

Non-House Theory as Applied to a Project for a (Non)-Museum for the City of Auburn, New York

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The central tenet of Non-House Theory (NHT) is the proposition that the *desire for non-house* is as essential an ingredient to the realization of dwelling as is the (more apparent) desire for house. In other words, in the process of realizing and experiencing architecture, the physically tangible and tactile aspect of architecture is intimately connected to a metaphysical, non-physical dimension, a dimension which is summed up by what we call a desire, a desire for non-house. These two forces, the desire for house and the desire for non-house, work together as opposing polarities, much like the negative and positive charges found in the physical sciences, to realize a unity of expression. We contend that, in fact, the presence of both must be operating in order for even the possibility of approaching the wholeness of being which is summed up by the word "dwelling." We have written upon this subject before', and here we propose to illustrate some of the theoretical principles of Non-House thinking in a project for a museum for the city of Auburn, New York. However, since Non-House Theory is a new perspective in the overall discourse on dwelling, some introductory material needs again to be outlined.

NON-HOUSE AND ARCHE.

First, it must be noted that the conception of the furniture of the material world being tied to a metaphysical, non-material *arche* (origin) is rooted deeply in the origins of Western thought. In this sense, Non-House theory is not meant to be a new theoretical stab in the dark, but rather a recovery of some early philosophical constructs. Take, for example, Plato. When we speak of form in a Platonic sense, we are actually not referring to a material form at all, but rather to an idealized perfection of that form which we have never seen, which cannot be seen (because for it to materially exist would be a contradiction to its perfection), but which nevertheless is substantive and not merely imaginative. In Platonic form, we are touching the region of the *eidos* and, for Plato, the *eidos* is the enabling basis for visible reality.² Plato's view of existence in the here-and-now is succinctly seen in his likening of the present human condition to life

lived in a cave, with the human being unalterably forced to look at the wall of the cave which is opposite to the actual cave opening (Fig. 1). Light coming from the (unseen) opening would cast shadows of any object unto the wall. The human being, by virtue of his unidirectional orientation, would be able only to see the *shadows* of real objects. The objects themselves are not accessible. They exist in the realm of the *eidos*. So it is with Plato's view of present reality.³

This application of the *eidos* (idea) to the realm of architecture may be captured by a question posed to Rykwert's vision of the hut in paradise. This line of argument has a long tradition in Western architectural theory-making. Vitruvius started the notion of the hut as the *arche*.⁴ To Laugier, the primitive hut was the positivistic reference for all acceptable architectural expression.⁵ But Rykwert is the most recent theoretician to anchor his treatise on the primitive hut. Rykwert posits that there was an original hut in Eden,⁶ and that every subsequent architectural expression traces back to this hut in some way (Fig. 2).

For our part, we have asked the question: what if there was no hut in paradise? What if the hut was not the ultimate, but

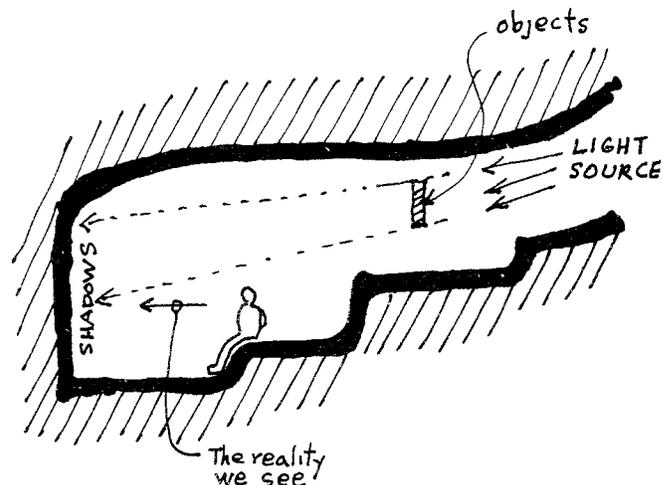


Fig. 1 Plato's cave



Fig. 2 Rykwert's Hut in Eden

rather the penultimate, condition? What if, in short, paradise *itself* was the hut? In other words, could it be that the essence of dwelling is rooted in an original continuity with the natural environment such that any man-made membrane (wall, roof, HUT, etc) becomes a necessary departure from dwelling? If this is so, then the original hut must be viewed in a totally different light. It no longer becomes a holy grail. Indeed, it renders the term "hut in paradise" somewhat of an oxymoron, because any hut in paradise would render the paradise no longer paradise. In this light, the hut just becomes one more obligation, one more "ought-to" and, as such, becomes a departure from dwelling in its purest sense.

