

# Dwelling

IN POSSIBILITY

Searching for the Soul of Shelter



HOWARD MANSFIELD

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In memory of Christina Ward

In Kyoto  
Hearing the cuckoo,  
I long for Kyoto  
— Basho



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## ❧ Introduction ❧

### *House Hunting*

In a boom market, a boom fever, we were hunting for a house. We had been hunting for months. A house on the market had the life of a mayfly, a day or two and it was sold. This was not a beginner's market. The houses went by at a dazzling speed, as if they were on a racetrack. We looked at many houses, even houses that were dead on description, dying in the phrase off the real estate agent's lips.

Pulling up to a house, the agent would say, "That's your driveway." (Oh so clever, slipping possessive ownership right in.) "And that's the driveway to the sandpit."

"Sandpit?"

"Oh, it's not big and he only works on the weekends."

At that point we should have said no—No thank you. We don't want to live next to a sandpit. But into the house we went. In the boom we had to look at what came along.

As we arrived at another house, she would say: "And he's just cleared all the trees!" This was delivered as good news, as if to say: "Good news! You won't have to despoil the land yourself!" The new house sat naked on its muddy lot. The recently felled great trees were stacked like Lincoln Logs awaiting the truck. No thank you.

I'd stay and look around long after it was clear that this was not the house for us (about thirty seconds). I was caught up in the psychological drama of the house, the hide-and-seek views of the people dwelling there.

My wife was distressed. As an Army brat, she had ping-ponged up and down the East Coast, packing everything up, being torn out of friendships. House hunting brought the anxiety back; she felt it in her stomach.

"Did you see that?" I'd say.

"Yeah, awful house," she'd say.

"Yes—but did you see all those photos of the guy around the house? Here's a guy with a wife and a newborn and all the photos are of him. Not one of the baby—or wife. Odd. And did you see those stock-picking tables and tips

posted by his desk? He's going to be broke. Broke and divorced." He was, the agent told us, a failed stockpicker who needed to sell. (What the real estate agents call a "motivated seller.") "What's the next house we're going to see?"

Coming out of another house, my wife would say, "Well, that was bad."

"Yes, but did you see that little red furnace? It was imported from Sweden. It burns wood, coal, oil, gas, tofu, Stephen King paperbacks. You could heat your house through January with just a few copies of *The Shining*. That's a great furnace."

The most fascinating houses we saw were a topographical map of a family's inner turmoil, their unsettled psyche. In one house the family had walked out. There were still cereal boxes on the table and bits of furniture about. The house had sat like this for years, the agent had warned us as we drove up the hill. But she couldn't have prepared us for the feeling of indecision that hung in the air. It was like walking in on a stale family argument. As best as I can recall, two brothers had inherited the house and just couldn't agree about what to do.

The house had more serious problems than this. It had been built in two sections; the original house in around 1830 and an addition fifty years later. It sat on the side of a hill, and each section, like the brothers, was going its own way: 1830 heading north and 1880 falling south, downhill.

We'd brought along an architect friend to look at it. He didn't mince words. "It's a derelict," he said. Well, said my wife, what about this fence?—an aging white picket fence she was standing next to. "This?" he answered—and pulled the gatepost right out of the ground. "It's a derelict." Next house.



The houses we saw had curb-appall—the opposite of curb appeal.

Houses choked for light and air.

Houses with failing septic fields—the telltale signs of cinnamon apple cider bubbling on the stove, and a suspiciously strong affection for potpourri or scented candles that just happened to be lighted in every room.

Tiny houses attached to huge barns. Little houses adrift on twenty rough acres. Big houses on wedges of land, a pie sliver of the old farm, cut up by a developer. Move here and have your heart ripped out.



Undernourished new houses so flimsy that you could put your foot through the particle-board sheathing and the vinyl siding and out in the world. Eggshell thin walls—but not as strong as a real eggshell.

