

☞ INTRODUCTION

SPACIOUSNESS, HISTORY OF A VISUAL EFFECT ☞

America doesn't need small. America needs big.
William Jefferson Clinton, 1996¹

One of the enduring beliefs of America is that it is a spacious nation, a land big to start and made bigger still by bottomless natural resources and energetic citizens, a place that easily accommodates a future without limits. The country's physical scope has been, throughout its history, the basis for such beliefs: endless vistas unrolling mile after mile as settlers moved westward were planted deeply in collective memory and reappear often in its culture. From the pioneer's clearing in the woods to the unpopulated horizon of so many westerns, from the frontier historiography of Frederick Jackson Turner to advertisements showing automobiles on mesa tops, Americans just do not like to feel fenced in. Perhaps for this reason, they place a high premium on big homes built on spreading lots that recall this national mythology, and they support energy and transportation policies that subsidize vast tracts of low-density housing to ensure that whoever can pay the price can live in a spacious place.

But big costs money, more money than most people have to spend. Often, then, they make do, envying the dimensions of wealth, but content to have a clean and comfortable home of their own. Early in the nineteenth century, when social reformers extolled the virtues of a small house, they emphasized the strength of the family living therein. Smallness was not a liability. The homestead, humble but independent, was a popular housing ideal in a mostly agrarian nation. In a country newly founded, the size of the house seemed less significant than the sense of autonomy, which was literally built into the very typology of the

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freestanding house. Its surrounding apron of land served a number of practical purposes, but it also looked like the principle of self-rule as it might be articulated at the level of the family. Although a minor figure in economic terms, the small homeowner held the franchise to vote and could therefore participate in a great experiment in democracy. As long as the house was able to meet the needs of shelter and convenience and to support the connotations of morality with which it was frequently invested, diminutive size was not a liability. Smallness served affordability, even efficiency, and thus widened the possibilities for those musing on that most redolent of reveries, what would come to be called the “American dream”² (Fig. 1).

Only later, by the early twentieth century, did smallness start to feel a little too snug. Advances in the mass production of building components, and in their distribution, as well as the continuing efforts of developers to minimize costs and broaden markets, meant there were more small houses, and, with increased urban growth, they were also closer together. As house buyers continued to insist on new heating, electrical, and plumbing systems, along with an assortment of household appliances, habitable space in the small house grew even smaller. With declines in the use of domestic servants and in overall family size, houses became smaller yet again. Finally, increased circulation of popular magazines meant that those of modest means could be more regularly in contact with the architectural grandeurs of the well-to-do. Along with making consumption that much more conspicuous, such magazines helped the middle class better appreciate how far down they stood on the ladder of social hierarchy and, in doing so, helped consolidate class identity around material goods and cultural attitudes, rather than strictly in terms of income. To a society that was witnessing widening choices among a range of goods, the small house began to seem an unpleasant anomaly. Smallness proved not to be the sort of stuff dreams were built on. Limits to wealth meant that a detached dwelling in a country-like setting would be relatively small, adequate perhaps, but something evidently less than the aristocratic villas on which the type was based.

A number of housing professionals – including real-estate developers and appraisers, home builders, architects, landscape architects, and interior designers – addressed the sinking feeling that small houses were not measuring up to larger ones. Americans, they believed, preferred their homes spacious rather than cramped, and so experimented with a range of architectural, landscape, financial, and legal means to create and secure a sense of spaciousness, especially in regard to the small house, precisely where a sense of size was most lacking. In the conflict between consumer ambitions and economic reality, designers began to argue that small houses need not feel small, even if they really were. Rather, designers began to work with two sorts of space, which Emily Post summarized neatly in 1930 as “space that is actual” and “space that does not exist.” The former could

