

Mystery House

A villa by OMA

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Somewhere in Holland there is a superb villa, the latest achievement of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. 'Somewhere', because the client is fully aware of the status of the architect he has engaged and knows how tenacious the professional architectural tourist can be. It is surely no accident, then, that privacy has become one of the main themes of the design. The client has acquired not one house, but three: one to divert attention and two for a strategic withdrawal.

Anyone observing the house from the street, descends between the trees what is known, post Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, as a *glass house*: a transparent villa with facades entirely of glass and an apparently floating roof. This impression intensifies as one approaches the house via the driveway. The image of the *glass house* expands to include that of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, the villas built by the Keck brothers, or some of Mies' court houses, where a deliberate attempt has been made to integrate the car into the residential programme. While the house seems to be slightly raised above the ground, the driveway drops away below it, curling under and around the house, linking the public and the private domains. Unlike those other houses there is no garage here; the car must stay outside, under the house. This is probably in the interests of efficiency: after all, a garage – just think of the Villa Savoye or Mies' 'court house with garage'¹ – interferes with the optimal routing.

The raising of the house and the driveway running under it also have the effect of making it seem as if not only the roof, but the entire house, is floating. The whole structure detaches itself from the ground, thereby emphasizing its autonomy, finiteness and boundedness. The villa becomes a clearly recognizable entity – or so it seems.

Inside the house the driveway is carried through in the form of a ramp that leads from the front door to the huge living area the *glass house* contains. It is here that one can fully appreciate the qualities of this dwelling type. The majestic view – partly due to the villa's raised position – makes the surroundings part of the living area. The room does not end at the full-length glass facades, but extends to where the trees cut off any further view. A lighting plan for the garden is designed to recreate this effect at night: if only the interior were illuminated at night, the glass walls would function just like mirrors. Various coloured types of glass, curtains and shades have been introduced to restrict looking in, to allow the indoor climate to be regulated and to lend the glass walls a degree of solidity.

The living room extends along the four sides of a core contained within the *glass house*. These strips roughly coincide with four functions: cooking, eating, working and sitting. The generous size of the floor area prevents the strips from being experienced as mere 'corridors' around the core: on the contrary, they are discrete rooms that communicate directly with one another. The combination of the elevation above ground level and the

promenade around a core may even evoke an association with the various decks of a ship. As for the sun deck – that stretches out at the back of the house in the guise of a terrace.

Reserve house

It is this terrace that guards the house's first secret, for hidden beneath it is a second villa – dubbed 'the motel' by the job architect Gro Bonesmo. This second villa, of almost the same dimensions as the *glass house* above, contains the solution to a problem that occurs in the best of families: how much hospitality to offer the children once they have finally left home. In this case the client's three daughters, all of whom have already departed the parental home, have been given a sort of reserve home. It can be closed off from the *glass house* by a sliding wall and it has its own entrance, somewhat hidden behind a column. A visit to the parental home is thus a double homecoming: home in the bosom of the family and home in one's own 'reserve' house.

The difference between the transparent volume that floats visibly above the driveway, and this sunken volume that is tucked away beneath the terrace, returns in the spatial layout of the two sections. While the first has only a compact core and for the rest consists of a single space, the second is divided into rooms. Transparency versus privacy, In the *glass house*, air and floor heating have been used so as not to disturb the openness, while the 'motel' simply has radiators. There was also a plan to place a glass column at the corner of the work/dining area – instead of the steel columns otherwise employed in the *glass house* – so as to emphasize the unimpeded view at this, the house's most communal corner. In the event the column idea had to be dropped.

In the reserve house the three bedrooms share two bathrooms, and two patios for daylighting. The living room borders a large patio with trees but it also has direct access to the garden via a slope. With a separate kitchen and utility room the reserve house is fully self-contained.

The borderline between the two houses is dominated by diagonals. The ramp that provides access to the *glass house* from the entrance hall cuts through a diagonal void that connects the glass 'upstairs' with the dug-in 'downstairs' in an artificial, somewhat improvised link: the autonomy of the two houses is the primary consideration.

Fortress

But apart from an upstairs and a downstairs house, a *glass house* and a reserve house, there is a third 'house', that lies hidden in the core of the glass volume. This second secret of OMA's villa takes on ritual dimensions here. Rather than being resolved with a compromise, the contrast between transparency and privacy in this villa is transcended in an escalation. Privacy is intensified into a mystery.

