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Though Vitra's new flagship showroom by Herzog and de Meuron plays on the tension between the familiar and the uncanny, the **Vitrahaus' Stack** construction has a profound tradition beyond its form. *Tim Abrahams* reports

The Stack is taking over the world. This architectural strategy, which began in the tightly packed hothouse of Todoroki in suburban Tokyo, has moved to New York and Europe. Perhaps the Stack's most renowned iteration is the offset boxes of the New Museum by SANAA – a sophisticated assemblage of anodised aluminium mesh boxes, it is a means of articulating the gallery spaces as voids legible to the exterior while simultaneously getting around New York's planning regulations regarding light permeation to street level.

It was the most famous use of the Stack until Herzog and de Meuron completed Vitrahaus. A gateway to Vitra's manufacturing base at Weil am Rhein in Switzerland, which opened in February, the flagship showroom looks like a cluster of abstract house forms piled on top of each other.

Theorists agree that the Stack is an interesting strategy because it does two things simultaneously. Jacques Herzog says the tension in the form is 'between the figurative and the abstract' or to use the Freudian phrases; between the heimlich and the unheimlich. The practice's main struggle was to know what to clad it in. 'We didn't want to use wood as a construction material. Although it would have been quite easy, it would've looked stupid; too obvious,' says Herzog. Equally, leaving

the Vitrahaus as raw concrete was not an avenue the architects wanted to explore: 'it would have looked pretentious,' he says. In the end it was clad in a charcoal stucco skin. It had to look both uncanny and familiar.

And yet if we look at the origins of this architectural form, there is a far more fundamental tension at work. It is no coincidence that Herzog and de Meuron has used the same small Bird's Nest-style lighting at Vitrahaus as it did in the National Stadium in Beijing. The Stack, after all, began in the East. The stadium was a collaboration with Ai Wei Wei whose sculptural pieces often use repetitions of basic industrial forms such as bicycles or scaffolding poles stacked in surprising patterns. His work evokes a Chinese modernity; simultaneously primitive yet endlessly complex. It has clearly influenced Herzog and de Meuron on a profound level.

If we look outside China to Japan, we can see that the tension between two formal strategies in the Stack is less about a mittel-European art eroticism and more about a vision of modernity. One of the earliest Stacks is Makoto Yamaguchi's 2006 House in Todoroki, south-east Tokyo. Before he built this house on a typically tight plot, Yamaguchi had hitherto designed single-volume rural villas or galleries, which were determined by their views of a landscape. His



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Above: WAM Architekten's Inntel hotel uses the vernacular wooden houses of the Zaan region to create the appearance of a Stack, although internally it has a straightforward plan

Below: The new Vitra showroom, Vitrahaus, piles archetypal houses in an unsettling composition and creates a tension between the familiar and the uncanny

urban Stack was effectively a means of raising a box to view the urban terrain. That is not to say that Yamaguchi invented the idea. Sou Fujimoto's design for Tokyo Apartments, a five-unit housing project, composed of 13 pitched-roof house forms stacked in a spiral. It is unsettlingly similar to the Vitrahaus. Fujimoto's view of architecture as shelter is instinctive yet, as an inhabitant of Tokyo, he understands the sophistication of human relationships in the 21st century.

Fujimoto defines this approach as Primitive Future and here we have a far more likely reason why the Stack has caught on elsewhere. There is a tension between a yearning for basic symbols of shelter and some reflection of the complex social relations which bind our world together. OMA has designed a 52-storey Stack in Jersey City, which features two slabs on top of a plinth and set at 90-degree angles to each other, recalling the vernacular 19th-century blocks of the surrounding

area. The Stack turns the familiar into the unfamiliar. Indeed, Herzog and de Meuron's Stack in New York – a residential tower with 145 apartments, each with its own unique floor plan and private outdoor space – has the same principle. Herzog refers to them as 'houses stacked in the sky.' (Indeed, earlier proposals for the Tate Modern extension were based on a Stack and the principle can still be seen in the floor plan.)

So while some architects from the East are co-opting the form as a means of reconciling primitive needs for shelter with the complexity of contemporary society, in the West the Stack is being used to turn buildings into signs as is the case with Vitrahaus, which is a showroom for largely domestic furniture, or give modernist building forms a faux-legibility as historical artefacts as can be seen in the facade of WAM Architekten's Inntel hotel in Zaandam, Amsterdam (pictured above). Clad with an assemblage of the iconic green wooden houses of the Zaan

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