

UNSTAKED TERRITORY: Frontiers of Beginning Design

Proceedings of the 19th National Conference on the Beginning
Design Student, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma
April 3-5, 2003



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Challenging The Boundaries I
Challenging The Boundaries II
Integrating The Boundaries
Obscuring The Boundaries
Various Terrains
Initial Terrain

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Architectural design and the fashionable disdain for domesticity

Tom Owens
University of Oklahoma

Introduction

So why would someone from a college of education and a school of international and area studies present a paper in an academic conference focused on architectural design? It is clear that I am writing from a position within architectural design that exists somewhere along a continuum that might extend from dilettante to voyeur. I am peeking over the academic fence to see what other disciplines have to contribute to improving schools. The essential nature of questions regarding schooling is one that warrants the considered efforts of even those who, within the architectural community, are clearly untrained, uneducated or ill-informed. However this obvious shortcoming may well be associated with the advantages of also being totally unconstrained, woefully lacking in understanding the respected traditions of architecture, absent any indoctrination, and having absolutely no status within the design community. While this intoxicating freedom would be sufficient reason to engage in this intellectual pursuit, the fundamental reason I feel the need, the responsibility, to address these issues is the absolutely vital role that schooling plays in our individual and collective lives and in the very future of our nation.

Just as there can be no disconnect between the social world and schooling there can be no disconnect between the physical world or spaces of schooling and the process or function of schooling. It is within the physical structure that schooling takes place. Educational philosopher Jane Roland Martin (1992) argues that the conspicuous absence of domesticity from contemporary schooling is at the heart of many of the educational problems we face as a society. Just as domesticity is that which changes a house into a home, it is also that which makes school the place of delight or torture, that which provides for success or failure for the many students. Domesticity is that which transforms a house of instruction and memorization into a home of guidance and understanding; it is the defining characteristic of a concerned, connected and caring learning environment.

In a recent television interview (Homes Across America) Stanley Allen, Dean of Architecture of Princeton University, spoke about the challenges he and his wife faced in converting a recently purchased farm into their home. He spoke of the difficulty in taking "large open spaces and creating a sense of domesticity." Does he use this term in the same sense as Martin or is he merely referring to the very individualized tastes that make people feel comfortable in a particular environment? It seems as though this question is important because if designing to promote care, concern and connectedness is a possibility, architects have a great deal to contribute to the conversation on places of learning. If, as Martin asserts, domesticity is crucial to schooling and if architects can design and build in such a way that nurtures or enhances the sense of domesticity, then the two disciplines have a social responsibility to collaborate to meet the most pressing of social demands.

Within the context of schooling, Martin maintains that domesticity necessarily is associated with care, concern and connectedness. However, Allen uses the term in such a manner so as to suggest that domesticity has to do with scale, or at least it is something that is difficult to find in large spaces. How are these differing visions, the potentially divergent perspectives reconciled? It is possible to structure social interaction so that the end result is something that might be identified as care or concern or connection. It is less clear to me how one might design or define a space so that it leads people to engage in these relational behaviors. In other words, it seems as though designing with care is significantly different from structuring space so that it is conducive to caring. Is domesticity as an element, a value or attitude that can be elicited by good design?

The relationship between architecture and schooling extends beyond the need to create an environment that expresses care concerned and connectedness to those who indwell that particular place. As Jameson (1997) observes in *Is Space Political*, one can think of many ways in which the political intrudes upon the design process. The most readily apparent of these involve building codes, zoning, city ordinances, local politics, wards, bosses, payoffs, and unions. All of these may well form part of the political arena within which architectural design takes place. But there's another form of politics, and he goes on to note "the other is politics in the global sense of the founding and transformation, the conservation and revolutionizing of the society as a whole, of the collective, a what organizes human relationships generally and enables or sponsors, or limits or maims

human possibilities". This larger acceptance of the word politics often seems not empirical, on the grounds that one can not see vast entities like society itself; perhaps we should characterize this distinction as that between the particular and the general or universal.

