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Houses Disguised for the Future

Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny . . . is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.[1]

Predictions about the future seem futile and almost comical when one looks at them in the light of the predictor's own "river of time." "Iron-clad," inevitable, that unknowable future as prediction is nothing more and nothing less than a projection of the future. The actual future, just beyond our nose, is dim and indistinguishable.

On the one hand, we are told by the *New York Times* with assurance that as baby-boomers we will require larger and more substantial homes in the future and " . . . developers who supplied this baby-boom market for most of the last decade will have to switch tactics if they are to survive,"[2] while on the other hand, an increasingly visible portion of society remains homeless. So, whose future are we predicting—ours, theirs, or just mine?

Adolf Loos said (and I paraphrase), "the art object is revolutionary and the house is conservative," suggesting that the *Times*' baby-boom extrapolation is inevitable; the single-family house—regardless of what happens—will still be the dominant dream. Alas, my three futures are then improbable.

House Without an Alibi

I have argued elsewhere that the typical single-family house is a disciplinary mechanism that promotes a rigid and simplistic view of family life.[3] In fact, the only reason to perpetuate the endless proliferation of two-bedroom houses, with living-dining rooms, kitchen, garage, back and front yards, is to secure them as investment objects for the institution that holds the mortgage.

More intriguing, the typical single-family house is a symbol of self and family; in fact, its *alibi* is that it represents us as a people. Thus, like a fetish, the home has become a token of our image of self. Le Corbusier sensed this (and rejected it) when he enthusiastically promoted "the machine for living" as a liberation from the ancient house. The House without an Alibi continues this struggle by employing a different strategy.

Severing the house from its umbilical connection to live human beings leaves it afloat in a world of inanimate things. As a mere product, the house, its parts, and its grammar must now spin their own narratives and dreams.

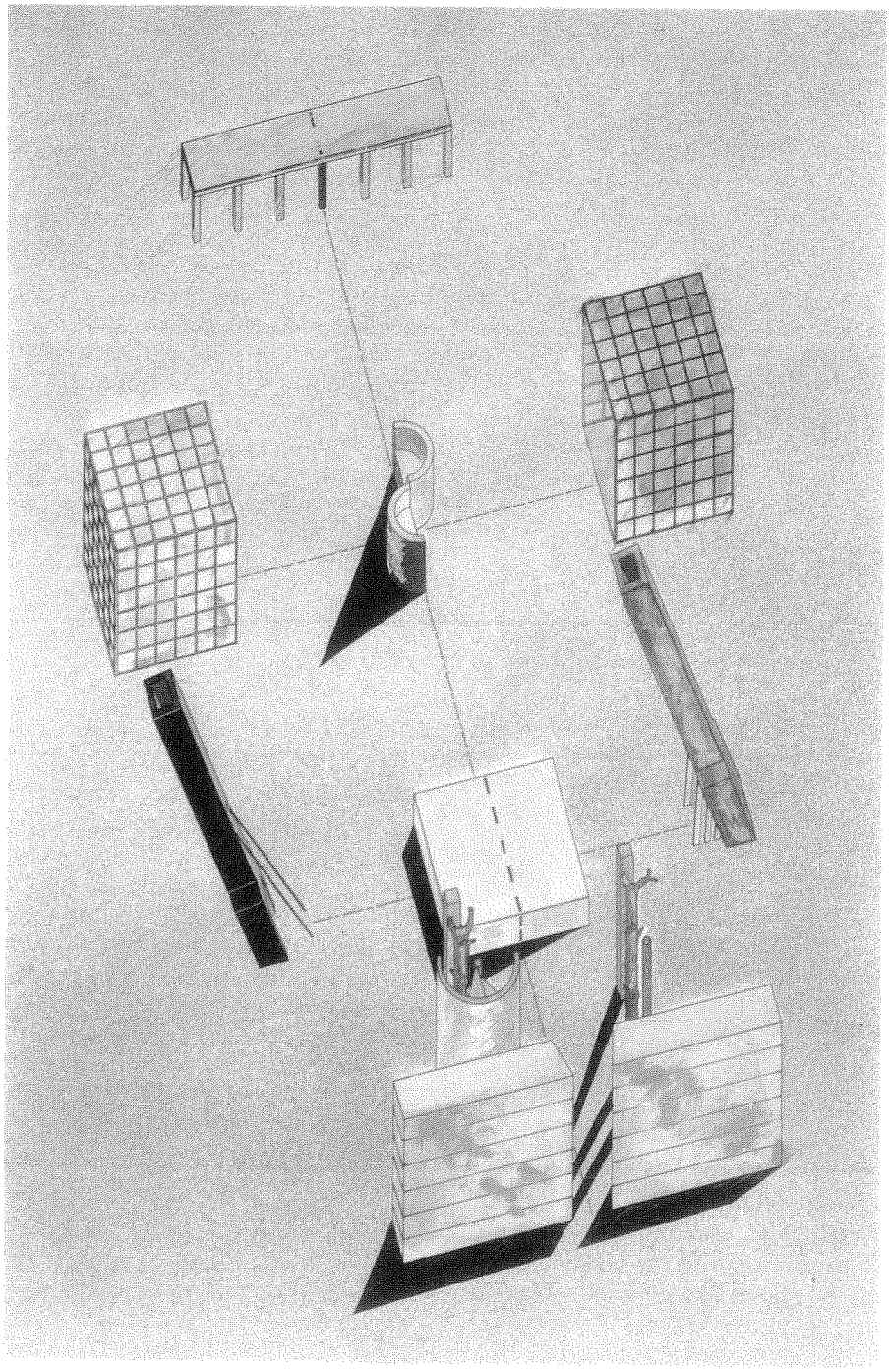
A first attempt to create such a neutral plane was the Texas Zero discussed in *Planned Assaults*.[3] The grammar of the archetypical home has been altered to create a plan degree zero in which the occupants must construct fresh links of significance with the built world. The familiar domestic elements are there, but in new relationships. Fireplaces, kitchen, bathroom, and so on have each been severed meticulously from the disciplinary grammar of the home. Each object is liberated from its referential position to restore its independence as a thing. The two leaning fireplaces, one in tension, the other in compression, separated by a sofabed, begin new sentences without the knowing subject of the user. In this instant they promote a knowledge almost without a known object.

