

Design and Domestic Narratives

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Referencing Gaston Bachelard, Clare Cooper Marcus and Rachel Sebba and their writings related to children and domesticity, this paper elaborates on the themes of experience and memory and their relationships to design. It is based on two projects undertaken by the author in collaboration with Coryn Kempster: the research project “Growing up Modern” and the design project “Sky House.” Using a methodology based on oral history, “Growing up Modern” comprises conversations with children, now senior citizens, who were the first to inhabit Modernist houses and housing, and photographic documentation of the iconic homes themselves. The study discovered patterns of living and occupation as well as memories of spatial arrangements and idiosyncratic details. Influenced by the focus of this study was the subsequent design of “Sky House.” The project is rooted in a desire to accommodate and elicit personal domestic narratives through specificity as much as it is driven by more conventional architectural preoccupations such as careful understanding of the site, and associated massing, programmatic, environmental and material strategies. Foregrounding personal narratives of inhabitation, the paper explores the relationship between research and design in architectural scholarship and practice, and the links possible between historical analysis and contemporary application.

EXPERIENCE AND MEMORY

Thinking of spatial memories defines architecture as an armature that satisfies more than the needs of shelter but is rather an infrastructure for experiences. The relationship between spaces created on the draughting board of the designer and lived experience becomes manifest in the personal memories of the inhabitants. If architecture is to be understood through the disciplinary rubrics of history, technology and style, it must also be understood through the more fleeting and the more personal memories it creates.

Referring to Gaston Bachelard’s descriptions of his childhood home in *The Poetics of Space*, this paper assumes that the domestic spaces one inhabits become ingrained in conscious or unconscious being.¹ As tactile, kinesthetic and sensorial experiences they form the backbone of our recalled landscapes.

Bachelard states: “Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.”² Thus the more specificity one can embed in a space the more unique value it has in terms of experience and consequently in terms of memory. Referencing Bachelard, but also Clare Cooper Marcus and Rachel Sebba and their writings related to children, this paper elaborates on the themes of experience and memory and their relationships to design based on two projects: the creative documentation project “Growing up Modern,” which comprised of conversations with original inhabitants of iconic Modernist houses and public housing, and “Sky House,” a recent design commission for a vacation home in Ontario, Canada.

THE CHILD’S PERSPECTIVE

Anna Mae Duane stresses the value of including the child’s perspective as expanding the scope and the questions asked in any discipline: “...to include the child in any field of study is to realign the very structure of that field, changing the terms of inquiry and forcing a different set of questions.”³ In architecture and design scholarship the design for children has had some focus from Amy Ogata’s *Designing the Creative Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Alexandra Lange’s *The Design of Childhood* (Bloomsbury Press, 2018) and the 2012 Museum of Modern Art exhibit *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900–2000*, and its associated catalogue. This in turn reflects a welcome expanded presence of the perspective of the user/inhabitant in recent scholarship.⁴

In her book *House as a Mirror of Self*, Clare Cooper Marcus emphasizes the ties we have to the spaces we grow up in. She writes: “As we change and grow throughout our lives, our psychological development is punctuated not only by meaningful relationships with people, but also by close affective ties with a number of significant physical environments, beginning in childhood.”⁵ Through an analysis based on ideas of Carl Jung, the author elaborates on the complex relationship of attachment and self-representation that develop with the places we occupy, and with spaces of childhood domesticity in particular. Indeed childhood, as a “time of acute vulnerability and openness to the world,”⁶ is also a formative period for the development of self in the evolution of one’s relationship to the world and its structures, both physical and implied. Cooper Marcus speaks of memories and dreams as a “personal ‘library’”⁷ and calls

childhood memories a kind of “psychic anchor, reminding us where we come from.”⁸

Gaston Bachelard goes further in explaining the impact of the early places of childhood by stating that “over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us.”⁹ In the philosopher’s view, the imprint of the elements of our first house on the unconscious memory and physical memory form a definition and benchmark of these architectural and spatial elements. Thus, the childhood home becomes the prototypical space and a reference as we encounter the broader context of the world beyond the shelter of early domesticity.

