

SLOW FOOD SLOW HOMES - EXPANDING THE ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE IN THE NORTH AMERICAN HOUSING INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The North American city is dominated by suburban sprawl, that vast formless, center-less, fragmented urban structure that the Sierra Club calls the ‘Dark Side of the American Dream.’ These places are like fast food. On the surface they appear cheap, and cheerful. However, this marketing veneer masks a world of thoughtless design and construction that is bad for both us and the environment. In the same way that fast food disrupts the historically rich context of cooking; these fast homes replace the deep potential of urban dwelling with a standardized product. The ‘Slow Food Movement’ provides an interesting antidote to the dilemma of fast food. It promotes individual empowerment through the use of natural ingredients, thoughtful preparation, and a renewed culture of the table. This paper critically surveys the current problems with the North American Housing Industry and proposes the potential for a ‘Slow Home Movement’ to generate a renewed role for the architecture profession within this milieu and to begin to make design matter again.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade the term ‘McMansions’ has entered the English lexicon as a short hand descriptor of the pervasive oversized mass produced house. Like fast food, these fast houses pervade the North American landscape as standardized, homogenized commodities designed to maximize the short-term profits for the industry that creates them, with little regard for the long-term costs to our health and well-being.

Both fast food and fast houses are shaped by one of modernism’s core philosophies – to make life better by making it easier. This powerful promise continues to capture the imagination of the majority of people, despite the fact that almost every other pillar of modernism has been felled over the past sixty years and in the face of mounting evidence of just how much harm it has wrought.

Most of the development created by the fast housing industry has resulted in environmentally unsustainable, culturally homogenous neighbourhoods of single family detached houses and strip retail malls. 70% of the population resides in this seemingly endless landscape of suburban sprawl largely “unaware of the subtle and not-so subtle ramifications of its presence in their lives.” (Leach, 1999)

According to Dolores Hayden, North America,

“has a housing crisis of disturbing complexity, a crisis that, in different ways, affects rich and poor, male and female, young and old, people of colour and white Americans. We have not merely a housing shortage, but a broader set of unmet needs caused by the efforts of the entire society to fit itself into a housing pattern that reflects the dreams of the mid19th Century better than the realities of the 21st Century.” (Hayden, 2002)

The impact of the fast food industry is equally disturbing. McDonald's has about 28,000 restaurants worldwide and opens almost 2,000 new ones each year. It is responsible for 90% of the new jobs created each year and an estimated one out of every eight workers in North America has at some point been employed by McDonald's. Within a 30 year time span, fast food's low paying service sector has become a major component of our economy.

According to Eric Schlosser, "during a relatively brief period of time, the fast food industry has helped to transform not only (our) diet, but also our landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture. Fast food and its consequences have become inescapable, regardless of whether you eat it twice a day, try to avoid it, or have never taken a single bite." (Schlosser, 2001)

This world of ever expanding girth, of both our waistlines and our cities, is a testament to modernism's broken promise. Easier is not better it's just easier. Moreover, in examining the consequences of this broken promise, easier actually brings us to the opposite of better. Like fat free instant chocolate cake, abs without exercising, learning a second language in your sleep, or becoming the next pop star without really knowing how to sing, the fast suburban home exhibits "the traits of a commerce with reality where the rootedness in the depth of things, i.e. in the irreplaceable context of time and place, has been dissolved. (Borgmann, 1984) In many cases these post- industrial commodities are popular for the very fact that they *can* be enjoyed as a mere end, unencumbered by means, making little demand on our skill, strength, or attention.

According to Eric Schlosser,

"Fast food has changed not just what Americans eat, but also how their food is made... A fast food kitchen is merely the final stage in a vast and highly complex system of mass production. Foods that may look familiar have been completely reformulated. What we eat has changed more in the last forty years than in the last 40 thousand... Much of the taste and aroma of American fast food, for example, is now manufactured at a series of large chemical plants off the New Jersey Turnpike." (Schlosser, 2001)

In the same way that fast food unravels the deeper cultural context of cooking and dining, the fast housing industry has transformed us from a nation of home-makers into one of home-buyers, all too ready to blindly consume the latest marketing image of a super-sized idyllic dream home as a vision of individualization. In such a world of strictly limited choices "notions of self and happiness are thus prone to disappear into categories of consumer products." (Archer, 2005)

