

CHAPTER 14

The Art of Living in a Double House. Everyday Aesthetics in the Space between (East and West)

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Abstract: The relationship between art and the domestic setting is complicated. A perceived incompatibility between the critical gesture of autonomous art and the protective enclosure of home and house sets the two apart. For the modern architect, art cannot accommodate domestic life without the loss of potency or homely comfort. At the same time, artists in the twentieth century have continued to challenge the resilience of the dwelling house through radical spatial practices producing new spaces and concepts for living. The following looks at the work *Merzbau* (1927 – 1937) by the German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887 – 1948) as an example of a work of art transforming a seemingly ordinary house into an extraordinary architecture. It is argued that a certain kind of coexistence becomes possible when Schwitters's *Merz* building radically challenges the dichotomy of the familiar/unknown embedded in the Western house. Furthermore, it is suggested that the aesthetics of 'the uncanny' sheds light on the forces at play when the artist thereby brings something of a foreign nature to the surface of the living space. The thinking of Theodor W. Adorno and Martin Heidegger informs the enquiry into modern Western concepts of dwelling while links to traditional Chinese aesthetics and the more recent 'living aesthetics' are developed with a view to a trans-cultural conceptualisation of the inclusive living space.

Keywords: Living Aesthetics, *Merzbau*, The Uncanny, Dwelling, The Everyday

1 The Art of Living

“It is widely known that there is a deep-rooted tradition of aestheticizing everyday life in Chinese culture and art” Liu Yuedi (2014, p. 15). Everyday aesthetics, or the ‘art of living’, as a category in the philosophy of everyday life, has a history in China. By contrast, in the West,

a preference for extraordinary experiences of art outside the realm and domain of the everyday has informed aesthetic thinking in recent centuries. John Dewey's twentieth-century critique outlined in the influential *Art as Experience* (1934) is a break from this tradition. The continued relevance of Dewey's questioning of the status of art as an elevated object, commodity and primary source of aesthetic experience is evidence of the need to develop more inclusive aesthetic concepts. In traditional Chinese culture, art is embedded in life as a dimension of the everyday cultivated as something at the same time extra *and* ordinary. In the tradition of the Chinese literati scholar, for example, a highly refined lifestyle integrates aesthetic experience in everyday life practices.¹ While a scholar's life, by all means, was exclusive, and the traditional Chinese concept of art is of a unique nature, aesthetic practice and experience were cultivated as profound components of daily life in the house and garden. The orientation of traditional Chinese thinking towards relational alignment of complementary forces, in contrast to the Western tendency to operate according to oppositional pairs demarcating fields of contradiction and hierarchy, might well account for this propensity for a harmonious integration.²

The contemporary Chinese philosopher Liu Yuedi (2014) identifies the difference between the East and the West with regard to everyday aesthetics in that the Western approach is "reflexive" because it is a reaction against the historical focus on art as the primary source of aesthetic experience (Liu 2014, p. 15). On the other hand, in Chinese aesthetics, the focus on the everyday is "a reaction against 'the Other' (Ibid.), where the adversary signifies the influence from Western aesthetics. If this 'other' then ultimately also refers back to art, different lines of thinking have driven aesthetics in the East and West in the last century. Respectively, a preoccupation with nature has come to involve the environment more broadly and a focus on art has become a concern with life in a wider sense. Overall, the contours of an 'intercultural turn' towards a shared interest in the environment of humans, animals and things, as well as a preoccupation with everyday life in its various extra/ordinary manifestations, can be glimpsed. In this light, traditional

¹ See for example Li Zehou (2010) for a detailed discussion of the literati scholar's 'art of living' in observance of Confucian and Taoist ideals.

² See for example the Chinese philosopher Fung Yu-Lan's history of Chinese philosophy (1997) as well as the writing of French sinologist François Jullien (2000) for further insights into differences and alignments between philosophical thinking in the East and West.

Chinese living aesthetics, according to Liu, provides a framework for a global aesthetics concerned with art and everyday life as complementary rather than opposing forces (Liu 2014, p. 17).

