

Reconsidering Modernism: The (in)Excess(able) Architecture of Alterstudio's Six Houses

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Our times of change and transition do not permit big gestures. There are only a few remaining common values left upon which we can build and which we can all share. I thus appeal for an architecture of common sense based on the fundamentals that we still know, understand, and feel.

-- Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 1999

The (in)Excess(able) experiences of six Alterstudio houses advance an alternative ethic of restraint that resists an excess frequented by contemporary architecture theory and practice. Rather than pursuing the ecstatic or superabundant as suggested in the Latin root *excessus*, (in)Excess(able) architecture is largely absent of signification. Instead, it focuses on visceral experiences of a fundamental nature that can be known, understood, and felt that arise from contact with things and the memories and associations brought about by their making. While akin to excess in its departure from custom and reason, the (in)Excess(able) architectural trajectory diverges to reveal the simple, humble, and ephemeral as discovered in nature, in things, and in ourselves. Echoing Luis Barragán's call for an authentic architecture created in "a sublime act of poetic imagination",¹ (in)Excess(able) architecture manifests itself in the serene and intimate where despite the profession's antipathy towards the term, beauty enters. Beauty in this sense is not an arbitrary set of aesthetic standards or tastes, but an attempt to reveal what Peter Zumthor would refer to as architecture's hard core. Discovering this core presages a sense of well-being that perhaps is best expressed through Dag Hammarskjöld's deeply held belief that "We all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence".²

This article explores the prospect of (in)Excess(able) architecture through the lenses of six Alterstudio houses, their values, and the questions they pose such as *How should we live?* and *How should we build?* While avoiding pretense and prescription, the six houses remind us of architecture's capacity to render us as our ideal selves and explore architectural beauty as a material articulation of certain ideas of a good life as a vision of happiness. Situated apart from excess, this pursuit of happiness results from seeking the enduring values we want to live by that transcend mere appearance. While avoiding nostalgia through a critical response to their region and its vernacular forms, the (in)Excess(able) architecture of the six houses revisits the values and experiences of the mid-century modern house with emphasis upon its honesty, ease, and lack of inhibition realized by means of tectonic expression and a redefinition of inside/outside and public/private relationships. As such, the (in)Excess(able) architecture of the six houses advocates a uniquely American sense of Wabi-Sabi, where the big gesture is avoided and "expressive reticence is consistently prized above and against the gratuitous manipulation of form"³ while still evoking a faith in the future and ourselves.

The six houses and the Alterstudio oeuvre presuppose that architecture has the capacity to challenge our individual and collective understanding of the world. As catalysts, the houses offer the potential for meaningful change in response to new perspectives discovered, and experiences garnered, through an (in)Excess(able) encounter with them. For Alterstudio change comes not through coercion, but an invitation to engage in a more meaningful pattern of living through contact with people and nature, space and material. All of the houses contribute to their situations, elicit a sense of

