Narrative Homes

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Self-initiated in the fall of 2018, *Narrative Homes* is an ongoing theoretical research project exploring home design through the lens of literature. The creative exploration focuses on the relationship of narratives (storytelling) to the architecture design process. The relationship between architecture and literature is understudied and undervalued with little to no arguments on the subject over the past half century. During this time the discipline of architecture shifted towards autonomy, resulting in an absence of imagination, disciplinary blind spots and a lack of critical engagement with other artistic fields. *Narrative Homes* looks to reclaim and reinvigorate this territory of architectural experimentation.

Narrative Homes entails the design of four homes; each home in the series is obsessively based on a selected portion of narrative literature. The homes completed thus far are based on *The Stranger* by Camus, *As I Lay Dying* by Faulkner and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Coetzee. The project investigates the techniques an architect and writer have at their disposal with the intent of discovering affinities and overlaps in method. How would one approach designing a home when a narrative text is the primary constraint?

The primary goal of the research is to disrupt the traditional modes of process in architecture by creating new methodologies via the use of voluntary self-imposed constraints. Inspired by Oulipo a group of French-speaking writers who created literary
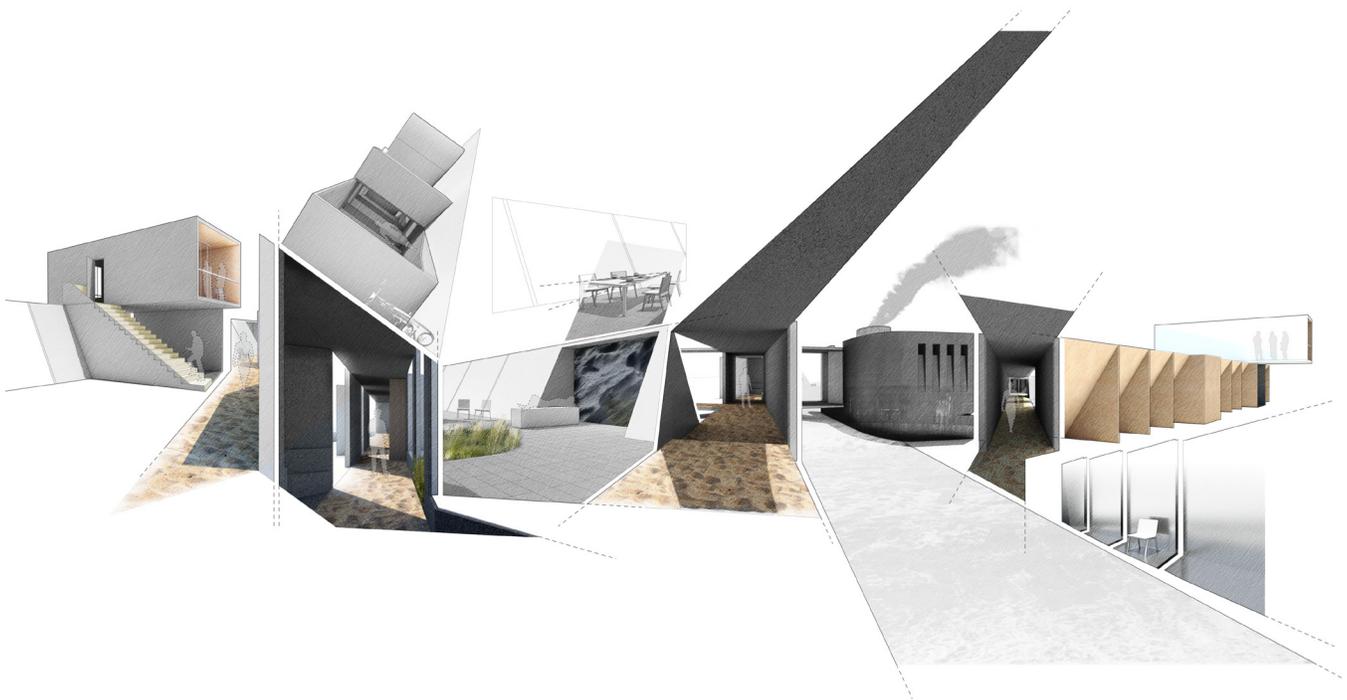