Apart from the physical characteristics of size and dimensions or materials and textures, the childhood home takes on an almost mythical quality in Bachelard’s view: “All I ought to say about my childhood home is just barely enough to place me, myself, in an oneiric situation, to set me on the threshold of a day-dream in which I shall find repose in the past.”¹⁰ The daydreams, triggered by the ideas of the childhood home, synthesize the places themselves with events that occurred in them and layer on the subsequent experiences and feelings of those dreaming. Bachelard thus claims “the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.”¹¹

“GROWING UP MODERN”

Aiming to understand some of the most paradigmatic homes of the twentieth century from the perspective of their inhabitants, as palaces that harbored life, Coryn Kempster and I undertook the research project “Growing up Modern.” We used a methodology based on oral history¹² and spoke with children who were the first to inhabit early Modernist houses and housing. We also revisited the iconic homes themselves to experience and photograph the spaces through the lens of these childhood recollections. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to interview Mr. Fassbaender, Mr. Tugendhat, Mrs. Zumpfe, Mrs. Goron and Ms. Moreau. They were the original inhabitants of the row houses by J. J. P. Oud in the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, Germany (1927); the Tugendhat Villa by Mies van der Rohe in Brno, Czech Republic (1930); the Schminke House by Hans Scharoun in Loebau, Germany (1933); Le Corbusier’s houses in Pessac, France (1926), and his Unité d’Habitation apartments in Marseille, France (1952), respectively.

In recollecting the way that they used the spaces of the house or apartment inside and out, the features of the dwellings they remembered, and the social dynamics that developed for them personally in this setting, the children, now senior citizens, shared not only the factual but also the emotive, bringing a complexity and richness to the physical structures, not accessible through other forms of historical accounts or even through visiting of the buildings themselves. As the editors of the book *Speaking*

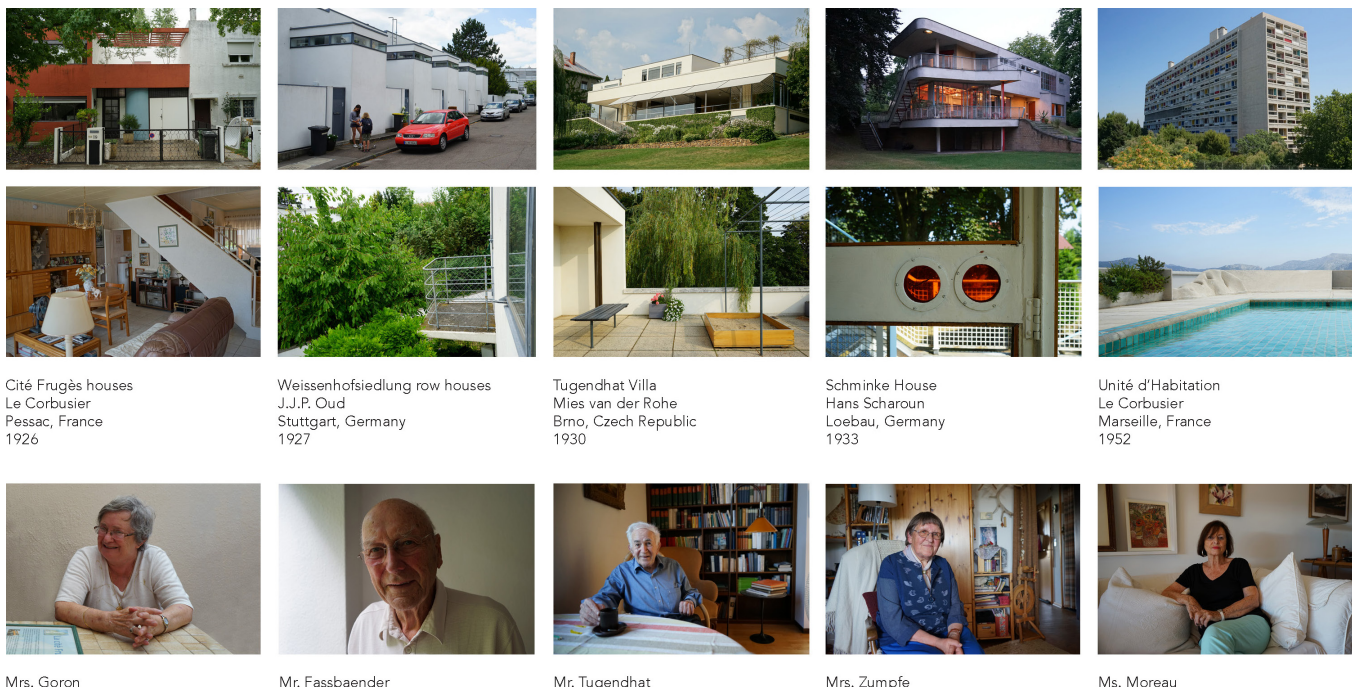


Figure 1. The individuals interviewed for the “Growing up Modern” project and the dwellings where, as children, they were the first inhabitants. Photographs by Coryn Kempster.

of *Buildings*, Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, and Deborah Van der Plaats argue, “by documenting the experience of and interactions with buildings over time, oral history can give a dynamic fourth dimensions to (what are generally thought of as) static three-dimensional structures.”¹³

IDIOSYNCRATIC MOMENTS

From the conversations we can draw links between the idiosyncratic moments of the homes and the personal memories of their former inhabitants. In fact, the interplay between a memory and an architectural feature, speak most clearly to the value of this form of architectural narrative. While the intensity and emotional attachment to the childhood spaces varied from narrator to narrator, there were several significant moments of discovery from the scale of the neighborhood to that of the architectural detail. For various reasons, including the architecture itself but also the age at which they moved from their childhood homes, the memories of Mr. Fassbender and Mrs. Zumpfe were especially rich in these particularities.

