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“Good-Life Modernism”
And Beyond
The American House in the 1950s and 1960s:
A Commentary

Mark Jarzombek
In 1952, Architectural Record published a list of “eighty-two distinctive houses” in an effort to document and lend support to what the editors confidently called a “revolution” in American architecture. Modernist principles, so it was pointed out, had coalesced with the time-honored virtues of domestic design to create an architecture so convincing as to seem to exemplify the way of the future. And indeed, the eighty-two houses painted a clear picture; one could call it Good-Life Modernism. Of elegant, lightweight appearance, the houses all had spacious lawns, patios, generous roof overhangs, well-equipped kitchens, separate rooms for children, and large, uncluttered living rooms with walls of glass opening to the outside. In the living room there was an obligatory stone or brick fireplace (fig. 2), its rhetorically exaggerated massiveness and rusticated texture meant to stand in contrast to the smooth wall surfaces of the rest of the house. Invariably, the vertical shaft of the chimney would punctuate the low and staggered profile of the roof. The editors pointed to an “appreciation of local materials,” “a hospitality of the out-of-doors,” and “a minimum of ornamentation, while providing for the mechanical equipment, services, and comforts Americans value so highly.”

In 1954, Architectural Record updated the list, but the principles remained the same. Houses such as the one in Westchester County, New York by Edelbaum & Webster (fig. 3) continued to “fit a better way of life,” “exploit the panoramas,” “provide a sense of spaciousness,” enable entertaining, and afford “good living for small servantless families.”

A house on Long Island for “an average family of four” designed by John Hancock Callender and Allen & Edwin Kramer was singled out for special praise. It had been commissioned by House & Garden in 1951 as a demonstration house, a “House of Ideas” as it was called. Thousands came to visit it. The Architectural Record article commented on its “great sense of space and openness,” “crisp black and white trim,” and “state of the art intercommunication system installed throughout the house.” But, as the editors explained, this house was designated a “House of Ideas” not simply because of its design qualities, but because it was built in accordance with the historiographic proposition underlying the new architecture: it synthesized the best of both the European International Style and the American Ranch Style (fig. 4). The argument, in its seductive simplicity, seemed reasonable enough:

This extremely pleasant and livable house, officially known as “House & Garden’s House of Ideas,” suggests one idea that is perhaps especially worthy of note. Its design seems to indicate a careful fusion of many better qualities of two widespread style influences – the crisp, clean lines of the International Style, and the rambling openness of the popularized Ranch House Style. Yet, it has eliminated the severity of the one, and the ugliness of the other (pp. 104-109).
Of the various journals contributing to the definition of Good-Life Modernism, *House & Home* could be considered the flagship. First published in 1952, it advocated a programmatic fusion of the modernist aesthetics with a revitalized American suburban consciousness. Its pages, full of bold-faced type, pronounced the “new approaches” that were to bring “vitality” back to American house design, to use the words of the editors who explained the journal’s purpose in the first issue. Deliberately avoiding the jargon of the avant-garde, *House & Home* sought to home in on a basic, common sense version of modernism. To explain “what customers want,” good buildings were compared to bad, and checklists were provided to make it simple to spot the difference. According to a 1954 checklist (fig. 5), for example, houses in the new style typically had to have open planning, low-pitched roofs, indoor-outdoor living, two bathrooms, and walls of glass in the living room.

*House & Home* stressed that architects and clients perceive of architectural expression not as a unique individualistic statement, but as a means to articulate community identity and values. This argument was not based on an ideal of social solidarity, but was the by-product of an attempt to integrate the house once and for all into the realm of consumer goods. Good-Life Modernists did not aim to make houses for the privileged few, but for the mass market. The journals, therefore, had to create a clear image of what the consumers “want” as well as to guarantee that architects would rise to the occasion and fill the newly-created demand. To make houses that could be bought and sold, architects and clients had to recognize the overlapping domains of aesthetics and marketplace. Thus the attempt at making modernism palatable to the all-American family was no abstract postulate. On the contrary, *House & Home* was created as a platform for a conflation of interests that included construction industries, banking establishments, architectural schools, and even museums, all of which collaborated to generate the massive dose of cultural administration needed to push Good-Life Modernism into the realm of everyday life. Good-Life Modernism, far from being a spontaneous development, was defined, sponsored, and funded by a nexus of interests of unparalleled dimension.

By drawing a tight circle around the newly emerging housing market, enmeshing the consumer in the characteristic ambiguities of manipulation and need, the forces behind Good-Life Modernism attempted to speak to the suburban middle-class with the authoritative voice of consensus. Museums were instrumental in this process that defined as well as legitimized the commercial reality underlying the Good-Life Modernist aesthetic. The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, for example, with funding from the Gaylord Container Corporation, held an exhibition of household objects in 1947, blatantly entitled *Good Design Is Your Business* with the implication that “good design” is good business. With pride, its organizers point out that the “development of the consumer mind is proceeding with increasing speed.” The success of Good-Life Modernism was very much dependent on those shows, which, as it was expressed in a show in California in 1952, “attempted to organize an attitude of mind, a state of living in terms of the objects that create the environment within the house.” One designer phrased it succinctly: “The public has to be led firmly...
The Albright Knox Art Gallery actually created an index "to aid the consumer in his or her search for household objects of good design." The index promised "to satisfy your sensual perceptions" while sharpening your intellectual apprehensions" of modern life. The user of the index should be grateful: "You can't go far astray that way."

