

RICHTER ET DAHL ROCHA

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CONTEMPORARY
WORLD
ARCHITECTS





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Introduction by
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Foreword

BY JORGE FRANCISCO LIERNUR

One of the most indisputable characteristics of contemporary Argentine architecture is the loss of creative tension. With few exceptions, and in most cases attributable to the almost militant desire of some creators, the majority of works (and projects) produced in recent years have a circumspect appearance, harsh in some ways, as though more skills than wisdom or passion had intervened in their conception. This condition has many causes, many of them related to the terrible events our country has gone through these last decades. This is obviously not the place to analyze them, but we could say that this lack of tension is the result of a triple act of simplification: first, by reducing a vast body of human knowledge and experience to a significant but only partial aspect of that body that is the project technique; second, by considering it first and foremost a professional praxis—when carried to an extreme, valued according to volume—rather than a discipline, a way of seeing and understanding the world, a cultural and therefore critical activity, and third, by assigning an exclusively evaluative role to what actually constitutes only one of the forms of project organization, that which attempts to obtain its unity through the paradigm referred to in academic theory as *parti*, known to us as *partido*.

The result of this triple reduction is usually work praised for its “clear geometry,” which confuses simplism with minimalism, in which the constructive aspect constitutes a secondary moment, added to the original “idea,” and where the absence of time—that time for reflection proposed by Alberti and Mies—reveals an unconditional surrendering to the haste imposed by the marketplace. This “terribilità” has obliged numerous architects to leave the country, some of them having contributed in notable fashion to the international debate. Nevertheless the structure of contemporary culture’s “North Atlantic–centricity” dissolves their origins when the movement is from the periphery towards the center, but not when in the opposite direction. In other words: The Tokyo Forum is not architecture from the River Plate in Japan, whilst the “Banca del Lavoro” in Buenos Aires is Swiss Italian architecture in Argentina.

For various reasons Richter and Dahl Rocha’s work is provocative in the debate on this asymmetry, and it simultaneously constitutes a solid contribution to a debate of a more basic nature, at once local and universal. And for this reason this book is a fortunate step. On the level of an international debate their work can be said to be in the place of the “same,” and here resides its provocative capacity: the most disturbing image of an assassin is the one of our innocent neighbor on the Metro, so close by. Richter and Dahl Rocha’s path is not the explicit one of militant “vanguardism,” therefore not disturbing to the majority—but rather of insertion in one of the most conservative societies in the world. The question running throughout the work of Richter and Dahl Rocha is one of creative margins within that model, of the possibility of introducing originality where there is greatest demand in the opposite direction. Their work does not perplex visually with presumably rotund affirmations but is rather a rigorous experience in subtleties. The interesting thing about their work is that, while on one hand they appear to border on banality, on the other they resist being reduced to an initial moment, to an excluding determination.



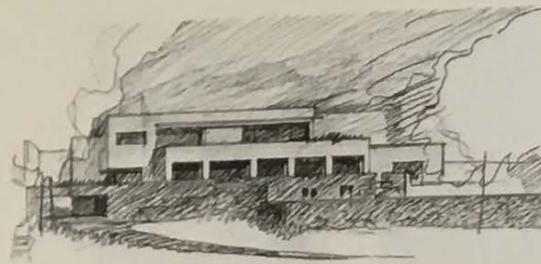
The coincidence is impressive. The paths of Richter and Dahl Rocha crossed in New Haven as students at the school that houses the legacy of Louis Kahn. What could a young man coming from the turbulence and darkness of Argentina in the seventies have in common with another brought up in the safe and opulent surroundings of the confederation in the Alps? My impression is that different roads led them to the place of sensible moderation that they share in their work today.

