The Yin, the Yang, and the Three Bears

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Earlier in this aging century, architects were given to writing ardent manifestos proclaiming the death of a shackling past and announcing the onset of a modern architectural salvation. Just over twenty years ago, Robert Venturi, speaking for members of another generation (his own and mine) presented a "gentle" manifesto in favor of pluralism and history, noting that the American Main Street was "almost all right." That gentle manifesto triggered howls of rage from the orthodox Moderns, and even Venturi's own position hardened into defense of the "ordinary" against the "heroic" modernists. An exhibition, new in 1986, called "Modern Redux," picks up the competition in previous centuries between the Moderns and the Ancients, and picks up the cudgel again in favor of the Moderns against the Ancients, by now marshaled under the banner of postmodernism.

I have believed for some time that sense might be made of the opposing views in the terms of "yin" and "yang," the Chinese diagram of opposites complementing one another. If our century's predominant urge to erect high-rise macho objects was nearly spent, I thought we might now be eligible for a fifty-year-long respite of yin, of absorbing and healing and trying to bring our freestanding creations into an inhabitable community. I like that, but am growing impatient with fifty-year swings, and wonder whether a more suitable model for us might be Goldilocks, of Three Bears fame, who found some things (Papa Bear's) too hot or too hard or too big, and other things (Mama Bear's) too cold, too soft, or too small, but still other things (Baby Bear's) just right, inhabitable, as we architects would say. The early modern polemicists disliked the world they saw and expected the opposite to be an improvement (like Goldilocks part way through her testing), but their panacea turned out to have its drawbacks, too, and it seems more accurate to note that, even as humans have yearnings—for place, for roots, for changing sequences of light and space, for order and clarity, for reverie—just so, when each of these yearnings is satisfied, we can feel surfeit, and seek to head another way, to mobility, or ambiguity, or surprise.

But there is one architectural circumstance more universal than our yearnings and surfeits. Buildings, Donlyn Lyndon pointed out to me years ago, are receptacles for human energy. If they receive enough of it, they can repay in satisfaction for the occupants, as in the biblical image of bread cast upon the waters. It behooves architects, it seems to me, therefore, to do everything we can do to increase the human energy put into "our" works, so those works can repay it. The care and love, then, of everyone involved—architects and builders and inhabitants, even the bank loan officers—should be invited. I still remember visiting some of Louis Kahn's building sites with him; everyone there from the guard at the gate on forward seemed vitalized by his part in the work. I don't make any parallel claims for the buildings in this book, but they do represent attempts increasingly pointed. I think, as time goes on, to collect as much energy as we can, starting with our own care and then trying to include the energies of the site (as at the Sea Ranch) and of the local history (as at the University of California at Santa Barbara Faculty Club) as well as the spirit of the inhabitants, their dreams and images and ambitions and care (as at the Hood Museum and St. Matthew's Church).

The buildings in these pages, I submit, should not be seen as signposts to some Architectural Utopia or some Big Revelation, or to some perfectible style, but rather as attempts better to gather into structures the energies of people and places. These attempts come from a belief that the world contains an astonishing number of wonderful places, fancy and plain, large and tiny (or somewhere in between). My own most worthy contribution, I believe, is that I have encouraged (it used to be decried) looking at places and listening to
people, acknowledging the sources, even exulting in them, adding our own
energies, care, and love, and even joy, if we have it in us.

Which is not to say that I decry learning and the rules. I stretched out my
schooling as far as I knew how and have been involved with architecture
schools, with hardly a gap, for the last forty-four years. I read The
Fountainhead at an early age and identified with the supercilious bad guy
Peter Keating, rather than with that dangerous baboon Howard Roark. And I
value the limited formal geometries I’m about to describe, even as I value the
caring that transcends limits.

The buildings themselves don’t make a particularly orderly oeuvre; they
were all done in response to a particular client, on a particular site, usually
with particular design collaborators. I started organizing the work of trying to
remove every project I didn’t really need and I never could get the list below
sixty-five buildings.

So, I started from the other direction, with four sections. I wanted to
include my own houses, eight of them by now; a section called Houses As the
Center of the World lets me include the geometries that have focused schemes
for houses and housing; Frivolous and Serious Play allows me to describe
some places meant as playgrounds which have offered chances for my most
serious explorations; and Fitting is the chance to show buildings designed to
be good neighbors to other buildings or friendly to a special past or a special
site or to a special group of people.

My own houses have given me the chance to pursue chimera, to the
possible discomfort of no one but myself. There have been eight of them, so
far: my house in Pebble Beach, California, on a sloping lot with a view of Point
Lobos to the south was really for my mother. It was built in 1955, with rooms
in single file facing south to the view. The plan, very like one I had done at
Torch Lake, Michigan, in 1948 (my first house), was 16 feet 2 inches wide, on
a 2-foot 8-inch module carefully set up to minimize wasted lumber and to be
within the $11,000 budget that the veterans’ loan demanded. The scheme owes
a lot to the Japanese buildings I had just seen for the first time, especially the
gardens at Daitokujii in Kyoto.

