

The Housing Studio: Different States of Housing

Value(s)?

Studio Critic: Charles Eldred

Room/Body

Edward Hopper, painter of bodies and windows.

In *Morning Sun* (1952), a lone woman, eyes black, stares through an open window, towards the City and its light. Her body, modeled solidly, its flesh a mix of the same colors as the sunlit plaster of the wall next to her and the masonry beyond the window frame, waits impassively. Hopper's urban, specifically New York, subjects are rendered as stone: they are infused with a solidity that seems to be transferred from the Architecture itself.

These subjects say little, but their postures betray a distant intensity, emotion without expression. Expectation, uncertainty, patience, longing, fear, stoicism, desire, disappointment, exhaustion. It is for us to guess at their secrets, and to empathize.

City/Eye

Through the window waits the City. In Hopper's *City Roofs* (1932), a bland monolith broods over a busy congregation of chimneys, skylights, stair bulkheads. This is the view from the artist's Greenwich Village studio. But the blocky mass framing the right side of the composition is no anonymous background building. It is One Fifth Avenue, by Harvey Wiley Corbett, an exuberant 1927 landmark co-op.

Hopper may have stripped the building of its Art Deco flourishes for his own artistic purposes, but a three bedroom apartment there on the market today is currently listed at \$4,395,000. Buildings also have secret lives: the value of their apartments, based on a complex, fluid blend of parametric variables. Size, height above the street, orientation to the sun, view, quality of baths and kitchens, ceiling height, layout, and neighborhood location-- each room, each unit, each building is in endless competition with other buildings, blocks, neighborhoods. One Fifth Avenue and all buildings like it exist because they are revenue-generating machines. Their form registers the ongoing competitions between speculation and regulation.

Value/Values

An isolated, vulnerable Body and an integrated, infrastructural City; unbearable human emotion and abstract asset valuation: these are the apparent extremes of both scale and perception that Housing must reconcile. But the rooms that Hopper's subjects inhabit, and the windows they stare through, are sized and placed in response to New York City's Building Code, Fire Code, Multiple Dwelling Law, Zoning Resolution. The neighborhoods they view are coldly ranked by the eye of the Market. These extremes of scale and perception are not alien to one another, they are in fact completely embedded and simultaneous, unfixed and fluid. Hopper's bodies and windows reveal the circularity of Value. Individual emotional responses to space anchor the apparent solidity of monetary worth; materials, once purchased and deployed into hyper-specific intersections of configuration and site, frame space that moves human emotion and behavior.

What about value is durable or persistent, and to what extent? What is transient? What anchors it? Where does value live? Does it reside internally, fully bound to specific places, configurations, and materials? Or does it live externally, in the collective mind of a perceiving market, and the market participants who bet capital on it? *And for us as Architects specifically: What is/ what could be/ what should be Architecture's role in the creation and sustenance of value?*

Risk/Reward

Our project site, at the intersection of Park Avenue and East 131st Street, was a former city property re-designated as a potential affordable housing site, and re-zoned in 2011 to a higher density zoning district. Who lives in East Harlem now? Who is eyeing East Harlem as a possible home? And how will the Architecture on the site respond to the risk new owners and renters take in moving to Harlem, to their choice to live here instead of another neighborhood, to their investment in the value of this project?

Our question will be: *Is it possible to filter the material and spatial means of Architecture through the competitive scales of the Market, in order to construct Value over time?*