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"TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC ESTHETIC"?
THE MODERN HOUSE IN AMERICA, 1932-1955

by
MATTHEW A. POSTAL

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Art History in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University
of New York.

1998

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

"TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC ESTHETIC"?
THE MODERN HOUSE IN AMERICA, 1932-1955

by

Matthew A. Postal

Adviser: Rosemarie Bletter

This dissertation explores the discourse and debates that shaped American house design from 1932 to 1955. It concentrates on the relationship between the house and the modern movement, not as viewed from the vantage point of the International Style alone, but as seen by its critics and interpreters. A broad and inclusive narrative is presented, emphasizing efforts by museums and magazines to shape the image of domestic architecture in the United States. From these debates a modified modern aesthetic emerged, one blending the International Style, vernacular traditions, and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

With 1932 as my starting point, I trace the ways the Museum of Modern Art attempted to influence popular taste, through public exhibitions, publications, and two full-size demonstration houses designed by Marcel Breuer and Gregory Ain. Whereas many historians view the Modern's programming as monolithic, dictated by Philip Johnson and his supporters, it was in fact shaped by a

number of curators, many of whom have been overlooked by historians. In particular, the contributions of John McAndrew and Elizabeth B. Mock are investigated.

The war years and the housing boom that followed are discussed, particularly the impact patriotism and political ideology had on the nation's domestic landscape. Consequently, after 1945 a general reassessment of the modern movement occurred. Long-time supporters like James Marston Fitch and Joseph Hudnut urged their peers to rethink the modernist enterprise to reflect the war, its meaning, and the sacrifices made by the layman. These populist critiques climaxed in the early 1950s when Elizabeth Gordon, editor of *House Beautiful*, launched a controversial campaign against modern architecture and its leaders, linking their ideas to fascism and similar authoritarian tendencies.

The conclusion, which focuses on William Levitt, describes the developer's career and his relationship to the modern movement. The stylistic evolution of Levittown is presented, analyzing specific designs and their debt to both critics and defenders of the International Style. In effect, this dissertation returns the modern architect and the merchant builder to their rightful positions of influence and impact — two parts of a extremely complex, and more often than not, interwoven narrative.

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To complete one's dissertation requires discipline, stamina, and the help of a good many friends and colleagues. Many have come generously to my aid, providing fresh ideas, relevant sources, and ceaseless encouragement. To all of them I extend my sincere and heartfelt thanks.

This journey began in Spring 1991, at the Institute of Fine Arts where the late Richard Pommer encouraged me to study the single-family house and its relationship to "the Modern Movement." Although I studied with him for less than three semesters, his advice was a critical factor in my decision to pursue this topic.

I wish to thank my advisor, Rosemarie Bletter, for her numerous efforts on my behalf, particularly her careful reading and constructive criticism of the final drafts of this dissertation. I would also like to acknowledge the members of my defense committee and their thoughtful reading of my work: Rose-Carol Washton Long, Sally Webster, and especially Joan Ockman of Columbia University.

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INTRODUCTION

But why bring this up? Is it barely possible that architectural design is too far ahead of public acceptance? Is it possible that those who cater to the benighted public's whims may be the most successful in providing the public with homes? Is the necessity for making architecture desirable and desired – as well as rational and advanced – fully realized? Is the public being educated or persuaded fast enough to accept the products of advanced architectural thinking?

. . . The postwar competitive market will provide the answers and the opportunity to prove the value of modern home design. There is no place like home in which to find out how effectively and how quickly new ideas can be sold and absorbed.¹

In December 1943 Kenneth K. Stowell, editor of the *Architectural Record*, published "There's No Place Like Home!," a brief but perceptive essay on the plight of domestic architecture in the United States. Despite his clear enthusiasm for "advanced architectural thinking" Stowell remained uncertain whether "modern home design" would win acceptance in postwar America.

Stowell's remarks are in many ways the key issue addressed by this study – how popular taste and critical

¹ Kenneth K. Stowell, "There's No Place Like Home!," *Architectural Record* (December 1943): 41.

opinion influenced the image of the American house between 1932 and 1955. No matter how convincing arguments were for adopting one style or another, he recognized that it would be in the marketplace that a style's fate would be determined, an arena shaped by a broad range of emotional, technical, economic, and even political factors.

Between 1946 and 1955 more single-family houses were built in the United States than during any previous decade.² Simple, modest, and unassuming, the most popular examples – the Cape Cod, the Colonial, the Ranch – offered few aesthetic thrills. While some were custom-built, the majority were constructed by large firms, professional builders who used up-to-date techniques to achieve unprecedented levels of efficiency and worker productivity. The impact of these trends was considerable: the areas adjacent to most metropolitan centers were transformed; where vegetables once grew stood rows of seemingly identical tract houses – decent, affordable, mass-produced places to make a life.³

Many architectural historians, however, view the years after World War II as a missed opportunity, an era

² William O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 19.

³ According to Kenneth T. Jackson "by 1955 subdivisions accounted for more than three-quarters of all new housing in the metropolitan areas" of the United States. See *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 233.

when the average builder ignored the progressive ideas associated with modern architecture in pursuit of quick profits and the bottom line. While there is certainly a degree of truth in such assertions, this view limits our understanding of postwar architecture. It ignores the debates new ideas generated, as well as the suburban landscape that would eventually rise. A broader perspective is warranted, one that expands the definition of what "modern" house design was and embraces the wider spectrum of developments that range from the European-influenced International Style and its variants to the familiar but no less significant market-driven subdivisions.

In a field where unique, expensive, and innovative creations are the most prized, houses built for the middle and working-class have only recently begun to receive scholarly attention. In fact, the most widely read surveys of twentieth-century architecture still tend to ignore them entirely. For instance, in his 1958 survey, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, Henry-Russell Hitchcock made no mention of the dwellings in which most Americans lived. He focused on a select group of International Style architects, houses that reflected the once-radical aesthetic polemics of the previous generation. Only four postwar American residences were included in the 1990 edition: the plan for Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and three projects by his lifelong

friend, Philip Johnson. Even as recently as 1992 Kenneth Frampton maintained this emphasis, focusing on well-known works by Mies, Johnson, and Richard Neutra.⁴

In the past two decades, however, the situation has begun to change. Since 1980 a more inclusive view of American house design had begun to develop, as seen in Gwendolyn Wright's *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, and Clifford Edward Clark Jr.'s *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*.⁵ As valuable as these investigations are, only a chapter or two in each is devoted to discussing the postwar period.

Those historians who have focused on this era tend to favor a monographic approach, investigating a single trend or housing program in a specific geographic area, such as Esther McCoy's pioneering survey of postwar modernism in Los Angeles, the *Case Study Houses 1945-1962*, Barbara M.

⁴ See Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1941); Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958; 1990); and Kenneth Frampton *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980; revised 1992).

⁵ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing the United States* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Clifford Edward Clark Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1986).

Kelly's study of one Long Island community's suburban development, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown*, and James A. Moore's dissertation on the relationship between architecture and construction techniques in southern California, "From Idea to Place: An Interpretation of the Role of Technology in the Architectural Development of the Post-War Single-Family House."⁶

With 1932 as my starting point, I will examine the single-family house on the east coast of the United States and its various encounters with European modernism during the Depression, World War II, as well as in the decade following the war. In no way intended to be an exhaustive study of the subject, this dissertation will survey the modern movement's early critical reception, particularly those viewpoints found in popular and professional magazines, as well as a select group of often overlooked curatorial efforts at New York's Museum of Modern Art (hereafter, MoMA).

It was in 1932 that Hitchcock and Johnson mounted the exhibition *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at MoMA and published *The International Style*:

⁶ Esther McCoy, *The Case Study Houses, 1945-62* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977); Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1973) and James A. Moore, "From Idea to Place: An Interpretation of the Role of Technology in the Architectural Development of the Postwar House" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1993).

Architecture Since 1922.⁷ Although the impact of these events continues to be contested and reinterpreted, most historians agree that *The International Style* transformed modern architecture's identity in the United States.

For Hitchcock and Johnson the modern movement's appeal was primarily aesthetic. They hoped to show readers how how specific techniques and materials could be used to transform the character and appearance of contemporary architecture. For its founders, however, the issue was more complicated. While it is certainly true that European architects sought to distance themselves from past styles, it was of equal importance that new techniques be used to serve other goals as well. The Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier (1887-1966), an insistent critic of the Ecole des Beaux Arts and its teachings, declared in his 1923 polemic *Vers une Architecture*:

In every field of industry, new problems have presented themselves and new tools have been created . . .

The history of Architecture unfolds itself slowly across the centuries as a modification of structure and ornament, but in the last fifty years steel and concrete have brought new conquests, which are the index of a greater capacity for construction, and of an architecture in which the old codes have been overturned. If we challenge the past, we shall learn that "styles" no longer exist for us, that

⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1932).

a style of our own period has come about; and there has been a Revolution.⁸

Rather than continuing to mine the past for decorative motifs and outdated symbols, he urged his peers to contemplate the current moment, borrowing forms and standards from such twentieth-century innovations as the airplane, the automobile, and the ocean liner. Not only did he seek to transform architectural aesthetics, but he hoped his ideas would benefit society as a whole.

The last chapters of *Vers une Architecture* were devoted to a single issue – the production of houses. In this section Le Corbusier laid out his various proposals, mostly inexpensive concrete units whose production would require the close cooperation of business, industrial, and institutional interests. He concluded:

We are dealing with an urgent problem of our epoch, nay more with, *the* problem of our epoch.⁹

Many of his European contemporaries agreed; architects in Austria, France, Germany, Holland, and Russia shared the belief that a new architecture could have aesthetic, political, and social implications.

⁸ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, translated by Frederick Etchells, 1931 (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 7.

⁹ Ibid., 265. These projects would set the tone for his entire career; from the Domino house prototype (1914) to the Unité d'habitation (Marseilles, 1947-1952), housing would remain Le Corbusier's, and briefly, modern architecture's, main concern. For an thoughtful overview of his career see Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* (Cambridge: Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1979).

These tendencies assumed an international focus in the summer of 1927 when a German Werkbund-sponsored display of exhibition housing was erected on the Weissenhof hill overlooking Stuttgart. Under the artistic direction of Mies van der Rohe, the *Siedlung* presented sixteen designs by members of the emerging modern movement, including single-family houses, row houses, and apartment buildings.¹⁰

The exposition's reception in the United States varied, from passionate to dismissive, with most American observers falling somewhere in-between. Despite differences in approach, it was what the various designs shared – the flat roofs, unadorned surfaces, and spare interiors – that was most often remembered. For supporters, this common architectural vocabulary had great potential and Weissenhof became the centerpiece of their crusade, a struggle to convince the public that the new style was important and should prevail. Opponents, however, were much less unified, breaking down into several factions; those who rejected aesthetic change of any kind, those who preferred non-traditional solutions pioneered by American architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, or those who favored European trends outside those

¹⁰ For a discussion of specific housing projects at Stuttgart and their significance, see Richard Pommer and Christian F. Otto, *Weissenhof 1927 and the Modern Movement in Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

promoted by Hitchcock and Johnson. Clearly, this was a period of intense speculation, a time when no single style or approach to house design dominated or appeared to lead the way.

At this point some brief remarks on the issue of terminology need to be clarified. When used, the "International Style" refers only to those architects associated with Hitchcock and Johnson's aesthetic polemic of 1932, mainly early Corbusier, Mies, Gropius, and their followers in the United States. Whereas the term "modern movement" describes a much larger group, consisting of, but not limited to, members of the Bauhaus, De Stijl, Purism, Constructivism, and German Expressionism. While the membership of the modern movement and the International Style frequently overlapped, one should keep in mind that Hitchcock and Johnson's book was a highly personal interpretation of recent European trends.

This dissertation will provide a broad, inclusive narrative of postwar house design, not juxtaposed against the dominant modernist framework created by Hitchcock and Johnson alone, but in terms of its east coast critics and interpreters – the architects, journalists, curators, and builders who explored and attempted to tailor these new developments for American consumption.

* * *

Chapter one, "Battles Won: America in 1945," introduces the historical context. Set midway in the study's overall chronology, this opening section looks both forward and back, attempting to find links and parallels between the concerns of the pre- and postwar nation. The chapter that follows, "The Thirties: Making a Case for the Modern," covers the early Depression, years when because of a struggling economy discourse and debate were substituted for housing starts. I will recount the modern movement's arrival in the United States and its mixed public reception, paying particular attention to efforts by the recently established MoMA in New York. While many scholarly accounts focus on Hitchcock and Johnson's curatorial activities, I will also consider the contributions made by Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer, and the urban planner Carol Aronovici.

Following Johnson's resignation from MoMA in 1934, his various successors pursued a broad, almost fluid definition of modern architecture. Under John McAndrew, who served as the museum's curator of architecture from 1937 to 1941, the department expanded its focus, devoting exhibitions to Wright, the history of American architecture, as well as contemporary house design.

The third chapter, "A Tentative Embrace," concentrates on the late 1930s and early 1940s, years when many observers saw the modern movement's dominance as inevitable, a foregone conclusion. Stimulated by a

resurgent economy, emigré architects like Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer gained positions of influence and designed East coast houses that received considerable acclaim. These architects also joined the war effort, designing innovative workers' housing for the Federal Works Agency's Division of Defense Housing. For those who reported on these projects in the architectural press, the modern movement's destiny seemed certain. Yet as this chapter also demonstrates, traditional strategies of house design and construction continued to find favor. In short, despite of what seemed to be a growing openness toward new architectural forms among the general public, such receptiveness would not last beyond the war's end.

As early as 1943, architects, writers, and builders began to contemplate the postwar house. The war demonstrated the importance of technology and the effect it might have on peacetime construction. Although a series of futuristic visions were paraded before the American people by Buckminster Fuller, among others, even the most highly praised prototypes failed to find investors.

Furthermore, this chapter will consider the war's psychological impact and its expression in domestic architecture. National service had required a remarkable amount of personal conformity and regimentation. While certainly necessary during wartime, few men or women wished to integrate such discipline into their daily lives. The idea of adopting a universal aesthetic based on

rationalism alone seemed to contradict the very values the nation had fought to defend. Consequently, the fourth chapter, "Forecasting a Democratic Esthetic" will focus on the writings of James Marston Fitch, Joseph Hudnut, and Russell Lynes, critics who promoted domestic imagery that would reward, praise, and celebrate America's democracy.

The fifth chapter, "*Built in USA: Other Examples*," will return to MoMA and examine its activities during and after the war. Two architectural curators will be discussed: Elizabeth B. Mock, who served from 1942 to 1946, and Philip Johnson who resumed his affiliation with the museum in late 1945. Like her predecessor McAndrew, Mock supported a modified modern aesthetic, one synthesizing both industrial technology and American imagery. While not entirely dismissive of European developments, like her mentor Frank Lloyd Wright she argued that architects must expand their vocabulary, designing houses that would be "vigorous, friendly and flexible."¹¹ Johnson, on the other hand, sought to revitalize his pre-1934 crusade for an "International" style, one now based almost entirely on Miesian aesthetics. Not only did he organize several exhibitions to promote this theme, but his strong views muted the broader, more inclusive interpretations that thrived during his ten-year absence.

¹¹ Elizabeth Mock, "American Architecture Since 1932," *Art in Progress* (New York: MoMA, 1944), 183.

Between 1948 and 1951 a remarkably diverse group of houses were built. Reflecting various tastes and incomes, Cape Cod Cottages, Wrightian ranches, and isolated works by members of the modern movement began to fill the suburban landscape. Yet, as time passed and global tensions increased, many Americans grew suspicious of the rigid architectural philosophy espoused by Johnson. Elizabeth Gordon, editor of *House Beautiful*, gave voice to the such criticism, targeting the International Style and its proponents. Chapter seven, "In Spite of Glass Houses: Elizabeth Gordon and the Crusade for an American Architecture," describes her lengthy career as a journalist and her evolving attitude and opposition toward European modernism. This chapter places particular emphasis on the public attacks she launched in the pages of *House Beautiful* and the debates they generated in the mid-1950s. Her reservations, I believe, shed considerable light on the modern movement's eventual fall from favor. Gordon's mission was to promote an American aesthetic; as had been the case for McAndrew and Mock, Frank Lloyd Wright became her indisputable, if unattainable, ideal.

In the conclusion, which takes the form of a case study, I will show how the sequence of events portrayed in this study, from the 1930s on, influenced the design and construction of single-family houses in the United States. Levitt & Sons, whose reputation and fortune soared during these years, built houses that exemplify these trends. The

firm had a sure sense of what the public wanted, marketing a well-priced product that reflected current architectural trends, federal housing guidelines, and the nation's mood.

* * *

Within this study's narrative one finds a range of complementary issues, from the waning prestige of European culture in the United States to the role played by the media and cultural institutions in shaping both elite and popular taste. Furthermore, many of the tastemakers discussed are women, a group whose contribution to the era's discourse has often been overlooked. While some may choose to play down their efforts as temporary and linked to the war years, these women were unusually perceptive observers of period's architecture and social climate. While such themes are not the main focus of individual chapters, they deserve further investigation and remain present throughout.

For two centuries homeownership and the image of the house has captured the American imagination. As early as 1850 the architectural theorist Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) proclaimed that domestic architecture:

. . . seems to demand a higher consideration in a country where the ease of obtaining a house and land, and the ability of almost every industrious citizen to build his own house,

constitute a distinctive feature of national prosperity.¹²

For Downing and his contemporaries, architects had a moral responsibility. The single-family house was to be a symbol of democracy, expressive of the individual and his place in the growing nation. Yet despite this emphasis on national identity, popular styles were, for the most part, borrowed from abroad – Greek, Gothic, Italianate dwellings – reflecting European fashion and traditions. Well into the twentieth century this approach prevailed, creating residential communities in a rich variety of often imported styles.

Beginning in the 1920s, however, architects and critics began to question this pattern. Not only was a uniquely American building type, the skyscraper, transforming the appearance of many cities, but architects had begun to seek alternative sources of inspiration, from the village greens of colonial New England to the pueblos of the southwest. In light of the litany of problems faced in Europe, one can easily see why during the late 1930s a growing number of Americans began to take pride in indigenous styles and folk traditions.

After World War II this trend persisted. While a variety of explanations might be given, in the context of

¹² A. J. Downing, "On the Real Meaning of Architecture," in *The Literature of Architecture: The Evolution of Architectural Theory and Practice in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. Don Gifford (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966), 201.

the Cold War and other global threats this tendency is easy to understand. Whether prompted by James Marston Fitch's call for a "democratic esthetic" or simply reflecting national pride, during the postwar years a subtle revival of architectural symbolism occurred, resulting in house designs that were familiar, comprehensible, and most of all, American.

Still, it is worth noting that most builders did not reject the modern movement's principles entirely, chiefly those that were demonstrably inconsistent with American values. Although most postwar houses did not resemble the singular works that Hitchcock and Johnson often championed, developers did, in fact, absorb and recast many of their high-style ideas.

At a time when cultural historians are beginning to evaluate the architectural consequences of post-modernism, a number of scholars have begun to investigate the symptoms that led to its rise. Among them, W. T. Lhamon, Jr.'s study, *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s*, demonstrates how American poets, painters, novelists, and musicians crafted a new cultural cycle – a "recharged tradition" – by incorporating popular and vernacular motifs into their work.¹³ Lhamon sharply criticizes modernism for its inability to adapt to shifts in postwar American culture:

¹³ W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (London and

. . . Rather than heeding wide social needs, a cultural strain may develop autonomous values that lock into its own traditions, as did modern painting. Rather than heeding the human needs of its current context, it may follow the seductive money of its caretakers, as did modern architecture. Rather than using the medium's force to clarify the condition of its audience, a few pied pipers whose charisma at first seems liberating may eventually march the medium over a far cliff. . .¹⁴

A similar impulse may have affected the suburban landscape during the 1950s. Although only a few contemporary critics recognized it, the Ranch, the Colonial, and even the Cape Cod could be interpreted as challenges to an architectural status quo dominated by MoMA and a select group of professional journals. Rather than embracing the hard-edged minimalism tirelessly promoted by a few "pied pipers" like Johnson, most builders and buyers preferred houses that reflected their own values and expectations.

This study seeks to integrate these common buildings into the larger narrative of twentieth-century architecture. While certainly designed to satisfy the largest common denominator, within the context of postwar America the single-family house proved to be an surprisingly ally of the modern movement, integrating many of its most cherished ideas, including the open plan and the use of a wide range of industrial techniques.

Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1900), 29.

¹⁴ Ibid.; 101.

In light of the infrequent successes enjoyed by members of the modern movement, the astonishing success of suburban builders like Levitt and others must have left a great, if often unmentioned, impression on the architectural community in the United States. Resistance to the modern movement, whether by critics or developers, certainly influenced Robert Venturi (b. 1925) and Charles Moore (1925-1996), two architects who led a quiet stylistic revolution during the 1960s. While the direction their careers took certainly owed something to the architect Louis Kahn, whom they both worked with during the late 1950s, it was a refreshing playfulness and lack of orthodoxy that set them apart from their peers and predecessors. Venturi, for instance, frequently praised the aesthetic messages found on "Main Street" or in communities like Levittown. In 1976 he and Denise Scott Brown conceded that suburban houses had an important symbolic role to play, they:

. . . tell us without need of signs that here is a community that values tradition, pride of ownership and rural life.¹⁵

While some historians may seek to identify specific mentors or routes of influence to explain the development of such attitudes, I would like to suggest one more general influence — the postwar suburbs. Not that Venturi

¹⁵ Denise Scott Brown, *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City* (New York: Aperture 77), 44. As published this photo essay was credited to Venturi and Rauch.

or Moore imitated specific house designs found there, but that the existence and success of these developments made clear that modern architecture – and the International Style in particular – had failed to live up to its original promise. Although in the 1920s leaders of the modern movement believed that the new style could have universal significance, transforming the character of all types of construction regardless of purpose or income group, by the 1950s most Americans were reluctant to subscribe to the modern aesthetic and the elitism by then associated with it.

For architects like Venturi and Moore, who incorporated a range of materials and historical forms into their subsequent work, these gleaming new houses demonstrated quite clearly the enduring value of traditional architectural symbolism. While some may prefer to associate these architects and their development with more respected and quantifiable art movements like "pop art" or simply "post-modernism," we should remember that as young men they experienced first-hand the spectacle of the suburbs being created.

* * *

Scholars have often examined these issues in isolation. In the case of the postwar single-family house, its physical appearance can not be fully appreciated

without some insight into the complex processes that led to its creation. To understand the taste for a specific style or styles, we must look closely at domestic paradigms – analyzing how current events and attitudes shaped the reception of specific ideals and forms. We should not assume that because the majority of housing initiatives were intended for the middle and lower-classes that federal bureaucrats and merchant builders were oblivious to modern house design. In fact, this study will demonstrate that such aesthetic preferences were meant to reflect – and direct – the postwar nation.

CHAPTER I
 .
 BATTLES WON: AMERICA IN 1945

Give us a peace equal to the war,
 Or else our souls will be unsatisfied,
 And we will wonder what we fought for
 And why the many died . . .

Give us a peace that is not cheaply used,
 A peace that is no clever scheme,
 A people's peace for which men can enthuse,
 A peace that brings reality to our dream.

Give us a peace that will produce great
 schools—
 As the war produced great armaments
 A peace that will wipe out our slums—
 As war wiped out our foes on evil bent.¹

So wrote the poet Langston Hughes in 1945. These stanzas illustrate the grand expectations that accompanied the end of World War II. The United States had waited four long, difficult years for this moment. Now with the Great Depression over and the war behind it, America had reason to gaze upon the future with well-deserved optimism.

¹ Langston Hughes, "Give Us Our Peace," quoted in the brochure for *Aftermath: The Transition from War to Peace after World War II*, a conference held at the Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware, October 26 and 27th, 1996.

Overall, the war had been good for the country. With the surprise attack by the Japanese air force on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the nation could no longer resist foreign engagement. To protect the United States, an immense coast-to-coast defense infrastructure was swiftly planned and executed, costing the federal government more than twenty-three billion dollars.² Beyond the seventeen million Americans who served in the military, an additional twenty-five million were employed simultaneously on the home front, producing arms and armaments throughout the forty-eight states.³ This infusion of emergency capital brought long-dormant factories rapidly back to life, creating jobs for eager workers who were united in their commitment to the war effort.⁴ This investment would have a tremendous impact in the United States, both during the war and after: unemployment fell to a historic low, wages and corporate

² Donald Albrecht, "Introduction," *World War II and the American Dream* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), XVI.

³ Margaret Crawford, "Daily Life on the Home front: Women, Blacks and the Struggle for Public Housing," *World War II and the American Dream*, 91.

⁴ For a detailed and particularly candid discussion of the nation's military build-up and its difficulties, see Donald M. Nelson, *Arsenal of Democracy, The Story of American War Production* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946).

profits soared, personal savings accrued, and the nation readied itself for better times down the road.⁵

Likewise, for the soldiers who served abroad there were substantial mortal risks – 400,000 Americans lost their lives in combat and nearly 700,000 were wounded – but there were also significant and lasting benefits.⁶ Not only did most gain valuable skills and take great pride in their service, but upon their return home they could expect substantial rewards.

* * *

It goes without saying that in 1945 with the successive surrenders of Germany and Japan there was cause for celebration. Conventional images of V-E and V-J days, May 7th and August 14th 1945, are filled with good cheer. Photographs, particularly of Times Square in New York City and other urban centers, capture the fleeting but nevertheless genuine euphoria that swept the nation. Patriotic images, like *The Spirit of '46* by the painter N.C. Wyeth, emphasized national unity and optimism. Commissioned by the Hercules Powder Company, a major munitions manufacturer, this popular image represented

⁵ John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and in Peace, 1941-1960* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1988), 15.

⁶ Albrecht, "Introduction," XVI.

three proud contributors to the war effort (figure 1).⁷ In a style best-described as heroic realism, the men are depicted wearing both factory cover-alls and military gear. With a bustling smoke-spewing factory complex visible in the distance, these striding figures stood for all Americans – those who participated abroad in the armed forces as well as those who labored on the home front. Several versions circulated, including a print, a calendar and a large poster that juxtaposed this image above a pair of line drawings representing three proud and visibly weary soldiers evoking the Revolutionary war. For Wyeth and his publisher the meaning of the Second World War was unmistakable: like the war of independence and its struggle for democracy, this pairing of images suggests that 1946 would mark the dawn of new era, one filled with great potential and promise.

All the same, such cheerful idealizations distort in their simplicity – this was a time of considerable caution, anxiety and occasionally doubt. While there was much for the average citizen to take pride in, such jubilant imagery obscured the more immediate problems the nation would face. With the hugely popular four-term President Franklin D. Roosevelt dead and the awesome

⁷ Painted in 1945, *The Spirit of '46* was reproduced as a print, poster and calendar image. See Douglass Allen and Douglass Allen, Jr., *N. C. Wyeth: The Collected Paintings, Illustration and Murals* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1972), 153, 290, 288.

power of the atomic bomb a sobering reality, the United States could not simply return to its prewar, pre-Depression, innocence. The new President Harry S. Truman was particularly candid about the situation, even on V-J day. Although he did describe it as a "great day," he warned of future emergencies, calling the present crisis "as great . . . as December 7, 1941."⁸ While there was little question that the United States had become a leading global power, there were still many uncertainties.

During the economic boom that followed, such doubts were either ignored or suppressed. Yet these concerns were real and have been well-documented by historians of the postwar period. For instance, James Gilbert, in the book *Another Chance: Postwar America 1945-1968*, called the victory a "fragile trophy," suggesting that future events would soon call into question the nation's accomplishments.⁹ Likewise, in his 1976 book *The Best Years 1945-1950*, journalist Joseph C. Goulden uncovered a "general aura of negativism" by the war's end, especially concerning family life. One reason for this dark mood was the fact that many enlisted men found their return home a let-down; the obvious joy of familial welcomes quickly

⁸ Quoted in Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade - And After, America 1945-1960* (New York: Random House, 1960), 4.

⁹ James Gilbert, *Another Chance: Postwar America 1945-69* (Temple University Press, 1981), 7.

faded as boredom set in and the national divorce rate surged.¹⁰ According to Goulden, a poll taken by the National Opinion Research Center in 1947 found that a shocking 48 percent of returning veterans felt that the war made their lives significantly worse, and that "one-in-five felt completely hostile to the civilians."¹¹

Such feelings were certainly heightened by the government's failure to plan the peace. The war ended as dramatically as it began, with a single act by the United States military. The secret development and surprise use of atomic weapons brought the war to an immediate halt. With thousands dead and two major urban centers in ruins, Japan quickly surrendered. A few Pentagon strategists may have suspected this final and decisive military strike, but the majority of Americans still anticipated a long and difficult war in the Pacific, one taking many lives.¹²

While there was a great deal to commend and celebrate, some contemporary observers believed the nation should begin a brief period of collective

¹⁰ Released in October 1946, the film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, director), follows the return of three servicemen and their difficult readjustment once home. Hardly upbeat, this candid portrayal was a popular and critical success, capturing nine Academy awards.

¹¹ For a description of these opinion polls and the public attitudes they revealed, see Joseph C. Goulden, *The Best Years 1945-1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 47.

¹² Goulden contends that the military anticipated an eighteen month lag between victories in Europe and Asia. *Ibid.*, 26.

reflection. On May 8, 1945 Norman Corwin's acclaimed radio broadcast *On A Note of Triumph* was aired. The announcer began:

Take a bow, G. I.
 Take a bow, little guy,
 The superman of tomorrow lies at the feet of
 you common men of this afternoon
 You had what it took and you gave it, and each
 of you has a hunk of rainbow round your helmet
 Seems like free men have done it again.¹³

Nonetheless, much of the hour-long broadcast delivered stern warnings. Despite Germany's unconditional surrender, Corwin urged the nation to ponder its future, considering what lessons had been learned during the conflict and how this potent experience might shape the future decade.

To defeat the Axis powers the United States had relied on its citizens and its technology: sophisticated Jeeps, seemingly invulnerable tanks, and swift aircraft came rolling off the assembly line with remarkable speed and quality. These industrial achievements have been described by the historian James Gilbert as "a triumph of order, planning, and production."¹⁴ And there were many reasons to suspect these techniques would soon play a large role in new civilian applications.

On the other hand, some writers stressed the importance of the nation's collective response — how

¹³ Norman Corwin, "On a Note of Triumph," (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 9.

¹⁴ Gilbert, *Another Chance*, 8.

various types of people, regardless of gender, race and ethnicity, joined together in the country's defense. These disruptions to everyday life met surprisingly little resistance, creating what historian John Patrick Diggins called "the most popular war in American history."¹⁵

With the war's end came new challenges. Many veterans who had interrupted their private lives without hesitation to fight fascism were now ready to return home. Yet how would the triumphant nation receive them? Various government agencies were established to deal with these important issues. During his final presidential campaign President Roosevelt proposed an "economic bill of rights" promising employment, education, medical care and "the right of every family to a decent home."¹⁶ Soon after, in June 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act became law. Popularly known as the GI Bill, this legislation provided public monies for a wide range of veteran's needs, including grants for education, medical care, and housing.¹⁷

¹⁵ Diggins, *The Proud Decades*, 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁷ Nearly eight million veterans received support for education and training, costing the federal government \$14.5 billion. The Veterans Administration also guaranteed or insured \$16.5 billion in home, farm, and business loans. See William O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence 1945-1960* (New York: Macmillan Inc., 1989), 10.

Many of the nation's worries in 1945 were economic, colored by the not-so-distant memories of the difficult years that followed the First World War. Some economists held President Woodrow Wilson responsible for the economic turmoil that began during his administration and eventually climaxed in the brutal stock market crash of 1929.¹⁸ The situation must have seemed ominously familiar; as military spending began to decline, rising inflation, unemployment and labor unrest would become national concerns.¹⁹

Business leaders feared that another depression was imminent and some predicted it would occur in as few as five years. Economic coordination was viewed as essential by major industrial leaders. Henry J. Kaiser, president of Kaiser Aluminum and the future developer of Panorama City, a community of three thousand houses near Los

¹⁸ "In the America of V-J, the story went around how Franklin Roosevelt had kept a picture of Woodrow Wilson hanging in the meeting room of the War Cabinet, frequently glancing toward it when he discussed the coming years, and everybody got the point of the tale. Woodrow Wilson also had led the United States to victory in a world war. Then came the hard times of 1920-1, less than a decade of prosperity, the brutal depression of the 1930s, and the furies of World War II." Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, 5.

¹⁹ "The economy fell with a thud the next winter, and the jobless total reached 8,000,000 before recovery. There were 110,000 business bankruptcies and more than 400,000 farmers lost their land; nearly half the inflation took place after the guns stopped firing . . . [Chester Bowles, director of the Office of Price Administration] called the situation "one of the most dangerous periods in our country's economic history." See Goulden, 94-95.

Angeles, stressed the importance of research, capital investment, and long-term planning. He believed there would be three principal areas of business opportunity: health care, transportation, and housing.

Of the three, housing would receive the most media attention. The popular photo-weekly *Life* reported in December 1945:

The shortage, bad for a long time, had become desperate by October when soldiers began coming back by the hundred thousand. Unable to find homes, they became bitter and belligerent, demanding that barracks and war plants be made over for them and hinting at a march on Washington.²⁰

Nine pages of text, graphs and photographs vividly framed the difficult situation: families crowded in small apartments, "heroes" living in tents, trucks, and trailers. Much of the article highlighted how ill-prepared the nation was. Not only were building materials and skilled labor in short supply but many of the existing residences were "beyond repair."

The article concluded with a strongly worded editorial that placed much of the blame on the housing industry. Calling its practices obsolete and inefficient, *Life's* editors wrote:

Never was there an industry which so little deserved the coming boom or was so unready to rise to the occasion . . . For a nation that judges other nations by their plumbing, we have let our guard down. Good homebuilding is

²⁰ "The Great Housing Shortage," *Life* (December 12, 1945): 27.

perhaps the first criterion of a decent civilization.²¹

Alleviating the shortage, consequently, became a matter of national pride. Clearly, drastic action was necessary.

For soldiers discharged in 1945 and 1946 housing would be in visibly short supply. The reason for this shortage was easily explained, but not so readily solved. Throughout the 1930s and during the war, housing starts had remained flat, averaging less than 100,000 new units each year.²² Consequently, in 1945 the National Housing Agency (NHA) estimated that to provide adequate housing for every American family more than sixteen million new houses would need to be built over the next ten years. This goal was quite ambitious; especially since the previous record for construction in a single year was only 937,000 units in 1925.²³

Exacerbating this situation was the speed with which the soldiers began to return. With "the spectacle of an army in near mutiny,"²⁴ great pressure was put on the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Between 1944 and 1950 annual housing starts would multiply tenfold, from 114,000 to 1.69 million. See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 232-3.

²³ "The Great Housing Shortage," *Life*, 33.

²⁴ Following Germany and Japan's surrender, the United States military was rocked by disunity. Impatient to return home, there was significant tension between officers and enlisted men, a high rate of venereal disease, and several violent protests. According to

federal government to release men from military service. Bowing to public opinion, the numbers of released soldiers grew and by July 1947 only one million remained in uniform. While President Truman conceded that such rapid demobilization led to a "disintegration of our armed forces," these developments also created enormous pressure on the less-than-ready home front.²⁵

* * *

When the war ended, the nation let out a loud and collective sigh of relief. Although much had been accomplished, it remained to be seen what lasting meaning these achievements would have once people had resumed their everyday lives. The single-family house stood at the center of these questions. Both shelter and symbol — its form, function, and meaning would be based in the context of recent American experience, reflecting both the individual and his or her larger place in society. Whether consciously or not, these modest dwellings would express and stimulate the dreams, values, and ambivalences of the postwar nation.

Goulden, such "turmoil made it difficult to "turn Japan toward true democracy." See Goulden, 32-33.

²⁵ Cited in Goulden, 34.

CHAPTER II

THE THIRTIES:
MAKING A CASE FOR THE MODERN

The building of houses constitutes the major architectural work of any civilization . . . but it is only during the last generation that we have begun to conceive of a new domestic environment which will utilize our technical and scientific achievements for the benefit of human living. The laying down of a new basis for housing has been, since 1914, one of the chief triumphs of modern architecture¹

One of the most prominent advocates for change in the 1930s was New York's Museum of Modern Art. In a decade when many Americans were out-of-work and looking for alternatives to the status quo, MoMA's voice was loudly heard.² For many historians the museum's first architectural exhibition, *Modern Architecture*:

¹ Lewis Mumford, "Housing," *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932; reprint ed. Arno Press, 1969), 179.

² Published in 1973, Russell Lynes' *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum), was the first book to discuss the museum's history in-depth. While much has been written since about specific exhibitions, departments, and their curators, it remains the most detailed and well-integrated account of the museum during its first forty years.

International Exhibition (February 9-March 23, 1932) remains its most enduring. Organized by the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1903-1987) and Philip Johnson (b. 1906), a recent graduate from Harvard University with a degree in philosophy, it helped to define the direction MoMA's programming would assume over the next three decades.³

Modern Architecture presented two main themes, first, that a "modern" style had "spread to all parts of the world," and second, that such tendencies could be the basis for a "new domestic environment."⁴ Despite its origins as a factionalized avant-garde, during the late 1920s modern architects won considerable recognition, securing commissions from both private individuals and various European governments. In the United States, however, the situation was quite different. Although a small number of "modern" houses had been built in the Los Angeles area, the vast majority of American firms continued to draw their inspiration from the past, creating richly ornamented structures with a strong theatrical sensibility. In his novel *The Day of the Locust*, Nathaniel West noted this trend, lamenting:

But not even the soft wash of dusk could help
the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use

³ See Henry Matthews, "The Promotion of Modern Architecture by the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s," *Journal of Design*, v. 7, no. 1 (1994): 43.

⁴ *Modern Architecture*, 20, 179.

against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles . . .

⁵

Modern Architecture, consequently, must have startled the average museum visitor; here spread out across the gallery walls and in the catalogue was an unadorned vision of architectural purity, clarity, and consensus.

As presented at the museum's original location on the twelfth floor of the Heckscher Building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, the exhibition consisted of work by more than fifty architects. It was divided into three sections: models of works by nine "of the most prominent architects in the world," photographs of buildings by thirty-seven architects from fifteen countries, as well as a gallery devoted to "slum improvement" and housing.⁶

Accounts of the exhibition, however, generally concentrate on aesthetic issues, what the buildings looked like and how the public responded to the new style. This emphasis distorts the exhibition's actual character. Furthermore, because of the fact that the catalogue was soon out-of-print, many critics and historians found it easier to rely on Hitchcock and

⁵ Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust in The Complete Works of Nathaniel West* (New York: Farrar, Strausand, Cuduhy, 1957), 262.

⁶ See Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Rizzoli/Columbia Books on Architecture, 1992).

Johnson's *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, a concurrent publication that complemented, but did not duplicate the ideas expressed by the exhibition.⁷ These books, nonetheless, defined the modern movement for an American audience — its white aesthetic, its use of industrial materials, and its European leaders. Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe dominate; both texts include numerous photographs of their early work, such as the Villa Savoye (Poissy-Sur-Seine, 1929-31) and the Tugendhat House (Brno, Czechoslovakia, 1930).

Despite considerable overlap between the two publications, it is important to recognize that there were also deliberate differences. MoMA's director Alfred H. Barr (1902-1981) noted this in his preface to *The International Style*, writing:

It should be made clear that aesthetic qualities of the Style are the principal concern of the authors of the book. Hitchcock has written elsewhere on its history . . . He and Mr. Johnson have also made little attempt to present here the technical or sociological aspects of the style except so far as they are related to problems of design.⁸

In short, Hitchcock and Johnson's book was an aesthetic polemic — specific do's and don'ts were explained,

⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1932; reprint ed., 1966).

⁸ Barr, *The International Style*, 13. For more on Barr and his relationship with Johnson, see Sybil Gordon Kantor, "Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Establishment of the Culture of Modernism in America," (Ph.D. diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1993).

including an emphasis on volume rather than mass, an interest in regularity, and the absence of applied ornament. In effect, the authors had created a stylistic checklist wherein one could easily deduce whether a given work of architecture was "modern" or not.

Although the words "modern" and "contemporary" are often used interchangeably by later writers, the museum's decision to use the term "modern" in its own name and in the title of the 1932 exhibition was a deliberate one, reflecting its founder's commitment to contemporary art and architecture as well as its relationship (or lack thereof) with past traditions.⁹ In both publications Hitchcock and Johnson incorporated brief historical reflections, tracing the birth of the modern movement from its origins in nineteenth-century industry and engineering up to the 1920s. Rather than simply disregarding the past, they used it selectively, arranging specific achievements in a Darwinian teleology.

As an educational tool, the recent past would always have a special and often ignored significance for MoMA. From the outset, attempts were made to locate the origins of modernity, presenting the works of the painters van Gogh and Cezanne, as well as the Prairie school houses of

⁹ Concerning the term modern, Barr later wrote "it cannot be defined with any degree of finality either in time or character and any attempt to do so implies a blind faith, insufficient knowledge, or an academic lack of realism." See *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* (May 1, 1934): 4.

Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1934, for instance, the Department of Architecture organized three historical exhibitions: *Early Modern Architecture: Chicago 1870-1910*, "Early Museum Architecture," and "Photographs of 19th-Century Houses by Walker Evans." It is important to note that these early efforts were not meant to celebrate past achievements, but were designed to complement the museum's modernist agenda, highlighting a select group of pioneers and sources.¹⁰

As outlined by Barr in 1929, MoMA would pursue an innovative "multidepartmental plan." Unlike most museums that were devoted exclusively to painting and sculpture, this museum would present exhibitions of both applied and popular art forms. He later recalled:

The Plan was radical . . . because it proposed an active and serious concern with the practical, commercial and popular arts as well as with the so-called "fine arts."¹¹

In July 1932, four months after the closing of *Modern Architecture*, MoMA established a permanent Department of

¹⁰ This attitude is vividly illustrated in Barr's famous chart published in *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: MoMA, 1936) illustrating the relationship between modern art and its various sources.

¹¹ No date given, Sam Hunter, "Introduction," *Museum of Modern Art, New York: The History and the Collection* (New York: Harry N. Abrams and the Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 11.

Architecture with Philip Johnson as its unsalaried chair.¹²

Although various professional groups in America had organized architectural exhibitions from time to time, MoMA's commitment to exhibiting architecture was unprecedented. Furthermore, scholarly exhibitions gave the young museum a certain prestige and depth of concern, helping to distinguish it from New York's various commercial galleries and other temporary venues. Yet to exhibit the historic and the avant-garde was not enough for MoMA: from the start its mission was to introduce the public to modern art and to demonstrate that recent architectural developments could have genuine social relevance.

Modern Architecture touched on a wide range of themes. In contrast to *The International Style*, with its emphasis on the European avant-garde, the exhibition paid considerable attention to current projects in the United States.¹³ Five of the nine architects included in the

¹² Franz Schulze, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 87-88.

¹³ Among the 70 architects whose works were included in *The International Style* only five were American. Among them, two were house designs: Richard J. Neutra's Lovell House in Los Angeles (1929) and a experimental prototype built for the Architectural and Allied Arts exposition in New York in 1931. Designed by Kocher & Frey, the so-called Aluminaire House has been moved on several occasions and presently sits on the campus of the New York Institute of Technology in Central Islip, New York. See *AIA Architectural Guide to Nassau and Suffolk*

first section were American: Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard J. Neutra, the Bowman Brothers, Howe & Lescaze, and Raymond M. Hood.¹⁴ Terence Riley's *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art* (1992) offers an invaluable glimpse into the exhibition and its creation.¹⁵ He notes that many historians have made the mistake of suggesting that it was the trustees who persuaded the curators to include American architects. While Hitchcock and Johnson certainly did have reservations about contemporary work by many American firms, and Wright's recent work in particular, they clearly understood the distinction between a public exhibition and a privately published book. Whereas *The International Style* strongly reflects their definition of what "modern" architecture should be, the exhibition and catalogue attempted to demonstrate more broadly the movement's "extent" and its potential to ease the housing shortage in the Depression-weary United States.

In subsequent exhibitions Johnson discounted such practical concerns, preferring, as he had in *The International Style*, to emphasize the new architecture's

Counties, Long Island (New York: Dover Publications, 1992) 113.

¹⁴ It should be noted that both Neutra and Lescaze were recent emigres. The European architects were: Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and J. J. P. Oud.

¹⁵ Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*.

formal characteristics. From *Machine Art* (1934) to *Mies van der Rohe* (1947) and *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture* (1952), he would build on the themes first expressed in *The International Style*. For more than twenty years Johnson remained committed to this narrow interpretation of modern architecture, privileging works that shunned conventional ornament and incorporated industrial materials. Yet as memorable as his exhibitions and catalogues were,¹⁶ one must not overlook the Department's subsequent curatorial activities. Whereas Johnson's curatorial bravura did bring much-needed publicity and attention to the young institution,¹⁷ in the decade that followed, the Department would expand its horizons, focusing on a much wider and varied group of social and aesthetic concerns.

