

"THE UN-PRIVATE HOUSE"

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Few architectural phenomena are as paradoxical as the question of the private house. At once a vehicle for change and a vessel for conservatism, the private house taps into an extraordinary inertia: No matter how radically transformed our place of work and play, we still, at the end of the day, apparently want to go home to a house that has changed little from that of our parents, and is at least as old. In the making of the private house, that peculiar relationship between architect and client, and the curious mutual education that occurs, is at its most quintessentially acute, precarious, tortuous, and potentially fulfilling. As for the clients themselves, they are not only paying for it but electing to live in it. In what is frequently a bid to make or break some aspect of their private lives, they are risking in a most public way not simply the bank account but the rocky marriage, the already fading relations with the teenage children, or the fragile coexistence with the baby/lower/peace of mind that won't come and for which the house is a substitute. In the face of this cathexis of desires/duties/roles/needs, nowhere is architecture quite so crude, so blatant, and so transparent. Nowhere are all the constructs of voyeurism, fetishism, and paranoia so plainly laid out for all to see.

The brief behind "The Un-Private House" is initially compelling: to examine how the public/private matrix that is a house might have changed in response to the permeation of the public/private membrane by information technology and new media, on the one hand, and to the ever more intricately varied sets of relations that make up a contemporary family, on the other. The relationship between parent and child (full, step, or otherwise) is pivotal here. None is so intensely private and yet so publicly scrutinized as the relationships we have with our children. How this complex and increasingly ambivalent relationship might play itself out in the fabric of the house that "holds" it together is certainly worthy of scrutiny, as is the much-heralded transformative effect of the virtual on domesticity via new media.

The exhibition comprises twenty-six built and unbuilt projects for private residences in the form of drawings, models, and, in a couple of cases, computer-animated videos. If you can get a seat, there is also a rather amusing lazy Susan-like table with interactive placemat entries on the projects, where you can watch the not-so-discreet jostle for their favorite dish—any of the three or four projects involving complex geometry or anything touched by Rem Koolhaas (whose display model of *Maison à Bordeaux* is refreshingly dog-eared compared with the immaculate conceptions around it).

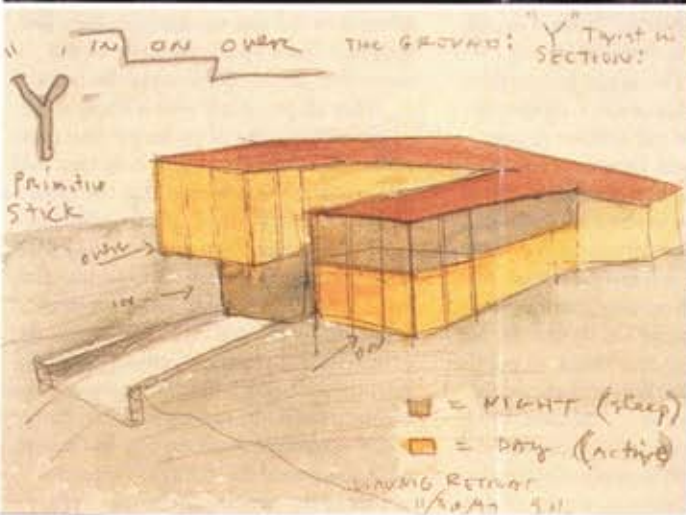
Michael Bell's *Glass House @ 2°* stands out as the only project that mentions budget (a scheme in Houston for low-income housing) and one of the few that does not feature either a seminal piece of modernist furniture, an exercise machine, or a muscled (and clad in little else) male body. It is also an exquisitely intelligent and unpretentious scheme, and about a third the size of the others. However, as with many of the projects, the extent to which it might

address the brief is debatable, as it deals with neither questions of the family nor issues of mediation in any pronounced manner. There are some very Dutch projects by the Dutch contingent, some overbearing New York projects still rearranging objects in lofts, and some surprisingly un-Japanese projects by the two Japanese contributors (SANAA & Shigeru Ban). Scogin Elam and Bray's uncharacteristically restrained (almost Northern) 64 Wakefield, though not their best, does have some juicy moments with its demure version of Josephine Baker's lap pool slung across its front elevation (minus portholes). And

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in the place the North was invented, Lancashire, England, Farjadi & Farjadi's BV House suggests a refined relation to the landscape, as does the proposed use of thatch cladding to the area's climate and flora, but the project is done an injustice by the slick computer renderings—an implicit sensitivity to the Lancashire grittiness gets lost.

