

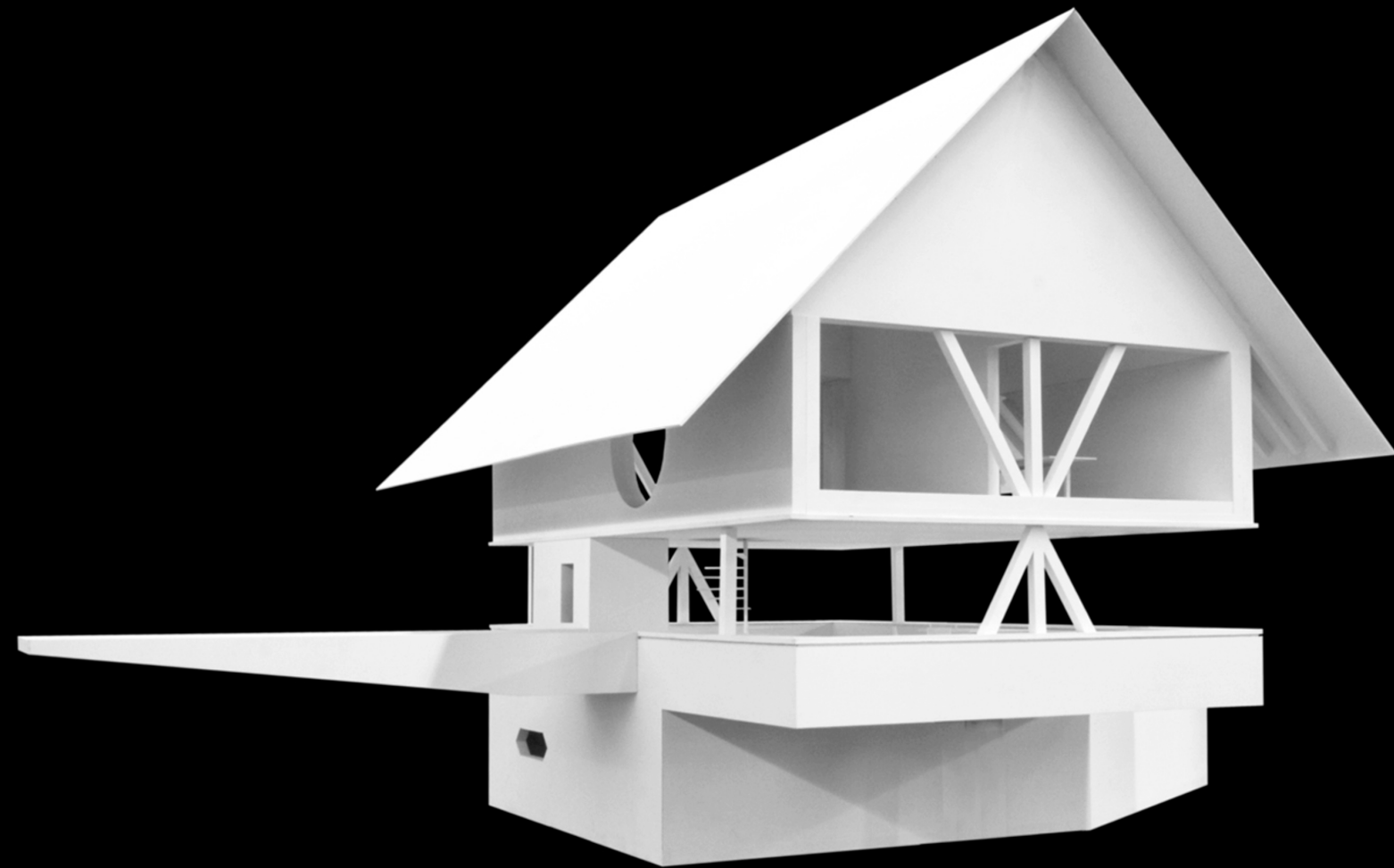
A haunting house

Daniel Tudor Munteanu

In the Greek movie *Kynodontas*¹, the children of a middle-class family imagine the world beyond their quiet rural estate solely on the basis of their parents' accounts, regardless of how laconic or misleading those may be. Airplanes, for example, are believed to be small toys that might fall into their garden.

I shall, in a similar manner, take the risk to write about a house that I have never visited, and that I only know from its depictions in the various architectural media.

