Architectural Models at the Boundary of the Architectural Profession: Alex Selenitsch and the Making and Remaking of the Australian Suburban House Type

Yvette Putra

Abstract

One way to treat the broad range of types and examples of the architectural model is to classify its manifestations in terms of their use in relation to the conventions of the architectural profession, in which they sit inside, or outside. This paper classifies those models relevant to the profession as a matter of use. A model is inside the profession if it contributes towards the realisation of an architectural project. Identifying a model within this framework adds to an understanding of the model's purpose, technique, and audience, among other aspects, and stresses well-established protocols that govern models in the profession. This paper analyses, in particular, Alex Selenitsch's models for two projects that are at the profession's boundary, and finds that their exceptional location is primarily informed by their purpose as architectural critique. This analysis has implications, for architecture and its discourse, because these models expand the role of the modelmaker as critic and, consequently, the roles of models in the profession.

Keywords

models; architectural profession; Alex Selenitsch; Australia; suburban house

Introduction

There is historical evidence for the use of models, as remote as in ancient Egypt, to describe the design of a proposed structure to a client or builder. This remains an important function of models, through which they figure persistently and powerfully in the architect's repertoire as design tools, and, therefore, reveal the architect's thinking. Models that are not explicitly used as tools by the architect are often endowed with more mystical functions, in which they act as signs and as surrogates for real buildings.

The range of functions assumed by architectural models suggests that they can be categorised in terms of their use inside or outside the architectural profession. A classification based upon these criteria has already been suggested for architectural drawings, in which orthographic projections, such as plans, are internal to the profession, while perspectives are not.[1] (This, of course, holds for the idea of the architect anchored to the Italian Renaissance,[2] while its presence in antiquity and the Middle Ages has been described in a way that recalls the conceptual narrowness of this measure.[3]) According to this system, a distinguishing factor of drawings is their use of projective lines, but this is utterly non-existent in three-dimensional models. A model is useful to the architectural profession if it contributes towards the realisation of an architectural project. Has an architect made the model and is it used in any part of the architectural processes? Certain factors, such as a model's intended audience, can shift a model's status but are typically insufficient to fully divorce it from its position inside or outside the profession. Identifying a model within this framework adds to an understanding of the model's purpose, technique, and audience, among other aspects, and stresses the well-established protocols that govern the making and use of models in the contemporary architecture profession.

The models by the Australian artist and architect Alex Selenitsch (b. 1946) occupy an unusual place in this regard because they are neither inside nor outside the processes of designing and constructing buildings. This paper analyses Selentish's models for two projects, *five DECADES* (2003-2007) and *The House of a Missing Family* (2005), which are at the profession's boundary, and finds that their exceptional location is primarily informed by their purpose as architectural critique. This purpose is, in turn, attributed to the narratives and symbolism of the models themselves. This analysis has implications for architecture and its discourse because these models expand the role of the architect as modelmaker, and, consequently, the roles of models in the profession, towards critical inquiry.

Classifying Architectural Models Inside and Outside the Architectural Profession

Architectural modes are unequivocally internal to the architectural profession if they are created by the architect as tools for any stage of an architectural project, from conception to realisation. The overwhelming majority of models used by the architect cleave to this designation, in which they are made to generate ideas, resolve problems, or present proposals.[4] Against this architectural background, such models necessarily conform to the profession's conventions of representation, often avoiding a clear imitation of materials while maintaining scalar and formal accuracy. This requirement for restrained modelmaking is prescribed as early as in Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (1485).[5]

However, if the model describes the architect's vision but is not bound by the profession's rules of representation, then its distance from the profession increases. This occurs most obviously when models must communicate a project to a viewership that is untrained in such codes. The difficulty for non-architects to interpret comparatively abstracted models is consistent with the confusion of this group of viewers towards orthographic projections.[6] Models that must compensate for this condition include advertisements to convince the public of the viability of unbuilt projects. A notable example of this, the model of the "House of Tomorrow" (1949) by Robin Boyd, is described later in this paper. But models of this kind are intended to facilitate a project's realisation, even with a speculative project whose realisation is a relatively remote possibility. This intention aligns with the architect's aspirations and, as a result, these models do not wholly depart from the profession. Additionally, the architect is usually consulted in the making and display of such models, so they are still underpinned by the profession.

