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Banham's 'Unhouse' as Anti-Interiority: Towards Twenty-First-Century Theories of Design and Domesticity

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Abstract | The British architectural historian, critic and writer, Reyner Banham, formed the concept of 'unhouse' in a period of intense technological transformation during the middle years of the twentieth century. His unhouse proposed the seemingly radical idea to dematerialize the walls and roof of a house, to remove the strictures that tie buildings, and thus people, to the encumbrances of what he termed: 'the dead weight of domestic architecture' (*A Home is Not a House*, 1965). This paper situates Banham's unhouse within a category of dominant architectural and design theory that suppressed or diminished the importance of interior spaces and their relevance to human wellbeing and social relations. It suggests that in exploratory designs from contemporary projects, including Philips' *Microbial Home* (2011) and Superflux's *Mitigation of Shock* (2017-19) the designers create immersive experiences in future interiors, pointing to the development of new theories of design and domesticity in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS | BANHAM, UNHOUSE, TECHNOLOGY, DOMESTICITY, INTERIORITY

1. Introduction

When the British architectural historian, critic and writer, Reyner Banham, proposed the concept of the 'Unhouse' in 1965, it appeared to be the inevitable conclusion to a number of themes and ideas that he had been researching, writing and commenting upon for many years. In his essay, 'A Home is Not a House', published in *Art in America*, in 1965, Banham argued that technology was now able to provide the answer to human needs and therefore the idea of what constituted a home was not necessarily a house, or a building. His Unhouse proposed the seemingly radical idea to dematerialize the walls and roof of a house, to remove the strictures that tie buildings, and thus people, to the encumbrances of what he termed: "the dead weight of domestic architecture." (Banham, 1965, p.73) Banham had been ruminating on the promises of technology and the implications of this on new ways of living in the middle of the twentieth century. He had previously feared the demise of the Modernist project in Italy, where he had criticised architects and designers in that country for reverting to architectural styles of the previous century. Referring to this 'backlash' as Neoliberty, Banham highlights how design styles such as Art Nouveau had become anachronisms in the twentieth century; such forms had been replaced by technology, he argued:

"Art Nouveau died of a cultural revolution that seems absolutely irreversible: the domestic revolution that began with electric cookers, vacuum cleaners, the telephone, the gramophone, and all those other mechanized aids to gracious living are still invading the home, and have permanently altered the nature of domestic life and the meaning of domestic architecture." (Banham, 1959, p.235)

Therefore, by 1965, Banham had already imagined how modern technology would replace the need or desire for any historical or historicising architectural or design styles, promoting the work of avant-garde artists and designers, such as Alison and Peter Smithson, in Britain, before turning his attention to the work of modern architects in the United States of America. 'A Home is Not a House' is the culmination of these ideas, suggesting that buildings themselves would become obsolete in the near future. Presented as an accumulation of technological services, including landscape flood lights, TV and stereo speakers, radio and tape deck, electric cooker and refrigerator, the unhouse would cater for all essential human needs, providing a convenient and transportable 'standard of living package'. Combined with a 'power membrane', which would furnish a curtain of hot or cold air around the Unhouse, the design proposed that the exterior building or fixed structure might be dispensed with altogether. (Banham, 1965, p.77)

While recognized as deliberately provocative and slightly eccentric at the time, Banham's ideas have acquired a certain currency again, in the early years of a new century, in a similar period of immense technological transformations. Faced with the challenges of climate change, mass movement of people, and globalized economic systems, the Unhouse, which suggested new features of solar power, natural insecticides (the universal pest lure and destructor) and environmentally-friendly noise reduction or anti-noise pollution,

demonstrates certain practices of sustainable design behavior that has influenced some recent architects and designers, perhaps most notably are those architects and designers engaged in speculative or critical design projects and methodologies.

Overall, however, the Unhouse does not represent a freeing up of humans from their environment, with a low-cost, itinerant lifestyle choice. Rather, this paper proposes that Unhouse exists within theories or ideas that might be described as 'anti-interiority', themes that originate within Modernist architecture and that have been challenged over recent decades. (See, for example, Reed, 1996. Colomina, 1996, Sparke, 2008, Hollis, 2018, Bachelard, 2014). It situates Banham's Unhouse within a category of dominant architectural and design theory that suppressed or diminished the importance of interior spaces and their relevance to human wellbeing and social relations. This paper argues that architecture and design in the twenty-first century, whilst acknowledging the prescient nature of Banham's concept, accounts for the significance of social meanings that are ascribed to the interior. For example, in exploratory designs from more contemporary projects, such as Philips's *Microbial Home* (2011), and Superflux's *Mitigation of Shock* (2017-19), the designers seek to create immersive experiences in near future interiors. Subjective encounters with internal spaces are incorporated with much thought and consideration for human patterns of behavior; of domestic rituals, self-sufficiency, comfort and embodied materiality. Banham (and others) sought to expunge the interior of historical 'weightiness' but in doing so merely avoided the intrinsic, and sometimes, difficult nature of our relationship to our interiors, and the ways in which physical interiors are not simply reflective of our personalities but are, importantly, the summation of our interiority as human beings.

