

J B Jackson

Urban Circumstances



Design Quarterly

128

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Design Quarterly is published
Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter
by The MIT Press, Cambridge,
Massachusetts and London,
England, for the Walker Art
Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Business Offices: Subscriptions,
address changes, and mailing list
correspondence should be
addressed to:
Journals Department
The MIT Press
28 Carleton Street
Cambridge MA 02142

Subscription Rates: \$20 for
individuals and \$35 for institutions.
Subscribers outside the United
States and Canada add \$4 for
surface postage, \$18 for airmail.
Single copies of current issues:
\$7.50; special issues: \$10.00. To be
honored free, claims for missing
issues must be made immediately
upon receipt of the next
published issue.

Postmaster:
Send address changes to
Design Quarterly
28 Carleton Street
Cambridge MA 02142

Design Quarterly is indexed in
ARTbibliographies and *Art Index*.

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0011-9415/85/280001-32 \$10.00/0

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ISSN 0011-9415

This issue of *Design Quarterly* was
supported in part by a grant from
the Design Arts Program of the
National Endowment for the Arts.

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photographs by
Stuart Klipper
and John Schott

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Editor's Notes

John Brinckerhoff Jackson often approaches a topic by defining it linguistically, searching out its derivation, its essence. In so doing he regularly reveals what for many reasons may have been overlooked or obscured by the strata of time. In unearthing the origins of the term "vernacular" in his essay "Urban Circumstances," Jackson once again brings to light, with an all-too-rare acuity, ideas and attitudes that historically have had enormous impact on the evolution of this country's landscape.

Here and in his most recent book, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1984), Jackson does not examine the picturesque, but searches out those aspects of nature not seen or understood by most environmentalist writers. His unique contemporary view of the American landscape contrasts radically with the more widely-held romantic one of man as the observer and protector of a vast wilderness. Instead Jackson looks at man's intercessions into nature: the farms, small communities, highways and

cities that are our living places. Jackson comments, "The older I grow and the longer I look at landscapes and seek to understand them, the more convinced I am that their beauty is not simply an aspect but their very essence, and that that beauty derives from the human presence." It is "the image of our common humanity" he looks for in his ongoing analysis of American space.

Jackson was an inspired professor of landscape history for many years at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley. Since his retirement from teaching his following has grown outside academe through his lectures and published writings. This issue of *Design Quarterly* continues Jackson's researches into the humanistic landscape and opens up new areas of concern to all who care deeply about the American environment.

The author has provided several photographs to illustrate his essay. In addition, we include images by the photographers Stuart Klipper and John Schott. Their distinctive works make visible what Jackson has brought to the mind's eye.

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A MERICANS have had the unique fortune of living in a landscape that reflects a single purpose, a monolithic plan. The grid with its national as well as its local or urban versions is not so much a practical scheme for organizing space in a uniform and efficient manner as it is a way of creating an infinite number of small holdings, individual spaces essential not only for physical survival but for establishing identity. We imagine our landscape as a wonderfully harmonious composition of thousands upon thousands of such rectangular spaces: a green and undulating landscape of farms and small white villages and well-defined fields with a horizon of forested hills. The houses capture our attention because they are the focal points of all the private, self-sufficient spaces. They nestle among trees and shadows at half-mile intervals, like brooding hens rejoicing in security and domestic isolation. It may well be out of keeping with the times, but our prototypal American landscape is as beautiful as any—healthy and humane and productive of many values. If it has blemishes, if neglect and over exploitation have left marks on its face, these are no part of its essence, they derive from elsewhere, from the city. Our landscape, so it seems to us, is our own in a special sense: it was deliberately created for us as we were some two hundred years ago, meant for our way of life.

Yet some quirk in our national character, some misreading of our history, causes many of us to celebrate one aspect, and one aspect only, of that landscape—the autonomous, self-sufficient, individual unit: the solitary house, the isolated farm or village, the lonely monument; the lonely independent hero. We minimize when we cannot ignore the role played by cities and towns and work communities in the formation and enrichment of our landscape. We forget that Jamestown and Plymouth came before the pioneer farm or the log cabin in the forest; that interdependence in America came before Independence. I need hardly point out how this vision of America as a society dedicated to rural and small town self-sufficiency prevails in much of our popular art and









literature. It dominates in our calendar art and in advertising, in our passion for preserving small-scale antiquities, even in our political philosophy. Much more significant is the fact that a great deal of serious writing about the American landscape and its history dwells on that very limited aspect of our past. Much of this writing discusses the American “settlement landscape,” but it rarely mentions such non-autonomous dwelling types as the slave cabin, the houses for New England mill and factory hands, the vast assortment of company towns and blue-collar residential districts.

