

THE NIGHTMARE OF THE DREAM HOUSE

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Most 'primitive' societies, lacking the sophisticated encumbrances of concert halls, museums, churches and so on, treat the house as the primary form of symbolic building. The typical symbolism goes something like this: basement/earth is the past -often the burial ground for ancestors- the attic or roof is the head, the conscious part, and also a representation of the cosmos. Because we're all pretty much in the same soup cosmically speaking, such huts tend to look alike. Adventurous individual concepts of interior design are surplus to requirements.

If you look at our typical hut -in the popular Barratt or Wimpey style, cod-nostalgic, pseudo-picturesque, individual identity assured by tiny changes in poor façade details between houses- it becomes clear that we are, in fact, sub-primitive as a society. We are spiritual plankton. We can't dwell. Our attics are inaccessible because the builders make more money using light prefab roof trusses which don't allow standing room. We fuck, fight, grow up, eat, shit, wash, sleep, dream, grow old and die in spaces that are moronically repetitive and bereft of meaning.

The recent property boom has made shelter (even of this depressing kind) an unattainable consumer luxury for most younger Britons, prompting Prescott and Blair to threaten pharaonic Thames Gateway developments as a palliative. The quality of life they can offer should be treated as a major political issue, as it will outlive by generations the officials who launch the projects.

But you can't blame *everything* on the politicians and developers. We have lost a shared cosmogony: our conception of the universe has more to do with navel-gazing than star-gazing. Our search for dwelling, for a place in the world, for our dream house, has become an enterprise of self-actualisation, working out in bricks and mortar what is worked out in words on the psychiatrist's couch.

Only a psychiatrist as barmy as Carl Jung would have the good grace (for the sake of my story) to have tried this exercise out for himself: He built and carved with his own hands a confabulation of stone huts on the shores of Lake Zurich, replete with his personal myth-map of cosmic worms, maternal forces and the like. He spoke of his dwelling as if it were an extension of his flesh, and vital to his identity.

For less self-assured members of society, you will need to recruit a new member to your family in order to realise your dream house: an architect. Filarete, the fifteenth-century architect and thinker, described the process thus: the client impregnates the architect with money, then nine months later a small relief model is born, which grows up under the joint tutelage of client

and designer into a full-size building. As we architects arrive with psychological and aesthetic baggage of our own, this process is never simple. In fact, having been through and observed it, I always see the hard forms one sees in the architectural press and design books as obscenely, pornographically objective compared to the messy, uncertain process that always underlies their production.

I'd like to flesh out those cold images you see in *Architectural Digest*: what are the real stories underlying great buildings, what nightmares can one unleash through the process of creating a double-portrait in bricks and mortar of a client and creator?

Everything, in fact, depends on the quality of relationship between architect and patron. In general, the more supine the client, the more bizarre the built results will be. New York avant-gardist Peter Eisenman designed a series of doctrinaire houses early in his career which were named not after their clients but as a numerical series (thus underlining their creative paternity, their belonging to *his* family). Number VI was designed for Suzanne and Dick Frank, who gave him exceptionally free range. He put a column obstructing the dining room table and made a glass slot which cut the marital bed in two. Alienation, I suppose. I presented the house to a conference of the French Family Psychotherapists' Association: they chortled (actually more of a hur-hur, as only the French can) when I showed a slide of Eisenman with his hand rather affectionately posed on the head of Suzanne Frank. They diagnosed the house as schizoid. The Franks had to restore the house after thirteen years (it was badly built); they bridged the slot and reunited the halves of their bed in the process. Eisenman claimed it lost its edge.

Frank Lloyd Wright went further than Eisenman may have done, running off with a client's wife, Mamah Borthwick Cheney. His own gaff, Taliesin (a sprawling farm-compound in Wisconsin) was run as a quasi-mystical commune, only a hair's breadth away from Branch Davidian bonkers. Students would travel from around the world to work (for free) in the master's studio, and find themselves milking cows instead. Frank held dinner with twelve guests every night, and guess who broke the bread... Mamah Borthwick was unfortunately chopped up with an axe by Taliesin's butler, who then burned the place down.

