

## ...the Unthinkable House

Ben Nicholson

### Thinking the Unthinkable

The idea of a franchise is an intriguing one because its life rotates about a name. Wherever the name goes an entourage of buildings, desks, stoves, storage bins, and countertops follow—to help make the name substantial. The Appliance House is a franchise of this kind: its name goes to all manner of places. Yet why does it commandeer this particular name?

The Appliance House is the direct heir to the sort of House that is endangered

by scores of little and big devices that are scattered throughout it. The appliance is examined for its potential selfhood and the unquantifiable values that are installed in its very constitution. Sears Roebuck, a firm synonymous with small and large appliances, has a sign in one of its repair centers that describes the mythological impact that Sears has had on the modern home. It declares:

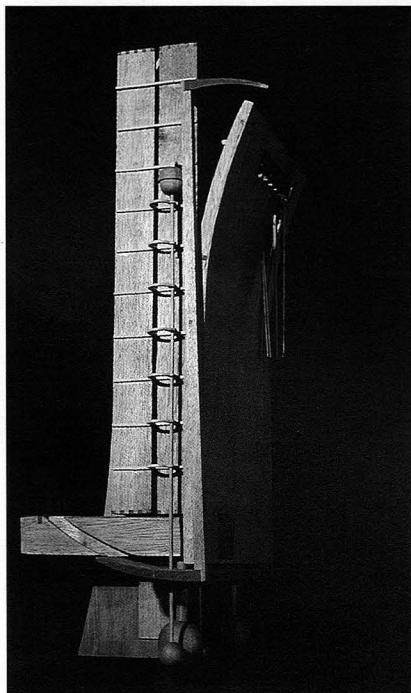
*Over 50,000,000 times a day someone depends on a Kenmore. During the last fifty years, Kenmore has built quite a reputation for reliability. So much*

*so, in fact, that today more people depend on Kenmore than on any other brand in America. Of course, it is partly because we always insist that our products be as close to immortality as human hands can make them.*

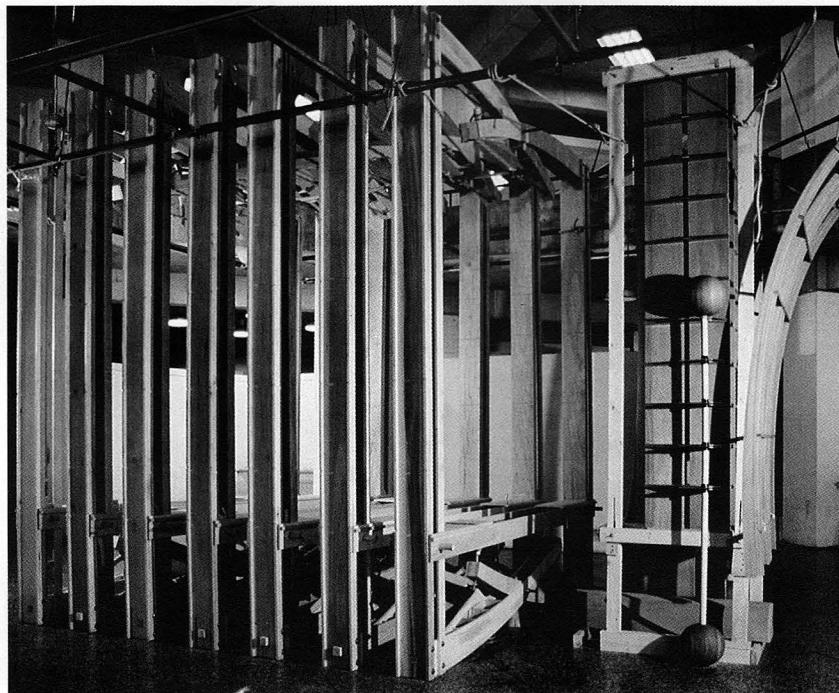
It is this claim to immortality that is of interest. Surely any object that is immortal must be worth incorporating into a home, particularly if its immortality is put to test 50,000,000 times a day. Despite the omnipotence of the manufacturer implied by this claim, the appliance has particular characteristics

that simultaneously promote and defy its immortality. A skin is stretched taut around every device, a skin that intentionally obfuscates the inner working of the appliance. This skin is vital to the mythical credibility of the object, for it separates two modes of comprehension, comprehension from without and from within. When an appliance fails, we tap and jiggle it, expecting the mechanism to correct itself. This is done without any knowledge of what actually occurs. Yet the owner often knows how to nurse the much-loved appliance back to life: a well-placed jolt from the right direction invariably sets it in motion once again. The owner's skills are similar to those of the chiropractor, who mysteriously bends and manipulates the body while the addicted (or skeptical) patient smiles in the aggravating and painful knowledge that the charm is working.

