

# Home is Ready-to-Wear

an essay by Steven Rugare

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Most 21st century Americans live more like migrants or squatters than we would care to admit. The spaces we call “home” are generic, sometimes shockingly so. Very few of us live in a house custom-designed to our needs by an architect. The suburban landscape of cookie-cutter houses is a literary cliché going back to the 1950s, and some urban observers cite the comparatively more diverse housing options of urban centers as one reason for their welcome resurgence in the last few years.

In truth, none of this is new. Nor is it actually restricted to the suburbs. In any given decade, American builders and developers have tended to produce and reproduce a fairly limited range of housing types, the mix varying by region. One can walk into just about any 2-family house in Cleveland, and the plan won't offer many surprises. One may even have developed an eye for distinguishing which decorative details are “original” to the mass development of these buildings in the first 2 decades of the last century. Anyone who looks for an apartment in the many buildings in Lakewood and Edgewater that date from the 1920s will discover a very limited degree of variety within a generic form. Moreover, an apartment building in Lakewood doesn't look very different from one of similar vintage in Cleveland Heights. And a 2-family house in Cleveland doesn't look that different from the one my immigrant grandparents lived in when I was a small child. But that was in Utica, New York.

There are good reasons for this. An apartment from the 1920s might well be nearing its 80th tenant by now, and even owner-occupied houses are expected to change hands. Residential buildings *should* be generic enough to outlast the people who temporarily call them “home.” A cityscape composed of generic “types” is also desirable from an urban design standpoint. They form the background against which more special buildings stand out. Nevertheless, there is a pretty strongly held ideal that “home” ought to be less ready-to-wear and more cut-to-fit, and that ideal sustains the American fascination with home ownership and the real estate market that comes with it. One can spend hours watching HGTV programs like *Rehab Addict* or *Fixer Upper* to see the transformation of some forlorn house to the point that the inevitable hunky carpenter or effusive decorator can tell the purchaser, “It's so you!” Of course, the other side of this fascination with real estate is well represented on the same network in shows like *Flip or Flop*, which remind us of the possibility that some people aren't so much “at home” in their house as they are camping out in a live-in asset.

## ***Nests, Boxes, Migration***

We acknowledge that our housing is not in some crucial sense what we mean by “home” whenever we talk about the need to personalize it, to put some kind of work into it to make it ours. This stands in stark contrast to the architectural dreams of designers like Frank Lloyd Wright, who imagined they could make a house and its furnishings in such perfect harmony with the residents that nothing would need to be added or taken away. In contrast to this ideal

of completeness, Do Ho Suh's rubbings are a literal record of the work added by the resident of any dwelling, of the contact between soft body and hard shell that gradually makes a sense of home. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard quotes descriptions of how birds shape their nests through the repetitive pressure of their bodies, and this comes to mind as I look at Suh's rubbings in the gallery, simultaneously re-calling the parts of an industrial product disassembled in a technical drawing and the pattern of a garment awaiting assembly to wear.

Dreams of the garment-house are not unfamiliar to those who indulge in the imaginary exercise of the function of inhabiting. And if we were to work at our dwelling-places the way Michelet dreams of his nest, we should not be wearing ready-made clothes.<sup>1</sup>



Do Ho Suh, *My Homes*, 2013, thread embedded in Dieu Donn  cotton paper, 14 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong. Photo: Brian Fitzsimmons.

A garment is portable and personal, like a memory, and the tension between building (fixed and tangible) and memory (portable but intangible) pervades Do Ho Suh's work. Sometimes this tension is expressed through images of impossible ambulatory houses, but it's also expressed in the large drawing *My Homes* (2013), in which a body is shown in relation to succession of housing units, each given proper technical description in plan, section, and isometric views. The color used in this drawing differentiates what is, in its technical representation, not all that different. Only the artist's childhood home in Korea stands out strongly from the succession of lofts and apartments that form the rest of the narrative, but the

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 101.

colors suggest an affective coding of the spaces. Architectural convention is used here to give a good deal of technical information that is not particularly informative. Meanwhile, color hints at a real story that is perhaps too fugitive to be spelled out.