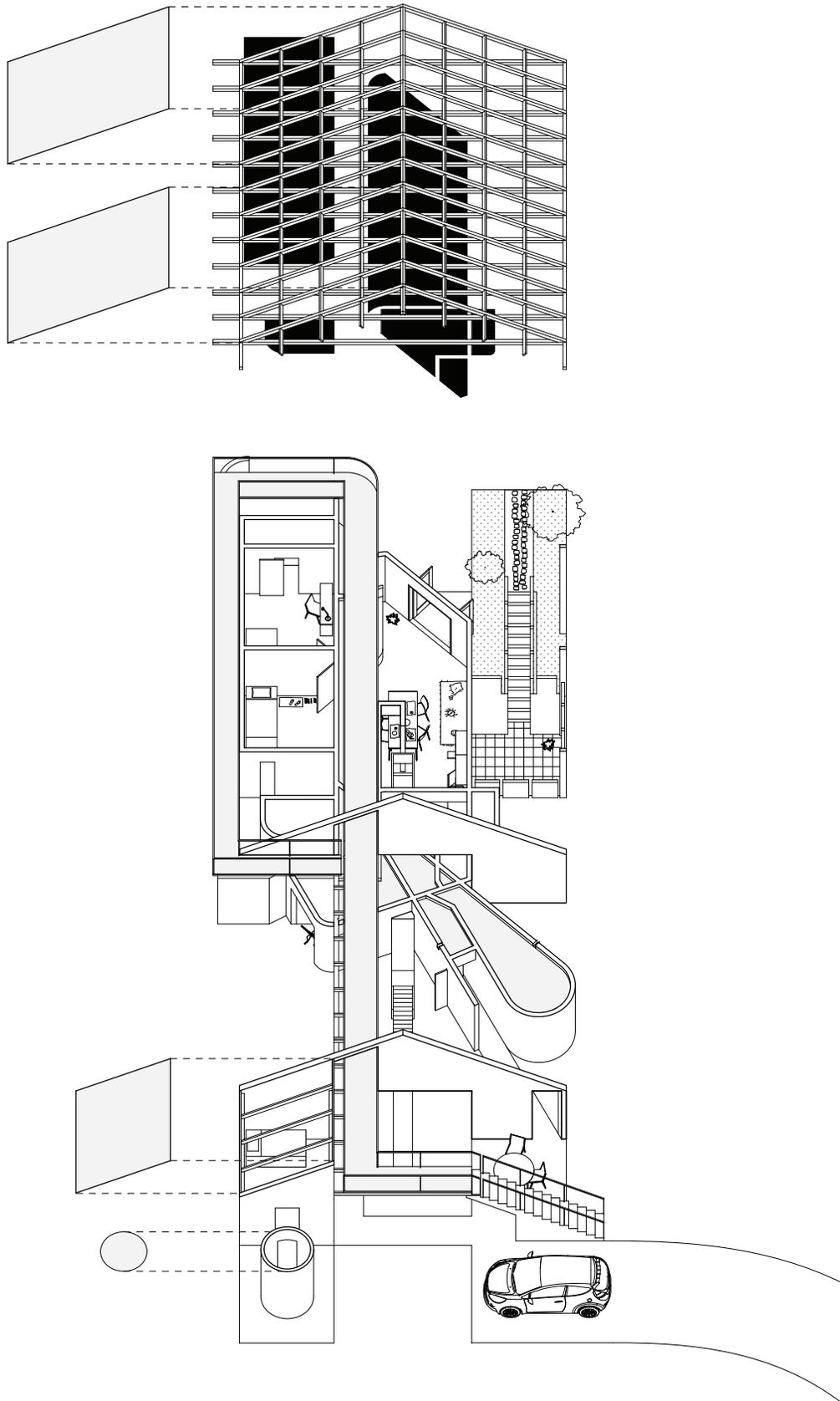Figure 1. *Narrative Home I, The Stranger : Perspective Collage.* Matthew Celmer.

