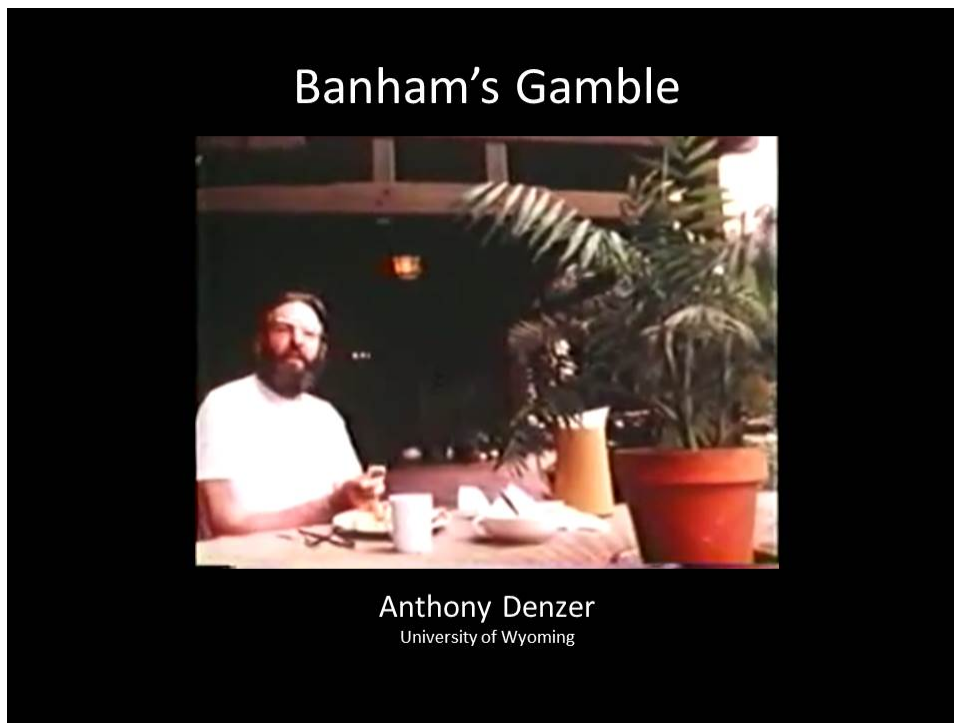


“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

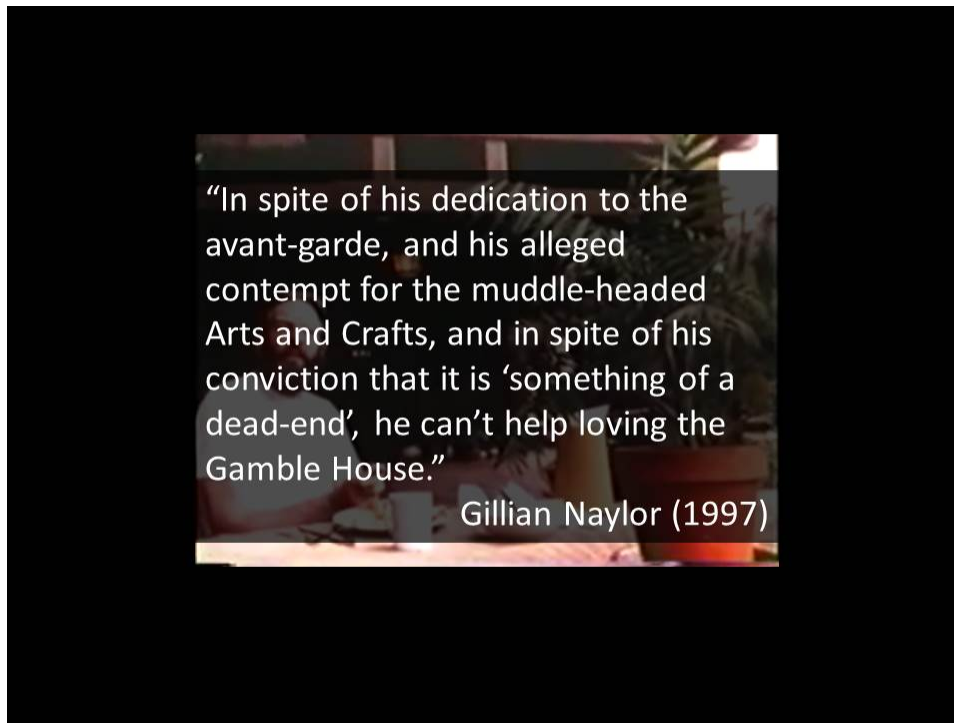
Slide 1:



The Gamble house, the Arts & Crafts-style monument by Charles & Henry Greene, built in Pasadena in 1908-09, held a special place for Reyner Banham, both in his personal life and his body of work as a historian. He lived in the house intermittently between 1968 and 1987, felt it “a privilege,” and it is fair to say he developed a deep attachment to the structure and its domestic experience.

In short Reyner Banham loved the Gamble house.

Slide 2:



This is a paradox, of course, and it has been acknowledged as long as Banham himself has been a subject of serious study.

[refer to on-screen quote]

His love for the Gamble house is curious for several reasons.

First, as Peder Anker says, Banham “focuses almost exclusively on the importance of mechanization to modernist design in general.”

