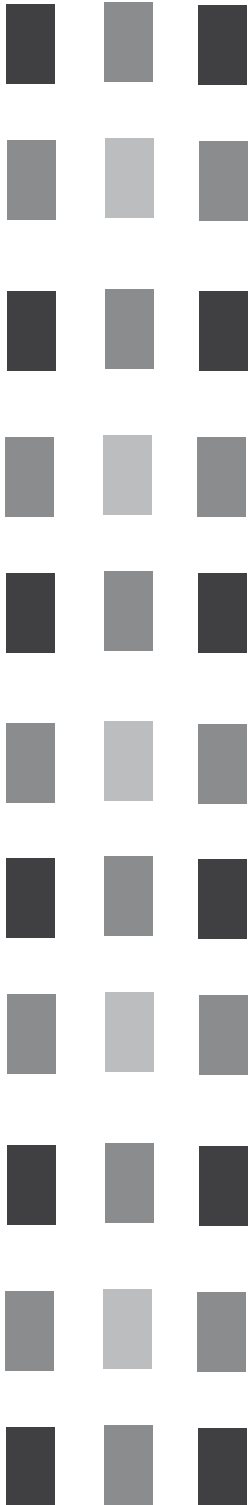


# Architectural Form and the Body "Impropre"

The Stone House at Tavole

*J. Kent Fitzsimons*



In a published text about the Stone House in Tavole (Italy, 1985–1988), Swiss architect Jacques Herzog comments that he and partner Pierre de Meuron "didn't want to create a perfect, jewel-like object."<sup>1</sup> Looking at images of the Stone House, we can only find the discrepancy between this intention and the result baffling: the building, like so much of Herzog and de Meuron's work, appears to be a flawless gem. While such inconsistency is common in architectural design, I do not wish to discuss the disjunction between intention and product as a problem to be criticized or overcome. Quite the opposite: I would like to read the plans, images and texts that describe the Stone House as a coherent whole.

Focusing on the publication of the House in *Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory*, I will argue that this whole can be discussed as a form of knowledge about the body (fig. 1). Furthermore, I will show that this particular knowledge patrols the limits of corporal discipline, and therefore contributes to the process by which the human body is socialized. At the border between abjection and propriety, we will see that, because its seeming contradictions correspond to the sublimation of anal eroticism, the Stone House is preoccupied with normalized views of a disciplined body.

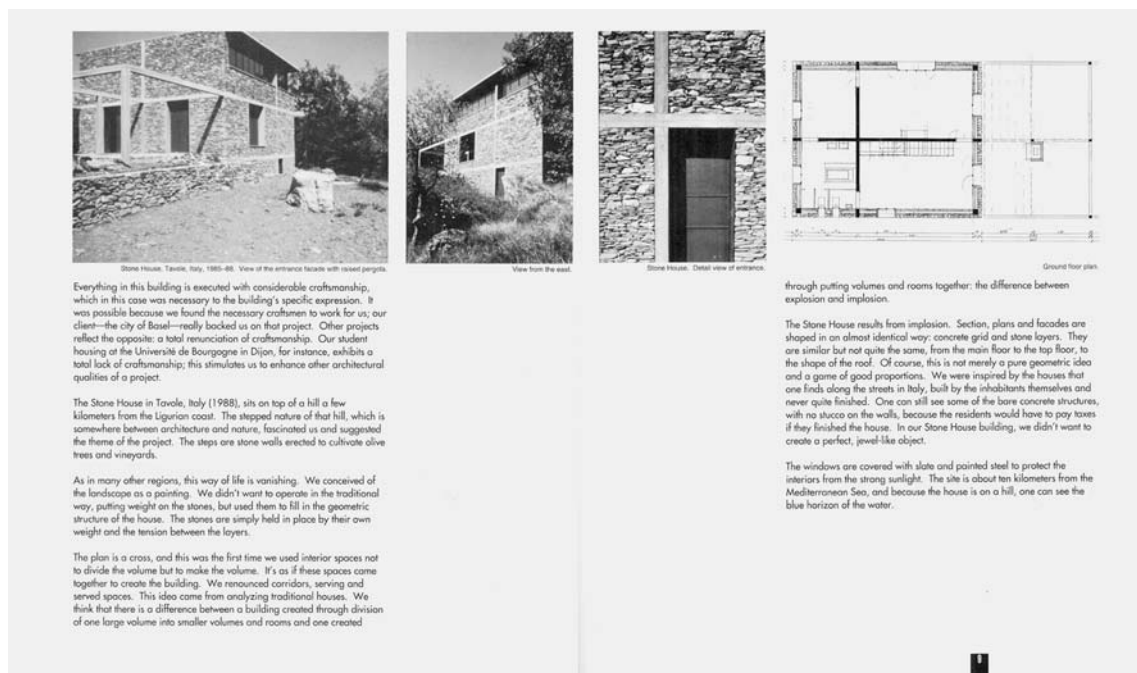
To explore these interrelationships of architectural form, the body, and society, I will discuss architecture in terms of the disciplinary mechanisms described by Michel Foucault. However, rather than consider architecture as a spatial appara-

