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THE FLOOD HOUSE II

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Photo looking West from Cliffe

The Flood House II is part of an on-going theoretical architectural project exploring new dwelling typologies for a flooded Thames Estuary of the future. Other incarnations of the work have appeared as the Filter House (2007-2011) and the Flood House (2004-2007)¹. The project is sited in the vicinity of the Cliffe marshes, an area of reclaimed land downriver from Gravesend. The area has featured as the setting for distinctly melancholic narrative explorations on numerous occasions. In particular, it is the location of the opening scene of Dickens's *Great Expectations* and it also features in the opening paragraph of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, setting the mood for the book's later dark voyage. It has a unique quality in the estuary and in England – a space where the river, agriculture, industry and the flood co-exist and overlap to create a hybrid condition with multiple ecologies.

The project imagines a landscape returned to the flood, in which the sea wall has been removed and the river has splayed, forming a new tidal estuary on the river's southern bank.

Both the Filter House and the Flood House situate themselves as prototypes for architectures that could exist in as well as provide solutions for a landscape threatened by rising sea levels. The Flood House II does not attempt this; instead, the work aims to be more reflective. It posits a type of architecture that would force occupants to engage directly with the difficulty and horror that might be the reality of living in such an environment. The project also attempts to address the poetics of such a place – a once highly-constructed and then reclaimed environment given back to the elements.

FUTURE PRIMITIVE

Before introducing the project, it is important to note that the ideas latent in the work have been influenced by certain Primitivist writers and thinkers,

including Paul Shepard and John Zerzan; in particular, the notions raised through their work of an over-reliance and emphasis on technology as a basis for our civilization. At the heart of the Flood House II is the theme running through much Primitivist thought: that our identity and our consciousness are defined primarily by our relationship to nature and ecology.

The building has no specific occupant in mind, although the location and logic of the proposal suggest that any inhabitants would feel empathy for Primitivist thought. Although there are clearly elements within the design that we can recognize and associate with the domestic – a sink and a reference to a toilet – there are no other signs that would communicate what we understand as a traditional dwelling. Instead, the project could be read as a diagram for a new type of living that would question the nature of what we understand as a house and what the purpose of such a typology might be.

LIVING OFF-GRID: A BUILDING THAT SHITS ITSELF AND BURIES ITSELF

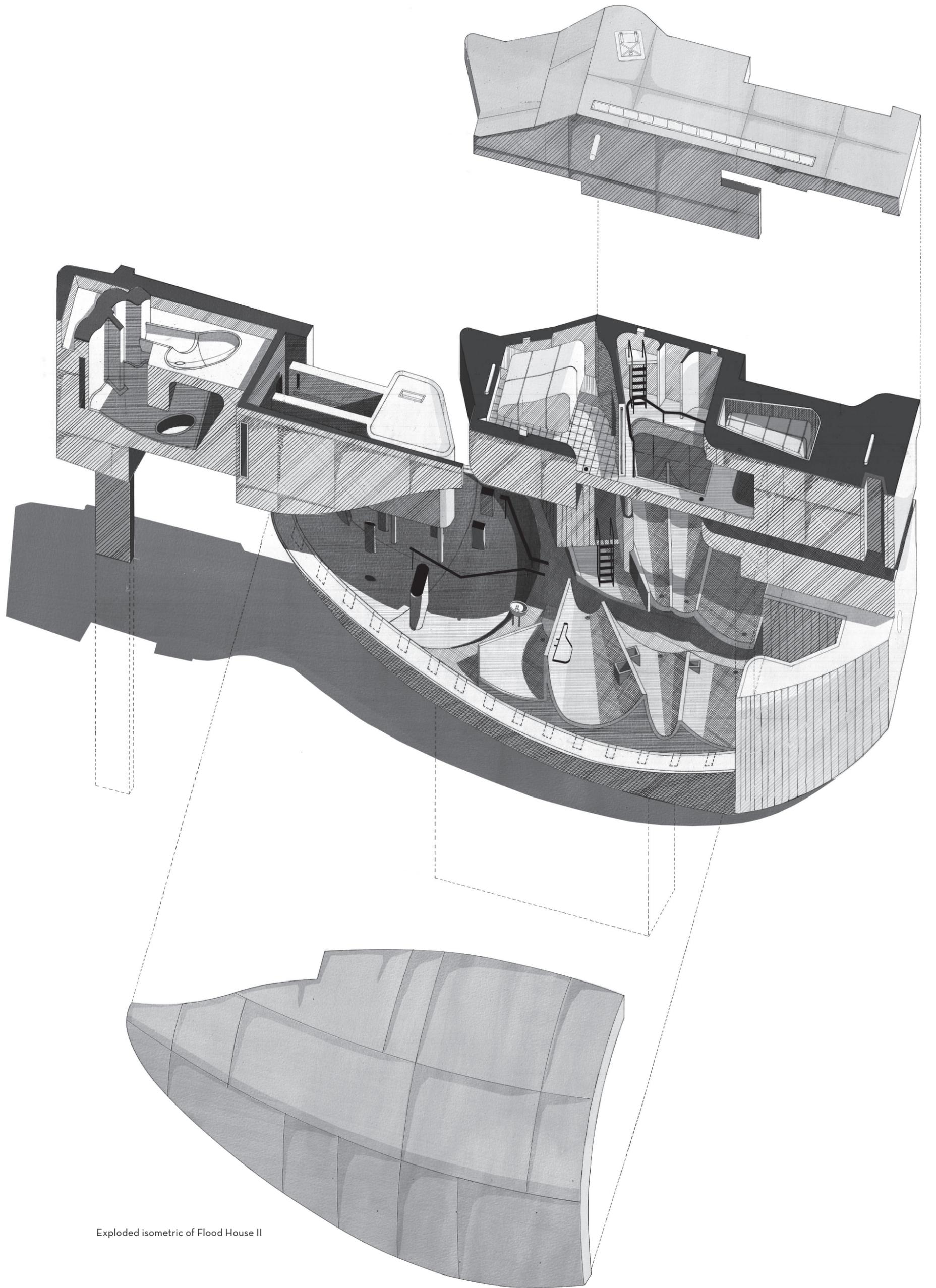
'If nature is not a prison and earth a shoddy way-station, we must find the faith and force to affirm its metabolism as our own—or rather, our own as part of it. To do so means nothing less than a shift in our whole frame of reference and our attitude toward life itself, a wider perception of the landscape as a creative, harmonious being where relationships of things are as real as the things.'
Paul Shepard²

