



la Biennale di Venezia

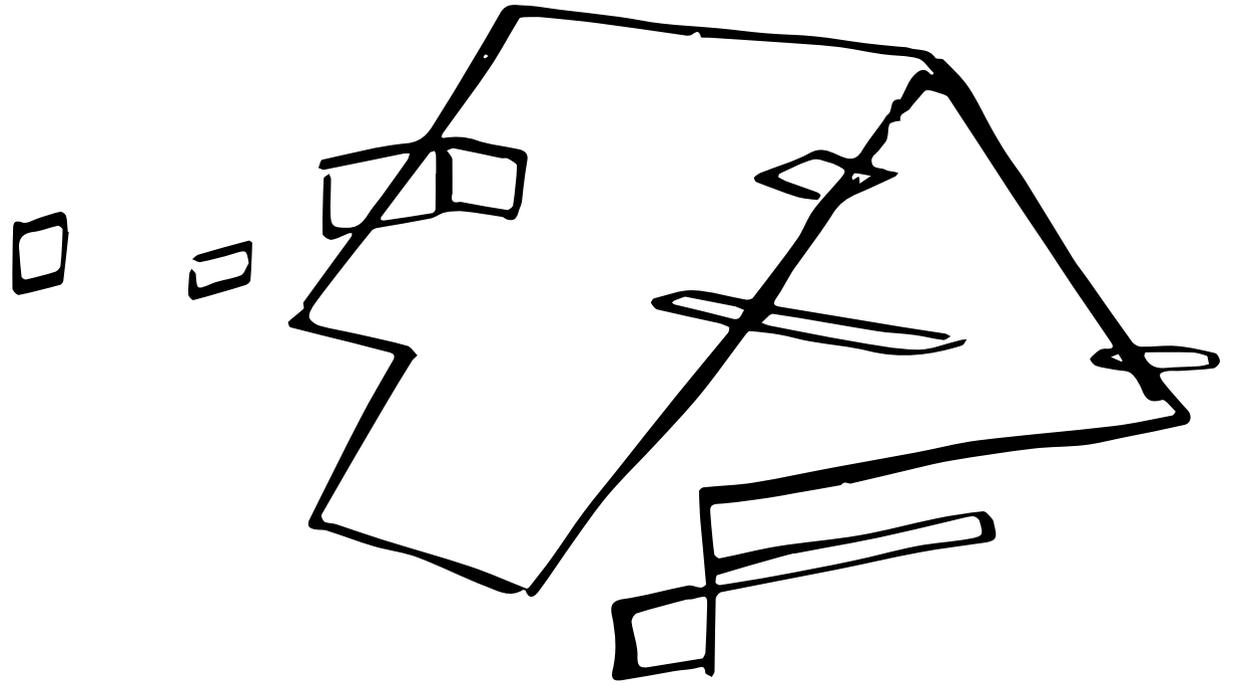
16. Mostra
Internazionale
di Architettura
Partecipazioni Nazionali

Amplifying Nature

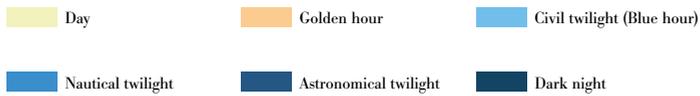
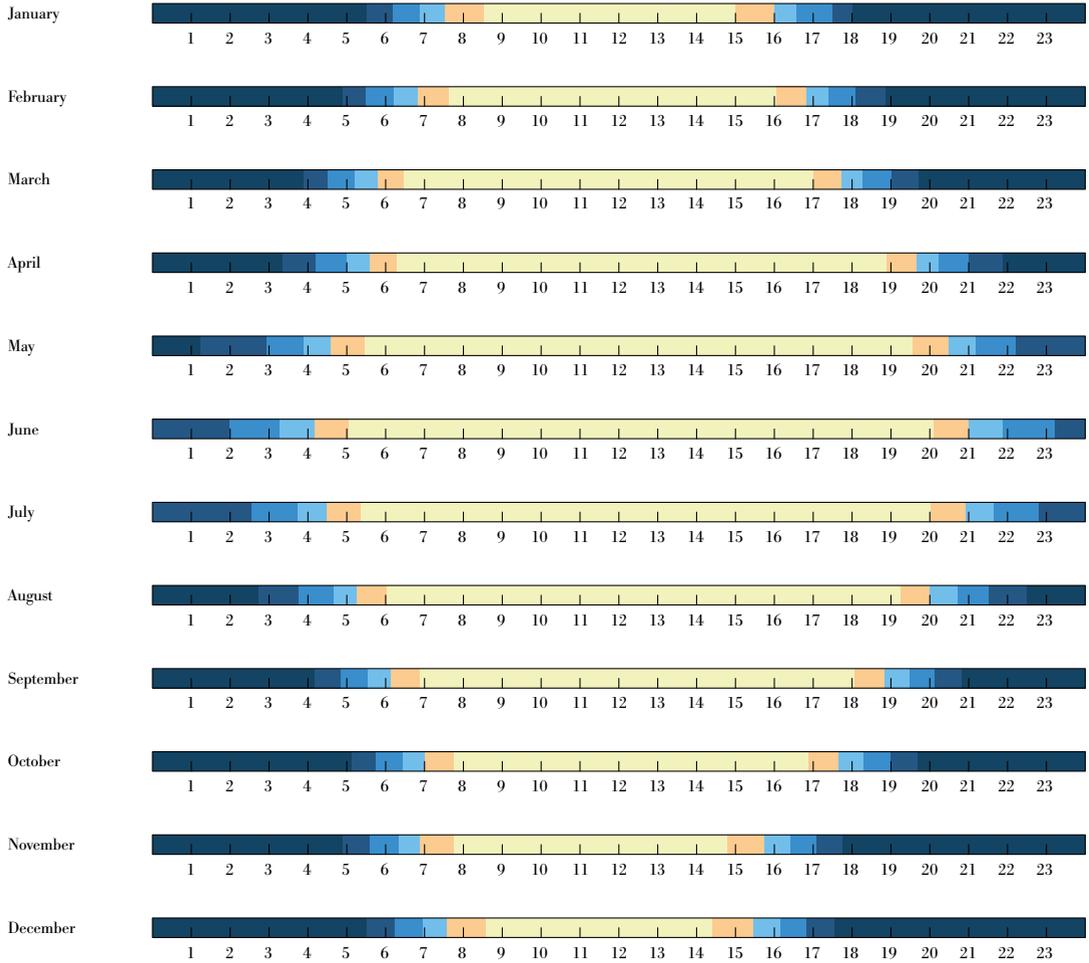
The Planetary Imagination of
Architecture in the Anthropocene