There is only one way of reaching the core of the *glass house*. As if it were a fortress, a mysterious castle inaccessible to outsiders, a wooden drawbridge acts as a ritual passageway to the core, which comprises bedroom and bathroom and a patio that

provides daylight and forms an enclosed terrace. When the bridge is open a much more earthly passageway is revealed: the stairs to the laundry and central heating area below, that also serves as 'service entrance'. For the shopping this stairway is the fastest route from the boot of the car to the kitchen cupboard. When the bridge is lowered, however, an intriguing corridor is revealed. The skylight in this corridor intensifies the impression of a bridge that, via a no-man's-land, gives access to another building. It is the theme of a house within a house.

Although the drawbridge and skylight are powerful elements in their own right, it is the walls on either side of the bridge that steal the show. These are covered with green velvet so that the passageway inadvertently recalls a fragment from the unforgettable, interminably long opening sentence of the main character in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*², where he tells of wandering endlessly through the rooms of an immense baroque hotel where the sound of the footsteps of those who walk there is absorbed by carpets so heavy and so thick that not a single sound reaches the ear – as if the very ear of the person moving through the rooms were at some vast distance from the carpets. The velvet is an acoustic symbol signifying the segregation of the core; the bridge is a spatial symbol that performs the same function. In the secure seclusion of the sleeping area, the *glass house* is as it were turned inside out and becomes a court house. The outdoor world is excluded here; only a segment is visible. And yet there are two other ways in which subtle relationships are created with the surrounding world.

Social domain

If we interpret the sleeping area as a secret fortress, then there are two reasons for undermining its perfection a little. On the one hand the perfect fortress can become oppressive: when every sign of the surrounding world is eschewed, security can turn into isolation. On the other hand a secret is most cherished when the veil of secrecy is ever so slightly raised. There is no satisfaction to be had from a secret whose existence remains unsuspected.

Both of these considerations are satisfied by two interventions in the patio. In the first place, the flooring incorporates a design of glass bricks that allows its existence to be surmised under the house and which, seen from the bedroom, may just admit the play of headlights from a car returning late at night. Secondly, a pane of glass has been let into the wall between patio and living area, that also serves as the rear wall of the fireplace. This few square decimetres of 'window', just above the floor, betrays the patio's presence to an alert observer and, seen from the other side, undermines the feeling of absolute privacy in the core.

There is an inescapable comparison here with the Villa Malaparte on the cliffs of Capri. There, too, the fireplace has a window of fireproof glass, except that what one sees through the glass there is the sea. One could say that the flames 'swim' above the water³ or that the living room affords a view of a mythical world where fire and water are still reconciled.⁴ But seen from the sea the symbolic force is of course even more powerful. The flames visible from the sea recall the fires that once upon a time acted as beacons for

ships, and were sometimes also used during a storm to lure ships onto the rocks, or by shipwrecked sailors hoping to attract the attention of passing ships. Anyone familiar with the inhospitable location of Casa Malaparte, where a sojourn must feel like exile, will have some idea how the open fire might on the one hand serve as a call for help and on the other hand serve as an invitation to lost souls to essay the house's hospitality. The hearth is the messenger between the house and the outside world.

In OMA's villa the hearth is a messenger between two parts of the same house. It is supposed to tempt those in the core to exchange their secure, introverted refuge for the villa's social domain. And so, in the last instance, the ultra-privacy of the house has been tempered.

1. In this house the car has to manoeuvre very precisely to reach the garage – encased in the centre of the dwelling – unscathed. It is as if this choice of location for the garage is meant to express the car's intimate connection with living. For a detailed description see Arthur Wortmann, 'De gebaren der dingen. Betekenis in de woningontwerpen van Mies', *Oase* no. 40, 1994, pp. 85-100.
2. Alain Robbe-Grillet's scenario for the film has been published in book-form: *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Editions de Minuit, 1961.
3. Rudolf Schmitz, 'Casa Malaparte. Architecture in the service of the imagination', *Archis* no. 4, 1994, pp. 62-69.
4. Wiel Arets, Wim van den Bergh, "'Casa come me" – A sublime alienation', *AA Files* no. 18, 1989, pp. 9-12. In fact in an earlier phase the fireplace window looked out on to a swimming pool that was part of the villa design – making the comparison with Casa Malaparte even more potent. Although the swimming pool disappeared from the design, the 'open' fire remained.

In: *Archis* no. 11, 1994, pp. 33-40.