

Landscape in Sight

Looking at America

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JBJ, drawing, "Other-Directed Houses," *Landscape* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1956–57): 35

Other-Directed Houses

Writing in *Harper's Magazine* almost for the last time before his death a year ago [in 1955], Bernard De Voto expressed himself on a subject close to the heart of many Americans: the increasing untidiness and ugliness of much of the landscape. He described what had happened to the New England countryside as a result of the invasion of tourists and vacation seekers, and was incensed by the roadside developments in places which a few years ago had still been unspoiled. U.S. Highway 1 in Maine came in for harsh words. "As far as Bucksport it has become what it has been from Newburyport on: a longitudinal slum. It is an intermittent eyesore of drive-ins, diners, souvenir stands, purulent amusement parks, cheapjack restaurants and the kind of cabins my companion describes as mailboxes."

I suspect this last phrase of having a lewd connotation, though what it is I cannot discover. Otherwise, Mr. De Voto's sentiments are impeccable and have been applauded and echoed by many thousands who travel the country by car for either business or pleasure; by planning and landscape experts, civic improvement groups, highway engineers; and by foreigners now seeing America for the first time. This mounting public indignation, together with the new Federal Highway Program, clearly suggest that we have reached the point of attempting some sort of reform in the treatment of our highway margins.

U.S. Highway 1 is in fact one of the most sensationally ugly roads in

America, and there is a particular stretch of it, somewhere between Washington and Baltimore, if I'm not mistaken, which when photographed through a telescopic lens seems to epitomize the degradation which in the last few years has overwhelmed our highways. Two sluggish streams of traffic, cars bumper to bumper, move as best they can over a hopelessly inadequate roadbed between jungles of billboards and roadside stands, each sprouting a dozen signs of its own, and each with its own swarm of parked cars in front. This extends out of sight for miles and miles, varied here and there by a set of traffic lights.

To a lesser degree, these conditions exist intermittently throughout the heavily populated East and Midwest. Even here in the West things can be pretty bad near any large city or along any heavily traveled highway. But by and large congestion is not one of our troubles, and I do not believe it is one of the troubles of the greater part of the country; it is the phenomenal growth of roadside establishments that most of America has to worry about. The West is tourist country, which means that our roadside businesses have their own special public, a generous and numerous one in the summer season; but at the same time the region is slowly becoming self-conscious about its man-made appearance and is wondering what it can do to control its highway margins. As it is, I suppose there are highway stretches here as hideous as anywhere in the United States. Highway 66, for instance, which traverses some of the finest scenery in New Mexico and Arizona, would be a disgrace (as far as mutilation of the landscape is concerned) to the Jersey Meadows. Its horrors end by fascinating the traveler, so that he pays little or no attention to the wider view; but there are plenty of tourists who try to find an alternate route.

It would be hard (though not impossible) to exaggerate the extent of this blight. But still we must give these roadside establishments their due. They are entitled to their day in court, and so far they have not had it. I keep remembering the times when I have driven for hour after hour across an emptiness—desert or prairie—which was *not* blemished by highway stands, and how relieved and delighted I always was to finally see somewhere in the distance the jumble of billboards and gas pumps and jerry-built houses. Tourist traps or not, these were very welcome sights, and even the commands to eat, come as you are, gas up, get free ice water and stickers had a comforting effect. Common report has it that the people get as much of your money as they can. I have rarely found that to be the case; they usually had a friendliness and a willingness to help which somehow came with their job. The gaudier the layout, the nicer it seemed, and its impact on the surrounding landscape bothered me not at all.

Nor can I forget another kind of encounter with Mr. De Voto's longitudinal slums, and that was when I have flown West. Somewhere (over western Kansas, perhaps) it begins to grow dark and at first all I can see is a dark mottled brown world under an immaculate sky of deep-blue steel; and then we fly over some small rectangular pattern of scattered lights—a farm town—and out of it, like the tail of a comet, stretches a long, sinuous line of lights of every color and intensity, a stream of concentrated, multicolored brilliance, some of it moving, some of it winking and sparkling, and every infinitesimal point of color distinct in the clear night air. The stream pours itself into the black farmlands, into the prairie, and vanishes. This, of course, is the roadside development seen from an altitude of several thousand feet; the most beautiful and in a way the most moving spectacle the western flight can offer, because for the first time you see that man's work can be an adornment to the face of the earth.