A tension is then set up. Let us call it the eidos-membrane tension. On the one hand, there is a substantive, albeit non-physical, ideation of form. On the other hand, physical form is absolutely needed for dwelling in the here-and-now. And we have traced through history the tendency for non-house to push the architectural endeavor more and more towards the disappearance of the house.¹ But could the house fully disappear? No. In the here-and-now, there is the need for some discontinuity with the environment by way of the membrane. After all, we've got to keep the rain out. We've got to strive for thermal comfort. But we must not mistake thermal comfort and all that that stands for (safety from the elements, the maintenance of a certain narrow zone of temperature and humidity) as ultimate comfort. Thermal comfort is not dwelling as such. We all are acquainted with the experience that the human soul could be thermally comfortable but not ultimately satisfied. What is missing? Well: thermal comfort, achievable by the membrane, has to do with the desire for house. But there is also a desire for non-house which ought not be neglected even though, because it is such a quiet force, it has. This is the tension: the interplay between the (loud) cry for HOUSE and the (quiet but present) desire for NON-HOUSE.

So here is the critical truth: due to this tension in the here-and-now, a pure expression of *non-house* in our present

condition is not possible. Any physical attempt to realize pure non-house is to defeat its own purpose. This is why Non-House Theory speaks of the desire for non-house. It is a desire. And we have contended that this desire, though quiet, is nevertheless very strong.

PURE NON-HOUSE EXPRESSION SEES NO DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND "STRUCTURE."

In the purest sense of non-house, there is no discontinuity between environment and "structure." Current practice, based upon the overwhelmingly stronger consciousness of HOUSE as opposed to NON-HOUSE, speaks of environmental awareness and contextualism. But we submit that these foci find their true origins (and indeed could only be explained) in the desire for non-house, which is to say, in a desire to be totally continuous with the environment. This is the reason, for example, for Johnson's glass house (Fig. 3), for Fay Jones' church in the woods, and for much of the subconscious driving force behind the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The very presence of material (that is to say, walls, roofs, windows, the styrofoam cup) necessarily drives the tension between comfort in the small sense (as in thermal comfort) and Comfort in a larger sense (continuity with the environment). This of course is a theoretical position. But radical continuity with the environment is in fact the ontological root of the environmental debate. From whence does the sense of responsibility for the "green" maintenance of the environment come from? We argue that it is rooted in the desire for non-house. The still small voice of non-house desire checks us and embarrasses us that we demand that our architecture be an architecture of materials. And yet the louder voice of HOUSE pushes us to go ahead with the gaudy logocentric statement anyway... This raises the question of the relationship of Non-House Theory to Deconstruction.

NON-HOUSE THEORY OPPOSITE OF DECONSTRUCTION.

As a transition to discussing the Auburn (non)-museum, we note that some physical manifestations of NHT may appear reminiscent of Deconstruction, but that the theoretical framework of the two is diametrically opposite one with the other. Deconstruction refuses the possibility of a perception of presence, elevating the supremacy of the symbol. In other

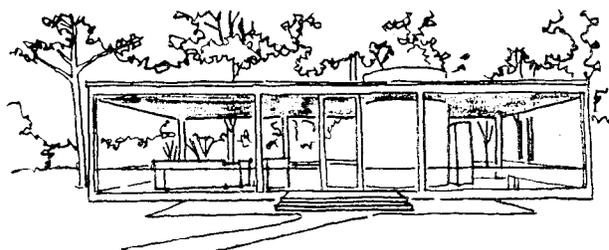


Fig. 3 Glass House, Philip Johnson

words, in Deconstruction, the signifier is an *enfant terrible*, while the signified is inaccessible. Deconstructive architecture is therefore a celebration of the autonomy of the symbol. It is the architectural version of this rubric: while the cat is away, the mice play. And so, for example, Eisenmann puts a column right through where the dining room table is in his House VI.⁸ Such is the play of the mice. Indeed, *play* is a big word in Deconstruction.