When Banham himself described his general orientation as a historian, he called it: “my consuming interest, through thick and thin, hardback and limp, in what happens along the shifting frontier between technology and art.” The Gamble house stood apart from

In other words, How could the author of “A Home is not a House” also describe so lovingly Greene & Greene’s ultimate bungalow?

And, there is an obvious disconnect between Banham’s love for the Gamble house and what Tom Hines called his “general inability to appreciate the continuing significance of older monuments.” Hines says this “was one of his major weaknesses as a historian.”

The effort to unpack these paradoxes will not only contribute narrowly to a greater understanding of Banham’s own view of history, but will act as a springboard to examine larger issues of technology and environment, some of which he addressed directly, and some of which he avoided.

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 3:



Banham discussed or presented the Gamble house for posterity at least six different times over two decades. Here's every word.

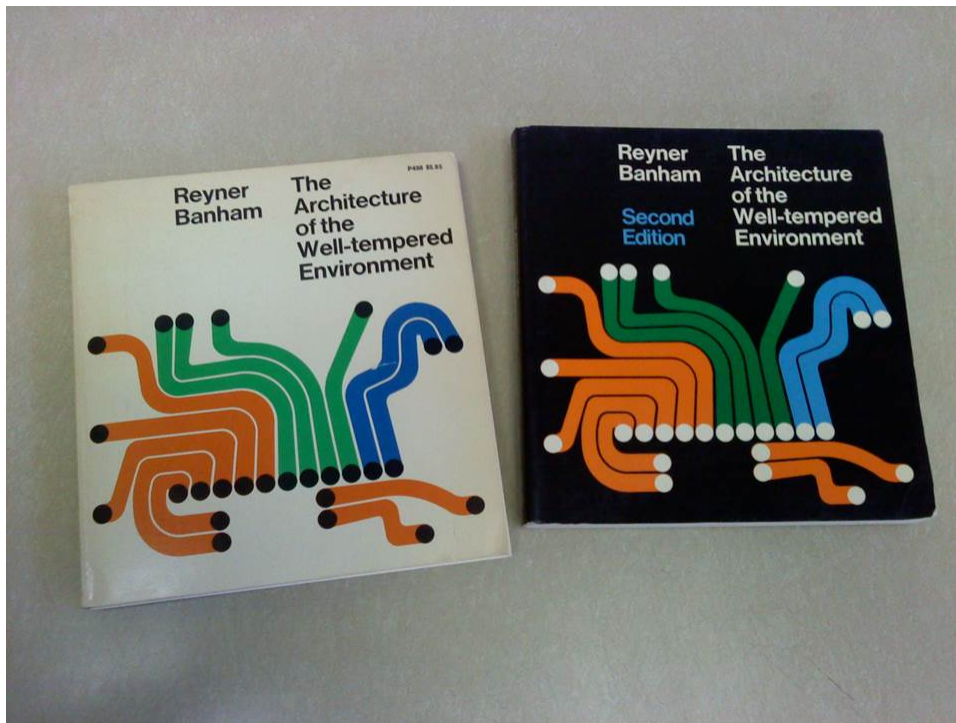
Slide 4:

Banham on Gamble:		Emphasis:
1969	<i>The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment</i>	“an elaborate system” of passive cooling climate-responsive design in the “Conservative mode”
1971	<i>Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies</i>	“a paste jewel” “a poetic and romantic summary” of exotic wood-building traditions
1971	“The Master Builders” (<i>London Times</i>)	“a beautiful dead-end” Gamble house discussed in concert with Schindler house
1972	“Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles”	“a very, very romantic house” but also a domestic, comfortable experience
1977	Introduction to <i>Greene and Greene: Architecture as Fine Art</i>	“nostalgia stalks” worth studying as a particular example, not a general one
1987	“Living in the Gamble House” (<i>Los Angeles Times</i>)	“live in it you must” “a compelling close domestic experience”

At times he described it as “alien,” “comfortable,” “romantic,” and a “perfect domestic experience.” And at one point he even claimed the house “forced me to start thinking again about the whole nature of modern architecture.”

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 5:



Banham first discussed the Gamble house in his innovative history *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* of 1969.

In general, the book demonstrated his enthusiasm for new technological solutions for heating, cooling, and lighting (especially air conditioning).

Banham’s thesis, as you surely know, can be summarized by this statement:

However obvious it may appear, on the slightest reflection, that the history of architecture should cover the whole of the technological art of creating habitable environments, the fact remains that [it] still deals almost exclusively with the external forms of habitable volumes as revealed by the structures that enclose them.

Nigel Whiteley says: “Here is Banham at his most radical in terms of method and value.”

