

# SOME THOUGHTS ON VISITING THE STONE HOUSE AT TAVOLE

Lorenzo De Chiffre

1

Kurt W. Forster, "Pieces for Four and More Hands", in Philip Ursprung, ed., *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2002), 49.

2

Irina Davidovici, *Forms of Practice: German-Swiss Architecture, 1980–2000* (Zurich: gta, 2012), 88.

3

Gerhard Mack, "Herzog & de Meuron: Herzog & de Meuron 1978–1988", in idem, ed., *Das Gesamtwerk, Band 1 / The Complete Works, Volume 1* (Basel, Boston and Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1997), 57.

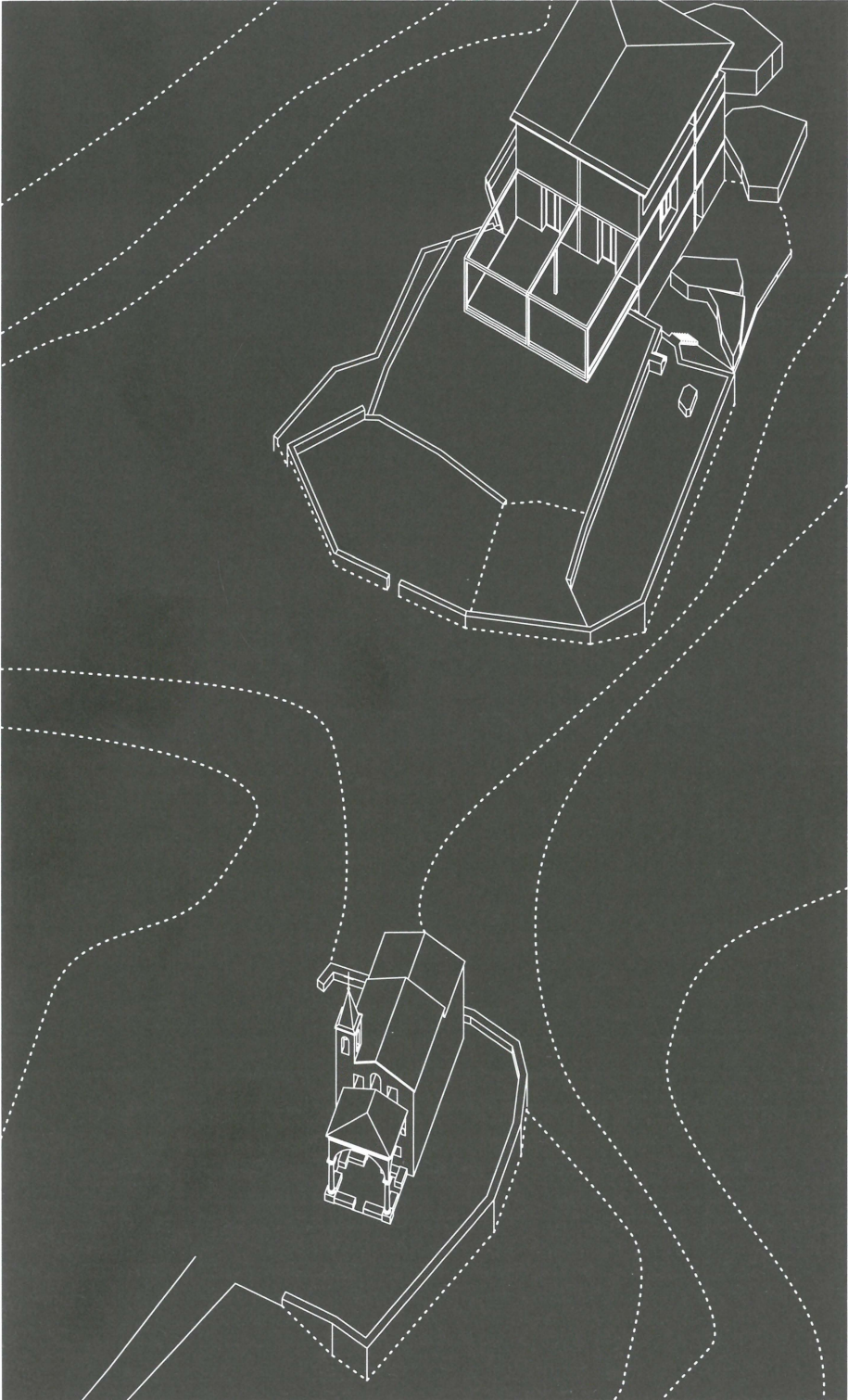
4

Davidovici, *Forms of Practice*, 94.

