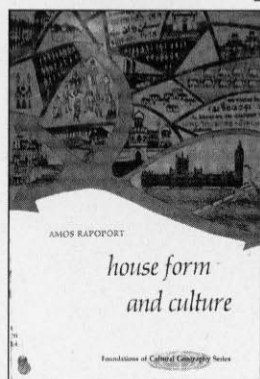
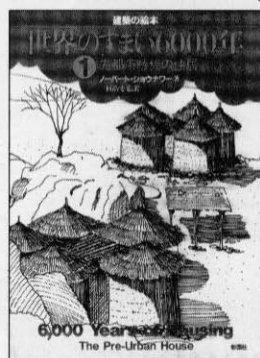
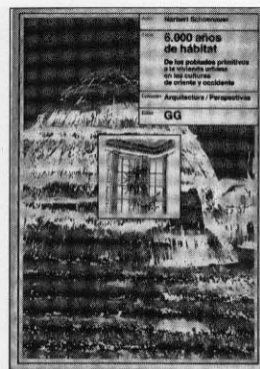


# THE ARCHITECT AS AUTHOR

## THE BOOKS OF NORBERT SCHOENAUER

ANNMARIE ADAMS



1. Cover of the Spanish edition of *6,000 Years of Housing*.
2. Cover of the Japanese edition of *6,000 Years of Housing*.
3. Copy of Schoenauer's copy of Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture*.
4. Sketch of Kung bushmen skerm.
5. Sketch of Percy Nobbs house, Westmount.
6. Section of Fermont windscreen building indicating prevailing winds and split-level plans.
7. Section of Habitat '67.

Of his one dozen or so books on housing, Norbert Schoenauer was perhaps proudest of the revised and expanded edition of *6,000 Years of Housing*, published by New York's W.W. Norton & Company just a year before his death. This large-format, generously illustrated tome, unhampered by fashionable academic theories and political correctness, is a rather old-fashioned book of information. It synthesizes a lifetime of teaching, travelling, reading, and thinking about housing. And as in all his books, each illustration in his *magnum opus* was lovingly drawn in freehand by its author.

The implicit argument of *6,000 Years of Housing*, as well as his earlier books, is that the evolution of housing is an important subject of study for architects. While many academics move through a series of well-defined topics in their careers, probing each deeply and moving on to the next (like a series of closed mine shafts), the key dimension of Schoenauer's research interests was its sheer breadth (like an open gravel pit). He embraced a huge subject—housing—and worked and re-worked his views on its entirety in books for nearly forty years.

The evolutionary model is important to the book. Schoenauer employs a six-part classification system—from ephemeral to permanent dwellings—to explain what he calls pre-urban housing, followed by lengthy sections on eastern and western urban dwellings. From the grass skerm of African Kung Bushmen to the trendy New Urbanism of Seaside, Florida, Schoenauer treats every house type with the same respectful attention, relating major design decisions to human needs. Plans, perspectives, sections, elevations, and even maps supplement the text. There is not a single photograph in the book. And a dearth of footnotes is offset by the careful credits to other scholars in the caption of every illustration—he drew most of the illustrations in his university office, from other books—and the lengthy bibliography.

During the twelve years I knew Norbert Schoenauer, he frequently reminded me (with a characteristic twinkle in his eye) that although he studied architecture of the past, he was *not* an architectural historian. He was an architect. To him, I think, most architectural historians were figures like his late colleague Peter Collins (1920-81), who studied treatises in faraway archives and explored the intersections of intellectual history and architecture. Schoenauer's approach to his subject, instead, was daily-life-as-research. He read everything that touched housing, from women's decorating manuals to Sigmund Freud. He travelled widely and recorded what he saw in thousands of 35 mm slides, carefully organized in binders on his office shelves. And he fervently believed that architects who un-

derstood the evolution of housing would design better homes.

A second viewpoint that differentiated Schoenauer from traditional architectural historians was his insistence that housing is architecture. The architect calls attention to this problem in the Preface to *6,000 Years of Housing* and it was also a favorite topic of conversation for him. Rather than argue for the expansion of the canon beyond great monuments, however, he suggested that housing served as a source for monumental building types, like churches. "There is documented evidence that in the distant past, houses of worship were modelled on human dwellings," he asserts, probably thinking of the famous house of Dura Europos, in Salhiyeh, Syria, converted to serve as a church in 231 AD. For Schoenauer, the so-called vernacular and high-style architectural camps had no boundaries; the worlds of the bicycle shed and Lincoln cathedral were a single, continuous realm, with plenty of lessons to offer young designers.

