

There's No Place Like Non-place

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Those who have deliberately spent time “nowhere” actively looking at “nothing” find themselves presented by a kind of stasis that has for so long been the traditional foil to architecture. In the main placelessness is seen by the profession as something for architecture to rectify. This paper explores this quality of placelessness through observations on the appearance of North American suburban housing. These observations are based on a six-month tour of the US from October 2002-03¹ and are comprised of a photographic and descriptive account of a series of different suburbs. The paper first describes the nature of this appearance in terms of a “normative” aesthetic and charts its association with the particular developments within visual arts and photography along with parallel architectural research into the ev-

eryday. It then looks at three particular instances of this aesthetic in terms of their attendant plan arrangement by comparing external appearance with typical uses within the home. The wider aim of this project is to re-appraise the “normative” within architecture that offers a critical reflection of the vast and prevalent condition of the contemporary suburban environment.

In this paper the term “normative” can be described as the “overtly familiar” imbued with a slight sense of estrangement.

TOUR

A more exact description of our tour we describe as a “repeated act of looking at the same thing.”²

Tomorrow" or "Signs Of Occupancy" by the Smithsons. In both cases their work relied in part on documentary type photography that provided a sense of direct experience. For the Smithsons, it is Mass Observation and Nigel Henderson and for the Venturis the work of Ed Ruscha and in particular "Every Building on the Sunset Strip."

The combined effect of these influences sets the terms by which we determine this normative aesthetic. Our repeated views of suburban houses are intended to elicit a sense a de-familiarized conventionality. Materials frequently carry a sense of slight misplacement. Brickwork appears indiscriminate, cladding over-expansive and windows slightly lost. Frequently the suburban house typology appears a little strained too. Often houses appear just a little too large, garages too prominent and dormer windows too many, perhaps by the count of one or two. Such anomalies carry a feeling of indifference which we encountered in many different forms during our travels. In all cases our attention was drawn to a sense of alienation that results from the ambiguities of homeliness and repetition.

The next phase of this paper considers how these visual categories might be read in terms of plan arrangements and movements within suburban homes, i.e. can the means by which we visually interpret the normative be applied to use? Do the movements within that carry a comparable sense of de-familiarized conventionality?

The following is an account of suburban house layouts drawn from a study homes in Houston, Dallas (Texas) and Ankeny (Iowa).

MOVING IN LOOPS

We became interested in David Weekley Homes⁹ because they appeared slightly excessive. These houses¹⁰ represent the latest in high-end North American suburban architecture.

Overtly traditional, outwardly "Ranch", explicitly "Chateau", excessively "Cape Cod" they proffer new extremes in the world of suburban imagery. However on closer inspection these buildings begin to take on an appearance that is at odds with the apparent familiarity of the traditional building

types to which they refer. While the language of the buildings is highly recognizable the form carries out a defamiliarizing role by appearing like a slightly enlarged conglomeration of the original. In plan they are outwardly not "Ranch", explicitly without "Chateau", excessively "un -Cape Cod."

The recognizable appearance of the house has little consequence on the plan. In the horizontal plane the visage of homeliness disappears and dispenses with tradition. The plan adopts a compositional system of its own making that is used to link a sequence of themes that result in a spatial expression of "LifeDesignSM – i.e. a blend of "design, architecture, engineering, physics, psychology and sociology"¹¹

David Weekley have created a hamlet of show homes at the New Home Center on Hwy 29 in Houston. One house collects a cowboy bar, an architect's studio, a child's apartment and a country kitchen together in a panorama of today's desirable activities. One space jumps to the other in a show that collectively reduces living to a collection of simulated activities. David Weekley takes a sense of thematic spaces and lifestyle scenarios to a new level. Going beyond the Victorian proscenium these houses break new ground with the spatial equivalent of channel surfing delivered through an abundance of available space.

This finds its apotheosis in the form of the apartment-within-the-house that the developers describe as a "retreat". A new domestic space that feels like it was generated from a designer's brief of "I need my own space" or "me time."