As discussed above, the Flood House II could be understood as an attempt to engage with certain logics of Primitivism, in particular the notion that our societies need to build greater systematic dwellings and infrastructures that exist in synthesis with our ecology. The Flood House II proposes an architecture that is explicitly 'of the ecology' and 'of the landscape' in which it sits. It could be seen as a conduit attempting to channel the poetics of natural processes, such as 'The Flood'.

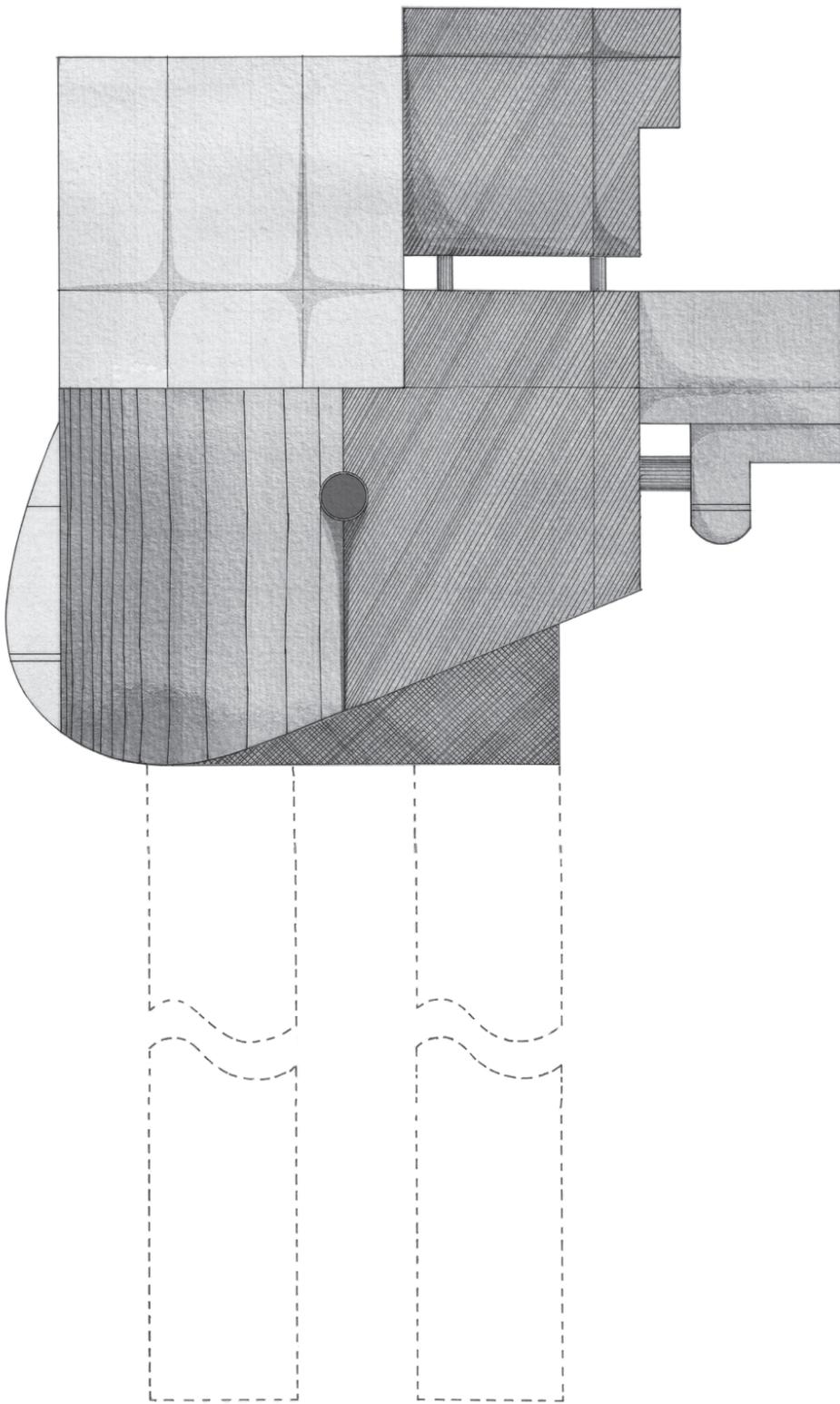
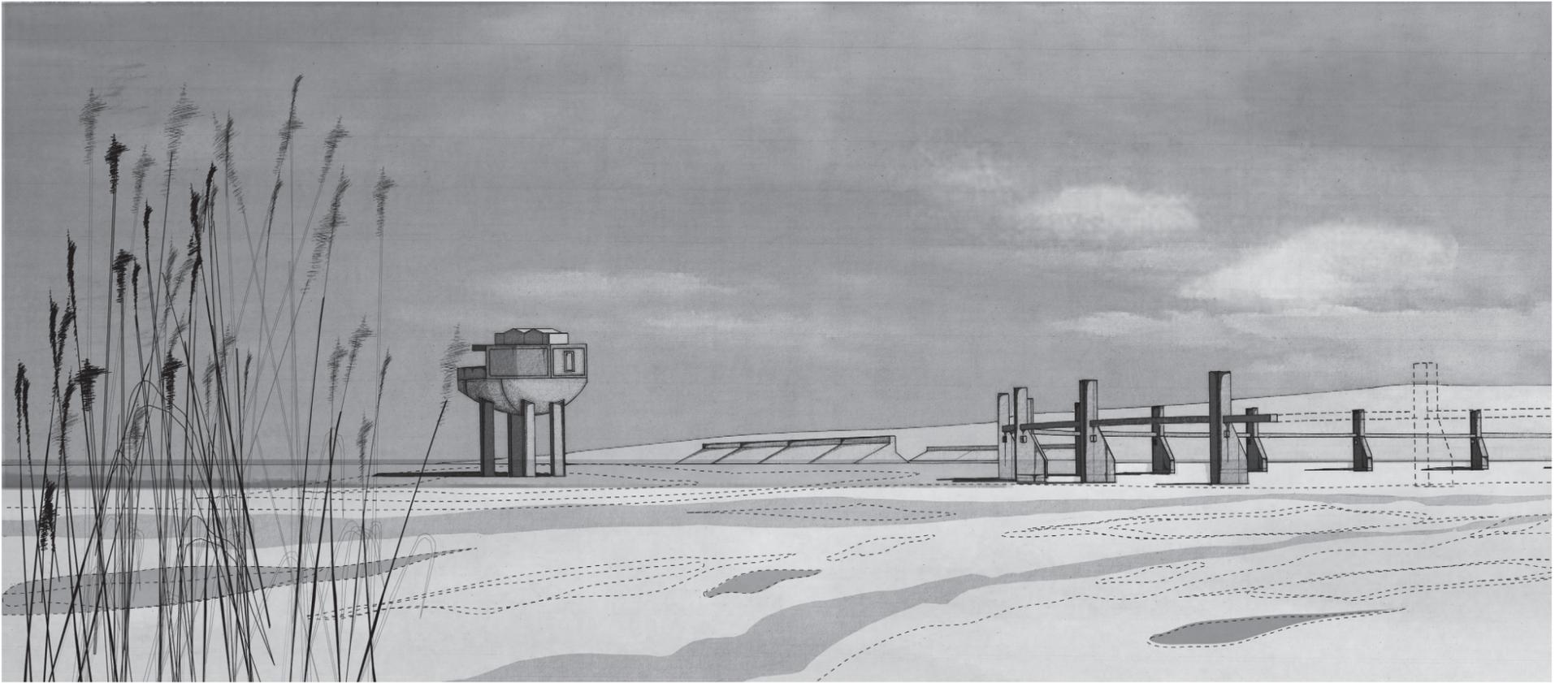
To do this the building would both use and adapt to the particular tidal environment, a shifting and unstable landscape prone to flash- and seasonal flooding. This process would occur in three main ways. Firstly, the house would