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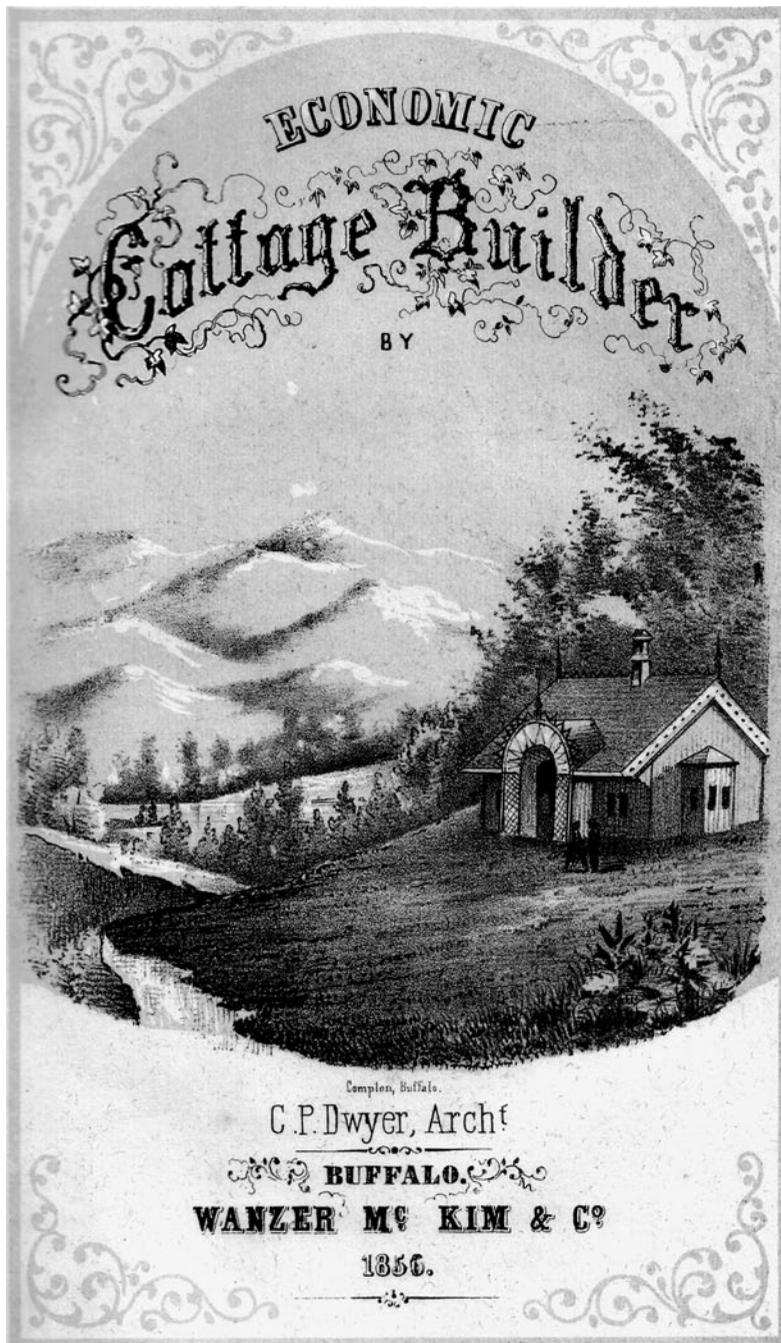
Sandy Isenstadt

Excerpt

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1. An independent farming couple beside their isolated cottage.
Charles P. Dwyer, *The Economic Cottage Builder: or, Cottages for Men of Small Means* (Buffalo: Wanzer, McKim & Co., 1856), frontispiece.

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be measured; the latter could only be appreciated as visual space. By 1951, when glass maker Libbey-Owens-Ford asked and then immediately answered its own question – “Where does this living room stop? By the ruler, just a few feet from you. By the eye, it reaches on out into the woods” – the logic of the ruler and the eye had become routine.³

Based on this distinction between perceived and actual space, designers claimed they could endow the small house with “an impression of airy space far beyond its actual dimensions” and well ahead of its actual costs. Modernist designers in particular began to cast their claim for aesthetic legitimacy in terms of their ability to create spaciousness. Spaciousness, that is, the sense of space, directly redressed the financial limitations to which the middle class had otherwise to yield. A generous sense of space was a luxury but with good design it was an affordable luxury, an idea that quickly became no more an oxymoron than spaciousness in small places. By the middle of the twentieth century, a range of architectural features were subsumed or at least touched by such notions. The picture window, for example, was an inexpensive outlook onto a bucolic ideal, even when the reality was quite different; opening up the small house to the outdoors, the picture window was able to “bring the outdoors in,” a phrase repeated often in the postwar years and reflecting accurately that era’s expansive mood. Unrelated to the actual budget, spaciousness could thus represent a kind of democracy attained. “Compactness with the illusion of spaciousness” came to be a formula by then, underpinning the modern version of the small house and promoted in diverse professional and popular publications and advocated for a surprising range of unlikely situations. In this way, spaciousness, unearned by expenditure and unwarranted by size, became the usual answer to the problem of the small house and a fixture of the middle-class imagination.