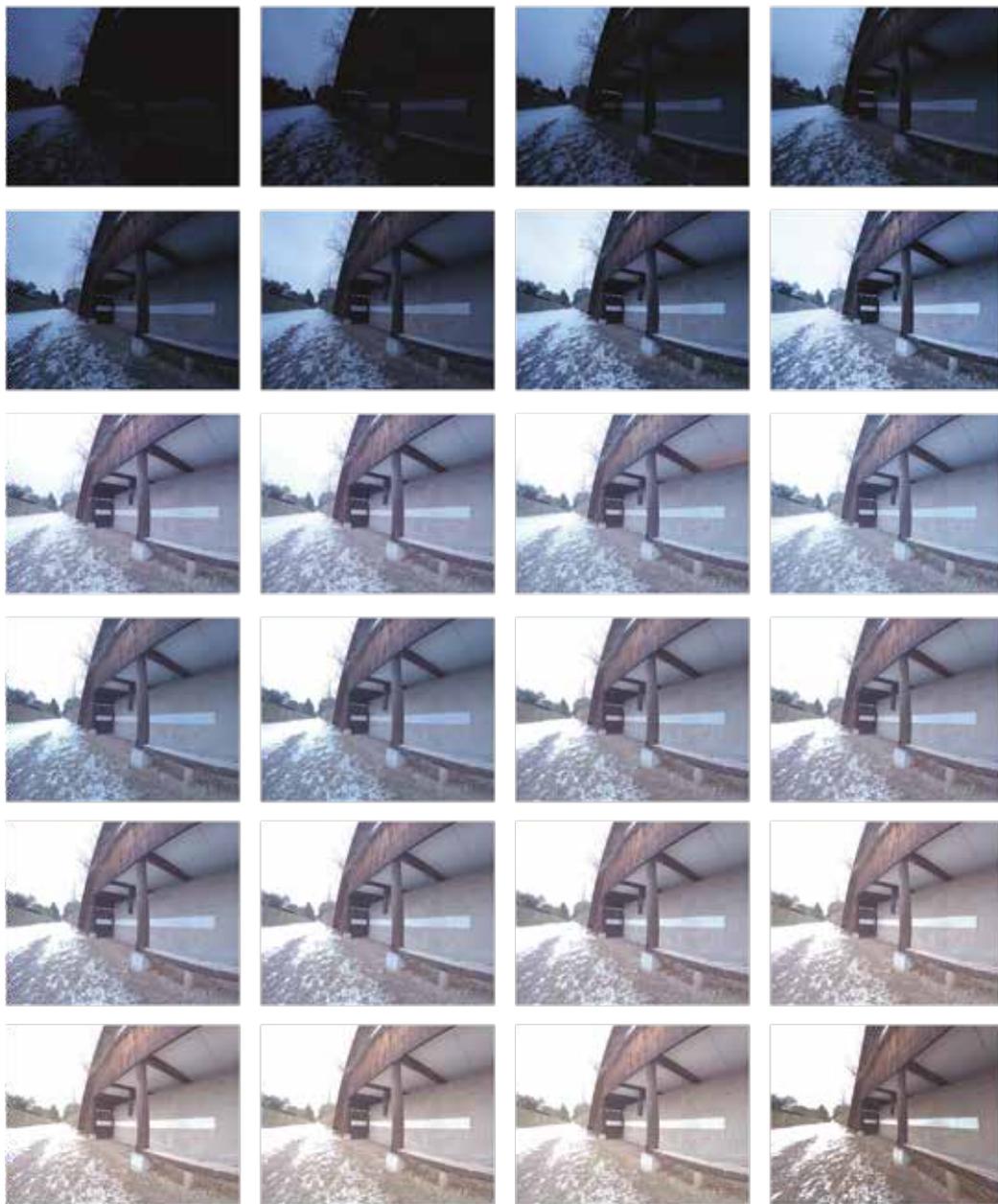
White polychromy in Zofia and Oskar Hansen's house in Szumin at twilight, 29.03.2018; photo: Anna Zagrodzka



OSCILLA-
TION OF
LIGHT



Since 2013, CENTRALA has been the custodian of the architecture of a living monument — Oskar and Zofia Hansen's house in Szumin near Warsaw. Staying there for longer periods of time reveals a choreography of everydayness, synced with the day-night cycle and embedded in the architecture. In this chapter, we seek to show the house as a dynamic process that concentrates and modifies routines and cycles, not only in relation to the inhabitants, but also the substance of the space co-begotten by the intensity of light at different times of day. In a conversation with Kacper Pobłocki, Małgorzata Kuciewicz and Simone De Iacobis report on how the study of the embodied and material aspect of the house replaces the difference between the 'objective' and 'subjective' images of architecture. [AP]