¹ The 'Flood House' was originally exhibited at the Northern Gallery of Contemporary art in 2007 as part of the exhibition 'North and South' curated by Alistair Robinson. The 'Filter House' was published in P.E.A.R. IV.

² Paul Shepard, "Ecology and Man – a Viewpoint", in *Deep Ecology for The Twenty-First Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston, 1995), pp. 133-34.

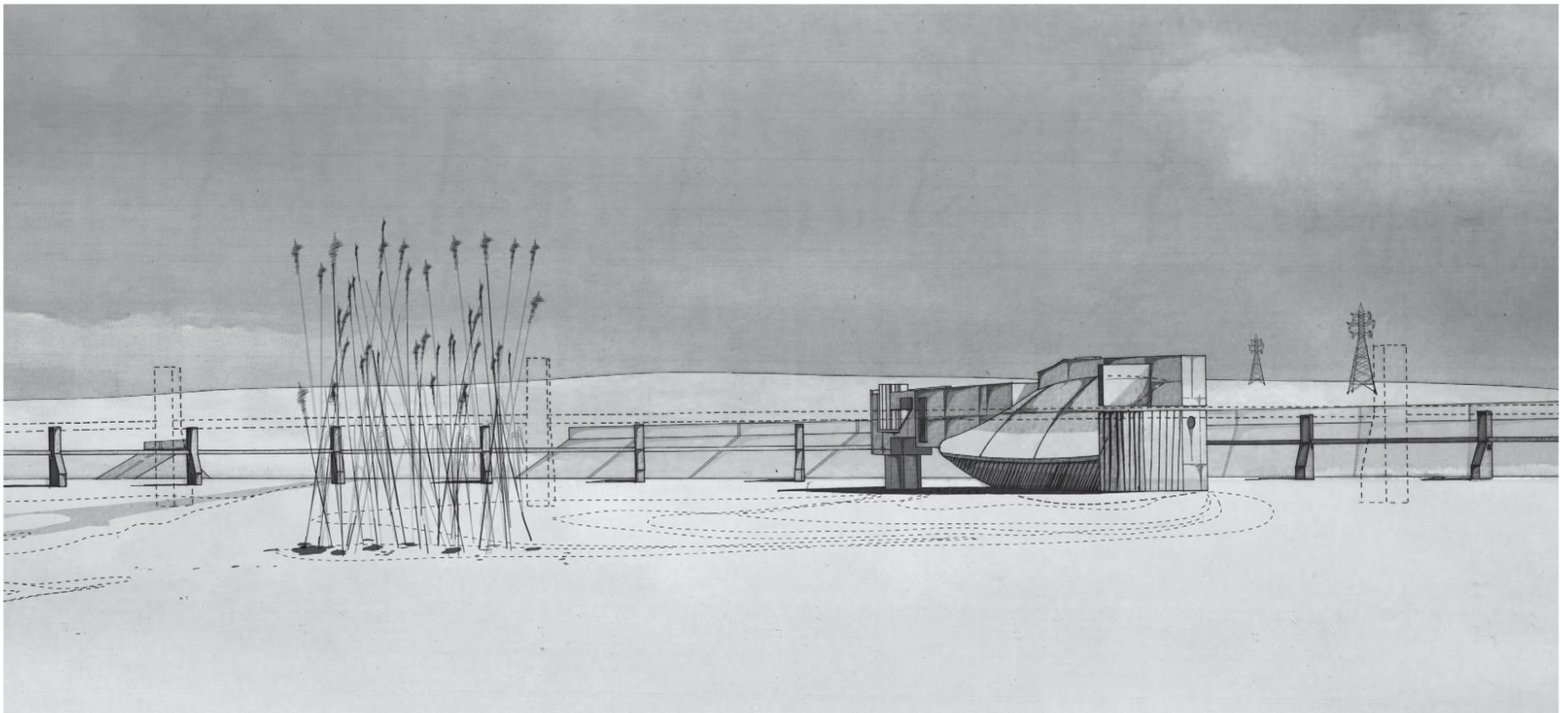


Exploded isometric of Flood House II



Above:
Main perspective

Left:
Back elevation with sewage conduit



operate off-grid and independent from civilized utilities. Electricity for the building would be produced through battery and generator power and fresh water obtained through the collection of rainwater, which would be gathered, purified and stored within tanks located at the top of the building. Secondly, flooding would be used to clean and sanitize the house and to control the sewage system. At high tide, water would be drawn into a system of pipes contained within the walls and floors of the building, and would be diverted to the septic tanks, swilling the waste water and stored faeces out of a small circular conduit located in the back façade of the building. Put simply, when the landscape floods, the building shifts itself.

Finally, during the winter months, when the building is exposed to the harsh North Sea winds, there would almost certainly be a necessity for the building to clothe itself, temporarily, in order to provide increased comfort and insulation for its occupants. To do this, the building would bury itself within the silt and sediment of the river, increasing the mass of the exterior façade and increasing the building's capacity to store heat during the winter³. To generate this particular performance, a system of nets would encircle the house, slowing the flow of the water around the structure and allowing heavier sediment to fall and collect on the roof of the house. Because the water runs at a lower speed it can no longer carry the weight of these particles.

By operating within and adapting to this constantly shifting environment, the building would mimic certain natural processes by which internal and external environments shift in response to the movements of the floodwater. Through the use of simple technologies the building cleanses and purifies itself as the floodwater washes across the land. Instead of denying the flood, retreating behind meters of concrete defence walls, the project attempts to suggest ways in which we can embrace and celebrate the natural processes, and allow them to co-exist with our basic needs as dwellers. In this way, the building is a prototype not only for living differently with tidal waters but also for positing a new attitude to them.

3 This particular action has two key references; the first of these relates back to the typology of Earth Sheltering seen in countries such as Iceland – where houses are buried to increase the building thermal mass and to protect the domestic environment against the elements. The other key reference for this particular element of the project is Robert Smithson's seminal earth work 'Partially Buried Wood Shed' from 1970. For the work, Smithson gradually tipped earth on to the roof of an abandoned shed in the grounds of Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA, until the central beam of the roof buckled.

FORM AND MATERIAL AS MOTION

In *Delirious New York* Rem Koolhaas notes that Salvador Dalí's Paranoid-Critical Method, or the 'conscious exploitation of the unconscious'⁴, is the process of architectural production and, further, that architecture is 'the imposition on the world of structures it never asked for'⁵ and 'the transformation of the speculative into the undeniably "There"⁶. Koolhaas goes on to state that concrete, a material favoured by architects and particularly by architects associated with the early- and mid-twentieth century, embodies the Paranoid-Critical Method, as demonstrated by its method of construction:

'A mouse-gray liquid is poured into the empty speculative counter-forms to give them permanent life on earth, an undeniable reality, especially after the signs of the initial madness – the shuttering – have been removed, leaving only the finger prints of the wood's grain. Infinitely malleable at first, then suddenly hard as rock, reinforced concrete can objectify vacuity and fullness with equal ease: it is the architects' plastic.'

Concrete is the material from which the Flood House II would be constructed, but it is also the material of the estuary. Along with water and silt it is what defines the experience of the Thames at Cliffe. The massive infrastructure of the sea wall, the abandoned concrete barges, the pillboxes that litter the sediment banks and the numerous aggregate works that dot the horizon, sifting through the piles of sediment dredged from the riverbed, all pertain to concrete. Used for its impermeable nature, its solidness only heightens and exaggerates the fluid nature of the river, as well as the form of the flood.

