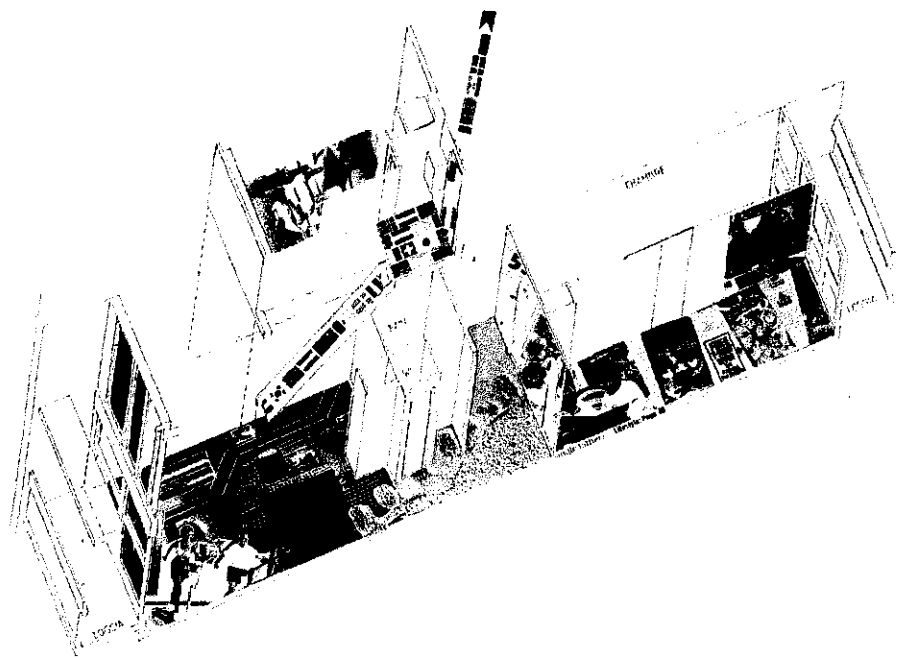


388

Judith Barry  
Ken Saylor

UNITE PROJECT  
Firminy, France, 1993 April  
Catalogue-Text by J. Barry  
and Ken Saylor



## House of the Present

### (Home)icide

Our title implies a homicide, a death, a domicile and possibly a crime. This could be a double play, a play on words, on language, as it combines two terms, the 'home' and the idea of 'cide', the 'side' of something, not facing you, but beside you OR like a suicide, perhaps a victimless crime.

There is a mystery here, a mystery about the home and the ways we use it, a mystery about what it might become, even a mystery about what it might be. And you, as the detective will have to sift the evidence, look at the clues, to assess finally, what you might think of this architectural premise, which may not seem like architecture – as this is a project which is investigative, temporary, discursive and reflective and which does not result in architecture as we know it, but which does, hopefully, begin to shed some light on what architecture might become.

So what do we mean by these cryptic statements? We must begin at the beginning, with the invitation to visit Firminy to investigate the public and private spaces of Le Corbusier's Unité.

### (Private)ize

In our visit to Firminy we were curious and most interested in the ways the inhabitants of the Unité had redesigned their apartments to reflect their actual social conditions; and it is from this reflection upon the real lived conditions of the inhabitants of Firminy that we decided to make a 'demonstration' apartment that would reflect through its design many of the discursive strategies that constitute contemporary living.

Consequently, we are deviating from perhaps a more primary paradigm of the model home design – the ubiquitous 'House of the Future' with its notions of a utopian lifestyle located elsewhere in the near future, to look specifically at contemporary living. One of our premises is that for most of us our living environments do not adequately contain or represent the issues that most shape our lives – this lack of representation has much to do with the legacy of modernism and the way the structure of the home itself is meant to be 'a cell for living'. We hope that through this project we will be able to redress some of the inadequacies in the formulations around domestic space that censor certain forms of representation. It is our desire in enunciating these discourses to make possible, new or hybrid relations within the very structure of the home that previously have been impossible or not foreseen.

### (Fam)ilies

In the initial designs by Le Corbusier for the Unités d'Habitation, it is clear that he intended to radically interrogate the family unit through the use of the apartment itself as a 'machine' that regulated and proscribed specific behaviours within the home. Clearly for Le Corbusier the apartments were to be used for the sole purpose of reproducing the family, and not for any other purposes. The model was not the mapping of bourgeoisie subjectivity onto the worker, but the creation of an environment that could reproduce the worker. It is clear that this functionalism allows for no deviance from the regulatory status of the family. The situation of the master bedroom over the living area assumes a control over the domain that can only be invoked by the primacy of the couple: whereas the diminutive stature of the children's rooms insure that the status of childhood will be preserved as long as is possible – until the children leave home.