In scholarly and well researched books such omissions cannot be dismissed as oversights. They represent a clearly defined point of view, shared by many Americanists who believe that the permanent, essential features of the American landscape, whether rural or urban, are those that come from our possession and exploitation of land. Thus the relationships that we establish with other people and that are made visible in many communities and places, are not important because they are subject to change and are unreliable. The only relationship that really matters, the only one worth studying and worth preserving, is the one between ourselves and our property, our private space.

It must be confessed that the literature devoted to the description of rural simplicities has always made attractive and refreshing reading, dealing as it usually does with the traditional aspects of domestic life: old or forgotten crafts, old ways of building a house, or of farming, old ways of relating to the natural environment. Instead of investigating such topics as technological change, land speculation, friction between groups and classes and other urban problems, our current landscape literature limits its discussion of conflict to one familiar confrontation—that between man and nature. We are given a reassuring picture of our timeless vernacular past.

BUT does this picture of America actually have anything to do with the vernacular? The qualities we tend to identify with our legendary landscape and its people—self-reliance, respect for the past and concern for the future, family loyalty and disdain for transient causes and enthusiasms, and a love of nature—are middle-class qualities in the best sense of the term, but they are not generally associated with the vernacular.

The common dictionary definition of the word is linguistic. It says that the vernacular is the everyday speech of a class or of a locality or region. It is a dialect, substandard in terms of the correct literary language of the establishment. Recent usage has expanded the definition to include other forms of expression, so that we now speak not only of vernacular language but of vernacular music, vernacular writing and vernacular architecture. The tendency in some circles is to emphasize the local or regional aspects of the vernacular, its identification with a class or a place, but we miss the full meaning of the word when we omit that relationship between the vernacular form and the standard form—whether of speech or music or architecture. It is not enough to say that a vernacular style is local. We must add that it is a *local* variation of a national or international style, and we must also add something about that relationship. Is the vernacular simply a crude imitation? Is it a new and improved version of the established style, equally valuable, equally sophisticated? Is it perhaps a style imposed by the establishment on a submissive element in the population? In any case we must keep that dichotomy in mind: whatever its merits, whatever its limitations, the vernacular represents a departure from a standard form, a form based on tradition or a generally accepted set of rules and principles. For this difference to exist, two conditions are essential. There must be an element in the social order that sets the standards and acts as arbiter of taste, and another element which for one reason or another cannot comply with those standards and devises pragmatic substitutes. To reduce the distinction to a formula: the vernacular is governed by







circumstances, by the sum of determining factors beyond our willful control; the establishment is ruled by universally accepted laws.

In the case of the landscape, these two philosophies must not only coexist, they must come to terms. The permanent forms and spaces in the community, the infrastructure, derives from the authority of the establishment; it is the vernacular that in most cases determines how those forms and spaces are used. And it is one of the peculiarities of the American landscape, ensuing from its artificial or planned nature, that we have numerous examples of vernacular communities existing within establishment forms, of the interaction between a wage earner, landless element, and an element identified with the possession of land and political power.

LET me give one of the earliest examples of the American vernacular community confined within an establishment organization of space—the slave quarters in a pre-Civil War plantation in the South—and let me insert an explanation of the word itself. The basic Latin form is *verna* which meant a slave born in the house of his or her master. By extension, *vernacular*, an adjective, indicated a person attached to a household or an estate as a worker, one who was not only native to a rural community but legally committed to that community and to the rules prescribed by the establishment.

It may be pure coincidence (and I suspect it is) that some American architectural historians have described the pre-Civil War slave quarters on a southern plantation as a specimen of the vernacular. In fact that is the case.

The slave cabin qualified as vernacular in several respects. Scholars have suggested that the first slaves brought to the New World introduced African building techniques and forms. These were succeeded in the 18th and 19th centuries by

variations on the log cabin—also a vernacular or local type of structure—and though many plantations eventually replaced the log cabin with frame houses, these were built by black craftsmen. So the cabin or house was a response to local circumstances. Built by local craftsmen using traditional methods and local materials to meet local needs, the slave quarters varied in size and degree of livability, but in general they were located in evenly spaced rows along the principal street. They were all alike in form and size, most of them containing three rooms and a loft. Frederick Law Olmsted remarked of one plantation that “. . . inside the cabins appeared dirty and disordered, which was a rather pleasant indication that their home life was not much interfered with, though I found certain police regulations enforced.”¹

Almost all commentators noted how dependent each slave dwelling was on the services and supplies provided by the plantation authorities: the weekly ration of food and firewood, the seasonal distribution of clothing. The slaves were no less dependent on the same authorities for the organization of work, for the maintenance of order, and for the appointing of certain days as holidays. The authorities not only decided on the location of the cabins, but also built such quasi-public buildings as the church, the hospital, the mills, barns and stables. Since the slaves received no share of the crops they cultivated, they had no need for large storage facilities, nor for much storage space inside, except to hold their rations of food. We can assume that there was little or no accumulation of possessions from the past, or any provision for the long-range future, since they had no assurance that they would not be suddenly obliged to leave. Olmsted hinted that the wooden cabins often caught on fire, and the plantation authorities often decided to move the entire slave quarters to another location.

