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The Poetics of the Ordinary: The American Places of Charles W. Moore [Research and Debate]

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Author:
Sabatino, Michelangelo

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In order to try to throw out our standard notions about shape and the making of it and about space and its importance, I have employed the perhaps vaguer notion of place, the ordering of the whole environment that members of a civilization stand in the middle of, the making of sense, the projection of the image of the civilization onto the environment.¹

These comments by Charles W. Moore appeared in his youthful essay, “Creating of Place,” published in 1966. At a time when the exclusionist dogma of high modernism and the brittle curtain-wall aesthetic of post-World War II American corporate architecture were dominant, Moore and his partners attempted to redirect architectural debate away from overly tectonic, formalistic notions of space.

By appropriating the materiality of the “ordinary,” Moore and his collaborators set the standard for an architecture and urbanism that interacted with the expanded field of the public and private realm. They pursued an open-ended design process that promoted the ideals of community and “open society.” And by seeking to instill anthropologically charged notions of place, they presciently anticipated the repudiation of postwar planning and mass housing that would surface in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet, despite Moore’s influence upon a generation of students and professionals in the 1970s, his legacy as an architect and a writer has suffered from indifference and at times hostility. Some critics have championed his early “modern” production and dismissed his later “postmodern” work on the basis of its eclecticism; others have ignored him altogether. Nevertheless, his core concern for context and site specificity continue to challenge the profession today, even as the limits of globalization become all too evident.

Modern, Postmodern, Premodern

Lucien Febvre’s dictum—“it is never a waste of time to study the history of a word”—is particularly apt for those seeking to differentiate the concepts of place and space in modernist architecture and theory during the 1950s and 1960s.² The cult of abstract space that was so powerful at the time had grown out of books like Sigfried Giedion’s Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition (1941). Bruno Zevi’s Architecture as Space: How to Look at Architecture (1957) was also current at the time Moore and his collaborators began to challenge the architecture of contextually disengaged “heroic” objects in the early 1960s.

It has been said that Moore’s critique of architectural culture at the time involved “popularizing” a variety of architectural sources in reaction to the elitism of the International Style.³ These sources ranged from classical Italian villas and fountains to California barns to roadside Texas burger stands he personally visited and photographed. But it is equally true that Moore’s counter-current “postmodern” design production, pedagogy and writing cannot be grasped without a
full appreciation for the impact of the European modernist avant-garde in postwar America.

Moore’s interest in improving society through architecture was distinctly modern in its advocacy of social responsibility. However, his approach was not charged with the same fundamentalist certainty implicit in radical European interwar modernity. Indeed, it would be inaccurate to describe Moore as anti-modernist. Robert A. M. Stern has rather pointed to a productive ambivalence. “Traditional post-modernists” like Moore and Robert Venturi, he has argued, embraced both “modernist and pre-modernist values.”

It is easier to perceive continuity in Moore’s strategies over the decades if one traces his design approach back to a fascination with ordinary ways of building and a belief in real experience over abstraction. A bricoleur of sorts, these proclivities allowed him to appropriate and popularize seemingly disparate sources of architecture at a time when the hand-driven folk arts of preindustrial rural society (from homesteaders to pioneers) were being replaced by new middle-class American icons such as the Campbell’s Soup can and neon signs along Route 66.

It is equally essential for those assessing Moore’s work to understand his design process. He had an insatiable curiosity about buildings and objects from all periods of history. But he was also able to bring these sources together with an eye toward accessibility and affordability, a process that often involved bridging “high” and “low” design and “warming up” the material properties of an original. Thus, stone was often replaced with wood, color was favored over monochrome, and ornament over plain surfaces.

Wherever possible, Moore and his collaborators also tempered architectural gravitas with wit and levity. Recall, for example, his Piazza d’Italia (1973–78) in New Orleans, where the “seriousness” of a classical fountain was irreverently undercut with neon lights and exaggerated effects to encourage public interaction.

Foremost, however, Moore’s work and that of his many collaborators, including his partners Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker in the firm MLTW (founded in 1962), sought to activate the poetic qualities of prose (i.e., of the ordinary, familiar or vernacular).
Senses of the Ordinary

Over his career Moore refined his understanding of the ordinary, the familiar, and the vernacular in relation to a particularly North American context.

I have taken great pleasure, all my life, in ordinary American places and garden variety tourist attractions. I am especially interested in vernacular architecture. It is familiar to me, I enjoy it, and I believe it is proper for it to be the prime source of my own work. I think it is important to note that ours is not a peasant society; to see vernacular architecture as hooked to the land, free of exotic influences or of pretension, at some odds with an aristocratic “high” architecture is, in the United States, altogether to miss the point.

