The Hybrid Practitioner

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Writing about architecture can transport us to another place and time to understand not just the intricacies of architectural design and production, but more significantly to contextualise and frame the built as a cultural and social project. To understand what it was like to grow up in an early Modernist villa or housing estate, our creative documentation research project Growing up Modern, undertaken by myself and Coryn Kempster, looks directly to a group of individuals who were the first inhabitants of radical Modernist domestic spaces as children.¹

Did living in such settings change children’s attitudes? Did these radical environments shape the way they look at domestic space later in life? Were children in Modernist homes self-conscious about their avant-garde surroundings, or proud of them?

To answer these questions and others, we documented their memories in an effort to understand the impact, or lack thereof, that these buildings had on our interlocutors at the time, as well as the influence, if any, they continue to have on their adult selves. Moreover, we wanted to understand the buildings themselves from the perspectives of their users – not as sterile monuments or architectural visions, but as places that harboured life, and in many ways continue to do so. The stories gathered offer an aggregation of individual memories that differ in circumstances, intensity, and details, and which have all inevitably faded with the passage of time. They nevertheless paint a uniquely intimate portrait of Modernism.

To speak with the children who first inhabited these buildings, and not the adults, was crucial for us. Beyond the practical impossibility of speaking to residents who have long since passed away, the adults chose either to commission or to live in the avant-garde settings and might therefore be partisan to
them. Instead, we sought the perspectives of their children, who we imagined were more open-minded and less inhibited. We were fortunate to interview Rolf Fassbaender, Ernst Tugendhat, Helga Zumpfe, and Gisèle Moreau, original inhabitants, respectively, of a row house by J. J. P. Oud in the Weissenhof Estate, in Stuttgart, Germany (1927); the Tugendhat House, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in Brno, Czech Republic (1930); the Schminke House, by Hans Scharoun, in Löbau, Germany (1933); and Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation apartments in Marseille, France (1952). As part of the project, we also visited our interlocutors’ childhood dwellings and documented them through photographs that reflect their recollections.

Much has been written about the Modernist architects’ claims of bringing about social change and the fulfillment (or failure) of these lofty ambitions. Our aim is neither to prove nor disprove the success of these buildings in this context; our project is not a quantitative study of the influence of architecture on its inhabitants, nor an assessment of Modernism’s wider social effects. Rather, it is an attempt to record the personal, unique, and fleeting memories of people whose childhood surroundings, through luck or the directed efforts of their parents, were unconventional. While it may be difficult to divorce the impact of architecture from its socio-economic or cultural contexts or the ideals of those who inhabited it, it is nevertheless worthwhile to examine these buildings from a point of view, that of the user, that has not been commonly represented in architectural history.

The stories allow both architects and those interested in architecture to view these iconic buildings from another perspective, prompting readers to imagine design through the eyes of children and more generally through the eyes of the user. The goal of the research behind Growing up Modern has been to challenge ourselves, and our audience, to better understand the visionary and political agency of architecture, not by denying the fact that architectural spaces are functional – that their histories are multifaceted and not controlled by the architect – but precisely by embracing this reality. “Oral history interviews might have the capacity to puncture through architecture’s professional mask and bring to the fore unauthorized, polyphonic, human, and social narratives,” Naomi Stead and Janina Gosseye suggest. By giving voice to not only the architect but also others involved in the processes of producing and using architecture, Stead and Gosseye argue for the value of oral history as a methodology in the writing of deeper and broader architectural history. While many institutions have accumulated interviews with significant architects and landscape architects, the perspective of the user has typically remained uninvestigated. In the book Speaking of Buildings, Gosseye, Stead, and Deborah van der Plaat argue that “by documenting the experience of and interactions with buildings over time, oral history can give a dynamic fourth dimension to (what are generally thought of as) static three-dimensional structures.”

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Using oral history methods, our research consisted of a close reading of dialogues and material artefacts. It acknowledges the personal and subjective impacts of the interaction between narrator and interviewer; our individual and collective biases are more or less willingly tangled into the narratives, just as they are present in the framing of each photograph. The circumstances of the informal conversations, the language barriers or errors of translation, the ambiguity of unspoken gestures and implied connotations – all are embedded in the stories. The material is marked by the imperfections of this method, yet we believe it is also greatly enriched by them, ultimately allowing for a fresh and intimate look at these iconic structures.