Introduced first as an occasional ornament on an estate, the small house stands two centuries later as the country’s most ubiquitous building type and one of its most important. The majority of Americans live in small houses, despite ever-higher costs of purchasing and maintaining one.⁴ It requires an extensive and expensive urban infrastructure to serve relatively low-density settlements, and, for individual families, it requires separate mechanical systems and maximizes the exterior enclosure that must be maintained. Isolated on its little plot, it takes little advantage of economies of density in housing or scale of construction. It remains, nonetheless, America’s most desired form of housing, a leading icon of prosperity, independence, even nationhood. For most families, their house continues to be their major financial asset, as well as the arena for rearing children and the staging of everyday life. Crucially, it makes possible the country’s economy of consumption, providing the storage space requisite for the continued acquisition of goods. The small house is the most visible embodiment of the American dream, at once a national reverie and built reality (Fig. 2).

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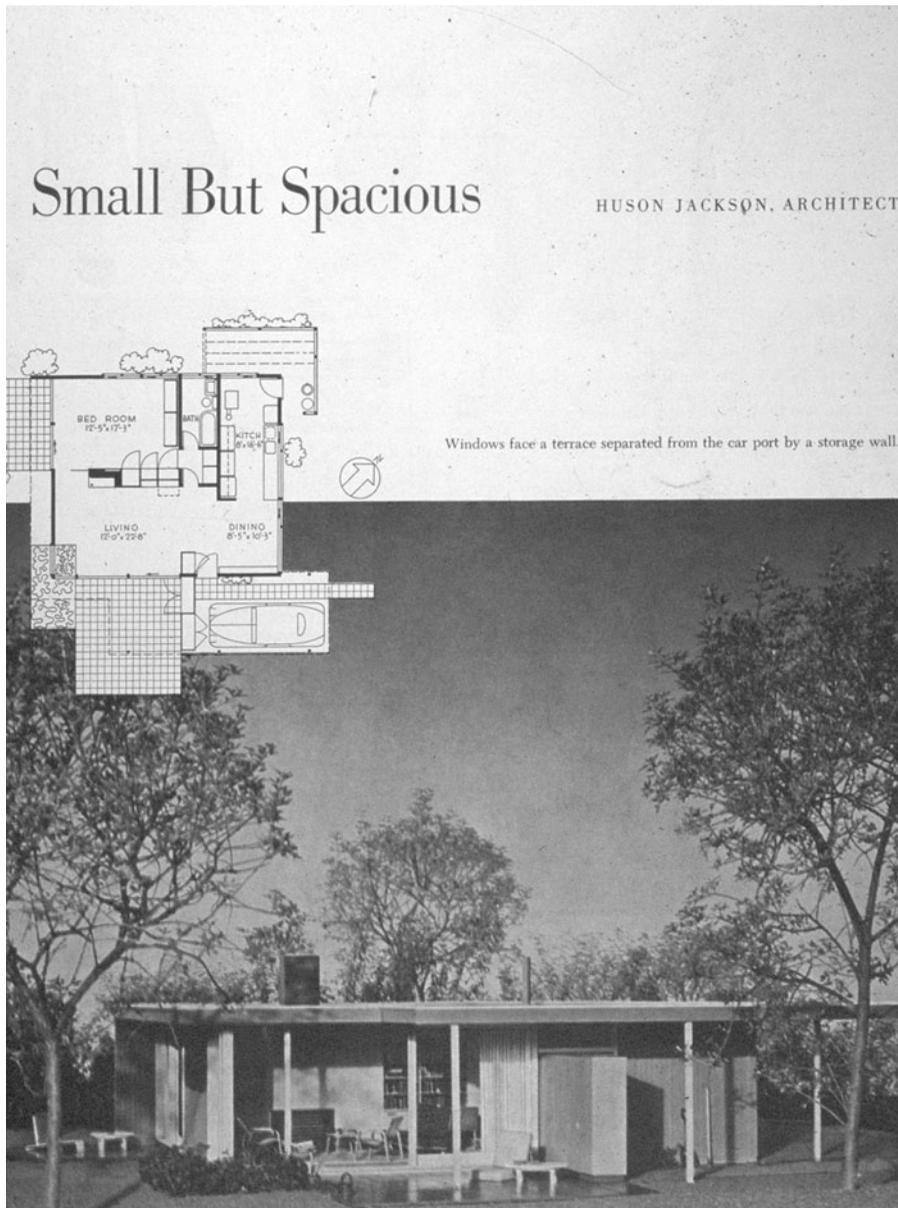
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2. "Small But Spacious," a paradox normalized.
House design by Huson Jackson. Mary Davis Gillies, *McCall's Book of Modern Houses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 48.

