

SITE EFFECTS

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN AN ARCHITECTURAL PHENOMENON? MARK TALKED TO INHABITANTS OF BAVINGER HOUSE IN OKLAHOMA, HABITAT 67 IN MONTREAL AND THE KUBUSWONINGEN IN ROTTERDAM.

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‘THE IDEA THAT A BUILDING TAKES ON MEANING BECAUSE YOU CAN TALK ABOUT IT IN A LECTURE IS NONSENSE’

— Oren Safdie —

BOB BAVINGER IN BAVINGER HOUSE
(1955) IN NORMAN, OKLAHOMA.
PHOTO JOSEPH MILLS

What is it like to live in an architectural phenomenon? Not one where the ink is barely dry on the trade journal articles, but one which should have proved its right to exist by its very age? Post-war buildings – from the period between the 1950s and 1980s, say – saw the light of day in a society which in many ways no longer seems like the present day. Other ideals, other expectations. Are the buildings still being used as they were intended? What traces have the inhabitants left behind in the houses? And, even more interesting, what sort of influence have the houses had on their inhabitants?

When this article was still in its embryonic stages, I called playwright and screenwriter Oren Safdie, son of architect Moshe Safdie, to ask what it was like growing up in Habitat 67, one of the most photogenic architectural and social experiments of the 20th century. Not long into the conversation, however, and we were thoroughly sidetracked. Oren, speaking from Los Angeles, voiced his skepticism regarding ‘the whole idea that a building takes on more meaning because you can talk about it in a lecture and abstract notions for an hour’. A residence must foremost address the social needs of its inhabitants, we considered. Such was the ambition of Habitat 67 from its inception. Which is to say, Oren and I found a segue back to our original topic. Our digression, meanwhile, had unveiled an added significance to broaching the topic in the first place.

Take a super-structure like Habitat 67, or its cousins in innovation and celebrity like the Kubuswoningen in Rotterdam and the lesser-known Bavinger House in Oklahoma. What happens when such a building becomes an integral part of someone’s life story, not just the casing for it? What can we say of those inhabitants whose lives become part of the architectural lectures, and whose identities crosswire with ‘abstract notions’? When possible, we should probably say little. Much better, after all, to let the inhabitants do the talking.

‘He was a people’s architect,’ said Ed de Graaf, of Piet Blom. ‘One of the few,’ he added with a laugh when we connected by phone in early February of this year. De Graaf met Blom when the Kubuswoningen were just a construction site. A young record manager at the time, de Graaf approached the then-unfinished Cube Houses out of curiosity, a camera in hand. This year marks the 25th anniversary of both the completion of the Kubuswoningen and the commencement of De Graaf’s new life there.

Like Habitat 67, the Kubuswoningen were designed as something of an aesthetic test tube for human interaction. They are a symbolic cluster of trees, whose canopy (composed of geometric diamonds on reinforced concrete trunks) was intended for private living, and whose ‘roots,’ at promenade level, for public – with shops, a playground, a school. Of the ‘treehouse’ community today, de Graaf jokes: ‘It’s not like the ‘70s with everybody bothering each other. It’s more private, that’s the spirit of the time. But, people really do meet. We

know each other.’ A dynamic that may change somewhat this summer, once one of the bigger cubes opens its doors as a hostel.

At present, the majority of the Kubuswoningen residents are in their 20s and 30s; singles or couples, only two families with children. ‘The oldest resident so far has been 70,’ said De Graaf. ‘He got in at the age of 60 and had to move because of a stroke.’ Steep staircases alone don’t explain the relatively homogenous makeup of Cube House residents (de Graaf belongs to a group of only four in their 50s, who’ve been there from the beginning). It may well be that the financial and creative demands of the Kubuswoningen intimidate all but the young and relatively unattached. ‘Everything you do here costs three times as much, in money and time,’ said De Graaf. ‘You really have to be motivated to do this.’

For De Graaf, the move to the Kubuswoningen cost him something else – his privacy. As soon as he relocated from his old two-room apartment to his Cube ‘people were ringing doorbells, people wanted to see it. I thought it would stop one day, but it never did.’ De Graaf embraced the change and turned his home into a ‘Show Cube’ (Kijk Kubus), which is where I caught him when I called. ‘We have about 30,000 people a year, and these days about 70% come from abroad,’ he said. ‘You could call it a world-known, or even a world-famous building. This is still quite amazing to me.’

But it’s a fact he’s proud of. He could talk about the Kubuswoningen all day. De Graaf said. In fact, he does so for a living. In Blom’s architectural experiment, therefore, De Graaf’s life is a variable. De Graaf’s self and his space are codependent.

