

NORTH GABLE, HENRY WHITFIELD STONE HOUSE, GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT, 1639

NATIVE GENIUS
IN ANONYMOUS
ARCHITECTURE
IN NORTH AMERICA
SIBYL MOHOLY-NAGY

SCHOCKEN BOOKS • NEW YORK

1957; 1976

- 60 House of the Territorial Period, California 109
 61 Diagram of Wood Circe 110
 62 Stone House, Otomi Region, Hidalgo, Mexico 111
 63 Stone House, Close-up of Cable End 111
 64 Kitchen Hut, El Tule, Oaxaca, Mexico 112
 65 "Folded" Gable, Überlingen, Germany 114
 66 Barn near Estherville, Iowa 115
 67 Diagram of Barn Construction 118
 68 Overhang Houses, Germany 117
 69 Mennonite Barn, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania 119
 70 Circular Stone Barn, New Lebanon, New York 121
 71 Circular Barn, Clinton, Pennsylvania 123
 72 Village Well, Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands 124
 73 Penobscot Indian Bark Hut 126
 74 Storage Bins, now Farmhand Houses, Zacatecas, Mexico 127
 75 Granary, Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico 128
 76 Corn Crib, New Hampshire 129
 77 Fortified Granary, Probably 17th Century, Teotyucan, Mexico 131
 78 *El Rollo*, Tepeaca, Puebla, Mexico 131
 79 Diagram, Fort Edgecomb Construction 132
 80 Fort Edgecomb, Maine, 1808 133
 81 Interior, Fortress *La Ferière*, Haiti 135
 82 Diagram, Moorish Embroidery and Ceiling Decoration, Ilita 137
 83 Fortified Village Church, Ilita, Puebla, Mexico 137
 84 Franciscan Church, Xochimilco, Mexico 139
 85 Diagram of One Gable at Christianborg Palace, Copenhagen, Denmark 140
 86 Chapel, Armstrong Plantation, St. Croix, Virgin Islands 141
 87 Presbyterian Church and Parsonage, New Milford, Connecticut 143
 88 Tombs in a Cemetery near Port-au-Prince, Haiti 144
 89 Painted Barn Front, Ile d'Orléans, Quebec, Canada 146
 90 Corner of Well House, New Hope, Pennsylvania 148
 91 Corner of Huguenot House, New Paltz, New York 148
 92 Corner of Medieval Half-timber House 149
 93 Ohio River Inn, Late 18th Century 150
 94 Wall of a Ruined Hacienda near San Udefonso Hueyotlipan, Mexico 153
 95 Wall detail of an Octagonal Cobblestone House, Madison, New York 153
 96 Double House, New Hope, Pennsylvania 155
 97 Wine Storehouse, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 156
 98 Wine Storehouse, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 157
 99 South Wall of a Brick Barn, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania 159
 100 Dutch Oven, Senate House, Kingston-on-Hudson, New York 159
 101 Entrance to a Patio, El Tepeaca, Puebla, Mexico 160
 102 Detail from the Casa de Alfenique, Puebla, Mexico 161
 103 Entrance to Slave Quarters, Abandoned Sugar Plantation, Jamaica 162
 104 Close-up of Hall of the Cloisters, Ephrata, Pennsylvania 165
 105 Diagram, False Gable of Lombard Church 166
 106 Abandoned Wholesale Store, Bay City, Michigan 167
 107 Close-up of Shingles, Wyckoff House, Brooklyn, New York 168
 108 Drawing of Carpathian Mountain Chapel 168
 109 Grist Mill, Long Island, New York 169
 110 Log House, New Mexico 171
 111 Lumberjack Cabin near Jonquière, Quebec, Canada 171
 112 Diagram of Terrone Brick 173
 113 Viga Ceiling 174
 114 Church at Trampas, New Mexico 175
 115 Village Well, Libres, Mexico 175
 116 Baking Stoves and North Buildings, Taos, New Mexico 176
 117 Summer Bower around Haitian House 178
 118 Granja Linda near Tulancingo, Hidalgo, Mexico 182
 119 Diagram, Construction of Thatched Roof in Plate 120 183
 120 Mestizzo House, Maya Region, Chiapas, Mexico 183
 121 House in Cajon Construction of a Navajo Shepherd, Arizona 184
 122 Wood Quoin of a Tenant House, Mohawk Valley, New York 1887 185
 123 The Wilson Popenoe House, Antigua, Guatemala 186
 124 Circular Manor of Abandoned Plantation near Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands 187
 125 Divided Dutch Door, Van Deusen House, Hurley, New York, 1723 188
 126 Gate in the Abode Wall of the Old Town, Albuquerque, New Mexico 190

