

# Traces of the Hidden. Ungraspable ALICE

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SESSION VI

PROCESS / THE ROLE OF THE HIDDEN

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Merleau-Ponty, ProtoStructure,  
prefabrication, collaboration

*What we call visible is (...) the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being. [1]*

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty

If, as stated by the French philosopher Guillaume Blanc [2], the visible is sewn to the invisible, while reading the projects developed by students, we should be able to read traces of the hidden, the structure which made them possible. We will therefore focus on HOUSE 1, an experimental collaborative project designed and built by 227 first-year architecture students by the end of the spring semester 2016 in the XXX university campus.

When looking at the two perspectival sections of HOUSE 1 (Fig. 1), we can read two kinds of 'ROOMS': spaces that accommodate inhabitation, and transitional spaces providing connectivity within the house. We can count a total of 12 ROOMS, within a 11m × 11m × 11m balloon-frame timber construct (Fig. 2) which provides the 'common ground' for experimentation, meaning that students had to collaborate in a physical pre-conceived wooden structure, by reinforcing, extending, cutting it when necessary to fit their purposes. Accordingly, we can notice that every project is strongly contextualized and enters into a multi-layered dialogical discourse with its surroundings. Boundaries — not only between the original timber construct and the ROOMS but also between the different ROOMS — have proved to be relevant zones for physical interaction and intellectual negotiation.

Negotiation is relevant, but it cannot be taken for granted. From September to April all students follow a common teaching program — fixing contents and outcomes — and gather twice a month in plenum for lectures, techné and philosophy lessons, blog reviews and critiques. However, they spend most of their time dedicated to Project Design in a studio of about 20 students taught by a specific studio director. It is in their studio where they draw, build models, make mock-ups and do most of the prefabrication for the HOUSES. By the second half of the second semester, students have learnt the necessary capacities in crafts and collaboration, and they should be ready to negotiate their ideas, choosing their own role and specific tasks within the studio team according to their abilities, from detail development to program and time management (Fig. 3), from construction drawings to prefabrication catalogues (Fig. 4) and fabrication itself.

Studios are a place for discussion, experimentation and cooperation. Accordingly, the role of the studio director is crucial. Coming from Switzerland (65%) and abroad, studio directors follow the y1 program and will — as students themselves — dive into an open process to learn by doing. They will

debate, contribute and dialogue in an open rhythm of weekly meetings to sustain diversity (Fig. 5). Studio directors have a pronounced responsibility but work within a supportive environment. These complex processes could never evolve orchestrated in top-down hierarchies. Instead they require structures of communication and mutual exchange on every level. Any rising question needs to be negotiated through spatially situated propositions. Here, with parallels to 'scaffolding' in cognitive sciences and extended mind theory (Chalmers), the lab's concept of protostructure is vital.

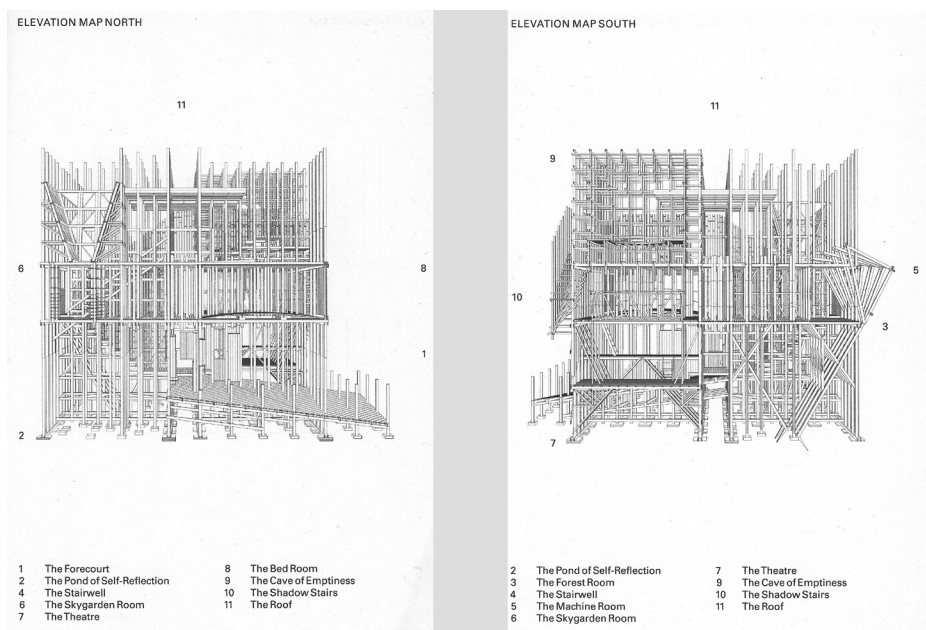
The lab defines protostructure as 'a structure ready to receive either alteration in itself, or to accommodate further configurations (...) whose destiny is to evolve (...) engaged in a constant interaction with agents' [3]. Each HOUSE owes its materialization to its own protostructure — different every year according to the site and programmatic conditions established by the program — and designed in close collaboration between teaching and research members within the Lab[4]. Providing a genetic code and first physical negotiable delineations protostructures engage a field of potentialities able to receive spatial articulations issued from dialogical negotiation (Sennett) amongst multiple actors — providing ground for processes different from completion-like design-build assignments where top-down hierarchies remain intact.

