

HOME AS MUSEUM – THE NEW TEMPLES OF ART

Home is a container of memories, a stable site of identification, a sacred space from which everything else is mapped. Nikos Papastergiadis

As a teenager I did not view the mean spirited, post-war, house that my parents owned as poetically as Professor Papastergiadis. It was space poor at 116.12 square metres and in my estimation it could not have been further from a museum. And yet it was a museum. It could not escape the definition. It was a vitrine of life-slipping-by, minute by minute, hour by hour. But even for a small house there was a surprise or two. Firstly the part-time recital space (the living room) where my father played classical piano to an audience of people scared as rabbits lest they make the slightest noise. Afraid to move, frozen into paleness as their cup of tea grew cold; left wondering when, if ever, the playing would stop and life would resume. It is overwhelming to sit close to a piano in a small room. Battered by the energy of the vibrating air the ever-changing audiences of relatives and acquaintances listened to Beethoven's Pathétique when the soothing voice of Frank Sinatra might have better answered their dreams. Then there was the gallery. The gallery was situated in the garage. Strictly speaking the gallery was not in the home, rather, of the home. The structure housed my father's collection of paintings, those not yet sent to Walter Wotzke in Hahndorf for exhibition and those returned. The pictures shared the space with piles of small, spiral-bound, sketchbooks, two cars and the star of the show, the Victa motor mower, as well as signwriting tools and the detritus of the painter decorator. Apart from the footprint of the house no other suburban home in Glenelg North was anything like ours. Ours was the home of outsiders but despite this the potential existed for even the poorest home to become a temple of art. Later, as the middle class in Australia became more affluent, interest in art collecting in the leafy suburbs grew substantially as a means of displaying financial and social position. Seventies Adelaide was characterised by the Pro Hart over the living room fireplace and the equally fast removal when the artist shot his career in the foot.

Houses are documents embedded in time, museums of documents able to be decoded by the generations that follow. John Ruskin

For centuries the affluent and the downright rich around the world have made a practice of leaving their homes and the collections housed within to an appreciative public. In Central London, Sir John Soane's house, studio and collections were left to the public in the early

nineteenth century and today provide that metaphorical layering of documents through which one can riffle, wide-eyed, as Ruskin-like, we set about decoding the past. This museum also provides a glimpse into the life maintained by a man of fortune. By making such a bequest Soane ensured his name, character and passion for architecture would be kept alive by his house-monument. And time has not proved him wrong. *The Frick Collection* is housed in the family home (or should we call a spade a spade and say mansion) on Fifth Avenue, New York. Here, dwarfed by the grandeur of the architecture, we view the home of an art connoisseur filled with the riches of Western European art dating back to the Renaissance. While in more modest East Melbourne, *Fairhall House Museum* is home to *The Johnston Collection*, enjoyed by the public for the last twenty-four years. In the majority of cases the owners of potential house museums have exhausted their need for the home and on their death the house becomes something else – a destination – a theatre of arts with a public audience. Museums like this provide an egalitarian opportunity to cross the threshold of a grand and seemingly secretive home hitherto only viewed from the outside. A home to which no invitation would have been extended while the owner was alive. Peggy Guggenheim's fabulous palazzo on the *Grand Canal* in Venice is an exception to the rule. She opened her palace and collections to the public while she was still very much alive and living there. After the passage of so much time, her spirit still lingers in the rooms and hallways.

The historical home as museum is an open window to the past and a successful working model. A perfect monument built on what appears to be philanthropy but which may be more complex. It is not unusual for philanthropists to require naming rights, plaques or some form of recognition for their gift. Often an element of reciprocal altruism is at play where pragmatism and cultural progress make for unfriendly bedfellows.

Privately funded public museums are on the increase around the world and the emphasis is predominantly on contemporary art. The *Museum of Old and New Art (MONA)* in Tasmania might be seen as the newest addition to the growing number of Australian privately funded galleries in Australia but it differs substantially from its relatives. Over the last decade museums such as *TarraWarra Museum of Art* (Healesville, Victoria) the *Holmes á Court Gallery* (Perth), the *Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation* (Sydney), *White Rabbit* (Sydney) and more, have opened their doors in either extensively renovated premises or bespoke buildings such as TarraWarra. In essence no-one lives in these galleries. The sense of the private collector, the

homeliness, the personal, the idiosyncratic, is strangely absent. And they are expensive entities to privately fund in the long term. Recently the *Holmes á Court Gallery* closed after a decade of operation.

