

Between Land and Sky:

Reduction in the Work of Stephen Atkinson

House by Stephen Atkinson

Text by William T. Willoughby



Between sowing and begetting, harvest and death, the child and the grain, a profound affinity is set up . . . And as completed expression of this life feeling, we find everywhere the symbolic shape of the farmhouse, which in the disposition of the rooms and in every line of external form tells us about the blood of its inhabitants. The peasant's dwelling is the

great symbol of settledness . . . The kindly spirits of hearth and door, floor and chamber—Vesta, Janus, Lares, and Penates—are as firmly fixed in it as the mortals themselves . . . This is the condition precedent of every Culture, which in itself grows up out of a mother-landscape and renews and intensifies the intimacy of humanity and soil.¹

Introduction

Reducing the Whole

Stephen Atkinson's Zachary House can be reduced to four elements as the quote above by Oswald Spengler suggests; each reflects the domestic deities, the spirits of home, and thus becomes symbolic of settlement within a once hostile landscape. Just as farm buildings are an indication of their

purpose (barn, grain silo, and crib), Stephen Atkinson creates an index for dwelling that points to humanity's place in the world.² The four reduced elements are as such:

Chimney/Hearth/Stoop; Deck/Platform; Roof/Walls/Room; Void Room/Vestibule³

The elements that make up Atkinson's Zachary House are bound by circumstance and should not be made universal in application; they are reductions that serve to rarefy a place and bring about an emotional attachment to a locale, albeit tinged with the nostalgic. The Zachary House, like any good example of architecture should, serves as an intercession between culture and nature; and thereby evokes all the potential meanings that arise when human culture emerges from a place.

The little retreat is not named for the owners but for the place it occupies.⁴ It is a possession of the locale. Its meanings are without outward reference except to those things that point inward to its existence: a spare expression of a place in the world where we can be human.

Atkinson's work becomes a point of emotional resonance, a simple composed figure on the land that opens up to a multivalence of meaning. His composition is comprised of singular elements that when drawn together create an interplay that resonates with a greater meaning.⁵ As a composition,

the Zachary House is complete; each element is attuned with the other so as to form a microcosm. What connects Atkinson's work to the whole of architecture are simple built decisions that represent human insight as to our place in the world—pointing to the primordial act of fabricating a human realm between the perilous beauty of land and sky.

Elements

Chimney/Hearth/Stoop

By making the hearth (considered the archetypal element of tribal and familial place-making) into a point of entry and departure—in fact loosening the hearth from its customary central and practical place and relocating it to the periphery—Atkinson transforms it into something symbolic. As an element, it redirects the purpose of the retreat from physical satiety to spiritual contemplation. By this architectural act, Atkinson moves toward the essence of the retreat: a place outside the world where we contemplate our place within the world.

The hearth and chimney are integrated with an adeptly fashioned stoop. The entry stoop's subtle offset creates an intermediate zone of ebb and flow, so appropriate to any entry configuration. Atkinson makes the steps that lead from ground to platform jointed and articulate so as to bring about a place for the transitory experiences of welcoming and departing. Atkinson combines entry and departure with

the hearth. In the process, he invokes the ancient Italian goddess Vesta, daughter of Saturn and Ops, goddess of the hearth, and more especially of the fire on the hearth. In her temple the Vestal virgins maintained a perpetual fire.

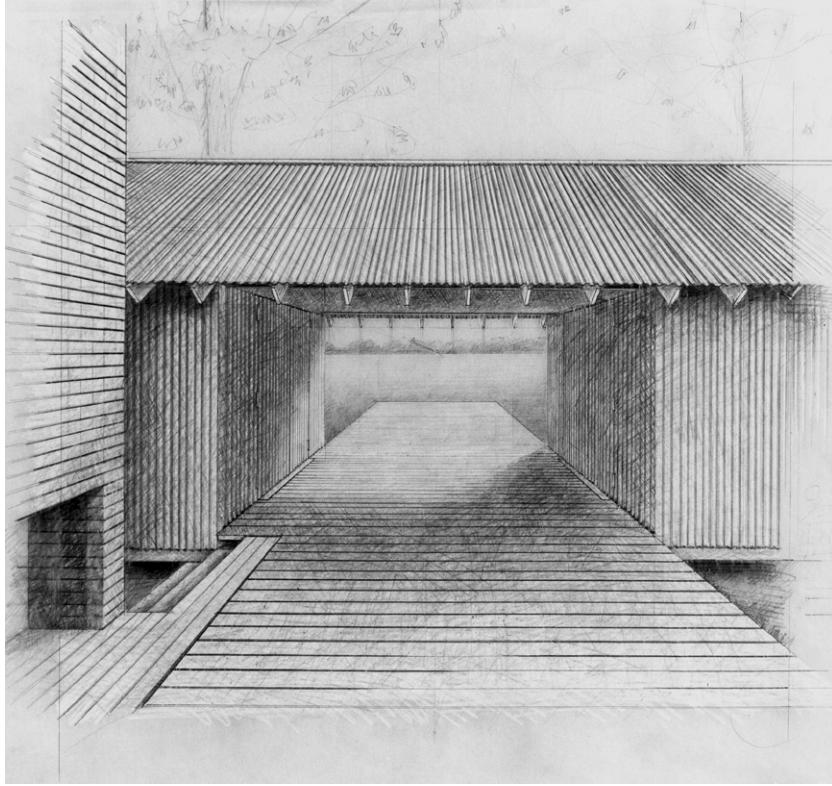
Atkinson economizes his use of masonry by integrating the components of stoop, hearth, and chimney into a single element. By necessity, each of these components is earthbound—by the very nature of the stoop, it delivers us to and from the ground; and by the sheer weight and mass of the hearth and chimney, it must bear direct to the ground. Masonry construction carries with it associative meanings: stacked units, mortar, stratification, solidity, longevity, and inert resistance to consumption in fire.