tus that arranges actual bodies, I will regard it as a written technology of the body. I will begin by explaining how architecture may be taken as a written corporal apparatus, and how it contributes to the dynamics that normalize what we think about the human body. This will lead to some comments about methodology, influenced by the work of Michel de Certeau, who recognized the dangers of writing about writing as a disciplinary technique. Finally, I will show how an architectural object can operate as a technology of the body even when it is accessed only through a publication, by discussing the Stone House's plans, exterior photos and texts in relation to the moment when an infant is compelled to control its bodily functions.

## Architecture as written technology of the body

When arguing that a given architectural object is part of a disciplinary mechanism, it is important to distinguish between two concepts in Foucault's thought: space and writing. On the one hand, Foucault uses spatial relationships to explain the historical development of panoptic disciplinary societies. From here, architectural form might be understood as an apparatus that composes specific physical and visual relationships between bodies, following Foucault's descriptions of prisons, military camps, schools, and a number of other institutional building types.

On the other hand, Foucault stresses that a discipline "draws up tables" in order to take hold of



1 | *The Stone House in Tavole*, by Jaque Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, 1985–1988, as presented in "Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory (D)", 1995

individual bodies and combine their productive forces.<sup>2</sup> The ability to document is fundamental to this project: For Foucault, "A 'power of writing' was constituted as an essential part of the mechanisms of discipline."<sup>3</sup> Writing is the medium by which a discipline's knowledge of the human body circulates in the absence of bodies. Architecture can be understood as this kind of medium. By giving form to knowledge about the body on many different registers, a given architectural object is not only a bio-technology insofar as it promotes or hinders movement, but also because it is a kind of table of the body. Such an object's contribution to the development and spread of "power/knowledge" and "bio-power" is not dependent on the presence of actual bodies in its space. In order to elaborate this proposition, I will not argue that Herzog and de Meuron's Stone House makes manifest certain social forms by placing actual bodies in precise relationships to each other. Rather, I would like to consider the publication of the Stone House as writing that circulates socially- and culturally-specific knowledge about the body, within our discipline.

### **Bio-power and normalization in architecture**

If architecture is taken as a discipline of the body, and architectural objects as writing about the body, it is important to recall that "positivity," in contrast to repression, underpins Foucault's model of modern society. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault develops an idea first introduced in *Discipline and Punish*: as human bodies came to be perceived as forces of production and reproduction in the Classical Age, the power that invested them lost interest in exclusively impeding their forces, and instead began generating them, "making them grow, and ordering them."<sup>4</sup> Modern society came to be traversed by "a power that exerts a positive influence on life," that "invest[s] life through and through."<sup>5</sup> For Foucault, this "bio-power" has historically resulted in what he called a "normalizing society," in which disciplinary mechanisms effect "distributions around the norm."<sup>6</sup> These norms incorporate concepts about how bodies should work, what they need, what they should do, and which of them are in place and out of place.

In this light, it is interesting to note that discussions of the body in architecture tend to assume two things: that the body senses and feels its built environment, and that the body makes use of the built environment to productive ends, whether those ends be economic, social, or recreational. In other words, architecture invests the body with life, through and through. As a discipline traversed by bio-power, architecture might therefore be said to contribute to the normalization of what a human body is, how it should behave, and what its

capacities should be. Perhaps, then, architecture theory is the arena for countering this disciplinary mechanism. But the activity of reading and writing about architectural objects falls within a discipline, too. When studies posit corporal sensations or actions as the link between the body and architecture, they partake of a normalizing bio-power. In other words, this kind of architecture theory suffers the same fate as architectural design: it writes about bodies invested with life. Like a drawing or a building, a text that explores the interrelationship of architectural form, the body and society is a medium through which disciplinary mechanisms extend their reach.

