

Three Visionary Houses: Reflections on the work of Peter Yeadon

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All models built by Sandy McKay and Peter Yeadon

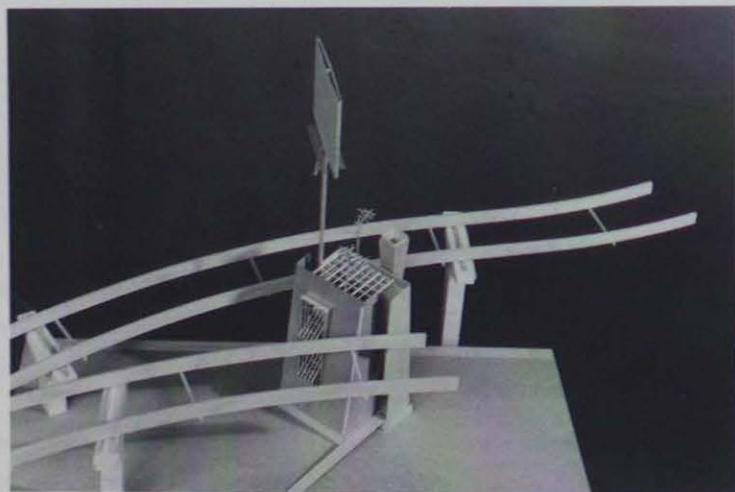


Figure 1. Ditto House, view of model

You are yourselves the town, wherever you choose to settle. . . . It is men that make the city, not the walls and ships without them.

Nicias¹

THERE CAN BE no sustained critical investigation in architecture without addressing the contemporary city. The work of Peter Yeadon is no exception; it hinges on an exploration of abandoned sites and places of interstitial character. One of the constant themes in these three house projects, *Ditto House*, *Trac House*, and *House for a Single Person*, is the aspect of dwelling and domesticity within marginal economic or urban situations. In writing on "The Individual Dwelling" in *The Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi reinforces this concern:

Thus there exists a specific aspect of the housing issue that is intimately bound up with the problem of the city, its way of life, its physical form and image—that is, with its structure. . . . The result is that the study of the individual dwelling offers one of the best means of studying the city and vice versa.²

Understanding the long established role of the architect as an urban poet is essential in any attempt to grasp the house as the embodiment of a civic program. Inspired by the poetic works of John Hejduk (whose development of architectural characters has led to a profound rediscovery of architectural program), Yeadon explores urbanist concerns regarding the place of the individual within the contemporary city.³ In each of the three projects examined here, he generates an architectural project from a response to a site, coupled with the development of a fictional character or set of characters. Out of this interplay grows a program of imagined inhabitations.

At first glance, the author's sketchbooks, filled with notes and drawings, do not appear to be about "house," but are rather evocative allusions to other types of built forms: bunker, tower, festival chariot, lighthouse or grain elevator (fig. 2). However, in their appropriation to house domestic programs, these forms attain a particularity that begins to explore the notion of house as civic program. Such projects do not align themselves with the white picket fences portrayed in *Blue Velvet*, demonstrating the ideal of post-war middle America; instead, these houses speak about the erosion and repair of the domestic city fabric as it appears in fringe conditions. Out of the marriage of the notions of domestic + city, Yeadon develops a commentary on domesticity, where the individual struggles to claim a place within a landscape of incertitude.

1 Ditto House

The *Ditto House* is a house for twins who have held a lifelong argument about which one was born first.⁴ Continuing the struggle for space begun in the womb, the house provides a stage for the infernal question surrounding sibling hierarchy. Situated between two one-way freeway ramps in an undesirable part of the urban fringe, *Ditto House* has two front façades and entries (one from the east and one from the west) that reflect the schism of its inhabitants (fig. 1, 3 and 4). The plan of the house is sheared to allow space for two entrance ramps. On the interior, this shear is reflected in the layout of the kitchen worktable, representing the inherent dichotomy of its characters. Thus, the twin entrances run parallel with one-way freeways: driving east in the morning sun, and returning west in the evening sun. External to the house are a water-collector and a Janus-faced billboard, whose advertising helps finance the building costs. At the moment, the billboard displays an image of Siamese twins as a corporate media message for *Toronto Mutual*.

Similar to the *Trac House*, the *Ditto House* is organized vertically. The program rises through three floors, from the kitchen to the shower and finally to the bedroom chamber, which is at the level of the freeway. Bookcases line the walls of the tower, culminating in diffused light retrieved by a large industrial skylight. The significant number of the *Ditto House* is two: twin operable industrial windows open out along the east wall, flooding the section with morning light; twin freeways create the gap that the house occupies within the urban fabric, allowing the form of the tower to ascend to meet the passing traffic and simultaneously descend to the sand floor of the house below (fig. 5). Twin phenomena.