The conversations we had pointed to no uniform conclusion, no consistent takeaway (nor universal love of white stucco walls and flat roofs). To attempt to define one single lesson would be much too simplistic and deny the richness of our interactions and the uniqueness of each narrator’s circumstances. Nevertheless, these interviews did yield knowledge that might benefit students and designers as much as historians.

Rolf Fassbaender’s happy childhood in a row house in the Weissenhof Estate had a lot to do with the proximity of other families with children and the spaces of the estate, which allowed freedom of play (fig. 15.1). The variety of types of houses and housing in the community, calibrated by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to respond to the different financial statuses of its inhabitants, led to a balance between built-up and open space in young Rolf’s environment. Designed by J. J. P. Oud, the row house itself was compact in area but generous as a dwelling, providing a plethora of amenities for 1927, including indoor plumbing, central heating, a state-of-the-art kitchen, and abundant built-in features.

Fig. 15.1 Rolf Fassbaender lived with his mother at 3 Pankokweg from the opening of the Weissenhof Estate in 1927 until 1939. Mr. Fassbaender’s memories of the row house involve both the immediate exterior of the house, with its sunny garden and service court, and the larger neighbourhood. The interiors of the unit, such as the social space of the living room and especially the balcony off Mr. Fassbaender’s bedroom (where he could sleep under the stars), also figure prominently in his narrative. © Julia Jamrozik and Coryn Kempster.
storage. Daylight poured in through large windows and through the milk-glass skylight above the stairs and bathroom. What stood out were the connections between inside and outside spaces of the dwelling, and the garden in particular. Oud took advantage of opportunities on the garden facade, using the entrance canopy as the base of a balcony and placing a concrete bench in the space in front of the living room windows. Both of these moves required extra thought; they are evidence of care and humanism in the architect’s approach, an empathy and a sincere desire to provide for the inhabitants.

At eight years old, Ernst Tugendhat was the youngest of our interlocutors when he and his family left the famous Modernist home of his childhood (fig. 15.2). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he has the fewest memories of the home’s interiors and features. Given the impending invasion by Nazi forces, the circumstances of the relocation must have been deeply emotional and even traumatic, if not for him directly then for the family generally. Coincidentally or consequently, the time he spent in Brno has largely disappeared from Mr. Tugendhat’s mind. In its place is not only an aversion to the house itself but also a general ambivalence towards architecture and design. The lack of emotion that the dwelling elicits in this former inhabitant is tied to his embarrassment about the opulence of the house. His indifference was striking, and one of the biggest surprises of the project for us, as designers indoctrinated through our own architectural education: that someone could grow up in one of history’s most famous buildings, designed by a widely acclaimed architect, and not care about it in the slightest. Mr. Tugendhat’s feelings are especially unexpected considering the affection that his parents, the clients, professed for the house even well after the family left it. Grete Tugendhat wrote that it allowed them
to “feel free to an extent never experienced before”, in 1969, during a speech in Brno, she confirmed that she and her husband “loved the house from the very first moment.” The freedom the adults experienced in the house was something they anticipated would extend to their children. On 29 February 2012, when the Tugendhat House reopened after extensive renovation, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat – the youngest daughter of the Tugendhats, an art historian, and a devoted advocate of the preservation of the house – spoke to these expectations: “My father believed that the beauty and clear forms of the architecture would affect the ethos of the people living in the house and the children growing up there.” Fritz Tugendhat may not have guessed exactly how the dwelling would affect his children, nor could he anticipate the course that global history would take.

Fig. 15.3 Helga Zumpfe, the youngest of the Schminke children, spent her childhood in the house in Löbau. She still dreams of the house and credits the experiences she had there for informing many personal and professional aspects of her later life. Her recollections further highlight the strong and lasting friendship that developed between the architect and the family. © Julia Jamrozik and Coryn Kempster.

