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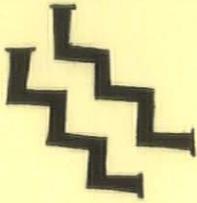
POTOMAC VALLEY ARCHITECT

JANUARY 1963
VOL. 7 NO. 5

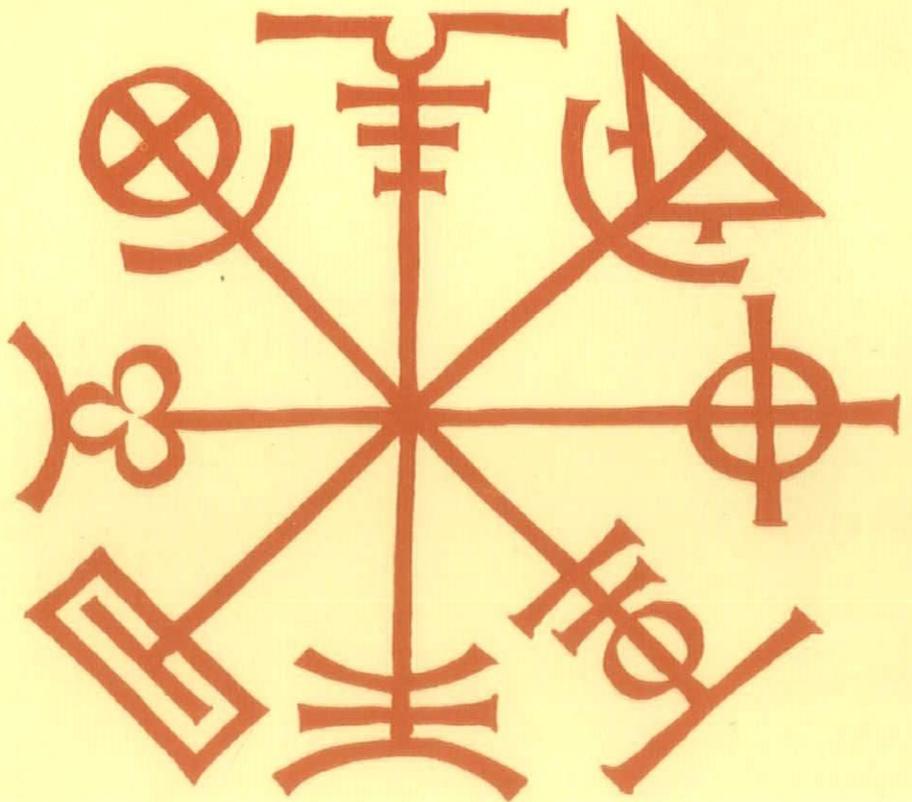


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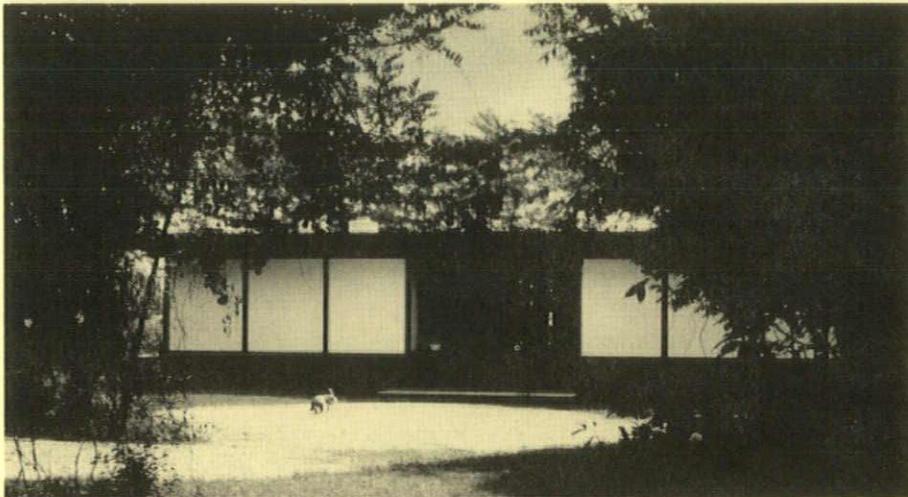
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Published monthly September-June by the Potomac Valley Chapter of Maryland, American Institute of Architects, 912 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring, Maryland. Entered as second class matter at the Silver Spring Post Office. Subscription price: 50c per copy, \$4.50 per year. Unsolicited manuscripts and photographs will be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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NO JANUARY MEETING



HAINS RESIDENCE

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AWARD FOR PVA

Potomac Valley Architect has just won an award in a nation wide competition for A.I.A. component publications. Details will follow in the February issue.