The birth narrative of the house, and its twins, maps out three scenarios aligned with various acts of inhabitation. The first deals with a position of repose within the house and the belly, where the twins sleep within a taut suspended membrane, located on the upper floor. While they begin their sleep at opposite ends of the large rubber diaphragm, during the course of the night they slowly shift position until finally, through the assistance of gravity, they find themselves entwined together upon waking (fig. 12). The accompanying scenario on the ground floor involves two tapered horizontal planes that are wedged between two parallel walls. Together the planes act as a table situated between two kitchens, the perfect Rorschach

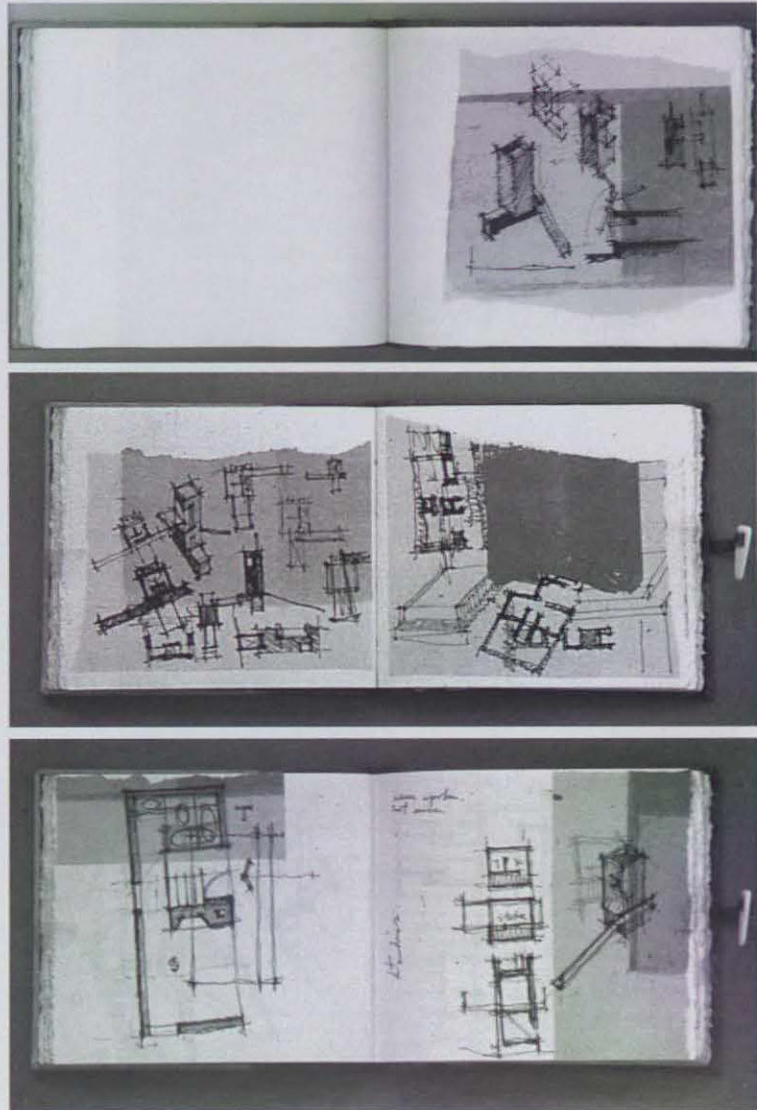
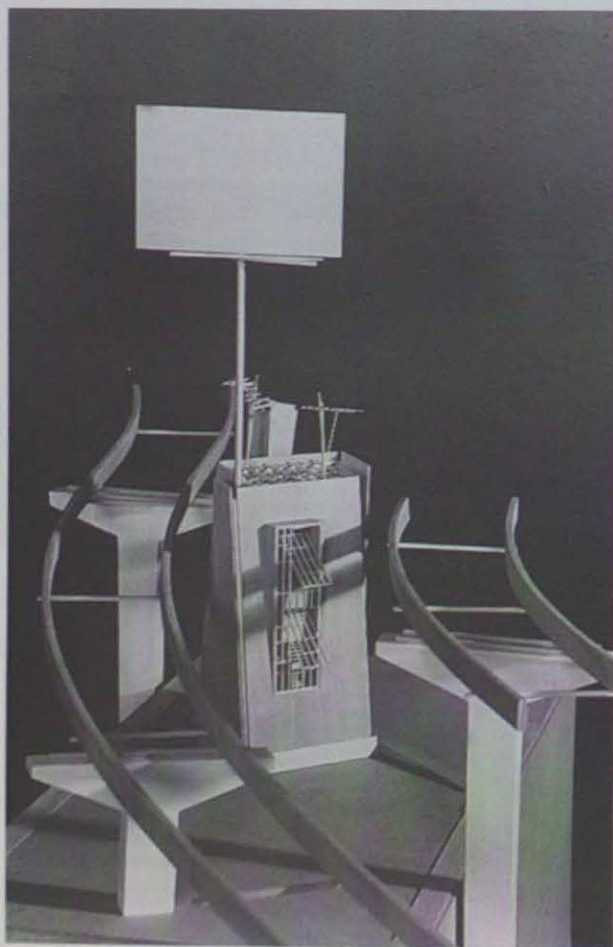


Figure 2. House for a Single Person, sketchbook



Figure 3. Ditto House, site

Figure 4. Ditto House, model



solution to domestic space for two individuals who resist balance. The tables record the push and pull of the twins, who continue to jockey for position within the house, just as they jockeyed for position within the womb. At times, as the table shifts position, one twin wins a bit of territory over the other; however, as the tug-of-war continues, another victor emerges. Thus, the proportion of the main room is in constant flux.

