

The Fracture of the Familiar. The Uncanny and the Contemporary Reconfiguration of Beauty / La Fractura De Lo Familiar. Lo Extraño Y La Reorganización Contemporánea De La Belleza

This article examines the relationship between beauty and the uncanny - *unheimlich* - in contemporary architecture. It argues that certain forms of beauty are produced through a controlled fracture of the familiar: buildings retain their legibility and their elements remain recognisable, while the usual relationships between form, use, body and meaning are altered. Through a brief genealogy of the uncanny and of abstraction, followed by an analysis of Adolf Loos, Pezo von Ellrichshausen and DOGMA, the article identifies a series of mechanisms through which architectural order becomes detached from the experience it was traditionally expected to stabilise. The uncanny thus appears not as the destruction of order, but as an internal condition of a form of beauty grounded in the tension between recognition and instability.

Keywords: beauty; the uncanny; *unheimlich*; familiarity; abstraction; contemporary architecture; Adolf Loos; Pezo von Ellrichshausen; DOGMA.



*Este artículo estudia la relación entre belleza y lo extraño - *unheimlich* - en la arquitectura contemporánea. Se propone que determinadas formas de belleza se producen mediante una fractura controlada de lo familiar: los edificios conservan su legibilidad y sus elementos permanecen reconocibles, pero alteran las relaciones habituales entre forma, uso, cuerpo y significado. A partir de una breve genealogía de lo extraño y de la abstracción, seguida del análisis de Adolf Loos, Pezo von Ellrichshausen y DOGMA, el texto identifica distintos mecanismos mediante los cuales el orden arquitectónico se separa de la experiencia que tradicionalmente debía estabilizar. Lo extraño aparece así no como destrucción del orden, sino como condición interna de una belleza fundada en la tensión entre reconocimiento e inestabilidad.*

Palabras clave: *belleza; lo extraño; *unheimlich*; uncanny; familiaridad; abstracción; arquitectura contemporánea; Adolf Loos; Pezo von Ellrichshausen; DOGMA.*

01. Introduction

Revisiting Beauty: Order, the Familiar and the Uncanny

Beauty has occupied a central position in Western culture. Despite the historical diversity of its formulations, this tradition tended to associate beauty with different forms of order, formal coherence and intelligibility: from the numerical harmony of the Pythagoreans and the Platonic identification of beauty with truth to the Vitruvian triad. Even when Kant shifted beauty from classical objectivity towards subjective judgement, he retained a claim to universal validity through his formulation of 'subjective universality' (Kant 1790). Beauty thus functioned as a normative category capable of stabilising the relationship between perception, form and meaning, and of linking aesthetic experience to recognisable structures of order and familiarity.

This association was never absolute. The history of architecture and its representations is traversed by ambiguous, dark and destabilising forms of beauty: from the ritualistic spaces of prehistoric caves and the demonic imagery of medieval sacred art to the monstrous excesses of the Baroque, the geometric sublime of the late Enlightenment and the Romantic fascination with ruins. Such manifestations rarely abandoned recognisable structures of order altogether. Historically, the uncanny appears less as the destruction of order than as a change in the conditions through which it is recognised as familiar. Disturbance arises when a structure remains legible but no longer meets the perceptual and cultural expectations attached to it.

This instability raises a fundamental tension in contemporary debates on architectural beauty. On the one hand, beauty is frequently understood as a cultural construction dependent on historical conventions, ideological frameworks and systems of representation (Bourdieu 1979). On the other, various approaches drawn from environmental psychology and studies of environmental perception suggest relatively stable perceptual responses to certain spatial conditions related to orientation, legibility and environmental coherence (Lynch 1960; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). In both cases, familiarity plays a central role: either as the recognition of culturally shared conventions or as the perceptual capacity to identify and organise the environment.