HOWARD U. LECTURES

Edward Durrell Stone, FAIA; Albert Bush-Brown, historian, author, and President of Rhode Island School of Design; Ian McHarg, Chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Pennsylvania; and Chlothiel Smith, FAIA; will be speakers in the 1962-63 visiting lecture series of the Department of Architecture, Howard University.

The public is invited to all the lectures, which are free of charge. Dates will be announced.

THIS MONTH'S COVER

Stonemason's signs, taken from THE BOOK OF SIGNS, by the great artist and typographer Rudolf Koch. A fascinating book, not only as a history of symbols, but as an example of the book designer's art. Available in Dover paperback for \$1.00.

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Through January 8
Etchings and Drypoints by George O'Connell

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Through January
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Opening January 12
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Opening January 12
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TEXTILE MUSEUM

Through January
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CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

Through January 13
Work by Ed McGowan

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NATIONAL HOUSING CENTER

January program to be announced

WASHINGTON GALLERY OF
MODERN ART

Opening January 8th
Sculpture by Reuben Nakian

CONSTRUCTION SPECIFICATIONS
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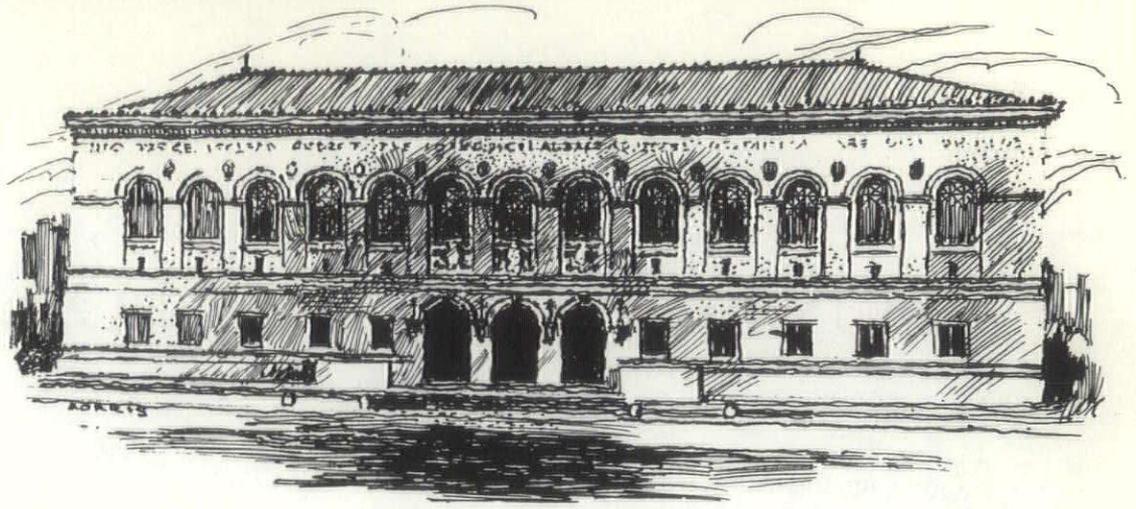
January 15, 8:00 p.m., National Housing Center

