

The un-private house : [brochure] the Museum of Modern Art, July 1-October 5, 1999

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un- the Private HOUSE

All of architecture is colored by the problem of the house.¹

—Jean Hélion

Jean Hélion's words point out the unique position the private house has played throughout the history of architecture. Despite its relatively small size, at least compared to other architectural programs, the house figures large in the cultural imagination. It has been and continues to be the man-made environment's fundamental building block, its most irreducible component, providing an essential daily need: shelter.

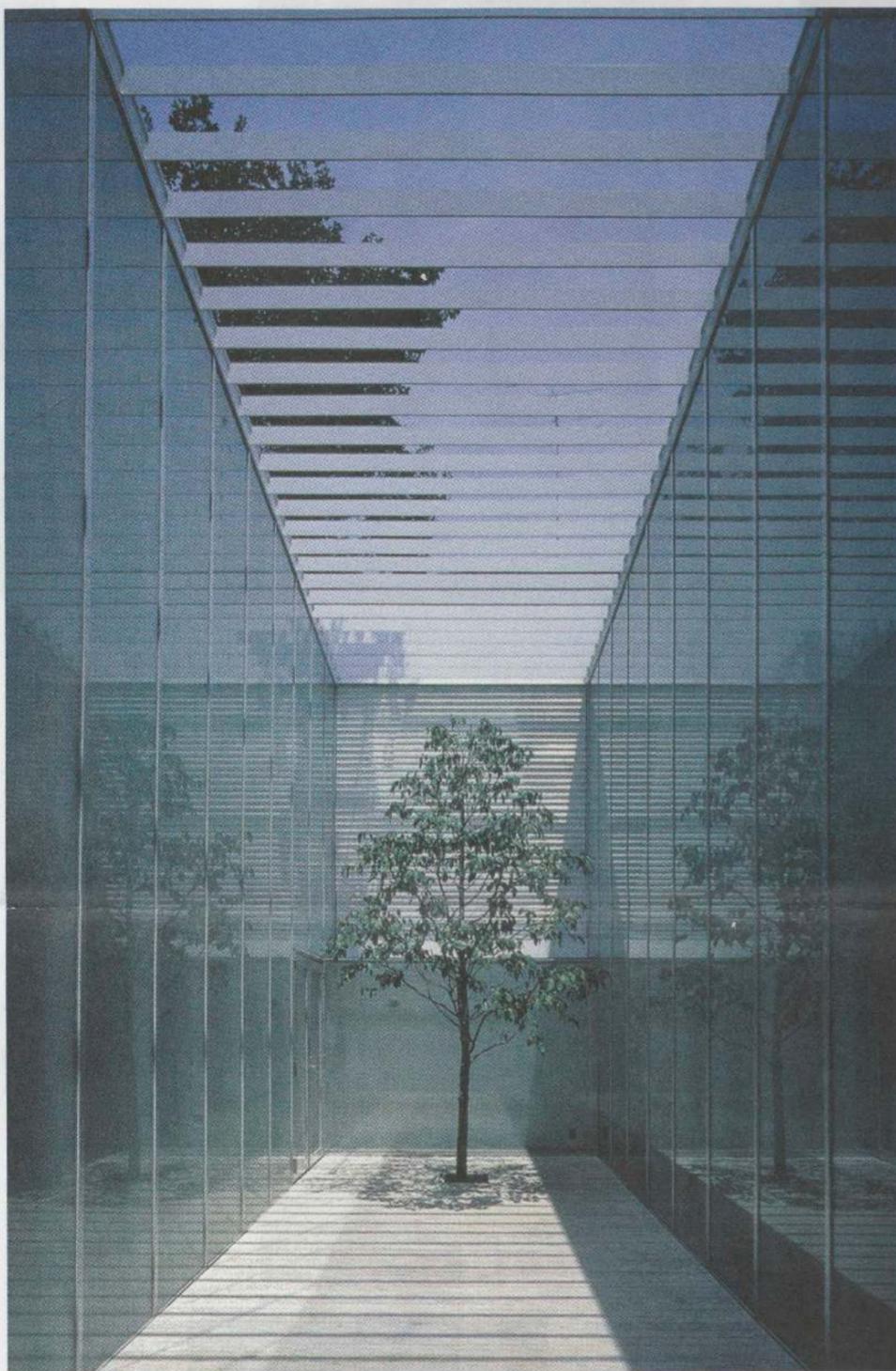
The private house as we know it today traces its lineage to seventeenth-century Europe and colonial New England. This new type frequently mimicked the contemporaneous palaces and villas of the upper classes in its architectural style, decoration, and relationship to the landscape. However, the characteristic that had the greatest influence on the private house's development was not architectural fashion but the prerequisite of privacy itself.