Models that are not used by the architect in the conception and construction of buildings are confirmedly outside the profession.[7] While such models may commemorate architecture that, at some point, originated from the architect's thinking, they remain external to the profession. This is because the architect's hand is absent or latent in the production of these models, and, more importantly, because these models do not figure in the architect's processes. Despite these models not being conceived for actual construction, they aid in a more metaphorical or spiritual fulfilment. This is evident, for example, in the funerary models of Ancient Egypt (c. 2000–1700 BCE) (fig. 1), which are copies of the architecture to be occupied in the afterlife.

From time to time, the architect may have more direct involvement with models that are outside the profession, as seen in the dolls' house for Queen Mary (1921), which was designed by the English architect Edwin Lutyens. In such cases, these models are urged closer towards the profession but, due to their overwhelmingly non-architectural purposes, are still outside it. Models that are outside the profession almost always clash with its rules of representation, by embracing overly faithful details and working parts. Queen Mary's dolls' house, for instance, has functioning electric lights, lifts, and plumbing.

The models for Alex Selenitsch's *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family*, meanwhile, are of his own conceptualisation and fabrication, and they depict speculative designs that are founded on an architectural precedent. Thus, they are afforded proximity to the profession. While their real-life construction would raise some challenges, they do not contradict any physical laws and are tectonically sound. And, following the profession's conventions of modelmaking, they are abstracted but scaled representations. At the same time, however, they disjoin from the profession because they were made with neither a client nor a built outcome in mind. More remarkably, the models' purpose is to inquire into the culture, politics, and society of the Australian suburban house type, and they embody a critique of the diktats of modernism.

It is the critical purpose of Selenitsch's models that ultimately pushes them to the profession's boundary. This purpose is itself carried by the narrative and symbolic agencies of these models. Marco Frascari described "architectural storytelling" as a compelling technique for architects to develop and share their visions,[8] and, in these models, their critical message is formed through a synthesis of storytelling and symbolism.

Alex Selenitsch's *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family*

Five DECADES and *The House of a Missing Family* have their origins in Alex Selenitsch's distinctly suburban childhood home. This dwelling was complete with the touchstones of the hipped roof, asymmetrical front,[9] and partitioned interior spaces, which were denounced by some Australian modernists. Robin Boyd, for example, regarded the typical suburban house as an "aesthetic calamity,"[10] and he was remembered as having "resolutely fought against the dominant configuration of a hipped roof over an asymmetrical-fronted house and its thoughtlessly divided up interior."[11]

It is worth mentioning that Boyd once committed his modernist vision for the home to an elaborate model, which serves as an intriguing foil to those by Selenitsch. In 1949, Boyd's full-scale model of the "House of Tomorrow" was exhibited in Melbourne (fig. 2). While this model is a highly authentic replica for a public audience, its architectural origins and intentions locate it inside the profession. Reactions to the modernist ideals of domestic architecture are recalled in the exhibition's visitors querying how "such a flat roof" would be built, and feeling perplexed that a single space stood for both the kitchen and dining room.[12]

Boyd and other modernists took the attitude that the suburban house type is, at times, an architectural crisis that demands urgent redesign through modernist principles, but Selenitsch looked at this type in retrospect, and at how it presents opportunities through making and remaking. Thus, the models for Selenitsch's *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family* are a critical inquiry into this type of dwelling.

