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The concrete house, the house of the imaginary

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Abstract

This article proposes the discussion of some aspects of the creative process in architecture design, particularly the house, mainly according to two authors' views on dwelling and the interaction between the dwelling space and the human imaginary: Gaston Bachelard and Witold Rybczynski. The author examines the relationship between user and built environment and searches for links between the fore mentioned authors' complementary concepts and the shape of brazilian homes built in the last three decades. The conclusion is rather a question than an answer, suggesting that the creative process should be more carefully explored in order to result in better architecture for the end user.

Keywords: Architecture; creative Processes; single-family house.

Introduction

The focus of this discussion is the house, or a built space that serves as a single family's home, be it part of a larger horizontal housing complex or not. Understanding that the house allows different dwellings than the ones propitiated by apartments, flats, short-term dwellings and other variations of shelter, a debate is proposed here about this kind of dwelling creation process, from the vision of two authors about the domestic dwelling and the human imaginary: the philosopher Gaston Bachelard and the architect Witold Rybczynski. The site proposed is the city of Belo Horizonte in the period from the second half of the XX century until these days.

In Bachelard's opinion the inhabited space transcends the geometric space. He defines the house as our place in the world and elaborates on the relationship between men and their house, the concrete geometric house and the one of memories and reverie.

'[...] the house is, at a first sight, a rigidly geometric object. We are tempted to analyze it rationally; its initial reality is visible and tangible, made of well carved solid, well placed beams. The straight line predominates; the plumb line has left its balanced wisdom mark. Such geometric object should resist to metaphors that hold the human body, the human soul. But the transposition to the human occurs instantaneously, as soon as we face the house as a space of comfort and intimacy, as a space that should condense and defend intimacy' (Bachelard, 1993, p.63, our translation).

Comfort and intimacy are some of the attributes of the house studied by Rybczynski, as well as the domesticity, privacy, convenience, the charm, style, essence, among other aspects perceivable by the human soul¹. Such attributes are not necessarily absent in other forms of dwelling, but possibly appear more intensely in the house; perhaps because this is the most primitive type of dwelling we can refer to.

The house, as we know today, is a relatively recent way of dwelling in the history of humanity. Up until the Middle Ages it was not even established for man the consciousness of an inner world, that would take him to the concepts of privacy or intimacy. According to Rybczynski, intimacy was less linked to functionality than to the way the room conveys its owner's personality. Life was a public matter, people were not as self-conscious as today and private rooms were unheard of (Rybczynski, 2002, p.48).

In a gradual transformation of the family relations, substituting the extended family² which dwelt the Middle Age housing arises the nuclear family, composed by father, mother and children, which even nowadays can be considered as the prevailing model in the contemporary society.

'The word home reunited the meanings of house and family, of dwelling and shelter, of property and affection. "Home" meant the house, but also everything which was around or in it, as the people and the satisfaction and contentment feeling that aroused from all that' (Rybczynski, 2002, p.73, our translation).

'The house was not merely shelter against nature elements anymore, a protection against the invader – these ones still being important functions – and had become the environment for the new social and compact unit: the family' (Rybczynski, 2002, p.87, our translation).

¹ The term "human soul" borrowed from Bachelard, here relates to the human perception that can experiment beyond the strictly pragmatic and rational, that the author's approach focus.

² The extended family would be the group, that in the Middle Ages, dwelt, and oftentimes worked in the same environment, composed by family, employees and apprentices.

This nuclear family, more specifically this individual who composes it, conscious of the existence of an interior world and its demands, will be the center of this discussion on the house.

Bachelard's investigations aim to determine the human value in properties, in spaces designed for sheltering purposes, in the beloved spaces (Bachelard, 2000, p.19). He does a poetic reading of the house and based on Jung's line of thought relates the house to the structure of one's soul. According to Bachelard (2000, p.36), the house is a body of images that give men reasons or illusions of stability. He judges the house as a vertical and concentrated being and proposes the opposition between the rationality of the roof and the irrationality of the basement.