Deck/Platform

Upon ascending the masonry stoop, our feet encounter a platform that runs between the two living chambers. The wood planking of the platform is level with the interior flooring, forming a continuous area that flows both inside and outside.

The Zachary House uses a conventional foundation and thereby raises the platform above the land. As with much of the construction in Louisiana, dwellings are built on a “pier and sill” foundation; this raises the living space above the earth's grade, forming a crawlspace below. The platform,





raised above the land, separates the retreat from its surroundings, and thereby opposes the extensive natural landscape with a humanized place.

The construction of a platform is first initiated by creating a clearing; a place distinguished from nature—a place cleared by human hands and made open to human eyes. Thus the platform becomes a place of action—indicative of human activity taking place. All recognized places are in fact, places of human action. The recognition of a place as distinct from its surroundings is to sense the presence of Lares, ancient Roman domestic deities, the presiders and protectors of a particular locale—associated with a place's genius loci. Constructing a platform, like making a clearing, frees a place from its surroundings and makes it ready for human settlement.⁶ Taking place implies the overlap between place and human activity.

The platform stretches into the landscape and leads the observer's eyes beyond the edge of the deck. The platform is divided by four occasions along its length: first, a landing that surmounts the masonry stoop; second, a fire-place taking advantage of the warmth and conviviality of the hearth; third, a breezeway between two interior rooms; and fourth, a shaded place beneath two adjacent pecan trees. The deck is a contradictory realm, stretched between ambiguous and contradictory tensions. It is at once an elevated place from which we might view the land beyond; and yet it creates an edge, thereby distinguishing itself from the surrounding grass-covered field.

Roof/Walls/Room

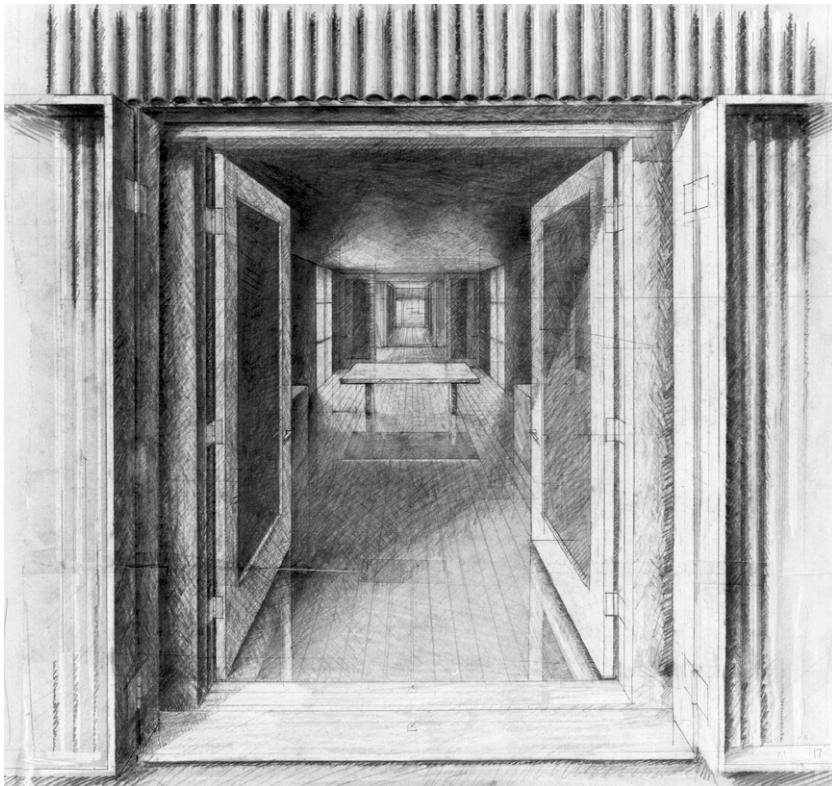
The retreat's walls and roof provide the fundamentals for shelter: a vertical barrier to serve as a windbreaker, and a pitched roof to shed rainwater in case of storms. A room is created from combining the elements of wall, roof, and platform. An inside is fashioned in opposition to the expansive world