We argue that the party is way out of hand. We concede that the cat may in fact be away, but the cat is not as far away as one would like to think. We argue that the signified, though not visible, is very much accessible. We argue that there is a sense in which the signified is always with us in (perhaps what Plato would call) the awareness of the region of the *eidōs*. We argue that, in architecture, this awareness actually keeps play within certain bounds. We argue, indeed, that the achieving of true dwelling in architecture is making the membrane subservient to this awareness, deferring to it. It is the recognition of the desire for non-house.

The problem with the overemphasis upon the supremacy of the material realm, as is the case with the flow of architectural development in the West, is that the deferring to non-house is lost. As a response to this state of affairs, Deconstruction rears its head by saying that the sign is supreme. But Deconstruction, for all of its insistence upon an escape from logocentricity, is itself logos-bound, at least when it is practiced *as architecture*. This is because it always ends up with the same material form which it condemns in theory - it ends up with something one could come to, something one could "go inside of", something one could say is a "piece of work", in short, something which is, well, a building.

Non-House Theory is also a response to the same state of affairs (that of an overemphasis on logocentric materiality). Whereas it does not insist on invisibility, it nevertheless wishes to capture the original state of things by means of an architectural expression which, in the end, does not give in to the material supremacy of the building-as-symbol.

In the project for the Auburn museum, this discourse takes on the problems inherent in an actual project of three dimensions. How do we "museum" Auburn? How does one capture the totality of memory, the totality of being which is Auburn in an architectural expression? Deconstruction teaches us that the physical monument, as sign, actually re-invents the memory of a thing - and keeps re-inventing it until the thing itself is lost in the mists of impossibility. All monuments are therefore their own worst enemies. Their only use is actually to subvert any true memories of the truth.

But as suggested above, the Deconstructive commentary is actually only a commentary on HOUSE, not NON-HOUSE. If a museum is constructed for Auburn along the lines of HOUSE, it will in fact suffer the life-imprisonment of the crypt⁹ sentenced upon it by Deconstruction. The ontology of the museum becomes actually the synthetic ontology of the monument *to* the museum for Auburn. Deconstruction wins.

But if we approach the Auburn museum from the perspective of NON-HOUSE, we then defer to the *eidōs* of the museum.....

THE PROJECT: HOW TO "MUSEUM" AUBURN?

This project was a master's level thesis at SUNY Buffalo. The impetus for it came out of the preparations by the city of Auburn, New York, to celebrate its bicentennial in 1993. As part of these preparations, the issue arose as to how the memory/history of Auburn were to be commemorated. Included in the menu of ideas was the notion of the construction of a museum for Auburn.

Of course, at this point (and for the initial phase of the project), the notion of a museum for Auburn was taken at face value: another building (Fig. 4), labeled as museum, to be plopped down somewhere within the environs of the city. The building would contain standard museum fare: exhibits of relics in glass cases, perhaps employees dressed in period costume, the obligatory dioramas of historical settings. It would be the typical, generic, museum-as-monument, reiterated countless times in municipalities worldwide.

But the uncomfortable question arises: would the museum/monument actually do what it was intended to do? By creating a logocentric object-as-museum, what keeps it from becoming one more object in a city of objects? And what's more, it is a fact that some of the already existing objects-of-Auburn were already anointed, mostly by various permutations of happenstance, as more important than other objects. Does not such a solution for "museum" merely contribute to this arbitrariness? Indeed, does not the attempt to recall a memory or a history by means of a monument (-as-such, whether it be a statue or a museum or anything else) actually introduce a *new* thing, a thing which, if we are not told of its function, would not actually remind us of any specific aspect

