

ITERATIVE FORMS

or the countless charms of repetition

Iterative forms elicit the countless charms of repetition and the inventive versatility of types. I would like to expand on this subject by first offering some recollections from the time I lived in Costa Rica, and secondly via some reflections on Gail Peter Borden's revisions of typology. I recall the intriguing constructions that I saw while growing up in the western coast of Costa Rica, many of them scattered from the port city of Quepos to the inland town of Parrita. Built initially by the United Fruit Company for the workers of their banana plantations (eventually replaced by palm oil cultivation), these repetitive two-story wooden houses would demarcate a large clearing in the midst of their thickly planted fields. I frequently visited and drove by these clusters of houses, their corrugated zinc roofs brightly painted from strident green to red hues. Aligning as a three-sided enfilade, each cluster of houses would form a distinct and common square, sometimes to contain a soccer field, an open market, or a playground. At each open corner and parallel to the main road, a commissariat or a meeting hall would be added to complete and anchor the entire compound. The Royal African palms (the source of palm oil) that surrounded the houses were planted in a similar iterative rhythm unleashing an extraordinary play of light and shade, at times dissolving into endless perspectives anywhere you looked. The regal palm trees produced an enthralling effect as the sunlight streamed from their leafy fronds to the dense ferns and plantings below.

The rudimentary construction system of these houses fascinated me, type was presented as the evolution of an essential vernacular, one adapted to the hot and humid tropical climate. Thus one could trace ingenious cross ventilation details layered or built to attenuate the heat, or one could read the raised verandah and porches as outdoor spaces, often occupied by hammocks or light chairs that also aided in dissipating the heat, or simply understood as another space where living or sleeping areas could spill over from the compact interiors. The house type was preserved not only in the repetition of its primary components but also modified by the personal and contrasting habits of each occupant or family. The combination of serial yet evolving houses, their lack of status consciousness, along with their synchronicity with the Royal African palms that surrounded them, gave the entire setting the aura of an enchanted tropical forest. The adaptability and simplicity of these iterative houses would remain an indelible lesson for me. Since living in the United States I have been able to trace similar traits in a variety of North American housing types, from the Shotgun or Dogtrot houses in Texas to the Saltbox houses in New England, and certainly in Gail Peter Borden's own revisions of typology through his "20 single housing prototypes."

Borden's prototypes outline variants of the modern house as counterpoint to the current anonymity and blandness of suburban houses and sites found aplenty across the United States and the world over. Each of Borden's house types aspires to transform their given site into an effective proposition driven by design engagement. An engagement that entails not only material, spatial, sensorial, and construction considerations, but also more importantly relevant issues of domesticity and their evolving patterns. Borden's investigations offer a malleable alternative to the tyranny of quasi-historical houses that land on a site, not only overblown and clueless, but proud of their indifferent and regressive agendas. At the will of speculative forces and their lending institutions, these houses remain absolute in their dominance of a market where critical design thinking is seldom given any attention or priority. These houses are sold complete with their regalia of superficial and immediate status above everything else. Practically indistinguishable from each other except for the cars on their driveways, these houses march side by side into a landscape of gradual disposability, or engage in an often-futile effort to outlast the value of their mortgage cycle.

The optimistic alternatives proposed by Borden for suburban living, along with the potential of iterative forms, are best captured in a marvelous site model where we see all of the architect's propositions laid out as a neighborhood. As a family of types, from Radial to Bar houses, from Organ to Box houses, from Orchard to Pavilions houses, they exist in this neighborhood individually and collectively, as a field interwoven by diversity and inclusivity. Gone are the ubiquitous double garage doors with their printed wood patterns, the extra wide driveways, the acres of composition shingles, the deaf fencing, the cheapening of standardization. ... The idea of the suburban house, whether it is to fit on a standard 60-foot by 120-foot plot, a smaller or larger plot, is given a lightness, a freedom, and a porosity seldom seen in the suburban landscape. The suburban condition can be imagined as a sustainable garden where type is transformed by a rich and complex set of possibilities. Iterative forms do not have to be deployed in militant seriality but in choral adaptability as Borden's investigations abundantly demonstrate.