An appliance repairman views a malfunction quite differently. He sees a mechanism without its veil because he has extensive knowledge of what really goes on beneath the surface; he does not invoke the genie, but simply replace the worn lever. Thus, on the one hand, a machine is fixed by its owner's using semi-divine interventions; and, on the other hand, there is the plain-truth mechanic who attends to the appliance without prejudice, without religion. The owner dares not remove the panel to inspect the innards for fear of being struck down by the voodoo wisdom installed in the appliance by the manufacturer. Of course the manufacturer



30 *Telamon Cupboard Marquette*



*Building the Kleptomaniac Cell*

and the mechanic retain the knowledge of the secret rites of the appliance; the uninitiated owner will always follow their advice, seeking to be in harmony with what drives the machine's activity from the outside of the panel.

Thus our comprehension of the methods of repair are separated from that of the experts by the opacity of the sheet of plastic or steel that serves as the appliance's epidermis. The methods are incongruous, leading to a diremption of the two ways of thinking about the appliance, which in turn leads to a separation of senses. It is seemingly irrelevant events such as these malfunctions and repairs that surround the intangible panel which give rise to the life of the Telamon Cupboard, one of the components of the Appliance House.

### The Inside and Outside meet at the Center

The appliance lives out its opacity by relying on its protective skin. Yet what about thinking of a place where there is no protective skin and where therefore what is inside and outside the former barrier suddenly become one and the same?

Marcel Duchamp's painting *The Large Glass* is such a place as this. It is a sort of map of a domain where a new Adam and Eve pretend to resolve their irreconcilable differences. It is a place that is completely filled up: wherever you move in it there is something to reckon with; it is a sort of floor plan of a room; and everything inside it is dense. If it were to be constructed it would be so thick with stuff that you would be prevented from moving around; it would be as if a landscape, a city, or a house had collapsed in upon itself, leaving everything in its correct position but with all the vacancy between things vacuumed away, so that the body is caught as if trapped in an ice flow.

*The Large Glass* is made of two big sheets of plate glass, one set above the

other, separated by a thick metal bar. The top sheet has the Bride's domain painted on it, and the bottom sheet has the Bachelor's domain painted on it. The metal bar that separates the Bride from the Bachelor is not unlike a bundling board. In eighteenth century America, bundling referred to the practice of a man and a woman, unknown to each other, sleeping on a bed together, with their clothes on, an expediency practiced because of the scarcity of beds. Once the practice had become established, beds were built with bundling boards, consisting of a piece of wood separating each person on the bed.

The metal barrier between Bride and Bachelor is a bundling board, something put there to delay the situation, to prevent the scene from unfolding in a wanton way.

Duchamp's *Large Glass* is thick with names. Translated into English they are: Chocolate Machine, Chocolate Grinder, Bayonet, Neck Tie, Rollers, Louis the Fifteenth Chassis, Parasols, Scissors, Sieves, and Spangles, all of which make for blunted, manufactured events in the room. With these words and associated events, there is no need actually to have anybody in the room—because it is already inhabited.

Duchamp makes it possible to think about a place where you cannot walk, a room so full, so over-thickened, so over-choreographed that the air becomes treacle—in other words, a sort of appliance.

### Granting Permission to Think the Unthinkable

The duality of the appliance's inner and outer life makes evident the possibility of an architecture that can harness and fix thought of an unlikely nature. In effect, the Appliance House has taken upon itself the obligation to become wedged between the two ways of thinking about a place, the unnerving and the practical, bound up with the uncanny and the familiar. This para-

dilemma is a constant in architecture, and every now and again it demands to be heard once more.