Dawn in Szumin, 29.03.2018,
photo: Anna Zagrodzka

As of 1975

Zofia and Oskar Hansen's
House in Szumin



Harvest time in Szumin, 1975,
photo: Zofia and Oskar Hansen Foundation,
courtesy of Igor Hansen

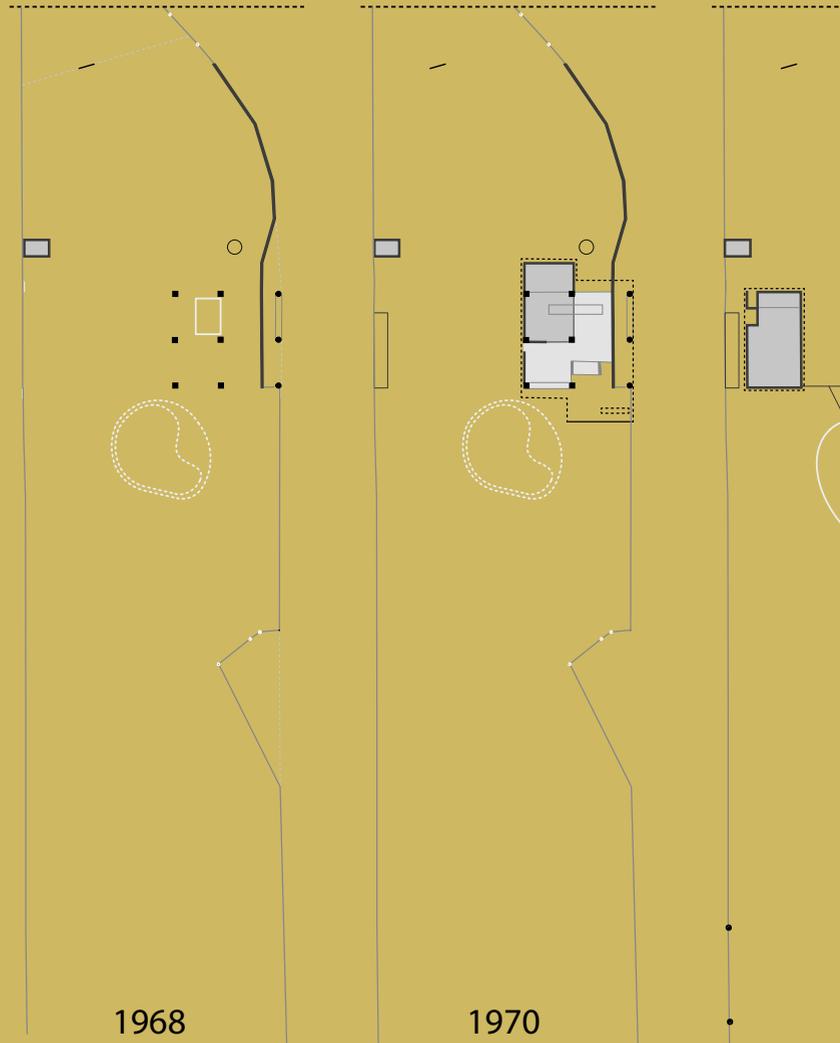
HOUSE FLOOR AREA (AS OF 1975):

20 m ²	ground floor (interior)
28 m ²	platform (floor only)
10 m ²	porch
35 m ²	garret floor
1 m ²	toilet
29 m ²	garage

Zofia and Oskar Hansen's house in Szumin, built and expanded from the late 1960s on, was originally meant as a vacation cottage for the Hansen family and at the same time a spatial manifesto of Open Form, a theory and practice aimed at creating architecture co-shaped by its users, serving as a background for the events of everyday life and adapting to changing needs.

The essence of such architecture consists in a variable architectural space, with the form and aesthetic of the substance of the building being of secondary importance since it was built in a DIY system, in a period of market shortages, including with second-hand materials.

An inventory of the condition of the Szumin house carried out by CENTRALA in 2013–2015 for the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw consisted in tracing back its biography in as much detail as possible, serving as a reconnaissance for and introduction to