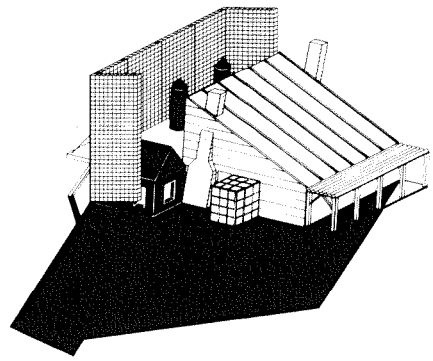
The neutral plan is different from the free plan in that its emphasis is not on functional flexibility and openness but on the flexibility and openness of meaning—Duchamps' coat rack is not only a coat rack but also a *trébuchet* (trap), the sofa is a bed as well, the fireplace is also an exercise in gravity.

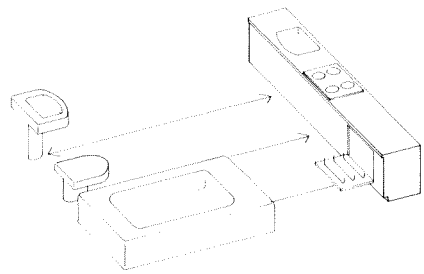
The exploration of the alibi-less house and the wilderness of the neutral plan has only just begun.

House as Many

Frank Gehry's work on the basic "dumb box" of Southern California suggests three rhetorical means of deviation from the set pattern of the box, the warped (Davis House), the wrapped (Gehry's own house), and the wrecked (Winton Guest House). The Winton Guest House begins to break the "plan" into its separate elements—each room becomes a







Texas Zero of 1981, axonometric, furniture, and equipment

house. The social implications of Gehry's wrecked plan point at continued compartmentalization and specialization of use as well as a tugging at the unity of the family, suggesting that its members may each soon require their own "house."

Twofold specialization of use and privatization may lead in two radically different directions, one in which the house is divided into minihouses for each of its members (this of course implies that we will still be able to afford single-family houses), another, where the house may need to become transformable to serve different uses and users, if not simultaneously, in sequence. Thus, much as in the traditional Japanese house, the equipment for each use such as sleeping and eating is stored away after it is used to accommodate the next use. Micro privacy devices and technologically light appliances may help in this process of rapid transformation—the house becomes a stage set or resembles a transformation toy. The key is lightness and appearance, light sources and sound barriers rather than cumbersome physical devices (e.g., movable walls). Likewise, ambiguous furniture, like sofabeds rather than single-use easy chairs, will furnish these chameleon-like rooms.

House as Ectoplasm

Both of the above strategies rely on the house itself and its inhabitants as their origin and assault, and transformation or mutation as the techniques for reshaping them. The final strategy has a different origin; in fact, until recently it has had virtually no manifestation in built form.

The machine analogy in architecture (via Le Corbusier and, later, Archigram and NASA) has brought the house closer to the human body—studies in ergonomics and space travel have completed the circle by making the ultimate house a spacesuit.

