Oz

Volume 25 Article 12

1-1-2003

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Recommended Citation
Biondo, Joseph N. (2003) "Two Houses," *Oz*: Vol. 25. https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1389

# Two Houses

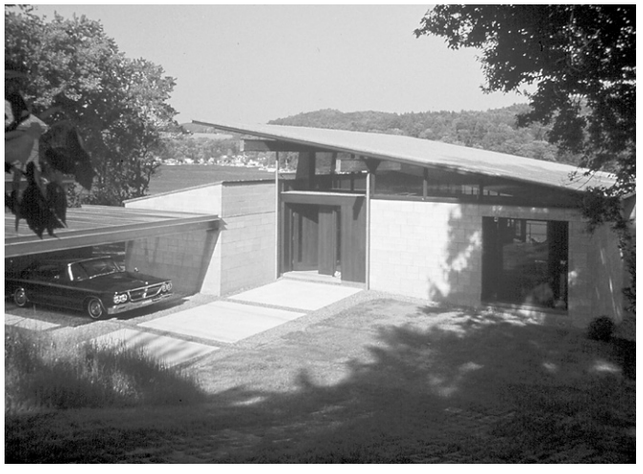
*Joseph N. Biondo*

We are living in a period increasingly enamored with high technology. The world keeps moving faster and faster. Therefore it is not unreasonable to believe that people regard their private domain as a safeguard against an inhospitable world of uncontrollable change. Linked to our primitive need for shelter, the house has been a symbol of status, personal freedom and individuality for centuries. Owning a private single-family home remains the dream for most individuals today. Throughout the country, sprawling new developments present us with the ideal dream home much like an automobile dealership introduces us to its latest models. All somehow alike, there is little evidence of professional input on design and they are too often placed upon the landscape without imagination and consideration for the ecological consequences of increased sprawl.

"Exquisite building lots available. Choose your model from our set of stock plans." These are familiar words from a billboard perched upon the pristine landscapes and farmland of Pennsylvania—evidence that production housing is on its way. From its post-war inception, production housing was created to provide the "American dream" in an efficient, economical, and predictable manner through means of standard building procedures and well-known imagery. Since then, our housing has been increasingly reduced to profit-driven, known merchandise that builders can build, bankers can finance, and real estate agents can sell. In producing these houses, ease of construction and time are paramount (time of construction that is—not time that records the history of a building or forecasts its uses). Landscapes are stripped of trees and vegetation and significant topographical characteristics, are flattened. Ecosystems are abruptly altered so lot owners can express their individuality. In an attempt to create a tranquil world of familiar situations, we have been left with peculiar landscapes and soulless containers or bad copies of historic archetypes that are adapted to meet our excessive lifestyles. They are an attempt to fulfill the perceived immediate needs for the traditional nuclear family, but do little to meet the many possible demands of future generations. Aah suburbia! It seems like a wonderful lifestyle, further dependent on our automobiles and mortgaged beyond our means in an effort to keep up with our neighbors. What should future generations do with these homogeneous places (structures of no historic value or architectural significance) when they begin to deteriorate? Are they destined to become slums like their inner-city counterpart?

Beyond site consideration, programmatic needs of a client and issues of sustainability, thoughtful planning of a house must include its ability to produce a lasting or timeless aesthetic. By employing time-honored materials that respond organically to the process of nature, an overall fabric whose appearance is improved with the weathering of time is achieved. In addition, carefully planned details that enhance structural integrity can also influence the appearance and form of a home. The choice of materials, quality of construction and the technical resolution of its parts endow a home with a character beyond that of an exaggerated expressions or short-lived fashion statement.