In Italy during the fifteenth century, two books were written on architecture; and they point to the dilemma. One is Alberti's *On the Art of Building, in Ten Books*, based upon a Roman treatise. It is a very how-to, advisory, sensible, instructional document of how architecture could be and should be. The other treatise, called *Hypnerotomachia polifili*, written by Collona, describes a dream, plagued, inhabited, and coded by sundry moments of architecture. Thus, a dream state described in architectural literature and a highly rational manual for the making and thinking of building exist side by side. These two ways of thinking bump into each other and are irreconcilable. From what we are told of *Hypnerotomachia*, it was a much-loved book, however difficult it was to place.

What is it in architecture that makes it taboo to settle a piece of work between these two recurring dualities? Whatever the case, architects are reluctant to give themselves up to mysteriousness, to spend part of the day working out that part of life which lurks within us. By contrast, a writer gets out of bed in the morning, has a bowl of corn flakes, puts the kids on the school bus, and then sits down to continue a tale that was begun yesterday, perhaps a tale about a person who accidentally gets glued to his or her seat in a subway train. An architect is not permitted to draw out such a licentious thought.

*How do the other creative trades get away with it?*

*Why don't architects have a vent for this sort of thing in their lexicon?*

*Why is it taboo for architects to think naughty thoughts?*

*Does architecture always have to be a social goody-goody?*

*Why does it keep thoughts locked in a dank closet?*

*Why can't architects build that stuff?*

The Appliance House volunteers to step into this realm. It is sort of wicked work, one that an architect, to be on the safe side, might think twice about before endorsing. These things are possible to identify only after the thoughts are over; they were invisible during the time when the house was under warranty.

### The Grit and Grist

The Appliance House began its trajectory by taking off from curious pictures found in catalogs of products associated with the building industry. The Sweets catalog, a multivolume deskmate for the architect, has in it a picture of an attachment that can be mounted onto the back of a pickup truck. As you drive forward three concertinas of razor sharp wire spill out from the tailgate, a perfect solution for containing unruly crowds. The same corporation provides a convenient backpack version for the security policeman jogging along the dividing line between the quarry and the predator and pouring forth a slinky path of maiming, slashing hell.

Why are products like this, devoid of any civility, allowed passage into a catalog dedicated to the building industry, a catalog that should be providing us with variegated bricks and steel sections?

By cutting out such pictures and re-assembling them under a collagist's knife, a vision of a place shot through with unnerving juxtapositions was brought to bear. Once a pile a collages was in hand, each was ordained with a name: "You are a Facade" or "You are a Plan," and then suddenly out of nowhere the spatial configuration of the House became apparent.

The Appliance House, in its nervous form of paper pictures, began gravitation towards suburbia. The little disturbances found in the building catalogs now shared their verve with the selfsame irritants latent in domesticity. Each corny room in the suburban house became pushed right up to the very edge

of its so-called purpose. What is known as the furnace room in the basement perhaps could take on the shared responsibility of satisfying the pyromania within us all; if nothing else, at least it could be a room for taking glee in ceremoniously smashing bottles, ostensibly to make the recycling a little more compact. (“What’s all the noise down there, Sweetie?” “Don’t worry, Honey; I’m just compacting the recycling to make it a little easier to carry to the Center; that’s all.”)

There are other rooms in the suburban home that torch the unsuspecting. After passing over the the obligatory step down into the Den, invariably we find the cabinet of Toby jugs and whatnots that are common to every home. The cabinet is invited to readjust itself to endorse the part within us all that needs to provide a place for all manner of objects subservient to our collecting, gleaning and saving, objects fair and foul. In order to accommodate these new thoughts, the Appliance House franchise spins off part of its substance and endorsed a smaller entity called the Kleptomaniac Cell.

### The Kleptomaniac Cell

This Cell is a whole room given over to the activity of the single errant shelf, formerly in the Den, upon which the organs of our curiosity are assembled. At the entrance to the Kleptomaniac Cell, measuring 23 feet long, 11 feet 6 inches wide, and 12 feet 9 inches high, a large entity called The Telamon Cupboard stands. Its sole purpose is to induce and release things as circumstances dictate. Objects are stored in forty 9 x 9-inch boxes, 20 inches deep, and split by a vertically sliding door, counterbalanced by springs and wires in much the same way that a garage door is kept in stasis. Instead of the door rolling up into the ceiling, the doors to the boxes rise directly through the base of the box above. This provides a second door to the box above, thus doubly obscuring what lies behind. When half of the forty boxes have

their doors lifted, the Kleptomaniac can get only half of his collection. The other half remains Kryptomaniac.

