

# A house is a house: Architecture is a gesture —

A book review by Pier Paolo Tamburelli

In the house he co-designed and built for his sister, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the greatest logician of his era found himself in a maze of architectural traps

## **L'architettura è un gesto. Ludwig Wittgenstein architetto [Architecture is a Gesture: Ludwig Wittgenstein, architect]**

Daniele Pisani. Quodlibet Studio, 2011 (261 pp., € 28)

With great earnestness, Daniele Pisani tells the story of the Kundmannngasse house, designed by Paul Engelmann and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and built by Wittgenstein in the period from 1926 to 1928. Pisani quietly puts together all the pieces necessary for understanding the house and its role in the evolution of Wittgenstein's thought. He accurately describes the philosopher's biography as well as that of his sisters who were involved in the project (Margaret, but also Hermine), providing us with information about the Wittgenstein family and the political and cultural situation in Vienna at the time. He reconstructs the era's architectural debate in which the story of the house is (reluctantly) placed. The quiet tone and the accuracy of the story help eliminate the many legends that have accumulated over time about the house. The Kundmannngasse house is in fact a favourite subject for architects' philosophical diletantism (second to this is only the exegesis, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" by Martin Heidegger) as well as for philosophers' architectural diletantism (think of the crazy interpretations that see in the house a petrified philosophy, a logic transformed into a house —*hausgewordene Logik*).

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Published  
[24 Jun 2011](#)

Keywords  
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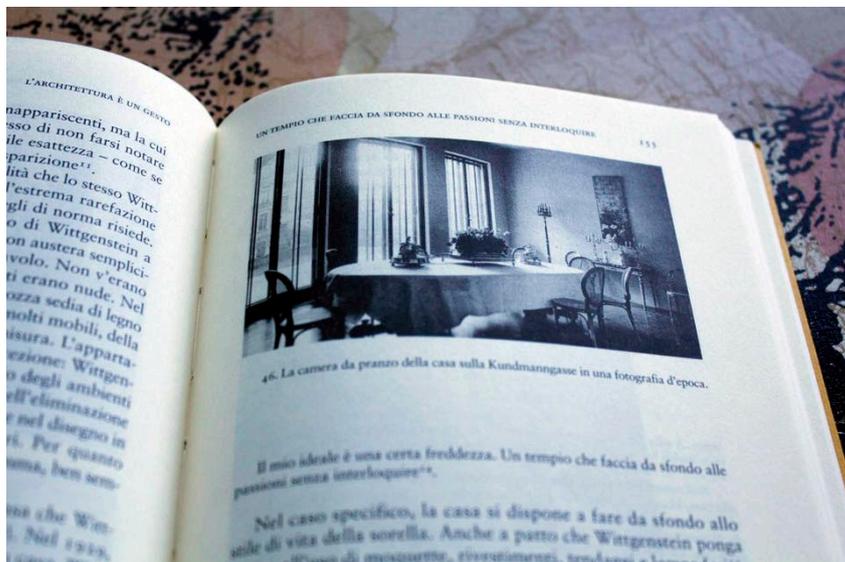
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↑ Interior pages from *Architecture is a Gesture: Ludvig Wittgenstein, architect*. Detail of the main front of the house on Kundmannsgasse. Note the window in the exact center which opens onto the breakfast room.

Pisani analyzes the Kundmannsgasse house without overestimating some of the notorious anecdotes relating to it. He graces us by treating the house as just a house and observing Wittgenstein's work as designer and construction supervisor. From his balanced narrative emerge the two key issues addressed in the book: the tone of Wittgenstein's architectural work and the impact of the experience in constructing the house on his later philosophical work.

Wittgenstein's work on the Kundmannsgasse house, at times exhausting, is characterized by a singular feature. Wittgenstein never questions Engelmann's initial design, "The project approved by Wittgenstein and then built starts from a scheme that was not only prepared by others but that was intended for another site with a different orientation, limiting himself to eliminating the surviving decorative elements and, above all, to making small and marginal—or at least that's what it seems at first glance—adaptations." (Pisani, p. 55)



Interior pages from *Interior pages from Architecture is a Gesture: Ludwig Wittgenstein, architect*. The dining room in a vintage photograph of the Kundmannngasse house.

