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IRONY AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORK OF JOHN HEJDUK

IRONIA I TECHNOLOGIA W TWÓRCZOŚCI JOHNA HEJDUKA

Abstract

In this essay, architectural technology is related to the concept of irony. The value of what becomes the object of such irony is “relativized”, in other words, any claim of precision, exactness, and control of reality on the part of the technical-scientific apparatus clashes with “the deformations of existence”. In the case of John Hejduk’s work, technological precision produced machines whose sole purpose was to have us reflect on the contradictions of history.

Keywords: architecture, irony, John Hejduk

Streszczenie

W niniejszym eseju technologia architektoniczna zostaje zestawiona z pojęciem ironii. Wartość tego, co staje się przedmiotem takiej ironii, zostaje „zrelatywizowana”, innymi słowy, każde roszczenie do precyzji, dokładności i kontroli rzeczywistości ze strony aparatu techniczno-naukowego zderza się z „deformacjami istnienia”. W przypadku twórczości Johna Hejduka technologiczna precyzja tworzyła maszyny, których jedynym celem było skłonić nas do refleksji nad sprzecznościami historii.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, ironia, John Hejduk

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘technology’ as the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes, or that part of science which deals with the machinery used to produce objects and improve human life. Put another way, technology deals with the technical procedures and machinery which make it possible to transform matter into processed products and, more generally, solve a practical problem. To do so, technological advancement produces and uses tools and machinery of great precision and accuracy.

According to Beda Allemann, in a wonderful work entitled *Irony and Poetry*, precision and exactitude constitute the background within which the field of action of irony moves. Irony consists in thinking that we can control reality by adopting scientific behaviour, knowing full well that this will not protect us from the “deformations of existence”, nor will it allow us to better grasp its essence. The greatest ironists of literature such as Kafka, Thomas Mann and Musil prepared the background for the ironic game by establishing a rigorous and unambiguous system of meanings through a detailed and meticulous description of reality:

But what does it mean to develop in detail what has been briefly described? It is a matter of clarifying, of making more real, of approaching something very distant and vague, so much so that one can delude oneself into thinking that one sees it with one's own eyes and touches it with one's own hands.¹

As William Firebrace has pointed out, in *Mask of Medusa* Hejduk cited a note by Alain-Robbe Grillet on Kafka: "In the end, nothing is more fantastic than precision." But Kafka's kind of precision backfired. In *The Building of the Temple*, he described how the temple had been built with the utmost precision and naturalness, but had become worthless because "...instruments obviously of a magnificent sharpness had been used to scratch on every stone – from what quarry had they come? – for an eternity outlasting the temple, the clumsy scribbles of senseless children's hands, or rather the entries of barbaric mountain dwellers."² The extent to which we can make fun of a world depends on its conventionality and determination, which is why science and technology are perfect grounds for irony to the point that, "the scientific style itself, being used in the service of irony, undergoes a process of ironization."³

For a project entitled *Riga, Vladivostok, Lake Baikal*, John Hejduk designed the "Chair of the Northern Watercolorist" (Character no. 52). The irony here lies in the disproportionate effort with which Hejduk undertakes to specify every detail of this strange chair and its practical utility: each knot is studied in detail while the shape and size of the screws and bolts are also indicated ($\frac{1}{2}$ " round bolt – nut on other side – 1" round washer); the actual mechanism makes it possible to fix the parasol in two positions; the seat is equipped with a protection bar as in children's highchairs; a construction detail shows the possibility of removing the steps that reach the seat; all the wood painted grey – all the metal black (Ill. 1). Unlike the comic style, in which the deviations from normality must be barely perceptible and, even in the presence of elements of absolute clarity, the covert and subtly played game of irony has the task of remedying the banality inherent to what now appears a matter impervious to development. The task of John Hejduk's poetry, literature and architecture was precisely this, to regain an authentic relationship with things after the automatism of perception had insinuated the mortal danger of considering all things as if they were the same, and of finding, in other words, the innocent gaze of a child. As I already said on other occasions,⁴ one of the rules that the Russian Formalists drew up to avert this danger was: "Never call an object by its name, but describe it as if it were being seen for the first time." It is not enough to say "Chair" or "Chair of the Watercolorist", but the chair must be described, that is, depicted, in detail.

