Barton Myers
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Barton Myers established his practice during the tumultuous 1960s, setting the stage for a career that embraced technology and innovation, though not at the expense of history and context. Housing has been one of his major areas of investigation. His approach is framed by two primary considerations: the physical context of the site—whether urban or rural—and a desire to maximize the flexibility of the living space. Myers has been continually interested in creating an architecture that addresses the needs of a broad population and taps into the vitality of the ordinary. For him, this means the use of industrial materials and common or off-the-shelf objects that assume fresh meaning in a residential setting.

Myers's embrace of the complexity of practice—the “Both-And” in architecture to use Robert Venturi’s terminology—stems in part from his early experience with architect Louis Kahn with whom he studied and worked prior to establishing his own firm. In Kahn, Myers saw the example of a designer who managed large projects with a complex range of functions and utilized those complexities to enrich his projects, demonstrating in architectural terms the duality of servant and served spaces. Myers turned the mundane into art; his sensitivity to space, light, industrial materials, and even environmental systems was integrated into a unified, artistic whole.
Barton Myers and his wife Vicki moved to Toronto in 1968, shortly after Myers graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. The new firm that he established with A. J. Diamond quickly earned a reputation for creative responses to the historical and urban architectural character of Toronto. They demonstrated their nimbleness at York Square in 1968, when they successfully converted four brick houses to commercial use, thus preserving the character and scale of the neighborhood.²

Several blocks north of York Square the Myers found an empty lot between two-story working-class brick houses on a block of similarly modest homes. Myers saw the site as an opportunity “to prove the feasibility of infilling on vacant properties to maintain and reinforce the urban fabric....”³ His goal perfectly coincided with concerns of a local residents group that refused permission for a developer to use the lot for parking; Myers’s plan to build his family residence was welcomed.⁴

Within the 25-by-125-foot lot he inserted a 2,400 square foot courtyard plan house for himself and his family, which he completed in 1970. Myers has observed a parallel between the narrow, internal courtyard of his house and the parti of ancient Roman urban dwellings, though in place of an open-air atrium he built the house around a 20-by-40-foot covered court. On the lower level the interior court links the garage and reception area to the living, kitchen, and dining spaces. On the upper level a bridge connects two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a study, located at the front of the house, to the master bedroom and bath at the rear. A tranquil garden lies at the rear of the property. Roof decks are accessible by ladders in the bedrooms. The court, roof decks, and garden all bring light into the house.
IV–4
Myers House, 19 Berryman: street facade, 1972

IV–5
Myers House, 19 Berryman: Vacant Lottery site plan with his own house as an example of urban infill and consolidation, 1978; Barton Myers Associates
The visible structural steel frame, with open web steel joists and ribbed metal deck, allows walls to be flexibly located and becomes the glazing frame. Plate glass is clipped directly to the steel frame. The mechanical systems are dramatically exposed and extend nearly the length of the house. The high-tech style shares a playful, irreverent quality with the contemporary Pop Art movement, treating utilitarian components as sculpture.

From the street the house has a modest presence, though its vivid yellow supergraphic street numbers and use of industrial steel lights suggest the strong design aesthetic found within. The intimate reception area opens dramatically into the courtyard that is more than two-and-a-half stories high. As Myers noted “the perception is that the house is bigger than it is...yet only the courtyard is a big room.” Zoning bylaws prohibited windows within three feet of the party walls so Myers had no choice but to open the house to the sky and to the front and rear yard. The juxtaposition of the open steel structure with the solid concrete block sidewalls suggested to Myers the Museum of Natural History at Oxford University (Deane and Woodward, 1855–1860) where a skylight bathes an interior iron structure that is surrounded by brick walls.

After careful consideration of the conditions in Toronto, especially the long winter season and narrow site, Myers settled on a greenhouse enclosure as the best solution for his house. The extensive natural light transmitted through the roof made it Vicki Myers's favorite feature of the house. “Natural light is addictive, it has a magical quality that artificial light just can’t duplicate. I’m so accustomed to it that sometimes I get depressed when I go into a conventional house where the light level is lower.”

