



Abstract

A stream-of-consciousness approach takes this essay into a tumultuous account of a designer-client relationship complicated by the fact that each is one-half of a long-term romantic partnership.

Written from the point of view of the designer (ala Barthes' lover vis-à-vis the beloved to whom this letter is addressed), the design processes that define the professional practices under the built environment cluster—drawing, material specification, punch-listing—are collapsed with the personal—frustrations, angst, hope—in this work that borders the confessional. Starting from the initial design phase, to the construction, and all the way to the occupancy of the finished project, this essay is ultimately centered on the unpacking of the complexity inherent in any collaboration, whether platonic or otherwise—furthered as it were here by the premise of the house as one of the more concrete expressions of love.

Keywords

design, interior design, built environment, home, love

THIS HOUSE IS MY LOVE LETTER

LOUIE T. NAVARRO

Words are such powerful things, and when they correspond to visual impressions—the floor looks like the dome—they may reasonably stand as proof.

—Robin Evans, “Translations from Drawing to Building”(1997)¹

¹ Robin Evans, “Translations from Drawing to Building,” in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Janet Evans and Architectural Association Publications, 1997), 175.





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(Preamble)

This is not our first house—third to be exact if we count that condo we codesigned and briefly occupied in between lease contracts. Barring the first house that we called home² for a good decade and a half (a good fifth of our lives!) and that was witness to our beginnings that I also built, this is the first house that I built *for you*. This perhaps is the funniest part: You thought you were building this for me—but I’m getting ahead of myself.

To be clear, this letter does not so much dwell on how I came to design this house, what inspired me—more so: how as an interior designer I came to design this house as in an “architecture”³—but rather on the challenges in the working relationship between the designer and client.

Shaped by the varying degrees of the personal that each brings, ours can be argued to be the most difficult simply because of our intimacy, which I trace here beginning from the initial design phase all the way to our life lived in this house—and beyond.

2 For a broader discussion on the subject of home, see Shelley Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” *The Sociological Review* 52, 1 (2004): 62–89, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x>.

3 This thread refers to long-standing issues of the profession vis-à-vis architecture ranging from the more theoretical, such as the reclamatory meditation in Amy Campos and Deborah Schneiderman, eds., introduction to *Interiors Beyond Architecture* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), xiv–xxvii, to the professional divide/territorialization in nineteenth-century England in Charles Rice, “Rethinking Histories of the Interior,” *The Journal of Architecture* 9, no. 3 (2007), 275–81; Joel Sanders, “Curtain Wars: Architects, Decorators, and the 20th-Century Domestic Interior,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 16 (Winter/Spring 2002): 14–20; and Peter Thornton, *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior, 1620–1920* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984).





Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells.

—Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” (1947)⁴

Our early days together were marked by myself as a full-time graduate student of art studies (major in art theory and criticism) while you were already at the start of what would become a stellar career in a field that was not quite what you had in mind.

While seemingly immaterial, my time in grad school was when I first got acquainted with Wigley, Derrida, and Heidegger, all of whose work is indirectly, directly (even literal at times, at face value) referenced in this letter, and, conveniently so, all made use of the tropes of the house, building, architecture, structure, and space—spatializing the abstract in an attempt to make more tangible things that may not be, ultimately, possessed. Barthes, too—for what self-respecting arts studies major writes about love without referencing a treatise that revolves around the notion of it as a monopoly of one—of that *proprietaryship* of love in its entirety?⁵

4 Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 217.

5 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1990).





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I guess to an extent, this letter is a response to these writers as well, this text together with this house. Moreover, these philosophers also concretised *an other*—the architectonic,⁶ a liminal space,⁷ the Being,⁸ and the beloved⁹—in an attempt to shelter, of occupancy and occupations.

On your end, your work is what precisely afforded us this house.

It started out like any other project: You gave a brief for me to work on and creative freedom bordering on the incredulous. Incredulous as in the unicorn that is the perfect client. But as they say, nothing is ever as it seems.¹⁰

What started as a house for two evolved into a house that must accommodate guests and then some.

The addition of the walk-in closet¹¹ to the master's bedroom was meant to accommodate imagined buyers should we decide to sell—"marketable," you said, and I thought, "well isn't this meant to last until our forever ends in death?"