Schooling likewise, has diverging understandings of the political. On the particular hand, we look at the mandates for standardized tests, teacher certification, accreditation standards, and the myriad compliance issues regulated by state legislatures and increasingly by the federal government. And like design, both disciplines (although I believe it to be worse in education) carry the burden of legislative micro-management. However, on a positive note, the area in which they are most connected is the manner in which they have the potential to structure human relationships and thereby impact the entire spectrum of human possibilities.

The use of a common language, a common term, may well be the bridge between architectural design and communities of learning. Does design have the capacity to clearly describe domesticity and if so what does it look like? How does a domestic space in some way look different from a non-domestic space or worse yet, the dilettante's pseudo-domesticity, or the dullard's derivative domesticity? Or does the best explanation rest in the possibility that domesticity, like pornography, or quality, is something that you know when you see it though it eludes specific definition?

It seems clear that design, to the extent that the field could pinpoint that which made a house of home, would have insight into domesticity. From this understanding of domesticity one might envision what the physical structure of schooling should look like in order to support the pedagogical orientation (ideological structure) of schooling for which Martin so effectively argues. In an effort to wrap my mind around this notion of the spaces of learning, I decided to look at schools, homes, the history of architecture, various design magazines, academic articles and tried to make sense out of a hodgepodge of seemingly unrelated if inconsistent meanings of domesticity. (I must admit, I took some delight in realizing that there were fields that approach education in terms of the proliferation of publications about which the discipline should, appropriately, be modest.).

Defining domesticity

According to *www.yourdictionary.com*, domesticity can be defined as the quality or condition of being domestic, with domestic being defined as, of or relating to family or household. Secondary definitions for both terms incorporate notions of home life. It is within this notion of home life that, Martin suggests, the promise for a more humane and meaningful schooling may rest.

Definitions and descriptions of domesticity vary enormously within and across fields. Stephen Perrella (1998), in writing about "an investigation into contemporary domesticity to reconsider dwelling for the new millennium" introduces the reader to hypersurface theory. This is an attempt to conjoin two trajectories—mediatised culture and topological architecture—into an intertwined dynamic... The Mobius house study, then is neither an interior space, nor an exterior form. It is a transversal membrane that reconfigures binary notions of the interior exterior into a continuous interwrapping median. A hypersurface is generated by first deconstructing the supporting geometry of a NURB (non-uniform rational B-spline) curve in animation software. Each singular control point that governs a five-point NURB was animated along the path of a Mobius surface. As this can not be understood by either Euclidean or Cartesian geometry and the program (computer) operates to avoid determinate linear form, the study is thus irreducible, rendering it open to complex, temporal experiences. "A domestic hypersurface program emerges immanently from the diagram-substrate, facilitating proprioceptive experience, a radical empiricism more commensurate with the complexities of the new-millennial modes of inhabitation" (Perrella, 1998).

After reading this a few times, it did not seem as though this definition or description of the domestic was one that held much promise for improving schools. However, this version of domesticity is nicely counterbalanced by a description that indirectly address issues of domesticity by generally describing the experiencing of place.

"...Cabin fever requires a true cabin—four buckling walls, a leaky roof, a warped door and a few windows. Furnishings consist of something less than the bare necessities. Wall decorations, while permitted should not be such as to arouse individual interest whatsoever...A wood stove, preferably one made from steel barrel, provides the heat and also the only excitement when its rusty tin pipe sets fire to the roof. That is your basic, true cabin.

When I was six, we lived for year in just such a cabin. My father speculated that in the built by a man who didn't know his adz from his elbow, or words to that effect. The shake roof looked as if it

been dealt out by an inebriated poker player during a sneezing fit. Proper alignment of one log over another was so rare as to suggest coincidence, if not divine intervention...