In an attempt to explain this dialogue between person and place, De Graaf, currently Chairman of the Association of Owners of Kubuswoningen, cited the ‘form follows function’ principle. ‘Here it’s the other way around,’ he said. ‘You have to adjust yourself and your furniture to the form of the house, which forces you to come up with ideas you never would have thought of before.’ De Graaf later added: ‘This is a different way of living, of course. It really changed my attitude towards “do it yourself”.’

Now working on a book about the Kubuswoningen, and also in the process of digitalizing his Cube House photos and videos, De Graaf is both literally and figuratively consumed by his home of a quarter century. ‘My life has changed, indeed,’ he said, as if still surprised by the fact.

Several time zones west of Rotterdam, and some 38 km south of downtown Oklahoma City, in the city of Norman, a single logarithmic spiral made of rough local rock integrates into its natural surroundings as if by instinct. A structure organic enough to seem animate, architect Bruce Goff’s Bavinger House is ‘a response to the client and site’. ‘Primarily, it is a spatial idea, which was best expressed in the form which resulted,’ said architect Bart Prince, Goff’s one-time collaborator and good friend. ‘It’s probably the most significant building of his that is still standing.’ »

Completed in 1955 for artists Eugene (Gene) and Nancy Bavinger, the single-family home foregoes traditional rooms in favor of circular pods, open on all sides (some can be screened by drapes). Supported largely by cables, the pods drastically redefine the way a nuclear family interacts. A continuous skylight separates roof from wall. 'Every night, I went to bed under the stars,' said Bob Bavinger, the youngest son of Gene and Nancy, who grew up in the structure and is its current owner. Laughing, Bavinger described adapting to a conventional house when he first moved away from his family. 'I couldn't sleep in the bedroom because the ceilings looked like the inside of a coffin.'

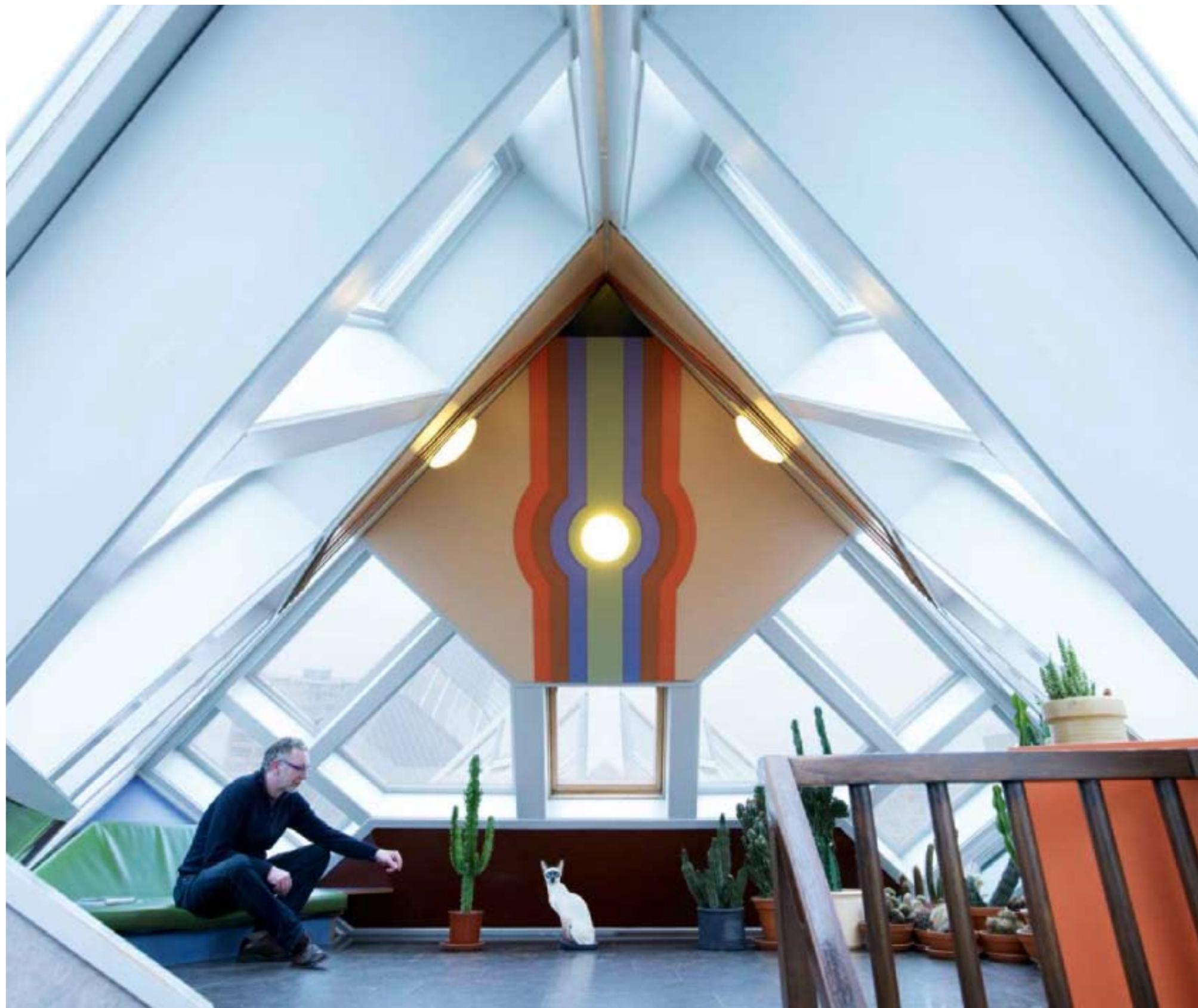
Gene and Nancy Bavinger had the creative ambitions and the patience to see the project through its five years of construction. 'There was no other contractor except for them,' said Prince, a friend to the Bavinger family. Speaking from his studio in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Prince added: 'I got a kick out of it when Gene told me Goff showed up there with a bunch of students all ready to start putting in some decorative items. It's the kind of thing Goff often did at the end of a building: he'd come in and start to put in beads and things like that. And Gene said, "not in my house".'

