Sentimental Associations of a Sunroom
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I plop down on the couch in the sunroom of the house I’m renting on Montclair, about a block from Lehigh University’s campus. A pretty standard two-story foursquare house with a hip roof, it sits about halfway up South Mountain on a corner lot. Two white shutters flank each window, and low, single-pitch, asphalt-shingle overhangs extend about nine feet out from the second floor level in the back and front of the house. In the back, this overhang shelters an open-air porch adjacent to an un-insulated storage room, and in the front, it covers an entry porch and sunroom. The interior of the house is beaten up and outdated. The wood floors in the bedrooms are for some reason painted green, the baseboards are scratched, the banister is falling apart, and the kitchen’s linoleum tile and cheap wood-veneered cabinets have long passed their intended lifespan. But the sunroom is a gem. It juts out toward the street, extending past the facades of all the other houses lining the road. The room is symmetrical and rectangular, about nine by twelve feet, with a glass entry door centered on the wall it shares with the main house and ten double-hung windows lining the rest of the room, three on each short side and four on the long. The row of wrap-around windows is framed in wood, painted white, and raised about two and a half feet above floor level. Between each window is a nine-inch wide white mullion, standing like a classical pilaster from the sill to an entablature-like cornice. A radiator extends all the way across the far wall from corner to corner underneath the windows, and couches sit on either side under the windows of the short walls. I choose the one that provides a view of all of Bethlehem through the windows, open my laptop, put on my headphones, the mid-afternoon sun shining through the glass to my left, and begin writing.
I sit in this room practically every day, whether it’s to watch a movie, read a book, do homework, or eat breakfast in the morning. My housemates and I have assigned no particular function or program to the sunroom—it doesn’t have a table, a TV, a shelf, or any semblance of effort put into its makeup. One couch sports a red and black hound’s tooth pattern, the other was probably white at one point, and a bile green ottoman with what may be an old diner booth bench sits between them, all failing at hiding the stains of a grossly unkempt tan shag-carpet. The three other guys I live with never use it; they stick to their rooms and the living room mostly, and rarely venture to this part of the house. It is a grungy room after all. So why do I love it so much? It’s unlikely an architect designed this space, and it hasn’t been renovated in years. I couldn’t tell you definitively the architectural style of the house or what year it was built, and I couldn’t give you any theories or intentions that influenced its inception. I like this room because of the sentiment I’ve attached to it. Architectural space, in a similar manner as music, has the ability to arouse sentiments, to evoke emotions and other reactions at particular moments in time, and these sentiments can have strong influences on architectural taste. Just like I’ll listen again and again to a favorite album that reminds me of riding trains from town to town in the Veneto, I adore this space because its characteristics remind me of certain places and memories from my past.

As an architecture student, I feel obligated to favor certain architects, styles, and movements over others. I need to develop my own tastes, so that when architects ask me what in the profession excites me, I have an answer. In truth, I do really enjoy architecture history, but it
can be an overtly objective way to look at the structures and places that shape our environment. We analyze buildings based on certain criteria, such as composition, material, intention, context, and the theories of the architects who designed them. I then decide from the most significant styles and buildings of a certain time which ones I like and which ones I don’t, and I’ll save the images of the good ones to my hard drive and to my memory, a catalog to reference later. We judge so much work based on photos, renderings, and drawings. In my architecture program in Copenhagen last spring, the overarching position of the students was to adamantly hate all Deconstructivism—Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, anything that focused more on sculptural form than spatial qualities. People complained of Zaha Hadid’s concrete buildings cracking, of Libeskind’s leaking when it rains, of Gehry’s being unnecessarily colorful and disjointed. Very few of these students had actually visited a single building by one of these architects.

I’ve always struggled to develop my own aesthetic taste for architecture from only pictures. Nearly every project published in online architectural blogs like ArchDaily or Architizer photographs really well, to the point at which it becomes extremely difficult to judge which projects really stand out, and which ones blend in with the pack. The only sure way to tell if I like a space is to experience it for myself. Suddenly then, a building I’ve only seen in photos is in three dimensions. I can implement four new senses and a wealth of context into my reaction—not only the physical context, but also the emotional context of where I am in my life and my experiences, tastes, and biases up to that point. My perception of the space is heightened tenfold, and now I can develop my reaction.

These experiences have changed the way I look at certain buildings and architects. After only studying Tadao Ando, I felt fairly indifferent to his minimalist aesthetic. I could appreciate
certain of his works like the Church of Light, but I thought of concrete as too cold a material to really be soothing spiritually. After I visited his Pulitzer Center in St. Louis on the other hand, after feeling the finish on the concrete, observing the care that went into each concrete slab (the design even of where the form ties were situated) and the placement each pane of glass, and witnessing how he transformed a one-acre lot in downtown St. Louis into a temple-like oasis, I felt differently.

