The Challenger

Dear Renato,

Flat Out asked me to write to a contemporary architect about a recently completed building. It was not difficult to choose. The Shakespeare Theatre in Gdansk, Poland that you recently completed (constructed 2008–14 following a competition win in 2005) is probably the best building by an Italian architect since Giorgio Grassi’s resto-

Continued on page 4

The Genealogist

Get the Door, It’s Domino’s

In a box kept in the off-site storage facility of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), nestled between what appear to be cabinet fixtures and an envelope of tile samples, sit two bronze sculptures from the office of James Stirling, Michael Wilford, and Associates. The “front” of each object is a shiny quarter-circle; the bottom

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The Opinionator

The List of 38

Marina City’s recently granted landmark status amounts to the highest possible recognition of its contribution to Chicago, a building’s equivalent of a Lifetime Achievement Award. It is an honor that will soon be conferred on the John Hancock Center as well. While both structures are unequivocal landmarks for the

Continued on page 12

The Mortician

Death at One’s Elbow

They call it “the law of the instrument”: to a carpen-
ter with a hammer, every problem is a nail. In my line of work it is recently deceased things. Bodies of all shapes, sizes, and ages, lives drained from their mortal form, come through the swing doors at the back of the mortuary. To someone like myself for whom the whiff of embalming fluid

Continued on page 18

The Odd Couple

Play the Part

They have received for their received in the architectural world. But I suspect that, as an historian, I look at them in a somewhat different way

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The Muckraker

Show Me the Money

There is a two-legged red stepladder in the City of Chicago Department of Buildings (DOB) ladies’ room. It leans against the window sill overlooking a courtyard in Chicago City Hall–County Building, a double square doughnut building by Holabird & Roche, circa 1911. A per-

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The Outsider

Hanging Around with Architects

I’m from outside the ecstatic, cathartic, sex-

crazed roller coaster ride you refer to as modern architectural practice. I’m from the dreary, monotonous, and functional world of rock and roll. Basically, I just hang around with architects. I married in. Some would say up! Sure, I wear black (and I own a pair of ludicrously

Continued on page 33

The Ad Man

Faves!

You have the ideas, we do the rest.

Graham Foundation
grahamfoundation.org

"There are more than 34,000,000 ways to create a single Domino’s pizza."

Dominos
dominos.com

Continued on page 44

The Scorekeeper

(Swedish) Meatball

On a recent trip to Sweden with limited time to spare, I decided to experience the local wares in the most condensed form I could manage, determining that I would have time only to eat one typical Swedish meal and see one signifi-
cant building. My concep-
tion of Sweden to date had been a limited mix of clichés: IKEA furniture and social housing, art films

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The Graphic Essayist

A Subjective Catalog of Columns

When Clint Eastwood appeared in the crucial last hour of the 2012 Republican National Convention to a theme song from the Dollars Trilogy and delivered a series of non-sequiturs to an empty chair, missing from the flood of com-

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The Political Economist

Good Design is Good Politics

Continued on page 54

The Inventor

Cartoon Plan

They said my plan was crazy. But let’s not forget, they came to me, after making a major botch of it all, to resolve their mess. It’s always the same story: the desperate plea for help before showing you the door.

No, I did not cause the problem, but I was commissioned to fix it—
to make legible an envi-

Continued on page 59

The Talent Agent

Ten Miles, One Year, and Two Worlds Apart

Rumor has it that your museum’s architecture and design division is look-

Continued on page 62

The Cameo

Easier Done than Said

It’s hard to imagine being disloyal to New York or Los Angeles. They con-
tain too much and no one ever mistakes a part as representative of the whole. Equally, they play host to worlds (fashion, finance and art, or enter-

Continued on page 65

You

You enter Mies van der Rohe’s S.R. Crown Hall from the south. In the sun-drenched entry area, oblique shadows march across your torso: a register of Mies’s cele-

