

Pure Time and Reconstructed Architecture

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In examining the relationships among architecture, culture, and identity, architecture may be viewed as a mapping of the past, a reflection of the present, and a vision for the future. To establish a sense of culture and identity, the past and present are particularly important. These relationships are true not only in architecture, but in literature as well. Through his autobiography, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust attempts to fully document and understand his own life and person. In "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," an analysis of the work, literary critic Joseph Frank focuses on the importance of events between the past and the present in establishing a true picture of where Proust, or any individual, places himself in the world. Using three recent examples of Louisiana State University faculty-designed homes, this paper focuses on the simultaneous presence of the vernacular (the past) and modernism (the present) – and the consequent affirmation of identity – within everyday spaces for living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

In the text of Proust, Frank finds both temporal and spatial ideas. As Proust reconstructs the memory of his own life, he discovers that certain sensory experiences – a vision, a taste, a touch – of one thing cause him to recollect another.¹ Thus, Frank states, Proust is "presented with two images – the world as he had formerly known it and the world, transformed by time, that he now sees before him."² As these pictures are viewed together in his mind, Proust finds that "the passage of time may suddenly be experienced through its visible effects."³ Proust called this simultaneous viewing of past and present a "pure time." Frank observes, however, that this concept of time "is not time at all – it is a perception in a moment of time, that is to say, space."⁴ In effect, the two images from different points in time have collapsed into one instant, trapping space between them. This space, found by Proust through the reconstruction of memory, can also be captured in a reconstructed architecture.

A reconstructed architecture, like a reconstructed memory, will be defined here as one in which the past has been forgotten, destroyed, or otherwise lost; but, in order to find "trapped space," the image of past forms and the meanings they hold

must be viewed simultaneously with the image of the world at the present moment. The goal of the reconstructed architecture is both to reveal or reassemble the memory of past forms and to present the new forms of a modern world. The past may be reassembled from samples of material and texture, ideas of geometry and volume, or feelings of stasis and motion that are found in fragments on the physical site or the site in memory. The assemblage of present form is more complex. Specific definitions of "contemporary" and "modern" are still in the process of being established and are difficult to identify. There must be a conscious and subjective choice of what to represent. In any case, when the time – or the distance – between past and present is compressed into a single moment, the result is a single space where the progression of time and the history of place are offered to the subject. When an individual perceives his own relationship to the past and the present, that offering is one of culture and identity.

DEFINITIONS

The past and present often meet in architectural design. Every geographic location has traditional building types, construction methods, materials, details, and ornament that form the vernacular of a culture. The present, meanwhile, inserts itself through the continuing influence of modernity, including ideas of form, space, and movement, which first surfaced in the beginning of the twentieth century. In order to see and interpret images of both vernacular and modern traditions, it is important to first understand the basic characteristics and definitions of each genre – characteristics that by necessity must be oversimplified here.

In Louisiana, as in any extreme environment, climate has had an important role in the development of a local vernacular. Here, the most critical factors in achieving human comfort are the control of heat and humidity. Ventilation, even after the advent of air-conditioning, is an essential part of design, and early building types that provided solutions to this problem

have become prominent. The shotgun house, originating in the late 1800's, is one example. Named for its one-room wide row of rooms extending perpendicular from the street, the house supposedly would allow a shotgun to be fired from the front door, through the house, and out the back door without hitting anything. In actuality, the doorways through these houses typically do not align so rigidly.⁵ Shotguns, which have no corridors to block breezes, allow cross-ventilation through each room to carry out the heavy, hot air. In larger buildings, interior courtyards are used to encourage ventilation. The New Orleans Spanish Colonial houses and Creole townhouses, which appeared in the late 1700's and early 1800's respectively, contain courtyards reached through a carriageway or walkway cut through the building from the street. The courtyard not only provided light and ventilation, but also differentiated areas of the house. A shop area would be found on the first floor near the street and the kitchen and service rooms were located on the far side of the courtyard, which kept additional heat and the hazards of fire away from the living quarters upstairs. The courtyards, which can be occupied for most of the year, also served as outdoor rooms for both residential and commercial uses.⁶

Other architectural devices also help to moderate the climate. Houses are raised off the ground to allow air circulation below the floor and attic space is typically reserved for the same purpose. Another important feature is the use of shutters. Usually covering windows and doors in their entirety, shutters allow varying degrees of light and air penetration into the home.⁷ Porches are also prominent. Located on the front and back of shotgun houses and in the courtyard in Creole townhouses and Spanish colonials, they provide a protected space outside of the house and shade for the windows. These solutions to the problem of climate in Louisiana are a local vernacular vocabulary that is culturally recognizable, and also continues to help meet climate control needs even in current building practices.

