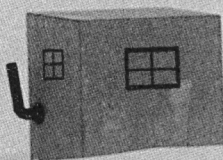


alien architectures by rob kovitz



gringo

In poetry and music, in sculpture and architecture, and in literature and practical arts there always have been and are other phenomena which appear, spread, and die entirely within the cities, remaining unknown and unintelligible to the country and its population. And vice versa: the country has had a series of esthetic phenomena which have not spread, in any noticeable degree, within the cities and their populations. *Pitirim Sorokin and Carle C. Zimmerman, Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology* ... *the stages through which, as a youth, he slowly learned that the world was composed of alien architectures.* *Umberto Eco, The Island of the Day Before* It was in no way accidental that Hoffmann's almost systematic exploration of the relations between the homely and the unhomely, the familiar and the strange, extended to an equally subtle examination of the role of architecture in staging the sensation and in acting as an instrument for its narrative and spatial manifestations. Hoffmann was himself an amateur architect ... and "collector" of strange houses ... *Anthony Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* I wasn't the only gringo who lived here back then. There were a few others, mainly on the run for smuggling arms or drugs. I became friendly with one of them, and one night he came to my hut. Pablo, he said, it's about time you saw the real culture here. So I went out with him. *Eric McCormack, The Paradise Motel*

in the heart of the heart of the country

When I first arrived here most of my neighbours were hiding in plain sight. *Jake MacDonald, Houseboat Chronicles* In every small town there is the lonely man who seldom leaves his own house. Usually he is a bachelor. He has let a high hedge grow about the yard almost hiding his house from the street. There are always whispered stories floating about the town concerning his life in the house. It is said that as a young man he was rejected by a beautiful woman. We Americans are born romanticists. Often there are more dark menacing tales. In his youth it is said that he committed some mysterious crime. It may be that he came suddenly into town from another place. Year after year his house remains unpainted. The yard before the house is overgrown with weeds. The front porch is rotting away. Occasionally he is seen emerging from his house at night. He hurries furtively along streets. He continually talks to himself. *Sherwood Anderson, Home Town* Billy Holsclaw lives alone—how alone it is impossible to fathom. In the post office he talks greedily to me about the weather. His head bobs on a wild flood of words, and I take this violence to be a measure of his eagerness for speech. He badly needs a shave, coal dust has layered his face, he spits when he speaks, and his fingers pick at his tatters. He wobbles out in the wind when I leave him, a paper sack mashed in the fold of his arm, the leaves blowing past him ... Billy closes his door and carries coal or wood to his fire and closes his eyes, and there's simply no way of knowing how lonely and empty he is or whether he's as vacant and barren and loveless as the rest of us are—here in the heart of the country. *William H. Gass, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*

members of the class

And there is a fish called a *Hermit*, that at a certain age gets into a dead fishes shell, and like a Hermit dwells there alone, studying the wind and weather, and so turns her shell, that she makes it defend her from the

injuries that they would bring upon her. *Izaak Walton, The Compleat Angler* Shack people represent a relatively wide range of incomes, but irrespective of their income they are the object of universal derision in Springdale, a declassed group. By the style of their dwelling—the jerry-built shack, the converted barn, the abandoned tenant house—they implicitly reject the whole complex of middle-class life styles. In the status evaluation made of them by others in the community, it matters little whether they consciously reject the middle-class patterns or whether they simply fail to understand the importance of housing styles. *Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, Small Town in Mass Society* *My house is diaphanous but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapor. Its walls contract and expand as I desire.* *George Spyridaki, Mort Lucide* To do hermitage, the preference for one's own company. Picture yourself in such solitude, in natural surroundings, say, the classical version. Build a hut in the woods, split your own logs, grow things, ritualize daily subsistence, listen to the wind sing, watch the treetops dance, feel the weather, feel yourself in touch with the way things are. You remember your Thoreau. There's a definite political component to avoiding all other human-beings and taking on the coloration of your surroundings, invisible as the toad on the log. Whatever the spiritual content, it is the action of hiding out, you see these guys hide out, so the question is, why? It may be a normal life directed by powerful paranoid impulses or it may be a paranoid life that makes sense given the particular individual's background. But something has happened. If he is hiding, I want to know why. But supposing on the other hand we all seek to impose the order we can manage, the more public the order the better we are known. Politicians are known. Artists are known. They impose public order. But say you are some hapless fellow, you can't keep a job, the wife nags, the children are vicious, the neighbors snigger. Down in your basement, though, you make nice things of wood. You make a bookshelf, you make a cabinet, sawing and planing, sanding, fitting, gluing, and you construct something very fine, you impose that, order, that is—the realm of your control. You make a bigger cabinet. You make a cabinet you can walk into. You build it where nobody will watch you. When it is done, you walk inside and lock the door. 0001. Members of the class: feral children, hermits, street people, gamblers, prisoners, missing persons, forest-fire wardens, freaks, permanent invalids, recluses, autistics, road tramps, the sensory deprived. (See also astronauts.) *E. L. Doctorow, The Leather Man*