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 6:



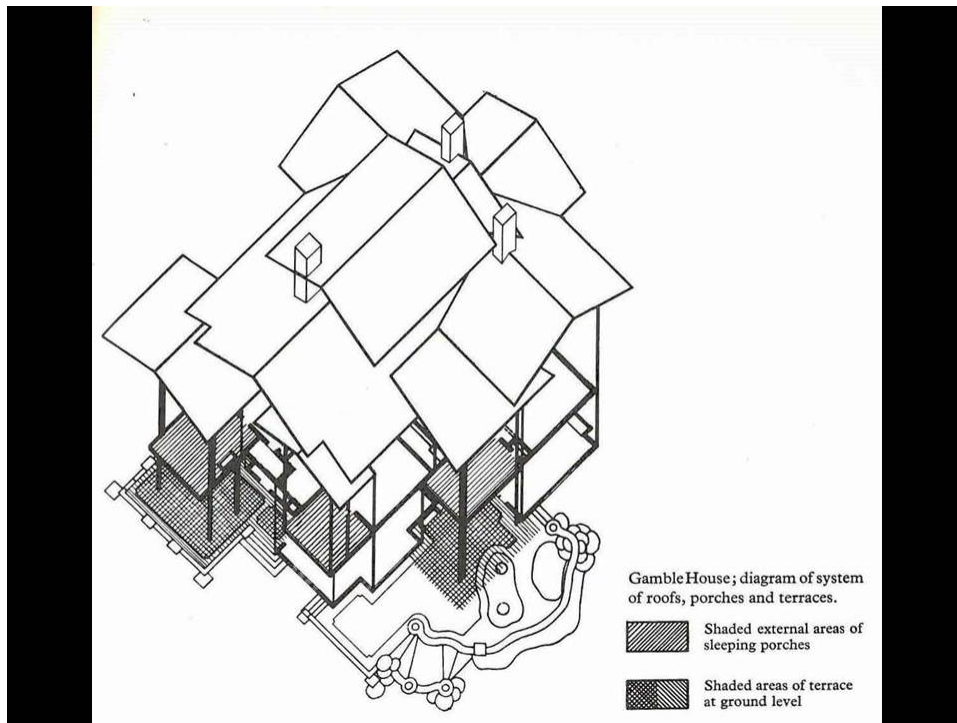
He took a rather clinical view at this early time.

What Banham highlighted about the Gamble house in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* was its ability to provide a “solution to the summer heat problem” through passive cooling techniques of shading and natural ventilation. It accomplished the latter with a fairly standard traditional strategy of a wide central halls with large doors at each end, to draw breezes through the center of the house.

He spent most of his descriptive effort on the structure’s projecting second-level sleeping porches and its broad roofs with deep overhanging eaves, all serving to shade the walls and windows.

He remarked that the cumulative aesthetic effect was that the Greenes’ practice, in this project, “reached the point where it seemed that their architecture was all roof.”

Slide 7:



For the book, Mary Banham created a new analytical drawing of the Gamble house, probably the first time a Greene and Greene building was redrawn to support a historical point.

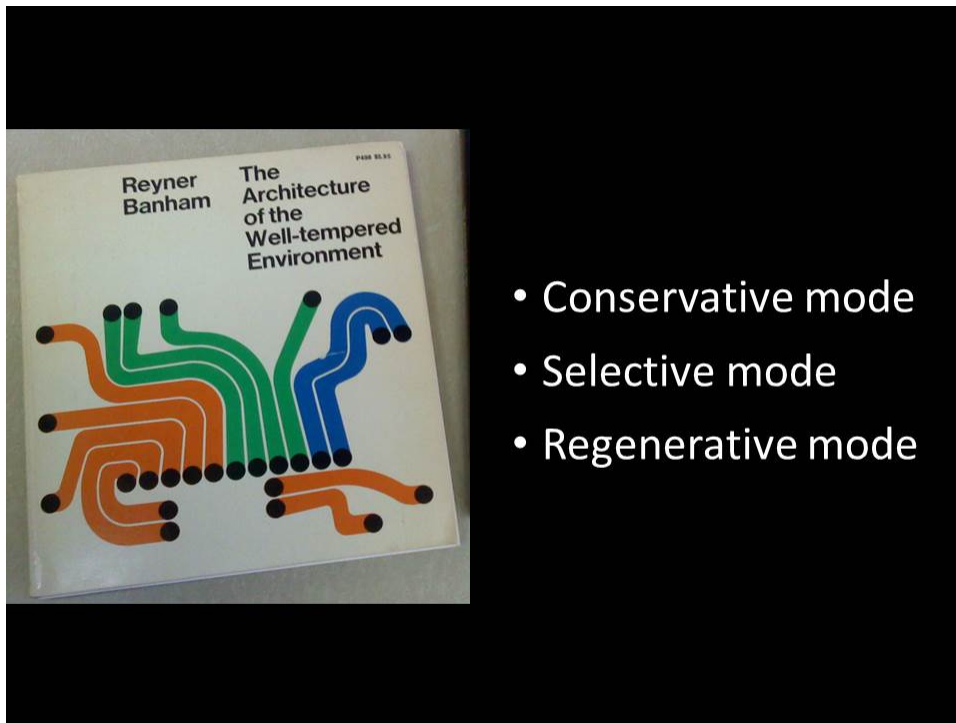
The drawing, an axonometric view from above, demonstrated the three-dimensional complexity of the roof system, and its effectiveness in shading the areas below.

It differed considerably from her other illustrations in the book, which were meant to “reveal the mechanical guts” of historical buildings.

Banham’s reading of the Gamble house as “an elaborate system” of passive cooling was relatively original.

The only writer to discuss the environmental performance of the Gamble house, even fleetingly, prior to Banham was Jean Murray Bangs, and Banham indeed acknowledged her “illuminating clarity.”

Slide 8:



In Banham’s larger historical analysis, the Gamble house exemplified “the Conservative mode,” which meant it generally used pre-modern techniques for environmental control.

The Conservative mode represented one of three ways that buildings managed the environment. The Selective mode, commonly used in humid or tropical climates, “employs structure not just to retain desirable environmental conditions, but to admit desirable conditions from outside.”