Discussion of the proposed Specification Manual

NEW ADDRESS

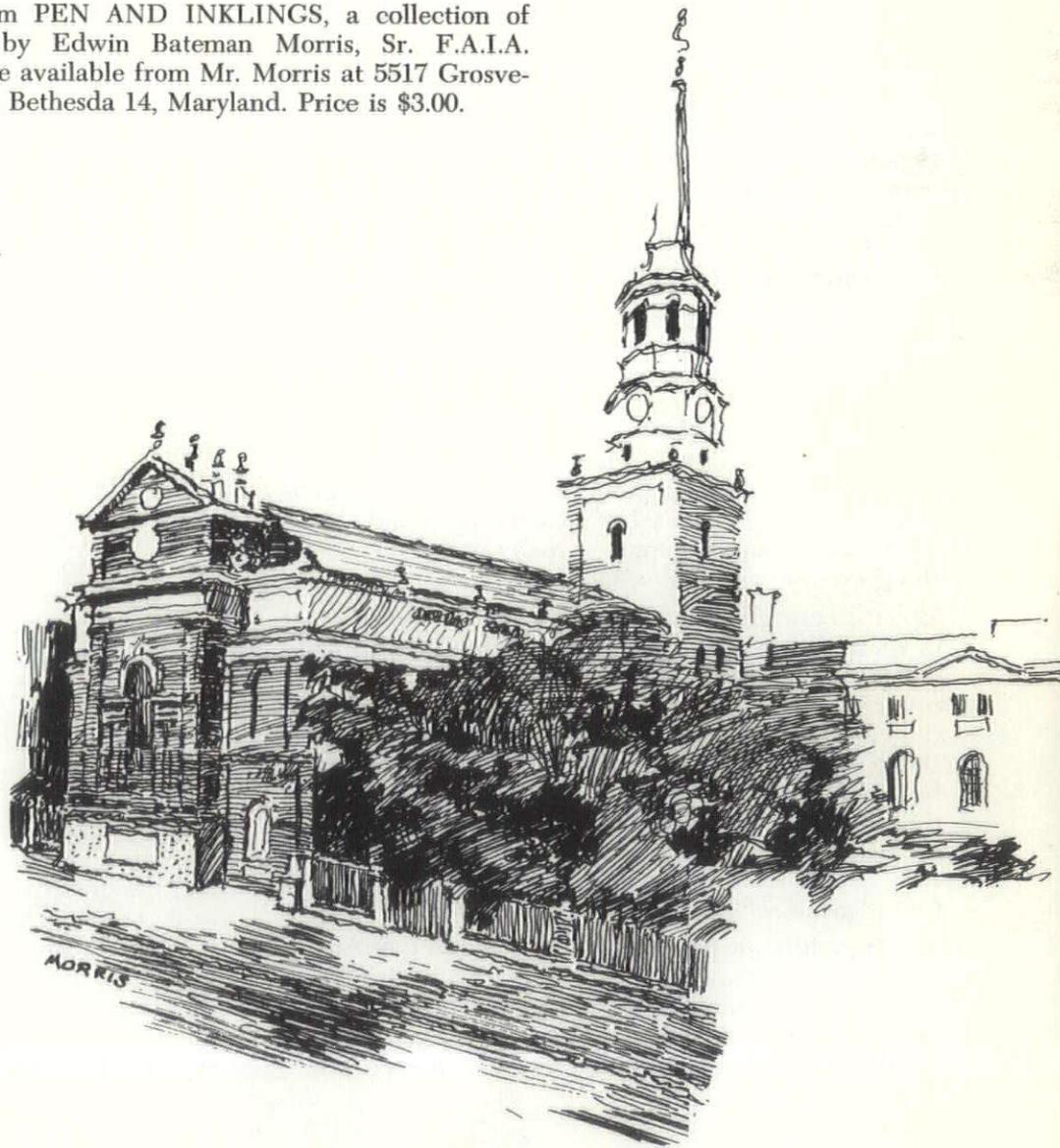
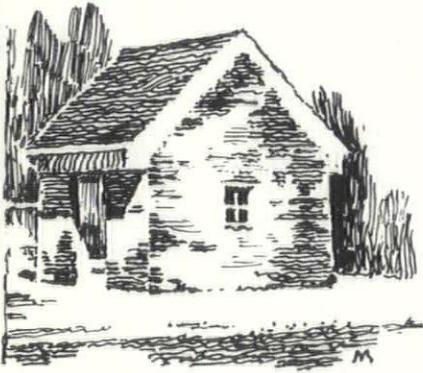
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The following article is reprinted with the kind permission of LANDSCAPE Magazine, where it first appeared.

The SENSIBLE LANDSCAPE

By JAMES C. ROSE

In the village nearest to the Pennsylvania country where I grew up, the houses were white and the lawns austere coming right to the sidewalk, American to the core. In the midst of this, there lived an Italian family who didn't understand the necessity for such landscape treatment. They had closed off their property from the street by a tall hedge as a kind of privacy-baffle. But now and then you could get glimpses through or over to the grape arbor and the fruit trees that lined the hedge. You could see Mama sitting under the arbor. But the thing I remember best was the noises: the sound of children at play, of intimate laughter; and music from a long since out-dated phonograph. Warmth and simplicity seemed to filter through the high enclosure, making the garden like a happy oasis. And although the prim white houses and lawns which surrounded the house of the Italians had neither enclosure nor privacy, they had another kind of barrier looming high indeed — the barrier of conformity, that seemed to conceal the true richness and vitality of the American scene, as if it were not quite proper, or safe to use and enjoy the landscape.