Living aesthetics is for Liu an attempt at reaching back to retrieve traditions at risk of disappearing because these might help reorient contemporary aesthetics towards a new agenda shared by the East and West. Living aesthetics thereby involves a wider critique of Western modernity as a disruptive ‘other’ suppressing the aesthetic potential of everyday life. If the art of living begins at home, then living aesthetics potentially resonates beyond the domestic setting and engages with the larger environment. In light of the planetary challenge beyond the lifeworlds of humans, this paper suggests that living aesthetics might extend to an aesthetics itself alive and open towards non-human life and things of all kinds as agents in a potentially unlimited collective setting.³

2 Double House

If, in the West, notions of art and living involve a split between the space of the artwork and the domestic setting, then how to conceive of a ‘double house’ encompassing both Eastern and Western values? How to conceive of an aesthetics beyond the divide? Is it possible to articulate a house for coexistence accommodating both aesthetic experience and practice, the extra and the ordinary, the familiar and the unknown, the self and the other? Must such a house be an artful rendering of an inhabitable structure in order to provide inclusive accommodation? In Western thinking, a perceived opposition between art and the domestic setting has historically set the two spheres apart. For the twentieth-century architectural Modern Movement, the autonomous work was qualified as art or architecture by the extent to which it represented non-domestic values (Reed 1996). Art was autonomous, could not be tamed or it would cease to be art, whereas, by contrast, the house as a structure for living when exercising its domesticating force would hold together

³ The German sinologist Karl-Heinz Pohl has elaborated on the notion of ‘living rules’ as opposed to ‘dead rules’ in Chinese aesthetics (2018, p. 332). The argument concerns the rules that artists adhere to in the creation of art which must involve both ‘naturalness’ (自然 *zìrán*) and ‘regularity’ (法 *fa*). Such a work embodies “a living, organic pattern, not dependent on rules derived from ‘orthodox’ models or periods but following the rules of nature. Such works come alive, creating their own rules, in each new period with each new poet-artist who is stirred by the world and its affairs,” Pohl writes (pp. 333-334).

the familiar and known. Western artists have repeatedly addressed this perceived antagonism with critical gestures reconfiguring the house for other ways of living, not least their own. Along the way, throughout the twentieth century, two Western philosophical positions have exerted a significant influence on the debate in architectural circles. On the one hand, Adorno's thinking on the critical gesture of modern, autonomous art has driven a negative dialectics in favour of dismantling the residential house.⁴ On the other hand, Heidegger's thinking on the relationship between poetic dwelling, building and thinking has informed a phenomenological approach to the attempted restoration of the home, house and sense of belonging to a place perceived to be lost.⁵ If the two positions would appear conflicting, they outline the schism between art and dwelling in modern Western thinking. In relation to Adorno's thinking, the architectural theorist Hilde Heynen (1992, p. 82) writes:

Modernity evokes a 'crisis of experience' because it increasingly destroys living conditions that are favourable to real, intense experiences and profound interpersonal contacts [...] Adorno sees contemporary art as a way of expressing this crisis. This is precisely why it is 'modern': the modernism of art consists in its relation to the crisis of experience.

A crisis of experience is evoked when disruptive modernity challenges the possibility of profound encounters in the everyday environment. Art is not only averse to the domestic setting because of being a stranger to domestication but, according to Adorno, expresses a crisis of extra/ordinary everyday experience in the modern house. Aesthetic experience is the experience of the negative, of loss and absence in a house devastated by war as well as the forces of modern development. How to reconfigure this house as a place for aesthetic experiences beyond the negative?

⁴ In exile in America during World War II, Adorno's concern with modernity's self-destructive nature led to a consideration of the tendency of rational progress to turn irrational. Adorno wrote, "The house is past. The bombings of European cities, as well as the labour and concentration camps, merely proceed as executors, with what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans" (1951/1978, p. 39).

⁵ The two published lectures 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (1954/2013) and '... Poetically Man Dwells...' ([1954] 2013) famously outline Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling. Both have exerted a significant influence on architects in the West and continue to be studied in China.

3 The Problem of the House

The desire for the dwelling house – with its promise of enclosure, familiarity and shelter – remains strong in the twenty-first century. The longing for a certain place to settle down endures in the form of a house of one’s own choice or perhaps handed down through generations. Yet, what if we cannot (all) have this house because most of us cannot afford it, there is not enough space, or the environment will collapse as a result of the building activity alone? What if the one-family house has become an exclusive, anti-social, even earth-destructive idea? Then the problem is not only the longing for a house grounded in a place of the past for the gathering of the ones who belong. It is not the desire for a house enclosing the relations and secrets, insights and achievements of the ones initiated through generations of accumulated things and memories. The dwelling house in the form of a grounded structure haunting contemporary dwellers becomes a *closed* house, a fortress enclosing the residents while keeping strangers outside. A *closure*, a dead-end, preventing communication, exchange and sharing with anyone and anything beyond the walls that frame and hold it.