Houses fallen from grace and houses fallen from non-grace. Houses melting before your eyes. Beautiful, ruined places. There was the old farmhouse that was diminished by renovation. On the table was a photo album of how it had been, how we wished it still was. In the photos the family is working hard with the best intentions, removing the barn, deleting the special spirit of the place, leaving the house with a green AstroTurf rug and a wagon-wheel chandelier and funky brickwork. The house still reached out to the missing barn, a phantom limb.

There was the house built in 1809 with a great ridgepole made from one tree. Below were two floors of crumbling plaster, a moody ruin. The attic told of good beginnings; the rest of the house had decayed, the plaster walls dissolving in the rain when the family let the roof go. And there was the gutted Victorian abandoned midway. It needed so much work that I could see us living in a tent in what had been the front parlor.

When the market boiled over in a frenzy, we were priced out of even these houses. We were shown camps built long ago with a bottle of whiskey or two, salvaged lumber, and a casual respect for the right angle. They were meant only to be camps, little better than tents with some plumbing. Approximate and crude. Over time they were propped up, jacked up, patched, added to, dressed up, fussed over—but camps never learn company manners. They slump back to the earth, the porch following the fall and rise of the ground like a caterpillar, a later addition floating against the old like a boat tied to a dock. The floors were soft with the give of mossy ground.

The asking price for the camps was astounding. “No, really,” you wanted to say to the real estate agent. “That’s very funny. Ha ha and all, but really isn’t there a zero too many in that price?”



I liked house hunting. I am fascinated by how houses succeed or fail to shelter us, body and soul. I could go from house to house clear across the country, knock on doors, and ask, Can I come in? Look around? What’s your favorite

room? Your latest house project? I'd like to see them all.

The sour living rooms behind dirty windows and overgrown shrubs; the small rooms made smaller by dark wood paneling, big fat La-Z-Boy recliners and the large-screen TV.

McMansions where rooms and rooms leak space.

Prim places where the grass is edged, the shrubs are obedient, and inside the couch is under a plastic cover and the cabinet of curios is dusted and gleams at attention.

Houses where the Bible and the baby Jesus are the only ornaments, and guns lie asleep in drawers and cabinets.

Houses that are all noise, as if they are cotton candy spun from the loud, always-on TV and the radio giving traffic reports to the resident who doesn't drive.

Houses that smell from the morning's bacon all day long, where one breakfast seems to compound the next, as if staleness were compounded daily like old-fashioned passbook saving accounts.

Houses that smell of feet, or vaguely like diapers, even though the children are in high school.

Houses you covet, so airy, so modest in their grandeur.

Houses where everything seems to be right. Husband loves wife, cat loves dog, tree loves house, house loves view.

Houses that are worn and comfortable, like an old fielder's mitt, like the sweatshirt and jeans the commuting executive wears on Saturdays.

Houses that are mysterious in their blandness. The rooms of furniture set out as expected, as prescribed, but you know no one really lives there. Where's the real life? This is a front. You want to see/don't want to see the private rooms.

Houses that are walled in with photos of children, grandchildren, nieces, and grandnieces. The walls of diplomas hanging like battle ribbons.

Houses that you pass a hundred days, a thousand days, maybe every day of your life, and no one enters. Even the lawn seems to be self-mowing, the mail self-removing.

Houses that command a hill; houses that play hide-and-seek behind trees and shrubs.

Houses that seem vulnerable, exposed, by a highway exit, on a traffic is-

land, backing to a big store parking lot or railroad tracks, the house a goldfish bowl.

Houses in which terrible things have happened in daylight.

Houses in which nothing has happened, and that seems terrible. Houses where boredom sticks to the walls, yellows the walls like grease from ten thousand meals.

Houses that grow old with their inhabitants—roof and walls, windows, all flaking, peeling, breaking. The house has arthritis. The house is closed to the world.

Houses that spill out toys and bikes and cars and tools and projects, sometimes right to the line of their neighbor's land.

Thousands, millions of houses. You drive past them at 1 a.m., 2 a.m., all those people asleep—snoring, dreaming, all in the dark, trusting in the state that no marauders will come in the night.



