

## HOUSE

### what's in the BOX anyway?

*Environmental degradation due to the HOUSE is it “human nature?”*

*Or is it just humans changing nature?*

Changing landscapes is innate to all species. (E.g. beavers-ponds/damming; ants-leaf choppers; goats-trees/forest; humans-cities). Externalities are environmental changes. Is it possible to change a landscape so drastically such as to invoke a shift in human culture? Or perhaps the impact of environmental changes could bring a culture to extinction? And does it matter anyway?

This paper will discuss two views of the evolution of the house. The first perspective is that the house is actually an innate language used to build shelter. It is a biological function for the existence of humans. If accepting that language is our humanity, we must also accept that words, symbols and patterns define language. Could it be possible that our architecture, the HOUSE, is in fact a symbol of an innate language, a fundamental understanding, in creating shelter for survival of the human species?

The second perspective is the externality of the house. The environmental change created by the construction of the house is considered its externality. How it affects its surrounding environment, culture, economics and species diversity to name a few. And if a house is considered a hardwired innate concept, then why do the secondary values such as the materials

used, the size, the disregard of the natural environment for heating and cooling, supercede the innermost desire for a productive habitat? Insights from Pierre Bordieu's "habitus" and Henry Glassie's "vernacular architecture" help in defining what exactly is happening with these cultural choices in building the HOUSE.

### **A matter of (the author's) perspective**

Houses are created and recreated to continue some underlying order. People are not happy with the HOUSE, nor do they understand the process involved with building the house. They are driven by economics and social status. But does it function environmentally for them? Does it provide human comfort? Does it promote the "village" that supports their community?

Furthermore, people have lost their desire to build their houses, and are disconnected from the satisfaction of creating their space and shelter. Does this have consequences, as well?

In order to understand the consequences or the externalities of the choices we make in building the HOUSE, why we build and design the way we do must be analyzed. As people become aware that their building behaviors are impacting the environment, they will have to make a cultural choice. But are the repetitive types and patterns, automatic without conscious thought? Or are they deliberate? Hence the same original question, is it *human-nature* or humans changing nature?

### **Supporting ideas**

Chomsky speaks of cognitive thinking and the patterns of language as being innate and hardwired. Through these symbols and patterns can we determine if the building of the HOUSE

is deeply rooted in the cognitive hardwired thinking? Or is there some development such as Bourdieu's "habitus"? (That thing than underlies the habits and behaviors of people), that defines the patterns that occur? Could the building of the HOUSE be that very pattern, developed, consistently repeated, and is accepted just because it is?

Accepting the norm of society seems to be the American Way-where cultural identities are reflected in the types of houses established. Mostly, we see the wood frame box as a common style, but still there are some pockets of cultures within the regions of the United States that have chosen not to be part of this "norm." They have developed functional models of shelter that actually work with their culture, their environment and their "village." Some examples are the Native American and Hispanic people of the Southwest; African Americans in the Mississippi Valley; Germans in Pennsylvania, Cajuns in Louisiana and Mormons in Utah. All were a minority of social people that would not subdivide, and who did not comply with the clear majority of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Why then do the majority of people follow this norm of the box? And others make a cultural choice not to?

How do cultural choices affect the HOUSE? And how does the HOUSE affect the environment? Essentially we know that population is growing, carrying capacity is reaching its tipping point, but more importantly the greed of people is increasing. In order to understand the consequences, the why and how of building the HOUSE must be questioned.

Humans, just like any other species require shelter in order to survive. For a very long time, the "idea" of shelter subscribed to an underlying order, human comfort. Is this underlying order "taught" through the generations, or is it an innate blueprint for a global fundamental

understanding? Noam Chomsky states that “The human brain has an innate language faculty and part of this biological endowment is a system of principles common to all languages (Maher 1997). Language is fundamental to our humanity. It is used to understand ourselves, others and to deal with the reality of our world and engage in acts of meaning.

If accepting that language is fundamental to humanity, we must also accept that words, symbols and patterns define language. Could it be possible that our architecture, the HOUSE, is in fact that symbol of an innate language that is a fundamental understanding in creating a necessary shelter for survival of the human species?

