

Although Kazuyo Sejima's projects have received nothing but praise since she began to practice in the early 1990s, this praise has been framed in terms of the most benign generalities. The discursive consensus that Sejima and her collaborator, Ryue Nishizawa, practice an unexceptional modernism has made it difficult to bring them into contemporary debates. While scathing criticism of Sejima and Nishizawa is hard to come by, frustrated readings are common. Alejandro Zaera-Polo's interview for *El Croquis* is typical.¹ In that interview, Zaera-Polo read into their work a deep concern with phenomenology and program that was systematically stifled by Sejima and Nishizawa's refusal to play along. While Zaera-Polo's projection of concerns did not entirely miss the mark, Sejima and Nishizawa's understated response represents a coherent position that cannot be easily subsumed by the typical architectural discourse which forms Zaera-Polo's theoretical milieu.

Sejima and Nishizawa's work is best characterized not by the formal qualities of transparency, blankness, minimalism, abstraction, and nonhierarchical programming that are surely present, but by how all of these attributes operate to make urban life a self-conscious aesthetic performance. Blankness calls for active projection, indeterminacy asks for participation, and the absence of spatial hierarchy requires communal initiative. Sejima and Nishizawa's projects for their collaborative international firm, SANAA, operate by curating a specific type of architectural subject. At the same time, inhabitants are encouraged by the architecture to aestheticize and curate their own lifestyle. "Curate" comes from the Latin *curare*, from which our term "care" derives. Sejima and Nishizawa's architecture cares for how people live their lives, but, more importantly, their architecture provokes people to care for their own lifestyle. This two-step curatorial logic is systematically projected onto all building types. Zollverein is a school in a white box; the Rolex Learning Center is a student center in an undulating white box; there are cafes, theaters, shops, and, of course,

museums in white boxes.² Each infuses its respective program with the atmosphere of a gallery, making everyday life a self-consciously aesthetic event.

Sejima and Nishizawa's curatorial logic has been best worked out in their recent housing projects. Housing is an obvious vehicle for a highly prescriptive project simply because people *choose* to live there; as long as demand for a type of housing exists in the market, developers can afford to defer the specifics of inhabitation to their architect. Residents can pick the impositions they like best. Sejima and Nishizawa's critical acclaim has given them great leeway. Their curatorial project is exhibited most clearly in Sejima's recent Seijo Townhouses because, just as with a well-run science experiment, a number of factors are controlled.³ The project was designed for a somewhat unadventurous developer and made of an atypical material for Sejima: light pink brick.⁴ Moriyama House—the canonical apartments-in-white-boxes project—deals with the same problems in a more ideal situation; it is important that it does not take the perfect client, site, and materials to achieve the desired effect. If Moriyama House was the first proof of a concept, the Seijo Townhouses

1— Alejandro Zaera-Polo, "A Conversation," in *Kazuyo Sejima, 1983-2000 + Ryue Nishizawa, 1995-2000*, eds. Richard C. Levene and Fernando Márquez Cecilia (Barcelona: El Croquis, 2001), 8-21.

2— The Zollverein School and the Rolex Learning Center are projects by SANAA.

3— The Seijo Townhouses project is by Kazuyo Sejima & Associates, Sejima's sole proprietorship.

4— Cathelijne Nuijsink, "Beneath the Surface," *Mark* 13 (April/May 2008): 105.

project is evidence of its pervasive application in Sejima and Nishizawa's work.

At first glance the plans of Seijo Townhouses seem typically Miesian. Only the loose organization of the alternating orthogonal buildings and courtyard spaces distinguish these designs from Mies's courtyard house project of 1934. The section reveals that the small, box-like volumes above ground are the result of placing larger programmatic elements in the basement, admittedly a concession made to the developer and the housing market. The elevations, rhythmic alternations of overlapping short, medium, and tall boxes, share a common language with many other Sejima and Nishizawa projects. Abstract white planes are punctured by large picture windows. The visual effect is to create a playful village: a cartoon of housing. Fourteen apartments deceptively occupy twenty small, seemingly disconnected buildings (which are in fact all connected at the basement level). So far—looking only at plans, sections, and elevations—the central concerns of the Seijo Townhouses remain invisible, hidden behind a convincing formal logic.