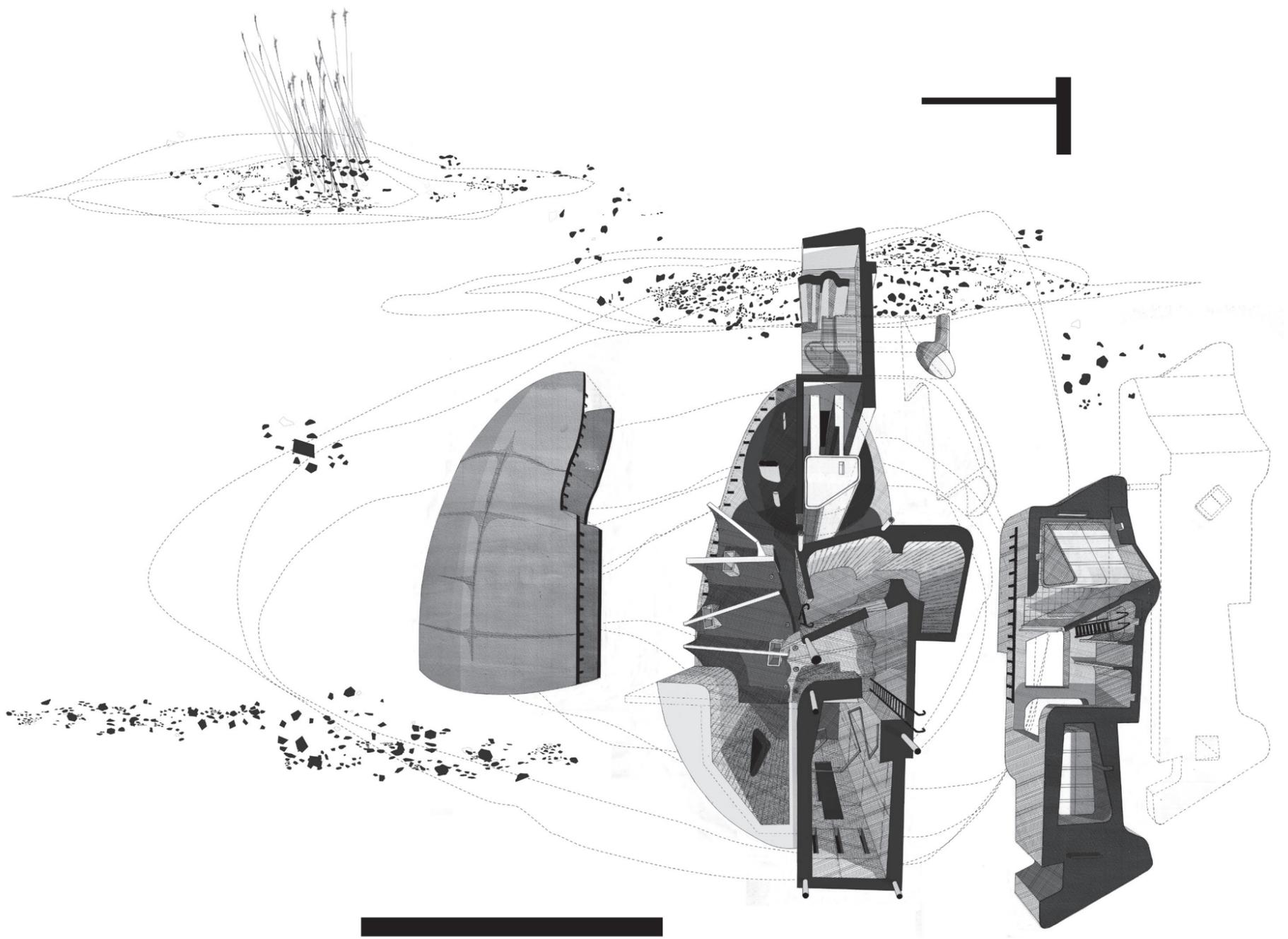
The process of curing and casting concrete, moving from liquid to solid and from the formless to the formed, is analogous to the very particular architectural language of the Flood House II, whose fragmented and curvilinear forms are constructed as if the building were moving from one state to another. But, the form of the building is also dynamic in other ways. Understood as a montage, synthesizing a range of architectural and vernacular references together into a single entity, the notion of movement within the form can also be read as shifts between certain symbolic loci. Firstly, that the Flood House

4 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press New ed. c1994), p. 237