This suggests an interesting possibility, that the experience of the migrant—an experience that is increasingly normal on our planet—reveals that architecture’s promise of stability and home can’t really be fulfilled. Architectural theorist Stephen Cairns makes an even broader claim in his writing on architecture and migrancy, suggesting that in a multicultural age:

...Migrancy threatens to break with its conventional role altogether and become immanent to the condition of dwelling, not so much the unfortunate exception to proper, settled modes of dwelling, as a predicate to the rule of how we dwell now. If contemporary dwelling is co-constituted with migrancy, then this sets challenges for architecture’s traditional investment in statics, foundations, groundedness, and stability.<sup>2</sup>

Cairns suggests that the migrant experience is no longer an occasional or temporary exception to the general definition of home and dwelling; it is now foundational. Do Ho Suh’s work gives a more telling physical meaning to a similar insight, that the knowledge of dwelling contained in our personal and political narratives may constitute “home,” even as we inevitably continue to *misrecognize* the apparent stability that’s created when we map that knowledge to the physical box that architecture knows how to model for us.

### ***The Clothes on their Backs***

It almost goes without saying that migrants rarely bring their architecture with them. Houses don’t trot along on legs, and many immigrants can’t afford to take more than a few suitcases with them. This was certainly the case for the huge population of European immigrants who came to the US between 1880 and 1920. It was true for the millions of African-Americans who migrated internally in the mid-century. And it’s true for many of the immigrants coming from Asia and Latin America today. They may bring some spatial habits with them, but they generally don’t—or can’t—attempt to duplicate particular architectural forms. Historically, immigrants have been more like hermit crabs than nest-building birds. They make do with what the housing the market provides, and often those choices have been quite limited due to cost and discriminatory real estate practices.

Colonizers have been the exception to this rule. They often tried to bring their architectural styles with them, transplanting them in what were sometimes highly unsuitable urban and climatic conditions. As Cairns says, “What is surprising to the Western eyes that come to see these exported architectures is the out-of-placeness that is registered in, for instance, lichen-drenched Doric columns, bamboo sunshades attached to pointed-arched windows, or blinding tropical light reflected from white, smooth-plastered facades.”<sup>3</sup> It usually took a few generations for colonial rulers to express their domination more subtly, as they came to appreciate the local traditions. Do Ho Suh’s *Secret Garden* (2012) could be seen in part as an ironic repetition of that history.

### ***Networks and Stories***

If architecture doesn’t necessarily house identity in immigrant communities, a sense of being at home has to come from relational and interpersonal networks, from all of the little ways that people help each other adapt to alien environments. We can still see this in a few of the inner-city immigrant gateways of the last century, Cleveland’s Asiatown for example. But the networked character of these relationships

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2 Stephen Cairns, *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

3 Cairns, 20.



Do Ho Suh, *Blueprint*, 2014, thread embedded in STPI cotton paper, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong. Photo: Brian Fitzsimmons.

is even more obvious in the suburban areas that are the gateways for most of today's immigrants. In a study of Chinese immigration in Los Angeles, geographer Wei Li calls these "ethnoburbs," describing them as "A place where they [Chinese immigrants] can make a living and do business through their own networks."<sup>4</sup> The network makes it possible to feel at home, even if the physical environment is very much like rest of the city. When investments in characteristic architecture are made, they are mostly for religious and funerary purposes, or to attract outside business, as in the decorative gateways of Chinatowns around the world.

All of this is to say that much of what makes "home" for the immigrant is the knowledge contained in stories and spatialized interpersonal relationships. One of the most striking features of Do Ho Suh's work is his ability to bring out the narrative potential of even the most generic architecture. The drawing called *Blueprint* (2014) evokes this potential and brings us back to the themes with which this essay began. Executed in thread, the drawing shows the façade of a New York brownstone, behind which is a mass of lines out of which a figure emerges, either dissolving into or emerging from the formless fabric that takes the place of an architectural plan. The immigrant has no time for the illusion of the plan. It's the web of memories and stories that hold her or him together in the succession of boxes that the rest of us like to call home.

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4 Wei Li, "Anatomy of a New Ethnic Settlement: The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 3 (1998), 483.