DESIGN QUALITY SURVEY

To gain some sense of the dimension of the fast house problem in the North American new housing market a survey of design quality was undertaken during a nine

month period in 2010 (Brown and North, 2011). The project involved more than 100 volunteers from across Canada and the United States who participated in a mass collaboration effort to identify and evaluate the design quality of new residential projects in nine cities - Toronto, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Miami, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, and Vancouver. This virtual community searched the web for new residential projects in three housing categories -- apartment/lofts, townhouses, and single-family houses. A standardized evaluation form was used to evaluate design quality across 12 different areas of the home. The results were posted to a web site and then analysed by the researchers

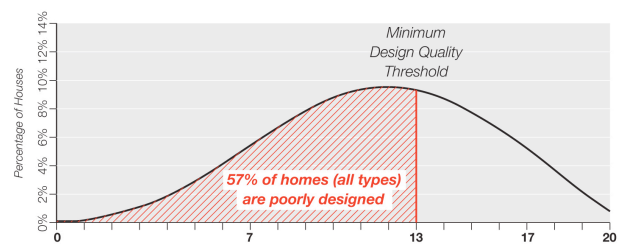


Figure 1 – Design Quality Result Summary by all House Types

Over half (57%) of the more than 4600 new home projects analysed in the survey failed to achieve a score of 13/20 or greater on the evaluation. This was considered to be the minimum design quality threshold, and properties that did not attain this score were classified as fast houses.

When broken down by house type, more than three out of every four (78%) of the single-family houses surveyed failed to meet the minimum threshold. The level of design quality was slightly better for townhouses, with just over half (57%) failing to meet the minimum threshold for design quality. Interestingly, apartment/lofts scored much better, with only 38% of projects receiving a failing grade.

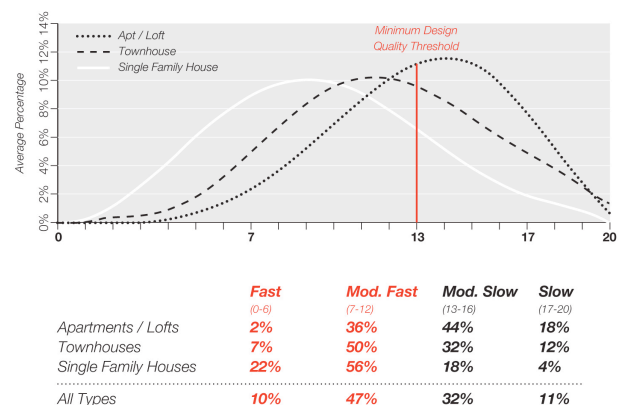


Figure 2 – Design Quality Result Summary by House Type

On the other end of the scale, a mere 11% of properties in all house types achieved a score of 17/20. For single-family houses, the percentage of these exceptionally well-designed homes dropped to just 4%. For townhouses, the number was 12%, and apartment/lofts

again fared the best, with 18% of the properties surveyed achieving top marks for design quality.

The higher level of design quality in the apartment/loft category can be attributed to the fact that, unlike single-family houses and low-rise townhouse developments, many apartment/loft projects are large, multi-storey buildings that require the services of a professional architect for their design.

The level of design quality also varied substantially over the nine cities in the survey. Vancouver had the best overall level of design quality, with 64% of properties in all house types exceeding the minimum design quality threshold. Miami was the worst of the nine cities, with only 29% of the properties in all house types receiving a minimum pass or better on the evaluation.

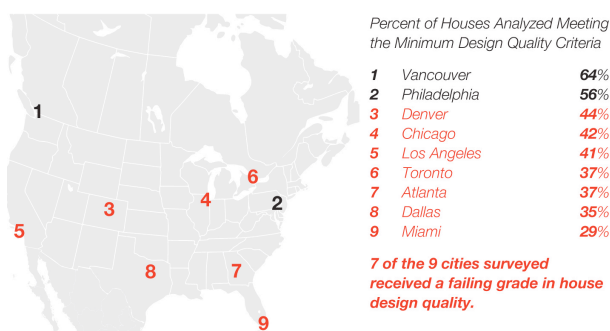


Figure 3 – Design Quality Result Summary by City

DESIGN AS MARKETING STRATEGIES

The fast home industry uses sophisticated strategies to market its cookie cutter houses and instant neighbourhoods with a combination of “theatre, show business, seduction and fashion. Like clothing lines, new houses are sold through the seductive power of “models” – or, in the sense of the luxury home, supermodels, tricked out in fashionable and flattering outfits” (Garber, 2000)

In addition to these overt marketing tactics, a detailed analysis of the survey results revealed four design strategies that kept recurring in all house types and sizes. They were found across all price ranges and in all nine of the cities that we surveyed. It is hypothesized that these strategies are being employed by the fast house industry for marketing purposes rather than to make the house better to live in.

