

ARCHITECTURAL STORIES

Architecture
FAS(t)

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I



The Paradoxical Belvedere

The grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence.

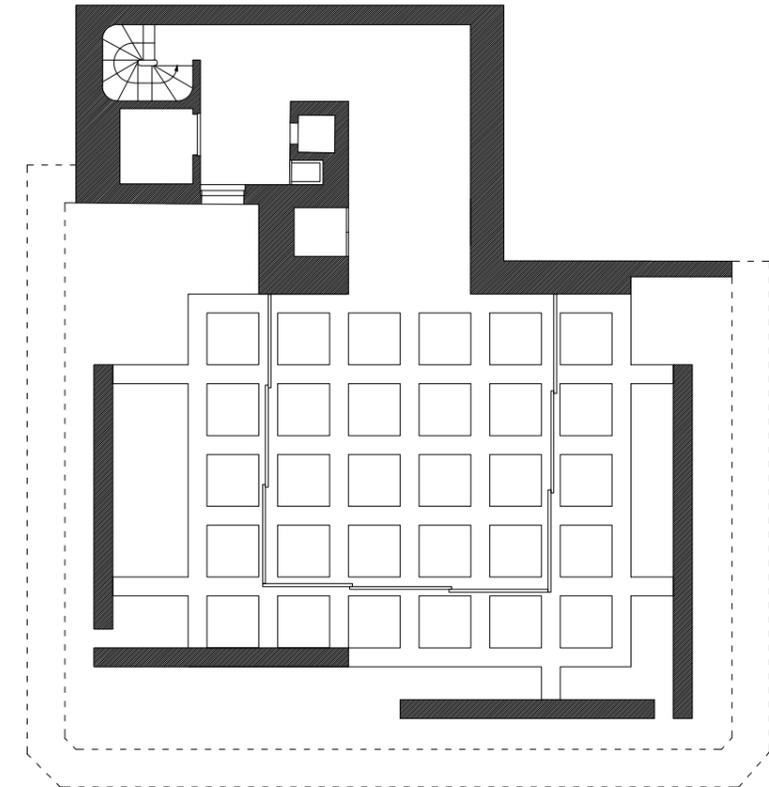
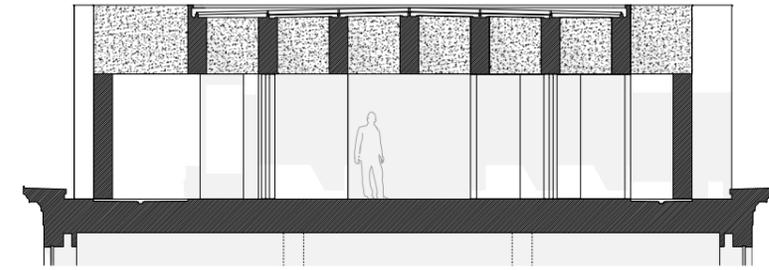
Rosalind Krauss

Bel means 'beautiful;' *vedere* means not only 'to see' and 'to look at,' but also 'to visit,' in addition to 'find out' and 'grasp.' In keeping with tradition, the belvedere is positioned on the roof above the main living area. Not a classical rotunda, but a covered glass terrace—an airy pavilion without any particular practical purpose. The spiral staircase leading to the empty pavilion, together with the stairwell's walls, appear as if they were carved from a single block of stone.

The paradox lies in the fact that while visitors are submerged in a sea of natural light, the belvedere does not open up any vistas for them: the cityscape is blocked from view by huge panels clad in Corten steel. Instead of a mixture of houses and vegetation receding into the horizon, one is offered to observe the iridescence of rust and four modest installations in the style of miniature Japanese gardens, wherein the role of the rocks has been assigned to pieces of construction trash left from the renovation.