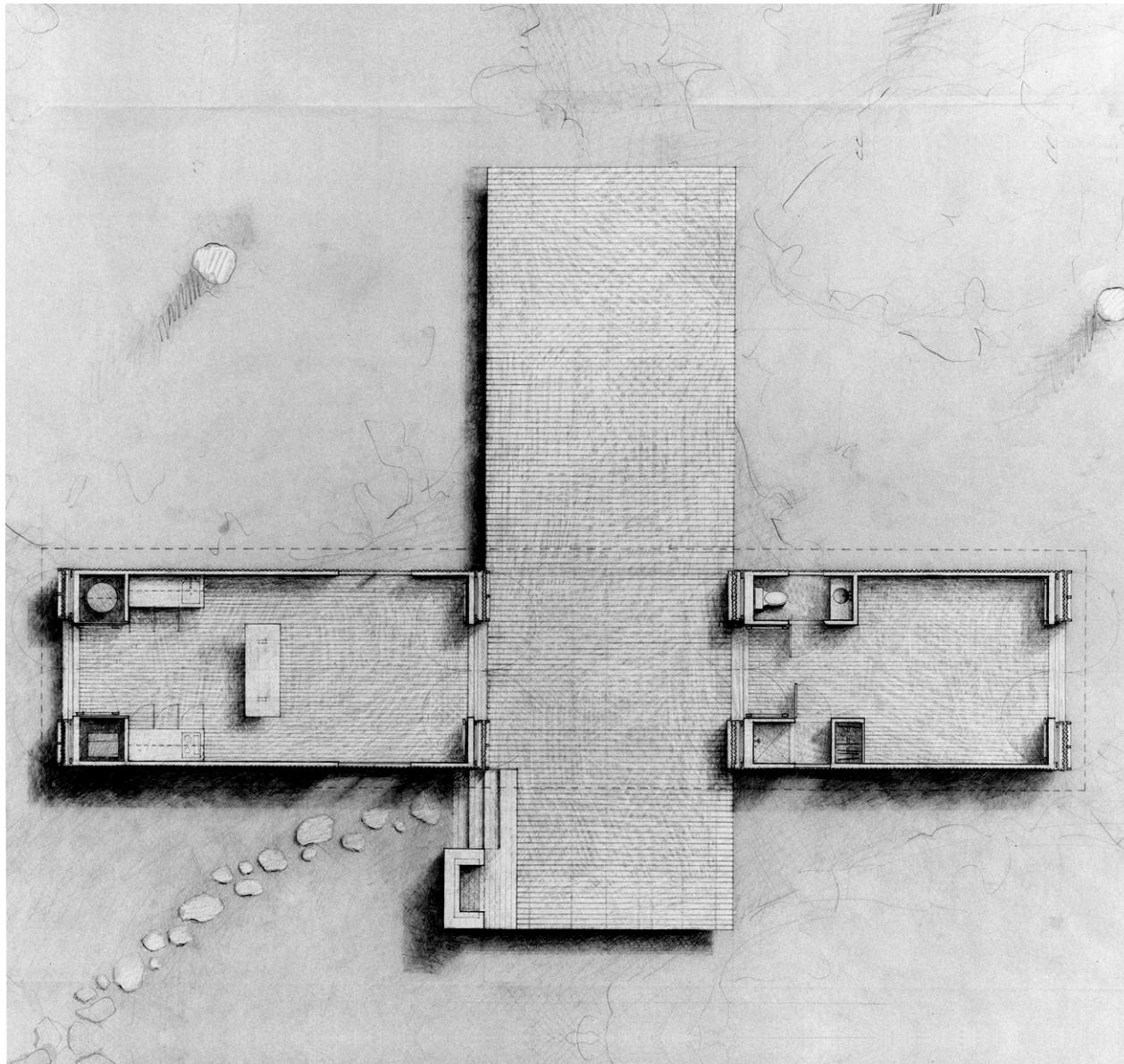
outside. Atkinson's walls invoke the primal expression of enclosure. A single wall is not enough; it takes a minimum of two walls spaced at an interval and parallel to each other to define an interior realm fit for human occupation.