The construction of the Cupboard requires that its detailing directly confront the way in which appliances are assembled. Every component is visible, but structural elements are intertwined with nonstructural elements. It is unclear which component performs which function in the Cupboard. This leads to an atmosphere of immanent inward collapse or implosion. To aid and abet the principle of immanent collapse, the Cupboard is so full of contradictory tensions and compressions that it pulls and pushes itself into complete stasis or paralysis.

Thought of as a place to store things, the Telamon Cupboard is quite conventional. When the doors to the Cupboard’s boxes drop down, there is no indication as to what is behind them. The Cupboard acts as a conventional cabinet in that it restores its outward appearance each time the doors are shut, giving no evidence of the fullness or bareness of the Cupboard’s inner realm.

Once a cabinet comes into existence, a nagging question follows: what will go into it? Looking into other peoples cupboards is taboo, for the structures of the storage that each of us has tend to tell more about ourselves than we care to volunteer. We shudder at the thought of a random inquisition of our drawers, so would it not be better to craft the unruliness in order to preempt the inquisition? A method of doing this might be to take a little drawing of the Cupboard and then meticulously cram ephemeral stuff into and onto it. The bunk bed, a net and an oxygen tank juxtaposed in such a way that they appear to be the norm.

What has been crafted is an exorcised, concocted stutter. The inherent willfulness of the collage is tamed so that the -ful is all that remains of the willful. The hurt of the collage filters out its distin-

guished quality, allowing the troublesome side of it to wander off and take a hold on something else.

The designer can always retain these thoughts, all sorts of thoughts, whilst making something; it is a privilege of the maker, not necessarily to know why he or she does something, but to allow the senses to operate directly without being squeamish.

### A Rest

Let us back up a little bit and catch a breath. We are at the entrance of a room in the Appliance House called the Kleptomaniac Cell. We are standing in front of the 12-foot high Telamon Cupboard, which has the appearance of an oversized, wooden fridge whose front is peeling off. The structure is balanced upon a line of five balls stuck onto sticks. On the right, at the top, is a curious bundle of wooden chains that hang off the front of the Cupboard like a clasp of campaign medals. Peering over the top of the front panel is the body of 40 boxes, which are accessed from the back.

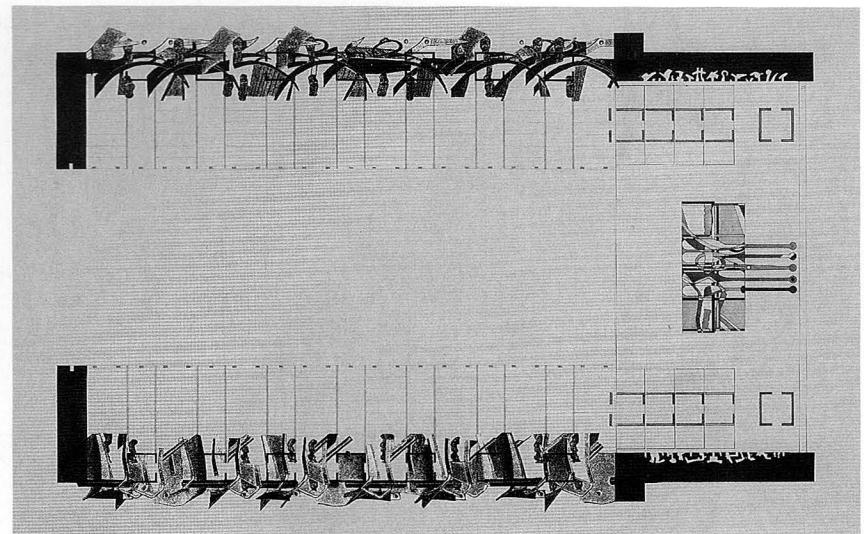
The proposed task of the Cell is to become an orphanage for things of ques-

tionable worth; things that you ought not hold on to but decide to keep anyway. The Cell will now be a room where you, and all the objects you have, fall into sympathetic performance, not unlike the many things that hover around a face painted by Vermeer.

### The Cavity of the Cell

To the left and the right of the Telamon Cupboard are narrow flights of steps that lead up into the cavity of the Cell. The Telamon Cupboard’s new task is to prompt into being the cavity of the Cell by pulling out all of its “drawers” (as in a chest of drawers) and then letting the body stand in a large hole cut into each of the distended drawer bottoms. A method of making this idea, the idea of standing in the middle of the drawers of a chest of drawers, needs to be invented.

