

AN INDIGENOUS THING: The Story of William Wurster and the Gregory Farmhouse

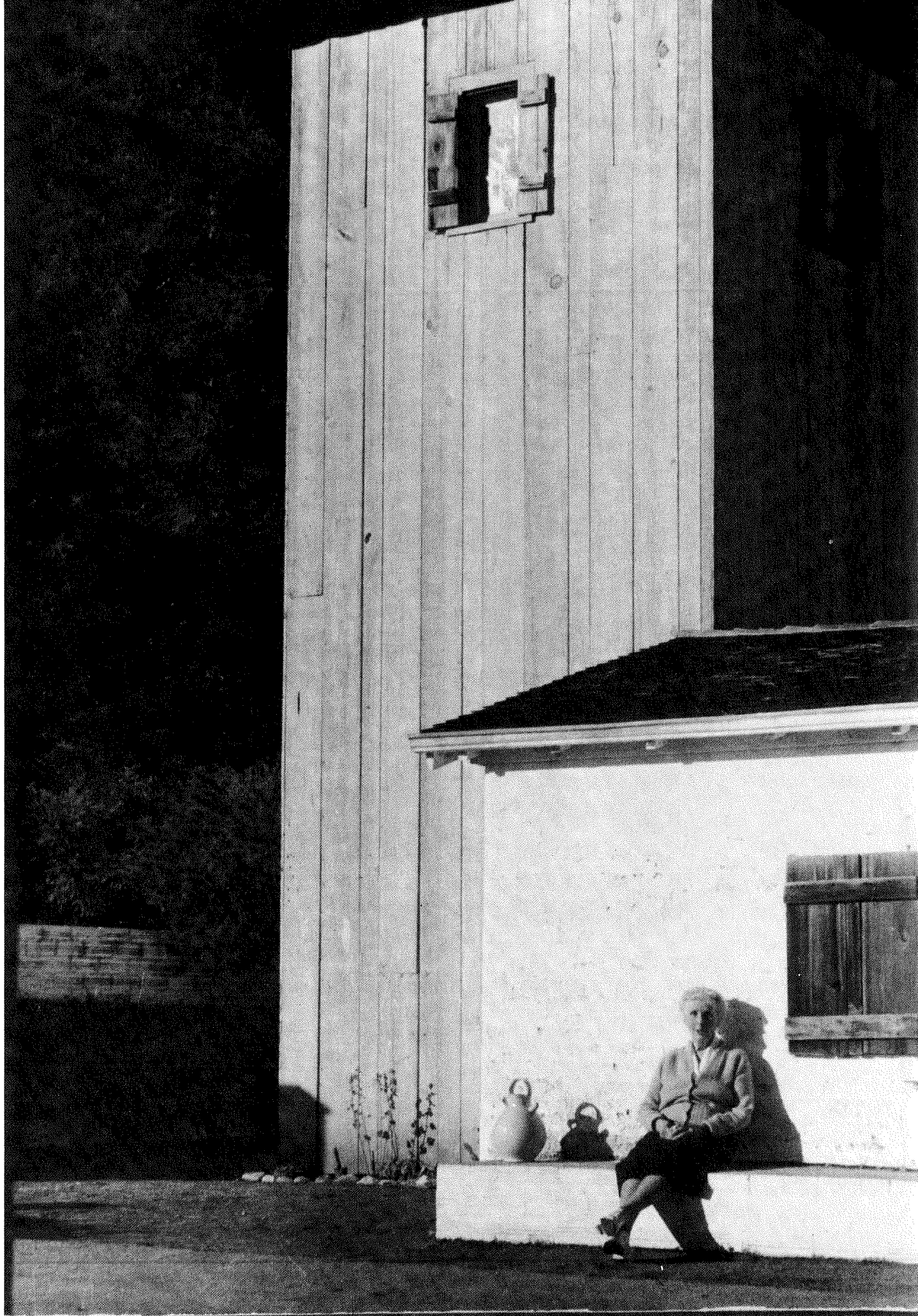
My grandmother's farmhouse stands at the end of a long, narrow, asphalt and dirt road that winds through dense manzanita and groves of redwood, oak and fir in the Santa Cruz Mountains along the central California coast. One's first glimpse of it is from a distance, a flash of white walls through branches. The house disappears briefly as the road climbs a slight ridge, then suddenly, after a short descent, there you are, in a dirt parking area beside the front gate.

The best known photograph of the house was taken by Roger Sturtevant from this clearing and looks indirectly at the house's west-facing facade. Everything is visible at once: There is the front wall with its central, diagonally braced gates flung wide; the tall, sheer water tower, like an enlarged milk carton, with a thick, mud-walled one-story structure at its base; and the L-shaped house proper, its simple gable-ends and covered walkways forming two sides of a courtyard.

On the south, a low-walled terrace off the living room looks out over a vineyard sloping down to an old apple orchard. In the distance is a view of Monterey Bay. The terrace broadens into a sweeping curve as it extends around the east side or back of the house. The whitewashed vertical boards, double-hung windows, porch overhangs and shingle roofs combine to form a structure that looks as though it has always been there. In the words of its architect, William Wurster, or "Bill," as he was known, this is "a house of carpenter architecture—no wood beams or posts larger than absolutely necessary—an arid, California yard with the protecting walls about."¹

The white house commands its spur of land with authority, both independent of and complementary to the surrounding landscape, abstract and ranch-like at the same time. The three dominant elements—tower, wall and gate—form an almost allegorical image of habitation and arrival, as if this were not just a summer and weekend house, but a small outpost or stockade on an isolated frontier.

Sadie Gregory, the author's grandmother, sitting in the forecourt, outside her bedroom.
Photo by Thomas Church, courtesy Daniel P. Gregory.



Resonance

A vivid composition fashioned out of ordinary forms and materials, the Gregory farmhouse expressed a brand of assertive modesty that became especially appealing during the Depression. Completed in 1928, it received an honor award from the Northern California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1929 and the \$500 first prize in the small house competition sponsored by *House Beautiful* in 1930. Widely published in the architectural journals and popular shelter magazines of the day—including *Architect and Engineer*, *Architecture*, *Pencil Points* and *Sunset*—it stood out among the traditional Tudor, Neoclassical, or Spanish Colonial Revival-inspired houses and estates that were still appearing regularly.

The house looked new and old at the same time. It expressed a modern approach to function without assuming radical new shapes and forms. *House Beautiful* wrote, “This house has, we believe, the great merit of originality and simplicity. Obviously a copy of no other house, it is a straightforward attempt to solve a specific problem, which it does in the most direct manner. The result is not only convenience of plan but charm of composition in no small degree.”²

Throughout the 1930s, writers and editors used the farmhouse as a praiseworthy example of how to design a vacation house for a mild climate. In her book *Designs for Outdoor Living*, Margaret Olthof Goldsmith wrote, “The lines of the house and its utter lack of pretense are an inspiration to anyone who seeks escape from official cares.”³ The professional press praised its sincerity and direct simplicity.

