THE HOUSE AS A SYMBOLIC MANIFESTATION

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Au-delà de son rôle d'abri, la maison est une source de symboles et d'images. L'auteur retrace le symbolisme de la maison de l'enfance à l'âge adulte.

The first inhabitants took it upon themselves to perform three basic yet fundamental earthly necessities: to clothe, feed and shelter themselves. Needless to say, the significance of shelter was undeniable then, as it is now. After all, our ancestors had to quickly learn to contend with the elements of the environment, the ferocity of beasts and the barbarism of fellow beings. It was not long before the essential need for shelter would be served by the house.

Over time, however, the importance of this shelter form has surpassed the basic functions it originally sought to satisfy. The house, as Gaston Bachelard claims, has become "our own corner of the world."[1] This most humble of physical structures has bestowed and been bestowed with a rainbow of symbolic imagery. The purpose within these pages will therefore be to trace such imagery from our infancy to our maturity or, rather, from the house as analogous to the womb to the house as a symbolic manifestation.

Of the underlying characteristics associated with the house, those rooted in infancy will reveal the initial basis for its attachment. The intimate relationship between child and mother soon becomes an analogy between womb and house. As the mother represents the centre of the universe for the child, the house becomes, first, indicative of that universe and, later, a reference to which all is relative.

In an essay titled *The House as Symbol of the Self,* Clare Cooper traces a child's maiden experiences and contends that the notion of security is what binds the child to its mother and, in turn, to its house.

> At first, the mother is its whole environment. Gradually, as the range of senses expands, the baby begins to perceive the people and the physical environment around it. The house becomes its world, its very cosmos... familiar, recognizable, a place of security and love... As the child matures, he ventures into the house's outer space, the yard, the garden, then gradually into the neighbourhood, the city, the region, the world. As space becomes known and experienced, it becomes a part of his world. But all the time, the house is home, the place of first conscious thoughts, of security and roots. It is no longer an inert box; it has been experienced and has become a symbol for self, family, mother, security.[2]

Once able, a child begins to represent the experiental images in pictorial form. In a fascinating examination of the development of human consciousness vis-à-vis human habitation, titled *Psychology of the House,* Oliver Marc maintains that a child reaches into the depth of the inner psyche to portray the mother's womb. The first scribbles depict circular shapes, spirals, wavy lines and dots. By school age, a child's drawing of a house often contains a self-portrait. This is not merely eyes for windows, a mouth for the door, and a forehead for the roof, but the inclusion of a nose, hair and even eyebrows. At times, the gender of the artist may also be detected (figs. 1 and 2).

Fig. 1

Layout by: Franco Maccarone and Anna Mainella

Fig. 2

A house's humanistic qualities, in particular as symbolic of the mother's womb, remain the exclusive domain of childhood. This strong emotional bond is carried, both consciously and subconsciously, throughout a lifetime. In his fictional story, *Malicroix*, Henri Bosco turns to this analogy while writing about a man being protected from a violent storm.

> The already human being in whom I had sought shelter for my body yielded nothing to the storm. The house clung to me, like a she-wolf, and at times I could smell her odour penetration maternally to my mother. She was all I had to keep and sustain me. We were alone.[3]

Security attributed to the mother's womb is one of the reasons that primitive beings, after seeking refuge in the warmth and safety of one, called the cave the first home. This natural derivation, the womb of nature, was also due to beliefs that the world had originated from an egg. Although ancient cultures later believed in a world as square and built according to that form, some aspects of the round shape have remained through time. Marc suggests that elaborately decorated entrances varying from arch to a full circle, for instance, are a direct result of our inner being and closeness to the womb. The same may be said for indigenous housing in Africa.

The womb, however, is but one analogy of the protective armour implied by the house. Sir Edward Coke's old adage that "a man's home is his castle" suggests a home fortified against the world at large. Marc explains:

> to build a house is to create an area of peace, calm and security, a replica of our own mother's womb, where we can leave the world and listen to our rhythm; it is to create a place of our own, safe from danger. For once we have crossed the threshold and shut the door behind us, we can be at one with ourselves.[4]

Clearly, the security of the house carries with it strong sentiments. One need not look far for sayings such as "home sweet home," "home is where the heart is," "there's no place like home" and travellers who feel "homesick" during a journey.

Such emotions have become associated with the house as a universal archetypal symbol of self. Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore, co-authors of *Body, Memory and Architecture,* believe that the house is "the one piece of the world around us which still speaks directly to our bodies as the centre and measure of that world."[5] Cooper concurs that we attempt to give the archetype of self concrete substance by searching for physical forms or symbols which are intimate and meaningful as well as definable.

