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Heaven on Earth: Transient Dwelling and Adaptation in Downtown Houston

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The magic of ruins persists, a near mystical fascination with sites seemingly charged with the aura of past events, as if the molecules of the sites still vibrated with the memory of their history.

James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory*

In the early 1970s, Houston boomed as the impact of the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973 fueled expanded employment opportunities in the US petrochemical industry. An influx of mostly Northerners initiated a wave of population growth and speculative building construction stretching from the city center to the suburban periphery. The burgeoning economy transformed downtown into a state-of-the-art global energy hub complete with modern office towers, an extensive pedestrian tunnel system, and several mid-rise hotels. Leveraged on oil, Houston epitomized optimism, opportunity, and opulence—while its unregulated growth philosophy became a popular mantra across a sprawling metropolitan area. By the mid-1980s, however, fortunes began to fade as oil prices plummeted and Houston experienced its first major recession. In a dramatic turn of events from boom-to-bust, businesses closed and a significant portion of the population left the city en masse.

Echoes of this first oil recession continue to haunt the built environment of downtown Houston. An abandoned 31-story structure on the western edge of downtown originally designed as a Holiday Inn attests to changing consumer tastes, shifting urban perceptions, and disinvestment. This proposal examines the rise, fall, and reincarnation of the Holiday Inn into a high-rise *ashram* in the 1980s—renamed the *Heaven on Earth Inn*—that served practitioners of Transcendental Meditation and the homeless community. Its adaptive re-use narrates a pivotal time of social, economic, and demographic change in Houston, while providing a speculative opportunity for the Interior Architecture studio curriculum at the University of Houston College of Architecture.

Using the existing 31-story abandoned shell of the Holiday Inn/Heaven on Earth as the site for a new capsule hostel for downtown Houston, the studio examined dwelling multiplicities to propose an alternative, intermingled living environment. Capsule

hotels, low-cost travelers' accommodation, SRO (Single-Room Occupancy), backpacking culture, migration, and nomadism were considered in the development of hybrid residential environments exploring the temporal and ecological parameters of adaptive re-use, as well as the broader social agency of interior architecture.

Shifting focus toward adaptation and incrementalism, while taking cues from various histories, this project engaged interior architecture through the lens of building renewal, considering performance, perception, and phenomenological conditions. Students designed interior dwelling interventions ranging in scale from the human body to multiple occupancies, addressing co-operative living concerns and blended programs that blurred the boundaries of time, space, and materiality. Activating a diverse new community based upon adaptation—this project allowed students to engage architecture at the scale of the interior, prompting them to reflect upon alternative futures for disinvested territories and cast-off buildings within the built environment.

Informality in Bogotá: Housing, Rapid Urbanization, and Public Space

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Increasing rates of population growth and migration into urban centers combine to burden existing infrastructures, transportation systems, and supplies of natural resources. Within informal settlements, residents occupy housing often lacking in water, sewage, and electricity while facing insecure land tenure. Despite these conditions, residents establish complex and highly sophisticated social and economic networks that create vibrant communities and a strong sense of identity.

The nature of this rapid urbanization, particularly in the Global South, results in extreme contrasts between wealth and poverty, and the prevalence of informality – undocumented forms of land occupation, economies, and social agreements. These conditions are highly complex, and locally specific, requiring design strategies that are immediate, flexible, and responsive to the physical demands of place. In Bogotá, Colombia, the World Bank estimates that over 1,400 informal settlements occupy 24% of its area and house 22% of its population. Within the Ciudad Bolívar, rural to urban migration has resulted in a 50% increase in population growth.

Urban interventions such as the public Transmilenio BRT or the weekly Ciclovía connect informal settlements into Bogotá's urban center. These systems expand towards the limits of the physical city and, as expected, have reduced commuting times for workers with jobs in the formal sector. They utilize existing infrastructure, and are less expensive and evasive to existing communities.

While surgical in their implementation, these kinds of strategies also provide new kinds of democratic space that reduce the physical barriers and separation between communities. They are flexible and responsive - accommodating both form and informal economies, while providing venues for action that are local, and that contribute to the overall identity of the city. These systems operate as public space - connecting disparate communities while granting greater access across a much larger metropolitan area.

Blind Spot: The User Usurps the Dwelling Act and the Designer's Attention

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In *Air and Dreams* Gaston Bachelard ponders, "...I am inclined to believe that flight is a warm wind before being a wing."¹ In contemplating the design process one might also say that architecture is an imagined experience before becoming a physical thing. How we, as designers, verbally articulate our design(s) reveals much about what we are imagining and where our attention is placed. Not that many years ago, a variety of verbs were commonly employed when imagining life within the spaces we design: to live, reside, inhabit, abide, occupy, exist, and more specifically, to pass through, pause, wander, etc. Through language, these diverse terms allowed us to touch upon the particular nature of the relationship we were creating between the inhabitant(s) and the spaces we were designing for them. Juhani Pallasmaa eloquently offers the following in this regard, "The phenomenology of architecture is founded on verbs rather than nouns. The approaching of the house, not the facade, the act of entering, not the door; the act of looking out of the window, not the window itself; or the act of gathering around rather than the hearth or the table as such seem to trigger our strongest emotions."² When we as designers engage dwelling acts through verbs, we gain access to, and in turn may affect, this rich and multifarious emotional terrain at the heart of experience. Recently, however, we have seen a significant impoverishment of the language employed in speaking and thinking about design. The rich pallet of verbs has been almost exclusively replaced with the terms *use* and *the user*. This paper will discuss the origins and emergence of *the user* as the exclusive inhabitant of imagined/designed spaces, and will examine how *the user* has come to affect the way designs are conceived, with speculations on what this might mean for human experience.

