

A PRIVATE HOUSE AS ARCHITECTURE BASED UPON IDEAS

Private houses are an area of architecture which – even though dominated by the patterns of mass culture – still offers architects the best opportunity to present their own creative philosophy and to establish professional reputation. They make a natural testing ground for new architectural ideas that can be later developed in designs of a larger scale and increased complexity.

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Introduction

The conference theses point out rightly that there is not a single theory of architecture today – there are numerous theories being an intellectual justification for authorial creative attitudes. These theories are reflected in designs of private houses, too. The prevailing part of this area of architecture is dominated by the catalogue product; fortunately, there are also many clients who expect untypical moderate solutions including a significant message.

Thus, on the one hand, a private house is the most durable bastion of tradition; on the other hand, it is a testing ground for new architectural ideas growing from the criticism of the contemporary society and mass culture. Even for great, acknowledged architects, a private house still makes a fascinating challenge because its vision is not just the professional fulfillment of utilitarian needs but also a transfer of opinions concerning the questions of privacy, homeliness and an attitude towards the natural and cultural context. A private house becomes a “place” when its residents fully identify with it, when its physical space becomes a part of their existential space. An architectonic form is the materialization of an idea coming from an architect and accepted by its future users.

For the Love of Nature

Contemporary architecture has not got a trend which would praise nature more strongly than the so-called American school of organic architecture. The achievements of its representatives under the leadership of Bruce Goff and Bart Prince go beyond Wright's concept of the organic and introduce some elements of imitating natural forms (geomorphism and biomorphism) and mimetic convergence with the surroundings. Houses designed in this spirit not only adjust to the landscape but become its part. An example of a perfectly “masked” object is a house in the High Desert near Palm Springs designed by Ken Kellog. Located on a rocky slope, it adjusts itself to the ground owing to its walls of the same material and the application of concrete shells as covering whose form and colour refer to the boulders lying all around. A house in Sun Valley, Idaho, designed by Bart Prince, has also become a part of the natural landscape. It resembles a snake crawling in the prairie, bending on the wavy ground, glittering in the sun with its scale of the shingle, matching the ochre of the soil and the sunburnt grasses. This architecture is obviously subordinate to nature and draws its formal ideas from it.

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1. Bavinger House, near Norma, Oklahoma, 1955, author: Bruce Goff 2. House in Sun Valley, Idaho, 1988, author: Bart Prince 3. Maria Short's house, Kempsey, 1974, Glenn Murcutt 4. Gehry's house in Santa Monica, 1978, author: Frank O. Gehry 5. Norton's house in Venice, author: Frank O. Gehry 6. Winton Guest House, Wayzata, 1987, author: Frank O. Gehry 7. Kidosaki House, Tokyo, 1986, author: Tadao Ando 8. Curtain Wall House, Tokyo, 1995, author: Shigeru Ban 9. Naked House, Saitama, 2000, author: Shigeru Ban



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Although time goes by, the icon of the American school of organic architecture is still Bavinger House in Oklahoma implemented in 1950–55 according to Bruce Goff's design. It combines motifs which imitate nature with some regional threads and the idea of ad-hoc, i.e. building of natural and reused materials found in the neighbourhood. The nature-loving hosts wished for a solution with an open space where they could practise their hobby – the cultivation of flowers. Their house, hung on a mast – an oil well tube, is adjusted to a riverside slope. Its plan is based on a logarithmic spiral similar to the form of a snail. The external walls of carelessly arranged, natural stones and boulders follow the spiral. A riverside terrace enters the interior through the glassed-in living room and transforms into a garden with lush plants and a pond. The house has not got any traditional rooms, only some platforms made of aircraft noses hung over a shared space. They are arranged regularly on the plan of the spiral, at various heights, befittingly to the increasing height of the roof. Bavinger House is an extremely individualized example of a combination of architecture and nature, a very “personal” one rendering its residents' character.

Naturally and Modernly

Glenn Murcutt, called the master of ordinariness and an Australian patriot, understands accordance with nature differently from organic architects. He derives the form of a house from the landscape and the climate in the functional, aesthetical and technical sense. He never uses any advanced systems of installations: his houses are naturally shaded, ventilated and heated by fireplaces. The effects of using simple, logical solutions adjusted to the local conditions are nearly archetypical architectonic forms. The houses of Maria Short, Marika Alderton, the Magneys or the Fletchers purposefully resemble sheds and barns characteristic of the cultural landscape of the agri-

cultural regions of Australia. Their long, one-storey bodies do not dominate in the open space without any tall trees. An aesthetic relationship with the surroundings is emphasized by their colours assuming the hues of the bush, sunburnt grass and faded wood. Houses designed by Murcutt combine ecology and aesthetics in an excellent manner. Devoid of pushy regional character, they are authentically local and modern as well.

In the Urban Jungle

One can love the city, hate it or establish a dialogue with it. The first houses designed by Frank O. Gehry in Los Angeles was a manifest of his creative philosophy as well as an expression of his attitude to the city and its culture.