Privacy in the private house, since its inception, has been predicated on a discernible separation of its inhabitants and activities from both the public realm and other houses. The private house has also been from its establishment a building type that enshrines family life to the exclusion of all other activities. Furthermore, as a space so dedicated, it has been for almost four hundred years largely responsible for the creation and development of those rituals and comforts that we now associate with the domestic. What we see today, however, is that these conditions are undergoing tremendous changes.

The Presence of the Public

The literary critic Walter Benjamin came to see the nineteenth-century private house as not only separate from the public world but, more significantly, as a retreat from it.² Perhaps for similar reasons, Swedish artist Carl Larsson was moved to devote a series of watercolors (*A Home*, 1899) to his family home, which he described as the place he "experienced that unspeakably sweet feeling of seclusion from the noise of the world."³

At the end of the twentieth century, a new relationship between public and private is emerging—one in which the private is engaged with the public through media and technology. In both theory and practice, the ascendancy of these digital technologies has become a catalyst for contemporary architectural innovation and experimentation. In Frank Lupo's and Daniel Rowen's Lipschutz/Jones Apartment in New York City, digital screens displaying financial information are visible throughout the loft, alerting the owners to fluctuations in international currency markets. In Jacques Herzog's and Pierre de Meuron's



Kramlich Residence and Media Collection, to be built in Napa Valley, California, the interior partitions of the house are screens onto which the owners' collection of video art is projected. Earlier in this century, the philosopher Martin Heidegger expressed concerns about the effects of the media in our lives, warning against what he called "distancelessness."⁴ His unease about this condition, however, has been replaced today by a common awareness of the distinction between the real and the virtual and an acceptance of both states.

Privacy

Privacy has always been related to political considerations and individual rights, but of late these issues involve not only physical privacy, but the increased presence of electronic media in people's homes and daily lives as well. Writing recently, with considerable alarm, on the proliferation of electronic media, the *New York Times* columnist William Safire said: "Your right to privacy has been stripped away. You cannot walk into your bank, or apply for a job, or access your personal computer,

without undergoing the scrutiny of strangers. . . . Isn't it time to reverse that terrible trend toward national nakedness before it replaces privacy as an American value?"⁵

In contrast, Bernard Tschumi displays a nonchalance about the literal and virtual permeability of his unbuilt Hague Villa. Referring to its most transparent parts' orientation toward a public boundary of the site, the architect remarked: "The house is to be seen as an extension of city events and a momentary pause in the digital transfer of information. The borders of the living room and work space, devoid of the camouflage of ornament, expand beyond the property lines just as they [the property lines] are undermined by the electronic devices of everyday use."⁶ Another example of a transparent house within a dense urban landscape is Shigeru Ban's Curtain Wall House in Tokyo, which erodes the border between public and private in a notable and even startling way. The outer skin of the house is comprised of two elements: transparent glass panels and fabric curtains the size of boating sails. Both glass and fabric can be drawn

back to open up the interior to the surrounding neighborhood. The result is a "nakedness" that even those who live in glass houses might find surprising.