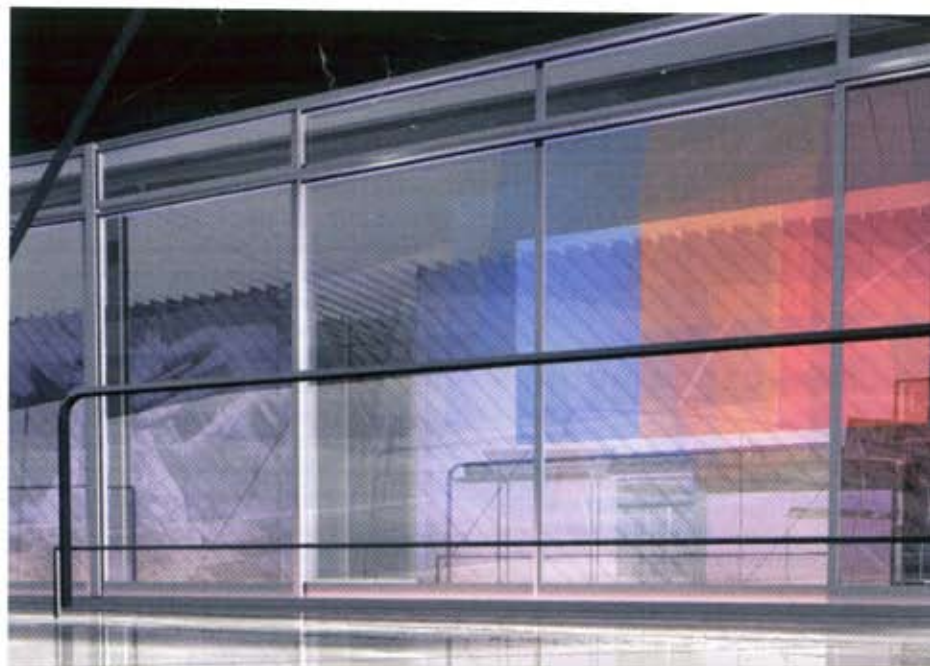
All this is bizarrely but most prettily hung on a little-boy-blue reproduction of a William Morris wallpaper print. A MOMA rep was talking loudly about Morris and socialism and good design for all, which is great news for those of us who thought we'd never be able to afford to commission our own Koolhaas or Herzog & de Meuron. Facetiousness aside, what is this wallpaper about? One lives in hope of irony. These projects are, again with the exception of Michael Bell's, in the tradition of seminal houses, one-offs for a reasonably if not exceedingly well-heeled elite. So why this appeal to long-lost socialism that never was? Unless the wallpaper is doing the job it is so exquisitely



Clockwise from top left: "The Un-Private House," 1999. Installation view. Photo: Michael Moran. Scogin Elam and Bray Architects, 64 Wakefield, Atlanta, 1997. View into master bedroom from lap pool. Photo: Timothy Hursley. Steven Holl Architects, Y House, Schoharle County, New York, 1999, watercolor sketch.



Left: Joel Sanders, *House for a Bachelor*, Minneapolis, unbuilt, 1998. Transverse section through dressing area (above) and master bedroom (below). Computer-generated image.
Right: Michael Bell, *Glass House @ 2'*, Houston, projected completion 1999–2000. View of entry facade. Computer-generated image.



well designed to do: filling in the background, holding the room together.

Stranger still is the degree to which the houses/projects collected here fail to address the brief of the “unprivate” house. With respect to the “changing family,” part of the problem seems to be that the interesting houses have boring family units in them (e.g., a bachelor) or that the more complex families are rather boring (Victorian?) in their thinking about how to live with their children (i.e., put them in the annex next door): as if, while the need for privacy from the outside “public” world vaporizes, the need for privacy from one’s children has become urgent. Equally unconvincing is the examination of the influence of new media. Surely the virtual and the interactive will register themselves more significantly in the fabric of our architecture than by the cosmetic addition of monitors over the bathtub or kitchen counter that have little truly transformative effect when turned on and none whatsoever when turned off. The projects that claim to be digital or virtual or smart simply are not.