So you see, your practical nature took over, and, yes, it's precisely because of it that we are enjoying our lives in relative ease. However, you seem to have forgotten who you're with.

This pragmatism also determined the number of bedrooms: three. One on the ground floor for our moms—mine a senior, yours still young but handicapped—whenever they're in town and two on the second floor: the master's bedroom and what was originally a home office/lounge that was transformed into a guest bedroom by your insistence on a double-sized bed instead of a daybed, which is what I really wanted for that space—for respite but not a *bedroom*—alongside the desk.

Together with your insistence on the walk-in, this was in stark contrast with the day-to-day you hated so much: cleaning up after yourself after meals, lining up for the bank, attending remedial classes back when we first decided that we were a thing that I had to drive you to just so you could finally finish college.

6 Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1993).

7 Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 105–26.

8 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 139–212.

9 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*.

10 Also, in what could be read as a scathing critique of this Heidegger-Derrida-Wigley thread referenced in this essay: "All things with conceptual dimension are like language, as all grey things are elephants." From Evans, "Translations from Drawing to Building," 154.

11 Obliquely, see Henry Urbach, "Closet, Clothes, disClosure," in *Assemblage*, no. 30 (1996), 63–73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171458>.



Stuff that I had to accept much like the redrawing, revisions needed.

What was most brutal was when after the fifth revision, you had me do another—matter-of-factly—saying that it was “easy” for me anyway. Drawing, that is. It was just a drawing. Besides, it’s not as if I’ll do that myself.

Yet the drawing as an expression of the design idea is a projection of all that can be had.¹²

You know by now that more than being a practicing interior designer, design has become my vocation, for better or worse.

We first met when we were both students of creative writing: you on your third degree (first two unfinished; engineering and chemistry wasn’t “you,” you said), and I was reeling from a false start as a designer after failing the Interior Designers Licensure Exam¹³ and deciding that it would be better to express my thoughts in words. If drawing had failed me, I thought, maybe I could find respite in stories.

Here, I exchanged line weights for punctuation, spatial layout for syntax, and watercolor renderings for poeticism. But neither on tracing paper nor notebook (Computers weren’t a thing just yet! Okay, there were laptops, but they were beyond the reach of most college students at that time.) did my obsessive-compulsiveness ever wane.

I only lasted a year, taking up the major subjects only before deciding on my master’s.

I failed once again. Our professor in poetry found my lines too mundane. In fiction writing, it was the other way around: more poetic than prosaic.

I was young and thought I was quite misunderstood. I blamed them like the way I blamed the sensibilities of my design professors who found my rooms empty and kept at it until my interiors were blank canvases,

12 Evans projected similar optimism in that such a drawing can then facilitate translation with minimal diversion while at the same time disbelieving: “Architecture has nevertheless been thought of as an attempt at maximum preservation in which both meaning and likeness are transported from idea through drawing to building with minimum loss.” From Evans, “Translations from Drawing to Building,” 181.

13 After finishing one’s undergraduate degree, one must first pass this examination conducted by the Professional Regulation Commission in order to legally practice interior design in the Philippines. This is based on Republic Act No. 10350 of 2012: An Act to Regulate and Modernize the Practice of Interior Design in the Philippines, which is the updated version of Republic Act No. 8534 of 1998 that “defines Interior Design for the first time as an autonomous and regulated discipline separate from Architecture.” Reuben Ramas Cañete, “Interior Design in the Philippines Since World War II, and a Brief History of the PIID,” *Interior Design Code of the Philippines*, by Philippine Institute of Interior Designers (Manila: C&E Publishing Inc., 2014), 177. See also, “Interior Design,” Republic of the Philippines Professional Regulation Commission, accessed Month DD, YYYY, <https://www.prc.gov.ph/interior-design>.



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so that one exasperated professor asked: “Where is the interior designer here?”¹⁴



It is simply that our belonging to, and inherence in, the language of metaphysics is something that can only be rigorously and adequately thought about from another topos or space where our problematic rapport with the boundary of metaphysics can be seen in a more radical light. Hence my attempts to discover the non-place or non-lieu which would be the ‘other’ of philosophy. This is the task of deconstruction.

—Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other” (1984)¹⁵

14 This profession owes much to the Parsons School of Design (United States), where the first interior designers in the Philippines went to study post-World War II. More importantly, this influence is reflected in the curriculum established by the pioneers of this profession in the country—first, at the University of Santo Tomas as a two-year certificate course in 1953. See Cañete, “Interior Design in the Philippines,” 169–99; and Raquel Baltazar-Florendo and Edith L. Oliveros, *Interior Design in the Philippines* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2014). A specific case in point: Today, students are still trained in the analogue production of the interior perspective rendering as this medium of representation of the design idea is part of the Interior Designers Licensure Exam in the Philippines. This connection is corroborated by Merwood-Salisbury, who identified that “[t]he chief medium was the interior perspective, rendered in watercolor and painstakingly constructed to depict the play and composition of colors, textures, and patterns on every surface.” This was part and parcel of the “Parsons look”: “Up until 1964 an education in interior design at Parsons meant an education in a very specific version of good taste.” From Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, “Interior Design as Environmental Design: The Parsons Program in the 1960s,” in *After Taste*, ed. Kent Kleinman, Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, and Lois Weinthal (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 116 and 113.

15 Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” 112.





Before building commenced, I made a write-up of the house:

Alluding to the architectures of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye and van der Rohe's Farnsworth house, the programme for this household of three is fairly straightforward: all private functions (bedrooms, toilet & baths) are relegated to the longitudinal North side of the volume on two levels while all public functions (living, dining, food preparation) occupy the other half of the space as one big interior volume (open-plan, double height).¹⁶

What I failed to note at that time was the simplicity that I took so much from John Pawson and the accompanying story I kept going back to as I began my semesters in my alma mater, where I now also teach—that I hoped you still remembered given your proclivity to ignore me (or so I thought). That when I was still an undergraduate student of interior design at the University of Santo Tomas (PH), at the time when the internet was just new and one had to “dial-up” and paid by the hour to connect, I used up all my time and resources to know as much about Pawson's asceticism.

I pored over whatever I could get of Pawson's collaborative project with Claudio Silverstrin: the Neuendorf House (1989), his Calvin Klein Manhattan flagship (1995), and his houses both located in London (1994 and 1999). As an impressionable student of design, I projected myself into the images and wondered if I should have been an architect instead.

Nonetheless, beginning my second year of design, the spaces I drew became sparser. Given a room to design, my designs revolved around hiding things then painting them white thinking that was what Pawson did.

Today, people have a term for this: What Would (insert name of your fandom's god here) Do? but in its acronym form. So in my case, every time I start a design project, it is more or less me asking myself: WWJPD (What Would John Pawson Do?). So to an extent, this is my letter to him, too.

For this house, it was certainly not intentional on my part to not have referenced Pawson in my write-up. Although I did note in the conclusion:

¹⁶ Subsequently published in Louta et al., “C Residence,” *Frame*, posted April 12, 2023, <https://frameweb.com/project/c-residence>.





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Cavern-like in its framing of the outside world—rendering both exterior and interior matter-of-factly—what is created is a site of erasure that allows for exactly an introspective thinking about design, of materiality, and gives sharp focus on life itself as a source of intimacies.

Very Pawson, right?

During the construction, in between projects where, in one, I intentionally referenced Pawson, I thought how I did okay honoring that imagined shared belief.

As a designer at present, I projected my clients in a void that to me was all about a clearing, especially in this age of the internet.

But by the time the photographs of the finished house were emailed to me, I was not sure anymore. Poring over the images, I kept thinking of the challenges during construction. Zooming in and out, I felt that the limited knowledge I had of the technicality of the engineering behind the architecture resulted in my disregard of some of the elements in the interior. Not “very interior design” in what I would call a lack of attention to detail.

Plainly, I took on more than I could handle.

There were lines unchecked and an overflow of ... stuff. However much I argued that it was because of the contractor in the case of the former and your inability to edit in the case of the latter, I only had myself to blame, and everything was reduced as if but an affectation.

Not quite an architect but not a successful interior designer either, it was like my writing all over again.

