

Some reasons for talking about Peter Wilson

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Wieczorek, I. (2021) Some reasons for talking about Peter Wilson. *The Journal of Architecture*, 26 (5). pp. 575-598. ISSN 1466-4410 doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2021.1949376> Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86666/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2021.1949376>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjar20>

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To cite this article: Izabela Wieczorek (2021) Some reasons for talking about Peter Wilson, The Journal of Architecture, 26:5, 575-598, DOI: [10.1080/13602365.2021.1949376](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2021.1949376)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2021.1949376>



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Some reasons for talking about Peter Wilson

Alluding to Peter Wilson's book *Some Reasons for Travelling to Italy* (2016) and adopting its narrative device, this article invites a journey of discovery into Wilson's own architectural universe. Listing idiosyncrasies of Wilson's work and reasons for delving into its multi-layered nature, the article decodes conceptual, figurative, and tectonic references from which Wilson derived his architectural vocabulary. Scanning Wilson's oeuvre requires traversing distant territories and intimate thresholds, looking simultaneously backwards and forwards, and moving through spatial practices of writing, drawing, and building, which together define its productive complexity. Accordingly, defying a chronological narrative, the article explores a series of built and speculative projects, drawings and installations, offering a transversal reading into accumulations of tropes and relations that underpin Wilson's work. His categories 'Appropriations', 'Juxtapositions', 'Narratives', 'Choreographies', 'Adjacencies', 'Artefacts', 'Objects', 'Fields', 'Material Assemblages', and 'Atmospheres' offer a particular projective taxonomy. The article presents them as a collection of plays, each with a set of rules and its own micro-narrative; each with its own *mask*. Masks recur in Wilson's work as both figurative and procedural frameworks embodying his concern with finding a role for the architectural object in the performance of everyday life. Uncovering these masks, the article argues that even though Wilson's work has distinct evolutionary stages, they cannot be seen as a diachronic succession. They rather fold into each other in a process of constant deviation from their own rules, rejection of fashions, or revalorisation. Such a process of internal folding mirrors Wilson's consistently provocative and experimental nature. It is one of the reasons why Wilson's work retains a particular allure, calling for an exploration of its conceptual complexity as well as spatial sensibility, and awakening our imagination.

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1. Shared subjectivity

'Peter Wilson. Born in the middle of [the twentieth] century. Early experience limited to suburban Australia except for a distant view of the pyramids at the age of five.'¹ With a distinctive tinge of irony, this biographical note

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accompanied the programme of Diploma Unit 1, which Wilson took over at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London in 1981, having graduated from the same school in 1974. Not only does it project a richly suggestive image, but it simultaneously signals Wilson's culturally situated (or displaced) self and reflects his idea of 'shared subjectivity'.² This was effectively a method of operating with mediated memory, 'taking the privacy into the public realm', which defined Wilson's AA teaching agenda at the time and remained present in his subsequent architectural production.³

Such a translation of the private internal nature of experience into public modes of appropriation and mediation was also employed as a narrative device in Wilson's book *Some Reasons for Travelling to Italy* (2016) more than three decades later. Far from being a conventional travelogue, this compact volume, conceived as a collection of episodes and densely populated with Wilson's drawings, decodes his (and others') cultivated interest in the Mediterranean country, echoing the vibrant legacy of the Grand Tour (Fig. 1). The book sheds light on Wilson's heroes and the heterogenous collection of cultural references that have shaped his architectural sensibility. Described as 'the product of cartographic imagination', it reveals, however, an unfamiliar topography of history, invested with unconventional meanings.⁴ Using words and drawings, which act as devices of both registration and projection, Wilson articulates a nuanced understanding of places as an accumulation of unexpected spatiotemporal relations, unravelling rich and complex processes of 'rescripting' their atmosphere.⁵ In its minute details and the myriad interpretations and readings included therein, the book reflects the power of Wilson's literary and pictorial imagination to skilfully envelope the reader in a cloudy continuum of facts and fictions, as well as personal and cultural memories. As such a mirroring medium, it also suggests that scanning Wilson's oeuvre requires traversing intimate thresholds and distant territories. It calls for looking simultaneously backwards and forwards, moving through spatial practices of writing, drawing, and building, which together define its productive complexity. Accordingly, adopting Wilson's narrative technique, the article takes the reader on a journey of discovery into Wilson's own architectural universe, listing reasons for delving into its multi-layered nature. As such, it offers a transversal reading into the accumulations of tropes and relations that underpin his work.

2. To bridge polarities

One could suggest that Wilson's work, like his native Australian landscape, is vast. With wide horizons, rich layers and textures of thoughts, it is inhabited by exotic 'specimens', such as the uncanny figural rainwater pipe crawling up the Blackburn House in Hampstead, London (1985–1987), his first built project, executed in collaboration with Chassay Wright (Fig. 2) — nowadays sadly stripped of all the peculiar details. The Münster City Library (1987–1993) — undoubtedly a signature built project in his partnership with Julia Bolles (also an AA graduate) — is full of hybrid creatures that, in their dual



capacities as structure-furniture, were designed to carry both visitors' bodies and architectural elements (Fig. 3). An enigmatic black imprint on the façade — a solidified shadow of a passing Ninja, as suggested by the architects (Fig. 4) — defines the character of the Suzuki House in Tokyo (1990–1993).⁶ The compact concrete body of the house is stuffed with a playful interior and equipped with a protruding red window, two white earthquake-resistant

Figure 1.
Peter Wilson, *How Grand My Tour*,
after Giovanni Paolo Panini, 2013,
courtesy Peter Wilson



legs, and a façade-mounted furniture crane. Despite their distant locations and differences in scale, these ambiguous ‘creatures’ all belong to a vast family of Wilson’s ‘architectonic animals’ housed in an ‘ark’ — to allude here to Alvin Boyarsky’s evocative trope — adrift on the seas of his imagination.⁷

Interestingly, as noted by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), an influential reference mentioned by Dalibor Vesely during Wilson’s fourth year of studies at the AA, the ‘word *vast* reconciles contraries’.⁸ The sense of linkage and the act of traversing are implicit in Wilson’s projects, where the speculative re-engages with the everyday, and where the factual and the imaginary are surreptitiously equated in the process of (creative) replication and radical playfulness. Bridging dualities is both a conceptual and a physical device, setting the mind and the body in constant movement. In the conceptual act of bridging, Wilson ingeniously explores polarities, revealing a productive interplay between the physical and the ephemeral, presence and absence, the figurative and the abstract, rationalism and expressionism, the real and the virtual. But more importantly, bridging and traversing are actual spatial mechanisms — particularly important in Wilson’s early work, which evolved into a whole series in the 1980s, culminating in the well-known *Bridge-buildings and Ship-shape* (1984).⁹

Bridges and ships became figurative and tectonic references from which Wilson derived significant components of his architectural vocabulary. They are easily recognisable in the nautical details of the aforementioned Blackburn House (Fig. 5), and again in the volumes and spatial configuration of the Münster City Library. As Wilson pointed out, this building ‘is made of a fleet of ships and half-ships, each with its own micro-narrative’.¹⁰ Bridges and ships acted, indeed, as important conceptual devices for reformulating spatial orders, as well as patterns of occupation and relations with the city and the landscape, playing with the theatricality of movement. It is thus not a coincidence that in defining new landscapes and new urbanities Bolles + Wilson refer to ‘scenographic urbanism’ and ‘choreographies’.¹¹