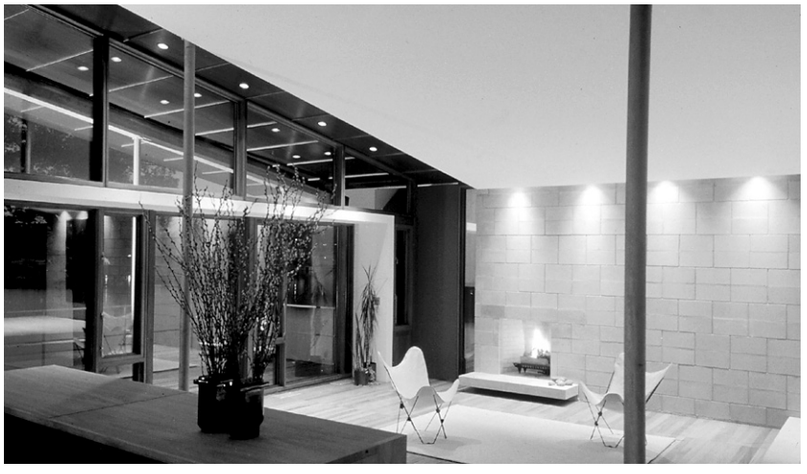
Herewith presented are two homes which share a tectonic language and focus on the process of production rather than the product itself. Homes

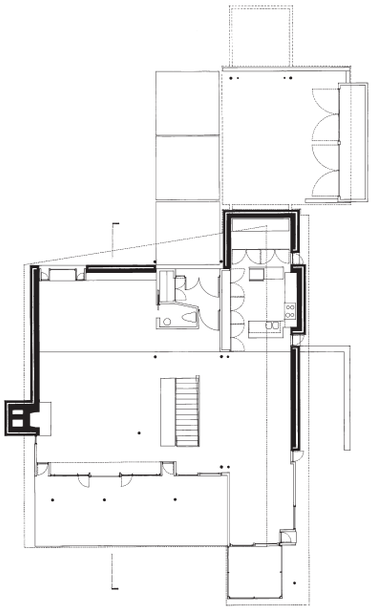


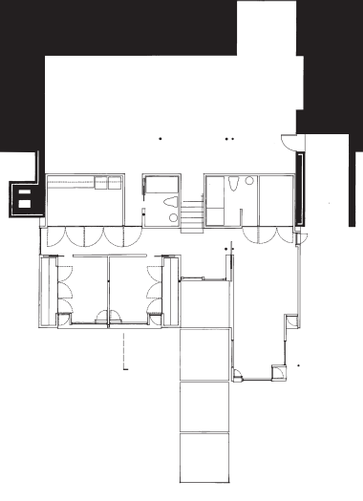
whose floor plans are influenced by the topography they nestle within. Through their directness and unadorned exposure of the manner in which they are made, they attempt to do more than demonstrate some narrow architectural issue. They represent architecture that is clear, precise, honest, and reflects on what is absolutely necessary. An architecture whose form is developed from the intense working of materials and their means of construction—an exploitation of materials and connections whose sensory and tactile qualities are revealed and further heightened through the movement of light. Buildings which do not depart from the latest technologies nor substitute them for the fundamental components of a building.

The choice to use certain materials in these homes is driven by an aesthetic, functional requirement and largely reflect ties to regional traditions. Our curiosity with materials of modest means is explored in both projects. By using ordinary materials we gain the greatest possibility of achieving a renewed reality within the material condition of a building. The materials we use are commonplace however, the care for their methods of assembly and absolute passion for scrupulous detailing are not. It is the detail which becomes the means for heightening and transfiguring the mundane, raising curiosity and elevating the human spirit. To make an extraordinary material special is trite, but to heighten one's awareness of a humble material can be poetic.