Nor is this American tendency to conform limited to certain regions or climates; the recalcitrant lawn and the odious foundation planting are forever with us from Florida to Oregon — a sacred cow, which we feel compelled to have and hold at any sacrifice. I use the word sacrifice advisedly because it is well known that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time, and I feel that the lawn and shrubbery habit in landscaping is actually preventing something exciting and interesting from taking place.

I do not pretend to understand fully the complex of reasons that compel a whole nation of great wealth and natural richness to settle for mediocrity in its millions of home landscapes. Nor am I impressed with the argument that they must have validity because there are so many of them — any more than I would be impressed with the idea that disease is a good thing because there is so much of it. But because I daily wrestle with the problem of the home landscape, I do have a few opinions about what is wrong, and a few ideas of what could be done about it.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that American values and awareness are not highly developed as far as the home landscape is concerned — a situation that might be expected in a country that has matured under mechanization without having estab-

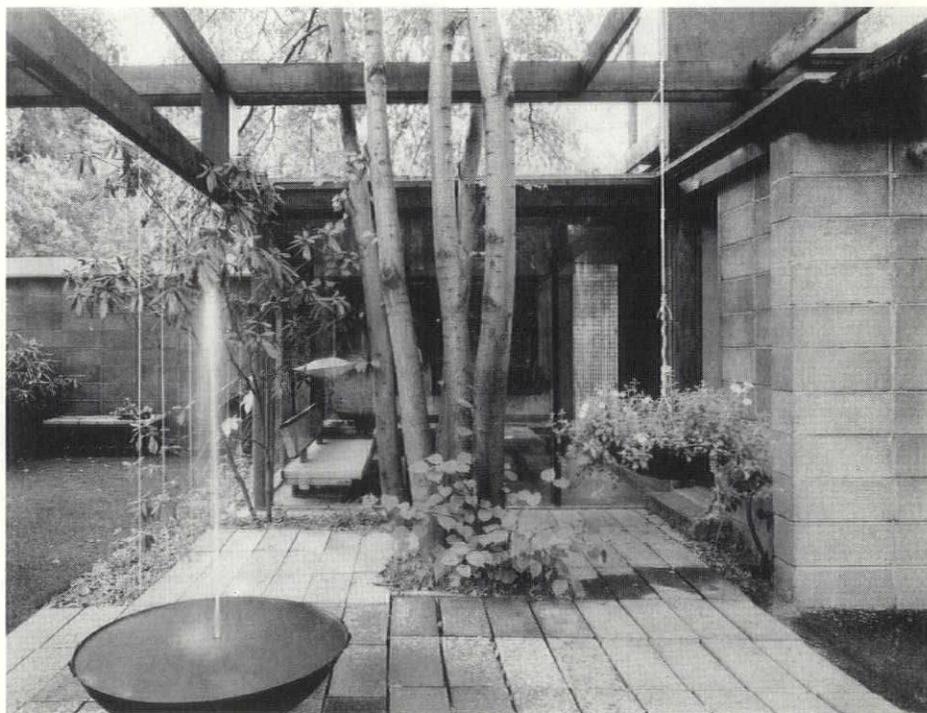
lished a truly indigenous garden or landscape tradition. An extra bathroom, a dishwasher, and television are all more important in the American mind. We are preoccupied with gadgets — wall to wall — with only a sideways glance at what they are doing to our environment. And when we do take a serious interest, we tend to borrow from other cultures — the “Japanese” garden is very popular at the moment, and we have not yet recovered from the “English” lawn and perennial border. Can we not wrestle with our own esthetic problems in terms of our own natural landscape? This is precisely what the Japanese have done so successfully. A solution cannot be bought or transported successfully. It must be elaborated on the home grounds, so to speak, until something appears that could not possibly fit any other place in the world because it so perfectly belongs right here and right now.

There is one consistent attitude of the average American home owner that seems to me to prevent good landscaping. This is the direct approach. The direct approach sounds like a virtue, and certainly typically American, but in landscaping is naive. For instance, having permitted the electric meter to be placed on the front wall of the house, the owner attempts to cover it with a bush or a vine; having permitted an ugly, raised foundation (always for the most “practical” reasons) the owner feels that the only answer is to hide it with a sea of shrubbery; having given no thought to how guests will arrive at the front door, how the garbage will be collected, how service will be directed to the kitchen, or how both the living rooms and the kitchen will connect with the patio, he ends up in a state of confusion. It is quite common in recent development homes that all guests must arrive at the kitchen door, because it is the only one accessible to them, while the lady of the house sneaks the garbage out the front door, because it is most handy for the garbage man, and the patio is not used at all, because you cannot get to it without going around the house.