Neither view fully explains how aesthetic sensibility has changed over time. If beauty were reduced entirely to universal biological predispositions, history would display a far greater degree of aesthetic continuity than it actually does. Conversely, if it were understood solely as a contingent cultural construction, it would be difficult to explain the historical persistence of certain spatial and perceptual patterns. Architectural beauty arises from specific historical configurations of perception, representation and the material organisation of experience; it cannot be reduced either to universal formal properties or to arbitrary cultural constructions.

The contemporary reappraisal of Brutalism clearly illustrates the historical and cultural mutability of aesthetic attraction: forms once associated with coldness, oppression or alienation are now valued for their monumentality, material honesty and formal intensity (Mould 2017). Similarly, certain postmodern languages, discredited for decades as superficial, decorative or kitsch, have been reappropriated from queer perspectives by figures such as Andrés Jaque and Adam Nathaniel Furman. Colour, ornament and irony thus regain the capacity to generate aesthetic intensity under different cultural conditions. In both cases, a recognisable form acquires different meanings and values within new cultural frameworks.

This shift becomes particularly significant when beauty also begins to function as a form of collective representation. The concept of *Volksgeist*, developed by Johann Gottfried Herder (1784–1791) and later reformulated by German Idealism, understood artistic manifestations as expressions of the spirit of a people. Under such conceptions, architecture operates as a structure of continuity, belonging and cultural recognition, while beauty acquires a role in historical identification and collective representation. It is therefore no coincidence that numerous contemporary discourses on beauty reactivate this association between architectural form, historical continuity and collective identity.

This connection is evident today in initiatives such as the British *Building Better*, *Building Beautiful Commission*, the US executive order *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture*, and movements such as Architectural Uprising, which originated in Sweden and subsequently developed into an international network opposed to the predominance of modern architecture. In contrast to these positions, a strand of contemporary architecture finds intensity in abstraction, ambiguity and perceptual instability. While some discourses tend to identify beauty with the continuity of familiar forms, certain contemporary architectures produce intensity through the alteration or intensification of those same conditions of stability. This tension suggests that contemporary beauty may also emerge through the internal fracture or hypertrophy of elements and systems that remain recognisable. Had the dissolution of traditional orders automatically entailed the collapse of beauty, the concept itself would have lost its historical relevance more than a century ago.

By contrast, industrialised and regulated societies, increasingly subject to processes of normalisation and control, offer especially fertile ground for the emergence of the uncanny as the reverse side of achieved stability. The more ordered, predictable and controlled experience appears, the greater the intensity acquired by its minor deviations. The uncanny thus emerges in the discrepancy between recognition and stability and plays a decisive role in certain forms of contemporary sensibility.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The research asks how alterations to the ordinary conditions of architectural experience can produce the uncanny and reshape the experience of beauty. It argues that certain contemporary forms of beauty arise through a controlled fracture of the familiar: the system retains its coherence and its elements remain recognisable, while the usual relationships between perception, use, representation and meaning cease to stabilise experience.

Objective and Method

The article aims to identify and compare the mechanisms that produce this fracture of the familiar. It does so through a historical account organised into four stages: the association between beauty, order and familiarity; the appearance of the uncanny in Gothic literature; its theoretical formulation, from Jentsch's notion of intellectual uncertainty to Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* and Vidler's translation of it into architecture; and its modern and contemporary reformulation. Abstraction provides the common ground for this final shift, reducing narrative and figurative references without entirely removing the legibility of the architectural object.

This historical account is followed by a comparative analysis of Adolf Loos, as a modern precursor, and Pezo von Ellrichshausen and DOGMA, as two distinct contemporary approaches. Each case is examined through a common framework that considers the underlying logic of order, the general mechanism of disturbance and the specific operations through which it is applied, together with its effect on the experience of beauty.

02. A Brief Genealogy of the Uncanny

Literary Prehistory and the Disturbance of the Familiar

The uncanny was theorised in the twentieth century, but it appeared as an experience much earlier. Late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction offers some of its earliest examples, from *The Castle of Otranto* (Walpole 1764) to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Radcliffe 1794). In these works, architecture ceases to be a mere backdrop and becomes an agent of unease: passageways, hidden chambers, locked doors, apparitions and objects of disproportionate scale transform the house or castle into an environment that remains recognisable yet difficult to anticipate. The uncanny thus arises not from the disappearance of the familiar, but from its internal alteration: domestic space retains its form, but no longer guarantees protection, orientation or belonging.

