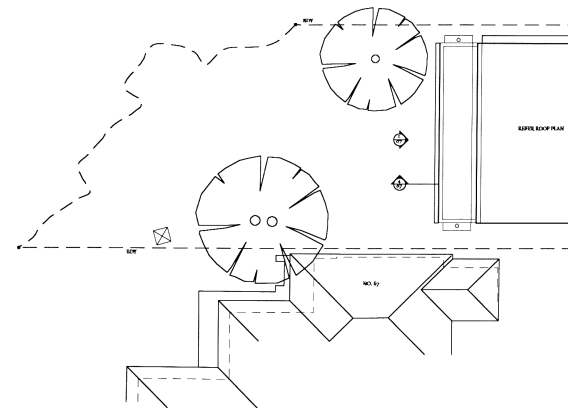


How to Get Home



Every spirit builds itself a house and beyond a house a world and beyond its world a heaven. Know then that the world exists for you . . . build therefore your own world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

THE FIRST DECADE of my life was spent living in hotels and dreaming about living in a house. This book is driven by my fascination about why the idea of home takes up so much room in our imaginations. What does a roof over our heads mean to each of us, at different stages in our lives and depending on different circumstances, as we journey from the nest of the cradle to the shelter of the grave? It's informed too by my curiosity about what architects can do to improve the way we live, whether we are young or old, rich or poor.

The strange array of structures in which we cocoon ourselves, where we seek sanctuary from the complexities of the twenty-first century and fortify ourselves against inconstant nature, are of crucial importance to us. Increasingly, so it seems. In recent years, there's been an explosion of media interest in the choices we make about designing, decorating, building or buying houses. Newsagents' shelves buckle under the weight of house magazines, and every month seems to bring another television lifestyle program about celebrity homes, interior design or the backyard.

As infotainment about domestic design has grown in the popular media, in the universities they've been debating the ideas that underpin residential architecture. Experts from widely divergent disciplines – including sociology, history, geography, anthropology and philosophy – have joined architects to look at how shelter has differed across time and across cultures. Yet what the academics uncover rarely seems to filter down to the producers of lifestyle magazines and TV programs to pass on to ordinary thinking people.

English speakers juggle the words *house* and *home* with such abandon that they have become almost indistinguishable. Although it might have one less letter, *home* is a much bigger word than *house*. It's more evocative, more politically charged and steeped in emotion. It's laden with connotations of family, ancestry and homeland.

While the banks talk of 'home loans' and developers peddle never-lived-in 'project homes', I like to think that architects and builders make houses; that houses become homes only when we take up residence in them, christen them with love and memories, make them the centre of our world. At the end of the working day we *go home*, we don't *go house*. For a house to be a home, I think you need to feel positive about the place: secure, rooted, comfortable (*at home* not *at house*) and able to express yourself within its walls. Although I haven't set out to define what people mean when they speak about home, one academic's suggestion is close to my heart: 'If it isn't chosen, it isn't home.'

The privilege of choosing an architect to design a house tailor-made to suit your idea of what a home should be is at the core of this book and its central chapter. You might never get to do it yourself but you can take vicarious enjoyment, as I have done while researching this book, in following how others have spent years (and millions of dollars) collaborating with architects to design their dream homes. But a dream home doesn't have to be an elaborate, expensive structure, as I found out when I encountered an architect who, more than any other I have ever met, has uncompromisingly embodied his values about what is essential in life within the one-room structure that he and his family call home. The closer I looked at architecture as a profession the more I wondered whether it was valid to think of architects as artists. If it was then what arts might we liken architecture to? Can the design of a house be

inspired by the score of a musical composition? Should our homes be more like theatre sets, stages on which we play out our lives?

Because I have no formal education in architecture, the questions I raise about housing are simply the result of naive curiosity. How do we shape our expectations about what a house should be? Do these expectations begin, as I begin this book, in the kindergarten, where children seem to mysteriously replicate the same image of home the world over? Did the building blocks, doll's houses or sandcastles you played house with as a child influence your ideas of domesticity? Where do your children imagine they are when they sit contentedly for hours beneath a blanket draped across two chairs, or in a cardboard box, or escape into some obscure corner of the house, daydreaming of fantastic places that adults can never hope to enter?

