

Charles Moore's Watermelon Pyramid: Playing with Scale, Function, and Symbolism

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This paper provides a historical analysis of the dynamics between scale, function, and symbolism at play in Charles Moore's domestic interiors. Homes designed by the architect for himself during the 1960s are examined. These include his first home in Orinda, CA (1962), his New Haven house (1966), and his Centerbrook home (1969). Across these works there is a shift from the formal problem of a house within a house to the social problem of worlds within worlds. Moore's interest in toys and adolescence along with critical theorizations of childhood frame the analysis of these design works within the larger question of play.

The postmodernist architect Charles W. Moore (1925-1993) is well known for his work in supergraphics, a low cost technique of applying large-scaled geometric designs in bright colors to interior spaces creating dynamic spatial effects. Less studied within the architect's oeuvre is the migration of this graphic approach to three-dimensional objects that cannot be easily qualified as a room, a piece of furniture, or an architectural model, but rather answers to all three. In particular this paper examines Moore's plywood pyramid that, on the second floor of his Centerbrook home, stood simultaneously as a scaled model of an ancient monument, an oversized dollhouse, a modestly scaled bachelor bedroom, and a symbol of US currency, all while being painted to look like a watermelon. It's indeterminate scale, function, and symbolism together raise questions about the construction of age, race, and gender in the domestic interior—suggesting that Moore's playful work is not simply staging an aesthetic escape, but rather tethering design to a material world of social practices. In moving from the formal problem of a house within a house at his earlier home in Orinda, CA (1962) to the social and historical problem of worlds within worlds at Centerbrook (1969) we can see pulses of the sociological and ecological currents emerging in architecture in the 1960s and 70s, yet here played out within the domestic interior rather than an overtly heroic polemic set on the urban stage of bionetworks.

INTRODUCTION

We see evidence of childhood as a protracted theme for the architect Charles Moore in numerous places, from his coveted collection of pop-up books, to two designs for dollhouses, a lecture devoted to the topic of fairy tales, and an exhibition piece for the Architectural League in New York that featured a figurative study of children's clothing. The conceit of childhood is arguably central to Moore's growing efforts to address the social concerns of America in the late

60s and early 70s. Furthermore, one finds a figuring of youth in Moore's work that is distinct from the contemporaneous celebration of hedonistic youth culture such as is found in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*, the post-war romantic ideation of childhood as a font of creativity exemplified in Nigel Henderson's mid-century photographs of children playing in the streets of London, and the earlier Modernist ideal of elementary forms used for example in the Bauhaus Bauspiel designed by Alma Siedhoff-Buscher in 1923. Where other conceptualizations of childhood are largely based on a myth of freedom, Moore's remains at least partially bounded to the domestic sphere.

WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE

Charles Moore built a series of houses for himself as he moved across the US for different teaching posts and configured new firms along the way as well. The first such personal project was the Orinda House, built when Moore moved to Berkeley for his first teaching position after finishing his PhD at Princeton. It is Moore's most muted project, as the architect had not yet begun his explorations of colorful supergraphics. Instead, the focus was a scalar problem of fitting miniature architectural forms, or aedicule, into the space of the open-plan house. Furthermore, the aedicule of this first house stood like diminutive versions of Louis Kahn's Trenton bathhouse.

Not long after Moore's Orinda House was completed in 1962, Robert Venturi would write the manifesto of postmodernism calling attention to the interior and intraspatial relationships (1965), and later Charles Jencks would theorize postmodernist architecture as a half-breed species or a mélange of Modernist abstract aesthetics and the vernaculars of popular and historicist forms (1977). We see aspects of both theorizations already staged in the evocative photographs of this first house that Moore built for himself. These images show, for example that the white boxes of the skylights sitting above the miniature monuments reminiscent of Kahn's bathhouse result from the formal game of fitting a space within a space. As such these elements appear to float within the house.

However, marble columns more reminiscent of Roman spolia than Modernist pilotis support these abstract forms. In one of the interior photographs of the Orinda house, a Modernist chair brushes up against one such column. The monumental columns brought into the domestic interior contrast with the flat abstract walls separating interior from exterior. This



Figure 1: Charles Moore, photographic study of children's clothing for Architectural League Project, 1980. University of Texas at Austin

juxtaposition is heightened in the visual contrast between the two-dimensionality of the walls and the imagery hanging on them, all of which is pushed to the background of the photograph, while the materially and spatially dynamic aedilculae of the foreground frame various three-dimensional objects such as a bed, ornamental plant, tub, showerhead, shower curtain, and the aforementioned chair. Staged as it is, and with a glimpse of exterior nature, the image seemingly falls into a by then well know genre of architectural photography of the Modernist interior. However it is a harbinger of things to come.