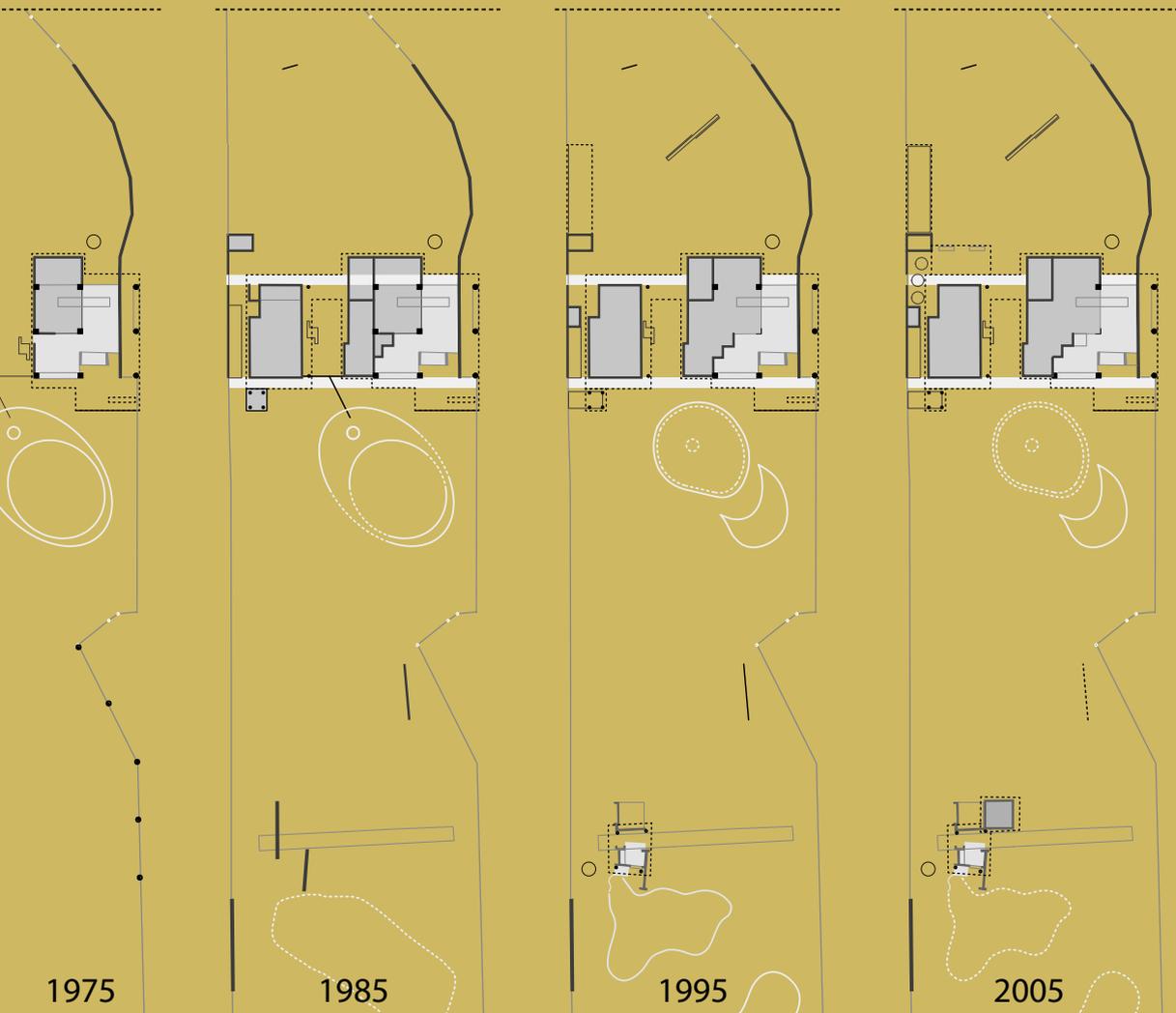


Analysis of the expansion of the house in Szumin, drawing by CENTRALA (Małgorzata Kuciewicz, Simone De Iacobis and team), 2013

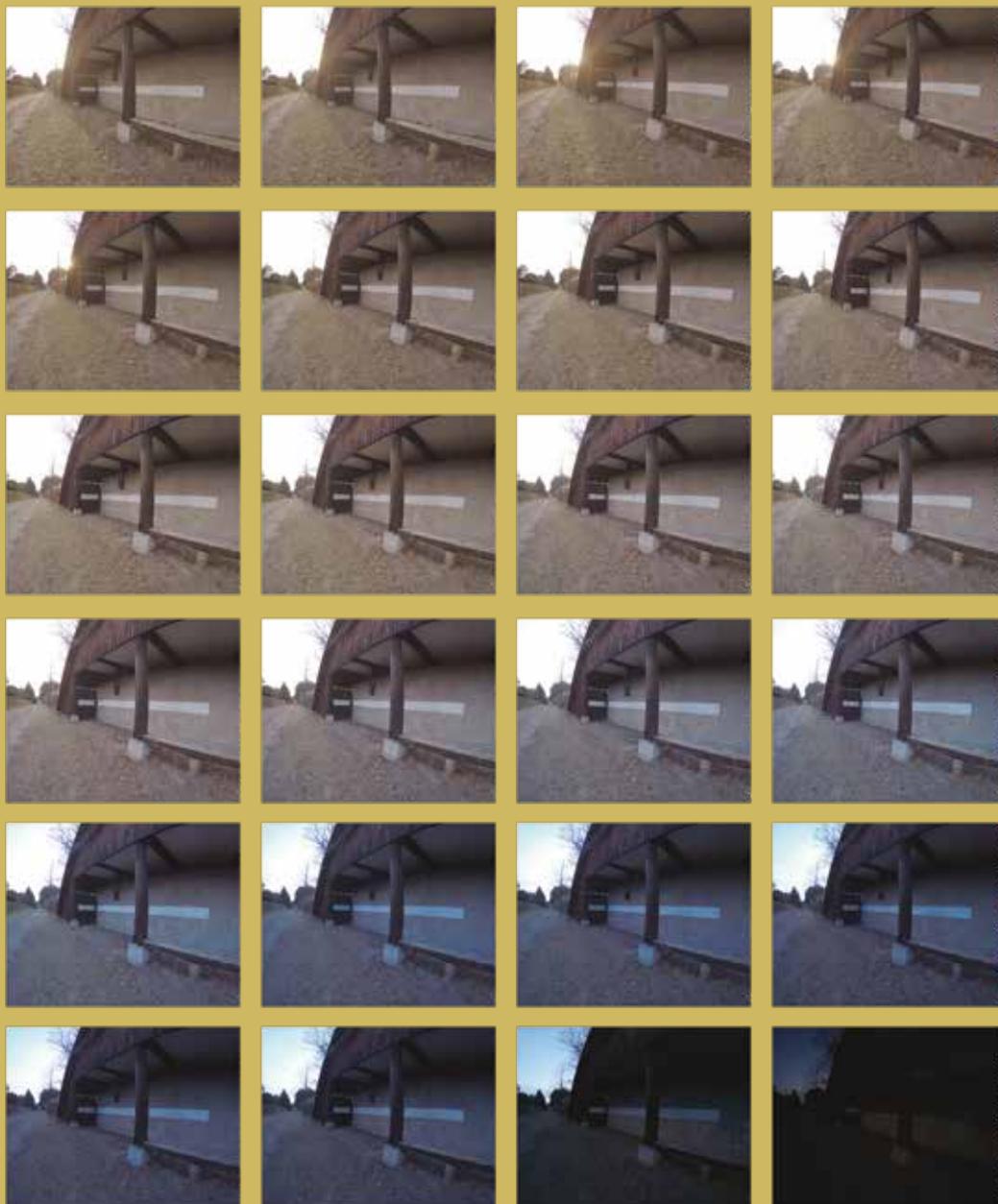
a future conservation strategy focused on the materiality of the house and its underlying philosophy. Research ranged from an analysis of archival materials and testimonies, to paint colour tests and the study