Bachelard's approach in the fore mentioned work is so rich, and its knowledge appear us so essential for laying the foundation of any architectural production, that there aren't enough citations to clarify all the author's thoughts on the house. We will then keep to the essence of those thoughts and develop the discussion on how to make architecture, bearing in mind the vision of the design project's object from the user's point of view, trying to understand this demand.

According to Rybczynski (2002), the notion of comfort has not always been present in the history of dwelling. It was a concept developed over a long period and when brought to England from France developed into the concept of domesticity.

'House was a social place, but with a curious privacy. It was not the medieval "big house", where people come and go naturally. Quite the contrary, the English bourgeois house was an isolated world where very few chosen ones were accepted, the world was kept at bay, and the family's privacy was the least possible disturbed as well as the individuals' (Rybczynski, 2002, p.117).

The nuclear family can be considered at that time, the domestic group model which contributed for the consolidation of several concepts related to dwelling. Nowadays, although this model can be considered statistically predominant, we cannot miss the variations in the familiar structure and lifestyle of the western cultures. However, it is possible to state that the individual consciousness that there established itself is still a determinant of the demands and expectations related to the private space.

Creating the House

Understanding architecture as an applied social science which necessarily transits between technique and art, studying the house is exciting for its-being an architectural object that

requires special interaction between the design agents and the end user, involving the latter in a much more intense participation than in any other type or architectural object. This circumstance of greater interaction between architect and dweller during the process of creation of the house may be justly related to the great symbolic meaning that the house represents, associated that it is with which is the most primordial way of dwelling. The building of a house tends to be a complex task of various goals for its dweller or user, from having it as a shelter to realizing a dream fulfilling desires and reveries collected throughout their existence. Thus, designing a house goes beyond solving geometric issues and making it inhabitable. It's a task that requires the ability to perceive and understand one's imaginary, symbols and desire for their poetic concretization into a livable space.

Rybczynski, elaborating on nostalgia, trying to unveil the attachment one has to past references, juts out that the common taste is not necessarily related to authenticity of certain images, but rather to the emotions caused by them. Observing sets that appeal for bringing references from the past in fashion, decoration or advertising, he mentions tradition:

'This strong tradition consciousness is a modern phenomenon which reflects a desire for habits and routines in a world characterized by changes and constant innovations. The reverence of the past has become so strong that, when traditions do not exist, they are invented' (Rybczynski, 2002, p. 23, our translation).

Still Rybczynski (2002, p.15) citing Hobsbawm (1983): Nonetheless, if there is such reference to a historic past, the particularity of the "invented" traditions is that they connect to it in an extremely artificial way. This statement will interest us especially in the quest of the understanding of our residential architectonic production, as we will see ahead.

According to Mahfuz (1995, p. 21, our translation):

'Architecture ordainates the human environment, control and regulates the relations between the man and his habitat. Doing this, architecture serves to various functions besides the practical ones. Before starting a project, there is a preliminary phase which seeks to define the problem, which comes from the information analysis of four project imperatives, necessary and sufficient for this definition. These four imperatives are: the pragmatic needs, the cultural heritage, the climate characteristics and the naturally available resources'.

This initial phase, which some authors call problematization³, is, for us, the phase in which the investigation of the user's perception mode regarding the built environment, where he lives his poetic aspirations related to the new housing site.

³ For Malard (2005) the talent of the architect is in his ability to problematize, and formulate hypothesis of solutions and to analyze and articulate criticism for the necessary corrections, eliminating the inappropriate solutions.

It seems particularly intriguing to analyze “doing architecture” at the same time under the focus of Mahfuz’s systematic thought, and in Bachelard’s phenomenological approach. Considering the architectural project as a synthesis process where concepts, technical data and elements of various disciplines must combine under a projectual structure capable of result in a functional and concrete space that at the same time bears a meaning for the user, the apparent contradiction between these two approaches might aid the understanding of a complex reality.

