

Literature Review III

Kyle McMindes

Dwelling

“A place where a person lives” (Merriam-Webster). A dwelling is merely a place where in which life occurs, it is given its value through two very simple but crucial criteria that of a person and that of living (actions, habits, needs, rhythms, desires). A dwelling can be a house, apartment, cave, boat, or overpass; as long as within that space living occurs.

Dweller

“To live in a particular place” (Merriam-Webster). A dweller, similar to that of a dwelling only has two basic criteria to satisfy in order to be manifested; those two criteria being a space and once again the act of living.

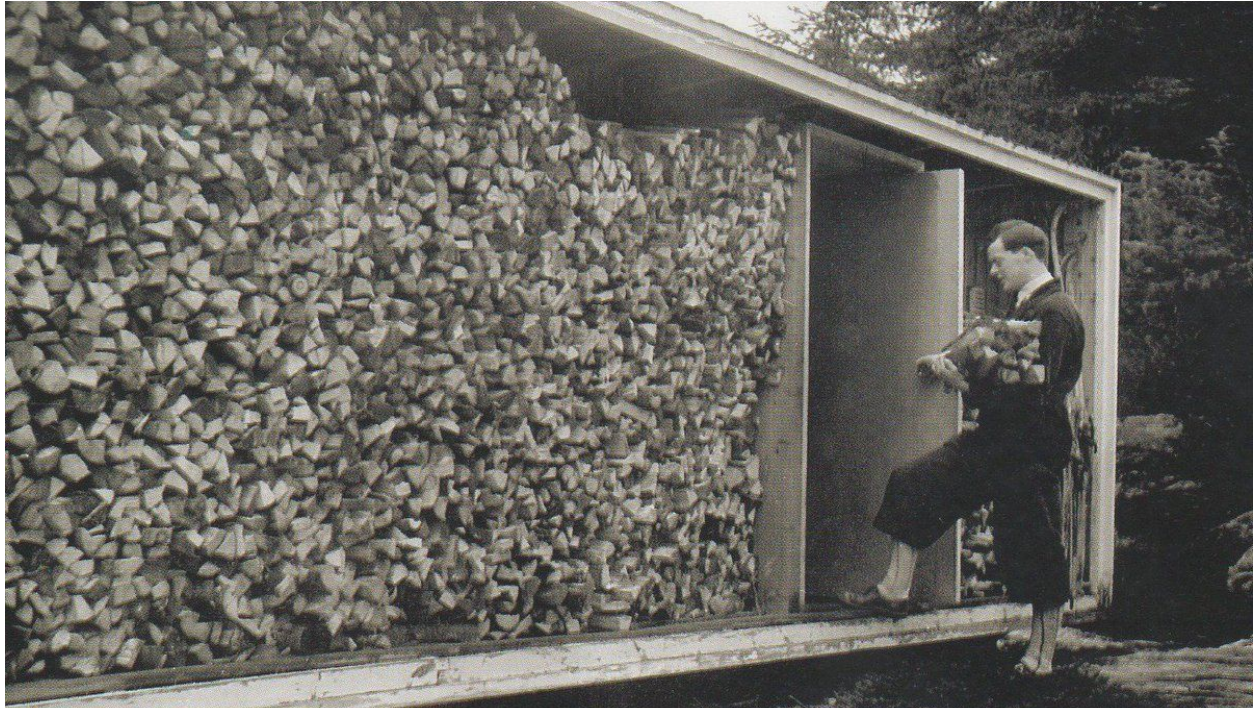
The Two

A dwelling may not exist without a dweller, nor a dweller without a dwelling; the only factor within this relationship that may stand independent, is living. Living is the endless list of activities, habits, thoughts, and rhythms that empower both dweller and dwelling. Living has no predetermined form, no obligations, nor an intent; yet without it a dwelling becomes a place and a dweller becomes meat.

“There is no space without event” - Bernard Tschumi

So how do we acknowledge this condition within our built environment?

Living with....



Ralph¹ trudges through the woods, bounding over heavy snowfall as he makes the journey back to his home, The Box². In his arms he carries a few groceries for his wife and family. Finally arriving at the back door he clutches his haul close to his chest with one hand as the other rummages through his pockets to retrieve his key. Grasping the piece of metal from his pocket he inserts it into the lock and pulls, the door has jammed from the cold, he tugs more viciously and the door flies backward tumbling him into the snow and creating a minor collapse of the firewood which lines the back wall. Disregarding the fallen wood he shuffles inside to be warmed. Looking about his single room home³ he sees his wife and child, and greets them hello, moving quickly into the kitchen area he hands the groceries off to his wife. Stepping over his son to get to his drafting table he begins to work.