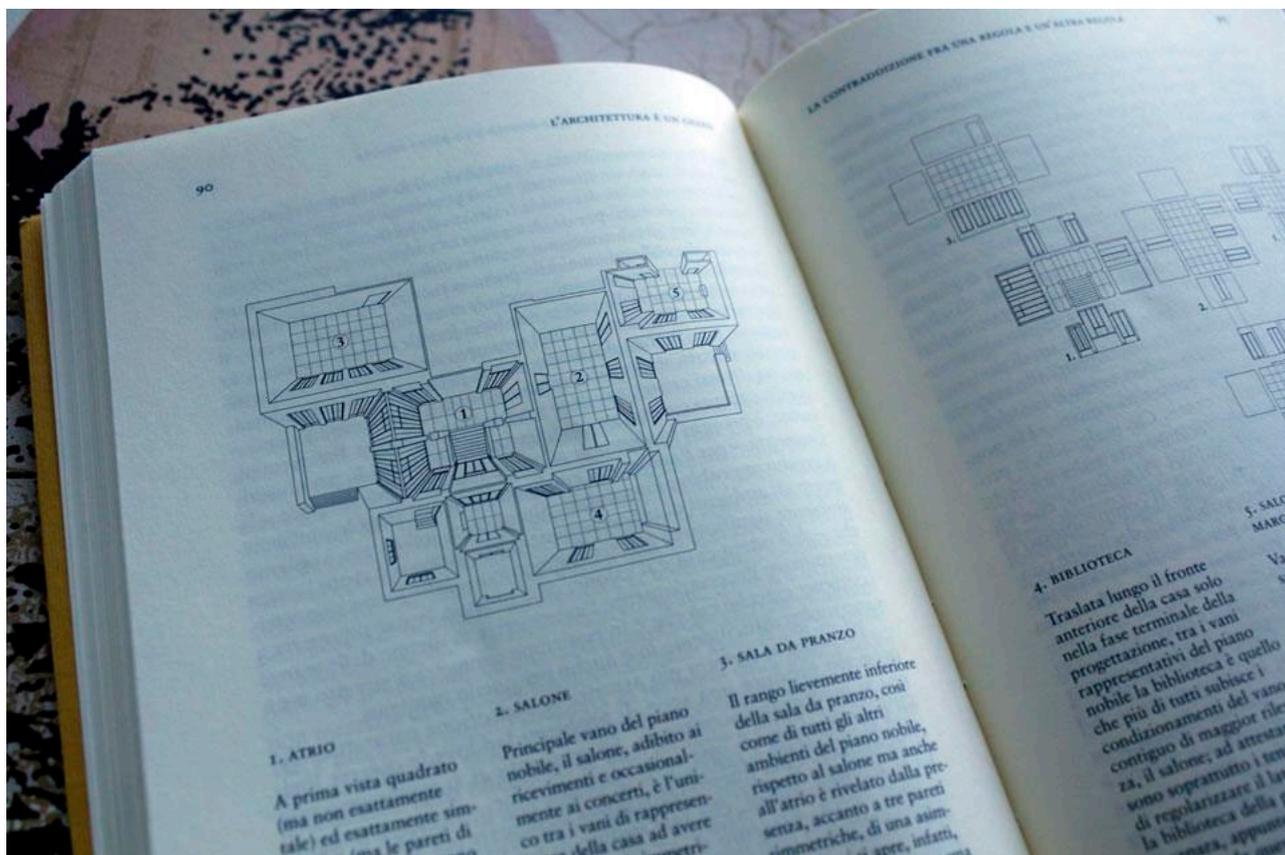
Wittgenstein devotes all his efforts to resolving the architectural problems raised in the initial project without even considering the possibility of acting on a larger scale and re-examining its initial assumptions. The design work is curiously blocked; Wittgenstein designs the rooms (for which he designed everything: doors, windows, handles, paving, lamps, radiators) but does not design the house. Wittgenstein is quite unavailable to consider even the possibility of a change in scale [here perhaps emerges a character trait and an analogy with his reluctance to admit logical passages that are too casual, "Where others go ahead, I stop" (LW, *Pensieri diversi*, p. 126)]. The architect's actions all work on the same level. The contradictions are not resolved because the possibility of establishing a hierarchy between different needs was immediately ruled out. The work on the design of the flooring in the rooms on the main floor, to which Pisani devotes a very detailed analysis (enriched by precise drawings by [Salottobuono](#) and Alessandra Dal Mos), reflects this design approach.

*"The persistence with which Wittgenstein tries to follow the rules which he self-imposes on the house's design and construction, and the compromises that he has to make to respect them, have important consequences on his later philosophic production."*



↑ Interior pages from *Interior pages from Architecture is a Gesture: Ludwig Wittgenstein, architect*. Metal door that leads from the atrium to the hall in the Kundmannsgasse.