In terms of domestic architecture, *Modern Architecture* held great significance, offering the public cause for hope and optimism. Presented at the height of the Depression, when even the most affluent were hesitant to build, the various displays demonstrated that modern architects were enjoying considerable support, especially

¹⁶ For a discussion of these exhibitions and their installations see Schulze, 98-99, 178.

¹⁷ A staff report in 1933 boasted that the Museum "receives more publicity than any museum in the world." See Lynes, 126.

in Germany.¹⁸ In the exhibition's first two sections the majority of completed buildings were residences, both single-family and multiple-unit dwellings. This was a sensible and realistic strategy, not only did such examples accurately reflect the modern movement's progress, but individual homebuilders were the most likely candidates to embrace these ideas. In short, private houses tend to reflect a new style much more quickly than other building types. Not subject to the restrictions often placed on more costly public and corporate edifices, private commissions allow for experimentation and innovation. History has proved this to be the case. Of what was built during the 1930s, the majority of structures designed in the new style would be single-family houses, such as Neutra's VDL Research House (Los Angeles, 1932), William Lescaze's house and studio (New York, 1934) and the A. Conger Goodyear House by Edward Durell Stone (Old Westbury, New York, 1938).¹⁹

¹⁸ Johnson and Hitchcock observed, "Of the countries in which modern architecture was first developed, Germany has today the greatest amount of consciously advanced building." *Modern Architecture*, 21.

¹⁹ It should be noted that Goodyear was the chairman of the committee that helped found the museum. Robert Stern, however, dismisses the impact of the 1932 MoMA exhibition. The photographs in his 1982 essay make clear that modernism had its strongest immediate impact in the design of the single-family house. See Stern, "International Style: immediate effects," *Progressive Architecture* (February 1982): 106-109.

The exhibition's third section offered the public an in-depth look at low-cost housing, with photographs comparing American and European efforts, text panels, and a model of Otto Haesler's large scale Rothenberg development in Kassel, Germany (1930-32). Curated by the well-known writer and magazine critic Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), his invitation to participate cut two ways: on the one hand, it suggests Hitchcock and Johnson's recognition of the issue's critical importance – housing starts were at a historically low level – but it may also suggest that the curators wished to distance themselves from the controversies surrounding the fulfillment of basic needs and their eventual impact on the building trades and real estate industry.

With the housing reformer Catherine Bauer, and the garden city designers Clarence Stein and Henry Wright as his collaborators, the housing section juxtaposed images of present conditions and potential solutions. Mumford's attitude, however, was shaped by a definite sense of uncertainty. Not only did he have strong reservations about the modern movement's severe aesthetic character, but he failed to believe that industrial techniques would substantially lower the price of most dwellings.²⁰ Bauer's

²⁰ See "Mass Production and the Modern House" (1930) reprinted in *Lewis Mumford, Architecture as A Home For Man: Essays for Architectural Record*, ed. Jeanne M. Davern (Architectural Record Books, 1975), 47-54.

sister, Elizabeth Mock-Kassler recalled in 1995 how Catherine had:

. . . persuaded Mumford to enjoy what we refer to as the International Style . . . As she said to me years later, that was one thing she should never have done because the International Style was not Lewis' style, it did not come from him, it was not part of him.²¹

Consequently, he used this opportunity not to champion specific architects or housing projects but to define what he described as a "Strategy of A Collective Attack," one utilizing comprehensive planning, large-scale operations, mass production, efficient design, limited profit, cheap money, and state subvention.²² While it is certainly true that many members of the modern movement subscribed to these methods, it is equally important to keep in mind that Mumford's catalogue essay made no mention of aesthetic issues nor the International Style.

Modern Architecture's "housing" section has seldom been discussed by scholars.²³ This is especially puzzling when one considers the attention the exhibition received from contemporary critics and the public. Not only was it viewed by 33,000 visitors in New York – a decent but

²¹ Elizabeth Mock Kassler, interview by Robert Gutman, Buell Center, Columbia University, 30 March 1995.

²² *Ibid.*, 185-87.

²³ Although never entirely ignored in historical accounts, most mentions of this section are exceedingly brief. For instance, all that MoMA historian Russell Lynes wrote was that there was "a piece on housing." See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 187.

hardly astonishing number – but after closing it traveled to fourteen American cities.²⁴ To explain this oversight is to recognize that no matter how many visits are made to a given exhibition, its legacy often depends on publications and the public's continued access to them. In this case, Mumford's contributions had an extremely brief life span.

By 1934 *Modern Architecture* was out-of-print, making *The International Style* the exhibition's defacto catalogue. Not only were the contents different, but Hitchcock and Johnson had replaced Mumford's ten-page report on housing with a much more succinct examination of "modern" city planning in Germany. Perhaps they were disappointed with Mumford's lukewarm support for their aesthetic crusade. Rather than trumpeting the cause, they may have seen his socially-motivated emphasis on "any sort of domestic quarters" as diluting their polemic, dulling the drama of the emergence of a new bold twentieth-century style.

In the absence of Mumford's broader and more humanistic perspective, Hitchcock and Johnson had chosen to dissociate the modern movement from its original ideals and social intent. By playing down these issues,

²⁴ Johnson was the first MoMA curator to employ this strategy. Two versions circulated, a complete version with ten models and seventy-five photographs (14 venues, 1932-34) and photographic exhibition (17 venues, 1932-28). For a complete listing of locations see Riley.

The International Style became a kind of pattern book, one whose aesthetic mission dominated all other concerns.²⁵

* * *

Throughout the Depression MoMA continued to organize exhibitions that addressed similar concerns. These programs coincided with the establishment of several public agencies, including the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934, whose primary task was to build or stimulate residential construction. Johnson must have sensed that this was an extraordinary opportunity, not only to acknowledge government's increased participation, but to demonstrate the International Style's continued relevance. The October 1934 museum bulletin explained:

The Museum in 1932 held an Exhibition of International Modern architecture in which one whole section was devoted to the exposition of this problem. Since that date little progress has been made in the actual construction of new housing. Today, however, the interest is greatly augmented because of the government aid being given such projects. The Housing Exhibition will show why America needs housing and yet is so backward in filling this need.²⁶

²⁵ Hitchcock remembered in 1971 ". . . our book became a kind of awkward bible, which it was not intended to be, a closed style." Cited in Lynes, 87.

²⁶ Carol Aronovici, "Housing and Architecture," *Bulletin of MoMA* (October 1934): 2.

Installed in the museum's new and larger home, a townhouse at 11 West 53rd Street, the "Housing Exhibition of the City of New York" filled the fourth floor galleries (October 17-November 7, 1934). In addition to models, plans, charts, and a sequence of mural-size photographs, its organizer G. Lyman Paine, Jr. of the New York Housing Authority described the installation as consisting of:

Three actual rooms set up to contrast an apartment in a modern house with the cramped filthy flats of the old-law tenements. The furnishings are simple low-cost products now on the market.²⁷

MoMA historian Russell Lynes recounted:

To add reality to the models of "slum and super-slum" tenement rooms constructed for display, live cockroaches were added.²⁸

These elements pushed the museum's efforts toward a new level. Although modest in comparison with the full-size housing displays at the previous year's Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, this exhibition would pave the way for even more ambitious installations down the road, several of which would include complete, furnished houses erected in the museum's sculpture garden. Six years later, a description of past museum publications would

²⁷ G. Lyman Paine, "Outline of the Exhibition" *America Can't Have Housing* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1934), 78.

²⁸ Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 90.

praise the housing exhibition's installation, remarking that the presentation was "famous for its realism."²⁹

Rather than focusing on interior decoration or specific stylistic issues, as was the case in several industrial design exhibitions organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA's 1934 exhibition attempted to depict current conditions, identify obstacles that were inhibiting change, and demonstrate the social advantages of quality housing. Although no catalogue documents what was presented, the museum published *America Can't Have Housing*, edited by Columbia professor Carol Aronovici, featuring seventeen essays by a number of well-known reformers. Many of the authors targeted the federal government and its failure to improve housing. Whereas housing advocate Edith Elmer Wood used her essay to describe recent trends and public programs, Mumford's tone was much harsher. He demanded radical change, attacking both government inertia and corporate greed. Describing American capitalism as "parasitic and predatory," Mumford's essay was a call for a new economic order.³⁰

Unlike other cultural institutions whose collections and exhibitions were mostly concerned with the past and

²⁹ *The MoMA Bulletin* (November 1940): 10.

³⁰ See Edith Elmer Wood, "The Housing Situation in the United States," and Lewis Mumford, "The Social Imperatives in Housing," in *America Can't Have Housing*, 24-27.

its achievements, MoMA could not help but immerse itself in the complicated and controversial present. One of the most insightful accounts of the museum and its early relationship with rival institutions in New York City can be found in A. Deirdre Robson's *Prestige, Profit, and Pleasure: The Market for Modern Art in New York in the 1940s and 1950s*. According to Robson, during the 1930s MoMA considered itself an artistic "proving ground," a unique public arena where new ideas could be presented, digested, and later absorbed into the mainstream.³¹ However, it must be emphasized, the museum's curators did not and could not speak with a unified voice. Even though each department hoped to choose and identify which artistic trends would have lasting value, these choices were a reflection of each curator's personality and his or her particular prejudices.

As a public institution, the question soon became whether MoMA's programs should reflect or direct current trends. Although Johnson's early activities were often strongly polemical, in the long run such heroic ambitions would be difficult to maintain. As time passed, MoMA became increasingly sensitive to its public. One source of this change in attitude may be traced to the "Report on the Development of the Museum of Modern Art" written

³¹ Robson, *Prestige, Profit, and Pleasure: The Market for Modern Art in New York in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 26.

by Dartmouth Professor of Art, Artemas Packard. Commissioned by trustee Nelson Rockefeller in 1935, the 138 page "Packard Report" urged the museum's curators to pay more attention to the public and "to the characteristic interests and needs of contemporary society." Although the troublesome phrase "Modern art" was not phased out, towards the end of the decade many of Packard's recommendations were taken to heart, including his suggestion that "popular instruction" be developed "in accordance with the public need."³²

This shift in emphasis had a strong, if somewhat delayed impact on the museum's Department of Architecture. Although Johnson resigned in December 1934, the museum would take more than two years before placing an astute leader at the Department's helm.³³ In July 1937 John McAndrew was appointed the museum's new curator of architecture. Trained as an architect at Harvard University, the former Vassar professor's appointment was certainly well-timed.³⁴ Unlike his predecessor, his

³² According to Lynes, although Packard did not formally announce his findings until February 1938, suggestions to the staff began during 1936. See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 161.

³³ In 1935 the architect and trustee Philip Goodwin administered the department, followed by his secretary Ernestine M. Fantl from 1936 to February 1937.

³⁴ McAndrew studied architecture at Harvard and traveled with Philip Johnson during his 1929 trip to Germany. After his return he worked with Aymar Embury, a New York architect whose firm specialized in costly private residences with a strong historical character.

interests were quite varied and he organized exhibitions on a wide range of architectural topics. For instance, in collaboration with Walter and Ise Gropius and Herbert Bayer, McAndrew presented *The Bauhaus: 1918-1938*, an ambitious survey of the school's approach to art and industrial design, accompanied by an extensive catalogue. It opened in December 1938 and was strongly criticized in the New York press. The art historian Erwin Panofsky called the exhibition a "flop d'estime," while an unidentified critic described the school's work as "heavy, forced, and repellant."³⁵

These hostile responses may have been shaped by the increasingly tense situation in Europe. By late 1938 Germany had not only occupied the Rhineland and annexed Austria, but as sanctioned by French and British governments at Munich, its armies were poised to enter Czechoslovakia as well. According to Gropius' biographer Reginald Issacs, Barr feared that these disturbing and well-publicized events would elicit criticism from: "pro-Nazi sources; from pro-French/anti-German sources; from American isolationists; and from antimodernists as well

Due to the Depression, McAndrew was laid off in 1932. At Vassar College he taught art and architectural history, as well as architectural drafting. Lynes, 178.

³⁵ See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 182. Also see "Pro and Con in the New York Press," *Bulletin of MoMA* (December 1938): 3.

as from those who regarded the Bauhaus as obsolete."³⁶ He encouraged Gropius to draft a statement concerning the number of Jews who worked or studied at the Bauhaus as well as the architect's own opposition to Nazi policy. Gropius, however, would not comply with Barr's request. Wishing to remain "non-political" – and perhaps fearful of reprisals against friends and relatives still in Germany – no public statement was issued.

Political concerns and prejudices had a definite impact on MoMA's subsequent programming.³⁷ From the opening of the 53rd Street building in 1939 through the end of the war, the Department of Architecture, by and large, ignored European developments, focusing almost exclusively on American architecture. One exhibition that anticipated this trend was "Trois siècles d'art aux Etats Unis," mounted at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris in

³⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the interchange between Barr and Gropius, see Reginald Issacs, *Walter Gropius: An Illustrated Biography of the Creator of the Bauhaus* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 240. Although Gropius was eager to become an American citizen, his reluctance to attack the Nazis publicly could have been misconstrued as a gesture of lingering support.

³⁷ As a circulating exhibition "The Bauhaus" was a similar failure, attracting only four bookings. It also is worth noting that Germany was not invited to participate in the 1939 World's Fair in New York. See Warren I. Susman, "The People's Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society," *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair 1939/40*, (New York and London: Queens Museum and New York University Press, 1980), 21.

the Summer of 1938.³⁸ Organized by McAndrew and his former student (and Wright apprentice) Elizabeth B. Mock, the architectural section featured a chronological presentation of American building from the colonial period up till the 1930s. Although considerable attention was given to such distinctly American achievements as the skyscraper, French visitors were most impressed by the nation's more modest efforts, especially the adobe pueblos of the southwestern states, the stone barns of Pennsylvania, and the simple wooden houses of New England.³⁹ As examples of America's own "domestic vernacular," McAndrew applauded the integrity and straightforward character of these residential designs.

Under McAndrew, the Department was transformed. Although he clearly appreciated aspects of modern architecture, especially in terms of function and planning, he nonetheless described the movement's earlier

³⁸ A domestic version of the Paris exhibition later circulated to 11 venues in the United States from 1939 to 1941. In his March 11, 1939 *New Yorker* review Lewis Mumford called the exhibition "a very able and gratifying presentation of a subject that no one — I said no one — has yet fully encompassed in print." See *Built in USA — Since 1932* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944; reprint ed., Arno Press, 1968), 125.

³⁹ Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 186. This was clearly McAndrew's intent. In the museum's bulletin he described the exhibition's layout and content: "he is confronted by a doorway on which BUT is written: while all this was going on, in centers more removed from European influence robust local styles were being evolved . . . an admirable phase of American architecture with which most Europeans are unfamiliar. *Bulletin of MoMA*, April-May 1939, 6.

character as "over-intellectual and over strict."⁴⁰ During his first full year as curator he organized a number of noteworthy exhibitions, including shows devoted to Wright's vacation house for the Pittsburgh department store owner Edgar Kaufmann, "Fallingwater," the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, as well as the first in a series of "good" design surveys titled "Useful Household Objects Under \$5.00." He also presented a group of proposed designs and drawings for several major public buildings, including a Fine Arts Center at Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts (1938), a National Festival Theater and Art Center at William and Mary College, Virginia (1939), and the New Smithsonian (National) Gallery of Art (1939).⁴¹ Unlike Johnson who often promoted a specific aesthetic agenda, McAndrew's programs were much more fluid and exploratory.⁴²

McAndrew also organized a great number of circulating exhibitions. Such activities had two primary goals: to broaden the museum's audience and to help finance these programs by leasing them to other institutions. During the late 1930s and early 1940s these

⁴⁰ John McAndrew, *Guide to Modern Architecture: Northeast States* (New York: MoMA, 1940), 11.

⁴¹ Both were organized as circulating exhibitions in 1939. For more information, see lists in *Built in USA - Since 1932*, 125-126.

⁴² For McAndrew's troubled relationship with Philip Johnson, see Schulze, 172-73.

exhibitions frequently focused on American themes, especially domestic architecture. Some notable examples include: "A New House by Frank Lloyd Wright on Bear Run, Pennsylvania" (18 locations, 1938-40), "Modern Houses in America" (24 locations, 1938-41) and "The Wooden House in America" (21 locations, 1940-44).

What is Modern Architecture?, prepared by McAndrew and Mock in 1942, attempted to explore and digest the lessons of the past decade. Although the exhibit did not break new ground, its real significance lies in the audience it was directed to – the general public. The thirty-six page booklet, based on the travelling exhibition's photographs and text panels, was a succinct and persuasive argument for a new approach to architecture. It confidently concluded:

Above all the modern architect wishes to transmute the practical into the beautiful. In this he does not greatly differ from the great builders of the past. But today our practical demands have changed and our ideas of beauty have changed with time, as they always do. A living architecture will embody our new attitudes toward the world we live in.⁴³

The exhibition, which later inspired *What is Modern Painting?* and *What is Modern Design?* was a huge success. Five identical editions toured the United States, stopping at a total of seventy-one sites by 1945, making

⁴³ John McAndrew, *What is Modern Architecture?* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 18.

it the Department's most successful circulating exhibition to date.⁴⁴

One explanation behind this increased educational emphasis may be found in the museum's uncertain economic situation. Unlike the recently established Whitney Museum of American Art (1930) and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1939), MoMA lacked an endowment. Therefore, to acquire works of art for the collection and to organize exhibitions, considerable energy was spent raising outside funds. Robson has suggested that without "a regular source of funding" the museum remained "for many years at the mercy of occasional individual generosity."⁴⁵ This situation would have a dramatic impact on the young institution's character. She observed that:

. . . whereas the Whitney and Guggenheim museums tended to be more consistent in their developments, MoMA was much more open to changes in direction and emphasis, and could even be described as opportunistic and erratic.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ After McAndrew's resignation in July 1941, a booklet on the exhibition was published. In the acknowledgments on page two, it was described as the first in a series of publications that "will eventually form a comprehensive introduction to various phases of modern art." 10,000 copies were published, more than three times the average museum publication devoted to architecture. Still, this seems insignificant when compared to the 150,000 copies of *What is Modern Painting?*, published in 1943.

⁴⁵ Robson, *Prestige, Profit and Pleasure*, 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

Not only did Johnson rely on private donations to organize and send *Modern Architecture* to locations outside the museum, but he and industrial design curator Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. would retain influence by contributing their own funds for departmental purchases.⁴⁷

In addition to accepting gifts from individuals, the Department of Architecture also continued to pursue alliances with public agencies. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the museum and the opening of its new building, *Art In Our Time* was organized in 1939, an ambitious exhibition with a catalogue featuring examples of European and American painting, folk art, prints, photography, and film. With the newly formed United States Housing Authority (USHA) as partner, the Department of Architecture presented "Houses and Housing." Curated by McAndrew and the Assistant Director of the USHA Informational Service Division and later critic, Frederick Gutheim, the exhibition's goal was to demonstrate the importance of all types of domestic architecture, whether a single-family house or apartment building. They concluded:

Few things are as vital to the future of our country and of every city in it as the proper

⁴⁷ According to Robson "From the early 1940s onward, there were relatively small MoMA purchase funds, in the main provided by museum trustees or staff: Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., offered \$750 quarterly for purchases in the design and architecture fields, while Johnson contributed \$1,000 for the purchase of paintings and another \$1,000 for industrial design. See Robson, 30.

solution of the housing problem. And good design is a vital part of the problem . . . Let us hope that we can take full advantage of this magnificent opportunity to improve our country not only with unprecedented social benefits but also a living and handsome architecture.⁴⁸

While the essay was probably written by Gutheim, the exhibition serves to demonstrate how the museum's interests and that of several government agencies had begun to converge.⁴⁹ No longer the lonely aesthetic trail-blazer, on the eve of the Second World War MoMA had begun to approach the mainstream. Not that the museum had given up on "modern" architecture and its leaders, only that the context in which it worked had changed as well. With \$800 million in public funds set aside for new housing, the museum was clearly eager to influence public debate. MoMA's director, Barr, spoke in no uncertain terms, describing the moment as a "national architectural emergency."⁵⁰ Gutheim and McAndrew shared this view, claiming:

In domestic architecture, nothing today is more important than public housing. As the skyscraper is the typical American monument of

⁴⁸ Frederick Gutheim and John McAndrew, "Houses and Housing," *Art in Our Time* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), 317.

⁴⁹ At the time of the exhibition the USHA's staff included Nathan Straus, administrator, Catherine Bauer, director of the Informational Service Division, and Frederick Gutheim, assistant director, Informational Service Division. *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵⁰ Barr, "Art In Our Time: The Plan of the Exhibition," *Ibid.*, 14.

the boom of the 20's, public housing may well be the true monument of the 40's.⁵¹

In the catalogue no style was singled-out for praise. Quality was what mattered most – from Wright's Jacobs House (Madison, Wisconsin, 1937, figure 28) to Gropius' own residence in Lincoln, Massachusetts (figure 4) and various "super-block" projects built by the Public Works Administration (PWA).

While stylistic issues still had some relevance, at MoMA support for radical formal change had quieted. In his less than four years as curator, McAndrew had steered the department away from Johnson's narrow aesthetic vision, defining architecture in terms of both form and function. While he did not ignore its benefits and appeal, McAndrew often highlighted lesser-known parallel developments, especially regional variations as seen in the work of American architects and even an occasional Scandinavian. Nevertheless, the modern movement – as shaped by the exhibition and catalogue *Modern Architecture* and the book *The International Style* – had left an indelible mark on the museum and its public identity. On the eve of the Second World War, the nation's architectural community stood at a crossroads. While the modern movement had gained significant respect,

⁵¹ Ibid., 311. This quote appeared almost verbatim in McAndrew's earlier essay "Architecture in the United States" prepared for the Paris exposition of 1938. See *Bulletin of MoMA* (February 1939): 12.

it remained difficult to gauge its future character and progress.

CHAPTER III

A TENTATIVE EMBRACE

Images of modern architecture were widely disseminated during the 1930s. Hitchcock and Johnson had given American architects a new and startling aesthetic vocabulary, but it remained to be seen what impact these radical ideas would have on the most popular American building – the single-family house. While some historians have disputed the exhibition's short-term influence, there is no question that it played a major role in shaping the decade's architectural discourse.¹

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the ways in which architects, builders, and the general public became further acquainted with the modern movement and how this growing familiarity would influence the design of the single-family house. Following a brief analysis of its progress and appeal, I will show how the unevenness of its public reception left the movement on

¹ Robert Stern, "International Style: immediate effects," *Progressive Architecture* (February 1982): 106-109.

precarious ground, making its long-term goals and future uncertain.

Thousands attended Hitchcock and Johnson's 1932 exhibition, at the Museum of Modern Art and during its fourteen city tour of the United States.² In the long run, it would become known as the International Style exhibition, a clear reference to the concurrent publication which remained in-print well after the museum's catalogue. Nonetheless, most of the period's literature failed to adopt this term, preferring the more inclusive, and perhaps less threatening, label: modern architecture.

Despite some early success, a relatively small number of modern houses were built during the 1930s. Consequently, the movement's reputation would depend almost entirely on its promotion and reception in the media. For without this steady stream of reports, both pro and con, its formal ideas and principles might never have reached a wider audience.

Initially, the response to the new architecture was divided. While some writers believed that the architect's embrace of the machine was long overdue, other critics felt that such bold mechanistic expression was both

² For a complete list of the exhibition's itinerary, see Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Rizzoli and Columbia Books of Architecture, 1992), 220-222.

unattractive and unnecessary. In 1932 the critic William Williams speculated:

How did they come into being — such houses?
Certainly no owner with an eye to comfort ever
specified one in detail.³

By the decade's end, however, architects, critics and even the general public would soften their opposition. We can attribute this change, in part, to the country's growing familiarity with European modernism. At American universities, in public expositions, and in national magazines, these new ideas were widely discussed.⁴ Gradually, architects began to experiment, first with International Style interiors decorated with tubular steel furnishings, and later with houses. Furthermore, of the nine architects featured in the first section of "Modern Architecture," seven were practicing in the United States, including two figures associated with the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, who had both emigrated by 1938. These architects joined major universities — Gropius at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge and Mies at the Armour Institute in Chicago (after 1940, the Illinois Institute of

³ William Williams, from *Pencil Points*, quoted in Stern, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli Books, 1987), 344.

⁴ Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "Modernism Rears Its Head -- The Twenties and Thirties," *The Making of an Architect, 1881-1981*, edited by Richard Oliver (New York: Columbia University and Rizzoli Books, 1981), 103-118.

Technology) — training dozens of American architects over the next two decades.

The arrival of these architects in the United States seemed to bode well for the modern movement. Surely, its time had come. Yet despite such optimism, not all Americans were ready to embrace the new architecture without some adjustment. This uncertainty was widely expressed in both popular magazines and the architectural press. For instance, in 1938 two magazines with disparate audiences, *Life* and *Architectural Forum*, collaborated on "Eight Houses for Modern Living" in which eight American firms were asked to design houses for four "typical American families" whose income ranged from \$2,000 to \$12,000 each year.⁵ Each income group was represented by two designs, one "modern" and the other "traditional." Those who worked in the modern idiom included Edward Durrell Stone, William Wurster, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Harrison & Fouilhoux. The remaining participants were Richard Koch, H. Roy Kelly, Royal Barry Wills, and Aymar Embury II.

The editors hoped that these contrasting schemes would whet the nation's appetite for better house design. Consequently, they had two interrelated objectives: to shape taste in general, and more specifically, to

⁵ For a detailed description of the designs, see *Architectural Forum* (November 1938): 312-34. For a full-color advertisement selling the house plans, see *Life* (October 10, 1938): 68-69.

influence the types of houses produced by speculative builders. While a poll of readers equally favored traditional and modern designs, the builders were much clearer in their preferences. Among the nineteen examples ultimately built for public inspection and sale, nearly all were traditional designs. Most popular were a \$5,000 to \$6,000 shuttered brick and clapboard model by Wills and a \$3,000 to \$4,000 "California Colonial" by Kelley. Notably, only one modern design was selected to be built, Stone's \$2,000 to \$3,000 "house without walls" (figure 2). With an open floorplan, generous windows and central service core, the editors praised its practical character and low cost, calling Stone's design "a super efficient machine for living."⁶

In July 1940 the magazines presented a second group of house designs,⁷ including works by the architects Cameron Clark, Gardner A. Daily, Holabird & Root, George Howe & Robert M. Brown, Perry Shaw & Hepburn, Treanor & Fatio, Shreve Lamb & Harmon and Shaw Naess & Murphy. Not only had all of the designs been executed and photographed at the time of publication, but in contrast to the first group of houses, 121 models were built or being built - an increase of more than 500 percent.⁸

⁶ Stone's design was built in Albany, New York. See *Life* (December 12, 1938): 35.

⁷ *Architectural Forum* (July 1940): 1-20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

Further comparison of the 1938 and 1940 series reveals a marked change of strategy in which stylistic labels and trends were given far less attention. In the second series each house was accompanied by plans and photographs, yet no effort was made to identify a particular architectural style. Instead, practical concerns were stressed, specific room dimensions, construction costs, and loan-suitability.⁹

In contrast to the first group, most of the 1940 models were traditional designs. All-but-one had sloping or pitched roofs, conventional ornament, and wood siding. Even George Howe, a once-devoted modernist who featured prominently in MoMA's 1932 exhibition with his partner William Lescaze, created a barn-like design, complete with central chimney, front porch, and dormer windows. Such a dwelling would not have been out of place in a New England pasture.

The lukewarm response that *Life* received from its first series of houses probably prompted the editors to consider a new strategy. Although a large percentage of readers favored modern designs, most builders clearly did not. *Life* had indeed given the new architecture a solid try, but without emphatic support from this critical

⁹ Although the FHA was established in 1934, not until the late 1930s was the impact of such programs felt on new construction. See Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1981), 242.

group, it quickly retreated toward a more familiar image of domesticity.

A similar example of modern architecture's ambiguous reception and status was found at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. "The Town of Tomorrow" consisted of fifteen single-family houses, each sponsored by a different manufacturer. Arranged along three suburban style cul-de-sacs, the Town's organizers hoped to demonstrate the economical use of specific products, from building materials to household appliances.

From the outset, the Town was criticized, for the prohibitive cost of the demonstration houses and their frank commercial orientation.¹⁰ MoMA, which had little to say publicly, was certainly disappointed with the results. On several occasions the museum had attempted to influence the Fair's organizers, including Hitchcock's 1936 essay where he described the significance of past expositions in the museum bulletin.¹¹ Furthermore, few of

¹⁰ Of the fifteen houses constructed only six met the requirement that each cost less than \$10,000. Fair critic, Gardner Harding, called this failure a "breach of fate." See Warren I. Susman, "The People's Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society," *Dawn of a New Day*, 24-25. Also see Rosemarie Bletter, "The World of Tomorrow: The Future with a Past," *High Styles: Twentieth Century American Design* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985), 92-93.

¹¹ See *Bulletin of MoMA* (January 1936): 1-8. In Spring 1936 a small exhibition was organized on this subject. A year later, in 1937 McAndrew was said to have organized an exhibition in "protest" against plans for the Town. Cited in *Built in USA - Since 1932* (New York:

the architects chosen for praise by the Modern would play a role in planning the Fair or its housing exhibits. Perhaps, in part due to their absence and MoMA's critiques, none of the houses built for the Fair would become icons of the modern movement.¹²

Nevertheless, this group of houses does serve as an appropriate yardstick to gauge modern architecture's progress in the United States. *Architectural Forum* tried to make the best of a mediocre situation, suggesting that here was an excellent opportunity to judge the rival styles:

Of the fifteen, four houses are modern, and two others are, with scant justification, so labeled by the Fair. The remaining nine are traditional, nearly all Colonial. Here for the first time the public can see modern and traditional side by side.¹³

Regardless of the large number of traditional designs, *Architectural Forum* maintained that the exhibit demonstrated a growing interest in modern architecture. Among visitors, 41 percent of the respondents expressed a clear preference for houses with a "modern" character. However, on closer inspection, the design which won first place and nearly 17 percent of the vote, Landefeld &

MoMA, 1944), 125. However, I have been unable to locate any further details.

¹² Gropius did, in fact, participate in the 1939 Fair, designing a pavilion for the state of Pennsylvania modeled after Philadelphia's Independence Hall. Only its interiors were in a modern style.

¹³ "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," *Architectural Forum* (July 1939): 63.

Hatch's Bride's House (figure 3), owed a considerable debt to Wright.¹⁴ While the magazine labeled it "completely modern," boundaries between the "modern" and traditional were clearly beginning to dissolve, especially in Landefeld & Hatch's use of decorative brickwork, extended eaves, as well as in the living room's cathedral ceiling. Such juxtapositions between the new and familiar, the convenient and the comforting, would prophesy the debates that would shape the American house in the coming decade.

* * *

Regardless of these successes and setbacks, technology remained a central aspect of modern architecture's appeal. For instance, in 1934 a young Nashville architect, James Marston Fitch, Jr., observed:

Structurally the house has a long way to go and an almost impossible set of requirements to fill. Our affections are with wood and stone; yet prefabrication seems inevitable, for economy lies that way. More accuracy and less waste will have to appear . . .¹⁵

¹⁴ Landefeld and Hatch likewise designed the Pittsburgh House of Glass (house #4) which was described by *Architectural Forum* as the Fair's "most imaginative house." This sleek, Euro-modern design featured an "extremely open plan . . . tremendous window areas . . . and cantilevered slabs of concrete." *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵ *Architecture*, vol. 69 (January 1934): 7.

Although Fitch would always retain some ambivalence about the modern movement, establishing Columbia University's School of Historic Preservation in 1963, during the Depression years he and many colleagues were sympathetic toward the idea of a technical fix.¹⁶ Moreover, with housing starts at an all-time low in 1933 and a growing number of Americans living in substandard conditions, there was increasing pressure on the housing industry to exploit both new materials and methods of construction.

In 1938 a cartoon "58 Years of Progress" appeared in *The New Republic* illustrating the nation's failure to address the ongoing housing crisis.¹⁷ Through a sequence of six loosely drawn images the unidentified artist compared the evolution of urban tenements to battleship design. The argument was a simple one: nautical design – with the help of government financing – had evolved greatly. Current models were sleek, technological marvels worthy of the twentieth century. Whereas in the past fifty years there had been considerable investment in costly military hardware, at the same time housing

¹⁶ See James Marston Fitch, "A Short History of Historic Preservation at Columbia University," *The Making of An Architect 1881-1981* (New York: Columbia University and Rizzoli International Publications, 1981), 235-42.

¹⁷ Reproduced in Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 243, fig. 7.38.

conditions had been seriously overlooked, left for the most part unchanged.

By the late 1930s manufacturers began to occasionally compare their technologically sophisticated consumer products with the latest examples of contemporary architecture. Despite reluctance from the Federal Housing Administration and local banks to finance modern house designs, an advertisement for the General Electric Company in the *Architectural Forum* (figure 4) commended Gropius' recently completed residence in Lincoln, Massachusetts.¹⁸ Despite making some concessions to local tradition, especially in his use of clapboard, brick and fieldstone, the unadorned, flat-roofed house must have stood out in the Boston suburbs.¹⁹ In fact, it was said to be the first "modern" house built in New England. The Swiss architectural historian Siegfried Giedion remembered:

When I was staying with him in the autumn of 1938 crowds of visitors used to come over every weekend, and often on weekdays as well to see the new finished "modern house;" for up till then not a

¹⁸ Advertisement for General Electric in *Architectural Forum* (July 1939): 72. For a brief discussion of the house and its difficult genesis, see Reginald Issacs, *Walter Gropius: An Illustrated Biography* (Boston: Little Brown, 1991), 232-36.

¹⁹ James and Katherine Morrow Ford claimed that Gropius' design "deliberately tries to fit into the order of white colonial houses in the vicinity without imitating them." James Ford and Katherine Morrow Ford, *The Modern House in America* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, sixth printing 1947), 41-43.

single example could be found in a radius of upwards of a hundred miles.²⁰

Clearly, General Electric was trying to profit from Gropius' reputation among architects and the general public. The banner near the top of the page proclaimed "House by Walter Gropius/Kitchen by General Electric." Three photographs were included: the rear facade complete with ribbon windows and lally columns, as well as two views of an immaculate sun-drenched kitchen. Gropius was extolled as "internationally famous" and the text compared his new state-of-the-art house to the "modern beauty and efficiency" of the all-electric kitchen included within. It is important to note that no effort was made to deemphasize the design's industrial character. No longer was Gropius' architecture portrayed as hard, cold, and mechanical; it was now beginning to be associated with quality and progress.²¹

The first publication to focus exclusively on modern house design was *The Modern House in America* (1940), written by James Ford (1884-1944) and Katherine Morrow Ford (b. 1904). At first glance, the book's title, sans serif typeface, and architectural heroes suggest these author's views will not be greatly different than those

²⁰ Giedion was the Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard in 1930 and 1939. From his lectures and seminars the book *Space, Time and Architecture* was completed in the Spring of 1940. See *Space, Time and Architecture*, VII and 502-3.

²¹ For contrasting opinions on the Gropius house, see Issacs, 236.

found in *The International Style*. Even the notable absence of Frank Lloyd Wright seems to confirm this impression. However, on close inspection the Fords' attitude towards house design was far more complex. Rather than limiting their selection to houses that imitate the work of Oud, Gropius and Le Corbusier, they chose examples that demonstrated the modern movement's potential for growth and variation.

The book was a popular success. Demand was great: between 1940 and 1947 it was reprinted six times and the book continues to be available today. While not a pattern-book per se, nor a manual, the Fords hoped to influence both working architects and future home builders. The introduction focused on explaining "the purposes and spirit, as well as the techniques, of modern architecture."²² This was followed by single and double page spreads devoted to specific designs. The architects who received the most attention were George Frederick Keck (3 designs), Hugh Stubbins & Royal Barry Wills (3 designs), Gropius (4 designs), and Richard Neutra (8 designs). Photos of each residence were accompanied by a description of its location, a detailed floorplan, and

²² Ford and Ford, *The Modern House in America*, 6. Also of note by the Fords are *The Design of Modern Interiors* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1942); *The American House Today*, (New York: Reinhold, 1951); *Quality Budget Houses: A Treasury of 100 Architect Designed Houses from \$5,000 to \$20,000* (New York: Reinhold, 1954). The last two publications were written with Thomas H. Creighton.

information regarding the occupants, site, and cost of construction. A series of quotes from these architects followed, highlighting the differences between the American architects and their European peers.

In sharp distinction to these examples was the selection of earlier projects that conclude the book. Twelve examples were chosen to illustrate the roots of the modern movement in America – some of the first houses to adopt or reflect the aesthetic rules codified by Hitchcock and Johnson in 1932. Arranged chronologically, from 1929 to 1936, most of houses featured white exteriors, steel sash windows, and unornamented facades. These works were included, not simply to reiterate modern architecture's impact, but to show how the movement's approach to house design had evolved since its introduction eight years earlier.²³

In 1940 the notion of an "International" style must have seemed naive at best – a lost cause. Across the Atlantic, waves of fascist nationalism had thrown Europe into a brutal world war. In part due to the fighting, the Fords now regarded the United States as "the source and custodian of all major developments in the new architecture."²⁴ In fact, they seem to have consciously

²³ Of the twelve firms represented, only three (Neutra, Howe & Lescaze, Kocher & Frey) had been featured in *The International Style*.

²⁴ Ford and Ford, *Modern House in America*, 14.

ignored its former global aspirations, focusing on how these selections distinguished the modern movement as American.

Of particular note was the way they treated Wright. While it is true that the Fords failed to include a single example of his work, they claimed they did so because it was readily available elsewhere. Yet, on the whole, his influence is strongly felt throughout their book, not in terms of specific buildings, but in the ways in which works by other architects were described and explained. Whereas Hitchcock and Johnson dismissed him as "a lone pioneer,"²⁵ the Fords shared Wright's dream of a "distinctly American" architecture.

Rather than ignoring regional variations and traditions, many of the houses selected employed wood siding, rustic fieldstone floors and an occasional pitched roof. In the section titled "America's Contribution to Modern Architecture," the architects Victorine Homsey and Samuel Homsey, focused their remarks on the importance of local geography and individualism:

It seems to us that American modern design is at present distinctive from European in that it is individual and less "a machine for living." Perhaps it is because our country with a wider range of climate and character of landscape than any European country must have a wider variation of design.²⁶

²⁵ Hitchcock and Johnson, *Modern Architecture*, 29.

²⁶ Ford and Ford, *The Modern House in America*, 125.

The Fords, like McAndrew and others, acknowledged that American needs and traditions would inevitably reshape the hard, cold truths of the once avant-garde International Style.

Hitchcock acknowledged this change as well. In contrast to Johnson, he had always recognized the need to balance "free tendencies" and sentiment, even if such strategies recalled "one or several styles from the far past."²⁷ In 1938 the Harvard University Graduate School of Design organized an exhibition devoted to Marcel Breuer, the Hungarian-born architect who recently joined its faculty. Although devoted almost exclusively to his earlier work in Europe, Hitchcock's essay focused on the character of Breuer's more recent American commissions. He began by considering the relationship between modern and vernacular forms. Asserting that the differences between the two approaches were "not unbridgeable" he praised Breuer and other European emigrés for being:

. . . far less intransigent toward American traditional values... than have the American architects born and brought up here.²⁸

For his New England clients, Breuer made considerable use of natural materials, integrating native woods and

²⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (New York: Payson & Clarke, Ltd., 1929), XVI.

²⁸ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Marcel Breuer & the American Tradition", Harvard University Graduate School of Design (June 1938): 2.

fieldstone paving into his domestic commissions. Hitchcock sensed that modern architects were entering a new phase; one in which the rational character of earlier solutions might be replaced by "mixed types" respectful of regional needs and traditions.²⁹

Although used widely, by the end of the decade the term "modern" architecture had begun to lose its precise meaning. In 1940 the Fords could not help but recognize this trend. As once defined by Hitchcock and Johnson, it was to be a global or "International" style based on universal aesthetic principles and rules. While many architects and critics were drawn to the use of up-to-date materials and techniques, only a minority of Americans seemed ready to adopt Hitchcock and Johnson's philosophy without further modification.

Hybrid forms, blending modern and traditional elements slowly began to dominate the nation's architectural discourse during the late 1930s. While some viewers lamented these necessary and selective compromises, overall, the modern movement was enriched by its encounters with American tradition. Even Hitchcock took pride in Breuer's response to his new home.

Still, where were such developments leading? Depicted by the Fords as "a movement so obviously in transition," in 1941 it remained to be seen whether

²⁹ Ibid, 17.

European modernism would thrive here.³⁰ And even if it would, were these changes in keeping – or, at odds – with its original social and aesthetic mandates?

* * *

During World War II modern, traditional, and hybrid solutions would all compete for attention. While the government did establish national housing standards, in terms of domestic imagery, no single approach received priority. The government's first involvement in the housing market began in the mid-1930s. These early public programs and their policies would have a significant impact on the nation's attitude toward domestic architecture during the 1940s, both in terms of defense housing and what *might* be built once the war came to an end.

In 1934 housing advocate Catherine Bauer published *Modern Housing*.³¹ Like Lewis Mumford, whom she assisted in the housing section of the 1932 MoMA exhibition, Bauer's book had two primary objectives: to raise current standards and to encourage commercial builders to adopt

³⁰ Ford and Ford, 123.

³¹ Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934).

new construction techniques.³² Although many of the book's examples were drawn directly from MoMA's exhibition files, for the most part, she focused her study on housing conditions in the United States. On the whole *Modern Housing* was not about aesthetics, but about social reform — how dwellings are built and financed. This was a challenge to a much less visible status quo, one in which business and professional interests were clearly at stake.

The impact of Bauer's ideas were felt most strongly under Roosevelt's New Deal. With little experience in the housing field, the Federal government learned as it went, building and financing homes for a wide range of constituents and in a great variety of settings. For instance, the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA) focused its efforts on slum clearance and the construction of low-rent housing in Philadelphia, New York, and other urban centers. Among the fifty-nine projects built by the PWA,³³ a great number were modeled after European examples. On the other hand, the suburban greenbelts created by the Resettlement Administration (RA) were much more conventional in

³² Bauer and Mumford were romantically involved between 1930 and 1932. Following their work together on the housing section of *Modern Architecture* they traveled to Europe where they visited France and Germany. See Donald L. Miller, *Lewis Mumford: A Life* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 288, 305-340.

³³ Gwendolyn Wright, 225.

character.³⁴ Built outside major cities, near Washington D.C., Milwaukee, and Cincinnati, these planned communities featured modest single-family residences, schools, and large areas of open space.³⁵

Bauer saw decent and affordable housing as a basic right, and if private industry could not satisfy the demand then government must make up the difference. The shift from private to public control was not without critics, who worried that such efforts were the first step toward "socialism." In response, a number of federal programs were created that did not require the government to build, own, or manage these residential complexes. Such agencies included: the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), established in 1933 to help refinance mortgages on residential property, and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), conceived in 1934 to stimulate house construction without direct cost to the taxpayer. This was accomplished by insuring long-term mortgages

³⁴ This most concise examination of PWA programs is found in Richard Pommer's "Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States During the Early 1930s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (December 1978): 235-264.

³⁵ The three towns included: Greenbelt, Maryland; Greendale, Wisconsin, and Greenhills, Ohio. These garden communities were celebrated at the 1939 New York World's Fair with the presentation of *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyck), a documentary film written by Lewis Mumford that supported the American Institute of Planners and its social objectives. According to Donald L. Miller, the film was one of the fair's "most popular attractions." See *Lewis Mumford: A Life*, 366.

made by private lenders.³⁶ While the government did not select or implement individual units, fixed standards and appraisal methods were used to influence the ways and types of designs that were being built. Underwriters were given eight criteria by which designs would be judged. It should be noted that among the three measures of quality, only the third most important - its visual appeal - was about the house itself. The balance focused on the building site and its proximity to transportation and commercial centers.

In the long run, these programs made a strong argument for government's continued participation. Rather than seeking to control the entire process - building houses from the start to finish - the government had created for itself a position of discreet but powerful influence. Not only could it refuse to grant loans for specific projects, but through standardized methods of evaluation it could affect how, where, and in what style dwellings a large number of Americans would live.

During World War II, however, the federal government would need to modify this approach. So total was the nation's commitment to the war effort that any lingering protests about its participation in house construction were temporarily quieted. Consequently, even before the

³⁶ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford Press, 1985), 203-218.

Japanese attack various public agencies had begun to put architects to work on defense construction and emergency housing. Over the next five years the government would become an extremely accommodating client, ready to experiment with a wide variety of methods, materials, and even architectural styles.

