Günther Domenig's Rational Centre: A reading of the Steinhaus

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On the shore of Lake Ossiach, in the Austrian region of Carinthia, stands a mountain of fragmented concrete structures and distorted cubes covered in brushed steel. This is Steinhaus (Stone House), the house Günther Domenig (1934–2012) built for himself: a manifesto built over a time span of twenty years.[1] Construction started in 1986 and the house was declared completed only on 5 October 2008, when it was baptised by some of Domenig's friends (including Peter Noever, Wolf D. Prix, Thom Mayne, Hans Hollein, and Raimund Abraham) during an opening event including a live set by the avant-garde jazz saxophonist Evan Parker.[2] The house was never meant to be just a house, but rather a space for hosting events for artists, his students, and his office. Inside the house, at first, one can see a wide opening towards the lake; now enclosed by an inclined glass cube. It is a space for events, workshops, lectures, and conferences. On the left, following one of the many staircases, one can enter the resident artists' and guests' spaces. On the right, by following a second set of stairs partially running outside the house, one can get in a smaller space to which Domenig's practice was meant to relocate for some time during the summer. From there, up yet another staircase, it is possible to visit Domenig's own room. The building's narrative is as clear as it is explicit: it is the labyrinthine incubator of its creator's life: Domenig's genius, his work, his students, and his privacy come together, all at once, under one roof.

Domenig worked on the design of the Steinhaus for more than twenty years, experimenting with different structural, formal, and technical solutions. The result is an incoherent agglomeration of differences; a mountain of expressive forms in concrete and steel; a swirl of cuts and joints. The vulgate: the house is the outcome of Domenig's personal obsessions and fantasies.[3] Therefore, the building is usually described as a sort of irrational, chaotic, and fragmentary fantasy. For example, for Peter Noever, this house's meaning would be 'invisible [...] to a perception which is not trained to look through the barbarism of triviality'.[4]

Indeed, it is possible to discuss this house in many other terms. We might say that this building is – quite simply – an example of expressionism. Or, following Matthias Boeckl, we might look at this house as one of those unique buildings that elude historical meta-categories, not unlike Vicino Orsini's Sacred Forest in Bomarzo, or *facteur* Cheval's Palais Idéal in Hauterives, France.[5] The house could be defined as surreal due to some of the objects one can find in it: three concrete structures designed by Domenig while thinking about when he broke his fingers when he was a child; or the lamp Nix-Nuz-Nix, resembling a bird flying in the house's main hall. Maybe, the house could be read by following Bruno Zevi's definition of Domenig's architecture (among others): 'Smash the idols directly'.[6]

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The process of building this house was particularly painful, to the point that a former collaborator of Domenig, whom I have tried to speak to about the project, prefers not to even talk about this period, having been somehow traumatic.

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The names are mentioned by Lebbeus Woods. See Woods 'Stonehouse', https://lebbeuswoods.wordpress.com/2008/10/02/stonehouse/. The event is reported by Peter Noever. See Noever, *Günther Domenig*, 21.

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For example, this is how Domenig describes the house in *Daidalos* in 1995: 'The evolution of an architectural design and the result representing a correlation of my person and the experience, the living conditions and the landscape, my personal existence, my memories, and their subjective expression. "The natural and the artificial", "Nature and mind", "Interior and exterior", "the twilight of the future"'. See Domenig, 'Stone House as Steindorf', 66.

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Noever, *Günther Domenig*, 22.

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Boeckl, *Günther Domenig*, 254–7.

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Zevi, 'The Seven Myths of Architecture', 420.

Fig. 1 The Steinhaus in its context.
(photo credits missing)

Or we could contextualise the house by looking at where and when it was designed; then, this house could be understood as the expression of what has been called the Grazer Schule: a school – a group of architects – sharing a similar aesthetic, expressive, subjective, and personal attitude towards architectural design, all working in Graz in the same period, among whom Domenig was the most internationally recognised.[7]

However we might like to frame it, because of its mysterious nature, this house is defined variably as barbarian, trivial, or irrational. This chapter's objective is to unpack why the house has been interpreted this way. As will be discussed, it is quite obvious that Domenig projected his own personality on the construction of the house. Nonetheless, it is less clear why such a fact has to be considered irrational. So, in order to jump into the topic, allow me to first ask a preliminary question: why did Domenig design this house in such an extreme manner?

