

# Living on the Second Floor: An Architectural Project of Furniture

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If we attain to the limit at which dream becomes exaggerated, we experience a sort of consciousness of constructing the house, in the very pains we take to keep it alive, to give it all its essential clarity. A house that shines from the care it receives appears to have been rebuilt from the inside; it is as though it were new inside. In the intimate harmony of the walls and furniture, it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside, and they know little or nothing of the 'wax' civilization.

- Gaston Bachelard

Living on the Second Floor is an investigation of the relationship between the suburban rental dweller and The American Dream of the single family detached house. In identifying the expectations and aspirations attendant with the pre-occupation of home-owning, this project addresses the schismatic conditions existing between the acts of home-making, a type of settlement, and renting, a type of trespass. This appears most acute when inscribing the traditional patterns of homemaking established in the domestic landscape of the free standing house within the framework of the suburban apartment. With the increasing prospect of renting housing versus private ownership, the maintenance of the domestic landscape becomes increasingly frustrated by the conceptual and physical dimensions of the apartment. This project addresses this frustration through five speculative structures which expand upon furniture's capacity to inscribe the patterns of home-making in the limited space of the apartment.

## THE APARTMENT

Unlike the urban apartment, which is made necessary by the density of nineteenth century urban fabric, the suburban apartment is an outgrowth of the expansionist and economically speculative tradition of the American middle and far west. The planned towns and developments of that era aspired to a future civic presence that the densely populated contemporary suburban apartment complex fails to recog-

nize. Often, criticism of suburban apartment development is through dialectic comparisons with the apartment's urban opposite, primarily focusing on the absence of civic space associated with the suburban complex. With the suburban complex valuing of sub-urbanity the suburban housing type is essentially a maintenance of rural principles and therefore the lack of civic cohesion is preferred. In this light the suburban apartment purposefully recedes from issues of cultural place and intentionally becomes an un-ornamented framework for dwelling; a mechanistic housing where the programmatically limited functions of enclosure are necessarily independent of the housed. It is not surprising then, that the singular apartment is defined by gracious anonymity, avoiding specific reference to the inhabitant.

The trend towards rental dwelling is the result of the economic burden facing the potential home owner with the cost of housing per income dollar having risen sharply in the last twenty five years. At the same time the increasingly fluid demographics marked by internal migrations and changes to the social infrastructure of the American landscape has challenged traditional ideas of the permanence implied by domestic independence. In the light of these conditions the Jeffersonian ideal to be of the land, where one first possesses the land and then in return is shaped by that ownership is increasingly perceived as a luxury rather than a necessity. However, this changing aspiration of home ownership has not replaced the expectations of home making.

"A house is not a home."

- proverb

Home making: a continual act of personalizing space, is antithetical to the institutionalized practices of the apartment. The apartment, defined through lease or contract, establishes a conditional trespass which, upon the lease's termination penalizes the personalization of space, effectively removing from the occupant's control the boundaries of the home: walls, ceiling, floor, and often, the landscape. A limiting rather than liberating device, the lease places implicit value on the non-traceable presence of the inhabitant. In light of the American Dream, which equates indepen-

dence and individuality with property (home-ownership) the apartment frustrates a fundamental need to homestead, or *settle*. Additionally, integral to the terminal nature of any lease (usually twelve months) is the eventual *unsettling* of the homestead. The nomadic likelihood of moving, un-settling and re-settling, places a premium on the mobility of individual possessions. The home of the apartment dweller, therefore, is more often a collection of objects rather than the transformations of property permitted by ownership. Collections that are limited by the dweller's tolerance for density within the pre-determined volume of the apartment.

Every piece of furniture, every thing, every object had a story to tell, a family history. The house was never finished; it grew along with us and we grew within it. Of course it did not have any style to it. That means there was no strangeness, no age. But there was one style that our home did have - the style of its occupants, the style of our family

- Adolph Loos

Home making, as opposed to house building, is realized through two significant acts: object collecting and *setting making*. Setting making, forming venues for objects, is a transformation of the fabric (physical properties) of a house. Every object that is possessed becomes an extension of the possessor into that fabric; establishing the home as an autobiography of the home maker. Inherently nostalgic, the biographical dimensions of *Home* encompasses all collected artifacts, whether common, special, useful, trivial, or reserved. Of these artifacts furniture, etymologically and physically, occupies the most profound relationship between the home maker and the house. Architectural in construction, scale, and craft, and anthropomorphic in proportion and tactility, furniture, as an object, is ambiguous in that it can function both as object and as setting. Wearing over time, furniture becomes unique, containing biographically potent registrations, erosions and imprints of the dweller, directly recording activities of the *Home*.