The Museum of Modern Art in New York was also actively engaged in keeping the consumer from 'going astray.' In 1951-1952, it held an exhibit entitled Good Design that was less an exhibit than a glorified trade show educating Americans to the new architecture and its furnishings. In fact, in putting the exhibition together, the Museum of Modern Art combined forces with the Merchandise Mart in Chicago to present "the best new examples in modern design in home furnishings" (fig. 6). To make sure Americans knew that their new furniture required a new house, the Museum of Modern Art commissioned Marcel Breuer in 1949 to build an exhibition house in the gardens of the museum (fig. 7). Gregory Ain designed another one the following year. The houses stood in bizarre contrast to the urban site.

The push on the part of journals and cultural institutions to introduce Good-Life Modernism into consumer culture elevated into general consciousness the formal vocabulary that, in the 1930s and 1940s, was being developed in the work of Marcel Breuer, Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, and Gregory Ain, among others. By the 1950s, however, the great masters of modern architecture in America played only a minor role in the actual implementation of Good-Life Modernism, which was taken up by many who have long since vanished into obscurity. Among the real protagonists, those mentioned, for example, in the first issues of House & Home, were: Edward L. Barnes (New York), Giorgio Cavaglieri (Connecticut), Gordon Drake (California), Edward Elliott (Michigan), Landis Gores (Connecticut), Henry Hebbeln (New York), Roger Lee (California), George Matsumoto (North Carolina), Warren Platner (Michigan), Edward Stone (Arkansas), and Cowell & Newhaus (Texas).

The origins of the formal language used by these architects lay essentially in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. But Good-Life Modernism transformed the prototypes into something different. For example, horizontal planes, low profiles, and fireplace baulks typical of the Prairie Style were maintained, but the complex interweaving of space, upper-floor bedrooms, and pinwheel organization of the plan around the fireplace were not. Furthermore, Wright's houses were too individualized, too custom-tailored, and too expensive for the middle-class of the 1950s. His fuzzy textures, myopic details, and expensive furnishings were also avoided; they went, after all, against the grain of the economic realities steering modernism.

The other prototype was Mies van der Rohe's Brick House (fig. 8). But here, too, differences bring to light the unique formal language of Good-Life Modernism. Van der Rohe designed the living room and bedroom of the Brick House as one fluidly interconnected zone separated from the office, labeled Wirtschaftsräume on the plan. In the context of the American suburb, the position allotted by Mies to the office – the office now being outside of the house in the city – became the bedroom.
Despite the success of residential modernism in the 1950s—the buildings still dot the landscape in all parts of the country—it has never received much critical attention. Two publications, for example, ignore it altogether: American Architecture and Urbanism (Vincenz Scully, 1969) and American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles (Marcus Whiffen, 1969). Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression (Alan Gowans, 1964), and Modern Movements in Architecture (Charles Jencks, 1973). The implication is that 1950s modernism was a low point in American architecture.

The lexicon in the history of architecture that surrounds Good-Life Modernism is perplexing, given the powerful forces that contributed to its success. Only the California Case Study Houses, which represent a mere fraction of Good-Life Modernist theorizing, have begun to be studied. The Case Study Houses, however, are peripheral to Good-Life Modernism, which in the 1950s was far beyond the experimental stage. To interpret the Case Study Houses as a vanguard of American modernism is, on the one hand, to attribute the rise of domestic modernism to a few committed designers, and, on the other hand, to fail to recognize that the Case Study Houses, in some sense, ran counter to Good-Life Modernism, which by that time had already established a clear-cut and lucrative response to domestic needs. Good-Life Modernism hoped to legitimize and anchor these needs, not search for idiocractic and potentially unprofitable alternatives.

The failure to recognize Good-Life Modernism as an artfully implemented grass-roots development lies partially in the fact that domestic modernism was viewed not as an American phenomenon, but as an extension of European modernism, which, even in the 1950s, continued to be billed as a phenomenon that was to some extent national. When Sigfried Giedion’s A Decade of New Architecture (1951), for example, was an eyewitness account of the dramatic success of American domestic modernism, it was also a demonstration of Giedion’s failure to differentiate between European and American postwar domestic modernism. In his book, American building was either totally absent or only marginally represented by categories such as working, education, hospitals and urban planning. The category of single-family dwellings, however, was dominated by Americans. Giedion was untroubled by the split. He still believed that, as a totality, modernist architecture continues to demonstrate the universal “inner reality of this period” and the continuing historical imperative of the “fundamental truth” of modernism.

In actuality, American domestic modernism had no parallel in postwar Europe, where modern architecture was too closely linked with the political Left or with bleak postwar urban renewal projects to achieve broad middle-class support. Though occasionally houses similar in form to American houses can be found, they are the exception rather than the rule. The McCauley House (1950) in Bel Air, California (fig. 13), contrasts sharply with the tightly-packaged interiors of most European suburban houses of the time (figs. 11 & 12).
The difference between postwar European and American house design was more than a matter of style and convention. Overseas, modernism was only marginally linked with domesticity. The French journal *Construction Moderne*, for example, did not discuss a single family residence during the 1950s and 1960s. Modernity was equated with communal needs and aspirations, not with the individualistic needs of the family. In *Werkarchitekt*, *Bauen-Wohnen* and *au jour d'hui*, discussions on houses did appear, yet here too houses took a backseat to multifamily dwellings, hospitals, churches, and sports centers. *Domus* and *Maison Française*, the only European journals dedicated exclusively to the problem of the house, were, in comparison with American counterparts of the early 1950s, consistently indifferent to an ideology of suburban domesticity. Like the English *Architectural Review*, these journals offered a broad spectrum of articles ranging from the history of ancient architecture, to street furniture, schools, contemporary painting, and ephemeral architecture. In contrast to the European journals *House & Home* and *Architectural Record* made their commitment to an ideology of domestic modernism loud and clear. In the early 1950s *Architectural Record* discussed at least one house in every issue, with titles such as “Livability on a Small Hilly Lot,” “Small House Designed with Spaciousness,” and “A House with Emotion.”

