I didn’t know what you couldn’t do. I didn’t deliberately set out to invent anything. It just seemed to me, “Why not?”

Orson Welles

A well-organized house should be laid out like a city, with streets and alleys that lead inevitably to places which are cut off from traffic, so that one can rest there.

Nina Stritzler-Levine on Josef Frank

The regeneration of buildings and landscapes in the city should be an important dimension of all architectural practice.

Shim-Sutcliffe

This is a meditation on new meanings, new makings, new ideas of what the house may be in the American fabric. On making and living a house. Yes, ‘living a house,’ not ‘in’ a house, meaning
as a thing we grow, make, inhabit, ... as in fabricating a vessel. To build a thing in order to find, re-discover, hope ... as artful craft. To allow spaces that not only protect and hover over us, but invite us into a real sense of place, into a new seeing, into an all new way of touch + sight + harmonics + the sensual, into the realm of the well-made thing. Thoughtful space. For if we can make such a domain, a domain that enhances dreams and rêverie, lingering and promenade, abiding and thriving ...

And that this new construct be a thing that touches the earth lightly, barely noticeable in terms of carbon or any other footprint ... a thing giving energy back instead of taking it, ...

... as well as a device for capturing light ...

... might we have something that could really make a difference?

Why not?

In 1932, the Viennese attempted such an experiment. Known as the ‘Werkbundsiedlung’, they founded a small enclave of modern design. Seventy houses by 33 leading architects. With these little Werkbund houses they were trying to see what architecture was doing, how the questions of the house might be answered, and how to demonstrate it to the world.

We want to echo that 1932 experiment in Virginia.

Smaller scale. Same daring.

WERKBUNDSIEDLUNG

Imagine an invasion of Corbusier + Adolf Loos houses. A village of little white houses, flat rooftops, clean lines, unsymmetrical facades. A three-dimensional abstraction that had blossomed. Anti-ornament, but slightly tweaked, there were pastel colors. What you have is a manifesto of modern design—a new way of living. A wind of change. It was a project of modern maturity, fueled by the critical mass of the post-Klimt generation; and yet it was like nothing they had seen before. It was the Otto Wagner U-Bahn stations now as dwellings. The Secession had given birth to a next wave.

This, indeed, became the Werkbundsiedlung exhibition. It was built with the idea of demonstrating to the world what architecture could do, and what it felt like to live in well-designed
buildings. Furniture, lighting, carpets, cutlery—they were all experimental, inventive; manufactured by cutting-edge firms to match the language of the houses. Architects could take the American Bar, the Postsparkasse, the Raumplan, the roof garden, and apply this structural rationalism to everyday living. And make it affordable.

The whole idea was to serve the common man/woman. The Werkbundsiedlung served as an exhibition for three months in the summer of 1932, after a two-year delay in financing and a relocation of site. Following the exhibition, the houses were available for purchase. An experiment, a neighborhood as laboratory, which now houses families nine decades later and serves as a world landmark to architecture.

A similar project had been realized in Stuttgart by the German Werkbund. Prestigious architects worked on this project, the language was similar, just as daring and notorious. A unique feature of the Vienna project was the man behind the project, Josef Frank. Much misunderstood in the mainstream, a modernist, but an avid outlier, though not exactly so; author of accidentism, yet the mastermind behind the whole Werkbundsiedlung project. Josef Frank took us into questioning all norms of assumption. He offered an architecture of comfort, not just rigor.

**VIENNESE LESSONS**

But what set Frank’s houses apart was their strong emphasis on what he often referred to as Wohnlichkeit—coziness and livability. He rejected the traditional planning concepts of axiality and symmetry, seeking instead to reproduce the rambling effect he so admired in the English country house.

Nina Stritzler-Levine on Josef Frank

First, the Werkbundsiedlung pursued ideals that met with opposition. There were delays, costs, funding, critics, ... all the usual obstacles. The team of architects and the Viennese people persevered, realizing this little village of modern design.