Lloyd Wright was, philandering, exploitation and mumbo-jumbo aside, a genius, and his best houses arose from relationships of hysterical intensity with the clients. Fallingwater, his masterpiece, a series of improbably floating concrete shelves angled out over a waterfall, was born, quite appropriately, from a relationship of brinksmanship with client Edgar Kaufmann, each party threatening to abandon the project whenever their respective authority was impugned. The house plays on primal feelings: it's a sort of flying cave, the bedrooms dark and earthy, seemingly incised in the rock, giving on to floating terraces which project one into the lush nature of the Bear Run valley. The Kaufmanns used the house for weekends very briefly, then decamped to a sunnier Richard Neutra house in Palm Springs. Fallingwater left a profound mark on their son Edgar Jr. (interestingly, an only child) who became an

important architectural historian, and loved the place until his death.

Part of the problem of the dream house is that it is inevitably a skewed portrait of the inhabiting family. Children can't give orders to builders, but their need to settle, to feel appropriately clothed by their surroundings, is no less important than that of their parents, who are the ones in charge (or, most likely, the *one* in charge, Daddy). Fallingwater is upside-down compared to the norm, the child becoming the real dweller. More often than not the dream house becomes tainted psychological baggage, a mixed blessing and burden for the children to inherit and shoulder. This is often due to the fact that, if the house is particularly good, lots of other people feel that it is theirs. I have shimmied up walls and perched on precipitous fences just to catch a glimpse of Maison X or Villa Y, doubtless much to the chagrin of their inhabitants. I'm sorry, by the way. But I just can't help it. And why oh why did you have to add that carport to House Z.....?

The exquisite Maison de Verre in Paris is a case in point: Dr. Dalsace, the original client, commissioned an unusual live/work combo (a family house incorporating his gynaecological practice) from pioneer modernist Pierre Chareau. The hygienic atmosphere of the medical study permeates the living spaces of the house: then innovative materials such as rubber tile flooring, as well as austere metal fittings, are carried throughout the building, and there is a delicate play of public and private, with pivoting screens and eye-height frosted glass partitions dividing the house as if it were a piece of machinery unfolding around an elaborate dance. The dance is carried through to Monsieur and Madame's bathroom, which they could rearrange with aluminium screens and folding wardrobes according to how much of each other they wanted to see. Dalsace loved the building deeply, a fact which frustrated his children, as a rather heavy, venerative atmosphere prevailed: no football in the living room, it might dent those divine perforated metal screens on the bookshelves; steady on the stairs junior, there's no guard rail.... . The kids left the house and allow it to be seen by those willing to submit themselves to arcane membership and visiting rules. They each keep a room there, nonetheless, and one daughter married a gynaecologist herself (as you do), who practised in his father-in-law's cabinet until his retirement a couple of years ago, keeping the torture chamber-grade 1920s equipment.

Architect Louis Kahn's family life was strained, to say the least: he had children with three women, and tried rather weakly to keep up appearances as a triple dad (as beautifully documented in his son Nathaniel's recent film, *My Architect*). He lived with his lifelong wife Esther in an unprepossessing row house in Philadelphia (he was always poor), and designed big houses in the suburbs for wealthy clients who were also often closer to him than his biological families. One such house was for Steven Korman, a builder of spec housing. Korman wanted something informal enough for his kids to play football in (smart guy...), but formal enough for large gatherings and parties. Kahn's rugged, sober, spiritual style fit the bill. The house is a kind of modernist castle, with warm, open wooden rooms braced between three massive brick chimneys (one of which opens up to its fireplace in what Kahn called 'a house within the house': too much fun...). The remarkable thing

about the house is that it has (perhaps thanks to its warmth and rigour, its tough love) survived the separation of the original client couple. Korman's son Larry and his wife Korin have lovingly (but not slavishly) restored the house with architect Joan Pierpoline of studio Intramuros, and it continues to welcome the extended (albeit fractured) family for big occasions like Thanksgiving.

Le Corbusier dedicated his life, so he said, to an attempt to re-infuse the dwelling with a sense of the spiritual. He carried this out at the scale of large collective dwellings (like his controversial Unité d'Habitation in Marseille) and a series of private houses which rank as some of the most significant buildings of the last hundred years. Some were a tad rhetorical: his early Villa Savoye, a white prism on stilts in a field outside Paris, looks out of place, yearning to toddle on its piloti to a rugged spot overlooking the Med, bathed in sunlight rather than drenched in northern damp. The clients left it quite quickly, then it was a hay store during the war. Now it has found its true vocation as a pure museum space with a bit of Corb furniture thrown in. The building needs its vast original site; but urban expansion led to the construction of a blue high school looming over the house, destroying its core qualities of infinite prospect and abstract isolation. The high school is named 'Le Corbusier.'