Continued on page 73
Part Play the Part

A Compact History

Typical Parts

The Odd Couple

From page 3

The Odd Couple

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Typical Parts

Oscar The ranch house as seen here has a long lineage. It began life as the workers’ cottage in the late nineteenth century—a rectangular block containing a single row of rooms, usually set at right angles to the street, on a narrow but deep city lot. Although the amount of architectural embellishment was necessarily restrained by a tight budget, it was often surprisingly exuberant: trim around the windows, scrollwork along the eaves. By the early twentieth century, this building type evolved into the bungalow. Because of a surge in affluence following the First World War, bungalows were typically larger and sturdier than the earlier workers’ cottages and came complete with plumbing installations and central heating. They were once again customized by inexpensive but effective ornamental features, including brick patterning, stone trim, and stained glass windows. The period after the Second World War saw yet another expansion in working and middle class affluence, and with it a new version of the typical starter house—the small ranch house.

By now the standard suburban lot size had reached a quarter acre (the largest average lot size on record in American history, as the typical suburban lot declined in subsequent decades in terms of land per capita). A 50-foot-wide by 100-foot-long lot made it possible to: recent the house so that its long axis could stretch along the street resulting in better lighting; incorporate a more generous yard in the front and back; and easily accommodate an automobile in either a garage (accessible from the street or alley) or a carport. The typical ranch house, whatever the exterior cladding, was almost invariably a frame structure. The highly developed post-war lumber and building industries made it possible to build at remarkably low cost, and improved firefighting capability and decreased suburban density together made these houses safer than earlier frame houses in the city. Like the workers’ cottage and bungalow, these mass-produced dwellings could also be customized look by decorative elements—at the upper end, real stone or brick veneers, and at the lower end, by simple frame elements like gables, shutters, or planter boxes. And of course color and landscaping. When you get down to this minimal level of ornament, every little detail acquires additional significance. One of the things I like most about this house is the placement of the gutter almost but apparently not quite dead center on the gable. Was this a conscious design decision? The result of an ad hoc plumber’s decision?
Attached Parts  Miniature red fences, an entry gable, and window trim are affixed to the primary volume. The parts are surface appliqué.

Attached Parts
Felix This house is as close as any to a pure generic house for this neighborhood, or at least it is the mostly subtly quirky. In others, the emphasis on parts is stronger, stranger, and more at odds with mainstream suburban design. Parts are liberally understood to be just about anything—a dormer, gutter, strip of siding, or even a color—and are subject to free combination. A part can be indiscriminately scaled, attached to another part, and located virtually anywhere in the house. Some of the houses look like mistakes. Others are hilarious or thoughtfully peculiar. Few are as earnestly traditional as this one.

Attached Parts
Oscar You tend to look at houses like this as a single composition, as if it emerged from a set of decisions at a single moment in time. When I see this house, I see a series of construction projects, each overlaying the previous ones. One of the great advantages of the frame house over the far more expensive concrete block houses that are the norm in Europe for example, is the way each successive owner can customize it. It is not clear what happened here and whether the blank wall on the right is a filled-in garage or porch, but it likely represents a modification of the original house. I particularly like the miniature red fence attached to the wall and the element, a small, non-structural attachment. Similarly, the windows appear as objects affixed to the façade rather than as openings through it. Sheet metal awnings, carports, shutters, mailboxes, windowless dormers, address numbers, flower boxes and pots, porch lights, flags, lamp posts, bird baths, attic vents, park benches and patio furniture, fiberglass porch roofs, garden hoses, front doors, downspouts, railings, chimneys, and even trim, all have a privileged status as objects in houses of this vintage. An attachment strategy of parts offers a way to achieve multiplicity that is not about variation or radical heterogeneity.

Missing Parts
Play the Part
Felix The hanging objects turn the façade into a display of craft projects, which are so personal and bizarre that they don’t seem to communicate any cultural meaning. Without them, the house would simply be a house. With them, it’s still a house, but an odd house. It suggests that a collection of attached parts can become so peculiar so as to overwhelm conventional definitions of the envelope as surface or mass.

Missing Parts
Oscar I can’t help but notice the extremely common design of the metalwork on the screen/storm door.