The frightening thing about this is that so few of the actors — the owner, the builder, the landscaper, and the guests — see the situation as a farce so long as it is accompanied by tile in the kitchen and a cute bend in the unused walk leading past the garbage pails up to the front door. Thus, unthinkingly, we make the American landscape. In the process, we are creating the newest, largest, most expensive, most anti-septic slums in the world.

I am not going to suggest ten easy ways to correct all landscape problems. No amount of rules, or planting, or furnishing, or decoration, will correct basic mistakes in planning. However, it is true that good landscaping will make many of the mistakes more palatable. For instance, the greatest single need in today's home landscape is privacy. The direct approach is to "fence it in." Much more effective is screen planting (or construction) in a series of successive planes throughout the property with open spaces between. These "screens," in small sections, can be arranged to baffle or disrupt the undesirable while letting in the distant view, and creating a flow of

were higher than the garage level, we could have a series of impressively broad steps up to it. There would then be no mistake about where guests were expected to approach the house. We would have an area, perhaps large enough to park cars off the street, instead of a single driving strip. And if the planting were part of the privacy-baffle sequence I spoke of as spaced throughout the property, we would end up with an enclosed entrance court, and instead of the garbage cans, or the electric meter, or a maze of walks, grass strips, drives and shrubbery each demanding attention, we would be aware of one large space — the entrance. It might even have dignity.



A detail of the author's own house

photograph by Lonnie Wasco

space within the property. In this way, privacy is "suggested" and tends to "happen." Then the private landscape also reaches into its surroundings rather than being isolated by a rim of shrubbery or fence.

Once privacy is given its proper place — that is, first place — in our thinking, we can tackle other more specific problems like the one of getting people to the front door without confusion. The usual handling of this is familiar: we drive in from the street on a driveway the width of the garage, dismount, and walk up a (slightly curved) path cut in the lawn, to a front door, flanked by bushes, and a couple of feet higher than the garage floor. But suppose that, instead of dealing with four or five elements separately — the drive, walk, lawn, planting, etc. — this were thought of as one thing — entrance? This can be done by making the ground between the garage and the front door all one level and one surface. If the front door

And suppose we carry this same type of thinking into the back yard. Instead of that sidewalk-concrete slab (9' by 12' or 12' by 20') which the contractor called a patio, suppose we have a space for family activity. The surface is not important. It can be brick, flagstone, pebbles, asphalt, or concrete — whatever suits the activity. But, most important, suppose this space were also part of the privacy-baffle so that *many* activities — outdoor eating, games, services, children's play, vegetable growing, etc. — are all together, yet properly separate, accessible, and communicating. We then not only have a sequence of privacy baffles, but also a sequence of spaces — volumes of space — some larger, some smaller, but part of each other, part of the dwelling and part of the total landscape. This could be the basis of an American landscape tradition. It is simple, and sensible. Perhaps too simple and too sensible to be readily adopted.