> The first and most consciously selected form to represent self is the body, for it appears to be the outward manifestation, and the enclosure of self. On a less conscious level, I believe, man also frequently selects the house, that basic protector of his internal environment (beyond skin and clothing) to represent or symbolize what is tantalizingly unrepresentable... It seems as though the personal space bubble which we carry with us and which is an almost tangible extension of our self expands to embrace the house we have designated as ours... We project something of ourselves onto its physical fabric.[6]

No one more profoundly exemplified this personal projection than Carl Jung in his dreams and actual manifestation of his house, drawing from both experiences to describe the complexity of the human psyche at its deepest levels. In a dream, Jung described a house with various levels of consciousness: the ground floor, cellar and vault (representing the lesser known realm of the unconscious). With respect to his house, built in four stages over some thirteen years, Jung realized that after all the parts were assembled it became "a symbol of psychic wholeness." The house was a representation of his own evolving and maturing psyche. He concluded that it was the place where "I am in the midst of my true life, I am most deeply myself... in which I could become what I was, what I am and will be. It gave me a feeling as if I were being reborn in stone."[7]

Images such as these correspond well to Bachelard's phenomenological symbolism as revealed in his illuminating work, *The Poetics of Space.* The notion of house is understood as a topography of our inner being. The house is, Bachelard asserts, "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind."[8]

This fixed point of reference around which an individual structures the world both encloses space, the house interior, and excludes space, everything ouside of it. In other words, the house has two essential and differing components, namely, its interior and its facade. Both elements are often selected so as to reflect how one views oneself both as an individual and in relation to society. Thus, the house, as a representation, portrays our characters and personalities, our image of self. In essence, the house becomes a self-portrait — no different in adulthood than it had been in childhood but perhaps somewhat more sophisticated (fig. 3).

Fig. 3

First impressions are initially revealed on the exterior via the front yard, with its landscaping and objects, then through the facade, with its materials and colours. The exterior may be likened to the cover of a book, for as Bloomer and Moore correctly point out, "the house front speaks to us about what lies behind it, and what it might be like to be inside."[9]

A significant element within the facade is the entrance or threshold, the dividing line between the outer public world and the inner private domain. Carrying the bride over the threshold goes back to Roman times. Removing one's hat and wiping off one's shoes before entering a dwelling also remain part of our rituals. Some cultures go further, to the point of orienting the entrance towards the cosmos; in China the door is oriented southward while in Madagascar it is towards the west. Furthermore, Orthodox Jews observe the scriptures by attaching the Commandments onto the doorpost of the house.

The location of the threshold also has its cultural differences. In North America, for example, the threshold is at the front door with the front yard acting as semi-public space, no doubt a reflection of our openness. In England, on the other hand, the front garden is enclosed with a fence and gate, placing the initial entry at some distance from the house itself and suggesting a greater desire for privacy. Even more restrictive are Moslem homes where solid perimeter high walls reflect the extreme privacy sought by individuals, particularly women, from strangers and neighbours.

Nowhere is individuality more expressed, on entering the house, than in the living room. This highly decorative space becomes the central show-place, the me or us.

> The living room is the area where "performances" for guests are most often given, and hence the "setting" of it must be appropriate to the performance. Thus, we expect that more than any other part of the home, the living room reflects the individual's conscious and unconscious attempts to express a social identity.[10]

Receiving special attention in the living room is the fireplace or hearth, over which a favourite painting and treasured objects are displayed in all their splendour. Although today the hearth may merely be an electric heater containing artificial smouldering logs, its significance is as old as civilization. The hearth is said to have been originally conceived as a microcosm of the sun, similar to the sacred flame in the temple. It was not something to cook on but rather a symbol of the sun whose flame must never be allowed to extinguish for fear that the sun itself would disappear. Moreover, Pierre Defontaines suggests that the house originated as a shelter for this sacred fire. A few examples will demonstrate the importance of this eternal flame: in northern China, the Kang or central hearth is considered "the mother of the dwelling." Until recently, the hearth in rural Sardinac homes was kept alight continuously and only extinguished on the death of an inhabitant (for the period of mourning). Finally, in Madagascar, fire is the first item brought into a newly completed dwelling.[11]