Like the hypnotic Australian horizon, Wilson’s work links Earth and Sky, triggering the phenomenal presence of natural elements and processes. ‘Obsessive involvement with water’ was a condition that defined the spatial occupation of *The Water House* (1976), a speculative project that, as Wilson himself claims, grounded his approach to architecture.¹² Inspired by the eighteenth-century *architecture parlante* of Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Étienne-Louis Boullée and Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *The Water House* became a manifesto for both the communicative and phenomenological potential of architecture defined by a tension between readability and signification. Its aim was to reveal infinite spatial possibilities by ‘demanding the involvement of the inhabitant through the need to establish a personal invention of meaning’.¹³

In Wilson’s works, infinity defines relationships and forms — in the landscape and the paper-scape. The latter refers particularly to Wilson’s soft-shaded early drawings which, under Japanese influences (‘cloud and smoke technique’), refused clearly defined boundaries and were thus imbued with ambiguity and ephemerality. There is also a fascinating dialectic between the immensity of

Figure 2. (opposite)
Peter Wilson, Blackburn House in
Hampstead, 1985–1987, courtesy
Peter Wilson

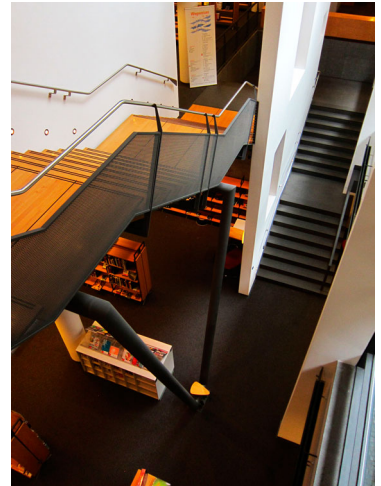


Figure 3.
Bolles + Wilson, interior of the
Münster City Library, 1987–1993,
photographed by Izabela
Wieczorek, 2014



Figure 4.
Bolles + Wilson, Suzuki House,
Tokyo, 1990–1993, photographed
by Ryuji Mijamoto, courtesy Peter
Wilson

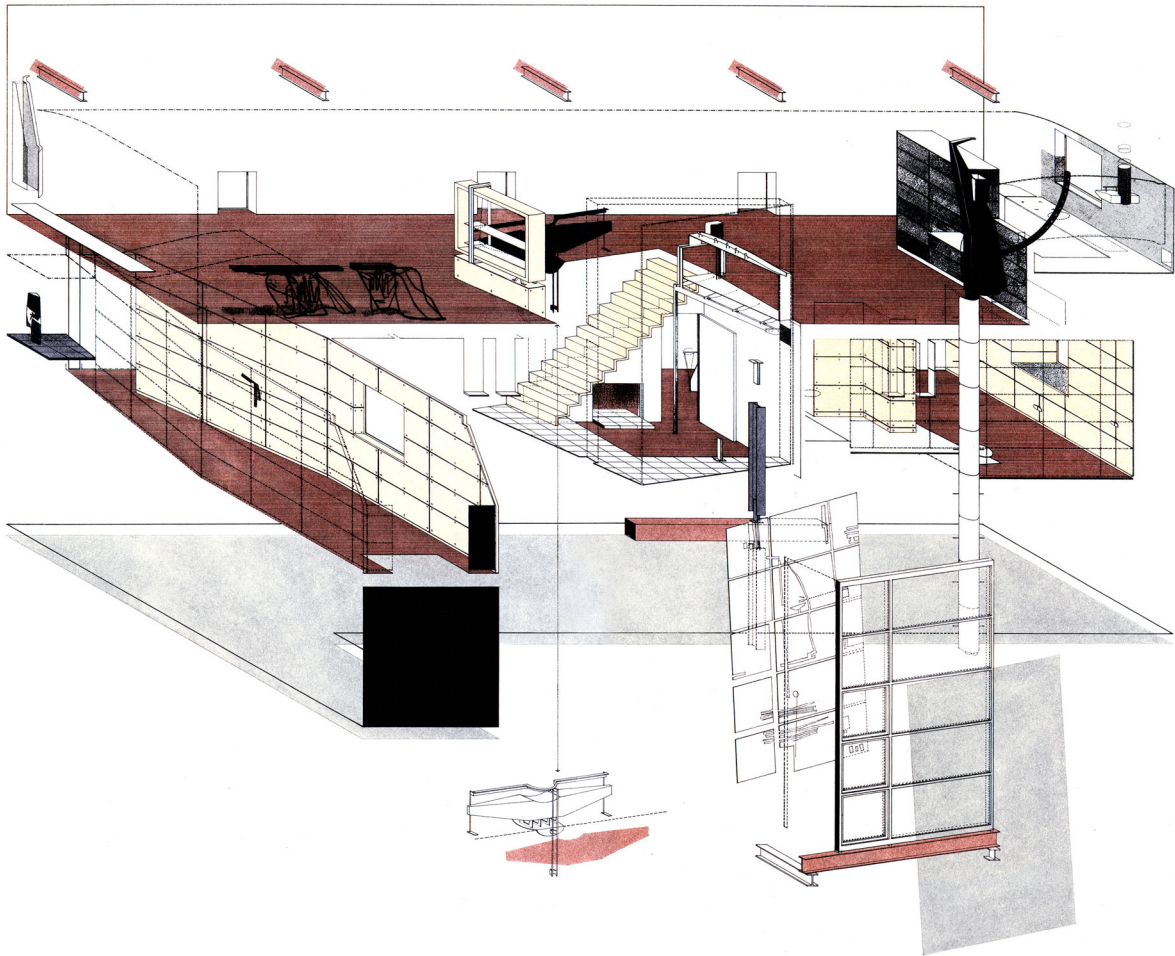
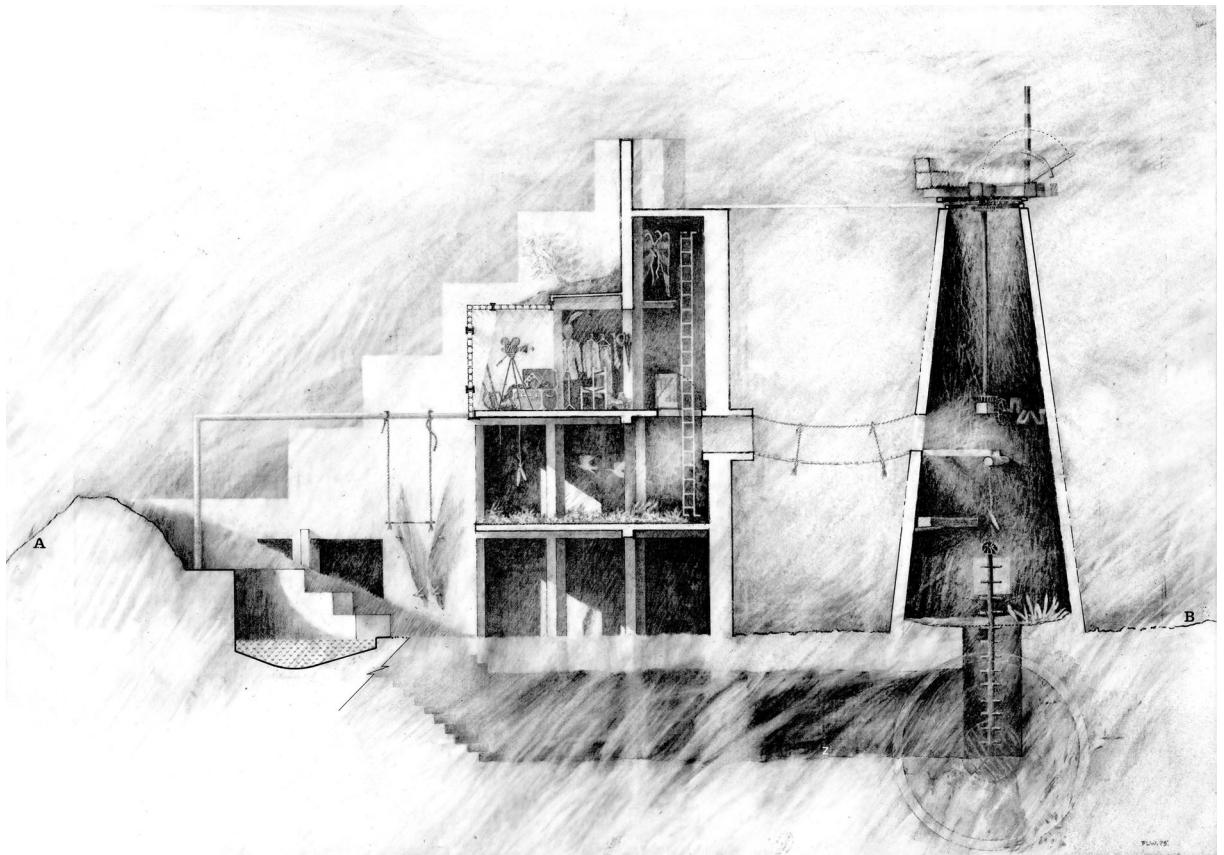