The third symbolic element in the house that modifies the actions of the twins is the shower cistern (fig. 11). Here, one twin waits while the other occupies the shower, which is fed by an exterior water-collector. This mechanism funnels water through the skin of the house and releases it into the shower itself. Yeadon's description of this recurring image follows:

The bathroom is detailed with the sink and tub lodged in the bathroom wall. The sink can only be used by one person at a time, but the tub is to be shared by both. The surface of the tub is to provide some insight into the adjacent room.⁵

The allusion to the womb's amniotic chamber is once more present, as the narrative reenacts the moment when one twin is being born, while the other is embraced in anticipation. The action in the shower cistern recalls the inevitable condition of twins: while being the same age, one must be born in advance of the other. In the case of the *Ditto House*, the struggle to determine this point of origin is essential to the form, furniture, and actions of its inhabitants.

II Trac House

In the *Trac House*, an abandoned railway track provides a foundation for the new construction (fig. 6 and 7).⁶ Along the track are situated three elements: a water-collector, a tower, and a platform with one vertical wall. The response to site includes a self-propelled water-collector funnel, which irrigates the surrounding landscape on both sides of the track. Once the mechanical funnel fills up, it drops under its own weight, propelling itself along the track. When empty, it subsequently rights itself to begin the process once more. In counterpoint to the horizontal motion of the self-propelled irrigation carriage is the tower house itself (fig. 8).

The character that inhabits the *Trac House* is singular and, potentially, nomadic. Architectural furnishings, which the occupant operates, include a mechanical louvered stair/drawbridge which unfolds to greet the occupant. Once the character has safely retreated

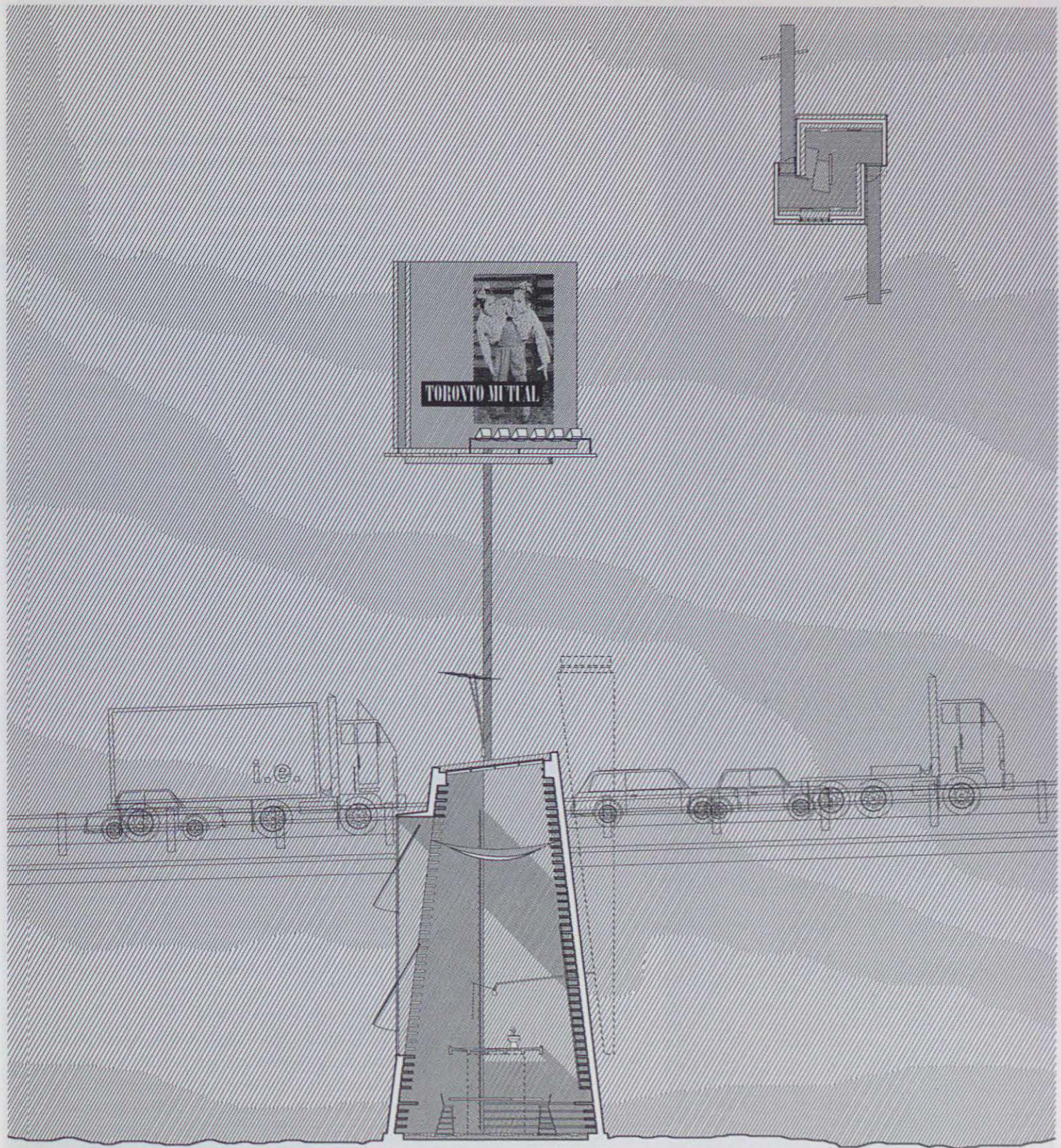
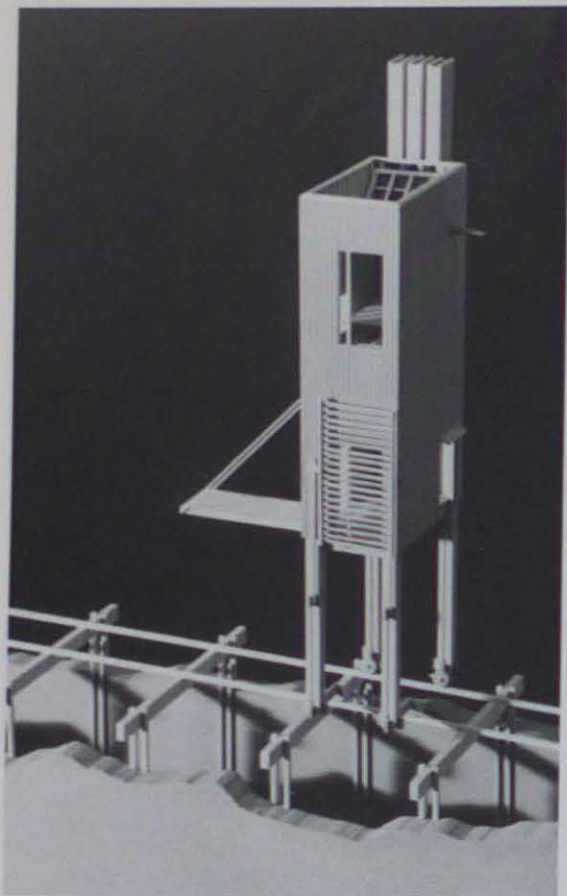
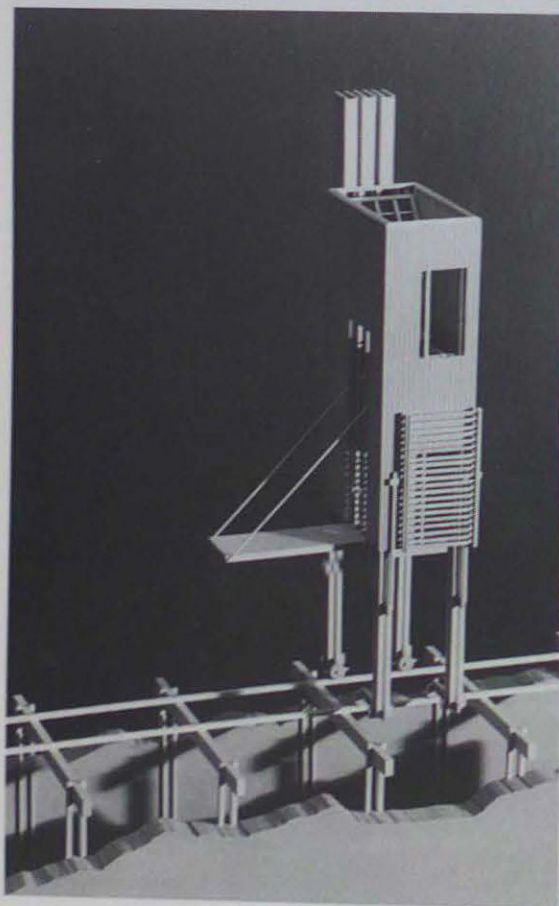