In other words, these strategies are designed to catch our attention, ignite our desire, and give us the illusion of value in much the same way that the dramatic photography, juicy description, and supersized ingredient list seduces us into buying a triple cheese bacon burger. Despite the allure of their first impressions, we buy houses that contain these features at our own risk.

The first designed-to-be-sold strategy identified was the use of colliding geometries to catch the attention of a buyer when they first walk into a house. They result whenever walls, stairs, kitchen counters, and fireplaces

are organized on a 45-degree angle to the orthogonal geometry in the rest of the plan. Our eyes notice things that are different from their surroundings, and advertisers have long used this fact to attract potential buyers. The foreign geometry collides with the rest of the house and makes it stand out and look more dramatic than it really is. However, this strategy can cause significant long-term problems when applied to the design of a home. Dramatic visual devices such as this usually end up fragmenting the spaces in a floor plan, causing serious disruptions to the way the rest of the house works.

17% of all house types contained some form of colliding geometry. They were most prevalent in single-family houses (32%).

The second designed-to-be-sold strategy identified in the survey was the use of redundant spaces. They are employed to ignite desire by artificially inflating the allure of a home with extra rooms and functions. The fast house industry counts on the fact that most people give very little thought to the usefulness, or even necessity, of these extra spaces at the point of purchase. Unfortunately, the lack of actual value that they provide soon becomes apparent when you move in and realize that these spaces are redundant, difficult to furnish, and perhaps even unpleasant to be in.

Redundant spaces were found in 23% of all of the properties in the survey. Multiple dining rooms were the most common example of redundant spaces across all house types.

False labeling was the third designed-to-be-sold strategy to be identified in the survey results. It makes a house look better in the sales brochure than it is in reality in order to ignite desire with the promise of a great feature. The problem is that false labeling of spaces in a fast house can mask significant design deficiencies that might not become evident until after you have moved in. Perhaps the most common falsely labeled space is the “study” or “home office.” In many fast houses, any wasted bit of space can suddenly be defined as a “study” on the floor plan. Too often these spaces are just too small, too dark, or too oddly shaped to function effectively

False Labeling was observed in 36% of all the properties surveyed. In single-family houses and townhomes, the most common falsely labeled spaces were. In apartment/lofts, falsely labelled study/office spaces were the most prevalent.

This was attributed to the fact that the addition of a study often raised a unit into the next higher price category, regardless of the quality, or even utility, of that space.

Supersizing was the final, and perhaps most common, designed-to-be-sold strategy identified in the survey. Bloated house sizes, over-sized rooms, and over-scaled fixtures such as bathtubs and staircases are used to give an illusion of value. The intent is to convince

homebuyers that the house they are considering is just too good a deal to pass up. It seduces the buyer with the offer of more product at a cut-rate price. In reality, it trades off quality for quantity. In most cases, however, the functional value of these supersized elements is much less than the more reasonably scaled versions.

Supersizing was noted in 37% of the properties reviewed. These ranged from individual elements, such as bathtubs and staircases, to oversized spaces such as garages, bathrooms and master bedrooms. The so-called “trophy kitchen” was a type of Supersizing found almost exclusively in large single-family houses. The multiple islands and large floor areas typical in these kitchens often resulted in ineffective and awkward kitchen layouts. Oversized master bedrooms were the most prevalent forms of Supersizing across all housing types.

