



A HOUSE DECONSTRUCTED: AN UNCERTAINTY MANIFESTO

O(U)R: OFFICE OF (U)NCERTAINTY RESEARCH
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A house is like a black hole. It sucks a huge amount of energy, creativity, materials, labor, and molecules into its orbit. But in the end what does it tell us? The decisiveness of the final building, its gravitational hold on the earth, belies the tangled web of realities that made it happen. For that reason, we need to remind ourselves of the strange inversion that is in play when we take on the study of the history of a building, even one as small as a house. While the very idea of architectural “research” promises the possibility of intelligibility, a house—as a signifier of architecture—seeks to preserve the secret that is at the discipline’s core and indeed at the core of modernity: the violence of the productivity that makes this house possible. O(U)R: Office of (Un)certainity Research focused on a single house located at 1119 25th Avenue East, Seattle, Washington 98112. It is a modest modernist house constructed in 2018.

What is the backstory of this house? Most architects will think they know the answer, but they may be just as ignorant as the general population. The house serves as an agent of modernism, which seeks its affirmation in the upper registers of abstraction. Its clean lines signify rationality, professionalism and transparency. But these same clean lines suppress information and complications regarding the history of the materials before they arrived onsite. That is, the history of the house’s modernity is also the history of modernity’s coverup of unsightly realities.

Our research used the house as a portal to better locate, describe, and understand this building’s unstable place on the earth. After all, a single modern house reaches around the world in dimensions that are social, economic, ecological, political, and planetary, stretching even into the domain of the history of the universe. But the house, like all buildings, is designed to be mute about all of this, its normative silence a barrier to a fuller epistemological and disciplinary critique.

We researched the house along four registers, each a type of consciousness that is silenced once the owners get the keys to the front door:

- Atomic Consciousness, dating back to the Big Bang and the earliest supernovas.**
- Production Consciousness, combining a vast array of ingredients to make architectural products.**
- Labor Consciousness, multilayered and global in reach.**
- Source Consciousness, digging and cutting into the earth and chopping the forests.**

Each of these registers has powerful stories to tell.

The global nature of the enterprise of making this house quickly came clear when we indexed the sources of its materials. The wood, for instance, was about a hundred years old and harvested in forests in south Germany. The iron, like other heavy metals, was produced in stars and distributed out into deep space when the stars collapsed and went supernova; it made its way to Earth as a part of the process of our solar system's formation and via asteroids some five billion years ago. At the other end of the temporal spectrum is the dramatic escalation in complexity of industrial systems of material production in the last twenty years.

From that perspective, the modernism of this house is far different from the modernism of even some thirty years ago. Since then, we have seen a quiet revolution of the building industry involving metallification (the house's rebars, siding, railings, beams, all rendered cheap in the neoliberal economy), plastification (in the house's piping and the coating on the steel), chemicalization (in the glues, additives, laminants, and insulation), and computationalization (in the design, production, and assembly). Global transportation played a role as well, as it made all this work appear to take place with little sweat, no more than a click of the button by the architect or contractor. The sheet glass took one week from order to manufacture to delivery; the oak flooring, sourced from a German forest, traveled around the world for processing in Indonesia; so too did the steel, which traveled from mines to various sites of production to its shipping and delivery.

Ethical sourcing of materials, complex calculations of the carbon footprint of products, and the energy rating of a building are some of the important standards for measuring the impact of architecture on the planet. But when we dig deeper into the above-mentioned issues from diverse epistemological perspectives, the story quickly explodes into a scale that reaches beyond current research mapping capacities and even—one can say—beyond human comprehension. In all of these are the untold and unknown stories, not just of labor and production, but also of environmental degradation and human consequences: the insecticides used in the forests of Indonesia (for making the wood pulp in the flooring), the sand particulates in the air that cause lung problems in Wisconsin (for the making of the plate glass), the child labor used in the mining of cobalt (for the additive in the steel) in Africa. The recycled steel that was celebrated as such by the suppliers who delivered the beams to the house probably came through Chitagong, Bangladesh, where discarded ships are cut up

by the hundreds, releasing toxic chemicals and gases, while workers are paid almost nothing and are uncompensated for injuries. Some parts of stories like these are rendered invisible by the calculated manipulations of capital; others by the inadequacies of documentation (purposeful or not); and others still by the core uncertainty of any attempt to trace the processes of production and labor. Thus, even though we pushed this research to the level of the granular, we want to emphasize the following attributes of architectural supply:

- the indeterminate status of the architectural object.
- the existence of both proximate and non-proximate relationships.
- the positive impossibility of comprehension across scales.

In sum, one could say that habitation in today's world is shot through with unavoidable distances and indifferences; yet habitation does not thereby cease to be a mode of belonging even if architecture protects its sense of purposefulness by means of its silencing mechanisms. Our questions are: How do we define and measure our response and responsibility? And how can we imagine a different way of teaching, learning about, and building architecture—indeed a new form of architectural agency for the future.



(Un)certainly is not opposed to certainty. (Un)certainly is the nature of certainty, the quality of knowledge.



Deconstructing the architectural object is akin to quantum research. The closer you look, the more things become uncertain, not because our instruments aren't strong enough or calibrated precisely enough, but because things themselves are indeterminate, uncertain. Holistically speaking, knowledge tends to the indeterminate, constitutively entangled with our modality of looking. This is certainly true of subatomic particles, of which all architecture is ultimately made, but it is also true of the geographic sources of things, the processes that manufacture materials, and the laborers who are engaged in the production of work.



Is the house a familiar object or a foreign object? From the point of view of the architect, contractor and student of architect, and even the client, it is familiar. But from its own position as modern—and indeed as architecture—it is of necessity foreign, belonging to a different planet than the one that it seems to sit on.



We think we are designers, authors of note, with agency. But our agency is truly circumscribed, emplaced and enabled by a complex prehistory that stretches millions of years, engages an array of industrial processes, complex social and civilizational forces, and puts the earth into play in ways that are well beyond our comprehension. Architectural agency is a circumscribed chimera, powerful in some respects, and deeply indebted and weighted in others.



There is no Archimedean point by which one can understand the modernity of architecture. Not in the history of its aesthetics, materials, labor, or even in its self-professed critiques. And yet a building as it stands in the landscape is not a contradiction. On the contrary, it speaks unambiguously. But about what? The more one studies the house, or better yet, fights against its foreclosures, the more one realizes it has an almost magical place in contemporary culture. But if in one breath it is magical, in the next it is scandalous.



The question is not, how to describe architecture? It is, how does architecture describe?

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