Hejduk had a real obsession with the metal connectors used in carpentry. Among the 28 characters that make up the project which Hejduk called *Berlin Masque*, in no. 15, "Masque", the L- and T-cross section steel plates normally used to connect wooden uprights and transoms are perceived as stars. This is a matter – as Wittgenstein already noted with regard to rhythmic configurations – of "seeing something";⁵ in this case, the shape of these small

¹ B. Allemann, *Ironia e Poesia*, Mursia, Milano 1971, p. 149.

² Cited in: W. Firebrace, *John Hejduk: Lancaster/Hanover Masque: AA Exhibition Gallery 2–26 May 1990*, "AA Files" 1991, no. 21, p. 78.

³ B. Allemann, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁴ See L. Amistadi, *Convention and symbols of the New England Masque* [in:] L. Amistadi, I. Clemente (eds.), *John Hejduk*, Aión, Florence 2015, p. 53.

⁵ "Seeing something in something". L. Wittgenstein, *Spiegazione della generalità per mezzo di esempi*

metal elements evokes that of stars and in the “Masque” they are extruded through the wall of a classroom to let in light: a wall “filled with a grouping of a stellarization of holes and openings in the wall of variant geometric configurations which project light onto the masque.”⁶ The way in which Hejduk takes apart the usual relationship between steel elements and their use in carpentry and establishes a “broad and lightning-fast” relationship with the stars in the sky, reminds us of the chemical/ironic spirit of which Allemann spoke regarding Schlegel and Novalis: “A witty gimmick is a dismembering of spiritual substances, which must therefore have been closely connected before the sudden separation.”⁷

The numerous theatrical machines invented by Hejduk are certainly an example of a technology whose purpose goes beyond the production of objects. Representations (of the world) can be produced, whose purpose is to allow humans to confront reality without being shocked or petrified, as in the case of the Medusa. What is built are not consumer objects but the actual consciousness of a certain linguistic community or perhaps even of the entire human race. Having to exorcise the “oblivion of the beginnings”, that is, the eradication of our original relationship with the world which the acceleration of technical-scientific progress has forced upon us, Hejduk’s theatres are always proto-theatres, assembled using proto-technologies, simple to the point of being able to easily identify their parts and their functioning (a bit like the difference that Benjamin established between the French toy and the Russian toy: in the latter manifests “the spirit from which the artifacts spring in their production process and not only the finished product”).⁸ In Hejduk’s theatres, the performance returns to its simplest and most original form, the theatre of mime (*Berlin Masque*: no. 8, “Pantomime Theatre”), and is part of a circle in which the “Retired Actor” himself (no. 6) in the Lancaster/Hanover Masque, at the end of a long career, finds himself learning the language of mimes: “Performs whenever he wishes. Can be seen at different hours. He prefers to act at dusk. He holds open house once a week on Wednesday. His voice is weak; therefore he is involved in learning pantomime.”⁹

Another example of a technical element used in an abnormal way is the train track. Not infrequently, Hejduk worked by reversing a custom,¹⁰ even of a typological kind: in the design of the 13 towers for Cannaregio in Venice, singular elements such as church bell towers are arranged in series along a single direction. The train itself, along with its tracks, represents an icon of technological advancement. Together with the ‘Henry Ford Revolution’, Popper pointed to the so-called ‘Stephenson Revolution’ (from the inventor of the first locomotive) as being the most important achievements of humanity:

These two transport revolutions show very clearly that we are dealing here with inventions and technical developments which, on the one hand, were humanly necessary, because they satisfied urgent and deeply personal needs and necessities – such as the need to see our closest

[in:] *The Big Typescript*, Einaudi, Torino 2012, p. 335. See L. Amistadi, *La città ordinata*, Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2024, p. 92: “Within the same physical image, different configurations, different ‘phrasings’ that correspond to different possibilities of characterization, can be recognized.”

⁶ J. Hejduk, *Berlin Masque* [in:] J. Hejduk, *Vier Entwürfe*, ETH Zürich, Zürich 1983, p. 50.

⁷ B. Allemann, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁸ W. Benjamin, *Giocattoli russi* [in:] F. Cappa, M. Negri (eds), *Figure dell’infanzia. Educazione, letteratura, immaginario*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2012, p. 156.

⁹ J. Hejduk, *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, Architectural Association, London 1992, p. 25.