Military production was critical to the nation's defense, causing a major expansion of existing facilities on the east and west coasts as well as the construction of new plants in the south and the midwest. Between 1940 and 1943 four million Americans would relocate to serve in these factories.³⁷ Most were outside major urban centers where housing was particularly scarce. Although some writers advocated bare-bones barracks with centralized mess-halls, many observers felt that such uncomfortable and anonymous conditions would cause "increased labor turnover and discontent."³⁸ The President's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt addressed the issue in the *New York Times* in January 1941:

What we do now must be with an eye to the well-being of the people who are going to do the work essential to our defense. We have no right to ask them to

³⁷ See Arnold Silverman, "Defense & Deconcentration: Defense Industrialization During World War II and the Development of Contemporary American Suburbs, in *Suburbia Re-Examined* (Hofstra University, 1989), 157-63.

³⁸ "In the Housing Picture," *Architectural Record*, (May 1942): 64.

sacrifice their home life in a way not compatible to our way.³⁹

Although she failed to elaborate on what was meant by "our way," we can assume she was suggesting that even temporary defense housing should be compatible with American values and traditions. Low-cost rapid construction was certainly important, but not if such plans contradicted the very life the country was fighting to defend.

More than two million housing units were constructed in the United States during the war years, providing work for architects, developers, construction workers, and manufacturers. In May 1942, *Architectural Forum* discussed the national significance of these programs:

Housing in the past has meant many things to many people. It has been the sticks-and-stones counterpart of two chickens in every pot. It has been the reformer's weapon . . . It has been, and is now being, held out as the most hopeful means of taking up the post-war slack . . . But these grounds are no longer important . . . It has become a war tool.⁴⁰

Given the fact that many observers saw housing as a critical weapon in the nation's defense, it remained to be seen what form such dwellings would take. Throughout the nation, in walking distance from round-the-clock factories, war housing would be created. Working closely with local agencies and private contractors, single-

³⁹ *New York Times*, 26 January 1941, 41.

⁴⁰ "War Housing," *Architectural Forum* (May 1942): 261.

family and multi-family residences were built for sale and rent throughout the country.

The results were impressive and varied. For instance, the Division of Defense Housing, under its director Clark Foreman, hired a number of emigré architects associated with MoMA and the European avant-garde. In just seven months Foreman's group, which included, among others, Gropius, Breuer, Wurster, Stubbins, and Louis Kahn, had designed and built eleven housing projects.⁴¹

Accomplishments such as these seemed to anticipate modern architecture's inevitable dominance. In May 1942 MoMA organized "Wartime Housing," to illustrate:

. . . why adequate housing designed by the country's best architects is necessary to help America win the war. It presents various new methods for producing such housing with maximum speed and economy according to contemporary design.⁴²

Organized by Eliot Noyes (1910-1977), the Museum's Director of the recently established Department of Industrial Design, this exhibition provided an upbeat survey of various government housing programs.⁴³ Sponsored

⁴¹ Peter S. Reed, "Enlisting Modernism," *World War II and the American Dream* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1994), 11.

⁴² "In The Housing Picture... " *Bulletin of MoMA* (May 1942): 63.

⁴³ In 1941 and 1942 many changes took place at MoMA, including McAndrew's resignation and the creation of a separate department focusing specifically on industrial design. Although for a brief period Philip L. Goodwin

by the National Committee on the Housing Emergency and prepared in cooperation with the National Housing Agency (NHA), it included several projects built by the Division of Defense Housing. The importance of this alliance, which included the museum, modern architects, and the Federal government, was underscored by the participation of President Roosevelt, whose recorded message accompanied the film presented in the galleries, as well as through a letter published in the museum's bulletin of May 1942. Like his wife Eleanor, he spoke of the critical relationship between housing and wartime production, as well as the importance of providing workers with a "proper home."⁴⁴

The exhibition was organized as "10 scenes," employing movie shorts, photographs, and architectural models to illustrate recent government efforts to improve the living conditions of workers and their families. To dramatize the message, designs by Neutra, Saarinen and other architects were juxtaposed to make-shift dwellings or the industrial ghost towns that resulted after the First World War. Although no mention was made of stylistic issues or the architects responsible for these praiseworthy projects, most examples were implicitly modern – absent was the eclectic detailing of the past

would replace McAndrew, Elizabeth B. Mock, his assistant, was eventually named acting Director.

⁴⁴ "Wartime Housing," *Bulletin of MoMA* (May 1942): 2.

and most employed clean lines and the emblem of modernity, the flat roof.

Most importantly, MoMA saw these achievements as a unmistakable forecast of future developments. Proud as the museum was of the modern architect's contribution to the present war effort, it tended to see these accomplishments in much grander terms. Mrs. Samuel I. Rosenman, Chairman of the National Committee on the Housing Emergency contemplated the long-term impact of such programs:

When this war is won, when victory is clearly within our reach, we will then face the constructive task of clearing up the ravages of war and take up the stimulating task of rehousing Americans. For this job we will be better equipped because of the experience gained, because we will have learned to work together, because we will have wider horizons and a better feel for things that are important.⁴⁵

Although ostensibly an up-to-the minute report on various government agencies and their progress, the illustrations chosen for the bulletin had a definite point of view. No effort was made to show the actual diversity found in most war-time programs. Either one found images of undesirable slums, or efficient and therefore commendable examples of "good planning" by prominent members of the modern movement.

As regularly portrayed by MoMA one might assume that most of the defense projects built by the government were designed by architects using a "modern" vocabulary. In

⁴⁵ "In the Housing Picture . . ." Ibid., 66.

reality, the situation was not so narrowly focused. Sifting through various professional journals from the war years, one finds compromise and variety. For instance, when the local housing authority in Middletown, Pennsylvania objected to the use of flat roofs, the architects Howe, Stonorov & Kahn modified their design, substituting more conventional pitched and low-shed models. Furthermore, both Saarinen and Stubbins chose to use redwood siding in their Michigan and Connecticut projects – a material long associated with California and the nation's western frontier.⁴⁶

Yet, even *Architectural Forum*, a loyal supporter of modernism, conceded that "Most of the new housing [was] quite ordinary in appearance."⁴⁷ In special issues devoted to the war effort the magazine presented numerous images of familiar Cape Cods and other traditional style dwellings incorporating shingles, chimneys, and colonial trim (figure 5). What was most innovative about these projects tended to be technical, and was often all-but-invisible to the passerby. Architects had to stretch materials and manpower, while diminishing waste and

⁴⁶ See Simon Schama's provocative discussion of nineteenth-century American nationalism and the redwood forest, in *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 187-201.

⁴⁷ "Norfolk, VA . . . confusion, chicanery, ineptitude," *Architectural Forum* (June 1942): 371.

providing homes where men, women, and children could live comfortably.

Architectural Forum reported that a "tidal wave of pseudo-Colonial boxes" were under construction near the United States naval base in Norfolk, Virginia.⁴⁸ With more than 25,000 new units needed, numerous out-of-state builders were active here. Among them, Long Island developer William J. Levitt (1908-1994) built 2,350 rental units for the Navy (figure 6).⁴⁹

For Levitt, who would become one of the nation's most successful developers of middle-class housing, this was a pivotal experience. According to historian David Halberstam, initially he had tremendous difficulty adjusting to the large-scale economies required by the war effort. If he was to prosper he had no choice but to scrutinize and streamline his operation. To speed production the firm decided to divide the process into twenty-seven distinct steps and to organize his employees into small teams with financial incentives for increased productivity.⁵⁰ These simple but innovative strategies rescued Levitt. *Architectural Forum* praised the results,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 369.

⁴⁹ See Eric Larrabee, "The Six Thousand Houses That Levitt Built," *Harper's* (September 1948): 80.

⁵⁰ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 132-33.

calling his modest one-story Capes "outstanding."⁵¹ Levitt would not forget this experience.

During the war emergency housing was generally built without controversy or debate. However, occasionally special interests would intervene. Whereas much has been written about Clark Foreman's tenure at the Division of Defense Housing, he eventually lost his position, replaced by George Howe, a reformed modernist whose work had begun to take on a strongly traditional character. It is worth noting why Foreman was replaced, not only for the conditions under which he departed, but also for the unique project that went unrealized.

In late 1941 Foreman asked Wright to design housing for the employees of a rifle factory in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.⁵² At the time he was seventy-four years old and still had many diverse projects ahead of him. For Wright, this public commission had important implications. For nearly a half-century he wrestled with the problem of low-cost housing. Popular magazines — *Life*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *House Beautiful* —

⁵¹ Along with Joseph B. Mason's article, "Levitt & Sons of Virginia Set New Standards in Title VI War Homes," *American Builder* (June 1942), 48-53, 84-85, this is the earliest mention of Levitt I have found in a national publication. *Architectural Forum*, (June 1942): 370.

⁵² Talbot Wegg, "FLLW versus the USA," *AIA Journal* (February 1970): 48.

published his domestic proposals, yet few had actually been built.

During the same years that Wright was creating one of his most ambitious and extravagant private residences — Falling Water at Bear Run, Pennsylvania (1937) — he was also launching his Usonian house, a concept he hoped would have national implications. In the January 1938 issue of *Architectural Forum* Wright conceded:

Notwithstanding all efforts to improve the product, the American "small house" problem is still a pressing, needy, hungry, confused issue.⁵³

In an effort to make single-family house ownership available to all Americans, Wright supported the use of new construction techniques, such as the use of composite wall panels, radiant underfloor heating, and a modular planning grid. While he probably hoped that interested parties would take advantage of recent FHA loan programs, the agency refused to finance his untested ideas. Fearing the re-sale value of such houses would be limited, the FHA declared to one of Wright's clients, Jeanette C. Lusk, that the "very uniqueness of the design put it beyond the scope of their approval."⁵⁴

Consequently, when Foreman contacted him three years later, in August 1941, he jumped at the opportunity. It

⁵³ Cited in John Seargeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1976), 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, n. 30, 172.

was Wright's first public commission and it was a chance to express his unwavering patriotism, to build houses on a scale commensurate with his ambition, and to demonstrate to members of the modern movement his continued artistic vitality.

Wright's scheme - "Usonian Houses for USA" (also known as the Cloverleaf Housing Project, figure 7) was unusually innovative.⁵⁵ He designed one hundred split-level units, all with sun decks and small gardens. To make the most of each site, he clustered the houses together in groups of four, leaving a great deal of open space between each unit. This solution permitted the architect considerable artistic license. Rather than placing them in a rigid grid, Wright could vary the manner in which the four units intersect, or even pivot the group to diminish visual monotony. Furthermore, unlike many defense projects, this unusual arrangement would offer residents privacy and a sense of open space - two qualities long-associated with the ideal American dwelling.

In January 1942 Wright completed his designs, yet complaints soon derailed his project. Local architects criticized the federal government for hiring both out-of-

⁵⁵ Gwendolyn Wright described it as "the most promising of the wartime efforts" and Anthony Alofsin called it "an alternative to a soulless mass architecture." *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect*, (New York: MoMA, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 49.

state and foreign architects. Regardless of each architect's country of birth or home town, the main issue was access to work and jobs. Furthermore, Congressional bureaucrats argued that the use of independent, non-government architects was an unnecessary luxury.⁵⁶

Self-interest and professional prejudices ultimately made Foreman a victim as well. According to the architectural historian Peter S. Reed, at the time of his dismissal he was branded a "radical" and the Division of Defense Housing was quickly absorbed into the Public Buildings Administration.⁵⁷ Such complications demonstrated that even in times of war the single-family house would resist innovation. And while these defense projects did realize many of the government's goals, it remained unclear how these experiences would shape the future of domestic architecture in the United States.

* * *

Aside from these essential defense projects, during the war very few private houses were built. Yet one should not assume that such issues did not remain central in the nation's consciousness. As early as 1942, an advertisement for the American Steel Corporation promised

⁵⁶ See Reed, "Enlisting Modernism," 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

readers their patience and hard work would be rewarded, urging them to "look beyond" the present crisis so that "when that work is done, all of us will again be building and rebuilding the future."⁵⁸

The war had brought the nation together. As tough as the job was, as time passed, confidence grew. Not only would the war be won, but there was also the expectation that an increased number of Americans should benefit from the outcome.

Consequently, during the war domestic imagery played an important role in popular and professional magazines – in both advertisements and editorial content.⁵⁹ With the encouragement of the War Advertising Council, manufacturers made shrewd use of media. Ads were frequently placed to demonstrate a specific company's patriotism and to assure them a positive public image once the war had come to an end. While some served as public service messages, others demonstrated how specific products, from quality paints to adhesives were aiding the war effort.

These promotions took pride not only in specific merchandise, but also in the American way of life. Images

⁵⁸ Advertisement for American Steel Corporation in *Architectural Forum* (April 1943): 79.

⁵⁹ See Cynthia Henthorn, "Commercial Fallout: The Image of Progress, the Culture of War, and the Feminine Consumer, 1939-1959" (Ph.D. diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1997).

of free enterprise and democracy were dutifully celebrated. Aside from photographs and illustrations depicting soldiers, workers, and weapons, a significant number of images illustrate the life the nation was fighting for - one reasonably similar to the pre-war world.

For instance, in a 1943 advertisement for the General Electric appliance and merchandise department, a man and woman are seated close together on a park bench (figure 8). The man, dressed in full uniform, is holding a stick which he uses to sketch the outline of a small house in the dirt.⁶⁰ Like a crude child's drawing, complete with chimney, door and window, it depicts a domestic image that was both obvious and ingrained - possibly even a Cape Cod or similar dwelling. Although "Jim's going away tomorrow," the text reminds us:

. . . that little home sketched there in the sand is a symbol of faith and hope and courage. It's a promise, too, a promise of gloriously happy days to come . . . when victory's won. Victory Homes of tomorrow will make up in part for all the sacrifices of today . . . and *that's our promise!*⁶¹

⁶⁰ A similar image appeared on the cover of *House Beautiful* (May 1945) in which both the man and woman are dressed in uniform as they examine the blueprints for their future home beneath flowering cherry trees. The man, who kneels, gestures at the plans with a tree branch.

⁶¹ Donald Albrecht, "Introduction," *World War II and the American Dream*, XXI.

Likewise, in 1943 architects began to view the future with renewed sense of optimism. Wright continued to promote his practice, organizing in 1943 a *Citizen's Petition* in support of his architectural philosophy. As exemplified by his plans for a suburban utopia called Broadacre City, announced in 1934, his petition advocated the "practical application" of science to "develop a new form of community life."⁶² Sixty-four prominent figures from diverse professions signed it, requesting that the National Resources and Planning Board (NRPB) authorize him to further develop his "search for democratic form." Signers included Clark Foreman, Albert Einstein, Nelson Rockefeller, John Dewey, Mies van der Rohe, and Buckminster Fuller.

Wright was not alone in his belief that the nation stood at the threshold of change. *Arts & Architecture* recommended in 1943:

There's no point in trying to run away from it, or hide from it, or deny it. It is senseless to look around for a cave, or an acre of land, or a well to jump into. The simple fact is that we are about to face the new world. . . The struggle against it will only prolong the agony of our final acceptance.⁶³

Although the fighting continued, on the European and Pacific fronts there was cause for optimism. From the United States' victory at Guadalcanal to the Allied

⁶² Seargeant, 136.

⁶³ "Notes in passing," *Arts & Architecture* (August 1943): 17.

invasion of Italy, there were numerous signs that the war would soon end. Even the Germans were no longer invincible, soundly defeated by the Soviets at Stalingrad.

Convinced that the war would eventually be won, America slowly began to plan the peace. In December 1943, the editor of the *Architectural Record*, Kenneth K. Stowell (d. 1969), spoke for all enlisted men when he wrote:

Gradually then the fighting forces will be coming home. And they want to come, and as quickly as they can. They are thinking of home, dreaming of home, and all that means, remembering all they have been deprived of, visualizing all they hope for in that home-of-their-own. ⁶⁴

One forward-looking notion in particular, labeled the "194x house," embodied these post-war expectations. Named because few could predict with certainty when the war would finally end, many writers were convinced that without constant reminder, the housing industry would revert to old habits. Still, it is important to recognize that the "194x house" was not about a distant visionary future, but about one viewed as presently attainable.

George Nelson (1908-1986), designer and editor of *Architectural Forum*, saw the war as an affirmation.⁶⁵ Writing in 1943, he predicted that "after decades of

⁶⁴ "There's No Place Like Home!" in *Architectural Record* (December 1943): 41.

⁶⁵ Nelson worked at *Architectural Forum* from 1934 to 1949.

functionalistic preaching . . . we turn unquestionably to functional design."⁶⁶ United by a common enemy, the federal government had invested heavily in new technologies. Success was everything: the conflict required both rapid production and the utilization of scientific advances. For instance, more than \$7 billion was spent by the government's Defense Plant Corporation (DPC) to build up-to-date aircraft factories and shipyards.⁶⁷ A modern industrialized economy had been created, one of enormous achievement and future potential.

In this context it is easy to see why *Architectural Forum* urged readers to disregard the past. In the hope that such breakthroughs could be extended into the domestic realm, the editors launched a series of sharp critiques against traditional house design. In "Planning the Postwar House," the magazine denounced the Cape Cod bungalow.⁶⁸ While the article did admit that the small, square design was highly efficient, such advantages were quickly discounted. The author viewed it as a "child" of

⁶⁶ Cited in Pulos, *The American Design Adventure* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1988), 15.

⁶⁷ Between 1940 and 1943 65 percent of the nation's capital investment came from the Federal government. See Joel Davidson, "Building for War, Preparing for Peace: World War II and the Military-Industrial Complex," in *World War II and the American Dream*, 189.

⁶⁸ "Planning the Postwar House," *Architectural Forum* (May 1944): 75.

the Depression, a house reflecting better-forgotten memories of national hardship. Certain that the public was eager for something new, the editors maintained that progress meant change and that the architects best qualified to create such reforms were "modern" ones. Not only would an improved product result, but they claimed that "the modern architect is the only architect who was ever on your side."⁶⁹

Such a collaboration between architecture and industry would be a dream come true for the modern movement. Machine-based technologies could now be used not only to build factories and weapons, but to change the way Americans would live. Such ideas had been eagerly anticipated by a number of European architects. Using the industrialist Henry Ford (1863-1947) and his success with the Model T automobile as their ideal, during the 1920s Le Corbusier and Ernst May tried to standardize house production, experimenting with assembly-line methods and techniques.

Throughout World War II a large number of factory-built dwellings were manufactured to house industrial workers and their families. A good example of these towns was built near Detroit at Willow Run, Michigan, where as many as five thousand prefabricated family units were

⁶⁹ Ibid.

constructed by 1944 (figure 9).⁷⁰ Delivered to sites on trucks and set down in even rows, these boxy plywood structures were viewed as short-term and temporary. While the advantages of factory construction had clearly been demonstrated, one could not help but notice the dull visual monotony of these communities.

Although completely lacking in architectural distinction, these simple buildings provided quick and inexpensive shelter for thousands of workers at one of the nation's largest bomber plants.⁷¹ Industrial accomplishments such as this served to stimulate the American imagination. Not that these temporary camps at Willow Run were ideal or even desirable, but many observers hoped that the techniques utilized there could later be adapted for postwar construction.

Many American architects shared the belief that such limitations would be overcome. The challenge was to design a house that could be built quickly and inexpensively without resorting to complete standardization. For instance, rather than building a house entirely in the factory as had been done by mostly commercial prefabricators, a number of architects sought

⁷⁰ Martin Pawley, *Architecture versus Housing* (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1971), 55.

⁷¹ Nevertheless, these dwellings barely met the plant's needs. By late 1943, only 8.8% of the workers at Willow Run were housed here. See Margaret Crawford, "Daily Life on the Homefront," *World War II and the American Dream*, 114-119.

to pursue modular systems whereby specific parts would be manufactured and later assembled on site.

Among the first proposals to win national recognition was Konrad Wachsmann and Walter Gropius' "Packaged house" (figure 10). In February 1943, after a year's research in the basement of Gropius' Cambridge home, a corporation was formed and the first of several full-size demonstration models were erected in Somerville, Massachusetts. Made of plywood panels and patented metal wedges, the architects maintained that this new system would permit considerable variation in both residential and even commercial design. Although it received extensive praise from the media, and a small exhibition at MoMA, ultimately their project would fail.⁷²

Several months later the Los Angeles architect Rudolf Schindler made a similar proposal in the article "A Prefabrication Vocabulary." Explained through a glossary of thirty-four terms, his "panel post" system consisted of interchangeable wall panels and joints. Like Gropius and Wachsmann, particular attention was placed on the system's potential for "individualization." He wrote:

Unless a personal relation can be established between house and occupant, both will become meaningless cogs in a social machine . . . to

⁷² The exhibition "Architecture in Steel: Standardization by Konrad Wachsmann" was presented at MoMA in 1946. See Gilbert Herbert, *The Dream of the Factory-Built House: Walter Gropius and Konrad Wachsmann* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 276.

safeguard life only fractional units shall be standardized.⁷³

To achieve this, Schindler stressed the need for prefabricated parts only, not complete structures.⁷⁴

Although left unsaid, these modular proposals assured architects a continued role in the housing profession. Schindler's design acknowledged the threats inherent in start-to-finish prefabrication. Like the "packaged house" his focus was on the means by which such structures could be built. No attempt was made to deliver a ready-made house, only to provide improved parts - modern successors to brick and even the balloon frame.

Schindler's proposal appeared in the magazine *California Arts & Architecture*. Edited and published by John Entenza since 1938, this monthly magazine focused on contemporary culture and especially single-family house design. In contrast to the east coast journals which reported on various wartime projects from afar, many of the magazine's contributors were located in or near Los Angeles, a city whose character had been dramatically

⁷³ Rudolf M. Schindler, "A Prefabrication Vocabulary" in *Arts & Architecture* (June 1943): 25-27.

⁷⁴ Schindler's early career may shed light on his interest in individualization. Although best known for his "modern" house designs, such as the Lovell Beach House of 1926, he also worked with Wright during the time when he was experimenting with his textile block system. It was hoped that these concrete blocks would be affordable, variable, and appropriate for the southwestern climate. While Wright failed to achieve these goals, his difficulties may have made Schindler more conscious of the critical relationship between these issues.

altered by the rapid construction of new military installations, factories, and housing.

In August 1943 the magazine announced a national competition "for the kind of house that can really be built."⁷⁵ Co-sponsored by twenty-two manufacturers, suppliers of glass, lumber, plywood, wall board, and heating systems, the aim was to encourage innovative single-family house designs that would make use of new technologies and production methods.

This competition is important because it was probably the first to occur during the war years. The magazine described the winning contestants as a "fairly good cross-section" of contemporary practice, with prizes going to designs by Eero Saarinen and Oliver Lundquist in Washington D. C., I. M. Pei and E. H. Duhart in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Raphael Soriano from Los Angeles.

Among the five jurors, the architect Sumner Spaulding, praised the entrants for their realism. He commented:

They distinctly had their feet well planted in the existing world, but were peering with wistful eyes into the world to come.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *Arts and Architecture* (August 1943): 22-25.

⁷⁶ Sumner Spaulding, "designs for postwar living," *California Arts and Architecture* (December 1943): 23-38. reprinted in *Arts & Architecture: The Entenza Years* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1990), 20.

Two trends dominated the winning entries: the need for increased industrial prefabrication and the conviction that such results should be flexible and variable.

Most of the entries promoted the idea of structural systems and vocabularies (panels, joints, etc.) that would be assembled on site and shipped in various combinations from the factory. This supply system had several advantages. Not only would it reduce the number of suppliers, but it would speed production and improve the overall quality of materials. Furthermore, by leaving the final arrangement of walls and living spaces up to the architect and homeowner, many of prefabrication's greatest critics, would, it was hoped, be silenced. No longer rigidly pre-packaged and sold, here was a postwar house that could be modified to suit an individual family's needs, both now and in the future.

Each of the three winning entrants presented a distinct approach to prefabrication. Pei & Duhart, for example proposed a straightforward system of aluminum panels not unlike those favored by Gropius (figure 11). This is not surprising since Duhart had been his student at Harvard, and Pei was currently working in Gropius' firm. Although the architect and juror Gregory Ain felt the boxy results were "not exciting," he praised their entry as "a nevertheless workable plan."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Gregory Ain, *Ibid.*, 22.

Other architects explored assembly-line production and its potential. Both Saarinen & Lundquist and Soriano proposed designs that would require the production of whole components that would be delivered and arranged on site. In contrast to previously mentioned systems, these integrated designs were a threat to builders and their employees. Although some carpentry and manual assembly would still be required, these plans relied on pre-assembled plumbing, wiring, and in the case of Soriano, furnishings.

Saarinen & Lundquist, who won first prize, proposed a house that was sensitive to both the enthusiasm and ambivalences that surrounded much of defense prefabrication (fig 12). Praised by Ain for its "unlimited flexibility," such praise was perhaps a bit generous. In fact, due to the use of large fixed components, such promised flexibility was only possible in the living and garden spaces.

During the war technological optimism surged. Regardless of a given project's shortcomings, the civilian application of such techniques seemed both logical and inevitable. One of the most radical and ambitious proposals was presented by Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) who for much of his career investigated the relationship between shelter and technology. With a powerful faith in science, Fuller maintained that centralized industrial solutions should be used to solve

even the most mundane universal problem. Having been brought up in rural New England, he paid little attention to urban and multiple-unit dwellings, focusing his energies entirely on the single-family house.

His earliest attempt to design a prefabricated dwelling was called the Dymaxion house. Unveiled at Chicago's Marshall Field department store in 1927, the hexagonal structure had little in common with traditional domestic imagery. Suspended from a central mast, this light-weight "House for Mass Production" featured two bedrooms, an elevator, sewage disposal, and central air-conditioning (figure 13). Designed on what Fuller called a "best for all" basis, he believed this residence could be manufactured inexpensively.⁷⁸

Although his futuristic project failed to find a sponsor, during the next decade he became increasingly well-known. In the catalogue for the 1932 MoMA exhibition Hitchcock and Johnson cited his "radical approach."⁷⁹ However, unlike most of the architects they praised, Fuller down-played aesthetics, seeking to use rather than express technology. A good example of his obliviousness to architectural trends occurred in 1941 when Fuller was directly inspired by a ubiquitous industrial product. Perhaps having learned from previous frustrations and

⁷⁸ *Architectural Forum* (July 1929): 103-104.

⁷⁹ See Johnson & Hitchcock, "The Extent of Modern Architecture," *Modern Architecture*, 22-23.

business failures, especially with his three-wheeled Dymaxion car, he proposed adapting the round grain bins used on farms in the midwest to provide shelter for both farm workers and others in need.

Two of Fuller's Dymaxion Deployment Unit prototypes were built and exhibited in the MoMA sculpture garden from October 1941 to April 1942 (figure 14).⁸⁰ This strategy had several objectives: not only could museum visitors observe the construction process first-hand, but in a modest way this installation reiterated the museum's view that the Town of Tomorrow at the 1939 World's Fair had failed to address the nation's housing shortage. Furthermore, these houses made clear that MoMA wished to play a role in national defense, and that conventional solutions would require considerable rethinking. Obviously pleased by the results, this would be the first in a series of model houses constructed in the museum garden. Costing approximately \$1,250 to build, Fuller's design had many advantages. Not only was it sturdy and inexpensive, but almost no site preparation was required. In addition, each unit could be built quickly — by two unskilled laborers in less than six days.⁸¹

⁸⁰ "Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Deployment Unit," *Bulletin of MoMA* (November 1941): 17.

⁸¹ See "Building for Defense . . . 1,000 Houses a Day at \$1,200 Each," *Architectural Forum* (June 1941) reproduced in Reed, *World War II and the American Dream*, 23.

Like many of his projects, Fuller's design paid little attention to convention. The walls were made of sheets of ribbed steel and the windows were small round port holes that circled the exterior. Except for a few minor decorative flourishes, it looked more like a storage container than a private residence, and even though it received considerable publicity, neither variant was adopted for residential use. With steel in short supply only the military could justify production.⁸²

In late 1943 Fuller was appointed chief of the mechanical engineering section of the Industrial Engineering Division of the United States Board of Economic Warfare.⁸³ No longer the eccentric visionary, this position gave him considerable insight into government operations and their long-term consequences. For instance, as part of the war effort, a large number of prefabricated houses had been constructed for the military. Using techniques and materials borrowed from various wartime industries, at least 850,000 units were built.⁸⁴ Among the most successful and well-known were the so-called Quonset huts, of which 170,000 were produced and erected throughout the world by the Great Lakes Steel Corporation. Consisting of pressed wood and corrugated-

⁸² See Pulos, 34.

⁸³ Martin Pawley, *Buckminster Fuller* (London: Trefoil Publications, 1990), 95.

⁸⁴ Pawley, 55.

steel sheets, these demountable structures served to house soldiers and other military purposes. The Quonset hut became the quintessential World War II structure: inexpensive, durable, and without aesthetic intent.

Fuller recognized that at the end of the war many factories would be silenced. Calling the house "a necessity of democracy" he proposed a design that would build on the success of the Quonset hut and the aviation industry in particular. By 1945, nearly \$4 billion had been spent increasing aircraft production and he was eager to take full advantage of its brand-new and highly efficient facilities. Furthermore, the aviation industry boasted one of the largest and most skilled work forces in the nation. In Fuller's eyes, he had found a perfect collaborator.

Unlike Gropius and Schindler, Fuller believed that the only solution to the housing crisis would be a single, universal design.⁸⁵ With Beech Aircraft Corporation as his partner he aimed to industrialize and revolutionize the private dwelling. Using successful aircraft production techniques, a single prototype of aluminum, steel, and plastic was built, known as the Dymaxion Wichita house (figure 15). Priced at the level

⁸⁵ Fuller wrote *Architectural Forum* to praise Britain's commitment to a single "dwelling machine." Concerned that British were more advanced, he saw housing as an opportunity demonstrate the enormous ability and potential of American science. See letter to the editors (May 1944): 34.

of a luxury automobile, \$6,500 – the 1,075 square foot prototype was filled with many up-to-date conveniences, including a centralized vacuum cleaner system, a wraparound thirty-seven foot picture window, and numerous space-saving built-ins.

In appearance it was without peer or category, without reference to any architect or architectural movement, past or present. A comparison of the Quonset hut and the Wichita House is particularly revealing. During the war, shelter was a practical matter. Made of raw steel, the Quonset hut did the job without any artistic or philosophic pretensions. On the other hand, Fuller's domed design – smooth, sleek, and floating above the ground – had the aerodynamic look of a World War II fighter plane. Clearly, this was not emergency housing, but a glimpse into the future.

Fuller's well-publicized prototype captivated a shelter-deprived nation. A contemporary newsreel reported:

. . . it may seem strange, but in a housing shortage people are giving attention to all new ideas.⁸⁶

Popular magazines like *Life* reported on his plans,⁸⁷ as did *Architectural Forum* and *Fortune*, who each placed his

⁸⁶ WNET, *Buckminster Fuller: Thinking Out Loud*, 1996.

⁸⁷ *Life* (1 April 1946): 73.

novel design on the covers of their April 1946 issues.⁸⁸ In an effort to attract customers, Fuller played down the design's unconventional character. Although the pie-shaped interiors would have challenged the average occupant and interior decorator, it was marketed as a place for doing ordinary things. Promotional photographs depict happy families surrounded by modern furnishings and a sizable fireplace. Although *Architectural Forum* noted that the hearth was a "startling Fuller concession to tradition," his ingenious solution to the housing crisis generated enormous interest.⁸⁹ With production of 50-60,000 units believed possible each year, not only would such dwellings be used to house returning veterans, but its production would help assure war workers continued employment and income.

And many Americans agreed. Between October 1945 and April 1946 more than thirty-seven thousand unsolicited orders had been received. Furthermore, the publicly traded stock in Fuller Homes, Inc. had soared to nearly double its original price. Yet for Fuller, his prototype still required research, refinement, and most importantly, \$10 million in capital. The decision to

⁸⁸ Fuller was a staff member at *Fortune* magazine 1938 to 1940. In a special issue devoted to housing the magazine's editors called the Wichita factory "the Kitty Hawk of industrial housing" and Fuller "the boldest man to accept the challenge." See *Fortune* (April 1946): 21, 167.

⁸⁹ *Architectural Forum* (April 1946): 129.

delay production of the Witchita house would ultimately doom his visionary plans. With the Cold War heating up, the Kansas factory resumed aircraft production and within a year Fuller's once-promising company declared bankruptcy.

While it remains to be seen whether Fuller's optimistic projections were realistic, the Witchita house stands as a unique episode in the history of American house design. Discussion regarding prefabrication would continue in national magazines, but rarely again would the public's enthusiasm seem so great. Often criticized for their unsatisfactory construction and lack of individuality, prefabricated houses failed to satisfy professional and governmental expectations.⁹⁰

Perhaps one explanation lies in this lasting association between prefabrication and temporary war housing. While much could be made of its progress during the war, most of these structures had little enduring appeal. Designed with the war's end fast approaching, Fuller was really offering the nation a super-evolved Quonset hut, a high-tech shell packaged with attractive luxuries that war-weary soldiers and their families were eager to possess.

As clichéd as it might seem, supporters of prefabrication hoped to revive and update the idea of

⁹⁰ *Fortune* (April 1946): 266.

"swords turned into ploughshares." Such industrial dwellings were reflections of the "good" war and the dreams associated with peacetime. Although his ideas were possibly achievable, Fuller's house remained like many designs, mere fantasy – what housing advocate Catherine Bauer criticized as "romantic nonsense" in 1945 – a technological vision shattered by postwar realities.⁹¹

⁹¹ Catherine Bauer, *Housing the US: Problems and Policy* (July 1945): 11.

CHAPTER IV
FORECASTING A "DEMOCRATIC ESTHETIC"

Building should be a democratic art.¹

This chapter will examine the debates that shaped house construction immediately after the war, focusing on the years 1945 through 1947. Reasons why the International Style had difficulty attracting broad support will be presented and why specific domestic images spoke to, and of, the American experience. Not that industrial prefabrication and other technical advances were ignored, but that postwar architects frequently gave priority to other considerations.

The mood in 1945 was cautious, yet celebratory. There were many reasons for the United States to be proud; not only had the "good" fight been won, but it was widely believed that the victory had been accomplished through American know-how and national cooperation. Unlike its allies and enemies, the continental United States had been spared the bombs and civilian mortality experienced abroad. Although some members of the

¹ Thomas Hawk Creighton, *Planning to Build* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc. 1945), 32.

architectural community saw potential benefits (and opportunities) in the war's physical destruction — soldiers returned home to a still-familiar landscape developed over three centuries of American growth and empowerment. While it was true that great change had come to the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century, the New England village, the prairie farmhouse, and the western frontier remained potent, if illusive symbols of the nation and its aspirations.

Many historians have noted a growing national self-consciousness during the 1930s, a period when the American public developed increasing pride and interest in its own cultural patterns, myths, folklore, and symbols. Cultural historian Warren I. Susman wrote that at this time:

. . . the idea of culture was domesticated, with important consequences. Americans then began thinking in terms of behavior and belief, values and lifestyles, symbols and meaning. It was during this period that we find, for the first time, frequent reference to "an American Way of Life." The phrase "The American Dream" came into common use; it meant something shared collectively by all Americans . . . the function of the organized nation itself.²

Not only did such attitudes help the nation struggle through the long Depression, but these ideas were used to justify involvement in the war and help soldiers

² Warren I. Susman, "The Thirties," in *The Development of an American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 184.

visualize what they might return to once the war had come to an end.

Both self-congratulatory and ideological, this growing self-awareness would subtly shape America's cultural output in years to come. From the ascension of the New York School of painting during the 1940s to Vice President Richard M. Nixon's legendary "kitchen debate" with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in July 1959, seemingly benign cultural agents were used to demonstrate the global importance of free speech and America's continued political supremacy.³

In 1955 Princeton professor of history, Eric F. Goldman published one of the first book-length histories of the postwar era. Appropriately titled *The Crucial Decade*, this book described how the nation dealt with its new status and how specific international events were affecting American attitudes and lives. He wrote:

The more Americans fretted over home affairs, the more plain a fact of fundamental importance became. For the first time during an American era of peace, it was next to impossible to discuss domestic problems coherently without having the points entangled in foreign affairs.⁴

³ For a discussion of their dramatic day-long encounter at the American National Exhibition in Moscow see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 16-20.

⁴ Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade - And After, America 1945-1960*, 2nd ed., enl., (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 28.

Consequently, at a time when the United States was just beginning a protracted Cold War with the Soviet Union, where and how its citizens lived took on profound significance.

* * *

That housing would be in short supply following the euphoria of V-J day was widely anticipated. Articles in popular and professional magazines featured numerous charts and graphs calculating the problem, as well as descriptions of what efforts were being made to alleviate the shortage. Catherine Bauer, who during the war served as chairman of the National Housing Agency's advisory committee, feared that much of postwar housing would be left in the hands of private builders, an industry that had been unusually susceptible to social and economic fluctuations.⁵ Free market economics and decentralization, she argued, were a threat to both the American family and "the basic doctrine of equal opportunity." Consequently, she believed that the housing policies pioneered during the Depression and the war

⁵ Catherine Bauer, "Housing in the United States: Problems and Policy," *International Labour Review* (July 1945): 1. For a study of Bauer and her marriage to the house designer William Wurster, see Gwendolyn Wright, "A Partnership: Catherine Bauer and William Wurster," in *An Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster* (Berkeley, California: San Francisco and University of California Press, 1995): 184-203.

should remain in place. A single and permanent national agency, she recommended, should be established to oversee all civic reconstruction, and especially, middle-income housing. Such public programs, she maintained would follow "truly productive, democratic and humanly hopeful interests."⁶

The federal government, nonetheless, resisted Bauer's advice, choosing to encourage construction as it had during the 1930s — through mostly indirect means. For instance, the GI Bill supported house construction through mortgage loan guarantees and by 1957 4.5 million houses (or about 30% of each year's domestic production) would be built with public support.⁷ The benefits were significant: not only was much-needed shelter created, but jobs too — both of which helped millions adjust to the uncertainties of demobilization and the return to civilian life.

A major issue facing the nation was what role technology should play in defining the peace. Although assembly-line techniques had raised industrial efficiency to an art and powerful new weapons had helped cause the surrender of the Axis powers, the nation still had to

⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷ According to the National Association of Home Builders, by 1957 the FHA had insured \$29.5 billion in loans. See Gwendolyn Wright, *Building The Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981), 248 and 299.

wonder how such advances would shape the built environment. Lewis Mumford, who was among the earliest writers to understand this, was cautiously optimistic. In the essay "The Social Foundations of Postwar Building" published in Great Britain in 1942 and in the United States three years later, he examined the complex situation.⁸ Of particular concern to him was how technology and related "mechanical improvements" could be utilized to serve the greater public. For Mumford, the war's end would be an opportunity to set goals, particularly those involving the relationship between man and machine. Many questions were posed, most of which described how new techniques and methods might be used for the general betterment of society. These tools, were not to be ignored or suppressed, but according to Mumford, should be used purposefully to express a "new myth" of national cooperation and equality.⁹

Perhaps Mumford's utopian ideals had already been realized in the war itself. As many scholars have noted, the war transformed American society in a number of ways. Not only did the defense build-up modernize the nation's industrial capacity and send millions back to work, but

⁸ Lewis Mumford, "Social Foundations of Postwar Building," in *Rebuilding Britain*, #9, (London: Lund Humphries, c. 1943). Reprinted in *City Development: Studies in Disintegration and Renewal* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945).

⁹ Ibid., 9.

it also gave new opportunities to groups who had often been ignored by the industrial sector, especially women and blacks.¹⁰ In short, the war seemed to provide a rosy template for the nation's future, wherein all citizens would benefit from the fruits of industrial progress.

The historian Roland Marchand has examined the war and its influence on American popular culture.¹¹ While it is certainly true that millions benefited from their selfless contribution to the war effort — what he characterized as "enacting the drama of the melting pot" — there was also a conspicuous downside. America's entry into the war placed enormous demands on the average citizen. Whether working at home or abroad, the impact was felt in their daily lives, determining where they lived, what they did, and with whom they spent their time. Patriotism, not surprisingly, was valued above all things and it was proudly expressed in a multitude of ways. While millions freely enlisted and served in the military, an equal or greater number expressed their loyalty by relocating near defense plants, planting

¹⁰ For instance, during the war "real compensation" for industrial workers rose 22% and the number of skilled blacks in the work force doubled. See Michael Sorkin, "War is Swell," *Building the American Dream*, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995), 233.

¹¹ Roland Marchand, "Visions of Classlessness, Quests for Dominion: American Popular Culture, 1945-60," in *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions, 1945-60*, ed. Robert H. Brenner and Gary W. Reichard, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 163-81.

victory gardens, purchasing war bonds, and rationing consumer goods. In short, this was a culture of consensus and sacrifice, a time when few Americans questioned national policy and its programs. And although many dismissed these constraints as temporary and entirely necessary, Marchand maintains that the very same attitudes remained in place after the war, creating a cultural climate in which individual preferences would be subordinated to the will of the larger group.

* * *

The rise of what Marchand calls a "composite national culture" would have a lasting impact on the design and debate surrounding the single-family house. No longer would technical issues dominate discussion as they once had in 1943 and 1944, but instead articles would address how various solutions might express the war's broader significance and meaning. Consequently, many writers maintained that postwar buildings must express the superior values that sustained, and eventually led the nation to victory.

In September 1940, *Architectural Forum* published James McQueedy's "Architecture for the Man in the Street," urging architects to pay greater attention to

architectural symbolism and comprehensibility.¹² While some of his remarks were directed toward the International Style and its frequent insensitivity to popular taste, he stressed the importance of one's choice of architectural style and how a building's design can convey its purpose and place in society:

As at all times in the past a building must stand or fall by its superficial appearance, which in any case is all that the man in the street has to judge by."¹³

For McQueedy, the modern aesthetic was simply too severe, too abstract, and too homogeneous. Not only did these limitations make it difficult for average American to interpret these structures, but according to McQueedy, "modern buildings have no associations with prosperity and security, nothing to make him proud."¹⁴

During the coming decade these concerns would take center stage. In books and magazines, writers frequently targeted the "layman," a then-fashionable term that made reference to the men and women who fought the war and were now ready to proceed with their lives. This attitude, I believe, was reinforced by the war effort. Having affected millions of lives, one could hardly expect a critic to describe the future without some lip

¹² James McQueedy, "Architecture for the Man in the Street," *Architectural Forum* (September 1940): 173-4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 174.

service to the invaluable contributions made by most Americans.

Critics often based their arguments in history, using past trends to suggest how builders and architects might respond to the present situation. They described how before the eighteenth century European models were brought and transformed, creating an architecture unique to the American continent. Postwar writers hoped indigenous forms would once again serve as inspiration; not that they would be copied exactly, but that their proven capacity to express democratic aspirations and values would be absorbed.

In the 1947 book *American Building: The Forces That Shape It*, James Marston Fitch described the history of American "esthetic standards" and the critical role producers and consumers play in creating them.¹⁵ While much of the book's first half was devoted to integrating historical, technical, and theoretical issues, Fitch also discussed the work of contemporary architects and their responsibility to the general public. He contended that architecture was a "lethargic field," one in which the

¹⁵ Fitch was extremely knowledgeable about domestic issues, having served in the Federal Housing Administration as a housing analyst during 1935 and 1936 and as a contributor to several architectural magazines. James Marston Fitch, *American Building: That Forces That Shape It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948). Although published in 1948, Fitch had most likely completed his text at the time he signed the preface on the 25th of January 1947, see IX.

physical persistence of buildings overshadowed all other considerations. He urged his peers to ignore these ever present models and pay greater attention to practical concerns and satisfying the individual user.

Fitch titled the concluding chapter "Toward a Democratic Esthetic." Like the book from which he paraphrased it, Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*, Fitch confidently believed that American building was entering a new phase, one of considerable challenge and opportunity.¹⁶ Technology and materials would no longer dominate discussion, but instead architects would pay increased attention to the "reaction of the individual and the standard of the group."¹⁷ He wrote:

. . . building designer and building consumer must join with all Americans of good will in building a society of peace, freedom, and plenty. In doing so, they will inevitably lay the basis for a flowering rich and wide, of a truly democratic esthetic.¹⁸

Fitch maintained that over the past decade the modern movement had consistently failed to address the needs of the common man, winning support — as at MoMA — exclusively amongst architects, intellectuals, and the elite. These associations clearly troubled Fitch. Written

¹⁶ Le Corbusier, *Toward a New Architecture* (London: J. Rodker, 1931; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986). The book's original title was *Vers une architecture* (1923).