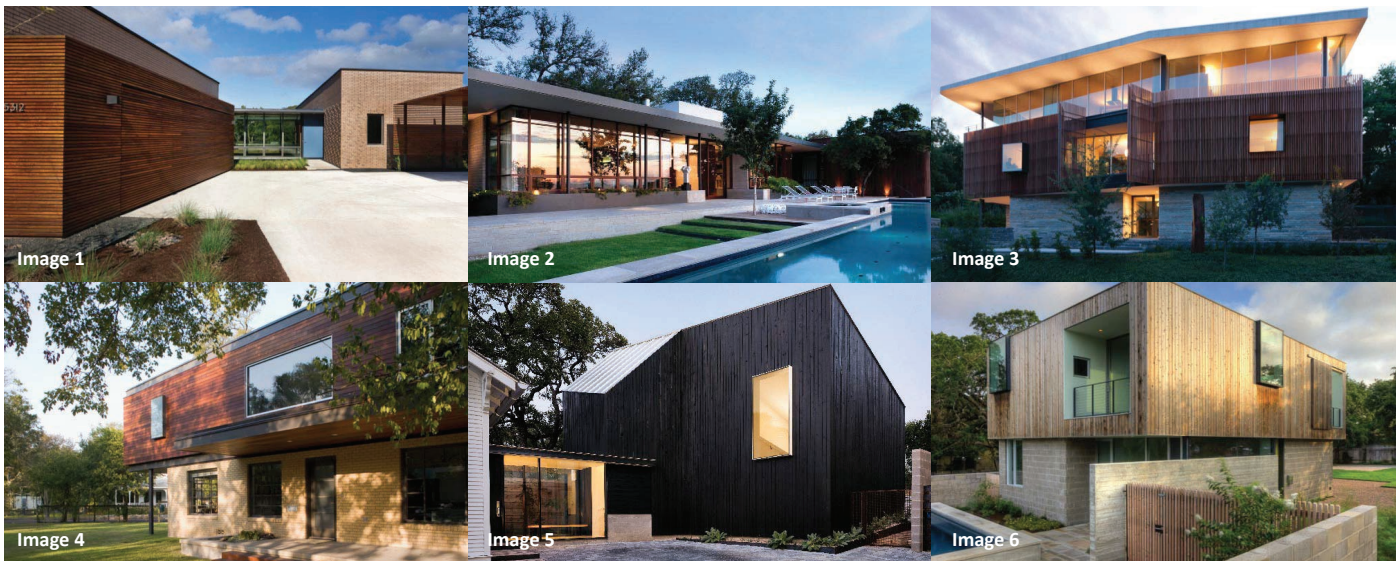


Figure 1: Alterstudio Six Houses. Image 1: The Scout Island Residence; Image 2: The Lakeview House; Image 3: East Windsor Residence; Image 4: Avenue G Residence; Image 5: Hillside Residence; Image 6: Bouldin Residence. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

spatial freedom, and are confident and poised in their technical and material expression while advancing a sense of ease that comes from an instinctual awareness of well-being.

Culturally and site specific, the six houses that include, The Scout Island Residence, (Image 1) The Lakeview House, (Image 2) East Windsor, (Image 3) Avenue G, (Image 4) Hillside, (Image 5) and Bouldin Residences (Image 6) skillfully situate themselves within the Austin, Texas environs at times quietly and, at other times, offering challenges to existing building conventions and assumptions. (Fig.1) The significance of the houses as suggested here, while substantial, is merely an introduction to an emerging narrative that will chronicle how the lives of their residents are impacted by the (in)Excess(able) architecture of the six houses and its prospect for their happiness and well-being.

REDISCOVERING THE (IN)EXCESS(ABLE) VALUE OF THE MID-CENTURY MODERN AMERICAN HOUSE

When asked about America’s most significant contribution to world architecture, Günter Behnisch, one of Germany’s foremost postwar practitioners, replied without hesitation that it was the ennobling qualities in American residential architecture.⁴ Not only did he refer to iconic twentieth century American examples found in the work of Wright, and his European American émigré peers such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Rudolph Schindler, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, he also cited the 1945-62 Arts and Architecture magazine “Case Study House Program” that would continue the exploration of Wright and the European cohort with particular regard to affordable residential design and construction.

Grounded in post-war optimism, the experimental efforts of these iconic architects and the design outcomes of the Case Study House Program posed essential social, economic, technical, and aesthetic questions. These questions were aimed towards discovering the values and developing the design practices that would shape contemporary American architecture at mid-century and beyond. Avoiding formal exhibitionism and thin detailing, the values and design outcomes that emerged from the program instead exhibit a deep concern for place and human experience within the framework of modern life. In this spirit, they underpin the (in)Excess(able) DNA structure that pervades the values and work of Alterstudio expressed in the following six themes:

1. Edge Space: The Redefinition of the Relationships, Boundaries, and Edges
2. Wabi-Sabi and Expressive Reticence
3. Transforming the Familiar: Regionalism and Modern Vernacular
4. Site integration, Natural Encounter, and Well-Being
5. Lightness, Minimalism, and the Tell-the-Tale Detail: Beauty’s Hard Core
6. The Spatial Articulation of the Good Life: Modernism’s Unfinished Legacy

EDGE SPACE: THE REDEFINITION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS, BOUNDARIES, AND EDGES

Frank Lloyd Wright’s first built Usonian exploration, The Herbert Jacobs House or Usonia 1 (Madison WI, 1936), set the stage for a unique redefinition of the relationship between inside and outside as well as the scale and spatial relationships between the public and private realms of the American domestic dwelling. Wright himself argued this point about the Usonian living room stating “We can never make the living room big enough, the fireplace important enough, or the sense of relationship



Figure 2: East Windsor Residence Living Room. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

between exterior, interior and environment close enough”⁵ in an effort to concretize his domestic spatial vision of a democratic Usonia.