### (But, there's a man in the room)

Lurking in every corner, literally built into the structure of each apartment, is the omnipresent

'modular man'. Irreverent of the golden mean, and seemingly uninterested in the Renaissance-humanist tradition that saw 'man' as the embodied potential of 'god', Le Corbusier's 'modular man' is an engineer's compass locating the mathematics of the body in space. Yet, Le Corbusier can not hide the body so easily, for despite his denials, the 'modular man' is a univertalized subject who regulates and is regulated by the space he produces. Power in this instance becomes reciprocal, and not a point of enforcement. And 'modular man' becomes a typological extension of the Enlightenment's desire to fix and control intangible things: units of time, units of measure and so on.

### Dis(c)ord

One question for us as designers is how do the discourses that determine and shape our sense of contemporary living come into the 'home'? How can we describe the received and collective sense of our social thinking except through some notion of discourse? Discourse historically refers to the collective body of knowledge surrounding a subject, usually a subject under inquiry – a perceived set of social circumstances.

As the world we live in reflects exceedingly intangible relations, it becomes more crucial for us as architects, artists and designers to give form to these issues, these thought processes, this dematerialization that makes up our world. Hence our desire to use the situation in Firminy to begin this representation, particularly because it is an exhibition.

These discourses stem from the multiplicity of complex inner-relations that make-up our experience of the lived world. Notice, we are not calling this the built world because our buildings and most of our forms follow behind, trail behind the ways we live in our imagination.

Yes, there is something missing, and it is inherent in the notion of discourse itself; for what is discourse but the attempt, however partial, to describe in words, that which is profoundly missing, which remains unknown and drives us to speak OR which is not yet represented and drives us to make something of it.

As designers we asked ourselves and the people inhabiting these spaces, "What is missing, what do you want, what are your fantasies?"

So we come to our project, subtitled (Home)icide – what is it? A detective sifts the evidence for clues, trying to assess who committed the crime. We as architects and artists need to perform other functions, sifting the array of discourses to allow them into the terrain of the home to allow them to speak a multiplicity of possibilities.

When discourses are no longer productive, do they become reactive, behaving like viruses? Another question we asked ourselves. Do they reproduce endlessly generating a force that is perhaps uncontainable, uncontrollable, beyond a certain locus of organization? We are not looking for a deep structure here, and this is not a form of physics as it is obviously impossible to generalize about how a variety of discourses behave. However, we can be fairly certain that they do reproduce through a wide variety of social circumstances, inserting themselves wherever and whenever they can make a place.

For example, looking at technologies of the body we can consider the constellation of reproduction in terms of sciences of reproduction as well as normative bounds; aging and daycare for aging parents as well as delaying aging through various advances in prosthetic devices, surgery techniques, aerobics and homoeopathic remedies; machine bodies, beauty, standards of appearance, class relations and life style choices; fantasy and the production of pleasure/leisure/culture; eating and nutrition mixed with ecological animal right issues and recycling; and so on. What is clear is the intense co-mingling of a multiplicity of discourses all of which conspire to shape the social fabric of contemporary living experience.

### Beyond boredom...

Henri Lefebvre wrote of two kinds of leisure. The first type, the ordinary prosaic kind, might be described as an epiphany that a man has as he sits in his humdrum living room trying to balance the demands of work and leisure within the family. This Kirkegardian character ultimately shreds his newspaper and flees from the room screaming 'Everything is possible'.

It is the horrible realisation of this endless panorama of possibilities, stullified by those two twin determining poles, work and leisure, that cause him to suffer a psychosis. He suffers his insanity in a Kirkegardien fashion, benignly, but there is no relief.

The other possibility posited by Lefebvre is that of escapism via drugs, or travel or general wordliness (which we are assuming means a form of cultural ennui).

But perhaps our project is another route, not to a psychosis or to the need to escape where we actually are, but to a fantasy structure which might enunciate and locate various options. For Lefebvre it was the very boredom induced by everyday life that could produce epiphanies and momentarily awaken the worker to the extraordinary. We live in a much richer world than is generally acknowledged or experienced, and it is not boredom so much that is needed, but more access to the widely divergent fields of inquiry that constitute our world and enter our home.

### Cyber-Subjects

There is no 'there', no time anywhere, and no real anymore ... what to do? The '80's legacy has left us with no sense of place as all spaces, in an attempt to cover for one another, seek to repeat the boring sameness of their utter muteness. Perhaps this is a screen for those older spatial paradigms that lent the machine its form – a mechanical system of moving, seeable parts – and an attempt to create those 'naked spaces' where what is really 'in there' – the transfer of information as it speeds through the city will finally show itself. The question becomes how to give a shape to what is often invisible?