In his biography of Reyner Banham, Nigel Whitely describes the Unhouse as a shift from "form and hardware to service and software." (Whitely, 2003, p.208). Effectively, Banham might be said to be simply repeating Modernist attitudes to domestic life in the interior, as elements of our being that ought to be streamlined, updated and restructured, in an: "almost universal expendability." (Banham, 1965, p.79). The Unhouse neglects or deliberately rejects consideration of the 'mess' and subjectivity of life in the domestic interior as this was not an important factor in the delivery of new technologies. However, the opposite might be said today as domestic technologies are grounded in user experiences and are described in this paper to explain how new theories of interior space are emerging from architecture and design practices engaged with the many layered meanings of interiority, embracing the significance of 'home' that Banham and others appeared to overlook.

2. Philips's *Microbial Home* 2011

Philips' *Microbial Home* project in 2011 proposed a cyclical consumption/production process that returned the space of the kitchen to the sorts of sustainable functions familiar to nineteenth-century homes, with home-grown produce, minimal waste and often

incorporating the raising and slaughtering of home-grown livestock. The concept for this kitchen is far removed from the industrialised efficiency of the Frankfurt Kitchen, the prototype for all modern kitchens subsequently, concerned with the speed, productivity, and accuracy within which a housewife could carry out domestic tasks. (See designs by Margarete (Grete) Schütte-Lihotzky, 1926-1927). Not only is the Microbial Home probe striking in its rejection of serialized, systematic tasks, but its design concept foregrounds human-centred actions that place significance on domestic activities often associated with 'chores' and suggests empathetic attitudes that relate to domesticity as lived experiences. For example, in their press release, Philips describe:

"Using a variety of tools, the group started to define a design direction for more "human" appliances. The result was a "new domestic quality", with characteristics such as "affection", "ritual", "reliability" and "ease of use". These factors were used as criteria to assess designs throughout the process. And it was decided that four products were to be made. Not lookalikes but individuals with certain resemblances." (Philips's Press Release 2011).

The purpose of Philips's Microbial Home is to suggest new ways of creating sustainable, energy-efficient, homes that reconnect humans with the natural environment. The probes designed consisted of: a bio-digester kitchen island that would breakdown human and vegetable waste, producing and capturing methane gas that would then be used to light the kitchen; a larder in the form of a large preparation and/or dining table that incorporated a central section, divided into smaller compartments for storing fresh food, this would be cooled by evaporation, another by-product of the bio-digester system; a machine called a 'Paternoster' that would grind down biodegradable plastics, incorporating mycelium, a fungus used to speed up decomposition, and that would, in turn, produce edible mushrooms; a beautiful sculptured glass beehive, or 'urban beehive', that allows the viewer to watch the bees build natural honeycomb and harvest the honey produced.

All of these different components are free-standing, although they are interconnected by their shared function of recycling of waste and energy, each piece of furniture is autonomous, reminiscent of kitchen or household furniture before the introduction of modern 'fitted' kitchens. While these objects present rather strange, almost anachronistic shapes and structures, with one British newspaper reviewer commenting that Philips's design represents a 'Steampunk' kitchen style, it is the language used by the designers to describe this project that is most pertinent here. (McGuirk, 2011). In the twentieth century it would be difficult to imagine kitchen designers placing such significance on words such as 'ritual' or 'affection' and the emphasis placed on a 'new domestic quality' signals a shift in attitudes to the ways in which domestic life is considered in current design practice. Philips's designers attempt to re-introduce gas lighting to the modern kitchen, an obsolete technology which, by necessity, may require to be utilised in the future. However, the glimmering, soft glow emitted from the gas mantle over the dining room table of the microbial kitchen seems appropriate, enhancing the features of the ritualised performance of 'slow' dining in a sustainable household. In this sense, Philips's Microbial Home

incorporates many features associated with domestic life before Modernism's rationalizing processes sought to eradicate the 'wasted labour' expended on washing up, preserving and preparing food, sweeping, dusting, and dealing with waste more generally. In the twenty-first century, architects and designers are revising attitudes and proposing solutions to these domestic tasks in order to counter the unsustainable practices ushered in by Modernism's obsession with technological answers to human inconveniences. (Dilnot, 2011, pp.119-121). In doing so, architects and designers are considering the social elements of life in the domestic space; those kinds of activities that Modernists tried to disassociate with a productive home life, the routines of housework familiar to many women in particular, and how these connect to durational processes of familial bonds and relationships.