Figure 5. Ditto House, plan and section

Figure 6. *Trac House*, view of modelFigure 7. *Trac House*, view of model

into the house, the stair recoils and comes to rest alongside the outside surface of the structure, recalling a drawbridge. Light is drawn into the house via three vertical light cannons, which illuminate the bathing area located on the main floor. While this floor is supported above the track on a set of legs, the glazed roof is comprised of two planes, angled towards the centre. This roof gathers water and jettisons it out onto the track below. The only other protrusion through the skin of the house is an extension of the main floor plane, a suspended gangplank which acts as a deck for the inhabitant, while establishing a new horizon above the ground plane of the track itself.

Following the form of the *Trac House*, the spatial program is stacked. A mezzanine bears on a freestanding service wall, dividing kitchen and bathing facilities below. This mezzanine supports the sleeping quarters which receive light from above via the glazed roof. Select views from within the tower towards the infinite horizon recall railway yard switch-houses and sentry-boxes. Like a giant chariot, the *Trac House* remains on wheels, enabling the inhabitant to position him/herself in relation to the water-funnel as it follows its environmental course.

The power of the *Trac House* lies in its ability to trace its way along the tracts of landscape drawn by the train track as it traverses the country. The project causes reflection upon the disuse and dissolution of national infrastructures such as the Canadian National Railway, which have become increasingly decentralized and marginalized. As such, they become fuel for other types of imagined uses. While the *Trac House* is not intended to be a viable solution to alternative housing, its fictional character inhabits the places of abandonment and disuse in a cynical manner, similar to other formidable characters, including Kafka's Odradek and Hejduk's Widow's House.⁷

III House for a Single Person

The *House for a Single Person*, located on the Tantramar Marshes between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, explores a poetic narrative which describes the type of character who would occupy such a house.⁸ Similar to the other two houses, the character dwells on a border condition, a place where he "finds security in the comparative fragility of his surrounding circumstance."⁹ Several aspects of the fit between the *House for a Single Person* and its character are revealed through the narrative of the spatial qualities of architecture:

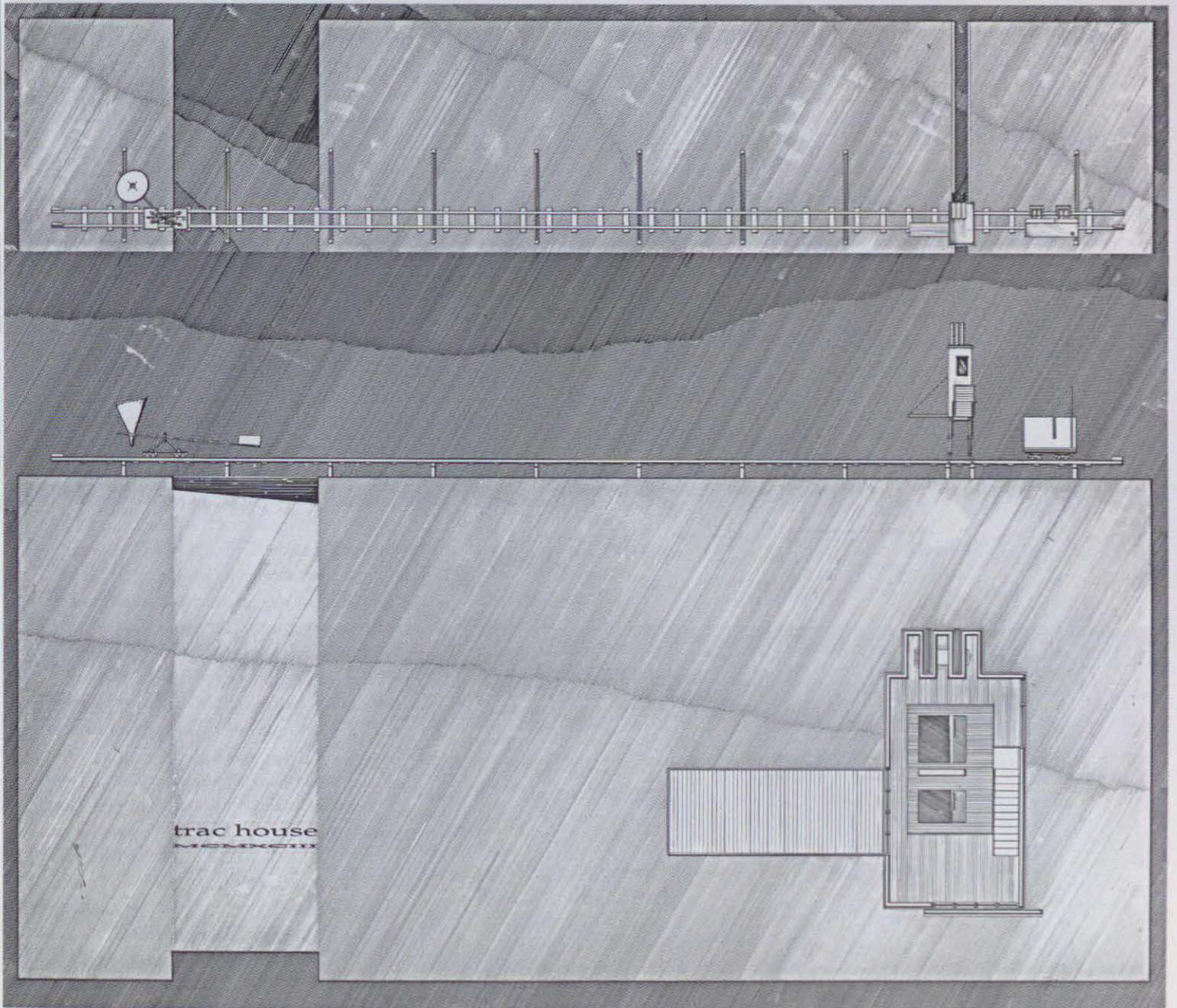


Figure 8. Trac House, site plan, site elevation, plan

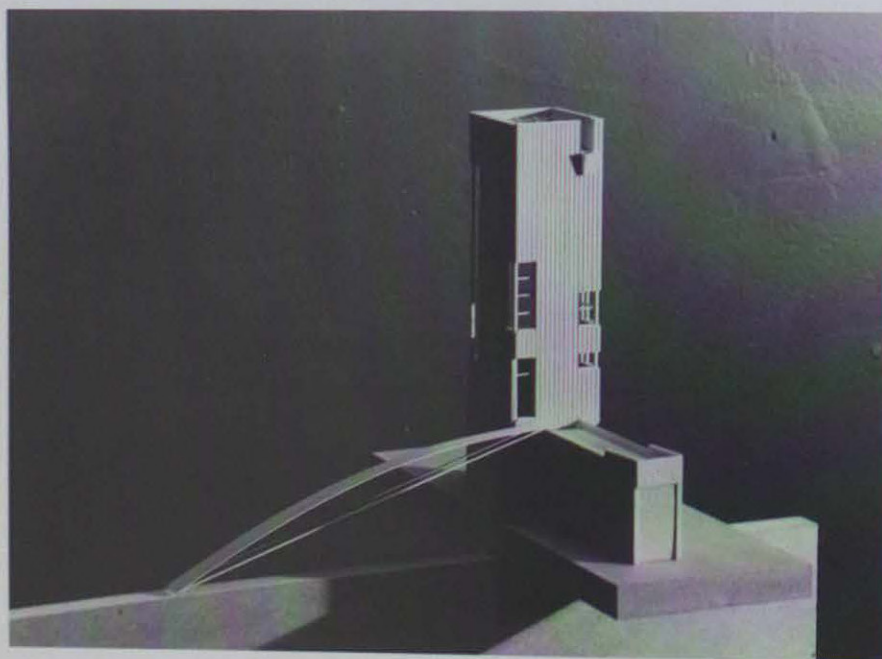


Figure 9. House for a Single Person, view of model.