part one

NATIVE GENIUS IN ANONYMOUS ARCHITECTURE

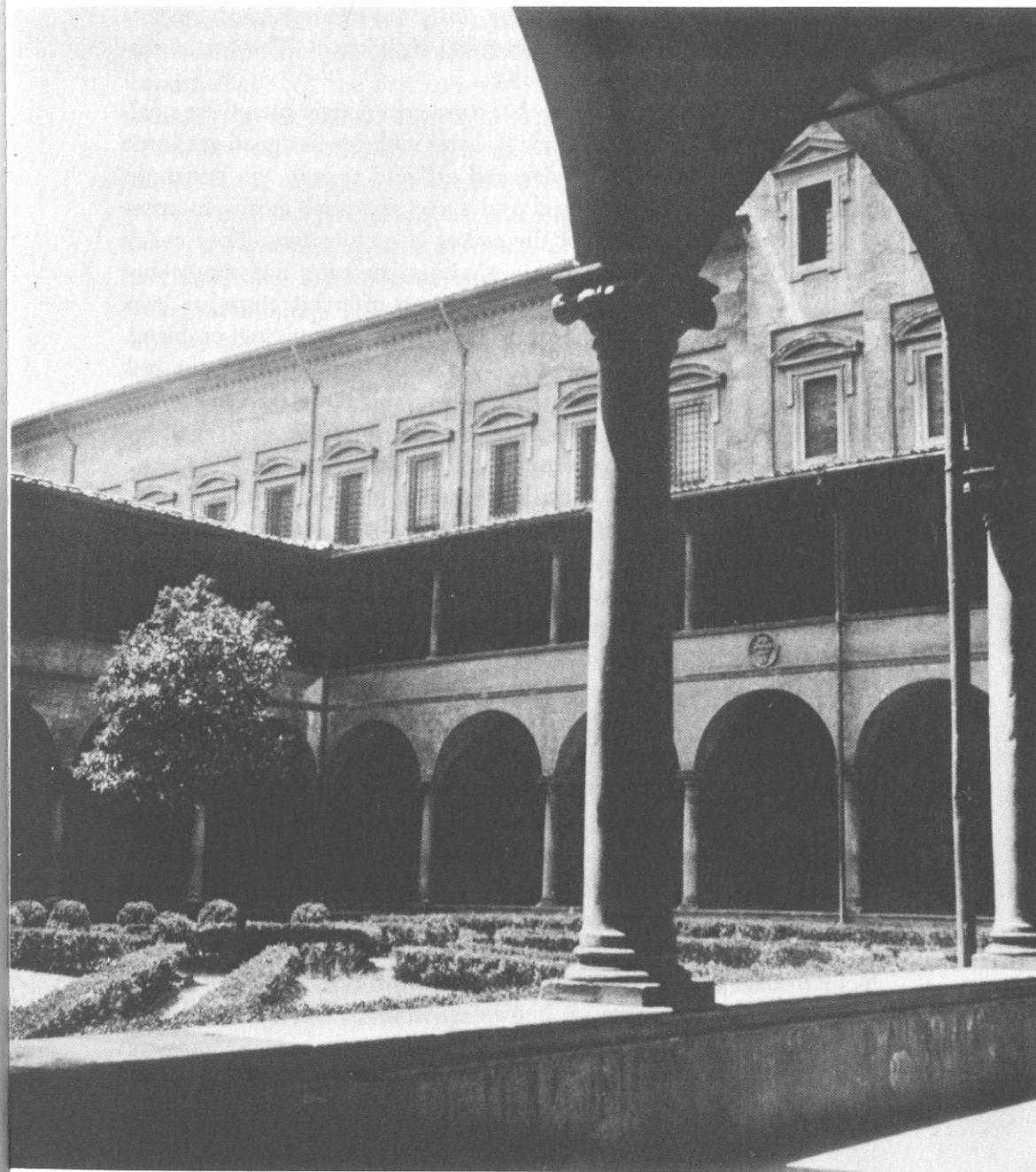
Buildings are transmitters of life. They transmit the life of the past into the lives of the future—if they are more than mere shelter and more than borrowed form. A people without architecture transmits little of its culture. Each phase of its history ends with the death of the generation that created it. The narrow realm of Justinian's Byzantine state, for instance, became the cultural link between Antiquity and Medieval Europe through its architecture, while the vast empire of Alaric, the Goth, standing at the same threshold of history, is no more than a dim legend. Forgotten is Suleiman the Magnificent, while his much weaker contemporary, Francis I, survives as the style-giver of the French Renaissance. The lack of architectural self-expression of many great peoples terminated their day in history beyond recall. A culture then asserts its place in the annals of mankind most forcefully through the acknowledged contribution its leaders made to architecture: classified, catalogued, and evaluated by scholars with platonical detachment from its contemporary function. But beyond this pedigreed "history in stone" exists an architecture that transmits a different aspect of life. It testifies to the aspirations of the group. Its buildings tell not the official but the private history of a culture—the unending struggle for physical and spiritual survival of anonymous men. Indigenous buildings speak the vernacular of the people.

In an age that has become myopic from gazing at the stupendous proportions of its technological structures, Americans are blind to the wealth of anonymous buildings in their own hemisphere. A traditional inferiority complex searches for architectural significance, even in Folk Architecture, in Asia and Europe rather than close to home. A Cottswold cottage or a Japanese Shoin house seems more interesting and instructive than a woven Indian hut or Pennsylvania-Dutch stone work. The romantic glow of the ancient and the far-away has dimmed for us the achievements of our own untutored and intuitive architectural geniuses. Their names are unknown and their work unclassified. It is this very anonymity that gives special weight to their work because it was preserved for no other reason than its adequacy beyond the life of the builder. It fulfilled an *ideal standard*.

Our own highly complicated way of life has produced architectural standards based on different values than those of pre-industrial times. These standards are concerned less and less with design and more and more with technology. Artificial needs, pitched by promotion, have obscured the fact that there is no progress in architecture, only progress in mechanical equipment. The Industrial Revolution has greatly improved man's physical environment. It is more comfortable to live in an air-conditioned apartment than in a pit-house, and more hygienic to use a toilet than a privy; but architecture, as the realization of man's search for anchorage in the current of time, is non-progressive. It develops not in a graphic curve but in cycles, as do all things of the mind and the heart. The "utility core" of a contemporary glass house that invades the living room with kitchen activities, or the thirty-story dwelling hive that invades the privacy of marriage with the noises of other lives, would have seemed as regressive to a Renaissance family as a Piano Nobile or a Minstrel Gallery seems to a modern family.

An architectural cycle has reached its high point when the architect has fulfilled the causal needs and aspirations of his own times in a design that is serviceable and timelessly beautiful (Plate 1). These might seem big words, applicable only to historical buildings of acknowledged fame. Yet the best among anonymous buildings in the

1. CLOISTERS OF SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE, ITALY



New World carry the same message. They are triumphant statements of architectural service and architectural significance. They are transmitters of life (Frontispiece).

But the value of vernacular architecture goes deeper than these qualities of adequate expression which it shares with pre-designed academic buildings. In addition to service and esthetic appeal, the structures built by settlers in a new land can serve as visual means to come closer to an understanding of the causes of architecture. They are in the actual meaning of the term primitive, meaning not simple but *original*. This concern with the original roots of architecture has been attacked as a romantic evasion of contemporary building problems. The fact remains, however, that the basic task of the builder, the task which distinguishes him from the engineer and the contractor, is still the sheltering of man, his work and his possessions in structures that provide spiritual as well as material gratifications.

The architect of today has a hard time holding on to this mission. He is challenged and confused at every turn by technology, economy, and a waning commitment of the public to cultural and esthetic values. There was a time when houses were built by unchallenged and unconfused architects whose ambition was total service to man. To look at their solutions might provide a much-needed inspiration without which no creative work, large or small, is possible. It might confirm the beleaguered architect in his calling as the artificer of form and space for the sheltering of body and soul. The academies are closed. The great unifying ideas of homogeneous societies no longer supply a natural common denominator. The architect of today is on his own. His search for a re-definition of his role between function and expression must focus on technology *and* the human equation. Wotton, some 300 years ago, spoke of the architect as "a diver into causes." It is he and no one else who must justify serviceable structure through the architectural idea. And this idea, this *first cause of architecture as shelter*, was and is the separation of human environment from natural environment.