3. Superflux's *Mitigation of Shock*, (2017-2019)

While Philips's Microbial Home represents working prototypes, functioning objects that propose future real-life solutions, Superflux's project, *Mitigation of Shock* (2017-2019) applies methodologies developed by critical or speculative design, to imagine near future scenarios but based on current reliable data. (Dunne and Raby, 2013, pp. 2-3). Superflux chose the domestic interior as a space to imagine a how human life will be sustained in the near future. The focus of the project was a typical London apartment in 2050. The designers describe their aims to create an interior that is both familiar and unfamiliar:

"We built an entire future apartment situated in the context of climate change and its consequences on food security. People could step inside this family home and directly experience for themselves what the restrictions of this future might feel like. Instead of leaving visitors scared and unprepared by the challenges of this world, we shared methods and tools for not only surviving, but thriving there". (Superflux, 2017).

With Unhouse, Reyner Banham also imagined the near future, where technology would answer to every human need, helped along with one or two 'natural' processes, such as a Darwinian 'pest lure' which would eradicate any bugs and other wild creatures that might try to cross into the perimeter of the Unhouse by means of capture and natural destruction between prey and predators. Little did Banham imagine that in 2050, insects and other small mammals would be encouraged into the home as a vital food source, as speculated by Superflux.

Banham's Unhouse was clearly a product of his own political and social beliefs that humans should be liberated from the encumbrances of property owning, home maintenance and the historical burden that home ownership entails. His counter-cultural generation embraced a whole range of new experiences that liberated them from the constrictions of previous generations and while Unhouse might appear to offer the owner of a 'standard of living package' a nomadic lifestyle, situated within open country, offering individuals the opportunity to be 'in nature', the extent to which Banham attempts to obstruct nature in the

Unhouse is surprising. For example, the most extraordinary feature of the project might be the 'Power Membrane':

"The basic proposition is simply that the power-membrane should blow down a curtain of warmed/cooled/conditioned air around the perimeter of the wind ward side of the Unhouse, and leave the surrounding weather to waft it through the living space, whose relationship in plan to the membrane above need not be a one-to-one-relationship". (Banham, 1965, p.77)

Of course, this incredibly wasteful use of energy, even if it is imaginary, is typical of the kind of drain on natural resources that Clive Dilnot describes in his history of how we became unsustainable. (Dilnot, 2011, pp.119-121). No such luxury of resources is afforded the inhabitants of Superflux's 2050 apartment. First exhibited at the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, in 2015, the design of this apartment foregrounds the interconnections between humans and the natural world. As with Philips's Microbial Home, the future sustainment of human life will depend on bringing nature into the home, cultivating crops, growing vegetables, and sourcing alternative food stuffs, including roadkill and snaring urban animals. Much of the living space in the apartment is given over to enormous computers that monitor the growth of these domestic crops, using hydroponics and fogponics, methods of growing crops that use a minimum of water and energy. The apartment hums with the noise of primitive technology (hacked together from everyday consumer items and outdated computers), the lighting is harsh, projecting a clinical, purplish glow throughout the apartment. Superflux managed to grow mushrooms, cabbages and chillies, among other vegetables, in this space and there are scattered signs that sourcing other kinds of food preoccupy its inhabitants, 'city foraging, breeding mealworms, and canning foodstuffs' are all part of domestic life in this place. Superflux explain that their project is intrinsically hopeful, despite its dystopian vision:

"By focussing on a residential space in an urban environment in the Global North, we were able to communicate with demographics who have the capacity to minimise climate change by changing their current patterns of consumption and who might assume they won't personally be impacted by the effects of climate change." (Superflux, 2017)

The constructed interiors of the apartment reflect this statement by Superflux, they have been designed to look very much like an ordinary 'open-plan' London flat:

"Once a comfortable living space designed for a world of automated living, global trade and material abundance, the apartment has been adapted to a future it was never meant to inhabit ... Scattered around the apartment are fragments from a future that never quite materialised". (Superflux, 2017).