Michel Foucault's analysis of the asylum, the prison, the factory, the school and the home, most aptly described the ways discourses of subjectivity are articulated through the built environment and inscribed within architecture, forcing specific relations of power, gender and ultimately social norms in which conformity is the only choice. This is also the legacy of Le Corbusier. And even now as the password replaces the watchword and the code substitutes for the norm, the spatial paradigms that might effect these representations refuse to take shape outside of fictions, across boundaries, geographies or among people.

The machine age gave birth to the cinema which allowed for believable simulations of spatial paradigms by tying a coherent sense of space to a coherent sense of time, mimicking how reality was perceived. It might be argued that television has produced the visual paradigm of the 'space of flows' allowing the 'zapping' viewer to experience the discontinuity of daily life by cruising through the channels juxtaposing seemingly incoherent bits of information, and recombining them into new configurations whose ability to phase us is dependent on our willingness to surrender to an illogical order which is predictable only in its randomness.

The computer and its invisible nets allow for a transformation of information and we as users can constantly travel its streams, escaping within this unrepresented and hence 'pure' machine the contamination of disciplinary forces comprised of real bodies who must yield to the spectre of its power. Yet we know the fallacy of this pureness merely articulates older class relations as it measures keystrokes for the computer worker while partially liberating the managerial class and rendering useless what remains of the working class who are no computer literate. If writing is the model for communicating with the algorithms that are the computer, is there a way in which

literature can give a shape to the multiplicity of flows set in motion by information technologies?

How to shape these invisible flows, how to transform these random bits of information into knowledge, how to describe the series of relations that these spaces provoke? Postmodernism in art, not architecture, provided for a way of representing the breakdown of 'master-narratives' by showing how 'subject-positions' were constructed across a heterogenous field of inquiry. Not one 'I', but many, not one 'history', but many. This is precisely the type of analysis that we are proposing to apply to Le Corbusier's 'modular man' and by implication the space of architecture.

In order to place the viewer in the position of the producer, rather than the passive consumer of these discourses, we are liberating various built-in architectural devices and appliances by antropomorphically mating them with 'modular man'. 'Morphing' as it is known in the computer world is a way of literally transforming one object into another. Popularized by such films as Terminator 2 and numerous television commercials, it is the most apt metaphor for the idea of Liquid Space as it is less the resulting objects that are important and more the act of transformation itself. What is made visible are the previously invisible networks and lines cohering into spaces that can be seen to render disparate objects across time and space, uniting them in time and space rather than collapsing one into the other (depending on whether you prefer Paul Virilio or Leo Marx). This paradigm allows for a kind of cyber-subjectivity as it provides for the 'morphing' of any object, plant, human, animal, or machine escaping the boundaries of its former function as it potentially becomes something else. As Donna Haraway suggests this kind of cyborg places in question older notions of human-ness and potentially provides a radical, yet specific re-working of precisely what these hybrids can do, possibly suggesting a new form of cognitive mapping and generating other less humanly orientated spatial paradigms.

### (Hal)ucinations

To approach this form of representation implies a willful suspension of belief; belief in reality as we know it. And we must go beyond the boredom of daily life to address the situation of today. What will prove epiphanies for contemporary situations? For to suffer from boredom implies that you have time and to be weary of the world implies that you have a coherent viewpoint within a generally consistent self. Lefebvre, although a Marxist, was actually critiquing humanism.

Psychical reality, the Freudian notion of the structure of fantasy, is a useful concept for us here as it recognizes no state of totally self-possessed lucidity in which the external world can simply be *seen* for what it is; rather it allows us to dip into some relation to our unconscious wishes and desires and believe, not in objective truth, but in our ability to apprehend some deeper truths by negotiating the relationships between older structures of the built world (pre-existing appliances or furniture for instance) and discursive structure. This liminal access between the objective world and the imagination can be seen as a way of providing entry into a wholly other form of representations; one at this stage which is scarcely seen, but often hinted at in much contemporary fiction.

In an earlier version of this project we 'morphed' a chair with 'modular man' and the ensuing combination reminded us of this section of a story by the writer Brad Miskell.