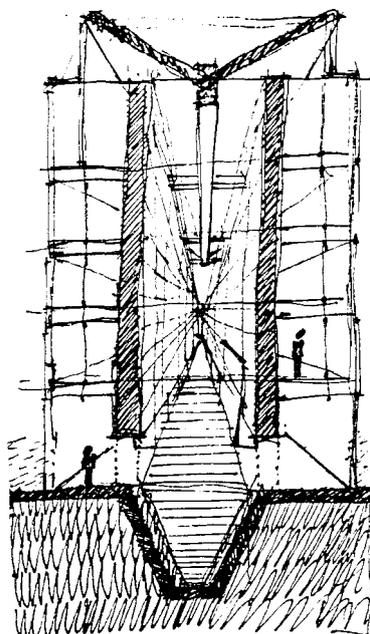


Fig. 4 Early design concept

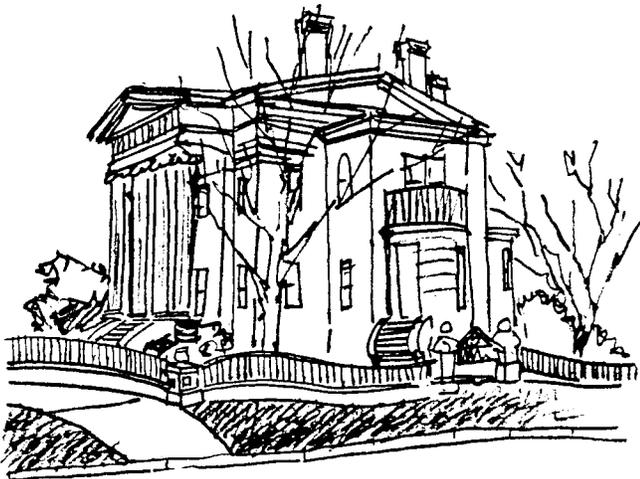


Fig. 5 Cayuga Museum, Auburn, NY

of Auburn? And once the exterior meaning is assigned to the edifice, we become victims of the fact that we are actually not celebrating the memory/history of Auburn, but rather celebrating something else which we have been *duped into thinking* is the memory/history of Auburn. In this way, monument *replaces* memory. In this way, an edifice creates new stories, but does not do well commemorating history-as-such. In this way, a logocentric monument actually subverts what it is actually intended to do. Of course, this line of reasoning is the line of reasoning of Deconstruction. And, as far as it goes, it happens to be correct.

And so, a questioning of the *idea* of the museum began to tear at the fundamentals of the project. How could a broader, more inclusive, and more accurate attempt be made to capture the memory/history of Auburn in architectural terms? The project started turning towards Non-House Theory.

We realized that an all inclusive gesture for a museum in Auburn necessarily required that *Auburn-as-totality* be the museum. Rather than a site-specific object, anointed with arbitrary privilege (Fig. 5), *promoted* as THE monument to Auburn, what was needed was some kind of device which aids in *receding back into a totality of the memory/history of Auburn*. We needed not an architecture of promotion, which is an architecture of HOUSE, but rather an architecture of recession, harking back to continuities (as opposed to dichotomies). We needed an architecture of NON-HOUSE (Fig. 6).

The solution came from a contemplation of the original nine-square grid by which the city was initially surveyed (Fig. 7). It was felt that this grid, even though it obviously introduced the danger of Cartesian logocentricity, was nevertheless the key to a capturing of the original Auburn-in-totality aspect which the project was reaching for. This grid further enabled a theoretical basis by which to see the city as covered under "an equalizing blanket" in which various already-important objects-of-the-city (not only different socio-economic zones but also various natural objects such as points of topography and rivers, etc) would be linked to all other aspects of the city in an egalitarian fashion.

