



House and Home

BY JOSEPH RYKWERT

HOME IS WHERE one starts from. That much is obvious. A home is not the same as a house, which is why we need two different words. Does a home need to be anything built at all, any fabric? I think not. Home could just be a hearth, a fire on the bare ground by any human lair. That may well be the one thing that nobody can quite do without: a fireplace, some focus. After all, if a home had no focus, you could not start from it.

Home is at the center. For many of us, a hearth marks that focus from which we start. Its fire need not necessarily burn in the fireplace of the living room or the hall, since even where it is not needed for warmth, fire can shelter from terrors of the encroaching night. Predators fear it. As human beings seem unable to subsist on raw food alone for long, cooking is also essential. In the hottest desert or tropical swamp, you may have to make a fire in order to eat. Eating is usually done close to it, so that eating and sleeping together have come to define the household: the old English marriage service speaks of a common bed and board as the summary of the life of the nuclear family. For many of us the focus may be a kitchen range.

Taming fire is *the* origin of culture, the token of control over environment. Fire is also the mark of settlement. Hearths and middens, kitchen-refuse heaps, are some of the earliest traces of human habitation—the very notion of home seems to have grown round the hearth. It follows that a notion so deeply rooted in human experience should have its appropriate term in every language: yet translators have always complained

about the difficulty of finding an exact equivalent for it—particularly in Romance languages.

Take French. "His home" is usually rendered by *chez lui*, and "my home" is *chez moi*. Although *chez* is a preposition, not a noun like "home," it is a corruption of the Latin noun *casa*, a hut or cottage, something humble. Where we use "house" the Romans said *domus*; which could also mean domesticity, household effects, homeliness—even peace—and is as close to "home" as you will get in Latin. And yet Latin also provides two other words for the house: as a thing built, *aedes*, and as a place of rest—which home so emphatically is—*mansio*, from *maneo*, I remain or abide, and it is from that word that the French get their *maison*, which in turn translates into our "house."¹

The Greeks called the house *domos*, which sounds almost the same as the Latin: yet the Greek home was *oikos*, a word from which we get a whole range of concepts, such as economy. The business of building a fabric, of sheltering the home, as it were, was *oikodomein*: the words were run together to emphasize their separate meaning.

The very similar words arrived in classical languages by different routes. The Romans got their *domus* from the Old Indo-European root *dem*, family; while the Greeks derived it from exactly the same-sounding root, meaning to build. That the two different words moved so close together, linguists now tell us, was a coincidence, but it seems to me to indicate an affinity which is not just accidental.

Or to move outside Europe: the Chinese dealt with such matters quite differently when they inscribed the character for "fire," *huô*, under the thatched radical for "roof" or "hut," *miān*, so that the result was *zai*, "disaster." On the other hand, if they inscribed "pig," *shì*, beneath that same radical, they suggested well-being or—at any rate—easy

¹ See Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (Coral Gables, Fla., 1973), pp. 241ff.

circumstance; the-pig-in-the-house, *jia*, which the character drew, read "home"—as well as "family."²

German might seem to provide the closest and the easiest translation into English: *Heim* is, after all, almost a homonym of "home"—yet the grammatically neuter *Heim* has a feminine *Heimat*, for which the English word is not really the "mother country," "motherland" which the dictionaries offer but the now more common "fatherland," which has a romantic and quite unarchaic sound; so that the familiar word acquires an alien association. Indeed, it was German-speaking Swiss mercenary soldiers who first suffered *Heimweh* in the fifteenth century, and it took the English another three centuries to name the unfamiliar sentiment "homesickness." Of course, the Germans, like the English, distinguish *Haus und Heim*, by which they signify not only all their possessions but their very citizenship of a place, to which the English equivalent would be "hearth and home."

Both English words, "house" and "home," are in turn heavily colored by a notion embedded in case law that the great Jacobean judge, Sir Edward Coke, enshrined in the dictum: "The house of everyman is to him as his castle and fortresse, as well as his defence against injury and violence, as for his repose."³ A nineteenth-century legal historian cheapened it into "the Englishman's house is his castle,"⁴ and this was adopted instantly as a slogan for all that is implied by the notion of a home. Almost imperceptibly the householder's legal rights were stamped on the land beyond—they moved from house to home.

² Edoardo Fazzioli, *Chinese Calligraphy: From Pictograph to Ideogram* (New York, 1987), p. 155. This is an archaic usage, however; the same word, *zai*, is now written as water-and-fire. Character spellings I have given here—following Fazzioli—are all archaic. Unfortunately, Chinese characters cannot be reproduced here.

