

The un-private house: an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York

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Nina Rappaport, New York

The Un-Private House

An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York

Twenty-six innovative houses are part of the exhibition, «The Un-Private House», currently on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and organized by Terence Riley, Chief Curator of Architecture and Design.

The exhibition, which focuses on the contemporary version of privacy, will be at MoMA through October 5 and then travels to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota from May 22 through July 29, 2000 and to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio from September 15 through January 3, 2001. It will be at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona from late January through April, 2001.

At the end of the 20th century the traditional pitched roof single family house continues to be built; architects, however, design houses diverting from this norm and use new materials, technologies and ideas about living – almost in spite of the speculative real estate market. Primarily built by and for the more educated upper middle and upper classes – who in a way have the luxury to indulge in the new and take risks – these new modern houses, many unbuilt, could transform our attitude about living in the same way that Le Corbusier did with the «house as a machine for living» or as Mies van der Rohe did with the transparency of the Farnsworth House.

The house is the archetype most imbued with personal history and meaning for both the client and the designer and is a popular focus of architectural exhibitions. *Houses for Sale*, held at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1980, commissioned architects to design houses that could then be sold as plans. MoMA held the «*Modular house*» exhibition in the 1950s where visitors could walk through model houses in the garden court, and Philip Johnson had many houses in the 1932 *International Style* exhibition. In California, the *Case Study Houses* inspired thirty-six experimental house prototypes to be built between 1945 and 1966 that explored new ways of living. And in 1994, *House Rules* in Ohio, architects paired with theorists, focused on the sociological needs of the new changing household and diverse demographics in American suburbia.

The Un-Private House began with a big open house party and was perfect for the summer audiences. The catalogue essay describes in great detail a sociological and design overview about the change in households compositions, the influence of media on rooms and change in spatial arrangements, while the wall texts make the houses accessible to those who wander in from the hot streets of New York, but might leave many questions. Architects who see the show have asked, why certain houses were included and not others, and why apartments were part of the show at all. With so many unbuilt projects exhibited it is evident how difficult it is to have these houses realized. It is interesting to hear what the non-architects say as they try to see if they would like to live in the houses in the show. While the «New Yorker» magazine said, «if you set ideas aside, the show is a delight: it's thrilling to see so many genuinely adventurous, even kooky, home designs...»

The installation is truly engaging. One enters the galleries across an image of an undulating welcome mat projected on the floor. Photographs and computer images of the houses are mounted on the walls with floral wallpaper and models are displayed on wooden pieces of furniture. Lamps, side tables, wooden beds are platforms for the architectural models. Dining tables with chairs provide view points at a perfect height for looking into the models, and couches with easy chairs let visitors relax in front of a TV monitor with a video of Ben van Berkel's Möbius House. The center piece of the show is a large circular dining table that operates as the interactive computer for the display of images and texts about each house. On a moving circular center, twenty-six cocktail coasters each depicting an image of a house can be taken off and located at one of the place settings that then activates the computer to display the information with statements from the owners and architects. The table, rather than be individual computer terminals was custom designed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab as a fun interactive event in the middle of the show, with the seats constantly occupied.

As Riley presents, the most drastic change in the house is the notion of privacy – less privacy. The house is now un-

