Dwelling and politics: the meaning of architecture essay

Family

While the twentieth century brought many wonders to our daily lives, it also radically changed the way we approach our living space. From one perspective, the dwelling became grandiose; instead of individual cottages or houses, people could live in tall buildings that featured individual apartment units with all of the appliances and amenities that they needed. The need for land around a dwelling, which had served during earlier centuries to allow the residents to draw some or all of their sustenance from the land, was now gone. Instead, more people could live in a much smaller area. The filth that characterized London and other major cities in the early 1800s, as pollution belched forth from factories, began to lessen during the twentieth century, as architects found ways to ameliorate the waste products from industrial processes. However, this change in the dwelling also led to a shrinkage of one's sphere of life. Even surrounded by a host of one's fellow humanity, life actually became lonelier. Ironically, the more people who surrounded one, the lonelier people had the possibility to be. Such works as John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer show the ways in which these alleged benefits of industrialization actually made life dirtier, smaller and meaner. In T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, even the scale of the epic had shrunk considerably. The ultimate epic hero, of course, is the " sailor home from sea,"(1922, 221), but in this new " unreal city"(207) this hero is now " the typist home at tea-time"(222). The mess from her breakfast is still on the table, waiting for her to put it away. Her food for dinner is in cans. Her divan, which is her bed at night, holds lingerie and accessories. Her great romantic adventure for the evening is " the young man carbuncular,"(231), " one of the low on whom assurance sits as a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire"(233-

234). Their evening, which might have been so romantic in an earlier era, gains some energy when “ she is bored and tired”(236) and he decides “ the time is now propitiousto engage her in caresses which still are unreproved, if undesired”(235, 237-238). Because “ his vanity requires no response and makes a welcome of indifference”(241-242), it is nothing to him that her only response is to provide “ no defence”(240) to his “ assaults”(239). After he has stumbled out the door, she “ smoothes her hair with automatic hand and puts a record on the gramophone”(255-256).

This scene between two young lovers, so devoid of connection and grace, is symbolic of the elements of life that such buildings as L’Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, designed by Le Corbusier, have brought to existence in the large city. Obviously, for major cities to work, everyone cannot have a freestanding house or even a small bungalow with a quarter-acre to live on. The density of population required simply does not allow that. Furthermore, city planning no longer allows that. The great historical cities, such as London, New York City and Paris, started out as settlements around a bridge or near a feature of water. Then came a cathedral or a building of government. Then, perhaps an industrial complex. Out of that the rest of the city grew, as necessary elements grafted themselves to one another. Zoning and citywide planning are still fairly new, at least on the timeline of human history. As Eugene Claudius-Petit wrote in 1950, “ now we design cities in their entirety, in new neighborhoods we have to construct housing for the great number which requires a new politics of habitation” (Nasiali 2010, 16). Claudius-Petit saw this as a positive process, with entire networks of administrators, experts and planners cobbling together urban concepts that

would benefit all. Le Corbusier and Bauhaus were among the modernist architects and designers whose work appealed to urban planners. Le Corbusier sought to create new forms in architecture that would give domestic space a rational, simple order that it had lacked. Such ongoing issues as slums would no longer be problems, because urban planning. When Le Corbusier designed Immeubles Villas in 1922, the building featured single apartments that functioned much like cubicles, stacked on top of one another like building blocks (Celik 1992, 61). While that might seem more orderly than a ramshackle line of row houses smashed together, or larger houses that had been cut into smaller units for dwelling without any thought for aesthetic or order, it remained to be seen whether it would solve the problem of the slum.

Before and during World War II, Le Corbusier developed plans for reorganizing and developing the Algiers Casbah (Prakash 2002). When the war ended, there were several countries that commissioned him to design experimental structures, including the Unité d'Habitation. This building was designed to be a prototype for the modern way of life and a solution for the acute shortage of housing in war-torn France. Le Corbusier designed this building as " the crossroads of architectural revival. It [represented] people's efficient mode of living in the machine age[b]y grouping in one harmonious block a natural social group – a community – it [provided] a ' vertical garden city' solution"(Sbriglio 2004, 148). It was this philosophy that informed modern urban planning, not just in France but throughout the world.

L' Unité d'Habitation, in its finished form, stood twelve stories all and was primarily made from concrete. The apartments were suspended on large

columns and included not only 337 apartments but also a hotel, shops, a restaurant, facilities for education, medical care and recreation and, most importantly, a unified community. All of the services that one would need were available in this one building. This principle of unity informed much of the mass housing built between 1950 and 1980 in France.

However, this way of living also ran into a great deal of opposition (Nasiali 2010). A local review of the building concluded that " Le Corbusier is monstrously indifferent to the elementary life needs of families"(Dariez and Chauviere 1992, 31). Monsieur Vergnolies, the president of a local housing association, found the building to be " an official attempt to direct how we live" (Nasiali 2010, 20). Vergnolies feared that " the man who lives [in L'Unite] will be separated from the exterior world, will live in artificial atmosphere without contact with naturethe dream of each Frenchman is the villa, with a small garden. Instead of that, they want to contain him in this blind and monstrous building" (Nasiali 2010, 20). In Marseille, many believed that the building was not only impractical but actually failed to meet their needs.

The mass housing projects that grew in the aftermath of World War II served the need of the time, in the sense that there was an immense housing shortage that needed to be redressed. In France, urban planners sought to bring reason and order to life through this building program. The idea was that if the citizen, the home and the city could be given order, then the nation would follow. While buildings like Le Corbusier's L' Unité d'Habitation were the most visible symbols in this process, the most important partners in the process were not the architects but, ultimately, the techniciens. These

were experts such as public health officials and urban planners; their role was to mediate between daily life and the redevelopment policies of the state. Their purpose was to give different places and people classifications, so that they could give different levels of human need their own particular codes. Designing modernist buildings, ultimately, turned out to be much simpler than analyzing and renovating the living conditions in slums. The purpose of the techniciens was to interact with immigrants and other residents of slums to see if they qualified for re-housing by being sufficiently “ sociable” (Nasiali 2010, 79). Rather than move on a case by case basis, though, these techniciens used government-approved assessments to determine whether or not a particular family was asocial and whether there was a remedy for that family. They saw families with a wide variety of domestic practices and acceptable family norms. Interestingly, their quantitative assessments often disagreed with the findings from their empirical work. One example was the families from North Africa. In demographic studies, they scored as the most likely to adapt successfully to French norms. However, in subjective assessments, the techniciens found that they were the least able to successfully transition from life in slums to modern housing.

The natural rhythms of humanity are not served by life inside the cubical beehives that modern housing took on in the decades after World War II. While it is true that not every person can have a villa in the country, on the sheer basis of available acreage, let alone the economic resources required to make that sort of provision, the notion that humanity could be crammed into a giant crate, even if that crate were very pleasant, seems at odds with

much of human nature. With that said, though, one of the ironies of the period since this housing area is that the isolation of humanity has continued, even as living spaces have become somewhat more generous and spread out. Urban planning was replaced by suburban sprawl; people turned out not to mind isolation so much as long as they had a back yard to mow and a television to watch. With the advent of the Internet, social media and channel guides that seem to grow longer every day, one wonders how much people would really mind L' Unité d'Habitation today, if they could just plug in and be left alone. The problem may have been more of timing than philosophy.

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