5 *ibid.*, p. 246

6 *ibid.*

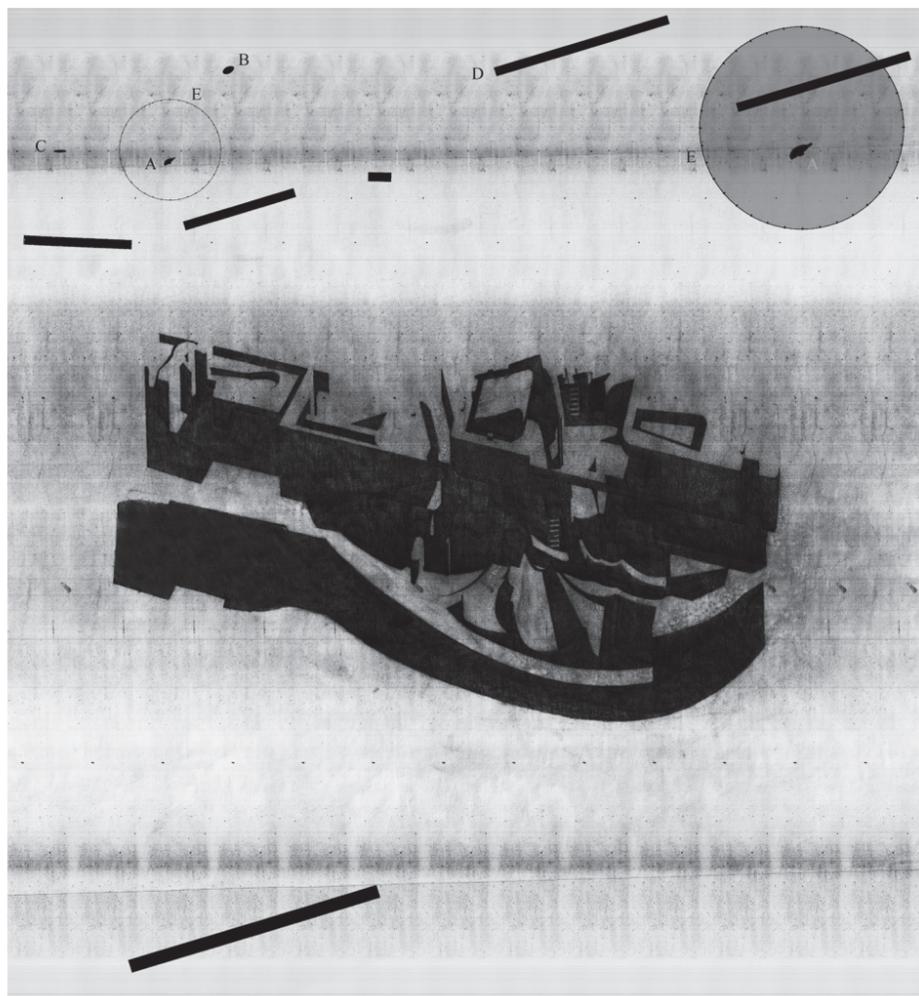
7 *ibid.*, p. 248

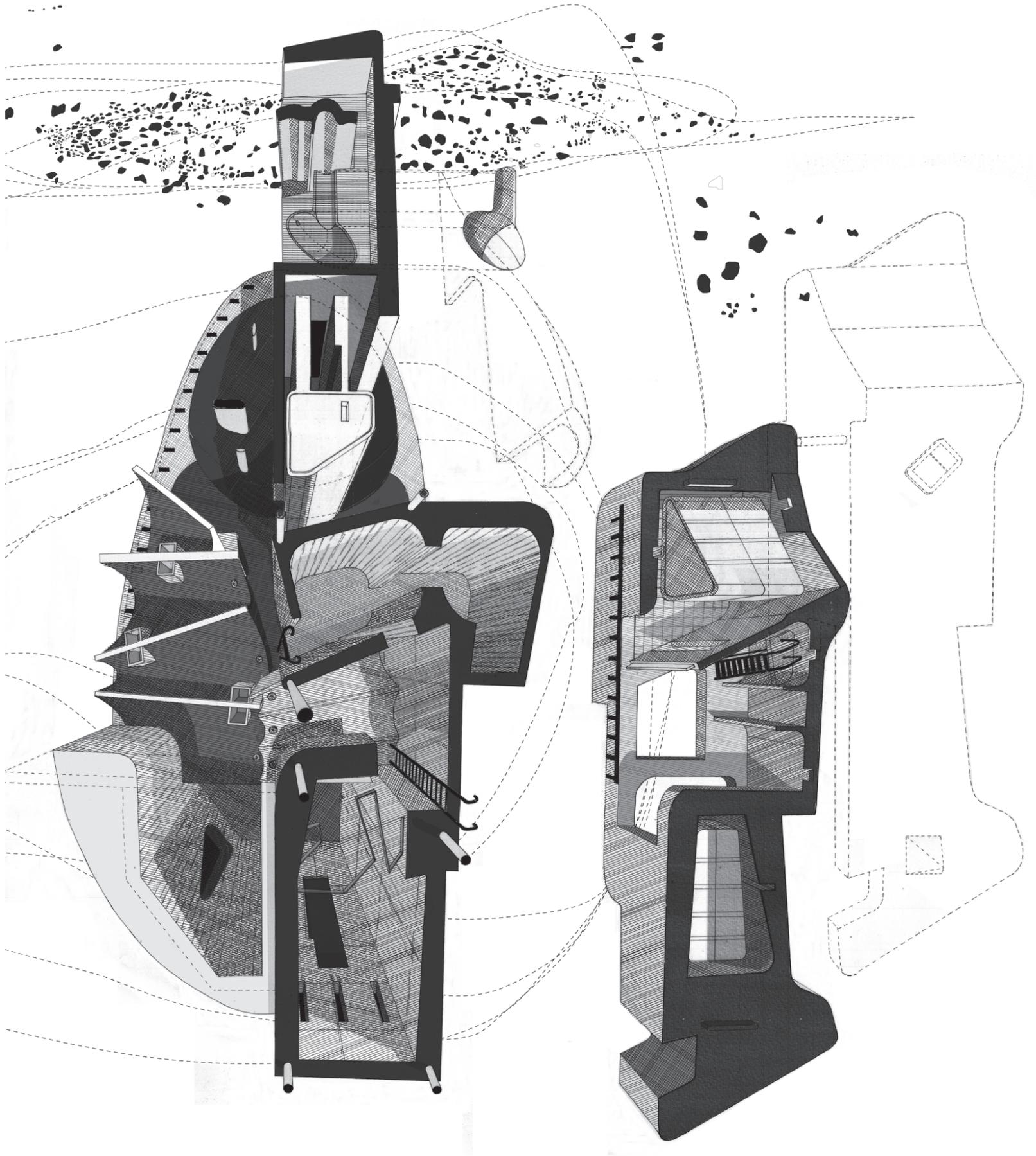


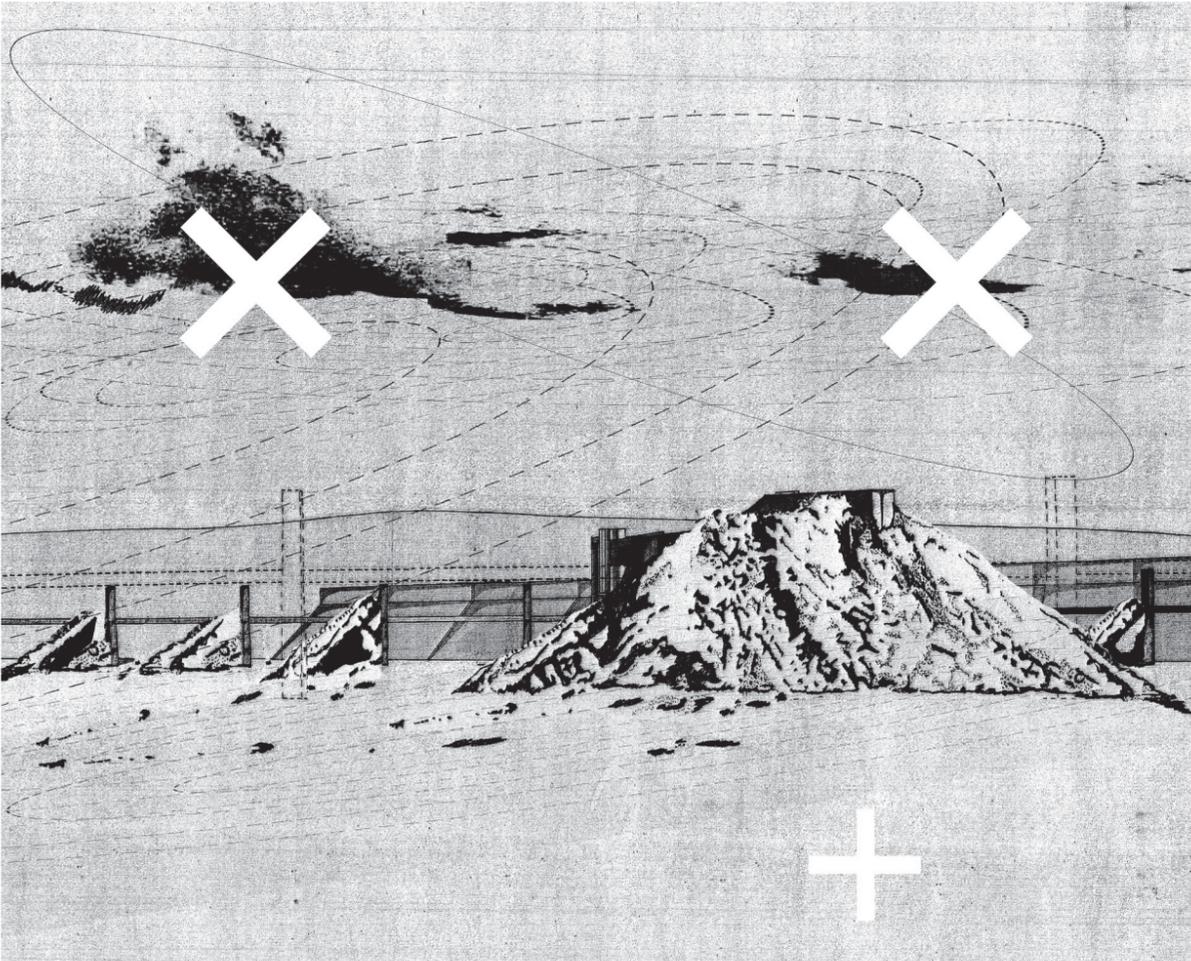
Above:
Exploded perspective plan
(Drawing worked on in
collaboration with Tim Yue)

Right:
Isometric of shadow and
Flood House II site plan
Key for site plan:
A: Flood House II
B: Flood Watch Tower
C: Reed House
D: Remaining element to Sea wall
E: Sediment nets and structure
for sediment nets.
(Drawing worked on in
collaboration with Tim Yue)

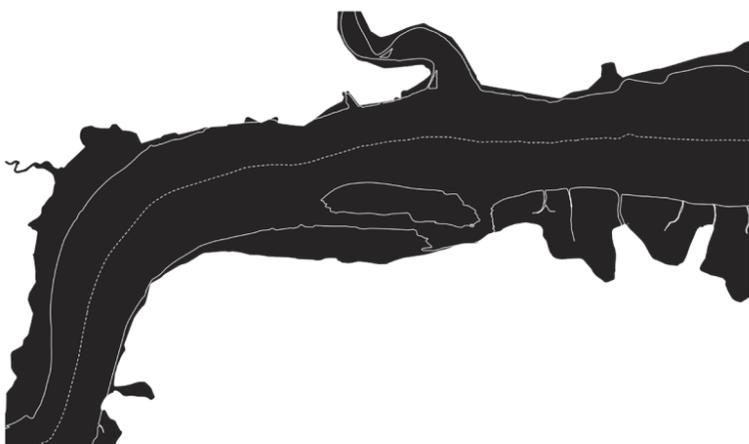
Opposite page:
Exploded perspective plan (detail)
(Drawing worked on in
collaboration with Tim Yue)



