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Smart Homes and Living Machines: Views From Performative Architecture (Paper)

From Le Corbusier's "machines for living in" to the "smart homes" of the present, discourses of architecture and technology have sought to extend the everyday assemblage of domestic performance (be it in registers of normativity or enhanced efficacy) in a human-scale middle ground between individual initiative and imposing ideology. With snapshot examples of modernist architecture and ubiquitous computing, the proposed paper's focus is thus decidedly not on performance as behavior – "typically human" or non-human – but rather, on a more contextual sense of everyday performativity as the material intertwining of both. One key strand here is how the dramaturgical organization of rooms and kitchens specifically is variously seen to coincide with that of life processes or indeed ways of living – its paradoxical performativity torn between values of novelty and normativity, doing and dissimulation, the heroic and the homeostatic; between brave performative futures and their predictably theatricalized pasts; between performances of uncluttered efficiency and their tacit grounding in cables or concrete. If the modernist ideal of functional performativity can arguably be derived from Louis Sullivan's 1896 dictum of "form following function," then with the change of prototypical technology – now downplaying rational intelligence for the style and art implicit in "smart" (the new key quality sought in device, decorum, and dwelling) – mechanistic paradigms of interaction also begin to morph into those of interweaving: re-coupling action with perception beyond one-on-one dramaturgies of task and user; implicating "man and machine" in the tacit meshworks in which they only emerge and are sustained; their social texture also spread from its youthful center to its ageing fringes. If a standard Le Corbusier house unfolds like an assembly line of theatrical vistas, then the "smart" ideal could well be imagined as an ongoing assembly of lines, evading our perception but not (we hope) our action, interwoven in some compact control often mobile and hand-held such that what once was solid now melts into the Cloud. As for these specifically early-twentieth and early-twenty-first century visions, however, the question might be posed if both – though a hundred years apart – ground their claims to efficient performance in a promise of instrumentality and if, in both, the spectra of the inhuman arises as soon as this human criterion is not quite met?

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