Like Ed de Graaf, Bob Bavinger felt the public's interest in his private home ricochet into his private life. Gene and Nancy often opened their doors to curious strangers. Bob, who was born the year the house was completed, joked: 'I gave up on the privacy thing when I was about one or two, I think.' Case in point: our conversation was interrupted by a phone call from a television station interested in featuring the Bavinger Home. 'That's what we're ready for,' Bob said, when I asked how he felt about the attention.

After his parents passed away, and his older brother died in a car accident, Bob Bavinger felt a strong obligation to keep the home in the Bavinger name and 'open to the public in a correct manner'.

'What my parents wanted us to do was open the house for the education and enjoyment of all,' said Bob, who is hosting several public events at Bavinger House throughout the year. The home is currently being restored (it suffered interior damages from a tornado and subsequent roof repair), but in the future Bob plans to display his father's paintings and his mother's pottery throughout the house. 'He wanted to promote his art and the house as one entity,' Bob said of his father. 'One entity,' it seems, is also an apt marker for that junction where Bavinger House becomes Bavinger Family.

On a much larger scale, Moshe Safdie designed Habitat 67 as a sentient building whose residents are as fundamental to the structure as its walls. 'We had many intentions,' the architect told me, when I caught him by cell phone as he was boarding a plane to Mexico. 'One intention was to reinvent the apartment building so that every apartment becomes a house.' In turn, these 'houses' – prefabricated modules of varying



dimensions – shape a single dynamic organism, a 'creative building that has a real sense of community'.

Realized, Habitat 67 is 354 cubes and 150 residences, but it was supposed to be several times that size. Initially, Moshe Safdie had envisioned something of an autonomous neighborhood budding from Habitat 67, complete with school and shopping areas.

'I was 25 when I designed Habitat 67, and 29 when it was finished,' said Safdie. 'But I had a feeling right then and there we were making history.' The architect remains a key writer of that history – he owns an apartment in the complex that he wants to make available to the public, and he is close with Habitat's residents ('they don't do anything in the building without consulting me'). Still, that history has taken twists beyond Safdie's control. Originally rent-controlled and government owned, Habitat 67 is now a Limited Partnership and 'somewhat of an exclusive address,' said Oren Safdie, for whom the remains of Montreal's Expo 67 once served as a fantastical playground.

Still, Habitat 67, a protected heritage building, remains a conceptual islet. Life there involves 'a constant interaction with the architecture,' said John Rae, who's lived in Habitat since 1972 and served as President of the Limited Partnership at one time. 'When you live in Habitat, you're affected positively by it.' Habitat, in turn, is affected by its residents. They are, after all, responsible for maintaining not only an existing building but also a living, breathing blueprint for the future.

Oren – who studied architecture at Columbia University and whose play *Private Jokes, Public Places* is 'very much influenced by Habitat and my father' – put it this way: 'You can say Habitat was ahead of its time. People might look at it again when we reach a point of saturation where it's our only solution. Now, we're just doing high rises and more high rises, but at some point we'll want to say: "Well, this is not the most humane way to house people".' To quote Moshe Safdie: 'It's an idea whose time is yet to come.'

What is that idea, exactly? I won't speak for Safdie, but perhaps it has something to do with architecture as a way of life, not a backdrop for it. <<