Dwelling in Architecture

HONORS THESIS

JONATHAN SINCO
The home in the present day is either loved or ignored. The otherwise oblivious occupant either applies time and effort into their residence, or they ignore it altogether as an architype of modern day repour. The way people live in their home can reveal values, habits, and worldview. The symptom of lack luster occupation often stems from an ignorance to questions which need careful consideration. If the homeowner fails to recognize the systemic issues which come to define a shortchange in the act of dwelling. The resident then, will continue to live with disadvantage. The rise of suburbia in the present day has transformed the discipline of space planning and place making into a business of the home. This business has been reduced to cost and profits trading the art of dwelling for a product.
The service the homebuilders are providing substitutes design for a customizable shell which can be painted or trimmed to the clients desire, while wholly ignoring issues of occupation altogether.

One of the greatest home makers of the 20th century describes these shells as a, “Bedeviled box with a fussy lid: a box that had to be cut full of holes to let light and air, with an especially ugly hole to go in and out of.” (85) The problem with treating construction and home building in this way is that the market becomes so saturated with these light frame gypsum shells that the occupant who is now the consumer becomes irrelevant to the practice of architecture. The idea of craft or art is so far from what is taking place in present day that design is forfeited and the architect released, with a used car salesman in his place. Wright writes about the shift he saw
taking place almost one hundred years ago when he gave the second of his two lectures on architecture to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930. Wright speaks to the phasing out of craftsmen in the decades after the industrial revolution, he writes, “The confusion arises because there is doubt in some minds, fear in some minds, and hope in other minds, that architecture is shifting its circumference. As the hod of mortar and some bricks give way to sheet metal, the lock seam, and the breaker- as the work man gives way to the automatic machine- so the architect seems to be giving way either to the engineer, the salesman, or the propagandist.” (91) Wright foreshadows the field of architecture today which is saturated by cost saving construction techniques. The architect is substituted for practitioners whose medium exists alongside the consumer. It is not that their techniques or methods are limiting, rather the discipline as a whole is more quickly and commonly understood, this giving allowing architecture to be viewed through the lens of criticism.
The discipline of architecture is critiqued by those in the building industry and those outside of it. Critiques may be reviled or unrested by the range of questions the architect asks of the client, the site or landscape, and the light quality. The critic will dismiss these issues as arbitrary or even obtuse to the client, budget, and construct. The Palladian villa was considered by Witold Rybczynski to be paramount in the discipline of architecture.
Witold writes in his book the perfect house that, “Much of the potent architectural symbolism associated with the home, whether it is the grand porch of a stockbroker’s mansion in Connecticut or the modest pediment over the front door of an American colonial bungalow, is derived from these sixteenth-century structures. It all starts with Palladio.” (Forward XVI)
Palladio was considered to be one of the first architects to move focus from the temple or the palace, to a scale which otherwise had been ignored, the residential. Witold Rybczynski writes of the dichotomy of home construction which speak to the level of questioning the architect employs when designing a dwelling. Witold illustrates the carefully mastered design in his villa Godi describing it as a, “Polished work of architecture and a sturdy farmhouse. Like a country gentleman in a tailored hacking coat and muddy rubber boots, the villa fits into its surroundings, even as it holds itself above them. This quality would permeate all of Palladio’s villas, which are both sophisticated and rustic, genteel and rude, cosmopolitan and vernacular.”

(7)
Architects have devoted their lives to the expertise and rigor of studying the home, the process of designing the home can exist as a capstone in the designer’s career, one which asks the simplest but most detrimental questions about making and dwelling. Wright speaks about the personal experience of designing the home, “As it worked with Louis Sullivan in designing the skyscraper, thus did going to the source work with me in building houses as the subsequent, consequent, flock of ideas that take flight from any constructive idea put to work.” (84)

The work of the architect in designing the single family home, produces compelling positions of site, sound or acoustics, light, and occupation. These conditions quickly become architecturalized, teams of designers work to understand and react against or control the external forces which will be exerted on the proposed construction. Issues of how the construct will touch the ground, where it might need to be built up, or canted, the proposed building’s
orientation, or its identity as a barricade or threshold are all issues designers grapple with pertaining to the site. Although issues of site may seem upfront for the architect or engineer, the abstract questions of light and occupation are where the architect’s training becomes foremost. Knowing where to parrot the surrounding landscape and when to juxtapose it comes through a deep appreciation of the landscape and is used to quiet his designs, “Organic simplicity might be seen producing significant character in the harmonious order we call nature: all around, beauty in growing things. None insignificant. I loved the prairie by instinct as great simplicity, the trees and flowers the sky itself, thrilling by contrast.” (85) Light can activate a space and adorn the enclosed space with a type of magic which can only be sought after by an appreciation of the progressive quality that inhabits each new day. Time is the instrument which operates the collection of light in a proposed space. The aperture can only act as a frame to the illuminated canvas, “More and more light began to become the beautifier of the building- the blessing of the occupants. Our arboreal ancestors in their trees are more likely precedent for us than the savage animals holed in for protection.” (90) The study of these external forces through architecture are too often at the wayside of the building project if the team of designers does not compliment the scale of the construction. The scale of the home then allows the designer or team to not only ruminate but mark a theme and variation of these architectural diversities. This then makes the designer who he is, the home acts as a scaled
model at 32 times under the true scale, a mock-up which can scaled to create compelling compositions for a community scale, not just that of the family.

Considering the home as a type of detail in an agglomerated drawing set requires the abdication of programmatic and elemental frill.

The type of integration which makes a residential scale project cooperate is exchanged for celebrated craft and diagram which becomes a materialized project. Wright describes the type of synthesis necessary to achieve such an installation, “More clearly emerging from previous practice, now came clear an entirely new sense of architecture, a higher conception of architecture: architecture not alone as form following function, but conceived as space
enclosed. The enclosed space itself might now be seen as the reality of the building. This sense of the within or the room itself, or the rooms themselves, I now saw as the great thing to be expressed as architecture.” (89)

Since issues of importance are solved at a smaller scale the question of engaging a communal scale becomes what can be traversed in the scale change. If enclosure is architecture according to Wright, the question of what defines enclosure is primary. In a geometric sense the top of the mass is central to the question of what encloses a space. Wright includes this body of thinking in his writing, “An idea that shelter should be the essential look of any dwelling put the spreading roof with generous projecting eves over the whole, I saw a building primarily not as a cave but as shelter in the open” (86) The overhead plane then should not only be respected, but realized as the jumping off point for a project who takes the same care found in designing a private residence, and scaling it to a communal scale.
A systematic study of the section of the building which touches the sky is employed through a careful look at a key detail in Wright’s repertoire, the geometric diagram used in each of Wright’s projects holds three dimensional answers within a one dimensional diagram.

Extracting and architecturalizing a detail gives an intensity to the assembly which supports the architecture in the truest sense. This type of assembly, when used in the overhead plane
becomes a celebration of materiality and space. A deliberate but quiet column grid lifts the architecture to the sky and allows the systems which are carefully revealed to be realized by those under it. Just as the diagram may be iterated in the same way the overhead is worked to capture light and provide shelter in a range of applications. The iterations not only support the architecture, but transform the overhead plane into a fixture, lasting in strength as much as it is
in beauty, which defines architecture, “The center of architecture remains unchanged
because—through all unconfessed or ill-concealed- beauty is no less the true purpose of
rational modern architectural endeavor than ever, just as beauty remains the essential
characteristic of architecture itself.” (92)
Bibliography