salvation coast

It was years before Gazarra was willing to accept that particular phenomenon found along the Salvation Coast. It was so strange and against all nature that he was tempted to consider it a perversion, or a scandalous secret only he was aware of. Yet it was true ... *David Homel, Get On Top* No monuments or landmarks guide the stranger / Going among this savage people, masks / Taciturn or babbling out an alien jargon / And moody as barbaric skies are moody ... / There is no law—even no atmosphere / To smoothe the anger of the flagrant sun. / November skies sting like icicles. / The land is open to all violent weathers. *Douglas LePan, A Country Without a Mythology* Here we have a selection of a particular sort of environment which does not seem to be attributable to chance. *Albert Blumenthal, Small-Town Stuff* If you come to a strange land / bow down / if this place is outlandish / bow down / if the day is all strangeness / yield /—you are infinitely more strange. *Orides Fontela, Initiation*



shed-roofed type

"And what is your chief artistic interest, Mrs. Kennicott?" "Oh—" Aware that the traveling salesman had murmured, "Dentistry," she desperately hazarded, "Architecture." "That's a real nice art. I've always said—when Haydock & Simons were finishing the new front on the Bon Ton building, the old man came to me, you know, Harry's father, 'D. H.,' I always call him, and he asked me how I liked it, and I said to him, 'Look here, D. H.,' I said—you see, he was going to leave the front plain, and I said to him, 'It's all very well to have modern lighting and a big display-space,' I said, 'but when you get that in, you want to have some architecture, too,' I said, and he laughed and said he guessed maybe I was right, and so he had 'em put on a cornice." "Tin!" observed the traveling salesman. Raymie bared his teeth like a belligerent mouse. "Well, what if it is tin? That's not my fault. I told D. H. to make it polished granite. You make me tired!" *Sinclair Lewis, Main Street* There is a[n] ... unfortunate practice in our books and speech to use the Eskimo word *iglu* (*igloo*) for a special type of house which we suppose to be or think of as being peculiar to the Eskimo. The first trouble is that we are then making a narrow, specific use of one of the broadest terms possible; for in the Eskimo language ... *iglu* means a temporary or permanent shelter for man or beast. To an Eskimo a railway station, cathedral, farmhouse, and cow barn are *iglus*. (There are districts, or it is claimed that there are, where the word is slightly narrowed; but even then only to meaning a temporary or permanent shelter for human beings, as opposed to animals.) *Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Arctic Manual* Small and simple in design, the popularity of the shed-roofed residence was due to the ease and