This book places in an historical context those efforts to visually enhance spatial perception; it finds spaciousness, or the sense of space, to be situated at the center of the development and the reception of modern American domestic architecture. I argue here that explicit strategies not just for creating space,

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but for perceiving it as well, became pivotal to the definition of modern house design. Explicitly, almost heroically, in conflict with actual dimensions, pursuit of such impressions was founded on the tension between spatial aspirations and financial limitations. Thus, professional endorsement of illusory space eventually found its way into discussions of real estate and law and, in time, obtained market value and received various degrees of legal recognition. However naturalized the concept has become today, spaciousness in the private home is an aesthetic preference that develops historically, is pursued by various means, and carries cultural significance.

Spaciousness is not the only theme threaded through professional discourse regarding the small house. Nor is it the most important. Far more prominent early in the nineteenth century was the issue of the house's expressive character, whereas matters of financing became prominent later. Designers in the first decades of the twentieth century regularly discussed access to adequate light and air, hygiene, or propriety and privacy, or the practical matter of meeting a budget. The domestic sphere was much more often idealized with terms like comfort and convenience and hominess, home-like, or homey, the latter terms appearing late in the nineteenth century to conjure ideas of enclosure, privacy, and familiarity.⁵ Spaciousness, in fact, is rarely a prominent topic and almost never a subject sustained for very long. But it does appear across a surprisingly wide range of writers on design and recurs in this almost offhand way for more than a century, continuing to the present day. It appears in distinct constellations with different concerns, rising and fading in relation to competing values. If there is what might be called a "discourse of spaciousness," then, it is sporadic and polemically unfocused, more of a changing motif than a progressive development. It is a value so good-natured and self-evident that it simply did not need much legitimation, only tips for ways to achieve it.

However casually it appears, a discourse of spaciousness is ripe for historical examination. Its status as an unquestioned good, after effectively being invented in the nineteenth century and aligned with class and nationhood, demonstrates the degree to which it has been naturalized as a transcendent value. As the historian Daniel Boorstin said in regard to picture windows: "We have become so accustomed to our illusions, they have become so routine, that they seem no longer produced by any special magic."⁶ My aim in this book is to describe how the magic of spaciousness was culturally internalized. I am interested, therefore, not only in how assertions about spaciousness came to be, but also how they came to be unexceptional, how it was that designers began to worry routinely about their clients' perceptual experiences along with accommodating their physical needs.

Spaciousness is a distinctly middle-class problem. It thrives between poverty and wealth. Affordable housing for the poor involves questions ranging from the

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appropriate mix of governmental and private-sector participation to acceptable levels of construction quality. Decency is always an issue, whereas perceptual dilemmas are rarely invoked. But its very absence from debates regarding housing for low-income families helped make the issue of spaciousness available for upper-income families; worrying about something as inessential as a sense of space could thus lift middle-class experience toward abundance. To the extent that crowding was associated with cities, immigrants, or minorities, spaciousness could further signify distance from urban tensions, hereditary citizenship, and racial difference and in this way function as a spatial symbolism of social inequality. At the other end of the scale, large houses simply are spacious; they are big, which even indifferent design decisions will not obscure. In contrast, the discourse of spaciousness is built on the conflict of a spatial desire that exceeds economic ability; spaciousness resolves that conflict in a culturally specific manner.

