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Minimalism and Sustainable Living:
An aesthetical approach

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**MINIMALISM AND SUSTAINABLE LIVING:
AN AESTHETICAL APPROACH (CFP 010200)**

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Requirements for an integral sustainability

Sustainable Living includes the emotional-spiritual and easy housework

Much is said about sustainable architecture or ecological houses, but indeed – as this congress rightly says – in the end it is the life in that house that must be sustainable. In this case it is essential, therefore, to consider what is usually called human ecology, too. Inhabitants, physically and emotionally, as well as spiritually, must maintain a healthy and long-lasting equilibrium, optimising their own resources. They must not permanently consume them, but rather permit their spontaneous recovery and renewal.

Thus, as the sustainability concept is extended, it is not just the physical or energy aspects of the building that have to be taken into account when a project is drafted. The importance of the building's influence on the emotional, psychological and even spiritual reactions of its inhabitants is fundamental, considering them both as individuals and in their family and social lives. All of this must be implicit in a good design.

On the other hand, the mechanical and energy needs that life in the buildings implies have generally been foreseen, and there is now more of a tendency to give them technical type solutions, even providing them with automatic answers. The same occurs with auxiliary machines, household appliances and others. But, however much things are made easier, it is impossible to do away altogether with housework, with

the personal attention that controls them and that executes the most essential chores: those where the person is irreplaceable.

A good design must respond, therefore, to both these aspects, which are also linked together: the sustainability of the actual life to be lived inside the house and the question of facilitating housework. In agreement with this, the aesthetic approach of the design of the house is also especially relevant. And in general, in order to achieve these objectives, some aesthetic tendencies are more favourable than others.

The aesthetic approach of the design and the integral sustainability

We are not referring to superficial aesthetics; a good design is the expression of a proposal made by the designer that affects both a shape and content. That content is sometimes requested, suggested or at least accepted by the client or recipient, who has a specific idea of the object designed and of the use that is expected to be made of it. All of this becomes more important in the case of architecture, which does not only manage shapes, but also lived in spaces. If, apart from this, the topic in question is housing, it is perfectly understandable that this will involve matters relating to personal intimacy and to facilitating relations in family life (where the family is the basic cell of society).

Design, therefore, is not something innocuous. If its aesthetic approach is deep, namely, if its beauty is linked to truth and goodness, as it should be, family life and the life of the individual is managed (but never determined) by it; and its choice implies a certain affinity with the approach by the occupant¹. The question of sustainability may be –and today this is almost essential- within this approach.

In this field, it is fundamental for the energy consumed in executing the object, in this case in the construction of the house, the basic energy that is consumed in its use and the energy which –when it becomes obsolete- will entail its destruction, or better still, its dismantling and recycling, to be minimum. Both the use of passive systems that direct the natural energies or reject them, adapting them to the needs, and the preferable consumption of renewable energies (water, the construction materials or the different energies) must also be contemplated, as fundamental aspects that they are.

But, as we have mentioned, the energy consumed in living is not only the energy used to maintain a healthy temperature and climate conditions in the building, or the right lighting or ventilation level, and other similar factors. The psychological and spiritual resources of man are affected by the spiritual climate that the design manages to arouse and maintain; which is preferably translated into the advisability of providing a feeling of calm and serenity that favour reflection, making it possible to quickly recover from the stress of working life, as well as the social and urban life outside the home.

¹ See María Antonia Frías Sagardoy: "John Pawson: la elocuencia del silencio o una belleza esencial", in *Revisiones. Revista de crítica cultural*, nº 01, Pamplona, January 2005, pp. 15-28

Another important factor is the one expressly indicated by the theme of this congress, which is often forgotten by scholars, despite having a very important influence on the vital satisfaction of its occupants. Indeed, the building –with all its content- requires continuous upkeep, serving the needs of man that are satisfied in its interior. An essential part of this is the work done in the home, which has repercussions both on physical and spiritual aspects. The design must enable that work to be sustainable, too; for the effort and energy used in it to be minimal, optimising the results.

In general, we can say that a Baroque or an excessively complicated design, does not respond well to these current demands for efficiency; although there are degrees where it can be, and there may be exceptions according to the personal aesthetic orientation. On the other hand, what has been called *Minimalist Current* in architecture and design, whether it is strict or considered more flexibly, has advantages in this sense².