Jentsch and Freud: From Intellectual Uncertainty to the *Unheimlich*

One of the earliest psychological accounts of the uncanny appears in *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen* (Jentsch 1906), where Jentsch links it to intellectual uncertainty in the face of something that cannot be clearly classified. To illustrate this condition, he uses the short story *Der Sandmann* (Hoffmann 1816), focusing on the ambiguity between the living and the inanimate embodied by the doll Olympia.

Freud takes up and expands this account in *Das Unheimliche* (Freud 1919). For Freud, the uncanny is no longer understood as the mere intrusion of the unknown, but as the unsettling return of something once familiar: "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud [1919] 1955, 220). He also recalls Schelling's formulation that the uncanny is "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud [1919] 1955, 224). The structure of the term itself is crucial: *unheimlich* names that which, while being or having once been *Heimlich* - domestic, intimate, familiar - returns in altered form. The uncanny therefore presupposes prior recognition and depends on the persistence of the very thing it disturbs.

Vidler and the Architectural Uncanny

It was Anthony Vidler who first translated this condition into the field of architecture. In *The Architectural Uncanny* (Vidler 1992), the uncanny is no longer located solely in the subject or in fiction, but appears in the house, the city and the spaces of modernity. Vidler links the architectural uncanny to the discontents of domesticity, the loss of security associated with the home, and a modern experience marked by alienation and urban displacement.

Within Vidler's framework, deconstructivist architecture appears as an explicit formulation of the uncanny: fragmentation, dislocation and the rupture of spatial continuity make the loss of stability within the architectural system visible. Some strands of deconstruction, however, push this operation too far for the argument developed here, as the alteration begins to compromise the legibility of the order itself. This study focuses on a less extreme condition: one in which the familiar is fractured, but the system still retains enough coherence to remain recognisable.

03. Abstraction and the Modern Condition of the Uncanny

Literary Prehistory and the Disturbance of the Familiar

In contrast to figuration, abstraction reduces the narrative supports that guide interpretation and shifts meaning towards structure, geometry, colour, matter and the relationships between elements (Kandinsky 1912). The work retains a formal order

but transfers an increasing share of meaning-making to the viewer. The uncanny may then arise from the distance between the clarity of the organisation and the indeterminacy of its meaning.

In architecture, this transformation found its fullest expression in the Modern Movement. The reduction of ornament and of historical and anthropomorphic references, together with constructional standardisation and the primacy of structure, function and geometry, progressively separated formal clarity from symbolic continuity.

Unlike painting and sculpture, architecture cannot suspend recognition entirely. Even the most abstract building retains walls, openings, rooms, circulation and relationships of use. Abstraction therefore operates on elements that remain identifiable, while weakening the domestic, cultural and historical associations that once stabilised them. The building remains legible and functional, although it no longer refers unambiguously to a shared repertoire of meanings. Abstraction thus becomes a particularly fertile ground for the architectural production of the uncanny.

Adolf Loos: The Uncanny through Separation

Adolf Loos represents an early precedent for the modern split between form and meaning. In his architecture, the reduction of ornament neither eliminates domesticity nor renders the house unrecognisable, but it weakens the correspondence between its outward appearance and the life it contains. This division reflects Loos's desire to present a restrained image to the city while reserving material and spatial richness for the domestic interior. The result, however, is not entirely neutral: the abstraction of the building envelope obscures the relationship between the external form of the house and the life within. This condition is particularly evident in the elevations of the *Rufer House* (1922) and the rear façade of *Villa Winteritz* (1931-1932), where the windows appear as seemingly autonomous perforations, difficult to integrate into a hierarchical composition or to relate directly to a recognisable domestic organisation. Although they respond to the needs of the interior spaces, from the outside they form a discontinuous arrangement that intensifies the abstraction of the volume, producing an opaque image and an uncertain relationship between the envelope and the domestic organisation within.