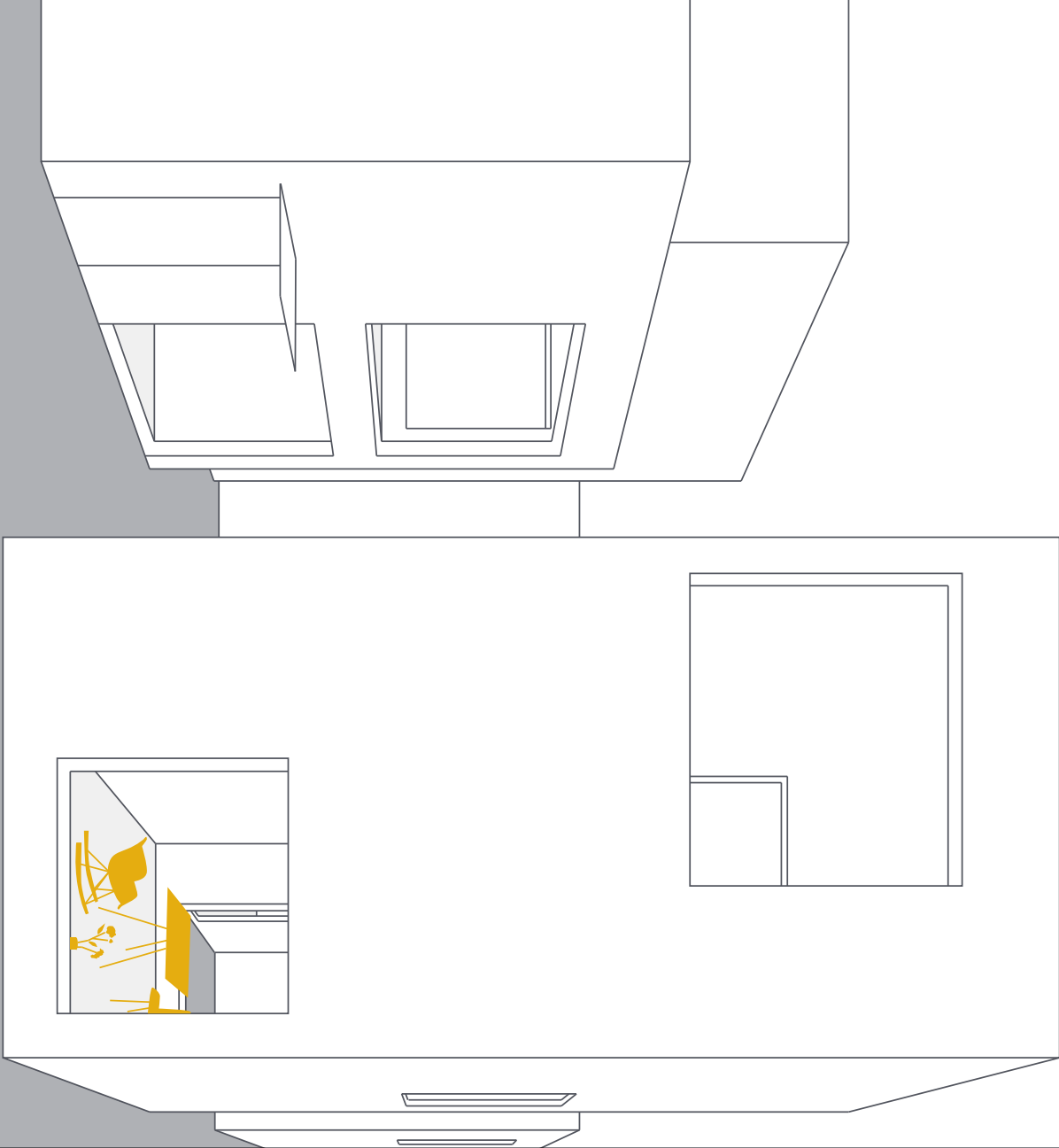
Then one comes across interviews with Sejima describing the project. She starts off with the simplest and most banal of explanations: “most importantly,” she says, “I tried to make a good living environment for fourteen families in one complex.”⁵ This meant providing “proximity to greenery and soil ... light and wind from two or more directions ... [and] views in various directions as well.” Then she becomes more specific: “residents,” Sejima says, “are responsible for creating a good living environment.... Some of the communal space belongs to your neighbor, while at another place it's as though you, as resident, get part of that communal space back.” Then finally a confession: “I tried to make housing in which living isn't as easy as it might be.”⁶