Figure 5.
Peter Wilson, Blackburn House in
Hampstead, 1985–1987, courtesy
Peter Wilson

the subject (the landscape) and the miniature drawings. The obsessive procedure of miniaturisation, a clear characteristic of Wilson's work, involves precision and a double immersion. It requires the author to be immersed in the work to render all nuances, slowly and carefully following a pencil's or a brush's behaviour as it plays out on the paper. But it also requires immersion from the viewer to unlock the internal logic and mediations. The slowness of the drawings' production prescribes a parallel slowness in their reading. One could suggest that the movement of the eye while wandering in astonishment through all the details depicted in Wilson's drawings is in itself a spatial practice. In this context, the aforementioned precision is not a precision of technique, but, as hinted by Wilson, a precision in representing an 'architectural sensibility';¹⁴ a sensibility that gives rise to a particular intimacy and engagement between the reader and these drawings, or the visitor and buildings by Bolles + Wilson.



In this intimate relationship, one also discovers that Wilson's drawings, like his buildings, are material assemblages. This iterates the illusion of an almost palpable envelopment and tactility of shadows in the early pencil drawings such as *The Bird House* of 1975 (Fig. 6) and *A Comfortable House* (for *Architectural Speculation*) in the *Metropolis* of 1977. It extends to the cigarette paper used in the drawings for the *Villa Auto* series (1979) and Wilson's emblematic invented medium, shoe polish, which both change colouration over time, imbuing the drawing with its own life. Colours, textures, glossy surfaces, and even three-dimensional objects which pop up from the surface, add to the drawings' material and symbolic layering.

3. To construct scenarios

Concerned with the transformative power of experience, both lived and imagined, in Wilson's work drawing acts as a mnemonic device for coding perceptions and constructing new realities. For Wilson, Bachelard's phenomenological poetics could be extracted from habits and desires that play a key role in the

Figure 6.
Peter Wilson, *The Bird House*,
1975, courtesy Peter Wilson

social and intimate relationship between space and its occupants. However paradoxical it may appear, it is intimacy that brings us back to the notion of immensity, which is related to a 'pure being of pure imagination', in Bachelard's words.¹⁵ Paraphrasing Bachelard, one can then suggest that Wilson's works 'are the *by-products* of [the] existentialism of the imagining being'.¹⁶ Evoking the power of the imagination, a spare pair of wings hangs on the attic wall of The Bird House, as if they were there to let our imagination fly.

Without underestimating Wilson's fascination for the Italian Radical Architecture movement and his early interest in the work of Bernard Tschumi, it was Bachelard that led him to define 'The Poetics and Rituals of Existential Space' as a framework for Diploma Unit 1 in 1981–1982.¹⁷ The aim of the brief was to translate the rituals of reading a place into rituals of place-making — an act of attentive 'looking' and 'existential anchoring' understood by Wilson as 'an appropriation and construction of ambiances and histories'.¹⁸

The idea of appropriation is key to reading Wilson's work. It encompasses a creative appropriation of 'genetic' material embedded in culture and territory, as well as a physical appropriation understood as an act of occupation of places by both architectural objects and their inhabitants. Yet, it also refers to a creative mutability of Wilson's design protocols and processes, opening up to their re-conception, re-composing, and re-appropriation. Therefore, even though Wilson's work has distinct evolutionary stages, they cannot be seen as a diachronic succession. They rather fold into each other in a process of deviation from their own rules, rejection of fashions, and re-valorisation, allowing for constant re-working and re-scripting of ideas. Such a process of internal folding mirrors Wilson's consistently provocative and experimental nature. It is the way he constructs scenarios; scenarios for projects and scenarios that become devices of seduction.

As Wilson has stated on many occasions, as soon as his drawings densely covered in pencil shading started to proliferate at the AA — promoted particularly by Dalibor Vesely and Mohsen Mostafavi — he headed in the opposite direction. He started searching for exactitude, multiple projections, bright colours, as well as expressive textures and strokes.¹⁹ Reacting against the semiotic and discursive explorations which prevailed at the AA then (with NATØ at the forefront), Wilson claimed that only physicality — that is, the act of building and its use — constitutes narrative validity.²⁰ To prove this hypothesis, his Unit turned towards 'the study of architecture not as abstract manipulations but as material assemblage', translating discursive ventures not into tectonic solutions but 'tectonically refined figurations'.²¹ Paradoxically, such corporeal forms and tectonics with their poetic function mirrored the elusiveness of perception. This was manifested in the tension between the exactitude of tectonic projection and the expressive depiction of the landscape as a smoky (*sfumato*) background in Wilson's Clandeboye series of 1984 and 1985 (Fig. 7).

The corporeality of form became also an antidote to the fleeting and instantaneous character of a then emerging technologically dominated world, but without opposing its meditative power. Inspired by Paul Virilio, Wilson's proposal for the 1988 *Japan Architect* Shinkenchiku Competition 'Comfort in the



Figure 7.
Peter Wilson, *The First Clandeboye Bridge*, 1984, courtesy Peter Wilson

Figure 8. (overleaf)
Peter Wilson, winning entry for the
Shinkenchiku Residential Design
Competition 'Comfort in the
Metropolis', 1988, courtesy Peter
Wilson

Metropolis', which was awarded the first prize by Toyo Ito, was conceived as a defensive shield (Fig. 8) that countered the ephemerality of the contemporary city celebrated by Ito's Tower of Winds in Yokohama (1986).²² Interestingly, its internal structure, defined as a 'cone of minimum electronic interference', was later re-appropriated in The Tower of Moving Numbers on Rotterdam's Wilhelminapier (1993–1996), which used electronic technology to make intangible data (time, temperature, world population) momentarily captured and visible (Fig. 9).²³

'Appropriations', 'Juxtapositions', 'Narratives', 'Figurations', 'Adjacencies', 'Artefacts', 'Objects', 'Fields', 'Material Assemblages', 'Atmospheres' are not simply 'a cumulative vocabulary of metaphors', as recognised by Wilson already in 1984.²⁴ They have become 'productive paradigms' — modes of operation and perception, performative codes that together constitute a thematic pattern underpinning both Wilson's teaching agenda and design work.²⁵ This projective taxonomy can be seen as a collection of plays, each with a set of rules and its own micro-narrative, each with its own 'mask' (Fig. 10).