¹⁷ Fitch, *American Building*, 349.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 372.

at a time of heightened tension between American labor and management, perhaps he worried that such aesthetic ambivalences were an expression of deeper class conflicts.¹⁹

Like Mumford, Fitch believed that even the simplest dwelling could have profound social significance. He encouraged architects and builders to pay less attention to superficial stylistic labels and more to the people who would ultimately reside there. In short, society, rather than technology, should be the primary stimulus behind postwar architecture. Equating the advantages of his approach to "native common sense,"²⁰ he illustrated his argument with a wide spectrum of solutions, ranging from house designs by Gropius and George Fred Keck to prefabricated models that were "timidly disguised to look like handmade Cape Cod Colonials."²¹ Designs by the Boston architect Hugh Stubbins Jr. merited special praise. Fitch described his defense housing at Windsor Locks, Connecticut, as "excellent . . . an extension of the New England wood tradition" (figure 16).²²

¹⁹ In January 1946 nearly two million workers were on strike. For a detailed discussion of wages, union activity and labor unrest between 1945 and 1948, see Joseph C. Goulden, *The Best Years 1945-1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 108-31.

²⁰ Fitch, *American Building*, 357.

²¹ For illustrations see Fitch, plate numbers 156, 157, 162.

²² *Ibid.*, caption for plate 151.

Fitch's faith in "the people" led him to assert that the common man, rather than critics and other experts, should direct the future of American architecture. Should they continue to desire some form of sentiment or even historic detail, then the modern architect must recognize this and learn to adapt. For without their support, the modernist enterprise — regardless of its extraordinary accomplishments — would come to a crashing halt. In short, it is the perception of modern architecture, rather than its materials or methods, that needed refinement. Like a blank screen onto which one may project or distort a given point of view, Fitch believed that only through the reshaping of its public image would the modern movement continue its rise.

For Fitch, Mumford and others, responsiveness to the public was the keystone to maintaining American democracy. Consequently, considerable rhetoric was spent focusing on how future buildings would reflect and encourage the nation's proud political tradition.

* * *

Like his peers who hoped to temper many of modern architecture's excesses, Fitch particularly admired Frank Lloyd Wright who throughout his career made consistent references to the "best aspects of American experience — its humanity, its hospitality, its lack of aristocratic

pretension."²³ From his early success in the suburbs of Chicago, to his unrealized Cloverleaf project for the Division of Defense housing in 1941, Wright designed houses that blended tradition and technological innovation. His lengthy career provided Fitch, and others like MoMA curator John McAndrew, with a model through which architects could adapt the machine aesthetic to the American experience.²⁴

In 1945 Wright returned to many of his lifelong themes, publishing *When Democracy Builds*,²⁵ an expanded version of an earlier book devoted to his scheme for Broadacre City, an unrealized project incorporating housing, industry, and transportation spread across a uniform rural grid. As throughout his career, the targets remained consistent: putting an end to imported academic styles, the threat of urban centralization, and the arrogance of science.²⁶ Such trends, he maintained, went

²³ Fitch, 363.

²⁴ See Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Art and Craft of the Machine," 1901. reprinted in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings*, edited by Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn (New American Library, 1960), 55.

²⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright, *When Democracy Builds*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945) was an expanded version of *The Disappearing City* (New York: W. F. Payson, 1932). A model of his plan for Broadacre City was constructed in 1934 and exhibited at Rockefeller Center in New York City the following year.

²⁶ Although Wright was an eloquent spokesman for the machine early in his career, he became increasingly wary of its broader cultural impact. In 1944 he wrote "The present status of the machine belongs squarely with

against American tradition, creating landscapes and communities without regard to the individual and his or her needs.

Wright challenged his peers to rise to the occasion. In a way, he envied the hypothetical British, German or Japanese architect whose opportunities had been expanded by "our bomb throwing extravaganza."²⁷ Still, Wright saw the postwar era as an historic moment for architects like himself. Like Thomas Jefferson and A. J. Downing before him, he embraced the idea of leaving the city. In his plans for Broadacre City, Wright expected the house to play a crucial role:

The true center in Democracy . . . is the individual Usonian home. In it we will have the most important building we can build . . . ever a refuge for the expanding spirit of the Individual man.²⁸

It would be a place:

. . . wherein a man can feel, think, and learn to live a new free life and build the new free house of a new free world.²⁹

Implicit in Wright's argument was the sense that America had gone astray and was not living up to its promise. In Broadacre City, he was proposing a new and utopian stage

Fascism and all forms of dictatorship because the machine itself is a dictator. The democratic citizen wants a free initiative." *Architectural Forum* (April 1944): 106.

²⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, *When Democracy Builds*, 131.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

from which the nation might live up to his unrealized expectations.

Wright clearly anticipated change, yet he also urged his readers to respect the past. To secure commissions he tried to position himself as America's elder statesman – a national conscience – a direct connection to the lost worlds of Horatio Greenough, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even Jefferson. For many Americans, this was a time to rediscover traditional values.

Among these patriotic writers was Thomas H. Creighton, editor of the *Architectural Record*. A prominent spokesman for increased social consciousness among architects, he wrote six popular books on the subject of house design between 1945 and 1955.³⁰ In the plain-spoken *Planning to Build* (1945), he maintained that the American people must draw on their wartime experience, building structures, especially houses, that would satisfy important social needs.

In his effort to foster "a democratic political entity," Creighton advised his readers to stand back and carefully scrutinize their lives and the built environment:

³⁰ Creighton's publications that address house design include: *Homes: Selected by the Editors of Progressive Architecture* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1947); and with Katherine Morrow Ford: *The American House Today* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1951); *Designs for Living: 175 Examples of Quality Home Interiors* (1955); *Quality Budget Houses: A Treasury of 100 Architect Designed Houses From \$5,000 to \$20,000* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1955).

In the case of writing, the public can answer for itself . . . It can refuse to buy . . . In the case of a building, are we going to wait . . . cock our democratic heads at it, decide it doesn't express us, and then tear it down?³¹

Rather than leaving construction to experts or speculators, he felt it was essential to educate the general public and thereby demystify the building process:

When buildings are an expression of popular interest, they tell a great many things about the populace . . . And yet, if our buildings are to be readable, if they will tell to future generations anything significant about us what is the formula by which the reflection is to be achieved? It cannot be anything but popular interest, popular knowledge, yes, popular control of that construction that goes on.³²

Creighton's mission was to end self-conscious phrases and meaningless slogans and speak plainly about how successful buildings are realized. Thus, he hoped to empower the common man, encouraging active participation rather than passive consumption of soon-to-be available designs. The benefits, he believed, would be invaluable to the nation.

Like Wright, he used historical precedents to justify this argument. In both references to seventeenth century architecture and Louis Sullivan's design philosophy he examined the nation's past record, celebrating native and popular expression over all other forms. For instance, he hailed the simple structures

³¹ Creighton, *Planning to Build*, 34.

³² Ibid., 32-33.

built by the early settlers as the "first important break in the architectural sterility which began in the Renaissance."³³ Such innovations, he maintained, had generally been ignored. Creighton believed the postwar nation must face the future like the first settlers did – with stern realism, focusing on the essentials, not elaborate drawings and other architectural extravagances.

Nonetheless, Crieghton refrained from forecasting what the future might bring. No photographs or detailed blueprints were used to illustrate his point of view, instead, he asked readers to consider the engineers and educators whose achievements had begun to change the course of twentieth-century architecture. What these two groups shared was a sensibility that was both critical and visionary – the very traits necessary to confront the present housing crisis. Yet oddly, when he spoke of the future only one living architect was mentioned – Wright – whom Creighton praised for fusing "structural and aesthetic design."³⁴ This was a moment of understandable nationalism and Wright seemed the ideal figure; an architect whose career expressed unceasing faith in both technology and American values.

* * *

³³ Ibid., 54.

³⁴ Ibid., 68.

The political implications of domestic design played a major role in redefining the modern movement in the mid-1940s. While critics like Fitch and Creighton called on architects to pay greater attention to the layman, others began to ponder how the use of symbolism affects the interpretation of built forms and their imagery.

Joseph Hudnut (1884-1968) was one the nation's most eloquent spokesmen on such issues. Trained as an architect at the University of Michigan and at Columbia University, he spent most of his career teaching at major American universities. At Columbia, where Hudnut became Dean in 1933, he reshaped the school's academic program, putting an end to architectural competitions that were long-favored by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and directed his faculty, which included such housing experts as Henry Wright and Carol Aronovici, to place greater emphasis on community planning, housing, and other practical issues.³⁵ Less than two years later, in 1935, he resigned, becoming the Dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Here, he did even more to alter the course of architectural education in America, moving European modernism into the academic mainstream. He accomplished this through a number of strategies: in addition to hiring the former

³⁵ For Hudnut's years at Columbia, see Rosemarie Bletter, "Modernism Rears Its Head," in *The Making of an Architect 1881-1981* (New York: Columbia University and Rizzoli International Publications, 1981), 112.

Bauhaus architects Gropius and Breuer, Hudnut invited the critic and historian Siegfried Giedion to teach at the University, and Giedion's Charles Eliot Norton lectures in 1938-39 became the influential book *Space, Time and Architecture*, an historical survey demonstrating the inevitability of the rise of the modern movement.³⁶

Yet for all of Hudnut's personal contact with the leaders of the new architecture, over the years he kept a critical distance, remaining an impartial judge of both past and present solutions. As a writer, he expressed interest in a wide range of subjects, from early twentieth century sculpture to Georgian architecture, and especially housing.³⁷ During the 1940s one theme appears repeatedly in his writing – that architectural imagery deserved greater public and professional attention.

It was in 1943 that Hudnut first began to publicly confront the modern movement and its uneven record. He began with the essay "Housing and the Democratic Process," a penetrating critique of government programs and their impact on American society. More than a decade had passed since the Public Works Administration had begun to raze slums and build new urban communities.

³⁶ Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 5th ed., rev. and enl. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1973). The first edition was published in 1941.

³⁷ Reginald Issacs, "Joseph Hudnut," in *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, Vol. II (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 435.

Although sympathetic with the rational mechanisms used to plan and maintain these facilities, overall he was disappointed by the results. Primarily built for members of the lower and working classes, he called these well-intended projects "an act of segregation," arguing that the physical isolation of these new apartment complexes "corrupt[s] the very core of democracy." He advised:

Now, while the war makes a necessary pause in our [architectural] practice, we ought to reexamine that pattern. We should examine not processes and appearances merely, not tools and means merely, but most searchingly of all, values and ends.³⁸

Hudnut believed that the vast impersonal communities built in New York and Chicago were ultimately a threat to the individual. Although he supported the government's goals, he worried that their anonymous character would eventually "channelize" urban life and human behavior.³⁹ Like the influential social critic Jane Jacobs who championed traditional street patterns and scale nearly a generation later, Hudnut's perceptive analysis praised the "clamor" and "confusion" of everyday urban life. In contrast to the open and artificial landscaping found in most high-rise developments, he sought to underscore the social importance of the street, calling it the "the most

³⁸ Hudnut, "Housing and the Democratic Process," *The Architectural Record* (June 1943): 45

³⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

active channel of human intercourse, the oldest theater of democracy."⁴⁰

Cities, no matter how large or small, depend on specific formal traditions for their sense of community and meaning. Hudnut maintained that public institutions – schools, churches, and gymnasiums – should be easily identified through specific architectural conventions.

For example, he wrote that:

What I miss most in all your housing schemes is the spire. You must make room for that symbol if only to relieve the deadly monotony of your roof-lines . . . You have fresh air, vitamins, plumbing, and landscaping no end – yes, and good planning sometimes – but you have left human nature outside your gate.⁴¹

This statement, which hints at Hudnut's growing interest in architectural symbols, was made in the very same year that Giedion, Jose Luis Sert, and Fernand Leger drafted their surprising call for a "New Monumentality" – an essay urging political leaders to build structures that would serve both the needs of the dead and the living. Not only would highly visible structures benefit man, but they hoped these new buildings would provide much needed symbols of a community's ideals, aims, and actions.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sigfried Giedion, Jose Luis Sert, Fernand Leger, "Nine Points on Monumentality" in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, edited by Joan Ockman (New York: Columbia University and Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), 27-28.

Although Hudnut praised the objectives of public housing, he regretted their scale, isolation, and anonymous character. Given the choice, he argued, few residents would freely remain. He compared the arrangement of a recent Chicago project to a "chicken farm . . . a stark parade of multiple cells." A fresh approach was called for, one that would "admit history and custom" into future community designs.⁴³

Towards the close of the war, Hudnut modified his support for "modern" architecture. Now in his late sixties, Hudnut had lived through two horrendous conflicts: the First World War as a soldier in the army from 1917 to 1919, and the Second World War, on the homefront. These experiences are definitely expressed in his writings. Hudnut sought to understand not only these wars and their place in American history, but also how architects could use these lessons to fashion a truly national landscape.

Two essays, both published in mid-1945, demonstrate Hudnut's view that architects can provide society with something much more meaningful than shelter. In "The Monument Does Not Remember" published a month after Japan's surrender, Hudnut surveyed the history of monumental expression: "what monuments are, why we build

⁴³ Hudnut, "Housing and the Democratic Process," 44.

them, and if we ought to build them."⁴⁴ Much of his attention focused on past efforts and their failure to make permanent the actual horror of war and the human suffering such conflicts entail:

I am for some act, immediate and unequivocal, repeated in every town and village which will attest our faith in the cause for which these men have made so great a sacrifice . . . Let us not turn to our ledgers without some durable achievement which shall give added life to that which our soldiers have fought.⁴⁵

From the pharaohs of Egypt to Nazi Germany, Hudnut stressed the persistent connection between monumental expression and tyranny. Because of these associations, he advocated an entirely different or, as Giedion had hoped for, a new kind of monument. He called on his peers to create a "people's memorial" – structures that would provide praise, pleasure, and even shelter.

Attention to such populist concerns, he maintained, would make future monuments comprehensible and intelligible to all. He wrote:

We should like to relate our architecture to ourselves in order that it may have meaning for us . . . Our soldiers will understand our faith. They fought for it. They will know that whatever we build for the happiness of the people – of their people – honors them; that we continue them in the structures which serve the ends they served.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Joseph Hudnut, "The Monument Does Not Remember," *The Atlantic* (September 1945): 55-59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

These structures, he suggested, might include such "useful" buildings as schools, libraries, and even houses.

Hudnut's contention that utilitarian buildings should and must serve symbolic ends was further explored in his essay "The Post-Modern House" published in the *Architectural Record* just after the German surrender in May 1945.⁴⁷ Here he openly criticized what he once enthusiastically supported – the relationship between domestic architecture and science. He apologized for the many misunderstandings that "modern" architecture had caused, suggesting:

. . . these were the important methods of an architecture never meant to be definite or "international" – which offered rather a base from which a new progress might be possible, a principle which should have its peculiar countenance in every nation and in every clime. . . . We must rely not upon the wonder and drama of our inventions, but upon the qualities, beyond wonder and beyond utility, which we can give them.⁴⁸

According to Hudnut, this "base" – its methods and formal concerns – had over time obscured the modern movement's original intent. Although the machine would continue to

⁴⁷ *Architectural Record* (May 1945): 70-75, reprinted in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Rizzoli Books and Columbia Books of Architecture, 1993), 71-76.

⁴⁸ Ockman, 75.

play a critical role, he warned architects not to "permit it to extinguish the fire on our hearth."⁴⁹

In using the new phrase "post-modern," Hudnut was clearly advocating further change. Like Fitch, Creighton, and many of his peers, he sought a progressive middle road, one in which architects would use modern techniques to satisfy a range of physical and emotional needs. Likewise, Hudnut went to great lengths to avoid advocating a single school or solution. As an influential member of the academy that had done so much to secure a place for the modern movement in America, perhaps he now hoped he could help purge it of some of its academic and technocentric excesses.

In the 1947 essay "Love and Little Houses" he created Mrs. Quigley of Potawatami, Massachusetts, an average upper middle class American, who had "cast aside her outworn shell" and was now "living in a non-colonial world."⁵⁰ Her home, which he singled out for praise because it was not identical to those of her neighbors, or copied from the pages of popular magazines, illustrated Hudnut's vision of postwar modernity. At an imagined dinner, served in the revised version of his essay published in 1949, Mrs. Quigley gave thanks to her

⁴⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁰ Joseph Hudnut, "Love and Little Houses", *House and Garden* (May 1947): 76-77, 161. Revised in *Architecture and the Spirit of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 127.

distinguished architect-guests, who included Mies, Le Corbusier, and Wright. In Hudnut's view, the ideal house would not copy but synthesize the lessons learned from each of these three modern masters, creating an environment that serves as a "frame for her individual life," hospitable to personal tastes and whims.⁵¹

Hudnut grasped the modern movement's strengths and weaknesses. While he admired its potential to sculpt space, he feared standardization and how such techniques might affect private lives. In short, he offered the nation no panacea; both symbolism and the machine had important roles to play in his vision of the postwar world. Hudnut contemplated what architects were trying to express and how architecture, especially houses, could satisfy more than just practical needs. As McAndrew and Gutheim had written in 1939 for MoMA, he urged his peers to embrace a higher purpose in their work, one "guided, but not tyrannized by necessity."⁵²

With the modern movement now part of the institutional mainstream, Hudnut had begun to question his once-radical allegiances. Although he once wholeheartedly embraced the International Style, as time passed he wondered whether the machine would subdue the spirit and imprison the user — whether it could

⁵¹ Ibid., 128.

⁵² In a footnote Hudnut credited this phrase to Frederick Gutheim, Ibid., 131.

ultimately "stand between us and the free exercise of our unique genius."⁵³ Subtle as his argument was, Hudnut's renewed interest in symbolism suggested a timely alternative for the nation's domestic architects, one that would grow and eventually eclipse an already vulnerable modern aesthetic.

At a time when many leading architects and critics were expecting the modern movement to shape the face of suburbia, Hudnut was beginning to express serious doubts. He was a poetic idealist who understood the limitations inherent in the modern movement. Critics and skeptics alike welcomed the Harvard Dean's change of heart. In fact, the "Post-Modern House" gained considerable attention. Over the next seven years it was reprinted at least three times. For instance, in August 1945 the popular interior decorating magazine *American Home* quoted large portions from the essay in conjunction with an article championing the Cape Cod house. Written by its editor Jean Austin — who Howard Myers, the editor of *Architectural Forum*, dubbed "Cape Cod Austin" — the article described the many advantages of such designs, particularly the Cape's "unbeatable plan" and its

⁵³ Joseph Hudnut, *The Three Lamps of Modern Architecture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1952), see 56. Hudnut's delivered the complete text as a series of public lectures at the College of Architecture and Design, May 12-16, 1952.

"flexible and versatile" character.⁵⁴ But what probably attracted Austin most of all was Hudnut's willingness to second-guess the movement he had done so much to promote. After nearly a decade at Harvard's Graduate School, he was questioning his once-pioneering support for the modern movement. And even though his essay showed little real affection for the type of house Austin's article was advocating, his critics must have hoped that Hudnut's ambivalence would signal the first of many defections.

* * *

Despite the considerable attention paid to technology, many intellectuals played down its potential in the mid-1940s, focusing instead on what the war revealed about the American character and national values. During this era, consequently, there were frequent reminders of the nation's integrity and global supremacy. Goldman remembered in 1955:

The trouble was that the more Americans ventured into the world, the more disconcerting were the facts that confronted them. War-crimes trials were going on and the picture of other civilizations that emerged was hardly encouraging.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Jean Austin, "Cape Cod: The Idea Indestructible," *American Home* (August 1945): 21-29. Likewise, Mumford sympathized with Hudnut's position, publishing his essay in *Roots of American Architecture* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1952), 306-316.

⁵⁵ Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, 32.

Such reports, combined with the establishment of the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction in 1947, created a substantial number of reasons for Americans to feel good about themselves and their nearly two-century old democratic tradition.

With peace, nonetheless, came a certain amount of national introspection. While it is certainly true that a long list of technological advances would shape the decade to come, there was also considerable apprehension about the atom bomb and its impact. In 1946 alone, more than three hundred articles on this subject would be published in major periodicals.⁵⁶

Believing that an arms race was all-but-inevitable, Mumford's 1946 essay on the bomb and its "Social Effects" was a call for international cooperation. While certainly concerned with its immense destructive power, he also focused his comments on less obvious issues, particularly the effect such a "stalemate" could have on human psychology and cultural production. He imagined:

In every other department of life, there is a slowing down of creativity: worse than that, an active regression. Life is now reduced to purely existential terms: existence toward death. To counteract this, a cult of the archaic and the antiquarian becomes popular.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 31.

⁵⁷ Lewis Mumford. "Social Effects," *Air Affairs: An International Quarterly* (March 1946): 375.

Although the term "cult" might be a bit strong, after the war there was a noticeable surge of interest in America's past. Many found inspiration in the era of the early republic, a period of similar potential and uncertainty.⁵⁸ For instance, Cornell professor of history Carl L. Becker (1873-1945) wrote *How New Will the Better World Be? A Discussion of Post-war Reconstruction* (1944). In this book he examined why the war began and how these lessons might shape the world in years to come. While foreign aggression and the defense of freedom were certainly important reasons for the nation's entry into the war, Becker also emphasized the historic sources of American freedom, particularly those guaranteed by the United States Constitution. He wrote that whatever future ultimately takes root, "it must firmly be grounded in the old."⁵⁹

Becker did not seek or find easy answers regarding the question of postwar reconstruction. Although the war had given the nation many new tools in its defense, he saw little sense to adopt them without greater introspection and self-knowledge. He did not seek "miracles," but gradual change reflecting shared goals

⁵⁸ See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), particularly chapters 16 and 17.

⁵⁹ Carl L. Becker, *How New Will the Better World Be? A Discussion of Post-war Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 133.

and national traditions. Becker asked that America approach the future with caution, addressing the concerns of the living, the dead, and those still to be born. In short, a "better" world would not necessarily be a new one.

One of the most perceptive observers of these debates was the critic Russell Lynes. At a time when many writers were discussing how techniques pioneered during the war could be used to express national values, Lynes attempted to explain why the modern architect would inevitably fail. In his October 1945 essay in *Harpers* "Architects in Glass Houses" he laid out his reasons.⁶⁰ In contrast to Fitch and Hudnut who believed that with a little fine-tuning the movement just might prosper, Lynes rightly believed that most Americans would never embrace a domestic environment based solely in rational thought and functional expression. To illustrate this, he contrasted the character of domestic and work environments. Such conditions, while perhaps desirable and beneficial in an office or factory setting, he maintained had no place in the private house. For instance, he noted that the use of large areas of glass and the adoption of the open plan ignored the universal need for privacy – an issue that would increase its

⁶⁰ Russell Lynes, "Architects in Glass Houses," *Harpers*, (October 1945): 338-345.

importance as the decade passed and American families grew in size.

In Lynes' view, the war had not improved the modern architect's prospects. He wrote:

No amount of inspired (or doctrinaire) theorizing is likely to withstand the popular reaction against the regimentation of wartime, and the earnest desire . . . to recapture the familiar.⁶¹

With history as his guide, Lynes asserted that after most wars people hurry home seeking houses that give them pleasure and a much-needed sense of security. Sensible as this may seem, Lynes believed that modern architects, for all their theorizing, had failed to understand basic human psychology. "Sentiment, individualism, pride, the competitive spirit, and identification with the past" he wrote, "had much to do with the kinds of houses we have chosen to live in."⁶²

Glass houses would continue to be built by the wealthy, but on the whole, Lynes was right. Not only would banks shy away from these untested investments, but without their financial support builders would never achieve the large-scale economies necessary to compete with more conventional models. To conclude, Lynes praised the personal and the familiar: describing his own comfortable Victorian furniture, the cellar and the

⁶¹ Ibid, 338.

⁶² Ibid.

stairs, as well as the doors that shut off various rooms in his house. Although admittedly old-fashioned, to Lynes these features seemed far more rational than those found in the high-tech single-story houses conceived by modern architects.

On the whole "Architects in Glass Houses" celebrated common sense. Rather than describing what architects can or might do, Lynes attempted to put into words what American homes are really like. While no style or individual architect was singled out for criticism or praise, implicit in his remarks was the belief that traditional solutions would prevail.

* * *

By 1947 the United States had begun to disentangle itself from the war and demobilization. Difficult as it is to generalize about the postwar state of mind, most writers agreed that what the nation would build must serve human needs and symbolize values.

In the spring of 1947 a conference was held at Princeton University, attracting architects and critics from throughout the nation. Although many leading modern architects attended, including Neutra, Wachsmann, and Gropius, much of the discussion focused on community planning and architecture as a social science, reflecting the "need to study the man of our time, with all his

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particular social, personal, and political requirements."⁶³

John Ely Burchard, one of the conference's organizers, warned his peers not underestimate the significance of recent aesthetic trends. He urged members of the profession to confront this issue head-on, declaring:

There was a time to clean the stables; a time to shock; a time to argue. The last was a long time. All these times are over for modern architecture. There remains only the time for decision. Is this a mere style; will it someday have become a tradition? This is the time for decision . . . The next few years will decide whether modern architecture is an important landmark in world history or an unimportant and transient style. Our's is the choice.⁶⁴

Such cautious impartiality must have come as a great disappointment to members of the modern movement. While much had been achieved since 1932, many of the conference's participants had begun to question their faith. Figures as diverse as Thomas Creighton, Sigfried Giedion, Talbot Hamlin, George Howe, Joseph Hudnut, Robert Moses, Roland Wank, Frank Lloyd Wright, and William Wurster were united in the belief that this was a moment of decision, an opportunity for the architectural

⁶³ Thomas Creighton, "Introduction," *Building for Modern Man: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas Creighton (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1949), 3.

⁶⁴ John E. Burchard, "Professional Limitations and Possibilities," *Ibid.*, 33, 36.

community to address and respond to the era's shifting social, personal, and even political requirements.

Lynes had stumbled, if rather unknowingly in his 1945 essay, onto one of the modern movement's most significant shortcomings. This failure to define clear aesthetic distinctions between the workplace and the home would keep European modernism from penetrating the design of the middle-class American house. While corporations would gladly embrace a machine aesthetic during the 1950s, building radiant skyscrapers of shiny aluminum and glass, among suburban builders and dwellers the modern movement would find limited success.

CHAPTER V

BUILT IN USA: OTHER PERSPECTIVES

From the outset, the Museum of Modern Art was highly conscious of its unique position in the museum world. This was particularly evident in the Department of Architecture where three publications *Art in Our Time* (1939), *Built in USA - Since 1932* (1944), and *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture* (1952), attempted to chart both recent developments in the field and the museum's efforts to shape public taste.¹

Built in USA: Post-war Architecture reveals a great deal about the department and its priorities in the years following World War II. Published in 1952, the book had two purposes: first, to demonstrate the "great post-war flowering of architecture in this country;"² and second, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Department

¹ See *Art in Our Time*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1939); *Built in USA -- Since 1932*; ed. Elizabeth Mock (New York: MoMA, 1944; reprint ed., Arno Press, 1968); *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, ed. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Arthur Drexler (New York: MoMA, 1952; reprint ed., Arno Press, 1968).

² Philip Johnson, "Preface," *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, 8.

of Architecture. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who helped select the works in both the 1932 and 1952 exhibitions, asserted in the 1952 catalogue that "what used to be called "traditional" architecture is dead, if not buried."³ For supporters of the modern movement, such pronouncements were cause for celebration. Yet such a statement belies the fact that over the past two decades MoMA had rarely maintained a single coherent definition of modern architecture. In fact, the year 1946 marked a critical turning point. With Philip Johnson's return as the unofficial director of the Department of Architecture and his hiring of a succession of curators sympathetic to his point of view, the museum would recharge its earlier crusade in support of the International Style.

Built in USA: Post-war Architecture had a strong polemical tone. Forty-three examples were analyzed and illustrated, most of which followed the then two-decades old International Style formula. Aside from four works by Frank Lloyd Wright that incorporated natural materials and dramatic curving forms,⁴ the majority were sleek

³ Ibid. See "Introduction" by Hitchcock, 11. Hitchcock kept close ties to the museum, writing *The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times* (New York: MoMA, 1936) and *In The Nature of Materials* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), an "ex post factor catalogue" of the museum's Wright retrospective of the previous year. He also contributed an essay to *Modern Architecture in England* (New York: MoMA, 1937).

⁴ Two of the four works by Wright were houses with a circular plan: "House for Herbert Jacobs" (Middleton,

rectangular structures that made considerable use of hard-edged industrial materials, especially glass, steel, and aluminum. Among the nineteen houses chosen, the one that received the most attention (four photographs, one plan) was Mies van der Rohe's house for Dr. Edith Farnsworth at Plano, Illinois (1950, figure 25). For curator Arthur Drexler, domestic comfort was not a prime consideration. Instead, after a largely abstract description of its form and spatial character, he wrote that "the Farnsworth house generates emotional overtones as insistent as the hum of a dynamo."⁵

Based on MoMA publications like this, it is easy to understand why historians characterize the 1950s as a golden age for modern architecture, an era of consistency and consensus. However, this view fails to explain why such a narrow account of developments continues to dominate the historical discourse. Not only did these publications ignore the stylistic diversity found in the in the United States, but such descriptions disregarded the debates that previously existed within the museum itself.

In the chapter that follows I will attempt to show that this was a conscious – and somewhat elitist – strategy, one that distorted the modern movement's

Wisconsin, 1948) and "House for Sol Friedman" (Pleasantville, New York, 1949).

⁵ Drexler, *Built in USA*, 21.

original intent. After a brief discussion of Johnson's activities outside the museum, I will discuss what transpired during his absence, particularly under curator Elizabeth B. Mock from 1943 to 1946. During these years the Modern adopted a rather democratic and populist stance, one that would be debased and gradually forgotten following Johnson's return.

* * *

Philip Johnson left MoMA in late 1934 to pursue a career in politics. At a time when a significant number of Americans were gravitating towards the Communist party and its leftist goals, he was drawn in an entirely different direction. As early as 1933 – the year that Hitler and the National Socialists assumed power – Johnson expressed his admiration for the Nazi regime. Although he failed to succeed in the political arena, he voiced his pro-German and anti-Semitic views publicly, in a number of American periodicals.⁶ These essays were not about art or architecture, but served to defend Hitler's accomplishments and philosophy. England, France, Poland,

⁶ Franz Schulze refers to this period as Johnson's "Inglorious detour." See *Philip Johnson: Life and Work* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994), 102-146.

and especially "the Jews" were often Johnson's targets.⁷

In *The Examiner* he wrote that:

Hitler-invented Barbarism . . . is part of the stream of German thought . . . To such Germans [as Nietzsche], Liberal ideals are centered on comfort, not on heroism. The comfort pursued in the name of "freedom" cancels out true freedom, which is not a matter of happiness but of effort, and effort is, in the nature of things, quite likely to include war.⁸

Inevitably, such harsh views and personal politics would come back to haunt him.

In September 1940 at the age of thirty-four Johnson enrolled at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Several factors may have figured into his decision. With the Federal Bureau of Investigation assembling a file on his activities, close friends began to encourage him to loosen his ties to fascism.⁹ Although I do not question his desire to become an architect, his timing was impeccable. Not only would his studies delay his entry into the armed services, but by withdrawing from the public sphere he

⁷ Johnson contributed five articles to Father Charles E. Coughlin's magazine, *Social Justice*, in 1939. Coughlin was a Catholic priest and an immensely popular radio personality who used his radio broadcasts to preach largely isolationist and anti-Semitic views. During the 1930s some estimates placed the audience for these weekly broadcasts at nearly thirty million listeners. For more on Coughlin and Johnson's relationship with him, see Schulze, 120-31, 139-139.

⁸ Cited by Schulze, 140.

⁹ Ibid., 142.

might silence his critics and the growing number of personal attacks directed his way.¹⁰

Johnson studied architecture at Harvard for three years. For his senior project in 1942 he planned and built (with the architect S. Clement Horsley) a house for himself in Cambridge (figure 17). Featuring a sixty-five foot glass wall opening onto a paved garden court, the flat-roofed house owed much to Mies' domestic work during the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹¹ Surrounded by high walls on a tree-lined residential street, the private compound stood as a conspicuous symbol of Johnson's wealth, privilege, and refined taste. *Architectural Forum*, which praised the building's "remarkable quality," did not hesitate to point out its limited audience:

¹⁰ By 1940 Johnson was receiving national attention for his affiliation with Nazi causes. Soon after he entered Harvard a detailed account of fascist activity in the United States was published in *Harpers*. In it, Johnson's earlier political pursuits were described in detail and he was identified as a lecturer and frequent contributor to fascist publications. See "The American Fascists," *Harper's* (October 1940): 391.

¹¹ *Built in USA - Since 1932*, 46-47. Much of the furniture was also designed by Mies, including a pair of Barcelona chairs, a leather day-bed, ottoman, and several tubular steel pieces. They appear prominently in Ezra Stoller's stunning photographs of the house which Johnson commissioned in the winter of 1944.

For an average U. S. family this house would be almost totally unlivable. But it was not built for an average U. S. family. It was built for the architect, who is also a bachelor.¹²

The Ash Street house was the site of many parties and lectures and it became quite well-known in the architectural community. It was featured in national magazines and in the MoMA catalogue *Built in USA - Since 1932*.¹³

When Johnson returned to the Modern much had changed. Not only was Alfred Barr no longer the museum's Director, but during his nearly eleven-year absence, his successors had not followed the course he had laid out so explicitly in his earlier writings. In fact, from 1935 to 1946 MoMA distanced itself from Johnson's definition of modern architecture.

Peter Blake, who served as curator of architecture under Johnson during the late 1940s, acknowledged this departure, writing:

¹² "House in Cambridge, Massachusetts," *Architectural Forum* (December 1943): 91.

¹³ It should be noted that this was the first time the museum recognized Johnson as an architect in his own right. This would be the first of many occasions that he would use his ties to the museum to advance his own career.

Except for a brief period of time in the late 1930s and 1940s when the department was first headed by people as John McAndrew, Elizabeth Mock and Mary Barnes, MoMA's position on architecture and design was that these were to be judged solely according to esthetic criteria.¹⁴

Elizabeth B. Mock (1910-1998) joined the museum's staff in 1938.¹⁵ From the start she was keenly aware of the critical debates within the modern movement – especially in terms of house design. Mock spent seven years at the museum in various capacities, serving as curator in the Department of Architecture from 1943 to 1946. Unlike many of her contemporaries who chose sides in the debates surrounding contemporary architecture, Mock enjoyed a privileged position. Rather following a single set of ideas, Mock was a product of both the excitement and ambivalences that shaped the rise of the modern movement. For instance, it was through her older sister, Catherine Bauer, who collaborated with Mumford on the housing section of *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, that she first developed her interest in the field. She later recalled:

¹⁴ Peter Blake, "Architecture is an Art and MOMA is its prophet," *ArtNews* (October 1979): 99.

¹⁵ Born Elizabeth Bauer, upon her marriage in 1934 she took the name of her Swiss husband Rudolf Mock. Occasionally she made reference to her maiden name, signing essays with the initials: E. B. M. Divorced and remarried in the 1950s, she took the name of her second husband the architect Kenneth Kassler. In latter years, she went by the name Elizabeth Mock-Kassler. Many libraries identify her this way.

I was her shadow, she knew all the smartest [people] in New York and was very well read and introduced me to Le Corbusier which made a great impression on me. That 1932 exhibition of modern architecture was very important in my life . . . I decided I wanted to be an architect.¹⁶

Mock majored in English at Vassar College and graduated in 1932. Although she was greatly impressed by the MoMA exhibition, she was hardly prepared to pursue a career in architecture. At the advice of Frederick Gutheim and possibly her sister, Mock applied to the newly formed Taliesin Fellowship program and became one of Wright's first "charter" apprentices.¹⁷ This experience would have an enormous and unanticipated effect on her. Not only would she marry fellow apprentice Rudolf Mock, a Swiss architect with a strong interest in planning, but it was one of her first opportunities to experience contemporary architecture. She later remembered:

I was so surprised by Taliesin. I had never seen any great architecture let alone modern architecture. I was from New Jersey, I couldn't believe it . . . I had never seen anything so beautiful, never anything like it at all.¹⁸

Nonetheless, her training at Spring Green did not last long. Early in 1933 she and Mock left, married, and traveled to Mexico, and then Switzerland, where she lived

¹⁶ Mock-Kassler interview, Buell Center, Columbia University, 30 March 1995.

¹⁷ Although Mock considered studying at the Bauhaus, she later explained her decision, remembering "oh Mr. Wright he was so decorative... at that time there was no where else to go, so I did go there." Mock-Kassler interview.

¹⁸ Mock-Kassler interview.

for four years. It was at this time that she visited Paris and saw a number of recently completed works by Le Corbusier. She was especially impressed by his "Pavilion Suisse" (1930-1932), a dormitory for Swiss students that was part of the University of Paris. Unlike much of the work promoted in *The International Style*, here was a modern building that incorporated both natural and man-made materials, such as glass, metal, cast-stone, and a curving wall made of rubble masonry.¹⁹ This visit proved to be a turning point in Mock's career. It was the first time she had seen a contemporary architect adopt this strategy and it was then that she realized she was "much more comfortable with a mixture of materials than the white boxes" preferred by others.²⁰

Mock returned to the United States in 1937 where she and her husband took up residence in Princeton, New Jersey. At the behest of Gutheim once again, she applied for a job at the museum. Hired by McAndrew, whom she may have known from her Vassar days, she was the ideal

¹⁹ It should be pointed out that the "Pavilion Suisse" was included in MoMA's 1932 exhibition, but only through plans and perspective drawings. See Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Rizzoli Books/Columbia Books of Architecture, 1992), 118.

²⁰ Mock-Kassler interview. It is interesting to juxtapose Johnson's comments with Mock's. He wrote to Hitchcock in June 1930: "Le Corbusier's Pavilion de la Suisse [sic] is bad in plan . . . He doesn't know materials. I'm afraid Oud was right. Le Corbusier is no architect." Quoted in Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 73.

candidate: extremely knowledgeable about the International Style and its leaders but not wholly devoted to its aesthetic. Over the next few years, as McAndrew's assistant, she worked on a number of exhibitions concerning American themes. In addition to the much-praised Jeu de Paume exhibition on the history of American art and architecture, she helped organize a number of exhibitions that touched on social issues, such as "Housing: Recent Developments in Europe and America" and "Modern Architecture for the Modern School."

In July 1941 McAndrew resigned as curator.²¹ Mock was the logical candidate to replace him, yet she declined, preferring to remain at home raising her infant son and working part-time for the museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions.²² For a brief period Janet Heinrich and Alice Carson ran the department, but by 1943 Mock was persuaded to return.²³

²¹ Although Lynes wrote that McAndrew resigned, Schulze contends that he was "dismissed" because the trustees believed the Department of Architecture was "not fiscally profitable." See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 225, and Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 173.

²² In a undated letter addressed to Mock, "Casey" wrote: "astounded at your turning down the curatorship." See MoMA archives, Circulating exhibition file #75, 3/4.

²³ Mock was not the museum's first woman curator; that accomplishment went to Elodie Courtier who organized the department of circulating exhibitions in 1933, and to the English film critic Iris Barry who guided the creation of the film department and library in 1935.

Over the next three years, as curator, Mock would publish three important essays that analyze the achievements of the modern movement: *Built in USA - Since 1932*, "Tomorrow's Small House," (1945) and *If You Want to Build a House* (1946). Their sequence is revealing. Whereas the first publication surveyed developments from 1932 to 1944, her subsequent writings addressed the future - what might be built.

In late 1944 *Built in USA - Since 1932* was published, documenting the forty-seven buildings featured in the architectural section of *Art in Progress*, a multi-departmental exhibition and catalogue marking the museum's fifteenth anniversary.²⁴ The Department of Architecture hoped the past summer's exhibition would be the first in a series of biannual exhibitions devoted to contemporary American building.²⁵ More than 16,000 copies of *Built in USA* were printed by the end of the following year, featuring a short glossary of architectural terms, black and white photographs, lists of past museum exhibitions

²⁴ *Art in Progress* (New York: MoMA, 1944). Because many members of the Architecture Committee were serving in the armed forces in 1944, a "Special Advisory Committee for Built in USA" was formed that chose thirty-six of the forty-seven selections. The Executive Committee, made up of Barr, Goodwin and Mock, chose the final eleven. See *Built in USA - Since 1932*, 2, 6-7.

²⁵ See Philip L. Goodwin's "Preface" to *Built in USA - Since 1932*, 6. Perhaps such an idea was the result of seeing the attention given to the recently formed Whitney Museum and its biannual exhibitions devoted to contemporary American painting and sculpture.

and publications, as well as a preface by the Architecture Committee's chair, Philip L. Goodwin, and an insightful essay by Mock discussing the present status of modern architecture.²⁶

Goodwin began by discussing the department's role in the architectural community. Although some Trustees believed that the crusade for modern architecture had been won and that the department had "served its purpose," Goodwin maintained that the "fight must go on."²⁷ Yet the battles he described were not necessarily about a specific style or approach, but about how the museum could encourage "sound and sincere building" in the postwar era.

Such plainspoken, reality-based objectives provided the perfect launching point for the department's assessment of recent achievements. Goodwin concluded his essay with a quote from Alfred Barr, the museum's former director:

The battle of modern architecture in this country is won but there are other problems . . . Housing is one of them: another is a reevaluation of the American past; and still another the development of a modern American architecture from the mingling of traditional American techniques and materials with the forms of Wright and the Europeans.²⁸

²⁶ According to the 1968 Arno Press reprint edition, 5,700 copies of the first edition of *Built in USA - Since 1932*, were published in May 1944, 4,000 copies in October 1944, and 7,000 in November 1945.

²⁷ Goodwin, *Built in USA - Since 1932*, 8.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

Mock took Barr's advice to heart, constructing a report that, though not specifically about the house, did address a number of issues that concerned its future and significance.

Mock viewed architecture as primarily a social art. While the 1932 exhibition remained influential, she downplayed its relevance, relegating it to the past. Like an adult remembering the excesses and idealism of her youth, Mock described her "re-reading" of the now twelve-year old catalogue as a "nostalgic experience." Though she admired and acknowledged the International Style's importance, she also recognized its "tragically unrealized promise."²⁹

Implicit in her essay was the belief that with the end of the war modern architecture would be entering a new phase. According to Mock the 1932 catalogue had significant failings. Not only were readers confused by its obtuse terminology, but she maintained that Hitchcock and Johnson had impaired the movement's progress by over-emphasizing aesthetic issues. For her, the Werkbund Housing Exhibition in Stuttgart of 1927 represented a temporary "puristic phase" and the use of industrial materials and techniques alone could not be the sole basis of a new architecture. She devalued the exposition's historical importance, calling the houses little more than

²⁹ Elizabeth Mock, *Built in USA - Since 1932*, Ibid., 10.

"formal symbols of Europe's idealization of the machine."³⁰

Furthermore, Mock claimed that the American public "deeply distrusted" the modern movement and its unforgiving aesthetic. She asserted:

Some process of humanization was necessary before the new architecture could be wholeheartedly accepted by the average man, European or American, for even beyond the lack of understanding of architecture in general, and new forms in particular, there was genuine suspicion of the romanticization of the machine which had produced these cold abstractions.³¹

She based her views on the public's mixed response to modern architecture over the past decade. Although it had valuable lessons to convey, she believed in the long run the machine alone should not be the generator of a new architectural style. She continued:

. . . Americans already suffered, if often unconsciously, from the over-mechanization of their lives, and no longer found anything romantic about it. Get up to the jangle of an alarm clock, rush through breakfast to spend an hour or two on a crowded bus or train, or driving yourself through frustrating traffic, pound a typewriter furiously all day with thirty minutes off for a counter lunch, and you're in no mood to come home to even the most beautiful *machine à habiter*.³²

Mock's paean to the commuter was spoken from experience. Most days she commuted from her home in Princeton, New Jersey, and like Lynes, she understood the need for

³⁰ Ibid, 12.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Ibid.

"escapism" – not into an idealized past, but away from the stresses of contemporary life and its regimentation. While functional design did have a contribution to make, she argued that architects must expand their vocabulary, drawing in particular on the lessons of Wright and traditional vernacular building.

With the war coming to a close, Mock's essay reflected national pride and a growing enthusiasm for things-American. Although by-no-means a crusade for the revival of the Cape Cod cottage, her essay did acknowledge the importance of American traditions. She wrote that this confluence of interests had finally led to:

. . . the development during the last decade of a modern American architecture, vigorous, friendly and flexible . . . the exchange of ideas has been constant and beneficial. The strength of the movement is evident in its capacity for continued growth.³³

Mock was undoubtedly pleased by the way in which the modern movement had begun to evolve. She applauded the increased use of natural materials and their lack of machine-like precision, writing:

The expressive treatment of materials was a new emphasis, but interest in their economical and direct use was basic in the theory of modern architecture.³⁴

Special praise was given to Le Corbusier and Alvar Aalto who during the 1930s moved away from stark white surfaces

³³ Elizabeth B. Mock, "American Architecture Since 1932" in *Art in Progress*, 183.

³⁴ Mock, *Built in USA*, Ibid., 16.

and rectilinear plans. Consideration for human needs became her top-priority: how contemporary architects could build structures that would reflect and express the evolving requirements and demands of family life. Mock concluded *Built in USA - Since 1932* with a brief examination of the context in which such structures would be built and the importance of site planning. While choosing a skilled architect and a fresh approach to design remained important, she placed equal if not more attention on the kinds of settings in which such residences would be placed.