The said house² is located in a narrow valley in the Jura Mountains, near the Swiss-French border. Scattered around the valley are farmhouses and the so-called *Stöckli*, multifunctional agricultural buildings that are traditionally part of the farms in Switzerland and Germany. The *Stöcklis* also become the homes of retired farmers, once they have turned their farms over to their heirs. The ground and upper floors are residential areas, while the attics and the cellars were traditionally used as storage spaces for grain and other farm produce. Such a wooden *Stöckli*, damaged by rot, needed to be demolished and rebuilt; needless to mention that the very strict local building legislation requires any new house to match the footprint and pitched roof silhouette of the previous one. The owner entrusted the job to Pascal Flammer, a young architect with no previous built projects of his own. Flammer had been working for years in Valerio Olgiati's office in Flims, and he was known as his master's assistant and protégé. Just like his father before him, Olgiati had already attained cult status in Switzerland. His legacy to his devotees is a trademark trait of obses-



sive precision and formal mastery, spiced with just the right amount of narcissism and arrogance. It is therefore safe to assume that the farmer knew that he wasn't going to be presented with a traditional cuckoo-clock chalet.

The new house establishes a subversive connection to its archetype. A black stained wooden box is set along the meadow, covered with the simplest side-gabled roof. The generous glazed surface does not attempt to conceal the interior — an overall cladding of oiled, white-pigmented spruce. It is the scale and the proportion of the elements that are alienating: the eaves protrude far too much from the facade, shading strange round windows inflated to absurd dimensions; the sequence of windows, floors and opaque tympanum mock the familiar with their inappropriate proportions and composition.

As a young architect confronted with his first direct commission, Flammer felt the pressure of having to prove himself. The first such works are usually overdesigned wannabe masterpieces, dictatorial and profusely textual self-portraits masking the architect's inherent uncertainty. Such was indeed the case with Olgiati's first house: his "Haus Kucher" in Rottenburg am Neckar (1991) is «at conflict with the overabundance of referential tropes, the facade at the base literally bulging like if filled to capacity»³. Flammer managed to dissolve his rhetorics in a surprisingly coherent whole, but he did not escape the overbearing attitude of a tyrant.