¹⁰ See L. Amistadi, *Una casa come loro. Curzio Malaparte e John Hejduk* [in:] A. Borsari, M. Cassani Simonetti, G. Iacoli (eds.), *Architetture. Forma e narrazione tra architettura e letteratura*, Mimesis, Milan-Udine 2019.

friends and relatives again from which circumstances had separated us, or to help them. At the same time, they inaugurated a new era of civilization, in which not only the wealthiest could afford to travel.¹¹

The reversal in this case concerns the use of the track as a fragment: an element that usually runs indefinitely over the planet connecting distant points to each other, is used by Hejduk like a raceme which develops at the scale of a single building or small community settlement.

In the *Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, character no. 46, “Cross-Over House” consists of two equal and exact but opposite facing replicas of each other. The houses run on wheels along a track drawn by a pulley system. The bridge connecting the two houses spans over a wide ditch where trunks of trees are planted. Also in this case, Hejduk’s project is detailed and full of specifics. What is the significance of this building that Hejduk calls home? What work does the machine do? The subject inhabiting it is “The Convert” and the irony consists in representing, by means of a mechanism designed and built with the utmost precision and an abundance of technical details, the most fragile of existential conditions: “Undecided. Argues with himself. Wishes to make a commitment. Asks for more time. Wants dimensions of bridge. Adds gains, subtracts losses. On one side then on the other side. Divided. English system or metric system. Tic Tac Toe. Black & White. How shall my house be built?”¹²

In 1984, Hejduk entered a tender to design a memorial park on the former site of the Gestapo headquarters (where, in 2010, following a new competition held in 2005, the documentation centre of the atrocities of Nazism would be opened as part of a more complete programme entitled “Topography of Terror”). The park enclosure within which the 67 characters of the *Victims* project were arranged consists of a trolley track bordered by twin rows of 14-foot-high hedges (see no. 8, the “Trolley Man”). Above the track is suspended a telephone line which cannot communicate with the outside world, beyond the hedge. Along the perimeter of the area, north of the “Topography of Terror”, lies an extant fragment of the Berlin Wall upon which Hejduk positioned a watchtower (no. 40, “Security”). The trolley runs round the perimeter of the park 24/7 and “[...] there is no way to enter the park from the trolley.”¹³ In Hejduk’s projects, time is always “felt” and generates anguish: the inner workings of the Riga clock (no. 9, “The Building of Time”) produce the sound generated by the shattering of the granite blocks with which the condemned perceived the passage of time and which counted off the years of the sentence still to be served.¹⁴ In *Victims*, no. 62, the “Time Keeper” controls a pair of Ferris Wheels, one of which turns clockwise and the other anticlockwise, like two huge clocks. Twelve cabins are hung from each wheel with a painted number from 1 to 12 corresponding to the 12 hours of the day. A thirteenth cabin is unnumbered and houses a man and a beast respectively:

At the moment of horizontal tangentiality the eyes of the man and the eyes of the beast are in direct horizontal alignment. At that moment, the Time Keeper stops the Ferris Wheels to

¹¹ K. Popper, *Technologie und Ethik. [Speech: 2nd Meeting in Haus im Wald, Verband der Automobilindustrie e.V. am 19. 9.1992]* E. Emmerich (ed.): *Dokumentation*. [Private edition].

¹² J. Hejduk, *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, op. cit., p. 51.

¹³ J. Hejduk, *Victims*, Architectural Association, London 1986. Character no. 64, “The Travellers.”

¹⁴ J. Hejduk, *Riga, Vladivostok, Lake Baikal*, Rizzoli International, New York 1989, pp. 32–34; see L. Amistadi, *John Hejduk. Nuovi programmi per l’edificio pubblico*, “BDC” 2016, no. 16(2), pp. 389–404.

note the recognition and to recapture past acts. The Time Keeper then accelerates the Ferris Wheel to make up for lost time, upon removal the beast roars and the man remains silent.¹⁵

In other words, we are dealing with a special time here, one which can be slowed down and accelerated and which Agamben defined as the time of the “While”: “[...] it is not a measurable interval between two times, indeed it is not even a time itself, but almost an immaterial place in which we somehow dwell, in a sort of modest and interlocutory perennality.”¹⁶ a time “which no crushed watch can measure.” And the watch too is a victim of Hejduk’s irony: the symbol of precision and exactitude, which marks chronological time, must be repaired (no. 32, the “Watch Repairman”). The task of irony is to relativize the object with which it is dealing. If no one can doubt the value of scientific and technological advancement to improve human life, the usefulness of the clock or the invention of the locomotive, in the field of action of irony all the elements appear relative and their reciprocal relationships are constantly shifting: we can relate train tracks to the possibility of reaching our loved ones in a distant place, but if we give too much weight to this possibility, irony calls to mind “Track 21” [*Binario 21*] which deported Jews from Milan to the concentration camps.