But again, non-house at this point comes up against its

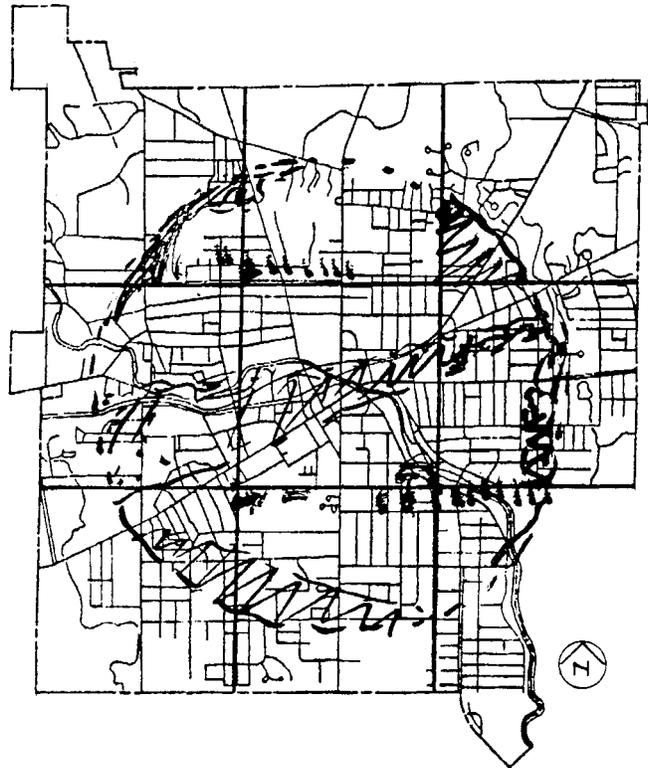


Fig. 6 Map of Auburn nine square and inscribed circle

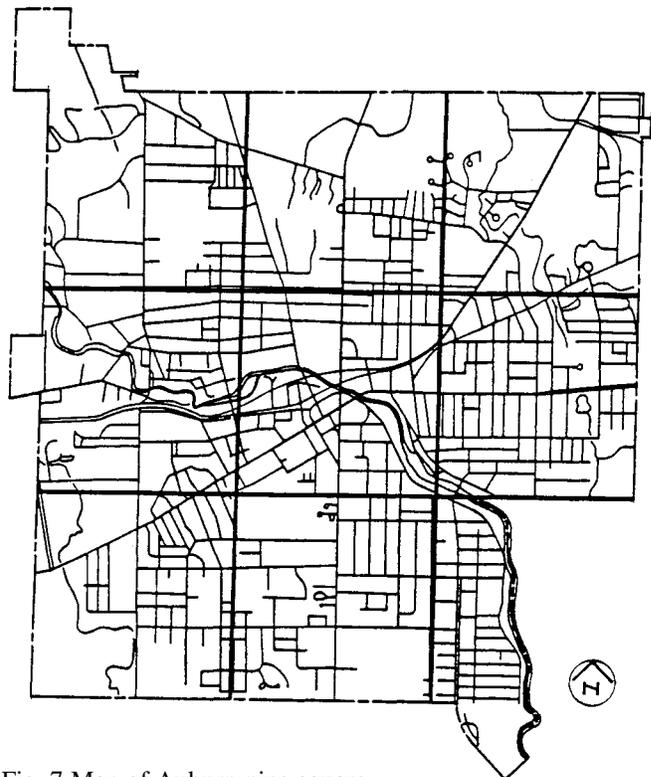


Fig. 7 Map of Auburn nine square

own impossibility. For it to remain just a theoretical grid would be the same as for it to remain inaccessible and encrypted. It cannot be totally invisible, although it must

concede that by being visible, it steps away from non-house nature in its purest expression. Given this concession, how could it step away from invisibility, but still celebrate a recession into the whole of Auburn?

In answer to this impossible question, the solution took two forms. First, the grid became the basis by which bits and pieces, subtle markers, were distributed throughout the city (Fig. 8). These markers were of themselves different, of themselves incomplete one without the other (Fig. 9). They were not to become discreet, logocentric "buildings." They were to be bits and pieces which deferred, each in its own way, immediately back to its context, back to the *whole(-someness)* of Auburn. Second, this distribution of markers necessitated a promenade through Auburn before the image of totality could be approached. In other words, to experience the non-museum of Auburn, one must experience Auburn.

And the level of the impossibility of this task is actually at the heart of the program of the Auburn non-museum. Does this approach bespeak only an exercise in futility? Is the grid really just logocentricity revisited by placing the whole city on a single "building grid" (in which case all we are talking

about is a fuzzy re-interpretation of the question of scale)? We think not. There is a level of impossibility in this, and there is a perhaps uncomfortable pushing of what the meaning of an architectural experience ought to be. But we feel that, in walking away from such an investigation, one walks away with a sense of having met up with Auburn-as-such, and not a museum-in-Auburn (interrupted by the invariable lunch break for hot dogs). We feel that this was a legitimate investigation of how Non-House Theory could be expressed.

The presence of the Cartesian grid and the inscribed circle are not meant to be primary. At ground level, at the scale of the individual, they are not materially perceivable. The suggested circle, which makes up bits and pieces of a promenade, suggests connectivity, but by dint of the scale of the "project" (that is to say, Auburn), it by necessity is incomplete at any one vantage point. But such, also, is the nature of presence. Along the various nodes and/or related intersections generated by this imposition of grid with circle, the non-museum itself is suggested by means of "markers" of three (very) general kinds: markers of crossing, markers of vertical form, markers of landscape. Obviously, this is not a "building" one could "come to." If you want to go visit the museum in Auburn, you must go visit Auburn.