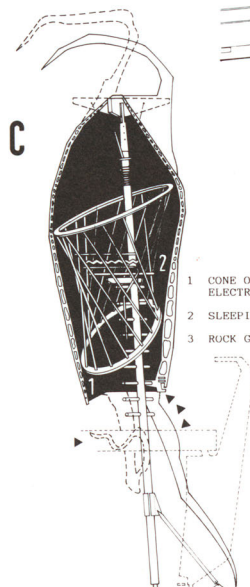
4. To uncover the mask

From the 1984 drawing of the Face of Liberty journeying across the Atlantic (Fig. 11), through the Münster City Library entrance portico (Fig. 12), to a

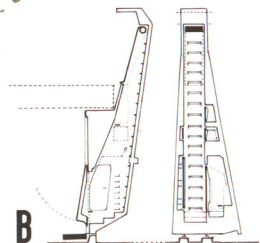
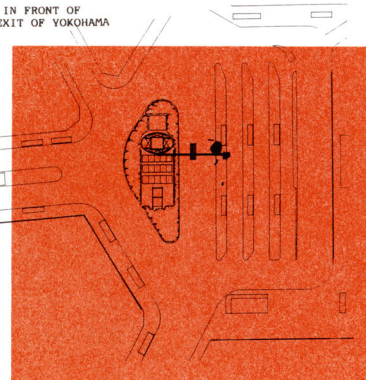
TO CREATE
A ZONE OF 'ELECTRONIC
SHADOWS'

SITE

THE PLAZA IN FRONT OF
THE WEST EXIT OF YOKOHAMA
STATION



- 1 CONE OF MINIMUM
ELECTRONIC INTERFERENCE
- 2 SLEEPING MAT
- 3 ROCK GARDEN



GLOVE AND 2 FILTERS

- A. FILTER 1 - MECHANICAL
MASK

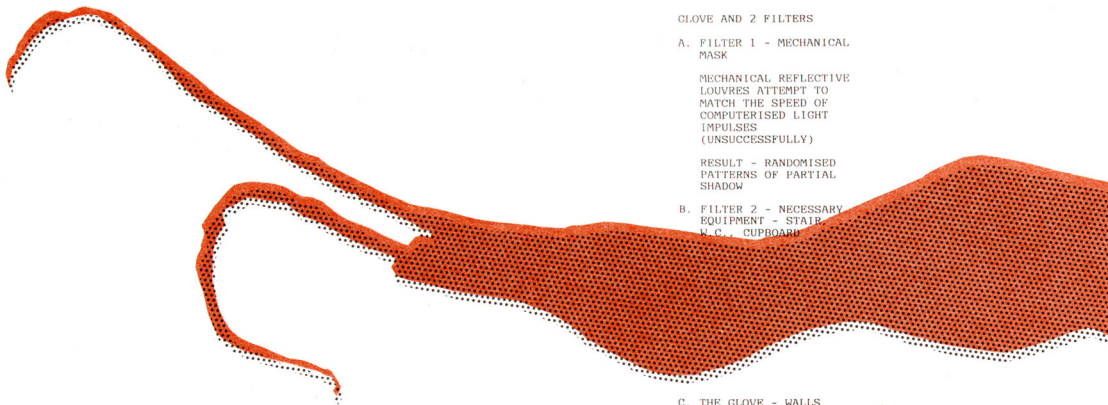
MECHANICAL REFLECTIVE
LOUVRES ATTEMPT TO
MATCH THE SPEED OF
COMPUTERISED LIGHT
IMPULSES
(UNSUCCESSFULLY)

RESULT - RANDOMISED
PATTERNS OF PARTIAL
SHADOW

- B. FILTER 2 - NECESSARY
EQUIPMENT - STAIR
W.C. - CUPBOARD

- C. THE GLOVE - WALLS
INFLATED BY WIND
BORROWED FROM THE
ADJACENT TOWER
(CONTAINING CONE
OF MINIMUM ELECTRONIC
INTERFERENCE - AN
ELECTRONIC SHADOW
AND THE SLEEPING
MAT)

- D. TOWER OF WINDS



'new face' given recently to the Korça Theatre in Tirana (2017) (Fig. 13), masks recur in Wilson's work as both figurative and procedural frameworks.²⁶ Regardless of whether they refer directly to theatrical iconography, or explore the Face/Façade/Interface relationship on a more conceptual level, masks embody Wilson's concern to find a role for the architectural object to play in the performance of everyday life.

Masks are powerful devices for trapping the observer in the realm of appearances.²⁷ They conceal in order to reveal. Following such a logic, the Paradise Bridge in Amsterdam (1986) — belonging to the *Bridge-buildings and Ship-shape* series — when open, exposes its own graffitied rear façade, a mask for the Paradiso Club (Fig. 14). In doing so, it reveals the multifaceted nature of contemporary culture. In its capacity as a bridge, it connects; yet, as a consequence of its rotation, it also highlights existing imbalances, contrasting physical, programmatic, and historical traits.

A mask with its formalised expression or imprinted 'persona', solidifies an idea, dragging the observer into a codified system of relations. However, it is simultaneously an ephemeral appearance. As I already noted, ephemerality defined the character of Wilson's proposal for the 1988 *Japan Architect Shinkenchiku* Competition 'Comfort in the Metropolis'. Epitomising a detachment from the electronically invaded contemporary city, it was in essence an inhabitable 'Mechanical Mask' — an 'electronic shadow' — parasitical to Toyo Ito's Tower of Winds.²⁸ Also in Japan, the façade of The Osaka Folly (1990) — a mask without an interior — provided 'a backdrop for performance' of shadows, reflections, and projections (Fig. 15).²⁹ Designed for the International Garden and Greenery Exhibition coordinated by Arata Isozaki, the pavilion played once again with polarities and ambiguities. As described by Wilson: 'The visitor is always passing through, and never quite in it. It stands on water, never quite on the earth. [...] Its green is not quite natural'.³⁰

Masks also mobilise imaginary worlds. In ancient Greece, masks allowed actors to play more than one role. Similarly, the Bridgwatcher's House in Rotterdam (1993–1996) has three different faces — yellow, black, and white (Fig. 16). Together with the uncanny triangular form of the building, they stage and enact the effect of a shifting presence, imbuing the object with an illusory dynamism relative to the observer's point of view and their point of arrival at the site.

Masks also emphasise the theatricality of projects by Bolles + Wilson, which are conceived as unfolding stage sets of immersive spatiality, similar to that of the Picturesque dream governed by ideas of character and sensation. As 'set-up fields of dramatic incidents, of dramatic moments' — to use Wilson's words — they question the relations between effect, affect, and meaning.³¹ Here character, which became a recurrent trope in Wilson's work, is not only allied to the specificity of expression (mask, face-façade) or the sense of place, but also to the sensory impressions and active engagement within the place, that is, its atmosphere.