Historically, to *furnish* meant outfitting; the *making* of a house habitable. In this light the migration of *Households* associated with the formulation of the American dream in the nineteenth century illustrates furniture's fundamental role in homesteading (the act of settling). The well traveled furnishings, multi-generational personifications of the household, served as progenitor of the house, establishing a collateral relationship between the *house*, *household*, and *homemaker*. Into the twentieth century the relationship between the house, furniture, and occupant remained constant; between the handmade house and the handwom *home*. With the introduction of furniture and architecture's mass production and commodification, however, this relationship was severed. The implications for the apartment resident as home-maker are profound; removed from any position of authority over the apartment, the traditional form of establishing *Home* has suffered a concomitant loss of capacity to settle a neutral housing.

"Home is where the heart is"

- proverb

## FURNITURE

Furniture, is the only form of settling that is transportable and like architecture, can be meaningful in form, use, and making. The specificity of furniture to basic issues of dwelling elevates these issues to meaningful events, repeals the cultural emptiness of the apartment and redirects the discourse surrounding the apartment 's stated intention: dwelling. Where the apartment relies on the strategy of joining functions within undifferentiated space (as in the Living/Dining room) to expand the perceived capacity of the apartment as a house, each construction's programmed specificity runs counter to this programmatic non-specificity. With this, furniture is redefined as the medium of settling, charging furniture as *the* medium of home-making within the physical dimension of the apartment. To do this, furnishings function both as significant object, a marker of family history, and as a setting; replacing what is not collaboratively present in the apartment: wall, floor, and landscape. In other words, furniture must be both house and *home*; acquiring the qualities of a house and yet, retaining the mobility of an object as well as bearing the biographical imprints of the dweller. While each of the following constructions exceed the normative expectations of furniture in scale and complexity, each is conceived with the eventuality of movement and, significantly, with re-settling, a process of reassembling the *Home*, mimetic of house building.

The issues of *home-making* examined through this project reveal the potency of the autobiographical *Home*, the past imprints of the dweller, in generating architectural form. The narrative capacity of biographical referents imbue the furniture constructions with a regional centering, inventing a Jeffersonian landscape contrary to the renter's nomadicism. Attendant with marking daily patterns of homemaking this nostalgic siting relies on the equation of land and permanence to establish the mobile homestead as the homologous presence of distant permanent sites. The resulting expanded dimensions of the suburban apartment, given the transformative, phenomenal, and embodied aspects of *Home* evident in each of the following constructions, is an amalgam of the dweller's desire for the permanence of location explicit in the American Dream and the exigencies of the renewable dwelling.

Home is what goes on inside a house

- American Express Commercial

## CONSTRUCTIONS

### *The Tableland*

The Tableland is comprised of two elements: a table and floor. The Tableland is effectively a room within a room, a location for the ritualized aspects of dining where the table situates the rarefied program of *Dinner*. Dinner, unlike breakfast or lunch, is a self contained iconic event within the day to day cycle of living. This daily cycle is punctuated by

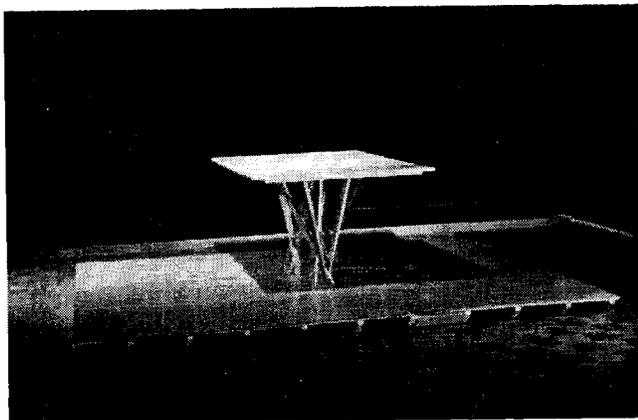


Fig. 1. The Tableland

meals of heightened status such as the Sunday dinner, the dinner date, and ultimately the Thanksgiving dinner marking moments of domestic significance. The plane of the table navigates and reinforces the programmatic dimensions of both the common daily meal and the more eventful with the table top reinforcing the discreet and formal nature of dining while the table legs exist within the unseen sensual realm of accidental (?) encounters between diners.