of the building's layers and chronological phases.

Since May 2014, the Szumin house has been part of the



Iconic Houses Network, and in late 2017 it officially became a branch of the MMA, curated first by Aleksandra Kędziorek (2013–2017) and since 2018 by Tomasz Fudala. [MK, SDI]



Dusk in Szumin, 28.03.2018,
photo: Anna Zagrodzka

A conversation between:
Małgorzata Kuciewicz (MK)
Simone De Iacobis (SDI)
Kacper Pobłocki (KP)

The Third Time of the Day

KP

What is it that you call the third time of the day? That's the Polish term for it, and I use it because English synonyms, such as 'twilight' or 'crepuscular hour' . . .

MK

Aren't as pretty.

KP

. . . and don't describe the autonomous phenomenon. 'Twilight' is merely the moment when day and night meet, a transient thing and not a phenomenon unto its own. So what is it?

MK

The third time is a distinct and discrete part of the solar day, distinguished not only by its light, but also by aromas, animal activity, and sounds. It has been completely repressed from our perception because electric light is now so strongly embedded in our environment. Few architectural structures or spaces are dedicated to the celebration of this time. When the third time of the day begins, your perception of distance changes, implying a different choreography of space. Your perception of your own body changes too. What is very close is suddenly amplified, while more distant stimuli are muffled.

KP

Scale is experienced differently.

MK

Yes, you inhabit space and the surrounding scales differently. The reality close to your body becomes domesticated, comfortable. What is farther away becomes blurry, vague, perhaps even slightly ominous.

SDI

We don't mean contemplation — that it's some kind of magical moment. For me, the most important aspect of the third time of the day is the tension that our daily routines are streaked with. In the morning, when you wake up, following that part of the full day that serves regeneration, and in the evening, when you prepare to go to sleep. Today, when you enter the workplace, it's daytime and when you leave, it's already dark. We've lost hold of the moment when our body can — for a short while at least — synchronise with the environment.

KP

How do you yourselves experience it?

MK

When I start receiving sonic or olfactory stimuli, my senses are recalibrated. When thinking of the third time of the day, I see myself in nature. In the city, it's a part of the day that I don't really notice at all. But when I'm in nature, I realise I have other senses too, not just eyesight.

KP

This is perhaps because today in the city, we are surrounded primarily by visual stimuli. One of the icons of contemporary urban space is New York's Times Square where the passer-by is bombarded with images. In cities where heaps of horse manure lay on the streets, the sense of sight had serious rivals.

MK

There are probably many reasons for this hyper-visibility of cities. The effect, however, is that our daily routines are not connected with the third time of the day. In Polish culture, the only



A photographic analysis of light reflection at the Zofia and Oskar Hansen's house in Szumin, according to CENTRALA's 'third time of the day' concept

Photos taken on the 28th of March 2018 between 7:26 p.m. and 7:40 p.m. and on the 29th of March between 5:31 a.m. and 5:51 a.m.



moment when it is noticed is Christmas Eve, when children are told to look out for the first star. Its appearance in the sky is a signal to sit down at the table and begin the feast. The festival, which lasts for a couple of days, begins precisely with the third time of the day. But that's an exception.

SDI

When looking for examples of amplifying nature, we were struck by the fact that in pre-modern cities, the moment when the sun rose and set was easier to notice.

KP

When I was a kid, I was fascinated by the moment when the street lamps went on, even though it was still daytime. This could stretch to almost an hour. I thought at the time it was a system error, that someone had had something wrong. After all, street lamps should be on during

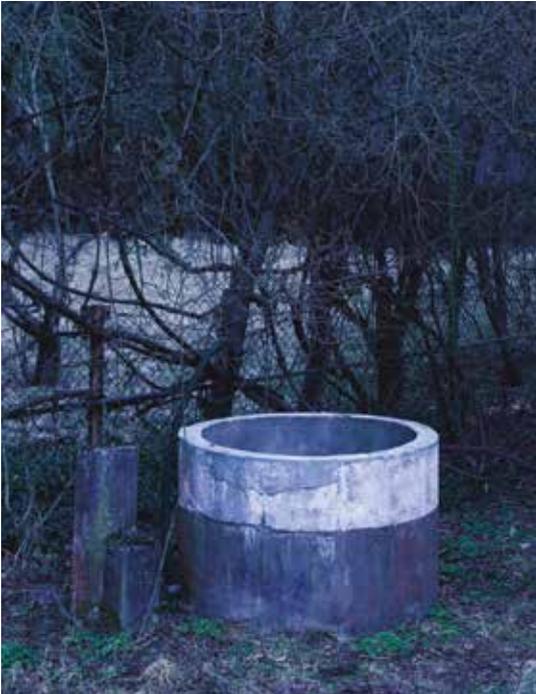
night-time only, shouldn't they? As a teenager, I attributed it to the proverbial sloppy Polish organisation of things. My reaction shows how much the binarity, the concept that it's either day or night, has become entrenched in our thinking. I would never have thought of it as an amplification — most likely unintended — of the third time of the day.