Despite this unintended purpose, the apartment maintains an atmosphere of optimism, of family life continuing on in this space, with children's toys placed alongside daily newspapers displaying headlines warning of impending food shortages. The well-used sofa, discarded clothes and mugs of just-finished drinks also indicates that people inhabit this place, people

who are thriving and not just surviving. Importantly, and in contrast to Reyner Banham's future vision, in this space, where the world outside presents extreme challenges, the emphasis is not on a 'standard living' or basic living idea, but on the ways in which humans might adapt to different kinds of existence while, at the same time, nurturing close human and non-human relationships. Banham's world is very much that of the single man and he emulates a 'bachelor lifestyle' in his Unhouse, unhampered by any sorts of dependents such as children, elderly relatives or even pets. In the Unhouse technology makes the fantasy of the 1960's single, male lifestyle achievable:

"But a properly set-up standard-of-living package, breathing out warm air along the ground (instead of sucking in cold air along the ground like a campfire), radiating soft light and Dionne Warwick in heart-warming stereo, with well-aged protein turning in an infra-red glow in the rotisserie, and the ice-maker discreetly coughing cubes into glasses on the swing-out bar – this could do something for a woodland glade or creek-side rock that Playboy could never do for its Penthouse." (Banham, 1965, p.76)

Such a standard of living package may seem luxurious but its focus remains on meeting basic human needs and, in this instance, the basic living needs of a single male with aspirations to live an alternative lifestyle whose understanding of this seem as conventional and mainstream as any other, slightly hippy, single male of the period. With hindsight, Banham's goals for his standard of living package are hardly radical at all. Fifty or so more years later, it is Superflux and other twenty-first century designers and architects who are proposing radical solutions or responses to real world problems. Encountering the apartment in *Mitigation of Shock*, the viewer or participant understands the significance of the interior to the wellbeing of its inhabitants, not just as shelter from the elements, but as a space that exists as a consequence of human and non-human co-dependence, within the walls of this fabricated interior are the combined hopes for the existence of living species, orchestrated and coordinated by human beings' potential for empathy and compassion, encouragement, development and adaptability. What is sometimes referred to as human-centred design is palpable in *Mitigation of Shock*, whether intentional or unintentional, as the designers state:

"Whilst the project is based on gaining better understanding of the ground level implications of global warming, it also acknowledges coexistent trends and forces such as infrastructure, transport, energy, water, housing, individual tech savviness, autonomy and agency of communities, amongst others. The ensemble of these core influences skillfully manifests within the finest details of the space, pointing out the complexity of the projected future world and the interdependencies between various game-changing factors." (Superflux, 2017)

In fact, *Mitigation of Shock* reveals a sharp of awareness by these designers of the meanings associated with ideas of the social in design. Their emphasis on 'interspecies relationships' and 'direct engagement with these living entities' account for an understanding of the social aspects of life lived within interior spaces, and the ways in which reconstructing or reflecting on such spaces need not lead to a "shrinking of definition of the social itself." (Latour, 2005, pp. 6-9). In contrast, it might be argued, that Banham's Unhouse, by releasing itself from the

encumbrances of home, stability, rootedness, situatedness, is deliberately 'unsocial', its existence needs no connection to any social meanings that are usually associated with home or interior spaces where home-life is conducted. In many ways this is a complex position as interior spaces ought to reflect the richness of our lives as social beings; homes are the repositories and animated states of our interactions with other beings and, in this sense, homes are constructed from the consequences of our existences as social beings and therefore require to be considered as expressions of our interiority, our interior lives.

4. Anti-interiority in Banham's Writings and Unhouse

If Banham's Unhouse is unsocial it is also argued here as inherently anti-interiority, or a deliberate attempt to overlook or not consider the ways in which buildings and their interiors shape our interior selves. In his anti-historicism, Banham is also indulging in a kind of revelry in 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater', neglecting to understand the emotional and visceral attachments that many of us feel towards our homes and interiors and how these, might, indeed, constitute an embodied materiality, a storehouse of all of our subjective experiences. (Ionescu, 2018, p. 2). It is clear that in forming his concept of the Unhouse, Banham was interested in progressing some of the main objectives of Modernist ideology that he understood would change society's adherence to cultural conventions, particularly historical styles of architecture, but also to the manners and patterns of human behavior that he believed tied us to out-of-date, burdensome domestic obligations. This is demonstrated by the type of architectural influences that he refers to in his writings. For example, in his essay, 'Neoliberty: The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture' (1959), he cites, Adolf Loos, Frank Lloyd Wright, Herman Muthesius, Cubist painters, as well as Futurist leader, Marinetti. He writes that Modern art and architecture makes possible:

"The promise of freedom from having to wear the discarded clothes of previous cultures, even if those previous cultures have the air of *tempi felici*. To want to put on those old clothes again is to be, in Marinetti's words describing Ruskin, like a man who has attained full physical maturity, yet wants to sleep in his cot again, to be suckled again by his decrepit nurse, in order to regain the nonchalance of his childhood. Even by the purely local standards of Milan and Turin, then, Neoliberty is infantile regression." (Banham, 1959, p.235).

As with Adolf Loos, Marinetti here casts the nurturing aspects of domesticity, of a man's memory of his childhood nursery and the association of this with a backwards looking sensibility. Longing for the past is connected to nostalgia and infantilism; especially for Loos, as the interior spaces of previous decades, or those reflecting period styles, represent for him all that is abject and wretched about domestic life:

"His [Loos] 1903 review of interior designs by a competing architect mocked their studied tastefulness by imagining them as settings 'for birth and death, the screams

of pain for an aborted son, the death of a dying mother, the last thoughts of a young woman who wishes to die." (Reed, 1996)

Loos's now notorious essay 'Ornament and Crime' (1908) is an extreme attack on historicism and significantly aligns ornament with uncivilised culture and behaviors. However, Loos' language, like Marinetti's is expressed in a fierce anti-domesticity, and as Christopher Reed has argued, led some Modernists to suppress domesticity in all its subjectivity; as a means of revealing interior thoughts and emotions. In this sense, Reed and others have suggested that Modernists' critique of ornament is, in fact, a criticism and rejection of interiority overall.

For Reyner Banham, writing in the 1960s, in a period defined by technocracy, the promise of new materials, new technology and international communications, appeared to offer up new ways of living which he enthusiastically embraced. Nevertheless, this paper has argued that in his zeal for an alternative lifestyle choice, he disregarded the significance of the material connections that human beings develop to our interior spaces. In recent years, challenges to Modernism's dominance of theories of architecture and interiors have revealed the layered meanings that are incorporated in domestic interiors in particular. For many, significantly for women's lives and associations with the interior, much has been uncovered by this reassessment of the history of domestic spaces and domesticity. Such revelations mean that for designers and architects today, the subjective experiences of lives lived in homes and houses must be considered, and the development of domestic technologies are signaling the way for very different theories of design and domesticity in the twenty-first century. As described in this paper, projects such as Philips's *Microbial Home* and Superflux's *Mitigation of Shock*, point the way in imagining more pluralistic theories of design and domesticity, where technology acts as a facilitator or mediator in domestic roles, acting in tandem with human and non-human activities, rather than dominating these. Unlike Banham's Unhouse, technology in the near future will not be harnessed to exclude domestic life but to encompass home-life, reinforcing and enhancing domestic rituals, acknowledging the durational processes of daily life within the home.

When Banham writes: "Recall too the homeless, starving couple in *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) whose first wish was a crystal chandelier, and you know something bitter about Milanese mental processes", he is most revealing of his misunderstanding of the nature of human needs and wants. (Banham, 1959, p.232). In her book, *Crafting Design in Italy From Post-War to Postmodernism*, Catharine Rossi remarks that Banham's disparaging 'tag' of Neoliberty was also a misreading of the situation in Italy during the period. She explains that: "Neoliberty proponents challenged orthodox modernism's industrial progressivism, and rejection of history but also reflected the desires of a largely middle-class market that preferred historical warmth to modernist asceticism." (Rossi, 2015, p.108). Therefore, the emphasis that Modernists placed on domestic technologies of the future were misplaced and for many, in fact, represented an alienating experience. The opposite might be said today with the development of digital technologies that foreground human experiences in their design and production. For a younger generation of architects and designers, Banham's Unhouse might appear to be a radical departure from conventional ideas of home and

domesticity but it is worth reminding ourselves of his generation's attitudes to home life and domestic obligations as the reverse of interiority or anti-interiority and of Modernist self-denial of the intricacies and messy nature of our interior lives.

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Helen McCormack add an author bio that describes research interests and main achievements in a maximum of 40 words. [LEAVE BLANK UNTIL FINAL ACCEPTANCE] [_DCs Author Bio and Acknowledgements]