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Home and Away

As the recession brought construction to a standstill, and my architectural practice with it, I meditated on the art of dwelling. I had lived in suburban houses, college dormitories, slum apartments, dense urban neighborhoods, and a house in the woods. The places were rented or owned, hated or loved, old or new. But for a few months or for many years, I called each one home.

On the material plane, a dwelling is four walls and a roof, a shelter. It protects from the weather, provides safety and comfort, and stands as a taxable asset. But home is more than square feet of livable space, more than saleable real estate, more than a design problem. The word can denote a single house, a cluster, a farm or village, a city or nation, even the planet earth as viewed from outer space. Home is loaded with meaning, with ties to family, birthplace, ownership of land, ethnic heritage, and more. Albert Camus wrote in “Summer in Algiers:”

> *To feel one’s attachment to a certain region, one’s love for a certain group of men, to know that there is always a spot where one’s heart will feel at peace ... at certain moments everything yearns for that spiritual home.*

A theme emerges from the range of words we use—abode, apartment, cabin, cottage, dwelling, habitation, house, lodging, mansion, residence—the theme of staying put. The root meaning of “mansion” for example is “remain;” “inhabit” is related to “have” in the sense of “hold;” and “abide” and “dwell,” the verbs linked to “abode” and dwelling,” carry a whiff of persistence. The International Building Code, used by jurisdictions in the United States and Canada, defines a “dwelling unit” as:

> *A single unit providing complete, independent living facilities for one or more persons, including permanent provisions for living, sleeping, eating, cooking, and sanitation.*

The key word is “permanent.” Legally, a tent, trailer, yurt or tipi is not a dwelling. The language we use contains a deep-seated prejudice against the person with no fixed address—the gypsy, vagabond, transient, tourist, tramp and nomad—above all, the homeless. The person who is so unlucky as to have no home lies at the bottom of the social order. This may explain the emotional stake we have in finding and keeping a place to live, a roof over our heads.

But is a roof enough? There are solid structures that do not count, even ones where notables have stayed and events have transpired. A hotel room or guest suite that lacks a means to cook is not a dwelling unit. This point came up in my practice when a homeowner wanted to finish space over the garage. If the property is zoned for one dwelling unit, a common dodge is to build all the “facilities,” including a bath and a kitchen, but to omit the stove. A guest suite can be rented, which leads to multiple dwelling units.

By watching clients and myself, as we bought and sold our dwellings, I saw that the fact of moving, or of building a new house, did not always

enhance our lives. Bigger and better, in a tonier neighborhood, with taller trees and greener grass, might fail to make us happier. The bickering married couple, who endured the ordeals of design and construction only to divorce a year after moving in, became stock characters in this drama. Real estate agents are familiar with the serial home buyer, ostensibly in search of a better house or neighborhood, but really in search of a better life.

As a designer of houses, I necessarily became involved with the personal lives of my clients and their families, including elderly parents and pets. The families were much like the one I grew up in, with four children, two parents and a grandmother. But as a single man, I wondered about alternative living arrangements.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, unmarried Americans lived in boarding houses or with family members. It was impractical to set up a household for one, and socially unacceptable for women. Only a well-to-do widow could manage it. But the Second World War brought a revolution in social attitudes, and equally important, in labor-saving devices. It became possible to live without servants, or a wife. A woman could work to support herself and live alone, and a more urbanized population tolerated her.

In her 2011 book New Spirits: Americans in the "Gilded Age" 1865-1905, Rebecca Edwards locates the shift earlier, though without discussing housing. A section called "Bachelors and Independent Women" begins:

> *In the late nineteenth century, more and more Americans chose a single life. Some women chose professional and reform careers and never married, while divorced women also increased in numbers. By 1890, more than 10 percent of adult wage-earning women in major cities were unmarried and not living with family members. . . . Adult men escaped the bonds of matrimony in even larger numbers.*

Edwards proceeds to discuss homosexuality, as if the single state implied the sexual orientation, a dubious assumption. But the social change is clear: technology and urban commercial culture made single life not only possible but desirable for some.

Married people, who increasingly include gay couples, still hold singles suspect. Their view is that a full and fulfilling life can only be lived in partnership. Do singles suffer from minority discrimination? The most rapidly growing residential category in the United States is the single-person household. According to U. S. Census figures, it rose from 7.8% of all households in 1940 to 26.7% in 2010. To dice the numbers another way, 10% of the American population, and not just those in major cities, live alone.

Are 31 million of us miserable hermits and frustrated spinsters? We all live in a web of relationships, and we all desire privacy. The single-person household is the ultimate in personal space. As such, it clarifies identity. I define myself not in relation to a wife or children, or even to a group of roommates or friends, but in terms of what I do and who I am.

Michel de Montaigne understood this imperative. Married, the father of six children, one of whom survived to adulthood, he wrote his Essays

as a long, minutely detailed self-portrait, or a series of attempts to define the self. Along the way, the self included a Frenchman, a Gascon, a royal counsellor, the mayor of Bordeaux, a landed aristocrat, and the proud owner of a library in a tower—a symbol of the writer, if ever there was one. Montaigne also wrote at length about his dearest friend, Étienne de la Boétie, who died young, and about customs, politics, food and fashion—the whole range of human experience.

An architect identifies with his home, or the press does the identifying for him. Think of Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin, Philip Johnson and the Glass House, or Thomas Jefferson and Monticello. Though hardly a celebrity, I could not help seeing myself in my living quarters. For nine years, I was a struggling young professional in a walk-up apartment in Manhattan. For five years, I lived the American Dream, with a two-car garage, a deck, two acres, and a woodland stream in back. In writing about these places, I saw a wish to experiment, a streak of impatience, a need to learn things the hard way. Also a susceptibility to the values of my parents, of the construction industry, and of society at large. But I learned a little.