The Family

Radical changes in the concept of privacy are paralleled both in terms of scope and pace by the transformation of the family and family life since World War II. Today people who live alone or with one other person are the general public in many parts of the industrialized world. For example, around a quarter of American households now consist of one person.⁷ Half of the families in America consist of couples without any children living under the same roof.⁸

These and other changes in the make up of the family are reflected in a recent newspaper article by Joseph Giovannini about a childless couple's search for a home. In the article, he points out, among other things, the very different spatial requirements a couple with children as compared to those of a couple (or, by inference, a single person) without children.⁹ Without the

need for acoustic and visual privacy, as one would have with children in the house, the traditional upstairs/downstairs separation of the private and public spaces is less compelling. Instead, the loft model has been deemed to be appropriate; its flexibility and openness are in marked contrast to the structured spaces that typify the traditional family house and reflect domestic rituals revolving around the presence of children. While none of them are literally lofts, Winka Dubbeldam's Millbrook Residence and Lupo's and Rowen's Lipschutz/Jones Apartment, both designed for young couples without children; Michael Maltzan's Hergott Shepard Residence in Beverly Hills, built for a gay couple without any children; and Francois de Menil's Shorthand House in Houston, built for a divorced woman whose children are now adults, are all good demonstrations of that spatial option.

Even traditional families have found such loftlike spaces to have unexpected advantages. Without caretakers, and often even without spouses to assist with child rearing, an open living arrangement ensures more contact and easier supervision of young children.

Work

Reversing a process begun nearly four hundred years ago, the reintroduction of work into the private house now under way is extensive, with some twenty million Americans now using their homes as principal workplaces.¹⁰ How working at home affects house design can be seen on a variety of scales. In one instance, a home office might be a fairly contained space that acts as an appendage or an extension of a remote place of work, such as in Thomas Hanrahan's and Victoria Meyers's Holley Loft in New York City. In other cases, the home office might be a principal place of work, in which one or more of the occupants spends all of his or her working time, as in Clorindo Testa's Ghirardo-Kohen House in Buenos Aires and Kazuyo Sejima's and Ryue Nishizawa's M House in Tokyo.

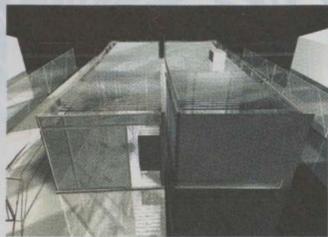
In other designs, the presence of work is not limited to a single space, instead merging with the living areas to create a new kind of space, as might be seen in the Lipschutz/Jones Apartment. The owners of this loft are both traders on Wall Street, and, in light of the globalization of international markets, their working hours are no longer fixed. Rather, work occurs when market activity occurs. Hence, the home office is in effect a panopticonlike trading room, its flickering digital screens visible from other areas of the loft. Six screens in addition to those in the office display information at close range in various locations: next to the bathroom mirror (so as to be visible when shaving), next to the bed (to be visible upon waking), and so on.

Domesticity

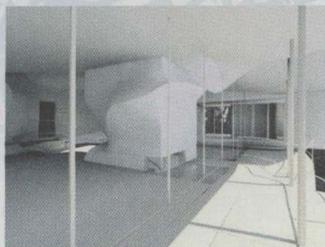
Of typical representations from the first half of the nineteenth century of German private houses, the



Shigeru Ban
Curtain Wall House, Tokyo, 1995
View with curtains open
Photo: Hiroyuki Hirai



Michael Bell
Glass House @ 2nd, Houston,
projected completion 1999-2000
View of rear facade. Computer-generated image



Preston Scott Cohen
Torus House, Old Chatham, New York,
projected completion 2001
View into easel painting studio from terrace.
Computer-generated image by Alexandra
Barker and Chris Hoxie



Kolatan/Mac Donald Studio
Ost/Kuttner Apartment, New York City, 1997
View of partition pivoted to serve as dining table
Photo: © Michael Moran



Rem Koolhaas, Office for Metropolitan Architecture
Maison à Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France, 1998
View from southwest
Photo: © 1998 Todd Eberle



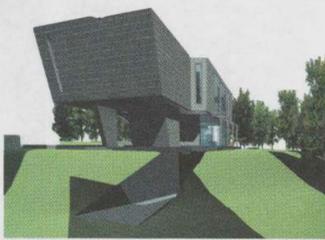
Frank Lupo/Daniel Rowen, Architects
Lipschutz/Jones Apartment, New York City, 1988
Living/dining area
Photo: © Michael Moran