The interactions, the dialogic tension between protostructural construct (physical and programmatic) and 12 studio cultures 'permit authorial intentions to be realized in such a way that we can acutely sense their presence' [5] but ALICE avoids 'giving herself up wholly to either of them' [6], she is 'the opening to the scene of the visible (...) [7]. The Hidden — ALICE — will always stay behind[8] the mirror, only through the common experience of making together can we access her.

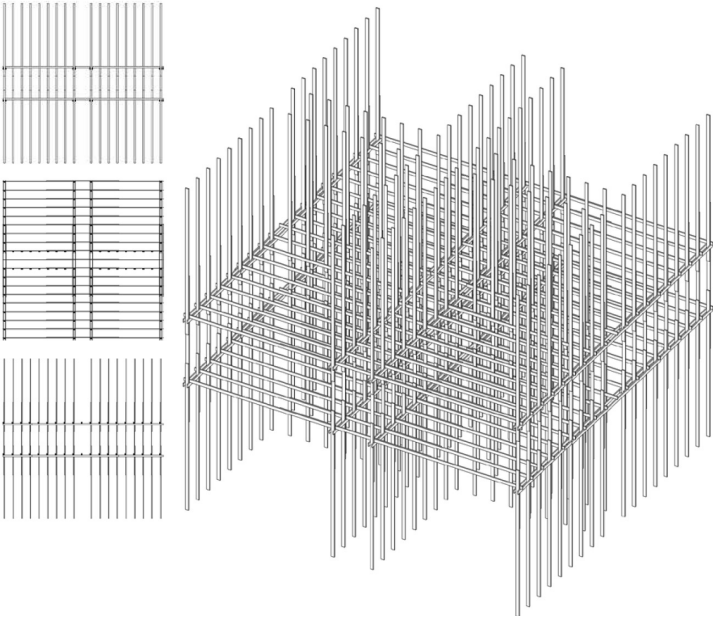
## REFERENCES

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). P. 136.
- 2 Guillaume le Blanc, 'Conclusion. Le Visible et l'invisible,' in *L'invisibilité Sociale, Pratiques Théoriques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009). P. 194. 'Le premier n'est jamais totalement donné car il est suspendu au second, qui en assure cependant la possibilité. Le visible est donc cousu à l'invisible'
- 3 Agathe Mignon, 'Proto-Structure,' in *All About Space 2. HOUSE 1 CATALOGUE* (Zurich: Park Books, 2017). p. 112

- 4 The concept of Protostructure has been investigated within the ALICE Lab as a PhD research project by Agathe Mignon under Prof. Dieter Dietz's supervision.
- 5 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). p. 314
- 6 Mikhail Bakhtin.
- 7 Guillaume le Blanc, 'Conclusion. Le Visible et l'invisible.'
- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty.



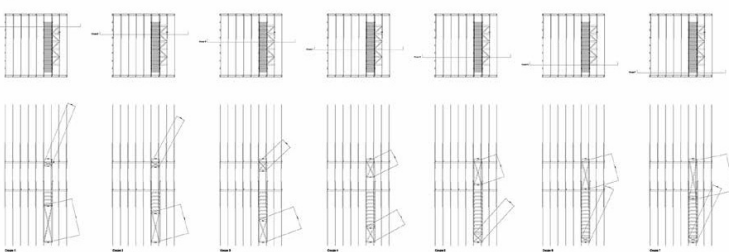
1: perspectival sections HOUSE 1. Drawing by Agathe Mignon.



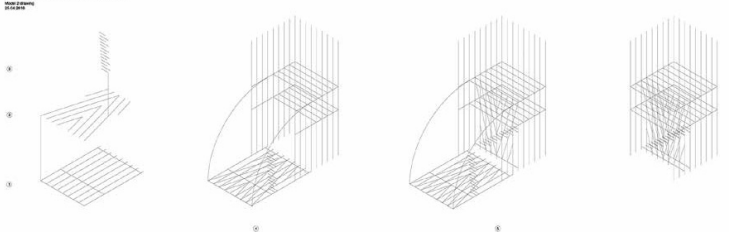
2: Protostructure. Drawing by Laurent Chassot.

#### EAST-WEST SECTIONS

Scale 1:100 on A1



#### STRATEGIE DE MONTAGE



3: Mapping of the different components and assembly strategies. Studio Cabay.