His gait fills the breath of the bridge
It is not quite large enough for two,
side by side

His house is a refuge,
Yet it is without enclosed rooms

He stores his belongings in the cavity of the floors

His work hangs on, and behind, the wall panels
He occupies surfaces

He opens the panels to reveal the work
They cloak the light from outside

He is reposed in his Thespian bath
He regards the ceiling above, 17 yards
The curved scrim disperses the light
He poses for his own satisfaction

The house is composed of two volumes, one horizontal, the other vertical (fig. 9 and 10). The ground plane houses the motorcycle garage, suggesting the linear motion of acceleration. Straddling this horizontal volume is the vertical volume of the tower, which contains the kitchen and bathroom on one level, followed by the lofty mezzanine with its skylit studio and living quarters. Vertical circulation is through a long ladder connecting the two platforms. The two parts of the house are joined by a third element, in the form of a long sloping bridge, which leads the inhabitant from the motorcycle garage to the elevated place of repose, over sixty feet in height. Within this luminous, silent volume, diffused light filters through an overhead scrim arched across the room like a large diaphanous wing.

The plinth (horizontal) and tower (vertical) represent the archetypal conditions of orientation. Their juxtaposition within the tidal basin delimits the domicile of an artistic recluse whose Soanian cabinet of curiosities is a repository of many travels and memories. Perched within this bunker-like refuge, the house contains the imaginings of a nomad. A house such as this wants one to speak in single images: site, client, materials, program, poetic variables, variable uncertainties. *Ins Leere gesprochen: Tantramarshes*.¹⁰

IV Visionary Architecture

Architectural fantasies seem to be most potent and relevant to the practice of architecture during times of tremendous change, what is often called a time of crisis. It is

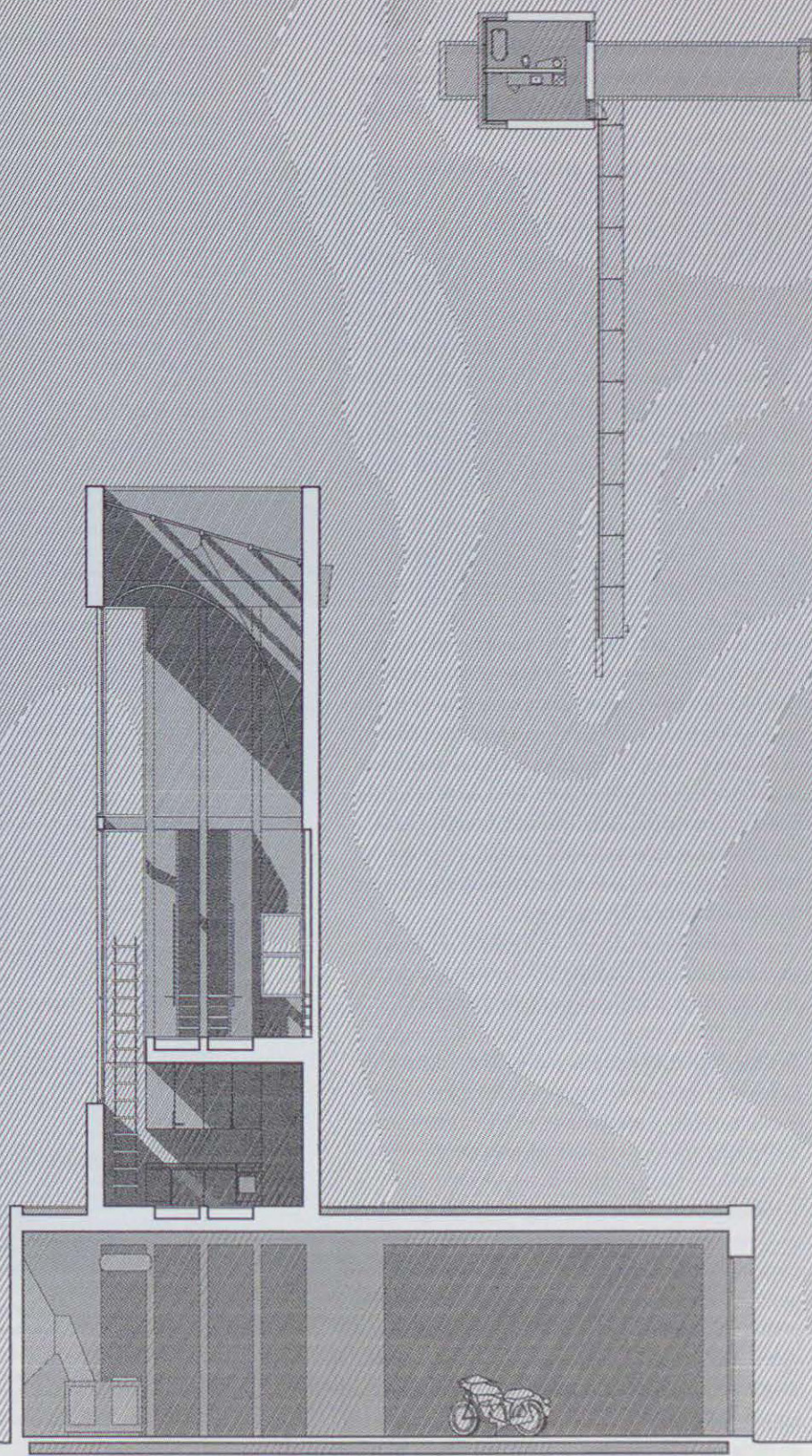


Figure 10. House for a Single Person, plan and section

a period that often involves usurping established practices and creating a struggle for the strange and difficult. Through this period architects struggle to reinvent the field by raising concerns that are termed contemporary.¹¹