The minimalist choice: consequences

Precisely the aim of Minimalism is to reduce resources to the essential, neglecting the superfluous. The first thing to do in the project is to try to satisfy all the environmental and usage needs with the least number of materials, colours, shapes possible. But simplicity is the result of a laborious refinement process which is difficult: “Pawson’s architecture appears unforced, and effortless, but simplicity is not easily achieved”³, comments Deyan Sudjic. And as Bruce Chatwin explains about this aspect: “It was the first realised work of John Pawson; yet the product of fifteen years hard thinking as to how such a room could be.”⁴ In addition, with respect to what remains, for it to have an effect, it must be possible to pass judgement: “Either the work must be perfect, or not at all.”⁵

1. Sensitive and contemplative results

The architect or designer accomplishes the arduous task of simplification by including the essentials, resulting in a clean, orderly, clear ambience; linked to silence that has a great calming effect on the user.

All of this means having less things or introducing less but better selected elements, of a higher quality and beauty; and making them more efficient, because they assume different functions at the same time. So each element used is recovered. Attention is focused on it; and as it has been the subject of a conscientious choice or meticulous design, the contemplation of its singular beauty is aroused. “This kind of ‘reduction’ is

² M^ª Antonia Frías, Ana Belén de Isla and Sara López: “Sobre el Sentido de la Propuesta Arquitectónica Minimalista” in FE Y RAZON, I Simposio Internacional Fe Cristiana y Cultura Contemporánea. Universidad de Navarra. Pamplona, 17-18 May 1999, pp. 513-524

³ Introduction of Deyan Sudjic, in *John Pawson*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1998 (6^a ed. 2002, p. 14)

⁴ “Wabi” by Bruce Chatwin in *John Pawson*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1998 (6^a ed. 2002, p. 10)

⁵ “Wabi” by Bruce Chatwin in *John Pawson*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1998 (6^a ed. 2002 p. 9)

not the antithesis of enjoyment, but invigorating and enjoyable”, one experienced user states.⁶

There are different ways of achieving this, depending on the method followed by each of the creators.

a) Simplicity, order.

In general, Minimalist environments leave few objects in view, using abundant cupboards which go unnoticed. This means great foresight in detail, the fundamental key to everything finding its place. The ambience itself rejects disorder, leading the user (if only out of respect for the beauty of the place) to be driven towards a certain discipline.

Speaking of Pawson, the only architect who confesses to being minimalist⁷ (others reject being labelled in any way), it is stated: “Rather, his kind of simplicity is an attempt to resolve the visual chaos of every day life, to introduce a sense of order and calm. It does not deny the practical necessities; rather it provides an approach to accommodating them in such a way that they do not dominate their surroundings. His interiors do not eliminate possessions, but they are designed in such a way –usually with extensive ranges of white lacquered polyester cupboard doors that hide every piece of domestic equipment- to eliminate their intrusiveness.”⁸

b) Silence, serenity.

A space like this permits concentration, and one’s interior voice can be heard, as Kosme de Barañano comments: “Its interiors are not only diaphanous, but are totally nude, and the light is always indirect. What Pawson does is to blend the large walls. Neutralising the space where objects used to exist in order for it to materialise: for people to inhabit it. This is the essence of architecture in the words of Martin Heidegger: ‘constructing to inhabit, inhabiting to think.’”⁹ These words of the philosopher, so well-loved by many architects, express perhaps his own personal experience in his cabin in the wood, an essential construction where he used to retire to think and write.¹⁰

But many other architects want something like that for their work and they warn that this effect is also felt by the inhabitants. Tadao Ando states: “The aim of the proposal that I offer anyone using these spaces is to act as a mediator in the dialogue that is established between the person and the architecture based on the fact that they go

⁶ “Wabi” by Bruce Chatwin in *John Pawson*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1998 (6ª ed. 2002 p. 10)

⁷ See John Pawson: *Minimum*, London, Phaidon, 1999

⁸ Introduction of Deyan Sudjic, in *John Pawson*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1998 (6ª ed. 2002, p. 14)

⁹ Kosme de Barañano: “Introducción” in *John Pawson: temas y proyectos* (Ed. by Anita Moryadas and Alison Morris) London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2002, p. 6