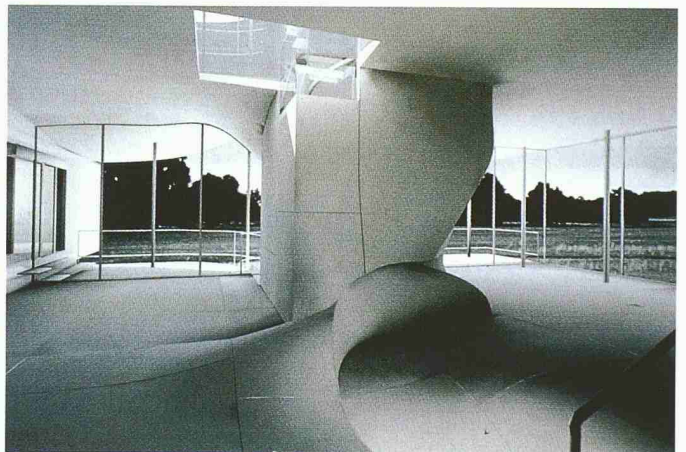
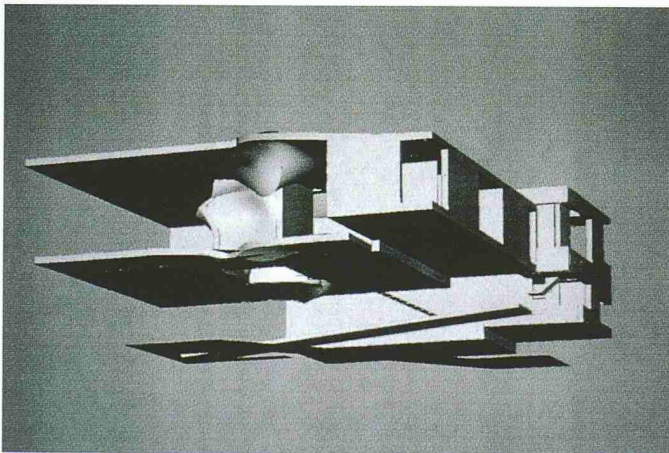
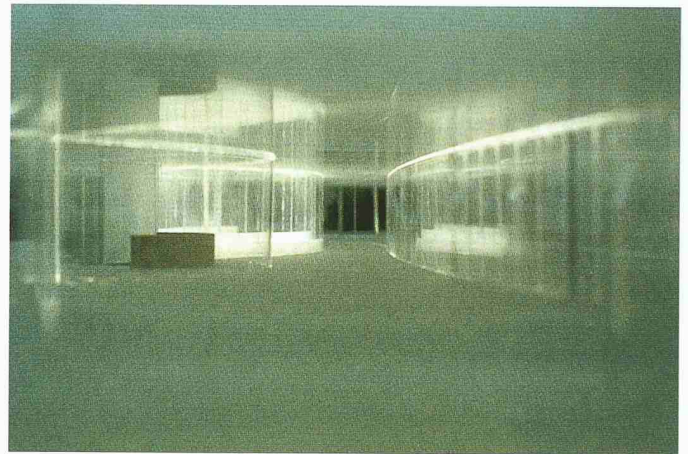
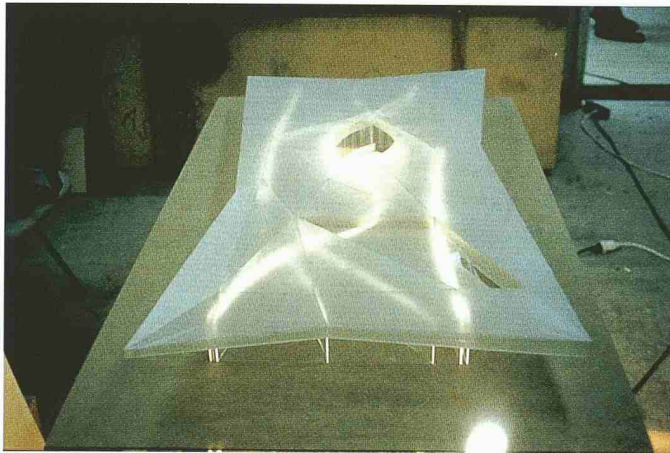
private due to both an invasion of media and computer and the more outward exposure of the house to the public with the use of an increase in glass and translucent surfaces. Interiors have been redefined with more flexible rooms and overlapping functions that often deny the articulation of a specific space similar to a layout of the loft apartment, and reduce private space to a minimum. The houses exhibited also respond to needs of changing household compositions and a revised notion of fewer boundaries between work and play. The role of the kitchen has had an effect on space as it has moved from being relegated to the downstairs cellar with servants to a central focal point of an open dining/living room, because the cook, the owner of the house, wants to be part of the party.

Some of the houses in the show evoke a reference that Gaston Bachelard makes in his book *Poetics of Space* to a poem by Georges Spyridaki from his book *Mort Lucide* where he says «My house is diaphanous, but is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapor. Its wall contract and expand as I desire. At times I draw them close about me like protective armor... But at others, I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensible.» This duality is seen in many of these houses which both embrace the world and create a shelter from it.

The exhibition and catalogue highlight the two current formal directions in architecture today: the blob and the box. The blob-like form is computer generated topological architecture which creates a fluid field. This is presented in the work of young American architects such as Neil Denari's unbuilt Massey House in Los Angeles, Winka Dubbeldam/Archi-Tectonics' Millbrook Residence and Preston Scott Cohen's Torus House to be completed in 2001. This house of movement in upstate New York for an artist couple, has a ramped foyer that creates a vertical circulation through the house whose seamless forms are based on the geometry of the torus shape. The Möbius House by UN Studio/Van Berkel & Bos built in 1998 in the Netherlands, named for its now ever so popular mathematical form also has a seamless space of paths through the house twisting through different levels and appears to fold back on itself. In Kolatan/MacDonald Studio's apartment for Ost/Kuttner of 1996 in New York, fluid plastic forms and molded skins create spaces that flow into each other to create an un-hierarchical animate interior, a «domestic scape.»

Kramlich Residence and Media Collection, Oakville, CA. Projected date of completion, 2000. Herzog & de Meuron. © Herzog & de Meuron (above)

Torus House, Old Chatham, NY. Projected date of completion, 2001. Preston Scott Cohen © Preston Scott Cohen (below)



The other dominant architectonic form in the exhibit is the modernist box, which frames spaces both in and out, featuring moveable partition walls and lots of transparency and steel structure. Houses such as Rem Koolhaas's Bordeaux House, the Xaveer de Geyter Architectenbureau House in Brasschaat, Belgium of 1992 and Shigeru Ban's Curtain Wall House all evoke a new or neo-modern house. The Double House by MVRDV in Utrecht (only in the catalogue), addresses the issue of privacy with the party wall becoming a zig-zag through two houses. And their houses in Amsterdam on Borneo Sporenburg slide into the site with unexpected glass walls at the sides and projections into the urban environment.

Many houses incorporate media and technology into the box, such as Herzog & de Meuron's Kramlich Residence and Media Collection, to be completed in Napa Valley, California in 2000. Media images flow into a bent box-shaped glass pavilion with fluid spaces below and above ground. A rooftop terrace embraces the landscape. The 1998 unbuilt project for the Digital House by Hariri and Hariri of New York demonstrates the infiltration of the media into the house with a video screen projecting an image of a virtual chef and the guests who have a virtual dinner party in a house with open partitions and separate prefabricated volumes that attach to a central core. The fluid spaces in the unbuilt project by New York architects Diller and Sco-

fidio called the Slow House of 1990, has two curving arcs that lead to viewpoints and incorporate video cameras to project the view back inside the house, a vacation space and work space. - Even putting these houses on display, adds another level to making these twenty-six houses and their owners un-private, while opening up even more questions as to what will become the house and the household of the future.

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