

The Anti-House Manifesto.

"Day after day, day after day, / We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship/ Upon a painted ocean." --Coleridge.

In this paper, I want to talk about the "Anti-House", and how it influences much of modern life. I will be very direct. In short, I feel that the house--the abode of most of us--in today's modern culture is perhaps more of a hinderance than a blessing. Of course, for most people, their house is the place where their "equity", their financial worth, exists. This is true. However, having a house (in today's sense of the word) has exercised the role of a parasite upon the energy and raw creativity of the average individual. In short, this part of the "American dream" has come at a price. The root of this problem start in the house we bought. Winston Churchill once remarked that first we shape houses; then, they shape us: how true. In this paper, I want to suggest an alternative "philosophy of having a house"--that is, the "Anti-House". The body of this paper will have three parts: first, the Problem; second, the Possible Solutions; and third, the Applications. Lest anyone think I am crazy, consider at what cost the current philosophy of "having a house" has cost this nation, and many others.

THE PROBLEM.

If you fly over the American landscape, you will see that almost all of the houses are alike--that is, they are a "wooden island on a green sea". That is, they are one building that is surrounded by lawn. At the edge of the lawn is usually the boundary line. We are an "open society", but we also cherish our privacy; with such an arrangement, the areas of lawn are effectively turned into wasted land, accessible to the outside world; it is no longer truly "ours". The sum total of a person's privacy is the wooden building itself; outside is no-man's land.

Then, there are the "3 M's". These stand for "Marriage, Mortgage, and Maintenance". By "Marriage" I mean marriage, all enmeshing and commitment-based relationships, and family. By "Mortgage" I mean mortgage, all debt, and the cost of living in this "service-oriented" society, as well as most expenses that keep us at work (but not the essentials). By "Maintenance" I mean all the maintenance that a house demands, such as cutting the grass, pruning, painting, cleaning, and the like. Just stop and think for a while how much of a toll these things take on the average life! It is very sobering.

Next, the "3 L's". These stand for "Lifestyle, Location, and Loyalty". By "Lifestyle" I mean living the kind of life that YOU want to--not anyone else. By "Location", I mean doing it in a part of the world where YOU want to be. By "Loyalty", I mean having someone who is with you who will remain steadfastly with YOU on your way of pilgrimage, and not rat out on you, because they also believe in what you are doing. (Now, if you want to be single, just cut out the "Loyalty" part.)

After that, consider everything as a whole. Most of today's people (usually young, college graduates, starting a career) want to buy a house. They do so, on a mortgage, and for the next 20 or 30 years, their life revolves around paying off that large mortgage. They may change house, as their family gets bigger,

and then smaller, and at some point in their middle-age (or, it could be later), they have "equity". Their work-sites are often determined by where their house is located, or else, they move. Either way, their house controls their life. Also when they get married (as many people still do), they reap what they sow, if they are unlucky, or just get by, if they are lucky. (I hate that word, "lucky".) For those who plan by more than "love", the odds are better. Still, they have to maintain their hard-won bit of empire--after all, what else would you call the current way of home-ownership, if not "empire-building"? By the time most people have reached retirement age, the dreams of their youth have been largely exterminated. Look around and ask: is it true for most people? Is this the end result of the "middle-class dream"? Did this all originate, in some form, from the very common philosophy of "The House", as we see it played out around us in this country? Or elsewhere?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS.

This is a disclaimer: after all, I have some raw ideas in my mind that I want to throw out to spark discussion, and not to say "This is the only way".

First, instead of seeing one's house as an island, think of it as a "coral atoll". That is, a small group of islands that enclose a small area of water. Of course, I am referring to a courtyard house, such ^{as} much of Asia (and many other places) uses. In a courtyard house, you will have an area of absolute privacy, where even your neighbors cannot see what you are up to. In the place of one, big building, you have your house dissected up and scattered into a square or long rectangle of smaller units. Instead of looking at a courtyard house as many small and unrelated house, think of the whole property as the "house", and the buildings, the yards, even the carp-pond as "rooms" in a bigger house. (By analogy, some people think of a bee-hive as being the "animal", and the bees as mere cells.) Here, the main reason for "tearing apart" your house is to allow yourself a central courtyard to have your own space, to look inwards and not outwards, and more.

Then, the "3 M's". Of course, marry if you wish, but avoid those relations that enmesh you--and your time and energy. As for mortgage, I recognize that we need the bank's money to get us on our way, but please consider ways to reduce, or even eliminate this "need". Buy a cheap house. Pay more cash. Does the job serve the house, or the house serve the job? Avoid all debt like the plague. Get really simple. (For more, read Thoreau.) However, it is the elimination of "Maintenance" that you must pay most attention to. Try to develop a "maintenance-free" house. You may scoff at this, but if you can do this, you have a lot of energy left to do other things. This is especially true for those people who are building their house from the very beginning, as they have carte blanche to order their own world according to their own designs. Remember, the "aim" (if I can call it such) of society is to have you waste your life, so that, at the end of the day, you have nothing left to do what you always wanted.