Atkinson creates two chambers set apart but bridged by the galvanized steel roof. Though similarly clad and sharing the same technique of wood framing, the walls and roof are treated as compositional counterpoints. The pitched roof caps the walls and exposes its rafters. The walls ascend vertical from the platform, while the roof spans horizontal—shadowing the platform, extending lengthwise, and paralleling the top bearing plate of the walls.

The rooms facilitate two occasions of human life: shared and private. Each space becomes a sanctuary to the dual aspects of the human spirit—the extrovert (us to others) and the introvert (us to ourselves), the convivial and the sequestered, the communal (eucharistic) and the individual (monastic). Furniture and fixtures distinguish the occasions in each room. Repose and privacy are indicated by bed and water closet. Whereas domestic communion is indicated by a dining table and the kitchen stove and sink. Both of these rooms are chambers through which we enact our humanity. Penates, ancient Roman deities that preside over the domestic sanctuary, could guard each chamber. The retreat that Stephen Atkinson fashions for his client need not be lived in to possess the qualities that make it human: the house acts out its humanity by its very presence—as an indicator of human existence and aspiration within the world.

Wood frame construction requires sensitivity to spacing, interval, and intermediacy. The space between studs is the important yet overlooked aspect of frame construction. Once the frame is clad, it transforms into a rigid diaphragm, becoming taut





like a drum or tent. The character of the wall outside is that of durability and resistance—while the character of the inside is one of refinement and delicacy.

The interval of the frame is revealed through translucent corrugated panels that interlock with the exterior galvanized steel walls. These floor-to-ceiling “openings” filter light from outside and illuminate the inside through a second layer of translucent-white acrylic panels set flush with the gypsum board. Light is transmuted as it passes through the wall. Another set

of openings, four in all, demonstrate the complex demands placed on a building’s openings. Articulate in their design, these other openings combine door with window and concealed sliding screens with hinged hurricane shutters. Within a thin frame, these openings accommodate various options that allow for gradual transformation from complete enclosure to an unencumbered void.

Intervals within the frame lead to ratios of breadth and height; and through the relation of differing intervals, ratios combine to form proportions.

Atkinson reconciles the use of standardized and conventional materials (nominal 2 by 4’s, corrugated panels of galvanized steel and acrylic, sheets of gypsum board, wood flooring, etc.) with a set of transcendent ratios (2/5, 3/5, 4/5 and 1/2, 1/4, 1/8). A flood of proportional relationships can be discerned throughout the various lineaments that outline the building’s constituent elements.⁷

Void Room/Vestibule

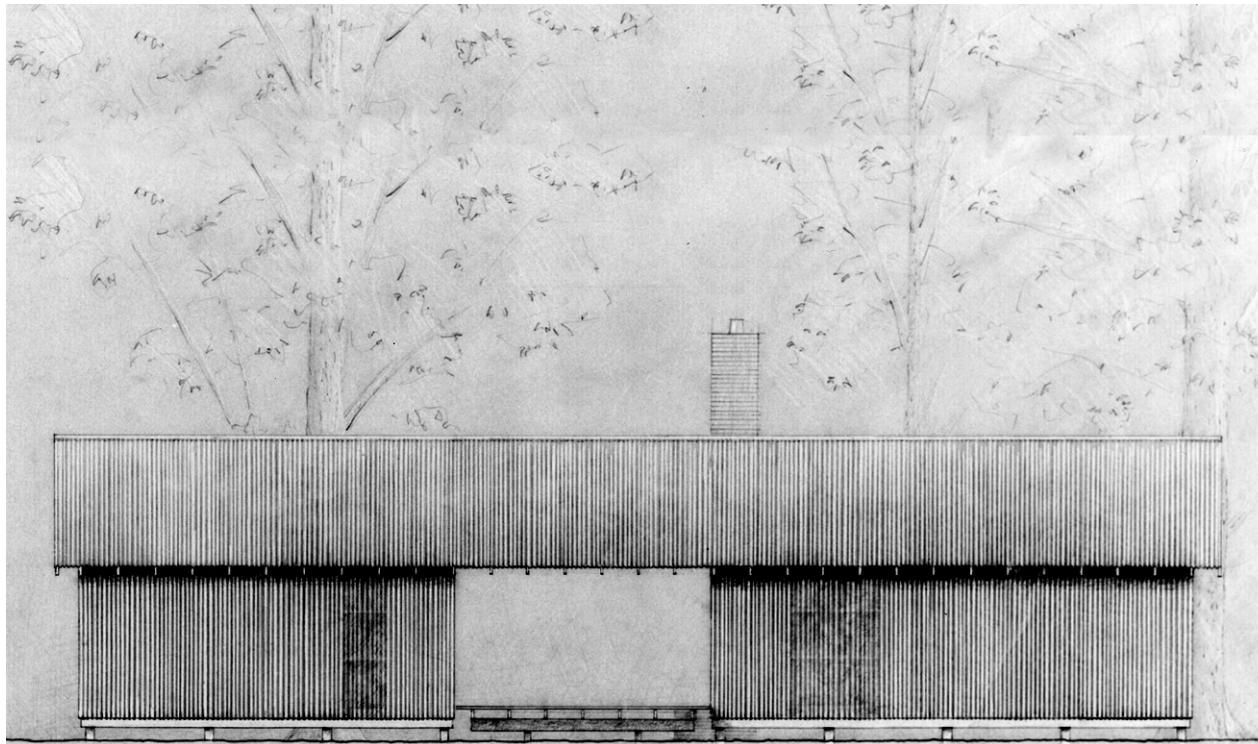
Next we encounter a breezeway reminiscent of other dwellings; a void room that serves both as interval and