I might point out—though it is obvious—that none of these cabins was designed to suit the needs of the individual family, nor built to last many years. It was always part of and subordinated to the slave community, and near the house of the owner. None, moreover, was directly connected with the

place of collective work. They were clustered in planned villages, to make control and organization of the daily routine easier. As a community, the slave quarters had no status in the eyes of the law. It was on private property, the creation of the plantation authorities, and subject to the unwritten rules and customs devised and enforced by them. A final characteristic, not of the dwellings but of their occupants: none had any property or any financial reserves.

OFFHAND, the slave quarters of a southern cotton or tobacco plantation seem a poor source of insight into the nature of American vernacular architecture. It is a grim environment, dedicated to profits and oppression, a far cry from the easy-going individualism we associate with the average small American working-class community. Nevertheless the vernacular can flourish in unlikely places, for (as I have suggested) it derives from the mutual adjustment between two distinct classes, and from adjustment to environmental factors, and it so happens that the plantation shows very clearly how these two adjustments produced a typical vernacular building, and a typical establishment organization of space.

There is nothing complicated about the first of these adjustments. The typical cotton or tobacco plantation was the product of a particular kind of soil, a particular climate, and a particular topography—all found in various parts of the coastal South. Almost every workaday aspect of the plantation was determined by those factors: the diet of the slaves, their work routine, and the crops they planted and harvested. As for the slave cabin, constructed as it was in many cases by local labor using local techniques and materials—logs from the nearby pine forests—it was a good example of what students of the subject would call a vernacular dwelling.

But a dwelling, to be vernacular, must also reflect the



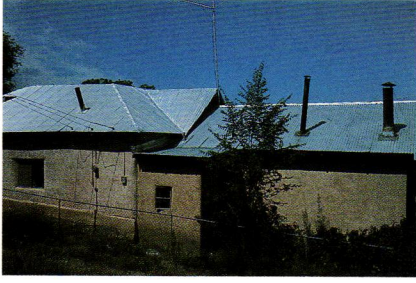
influence of the establishment and use establishment models. I mentioned the likelihood that the first slave dwellings were copies of the dwellings the slaves had known in their African homeland. They were doubtless well suited to their new southern environment. As in the case of many societies where people find their identity in ethnic or language groups rather than in a territory, these early dwellings were probably clustered. But they were soon replaced by dwellings that resembled, at least in form, traditional workers' cottages in England. There, two- or three-room, one-story, pitched-roof constructions, not unlike the American log cabin, were arranged in orderly rows along both sides of a street. In other words, the establishment decided that the vernacular dwellings in the plantation should copy English models, specifically that they should be replicas of the cottage, the home of the landless farm laborer or field hand, the dwellings associated with the lowest economic order in the English village.

Here we are confronted by a long outdated philosophy of the dwelling, a distinction between house types based not on domestic requirements or on the material used, but on the amount of land controlled by the owner of the house. The most prestigious house was the manor, which usually had a large estate with many tenants, a small sovereign territory in which the owner could administer justice in his own court, defend his land against intruders, and pass it on to his descendants. Such an estate could well be called autonomous, for the house with its extensive lands was in almost every respect self-sufficient. The autonomous house was not only a large and permanent structure, full of family memories, it was a seat of legal authority, a center of administration, and the headquarters of an elaborate organization of space.

The plantation mansion was its Colonial American equivalent—an autonomous establishment playing a variety of social, economic and legal roles. It had its own port or landing place, its own workshops and craftsmen, and of course its own farmlands and subjects, the slaves. In a much more modest way, many American farms and ranches and suburban







residences have imitated this autonomy, and the landscape and architectural results have often been very beautiful, for they have usually sought to hark back to some English model with formal gardens and formal architectural design.

At the other extreme was the dwelling of the laborer, or proletarian. This very contemporary sounding term was used more than four centuries ago to describe “day labourers, poor husbandmen, yea merchants or retailers which have no free land.”² We now usually define a proletarian as one who is dependent on daily labor for sustenance, usually away from the home, and who has no capital or financial reserves, nor any special skill.