Modern architecture, in being described by a time (modern) rather than a place (vernacular), implies building types and architectural ideas that are more widespread and not confined by a particular history, culture, or climate. "Modernism" now typically refers to design trends begun in the early twentieth century that were strongly influenced by the efficiencies and aesthetics of the industrial revolution and machine technology. In his book, *Space, Time, and Architecture*, Sigfried Giedion defines modern architecture in terms of a change in the perception of space, which then became a universal design influence. While previous architectural movements had focused on either exterior or interior space, the early 1900's gave birth to an "optical revolution that abolished the single viewpoint of space."⁸ Advancements in science, such as Einstein's theory of relativity, were concurrent with the fourth dimension of time appearing prominently as a design factor in the arts. Modern architecture thus began to explore "a hitherto unknown

interpenetration of inner and outer space and an interpenetration of different levels (largely an effect of the automobile), which has forced the incorporation of movement as an inseparable element of architecture."⁹ Modern architecture, among many attributes, thus promotes multiple readings of space and a blurring of spatial relationships that depend on motion. This movement can be either real (the body moves through space) or phenomenal (the mind is prompted to make leaps in perception to explore or imply space), but both require the active participation of the viewer.

Because of the simultaneous presence of both vernacular and modern traditions, the following three projects exemplify architecture's ability to capture "pure time."

SULLIVAN-MIKULA RESIDENCE

One means to view two or more events simultaneously is through layering. In the Sullivan-Mikula Residence, three blocks from downtown Baton Rouge, two dilapidated shotgun houses have been combined into a single residence. Built around 1910, the original houses were each 14 feet wide and 49 feet long and separated by 12 feet. By adding a connecting hallway (called "the bridge") near the front of the houses and joining the existing "saddlebag" bathrooms in back, the space between the shotguns has been closed off to form a new interior courtyard. Three sides of the courtyard are defined by re-conditioned steel windows (salvaged from a university renovation project), which pivot to allow access from and ventilation to the house. Reminiscent of Spanish Colonial courtyards, it distinguishes the public functions of the house (living room, hall, and dining/kitchen) that surround it, from the more private bedrooms, which occupy the distant corners.

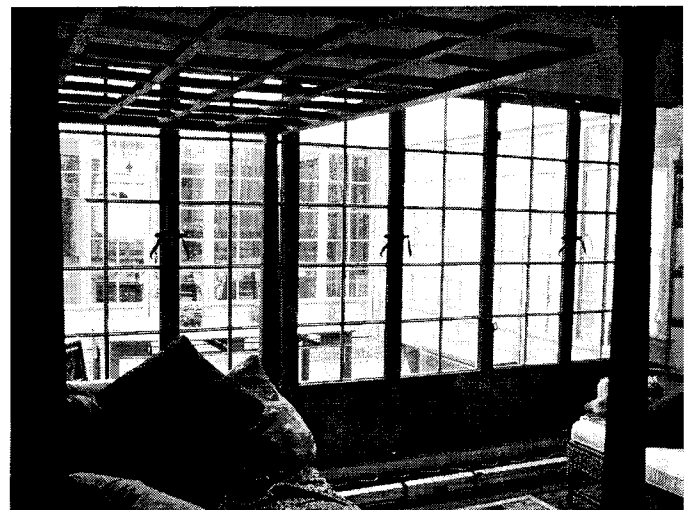


Fig. 1. View Through Closed Courtyard, Sullivan-Mikula Residence.

In one context then, the house is about volume: one space (the courtyard) seems carved out of another (the house). Experientially, however, space is created through layers, which occurs both at the scale of the room and at the scale of the house as a whole. Each public room is sited between planes of vastly different identities. When standing between a rough wood wall that is a remnant from the original house and a glass wall that is modern in appearance and use, an individual finds himself between two times. (In truth, the steel frames of the glass walls may pre-date the wood siding, but the wood wall is from a vernacular tradition that is far older than the glazing.) Here, an individual occupies a place that is not static, but held in tension between two images of time, which form a unique space. At the scale of the house, an individual is allowed to view through layers into adjacent spaces. From the living room, one looks through a glass wall, across the courtyard, through a second glass wall, and into the kitchen (or vice-versa). In both directions, the view is stopped and space is contained by something traditional—the original, horizontal, wood plank surface that forms the outside wall of the house. In a single glance, one has thus viewed three rooms, both interior and exterior space, and three walls—two transparent and one opaque. One is pulled through the spaces of the house without physically moving. Instead, there is a phenomenal motion through the courtyard and a blurring of inside and outside that is a distinctly modern perception of space. The reflections of the glass add to this effect. When the glass walls are open, however, the view—and the space—changes dramatically. The formerly defined rooms are now physically indistinct as the width of the pivoting window extends into both the interior and exterior space. All of the public rooms, both interior and exterior, merge into a single space.