Without adding so much furniture dedicated to store our personal effects, I struggle today to control what we buy—asking myself (or you) multiple times before any purchase.

Our day-to-day is a loop of you making a mess and me cleaning up after you: the small things that nonetheless trigger people who've lived together for quite some time.





Language is a house because it is a mode of appropriation whereby thought recovers presence in the face of alienating representations rather than a form of representation. It is a house because it appropriates, making proper by excluding representation and establishing a 'proximity' to presence.

—Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (1993)¹⁷

Like many things in life, in retrospect it's now clearer why I wanted that home office/lounge.

Remember how I insisted on a nice daybed? Nice like many things in life that I like is expensive. Initially I thought that was the reason why you had me buy a cheaper sofa bed that in about two months after we moved in and your family came for a visit was deemed too small, inappropriate, and was replaced with a real bed (in the middle of their three-week stay no less!) much more expensive than the daybed I initially wanted to buy.

I already imagined my body clock making a mess of your routine, so I wanted a room where I could be by myself. I guess this is part of growing old right? We've become light sleepers to the point that a slight shift to one's sleeping position can disturb the other.

That was my *selfless* reason in wanting a daybed in that room. So that I could stay there whenever I felt that distance, however minimal, would help in that specific instance.

¹⁷ Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, 102.





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Adding insult to all this was the idea that I had already bought the black and white area rug for this room that perfectly matched the charcoal daybed. My budget was limited, but as always, I was stubborn, fixated. So with the “lack” of options, I settled on the only gray available for the sofa bed, which like everything else was bought off the rack.

So you see, in my head it was a win-win: I get to rest in a bed (daybed) and wake up anytime in an environment that is conducive to work, and you get to sleep in peace.

Of course this is a lie, a projection that I’m doing this for you—much like your claims of building this house for me. Because I’m not deaf to a joke you made one time to a friend when asked why we didn’t go together on some vacations they went to: “But we’re always together as it is.” I was working on something then, but I saw you pointing at me with your lips as you said this. I pretended to have not heard/seen this.

Could it have helped if I just said then that I wanted a separate bedroom for myself?

I think that was the problem with the flat we renovated that took almost a year to finish. To be fair, we were in the middle of the pandemic in one of the more restrictive lockdowns in the world, hence a modest renovation that should have been finished in less than three months took forever.

This was a seventy-square-meter one-bedroom condo. There was no room for escape except when you had to go to work, a convenient five-block walk, and for me, when I went back to my house.

Further, it was overwhelming aesthetically—to me at least—done in the then-trending #industrial vibe: raw concrete finished ceiling (superficial as it came painted white originally) with the doors to the bedroom and toilet and bath replaced with Crittall-style doors. Dividers were also added in this style and, to complete the look, all light fixtures were replaced with exposed luminaries; we even attached galvanized iron pipes to the ceiling for their wiring. When I was so used to hiding everything, here we had to, not so much expose, but add on. Well, at least *very* interior design in its superficiality, like how some still view the profession.¹⁸ Again owing to

¹⁸ Still, one of the more prevalent notions of the practice that can be traced as far back as two hundred or so odd years ago with the practice’s professionalisation by way of interior design’s differentiation from the “mere” upholsterer in nineteenth-century England (see note #3). This can also be argued to have gone further back—the architect versus upholsterer—that for Thornton began in the late seventeenth century and “ragged right through the nineteenth century.” See Thornton, *Authentic Décor*, 10. See also Kent Kleinman, “Taste, After All,” in *After Taste*, ed. Kent Kleinman, Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, and Lois Weinthal (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 28–41.



your sensibleness, it was all for the marketability of the condo whether for lease or for sale, and you were right.

We never really got around to living in this condo until this time because I had to leave for my PhD studies soon after we bought it together. This is important: The first house we occupied was mine—it was built not long after we became a thing—this condo was ours and now this house is yours.

All becomes very transactional at some point, this thing called love. Practical in a way one apportions the love one gives, not unlike how one divides space, “programming” as it is called by many of my colleagues in the academia.