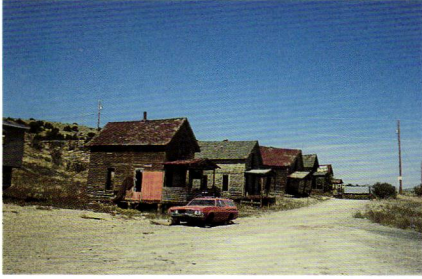
The dwelling of this wage earner or laborer differs in many ways from that of the farmer or landowner. In keeping with his inferior social and political status, it is small, simple in plan and construction, and situated in an outlying section of the community, along with the dwellings of other laborers. Since the occupant works at a number of manual tasks for a number of employers, and since he is often obliged to move where jobs are to be found, his dwelling is never thought of as permanent or as part of his occupation. It is therefore more often than not a flimsy construction, even movable, with few spaces for work or storage. He has no land to farm, no crops to store, no livestock to shelter, and few possessions. Its only real function is to provide shelter for the family. A characteristic of what can be called the basic vernacular dwelling is that it is often added to. A room, a cellar, a higher roof, a dormer window, crudely built, are responses to short-term emergencies and are undertaken without any long-range plan, any notion of “completing” a prototypal dwelling.

Like all vernacular housing, that of the laborer makes use of locally available resources, except that he has little access to the natural resources of the wider natural environment and has to depend on what can be found in the community itself, such as scrap, used or reprocessed wood and unorthodox substitutes. The basic vernacular dwelling, because of its predominantly urban or built up setting, responds to different

environmental circumstances—more economic than natural.

In one respect the traditional basic vernacular dwelling is privileged. Whereas the autonomous establishment dwelling, the prosperous farmhouse or townhouse must provide its own services and amenities, the laborer has them for nothing. Firewood, a communal water supply, a communal bake oven, a communal flour mill and of course a communal police and fire-fighting force are shared. The community authorities choose the holidays, which all observe. Various spaces and buildings compensate for the smallness of the laborer's house; the church takes care of family rites, protects his few valuable belongings, and provides him with entertainment and uplift. It even instructs his children and by means of its bell, tells him what time it is, when to go to work, when to pray and when to go home. The village has other common places: the market, the common or green, the tavern where a man sees his neighbors and colleagues; these and other communal spaces and structures—all of them aspects of establishment paternalism—are in a sense extensions of the vernacular dwelling and make it less confining, even though the more prosperous residents are careful to stay within their own autonomous domains and avoid too much contact with the vernacular world.

It is certainly not my intention to minimize the inhumanity of the slave village or to exaggerate the importance of the slave cabin as a specimen of vernacular architecture. The cabin invites comment simply because it is perhaps the earliest recorded example of the landless wage earner's house that we have in the North American colonies. It was a variation on the traditional European prototype. In the course of our history this basic vernacular dwelling underwent many structural changes, and changes in its relationship to its surroundings, all of them worth studying. Construction became increasingly standardized and simplified, and the basic vernacular dwelling—to repeat, the dwelling of the landless wage earner—gradually ceased to resemble its European prototype, ceased to show regional variations, and became a low-cost, usually



easily operated appliance or utility, of limited lifespan, with limited functions.