Concrete and concrete block, materials that have been relegated to areas of a building hidden below grade or behind finished walls, possess their own unique qualities. Concrete, a







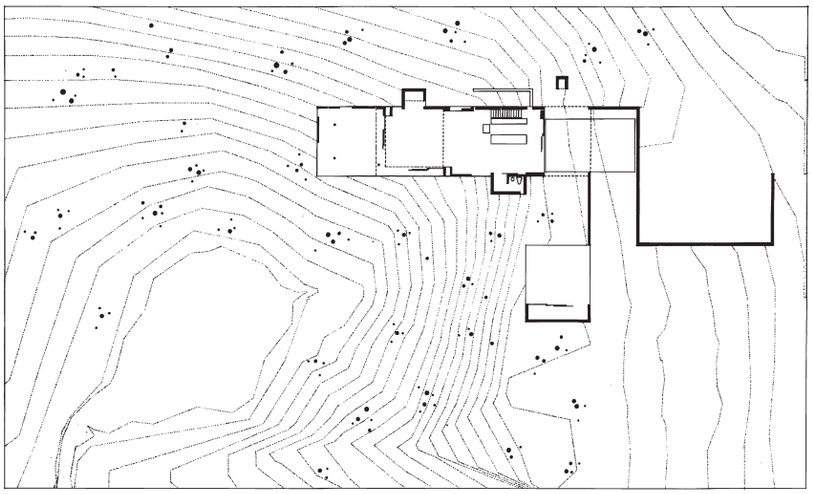
fluid material that takes the shape of its form, is a product that is very versatile in its use, workability, and surface treatment. As for concrete masonry units, nothing can be more elemental, humbler in substance, modest in manufacture, and simpler in shape and texture. More than any other building components, concrete and concrete block can be married to many other materials whether natural or man made: wood, metal, glass, cementitious panels. Through rigorous and precise application of these complimentary materials, the status of concrete and concrete block, which is so simple and so ordinary, can be elevated.

Each material has particular characteristics, which, through careful and appropriate treatment, a distinct expression can develop. In the Kennedy Residence, the application of concrete block does not elude images of the time-saving economical industrial product we are accustomed to. The image is that in which perfection and craft are given high priority. Conversely, the site-cast concrete House Equanimity is constructed using site-cast concrete that is accepted as is, and then, much like a fine stone, is further manicured by sand blasting and selectively bush hammering of its surfaces.

In detailing these two homes, nothing is to be taken for granted. Whether it be exploiting the module of a material, the detail of a stair riser meeting a tread, or the layout of the whole. An orthogonal plan or an intentionally austere, barrier-like, street facade seem deceptively simple from outward appearances. Upon closer investigation, the interiors seem to radiate a sense of tranquility through their appropriate scale, materiality, and detailing. The physical line between exterior and interior is now masked through the continuity of a particular material. Interior zones are brought into accord with zones of materials. A journey through the homes becomes a series of discoveries that are developed through to the smallest detail: consider the connection of a steel beam helping a cantilevered wood beam and make it beautiful; allow a concrete counter to rise from the floor and articulate the keyed joint as if it were wood; brace a simple handrail to become an inherent and curious part of the design.

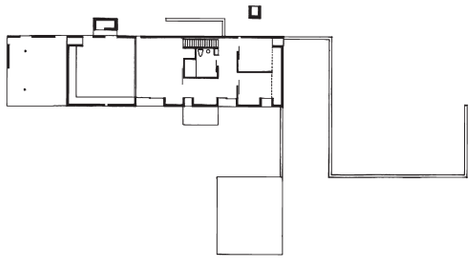
**Kennedy Residence**

With the living spaces located directly above the bedroom spaces, the Kennedy Residence transcends the conventional planning and construction of the traditional cottage architecture that exists on Lake Winola. As one approaches the building from Point Road, the initial image is that of restrained elegance. The presence of the shimmering metal roofs becomes analogous to that of the lake while the subtly-carved facade provides a glimpse through the house to the lake beyond. Once adjacent to the building, the layering becomes evident. The roof appears to hover, while the masonry volumes become an organizing element with sufficient size, closure, and regularity to serve as a figure that can embrace the other layers being organized from within. The flanking reinforced masonry walls provide sufficient structure and enclosure which enable the main living area to be free of interior walls. The absence of these walls offers uninterrupted views to the lake from every room. The natural progression of the building with respect to its topography is rhythmic. Gradationally carved and more delicate, the structure anchors itself differently as the grade falls towards the lake. The heavy masonry walls affix themselves into the earth while the lighter wood-framed, cement panel and glass envelope appears to hover above grade. The roof form, which consists of two opposing sheds, visually floats above the primary living space giving the impression of outdoor pavilions from the lake.