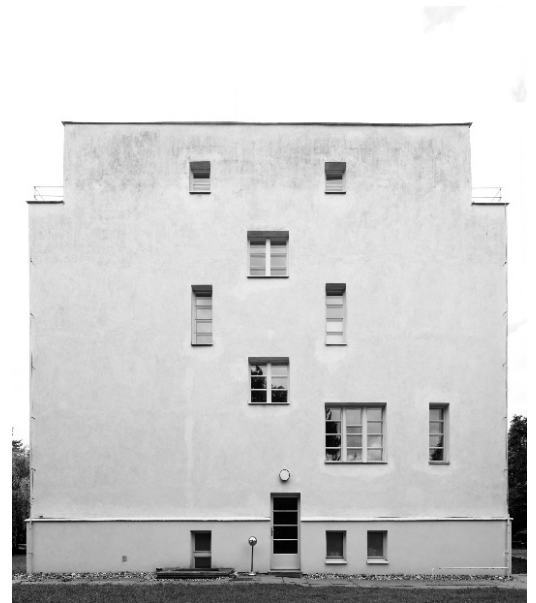
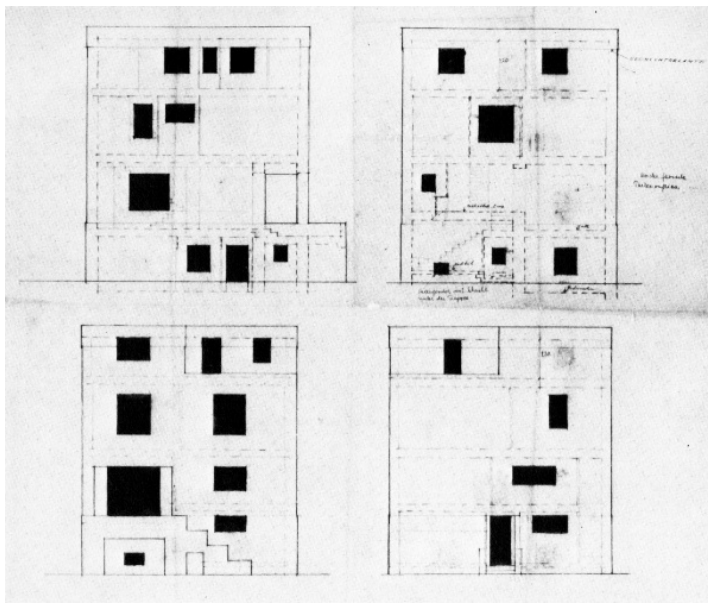


Fig. 1. Adolf Loos, elevations, *Rufer House* (1922)

Fig. 2. Adolf Loos, rear façade, *Villa Winternitz* (1931-1932)

As Beatriz Colomina has pointed out, Loos's interiors organise positions of observation, exposure and control (Colomina 1992). In *Villa Müller* (1928–1930), each space remains recognisable in itself, but the connections between rooms make it difficult to reconstruct the whole as a unified arrangement. The uncanny thus acquires a behavioural dimension: space regulates positions, movements and lines of sight, allowing the observer to remain partially concealed while those passing through the communal areas are exposed.



Fig. 3. Adolf Loos, living room, *Villa Müller* (1928-1930)

Fig. 4. Adolf Loos, ladies' room, *Villa Müller* (1928-1930)

This condition is intensified in the ladies' room of *Villa Müller*, which may deliberately be interpreted here as a "voyeur's room". Its secluded, elevated and comfortable character presents it as a refuge, yet its position turns the living room into a spectacle. Intimacy therefore no longer amounts to protection, but always includes the possibility of exposure. Domestic familiarity remains, but is unsettled by an unstable relationship between refuge, surveillance and exposure.