Simplicity became its most remarked upon quality, and the commentary acquired a moralistic undertone. *Pencil Points* editor Kenneth Reid wrote: “Forms natural to materials and uses, undistorted by any faint suggestion of ‘artiness,’ give this house the charm of honesty that might have been produced by a carpenter endowed with good taste.”⁴

By the 1960s the house had become an emblem of regionalism, used often to illustrate part of California’s contribution to the history of architecture. It represented an in-between stage in the evolution of Modernism: not traditional, not avant-garde, but free thinking and pragmatic. In *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History*, authors John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown wrote that Wurster’s “early ranch houses stemmed from the historic tradition of revivalism. The one-story grouping he did in the simplest vernacular for Mrs. Gregory in 1927...shows how fine such work might be when approached simply. But the romance was still there.”⁵

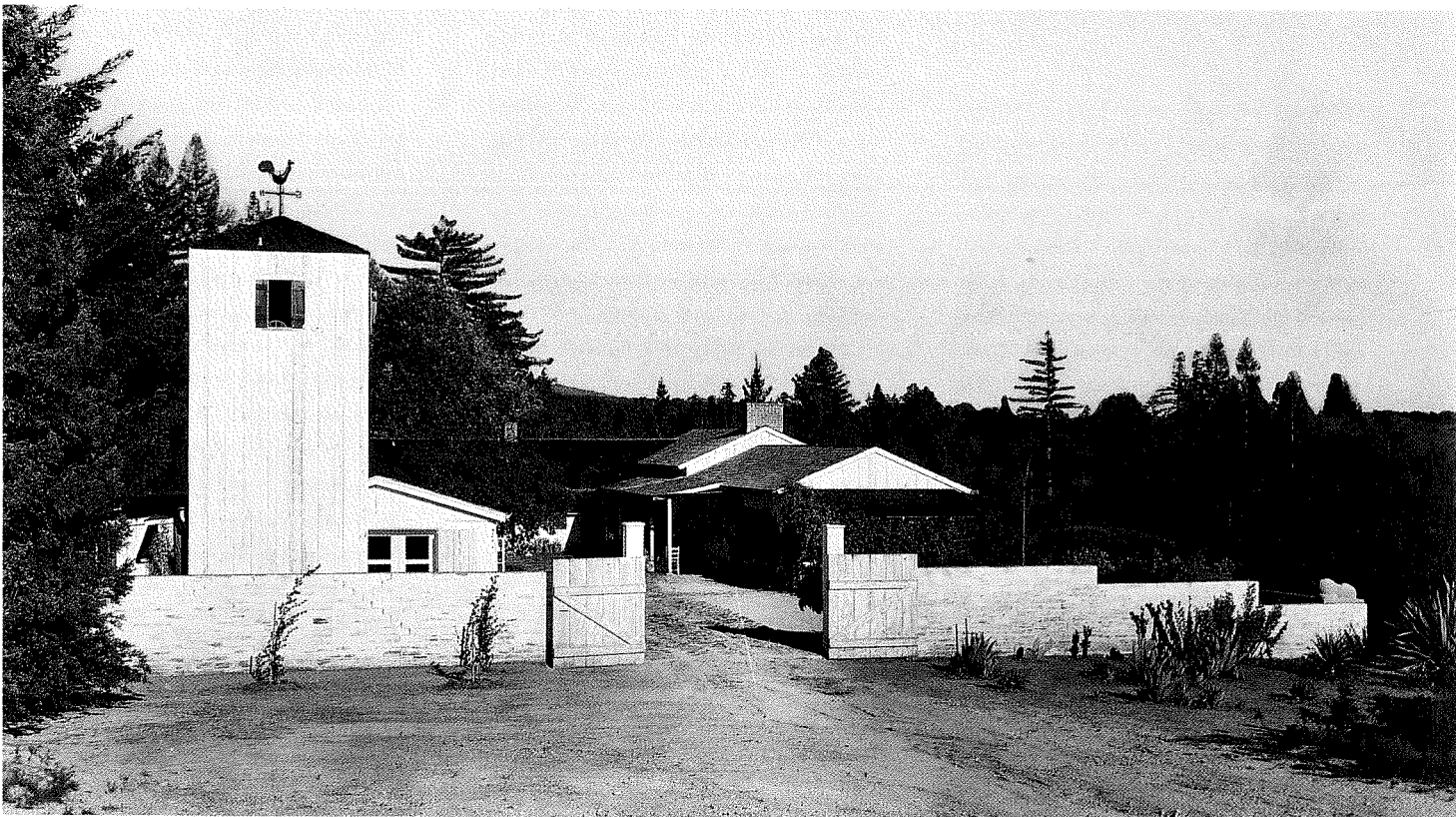
More recently, architectural historian Sally Woodbridge wrote that in the farmhouse Wurster “took the body of Modern architecture and gave it a regional soul.”⁶ With its inclusion in histories and guidebooks, the Gregory farmhouse has become an architectural icon.



The Gregory house fit the *Sunset* dictum that “there must be romance in the house you build.” The illustration includes two figures in chaps, boots and a cowboy hat, apparently in an effort to heighten the Western ranch feeling.

Courtesy Daniel P. Gregory.

Roger Sturtevant's classic photograph of the Gregory house, looking into the forecourt. Courtesy Sally Woodbridge.



Today the design still seems both fresh and familiar, simple and evocative. Visitors' reactions tend to bear this out. One first-time guest remarked: "I feel I've taken a sentimental journey to a place I've never been." Another asked, "So where is the architecture?" And another, seeing the house after it had undergone a period of meticulous painting and repair, observed: "It must have been quite a place once."

Bill would have been delighted. For what each of these remarks illustrates is this: Here is a house that illustrates simple place-making without being all that simple.

An Affection for the Site

Wurster met my grandparents, Warren and Sadie Gregory, through their eldest son, Don, a friend from his college days at the University of California, Berkeley. Sadie came to view Bill almost as an adopted son. He visited "The Farm" often to participate in family rituals, especially at Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. He remained a devoted admirer of my grandmother, ultimately naming his only child after her. She returned the compliment late in her life (in the early 1950s) by selling him the Gregory house in Berkeley, which had been designed by John Galen Howard and which Wurster had admired since architectural school.

The Gregorys purchased the Santa Cruz mountain acreage in 1916, and they drove or took the train down from Berkeley to vacation there whenever they could. Initially, a small Gothic Revival farmhouse dating from the 1880s provided adequate shelter. But eventually it felt cramped for a family with four children, and it stood at the bottom of a heavily forested canyon—pleasantly cool during the hottest days of summer but uncomfortably cold, damp and dark the rest of the year. They often thought about building a new house on a sunnier site.

Warren and Sadie both loved the outdoor life and took their children on numerous horse-packing trips through the Sierra. They explored their own land with equal enthusiasm, finding here a grove of redwoods suitable for staging family pageants and there a hay field big enough for softball. There was no doubt about where a new house would go: up out of the canyon and in the sunlight, on a particular south-facing knoll where they had often picnicked.

