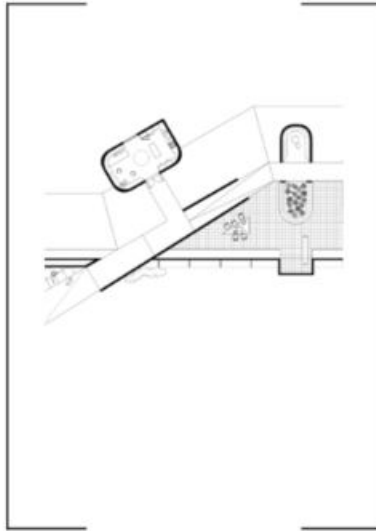


Narrative Home I: The Stranger

// Matthew Celmer



Abstract

Narrative Homes is a theoretical research project exploring home design through the lens of literature. The exploration focuses on written narrative as a driver for the architectural design process. The design of Narrative Home I, outlined in this submission, is based on the climactic scene in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, which is analyzed here and translated to built form using a method informed by the theories of Bernard Tschumi and Giuseppe Terragni.

Matthew Celmer is an Assistant Teaching Professor at the Syracuse University School of Architecture and the founder of MCV studio a New York-based architecture and design practice. Prior to joining Syracuse University Matthew was a Project Architect at Weiss/Manfredi in New York City. At the same time, he taught a course on the architectural history of New York City for City Tech in Brooklyn. Matthew earned a M.S. in Adv. Architectural Design from Columbia University where he was awarded the Lucille Smyser Lowenfish Memorial Design Prize, and a Bachelor of Architecture from Florida Atlantic University.

techniques and mathematical structures.¹ By using self-imposed rules and constraints, the predictable problems of writing poetry and literature could be completely realigned. Queneau famously described the Oulipians as “rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape.”² *Narrative Homes* subverts the typical architectural problem of designing a home by voluntarily using a literary text as the primary design constraint, the text becomes the site, client and context. The literary text is our labyrinth. To escape, a set of rules are constructed to allow the transformation of the text to architecture. The rules act as a scaffolding; once they are removed, they leave no mark.

Narrative Home I is based on the climactic scene in *The Stranger* written by Albert Camus in 1942. The following is an introduction to the scaffolding that was constructed to mediate the translation of Camus’ written text to the design of a home. The construction of a scaffolding is a subjective endeavor, there is no ‘correct’ way to use the written text. In other words, if the same text and brief was given to twenty architects, it follows that twenty different home designs would be produced. I offer my process as one of the many techniques that may be derived from such an exercise.

In order to carefully define the voluntary constraint I realized parsing the text of the entire novel would be overwhelming. In

1 The Oulipo group’s most notable works included *Life: A User’s Manual* by Georges Perec, *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino and *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau. Arguably the most successful example of this labyrinth is Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual*. The novel is the description of a block of flats in Paris, the structure of the book is essentially a building section revealing one-hundred rooms in a ten by ten grid configuration. Each chapter describes one room and the objects within the room are used to tell the story of the people who live there. In order to determine the sequence of the chapters, Perec used the Knight’s Tour, a chess problem that requires moving the knight around the board and touching each square only once. Perec then created forty-two lists of ten items each, these items were then distributed across the chapters via the use of an orthogonal bi-square, also known as a Latin square. A Latin square is a mathematical system that distributes the elements across a grid in such a way that no pairing occurs twice, each element occurs exactly once in each row and column. Once Perec began to write each chapter there was already a predetermined list of elements that must be integrated. Perec then used all of his resources to hide the ‘scaffolding’ that lies beneath the surface resulting in a complex novel with interweaving fragmentary narratives.