The trail of events that has led to this moment included a little scrap of a collage that was charged with describing the contents of the Telamon Cupboard. The scrap showed a dog surrounded by a tangle of bones, sticks, cords, and axes. Now let us invite the dog to take on the task of forming the walls of the Kleptomaniac Cell.



Plan Section II of Kleptomaniac Cell

First he gets Xeroxed ten times and under the collagist's knife is stretched out taut over a horizontal slice of the wall. It is formal, though slightly coerced, invitation to the dog to enter the house. Through his being pasted and Xeroxed, he has leapt to the brink of artifactual certainty. The pictorial novelty of a partly hidden dog has been transfigured by means of a gradual dismemberment of the animal. The dissolution continues until the graphic description of the dog includes only its woofs, licks, and bounds, but no evidence of its tongue, fur, or paws. The dog has been made into patina. The dog has been grafted and stretched until he has become a wall; and as with every elastic substance, there is always the desire to ping it to see if it will go back into its former state. So the dog is eventually released with a whoosh and his extended body flicks back into his old self. However, as is usual with this sort of object (dog) (wall), he is disobedient and will not go back to the same shape that he started out to be. The released dog (drawing) (wall) forms a new, compressed wall, not two feet from the Cupboard and separated only by the narrow steps that lead into the cavity of the Cell.

Thus, the Cell began its life as a collage, which became a cupboard, which became depictions of objects, which stretched into a wall, which compressed back into a smaller wall, which stands just two feet from the original thing that happened five moments ago. With the first and last moments in time so close together (two feet) in space, the entrance of the Cell has a torque to it, between the moment of entering and the moment of exiting.

### The Things in the Cell

Now that the majority of the surfaces in the room have been assembled, the same question must be asked of the Cell as was asked of the Cupboard. What will go into it?

The Cell is a "memorial" of the things you wish to keep but are sheepish about making the declaration to undertake the keeping of them. Such a pile of items might be the plastic tags that grip the twisted neck of plastic bags of bread.

Every time we buy a loaf, we remove the tag and chuck it, or let it skulk about a kitchen drawer to wait for the moment of reuse. However the endless supply of tags makes the need to keep them redundant.

At first glance, bread tags appear to be perfectly sensible. The plastic tag has printed upon it the curriculum vitae of the bread within: how much it costs, when it is going to be stale, who made it and where. The flange of the tag also doubles as something to hold when the bread bag is pressed between the fangs of the snap, making them open askance and letting the folds of the bag crowd into the hole provided. The hole may have teeth set into the sides to prevent the oily bag of bread from slipping out. Each tag design has marginally different quirks. In some there are no teeth, in others there might be a pronounced entry slot. Each design is slightly dissimilar.

If a row of bread tags are balanced on their entry holes they become figurative. A city street comes into existence and it is populated by blocks of white glassine masonry accessed through a lower passage. Sometimes a room is smooth and rounded. At other times it is complex, full of recurves and indentations, and a string of anthropomorphic associations is recalled. In this context a bread tag becomes a talisman, a little map which can be kept in the pocket in order to savor the very moment of life itself.

Bread tags can be categorized into various types. Like all collections of things that outwardly appear similar to the uninitiated, such as Greek vases or baseball cards, each has its own characteristics, common or rare. A bread tag is evaluated according to the following criteria; the overall deportment of the tag, the proportion of the aperture system in relation to its shape, and the organization of the aperture system itself.