In Richter’s case I believe there are objective, structural reasons for such moderation. Construction in Switzerland is strongly conditioned by strict regulations, by the democratic and decisive participation of its citizens in matters of urban interest, by the high technological level of constructive processes. In this context, and especially when working for large corporations, creative margins are reduced to a minimum, commonly allowed to disappear altogether. Clearly these “hard” reasons are not new, but they have given direction to a special cultural tradition for some time now. The so-called “modern Swiss tradition,” that which emerged particularly following the publication of *La Nouvelle Architecture* compiled by Alfred Roth in the late thirties, represents a sort of “responsible” modernism, a credible, pacified response to the sustainability of new architectural forms within the Confederation’s stable social and economic framework. With its care for constructive quality, material, workmanship, its rational functional organization, its elegant aesthetic manipulation, the “modern Swiss tradition” expresses a manifest rejection of simplistic regionalism, but above all, of the stridencies, the “pamphletism,” and the excessive plasticism of other European modernisms.

I believe, however, that there are different reasons for Dahl Rocha’s moderation. To a large extent, it is also the consequence of his own modern tradition. By this I mean the tradition of self-containment and discretion of Argentine architecture, which includes the work of Alberto Prebisch and Antonio Vilar, and which has matured recently in the work of Ernesto Katzenstein and Horacio Baliero. That tradition is part of an important current in Argentine culture that has constructed a minimalist paradigm on the practical and metaphysical impositions of the gigantic plain. For this tradition the radicality of Amancio Williams’ work constitutes an excess. Dahl Rocha’s “objective” motives are very different. While Swiss moderation is an adaptation to the dictates of an extremely solid socio-economic structure, Argentine moderation is a response to the absence of any stable point of reference. Dahl Rocha’s moderation in his best works in Argentina is a choice, or rather a selection, of severe self-discipline as a recourse against the possibility of dissolution.

The pilgrimage of that sobriety from the plains of Argentina to the Swiss Alps may seem surprising, but the coincidence is not rare. As many will remember, Jorge Luis Borges decided to live out his final days in Switzerland. On the other hand, the strange sensation of seeing the same image duplicated by different mirrors has antecedents that copy it. By the late forties the story of Richter and Dahl Rocha had already been told in a similar way with other names: the Swiss, Max Bill and the Argentine, Tomas

Golay Buchel Headquarters, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1997 (above)