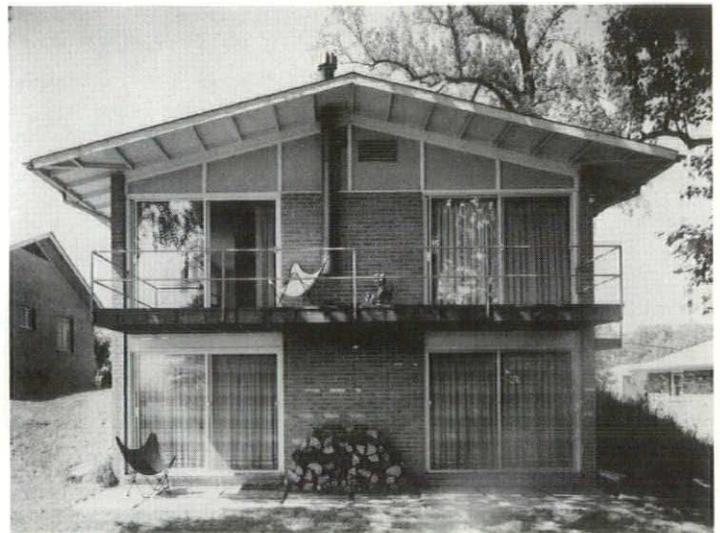


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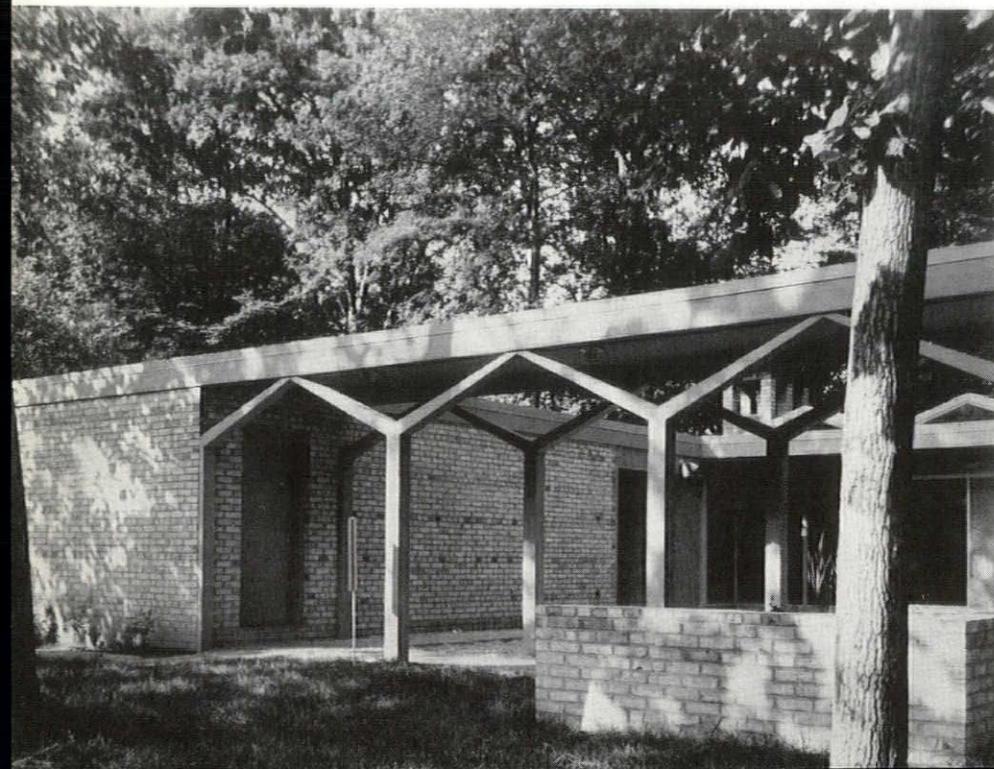
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HOUSES

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HAROLD LIONEL ESTEN, ARCHITECT
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RESIDENCE in DADA WOODS
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Mr. Banham looks at our problems with the detached perspective of a stranger, and arrives at some fresh conclusions. Like Herbert J. Gans, in the October PVA, he suggests that the suburbs may not be the bogey-man we think, but a legitimate living pattern for many Americans.

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URBANISM: USA

by Reyner Banham

The literature of American urbanism has recently attained a certain age. This is not to say that it has matured — its maturity was as early as the time of Lewis Mumford's *Culture of Cities*. But with the appearance of a special issue of *Daedalus*, devoted to 'The Future Metropolis,' town planning finally entered the main arena of intellectual debate, along with such subjects as International Arms Control, the Russian Intelligentsia, the Mass Media, and other neuroses-of-state which have also been the subject of recent special issues of *Daedalus*. Town planning is thus a part of the White Man's Burden of US Liberalism, one of the many things that have been dumped on the desks of the whizz-kids of the Kennedy administration 'for immediate attention.'

But one may doubt that it is really a live issue in the sense that colour prejudice is a live issue. One of the reasons for saying that US planning literature was mature at the time of the *Culture of Cities* is that it has produced very few new ideas since. Mumford was preoccupied with the pathology of Metropolis, so are the contributors to *Daedalus* a generation later. They remain obsessed with the geriatrics of urban senescence, and their doubtful reward is to have fathered the rough-hewn branch of surgery known (hopefully) as urban renewal, by which whole organs of metropolis are lopped off and made over new.

But what is an American Metropolis? What Mumford had in mind was a city with a distinct corporate history and personality, expressed in economic and political power, and monumentalized in some massive units of capital investment — palaces, bourses, railway termini, law courts, cathedrals and the like. But

when Starch Consumer Magazine Report assures prospective advertisers in *Playboy* that 72.4 per cent of its readers 'live in 168 metropolitan areas' of the the USA it clearly does not mean what Mumford meant by *metropolis*, and neither do the contributors to *Daedalus*.

