

RAIMUND FEIN*

A HOUSE WANTS TO BE A HOUSE

DOM CHCE BYĆ DOMEM

A b s t r a c t

People expect houses to feature recognisable and familiar formal elements. During Modernism, the design of houses has often turned into an exercise of abstract formative art. This is why modern architecture has largely lost the understanding and acceptance of the general public. The emotional needs and expectations of the users should no longer be abused as test-beds for abstract formal experiments.

Keywords: Recognisable forms, modernist abstraction, emotional expectations, unselfish practice

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Ludzie oczekują, by domy charakteryzowały się rozpoznawalnymi i znajomymi elementami formalnymi. W modernizmie projektowanie domów często zamieniało się w ćwiczenie z abstrakcyjnej sztuki formalnej. To dlatego architektura modernistyczna straciła w dużej mierze zrozumienie i akceptację. Potrzeby emocjonalne i oczekiwania użytkowników nie powinny być dłużej „nadużywane” jako podłoże testowe dla abstrakcyjnych formalnych eksperymentów.

Słowa kluczowe: rozpoznawalne formy, abstrakcja modernistyczna, emocjonalne oczekiwania, praktyki altruistyczne

* Prof. Dr.-Ing. (I) Raimund Fein, BTU Brandenburgische Technische Universität, Cottbus.

When you ask a young child to draw a house for you, you know already what the drawing will look like: A solid volume with a steeply pitched gable, a door, some windows, probably with cross-bars, and a chimney sticking from the roof. The drawing will be a composition of those formal elements that make a house recognisable as such. The pitched roof, the windows and the chimney are the elements that tell us: “This is a house!”

Just as young children recognise these elements immediately, most grown-ups maintain those connotations. They recognise a house from these elements as well, and therefor expect a house to feature those elements, so that it tells everybody: “I am a house!”

Like with all other things that surround us, we expect a building to tell us what it is. We want to recognise it as what it is from certain formal elements that they usually have and that we know from experience. It matters little if these elements are in reality there for functional or technical reasons: It is the recognisable forms that offer us the information, which is necessary for identification and to gain familiarity with the built object that we call a “house”.

In fact, and to prove this theory, we have to acknowledge that the vast majority of detached houses that are build, at least in our part of the world, still follows this basic formal pattern, and certainly not only for functional, technological or economic reasons – if it was for these reasons, other forms would be just as suitable, if not more suitable. It is just that people expect a house to look like this: A volume of a normal size, an entry door, windows and a pitched roof. Only this way, they seem to be able to identify it as a house, to feel “at home” with it, and in it.

There is certainly nothing wrong with this. Everybody has a right and even a need to be able to identify the objects of the real world from their aspect. This is what makes us familiar with the things that surround us and what gives us a feeling of security and orientation. There is a very strong emotional component behind the instinctive search for orientation in familiar forms.

As we all know, architects have spent the best part of the last hundred years trying to break up those formal patterns that had been true and accepted for hundreds of years. All in a sudden, a house was allowed to look like a strange machine, like a weird sculpture or like an object from a different planet. This originally derived from the architects’ search to change the people’s relationship with their built habitat into something less emotional and sentimental, but more rational and practical. It was an educational act on behalf of the architects, in order to form, through their houses and the way one had to live in them, the new man/woman of the so-called modern, technological age. Emotional values were under general suspicion of being a sentimental element of weakness from a time to overcome and therefor detrimental to the forming of a new social, practical and mechanical new world.

Desperately trying to avoid conventional forms, but still driven by artistic instants, the architects moved more and more into an abstract, purely conceptual design of their objects. Sculptural quality in itself became paramount, and the forms became more and more detached from their content, or at least from what could be expected behind the forms in terms of functional and emotional content. “Educated” architecture more and more turned into an abstract, figurative art. Abstraction, alienation between form and content, or at least the

content that is connoted with a form, is certainly one major symptom and problem of modern architecture.

We can confirm today that this has alienated the vast majority of the population from the so-called “modern architecture”. Modern, “educated” architecture has mostly lost contact with the general world. It is not even a matter of discussion any more: People have resigned protesting against “strange built objects” that they cannot familiarise themselves with, and they just take them as symbols of a wrong-gone world. Advanced architecture has become something that only experts can understand and enjoy. It is as if architects would solely try to find the recognition of a highly educated elite or of their colleague architects. Many architects are content by having their colleagues and the experts as an applauding audience.