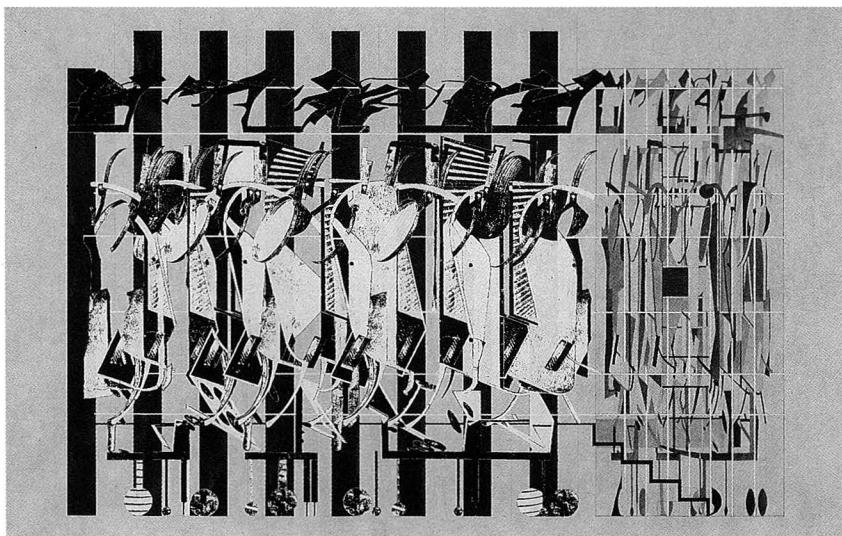
This collection would be quite easy to keep in the house, but collections have a habit of including larger orbits of other things whose association to the primary collection is often held by a very thin thread. For example, dog tags worn by soldiers might hold association with bread tags.

There is a man, named Durey Felton, who catalogs items left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington. He relates the history of the dog tag. During the American Civil War the men who sharpened sabers wore copper discs around their necks because sometimes big chunks of the flying grinding wheel would come off at great speed and demolish a group of sharpeners. It was difficult to tell who was who from looks alone, and the copper discs made identification possible. During World War II the tags took their present form, and they were not greatly modified until the Vietnam War. When a soldier was killed, the tag was set between the upper and lower teeth of the deceased to make identification easy. The tag would then be screwed onto the coffin at the morgue. The morticians complained that when they put a screw through the hole in the tag it would chase the screw. In the field the new design was preferred because it was easier to fit between the jaws. Maybe the same person who designed the dog tags designed the bread tags, but of course, this is not true.

The Kleptomaniac Cell, an orphanage for wanton objects, would be appropriate for storing various things like these because the walls form an intractable web of different types of shelves that occur in three dimensions. Some permit the hiding of things, others promote an accentuated revelation, some allow for pairing and others make provision for a tryst.

### The Mechanics of the Cell

The floor of the Kleptomaniac Cell suspends from ropes that hook into the roof beams. The floor gives a little when it is stood on, and the ropes pull down upon a bar that taps the rafters, so that when body weight bears down upon the floor there is a little tapping noise above your head to let you know that you are in the Cell. The floor also has trap doors into it that accommodate the secreting of flat stuff—a fa-



*Exterior Elevation Of West Cell Wall*

favorite shirt, unusual letters, or a particularly handsome cardboard insert from a packing box that is not too easy to fit anywhere else in the house.

### The Unthinkable

This journey through parts of the Appliance House, which exists mostly in shades, stops short of the moment of a completed building. There is an accompanying silence when a work is finished, for there is little to do except stand back, or step forward, to embrace the building. Once a building is made,

it cannot any longer be imagined what it might look like, or what it might do to the neighborhood, because it has already come to pass. The architecture has silenced that speculation.