The project for the house designed for Josephine Baker (1927) gives this logic a more explicit form. The swimming pool, visible through lateral openings, transformed the swimmer's body into an image incorporated into the architecture: the spatial boundary no longer separated only public from private, but also the observer from the observed body. This arrangement, inseparable from the sexualised and racialised gaze projected onto Baker within European culture at the time, shows how Loosian domesticity could be traversed by relations of desire, power and representation.

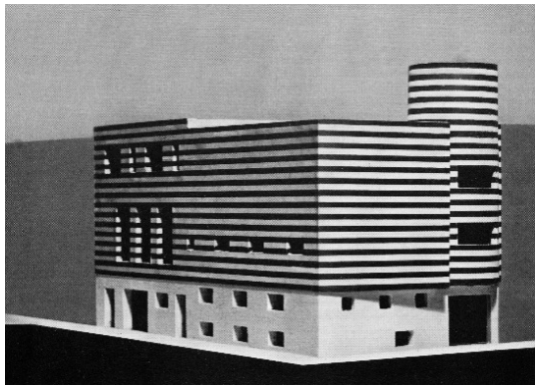


Fig.5. Adolf Loos, façade, *House for Josephine Baker* (1927)



Fig.6. Adolf Loos, swimming pool, *House for Josephine Baker* (1927)



Fig.7. Josephine Baker, *Danse Sauvage* in *Un Vent de Folie*, Folies Bergère, Paris (1927)

The historical and geographical proximity of Loos and Freud suggests a structural affinity: while Freud described the persistence of desires and drives beneath the apparent continuity of family life, Loos designed houses whose serene exteriors contained fragmented routes, concealed positions and asymmetrical devices of observation. The legal proceedings against the architect in 1928 cannot provide a causal explanation for his architecture, but they compel a critical examination of intimacy, the gaze and the sexualisation of the body in his work (Long 2017). In any case, Loos constitutes a decisive precedent: the separation between exterior and interior, appearance and movement, intimacy and exposure turns domestic familiarity into the setting of its own fracture and produces a beauty that is distant, ambiguous and permeated by a latent unease.

04. Mechanisms and Operations of the Contemporary Uncanny

Pezo von Ellrichshausen: Intensifying the Uncanny

The work of Pezo von Ellrichshausen intensifies some of the mechanisms already present in Loos. The separation between a stable external figure and an interior experience that is difficult to anticipate becomes the starting point for a system of operations. Their houses retain recognisable architectural elements and figures - rooms, courtyards, staircases, compact volumes and towers - but subject them to operations of isolation, repetition, doubling, insertion and shifts in scale.

Their houses appear as compact, geometrically emphatic objects constructed from a single material, often set in remote locations: on cliffs, in forests or in isolated landscapes. This autonomy brings them close to the archetype of the isolated house in Gothic fiction and horror: a recognisable construction that seems to contain an inaccessible reality inside. As in Loos, the envelope does not transparently represent domestic life, but Pezo von Ellrichshausen radicalise this discrepancy by subjecting the internal organisation, the scale of the spaces and the sequence of movement to the autonomous logic of the geometric figure.

Loba House (2016–2017) condenses this condition. Its solitary volume presents a stable external image, while the interior is organised around a large void that exceeds the usual domestic scale. Visual connections between spaces at different levels make the interior legible as a whole, while its relationship to conventional patterns of use and occupation remains uncertain. Architectural objects of uncertain origin appear within this void: a monumental fireplace, several columns and unreachable bridges crossing the space. Although they retain a recognisable identity, their size, position and disconnection from use turn them into autonomous presences within the house.

The stepped section recalls certain effects of the *Raumplan* but intensifies them to the point of producing a deliberately unstable bodily experience. Steps, changes in level and familiar elements seem scaled for someone other than the inhabitant. The house remains legible, yet its dimensions no longer feel entirely human. This alteration of scale reappears in works such as *Rode House* (2015–2017), where some rooms seem too small for the monumental form they assume and too large for the use they contain.