The grid, consisting of square coffers and skylights, forms the roof of the belvedere, offering a not entirely expected, but perhaps the most effective key to the resolution of this peculiar contradiction. Or, to be more precise, to a positive acknowledgement of its insolubility. Having considered several prototypes and mediations of this grid, such as Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin (without skylights) and Kahn's Yale Center for British Art (with skylights), we inevitably

fall back on what is now a classical thesis pointing to the foundational role of the grid in modernist painterly abstraction. According to Rosalind Krauss, one of the most influential art historians of the second half of the 20th century, the masters of geometric abstraction must have picked up the idea of the grid from two sources. First, from symbolist art (e.g. Odilon Redon), where the grid is still simply a window, but already the kind of window which, aside from transparency, possesses the property of reflecting back the viewer's gaze. Second, from the treatises on physiological optics written in the mid-to late-19th century, in which the grid was used as a tool for scientific modeling and describing the very act of visual perception. One might disagree with Krauss' statement that the perspective lattices, used by the artists of the Renaissance (Alberti, da Vinci, Dürer) in the early stages of the development of linear perspective, are not part of the modernist grid's lineage. Be that as it may, it is indisputable that the symbolic power of the grid in the modernist age was based on its unique ability to simultaneously influence the viewers in two ways: on the one hand, it moves them out of the everyday verbal stream of consciousness and into the realm of *pure aesthetic contemplation*; on the other hand, it spotlights not just anything, but, first of all, precisely this state of *disentangled contemplativeness* as a privileged object for itself. Having placed itself under mighty aegis of the grid, the paradoxical belvedere creates the effect of 'vision without the visible': the effect of a gaze directed at the gaze that looks at the gaze focused on the gaze that observes the gaze, etc. *ad infinitum*.



II



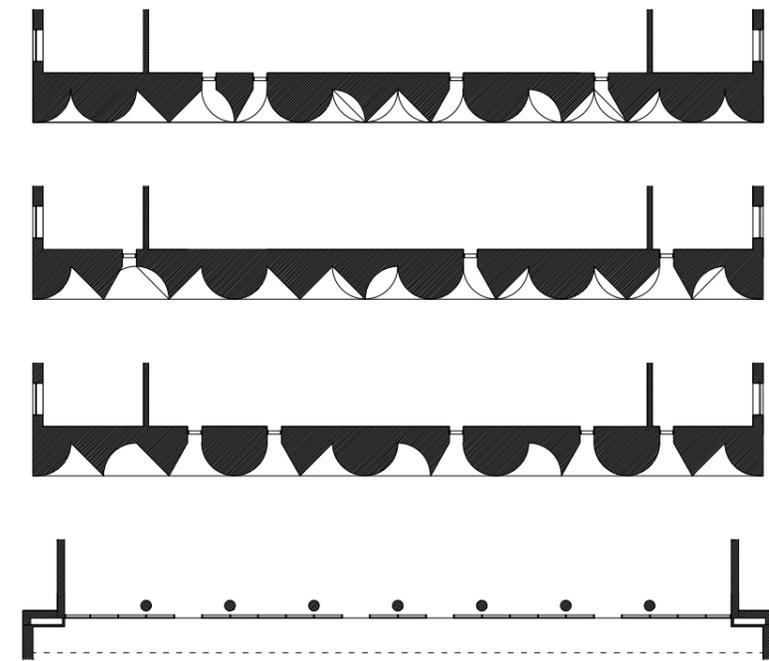
The Stochastic Gopuram

An ascending collection of reliefs—a radiator-like structure of brick protrusions and depressions stacked in rows on top of each other—arises from an empty lot amidst the buildings comprising an old factory complex. The spacious *cour d'honneur*, separating this restless structure from the setback line, gives it a solemn and even sacred undertone. Two paved, gradually-descending ramps lead to the glass-encased ground floor, inviting one to look inside and enter.

