

Mediating the Middle Ground

The Impact of Financial, Material, and Cultural Practices on Developing a Critical Alternative for the North American Housing Market

Submitted by

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My work deals with the North American Housing Industry and the goal of developing a critical alternative to the mass-produced cookie-cutter house. My challenge is to evaluate the professional role of the architect and find new ways to insert their presence into this largely vernacular practice in order to produce a well-designed, affordable dwelling prototype for the single family house. The intent of this paper is to explore the various mediators that have been identified as impinging on this goal, to interrogate their influence/role in the design and construction process for the FABhouse prototype, and to speculate on their long-term impact on the designer and his future professional practice.

Specifically the paper will explore three different types of mediators, each representing a different type of knowledge or worldview:

The first mediator, from the realm of financial practice, consists of the expectations created by the normative property market for single family residences.

The second, from the world of material practice, consists of the limitations inherent in vernacular wood-frame construction techniques.

The third, from the realm of cultural practice, consists of the rapidly changing expectations for dwelling that result from evolving family structures, rapid technological development, and globally fueled patterns of design consumption.

I have identified these mediators in my work to date to be the key drivers that define the conditions of the possible for the design of the prototype house as well as the more general goal of describing a new alternative for the North American Housing Industry. This paper will describe the pre-existing contexts - financial, material, and cultural - of these three mediators and articulate the way in which they challenge the creative process of designing the FABhouse prototype. The paper will conclude with a speculation on their impact on the designer and future models of practice, specifically as the mediators force the project, and the architect, into unanticipated, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable areas of architectural endeavor.

Background

North American architects have a shameful history of irrelevance in the world of single family housing. Almost all of the profession's involvement has been, and remains, at the extreme high end of the market, creating boutique houses for wealthy patron clients. The two most widely known, and historically significant, attempts by the profession to meaningfully engage in mass market housing for the middle class failed. For a variety of reasons, neither the California Case Study House Program in the 1940's nor Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian House Project in the 1950's captured the imagination of the public or, more significantly, the interest of the residential construction industry. Since then very little of substance has been ventured by the profession and almost nothing has been gained.

As a result, it's estimated that up to 95% of the single family houses built, and being built, in North America have not been designed by an architect. In fact, the vast majority have not had any professional design involvement whatsoever. The result is what the Sierra Club calls the 'Dark Side of the American Dream.' On the surface these houses, and the suburbs in which they sit, appear easy, cheap, and cheerful. Too often, however, this marketing veneer masks a world of thoughtless design, careless construction, and ecological waste that, as we learned from the housing collapse of 2008, has little real enduring value.

The architecture profession's abandonment of the middle class single family house is a gross abrogation of our public responsibility on a cultural, social, and environmental level. Houses are too important to an individual's well-being, too significant a cost for most families, comprise too large a land use in our cities, and have far too big an environmental footprint to be ignored by architects. For too long we have taken the easy way out, treating cookie-cutter suburban housing with disdain without offering any sort of real alternative that makes sense in the lives of the everyday middle class homeowner.

Eighteen years ago, and in response to this situation, I designed, and implemented a new kind of architectural practice that provides a comprehensive suite of services targeted to helping middle ground homeowners create a well-designed place to live. The result is Housebrand, an award winning business model providing architectural solutions for people who would not normally have considered it possible to work with an architect. The over 150 Housebrand projects completed to date, ranging from large new residences to small micro-renovations, provided both the rigor and the freedom to explore the design potential of creating architecturally relevant work within the tight physical and economic constraints of the middle ground's vernacular system of wood frame construction.

The goal of my current research program within the Adapt-r / RMIT PhD Program is to take the next step in my practice and explore new and more venturesome strategies for architects to meaningfully engage this middle ground of North American housing - that vast, formless, un-designed place where almost everyone lives.

The research is being conducted in three stages. The first looks back over the landscape of my work from the past twenty eight years to develop a critically evaluated context or foundation for the research. It begins with my early work designing and constructing furniture and the obsession that developed with expressing both the reality of materials and the process of making.

The second stage of the research expands out beyond my own personal narrative and explores the broader context of contemporary work that impact or relate in some way to the critical threads identified in my existing projects. This includes not only other architects and designers who are engaged with housing's middle ground but also entrepreneurs in other industries who are developing new business strategies that challenge the hegemony of mass produced culture, as well as those who are creating social enterprises and other idea-based movements that empower individuals to take more control and begin effecting real change in their lives.

The final step in the dissertation gathers together the results of the explorations of the first two stages and charts a course forward that includes the development of a prototypical single family house as well as a new model of critical architectural practice.