Fig.8. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, isolated setting, *Loba House* (2016-2017)

Fig.9. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, platform without guardrails, *Loba House* (2016-2017)

Fig.10. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, interior void and monumental scale, *Loba House* (2016-2017)

Fig.11. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, autonomous elements, *Loba House* (2016-2017)

In *Solo House* (2009–2013), in Cretas, the square figure, terraces and central courtyard present a clear geometric image, but the logic of the figure takes precedence over the functional and familiar organisation of the dwelling. The symmetry of the form requires the duplication of equivalent doors, entrances and routes, without this bifurcation leading to different destinations. The Freudian figure of the double underlies this repetition of equivalent elements. Similar doors and routes appear to confirm the clarity of the system, yet weaken the distinct identity of each alternative and produce interchangeable and ambiguous situations. The same operation reappears in *Rode House*, where the duplication of entrances, routes and rooms, arranged symmetrically around a central axis, turns similarity into a source of uncertainty.

In *Solo House*, beyond two symmetrical and redundant entrance doors, the blue light filtered through the swimming pool appears as an almost bodily presence, seductive and unsettling, destabilising the perception of the interior. Also visible through two lateral openings, the “fish-tank pool” recalls the house for Josephine Baker by separating the observer from the observed body. Its reflections spread across the concrete interior and produce uncanny atmospheric effects.

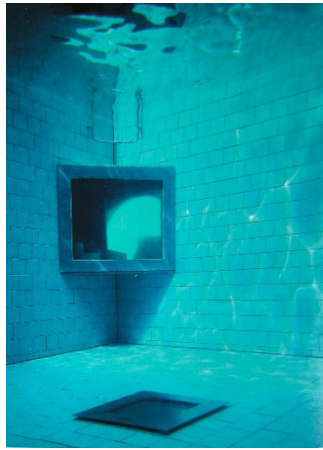


Fig.12. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, double entrance, *Solo House* (2009-2013)

Fig.13. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, swimming pool, *Solo House* (2009-2013)

Fig.14. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, swimming pool and duplicated route, *Solo House* (2009-2013)



Fig.15. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, compact exterior figure, *Rode House* (2015-2017)

Fig.16. Pezo von Ellrichshausen, domestic interior and altered scale, *Rode House* (2015-2017)

Pezo von Ellrichshausen thus combine operations that separate exterior from interior, isolate the house, alter scale, duplicate routes and insert autonomous figures. The dwelling remains elemental and recognisable, but no longer offers stable relationships between geometry, use, movement and the body. The uncanny arises from this intensification of domestic form, which retains its identity while fracturing the relationships that ordinarily make it familiar. The beauty of these houses lies precisely in the tension between the clarity of their geometric figure and the bodily and functional mismatch produced by the experience it generates.

DOGMA: Condensing the Uncanny

A different strand of the contemporary uncanny, represented by DOGMA, shifts the emphasis from formal intensification to the condensation of impersonal conditions embedded in everyday life. Repetition, discipline, exposure and control, usually dispersed across the organisation of daily experience, are concentrated into rigorous and elementary spatial systems. In contrast to the spatial hypertrophy found in Pezo von Ellrichshausen, DOGMA works with recognisable architectural figures - furniture, rooms, corridors, courtyards and walls - and subjects them to mechanisms of elimination, repetition and codification. The architecture remains legible and does not assume anomalous forms: it is rigorous, bureaucratic and almost conventional. Yet its elements gradually lose the connections that tie them to particular subjects, specific uses and shared narratives. Much of DOGMA's work exists primarily through projects, drawings and images rather than completed buildings, so the uncanny is produced not only spatially but also through representation.

The first mechanism involves removing the conditions that stabilise meaning. DOGMA does not eliminate the room, the piece of furniture or the domestic scale, but rather what makes them the setting for a particular life. In *Do You See Me When We Pass?* (2019), the architecture retains recognisable and familiar references, but the inhabitant disappears as its organising principle. The images do not simply depict empty spaces. They construct a form of domesticity in which traces of occupation remain, although bodies, biographies and affective ties have been removed. Everything appears ready to be inhabited, yet the life that should account for it is absent.