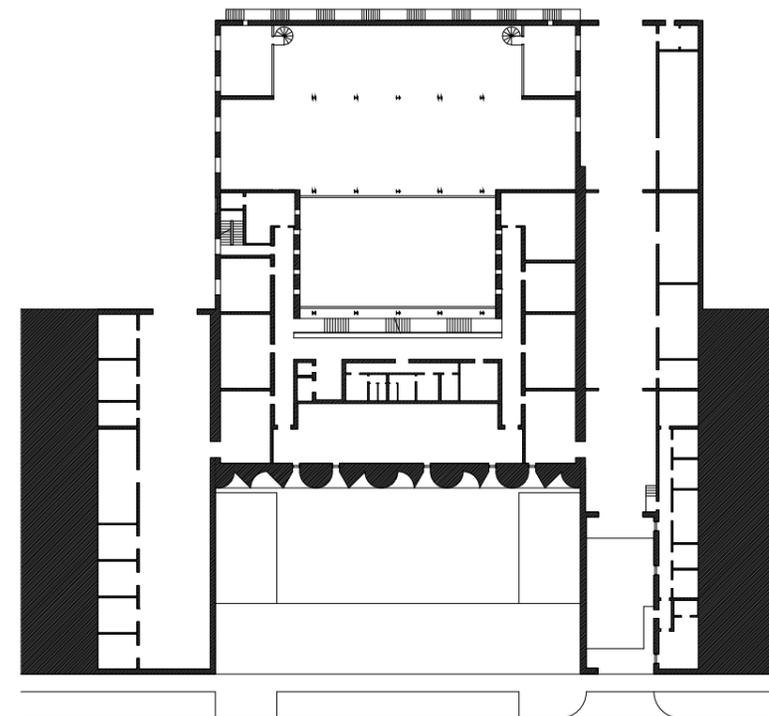
In the history of architectural typologies, there is perhaps only one sufficiently close equivalent of this animated, sculptural mass that seems to levitate over emptiness. It is the gopuram—a multilevel tower consisting of upward-tapering, ornately carved stories, traditionally erected over the entrances of south Indian Dravidian temples. While the number of their tiers may vary significantly, they always tend to be overwhelmingly tightly packed with vibrant, high-relief figures, depicting the numerous Hindu deities, heroes, demons, and other supernatural beings. Two fundamental differences, however, are immediately recognizable. First, the role of 'deities and heroes' in the observed structure is played not by anthropomorphic figures, but by abstract geometrical volumes—cylinders, prisms and their whimsical hybrids. Second, the arrangement of these volumes, interspersed by narrow vertical windows, apparently refuses to conform to any strict rules of symmetry or a regular rhythm. This deliberate irregularity is not determined by

some practical considerations, as was often the case with the works of the functionalists. Moreover, the inconceivably stochastic, aleatory pattern of the facade cannot be subsumed under the category of texture: its constituent elements are intentionally made large, clearly legible, and visually quantifiable—just enough to blatantly *manifest randomness*.

In the belief systems of ancient cults, the personifications of Reason and Blind Fate co-existed in a fragile, finely-tuned equilibrium; however, the notion of a pure, impersonal, mathematically verified contingency was totally alien to them. It took the developments of monotheism, medieval scholasticism, and the Enlightenment for Goethe to identify the universal with the individual case, and the particular with a million cases, thereby acknowledging the critically close convergence of *sense* and *nonsense*, achieved through their meticulous concurrent abstraction—a centuries-long process of filtering out the anthropomorphic and magical elements. Even John Cage, who had introduced chance operations into the composing process in the early 1950s, still had to justify his actions and explain that the pure arbitrariness he worked into the fabric of his music was only one of its elements, controlled by carefully thought-out algorithms. All this despite the fact that half a century before, Stephane Mallarme could already allow himself to finish one of his famous 'hypertextual' poems with an irrefutable theorem: "All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice."