Helga Zumpfe’s personal experience was very different, and her relationship to her childhood home, the Schminke House, stands in sharp contrast to that of Mr. Tugendhat (fig. 15.3). Even during World War II, she was able to enjoy the home that Hans Scharoun designed for her family in relative safety and comfort. Not only did she live much longer – fifteen years – in the house, she was also much older (eighteen years old) when she left it, so it follows that her memories are stronger and more vivid. While particular features and architectural details play a key role in the stories she tells about the home, it is the building’s openness and spaciousness that had the most lasting impression on her, and by extension on us. She internalised these qualities to such an extent that her dreams often still take place inside the house, which, after seven decades away, is in and of itself remarkable. Further, she has tried to adapt her current living conditions – at least as much as possible, considering her more
limited resources – to emulate the openness of the childhood home, privileging views and replacing doors with curtains. Last, she convinced her congregation to commission Scharoun to design a church and community space in Bochum, rekindling her relationship with the architect and bringing his architectural approach back into her life.

Fig. 15.4  Gisèle Moreau moved into Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseille when it opened and has resided there for the majority of her life. She has lived in several apartments in the building but now occupies the apartment in which she grew up, having inherited it from her parents. She is passionately invested in telling the story of the building that has become a significant aspect of her, and her family’s, identity. © Julia Jamrozik and Coryn Kempster.

Having lived for most of her life in the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, Gisèle Moreau is unique among our narrators (fig. 15.4). She has been a witness to the building in every era of its existence, and the mythology of the place has become a strong part of her personal story. The identity of the Unité, and by extension the identity of the architect, have over the years become intertwined with her own. She is an advocate for the building and a believer in the goals that Le Corbusier outlined for it. While her parents may have chosen to move into the building in the first place, it is explicitly by choice that Ms. Moreau has stayed there throughout her adulthood. Her emotional attachment was clear when she spoke about the apartment block and how it has changed over time. While the Unité functioned as state-run social housing only in its initial years, it does provide social infrastructures that are essential to its inhabitants, and these in turn enable a strong sense of community. The aspects of community and collective amenity that Le Corbusier embedded into the building are chief among her memories as a child and experiences as an adult.

In listening to our interlocutors’ stories about these important examples of Modernism, we were most struck by how the moments of humanism in the architecture play out in the memories of those who inhabited these spaces. At the scale of a building, for example, the rooftop of the Unité – a significant social amenity – serves to this day as a place of relief and play, just as the
architect intended. Organisationally, locating the playroom at the centre of the building in the Schminke House enabled and empowered the children in the home. The pass-through from the kitchen to the dining area of the Oud row house shaped family interactions, just as the playroom’s wide windowsill at the Schminke House, with its conspicuously adjacent operable pane, allowed the kids direct access outside before they could even reach a door handle. It is the details, designed for utility but also beauty, that endure in inhabitants’ minds: the colourful glass portholes of the Schminke House or the balcony and bench of the Oud row house.

Designers and students of architecture history must be aware of not only the utilitarian amenities adopted as standard under Modernism but also the particular generosity that was a feature of at least some of the early examples of the movement. While the lessons of Modernism’s focus on efficiency have made their way into the housing canon over the last century, its humanist aspirations and social agendas, at both the individual and collective scales, have often been backgrounded. There is no doubt that specific, humane design requires inventiveness and care on the part of the architect; it often, but not always, requires an additional financial investment. Based on our conversations, we have come to believe it is precisely the moments where such thought is evident that endear buildings to people. These are significant lessons as we deepen our understanding of Modernists’ audacity in questioning conventions and defying norms.

To conduct the interviews for this project, we travelled around Europe in a camper van – an *Existenzminimum* dwelling in and of itself – through a heat wave, with our child, who was just learning to stand on his own two legs. The fragility of our son’s balance was a good reminder of the growing and changing child’s body, while his demands for food and sleep ruled our schedule as much as the interview appointments did (fig. 15.5). Each of the conversations took place under different circumstances, and we personally learned from

![Fig. 15.5](image-url) Visiting the Schminke House (left) and during our conversation with Helga Zumpfe, who grew up in the home (right). © Julia Jamrozik and Coryn Kempster.
each, even beyond the content of the stories the narrators shared about their childhood homes. We learned how to ask our questions better, how to leave more time for replies, and how not to interrupt the recording with laughter. Navigating language barriers and age differences involved deciphering body language and interpreting social customs. Perhaps having a fussy baby along for the ride helped to make the circumstances familiar or familial, disarming our narrators – or maybe it was a nuisance, though they were all too polite to say so (fig. 15.6).

Fig. 15.6  Rolf Fassbaender playing hide-and-seek with our son while showing us the port-holes that feature in the interior doors in J. J. P. Oud’s Weissenhof Estate row houses. © Julia Jamrozik and Coryn Kempster.