Well, lets take a look at a few more assertions that might support this idea:

1. “Language is so close to our Being that we frequently do not notice it.”  
*Chomsky* (Maher 1997). And because of differences in language diversity, we pay little attention to potential similarities. We all “know” the same language, even though it is superficially remote, *Chomsky* (Maher 1997). Making common analogies to Chomsky’s observations, we can look at the face of modern housing in the United States. What we see is the repetition and production of wood-frame houses. Even though the facades have some differences, there is still the same underlying “symbol”, the language of the wood-frame house that continues to be recreated.
2. “Language, like the movement of the planets and gravitational constants, is taken for granted. People have no intuition about the Rules of Classical

Physics” *Chomsky* (Maher 1997). Henry Glassie, in his search of vernacular architecture in the United States, makes a statement that “people don’t build their houses anymore.” What he was referring to was the idea that people are disconnected from the understanding of what it requires to build a house. Even more important is the fact that because we are not “builders” using our hands and our physical strength, we are somehow disconnected from the earth, from our culture, and have become followers of another underlying paradigm called Economics. Therefore, if we do not build, we are not connected and we do not understand the Rules. Whether it be the Rules of Classical Physics as stated above by Chomsky, or the Rules of building houses, the intuition about these Rules are taken for granted.

3. “The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their familiarity (one is unable to notice something because it is always before one’s eyes),” *Chomsky* (Maher 1997). Familiarity drives us to be comfortable within what is acceptable amongst our culture. For instance, if one rides his bike to school everyday, and takes the same path, which usually has been followed due to efficiency, the aspects of the trip will become unnoticeable. If we relate this to the HOUSE, we can also say that if we become accustomed to the way a house looks, or a certain order that is created from living in the house for awhile, then we begin to forget the aspects of the HOUSE. Such as what materials the walls are made of, how they feel, how

much sun comes in the window, etc. A round-house or an underground house is alarming to most people and they don't understand why.

Considering language as our humanity, one language is no more a language than another, but serves as a map. For instance, Chinese is no more a language than Romance, but it defines boundaries of types and styles. We can also make the same assumptions for styles of architecture when we look at photos of a pagoda and a Victorian house, or a map that defines meaningless boundary lines across the globe.

### **The structure of every being is related**

Darwin, from the Origin of Species, states that “The structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all other organic beings, with which it comes into competition for food or residence.” Therefore, all humanity is related, without conscious thinking when it comes to fundamental orders like searching for food and for shelter. Thus, using evolutionary theories to support shelter as an innate biological process, humans are driven just as any species.

Another idea supporting innate processes such as Darwin's is from Otto Jespersen, a Danish linguist. He states that “there is an innate structure in the mind. It underlies free expressions and linguistic use is an individual property.” It is likely to involve morphology (the biological study of the form and structure of organisms) and lexicon (a vocabulary used in a particular profession, subject or style) (Maher 1997). How does the HOUSE fit into this thinking pattern? For example: I want to enter my house through an invisible force field! This entry is already

structured in my mind that it must be a portal of some kind, but my free expression allows me to make it a force field rather than a slab of wood like most common doors. The portal is that idea set in the lexicon vocabulary, specific to the instructions of how to build a house, but defined within that underlying order.

### **Understanding the phenomena**

In the 1860s and 1870s, a number of scientists, including, for example, Thomas Henry Huxley and John Tyndall, proposed a new perspective on science and culture. Specifically, the scientific naturalists, as they have been called, claimed it was impossible to arrive at true knowledge of any reality, which lay beyond or behind our sense perceptions. They firmly maintained that people could only know the information received through the senses. Transcendental realities, the scientific naturalists insisted, were unknown and unknowable in any field. One could not, for example, prove that one phenomenon caused another. Therefore, the idea of alternative houses constructed differently from the norm could not be assessed as being driven by change in the natural environment, or that change in the natural environment could be caused due to the wood frame box called the HOUSE.

If true knowledge of any reality must be gained through our senses, then what sense will demand the change away from the wood frame HOUSE? Will it be the visual destruction of our environment? Or the loss of tactile responses in the houses we live in? Or the smells that cause health problems? Or the deafening of the infrastructure? Or Taste? Economics, technology, rebellion against an Old World government, habit through repetitive behavior and efficiency seems to keep us in this perpetual building pattern. But what if we returned to our senses? These

questions lead us to examine the idea of vernacular architecture. That design that uses local resources constructed with the local environment in mind, simple, modular, mobile, tactile and what most architects call “non-pedigreed” architecture.

### **Non-pedigreed Architecture**

Non-pedigreed architecture is the creation of structures by and through people outside of the known cultural lists of history. Architectural history as it has been written and taught in the western world has limited its vocabulary to only a few thousand years and also to select cultures. It represents only a small part of the world and an even smaller part of the evolution of the ideas of shelter. Some think this selective history choice is due to parochialism, others blame it on the bias of the historians. But what we are now finding in the archaeological record is information about shelters of people from the past.