1 0 5 20



1 0 5 15 30

III



One and Three Staircases

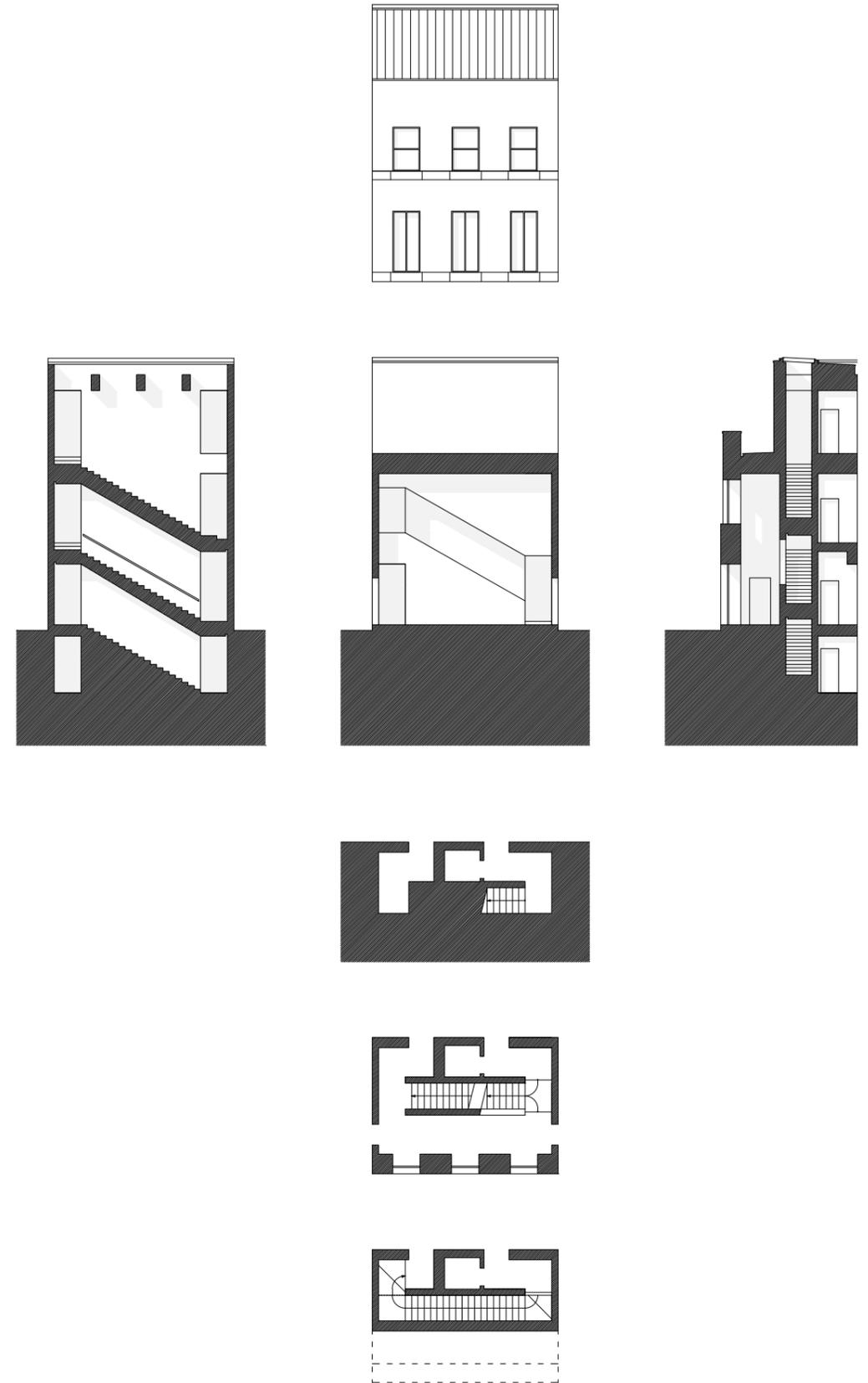
...It's never about a separate element, but about the sequence of encounters—flowing, overlapping, emerging from one another as the building is gradually lit up by someone's gaze and presence. In this particular case, after a succession of vestibule spaces and logistical turns, the accidental 'witness of architecture' unexpectedly finds him- or herself in a deep 'ravine,' bordered on one side by a row of two-story windows, and on the other side by a diagonal opening between two long flights of stairs. A forward stroll, a trail of steps echoing from the ceiling that soars to an unreachable height and, after turning around at the far end, a quiet ascent up the stairs, which will involve, no doubt, a look through the huge windows on the left at the gradually descending parterre of the city. Perhaps, without having solidified into a clear, conscious experience, this array of encounters will soon join the myriad of Leibniz's *petites perceptions*, populating the somnambulist archive of an active mind. But each monad is a mirror of the universe. Thus, at the pre-individual threshold of thought, a whole swarm of such pale imprints will be welcoming the newcomers, for inside of it, the millennia-old debate on the architectural role of the staircase still rages on.