Concurring with William James, we could say that irony is the way in which language keeps us alert to our own and others’ certainties and, for this reason, has a therapeutic value.¹⁷ As is true for most of these techniques, we remain in the field of combinatorial play and editing. Irony glides lightly across the surface of what can be said in the infinite game of variations (and by ‘game’ we mean precisely that which brings no practical advantage). Beda Allemann ascribed to “playful irony” the contradictions deriving from an absurd juxtaposition of terms (metal fixings/stars of the firmament), the repetition of the same thing in different situations or the establishment of new relationships between known elements (*Victims*, for example, is an “open” project, which, given simple associative rules – such as the possibility of characters touching each other in a single point – is to be built over time corresponding to many different configurations). But above all, irony provides for a *dissimulatio* according to which the literal sense is the exact opposite of what is meant, and it works all the better in a codified context such as the scientific-technological universe.

Unlike playful irony, so-called “constructive irony” or “poetic irony” must be understood “not as an Alexandrian game, played with beautiful, ready facts, but instead consists in first of all opening up a field of action: in poetically opening up a world, together with the possibilities of internal references that it can offer.”¹⁸ This poetic irony does not operate on the surface of what can be said and expressed, but cautiously peeps out over the abyss of the inexpressible, avoiding mechanical repetition, opening the way towards “that repeating with a greater spirit of authenticity, from which poetry sprouts.” Irony becomes poetic if, thanks to technical ability, it manages to individualize the universal, revisiting the very roots of the language, building a world from which to look out over the invisible and ineffable. Hejduk’s efforts to build a world and a “secret language” allowed him to express the anguish and horror of the Holocaust and the concentration camps indirectly, in a veiled way; a way that would not be possible using propositions designed to be expressed logically.

¹⁵ J. Hejduk, *Victims*, *op. cit.*, character no. 62, the “Time Keeper.”

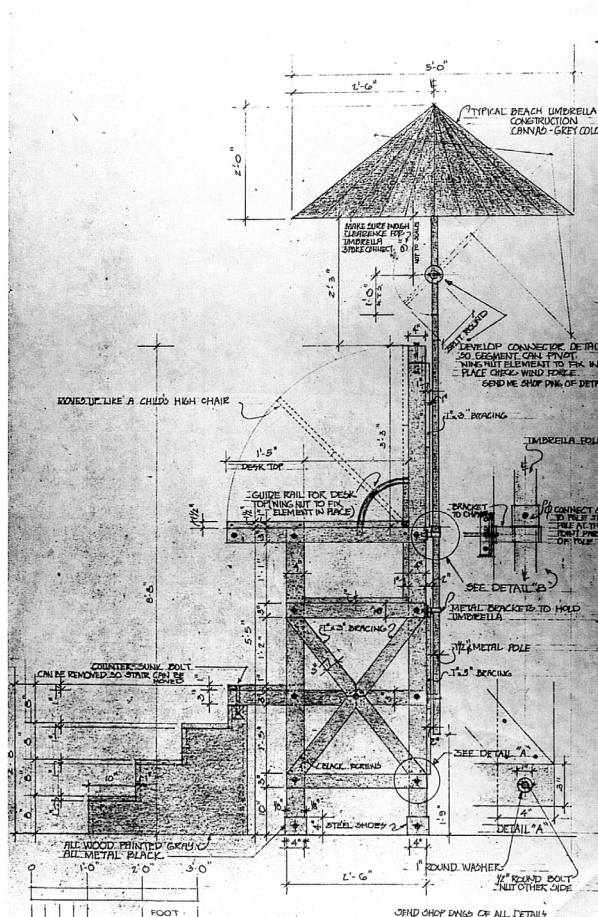
¹⁶ G. Agamben, *Mentre* [in:] *Quodlibet. Una voce. Rubrica di Giorgio Agamben*, 14.03.2024. <http://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben> (access: 20.06.2024).

¹⁷ See J. Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony*, Routledge, London 2003.