Mock attempted to portray MoMA (and the house) as part of a larger community. With the war winding down and servicemen thinking of home, she attempted to visualize what returning servicemen might want, and how the nation's recent experience might be expressed in postwar buildings. Although science and rational thought remained important, Mock believed that the basis for future designs would be found in the user and his or her needs.

Populist concerns played a major role in the museum's programming during the early 1940s.³⁵ While some might dismiss these exhibitions as a typical response to the war, they also reflect the ideas advanced by Professor

³⁵ The museum's collection - painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, films, industrial design was praised in 1942 as "a symbol of one of the four freedoms which we are fighting - the freedom of expression." *MoMA Bulletin*, 1 Vol. X (October 1942): 19.

Artemas Packard in his 1938 report on the museum and its audience. During the war years a museum-wide effort promoted the American cause, bringing military innovations and progress reports to a public eager for good news. Some of the more notable exhibitions included: "Camouflage for Civilian Defense" (August 12-September 13, 1942), "Useful Objects in Wartime under \$10" (December 2, 1942-January 9, 1943), "Yank Illustrates the War" (March 17-April 18, 1943), and "Airways to Peace" (July 2-October 31, 1943).

These programs succeeded in expanding the museum's audience. Both attendance and membership increased dramatically during the early 1940s and a Veterans Art Center was established in the Museum annex. By 1945 MoMA was listed as New York's fourth most popular destination for enlisted men.³⁶ *Built in USA* benefited greatly from the museum's surging popularity. With the war's end close in sight, Mock's assessment of recent trends and tendencies sold exceedingly well. Stephen C. Clark, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, described it as "the most successful book on architecture ever published by the Museum."³⁷

³⁶ Between 1943 and 1945 annual attendance at the museum rose from 314,000 to 473,000. Likewise, membership almost doubled during this period, reaching 8,617 by 1946. See *MoMA Bulletin* (February 1946): 8.

³⁷ "Foreword," *MoMA Bulletin*, Ibid.

While consistent with her own interests, *Built in USA* must be seen within a broader context. MoMA had found in Mock an articulate champion of American architecture, one which was modern but did not emphasize a specific aesthetic agenda. And like McAndrew, Fitch, and Lynes, who all admired the modern movement, Mock emphasized the importance of tradition and the need for architects to show greater sensitivity to public needs. She later recalled, "I was trying to promote modern architecture, but open it up."³⁸

Occasionally, though, Mock did present more orthodox modern designs. In 1945 she helped organize "Tomorrow's Small House" (May 28 - September 30) which consisted of thirteen single-family house designs commissioned by the popular magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*. For the museum, this was an important opportunity. Not only did the models illustrate many of the key concepts and principles associated with the now decade-old International Style — the glass wall, the open plan, and single-story living — but this new alliance gave the museum a prominent ally in the media.

The Summer 1945 *MoMA Bulletin* documented the exhibition, including photographs and plans of each model. Mock began by declaring, "A million and a quarter new dwellings will be needed each year after the war, a

³⁸ Mock-Kassler interview.

challenge without precedent in American building history."³⁹ Many of the architects were already familiar to the museum's audience, especially George Fred Keck, John Funk, Hugh Stubbins, Jr., Wurster & Bernardi, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Philip Johnson.⁴⁰

Participants were required to follow specific guidelines. According to the magazine's architectural editor, Richard Pratt, "a really adequate house" would have three bedrooms, two bathrooms and cost less than \$6,000. In principle, Mock supported the program's objectives. Yet in the essay introducing the models she kept her critical distance. Rather than praising specific architects and designs, she warned readers of the "dangers of realistic models" and urged them to consider general rather than specific features. Her attitude was cool, polite, and curious. Although she clearly admired some of the schemes, she seemed reluctant to endorse them. In fact, she refrained from judgment, suggesting that "such houses will be available to the average American family only when that family *demands* them."⁴¹

³⁹ *MoMA Bulletin* (Summer 1945): 5.

⁴⁰ Like the Ash Street house in Cambridge three years earlier, Johnson's design featured a "rhythmic band of fixed glass and doors" overlooking a patio and garden. The primary concession made to family needs was the addition of two small bedrooms, a carport, and play yard. For model and plan, see house III, *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

"Imagine yourself," she wrote, "five or six inches tall and walk about each house until you feel quite at home, inside and out. Only then will you begin to understand the nature of each architects' proposals."⁴² The exhibition was conceived not to show the public what they should want, but to suggest what might be possible when the housing industry modernizes. Unlike Hitchcock and Johnson who sought an absolute aesthetic truth through a checklist of acceptable features and forms, Mock expressed faith that the readers could decide what was best for themselves. For her, "Tomorrow's Small House" was still on the drawing board. A product of both industry and consumer demand, she hoped house design would be shaped by the postwar family and its needs.

* * *

Books on house design would prove enormously popular in the decade following the war. These publications were not written for architects or critics, but for the general public. Two factors fueled their phenomenal popularity: the housing shortage and ongoing government controls. No matter how great the demand, scarce materials, labor unrest, and rising inflation made progress infuriatingly

⁴² Ibid.

slow.⁴³ In fact, it would take nearly two years before tangible results would be seen. To temper their frustration, many Americans took solace in upbeat publications like these. Most were large format books generously illustrated with photographs, plans, and even cartoons. MoMA, not surprisingly, joined in.

If You Want to Build a House was Mock's third and most significant text.⁴⁴ Thirty-one thousand hardbound copies were printed in early 1946 – about seven times the museum's usual number for architectural publications. Again mixing high art with sensible advice, Mock proposed a populist and clearly American approach to postwar house design. Promoted as both "practical and necessary" on the book jacket, she directed the reader room by room and house by house, presenting the pros and cons of modern architecture:

⁴³ In 1946, according to the Civilian Production Administration, most major building materials (lumber, plywood, brick) were in "critically short" supply. For a summary of these and other shortages, see "Housing in Crisis," *Architectural Forum* (April 1946): 98-101.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth B. Mock, *If You Want to Build a House* (New York: MoMA, 1946). Other concurrent examples of this genre include: George Nelson and Henry Wright, *Tomorrow's House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945); Royal Barry Wills, *Houses for Homemakers* (New York: F. Watts, 1945), Frederick Gutheim, *Houses for Family Living* (New York: The Woman's Foundation, 1948) and Mary and Russell Wright's *Guide to Easier Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950). For a contemporary response to these publications, see Richardson Wright, "Books on House Building and Livability," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 30, 1946.

It isn't just another imitative style. It is an attitude towards life, an approach that starts with living people and their needs . . . there are no rules. The results will be as various as the range of materials offered, the human problems posed, and the creative talent employed . . . "45

Nevertheless, Mock's polemic opposed rules of any type, whether established in the colonial period or the twentieth century. It should be pointed out that Mock was not alone in her views. The book was published at a time when the museum's architecture committee was dominated by critics and writers who expressed similar reservations about the International Style, notably her sister Catherine Bauer, Talbot Hamlin, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Joseph Hudnut, and MoMA's former curator of architecture, John McAndrew.

Mock's book was designed to be likable, featuring whimsical illustrations by the popular cartoonist Lieutenant Commander Robert C. Osborn and over one hundred photographs of houses designed by mostly American architects, such as Neutra, Harwell Harris, Wurster and especially Wright. The chapters were arranged to address specific areas of the house, as well as its physical size, the choice of materials, and methods of ventilation. Of particular note was the attention paid to her former mentor: among the nine examples included of his work, Mock juxtaposed a synopsis of her ideas, "Questions of Quality," with a full-page photograph of Wright's Goetsch-

⁴⁵ Mock, *If You Want to Build a House*, 7.

Winkler house in Okemos, Michigan (figure 18). Featured in several chapters, under "Space for Living" and "House and Surroundings," this striking horizontal design of 1939 was chosen to demonstrate that the non-traditional house could be modern and still American.

Through Wright, Mock was championing a modified modern aesthetic, one blending European and American schools of thought: an open plan, a wall of glass, as well as an imposing brick hearth. Wright clearly represented Mock's ideal. Although she studied with him only briefly, she much later recalled: "Looking back over my [written] work I find that whatever it may have of lasting value must be ascribed to my Taliesin experience."⁴⁶

A small exhibition of photographs and plans accompanied the book's publication (January 9 – February 1946). In a review published in *The New York Herald Tribune*, critic Eugenia Shephard praised Mock's approach. She described it as:

down-to-earth, unbiased, and unexcited about whether things are old or new, the little exhibit presents a potent argument for contemporary design.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Mock studied with Wright on two occasions, in 1932-33 and in 1948-49. See the statement she wrote for publication, dated November 10, 1981, in *Letters to Apprentices: Frank Lloyd Wright*, (Fresno, California: The Press at California State University), 200-201.

⁴⁷ "Home Building Exhibition," *New York Herald Tribune* (January 9, 1946). Also see *New York Times* (9 January 1946): 26.

Two versions circulated to more than one hundred locations during the next three years, making "Modern American Houses" one of the museum's most popular traveling exhibitions.⁴⁸

Though widely praised, not long after the publication of *If You Want to Build a House*, Mock's time as curator came to an end. After organizing a small exhibition devoted to a recent Wright project, she left the museum in mid-1946.⁴⁹ While her open and easy-going approach had garnered considerable support, in the years that followed, her socially concerned objectives would gradually be cast into shadow, obscured by Johnson and his pre-war aesthetic allegiances.

⁴⁸ The traveling exhibition was called "Modern American Houses." Only "Look at Your Neighborhood," organized by her first husband Rudolf Mock in 1944, received more attention, circulating to 249 venues. One of the exhibition's 30 x 40" text and photo panels is illustrated in *Art in Progress*, see 211.

⁴⁹ Her last act as curator was to organize "A New Country House by Frank Lloyd Wright." The exhibit featured a 6 by 13 foot scale model of an unrealized 1944 project for G. M. Loeb of Redding, Connecticut. The museum bulletin called the house "large and romantic." See *MoMA Bulletin*, Vol. XIII, no. 4-5 (1946): 39.

* * *

In late 1945 Johnson eased his way back into the museum. With what his biographer Franz Schulze described as "direct and indirect forces working on his behalf, Philip was showing up every afternoon at the museum, as usual collecting no salary."⁵⁰ During the next few years he did much to erase Mock's and McAndrew's legacy. In fact, his attacks on his predecessors often became quite personal. Not only did he later spurn Mock for "not knowing anything," but he and McAndrew did not speak for years.⁵¹ This type of clear break - aesthetic, intellectual, and personal - was a constant throughout Johnson's life and years at the museum.

Today it remains unclear what circumstances led to Mock's departure. As she recollected in 1995, her relationship with Johnson had always been excellent. Although they never worked together, she included his early projects in several exhibitions and spent a weekend

⁵⁰ Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 174. He is identified on page two of *If You Want to Build a House* (1946) as a member of the Architectural Committee. Furthermore, no mention is made of his position at the museum in the *Mies van der Rohe* book of 1947.

⁵¹ Johnson told this to Rosemarie Bletter in the mid-1970s. Also, regarding his relationship with John McAndrew, Schulze wrote "Exactly when and why Philip's intense and unyielding dislike of McAndrew developed is beyond anyone's recall." See *Philip Johnson*, 172-73.

at his house in Cambridge.⁵² Still, Johnson must have viewed her departure as inevitable. It was "his" department and he had returned to claim his "rightful" position as director. In Schulze's biography, Mock was described as "gentled into the departmental shade . . . [Johnson] so pointedly ignored her that she was nearly reduced to tears."⁵³ Yet her memory of events, fifty years later, was quite different. She maintains it was she, rather than he or the museum, that decided they should part ways:

I left the museum in 1946. My husband was made head of the TVA . . . Philip Goodwin, a trustee, one of my great supporters, took me out to a fine lunch and pleaded with me not to leave and I was adamant and said I would follow my husband to Knoxville. So they gave up . . .⁵⁴

Under Johnson the Department of Architecture would reestablish its credentials as the chief advocate for the International Style. His first curatorial effort was an ambitious exhibition devoted to Mies (16 September - 23

⁵² Mock-Kassler interview.

⁵³ Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 173-74.

⁵⁴ Mock-Kassler interview. She would remain associated with MoMA well into the 1960s, publishing *The Architecture of Bridges* (New York: MoMA, 1949) and as Elizabeth B. Kassler, *Modern Gardens and The Landscape* (New York: MoMA, 1964). She was also a member of the architecture department's advisory committee as late as 1952. See *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, 5. Rudolf Mock replaced Roland Wank, an Austrian architect who worked on the TVA plans for Norris Village in Tennessee during the mid-1930s. See Alvin Rosenblum, *Usonia: Frank Lloyd Wright's Design for America*, (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1993), 180.

November 1947). This was an attempt on Johnson's part to right what he perceived as the previous wrongs made by his recent predecessors. He introduced the monograph claiming: "Of all the great modern architects Mies van der Rohe is the least known."⁵⁵

After more than a decade of seeing his aesthetic refashioned, and as he viewed it, diluted for American taste, Johnson used this and successive programs to rejuvenate the International Style's still uncertain reputation.⁵⁶ The exhibition was large, taking up more gallery space than any previous MoMA show. Mies, who turned down Johnson's offer to lay out the 1932 installation of *Modern Architecture*, on this occasion agreed to design the setting for his own retrospective. Furthermore, Johnson's research for the exhibition would become the first substantial book on Mies and his oeuvre.

Unlike Le Corbusier and Breuer who gradually softened their hard-edged aesthetic, Mies had changed little over the past two decades. He epitomized the precise, elegant, but nonetheless industrial esthetic that Johnson

⁵⁵ Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, September 1947), 7.

⁵⁶ MoMA relished controversy and the publicity that came with it. Following the Mies exhibition, Johnson organized a public symposium, "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?," featuring both critics and supporters of the International Style. Although he probably hoped to see his viewpoint vindicated, on the whole the speakers endorsed a change of direction, especially in terms of domestic architecture. See *MoMA Bulletin* (Spring 1948).

preferred. In fact, until the early 1960s, he would be the architect's best known disciple and imitator. Consequently, the exhibition served to recommend both architects' practice.⁵⁷

Johnson's monograph on Mies remains a key scholarly work. One-quarter of the book or about fifty pages of text and photographs were devoted to Mies' first decade of activity in the United States, from 1937 to 1947. In particular, Johnson praised the architect's various schemes for the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT):

No other modern architect has had an opportunity to design on so large a scale. When completed it will be one of the rare executed examples of group planning by a great contemporary artist.⁵⁸

Johnson's monograph was a passionate and hyperbolic sales-pitch, whereby he hoped to generate interest in Mies and the International Style.

Several unrealized American projects were also described: a museum scheme for a small city (1942), a drive-in restaurant for Indianapolis, Indiana (1946), the Promontory Apartments in Chicago (1946) and two small houses. Regardless of the fact that none of the projects were under construction at the time of publication, Johnson insisted:

⁵⁷ By 1947 Johnson had designed three houses that owed something to Mies: his own house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Booth House (Bedford Village, New York) and the Farney House (Sagaponack, New York).

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*, 131.

At sixty-one Mies has more commissioned work than ever before. His position as one of the most important innovators of the present century is assured, and the quality of his achievements, so far as we can judge now, is second to none among his contemporaries.⁵⁹

Mies' American work had an unmistakable technological character. Pared down to their structural essence, these buildings stood as metaphors for industry and engineering. Abstract in plan and form, the IIT campus featured a wide central plaza around which a number of low-rise white brick and steel-framed structures were built. Though appropriate for scientific research and study, it would be difficult to transfer IIT's lessons to the domestic realm. While one might admire his lucid aesthetic, these designs were hardly a model that developers of housing could take inspiration from.

In his single-minded devotion to Mies, Johnson may have miscalculated.⁶⁰ At a time when most Americans were happily reacclimating themselves to their families and hometowns, Johnson continued to advocate change. The following year, in April 1948, the architect Robert W. Kennedy offered a homegrown and clearly patriotic antidote to such industrial forms in the essay "The Small House in

⁵⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁰ Under Johnson and his approved successors, MoMA frequently exhibited work by architects who shared a similar aesthetic to Mies, including his own work and projects by Neutra and especially Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

New England."⁶¹ He maintained that a futile battle was being fought between the conservatives who stubbornly borrow from past foreign models and the "internationalists" like Mies who design buildings that derive their aesthetic entirely from the machine. While some might argue that one of these two groups must ultimately prevail, Kennedy asserted that a sensible, time-proven alternative existed in the nation's surviving colonial dwellings. He concluded:

The moral I draw from all of this is that if we are to achieve the good house . . . we must first discontinue our subscriptions to the dream magazines and then take several leisurely afternoons to visit the great monuments of our native architecture. There is little more that we need to search for. Our own brand of cultural bias, our own technology is in the very air we breathe.⁶²

This regard for the past stood in direct opposition to Johnson's revived crusade. Although some critics viewed Mies' work as sterile and authoritarian, in their response to Kennedy, published in the *Magazine of Art*, Johnson and Peter Blake defended continued industrialization and standardization, claiming these techniques could also have a "liberating" and "humanizing impact" on American

⁶¹ Robert W. Kennedy, "The Small House in New England," *The Magazine of Art* (April 1948): 123-28. Five years later he wrote an extremely popular analysis of the subject, *The House and the Art of its Design*, (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1953).

⁶² Ibid., 128.

society.⁶³ For them, the haphazard and informal patterns of the past were a form of anarchy — "an instrument, however unconscious, of human servitude."⁶⁴ For diehard modernists, Kennedy's beloved New England had few lessons to convey, it was a clearly obsolete landscape, a "mother's womb" not worth returning to.

* * *

In 1948 the modern movement was having limited success in the expanding American suburbs. While some may attribute this failure to a conservative public or various economic pressures, we must not ignore that this was the era that gave rise to black-listing and McCarthyism — a time when one's political views (whether past or present) could have significant impact on an individual's reputation and career. Architectural historians have rarely addressed these issues. Though some advocates maintained that the International Style was a lucid expression of freedom and American democracy,⁶⁵ I believe

⁶³ Philip C. Johnson and Peter Blake, "Architectural Freedom and Order: An Answer to Robert W. Kennedy," *Magazine of Art* (October 1948): 228.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ ". . . there was simply no issue at all: modern architecture spoke the language of a free, democratic society deeply concerned with the real problems of the postwar years. Neoclassical architecture, on the other hand, spoke the language of elitism and totalitarianism."

Johnson's early experiments with National Socialism – as well as the modern movement's German roots – made it difficult for critics to accept this point of view.

For nearly four decades little mention was made of Johnson's interest in fascism. Yet it should be noted that his contemporaries rarely forgot the years he spent promoting such causes. According to Schulze, his past was frequently at issue. In 1940, for instance, he was dismissed from the Harvard Defense Group because of continued skepticism regarding his loyalty to the United States. In his FBI file one source reported that some people believe he "has reformed . . . while others feel that his present position is covering up his real feelings."⁶⁶ Mock, who generally hesitated to criticize Johnson, recalled "he wasn't around much when I was at the museum, he was in ill-favor."⁶⁷

In his 1994 memoir, Peter Blake remembered hearing early on "a good deal about Philip's fascist past from Bertrand Russell and his wife who met him at Cambridge in the 1940s."⁶⁸ Later, when Johnson offered him the position of curator in 1948 he didn't flatter Blake, but instead disclosed:

Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (New York: A. A. Knopf) 103.

⁶⁶ FBI report, 8 December 1941, cited in Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 153.

⁶⁷ Mock-Kassler interview.

⁶⁸ Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 105

. . . some of the trustees can't forget my Nazi past and would resign if I became the official director of the department.

Blake accepted Johnson's offer:

We maintained the fiction — I was the head of the Department of Architecture and Industrial Design, and Philip was sort of an unofficial consultant. Nobody, needless to say, was fooled.⁶⁹

Although in 1952 Johnson did begin to use the title of Director, his past activities continued to haunt him. According to the architect-critic Michael Sorkin, when Johnson was up for election to the museum's Board of Trustees in 1957, an unidentified member stood up and accused him a being a "Jew-bashing Fascist." While Trustee (and client) Blanchette Rockefeller did come to his defense, this anecdote makes clear that even after more than twenty years Johnson's past was not entirely forgotten nor forgiven.⁷⁰

But his lifestyle might also have hampered his attempts to reach a larger audience. Both rich and gay, Johnson led a privileged existence. He enjoyed wealthy educated friends, fine art, and comfortable surroundings.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁰ Michael Sorkin, "Where Was Philip?," *Exquisite Corpse: Writings on Buildings* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 311. Clearly others were convinced he had changed. "Moreover, Johnson's truly amazing circle of Jewish friends stuck by him through the years of pro-Nazi nuttiness and beyond; in fact, so many of his professional friends to this day are Jewish that it sometimes seems as if he were carrying remorse a little far." Peter Blake, "Philip Johnson: Private and Public," *Interior Design*, (January 1995): 56-60.

As a man who frequently lived alone, it should not surprise us that he often seemed oblivious to the domestic revival that was occurring around him.

During the late 1940s and 1950s the majority of structures built in the United States were private houses, small residences for families. Although most homebuyers wanted modern conveniences, such as kitchen appliances and picture windows, few were willing to take the aesthetic risks advanced by Johnson and his colleagues. They desired houses that were familiar, designs that promised privacy and expandability, as well as a dependable resale value.

In this climate the conventional and the everyday were rewarded. Those who strayed from the norm — alleged communists and homosexuals — were frequently attacked. According to the historian John D'Emilio, homosexuals not only "mocked the ideals of marriage," but they were also perceived as threats to national security.⁷¹ Thousands lost their positions in the federal government and military, while millions were secretly investigated. Although I have no evidence to suggest that such paranoia affected Johnson directly, it is conceivable that his

⁷¹ John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons with Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 232.

private life diminished his ability to reach and influence the larger public.⁷²

These preferences, while unimportant in most fields, may have had some impact on MoMA's attitude toward architecture during these years. In 1950 Blake resigned from the museum, becoming an associate editor at *Architectural Forum*. In speaking of his successor, Blake later wrote:

Arthur [Drexler] was gay and while this helped endow him with an exceptional sensitivity to aesthetic issues, it tended to make him rather insensitive to the simple fact that, to most of humanity and especially in an egalitarian democracy, *architecture is not an art at all, but a discipline that is expected to provide housing . . .*⁷³

Although he and Johnson remained life-long friends, Blake was highly aware of their differences and their financial circumstance. Whereas Johnson took no salary, Blake's modest income was hardly enough to support his wife and new baby daughter.⁷⁴ In fact, he claimed, this was the main reason he left MoMA. Furthermore, Blake believed that such class differences made it difficult for the museum, and particularly Johnson, to:

⁷² Johnson and Wright always had an adversarial relationship. Although aesthetics certainly played a role, Wright had a strong dislike for homosexuals. Elizabeth Gordon, interview by author, 23 February 1995.

⁷³ Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 133.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 159.

. . . appreciate the social and political issues raised by the new architecture, either because they were too rich or because they lived outside the concerns of most of the human community.⁷⁵

This harsh interpretation was probably intensified by the fact that while he was curator, MoMA did try, if awkwardly, to address these critical issues. The housing boom was on, and even Johnson could no longer turn his back on the mediocre results that were rising in the nation's suburbs. Consequently, in 1949 and 1950, two full-scale model houses were commissioned by the museum and built in the garden on west 54th Street.

This was the first time since the 1934 Housing Exhibition of the City of New York that Johnson participated in such down-to-earth efforts. These demonstration houses had two purposes in mind: as a direct response to what was being built in the New York metropolitan area, and perhaps even more importantly, to reassert the department's leadership in the architectural community.⁷⁶

Johnson clearly understood the publicity value of such exercises. In recent years temporary exhibition houses had played an important role introducing new products and architectural ideas to consumers. From Le

⁷⁵ Ibid, 134.

⁷⁶ Johnson was also probably aware of the ambitious Case Study House program, sponsored by *Arts and Architecture* magazine. Announced in January 1945, the program was organized to demonstrate the suitability of modern architecture for postwar living.

Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's "Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau" at the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs (1925) to the "House of Tomorrow" and "The Crystal House" by Fred Keck and Leland Atwood at Chicago's A Century of Progress International Exposition (1933), domestic pavilions had served to familiarize the general public with modern architecture. Perhaps the most ambitious group had been presented at Stuttgart in 1927. Devoted entirely to residential architecture, the Werkbund Housing exposition featured apartments and single-family houses by sixteen architects. Johnson, who was travelling in Germany with John McAndrew in 1929, visited the houses that remained from the exposition and several examples were used in his 1932 book and exhibition.⁷⁷

In the late 1940s New York was an ideal place to exhibit model houses. The national media were based in the city, and with their coverage MoMA could expect a large turnout. Over the past two decades many demonstration houses had been presented here, as part of commercial expositions and on empty city lots. During 1934 and 1936 two successive exhibition houses were built at Park Avenue and 39th Street. The first, known as "America's Little House" (figure 19) was sponsored by Better Homes in America, a housing industry organization. Designed by

⁷⁷ He traveled to Stuttgart at the urging of MoMA director Alfred Barr in 1929. See Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 52.

Roger Bullard and Clifford C. Wendehack, the quaint neo-Georgian design was described by the *New York Times* as a "national demonstration of what the dollar would buy in the construction field." Although few Americans could afford such a house, more than 166,000 people paid ten cents to explore its modest eight-room interior.⁷⁸

Over the next decade full and partial houses designed in various styles were frequently on public display. These included: *Collier's* "House of Ideas" designed by Edward Durell Stone and built on a low rooftop terrace at the Rockefeller Home Center in Rockefeller Center (1940), Donald Deskey's "Sportshack" at the New York Housing Exposition (1946), Walter Dorwin Teague's *Look House* at the Museum of Science and Industry (1948), a Lustron prefabricated model on 52nd Street (1948), and a small ranch-style house constructed in the center of Columbus Circle as part of a fund-raising drive for the New York Foundling Hospital (1949).⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Its successor, which stood from June to November 1936, was the all-steel "House of the Modern Age" designed by the architect of the Chrysler Building, William van Alen. See "Little House in Midtown," *New York Times* (19 January 1997): section 13, 2.

⁷⁹ Featuring a television, new car, and garage, the model home was the grand prize in the hospital's 1949 raffle.

While these examples were attempts to influence public taste, their chief objective was to attract customers and clients, whether they be corporate or private. Thus, when Johnson commissioned MoMA's first exhibition house, he probably envisioned a slightly different role for himself and the museum: that of enlightened tastemaker. By building a full-scale house he hoped to set *the* example, demonstrating to all classes what a proper modern American house should be.

MoMA, however, was not the first art museum to employ this strategy. In fact, this exhibit may have been inspired by a case of sibling rivalry. Founded in 1936, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the largest of many Community Art Centers created by the Works Project Administration (WPA). Like many New Deal programs, these centers provided work relief for artists during the Depression. Overall, the emphasis was on education and practical results. Artists were expected to teach or create works that were deemed socially useful — posters, public murals, etc. To display these and other American-made products, in 1940 an Everyday Art Gallery was established as well as its own *Quarterly* magazine.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *Everyday Art Quarterly* was later renamed *Design Quarterly*. For more on the Walker Art Center and the "Idea House" program, see Bruce N. Wright, "Visions of a New World? The Walker Art Center Idea House II," *Hennepin History* (Summer 1993): 16-31.

In 1941 the Everyday Art Gallery expanded its program, building a full-size "Idea House" for public viewing.⁸¹ Six years later, in September 1947, a second and larger model house was built, designed by William Friedman, the museum's assistant director, and his wife, Hilde Reiss, the gallery's curator (figure 20). Trained as architects, both were committed modernists: she studied with Mies at the Bauhaus in Dessau and together they taught at the progressive Laboratory School in New York whose methodology owed much to the German school and its teachings.

"Idea House II" was not meant to be copied or sold. No plans were available for purchase and neither of the two architects were seeking future commissions. The emphasis was on the ideas the house demonstrated and what could be learned by this example. Loaded with innovative features, it included a multi-purpose "4-in-1 Living Area," a free-standing storage wall, a modular bathroom, a carport, as well as furnishings by mostly American designers including George Nelson, Charles Eames, and Eero Saarinen.

On the whole, its built form was rather ordinary – an uncritical jumble of up-to-date materials and appliances. The goal was simply to demonstrate how a family of four

⁸¹ The first house was designed by Lein, Tudor & Bend. Ibid., 21.

might choose to live once construction resumed.⁸² Though the reviews in the press were mixed, the well-publicized program achieved considerable notoriety. Sixty thousand visitors passed through the interiors and articles were published in *Life*, *McCall's*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.⁸³

The attention the "Idea House II" received was not lost on MoMA. Soon after its opening in 1947, Johnson and Blake invited Marcel Breuer (1902-81), the former Bauhaus member and Harvard educator to design a house in the museum garden (figure 21). At the time, Breuer must have seemed the ideal candidate. Not only had he designed houses and furniture, but since his arrival in the United States in 1937 he had demonstrated a unique sensitivity to local materials and traditions.⁸⁴ In the suburbs of Boston and New York he achieved considerable success, building houses for a young but wealthy clientele. His own house, in fact, was one of the first residences built after the

⁸² The curators hoped that two subsequent models would utilize "factory-fabricated modular building units." Ibid., 22 and 31, footnote 17.

⁸³ For more on this house, see Mary Davis Gillies, "Planned by a Museum," *McCall's Book of Modern Houses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 64-73. This book has good color photographs, plans, elevations, and a construction outline.

⁸⁴ In the context of Johnson's support for Mies, Blake found Breuer's selection "a trifle bizarre." Still, he suggests that it is conceivable that the Hungarian-Jew was invited so that Johnson could "atone for some of his past sins." See Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 137.

war in New Canaan, a small Connecticut town that was later described as having "more modern architecture per capita than just about any place in the East."⁸⁵

Breuer's 1949 house was an essay in moderation and compromise. This was a house designed to fit in with, and appeal to, American tastes. In an interview he declared:

Modern architects don't like severity in a house. . . .
Perhaps we once did, but we don't anymore. . . .
Everybody is a pioneer at heart, ready to go into the
wilderness and make himself a shelter.⁸⁶

Although Breuer continued to employ industrial materials, like his former partner Gropius, the house included a number of references to American tradition, such as blue-stone flagging and a rugged fieldstone hearth. Perhaps the most memorable feature was its off-centered "butterfly roof." Not only did it give the house an unusual profile, but it allowed him (and the museum) to diffuse the public's continued unease with the flat roof.

MoMA devoted considerable energy to promoting the house which stood in the garden from April to October 1949. Advertisements were placed in the New York subways, a modest catalogue was published, and young female "hostesses" were hired to take questions from the 75,000 visitors who paid thirty-five cents to enter. Despite

⁸⁵ By this time his architect neighbors included such notable figures as Johnson, Eliot Noyes, Landis Gore and John Johansen. See "What's going on in New Canaan?" *House & Home* (February 1953): 132-38.

⁸⁶ "American Gift," *The New Yorker* (5 March 1949), MoMA scrapbook 43I.

mixed reviews, MoMA celebrated the controversy in a promotional brochure, juxtaposing various quotes from critical reviews and provocatively urging the public: "Why don't you come and decide for yourself?"

The New York Sun praised the museum and applauded Breuer's design, concluding that his model house would have "a wide and constructive effect upon public opinion."⁸⁷ On the other hand, former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, in a nationally syndicated column criticized its cost and unconventional appearance.⁸⁸ And in his essay in the *New York Post* titled "Man Lives in Glass House, He Doesn't Conceal a Thing," the columnist Earl Wilson compared Breuer's design to Johnson's recently completed Glass House in New Canaan, poking fun at its excessive transparency, its lack of privacy, and the absence of walls for hanging pictures.⁸⁹

But only one reviewer's comments stung sharply enough to illicit a response. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, the architectural critic Frederick Gutheim announced "Museum House Is Romantic, but Has Its Flaws." Although he admired the "happy, sunny house," he criticized the arrangement of

⁸⁷ *The New York Sun* (14 April 1949), MoMA scrapbook 43I.

⁸⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt, "Museum Model Home is New but Expensive," *New York World Telegram* (24 June 1949), MoMA scrapbook 43I.

⁸⁹ Earl Wilson, "Man Lives in Glass House, He Doesn't Conceal a Thing," *New York Post* (23 June 1949), MoMA scrapbook 43I.

spaces, especially the great distance between the parent's and children's bedrooms and the absence of an spacious eat-in kitchen. To support his argument, he cited public opinion and the layman, writing, "Perhaps some one should tell the Museum of Modern Art that in four separate polls, most of the families said they disliked this particular arrangement so intensely they preferred to eat in the kitchen - some of them said in shifts if necessary."⁹⁰

He closed his review with a slightly bitter reminder of someone who did understand such practical concerns. "Several years ago," he wrote, "the museum issued a useful book, *If You Want to Build a House*, by Elizabeth Mock. Before commissioning their house, some one on the museum staff would have done well to read at least the first chapter."⁹¹

Johnson and Blake responded with a rather long letter that appeared a week later in the same newspaper. Although they defended aspects of Breuer's design as a reflection of economic necessity, most of Gutheim's comments were sharply dismissed as irrelevant:

⁹⁰ "Museum House Is Romantic, but Has Its Flaws," *New York Herald Tribune* (17 April 1949): section 6, 4.

⁹¹ The chapter Gutheim is speaking of is probably the third and more substantial one, "Space for Living" which concerns various rooms and their arrangement. See Mock, *If You Want to Build a House*.

The museum is a museum of art, and it did not ask Mr. Breuer to solve problems of living in sociological terms (although he also did that), just as it would not ask Picasso to select his colors for therapeutic value. Neither did the Museum ask Mr. Breuer to design by public opinion poll — if architects had followed that method, there would be no modern architecture today.⁹²

Once again, MoMA distanced itself from real-life concerns. Although theoretically designed to adapt to growing families through its expandable plan, the proposed audience for this house, if not unclear, was small at best. Estimates placed the cost — without land, landscaping, or the architect's fee — at more than \$27,000. This price was far above what the majority of Americans wished or could afford to spend. In fact, it was about five times the limit set by the GI Bill of 1944.⁹³

⁹² "Officials Dispute Critical Report on Museum House," *New York Herald Tribune* (24 April 1949): section 6, 2.

⁹³ According to *Fortune* magazine's survey of April 1946, 76 percent of those questioned wished to spend less than \$10,000. That same month *Architectural Forum* reported 93 percent.

Perhaps MoMA regretted building Breuer's elaborate, expensive, and consequently, impractical design.⁹⁴ The following year the museum tried again; this time the Department invited Gregory Ain (b. 1908), a California architect known for designing low-cost but nonetheless non-traditional dwellings.⁹⁵ Co-sponsored by the magazine *Woman's Home Companion*, Ain's model house was presented in the garden from May through October (figure 22).⁹⁶ With a flat roof and open plan, the museum promised this design

⁹⁴ According to a scrapbook in the MoMA archives, Westchester homebuilder David Swope constructed a house based on Breuer's design. Also reported was that two local savings and loan associations, West Side Federal and Century Federal Savings, had agreed to loan up to \$18,000 for a house built to similar specifications. See *New York Times* (14 June 1949), MoMA scrapbook 43I. As for the house itself, which was slated for demolition after the exhibition, it was moved to Tarrytown and reassembled as a guest house for the Rockefeller family. With some modifications, it remains on the Kykuit grounds to this day. See Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 142.

⁹⁵ Despite the inclusion of Ain's Dunsmuir Flats in *Built in USA - Since 1932*, edited by Mock, neither Johnson nor Blake knew the architect's work particularly well. According to a 1997 interview with the author, Blake visited one Ain house on a cross-country trip for *Architectural Forum* in 1947 and Johnson knew his work primarily from a special issue of the same magazine in April 1949 (126-28). So impressed was Johnson by the photographs of the "convertible plan" of the Mar Vista Houses in Los Angeles, that he sent a letter to the magazine commending its design. He described the housing development as "excellent" and hoped that more issues of the magazine would be devoted to similar work. See *Architectural Forum* (June 1949): 24.

⁹⁶ Like the Breuer house, it was decorated with contemporary art, paintings by Magritte, Matta, and others. A modest catalogue describing the house, its materials and furnishings (with prices) was published. See *The Museum of Modern Art - Woman's Home Companion Exhibition House*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1950).

would demonstrate that "good modern architectural design is possible in the speculatively built house, of the kind lived in by most Americans."⁹⁷ Proposed for a typical 60 by 120 foot subdivision, the three-bedroom design featured a series of exterior screens and sliding panels that would give residents a sense of privacy and flexibility — features that were often neglected in the average mass-produced dwelling.

The Ain house was, nonetheless, criticized. Mumford found it unexceptional;⁹⁸ and in *Consumer Reports* the museum's former curator of industrial design, Eliot Noyes attacked the project for being neither cost-efficient nor experimental.⁹⁹ This was because when compared to other speculatively built units, the price of Ain's house remained quite high. At \$19,000 plus land, it cost less than Breuer's house, but, as pointed out by Noyes, it was

⁹⁷ "An Exhibition House at the Museum of Modern Art Designed by Gregory Ain," *Arts & Architecture* (July 1950): 40-41, 50.

⁹⁸ Mumford found little to admire in the Ain house, calling the glass walls a cliché, and the desire for openness and flexibility, "modern booby traps." See Lewis Mumford, "Not for Internal Use," *The New Yorker* (26 August 1950): 54.

⁹⁹ See Noyes, "Agreeable as a Design But Pointless as a Project," *Consumer Reports* (July 1950): 308-9. When the Department of Architecture was divided into two parts in 1940, Noyes was put in charge of the Industrial Design section. According to Schulze, they had a strained relationship and that Johnson often behaved "outrageously" toward Noyes. His final exhibition at MoMA was organized in 1947. See Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 180.

still more than double the price of the standard model offered by Levitt & Sons that year.

Johnson shot back at his former colleague and defended Ain's house. His letter suggests, if only momentarily, that the museum's focus had changed. After years of promoting architecture as a fine art form, ordinary suburban developers had momentarily become MoMA's target audience. Though Johnson seems to concede in his reply to *Consumer Reports* that at this stage the exhibition house was indeed expensive, he also claimed that "In our coverage of the field of small houses in America, we have come across none with the amenities or beauty of the Ain house."¹⁰⁰ He explained how such a house might fit into the existing pattern of suburban development:

It is our belief, as we show in the catalogue, that the Ain house would look best if identical units were built side by side, and that its good architectural features would then show up in a group, quite unlike the higgledy-piggledy arrangement of Cape Codders and Ranch Houses that scar the landscape of Long Island.¹⁰¹

Johnson's letter made strikingly clear that speculative builders, no matter what their aesthetic disposition, now held the cards – the future of the house was in their

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Philip C. Johnson in *Consumer Reports* (September 1950): 382.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

hands.¹⁰² Even if mass-production could reduce the price of the Ain project, it remained far above what the average American was prepared to spend.

* * *

With the Ain house, Johnson quietly accepted defeat. While occasionally temporary structures would be built in the museum's garden, rarely would MoMA invest so much time and money addressing the entrepreneurial mainstream.¹⁰³ In fact, the museum took little pride in these programs. Both the Ain and the Breuer house were noticeably absent from *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, the 1952 publication that climaxed Johnson's and the International Style's apparent return to dominance. Throughout the book one finds a conspicuous lack of interest in what Hitchcock termed "sociological criteria." He dismissed most examples of contemporary housing for their "conspicuously low"

¹⁰² Noyes, though, had the final word. The editors responded: ". . . that it is not comparable to a Levitt house in size or cost seems to underline Mr. Noyes' complaints that the project was somewhat pointless. Thus it is not Mr. Ain or his house but the Museum of Modern Art which mildly disappointed Mr. Noyes and CU [Consumer's Union]." Ibid.

¹⁰³ Another probable factor in the program's demise was Johnson's much-celebrated plan for the Abby Aldrich Sculpture Garden. Proposed in 1950, as completed in 1952 the garden diminished the space available for future structures. Whereas the first two houses were oriented east-west, Junzo Yoshimura's Japanese House (Summer 1954) was oriented north-south along the garden's unfinished eastern wall. In 1964 a new wing was built on that site, leaving hardly any space for future structures.

quality, and disregarded regional variations in design because it "would defeat the purpose of the book and exhibition."¹⁰⁴ Once again, Hitchcock and Johnson had chosen a highly selective approach, one which offered readers and museum-goers an extremely narrow perspective on recent developments in American architecture.

Under Johnson, modern architecture's growth was stunted. Like the museum itself, it came to be perceived as increasingly elitist, divorced from the life of the average American family. Not only did Johnson suppress the more inclusive character that McAndrew and Mock had encouraged in his absence, but he had taken once-radical ideas and refined them to a point whereby the structures built were both stylistically austere and impractical for the average builder and buyer.

By the early 1950s the future of American architecture was set. Although an occasional west-coast developer expressed interest in the International Style, support was found primarily among the educated and the wealthy. These ties – especially in Cold War America – probably damaged the International Style's reputation, leaving it open to renewed criticism and occasionally, regrettable re-interpretation.

¹⁰⁴ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Introduction," *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, 11.

Chapter VI

IN SPITE OF GLASS HOUSES: ELIZABETH GORDON AND THE CRUSADE FOR AN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

Do our homes really express the ideals of
democracy and individualism we all profess?¹

In 1949, the same year that Marcel Breuer's "House in the Garden" opened for public tours and inspection at the Museum of Modern Art, Philip Johnson's Glass House was completed an hour's drive away in New Canaan, Connecticut (figure 23). As in the house he built for himself in 1943, it was designed as a showpiece: to draw attention to the modern movement and to display his own talents as an architect. While his primary concern was aesthetic – to build a residence in the style of his mentor Mies van der Rohe – he also intended to secure a place for himself as a leading International Style architect. To make certain this second goal was achieved, he invited numerous guests to his new weekend refuge. Peter Blake recalled:

¹ Mary and Russell Wright, *Mary and Russell Wright's Guide To Easier Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 1.

To be invited to visit the glass house might seem like a sign that one had been admitted to a fairly exclusive club. Actually, the club had a very wide membership: sooner or later, everyone of any standing in the arts, in the U.S. or abroad, would show up at the house if he or she happened to be within a hundred miles or so of New Canaan.²

Yet Johnson did not limit his invitations to members of the art world, tours were frequently organized for the curious public, as well.

Set on a parcel of five wooded acres, Johnson's residence ignored the needs of the average middle-class family. Conceived at a time when most were content to purchase mass-produced house set on a half acre at most, Johnson had built for himself a eighteen-hundred square-foot glazed folly in the most pristine of natural settings. Sited far from the road with panoramic views of the surrounding wooded landscape, there were 178 running feet of glass, no interior walls, a bathroom enclosed in a brick cylinder, and a compact kitchen.³ As in Cambridge,

² Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993), 151. Landes Gore, Johnson's partner at the time, remembered the house: "attracted endless publicity quite on its own . . . *Life Magazine*, in those pretelevision days, the great disseminator of visual memorabilia, undertook its regular "Life Goes to a Party" feature, an evening at the Glass House. Philip gallantly asked all of us who were his colleagues and our wives to come in full evening dress as "to provide scale figures" for the gala occasion." See "Philip Johnson Comes To New Canaan," *The New Canaan Historical Society Annual*, Volume X, Number 2 (1986): 8.

³ It should be noted that a second one-story brick structure, known as the "Guest House," was built simultaneously. Here Johnson's visitors would sleep.

this was a "bachelor's" house — a residence in which privacy and other domestic conventions were of secondary importance. Built to delight Johnson and to entertain his guests, even Frank Lloyd Wright visited to judge the much-talked about structure.

Johnson's glass and steel house remains a canonical work, one of the most complete expressions of the International Style and its aesthetic in America. It appears in most histories of twentieth century architecture and numerous articles have been written about its form and influence.⁴ Nevertheless, at the time of construction it was not without critics, many of whom poked fun at the one-room house and the life-style it might engender.

Those who admired the house praised its simplicity, its understated elegance, and its relationship to the landscape. Few observers, however, failed to mention that this was a house for an extremely well-off individual. Costing more than \$60,000, the quality of materials and precision of finish spoke of Johnson's wealth and sophisticated taste.⁵ As restrained as it was, the house had a luxurious feel, decorated with chrome and leather

⁴ See Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (London: Penguin Books, 1958 reprinted 1990), 570-1; and Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985, rev. and enl. ed.), 240-41.