Separation from nature has become easy enough. Natural forces are countered by technological forces, from earth-moving equipment to air conditioning, but the first cause of domestic architecture is still the same. Rampant natural environment as the perpetual threat to man's self-willed order has been replaced by industrial environment which threatens the matrix of human life with the same forces of chaos and extinction as did jungle, sea, sky and volcano. To provide *the home as an ideal standard* is still the architect's first cause, no matter how great and rewarding are his other contributions to monumental and technological building. The delineation of the place where man can grow, in spite of the dehumanizing forces of mechanization and de-personalization, must be the concern of the architect. He has to fight for it with the same fierce determination with which the land settler cleared his place to live in the wilderness. As those builders of old, the architect of today has to create *an anonymous architecture for the anonymous men* of the Industrial Age. Without new environmental standards provided by architecture the anonymous multitude will be unable to retain an at-homeness on this factory-strewn earth, and its morale will be broken.

What then is a man-made environment? The term environment itself is ambiguous, having lost its proper identity and serving all definitions with impartial imprecision. As victims of perpetual self-analysis, we have become used to speaking quite meaninglessly of conscious and subconscious environment, of environments economical, political, collective, individual, creative, oppressive, controlled, religious, and a dozen others. But the root of the word "environment" is quite simple: "to veer around," to define by circumambulation that much of the earth's surface as lies within reach of individual man. The only "environmental responses" our pre-analytical forebears knew were provided by the actual physical space they lived in "as the logical condition for the existence of bodies" as Euclid put it. In this primordial space *homo sapiens* had no more rights than any other animal. He was organism among organisms in the unending cycle of

conception, growth and death, weaker than most of his fellow animals, without fur and feather and the cyclical instinct of hibernation. He could not make himself invisible like the snow hare, nor secure his offspring in a pouch while foraging for food, nor loosen barbed quills from his back for defense. He needed shelter to protect his warm-blooded offspring and maintain the one possession no other animal had: FIRE. Perhaps it was this flame that lighted his evolutionary way. It kept him awake and scheming while the contented creatures slept. The possession of thermal energy outside his body metabolism was possibly the stimulus that separated the worst-equipped primate from the undistinguished generic mass. He started to develop in himself that which was specific. Dimly he anticipated himself as an individual, and his gains as lasting instead of as merely sustaining. No achievements in the milleniums to come would ever match the magnitude of this development toward a man-made social environment.

Nature, it has been said, abhors a vacuum, but she abhors even more the three concepts on which hinged the genesis of the architectural evolution: *economy*, *diversity*, and *permanence*. Economy is alien to Nature. She is a wasteful progenitress. The continuation of life is guaranteed by sheer over-production. New matter crowds upon decay in wanton abundance. Only the maintenance of human life is based on economy, the first premise of which is the organization and upkeep of planned resources.

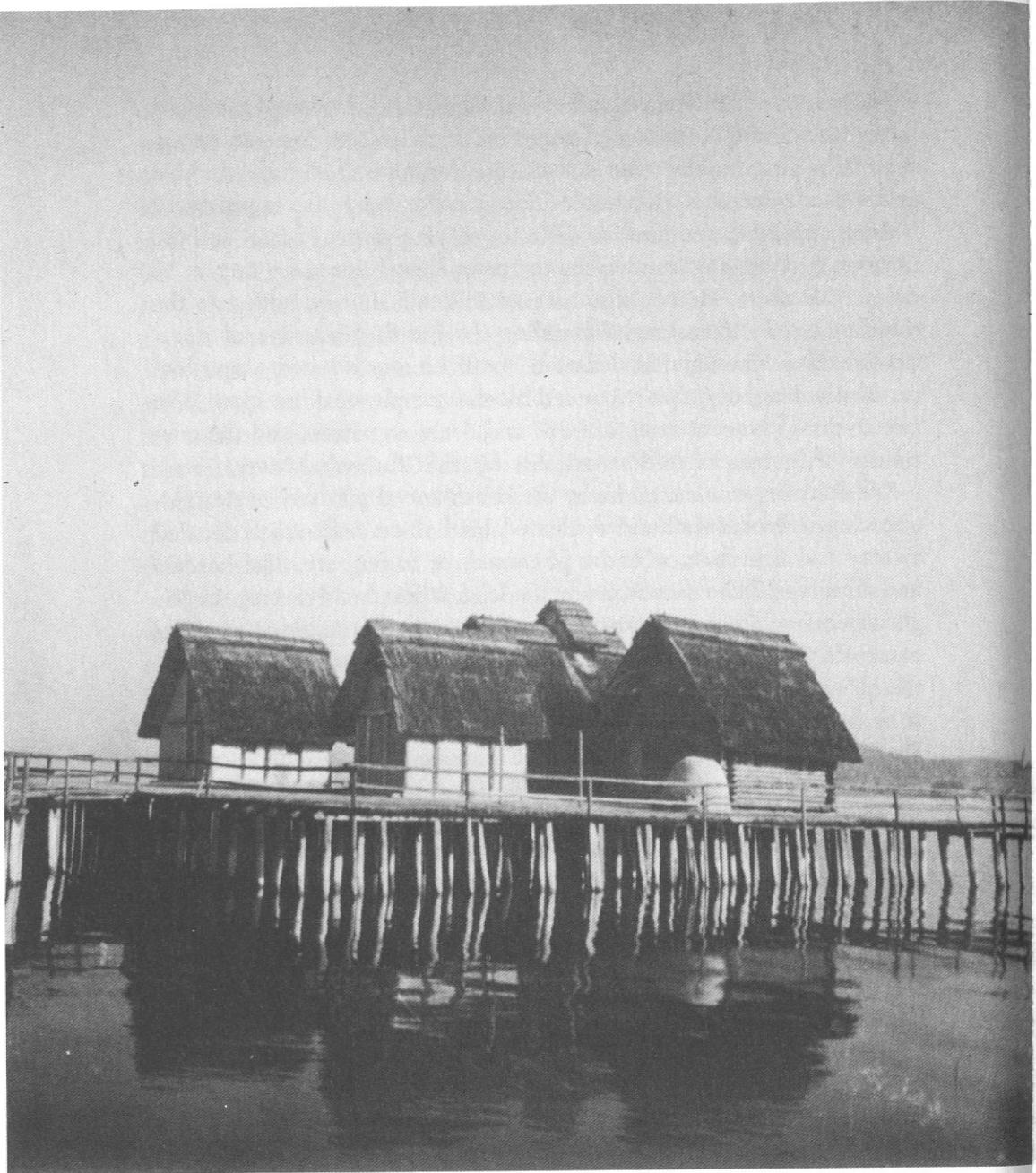
There is no diversity in the natural group. Every organism in its natural state is species, subject to generic law. Nothing is singular phenomenon. Exceptionality if it occurs is not exempt from cyclical laws; for on the lower levels of social intelligence the herd destroys the non-typical specimen. The human being, in contrast, gradually came to acknowledge non-uniformity within the laws of the group. Just as no two human skeletons are exactly identical, so each shelter, no matter how primitive, expresses in some detail a specific, non-collective need.