Fleeting beauty, then, and occasional usefulness; how much more can be said of many other of our products? So when I hear high-minded groups vying with each other in bitter condemnation of the highway developments and devising legal and moral means of destroying them, I find I cannot go along with them. Those two glimpses come to mind and I ask myself if it would not be better—fairer, that is to say, and more intelligent—to see if the potentialities of these roadside slums cannot somehow be realized for the greater profit and pleasure of all.

I do not mean to say that a liking such as mine for this feature of the human landscape of America should blind anyone to its frequent depravity and confusion and dirt. Its potentialities for trouble—esthetic, social, economic—are as great as its potentialities for good, and indeed it is this ambidexterity which gives the highway and its margins so much significance and fascination. But how are we to tame this force unless we understand it and even develop a kind of love for it? And I do not believe that we have really tried to understand it as yet. For one thing, we know little or nothing about how the roadside development, the strip, came into being, nor about how it grows. We know (and seem to care) far too little about the variety of businesses which comprise it. Why is it that certain enterprises proliferate in certain areas and not in others? Why are some of them clustered together, and others are far apart? Which of them are dependent on the nearby town and city, which of them depend on transients? The modern highway is of course the origin and sustainer of them all, but what a complex thing the modern highway has become; how varied its functions and how varied the public

which makes use of it! To the factory or warehouse on its margin, it is essentially the equivalent of the railroad; to the garage or service station, it means direct accessibility to the passing public. The local businessman thinks of it as a way to reach and exploit the outlying suburban and rural areas, the farmer thinks of it as a way to reach town; the tourist thinks of it as an amenity, and the transcontinental bus or trucking company thinks of it as the shortest distance between two widely separated points. Each of these interests not only has its own idea of how the highway is to be designed and traced, it brings its own special highway service establishment into being. Which of the lot are we to eliminate?

Or perhaps it is more a question of which of them we are to save, for more than one program of highway reform calls for the almost complete suppression of them all. If I were asked to make a distinction among them with a view to finding out which were to survive and in what proportion, I would say that they roughly fell into two classes: those establishments serving the working economy, and those serving our leisure.

In the first I would naturally put all the factories, warehouses, truck depots, service stations, used car lots, shopping centers, and so on—the rollcall is endless; and in the second I would put restaurants, cafes, nightclubs, amusement parks, drive-in movies, souvenir stands, motels (for motels are primarily associated with vacation travel and with leisure)—in brief all those enterprises which Mr. De Voto listed and denounced, and then some. What is more, I would give them two classes—the workaday and the leisure—almost equal value, though keeping them well apart, at least when we were considering which businesses would be allowed along the highway outside of built-up areas.

My reason for so doing can be easily given: one of the unique aspects of the modern American highway (an aspect often overlooked) is that it has become the place where we spend more and more of our leisure. It plays the role which Main Street or the Park or the Courthouse Square used to play in the free time of our pedestrian predecessors: the place where we go to enjoy ourselves and spend our leisure hours. Never was the lure of the open road so powerful, so irresistible as now; for merely to *be* on a highway, entirely without a destination in view, is to many of every class and age a source of unending pleasure. Is this an exaggeration? Eliminate from any stretch of highway—always outside the largest cities and the great industrial areas—the motorists who are driving purely for enjoyment, either on vacation or for a breath of fresh air or to show off the new paint job or in search of a good time, and I be-