The North American continent abounds in striking proofs that a pile of king-size statistics do not add up to a metropolis, and while making all due regard to local pride, and local munificence, it is difficult to see what specifically metropolitan functions are performed by most of the large towns of the US. The 168 canonized by Daniel Starch may have as many head of population, as large a rate-roll, as many square feet of gallery space and as many chamber music concerts as the traditional metropolises of the Old World, and they may be distributed across the face of the continent at about the same rate of incidence as Amsterdam, Cologne, Munich, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, Berlin. But each of these was (and sometimes still is) the heart and life of a distinct political, cultural and ethnic unit. Is this true of any American City? Washington is the metropolis of only one aspect of the US, the bureaucracy; New York of the communications industry; even Los Angeles and San Francisco have not yet decided which of them is the metropolis of the West Coast: St. Louis, Chicago, New Orleans, appear to exhibit some of the traits of a metropolis. That leaves another 161, whose elevation to metropolitan status by Mr. Starch and *Daedalus* merely creates problems that need not exist.

To say this is not European snobbery, but — rather — to see if America cannot do better than Europe in this respect. Behind Mumford's anguished prognosis of the metropolitan disease (Megalopolitan tendencies and General Paralysis of the Insane) lies the proposition that a metropolis, while healthy, is worth having. It sets the tone of a culture, regulates its commercial metabolism, rallies its political talents, fixes its corporate image among the commonwealth of human societies. Where a city is more or less doing this — a very rare circumstance nowadays — there may be good sense in the heart-grafts of Urban Renewal, or at least, in holding up its arms, like those of the aged Moses, so that its children may prevail.

But the rest are pretty certainly expendable: in terms of relative scale and ratio of resources to problem, the US is, in this field, about where Europe was in the Thirteenth Century, able not only to found new towns, but to abandon old ones. How about putting Pittsburgh somewhere else, as the English once did with Sarum? America has the space, the resources and, for a little while yet, the time. The problem of the American Metropolis lies, in most cases, in taking seriously cities that don't deserve it, and in trying to operate ill-designed conurbations that would be better scrapped. America could become the first major culture to shed its pseudo-metropolitan encumbrances without losing any significant part of its cultural life in the process.

The alternative to Metropolis exists already, and has long been recognized as the other great problem of US urbanism — the suburb. This is a form of urban organization to which the nation is clearly committed, as Alistair Cooke explained at length and with lingering distaste in his Discourse to the RIBA. But the sane study of the problem is all-but-paralysed by a failure to recognize that the European name, *suburb*, involves an assessment that is false.

False because, as Mr. Cooke also observed — though without appearing to notice the import of what he had said — the US suburb does not need to be a satellite of a metropolis. It is not a subordinate nor a sub-standard limb of a city, but an independent urban unit with a character of its own. It blights the fringes of great cities because it does not need those cities and has no organic relation with them; it is at its best, one of the major successes of the American Way of Life, where it is allowed to exist on its own, as it does in every county of the Middle West.

There, too, it reveals its history. For it is not a new invention; towns that have stood since before 1900, towns with populations going on for 20,000, are found to be laid out entirely at suburban densities. They are not overgrown villages and no earlier street-pattern underlies the regular grid-iron. They

were created, by accident or (rarely) design, in the suburban image. Main Street may present a conventionally urban facade of plate glass and neon, and directly behind it there is indeed (as we have been indoctrinated to expect) a squalid wilderness of parking lots and gas stations. But two blocks back from Main — one block back in some cases — the standard pattern of trim grass verges, roadside shrubs, white boarded gables and parked Chevrolets in every carport has begun, and you are in suburbia without ever having been convincingly in town.

What is more, the 'suburb' is better than the 'town.' Against all the probabilities that a European will have assessed (balancing heavily wire-scaped views of Levittown against the idyllic scenery of the Andy Hardy film of his youth) grid-plan low-density housing can be a convincing image of urbanity — a point that has been obscured by excessive concentration on the social and cultural horrors of the raw new suburbs in the *No Down Payment* belt. Older and well shaken-down suburbs have grown out of this hire-purchased Hell; they also have trees and a better basic plan, for the grid-iron is — at these densities — a far better plan than the serpentine roads and closes that descend (one supposes) from Radburn, and are *de rigueur* now, even with cut-price tract-developers. Europeans are justifiably suspicious of grid-iron plans, since their main experience of them is in by-law housing or its Continental equivalents, smothering both urbanity and the *genius loci* under an abstract, land-valuer's geometry.