connector. The void room is open on two opposing ends. The observer is presented with a vista, being given a selective picture of the natural world. As we peer through this void room, we encounter the world beyond, not as a person immersed within but as a something to be viewed from without. The void room, when thought of as a frame, becomes a vestibule through which we can engage the world.

When we follow the grain of the deck boards, the void room becomes an interval between two doors, an open break between two realms. While a chasm is formed, the deck below our feet becomes a bridge, connecting disparate realms and drawing the two living spaces together. The bridge, in both metaphor and reality, exposes the interdependence of things once considered separate. A door may be open or shut, serving as both conjunction and disjunction between realms; yet a bridge always unites across space and intervenes between things divided.⁸ The breezeway manifests the ambiguous aspects of passage and door. Atkinson’s enigmatic and poetic breezeway could easily be dedicated to Janus, the ancient Italian deity depicted with two faces—one looking forward and the other back; this versatile god presided over doors, passages, entrances, and personifies all beginnings—including the month of January.

Reduction

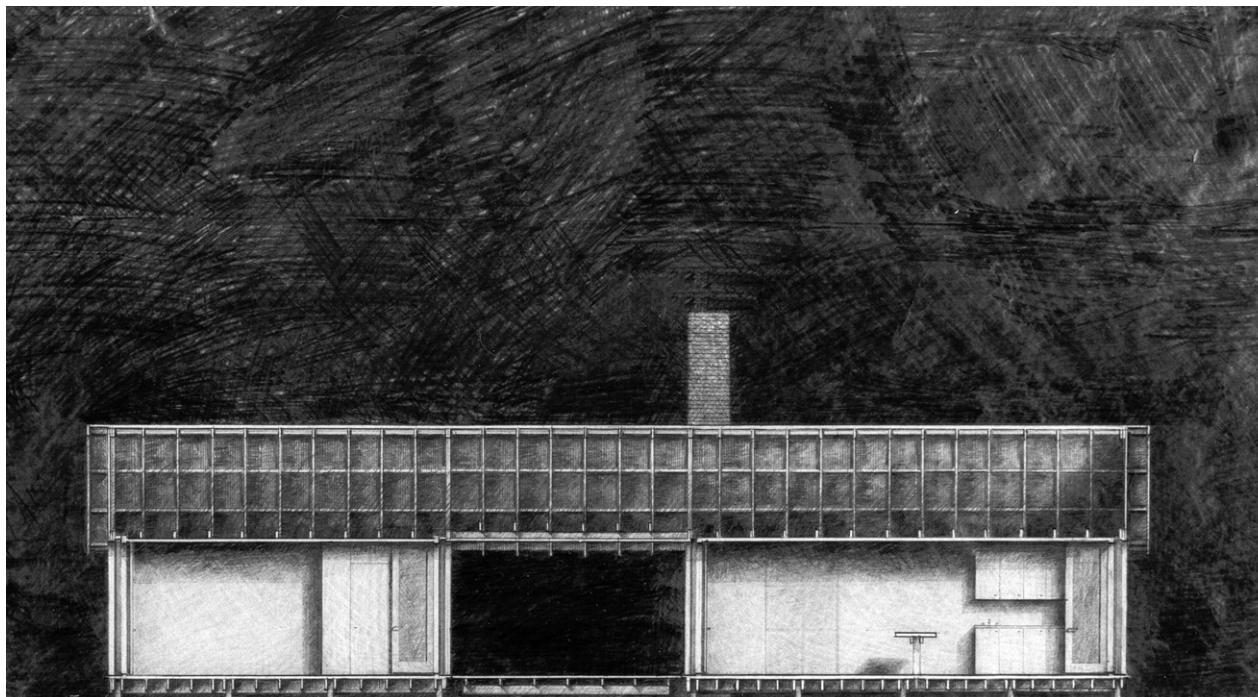
The Zachary House is reminiscent of previous dwellings. Many critics have considered the building a reinterpretation of typological forms: as dogtrot or shotgun house. To be sure, this is a superficial insight, since the house operates beyond this level of formal association and directs our attention to much deeper levels of human experience. For Atkinson, personal reminiscence and cultural memory serve as a propelling force that directs us toward the future, and in doing so, carries the past forward.