lieve you would eliminate more than a third of the normal traffic. This mass movement onto the highways is in no manner mysterious: given more and more leisure—not merely in terms of holidays and vacations but shorter daily working hours—and given more and more cars, what is the inevitable result? The highways leading out of our towns and cities are alive with cars, with people driving when work is over and before the evening meal to see how the new subdivision is getting on; out to the Dairy Queen five miles east to have a giant malt; to the drive-in movie still further away; cars with couples necking, souped-up cars racing down the measured mile, cars playing chicken; cars, pickups, motorcycles, scooters, all filled with people driving merely for the sake of driving. “Gliding up and down for no purpose that I could see—not to eat, not for love, but only gliding.” And this leisure traffic is multiplied many times over on Sundays and holidays. Foolish or not, dangerous, unprofitable, unhealthy or otherwise, these are the ways we spend many of our carefree hours, and the highway is an essential adjunct of them all. Thus any highway reform program which has at the back of its mind the old-fashioned notion that our roads are really nothing but means for fast and efficient long-distance transportation, to the neglect of the leisurely pleasure seeker and the establishments which exist to serve him, will run head on into a flourishing American institution. And I like to think that the collision will end in the defeat of the reformers.

But the driving habits of the American public are not what I want to defend; they are in any case better than those of any other people. I am concerned with pointing out the importance of that portion of the longitudinal slum associated with our free-time motorized activities, and the need to understand it. I think it very likely that the present mood of highway reform will expend itself chiefly on those establishments least organized, least equipped economically to protect themselves, and I have a strong conviction that this highway development (or, more accurately, this whole aspect of American life) holds enormous promise of future growth, esthetic as well as social. This promise, I admit, is not always very evident. Our highway margins are littered not only with the decaying refuse of what might be called the premotorized leisure age—shanties, one-pump filling stations, rows of empty overnight cabins, miserable bars; they are also growing a second jungle crop of ill-planned, ill-designed, uneconomic enterprises. These still far outnumber the good ones. One American town and city after another is finding to its shame that its highway approaches are becoming intolerably ugly and unwholesome. And the aftermath of this discovery is more often than not a wholesale con-

demnation, especially on the part of the right-thinking, of the local highway strip.

I am inclined to believe, however, that we have become entirely too fastidious, too conformist, in architectural matters. In our recently acquired awareness of architectural values, we have somehow lost sight of the fact that there is still such a thing as a popular taste in art quite distinct from the educated taste, and that popular taste often evolves in its own way. Not that a recognition of such a distinction would automatically lead to an acceptance of roadside architecture; most of it, by any standards, is bad. But it would perhaps allow us to see that highway architecture is changing and improving very rapidly all around us, and allow us to find certain virtues—or at least certain qualities—in it worth respecting and fostering. In all those streamlined facades, in all those flamboyant entrances and deliberately bizarre decorative effects, those cheerfully self-assertive masses of color and light and movement that clash so roughly with the old and traditional, there are, I believe, certain underlying characteristics which suggest that we are confronted not by a debased and cheapened art but by a kind of folk art in mid-twentieth-century garb.

We must accustom ourselves to the fact that the basic motive in the design of these establishments—whether motels or drive-in movies or nightclubs—is a desire to please and attract the passerby. The austere ambitions of the contemporary architect to create a self-justifying work of art have no place in this other part of town. Here every business has to woo the public—a public, moreover, which passes by at forty miles or more an hour—if it is to survive. The result is an *other-directed architecture*, and the only possible criterion of its success is whether or not it is liked; the consumer, not the artist or the critic, is the final court of appeal.

This, to be sure, is true of almost every retail business: they all have eye appeal. But a downtown business catering to pedestrians can concentrate on relatively modest display, whereas a highway leisure-time enterprise not only has to catch the eye of the motorist, it has to offer a special attraction of its own: it has to suggest pleasure and good times. I doubt if this is always easy to do: an appearance of hospitality or inexpensiveness or reliability is not enough. What there has to be is the absence of any hint of the workaday world which presumably is being left behind: any hint of the domestic, the institutional, the severely practical, the economical; any hint of the common or plain. On the contrary, what is essential, both inside and out, is an atmosphere of luxury, gaiety, of the unusual and unreal. Imitation is quite as good as the

genuine thing if the effect is convincing and the customer is happy. Go into a roadside dine-and-dance in a nonholiday mood (as happens when you stop to make a phone call) and you are affronted by the shoddy decorations, the crude indirect lighting, the menu, and the music. But go in when you are looking for a good time and for an escape from the everyday, and at once the place seems steeped in magic. It is a glimpse of another world.

