ARCHITECTURE VIEW: JOHN HEJDUK-- A MYSTIC AND POET ARCHITECTURE VIEW
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

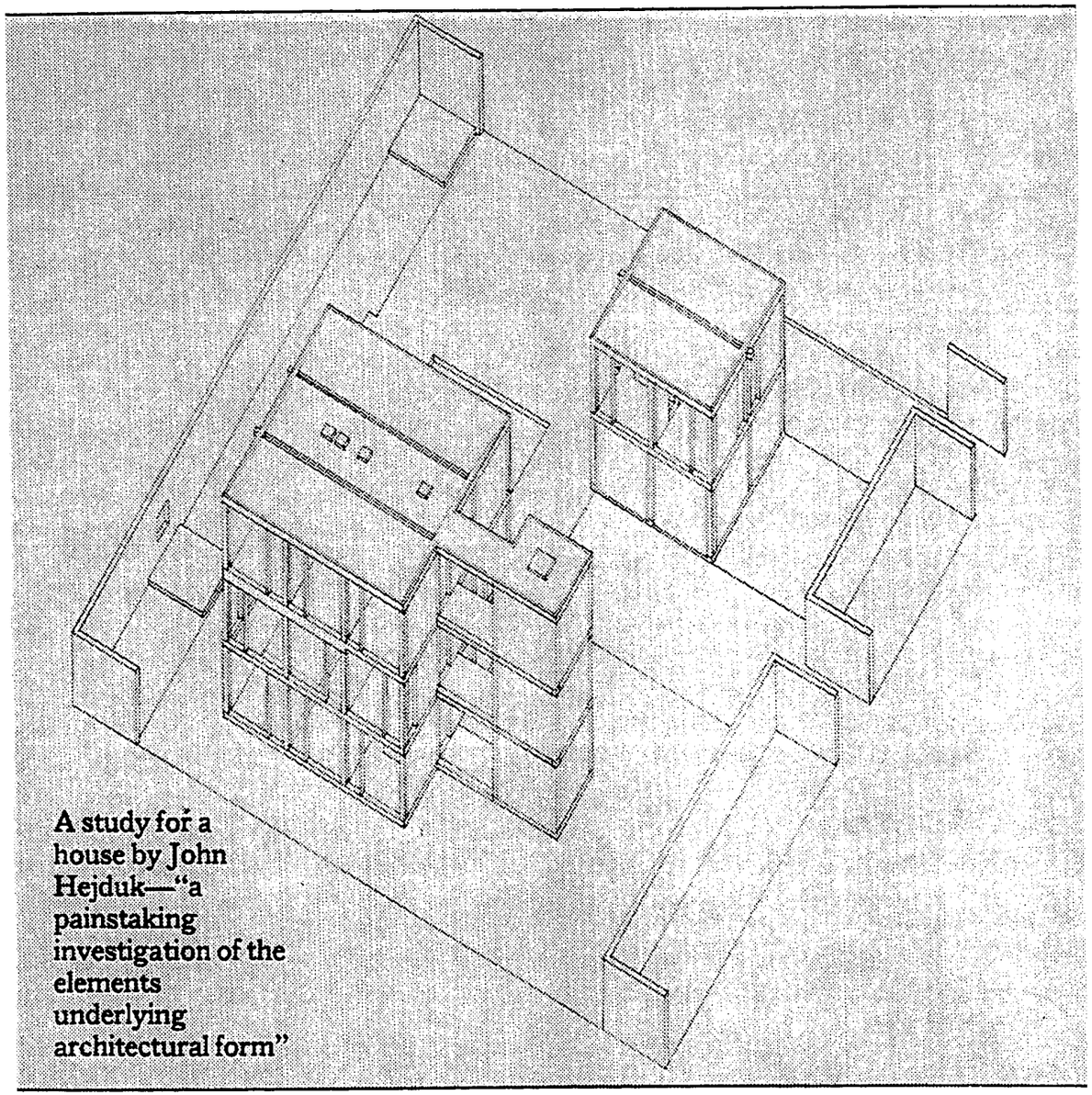
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

John Hejduk— A Mystic And Poet

Architecture exhibitions seem to come in pairs these days. Last week saw the opening of two shows of the work of John Hejduk, at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (8 West 40th Street) and the Max Protetch Gallery (37 West 57th Street), both to run through Feb. 16. The Institute's exhibition, called "John Hejduk: Seven Houses," consists of a painstaking, abstract investigation of the elements underlying architectural form, carried out in a series of house studies made over a period of nine years, from 1954 to 1963. The show at the Protetch Gallery, "The Works of John Hejduk," deals with later projects, of the 1960's and 70's, in a totally different vein — these are intensely personal, visionary and poetic schemes where architectural forms are primarily vehicles of mystery and metaphor — frightening fairy tales for the malaise of our times.

The two shows, and the two themes, could not be more appropriate; since they illustrate two sides of a very complex man. Nor are these two sides of vision mutually exclusive — any more than night and day are not part of the same quotidian cycle — a theme of contrasts that he likes and has explored, incidentally, in a scheme for a "day and night" house. There is a good deal of crossing over between these poles of expression.