The dramatic history of the staircase can be broken up into three distinct phases. Up until the Renaissance, it remained a servant—a stepchild at best—in the family of architectural elements, ensconcing itself modestly outside or spiralling nimbly towards the sky inside massive walls. Then, the genius of Baroque architects and the unbridled opulence of aristocratic residences temporarily made the staircase a star, a cult object; it captured the architects' imagination, virtually becoming the main focus of their

efforts. Modernism held the staircase in high regard for its inherent dynamism and rebellious spirit, but nevertheless destined it to return to its former genteel poverty and to wither away in the shadows of its fashionable mechanical rivals—the elevator and the escalator. Finally, it took the full 'reboot' of the past few decades to notice something at once simple and strange: it turns out that the ghosts of the spectacular past have never ceased to haunt the ardent leaders of the Modern movement — Le Corbusier, Mies, Kahn. And they never missed the opportunity—no, not to resurrect those stubborn ghosts, but to capture now one, now another within the contemplative, reflective frames, the arrangement of which, according to Gilles Deleuze, is what the architect's mission boils down to...

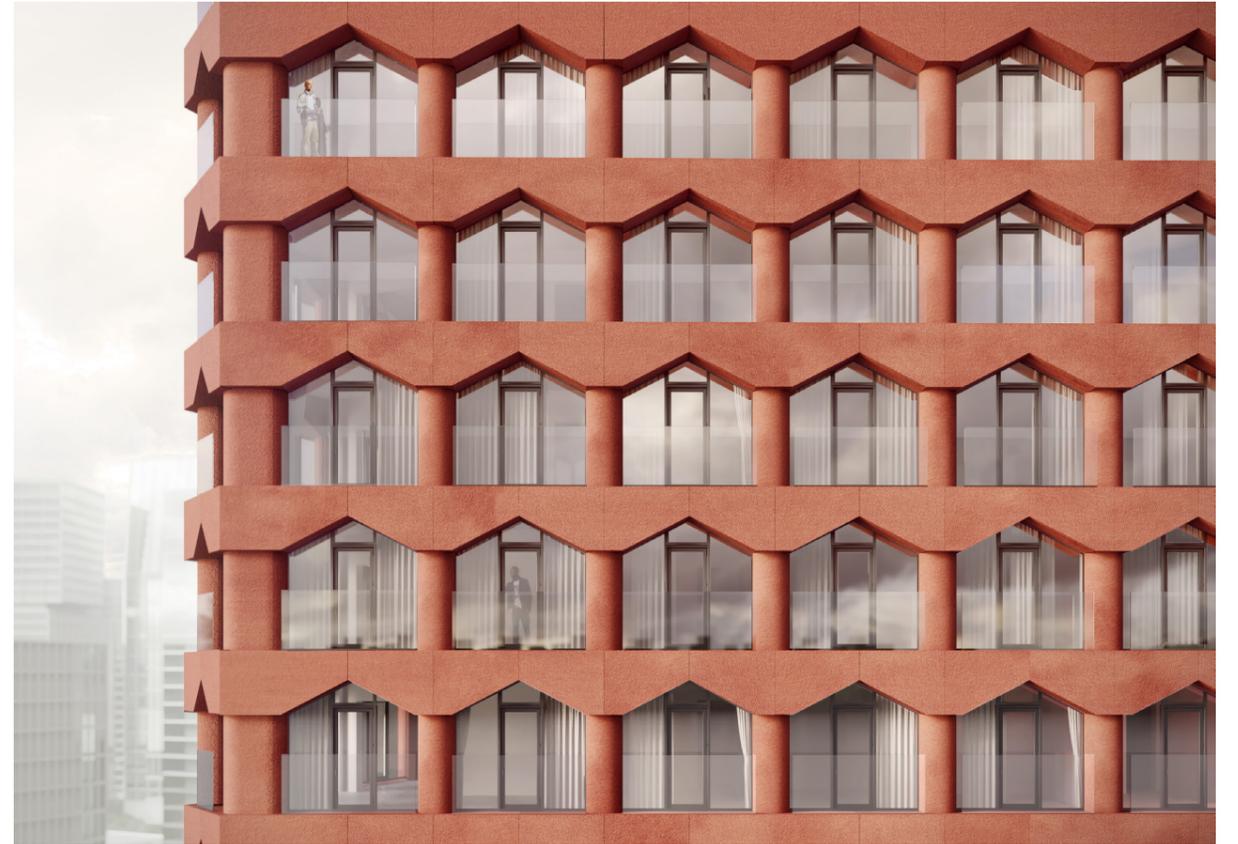
In a similar way, the three pairs of two-story windows of the aforementioned 'ravine' evoke in the visitor's memory—somewhere in the region of the right hemisphere, to be more precise—nothing less than a ghostly vision of Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, where the repetitive clerestory windows of the vestibule surround the famous staircase (nicknamed 'the lava of thought') with an utterly paranoid insistence. The left hemisphere, meanwhile, complements the right one by murmuring the words of the symbolist Konstantin Balmont, who had sought ways to escape from time in the twilight of the Belle Epoque:

*I had learned to ensnare the vague shadows
far straying,
The vague shadows far straying, where the
daylight had fled;
Ever higher I rose, and the stairway was
swaying...¹*



¹ Translated by Avrahm Yarmolinsky and Cecil Cowdrey. — In: Russian poetry. An anthology. Chosen and translated by Babette Deutsch, Avrahm Yarmolinsky. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921.

IV



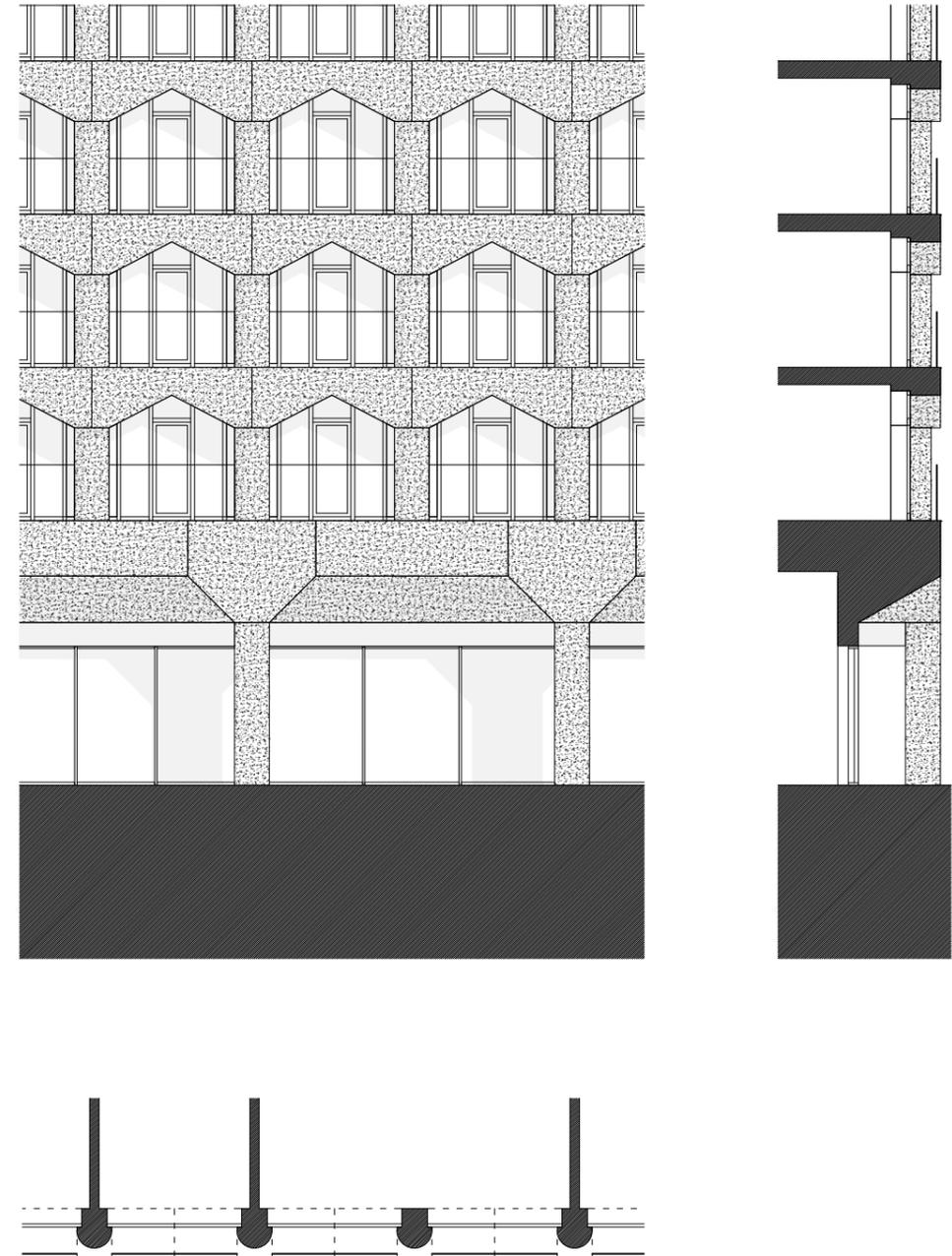
A Showcased Baldachin

In 1962, the French artist Ben Vautier would, now and then, make an appearance at exhibitions holding a sign that read “*Regardez moi cela suffit*” (‘Watch me, that’s sufficient’). Vautier’s gesture was perfectly in line with the dominant architectural trend of that time—the International Style, whose functionalist creed rejected ornaments as symptomatic of false conventions and ridiculous, barbaric attempts to render a building more ‘expressive’ or attractive than it essentially was. A postmodern critique of this attitude, as exemplified by the position of Charles Jencks, would point out that any act of perception is inevitably mediated and therefore predetermined by the preceding sociocultural codes. The only strategy left at the disposal of the truth-seeking artists and architects upon the endorsement of this thesis was that of deconstruction—i.e. of incessant presentation of aesthetic experience as being ‘stretched out’ between a boundless sea of cultural conventions and the unattainable goal of their total repudiation.

The first conventional association conjured by the mask-like facade of the building in the “Zilart” apartment complex, currently under construction, is that of *furled sails*—perhaps it has something to do with the building’s proximity to the river. The massive serrated traverses, resembling a festoon motif, completely subordinate the facade to a horizontal rhythm as if to reaffirm once more the modernist dogma of ribbon windows. Yet on closer inspection, the details of this unusual design become far more reminiscent of antiquity. What we have before us is in fact a multilevel arcade surprisingly made up of antediluvian *corbel* arches. Their spans remind one either of a *runduk*, a traditional Slavic porch covering,