The houses were affordable and of superior quality. There was a definite aesthetic that reflected their times. Josef Frank brought
a special twist to the modern language. Houses were designed from inside out, based on the use and purpose of the dweller. Facades and architectural language were derived from how people lived and moved. It was the very opposite of the Northern Virginia idea of curb appeal.

The design of furniture, lighting, kitchen appliances were all integrated, thought about with the budding awareness of ergonomics, so that the world of things was purposeful, yet thoughtful. This emphasis both invited and encouraged the makers of these devices to see the project as a great opportunity to show their wares, and much in the way of furnishings were donated by the Thonets of Viennese space. Which also gave them the chance of experimenting and seeing how their products were received and used. The good thing, the good idea, would spread, and the word would be out.

It is important to see the Werkbundsiedlung for what it was: a laboratory of design. Nothing was certain, nothing was guaranteed. This was a new vision for what a ‘village’ could be, and set within what was still very much a Biedermeier status quo—things were brown, and heavy, and dark, and eclectic.

The Werkbundsiedlung offered prototypes for a new, modern dignity of living. There was a great overall simplicity to the spaces and objects found in the housing units. Light was celebrated. Things were of clean line.

The Werkbundsiedlung created a new way of seeing.

CASA AMERICANA

Our context of the generic American house tends to be transient, predictable, and staid. Pragmatics demand curb appeal, resale value, and efficient heating and cooling; we see energy as consumable, not a thing for investment. So we need multiple bedrooms—all with baths, a garage for the cars, kitchens with herculean stainless steel appliances, and now has entered the new norm of every American McMansion having its own home theatre. Basically, we want what we see in magazines, including youth and great skin. Windows are placed via stylistic dogma, have nothing to do with view, or breeze, or light, or time, or trees. And along the way, we cut down/bulldoze anything in our way.
American adage: nature is a thing to be conquered; well, we had all these prairies to cross ...

And we have ‘lawns,’ not ‘gardens.’ Roofs are pitched [because any other thought leaks], ceilings are cathedraled, fireplaces are gas logs if not digital, and we have forsaken the porch for wood monstrosities called decks. And the American deck is now a universal typology of craftless construction. All our houses have the equivalent of wooden tumors on their back side. Skylights are bubbles ordered from catalogs.

If you go to the more affluent suburbs, and we mean really affluent, thus the Americans with higher intellect [the new silicon Ts], the cream of the crop so to speak, you get more of the same, only bigger. Differences at this level are marked by fake stone on the front facade before turning the corner into vinyl siding, 3–5 SUVs instead of vans/pickups, and there are never sidewalks now. Who walks to get anywhere?

It is politically correct to speak of sustainability, green design, and better fuel efficiency. But in general, it is a thing spoken of, not done. No one has time to consider how to pull it off because we have hour and a half commutes to and from work. All this energy stuff is too expensive anyway. Who can afford it?

A door ajar to the right afforded a glimpse of a living room, with some more Mexican trash in a corner cabinet and a striped sofa along the wall. But there was no question of my settling there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called “functional modern furniture” and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps.

Vladimir Nabokov, from Lolita

ZORRO TO THE RESCUE

We have our druthers. There must be an alternative. In America these happen sporadically and secretly. When encountered, they are never obvious, generally considered strange, and prove to be
delightful anytime you step into such space.

Thus, we are on a quest to create something that is thoughtful, well-built, off the grid, and modest. Can you hear the masses screaming? Modest does not equal success. How do you live off the grid? Well-built means way too expensive. And we want to work directly with the builder; not even sure what thoughtful means.

So there is an understood friction. But that is the very direction from which the new comes. Ours is a time of reinvention. The need is urgent. Re-thinking the home as a poetic act.

Siza also liked a mosque in Fez very much, which has a remarkably low entrance. I think you can walk through it, but it feels as if you can’t. A month ago, some Americans came, and they almost couldn’t get in, they wouldn’t fit.