The effectiveness of this architecture is finally a matter of what that other world is: whether it is one that you have been dreaming about or not. And it is here, it seems to me, that you begin to discover the real vitality of this new other-directed architecture along our highways: it is creating a dream environment for our leisure that is totally unlike the dream environment of a generation ago. It is creating and at the same time reflecting a new public taste.

Most of us can recall a time when our leisure and holiday activities were essentially imitations of the everyday activities of a superior social group—the so-called leisure class. If we dressed up on formal occasions, it was because these enviable people dressed that way all the time, and our dress was an imitation of theirs. We went to hotels which resembled at a dozen removes the palace of a prince, to movie houses which resembled court operas, to restaurants and bars adorned with mahogany and crystal and gold. All places associated with group good times—football stadiums, circuses, theaters, transatlantic steamers, even train stations and parlor cars, were designed and decorated to suggest a way of life more sumptuous than our own. Such was the other-directed architecture of the period: in the Victorian phrase, our good times were largely spent in aping our betters.

It is hard to say when this class imitation lost its appeal. Undoubtedly the Depression, by reducing the number and wealth of the leisure class as well as its prestige, had much to do with it. Still, its architectural manifestations lasted until the end of the last war. The older and more traditional regions of the country continued until a few years ago (although with decreasing enthusiasm) to design many of their places of public entertainment to look colonial or Olde Englishe—for the antique also had its snob appeal. What actually speeded the revolution in taste was something quite outside the field of art: it was the fact that the wage-earning class began to acquire more leisure than the executive or professional class had, and began to have more money than before. It was at last in a position to set its own pace in leisure activities and attitude.

If we bear in mind that along with this increased leisure came a renewed flood of automobiles, we should have no trouble understanding what hap-

pened: the new leisure ideal became a hankering after what advertising copy writers call "vacationland." We wanted to spend our free time not in a superior social world but in a world remote in terms of space. Yet vacationland is still only attainable once or twice a year; for the rest of the time we have to find a substitute, and it was in response to that need that every place of popular entertainment, and in particular every roadside place, rose up and transformed itself. At once the white tablecloth, the waiter in dinner jacket, the potted palm, the Louis XVI decorations were banished. Names like Astor and Ritz and Ambassador dropped out of the popular world, to be replaced by Casa Mañana, Bali, Sirocco, Shangri-La. The new drive-in movies built along every highway and outside every town ignored the old prestige names of Rivoli and Criterion and Excelsior to call themselves the Lariat, the Rocket, the Cornhusker. Motels designed to look like New England villages or California missions or southern plantations (depending on their location) were all but crowded out of business by brand-new establishments inspired by the Futurama of the 1939 World's Fair or by Hawaii, Hollywood, the Caribbean. Swimming pools and exotic planting made them even more inviting.

A sudden increase in holiday and free-time travel, faster and more comfortable cars, more money to spend, all helped precipitate the change. Across the country at strategic intervals of 100 to 150 miles (the average distance covered between meals), one new and expensive highway strip after another burst into activity. Sometimes they rose outside of large cities; more often they rose next to some small town remote from any neighbor. In every case, their presence affected the local pattern of leisure activities even while it served the traveling public. Never before had there been so total and dramatic a transformation of a portion of the American landscape, so sudden an evolution in habits, nor such a flowering of popular architecture.

Is it necessary to add that along with this development came a rash of billboards and a totally unrelated growth of highway-based industries? That chaos overtook countless communities and that much of the old landscape was damaged beyond repair? Those are the features we are not allowed to forget, the ones we lament. But they cannot entirely hide from us the fact that a new kind of architecture, popular in the truest sense, was for the first time given an opportunity to evolve.

Well it has not yet finished its evolution by any means, but some of its more salient characteristics are already becoming evident. At the moment flashiness seems to be the chief of these: a flashiness of color and design that overshoots its mark. In time we will learn how to astonish and attract, how to

suggest exotic vacationland without resorting to shock treatment. Walls canted out for no good reason, facades placed at an angle to the highway and over-dramatized (while the other sides are left in their native cement-block nakedness)—these are more or less clumsy attempts to capture the passerby's attention, something which could be done by other means.