In the Sullivan-Mikula Residence, an occupant is allowed to see through the space of one time into another. Glancing across the house means looking through a courtyard that oscillates

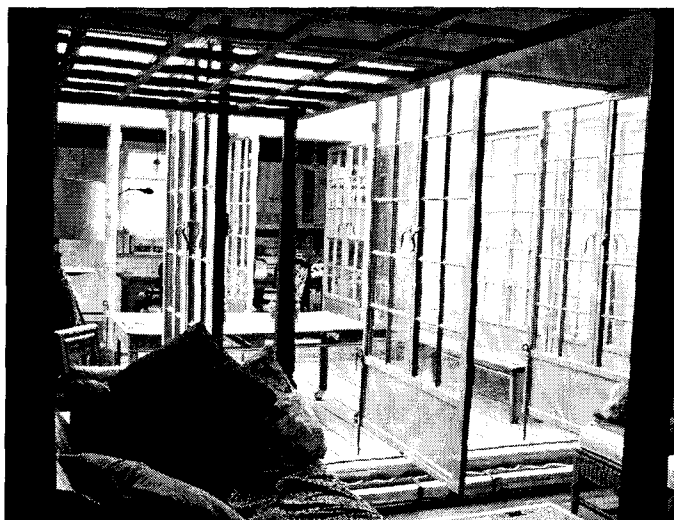


Fig. 2. View Through Open Courtyard, Sullivan-Mikula Residence.

between being traditional in form and intention, but modern in construction and perception. Open, modern spaces are contained by rustic, vernacular walls. The house is simultaneously both old and new, and in this perception of layered space and time, the past and present are simultaneously viewed.

EMERY-MCCLURE RESIDENCE

A second means to concurrently view both past and present is through the alteration of traditional elements and the meanings they hold. Eight blocks away in Beauregard Town, the Emery-McClure Residence re-blends into a resurging neighborhood. A double-shotgun (two rooms wide), the original house was built as a duplex around 1930 and salvaged in 2000 after being damaged by fire. Most of the external appearance of the building has been retained, though sometimes with a modern twist: a metal roof (a part of both local and modern traditions) is used instead of the original asphalt shingles and wood clapboard has been replaced with termite-and-moisture-resistant cementitious siding. The shotgun retains its traditional forms inside as well: a row of rooms on each side of the house stretch from street to backyard without corridors. Interior space, however, has been subtly manipulated into something new. In the repair and reconstruction process, original or traditional building elements have been stripped, cut, or re-inserted into the house to form a modern space that also reveals an image of the past.

Traditionally, a solid stud wall separated the two sides of the double-shotgun. Though this wall remains in the house, the studs are often left without a finished surface, as if the outer layer of the wall has been stripped away. Reinvented windows again play a strong role. Shutters, which are typically found on the outside edge of the house, have been inserted inside to separate the living room from the dining area. Pivoting on their centers, they allow rooms to be adjusted in size—the dining area can be a separate, intimate space or a part of the living room. These simple manipulations result in a modern space: boundaries are defined—but penetrable—and enclosure is alterable. Throughout the house, the body can move through walls into adjoining spaces without encumbrances, and from the living room, one can see through the stud wall into the study, through a cut “window” into a second bedroom, or through the shuttered wall into the dining area. Real and phenomenal movement becomes highlighted in the space, and each altered element is reminiscent of both past and present.

This simultaneous viewing of past and present occurs between inside and outside as well. In the master bedroom, transom windows formerly located over doors have been re-located to random heights where they frame views of the neighbor's exterior wall. Through these windows, a depth is achieved that is far greater than the dimension of the wall. Near the viewer is

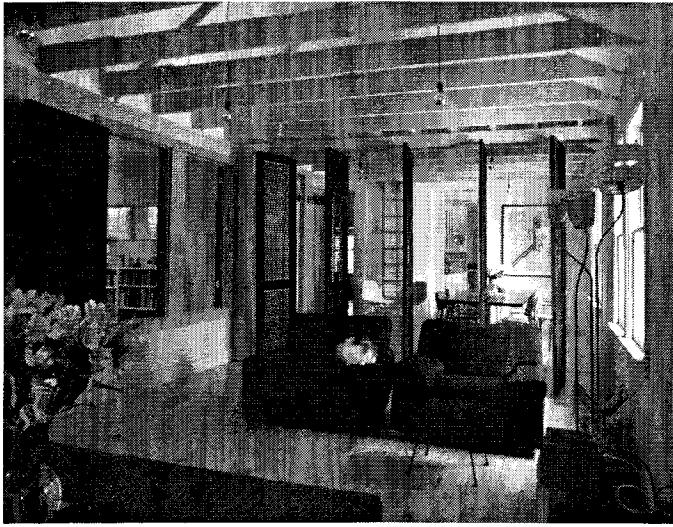


Fig. 3. Living/Dining Space, Emery-McClure Residence.