⁵ Mary Roche, "Living In a Glass House," *New York Times Magazine* (14 August 1949): 34.

furnishings by Mies and a landscape painting attributed to Nicolas Poussin. Furthermore, the ceilings were over ten feet high and the total square footage was nearly twice the average Levittown model - all in one room, no less.⁶ Arthur Drexler (1925-87), who would succeed Blake as MoMA's curator of architecture in 1950, did not shy away from the design's elitist pretensions, in fact, he celebrated them. In an article that appeared in *Interiors and Industrial Design* in October 1949, he wrote:

In order to live successfully in Philip Johnson's new house one would have to be Philip Johnson, or a reasonable facsimile. In its time Versailles must have been a little problematic, to the peasants outside, but after one has admitted that the several Louis's were able to stand the pace without undue strain, one is free to enjoy the architecture.⁷

Many observers speculated whether this approach could have broader relevance, especially in terms of the average middle class "peasant." The *New York Times Magazine*, for instance, published a sequence of cartoons by Roy Doty

⁶ It has been frequently mentioned that the design for the Glass House, particularly its brick cylinder, was inspired by "a burnt wooden village" that Johnson saw during his travels. Although Schulze dismisses any connection to the "insensate rapture Philip felt a decade earlier" in war-torn Poland, might such a reading allude to the modern movement's hopes for Levittown and the thousands of Cape Cod cottages spread across the American landscape. Schulze, 197.

⁷ Arthur Drexler, "Architecture Opaque and Transparent," in *Philip Johnson The Glass House*, ed. Jeffrey Kipnis, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 3. It is interesting to note that among the essays chosen, only Drexler's and Johnson's were written close to the time when the house was completed.

playfully exploring how the unconventional character of a glass house might affect day-to-day living.⁸ The four images imagine an uncomfortable lack of privacy, from the prying eyes of curious onlookers who surround the house ("Let's all go see the glass-house") to attempts by salesmen to capture a busy housewife's attention ("No need for a foot in the door"). In the fourth and final image, the harassed couple have given up their new house and relocated to the main concourse in New York's Grand Central Terminal. Now ignored by rushing suburban commuters, here, they can finally relax in peace.

Despite the enormous publicity Johnson's house generated, it is probably safe to say that the humor and unease directed toward it was genuine and significant. Several dozen International Style residences were constructed in New Canaan, designed by Marcel Breuer, John Johansen, Eliot Noyes and others, however, not all members of the community approved of the trend. In the *New Canaan Advertiser* the following verse appeared on March 13, 1952:

⁸ "People Who Live-," *New York Times Magazine* (20 August 1949): 34.

It seems to me there are about seventy-nine
 hundred out of our eight thousand population
 That wish to hell that Harvard and the Modern
 Art Museum
 Had provided padded cells for their brilliant
 graduate architects
 Complete with air-conditioned functions and
 cantilevered sundecks -
 Windowless, doorless, charmless and escapeproof⁹

Hardly a dream house stocked with up-to-date appliances
 and familiar domestic associations, Johnson's house was a
 curiosity worthy of gossip, but not necessarily meriting
 exact duplication. Wright, not surprisingly, was quick to
 point out the design's various faults. And Johnson did not
 hesitate to share his comments with the larger
 architectural community. In a speech given to the
 Washington State Chapter of the American Institute of
 Architects in the late 1950s he revealed:

Mr. Wright has been annoying me for some time
 . . . He says that my house, especially the
 Glass House that you may have seen pictures of,
 is not a house at all - it's not a shelter, it
 doesn't have any caves, it's cold and it doesn't
 give you a feeling of comfort; it's a box. He
 said once . . . my house is a monkey cage for a
 monkey. Then he came to my house the other day,
 strode in and said, "Philip, should I take off
 my hat or leave it on? Am I indoors or out?"¹⁰

In the context of Wright's career, such remarks are not
 surprising. Although Johnson certainly respected the elder
 architect's work, their relationship had always been

⁹ Cited in "What's going on in . . . New Canaan,"
House and Home (February 1953): 132.

¹⁰ Philip Johnson, "100 Years, Frank Lloyd Wright and
 Us," *Pacific Architect and Builder* (March 1957):, 13, 25-
 36), reprinted in *Writings/Philip Johnson* (New York:
 Oxford University Press, 1979), 193.

somewhat strained. In fact, only in Johnson's decade-long absence from MoMA, between 1934 and 1945, did Wright receive significant attention from the museum's curatorial staff, particularly in the 1940 retrospective of his career, "Frank Lloyd Wright, American Architect," organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and in various exhibitions organized by John McAndrew and Elizabeth B. Mock.

The Glass House was indicative of Johnson's long-standing antipathy towards Wright and American architecture in general. Johnson acknowledged his debt to Europe at the time, publishing a detailed account of the design's various sources in the *Architectural Review*, including works by Claude-Nicholas Ledoux, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, and Mies' yet-to-be completed project for Dr. Edith Farnsworth.¹¹ These persistent connections, between Johnson, MoMA, and the continent, frustrated Wright and would continue to do so.¹² In a letter written to Johnson in March 1949, he belittled these persistent borrowings, calling the International Style and its supporters Philip's "foreign legion."¹³

¹¹ Philip Johnson, "House at New Canaan, Connecticut," *Architectural Review* (September 1950): 152-59. Reprinted in *Writings* and *Philip Johnson: Glass House*.

¹² Peter Blake later described the house as "classically European and authoritarian at that." See *No Place Like Utopia*, 154.

¹³ Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 224, 434.

* * *

Critiques of the International Style increased during late 1940s and early 1950s. At the time when its rise seemed all-but-inevitable, one magazine, *House Beautiful* voiced consistent doubts, calling this trend a threat to the American way of life. The editor behind this controversial campaign was Elizabeth Gordon (b. 1907). Whereas Wright's light-hearted comments reveal a sense of professional rivalry, even jealously, Gordon's crusade adopted a much darker, even sinister tone.

Unlike many of her contemporaries who wrote about architecture, Gordon gained her expertise outside the field as a journalist. In most architectural publications the primary contributors were architects and designers, professionals who tended to support the modern movement and its aims. *Architectural Forum*, *Interiors*, and *Arts & Architecture* exemplify this type of insider approach. Gordon, however, did not begin her career with such training. At heart, she was a newspaper woman, a writer forever on the prowl for a hot story:

My own goal was to get a job in New York City, where my boyfriend was going to Columbia to get his Ph.D. . . . in high school I read a book by Edna Ferber about a girl who worked on a newspaper and had a wonderful life. That gave me

a specific goal — newspaper work. So I aimed to get on a New York newspaper.¹⁴

From the start, Gordon displayed a talent for publicity. She began as a copywriter in the promotion department at the daily newspaper the *New York World* in August 1929, composing advertising slogans. Gradually, she worked her way up, writing weekly columns on house remodeling and maintenance for a Hearst daily, the *New York American*. This hands-on experience provided Gordon with invaluable contacts among builders and manufacturers. Her career prospered; she became a consultant to *Good Housekeeping* and her weekly newspaper columns were syndicated nationally.¹⁵

Gordon was appointed editor of *House Beautiful* in 1941. With the nation's entry into the war, many new opportunities were opened to women.¹⁶ Yet Gordon's position at the magazine would not be temporary; she

¹⁴ Elizabeth Gordon, letter to author, 28 February 1995.

¹⁵ For insight into Gordon's approach to domestic architecture in the 1930s, see the book she co-authored with Dorothy Ducas, *More House For Your Money*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1937). Although vaguely sympathetic to modern architecture and its goals, no specific architects or houses were identified in the text. According to Gordon and Ducas, it was to be a book of "facts, of how a house is made, whatever its style." See page XII.

¹⁶ She replaced Kenneth Stowell (1894-1969) an architect and urban planner who became editor of *The Architectural Record*. Although highly qualified, it is difficult to say whether candidates like Gordon or Mock would have been given such opportunities if the war and the draft had not occurred.

remained editor for twenty-three years, until 1964. At the time of her appointment *House Beautiful* offered readers advice on a predictable range of domestic topics: cooking, gardening, and especially interior decorating. However, toward the end of the war, Gordon began to reshape the magazine's editorial content, giving increased attention to architecture, technology, and the role they might together play in American lives.

Goals such as these required Gordon to assume the role of an enlightened and engaged interpreter. Rather than depicting the magazine's staff as passive and uncritical, she presented them as active participants in the design field, meeting with prominent scientists, bureaucrats, and retailers. This view was plainly expressed in a full page advertisement that appeared in the publication *Architectural Forum* in March 1945. The text asserted that *House Beautiful's* mission was to explain current developments "in simple basic English" and to offer readers "Complete Coverage of the Post-War Picture." Such consumer-oriented goals were compatible with the nation's emerging mood and Gordon's desire to take full advantage of growing interest in the housing field. Across the bottom of the page a banner boasted:

HOUSE BEAUTIFUL is the magazine that interprets
your market for you! It's FIRST in the home
field . . . You know It's Right When Its Right
From HOUSE BEAUTIFUL.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Architectural Forum* (March 1945): 199.

Gordon herself frequently participated in these investigations. For instance, she took flying lessons in 1945 to determine what role small private planes would play in the coming decades. The goal was to understand how one technology might affect American lives. Photographs, both in the advertisement and accompanying her report, "Will You Fly Your Own Plane After the War?," depict the caped, bespectacled editor climbing into the cockpit of a two-seat prototype.¹⁸ She informed her readers:

I wanted to become a pilot to find out how deeply our future life will be changed if the predictions come true . . . If HOUSE BEAUTIFUL is to be your guide to better living, I had to look into flying first hand. . . . What I wanted to discover was how hard it would be for me, a Mrs. Joe Doakes, to fly my own private plane — assuming I had a plane. I wanted to be able to gauge the effect of personal flying on good living of the future.¹⁹

Although Gordon learned quickly and "soloed" after five days of training, she failed to endorse industry predictions. It was not a question of who, what, and when, but whether the average American would actually benefit from this and other breakthroughs. In Gordon's mind, no matter how inexpensive or safe aviation technology became, it remained to be seen whether it would prove useful in everyday life. While many rival magazines touted each and every new postwar prediction without careful analysis or

¹⁸ Elizabeth Gordon, "Will You Fly Your Own Plane After the War?," *House Beautiful* (March 1945): 54-55, 134.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

judgment, she remained uncertain, finding more problems than potential in her five-day course.

This attitude – both cautious and skeptical – would shape many of Gordon's future endeavors. In December 1946, *House Beautiful* observed its Golden Jubilee – its 50th anniversary. Instead of the usual holiday spreads with Christmas decorations and tasteful suggestions for gift-giving, nearly the entire issue was dedicated to exploring the magazine's past legacy and forecasting future trends. While there was obvious cause for celebration, Gordon also used the occasion to do some journalistic soul-searching. "On Reaching Fifty," she confessed:

But mixed with our jubilation is a deep sense of obligation. Though we are the oldest home magazine in America, by some years, that is less important than being the best home magazine. Watching and commenting on American living is a real obligation, and great social harm can be done when the sanctimonious cloak of "doing good" is worn by snobbish, anti-social minds.²⁰

Gordon hoped the magazine would continue to serve its historic role as a bridge between professional architects, designers, and the growing middle-class. Over the past half-century many leading figures had presented their work here, including Wright. Yet Gordon was not satisfied to rest on such laurels. She believed that *House Beautiful's* content must develop a distinct social dimension – encouraging the idea that the home and its contents were a

²⁰ "On reaching FIFTY," *House Beautiful*, (December 1946): 149.

highly personal statement, reflecting the family that occupies the house and the American values they together sustain.

The Golden Jubilee issue gave *House Beautiful* – and Gordon – a fresh start. With circulation sagging, she paused to reflect on the past, wondering if the magazine had lost some of its early vigor.²¹ She proudly recalled, "like most institutions that outlive their originators, *House Beautiful* was started as a crusade."²² Clearly, this was an ideal moment to rediscover the magazine's original mission. Rather than simply describing or following trends, she sought to use her position as editor to sort through current developments and promote designs that were practical, tasteful, and in no way derivative of European fashion. Gordon claimed:

Modern American design has been evolving for more than fifty years, unnoticed and generally un-acclaimed. Now after many adolescent gaucheries, it has matured into a graceful, unpostured, truly indigenous style of which it may be proud.²³

To make her case, she concentrated on a number of historical precedents, commissioning articles on a select group of past American architects and their pioneering

²¹ After the war's end, sales of *House Beautiful* fell slightly, from 283,674 in 1942 to 265,055 in 1946. See *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayers & Sons, 1946).

²² "What inspired *House Beautiful*?", *House Beautiful*, (December 1946): 151.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

achievements. Such themes predominated the December 1946 issue, including "America Did It First," "They Made Us What We Are Today," "The Best Modern Architecture Has Its Roots in Our Own Soil," and two articles on Wright, "The Most Influential Design Source of the Last Fifty Years" and "One Man's House" written by Gordon herself.²⁴ By concentrating on such innovators as Wright, Bernard Maybeck and Greene & Greene, Gordon hoped to demonstrate that American architects had long-struggled to loosen their ties to European tradition. Such a revisionist view, which disregarded the majority of neoclassical and other imitative modes of design embraced by most late nineteenth and early twentieth-century architects, was a product of both pride and postwar patriotism.

Taken as a whole, the Golden Jubilee served as a sharp, if underhanded, critique of European modernism. In anticipation of a housing boom, there was serious concern about stylistic issues and the appearance American residences would take. Gordon was particularly wary of the types of houses promoted in rival publications (especially architectural magazines) and by MoMA. In the essay "A Forecast of Taste for the Next Half Century" she applauded the trend toward greater formal simplicity, yet voiced significant reservations about modern architecture's

²⁴ Ibid., 156-58, 159, 160-61, 186-96.

aesthetic character and the possibility that these austere environments might stifle personal expression.²⁵

"How Modern Got This Way" was the anniversary issue's most strongly worded attack.²⁶ While no writer was directly credited, Gordon was probably responsible for its content. Located between a pair of articles on furniture and glassware, curiously the essay is not even listed in the issue's table of contents. It is difficult to explain why this omission was made. Perhaps this was an oversight, or Gordon consciously chose to remain anonymous, using this opportunity to gauge the public's response and help plot the magazine's future agenda.

This article is particularly significant because here for the first time Gordon revealed her specific reservations about the International Style and its European sponsors. When she came to New York in 1929, the modern movement's stripped-down aesthetic was just beginning to gather momentum. Finally, a number of writers believed, the twentieth century would have a unique and propitious aesthetic. Yet Gordon would gradually lose enthusiasm for such ideas. Although she once described herself as "out in the field myself, slugging away on the

²⁵ Elizabeth Gordon, "A Forecast of Taste for the Next Half Century," *House Beautiful* (December 1946): 222.

²⁶ [Elizabeth Gordon], "How Modern Got This Way," *House Beautiful* (December 1946): 174-75, 255-57.

modern team," by war's end her views had changed and she had clearly joined the opposition.²⁷

The Jubilee essay attacked the International Style, calling it and similar architectural tendencies an "old classic aesthetic dictatorship in modern guise."²⁸ She explained her ambivalence in geo-political terms: having decisively defeated the Axis powers, America's relationship with Europe had been irrevocably changed. Gordon claimed the nation would no longer need to "look back in time or abroad in space" for security and cultural authority. World War II, she proudly announced:

. . . brought a new awareness to Americans of the implications of the International Style. Today, discredited and soft-pedaled by its one-time sponsors, it joins the classic feudal style in oblivion.

Aware at last that the truth is not to be found in the columns and cornices of Greece and Rome, or in the authoritarian sterility of the "machines for living," Americans are today searching out the forgotten saga of our indigenous design history.²⁹

Nevertheless, the International Style did not fade away. Despite questions and doubts raised by Mock, Hudnut, Gordon, and others, it would continue to gain prominence and a strong degree of respect.

²⁷ Elizabeth Gordon, "Here's Modern Nobody Can Object To," *House Beautiful* (December 1943): 42.

²⁸ Ibid., 256.

²⁹ Ibid., 257.

Gordon remained adamant that American homebuyers deserved a style that was truly their own – an alternate but nonetheless modern style. She envisioned:

. . . houses which are truly complete expressions of our democratic system . . . They belong to our way of living as much as maple sugar, Detroit automobiles, and a free education.³⁰

For her, time was of the essence; she surrounded herself with a staff of like-minded writers, particularly the designer T. H. (Terence Harold) Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905-1976) and the architect-historian James Marston Fitch. These writers shared a growing ambivalence toward the modern movement and the narrow direction it had taken. For them, an authentic modern architecture would be American at heart, the result of the country's unique character and ingenuity.

Fitch joined the staff of *House Beautiful* in 1948. In *American Building: The Forces That Shape It*, published the same year, he surveyed the history of American architecture and its future prospects.³¹ He described building as an immensely complicated process, dependent on a wide range of groups with often conflicting interests. Fitch was particularly sympathetic toward the individual user, writing: "it is only from the consumer's point of

³⁰ Elizabeth Gordon, "Is Modern Architecture Mature?," *House Beautiful* (February 1947): 59.

³¹ James Marston Fitch, *American Building: The Forces That Shape It* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1948).

view that the social function of building can be fully seen and understood."³² Although clearly appreciative of the machine and its potential, like Gordon, he recognized that tradition and popular taste should continue to play an important role in shaping American architecture. His was a practical and even-handed vision, one in which foreign architects and the avant-garde would both have to demonstrate their worth. With views closely paralleling her own, it is easy to understand why Gordon hired Fitch as the magazine's architectural editor.

Under Gordon, *House Beautiful* became a showcase for American architects and designers, especially the work of such "soft" modernists as Edward Wormley, Harwell Hamilton Harris, and Robsjohn-Gibbings. Like Gordon, the English-born designer Robsjohn-Gibbings did not mince words. Although his best-selling *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* (seven editions, 1944-1947)³³ expressed some begrudging respect for the modern movement, after the war he denounced abstract painting and especially the Bauhaus, calling the school cold, illogical, and elitist. In a later book, *Mona Lisa's Mustache* (1947),³⁴ he placed much of the blame on

³² Ibid., vii.

³³ Robsjohn-Gibbings, T. H., *Good-bye Mr. Chippendale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

³⁴ Another often-ignored contributor to the magazine was Jean Murray Bangs, wife of California architect Harwell Hamilton Harris. Introduced to Gordon by Fitch, she was also close friends with Robsjohn-Gibbings, who dedicated his much-criticized book, *Mona Lisa's Mustache*:

the Italian Futurists, whose early fascist leanings and love of the machine, he said, led directly to the Bauhaus and its "system of psychological standardization."³⁵

Robsjohn-Gibbings also criticized MoMA for disregarding these origins, exhibiting works by artists and architects who he accused of being fascists, communists, and even "occultists."

Gordon admired Robsjohn-Gibbings, his opinionated writings, and his affordable furniture designs. Although he began his career as a high-paid interior decorator, after the war his work took a decidedly populist turn as many of his designs were mass-produced by the Widdicomb Furniture Company. Simple and comfortable, his understated wood chairs and tables synthesized a wide range of stylistic sources, from ancient Greece to Scandinavian modern. He began writing for *House Beautiful* in August 1944 and on many occasions his latest designs and interiors appeared on the magazine's cover, including the Golden Jubilee.

A Dissection of Modern Art, to Bangs and Carlton Pullin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947). Both she and her husband were closely associated with *House Beautiful* during the 1940s and 1950s and she wrote a number of articles for the magazine, including an essay on the architects Greene & Greene "Prophets Without Honor" (*House Beautiful*, May 1950), "How American is your way of living?" and "What is a truly American House?" (both September 1950). For more on Bangs and her contacts in New York, see Lisa Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

³⁵ Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Mona Lisa's Mustache*, 199.

Yet Gordon was interested in much more than furniture and decoration. In 1944 she inaugurated the "Home Planner's Study Course," a series of monthly discussions concerning the basics of house design.³⁶ Anticipating the war's end, these articles celebrated domestic resourcefulness, showing expectant homeowners what they might want once they were given the opportunity. The subjects varied, from adapting a surplus Quonset hut for domestic use, to the impact one's home has on rearing children.

1949 was a pivotal year for the modern movement, especially in the national media. Inspired by MoMA, Johnson, and building activity in southern California, *Time* magazine published in-depth report on the nation's domestic architecture.

Like them or not, modern houses are here to stay
 . . . Half a dozen immigrants, all Europeans,
 have helped swell the U. S. tide.³⁷

Richard Neutra, whose portrait appeared on the magazine's cover, received the most attention. Although the unsigned writer did recognize the architect's substantial debt to Wright, especially in the use of "warm-colored woods," he remained unsure whether modern designs were right for the average American family. The article recounted how clients

³⁶ For instance, see "So You Think You Know How To Dream," *House Beautiful* (May 1944): 91.

³⁷ "Modern Houses . . . Across the U.S.A.," *Time* (15 August 1949): 60-61.

quickly lost their enthusiasm for their new homes, how Neutra once criticized a client's preference for traditional furnishings, and how one day a young child came to his parents and asked, "Ma, why can't we live in a regular house?"³⁸

To counter the perception that only one type of modern house was being produced, Gordon launched the Pace-Setter House program in November 1949.³⁹ Presented in multi-page, often full-color spreads, these exemplary American residences were fully furnished and open for public inspection. Many could be visited and travel directions were published in each month's issue. The first Pace-Setter, built in Orange, New Jersey, was designed by the architect Emil A. Schmidlin (figure 24). Featuring walls of local stone and a pitched roof, it exemplified everything that Johnson's house and the International Style was not. Although the design boasted many up-to-date features, including solar windows, radiant heating, and a somewhat open plan, the focus was on comfort rather than aesthetic appeal. The magazine reported:

³⁸ "New Shells," *Time* (15 August 1949): 65.

³⁹ Perhaps Gordon was inspired by *Arts & Architecture* magazine which announced the Case Study House Program in April 1945. The first Case Study House opened to the public in December 1946. Designed by the California architect J. R. Davidson, the modest four-room, 1100 square foot residence attracted 55,000 visitors over the next two months. See Esther McCoy, "History and Legacy of the Case Study House Program," *Blueprints for Modern Living*, (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1989), 57.

In short, to look at a Pace-Setter means many more things than whether you like its looks. Looks have nothing to do with the intrinsic performance of a house or its capacity to produce comfort, as too many homeowners find out too late, to their last chagrin. You can be sure a Pace-Setter works better on more counts than any house up until then.⁴⁰

For the next eleven years practical concerns such as these would guide the Pace-Setter program. According to Gordon, these designs were chosen "not because they are typical, or representative, but because they are excellent."⁴¹ Rather than seeking out the best-known or most famous architects, she chose ones she personally admired and who understood "real needs, real problems," including Julius Gregory, John Yeon, Harwell Hamilton Harris, and Alfred Parker.⁴²

Yet she also cautioned "Above all, *it's not a house to copy exactly - ever.*"⁴³ Despite its apparent charms and many conveniences, Gordon stressed the importance of

⁴⁰ *House Beautiful* (November 1949): 195.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Gordon, "The Beauty of Common Sense," in Joseph Barry, ed., *The House Beautiful Treasury of Contemporary American Homes* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1958), 7. Most, but not all, of the Pace-Setters are included in this publication.

⁴² The 1954 Pace-Setter was built at the Texas State Fair in Dallas by Harris and six students from the School of Architecture at the University of Texas. According to Gordon "a million and a half people went through the house and the house had to be kept open (by public demand) long after the fair closed." Elizabeth Gordon, letter to author, 23 February 1995, 4-5.

⁴³ "How to Look at a Pace-Setter House," *House Beautiful* (November 1949): 200.

specific site conditions and individual needs. While such a design might work in this certain situations, it did not guarantee similar success elsewhere.

* * *

By the early 1950s, Gordon grew increasingly frustrated with the International Style's continued media dominance. The Pace-Setter House program had been an attempt to provide readers with an alternative paradigm – houses with broad popular appeal. As juxtaposed to Breuer, Johnson, Neutra, and other modernists, her choices displayed a distinct American character, featuring prominent stone fireplaces and the use of natural materials: native woods, brick, and fieldstone. Not surprisingly, an eighteenth-century butter stamp depicting the American eagle provided the program with its logo.

Still, just blocks from her office at 572 Madison Avenue, midtown Manhattan was being transformed into a shimmering canyon of glass, aluminum, and steel. Just one block away, on Park Avenue, gone were the grand masonry apartment buildings of a previous generation. Lever House (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1950-52) had just been completed and soon a multitude of often shallow corporate imitators would follow its much-praised example. Moreover, MoMA was growing. In 1949 Johnson was asked to design the museum's new annex at 21 West 53rd Street, the Grace

Rainey Rogers Memorial. Built to house curatorial offices and the People's Art Center, the dark steel and glass facade stood in direct contrast to Goodwin and Stone's marble and thermolux panel exterior of 1939. Hitchcock later described its aesthetic vocabulary as even "more Miesian" than Johnson's own house of the previous year.⁴⁴

Gordon surely watched these developments with discomfort and apprehension. In the spring of 1953 she decided to revise her strategy and speak out. Rather than trying to teach by example, she took direct aim against the modern movement. Two vitriolic essays defined her position: "The Threat to the Next America" published in April, and "Does Design Have Social Significance" appearing the following October. Both share the position that aesthetic decisions have more than mere formal consequence. She warned readers of the repercussions of choosing one style over another:

For how men build determines how they live – and how they live influences, sometimes determines how they think and act . . . We say vote either Nazi or Communist . . . and it is your last election for a long time. Similarly, choose a way of life whose architecture is the International Style and whose philosophy of living is the Bauhaus and you subject yourself to something far beyond a casual change in home fashions.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Cited in Robert Stern, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (1995), 476, 1262. Johnson's annex was later razed to make way for Caesar Pelli's Museum Tower.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Gordon, "Does Design Have Social Significance?," *House Beautiful* (October 1953): 230.

In short, aesthetics could not be separated from the attitudes they reflect and ultimately encourage.

Gordon borrowed the title of her essay from the 1952 publication, *The Next America: Prophecy & Faith*, written by the social critic Lyman Bryson (1889-1959).⁴⁶ In fact, several images of the book's cover were reproduced on the issue's introductory page. It is easy to understand why Gordon was attracted to his point of view. Bryson equated choice in the marketplace with freedom of expression, warning readers that "hidden authoritarians" were attempting to use their positions to "stifle the personal experience of choice."⁴⁷ Similar fears were restated in the essay she asked him to write for the April issue of *House Beautiful*. From his perspective, no expert, regardless of training or affiliation, should have the power to determine what people should want or have in their homes. He warned that Americans must demand:

. . . the opportunity for everyone to share in the actual creation of his own culture . . . We do not suspect political or ideological invasion of our homes by way of design or decoration. Yet it is indeed possible.⁴⁸

Such stern admonitions would certainly have appealed to Gordon. Yet, who were these experts Bryson was speaking

⁴⁶ Lyman Bryson, *The Next America: Faith and Prophecy* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1952).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁸ Lyman Bryson, "The greatest good- and goods for the greatest number," *House Beautiful* (April 1953): 172.

of? This was a newsworthy story; guilty parties could no longer remain nameless, and many of Gordon's attacks became quite personal. On several occasions she or members of her staff would attack MoMA or Mies directly, especially his design for the Farnsworth house that Gordon bemoaned had "been repeatedly shown in exhibition" by the museum (figure 25).⁴⁹ Her new executive editor, Joseph A. Barry, ridiculed the costly residence, comparing the all-glazed design to a "fishbowl" or "an emptied aquarium on a steel stand."⁵⁰ He particularly objected to the lack of privacy, writing that the dissatisfied owner felt like "a prowling animal, always on the alert."⁵¹

To illustrate her thesis, photographs of two canonical works — Mies' Barcelona Pavilion (1929) and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1929-31) — accompanied the essay. Though both were more than two decades old and hardly stereotypical, Gordon chose these buildings to defend her position. She declared:

Something is rotten in the state of design — and it is spoiling some of our best efforts in modern living. After watching it for several years, after meeting it with silence, *House Beautiful* has decided to speak out and appeal to

⁴⁹ When asked who the "Threat" essay was directed towards, she quickly responded, "Johnson and the Museum of Modern Art." Gordon, interview by author, by telephone, 23 February 1995.

⁵⁰ Joseph A. Barry, "Report on the American Battle between GOOD AND BAD MODERN HOUSES," *House Beautiful* (May 1953): 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

your common sense. Two ways stretch before us. One leads to richness and variety, to comfort and beauty. The other, the one we want to fully expose to you, retreats to poverty and unlivability. Worst of all, it contains a threat of cultural dictatorship.⁵²

Both a call-to-arms and a manifesto, she challenged architects, her professional peers, and the general public to rise up against what she considered to be an illogical, anti-American movement. She sensed a "ferment of uneasiness" and maintained that most of her contemporaries were scared to stand-up for what they really believed, fearing reprisals and other forms of professional ostracism. In Gordon's view, even dissatisfied house owners were afraid to speak up, fearing that such candor would diminish the resale potential of their unconventional homes. Likewise, she asked the public to pause and consider its own feelings: did they truly prefer modern designs, or did they merely accept what was being offered to them?

Gordon's crusade was launched at the height of the red scare. From war-time ally to Cold War rival, anti-Soviet (and Chinese) sentiment had become an American fixation leading to both military engagement abroad and Congressional investigations nationwide. Such threats had dominated the political discourse for several years, giving substantial powers to such conservative ideologues as Joseph McCarthy and Richard M. Nixon.

⁵² Elizabeth Gordon, "The Threat to the Next America," *House Beautiful* (April 1953): 127.

At first glance, Gordon seems to have shared a similar perspective. The alarmist vocabulary of this historic moment is present throughout her essays, inserting words and phrases like: collectivism, totalitarianism, the "cult of the leader," and the "odor of dictatorship." However, her exact political position is difficult to establish. In her writings she made no distinction between Soviet Communism and the discredited fascists.⁵³ Perhaps, it was not about politics or government, but about authority and control. This was an independent woman who did not appreciate being told what to do. Proudly independent, Gordon distrusted any individual or group professing to know a single best way. She labeled Johnson and other modernists a "self-chosen elite" and challenged her readers to ignore these "bullying tactics" and follow their own instincts.

Furthermore, even if few of the houses illustrated in *House Beautiful* were affordable to the average American family, she infused her rhetoric with a populist and democratic sensibility. She concluded her April 1953 essay optimistically, writing that "Once people close their ears to the ecstatic gibberish they now hear in favor of the bad modern furniture and worse modern architecture, and

⁵³ A similar attitude was adopted in Whittaker Chambers' 1952 best-selling memoir *Witness* in which he lumped communists, socialists, and progressives together as fascists (New York: Random House, 1952).

open their eyes to the truth, then the reign of error will be over."⁵⁴

"The Threat to the Next America" generated significant discussion and debate. Gordon was invited to speak at public forums and her views received national attention.⁵⁵ She relished the controversy, publishing excerpts from more than sixty responses to her article, both pro and con, in the June, July, and September issues of the magazine. Among them, some writers noted her autocratic stance. California architect, William W. Wurster objected to the article which he described as having been "written with so little compassion, tolerance, or real understanding."⁵⁶ And Thomas Creighton, the editor of *Progressive Architecture* wondered who was really trying to stifle whom. Although he agreed with her on certain points, he wanted to remind her of the media's responsibility and obligation to the general public. He warned:

Those are strong words . . . *House Beautiful* reaches a great many people, and is a strong influence on American taste. With the violence of your attitude in the present issue, aren't

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Gordon, "The Threat To The Next America," 251.

⁵⁵ For example, see Betty Pepis, "Home Design Held of Social Import," *New York Times* (8 May 1953): 31.

⁵⁶ "More Reader's Mail on "The Threat To The Next America," *House Beautiful* (July 1953): 94. Wurster, who married Catherine Bauer in 1940, was Elizabeth Mock's brother-in-law.

you running the risk of becoming just as dictatorial?⁵⁷

For other critics the essay was a promotional stunt: a blatant attempt to increase sales. Peter Blake, then an associate editor at *Architectural Forum*, did not attempt to defend Mies or the International Style. Instead, he focused on the narrowness of Gordon's point of view, cautioning her that:

We are plagued by many fears today, and fear – in individuals and in nations – generally produces stupidity and cruelty. The dark hint and the shrill note of alarm may help increase a magazine's circulation at such a time, and so may the smear. But these devices are neither intelligent nor very kind, and they tend to backfire in the end. After all, let it not be said on your epitaph –: "Here lies HOUSE BEAUTIFUL, scared to death by a chromium chair."⁵⁸

Hearst publications, of which *House Beautiful* was one, had often used sensational and unscrupulous methods to increase readership. Its daily newspapers were militantly anti-communist during the late 1940s, fueling Cold War hysteria with coverage of the Alger Hiss trial. As difficult as it is to determine how deliberate Gordon's

⁵⁷ Thomas H. Creighton, "P. S.," *Progressive Architecture* (May 1953): 234. It should be noted that several months later Creighton claimed to have received hundreds of responses, of which only one supported Gordon's point of view. See "P. S.," *Progressive Architecture* (July 1953): 224.

⁵⁸ Peter Blake, "More Readers' Mail," *House Beautiful* (July 1953): 92

marketing strategy was, the magazine's circulation enjoyed consistent growth during the early 1950s.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, among her staff, Gordon's attacks on the International Style caused considerable dissension. In general, the atmosphere was tense. At least two members of her staff resigned in protest, including Fitch.⁶⁰ Although friends and colleagues urged him to remain, he remembered quitting to "avoid being sucked into the controversy."⁶¹

According to Gordon, though, 85 percent of the letters received by the magazine applauded her stand.⁶² For instance, the designer Walter Dorwin Teague wrote that her remarks finally expressed what a great many people were thinking, and the architect Bruce Goff praised her "plain language" and courage to stand against the "dangers of the cultural menace now threatening the United States."

⁵⁹ According to polls taken in 1948 and 1954 the majority of Americans held unfavorable views of the Soviet Union (70 percent) and 50 percent supported McCarthy and his crusade against purported communists. See Joseph C. Goulden, *The Best Years 1945-50* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 249; and Richard H. Rovere, "The Most Gifted Demagogue Ever," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 April 1996, 101.

⁶⁰ According to Creighton, former *New York Times* writer Mary M. Roche and Jimmy Fitch resigned due to Gordon's "violent chauvinistic attitude." See "P.S.," *Progressive Architecture* (July 1953): 224.

⁶¹ James Marston Fitch, interview by author, 16 January 1996, New York.

⁶² "Public Opinion on: 'The Threat to the Next America,'" *House Beautiful* (June 1953): 28.

Even Lewis Mumford commended her, saying that many of her points "might well be emblazoned in gold . . ." ⁶³

* * *

The most significant and enduring response came from Frank Lloyd Wright. He wired her the following telegram:

SURPRISED AND DELIGHTED. DID NOT KNOW YOU HAD IT
IN YOU. FROM NOW ON AT YOUR SERVICE.

GODFATHER⁶⁴

Gordon accepted the architect's offer, claiming this had been their first personal contact. She has reiterated this story a number of times, in the pages of *House Beautiful* as well as in letters and conversations exchanged with this author. But might it be possible that this instantaneous and impromptu meeting of the minds was staged?

For many years Gordon had admired Wright, his buildings, and his attitude toward life. Not only had she written about his work, but she had probably visited his studio in preparation for a 1946 article on Taliesin.⁶⁵ Furthermore, many of the positions taken by the magazine during this decade, owed something to Wright. For instance, in a 1946 essay he discussed how the design of

⁶³ Ibid., 91, 28.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁵ See Elizabeth Gordon, "One Man's House," *House Beautiful* (December 1946): 186-96.

the United Nations Headquarters might embody and express democratic values:

To overcome false ideas, bad work or violent men, democracy has only to mind its own business, stand its own ground, build its own way . . . ⁶⁶

For Wright, "organic" architecture was the only solution — an architecture with its origins in the American way of life. In short, he imagined the future world headquarters as a model for all nations to see and imitate.

Six years later, the 1952 essay "Organic Architecture Looks at Modern Architecture" revealed an even greater sense of disappointment.⁶⁷ Perhaps resentful of the attention the International Style continued to receive, he described how European architects had "sterilized" his early ideas, creating a "white sepulcher for unthinking mass-life." Furthermore, Wright warned that embracing such a style would be a "cultural calamity fit for Fascism but intolerable to democracy."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, "Building A Democracy," published as *Taliesin Square-Paper Number 10* in October 1946, reprinted in Bruce Pfeiffer, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings*, vol. IV (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 301.

⁶⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, "Organic Architecture Looks at Modern Architecture," published in the *Architectural Record* (May 1952), reprinted in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings*, Ibid.; 45-50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 50.

Wright had two intended targets: cultural institutions, such as Harvard University and MoMA, and the media. In revisiting his long career, he attributed his failures, not to his own limitations, or shifting public taste, but for receiving less than his rightful share of attention from newspapers and magazines. He grumbled in 1952: "Being truly individual, Organic-architecture lacked the journalist. America is nothing if not journalistic."⁶⁹

Gordon seized the opportunity. For the rest of his career, *House Beautiful* would become a reliable mouthpiece for "Organic-architecture," giving Wright and his devoted following an arena where he could disseminate his philosophy and life's work. Not surprisingly, he and Gordon became good friends. With shared roots in the Chicago area, these two midwesterners had much in common: both were fiercely independent, proudly patriotic, and felt somewhat misunderstood. He frequently visited New York during the mid-1950s, meeting with clients and supervising construction of the Guggenheim Museum from his suite and office at the Plaza Hotel. She remembered his visits fondly, describing him as "charming and gallant and manly."⁷⁰

Wright and Gordon benefited immeasurably from their alliance. He used *House Beautiful* (as well as other

⁶⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁰ Jane Margolies, "Remembering Mr. Wright," *House Beautiful* (June 1992): 122.

magazines) to mount a final public relations offensive. "We were more than a magazine" remembered Gordon proudly in 1992, "the architecture department was an extension of Taliesin."⁷¹ Three of his apprentices joined the magazine's staff: Ken Lockhart, Curtis Besinger, and John DeKoven Hill. With Fitch's resignation in 1953, Gordon had contacted Wright regarding a suitable and sympathetic replacement. He encouraged DeKoven Hill who had worked by his side since the late 1930s to accept her offer and he remained with the magazine until after the architect's death. He later recalled: "Mr. Wright was happy I was there as a representative of the cause."⁷²

Together Gordon and DeKoven Hill played a critical role in keeping Wright in the spotlight. Although nearing his 90th birthday, no aspect of his life went ignored: from his "way with little things" to his taste in food and movies. He was clearly her hero and Gordon stood careful watch over his reputation.

In March 1954 the architectural historian Vincent Scully suggested in *Art News* that Wright's recent work displayed the influence of architects whom he frequently attacked, particularly Le Corbusier.⁷³ Although he definitely found contradictions in Wright's stated

⁷¹ Ibid., 24.

⁷² Ibid., 122.

⁷³ Vincent Scully, "Wright vs. the International Style," *Art News* (March 1954): 32-35, 66.

positions, Scully applauded this process as demonstrating "the power of western civilization to receive freely and to be stimulated rather than destroyed by influences from all cultures."⁷⁴

Such comments were possibly targeted at Gordon and the magazine's staff. Although he did not identify her by name, he did mention a "clangorous pack" who accused followers of the International Style as being un-American.⁷⁵ As if to permit them equal-time, letters from both Gordon and Robsjohn-Gibbings were published in the magazine the following September. While Robsjohn-Gibbings dismissed Scully's reasonable speculations as "too preposterous to be taken seriously," Gordon criticized Scully's dependence on photographic images, claiming his analysis relied too heavily on two-dimensional phenomena, especially the relationship between architectural aesthetics, abstract painting, and sculpture. By foregrounding pictorial values, Gordon suggested that Scully had distorted Wright's accomplishments. Architecture, she maintained, was a far more complex art than he had given credit, and that consequently, his arguments made "neither truth nor poetry."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁶ For their letters and Scully's lengthy response, see "The Wright-International Style controversy," *Art News* (September 1954): 48-49.

Gordon's successor at *House Beautiful*, Sarah Tomerlin Lee, described the magazine's support for Wright as responsible for triggering "a second wave of homage."⁷⁷ Two issues of the magazine were entirely devoted to his career (November 1955 and October 1959) and Wright himself contributed several articles that addressed many of the concerns raised by Gordon's controversial essays.⁷⁸ In July 1953 issue he denounced the International Style as:

. . . neither international nor a style.
Essentially it is totalitarianism, an old
totalitarian cult made new by organized
publicity . . .

So many university professors, museum authorities, magazine editors, feature writers, and critics seem to be trying hard to give notoriety to a group of architects imported, by a curious twist of fate, from the German Bauhaus to the New York Museum of Modern Art.

These Bauhaus architects ran from political totalitarianism in Germany to what is now made by specious promotion to seem their own totalitarianism in art here in America.⁷⁹

Despite the essay's mean-spirited character, Wright's other contributions to the magazine were much more constructive, focusing on how America could "develop a culture of its own."⁸⁰ This, he remained confident, could

⁷⁷ Sarah Tomerlin Lee, "Elizabeth Gordon," *House Beautiful* (January 1965): 69.

⁷⁸ See Frank Lloyd Wright, "Frank Lloyd Wright Speaks Up," *House Beautiful* (July 1953): 87-90; "For A Democratic Architecture," *House Beautiful* (October 1953): 316-17; "Faith in Your Own Individuality," *House Beautiful* November 1955; reprinted in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Works*, vol. IV, 131-34.

⁷⁹ Wright, "Frank Lloyd Wright Speaks Up," 87, 88.

⁸⁰ Wright, "Faith in Your Own Individuality," 132.

be realized through respect for nature and the individual forms it creates and encourages. He cautioned:

Nature loves individuality, resists and punishes the loss of it in any field of creation. If our civilization goes contrary to this divinity within the nature of us all, if it does not learn these secrets of behavior, of character, of appropriate changes of form, then what is going to happen to us? Where shall we go? Now is the time for us to say wherein lies salvation for us as human beings.⁸¹

Gordon, who endorsed these ideas wholeheartedly, helped make Wright the most famous architect in the United States, if not the world. The late 1950s were among Wright's most active periods: he designed both public buildings and private residences throughout the United States and became an identifiable public figure, seen in television interviews and advertisements. Like Robsjohn-Gibbings, he would have his own line of furniture, decorative fabrics, and even prefabricated houses.

After his death, his deification would continue. An advertisement for F. Schumacher & Co., which appeared in a memorial issue of *House Beautiful* dedicated to Wright in October 1959, placed his photograph at the center of a display of various fabric designs. It described the architect as "immortal," and noted that his "brilliant mind and deft hand . . . have left their indelible mark on the panorama of our civilization."⁸² Clearly, Gordon had

⁸¹ Ibid., 134.

⁸² Advertisement for F. Schumacher & Co., *House Beautiful* (October 1959): 8

met Wright's challenge, providing the architect with a mainstream journalistic venue which would promote the man and his design philosophy.

While his oeuvre did satisfy the need for an architecture that was both American and modern, Wright's domestic designs remained an elite and exclusive paradigm, generally unreachable to all but the upper class. His occasional flawed attempts to build for the middle-class – his aborted Cloverleaf project, his site plan for Usonia Homes, Inc. in Pleasantville, New York (1948)⁸³ and his later prefabricated models (1956-57) for Marshall Erdman & Associates – enjoyed minimal success, hurt by their high cost and their architectural complexity.

Gordon's affinity for Wright was, in part, ideological. She ignored the limitations and faults in his practice, giving him a place in her pantheon comparable to that which MoMA and Johnson had given to Mies. In her role as editor she shared with them the desire to find an ideal and a role model, an architect who could show the way. And therein lies the paradox: after more than a decade of promoting supposedly pragmatic solutions to consumers in the domestic realm, Gordon had aligned herself with an architect whose patriotic rhetoric and aesthetic genius would produce few, if any, distinguished followers. While

⁸³ After completing the site plan, Wright served as a consultant on future construction. He designed three private houses here, for Sol Friedman (1948), Edward Serlin (1949), and Roland & Ronny Reisley (1951).

certainly expressive of American individuality and ingenuity, Gordon's crusade remained an elite and exclusive enterprise.

* * *

Gordon's focus on architecture was unusual but not unique. Many popular and professional magazines offered readers advice on house design. What set *House Beautiful* apart, though, was not the subjects described, but the particular rhetoric that accompanied each spread. In the 1950s the architect-designed interior dominated the popular and professional media, from Mies to Florence Knoll and Charles and Ray Eames; practicing architects were not only designing buildings, but furniture and interior spaces as well. In 1953, the MoMA publication *What is Modern Interior Design?* included fifty examples: living rooms, dining rooms, and bedrooms – nearly all planned by contemporary architects.⁸⁴ While this development was certainly bad news for the decorating profession, in Gordon's mind such dominance also threatened the individual, narrowing the range of consumer options and the potential for personal expression. It should be noted, however, that similar tendencies could be

⁸⁴ Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *What is Modern Interior Design?*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, Introductory Series to the Modern Arts, #4, 1953).

found in Wright's work — all of which was conveniently ignored by Gordon. No aesthetic decision was viewed as innocent and without meaning, and any attempt to limit or manipulate choice was viewed with caution and even alarm.