This all-inclusive view of architecture is what differentiates Schoenauer's book from the three publications which most closely resemble it, Paul Oliver's *Dwellings: The House across the World* (1987), Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* (1964), and Amos Rapoport's *House Form and Culture* (1969). Oliver's book focuses on indigenous housing, mostly in the developing world, and is intended for general readers, rather than architects. Like Schoenauer, though, he derides architects for their contemptuous attitudes towards housing, particularly in the suburbs. But Oliver's is a more romantic work. Its stunning photographs—à la *National Geographic*—are reminiscent of Bernard Rudofsky's famous *Architecture without Architects* of 1964. Although I never asked him, I imagine Rudofsky's rather snobbish subtitle, "A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture," would not please Schoenauer, who disdained arrogance. All architecture was "pedigreed" to him.

Schoenauer's work was unimportant to these other housing scholars. The dust jacket of Oliver's *Dwellings* claims it to be "the first book to examine in depth the principles that have shaped the world's informal domestic architecture." And only his *Introduction to Contemporary Indigenous Housing* (1973) is cited in Oliver's bibliography. Sadly, this omission of Schoenauer's publications by other authors is quite common, probably because he opted to publish serially, and with local and in-house presses. For example, *Introduction to Contemporary Indigenous Housing* (1973) was the first publication of Part I of *6,000 Years of Housing* (2000). And between these two versions it appeared as Volume 1 of three in the



Bushmen







series *6,000 Years of Housing*, published by Garland in 1981. A third iteration was as the first third of an in-house limited edition, *History of Housing* (1992), which served as a textbook in Schoenauer's popular course of the same name at McGill University. *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings in the Postwar Era* (1994) and *Arts + Crafts Art Nouveau Dwellings* (1996), Schoenauer's major publications of the mid-1990s, were both issued as handsome, square-format, in-house publications of the School of Architecture at McGill, and thus may have been difficult to obtain outside Montreal. My sense is that Schoenauer liked the speed and design control with which he could produce these books and the ease with which his own students could obtain copies. There is also considerable overlap among the books, which may not have been tolerated by an academic press. To him, accessibility is what mattered.

Rapoport's classic *House Form and Culture* shares with Schoenauer's *6,000 Years of Housing* its focus on accessibility. It, too, was intended as a textbook and it presents an essentially *social* analysis of dwellings. But that's where the similarities end. While Schoenauer's approach is encyclopedic, Rapoport's is a slim book that argues for the cultural, rather than physical determinants of housing. After vigorously refuting climate, materials, and available technologies as shapers of form, Rapoport proposes a more complex socio-cultural model that permits environmental influences only *after* religious needs, family and clan structure, and social relations. "What finally decides the form of a dwelling, and moulds the spaces and their relationships, is the vision that people have of the ideal life," he asserts. Schoenauer embraced Rapoport's late 1960s view of the house as a container shaped by its inhabitants, evident in his mode of describing a house type through the type of life it accommodated.

Less interesting to Schoenauer was the "other" school of housing research, in which highly specialized scholars tested academic theories through a close inspection of domestic architecture. This was mostly accomplished through comprehensive fieldwork, inspired by the field of cultural geography. The epitome of this work is Henry Glassie's *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (1975), in which the folklorist explores 338 eighteenth-century houses of Goochland and Louisa counties, Virginia, within the linguistic theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss' and Noam Chomsky's Structuralism. Exquisitely drawn plans and details accompany Glassie's compelling unravelling of a transformational grammar of architecture. The revolutionary argument of Glassie's work is his suggestion that housing becomes more "formal" (symmetrical, less connected to its environment) as the politi-

cal environment becomes less stable, an idea he subsequently tested in a ground-breaking book on Ireland.