Driven by wanderlust, Moore traveled extensively throughout his life to seek out and write about the architecture, built environments, and material cultures of the distant and not-so-distant past. His vast slide collection, now housed at the University of Texas and the Moore Center in Austin, attests to this voracious appetite for discovering (and documenting) examples of both high and low architecture. Thanks to his extensive travel, Moore was also able to pinpoint and vindicate the differences between the vernacular of North America and that of other continents:

What is most familiar, of course, is what lies around us, loosely labeled the vernacular. The term, I’m afraid, confuses: it immediately conjures up in the minds of art historians and many others, images of the elegant cubist assemblages of the Greek islands or Mexico, beautiful compositions made by villages in strict response to familiar conditions of site and society, with a stringently limited palette of materials and (for us) thrilling level of agreement about color and shape and scale.

The contemporary North American vernacular, on the other hand, the one that concerns me here, is very different from that, on just about every count.

To be sure, during the 1950s and early 1960s several European architects and émigrés had laid the foundation for a renewed interest in the “primitive” preindustrial vernacular. Among them was Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, with her pioneering Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture (1957). Bernard Rudofsky’s polemical exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and its related book, Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigree Architecture (1964), also initiated intense debate over the possible role of preindustrial vernacular as a tonic for modern architecture in the United States. However, both works fell into the camp of “Greek islands or Mexico” that Moore distinguished from a specifically American twentieth-century vernacular. Moore was able to make these distinctions thanks to his travels and his willingness to understand “foreign” cultures before formulating his opinions, thus avoiding snap, unsubstantiated judgments.

Like such English and American Pop artists as Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol, Moore saw the working class of the 1960s as the protagonist of a “people’s” art that was taking shape in a heterogeneous, mass-media-based, entrepreneurial culture. In this regard, Moore related to the position of John A. Kouwenhoven, whose important study Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization (1949) attempted to vindicate the specificity of an American vernacular as the “unself-conscious effort of common people to create satisfying patterns out of their environment.” Moore understood that the slow fine-tuning typical of the European rural vernacular assured a situation of little transformation over the centuries, while the North American commercial vernacular was
subject to the rapid change typical of capitalist economic dynamics.

Likewise, although Moore was interested in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s popularizing of “complexity and contradiction” (as Dean of the Yale School of Architecture, he even encouraged them to give a studio on Las Vegas), his approach was far less conceptual. Even their common interest in the overlap of the classical and the vernacular led to quite different results, especially at the beginning of their careers. One might, for example, compare Venturi’s design of his mother’s house in Philadelphia (1962) with Moore’s design of his own house in Orinda, California, completed the same year. In the Venturi design, classical and vernacular allusions were combined to achieve ironic, almost surreal effects; Moore’s was a more distilled design, whose deceptively simple exterior masked a complex interior featuring salvaged columns from a historic building.

Yet Moore’s interest in appropriating commercial and noncommercial vernacular did not extend to the conventions of the builder vernacular celebrated by Sigfried Giedion in Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History (1948). Indeed, Moore worked against the grain of such builder developments, especially those of the ilk of the Levitt brothers that surfaced in the postwar period that he considered devoid of the urban planning ideals crucial to the construction of place. If anything, he was more sympathetic to Gustav Stickley’s Arts and Crafts bungalows, which flourished on the West Coast (and elsewhere) under the influence of Charles Keeler’s moralizing text The Simple Home (1904).


Above: The completed Moore House, showing the complex relation between interior and exterior. Photo courtesy of the Charles Moore Foundation.
Mobility and Impermanence

If any one thinker of the times espoused a view of the ordinary similar to Moore’s it was the J.B. Jackson. Jackson believed that the twentieth-century American vernacular landscape embraced the varied expressions of human ingenuity resulting from people’s interaction with the specificities of place. The spirited, unself-conscious ingenuity of the commonplace intrigued Moore. And whether this ingenuity was the result of mobility (associated with Route 66) or the urbanity of classically inspired sites, it often was perceptible in spatial arrangements characterized by a pragmatic intelligence that transformed prose into poetry. Mobility was central to Moore and Jackson’s concept of ordinary landscapes. In one of his many essays, Jackson traced the genesis of American wood building in relation to mobility. He assigned great importance to wood as a construction material in conferring a transitional or impermanent quality to a building type—the single multifunctional room that was originally meant for the working class or rural population, but which eventually developed into the mobile trailer.

Upon Moore’s arrival at the University of Texas in 1964 to occupy the O’Neil Ford Chair of Architecture, he and Sally Woodbridge published a small catalogue to accompany an exhibition that had originally been held in Los Angeles and entitled “Home Sweet Home: American Domestic Vernacular Architecture.” In the Texas version of the exhibition, “The Cabin/ The Temple/ The Trailer,” Moore looked to the overlapping features of the indigenous log cabin, the clapboard house as miniature temple, and the Airstream trailer. The modest scale of these units, their intimate relationship to the human body, and their cost-efficiency were all part of their allure for him.

