

Editorial

Segovia has said that the guitar was at once the easiest instrument to play badly and the most difficult to play well. The design of houses represents the same kind of paradox to the architect by opposing the familiarity and apparent simplicity of the building of the house to its multi-purpose role. As a home, it must reflect the individual needs and dreams of the inhabitants, while at the same time belonging and responding to the community. It is usually small as a building, and therefore easier to build than other types of architecture, but because of its smallness, it provides the designer with the opportunity to budget more energy to innovation, to take risks, and find daring solutions to the problem of creating a home. Conversely, the familiarity and simplicity can and too often does lead to the creation of thoughtless, mass produced, cheap houses, which unfortunately proliferate due to their economic appeal. These houses are no longer built as homes, but as machines for shelter.

The phenomenon of the impersonal mass produced house is a new one. How did it come about? One answer is that architecture evolves with society. Such an answer avoids the question. How far has the mass produced house deviated from the ideal, what is the ideal, and how has the house been treated in the past are questions that must be answered before defining the designer's role with respect to today's home.

What are some ideals that make up a home? A home cares, it follows tradition, it adapts and it provides a symbol for its inhabitants. Of course, a home is also shelter, and must fit pragmatic considerations such as maintainability and affordability. The weighing of these factors is very variable and history can help to trace and explain the shifts in emphasis which seem to have occurred.

In the Middle Ages, the hostility of nature was offset by the enclosure of the house. It was an artifact designed to protect against the outside. This separation of inside and outside remains strong until modern times. Then begins the opening up of the house to nature. Some architects, notably Frank Lloyd Wright, go as far as wanting to merge with nature by making the house its extension. Others try to establish the building as a man-made object, while still allowing it to penetrate through large glazed surfaces. This reversal from the medieval attitude comes in part from the growing urbanization and industrialization of the world. Nature having been dominated becomes benign and decorative, not threatening. Nature becomes a symbol of serenity.

The technology of houses also changes radically in the twentieth century. Houses reflect industrialization and become machine-made artifacts. This comes about as the new building technologies are used to solve post-war dwelling shortages, and to provide cheap worker housing. The advances made have significant economic advantages, and it is

probably for this reason that they so strongly influence house design today. Yet this technology, if used too directly, can and does alienate, since it provides too strong a reminder of the efficient and impersonal aspects of mass production. If the house is designed as an artifact, using machine-made materials, and if it limits itself to being an optimal assembly of parts, it loses its identity as a haven from the mechanized world. As a mass produced object, the house becomes merely physical shelter, not emotional shelter.

Another aspect to be considered is that of tradition. Two streams of development must be looked at to understand the way tradition is espoused by the house: the vernacular and the commissioned.

In the vernacular stream, houses espouse the locale through a constant and delightful evolution, an evolution which is a combination of local ingenuity, borrowed idioms, memory and accident. Houses which emerge in this way cannot help but have a very strong sense of place. But are such houses still possible in today's accelerating world? Renovation of old houses is, in a way, part of this process, but the stability and constant improvement of the ancestral home is no longer a prevalent phenomenon.

The other main current of house types is the designed residence. Many of the designs are no less superb adaptations to the environment than the vernacular types, but they are generally more self conscious and specific to the inhabitant. This was and still is very much the domain of the architect. Only recently has he seen himself as a designer for the masses. The use of his services as a technical problem solver during housing shortages was the seed of his involvement, but gradually, the concept of a house for the Average Person emerged. Le Corbusier's dom-ino and Wright's Usonian are examples of this abstraction of the house from the individual.

As a parallel development, today's mass produced houses borrow idioms from architect's designs, designs which were meant for one particular site, client and time. So the architect designed house is influencing today's version of the vernacular house, the object of consumption.

So where exactly does the architect fit into the process of making houses? As an idea generator, as a wrench in the works of tradition? As a historian, interpreting the language of the past? As a technological consultant? As a custom fitter? Of course the answer lies in seeing all the modes as complementary. The unifying thrust must be to maintain the link between the house, and the individual's experience of the home.

Tony Barake
Judith Letarte
Jacquin Lorange