¹⁰ Adam Sharr: *Heidegger’s hut*. The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.)/ London, 2006; Iñaki Ábalos: “Heidegger en su refugio: la casa existencialista” in *La buena vida. Visita guiada a las casas de la modernidad*. Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2000, p.37-59

beyond the theoreticians and call upon the deeper spiritual planes”¹¹. Luis Barragan, considered the forerunner of minimalism and the inspirer of some architects of this tendency, also commented that his work aims to achieve an oasis where man finds himself, far away from the outside hustle and bustle that continuously bombards us: “Serenity is the great and true antidote against anguish and fear, and today, more than ever, it is the architect's duty to make of it a permanent guest in the home, no matter how sumptuous or how humble. Throughout my work I have always strived to achieve serenity, but one must be on guard not to destroy it by the use of an indiscriminate palette.”¹² Alberto Campo Baeza defends white as a way of achieving some of this: “Is not white like the silent music faced with the clamour of the shallowness that harasses us? Silence faced with such thunderous noise. Bareness faced with so many meaningless decorations. Straightness faced with so much useless obliquity. Simplicity faced with so much complication. Present absence faced with so much empty presence.” And he even specified: “White is the symbol of the perennial, the universal in space and the eternal in time.”¹³

2. Influences in behaviour: Discipline and good customs

It can be said that this architectural movement is also a lifestyle for those who use it, a certain asceticism which at the same time is highly satisfactory (at least when linked with aesthetic pleasure, or even something more spiritual). It is the personal reception of an invitation that the ambience achieved makes to us, to contribute with our own effort to maintaining, and even increasing, its harmony.

Indeed, an object that is out of place immediately draws our attention to it and asks to be put away again. The enjoyment achieved with this compensates for the small effort that it requires. On the other hand, the limitation imposed by the space is a call to not accumulate, to select and to give the objects which, with the passing of time come to rest in the actual house, their own space.

When the inhabitant experiences these spaces, he also contemplates himself acting, and within this framework, his own actions become more important. This is not done in any old way: details are important. The words: “God is in the details” are attributed to an architect, Mies van der Rohe. But it is common experience that he who loves takes care of them and thus, daily life becomes more transcendent and fruitful.

The concentration that these spaces require with respect to their perception also occurs with respect to the use. The designs are successful and often univocal respect to the orientation of use: distracted dispersion stimulated by a multiple and motley space has no place. Actions, also reduced to the essential, take on a holy nature, which some compare with a rite. And simplification leads to limited and repeated rituals of use, which facilitate habits.

¹¹ Tadao Ando "Una cuña en nuestras formas de vida" in "Tadao Ando: Edificios, Proyectos, Escritos" Ed. Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1985 p.12

¹² Luis Barragán: Ceremony acceptance speech, PRITZKER prize in Washington, June, 1980

¹³ Alberto Campo Baeza: “El Blanco certero”, published in magazines such as Baumeister, Arquitectura, Casabella y Ehituskunst from 1991 to 1994, it is included in "La idea construida. La arquitectura a la luz de las palabras " Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid, 1996, by the same author.

3. Make housework easier

The forms, few and simple, mean that the attention required is faster and more specific. The choice of materials is key in this type of design, and the usual standard of quality and their frequent uniformity, make cleaning and general maintenance easy.

The entire floor is often continuous, of the same material, so it can be cleaned or restored with one single product; skirting boards, bases and capping that accumulate dust are eliminated; auxiliary elements like sockets, switches, inspection lids, etc. are hidden from sight or are unified in a discrete design that goes unnoticed because of its shape or colour, so when they break down, they are simple to maintain. The elements of use remain exempt or else are unified continuously, recessed into the same material.¹⁴

The design simplifies all the shapes so that, as our eyes move over them facilitating their perception, the duster or cleaning appliance also does so quickly, without obstacles and without leaving a trace behind. Objects that are not in view do not need to be dusted, as dust does not accumulate in the same way as if they were on display, and tidiness is maintained more easily as they do not have to be handled every day. This also guarantees that they will last longer.