Fig.17. DOGMA, domestic void, *Do You See Me When We Pass?* (2019)

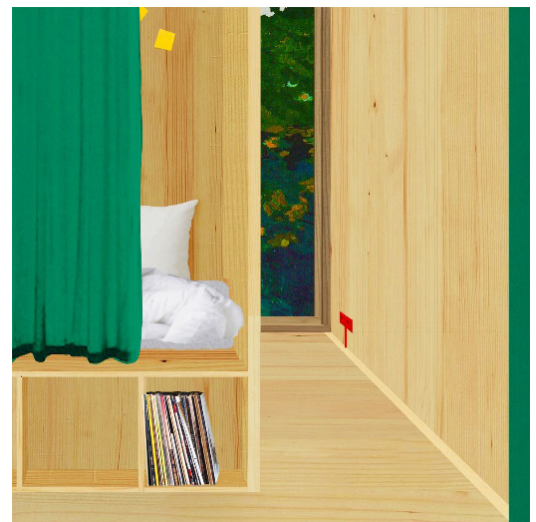


Fig.18. DOGMA, domestic void, *Do You See Me When We Pass?* (2019)

Repetition provides a second mechanism for producing the uncanny. In DOGMA, it is exact, deliberate and exhaustive: rooms, corridors, bays, modules and types are repeated until the differences between them are reduced. Repetition does not make the architecture illegible. On the contrary, it makes the rule governing it increasingly apparent. Yet the more explicit the system becomes, the more interchangeable its parts appear.

This logic operates at different scales. In *Urban Villa*, repetition turns the villa into a reproducible unit within an undifferentiated series. In *Everyday Is Like Sunday* and *Longhouse*, each new module confirms the rule without introducing hierarchy. In *A Simple Heart*, *Life Forever / The Return of the Factory* and *A Field of Walls*, repetition extends beyond the limits of the architectural object itself. Form becomes a continuous condition whose scale can no longer be judged from individual experience and whose extent overwhelms through sheer insistence.

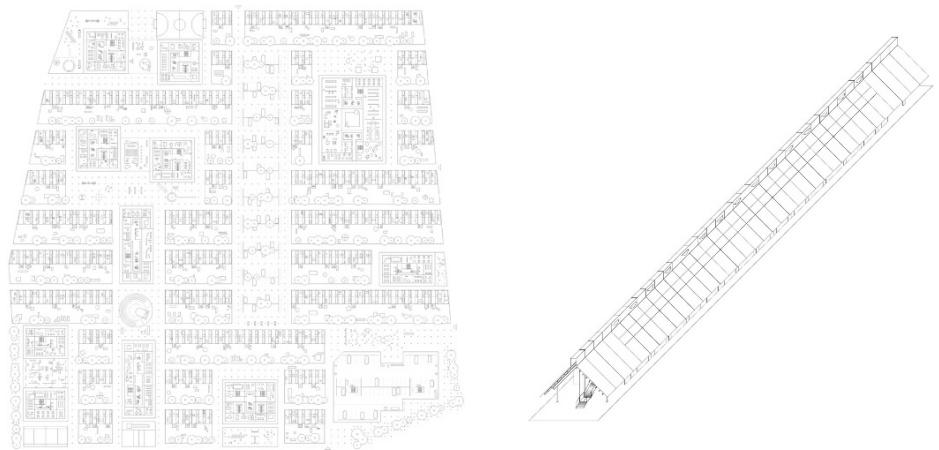


Fig.19. DOGMA, repetition of equivalent domestic units, *Everyday Is Like Sunday* (2015)

Fig.20. DOGMA, serial organisation without hierarchy, *The Longhouse* (2021)



Fig.21. DOGMA, the villa as a repeatable unit, *Urban Villa* (2024)