The narratives of the models for *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family* are most apparent in how these models relate to the past. Through the envisioning concomitant to architectural narratives,[13] these pasts are replayed in settings that have been emphatically and provocatively altered. The merging of the familiar and unfamiliar invites the viewer to speculate on an alternative reality of what *could* be and, in turn, share in the models' anecdotes and polemics. It must be noted that these models do not involve scaled figures and it is their architectural representation that is the sole carrier of their narratives. The symbolism of the models for *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family* is not, however, restricted to the architecture itself. The models' symbolism is joined to their narratives and largely motivated by quotations of both well and less known precedents, and by references to both private and

public events. The symbolism and narratives of these models act in conjunction, to enable the models' critical stance towards a highly recognisable architectural type.

Integral to *five DECADES* is Selenitsch's return to the architecture of his childhood home, through which he engaged with political changes that effected personal changes. This project consists of five different designs, all derived from this house, with each design corresponding to a different decade from the 1950s onwards (this paper discusses the models for the 1950s and 1960s designs). The temporal and experiential changes relevant to each decade are evinced amidst the perpetuity of the typical dwellings that have prevailed in many Australian suburbs, even into the twenty-first century. In this way, the suburban house type remains constant through moments of conflict, disruption, and reckoning. In these designs, and as is frequently the case in reality, the houses of this type become the witness to, and enabler of, important political and personal moments.

Halfway House (figs. 3 and 4) is the first house in *five DECADES* and, in representing the 1950s, exposes its unique, finer grain of the project's broader narrative. Selenitsch is among the post-war migrants to Australia, having arrived with his parents from Germany at three years of age and settling in Geelong, south-west of Melbourne, shortly thereafter. He recalled that the population in this area consisted chiefly of European migrants, with each family living on a suburban lot of comparable size.[14] Not every family built its home on these lots in the same manner, because post-war austerity meant that "many chose to build half a house as the first occupying gesture."[15] The "half a house" was invariably the rear half, which had the strange effect of the house's main façade being completely clad in cement sheeting. The main façade was not always left unornamented, as it usually had "a small central window signalling the future connection to the rooms to be built in the more prosperous future."[16] In further anticipation of the construction of more rooms, the families in these truncated houses would raise sheds and other outbuildings on their lots for, among other reasons, growing vegetables and rearing chickens.

The symbolism of *Halfway House* is allied with its narrative, which responds to displacement and the impact of displacement on domesticity. Selenitsch, having located the half-house of his childhood on its lot, surrounded it with sheds that quote other structures. Each of these sheds is linked, aptly and humorously, to the program and form of its corresponding quotation. These sheds are encountered along a journey that starts with the "Twin Paths of Home" and criss-crosses the backyard, with "The Bicycle Shed," "a 1:5 version of *Maison Carre* at Nimes [sic.], but slightly sunk into the ground,"[17] being met first, at the bottom of these two paths. Directly behind the Bicycle Shed is "The Primitive Hut," which quotes a bathing pavilion by Aldo Rossi and functions as a rudimentary outdoor lavatory. "The Curtain Wall" runs across part of the rear of this lot and is a translation, in chicken-wire, of Thomas Jefferson's walls for the garden at the University of Virginia. The Curtain Wall "separates the utilitarian chicken run and vegetable garden from the semantic intensity of the back yard,"[18] while the triangled chicken run is itself a quotation of the hut, supported on chicken legs, belonging to the Baba Yaga of Russian folklore.

Unlike its surrounding sheds, the house in *Halfway House* is a more accurate representation of Selenitsch's childhood home, as it has the needful hipped roof and is entered through the rear half that is, presently, the only built half. The otherwise plain elements of this half-house are given greater meaning through their symbolic designations. The "Cement Sheet Face" installed in the street-facing façade is penetrated by the "Window of Hope," beyond which lies "The Future Floor" that foreshadows the other half of the house to come: "The concrete stumps wait

to take the superstructure which will allow a separation of activities in space, and a 'room of one's own'."[19]