Neil M. Denari
Massey House, Los Angeles, unbuilt, 1994
Aerial view from northwest. Computer-generated image



Diller + Scofidio
Slow House, Long Island, New York, unbuilt, 1990
Model: Wood, cardboard, metal, plastic, and twine.
The Museum of Modern Art, Marshall Cogan Purchase
Fund, Bertha and Isaac Liberman Foundation Fund



Winka Dubbeldam, Archi-Tectonics
Millbrook Residence, Millbrook, New York, unbuilt, 1997
View from northwest. Computer-generated image



Michael Maltzan Architecture
Hergott Shepard Residence, Beverly Hills, 1999
Principal facade
Photo: © Richard Barnes



Francois de Menil, Architect
Shorthand House, Houston, 1997
Principal facade
Photo: © Paul Warchol Photography



MVRDV
Two Houses on Borneo Sporenburg,
Amsterdam, 1999
Borneo Sporenburg-12: Model



Farjadi Farjadi Architects
BV House, Ribblesdale, Lancashire, England, 1999
Hillside view from northwest. Computer-generated image



Xaveer de Geyter Architectenbureau
House in Brasschaat, Brasschaat, Belgium, 1992
View of central courtyard toward entry ramp
Photo: Hans Werlemann



Guthrie + Buresh Architects
WorkHouse, Los Angeles, 1996
View from northwest
Photo: © David Hewitt / Anne Garrison



Joel Sanders, Architect
House for a Bachelor, Minneapolis, unbuilt, 1998
Transverse section through dressing area (above) and
master bedroom (below). Computer-generated image



SANAA/Kazuyo Sejima,
Ryu Nishizawa & Associates
M House, Tokyo, 1997
Detail of central light court at night
Photo: Shinkenshoku-sha



Scogin Elam and Bray Architects
64 Wakefield, Atlanta, 1997
Principal facade
Photo: © Timothy Hursley

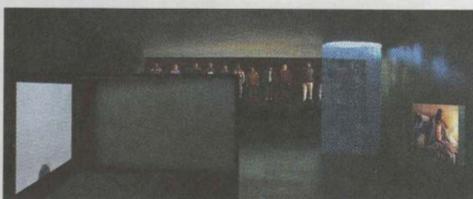


Thomas Hanrahan and Victoria Meyers, Architects
Holley Loft, New York City, 1995
View of master bedroom
Photo: Esto Photographics © Peter Aaron



Hariri & Hariri
The Digital House, Project, 1998
View of principal facade. Computer-generated image

un the private HOUSE



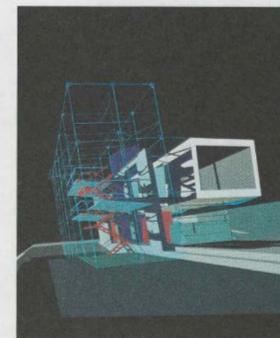
Herzog & de Meuron
Kramlich Residence and Media Collection,
Napa Valley, California, projected completion 2000
Lower-level interior with video installations: Steve
McQueen's *Just Above My Head* (1996) at left, Gary
Hill's *Viewer* (1996) at back, and Jeff Wall's *The Quarrel*
(1998) at right. Computer-generated image



Steven Holl Architects
Y House, Schoharie County, New York, 1999
Construction view from northwest
Photo: © Arch Photo, Inc., Eduard Hueber



Clorindo Testa, Architect
Ghirardo-Kohen House, Buenos Aires, 1994
View of solarium and renovated house
Photo: Diego Troillet