INSIDE/OUTSIDE AND THE DEMATERIALIZED CORNER

At Alterstudio’s Lakeview House, the family room corner detail recalls aspects of the Usonian inside/outside experience in a refined, minimalist manner. The corner window wall detail transitions from inside to outside by means of a stepped molding at the ceiling that “breaks the box” and advances the renowned Schindler-Chase House (West Hollywood CA, 1922) glass corner detail to another level by removing the vertical mullion to completely open the corner. This graceful transition calls to mind the exceptional layered inside-outside transition of The Jacob House’s east elevation. Approaching the Jacobs House’s east elevation from the southeast corner of the living room, one discovers rich experiences in mass and light. The progression to the east elevation along the south wall transitions from glass in small square proportions aligned with the board and batten grid, to brick, to rectangular glass again on the board and batten grid, to a dissolved corner condition created by two wood panel doors opening at ninety degrees, (in)Excess(ably), as if one were emerging from a forest enclosure.

LAYERED TRANSITIONS

Continuing the reductive distillation of the dematerialized corner detail with no horizontal mullion, the dramatic southeast corner inside-outside transition of the East Windsor Residence’s third level living room, in essence, becomes more Miesian in how the flat unarticulated ceiling transitions inside-outside independent of two paired free-standing structural columns in the spirit of Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion. (Fig.2) Similarly, the ceiling surfaces here and at the Lakeview House are remarkably clean, free of lighting and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning elements, reflecting light from multiple sources and balancing the contrast of the interior ambient light with the exterior that eases inside-outside transitions.

An equally compelling mid-level edge space gesture at the East Windsor Residence east façade includes the two steel box windows that create an ethereal inside-outside edge space that takes the box casement at Jacobs House to a new level of habitable experience. At Jacobs, the dining alcove projects with a casement box window extending beyond the lower partial

ceiling/light shelf, projecting the space further into the landscape while creating an edge space that is both inside and outside. Reminiscent of this gesture, at the East Windsor second floor, the box window at the bedroom projects while the guest suite box window is coincident with the façade plane that, together, balance the large ipe, screen which theatrically reveals the second floor dining room and inverts the reading of the façade day to night. It should be observed that these carefully choreographed spatial transitions exist not only in relation to inside-outside but also between spaces such as the living and dining areas, recalling a key Usonian construct as John Sergeant points out at Jacobs House:

The space in the Jacobs House is not static. Its boundaries are complex and ambiguous. There is always an area of overlap - a part of the space for sitting is also a part of the dining area or even kitchen, lobby, or terrace.⁶

Translating this sophisticated layered transition to the ground plane, at the Lakeview living room a planter masks the elevation change from the living room to the patio, shifting scale from the intimacy of its plantings to the contrasting extended view to the Southwest as it relaxes inside-outside distinction and extends the sight line over the patio elements kindred in spirit to Saarinen’s Miller House (Columbus IN, 1957) and Mies’s Farnsworth Houses’ (Plano IL, 1951) dining-terrace transitions.

KITCHEN-DINING-LIVING IN LINE ARRANGEMENTS

The Lakeview and Scout Island Residences advance this Usonian spatial construct in the horizontal plane as found in the kitchen-dining-living linear in-line arrangements where the narrow, largely transparent spaces interpenetrate each other usually mediated by means of service islands, cabinetry, and hearths. One of the more exuberant Post-Usonian, mid-century sequence precedents of this nature can be found in Pierre Koenig’s Stahl Residence (West Hollywood CA, 1960). As a pavilion house with an understated structure to effect an appropriate “balance between house, pool, sky, and view”⁷, its public realm is characterized by a remarkably open and continuous kitchen-dining-living linear sequence running north-south parallel to the interlocking pool and terrace that offers stunning views of West Hollywood.

At Lakeview, the in-line kitchen-indoor dining room sequence runs south to north with the outdoor dining room at the south, accessible from the kitchen and patio with the Zen garden visually accessible and acting as an experiential spatial bookend. The south wall of the kitchen serves as the backdrop for the experience, with physical and spatial connections to and through the outdoor dining to an exterior court and the guest suite and its garden beyond. The north dining room boundary is fleeting, defined at its north edge by an open limestone see-through hearth recalling the abstract simplicity of hearth of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen’s Case Study House Number 9. From here one ascends to the diaphanous living room with its expansive views to the west horizon countered by the subtle pull to the northeast by the glass gallery situated just north of the southeast limestone wall and its connection to the porch and live oak grove beyond. Here one encounters a serene, centering, private domestic retreat, recalling the grace of Joseph Eichler’s modest, modern Northern California homes that not only provided an insular family refuge but a sensual encounter with light, water, vegetation, and stones that (in) Excessible(ably) elevate the mind and restore the soul.