Way that the fence has been used to hang a series of objects, for example a watering can used as planter, to signal a kind of homey domesticity. I have often wondered why the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement has been so much stronger in the United States than in Europe. Is it simply a matter of economics—Americans had much more disposable income and a higher rate of home-ownership during most of the twentieth century? Or because the Europeans chopped down all their trees several centuries ago and so now they don’t have the most versatile and forgiving building material ever invented? Or is it the idea that the designers’ original intentions should always be respected or that buildings are viewed as permanent parts of the landscape instead of individual ownership taking precedence as in the United States?

Missing Parts
Play the Part
Felix Subtraction is a different, but related, customization strategy that results in partial or missing parts. When fundamental building components, for example the front door or garage, are considered discrete objects, they are subject to removal. Detachment—appliance in reverse—can be as simple as attachment. The interior programming of this house is obscure, but is undoubtedly affected by the location of the front door and the lopsided elevation. To wit, the building envelope provides neither a seamless connection between interior and exterior, nor a complete separation, but is indifferent to any relationship between the two. The mismatch of a symmetrical footprint and asymmetrical facade leads to an incomplete central gable. This free association of floor plan to elevation creates a house in which neither the overall composition nor any individual part is required to maintain its integrity. Just as a house’s aesthetic identity might be established by attaching parts, it may also rely on the absence of a part, or part of a part that we normally expect to be there.

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Missing Parts
Oscar I can’t help but notice the extremely common design of the metalwork on the screen/storm door.
What a great piece of Americana—this bizarre set of Baroque scrolls probably designed to reduce the possibility of young children, pets, and footballs crashing through the glass or screen. And I’ve always wondered why the Europeans never cared for or learned about the benefits of window and door screens.

Superficial Parts

Felix Material patterns can exist independent of form and structural performance. Relieved of the responsibility to communicate principles of geometry or construction, any material is acceptable to be used and freely combined with other materials. Color and finish override substance. In most houses, materials are used to unify multiple volumes. But here, where two materials are competing to cover a single volume, the relationship is inverted and there is a clear demarcation. And rather than stacking the lighter siding on top of the heavier stone, which would be structurally logical, the two are placed side by side. In some houses, brightly colored vinyl siding is striped (color can change in a single surface and material) and often wraps chimneys, columns, and other parts of the house that are typically made of masonry (think Shingle style). Since materiality doesn’t always correspond to form, materials can be treated as flat parts either by drifting across the building envelope, or differentiating an otherwise monolithic mass without the fuss of corners or penetrations. Parts can be surfaces and surfaces can define parts.

Oscar When I look at this house I see another archaeology project. How in the world did this house come to look like this? Was it a small house that was enlarged by an addition to the left? That explanation seems unlikely because the existing footprint sits in the center of the lot and it is hard to imagine that the expansive hipped roof wasn’t original to the building. Was the portion to the left an attached garage or open porch that was later filled in to create a family room or additional bedroom? In any case, the resulting composition with a red color uniting a foundation wall to the right, the red siding to the left, and a tall skylight poking out in the rear, is striking and surprisingly balanced. I assume that this house once had standard foundation plantings. At some point these were apparently removed to create the low maintenance landscape we see here. In some ways, though, the paring away of the three-dimensional landscape element only acccentsuates the two-dimensional reality of the front lawn, that icon of American suburbia.

Ambivalent Parts

Felix Many parts of these houses drift out of typical, hierarchical organizations. The roof in this example is made up of two distinct parts: a large hip roof and a small gable. The gable is simultaneously tiny and enormous. It is positioned on the primary roof like a dormer, but projects horizontally beyond the façade to cover the entry, its eaves extending vertically below the edge of the primary roof. The result is a single building part that is simultaneously trim and roof, profile and object, a drawing of a gable and a gable. It doesn’t follow the typical roof script. The house is equally peculiar when it comes to material articulation—brick is used for trim instead of comprising the main façade.