Barton Myers: Works of Architecture and Urbanism
Myers’s use of a steel frame structure for his house was an early example of his ongoing exploration of the material in a residential context. In the late 1960s he and Diamond developed prototypes for mass-produced steel houses for the Steel Company of Canada (STELCO), which were the basis, with some modification, of seventy-seven steel houses built by the British Steel and Dominion Foundries (DOFASCO) in Hamilton, Ontario in 1971.

Myers saw the steel house as a kit-of-parts, comprised of off-the-shelf prefabricated components. In this regard his design explorations continue the ideas found in the California postwar steel houses designed by Charles and Ray Eames (Case Study House 8) and Pierre Koenig (Case Study Houses 21 and 22) for Arts and Architecture. Despite the brilliance of the individual Case Study Houses, however, the goal of the program—to sponsor prototypes for middleclass housing—was not realized.
In 1971–72 Myers was presented with another opportunity to explore the steel frame house within a confined, albeit suburban context. The site for Larry and Mary Wolf’s house is a lot in the exclusive Rosedale section of Toronto, at the edge of a public park. Larry Wolf, an entrepreneur who had achieved success by launching new products, was clearly intrigued by the process that off-the-shelf building technology implied. “We saw the house as the ultimate new product...the mass-market space and flexibility solution of the future.”\(^{11}\)

With his usual candor, Myers described the house,

*It’s slick, let’s face it....We purposely took commonplace parts out of context to achieve a kind of pop elegance. But it is also an honest, elemental kind of architecture. All the independent parts have been weighted for a more direct relationship between cost, function and symbolic appropriateness.*\(^{12}\)

At first look, the landscape context suggests a more spacious site than was true for the Myers House, however strict side yard limitations prevailed, resulting in what Myers referred to as a “narrow shoebox scheme.” The design uses a horizontal row house concept with an opaque sidewall on the east. To the west an open court faces a grove of willow trees that provides protection from south and southwestern exposures.\(^ {13}\) The other major challenge was the condition of the site itself: 20 feet of fill over a subterranean creek. In response, the house was raised on piers to avoid complicated foundation work and to provide space for a future garden/family room.

The *Architectural Record* recognized the Wolf House as a “Record House” in 1977 and in 1981 in *25 Years of Record Houses.*\(^ {14}\) The editors noted that there had been earlier attempts (few as successful) in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere to blur the distinction between industrial and residential design vocabularies. Perhaps it was always a needless distinction, but it is still stimulating to see the steel columns, metal deck and the delicate tracery of open web joists transfer their precise elegance from factory to home so easily and persuasively.\(^ {15}\)
The parti of the Wolf House is similar to that of Myers's own residence. One enters the house via a bridge alongside the carport. The glazed hall, which looks out to the courtyard, leads to the living/dining room. Sliding doors open a galley kitchen along the eastern wall of the living space. On the second floor, another bridge connects the children's bedrooms, playroom, guest room, and bath at the front of the house to the master bedroom, bath, and study at the rear. Sliding doors on tracks, adjustable canvas awnings under the roof skylights, and roller blinds for the glass walls give the owners great flexibility in defining rooms as well as managing shade and temperature control.

Despite the spatial parallels with the Myers House, the Wolf House overtly declares its association with the modern steel frame houses of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Charles Eames, and Craig Ellwood. Rising from the site on pilotis, its crisp steel frame is thinly enclosed by glass and aluminum panels. Plastic domes rise above the flat roof. Internally, the spatial character is more complex than Myers's own house. Glazed walls define the exterior courtyard and set up complex reflections of the surrounding landscape. All spaces are suffused in natural light. As noted by the editors of The Architectural Record, “in its rhythms, its textures and the handling of its details, the Wolf residence is beautifully organized and very skillfully executed.”