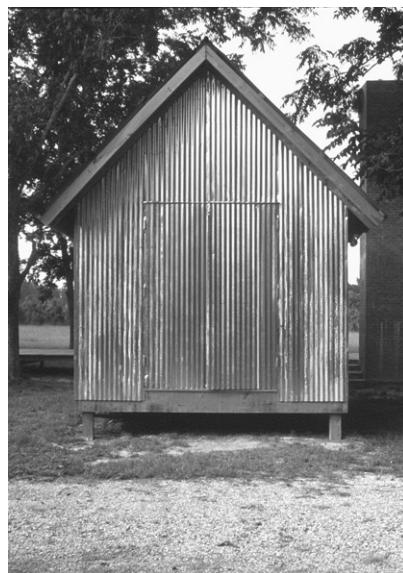
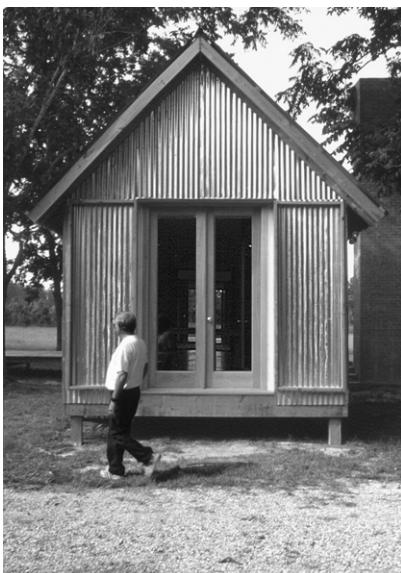
The method by which Atkinson makes architecture is not one of abstraction but rather a process of reduction—a distillation from diffuse sources that must be forced through an architectural act of compression—intuitively reduced and condensed to form an effusion of essences. Through design, Atkinson takes the complex and abundant relationships found between land and sky, people and place, life and location, enclosure and expanse, past and future and draws tight the cord between extremes, pulling them closer, drawing them together into a singular association. And by a secret and reductive process, simple form encompasses a vastness of spirit.⁹

Stephen Atkinson's work evokes in the observer the discomfiting sense of something already seen. Through the use of spare and primal elements his work reminds the observer of other buildings, forms, and places. Atkinson's work unpretentiously links the transcendent with the common. The thought persists that Atkinson is in pursuit of that which is timeless in architecture.

The forms employed by Stephen Atkinson are expedients—pondered upon and reduced to a composition of primal elements set in a specific landscape. Undoubtedly beginning and ending with a simple figure, the Stephen Atkinson's work goes through a deliberate distillation of multiple sources from which his architecture might be derived. Atkinson's work in the Zachary House is that of stubborn returns, journeys into memory; an intuitive search to retrieve some elusive condition with which to imbue this particular place.



The configuration of forms that comprise the Zachary House give the observer a sense of apprehension due to their familiarity. We feel as if Atkinson's forms and spaces remain consciously unresolved, thereby opening his architecture to further interpreta-



tion. Were the derivation of his forms refined any further, they might lose their raw power; and thereby weaken their ability to latch onto the familiar and the transcendent.

By keeping his architecture simple to point of ambiguity, Atkinson leaves his work open to multiple meaning. This is a deliberate kind of ambiguity, resulting in the creation of a poetic construct which contains an essence greater than its potential interpretations—a persistent formal structure whose perceived meaning will be less than the overall essence of the architecture.

The elements of the Zachary House (Chimney/Hearth/Stoop, Deck/Platform, Roof/Walls/Room, and Void Room/Vestibule) each have their own analogical structures that individually call forth multiple sources. After com-