Figure 2. *Narrative Home II, As I Lay Dying : Exploded Axonometric.* Matthew Celmer.
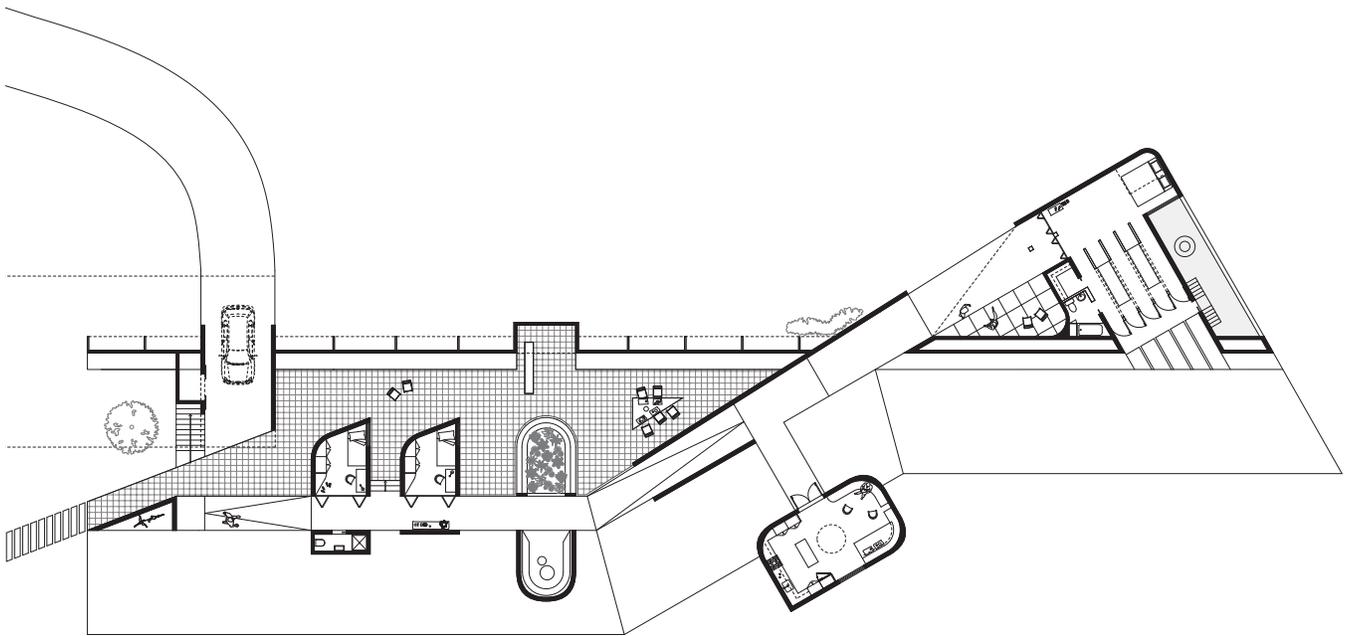
Figure 3. *Narrative Home I, The Stranger : Floor Plan.* Matthew Celmer.

works using constrained writing techniques and mathematical structures. By using self-imposed rules and constraints predictable problems could be realigned, for them the novel in our case the home. The group's most notable works include *Life: A User's Manual* by Georges Perec, *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino and *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau. Famously Queneau described the Oulipians as "rats who must build the labyrinth from which they plan to escape."[1]

In my case to realign the typical architectural problem of the home, a literary text becomes the primary constraint, the text becomes the site, client and context. In other words, the literary text is the 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 Homes* amplifies the common tension between constraint and pragmatism, the work does not exclude function, but synthesize it with the constraints.

For example, *Narrative Home I* is based on the climactic scene in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus where the protagonist Meursault shoots and kills a man on the beach. The sequence of events is depicted as a clear linear narrative, from when Meursault leaves his friend Raymond to the moment he walks along the beach and encounters the man he is to kill.[2] A graphic notational

system was created diagramming the sequence, scenes, events and conditions of ambience. The antagonist's movement vector in the text becomes the unifying circulation system in the home with corresponding events branching off this spine. A metre (measuring system) was created by allocating a number to every five words of text creating a 'frame'. Frames with significant events were highlighted and used to create spaces within the home. The design of the home subsequently follows the narrative moving from left to right in plan.

Narrative Homes looks outside of the field of architecture to understand and borrow techniques from adjacent artistic spheres. The use of extra-architectural mediums as a starting point for architecture is evident in Bernard Tschumi's early work *Screenplays*, Giuseppe Terragni's unbuilt *Danteum* proposal and Peter Eisenman's *Moving Arrows, Eros, and Other Errors, Romeo + Juliet*. These projects were referenced as a starting point for understanding inter-medial translation across artistic fields. A medium-to-medium translation requires a change from one state or form to another. Walter Benjamin's "afterlife" argues that a translation is autonomous from the original text and is in itself a new form of expression.[3] This is to say each home in this series is a new expression with inevitable differences, dislocations and infidelities from the process of translation.

Figure 4. *Narrative Home II, As I Lay Dying.* Matthew Celmer.