The concept of urban infill was taken to a new level in Diamond and Myers's next major housing project: Dundas-Sherbourne housing (1973–76). The architects, with Myers as partner-in-charge, were hired to find a solution for a city block that was the subject of a highly charged political campaign to create low-income housing without losing a row of historic residences.
The project coincided with a political shift led by Toronto Mayor David Crombie and other reform aldermen, who advocated a new vision of public housing containing a mixture of subsidized and near market rate units. The goal was to integrate housing into the community fabric by preserving and renovating existing dwellings and adding new construction on a similar scale. The first real test of the new ideas in Toronto was Dundas-Sherbourne. A newly created housing corporation, later named Cityhome, was the client.

Cityhome selected Diamond and Myers in part, because of the success of York Square. Myers’s solution at Dundas-Sherbourne was to rehabilitate and convert eighteen existing houses on Sherbourne Street into apartments. The public lane and deep backyards of the houses provided enough space to insert a new development of five housing blocks with a walkway between the old and new. The 7 million dollar project created 376 units of various types for 900 residents—many more people than could have been housed in the 24-story towers originally planned for the site.

Myers varied the size and height of the new housing blocks—none rise more than six stories above one level of parking and the overall height is within one and one-half stories of the gable roofs of the existing houses. Four of the blocks are staggered along the rear of the property. A fifth, along the northern edge of the site, connects with Sherbourne Street. The new units are a mix of two-story townhouses with direct access to the walkway and Oskenonton Lane to the east, and one and two-level units on the upper floors with access to a third floor corridor/balcony that overlooks the street.

The form and materials of the new construction are characterized by a simple geometry that expresses the interior configurations of the units. Yellow and red brick faces the concrete frame structure and reflects the materials of the existing houses. Myers ran a series of concrete partitions punched with large circular openings along the fifth floor balconies, creating a playful motif that unifies the upper portions of the buildings. (For illustrations, refer to pages 18–19.)

The Dundas-Sherbourne project is a successful model of large-scale urban infill for several reasons. The project preserves the community’s historic character while sensitively adding over 300 low and market rate housing units into the neighborhood. As a social experiment, the complex set a new standard for urban housing projects.
Barton Myers is a native of the port city of Norfolk, Virginia. He credits many of his urban values including his antipathy toward urban renewal to the writings of city planner Jane Jacob, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Consequently, Myers relished the opportunity to redress some of the negative effects wrought by wide-scale blight clearance projects of the postwar period in his hometown. Among these were several projects in the residential neighborhood of Ghent. Sponsored by Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority’s (NRHA), the area included a residential square that was sold for private development and named Ghent Square.

Ghent Square, with housing sites at the four quadrants surrounding the central green, presented Myers with a modest opportunity to reintroduce high quality urban housing to a community transformed by misguided urban renewal programs. Myers designed units for all four quadrants, but only had the opportunity to construct townhouses at the northeast corner of the area; housing was constructed at the other corners of the square following Myers’s model, but not designed by him. His goal had been to create a unified appearance to the square that referenced the great tradition of terrace housing in London. Working with parcels previously subdivided, Myers designed three different house types in response to site conditions and a desire to offer options to buyers. The townhouses were only 54-feet deep so Myers created an indoor-outdoor space around them. Terraced gardens were placed on garage roofs at the rear of the lots. Each facade was defined by a combined window bay and chimney; the chimney and the Flemish bond brickwork referenced traditions of the Virginia Tidewater region and the neighborhood’s namesake city in Belgium.
When Myers moved to Los Angeles in the 1980s, he immersed himself, as he had done when he first moved to Toronto, in a study of the local built environment. He began teaching at the University of California Los Angeles in 1980 and established a practice.  

The climate of Southern California played a central role in the evolution of Myers's residential practice, just as it had done in Toronto, where capturing the winter sun and harnessing interior light had been a goal of his single-family steel framed houses. In Los Angeles and nearby communities, Myers inverted the envelope and sought opportunities to connect and open the living spaces to the outdoors and the mild climate.

As part of his analysis of Southern California, Myers studied the great Mediterranean landscape traditions that had long-flourished in the area. He became interested in the work of early twentieth-century landscape architects Yoch and Council (Florence Yoch, 1890–1972 and Lucile Council, 1898–1964), Lockwood de Forest, Jr. (1896–1949), and others who created gardens that incorporated terraces, courtyards and landscape features inspired by Italian and Spanish precedent. For Myers their work suggested lessons for extending living and working spaces into the outdoors, methods of responding to topography and climate, though not necessarily precedent for specific architectural forms and details.

