

What Can a Single Wall Do?

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To radically exploit the potential of space can mean approaching each new design problem with as few preconceptions as possible and wrestling from it the one solution that will finally prove valid and compelling. In such cases, reality is not something that compromises the idea or contaminates it with the banal or everyday. Rather, the very confrontation between the design process and the existing parameters is what leads to conceptual clarification, to the intensification and radicalization of the architectural concept. Christian Kerez's "House with One Wall" in Zurich-Witikon serves to demonstrate how the contingency of an initial design can give way to stringency, how the accidental must yield to the essential. The Witikon borough in southwest Zurich, incorporated in 1934, is a district typical of that city. Despite isolated remnants of the original rural settlement in the form of barns or converted farmhouses, its decisive urban structures stem from more recent decades: large plots were divided up, with single-family homes and row houses occupying the privileged hillside locations in which space is in short supply and lakeside property expensive.

In this setting, the clients acquired a relatively narrow plot with an unspectacular gable-roofed building and, inspired by the house on Forsterstraße, initiated contact with Christian Kerez. The fundamental question revolved around the basic forms to be constructed on the site after the demolition of the existing building. The clients requested two dwellings of equal size, each with two stories above ground as well as a basement-level study or atelier. In addition, they specified simple, clear, quiet volumes with a spacious effect despite their inevitably modest dimensions, and large, tall windows and flat roofs. The interior, likewise, was to be spacious, defined by a fluid connection of rooms and transparency throughout the different floor levels as well as clear articulation and unified materials. With the study in the basement, the living and dining areas at ground level, and sleeping areas on the top floor, the essential functions were established. But how would these parameters translate into a compelling architectural form?

The first sketches, designs, and models were devoted to the placement of the building or buildings on the site, as well as to questions