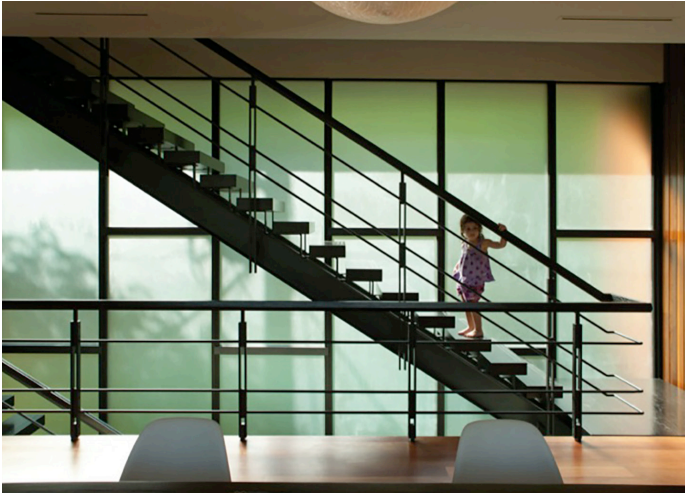


Figure 3: East Windsor Residence Stair. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

WABI-SABI AND EXPRESSIVE RETICENCE: REVEALING THE SIMPLE, HUMBLE, AND EPHEMERAL

Revealing the simple, humble, and ephemeral as discovered in nature and things, Wabi-Sabi informs the (in)Excess(able) architecture of Alterstudio. Wabi-Sabi, as a traditional conception of Japanese beauty, emphasizes an object's transience both in terms of impermanence, incompleteness, and imperfection leading towards an understated elegance. The objective of the Wabi-Sabi experience is to nurture a sense of absence or spiritual longing that results from simplicity, absence, and the aging effects of time.

WABI-SABI AND CONTEMPORARY MATERIALITY

Charles Eames at his residence, "Case Study House #8" (Pacific Palisades CA, 1949) explored these transient (in)Excess(able) ideas, interpreting them in contemporary materials. From the perspective of outside-in, the reflections and shadows of the eucalyptus grove on the glass and cement panels create a weightless, evanescent space between the eucalyptus trees and the building surface. From inside-out the silhouettes of the eucalyptus trees on the pylon glass sun protection reads as a kind of natural calligraphy that one discovers at Alterstudio's East Windsor. As one moves vertically along East Windsor's major stair, one recalls the experience of the Eames House's building envelope as the clear glass transitions to obscure and the delicate silhouettes of the bamboo can be read through the glass acting as a weightless counterpoint to the sculpture below. (Fig.3)

ZEN AND THE ACT OF ENTRY

The East Windsor entry is anchored by a stone monolith that recalls the boldness of Isamu Noguchi's monolith at the UNESCO Garden of Peace (Paris FR, 1956) and mediates the scales between house and landscape. Turning left, one passes over a series of rhythmically staggered stones into a transparent entry space that transitions into a three story vertical stair volume and beyond to the outdoors where the irregular paving of the stair volume slips outside to an inclined garden reading as a green tapestry. This entry Zen Garden experience occurs again in a more direct, but no less erudite manner at the Hillside Residence entrance. At that entrance, vegetation is juxtaposed against the rough grain of the rear

wall and reflected in the glazing that recalls the ghost-like space of a Japanese woodcut when seen from the outside.

SIMPLICITY AND SERENITY

In addition to this more public Zen experience, the most private space, the East Windsor third floor master bath is a place of great simplicity and serenity. The tub's sculptural quality quietly suggests the subtle asymmetrical irregularity of Hagi Ware Japanese tea ceremony pottery floating on a raised monolithic plinth. Another different, yet powerful, (in)Excess(able) experience of light, shadow, and material interplay at East Windsor and occurs on the second level dining terrace behind an ipe screen that conveys an aura of serenity and silence. At the Lakeview Residence, the Zen garden caps a linear public sequence that begins with the outdoor dining area that poetically frames the live oak and landscape, passes northward through the open kitchen, dining, living, "in-line" arrangement into the outdoor Zen garden. As an anchor to the sequence, the Zen garden presents a small universe imbued with stones, vegetation, and the natural occurrence of water and sky.