The crossing markers are small in scale (relative to the person) and are for the most part pedestrian in nature. Although they can be seen from vehicles, a better way to grasp their gesture is by foot over the landscape. Each is unique, but they are tied together in their (incomplete) forms by a multiplicity of reasons, all of which point to Auburn in its metaphysical totality. In this way, an attempt was made to escape from an artificial history, a history which is not really the ephemeral actual history of the place, but rather a logocentric invention of the participants' own imagination.

Another type of marker is the vertical form. These mark crossings by means of a positive formal object. They straddle the crossing points and allow the viewer to engage the space by passing through the door. Some of these vertical forms also have attached to them the inevitable shelter related needs of "normal" buildings, but these shelters at any one marker is laid out in a purposefully incomplete sense, thus the one points to its completion at a point not visible to it.

The northwest corner of the city is a location for one of these markers. Here in the city landfill stands one of the places for a non-museum crossing. This marker is made completely of the things which have been disposed of by the city of Auburn. By the dictates of HOUSE, not a desirable place. But for non-museum to be realized, it is necessary, for it is part of the demand for Auburn-wholeness to be highlighted in a non-logocentric, non-privileged, way.

An example of a marker of landscape may be found on the sidewalk of Elizabeth Street in front of a small city park. It is marked by a change in the sidewalk material. A cross has been inscribed into the paving with the use of materials that were in the former building that once sat in the location where the park now is. The crossing of the brick in the sidewalk is extended beyond its borders into the street, park

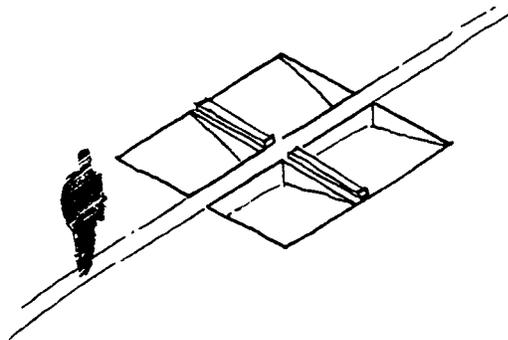


Fig. 8 Marker

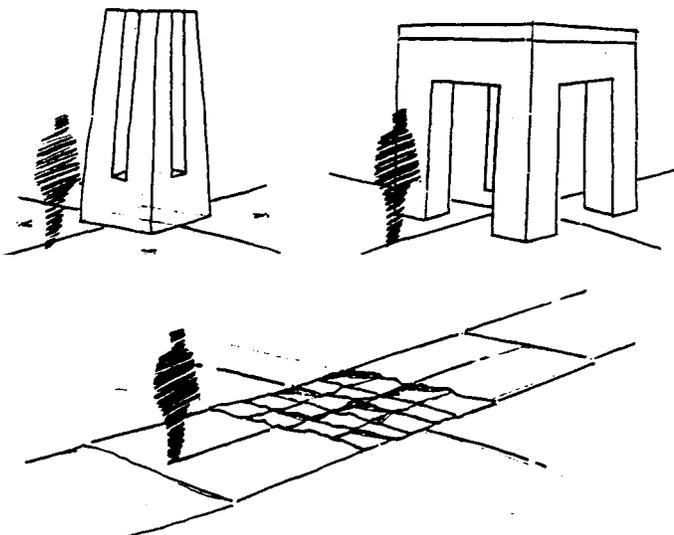


Fig. 9 Other markers

and down the path of the sidewalk. Material that once provided shelter is now giving rise to a greater understanding of the history of Auburn.

CONCLUSION.

In the Auburn (non)-museum, we have sought to push the architectural discourse into realms which are as-yet not fully charted. Of course, as we have noted, there has always been the symptoms. Venturi's Franklin Court in Philadelphia comes to mind as one example (Fig. 10). Here, to "museum" Benjamin Franklin's house, Venturi resorted to non-house, that is, he merely suggested the original house by erecting a framed outline of the structure, and placing it in a pattern of paving which forced the participant to fill in the unspoken realities of the original condition. Whether Venturi actually verbalized his theory in terms of non-house, we could not say. But certainly it is a valid interpretation of what he wanted to do.