As already said, we know that this house is a figment of its author's imagination. So, in order to answer the question, we should start with Domenig's biography and look at his personality. Günther was the son of Herbert Domenig, a Nazi judge who was executed at the end of the Second World War. Such a traumatic event undoubtedly influenced Domenig's personality. But does this personal history stick to the house? According to his former students, the Austrian architect was obsessed with the need to emancipate himself from the role of his father in the history of Styria; and his architectural language was part of this process of emancipation.[8] Simply put, as the architecture of the Nazi was symmetrical, monumental, and hierarchical, Domenig's architecture was deliberately asymmetrical, organic, and contradictory. It can thus (at least partly) be read as the outcome of such an ideological opposition. To strengthen this hypothesis, it is worthwhile to briefly focus on another project by Domenig: the restoration of the Nazi Rally Grounds Documentation Centre in Nuremberg, Germany. The project was to convert Ludwig and Frank Ruff's Nazi convention hall into a centre for documentation on the Nazi period. Domenig's intervention engages in a direct and almost violent confrontation; it slices through the imposing brick torso of the original complex with a diagonal incision that cuts one wing of the immense hall. In doing so, it disturbs the building's symmetry and activates novel spatial hierarchies.

However, assuming that Domenig's house is solely the outcome of his desire to confront and challenge his past is only partly interesting. Let's consider, then, the nature and the characters of this house's formalism. A lot, it seems, depends on irrational considerations. For instance, in a conversation between Domenig, Alvin Boyarski, Peter Cook, and Noever that took place at the Architectural Association in London in 1986, words like 'individualistic', 'dream', 'anti-rational', 'surrealist', or even 'demonic' were used to describe the house.[9] These words are used to imply a personal design method based on imagination; an architecture that appar-

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For a short introduction, see Bardeschi, 'Organic Manic Mannerism'.

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I refer to what professor Peter Trummer – my PhD advisor, former student of Domenig at the University of Graz, and professor of urban design at the University of Innsbruck – has said during a public lecture at the University of Innsbruck.

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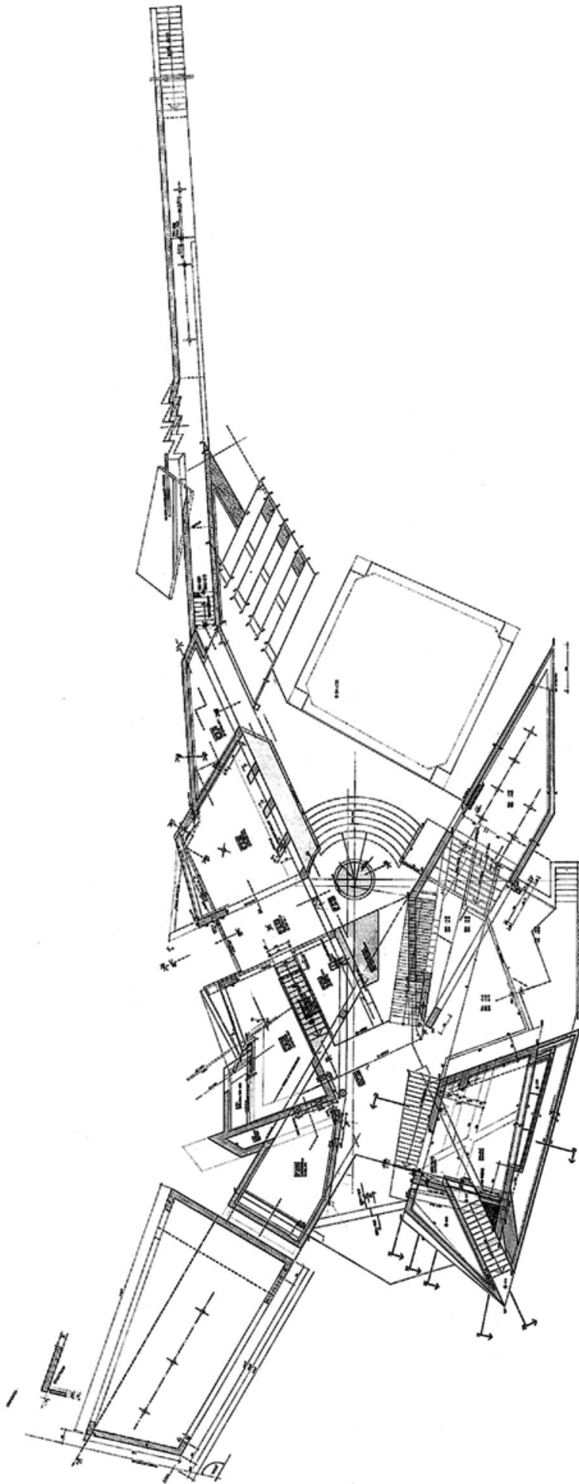
Boyarsky et al, 'Drawing on Dreams'.

