

The Museum of Modern Art
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in the PRIVATE HOUSE

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

—Jean Hélon

Jean Hélon'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.

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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

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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.⁴ 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."⁵

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."⁶ 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?"⁷

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."⁸ 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

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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.⁹ 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 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

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.¹⁰ Half of the families in America consist of couples without any children living under the same roof.¹¹

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.¹² Without the



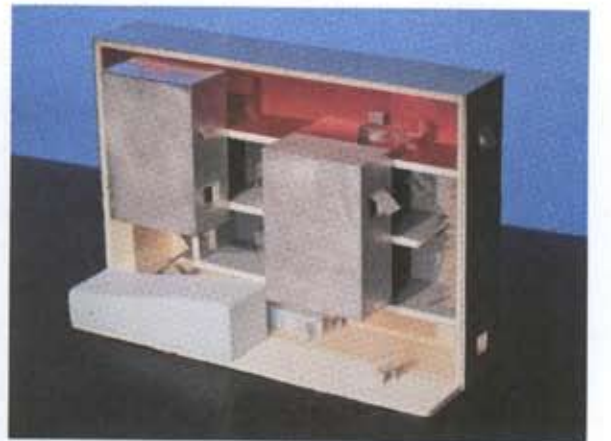
Rem Koolhaas, Office for Metropolitan Architecture
Maison à Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France, 1998
View from southwest
Photo: © 1998 Todd Eberle



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



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



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



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



Above: SANAA/Kazuyo Sejima, Ryue Nishizawa & Associates
M House, Tokyo, 1997. Central light court
Photo: Shinkechiku-sha