All houses are mysteries. In all houses we are struggling to live the life we should; we are confined, cluttered, slothful, or ambitious, planning, rebuilding, self-improving. In all houses we are hiding out, from the neighbors, from the world out there, from the world in here, from each other, from ourselves. The domestic is strange. *Unheimlich*, as the Germans say. Not home-like, haunted. The *unheimlich* is intertwined with the *heimlich*, the comfortable and familiar, Freud said. We settle in our routines. We shield them. We need to. We don't want to be found out as being ordinary or extraordinary.

The mystery that holds my attention is that some houses have life—are home, are dwellings—and others don't. Dwelling is an old-fashioned word that we've misplaced.

When we live heart and soul, we dwell. When we belong to a place, we dwell. Possession, they say, is nine-tenths of the law, but it is also what too many houses and towns lack. We are not possessed by our home places. Dwelling has left our buildings. We have "housing" without dwellings. We have Home Depot, but not home. This lost quality of dwelling—the soul of buildings—haunts most of our houses and our landscape.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote an influential essay in which

he says that dwelling is our basic character. Dwelling involves letting things be, letting the earth be the earth at that spot. Or, as he says, letting things “presence.” A good dwelling defines a place, brings forth the true qualities of that place. When this happens, he says, we are in touch with the higher realities, with a spiritual life. “The peak of dwelling is poetry.” But “when we rule things, as modern man does, we are homeless . . . even though we have a place to live.”

“Dwelling, and not atomic energy, is the real, even though hidden as yet, problem of modern times,” he said in the 1950s. “Finding ways for a true dwelling is more important than harnessing atomic energy.”

A more concise definition of dwelling comes from Samuel Mockbee, the wizard/architect who started Alabama’s Rural Studio, in which architecture students design and build homes for the poorest of the poor. Mockbee said, “Everyone, rich or poor, deserves a shelter for the soul.”

Dwelling is the restoration we seek. We want to build and live in a way that, though chosen, exists as the right fit, as the only way to build. We want to inhabit and build without second-guessing, with delight, with old tools and knowledge that lead us easily step to step. We want our home not to come from the big home center or the shelter magazines or the zoning code, but to arise out of the place and the materials. We want to build the only house possible at that spot on earth. As the geographer J. B. Jackson said, “The dwelling is the primary effort of man to create heaven on earth.” But this is not a thought that comes to mind when you’re out house hunting. It seems more like a sentiment that would be stitched in a sampler, as archaic as Home Sweet Home. Insisting that our shelters should have soul seems naïve, like professing heart-felt beliefs at a job interview.

In this Flip This House/Flip That House era there is little talk of dwelling. Meanwhile we go on building anti-dwellings: bad houses, depressing waiting rooms, miles of roadside slop. And all of it with due deliberation, all of it to code. We build thousands of houses, but only a few homes. With the world’s population projected to double, we will have to build this world all over again. How can we do that and shelter the soul?

At the gym where I work out, warding off creakiness, I see those home-decorator, design-in-a-whirlwind shows. All the shows, no matter the channel or premise, are the same—hope lies in quick fixes, in bold paint schemes,

mirrors, cutesy photo displays, contrived twists of fabric. But the space is just usually bad-dim rooms as narrow as a single bowling alley, rooms in which every door, window, cabinet, and light switch is in the wrong place. This is just renovating deck chairs on the *Titanic*. The shows are about dolling up a house to compensate for how unsheltered people feel. These shows deal only with surfaces. They are working in a long tradition of faux finishes and false fronts. “American architecture is the art of covering one thing with another thing to imitate a third thing which, if genuine, would not be desirable,” said the nineteenth-century architect Leopold Eidlitz. The real problem isn’t the window treatment or the clutter by the door. The real problem is that too many of our houses are no longer dwellings.

We have shelter from the rain and snow and sun, but our houses aren’t sheltering our souls. They aren’t nourishing. We treat houses as investments or as social policy problems, as in the statistical Sahara of “the housing problem.” The soul starves—we’re in our house, but not at home. Our dream houses lack room for us to dream.