In a time that may be considered one of the most remarkable in the history of architecture, modernism started as a movement which sought to solve urgent and pragmatic problems related to dwelling, and as a side effect of this search, a true revolution in the architectural design concepts, with a production that even today influences the pursuit of many clients and architects worldwide. There was a concern of simplifying and standardizing industrialized elements, as a means of making mass production more effective as was needed at the time⁴. However much the production of that period showed common elements⁵, and if practical needs would set the tone of the process, one may not affirm the resulting cityscape was dull or meaningless.

The masterminds behind the architecture revolution in the 20’s and 30’s shared the research in the field of the use of material and new techniques derived from the Industrial Revolution. They had a common pursuit for an architectural language that’s in harmony with these new conditions, unlike what was then the status quo. They expanded the enclosed geometric spaces and opened up the interiors for light and nature to come in. (...) They didn’t see function as a means to satisfy primary biological needs, they saw themselves as the presenters of a new society where Le Corbusier’s “Basic Happiness” was not meant to be a luxury item, but a right for all (Kopp, 1990, p.23).

The city of Belo Horizonte was the cradle of Niemeyer’s first significant works, forming the Pampulha architectural complex. In the following years the city saw important examples of the modernist residential architecture arise, mainly in the Cidade Jardim neighborhood. In the 70’s and 80’s however, the city saw the establishment of a new style that would resemble the colonial architecture of baroque Ouro Preto, which would be denominated “colonial” by their proud owners and “colonish” by architects criticizing the inconsistent pastiche. This new trend reached phenomenal popularity, so much so that some modernist buildings were being re-styled with colonial ornaments. What were the inhabitants of such architecture seeking? It might be worth reviewing Rybczynski (2002, p.27)

⁴ At the time the modern was not a style, but a cause, Kopp (1990) analyzing in depth the historical context where the modern movement arises, facilitating the comprehension of the foundations of that movement.

⁵ The five points of that architecture, created by Le Corbusier, turned out to become canons of the modern architecture. Open plant, free façade, pilotis, roof garden, ribbon windows

'Is this desire for tradition simply an anachronism or a reflex of a deeper dissatisfaction with what the modern world created? What is this which is missing and we look so eagerly for in the past?'

This style that might be considered predominant in that time probably fulfilled their inhabitants' poetic desires in what comes to private space, or at least create an illusion of it. But copying a model just for its appearance with no relation to its essential reasons may stake the effective quality of the space. The houses would be badly lit, since the windows that might have been suitable for original colonial houses don't necessarily fit the new shape interior spaces had taken.

Furthermore, identity⁶ is a value that was definitely lost in that context. The identity of the house in the city, the neighborhood, the condominium, seems to be very valuable to its inhabitant, regardless of its economic value or social class. It's interesting to note how, historically, houses in homogeneously configured housing projects are individually stylized as soon as they're occupied. This reflects man's need to print their identity onto the home, as said Bakelard, our place in the world, our first reference point. Even a simple choice of a new façade color shows the inhabitant's need for marking his territory in a sea of homogeneity.

However, if we check the biggest agglomerations of houses in the city of Belo Horizonte, we can observe in different moments, an apparent search for standardization, which seems to run against the cited fact; It seems to be, in most houses, an easily identifiable mark, which makes the setting, in a way, more homogeneous than logic would seem to indicate. Even considering the human species has fundamental defined needs – that is, very simple ones, if we glance at our remote ancestors' life styles – and that the architects generally have a similar formation pattern, it is at least questionable that one is able to build so repetitively for beings who search to differentiate themselves from the context so intensely.

It is expected that the creation of a new house should be for the architect an opportunity to innovate, invent, research, update knowledge and contribute to the client's quality of life as well as to the quality of the site where this new edification will be built. For the client, probably there will be many other aspirations that will compose this moment of a new house creation choice. Such poetic charge that follows the house since its first dwelling will certainly influence on his/her requests for the architect, in their search to make explicit of what to expect in the new house. However, creating a house which will inspire such sensations is up to the architect. Architecture, especially residential, has this primordial role of creating life, private or not.