TRANSFORMING THE FAMILIAR: REGIONALISM AND MODERN VERNACULAR

Cited as an example of the "New Regionalism" by Siegfried Gideon due to its use of traditional materials, The Gropius House (Lincoln MA, 1938) by Walter Gropius can be seen as an early, nuanced, emerging form of Critical Regionalism that mediates the demands and contingencies of place with the forces of universal civilization. As Gropius himself explained in his Total Scope of Architecture in 1956, "I made it a point to absorb into my own conception those features of the New England architectural tradition that I found still alive and adequate"⁸ while acknowledging that "this fusion of the regional spirit with a contemporary approach to design produced a house that I would never have built in Europe"⁹. In response to these emerging modern vernacular design tendencies, Gropius's design for his home features a material palette that combines wood, fieldstone, and brick with glass block, steel, and chrome. Materially, the house suggests the experience of the familiar while advancing a modern tectonic framework that presages the regionally inspired attitude of the six houses.

Alterstudio's 6 houses are lightly etched with (in)Excessible(able) traces of an incipient, regionally inspired modern vernacular. Although apparently contrary in nature, the term suggests an architectural amalgam that on the one hand responds to the spatial and tectonic exigencies of global architectural culture, while on the other, acknowledges the traditional nuance and building patterns specific to place and region. This approach, clearly evident at the Bouldin and Hillside residences, avoids nostalgia as the vernacular reference to the familiar is transformed, enhancing a new reading.

MATERIALITY AND MONTAGE

The Alterstudio Bouldin Residence exemplifies modern vernacular design tactics, particularly in the (in)Excess(able) manner in which the exterior materials are montaged. Board formed concrete, vertical knotty cedar siding, and concrete block exist side-by-side as part of a contemporary vernacular material palette recalling Gropius's reinterpretation



Fig. 4: Hillside Residence Exterior Transition. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

of the New England frame and horizontal clapboard construction and its contrast with the steel casement windows and polished plate glass. Curiously, on the interior, like Gropius, Alterstudio explores the use of clapboard but in this case horizontally as a skin for the interior media room whose sliding door suggests the industrial vernacular and fragments of the American southwestern road architecture of the 1940's and 1950's as a form of restrained, minimal bricolage. Interior use of recycled barn flooring, interior ventilators, and a modest dining lighting program suggestive of found objects add to the mix. At the exterior, a board formed concrete wall deftly slips out from the living room to merge with cedar picket screens and concrete block walls to create a discrete pool terrace and private oasis that recalls Gropius's use of fieldstone walls and screens that montage interior and exterior space, redefining the relationships and boundaries between them.

COMBINING OLD AND NEW: MODERN VERNACULAR ADDITIONS

As a renovation of, and an addition to, a 1927 bungalow, The Hillside Residence presents a number of modern vernacular tendencies. Beginning with its massing which responds to the existing bungalow in type and scale, the addition is notched with tapered gables to allow for a hard entry court while distinguishing it from the existing bungalow. Also, to resolve the issue of the buildings' retaining a distinct formal identity while setting them apart, a glazed entrance gallery balancing the bifurcated plan was deployed to establish a transparent bridge connection between the two building volumes. The exterior materials of the new volume borrow from the vernacular with a metal standing seam roof and

vertical black painted cedar siding, a slightly removed reference to the Japanese Shou-sugi-ban or burned cypress work of Terunobu Fujimori. (Fig.4)

Now redesigned to contain the private bedroom domain, the existing volume is stripped to its pristine clapboard essence with the porch and rear shed removed and their former traces carefully veiled with new glazing that, with the new central skylight, bring light deep into the volume. The crisply detailed white kitchen is interspersed with references to the former bungalow, its salvaged beams repurposed as table and counter tops, that with the horizontal wood cladding at the kitchen island and cabinetry add moments of vernacular contrast.

SITE INTEGRATION, NATURAL ENCOUNTER, AND HUMAN WELL-BEING

Each of Alterstudio's six houses demonstrate great sensitivity to site issues with each establishing a new affinity between landscape and architecture. They all range in their response to site, recalling such precedents as Richard Neutra and Garret Eckbos's aggressive transparency and redefinition of inside-outside boundary relationships to the sophisticated, yet subtle, softening transitions found in Isamu Noguchi's sculptural dry Zen garden set pieces. All of the Alterstudio's six houses work assiduously at house-garden-nature transition sequences to avoid the 'house-and-then-a-garden' trap most memorably resisted in the house-garden transitions and quiet, architecturally derived formalism of Dan Kiley's lyrical Miller Garden (Columbus IN, 1955-57).