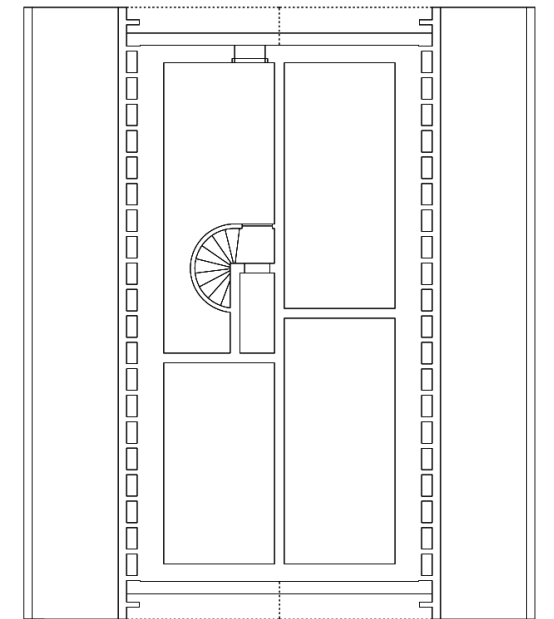
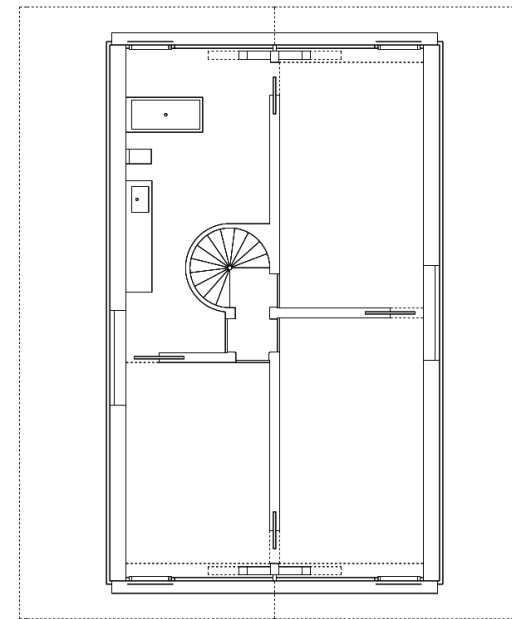
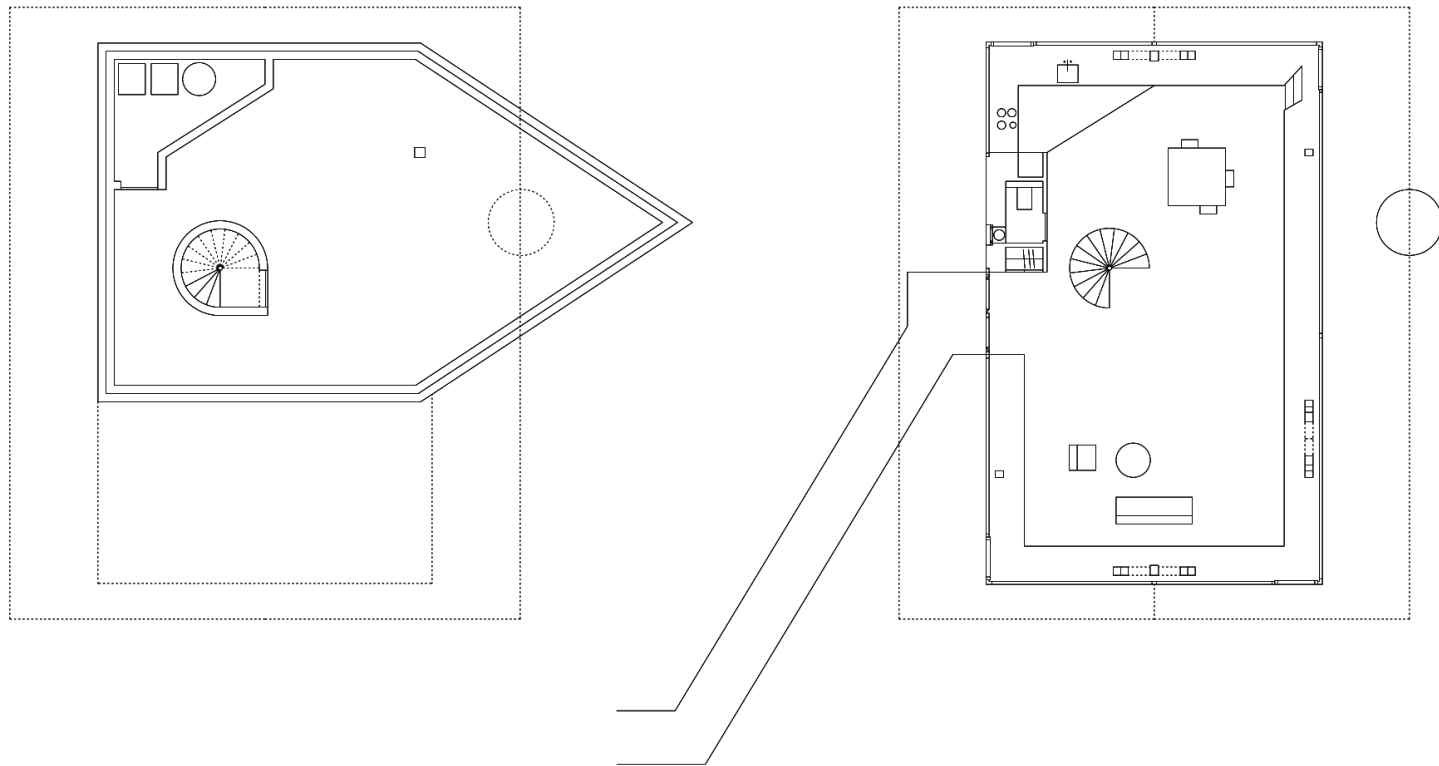
The head of the family depicted in *Kynodontas* is in total control of the domestic social experiment he conducts. He feeds his unsuspecting children, on a daily basis, tape-recorded vocabulary lessons, in which every notion related to the outside world is linked to a domestic object. The children are therefore taught that "excursion" refers to a flooring material, that a "sea" is a sort of armchair etc.

The same autocratic conduct governs Flammer's Stöckli. Beneath the warm, cozy appearance lies a tyrannical force that assigns every

activity to its particular spot and carefully framed view. The place is endowed with an absolute and inescapable logic (Flammer's logic), that makes it, at the same time, both a prison and a sanctuary. However, voluntary prisoners of architecture exist only in the architect's imagination. Regular people dislike being coerced to live in a pinball machine operated by an almighty, albeit extremely talented power. Therefore, the house failed to accommodate its owners; Flammer, who later publicly admitted that he had designed it as if for himself, rented the house and has lived in it ever since.