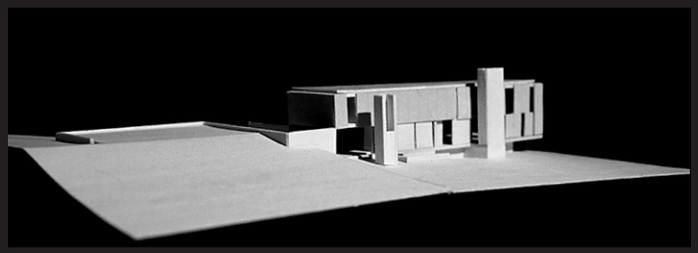


**House Equanimity**
Northampton, Pennsylvania

Situated in a typical nondescript subdivision of Eastern Pennsylvania, this home is surrounded by other single-family houses of all shades and sizes, redolent with clichés and conventions, which can be just as easily elsewhere as here. For that reason it is the surrounding landscape and history of the region that largely determines the design. The primary building materials, site poured concrete and various concrete products, pay respect to the history of Northampton—the birthplace of American Portland Cement.



Permanently embedded into the outlying landscape of Northampton, and now standing proudly in ruin, are the industrial artifacts which record the history of cement making. Kilns



which were used to melt the rock quarried here, developed over time. The initial Dome kilns were inefficient and gave way to the Schoefer kilns which could operate continuously. Within a decade, the Schoefer kilns were replaced with rotary kilns whose technology still remains in existence. Today's modern cement plant stands as a strong form consisting of framed boxes perched atop a series of concrete monoliths which loom in the partially monotonous and chaotic surroundings that are suburbia. These industrial machines, along with the material they produce, greatly influence the design of this home.

The house is not a solitary cube that might have been sited anywhere, but one which penetrates into the landscape and becomes one with it. This single-family, three bedroom home deviates in scale and appearance from the neighboring houses. In fact it seems closer in spirit to the walnut forest and topography it nestles within. The main living area, whose east facade is half buried into the landscape, offers no views to the east except that of its walled courtyards that define the colors of the gardens within. It is to be a peaceful place, a kind of oasis sheltered from the sound and views of the subdivision thus creating outdoor rooms that open to the sky. The interior space is open, intimate, and neutral with domestic objects articulated as furnishings placed within.

The base of the home is constructed of concrete, a seemingly unnatural mixture of fluid stone and steel reinforcement, which is quite sufficiently different from historical materials. However, it is a material that offers the rough, tactile charms that often emanate from the irregularities of mature buildings. Deliberately crude in its execution, the concrete monolith is treated as an existing condition, or ruin, whose subsequent wood-framed, cementitious clad boxes are carefully inserted. The ruin's powerful presence is derived from its material qualities and from the way it is linked to the ground. It penetrates into the earth and engages a platform which becomes clearly define as the topography falls away.

The planted concrete ruin looks as though it is going to be in the location it has found for itself for a long time. Unlike the its surrounding production-housing counterparts, it is not even thinking of moving away from the place it occupies and defines by its very existence. The concrete is allowed to age, become rough, and, perhaps, slowly erode. The intangible dimension of time could then be recorded by the traces left on the walls. Eventually, gravel will be exposed and particles of dirt, algae, and moss will take hold.

Much like the Kennedy Residence, this home is an architecture that involves all the senses. The surfaces and details demand to be felt. The spaces and spatial sequences require to be grasped by the senses that apprehend gravity, driving forces, and temperature. Details involving human contact, such as entrance areas, steps, handles, and handrails are treated with particular care. The restricted tolerances of construction elegantly contrasts with the random nature of the organic while the massing, textures, and unevenness of weathering surfaces transmit similar sensations to the landscape.