More calculated, less intuitive in that attempt of the profession to distance itself from that notion of taste¹⁹ or the feminine in charge of the household vis-à-vis the masculine that goes to work.²⁰

Writing this letter, I realize this history is like a mirror to our life together: I work as an interior designer (feminine) and you work in banking (masculine)—nowhere near the creative writing degree you finished and closer to the remedial classes (math!) I drove you to before 7 a.m. back when we started going out. Was that a premonition on my part?

Between the two of us, it’s me who always sees the connection between things and you the opposite, compartmentalizing everything: both to a fault.

Knowing myself so well—impulsive, emotional—when faced with dilemmas, I sometimes ask myself: WWYD? What Would You Do?

Ironic because when we’re first introduced to people, they assume—even the two of us at some point laughed about this—that I’m the banker and you’re the creative type. I’m more reasonable, and you’re more carefree. I’m more serious, you’re more fun. I like the quiet mornings here in this house as if the world is mine alone. You watch, rather, play anime as if Muzak as you sleep. You’re independent, while I’m attached. I can be too demanding, you too go-with-the-flow.

But maybe you really did build this house for me.

More than paying for its realization, are you intentional in your choosing to sleep not in the bed you bought Egyptian cotton for but on

19 Kleinman, “Taste, After All.” Also, Merwood-Salisbury, “Interior Design as Environmental Design,” 110–29.

20 From Rice’s reading of Benjamin’s anchoring of the domestic interior to the new form of labour under industrialisation: “For the bourgeoisie, the interior emerges as a space separated from sites of work and productive labour, and becomes a place of refuge from the city and its new, alienating forms of experience.” Rice, “Rethinking Histories of the Interior,” 276.



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the couch while Naruto plays in the background—because you respect my sensitivity to noise—thus making our bedroom, effectively, my bedroom (but I only stay on my side for those nights you come up)?

Or not as I intentionally try to stay upstairs in the common area in-between the master's and guest bedrooms—an area I've transformed into a corner refuge filled with small things, all mine in contrast to my clean aesthetic (I've been meaning to ask if you've noticed this)?

I initially thought it was an act of deference on my part, it was, after all, your house—but maybe this way I'm keeping my distance so that you—we—don't get tired of each other.

Me with my neurosis and constant nagging fueled by my OCD—and I do really know where the smallest of accouterments are or at least where they should be. You with your karaoke sessions that even with noise canceling earphones I can still hear—although, as I'm sure I've told you, you do have a good voice.

Now you're keen on building a beach house. You've become—like anything you put your mind to—a good surfer, and you just want to escape more and more the realities of the everyday.

And this is crucial: Early in our relationship, we had a fight. Although I don't recall anymore how we arrived at a discussion that involved fate, I distinctly remember you saying that you never believed in it. You believed wholeheartedly (me: naively?) that what you achieved, you worked hard for. No handouts. No favors. No help.

You say work has become too much is why you need more time to surf. But I don't know. Is it really this reality you wanted to escape? Or is it me/us?

In this need for a beach house that you've asked me to design, you've already moved on, while here I am writing about this house and still wondering, almost two decades after, how my fate has turned out.





I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.

—Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977)²¹

You've started to cook. In one of our last preturndown checks, as I was busy scrutinizing corners, junctions, and crevices, you exclaimed: I'm going to start cooking. I felt indifferent at that time, we were always on a diet after all.

As mentioned, blaming your inability to edit for the overflow of stuff was just a pretext for my inattention as an interior designer. But when you started not just cooking but baking as well, I was revealed as a complete sham.

In spite of my proclamation of love for John Pawson, I only recently came across the first lecture he gave at the Architectural Association (GB) on YouTube²² (the internet is an amazing thing—except sometimes when I need to talk to you, that is) that coincided with the launch of his book *Minimum* (1996).

Just like the book—that I only got a hold of years after I graduated from the university—he went through one-by-one references (mass, light, structure, etc.) that informed his pursuit of simplicity.

²¹ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 49.

²² "John Pawson – Works," lecture, May 8, 1996, posted May 8, 2015, by AA School of Architecture, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJWKjk_VrN8&t=20s.





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Yet for each reference, each minute, of the almost hour-long lecture, I was made to feel smaller and smaller as a designer.