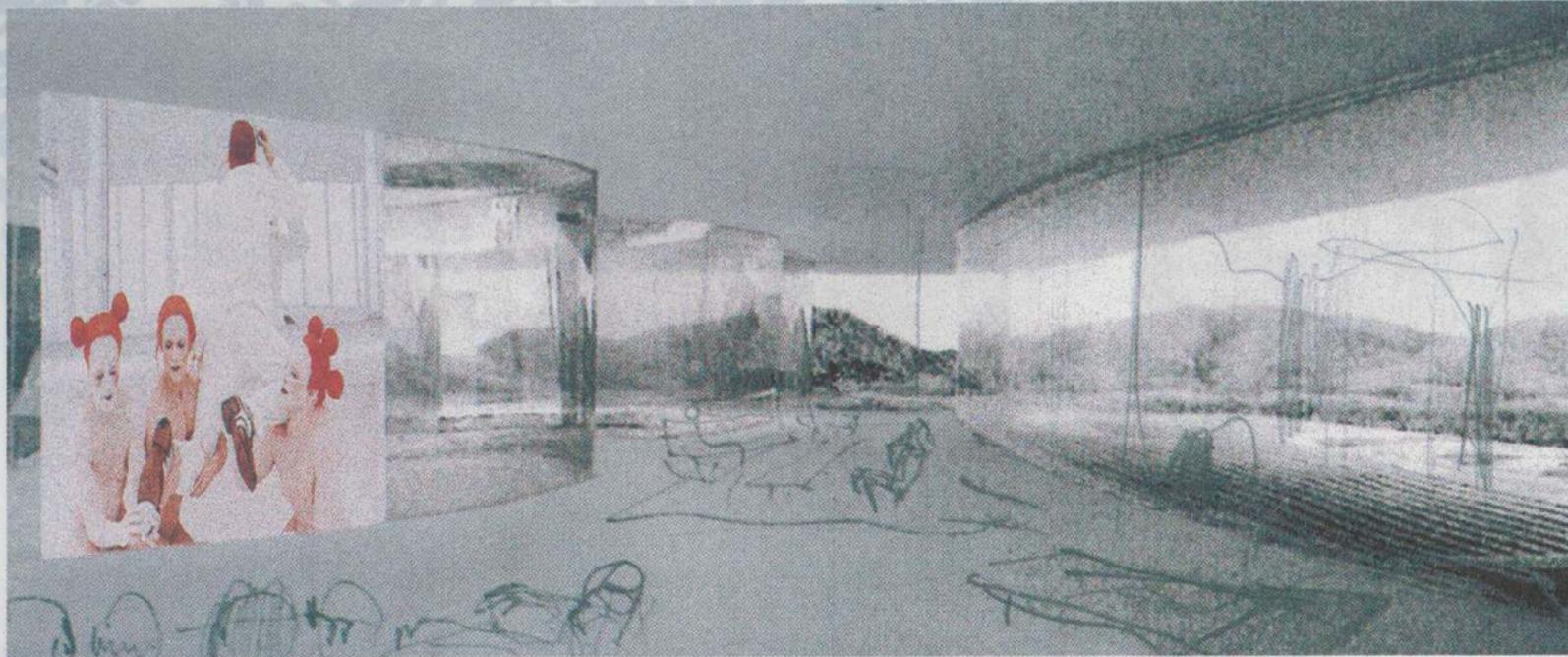
Bernard Tschumi
The Hague Villa, The Hague,
The Netherlands, unbuilt, 1992
View from south. Computer-generated image



Simon Ungers with Thomas Kinslow
T-House, Wilton, New York, 1992
View from northwest
Photo: Arch Photo, Inc., Eduard Hueber



UN Studio/Van Berkel & Bos
Möbius House, Het Gooi, The Netherlands, 1998
View from southeast
Photo: © Christian Richters



historian Alexandra Richie describes how the "the rooms were cosy and homely, with wooden floors and striped silk wallpaper, filled with dainty furniture of lavender and cherrywood. The centre of this world was the family."⁹ The comfort of the houses suggested by Richie's words, and the orderliness and functionality that would have maintained them, were not spontaneous inventions of an architect. Rather, they represent highly refined attitudes that could scarcely have developed if it were not for the fact that for over two centuries the intellectual and physical capabilities of bourgeois European women and their later middle-class American counterparts had been channeled toward the near-exclusive responsibility of tending their houses and caring for their families.

