

Tradition and Arrival of the New: Six Houses

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I am indebted to Charles Sullivan for the subject of this essay. Shortly before shelter orders locked down much of California, he telephoned asking me to think about giving a talk at the Towers on architecture. We talked about a date later in the spring of 2020, but then agreed to wait and see whether the coronavirus would interfere. It did. There things were left, but as Charles was about to hang up he said, “You know, the audience will probably prefer traditional architecture to modern.”

Why should that be? I had a possible title, but not a talk. And, as I began to think about it, I realized that ‘tradition’ is not a synonym for old and ‘modern’ not the same as new. Both words are freighted with what observers know or feel about the buildings they observe.

When we look at a building, we call it traditional if it is conservative, of a form and shape seen before, familiar to builders, perhaps published in hand- or pattern-books, influenced by the past or by regional style.

When we think of a building that is modern, we may see something innovative, unfamiliar, surprising in form or shape, that uses materials in a new or creative way, is possibly published in current journals or papers, defines the cutting edge stylistically, and even if it has been around for years, points to the future.

My objectives in this paper have been to look to the recent past and examine how the traditional and the modern—as elastic as those terms are—have developed and changed simultaneously. I realize that any building, just completed, is new to its creators. Also, some distance in time is required before students of architectural history begin to notice differences in style between certain designs and others. Finally, even the words ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ are coinages that haven’t meant, for long, what we now understand them to mean.

Royal Barry Wills (1895-1962)

Wills, our traditionalist, was born in Melrose, MA in 1895. He attended M.I.T., graduating in 1918 as a structural engineer. He spent 1919 to 1925 working for Turner Construction Company, Boston, as a design engineer. On the side, he published sketches of houses in the Boston Transcript, hoping to become known and to obtain commissions. In 1925 he was registered as an architect and opened his own office in Boston, practicing there until his death in 1962.

Wills was known as the ‘master of the Cape Cod style.’ Using a form typical of Massachusetts houses from the 1600s forward, Wills found ways of building comfortable family homes that were instantly popular. They fit in; they were comfortable; they were easy to enlarge and to modify.

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959)

Wright, one of the giants of world architecture during the late 19th century and first half of the 20th, was 71 in 1938 and showing no sign of slowing down. Well known to the editors of Time and Life, he had posed for the cover of Time Magazine in 1937, standing in front of his own drawing of Fallingwater, the modern masterwork Wright designed for the Kaufmann family of Pittsburgh. Construction of Fallingwater had been substantially complete in 1937. New York’s Museum of Modern Art had organized a traveling exhibition, “A New House by Frank Lloyd Wright,” in 1938. Life was presenting Wright as the modernist of choice.

Modernist yes, but not chosen by the ‘clients.’ The Blackbourns chose the more modest Cape Cod design of Royal Barry Wills and built it in 1939 in Edina, Minnesota.



House in saltbox style, 1930s. Source: Wills, Richard, op. cit.



Fallingwater. Source: fallingwater.org.

The 1970s and 1980s

Let us move ahead in time forty to fifty years. The Great Depression has lifted, World War II has been fought and won, and California has continued its influence as a center of innovative residential design.

Joseph Esherick (1914-1998)

Joseph Esherick was born in Philadelphia in 1914. He entered the architectural program of the University of Pennsylvania in 1932 and graduated in 1937. At the time, most design programs in American universities were modeled after those at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris. Beaux-arts training began with architectural history, drawing, mathematics and basic engineering. Students were then given a series of progressively difficult design problems. A typical problem would consist of a listing of basic building needs (program) and a written description of the use and character of the desired composition. A specific site was almost never indicated. The student would analyze the written material and make an initial drawing or sketch. This would be the kernel of his project, which would continue to be developed in detail. A final 'thesis' problem would be quite ambitious and of large scale, such as a cathedral or civic center.

Esherick excelled in Penn's program and was a successful student and athlete, even president of his



Shaw House, San Francisco, 1987. Exterior elevation. Source: Jay Turnbull.