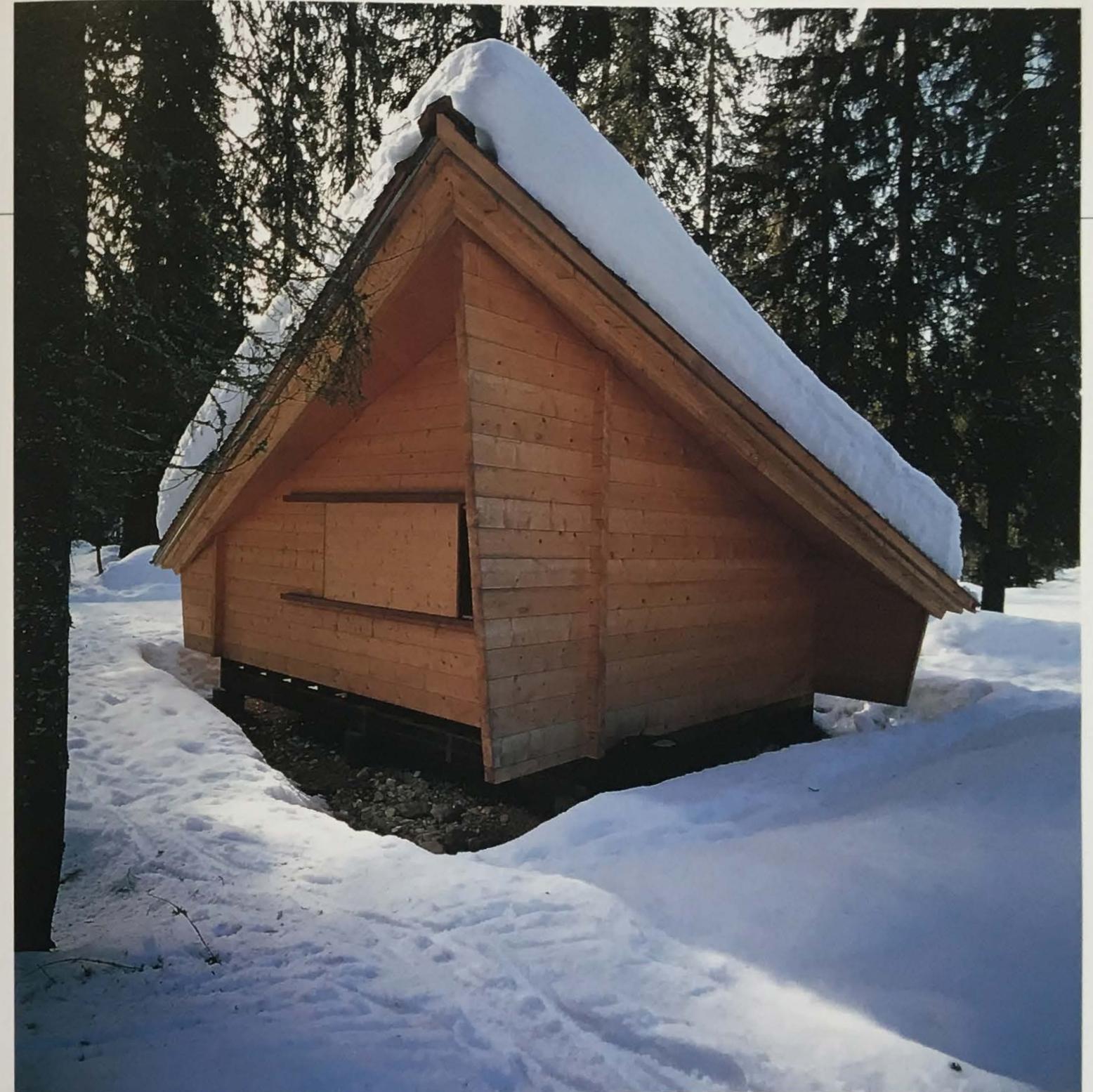
Foreword

Maldonado. In that case also, simultaneously and for similar reasons, the two men found themselves postulating the same handful of ideas. Unlike Richter-Dahl Rocha, however, Bill-Maldonado believed in a total solution.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the architecture of Richter and Dahl Rocha is nothing more than craft and sobriety. The interest resides in the fact that it is precisely with craft and sobriety, with moderation and professional rigor, that they are able to construct imaginative and poetic architecture where originality is savored without anxiety. It is that imagination and that poetry that give way to an open, uncertain, and latent universe of meanings. The work of Richter-Dahl Rocha is perceived as complete precisely because it is capable of raising doubts about the certainties of the profession, because once these are reached they are surpassed.

It is true that despite clearly identifiable traits, this work is the reflection of a process of maturation. Perhaps one could ask them to take greater risks in some operations, to avoid the temptation of the contemporary or to practice greater economy of their own skills. I believe, however, that their work, even in its relatively early stages—we are talking about a period of only six years—proposes some important affirmations: first, that it is not inevitable that discipline be dissolved in the profession; second, that it is likewise not inevitable that projects be reduced to exercises in geometry; third, that research is possible simultaneously with insertion in the market; fourth, that the condition of materiality is a starting point that can become decisive; and finally that architecture, wherever it may be, is still capable of raising the same questions as ever, about great and small, space and material, beauty and utility, permanent and ephemeral, nature and society.

Sketch for a house in San Isidro, Argentina, 1988 (top); forest refuge in the Jura Mountains Forest, Switzerland, 1995 (bottom and opposite page)



Introduction

BY JACQUES GUBLER

CONTRASTS AND SURPRISES

A SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jacques Richter, born in 1954, a Swiss lover of tango, and Ignacio Dahl Rocha, born in 1956, Latin American and an acute and critically nostalgic observer of European architecture, met and fraternized at Yale in New Haven at the beginning of the eighties. Richter studied at the ETH in Zurich and Dahl Rocha at the FADU in Buenos Aires. The many didactic stimuli experienced at Yale with James Stirling and Cesar Pelli or the repeated visits to Louis Kahn's Mellon Center for British Art offered a solid ground for their developing friendship.

