Anti-Site Architecture and the Vernacular

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A building must react to its site. That is generally agreed upon within the architecture community. Architects derive so much of their design from intense site analysis. So what happens when a building is designed without site? What does it mean to be site-less? Or even one-step further, architecture that rejects site entirely – anti-site architecture.

As we travel around a space, we experience an infinite series of moments resulting in our relocation. Great architecture deals directly with these moments and how we experience them. We are constantly reacting to this as we travel through and around spaces.

Twice this year, students were asked to design architecture that moves. Not in the sense that it has moving parts but rather, it physically acts as a vehicle. The houseboat project for second years and the van project for third years were interesting in that, unlike most other projects, the site was ever changing. The moments were no longer restricted to the user, but the building had to react to its shifting site in many of the same ways.

This then poses the question: as architects how do we design, in this case a dwelling space, which accounts for these moments and change? Well frankly, it’s incredibly difficult. The designer no longer has any context to work from, or at least the context isn’t concrete. We cannot draw from site, circulation, demographics, adjacent structures, etc.

There are really two ways to go about this as I see it. The first is to design site-less architecture – something that reacts positively with whatever site it’s placed into, no matter the context. The other is
to design anti-site architecture — architecture that rejects any context and site. Its reactions with the ever-changing moments are always negative, looking alien in any environment.

To better understand this, an appropriate analogy would be comparing building behavior with human behavior. We as humans all have varying opinions on what we like and dislike and as a result, it is impossible to be amicable to everyone else.

Buildings, like us, have opinions, and thus it is impossible for them to accept all sites and surroundings. Neil Leach, author of the book Camouflage, states “[…] human beings are largely conformist creatures, driven by a chameleon like urge to adapt to the behavior of those around [them]”. We seek things to identify with within our present environment, which is where architecture plays its part as it aids us in our search for familiarity and assimilation.

So what does this mean? It means that, on the extremes, wholly site-less and wholly anti-site architecture are unattainable. An entirely site-less building is impossible as it requires the possibility of immediate assimilation to any given context. That isn’t to say that site-less architecture isn’t achievable in a smaller context like a specific city or state. One could design a building for a general area, without a specific site in mind and it could approach site-less-ness, however, as buildings are like people, there is no way to consistently ensure a positive reaction.

Anti-site architecture too is unachievable as Leach argues that, with time, anything becomes part of an environment as familiarity is gradually established, no matter how foreign it may look.

The mobile home is the closest example of anti-site architecture available. It looks immediately alien in almost any site and rejects any neighboring structures or environments, other than when it is surrounded by other mobile homes.

Mobile structures like RV’s and trailer homes however, are almost never considered architecture - but why not? Does an architect have to design something for it to be considered architecture? Certainly not, for architecture, in its most broad definition, is designed space. Though there is also the much more widely
accepted Vitruvian criteria of durability, utility, and beauty. For mobile homes, utility is paramount as they focus almost exclusively on functionality. All the moves made are carefully thought through in the creation of these vehicular dwellings. Perhaps the rejection by the architectural community could be accredited to the “chameleon like” desires Leach describes - “the urge to identify with our physical environment is merely a manifestation of a larger desire to establish some connection with culture as a whole, and overcome the threat of alienation”. We disregard these dwellings because to us, they do not share the same desire to assimilate nor do they aid us in our search.

Unfortunately, this rejection has really limited the architectural potential to impact a large social group. Suppose for a minute that we begin, with this argument, to consider vehicular dwellings as architecture.

There are a few architects that have already begun to do just this. The “Drop House” by the French firm Drop Architects is one such example. This project is a small residence that can literally be “dropped off” anywhere and inhabited. Its use of modern style and technique help it to blend into the urban fabric quite well, rather than rejecting it as typical mobile homes so often do. So this proposal, to stop casting aside mobile architecture, has already been accepted on some small scales, but what if it was accepted more widely?

It would open up a world of possibilities for architecture in the realm of low-income housing. We could begin to apply our understanding of space and dwelling to potentially improve the living conditions in these previously disregarded spaces, and improve their level of assimilation. Anti-site architecture would begin to shift towards site-less architecture, which could have a positive effect on the public perception of housing as it is associated with class, changing social constructs towards a more accepting view. It seems that this could be a very powerful direction for architecture to head in, and welcoming this could put us at the forefront of this “assimilation”.