That many of the houses discussed in European journals were American – “Una Casa in Beverly Hills” (Domus, December 1952), for example – only goes to show that the sea-change that once brought modernism to America was now working in reverse. By the 1960s, the modern American house was viewed by Europeans as an exotic import item. Some architectural firms in Switzerland still specialize in these American-styled houses.

In the light of the mystique of modernity’s internationality, however, the difference between European and American postwar modernism remained obscure. Sherban Cantacuzino in his book *Modern Houses of the World* (1964), perpetuated the myth of modernity’s internationality by displaying American and European domestic architecture together, all in one run-on collection of houses. The various buildings Cantacuzino discussed – from the United States, Germany, Spain and Japan – may share formal language, but the underlying differences between the situations in Europe and the United States were ignored.

In Europe, the marketing industry, far less developed than in America, never encroached on the domain of one-family houses. The reasons were economic and cultural. In Switzerland, for example, most residences are owned by banks and corporations to the extent that 75 percent of the Swiss are renters. In France and Germany the situation is less extreme, yet here, too, the house is rarely interpreted as an affordable consumer item. As a consequence, there is little need for journals like *House & Home* that address owners and contractors, and no need for a cultural discourse elaborating the connections between domesticity, architectural theory and the consumer market. Furthermore, rigorous amortization and depreciation laws, lengthy mortgaging periods (seventy-five years in Switzerland, for example) and tough construction laws that made cheap, lightweight construction in some places a legal impossibility, hindered
the development of a suburban-domestic-modernist aesthetic. But in America, reforms of ammonization laws passed by Congress in the early 1950s, new buyer-friendly mortgaging procedures, an indigenous tradition of lightweight wood construction and the growing popularity of materials such as plywood allowed modernism to enter into the broad domestic arena like hand into glove.

To insinuate itself into domestic consciousness, Good-Life Modernism had to distance itself from the prewar modernist disdain for bourgeois culture: principles and strategies were maintained, but without the perceived contamination of a theory that might alienate the middle-class. As a consequence, journals consistently tiptoed around everything that sounded too esoteric. Ideology was masked by pragmatism: Le Corbusier’s *la fenêtre en longueur* (fig. 14) was justified not as a modernist directive, but in terms of “sleekness”; a house, like a woman, “needs a waistline” (fig. 15). Interiors with open connections to the outdoors make rooms appear “less cramped” but also make houses “sell better” (fig. 16). Though many of the articles focus on “special problems,” the solutions were never complex. The living room, for example, as it was discussed in one article, was to be organized around three principal elements: television, fireplace, and, of course, the “view into the garden” through a large expanse of modern windows (fig. 17). During the American Institute of Architects convention in 1952 Al Lewis, one of the most important builder-architects of the 1950s, expressed the confidence of builders who had taken over modernist theory and practice from the architects. “More could be done to the face of America by a few hundred builders who have a few simple explanations than can be done by all the thousands of architects because the architects are not in touch; they have no control over the millions who are buying and building.”

The newly created discourse of reasonableness – the Trojan horse, so to speak, by which modernist principles were introduced into the housing market – meant that the European contribution to modernist theory was altered beyond recognition. None of the American journals discuss the history and theory of modernism in any substantive way, but that, alas, was part of the strategy. A more serious and accurate representation of the events leading up to the advent of modernism – particularly the socialist and leftist associations of some of the early modernists – would have defeated any potential for success in the McCarthy era of the early 1950s. A European might look on the American rewriting of the modernist text with haughty scorn and would therefore fail to recognize what happened: in the very misprision of its origins, Good-Life Modernism seemed to be fulfilling one of the original goals of modernism, a unification of art and material culture.

Despite the creation of a discourse of reasonableness aimed at masking modernity from itself, Good-Life Modernism did not abandon the utopian vision of modernism. The prosaic world was never allowed to slacken into a mere contractor’s how-to-aesthetic. The presentations, carefully crafted and insistently repetitive, focused beyond the everyday on a mixture of boosterism and utopianism, which in turn was informed – but only obliquely – by a modernist ideology that envisions a new world beginning in the here and now. Interjected in the pages of *House & Home*’s photos,
This house is just what we've been looking for... but what about its resale value?

It couldn't be better! We've used only top-quality, nationally advertised products... like Rentile Floors throughout.

House & Home, and its diverse subscription membership of builders, realtors, bankers, lenders, and suppliers, hoped that "collective hands" would spread the acceptance of "good new ideas" (fig. 19). An architect from Pennsylvania succinctly spelled out the ideal scenario. He describes how clients walk into his office looking for a traditional house design. "So what do I do? Well, I start out by telling them that they are all wrong [in] asking me, a 1952 builder, to build them a nineteenth-century house... I take their folder of magazine pictures, sketches, photos, etc., and throw it in the wastebasket. I spread before them my latest copy of House & Home, and sure enough, that picture on the front starts to get them. The deeper into the magazine we go, the more excited they become and from there on, they push on." The author is speaking tongue in cheek, for he feels that too many Americans still hold on to their antiquated life-styles for modernism to really be successful. The editors of the journal responded by admonishing him to keep faith; he too would soon be among those who benefit from the modernist boom.