Fig. 2 Internal space joining the different levels of the house.

Fig. 3 Steinhaus' plan. (© Architekt Günther Domenig)



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ently goes against the grain of systematic thinking. But what is the difference between a rational and irrational design? Is apparent disorder necessarily illogical or irrational? Domenig told his peers, 'The most important part of my work is the attempt to develop out of the free sketches a controlled and geometric concept, to find a systematic order that retains the complexity of the sketches'.[10] This suggests that while his house looks surreal or irrational, it is the product of a rational (even linear) way of thinking.[11]

Reasonable irrationality

Domenig's house looks like a contradictory composition of parts, each unrelated to the other. Its plan clearly expresses such quality: several objects are asymmetrically arranged around a path and what seems to be a circular centre. What emerges are tensions between repetition and difference; centrifugal and centripetal; whole against parts. These tensions are amplified by the existence of one main directionality of the design (due to the site's shape) yet fragmented into multiple parts directed towards the outside of the building. The experience of the house, however, is far less irrational than its appearance in visual representations. Precise detailing joins this 'irrational' agglomeration of parts, straddling complex and sophisticated junctions between concrete, steel, and glass. One could hardly call this level of attention to detail irrational.

Even so, Domenig was obsessively devoted to the development of a sort of weird and personal architecture: 'the personal dimension of architecture', as he would say.[12] His house, then, could be said to be nothing more than the umpteenth excuse to experiment with such personal obsessions. After all, Domenig himself describes the house this way.[13] Nonetheless, as the author's declared intentions should not always be taken as fact, a different interpretation of the work can be proffered; one that may suggest the vagueness of words such as 'irrational', particularly after visiting the house. The house can appear as non-rational, but only if we decide to surrender to its official descriptions and to the meaning usually attributed to this word. Thom Mayne describes the house as a dream, and he does so by first quoting a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke: 'The house is dissolved and distributed within me.'[14] Such a sentence is an evocative reference, but why should the expression of an architect's subjectivity be a form of irrationalism?

Because we pretend to know what irrationality looks like: it is contradictory, irregular, and, above-all, fragmented. But still, why should we rely on this imaginary? Aldo Rossi's work, often defined as an example of rationalism, is a good example.[15] Rossi's projects – despite relying on pure volumes – are often designed as compositions of quotations and extremely illogical allusions to the architect's personal obsessions. In a sense, it is thus no less irrational than Domenig's house. Furthermore, both architects shared an obsession for personal memories to be symbolically embedded in their projects. Nonetheless, we describe Rossi's architecture as 'rational', and Domenig's as 'irrational'. We believe both these inter-

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Boyarsky et al, 'Drawing on Dreams', 105.