"There are times when even the closest of families need their privacy."¹² An owner's retreat is placed far enough away from the entertainment center or a child retreat that provides a "special place just for them."¹³

In one part of the house is "Dad's Bar "with pool table, saddle bar stools and a sofa." In another a pre-pubescent apartment with its own mini living room, bedroom, play area and bathroom. In another is a beauty parlor with walk-in closet and so on each giving rise to a sense that the house is now a set of individual centers of activity, which together trying to cohere as house. The result is a conglomeration of overstuffed forms bulging in all

directions and barely able to contain burgeoning embryo apartments within its walls.

This compulsion puts such pressure on the suburban house as to make traditional typological reference almost meaningless. At this extreme, we should start to consider it as something else. This house is too small to be called an apartment block but too big to be a house. It becomes is an apartment building for family members with individual apartments arranged around a hall that is probably closer to a small fraternity house.

This places great demand on the plan because it has to string together more themes without making movement completely ridiculous. The scenes are so intense that you do not realize how far you have traveled or how deeply you go within the building. Rooms can be strung together in a chain of up to five rooms leading one into the other.¹⁴ To alleviate this problem, rooms lead into other rooms with the consequence that you frequently travel in loops finding yourself back in a central space. Rooms (sometimes the most private) often have two doors turning them into semi transitional spaces.

Of the 315 floor plans offered in the "Handyman Home Plans" 50% have no "Hall", and 77% have at least one loop movement around the plan 10% of which pass through a toilet or bathroom. A typical loop movement runs;

entry-family room-breakfast-kitchen-dining

A more excessive movement comes from the "Porches All Around" variant that runs:

foyer-living-dining-family room -living-foyer

and

foyer-living-bedroom3-walkincloset/sink(bed3)-
bathroom-walkincloset/sink(bed2)-bedroom2-living

Designers of these contemporary American homes takes great pride in this achievement.

"These days, David Weekley Homes rarely uses hallways to move from one space to another. Now, other rooms have become our passageways. This has the added advantage of making small rooms seem larger when they are open to other rooms with good "Sight Lines." The key is to avoid Traffic Patterns that interrupt the intended use of the room. The best floor plans uses a technique called horizontal banding to accommodate Traffic Patterns"¹⁵

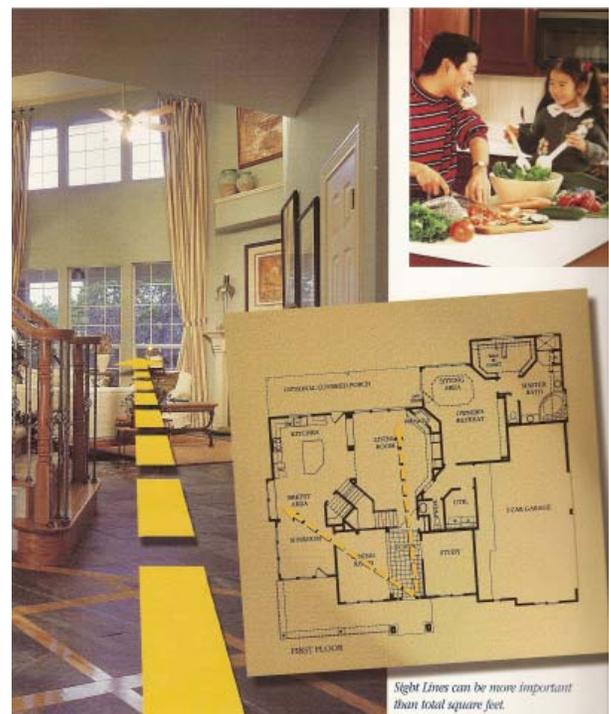
To better facilitate this flow homes adopt the 45% plan walls in the principle spaces that further encourage the movement around the house.

The kitchen and dining areas are the high point of this planning giving a maximum amount of uninterrupted movement where people avoid bumping into one another during social gatherings. Trade literature displays central spaces as having a multitude of escape routes through arches portals, door openings, and loggias. Furniture is placed in areas that would assist easy circumnavigation using the "horizontal banding" system.