Implementing the controversial extension of his own house in Santa Monica, Gehry used a casual wire net, corrugated iron, unprocessed concrete, unseasoned plywood, even pink asbestos. The use of “junk” materials was an absolutely conscious artistic decision – Gehry often said that art did not need any expensive materials, that his befriended sculptors created beautiful things of pieces of wood or paper only. At the first glance, this collage of materials and forms seem accidental, chaotic and unfinished. However, all the sense lies in its confusion (jungle architecture). Sudden transitions between various materials, ugly connections, even asphalt on the kitchen floor – all these make a repetition of certain frames encountered in an American city every day. Free from previous conventions, the design carries a clear message – it is a critical, architectural answer to the urban chaos of LA with its hectic culture. It is also an affirmation of the beauty of the process of formation lost in industrial production.

Norton's house, built on a beach in Venice, carries a similar message. It looks like a quickly assembled shelter of casual materials. There is even a wooden

log thrown away by the sea waves. The hallmark of the house is a freestanding studio shaped like lifeguards' cabins. Gehry reached for a model from the world of mass culture and transferred it to the world of art.

The Idea of Breakup

Residences designed by Gehry in a later period, such as Winton Guest House or Schnabel House, contribute a degree of mysteriousness, humour and fantasy. In fact, they also contribute the idea of breakup. Winton Guest House consists of six bodies – each of them has got a different form and is finished with a different material. Each room becomes a building subject its own laws. What Wright integrated in an open plan, Gehry dismembered extremely. The breakup of the house plan has got its meaning – it reflects the liberalization of family life and the disintegration of contemporary culture. The deconstruction of the traditional body and function, exploding forms become an answer to our times, full of diversity, contradiction and uncertainty. We can also find the idea of breakup in the picturesque concepts of houses by Joshua Sweitzer (Monument Joshua Tree), Diana Agrest (House on Sag Pond) or Daryl Jackson (Beach House).

An Introvert House

While Gehry establishes a rough dialogue with the city in his deconstructionist houses, numerous Japanese architects, including Tadao Ando and Ushida Findley, assume a completely different – introvert – attitude towards the surroundings. In response to an unfriendly urban environment – urban mess, noise, unimaginable density and tiny plots, their houses separate themselves from the outside world and turn towards the interior.

In the case of Tadao Ando, the slogan *My home is my castle* is transformed into *My plot is my castle*

(Kidosaki, Koshino, Matsumoto, Nagayama and Azuma Houses). Tall walls along the plot border make the whole strictly private. They also have got a metaphysical meaning: they act as a shell separating a living space – from one side, protecting it from interference from the outside; from the other side, stopping the outflow of internal affairs. The houses, fortified from the outside, open to the inside, to the internal courtyards – an oasis of peace and quiet, living in the rhythm of day and night as well as the seasons. The courtyards are usually bare and empty; if there is a single tree or a bush, it is formed beautifully and becomes a symbol of nature in the city. Tadao Ando thinks that urban man lost touch with nature long ago. Only the sun, the rain, the wind and the cool are still authentic. These phenomena are significant when they enter an interior. In an extreme way, he realizes this concept in Azuma House where he forces the residents to cross an open courtyard in order to have contact with the atmospheric conditions.

In a series of private houses: Truss Wall House, Echo Chamber, Soft and Hairy, Ushida Findley presents the art of enclosure being the opposite of “confusion” and dismemberment. The heart of Truss Wall House is a tiny courtyard at the level of the raised ground floor which is a miracle itself considering the small plan of this building. The metaphysics of enclosure and concentration can be also found in these houses designed by Masakazu Takasaki: Egg House, Crystal Light and Zero-Cosmology where the author uses his favourite form of an egg as a symbol of birth and creativity.

The Idea of Changeability

Shigeru Ban approaches the question of the protection of privacy in a different manner. He chooses flexible architecture capable of adjusting to the changing conditions like man who changes his clothes depending on the weather. Instead of dividing a house

with external walls, he suggests movable elements. In Curtain Wall House, they are: a curtain hung on the external edge of the terrace and movable glass walls between the terrace and the interior. They make it possible to create various combinations of opening and closing the space. In Glass Shutter House, this problem is solved a simpler way – by means of an industrial roller blind which changes a glass cube into a tightly closed box.

In Shigeru Ban's implementations, the idea of flexibility, conceived by the first modernists, is combined with the concept of a universal space. The permanent elements of the interior of Wall Less House are just sanitary facilities and the kitchen core, while possible divisions of the space are facilitated by curtains. A special case of a private house with minimum privacy is Naked House. It was commissioned by a three-generation family which wanted the arrangement of the space to connect its members so that they could spend much more time together. For such a life model, the architect designed a transparent container

with glazed walls shut out by a curtain where the rooms are movable boxes without any windows or doors. The boxes may be arranged in various positions to make different interior arrangements or be taken outside.

Summary

The presented houses, designed by famous architects, represent various comprehensions of homeliness and privacy, various attitudes towards the natural and cultural context. They share just one feature: each of them is based upon an idea which dominated its solution. For the propagators of organic architecture, it is the affirmation of nature; for Tadao Ando – the metaphysics of enclosure; for Glenn Murcutt – a relationship between a landscape and the climate; for Frank Gehry – a house reflects the chaos of contemporary cities and their disintegrating culture; Shigeru Ban issues a challenge to the traditional notions of intimacy, homeliness and the durability of a structure.

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