Actually, the style already possesses two other characteristics ideally suited to this purpose: I mean its use of lights and its use of signs. Neon lights, floodlights, fluorescent lights, spotlights, moving and changing lights of every strength and color—these constitute one of the most original and potentially creative elements in the other-directed style. It would be hard to find a better formula for obliterating the workaday world and substituting that of the holiday than this: nighttime and a garden of moving colored lights. It is perhaps too much to say that the neon light is one of the great artistic innovations of our age, but I cannot help wondering what a gothic or a baroque architect would have done to exploit its theatrical and illusionist possibilities, its capacity to transform not only a building but its immediate environment. The contemporary architect will have none of it, and while he makes much of his synthesizing of all art forms, the ones he chooses are usually the traditional fresco and mural and mosaic. Matisse and Dufy might have designed in neon with great success, and so for that matter could any imaginative sculptor. A prejudice against any taint of commercialism in decoration is so strong in a segment of the public that one of the chief targets of civic reform groups is usually the local display of neon lights. And yet one would have to be blind indeed not to respond to the fantastic beauty of any neon-lighted strip after dark.

The second basic characteristic of the other-directed architecture is the liberal use of signs. Their purpose is obvious: to identify and promote business. But they also serve to help establish the mood at hand, and even to complete the artistic composition. The tendency seems to be for all signs connected with roadside establishments to grow larger, more conspicuous, and more elaborate. One reason for this is well explained by Mobilgas in a bulletin telling its dealers why the Mobil sign outside service stations is to be changed: "Today's motorist drives 50 or 60 miles an hour in the open country. He is often miles from home and doesn't know where the next Mobil service station is. So he must have plenty of advance notice. . . . The problem of long range visibility becomes extremely important. . . . The old Mobilgas shield was designed to go with Colonial type service stations which once dotted New England and New York. But as the company expanded its marketing area and

functional streamlined stations replaced the Colonial design, the shield took on a somewhat out-of-date and out-of-place appearance."

The new sign, fittingly enough, is the work of an industrial designer formerly connected with Futurama.

But aside from this very practical reason, the signs are large because they are held to be ornamental. Great pilons, masts, walls thrusting out toward the passerby serve very often to balance the architectural composition and are part of its fantastic and unreal charm. And since modesty has no place along the highway, there seems to be nothing to prevent an even further increase in size. Eventually, let us hope, the sign will concentrate in itself most of the distant eye appeal, and allow the building to assume a more restful and conventional appearance.

These, then, are some of the peculiarities of the new architecture lining our highways and catering to our leisure hours: conspicuous facades, exotic decoration and landscaping, a lavish use of lights and colors and signs, and an indiscriminate borrowing and imitating to produce certain pleasing effects. They are by no means the ingredients of a serious or lasting style, but the idiom is still only about ten years old. At present it already manages on occasion to achieve very attractive and gay effects, ideally suited to its festive purpose.

The trouble is, these successes are few and far between. They often suffer, moreover, from being located in the midst of confusion. One remedy for this (and also a partial remedy for the whole condition of the highway margin) would be the elimination of billboards. They serve no constructive purpose, they are unsightly, and they blight their immediate surroundings; no one likes them and they have many powerful enemies; if they were to go, the highway jungle would be reduced to manageable proportions and many unsuspected architectural and urbanist qualities would for the first time become visible. I would, however, allow local firms and services to advertise. Their signs often provide information not to be found elsewhere and which the stranger approaching a town has to have; and here again it must be pointed out that limitations on size are increasingly unrealistic. Even state highway departments are awakening to the fact that a public traveling at sixty miles an hour cannot be served by signs designed to be read at half that speed.