Halfway House evokes the partially constructed edifice of several decades' past, which acted, in combination with the makeshift outbuildings, to service the needs of a newly arrived family. It arose out of a poverty of economy, but not a poverty of ingenuity or idealism. Through *Halfway House,* Selenitsch showed that each structure must be thought of individually, with a unique role within the workings of a suburban family home, and that each structure was sited and performed in relation to its nearby structures. The quoting of acclaimed and "beautiful" precedents, in such far more modest structures, and the recasting of these structures to be heavy with architectural symbolism, creates a witty disjunction between renown and anonymity, elegance and crudity. These quotations and reformations encourage thinking about how such spaces are, irrespective of their meanness, the important settings of opportunity and negotiation in the adopted country. The half-house simultaneously captures the sudden break with the old life and the pressing need to re-establish the identity, while the portion of the house yet unbuilt presages the unknown future.

The design for the 1960s in *five DECADES* is *Das Englische Haus* (figs. 5 and 6),[20] which contributes to the serialisation of the narrative that has begun in *Halfway House*. However, the narrative particular to *Das Englische Haus* is more polemical than that of the preceding design. *Das Englische Haus* is based on the confounding rules of spelling in the English language and is, discounting its light-hearted appearance, a response to the cruelty and absurdity of the dictation test of the White Australia Policy. This policy, formally established in 1901 and fully dismantled by 1973, limited the influx of non-British migrants to Australia.[21] It included a test in which the dictation could be carried out in any language chosen by the administering officer.[22] Selenitsch used the typical suburban house and its assembly of outbuildings to comment on English specifically. Regarding the use of different languages in the dictation test, he wrote: "It was also proof of Australian blindness to the obvious: the trickiest misfit of writing and speaking was around them in daily use."[23]The symbolism that follows the narrative of *Das Englische Haus* is, fittingly, more sardonic than that of *Halfway House*. In *Das Englische Haus*, the now completed house is deliberately split into two halves, with each half repositioned on the lot and reprogrammed to align with tokens of both the English language and the dictation test. The black half, at the front of the lot, and known as the "House of Standards," contains the "Oratory" and "Room of the Dictionary," while the white half, set on an angle in the middle of the lot, contains the "Dictation Room" and "Keeper's Office." In the Dictation Room: "English phrases and proverbs are broadcast as ambient sound from the console … in the middle of the room; a writing bench along the western wall is there for writing out what is heard."[24] In the backyard, the scattering of sheds of the preceding decade is replaced with new outbuildings, known as pavilions, which surround the "Pocket Oxford Park."

The hipped roof of the original house is prominent across each instalment of *five DECADES*, in which it is wedded to the experiences of each decade to suggest intriguing structural and aesthetic possibilities. Selenitsch explained that the process of resolving the hipped roofs in these models had begun with a cardboard template, and when the template was in its flattened form, its roof planes yielded "a beautiful outline."[25]

Of the new way of viewing a familiar object, he observed: "[It reminded] me of some of Frank Stella's shaped canvases of the 1960s. I was also reminded of Allan Wexler's works which are 2D, flattened, images of 3D objects such as chairs and huts."[26] Selenitsch did not ignore that the hipped roof is, despite, or perhaps because of, its presence in suburban architecture, "an irritation for modernist high art architects."[27] After having been rethought, the hipped roof

becomes a potential generator of architecture: “I grew up under flat ceilings covered by such a roof … What if I were to look again at what was above me then, and what is above the majority of people who live in this city?”[28]

Selenitsch’s original house is more dramatically altered in *The House of a Missing Family* (figs. 7 and 8). This project is based on Selenitsch’s memory of his parents: “My father never spoke of his past or his family. My mother did, but through anecdotes and details.”[29] The narrative of the model for this project is more literal than those for *five DECADES*, because it is a direct outcome of the occupants’ idiosyncrasies in their own acts of recounting.