Allesandra Ganchetti and Enrico Molteni
on Álvaro Siza Vieira’s Casa Alves Santos

A QUIET RADICALISM

This project is about rediscovery.
It is to make a constructed resonance.
As in making an architecture of echoes.
With solitude, not privacy.
With courtyards, not lawns.
With gardens, not yards.
With thickness + depth, not skins.
With tectonic order, not field carpentry.
With thoughtfulness, not hurry.
With communal space, not insulation.
With multiple speeds, not just fast.
With light as tuned nuance, not ignored.
With zero net energy use, not coal.
With six generations in mind, not resale.
Can we make this?
With a little help from 1932 Vienna, we try.
It is about awakening.
What we need is a much greater elasticity, not strict formal rules. A demonumentalization, without recourse to historical styles. [...] Away with universal styles, away with the equalization of art and industry, away with the whole system that has become popular under the name functionalism. This new architectural system [...] I will call [...] ACCIDENTISM for the time being, and by that I mean that we should design our surroundings as if they originated by chance.

Nina Stritzler-Levine

GOLD RUSH

Staunton is a small town in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, with an architectural geography marked by a scale that is Victorian and welcoming. The town’s horizons are sliced by many a church steeple over rolling hill topography, offering scenographic space, a layered seeing. The author has often referred to Staunton as the ‘nearest Italian hill town.’ One edge of the town is marked by two prominent hills, Betsy Belle and Mary Gray. They are softly wooded, a gateway into the city.

The very thought that modern man could live in anachronistic communities like these would seem absurd were it not that they are increasingly refuges for city dwellers. People who have not yet been reduced to appendages to automobiles find in them a fountain of youth.

Bernard Rudofsky

Enter the greed of the developer. These hills are now the site of apartment developments that are carved out of the hillside, with giant retaining walls installed to create level land on the sloping hillside. The softly wooded hills now bear scars reminiscent of a mining operation. This is all too typical of American construction. Nature is ignored, site dynamics simply conquered; heritage is artificial, construction is cheap-as-possible. It
is the mindset of a nation that blows up mountains to dig coal. It is a hierarchy of dollars, making zillions fast, selling off, retiring at 30.

Somewhere compassion and justice have fallen by the wayside. ... Any wonder about the shootings?

Ours is a society of fast ease and convenience. The goal is to park as close as possible to the door of Walmart.

When you think that way, your building often destroys more than it gives.

Which now takes us to another site in Staunton. Just down the road from Betsy Belle and Mary Gray. So far undeveloped, virgin woods ...

GENESIS

I drove up Sears Hill on Garber Street, took a sharp left along a wooded edge, looking south through the trees. Then appeared a 'For Sale' sign. Twenty lots. Contact so and so. And I began to wonder ...

We always look beyond the current condition of a site to see its potential.

Shim-Sutcliffe

COUNTER-THRUST: OR. 5 + 5 + 5 = REVOLUTION

Our idea is to take this wooded site and offer an alternative to all that is normally assumed in building a house or tract of houses. To make a Werkbundsiedlung. Instead of 20 lots we want 15. Fifteen will give us opportunity to work the in-between spaces, to breathe a bit, to play into the nature of the hill, to design and relate and hover and invite. Plus think about the car.

(People who wanted to have a house built on the beach want to see the water, this is normal. But Siza explained that it was also horrible to see the
sea all day long, morning and evening: he wanted to create a different world. Now we say: "Bless the day that we decided to cut the view."

Allesandra Gianchetti and Enrico Molteni on Álvaro Siza Vieira’s Casa Alves Santos

An immediate fear when one sees For Sale signs in America, is that a developer will come in and make houses with rich clients in mind, like all the farmland of Northern Virginia now covered with McMansions lined up shoulder to shoulder. With the scale of Sears Hill being very modest little houses with porches, this context would be destroyed by normal developer thinking. Thus we want to build small, to keep it tight, modest, affordable.