DOUBLE DOORS

Please note that this is a toilet. It is also a corridor. It is taken from an apartment in the "Turtle Creek" community in Dallas in the "region of the city just off the I45 two exits north of downtown.

There is nothing unique about it and in fact it is more or less commonplace in contemporary up market apartments and houses. The two doors facilitate the duplicitous condition of being both a transitional and servant space depending on how they are arranged. One door opens onto a living dining area and the other an en suite bathroom that in turn connects to an adjoining bedroom



completing the circle back to the living/dining area. (You could be chased around these spaces and keep running in a loop). When I discussed this with the sales manager (social area and perpetual sales room) I got the verbal equivalent of the space. "Does this apartment have a toilet onto the living room - yes- does it have a toilet onto the bedroom yes - is there a corridor from the bedroom to the living room - yes- but I thought it was a toilet - it is -you said a corridor-well it all depends on how it is being used."

This creates a space that is functionally fluid in a practical way (despite the fact that it bears none of the hallmarks of what contemporary architectural thought wants "fluid" to mean). The switch from one use of the space to another is determined by how you secure the doors with small draw bolts. The designers see these doors as temporary walls according to when they are locked. When you lock the bathroom side door it becomes a "living room toilet". When you lock the bathroom side it becomes an extension of the en suite bathroom and when neither are locked - a corridor. The permutations are as follows:

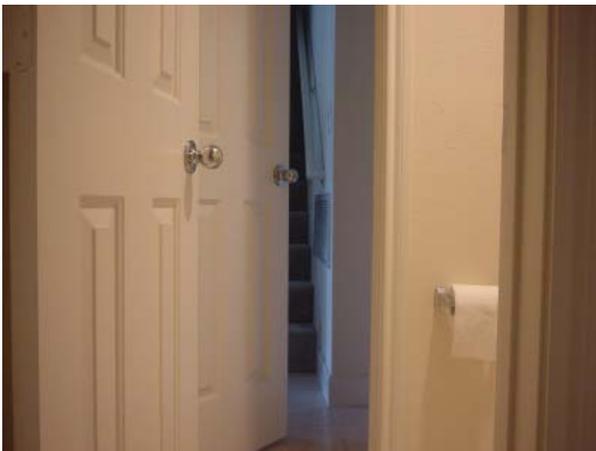
- Liv./O - Bath/L
- Liv./L - Bath/O
- Liv./O - Bath/O
- Liv./L - Bath/L

The final permutation is when the toilet is in use. In attempting to project some fixity to this arrangement, we imagined that the owners would secure the doors to suit the social situation, a different arrangement in the evening, during the day, friends, etc. We wanted to think that the consequence of a

planning invention like this would force a change in typical domestic routines. Seen in plan or in advance the obvious advantages of this arrangement outweigh the hidden consequences of opening and closing doors more than usual. But trying to imagine the implications without the actual experience is pointless. What actually happens is an approximation of the would-be hyperfastidious domestic practice. Like many multiuse designs, the appeal and selling point has the consequence of requiring extra attention which may lapse after time. Sometimes you do, sometimes you do not with a catchall condition of "when you have finished leave both doors unlocked" What transpires is a sense of indifference towards a space that lacks any apparent fixity. After time it lapses into a compromised status with both doors left swinging in a dance of indecisiveness.

When we first came across this kind of space I could not help thinking how it had created a similar sensation to Duchamp's Door, 11 rue Larrey i.e. an object that keeps resisting your attempts to categorize it in one role or another. In the case of the Dallas doors they are playing three roles. Thier ambiguous quality interests us because it is realized in an unconscious manner as its attempts to pass itself off as something quite normal. It attempts to slip by declaring itself just another toilet.