The new kid on the block in the privately funded public museum realm is the house as living home museum. Here in real time, fixed in the public gaze, the home as stage for life, complete with family and personal collections is shared. Or perhaps this is not new at all maybe we have just caught up with Peggy Guggenheim. The home museum is a paradigm unlike the slice-of-history museum and more like history-in-the-making as life is lived and the collection built. The public observes, fascinated, as if they are at a building site, peering through the small hole in the safety fence. This private as public museum model allows for new explorations of the relationship between art, architecture and life.

In a suburb of Melbourne, *The Lyon Housemuseum* is a recently completed project where architect, Corbett Lyon, his wife Yueji and their children live surrounded by selected works from the Lyon Collection of Australian contemporary art – their personal collection.

The bespoke *Housemuseum* is open to the public and to school students on particular days of the year. In between the *Housemuseum* reverts to a family home. The Lyon Family have wisely capped the number of allowable days their tranquil home will be invaded by strangers. The friction of purpose appears challenging to one that believes studio visitations can be anxious-making let alone house visits by strangers. But there will be an army of scholars, students and aficionados eager to see what the Lyon family collects, how they display the work in a domestic situation and how it feels to encounter the works within the architecture of the home. There is a little voyeur in all of us.

On a world stage it seems that contemporary art is becoming a substantial part of the cultural panacea of the future with the Guggenheim Bilbao held aloft as exemplar. Contemporary art housed in an extraordinary building has proven a successful cultural lever in the transformation of a city in need of repair and regeneration. And now some of the top ten art collectors in the world are thinking about building museums for their collections. Mexican tycoon, Carlos Slim, has chosen to open his collection to the public and, like David Walsh at *MONA*, he is charging no entry fee. The collection is housed in his recently opened museum,

The Soumaya, a glittering metal-clad, bespoke, building that looks like a giant metal-mesh handbag. *The Soumaya*, in Mexico City, is part of an \$800 million redevelopment including Carlos Slim's corporate headquarters, retail development, a luxury hotel and apartment buildings. A veritable suburb of a project far from philanthropy, despite free entry. And there are whispers about Russian-born tycoon, Roman Abramovich, owner of the Chelsea Football Club, and his acquisition of a private island in the heart of St Petersburg. The island, New Holland, was developed in the eighteenth century as a military base and is due for regeneration. Like Slim he is planning a big picture redevelopment for the eighteen-acre site. Scheduled for inclusion are cultural precincts, housing, retail, hotels, restaurants and galleries and in particular a palace of a museum worthy of showcasing his art collection, a palace he may also choose to live in. Whispers also include a larger version of his partner's *Garage for Contemporary Culture* currently based in Moscow. Secrecy surrounds the world's foremost art collector and his plans and I suspect we will have to wait to see what emerges. Certainly Abramovich's luxury 'house-on-the-water' has its own collection of thirty-five contemporary artworks shown in the yacht's very own art gallery.

US hedge fund manager Steven Cohen is also said to be building a museum on his Greenwich estate in Connecticut. Cohen is famous for buying Damian Hirst's suspended shark, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The work is more than ten years old and its gradual disintegration has stimulated a refurbishment. A new Australian shark is to replace the rotting original. Refurbishment is said to be costing \$100,000, a sum Cohen brushes aside as inconsequential. Formerly of Detroit, Michigan and now in Los Angeles, California the real estate mogul, Eli Broad and his wife Edythe have built an impressive collection of contemporary art over many decades. Until now the collection has operated as a valuable lending resource for institutions. In 2010 the Broads joined the push for the creation of new museums in bespoke buildings. They have commissioned Pritzker Prize winner, Zaha Hadid to design a contemporary art museum to be called, *The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum*. The new museum will be built on the campus of Michigan State University.

While this flurry of activity will inevitably allow many more people to see works of art held within private collections the activity is most often at the epicentre of a money-making project or the assembly of a temple of remembrance. No-one is home in a personal sense. It

is a dispassionate activity, far from the emotional context of the house as museum that binds art, architecture and life so tightly and curiously together. The activity is managed to such a degree that the personal eccentricities or choices of the collectors are obscured. These museums inevitably present art that adheres to the philosophy *“that an object can only be(come) art in the context of the institution known as “the artworld”*. But this proactivity among the richest collectors in the world raises a question. Are the traditional art museums losing their power over a broader public?

Returning to my original premise that home is a museum filled with coded documents, memories and life-maps. There is one who would question why we care at all about our domestic space and why we don't flee in haste to save ourselves. Despite a sprawling, and at times colourful, career signposted by remarkable buildings, both corporate and domestic, in later life architect Frank Lloyd Wright developed a rather dyspeptic view of the domestic home. Mark Wigley in his book, *Cardboard House* begins with the following quote from Wright.