The next house was a square pavilion across the hills from Berkeley, in
Orinda, California. I had fallen in love with the site when Dick Whitaker, who
was looking for a lot himself, took me one noon hour to see it. A slope thick
with oaks had had a circular pad bulldozed years before, so it looked as if it
had always been there, and I remembered a description by an early Chinese
poet—I think Li Po—of his little square house on a round meadow. I had to
have one, too. My square pavilion measured 26 feet 8 inches on a side. By the
time the house was designed, I had bought several wooden columns from a
demolition in San Francisco. They had cost only two dollars each and were
over 11 feet tall, so I argued that they would keep me from thinking too small.
They became two square aedicas within the larger square and had, I thought,
to hold up the roof, on which I wanted a skylight. That left the outside walls
structurally redundant, except that they were required for shear; so the sides
became half wall, half sliding doors, with all the corners left open, to insist on
the supporting role of the big columns. That allowed for symmetry about a
diagonal axis, which pleased me.

My next house, built in 1964, and still mine, which makes it the longest
inhabited of my own houses, was a condominium in a group designed by
Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, Whitaker for the Sea Ranch, north of San Francisco.
Here was another four-posted aedicula inside a square barn structure with a
two-story object beside the four-poster which contains kitchen below, bath
above, and a sleeping loft above that, in what we thought of as a giant piece of
furniture and have painted several shades, first of blue, later of gray to
emphasize layers of shelter in a thrillingly exposed site on the bluff above a
rocky bay.

The fourth house is in New Haven, Connecticut, a workman’s little house
of the 1860s bought in 1966. The standard procedure then was to gut old
houses, but this one was so small that gutting would have yielded about one
middle-sized room. I decided therefore to poke some vertical holes and line
them with double layers of painted plywood. For reasons of code and
preferences, the openings were staggered, the first one just inside the front
door opened to the basement; the next one, in the living room creating the only room on the entrance floor, opened up to the roof; and a third one, under the one-story rear wing, opened to the basement again, which was kitchen, dining, and study. The vertical shafts, or tubes, were named Howard, Berengaria, and Ethel, and the cutouts in their plywood linings, in an early case of supergraphics, played with making fragments of shapes too grand to fit in the tiny house—my East Coast version of the giant columns in the little house in Orinda.

We bought an old brick factory in Essex, Connecticut, in 1969. The property included a Victorian gingerbread wooden predecessor of the factory, which had been storage rooms, but became my apartment. An entry building was gutted and then partly filled with an object which contained kitchen below and bath above and a big stair, all of it painted with stars and stripes to match a spirited paper napkin I had chanced on. The stairs and a bridge led to a large upper room, the main living room, big, with ancient, dark, beaded board walls and ceiling. After some tentative moves, I finally seized on an Olivetti calendar that showed a section (like an ant farm) through an Egyptian pyramid, and decided to make a pyramid cut away on the front to reveal passages full of toy figures and a train, and cut away behind to accept my bed. Once I had the pyramid, I established an interest in the U.S. dollar bill with its pyramid topped with an eye (a witch ball would do) with ANNUIT COEPTIS NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM ready to be painted on the ceiling. The U.S. currency green, which was the obvious color to paint the pyramid, came off a touch too blue—just the color of a watermelon—which led to our painting the cut sections of the pyramid green into watermelon pink. We skipped the seeds.

The first act of the new tenants when I left was to sweep all this away.

I moved to Los Angeles in 1975 and found myself looking for a lot, to build again. This time I joined two other academic families from UCLA, and we bought a vacant lot 50 by 125 feet not too far from the campus for three condominiums. The site plan is based on the reasonable premise that arrival in Los Angeles is always by car, so the place for the cars should be the main plaza, not a grungy dungeon below it. My own condominium is the smallest and fit in front, climbing up over three parking spaces. The whole place inside became a giant room with landings: guest room, bath, and hot tub are below, opening onto the patio, which doubles as a required car parking space; on the middle level is a dining room, kitchen, and tiny passage to a master bedroom and bath; on the top landing is a living room and study. But it is the stair, all visible from the entrance which serves here as the grand act, like the columns in Orinda or the tubes in New Haven, to try to make a small apartment spacious.

The cabin at Pine Mountain, in the mountains north of Los Angeles, is the same scheme as the Los Angeles house, but smaller, a flight of stairs on a very steep slope with flat spaces along the way, and open decks to the sides. The interior painting here was the special act, with widening bands of soft dark colors which owe a great deal to the similarly painted dining room at Olana, Frederick Church's house above the Hudson, north of New York.

The most recent house, in Austin, Texas, was occupied in 1985, but at this writing it isn't finished yet. Here the grand gesture is a giant ellipse in plan, which sweeps through and opens up my house, and will eventually continue outside (as chain link) to screen off a pool, thence inside the house next door, where it is suggested on a fireplace wall. The original house on the wooded site, a rather nasty wood-floor cottage of 1936, had been enlarged in 1950 by an even nastier addition, on a concrete slab. This slab became rather attractive when the asphalt tiles were pulled off, revealing a grid of mottled mastic. I thought it would be archaeologically proper to reveal both and painted a loose net of lines and circles over them, on a scale grander by far than the house deserves.