Next, the "3 L's". The lifestyle you lead is probably one of the most important decisions you will make in your life! So, don't sell it for nothing. Go out and do it; certainly, don't

allow having a house to cheat you out of this one! The most disgusting, insidious lie that stalks this land is this one: "I can do it after I have retired." As for location, there is a spot (for most, perhaps all of us, I hope), where we recognize our special place, the place we were born for. Find it, and be there, and don't allow your "house" to cheat you of that either. As for loyalty, if you have someone who will walk with you, as they believe in it too, then you are very well off. Otherwise, go alone. I think it is better to have done it alone, than to be with someone, and lost your dream.

What are the possible benefits, to society? Perhaps, more happy, fulfilled people. (I have not done any ex post facto studies here.) However, one result will be that "the house", as we have discussed it in this paper, will no longer have the immense level of authority that it has had for so long. So far, the house has been at the center of many people's lives: well, in the new order, it will be a tool, a instrument of other ideas and designs. It will be an "anti-house".

APPLICATIONS.

I will now share some of my own personal experiences. I am only one person, and not at all a "typical American", but I do feel that the concept of the "anti-house" should be discussed, so here are some observations.

I bought 20 acres in N.E. USA, in the deep forest. I bought it with no consideration of where I would work. (As it is, I have made a career of teaching English as a Foreign Language in another country, and I view this 20 acre parcel as a "global crash-pad".) I had four or five acres stripped, and the land is currently (June, 2005) being made into hayfields, an apple orchard, and a courtyard house. My "summer cottage" is 20' x 8', and the "winter cottage" is 20' x 10'. That is small. Also, there are some other, small structures, that taken together, will enclose a "courtyard" of about 120' x 250' (feet). The other 16 acres will be left to nature, I hope. The weather is harsh in winter, but then, I am only going to be there during the summer holidays, when I am back from teaching overseas. There, I can take the small rooms my employer offers me, or else I can rent in some cheap crash-pad of a place. Yes, I had start-up capital, but with modifications, this idea can be done creatively, under "other" operating conditions. I am here to tell a story, not to show off.

Then, the "3 M's". I have avoided marriage, and all deep and enmeshing relationships and commitments, as I consider that route to be a snare. Besides, I have found nobody I want to share the journey with (let alone someone who wants to share the journey with me). I avoided a mortgage, and try to avoid all debts. As for maintenance, as the land was being cleared, I was (almost) savage in the way I razed the trees, moved boulders and made the land suit MY purposes. The result, I hope, is a parcel of land that will be mowed by a "bush-hogging" tractor-mower only once a year--and no more. I want a property that is more like a storage locker, a hotel room than a "home" (in the typical sense of the word). I am too busy overseas; for me, the "American dream" has the whole world as its stage, not as far as I can commute on two hours.

Next, the "3 L's". For me, lifestyle is everything. If a person, or a house, will suppress that lifestyle, then I want to remove them. Period. The way one lives is much more important than the house one owns, especially if that house is hostile to one's lifestyle. Location: that is my secret, but I have one. It is in a potentially unstable part of the world, and having a house there is not a good idea (I tried that, and saw many problems there). When I am in that place, I feel happy and fulfilled. Why should a house keep me away from that? As for loyalty, I have found no such person--yet. So, I go the road alone. Hard, but in the night-watches, I have no regrets.

Where will this lead me? I am not sure. I have 20 acres, a courtyard house in the middle of "lumberjack country" in the N.E. corner of the USA, the place looks like a storagelocker, but I am happy with it, as I can go out into that place overseas, and chase my dreams now. At almost every step, I have done something that the vast majority of home-builders just do not do. I have mortified many, been told that I am a fool, and left to myself. That is why I have called this paper "The Anti-House Manifesto". I have a house that goes against the grain of much of what middle class America holds dear. However, here is what I hope to get out of this venture (even if some would consider me like that character in Herzog's film "Fitzcarraldo"--about the man who went to great lengths to stage an opera production in the depths of the Amazon jungle). I have a home-base, a global crash-pad, and from here I will pursue my dreams in some foreign, rugged land. I will, I hope, come back periodically to see how the storage locker looks, tidy up a few things, but let the majority fall into genteel scruffiness. If I survive, I will come back in old-age to enjoy the few apple trees that I will have planted. I will let my friends and others use this courtyard house as a simple weekend resting place, while I am thousands of miles away. I will think about it, as one thinks of a distant lover from afar in one's dreams. However, most of all, I will consider it as but one room, one room with a view of the whole world before me, for in the end, I consider the whole world as my home, my place of life. Thus, there is no "commuting", or "maintenance", or the like. I want a place where I can use language, a foreign language to access everything I like, to teach language. My suitcase is my home, and my home is my suitcase.

CONCLUSION.

Why did I do all this? For 25 years, I wanted a homestead, but never did it. I did many things I did not really like, I saw much of the world, and worked in parts. Then I built this courtyard house in the middle of the forest. I think of Thoreau, who is so important to all free-thinkers. I think of Luther, who nailed up the 95 Theses on a door, and made significant changes. I do not know the future, but I hope that this "Anti-House Manifesto" will be read and discussed. Is there something about the American house, as we know it, that needs to be re-thought, re-engineered, or even re-written? You decide. I just think that "the house" in today's culture exerts much too much power, and in a nation of idealists, of dreamers, and of "go-getters", this is not acceptable. I wish you all the best as you consider what sort of house YOU are going to have--or even if you will have a house. Remember, those years from 25 to 55 are the most precious of them all. Why should you give them all to some bank or credit union?