Over the course of the past decade, Peter and I have continued an ongoing dialogue about how his work is a vehicle for exploring architectural issues critical to the individual. The projects are heavily tempered by concentrated time spent in Berlin, in 1988, when the Berlin Wall still divided the city. Here, the architect lived on the street for weeks, and eventually recorded the actions of the physically displaced characters he encountered. These recordings of impressions were then translated into a project which posited nine architectural interventions within the city, including a clock, a bottle-collector, a trailer, public washrooms and an inhabitable scaffold.¹²

The work of visionary architects is traditionally characterized as the positing of visions of possible realities. Visionaries fill sketchbooks, often have day jobs or commissions and pursue the development of their visions as "shadow work," so to speak. Peter's sketches and finished drawings are thus reminiscent of those of other architects who have developed projects along contemporary visionary lines. The practice of building up a portfolio of theoretical projects, to be built or exhibited at a future date, has an illustrious pedigree. Aldo Rossi's *Teatro del Mondo*, John Hejduk's *House for the Eldest Inhabitant*, Douglas Darden's architectural narratives and Brodsky and Utkin's project *Villa Nautilus* come to mind as I reflect upon the development of the theme of house in Peter's projects.¹³

Out of a deep awareness of the fragility of contemporary urban situations, coupled with the belief that the role of architecture is to intervene positively through the act of building, Peter's three projects provoke the potential of dwelling while challenging the conventions of domesticity. Each project embraces a particular condition and a specific narrative in order to examine the conditions of sitelessness. Each project develops a place of refuge in an otherwise inhospitable condition, which by its very presence allows us to visualize the inherent dichotomy of "dwelling" within the contemporary city. Through the use of characters and caricature, the architect enables us to view his careful explorations as meditations upon new forms of domesticity. Whether it be the house as a movable workplace, the site of sibling rivalry, or a refuge from the postmodern condition, the projects make us all too aware that the erosion of the nuclear family has taken hold, and that immanent forms of dwelling are to be explored in architectural projects. It is through this radical sense of imaging "house" that the beautiful work of Peter Yeadon remains visionary.

1. Quoted by Joseph Rykwert in *The Idea of a Town* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 23.

2. *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 72.

3. Relevant works by Hejduk which explore the relation between object-subject, or elements-structures include: *Victims; The Berlin Masque; Mask of Medusa: Works 1947-1983*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1985); and the *Lancaster/Hanover Masque* (London: Architectural Association, and Montreal: CCA, 1992). Characters such as "Death House" and "Widow's House" (*Lancaster/Hanover Masque* #64 and #65), and urban artifacts, including Drawbridge and Trolley (*Victims* #7 and #8), are also pertinent to Yeadon's work.

4. Yeadon comments: "On the inside, it is a study of two bodies coming together in a mutually balanced manner; while on the outside, it attempts to place a home in an urban wasteland, which resists the abandonment of entire sectors of the city." E-mail text received from Peter Yeadon 16 August 1997.

5. Ditto. (I mean *ibid.*)

6. Yeadon's reflection: "The *Trac House* was developed for an individual who desires, yet hesitates, to be a wanderer. It has been created for one who wants the illusion of travel, but never ventures too far. He is comforted simply by the potential to wander great distances, even though the *Trac House* demonstrates his inability to act upon his desire. What remains is the desire of the wanderer to continually survey the extent of borders—both present and imagined" (*ibid.*).

7. The use of "cynical" is meant to be understood according to its original definition, literally a dog-like (*kunikos*) group of ascetics who advocated virtue and self-control as the highest good. The original use of the term cynic did not have the pejorative overtones it later acquired, but was more closely related to Socratic irony. For further inquiry, refer to the works of Antisthenes, a follower of Socrates. Odradek remains the paradigm for the cynical character. See Kafka's short story "The Cares of a Family Man" in *Kafka: The Complete Stories and Parables* (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1946). For the *Widow's House*, see n. 3.

8. For a full description of the narrative text, please refer to *Canadian Architect* (December 1995), 22-3. Again, Yeadon summarizes: "The House for A Single Person is to be more than a shelter to its inhabitant; it is to be a fitting representation of the person himself. The project translates this resemblance between the person and the place with metaphors, whereby the house becomes a character with its own aura. While the inhabitant has some influence on the development of the place, the place itself emerges to embody the kind of character which might inhabit it... each playing host to the other" (see n. 4).

9. *Canadian Architect* (December 1995), 22.

10. *Ins Leere gesprochen* is the title of an essay by Adolf Loos; see Adolf Loos, *Spoken Into the Void, Collected Essays 1897-1900*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982).