Surrounded completely by the activities and sensations of domesticity he drifts from his obligations, the smell of roasted vegetables fill his nose, the sound of chopping and stirring reverberate in his ears, on his leg he feels the tug of his child. He clears off his drafting table and prepares it for dinner.

¹ Ralph Erskine: a prominent British Architect who following the 1940-1941 London Blitz retreated from Britain to begin practicing in Sweden.

² The Box: was Erskine's family home and office, one of his most published and appreciated works. The Box was located just south of Stockholm Sweden. The box

³ "The interior (of The Box) is a single room functioning as a living room/bedroom/office and divided by an interior-exterior chimney that accommodates a small kitchen/office. The bathroom is situated in an outdoor hut and the water has to be taken from a well outside" - Francisco Gonzalez de Canales

Gathered at the table for their meal the family begins to eat and chat about the events of their day, as he cuts into a freshly steamed carrot Ralph feels the cold touch of a draft upon his back, this icy caress steals him away from his meal and family. He turns and stares at the wall behind him, combing it over for any sign of exposure, but none can be found. Continuing to stare at this wall his mind drifts into a state of reflection regarding all the shortcomings of his home; it's intense upkeep, it's lack of privacy, it's overly simplified form, it's tight quarters, it's isolation, and it's Romantic Functionalism⁴. Ruth⁵ calls out to him and he snaps out of his minor trance and back to his meal. She informs him that some post has arrived for him and hands him the letter. Opening it at the table he reads it to himself, putting the letter down his wife asks what the message was about, solemnly he replies there is interest in publishing their home in an article.

20 years later....



⁴ "Romantic Functionalism": was a critique from Peter Collymore regarding The Box's hyper over simplifications made in the name of functionalism. These eliminatory design decisions did not generate purity of function, in fact they decreased the functionality of both the space and its inhabitants.

⁵ Ralph Erskine's wife, they were wed in in Sweden in 1939.

Carrying a tepid cup of tea out from his office Ralph meanders about his home⁶ without intent. Moving aimlessly through a vast array of spaces, his eyes shift up, down, left, and right, examining “the residue that the passage of time has accumulated”⁷, a wooden horse, a pile of news clippings, paper mache masks, model sailboats, an old shirt, books bulging from the shelf, a pair of slippers, and a half empty glass of juice. His attention is caught by the soft echo of his family from above, he now moves with purpose; ascending the stairwell up to the bedroom loft. Under the soft curve of the ceiling overhead his wife and four children are preparing to go out and enjoy the snow.

Lending a hand he sits the younger ones on the bed to lace up their boots and then moves to the closet to fetch several pairs of gloves. Fully equipped and bubbling over with impatience the children fly down stairs, flinging the door wide open and piling out into the snowy courtyard. Ruth closes the door behind them, as Ralph starts a fire in the hanging flue within the large living area. Ruth heads into the kitchen to fetch some hot beverages. Watching their children through the western facing window they sip and converse around the fire, once again Ralph slips into a brief day dream. He recalls his back tight to the northern wall of “The Box” as they ate dinner 20 years ago, and the chilling prick of cold from the imperceptible draft in that wall. A thud from a snowball thrown by one of the children erupts against the window, jolting Erskine out of his day dream, grinning he inches closer to the fireplaces warm embrace.

“Dwellers are experts on their own needs.”⁸ A dwelling is not meant to be sterile or idealised, it is the manifestation of its dwellers and should cultivate the “practice of the everyday”⁹. Erskine’s Box suffered from his own “rationalist dreams”¹⁰, it quantified and simplified the requirements of living to a terribly marginal outcome, forcing a box to be the place of cooking, cleaning, working, relaxing, sleeping, pondering, loving, and fighting; which it could not do. His move to Drotningholm shows his appreciation for the habits, rhythms, and nuances that come with the everyday and feed off dweller and dwelling.

Can flexibility of space be achieved without vagueness? Can our dwellings engage our rhythms without becoming fixed?