We have often had to make the case that we are the right people to be doing this research. When we embarked on our journey of creative documentation, we were not practised interviewers, nor were we seasoned photographers. We were not experts in Modernism, nor were we historians, psychologists, or oral historians. We were, and we are, simply a couple with backgrounds in architecture and visual arts and interests in spatial history and narrative. We are parents – and as these are children’s stories, perhaps this is also relevant. We are designers, and we are educators. As Naomi Stead asserts, it is important to acknowledge our backgrounds:

All scholars are influenced by the particularities of their backgrounds and education, plus the identity categories of class, race, and gender, plus the irrationalities of their emotions, but also their own bodies – we write and speak not only as disembodied floating brains, but as bodies with needs and wants of their own.\footnote{15}

Perhaps most significantly, we were curious and persistent enough to try to get in contact with these individuals and, through them, to add to our knowledge of the icons of Modernism.
We had few conscious preconceptions when we started our research. We were not sure what to expect from our interlocutors and how much or how little they would remember of their pasts in Modernist homes. We hoped their memories would be vivid – but we were aware that, because so much time had passed, this was rather unlikely. We were not sure if their recollections would be positive or negative, and the extent to which they would communicate these emotions. We found it deeply endearing that people wanted to speak with us and share their experiences. We left the interviews with genuine gratitude for the time and openness of each interlocutor, for their trust and willingness to talk to us, total strangers, about intimate details of their upbringing. We believed – and in this we were proven correct – that hearing about the history of a place from someone who grew up there would help us understand the architecture better and would make us pay attention to it in a different way.

For us, the research encompassing the Growing up Modern project has opened up various “other worlds” from the intimacy of speaking to our interlocutors to archival research to the intricacies of the publishing world, with its distinctive processes and conventions, that we were previously not acquainted with. The project has also been influential both in terms of our design practice and in teaching.

When designing domestic spaces, we are now even more sensitive to future inhabitants. We not only listen and implement the clients’ desires offering pragmatic responses to stated objectives, but rather strive to further imagine opportunities for use and occupation. Through narrative projections and scenarios we thus conceive possible adaptations and changing uses over time. In our 2017 Sky House design, for example, we specifically thought about the young daughter and implemented a series of idiosyncratic spaces and elements with her in mind, imagining the memories she may possibly develop in the holiday home.

In teaching the discussion of the childhood home has further been a vehicle for eliciting more subjective conversations than are typical in architectural education. From personal memories, family histories, cultural associations, and social commentaries, the topic allows a focus on people and inhabitation. It offers a mechanism for connecting across age groups, racial, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds. In teaching the seminar to a mix of undergraduate and graduate students at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, weekly drawing exercises of the spaces of childhood by the students became a further tool in unravelling and sharing their domestic narratives.

The topic of the childhood home becomes a link between everyday experiences and the iconic examples of architecture. While the Growing up Modern research expands our sources of knowledge through oral history to include the voices of architecture’s inhabitants, more broadly, it urges us, as academics, as practitioners, and as teachers, to consider what narratives we privilege as we contribute to the writing of, making, and learning about architecture.
Acknowledgements

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Notes


3. Either in the vein of quantitative post-occupancy evaluations or the more conceptual approach presented by AMO and Rem Koolhaas in their guest-edited *Domus* issue “Post-Occupancy” (2006).


Growing Up Modern


9. We are not oral historians and have not been formally trained in the practice, though we have attended oral history workshops at Columbia University. We refer to significant texts on the practice of oral history in our efforts to not only record but also transcribe and represent the stories that our interlocutors narrated to us as part of this project. See Donald A. Ritchie, Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, The Oral History Reader, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006); and Gosseye, Stead, and van der Plaat, Speaking of Buildings.
10. We are careful not to attribute a child’s happiness to the home where they grew up; clearly, the causality is much more complicated. While it is fair to state that Oud’s design only added to Mr. Fassbaender’s happy childhood, it is evident that his happiness is more in debt to the efforts of his mother – which leaves us to wonder if he would have experienced the same level of happiness in an entirely different dwelling.
13. Daniela was born in 1946 in Caracas, Venezuela, after the family was forced to flee the house in Brno.

Bibliography