MK

The early morning is also the best time for watching birds in the city. They wake up at two or three a.m. It's the only moment when you can hear them. You can even tell the time by the voice of a given bird. If you recognise bird voices and wake up, you know what time it is.

SDI

It also needs to be noted that the third time of the day is a phenomenon of our geographical latitudes. Nearer the equator, night-time does come abruptly. You go to the bathroom when it's

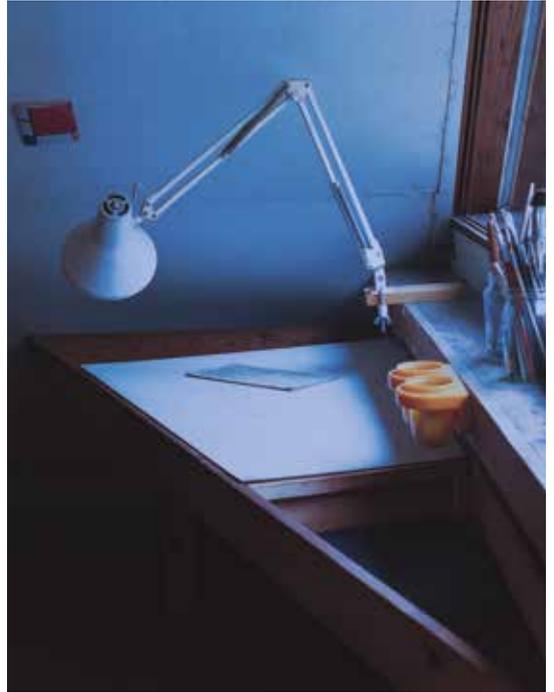




daytime and when you come back to the living room, it's already dark. In Poland, the third time of the day can last three, even four hours. In the summer, especially in the north, on the Baltic coast, the night is very bright, almost white.

KP

You've discovered the third time of the day — or, more precisely, named the phenomenon — through your experience with the Hansen house in Szumin. Not by working with theory, such as Oskar Hansen's idea of Open Form, but through the documentation of the structure. Your point of departure was in materiality.



MK

Szumin is not so much an architectural structure as a machine for the senses. First, we experienced the space, then we started connecting certain facts, not necessarily while in Szumin itself. First of all, we connected the pieces of information we'd received from various sources, such as that Zofia Hansen liked to sit on a bench in front of the garden, that she had her favourite spot at the kitchen table, that it was mostly she who washed the dishes. Measuring the house, we noticed that the three spots were strewn along a single viewing axis. The Hansens had actually lowered the kitchen floor so that when doing the dishes, Mrs Hansen could look from the same level as when sitting at the table or on the bench. It was her favourite view and she could see it from those three places. So the tectonics of the house had been subordinated to Mrs Hansen's gaze. It's not something you can

discover by simply being there, because none of us is Mrs Hansen. You won't sit on the bench or at the table and you won't wash the dishes to notice this. One person told us that Mrs Hansen had her favourite spot at the table, another one showed us her bench, and then we learned that her husband cooked quite often and she did the dishes. And we connected the facts.

KP

Why was it so important for them to build this axis into the architecture of the house?

SDI

Perhaps it was the oblong shape of the plot, which was an important factor in designing



the house. First there was a bulge-and-hollow, and then they came up with the idea of using the lay of the land to grow plants that are unusual in Poland, such as peaches. So the house was being kind of pulled along through those interventions in the landscape. Mrs Hansen's view was part of that. It's actually a primal feeling when you are a farmer — you want to be able to take in the view of your domain. So I'm not surprised that while doing the things she liked to do, she wanted to have her estate in view.

MK

Szumin was woven with their habits. It's not like they built an architectural structure and then chose their favourite places in it. It was an open form, and they kept expanding and rebuilding it. And though there are no captions there today, you can still read the inhabitants' invisible routines from the space.

KP

And how did you discover that Szumin was a light machine — a *camera obscura* — in a very literal sense, as Anna Ptak put it?

SDI

When we went there for the first time, the Hansens' son, Igor, brought to our attention white vertical grooves in the corner of the building's sole concrete wall. Reflecting light, the low relief served as a warning sign for cars so that they didn't crash into the wall. The road curves there and you can miss the house. You can easily assume that these polychrome details are there for the sake of decoration only rather than playing a practical function. But we noticed that the main white horizontal line leads to the keyhole. So it's a life hack that helps you to open the door when it gets dark.

MK

And I simply fell into the service pit in the garage. Waiting for someone to rescue me, I discovered that its now-faded walls used to be

painted white. And I realised why the borders of all water wells in the garden were painted white.

KP
Why?

SDI
To prevent people from falling into them. An edge amplified with white paint becomes a warning.

MK
We had another experience when we'd invited some guests to Szumin and as luck would have it, there was a power shortage. We only had candles. The slats comprising the top of the main table are painted white on one side. The table is also a didactic apparatus that's used for practicing composition; you can arrange various patterns by placing the slats this or that way. But when we turned all the slats white side up, the white began to reflect the candle light. This illuminated the white ceiling overhead. Additionally, the whole space ends with a horizontal mirror and another white polychrome on the other side. Suddenly there was quite a lot of light. Enough to read without electricity.

KP
And it was during the third time of the day, wasn't it?

