

MONUMENT

Residential Special 2004

Conditions of Living



One up, one down, London
Photography: Ed Reeve

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Architecture not only provides for the physical requirements of humanity, but also satisfies the less tangible human need for intellectual stimulation. By assigning cultural value to the components that constitute a building, architecture has the potential to transform utilitarian tasks into enjoyable rituals.



BATHING

The desire for residential bathrooms to emulate hotel rooms seems widespread. Both in material and spatial arrangement, clients tend to favour this commercial model over a traditional residential one. Perhaps perpetuated by real-estate notions of value, the ensuite bathroom could be said to isolate the occupants from the rest of the activity of the house. Ensuite bathrooms can also be seen as recontextualising the otherwise generally unaltered notion of the bedroom, by introducing a secondary activity. Some of my recent bathroom designs have incorporated roof glazing and other extensive outward views. Together with outdoor materials such as decking, these visual devices establish a strong connection with the outside environment that is unusual in urban contexts.

SLEEPING

The bedroom is perhaps the domestic architectural typology least affected by modern innovation. While experiments such as loft apartments have attempted to integrate living and sleeping spaces, the traditional reclusive and defensive space is the overwhelmingly persistent model. The particularities of English housing stock and planning legislation mean that the bedroom roof extension is a ubiquitous form of architectural intervention in contemporary London. In my work, these spaces tend to assume the spatial character of tree houses or survey towers. Tucked behind parapets and providing opportunities for surveillance, the defensive character of the resulting architecture responds to traditional notions of the bedroom, while evoking the fantasy of dreaming.

LIVING

The practise of architecture can be seen as the provision or facilitation of the fundamental requirements of human existence – shelter, food and intellectual stimulation. In these terms, the house is the most basic unit of architecture, and so it should come as no surprise that it has been the site of the most intense architectural innovation in the modern period. In recent decades, changes in the political and social contexts within which architecture is practised have given rise to a broader range of opportunities for innovation. It seems likely, however, that the house will continue to be the subject of particularly vigorous exploration.



EATING

Architecture not only provides an environment for preparing and consuming food, but also helps enhance the activity. This capacity to transform utilitarian activities into rituals is a fundamental function of architecture. Much of my recent work has involved transforming cellular Victorian houses into modern homes where cooking, dining and living are integrated. In contrast to the modern ideal, Victorian terraces can be understood as miniaturisations of an idealised country house, and so consist of a dense arrangement of small discrete rooms. This spatial organisation presumes that servants prepare food behind closed doors, and that dining is a formal and isolated activity.

ENTERTAINING

Entertaining is simply one of the many activities that a dwelling encompasses. The contemporary tendency is for this entertaining function to be integrated across many of the activities of the house, rather than contained in isolation. The creation of 'soft edges' is critical to the success of open-plan spaces that enable functions to overlap in this way. In the absence of walls to contain separate functions, changes of floor or ceiling level, lighting or materials can delineate flexible boundaries.