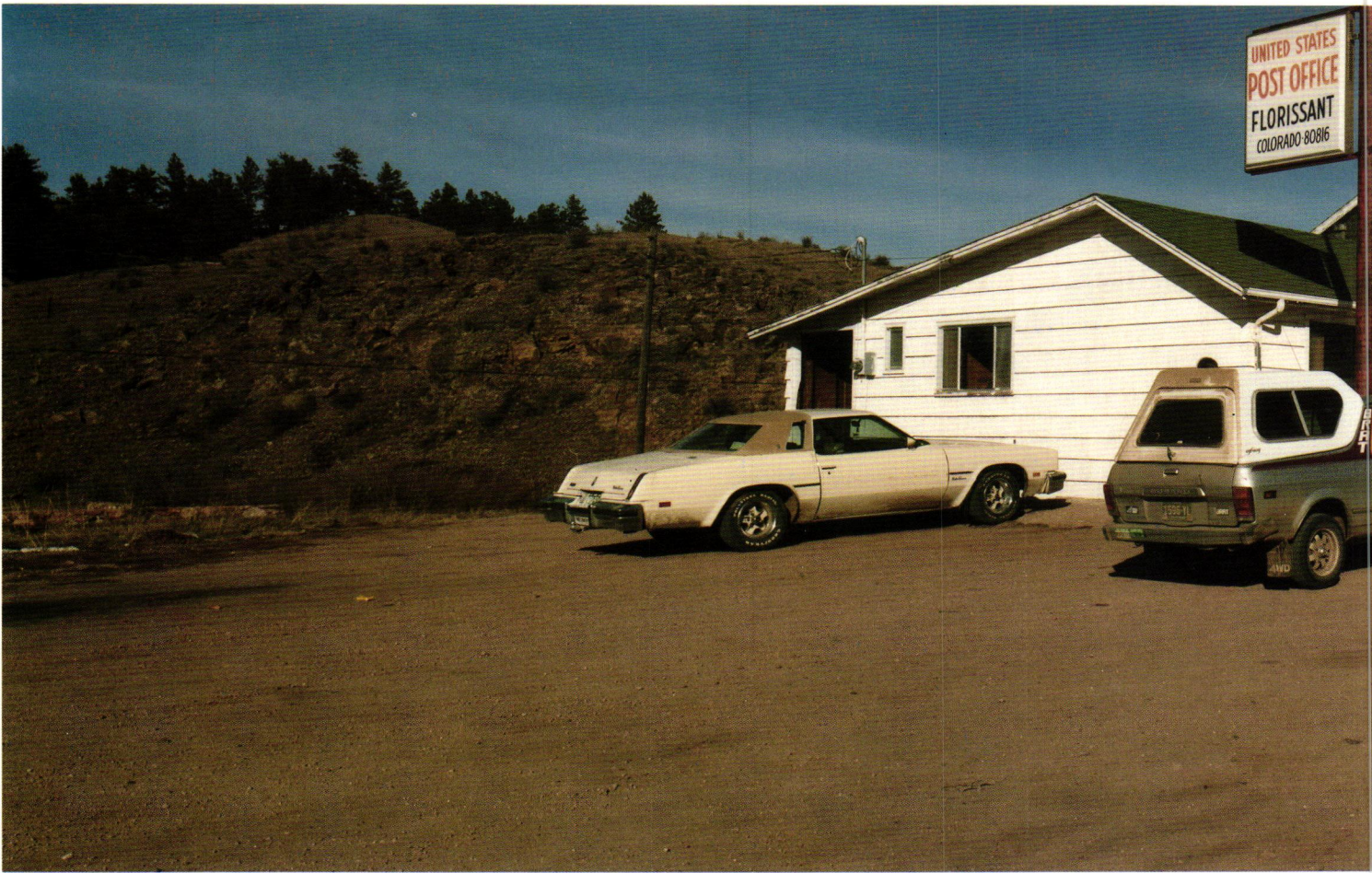
A familiar early example was the dwelling of the workers in a New England mill town, particularly those built by the mill owners for their employees. Here the traditional English form was long retained, and the layout of the streets and public spaces focused on the factory with its brick clock tower as the recognized symbol of authority. But elsewhere in America, industrial or workers' communities were much less urban in character. Lumber and mining camps, construction sites for railroads and canals, all essentially temporary, were little more than haphazard clusters of hastily built wooden dwellings meant not only for temporary occupancy but for eventual moving to another site. Many of these were designed by large lumber companies and either shipped by rail or assembled at their destinations. Their cheapness and the speed with which they could be erected compensated for their crudeness and uniformity, and they established what was for long the standard basic vernacular type, widely copied by local contractors and by those who undertook to build their own homes. This was a one-story frame structure without foundations, with three or four rooms and a porch.

Historians have done much research on the evolution of the middle-class American dwelling, especially on the farm and in the suburbs. In time we will discover that the blue-collar vernacular had its own very different evolution with the emphasis not on solid construction but on an efficient organization of interior spaces: on cheapness, interchangeability and convenience. Long before the corresponding European house underwent modernization the basic vernacular in our towns and cities developed in complexity and livability. They may have been all alike when seen from the street, they may have been lacking in traditional building skills, but they had become something more than crude shelters. They were, and still are, micro-environments, designed for comfort and family intimacy. The vernacular dwelling in America is never seen as a place of work, rarely seen as an indication of status, or as an

heirloom. It is not a home; it *contains* a home, a way of domestic living that can and often does move out to another location.

Architecturally speaking, the contemporary wage-earner dwelling, whether bought or rented or built by the occupants, whether in a small town or in a city, is in most cases so much better than its predecessor of even fifty years ago that we hesitate to call it vernacular. And yet many vernacular traits persist, not only in the dwelling itself but in the attitudes of its occupants. It is almost always small—too small for the spatial needs of the family. It has no architectural pretensions, being built out of the cheapest available materials on the cheapest available land. Though each house stands free on its own miniature plot of ground, and the developer has been careful to give every third house in the row a different color, a different orientation, a differently designed front door, they are all essentially alike. Residents are all involved in the activities of their neighbors and they all share the problems of a new, mass-produced subdivision. Perhaps it is this set of problems that brings them together, perhaps it is their being all of very much the same age and income, perhaps it is the isolation of the subdivision, its remoteness from the older, more established residential parts of town. Whatever the reason, a cluster of households eventually creates something like a community, entirely without political features, entirely without power, but on a small, temporary scale effective enough.