Perhaps the most influential experience on my aesthetic taste was my semester abroad in Copenhagen. The combination of traveling around Scandinavia, visiting important places, cities, and works of architecture, and the thrill of being abroad, everything new and exciting, imbued in me very lasting sentiments toward Scandinavian design and the landscape in which it is set. I can’t say I liked everything I saw. Truthfully, I was rather disappointed in most of Arne Jacobsen’s architecture. His Aarhus town hall reminded me of tacky 1950s-built middle school (again, sentiment influences my reaction). But on a visit to Finland, I was finally able to see Villa Mairea by Alvar Aalto, which had long been a favorite of mine from the photos I had seen and the texts on it I’d read. I loved way the white plaster, boxy forms coalesced so well with the natural curves and wood details, and how the wooden posts in the entry gallery and living room echoed the verticality of the birch forest outside. But having spent a couple hours on the grounds, I appreciate it in a different, more fulfilled way. I can recall actually walking around the house, and the how chilly it was. I associate it with the excitement of the bus ride prior to arriving, talking with my friends, and eating lunch in the woods with the Villa in view. I remember the way the warm Nordic light (right)
diffused through the wooden blinds into the living area, bouncing off of the walls and ceiling.

The image of the light coming through the blinds at Villa Mairea would repeat in my mind for the months to come when I would hang out with my host sister in my host family’s living room in Copenhagen. Their living room wasn’t all that similar to Aalto’s design at Villa Mairea. Where Aalto’s was warmer and full of wood paneling and detailing, and sported low, almost Japanese-style furniture, theirs had wood floors, white walls, contemporary furniture of different styles and materials, and an old cast-iron wood-burning stove. But a set of glass French doors opened to the porch, and it seemed almost the same light that came through those blinds as the light entering the Villa in Finland.

Which brings me to one of the main reasons I adore the sunroom in my house on Montclair. In the late afternoon with the shades half drawn, the light enters the room in a way that reminds me of Copenhagen, a very low hanging, honey-colored light that reflects off the white mullions and light walls the same way it reflected off the white walls of my host family’s living room. In this association, there exists a certain comfort, a sense of security. These days, I really enjoy most spaces that handle the low hanging light with a similar ease and softness, because they call to mind this sentiment. That includes a large amount of design in Scandinavia, where the sun sits low in the sky even at noon in the summer, and spaces are constructed in a way to regulate and amplify that soft glow. I could even continue to associate the sunroom with the room I grew up in at my parents’ house in St. Louis, a small, closet-less bedroom almost the exact same size, with two huge windows taking up nearly two whole walls, and a streetlight with an eerily similar glow shining through from across the street. We’re constantly comparing new spaces to those of our past, and with those comparisons come the stronger sentiments and emotions we experienced in them.
Because of these associations, I’ve come to enjoy this sunroom, and moving forward, I’ve begun to recognize new things about this room that I haven’t seen before, like its position high on the hill with a view of the Lehigh Valley that stretches for miles from the foot of South Mountain. And though it is the most visually extroverted room in the house, because of its size and the length of the radiator it is also always the warmest room in the house, ideal for the dozens of freezing nights we have experienced this semester so far.

Sentiment has its place in architectural studies as well. Entire movements in America, particularly the revival styles, were brought about by common sentiment and emotional connections among the people. The Gothic Revival stems from the sentiment that Gothic architecture, pre-Renaissance, came from a simpler time, a time divorced from the burden of technology. And the Greek Revival gained its popularity through American empathy for the Greek cause, rooted in the still persistent memory of America’s own revolution several decades earlier. Architecture builds off connections, associations with earlier times, and thus can progress. Architectural studies can be very academic and objective. We see a couple images of house, jot down notes on its characteristics and context, and move on. But in empathizing with the sentiments of the time, I can reconcile the academic approach with the biases and preferences I’ve developed through my own experiences.

Taste is a very complicated phenomenon. It’s dependent on many internal and external factors, but it can’t be forgotten that some of the most powerful influences are the sentiment and emotion we designate to and evoke from architectural spaces. One of the questions friends always ask after finding out I’m an architecture student is if, when I’m a full-fledged architect, I’ll design them their first house. I ask what they would want it to be like. The response is almost always something like a bay window with a reading nook, a view of the backyard from the
kitchen sink, or a big open, two-story foyer. These answers aren’t a result of academic research; they come from the sentiment that person has attached to the idea of home.