To symbolise, in *The House of a Missing Family*, the dissimilar narrative styles of Selenitsch’s parents, the house is once again sliced in two, creating a half-house for the father, and another for the mother. But this time the cut is longitudinal and unlike that in *Halfway House*. Each half-house in *The House of a Missing Family* appears to be planned from the inside out, with the interior planning determining the overall forms. The father’s half-house is comprised of a row of identically dimensioned alcoves. It is predictable, severe, and uncomplicated. In having mostly flat and orthogonal planes, it resembles, curiously, some modernist architecture. The mother’s half-house, meanwhile, is a livelier composition of variously shaped alcoves. While the alcoves of the mother’s half-house are adjacent to one another, as are those of the father’s half-house, the functions of the alcoves of the mother’s half-house are stitched together illogically. This disallows any uninterrupted linear movement through, or straightforward use of, the space as a whole. Regardless of the architectural incompatibility of the two half- houses, a sense of connection and grounding remains, through their shared location on the suburban lot and the common wall along most of the lot’s length.

In *The House of a Missing Family*, Selenitsch used complex design techniques to represent his parents’ divergent approaches to narrative and relationships with the past. Through this project, the interior planning of typical suburban houses, decried as “thoughtlessly divided up”[30] in some modernist circles, is reconsidered. This is accomplished not through open planning, but through other techniques that, although on the outer limits of buildable architecture, more meaningfully reflect the occupants’ lifestyles. A minor but interesting feature of this project is that irrespective of the acts of shattering, joining, and moulding, the house retains its asymmetrical front.

In *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family*, the suburban house is an embodiment of memory and a legitimate source of architectural language. In spite of its lack of “good” taste, the type is the container for memories in both their creation and recollection. It is also the place of personal and political transformations, refuge and optimism, and often the first permanent home of many Australians, even to the present day. For Selenitsch, what is valuable is not the literal application of its architectural language. Rather, value is to be found in the disentanglement of this type from shame and vulgarity, to allow it to speak in explorations of politics and self. Whereas some modernists reacted aggressively to the typical suburban house and attempted to erase it, Selenitsch identified its constancy in Australia in both the physical landscape and popular thought, to elevate it to a source of architectural language. An example of the possibilities offered by such suburban architecture, over some modernist approaches, is how the unique morphologies of the sheds and other ad hoc structures would be unattainable in modernist designs.

Conclusion

The classification of architectural models according to their positions inside or outside the architectural profession is a means of generating or augmenting the models' study, and such classification has a long history in the field of architectural drawings. Nevertheless, this is a graduated system that allows models to approach one or the other domain. Models that are inside the profession are defined as those that the architect uses for a project, either in acts of problem-solving or presentation. Consequently, these models adhere to the profession's demands for abstracted and scaled forms. But within this designation are models that come closer to being outside the profession, while remaining inside it, such as those that eschew some representational conventions in favour of being more readily understood by external viewers.

Models that are outside the profession are those not used by the architect towards the realisation of a project, but they may be linked to a less literal realisation. Furthermore, the hand of the architect may be present either indirectly or directly in such models. In the latter instance, these models lean closer to the profession, but their non-architectural purposes determine their place outside it.

In this framework, Alex Selenitsch's models for *five DECADES* and *The House of a Missing Family* are at the profession's boundary, owing mainly to their purpose as explorations into the architectural, cultural, political, and social contexts of the Australian suburban house type. The models' message is based on a first-hand experience of the typical suburban dwelling and is a riposte to the modernist values of the preceding years. Through these models, this type becomes a way of exploring architectural ideas, and it is presented as a place of memory and a legitimate language for architecture. In being apart from the expected purposes of models in the profession, these models propose intriguing and novel routes, for both the architect as modelmaker and models in architecture, towards probing and criticism, dialogue and rebuttal.