¹⁸ B. Allemann, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

The question at the origin of *Victims* has the radical nature of those individuals who wonder whether it is possible to express the meaning of the world as it was produced in certain historical conditions. In 1957, the eminent Russian poet Anna Akhmatova answered “Yes”; with her famous “I can” she declared the ability of poetry to describe what has taken the form of the unspeakable and to regenerate the human with the irony of a smile:

In the fearful years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day somebody ‘identified’ me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): ‘Can you describe this?’ And I said: ‘Yes, I can.’ And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.¹⁹

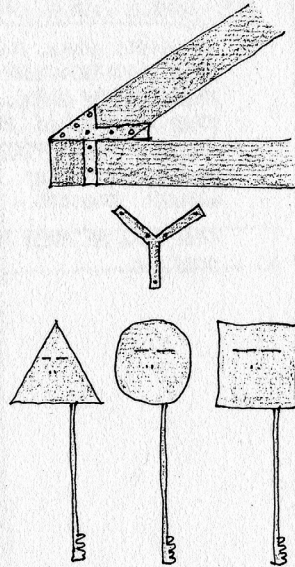


III. 1. Chair of the Watercolorist (no. 52), source: J. Hejduk, *Riga, Vladivostok, Lake Baikal*, Rizzoli International, New York 1989, p. 137.

¹⁹ A. Akhmatova, *Requiem* [in:] A. Akhmatova, *Selected poems*, Vintage Books, London 2009, p. 87.

(15)² CONTINUED...

THE DETAILING OF THE METAL CONNECTORS FOR THE JOINTS BECAME OBSESSIVE. THE MASQUE METAL JOINTS ENVISIONED WERE LIKE A METAL STELLARIZATION, THAT IS PEWTER STARS SOLIDIFYING IN THEIR JOURNEY TO THE EARTH..... METAL STAR CONNECTORS... RE-CALLING... ALSO PRIMITIVE RITES OF THE NORSE, ALSO THE HORN HEAD IMPLICATIONS OF CERTAIN POEMS. THEN A VISIT TO THE PICASSO EXHIBITION AT THE NEW YORK MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. HIS WOODEN SCULPTURES BECAME MODELS FOR THE GEOMETRIC MASKS OF THE BERLIN MASQUE.

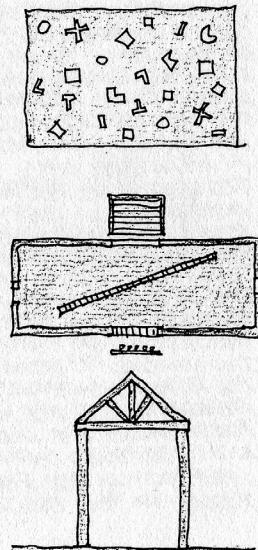


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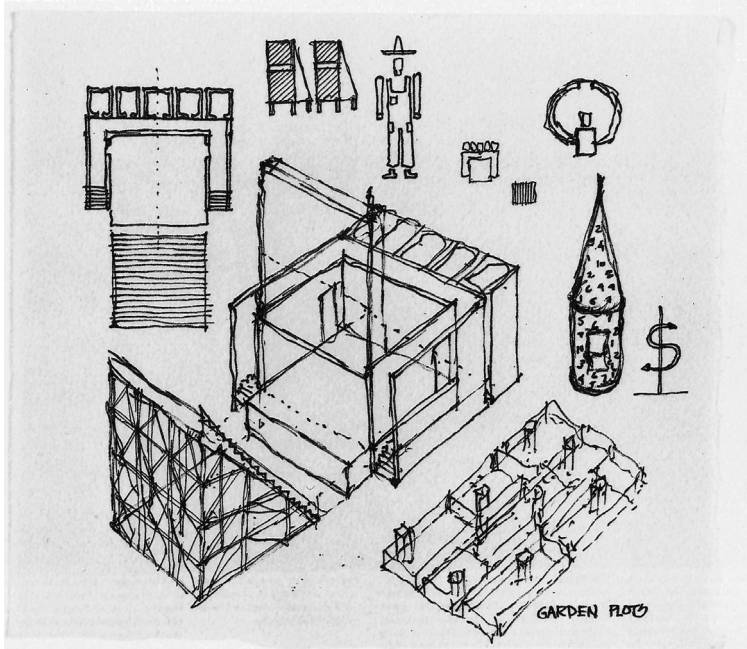
THEY CAN SEE PART OF THE OPPOSITE WALL WHICH IS A MIRROR IMAGE TO THEIR OPENING (FILLED WITH A GROUPING OF A STELLARIZATION OF HOLES AND OPENINGS IN THE WALL OF VARIANT GEOMETRIC CONFIGURATIONS WHICH PROJECT LIGHT INTO THE MASQUE. THE SPECTATORS MUST HOLD A MASK. THESE MASKS ARE MADE OF WOOD AND ARE PAINTED IN MUTED GRAYS.