What gives the vernacular way of life its vitality and persistence is its ability to adjust to circumstances, to external factors beyond its control, provided that somewhere in the environment there is some institution identified with permanence and long-range purpose. Lack of financial resources, lack of any control over the future, lack of social acceptance—all can be compensated for if the environment contains some symbol of an established order that takes the needs of the vernacular into account, that gives security and a sense of belonging to the wider community. That is what the feudal castle, the manor house, the parish church once stood for. In America, in the past, that is what the plantation house,



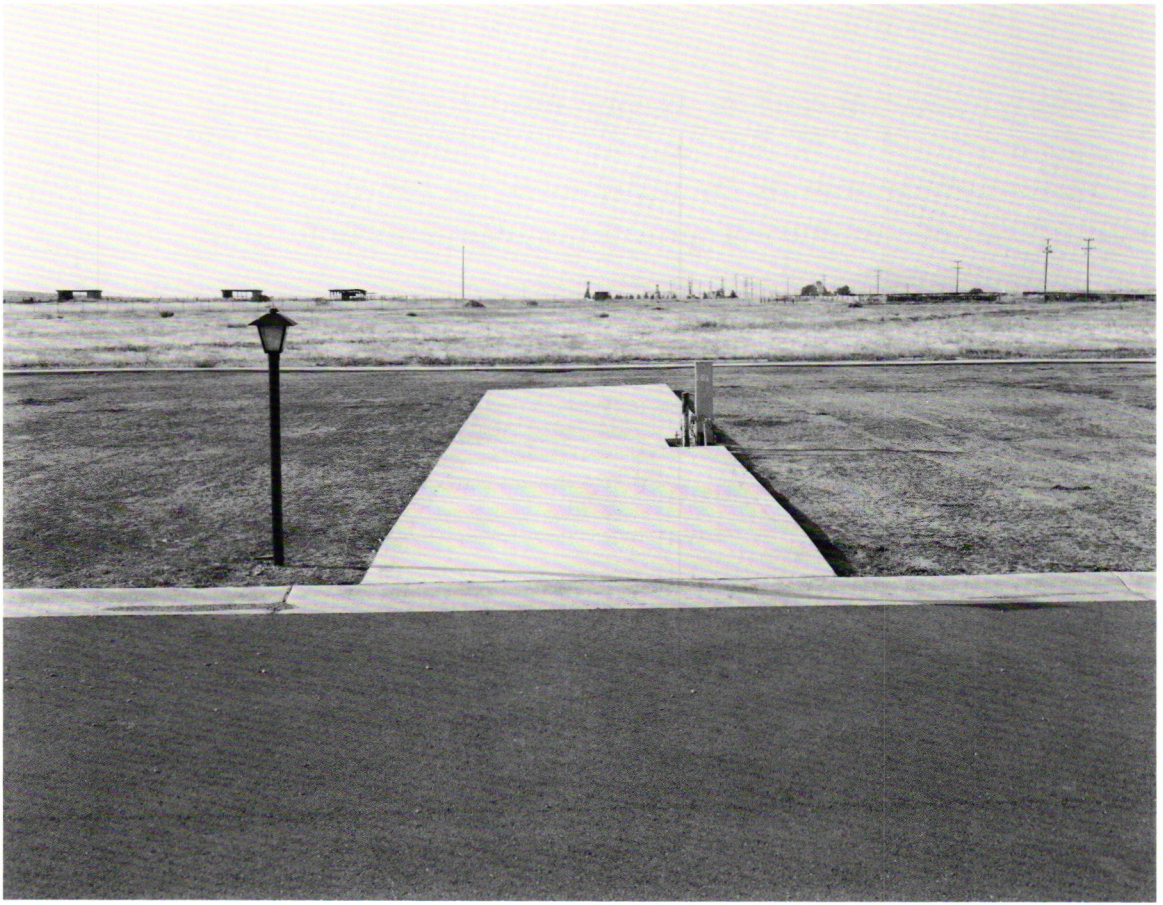




the meeting house, the mill or factory stood for. In the contemporary world it is the road or the highway, the subdivision street, the street in the trailer court that has come to be the acknowledged symbol of permanent authority, a vision of the future that includes us all.