With some justice, we complain of the shoddy construction and poor design of our highway establishments, the total lack of any comprehensive scheme or of any harmony between the several parts of a strip development. But the wonder is that they are as good as they frequently are. I know of no ar-

chitecture school in the country which acknowledges the existence and the importance of a popular, other-directed architecture meant for pleasure and popular mass entertainment. We have forgotten, it seems, that architecture can sometimes smile and be lighthearted, and that leisure, no less than study or work, calls for an appropriate setting. Yet the few roadside establishments designed by imaginative and skillful architects are so immensely superior to the rest that they have almost at once been imitated. At present the average highway resort—motel, drive-in movie, restaurant, or nightclub—has been put up by the owner with no sort of guidance but his own limited experience and taste, or at best by a building contractor. The display signs are usually the product of an industrial firm knowing nothing of the location or the public. The lighting itself is the work of the local electrician, relying on catalogs for inspiration. The landscaping is done by the local nurseryman, and the planning, the location, the relationship to the neighbors and to the highway is little more than an adjustment to local zoning restrictions or to the edicts of the highway department. We need not be astonished at the results.

Both of those hallmarks of an other-directed architecture, lighting and display, cry out for intelligent and artistic handling. In these fields I suspect we could learn much from Europe, for architects and decorators abroad have not been handicapped by the notion that the architect should have nothing to do with the promotional phases of his project. In Europe, neon lighting often betrays a feeling for color and design and mood. A rollerskating rink demands different treatment, different colors, than a restaurant or a motel; yet we see many of all three trimmed in the same bright green and harsh red. We also suffer in this country from that malady which Victor Hugo, a little-appreciated writer on architecture, said had killed architecture in the Western world: the tyranny of the printed word. The printed (or painted or illuminated) word has not killed architecture in America or anywhere else, but it threatens at times to overpower it, to thwart it. Our neon lights, capable of expressing a genuine poetry, have so far only been taught to shout PEPSI COLA, CAFE, STOP, and the tyranny of the word in other forms, its poverty and monotony, is nowhere more in evidence than in the clutter of letters outside every town and city, where a few universally recognized symbols would suffice to communicate the same messages more rapidly and with less fatigue to the eye. Once more, the European highway signs are clearer and neater and better understood than our own inscriptions—not to mention those traditional trade emblems—the barber's dish, the tobacconist's cigar, the butcher's flag, the locksmith's key—which enliven the European street without destroying its unity.

Here is where the advertising expert could well do us a valuable service: by devising a set of symbols for roadside use to replace the present nightmare of words.

Has the planner no contribution to make? Is it not possible to introduce order and harmony even in the midst of a collection of heterogeneous enterprises? Shopping centers show us something which we would not have believed possible a decade or more ago: that diverse businesses can willingly come together in one location, subject themselves to certain controls, learn to think in terms of a small community, and still prosper as never before. Their location off the highway with their own ample parking space likewise makes them models for other groupings. Most highway pleasure spots are hopelessly scattered; some wedged in between truck depots and service stations, others far out among the empty lots. They belong in each other's company, they are meant to share the same atmosphere of good times. If they were grouped together in clusters of, say, six at frequent intervals, traffic confusion would be reduced and the establishments themselves would be protected. Some of them appear to belong logically together: restaurants, drive-in movies, motels, and souvenir stands; and for a different (and perhaps a younger) public: sports arenas, drive-in refreshment stands, and dance halls.

For any such systematic and orderly strip development, a new kind of zone, a Zone of Amusements, would have to be recognized and created, and then protected from intrusion on the part of workaday businesses or residences. It is in the organizing and rehabilitating of this neglected and misunderstood part of the community that the planner and architect and industrial designer and advertising expert could work together.

Will they have a chance to do it? I like to believe so. I like to believe that the merits and charm of the highway strip are not so obscure but that they will be accepted by the wider public; that our professed and frequently genuine regard for the small business will protect these smallest of small businessmen from extinction, and in some manner give them a firmer footing in the community. And I would like to believe that all those architectural and planning skills, the advertiser's knowledge of public taste and custom would welcome the opportunities to broaden their scope and to work together. We can be sure of none of these things. A tide of urban improvement is beginning to rise all over the country, and it is reinforced by public money and a kind of impatience with nonconformity, as noticeable on the left as on the right. What local zeal cannot achieve may well be achieved by the Federal Highway Program: the sterilizing of our roadsides.