Certainly Moore built the Orinda House and commissioned its famous set of photographs by Morley Baer to launch his career – indeed the images of the house appeared multiple times in *Progressive Architecture* between 1962 and 1964.¹ There is of course a tradition of architects building their own homes, or a house for their parents, as a way of testing ideas and jump-starting one's career. But Moore is unique in that he kept building houses for himself even after his professional identity was established and without explicitly using them for further promotion. Moore left Berkley for Yale in 1965, and it was in New Haven that he built his most prominently publicized house, which was featured in *Playboy* in October of 1969.² Whereas the photographs of the Orinda House followed a visual conceit of presenting architectural space as gender neutral, the *Playboy* spread amplified Moore's bachelor status. Beatriz Colomina characterizes the popular series of "playboy pads" as obsessed with a totalized interior that, "[I]n each case, the fantasy is the same: the bachelor and his equipment are able to control every aspect of the interior environment to choreograph the successful conquest and subsequent erasure of all traces in preparation for the next capture."³ In contrast to this image of a perfected interior, Moore was always inventing another iteration.

By the time the *Playboy* article came out, Moore had already moved on. While he was still dean at Yale, Moore moved his home and his office to Essex, CT where he bought a

nineteenth-century compound of mill buildings with a social vision that ranged from establishing a more collaborative firm, connections to industrial history, and an ecological agenda for the site. The property was purchased in 1969 and the build out of the house was completed in 1970, but the property was large and in disrepair. During the early 70s Moore continued with the costly renovations primarily through sweat equity, but the firm, like so many, fell on hard financial times. Weathering the oil crisis and economic recession the firm only officially opened in 1975, with a mission of focusing on craft and place making.

The plywood pyramid of the Centerbrook House sits squarely on the ground awkwardly filling the second floor of the 18th century clapboard house. The first visual cue that one gets upon walking into the space is the image of an Egyptian pyramid filled with Moore's collection of toys, which was a collection he had been accumulating but was not so overtly and singularly staged in the previous houses. In her text on narrative and scale Susan Stewart writes, "[T]he dollhouse has two dominant motifs: wealth and nostalgia. It presents a myriad of perfect objects that are, as signifiers, often affordable, whereas the signified is not."⁴

Such an encounter with Moore's pyramid may prompt us to ask, what is the difference between a dollhouse and an architectural model? Well, the scaled model has long remained one of the fundamental instruments of architectural design, providing a means of assessing aesthetic compositions as well as testing spatial qualities. As the architectural object, and its monumental structures in particular, were increasingly recognized as being in crisis during the postmodern period, scaled models for the most part changed in scope not kind; which is to say that while they may have gathered urban and environmental contexts rather than isolated buildings, they still performed their essential scalar function of rendering complex spatial, social, and ecological relationships visible.

In contrast, dollhouses arguably do a bit more than this. In his entry on "Toys" in the *Mythologies* collection, Roland Barthes writes, "All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of

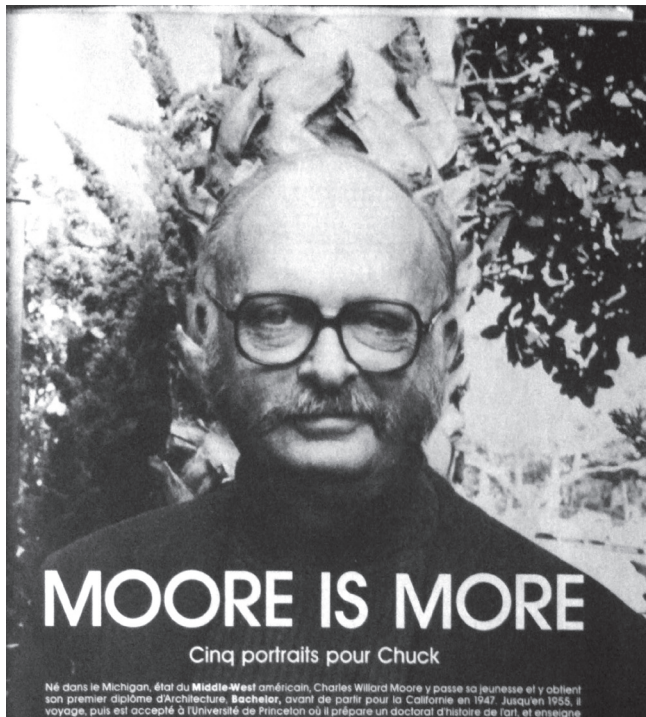


Figure 2: *Architecture Ajourd'hui*, 1976.

human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size.”⁵ Thus dollhouses not only replicate domestic environments, they domesticate their users. Furthermore, Barthes’ theorization operates on an assumption of miniaturization. In contrast, Moore’s pyramid, in its function as a display case for his toy collection or a dollhouse, is excessive. It is, as it were, a giant miniature; smaller than a pyramid, larger than a typical model.