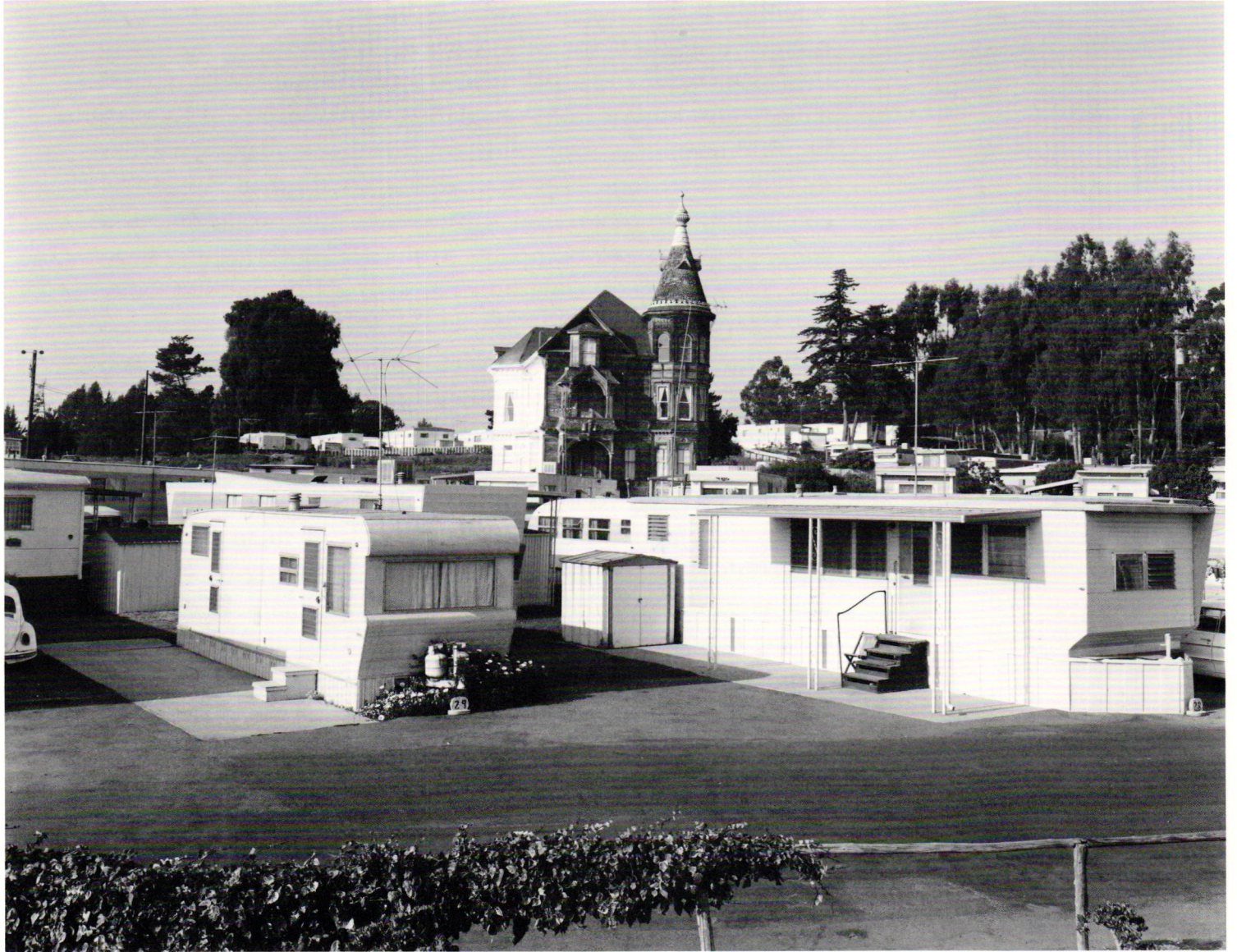
It is of course the automobile that has elevated the road to this exalted position. It is true that in times past the royal road, the king's highway, as the creation and property of the crown, enjoyed a special status wherever it passed. Even in medieval times the king's highway had its own police, its own laws; even then access to the highway was strictly limited. But it was its destination that set it apart from local roads and lanes leading only to the church or the mill, and moreover royal roads were short and few. But when the modern highway began to be used by all citizens on their way to and from work and for pleasure it was then transformed into an autonomous space, choosing its own destination, creating its own environment, enforcing its own laws and excluding all transgressors. Say what we will about the Interstate, its destructiveness, its ruthless monotony, we cannot help being impressed by its permanence and power. The sight of such a highway undulating and cutting through the landscape and reducing it to mere green background is something not easy to forget. Nowhere is the prestige of the establishment more vivid than where the highway and the strip development come together. Strip is vernacular, short-lived, anxious to please, abjectly dependent on the goodwill of the public, structurally, economically, aesthetically insecure, as it sidles along the massive statement of long-range purpose and determination: the highway.