TRANSITION STRATEGIES

Lakeview presents the most elaborate of Alterstudio's landscape into architecture sequence transition strategies. Beginning at the live oak grove, one moves in a staggered pattern under the tree canopy, along a limestone wall with a view through the glass wall south of the entry directly to the deep space of the nature preserve and sky beyond. (Fig.5)

The Zen garden appears montaged through the glass to the north drawing one to the entry. The small entrance is hidden beyond the small, free-form, cypress-clad volume and its belying box window. Upon entry, one is led west through a small glazed gallery with north views to live oaks that continue through the porch roof to a point of pause at the southwest corner of the living room. Here, at the crux of bifurcated plan, one has the choice to move south to the kitchen and service wings, north through the glazed gallery with western views to the Zen garden and east to the porch live oaks to the private bedroom area, or directly west through the living room to the stairs that descends into the dining room and out to the patio and pool to the expansive freedom of the western panoramic view.

NATURAL ENCOUNTER IN INTROVERTED AND EXTROVERTED FORMS

At The Scout Island Residence, natural encounter occurs in both introverted and extroverted forms. Situated within a planned development governed by severe covenant restrictions, the decision was made to turn inward, away from the surrounding suburban context through the deployment of a semi-enclosed entrance court. A glazed entrance gallery



Fig. 5: Lakeview Residence Entry Sequence. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

separates the entrance court and a second garden court with expansive views. Originating in a sunlit court to the south with its oppositely disposed ipe screen and steel carport to the east and ipe-clad garage to the west, the honorific sequence moves into a semi-enclosed emerald zoysia grass court whose surfaces merge with the distant green of the escarpment as seen through the glazed entrance gallery. One traverses through the grasses along the wall to the semi-covered, shimmering water garden threshold. Here one captures reflections of building, sky, and garden as the surrounding context begins to disappear before passing through the blue steel door into the entrance gallery. Defining the edge condition between the manicured upper green court with its views back across the lawn to the glazed entry and the lower pool terrace, the pergola sets up the vista to the deep space of the escarpment to the north. The inner court, supported by the inward focus of the planning of the east and west wings, completely removes one from their surroundings with the modesty, functional and spatial clarity, and elegance as seen in mid-century Joseph Eichler home plans such as House Plan # 470-4 before releasing them into expanse of nature and sky.

The result of these mid-century precedent sequences and the Alterstudio Lakeview and Scout Island residences that follow one half century later cannot be understated as they remove the participant from the world of work and social obligation, to a private retreat immersed in nature, both wild and manicured, where one experiences a sense of serenity, repose, and well-being brought about by their encounter.

LIGHTNESS, MINIMALISM, AND THE TELL-THE-TALE DETAIL: BEAUTY'S HARD CORE

Presenting the argument that buildings should not stir up emotions but should "allow emotions to emerge, to be",¹⁰ Peter Zumthor suggests that the architect should instead: "...remain close to the thing itself, close to the essence of the thing I have to shape, confident that if the building is conceived accurately enough for its place and its function, it will develop its own strength, with no need for artistic addition. The hard core of beauty: concentrated substance".¹¹

Zumthor elaborates further that in order to obtain an architecture of depth and multiplicity, one must allow for a vagueness, indeterminacy,

and openness that, ironically, is grounded in a precision that results from the meticulous definition of details. This precision is not found in the fastidious or Excessive, but in details that emanate from the things themselves. Such details as noted by Jean Labatut and articulated by Marco Frascari through his work on the tell-the-tale detail, which is the minimal unit of production that underlies architecture's possibility for innovation and invention. For Zumthor and Alterstudio, the desired outcome of this mode of inquiry is an architectural object that, through its details, exudes a corporeal wholeness discovered in the laws of concrete things and in nature or the natural environment that results in a what Zumthor refers to as a "factual complex"¹² that is faithful to place and beyond the architect's personal rhetoric. Alterstudio's six houses rigorously pursue the questions of site, purpose, and material through tell-the-tale details that express a site's factual complex. This mode of design inquiry for Alterstudio leads to architectural outcomes characterized by their lightness and minimalism brought about by purposefully considered site and materially specific detailing.

