

## IDEA OF HOUSE

### The Demise of Housing (once and for all...)

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This paper seeks to challenge the merits of our inclination to isolate 'housing' as a distinct and quasi-autonomous field of enquiry and action. This habit is deeply embedded in a broad range of institutional constructs, yet there exist compelling reason to encourage critical questioning of the enduring value of these conventions. In doing so we might refresh more general expectations concerning the current demeanor of architecture and planning actions, as well as to fashion the speculative formulation of incremental and strategic actions that could move beyond the present condition of status quo inertia and entrenchment. In each area of research resides the ambition of satisfying the potential for emergent social practices to be given generous and dignified spatial frame, and for this sensibility to be projected into a fully sustainable future.

'Since the middle of the nineteenth century there have been no great changes in domestic planning – only accentuations, modifications and restatements. Neither the radical Victorian medievalists nor the modernists made any noticeable attempt to go back or forward from the accepted conventions of the nineteenth century...Thus the social aspect of architecture...was more concerned with the fabrication of buildings than with their occupation. ... with the house considered first and foremost as an item of production, the stage was set for the arrival of 'housing' in the current sense of the term. Emphasis shifted from the nature of the place to the procedures of its assembly. Nevertheless, beneath this or that revolutionary, workmanlike programme of reconstruction, the house itself remained unaltered in all its essentials.'

#### A Brief Overview

While dwelling places of collective and institutional identity were certainly characteristic of long-standing patterns of Western settlement, prior to the advent of industrialization these were apt to be exceptional in their singularity of purpose and identity. The provision of built accommodation for residential purposes was almost

exclusively filled by vernacular constructions of modest physical scale, whose collective identity would be understood as hamlet, village, or town according to scale and political status. Residences for collective communities would, on the other hand, be established for specific populations: soldiers or veterans; the sick or indigent; clerics or students; and so on.

With the advent of European industrialization in the nineteenth century, however, changes in production systems and an unprecedented rise in population forced a cathartic shift in the administration of the social order that included a wholesale reconsideration of the techniques of settlement. Impulses towards social and political reform found direct expression in the newly formulated procedures of planning, and together with changing technologies in construction these were to fundamentally reshape the traditions of architecture and the locus in which housing would occur.

It is important to be reminded of the circumstances in which the broad application of housing as a social practice - underpinned by the deliberate invention of building typologies – arose, in part so that we acknowledge the acute differences between that extraordinary historical moment and our own.

It is also critical to be reminded of concurrent developments in urban planning strategies that arose at this time. Whether in utopian industrial models, the emergence of the Garden City sensibility or the urban cleansing of Haussman's Paris, the appropriation of industrial production logic in reconfiguring the public intervention in the production of urban structure sounds a consistent and recurring theme. The rationalization of manufacturing found congruent expression in attempts to regulate and control the conduct of the emerging industrial townscape and to locate this construct called housing there.

The effort to systematically distinguish precincts of settlement according to discrete types of activity was to acquire a particularly severe entrenchment in the planning practices of post-industrial legislation in Europe and in the parallel expansion of colonial

development in North America. This strategy of rendering social attributes in distinct territorial or spatial terms may also be observed in the organization of individual dwelling units of the same period : a habit that has become entrenched in everyday practice and is clearly evident in our own contemporary realm.

### **The Current Context**

This admittedly cursory reminder of housing's historical origins is intended to identify general attributes that might be usefully challenged in the face of our current conditions of social order and technological opportunity.

Most importantly - and fundamental to the argument made here - is to acknowledge the anachronistic insistence upon zoning of urban domain and dwelling space according to strict distinctions of functional program. This single cultural practice lies at the core of our instinct to consider housing as quasi-autonomous practice and, I would propose, as such is entirely questionable in its motivation and in its consequence.

Less systemic in its expression, but nonetheless significant, is housing's implicit configuration of collective values at a scale independent of both the general community – say the scale of neighborhood – and that of the individual dwelling unit. Given the extent of current challenge to the continuing value of a public realm, this scale of identity too readily establishes broad and inclusive social milieus in favor of the capacity to 'gate': to define localized and exclusive groupings.

In addition, these broad attributes have been further entrenched in North American practice by the development of distinct procedures for the capitalization of housing and of distinct techniques in construction. This entrenchment of sensibility contributes to the overall degree of inertia that now characterizes the conventions of housing practice, and must be identified as key constituents to be addressed in remedy.

### **New Opportunities**

These observations imply an overarching challenge to current

practices in planning and building that directly impinge upon our sense of housing's position within our culture.