But it was the claim to permanence that flung the boldest challenge at natural law. The first Paleolithic man who rubbed two stones

together to produce fire, instead of waiting for the accidental provision by lightning or spontaneous combustion, took on Nature as an antagonist. The first builder who constructed for himself a more durable protection than the vulnerable skin provided by an improvident Nature, opened the contest between the staying power of man and the transience of organic matter. In the most literal sense, he dug in to defend his claim. He could not liquidate death, but he added to the three material dimensions of building the fourth dimension of duration in time. Through the house he built he was assured a spiritual survival in his group that surpassed his meagre physical life span. Like two streams, the continuity of birth and decay in nature, and the continuity of human aspiration run side by side through history.

We don't know when and why the knock-kneed pit dweller straightened himself, observed and evaluated his habitat and either decided to stay and transform what he possessed, or to migrate. The herders and farmers of the Neolithic made another decisive step in the genesis of architecture. Instead of submitting to an *intrinsic* environment, they adapted a *selective* environment to human needs. Where the primordial surroundings proved unsuitable for human control, tribes set out in search of adaptable conditions. The appearance of the Semites in Mesopotamia, the Indo-Europeans in India and Greece, the Mongols in America, are a few examples of the drive toward a selective environment.

The ability of the settler to construct a complex and lasting shelter on alien ground was based on a proficiency, denied to the beast, and uniquely human; man could turn natural obstacles into assets. Alpine settlers built on the very surface of the glacial lakes (Plate 2). Mesopotamians transformed such unlikely building materials as river mud, reed and pitch into Ziggurats. The Eskimo survived by the very substance—snow—that should have defeated him biologically. With infinite humility the Neolithic settler adjusted himself to his selected environment, and with infinite cunning he imposed on it the concepts of man. Like a lover who delights in the discovery of more beauty in his love, he sought out the best features of location, material, and

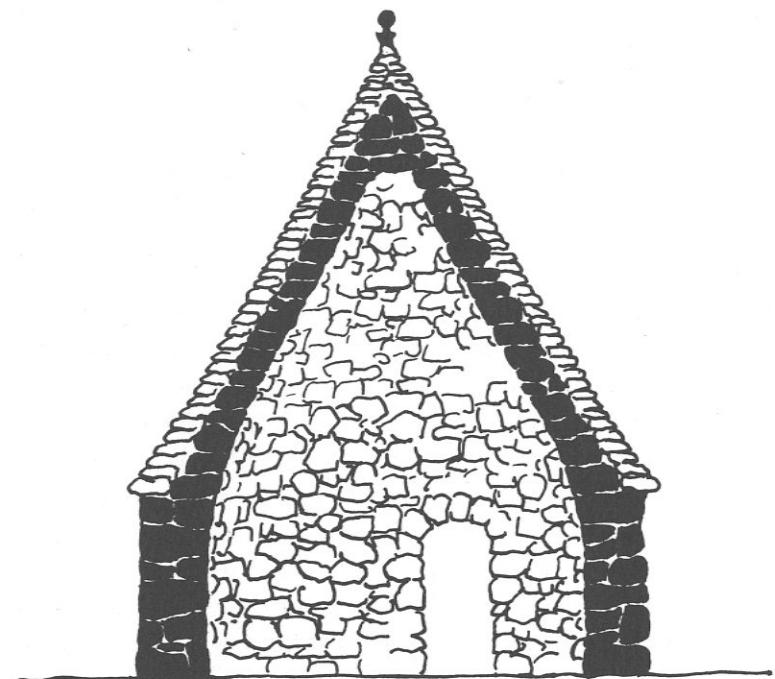


2. RECONSTRUCTED NEOLITHIC LAKE DWELLING, LAKE CONSTANCE, GERMANY

climate to serve his purpose. Each designed structure in a selected and adapted environment separates once and for all that which is human from that which is natural. It was from this premise of purpose versus chaos that the architecture of man received its logic.

More decisive than this material progress was the growing self-consciousness of man, an awareness that he had endured through the pre-eminence of his brain. By evaluating his place in the creative scheme, he became conscious of his own measure and the magnitude of his achievement. It was this recognition of himself as a carrier of ultimate purpose that scaled down the gigantic images of the cave paintings to the realistic proportions of the New Stone Age. At the same point in history at which the settler gained control over nature he also gained control over the dual spheres of physical and spiritual forces. With this control starts the actual history of architecture as being predominantly *a selection of means and meanings in deliberately planned environments*. The confinement of the potent spirit to a place of worship would have seemed a futile undertaking to the Old Stone Age man. In his pre-artistic world everything at all times could contain the Real Presence, but man the settler learned to distinguish between purposes. To the divine spirit which in the magic-animistic past had favored the beast over the cave dweller, he now gave human characteristics. The settler separated his environments. The spiritual forces were relegated to the sacred district while in his earthly habitat he himself exercised control. Gradually he learned to think in three environmental dimensions—natural, human, and divine—and he never confused one with another.

The common people of Assyria left the winged monsters, the imported cedar logs and the multicolored terra cotta bricks to the sacred dwellings of their divine rulers. They constructed habitable space from the very earth on which they stood. Even a Boeotian peasant knew a temple when he saw one. The columned portico on a nineteenth century country house would have seemed to him as nonsensical and presumptuous as if he had been asked to plow his field in the ceremonial garb of a priest. From nature the land cultivator expected the



3. DIAGRAMMATIC SECTION OF AN ITALIAN TRULLI AND AN IRISH CAIRN



raw materials of shelter and sustenance; from his house he expected fitness and identification with the self and the group; from his temple he expected divine protection for his unending contest with nature. All three were essential parts of a planned environment that was man's only guarantee against chaos, the antithesis of human effort.

These then were the basic causes for the development of architecture: Diversity of form and function; economy of resources and upkeep; duration as material value and spiritual symbol. These causes created the anonymous architecture of Europe. The corbelled Trulli of Southern Italy, for instance, and the corbelled Cairns of Ireland, show closely related responses to given environmental conditions (Plate 3); but in addition to similarities, there are essential differences, based on specific circumstances. The Mediterranean climate demanded a heat-reflecting whitewash that is missing in the fog-bound North where an overgrowth of turf and shrub gives additional cold protection. The ancient building history of the South furnished the skill to construct a double-layered wall while the primitive North achieved only a single corbelled dome of dry-set stone. It is flared in the middle to gain stability which in Italy is assured through mortar and stucco.

