

The house as symbol of self

Clare Cooper

Defining self

Although impossible for most of us to define or describe, we are all aware of the existence of something we call "self." It is in the nature of man that he constantly seeks a rational explanation of the inexplicable, and so he struggles with the question, what is self? why here? why now? In trying to clothe this tantalizing and invisible self, to give it concrete substance, man grasps at physical forms or symbols which are close and meaningful to him and which are visible and definable. The first and most consciously selected form to represent self is the body, for it appears to be both the outward manifestation and the encloser of self. On a less conscious level, I believe, man also frequently selects the house, that basic protector of his internal environment (beyond skin and clothing) to represent or symbolize what is tantalizingly unrepresentable.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has suggested that just as the house and the non-house are the basic divisions of geographic space, so the self and the non-self represent the basic divisions of psychic space. The house both encloses space (the house interior) and excludes space (everything outside it). The house thus has two very important and different components: its interior and its facade.

The house, therefore, reflects how man sees himself, with both an intimate interior, or self as viewed from within and revealed only to those intimates who are invited inside, and a public exterior or the self that we choose to display to others.

The house and the psyche

Most of us have had the experience of moving to another house, and of finding the new abode initially strange, unwelcoming, perhaps even hostile. But, with time, we get

used to the house and its quirks, and it seems almost as though it gets used to us. We can relax when we return to it, put our feet up, become "ourselves." But why in this particular "box" should we be ourselves more than in any other? Probably because the personal space bubble which we carry around with us and which is an almost tangible extension of our self, expands to embrace the house we have designated as ours. As we become accustomed to, and lay claim to, this little niche in the world, we project something of ourselves onto its physical fabric. The furniture we install, the way we arrange it, the pictures we hang, the plants we buy and tend to, all are expressions of our image of ourselves, all are messages about ourselves that we want to convey back to ourselves, and to the few intimates that we invite into this, our house.

The contemporary house-buyer is often unconsciously seeking a symbol of self when choosing his environment. In a recent study of how contemporary California suburbanites chose their homes, Carl Werthman concluded that, for example, extroverted, self-made businessmen will tend to choose somewhat ostentatious, mock-Colonial "display" homes, while people in the helping professions whose goals revolve around personal satisfaction rather than financial success tend to opt for the quieter, inward-looking architect-designed styles conforming to the current standard of "good design." The styles chosen reflect the self-image of the owner and announce to friends and strangers—perhaps again at an unconscious level—the kind of person who lives there.

The house as symbol-of-self is so deeply engrained in the American ethos (albeit unconsciously for many), that this may partly explain the inability of our society to come to grips with "the housing problem"—which is quite within its technological and financial capabilities to solve and which it persistently delegates to a low level in the hierarchy of budgetary values. America is the home of the self-made man, and if the house is seen

From Clare Cooper, "The House as Symbol of Self," *Design and Environment* 3 (Fall 1972): 66, 72.

25

26

HOUSING: A MACRO- ENVIRONMENTAL VIEW

(even unconsciously) as the symbol of self, then it is small wonder that there is a resistance to subsidized housing or the state providing houses for people. The frontier image of the man clearing the land and building a cabin for himself and his family is not far behind us. To a culture inbred with this image, the house/self identity is particularly strong. Little wonder then that, in some barely conscious way, society has decided to penalize those who, through no fault of their own, cannot build, buy or rent their own housing. They are not self-made men.

The free-standing house

Studies in England, Australia and the United States have indicated that, when asked to describe their ideal house, people of all incomes and backgrounds will tend to describe a free-standing, square, detached, single-family house and yard. Whether the attachment to this form is the form itself, or the fact that it subsumes territorial rights over a small portion of the earth, is difficult to say, but we do know that, almost universally, the image of the high-rise apartment building for family living is rejected. An apartment is not seen as "home," for a home can only be seen as a free-standing house-on-the-ground. According to a recent survey of 748 men and women in 32 metropolitan areas in the U.S., carried out by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan, about 85 percent said they preferred living in a single-family house rather than in an apartment. Although 70 percent of the sample were already living in single-family houses, this preference is not necessarily a rationalization of current habits, since two-thirds of those living in multi-family dwellings also said they preferred private houses.