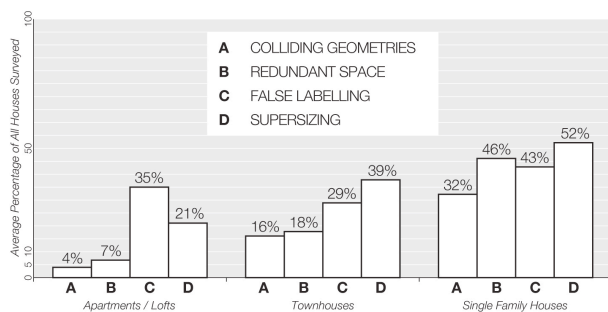


Figure 4 – Incident of Marketing Strategies by House Type

SLOW FOOD SLOW HOMES

Fortunately, in food, there is a critical alternative to the pervasive fast food industry. The Slow food movement, as the name suggests, “stands for everything that McDonald’s does not; fresh local, seasonal produce, recipes handed down through generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; and leisurely dining with family and friends.” (Honore, 2004) Founded in Italy by Carlo Petrini in 1986, slow food is an international movement with a membership of over 100,000. Its mandate “opposes the standardization of taste and protects cultural identities tied to food and gastronomic traditions.” (Petrini, 2006)

Slow food is an attempt to reverse the infantilization that occurs with fast food. It promotes a re-engagement with the culture of the table through individual everyday involvement with the selection, preparation and enjoyment of food.

Slow food is the discipline of creating and enjoying our daily meals, however humble, as an act of individual engagement. Replacing the superficial consumption of a commodity with a practice promotes a more intentional, directed way of being in the world and begins to counteract some of the infantilization we have suffered from an overdependence on market driven consumption.

According to Carl Honore,

“Fast and slow do more than just describe a rate of change. They are shorthand for ways of being. Fast is “busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity over quality. Slow is the opposite, calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality over quantity. It is about making real and meaningful connections – with people, culture, work, food, everything.” (Honore, 2004)

The fast house industry is based on the fast idea that the American dream can be purchased as a ready to move in commodity package. But this “not only masks the larger ideological contests that are at play. It also denies the complexities of domestic life.” (Archer, 2005) Drawing on the precedent of the slow food movement, a slow home is a potential antidote to the fast houses and communities churned out by the development industry. A slow home would foster a re-engagement with the culture of the house by directing attention to the house as the focus of a practice to be lived rather than as a product to be consumed. This process would create a more mature, less infantilized, role for the homeowner as they assume more responsibility for both the way in which the house is acquired and the manner in which it is lived in.

This does not mean, however, that we must all take a year off from work, buy a set of tools and physically construct our own house. The realities of 21st Century society make withdrawal from the present commodity economy inconceivable if not impossible. According to Archer, “Individually we do not have the opportunity to negotiate the categorical terms in which our dreams are realized. Rather, we choose from an array of options that our culture affords us.” (Archer, 2005)

A slow home would expand that array beyond the choice of one complete package of commodities or another and towards a more distributed and complex set of real decisions. At the same time, it would transfer control and responsibility for these choices away from big business and back to the individual. A slow home would create a system in which decisions can be made by individual homeowners based on a mature understanding of the real cost of home ownership to the environment, our cities and ourselves.

The slow home philosophy would also curb new suburban development by encouraging the creative re-use of existing structures. In the fast world of commodified housing, used homes quickly lose their lustre in comparison to the newest model of dream home. In a slow world, these older properties become opportunities for creative intervention.

The slow home is more than an operational strategy. It is as much a political statement as it is an ideological one. It promotes a shift in the underlying structure of one of the largest components of the American economy. It is a redefinition of the dream house into a process that enables each of us, as individuals, to

explore the intricacies of an adult oriented selfhood rather than an infantilized image.

It recognizes that suburbia is,

“... a social terrain in continuous process of production, a material artefact in which and by which people negotiate the resources and skills that they can marshal, the opportunities that their lives present and the various dreams and aspirations that they may choose to pursue. To approach suburbia in such a fashion is to recognize that, like everything in life it is a messy artefact, always incomplete and full of inconsistencies.” (Archer, 2005)

The slow home could be a first step towards creating a cultural condition in which the deeper potential for livable communities could emerge. The question of whether it is an achievable option, however, rests with the attitude of society rather than the mechanics of the system.

According to Waxman,

Those things that make us lesser cooks are not very different from those that are impairing the quality of much of our lives – insufficiencies of the right kind of education, an unwillingness or an inability to move beyond the superficial, a reluctance to endure risk, and a stupefying laziness for anything but long hours at our jobs.” (Waxman, 1996)

Given the current state of North American culture this is a question that very much remains to be seen.

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