The two-doored toilet is one variant of these transitional rooms. All over the plan of the David Weekley house are rooms that resist the architectural compulsion to define served and servant spaces. They do this as a means to give purpose and character to every part of the house. Despite the "me



time" nature of the individual rooms the connected room plan produces an unlikely benefit. These plans reveal something akin to what Robin Evans describes in the plans of Villa Madama¹⁶ and the manner in which important rooms with connecting doors improve the chances of social interaction. Alberti Raphael considered the more connections the better facilitating their fondness for company, proximity and social relations. These are qualities that have gradually been eroded by the emergence of the corridor. While recent architectural thought has moved in favor of the "loose fit" relation of form and function it only does so within examples conditioned by architectural taste. The possibility that a new precedent for fluid space might lie within the bones of a Mac mansion is overlooked for its distasteful appearance and what it represents. While the trend in architectural criticism of the Mac mansion has been to reiterate that its de-socializing it is interesting to note that in plan it unwittingly delivers a credible opposite.

Another key element of today's ideal living spaces is the appropriation of modernist spatial arrangements. As in all cases with the Mac Mansion the ingredients of tradition undergo a disfiguring expropriation from their original sources to the point at which such associations become so disguised that they are barely legible. However they are still present and testify to the fact that Mac Mansions are hybrid compositions that cherry pick from the best elements and assimilate them into the overall scheme of things. Behind the garb and period décor lie formal compositions that could not possibly belong to the period to which the style refers. Whether the look is an all-pervading Shaker Kitchen or Colonial Family Room the bones of the space come from somewhere else. Any axial view or "room fixation"¹⁷ you may have in the original is now unachievable despite the "period look" that attempts to persuade you otherwise. The new composition arranges space under the design mantra of "Sight Lines" that may, with or without intention, translate as phenomenal transparency. Mac Mansion offer an interpretation of plastic space in practical market terms that gives you apparently more by way of visually presenting more of the house. "Sight Lines" allow you to see deep into the rooms and the rooms beyond creating visual access through a spatially rich environment. The juxtaposition of rooms offset from one another and the diverse array of apertures, doors,

arches, and windows combined with careful lighting and external views gives you a kind of layered composition and spatial depth. This idea pursued from different points within the building and vertically through the double height central space at each point reinforces and further affirms the effect. The spaces flow like modernist spaces though appearing like an indignation of neoplasticism cross-dressed in Jeffersonian attire.

BUMP-OUT

Now we are in Iowa and looking at another architectural device that assists movement across the plan. On SE Delaware and SE 9th St, Ankeny, Iowa is a new development called Millers Point. It consist of a small community of houses whose many features includes an extensive use of the "bump-out". It appears that bump-outs are regular additions to houses and there is no reason to assume that they are in anyway unique to this particular place. We had noticed them on other houses although in Ankeny they are especially large. We are informed that in order to retain the rectangular proportion of the room some additional features are pushed back in line with the internal face of the external wall. These features are typically bookcases and fireplaces which are sometimes paired together. This helps to minimize the intrusion into the space and in so doing maintains the movement across the living room. From within this has the curious effect of compressing these elements towards a two-dimensional wall finish. The fireplace approximates to a flattened, more two-dimensional fireplace. Again the effect is of an appropriated element that is at one remove from the original. From within this has the curious effect of once again cherry picking from a planar modernist approach towards storage and then collaging on familiar fireplace and bookcase elements.

However it is from the outside that the subversion of the fireplace is at its most extreme. At first it is a bit difficult to locate. Going outside and round the house you cannot be exactly sure where the fireplace would be though you are hoping that there might be some physical resemblance. Instead you get a cantilevered box that is only distinguished by a vent in the center. The cantilever is a way of adding to the plan without having to increase the footprint of the basement walls. This



gives the effect of pushing bits of the interior outwards without regard for where they are going or what effect they have on the already ad-hoc conglomeration of the overall form. The additive feel is then lessened by applying the same horizontal PVC cladding and asphalt shingles which, along with a familiar section of pitch roof, has the effect of subsuming the bits into the whole in a deceptively coherent manner. In effect the incongruity is disguised by this the all-pervading “normal” material of siding.

