

## **Autonomy and Heteronomy in Architecture Theory: Part II**

### ***Home and House* (2000)**

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I found a striking formulation of the synergy of autonomy and heteronomy in architecture in a paper by Prof. Joseph Rykwert: “House and Home” which I will comment on shortly. In this paper, Rykwert writes:

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 terms. Does a home need to be anything built at all, any fabric? I think not. Home could just be a hearth, a fire or 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<sup>1</sup>.

House refers to an inert object. On the contrary, home refers to a situation, an activity: it is always in the process of making.

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.[...]... But a house must be brick and timber, mortar and trowels, carpentry and masonry, foundation and topping off: and it requires taking thought.<sup>2</sup>

But in Mexico, a home can consist of four poles, some beams and a roof of palm leaves or of tar paper. Or is a shack not a home? House is something that is done for you, home is what you do, by yourself and for yourself, sometimes thanks to, sometimes in spite of the architect.

The Latin word whose meaning is closest to home is *domus*, from which domestic and

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Rykwert, “House and Home,” in Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Uta Kleine, eds., *Anthology for Jean Robert, Raum und Geschichte*, Kurseinheit 4, Hagen: Fernuniversität, 1998, pp. 1-11.

domesticity stem. *Domus* never means the physical structure, though it is often translated as house. *Domus* is a notion related to the family, and connotes homeliness, and even “peace”: its meaning is social and moral, never material. Home requires stability, spatial and social “recognizableness,” that is orientation, and possession, which demands a relation to the soil (to a piece of land, but “land” is an imperial concept) and so a protection against extradition. For the Romans, a man’s threshold was so sacred that even the emperor could not trespass it. Another Latin word is *mansio*, from *maneo*, I remain or abide, from which the early Middle Ages derived the word *mansus* (OG *huoba*, modern German *Hufe*, words akin to Greek *kepos*, a garden), which connotes a dwelling place by the soil needed to establish it. In the IXth century, the *mansus*’s material complement was called *casa*, a “hut” and was often precarious, dispersed and mobile. The Greek even has a verb for the establishment of such a two-faced dwelling place: *oikodomeo*, I break a piece of land open, for cultivation or building, I found, I edify. That verb combines the root *\*dom*, meaning to build (or perhaps, only perhaps, to tame?)<sup>3</sup> and *oikos*, the Greek word more akin to home. When the Roman wanted to specify that he meant the physical house, he would say *aedes*, a thing built (hence: *aedifico*, a verb built by learned Romans to translate *oikodomeo*).

The architects’ business is to build houses, not to establish homes. It is “with structure, with physical fabric, with limit, with context.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one of the most doubtful effects of the modern movement is the demise of the distinction between house and home. But, as we shall see later, the

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<sup>2</sup> Rykwert, op. cit. pp. 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européennes*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969, vol. I, p. 307 (cf. also vol. II, p.90 on *demos*) insists that Lat. *domus*, Gr. *domos* (the physical house as opposed to *oikos*), and Lat. *domare* as well as Gr. *damao* (Engl. tame) derive from three distinct and irreducible, though homophonic roots: 1. *\*doma*, to exert a “domesticating” violence, to “tame”, to establish a *chora*” or cleaned field (hence Gr. *chorites*, country-man); 2. *\*dem*, to build (hence English *timber*, Greek *domos*); 3. *\*dem-*, house, family, group sharing a territory (hence Greek *demos*). In spite of their striking homophony, Lat. *domus* (from *\*dem-*) and Gr. *domos* (from *\*dem*) do not have at all the same origin nor do they have the same meaning, since *domus* is the home and *domos* the house. As to *oikodomeo*, though it meant to build in classical times, its original meaning can hardly have been the equivalent of *aedifico*, for such meaning would have been rendered by a (non-attested) “*domodomeo*.” In spite of all, *\*doma* and *\*dem* might have a common origin. In this context, remember that in German, *bauen* means both to build and to cultivate, two activities that required a founding act.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Rykwert, “House and Home”, op. cit. p. 9.

“postmodern” reaction is as questionable.

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 under the stairs, they forgot that their business was with house and not with home<sup>5</sup>.

This can be seen as a consequence of the reduction of the complexities of the web of *personal* interactions called home to catalogues of “functions” meeting standard “needs.” In this respect, Rykwert recalls the lesson that the Austrian writer Karl Kraus tried to instill in architects and planners:

... he said that he expected the city to provide him with water, gas, electricity and working roads: *die Gemütlichkeit besorge ich* - I will supply the homeliness, he said<sup>6</sup>.

In his article, Rykwert also clarifies an issue blurred by a fashionable interpretation of vernacular building as “architecture without architects” (he is an adversary of the (ab)use of the expression “vernacular architecture”):

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,”<sup>7</sup> 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.[...]

Yet, 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 legends - yet their accounts of them would often contain the word “because.”<sup>8</sup>

Rykwert further stresses that there is no building that does not involve decision and choice,

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<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit. p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects. A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Rykwert, op. cit., pp. 4, 5.

concertation, in short a project, even if it is justified and glossed “in mythical terms, and given some specific legendary weight.”<sup>9</sup> Deliberating, making decisions and choices, and glossing, in short, “taking thought about building” is one of the several useful definitions of architecture—which is where I come in.”<sup>10</sup> In that peculiar respect, there is no specificity of “vernacular architecture” that would oppose it definitionally to “pedigreed architecture.”

Rykwert’s essay ends with an indictment of an architecture that “packages a life-style” without thinking of the context because it has lost the sense of its own limits:

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 purlieus (if not the homes) of the dispossessed, however many the varieties of the marbles which line its walls, or photo-eyes blink from its cornices<sup>11</sup>.

He concludes:

I must therefore plead with my contemporaries to reassess the conjunction between house and home.<sup>12</sup>

How do other architecture theorists celebrate the conjunction of home and house or ratify their modern and postmodern disjunction?

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<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., pp. 8, 9.