PARTS OF THE MASQUE BEGAN TO EMERGE. THE WALLS SUPPORTING THE STRUCTURE (WOOD ROOF TRUSSES) WERE TO BE MADE OF REINFORCED CONCRETE. WITH THE DIVISIONAL OF THE FORM WORK EXPOSING THE ROUND PLUG MARKINGS.

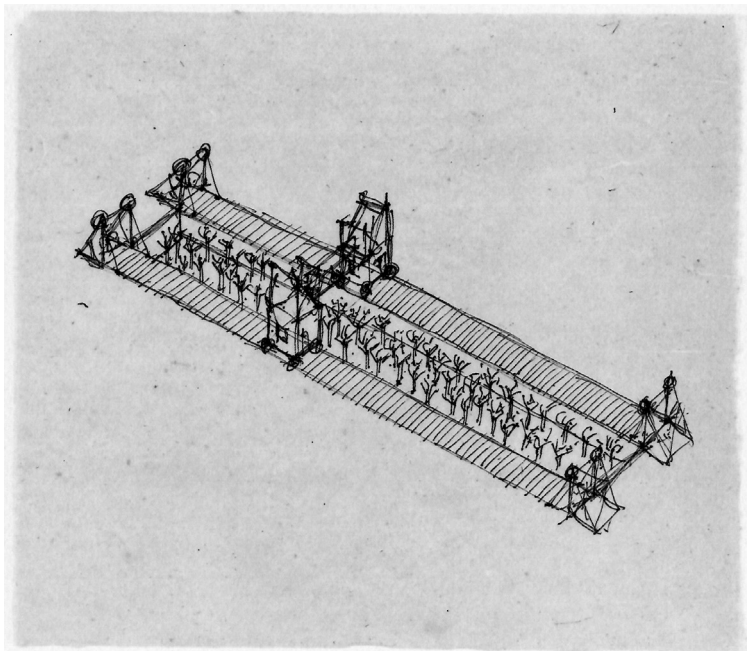


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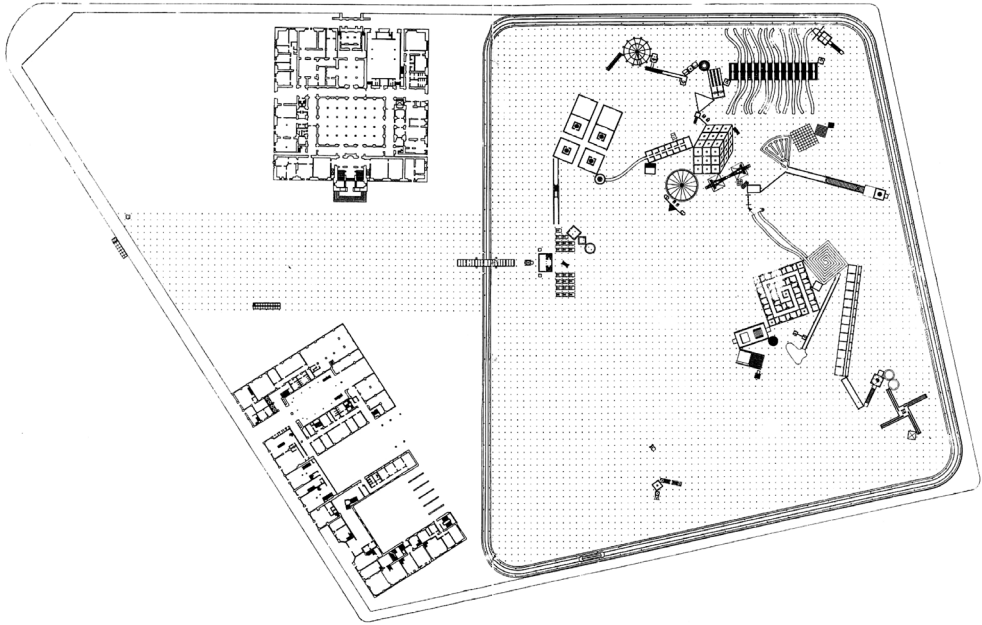
III. 2. Masque (no. 15), source: J. Hejduk, *Berlin Masque* [in:] J. Hejduk, *Vier Entwürfe*, ETH Zürich, Zürich 1983, p. 50.