And finally, the Regenerative mode—which Banham celebrated—uses mechanical systems and “applied power” to heat, ventilate, cool, and illuminate the interior environment.

Although the language has evolved, Banham’s schema applies fairly well today: the Conservative mode encompasses what are generally called Passive strategies; the Selective mode is represented by Mixed-mode or Hybrid systems; and the Regenerative mode is basically standard practice.

In *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, the Gamble house sits somewhat uncomfortably outside the dominant narrative thrust celebrating the mechanized environment.

And the house was treated as an exceptional historical moment rather than any kind of model that could be followed.

Slide 9:



Elsewhere and later, Banham extended his environmental analysis of the Gamble house to emphasize more expansive notions of its relationship to the site.

He spoke of the house being “craftily adjusted to take full advantage of Pasadena’s gently nuanced winter weather,” and noted that Charles Greene included Climate and Environment as two of his “four determinants of architecture.”

Indeed, the subject of site-specificity perplexed Banham the historian; he could not find precedent or parallel for the Greenes’ approach, and he found the effects ineffable:

“The added architectural dimension that separates their work from their contemporaries’ is still impossible to define verbally, but has something to do with the reason they, and the Gambles, were in Pasadena: the climate (psychological as much as meteorological) of Southern California.”

The parenthetical insight that the climate might be understood psychologically seems to have been important to Banham, showing that he was abreast of new ways of conceptualizing ‘site’ in the early 1970s.

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 10:



Although the Gamble house represented the Conservative mode, Banham acknowledged, matter-of-factly, that it had an (active) central heating system --- coal burning furnaces and gravity flow air distribution, a system that was fairly advanced for its time. Banham mentioned the mechanical heat but did not analyze it or suggest that it was an essential feature.

Later he also wrote insightfully about the artificial lighting, which he considered a key contributor to the well-tempered environment.

Slide 11:



After *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, Banham, naturally, interpreted the Greene & Greene structure differently to address different audiences or to support different arguments.

But he quite consistently emphasized the “romantic” quality of the house over its environmental features. It was, he said, “a great romantic house, perhaps the finest in the world.”

When writing about the Gamble house Banham’s language became rather purple, suffused with naked sentimentality. In one bizarre instance, the ‘historian of the immediate future’ rambled on about the “presence” of the Gamble family, which “still pervaded” the house in the 1970s, and testified to the spirit of Aunt Julia.

Slide 12:

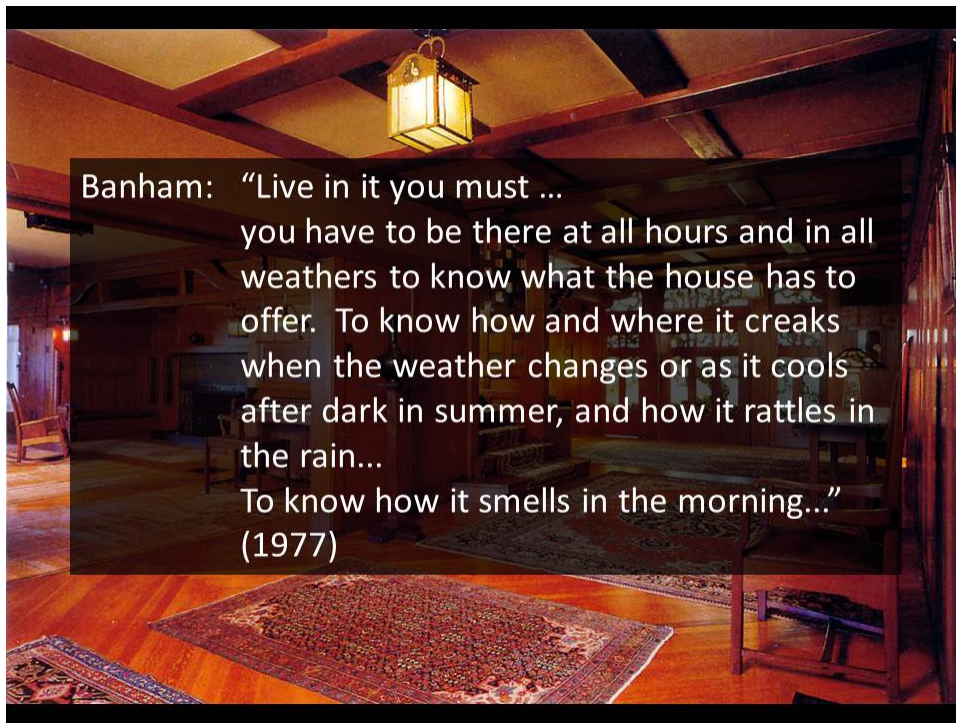


In his most comprehensive account of the Gamble house, Banham directly grappled with the problem of the past, but with more tenderness than one might expect:

Nostalgia stalks. It is all too easy to sentimentalize and romanticize that lost world.... You can't go back....

Yet the temptation for any close historian of the period to appear, or become, a lamenter of past times is very powerful. The subject matter itself demands close and detailed study, and tends to resist the kind of large-scale generalization that preserves the longer historical perspective and prevents provincialism. So one must be wary of damning those devoted historians who are patiently restoring the period to clearer view, as men of old-fashioned and parochial vision.

