An Architectural Approach to Coastal Infrastructure

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Coastal suburbia has a complicated relationship with the ground. While public life and public infrastructure exist on the ground plane, the coastal home must be elevated from the ground on stilts to be a legal, livable space. These stilts, or columns, are dual-functioning. They are structure, but they are also infrastructure. They serve as structure for the home above, but also as a device to protect the home from climate change and rising sea levels. Their place resides within the architect’s realm of specialty—the single-family home’s structure—but are also a stepping stone for the architect to have a larger presence within infrastructural decision making, specifically decisions surrounding infrastructure tied to climate change and sea level rise. Since the beginnings of postmodernism, the architect has stood on the fringes of the infrastructural design world. City infrastructure issues are first a policy issue and second, a problem of efficiency—a problem given to engineers to solve. While this is not inherently a bad thing, the opportunities for the architect to create infrastructure that is better integrated into the ways we live are few and far between. In order to bring the architect back into discussions surrounding city infrastructure, the architect must first repurpose and exhaust the uses of the humble column. In approaching the coastal home’s structural columns as pieces of an expanded infrastructural system, climate change becomes the impetus for the reassertion of the architect’s agency, and an architectural approach to designing infrastructure begins to surface.

The American coastal home lives its life on stilts. Some of these homes try their best to mask this, while others boast their elevated status. While homes living on the ground plane benefit from existing infrastructure (streets, pedestrian pathways, green spaces, etc.), the raised nature of these homes removes any interaction with ground-level infrastructure or the homes around them. This condition is a direct result of building codes that dictate the base flood elevation line, the height at which these odd suburban living spaces must rest above the ground. As one views a plan cut through the elevating structural members of these homes, a free plan emerges. The elevated structures are among the only architectural connection to the terrain below, yet these terrains oddly operate in the same ways that neighborhoods otherwise would.¹

Considering this, these elevated columns could serve as evidence of the architect’s future role in designing infrastructure. Architects have long been excluded from the infrastructural issues that today’s cities face. Since early modernism, infrastructure has been the realm of engineers and policymakers.² Still, the dual nature of the stilts that keep a home elevated offer an opportunity for architects to reintroduce their
Figure 1  *Floor plan of Tybee Island Home.*
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Figure 2  Three homes, each with a different structural language.
own expertise to infrastructural design and
decision making. These stilts are structure, but
they are also infrastructure. They are structure
in that they work locally to anchor the home
above into the ground below, and infrastructure
in that their expanded network works to provide
homes with a basic operational necessity: the
need to stay safe from water. Their place resides
within the architect’s realm of specialty—the
single-family home structure—but they are also
a stepping stone for the architect to have a larger
presence within infrastructural decision making,
especially decisions tied to climate change and sea
level rise.

The architectural column is among the most
rudimentary facets of architectural thinking.
Easily understood by all, its basic, unassuming
nature also may contribute to its versatility. A
single column as an object in a field may suggest
a monument or a point of demarcation. A grid of
columns may suggest a framework for structure
or a piece of a larger whole. But what happens
when a column breaks its regulating grid lines
and moves past simply serving as structure for
the multitude of loads that lie within? They may
group together to read as a mass of columns,
or continue linearly and read as a line. Within
a coastal housing context, the column reads
both as structure and as a fleeing device from
rising flood waters. If these columns began to
reorganize outside of their usual gridlines, along
the coast a mass of columns may perform as a
sluice, or a line of columns may begin to perform
as a seawall. If one reimagines how the column
may be represented as a field condition, its
performative capabilities may also expand beyond
its traditional understanding, and a new, elevated
urbanism with increased infrastructural capacity
may emerge.

Given the possibility of the architectural column
breaking its typological understanding and

Figure 3 Models exploring an expanded column
framework.
becoming a field of infrastructure, the housing
and program that they support may also become
a field condition. This field condition, involving
an expanded column grid and its anomalies, may
be reimagined to form new infrastructures. Dense
groupings of the column may support larger
public functions or larger housing projects, while
expansive, less dense groups of columns may
support streets or pedestrian infrastructure. In
the context of climate change architecture, these
expanded column grids may influence pieces of
location-specific infrastructure (sluices, canals,
dunes, etc.) as well as more general neighborhood
infrastructure (streets, greenspaces).

Agencies such as the Federal Emergency
Management Agency could build awareness
of the advantages of a combined column and
infrastructural framework. They could help
to educate builders, planners, developers, and
architects in coastal communities on the benefits
of combining coastal infrastructure with the
stilts that support various buildings. For new
developments, planners could enter the equation
by implementing zoning that emphasizes
interplay between neighboring properties. With
this new, elevated landscape, the “properties”
that they support could be valued by leveraging
relationships to organize a stream of experiences.
rather than traditional “intangibles” such as mineral resources, wind, or aquifers.  

Considering this, the architecture of climate change will be the catalyst for the architect’s intervention within infrastructure. Since the rise of postmodernism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, architects have sat along the margins of infrastructural design. Still, as Stan Allen notes, “While architects are relatively powerless to generate new investment in infrastructure, they can redirect their own imaginative and technical efforts toward the question of infrastructure.” The architect existing within their own domain is no longer a possibility. The conception of the pre-modernist architect who embraced landscapes, infrastructure, and architecture must gain prominence again as climate change continues to affect the country in greater and more visible ways. If one approaches the coastal home’s structural columns as pieces of an expanded infrastructural system, climate change becomes the impetus for the reassertion of the architect’s agency, and an architectural approach to designing infrastructure begins to surface.

Endnotes