Not surprisingly, in the *Villa Auto* catalogue (1980) that accompanied Wilson's early AA exhibition, masks — actual and conceptual — played a



Figure 9.
Bolles + Wilson, The Tower of
Moving Numbers, Rotterdam,
1997, photographed by Christian
Richters, courtesy Peter Wilson



Figure 10.
Peter Wilson, Shinkenchiku
Portrait, 1978, courtesy Peter
Wilson



Figure 11.
Peter Wilson, *The Moving Face of Liberty*, *Figurative Departure*, 1981,
courtesy Peter Wilson

paramount role. In his text for the catalogue, Nigel Coates pointed out that 'doing it Wilson's way is doing it with ATMOSPHERE'.³² Decoding the mask's significance in the *Villa Auto* series (1979–1980), Coates evoked Sebastiano Serlio, a disciple of Leon Battista Alberti known for his fertile imagination and innovative contribution to the theatre architecture of the Renaissance. Interestingly, Serlio used domestic models to define theatrical settings, questioning dominant power structures and social divisions. While the comic scene finds its analogy in private houses, the house of the noblemen provides a scenery for tragic events, and the satiric scene unfolds in a backdrop of rustic huts. In the *Villa Auto* series (also set in a pastoral context), comic and tragic masks embody operational and formal differences between the eighteenth-century Classical villa (*Powerscourt*) and the twentieth-century villa (*Villa Auto*). The latter is conceived as two formally identical, yet essentially different, comic and tragic, pavilions. Connected by an auto-path, they define new rituals of occupation and question the logic of contemporary dwelling.

One could claim another connection between Serlio's and Wilson's work. In his treatise, Serlio not only presents the diversity of domestic forms, or what he

calls 'habitations', but also 'inventions for unusual situations' at times 'completely divorced from contemporary urban realities and expectations of commodity'.³³ As in his theatrical scenes, Serlio's houses are characters representing social orders (and conflicts) — a noble Gentleman, a rich Citizen, a Peasant, or even the Tyrant Prince. There are also houses that differ from 'common custom', such as a house with four entrances, a house for music, and a house with walled secret gardens.³⁴

It seems that a series of Wilson's speculative projects, including the Australian Summer Pavilion for the Barbecue Ritual (1979), The House for the Kite Flier (1975), A House for any Fred Astaire (1976), The Comfortable House, The Water House, and The Bird House, could fit within a Serlian taxonomy. They are similarly 'defined by different criteria than one has been conditioned to associate with a house'.³⁵ As Wilson wrote in the *ArtNet* magazine in 1976, he was interested in:

spaces whose uses are outside contemporary cultural precedents and whose use involves a questioning of the user's terms of reference. An architecture that is concerned with the expression and fulfilment of desires and values that are usually expedient in the face of existing systems and economics.³⁶

In other words, these are spaces that subvert their familiar functions and become masks, suggesting certain similarities with John Hejduk's *Masques* series.³⁷

Alluding to ceremonial masked entertainments particularly popular at sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European courts, Hejduk developed over the course of the 1980s a series of imaginary character-buildings (a family of forms) condensing histories, ambiguities, and contradictions of contemporary urban and rural living, fundamental human existence, as well as architectural practice. In Hejduk's architectural theatre, 'Masques' were provocative — figurative and narrative — constructions with an evocative power. They were not solutions to problems, but architectural expressions of reflection on social and political conditions. As such, they unsettled familiar meanings, common expectations, and activated new modes of perception. Not unlike Hejduk and Serlio, with a tinge of irony, yet with sharp seriousness, Wilson's early works can also be seen as operational scenarios. As they question inherited contemporary values, social orders, cultural attitudes, myths, habits, and dominant powers, they provide not solutions but different views of modern dilemmas.³⁸

While both Serlio and Hejduk seem to be suggestive references for reading Wilson's projects, there is another work which Wilson himself recognises as a major, if momentary, influence on the *Villa Auto* series: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's recipe for 'divorced eggs',³⁹ included in his provocative *Futurist Cookbook* of 1932.⁴⁰ Just as Marinetti's recipes are based on de-composing and re-combining recognisable and often conflicting elements, Wilson's projects deliberately play with juxtapositions, disjunctions, and dualities. One finds a Palladian Villa, an eighteenth-century Irish mansion (Powerscourt), a mini-Acropolis, a glass pyramid, and Karl Friedrich Schinkel's ghost. All of them are suspended in seemingly infinite landscapes (Fig. 17), in dialectic tension,



Figure 12.
Bolles + Wilson, Entrance portico of
the Münster City Library, 1987–
1993, photographed by Christian
Richters, courtesy Peter Wilson



Figure 13.
Bolles + Wilson, Korça Theatre,
2017, photographed by Peter
Wilson, showing the curtain that
goes up on the masks, courtesy
Peter Wilson

including the dialectics of object, field and an absent centre, intimacy and immensity, past and present.

Moreover, in the same way that Marinetti's *Cookbook* aimed to question the Italian 'bourgeois' past, Wilson's *Villa Auto* rejected traditional urban modes of occupation, subverting perceptions and typologies. But this reference to Marinetti suggests another subliminal meaning. If Marinetti's *Cookbook* — an anti-pasta treatise — refuses a certain Italian-ness, can *Villa Auto* be read as an exorcising mask to drive away the ghost of Wilson's Australian past represented by the omnipresence of the car?

5. To stage atmosphere

Marinetti's *Cookbook* was as much about cultural provocation as behavioural orchestration and sensual appreciation. It was about staging a culinary and social theatre. Similarly, Wilson's architecture provides a stage for action,

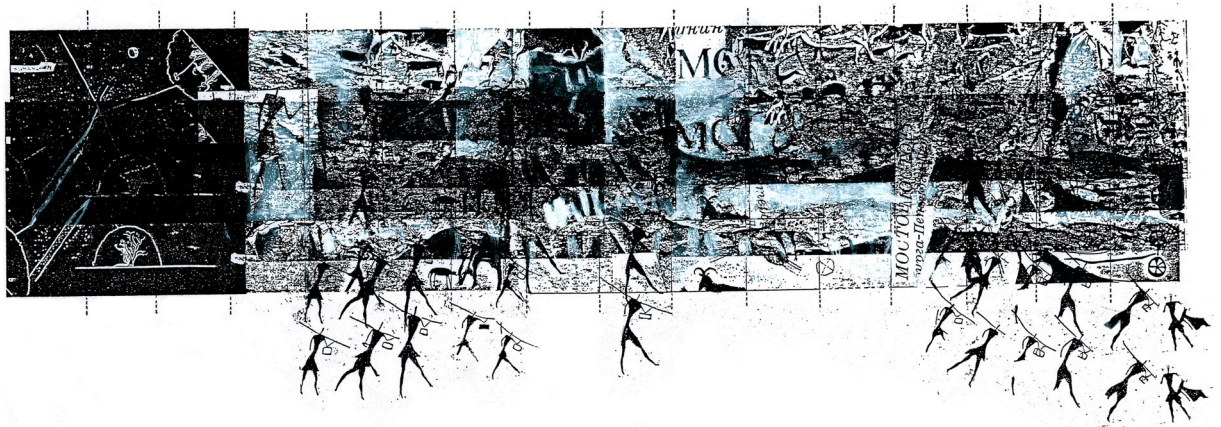


Figure 14.
Peter Wilson, Amsterdam Paradise
Bridge planned graffiti, 1986,
courtesy Peter Wilson

turning the occupant into a performer — ‘the true activist, the REAL generator of the tale’, as noted by Coates.⁴¹ Such an understanding crystallised as early as in Wilson’s Diploma Project *Inhabiting a Landscape: Dorset* (1973–1974) developed in collaboration with Jeanne Sillett under the supervision of Elia Zenghelis.⁴² However, it became explicit in the *Faccia a Faccia* [Face to Face] installation in the Gallery Zona in Florence (1979), which translated the speculative narrative of the *Villa Auto* series into a spatial narrative articulated by two masks, two identical photos of a Florentine pavilion, and a life-sized graphite drawn column. Glimpsing through the mask (with an internal imprint of Wilson’s face), the visitor would discover a reflection in the mirror/window embedded in the column, experiencing a restless oscillation and mutual reflection between the author and the observer (Fig. 18).⁴³

