

Introduction

There is a particular play with space that vanishes as we grow older, just as it no longer becomes plausible for us to hide beneath tables or within cardboard boxes, cabinets, and wardrobes. We outgrow these places just as our hands are no longer small enough to maneuver dolls within miniaturized spaces. The early stages of our life consist of attempts to discover anomalous places for ourselves and our friends since most of the world around us was adult size. Even as these early childhood tendencies fade away, there are adults who choose to seek ceremonies analogous to our once discovery of child-caves.¹

Perhaps this is why some adults enjoy camping. Camping potentially brings back the inner-child and allows us to become secluded and break away from “normal adult space.” If you ask any outdoors-person why they like camping they might say something along the lines of, “I like it because it allows me to take a break with reality. I like the feeling of being sheltered by a thin layer of fabric which in return allows me to hear the cryptic sounds of nature lost within the city. And also knowing that it is only a thin, permeable material separating me from billions of stars...I like being cozily cuddled up in warm blanket while in a hypnosis caused

by the flames of a campfire on a cold night.” City dwellers are drawn to these activities to escape their everyday commodities and surroundings. In the moments when one is unable to remove oneself from normal space, one reverts to pitching a tent on the roof or in the living room, forming an internalized place of one’s own within an everyday space.

While flipping through books in the library, I came across Perry Ogden’s ² photograph of the interior of Robin Middleton’s ³ converted fish-packing plant dwelling in the Tribeca section of Manhattan. There was one photo in particular that stood out which illustrated a tent pitched within a living space (Fig. 4).

In a description of this now demolished building, it was noted that Middleton’s roommate Ruth Lakofski expressed her affection for dark, internalized spaces. Knowing this about herself, Ruth thoughtfully assembled a special place to fulfill her need for a cozy space within their open-planned apartment. This photograph captivated me and instantaneously began the search for likewise moments within architecture that sought to generate spaces like Ruth’s tent.

The child underneath a table and the tent in the living room function as symbols of a human need for an enclosure within the given architecture that is not directly provided by the architecture itself. It is certain that the initial architecture is the catalyst for this type of intensified internalization.

Sir John Summerson emanates these thoughts in his essay “Heavenly Mansions: An Interpretation of Gothic” and wrote: “None of us ever entirely outgrew the love of the doll’s house or, usually in a vicarious form, the love of squatting under the table. Camping and sailing are two adult forms of play analogous to the ‘my house’ pretences of a child. In both, there is the fascination of the miniature shelter which excludes elements by only a narrow margin and intensifies the sense of security in a hostile world.”⁴ Summerson writes this prior to introducing his thesis in which he compares two architectural compositions separated by nearly one thousand years and links them by their use of the aedicule.⁵

The aedicule (noted as a small construction within a building that is framed by columns and covered by a pediment above or a “miniature temple within a temple”) is chosen to understand that Gothic architecture (however much it has been portrayed as radical and doing everything to oppose Classicism) is truly a continuation of the classical line. Summerson uses the image of a child beneath the table to symbolically show how these historically opposing styles are related and why the aedicule survived so many centuries. He writes, “I believe that there are historical threads, but I do not think that they could have spun their way through a thousand years of history, but it was rather the primitive and universal love that kind of

fantasy represented by the aedicule - ‘the little house.’”⁶ Summerson associates the aedicule with “the little house” because both exist in their appeal as a cozy space. He argues that it was the aedicule’s cozy appeal which allowed it to survive through numerous eras of “styles” and to be nearly immortal within the history of architecture. Nevertheless, Summerson notes at the end of his essay that by the mid 13th-century, the aedicule would become out-fashioned.

Little did he anticipate that shortly after his essay was published (in the year 1966) architect Charles Willard Moore would read Summerson’s essay and place four-posted aedicules in several small houses he designed in California... (Fig. 5 & 6) Immortal aedicules! Of course Moore realized that by doing this (placing the aedicule in a 20th-century house) would by no means make us medieval again.⁷ He was simply re-emphasizing Summerson’s articulation regarding these undying moments within architecture. His gesture shows how architecture from previous centuries can be considered through their cozy spaces that return to the visceral feeling of a child of any era crawling beneath the table - i.e. “the snug moment.”

It seems unwarranted that “cozy” or any associative words were never so much as uttered during the crucial years of my architectural education. Yet this is one of the superior adjectives that can be used to describe a space, when we are with someone and they describe a space as

being “cozy” it is a way of saying they are comfortable or at ease. The suppression of coziness by several leaders of the modern movement may have something to do with the term becoming generally expelled from academia and the practice. According to avant-garde architects of the Weimar period, such as Bruno Taut, Hannes Meyer, and Adolf Behne, the term “cozy” was associated with the practice of interior decoration or of “filling the empty naked space of the house with all kinds of objects, souvenirs, cushions, and curtains.”⁸ Somehow this relationship between coziness and architecture has often been described in the context of consumerism and wealth rather than feelings of ease or inner warmth. Take for instance, coziness depicted in descriptions of an element of the frilly interior: the curtain.