All houses are houses of dreams, said Gaston Bachelard, the philosopher-poet of dwelling. We live in houses and so we dream houses. We daydream there and daydream about them. They give us the shelter to enlarge ourselves. They are the vessel in which we go forth into the universe. A good house is a good daydreaming space. It is the universe, he says.



House hunting is a matter of numbers and intuition. The numbers weigh heavily on us—what we can afford, the size of the house, the reputation of the school district. But if we are to be happy in our new home, it’s intuition that rules. We know within seconds upon entering a house if it’s the place for us. We know when a place makes us feel more alive. (My wife and I followed our intuition, gave up the search, and bought the old house where we were caretakers.)

We are tuned in to the qualities of dwelling, the feeling of home that some houses have and others lack. We can recognize these elusive qualities, and yet we find it very difficult, if not impossible, to create this feeling in our new houses and in our towns and cities.

The architect Christopher Alexander calls this animating spirit “the qual-

ity without a name.” “The search which we make for this quality, in our own lives, is the central search of any person, and the crux of any individual person’s story,” Alexander writes. “It is the search for those moments and situations when we are most alive.”

*Dwelling in Possibility* is a search for the soul of shelter. The book looks into our houses, and thus our selves, to rediscover the endangered qualities of homes that offer us the private commons that nurture our dreams.

This book is in three parts:

1 *Dwelling in the Ordinary*. We look at some things that were once ordinary but are now vanishing: the hearth, rooms without clutter, a footpath, and the simplicity of a beloved and hated modern house.

2 *Dwelling in Destruction*. The wars of the last century targeted homes that were far from the battlefield. After World War II, with Europe in ruins, three distinctly different writers sought to restore the safety of home. We also look at the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina to get a sharper sense of how fragile our dwellings are and how strong our commitment is to the idea of home.

3 *Dwelling in Possibility*. How do we court this unnamable “quality without a name”? Where can it be found? We seek out some hints with the aid of the census and an additional set of questions. And we enter into the hidden lives of the most ordinary buildings there are, the many kinds of sheds.



To go house hunting is to dwell in possibility. But what is that possibility? One is that we’ll be a new person in a new home. Given a fresh start, our better selves will rise. That’s part of the answer. But the real possibility we seek is habit; it’s the ordinary. We want room for the mundane. This is not what we ask real estate agents or builders for. We ask for “great rooms” and “upgrades”: granite counters, stainless-steel appliances, luxurious “spa bathrooms,” home theaters, walk-in closets the size of Wyoming. But we should ask: Give us room for tumult and quiet, for solitude and passing the time with friends. Give us room for ordinary pleasures, for a day well lived. “How to spend a day nobly is the problem to be solved, beside which all the great reforms which are preached seem to me trivial,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. We should be hunting for the ordinary.

DWELLING IN THE ORDINARY



*I have long been of an Opinion similar to that you express, and think Happiness consists more in small Conveniencies or Pleasures that occur every day, than in great Pieces of good Fortune that happen but seldom to a Man in the Course of his Life.*

• Benjamin Franklin, letter to Lord Kames,  
February 28, 1768



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## ❧ Pages from an Ice Storm Journal ❧

### I

#### *Ice and Fire*

*On December 11, 2008, an ice storm hit New England. In New Hampshire 420,000 houses and businesses—55 percent of the state—lost power for as long as two weeks. It was the worst natural disaster in the state's history.*

#### THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11

A slight ticking on the window, low like a sizzle of static beginning or oil just heating up in a pan. The freezing rain has begun. The sky is forecast to fall in with ice, sleet, snow, and rain over the next two days. It's a dark morning in what has been a dark week.

#### FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12

I awaken at 1 a.m. and turn on the radio—silence. NHPR is off the air. Our lights go out. The battery-backups for the computers begin beeping. I take one of the small flashlights that we've left by the bed and go poke and prod the back-up boxes until they stop the alarm call. I pull all the plugs out of the wall.

Sometime after 2:30 a.m. we're both jostled awake by a cracking thud. The snap of wood, the smash of it landing. It's all in the bass range and this one rocks the house. I get up to look out, but in the dark I can't see.