The house is to be approached from a carefully designated point and at a precisely calculated angle, via a grooved ramp that descends to the entrance. The ground floor exists no more, as the main floor is sunken into the ground at table-top height. There is a single vast space, and the low ceiling and all-surrounding glass with hidden frames magnifies the vastness of it, giving it the appearance of a covered piazza. The perimetral windows rise one and a half meters above the turf outside, too low to be entered through without effort, but too high to protect the privacy of the indoor space. Flammer calls that an "animalistic" space, referring to the delicate balance of comfort and exposure that an animal has while crouching in a hollow at the base of a large tree. All signs of domesticity — books, toys, dishes — are hidden in an all-encompassing perimetral storage unit. When something is left exposed, it becomes a protagonist in an impromptu exhibition. The counter has become a pedestal. Sometimes such apparently casually exposed objects are study models of the house itself. It is not the purpose of this text to dig deeper into the psychoanalytical meaning of that.

A filigree staircase with wooden threads connects all levels of the house. Experiencing the narrow spiral stair with steep risers reminds one more of an elevator ride, because each level is entirely different, like a stacking of contrasting and sometimes contradicting atmospheres.



© Pascal Flammer

The first floor is reminiscent of the *piano nobile* of a villa, with generous windows facing the long valley, allowing deep, spectacular views of the “domain”. High sloping ceilings, going up to six meters at the ridge, enforce the impression of luxury and dominance. This upper space is a “mansard” of sorts; one somehow only perceives the roof and the floor. From the level surface up to the sloping cornices, the space is legible as a whole, despite being fragmented in four almost similar-sized rooms. One can always see the thickness of the partitions, and therefore understand the vertical planes as screens or room dividers, rather than structural walls. Such dividing screens are cut along the outer perimeter, in order to allow for a circular path among the rooms. Vitruvian-Man scaled round windows are placed at the intersection of the transversal walls with the side elevations. Consequently, one can see from each room the roof’s oversized eaves and exposed rafters — an all — protective canopy that conveys the feeling of being under a precious baldaquin.

The children in *Kynodontas* are never allowed to experience the world beyond the tall fence of their property. Their house and garden are their microcosm. However, the barrier is not complete: one can still glance outside above the driveway gate, but one never feels the urge to do so. The simple presence of such a breach merely underlines the limit and paralyses any intention to escape.

“The House in Balsthal” is in itself such a microcosm, secluded from the rest of the world by the utterly boring and anaesthetizing countryside. It is a self-contained architectural feast, where, in Flammer’s words, «one has to be able to stay at least seven days in the house without going out and should not be bored»⁴.