Quality of living must be emphasized. We want to re-claim the phenomenological aspects of architecture that we have grown too far away from, that has become an experience of rarity. (That is why we all travel to Vienna and Italian hill towns.) We want to bring back places of haven, surprise, delight, serenity. Places that gather light: a moon-viewing platform; a house where the difference in morning light and afternoon light matter. We believe that, like the Werkbund, we want to bring magic into the everyday. Nothing extravagant, just thoughtful. Meaningful. A house, a place, an atmosphere that you never take for granted.

Such space becomes contagious. This is architecture as healing agent. Yes what we build does matter. How we dwell matters. Good architecture creates ripple effects. Good houses, no guns. America the Beautiful?

With much discussion/attention given today to green design and sustainability, we laud such focus. But are we rigorous enough? Do we really believe in it? There are spurts of excellence, but for the most part we are not doing nearly all that we need to be doing. This will be a priority for the new Werkbund project. All fifteen houses will be zero-energy houses. We will work to achieve off-the-grid energy sources. The designs will research and innovate on the use of materials, recycling, renewable sources. This is pure laboratory. We want to prove to America that a small, modest set of houses can set new standards of design, operating off the grid, sustainable, and with economy. And that this can be the new standard. Imagine America being below Haiti in energy consumption —
Also: Building quality. Via design and thoughtfulness, we want to do more with less. Can things last? Can a tectonic architecture re-enter the American scene? Can we love how a thing ages? Can material patina yield beauty? Can we thrive on seeing how a thing is put together, to see the structure, that the construction is the architecture? A thing true and honest. Does this not harken to Thoreau-ian ideals? We want these houses to raise the standard of craft in building, that they can serve even as a school of building. And not only on Sears Hill, but that this renewed constructional philosophy can be exported to places struggling with questions of survival, refugee status, war-torn, poverty. Our building techne can become ambassadors to the world.

We had long term collaborative relationships with all the key fabricators, and these had developed and evolved through working together on multiple projects.

Shim-Sutcliffe

When we built the Laneway House, we specified custom designed mahogany windows, with a large full-height pivoting window that could open to connect the living room to the garden. The fabricators told us that it would not work. However, because the house was to be our home, we assured them that we would not sue and suggested, “Let’s build it so we can see how it works.” It has worked well for two decades.

Shim-Sutcliffe

My father would go to the construction site and lie down on the ground to get a sense of the space, and then they would talk and talk. I remember my father saying: “I can’t sleep here.” I have a great photograph: they were both there, Siza and my father, on the ground, to see whether two people could sleep in what would be a bedroom.

Allesandra Cianchetti and Enrico Molteni on Álvaro Siza Vieira’s Casa Alves Santos
One more point on the design question. We want those beautiful words of Luis Barragán to re-enter our lives. Can we not make wonder? Beauty? Can we create zones of solitude, and allow mystery, silence, and surprise to be part of our lives? Imagine that we programme as seriously to allow mystery as to allow a place to sleep. Gregor Eichinger in Vienna talks about designing houses around the rituals of life, that his design follows the rituals of living around the house. The house actually becomes a map of the client’s brain.

We really want to change how we live. Or elevate it. And with economy of means.

**STRATEGIC ORCHESTRATION**

The new Werkbund will be a three-phase project to bring in the new architectural matrix.

First we will invite five strong architects of authenticity, with the right scale and mindset for Sears Hill. These can be regional, international, some will certainly be from Vienna. We look for these five to set the standard within the given program. We have longed to work with our Vienna Studio ties to bring direct Werkbund source to America.

Phase 2 will be an international competition for the same program, to select five winners to have houses built. This will lend notoriety, PR, and some revenue to the project.

Phase 3 will be realized within the context of a school of building. We want Umbau project architects to design and have the construction site become a classroom of learning. The new Werkbund will be a real case study for the next generation[s], as the original Werkbundsiedlung has been.