The less than straightforward connotations of the term *dwelling* – noun and verb in one – contribute to the complexity of the issue. Famously, Heidegger (2013, p. 145) elucidated the meaning of the term’s German equivalents through close readings of etymological dictionaries on the German language. Heidegger found that the German word for *building* – ‘bauen’ – can be demonstrated to originally mean ‘to dwell’. This meaning has, however, fallen into oblivion or it has been concealed and Heidegger writes (2013, p. 146) “We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are *dwellers*.” Dwelling comes before building because, as human beings, we are foremost dwellers and how we choose to build this dwelling remains a challenge.⁶

While dictionary recordings are likely to throw new light on the meaning of terms, the notion that dwelling today could mean something else than what dictionary entries have recorded in the past is there. Is it possible to imagine a “place of residence; a dwelling-place, habitation, house” – the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of the term *dwelling*

⁶ Heidegger proceeds from the Old English/High German word for building, *buan*, which not only means ‘to dwell’ but also refers to ‘being’ itself via *buan*’s relation to the German *bin* – *ich bin* = ‘I am’, and therefore, I am = I dwell. “The manner in which we humans are on the earth is *Buan*, dwelling,” Heidegger writes (2013, p. 145).

(1989, p. 3) – with application in the twenty-first century? If the immediate answer is affirmative, then the question is what the nature of this dwelling-place-house would be. Where is a “place of residence” located in the migratory flux of the twenty-first century? What is “habitation” in an age characterised by movement and change? Does observable life conform to a shared set of values and practices that might be grounded in a “house”? Will a placeless contemporary life be contained in just one “dwelling-place”? Should the dictionary entry be revised? Should it be deleted or marked obsolete?



Figure 1: Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau* (Grosse Gruppe), Hannover, Germany, 1933.
Source: Photo by Wilhelm Redemann. Copyright: bpk, Sprengel Museum Hannover

4 The Artist's House

In between the two World Wars, a family house in Hannover, Germany, becomes a work of art when the artist's studio located inside one of the apartments transforms into a new architecture. A highly personalised living space emerges, built in a bricolage fashion from material collected

from the war-torn streets of Hannover. Inside the structure, numerous hidden spaces hold objects and memorabilia, while larger inhabitable spaces serve functions such as a library and a living room. It is around 1918 that the emerging Dada-artist Kurt Schwitters initiates the sculptural columns that eventually merge with each other as well as with the walls of the square bedroom at the back of the house that becomes his studio in 1927. Over the course of ten years, before Schwitters is forced to flee Germany because of being persecuted by the National Socialists, the work *Merzbau* embodies the artist's attempt at making a space for himself as well as his family and friends. As such, the work can be seen as a refuge from political upheaval and persecution which, at the same time, gives form to an intuitive and expressive architecture.

Schwitters outlines his *Merz* philosophy and method in numerous texts that are published in avantgarde art journals and contribute to a lively discourse on the role of art in the twentieth century. One of these texts, written in December 1920 with the title 'Merz', outlines the agenda in terms of how material found on the street is recharged with meaning and purpose when entering one of Schwitters's *Merz* compositions. About his *Merz* pictures, Schwitters writes:

Because the medium is unimportant, I take any material whatsoever if the picture demands it. When I adjust materials of different kinds to one another, I have taken a step in advance of mere oil painting, for in addition to playing off colour against colour, line against line, form against form etc., I play off material against material; for example, wood against sackcloth. I call the *Weltanschauung* from which this mode of artistic creation arose *Merz*.⁷

Schwitters's *Merz* method gives aesthetic form to everyday objects and materials, found in the streets of Hannover, when these are brought together in a composition on the shared image-plane or in a three-dimensional space. Within these confines, every object or piece of material is re-charged with value and meaning when integrated into a composition that marks a site of a non-hierarchical, harmonious coexistence. In the creation of the new living environment, the inclusivity of *Merz* appears to have no limit, and the relation between the work and the studio, inside which it is built, becomes one of attachment

⁷ The quote is from the English translation of the text 'Merz (Für den *Ararat* geschrieben 19. Dezember 1920)' published in vol. 5 of *Das literarische Werk* [The Literary Work] which is a collection of Kurt Schwitters's published writing (1981).