Slide 13:

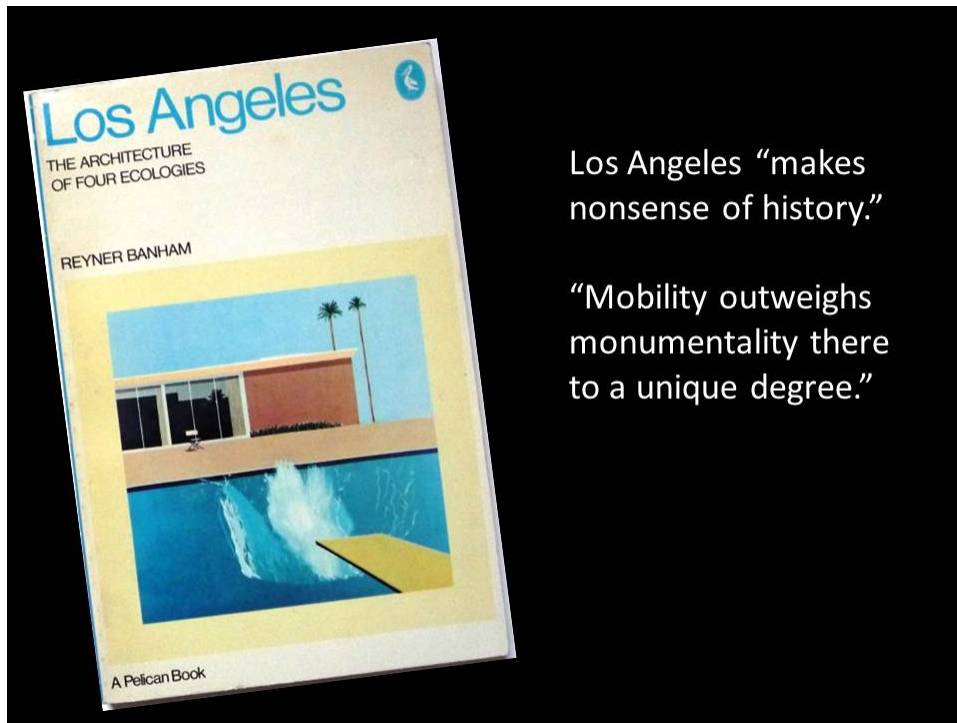


Banham also adopted a somewhat romantic (using the term loosely now) posture in recalling and describing that “the fundamental quality of these houses is sheer space.” Here is Banham the Phenomenologist:

[refer to on-screen quote]

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 14:



Los Angeles “makes nonsense of history.”

“Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree.”

In Banham’s oeuvre, the Gamble house always appears as an oddity, a misfit.

In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, where mobility outweighed monumentality, the Gamble house represented a static, old-fashioned monument. Banham discussed it as one example of “a very large body of first-class & highly original architecture.”

Frankly, his discussion of the Gamble house in *Los Angeles* was not particularly insightful, and it certainly did not offer anything to the nascent environmental movement in 1971.

I should also emphasize that, while Banham proposed a new reading of Los Angeles based on the concept of ecology, he did not propose anything like what would be called ecological architecture. Even after 1973, when the interest in ecological architecture swelled, Banham remained largely silent on the subject for a decade.

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 15:



In the BBC film *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, the Gamble house again disrupts the theme:

[video clip]

Before this, of course, he is cruising the freeway system, fully-mechanized and fully-liberated. He imagines himself as a Humphrey Bogart character in a film noir. Then, abruptly, we find him enjoying coffee on the porch of the Gamble house.

In Banham’s experience of Los Angeles, the Gamble house seems to have offered him a place of repose, as a kind of antidote to the kaleidoscopic mobility.

He used it principally as a counterpoint, a balance in the weights-and-measures of his interests.

He clearly embraced both historical and narrative disruptions, giving highest privilege in his work to explaining things that needed explaining.

Slide 16:



How Banham understood the Gamble house may come into sharper relief by comparing it with his treatment of Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art.

Banham found the Glasgow School to be the only example of the Arts & Crafts movement worthy of inclusion in his *Guide to Modern Architecture* (1962).