Within a short while Dad had the cabin whipped into shape, a shape that might now be regarded as unfit for human habitation but which in those days, would generally have been thought of as unfit for human habitation...One might suppose that a family of four would be miserable living in a tiny, sagging log cabin in the middle of an Idaho wilderness, and one would be right. My mother and sister accepted our situation philosophically and cried only on alternate days...I spent my time, morosely digging away at the chinking between the logs, not realizing that the resulting cracks would let all the cold out." (McManus, 1984, pp 49-51)

While this description may hint at the physical conditions of schooling for some readers, it is not the standard across our nation. But for many students, all of those living at the borders of a system of values and beliefs that include only a portion of society, it may well describe the cultural welcome they feel as they approach the primary socializing institution. This notion of school as ideological home "unfit for human habitation" may resonate with some readers. But we must acknowledge that those for whom school was this experience are most likely not reading this.

Domesticity then exists somewhere along the continuum between cyberspace and cabin, in the space between mathematical models of the impossible and those structures that are marginally inhabitable. But most frequently domesticity is tied to home, to mothers, to warmth and to family. In other words most definitions or explanations of domesticity are closely linked to definitions of femininity.

Domesticity as the feminine

One hundred men may make an encampment but
it takes a woman to make a home.--*Chinese Proverb*

"What happens to femininity when it is linked to domesticity? At first femininity seems reduced: linking woman and house could be a means to simplify and control the feminine, out of fear or for whatever reason...woman is not just the name for what drives homewards, what brings movement and history to a stop, to rest and peace. Woman also lures into the woods and the sea and the night, she invites to danger and death...Linking femininity and domesticity or house can only come down to a simplification and limitation" (Verschaffelk, 2002). While this excerpt may be eligible for an award for the most poetic scholarly passage, it also eloquently makes a crucial introductory point: domesticity as femininity is woefully simplistic.

In trying to specify the nature of the relationship between the feminine and the domestic one confronts a social version of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, in which there is a trade-off of one form of certainty for another. In a particular socio-temporal context one might argue that the woman-domesticity relationship may be described in a particular fashion, however it would be difficult to suggest any notion of universality from such a description. Notwithstanding these issues there seems to be an abundant literature that seeks to make the tenuous, robust and the nebulous, clear.

Lamentably, the one thing that we can typically assert is that the relative position associated with gender roles is definable, and very slow to change. As Christopher Reed observes, in writing about the Bloomsbury Group's Creation of Modern Domesticity, "domesticity becomes equated with femininity...in a culture where the real and the important are conceived as prerogatives of masculinity and the homey is by definition, insipid" (1996).

We can readily trace changes in the manner in which dominant ideology characterizes those values most closely associated with the nurturing images we have of women in society. These changes have been confusing for some, challenging for others, a nuisance to many, and simultaneously liberating, divisive and intimidating.

The changes in the roles of women in the early-mid XIX century are frequently discussed in terms of the emergence of the Cult of Domesticity. This ideal of womanhood had essentially four parts--four characteristics any good and proper young woman should cultivate: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Domesticity was constructed in such a manner so as to mean that a woman's place was in the home. Woman's role was to be busy at those morally uplifting tasks aimed at maintaining and fulfilling her piety and purity.

Housework was deemed such an uplifting task. *Godey's Ladies Book* argued, "There is more to be learned about pouring out tea and coffee than most young ladies are willing to believe." Needlework and crafts were also approved activities which kept women in the home, busy about her tasks of wifely duties and

childcare, keeping the home a cheerful, peaceful place which would attract men away from the evils of the outer world. (<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu>)

Consistent with the vision of the happiness that accompanied “wifely duties” is the manner in which domesticity was described in the Kent State exhibit “Designing Domesticity: Decorating the American Home Since 1876, curated by Dr. Shirley Wajda and Dr. Terrence L. Uber. This exhibit sought to inform as to the manner in which notions of domesticity and house/home had change over the preceding 125 years. (the website for display can be found at <http://dept.kent.edu/museum/exhibit/domesticity/domesticity.htm>)

“The popular Eastlake style constituted an important early element in the broader Aesthetic movement sweeping the Western world...Under the tender care of women, houses were aesthetic creations reflecting and encouraging their occupants' imagination and interests. Collections of art, sculpture and books reflected the family's dedication to cultural sophistication, while embroidery and other handiwork symbolized talent and self-expression. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American families lavishly ornamented their homes with goods increasingly available through department stores, mail order catalogues, and other retailers.”