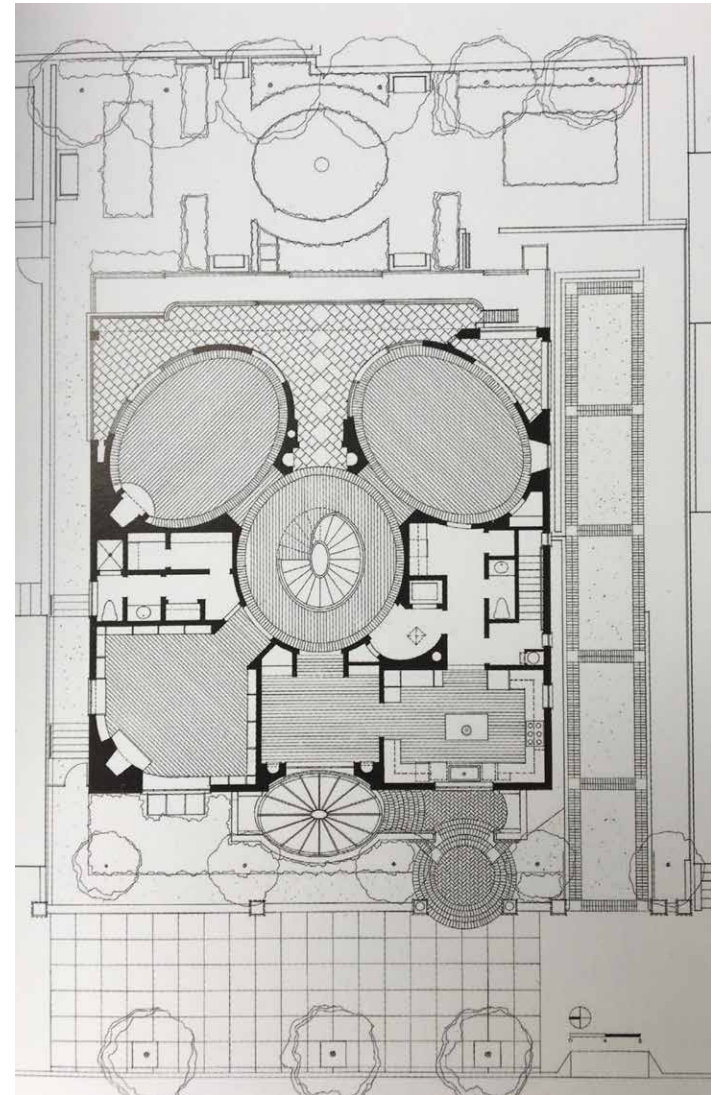
class. After graduation he came to San Francisco and worked with architect Gardiner Dailey. During World War II he was an aerial reconnaissance officer in the Navy.

Upon return to San Francisco after the war, he opened his own office in 1946. He began designing houses of simplicity and sensitive relationship to site. Later, over a design and teaching career spanning more than 50 years and including association with George Homsey, Peter Dodge and Charles Davis, Esherick exerted a profound influence on Bay Area architecture. The firm he founded continues practice as EHDD.

One of the last houses Esherick designed, this work is traditional in a unique way. The client made a special request: don't include any right angles. As can be seen in the main floor plan illustrated, the architect has avoided right angles everywhere he could, and has substituted curving shapes not seen since the late Renaissance or Baroque periods. He said, "It's the only house I ever did in my life where I used what I was trained to do in school."



Shaw House, San Francisco, 1987. Interior stair. Source: Marc Treib, *op. cit.*



Shaw House, San Francisco, 1987. Plan diagram. Source: Marc Treib, *op. cit.*



Gehry's former residence, front elevation. Source: archeyes.com.



Gehry's former residence, side elevation. Source: archeyes.com.

Frank Gehry (1929-)

Frank Gehry was born in Toronto and spent his childhood and high school years in Canada. In 1947 his family moved to Los Angeles. He began college work at Los Angeles City College and later transferred to USC in 1948, earning a degree in architecture in 1954. After a time in the Army and experience in prominent Los Angeles firms, Gehry spent a year at Harvard in 1956-57. He opened an office in Los Angeles in the early 1960s.

Frank Gehry's former residence in Santa Monica, initially built in the 1920s and remodeled in 1978 for his own use, is quite famous even today. Gehry, still practicing in his 90's, is identified with building new and 'difficult' structures even though some have been standing for decades. Here, Gehry has overlaid chain link fencing, plywood, concrete steps,



Gehry's former residence, interior. Source: archeyes.com.

corrugated metal siding, and exposed framing upon an existing house. He has changed the interior substantially. His intent in designing anything has always been ‘making the new.’