The embattled peasant cultures of Europe were gradually forced to equalize their mode of living and building. The dire necessity of organized defense and mutual aid all but wiped out the open land settlement. The closed agricultural community, subservient to a protective overlord and a fixed spiritual dogma, became the predominant form of existence (Plate 4). The spontaneous response of the anonymous builder to the environmental challenge ceased. He submitted to *tradition* as the perpetuation of collective principles, regardless of their contemporary value.

This tyranny of traditional ideas was to a great extent cast off by the migrants who left Europe for the New World. They carried with them no desire to perpetuate traditions which had failed to provide the good life. Their most valuable import was *brauch*. This is a German word which can be translated approximately with the English words "usage" and "observance." In connection with building it signifies the

4.

STEIN-AM-RHEIN,
SWITZERLAND



memory of the best past performance applied to new environmental demands. While the immigrants who founded the cities of the New World based their architecture mostly on the perpetuation of traditional ideas, and so created—at least in their official buildings—a nightmare of eclectic vulgarity, the land-takers planned their human and vegetative resources with the same care and cunning as their Neolithic ancestors. They staked the security of a limited environs and traditional observance on a tentative promise of prosperity and expansion. It was only by self-confidence in their selective judgment of new environment and old *brauch* that they could hope to survive. The heaped stone ring, a daubed wattle screen around a fire pit, or palisades of undressed timber or cacti (Plate 5), serving the earliest immigrants in their semi-nomadic existence, differed yet little from the nest, the hive and the burrow of the beast. It was a specifically human intelligence which did not limit itself to gravity and climate but created architecture by modifying that which is inherited and transforming that which is given.

5. CACTUS HUT, OTOMI
REGION, HIDALGO,
MEXICO





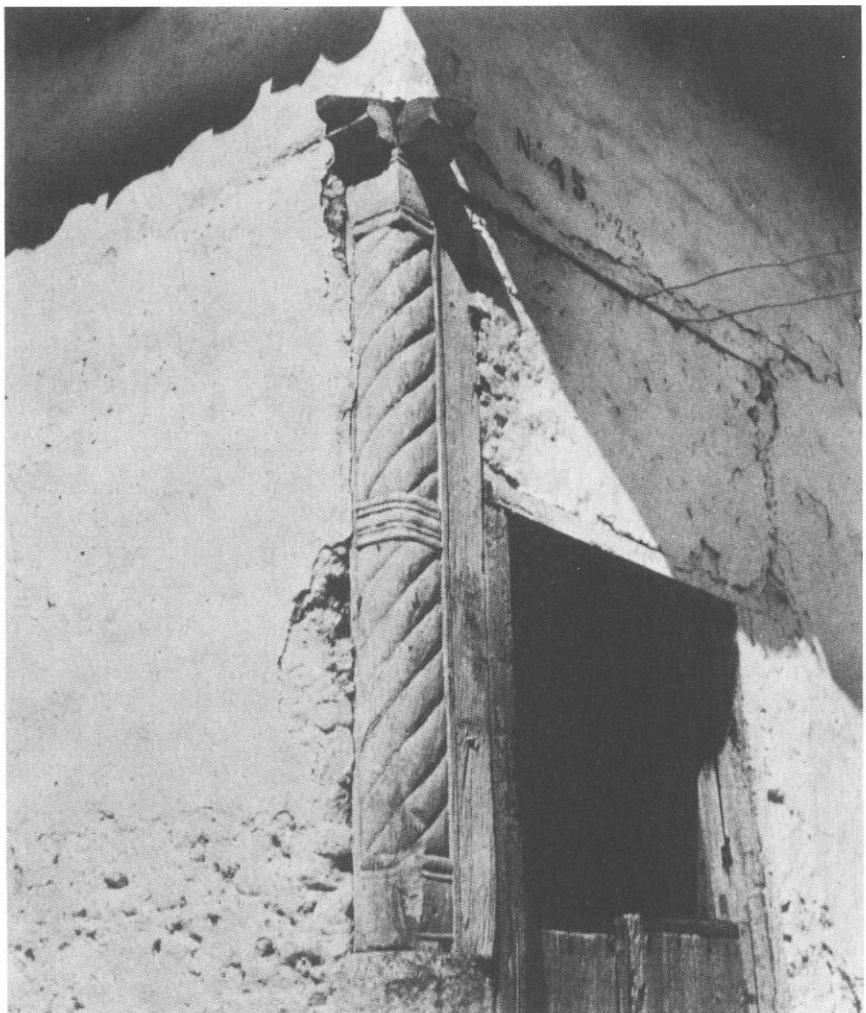
6. WINERY, RUSSIAN COLONY, SONOMO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

A Russian wine grower in Sonoma County, California (Plate 6), for instance, who had followed the wagon train of Russian occupation in the early 19th century, combined the *brauch* of his origin with the demands of his new profession. He built his *ferma* in paled timber construction, customary throughout Russia. His gate towers have the octagonal "tent roof" of the Kremlin's Trinity Tower or the church at Kolomenskoe, correct to the brass spike, commemorating the tent pole, but here serving as lightning rod. The peculiar flat arch with dentil ends goes back to 1160 and the Bogoliubski Palace, but is eminently suitable here to admit team and wagon. It is built on the principle of the barrel maker's craft in bent wood construction, as are the towers with hoops of wine casks and slim uprights that are actually barrel staves.