For those who were not planning to buy a new house, there was always the possibility of "modernizing." Samuel Paul and Robert Stone were among the first to recognize the challenge and in 1952 produced the Complete Book of Home Modernizing (fig. 20), a book that deserves a place among the other great texts of architectural theory. Samuel Paul was the consummate Good-Life Modernist architect, with over 30,000 families living in dwellings designed by him. The book, complete with before-and-after photos, explained how to carry out a successful modernizing campaign in your home and transform the house so that it will have a "smarter appearance, more space... [while providing] richer living satisfaction for the whole family." As the authors pointed out in their introduction, "Here, for the first time within the covers of one book, families planning to modernize will find a bird's-eye view of the whole field of creative home transformation, a close-up of modern materials, new appliances and latest construction methods which make it possible and a complete guide to the proper planning and successful completion of a modernizing program." The authors hardly miss a beat; they go from "What Modernizing Means" to "Health and Safety" to "Beauty and Aesthetics" to "How to Finance Modernizing Work."

What happened in the United States in the 1930s was very much home-grown; Good-Life Modernism, once introduced and cultivated, took well to its soil. From today's perspective, one sees all too clearly that the cultural apparatus behind Good-Life Modernism though it may have produced a bourgeois ego as never before existed, simultaneously devalued it by the hard sell that aimed at making resistance seem superfluous in the face of its imminent triumph.
No sooner did Good-Life Modernism appear to be a self-enclosed cultural system than it began to be challenged. The architects involved in this protest were not so much against modernism per se — that is its style or even its aesthetic — as they were against its domestication. It would be too facile to point out that these architects were part of the counterculture movement of the 1960s. The critique of modernism took place on a broad international scale. The American response, however, was directed at a unique situation, a suburban architecture that nurtured an ideological commitment to future bliss in the cradle of uncritical domestic comfort. The opposition to Good-Life Modernism seemed at the time confused and discordant. Only in retrospect does it emerge as a concerted re-evaluation of the American domestic realm.

The first winds of change came with the growing popularity of camp, as exemplified by Bruce Goff’s house in Aurora, Illinois in 1948 (figs. 21 & 22) for Betty Ford, Director of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. Its curved lines, whimsical flourishes and organic shapes defied the well-trodden principles of Good-Life Modernism. Schindler was moving in the same direction with his last houses of the 1950s. Camp, an architecture whose patrons were the laid-back new rich, was not for everyone. But that was exactly its attraction. Victor Lundy, one of the first rebels, said “I want my buildings to be exuberant, not safe, lovely, cubaral things.” Yet camp architecture was less a critique of the historical imperative embedded in Good-Life Modernism than a reaction to it. The social vision of Good-Life Modernism was left intact, but the cultural elite was ever more eager to differentiate itself from it. In other words, camp represented the weakening of the cultural elite’s resolve to continue participating in the grand scheme of Good-Life Modernism. Nevertheless, camp did not reject the aesthetic of domesticity fundamental to Good-Life Modernism.

Two houses that, though they fit into this category, can be seen as the beginnings of a more focused critique of Good-Life Modernism, are the Glass House and the Eames House. They represent the first attempts to redefine domesticity. That the two houses were built by architects for themselves demonstrates that the agitation against Good-Life Modernism was very much from above.

The Glass House, built in 1949, was one of the first houses to sound a challenge. It is different from houses Philip Johnson was then building for his clients, houses much more in line with Good-Life Modernism. The Hodgson House (fig. 23), for example, was not only included in the 1954 list of “distinctive houses,” but was even discussed in House & Home (August 1954) in the category patio house. The dramatic fireplace, integration of inside and outside, restrained volumetric effects, subtle use of natural materials, and differentiation between public and private were praised in the article, which clearly meant to teach these virtues to a broad audience of contractors and home owners (fig. 24). The Glass House (figs. 25 & 26) — its current fame, a post-1960s phenomenon — was much slower in finding acceptance. It is conspicuously absent from both House & Home and the list of “eighty-two distinctive houses” from Architectural Record.
Just as with Johnson, whose public commissions were different from his own house, Charles and Ray Eames' Billy Wilder House, of 1950, and the Max de Pree House, of 1954, are also closer to the principles of Good-Life Modernism than their own house, built in Pacific Palisades, California in 1949 (fig. 27). Whereas Johnson stretched the logic of modernism to distance himself from the rising tide of everyday consumerist modernism, Eames took the opportunity to explore head-on the problem of the domestic environment within a modernist context. Though the house is often listed among examples of modernism because of its use of steel and glass, it is an attempt to re-identify values inherent in the American house without falling into the uncritical realm of Good-Life Modernism that typified many of the other Case Study Houses. Implicit in the building is a critique of the reductivist language of consumerism, which, in its stereotyped and all-Americanized form of the 50s, instead of defining American life, tended to equalize it out of existence. Thus, whereas the Glass House exaggerates conceptual purity to cleanse the house of banal domesticity, the Eames House allows domestic energy to sprout almost carelessly within its spaces. The house becomes an expression of a diaphanous quality of life; it is full of nooks, crannies and movable panels in which, and along which, the paraphernalia of the Eames' life has settled. Objects, books, and toys collected for use in films and projects, along with memorabilia, kitsch, shells and the like, became part of their surroundings. Some are more public in nature and more visible, others more private and further removed. As a consequence, many desirable aspects of the Victorian tradition are still very much alive, such as relaxed clutter, comfort, and a certain indifference toward opinion. Absent is the conventionality of Victorian interiors on the one hand, and the stilted orderliness associated with Good-Life Modernism.

