



Inside STORIES

The architect's claim that the house he has designed lets the outside in used to puzzle me. I thought we built houses to keep the outside out—shelter against the elements, the enemy, and the night. Then I realized that the architect who says this is speaking not functionally, but formally. His design says, "Look! My shelter shelters, even while it looks like it's doing something else." This is not the art that hides art, but high design that displays itself as artlessness.

This wee epiphany has something to do with my moment in Harrod's, on my first trip to London. I oohed and aahed with great grace and asked a friendly salesman what the place was really like. He said, "It's like a city in itself." Really. I am not persuaded by highbrow metaphors that praise Mozart for being "pure poetry" or defend pro basketball because of its affinity with ballet. What the speaker is actually doing is not clarifying anything about Mozart or basketball, but boasting about his level of culture. The salesman could have called Harrod's the real flagship of the British Empire. He could have called it the House of Di. But in this instance he wasn't boasting about himself. He was describing the store's complexity, and suggesting it was a principle of narrative—a container of many stories, which he could tell me.

Buildings are more than their material components. They are made of ideas and values and remade by their inhabitants into another kind of fit, another meaning and explanation. Cities summon strangers together and place them in many kinds of containers, and the containers that we have invented to be buildings and the ones we have invented to be novels have more in common than the pun they share on "story." Buildings and novels also ground the tradition of thinking about architecture and narrative together. Figures of gods and goddesses, women and men, have traditionally

adorned temples, churches, and governmental buildings, and their stories are intrinsic to the buildings' significance and function. In traditional narratives, it is the inn on the road that sets the stage for pilgrims and travelers to tell their stories to each other. And this tradition enters the history of the novel in Henry James's famous preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, where James writes: "The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million ... every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will." Throughout the 19th century, in fact, there was a whole tradition of novels set in boarding houses and apartment buildings, which contained not only the stories of the novel's characters, but also embodied the culture's ideas about privacy, the street's temptations, and the doctrine of the sexes' separate spheres.

"A sense of place," or "the spirit of place," always suggest to my mind the ethos of Romantic nature poetry. William Blake wanted to see all the world in a grain of sand. Walter Benjamin wanted to see his world in an item for sale in the Paris arcades. Which implies a much different kind of story—more enclosed, more material, more novelistic. The architect who wants to tell us the story of his house that lets the outside in is also telling us a version of his own story: his autobiography, embodied in terms of his intentions and the decisions he has made. And the person who wants to tell us about the house he grew up in, or the one that marked a new chapter in her life, or the one that provides a final place to settle, is also offering a life tale. This is the autobiographical story in every work of art, told in the choice of the word, the stroke of the brush, the exact slant of the roof, and there is no telling of this story from the outside. The good stories are always inside jobs. — *Terrence Doody*