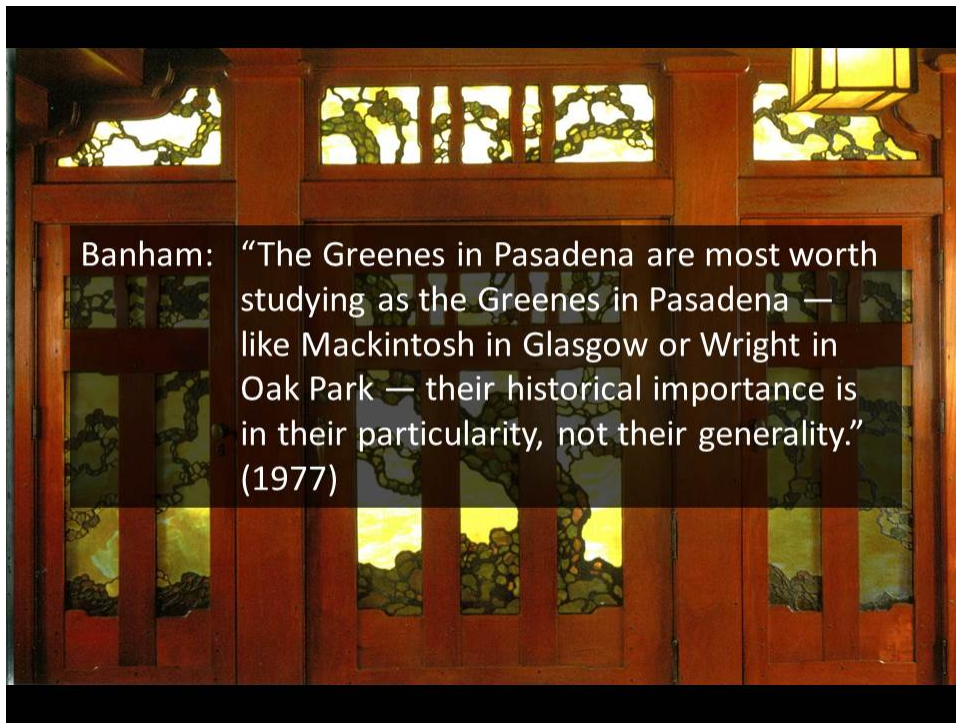
In both cases, Banham could barely conceal his disdain for the crafted details. The Glasgow decorations were “not modern ... hypersensitive and ... neurotically overworked.” And he used remarkably similar language in describing the Gamble house’s woodwork.

But on the issue of structural expression, however, Banham drew a clear distinction. Glasgow represented a bridge between the 19th and 20th centuries, because the structure was frankness and demonstrative: “with Mackintosh, structure must not only be done, it must manifestly be seen to be done.”

At the Gamble house, he found little authentic integrity in the structural engineering. In fact he seems to have enjoyed pointing out “the usual old U S carpenter’s crudwork” in the attic and other features that “always caused purists to foam at the mouth.”

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

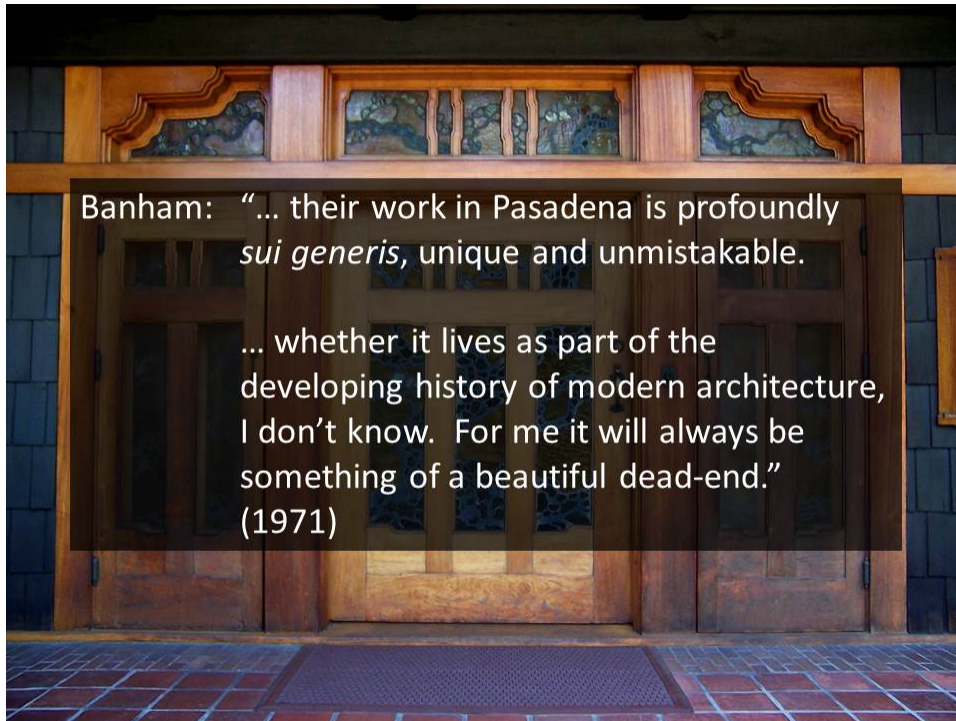
Slide 17:



For Banham the historian, the Gamble house did not represent larger themes or movements.

[refer to on-screen quote]

Slide 18:

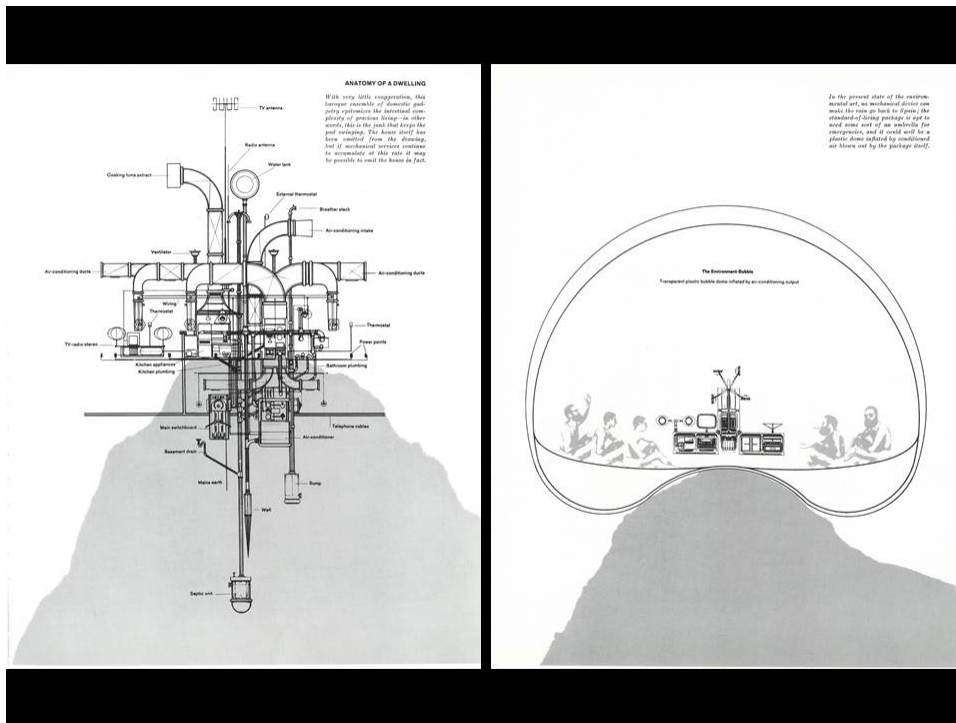


Thus he viewed it as “a beautiful dead-end”:

[refer to on-screen quote]

The issue here is that historians, especially those of Banham’s ambition and stature, are not normally concerned with dead-ends. When you also consider that it also failed to arouse any of his futurist/high-tech or socialist sympathies, one may wonder why he ever wrote a word about the house. There must be more than the simple contingency of his residency to explain its repeated appeal as a subject for him.

Slide 19:



It may help to juxtapose the Gamble house for a moment against its virtual opposite.

In his satirical article “A Home is not a House” of 1965, Banham argued that the essence of the modern dwelling was its mechanical equipment, and asked: “when it contains so many services that the hardware could stand up by itself without any assistance from the house, why have a house to hold it up?”

Here (with considerable credit to illustrator François Dallegret), the Environment-Bubble, the standard-of-living-package, or the un-house—a clever futurist provocation and a profound disclosure about the culture of mechanical comfort which he found to be especially strong in America.

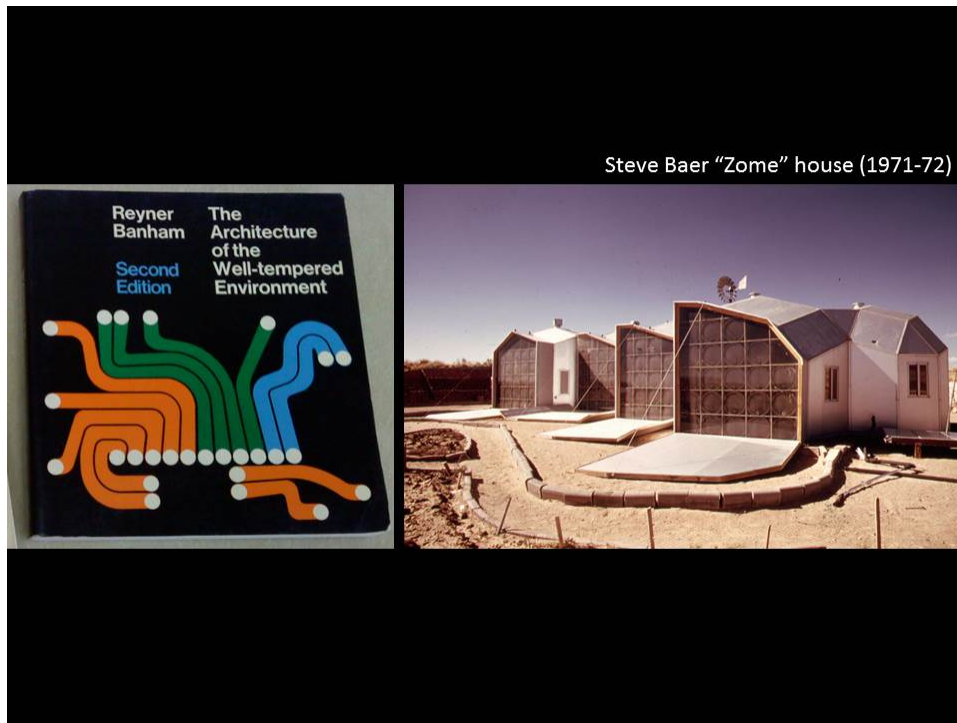
It is worth remembering that Banham spoke of “the threat or promise of the un-house” The threat was not made explicit, and needs some interpretation.

An obvious answer is that the bubble posed a threat to classical definition of architecture—commodity, firmness and delight—and monumental space, all of which Banham did value and which the Gamble house possessed in spades.

By logical extension, his love for Gamble house would (later) represent his “trad” sentiments, and therefore counterbalanced his polemical futurism. Greene and Greene’s work offered a reminder of what might be lost in a world of glass houses and Centres Pompidou.

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 20:



When Banham revised *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* for republication in 1984, he added substantive discussions of two new buildings: Steve Baer’s Zome house in New Mexico, and Norman Foster’s office building for Willis, Faber, Dumas.

The new content on the Baer house is particularly revealing as a vehicle to understand Banham’s peculiar and enduring attachment to the dead-end Gamble house.

Banham should have loved the Baer house --- it was radical, both in terms of architectural form (distorted versions of Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic structures) and passive solar heating strategies (stacks of water drums to collect and store solar heat). It worked extremely well in terms of comfort and energy use. Solar supplied 85% of the heat needed. Baer burned less than a cord of wood per winter to supply the difference.