Mr. Fassbender enthusiastically recalled for example the balcony cantilevering off of his bedroom on the second floor in the J.J.P. Oud rowhouse in the Weissenhofsiedlung. Architecturally speaking, it was possibly a coincidence that the balcony came off of the smallest bedroom. More likely, serving as a canopy its placement related to the entry door on the floor below, and the sectional superimposition of the adjacent larger parents’ bedroom and living room space below. Yet for the boy it created a transformative and very memorable experience tied intrinsically to place: in the summer the balcony allowed him to drag the head of his mattress outside and sleep under the stars.

Mrs. Zumpfe shared with us the memory of her childhood home, the Schminke House. She described how the architect Hans Scharoun designed the building with several features specifically with the children in mind. The most distinctive of these were a series of color glass portholes that were embedded at a child’s eye level in the exterior doors leading to the garden. Mrs. Zumpfe recalled enthusiastically running from door to door to look at the world through different colors: red, orange, purple and blue. Mrs. Zumpfe left the home when she was 18, but she still dreams about the house decades after not having lived there. The generous openness of the spaces of the home left a life-long impression on her.

From the conversations in “Growing up Modern” it became very clear to us that these spaces designed by early Modernists were anything but generic. The architects took on the pragmatic matters of everyday life, from cooking to drying laundry and delivering milk, and used these as instigators for inventive design solutions. Further by creating intentional configurations of indoor and outdoor spaces and by dramatically opening up the interiors, they allow daylight and fresh air to be the distinctive features of architecture. Defining typologies and questioning building methods and materials, the architects worked hard to



Figure 2. The winter-garden of the Schminke House by Hans Scharoun showing one of the exterior doors with its colored glass portholes, set at a child’s eye-level. Photograph by Coryn Kempster.

create buildings that were optimized functionally and aesthetically, but that were also inherently humanistic, foregrounding experience and use as drivers in architecture.

“SKY HOUSE”

As designers, it was impossible not to be influenced by the radical optimism of the early Modernists and the intimacy of the conversations and encounters gathered through the project “Growing up Modern.” The commission to design a holiday home for a young family two hours northeast of Toronto, became an opportunity to test and interrogate some of these attitudes and preoccupations, not copying the formal language of Modernism but rather intentionally learning from the memories of it.

The clients of “Sky House” had very specific ideas about the way that they and their extended family and friends would occupy the home, but they had few preconceptions of what form this would take on the site. We wanted to make sure to respond to the programmatic parameters, and in doing so we presented



Figure 3. Exterior view of “Sky House” showing approach ramp. Stoney Lake, Canada, 2017. House designed by Julia Jamroik and Coryn Kempster. Photograph by Doublespace Photography.

multiple strategies and massing options for their consideration. They decided quickly on the preferred configuration that would separate the program into two volumes, splitting the social spaces from the more intimate sleeping spaces. The massing strategy of the project corresponds to this separation into the two volumes sectionally by embedding the lower bedroom volume into the ground and allowing the upper volume to bridge above. The design evolved with considerations of the topography of the site, sustainable approaches and technologies, materials and construction practices.

But as critical as these parameters were, most of the decisions were governed by an understanding of the way that the spaces could be used by groups and individuals and the opportunities that this presented. Thinking how we could provide distinctive experiences in each room of the house, we aimed to carve an identity for each through material choices but also larger, more conceptual moves. The main living space, for example, is very open and allows for views out to the lake and in all other directions linking the interior to the site. Here the room is further defined through a series of vertical skylights, which are oriented off-axis from the house to face due north and minimize heat gain while creating a sculptural ceiling condition.

By contrast the bedrooms are intimate wood-clad spaces that orient themselves to the surrounding forest. Every bathroom in the house is entirely enveloped by a different color (yellow, blue and green), creating a distinctive feeling and identity for each.