Testa's Ghirardo-Kohen House, a complete reconfiguration of a grand suburban residence north of Buenos Aires, might equally be interpreted as a critique of the cult of domesticity. Built in the 1920s, the original house was designed in a Tudor style, the very image of the house as an institution devoted to tradition and comfort. But Testa's design deconstructs this image, with slashing interventions that slice through the house and open it up and expansions that add to it strange new forms that are as disquieting and inexplicable as the original house's imagery was soothing and familiar. Similarly, Rem Koolhaas's *Maison à Bordeaux* strikes an unsentimental pose in opposition to traditional expressions of domesticity—"a shelter from shelter," as one architecture critic has called it.¹⁰ This aloofness is, in a sense, a kind of antidomesticity, a highly stylized, constitutional unfamiliarity that is both challenging and liberating.

The Private House: An Architectural Bellwether

While it might be said that the private house is just now beginning to catch up to the fundamental social and cultural changes of recent years, the private houses in this exhibition can also be seen as both a collective bellwether of the current state of architecture and a harbinger of its future direction. In this sense, these houses reflect what have emerged as the two most influential areas of contemporary architectural theory, most often summed up in a conjunction of mutually derisive terms: "blobs" versus "boxes."

The term blob refers to the results of new architectural investigations into various geometric models. Ignoring traditional sources of architectural form, these investigations are based on topology, a branch of mathematics concerned with certain geometries such as the torus, the more complex Möbius

strip, and the related Klein bottle and projective plane.¹¹ The Ost/Kuttner Apartment, by Sulan Kolatan and William Mac Donald, might serve as an example of the architectonic possibilities of such a topological approach, in which various spaces are defined to satisfy programmatic needs without interrupting the continuous flow of surfaces. The computer technology used to generate the forms as well as to fabricate their fiberglass shells was previously only available for very large and expensive projects. This accessibility is certainly driving much of the interest in complex geometries.

The most important questions relating to this field, though, are not technical but philosophical. What is it about topology that has captured the imagination of so many architects who have created so many projects that simply could not have existed a decade ago? Their appeal is, it must be acknowledged, in part aesthetic and in part technological. There is a novelty to these new forms and the means of creating them that is compelling as well as beautiful and marvelous. Nonetheless, the real interest in using these geometries on a domestic scale lies in the connections that can be drawn between them and broader cultural issues. If, as we have seen, the "un-private house" has challenged many of the dialectics that had calcified around the concept of the private house during the nineteenth century—public/private, male/female, nature/culture, and so on—topology takes the challenge further in that it is inherently disposed to creating spatial interconnections rather than making spatial distinctions.

Just as behind every "blob" is the figure of August Möbius, the German mathematician who first published the single-sided figure named after him in 1865, the "box" has its own paternity. It is difficult to dissociate the term, however obvious it may sound, from the pivotal work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The relatively unheralded reemergence of the influence of Mies at the end of the twentieth century deserves note. Far from being a pariah today, the "glass box" has reappeared in such diverse and far-flung residential projects as Michael Bell's Glass House @ 2° and Sejima's and Nishizawa's M House among others. The fin-de-siècle reappearance of Mies is as dramatic as it is unexpected, but is not, it should be noted, due to revived cadres of adherents reviving up the old war cries like "less is more" and "God is in the details." The evidence suggests that the pervasiveness of Mies's influence today is precisely due to the extent to which it has finally escaped the rhetorical sloganeering with which it had become encrusted.

It might be argued that the revived interest in the glass house and its spatial conditions is, paradoxically, an indication of how much culture has changed since Mies's time. Conceived as a heroically contemplative place, the Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois; 1946–51) met with great public resistance for the simple fact that it was assumed one could see in as easily as see out. This visual accessibility flew in the face of accepted notions of privacy at the time. At the end of the twentieth century, it might even be said that the "interactive" aspect that was so objectionable previously is now its greatest allure, and that the reflexive gaze of the electronic media has become a metaphor grafted onto the glass box.

