

Literature Review

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“What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true, we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why? - Georges Perec 1973 -

A 7:15 AM alarm chimes out as one turns over to finger the STOP button on their cell phone. Wiping sleep from their eyes and somberly groaning, they peel the covers off their body and rise up to the new day. Soft blue sunlight gleams through the windows at the back of the bedroom, offering just enough light to maneuver past variously sized piles of dirty laundry. Stepping through the bedroom door and onto the cold kitchen floor, the gentle morning light has not yet reached this space. Quickly tip toeing across the room and aggressively swatting at the general area of a light switch, the space is soon illuminated, spreading its yellowy glow down a thin hallway leading to the bathroom. Striding again across the kitchen's floor boards and through the hallway they enter the bathroom. With clear distinction this time they reach for the switch below the lightbulb and bring to life all the calcium deposits, dust laden corners, and toothpaste globs they swore to take care of last week. Ignoring once again the cleanliness of the space they reach into the tub and twist two knobs, one to be turned 70 degrees and the other 120. Spitting and splattering to life, a steady flow of water propels itself from the showerhead, as they wait for the water to warm they turn back and reach to a cabinet above the sink and pry it open, pulling forth from its interior a toothpaste tube and a brush frayed from overuse. Placing a dollop of paste onto the brush and running it under the sink briefly, they begin to scrub. Meaning to waste no time they turn to the toilet and raise the seat with their idle hand, brushing with the right and controlling their stream with the left, they relieve themselves. Once relieved they spit the froth from their mouth into the open toilet, closing the lid and returning to the sink for a rinse. Smoothly gliding their head into the bowl below the faucet they pull in some water with which to gargle. As they swish and swash the tap water between their cheeks, they realize by now that the shower has reached optimum temperature, they step into its warm embrace spitting more froth onto the plastic tub floor and begin the washing up.

The time is 7:19 AM

This brief story depicting the act of Morning Preparation begins to address essential components of Architecture that are often times under represented. These components as a collective comprise the

abstract idea of Everyday; our rituals, our tendencies, routines, thoughts, and actions. Referencing the above text, very little of it was devoted to the description of space in a literal manner, rear side windows, cold floor boards, a thin hallway, and light switches are some of the few “Architectural” components addressed in that 4 minute segment. The crux of that text was dominated by action, inhabitation, and detail; despite this however all who read are projected into a fairly similar space. This is the power of our inhabitation and spatial interactions, they are what give space value, memory, purpose, desire, reflection, and beyond.

Francisco Gonzalez de Canales is very aware of this condition and utilizes the lives of a few prominent Architects and Designers in order to shine light on this situation in his text “Experiments with Life Itself”. Focusing on the actual practice of the everyday and the desires of both the Dweller and Dwelling, the first Architect relevant to this discussion covered by Canales is Ralph Erskine.

Erskine was a British Architect who moved to Sweden around the time of WWII, and worked on a project (his personal home) called “The Box”. The Box was a small wooden shelter located in the woods of Sweden, made with an open plan and in the modernist style of the time. The Box was well praised for its purity of form and economy of material, despite this it was in fact quite a burden to live in; it did not adapt well to its environment, was in constant need of repair, and its lack of spatial specificity proved a very trying living condition. These shortcomings however lead Erskine to “A recognition of the reflexive ability of the inhabitant - as opposed to a simple occupant of the abstract, geometrical body of modern architecture”.

In his later works and especially his later residence, House in Drottningholm, Erskine became infatuated with designing “to realise an architecture which roots the relations between the human and the environment through the practice of everyday life”. He began to more intensely engage his own patterns as well as maintain a hypersensitivity to his existing environment. The home itself provided an overarching system that could be easily adapted and intervened upon pending his personal needs or desires; strengthening his belief that “dwellers are experts on their own needs” and perhaps to go a step further also the needs of their dwellings.

Using Erskine’s passion for occupant understanding and a dweller dwelling connection, Francisco moves into a conversation regarding Ray and Charles Eames. The Eames were designers of many things but they are most notably recalled for their work in furniture design. Charles believed that “a house was not the walls that framed it but rather an organization of personal objects and belongings that defined a lifestyle” and the Eames together were very fascinated by the power of objects and the role that they played in space making. Now the Eames passion for furniture is not directly relevant to the concerns of the

Everyday but the way in which they viewed and produced their work is. Ray and Charles were obsessed with documentation, filming, recording, photographing, sketching; they would even go so far as to hire costume designers to outfit them for the day so they could “play out life”. This devotion to the understanding of the everyday was a cornerstone to the success of their designs. Ray once said “After 13 years of living in it, the building for me ceased to exist a long time ago”, this quote is not intended to downplay the role of architecture within her life, in fact quite the opposite, Ray’s familiarity and intense use of her home had transformed it from a steel and glass shelter, into an active participant within her daily life, an informant, an instigator, a partner. The home acted as the set upon which daily life played itself out and the trial areas for many of the couple's proposed designs.

The final case study relevant to the analysis of dweller and dwelling relative to the notion of everyday life, is the case of Alison and Peter Smithson. “Architecture has never stopped looking at itself, or even worse, has never stopped looking at its heroes. As a consequence, it has lost an opportunity to actively incorporate values that are external to it, where the majority of the issues that really affect contemporary life are found”. This “external” is exactly where the Smithsons stake their claim, Canales works to describe their interest in the memorable and imaginative qualities of space. Several very short stories are crafted in regards to the family's summer Cottage, the Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion. One of these stories titled, “The Theatre in the Stable” describes the Smithsons children re-enacting a Midsummer Night's Dream out by a little mill stream for a few grazing cows. The children perform the piece in an oddly random yet perfectly inspiring location, wherein overlays Pucks¹ tales of English history; all of these events occurring in the same space, “where the imaginary and the sensible are combined into one”. This combination of imaginary and sensible allows space to go beyond the physical placemaker of our lives and simultaneously enter the ephemeral world of dreamscapes and memory.

The beauty of these case studies and their narrow window into the practice of everyday domestic life, is their futility. They will never lead to a singularity or go uncontested by cynics, they are soft, circumstantial, fleeting, and unrefined. They have no discernible form, no monetary value, or structural capabilities and they look not to begin a new era of design. Regardless of all that they lack from a critical external perspective these events, situations, patterns, memories, habits, and dreams are the very fabric of our existence, they are the things we do when we think we are doing nothing and the things we do when we think we are doing something. What they may lack in clarity and specificity they make up for in ambiguity and familiarity, giving them strength to go beyond a movement or a style and enter into the realm of the independent.

¹ Rudyard Kipling’s “Puck of Pook’s Hill. A reflective piece on the History of England and the timeless nature of place. “See you the dimpled track that runs, All hollow through the wheat? O that was where they hauled the guns. That smote King Philip’s fleet!”

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