The fascination with the steel frame house in Southern California, a small but well-publicized phenomenon, had engaged Myers's attention since his Toronto days and, after a 25 year hiatus, Myers returned to the steel frame house, with a fresh perspective. His first exploration of a new prototype was for his own house.

Myers designed his second house for his family just east of Santa Barbara, California in Toro Canyon on a sloped 40-acre site densely covered with live oaks and with a view of the Pacific Ocean and the Channel Islands. In order to make as few changes to the site as possible, Myers designed the house as a series of four pavilions on three stepped terraces. A guesthouse and garage occupy the lowest terrace, the main house is on the intermediate level, and a studio is located above. Each structure, echoing the other two, is an open space constructed of exposed steel frame, with metal deck framing, and concrete floors. Glazed sectional doors on tracks open the main living space to a view terrace.

There is a disarming informality to the Myers house. It has been described as an “elegant warehouse.” The principle, and obvious means of entering is through the three-bay sectional doors, although a conventional and modest entry door is on the side. The side walls are largely glass doors and windows further dissolving the separation from the outdoors. A clerestory window along the northern façade opens a view to the surrounding hillside. Privacy is created with a double-sided bookcase that separates bedrooms and bathrooms along the north side of the house from the living spaces.

The site is in a fire-prone area and Myers introduced several precautionary measures. A recirculating water system is incorporated into the rooftops, transforming the structures into a series of terraced reflecting ponds. The lap pool on top of the
guesthouse doubles as water storage. Galvanized steel outer roll-up doors provide security and fire protection. Vicki Myers and landscape architect Douglas Richardson planted the new terraces that flank the house with succulents, as well as orange and olive trees and a vineyard.

Myers has described the personal pleasure he derives from the house:

When the fog clears, you think you are in Greece, looking down from the mountains to the changing tones of the ocean....But I'm just as happy lying in bed, looking back to the hillside, or out to the creek through a grove of live oaks. The house and studio open up on three sides so that the boundary between indoors and out disappears. I've always wanted a house that was integrated with the landscape, and this is it.20

The singular importance of the Toro Canyon house has been recognized through numerous awards including an AIA and Progressive Architecture House Award for Innovation in Housing Design (2002).

The Myers House is especially important as a prototype, adaptable to many configurations and sites. The centerpiece of the prototype is the three-bay steel frame structure. This can evolve into an L-shaped or courtyard plan depending on the number of wings. The prototype can be modified for various site conditions, and to the taste of the clients. Recognizing that not everyone may want the sectional or roll-up doors he used on his own house, Myers has suggested alternatives of accordion, sliding, two-or three-panel doors to provide the desired open connection to the outdoors.
Myers constructed three new houses—Gardner in 2009, Bekins in 2008, Rogers in 2006, and remodeled a fourth, using the Myers Toro Canyon house prototype. Bekins and Gardener are in Toro Canyon; Rogers is located in West Los Angeles. Myers created the Morioka House, also in West Los Angeles, by adding to an existing structure using this prototype. Each of these houses in Southern California continued his investigation into the balance between indoor and outdoor living, using the Toro Canyon house as a model and referencing his early high-tech houses in Toronto.

The Bekins House was built in Montecito on the site of the former home of famed conductor Leopold Stokowski; the design has been credited to Stokowski and his first wife Evangeline. Myers oriented the new house on this site in order to retain significant landscape features, notably a row of olive trees that define the edge of a semi-circular lawn, a remnant of the garden design by Lockwood de Forest, Jr. and restored by Arcadia Studio. Myers's plan for Bekins stretches along the east-west axis of the site; the living section of the house looks out to the landscape. The bedrooms are set back and frame two sides of a courtyard.