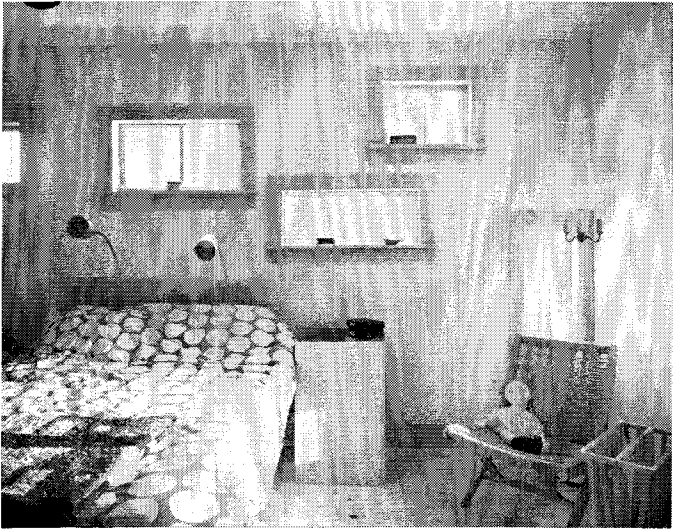


Fig. 4. Master Bedroom, Emery-McClure Residence.

an image of the present – clean, square window casings and sills in a comfortable, darkened interior space. Meanwhile, the past – the horizontal weathered wood cladding outside – is strongly highlighted by the sun. The contrast between exterior and interior, light and dark, old and new, horizontal and vertical, cause the viewer to oscillate between past and present and add depth in both time and space.

Traditionally, the purpose of a shutter is to block light, a stud wall is intended to hold a finished surface, and a window is meant to view the outside. Each of these elements has been stripped of its original use and given a new one. In the process, the meanings the elements hold has also been re-invented, and each change becomes a clue to a new perception of the space.

ZWIRN-PIONE RESIDENCE

A third means to view the past and present simultaneously is through the manipulation of form and volume. Unlike the previous two projects, the Zwirn-Pione Residence is a new, two-story construction located in a neighborhood where single-family residences are freestanding rather than a part of the street. Here, the struggle of vernacular context becomes more challenging; the past and the present must be constructed at the same time. To do this, the house borrows familiar dimensions and spatial relationships from vernacular tradition, but allows traditional elements, which are not needed in the modern house, to change in form and use.

In exterior form, the house combines and borrows from several traditional building styles. From the shotgun, it takes both its low-pitched roof facing the street and its single room depth void of corridors and allowing cross-ventilation. It also borrows several features from the Creole townhouse. On the ground level, exterior space (used as a carport) separates a home office near the street from a kitchen and dining area at the back, providing an opportunity to place the more private rooms upstairs. An exterior stair, reminiscent of a courtyard access way, is entered from the street side and runs upward along the length of the house to the living room on the second floor. Finally, a side balcony, also located on the second floor, is carved in courtyard-like fashion from the rectangular volume of the house.¹⁰ The traditional rectangular form also has one purely modern twist; although the house sits square to the street, one long facade angles in to face south directly, and this angle then influences other walls of the house set perpendicular to it.

On the interior, walking through the house provides a changing perception of space and an oscillation between inside and outside. The angled wall of the house produces both a slight distortion of space and a sense of heightened perspective. Substitutes for fireplaces, thick walls containing bookshelves, cabinetry, and service areas separate the primary rooms of the house. Simple, square windows – fixed on the smaller east and west elevations and operable awnings on the north and south – replace traditional tall, narrow casements. Between the living room and second floor balcony, smaller versions of these square windows come together to form a glass wall and take the place of shutters in providing a screen-like division between the interior and exterior. Even under a deep overhang, the south-facing glass brightly contrasts with a deep blue-purple wall on the opposite side of the living room, and one senses a deepness of space. Finally, stripes in the flooring, which alternate between wide-plank wood and stone, cut across the grain of the room and lead outside; a detail which conceptually unites darkness and light, interior and exterior, vernacular and modern.