MK
That's right. And that was the moment when we began to realise that all those white lines weren't there for compositional reasons. They can be found by the dovecote because sharp tools hang there. White is a signal that here are the sharp edges of the rakes and there hang the pruning shears. Contrasts were thus heightened during the third time of the day and the outlines of the items were brought out.

KP
Do you think they were aware, theory-wise, of the amplifications they were effecting?

MK

The house kept changing, being constantly expanded. The exhibition presents its condition as of 1975 when it hadn't yet grown all those extensions. Then the Hansens converted the place into a year-round abode and gave it new skins. Polychromy is best visible at the earliest stage. At first its function was purely utilitarian, but then the Hansens began to use it in a more visual way, and ultimately even in a formal one. Even the dog house had a white element, for no apparent reason.

SDI

The first facility that was built, even before the house itself, was a privy. They had no electricity there at all yet. And the privy has polychrome elements too. The door handle area has been painted white to find it more easily when it gets dark. The toilet itself is a plank with a hole and a drawer underneath. You can remove



the drawer from the outside in order to empty its contents. The area around the drawer has been painted white, too, so you can locate it and reach for it efficiently.

MK

During the period in the history of the Szumin House that we are showing in the exhibition, the trees in the garden were also painted white. In orcharding, you paint tree trunks white so that, if an early spring arrives, the white colour reflects sunlight. This delays the release of sap and the start of vegetation. The plant — its most sensitive parts such as blossoms or fruit germs — is also more resilient to ground frost, which occurs frequently during early spring in Poland.

KP

So we have a situation here where a practice commonly used in orcharding is transplanted — most likely by Mr Hansen, who was an avid gardener — to the field of architecture. But you are also saying that the experience of Mrs Hansen, who participated in the reconstruction of the Polish countryside after the war, is also evident in the architecture of Szumin.

MK

And not only Szumin. During our performative lecture on Zofia Hansen, her son, Igor, told a story about the specificity of entrances to peasant cottages. They are adapted to the scale of the human body. The entrances are small, like in a boat. The natural instinct when stepping over something high is to stoop, so the doors were low and had a high threshold. This reduced the escape of heat from inside. Mrs Hansen's knowledge of such matters was extensive and she often used it. In the housing estate in Rakowiec, Warsaw, which the Hansens designed in 1959, you'll find a mirror that is an obvious quotation from small towns or farmsteads. Each entrance to the apartment block has a kind of mini-porch, a small roof



supported by a post. On the inside of the post there hangs a mirror, so when leaving the building you encounter your own image and have the last chance to tidy yourself up.

KP

So the mirror was brought from private space out into public space?

MK

To the space in between, in fact. Just as it was in the peasant cottage. There the mirror usually hung on the porch rather than indoors. It was the last 'checkpoint' to make sure you haven't forgotten your headscarf or something.

KP

What other quotations from folk architecture can be found in Szumin?



MK

For example, the *dirt floor* which is part of the house. Or the foot-beam bench, which they built outside the house, under the roof overhang.

SDI

In Szumin there are three, or actually four, such benches. One for the guests and neighbours, by the main entrance, one for Mrs Hansen at her favourite spot, one by the garage, and one by the exit from Mrs Hansen's bedroom and the kitchen entrance.

MK

In the traditional Polish house, which had stone foundations and wooden walls, there was a ledge at their junction due to the difference in thickness. The place closest to the door was traditionally a place of meeting. People would sit on the foot-beam bench and chat. The Polish

word *pryzba* comes from *przy izbie*, meaning 'by the room'. As we understand it, it's domesticated outdoor space.

KP

Again, neither private nor public, but rather something in between.

MK

The foot-beam bench was often installed under the roof overhang, which in bad weather allowed you to perform various farm-related activities, and in good weather even the domestic chores. So you could go outside with your sewing or potato peeling. The foot-beam bench made for very comfortable seating; it was located at approximately 30-40 centimetres above the ground, the usual height of the protruding part of the foundation, more or less equal to rain-splash or snowfall level. In Szumin, Mrs Hansen's foot-beam bench, which is situated on the edge of the floor, is also 30 centimetres high.

KP

So what is the architectural difference between the *dirt floor* and the other floor?

SDI

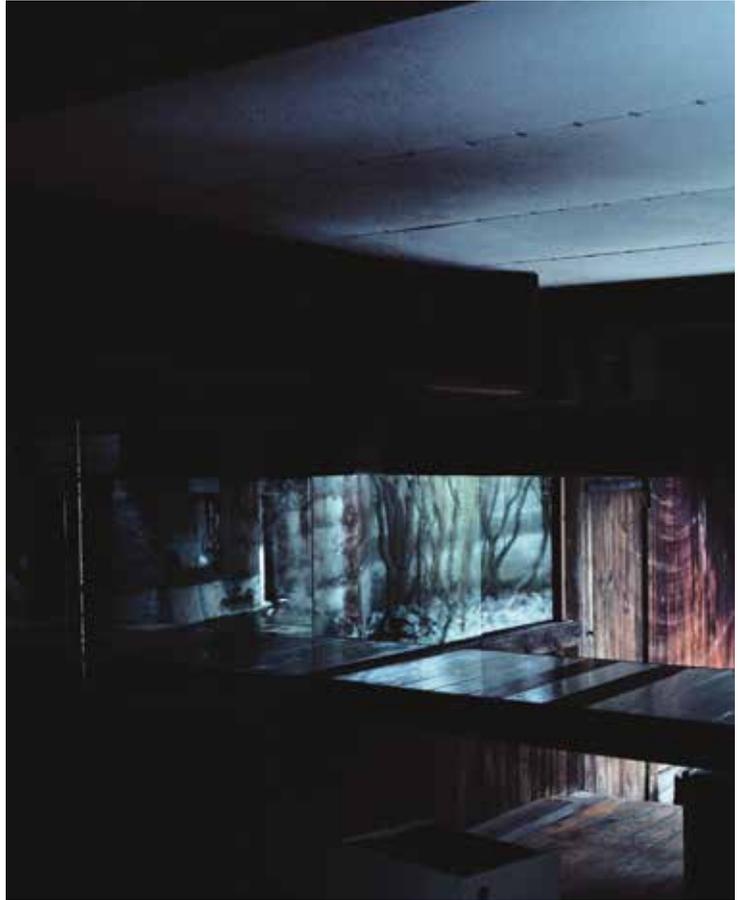
In Szumin, when approaching the house, the first thing you see after opening the gate are the wellingtons of the whole family, standing right past the threshold. Then you enter a raised floor, a kind of platform, which is level with the floor inside. This step is precisely the boundary between what you might call the *dirty floor* and the *clean floor*. As in a Japanese house. The kitchen floor and door are, in turn, flush with the ground rather than the platform, so when carrying a bucket of water from the well, for example, you don't need to negotiate a step.