It is finally, I suppose, a question of which force proves the stronger: the demand for an efficient and expensive highway system designed primarily to serve the working economy of the country, or a new and happy concept of leisure with its own economic structure, its own art forms, and its own claim on a share of the highway. At present we are indifferent to this promise for our culture, and to the extinction which threatens it; is it not time that we included this new part of America in our concern? It is true that we can no longer enter our towns and cities on avenues leading among meadows and lawns and trees, and that we often enter them instead through roadside slums. But we can, if we choose, transform these approaches into avenues of gaiety and brilliance, as beautiful as any in the world; and it is not yet too late.

"Other-Directed Houses," *Landscape* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1956-57): 29-35.

matter. He has to have an air-conditioned room all of his own." As for eating outside: "Well," Mrs. Panther says with a delightful smile, "I think I prefer to keep the outdoors for the very simplest kind of pleasure. And I adore my work area" (kitchen, in old-fashioned parlance) "and spend a great deal of time there. When we have company I open some cans and toss a salad; we have a bottle of French wine, some cheese, and then sit around on cushions and discuss McCarthyism and how we dislike it. I've become quite a cook," she adds proudly.

The children? They have their own rooms—sound-proof and out of the way. "Besides, they spend most of their time at the Play Clinic in town, where there's a marvelous psychiatric guidance expert."

Yes, we reflect, as Mrs. Panther leads us back into the house, this typical American family leads a *natural* life for young Moderns. The artificialities of city existence are far, far removed from the quiet little eight-room house out there on stilts in the Connecticut woods. Nightclubs, traffic jams, dirt, and confusion are no part of their life. Excitement? A casual little concert on recorders, or a new wine-and-shallot sauce Babs discovers, or waking up on a winter's morning to see the Japanese-printlike effect of snow on the black branches—these comprise the Panthers' happiest moments. The Panthers, by the way, have an automatic snow-melting system from the garage door to the road a hundred yards distant, so that Jeff need not shovel snow like his Victorian forebears. What's more, it disposes of the melted snow so that no ice is ever formed on the driveway. "Let it snow," says Babs in the words of the once popular song. She turns up the thermostat, adjusts the temperatroll to suit her toreador tights and yellow shirt and little-girl hairdo; and once the children have been called for by the school bus, she settles down with a volume of her favorite author, André Gide, to enjoy a winter's day in the country. "I'm afraid," she laughingly tells us, "that I wouldn't know how to behave in the city any more. But we young Moderns are like that: we want to live abundantly, the way Jeff and I do: in a simple kind of house with this immediate kind of experience of Nature." She thoughtfully caresses the Henry Moore composition. "Or do you think I'm utterly barbaric?"

Well, frankly, Mrs. Panther, since you ask . . .

Ajax, "Living Outdoors with Mrs. Panther," *Landscape* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1954–55): 24–25.

Hail and Farewell

It is appropriate that the seventieth birthday of Walter Gropius should have been the occasion for honoring the architect and his work. The larger part of his life has been spent in Central Europe, and it was there that his theories were formulated; but the two decades during which he has worked in America represent perhaps the most fruitful period in his career. Ever since his appointment to Harvard in 1934, Gropius has been the most important and often the healthiest influence in American architecture. If his present following is numerous and devoted, it is because he has not only excelled as an architect and teacher but has known how to use his prestige with moderation.

Having said this much, we must add that we are among those who believe that the undisputed authority of Gropius and his disciples is fast approaching its end. The virtues of that philosophy of architecture usually identified with the Bauhaus, so novel and so unwelcome a generation ago, are by now almost universally accepted. We have learned to discard meaningless ornament and academic design, we have learned to use new techniques and materials. Our eyes have been opened to a new (or at least a neglected) kind of beauty, and a new kind of architecture as well as a new kind of architect have evolved, both well suited to the problems of our times. We have much to be grateful for to the Bauhaus and its leader.