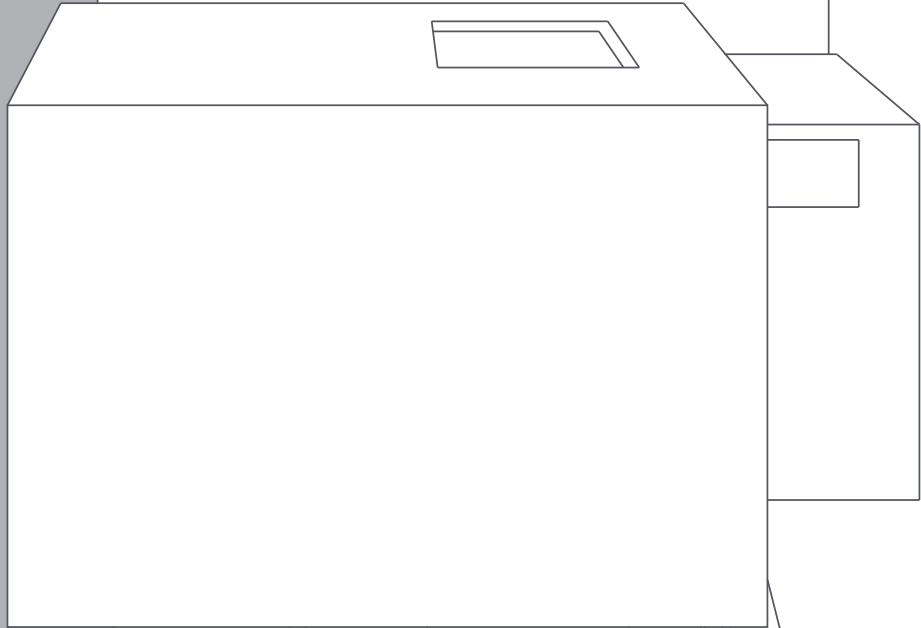
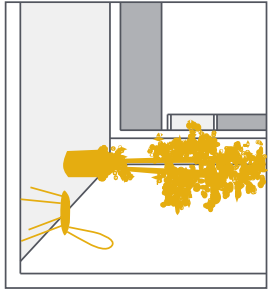
Looking at the photographs of the project, we get a sense of what this not-so-easy living entails. The photographs show the projection of a self-consciously disciplined, aestheticized lifestyle onto the domestic