### **Architecture theory and improper bodies**

This particular contextualization of architecture within Foucault's work leads to a dilemma at the core of theorizing architecture's social dimension in relation to the body. An inevitable question arises: is it possible to research and report on the social and corporal aspects of architecture without writing a knowledge of the body that inevitably participates in the normalization of life?

In various essays, Michel de Certeau tries to think beyond what seems to be an inevitable regressive spiral Foucault's work. De Certeau's most simple remark about Foucault's seemingly complete model of society is the most relevant here: throughout almost all of Foucault's work, the disciplinary procedures that he studies have "their own place (un lieu propre) on which the panoptic machinery can operate."<sup>7</sup> The hospital, the psychiatric ward, the prison, the army, the school, the family: from book to book, power/knowledge and bio-power concern bodies that are in a proper place.

A wide range of de Certeau's own work may be understood to stem from this observation. His research gravitates around the notion that certain bodies are *a priori* excluded from the interiority of disciplines, or institutions. The role of these improper bodies is such that they can furnish no knowledge that would allow "distributions around the norm," but rather hold the place of an unthinkable and unknowable life. De Certeau's work seems to be based on the belief that it can resist the totalization of bio-power by addressing the role of improper bodies in constructing the place where discipline takes hold of proper bodies. This methodology contains the hope that the corporal dimension of disciplines can be discussed without extending their normalizing grip on lived experience.

In light of this rough sketch of de Certeau's methodology, this paper will explore the role, in an architectural object, of bodies for which that object does not make a place. By visiting the interior of the discipline with these bodies, I hope to

speak about the corporal dimension of architecture without contributing to such discourses as architectural functionalism, spatial ergonomics, program, or biological design metaphors, all of which I believe tend towards the normalization of what we can imagine the body to be. As we will see, if the unclean and hence un-socialized body has no place in Herzog and de Meuron's Stone House, it still serves a function crucial to the House's coherence as a compelling architectural work. By exploring how the Stone House sits at the border between the undisciplined and the proper body, we may discover the social norms that underpin its coherence.

### The Stone House Plan

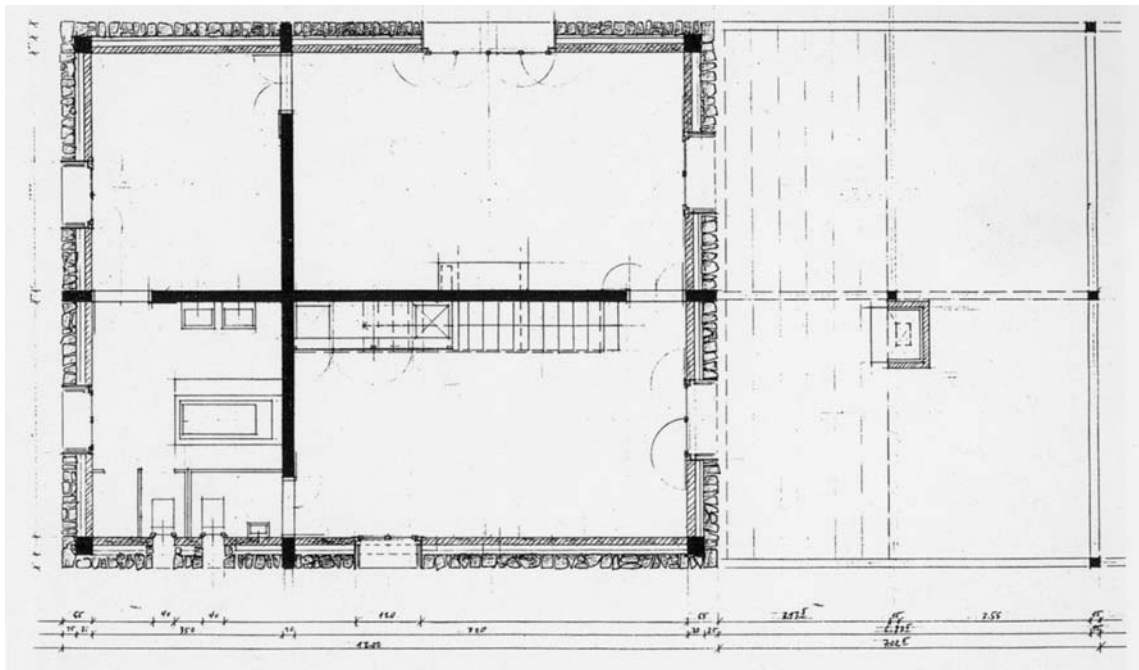
The Stone House's plan reveals an unusual arrangement of passages and rooms (fig. 2). On the main floor, two walls intersect at right angles to form the figure of a cross. These interior partitions do not reach the House's exterior wall, and the passage from room to room happens at the building's periphery. The text that accompanies the plan explains that the architects "renounced corridors, serving and served spaces."<sup>8</sup> This subtle change to an otherwise typical country house plan has profound architectural consequences, as none of the resulting spaces is solely a room or a corridor, but rather a hybrid of both. The same could be said of a canonical *plan libre*, such as Mies's plan for a Brick Villa (1923) or Le Corbusier and Jeanneret's Villa Stein-de-Monzie at Garches (1927). But the Stone House is very different from