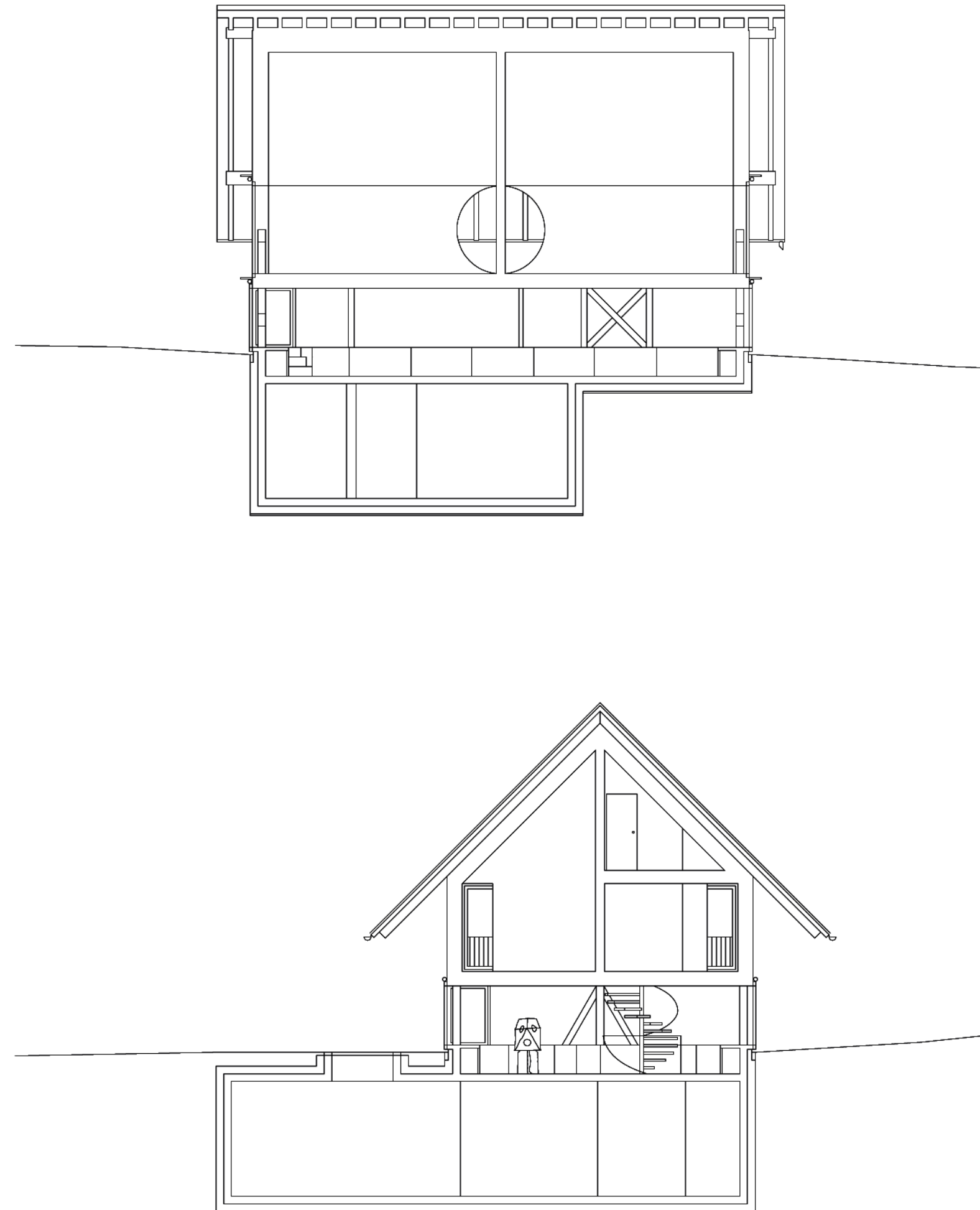
Translating almost literally the Bachelardian understanding of a “house” as a vertical being created by the polarity of cellar and attic, Flammer added two more floors with no specific functions — mere drugs to treat the anticipated cabin fever. Here, the architect leaves the

realm of the prosaic and reaches for the sublime. Curiously enough, depictions of those spaces have never been shown outside of Flammer's lectures.

An attic space is placed above the bathroom, directly under the slant of the roof. It is a space of maximum rationality, an almost un-designed space resulting from the immediate intersection of the horizontal, vertical and oblique planes. That solitary escape, almost like a tree house, is a Calvinistic space of reason and clarity of mind. Not surprisingly, it is the only space that can be described as “a room with a window” (i.e. a hole in the wall, instead of a discontinuity of the wall), even if that window is placed at crotch height.

The second — and possibly the most important — space in the house is the basement. The stairs descend from the lower level into a cylindrical concrete pit. From there, one enters a space of complete irrationality, totally disconnected from the outside world, except for a small, very deep skylight. It is a dark space with angled walls and a misplaced column, impossible to understand at first, because it does not fit under the footprint of the house above. It looks as though a god of the underworld had twisted the basement at 90 degrees, a stop frame in an insane pirouette. It is a folly, at the same time a vault and a crypt, a cavern for daydreaming. Based on a close reading of the available photographs, one can conclude that the “cave” was not built according to the plans. The chimera has proven to be only a mirage; the unfathomable space was arguably too much for the Swiss farmer that had to pay for it.

Kynodontas reaches its climax when the eldest child decides to leave her family's perverted Eden. She hides in the trunk of her father's car, with vain hopes of not actually entering her coffin. The next day, the father drives out of the premises and into the real world. The movie ends with a close-up of the car trunk; there is uncertainty as to whether the girl has escaped, is going to escape, or is already dead in the trunk.





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My relation with the “House in Balsthal” shares the same amount of ambiguity. While it’s difficult not to appreciate its structural brilliance and formal virtuosity, I’m at the same time aware that that is not the path to follow. Although I could re-draw its plans literally with my eyes closed, I’m almost certain that I would not like to live in such a place.

One thing is certain though: that kind of house will always haunt you.



© Pascal Flammer

1. *Kynodontas (Dogtooth)*. Dir. Yorgos Lanthimos. Boo Productions, 2009.
2. Pascal Flammer, *House in Balsthal*, Balsthal, Switzerland, 2007-14.
3. Jeff Kaplon, *The idea of traditions (pt 2)*, in www.ofhouses.com, 28 November 2015.
4. Pascal Flammer, *Conversations*, The Scott Sutherland School, Aberdeen, 15 March 2010.