The photograph of Charles and Ray Eames standing in the framework of the unfinished house, smiling and proud (fig. 28), seems to suggest a reference to the Vitruvian thesis of the unity of man, proportion, and space. In actuality the Eameses are challenging this notion. Whereas in the Vitruvian world the meaning of architecture comes from its ability to stand in for and replace the human spirit, here meaning begins only after construction has stopped. The photograph, therefore, represents that instant in time after which the construction has been completed but before the conquest of the interior. As time passes, the house increasingly takes on the personality of its owner and creator. The object world mirrors the private realm and in the process changes, acquiring an ontological presence of its own. Though all houses reflect their owners, here the architecture anticipated the slow sedimentation of life over time. The solemn Vitruvian man dominating his well-proportioned space is replaced by a zesty couple eager to fill the architectural void behind them. Whereas in the Vitruvian model architecture aspires to be a representation of an inherent spirituality, here the spiritual borrows its permanence from the world of small-scale objects elevated into prominence by architecture (fig. 29). History and monumentality are not embedded in the design in the form of a grand scheme, but rather brought to the design in the form of an infinite array of personal memory components.
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Though the Glass House is often billed as another example of Johnson's European modernism, it should be understood as an ironic challenge to the stereotypes already then becoming evident in American domestic modernism. From the perspective of architectural theory, one could view the house as an exaggerated version of Marc Antoine Laugier's primitive hut (albeit expensive and exclusive); from the perspective of 'Pop' culture, an ontological showroom; and, from the perspective of the petty bourgeoisie, an ironic version of the gare Stade. Implicit in all these allusions is a critique of Good-Life Modernism, for the house portrays a life cleansed of the barnacles of consumerism, sentimental domesticity, and suburban posturing. Johnson brought modernism to its ultimate purify, detached it from everyday life, and transformed it into an instrument of anti-domesticity.

The Glass House was unacceptable as a model for Good-Life Modernism, as it stood apart—not far, but just far enough—from the social vision of Good-Life Modernism. Admittedly, American modernism was devoid of fiery European socialism, but it did have a social vision nonetheless, one claiming to be in keeping with the American spirit. House & Home, for example, propagandizes an ideology of family life, of a clean and orderly domestic environment, of responsibility to the suburban aesthetic, of a hands-on, do-it-yourself approach, and of an unshakable faith in an improving world. The Glass House is not only a bachelor pad, but freely mixes themes of aristocratic elitism, Emersonian escapism, and surreal reductivism, all themes alien and even antagonistic to Good-Life Modernism.

A small testament to the fact that this house was an anomaly can be found in a statement by Jaquelin T. Robertson, former Dean of the University of Virginia School of Architecture. Robertson grew up in a house designed by the great early twentieth-century neocolonialist William Lawrence Bottomley, who designed houses on the model of European villas for the Virginia upper crust. Fittingly, it was the son of one of Bottomley's patrons who recognized an affinity between the Glass House and the houses of Bottomley.

I still remember vividly my first trip to New Canaan, Connecticut, as a first-year architecture student at Yale to see 'modern architecture'. Many of the current favorites were there, and we spent the day with all those dreadful flat-roofed, little wooden shoe-boxes said by my instructors to represent the most advanced and enlightened aspects of architectural thinking and design. It was enough to turn one away forever...to banking or selling cars or anything! At the end of the day, architecture was just barely saved for me by Philip Johnson's Glass House. There was such a thing as architecture in this modern desert after all! Yes, only Johnson survived that dreadful burning excursion, and I hold him, much later, that he had the only serious 'modern estate'. In saying that, I, of course, was comparing him in my own mind not unfavorably to Bottomley; that is, against the standards that Bottomley had found in the Virginia tradition and given to me.
4. The Critical Rescue of the American House

The Glass House and the Eames House were not conceived as full-fledged alternatives to Good-Life Modernism; they were private essays that suited the unique vision of their designers. Only in the late 1950s and 1960s did architects begin a broad counteroffensive to Good-Life Modernism.

The design that turned the corner, questioning the very nature of the American house, was Louis Kahn's Weber de Vore House (1954) (fig. 31). The earlier Morton Weiss House, of 1948 (fig. 30) still has all the earmarks of Good-Life Modernism: a generous living room, a solid-looking fireplace, easy traffic flow between rooms, stone floor pavings, lightweight construction, and loose overall profile. The Weber de Vore House takes bold strides in new directions and pronounces a radical rethinking of the domestic environment. The plan is amazingly simple; a wall forms the backdrop for six eighteen-foot-square boxes. The residential nature of the structure is articulated simply through the relative placement of the boxes.

Not only has Kahn's own impressive body of civic architecture detracted from his contribution to domestic architecture, but so, too, has the Neoplatonist jargon in which Kahn himself embedded his work. In looking for the form or the design, one can fail to recognize the radical break between the Weiss House and the de Vore House. The earlier house is described as an example of "The discipline of service, the freedom of spaces," words that portray exactly the Good-Life Modernist sentiments of the American middle-class. With the de Vore House, Kahn is more analytical. "In searching for the nature of the space of a house might they not be separated a distance from each other theoretically before they are brought together."