As I went down to eat after watching this—intentionally staying away from the kitchen whenever you cook since you got mad at me for interfering when all the while I was just cleaning after you, telling you that that was the first thing chefs learned in culinary school (or so I'd been told)—as I sat at the table in front the four-meter island counter I thought was more than enough for our needs, I realized I made a mistake.

How could I have not anticipated any of this? How could I have not created enough storage space at the very beginning when I was still at the drawing board—especially since it was not a shell I started with but nothing? How could I let my preoccupation with the ghosts (i.e., the architectures) of Le Corbusier and van der Rohe get the best of me, but when it came to the interior I was absent?

In the midst of the most domestic of acts (the preparation of meals), the interior designer in me was nowhere to be found—as if I was a criminal hiding from Adolf Loos who called for the persecution of ornamentation and, by extension, interior design.²³

In hindsight, it was the case as well with my house that I built soon after I graduated. Consistent with this house in its use of the same vocabulary, but with a radial layout emanating from an uncovered atrium, it was marvelous—until the annual monsoon season, that is. Nonetheless, we endured it for close to two decades.

Not quite an architect.... Alright, maybe I'm being melodramatic. I feel you rolling your eyes: This is false humility. But in all seriousness, looking back, I'm not quite sure anymore if I really understood Pawson then. Alternatively, I'm not quite sure anymore if I understand him—and by extension, myself as a designer—today as I ponder what could be done to rectify this issue with stowage.

I tried talking to you about this a couple of months into occupancy, asking you about how you felt about this redo, and you dismissed it like how you dismissed my many appeals. Of course, dismissing is acted differently by different people. For you, this meant ignoring my arguments, my pleas, but sometimes it also just meant you saying yes to my excesses, insatiability.

²³ This, in spite of my affinity that is to Modernism. See Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Mitchell (California: Ariadne Press, 1998).



I fully acknowledge you've moved on. Looking forward as it were to that house by the beach.

I would just like to point out at this juncture that I still hesitate calling this *our* house (what more: *our* beach house?). I've never really resolved—and I'm not really sure if it will ever be resolved—that issue of the selfless offer to build on either of our part. A selfless offering that reveals itself that neither seem to be appreciative of.

What made us so skeptical? Is this but part of growing old in the same way we've become restless sleepers?

Is acceptance a concession? Because one's search for a gift usually starts with a lack: What do they need? What do they not have? Is our inability to concede a conceit? So here we are in a tug of war: I did this for you versus you did this for me. A competitiveness that we're so accustomed to that I'm not sure is healthy in the way it's healthy when something keeps us on our toes.

As I start to revise the drawings for *your* beach house, I take every opportunity (and inflection) to say to you that it is yours.

Of course, I proudly tell our friends that we are soon to build it as if it were ours. I fantasize about the mornings I'll be spending there: quieter still than where we are now. But in this game where there seems to be a need for a winner—like any zero-sum game—how can somebody win if, as Fiona Apple sings in confusion, even utter disbelief by way of a chess match (spatial still) as metaphor:

How could I fight
When we're on the same side
How can I fight
 Beside you²⁴

I don't know anymore. There are times I just want to disappear.

24 "The Way Things Are," digital audio, track 8 on Fiona Apple, *When the Pawn...*, Epic Records, 1999.



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(Epilogue)

I said at the beginning that this was a love letter, or rather the house was the love letter, but I don't know anymore.

This house was supposed to be my best work yet, but when people come over and they commend it for being *maaliwalas*²⁵ for its open-planned design that capitalized on the principle of cross-ventilation, I feel the opposite: drowning, claustrophobic even as I retreat to the second floor: I can still hear them.

The marble stone flooring that was sourced locally and the minimal floor covering certainly do not help with the acoustics—but it's wonderful, the floor running all the way to the property line on all sides, including the garage and backyard. Arranged in a simple grid that begins at the latitudinal center of the house, it runs up the stairs then inside all the rooms then all the toilets and baths.

I'm generous in the use of the term “locally sourced.” At the least we didn't have to import from abroad, but it's still quarried from another island altogether. Certainly, next to the challenges posed by the designer-client relationship, this issue of sustainability comes a close second in this age of the ecological crisis; this is one of the selling points of this property: its high altitude relative to the city where we used to live takes us away from the increasing urban heat.