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The question of linearity is an interesting theoretical topic. In fact, Stone House has sometimes been related to the so-called complexity paradigm, particularly during the first phase of excitement for new digital tools in the 1990s. For instance, Charles Jencks has interpreted the house as a possible forerunner of a non-linear architecture, even though, I would argue, his interpretation relies on a metaphoric understanding, transforming the problem of non-linearity in a pure metaphor to be evoked by architecture's shapes. See Jencks, 'Nonlinear Architecture', 6–9.

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Domenig, 'Stone House as Steindorf', 66.

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'What the hand does / What the head does / It is the house', in Noever, *Günther Domenig*, 60.

14
Thom Mayne, 'Emerging from Collapse', 6.

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Rossi himself has often discussed the idea of rationalism in architecture as a form of realism. For instance, in 'Architettura e Città, Passato e Presente', he writes the following words: 'Le architetture utopiche, fantascientifiche hanno la loro debolezza [...] nell'allontanarsi dal reale. Un'architettura razionalista è necessariamente realista' (Utopian, science-fiction architectures have their weakness [...] in moving away from reality. A rationalist architecture is necessarily realist). Rossi, 'Architettura e Città, Passato e Presente', 480.

Fig. 4 Günther Domenig's room.
(© ##)

Fig. 5 Steinhaus' main space. (© ##)

pretations because we are used to them; they are obvious platitudes, or – at best – they are shared 'critical' metanarratives. The real matter of dispute, as once brilliantly put by Robin Evans, resides in the problem of recognition: how we perceive and recognise values.[16] We perceive irrationality when we see it, as we perceive rationality when we see the shapes that have always been used to represent such 'meaning' (grids, pure volumes, regularity, axial symmetries). Irrationality, in this case, is nothing more – and nothing less – than an aesthetic effect since any design method is inherently rational. Why, then, keep on defining this house as irrational? Could Domenig's house be something other than that?

While it is undeniable that the Steinhaus is the outcome of a self-reflexive process mirroring Domenig's own construction of personality, it is less clear why such a fact has to be considered irrational, not to say demonic.

The house as a world

In order to find a new meaning, or to formulate a different interpretation of the house, it may be worth referring once again to Rilke's writing, only partially quoted by Mayne. Rilke's poem reads: '[T]he whole thing is scattered about inside me, the rooms, the stairs that descended with such ceremonious slowness, others, narrow cages that mounted in a spiral movement, in the darkness of which we advanced like the blood in our veins.'[17]

This poem describes a house as something similar to a body: a setting for a seemingly continuous and fragmented experience where we circulate like the blood inside our organs. In other words, the house defines a whole world in itself. And yet, the inner space of the house is in constant dialogue with its surroundings. The result is the visual fragmentation of the building in relation to its environment. In this sense, the possibly hidden meaning of this house resides in its ability to fragment the vastness of the outside space and recompose it in the security of an enclosed space by juxtaposing fragments and discrete pieces. In this respect, the building may be looked at as a cubist painting in which the different abstracted parts assume different configurations depending on the point of view from which we look at them. And yet, as the experience of a space can only be compared to that of a painting in a metaphorical sense, this house's interiority possesses much more interesting specificities. The intelligibility of Domenig's composed fragments is related to something different. What we see is a masterly alternation between masses in steel and concrete, next to cuts and openings allowing us to see what is outside of this house's spaces. Materials without any applied colour reveal properties that are both formal and material. Light has mass, but it is suspended in the alternation of cuts resembling wounds or loopholes and wide openings towards the landscape. Everything is lifted, cantilevered, suspended in the air, but everything has a mass and an extremely powerful visual weight. There is no sense of lightness, nor heaviness; we only see suspension. Some of the most striking properties of the house have to do with the perception of mass, figurative elements, symbols, and materials. That is one of the reasons why

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In Robin Evans' words: 'The whole matter resides in recognition. I recognize plant life when I see it, and I recognize rationality in architecture when I see it, because I begin to understand, after much practice, what the word is applied to. I am then tempted to think that all things bearing the same name, whether or not they are architecture, must share an essential, but this is not necessary, nor, in this instance [Mies' Barcelona Pavilion], is it likely.' See Evans, 'Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries', 59.