In the profession, any appraisal from "within the fold" is, accordingly, underwritten by a shared pedigree, so that the critic becomes a trustworthy, if dissenting, voice. The critique is then received, by its audience of peers, more polemically than if it had external origins. Moreover, it is given greater agency when demonstrated through a medium that is native to the profession. This is because the skill, inherent in such a demonstration, helps to legitimise the critic, and a common language always resonates more strongly with its audience. Models are, therefore, keen tools for architects to evaluate their profession reflexively and judgementally, itself an act of long precedence and necessary for the crystallisation of the profession.

Notes

1. For an example of this argument, which dates from the early sixteenth century, see the discussion of the *Letter to Leo X* in Caroline van Eck, "Verbal and Visual Abstraction: The Role of Pictorial Techniques of Representation in Renaissance Architectural Theory," in *The Built Surface: Architectural and the Pictorial Arts from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. Christy Anderson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 164. For a more modern example, see Gavin Stamp, *The Great Perspectivists* (London: Trefoil Books in association with the RIBA Drawings Collection, 1982), 7.
2. James S. Ackerman, "Architectural Practice in the Italian Renaissance," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 13, no. 3 (October 1954), 3.
3. For discussions of the architecture profession in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and in the Middle Ages, see Spiro Kostof, ed., *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
4. For examples and discussions of models used by architects in architectural processes, see Matthew Mindrup, *The Architectural Model: Histories of the Miniature and the Prototype, the Exemplar and*

the Muse (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); see also Albert Smith, *Architectural Model as Machine: A New View of Models from Antiquity to the Present Day* (Boston: Elsevier, 2004); and Mark Morris, *Models: Architecture and the Miniature* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2006).

5. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 34. For discussions of this approach, including vis-à-vis other approaches, see Chapter 5, "Modeling Material as Medium," in Mindrup, *The Architectural Model*, 157–202; see also Thea Brejzek and Lawrence Wallen, *The Model as Performance: Staging Space in Theatre and Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2018), 43–44.
6. Stamp, *The Great Perspectivists*, 7.
7. For examples and discussions of models outside the architectural profession, especially as donor, souvenir, and votive models, see Chapter 1, "Models of Existing Structures," in Mindrup, *The Architectural Model*, 9–44.
8. Marco Frascari, "An Architectural Good-Life Can be Built, Explained and Taught Only Through Storytelling," in *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents*, ed. Adam Sharr (London: Routledge, 2012), 227.
9. The asymmetrical front was defined by Robin Boyd as being formed when a "front room, usually the left-hand one facing the street, was thrust forward." Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1952), 8–10.
10. Boyd, *Australia's Home*, np.
11. Neil Clerehan, "The Age RVIA Small Homes Service," *Transition* 38 (1992): 59–60.
12. Robin Boyd "Small Homes Section: Questions and Answers—On the 'House of Tomorrow'," *Age*, October 26, 1949, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article189472498.
13. Frascari, "An Architectural Good-Life Can be Built, Explained and Taught Only Through Storytelling," 227.
14. Alex Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites: Composing the Multiple Artwork" (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2007), np.
15. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
16. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
17. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
18. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
19. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
20. A reference, no doubt, to the 1904 publication of the same name by the German architect Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927).
21. H. I. London, *Non-white Immigration and the "White Australia" Policy* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1970), 12; Ken Rivett, "The Immigration Reform Movement," in *The Abolition of the White Australia Policy: The Immigration Reform Movement Revisited*, ed. Nancy Viviani, research paper (Brisbane: Griffith University Centre for the Study of Australian–Asian Relations, 1992), 16.
22. Peter Cochrane, *Best We Forget: The War for White Australia, 1914–18* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2018), 50.
23. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
24. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
25. Selenitsch, "Hip Roof," unpublished ms, 2007, np.
26. Selenitsch, "Hip Roof," np.
27. Selenitsch, "Hip Roof," np.
28. Selenitsch, "Hip Roof," np.
29. Selenitsch, "Sets, Series and Suites," np.
30. Clerehan, "The Age RVIA Small Homes Service," 59.