For those architects who are not content to live in an Ivory Tower, for those who pretend to be an effective part of the general culture of their place and time, this alienation between architecture as an educated art form and the general public who does not understand, is painfully felt. One wonders if anything can be done to close the gap between those who work at the cultural and artistic front of architecture and those who should benefit from it in their daily lives.

How come the late houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, to name just one example, are still saying: “I am a house!”, even though they look without doubt modern, part of the twentieth century, and by no means following traditional formal patterns? There has to be an understandable modernity without abstraction.

In fact, a closer design analysis of those houses of Frank Lloyd Wright shows that they still correspond to those emotional expectations that an “architecturally uneducated” user rightly has: Most of the time, Wright’s houses have no pitched roof, and if they have, not a steep one. For the normal person, a pitched roof symbolises and assures protection from all that might be unpleasant and coming from above: Sunlight, rainwater or whatever might fall of from the sky. So, Frank Lloyd Wright’s houses offer strongly expressed elements of broad shelter toward the skies that fulfil exactly this need and expectation that is not only practical, but also highly emotional. To achieve this, he does not have to give his houses steep pitched roofs. A strongly expressed closure towards above is more than enough to fulfil the instinctive human emotional requirement of a secure shelter.

Secondly, Frank Lloyd Wright’s houses seek and find a very fine balance between enclosure and openness that are, both at the same time, emotional expectations that one has towards a house. In the child’s drawing, the windows talk about being enclosed and still being in contact with the outside world. It is a very basic emotional need that also defines one’s general relationship with the outside world. Frank Lloyd Wright manages to fulfil this need, without going back to the classical window as a hole in a wall, by introducing large openings that are, at the same time, detailed as deep filters between inside and outside.

And thirdly, Wright’s houses have well-controlled measures, or better, a scale that makes it easy to relate to them: All measures seem rather small, even though the house might in fact be very large. All the long lines are broken down into a rhythm of smaller details. Mostly, the heights are very much reduced. This enhances the sense of intimacy and protection of any space. Natural materials are mostly used. Or let’s think about the fireplace: It gives the house

a centre, a “heart” if you want, a source of warmth and a place of gathering. Why does a child draw a house with a smoking chimney? It symbolises warmth and cosiness, togetherness and activity inside. In Frank Lloyd Wright’s houses, all these elements provide a kind of “cosiness” that makes them “liveable” and acceptable for non-architects as well. This can certainly not be said of all of Le Corbusier’s and Mies van der Rohe’s houses. With all their finesse and radicality, they do not care, and probably don’t even want to, about the expectations of the ordinary person. The same is true for many “futuristic” or “minimalistic” houses that are being designed nowadays, by highly educated architects for mostly unsuspecting clients. What is more embarrassing than seeing somebody struggling to live a normal life in a house that makes a normal life all but impossible?

I think that the problem does not stay in the architectural or formal experiments that some masters of architecture have been performing or are performing. This is fine; somebody has to push the borders. The problem is when these extraordinary, revolutionary experiments are being transported, before they are even understood, into the normal “production” of architecture.

Architecture should not be designed as a self-referring academic and abstract exercise, but in relation to its future everyday use and the well-being of the users. Modern forms are not the problems with the general public. A modern look seems no problem in product design like cars or clothes; why should it be in houses?

What people hate, and legitimately so, is when they feel that their houses were not designed for their practical and emotional needs, but as selfish experiments or self-representations of some architects.

We as architects should learn to distinguish between fundamental conceptual experiments that are necessary for the evolution of our art discipline, that can be performed only by the true masters, and the good average production that may or may not learn from those experiments, but bears the best for the user in mind, a concrete, realistic and unselfish architecture that does not want to teach or show off anything, that just wants to be good, efficient and emotionally rewarding to use. I as one prefer a hundred time the thanks of a happy user to the praise of some “expert” of architecture.

We as teachers have to prepare the young architects to focus on the human side and effect of what they create, and not to get lost in academic, abstract little (or big) aesthetic games. The experiments we can leave to those few masters who know how to perform them; they will provide the innovation and push things ahead. All the others should be just solid workers, servants of human needs, not only the practical ones, but also the emotional ones. It is not a matter of style or look; it is a matter of closeness to real needs and expectations. It is very much like in fashion: There is “haute couture”, and there is “pret-a-porter”. Both are necessary, but only the latter should be offered to the normal user.

We need a new, good architecture that is “pret-a-porter”, or “pret-a-habiter” as we should say. When modern architecture finally goes back to understanding the needs of the “non-educated”, I am sure it will be generally understood and accepted, and the gap between both worlds will close, and architecture will regain a good standing in the public’s opinion.