The notion of fire also proved significant in Vitruvius' conception of the origin of the house.[12] The father of architectural theory explains that it was the discovery of fire which first brought about the assembly of people and, in turn, resulted in the genesis of conversation. It was at that first gathering, Vitruvius declares, that shelters began to be constructed — be they dug on mountainsides or made of mud and twigs. On observing the works of one another, these people "of an imitative and teachable nature" were able to continously improve upon their dwellings. Vitruvius proceeds to trace the development of the primative hut, making particular note of one whose form strongly resembles that of Marc-Antoine Laugier's image: four trees denoting a square, connected by branches on top with additional branches forming a pyramidal roof. The correlation is clear: columns, entablatures, and pediment. It was this "little hut," argues Laugier, "on which all the magnificences of architecture are elaborated."[13] For "higher ideas born of the multiplication of the arts," adds Vitruvius, led to "civilization and refinement."[14] Hence, the house was not only the first form of architecture, albeit rustic, but with its elements, the first temple, built not to divine deities but to mere mortals (as recreated by Sir William Chambers) (figs. 4 and 5).

This theme may also be read into Joseph Rykwert's own search for the nature of the first house while contemplating *On Adam's House in Paradise.* In his unrelenting quest for origins, Rykwert has, among other insights, brought forth the true meaning of the house, simply, as a temple of being. He describes this "notional" sanctuary:

> Its floor was the earth, its supports were living beings, its trellised roof was like a tiny sky of leaves and flowers: to the couple sheltering within it, it was both an image of their joined bodies and a pledge of the world's consent to their union. It was more; it provided them — at a critical moment — with a mediation between the intimate sensations of their own bodies and the sense of the great unexplored world around. It was therefore both an image of the occu-

pants' bodies and a map, a model of the world's meaning. That, if at all, is why I must postulate a house for Adam in Paradise. Not as a shelter against the weather, but as a volume which he could interpret in terms of his own body, and which yet was an exposition of the paradisal plan, and therefore established him at the centre of it.[15]

Fig. 4

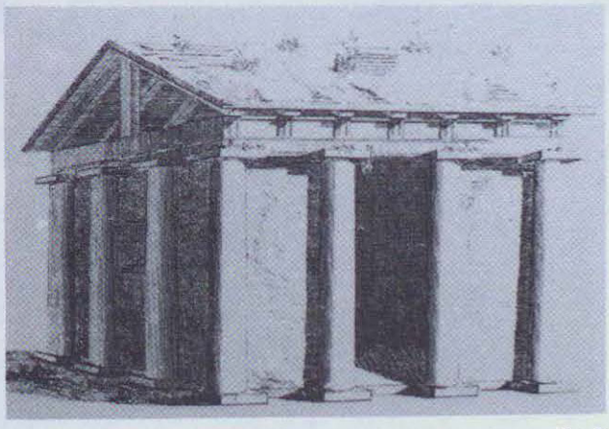

Fig. 5

Indeed, the symbolic meaning of the house is embedded within its mediative enclosure. It is at once the centre of our universe and of the universe itself. Returning again to the poetics of Marc:

> The house is seen as the fullest and oldest manifestation of the psyche. Like dance, like song, it represents a necessity of expression, with the added function of protecting a vulnerable creature in the course of his development. Its reality is durable and tangible: the place whence all human activities have emerged. It provides the necessary base from which consciousness is formed, consolidated and expanded, and the self-defined. The house is the hearth, the common ground of the psyche's growth and transformation.[16]

Veritably, the house always satisfies its initial function of shelter, a given of all buildings. And, like architecture, its significance goes beyond the basic necessity of a physical enclosure. The house has become both a metaphor for the mother womb and a mirror of self. Ultimately, when it achieves its essence, this first form of architecture is a symbolic manifestation of the sanctuary of conscious and subconscious eternal being.

NOTES:

1. G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 4.
2. C. Cooper, "The House as Symbol of Self," *Designing for Human Behaviour,* ed. Jorh Lang et al. (Pennsylvania: Dowen, Hutchinson & Ross, Inc., 1974), p. 138.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 137-138.
4. O. Marc, *Psychology of the House* (London: THames & Hudson, 1977), p. 14.
5. K. Bloomer & C. Moore, *Body, Memory and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 5.
6. Cooper, p. 131.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
8. Bachelard, p. 6.
9. Bloomer & Moore, p. 2.
10. Cooper, p. 136.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
12. M. Vitruvius, *Vitruvius: The Ten Books of Architecture,* trans. M.H. Morgan (New York: Dover Publication, Inc., 1960), p. 38-40.
13. J. Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primative Hut in Architectural History,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 44.
14. Vitruvius, p. 40.
15. Rykwert. p. 190.
16. Marc, p.67.

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