“Following the lead of Eastlake and William Morris in England, proponents of what was known as the Arts and Crafts movement offered the middle classes on both sides of the Atlantic an anti-consumerist philosophy with which to repudiate imitation and mass production-and the evils of degraded labor. “The art that is life” should incorporate the value of work in the design of everyday objects... Technological innovations such as indoor plumbing, central heating, and electricity replaced servants' labor and ensured family privacy-but made more work for Mother and Father...the kitchen was to be “sweet and clean,” its smooth surfaces and implements of porcelain and steel celebrating the modern as much as the Arts and Crafts design...the bungalow was mass produced: Sears, Roebuck offered consumers a wide variety of Honorbilt homes, available through their catalogues and shipped as a kit by train to the nearest depot.”

“The War's end brought a renewed commitment to domesticity, facilitated in great part by the Federal Housing Administration's subsidy of the nation's housing industry... Reduced square footage, standardized floor plans, and prefabricated and modular components of Ranch style houses eased the postwar housing crisis...People live in basements. Women do laundry in basements. Children play in basements. Handymen work in basements. Families have parties in basements. Scooters and screens, furniture and food, tools and toys, boxes and bicycles are stored in basements.”

“...Long on style but short on substance, dependent on the wealth generated in the “New New Economy” of “high tech,” Wall Street stock trading, and real estate...traditional values, financial security, and material possessions. The houses that Boomers have chosen to build embody this contradiction in values. These “McMansions,” so dubbed by critics who see only the waste of conspicuous consumption in “gentrified” suburban enclaves, offer their owners the means by which to balance of work and play, sociability and privacy, community and independence. The alternative lifestyle of 1960s communes, for example, is incorporated in the novel “Great Room” (the previous four paragraphs are excerpts from <http://dept.kent.edu/museum/exhibit/domesticity/domesticity.htm>).

The reason I have recounted them in such detail is that they suggest certain trends that are consistent with changing models of families and housing that may inform subsequent analysis. In the section on Eastlake one notices that decoration is dependent upon the “tender care of women” and that “families lavishly ornamented their homes with goods increasingly available through department stores, mail order catalogues, and other retailers.”

The Arts and Crafts movement though rooted in an “anti-consumerist philosophy with which to repudiate imitation and mass production-and the evils of degraded labor” certainly was not hesitant about any labor-saving device that would make the art-like life a little easier. The anti-consumerist mentality was sufficiently constrained so that the Walmart of the day, Sears, was providing everything one needed to reject materialism.

The ranch style home brought with it ever increasing standardization with prefab and modular construction elements. And basements. Basements, so families could get away from each other and still be at home—so that parents would not be bothered by children. Basements, so that people had more places to put their stuff. Basements, so that you could have a larger yard. Basements, as yet another step in turning homes into houses.

Then came the assault of the “McMansions”—more than sufficient to cause many to proclaim the prophetic nature of Thorstein Veblen's notions regarding conspicuous consumption. The openness of the

interior spaces of the house most frequently found in gated communities serves as indicator of the specious authenticity of care, concern or connectedness.

In short, this seems to describe a transition from domesticity as the feminine, as that which women do, to an ever increasing focus on life lived primarily for one's own comfort; domesticity as self-indulgence. While some parents may still sacrifice for the next generation, while there are instances in which the first thought is of others rather than self, it appears as though trends in housing design hint at a very different reality.