Richter went back to his home city, Lausanne, on Lake Geneva, and worked in his father's office. Dahl Rocha returned to his home metropolis, Buenos Aires, on the Rio de la Plata, teaming up with Billoch and Ramos. Their "House in San Isidro" was shown in 1988 in Vicenza, selected for the Palladio Prize, and in the Buenos Aires Bienalle a year later. In 1987 Richter won the competition for the "Place Sans Nom" (Square without a Name) organized by the city of La Chaux-de-Fonds to celebrate Le Corbusier's Centennial. The open program was formulated as the need for a "courageous" urban proposal, the fostering of a new landmark in the heart of Jeanneret's birth place. To make a long story short, let us add that Richter and Dahl Rocha eventually succeeded in creating their own firm and partnership. Being the successors of Richter's father's confirmed practice was no doubt helpful, but they had proved their independence by winning prizes and competitions that would allow them to be themselves and develop their own "themes in architecture."

CAN A SINGLE BOX BE ARTICULATED?

The willingness to concentrate and "solve" the program into a single, box-like, volume, whether a private house, a gymnasium, a shed, a school, or a museum, has been a dominant tendency in Switzerland in the last decade. A similar trend has been observed elsewhere, particularly in Germany, Holland, and Belgium: the "Neue Einfachheit" (new simplicity) or the "Eenvoud" (unity, integrity). But we shall concentrate on the local Swiss scene, where such poetry has been explained by various and sometimes contradictory statements:

- a) the request for the "ordinary" (a true borrowing from Venturi's word without the related images) connected to the refusal of the icon or the totem;
- b) the ensuing rejection of architecture as a personal or idiosyncratic expression and the need for a "neutral" gesture;
- c) the research of the essential in agreement with the social policy of "minimalism" rooted in the Swiss avant-garde tradition (Paul Artaria, Hans Schmidt, Emil Roth, Max Bill); and



d) the need for economy and "integrality" in response to sustainable development and energy-saving techniques.

Among these arguments, the more convincing ones were related to the philosophical tradition of materialism and the criticism of the industry of materials. The poetics and phenomenology of the physical and silent presence of the materials could even be related to a pun, a radical and political pun. This pun exists only in German. It was first uttered in the post-Dadaist and pre-Heideggerian Republic of Weimar: *Nicht darstellen sondern dastellen*. The act of representation (*darstellen*) is replaced by the immediate necessity to put things on the table now and here (*dastellen*).

Plain boxes were built and the photographers came to shoot laconic black-and-white pictures. The picturesque, one of the plagues of architecture in Switzerland, had been buried. The beautiful prosaic images of mere boxes became icons. The "magic box" of the camera would even infuse magic into "dematerialized" or "virtual" boxes.

If the "precept of the box" in Switzerland has been a reaction against "deconstruction" and "technological pathos," it is obvious that such a general assumption does not permit one to approach and study the singularity of each case. Nevertheless, one may agree that the challenge to build a single volume is directed to the revisiting of the modern tradition, Wright's "breaking of the box," Corbusier's comparative diagram of the "very difficult" compact solution, or the need for configuration (*Gestaltung*) expressed by Gropius and Hannes Meyer, of the ambivalent principle of "open is shut" contained in the Miesian pavilions. Indeed, the critical revisiting of the Modern movement has been the leading moral attitude in Swiss "learned" architecture over the last two decades. "Learned," that is self-conscious, architecture includes only about five percent of the overall building production in Switzerland, a percentage that corresponds to the situation observed elsewhere in Europe.