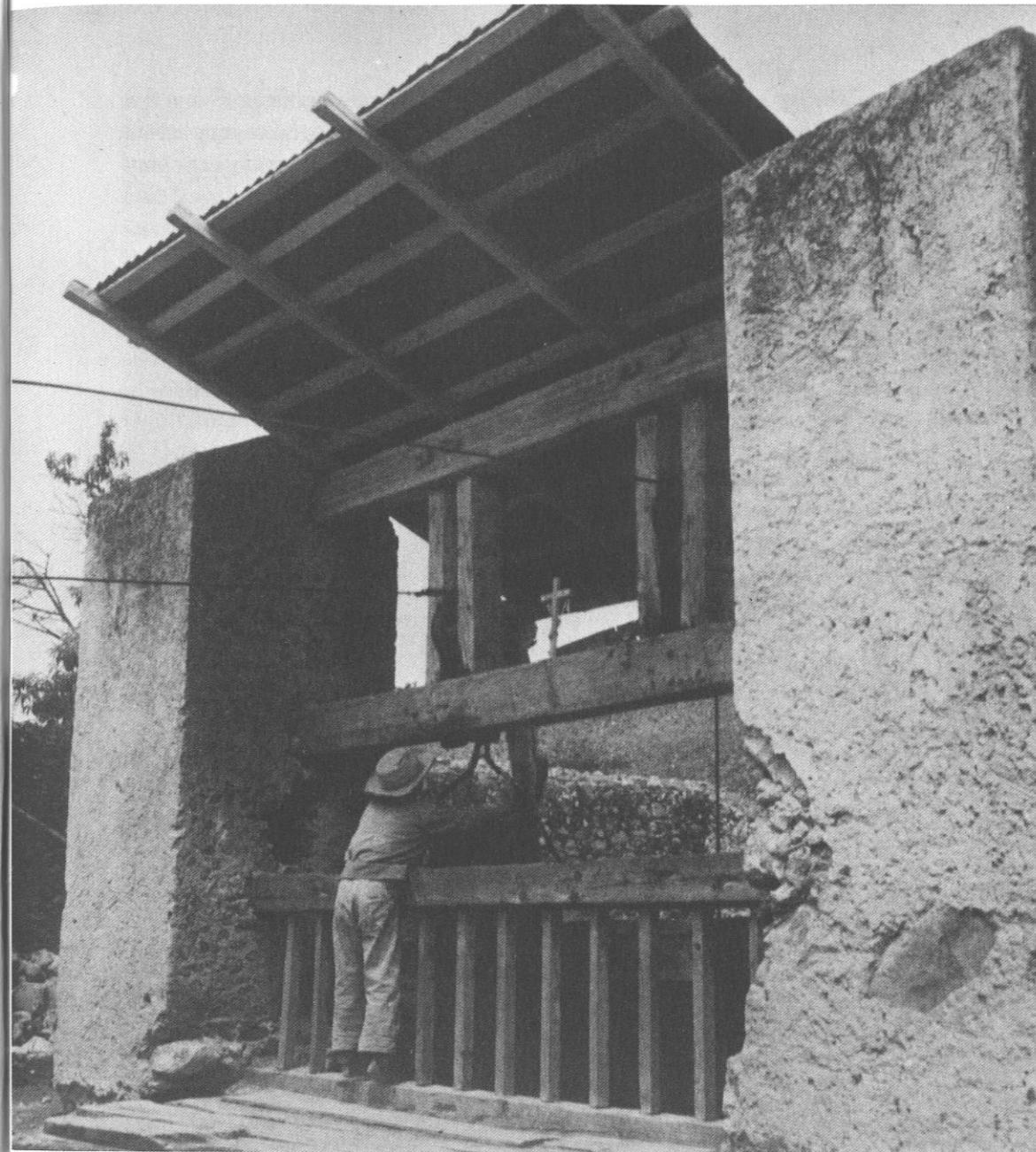
The tension between the mechanical and climatic forces lined up against man, and the selected materials and skills countering this natural resistance, gives to anonymous buildings their beauty and their strength. A structure stands because man wills it so in spite of its mass that tends to fall. All architecture is, of course, so conceived. All material is subject to the forces of gravity and is upheld by human construction; and all walls provide climatic protection. But the chief claim of building technology is its theoretical universality. Calculation and scientific climatology have made building construction independent of architectural design. The behavior of a concrete wall is no longer the concern of the man who pours it, and any desired climate can be produced within four prefabricated walls anywhere on earth. In settler houses, on the other hand, every foot of ground, every stone, brick or piece of timber, every proportion, opening and wall angle is coordinated to answer to particular, never quite duplicated, challenges of site and gravity, of climate and human comfort.

Spontaneous building cannot be separated with a precise dividing line from technological and academic design. Simplified academic and technological elements do occur in anonymous architecture. They usually are an afterthought of a younger generation, moving gradually out of the settler pattern into an urban way of thinking, demonstrated

here in Plate 7. A carved corner column, echo of the baroque church in town, has been attached to a rubble and daub house in Chiapas, Mexico. Other concessions are those made to improved methods of husbandry as the wire cable on a Mexican village well that has replaced the ancient sisal rope (Plate 8).



7. CARVED CORNER COLUMN, CHIAPAS, MEXICO



8. MEXICAN VILLAGE WELL

"The group," wrote Henri Bergson, "must not be defined by the possession of certain characteristics but by the tendency to emphasize them." It is this special emphasis, the *leitmotif* of diversity, economy and permanence, that relates settler architecture from one rim of this continent to the other. Its hundred variations tell the story of conquering the natural chaos of a new world.

This folklore of building will be meaningless to those who define architecture either as pure esthetics, expressed in Le Corbusier's poetic exclamation: "Architecture is the play of light—supreme and magnificent—on significant form"; or to those who consider it predominantly a branch of modern technology, believing that "engineering will absorb architecture"¹ and that the architect's function can only be defined in the turgid phraseology of the technocrat: "catalyzing cooperative and potential resources into realigned and realizable technology and management strategy, providing demonstrable increase in performance increments per units of invested resources."²

Between these two extremes there is a growing awareness that architecture is neither the sophisticated libertinism of the artist who is responsible only to his own genius, nor the simple-minded mechanical objectivity of the slide rule, no matter how scientifically disguised. The variety of problems, inherent today in the architectural task, makes it more than ever a selective and coordinative function. It is a challenge of responsible choices with the ultimate aim of total *coherence*. A good vernacular structure, being eminently selective, coordinative and coherent, is of similar architectural importance.

This importance is insignificant compared to the gigantic building projects of industry and communities. Factories, office skyscrapers, mammoth schools and hospitals dominate the architectural scene. Yet, vast numbers of our population depend for their happiness on the qualities that make non-urban buildings good architecture. Our big cities are exploding rapidly. From Maine to San Diego, "developments"

¹ J. Hudnut, "The Engineer's Esthetics." (Architectural Record, January 1956).

² Buckminster Fuller, "Considerations for an Architectural Curriculum." (Student Publication of the North Carolina State College, October 1954).

are crawling along the highways, depositing along their destructive trail an unending string of inadequate and unserviceable speculation houses, lacking in site orientation, durability, beauty, privacy and functionality. For each truly contemporary house there shoot from the defenseless ground a dozen boxes, held together by no more than Federal Loan Certificates (Plate 9). They are to serve today's land



9. REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT, NEW YORK STATE

settlers who, like birds, follow an instinct for survival in a better climate than that provided by the modern city: "The chimerical dream of individual liberty that obsesses those millions who want to walk once more with their feet in the green grass of nature"³ has sent the disillusioned migrant in search of a personalized physical and social environment. These dreamers do not listen to statistics, offered by planners and theoreticians, that the individual detached house is as obsolete as the shaving mug and as disproportionate to their financial resources as the Hope Diamond. *Home ownership is an act of faith with man*, and, as all matters of emotion, is impervious to logic. It is a dangerous fallacy, cherished by most successful architects, that by ignoring its existence the small low-cost house will vanish from the earth. Its ugly imprint on the landscape is largely due to the lofty assertion that no architect is needed for its design, as if a doctor were to attend only to the births of future board chairmen while a midwife were good enough for truck drivers and stenographers.