Regretably, this transition can be seen in the manner in which the youth of our nation are being schooled. As efficiency becomes the yardstick for evaluating schools and as test scores become the measure of the student, we can visualize a transition to a society of disconnected, efficient test takers. The product of such a system would be that person who has neither the thought nor the capacity of putting others or the collective before self. The care, concern and connectedness for which Martin so convincingly argues is an important key to improving education is obvious only in its absence.

Domesticity in architectural design

Frank Lloyd Wright, in speaking about the structure of a house stated, "The whole interior is this kind of stomach that attempts to digest objects—objects, "objets d'art" maybe, but objects always. There the affected affliction sits, ever hungry—for ever more objects—or plethoric with over plenty...Human houses should not be like boxes, blazing in the sun, nor should we outrage the machine by trying to make it a dwelling place to complementary to machinery. Any building for humane purposes should be an elemental, sympathetic feature of the ground, complementary to its nature-environment, belonging by kinship to the terrain...But most "modernistic" houses manage to look as though cut from cardboard and scissors, the sheets of cardboard folded or bent in rectangles with an occasional curve cardboard service added to get relief"(1953).

This belief seems reflected in many of his designs as the Robie House, the Oak Park Studio and the Guggenheim all are clearly differentiated from the basic box. But one must wonder how he would explain the Barnsdall House. With the exception of some ornate external patterns, this house could very well be the sort he was criticizing. Apparently Ms. Barnsdall felt the same way as she was reported to have said that it was a delightful house. "As long as one did not mind sleeping in tents in the yard every time it rained. Her dissatisfaction was so great that six years after the house was completed, she donated to the house to the city of Los Angeles. One might assume that the comfort of domesticity does not include unwanted water inside the house, even in southern California.

Or consider the Farnsworth Home, Mies van der Rohe's house in Plano, Illinois. Consistent with his belief in stripping away all non-essentials, the house, is a floating rectangle or box. The interior space was defined by placement of the furnishings, and there were very few of those. Dr. Farnsworth was so dissatisfied with the result which she claimed left her feeling like a caged animal. "Something should be done about such architecture as this or there will be no future for architecture... I thought, you can animate a predetermined classic form like this with your presence. I wanted to do something 'meaningful' and all I got was this glib, false sophistication" (LeBlanc, 1993). (In fairness, it should be noted that apparently frustration was mutual and that mitigating variables that may have made this less than a fair assessment of the house.)

However, on a personal note, I visited his Barcelona Pavilion and found it to be intriguing and possessing a certain classic style. But I found nothing that would even hint at the welcoming warmth I associate with notions of domesticity. This is a very simplified, argument that is made much succinctly in *Not at Home*. This book seeks to analyze, "the antagonism of twentieth century art and architecture toward the values associated with domesticity, and to explore alternatives to this trend" (Reed, 1996). This idea of antagonism toward domesticity is readily obvious in the manner in which schooling is conducted. Children are divorced from the joy of discovery; learning becomes guessing what the teacher wants you to remember until the next exam; and the most human of all characteristics, curiosity, is systematically excluded from the educational equation.

Regardless, anti-domestic design not only persists, but is praised. In a current design magazine, the quest for domesticity tells of Drew Mandel who..."wanted to develop a more personal and idiosyncratic modernism, in order to make a home that was meaningful to us... the result? Five layers of narrow, rectangular volumes that work to maximize light and space...A geometric house of glass and steel" (Ota, 2003). In my opinion this description has less in common with a secure, nurturing and caring environment than it does with home as public art.

From each of these examples we can readily construct numerous educational analogues that may provide insight into a comparable disconnect from domesticity. All of these would revolve around notions of

domesticity, of the designed space for living, that in many ways ignored the human element as the inhabitant of such structures. The problems in education are similar. The greatest challenges faced are the inauthentic ways in which schools are conducted and constructed. A potential means to recover both house and school, and ultimately the individual and collective soul, is through the incorporation of domesticity in design and in education. Working against this possibility is the dominant organizational value of capitalist societies: efficiency.