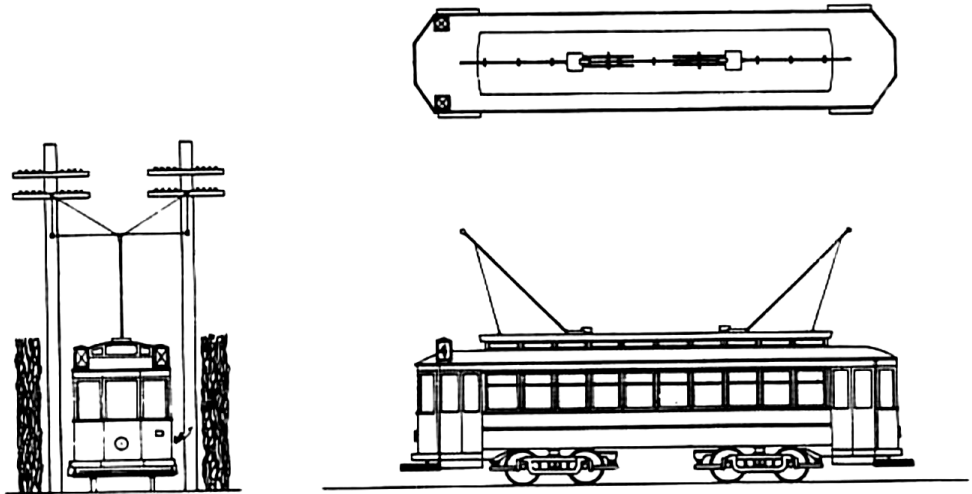
III. 3. Retired Actor (no. 6), source: J. Hejduk, *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, Architectural Association, London 1992, p. 27.



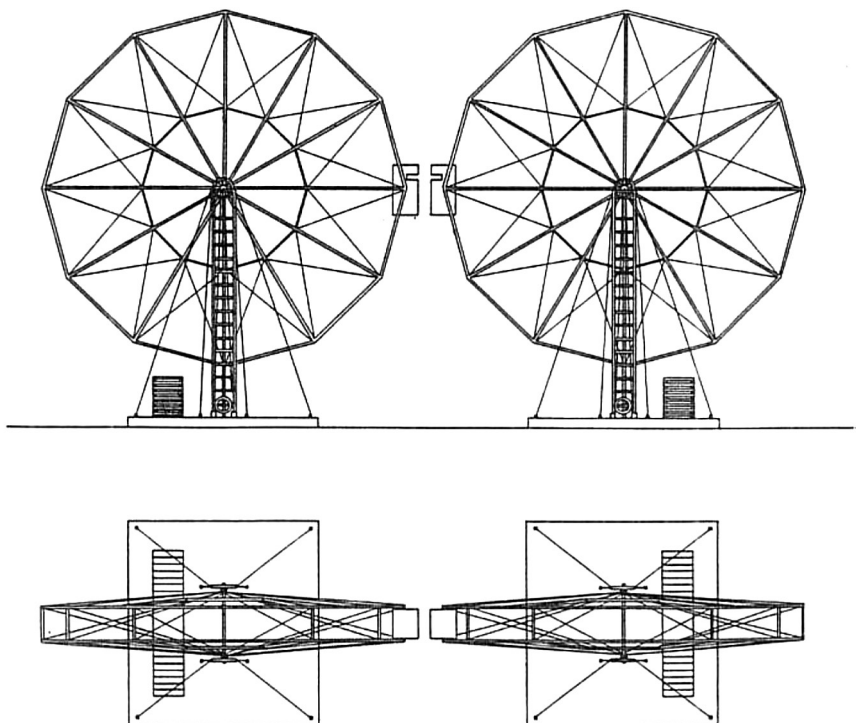
III. 4. Cross-Over House (no. 46), source: J. Hejduk, *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, Architectural Association, London 1992, p. 50.



Ill. 5. Site Plan, source: J. Hejduk, *Victims*, Architectural Association, London 1986, n.pag.



Ill. 6. Trolley Man (no. 8), source: J. Hejduk, *Victims*, Architectural Association, London 1986, n.pag.



Ill. 7. Time Keeper (no. 62), source: J. Hejduk, *Victims*, Architectural Association, London 1986, n.pag.

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