For all the models and drawings and lazy Susans, the display of this work remains very closed. One is left unsatiated, wanting to know more: Budget. What the clients are like. Declarations of intent. Anything. Precedents at least might have surfaced in a way that would have made more cohesive the latent conversations about relations between house/architecture, family/public and private spheres, in the way that the droopy wallpaper is presumably attempting to do visually. (I just hate the thought that people might leave the show thinking that because this work is

“new” it is actually new. Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Loos’s Josephine Baker House, Mies’s Tugendhat House and Barcelona Pavilion are all lurking about Morris’s feisty foliage.)

Many other questions remain unanswered: What exactly is it that the currency-trader occupants of the Lipschutz/Jones’s apartment, like Orpheus, are searching for in the flickering screens that crowd every moment of their domestic life? Surely not just money. Exactly whose vanity are we observing in this preponderance of exercise bikes or exercising bodies (and reflective surfaces) beached in Möbius landscapes (outnumbering the Perriand chaises longues by six to three)? Is a crude call to narcissism the only way in which sexuality can be contained in architecture (or in the “family,” for that matter)?

If these are “unprivate” houses on display, my voyeuristic desire at least is left far from satisfied. This is not just a *Hello!* magazine need to know the contents of bathroom cabinets, but a desire to peer into the project itself. Despite the brave attempts of curator Terence Riley’s introduction, the notion of the unprivate fails to take flight. Privacy of course is not vanished, not undone, but reconfigured. Exactly what this new configuration is, is the question. We never see the private life of these houses, any more than we see the private life of the projects that produced them. There is next to no intimate detail provided; the seamless photographs belie the actual complexities and compromises that occur when drawings, materials, and construction technologies collide on site, just as the words “husband’s bedroom” and

“wife’s bedroom” on the plan neatly circumvent the privacy (and taboo) of sexuality in a wheelchair-bound body in *Maison à Bordeaux*. This exhibition is the medium for this representation of these houses, and the projects are occupying it in the usual very public exhibition (read: limited) way. Representations of architecture always do this, so why is it so irksome here? Is it because “unprivate” promises some dissection of the construct of privacy that remains undelivered? While there is some crucial investigation of the brief going on here—some *frisson* in the adjacency of these projects *now*—it is dampened by the homogeneity with which each project is presented, the examlike rigor with which the format is enforced. (Is it inconceivable that some projects might have more to say, or longer ways of saying it, than others?) Ultimately the few stunning projects are weighed down by the presence of too many that simply don’t make the mark.

After all one is left with a sharp sense of the architecture of exclusion that organizes the exhibition. There is an unstated insistence in the selection that the projects all be, if not built, then at least buildable (as if this makes them more real as architecture). This is almost always a mistake, and particularly so here. One can think immediately of projects that examine the exhibition’s questions exquisitely with no intention of being buildable, many of which are included in the catalogue’s introductory essay—strategic insertion of a few might have sharpened the at-times digressive nature of the contents. Then, in a move that has more architecture to it than some of the projects, the lineage of everything

on view is traced to one of two great genealogies: Mies (aka the box) or Möbius (aka the blob). This taxonomy, itself reinforced by the sample selected, as all great blunders in taxonomy necessarily are, is alarming in its reductivism. Not only is the conversation limited to form, but we are only given two flavors to play with. I always thought that the redeeming feature of form was its inclusiveness. What is the purpose of erecting these limits, how does it make an analysis more intelligent, correct, or even consumable, if that is the concern? Such moments plague architecture, which (like natural history) somehow attracts the worst of taxonomy. At the first sight of the complex rambling sprawl of architectural invention and its relations to the culture that produces it, we get our shoe boxes out in panic and start sorting.

When I look at these houses, I see a motley crew: There are some extraordinary projects, some satisfactory projects, and some bad projects. Some are ambitious in the problematics they present and some offer no resistance. Some have substance, some are too simplistic to hold anything. One is vaguely reminded of a police lineup: One or two are crucial and must eventually be identified if we are to learn their lessons; there may be a small group of usual suspects too, and the rest are just there for dilution, background, wallpaper. Together, though, they make up a canny cross-section in which the individuals are simultaneously hidden and exposed. □

“The Un-Private House” travels to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, May 22–July 29, 2000; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, Sept. 15–Jan. 3, 2001; Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, dates to be announced.