First, it is significant to note that in our current condition of a highly fluid social pluralism , presumptions of a persisting social orthodoxy are entirely inappropriate. Their translation into 'bricks and mortar' through regulatory practices directly limits the capacity for our built environment to foster social complexity and change. Issues of shifting domestic social practices are most usually co-opted by the language and media of the marketplace: if at all. To give direct spatialized expression to emerging social patterns through commercial culture, however, simply postpones the misfit between house and household for another generation or – more likely – ensures that the misfit among consumers with less capital resources and opportunities for choice becomes institutionalized.

Our urgent need to provide material sustainability would, on the other hand, encourage an investment in building stock that carries with it a commensurate capacity to anticipate and manage emerging social change over time. In pursuit of a context for action in which choice and adaptability are privileged, there may well be some reason to attempt to undo the distinction between the value of property and the value of building that arose at the time of industrialization. This distinction, and the organization of capitalization that flow from it, encourages building as an essentially provisional activity doomed to perpetuate a culture of short-term focus with a profound disregard for material sustainability.

Finally, recent shifts in production technologies suggest that the conventional patterns of production and their inscription in urban settlement may now occur with a vastly looser configuration of the regard between social and physical geographies.

These observations may lead us to consider one overarching conclusion, namely that housing – no different from any other functional program – is institutionalized in current building and planning practices at great risk to vital and sustainable social practices. We might do well to ask, Whose interests, exactly, are being served by the persistent encouragement of this discipline

called housing?

### **Beta-space ( non-housing housing... )**

The formulation of an alternative program for building that does not discriminate on the basis of putative – and present - function is most certainly fraught with challenges. If something of a broad brush-stroke argument has been made that encourages further research around the topic, it would be useful to begin the process of identifying the range of obstacles and opportunities that are likely to present themselves. Issues identified include the following:

#### ***Planning practices***

The orthodoxy of land-use zoning practices has become so broadly applied that it is almost inconceivable to formulate a fundamental strategy concerning planning without recourse to these techniques. The question becomes, what attributes of building development can be clearly delineated – and even quantified – without recourse to the prescription of occupation and use?

What becomes immediately apparent is that in the course of generalizing the criteria of occupation the bureaucratic tendency is to revert to the 'worst-case' possibility: planning for the most extreme needs of parking and transportation – for instance - rather than the least demanding. The exploration of a new paradigm – for now call it beta-space – would need to explore the potential for fine-scaled discriminations of land-use to be administered through an expansion of existing agencies that authorize permits for.

How would a permit for a single-family domestic household be formulated to facilitate clear parameters of requirement and a fair and objective procedure of review? Which aspects of housing building typologies will need to shift in emphasis in order to anticipate change over time? Which institutionalized proprieties of use and adjacency might lay claim to continued codification?

#### ***Building practices***

By simply acknowledging that built space might – at some point – be used for purposes other than the domestic immediately sets up a new set of standards and expectations.

If the scale of urban pattern is reduced to that of individual buildings rather than extensive areas of homogenous uses, the negotiation of anticipated change and present functional delineation becomes more finely grained in a reciprocal fashion. The likelihood of a degree of designed redundancy in terms of material, overall spatial provision and services allocation will in part become characteristic features of the beta-space postulation.

What is interesting in making this observation, however, is that such a shift might well encourage a standard of building performance that is overall higher than that currently characterizing buildings called 'housing'. Both national and local building codes identify particular criteria for single-family and small aggregations of multiple family housing that in many instances institutionalize practices of planning and performance that would simply not be tolerated in the public arena.

#### ***Financial practices***

The reform of practices of planning and building almost pale in light of the scale of institutional inertia characterizing the array of financial practices that now accompany 'housing' – whether in public or private constituencies.

The suggestion of a material redundancy noted earlier must, of course, find commensurate measure in the capitalization of building. It is remarkable that financial privilege is granted to investment in the purchase of an individual house or apartment. What aspects of our social and cultural life are encouraged by this inclination? How can increments of capital beyond the scale of an individual home be made available more broadly to encourage investment in our built environment in areas outside those of private, domestic consideration?

Is it inconceivable that just as a 'housing license' might be granted in a manner comparable to a business license, that the associated building's capitalization could be considered by the lending agency in a manner comparable to a commercial loan, with the plethora of design elaboration and themed fittings being returned to the real of occupants' desires and resources?

**Notes in Conclusion**

While oblique in its contribution to the regard between technology and housing practices, I believe this research raises issues that once exposed are compelling and invite deliberate and active response.

In part, the underpinnings for the work represent a very modest portion of the project of moving from an inherently unhealthy construct of economic production towards a future that is fundamentally sustainable. This is not the sustainability that arrives one building at a time – the energy-efficient supermarket that everyone drives to - but one in which profound structural instabilities are identified, understood, and critically challenged. In these terms the potential consequences of the research might radically reconfigure the framework in which housing and building technology are understood in future. Indeed, we might be encouraged to understand how the social imperatives for architecture and urban design might begin to conform to a full and valued role that is considered, responsible and renewable.