The Grit and Grist of Thinking the Unthinkable House

BEN NICHOLSON
Illinois Institute of Technology

I. Thinking the Unthinkable

The idea of a franchise is an intriguing one because its life rotates about a name. Wherever the name goes an entourage of buildings, desks, stoves, storage bins, and countertops follow—to help make the name substantial. The Appliance House is a franchise of this kind: its name goes to all manner of places. Yet why does it commandeer this particular name?

The Appliance House is the direct heir to the sort of house that is endangered by scores of little and big devices that are scattered throughout it. The appliance is examined for its potential selfhood and the unquantifiable values that are installed in its very constitution. Sears Roebuck, a firm synonymous with small and large appliances, has a sign in one of its repair centers that describes the mythological impact that Sears has had on the modern home. It declares: "Over 50,000,000 times a day someone depends on a Kenmore. During the last fifty years, Kenmore has built quite a reputation for reliability. So much so, in fact, that today more people depend on Kenmore than on any other brand in America. Of course, it is partly because we always insist that our products be as close to immortality as human hands can make them."

It is this claim to immortality that is of interest. Surely any object that is immortal must be worth incorporating into a home, particularly if its immortality is put to the test 50,000,000 times a day.
Despite the omnipotence of the manufacturer implied by this claim, the appliance has particular characteristics that simultaneously promote and defy its immortality. A skin is stretched taut around every device, a skin that intentionally obfuscates the inner working of the appliance. This skin is vital to the mythical credibility of the object, for it separates two modes of comprehension, comprehension from without and from within. When an appliance fails, we tap and jiggle it, expecting the mechanism to correct itself. This is done without any knowledge of what actually occurs. Yet the owner often knows how to nurse the much-loved appliance back to life: a well-placed jolt from the right direction invariably sets it in motion once again. The owner's skills are similar to those of the chiropractor, who mysteriously bends and manipulates the body while the addicted (or skeptical) patient smiles in the aggravating and painful knowledge that the charm is working.

An appliance repairman views a malfunction quite differently. He sees a mechanism without its veil because he has extensive knowledge of what really goes on beneath the surface; he does not invoke the genie, but simply replaces a worn lever. Thus, on the one hand, a machine is fixed by its owner's using semi-divine interventions; and, on the other hand, there is the plain-truth mechanic who attends to the appliance without prejudice, without religion. The owner dare not remove the panel to inspect the innards for fear of being struck down by the voodoo wisdom installed in the appliance by the manufacturer. Of course the manufacturer and the mechanic retain the knowledge of the secret rites of the appliance; the uninitiated owner will always follow their advice, seeking to be in harmony with what drives the machine's activity from the outside of the panel.

Thus our comprehension of the methods of repair are separated from that of the experts by the opacity of the sheet of plastic or steel that serves as the appliance's epidermis. The methods are incongruous, leading to a diremption of the two ways of thinking about the appliance, which in turn leads to a separation of senses. It is seemingly irrelevant events such as these malfunctions and repairs that surround the intangible panel which give rise to the life of the Telamon Cupboard, one of the components of the Appliance House.

II. The Inside and Outside
Meet at the Center

The appliance lives out its opacity by relying on its protective skin. Yet what about thinking of a place where there is no protective skin and where therefore what is inside and outside the former barrier suddenly become one and the same?