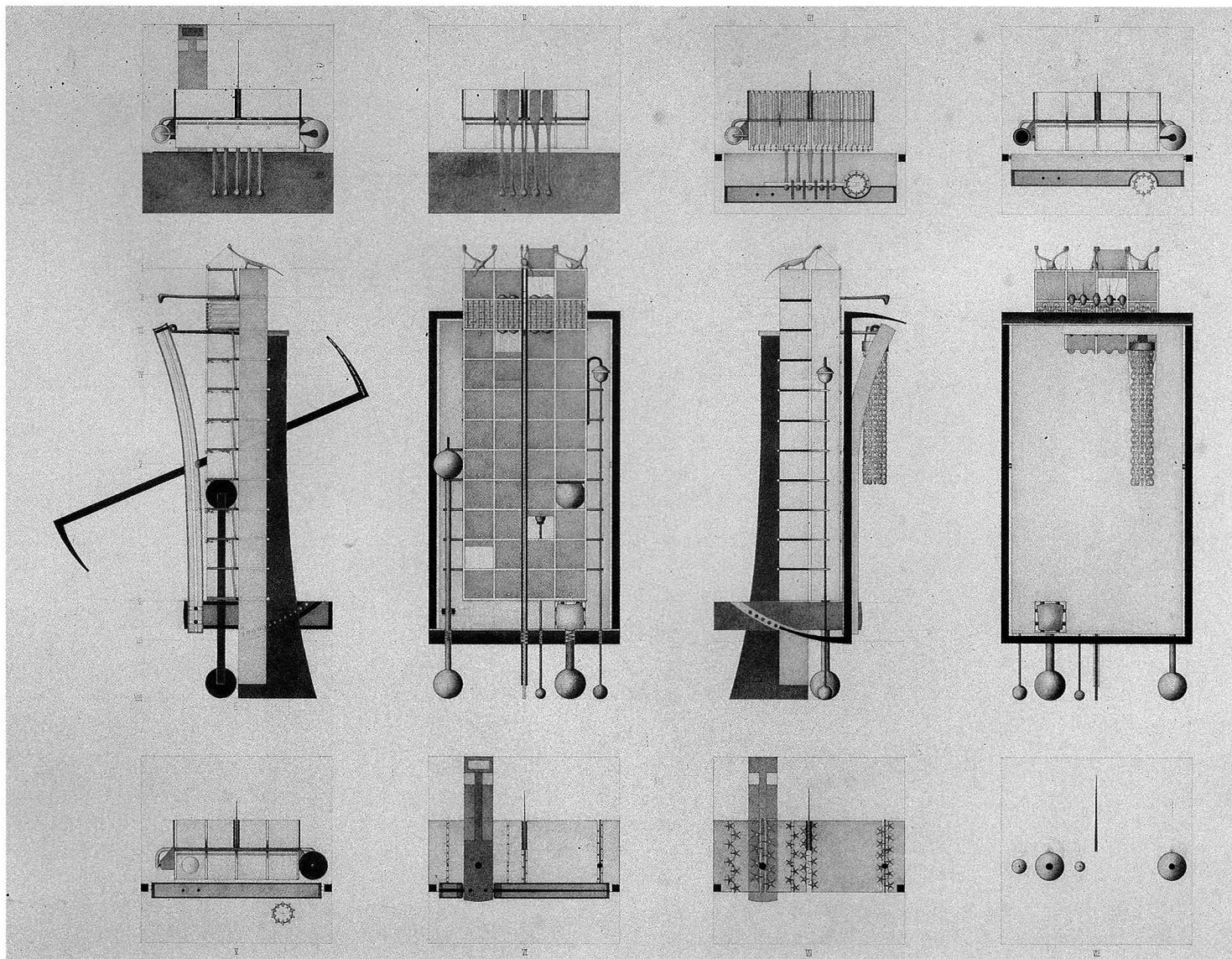
A building does not have a tongue; it stands quite mute, even when poked and cajoled. Its voice is thrown out through a general mouthpiece; it presses its silent noise through the vents and weep holes of the structure. Architecture is released when it has instilled into the mute fabric the fidgeting dilemmas that occur before and during the time when the last brick

is put into place. After that, no labels are good enough to announce that "this will do this and that will do that"; the work is left entirely on its own, with no possibility of any sort of rescue save usage (which builds up the patina for the place), the application of more thought onto the building (additions), or the dreaded wrecker's ball.

Once all this has come to pass, the quality of *Unheimlichkeit* will either be there or not, for it rebuffs any call to forcing, and a building cannot demand an audience. However, if *das Unheimliche* is

considered well and is known about before and during the process of manufacture, then there is the chance that it may come to life.

To take possession of *das Unheimliche*, the maker has to consider it well and let it sink in prior to the moment of manufacture. Or he or she must self-invent the quality without necessarily knowing what the word is at all. *Unheimlich* is way beyond franchise, beyond artificial manufacture, yet paradoxically the word (its name) was found for its mercurial state.



Things can be laid in front of Architecture to wake it up. Words can be deliberately ingested, choices made to steer the project to places where there is more likelihood than not of coming across the word. But the manufacture of the word, beyond being alert to it, is out of play.

### The Unthinkable House

The Appliance House has turned cold, and its life has slipped into another set of drawings that are charged with drifting towards construction.

The given method of its new life is deliberately to fabricate a state of nonarticulation; to fabricate series of metamorphoses, each of which demanding that the next set of drawings not look like anything known. If the hand and pencil stray towards any point of knowing, its wrist is slapped, it is checked, put into check, and deliberately pressed back into a place of not knowing.