³ Sir Edward Coke, *Reports, 1600–1615* (London, 1738), V, 91b. He was, in fact, translating the Anglo-Norman adage of Sir William Stanford, *Les Plees del Coron: Divisees in plusiours Titles & Common Lieux* (London, 1567), p. 14 b.

⁴ Edward A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England* (Oxford, 1873), 2: 82.

Without that move, I suspect the development of the suburbs in Anglo-Saxon countries could not have been possible.

Some distinction between home, the situation—with its implication of well-being, stability, ownership—as against a rather more inert notion of the house, persists in most languages, persists through very powerful cultural shifts and over vast distances. Its variation may be an indicator of differing mentalities, as well as of radical social innovation. Yet almost always *home* is at the centrifugal hearth, the fire burning at the center of my awareness, as its light once spread like a stain in the hostile night.

It is the family.

"House" means shelter, and implies edges, walls, doors, and roofs—and the whole repertory of the fabric.

"Home" does not require any building, even if a house always does. You can make a home anywhere: a little tinder, even some waste paper, a few matches, or a cigarette lighter is all you need. In our technically advanced civilization, it can be secured with less trouble (but a great deal of equipment) by a VCR tape, which will make flames leap up on your television screen at the push of a button.

But a house must be brick and timber, mortar and trowels, carpentry and masonry, foundations and topping off: and it requires taking thought.

Taking thought about building is one of several useful definitions of architecture—which is where I come in, I suppose; particularly as a common accusation against architects is that they fail to do just that. On the other hand, too much taking thought by architects is not considered entirely desirable either. Only too often in the last twenty years or so, they have been hectored about how wrong they had been to take on themselves the role of social thinkers and reformers; they should instead have got on with what has been called "packaging a life-style"; and should have done so in the most expeditious and agreeable way they might.

A "life-style," after all, is thrown up by the people: through it

they instinctually and mutely declare their will and aspirations. Like the market, this popular "style" has its internal, imperious laws of life and growth which cannot be defied.

Without wishing to digress, I would like to remind you of a very popular slim book, full of beautiful images, published some years ago, which was called *Architecture Without Architects*, as if such a thing were not a contradiction in terms. It suggested that the shelters of monkeys and the dams of beavers were analogous to those of "untutored builders in space and time,"⁵ nomads, peasants and suchlike, whose houses had evolved from those of the animals without any need for deliberation—like the animals, they worked by instinct.

A century earlier, the Reverend George Wood, who was a very prolific scientific popularizer, called an analogous, much bulkier book more accurately *Homes Without Hands*, and discussed animal dwellings only. The Viennese architect and wit Bernard Rudofsky, the author of my first book, admired the buildings of primitive people for their intuitive rightness, the way they seemed to "fit in" with nature. He echoed a belief common among historians of architecture that there was an unarticulated, immediate harmony between the primitive builder and his environment which had been lost by the overly reflective, brain-bound modern designer. School-trained architects, who take too much—or perhaps the wrong kind of—thought, not only go against the nature of place but also against that of the society in which they work.

Now, I suspect that if one were to investigate any of the human dwellings illustrated in Rudofsky's book, however "instinctual" they may appear, one would soon find that many were produced by specialist craftsmen who could be very articulate indeed about what they were doing. Their notions may have been framed in terms of legend, but their accounts of them would often contain the word "because."

Even when they merely followed a rule of thumb, and built

⁵ Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects* (New York, 1964), p. 16.

according to habit, the rule of thumb still had to be taught to be transmitted from generation to generation; and often such teaching had the character of initiation. It teaches by cross-reference between techniques of building and cosmogonies, or between stories about the origins of the tribe and the builder's skills. At their simplest, such references were often enshrined in the work songs in which people celebrated their efforts and the trouble to which the population of a settlement was put when building was a communal rather than a specialized activity; at their best, such songs could even turn the act of building, with its repeated rhythmic action, into a game and a festival.

Unlike even the most elaborate animal construction, human building involves decision and choice, always and inevitably; it therefore involves a project. A project may demand only a close adherence to a traditional type—but a type can almost always be specified in words: whether it is the Mongol *yurts* of skin and embroidered felt stretched over a wooden frame, or Eskimo igloos built up of blocks of ice, or the mere propped mats of Andaman Islanders or even the leaf shelters of pygmies in Central Africa—all these types can not only be “specified” by their builders and by their inhabitants, as I said, but also “justified,” glossed in mythical terms, and given some specific legendary weight. However atrophied and ritualized that life-style may seem to us, building for them is never the “packaging of a life-style.”