Mirrors and reflections define a threshold between the real and the imaginary, between perceptual modes and semiotic codes. Knowing Wilson’s interest in Surrealism, one might be tempted to evoke the Surrealists’ fascinations with the mirror, or Lacanian thoughts on specularised subjectivity and the constitution of the ‘self’.⁴⁴ It might, however, be more suggestive to turn to the phenomenology of the mirror and regard it as a perceptual mechanism in the production of effects and signs. Within their performative nature, mirrors in Wilson’s work embody what Umberto Eco defines as catoptric prostheses. Rather than bare objects to be looked at, they are viewing apparatuses themselves.⁴⁵ This is evident in Bolles + Wilson’s installation *Column to Door* in the Van Rooy Gallery in Amsterdam (1982) (Fig. 19), in which, similar to the *Face to Face* exhibit, mirrors are seen as a ‘material medium for the passage of information’ and, thus, generators of the narrative.⁴⁶

The first *Comfortable House* of 1977 — a proposal for a partly submerged house-periscope in Covent Garden in London awarded fourth prize in the 1978 *Japan Architect* Shinkenchiku Competition — was also conceived as a catoptric theatre. Mirrors were used here to defy both spatial logic and

Figure 15.
Bolles + Wilson, The Osaka Folly,
1990, photographed by Peter
Wilson, courtesy Peter Wilson



the logic of the eye, affecting the inhabitant's perception of the relationship between inside and outside, and inviting architectural speculation. 'Through a quirk of optics', not only did the house translate the reality of the metropolis into an impression of virtuality, but it also enhanced the sense of otherness, making 'the house particularly comfortable to an antipodean speculator' — as Wilson remarked alluding to his Australian origins.⁴⁷



Figure 16.
Bolles + Wilson, Bridgeworker's
House, Rotterdam, 1996,
photographed by Christian
Richters, courtesy Peter Wilson

Figure 17. (overleaf)
Peter Wilson, Villa Auto: The Karl
Friedrich Schinkel House, 1979,
courtesy Peter Wilson

Interestingly, Peter Cook, the competition judge, was searching for proposals that not only contained 'layerings of meanings', but could also 'augment them toward [...] a space that can be enjoyed, an atmosphere that can be created'.⁴⁸ Wilson's project certainly responded to Cook's call for a "'theatre" of situations', but more importantly, as noted by Cook, it illustrated Wilson's 'readiness to build'.⁴⁹ With its implicit tactility, it announced Wilson's transition from a 'conceptualist' to a 'materializer'.⁵⁰ Interestingly, the words of another Futurist — Umberto Boccioni — might be relevant here, as he insightfully pointed out that although atmosphere is culturally regarded as intangible, it 'is a materiality that exists between objects'.⁵¹ Undoubtedly, Wilson also believed in material alchemy, emphasising atmosphere 'by using all the various effects which light, shadows, and streams of energy have on it' — to borrow Boccioni's words.⁵²

Analogous to Boccioni's interest in the dynamism of form, movement, and light, in Wilson's projects reflective surfaces become tools for imbuing architecture with ambiguity and life. The dark bluish-green glazed brick façade of the WLV office building in Münster (1991–1996) was conceived as a sensitive interface, dissolving the mass of the building, recording light conditions and mirroring its context (Fig. 20). Generating such 'material incidents' (to use Wilson's words) is a means to create an atmosphere and mobilise the observer. As

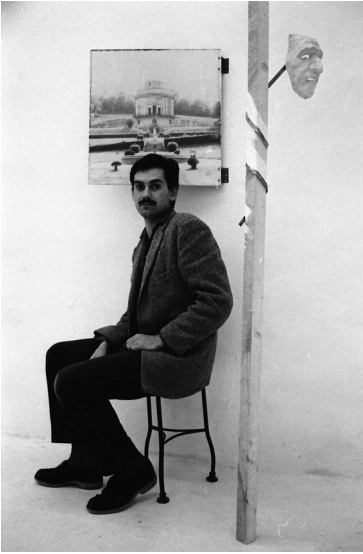
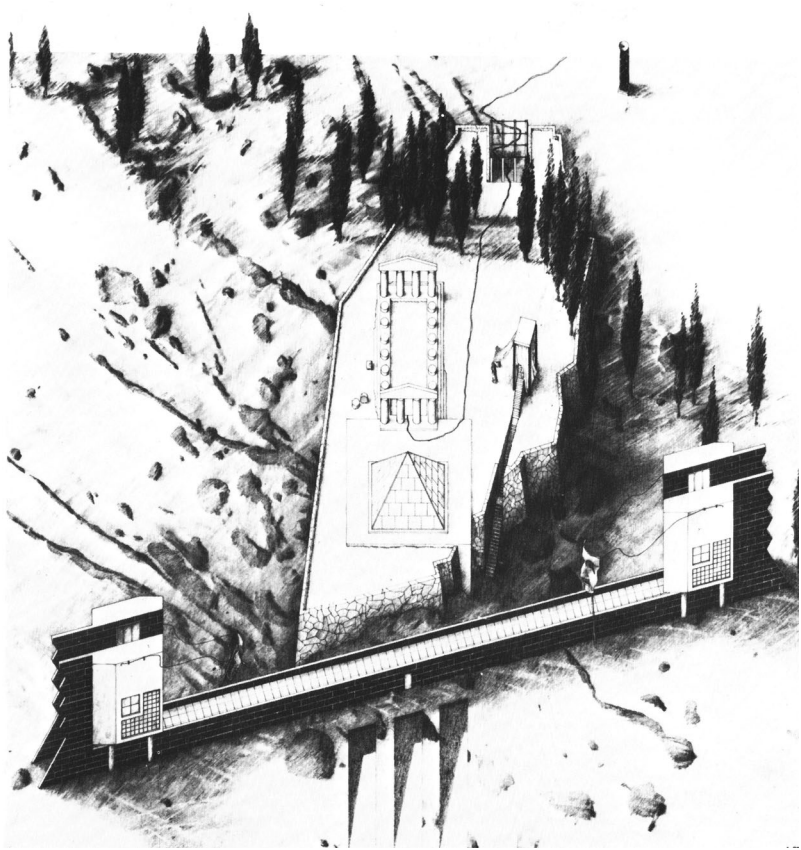


Figure 18.
Peter Wilson, *Faccia a Faccia*,
installation at Gallery Zona,
Florence, 1977, courtesy Peter
Wilson



Figure 19.
Bolles + Wilson, *Column to Door*,
installation at Van Rooy Gallery,
Amsterdam, 1982, courtesy Peter
Wilson