After each pass, each metamorphosis, there is a second deliberate act to try to reverse the chemical composition of what has just been made, to recover it,

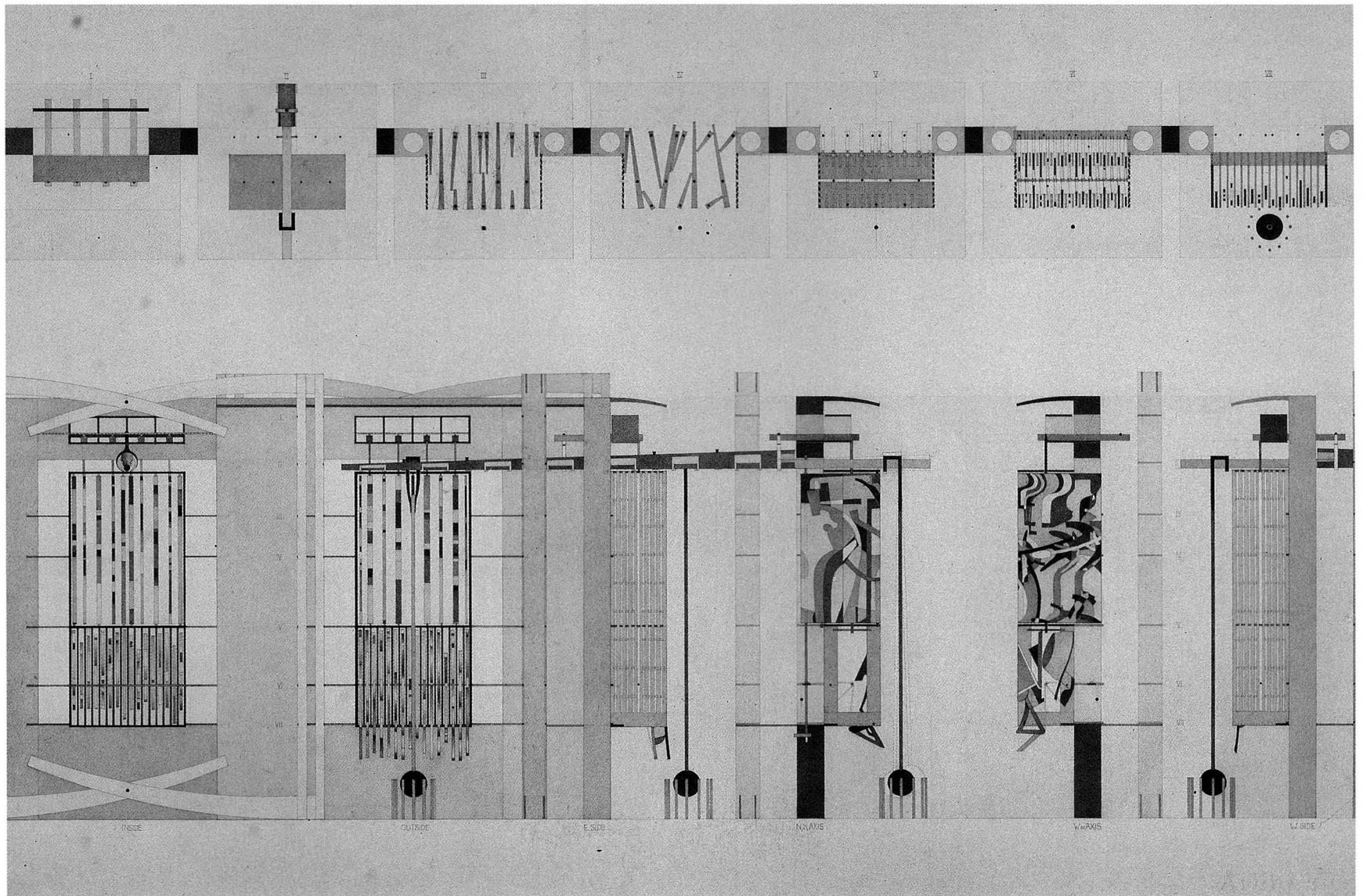
and to document on the drawing what took place, which is a drawn moment that settles itself between the two acts.

The activity is akin to polishing; the arm and body rotate back and forth into a contemplative state where guards fall and the senses are accessible for public gain.

The drift of the house is to make a place that does not recognize itself at first, but does know itself deep down. It has jumped and jolted around so much that it finds stasis. The activity has been

done to induce the cleanliness of the movement—but without outwardly presenting any movement whatsoever.

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*Rear Window*