Spaciousness emerges in tandem with a large, home-buying middle class, appearing in the context of planning for small homes and home sites, that is, for those with means enough to own their own home and decorate it with commercially available products and in keeping with professional design advice. In this context, spaciousness was useful to the middle class because it was believed to transcend standards associated with one or another class. Writers argued that the same social forces affected rich and common alike, which led to an equality of situation, if not of status. In *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, Stuart Blumin describes the difficulties of characterizing a middle-class identity formed “through the common embrace of an ideology of social atomism,” in contrast to strictly economic measures, and refers to Anthony Giddens’s argument that the denial of class associations may be a factor in class identity as much as explicit solidarity.⁷ From the standpoint of a member of the American middle class, a space-making private view from the living room window looking over an unpopulated landscape would be an effective visual correlate of social atomism; the fact that unpopulated landscape views are possible in suburbs only when neighbors living shoulder to shoulder agree to focus on their yards, rather than on each other, is an indication of its ideological potency. An impression of spatial independence, at least from the heart of the private house, could confer a sense of stability and respectability at the same time it could support an underlying ideology of individual liberation and the abrogation of social limits. Spaciousness in small places, in other words, is an artifact of middle-class design culture: an enhancement of a middle-class family’s most economically valuable possession – its house – promoted in vehicles of consumer culture like magazines and pitched often as a discounted way to acquire the visual trappings of greater wealth.

A sense of spaciousness despite small dimensions is also distinctly modern; the dilemma underpinning it does not appear with any regularity before the twentieth

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century.⁸ The term “spacious” has been used in English since the late fourteenth century to denote “vast, large, or indefinite” exterior spaces and, regarding interiors, “having or affording ample space or room; large, roomy, commodious.” Other definitions apply to objects with extended surfaces or to human traits, like intelligence, “characterized by greatness, breadth, or comprehensiveness.” The term describes, in other words, a range of phenomena that actually are capacious or extended, relative to similar phenomena. This use is entirely explicit for the substantive, “spaciousness.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* allows that the term defines “the state or quality of being wide,” which provides room for perceptual readings, but supports this definition with a well-known tract on house design by the nineteenth-century British architect Robert Kerr. Kerr says, “somewhat opposed to spaciousness . . . is the exquisite quality of compactness,” and so makes clear that “compactness” has a character contrary to that of “spaciousness.”⁹

In short, “spacious” has been since its inception consistently used not simply as a perception of extent but as a judgment of it as well. It was a perception in keeping with how the world really was. The discovery of linear perspective was momentous in that it demonstrated that visual perception could, in fact, be codified, the ruler made to agree with the eye. A perception of spaciousness implied the presence of space, in physical terms, or of great capacity in other ways. That these were implications only, and not inevitable connections, was seen already by Shakespeare, who played precisely with the gap between the word’s senses. He drew a wry insight when he revealed the distance between one sense and the other. Hamlet (V, ii.), describing the courtier Osric to Horatio, thought there was little to recommend him but his estate. He was, Hamlet said, “spacious in the possession of dirt.” Osric’s land was grand; the land’s owner was not. By now, the possibility that something really small can appear to be large is not only commonplace, but it is also a desired outcome available through the purchase of design services and off-the-shelf products that affect the visual environment.

For modern architects, the conflict between actual and perceived space was welcomed as an opportunity. Addressing themselves directly to middle-class home buyers, George Nelson and Henry Wright argued that illusions of space were the architect’s stock-in-trade and the basis for the architect’s fees. More than simply a design strategy, spaciousness was central to the economic rationale of the profession:

Where space is at a premium big windows can work wonders, for these, used in conjunction with low garden walls, trellises, and other cheap exterior features, can create the impression that the space available is much larger than is actually the fact. Right here is where the topnotch architect is more than worth his fee, because he can create the illusion of additional space without making you spend the money to build it.¹⁰

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The authors were not suggesting that clients actually pay their architects more, in order to match the value of the service provided. They were, rather, bolstering client decisions to hire their own architects, that is, their own modern architects, in the first place. As Elizabeth Mock claimed, “Only the modern architect is . . . *free* to give you at least a feeling of spaciousness if the actuality is unattainable.”¹¹ Only the modern architect recognized the necessity of spaciousness along with the limitations of finances. Only the modern architect could provide a sense of space beyond the client’s financial means and design services incommensurate with their cost, making a sense of space a dividend of design.

