

# The Architectural Review

## Drivers' licence: the possibility of garage space

24 May, 2019 By [Tom Wilkinson](#)



The simplicity of the garage's form has allowed its owners to make of it what they will

With their recent book about the integral garage, Olivia Erlanger and Luis Ortega Goveia rescue an apparently peripheral type from obscurity; however, their self-confessed 'Benjaminian delusion' that the garage is 'the most important architectural form of the 20th century' is, in the end, far from convincing. Nevertheless, we learn something along the way. Particularly informative are the earlier chapters, which focus on the creation of the integral garage at the hands of Frank Lloyd Wright, who, in the course of inventing the American suburban ideal with his Robie House in the early 20th century, may also have spawned this sub-type. (On the other hand, the authors add, this inveterate self-mythologiser may not have done – couldn't they have found out if he was really telling the truth in this instance?)

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In any case, it is here that the analysis is at its most concrete and convincing. Wright was an early adopting car nut and this enthusiasm, combined with his distaste for the city, facilitated his dream of suburban dispersal. But this new way of living also required a reconfiguration of the traditional house. By doing away with the porch and replacing it with the garage, Wright ushered in a new relationship between the home, the neighbourhood and the city. The porch had been a porous, semi-public space but its replacement allowed suburbanites to cut themselves off from their immediate surroundings; only to subsequently burst forth like space explorers out of an airlock. However, the authors add, Wright's domestic vision – which attempted to encode his intensely heteronormative, patriarchal views into prescriptive spatial form – was immediately undermined by the Robie family's 'misuse' of the garage for storage. This development prefigured the type's fate as a space of possibility at the heart of the American house, a domesticated frontier.

In the following decades, the garage spread across the United States, abetted by the Federal Housing Administration, founded in 1934 as part of the New Deal. This agency encouraged the growth of suburbia by promoting mortgages to middle-class borrowers. There were several provisos, however: the property in question had to be a detached, single-family home located in a peripheral zone, it had to be equipped with a garage in order to foster the motorised connectivity of dispersed populations – and the applicant had to be white. These conditions ensured the development of a homogeneous suburbia, and 'what began as monocultural societies founded on racist practices turned into cultural and ideological deserts, devoid of diversity. Life became so monotonous it seemed dead.' The garage, as a deprogrammed space within the home, functioned both to shore up and to critique this domestic microcosm of capitalist society – an incubator of entrepreneurs and a 'man cave' for macho atavists, but also the lair of 'teenage dirtbags' and grunge bands.



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The later sections of the book that deal with these contradictory uses of the garage are themselves rather incoherent. The dominant thread is the invention of personal computing in the garages of the founders of Hewlett Packard, and later, Apple, but paragraphs detailing the activities of serial killers, 'bros', goths and techies are piled up higgledy-piggledy, like junk laid on the lawn in a garage sale. This reflects the central difficulty of typological historiography: without sustained attention to both the formal qualities of the architectural object and the material of history followed by a careful construction of arguments relating the two, it tends to dissolve into anecdotal soup. (I must admit I have not always avoided this pitfall in my own attempts at the genre.) Perhaps the clouds might have parted if the authors had devoted more space to the admittedly thorny problem of causality. Although they make reference to the macro-historical conditions under which the garage developed, more often than not it feels like the ideological cart is being put before the capitalist horse, or that a kind of Kittlerian technological determinism is being posited.

Such inversions, although not beyond the bounds of possibility (see, for instance, the earlier sections of the book), are not sufficiently reflected upon, leading to the unrestrained proliferation of the garage as historical agent. Following the original Macintosh's legendary nativity in the garage, the iPhone 'garageified our existence', we are told. Subsequently, 'the garage is exploded and expanded to encapsulate the entire city', leading to a 'garageification of space' – by which the authors refer to the interpenetration of home and office in co-working spaces and the like. What is elided here is that this transformation – undoubtedly huge in significance, and certainly aided by Jobs and Wozniak's tinkering – is more fundamentally due to corporations seeking to extract greater profits from their employees by abdicating the provision of the workplace.



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The lack of clarity of the book's argument is also mirrored, and perhaps to some extent produced, by the incoherence of its form. One of the authors is an artist, the other an academic, architect and artist – Garage is something between an artist's book and a conventional academic text. The result is that it is not entirely satisfactory as either, with neither the substantiated argument expected of the latter nor the aesthetic coherence of the former. Instead of usefully legible images of the structures discussed in the text, the book is replete with examples of the authors' artworks, which are not terribly enlightening (some of them are embarrassing, such as a photo of Ayn Rand emblazoned with the Disney logo). The captions the publishers evidently thought necessary to render these comprehensible to an academic readership are redundantly reproductive of the images in question (one informs us that a cowboy hat is a 'symbol of Americana'). There are no footnotes, bibliography or index and, in the end, one wonders if the forthcoming film promised by the authors will be a better medium for the story than the hybrid attempted here.

All images by John Divola

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