ON THE FLIP SIDE, A BACHELOR BEDROOM

But the scale of the dollhouse is not the only measure of the pyramid object—it also functions as a full-scale encasement for his bedroom on the opposite side. For this purpose it is awkwardly tight, barely providing a small closet, cubbyhole, and headboard. This oscillation in scale complicates conceptualizing this structure through Stewart’s definition of the dollhouse. Alternatively, we may read this space as a *mise en abyme*, which Mieke Bal describes as, “a microstructure that contains a summary of the overall fabula in which it functions.”⁶ Such nested forms have more to do with narrative structure rather than simply the scale of the object, or with the kinds of narrative structures afforded by shifting scales. In her textual analysis, Bal reveals the *mise en abyme* to operate through proper names, stating, “The proper names whose intertextual and intratextual interplay... end up as partaking in one of the most knotty figures of contemporary narratology, the *mise en abyme*. Why is this little figure of analogy so fascinating, for critics as well as for writers and readers? Its status as troublemaker, as disturber of chronology, as

interrupter of the neat linearity of narrative, makes it especially attractive...”⁷ The intraspatial character of Moore’s domestic interior at Centerbrook is arguably more knotty than his earlier aedicular forms in his Orinda and New Haven homes because here the dual functions of dollhouse and bedroom coincide within a single encasement.

The only publication to feature Moore’s third home was a lengthy spread on the architect in the French journal *Architecture Ajourd’hui* from 1976, which featured a whopping five “portraits” of the protean Moore. These included a self-portrait written by Moore followed by professional, professor, activist, and artist portraits each individually authored by architects including Frank Israel and Diana Agrest, who wrote the portrait of an artist and featured the Centerbrook house, which she describes as a cultural compressor. In his opening self-portrait Moore writes, “There is an excitement in my mind especially for miniatures, for tiny things that carry the message of much bigger ones.” He goes on to describe the aedicular forms at Orinda and Sea Ranch, but adds at the end, “Later we have become very much interested in the urgencies of larger housing groups where the need has been not only to make the center of the world for an individual family, but to figure out how at minimum cost and with some density, to put those centers of the world together.”⁸

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

In moving from the formal problem of a house within a house at his earlier home to the social and historical problem of worlds within worlds at Centerbrook, we can see pulses of the sociological and ecological currents emerging in architecture in the 1960s and 70s, yet here played out within the domestic interior rather than the urban stage. In terms of scale and function, the Centerbrook pyramid already confounds the typical role of toys and play to naturalize adult behavior. Where Barthes discovers through close examination of miniatures that, “Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc.,”⁹ Moore makes larger than life some other things the American adult doesn’t find unusual, such as racism and the divine status of the dollar, by painting his variously scaled pyramid as a dual symbol of US currency and racism in America, oscillating between monetary insignia and watermelon.

In a 1975 lecture at Tulane University, Moore outlined his definition of “the architectural fairy tale” by drawing a line between fairy tale and fantasy.¹⁰ There, Moore defined fantasy as irrational and separate from both the realms of possibility and of lived life. In contrast he qualified the fairy tale as starting with the familiar but extending to immeasurable dimensions. While the architect made a semantic distinction between fairy tale and fantasy, this paper looks more broadly at the ways in which flights of fancy implemented through the architectural dimension serve to tie



Figure 3 & 4: Charles Moore, Centerbrook House, 1969. Yale University Manuscripts and Archives.

architecture to its socio-economic context rather than simply setting it free. Similarly, Walter Benjamin emphasized, “After all, a child is no Robinson Crusoe; children do not constitute a community cut off from everything else. They belong to the nation and the class they come from. This means that their toys cannot bear witness to any autonomous separate existence, but rather are a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation.”¹¹

To conclude, Moore’s Centerbrook house instantiates a comparable signifying dialogue. The symbolism here is overt; it is multilayered, but not ambiguous—it images an Egyptian pyramid, at once part of the architectural canon, a major monument in Western architectural history, a foundation myth, founded on privileged art historical narratives that rope African history into the western canon, but also a monument of immense material orchestration, and built from slave labor; as such it represents a monument that is not simply an art historical image but also an artifact of a particular social and political structure; that is here transposed into a contemporary American context of money, labor, and social equity—it is open to interpretation, but not endlessly so; it is in short a carefully composed multivalency that operates on a personal and physical scale as much as it does visually.

ENDNOTES

1. “House at Orinda, California,” *Progressive Architecture* 43, (01, 1962), 146-149. “Residence, Orinda, California,” *Progressive Architecture* 44, (05, 1963), 139, 144, 171-175. “Eleventh Annual Design Awards,” *Progressive Architecture* 45, (01, 1964). Also in Hitoshi Misawa, “Charles W. Moore and His Partners,” *Japan Architect* no. 112 (1965), 75-86 & “The Architectural League’s 63rd Gold Medal Exhibition,” *Contract Interiors* 125, no. 5 (12, 1965), 102-105.
2. “A Playboy Pad: New Haven Haven,” in *Playboy*, (October 1969), 126-129, 186.
3. Beatriz Colomina, “L’Obsession De Playboy: L’intérieur Total = the Total Interior: Playboy’s Obsession,” *Architecture d’aujourd’hui*, no. 398 (2013), 69.
4. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 61.
5. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 53.
6. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 75.
7. *Ibid.*, 87.
8. *Architecture Ajour’d’hui*, no. 184, (1976), xlv.
9. Barthes, 53.
10. Charles W. Moore, *Architecture: Architecture and Fairy Tales* (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1975).
11. Walter Benjamin, “The Cultural History of Toys,” trans. by Rodney Livingstone in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 116.