In 1953 she warned:

It is a time of profound, spiritual crisis and a time of false leaders as well as true, both of whom sometimes use the same language. The individual is under assault from many sides: political and social, cultural and commercial, collective pressures and pseudo-esthetic philosophies.⁸⁵

Under such terms, any architect or designer was suspect and only a select few would be found worthy of praise. Wright was her paradigm: an architect whose domestic work was defiantly American and illustrative of the individualist philosophy promoted by Gordon and *House Beautiful* since its inception.

Ironically, at the same time that Gordon was mounting her crusade, the modern movement was looking for alternatives of its own. Although Johnson's Glass House would eventually develop a following and be widely praised, during the mid-1950s many architects were beginning to discover new sources of inspiration. Some would find ideas in history and even popular culture, borrowing familiar details and motifs from the past. Yet Wright's presence remained strong. Here was an architect who had succeeded in locating a middle road, using detail

⁸⁵ Gordon, "Does Design Have Social Significance," 314.

and decoration to create house designs that were modern, but still recognizably American in spirit.

Wright, nonetheless, proved to be a slippery and elusive model, one that Johnson and Hitchcock greatly admired but felt ill-prepared to follow. Both men, in fact, at different times would compare him to Michelangelo.⁸⁶ Although few would argue with Gordon that Wright was one of world's leading architects, it remained difficult to adopt his ideas without crude and slavish imitation. As compared to Mies, Johnson admitted, "Wright's principles . . . are impossible to teach in a conventional, institutional way."⁸⁷ Although occasionally attempts were made to simmer his philosophy down to an easy-to-follow formula, the results were seldom convincing.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ At the symposium "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?" Hitchcock said that Wright is "obviously the Michelangelo of the twentieth century." See *MoMA Bulletin*, Vol. XV, No. 3, (Spring 1948): 10. Johnson wrote in 1951 that "Frank Lloyd Wright is the most difficult because he is the Michelangelo of our time and invents a new style every time he designs." See Schulze, *Philip Johnson*, 200.

⁸⁷ Philip Johnson, "The Frontiersman," *Architectural Review*, CVI (August 1949): 105-110, reprinted in *Philip Johnson/Writings*, 190.

⁸⁸ See "Frank Lloyd Wright Gives Seven Design Lessons," *House & Home* (November 1954): 98-105; "32 simple and basic ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright," *House & Home* (September 1956): 136-141; and "Builder Jim DeReus tells you: What We Learned from Frank Lloyd Wright," *House & Home* (February 1959): 126.

With Wright's death came the end of an extraordinary career. Yet as remarkable as his accomplishments were, Gordon had aspired to an unreachable ideal – one that could not be copied nor imitated. As a philosopher and successor to Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Wright's romantic rhetoric held great appeal, but as an architect few would walk comfortably in his shoes. Part of his style's appeal was in its uniqueness, a characteristic that made it all but impossible to adapt to the mass-produced single-family house.

What made Gordon's campaign so controversial was not her sincere appreciation for Wright, but her manner and method. What little has been written about her has generally focused on her bitter crusade against the International Style, ignoring all else she contributed to America's architectural discourse during the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, in his 1993 memoirs Peter Blake mentioned her only in the context of McCarthyism. He remembered her as:

a combative lady . . . who attacked everyone from Mies to Gropius and Le Corbusier as some sort of subversive – a sleazy maneuver evidently intended to build circulation.⁸⁹

On the other hand, her former architecture editor, Fitch, remembered her much more fondly. Although he objected to the direction her editorial policy eventually took, and resigned, their parting was for the most part amicable and

⁸⁹ Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 175.

they remain friends. He described her in 1995 quite glowingly, as exceptionally smart and "the best editor I ever worked with."⁹⁰

Elizabeth Gordon's twenty-three years at *House Beautiful*, from 1942 to 1964, deserve attention. Under her forceful and remarkably long editorship, the magazine's circulation nearly tripled, making it one of America's most popular shelter magazines. And while her preferences and prejudices rarely embraced the avant-garde, she did have a keen sense of her audience which consisted mainly of upper-middle class readers. This was the public that Johnson hoped, but ultimately failed, to reach – a market whose preferences had more to say about national psychology than the elite intellectual circle that supported the International Style.

At a time when historians seek to better understand the modern movement's introduction and development, Gordon's crusade reveals much about the misperceptions and cultural insights that led to its eventual demise. Like most Americans, she did not want the American home to be a "machine for living," nor did she want it to be "international," subscribing to what she claimed were uniform principles and aesthetics. For her, such restrictive strategies were akin to fascism, a defeated

⁹⁰ James Marston Fitch, interview by author, 16 January 1996, New York.

ideology demanding uncompromising order and the suppression of the individual and personal preferences.

While some might view her taste as conservative and reactionary, it is important to remember that Gordon did not seek to revive historical eclecticism. Rather, she promoted designs and techniques that she thought would express the United States — its dreams, traditions, and values. As editor, Gordon was a tireless advocate for things American; yet by politicizing her remarks, she may have obscured her original and sincere intent. While her goal was to educate and to influence, ultimately, it was close-mindedness and arrogance that define her legacy — an attitude that for a number of her contemporaries created far more smoke than light.

CONCLUSION

It is an important issue to everyone, for in it America will decide how best it can prove to its millions of veterans and citizens who defended democracy that this democracy is willing to meet their elementary housing needs.¹

By 1955 the die had been cast — fifteen million new single-family residences had been built in less than ten years, providing much-needed housing for war "heroes" and their children. For the United States, the postwar housing boom represented one more important victory. Not only had a severe housing shortage been quickly and decisively overcome, but the types of units constructed were, by and large, consistent with the era's beliefs and values.

An empirical survey of postwar American taste and building habits, as seen from passing automobiles, in airplanes and on television sitcoms, reveals a domestic landscape dominated by three styles: the Ranch, Cape Cod, and Colonial. Only occasionally is the direct influence of the International Style discernible in American house

¹ [Housing], Paramount News, c. 1949, videocassette.

designs. Why did these preferences result? For what reason did flat roofs and glass walls fail to catch on? Were builders as oblivious to the modern movement as many historians have led us to believe? Not at all. In fact, as this study suggests, most single-family houses built during these years were a response to these debates, incorporating ideas associated with both the modern movement and its critics.

The postwar house was a product of historical circumstance. Although modernism did leave a mark on the design of many cities, the impact on the single-family house was minimal. With Philip Johnson as its most persistent advocate, diverse European approaches were consolidated under a single stylistic umbrella commonly referred to as the International Style. A powerful minority subscribed to its ideas: architects and writers who tended to promote architecture as an art form, focusing on aesthetic issues that often neglected the movement's original social intent.

During the Depression housing starts fell dramatically. With the building industry in serious disarray, the reformers Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer tentatively aligned themselves with the new style. For them, aesthetic issues were of secondary importance; like many of the modern movement's founders they emphasized the social value of industrial techniques and their potential to improve living conditions. These writers tended to look

to the federal government for leadership, and by the decade's end, President Roosevelt's New Deal became the backbone of a recovering housing industry, providing generous subsidies and loans to both builders and buyers.

More importantly, during the late 1930s a broader and perhaps more realistic definition of modern architecture materialized, one blending current European practice, American vernacular traditions, and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Rarely acknowledged by scholars, this alternate canon won significant praise, particularly under Johnson's temporary successors at the Museum of Modern Art, John McAndrew and Elizabeth B. Mock.

Housing was an essential part of the war effort: to shelter defense workers, but also to promote social stability on the homefront. Although MoMA and magazines like *Architectural Forum* praised the more innovative designs offered by European emigrés like Gropius, Breuer and Saarinen, most examples of emergency housing were actually quite ordinary in appearance: small wood structures built by commercial developers who timidly exploited new techniques without altering their domestic imagery.

As sweet as America's victory was in 1945, reality set in quickly. Initially, there was hope that a technical fix, prefabrication, might solve the anticipated housing shortage. New materials — fiberglass, plywood, Homasote, aluminum, and steel sheeting — stimulated a great deal of

media attention. In an economy still geared for war, technologically-driven solutions had enormous appeal. Yet most prefabricators failed to succeed. Reasons for their failures varied: opposition from the housing industry which feared increased competition and the loss of jobs, immense start-up costs, as well as resistance from the general public. Ultimately, visionary prefabricators like Buckminster Fuller could not live up to their glowing press – of more than 500,000 prefabs proposed by the National Housing Agency in 1945, less than one-third would be completed.²

Of the many developers whose careers profited from, and coincided with these developments, William J. Levitt (1907-1994), president of Levitt & Sons, Inc., stands out.³ Born in Brooklyn, New York, Levitt got his start as a builder during the early Depression, at the very moment when the International Style was first introduced and beginning to gain recognition. Initially, the movement's ideas had little impact on Levitt & Sons. The firm favored conventional designs; his Strathmore developments on Long Island's affluent North Shore featured Tudor-style and

² Martin Pawley, *Architecture versus Housing* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 59.

³ Levitt & Sons, Inc. was founded by Abraham Levitt, a real estate lawyer from Brooklyn in 1929. William and Alfred, who served as the firm's architect, were both New York University drop-outs. See "Up from the Potato Fields," *Time* (3 July 1950): 70.

neocolonial models set on rolling hills and along picturesque cul-de-sacs.

However, as time passed, Levitt's ambitions grew. Like many builders who found opportunity in the service of their country, Levitt constructed war workers' housing for the Navy at Norfolk, Virginia, and served as a lieutenant in the Seabees, supervising construction of airfields in the Pacific. These situations taught him how to work with the federal government, to lower construction costs, and to meet what must have seemed at the time impossibly short but critical deadlines.

After the war, Levitt did not return to his earlier building practices. He recognized there was considerable money to be made through mass-production, building affordable houses for the millions who served. With the layman clearly in his thoughts, he commented in 1947:

We believe that the market for custom housing, like that for custom tailoring no longer exists. People who want to buy that kind of thing will always be able to get it, but the real market is for the ordinary, mass-produced suit of clothes.⁴

Not only did the GI Bill of 1944 promise veterans and their families the possibility of owning their own home, but it also encouraged large-scale production through loans to merchant builders like himself.⁵

⁴ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 134.

⁵ Nearly half the 1.7 million houses completed in 1950 were financed by the United States government. The

Ground was broken for the first of three Levittowns, near Hempstead, Long Island, in the spring of 1947. Underwritten by an amendment to the National Housing Act, and later the Veterans Emergency Housing Program, Levitt & Sons' first postwar models were compact four-and-a-half room Cape Cods, each with two bedrooms and one bathroom (figure 26). Vaguely nostalgic in feel, the \$7,990 house had a pitched roof, a small chimney, wood siding, and shutters facing the street.⁶ This was a modest house, one that would ruffle few feathers: efficient, reliable, and decidedly American. In September 1948 *Harper's* writer Eric Larrabee described it as:

. . . the Model-T equivalent of the rose-covered cottage — or Cape Coddage, as some have called it. It is meant to look like the Little Home of One's Own that was a subsidiary myth of the American Dream . . .⁷

Though six thousand were quickly sold, Levitt was not content with this unassuming house.

impact of such funding was obvious; by the end of the decade more than one-quarter of the population had left the city for the new suburbs. See J. P. Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), 183.

⁶ Other neocolonial characteristics included, a sequence of candle images punched into a pine banister along the stairs and in the soffit above the kitchen, knee windows beneath the front eaves, as well as rustic lattice-work fencing. See Barbara Kelly, *Expanding the Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), 65.

⁷ Eric Larrabee was the first journalist to examine Levitt's enterprise in-depth. In this perceptive essay he focused on Levitt's product, techniques and rhetoric. See "The Six Thousand Houses That Levitt Built," *Harper's* (September 1948): 79-88.

In April 1949 the company introduced its new model, a ranch (figure 27). The metaphor of the ranch, of course, was derived from the frontier, where modest frame houses were built to shelter western pioneers and their families. Yet despite attempts to connect the present to a mythic American past, the "ranch" was undeniably a twentieth century phenomenon. The absence of traditional detailing, the adoption of the open single-story plan, and the integration of features associated with architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and Cliff May, made such designs a postwar ideal.⁸

Levitt was a shrewd and calculating businessman. A veteran himself, he grasped the needs of veterans and used these insights to finance, build, and market his product. For instance, although he did not wish to be a landlord, his earliest completed units were, temporarily, rentals. In 1948 he announced that he would accept this role, if:

. . . this is the only way to enable the former serviceman, who is without sufficient funds, or whose life is somewhat in a state of flux, to secure a home, a pleasant home, at a reasonable cost.⁹

And an advertisement placed in the *New York Times* in 1949 portrayed each house as a reward for military service:

⁸ For a concise description of the ranch and other American dwellings, see John A. Jackle, Robert Bastian and Douglas K. Meyer, *Common Houses in America's Small Towns* (University of Georgia, 1989).

⁹ "Will Raise Rents to \$65 at End of Lease, Levittown Eagle (19 February 1948), quoted by Kelly, *Expanding the Dream*, 31, 192.

This is Levittown! All yours for \$58. You're a lucky fellow, Mr. Veteran. Uncle Sam and the world's largest builder have made it possible for you to live in a charming house in a delightful community without having to pay for them with your eye teeth . . .¹⁰

The media proved to be a willing ally, reporting on each new model and the interest they generated from veterans. Most stories focused on consumer demand, the hundreds of veterans who "arrived with GI sleeping bags" to place a downpayment, the astounding 1,400 contracts signed in a single day, and the first families to arrive and move into their freshly completed homes.¹¹ Levitt made homeownership patriotic, a symbol of one's allegiance to the American dream. He was repeatedly quoted as saying: "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist . . . He has to much to do."¹²

These houses, as Larrabee pointed out, became "a cultural index," demonstrating what money would buy and what the majority of Americans were willing to pay for.¹³ Although the housing shortage diminished in 1950, Levitt continued to prosper, selling 11,500 ranch-style units by

¹⁰ Quoted in Halberstam, 135.

¹¹ "4,000 Houses Per Year," *Architectural Forum* (April 1949): 84-93; "First Veteran Enters Project," *New York Times* (2 October 1947): 30. This emphasis was also stressed in the firm's promotional materials during this period which listed different prices and payment plans for veteran and non-veterans.

¹² Larrabee, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

the end of 1951. Moreover, a multitude of rivals closely imitated the company's new formula. Concerning Levitt's national influence, *Architectural Forum* wrote in 1950: "Never before in the history of U. S. building has one house type made such an impact on the industry in so short a time."¹⁴

Yet with large scale production also came a high degree of uniformity. Buyers appreciated the cost-efficiency assembly-line techniques achieved, but critics like Mumford deplored the standardized appearance of the average postwar subdivision. To reduce this perception, Levitt marketed the ranch in five somewhat distinct styles.¹⁵ Buyers could choose between models that had distinct roof, window, and surface treatments. The rear facade, however, in all variants was identical. Each had a rather large, eight by sixteen foot double-glazed window overlooking the backyard. While this new feature brought considerable natural light into the living room, it also sacrificed privacy, creating unobstructed views into neighboring residences. This well-publicized innovation demonstrated a clear awareness of the modern movement, especially its long-standing interest in structural

¹⁴ "The Most Popular Builder's House," *Architectural Forum* (April 1950): 134.

¹⁵ Although Levitt made similar claims for the earlier Cape Cod, in reality, the variations were minimal.

transparency and the encouragement of dissolving the division between indoor and outdoor living.

According to the firm's publicity, as much as \$100,000 had been spent researching and implementing this new design.¹⁶ Instead of disguising novel techniques and elements behind conventional facades and traditional detailing, new features became major selling points, promoted in newspaper advertisements and interviews.

Yet how "modern" was the ranch? *Life* described the 1949 models as "semimodern," and *Time* called Levitt "the most potent single modernizing influence in a largely antiquated industry."¹⁷ Although he seemed to never use the word in interviews or advertisements, Levitt certainly viewed his product as an up-to-the-minute response to the nation's housing needs.

Alfred S. Levitt, William's younger brother, was the firm's architect. According to *Architectural Forum* it was his:

. . . custom to design by building and ripping, building and ripping again. The new 1949 house was ripped apart at least 30 times . . . "We don't follow a recipe" says Alfred Levitt, a designer who taught himself architecture by 20 years of hard work. "We build by taste, like a good cook. We carry every dimension in our head.

¹⁶ "Levitt's 1950 House," *Architectural Forum* (April 1950): 136.

¹⁷ *Life*, "Levitt Adds 1950 Model to His Line" (22 May 1950): 142. *Time*, "Up from the Potato Fields" (3 July 1950): 67.

When we are all finished we draw up the plans and file them with the building department."¹⁸

Consequently, no single design philosophy dominated the Levitt's pragmatic enterprise. This lack of orthodoxy is not surprising when we consider the context in which the ranch was introduced. This was a period when the modern aesthetic was domesticated, diluted, and integrated into the popular mainstream. The ranch was, in effect, an updated Cape Cod filtered through the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and perhaps even Marcel Breuer.

During the rise of Levitt & Sons, Wright loomed large. Not only was he at the peak of his creativity, but during the late 1930s his reputation soared as he reiterated his commitment to both high art and solving the problem of the low-cost house. His Usonian designs, which grew out of his vision for Broadacre City, generated considerable publicity and at least twenty-five domestic commissions between 1936 and 1941.

Alfred Levitt acknowledged Wright's influence on his work. At a June 1952 meeting of the American Institute of Architects, he recalled how in 1936:

. . . he stopped going to work for ten months so that he could spend every day watching the construction of a Frank Lloyd Wright house in Great Neck.¹⁹

¹⁸ "4,000 Houses Per Year," 86.

¹⁹ Built for the publisher of Horizon Press, the Ben Rehbn Residence (1936-37) is located on Myrtle Drive in Great Neck, New York. See *Fortune* (October 1952): 164.

Perhaps an exaggeration, the firm's Manhasset office was close-by and Alfred probably visited the site. Of five models offered in 1949, one, in fact, weakly echoed the house Wright built for Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Jacobs in 1937 (Madison, Wisconsin, figure 28). With its main entry and outside foyer placed at the left corner of the street facade, Levitt's ranch had a similar horizontal orientation. Not only were asbestos shingles set lengthwise across the front, but most ranch models had small horizontal sliding windows set just below the roof line, similar to Wright's clerestories.

In terms of the interior, there was a strong emphasis on the fireplace, with the two-sided hearth placed between the kitchen and living areas. Alfred Levitt recalled, "we decided to borrow from Frank Lloyd Wright and put in a fireplace as the central pivot of the plan."²⁰ Like the built-in storage area located between the bedrooms, these innovative features served double-duty: not only did they divide rooms, but they also reduced construction costs.²¹

Levitt's ranch may have also owed something to MoMA and the two exhibition houses it built in 1949 and 1950. William Levitt lived on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan and it

²⁰ "4,000 Houses per year," *Architectural Forum* (April 1949): 86. Oddly, in a description of the ranch plan on page 87, this arrangement was compared to a "early American Cape Cod house."

²¹ The concept of the "kitchen hearth," Kelly points out in her study of Levittown, Long Island, was often credited to Wright. See *Expanding the Dream*, 85.

is conceivable that he visited these and other exhibitions at the museum. Despite clearly different objectives, Levitt's firm shared with Breuer an ability to adapt to changing circumstance. Just as the former Bauhaus instructor had modified his approach to satisfy American taste, so would Levitt. For example, Levitt's 1949 ranch was not nearly as box-like as earlier models: two variants had conventional pitched roofs with chimneys, two had unusual half-shed roofs, and one, a prominent reversed gable.

Levitt further modified the ranch in 1950, most notably adding a twelve by twenty foot carport (figure 29). This Wrightian element altered its profile, extending the roof and giving the house a slightly larger and more sculptural presence. In fact, as photographed from an angle, it somewhat resembled the much talked-about "butterfly" roof employed in Breuer's 1949 house for MoMA (figure 21). Although Levitt's 1950 and 1951 models lacked many of the refinements found in Breuer's far more costly design, both used the roof's unusual shape to create additional interest, storage, and in Breuer's case, potential living space.²²

²² It is worth noting that Wright's 1951 to 1956 house design for Ronny and Roland Reisley near Pleasantville, New York, featured a much more dramatic v-shaped roof integrating the carport, entry, and living areas.

Levitt remained committed to similar innovations in his next project. In early 1951 the firm announced plans to build Landia, a community of 1,750 units in Jericho, Long Island. This would be the firm's least traditional design, using what *Architectural Forum* described as "new materials and design techniques."²³ Like Gregory Ain's design for MoMA in 1950, each house was a single-story unit that featured an "open-planned living-dining-kitchen area" that could be modified through the use of sliding interior walls, basswood curtains, and a twelve-foot rolling Thermopane picture window (figure 30). Furthermore, demonstration models were decorated with up-to-date furnishings and works of art, a strategy frequently employed by MoMA and other supporters of modern design.

Landia was no masterpiece, but Alfred Levitt proudly described his approach in progressive terms, boastfully calling it "another great step forward."²⁴ With its nearly flat roof, simple lines, and flexible spacious layout, it was, as *Architectural Forum* noted, Levitt's attempt to integrate "contemporary design into their mass volume

²³ "Landia" *Architectural Forum* (February 1951): 140-43; Alfred Levitt, "A Community Builder Looks at Community Planning, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (Spring 1951): 80-88.

²⁴ *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, (Spring 1951): 88.

operation."²⁵ Yet this experiment failed to get off the ground. Despite more than 650 cash deposits taken by the firm, construction was quickly postponed, and then abandoned — a victim of the Korean War and new restrictions placed on materials and house construction.²⁶

This and other events sparked considerable national anxiety and renewed doubt. The People's Republic of China had been formed in 1949, the Soviets had detonated their own atomic weapon, and McCarthyism was continuing to make even the most loyal citizens self-conscious about their own friends and personal behavior. These events had a powerful impact on the nation's mood and cultural production. Just as Mumford had worried in 1946, the bomb did increase global tensions, resulting in a "slowing down of creativity."²⁷ Although his prediction that invention and innovation would become "taboo" was a little strong, during the 1950s tastemakers as varied as Johnson and Levitt did begin to take fewer risks, aligning themselves

²⁵ "Landia," *Architectural Forum* (February 1951): 143.

²⁶ The national emergency did not stop house construction completely. In 1951 the firm began building a second Levittown in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Perhaps because of its proximity to U.S. Steel's new Fairless Works, this ambitious development of 9,500 units was allowed to proceed. Many of the houses built here resembled those planned for Landia. See "The Most House for the Money," *Fortune* (October 1952): 151-68.

²⁷ Lewis Mumford, "Social Effects," *Air Affairs: An International Quarterly Journal* (March 1946): 370-82.

with architectural styles that were, in general, more familiar and less controversial.

In light of such trends and attitudes, in 1954 Levitt introduced two models that would mark a definite end to the firm's experiments with non-traditional house design. Called the "Jubilee House" — to celebrate the firm's twentieth-fifth anniversary — and the "Country Clubber," (figures 32, 31) these new models were promoted as being more conventional than any Levitt had built since 1948. While reasonably similar to the ranches offered in 1950 and 1951, Levitt described them as "so revolutionary that some of it goes right back to 1776."²⁸ Now swearing allegiance to tradition, a *House & Home* article displayed a sequence of photographs that emphasized the firm's long-standing commitment to established architectural forms — from his costly custom-built "Long Island Norman" of 1929 and his "Long Island Tudor" of 1939 to the legendary everyman's "Long Island Cape Cod" of 1947.

Organized in a question-and-answer format, the article juxtaposed several of Levitt's earlier experiments with modern design beside his latest offerings. The article's clearly biased author pondered:

Do home buyers want . . . open carport or
attached garage? . . . floor-to-ceiling window
or wall space for furniture? . . . a finished

²⁸ "Levitt's New Houses for 1955," *House And Home* (November 1954): 137.

attic or an expansion attic . . . big blank surfaces or small scale textures?²⁹

Levitt's image of the postwar house had made a sharp reversal. His latest models incorporated many pre-war features: a two-story plan, wood window sills, increased wall space, a street-side living room, and an attached garage.

Clearly, Levitt sensed a change in the nation's mood. Shaken by economic uncertainties and international conflicts, vocal critics like *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon were urging the architectural community to seek out American traditions, encouraging house designs that would in no way be confused or associated with foreign cultures and influence. Unsure of what was ahead, Levitt utilized few of the innovations — aesthetic or otherwise — that had been proposed for Landia. In his 1955 plans for a third and final Levittown in Willingboro Township, New Jersey, only models with strong American associations were marketed: the "Rancher," "Cape Cod," and "Colonial."³⁰

* * *

²⁹ Ibid; 138-39.

³⁰ Willingboro Township is located seventeen miles east of Philadelphia. See Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners* (New York: Columbia University Press), 6-7.

Though it has taken nearly a half-century for historians to begin to examine the design of these familiar structures, scholars are addressing what had in fact been long self-evident: that the postwar single-family house stood for something more than shelter, creating an appropriate setting for one's pursuit of the American dream. These communities gave residents the illusion, if not the reality, of living in a triumphant democratic society where the right to homeownership and a small plot of land was available to all. A product of the war and industrialization, urban heterogeneity was quickly replaced with suburban homogeneity, developments where most, if not all residents shared similar backgrounds and experience.

Had James Marston Fitch's call for a "democratic esthetic" been realized by builders like Levitt? Despite the timely appeal of such slogans, architects and critics sympathetic to his views failed to successfully demonstrate how such ideas might be given tangible form. Was it enough to solve the housing shortage, keep prices low, and satisfy popular taste, or was Levitt just a capitalist camouflaged in patriotic rhetoric? While it may be true that the debates that shaped most single-family residences quickly lost their urgency, during the decade when they were being conceived these issues were of real national significance.

So important was domestic architecture in the United States that in less than one year's time, two seemingly antithetical figures found themselves on the cover of *Time* magazine: Richard Neutra and William Levitt.³¹ While European emigrés like Neutra were indeed highly regarded during these years, the legacy of community builders like Levitt, it could be argued, was just as profound.

Neutra and Levitt exemplify the trends and counter-trends that shaped American architecture during the postwar era. Despite differences in approach, this study has returned the modern architect and the merchant builder to their rightful positions of influence and impact — two parts of a very complex, and, more often than not, interwoven narrative.

While some may deny these houses a place in the pantheon of twentieth-century architecture, we can no longer ignore them. New ideas in architecture are generally understood to trickle down slowly from costly custom-built houses and their prominent architects to the mainstream. However, in the years after 1945 the public's and the media's resistance to European models suggested new and intriguing aesthetic possibilities. No matter how practical, naive, or even clumsy the average subdivision

³¹ See "New Shells" "Modern Houses . . . Across The U.S.A." *Time* (15 August 1949): 58-66; and "Up from Potato Fields," *Time* (3 July 1950): 67-72. Below Levitt's portrait was written: "HOUSE BUILDER LEVITT. For Sale: a new way of life."

might have been, their familiar and comprehensible imagery, spoke loudly to both homebuyers and the architectural generation that followed.



Fig. 1

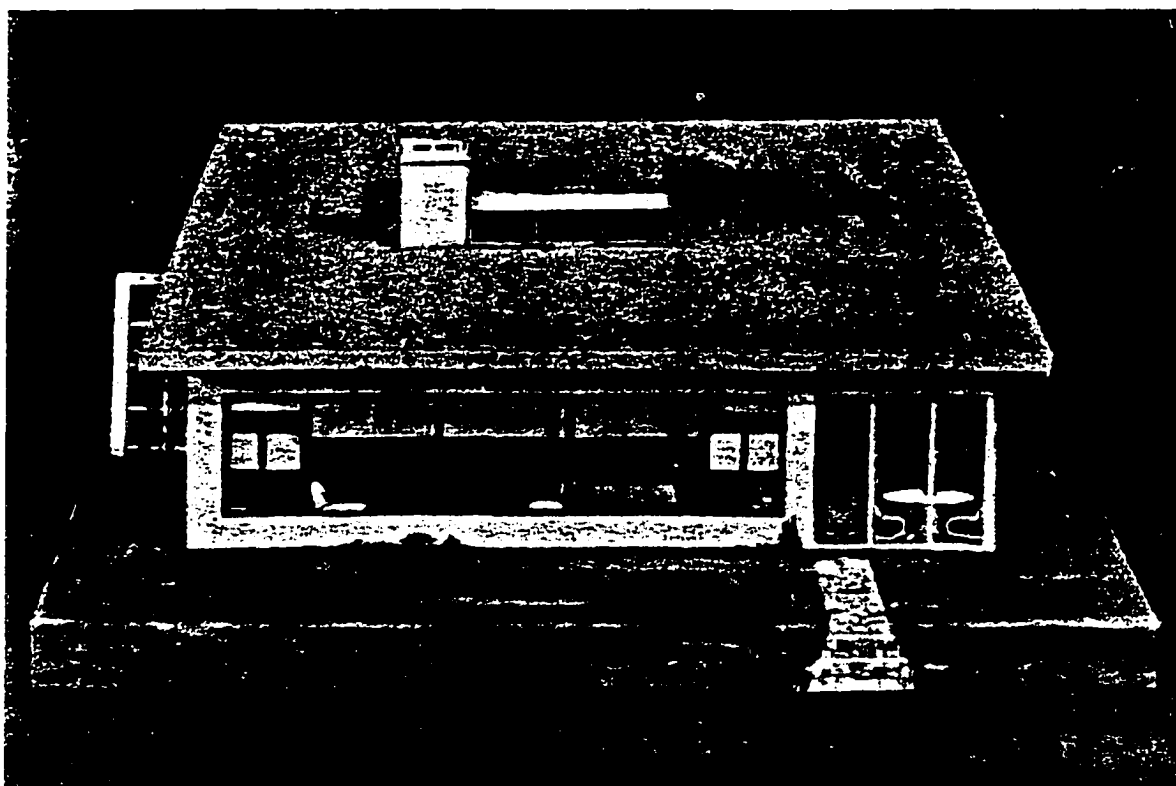


Fig. 2

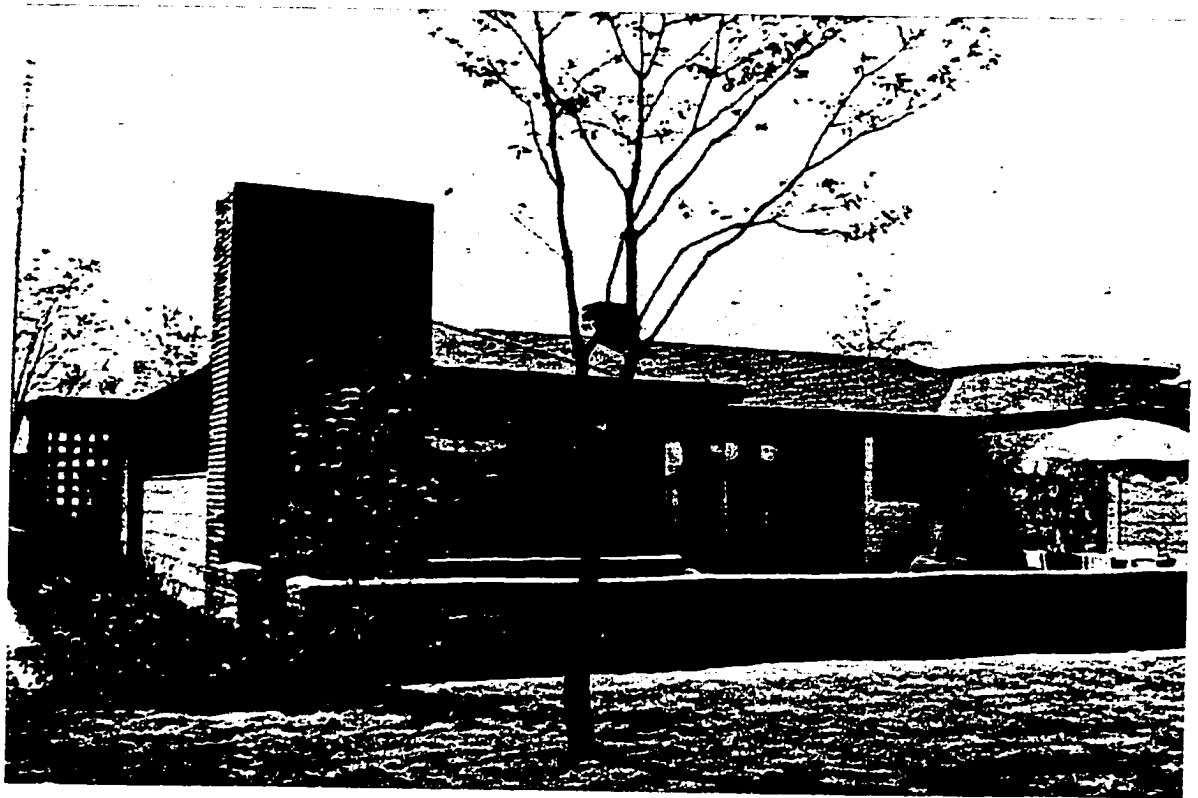


Fig. 3

HOUSE BY WALTER GROPIUS

KITCHEN BY GENERAL ELECTRIC

GE

The Modern Kitchen is ALL-ELECTRIC!

We point with pride to the complete General Electric Kitchen in the house of Walter Gropius, internationally famous architect. Like the house itself, this *all-electric* kitchen is a model of modern beauty and efficiency.

Other modern houses described in this issue of "The Architectural Forum" also feature General Electric Kitchen equipment. G-E Electric Kitchens are **FIRST CHOICE** of the majority whose house specifications have appeared in the profession's No. 1 magazine.