THEIR BUILDINGS ARE ARTICULATED BOXES

The works of R&DR could be described as articulated boxes. The emphasis is given to the physical perception of the building. From the intimacy of the first sketches, a dominant line is followed in the hierarchy of the design: to create a sculptural event. The process of "composition" is a process in "configuration." This approach pays respect to the tradition of the Modern movement, but their ideological adhesion is based upon empiricism. Past adventures on the building site permit to integrate technical feasibility into the intimacy of the first sketches. It has been one of the leading precepts in the Swiss polytechnical training in architecture since Semper that building should rely upon previous practical experiences, that past mistakes and miscarriages on the building site should be digested and corrected, that risky gestures should be tamed.

House in San Isidro, Argentina, 1988 (left); Espacités complex in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, 1987–1995 (right).



Introduction

The emphasis put on "the practical" (*das Praktische*) does not necessarily eliminate theory, even if the majority of the partisans of practicality strongly disbelieve in the necessity of intellectual speculation. Such a position submits theory to the apprenticeship and mastering of the technical and material processes. It means that theory enters the stage *a posteriori*, wearing the costume of the "professional" commentary on initial intentions. In this context, when time and history have been eliminated, the *a posteriori* is often delivered as the description of the initial intentions and plays the role of the *a priori*.

The belief in *tekhne* and "craft" can generate a lyrical narration of technology. It also permits to concentrate on "themes." "Themes in architecture" derive from the focussing on single, obsessive fragments. Their recurrence in design is stronger than formal evolution. Or rather, the possibility of formal evolution is connected to the industrial evolution and progress found in systems and technical devices put on the market by the industry of materials. The industry of materials also works with "specialities" and fragments.

THEIR THEMES IN ARCHITECTURE

What are the Richter and Dahl Rocha "themes in architecture"? Among their basic, obsessive preoccupations, certainly the mastering of natural light plays a leading role. They have observed Kahn's "construction of the light" in relationship to the dramatization of the structure. The lesson given by the master is linked with the shared memories of his last building at Yale. In their own designs, the "shafts" will integrate the courtyards, atriums, and staircases. Light is conducted as part of the circulation system. Effects of "literal transparency" cross the building both in vertical and horizontal directions. These modulations, which participate in the plastic organization of the light, are connected to the streams of passive solar energy. Richter and Dahl Rocha speak of "ecological approach" and tell us that "common sense prevails over technological sophistication," when the draft enters the drawing and the good old ventilation shaft questions the universal value of air-conditioning. Such empirical energy-saving devices have been tested on models at Lausanne by the Federal Institute of Technology. If light is a flux of energy, it stresses the physical, almost theatrical presence of the people moving within the building.

From the inside we shall reach the outside of the box(es) and find a second "theme," best expressed by the Italian phrase promoted by Luciano Semerani and Boris Podrecca: *cultura del rivestimento*. That the cladding of a wall requires a revived "tectonical" culture has been one of the main assumptions put forward in the European architectural debate since the beginning of the nineties.

As a consequence to the successive "oil crises" that shook capitalism in the seventies, severe legal measures were adopted in Switzerland regarding the control of thermostatic waste, both in public and private buildings. According to the old capitalist logic, these new regulations were favorable to costly systems that produced a good crop of ugly and even pornographic façades, when

Train Maintenance Building,
Geneva, Switzerland, 1999
(this and opposite page)





glass panels were proposed as the solution for isolating the internal structures and rooms. To the "learned" architects the new legal measures meant the necessity to revisit the construction of the peripheral walls. The modern routines of the "curtain" sustained by the framework of thin slabs and trusses or the single panel cast in concrete were questioned. Attention was directed to the system of the double wall. Various solutions were developed, from the self-supporting wall to the composed panel. Somehow, the technical metaphor of the skeleton was replaced by the sandwich. Whatever the solution, the problem of cladding was put forward.