these elaborate Modern Movement works. In contrast, the Stone House poses an almost simplistic challenge to the division of servant and served spaces. A review of traditional domestic planning can illuminate the Stone House's distinction.

Robin Evans has shown that, starting in the seventeenth century, many English country houses were designed with a corridor that ran parallel to a series of rooms, allowing for their direct access and preventing any one room from becoming the link between two others. But the rooms in these houses were often connected by direct passages as well, so that the main apartments were enfiladed by a vista of doors. Evans distilled the consequences for social relations thus: "The introduction of the through-passage in domestic architecture first inscribed a deeper division between the upper and lower ranks of society by maintaining direct sequential access for the privileged family circle while consigning servants to a limited territory always adjacent to, but never within the house proper ..."<sup>9</sup>

Two parallel means of circulation came to cohabit in the country house, each with a definite role to play. The passage, or corridor, allowed the simultaneous separation and servicing of rooms, while the enfilade of doors produced a pleasing aesthetic experience. As Evans interpreted the situation, "the integration of household space was for the sake of beauty, its separation for convenience."<sup>10</sup>

Much domestic planning in the twentieth-century retained the division between servant and served space. Theoretical texts made the preference



2 | The Stone House in Tavole, by Jaque Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, 1985–1988, main-floor plan

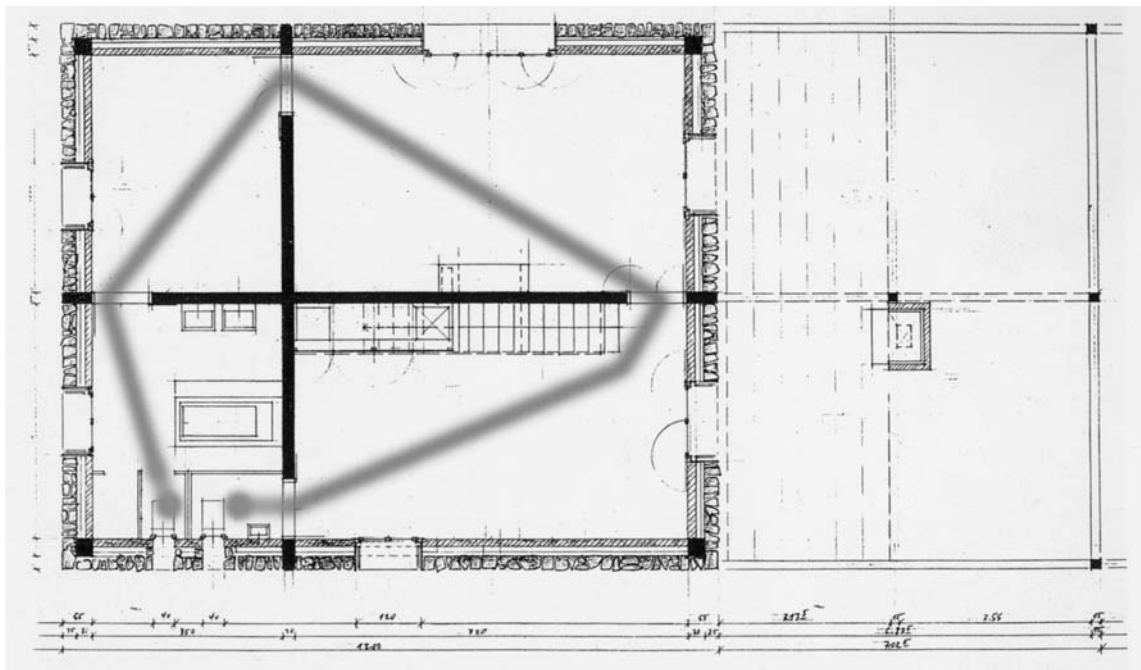
for division explicit, as in Le Corbusier's claim that "[i]n a decent house the servants' stairs do not go through the drawing room – even if the maid is charming."<sup>11</sup> Where servants themselves disappeared from the house, the preoccupation with eliminating intersecting paths in the home persisted. For example, in Alexander Klein's *Functional House for Frictionless Living* (1928), the primary concern is to prevent circulation paths from crossing-in a house for a small family.<sup>12</sup> To borrow Evans's words again, here the "journey between bedroom and bath – where trod the naked to enact the rawest acts of the body –" was carefully separated from the circulation between other spaces.<sup>13</sup>