The choice of shapes and materials points towards a greater quality than normal in other types of designs, whether the materials are natural or artificial. Today's technical developments have improved the conditions of many of them, especially glass and wood, and other new ones have been found, making it possible for them to be used in vertical and horizontal surfaces, on floors and ceilings, as their resistance to friction and wear is improved, or because they are self-supporting.

Conclusions: Critical points and new proposals

As we have seen, these and other questions related to sustainability find support in written testimonies by those who have made or have experienced this type of design and they can be verified with the illustrations provided of examples of housing of all kinds planned in agreement with this way of doing things.

However, we must also point out some extremes:

a) Need to preserve personal privacy

Not all minimalist tendencies, with respect to the theme that concerns us, present optimal solutions in all aspects. In some cases, personal intimacy is neglected, because the customs or attitudes, which some wish to introduce, are more normal in other civilisations than in the West. The desirable spatial connection between the different areas that make up the house to achieve sociability has certain limits that are necessary to us if we are to achieve some privacy at the same time.

¹⁴ For a more in-depth description of resources used in the minimalist project, see Linda Parker: *Casas minimalistas*. (texts: Patricia Bueno, Martha Torres, Marta Eiriz) Barcelona, Atrium, 2002

b) Convenience for joining spiritual sustainability with energetic and material sustainability

Finally, we also wish to put forward the idea that, although minimalist aesthetics have preponderantly existed regardless of the attempts to develop ecological architecture, these fields are not incompatible. In fact, there are some hybrid examples. An attempt to incorporate some of the resources of the latter into the former, or vice versa, could result in a more complete and global sustainability of the house.

For example, in the publication: *Casas Ecológicas*, of Sergi Costa Durán¹⁵, we can select some examples that incorporate a series of mechanisms whose use is aimed at guaranteeing compatibility, and which if selected in the design, brings them closer to the Minimalism that we defend. This happens in the following houses: GLIDEHOUSE, by Michelle Kaufmann, in Novato, California, USA; LOBLOLLY HOUSE by Kieran Timberlake Associates, in Taylors Island, Maryland, USA; WALLA WOMBA, by 1+2 Architecture, in Bruny Island, Tasmania, Australia; Z6 HOUSE, by Kappe+Du Architects, in Santa Monica, California, USA and HAUS W, by Markus Gentner / att architekten, in Gräfenberg, Germany

Another recent example that we should consider is the last Solar Decathlon, a Biennial inter-university Competition celebrated last summer in Madrid¹⁶. Seventeen different universities from Asia, America and Europe participated in it. They proposed different house prototypes that are fed with eco-energetic technologies, such as solar panels.

The winner was the “Lumenhaus Eclipse” proposed by the Polytechnic University of Virginia, and they proposed a design which is much closer to minimalism, inspired, as they say, in the mythical Mies Van Der Rohe’s Farnsworth House. We can appreciate the simplicity in its plans and elevations.

Other proposed houses in the competition that also are similar to this aesthetically are:

Re-focus, from the University of Florida, or SML House, from the CEU University in Valencia.

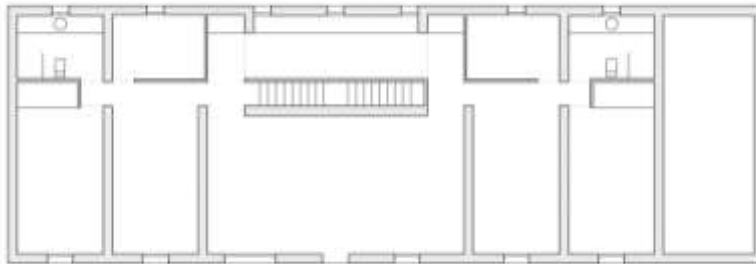
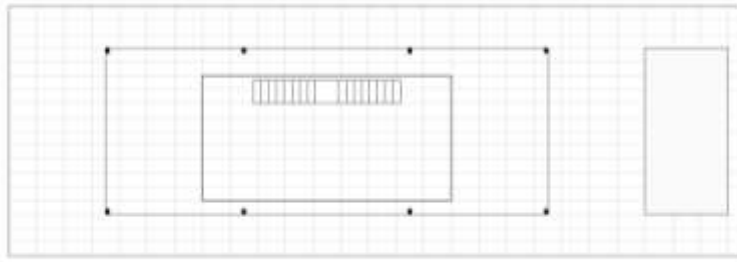
If an effort is made in this regard, to reduce the ecological design to what is absolutely essential, or to incorporate some of these ecological techniques into the minimalist design, sustainability in the home could reach both the physical and the spiritual, and facilitate housework at the same time.