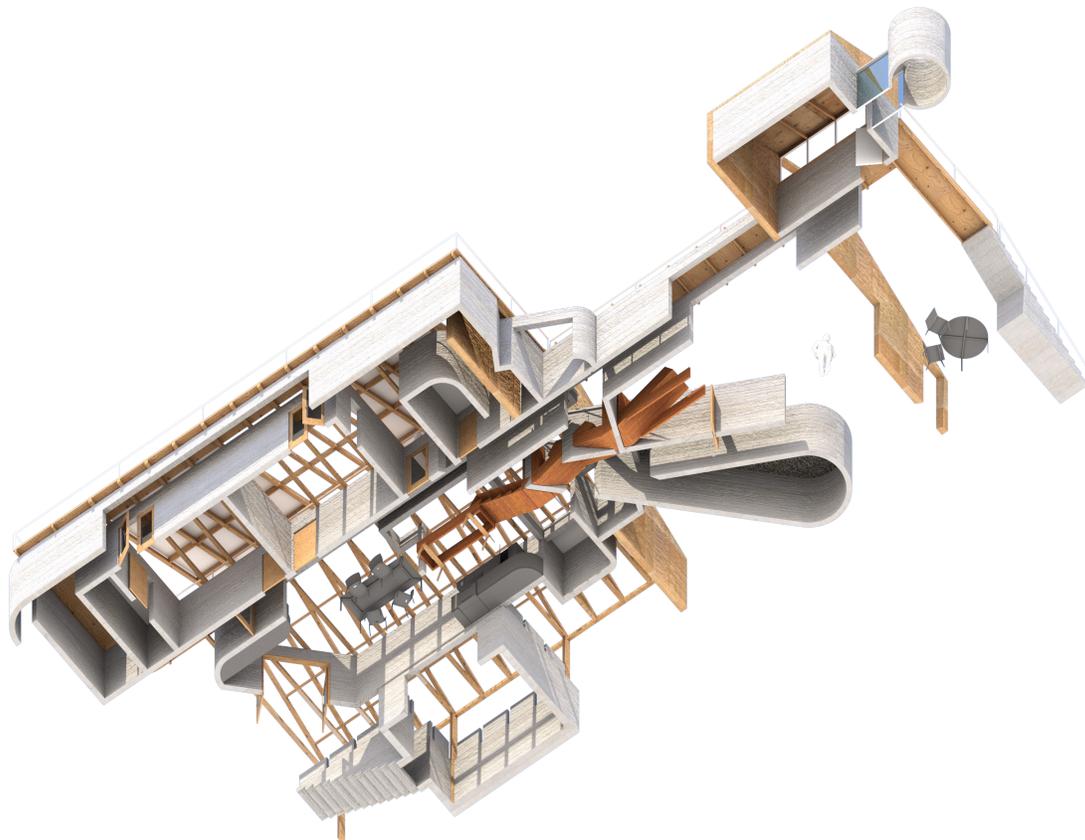Figure 5. *Narrative Home II, As I Lay Dying.* Matthew Celmer.

Figure 6. *Narrative Home II, As I Lay Dying : Rendered Worm's Eye View.* Matthew Celmer.

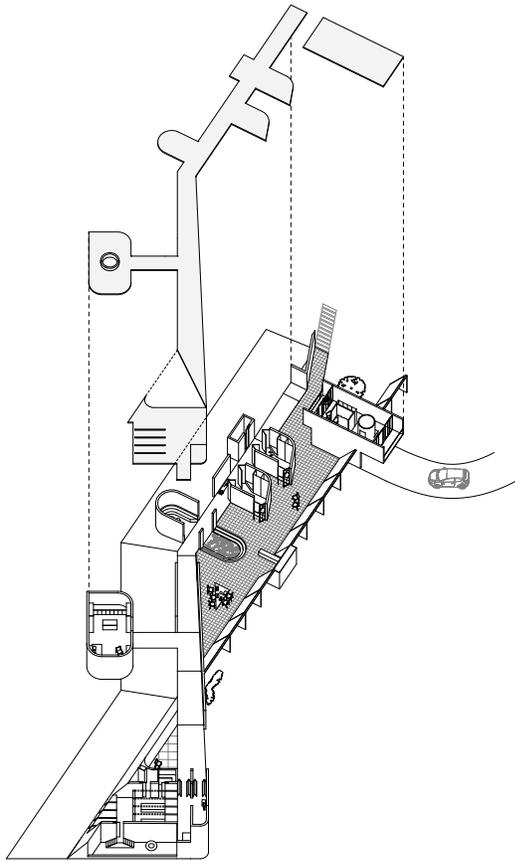Figure 7. *Narrative Home I, The Stranger.* Matthew Celmer.

Figure 8. *Narrative Home I, The Stranger.* Matthew Celmer.