However it is the displaced familiarity of these bump-outs that attracted us to them in first place. Initially such things are easy to pass by and only attract attention after prolonged scrutiny. The incoherence is so understated that they fit in to the general context without any difficulty. However it is their understatedness that is a key factor to why we consider them architecture with a satirical quality. Here again there is the sense that suburbia casts everything in its own image to the point that it becomes contradictory. While the fireplace is a modern gas burner with a flue it is hardly likely to warrant a brick stack however what appears in its place is so far removed from the fireplace that it gains its own unique ambivalence. The position and appearance of the vent present the fireplace as an architectural element that has been reduced to a utilitarian vent in the short distance between the hearth and the protective grate. The small size of the vent set in the expanse of generic PVC siding gives a further abject nature to its existence. As nearly all the bump-out volume is the same PVC clad form it lends a further muteness to the architecture. While the bump-out formally suggests something like a door or a bay window

the lack such an opening conveys the properties of an erased, featureless house that is perhaps deformed or at best missing something important. Its blindness is further compounded by the cantilever that raises it above the ground and further alienates it from its attempted familiarity. It is this abject quality that we find interesting and potentially useful as a new form of architectural expression.

CONCLUSION

The appearance and organizational qualities of suburban houses offer an introduction to our observations on found anomalies of mainstream housing in the US. Further examples include; nearly invisible barriers of lawn junctions, accidental sublime in Las Vegas, concrete embossed brickwork basements of the Midwest, “spot-off” placement of ac vents (white horse ranch Houston), indiscriminate brickwork wall paper (Vegas), studwork forests (Dallas) and so on.

This paper suggests that these anomalies set the basis for a “normative” aesthetic that is derived from suburban housing. This aesthetic offers a re-appraisal of the normative by exploring a sense of de-familiarized conventionality. It also suggests that there is a parallel condition of this normative that can be found in the arrangements of these buildings and movement across the plan. At certain moments both the aesthetic and organizational properties of these houses arrive, unwittingly, at an ambiguous familiarity within which lies the possibilities of design. We presented them as cues for an aesthetic that is conscious of its own mute beauty and one that draws architecture from a narrative everyday living.

“I sometimes feel that I have nothing to say and I want to communicate this.”¹⁸

ENDNOTES

1. Tour financed by a sequence of lectures and exhibitions in US universities from October 2002 – April 2003. Tour lasted 178 days and we drove 22382 miles gave 18 lectures, held 12 exhibitions.
2. All work carried out in collaboration with Alex Gino, partner Gino Griffiths Architects.
3. Premiered in 1966 at “projected Art” Finch College Museum of Art, New York.

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4. Double Intersections: The Optics of Dan Graham. Birgit Pelzer. From Dan Graham. Phiadon Press Ltd 2001.
 5. See discussions with Oppenheim from Lucy Lippard – "Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 1972" Published by University of California Press April 30th 1997 or "Tour of the Monuments of Pas-saic" from Robert Smithson: The Collected Writtings" Published by University of California Press April 10th 1996.
 6. Text from Jonathan Green, American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present.
 7. Scanspace -Peter Marcuse, Elizabeth McNeil and Marc Rader – Published by Actar March 1,200)
 8. Robert Adams. "What We Bought: The New World: Scenes from Denver Metropolitan Area 1970 -1974" Published by Sprengel Museum Hannover 1996.
 9. See David Weekley Website <http://davidweekley-homes.com>
 10. Like many similar "Mac Mansions" we visited in Atlanta, Dallas, Phoenix and Las Vegas.
 11. David Weekley Homes brochure. 2002 P6
 12. Ibid. p10
 13. Ibid. p11
 14. David Weekley Website <http://davidweekley-homes.com/search.asp>
 15. Ibid. p12-13
 16. Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays. MIT Press
 17. Term used by Peter Smithson to describe lack of flexibility. Changing the Art of Inhabitation Alison and Peter Smithson -Watson-Guptill Sept. 1998)
 18. Damien Hirst