I now believe that the financial advantages of owning a home are overrated. It is supposed to be a good way to save, to accumulate wealth. But a long-term loan enriches the lender far more. Working people benefit from the ability to move where the jobs are. This has always been true for highly specialized trades and university professors. Now it is true for everyone. While saving money for the future is a worthy goal, real estate is not always the best way to achieve it. It is risky, expensive to maintain, and hard to convert to cash.

In any case, following our national myth, Americans are a mobile people. We get ahead by moving on. We believe just as strongly that homeownership makes for good citizens, ones who care for their property, vote regularly, keep up with the news, pay their taxes, and so forth. So we watch the rate of homeownership as a measure of economic health, with political implications. The United States Census Bureau says that this rate hit a high of 69.2% in June 2004. It dropped to 64.4% by October 2014, which means that a greater part of the population is renting. Is this bad news? Or does it confirm other statistics which show a shift of population since 2000 from suburbs and rural areas to cities and downtowns?

Cosmopolitan writers such as Pico Iyer say that the up-to-date person can make a home anywhere, that national boundaries and ethnic origins are irrelevant. In a matter of hours, you can fly around the world, and urban life is the much the same. Iyer asks: why should you buy into one place and not another? Why should you put down roots?

The English travel writer Bruce Chatwin tried to soothe his itching feet with a theory of the nomad. He studied people who wander—Australian aborigines in The Songlines (1987), Bedouins in North Africa, shepherds in Patagonia, and herders in general. In Anatomy of Restlessness (1996), a collection of essays and stories published after his death in 1989, he sketched the nomad way of life. His research showed that nomads have a territory, a circuit which they follow through the seasons, sometimes over vast distances. They wander but are never lost. In fact, nomads and settlers exist in symbiosis. They trade goods and services, and historically they exchange roles with ease.

A generation has passed since Chatwin wrote. Brilliant but not entirely forthright, Chatwin spiced autobiography with fiction. He was a world traveler but never a nomad. In fact, he lived in London, and then in the Welsh countryside. Educated to the nth degree, a popular speaker and journalist, Iyer is more quotable than incisive: "I am not rooted in a place, I think, so much as in certain values and affiliations and friendships that I carry everywhere I go; my home is both invisible and portable." The metaphor can run away with the message, as the dish ran away with the spoon.

Then again, few people ever build a home. We buy or rent one, and in America, we are prone to consider each apartment or house as a temporary stop in life's journey. When it comes to housing, we are consumers. But given the chance, we eagerly become builders. Home design and construction are a common fantasy, as shown by the books of dream houses, shelter magazines, and television shows on remodeling.

Anthropologists and social scientists pose an alternate reality. As hominids, we once lived in trees, then on African savannas. Then as homo sapiens, but before we invented agriculture, we roamed in search of food, hunted wild game, camped in caves, made leafy nests, and so on. Wandering on foot, outdoors, under the stars, foraging in the wild and eating raw—such a life is more natural and healthier, they say.

This sort of talk sets my teeth on edge. Thousands of years of prehistory intervene, during which humans developed language, culture, and a range of activities that set us apart from animals. The urge to build may not be an instinct, but it lies deep in our collective soul.

The single-family house, though, is one type among many, and not necessarily the earliest. If the most primitive social unit was the extended family, clan or tribe, then something like the Iroquois longhouse or the Southwestern pueblo came first. Or maybe the village evolved from the camp, and a group of tents became a group of houses, close or connected. The prehistoric stone houses on the island of Skara Brae, Orkney (3100-2500 BC) may represent the type. The isolated homestead, farmhouse, or cabin—a favorite daydream for inhabitants of big cities—would be a late development.

They are a small fraction of the population, but since the early 1800s, Americans have lived in communes or utopian communities. At the same time as I wrote about my own homes, I read about American communes. For my purposes, a monastery is a utopian community, and a commune, intentional community or collective, despite all the variations in living arrangements, is marked by group ownership of real estate.

Twin Oaks, a hippie commune founded in 1967 and still thriving, was a short drive away. I visited it twice, as well as two Catholic monasteries, a Hindu ashram, an ecumenical group, and a cohousing group, all in Virginia. What struck me was the unimportance of social experiments related to sex, marriage, child-rearing, wages, and political leadership. Religion, or the lack of it, does not seem to matter. Instead, key factors for communal success are sound finances and a stable group. And most important, despite their nominal withdrawal from the world, is a healthy flow in and out of goods, services, money, casual visitors and residents.

On a smaller scale, the flow principle applies to a household, which must have income and pay expenses. A household imports food and supplies, and it exports waste and sometimes manufactured goods and professional services. A dwelling is like a body; body and house are ancient symbols for each other. When a child draws a house, it resembles a face, with windows for eyes and a door for a mouth. The frame, or the structure of posts and beams, is a skeleton, while architects speak of the roof and walls as a skin.

I love the physical aspect of houses, their construction and sense of space. My adventure in architecture has been rewarding, but my personal search for home may have been short-sighted. After all my speculative investments, house renovations, and changes of address, I have come to rest in an old stucco cottage in Charlottesville.

Instead of an inanimate object, perhaps home is a live organism. It maintains a biological equilibrium, the life of its inhabitants, just as they maintain it. The cross-stitch sampler that hangs over the fireplace should read: “Home Sweet Homeostasis.”