2 Enrique Walker, “Scaffolding,” *Log*, no. 31 (Spring/Summer 2014), 59.

response, I created a series of parameters to narrow the text selection; the text would be a distinctly important scene in the novel with a clear beginning and end. The scene must also include space/event/movement following Bernard Tschumi’s SEM sequence formula.³ The scene selected for the home is the climax of the novel where our protagonist Meursault walks (movement) along a beach (space) ultimately shooting and killing a man (event).⁴

The movement described in the scene is relatively simple, Meursault leaves his friend Raymond at the bungalow and continues to walk in one direction, terminating at the location of the shooting. Meursault’s movement vector becomes the unifying circulation spine in the home with corresponding events branching from this spine. The sequence of events is depicted as a clear linear narrative, similar to a timeline moving from left to right in the plan of the home.

A measuring system was created in which a frame number is assigned to every five words of text. The selected scene is four pages long, containing 560 words, resulting in 112 frames. Frames with significant events were highlighted and used to create spaces within the home. The following are a selection of explanations for how the frames were used.

Frame 1 “*When we reached the Bungalow*” and **Frame 3** “*wooden steps, but I halted*” determined the location of the bungalow apartment in plan and that it would be elevated above ground, accessible by stair.

Frames 19/29/42: the narrator mentions, thinks of, and sees the boulder where he will ultimately commit the murder. These frames were significant for their use of foreshadowing; each became a bedroom with a direct view to the frame in which the murder occurs.

Frame 46: the narrator sees the man he would murder for the first time in the scene, the plan of the home pivots at this critical moment. **If you are walking through the first 45 frames**

3 Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 162.

4 Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 72-76.

you are unable to see the end of the house, once your reach 46 you have a clear visual of the last frame.

Frame 104 “*The trigger gave, and the*” is the moment of the murder. This frame designates the location of the master bedroom.

Frame 109 “*fired four shots more into*” and **Frame 112** “*on the door of my undoing*” translate to 5 doors in plan leading from the master bedroom (5 is significant because it is the total shots fired).

Narrative Home I uses movement vectors and a numerical system that were both derived from the text. This approach was influenced by combining techniques from Bernard Tschumi’s early work *Screenplays* (1976) and Giuseppe Terragni’s unbuilt *Danteum* (1938) proposal. Tschumi’s theoretical screenplays used film images to explore sequence and fictional events in architecture. Central to these early studies is the movement of characters in space, with their vectors often becoming static walls or voids in the design of architecture. Terragni’s *Danteum* is an unbuilt monument proposal for the Italian poet Dante. The architectural scheme is based on his narrative poem the *Divine Comedy*, which employs a numerical system derived from the poem’s canto structure.

In the work of both Tschumi and Terragni, a scaffolding is constructed to support and mediate the translation process. The former uses vector diagrams, while the latter employs a numerical system. In either case, a medium-to-medium translation requires a change from one state or form to another, resulting in a new expression with inevitable differences, dislocations, and infidelities from the process of translation. As Walter Benjamin argued, a translation has an “afterlife” that is autonomous from its original “text” and is in itself a new form of expression. This realization was a liberating point of departure. The homes of *Narrative Homes* are textual architecture.⁵

5 Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, eds. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 73.

Narrative Homes is a theoretical project exploring home design through the lens of literature and is comprised as a series of four unique homes, each home in the series is obsessively based on a different selected portion of literature. This series of homes is meant to resuscitate or at least send a shock to the dormant and undervalued area of study between architecture and literature. The exploration focuses specifically on the relationship of written narrative to the architectural design process, asking how would one approach designing a home when a narrative text is the primary constraint?

The subtext to this project is my conventional training as an architect and my subsequent search for ways to disrupt the common architecture design methods we receive from education and practice. Using a literary text as a starting point for a design project is a strategic decision that forces us to look outside of the field of architecture with the hopes of understanding and borrowing techniques from writers. Additionally, starting a design problem with a written text is an exercise in self-imposed constraints, historically in art self-imposed constraints have been harnessed to produce unexpected and unpredictable results.

Oulipo was a group of French-speaking writers and mathematicians who created literary works using constrained writing