Transition from ethics and aesthetics to efficiency

Charles W. Moore includes among memoirs and memories the insight that, "It has become commonplace that the chief concern of architects is or ought to be providing spaces for people (not just kings) to live and work and play—a place to inhabit some portion of the planet surface...Unfortunately, we have not quite learned how to do that. Despite all our rhetoric, high-sounding manifestoes, questions of style...that seem to be central to most discussions of contemporary architecture. There is a failure to address our central dilemma, which is, I believe, that in the midst of our skilled composition of increasing numbers of architectural shapes, and the availability of just about every means of comfort, our cities and towns grew increasingly hostile and unlivable" (Keim, 1996).

So it is in the schools of our nation. We have had extensive debates, on method on philosophy on testing. And yet have failed to address the central dilemma, which is how do we create citizens for the communities that make up our nation. In education, as an architectural design, these questions are not, should not and cannot be answered in isolation from a broader social context that defines and constrains the desirability of the options open to us as a society.

Our collective shortcomings seem to be part of a transition in across most fields as we have, over the last century, increasingly replaced ethics and aesthetics with efficiency as the organizing characteristic for human endeavor. This movement toward the inauthentic, is a key element of what separates us from the communal life that has the potential to give meaning through care, concern and connectedness. This is not to suggest that we do not participate in community, but that it is superficial, everchanging, undemanding, and above all, neat.

For example, it is not uncommon for the popular press to point to Seaside as an example of what a community should be. And it is a delightful community. It is delightful community as long as you accept that nobody that works there are can afford to live there. It is delightful until you understand that those people who are fortunate enough to have homes there generate their income in areas far removed from their community. Lamentably, this is the same sort of false solution that is being applied by legislatures, and other educational leaders to address the problems of schooling. They are content with constructing artificial communities, beautiful but distant, sterile artistry. It may pleasant in observation, but that in no way is connected to learning to lead a communal life.

What does this suggest for the future of our schools; for the manner in which the schools must be developed. For schools to meet the Herculean task set before they must strive for congruency of both the ideological structure and the physical structure. These structures should be designed to reinforce the purposes of the other. The fundamental argument of this paper is that without cooperative and ideologically aligned participants in the process schools can never move from being more than a house. They will never be able to be the home that our children in society need and deserve.

SO WHAT??

Richard Neutra, an architect who designed many homes in California during the first half of the century, claim that he can design a house in such a way that would land a happily married couple in divorce court within six months of moving in. His point was that design is not benign. Where you locate rooms, what you should have within the house and without, the quantity of privacy, the material used, the choice of lighting—all of it affect your interaction with the built environment and the people you live with. Design can enhance that relationship—smoothing the path of your life—or the lack of carefully considered-design can just as easily make your home an obstruction to living well. (Connell, 1998).

Jane Addams is reported to have said that "America's future will be determined by the home and the school. The child becomes largely what it is taught hence, you must watch what we teach it and how we lived before it." To the extent that we teach spectators, spectators we will have. To extent that we introduce children to the world of wonder and provide opportunities for learning connected to life, we will create the citizens our nation needs. And in this process, as Neutra claims, design places a crucial role.

"A nation that can no longer count on home to perform its educative functions dares not settle for so narrow a definition of the school's task." Martin goes on to say, "I have been talking about educating all of our children and our whole heritage. That valuable capital includes ways of living, as well as forms of knowing, societal activities impact this is, as well as literary and artistic achievements is all too easy, however, for the school to instruct children of not their heritage without ever teaching them to be active and constructive participants in the world, let alone how to make it a better place for themselves and their progeny. This is especially important in the United States where school is thought as an instrument for developing children's minds. Not their bodies, their thinking and their reasoning skills. Not their emotional capacities or active propensities...They need to learn to live in the world. Not just know about it" (Martin, 1992).

I remain hopeful that as educators continue to reconceptualize their arena of practice they will be met with similar efforts in making the spaces of learning integral to the means of learning.

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