⁶ House in Drotningholm: Erskine most preferred home in Sweden. Designed and built some 20 years after his construction and occupation of “The Box”. The new estate did away with his earlier desire for the abstract view of pure functionalism and looked to embrace that of everyday life.

⁷ The actual quote from George Perec in his novel “Species of Space and Other Pieces” is as follows; “The passage of time (my history) leave behind a residue that accumulates: photographs, drawings, the corpses of long since dried up felt pens, shirts, non-returnable glasses and returnable glasses, cigar wrappers, tins erasers, postcards, books, dust, and knickknacks: this is what I call my fortune.”

⁸ This is a quote from Peter Collymore in regards to one of Erskine’s design philosophies.

⁹ The full quote from Francisco Gonzalez de Canales is; “the logic which tries to surpass an analytical/productivist approach in order to realise an architecture which roots the relations between the human and the environment through the practice of everyday life.”

¹⁰ A critique from Peter Collymore, regarding The Box’s preference for purity of form and minimalist detail, over that of genuine necessity and flexible living requirement; making it a jewel within the Architectural community but a flop for family there within.

Looking at....



Ray¹¹ calls out for her costume designer to come and help her with the finishing touches of her outfit. She glides up the stairwell of the house¹² leaping into the bedroom to assist Ray. On the first floor Charles¹³ is in the kitchen preparing him and his wife a bit of breakfast, brewing coffee, frying an egg, and toasting some bread; he is already adorned in his outfit. Gracefully descending the staircase Ray enters the kitchen and the play¹⁴ begins. Gathering their plates they pass by a camera fastened to a post in the home on their way to dine. The shutter goes off at a rapid pace as their bodies glide through the hallway. Sitting down and resting their plates, they simultaneously cut through an egg and watch as the yolk slowly spills across the china, contouring to its curves and soaking into the toast. Above their heads, fastened to a floating painting, a video camera records the two of them as they consume this meal and discuss today's intentions.

This day commences similarly to many other days, they flow in and out of various spaces and perform various tasks, all of which they both have and have not done before. Some friends come to the

¹¹ Ray Eames: one half of the world renowned design duo "The Eames", their work ranging far and wide across the field of design from Architecture, Product Design, Photography, and Furniture Production.

¹² The Eames House; built in 1949 and located in California, the Eames home was the epicenter and space of inspiration for many of the world renowned designs and products that the Eames created throughout their careers.

¹³ Charles Eames: the other half of the design duo and Ray's husband.

¹⁴ Ray and Charles Eames were obsessed with documentation, they would film, record, photograph, and sketch all the minute details of their lives and work. They were even known commission costume designers so that they could "play" out their day. They attributed much of their success to this intense attention to interaction and detail.

house and gather around for drinks and mild conversation, entering into the play without ever knowing. The supporting cast moves through the home unsuspecting and thereby very naturally, all the while the home works with them and watches over them. As the final guests leave and the batteries in the camera's die, the Eames prepare to analyze the performance.

“The space between two tangible volumes is nevertheless a tangible volume, and it is in this space of the in-between where relationships are produced”¹⁵. It was through these procedures of documentation wherein they are first watched by their dwelling, only then to rewatch themselves acting as dwellers but through the lens of the dwelling, that allowed them to engage with the relationships of the in between. Watching their feet as they slide against the floorboards, the stream of a drink as it's poured into a glass, the reach of their arms as they retrieve a book from the shelf, or the cluster of shadows that collect in a vacated corner as their guests convene elsewhere.

What is the dwelling allowing, what is it not, and how may it be changed?

Dreaming of....



¹⁵ This is a quote from Charles Eames, the quote is then further analyzed by Francisco Gonzalez de Canales who goes on to say; “The facts of daily life, just as in Taoism that so influenced them, cannot be considered as accidental coincidences; rather, they are connected to the world and determine one another.”

Sitting at a desk outside of her cottage¹⁶ Alison¹⁷ observes her children as they adventure around the home and throughout the property. Running in circles around the aged stone terrace, the two children veer off towards an opening in the wall. Coming to a sudden stop each of them look upwards at the masked face of an Armored Knight¹⁸. Stepping backwards they form a line, tentatively they re-approach and bow to the apparition so as to be granted passage. Their mother looks on and smirks as the children bow to a column of worn stone. Having been granted passage the running begins again and out of sight they venture.