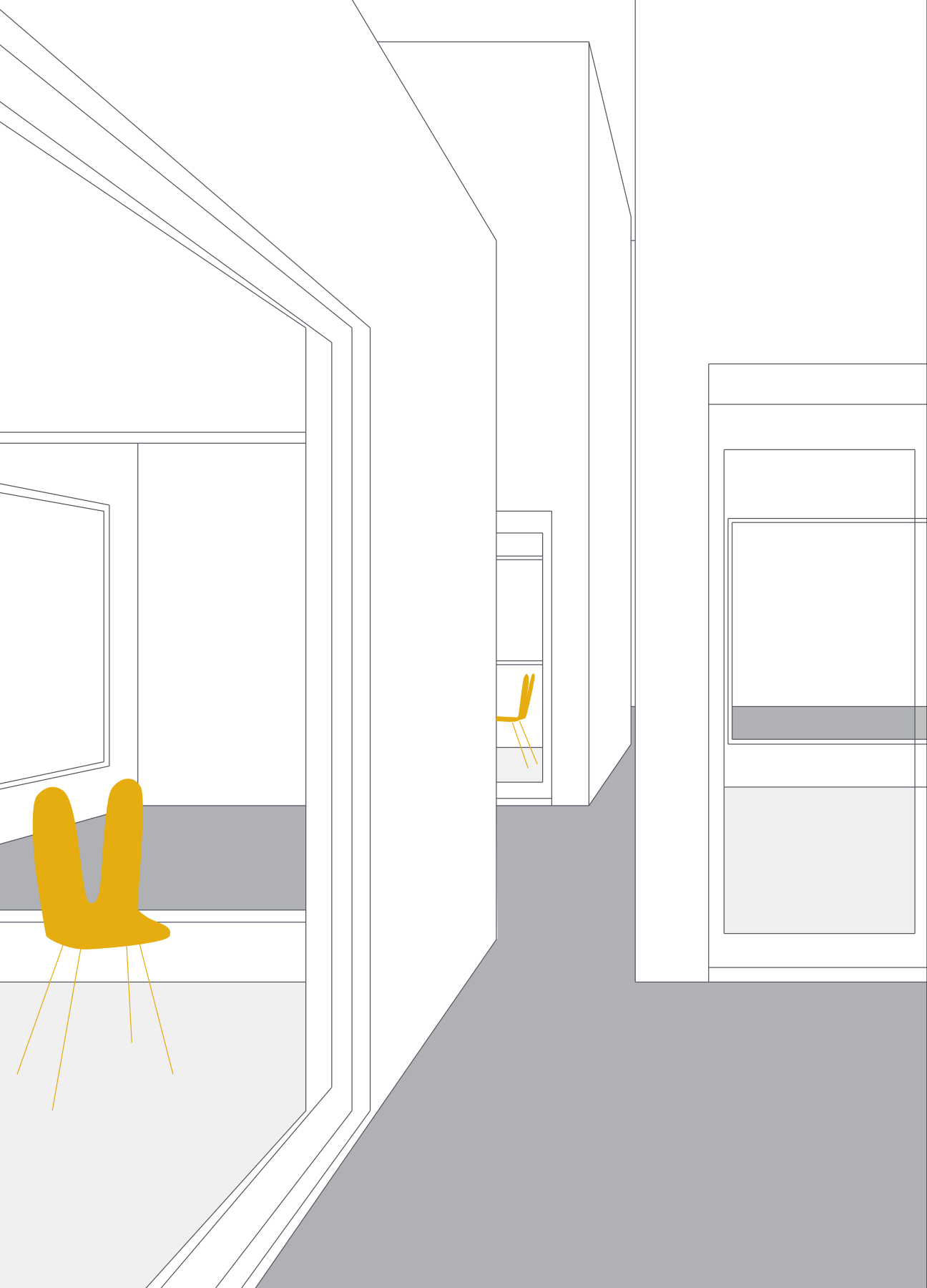
environment. The architecture itself demands that its inhabitants undertake this curation. In a typical view of a representative space, we see a white room with a picture window—with desk, potted plants, and chair—looking over a sparse, manicured garden. Through a similar picture window in an abstract wall-plane, we glimpse across into another white box with table, chairs, and potted plants. Two families, urban, educated, and upper middle class, overlook each other. The room in the foreground is an inhabited gallery space. The two picture windows frame another, similar gallery. While modernism has traditionally idealized the home as a container of art—caricatured by Adolf Loos in “The Poor Little Rich Man” and definitively instantiated in Philip Johnson's Glass House—the very privacy of modernist domesticity precluded the recognition of gallery *culture* at the center of a common social system. The reciprocal surveillance of Seijo requires the building's inhabitants to curate their own lifestyle. Rather than the omnipresent surveillance of Foucaultian disciplinary societies, Seijo exhibits the “free-floating control” described by Deleuze as the late-twentieth-century successor to Foucault's

5— *Ibid.*, 106-108.

6— *Ibid.*







nineteenth-century paradigm. By “motivating” inhabitants to “modulate” their inhabitation of their own home, Sejima is the archetype of housing in the “society of control.”⁷ Inhabitants regulate their own behavior not as a response to a disciplinary authority, but as a way to fit within a socially determined aesthetic of life.

Insisting that residents pay attention to the aesthetic details of their daily life is a steep price for a luxury condo. But this is the central allure of Sejima and Nishizawa’s work; it contains a crucial political insight. In explaining why the Russian people were not making good revolutionaries in the aftermath of the establishment of the Soviet Union, Leon Trotsky complained that Russians lack the habit of deliberate attention to detail characteristic of other societies. In those weeks of civil war and mass revelry, Russians proved they would rather give their lives for the revolution than clean their rifles or polish their boots. But without creating self-disciplined order in everyday life, the military and political gains made by the proletariat were sure to erode. The revolution, rather than being a public political event, was a matter of lifestyle.⁸