Warren's affection for this particular knoll is movingly expressed in a letter he wrote the day he died: "I am building a new house up on the ridge where the sun is a more frequent visitor and we can look across Scott's Valley in the evening and count the evening stars."⁷

The Gregory House Forecourt

The house for Sadie Gregory has a feature almost always absent from American houses, whether they are urban, suburban, or rural. This is the enclosed forecourt. Daniel P. Gregory writes that the forecourt can be accounted for by William Wurster's having studied rural complexes in the Monterey area, quoting Wurster's own words, "an early California Yard." No doubt such a precedent exists and is an echo from distant Spain.

It is tempting to suggest an even broader reference. During Wurster's postgraduate year abroad, he surely savored, over and over, the rich patterns of the agricultural landscapes of

Europe. When people began to keep records of the ways these lands were used, there was already in place a social structure in which some farms were more important than others; these were surrounded by smaller holdings worked by serfs and tenants who owed services and productive goods to the local *seigneur* in return for his protection. The resulting installations have not been erased despite endless social and economic changes.

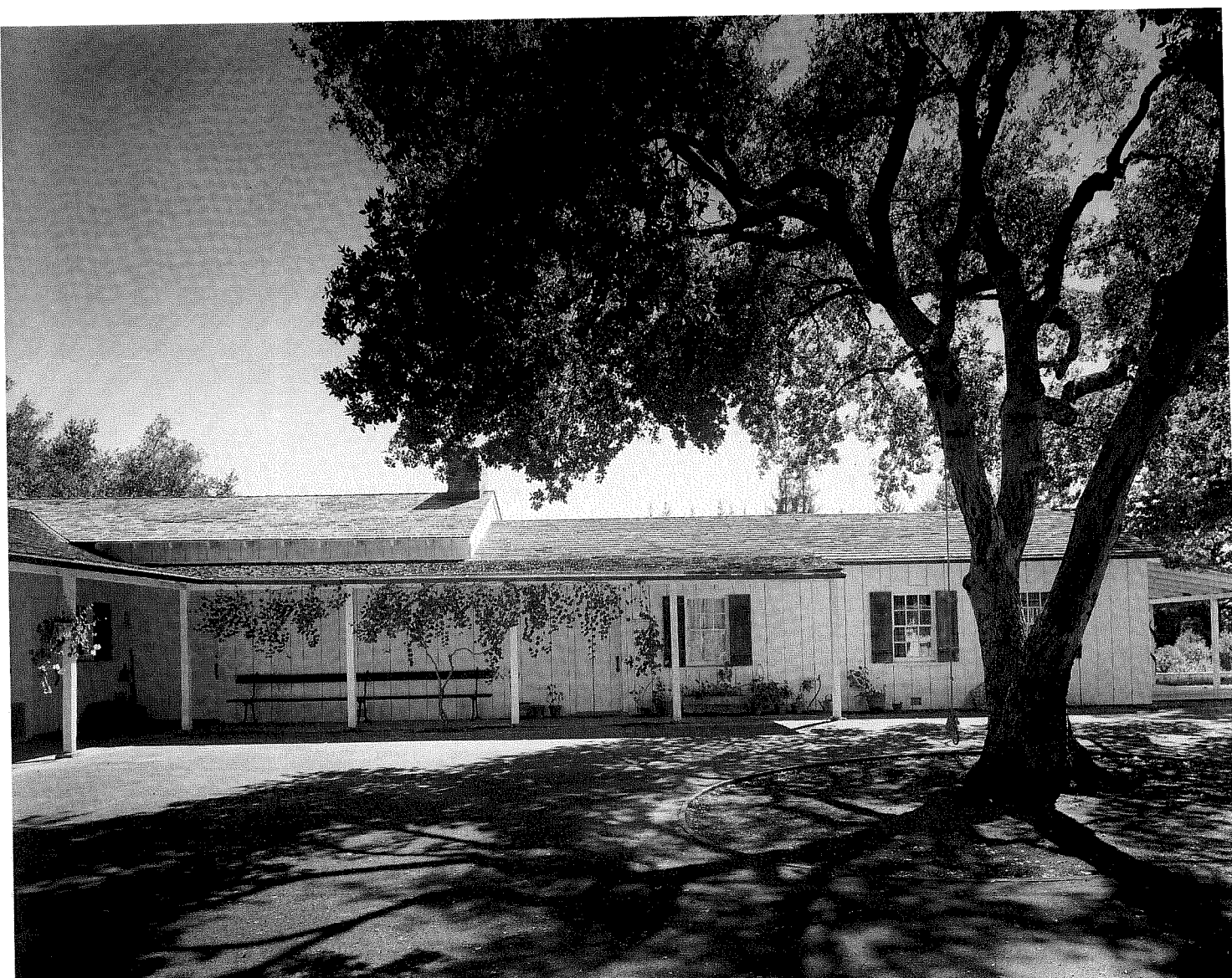
The manor house itself typically had an enclosed forecourt serving many uses. It clustered and controlled the various non-residential structures needed for farm management; it stored machines and tools and formed a sheltered outdoor workshop for their repair. (The farm animals, being more of a nuisance, lived

The south wing of the house.

Photo by Morley Baer.

in the *basse-cour*.) A sizable manor might generate wings that could help enclose a forecourt. In the courtyard people handled cargoes and climbed on and off horses and vehicles, thus creating a necessary locus for greeting and leave-taking. These activities are distinct from those taking place in an inner patio, a walled garden, an orchard, or a private terrace, but they are not unlike many events in modern life that find appropriate setting in a forecourt. See, for instance, the little ritual with flags photographed by Thomas Church.

More a concourse than a living space, the forecourt offers no obstructions to the movement of vehicles once they have been admitted. Foliage, if any, is restricted to vines or flowers at the edges, not foundation planting.



The inexpensive floor is preferably some earthy mixture that is firm underfoot, yet porous over buried drain tiles. Without ruts or gullies, it looks maintenance-free but may need endless raking and weeding.

The Gregory house is small, intended mainly for weekends and vacations. Owner and architect were in agreement about the desire for simplicity and the suppression of all useless features. Even so, they found ways to enclose the court, glorify the water tank and supply the gates. The Gregorys took refuge in the forest but brought civilization with them.

—Lawrence B. Anderson

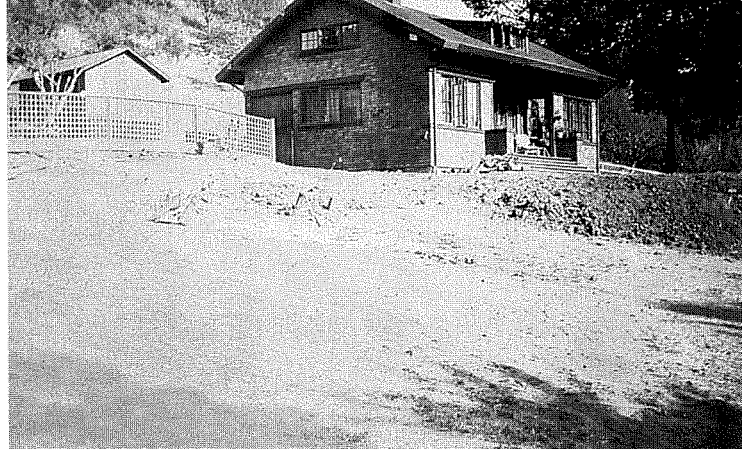
A Roundabout Search for Simplicity

Before beginning to build on the new site, however, Warren and Sadie considered the possibility of remodeling the old canyon house. They turned to their closest friend and Berkeley neighbor, John Galen Howard, who had designed houses for both the Gregorys and for Warren's sister, and for whose own house Warren had paid.