In Herzog and de Meuron's Stone House, each enclosed space is simultaneously both corridor and room. None are conventional rooms, as each is crossed diagonally by the only path to and from adjoining rooms. But neither are any of these spaces conventional corridors, as none efficiently serve any rooms. The plan perfectly superposes the servant and the served in a single group of spaces. There is no architectural discrimination amongst the bodies whose paths cross in the Stone House. Furthermore, where a conventional enfilade of rooms allows a vista extending to the house's exterior, the kite-shaped "vista" that connects the rooms in the Stone House begins and ends at a toilet. Applying Evans's reading of domestic space, this plan offers neither beauty nor convenience, and it would surely figure as a bad example in a Kleinian study.

Beyond questioning functional and aesthetic performance, the Stone House plan disrupts a more

general concern with keeping people separated. For Evans, the division of spaces with different uses and occupants would not only eliminate inopportune meetings, but also keep passion and carnality at bay.<sup>14</sup> While hierarchical social conventions are clearly embedded in the distinction between the servant and the served, so are moral imperatives that pertain to proper conduct. In the Stone House, the superposition of corridor and en suite rooms might be interpreted as the sign and even medium for dissent from norms of propriety, promoting what might be called "indecent" behaviour.

But closer inspection of the plan offers evidence to the contrary. In fact, the plan reveals an unusual preoccupation with decency. Those toilets at the end of the kite-shaped circulation path produce a definite division in the house (fig. 3). A body in the plan finds itself in one of two positions: on a path whose two destinations are toilets, or off that path. And because that path cuts diagonally across each room, any other point in any room is literally marginalized. Being off the path means being in the corner. Because the plan superposes corridor and enfilade, there are no rooms in which to take refuge from the circulation's dominant orientation, and no corridors to hide the architectural concern with bodily functions. One is either on the road to what is by convention the proper place for those functions, or at the edge of that road. The only alternative is to be in one of the toilets. The Stone House plan stresses the importance of confining a particular bodily activity to its proper place. That activity anywhere else would be indecent.



3 | *The Stone House in Tavole*, by Jaque Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, 1985–1988, main-floor plan with circulation path (added)



It is significant that de Certeau uses the word "propre" in his critique of Foucault. In French, *propre* refers to the specificity of something, such as the characteristics inherent in a place. *Propre* also carries connotations of propriety or appropriateness, for example of an activity. Generally, it also means clean, and a toilet-trained child is called *propre*. The Stone House plan orchestrates these different meanings around defecation and domesticity, and might therefore be understood in terms of an infant's body at the time of toilet training.

Under the Freudian model of child development, the anal phase corresponds to an important period of socialization. Literary critic Norman Holland observes that a child's "first moral imperative comes in the field of toilet training ..."<sup>15</sup> During the anal phase, the parental emphasis on proper behaviour is met by the infant's ambivalence and confusion. The anal erotic infant learning to control his or her filth is conflicted, because while physical pleasure is derived from elimination, other pleasures may be had from temporary retention. One such pleasure precludes flushing the child's waste down the toilet, as it derived from "doing all sorts of unseemly things with the faeces that had been passed."<sup>16</sup> Improper behaviour in the house goes hand in hand with an improper body: unclean, uncontrolled, and out of place.