There's more cracking and thudding, near and far.

We sleep fitfully. At 7 a.m., in a cold house, we arise. Sally is afraid. She is curled tight, a black-and-white ball of border collie, pressed close to my wife, Sy. We play a little with her, tug with her toy, a big, soft red bone.

In the morning light—silver on silver—I first see part of the old ash on the icy ground: one ten-foot-long broken branch. I look out the other side of the house. The silver maple has taken a hit. That was the big thud. A tangle of tree limbs lies on the ground. Sy thinks that maybe an eighth of our favorite tree has sheared off. In the summer we live under this tree as much as possible. Our house is tucked under its elegant upward sweep and the stouter ash.

I'm sick to my stomach. Even as I know that impermanence is our lot, I love this tree. We had it trimmed years ago to take weight off its long arching limbs.

The tree had ducked every storm in the twenty years we've been here, most notably the ice storm of '98.

Another big limb falls nearer the house as I light a fire in the woodstove, and another limb falls from the ash, slamming the porch.

Now our neighbors are stirring. We hear Bobbie and Jarvis's backup generator starting. Sy has brought in a bucket of water and we've eaten breakfast. I sit by the fire, drinking tea and writing. I can work on my computer two hours or so, until the battery runs out. Note to self: order a second battery, a back-up generator for the house, etc.



A lot of cleanup is ahead for us. We'll be at it Saturday morning, once it's safe to be under the trees.

#### MONDAY, DECEMBER 15—ICE STORM, DAY 4

No power. The trees that fell onto the power lines at the head of our road and at the corner of Route 137 hang there still, making for a one-lane tunnel that cars take turns entering. There's a broken telephone pole hanging in the middle of Route 101 near Temple Mountain, we've been told. Route 101—the major east/west road—has been reduced to one lane there. On Friday one car led a small band of cars through a detour. At each fallen tree blocking the road, the driver would get out and clear the way with his chainsaw. Up near the Harris Center on King's Highway, Bobby Fogg says that he must have cut sixty trees. Route 9 down to Keene is a slalom course of felled trees. Around Dublin Lake there's one inch of ice on the branches, our tree guy Dan and his wife, Marilyn, tell us when they visit. (Tree doctors still make house calls.) Towns to the south—Marlborough, Jaffrey, Rindge—are “a war zone.”

So we will not be getting our power back for two or three days and that is an optimistic view. Last night our road agent told me that the utilities have discovered the major feeder lines are severely damaged. And Marilyn said she had heard they were running short of wire.



Our world is upended and reorganized by the disaster. Our lives revolve

around feeding the woodstove, bringing in wood, fetching water, and cutting up the maple.

We have done fairly well. The living room is hot and the heat travels upstairs to make the bedroom warm enough. Sy has cooked good meals on the gas stove—fresh eggs from our hens. We have a pile of flashlights and candles.

Our one failing was in not buying a generator. We had discussed it years ago. A good friend has a top-of-the-line generator wired to go on automatically. It has never worked. We know another person with a failed propane model. So that was out. We'd decided against getting a gasoline generator because if the power is out, the gas pumps would be out too, and so it would be useless.

But the gasoline generators around here have been running fine. Seeking a perfect solution, we have a perfect nothing.



Generators have been quite the topic among our neighbors: Who has one and when did he start it? In the classic New England manner, no one offers the information unless asked. To flaunt one's generator would be immodest. We sit in the dark and talk of generating electricity. What kind of generator is best? A generator is the ship that would take us home.

It's been good to hear Bobbie and Jarvis's generator thrumming along. I had a hot shower over there on Saturday night. It was like a little holiday, a visit to a far-off land called electricity.



To be "off the grid" is to lose, by degrees, your citizenship. This was really brought home when I talked by phone with my brother and father who live two hundred miles from here. I heard the television in the background. I'm trying to tell my father about the trees cracking through the night, but he's telling me about what he saw on TV—"the announcer was talking and there were trees cracking right behind him. You should have seen it."