In January and February of 1926 Howard's office drew up plans for an addition to the old farmhouse.⁸ This so-called guest house matches the simple board and batten appearance of the existing house, but is more rigorously symmetrical. A verandah runs the entire length of the free-standing, rectangular, shed-roofed structure. Behind that porch are a bedroom, bathroom, bedroom and another sleeping porch.

At the center of the verandah and parallel to it, a mirror-image pair of stairs leads down to another short flight of steps perpendicular to the porch. With its emphatic use of a verandah as an outdoor hallway and of smaller porches as sleeping areas, this design expressed its rustic, camp-like function simply and directly. Its directness was not to be lost on Wurster, who would later write of his own design that "the idea is to use the house as a weekend camp."⁹

The process of studying what could be done by remodeling seemed to help the Gregorys justify their original resolve to start from scratch and build an entirely new house. By April, 1926, they asked Howard to draw sketches for a new house on the new site.

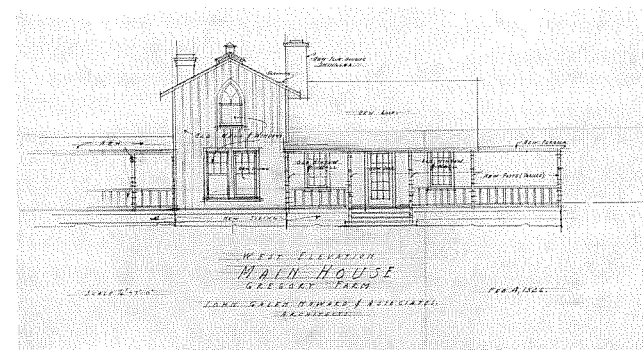
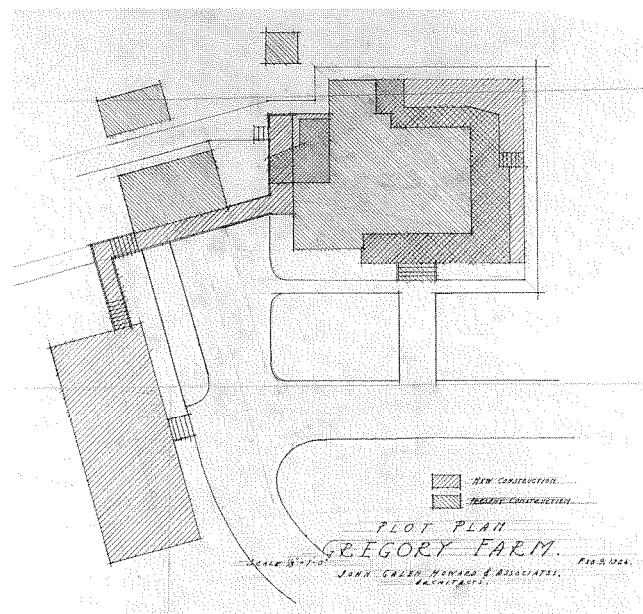


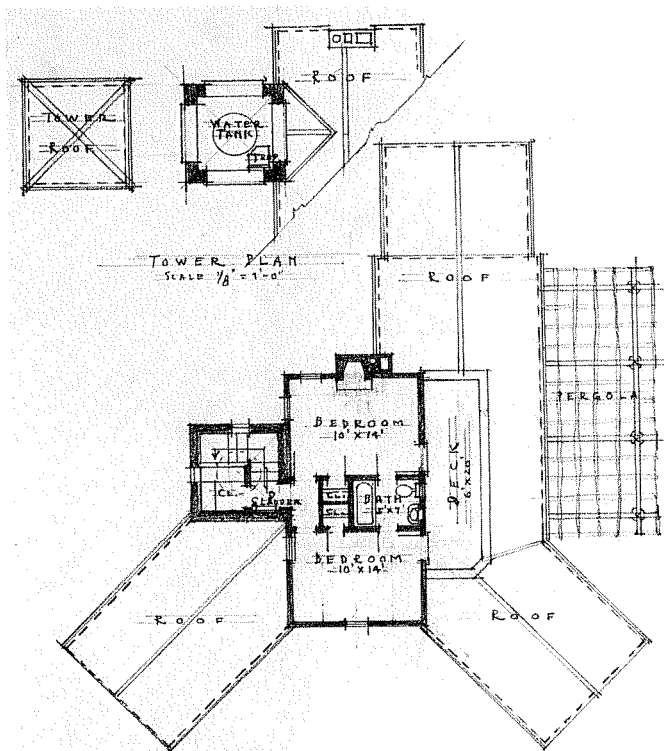
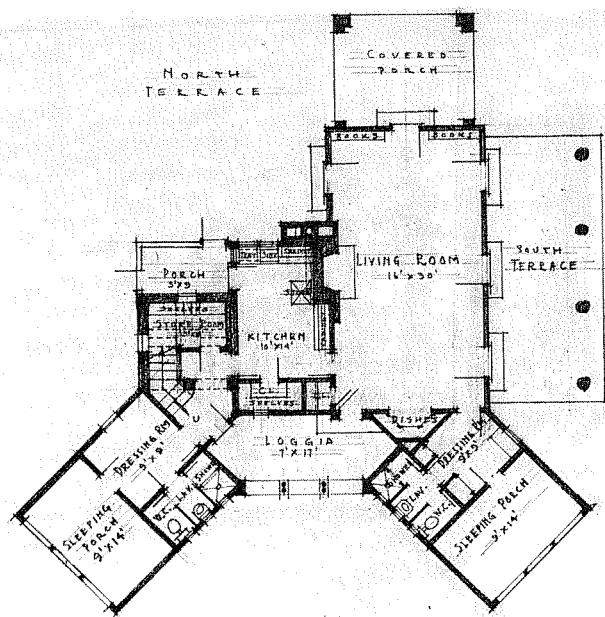
The Gregory house in Berkeley, circa 1900, designed by John Galen Howard.

Photo by Thorstein Veblen, courtesy Daniel P. Gregory.

Before deciding to build a new house, the Gregorys asked John Galen Howard to draw plans for expanding a house that already stood elsewhere on their property.

Drawings courtesy Documents Collection, College of Environmental Design Library, University of California, Berkeley.





John Galen Howard's proposal for a new house contained several elements that Wurster would distill and refine.

Several of the elements that Wurster would later distill and redefine are in those drawings: the courtyard plan, water tower and sleeping porches. In this plan, geometry dominates: The entry court is octagonal and the two-story house rather awkwardly angles around three sides of it. The water tower is incorporated into the body of the house, and a graded terrace on the back side echoes the shape of the front court.