Even before people were building shelters there were animals constructing their platforms, dams and structures. In our anthropogenic views, we somehow think that the beavers learned from man how to build its dams! Yet even before man and beast walked on the earth, there was architecture, carved from the wind and water. Part of the trouble of the anthropogenic view is ascribing to architects and specialists as to having exceptional insight to living, when in fact most of them are concerned with problems of business and prestige. (Rudofsky 1990)

Focusing on business and prestige could be the driving patterns of housing in the United States, economists would like to think so, but given the underlying order of a biological need for shelter there supercedes a secondary value that creates the HOUSE.

## **The Second Perspective.....**

...in this study of the evolution of HOUSE begins with Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist. Bourdieu wrote a book called *Outline Of A Theory Of Practice*, which seeks to define the prerequisites for a true scientific discourse about human behaviour. In this research Bourdieu states that “the problem with relations between culture and language, no anthropologist has tried to bring out all the implications of homology except Leslie White.” Culture and conduct is comparable as is speech is to language. If we accept the hypotheses at the beginning of this paper to say that symbols and patterns are similar in faculties as words in language, then hopefully this argument can attempt to define the homology of language and culture.

Symbolic forms, in this case the HOUSE, is the conversion of economics into symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977). “To these forms of legitimate accumulation, through which the dominant groups or classes secure a capital of “credit” which seems to owe nothing to the logic of exploitation, must be added another form of accumulation of symbolic capital, the collection of luxury goods attesting the taste and distinction of their owner” (Bourdieu 1977). Wealth, Bourdieu states, is the ultimate basis of power, and is only in the form of symbolic capital. We can then agree that the symbol of HOUSE is a socially recognizable commodity that is chosen and constructed by the owner’s distinction and a testament to his appeared wealth without logic of exploitation.

Bourdieu also explains that the house, an *opus operatum*, lends itself to decipher the “book” from which children learn their vision of the world, as read by the body, in and through the

movements which make space within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it. Therefore, all actions performed in this space are immediately qualified symbolically, according to Bourdieu, and function to construct the fundamental schemes. “The construction of the world of objects is clearly not the sovereign operation of consciousness...the mental structures which constructed the world of objects are constructed in the practice of a world of objects constructed according to the same structures” (Bourdieu 1977). These schemes of thought and expression acquired are the basis for the intentionless invention of regulated improvisation, or *habitus*. The habitus is in practice that part of history that we have learned and forgotten but remains through the unconscious; “it is yesterday’s man who inevitably predominates in us...yet we do not sense this man”. (Bourdieu 1977)

Habitus, as applied to the idea of HOUSE, begins to explain repetition without thought is that part acquired, forgotten, and continued to be practiced. Could the HOUSE, a wood frame shelter, be symbolic capital representing the basic economic status of the common wealth of a population of people that is practiced without thought, learned as a child, and unconsciously chosen to replicate upon entering the economic system as an adult? Henry Glassie, in *Vernacular Architecture*, supports the idea that the economic system is represented by HOUSE- the commodity in modern America.

### **In the beginning there was the village....**

Glassie, a folklorist, spent much of his time researching the evolution of HOUSE in America beginning with the European culture in England before peoples arrived here.

In medieval England and nineteenth-century Utah, villages were asserted into space by people who made clear-headed decisions. They chose to build as they did in order to exploit the environment efficiently through agriculture, and in order to shape a social order that brought the familial and the communal together on the base of the sacred (Glassie 2000). In southern England, there was a pronounced shift from organic to geometric massing in architecture before the English revolution, but first they killed the king in England and then rebelled in America.

In the beginning the house in America was impermanent. At the end it was permanent (Glassie 2000). Something changed, and it started with the villages of Jamestown and Plymouth. English people understood village life and they knew of an alternative: enclosure. In both places they abandoned the village for separate farms. They did not risk their lives on a black ocean to repeat the old but to create the new. “They came to get rich and Old Virginia was the first impeccably capitalistic landscape” (Glassie 2000). So the first Americans came to get rich. They rebelled against the typical idea of village and created a new form of architecture, separate and isolated.