NOTE: In this electronic edition images of five of Alberto Campo Baeza’s Houses are shown below as examples of Minimalist Homes.

¹⁵ See Sergi Costa Durán: *Casas Ecológicas*. (Introduction of Lance Hosey) Reditar Libros S.L., Barcelona, 2007, pp. 63-64; 104-106; 117-119; 123; 139-141

¹⁶ See AV proyectos, 038/2010. Madrid.

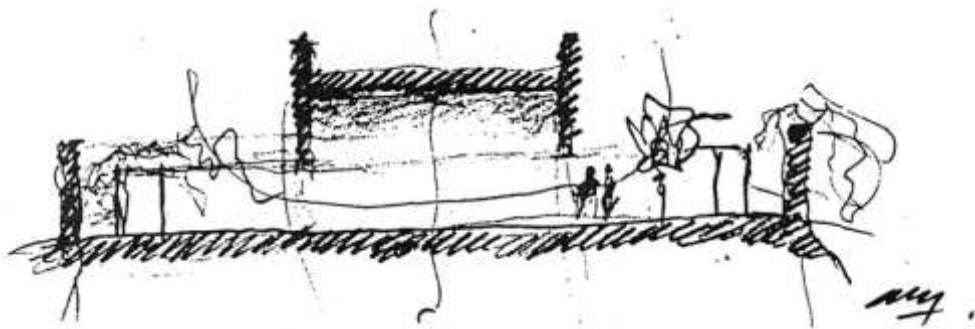
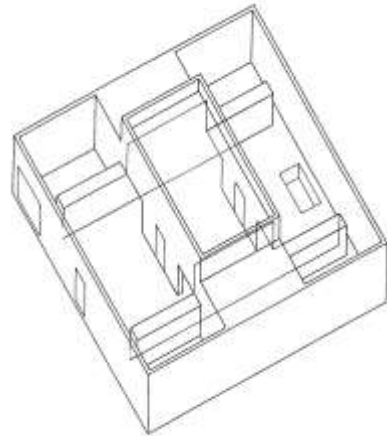
Casa De Blas



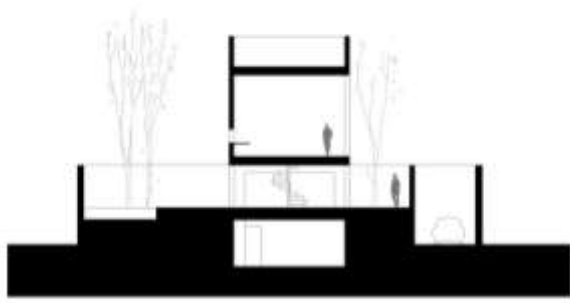
1. isometric + tree
 2. to establish a platform
 3. to carve to house not wild
 4. to lower it is really
 5. to show it is wild + TECTONIC.
 + isometric + section = ARCHITECTURE.
 DE BLAS HOUSE
 with A. del V.
 by
 January 16 1999.