This three-phased participation brings a nice diversity into the mix. We will have master architects at work, current heat via competition, and close-at-hand students of making. It is a new Werkbund that will lead to experimentation, prototyping, and learning. America will see that it is possible to be resourceful, sustainable, and beautiful. A new standard will have been set. We will begin to own a new mindset for the craft, sustainability, and
Both house and cabin were experiments in design and construction. They continue to be laboratories about life, specifically about our life and about how we think about the world. And as we live in them, they in turn take on their own life.

**Shim-Sutcliffe**

**THE HOUSE OF AAAAA4HHHHHHHHis ...**
sightlines and movement through a sequence of spaces are fundamental to the experience of the place. As you move along the length of these houses, you see inside, outside, inside, outside.

**Shim-Sutcliffe**

The house functions thus by means of an invisible accumulation. The tools of its trade are silence, the sound of water or of the wind in the branches, the sure intimacy of confined spaces mysteriously open to the other, the essential refinement of materials and objects arranged with the most laborious naturalness, the reticent grammar of carefully determined colors and textures, the formal and spatial purity pursued to the extremes of secret delirium.

**Armando Chavez on Casa Barragan**

The marvelous little construction shows all its mechanisms and deriving devices, and is lavished with handwork and affection. Inside, as the owner explained to us, it does not seem as if we are on a street in an ordinary setting. A sense of protection, intimacy, distance, material quality is what most satisfies the owners [...].

**Allesandra Cianchetti and Enrico Molteni on Alvaro Siza Vieira’s Casa Rocha Ribeiro**

"A house is like an outfit, it is like a shawl in which we wrap ourselves," says the owner. Then, remembering a typical answer of Siza’s: "... it’s not much,
AUSTRIAN AIRLINES: AN ASIDE

On the way to the AAAS conference in Graz, Austrian Airlines screened the film *Hearts of Atlantis* (2001) starring Anthony Hopkins. It was almost prophetic, as this movie was made in Staunton, and the core house of the movie was located on Sears Hill. So as we flew to Austria to present this paper, here was the actual site and views into the future site of the new Werkbund. It was one of those uncanny alignments life often gives us; a sense that it is meant to be, prophetic—a right fit.

FUNDING

The project needs to be approached as an investment. We are using experimental means with a long reach to bring in new ideas for building. While modest in scale, we do have big vision for bringing in a certain notoriety of architect, as well as quality of building and a totally new energy extreme. If we can raise the bar of expectation, this can become more of the norm. The goal is to show what is now possible, à la Werkbundsiedlung, and to introduce a new way of thinking, so that we will not settle for anything less.

That said, we will work a combination of funding sources to realize the project. This is a project of hype, so crowdsourcing is extremely viable for seed money and particular aspects of project narration. We will pursue donors, grants, and corporate sponsorship. Tax credits for green design will be available. So, the sources will be diverse and varied.

We also see this is a great opportunity to team up with our partner school in Denmark, Kaospilots, a like-minded radical-think-social-entrepreneurial school in Aarhus. Kaospilots take real-world projects and innovate breathtakingly. We both have been looking for collaborative projects; there is much to
learn from Kaospilots. A strategic and subversive capital campaign is right up their alley.

As a pioneering project for America, the cost of the house on the market will not be the cost of construction. There is a need with prototyping to go above and beyond, and thus, subsidize the cost of these houses. We are investing in R&D, but as we realize the level of energy savings, quality construction, and thoughtful space, we are merely planting seeds. The harvest of subsequent generations will be fertile. In addition, we see the houses as a matrix for application in other places in need, whether New Orleans, Detroit, Haiti, Syria, Liberia, or El Salvador.

Philosophically, economics tend to drive the capitalized world. Most actions are justified by the return on the almighty dollar. Granted, this is a limit we live with. But within the Umbau framework, part of the work of the Lander, our new breed of architect, is to begin forging a mindset of generosity, operating from a basis of acknowledged abundance rather than scarcity, for we sense a call to generosity, global generosity. Too much of our project-work-consumption spending is kept under our control to better our own welfare. And this, with the glaring degrees of poverty within and without our borders. This inequality can lead to the international ills we are all too familiar with. Thus, we propose purposeful, disciplined generosity that helps spread from our abundance to our global families that are lacking. So, for Umbau, one of our tenets as we develop our real-world project base, is that the projects we work on will be required to be energy self-sufficient, and to generate 10% of its project budget to mission work outside the scope of the project.