KP

Anything else?

MK

The chimney corner or inglenook (*zapiecek*). In the middle of the rural cottage, the cooking stove



stood there, or rather the whole cooking range, a multifunctional fixture. It featured the cooking part with an iron top plate, a bread oven, a heating stove, as well as a section where you could sit on, recline on, where you could dry mushrooms, herbs, or bed linens. It was a system whose thermal effect was used to the full. The Hansens' stove was painted white and fuelled with wood from the outside through the wall. All of the dirt and ash remained outside, and the heating chamber was a large, sculptural form that set the tone of the domestic space. The inglenook was tiny, good for a brief sit-down or for drying things. The bed was above the stove, upstairs.

SDI

What is evident at the Szumin House is the logic of building around the fireplace. There is a chimney there now because the original stove was replaced after 2004, but in 1975 there was no structural chimney yet. So you can see how the inglenook principle was applied throughout the house. I can imagine perfectly well why Mr Hansen built his bed in that elevated spot, above the living-room floor level — because it was the warmest place, heated from below by the stove.

MK

The lesson we drew from all that was to think about architecture through routines rather than functions. Spaces kind of configure themselves around specific household activities. And during different seasons. That was the main point of departure for us in thinking about the *Cabrio House*.

KP

You could say the Hansens were building a machine for living, as postulated by modernism.

SDI

It's actually anti-modernist because modernism was based on a whole system of infrastructure, like central heating, that served you and your home. Here, everything is individual, you need to heat your home yourself and take care of everything. We are particularly interested in how certain solutions from before the industrial era can be applied in contemporary architectural design.

MK

For example, we are preoccupied with the question of responsivity to the seasons. The first thing you do when you come to Szumin is open the window shutters. You remove the first outside skin. And then the outside space pours inside and you can become disoriented as to where the edge of the house is. This house is like

an onion: it consists of layers. You can remove them, but also add them. Mrs Hansen had even tailored a down-filled quilt that insulated a section of the roof from the inside to prevent heat loss in winter time. Windbreakers are quite frequent: you hang a curtain in the corridor to create an extra textile skin for the home. But I've never heard of someone tailoring a garment for a house, and a suspended one, as if it were to be its palate.

HANSEN'S ECOLOGY

In two books about Oskar Hansen, *To See the World* and *Towards Open Form*, both published in 2005, the value criteria underlying his philosophy of space resound very strongly. *Open Form*, as Hansen construed it, after Johann Jakob Bachofen, is characteristic for a matri-archal culture based on the conservation and nourishment of the inner causes of life in its most diverse forms, as well as the active, cognitive organisation of space. *Closed Form*, in turn, is a consequence of the desire to possess. The existing organisation of space is one of the reasons for

the difficult current situation on Earth. The repercussions of spatiotemporal compositions are varied — some can serve life while others may cause destruction.' A transition to an era of ecological sustainability and social justice is hindered according to Hansen by such *visual influence tools* as 'nation states, centric cities, patriotisms, nationalisms, and theisms'. In the 1990s and 2000s, an era culturally and politically geared towards individualism and neoliberal freedom, this ecological aspect of Hansen's legacy was ignored or dominated by the impact of *Open Form* on the small scale and the criticism of Hansen's fundamental macro-scale program, the Linear Continuous System (envisaging parallel settlement 'belts', hundreds of kilometres

long, stretching across the country), as a totalitarian idea. In a conversation with Joanna Mytkowska, Hansen explains why it is necessary to reorganise our spatial notions: 'The LCS is not a fad. Not because I insist, but because we won't change the forces of nature: gravity, the way sun heats the earth, or the direction of river flows . . . The LCS is based to large extent on nature laws. All four bands relate to rivers. Why? Because they ensure the best flow of air. We have to breathe.' Convinced he was dying of cancer caused by exposure to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster radiation (as on those days



in 1986 he worked in the garden as usual, unaware of what had happened), Hansen criticised the greedy exploitation of natural resources, militarism, and nation states nursing a siege mentality. The results of this are felt not where they serve the powerful, but where they affect the powerless. An anti-capitalist rhetoric is accompanied in his statements by the idea that the partnership of mankind and nature is not a challenge on the individual level, but that 'we need to realise that we are in a different quantitative phase, that this quality has to be managed differently.' (AP)

sources:

Oskar Hansen, *Zobaczyć świat*, ed. Jola Gola, Maryla Siłkowska, Joanna Kania, Agnieszka Szewczyk, Warsaw: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2005

Oskar Hansen, *Towards Open Form*, ed. Jola Gola, Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, Revolver, Muzeum ASP w Warszawie, 2004

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