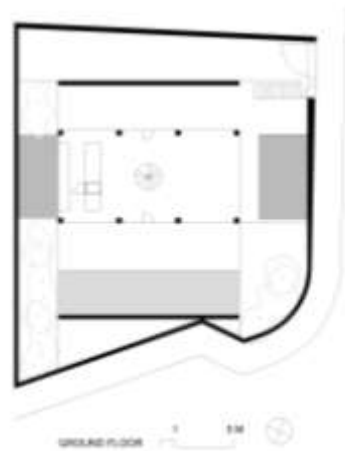
Casa Gaspar



Casa Moliner



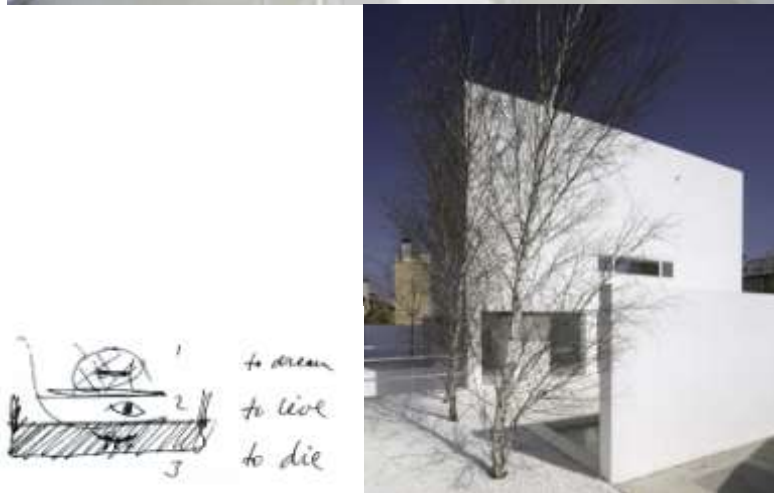
CROSS SECTION 1 5 M



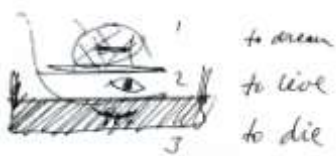
GROUND FLOOR 1 5 M



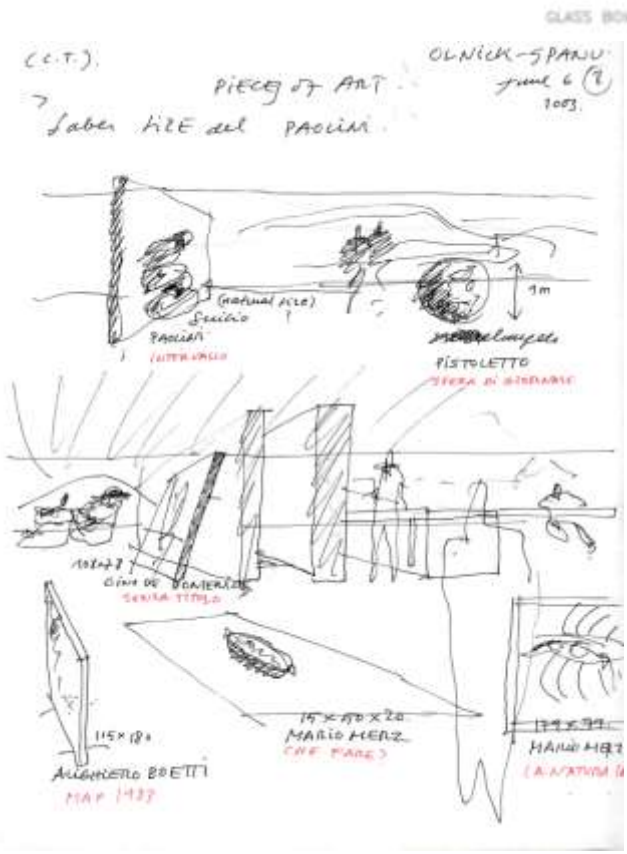
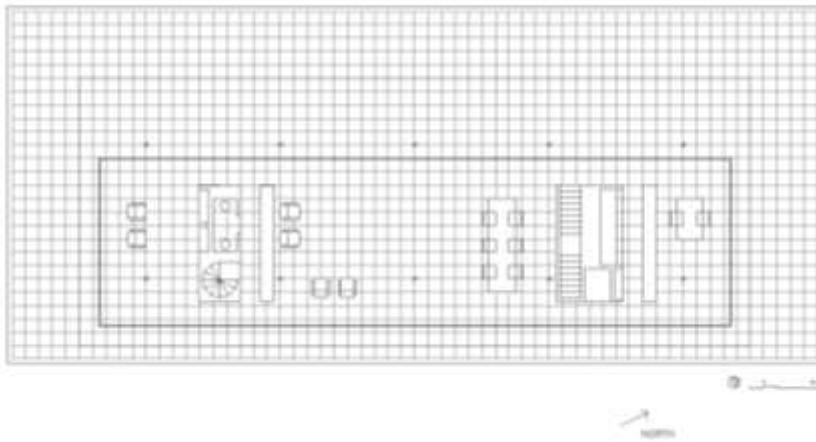
FIRST FLOOR 1 5 M



BASEMENT LEVEL 1 5 M



Casa Olnick



Casa Turegano