The design of the interior floor pattern tries to create, room by room, an order that is systematically undermined by the need to adapt the flooring to the openings connecting the various rooms. Wittgenstein designs the floor of each room as a separate entity, to which he seeks, each and every time, to provide a regular order and for which, each and every time, he discovers the impossibility. The floors, in a refined play of adjustments and exceptions, are all very different, "from a careful analysis of the layout of the main floor of the Kundmannsgasse house emerges Wittgenstein's attempt to achieve symmetry in the arrangement of each room, intended as an autonomous space; the difference in dimension between the various rooms and their opening one into another, influencing and distorting each other's configurations, however, make such a goal almost always impossible to achieve and translates in to the need of creating, at least, a symmetrical design for each of the individual walls [...] the logic that organizes the house is primarily a para-tactical one. Each room has its own order, which, however, conflicts with the others, and even before the rooms, each of the walls that define it and, often, each of the parts into which the walls are divided, and even some of the elements within them aspire to that same order." (Pisani, p. 87).



↑ Interior pages from *Interior pages from Architecture is a Gesture: Ludwig Wittgenstein, architect*. The design of the para-tactical main floor of the Kundmannngasse house (illustration by SalottoBuono with Alessandra Dal Mos).

The persistence with which Wittgenstein tries to follow the rules which he self-imposes on the house's design and construction, and the compromises that he has to make to respect them, have important consequences on his later philosophic production. The detailed analysis of what it means to follow a rule that can apply applying to all materials, later incorporated into "Philosophical Investigations," is sustained by his personal experience as a designer. Pisani finds traces of his activity as an architect in the analysis of the rule that permeates Wittgenstein's philosophical work, "In an architectural project, it is evident that one of the gaps lies in its execution; and the problem of transmitting information to workers during the construction of the Kundmannngasse house must have provided food for thought for Wittgenstein, if it's true that this is a recurring theme—and a typical example—in his thinking." This gap already seems unbridgeable. "There is an abyss between order and its execution" (LW, *Ricerche filosofiche*, p. 413). Some evidence suggests, moreover, that in designing the house, Wittgenstein makes an effort to overcome, insofar as was possible, this abyss. In this sense, he notes in the 1930s:

*"An excellent observation by Engelmann occasionally comes to mind: during construction, when we were still together, he told me after a talk with the building contractor, 'You can't talk logic with this man!'*

*I: 'I will teach him logic'*

*Him: 'And he will teach you psychology'"*

(LW, *Movimenti del pensiero*. Diari 1930–32/1936–37, p. 42) "(Pisani, p. 133)

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The title of Pisani's book contains a note by Wittgenstein, "Architecture is a gesture. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. Just as little as every functional building is architecture." (LW, *Pensieri diversi*, p. 87). Pisani discusses this phrase starting from the distinction made by Adolf Loos between what is architecture and what is not. One

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question remains: whose gesture is it that constitutes the architecture in Wittgenstein's note? Looking at Wittgenstein's design work for the Kundmangasse house, it seems that the act in question is not that of the house's residents but that of its architect. Wittgenstein uses the gesture in the singular; the gesture shown through architecture is only one. The architecture does not accept, or protect, or suggest, or prohibit gestures but is identified with a gesture. Even the design method that seems to come to light observing the story of the Kundmangasse house is decidedly unique and something very primal ["He has the great gift of always seeing things as if for the first time." (letter to Moritz Schlick Weismann Friedrich, August 9, 1934) Pisani, p. 41 note].

Wittgenstein seems to work like a Doric architect, strictly dedicated to solving a geometric and formally insoluble problem (for example, finding a corner solution that combines the regular rhythm of the triglyphs, the end position of the frieze's last triglyph and the axial correspondence of the terminal triglyph and the corresponding column), totally uninterested in the impact of space on its possible users. Except that, in relation to a Doric temple, in which everything corresponds to this heroic and unsuccessful attempt, the Kundmangasse house is somewhat clumsy. After all, Wittgenstein applies his Doric fury to a hypothesis that lies clearly within in another architecture logic (the one of the Roman tradition that Loos and his student Engelmann considered the only master of all good architecture). Perhaps what Pisani refrains from saying is that, in the end, despite its ostentatious austerity, the Kundmangasse house is also somewhat comical.

**Pier Paolo Tamburelli** is cofounder of **baukuh**. He collaborated with Domus in the period 2004–2007, is former guest editor of OASE 79 *James Stirling 1964–1992. A Non-Dogmatic Accumulation of Formal Knowledge*, and is currently unit professor at the Engineering Faculty of the University of Genoa and at Berlage Institute.

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