Wilson pointed out in his lecture at the AA in 1998, atmosphere defines the 'real magic of architecture', which 'no drawing, no simulation can communicate'.⁵³ The contemporary philosopher Gernot Böhme, who has written extensively on atmospheres, might be instructive here, defining 'magic' as 'conjuring, telekinesis, the triggering of effects through signs'.⁵⁴

6. To redefine the status of an object

Undoubtedly, Wilson's atmospheres emerged from, and at the same time contributed to, a particular ambience of the AA. A hybrid atmosphere — educational and ideological — evocatively described by then Chairman Alvin Boyarsky in the interview entitled 'Ambience and Alchemy', published in *The Architectural Review* in 1983.⁵⁵ In the same issue, dedicated almost entirely to the AA for its 'intensity of exploration, innovation and sheer graphic style',⁵⁶ Peter Cook traced the AA's evolutionary timeline, identifying the beginning of the 1970s with 'the most creatively perspicacious' moment, described as 'scenographic'. It was precisely the time of Wilson's arrival to



Figure 20.
Bolles + Wilson, WLV office
building in Münster (1991–1996),
photographed by Christian
Richters, courtesy Peter Wilson

the AA, a time in which — to use Cook's words — 'atmospheric values, narrative instincts [...] became the *lingua franca* of several units'.⁵⁷

But, as I already suggested, Wilson's atmospheres were not limited to the elusive, shaded, and blurred ambience of the drawing, often recognised as his signature, and associated with a certain AA mood, as Cook pointed out. A parallel atmospheric quality can be detected in the tangible reality of Wilson's exhibitions, before such atmospheric 'staging' was applied to the scale of the building and the city. Like the drawings themselves, the exhibitions were scenographic constructs that operated on multiple levels (Fig. 21). Not only were exhibitions important tools for shaping the AA culture, they also allowed ideas about building to be put into practice, marking the transition from the speculative to the operative.⁵⁸ To a considerable extent, exhibitions moved the attention from the content to its reception and the performance of making space. They were small-scale building experiments focused on the creation of the particular conditions for reading and inhabiting projects and ideas that were put on display (Fig. 22).

This was certainly the case of the 1984 'Living with Rust' exhibition in Ron Arad's 'One Off' shop in Covent Garden, where drawings were replaced by one of Wilson's hybrid creatures — half wall/half table — of the ship-shape taxonomy (Fig. 23).⁵⁹ It was an installation conceived as a creative re-appropriation of found conditions. It acted as a phenomenological device — a kind of drawing machine augmenting and visualising the ongoing process of decay, and engulfing the visitor in the particular atmosphere of the basement room. This was the first mark of a new spatial sensibility in which

Figure 21.
Peter Wilson, 'Bridgebuildings +
the Shipshape' exhibition at the
AA, 1984, courtesy Peter Wilson



Figure 22.
Exhibition of Wilson's Diploma Unit
1 at the AA, 1985, photographed
by Peter Wilson, courtesy Peter
Wilson





Figure 23.
'Living with Rust' exhibition at the
One Off Showroom in Covent
Garden, 1984, courtesy Peter
Wilson

speculative scenarios took on a physical presence, defined through materials and details, spatial articulation, the interplay of volumes, and material and immaterial effects. The narrative informed the object, marking the shift towards artefacts with (what Wilson would later define as) 'magnetic radiation'.⁶⁰

Since then, the status of the object has been at the centre of Wilson's work. Although within clearly defined boundaries, Wilson's architectural objects are expansive entities. They cannot be dissociated from their context, neither from the experiencing subject. Reflecting on their contradictory, internal nature, one could evoke Bruno Latour's definition of artefacts as 'things' — that is, 'complex assemblies of contradictory issues'.⁶¹ Latour suggests that things, as opposed to Modernist objects, bridge the social, symbolic, subjective, and lived with the material, real, objective, and factual. In addition, things call for interpreting design in 'the language of signs'.⁶² Understood in such terms, design carries, among other aspects, an attention to detail and an attention to meaning. These are the unquestionable lineaments of Wilson's work and some of the reasons for delving into its multi-layered and, at times, contradictory nature. But they are not the only ones. Exploring Wilson's foundational oeuvre is a journey of discovery that remains perpetually surprising and fresh.

Notes and references

1. Peter Wilson, 'Unit 1', in *AA Prospectus 1981–82*, ed. by Jennifer Havinden (London: Architectural Association, 1981), p. 33. The original reads 'in the middle of this century'.
2. Wilson referred to 'a subjectivity that can be shared' in a joint lecture with Jean Sillett, which took place in Edinburgh in February 1976 alongside contributions by Peter Cook,

- Paul Shephard, and Will Alsop. The talks were part of a series of lectures on the Art Net gallery set up by Cook in 1973 in London. Wilson and Sillett participated in the 'Forty London Architects' exhibition at the Art Net in 1976. See <<https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=859>> (2:02:29) [accessed 31 March 2018].
3. Peter Wilson, 'Alvin Boyarsky Interviews Peter Wilson', in Peter Wilson, *Bridgebuildings and the Shipshape* (London: Architectural Association, 1984), pp. 7–13 (p. 10).
 4. Peter Wilson, *Some Reasons for Travelling to Italy* (London: Architectural Association, 2016), p. 17.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
 6. See, for instance: *Bolles + Wilson: A Handful of Productive Paradigms*, ed. by Julia Bolles and Peter Wilson (Essen: Nissen, 2009), p. 43.
 7. See Peter Wilson, 'The Status of Artefact', *AA Files*, 9 (1985), 100–01 (p. 100); Alvin Boyarsky, 'The Wilson Partnership & Chassay Wright Blackburn House, Hampstead', *AA Files*, 16 (1987), 27–32 (p. 27).
 8. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1994), p. 192 (emphasis in the original). For the influence of Bachelard in Wilson's work see, for instance: Peter Wilson, 'Sometimes Bachelard', in *Poetics in Architecture*, ed. by Leon van Schaik (= *Architectural Design*, 72.2 (March 2002)), pp. 15–17.
 9. See, for instance: Wilson, *Bridgebuildings and the Shipshape*.
 10. Peter Wilson and Alvin Boyarsky, 'Far Eastern Conversation', in *Western Objects Eastern Fields: Recent Projects by the Architekturbüro Bolles Wilson* (London: Architectural Association, 1989), pp. 5–17 (p. 5).
 11. Bolles and Wilson, *Bolles + Wilson*, pp. 81–173.
 12. Peter Wilson, 'Architecture and Water', in *Net #3, The Rally: Forty London Architects*, ed. by Peter Cook (London, 1976). See 'Alvin Boyarsky Interviews Peter Wilson', pp. 7–8.
 13. Wilson, 'Architecture and Water'.
 14. 'Alvin Boyarsky Interviews Peter Wilson', p. 13.
 15. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 184.
 16. *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original). Bachelard refers to art rather than architecture.
 17. Wilson, 'Unit 1', p. 33. For an account of Wilson's Italian influences see, for instance: 'Alvin Boyarsky Interviews Peter Wilson', pp. 8–9.
 18. Peter Wilson, 'Interview with Peter Wilson', in *Bolles + Wilson: Inspiration and Process in Architecture*, ed. by Francesca Serrazanetti and Matteo Schubert (Moleskine, 2011), pp. 10–32 (p. 27). See also Peter Wilson, *The Clandeboye Report: Contemporary Options for Clandeboye, County Down, Ulster* (London: Architectural Association, 1985), p. 5.
 19. See, for instance: 'Alvin Boyarsky Interviews Peter Wilson', p. 13; 'Interview with Peter Wilson', p. 16.
 20. NATØ (Narrative Architecture Today) was an architectural group led by Nigel Coates, which emerged from the AA at the beginning of the 1980s.
 21. Peter Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Informing the Object: Projects from Diploma Unit 1, 1981–85. Unit Master Peter Wilson* (London: Architectural Association, 1986), pp. 11–25 (pp. 21, 17).
 22. In his seminal publications *Guerre et Cinéma* of 1984 and *Esthétique de la disparition* of 1980, the French historian and critic Paul Virilio questioned the technologically dominated and manipulated modern experience. See Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. by Phil Beitchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2009).
 23. Wilson, *Western Objects Eastern Fields*, p. 37.
 24. 'Alvin Boyarsky Interviews Peter Wilson', p. 12.