Trends of the same were happening everywhere in the world. Round corners were squared off, and people built “cleaner” houses. People moving to cities left old villages vacant, and the new wealth brought about bigger houses symbolizing their economic success, protected their belongings, and gave them as they said more privacy (Glassie 2000) But before there was isolationism, there was the village. The HOUSE was asymmetrical and open fitting to a communal experience. They belonged to the period of the village. People wanted to prosper but they understood that an appetite for worldly goods was avarice. And as a reminder the biggest buildings of the time were the churches.

The second period of the HOUSE saw political buildings as the focus of the community. With enclosure the house was broken out of the collective composition of the village. It came to stand apart – apart from other houses and apart from the church. The HOUSE was rebuilt in permanent materials. The new house centered the world, away from the church and away from the barn in the midst of the fields, enclosed by fences. “When a closed house stood on an enclosed landscape, the modern age began” (Glassie 2000).

### **The HOUSE, as commodity**

The modern era, or the third period is the house as commodity. This period’s big buildings do not belong to religion or politics, but to business. As industrial capitalism expanded, slowly people came into conformity. They worked for wages, went shopping, and filled their houses with stuff. Commodities aren’t anything new, and archaeology teaches that people have always consumed commodities. The difference is that at one time the commodities made ornaments of peripheral importance in houses that people built, but as industrialization continued, houses themselves became commodities, and people were assigned the difficult task of shaping their personalities out of things made by other people. “In these late days houses are consumed by many and designed by few” (Glassie 2000). Even the architect is less one who transforms nature than one who designs assemblies of prefabricated components.

These prefabricated components define material culture, that thing of human work made permanent in buildings, books, clothing and tools. Since architecture is not a system unto itself, the architectural change provides the clearest evidence of a cultural change that happened at

different times in different places. That cultural change was based on the needs of the capitalist (Glassie 2000). But the big pattern was clear from the beginning, and it endures in subdivisions called estates and ranches, where houses stand in isolation, each on its own grassy plot. House laid next to house, next to house, that look identical to each other. Glassie states that the American landscape is evidence that people chose to exchange the confidence of communal life for the excitement of the pursuit of wealth. In daily experience, it might have been only a gentle shift in common conduct as people worked and lived amongst their neighbors. But in history it was a great watershed.

In history, as time passed, people pressed westward, and the regional differences of the HOUSE diminished. In the wake of genocide, the land of the interior was surveyed, gridded and enclosed. The widening dispersal was not ordered by a sacred, communal vision, but by civil law, a network of trade and greed. Changed seemed trapped in continuity and repetition. The choice of building a new house instead of an old one was a progressive step perhaps for status. And In the development of the cities there seemed to lack law and order. As the Romans created their cities on grids and in linear pathways, so were the cities of the New World created to keep people from mingling in spaces. They could not be trusted to carry order within themselves, and if their conduct was threatening or impolite, then the order must be built into buildings that blocks and direct them. This change also signaled a presence in control of communication.

As architecture changed communication, it also trained people's aspirations. Urban environments created small full-scale fragments of a big house. This fractional house

solved the problem of the tight urban spaces. It also temporarily solved the problem of limited resources in the countryside, providing less prosperous people with a way to participate in the big architectural change. But now in postmodern practice, people are accumulating commodities and arranging them to suit themselves. This idea took off in the 1920's during a period that was characterized by people who consume houses, reshape them through remodeling and make them habitable through the organization of goods into domestic environments. It is a collection of portable furnishings, and less a house (Glassie 2000).

### **The Age of Consumerism**

In the age of consumerism we are also faced with a new paradigm concerned with the environment. In early American history, there wasn't any concern with the consumption of resources for the construction of houses. Expansion exploded and now we are faced with extinction of species, loss of habitat and timber resources, and a population demand consuming exorbitant amounts of materials. Change is needed.

Current habits and behaviors of building the HOUSE have surpassed double in size from 50 years ago in America. We are building bigger, less durable, more expensive houses without true real costs for the products that we build them with. We do not optimize the natural environment for solar, wind or other natural resources. The houses are isolated without a framework of community and are constructed on linear pathways optimizing for the automobile instead of the people. These choices are all secondary values that seem automatic.

A cultural choice may be automatic, like Bourdieu's habitus, or it may be a distinct value choice, but the primary objective of building a house is biological. We as a human species require a shelter in order to keep us warm and to propagate our species. We have a fundamental understanding of human comfort that is not conscious thought, but is part of the fundamental schema, or our blueprint that operates under our cultural choices. So why then do we make cultural choices in opposition of the best interest of the species? We see similar things happening with grains and food production. We have propagated certain species of food that brings no nutritional value. It is a global phenomenon of planet Earth's cultures.