According to a Public Housing Administration report, quickly outdated because there is a constant increase in the quoted figures,⁴ a minimum of 7 million dwellings out of an existing 46 million in the United States are substandard and must be replaced in the immediate future. Our national income has risen so much that a 300% increase in the demand for \$22,000 homes has been created which so far has been met by only a 30% increase in production. Without any attempt at reorientation of design standards, this combination of decay and need plays into the hands of the building promoter who has no inhibitions about ruining the American landscape for the sake of rapid investment returns. He knows what to make of the unhappy coincidence of architectural neglect and romantic ignorance by dangling, for instance, before the eyes of the new land settler a pasteboard replica of the Abraham Hasbrook House, built in 1712 (Plate 10) as if this were what today's family needs. For its location and times this Huguenot home was a marvel of functionality and good design. Its exceptional

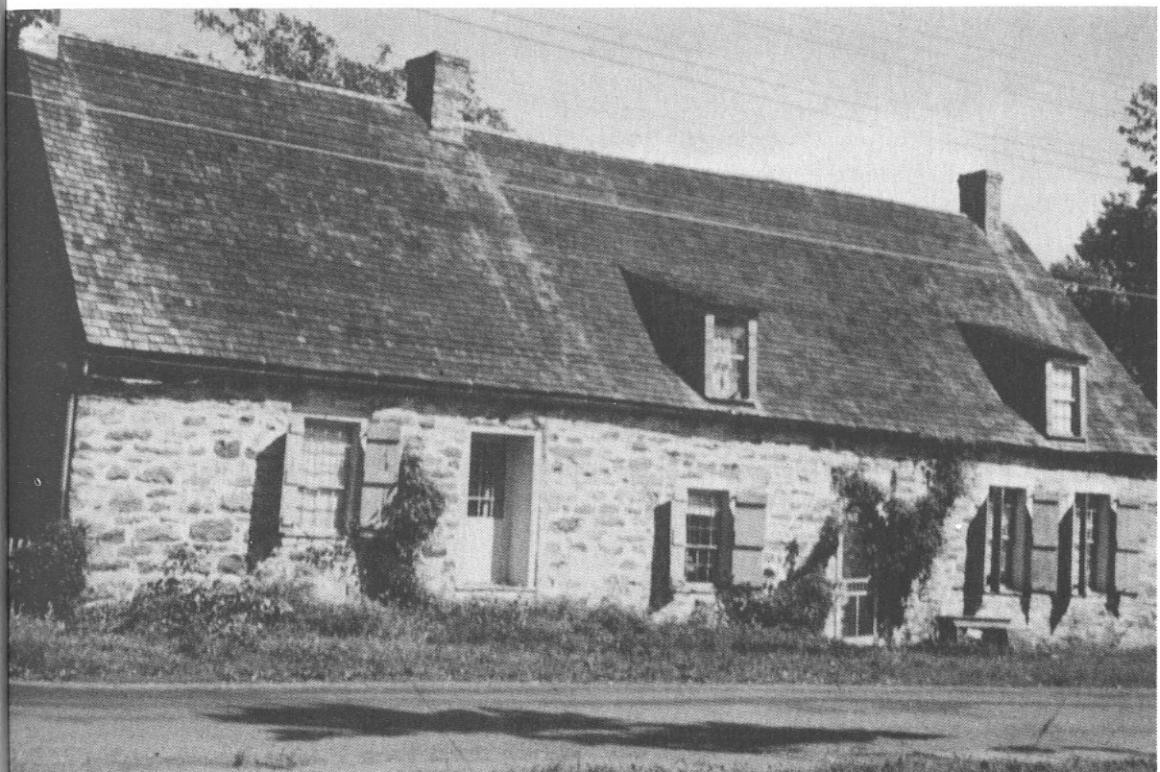
³ Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*. (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947).

⁴ National Municipal Revue, October 1955.



10. LEVITTOWN SPECULATION HOUSE

10. ABRAHAM HASBROOK HOUSE, NEW PALTZ, N. Y.



length of over sixty feet was due to an outsized kitchen where weekly cockfights at high bets scandalized the neighboring Puritans and entertained the French Patentees. The small window openings, flush with the roof plate to save on masonry, the steep roof pitch, the two feet stone walls were all adaptations of the medieval European farmhouse to a new environment of heavy precipitation and snowfall, poor heating provisions and unsafe territory open to Indian attack. It would be only logical if the speculator, disguised as benefactor, would offer together with television antenna, useless attic, and imitation wood shingles, a unionized detachment of attacking Seminoles to justify his fraud.

Architects of reputation have approached the small house problem via industrial prefabrication. Together with learned treatises on their inevitability and beauty, factory-built houses of plywood panels, plastic, sprayed rubber balloons, geodesic triangles and processed bamboo sprouts have been offered as the "home of tomorrow" (Plate 11). The fact still remains that the anonymous homeseeker will settle for a shoddy illusion of a designed home rather than for "a demonstrable increase in performance increments." Industrially produced containers, lined up on a bulldozed furrow, are too reminiscent of the city tenement he has fled, no matter how famous the name of the inventor or how original the construction material. And the savings are small, because even an ignorant prospective buyer gradually comprehends that the major expense of a house lies not with its walls and roof but with the lot, foundation and mechanical equipment.

It is not the repetition of type to which the home buyer objects in prefabricated houses. If he did, all our developments would stand empty. He has an instinctual aversion to their gross ugliness that does not permit even a tenuous illusion of designed environment. The history of domestic building shows that diversity in similarity is workable and attractive, provided that high standards of construction and taste are maintained. The old quarters of Savannah, Charleston, Germantown and Salem furnish proof. Plate 12 shows an example of early 19th century houses in Cap Haitien. The success of the historical