MATERIALITY, SITE, AND THE TELL-THE-TALE DETAIL

Richard Neutra at his Kaufmann Desert House, (Palm Springs CA, 1946) anticipates both Zumthor's and Alterstudio's notion that architecture should respond to the basic questions and material suppositions that arise from its site. Taking on the formal quality of a pavilion in a constructed landscape through the dramatic blurring of inside and outside, the Desert House's evanescent weightlessness brought about by changing patterns of desert shade and shadow exudes an ethereal quality as seen in the reflections that animate the glass surfaces protected by the extended overhangs, vertical aluminum fins, and trellises. The pool tenuously balances the house within the landscape as its surfaces create an interplay between reflections of landscape, house, and sky. A limited material palette such as the buff Utah stone, steel, aluminum, glass, and wood encourage a sentient encounter with house and landscape. Neutra, in a manner anticipating Alterstudio, was not concerned with Excessive abstract form but, as Frampton notes "the modulation of sun and light and the sensitive articulation of the screens of plants between the building and its general context."¹³ These direct encounters with nature through architecture's material response, give rise not only to user well-being as advanced in Neutra's bio realism writings, but as Alain de Botton notes, contribute to the Desert House's sense of honesty, ease, and lack of inhibition.¹⁴

LIGHTNESS AND MINIMALISM

These tendencies are clearly evident in the current work of Alterstudio. An (in)Excess(able) lightness and minimalism pervade their work, particularly at the exterior of both the Lakeview and East Windsor residences.. At Lakeview, the main living area roof profile is stepped by means of a concealed box gutter detail that limits the visible surface to the ten-inch depth of the channel that forms the edge of the roofline. The wood profiles at Lakeview are extremely slender as indicated in their two-inch vertical mullions including stops and restrained with only a three quarter-inch wood liner at the head and sill conditions. At the Scout Island entry, the two fifteen inch-deep water garden features extend under the modestly cantilevered gallery slab to enhance its floating reading on either



Fig. 6: Scout Island Residence Entry. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

side of the entrance gallery. (Fig. 6) Minimally defined by steel angles and traversed by two and one quarter-inch thick floating limestone slabs, it adds a sense of weightlessness as it captures sky reflections whose qualities are further reinforced upon entry by the almost immediate reflective encounter with the butt-glazed corner condition and floating wood ceiling concealed lighting above.

Answering these questions of site, purpose, and material, allows for the potential to exact a culturally innocent “primordial force that reaches deeper than mere arrangement of stylistically preconceived forms”.¹⁵ For Zumthor and Alterstudio, The desired outcome of this mode of inquiry is an architectural object that through its details exudes a corporeal wholeness discovered in the laws of concrete things in nature or the natural environment that, in turn, establishes the “factual complex” that is faithful to place and beyond the architect’s personal rhetoric.

THE SPATIAL ARTICULATION OF THE GOOD LIFE: MODERNISM’S UNFINISHED LEGACY

The Austin-based residential work of the Alterstudio speculates upon the historic mid-century circumstance and unfinished legacy of the Modern American House. It emerges now to proffer a new, (in)Excessible(able), form of late modernism specific to time and place, people and landscape. The six houses exist in a world accepted as it is found, arising out of ordinary contexts with clients who desire affordable shelter consistent with the reality of normative budgets, while challenging traditional construction techniques, restrictive zoning constraints and homeowner association codes, covenants, and restrictions. Reflecting the ambition of the “Case Study House Program” houses that posed the essential social, economic, technical, and aesthetic questions of their time, the six houses project an additional concern for the environmental and social instability that, coupled with a disregard for human experience, are the byproducts of an era of excess. Avoiding the pitfalls of the modern utopianism and post-modern stylistic simulacra though their erudite simplicity, the six houses are real. (Fig 7) They are present in their perceptual richness and environmental awareness and significant to the general lives of their owners through their existential import. Materially authentic, the six houses give evidence of their making in details that delight through their artful joining. Absent of signification and rhetoric, they are silent. Most importantly, in their lack of pretense and excess, the six houses reflect the



Fig. 7: Lakeview Residence Living Room. Courtesy of Alterstudio Archives.

cultural innocence of the mid century modern American house and pursue the unfinished legacy of the “Case Study House Program” to advance an architecture that can be both sophisticated and modest while ennobling the lives of those who live within it.

ENDNOTES

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