inexpense with which it could be constructed (Plate 24). A settler did not have to be a skilled carpenter to build such a house and construction took little time. Early photographs and remaining examples indicate that shed-roofed residences varied in size and plan. Some, such as a now-abandoned structure near Hnaua, were simply constructed single-roomed bachelor shacks that rested on a foundation of loose stone (Plate 25). Others, built as more permanent structures, had several rooms and concrete foundations (Plate 26). *Edward M. Ledohowski and David K. Butterfield, Architectural Heritage: The Eastern Interlake Planning District* Before I proceed further, I will describe to you all the aspect of house and site; and all the manner how I approached this place, which stood upon so lofty a rock that in Spain there stands none higher. But I climbed up with great labor, yet notwithstanding I was attentive to see and to pore wondrous low at my feet, to find out if I could in any wise of what manner of stone this rock was; for it was like a thing made of glass, save that it shone much more brightly. But of what congealed matter it was, I wist not, of a truth. But at last I espied that it was every whit a rock of ice, and not of steel. Thought I, 'By Saint Thomas of Kent, this were a feeble foundation on which to build so lofty a place! He ought to boast but little who builds hereon, so God save me!' *Geoffrey Chaucer, House of Fame* Of these huts, built entirely of snow, I must add that they were all lighted by a large oval piece of clear ice fixed about half way up on the eastern side of the roof. We found that these huts had been but just erected; they were scarcely a day old; so that the architectural process of this country did not occupy much time. *John Ross, Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of a Northwest Passage*

aesthetic theory

What happens if you pull down / beams and supports? / A host of opinions greet / the leaning skeleton house. / Carpenters with rulers and ink / keep milling around. *Chong Ch'ol (1536-1593), Confusion in Government* We have said ... that man is regressing to the *cave dwelling*, etc.,—but he is regressing to it in an estranged, malignant form. The savage in his cave—a natural element which freely offers itself for his use and protection—feels himself no more than a stranger, or *rather feels as much at home as a fish in water*. But the cellar-dwelling of the poor man is a hostile element, “a dwelling which remains an alien power and only gives itself up to him insofar as he gives up to it his own blood and sweat”—a dwelling which he cannot regard as his own hearth—where he might at last exclaim: “Here I am at home”—but where instead he finds himself *in someone else's house*, in the *house of a stranger* who always watches him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent. *Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* No meaning, yes. But it would be impossible to say that we are not haunted. Freud has described such experiences as “uncanny,” or *unheimlich*—the opposite of *heimlich*, which means “familiar,” “native,” “belonging to the home.” The implication, therefore, is that we are thrust out from the protective shell of our habitual perceptions, as though we were suddenly outside ourselves, adrift in a world we do not understand. By definition, we are lost in that world. We cannot even hope to find our way in it. *Paul Auster, The Invention of Solitude* *I had not pondered Kant's rather lenient remark about the crooked timber of humanity, out of which nothing straight is ever wrought.* *Martin Amis, The Voice of the Lonely Crowd* Adorno supports his observations by citing Freud's dictum “that the uncanny is uncanny only because it is secretly all too familiar, which is

why it is repressed.” (Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*) The familiarity of estrangement in modern art, Adorno concluded, as opposed to the distance of the apparently familiar “classic” artwork, was a result of the very “repression” of modern art’s effects; its dismissal by contemporary critics was in fact a sign of its secret comprehensibility. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*

efflorescences

“What this house wants to be is Greek Revival,” said Bill. “It does?” said Judith. “How does it know?” Tracy Kidder, *House ... the remains of may-flies form a snowy layer on the ground ... In fragments of ice he perceives efflorescences ...* Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of St Antony* Now as yet I never had questioned the woman ... why I had been brought to the house, or how long I was to stay in the house. There I was; just as I found myself in the world; there I was; for what cause I had been brought into the world, would have been no stranger question to me, than for what cause I had been brought to the house. Herman Melville, *Pierre, Or, The Ambiguities* Everybody, quite rightly, dreams of sheltering himself in a sure and permanent home of his own. This dream, because it is impossible in the existing state of things, is deemed incapable of realization and so provokes an actual state of sentimental hysteria; to build one’s own house is very much like making one’s will ... When the time does arrive for building this house, it is not the mason’s nor the craftsman’s moment, but that moment in which every man makes *one* poem, at any rate, in his life. And so, in our towns and their outskirts, we have had during the last forty years not so much houses as *poems* ... Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*



An excerpt from *Ice Fishing in Gimli*, a bookwork-in-progress.