But as we have grown adept at using the new idiom, we have become aware

of its shortcomings. Many current esthetic tendencies the Bauhaus style expresses with unrivaled clarity and ease; others—and the number is increasing—it cannot express at all. The collaboration of several arts, painting and sculpture and stagecraft and landscaping, that has marked previous architectural styles has never been entirely successful with the Bauhaus movement, even though the importance of the collaboration was recognized at the start. The style is undoubtedly seen at its best when movement and color and monumentality are absent and when its effects are achieved solely by architectural means. That is a perfectly legitimate trait; and yet we do not have to look very far to see that there exists in America a kind of architecture which seeks to attract attention to itself—shops, factories, institutions, roadside enterprises—and that this architecture uses every artistic device to this end: colors, lights, monumental facades, landscaping, and so on. Moreover, these techniques are having an effect on all other types of building in America. By Bauhaus standards this is an unwarranted development, but is it likely that the designers of such buildings will be much influenced by the autonomy of the Bauhaus style? That they will sacrifice a popular flamboyance in order to conform to uncongenial standards of sobriety?

The same autonomy, the same self-imposed isolation is typical of the Bauhaus in its relation to environment, whether architectural or natural. Not only does the style see little virtue in using local materials and forms, it sees little virtue in trying to "blend" with its surroundings. We have ceased to be shocked by the spectacle of an elegant Gropius or Mies van der Rohe house of gleaming plate glass and smooth white wall rising in the midst of a New England woodlot or among nineteenth-century city residences; we have learned that the success of a Bauhaus design is to be judged independent of its setting. But again we discover a strong national tendency in the opposite direction. The average American house makes much of the merging of indoors and outdoors, and of the use of materials whose color and texture harmonize with the surroundings. It is worth remembering that neither city planning nor landscaping were part of the original Bauhaus curriculum; the house was all that mattered then. But contemporary American architecture, influenced as it has been by public housing and private real estate developments, would be unthinkable without some attempt at coordination between the various structures and between the structures and the site.

Perhaps the basic characteristic of the Bauhaus style is this: It evolved out of a new concept of the relation between the artist and his medium. If the style developed, it did so as the result of the use of new materials and new techniques; public taste was an unimportant factor. And this is also true of the

function of the house as the Bauhaus interprets it. Function is thought of almost entirely in terms of interior organization—in terms of the occupants and immediate users—not in terms of its effect on the passing public. This means, of course, that exterior decoration, facade treatment, adaptation to the surroundings are held to be of minor importance.

In contrast, modern run-of-the-mill American architecture has remained essentially traditional and unintellectual in its outlook. The average American architect sees his art as developing out of the relationship between artist and public—or client, whichever you prefer. He sees style evolving not from the use of new materials and techniques but from new requirements on the part of the public. His art, therefore, like that of all artists who think in terms of public demand, is representational. It seeks to communicate some message or emotion. That is why the American architect unconsciously defines function in a much broader sense than the Bauhaus architect does. He defines it not simply in terms of the house occupant but in terms of impact on the public. The exterior appearance of a church is of no consequence to the Bauhaus, but to the average American architect it suggests the mystery and solemnity of religious experience, just as the exterior of the public building suggests the power of the state and the exterior of the dwelling suggests the privacy and individuality of domestic life. The architect designs accordingly.

From the point of view of theory, the Bauhaus is coherent and on sure ground. We are not dealing with theory, however, but with the fact that American architecture is going its own way. It is idle to argue whether architecture is an art of communication or of form when it is apparent that our buildings are being called upon to say something to the public. They are required to sell goods, to establish social position, to inspire confidence, to impress or elevate or excite. The result is a carnival of extravagant taste, an architectural idiom partaking more of advertising or theater or landscaping than of "pure space arrangements and the balance of tense contrary forces."

Yet in spite of that we welcome the current development as a release, a promise of greater freedom and creativity. The fact that the flag-waving Philistines are opposed to the Bauhaus and that many of the best architects in the country are still enthusiastic about it gives us pause, but it cannot in the long run deter us from hoping that the days of the Bauhaus are numbered.