In the Stone House, the oscillation between being on and off the toilet path describes an infantile play between retention and elimination. As such, it also corresponds to an ambivalence between defiance and submission which characterizes the infant's new relationship to its parents.<sup>17</sup> The Stone House plan may challenge the social division inherent in separating served and servant spaces, but the result is a return to a fundamental moment of socialization in which the body, its dirt, and space become problematic in the domestic realm. Where the House seems to dispel with forms of social domination between masters and servants, it retreats to dwell on a relationship of domination within the family, which is the model for broader social forms. The servant-versus-served debate focuses on bodies in their proper place; the Stone House is more concerned with proper bodies, period. It contains the knowledge that social space must be protected from the scandal of an untrained infant's body. In this way, the Stone House marks the border between the pre-social and the social, between impropriety and decency, between abjection and discipline.

### The Stone House Facade

A related preoccupation with proper bodies can be found in the Stone House façades (fig. 4–6). The text in the publication claims that the House's ex-



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6 | *The Stone House in Tavole*, by Jaque Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, 1985–1988, exterior view

terior aspect was "inspired by the houses that one finds along the street in Italy, built by the inhabitants themselves and never quite finished." The text explains that "the residents would have to pay taxes if they finished the house," implying that an aversion to giving money to public coffers is why "[o]ne can still see some of the bare concrete structures, with no stucco on the walls."<sup>18</sup> By proposing an allusion between the Stone House and vernacular unfinished houses, the text and photographs imply that it has withdrawn from the responsibilities of public life. The social implications of this withdrawal might be understood by recalling the conventional relationship between the private and the public spheres. In his canonical work on the subject, Jürgen Habermas argued that it was a free citizen's private autonomy as the master of a household on which his participation in public life depended.<sup>19</sup> The prerequisite for individual participation in political life was to be a patriarch. A hierarchical social structure at home guaranteed democratic representation in city life. Thus the private and the public spheres were linked. This relationship between the integrity of one's household and one's public privileges persists in modern thought. In Habermas's words, while "tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable," ... "publicity continues to be an organizational principle for our political order."<sup>20</sup>

Because the Stone House alludes to defrauding the public coffers, it appears to signal its voluntary exclusion from the public sphere. By implying that there is no master within, the House might be understood to challenge the types of domestic social organization upon which public life depends. This recalls the disruption of hierarchical servant-served relationships found in the plan. But just as the question of the infant's body suggested a more orthodox social dimension to the plan, a look at the corporal dimension of the facade reveals a similar conservatism.

In *Character and Anal Eroticism*, Freud speculates on how an individual's infantile anal experience is related to his or her adult characteristics. Based on his clinical research, he suggests that an adult's orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy may result from the disappearance of the infant's anal eroticism. For Freud, these character traits, "which are so often prominent in people who were formerly anal erotics, are to be regarded as the first and most constant results of the sublimation of anal eroticism."<sup>21</sup>

Orderliness is a "reaction-formation against an interest in what is unclean and disturbing."<sup>22</sup> Obstinacy is less clearly related to defecation and pleasure, but, as we have seen, it is common for defiance to appear during the anal phase. Parsimony seems to have the least obvious link to anal

eroticism. But as Freud observed, "[t]he connections between the complexes of interest in money and of defaecation ... appear to be the most extensive of all."<sup>23</sup> "Money is brought into the most intimate relationship with dirt" in myths, fairy tales, superstitions, and dreams, which for Freud are places where "archaic modes of thinking have predominated or persist."

The text published in *Documents* suggests a relationship between the Stone House facade and unpaid taxes, which corresponds to the stinginess that is characteristic of sublimated anal eroticism. At the same time, the contradiction between the refusal to create "a perfect, jewel-like object"<sup>24</sup> and the building's high aesthetic quality might be explained by the connection, in the minds of former anal erotics, between "the most precious substance known to men and the most worthless."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the architectural expression of this allusion to local unfinished houses is so neat and tidy that orderliness and parsimony easily coexist. And we find obstinacy back in the plan, where the path to the toilets orchestrates the play between submission and defiance. With its *mise en scene* of the struggle to control bowel movements, the House plan teeters on the edge of preventing organic matter, with its unpleasing odors and appearance, from emerging in the wrong place. Returning to the facade, the dry-stone walls that play against the bone-dry concrete frame seem to take the side of expulsion in its proper place.