The Gardner House also sits on a deep site, which rises dramatically to the east. Myers's solution was to provide a stepped walkway and parallel driveway along the southern edge of the property. The entrance path crosses a terrace in front of the main portion of the house. The bedroom and library wing is accessed via a gallery along the north. The landscape and interior design by Rios Clementi Hale Studios treats the site as a series of outdoor rooms, each with a distinct character.
Bekins House, view of glazed, steel roll-up doors and garden
IV–24
Gardner House, Montecito California: view toward entry gate with house in background, 2009; Barton Myers Associates

IV–25
Gardner House, site plan; landscape by Rios Clementi Hale
Rogers House, Los Angeles, California: courtyard with steel and glass doors raised, 2006; Barton Myers Associates
The two steel houses in Los Angeles presented Myers with the opportunity to revisit the steel frame urban house based on his new steel prototype. The Rogers House illustrates the adaptability of the prototype to a corner city lot. The courtyard plan house is built to the lot lines in order to maximize the private open space. The living/dining and kitchen space open onto the courtyard, with private spaces set behind a corridor. The edges of the property are filled with a guest room, game room and garage, all accessible from the courtyard.

The earliest of these steel houses is the Morioka House (2002–5). Myers added a bedroom, bathroom, and side yard landscape to a modest mid-block house in the Venice neighborhood of Los Angeles. The addition connects to the rear of the existing house with a breezeway. In contrast with the other houses, this steel frame addition is sheathed with plywood panels for economy. The west wall of the house is a sectional sliding door that flanks a double-sided fireplace.

Myers has tested other variations of the Toro Canyon prototype that have as yet not been built. Most recently he proposed the Bridge House for a site in Lake Toxaway, North Carolina (2011–12), and an Industrial Research Mixed-Use Campus for a site in Carpinteria, California (2013–14). The 200-foot long Bridge House was designed to span a ravine. In many ways, it is the purest expression of Myers's steel houses: structure, space, and nature are unified in this building which recalls earlier explorations of bridge-as-building, ranging from the late medieval Ponte Vecchio in Florence (dating from 1340s) to Craig Ellwood's Art Center in Pasadena (1989–91), a public expression of Ellwood's earlier conceptual Bridge House (1968). The projected Carpinteria complex consists of one-
IV–30
Morioka House, Venice, Los Angeles, California: elevations and plan, 2005;
Barton Myers Associates

IV–31
Morioka House: exterior evening view looking inside toward studio and bath.
Conclusion

and two-story office, live/work, and community buildings that would sit lightly on the Carpinteria bluffs overlooking the Pacific. Views of the ocean framed through the steel structures are reminiscent of Kahn’s Salk Institute.

Geography, housing typologies, and urban vs. suburban conditions are among the contexts defining Barton Myers’s contributions to residential architecture. The history of his practice—beginning in Toronto then relocating to Los Angeles—anched Myers’s work in two climatic extremes of the North American continent. Utilizing steel, glass, and exposed environmental systems, he creatively framed innate responses to natural light, seasonal change, and landscape conditions in single-family houses in Toronto, Los Angeles, and the Santa Barbara Area.

In reflecting on the importance of the single-family house versus low-income multi-family housing as a subject worthy of architectural attention, Myers articulated a defense of the former when he wrote the history of his house in Toronto. It was his view that the single-family house could be fertile testing ground for many architectural problems. His interest in creating flexible interior spaces reflects a response to cultural and life style changes. He investigated innovative technologies and off-the-shelf elements and materials developed for industrial and commercial purposes. Finally, the public engagement of the house with the street, block, neighborhood, and city was as important to Myers as for other public or civic building types.22

Myers’s concerns about the condition of North American cities have led him to take on several important multi-family housing developments. His Dundas-Sherbourne housing in Toronto was innovative for creating the first low-rise infill housing in Toronto—low-income housing units within a mix of new buildings and rehabilitated historic houses. This development and Ghent Square in Norfolk, Virginia illustrate the important role that housing plays in revitalizing cities and Myers’s early advocacy of a balance between renewal and preservation. Myers’s embrace of history has enriched his architectural practice. He has studied and fully appreciates America’s significant contributions to housing. Virginia’s rich history in particular gave him many excellent examples of domestic architecture, from the Moses Myers House to Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello and he has embraced the challenges they present.