25. See, for instance: Bolles and Wilson, *Bolles + Wilson*; Bolles and Wilson, *Informing the Object*.
26. Two giant silhouettes of the tragic and comic masks and a matrix of 160 terracotta masks produced by the local potter Vasilak Klevica define the new façade designed by Bolles + Wilson as part of the refurbishment of the existing building of the Theatre Andon Z. Çajupi in Korça.
27. See, for instance: Daniel Poirion, 'Mask and Allegorical Personification', trans. by Caroline Weber, in *Rereading Allegory: Essays in Memory of Daniel Poirion* (= *Yale French Studies*, 95 (1999)), 13–32. Originally published in French under the title 'Masque et personification allégorique', in *Masques et déguisements dans la littérature médiévale*, ed. by Marie-Louise Ollier (Montréal: Université de Montréal, 1988), pp. 151–64.
28. For an idea of the 'electronic shadow,' see: Wilson, *Western Objects Eastern Fields*. pp. 9–11, 37.
29. Bolles-Wilson, 'Folly 2', in *Osaka Follies* (London: Architectural Association, 1991), pp. 30–43 (p. 31).
30. Wilson, *Western Objects Eastern Fields*, p. 61.
31. Peter Wilson, in Mirko Zardini, 'The Scale of the Eurolandschaft: Talking with Julia Bolles and Peter Wilson', *El Croquis*, 105 (2001), 6–20 (p. 15).
32. Nigel Coates, 'Introduction', in *The Villa Auto — Peter Wilson* (London: Architectural Association, 1980), pp. 2–7 (p. 6; emphasis in the original).
33. Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, 'Introduction', in Sebastiano Serlio, *On Architecture*, II, Books VI and VII, trans. by Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. ix–xlvii (p. xxvii).
34. Sebastiano Serlio, 'Book VII: On Situations', in Serlio, *On Architecture*, II, Books VI and VII, 352 (p. 210), 352 (p. 202), 364 (p. 218), and 374 (p. 230), respectively.
35. Jeanne Sillett and Peter Wilson, 'Yesterday Was as Bad as Any Other Day For a Solution ...', *Casabella*, 413 (1976), p. 23. The same text under a title 'Wednesday is as Bad as Any Other Day for a Solution' appeared in *Net #2*, ed. by Peter Cook (London, 1975).
36. Wilson, 'Architecture and Water'.
37. See, for instance: John Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa: Works 1947–1983*, ed. by Kim Shkarpich (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1985). A certain parallelism between Hejduk's and Wilson's works was suggested by Bernard Tschumi, 'Homeless Representation', *AA Files*, 9 (1985), 93–96 (p. 93).
38. See, for instance: Sillett and Wilson, 'Wednesday is as Bad as Any Other Day for a Solution'.
39. See: Wilson, *The Villa Auto — Peter Wilson*, p. 11.
40. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *La Cucina Futurista* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1932), p. 242. See also: *Marinetti The Futurist Cookbook*, ed. by Lesley Chamberlain, trans. by Suzanne Brill (San Francisco, CA; London: Bedford Arts; Trefoil, 1989), p. 169.
41. Coates, 'Introduction', p. 4.
42. See: Peter Wilson and Jeanne Sillett, 'Dorset: Inhabiting a Landscape' — Rotunda of Profit and Gain, AA Diploma Unit 9 (1973–74), AA Archive. Reference Number: AA/02/02/01/03/76.
43. Peter Wilson, email to Izabela Wieczorek, 3 March 2018.
44. See, for instance: Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as a Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink, Héroise Fink and Russel Grigg (New York, NY: Norton, 2006), pp. 75–81. In grounding his interests in Surrealism, Wilson recognises the influence of Vesely. See for instance: 'Alvin Boyarsky interviews Peter Wilson', p. 7.
45. Umberto Eco, 'Mirrors', in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 202–26 (p. 208).

46. Ibid.
47. Peter Wilson, 'A Comfortable House (for Architectural Speculation) in the Metropolis', *The Japan Architect: International Edition of Shinkenchiku*, 250 (February 1978), 21.
48. Peter Cook, 'Judge's Notes', *The Japan Architect: International Edition of Shinkenchiku*, 250 (February 1978), 8–13 (p. 9).
49. Ibid., pp. 9, 11.
50. For a discussion on 'London Conceptualists' as referred by Peter Cook to the group of then recent AA graduates, including Wilson and Jeanne Sillett, Will Alsop, Jenny Lowe, Derek Revington, Leon van Schaik, and Paul Shephard, see: Sandra Kaji-O'Grady, 'The London Conceptualists: Architecture and Performance in the 1970s', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 61 (2008), 43–51. Wilson refers to himself as 'a materializer' in 'Far Eastern Conversations', p. 9.
51. Umberto Boccioni, 'The Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting' (1913), repr. in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 140.
52. Ibid.
53. Peter Wilson, 'Not to Underestimate Commodity', lecture at the Architectural Association, 9 November 1998 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK_5FhgJgoA> (31:57") [accessed 27 May 2021].
54. Gernot Böhme, 'Staged Materiality', in *Magic of Materials* (= *Daidalos*, 56 (June 1995)), p. 36 (emphasis in the original).
55. See Alvin Boyarsky, 'Ambience and Alchemy: Alvin Boyarsky Interviewed', *The Architectural Review*, 174.1040 (October 1983), 27–31.
56. Such a description appeared as the announcement of the upcoming issue in *The Architectural Review*, 174.1039 (September 1983), 108.
57. Peter Cook, 'Cook's Grand Tour: Highlights of Recent History', *The Architectural Review*, 174.1040 (October 1983), 32–43 (p. 40; emphasis in the original). Peter Wilson arrived at the AA in 1971.
58. Boyarski stated: 'We're in pursuit of architecture, we discuss it boldly, we draw it as well as we can and we exhibit it'. See 'Ambience and Alchemy', p. 28.
59. See Pascal Schöning, 'SIGNS OF LIFE. Living with Rust: Installations by Peter Wilson, Guy Comely and Neil Porter at the One Off Showroom', *AA Files*, 10 (1985), 66–67.
60. Peter Wilson in Rianne Makkink, 'Dialogue: The Launching of the "Tactile Dinosaur"', in *Bolles-Wilson*, ed. by Toshio Nakamura (= *A+U*, 303 (December 1995)), 88–97 (p. 96).
61. Bruno Latour, 'A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)', p. 6 <<https://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/112-DESIGN-CORNWALL-GB.pdf>> [accessed 31 March 2018].
62. Ibid.