Any discussion on translation must be paired with meaning. *Narrative Homes* looks to continue and add to the discourse on meaning, symbolism and metaphor in architecture. With a focus on positive techniques for constructing sincere symbolism in architecture, this is in contrast to the ironic and kitsch. An example can be found in *Narrative Home II* where the mother's coffin in *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner becomes a central theme for the home's meaning. The selected scene, Faulkner describes the family rescuing their mother's coffin from a burning barn. The author's description of the coffin sitting on "the sawhorses like a cubistic bug"[4] is literally translated to a matching physical object within the home. Later in the text, Jewel the scene's hero saves the coffin by toppling it forward out of the barn, the dynamic action of flipping the coffin end-over-end is frozen to become a static object. Character movement vectors cut through it creating its specific form. Finally, the coffin's movement becomes a static part of the home: part skylight, part staircase and part central storage for the home. The coffin becomes a symbolic representation of flattened meaning: combining sequence, metaphor and use into one object.

The single-family home is a manageable and productive scale for experimentation in architecture while continuing to be a central theme in American culture and fiction. As Marilyn

Chandler notes in her book *Dwelling in the Text* "writers have appropriated houses as structural, psychological, metaphysical, and literary metaphors, constructing complex analogies between house and psyche."[5] In this sense, houses are closed worlds, finite, definitive, insular with a beginning and an end. The home is the perfect cross medium device, they represent us, and we represent ourselves through them in written and built manifestations.

Narrative Homes are textual architecture.

ENDNOTES

1.   Enrique Walker, "Scaffolding," *Log*, no. 31 (Spring/Summer 2014): 59.

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

3.   Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 73.

4.   William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 219.

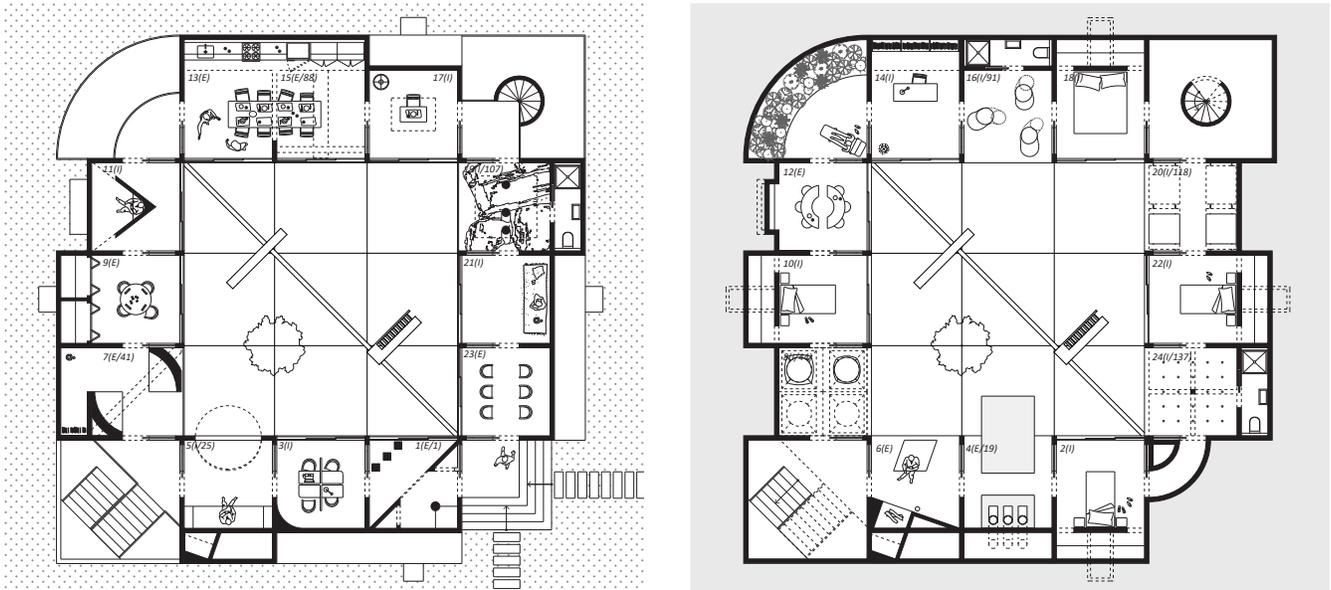5.   Marilyn R. Chandler, **Dwelling in the Text** (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 3.

Figure 9. *Narrative Home III, Waiting for the Barbarians : Floor Plans*. Matthew Celmer.

Figure 10. *Narrative Home III, Waiting for the Barbarians : Perspective*. Matthew Celmer.