

# Places, Spaces, Baggage

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Let's come clean: when we go to look at places and spaces (architecture, that is), we drag along a lot of baggage and, especially if we're there to write about these places and spaces, quite a few undeclared items. Our prejudices and preconceptions, for instance – our values and agendas, our ethics and our politics. This discretionary approach to disclosure, most apparent in the treatment of domestic architecture, is at odds with the *modus operandi* of other writers who deal with places and spaces. Travel writing, for example, is now a confessional genre. At this stage of the game, everyone expects that a traveller's tale will be about not what the traveller finds, but what he brings. That is, the accoutrements of a personality or, more likely, the trappings of a persona. Travel, for writers, used to be what the Foreign Legion was for fugitives: a means of escape from an old self. Contemporary travel writing, though, is based on the profitable acceptance of the realization that, in a world that's thoroughly known, there's no point in trying to escape the inescapable. That guy in the mirror: Why try to get away from him? The self and its psychic freight – that's the story.

In architectural writing – 'popular' architectural writing, that is, although the audience is hardly substantial – we proceed as though the place is still the thing. The journey is beside the point, and our 'baggage' is meant to be checked at the door. Of course, this is an unrealistic, if not impossible requirement. Much like the endangered principle of journalistic objectivity, though, it does offer a disciplinary counter to self-indulgence, and does engender some productive tension. For what one has to resist, or at least monitor, when encountering and then writing about residential architecture, is the rush to normative judgement. This is not a concern for the 'lifestyle' school of house literature, a critical kindy in which cheer-leading is the only subject on the curriculum, but it is an issue for anyone who approaches the subject with some seriousness. A commentary on a building can easily morph, via a critique of the inhabitants' aesthetic sensibility and the presumed size of their bank balance, into a moral tract.

Bespoke residential architecture provokes complicated reactions, as do the publications dedicated to it. Admiration is one response, although respect is rarely accorded without reservation, sensibly enough. Unsurprisingly, in a small society with folk memories of egalitarianism and homogeneity, envy is a more common and more visceral response. The spectrum of resentment ranges from mild social democratic disdain, through pursed-lipped, petit-bourgeois puritanism, to full-blown rage over the manifest inequality exemplified by a large, architect-designed house. Lately, such buildings have faced criticism on another front: not only are they offensive to a putative natural order, but they affront Nature herself. 'Big A' residential architecture, especially if realized on a big scale, is unsustainable, its critics rejoice. If God or Man won't stop it, Gaia will.

The moralistic denunciation of new domestic architecture extends to representations of it. Architectural photographers, and their publishers, are, apparently, engaged in pornography. 'Soft-core' porn, that is. (Which does beg some questions: Is there 'hard-core' architectural porn? Do the monumental erections flaunted by the Gulf sultanates earn the appellation?) Architects themselves are particularly partial to this analogy, a trope that suggests a certain degree of professional self-loathing – unresolved baggage, perhaps. The problem seems to be that houses in magazines or books look too good. The sun is out, the sky is blue; frequently – normally – the houses are photographed without their occupants. There's stuff, but there's no mess. There's style, but there's no life.

Really, you'd have to be a bit of a wanker to find this pornographic. What seems to be occurring is the wilfully naïve mistaking of the conventions of a genre for a pernicious world-view. As architects well know, there are good reasons why people and their baggage are absent from architectural photographs. In part, it's because architects want viewers to see the architecture; in part it's because inhabitants don't want viewers to see them; and in part, it's because publishers have to sell books. Unmade beds, unwashed dishes, unlaundered undies – that might be how we live, but it's not, unless our tastes do indeed run to the scatological end of soft-core porn, what we'll pay to read about. Sadly, the magazine and book-buying public is also resistant to washed-out photographs taken on the drear days typical of our pluvial isles. No doubt it would be morally improving for readers to confront houses in their more dishevelled states and at their less photogenic moments, but as for paying for the privilege – why should they? It's only natural that readers of architectural books and magazines prefer to view the subjects of those publications as we all tend to remember the days of our pasts, that is, as lit by the sun.

If writers and photographers, and their publishers, seem to conspire to pretend that the occupants of architect-designed houses live without traces, how do architects themselves approach their clients' baggage? This is a more serious concern: while publishers trade in appearances (how could they do otherwise?), architects design for real, and particular, lives. Quotidian duty takes me to quite a few new houses, and rather melancholy these visits can be. I've ruminated upon this tristesse; I don't think it's occasioned by jealousy (however impressive a house may be, I understand it hasn't been made for me), or incompetence (the standards of design and execution are often very high), or the shortcomings of the site or my reception (usually stunning and invariably courteous, respectively). I think the sadness – and I may be too sensitive on this point – derives from a certain incongruity between the clients and their houses. A sense of bemusement is often palpable: the clients' houses might be brand new, but they're not. They definitely have excess baggage.

At their age – and architectural patronage is a mature pursuit – clients are built for comfort. Their houses, however, especially if designed in the neo-modernist style, are more uncompromising. The tell-tale sign of true middle-age, upper middle-class inclinations is the huge plasma TV: its inclusion is the one demand clients are sure to make, and it's the one concession that otherwise strict architects know they had better offer. Seeing these big screens, the question does occur: Are the clients seeking to escape from themselves, or from the hard, angular spaces that their bright, young architects have designed for them? A depressing choice, maybe, but let's not be too snooty; as we pass through people's houses we should resist the temptation to put them in their place.