The Un-Private House

Certain conclusions can be drawn about the status of the private house at the end of the century, both as a cultural invention and as a product of the autonomous discipline of architecture. All the houses examined in this exhibition depart substantially from the patterns established by the traditional private house. But it would be overreaching to suppose that the popularity of the traditional private house is now on the wane. Nonetheless, it is manifestly evident that the private house developed for a fairly static nuclear family is not necessarily applicable to all householders or even a majority of them. Various scenarios for the future might be considered. If the housing industry responds to the changing conditions, it is possible that in the future the market will offer an increased number of housing types. The dynamics of the real-estate market and the building industry will also, no doubt, experience great changes as a significant number of people no longer have separate work and living places.

The impact of this shift is not clear. These changes in themselves will not automatically generate an appropriate architecture. Rather it will be, as it has been for centuries, the role of the architect to interpret these changes into built form. One factor in this interpretation will be the evolving dialogue between adherents of "boxes" and those supporting "blobs." The current debate calls to mind Leonardo da Vinci's High Renaissance writings in which he speculated on the nature of form. By his reasoning, there were two types of visible bodies: "The first is without shape or any distinct or definite extremities. . . . The second kind . . . is that of which the surface defines and distinguishes the shape."¹²

The computer has, of course, made the absolute distinctions that Leonardo saw between simpler

and more complex geometries unsustainable. Simple, rectilinear geometries and curving topologies (with the exception of certain "nonorientable" geometries) are now more accurately seen as points on a sliding scale of complexity rather than as fundamentally different types of forms. Attempts to judge one or the other superior on a formal basis simply maintain the misunderstanding that Leonardo and his contemporaries shared. In the instance of Preston Scott Cohen's Torus House, the fusion of the normative glass box and the torus forces a suspension of all the associations imputed to one form or the other. The compressed horizontality of its space recalls the Cartesian infinitude ascribed to Mies's work; the remnants of the torus form at its center suggest its own, internalized kind of endlessness. The fusion of the two, although generated from dissimilar mathematical models, creates a tandem sense of the boundless, both from without and within.

The cultural definition of the private house is undergoing great change, a transformation that, in itself, can generate significant architectural invention. This change is taking place at a time when architecture is being fueled by enormous new technical and material resources. The private houses discussed here, and the architects who designed them, can thus be seen as not only reconfiguring the domestic landscape but laying the groundwork for the first architectural debates of the twenty-first century.

Terence Riley
Chief Curator, Department of
Architecture and Design

1. Jean Hélon, "Termes de vie, termes d'espace," *Cahiers d'art* 10, nos. 7–10 (1935), p. 268.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 154.
3. Quoted in Michelle Facos, "The Ideal Swedish Home: Carl Larsson's Lilla Hyttmäns," in Christopher Reed, ed., *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp. 81–91.
4. Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (1971; paper, New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 166. (From essay in German published 1954.)
5. William Safire, "Nobody's Business," *The New York Times on the Web*, Jan. 8, 1998, Editorial Desk sec.
6. Bernard Tschumi, unpublished project description, 1992.
7. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census [1990] of Housing Tables: Living Alone" (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/livalone.html>). A cursory search of databases from other industrialized countries indicates similar demographics.
8. Ken Bryson and Lynne M. Casper, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, "Household and Family Characteristics: March 1997," Table B, [U.S.] Census Bureau, P20-509, issued April 1998 (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>).

9. Joseph Giovannini, "Design Notebook: A House Where Rooms Are a State of Mind," *The New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1998, p. F1.
10. Jim Shahin, "'Working' at Home," *American Way* 32, no. 5 (March 1, 1999), p. 44.
11. Alexandra Richie, *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1998), pp. 116–17.
12. Herbert Muschamp, "Living Boldly on the Event Horizon," *The New York Times*, Nov. 19, 1998, p. F7.
13. Topology explores certain basic properties of geometric objects that do not change when they are stretched, twisted, or bent, such as the number of edges (or boundaries) and holes.
14. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. and trans. Edward MacCurdy (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), pp. 986–87.

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Symposium: The Un-Private House: Architecture, the Media, and Domesticity in Contemporary Culture

Wednesday, September 15, 1999

A panel of architects, designers, and other professionals will examine the evolution of the private house in response to recent architectural and technological innovations, changing cultural conditions, and related issues raised by *The Un-Private House* exhibition.

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