I am reminded of when Sy returned from seeing the mountain gorillas in Rwanda. A friend had seen that same troop on TV. He kept interrupting her. He'd seen it on TV—he'd been there. It was the same thing.

If a tree falls and it's not near your house, it makes no sound. Weather only happens to us.



We sat watching the fire on Saturday night. One log had a play of colors that was like lightning in the jungle or like the play of lightning across the earth when seen from space.

The entire fire box glowed red. Along a cleft of one small log that glowed red too, the lights would flash—blue and yellow on the left and yellow-green along the fissure. The flames danced in a regular pattern as they moved along the split. The yellow-green dancing up, rolling down, dancing up. The blue-green flashing at the end. Stunning. We were going to go for a walk, but we just sat watching. Sy said that it looked like the aurora borealis.

Full moon. Bright cold nights, Friday and Saturday.



Another spirit is in this house. I felt it when I was upstairs as I closed the doors to chase the heat to the bedroom. There's a tinge of woodsmoke in the house and muted light—shadowy rooms lit only by daylight and moonlight. This house may have felt like this back in the 1880s and 1890s.



The question I'm dancing with here is this: What parts of shelter are obscured or liberated by electric power? Obscured: quiet, daylight, and attention to the mundane. Without electricity, the basics of shelter require our attention. We are reintroduced to once-common chores. Each day presents itself with a demanding fullness. Without electricity we are quiet enough, still enough, to see the blue-green flashing of one burning log.

And what is liberated? The house steps away from its primary role as shelter, just as we step away from keeping a fire in the hearth.



Basic statistics: As of Monday morning, Public Service of New Hampshire has restored power to one-third of the powerless homes. That leaves 280,000 in the dark. The big ice storm in 1998 blacked out 55,000 customers.



We worked intensely to remove the fallen limbs of the silver maple, so like a dead elephant or a whale upon a beach. We worked Saturday from morning to late afternoon and finished up, on Sunday. I sawed steadily. Sy hauled and stacked wood. It's all cut up, cleaned up, and under cover.



It was good today to know that all we had to do was cook, bring in wood and water, and that we were able to do that, Sy said. There was no anxiety about unfinished tasks, no doubting about what you were doing. We needed to stay warm. We were.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16—ICE STORM, DAY 5

We are phototropic creatures. I'm never without a small pocket flashlight. Our kitchen looks like a testing lab for candles. We sit around the fire; to read, we pull chairs to the window. We've lost power during the shortest days of the year. By 4:30 it's dark. Bedtime comes early. We rise and it's still dark. We are living in the dark depths of the ocean.



Other neighbors, the Garands, now have a generator—much louder than Bobbie and Jarvis's. Now two generators thrum away.



The trees blocking Route 137 and Antrim Road have been removed. At noon a crew was cutting them away from the wires, a guy high up in a bucket leaning over a tangle of trees and wires with a regular chain saw.

The trees fell away and the wires snapped back into their usual position. There are piles of slash on both sides of the road. Newly cut tree stumps lean outward. It looks as if a tornado has been through.



“Eminently readable, ruthless, mind-changing, this unique look at what makes house home rewards the closest of scrutiny.”

—JOHN STILGOE

Robert and Lois Orchard Professor in the  
History of Landscape, Harvard University

“This wise and witty meditation on what makes a house a home fascinated, challenged, and tickled me. After reading it (and believe me, you should read it), you will look at your surroundings—and, perhaps, yourself—in a richer, more nuanced way.”

—GEORGE HOWE COLT

author of *The Big House: A Century in  
the Life of an American Summer Home*

“Howard Mansfield is a graceful writer with deep-rooted curiosity and a free-range mind. Reading him is like taking a long walk with a learned friend. In *Dwelling in Possibility*, Mansfield invites us to travel across time, geography and culture before delivering us—wiser and more thoughtful—to the full-of-meaning place we call home.”

—KATE WHOULEY

author of *Cottage for Sale, Must Be Moved*

“Like Thoreau, Mr. Mansfield is a keen observer and, in his neck of New Hampshire, a granitic critic of the rushed life.”

— *The Wall Street Journal*

