

CAROL BURNS INTERVIEW

What is the true definition of a manufactured house?

In the bottom line, what defines a manufactured house is a permanent chassis. This is a fundamental physical feature by which we know this house type that has gone under various names at other times – the travel trailer, the house trailer, and, for a long period of time, the mobile home. Ever since the HUD Code was put into effect in 1974, it has been called a manufactured house. The funny thing is, it doesn't mean anything out of a factory; it means precisely a house that moves down the highway on its own permanent chassis. It's a hybrid entity, having as much to do with travel trailers and transportation vehicles as it does with housing.

When did the notion of mobility enter the realm of housing?

Issues of mobility have influenced dwellings even perhaps before settlement – the nomads were mobile dwellers, of course. But in terms of industrialization, which is the more relevant epistemological era of considering this, the U.S. railroad system allowed prefabricated buildings to be shipped around the country. In the popular summer destination of Martha's Vineyard, for example, there are Queen Anne gingerbread-style houses that were built just after the Civil War, originally ordered from the Sears catalogue. They weren't aimed at the mobility of the people, but they were made available to this island by way of a transportation infrastructure.

When did the design of trailers change to reflect their new role as a dwelling

Massive Change Radio is a project by Jennifer Leonard, Bruce Mau Design, the Institute without Boundaries, and CIUT FM, Toronto.

space?

When the federal government had to move soldiers and their families around the country during WWII, the house trailer fit the bill. They required fast construction of large-scale settlements, and although the house trailer could be moved, it had more interest for its occupants in a set location. In the subsequent peacetime economy, there was such a pent-up demand for housing that trailers as permanent homes became more widely available and more acceptable.

Were there any significant housing initiatives that took advantage of the manufacturing technology immediately after WWII?

The story of Levittown is the best example of retooling factories for civilian purposes in postwar America – the “swords into ploughshares” idea. Levitt began to develop housing at a scale and in a way that had not been seen before. It’s the way that we understand the development of suburbs now, but at the time it was a radical idea. Levitt referred to it as a “factory under the sky.”

What sort of aesthetic patterns have you come to observe in your research?

Over 95% of American housing construction is in the detached home – it seems to be a cultural preference that’s not easily denied. Its alluring features are private outdoor space and a place to park the car nearby, if not directly in the house. Also, in these changing times, we as a society have overwhelming preferences toward aesthetic expressions of the past. People depend on the physical environment to provide them with a certain kind of continuity or “lasting,” as Raphael Moneo would call it. With that comes an over-sentimentalized desire to have even new things look old.

Massive Change Radio is a project by Jennifer Leonard, Bruce Mau Design, the Institute without Boundaries, and CIUT FM, Toronto.

Are there manufactured solutions for both the suburban and increasingly dense urban environments?

Local codes have specified in the past that manufactured housing be located in less desirable areas – the other side of the tracks or low-lying land, down by the river. With the rise of zoning as a primary tool of planning, it's often the case that manufactured homes exist as a separate homogenous entity. But it need not be the case. In the urban context, the manufactured house is morphologically a great candidate for infilling empty lots that were developed before WWII, whose configuration is deep, with a short side facing the street.

Why is manufactured housing an attractive area of investigation for you?

The fact that this house type comprises the lowest rung on the stepladder of home ownership makes it so inherently interesting to me. Its low price is due to the efficiency of factory production, the closed conditions, the twelve-month work cycle, and the fact that it greatly reduces construction waste. It's true that manufactured housing too often has looked cheap, and has been stigmatized in various locations because of it. But I believe good design doesn't need to cost more than poor or inattentive design. I'm interested in exploring this further.

You refer to Karl Popper's notions of clocklike and cloudlike systems in relation to industrialized housing. What's the connection?

Karl Popper was a theoretician who was interested in the processes of early industrialization and anticipated some of what has been characterized much more recently as chaos theory. He recognized that some processes are like clocks -

Massive Change Radio is a project by Jennifer Leonard, Bruce Mau Design, the Institute without Boundaries, and CIUT FM, Toronto.

–engineered, linear – and some processes are like clouds (or gnats or birds) – less predictable, more open-ended. With respect to manufactured housing, many of the early efforts by Fuller, Prouvé, Wachsmann, etc. wanted to work in line with the industrialized process, and so they tried to make “clocks”. When the systems at play in the field had nothing to do with “the clock” that they were designing, their projects ground to a halt. Popper suggested an alternative way of thinking, something more amorphous that could be harnessed to understand the processes at play, which many industries are getting at today by way of mass customization. Mass customization allows for a high degree of individuation and a certain kind of unpredictability in the line of production that takes advantage of efficiencies without necessarily producing the same thing everywhere.

Do you think Bucky Fuller’s prediction of housing becoming a service rather than a commodity will ever come true?

One way that I’ve understood this idea of his has to do with an assessment of what should be provided to everyone. For instance, we look at utilities like water as a service – and there’s a regulated market that’s constructed to provide equally to all consumers within the market. Housing has never been in such a category in America. The American real estate system looks at houses as investments. The possibility of saving and gaining based on home ownership is one of the most important financial opportunities that most families in this country face. So I can understand the benefit of thinking about housing as if it were conceived of as a service, but it’s hard to imagine the system that we live in undergoing such a transformation. I think the Buckminster Fuller idea was a great polemical challenge

and, like other early visionaries of industrial processes, he has inspired many of us to search for possible futures.

Carol Burns is a principal at Taylor and Burns Architects in Boston. She has taught at the University of Virginia, MIT, Yale, and for twelve years at Harvard Design School, where she directs the Harvard Institute of Affordable Housing. Her pet project is manufactured housing.

Massive Change Radio is a project by Jennifer Leonard, Bruce Mau Design, the Institute without Boundaries, and CIUT FM, Toronto.