Slide 21:

Banham : “Wood-burning Baer ...
far from being radical ...
individualistic, property-oriented,
conservative and defensive.”



But in the 2nd edition, and in an article about the Baer house a year earlier, he did not discuss the form or the function, and instead launched a larger ideological argument against the Conservative mode, which he now called ancient.

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Whether right or wrong, what is most striking about Banham’s characterization of Baer as “individualistic, property-oriented, conservative and defensive,” is that it was a political critique, rather than an architectural or environmental one.

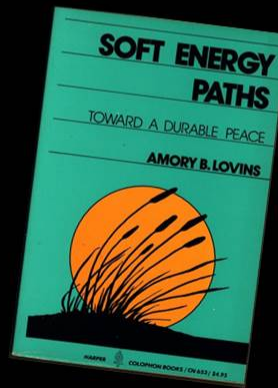
The fact that Banham would include the Baer house in the second edition, only to use it, quite falsely, as a straw man, points to deeper issues.

Slide 22:

Banham :

“The emphasis on supposedly “low” or “soft” technologies, like burning wood instead of oil, was part of the general radical-left revolt against conglomerates, multinationals, the military-industrial complex.

Anyone who listened carefully, however, would soon begin to sense that the constant emphasis on household or even individual self-sufficiency ... seemed to be pointing in a different direction from the communitarian and collectivist goals the left normally cherishes.”



Those deeper issues emerged, of course, from the intersection between politics and technology, and engaged a much larger discourse which involved people like Amory Lovins.

[refer to on-screen quote]

As Nigel Whiteley discusses, Banham was forced to admit, ruefully, that the “American eco-movement ... was not French and it was not marxist.”

“Banham’s Gamble”
Anthony Denzer
for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting
March 1, 2014

Slide 23:



By equating the solar movement with low technology, Banham ignored another body of work that should have interested him: the active solar house.

By 1974, there were successful, well-publicized, and aesthetically-resolved active solar houses at the University of Delaware (by Harry Weese) and Colorado State University (by Richard Crowther), among many others.

In the wider discourse, the ‘passive vs. active’ debate, which had been simmering for decades without a nomenclature, finally became explicit and vigorously discussed after 1973. Apart from these dismissals of low technology, Banham did not engage in the discourse about solar houses, passive and active, and it was a discourse that would have benefitted greatly by his participation.

He also ignored, in the late 1970s, the emerging science of superinsulation.

Slide 24:



Banham’s hostility to the Baer house, and to the solar movement in general, pertains to his reading of the Gamble house in several ways.

For Banham, the historical moment and the attitude to available technology clearly mattered most. The Gamble house used the best available technology, a “conventional” system, of the time. The Baer house, in his interpretation, looked to the past, rather than the future.

It must be noted that the qualities of “individualistic, property-oriented, conservative and defensive,” would also apply to the Gamble house, had Banham thought to place those two projects side-by-side in his mind.

Of course the political character the Gamble house was not discussed by Banham (nor by anyone else). Why?

Of course Banham thought deeply about the interrelationships between architectural movements, political meanings, and aesthetics. In a 1976 lecture in Los Angeles, he remarked:

Modern architecture is, by its origins, by the kind of men who dreamed it up, linked to the idea of social improvement by large-scale social action. Modern architecture may not be democratic, in fact, in the American, individualistic, sense of the word. It’s certainly, in its intentions, democratic in the European, collectivist, sense of the word.

This is why the Gamble house escapes political interrogation: it was not modern. Therefore, it was not expected to exhibit liberal political relationships or social progress. Plus it was a historical misfit, outside the narrative. As “a beautiful dead-end,” the political character of the Gamble house no longer mattered. Its meanings were inert.

“Banham’s Gamble”

Anthony Denzer

for 2014 SAH Annual Meeting

March 1, 2014

Baer’s house, while not classically ‘modern’ in the International Style sense of the term, remains part of the larger modern project and therefore it should have advanced the cause, in Banham’s view. To extend this line of reasoning, perhaps Banham wanted ecological architecture to have an avant-garde political agenda, and an avant-garde aesthetic which would speak directly to its political identity.

And the Baer house was not a dead-end; it was immediately relevant to the future of architecture. I suggest that Banham saw the Baer house as part of a living movement that could still become potentially powerful—technically, aesthetically, and politically—going forward in the mid 80s.

In other words, the Gamble/Baer dichotomy may ultimately show that Banham held secret aspirations for what he called, with approval, “energy conscious design” --- aspirations for its capacity to develop a precise visual imagery of clear political sentiments, and he could only express these aspirations through his derisive commentary about “Wood-burning Baer.”

Slide 25:



Finally, just as Banham had enjoyed skewering the ‘purists’ over the carpenters’ crudwork, imagine how pleased he must have been to make the astonishing revelation in 1977 that air-conditioning had been added to the Gamble house. He offered this new information in a most offhand manner, and said it was “the only modification needed to bring its offices up to nineteen-seventies standards.”

Did the intervention of air-conditioning threaten the ‘authenticity’ of the place? Did it suggest that the structure’s passive cooling features — those that he had celebrated in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* — did not work very well?

Banham, of course, treated the modernization as if it were perfectly sensible.