By June, Henry Howard, John Galen Howard's architect son, had produced a set of working drawings for a substantially altered design. In his version the house spread out on one level and assumed a Spanish Colonial Revival feeling, with tile roofs, stucco walls and elaborate grillwork for windows and gates. It was L-shaped, wrapping around two sides of a simpler, rectangular entry courtyard, with a water tower approximately where Wurster's tower would stand.

Warren and Sadie balked at the design, which they thought would be more formal and elaborate than that of their Berkeley house. They decided not to proceed, a decision that must have been difficult because of their close friendship with the Howards.

About this time, Warren engaged a contractor to build what he thought would become the garage for the new house out of rammed earth, or *pise de terre*. (It ultimately became Sadie's bedroom, at the tower's base.) He had become interested in this method of building, possibly during a 1909 trip to Mexico City, and was eager to try it. It would be a way of constructing part of the new house out of the very land on which it stood, making it literally indigenous (though the claylike loam used for the walls came from some distance away). He obtained instructions and advice from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and from the Agricultural School at Davis.¹⁰

In the fall of 1926 Warren had a heart attack. Despite his illness, the Santa Cruz project remained uppermost in his thoughts. He and Sadie decided to see what young Bill Wurster could do with it and sent him their accumulation of Howard drawings. In a letter dated December 19, 1926, Warren wrote Bill, saying that a board and batten exterior finish (like one Wurster had used in a house in Oakland)¹¹ would be suitable and that "we want this house to be a simple one which can be closed when we are away, but which nevertheless will have a maximum of comfort while we are there."¹²

Warren died in February 1927, and everything came to a halt. Six months later, Sadie asked Bill to resume his analysis. Bill recalled the subsequent events in a letter written to Sadie on her birthday 25 years later: "Dearest Mrs. Gregory: How well I remember this day in 1927 when I met you on Hearst and LeConte and spent the day on the beginning sketches for the Farm—and that evening at Don's you said, 'This is it—when do we start?'"¹³

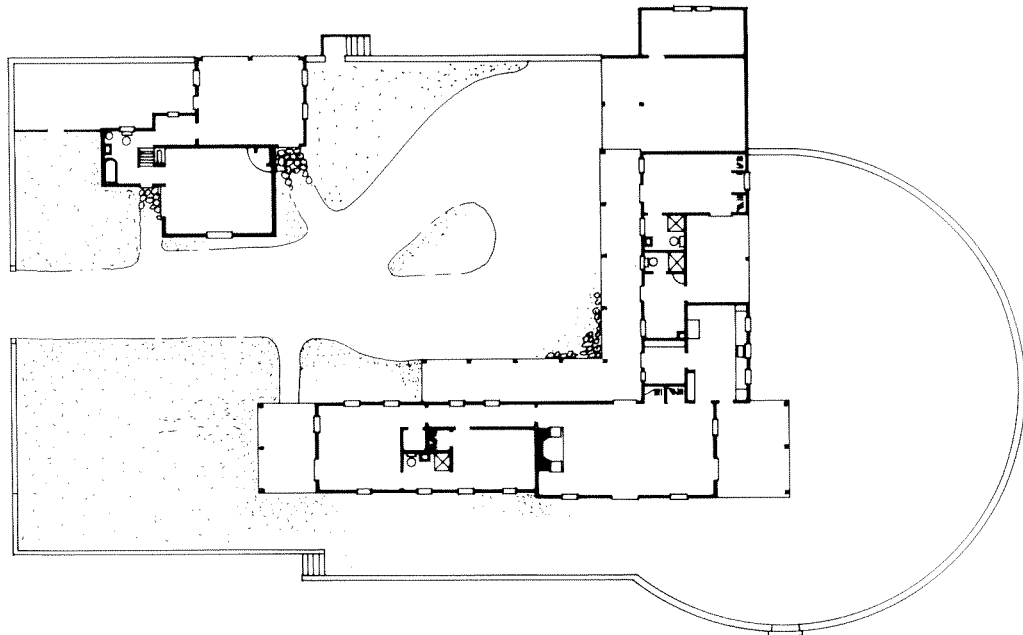
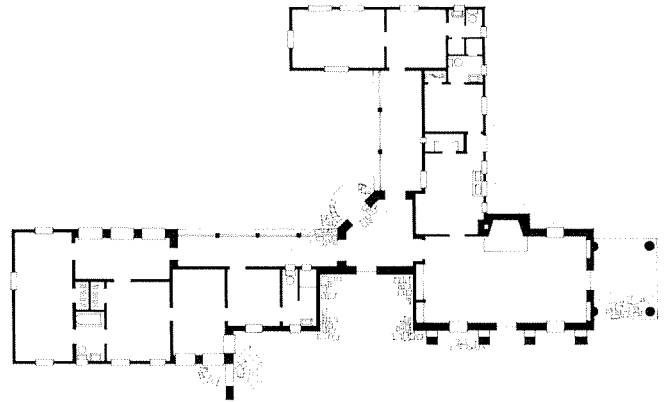
Stabilizing the Essential

Bill's design, after what he maintained was only a day's work, embodied everything Sadie and Warren had been looking for. It was a deeply original conception, but one that benefited from the close analysis of Henry Howard's earlier planning.

Bill's solution was to keep only the bare outline of Henry Howard's L-shaped plan. He pared it to the bone, removing as much stylistic elaboration as possible. Out went the stucco walls, wrought iron grille-work and tile roofs. Out went such formal-sounding and elaborately treated rooms as the "vestibule," with its ceiling detailed as a "five-part cloister vault," and the flagstone-paved "loggia."

Though Bill retained certain key spaces, he utterly transformed them. For example, Howard's two intersecting "corridors," though essentially open to the weather, were separated from the courtyard by balusters and could be used only as hallways between the bedrooms and the vestibule. Bill made them "galleries": covered extensions of the courtyard and fully accessible from it. The covered walkways themselves became a kind of vestibule leading to and protecting the front door,

Henry Howard's plan for a new house (top) and Bill Wurster's final plan.



Graphics by Neema Kudva,
based on drawings from the
Documents Collection, College
of Environmental Design
Library, University of California,
Berkeley, and from *Bay Area
Houses*.

Image and Reality

It was probably not until about six or eight years ago that I saw the Gregory farmhouse. Until then I had only known it from Roger Sturtevant's elegant photographs and from the plans that had been published in a number of consumer or professional journals.

I probably first saw articles about the farmhouse in *Architecture* when I was still at Penn in 1935. I confess that my first impressions, probably influenced in part by the fact that *Architecture* was the most conservative of the journals then (publishing largely derivative work, strongly or mildly so) and in part by the romantic character of Roger Sturtevant's photographs, led me to

see the farmhouse more as pictorial image and less as a real house. What did impress me strongly was the clarity and discipline of the plan of both the house and the beautifully simple garden. The clear, sharp definition of the house and garden separated from the entrance and a low garden wall had the greatest impact.