Two other of his houses near Paris are far more personal and modest, and their destiny has been closely linked to the unusual family structure of their initial client. André Jaoul was a wealthy industrialist and art collector; he decided to build twin houses, one for himself and his wife, and one for his son and young family. Le Corbusier conceived them as a fragment of a city, arranged at right angles with a miniature piazza between them. The houses were built of rugged bricks (the brickies were moved around the site at half-hour intervals to avoid homogeneity in the finish), plus roughcast concrete and wood. They have a primitive air, and both are similar in appearance, declining their system of vaulted floor construction differently as if they were related pieces of music in the same key. The harmony was soon broken: Jaoul *père* died before the buildings' completion in 1954.

Michel Jaoul (the son) lived on with his widowed mother rattling around alone in the vast senior house. Feeling out of scale with the double character of the houses (his own children had moved on) he sold them in 1987 but continues to live on the same street, visiting occasionally. The buyer was Peter Palumbo, an avid collector of houses (he has also owned a Frank Lloyd Wright pad near Fallingwater and Mies van der Roë's glassy Farnsworth House built in a swampy field outside Chicago; Mies' refusal to install insect screens -they would destroy the transparency- apparently led the original owner literally to develop a thicker skin once the mosquitoes had had their way with him.) . Palumbo loved the Maisons Jaoul, restoring them with the original builders, all brought out of retirement for one last job. He kept one house for himself and generously allowed visits to the second, except when in use as a guest house (allegedly for the likes of Lady Di). Palumbo had the means to keep the houses going, and during his residency they really felt like homes -warm, welcoming, well-furnished and decorated. Unfortunately he

had to sell up after a dispute with his family trust (there are rumours that he was in conflict with his son James, who removed all the trust-owned furniture from the houses one day). Now they are owned by two sisters, who didn't particularly like the architecture but were enchanted by the possibility of having two houses together in Neuilly-sur-Seine. Perhaps the Maisons Jaoul have found their destiny finally in the unlikeliest of ways.

Le Corbusier's best domestic clients (because they were close to his own outlook on life) were the Dominican brothers of his La Tourette Monastery. This is a hair-shirt building, a tough, all-concrete fortress where the various rough surfaces catch the slowly changing light of the monk's ordered day, making time act like a drug. One of the brothers confessed to me that whenever he returns from his frequent trips abroad, he is happy (and slightly surprised) to see the building still there, and caresses its columns, seeing it as something soft, delicate and loving.

Corb was similarly gruff when he built for himself: he had a functional apartment in Paris and a 4 metre-squared log cabin perched on the Mediterranean seashore where, amazingly, he and his wife stayed for a month every year. He died swimming in the sea by this house. He also built a charming and austere one-room dwelling for his parents by the shore of Lake Geneva. His father, a successful journalist and publisher, had grown tired of the damp and cold of La Chaux de Fonds in the Jura (he had perhaps also grown tired of the slightly bombastic villa his adolescent son had designed for the couple). He died within a year of retiring to the warmer climes of Montreux, but his wife lived until 100, claiming she prayed every day not to suffer the sin of pride for having brought into the world its greatest architect. Corb survived her by only 6 years. He and his wife Yvonne built another tiny shack attached to the house (two bunk beds, a desk by a window, access by ladder) for their visits as they themselves became old.

The shed or hut is the degree zero of the dream house: minimum comfort, minimum fuss, existenz minimum. Writers (Dylan Thomas, even one of the editors of this magazine) have been particularly fond of sheds for the isolated, freestanding concentration they afford. In a shed one approximates the condition of Adam, the first dweller, who, Joseph Rykwert posits in his book *Adam's House In Paradise*, must have had a hut (where can you store the Edenic fruit and veg?). We can yearn, but at the end of the day we are outcasts, bound to imperfection, confined by what Henry James called our individual 'terrible algebra' as we seek our place in the world. Filarete showed this in his beautiful drawing of the expelled Adam forming a roof above his head with his hands to protect him from the elements: surely the first low-cost self-build. Let's hope this doesn't give Prescott and Blair any ideas.