"What I need is a chair. What I need is an expendable, gyroscopic, streamlined Lazy Boy Recliner with a wrist pivot joy stick parked right inside the front door purring. I need to walk in, strip, sit and git down to business. Customize the sucka. Don't expect me to hold the phone, further deforming my cervical vertebrae I need to be fiber-optic ready, head-set free and totally submersible. Give me the chair stirrups and ashtrays, microwaves and microfiche. Let me hear my messages, check my lasagna, feed the cats, talk to my attorney, watch porn, smoke a blunt, attend an electronic town meeting, do my personal banking, and shower. A tutti. Make this latter day easy chair naval of my universe. The nerve center of my own little electronic megaloscape. I've got to be able to return calls,

track tropical depressions, preview past life regressions and undergo ritual scarification in a one-stop, plop-down, plug-in, play-back bargain hunter's dream. "I'm not going to pay a lot for this elective surgery." Which reminds me. What I need is plumbing. I don't have time to walk to the bathroom with a portable phone. I need to assimilate and eliminate at the same time. Uplink and download. Don't make me draw up the schematics. You've got what I want and you know how to use it ..."

What are appliances and furniture but the representation in built form of a desire for a solution to the problems or pleasure of living. Each appliance represents a particular concentration of an abstract relation or activity. Each one started out as someone's dream, as an idea.

How can we use these devices in a liberative fashion – beyond labour-saving and utilitarian, as in the earlier notion of the appliance, through the inscription of leisure using a variety of televisual and audio equipment and into the present with its multitude of discourses that can potentially effect the home and allow it to interact with the larger social world?

Returning to Firminy for a moment, we have seen how each home has been transformed by the various desires of its inhabitants. In a sense we can argue that domestic space reproduces endlessly, mirroring and reflecting the needs of its inhabitants. By introducing the possibilities of the myriad of discourses that are currently circulating in the world 'out there' into the home, we can allow the repressed psychical structure of the home to be more fully integrated within the lived structure of contemporary domestic life. For all of us have a fantasy about the present...

Judith Barry  
Ken Saylor  
April 1993

## Maison du présent :

### (Home)icide

Notre titre suggère l'homicide, la mort, le domicile, peut-être un crime. Il y aurait là un double jeu de mots, de langage, puisque se trouvent mêlées l'idée du domicile (home) et – partant maintenant d'icide – celle du côté (side) d'une chose quelconque, de ce qui ne se trouverait pas en face de vous, mais à côté; et qui serait aussi, peut-être, comme un suicide, un crime sans victime.

Il y a donc un mystère: mystère qui porte sur le domicile et ce qu'on y fait, sur ce que le domicile pourrait devenir, sur ce qu'il pourrait être. Le détective que vous êtes aura à trier les indices et à examiner soigneusement les preuves; puis enfin à juger cette prémisse architecturale qui peut vous sembler avoir fort peu de rapports avec l'architecture. Car il s'agit d'un projet d'investigation, donc de quelque chose de provisoire, de discursif et de spéculatif, qui ne doit pas aboutir à de l'architecture – c'est-à-dire à ce qu'on pense couramment être de l'architecture – mais qui pourrait cependant (du moins, nous l'espérons) jeter un peu de lumière sur ce que l'architecture est susceptible de devenir.

Que signifient ces propos sibyllins? Commençons par le commencement, c'est-à-dire par la proposition qui nous a été faite de nous rendre à Firminy et d'explorer les espaces publics et privés de l'UNITE de Le Corbusier.

### (Privat)iser

Lors de notre visite à Firminy, nous avons été frappés par un phénomène fort intéressant, à savoir la façon dont les locataires de l'UNITE réaménageaient leur appartement pour qu'il devienne le reflet de leur condition sociale. C'est donc à partir d'une réflexion sur les véritables conditions de vie des habitants de Firminy, que nous avons décidé de réaliser un appartement "témoin" reflétant dans sa conception nombre des stratégies discursives qui définissent nos façons de vivre contemporaines.

Par conséquent, notre travail prend quelques libertés avec le paradigme fort courant de la maison ou appartement témoin: l'omniprésente "Maison de l'Avenir" qui, témoignant d'un mode de vie utopique, se trouve projetée dans un proche avenir, pour se concentrer sur la vie contemporaine. L'une de nos prémisses est que nous vivons le plus souvent dans un environnement qui ne sait pas plus retenir que représenter les forces qui modèlent notre vie; mais aussi que ce défaut de représentation découle en grande partie du modernisme et de sa conception du domicile comme "cellule vitale". A travers notre projet, nous espérons corriger un certain nombre de faiblesses dans la façon dont est actuellement perçu l'espace domestique, qui ont pour effet de censurer certaines formes de représentation. Nous chercherons à articuler des discours susceptibles d'ouvrir des pistes impossibles à prévoir ou à percer jusqu'ici, et de promouvoir par là le renouvellement ou l'hybridation des relations au sein même de la structure domiciliaire.

### (Fam)illes

Dès les premiers dessins de Le Corbusier pour les UNITES d'Habitation, il était clair que l'architecte avait l'intention de remettre radicalement en question le fonctionnement de l'unité familiale, en envisageant l'appartement comme une "machine" destinée à régler la vie