Mario Botta is known for his clever epidermic use of brickwork or thin stone plates fixed on the masked wall that reflect to the public the image of brick or stone. For the architects who followed Ruskin's denunciation of "structural deceits" in his *Lamp of Truth* and reacted against the "false" image of a concrete wall clad with brick, the technical problem required further developments. A whole set of materials stood by at one's disposal: glass, ceramics, enameled steel sheets. The industry of materials had anticipated the situation. Some architects developed their own preferences and used corrugated iron, wood tiles, wood siding, eternit sheets, concrete panels on reinforced concrete walls. Two basic problems were put forward: the control of the joint and the personal, moral adhesion to one material in rejecting others. As in the case of the brick or corrugated iron, strong and "ancient" connotations were attached to the materials now used in cladding. The network of the joint could alter if not dilapidate the visual mass inscribed in the volume. Would the face be a screen, a gate, a mask? Would the underwear become the suit?

In contrast to other colleagues, Richter and Dahl Rocha do not show a constant personal preference for the materials exposed in cladding. They rather use a set of contrasted solutions; they want to blend, for instance, steel plates and stone panels in the case of the EOS headquarters in Lausanne. The choice is adapted to the "character" and scale of the building. The perception of the image is simultaneous with the perception of the mass. The skin takes roots in the configuration of the box(es). A genuine understanding of the various technical systems makes it possible to translate the sensory into the sensual.

ELEGANCE AND HEDONISM

The physical, concrete presence of the material leads to the question: Can elegance be a theme in architecture? Is elegance a futile category, tied to fashion and quick obsolescence? Is it moral? Is it not a slogan developed by the motor-car industry? Does it reduce architecture to a mere rhetoric of seduction? What has it got to do with the cultural value of architecture? Is elegance addressed to the client? Does it add brilliance to the public institution? Does it enhance the corporate identity of the client? Is it linked to the aesthetics of pleasure?



Richter and Dahl Rocha admit: "We use elegance." And they tell you boldly that elegance is not tied to fashion and obsolescence, but to permanency and the negation of temporariness. This statement can be related to their own pleasure in designing profiles, joints, cornices and canopies. The metaphor of architecture as sculpture must be recalled because they work in Lausanne, where Jean Tschumi was active both as a professor and a practicing architect. A direct link could be traced between Jean Tschumi and Richter and Dahl Rocha, not only because Richter's father worked with Tschumi but also because Richter and Dahl Rocha have looked at Tschumi's work "from the outside," without being influenced by the many local prejudices and anecdotes. The lesson found in Tschumi was useful in two directions, first in urban design (the scale, the articulation, and the position of the building are the tools for city planning), second in technology (the necessity to learn, master, and confront the numerous catalogues published by the building industry). For Tschumi, formal elegance resulted from technical sophistication and the mastering of the details.

Richter and Dahl Rocha's hedonism in buildings is linked to a subtle use of the pleasure delivered by the materials. It does not lift moderation to the level of a philosophical principle in life. The tactile impression offers a sensual play of contrasts and surprises.



EOS Headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, 1995 (opposite page); Nestlé Headquarters, Jean Tschumi Architect, Vevey, Switzerland, 1960 (top); Nestlé Headquarters Renovation, 1996–2000 (bottom).



Wood-Wood ▶

Forest Refuge

VALLEE DE JOUX, VAUD, SWITZERLAND

The forest refuge offers a shelter for the hikers in the Grand Risoux forest in the Jura mountains. With rustic comfort, it is furnished with only a table and wood stove. The initial brief proposed the development of a constructive principle allowing the forestry agents to pre-construct the different elements during the winter, while waiting for the return of spring for their assembly. The whole was built in fir—a material traditionally used in the region—including the roof's shingles. Starting from the traditional cabin type and keeping its basic elements, the project operates a series of geometrical transformations: the corners are unblocked and the wall slides out following the strategy of the modern plan; the rotation created is followed by a shift of the roof system; and the eaves articulate the two geometries. The result is a rather organic volume in tune with the landscape.