The Stone House (1982–88) holds a prominent place in the early oeuvre of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. Together with the Ricola Warehouse (1986–87) and the Goetz Gallery (1988–92), it cemented their status as masters of a Minimalist architecture based on the orchestration of tectonic and material effects. Labelled as "einsames Haus", or the "Lonely House", in an early sketch, the building's sense of remoteness and isolation is strongly felt in photographs of it. The images of the still uninhabited house sitting in its arid landscape convey a timeless, ruinous atmosphere. As a key work by the Swiss architectural duo, the Stone House has been comprehensively analyzed and interpreted. The recurrent theme in the discourse is the artfulness of the building. In particular, it has been related to Land Art and Arte Povera,<sup>1</sup> as well as to Minimalist sculpture.<sup>2</sup> The consensus is that the building's uniqueness is the result of a radical exploration of place, whereby refined tectonic and material manipulations produce a geometric representation of the surrounding landscape.<sup>3</sup> But through this exploration, the basic purpose of a house – namely, to provide a feeling of domesticity – is largely disregarded.<sup>4</sup>

I had wanted to visit the building for a long time, so on a lazy afternoon last summer while on holiday, a friend and I went to look for it. With the entire planet mapped through satellite images, it seemed like finding the building outside the small village of Tavole in Liguria wouldn't be difficult, but its location in a relatively hilly landscape made our search more difficult than expected.

After a short drive into the hills above Dolcedo, we reached Tavole, where a side road turning steeply up the hillside was marked with signs indicating the way to some pilgrim chapels. After several curves, we



reached another side road with another sign pointing to one of the chapels. Unsure if this was the way to the Stone House, we proceeded anyway. It turned out to be a Via Crucis leading to the small chapel of the Madonna del Piano. Although we realized at that point that we had taken a path leading to something other than the Stone House, we walked up to the modest yet dignified church. Situated in an outlying place where the village community congregates on special occasions, the chapel is also more than that: it is a landmark, a collective point of reference for the area. Knowing that the Stone House could not be far away, the small chapel awakened our curiosity, for its mute appearance recalled the image in our heads of the building we were seeking. As we took in the impressive view of the valley below and the coastal town of Porto Maurizio, we spied the unmistakable form of the Stone House, tucked away behind some trees on a slightly lower terrace.

Suddenly the iconic house did not seem that lonely or abstract any more. On the contrary, the way it was positioned – with the open space in front of the building and the sparse precise openings – mimicked the main traits of the Madonna del Piano chapel. But most of all, the iconic and mystifying “portico” of the Stone House can be perceived in a different light when it is compared to the cross-vaulted portico of the little church. This direct formal relationship makes the house seem like a sort of reincarnation of the chapel.

The Stone House is accessed by a narrow road north of the site. A solid steel gate marks the entrance, and the portico structure hovers one storey above it. On the lowest level of the building, only a square garage door is visible. To arrive at the main level, one has to walk all the way around the building on the outside. On the opposite side of the house, stairs lead up to the garden level. At this point, standing right next to the house, the east gable of the Madonna del Piano dominates the scene. The bracketed space between the two buildings is very strong, and it becomes clear that the architects of the Stone House were highly aware of its neighbour’s presence.

The building consists of three parts: the portico-like structure, which is a slightly raised rectangular plateau framed by a concrete pergola with a (structurally unnecessary) totemic column in the centre; the *piano nobile* with the kitchen, the living room – where a large window looks out over the valley and the sea to the south – and the master bedroom suite with its own view across the valley; and finally the top floor – labelled “studio” in the plan – which houses an open loft-like space with a horizontal ribbon window on three sides. This



The Stone House with the chapel of the Madonna del Piano in the background. Photograph Margherita Spiluttini, 1994

floor underwent the most changes during the design process. In early sketches, different versions of a cut-away terrace were explored. It also incorporated the framing of a specific view – in one version, the imposing silhouette of Porto Maurizio, and in another, the neighbouring chapel. In its realized form, this part of the building is an internalized equivalent to the open portico: a neutral stage-like space where each of the inhabitants must negotiate his or her individual place within it.

Experiencing the Stone House in situ instilled the strong conviction that the project cannot simply be seen in isolation as a fascinating, artful object. Instead, its strength derives from the intricate interweaving of spatial relationships that unfold through the inhabitation of the building. It should be recognized as a highly contextual and engaging house. Like the chapel, it is both a device that choreographs different forms of spatial interaction as well as a point of reference outside the reality of urban life. It is a building in which the architecture has a direct effect on consolidating the individual inhabitants as a unit. In reality, it is quite the opposite of an “einsames Haus”.