In the Auburn (non)-museum, we not only wished to confront this same desire in a methodologically rigorous way, but in the very process of doing so, to state that all of Auburn itself must necessarily be the "site" of the endeavor.

Some have suggested that Non-House Theory is a reiteration of Taoist ideals in another costume. This is not correct. Of course, certain aspects of NHT may in fact display a patina of Taoist ideology. For example, Lao Tzu says: "Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room...adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room..."¹⁰ And Non-House Theory does say that the window is always the first evidence of non-house desire." But the difference is the issue of presence. Taoism says that presence is not accessible in the here-and-now: "the way is forever nameless..."¹² or, "the way that could be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name..."¹³ In this respect, the Tao is actually closer to Deconstruction. It is in fact a stronger ideology than

Deconstruction in that Taoist thought promotes the actual *doing of nothingness*, at least insofar as the civilizing arts. In contrast, Deconstructive architecture, while theoretically espousing all sorts of ephemeral terms such as "trace" and "play," is nevertheless at the material level exerting all kinds of energy...to build buildings.¹⁴

The critique which Deconstruction has leveled against onto-architecture (a term we use to describe any material, site-specific building) is that such an architecture is not a real expression of reality, that it involves instead all kinds of suppressed forces. And yet in its place Deconstruction has given us a menu of constructions which, besides themselves being logocentric onto-constructions, are filled with problematic jagged edges, both literally and philosophically. We feel that Non-House Theory provides yet another alternative for architectural expression. It is going back home to the *arche* by another way. It is our hope that others would take up and explore the possibilities which Non-House Theory provides.

NOTES

- ¹ Wang, David and Fama, Jeffrey. "The Desire for Non-House: The Use of Technology in Architectural History to Achieve Continuity with the Environment" in *Design and Technological Innovation for the Environment*. Proceedings of the 12th Annual ACSA Technology Conference. (ACSA, 1994). pp. 190-195.
- ² Friedlander, Paul. *Plato, An Introduction*. (Princeton University Press, 1969). pp. 3-31.
- ³ Plato. *Republic VII*, 514-517.
- ⁴ Vitruvius. *The Ten Books of Architecture*. II/1.
- ⁵ Laugier, Marc-Antoine. *An Essay in Architecture*. trans. Wolfgang and Anni Hermann. (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977). pp. 11-14.
- ⁶ Rykwert, Joseph. *On Adam's House in Paradise, the Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*. 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1981).
- ⁷ Wang/Fama. *op. cit.* 190-195.
- ⁸ Benjamin, Andrew. "Deconstruction and Art / The Art of Deconstruction" in *What is Deconstruction?* A. Benjamin/C. Norris (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988). p. 42.
- ⁹ see commentary on encryption in *ibid.* pp. 46-47.
- ¹⁰ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. 1.21.27.
- ¹¹ Wang/Fama. *op. cit.* pp. 191-192.
- ¹² Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. 1.32.72.
- ¹³ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. 1.1.1.
- ¹⁴ "Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words..." Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. 1.2.6. "Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail..." 1.3.10.

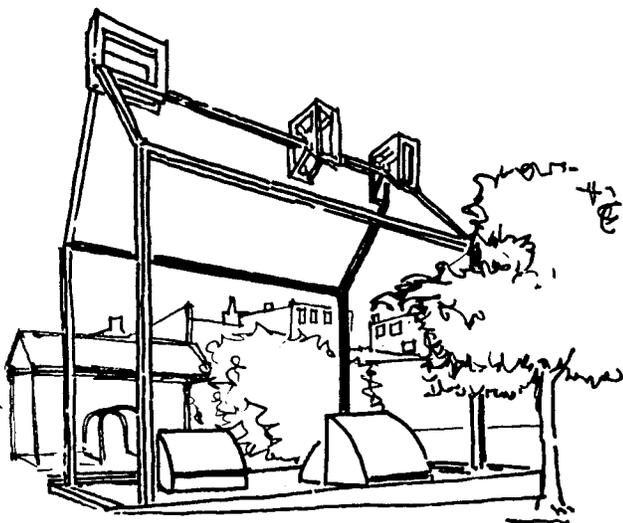


Fig. 10 Franklin Court, R. Venturi