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GENERAL GE ELECTRIC

GE Triple-Thrust Refrigerator

GE Electric Range

GE Electric Sink with Disposal and Dishwasher

GE Kitchen Cabinet

Fig. 4



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

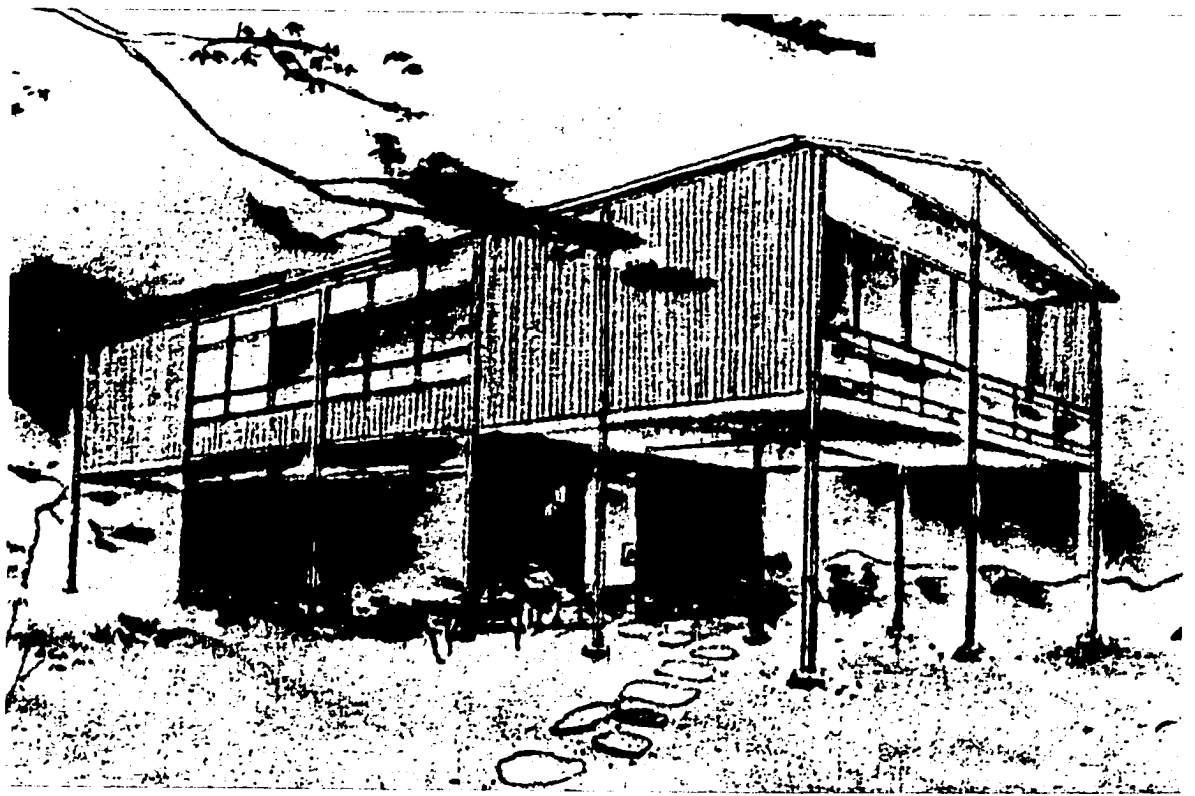


Fig. 10

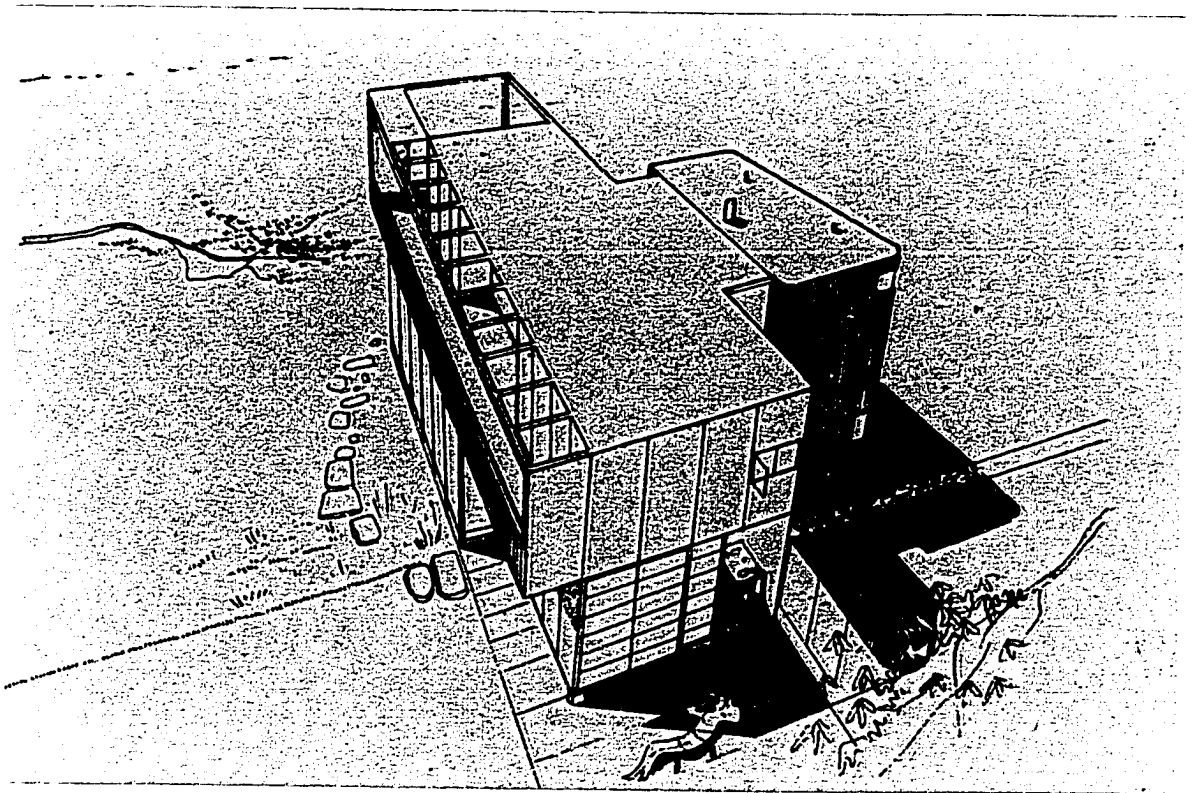


Fig. 11

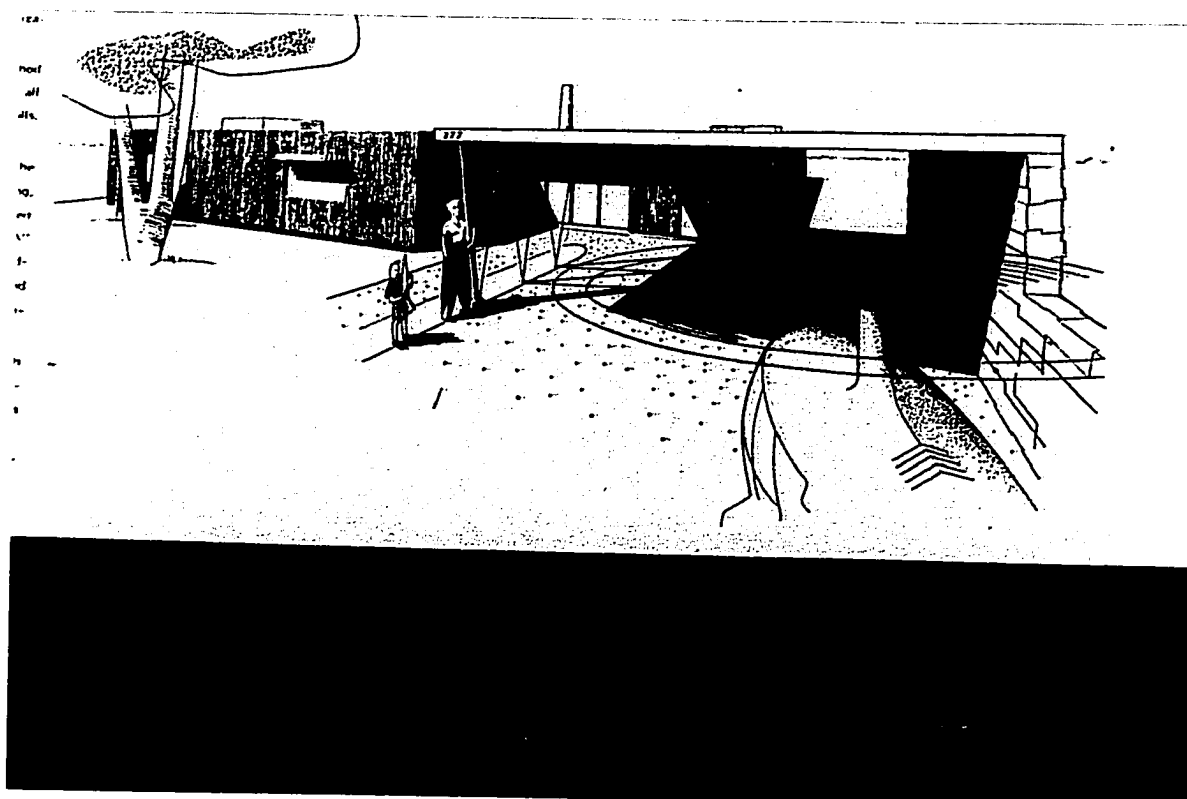


Fig. 12

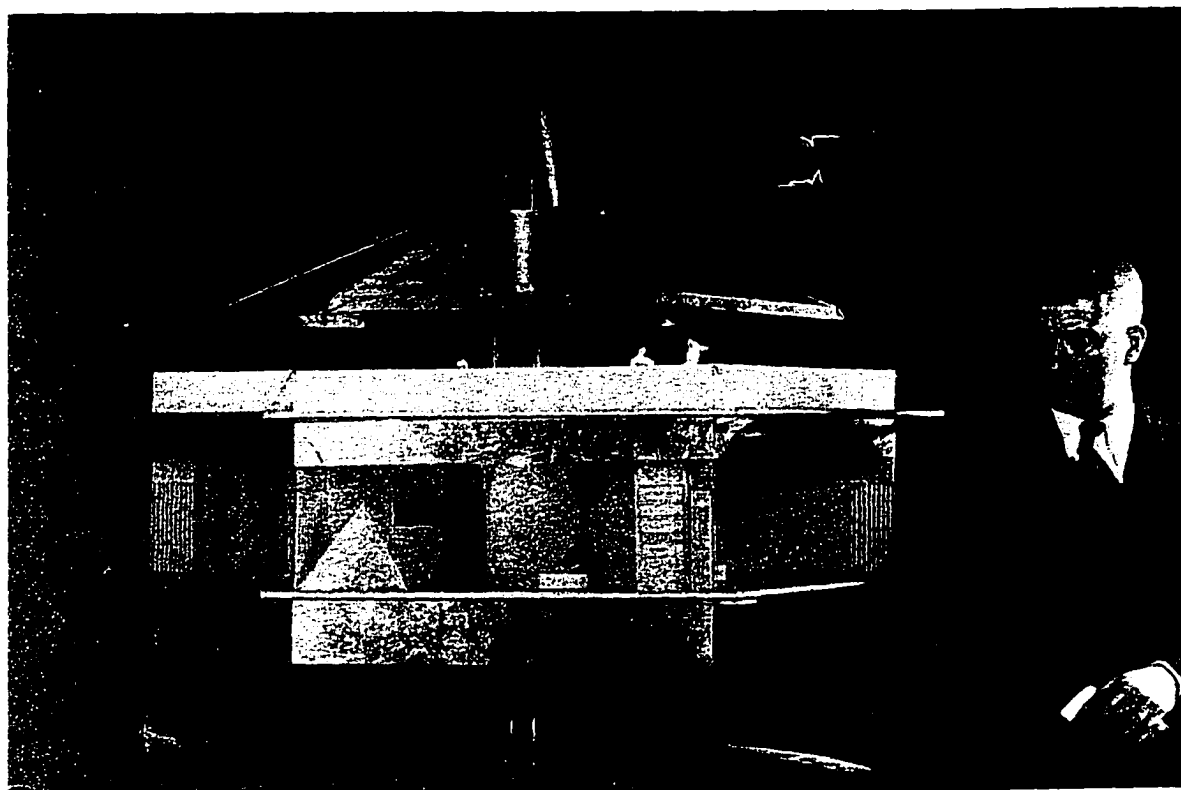


Fig. 13

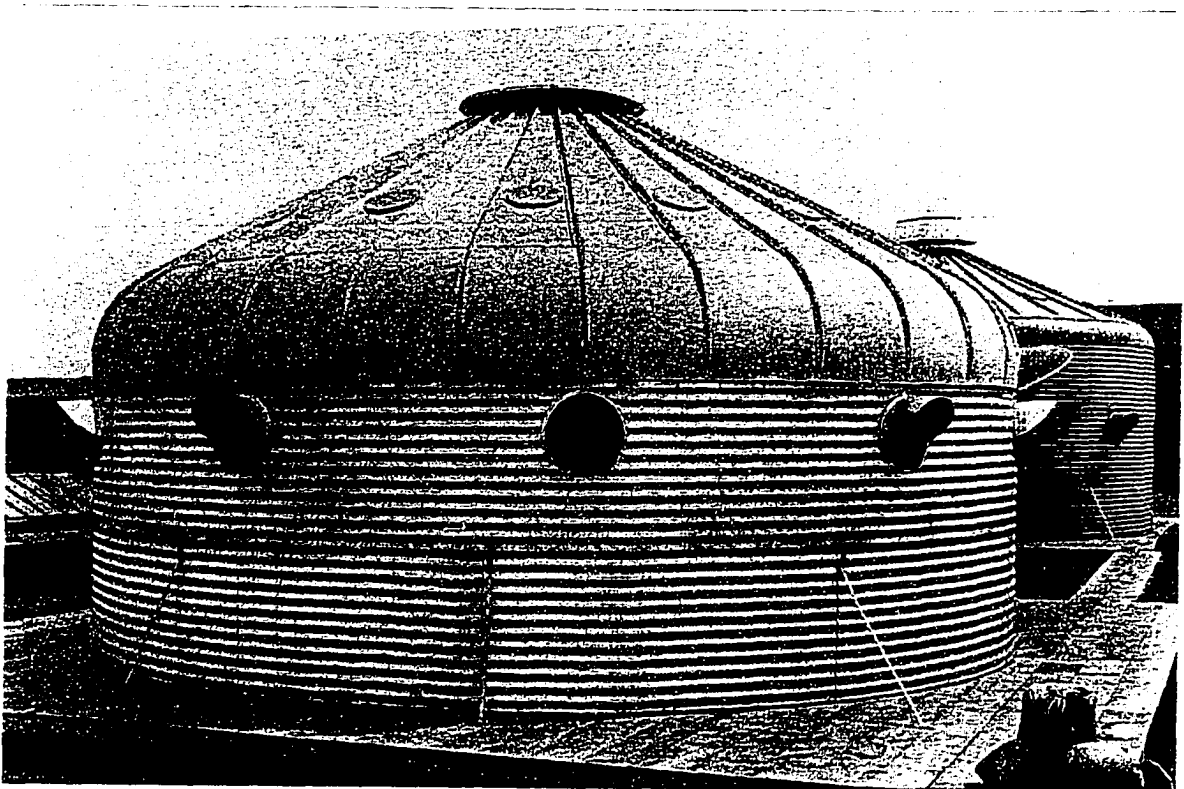


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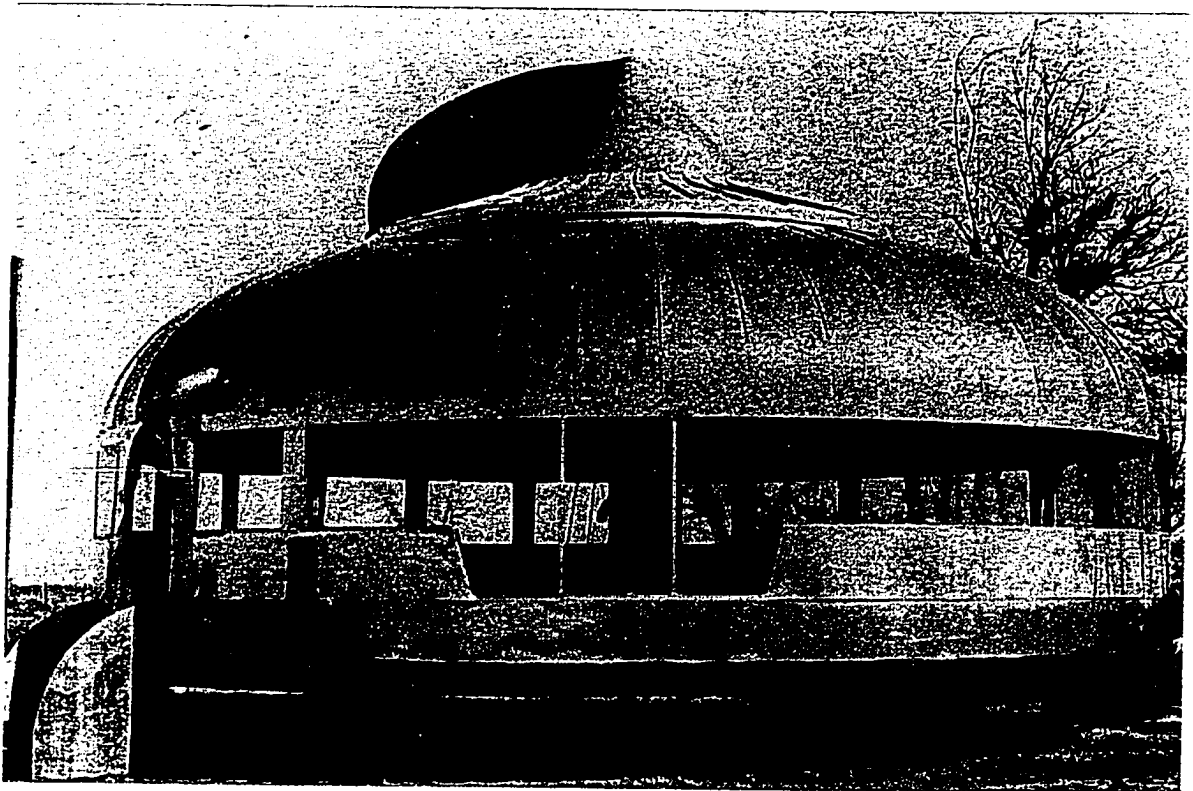


Fig. 15

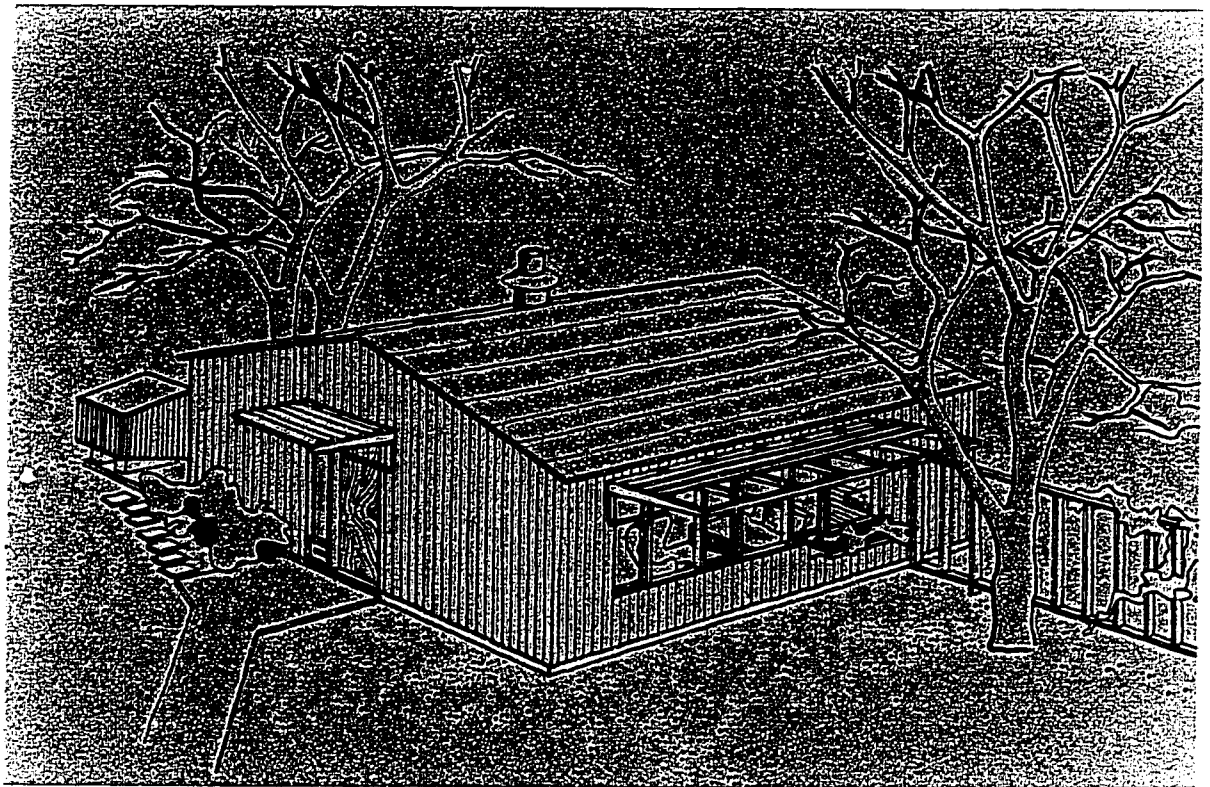


Fig. 16

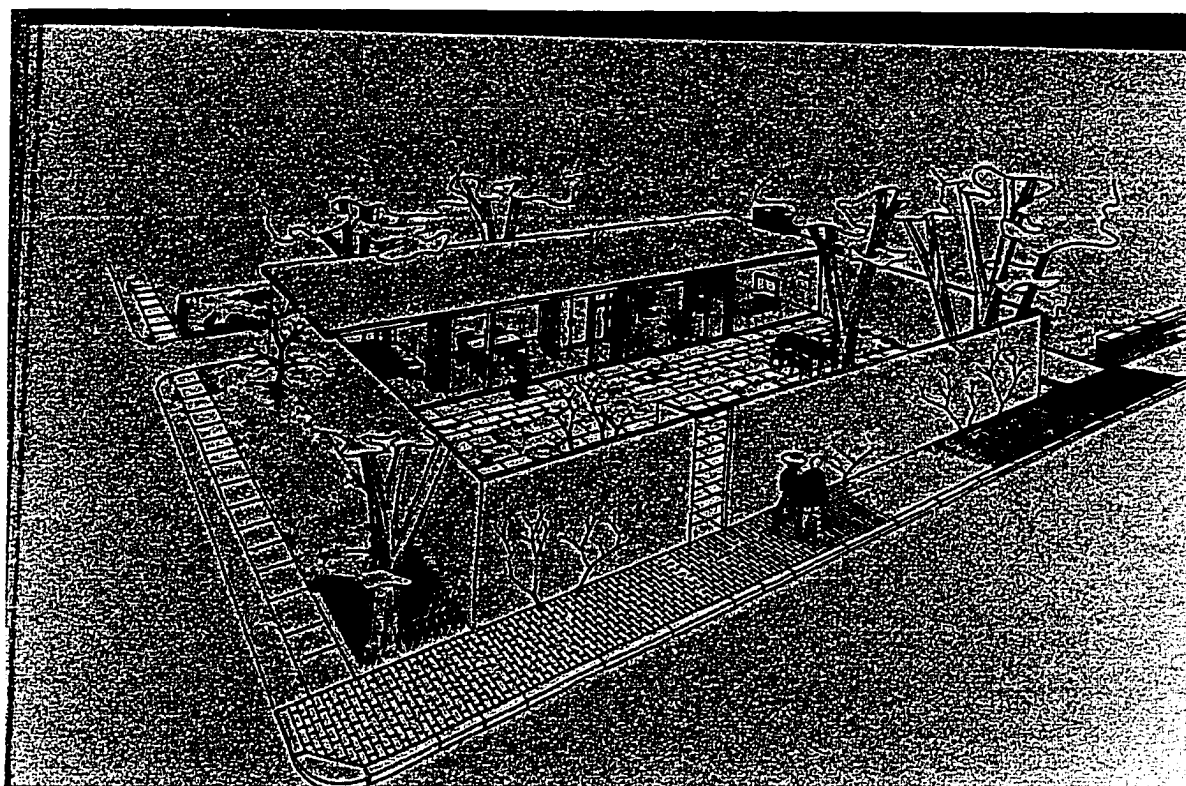


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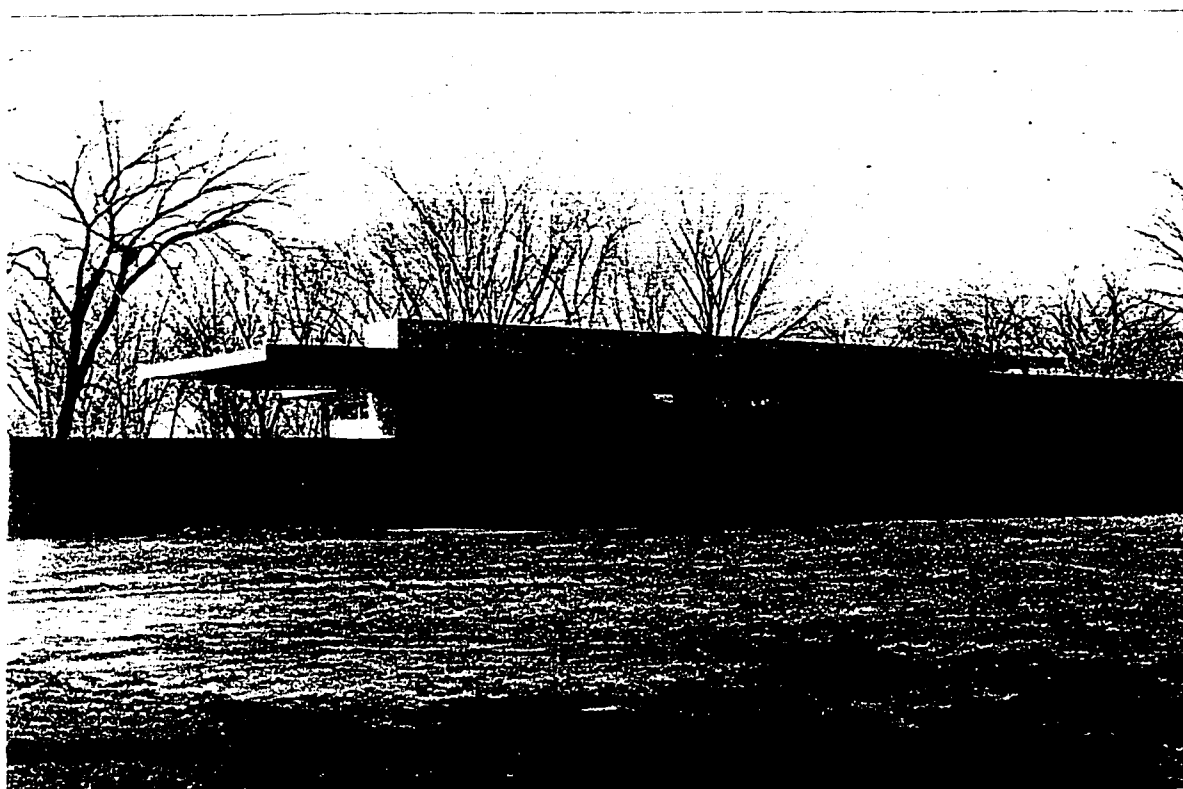


Fig. 18



Fig. 19

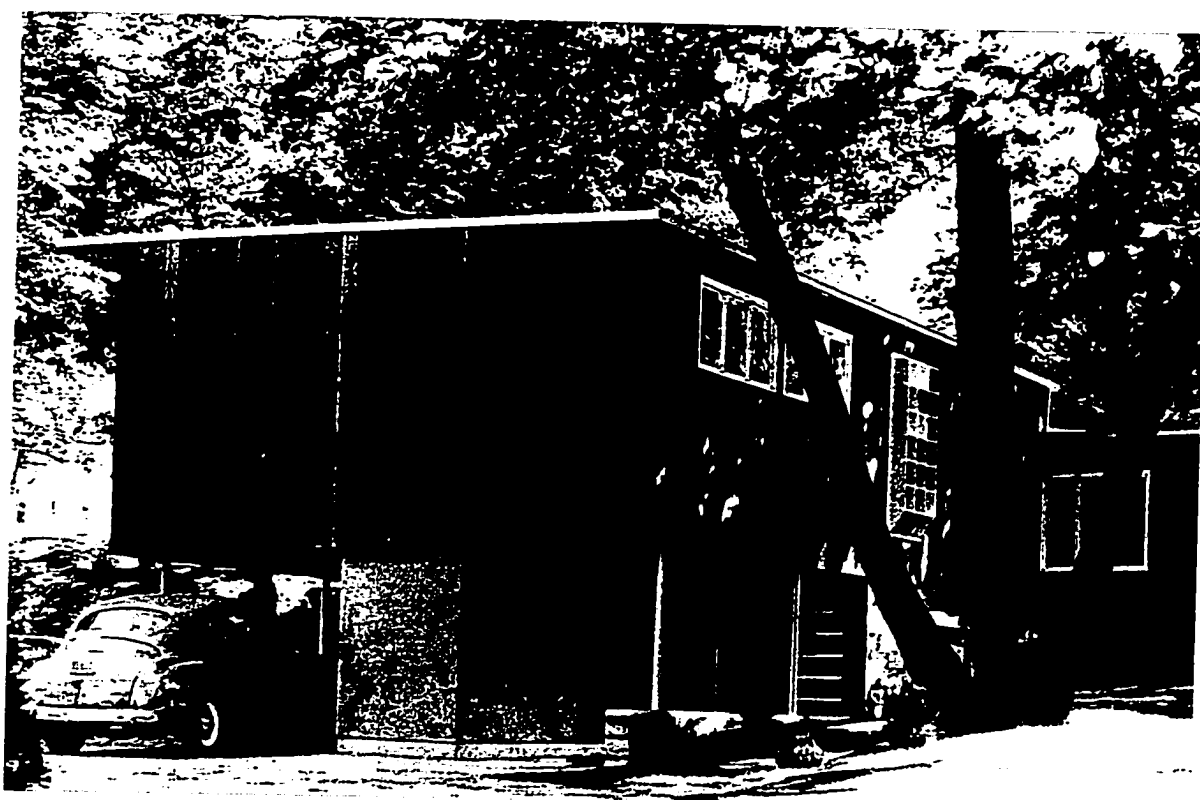


Fig. 20

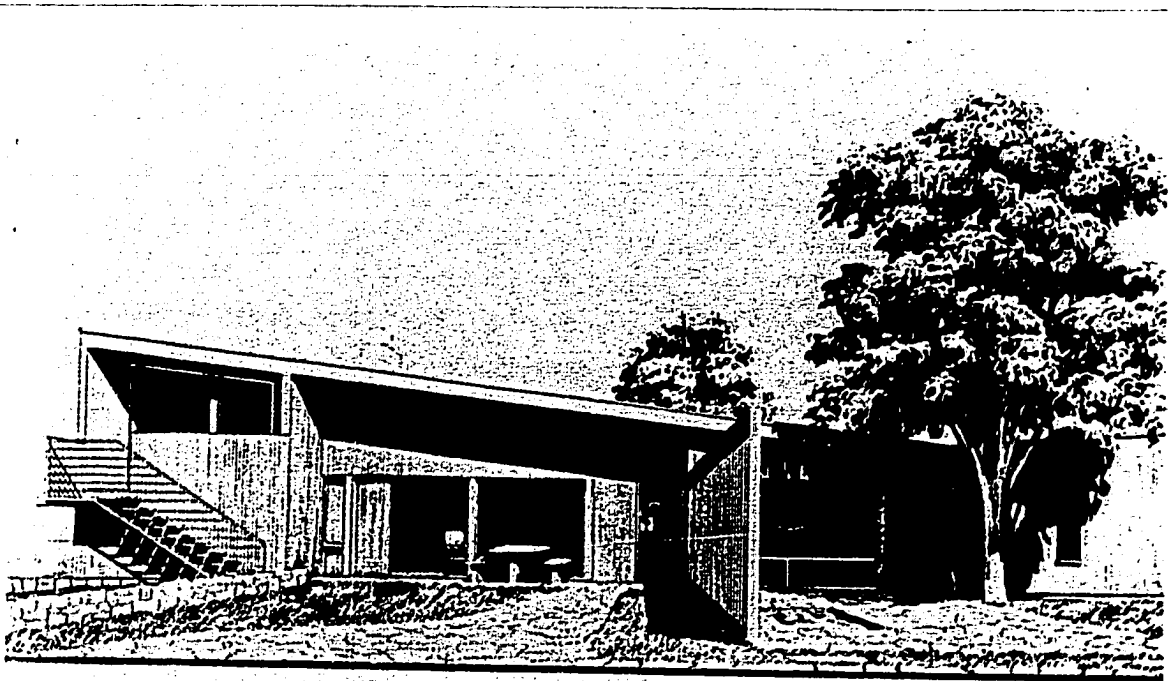


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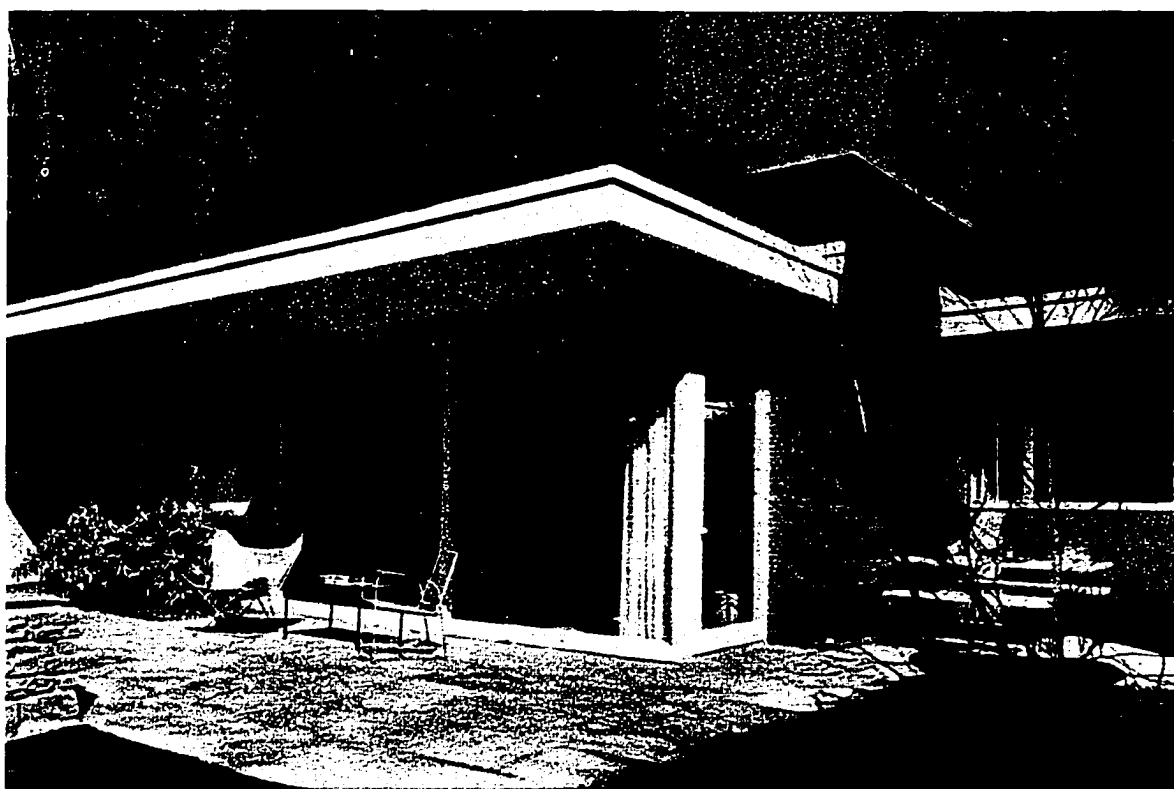


Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

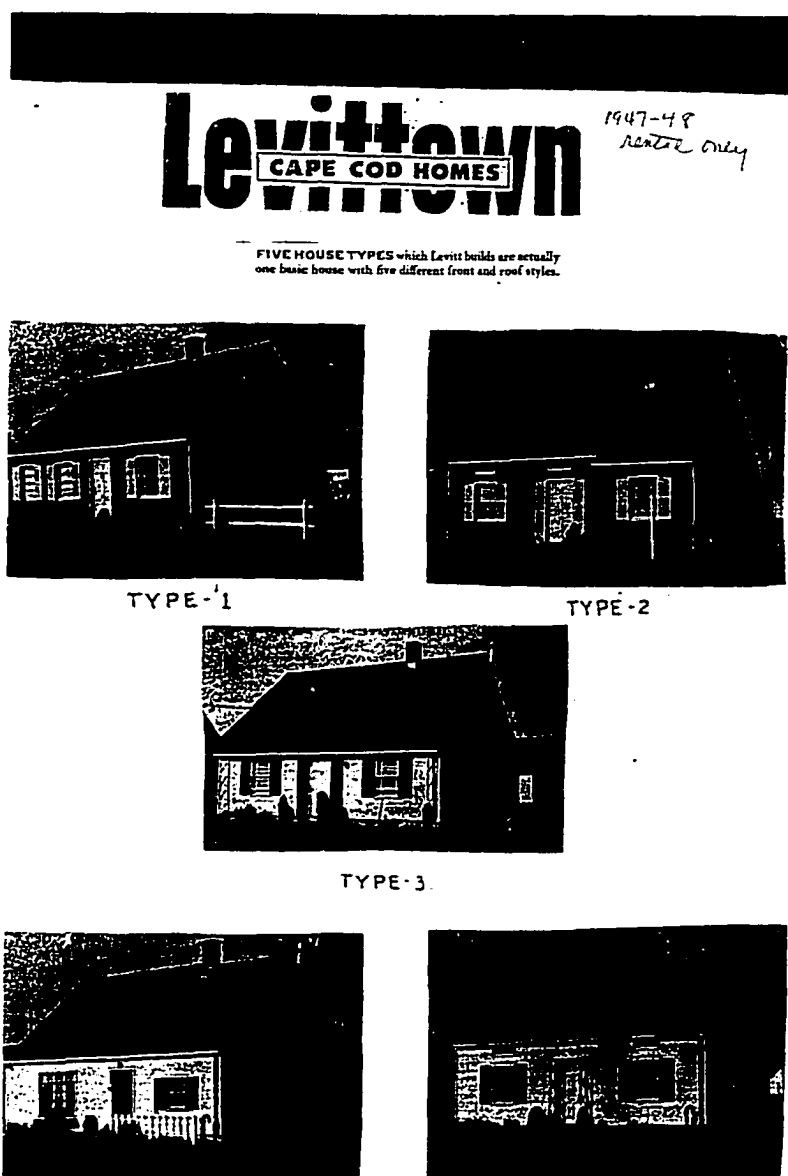


Fig. 26

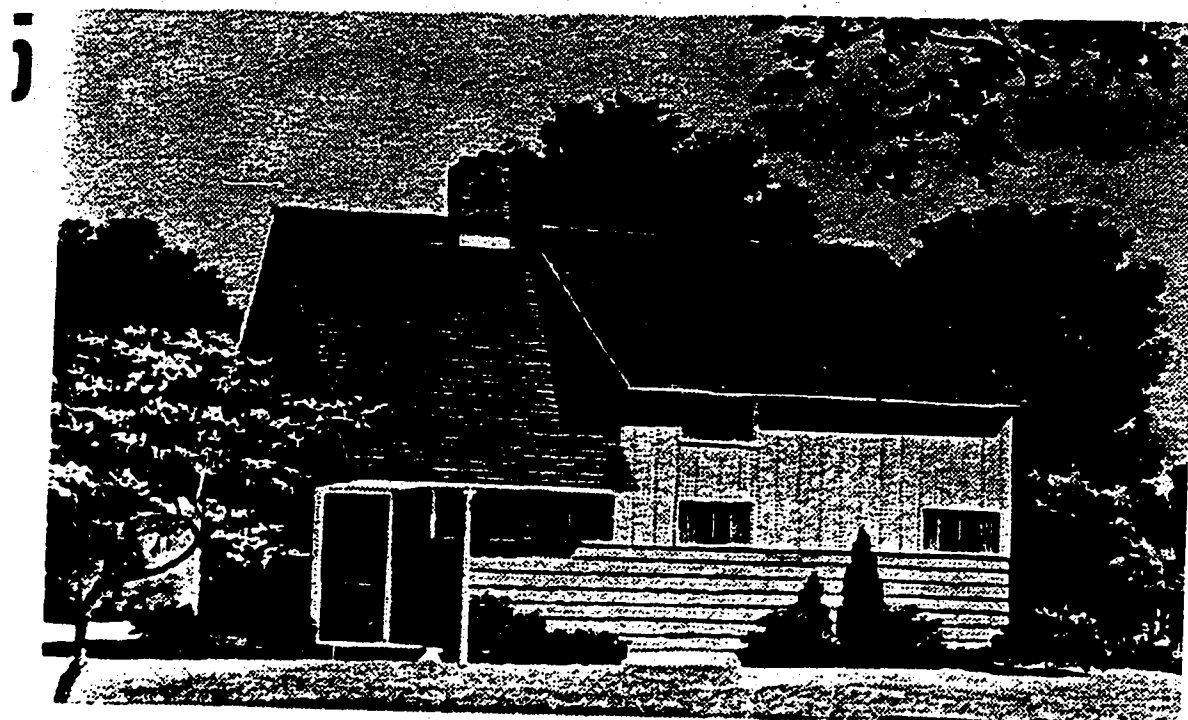


Fig. 27

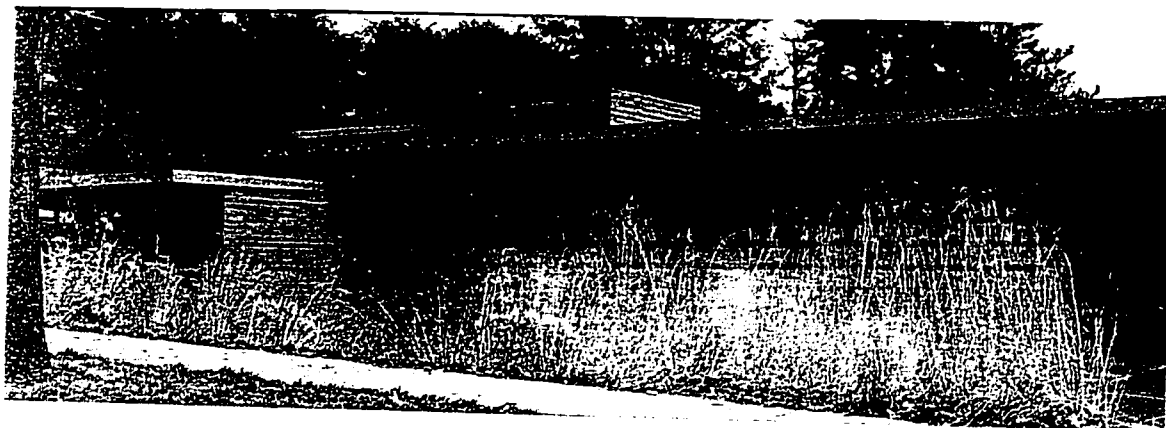


Fig. 28

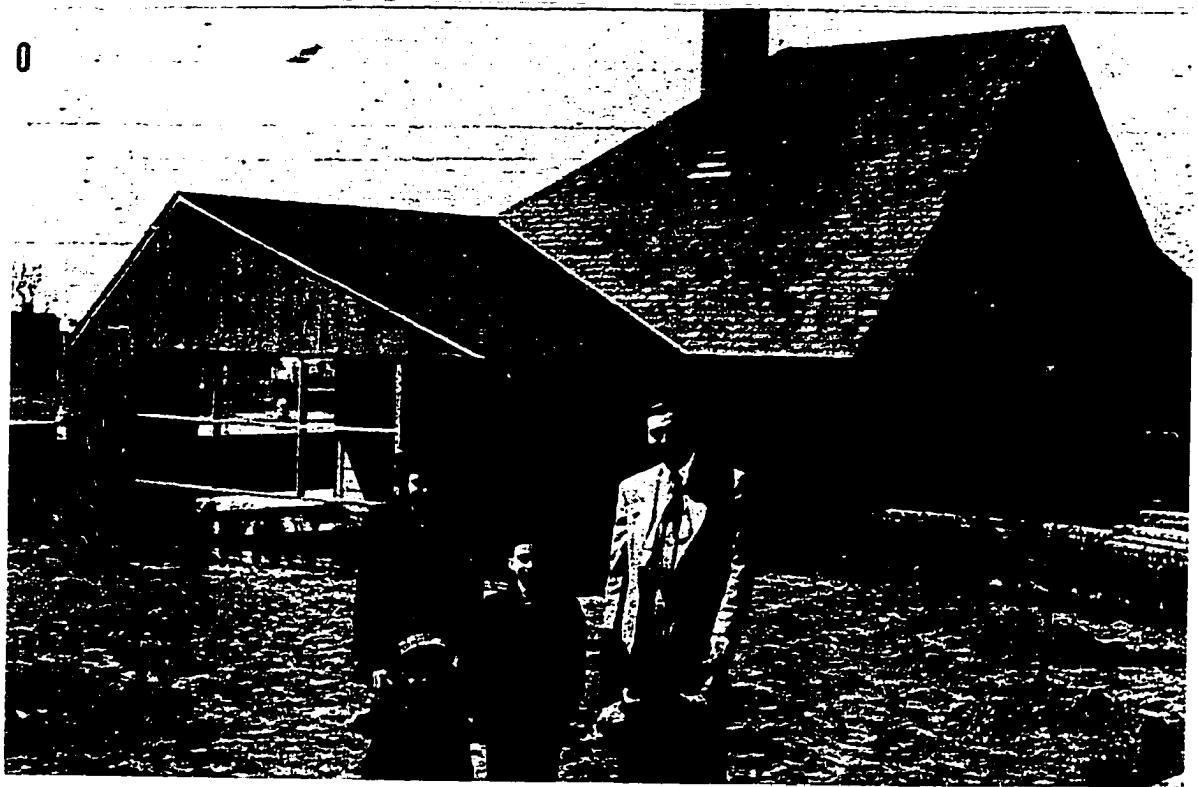


Fig. 29



Fig. 30

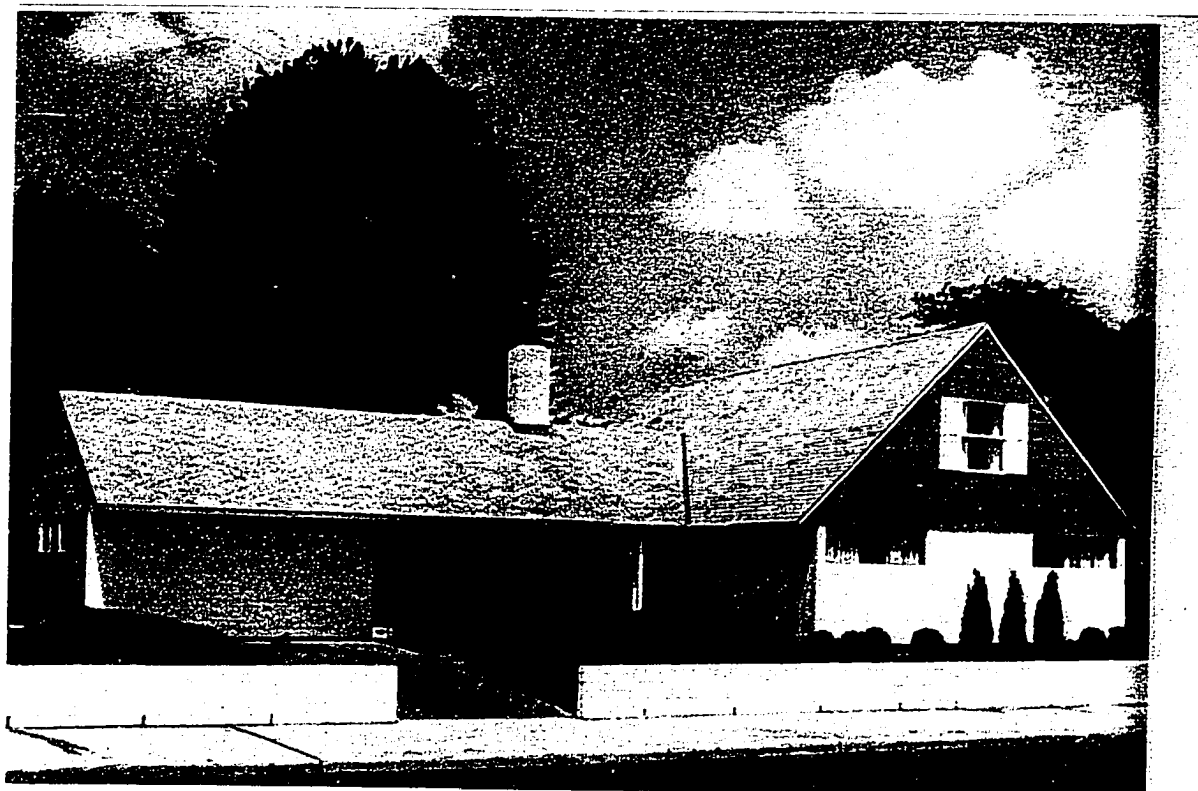


Fig. 31

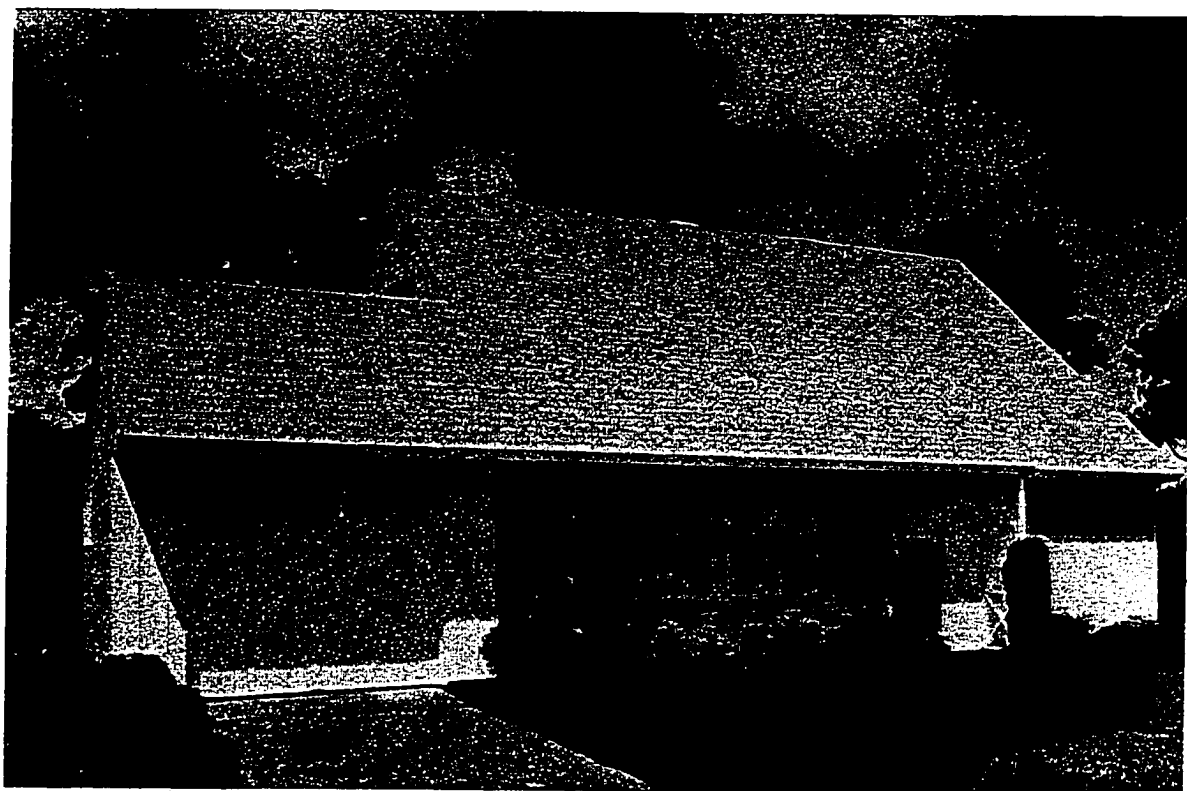


Fig. 32

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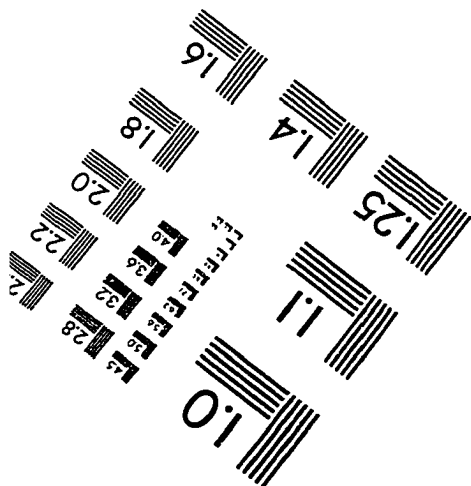
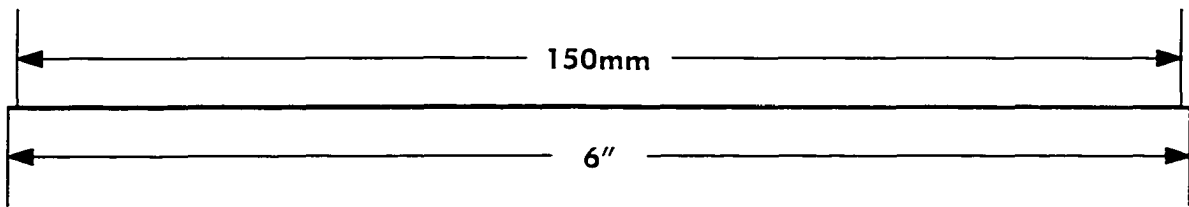
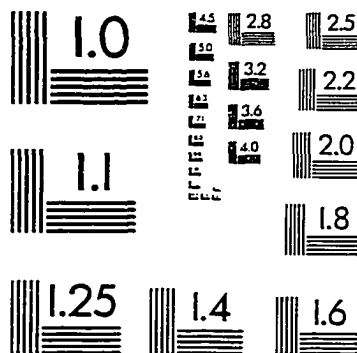
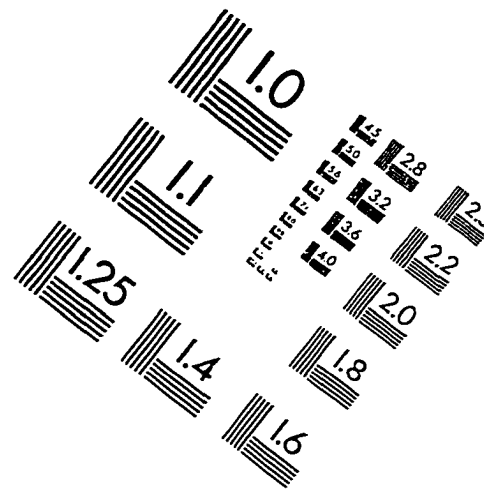
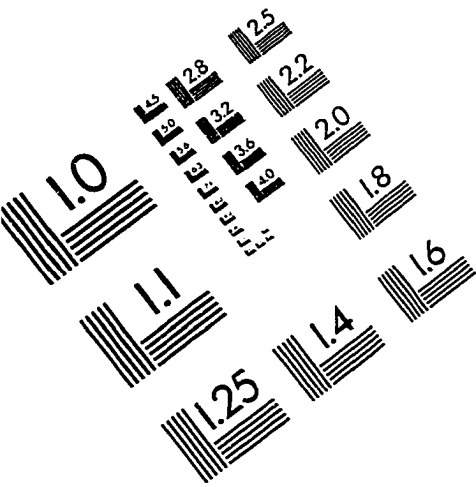
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IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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