But the prairie can be so flat and featureless that the only genius of the place is the regular rectangular pattern of land-holding, with the roads running north-south or east-west along its boundaries, a system of map co-ordinates made real by the crossroads — far more real than the odd knoll or tuft of trees that may occasionally break the dead level of the ploughed land or standing corn. Within this landscape, the grid-iron plan of Prairie-ville is an accentuation of the *genius loci*. More unexpectedly, it also accentuates the land-form, instead of smothering it. The streets of Prairie-ville, plunging up and down over changes of level that are sometimes as big as seven feet, draw attention to every accident on the terrain; the town creek, trailing a meander of unkempt greenery through the grid, becomes an obtrusive landscape feature. But in a 'sympathetic,' landscape-architect's design, the changes of level would be smudged by contour-chasing roads and the creek lost at the bottom of the back gardens.

Beyond this, the function of the straight streets of the grid is subtly ambiguous. By implying, as Ian Nairn pointed out, a means of escape from the town, they threaten its urbanity, but at the same time they introduce an element of largeness into a townscape

otherwise composed of small-scale elements, and this quality is heightened by the absence of visible fences that makes the land-surface of every block within the grid a continuous lawn on which the little houses sit lightly, barely engaged with the ground and the landscape. If the roads are narrow enough not to interrupt this lawn too much, and the tree-cover heavy enough (as it often is) the townscape becomes an idealized and intensified prairiescape whose reality as an ecological fact, rather than real-estate fiction, is guaranteed by the squirrels on the lawn. They are real flesh and fur, not — as in equivalent English settlements — plaster.

For a people that emphatically believes that the 'Outdoors' is beneficial to man, yet may only be a generation away from farming, the result is a kind of permissive, do-it-yourself Utopia whose outstanding virtue is to have freed its inhabitants from the curse of Adam. Throughout the history of American Utopianism, down to and including the most praised of recent Utopias, that of the Goodman Brothers in their book *Communitas*, runs a vengeful determination that those who live in sight of greenery shall till the soil, even though they also work in factory or office. But those who enjoy the green prospects of Prairie-ville from the seat of a motor lawn-mower look on scenes that are 'Nature, still, but Nature methodiz'd' to quote Alexander Pope, and their 'agricultural' pursuits are, to quote Humphrey Repton, 'less the reality of penury than . . . industry with an affectation.'

As in the landscape gardens of Pope and Repton, the scenery and the way of life are inextricably related. Restore the curse of Adam, cultivate the land between the houses because penury is real, as in the Negro quarter of Prairie-ville, and the broken land-surface with its concomitant fences reveals at once how high the densities really are, how small the scale. But on this wrong side of the tracks, other limiting factors of Prairie-ville become manifest, because the houses of second-class citizens do not receive the regular painting that a wooden structure needs, nor have they the sanitary accommodation

their high occupancy requires, and the municipality that leaves them to soakaways and cess-pits also tends not to bother with the upkeep of their roads.

But what makes all this so sickening to see is that the margin between squalor on one side of the tracks and Arcadia on the other is so slight a margin that most Prairie-illes could easily erase without municipal bankruptcy overtaking them. Most of the limits of Prairie-ville are as slight and precise as this. The grid-iron of twenty-foot developer's roads is almost perfect for ambling neighborhood traffic, useless for anything heavier, hence the slummy chaos of Main Street. But the solution is not to screw up the grid into a tangle of twists and closes, in which the motorist is reduced to the status of a frantic rat in a laboratory maze-test. The solution is to get shopping and main highways out of the grid — a process already in hand with the move of shops from Main Street to free-standing shopping-centres, though the solution of the interconnection between grid and highway still seems a long way off.

Prairie-ville is not perfect, but neither is it the social and urbanistic mess that interested parties make it out to be. Certainly the air-view of Long Island as 'a housing estate entirely surrounded by water' is alarming, but that isn't America. Look down instead from the windows of some Mid-Western airline's well-preserved Dakota and see just how much America there is left once you get away from the 'metropolitan' coasts, or watch from the windows of a train and see a countryside that is invisible from the main roads from which professional Jeremiahs like Alistair Cooke never seem to stray. America has room for Prairie-ville, provided that it is a Prairie-ville that works and gives an honest image of a way of life. Given a nation that is prepared to consume a fairly large part of its national product in the form of communications, this form of town is a workable environment for the good life of all but a small percentage of its citizens. And for that percentage there will, of course, always be those half dozen or so cities that can make a fair boast to the status of Metropolis.

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