25 Filipino, roughly translated as “bright, serene (as of the weather, a room, the countenance, etc.).” *WordSense Dictionary*, under “maaliwalas,” accessed Month DD, YYYY, <https://www.wordsense.eu/maaliwalas/>.



The same marble is also used for the kitchen island, albeit in a more generous cut than what's used for the floor (600 × 2,200 mm versus 300 × 600 mm), and all of your friends that have come over loved it. It's one thing to entertain people because you're proud of this house as something you've worked hard for—although you consistently say you're proud of my design—and another you wanting to be in the company of other people.

I get so jealous, unsustainably so for both our sanity. Why can't it be just the two of us? Will we not survive that? In this house, for the rest of life, just the two of us? Materialistic that I am, I'm also possessive, which unfortunately extends to my idea of what love should be.

The dining table is for 12 because it's appropriate for the volume of the double-height longitudinal half of the house and not because I want you to invite more people. Whenever you tell me that you intend to have people over, I know you make sure I'm in a good mood and that you risk it always as I seem to always regret my approval halfway through any gathering.

But you're unaware sometimes. I wouldn't call it deliberate—you're better than that—but you could be better at communicating. Sometimes I just want to be told what to do. I just want you to tell me what you want from me. Instead, you ignore me or just say yes, and then I have to guess what.

Although to be fair, in all our years together, I've never heard so many requests and expressions of approval in the period between the designing and the completion of this house.

This is a love letter, but it sounds like I'm hating on you unfairly. The reality is, I can be unbearable at times. I recognize that myself.

I accuse you of not minding me, but there is that one instance while we were having coffee at the counter one early morning and you caught me off-guard. For the life of me I cannot recall anymore what it was you remembered. I was just flabbergasted by what could only be described as the uncanniness of the instance of remembrance itself. All this time I've been accusing you of not paying attention to me, but you do.

In the same way that it's the little things that can cause much chagrin to one's day-to-day, it's also the small stuff that can surprise one the most.

At my worst, I feel I have overstayed in your house. Am I insisting on my relevance? After the beach house when you no longer need my services as a designer, will that be it? I really don't know anymore. I've so much more to say, but it's so hard to continue. It's so hard, this thing called love. This life.



ESSAY

I used to get so angry at you. Now I think I understand that I'm mad at the world (god?) instead and that like everybody else, you're just trying to live your best life. I used to take that against you in ways far removed from the real reason but now, not so much. This, all the good and bad, is just the nature of things—fate, even if you don't believe in that.

The days in this new house can shift like a switch, like my temper: One moment I'm left wondering how I can prolong the moments where I just sit watching the sun rise as I'm having coffee in my corner on the second floor while you're asleep still (our furbaby always snuggling up against me as she is not her usual snobbish self yet in the mornings!), then just like that everything is in motion, and we go out for work, and by the time we get back, it's already dark.

I'm a homebody—conveniently suits my profession even if my account here of my failure as a designer says otherwise. But this move away from the city has changed us a lot. It certainly has taken me out of my comfort zone as I spend more time on the road, outside the house. The commute one way to the city lasts an hour and a half, but I enjoy this much like I enjoy the six-hour drive one way to your home beach.

It's like the world is telling me more and more about the transitory nature of things—of life itself. Of relentless time and that I won't really possess—or even, understand—anything. I'm surrendering to this life.

So lately I've been asking myself, does one really need a house? A question that hits harder since my livelihood depends on people dreaming of homeownership.

But if proprietorship is not the answer and our notion of home becomes finally detached to the architecture as we know it—virtual/augmented reality, anyone?²⁶—what happens then to this most concrete of expressions where not only obsessiveness, anxiety, and dependency dwell but also, of course and most importantly, love?

ALL IMAGES:

louta et al. (2023) [Photographer: Rog Castillo II, 2023]

26 As Bachelard posits that a person "experiences the house in its reality and its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams." In Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 5. Also, VR/AR may be considered but a play on the medium—as in the real versus the virtual (in-between, augmented)—recalling Marshall McLuhan's thesis: "the medium as the message." From Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man* (California: Gingko Press Inc. 2013).