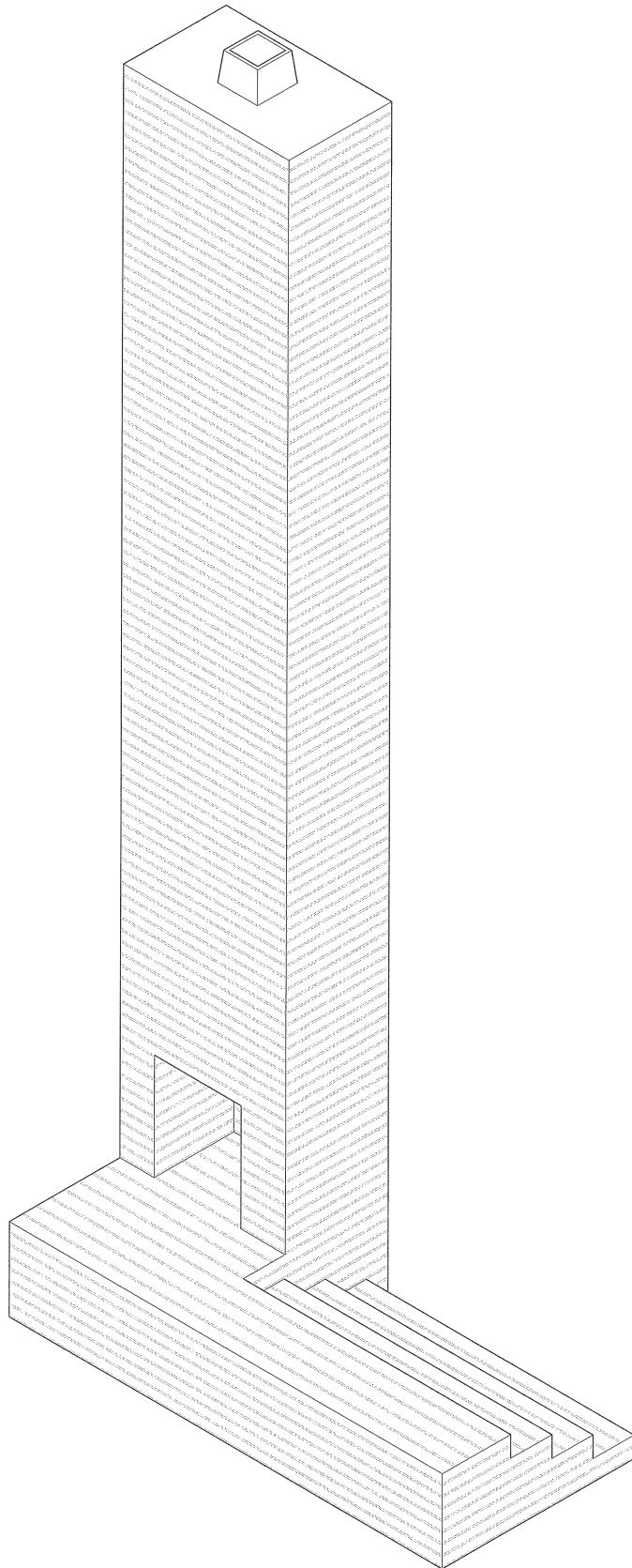
posing these already potent forms in an overall organization, their individual meanings go through a radical shift, evoking a newly defined whole which is stronger than each particular element. By combining elements already able to withstand multiple meaning into a potent formal composition, Atkinson suffuses his architecture with greater meaning. As Aldo Rossi suggests, “The emergence of relations among things, more than the things themselves, always give rise to new meanings.”¹⁰ Thus, the juxtaposition of elements that are independently laden with meaning allows for internal reference between the elements—the establishment of a conversation between the four elements that purports an even greater and unruly essence.

Atkinson’s work is not mimetic in a direct sense, but rather is distilled from original sources both real and imagined. Atkinson creates an architectural composition of primal elements that contain within themselves the memory of other structures. The disturbing, archetypal quality of Atkinson’s work is caused by the lack of clarity as to where his sources begin or end. Atkinson’s architecture generates its identity through the dual conditions of presence and memory. The overall significance of the Zachary House draws from the personal memories of the observer in reference to a greater cultural memory—the ultimate source from which Atkinson draws his images.

Conclusion:

Between Land and Sky

We humans create a world for ourselves by humanizing nature. In antipathy to the natural world, we humans extract a place for ourselves. Humanity creates buildings attuned to human life and aspiration, and we call this expression architecture. Atkinson uses architecture to invoke a microcosm, and thereby establishes a humane place within that larger cosmos; the Zachary House, as a form of expres-



sion, adjusts that greater cosmos in harmony with our lives.

What makes a building both timeless and local? The answer to this conundrum seems implicit to the work of Stephen Atkinson. To reveal the timeless in the local is a rare gift for an architect to bring forth.

With Atkinson's work, the mind of the architect is defined: purveyor of cultural meaning and cultural memory; insightful observer of human life upon the land and over time—endeavoring to perceive the transcendent and unchanged marks of human presence and seeking to amplify their expression in new works. We live between the walls, under the roof, and above the ground; yet architecture exists under the sky and on the land—between land and sky.

Endnotes

¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Volume Two* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939) 90.

