Garage: The Id of the House

The perfect hiding place for our collective unconscious

BY TRACY YOUNG

ILLUSTRATION BY CALEF BROWN

THE ONLY GOOD REASON to buy a house, I've often thought, is that a house tends to come with a garage. And a garage—defiantly inelegant, redolent of use, crammed with our ambivalence about whether to commit or split—well, a garage is the best room in the house. A brief history will bear me out.

Between 1910 and 1920, when the automobile began to assume the duties of the horse and carriage, the garage was nothing more than a humble barn—or a descendant of it. A shed. A lean-to. A ratty tarp. The garage was an afterthought, separate from the main idea of the house, until the twentieth century hit the road; then all of that changed.

According to Virginia and Lee McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses*, in a 1,000-square-foot house, the percentage of space devoted to sheltering an automobile grew from zero in 1915 to 15 percent in 1930. By 1940, the percentage had nearly doubled. By 1960 it was 45 percent. To paraphrase Norma Desmond, were the garages getting bigger—or were the houses getting smaller?

During the postwar suburban building boom, the garage moved in like a pushy relative. It became part of the house, attached by a simple overhang or joined flank to flank with the living areas, bringing the automobile into a relationship much more intimate than most carriage horses had ever enjoyed, and which heretofore had been endured primarily by extended family. Just recently, in fact, a friend's mother wanted to turn her garage into an apartment for the grandmother. The local zoning board said that it would not permit the renovation unless another garage were built for the car and *attached to the house!* Is it any surprise, then, that people give pet names to their automobiles? (My grandmother grew up on a ranch. She believed animals should live outside; she parked her Buick on the street.)

As incredible as it sounds today, when the garage is so commonplace that it seems more a metaphysical construct than a marvel of design, by mid-century, American vernacular architecture had done an about-face. The size and shape of new houses, the way they were situated, had changed radically—all because of this evolution in the popular mode of transportation. Just as quickly, the garage ran out of road, architecturally speaking.

"Architects," Witold Rybczynski points out in *Home*, "are more interested in the appearance of a building than in its function," and the developments of Venturi et al., did nothing more than add po-mo fripperies—a shed roof here, some

wood-shingle cladding there, or, my personal favorite, a Queen Anne–inspired spindle-work porch smack above a garage! What had changed most profoundly about our houses was their souls.

This transformation reaches its apotheosis in the '70s. Look at *Suburbia,* a book of photographs by Bill Owens, published in 1973. In three nondescript northern California developments, the houses have been devoured by the garages. They yawn onto the street, disgorging speedboats on trailers, his and her motorcycles, broken mowers, BMX bikes, the back end of a mobile home. Women with big hair, men with big bellies sit on lawn chairs in the driveway. Teenagers skulk by in camo gear. A toddler on a tricycle brandishes his gun. In the living room, a TV is beaming Richard Nixon's mug.

What strange paradise is this where people settle down only to surround themselves, like pharaohs hell-bent for the afterlife, with the symbols of their restlessness—as well as acquisitiveness. (The automobile industry pioneered the practice of payment financing.) Where the freedom promised by open spaces has been traded for the possession of vehicles that could take you there, except that there isn't any there there. Where the pictures shout: I am not some barnacle with a couple of snot-nosed kids and a fat mortgage, I am a *fun* individual. With a serious bent for leisure. "The California garage today," reads one *Suburbia* caption, "requires that you move the cars out and the tools in." The tools could be anything: ratchet sets, routers, mowers, blowers, spar varnish, soldering iron, quick-set cement. What they said was that the American work ethic had split into two distinct schools: realism and expressionism, realism being the daily drudgery of 9:00-to-5:00 compromise, and expressionism the full flowering of one's fantasy avocation. I am the master of my ship, out here endlessly polishing the brightwork, the captain of my soul.

By the late '80s, this latter trend diverged again; one branch was the creative entrepreneurialism that spawned, in their respective garages, Jan and Dean's first Top 10 hit and Steve and Steve's Apple Computer; the other devolved into the commodification of make-work—in a word, Home Depot.

If the "Little Old Lady from Pasadena" could not have existed before the garage entered our collective unconscious, neither could the garage have existed before Freud. The garage is the id of the house. Teeming with perfervid fantasies, whether Sabrina's flirtations with *L'air du Temps*—and carbon monoxide—or Hannibal Lecter's hunger for recognition. (Remember where he stored those spare body parts?) Omphalos, by necessity, of the teenaged universe. The perfect hiding place for a stash. "When I was in high school," says a forty-year-old woman I know, "my friends and I dragged all this stuff in off the street and made an opium den in our garage. I can't tell you how many times I got laid there."

The garage finally is a monument to the place where the spiritual and the material collide. As eloquently as the spires of Chartres affirm the soaring faith of medieval Christianity—and as the workmanlike houses of our founding fathers, as Tracy Kidder writes in *House,* hammer out their transfiguration of the Creation—so does that eyesore, the garage, expose the intrapsychic conflicts of late-twentieth-century middle-class America. No wonder some of us fled to the city, into apartments that would fit into the garages of our childhood.

The city has never been hospitable to the garage. In April 1921, *Popular Science* magazine reported that Fernand D'Humy, an engineer, had a solution for parking cars: a six-story building, divided into two sections so that the floor of one joined midpoint between the floor and the ceiling of the other, affording a passageway with an easily managed upgrade. Seventy-five years later, the city is no longer hospitable to the middle class, either. A real garage is so rare, so financially improbable, it arouses awe as well as envy. The typical city garage—bastard child of D'Humy's brainstorm, or some Self-locking Mini Storage—is no longer part of the house; frequently it's not even part of the neighborhood. (I take a cab to mine.) What strange nightmare is this, then, where people pay more to keep a car than their parents paid in mortgage? It's no surprise that we feel nostalgic for the '70s.

The pioneers, meanwhile, park on the street. Their trunks open to disgorge Zymol wax, jumper cables, bike pump, air compressor, litter boxes, gardening shears; mounted to the roof rack is a kind of portable shelter—heavily advertised in the latest 4 x 4 auto-porn catalogue—but nearly identical to a rig found on cars in the '20s! All of which conspires to remind us that you can take the car out of the garage, but you can't take the garage out of the car.

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Futurists, however, would have us believe that one hundred years from now the car will no longer be feasible as a personal conveyance, which surely does not bode well for the garage. Proponents of the digital revolution promise that our three-pronged needs for sex, work, and mobility will be met by ISDN phone lines and all the right software. Clearly, futurists are as naïve as architects. The moment at which America could choose between supporting public transportation or the automobile came and went nearly a century ago. The vehicle of the hour is the Chevy Suburban, big enough to carry our gear—and our vestigial longings. And the fastest modem money can buy is still a poor second to a Porsche. The car, after all, is part of our constitution.

And the garage is more than a place to park a car. More than the best room in the house. It's not really a place at all, any more than Alice's Rabbit-Hole is. It's a part of our interior landscape.

Tracy Young'*s column on the garage and its contents will appear occasionally. Young is a writer-at-large for* Allure.