Peter¹⁹ rests inside and spots the children through a rear window of the home. Out in a rich green pasture they have picked up two large sticks. They swing them in unison, and dirt begins to be flung in all directions. As Peter watches them use their tools and work the ground, he is taken back to a very real but fully imagined time in space. The children have grown old and hunch over the earth that they work, with knobby poles they till the ground so that they may plant their crop. Lurching upward from her labor, his now decrepit daughter looks through him at her stone cabin, its insides damp and musty, light rarely enters and neither does warmth, the thatching of the roof has begun to sink inward; worrying if it will hold a few more weeks she turns back to the ground and continues to till.²⁰ Having lost interest, the children chuck their sticks and move on, at this time Peter returns from this drift “where the imaginary and the sensible have combined into one.”²¹

Stepping out of the house and across the courtyard Peter heads towards Alison to discuss his daydream. On his short journey across the cobblestone, his toe drags and stubs against one of the more protruded pebbles, knocking it loose from its 100 year home. Cursing the rock he bends over and grasps it in his palm, turning he launches it at the column of worn stone, and with a loud clang the stone connects sending bits of shrapnel throughout the air. The children sprint by him, panicked they tend to the Knight.

¹⁶ The cottage in use is the Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion, a modern critique of the old english cottage. The structure is crafted almost entirely from glass, with a single wall being made from a pre-existing stone cottage, (Larger concern of the project an attempt at addressing modern techniques with the real and unromantic aspects of British rural life), that the family retreated to on weekends.

¹⁷ Alison Smithson: One half of the husband and wife architectural duo Alison and Peter Smithson, and member of the British think tank the Independent Group.

¹⁸ Referencing Puck of Pook's Hill (Weland's Sword) The passage folds time in on itself as one looks out onto the English Pastoral Landscape, bringing events long since past and placing them overtop of the existing context. “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!”

¹⁹ Peter Smithson: The other half of the architectural couple and also a member of the Independent Group.

²⁰ The Smithson's were very intrigued by the “counter-pastoral movement” (Raymond Williams). This movement regarded the poverty and unromantic living that most poor laborers endured. The Smithsons looked closely and the lives and styles of Britain's Middle and Low class families, preferring these case studies for their more authentic representation of life.

²¹ A quote from Francisco Gonzalez de Canales referring to The Smithsons photographs of their family living at the Solar Pavilion, over layed with stories from Puck of Pook's Hill.

“They felt that the new order of their lives would be compatible with the small everyday things: the mutual belonging of the human, the natural, the memories and imagination.”²² The Smithsons used the Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion as the hub for their personal investigations into the legends and lifestyles of the English countryside. Juxtaposing their current existence, material capacities, and daily activities with historically fictional dreamscapes allowed them to explore both the dweller and dwelling in a curiously temporal²³ fashion.

How does the physical and imagined history of an object or space dictate or inform our interactions with it?

“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

Citations

²² A quote from Francisco Gonzalez de Canales regarding the Smithson decision to design, build, and retreat to the Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion in Fonthill, England.

²³ Temporal: referring to both its definition as an infinite material state as well as its other definition as a single moment in time.

Bachelard, Gaston, M. Jolas, and John R. Stilgoe. *The Poetics of Space*. Print.

Barker, Roger G. *The Stream of Behavior; Explorations of Its Structure & Content*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963. Print.

Blauvelt, Andrew. *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003. Print.

Canales, Francisco González De, Dorota Biczal, and Lucy Bullivant. *Experiments with Life Itself: Radical Domestic Architectures between 1937 and 1959*. Print.

Coates, Nigel. *Narrative Architecture*. Print.

Ellin, Nan, and Edward J. Blakely. *Architecture of Fear*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 1997. Print.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso, 1991. Print.

Marcus, Clare Cooper. *House as Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Berkeley: Conari, 1995. Print.

Nicholson, Ben. *Appliance House*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, 1990. Print.

Perec, Georges, and John Sturrock. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. London, England: Penguin, 1997. Print.

Perec, Georges, and Marc Lowenthal. *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*. Cambridge, MA: Wakefield, 2010. Print.

Robbins, David. *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990. Print.

Spiller, Neil. *Maverick Deviations: Neil Spiller: Architectural Works (1985-1998)*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 2000. Print.

Spiller, Neil. *Visionary Architecture: Blueprints of the Modern Imagination*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007. Print.

Tschumi, Bernard. *The Manhattan Transcripts*. London: Academy Editions, 1994. Print.