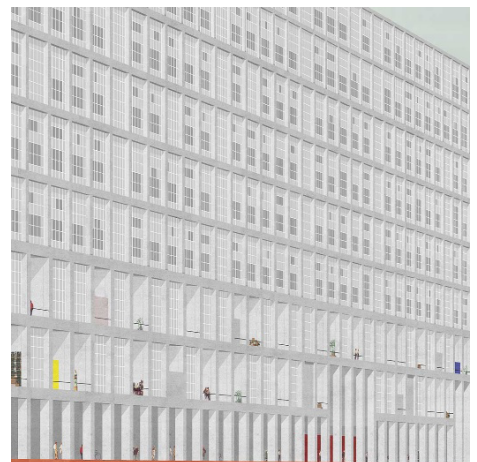


Fig.22. DOGMA, repetition beyond measure, *Life Forever / The Return of the Factory* (2013)

Codification constitutes a third mechanism for producing the uncanny in DOGMA. Architecture no longer merely arranges space but begins to define the conditions under which life may unfold within it. In *Like a Rolling Stone* (2016), this mechanism is applied to collective living through a long, narrow bay conceived as a lodging house and stripped of intermediate internal divisions. Domestic activities are arranged continuously within a single space, leaving bodies, objects and actions exposed to the gaze of others. The architecture neither prohibits nor explicitly prescribes behaviour, but it restricts the possibility of privacy and makes communal life unavoidably visible. A similar condition appears in *Sometimes I Just Sit* (2022), where the spatial organisation intensifies a panoptic condition of exposure and mutual surveillance.

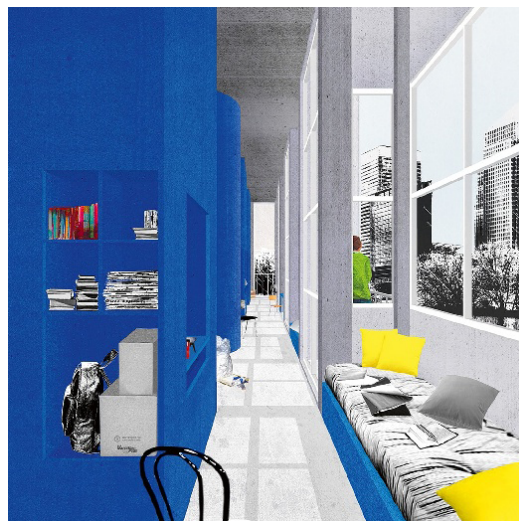


Fig.23. DOGMA, continuous domestic space and reduced privacy, *Like a Rolling Stone* (2016)



Fig.24. DOGMA, reciprocal surveillance and panoptic organisation, *Sometimes I Just Sit* (2022)

DOGMA condenses these operations into silent, suspended architectures in which abstraction strips away narrative and affective references, reduces difference and codifies relationships between bodies. Their particular beauty lies in the ambivalence of a potentially inhabitable system that retains its formal force while eroding the house as a singular, intimate realm conceived around the individual subject.

05. Conclusions: Unstable Beauty

The examined cases show that the uncanny does not depend on any particular form, but on mechanisms and operations that alter systems which remain recognisable. Loos separates exterior from interior, appearance from experience, and intimacy from exposure; Pezo von Ellrichshausen intensify this fracture through isolation, ambiguous scale, duplication and the autonomy of geometry; DOGMA removes the subject, repeats the type and codifies collective life until the dwelling becomes an almost administrative system. In each case, order remains, but the relationships that once connected it to familiar experience are weakened.

The uncanny is therefore neither the opposite of beauty nor a form of absolute disorder. It occupies an intermediate position in which recognition remains active but can no longer stabilise experience. Contemporary beauty can thus be understood as an unstable beauty: an intensity produced by the coexistence of order and ambiguity, familiarity and distance, legibility and uncertainty. Its appeal lies precisely in this tension.

This interpretation is not intended to exhaust the contemporary forms of the uncanny, but to propose a framework that may be applied to other cases in which the preservation of order coexists with the destabilisation of experience. Its scope is also limited by a selection of examples focused on housing and contemporary European practices. Future research could therefore extend the analysis to other programmes, cultural contexts and architectural scales.

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Fig.24. DOGMA, reciprocal surveillance and panoptic organisation, *Sometimes I Just Sit* (2022)

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