Commercial vernacular is a distinct subspecies, but the highway has already created its own vernacular settlements—shopping centers, office complexes, rows and rows of dwellings each with a pickup in the driveway waiting to drive to work—surviving by grace of an interchange. It has even created its own type of dwelling, whose design was inspired by the automobile and whose sole bond with the environment is an











oblong slab of concrete in a trailer court.

The mobile home, or (as it is usually called by those who live in it) the trailer, seems to be the ultimate in the stripped down, minimal dwelling. Of all contemporary vernacular types it is the one that is most uncompromising in its rejection of tradition. It does not pretend to be a local product, it does not pretend to adjust to the natural setting, it does not acknowledge the existence of a regional style. The uniformity of its types is almost total, but far from being a source of regret, it is a source of pride, an indication of solidarity. No other kind of vernacular dwelling is so much resented by the established residential community, no other kind suffers from such exclusion; as a consequence, trailer occupants, true to their vernacular heritage, form their own community of mutual help and sociability and interdependence. Mobility of one sort or another is always in the air. We know that trailers, once in place, rarely move, but their occupants are unusually subject to mobility in their jobs; and trailers, largely because of their uniformity, change hands almost as easily and as frequently as automobiles do.

It is not easy to find a trailer family that does not reluctantly accept its temporary existence. For most of them the trailer represents the first step upwards, the beginning of social as well as geographical mobility that will eventually lead to the buying of a “real” house. The family explains its way of life by saying that the job held by the husband or wife is only for a few months; a promising transfer is in store for the near future. In the meantime they live in an attractive if congested micro-environment of their own, far more comfortable and convenient than their first home in the house of their parents. They make numerous short-term inexpensive improvements in the trailer, but none which diminish its fungibility, its chances for resale. They make experiments in landscaping the space in front of the hitch, but rarely if ever plant a tree. Valued family possessions, furniture from the past, furniture for the future, are relegated to the mini-storage facility, but the best way of providing for the short-range future is to buy another car—one for going to work, one for going to the supermarket,

one for working on and for eventual resale. For almost every phase of existence depends on mobility and the highway. The highway leads to and from the place of work, to the laundromat, to the doctor, to distant friends, to restaurants and places of recreation scattered across the landscape but always accessible by car. No matter how satisfactory the trailer may be, it demands too little attention to be the center of existence. The highway leads to a wider world, and is always there.

It is perhaps a poor substitute for the traditional spaces that in the past gave form and permanence to vernacular existence. Nevertheless it is all that many Americans have by way of an established, recognizable symbol of continuity and order and it confers certain benefits never offered by the more structured community: freedom from bondage to a particular environment and its way of life, freedom from the restraints of a rigid society and an unrewarding job, freedom to move and start out all over again.

1. From Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856).

2. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 30.

Photographs by Stuart Klipper were printed by Jeff Garry, Chroma Labs, St. Paul, Minnesota. These photographs are from the series *The World in a Few States*:

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Farm with "Elsie the Cow" on the barn,
Webster County, Iowa, fall 1983.

pp. 6, 7
Corner of Atlantic Boulevard and Coronado Street, Atlantic Beach, Long Island, New York, summer 1984.

pp. 10, 11
North 4th Street, Northfield, Minnesota, spring 1981.

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Backyards and houses, Eastside, Pueblo, Colorado, fall 1980.

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Business district, Florissant, Colorado, fall 1984.

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Highway 87 approaching Great Falls, Montana, spring 1981.

Photographs by John Schott:

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Vallejo, California, 1975

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California, 1975

p. 26 (top)
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p. 26 (bottom)
Hemet, California, 1975

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Ideal Trailer Village, Auburn Way, Sacramento, California, 1975

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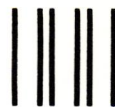
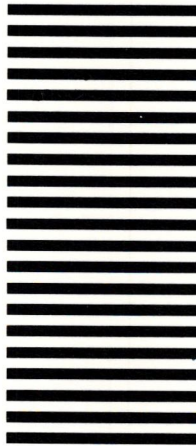


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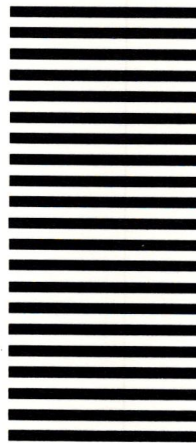


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