The overt materiality of the floor, in opposition to the neutrality of the beige or gray carpet, distances this construction from the ill defined adjacent space of the apartment. The floor construction, platform sheeting on two by four joists, sectionally reinforces this displacement establishing a physical as well as programmatic threshold. The vertical dimension of the threshold perceptually alters the apartment establishing a new visual horizon accessible only when dining. This horizon is at odds with the construction based latent proportioning of the common apartment where the four by eight sheet of gypsum wall board has become the de facto determiner of scale. The implication of this horizon potentially affects the ornamentation or dressing of the apartment walls. Images or objects hung with respect to the apartment floor are visually discordant with the perceptual vista from the Tableland. In effect, the Tableland develops a privileged



Fig. 2. Tableland Floor Assembly

prospect from which the apartment walls can be ornamented, nesting a second less tangible apartment within the original.

Assembly of the floor requires the measuring and plotting of the apartment which parallels the measuring and plotting of a prospective homestead prior to construction. This reestablishes the primacy of delineating or marking the "land" as a means of establishing place, with the construction of the floor, the remaking of the ground, the essential first act of domestication. The floor's assembly, mimetic of typical house construction (western framing), continues this parallel of homesteading through the reconstruction of the apartment ground as the floor upon which the house is built.

### The Field of Wheat

The Field of Wheat, a frame, two soil filled metal furrows, earth and wheat, establishes within the daily cycles of the apartment dweller the larger scaled cyclical patterns associated with the agrarian practices of maintaining the *Land*. Rooted in seasonal actions the Field of Wheat reinvests the land as a tactile experience within the otherwise hermetically de-climatized apartment. Repetitive seasonal occurrences, from the smell of damp fertilized earth in the spring to the rustlings of dried stalks in the fall breeze, counter the heat pump homogenized climate reconnecting the dweller to the mythical Land associated with the Puritan desire of American Bounty (the amber waves of grain). The physical exertion of tending the land, tilling, sowing, cutting and winnowing, imbues the apartment dweller with a consciousness of an agrarian yearly ethos not associated with the work week or the daily commute. Consequently, in opposition to the apartment's placelessness The Field of Wheat grounds the dweller's apartment within the functioning American midwestern landscape and within cyclically timeless seasonal patterns associated with the harvest.

As with the Tableland, the movement of the Field of Wheat from one apartment to the next recalls homesteading. Where the Tableland reconfigures the apartment internally the Field of Wheat locates the placeless apartment in the American heartland. Regardless of the apartment's geographic location, the end of the work day return home is a projected return to the mythically potent landscape of Grant Wood and Chevrolet. For travel the wheat field reduces to the constituent elements of a collapsible bedstead-like frame, the two metal furrows, tools for the field, and seed held over from the previous harvest. Earth, the most vital and least transportable element, is returned to the ground to be replaced from the next location. Upon arrival the preparing of the soil parallels the pioneer's sod busting of fallow land establishing the apartment once again through the activities of remaking the ground.

### The Corner Lamp

The Corner Lamp is modeled after utilitarian towers common to rural yards and landscapes and accompanies the Field of Wheat. The Corner Lamp is an anthropomorphi-