Oscar What is most startling to me about this house is the unexpected way the designer altered what appears to have started out as an axial, symmetrical façade. To accommodate the interior spaces within (because one side of the house required a large living room window but the other side didn’t), he was left with an uncomfortable area of blank wall. No problem—simply extend the small gable over the front door and down across the wall in asymmetric fashion. Of course, projecting the gable across the wall completely subverts the constructional logic of the gable and the highly uncertain way the gable ends—almost crashing into the window on one side but ending at a curious point between the foundation wall and window sill height on the other—is nothing if not perplexing. Was this simply an irrational or careless decision, or was it due to some brilliant intuitive design thinking?

Felix I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is how the house strikes a balance between seemingly irreconcilable categories of parts without discord. For example, representation and object are equally present and mutually reinforcing in the entry dormer-gable. It’s not a unique situation either: conventional hierarchies often break down in interesting ways in other houses where multiple roof types cover a single volume, gutters outline building mass, and equal emphasis is placed on structural and decorative parts.
Scaled Parts

Oscar I can guess what happened here. This looks like another remodeling in which the low, hipped roof of an original one-story house was replaced by a much higher roof in order to provide a usable second floor. Then a substantial porch was added to the front to provide a sheltered outdoor space, and finally, a brick chimney was added to provide a working fireplace inside.

Felix Houses these days almost universally grow by agglomeration. Their doors, windows, dormers, bay windows, and other parts differ in size, but not by much. Here, scale is the preferred method for changing size. This house is considerably wider and taller than most in the neighborhood. Its primary façade combines four roofs—three gables that trace a triple peak at the top and one large shed roof to the side—flattening what would normally be four separate volumes into two planes. The large yellow gable over the porch is an addition, perhaps stock, but it is attached. The tip of its peak is a tiny part of the house’s silhouette, giving it dual readings as a large mass as well as a detail of the overall profile. Together, the three small gables, identical in size and alignment, are strange. Houses can be customized by making parts uncharacteristically large or small, or by standardizing sizes of parts that usually vary.

Familiar Parts

Oscar I would guess from the visual evidence—the small size, simpler construction, flush wood siding, higher floor heights, and higher roof pitch—that this is an older house than the other examples, and perhaps a relic from a failed 1920s subdivision. It is also possible that it was a self-built house rather than the product of a professional builder. It is difficult to know what original ornamentation or trim it originally carried, but it seems likely that whatever it was, the original ornamentation has been scraped away, perhaps during a replacement of the siding. In its place an owner or subsequent owners at some point in time used two very inexpensive elements to enliven the façade. The first is the unusual yellow and red color scheme. The other is the use of shutters. On many twentieth century houses the shutters are non-functional decorative elements used only to frame the door—whether stock items from the lumber yard or, more likely, salvaged pieces, not only fail to fit the windows they flank but they are also used to frame the door—which makes no sense as a practical measure or a nod to history. Moreover, because the door is so much taller than the shutters, this produces a curious floating effect when you focus on the door, and the shutter that flanks both door and window generates a kind of visual double take.

Felix This house appears to be deliberately off center, with the front door and vent pushed to the right, but parts of the façade also have local symmetry. It seems to me that the freedom allowed by the easy recombinant of everyday forms and materials seen in this house is relevant to contemporary design. Part of the backlash against signature is a renewed interest in the generic. Many architects have abandoned the quest for visual distinction in favor of more subtle inflections of banal objects and buildings. The risk of embracing ordinary things as the basis for design is that the result may be equally ordinary. Often, architects use elaborate techniques to avoid this pitfall (say, using a software script to generate highly articulated variations of a primitive form), or lean on an ethical argument to justify conservative work (“it may not be cutting edge, but it’s better for the environment / refugees / the poor!”). These houses suggest a different approach: they mix intense perception of what everyday architecture is with wild speculation about what it could be. If we figure out the unwritten rules, we can break them, and design entirely new configurations of familiar forms and materials. Architecture’s most fundamentally ordinary aspects can pave the way for another, quirkier architecture.