POLEMIC, TERMS, AND METHOD

The polemic of this book is that modernism in architecture may be defined as much by the perceptual ambitions of its patrons as by the formal innovations of its producers and that the desire for spaciousness in small places preceded modernist architecture’s much-vaunted ability to provide such an effect. Thus, in place of cubic forms, unadorned walls, flat roofs, large windows, and a generalized expression of function, I present changing prescriptive ideals of visual and spatial perception across related but distinct design disciplines as the core of an architectural history. I concentrate on a specific cultural preoccupation with spatial perception, rather than a more general idea of space as a plastic medium in architectural theory, and argue that “spaciousness,” not physical space but the sense of space, was at the center of the development of modern American domestic architecture. In the pages that follow, I adduce strategies advocated by a variety of design professionals not for creating space but for perceiving it and for promoting to the middle class a vocabulary with which to evaluate spatial experience in their modest homes, a vocabulary that would prove receptive to architectural modernism. Spaciousness represents a shift in discussions of the small house from matters of formal organization to those of psychological reception. Accordingly, I forgo discussions of formal traits or functional rhetoric in favor of a focus on professional attempts to guide clients’ perception of space and, ultimately, to reformulate categories for the judgment of private, domestic space. Throughout this book, spaciousness is taken as a new and distinctively modern category for domestic architecture, one that prizes perceptual effects, informs design decisions, comes in time to affect aesthetic regulation of residential neighborhoods, and that intersects with contemporary notions of personal, community, and national identity.

That spaciousness was a value running across the spectrum of practitioners from conservative to avant-garde was brought home to me, so to speak, when I happened on several boxes of shelter magazines from the 1950s, which had been

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set out by a neighbor one night for the morning's trash. Spiriting them to safety, I spent the next few days poring through them. What struck me most at that moment was that these magazines, intended for mass suburban audiences, shared an interest with the self-consciously avant-garde architecture I had recently been studying. Both were concerned – obsessed, actually – with finding ways to achieve a sense of space in single-family houses but to do so within small dimensions and for very little money. Both, moreover, were saturated with images of unpopulated landscapes seen through walls of glass, and, from leading trade journals such as *Progressive Architecture* to popular shelter magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, both described ways to visually make neighbors disappear and to avoid a sense of feeling cramped by the limited budget forced on middle-class houses. I had been in small suburban houses before – I grew up in one – and I knew they faced neighbors much more than open meadows, so I saw a contradiction as, in journal after journal and in issue after issue, every middle-class house was depicted at the vertex of a beautiful view. When, out of curiosity, I looked to older sources, an interest in spaciousness appeared in other ways or disappeared altogether. Views through nineteenth-century windows, for example, were discussed more often in terms of chiaroscuro and their affirmation of picturesque values; they were not appreciated for making interiors seem larger. Spaciousness, in other words, was historical, a cultural preference in the United States for visual extent in domestic environments that developed over time. The motivation for this book was to learn how such an evanescent value came to be so firmly entrenched in American design culture; how a domestic view of landscape came to be a category of popular perception.

Humans, no doubt, have made judgments regarding space at least since they had two eyes, and architects have always worked with some notion of space in their designs; how could they not? Vernacular buildings incorporate spatial patterns that are useful, often complex, and as familiar to their occupants as a first language. Baroque-era architects consciously worked with actual and implied spaces and welcomed pictorial acceleration of their spatial evocations. Yet only since the nineteenth century have writers on architecture focused directly on space as a primary determinant of form, as a plastic medium to be shaped, and the very essence of architecture. This notion emerged in the writings of figures such as Robert Vischer, August Schmarsow, and Konrad Fiedler, drawing from the work of perceptual psychologists who tried to find a physiological basis for the cognition of space. Later writers, such as Paul Frankl, described what he called “spatial form” as both evidence and engine of architectural change over time. The configuration of space came to be the core of studies of modern architecture, such as Sigfried Giedion's *Space Time Architecture*, published in 1941, or Bruno Zevi's 1950 book *Towards an Organic Architecture*, which put space at the center of modernism, with a new and distinctly modern space flowing across an “open