I had come to know Bill Wurster quite well before the war, and it was what he said, his wonderfully simple and straightforward description of what he was trying to do and what he thought we should all be trying to do, that was much more influential than the buildings, as beautifully and striking as they were. I was especially taken with many of Bill's San Francisco houses, especially the severely plain ones using that most ordinary siding, channel rustic. But

nothing, fifty years ago, came close to the wonder of the Yerba Buena Club built for the 1939 San Francisco Fair.

Finally seeing the Gregory farmhouse completely dispelled the soft romanticism that Sturtevant's photographs had conveyed. It had a wonderful, slightly beat up look to it. (I suspect it always had that) and a simplicity which for all its power did not get in the way. It is one of the best examples, if not the best, of Bill's ideas. I might regret that I did not realize this by looking at magazines, but then I had it straight from Bill. It is a useful lesson in the limits of flat images on flat paper. It is one hell of a good house.

—Joseph P. Esherick



which now opened directly into the living room. Bill's design contained only one short interior hall, from the living room to two bedrooms, and even that opens to the courtyard.

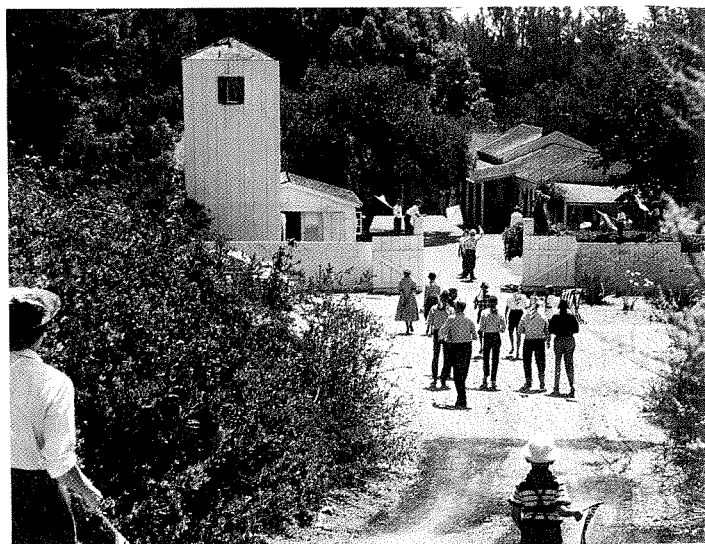
Bill concentrated on the idea that this house would be used primarily during the warmest months of the year and made sure that every major room opened directly to the out-of-doors. The living room has doors to the outside on three sides, and every major bedroom opens onto a porch. There is even a porch at the east end of the living room, just off the kitchen, to be used as an outdoor dining room.

Bill brought his own strong architectural sensibility to the commission. Like John Galen Howard before him, Bill had studied early California adobe architecture, especially the early nineteenth-century buildings of Monterey, with their signature verandahs, double-hung windows, shingled roofs and walled courtyards. He certainly knew the handsomely proportioned double-decker porches of the Larkin house, and he might well have seen the Sherwood Ranch, also in Monterey County, which consisted of adobe buildings and wooden buildings standing side by side around a walled courtyard with a distinctive arched gateway.

For the Gregory farmhouse, Bill reinterpreted aspects of the vernacular Monterey ranch, especially "an early California Yard," on his own terms: by abstracting it slightly, by favoring broad unbroken surfaces and by employing a stricter sense of proportion and axiality.

Perhaps Bill's most original contributions were his concentration on the idea of the house as a walled compound in the wilderness and his realization that the entrance and the sense of arrival should dominate. The importance of that feeling is apparent in his first reaction to the site, noted in a letter to Warren dated February 11, 1927: "I think the site very beautiful, not the least of its charms being the approach. An air of intimacy seems always gained when one descends into a forecourt. I was totally unprepared for this as I had conceived of it on a knoll in such a fashion that one always climbed."¹⁴ His gate, wall and tower create an essentially ceremonial public facade that is oriented toward the road, which shields the main living areas behind it and allows them to open informally to a private outdoor world of trees, sun and view.

The process of clarification and simplification, of reduction to essential elements, would no doubt have pleased Warren, but it was equally important to Sadie. Not only did she need to keep costs down now that her husband was gone; she also frowned upon pretense of any kind. She had been trained as a political economist at the University of Chicago, where she had studied under Thorstein Veblen. Any hint of "conspicuous consumption" was anathema.¹⁵ And since her shingle-covered, gable-roofed Berkeley house, where she and Warren had



The ritual Fourth of July parade.

Photo by Thomas Church, courtesy Daniel P. Gregory.

Opposite:

Southeast corner of the house.

Photo by Roger Sturtevant.

hosted “Dr. Veblen” many times, was stylistically unpretentious (though expansive), simplicity and informality would be even more important in her summer house.

Sadie and Bill were kindred spirits. Bill’s own description of the project soon after its completion underscores their mutual agreement on a form of architectural understatement: “A resolve was formed to make it simple and direct—no substitutes of any kind—to keep it free from any distorted or over-studied look.” That meant, for the walls, “rough vertical redwood boards, left without battens as it was desirable to have more restful surfaces than battens allow.” It meant little reliance on style: “In general there was a definite attempt to keep the building free from so-called decoration, relying for interest on the proportioning of the necessary elements.”¹⁶

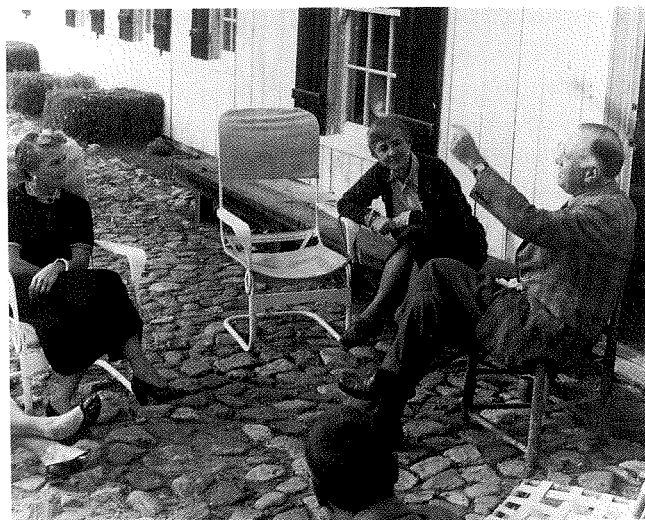
Architectural understatement meant collaboration. Family and friends brainstormed over the design of the farmhouse with excitement and enthusiasm. According to Josephine Gregory, the ideas of making the water tower an emphatic three stories instead of the strictly functional two (for gravity flow) and of placing it next to the rammed earth structure came from one of Sadie’s closest friends, Elizabeth Ellis, who had met Bill when he worked briefly for the New York architect William Adams Delano several years before. Sadie herself contributed the idea of built-in brick seats on either side of the living room fireplace.