² Atkinson's elements serve as simple signals, understandable in reference to Charles Sanders Peirce's division of signs, specifically his classification of the index. Atkinson's building elements serve as indicators. Peirce's term "index" derives from the conventional use of the term "indicate." This division has great implications to architecture as a form of expression. Peirce defines "index" as a thing that focuses attention. For instance: a doorway indicates physical passage, a canopy may indicate shade, a street may indicate direction. Geoffrey Broadbent's essay "Architects and Their Symbols" relies on Peirce's contribution to the study of signs. Broadbent suggests that certain symbols in architecture may be unreliable and that a more fundamental and reliable form of architectural expression is the index, which does not require indoctrination into culturally specific forms of expression. For more on this, please see Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," from *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justin Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955) 98-119. Also, please consult Geoffrey Broadbent's "Architects and

Their Symbols," most recently to be found in *Classic Readings in Architecture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999) 96-120.

³ Each of these four elements can be subdivided into a set of extended elements all honed by Atkinson. Here is a list of twelve extended elements that could withstand further classification: Stoop/masonry steps, Hearth/chimney, Corrugated metal roof, Wood frame walls, Void room/vestibule, Expository room (active/extroverted half), Preparatory room (passive/introverted half), Doors/screens/shutters, Thresholds/openings/frames, Utensils and fixtures, Immediate landscape, and Shade trees.

⁴ Zachary, Louisiana is north of Baton Rouge; a landscape crossed by a strata that geologists classify as prairie; a typically grassy region known for meandering streams and floodplains terraced slightly higher in elevation than the river's delta region; it is noticeably different than lowland swamps; the terrain is flat but mildly undulating and populated by pines and deciduous trees that prefer a sandy soil.

⁵ This notion stems from the similarity between harmony in musical instruments and harmony in architectural elements. Although a rather common notion, it was succinctly defined by Sir Henry Wotton in his *The Elements of Architecture*. In the section "Of Doores and Windowes" he states, "These In-lets of Men and of Light, I couple together, because I find their due Dimensions, brought under one rule, by Leone Alberti (a learned Searcher) who form the Schoole of Pythagoras (where it was a fundamental Maxime, that the Images of all things are latent in Numbers) doth determine the comeliest Proportion, between breadths and heights; Reducing Symmetrie to Symphonie, and the harmonie of Sounde, to a kinde of harmonie in Sight, after this manner: the two principall Consanances..." Sir Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture*, [facsimile reprint of the first edition (London, 1624)] (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968) 53-54.

⁶ The phrases clearing, place of action, and taking place are found in the writings of David Michael Levin and Christian Norberg-Schulz. Though not expressly stated, David Michael Levin points out that the dance-circle, is a gathering of action and place since literally, the name suggests a dance taking place there. See Chapter 7, Part I, "A Place of Clearing," from David Michael Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 322-338. Christian Norberg-Schulz, with regard to Otto Friedrich Bollnow states that, "Thus the German word Raum (space) meant the action of freeing a place for settlement (einräumen), before it came to denote the place as such. This state of affairs is well expressed by the term "take place." The concept of place, thus, has two meanings: place of action and

point of departure.” From Christian Norberg-Schulz, “The Concept of Place,” *Architecture: Meaning and Place* (New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1988) 29-30. Also to understand the source of Norberg-Schulz’s comment, one must see the German edition of O. F. Bollnow, *Mensch und Raum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000)—sadly, this book has been in print since 1963 and has never been translated into an English edition.

⁷This insight points to Alberti and his definition of lineaments. He states, “Let us therefore begin thus: the Whole matter of building is composed of lineaments and structure. All the intent and purpose of lineaments lies in finding the correct, infallible way of joining and fitting together those lines and angles which define and enclose the surfaces of a building. It is the function and duty of lineaments, then, to prescribe an appropriate place, exact numbers, a proper scale, and a graceful order for whole buildings and for each of their constituent parts, so that the whole form and appearance of a building may depend on the lineaments alone. . . .” Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, Robert Tavernor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) 7.

⁸For further inquiry into these ideas, see Georg Simmel’s republished essay “Bridge and Door,” translated in *Lotus International*, Vol. 47 (Milan: Electa Spa, 1985) 52-56.

⁹Atkinson’s method operates along lines similar to the actual process of distillation. Writer John Berger describes the distillation of gnôle, a cider-alcohol distilled from apples and wood smoked sausages. Berger here describes the bull-like appearance of the distillery while simultaneously remarking on the process, “That the produce of this giant, shaking, copper-horned bull should come, drop by drop, out of a duct no larger than the open beak of a small bird, is a sign of its secret. Its secret is to transform work [of growing, harvesting, and mashing apples by hand] into spirit. What is emptied into the vases is work; what comes out of the beak is imagination.” Excerpted from John Berger’s short story “The Value of Money,”



found in his collection entitled *Pig Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) 88.

¹⁰ Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) 19.