Housing in America over the past 100 years has adopted a style of architecture that is neither built by architects, nor designed by them that is taking over the landscape. Expansion is rapid and seems out of control. The HOUSE does not bring human comfort without technology. It does not utilize the natural environment and requires heavy consumption of non-renewable resources to keep it operating. The wood frame box is not safe in fires, not sturdy in powerful windstorms, or earthquakes. But yet more than 90% of our houses built in the United States are of wood frame construction. Totalling 1.35 million houses a year, this approximates to over 2,000 square miles of timber forest consumed annually. But are humans any different than beavers in how they change their environment? Or the leaf-choppers in the tropical rainforest? Or even ancient human civilizations and what they have done to their environments? Do we really think that when the saw blade was created to make milling of trees more efficient,

that we would someday consume all of our forests? The answer is no. But with the advance in technology, and the increase in efficiency, we as a species allowed expansion of our population. With this expansion, an innate biological process to procreate and expand explosively, we demand more resources. The demand in resources eventually will supercede the carrying capacity of the population and the tipping point will be reached.

### **Questions for the future**

Have we, or are we reaching our tipping point? Consider these facts: population is increasing, 20% of the world's population consumes 3/4's of the world's resources, and 40% of the total global resources are used for building materials (Wackernagel 1996). The United States is the number one consumer of timber and it is building increasingly larger houses that are demanding more resources. And these western ideas are spreading across the globe. But you ask are these ideas of consumption, exploitation, greed, and population explosion new concepts? The answer is No. When you look back into the archaeological record and the history of human ecology, we see patterns of exploitation of natural resources with some ending in failure of the civilization. It is still unclear whether depletion of resources end with civilization failure, or whether the culture fails due to natural climate changes that deplete the resources.

### **Economy of nature**

Economists tout models like the Kuznets curve that theorize: *economic growth promotes environmental improvement*. But this model is in great err. It does not include mechanisms that

trigger change, it includes no global phenomena, and mostly consumption is implicit in the model. What they are missing is the proven fact that with economic growth there is more consumption. With more consumption there is more waste. With waste there are externalities: environmental degradation, reduction in resources, loss of cultural diversity, and a loss of biodiversity to name a few. Then how can economists claim that with economic growth, there will be environmental improvement? For instance, the HOUSE, a symbol of economic wealth in America, is the American ideal. Grow up, establish your status in life with the house that you are now able to own. It's an obvious path: more people, more houses, greater economic wealth, bigger houses, more greed, more resources consumed, more environmental losses, more resources exploited, less future capital, and then perhaps there is a crisis. Or even before that there may be a cultural shift. Currently 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of the world's resources. And only a small portion of that 20% is willing to "give-up" what they have acquired and still most want more.

### **Examples in history of extinction**

Some examples of human contributions to extinction include the end of the Pleistocene Epoch, where large land mammals were hunted to extinction. Extinction by overharvesting is a global phenomenon. In the Pacific Islands, human colonists hunted many bird species to extinction. More relative to building construction, we have evidence at Chaco Canyon where the Anasazi built a great city only to completely deplete its natural resources to the point of failure. Some attest that it was climate change that caused the failure, others believe that the human exploitation created microclimate changes that eventually led to culture failure. Whatever the cause of

events the result was failure of the human culture. Even as far back as 4,000 years ago the UrIII Dynasty is a relevant example to a successful agrarian society that had long cycles of growth, stability and eventual decline.

### **Now back to the beginning**

If we go back to the very first sentence of this paper, we ask if the environmental degradation due to the HOUSE is “human nature” or is it just humans changing nature? We can answer both. Because changing landscapes is innate to all species and human nature is to exploit whatever resources we see fit to serve our purpose regardless of the consequences. We see that in evidence of beaver ponds and dams, termites and lumber, goats and trees, and humans building cities. Is it important that we assess whether environmental change impacts human culture or if humans can change the environment? Yes. If we accept that building shelters is an innate faculty for humans, and people are driven to create shelters for their existence, then building houses will never cease. And what resources we use to build the HOUSE, mostly an automatic choice but sometimes a cultural choice. But mainly and mostly from evidence of past and present, we acknowledge that repetition leads to efficiency, and efficiency lends to more productivity which leads to more houses, bigger houses, more resources consumed and eventual failure. It is a process of natural selection.

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