It is not the first house Gehry designed. But he lived in it; it was home. It was a design laboratory for him during forty years. The exterior is fragmented, similar to the many housing tracts, freeways and shopping centers—in varying states of construction or deconstruction—that Gehry saw during his college years in Los Angeles. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of social upheaval, even unraveling, particularly in California. The atmosphere was described in Joan Didion’s 1967 book, Slouching Towards Bethlehem: “It was the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization” Didion later said.

Gehry’s practice is not confined to residences; he has designed relatively few. He is known for his work at the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles; and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris—among many other innovative and famous designs.



Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao. Source: Guggenheim, Bilbao.



Disney Concert Hall. Source: architectmagazine.com.



Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris. Source: architectmagazine.com.

2000s

Closer to our own time, two architects of international scope demonstrate that what we used to call 'traditional' and what in the mid-20th century was 'modern' is not so easy to discern at present. The artists mentioned here feel free to incorporate elements from the past in whatever they do, and to pair these elements with austere modernity when they please. I call Annabelle Selldorf a traditionalist because she has successfully rehabilitated important antique landmarks; and David Adjaye modern because many of the details of his work may shock and have never been seen before. But we can let succeeding generations apply other labels.

Annabelle Selldorf (1960-)

Selldorf was born in Cologne to parents who were architects and designers. She moved to New York in the early 1980s, later obtaining a bachelor's degree in architecture at Pratt Institute and a master's from Syracuse University. She opened her own office in 1988.

The house shown here, an artist's residence in Sagaponack, New York, is tied both to the existing structures of its site (barn and outbuildings), to the materials used, and to existing form and proportion. In addition, the end elevation of the new structure is strongly reminiscent of the Graeco-Roman temple fronts that have been seen since ancient times. The overall impression is one of coherence and continuation. Hence, I have called it traditional.



Sagaponack House & Studio, main elevation. Source: selldorf.com.



Sagaponack House, front elevation. Source: selldorf.com.



Sagaponack House, barn. Source: selldorf.com.



Sagaponack House, relationship between the house and the barn. Source: selldorf.com.

Other work by Annabelle Selldorf includes a projected new addition to the Frick Collection, New York; she was chosen for this project after an earlier project failed to protect a much loved courtyard garden by Russell Page. The Neue Galerie, New York, completed in the 1990s, houses Viennese art of the Art Nouveau and Secession periods. The Clark Institute of Art, where she rehabilitated historic structures and Tadao Ando made modern additions, was completed in 2015.



The Frick expansion. Source: selldorf.com.



The Clark Institute. Source: selldorf.com.

Sir David Adjaye (1966-)

David Adjaye was born in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, the son of a Ghanaian diplomat. He moved to Great Britain when he was 9 years old. He obtained a bachelor of arts in architecture from London's South Bank University in 1990, and a master of arts from the Royal College of Art in 1993. His early promise was shown when he received a medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects for the best design project at the bachelor's degree level in 1990.

Adjaye has taught at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard and is known for private houses, exhibitions of his designs, and furniture.

The Mole House, London was designed for the artist Sue Webster, who participated in development of the design. Formerly the site of a detached Victorian house, the remains of that building were vacant and derelict after 40 years of occupancy by the "Hackney Mole Man," an eccentric. Adjaye and Webster removed much concrete that had been added to or had replaced the original building and expanded the house at basement level. The result is astounding—certainly enough to call it modern in today's sense.



Mole House, front elevation. Source: adjaye.com/photo by Ed Reeve.



*Mole House, interior. Source: wallpaper.com/
photo by Ed Reeve.*



*Mole House, exterior with wall. Source: wallpaper.
com/photo by Ed Reeve.*



*Mole House, stair detail. Source: wallpaper.com/
photo by Ed Reeve.*

In the U.S., Adjaye is best known for his design, with two other firms, of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.



National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC. Source: architecturalrecord.com/photo by Alan Karchmer.

I hope you will agree that the three pairs of houses shown here exhibit differing qualities, and that they are worth examining when we think what new and old, traditional and modern, mean. To me, what is traditional is what we inherit. This may limit us, and tie us to forms and practices that spring from a single set of norms.

What is modern is what appears new. It won't be completely new—what is, after all?—and with time the label may be attached to methods of building that are almost antique. But the modern makes us think again about what we see, and whether to admit it into everyday life.

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