The idea of impermanence, epitomized by the mobile home, as well as by such objects as the disposable Bic pen, invented in the 1960s, emerged at a time when increased opportunities for travel were igniting imaginations. And compared with the stability and rootedness of rural societies of Europe, the mobility and prosperity of postwar America encouraged Moore’s restless freedom.

The influence of the automobile was particularly important in American architecture and urbanism. During the 1960s, it far outpaced the other modernist icons of progress celebrated by Le Corbusier in Towards a New Architecture (1923) and Aircraft (1935). But where Le Corbusier adopted the aircraft, ocean liner, and automobile as types that could inspire design, Moore was primarily interested in the car as a means to explore and discover new realities.

At the time an endless array of new motor hotels (motels), shopping malls, and fast-food drive-ins already attested to the power of car culture to generate new types, and even “monuments” like the artist collective Ant Farm’s Cadillac Ranch (1974) in Amarillo, Texas. Until the late 1950s and mid-60s, the roadside still also provided a fertile cross-section of American working-class culture and its creative talent—as well as a penchant for excess that excited Moore’s imagination.

In the mid-1960s, Moore brought automobile and design together in his essay “You Have to Pay for the Public Life.” In it, he acknowledged America’s romance with the freedom offered by the car and the car culture’s inevitable influence on the built environment. Yet, unlike Buckminster Fuller, for example, he expressed little interest in the streamlined aesthetics of the car (or the machine) as a source for architectural design.

Homes as Places

Instead, it was the experience of dwelling in the domestic realm that occupied an increasingly important role in the buildings and writings of Moore and his collaborators. Homes functioned as catalysts for collective design and for contemplating the notion of place.

Writing in The Place of Houses (1974), Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, and Gerald Allen drew attention to the qualities of the small town of Edgartown, Massachusetts. In particular, they observed that it “preserves the decorum of a black-tie dinner, where everyone manages to look his best while dressing very much like everyone else.” But this was just one of many instances in which Moore and his collaborators identified the vernacular as a conduit for individual and collective identities to coexist.

By the time The Place of Houses was published, MLTW had already completed the Sea Ranch Condominium north of San Francisco (1963–65) and Kresge College at the University of California, Santa Cruz (1964–74). These projects reflected a desire to integrate architecture with context (a windswept coastal meadow and...
Within the currents of modernism at the time they also indicated how Moore’s “realism” might provide a brake on the grand urban gestures and utopian megastructures of those years.

At Kresge College, MLTW focused on the street as a space for interpersonal interaction and a conduit for placemaking. But the firm also revealed keen interest in high-density low-lying Mediterranean “townscapes.” Both it and the contemporaneous Church Street South housing in New Haven (1966–69) were organized around open-air “piazzas.” These provided areas for social interaction that recalled Mediterranean prototypes, despite their distinctive Pop Art-inspired “supergraphics” and the “cheapness” of the cinderblock construction.

Other residences he designed at the time, such as the Bonham House in Boulder Creek, California (1961), and the original Sea Ranch Condominium, combined the understated, introverted qualities of sheds and barns with open, highly articulated interiors. The dichotomy between toned-down, ordinary exterior and wunderkammer-like complex, colorful interior (perhaps most evident in his last house in Austin, designed with Arthur W. Andersson) allowed his domestic designs to affirm civic modesty externally without forgoing interior richness.

Nevertheless, Moore’s concept of the ordinary was always closely linked to notions of place. Writing on the sources of inspiration for the Orinda house, he stated that “the overall design for the house took the archetypal form of a square hut, not unlike those to be found in primitive villages or those symbolized in the motifs carved in the stone of Mayan or Hindu temples.”

Moore’s love for folk objects has never been adequately discussed, and it was in the design of residential interiors (for his own homes, especially) that his affinity for ordinary material culture was most visible. During his life he acquired a vast collection of objects as diverse as toy soldiers and folk masks. His passion for such forms is especially revealing in the current installation of items from his collection in the Moore house in Austin. Moore looked to these objects as a source of design inspiration. One might recall his “transformation” of a familiar Adirondack chair by refashioning its profile and adding color and ornament (c. 1990).
Construction Technique

Whether making reference to barns found in situ (Sea Ranch) or rethinking shingle cladding for the Whitman Village public housing complex in Huntington, New York (1971–75), Moore and his collaborators also demonstrated a commitment to building in wood. Although this practice was typical of many regions of the United States, it clashed with the use of industrially produced materials like glass and steel that were being championed at the time in the modern architecture of European émigrés.