One ultimately discarded suggestion was to use unpeeled madrone saplings for the roof beams in the living room. This would have been a picturesque homage to Sadie and Warren’s friend Joseph Worcester, the influential Swedenborgin minister who had incorporated unpeeled logs from the Santa Cruz mountains in the nave of his church in San Francisco many years before. Don Gregory said that they tried the madrone saplings “but it looked awful.”¹⁷ They decided to use ordinary wood beams and paint the living room white like the rest of the house, though a hint of romantic rusticity remained in Bill’s eye-catching basket-weave pattern of rough sawn fir floor boards.

Finally, but most importantly, architectural understatement meant a design that functioned well for the family who built it. Bill wrote: “This was a happy job from start to finish, for utmost cooperation lifted it far higher than any one of us could have brought about. Both the actual plan and the appearance are not too ‘busy’ for really simple living.”¹⁸ More than 60 years later, and with very little modification, the house continues to shelter and shape family activities as friends and relatives eddy through the big living room onto the terrace, gathering again for a Fourth of July picnic of ham and ravioli and artichoke hearts under the oaks at the edge of the hill.

An Eye on Bill Wurster

From his Carmel studio, photographer Morley Baer reflected on his 45-year career and his abiding interest in Bay Area-style architecture. He was introduced to architectural photography in San Francisco after World War II by Roger Sturtevant, whose work he had admired. Sturtevant helped him get started by telling him what architects to go see. Baer photographed the Gregory farmhouse during the mid-1970s. Several of those photographs, never before published, accompany this article.



Bill Wurster at the Gregory house.

Photo by Thomas Church, courtesy Daniel P. Gregory.

South wing and forecourt of the Gregory House.

Photo by Morley Baer.

Photography came first; I had no previous training in architecture. Because I had no background in architecture, I wanted to be sure that I was faithful to what the architect designed. I studied the design, asked why the house was sited where it was, how it functioned, what the materials were. I listened to the architect and prided myself on adhering to the architect's design. I tried to be deliberate and careful in my shooting. I felt my task was to explain the design in the photographs.

Bill Wurster had a lot to do with educating me about architecture. On Saturday afternoons in the early 1950s he would walk down to our house on Greenwood Common in Berkeley for

a chat on the patio. Bill said architecture had to have delight in it and I was astonished to learn that architecture should have anything to do with delight.

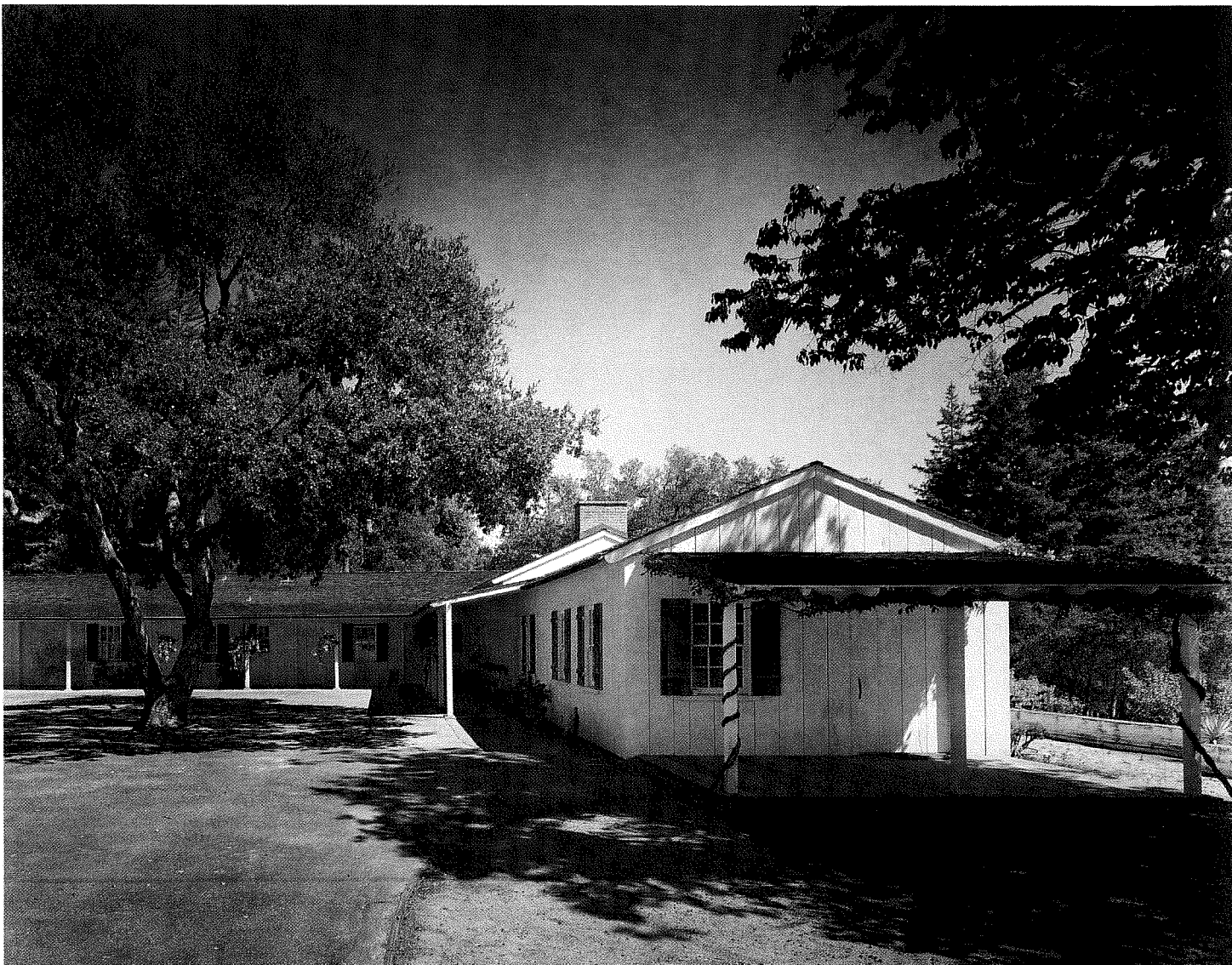
I really liked the Gregory farmhouse, which I considered the first modern ranch house. I knew Bill was sometimes criticized by other architects who thought his houses were so plain, but I thought that was why they were so wonderful. In many of Bill's houses there was very little need to edit the spaces for the photographs. They were not that bedecked.

I always liked Catherine Wurster's (Bill's wife) famous statement, which I heard her make, that "there's nobody like Bill to make a

\$90,000 house look like a \$10,000 house." There was a restraint, a holding back in his work.

An architect once said to me, "You interpret a house well for lay people, but not for architects. You explain where it's done and how it functions, but you don't provide the depth of analysis that architects would like." Well, I'm perfectly happy to interpret for lay people.

*Morley Baer was interviewed by
Daniel P. Gregory.*



Reflections on a Visit

To have known a work of architecture for a long time on paper, and then to have the opportunity to see it in person, especially when that work is a very private work, is a particular privilege. It was my good fortune to be taken to see the Gregory farmhouse by Daniel P. Gregory, who kindly invited San Francisco architect Toby Levy and me for lunch with his family at his mother's house on the same property.