Mr. Hejduk is equally concerned with vast mysteries and the most impeccably calculated structural details. He spent those nine years on the seven-house project (done with the help of a Graham Foundation grant while he was teaching at the University of Texas in Austin), working on the reduction of a basic architectural object to its most absolute elements. The houses are composed of nine squares, with infinite analysis of how columns, piers, walls and panels create related enclosures within an ideal symmetry, carried to the point where he succeeds in demonstrating how complex the search for basics can become. It was a nine-year, one-man investigation of the architectural generators of form. This requires a mind of Euclidian curiosity and the patience of a saint; Mr. Hejduk has both.



A study for a house by John Hejduk—"a painstaking investigation of the elements underlying architectural form"

It is clear from these meticulous drawings that he is in love with the art of architecture and filled with awe and admiration for those who have raised it to its highest level. There are echoes, in these house studies, of the villas of Palladio and Le Corbusier; there is homage to Mies.

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It is also clear that he is a mystic and a poet. There are suggestions of everything from the solemn fears learned during a Bronx Catholic childhood to the discovery of the suave beauties of the Italian landscape encountered during a Fulbright year abroad. He has become best known for his poetic fantasies — architectural metaphors and morality tales with titles like "Silent Witnesses" and "Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought," and for the lyrical drawings and paintings that express these ideas.

But what is not too well understood is that he is a fine architect, very much overpublicized as a dreamer, and underpublicized — and undercommissioned — as a builder. As head of the Cooper Union School of Architecture in New York, he remodeled, with Peter Bruder and Ed Aviles, the historic Cooper Union building, displaying great skill in the creation of new spaces within a landmark structure. It is a restoration and conversion of unusual elegance and style.

To further point up the dichotomy of his work, the house exercises at the Institute are precise line drawings in black and white, or more correctly, in shades of gray, executed completely in extremely fine, hard pencils. These detailed explorations of the language of architecture are technically exquisite — it would be hard to find a roomful of more beautiful architectural renderings.

The work at the Protetch Gallery is free, fanciful, executed in a variety of media and full of color. These colors are so lovely and light-hearted that they are like candy-coatings on timeless themes of infinity and dread. Picture 13 tall, close-ranked towers on a bare Venetian plaza, containing 13 men condemned to dwell in them for a lifetime, with one house for another dweller who will take the place of the first man who dies. And then imagine, on another solitary square, "the house of the inhabitant who refused to participate," where the functions of living are reduced to a punitive simplicity, exposed to the gaze of strangers, in an obscure symbolic world somewhere between the eye and the mind. This is a series called "The 13 Watchtowers of Cana-

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reggio." A script provides the explanation, but the images have a life of their own.

The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies has produced a handsome catalogue for the "Seven Houses," and is also issuing a limited edition of a group of Mr. Hejduk's poems with the same name as one of his architectural parables, "Silent Witnesses." The catalogue has an admirable introduction by Peter Eisenman, although the detailed discussions of the house designs will be hard going for all but the most architecturally knowlegeable.

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One statement by Mr. Eisenman sums up this work superbly; he characterizes Mr. Hejduk's house studies as "a synthesis of abstraction and reality [using] a reduced vernacular of the 20th century in the 16th-century manner." He points out that this rational simplicity "contains a conceptual overload, a density and compaction of themes." It is evident that when Mr. Eisenman says that these designs "articulate an intrinsic architectural language," dealing as they do in a basic geometry of space and form, he means it as an object lesson to those who are busy today articulating such things as decorative detail or historical recall.

There are also some interesting statements by Mr. Hejduk in the catalogue. One refers directly to the period of the Texas house project, and its observations and sentiments are a delightful indicator of his particular sensibilities.

"In 1954 . . . I returned from the landscape of Italy to that of the hill country of central Texas . . . The landscape of Texas is sparse; objects take on a clarity and remoteness."

"There is a magic moment in the fall after weeks of intense dry heat when the Blue Northern comes down across the northeast plains. Temperatures drop 50 degrees within minutes and the air becomes cool and crystal clear; the shadows deepen. It is also a time when you can run after armadillos."

"Now, armadillos appear to be hard, but in fact they are soft and they shed tears when you catch them by the tail; so you let them go."

"There are a lot of things you let go of in Texas. You let go of old visions and old romances, you let go of city-states and northern broodings. But, in letting go, other things and other moods are captured, such as the meaning of isolated objects, of void spaces. You capture the horizontal and you capture a flatness, a flatness which impregnates your thoughts and fills you with an anticipation — an anticipation of the solemnity of detail and of construction."

The Texas house studies are solemn, isolated objects created in precise structural detail. They have severe limitations, the result of formal restrictions that are scrupulously self-imposed. But in their response to a special time and place, and their total preoccupation with the genesis of form, they represent that part of architecture that transcends practical reality. Still, Mr. Hejduk is not a bad man with practical reality, either, as he demonstrated at Cooper Union. What he needs now are not silent witnesses, but active clients, interested in the kind of vision that transforms structure into art. ■