Any house is a far too complicated, clumsy, fussy, mechanical counterfeit of the human body...The whole interior is a kind of stomach that attempts to digest objects...The whole life of the average house, it seems, is a sort of indigestion. A body in ill repair, suffering indisposition (requiring) constant tinkering and doctoring to keep it alive. It is a marvel, we its infesters, do not go insane in it and with it. Perhaps it is a form of insanity we have put in it. Lucky we are able to get something else out of it, though we seldom get out of it alive ourselves.

In the opening lines of his rant the architect might have been describing *Cloaca Professional* an installation by Wim Delvoye simulating the workings of the human digestive process. The work is part of David Walsh's *Monanism exhibition*. While there is no personal residence, *MONA* is very much the living room of David Walsh and the collector generously invites all comers to share his collections in the magnificently articulated, rusted steel, three-level, bespoke museum, designed by architect, Nonda Katsalidis. No matter how all encompassing the new building seeks to be vestigial memory of the domestic, home, family, and life-past is unexpectedly present. Two heritage-listed houses designed by Sir Roy Grounds for the former owner of the property, Claudio Alcorso, have been incorporated into the museum design. The bones of the structures providing an emotional context at counterpoint to the heavy metal monumentality of the architecture. It is as if the houses emerge from the archaeology of the site, remnants of another time refusing to be ignored. Visitors enter the museum through the living room of the larger Grounds house, the *Courtyard House* (1956). While the smaller,

circular house, the *Round House* (1957), is being nursed back to life as a library. A fitting memory for an early philanthropist.

Upon entry, all sense of domestic scale is immediately turned up-side-down by the new, internal three-storey, sand stone, wall, inside the museum. An extreme cut exposing layers of time measured in glorious umbers, yellows and ochres. The wall weeps gently like a character from Peter Brook's legendary production of *The Mahabharata*. And the weeping creates anxiety, a feeling of human fragility in the face of possible disaster should the wall gave way. The power and exoticism of the wall overwhelm.

There is nothing institutional about this museum. It vibrates with Walsh's personal vision. This is his collection and there can be no misunderstanding about that. Simultaneously Walsh tries to provoke, repel and shock, like a teenager who farts in an elevator, while he welcomes all comers into his brainchild. It is a gift of immense magnitude. On view for all to see are the eccentricities of the collector, the killer decisions and the lesser decisions; the power works and those that whisper quietly. It is an intensely personal place that Walsh calls his *subversive adult Disneyland*. Others have described the museum as his cabinet of curiosities – his Wunderkammer and his laboratory. Every detail of the building, the collections and the display contribute to a portrait of a complicated man. Walsh's preference is for works that are visceral, that centre on the body and he then juxtaposes these works with exquisite ancient artefacts.

The building is surprisingly intimate for all its size and intention to intimidate. As a viewer one gets lost in the gentle light revealing the art and artefacts. A kind of dream-like state takes hold and reality seems to be absent as you become ever-more immersed in this extraordinary home/temple of visual art.

On my fourth visit to Tasmania, when the love affair had gone too far and I was busy making plans to live on the island, I decided to stay in one of the original MONA pavilions designed by Katsalidis. The stay was scheduled for December 2009 and in theory *MONA* the museum was to be open. That was not the case but I was too busy house hunting to be disappointed. Each day I returned to the tranquil domesticity of the Arthur (Boyd) Pavilion with its own art collection and wine cellar. In the mornings I ate breakfast looking at the water – 'my' water as

I sat on an elegantly cantilevered balcony over the river or experienced the spectacular view from *The Source Restaurant*. One morning at breakfast I read a newspaper story about a work purchased by David Walsh for his museum. It was by Christian Boltanski and the purchase was made in a most unusual way. The agreement to purchase was not based on a one-off payment rather it was determined using the law of probabilities and the artist's birthdate to estimate Boltanski's remaining life span. In turn that information was used to form the basis of a monthly agreement or lease-for-life. The work itself profoundly interested me. In the artist's studio in a suburb of Paris three cameras would be installed and for the rest of the artist's life there would be a direct, twenty-four-hour, live-feed direct to *MONA* – life as art in serial form, viewed on nine screens in a remote bunker near the ferry wharf. The brief article had a powerful effect. Like a dog with a bone I chewed on the possibilities, making links with CCTV and the community, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and on. Wild linkages. I played with the idea until I realised I was actually making a case for another PhD.

The doors to *MONA* are now open and this new temple of art has an important role to play in showcasing the ideas, the heart and the soul of the living collector. An individual still actively engaged in developing his collections. As we take a deep breath and dive deeply into the largesse of Walsh's collection we cannot avoid learning something about the human condition. And when we surface there is much to contemplate on a smaller scale about our own homes as museums and the ever-eroding distinction between private and public space.