Once again recurring to the modernist movement, it can be said that it had fundamental importance for the reviewing of the traditional understanding of the architectural standards, as

⁶ According to Houaiss, the set of characteristics and circumstances which distinguish one person or a thing and thanks to which, it is possible to individualize his/her.

repetition of known formal proceedings. For Mahfuz (1995, p.18, our translation), in the academic composition,

given parts were organized according to fixed combination rules, and the whole was "dressed" with a chosen style. In the modernism, given parts, that is, individually created are freely organized, according to the architect's intention.

The author also states:

'The difference between art and non-art resides in the first one's structure, because its elements are also present in the work of those ones who are not artists, but without a structure that unites them' (Venturini, 1964, p.21 apud Mahfuz, 1985, p.35, our translation).

Would it be worth saying that this repetitive architecture discussed here lacks structure which would make it a piece of artwork? Or trying to understand the issue from the dwellers' side: while as client demanding certain characteristics for the new house, wouldn't this client be looking for a known model which would bring some illusion of safety in an attempt to present himself as the connoisseur of some model previously accepted as ideal?

Noticing the massive repetition of certain elements which print a homogeneity mark onto the houses in the context here analyzed, it would be reasonable to question whether architecture was answering the clients' desires satisfactorily. We propose two points for this discussion: were the architects taking their clients' desires into account, the ones related to the cultural heritage and all its implications? In the case of the "colonial houses", would the local history have so deeply marked the popular taste through those architectural elements that even a few generations later they could yet be meaningful, even as merely copies?

The answers to these questions are not so simple, mainly if we observe the recent occupation of the city with a type of architecture that is no longer concentrated downtown, but in suburban condominiums and in neighboring towns, which represent the new axis of urbanization. The occupation of many new districts, some of them high-standard closed condominiums, has been dominated by a mass of cubes and cobblestones which aggregate forming residential unities, in a more homogeneous landscape than any other verifiable local architectural periods. If one tries to understand the copying of colonial architecture as some desire for tradition or for some poetic reason associated to a romanticized idea of the past, what can one say about this new phenomenon?

This new version of standardized architecture does not seem to reference any moment of local history nor it seems to answer to any cultural heritage. On the contrary, it transpires conceptual inconsistency that can be perceived as an alert on how residential architecture is being produced. If, in the apartment building design, the endless repetition of typologies and architectural elements can somehow be justified as they are intended for undetermined users,

the same mindset doesn't apply to residential architecture. By affirming that the dwelt space goes beyond the geometrical one, and talk about the metaphoric aspects involved in the relationship of men and their home, Bachelard calls to our attention the importance of this aspect of designing the house: it is not enough to fulfill the basic practical needs. It is necessary to create a certain charm, the possibility of daydreaming from the space.

Conclusion

Observing these new architectural landscapes and hearing from very diverse sources a kind of indignation with this apparently empty repetition, we can suppose that, in general, our residential architecture lacks some essence. Really meaningful architectural works move people worldwide, regardless of place, time, size or initial function. That admiration for harmonious space, adequately proportioned to its purposes, well solved aesthetically, is not restricted to architects or historians; the perception of good architecture is accessible to anyone of us.

It is not about judging the projects and works' quality based on one remarkable formal quality, even because architecture is much more complex than what is disclosed at a first sight, what matters here is to question pure and simple copy, so many times disclosed from the copied model's essence.

Obvious principles of good architecture can be seen in diversely shaped and conceptualized houses, but the massive production of a certain model leads us to believe those principles were put aside, traded-off for the superficial valuing of more evident aesthetics.

What seems relevant for us in this discussion is, therefore, put the discussion's weight about doing architecture in such a way that it can perpetrate cultural values, and not simply relegate architecture to trend-based realizations, which would make its product brief and disproved of real values. And the realization of an architecture which can translate certain poetic and symbolic aspects for the human being certainly includes the attentive analysis of the user's perception of space.

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