Moreover, “primitive” or “traditional” buildings always presuppose neighbors. An isolated nuclear family in such dwellings is not thinkable. Indeed, our word “home,” like the German *Heim*, is sometimes thought to derive from the Indo-European root *kei*, “to lie or settle”—from which came the Greek *khomi*, which means a settlement, a village (as against a town), a rustic place and rustic festivals that extended into dances and play acting, which the Greeks (and therefore also we, following them) called “comedy,” so that “home” becomes also a communal and neighborly manner of dwelling. A hermit

may make a home for himself in isolation, of course—but for all that, human dwellings are always more or less communal.

However shabby and casual it may look, a rustic dwelling depends on being part of an articulated (I am even tempted to say an organic) layout; often a layout which was understood as a body with head and members into which the homesteads were “integrated.”

I would argue further that a house, whether it is rural or urban, can be a true home only in such neighborly circumstances. While the lonely hearth will not quite make a home, therefore, yet the erection of the home-house into a castle which defies its neighbors, and may be seen as quite separate from the public realm, makes it much less of a home. Or, in other words, an individual can have many houses, but only a person can make a home.

In the villages of preindustrial Europe, and to some extent also in the towns there, even in the early settlements of the New World, neighborliness was a normal condition. It was taken for granted as long as the body continued to be the metaphor for the body politic. However, about 1800 the new science of biology taught that the human body was just one kind of organic tissue among many. The notion of an *organic* substance—meaning any tissue containing protoplasmic carbon compounds—displaced that of the *organon*, the body as an instrument of a will or mind. By then the Industrial Revolution was already in full swing in the United States and in Great Britain, and the organizing of energy for production was seen as the overriding social good from which all other benefits would flow.

Industrialism was to bring vast benefits. Meanwhile, it would also involve much suffering: the version of social Darwinism which inspired many of the great industrialists of the nineteenth century—and therefore presided over the building and the rebuilding of cities—taught that progress was an organic process, that society developed following internal and inexorable laws, like those which governed the growth of

plants; and that (by inference) the ills of the environment were the mere detritus of the great onward march—which one popular writer of the time called *The Martyrdom of Man*.⁶

Older images of a corporate city faded into an increasingly stiff and remote irrelevance before the imperatives of production. In the two principal English-speaking countries, the form and extent of cities grew in a way that had no precedent. Business was increasingly packed at the center; the perfecting of metal structure and the first safe elevators made ever-greater heights possible, and promoted the speculation in land values. In consequence, the main and usually older institutional buildings—town halls, government offices, law courts, churches—were soon dwarfed by the increasingly high monuments to enterprise. Those who profited most by these buildings (and what went on inside them) soon moved out of the darkening city centers; they built their castles and palaces in the surrounding countryside. They were followed by their most successful employees, and so on down the scale, until the dormitory suburb, where everyman's house truly was his castle, extended all round the tall urban core.

There was nothing new about the suburb, the *faubourg*, of course; even while city walls offered the only available security, areas outside the city gates were populated by those who, for one reason or another, were brave enough to escape city regulations and city taxes. When that security became something of an irrelevance, magnates who wanted to benefit from large landholdings within easy reach of the centers of power joined the riffraff. St. Honoré and St. Germain in Paris, Piccadilly and Bloomsbury in London, were crowded with palatial mansions from the sixteenth until the nineteenth century.

But the new industrial suburbs were quite different. Since they were not within walking distance of the city, they required transport. The upper crust of commerce and the middle

⁶ William Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London, 1872). There were many subsequent editions.

classes had taken over the land of the magnates who simultaneously moved to town houses and country ones, having parceled out their suburban palaces at vast profit. The riffraff had for the most part moved back into the city centers, since a concentration of urban workers was easier to batten on than the diffuse suburbanites. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the notion of the hearth-on-the-ground as the center of the house had been firmly grafted onto that of the house as everyman's castle. Put the essential hearth into everyman's castle, and you have the powerful commonplace of the suburban house. Such houses cannot be piled up, one on top of the other—the hearth has to be on the ground.

Building in height was forced on the older cities by their immoderate nineteenth-century growth. In Europe, the various *ensanches*—a term coined in Barcelona, like the very word *urbanism*, and by the same man, Idelfonso Cerdà⁷—were additions to (or rings around) older cities, so that historic centers continued to play the institutional role for the enlarged areas and populations, while in the New World very few towns had such points of reference.