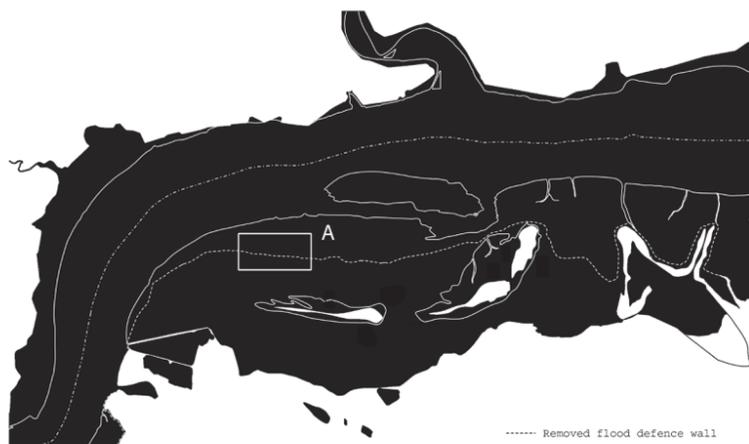




Perspective showing Flood House II buried by the silt



River Thames at high tide by Cliffe, before The Flood House is opened.



..... Removed flood defence wall



..... Removed flood defence wall



..... Removed flood defence wall

River site plan showing location of removed sea wall and daily activity of the tide

II is seen as one part infrastructure and one part ideological instrument of Primitivist logic. Secondly, that the house can be read as a bridge from our nuanced notion of civilized dwelling to an understanding of dwelling that is primitive and in an uncivilized environment.

To construct these simultaneous readings, the form incorporates references from several sources: architects John Hejduk and Raymond Abraham, individuals who explored very particular existential notions of dwelling; the vernacular of the estuary, its infrastructure, consisting of pillboxes, concrete sea walls, barges and industrial architectures; and the architecture of the cave, the most primitive of dwellings.

Because of this, the language of the architecture attempts to be several things at once and in several places at once – past and present, real and imagined, architecture and vernacular, or infrastructure. It is an architecture that is trying to evade any one definition and, therefore, like the flood, its specific meaning is in flux.

A PERFORMATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND A PERFORMATIVE LANDSCAPE

As discussed earlier, the building would have two main operations, both utilizing the movement of the tide so that it would function better within the conditions of a tidal estuary. It is an architecture of actions, and these actions allow for multiple and divergent readings of the building in relationship to its proposed context. Although its operations would serve clear programmatic and practical necessities, their specific nature, the projection and discard of sewage and the burial of the building in the silt create an anthropomorphic architecture. Read in this way, the building can be seen to experience certain fears and desires and to then physically react to these emotions by replicating actions that also occur within and to our bodies – the act of defecation and the need to protect ourselves, or to hide from danger, and to be warm.

Another way of reading these particular actions of the architecture would be to see them as potentially analogous to the fears and desires of those who might occupy the building – their fear of death from the flood, their need for security and warmth, and their need to eat and shit while the flood rises and falls. Finally, these actions would also exaggerate and frame the daily theatricality of the landscape, so that the building would become a character emoting the performance of the daily rise and fall of the water.

Within these contexts the building becomes illustrative and symbolic of the complex relationship between the body, identity, emotion and the landscape. The building performs, and performs the landscape.

THE PERFORMATIVE FORM AND THE PERFORMATIVE SPACE

In the seminal architectural project by Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, 'The Function of the Oblique', walls, floors and ceilings were all placed at an angle. To occupy this architecture the body was thrown into constant displacement against the forces of gravity, projected into an endless state of movement. Virilio and Parent suggested that the function of this particular condition was to enhance a physical and social condition within our cities, in which a body was constantly moving either away from others or towards them. It sought to construct a new relationship between the body, space and architecture, destabilizing traditional notions of how we could and should occupy cities and buildings.⁸

Taking this notion as a starting point, the interior of the Flood House II aims to destabilize any typological norm traditionally associated with the house. Instead of movements of vertical planes in relation to the horizontal (or diagonal, as in 'The Function of The Oblique'), the floors, walls and ceiling of the Flood House undulate like a landscape. There is no central access within the house; instead, the forms of the walls and floors choreograph the body into a continual contoured procession and stimulate very particular types of movement that require balance, poise and a steady foot, demanding a control and knowledge of one's own body in order to occupy the building safely. Each floor is linked to the other and, due to the particular formal language of the proposal, there could be said to be no clear hierarchy of floors with no particular ground datum. The building's complex floor and ceiling plates would allow occupants to find points of rest and to watch other bodies as they navigate through the space. Here the architecture creates both a stage and an auditorium, allowing the movement of bodies to be watched.

The building operates as a diagram, suggesting a new way of living. As the floodwater affects the landscape, continually shifting the silt and sediment washed across the estuary bed, so the building's formal and spatial organization continually alters the relationship of the body to the ground. Occupying this architecture allows its inhabitants to readdress their emotional and physical relationship to the flood, as well as to question their understanding of civilization.

⁸ 'By diaphragming habitable area the oblique joins the static and the dynamic. The inhabitant's motivity in three-dimensional space is constantly considered. Architecture is no longer a receptacle hiding man but a bridge favoring social contact' Paul Virilio, 'The architecture of open system', *Architectures, Forms, Functions*, no16 1971.