The curtain, similar to the aedicule, is an architectural feature that was not expelled from interiors of the modern movement despite its decorous associations.⁹ In fact, the curtain appears countless in photographs of buildings of this era. Yet even with the curtain’s association with the feminine and the sensorial (two things opposed in modernism), its presence was necessary to shield excessive daylight and prying eyes. The curtain was an exception within the anti-cozy modern functionalist ideology, but modernists sought to justify its use within their agenda. The solution was legislated through several protagonists’ ability to make load-bearing walls disappear, which then allowed

curtains to be redefined as a partitioning element or translucent spatial and structural membrane (Fig. 6). By increasing its “function,” the curtain became stripped of its prior aesthetic and decorous relations. Despite this re-definition, the essence of the curtain shall never be denied its provisions of comfort, privacy, and intimacy, regardless of time period and use. The new architects were aware of the long-winded history of the curtain’s décor and symbolisms, but they were unwilling to deny its strength as an architectural detail. Ever since then has it never been removed from the interior.

The curtain indicates another undying moment within architecture, in the sense that features like these will remain immortal until it is typical in the future to use glass windows that are able to transform from transparent to opaque between night and day. Even when that moment comes, perhaps the curtain may still be sought after for its happy, sensorial pleasures. If architects are unable to articulate what it means to be cozy relative to architecture without associating it with “the bourgeois cult of coziness,” how can architects better understand how to design space which may allow for inner warmth and a feeling of ease?

If we were to ask anyone what it means to be cozy in relation to space and materiality (without being tainted by material culture and commodity) we should ask the child. Some random research I stumbled upon while Googling verified that children (more often than

adults) “have a greater need for cozy places in order to cultivate their sense of self.” Contemporary child experts have emphasized that it is essential for them to have a place where they can relax while they “flip through books, play with interesting objects, or daydream,” in which case the composed space and materiality are significant for the child’s progression and well-being.¹⁰ Snug places described in this context seem considerably “functional” in their manner of calming the user. The need for cozy places is also demonstrated in the event when children occupy a space that is not primarily designed for them. They go off and discover or make their own places of refuge within adult space, unobtainable for grown-ups, and without being out of their sight or directly removed from them.

While finding research on a need for retreat and snug spaces, my interest in child-caves manifested into a curiosity for architectural spaces used for their inherent snug nature that allows us as adults (and the child) to withdraw from modern space without having to pitch a tent in the wilderness. To delineate this question, I chose a specific form of space as a running theme.

The theme is a unique place that manifests shelter and security similar to the tent in the living room. It is a place that allows us to break away from everyday space when without having to shut out the rest of the world by closing a door. I encountered this type of space in London (which was occupied before but not nearly as

frequently). I am referring mainly to my time spent with friends inside the dimly lit dark snug wooden corners within Victorian and Edwardian Public Houses, specifically within a place like the Princess Louise of High Holborn.¹¹ What better way could one have thought an interior than by allowing friends to drink within their own semi-enclosed space situated around an island bar while still allowing access to ordering drinks?! Granted, pubs like these are 19th-century establishments, and in the 19th-century the bourgeois were quite concerned for the “frill and coziness” of interiors (which was to be protested in the following century).¹²

The alcove has endured centuries of different architectural styles and ideologies just as the aedicule and curtain have. Its condition as well as that of likewise recesses in rooms became the running theme to dissect my personal contentment when occupying these spaces. I also wanted to understand their resilience within the emergence of the modern interior. The alcove, or any similar recess, is a space that has existed prior to the medieval and through and beyond the modern movement. Most astonishingly it can be located within some presupposed open, doorless, roomless, and “light and airy” modern functionalist interiors. Like the modern curtain, it is another exceptional paradox within the modern ideology rules of openness, i.e. a “timeless” feature.¹³

Presenting dark alcoves, hidden niches, and cozy corners through the sentimental state of “cozy” is just one way of arguing this. I also want to believe that even within the open, light, and airy spaces of modernism there are moments where darkness and invisibility appear. Darkish alcoves have been chosen over glazed ones and bay windows, because these are the types of spaces rarely mentioned in written histories of architecture. Historians, with one or two exceptions, have preferred to write histories by means of “power through transparency” as if darkened spaces were the sin of man.¹⁴ This is not about promoting dark alcoves, hidden niches, and cozy corners but more about understanding what it means to be cozy in relation to architecture and about discovering its meaning through such timeworn and snug spaces. The following locates a sort of history of the alcove without writing a history, reflecting on its arrival into modernism and its transformation from a medieval space that trapped warmth to a space with no other significance but to make the occupier feel “snug” within an open space. The initial questions that directed the research were: what about alcoves made them survive the 20th-century’s discourse of transparency and why are they so cozy for someone living in the 21st-century? The response is divided in two parts. “Part I: A Need for Retreat” addresses an historical question centered on modern functionalism in light of a conditional space which

exists for nothing other than the occupant's well-being. "Part II" argues for a human wish for snug space in a seemingly hostile world.

The following hopes to do at least one thing: sincerely encourage "cozy" or "snug" beyond its bourgeois associations in order to become a valid academic term within the field of architecture. Whether one finds the alcove to be cozy or confining, let this be an argument for coziness and sentiment, and that perhaps the best architects and designers are the ones that understand what these things mean relative to the client. Before you continue, I must warn that only a particular type of person will agree with me in choosing to write about the alcove and recessed spaces in relation to "snuggness." As Gaston Bachelard wrote towards his audience within the chapter "Corners" of The Poetics of Space, "But only the dreamer who curls up in a contemplation of loops, understands these simple joys of delineated repose."¹⁵ Corner dwellers, read on...