One could argue that people have been conditioned to want such a dwelling through advertising, model homes salesmanship and the image of the "good life" portrayed on television. To a certain extent this must be true, but these media are in turn only reflecting what seems to be a universal need for a

house form in which the self and the family unit can be seen as separate, unique, private and protected.

Is a high-rise a home?

The high-rise apartment building is rejected by most Americans as a "home" because it gives one no private territory on the ground, violates the archaic image of what a house is, and, I would suggest, is perceived unconsciously as a threat to one's self-image as a separate and unique personality. The house form in which people are being asked to live is not a symbol-of-self, but a symbol of a stereotyped, anonymous, filing-cabinet of selves. Even though we may make apartments larger and with many of the appurtenances of the suburban house, it still may be a long time before the majority of lower- and middle-income American families will accept this as a valid image of "home." It is too great a threat to their self-image. It is possible that the vandalism inflicted on high-rise housing projects is, in part, an angry reaction of the inhabitants to this blatant violation of self-image.

The mobile, hippie house-on-wheels is another instance of a new housing form greatly threatening people's image of what a house should be. The van converted to mobile home and the wooden gable-roofed house built on the back of a truck are becoming fairly common sights in Berkeley. It is tempting to speculate that this house form has been adopted by hippies not only because of its cheapness as living accommodations, but also because its mobility and uniqueness of form is a reflection of where many hippies are in psychic terms—concerned with self, with their own uniqueness, with the desirability of inward exploration, with the freedom of being without roots so as to move and swing with whatever happens. Hippies view themselves as different from the average person, and so they have chosen to live in house forms—converted trucks, tree-houses in Canyon, California, geodesic domes and Indian teepees in wilderness

27

communes—which reflect that uniqueness.

In February, 1970, the City of Berkeley passed an ordinance that makes it illegal to live in a converted truck or van. The residents of these new "houses" mobilized and formed the Rolling Homes Association, but it was too late to prevent the ordinance from being passed. When others too openly display the appurtenances—clothes, hair-styles, houses—of a new self-image, it is a threat to the values and images of the majority community. And the image of the self as a house-on-wheels was too much for the Establishment to accept.

Even the edge-of-town mobile home park occupied by the young retireds and transient lower-middle-class is somehow looked down upon by the average American home-owner as violating the true image of "home" and "neighborhood." A person who lives in a house that moves must somehow be as unstable as the structure he inhabits. Much the same view is held by stable house owners in Marin County near San Francisco about the houseboat dwellers in Sausalito. They are "different," "Bohemian," "nonconformists," and their extraordinary choice of dwelling reflects these values. Again the "self" and the "house" are seen as reflections of each other.

The contrasting views that people of different socio-economic classes in the U.S. have of their houses reflects again the house-as-a symbol-of-self. The more keenly people feel that they are living in a dangerous and hos-

tile world with constant threats to the self, the greater is the likelihood that they will regard their house as a shell, a fortress into which to retreat. Anthropologist Lee Rainwater has shown that this image of the self, and of the house, is true for many low-income blacks (particularly women) in the ghettos and housing projects of this country.

Fortress or expression of self?

With increasing economic and psychic stability (and in some cases, these are linked) a person may no longer regard his house as a fortress-to-be-defended, but as an attractive, individual expression of self-and-family with picture windows so that neighbors can admire the inside. Thus, for many in the middle-income bracket, the house becomes an expression of self, rather than a defender of self. The self-and-environment are seen in a state of mutual regard, rather than in a state of combat.

The fact that the decoration of the house interior often symbolizes the inhabitants' feelings about self has long been recognized. It has even been suggested that the rise in popularity of the interior decorator is in some degree linked to people's inability to make these decisions for themselves, since they're not sure what their "self" really is. The phenomenon of people, particularly women, rearranging the furniture in their house at times of psychic turmoil or changes-in-self is a further suggestion that the house is very intimately entwined with the psyche.

HOUSING IN HUMAN PERSPECTIVE