Where (as in Washington) such reference was deliberately created on the scale of new and much larger cities but in a quasi-rural environment, it was to produce its own problems. The great majority of towns built in the New (as in the Old) World during the nineteenth century were gridded and undifferentiated tissues into which the new proletariat was herded, usually with disastrous results, and they in turn produced horrid new linguistic usages: housing reforms, housing questions, and housing schemes.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, housing became a word which signified doing good to the poor by providing them, institutionally, with houses in which they could make

⁷ Idelfonso Cerdà's *Teoria general de la urbanizaciòn y aplicaciòn de sus principes y doctrinas a la reforma y ensanche de Barcelona* was published in Madrid in 1867. Cerdà's plan was originally drawn up in 1859.

some kind of home. Some of these do-gooders were philanthropists, others (of whom Ebenezer Howard may have been the most interesting and the most successful) were planners and utopians. A few of them did see that the provision of places to live had in some way to be related to a physical structure which would in turn correspond to the articulated organization of older towns. Still, none foresaw the world population catastrophe that has overtaken our cities in the last quarter of this century, and through which we are still working and living.

Housing reforms and schemes spawned questions, ministries, administrations. Soon all this became more ambitious: "Homes for Heroes" was the program of the British housing administration after 1918; it was not an unqualified success, but it was echoed and amplified in the great rebuilding of war-ravaged countries after 1945. Architects went at it with a will. The notion of the *Existenzminimum*, which had been launched in the 1920s in Germany, had an enormous success in the '50s and '60s.

Architects tried to fit everything that went on in a "typical" household into a closely packed shell. It was as if they saw their business not as the provision of houses but the enclosure of Home, over which Frank Taylor and his motion-study was patron. They forgot the important moral which Karl Kraus once tried to instill in them, when he said that he expected of the city to provide him with water, gas, electricity, and working roads: *die Gemütlichkeit besorge ich*—I will supply the homeliness, he added.

Obsessed with the detailed working of the home where every movement was planned, where a bed would never stand under a window, and baby carriages could be stored away under the stairs, they forgot that their business was with house and not with home. It is, moreover, with house in context, whether in the town or in the country. For all their concern with the exact layout of the home, the assumption was somehow made by many of those concerned with planning and building that the

point or the slab block would provide the answer to all the bulk problems of urban housing. A number of factors have brought disappointment to the planners. The most important is the deterioration of the social structure, for which they cannot be held responsible; which has been attributed to the loss of faith, the two-income family, or television—or a combination of all three. But almost equally weighty is the poor performance of the physical fabric of many of those buildings, their all-too-rapid decay.

I must therefore plead with my contemporaries to reassess the conjunction between house and home. Let the professionals recognize that their business is with the house, not with home; with structure, with physical fabric, with limits, with context.

Look at the real-estate advertising in New York papers with this in mind. If a home is offered you on the sixty-ninth floor of a pencil-sharp skyscraper, know for sure that the sidewalks and indeed the surroundings of the building will be the purlieu (if not the home) of the dispossessed, however many the varieties of marble which line its walls, or photo-eyes blink from its cornices.

The apartment in the New York point block is, in its luxurious and alienating way, no more welcoming or safer than quarters in municipal-housing slab blocks in the immediate postwar period, of which Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, dynamited by the authority that had paid for its erection twenty years earlier, has become the most infamous. In spite of that clamorous destruction, entire cities of slab-block housing have been built since—in Eastern Europe, in some African countries, and in South America. In the West, private developers have replaced the regimented slab with a chaos of points, which are sometimes decked out with fancy “classical” detailing, as if cosmetics of that kind had anything to do with the case. Others have tried to focus attention on the possible adaptation of the quasi-public spaces left over between

skyscrapers; it is essential first-aid action, but in conceptual terms, it is like applying Band-Aid to a cut jugular vein.

The truth is that planners, developers, architects need to recognize again that they are not the creatures, nor yet the servants, of inexorable natural forces, but are in the business of taking thought about building. Architects may not be entitled to impose their utopian ideas on their clients—and yet, all those concerned with building must recognize that every foundation laid is always and inevitably a political act. The damage they can inflict is more grievous than that of a bungling surgeon or a physician. I would therefore like to see developers and housing directors liable in law for professional malpractice: not for the collapse of a building (for which the architect and engineer are almost always blamed anyway), but for putting up buildings which should be blown up—because they are so ugly, or because they damage the texture of urban life. The constraints of market forces or the alienating, capitalist conditions of labor are not an extenuating circumstance for our sins of commission.

The trouble is to find a suitable judge and jury. To exercise judgment, such a court would need to learn again, as we all need to, that the city is what we will it to be; it is our common act—not a piece of organic tissue growing at the behest of inflexible and barely comprehensible forces. This is a lesson which it will take many years to articulate and to apply. Perhaps in any case it is too late, our cities are no longer salvageable. I think it is worth trying. And the sooner we begin, the better.

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