The de Vore House is the first project to challenge the paradigm set up by Mies van der Rohe's Brick Country House. Fluidity of space, legibility of function, the hearth topos, and the organic distinction between public and private have all been rejected. The repetition of identical spatial elements alone articulates the functional dynamic. The house is no longer a modernist machine, with its various parts designed according to the inner functional dynamic of suburban family life, but a conglomerate of smaller houses. The living room, for example, is like a house, Kahn explains. The de Vore House thus no longer postulates a condition of suburban enlightenment, but rather aims to bring about an anthropological understanding of communal living. It makes allusions not to the conventional notion of modernity, but to African tribal huts (fig. 32).

With the Norman Fisher House (1960) (fig. 33), Kahn continues the critique of his own earlier work. From the viewpoint of Good-Life Modernism, the Fisher House does not even read as house; it is too self-contained and the facade too austere with its narrow slit-window. Nor is there even a lamp or rain guard over the entrance door. The house further defies the Good-Life Modernist idea of a design fabric extending into the landscape. Kahn packages public and private spaces tightly into their respective cubes and places them at an aggressive angle to each other.
The theme was not unfamiliar to Good-Life Modernism as can be seen in the Hammarstrom House (fig. 34), for example. Yet, gone are the patios and horizontal windows and the equation of living room with outdoors. Furthermore, the joint between the two cubes is too precise and calculated for Good-Life Modernist sensibilities. The energy that pervades the Fisher House reminds strongly of El Lissitzky’s 2 Squares (1920) (fig. 35).

Although the two boxes make not the slightest concession to indoor-outdoor space, they do not ignore the surroundings. A change of height in the string course along the entrance facade gestures in an elegant contrapposto to the hillside sloping downward to the right (fig. 36). And in the living room, the built-in bench next to the fireplace becomes a veritable throne celebrating the grandeur of nature (fig. 37). The architecture does not invite the inhabitant to be in nature by means of big picture windows and broad patios, but rather frames the inhabitant against the backdrop of nature.

Another house that challenged modernist notions about form and function was the Moore-Heady House, of 1962 (fig. 38). If the Glass House initiates a critique of Good-Life Modernism from above, Charles Moore’s Moore-Heady House does so from below. Of similar dimension as the Glass House, it is a large, barn-like structure with moveable exterior walls and windows. As in the Glass House, there are no doors on the inside (except for the toilet), but distinguishing it from the Glass House are two baladin-like constructions defining the living room and the bathing area respectively. Whereas the Glass House is a high-society hut, the Moore-Heady House is a counterculture shack. Built with bravura cheapness, it is infamous for its leaky roof, cold drafts, and rattling window panes, and thus it is hard today to appreciate the impact this house had in both America and Europe at the time of its construction.

Moore’s well-known interest in “sense of place” takes its departure from this project, which initiated his investigation into the disjuncture between place and function. The modernists, generally speaking, held to the idea that each function required individual expression. The Moore-Heady House, which confronts this thesis head-on, can be placed on a par with Fernand Leger’s Country Outing (1954) (fig. 39), where the convention of outline and color is challenged in a similar way. Shapes are not identical with the outlines of form but float freely in space. Just as the objects are disengaged from their color, so it is with forms and their functions in the Moore-Heady House; instead of one following the other, each has its own trajectory. In some instances forms and functions overlap, as with the bathroom in the Moore-Heady House or the tree stump in Country Outing. In cases where they do not, a loose fit is readily accepted. In this sense, the Moore-Heady House, more than simply a counterculture version of the Glass House, stands on the other side of a historical divide in architectural theory.

With John Hejduk’s projects of the 1960s the emphasis shifts away from a question of form and function to a phenomenological investigation into the problem of place. Hejduk’s so-called House (fig. 40), is one of the outstanding theoretical accomplishments of the decade. It is part of a series of unbuilt investigations which include the 1/2 House, the Red-Yellow House, and the Good Neighbor House. The simplicity of House is deceiving. It is a purely historiographic proposition. Not only does it evoke the theoretical origins of architecture, namely house-as-shelter, but because it is a naos surrounded by
columns that support the roof, it reaches back to the roots of Greek architecture (fig. 41). The organization of the columns, however, is Palladian, abstracted from the Villa Rotonda (fig. 42). In this sense, the house combines archaic directness with cultivated nobility, totally bypassing all the concerns of Good-Life Modernism.

Through the new conceptual optic of Hejduk's architecture, Good-Life Modernism was once and for all revealed for what it was. It had falsely proclaimed itself the authentic voice of domestic life. It had legitimized itself by means of a questionable means of consensus and an artificial discourse of reasonableness. And finally, it had co-opted architectural theory into the services of cultural manipulations that ossified theory and standardized it for general consumption. Above all, in Hejduk’s work that grand postwar attempt to create a fresh bourgeois enlightenment is revealed as a sham enterprise that side-stepped rather than addressed the difficult problematic of the relationship between architecture and society.