AIMING FOR SPECIFICITY

We were particularly conscious of the clients’ young daughter, thinking of the many experiences she would have of the home and how these would in turn help define her memories of summer and of her childhood. We were conscious to include her wishes and desires in the design of the house and equally we also aimed to design unsolicited idiosyncratic moments with her in mind. The approach to the house, for example, became an opportunity to signify arrival through a specific visual, auditory and kinesthetic experience: connecting the level of the ground to the upper volume of the house with a sky-blue ramp, whose wooden boards would emulate the experience of a wooden deck and would reverberate with the pressure of running feet. Right in the entry we placed a checkerboard grid of round pink coat-hooks at various heights and sizes that would accommodate the growing child. In the living room we designed a blue fireplace socle of glazed bricks where she might snuggle with her dog. In her bedroom, thinking of sleepovers and the

sharing of the space with her friends, we specified a bed as wide as the room. Outside, underneath the bridging volume of the house, we hung a bespoke perforated metal loveseat, creating a place to escape with a friend or a book with a view of the lake. All of these moments are specific, and while our young client may use them in entirely different ways than we intended, we hope that they will actively or passively become engrained in the memories she develops in this place.

'Sky House' is thus an example of how the decision-making process of design can incorporate the clients' wishes while

constructing opportunities for unexpected and memorable relationships between the building, its occupants and its site. The design incorporates ambitions beyond the pragmatic, drawing on and creating experiential narratives and scenarios, often through playful and whimsical elements.

DESIGN OVER TIME

While we may have had the best intentions in making memorable spaces for our youngest "Sky House" client, only time will tell if the idiosyncrasies of the design will have made a mark in her memory. In looking at the spatial memories of



Figure 4. Exterior view of "Sky House" showing approach ramp. Photograph by Doublespace Photography.



Figure 5. Two volumes of “Sky House” with suspended swing seat. Photograph by Doublespace Photography.

children Rachel Sebba states, “The voyage into the landscapes of childhood is not a return to objective features, but rather a journey as the adult self into the childhood self.”¹⁴ As we learned through the conversations in “Growing up Modern,” many factors play a role in the definitions of memories and while the architectural uniqueness of the spaces certainly plays a part, others are certainly foundational. Key among these is the length of time spent in the place and the age at which the memories are formed. Another factor is the intensity of experiences and their emotional weight, relative to the quotidian. Lastly the impact of personal interests and predispositions cannot be underestimated as it undeniably plays a role in what is important to an individual over time and what captures the imagination. The recollections in “Growing Up Modern” were necessarily colored by the subsequent experiences and the history of our interlocutors, both personal and global. The mixture of trauma and nostalgia as families were relocated during World War II and after, in particular, plays a large part in their stories and impacts the memories of their childhood places, straining, tainting or glorifying them. Imperfect as they may be, I argue, that these recollections are as worthy of preservation as the more as the reflections of the architects themselves, as the critiques of contemporaries and historians and as the material constructions. Providing an intimate look at childhood domesticity, they contribute to an expanded and evolving architectural and social history.

Bachelard writes: “Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”¹⁵ Thus approaching the realm of domestic narratives through the process of creative documentation and through design, the projects presented here aim to bring a focus to the personal nature of domesticity. They demonstrate the impurity of individual recollection and individual desire while at the same time they assert the value of individual experience and personal memory as forms of architectural understanding.

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ENDNOTES

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space* (Boston: Beacon, 1958). Bachelard speaks of “the house where one is born” but I want to expand that here to include childhood homes more broadly.
2. Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, 9.
3. Anna Mae Duane ed., *Children’s Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2013). ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.gate.lib.buffalo.edu/lib/buffalo/detail.action?docID=1222475>.
4. Titles such as Kenny Cupers ed., *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Stephen Grabow and Kent F. Spreckelmeyer, *The Architecture of Use: Aesthetics and Function in Architectural Design* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003); Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, and Deborah Van der Plaats eds., *Speaking of buildings: Oral history in architectural research* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019).
5. Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1995), 4.
6. Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self*, 34.
7. “Our memories and dreams are our personal ‘library.’” Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self*, 41.
8. Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self*, 20.
9. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 14.
10. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 13. As some have pointed out Bachelard assumes positive memories of childhood in his writings, leaving out negative experiences or even trauma. See for example: Karen W. Martin, “The House (of Memory) on Mango Street: Sandra Cisneros’s Counter-Poetics of Space,” *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 50-67.
11. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.
12. We are not oral historians, not having been formally trained in the practice. We have however attended oral history workshops at Columbia University and refer to oral history texts in our attempts to not only record but also transcribe and represent the stories narrated to us by our interlocutors in this project. see Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2003); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006) and for the use of oral history in architecture see Gosseye et al., *Speaking of buildings*.
13. Gosseye et al., *Speaking of buildings*, 26.
14. Rachel Sebba, “The Landscapes of Childhood: The Reflection of Childhood’s Environment in Adult Memories and in Children’s Attitudes,” *Environment and Behavior* 23, no. 4 (July 1991), 419.
15. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.