¹ Gaston Bachelard, "The Poetics of Wings," in *Air and Dreams, An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. E. and F. Farrell (Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 73.

² Juhani Pallasmaa, "Identity, Intimacy and Domicile - Notes on the Phenomenology of Home," in *Arkkitehti – Finnish Architectural Review* (Helsinki, Suomen Arkkitehtiliitto, 1994), accessed June 13, 2007, http://www2.uiah.fi/esittely/historia/e_ident.htm#identity

Poetic Action for Autism: An Intersubjective Approach

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Fueled by our senses, we frame our world view with our experiences and memories. Through narrative and history, we are able to translate these experiences and memories into built form to connect to our society on a transcendental level. What happens, though, when built form lacks this inherent meaning and inhibits the socialization process of those who are classified “to have no sense of identity, and to inhabit an empty world?”¹ This paper proposes to use our design sensibilities to understand the nature of materials, textures, and poetic experiences of architectural space for those with autism. This holistic and empathetic approach to design could enhance the environment for those who appear limited in their mental abilities.

Autism is classified as a specialized disorder in which those affected have minimal to no communication skills and no executive function. This unfiltered worldview allows those with autism to understand the inherent nature of things in a more concrete, primal level, making them bottom-up thinkers.² However, because of our increasingly disengaged societal interactions, (through computer programs, video games, TV shows, partnered with the effects of medication) those with autism retreat into a world of their own. Thus, their world is experienced through observation rather than “doing,” and their interaction with the real world becomes static.

In our current means and methods of design, we are also experiencing through observation rather than “doing.” However, as architects designing specific one-to-one scale objects, we are able to enter the world of an individual and incite within that individual an intersubjective world view. One-to-one scale objects inform our architectural decisions in a metaphorical way – stretching the perceptions of those with autism that will reawaken their ability to interact with society.

¹ Barbara Furneaux and Brian Roberts, *Autistic Children* (London: Routledge, 1977), 11.

² Temple Grandin, “Dr. Temple Grandin” (lecture at the Character in Leadership event, University of Jamestown, Jamestown, ND, October 10, 2013).

Turbulence and the Creation of Home

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Human constructed environments are subject to numerous flows, including those of people, information, energy, goods, food, waste, water, and air. Flows behave like fluids, and are subject to varying degrees of turbulence. Turbulence is generated by a variety of factors and are characterized by what J.A. Fay describes as vortical and cascading “regions of swirling flow.” Turbulence involves the loss of energy from a flow, and is typically seen as a sign of inefficiency. However, turbulence also has beneficial effects and significantly shapes the habitats of numerous organisms, including those made by humans. How can humans benefit from turbulence in the creation and maintenance of home?

Many organisms have adapted to existence within turbulent flow systems. For example, if we examine the behaviour of trout in a river, a particularly turbulent environment it is evident they are able to use turbulence to their benefit. Trout have evolved shape, fin performance, eating patterns, and swimming mechanics to continuously adjust to changing flow patterns. Organisms, like fish and birds, typically benefit from the effect of “vortex capture,” where energy is harnessed from the turbulence in the environment. By harnessing the energy from turbulent flows, and continuously adjusting to the flows in the environment, they are able to achieve a dynamic balance within a habitat.

Turbulence has been used to define various kinds of human behaviour from migration patterns, political systems, to homelessness. For example, homeless urban populations can be described as being continuously buffeted by the forces of turbulence in cities. In their efforts to adjust and adapt to turbulent conditions, both actual and metaphorical, the homeless engage in various forms of “material survival strategies” that involve the expenditure of energy, such as casual labour, peddling, panhandling, prostitution, theft, street performing, and scavenging. Further, the homeless adapt to the turbulence of the city by hiding, by moving constantly, and by adopting nomadic approaches to sourcing heat, clothing, food, and shelter.

In this paper the notion that the creation of home is a continuous activity that involves managing flows is explored against Kobo Abe’s novels *The Box Man* and *The Woman in the Dunes*. In the first novel Abe describes the life of a photographer who chooses to abandon

conventional living to live in a cardboard box. Abe describes how the box man selects a suitable box, the modifications he makes to it, and the various indispensable objects that can be hung inside of the box, these are essential for his survival. In the second novel Abe's protagonist is a teacher and amateur entomologist, who ends up trapped in the bottom of a sand pit with a woman and her house, he is drawn into her daily struggle against the flows of sand that constantly threaten her survival.

As Jean Baudrillard points out in his book *The System of Objects*, objects employed in everyday life embody various forms of energy, he writes: "We cannot help but admire scythes, baskets, pitchers or ploughs, amalgams of gestures and forces, of symbols and functions, decorated and stylized by human energy and shaped by the forms of the human body, by the exertions they imply and by the matter they transform...." The objects we employ and make in the creation of habitat help negotiate our spatial and social relationships, these involve continuous energy transfers, much like that of a trout in a river. The effects of turbulence on home are part of the patterns, behaviours, structures, and processes of habitat, and the creative harnessing of energy in the creation of home is vital.