Low-tech construction in wood, using familiar, and therefore less costly, materials and techniques, also allowed Moore to design projects that were affordable (to both low-income public-housing residents and individual clients of limited means).26 This low-tech approach often involved simple platform wood construction, a distinctly American method for domestic building. Despite Moore’s affinity with the spirit of Pop Art (American and English), his designs never embraced the high-tech attitude of contemporary British design spearheaded by the likes of Peter Cook.27

During the postwar period, European-born modernists like Sigfried Giedion, Walter Gropius, and Konrad Wachsmann identified traditional American wood construction as a model for new factory-produced housing that was affordable.28 While Moore was captivated by the modesty of indigenous wood construction, he was less enthusiastic about the modernists’ interest in mundane anonymity or serial repetition. On the contrary, Moore’s projects were carefully articulated to show off the artistry of the designer and the identity of the patron (public or private). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Vincent Scully celebrated Moore’s
work as a creative continuation of the Shingle Style, inaugurated by tal-ented American architects of the late nineteenth century.29

Despite his commitment to author-ship, Moore firmly believed that a sophisticated yet empirical approach could also be applied to modest ends. For example, the New Zion Community Center in Kentucky, the first completed project of the design/build program he initiated at the Yale School of Architecture (1967), demonstrated William Morris’s principle that archi-tectural design should not be divorced from the process of building.30

Yet, in contrast to the English Arts and Crafts movement, which was heavily influenced by the built envi-ronment of rural peasantry, Moore’s understanding of ordinary America also led him to consider such simula-cra of “real” places as Disneyland.31

An Important Legacy

Were it not for the unifying element of Moore’s concern for ordinary American places and their importance for contemporary design, his contribution to architectural culture might be lost. He was a keen observer in the tradition of Henry James, whose writing he admired. And despite his erudition, extensive travels, and personal library, he was never snobbish or condescending. Manfredo Tafuri admired Moore’s sophistica-tion, and aptly described him as a “refined populist.”32

During his life, Moore published several books (mostly in collaboration with others) and numerous seminal essays, yet none of these texts have found their way into scholarly anthol-ogies published in recent years.33 Never-theless, The Place of Houses (1974) was reprinted in 2000 and has sold some 35,000 copies. Despite Moore’s prolific production as an architect and writer, he has also been marginalized in recent assessments of twentieth-century architecture and urbanism.34 Dell Upton’s Architecture in the United States virtually ignored him.35 And under the rubric of “populism” in Modern Architecture: A Critical History, Kenneth Frampton denounced his “flaccid eclecticism,” and scolded him for abandoning the “constructional purity” of Sea Ranch.36

Rather than seek out aspects of continuity throughout his career (i.e., his unfailing interest in the ordinary),

Opposite: Kresge College, Santa Cruz, California (1964-74). Initial site plan drawing courtesy of UC Berkeley Design Archive.
critics like Frampton have divided his output into periods of good and bad work. Nevertheless, more sympathetic critics did assess his contribution over the years. These have included Charles Jencks in England, Paolo Portoghesi and Manfredo Tafuri in Italy, Heinrich Klotz in Germany, and in the United States, Vincent Scully.

By activating the poetics of the ordinary, Moore and his collaborators sought to counteract postwar formalism with a more humanist strategy of placemaking. Their accessible and open-ended design process provided a challenge to the architects and urban planners of the “affluent society.”

Today, in light of the alarming withdrawal from civic life demonstrated by the increase of gated communities and concern for security since 9/11, Moore’s optimistic and generous vision of an “ordinary” architecture for the public realm is an important legacy that deserves rediscovery by students and professionals alike.

Notes
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8. While Rudofsky’s book focused primarily on Mediterranean examples, Moholy-Nagy’s also looked to the preindustrial vernacular of the Americas (she


20. In the last twenty years, the New Urbanism has sought to identify a similar socially driven urban strategy, but it has never advocated the same freedom to re-create experiences of place that so intrigued Moore and his collaborators.

21. At the time, Bernard Rudofsky’s *Streets for People: A Primer for Americans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) was in the process of being published.


26. Philip Johnson’s “low-tech” glass house (whose structural eclecticism disturbed Mies van der Rohe) is thus closer in spirit to Moore’s approach than Mies’s own Farnsworth house.


Some of Moore’s writings have been republished in: Robert A. M. Stern, Alan Plattus, Peggy Deamer, eds., *Re-reading Perspecta: The First 50 Years of the Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), which reprinted three: “You Have to Pay for a Public Life” (pp. 173–83), “Hadrian’s Villa” (pp. 93–99), and “Plug It In, Rameses, and See if It Lights Up” (pp. 242–45).