Hejduk’s plans, therefore, explore the concept of ‘houselessness’, while at the same time denying sentimentalist definition of the domestic realm. House 10 (1966), for example, takes 3/4 spaces and punctuates them with 3/4 objects (fig. 43). Everything is connected by a long corridor along which an amoeba-shaped space is attached. Instead of ‘less is more’ we seem to be given the ironic proposition that ‘3/4 is more’, implying that theory is not one-to-one with practical reality. Hejduk intensifies the disjuncture between 3/4 places and their function by exploring the equally intriguing disjuncture between words and space. The program for 3/4 House listed alongside the plan – ‘Garage, Walk, Entry, Living, Dining, Kitchen, Gallery, Storage, Bathroom, Bedroom’ – would satisfy any realtor’s listing for a one-bedroom house. But as concepts the words evoke wholeness; a bedroom, a living room, a kitchen. The architect, fracturing space in the three-dimensional sense, but unable to fracture space in the conceptual sense, opens our eyes to the conventions that govern the relationships between words and architectural space. 3/4, an alienating measure that wants to emphasize the theoretical nature of the discourse, is therefore, equivalent to an elegant statement of a Brechtian statement. As in Brecht’s plays, alienation is employed to point out that the play is not equivalent with reality, but a theoretical proposition.

The most radical experiments with the American house were the early designs by Peter Eisenman. Whereas Eames, Kahn, and Hejduk responded, in the final analysis, to the question of livability, Eisenman rejects such considerations altogether. The fact that columns in his House II (1969) thrust themselves upwards in unfortunate spots is immaterial (fig. 44). The house defies both function and form. To guarantee this, Eisenman does not ‘design’ the house, but ‘generates’ it with a series of twenty-four transformations that, in their repetition and arbitrariness, thematize the insistent alienation of the design from all human, site, and functional considerations. The transformations, which bit-by-bit drain space from the initial volume, are much more than formal games; they remove the design stepwise not only from the discourse of modernism (i.e., form and function) but also from life. The fact that the house is ‘unlivable’ is supposed to be understood as “not his fault.” Absence of place is part of the theoretical program that intended to critique a society that was then engaged in a brutal war, and that was at war with itself. The photograph Eisenman published of House II in a grey and cold winter landscape is his comment on the times (fig. 45).
In Eisenman's critique, architects should refuse to become agents for Good Living. The design should erect barriers against Good Living and, if anything, simulate the fragmented arbitrariness of the world. The resultant architectural object purposefully challenges the anthropological urge to settle and to define a place. Like Franz Kafka's castle—also covered by a dusting of snow—House II frustrates attempts to inhabit it. Kafka's inability to gain access to the castle, the domestic alter ego for which he searches, can be interpreted as the textual counterimage of Eisenman's work. It is your task, not mine. Eisenman seems to be suggesting, to find a place for yourself in this dehumanized world.

Eisenman and others, in their attempt to expand investigations of house forms, turned their backs on the conventional; but not so Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who bravely entered the American interior, in particular the trite living rooms of the middle-class. Signs of Life (fig. 46) ridicules the all-American interior by raising it to a pseudo-monumental status. Whereas on a deserted island, 'signs of life' might be a cause for joy, here 'signs of life'—envisioned in the ironic context of an all-too-familiar living room setting—speaks of mankind's entrapment within the realm of the signified. The signs, perversely larger than life, hang from the ceiling over the furniture, identifying the world of architectural things, on the one hand, as interchangeable and replaceable, and, on the other hand, as frightfully permanent. The middle-class, with its now-revealed language of taste-signs, is shown in its attempt to co-opt objects to speak better of its urge to control. In this man-made world of object-words, functional requirements, such as comfort and light, are secondary to the hidden language which is carried by means of a subterfuge into the seemingly introverted and non-referential world of the living room. Signs of Life thus not only reveals the trite, petty, and constrained interiors of establishmentarian life, but monumentalizes them, rendering the rhetorical nature of the everyday world obvious while simultaneously casting it into doubt.

Signs of Life brings into focus the difference between things produced and things valued. Values are social commodities whose importance lies in their identity as products, but in the ever-changing reality of social linkages. Objects, in being 'valued', signify the larger cultural system in which they are placed. Thus there is a difference between the signs one sees on the street and cultural signs by which a society identifies itself. The former have a single overt reference. The latter emerge only as signs that were not conceived as such. Furniture and other objects in a room, for example, serve as frightfully accurate signs of cultural mindsets, since they are eminently readable within a certain cultural context, even though they are never explicitly intended to be used within the context of a cultural discourse. Placing signs (as physical objects) over the furniture makes overt the silent process that relies on the hidden forces of suppressed articulation.

In misplacing the 'sign' into the realm of actual signage, Venturi creates an architecture free from the constraints of hidden hegemonic syntax. It is freed, however, only from its collusion with silence, for in exposing and thus weakening the power of hidden meanings, Venturi's signs point to the troubling reality of modern life. The fetishistic insistence on congruence reveals an actual lack of happy correspondence between words and things, desires and expressions, and social values and marketplace economies.