since Schwitters does not alter the walls of the room. The work rather doubles the walls to become itself a wall-structure and *Merzbau*, therefore, has no outer side or external façade. It is a three-winged, horseshoe-shaped, interior structure with a large window occupying the studio's fourth wall that overlooks the garden. *Merzbau* thereby faces an internal courtyard and the spatial relationships between work of art, house and site are intricate. The work's amalgamation of everyday materials and findings into an inhabitable, white-washed bricolage *Gesamtkunstwerk* embedded in a bourgeois residential building demonstrates Schwitters's ability to transcend the limit of the house in an inwards movement. In doing so, the work brings something unusual, perhaps un-domestic, to the inner surface of the house.



Figure 2: Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau* (Blaues Fenster), Hannover, Germany, 1933.
Source: Photo by Wilhelm Redemann. Copyright: bpk, Sprengel Museum Hannover

5 The Un/homely

As is well known, Sigmund Freud begins the essay *Das Unheimliche* [The Uncanny] (1919) by explaining that the uncanny signifies an area of aesthetics that has so far been neglected in the specialist literature. It is an area involving the experience of something once familiar and known resurfacing from the depth of the unconscious mind to cause distress. As such, the uncanny signifies the return of the repressed, and Freud quotes the philosopher F. W. J. Schelling (2003, p. 132) who wrote, “Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.” Freud proceeds to scrutinise dictionaries on the German language for meanings of the German word *unheimlich*, which literally translated means ‘unhomely’. The term signifies not only the experience of something unfamiliar and hidden that comes to light, but also the circumstance that the opposite term, *heimlich* or ‘homely’, historically, has carried the same meaning. In other words, what is homely coincides with what is unhomely, so that the meaning of the two terms slide and shift and cannot be distinguished. The un/homely signifies something strangely familiar which, as an aesthetic concept, defies binary thinking in the modern Western tradition. The ambiguous term thereby opens towards the acknowledgement of a form of otherness beyond and within the given; a kind of belonging in need of affirmation.

The work of art, in this light, builds on a critical, artistic gesture that brings something otherwise hidden, or suppressed, to the surface of the house. It expresses the ‘crisis of experience,’ to return to Heynen (1992, p. 82), by framing the house as ‘other’ to itself. Schwitters’s *Merzbau* brings the ‘other house’ into the open by transforming the studio into a living space receptive to possibilities beyond the immediate limits of the domestic setting. The work thereby recalls the house as a creative environment open to transformation and change despite common ideas about what a dwelling house should be. Philosopher of the everyday Yuriko Saito (2017, p. 17) writes about estrangement as a prerequisite for everyday aesthetics:

Because we take most things for granted in our everyday dealing with them, thus paying very little attention, wearing an artistic lens often renders the familiar things strange, and we experience them as if we have never experienced them before. Such experiences are refreshing, enlightening, and exciting. One could claim that many instances of art-making consist of rendering familiar things strange and encourage the audience to attend to familiar things in a different way.

Saito suggests that artistic framing makes an audience susceptible to estrangement so that something familiar while appearing unfamiliar opens new cognitive dimensions. To experience everyday phenomena aesthetically involves a cognitive shift that invites new conceptualisations of the experienced. Thus, Adorno's crisis of experience is both expressed and countered in an everyday environment open to aesthetic exploration, contemplation and experimentation. Such a space, while reinstating the notion of experience, offers an opportunity for reclaiming and taking charge of the everyday domestic setting.

Merzbau both builds on and becomes the everyday while producing an extraordinary living space inside of a seemingly ordinary house. The work relies on found material and everyday gestures as much as it draws on the language of art for the form that it takes. What is ordinary and extraordinary cannot easily be distinguished, and if one considers *Merzbau* a work of architecture, its functionality cannot be denied either. Schwitters's complex work practices a form of estrangement while, at the same time, constructing an inhabitable living space. Returning to the question of a trans-cultural living aesthetics encompassing everyday gestures and pleasures derived from experiences in the daily environment, one might argue that *Merzbau* is both more and less than a work of art when weaving a complex spatial narrative open for interpretation and inhabitation. It is an architecture of the everyday in all its complex, surprising, unspeakable confusion; strangely familiar, beyond recognition and alive. The work embodies a living aesthetics where something foreign but already there is invited to come to the surface.

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