The curation of a self-disciplined lifestyle: it is hard to believe that white walls and picture windows could be responsible for so much. In assessing the New Museum for *Log*, Kurt Forster opined that “when no historical baggage weighs down the flight of the architect’s imagination, we might expect more than a return to the familiar ‘white cube.’”⁹ He finds in the end, however, that “the authority of the New Museum evolves from the ‘blank,’ from its power to still and allay the very force that resides in works of art. As a result, the museum exercises its authority by dint of its

extinguishing power, sapping as it were the residual life vested in the works of art that find their way under its roof.”¹⁰ His analysis ought to have gone on to explore how this power is reinvested in museumgoers, but for a museum this would not be an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence. Michael Fried argued long ago that the entire project of minimalism was to make art mute so that art-viewing could become a self-reflexive performance.¹¹ Sejima and Nishizawa’s innovation is to use the atmosphere typical of a gallery in the architecture of housing, offices, theaters, cafes, shops, game parlors, and the like. While other architecture might elaborate walls, interiors, windows, and gardens as figures in their own right, Sejima and Nishizawa leave these elements blank. As a result, the attention of inhabitants shifts to the aesthetic performance of their inhabitation.

It is surprising that Sejima and Nishizawa have found so many projects in which to develop this agenda of turning lifestyles into works of art; this is perhaps proof that they have hit upon a general cultural condition at the turn of the century. Photographs of the post-inhabitation Moriama House show image-conscious young architects and eccentric professionals whose lifestyle involves meticulously crafted social spectacle. In the New Museum, New York aesthetes at openings make aesthetic discipline look easy. But even in the much more difficult case of a large office building—such as SANAA’s Novartis campus—the view out a window, through a courtyard, and into a blank space on the other side somehow creates the distance and staging necessary for the atmosphere of a gallery. Office work, against all odds, becomes art.

7— Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7.

8— Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (New York: Verso, 2003), 266.

9— Kurt Forster, “The New Museum in New York: A Whitewash?” *Log* 12 (Spring/Summer 2008): 6.

10— *Ibid.*, 12.

11— Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172.



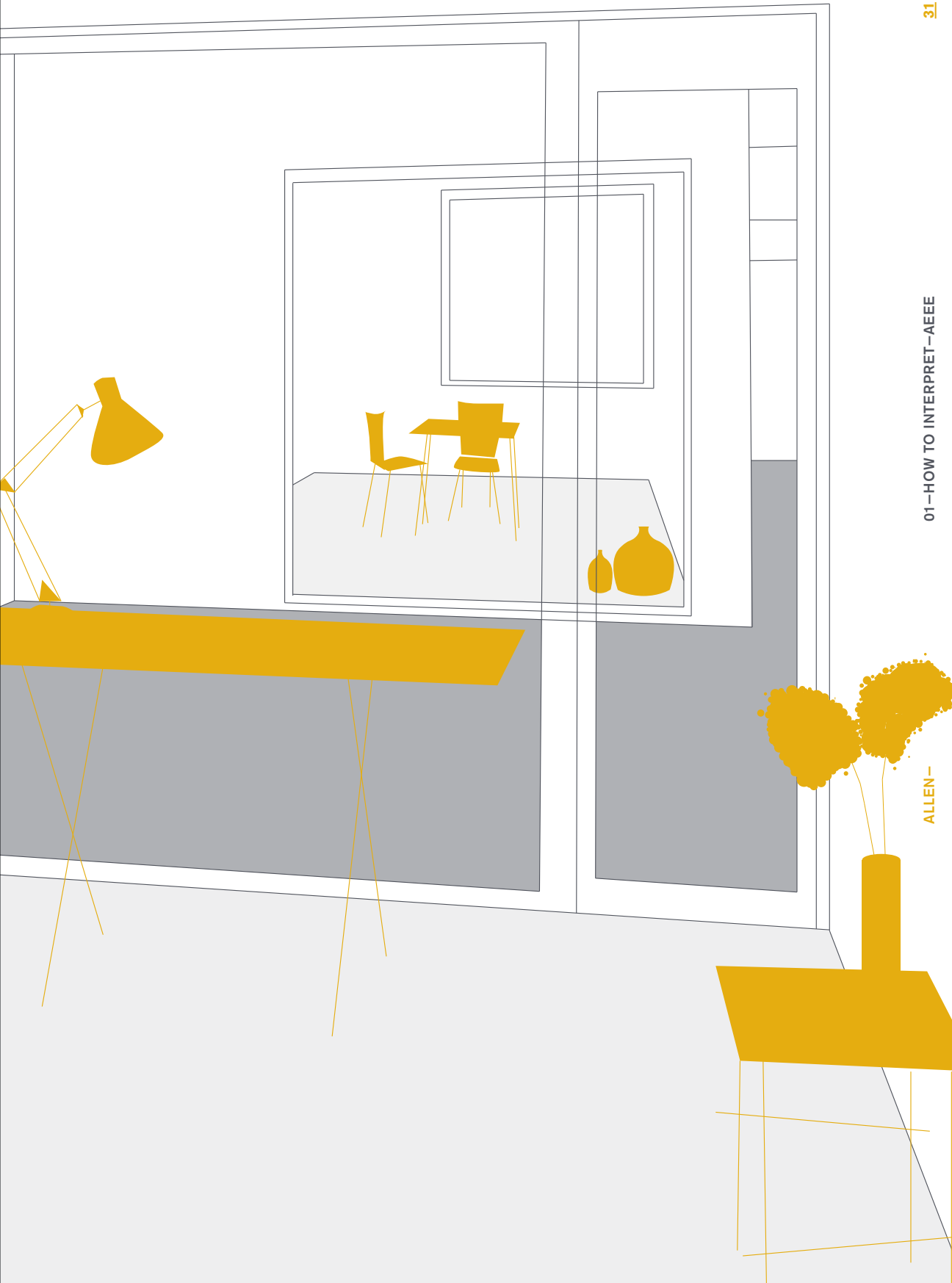
The atmosphere of the gallery has been steadily evolving since the Renaissance. In the late nineteenth century, John Ruskin advocated the use of museums as an “example of perfect order and perfect elegance ... to the disorderly and rude populace.”¹² As museums have oscillated between populist and elitist agendas and cultural capital has taken on ever more nuanced forms, this agenda has been subtly tweaked. Andrea Fraser has identified the “museum’s purpose as not only to publicize art, but to publicize art as an emblem of bourgeois privacy. Its purpose, in a sense, is to publicize privacy. It is in this, it would seem, that the museum’s educational function consists.”¹³ Sejima and Nishizawa’s work short-circuits Fraser’s formula, instituting the gallery in all spheres of privacy (there is no longer a public sphere, after all). In their hands, architecture becomes a device of self-education.