I go into details of personal circumstances because building exists not only in a place, that is to say, a physical context, but in a social and cultural context as well. My sense of the Gregory farmhouse would have been perhaps

quite different if somehow magically I had been dropped onto the site and had explored it unaccompanied. But with so knowledgeable, and so personally involved and intimately connected a guide as Gregory, my experience was enriched immeasurably.

As my experience of the farmhouse had been only through photographs and through the words of such enthusiastic commentators as Charles Moore, I was prepared to be disillusioned by the reality. In the age of mechanical reproduction, reality is frequently less wonderful than our anticipation of it. Not so in the case of the Gregory farmhouse, which, as I think back on it now some five years later, had that ineffable quality in reality—dare I use the buzzword *aura*—that it had for me in the photos. A



work created at a pivotal point in an architect's career, the Gregory farmhouse is the minor masterpiece I had been led to believe it to be.

What makes it so special? It is not really natural to its place, though I had been led to believe it might so seem. In fact, it is arty and stagey and therein lies its charm. From artiness and staginess comes an intimacy of scale and a wonderfully toy-like spirit. Though a stage set and a toy, it is much more—it is a knowing work of architecture, with carefully composed elements that blend abstract order and scenographic effect.

Everything about it seems so deliberate yet so casual, so contrived yet so straightforward. The materials are handled in a way that suggests not a natural inevitability but the ingenious translation of one material to another. So too, the forms, Californian by adoption, seem much more of Normandy by way of New York. Thereby they invite interpretation and add mystery. The Gregory farmhouse is a marvel of architectural artifice.

—Robert A. M. Stern

The living room of the Gregory house.

Photo by Roger Sturtevant, courtesy Oakland Museum.



The road leading from the Gregory house.

Photo by Thomas Church, courtesy Daniel P. Gregory.

Frames of Reference

When Frank Lloyd Wright met Bill Wurster for the first time, so the story goes, he said: "Oh yes. You're that shanty architect. I understand your roofs leak too."¹⁹

This would have pleased Bill, because it showed that Wright knew enough about Wurster's work to start playing one-upmanship the moment they were introduced. Bill took some pleasure in his reputation for designing houses that looked, if not shanty-like, at least simple and straightforward, yet artful enough to make you think they belonged where they were. If a house looked cheap, so much the better. In his own words: "I like to work on direct, honest solutions, avoiding exotic materials, using indigenous things so that there is no affectation and the best is obtained for the money."²⁰ The Gregory farmhouse was one of his first houses to express that philosophy with eloquence and assurance.

Such early California architects as Ernest Coxhead, Bernard Maybeck, Julia Morgan and John Galen Howard had produced a regional architecture by using redwood and incorporating vernacular elements into their residential work. But it was really the next generation of Bay Area architects—led by Bill Wurster and including Gardner Daily, Hervey Clark and others—that consciously articulated a regional point of view.

Born in the central valley town of Stockton, Calif., in 1895, Wurster graduated from Berkeley in 1919. After working for other architects during the early 1920s, he launched his own practice in San Francisco in 1926. One commission led to another; on the strength of a visit to the Gregory farmhouse, for example, the developer of a residential gold course community at Santa Cruz, called Pasatiempo, hired Bill to do most

of the early houses and club buildings. The Pastiempo houses gave him his first extensive experience in reinventing the suburban ranch house.

By 1943 Bill had designed more than 200 houses throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, many in partnership with Theodore Bernardi and Donn Emmons. After a stint as dean of architecture at MIT from 1944 to 1950, he returned to Berkeley where, with his wife, city planner Catherine Bauer, he helped found the College of Environmental Design, becoming its first dean. He received the Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects (its highest honor) in 1969. He died in 1973.

Wurster's trademarks were a sophisticated simplicity, careful siting, emphatic indoor-outdoor relationships, natural materials straightforwardly worked and a contradictory air of informal, sometimes rustic elegance—like an expensively tailored work shirt. In his early houses especially, Bill Wurster reworked the old and the ordinary, helping us see familiar things as if for the first time.

His was not a radical but a subtle art. Like a photographer or collage-maker, he dealt in ready-made images, fashioning his assemblages out of the experience of everyday reality. He thought of architecture as a social art, a collaboration between architect and client. For Bill, architecture was “the picture frame and not the picture.”²¹

His most powerful works, like the Gregory farmhouse, remain indelible frames for living because they seem inevitable. They are capable of sparking a shock of recognition: Arrival means simply coming home at last through a big, generous front door to an outdoor room with a view. Such a house is not just regional but archetypal. Welcome home.

Notes

1. William Wurster Papers, College of Environmental Design Documents Collection, University of California, Berkeley.
2. *House Beautiful* (Vol. 69, Mar., 1931) discusses the first-prize winner in its editorial, p. 237.
3. Margaret Olthof Goldsmith, *Designs for Outdoor Living* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1941), p. 200.
4. Kenneth Reid, “The Architect and the House: William Wurster of California,” *Pencil Points* (Vol. 19, Aug., 1938), pp. 472-4.
5. John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1966), p. 300.
6. Sally Woodbridge, ed., *Bay Area Houses* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1988), p. 157.
7. Letter, Warren Gregory to Armin O. Leuschner, Feb. 12, 1927; collection of the author.
8. This and subsequent schemes by the Howard firm are part of the Wurster Papers, CED Documents Collection.

9. Letter, Wurster to Carl C. Maurer, Mar. 8, 1928; collection of the author.
10. Letter, Warren Gregory to Wurster, Dec. 19, 1926; Wurster Papers, CED Documents Collection.
11. This was the Gillespie house, built in 1926 in the Montclair neighborhood, according to Wurster's biographer Richard C. Peters.
12. Letter, Warren Gregory to Bill Wurster, Dec. 19, 1926; Wurster Papers, CED Documents Collection.
13. Letter, Wurster to Sadie Gregory, Oct. 12, 1952; collection of the author.
14. Letter, Wurster to Warren Gregory, Feb. 11, 1952, Wurster Papers, CED Documents Collection.
15. According to Elizabeth Gregory Kent (the Gregory's second child), Sadie kept a photograph of Veblen on her dressing table and carefully preserved several snapshots he took of the Gregory house in Berkeley. In the autobiography *Two Lives: The Story of Wesley Claire Mitchell and Myself* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953) author Lucy Sprague Mitchell mentions Sadie as a friend and colleague of her political economist husband Wesley: "Marriage and children meant for Sadie not only giving up an active professional life but to a large extent, losing contact with people who were working on economic problems. She still kept in close touch with Veblen, as she had ever since she had studied with him in Chicago; she also proof-read his manuscripts." pp. 152-153.
16. Wurster Papers, CED Documents Collection.
17. Interview, Donald and Josephine Gregory, Sept. 15, 1989.
18. "Farmhouse for Mrs. Warren Gregory," *Architecture* (Aug., 1935), p. 91.
19. My mother, Mrs. Jack Gregory, remembers Bill telling the leaky roofs anecdote about himself with a laugh.
20. "Quoting Mr. Wurster," *Architectural Forum* (Vol. 64, May, 1936), pp. 36-37.
21. Woodbridge, p.121.