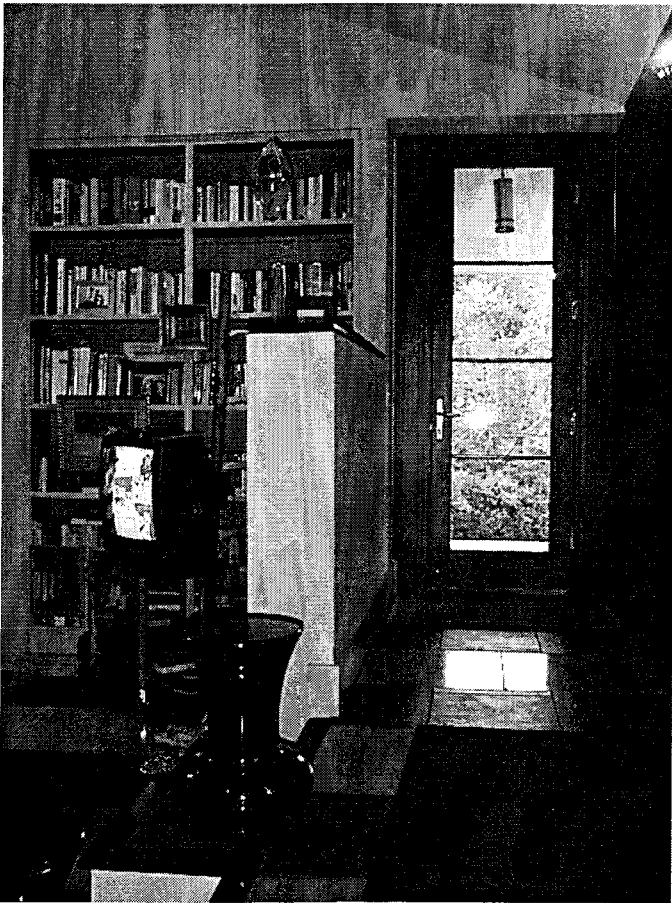


Fig. 5. Entry Hall, Zwirn-Pione Residence.



Fig. 6. Living Room, Zwirn-Pione Residence.

As new construction, the Zwirn-Pione Residence is unable to utilize remnant samples of material and texture to represent the past. Instead, it relies on traditional forms, spatial relationships, and building elements that can be given new roles and functions. In this way, one senses both familiarity and innovation in the house.

CONCLUSION

While perhaps not the specified intention of their work, the simultaneous existence of present and past is embedded in the work of these architects. Distinct from ideas of critical regionalism, these projects do not attempt to re-define modernism and vernacular in order to form a new, seamless whole. Instead, they achieve an active coexistence of unlike parts that together provide a place of both cultural history and cultural advancement—the same unstable (but familiar) place of the individual.

These projects are reflective of a struggle the profession faces today: how to create spaces for modern living in contexts thick with vernacular tradition. The mere existence of the struggle is an acknowledgement that the past cannot be left behind. But still, questions remain: What does the past signify? Why is this view of the past important? Writing of the same struggle in literature, T.S. Eliot explains that part of the responsibility of contemporary work is to re-present the past because “. . . the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.”¹¹

This task is difficult to achieve. Modern architecture can feel cold and inhuman. New vernacular architecture is often in danger of being overly nostalgic. Yet, individuals of every time in history live naturally and simultaneously in both worlds. The history, experience, and knowledge of past events of individuals and groups of individuals are what form and inform the culture to which they belong. Geographically, an obelisk or church tower—any “axis mundi”—can mark the physical location of an individual’s place in the world. Locating oneself in the construct of time can have the same effect: an individual finds place and identity.

Perhaps in the quest to find “pure time” in reconstructed architecture, the ultimate goal is an acknowledgement of conditions that already naturally exist: individuals belong to cultures; cultures and individuals share pasts and presents and create futures. As psychoanalyst Carl Jung remarked in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, “inner peace and contentment depend in large measure upon whether or not the historical family which is inherent in the individual can be harmonized with the ephemeral conditions of the present.”¹² This was Marcel Proust’s goal, and it is probably ours as well.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” in *The Widening Gyre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 20-21.

² Joseph Frank, 22.

³ Joseph Frank, 23.

⁴ Joseph Frank, 24.

⁵ Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: An Architectural Guide to New Orleans' Vieux Carré* (New Orleans: Tulane School of Architecture, 1997), 48.

⁶ Malcolm Heard, 21-24, 38-42, 104-106.

⁷ Malcolm Heard, 62-63.

⁸ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a new Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), lvi.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Malcolm Heard, 41-43.

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), 39.

¹² C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 237.

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