Taken as a whole, the text, plans, and facade suggest that the Stone House carefully shows its efforts to sublimate anal eroticism. This implies putting an end to using bodily functions to fulfill pleasures that are not socially acceptable, which is nothing less than the social disciplining and control of the body. The concern with the body's filth, which appears in the Stone House as the orchestration of toilet training and the expression of anal character traits, is linked to the socialization of the infant within the household, a process that sets the basis for an individual's participation in society beyond the family. As presented in images and text, the Stone House is a coherent written knowledge of a proper body, patrolling the border of discipline.

## Conclusion

The discomfort that many feel at the mention of adult diapers is an indication of how much the control of the body's functions is a prerequisite for "normal" social interactions. It is this kind of increasingly restrictive notion of the normal body that Foucault argued was a consequence of our society's insistence on vitality, an insistence that architecture usually shares. But this paper is not a call for architecture to reverse the process of nor-

malization. It has the more humble task of introducing an undisciplined body to architectural work to see if it reveals a previously unrecognized social dimension in the medium of space. Here, that method has shown how the Stone House – as writing about the body – circulates a knowledge of corporal propriety. It is our deeply seated grasp of the relation between our bodies and our built environment that allows us to put that knowledge to work, or rather that allows that knowledge to put us to work. Pursuing a body that is excluded at the constitution of the discipline's limits might allow a critique of that knowledge, while at the same time

avoiding Foucault's trap whereby writing about the body simply reinforces the "dispositif" that would normalize life. While I wouldn't want Herzog and de Meuron to stop putting their jewels into the world, I think it is important to ask why and how certain ideas, which are ultimately about proper bodies, are so closely connected to architectural form.

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Notes:

- 1 Herzog, Jacques: *Recent Work of Herzog and de Meuron*, in: *Columbia documents of architecture and theory*, (D), vol. 4, 1995, p. 9.
- 2 Foucault, Michel: *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, New York, 1997, p. 167.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
- 4 Foucault, Michel: *The history of sexuality volume 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York, 1978, p. 137.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 6 *Op. cit.*, note 2, p. 139, 199, and *op. cit.* note 4, p. 144.
- 7 Certeau, Michel de: *Foucault and Bourdieu*, in: *The practice of everyday life*, trans. by Stephen Rendall, Berkeley/Los Angeles, p. 49. De Certeau reused parts of this chapter in another essay on Foucault, the English translation of which renders the same quote as "a locus or specific space of their own on which the panoptic machinery can operate." See Certeau, Michel de: *Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse*, in: *Heterologies: Discourse on the other*, trans. by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 189.
- 8 *Op. cit.*, note 1, p. 8.
- 9 Evans, Robin: *Figures, Doors and Passages*, 1978, in: *Translations from drawing to building and other essays*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 71.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 11 Le Corbusier, *A Contemporary City, 1929*, in: *The city of to-morrow and its planning*, Cambridge, 1971, pp. 157–178. Here, Le Corbusier mentions this 'obvious' criterion for domestic architecture to explain, through analogy, that the river serving a decent city should be discrete, too.
- 12 This example is discussed by Robin Evans in *Figures, Doors and Passages*, *op. cit.* note 9, pp. 84–85.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 88, 90.
- 15 Holland, Norman N.: *The dynamics of literary response*, New York, 1975, p. 39.
- 16 Freud, Sigmund: *Character and Anal Eroticism*, 1908, in: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX, trans. by James Strachey, London, p. 170.
- 17 *Op. cit.*, note 15, p. 39.
- 18 *Op. cit.*, note 1, p. 9.
- 19 Habermas, Jürgen: *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. by Thomas Burger, Cambridge, 1989, p. 3.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 21 *Op. cit.*, note 16, p. 171.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 24 *Op. cit.*, note 1, p. 9.
- 25 *Op. cit.*, note 16, p. 174.

Credits:

- 1–6 Herzog, Jacques: *Recent Work of Herzog and de Meuron*, in: *Columbia documents of architecture and theory*, (D), vol. 4, 1995.