Many of the lesser-haves have been dependent of governmental and NGO aid, through various bureaucratic channels. Umbau will work to make the giving generative. It will be part of doing our work. Generosity becomes a way of life; we reach for something far bigger than our immediate project.

Thus, the idea for this new Werkbund, just as the original Viennese model was a form of affordable social housing, however cutting edge, of an investment into a new way of thinking-building-living-sustaining, really is consistent with a much broader framework. We will give more.

The new Werkbund will let us flex our muscle into school, and making, and education, and alternative ways of practice. We
see the architect as a hybrid healer-prophet. This is the true role. We will educate a new breed of architect: the LANDER. Our icon is the lunar space module. As LANDERS we thrive on the unknown, flux, improvisation, a new seeing. We are in re-tool. And big RAMP IT UP.

The population of the planet is close to 7 billion in 2012, and global output is slightly greater than 70 trillion euros, so that global output per capita is almost exactly 10,000 euros. If we subtract 10 percent for capital depreciation and divide by 12, we find this yields an average per capita monthly income of 760 euros, which may be a clearer way of making the point. In other words, if global output and the income to which it gives rise were equally divided, each individual in the world would have an income of about 760 euros per month.

Thomas Piketty

ZERO ENERGY

As traditional buildings consume 40% of total fossil energy in the United States, the new Werkbund is committed to harvesting energy available on site through a combination of solar, wind, and geo-thermal sources with increased efficiency of HVAC and lighting technologies. To have zero-energy as a goal means the total amount of energy used by the building is equivalent to the amount of renewable energy generated on site. Most zero-energy buildings are still reliant on grid-based power sources to compensate for weather/sun variables. This given, we will push to the extreme of going off the grid, as much as possible, if not totally.

Part of this new functioning will be to recycle and recover energy that is usually exhausted by most buildings. Passive house design can reduce energy consumption by 70–80%. The new Werkbund will ramp up energy conservation into a new level of new technologies and innovation. For us it will be an art form. Our prototypes will set new standards for housing and energy consumption in America.
WHY NOT?

Make dwellings that...
Are modest.
Have zero carbon footprint.
Are assembled—constructed—gathered—poetic.
Offer views to and from, across and through.
Pay homage to the trees.
Catch morning light.
Allow contemplation.
Invite life.
Walk the sun through the day.
Gather the vesper light.
Slow down.
Invite generations.
Breathe deep.

All of this will make the American consumer uncomfortable. It is an invitation to change the patterns of thinking and of living. Transformation. We seek to create an opportunity for a resonant architecture that will stir the emotions, allow pausing, savoring, trusting. Hopefully, it will invite us to unplug and be still.

Our belief is that architecture at present is following stylistic tendencies that are shallow and bad habits. No one knows how to judge or see what is possible. With fifteen small houses, we want to shift the boundaries. This small development could become a fulcrum of change, of what else is possible. We find that trim and fit are good.

So, we are calling for an influx of the new. Of ideational sources outside the norm. We are casting a wider net, to invite juxta-
position into circumstances, and then see what will happen.

A laboratory, a box of surprises, a safety vault of visions and memories, a clear outlook from which the future can be seen with tranquil hope: the program of a house. Through this prolonged exercise in achieving an unrepeatable place on earth, where one can watch time pass and friends arrive, navigate among loves, work through memories, inquire into books and things, cultivate the nearness of trees and plants.

Armando Chavez on Casa Barragán

Faith is revolutionary and today I ask you: are you open to entering into this revolutionary wave of faith?

Pope Francis

WORKS CITED