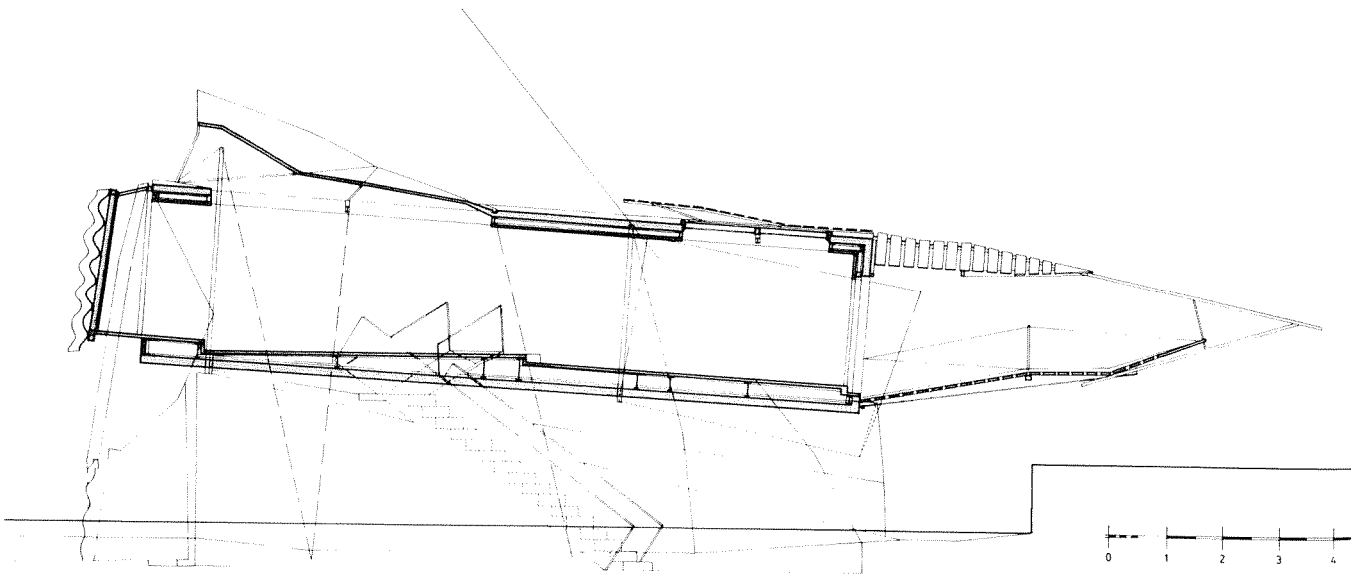
However, when Coop Himmelblau describes its work as manifestations of *kraftlinien*—lines of power—a new substance emerges that despite their earlier fascination with personalized space (Villa Rosa of 1968, Die Weisse Anzug of 1969, and Hertzstadt of 1969), is not a mere extension of the body. This new substance is freed from bondages to Palladio and the body. Its origins are the *linie occulte* of the Renaissance that remained on the drawing, the regulating lines underlying Le Corbusier's facades (maybe even his Modulor). In the hands of a new generation of architects trained in the turbulent 1960s these lines become manifested in a form that appears to be a fusion of house and inhabitant—here teasingly referred to as ectoplasm (the outer firm layer of an amoeba, or the like).

Ambiguous and free, The Open House of 1983 (soon to be built in Malibu, California) relies on virtually none of the established type-objects of the house. The locus for its origin will be found among tents, bugs, and gossamer-like plants rather than in the domesticity of the house. Yet the precariousness and vibrant instability of its stability-seeking rods and membranes are more like thoughts than the stringent rules of evolution that shaped a bug. The apparent purposelessness of the structure seems more akin to the visions of a poetic drunk than to a new and efficient earth-capsule for the gun-toting survivalist.

There is in this house, and in other work of the group, a cry for the expression of a substance—"a wall of nerves from which all the layers of urban skins have been peeled away"—that may have been dormant in architectural thinking for a very long time, but its time is now, at the dawn of the 21st century.

Finally

My cat V.J. sleeps. Wrapped in his all-enclosing coat of fur, his paw protecting his eyes from the bright light, his world of cat-dreams is distant from my own speculations about the holsters of our trajectories of the future. Yet the struggle for domestic space will continue, and we can rest assured that beyond the gables of the stolid single-family house, surrounded by its cloak of open space, will appear other shelters, and V.J.'s offspring will, with the help of their paws, all sleep well in either place. As for us, Borges' tiger will keep us awake.



Notes

1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, edited by D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1962), pp. 233–234.

2 Anthony DePalma, "Baby Boomers Reshaping the Housing Market," *New York Times* (March 6, 1988), Real Estate section, p. RY1.

3 Lars Lerup, *Planned Assaults* (Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 16.

The Open House, 1983