The contemporary culture of self-discipline has been interpreted as a long resurgence of social conservatism after a short period of radical experimentation; this was Deleuze’s conclusion in his “Postscript to Societies of Control.” While the present is certainly the opposite of the sixties, the flip has been not from radical to conservative, but from a culture of optimism to a culture of realism. Sejima and Nishizawa’s unwillingness to exaggerate their own agenda is a sign that the agency of political change has shifted from the sweeping gesture of theory to the subtlety of ethics. Theory is premised

12— John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: Geo. Allen), vol. 30 (1907), 53; vol. 34 (1908), 247; quoted in Andrew McClellan, “A Brief History of The Art Museum Public,” in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millenium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Malden; MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), 8.

13— Andrea Fraser, “Notes on the Museum’s Publicity,” in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 92.





on the belief that culture is subject to critique by someone in the position to grasp its deep contradictions—a broad agenda for an optimistic time. The realist agenda of ethics limits its scope to, as Foucault put it, the “technologies of the self.”¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek has been the most vocal enumerator of the differences between critique and self-discipline. It is easy, he says, to condemn Lenin (for example, but also the Red Guards, the Taliban, et alia), but the fact that his worldview was articulated in his micropolitical actions means there is something we can learn from the way Lenin lived his life, quite apart from more sweeping moral issues.¹⁵ Developing an ethics through architecture—what I have been calling curating a lifestyle—is a small goal when compared to the social transformation promised by critique, but it is perhaps more realistic.

Extrapolating from the work of Sejima and Nishizawa, then, and taking Trotsky’s call for self-discipline as the foundation of politics, we can imagine an architecture that is not critical of its social context, but instead shifts speculation to finding ways of isolating, reinforcing, and foregrounding existing forms of self-consciousness while playing down any architectural concept that might get in the way. The problem becomes how to understate architecture in order to curate specific and already-existing lifestyles. If the New Museum traps and extinguishes art for the sake of the museumgoers’ edification, and the Seijo Townhouses make life difficult and deliberate in order to create community, what other micropolitical moments can the architect curate? What architecture does it take to make a given lifestyle distinct and self-conscious? The same gallery does not work for all situations, but Sejima and Nishizawa have shown that the generalizable function of the gallery is a powerful device with which to aestheticize life.

14— Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Patrick H. Hutton, and Huck Gutman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

15— See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), and Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s Choice,” in Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October, 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2002), 165-336.