Many men and women appear to have a fundamental urge to build with their own hands, whether it be a hut in the woods or, as it is more often, a mansion in suburbia. I've tried to understand what's behind the monumental impulse to build big (what in this world, or the next, could drive a woman to spend thirty-eight years constructing a house that at one stage had about 750 rooms?). And why are most of us innately conservative about the places where we live, allowing nostalgia to govern our tastes to the frustration of the architectural profession?

If, like an increasing number of city-dwellers (including me), you live not in a house but in an apartment, then you might sometimes wonder how your lifestyle fits into the traditional idea of home. Perhaps you see apartment living as a compromise to the popular dream of the free-standing house. But, as I learned, the early Romans didn't have any qualms about living on top of one another nor did nineteenth-century Parisians. Living alone, yet together, in apartment blocks, should we consider our homes as refuges from the neighbourhood, or little

neighbourhoods in themselves; places where we still need to deal with issues such as lack of privacy and noise? And does living in a high-rise building come at a higher social or psychological cost than living on the ground?

Having to give up your home in later life because you can no longer cope with the place can be as devastating as losing a partner. But as I discovered there are ways of designing living environments for now that are less likely to turn against us later on, when we grow old. Faced with the situation where you, or your partner or parent, might have to move into an aged-care facility, you might be surprised to discover how architects have worked with health authorities to develop more home-like places that cater for the special needs of those with disabilities, especially Alzheimer's, a disease that corrupts the way we see our domestic environments in the most fascinating and sometimes frightening ways. And if you think that architecture favours sight above all the senses, my visit to the home of one blind woman will give you pause to think again.

At the end of the day what does all this talk of home and architecture mean if natural disaster, or war, or life's pressures finds you wandering homeless or sleeping rough on the streets? Among architects' often innovative, sometimes strange, responses to providing emergency shelter are converted shipping containers, huts made of paper tubes, fibreglass domes and inflatable clothes. But the shelters the homeless build themselves, out of cardboard or plastic or abandoned umbrellas, hark back to the starting point of all architecture, the primitive hut, the type Adam and Eve might have built in paradise. And, after speculating on what houses might be like come the year 2033, it's to paradise that I am inevitably led for this book's finale, imagining building codes in the hereafter.

Dream Home raises more questions than it answers. But I've written it in the belief that there are others who will enjoy pondering them; readers who are now ready to begin to think more deeply about the places in which we live out our lives, beyond seeing them simply as resaleable commodities. This is an exploration of home through personal remembered spaces and architectural visions. All you need bring is your curiosity and imagination.

I should add though, in case you too are wondering, that I'm frequently asked whether I'm a frustrated architect. Certainly, until early in secondary school I did see it as a career option. I had wanted to study what was then called technical drawing, and I still feel it might have led me on to architectural studies. However, the Catholic brothers who taught me insisted that I take Latin instead. I even sent my father to the headmaster to argue my case but, as they say in the classics, the rest is history.

Who's to say whether I would have done better as an architect than as a journalist. Architects, of course, are not all geniuses and mustn't be revered as such. As with any profession, some are enormously inspiring, generous people whose work will make a difference. Some are the most pedestrian practitioners and others are fractious personalities who have chosen to conduct their careers with honest arrogance rather than hypocritical humility, as Frank Lloyd Wright once said of himself. I don't think I'd be happier if I had ended up at the drafting table rather than here at the keyboard, my nose pressed up against a window through which I gaze with puzzlement upon the world of human habitat in all its diversity, both ramshackle and glorious.

12 June 1956

Bob is resting his ear against Lorna's swollen stomach, eavesdropping for sounds of life, a heartbeat from beneath the soft swoosh of embryonic fluid. On the other side of the fleshy wall, I am at home, floating and gently somersaulting in my dark, spa-like bubble. Through the warm waters, I stretch out my hand and tap on the inside of my mother's stomach, signalling my father that I am ready to swim towards him. What I do not know is that once I leave this place it is never to return, and that no cradle, no room, no house will ever recapture its comfort.