The shifting realm of indicators that is the theme of Signs of Life finds its primary architectural manifestation in the collision of the public and private domains, as in Venturi's Lieb House (fig. 50), where, accidentally-on-purpose,
some windows are designed from the interior and others from the exterior, revealing elements of both. In this world of misplaced architectural modifiers that glorify the bourgeois while making it uncomfortable, the Vanna Venturi House (1961) stands out by far. The famous photo of the facade with Vanna, Venturi’s mother, sitting in front shows a house as inhabited, that is, all the “signs” are in place (fig. 47). Is the mother a ‘sign of life’, or only a piece of signage, like the potted plant? To make the puzzle more complex, Venturi overlays on the facade a commentary on the classical system of proportion. The geometric signage, extrapolated from the curved molding and the lintel, is a residual and fragmentary reference to architectural theory’s hybrids that posit man as measure of all things (fig. 48). In Leonardo’s scheme (fig. 49), for example, the man moves his legs elevating the center from the pelvis to the navel; in Venturi’s scheme, the circle is also levitated over the square, but here, the architects place a feminist spin on the problem. The standing man is replaced by a seated woman who represents the stool and unprovable nature of domesticity. Her feet are not part of the circle and rest unambiguously on the ground. That spot, together with the center of the circle focused on her lap—and more precisely on the spine of an open book which she is reading—define the essential qualities of her matrixial identity: place, birth and knowledge.

Venturi and Braun’s architecture exposes the sadness as well as the happiness of being human and ultimately the irony in the laudable yet often pathetic search for human dignity. It speaks simultaneously of power and powerlessness. Architecture’s power derives from its ability to unmask the world and to remove the forces that, on the other hand, hold together words and things in their complement, unrevealed, natural state, and, on the other hand, separate private and public realms. The powerlessness of architecture derives, however, from architecture’s inability to resolve the social and cultural equation. Venturi’s architecture, as a result, tends to home in on architectural skin, for the skin of the building celebrates not only the disjunction between inside and outside—a comment on the failure of man’s attempt to control the world—but also the ironic permanence of the ‘Good-Life’ based on the residual anthropological mystery of its signs.

To reveal society as manipulative and calculating, architects have to contrive countermanipulations and miscalculations. Venturi seems to argue, but without lapsing into absurd or self-gratifying expressionism. This critique of the Good-Life Modernist acceptance of social conventions, which led to Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, culminated in the Trubek House (1970), on the shore of Nantucket Island (fig. 51). The house is a brilliant architectural commentary on the All-American life. On the outside the house was meant to read as indigenous American, consciousness imitating late nineteenth-century Shingle-Style houses, examples of which Venturi pairs with illustrations of the Trubek House in some of the publications. The house is not, however, meant as pure imitation, but rather as an exaggeration of the convention, an enlargement of it, holding onto the image of ‘American House’ as if for dear life. And, upon entering, one sees why: on the inside a powerful force has disrupted its organization. The effect is as if the high tide, swept in by a gale, had burst into the living room and forced everything back creating a jumble of architectural flotsam and jetsam against the rear wall. A single column managed to hold its ground; its counterpart, on the other side of the room, was lost to the tempest.

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Not all architects of the sixties belong to the group that attempted to salvage the theoretical dialogue. Charles Gwathmey, Michael Graves, and Richard Meier confuse virtuosity with authentic critical statement. Eames, Kahn, Venturi, and Eisenman, however, based their work on insightful investigations into the bonds that link society and architecture. They studied how these conventions were created and how they could be revitalized. Kahn sought anthropological meaning; Moore broke apart the modernist conflation of form and function; Eisenman rejected anthropological elements; Hejduk challenged the conventions that purport to relate space and words; Venturi studied the cultural impulses that deform architectural thought. Some of the approaches are diametrically opposed to one another and during the 1960s were not seen as having a common focus. Students would defend one against the other. Yet, from the perspective of the late 1980s, it becomes clear that they all aimed at bringing new vitality to the American House. Each attempt in its particular way, took account of those traits of modernity that were incompatible with Good-Life Modernism, and this is why Good-Life Modernism had claimed to be the final revelation of modernism unto itself. The architects of the 1960s, however, did not—never even intend to—replace Good-Life Modernism with a programmatic alternative; theirs was not a vision that could be implemented in the manner of a new all-encompassing domestic aesthetic. On the contrary, they saw their contribution as a rescue of theory from the clutches of practice.

The real contribution of the 1960s can therefore, only be seen against the backdrop of Good-Life Modernism. Its lure was its promise to heal the rifts between subject and object by creating an architecture without pain, displacements, residual wants or unfilled desires. The logic of this illusion began with the ostensibly innocuous attempt on the part of Good-Life Modernists to help the middle-class become a patronal class by preparing a specially crafted version of modernity. Good-Life Modernism demanded that Americans heighten their aesthetic sensibilities and cleanse themselves of the impulse towards kitsch and historicism. But it also demanded acceptance of the purported status quo of modernism and a lowering of the threshold of cultural skepticism. Relying on the unique America myths of shared equality and individualistic market-mindedness, architectural firms, banks, and museums, together with the rapidly expanding construction industry hoped not only to articulate an unchangingly valid aesthetic for the new patronal class but also to provide the buildings that would 'cash in' on that aesthetic. "Theory" was reduced to stereotyped responses so that the 'practice' of cultural administration could implement itself all the more effectively. The result was a trompe l'oeil in which the middle-class, satisfying itself with its appearance as patrons, failed to recognize that in actuality it was at the mercy of forces over which it had very little control.

By the 1970s, Good-Life Modernism was stripped of its claims to theory. But the success left the new architecture without its dialectical antagonist, and as the critique played itself out, it spiraled from reactionary historicism and mannerist impressionism to the super-realist strutting of deconstruction. Theory, no longer a cultural system of interconnected truths, as it was for Good-Life Modernism, came to be envisioned as working hypotheses, changing in accordance with the results. Theory mongers, searching now for congratulatory applause from the culture voyeurs, fight their quixotic struggle far removed from the site of the real battle.
Mrs. Leonard B. Thomas

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