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Rilke, 'Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge', quoted in Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 57.

the drawings and photographic reproductions of this house cannot help us to really understand what this house is like. This is also why, while visiting the house, it is particularly interesting to discover that the circle appearing in the building's plan, cuts through every floor and visually connects all the levels. A glass circle that, in the underground level, becomes a glass cylinder inside which water can run, entering a crypt-like room (Domenig used to call this the '*Spiralraum*' [spiral space]) coated in black marble, from where Domenig planned to have his urn shot with a missile towards his grandmother's village.[18] In spite of Domenig's odd intentions, it is interesting to find an element connecting all of the parts of the house vertically, thus reconstructing a unity of the space.

Usual descriptions of the problem of fragmentation – the ultimate shape of what we like to call 'irrational' – tell us that it insists upon individual notions, loose ends, and distrust in any defined system. As Julia Kristeva states: 'It [modern art] seizes this moment of fragmentation in a gesture that does not give it meaning but is, in its very formal existence, a gesture of fleeting sovereignty and of momentary enthusiasm'.[19] While it is easy to suggest that fragmentation is the outcome of an enthusiastic gesture, it is equally easy to claim that one may actually find meanings through fragmentation. The understanding of formal fragmentation as the 'meaningless' representation of a disembodied and corrupted world is one of the most spectacular and successful theoretical simplifications in history of art and architecture critcism. Once we rid ourselves of such preconception, fragmentation may be recognised as a way to generate order, not chaos. Then, Domenig's centripetal centre may be finally seen as something defining some kind of order. It is a proper centre where forces collide; a centre of experience.[20] It is like inserting a point from where the house can be understood. It is like when, hiking through the mountains, one encounters a viewpoint from where the vastness of the environment is described by signs revealing the mountains' heights, and the peaks' names. It is a centripetal hole giving sense to the overall space. But then: what does Domenig want us to experience? The question will never be answered. Yet, it is worthwhile to attempt a speculation. From the circle's centre, the space is continuous: there is no dichotomy between verticals and horizontals, nor between the inside and the outside. Maybe, in this case, Domenig wants us to simply experience space, asking us to forget our memories – something that, after all, seems to have been his life's struggle.

Surely, architecture may produce comments on society, culture, and history, reminding us of the world's unjust realities, in a more or less critical way. And yet, this house sheds a light on another option: architecture (with the arts) can also try to transcend commentary. By virtue of its spatial qualities, its embodied mass, and its formal properties, this house draws us away from the social world, throwing us into a suspended world; a world where, as Raimund Abraham said, 'Expression and contents merge'.[21] In conclusion, this house may show a specific kind of activism – quite rational indeed – the attempt of both expressing and representing something other than the mundane.

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Here I have to thank Raffaela Lackner for providing me with this information while I was visiting Steinhaus.

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Julia Kristeva, 'Interview with Catherine Francolin' (1986), 185.

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In an interview with Paolo Vincenzo Genovese, Domenig gives us a clue about this issue, talking about the need of defining an 'essential' point to be found inside a project: 'Le opere che considero riuscite costituiscono un'unità, sia nel loro interno sia nel contesto nelle quali sono inserite e relativamente alla loro reciproca correlazione. il riferimento che personalmente ritengo più profondo è quello di riuscire a colpire un determinato punto essenziale che spesso si trova all'interno dell'edificio'. (The works that I consider successful constitute a unity in their interiority and in the context in which they are inserted as well as in relation to their mutual correlation. The reference that I personally believe to be the deepest is to be able to hit a certain essential point that is often found inside the building.) See Genovese, *Günther Domenig*, 37.

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Noever, *Günther Domenig*, 57.

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