11. Yeadon, e-mail text August 16, 1997.

12. Please refer to Peter Yeadon's project on the homeless in Berlin entitled *marking* (Halifax, N.S.: TUNS Resource Centre Publications, 1989).

13. See Hejduk's *Berlin Masque* in *Mask of Medusa*: Yeadon observes: "Hejduk's project develops a programme whereby the city provides the eldest citizen with a house, expense-free for the taking. Hejduk offers a commitment to elders in recognition for their contribution to the city. I also believe the work illustrates an idea about the health and prosperity of a city being directly related to the well-being of any of its citizens." For Douglas Darden's eloquent use of historical fictions, see *Condemned Buildings* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992). The visionary projects of A. Brodsky and I. Utkin can be found in Lois Nesbitt, ed., *Brodsky and Utkin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991); *Nostalgia of Culture: Contemporary Soviet Visionary Architecture* (London: Architectural Association, 1988); and *Paper Architecture: New Projects from the Soviet Union* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).

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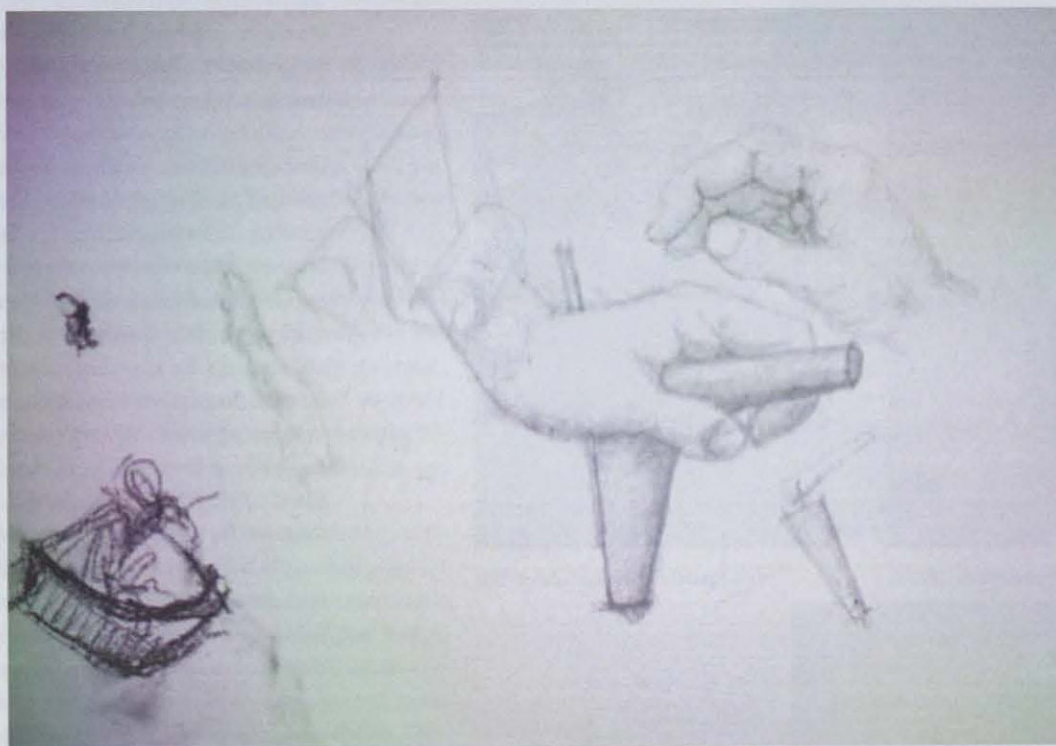
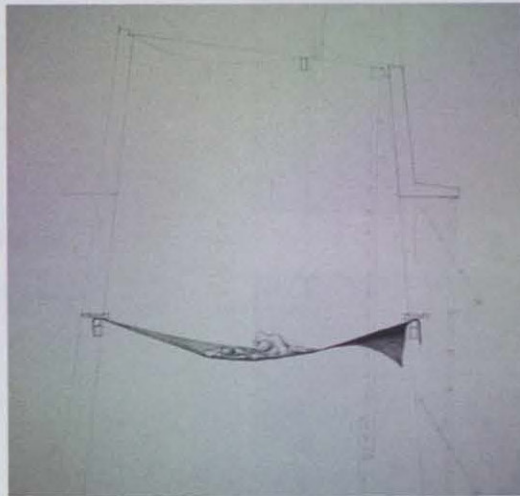
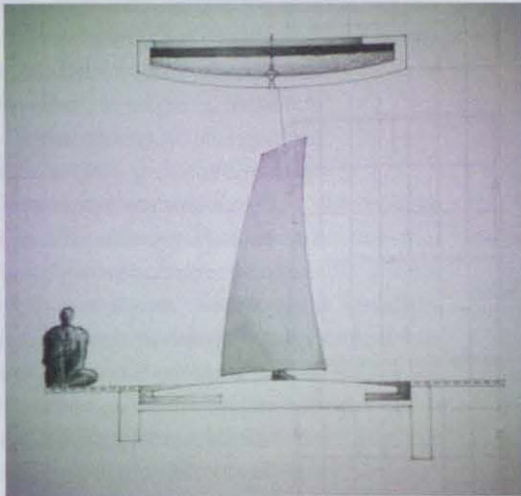


Figure 11. Ditto House, shower Figure 12. Ditto House, sleeping diaphragm
Figure 13. Ditto House, faucet