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Peeking Through the Keyhole. The Evolution of North American Houses. By Avi Friedman and David Krawitz. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-773-524-398, cloth.)

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Callum respond breathless to the first few stories, unprepared as he was for their lurid detail, I too was caught up in the fairy tale's magic. And for a few precious minutes I was eight again reading Grimm's tales for the very first time.

Diane Tye and Callum Latta
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Peeking Through the Keyhole. The Evolution of North American Houses. By Avi Friedman and David Krawitz. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-773-524-398, cloth.)

Montreal architect Avi Friedman is best known for the Grow Home, an inexpensive, efficient house with a large capacity for change — if it can grow with the addition of children, so can it shrink when they leave. Both a polemic against megacities, megasuburbs and megahouses and an intelligent system for low cost housing, the Grow Home might be seen as part of the simple life movement where we really ought to be able to afford accommodating spaces in which we can live happily and freely. *Peeking Through the Keyhole* is an exegesis, a post-Grow Home justification of why we should be thinking smaller, kinder house thoughts.

The premise is that since the Second World War spatial practices have changed enormously. Families are smaller, fragmented; everyone works, stability in the home is no longer a shirtwaisted mum in the kitchen. The kitchen in fact is more a centre of operations where the family meets in fleeting and chance encounters. While this change has been taking place, everything else has become very large: three garages rather than one, double height living rooms, a bedroom and a king-sized mattress for each individual. Life now is wide, fast and selfish.

Friedman and Krawitz discuss this in seven chapters, dense with information and ideas, starting with the deconstruction of the kitchen, once an adjunct to the house, now the heart, the hearth, the command centre. This locational centrality is undermined however by the plugged-in nature of the house where each occupant has their own phone, TV and computer. The house has become the workplace, the school, the club — or rather the computer desk has. Electronic interface also undermines the centrality of the business district in the city, already fragmented by the demands of automobile access. The spatial

discontinuity between workers and work itself has never been greater. The question here is how this dislocation, increasingly common in North American life, is mirrored in changing house form.

The profound questions raised by this discussion of the evolution of the house over the last fifty years can be paraphrased as — does the house fit its occupants? We tend to think about fitting ourselves into the houses available to us. *We* change, *we* adapt — it's easier and cheaper, but results in a misalignment that can be profoundly unsettling. The urge to move on to an ever-newer house is both wasteful of energy and casts housing into a state of temporal gratification. No roots can grow here.

The sheer diversity and shifting nature of the family unit today force changes on any dwelling. Rooms are reassigned roles as the family needs. As well, ideological shifts in child rearing routinely blow apart traditional hierarchies built into house form. Our expectations of what the house has to give us are completely conditional: if a high degree of personal autonomy is desired, the house can become a straitjacket, unless it is huge, but most people can't afford huge. Friedman and Krawitz state, "the priority in finding a home should not be the pursuit of an unsuitable or unattainable goal. Obvious as it may sound, the focus should be on finding the right kind of home and on using it well" (115).

The book ends with discussion about the city, its extravagant distances, its megamalls, its freeways, its essential incoherence — again, much energy wasted. The conclusion is an admonition to think smaller, think local, try to find a sense of community and gain some serenity, some sort of calm. Or, if this is too impossible, at least be aware that the state of hyperactivity knows as exhaustion is neither healthy or normal.

Friedman and Krawitz collect a lot of information about changing social relationships, building practices and living patterns from a great many sources. There is some interesting information here, and one must read word by word to find it, rather in the way that one reads a *New Yorker* essay. It flows on and on, uninterrupted by illustrations or diagrams, forcing one to slow down, to think through the points being made. This means that quantitative information is written out in long sentences that are just a bit numbing. The list of materials of the 1960s house is 800 words long: "Hardwood floors were still installed, in many cases covered with broadloom; in fact, many builders began to lay the

broadloom directly on a plywood subfloor. Linoleum and asphalt products were used infrequently, with plastics finding their way into many finishes and materials…"(78). However, one must not be impatient and there is a very interesting and wide ranging bibliography.

Given that this book is being reviewed in a journal that investigates folklore and material culture in all its specificity, one is struck by the insistence on the generalised "North American" condition throughout this book. Stereotypes are written out as veracities: in the 1950s, after dinner, we likely listened to the radio: "Father would make the selection, and no one dared to object… Mother sat silently and listened, relishing these moments of relaxation…." (43) Really? Our baby boom past appears to be a series of Rockwellian episodes imbued with an almost unbearable propriety. People are strangely absent except as cosy participants in a middle class household located somewhere in middle America. In the 1960s house mentioned above, how much of the shift from hardwood floors to plywood and wall-to-wall, from the plasterer's trade to drywall, was supported by the desire to be freed from propriety, to have *less* house, to be free to leave it because it wasn't that great to start with? Was the social and economic restlessness of the last fifty years encouraged by a general loss of focus in housing provision, or did it produce that loss of focus? We find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century without roots, without community.

"A collection of homes makes up a neighbourhood, and it is hoped that the two together — homes and neighbourhood — create a sense of community" (160). And community is what is missing in suburbia. It is more easily achieved in traditional early twentieth century neighbourhoods of lanes, picket fences and front porches. In the racialised present of American inner city neighbourhoods where that urban, intimate spatiality is often occupied by violence and unrest the New Urbanism movement refabricates this scale in a safer suburbia. Friedman and Krawitz state that the slightly older suburbia of wide lots and car-dominated spaces need a realignment of priorities so that these vast areas of housing surrounding our cities do not continue to be hampered by restrictive zoning which prevents them from adapting to changed times.

Friedman and Krawitz do not distinguish between Canada and the United States, between east and west, north and south. Social environments are abstracted, with little acknowledgment of class, or

indeed of any kind of stratification. Is life essentially the same in its major outlines for all of us? Housing at the crisis end of the spectrum — low income, homeless and temporary shelter — is not in this book, neither is the upper end of architecture — the singular, elegant exercises found in the magazines. This is a book about the middle region of housing that is built without a lot of critical attention, and in which most of us live.

Stephanie White
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Irene Avaalaaqiaq/Myth and Reality. By Judith Nasby. (Montréal, MacGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv + 129, map, illustrations, photographs, appendices, ISBN 0-7735-2440-1.)

Irene Avaalaaqiaq was born about 1936-1941, an Inuk of Harvatormiuq group of Barren Ground peoples; she came to Baker Lake with her adoptive family in the 1950's to escape famine, married here in 1956 and became a graphic and textile artist now of international renown. Nasby engages Avaalaaqiaq through an essay compiling excerpts from Avaalaaqiaq's memoirs with skilled commentary composed from ethnographic (especially from Rasmussen's 1931 report on the Fifth Thule Expedition), administrative, historical and art specialist's resources to broaden context for the reader. Nasby follows Avaalaaqiaq's plain style, but the choice of illustrations supplements Avaalaaqiaq's graphics with a balance of ethnographic photos, family and community images, and some stark landscapes. These supply not only information but mood.

Avaalaaqiaq's memoirs, developed at Nasby's request, are disarmingly fluent, matter-of-fact accounts, usually of personal and community experience, in which she describes food, hunger, hunting, family matters, and relates her experience to her art. Among these accounts she states in plain language the myths upon which her graphics and wall-hangings are based. Nasby declares

> Myth and reality intersect as [Avaalaaqiaq] translates multilayered stories, transformation scenes, and personal memories into bold graphic imagery... manipulating bold shapes in bright contrasting colours against a solid background to represent her world in a symbolic manner (3-4).