Schoenauer's method of fieldwork was decidedly less rigorous. Although his books were illustrated exclusively with drawings of his own, these were often drawn from other researchers' drawings or photos in his office, rather than in the field. He also kept his distance from the burgeoning academic interest in all things vernacular in the 1980s, inspired by the work of Glassie, geographer Fred Kniffen (1900-93), historical archaeologist James Deetz (1930-2000), architectural historian Dell Upton, and others. Schoenauer never joined the Vernacular Architecture Forum (founded 1980), an academic association which would have valued and perhaps even nurtured his research. I can only surmise that significant books on domestic architecture, such as Deetz' *In Small Things Forgotten* or Upton's co-edited collection, *Common Places*, were either too removed from contemporary architectural issues, focused as they were on method and argument, or too U.S.-focused for Schoenauer's tastes. His steady production of housing books, instead, seems to have been inspired more by his McGill colleagues who consciously identified themselves as architect-authors, especially Collins and John Bland. Like Collins, he also may have seen his chosen location in Canada as a relatively neutral place from which to study places outside North America.

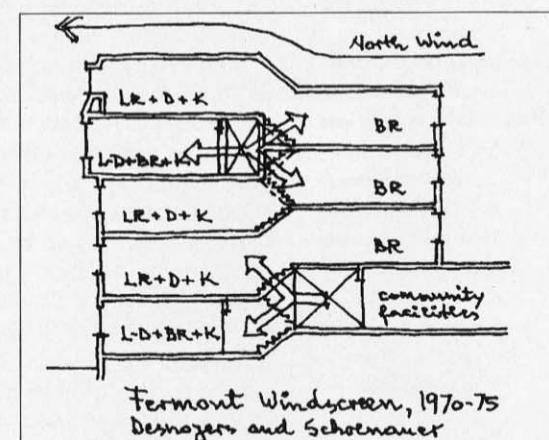
To Schoenauer, our continent's main problem was the automobile. In *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings in the postwar era*, he blames the pollution, wastefulness and disconnection for many of the social problems which beset the postwar North American city. High-rise towers he saw as equally problematic, due to social, environmental, and economic shortcomings. To Schoenauer, the midrise (4-8 storeys) was the only acceptable housing form for late twentieth-century urban life. And practice, teaching, and his personal experience fed directly into the pro-midrise position of the books, albeit with local examples. In Chapter 10 of *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings in the postwar era*, he uses his own designs for Fermont (with Maurice Desnoyers 1970-75), which featured a split-level unit plan and north-facing bedrooms to offset the affect of arctic winds. Moshe Safdie's Habitat at Expo '67, described in the book as "a dramatic and well-articulated building," began as Safdie's McGill thesis. And he was a longtime admirer of courtyard planning.

Still, Schoenauer's last book *Arts + Crafts Art Nouveau Dwellings*, is the only one since *Housing in Canada* (1966), co-authored with John Bland, to really include Montreal architecture. It is no coinci-

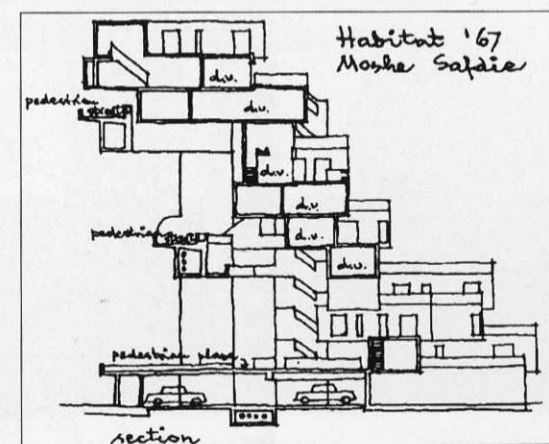
dence that the book was published during the same year the School of Architecture at McGill celebrated its centennial, for *Arts + Crafts Art Nouveau Dwellings* is a heartfelt tribute to the school's early Scottish-born faculty members, Stewart Henbest Capper, Percy Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair, whom Schoenauer much admired. Paradoxically, as the most "local" of all his subjects, one of Schoenauer's most-cited publications is the so-called "Green Book," a history of the McGill University School of Architecture, to which he contributed a highly informative essay on the history of the institution.

Books, to Norbert Schoenauer, were ways of starting conversations, a venue for teaching outside the university classroom. Perhaps he was proudest of the Norton edition of *6,000 Years of Housing* because its scope and its distribution were so broad. And as such it promised a wise and experienced architect, teacher, and writer the large following he truly deserves.

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