or the early Christian ciborium—a solid baldachin, supported by engaged columns. The antique, or, better say, prehistoric nature of this element is highlighted not only by the heftiness of the spans and the complete absence of decoration, but also, and primarily, by the clearly articulated difference between the supporting piers and the supported spans. According to the authoritative view of Hans Sedlmayr, it was the disappearance of that difference in the course of the development of the ‘baldachin principle’ that had brought to an end the Age of Antiquity and gave rise to what he regarded as ‘the first architectural system of the Middle Ages’—the so-called ‘*encompassing form*’.

The counterpoint to this multiplied dolmen-like structure is the element which would be absolutely unthinkable in traditional architecture, and whose technical possibility is precarious even today. It is the balcony parapet made of a single sheet of impact-resistant glass without any additional details such as mullions or railings. A large vitrine-like glass is suggestive of museumification: its use transforms the facade with its archaized arcade into an act of *self-exhibition* (kudos to Ben Vautier). The postmodernist tension between tradition and its defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) is staged here as a clash between a ‘prehistoric’ body and a ‘post-historic’ view of it through the prism of this ultra-technologically advanced glass—*sub specie aeternitatis* of the cultural archive, so to speak. The aforementioned ‘stretched out’ nature of the aesthetic experience is thus exacerbated up to the point of rupture, up to that extreme degree of destabilization of the artistic mindset, which Sedlmayr once, in a bout of myopic despair, had called “the loss of the center.”



I

“The Paradoxical Belvedere”

Penthouse with pavilion
Moscow, 2013-2015

II

“The Stochastic Gopuram”

Old factory building renovation
Moscow, 2014

III

“One and Three Staircases”

Family house
Antwerp, 2016

IV

“A Showcased Baldachin”

Residential building
Moscow, 2016