What all these houses have in common (besides their modesty, and my residing in them) is a grand gesture, and since there was no client to offend but myself, they gave eight special chances to walk the thin edge of disaster.

The next section I'm calling Houses As the Center of the World, for what have been lifelong preoccupations of mine: to try to make each dwelling the center of the world for its inhabitants, and then to make groups of dwellings in
which each place centers its occupants. Following an idea developed by Sir John Summerson in *Heavenly Mansions*, we found ourselves employing a four-posted aedicula which served Egyptian pharaohs and medieval saints alike as a dwelling, to enshrine (without too much confinement) contemporary inhabitants. The first clear aedicula house of mine was in 1961, for the Cyril Johnson family. Then there were two aediculas in my own little house in Orinda, and more in larger houses later. After that, there were variations: houses built, like the Bonham cabin, with mechanical spaces hung on a high central space like saddlebags on a horse, and houses, like the Jenkins House project in Saint Helena, California, where the house is a quartet of sheds spiraled around a middle space open to the sky. The Otus House project, too, on a steep hill is built around a center, here a stair.

There are two houses for Fred and Dottie Rudolph. One is in Florida on a Gulf Coast beach where a central court is divided by a walk that leads to the Gulf, one side a jungle, the other side open and sunny, but protected from the winter breezes. The other house is in Massachusetts, and more formal, a mini Villa Roizenda on a side hill. Here a dome very literally marks a center, which in the more casual Florida house is indicated by the diagonal walkway to the open waters of the gulf.

The Burns House in Santa Monica Canyon is meant to accommodate two different worlds, built on the one hand around a fine organ, and on the other around a sybaritic swimming pool. In between is a twisting stair up to the third floor, dark and lined with books, in contrast with the bright and cheerful space around it. The exterior colors were developed by Tina Beebe, dozens of them, to make ambiguous the volumes of the house, to entice the soft light of the coastal canyon into playing around the stucco planes, and to camouflage the three-story box so it might better fit among its one-story neighbors.

The Miglio House, at the Sea Ranch, finished in 1986, is not so much at the center of the world as at the edge of it, its rooms lined up along a slope to share a view of the sea. A slight curve in the planaux under a continuous roof gets extra height and more light and life in the living room.

The Hoffman House in Dallas, to be built in 1986, spreads relaxedly around a central plaza. Its chief gesture inside is a stepped ceiling which forms, with the two adjacent sloping roofs, a tray ceiling.

Groups of dwellings also need to make their several inhabitants feel at the center of the world (this is harder than in houses, since the inhabitants may not be known in advance). At Church Street South, in New Haven, a diverse set of public spaces—greens and streets and plazas—give at least a memorable address to each of the identical apartments. At Whitman Village in Huntington, Long Island, town houses all have their own front doors and fourplex buildings match in scale the big old houses across the street, to avoid the isolated look of a housing project. At Kresge College, at the University of California at Santa Cruz, student dwellings each claim a position along a street between faculty offices and a dining room, with a set of offhand monuments (telephone booths a laundromat) to help mark the way.

Buildings, I have insisted for a long time, can and must speak to us, which requires that we grant them freedom of speech, the chance to say things that are unimportant, even silly, so when they are grave or portentous we can tell the difference. I have taken it as my particular mission to emphasize the light and sunny moments. I'm calling some of the projects *Frivolous and Serious Play*; I think the two are not inimical, and that both can be joyous. These are all places where people are meant to have a good time. The Faculty Club at the University of California at Santa Barbara was meant to evoke the brio of the Santa Barbara of the twenties and thirties, especially its County Courthouse, alternatively exploding with joyous leaps of scale and beguiling with romantic shadows, like nothing that the past had ever created.

Lovejoy Fountain in Portland, Oregon, made in Lawrence Halprin's office in 1964, is a waterfall in the High Sierra abstracted into 5½-inch steps, brought alive with water falling and enticing people to come closer. We started on the next fountain in 1974, in a piazza for the Italian community in New Orleans, Louisiana. This time we weren't so shy about abstracting our spaces, and straightforwardly employed the map of Italy, made in steps with water running down the Po and the Arno and the Tiber, with more water forming details of
places where the extension department meets the public, on a little plaza across from an alumni house, also one-story high at the edge of a campus otherwise composed of big buildings. People tell me they feel much at home in the two buildings, though no one yet has ever heard of the Roman chapels.

Most important, I believe, for what may come in the future, is the enlistment of the energies and images of the people who are going to use the buildings. St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, in Pacific Palisades, California, was designed by about 150 members of the parish, with the architects in the background until we became needed to compose the extensive directions and vivid images that the members of the parish had developed. Our contract called for 67 percent acceptance of a scheme; we got an 83 percent vote and the sense, clearer than ever, that enlisting human energy is the key (or a key, anyhow) to making buildings in which people feel they belong.