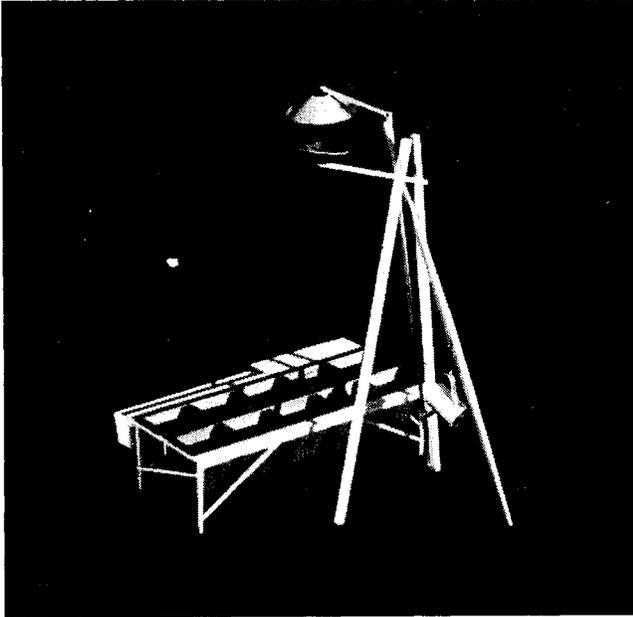


Fig. 3. Field of Wheat and Corner Lamp

cally vertical element which challenges the dominant horizontal of the apartment. Functionally, the Corner Lamp supports a watering can and light for the sustenance of the Field of Wheat and an additional ceiling light for the apartment. Derived from a category of background elements which are typically displayed against the sky, the Corner lamp challenges the vertical limit of the apartment. The wheat lamp switch is operated at the base of the bulb socket causing the apartment dweller to twice daily briefly brush the ceiling while tending the crop. Concurrently, the ceiling lamp casts an adjustable illuminated figure upward, transforming the ceiling from an irresolute plane to a simulacra of sky.

### The Prairie Schooner Sofa

The Prairie Schooner Sofa is the social framework of the Home. Capable of performing several roles within the daily pattern of living, The Prairie Schooner is not only a place of solitary repose but, may also in times of social need may be reconfigured as a love seat and two side chairs and may be folded flat as a bed for either the resident or house guest. Prairie schooner was the name given to the conestoga wagons of the pioneers, the essential vehicle of the overture to the American Dream, Manifest Destiny. This wagon was all *things* to the pioneers: the living room, the bedroom, the kitchen, the household and most importantly the vehicle through which to achieve the future Home. As with the conestoga, the Prairie Schooner Sofa is not intended as the sole element of the constructed homestead, rather, a vehicle from which to project the social aspects of *Home*. A singular element which is *all things* within the limited space of the apartment. Like this structure's namesake the Prairie Schooner Sofa is the embodiment of migration between homesteads, a functioning symbol of mobility. With the average

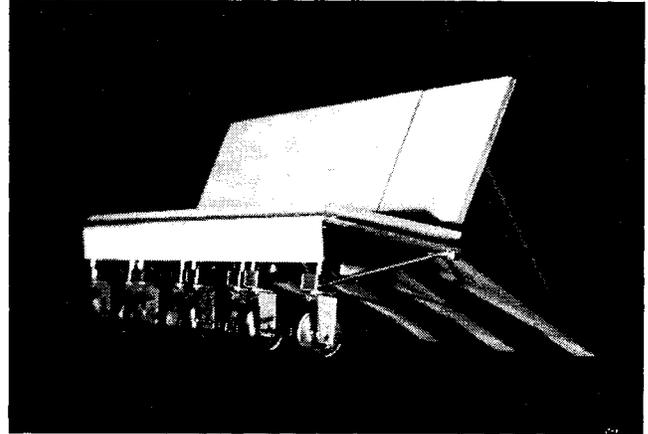


Fig. 4. The Prairie Schooner Sofa

apartment being occupied for three years or less between turnover, the sofa reminds of future mobility as did the abandoned wagons behind barns at the end of the journey, saved as a hedge against the failure of the homestead. The sofa, however, recalls that the apartment is temporary and will likely be soon needed.

### EPILOGUE

I did not know it at the time but, I began this project in December of 1990 in the Century City Holiday Inn. My hotel view of Los Angeles the morning after my arrival was this collection of banquet chairs on the roof below; the daily lunch spot of the hotel staff. This image later returned to me in Columbus, Ohio as I had recently moved into my third apartment in six years, lamenting that I had either too much or not enough things. In each previous move I had thrown out half of my furniture only later to collect more furniture to establish the new apartment. Through this ritual of



Fig. 5. Century City Holiday Inn

reducing and then re-expanding my home, I came to understand that the architectural condition of House was different from the architectural condition of Home and that while in many cases they could be one in the same this was not the case with the apartment. The physical dimension of moving, the availability of transportation, stairs, and the size of the apartment, I found, had a profound effect on what was

considered essential. Revealing, that Home is a conceptualizing of desired place written through objects. I have moved twice since, and in that time I have worked on this project partly in response to the homogeneity of suburban apartment housing stock I have experienced and partly a nostalgic desire for the Ohio landscape of my past, upon which much of this project is based.