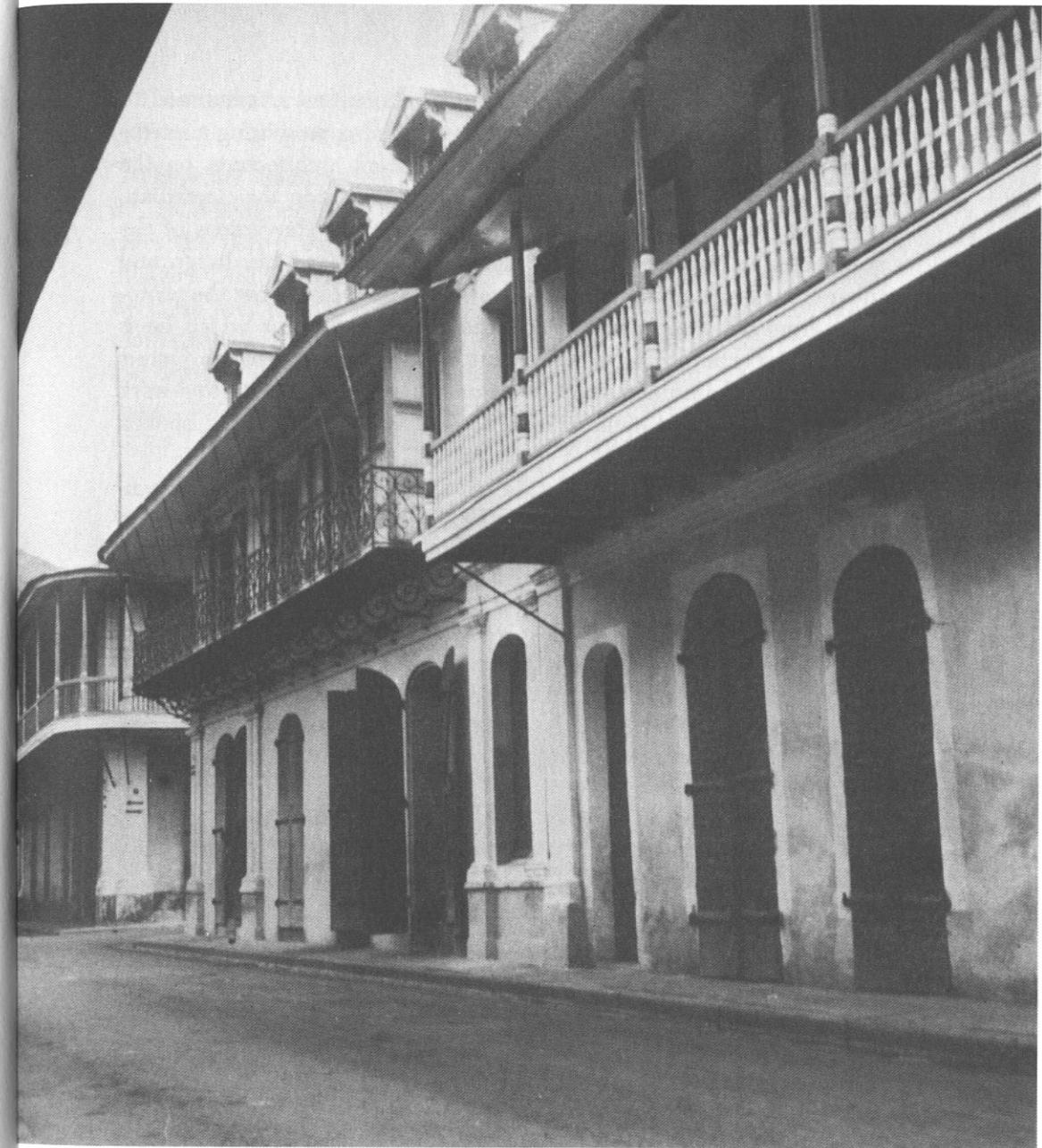


11. Dymaxion House by Buckminster Fuller, erected in North Carolina, 1940

row house lies in an acknowledgment of physically uniform requirements, inherent in man's biological sameness, and of psychologically variable requirements, inherent in man's individuality. The practical premise of building technology and the automation of household functions is taken for granted today. No one advocates a new primitivism of construction and equipment, but it is a degrading paucity of professional ability in the architect if he champions industrial prefabrication, disguised as social philosophy, for the sole purpose of quick investment returns. To strip down life to the "rationalized" provisions of a standard box reduces the human being to the sole aspect of biological uniformity. The individual is denied his superiority and it is this denial that has produced a curious reversal of the role of architecture. Where before a man selected or built a house to fit his unique needs; now he is urged by the most famous architects of the century to contort his whole existence to fit the provisions of the mass-produced technological shelter.

It has been argued that the study of historical prototypes—academic or indigenous—will not help the situation but might contaminate pure modern design with imitation. Imitation, it is true, transforms the past into a junk yard where parts of discontinued models can be picked up for re-use. It is not imitation that justifies an intense study of the past. It is inspiration that is urgently needed. Inspiration is an indispensable element of all growth, an intuitive response to related problems that are successfully solved. It derives from the eminent prototype an understanding of that which is timeless as against that which is timebound. Imitation concerns itself only with external form, inspiration with the total concept. Every creative effort is a metamorphosis of the spirit that must be fed on the admired precedent. It betrays the immaturity of an arrogant age to hail modern architecture as being "not a branch of an old tree but a new growth coming directly from the roots."

A fruitful appreciation of concept and quality in historical architecture is made easier for the layman in anonymous rather than in pre-designed buildings. Even the simplest settler house in its own setting



12. STREET IN CAP HAITIEN, HAITI

furnishes concrete answers to human aspirations that are common to mankind. It is *sinnfaellig* (evident to the senses) representing a microcosmos of the totality of life. The best modern architecture, on the other hand, has the measure of its perfection outside the immediate reality of the building itself. The development and convictions of the architect who built it should be known to understand his design and the inevitable imperfections in realization. Only by knowing the prototypes from which he evolved and the ultimate goal for which he is set, can the extent of his achievement be evaluated. These are factors open only to the trained mind while an indigenous and intuitive work of architecture is, as Goethe said of folk art, "like a word of God, spoken this instant."

In spite of all-out attempts to align architecture with the contemporary ideal of "quick turnover and ready replacement" we have to face the fact that house designing, like child bearing, is a creative activity that cannot be accelerated without destructive results. The consequences of both continue to reach into the future, whether what was conceived is permanently adequate and beautiful or permanently defective and ugly. Every human being and every building exert environmental influences beyond the control and lifetime of their creator. It is this unbreakable tie with the future that makes the historical vista imperative. Because "only by taking on infinitesimally small units for observation and attaining to the art of integrating them with the whole can we arrive at the laws of history."⁵ In anonymous architecture, these units of observation concern themselves with four aspects which emphasize the contrast to pre-designed or technological building:

- One: The unsupplemented use of native building materials and local construction skills.
- Two: Planning and massing as the result of specific unduplicable functional requirements and site conditions, regardless of symmetry or generally accepted taste canons.

⁵ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*.

- Three: Absence of any ornamentation that is not part of the structure.
- Four: Identity of enclosing form and enclosed space.

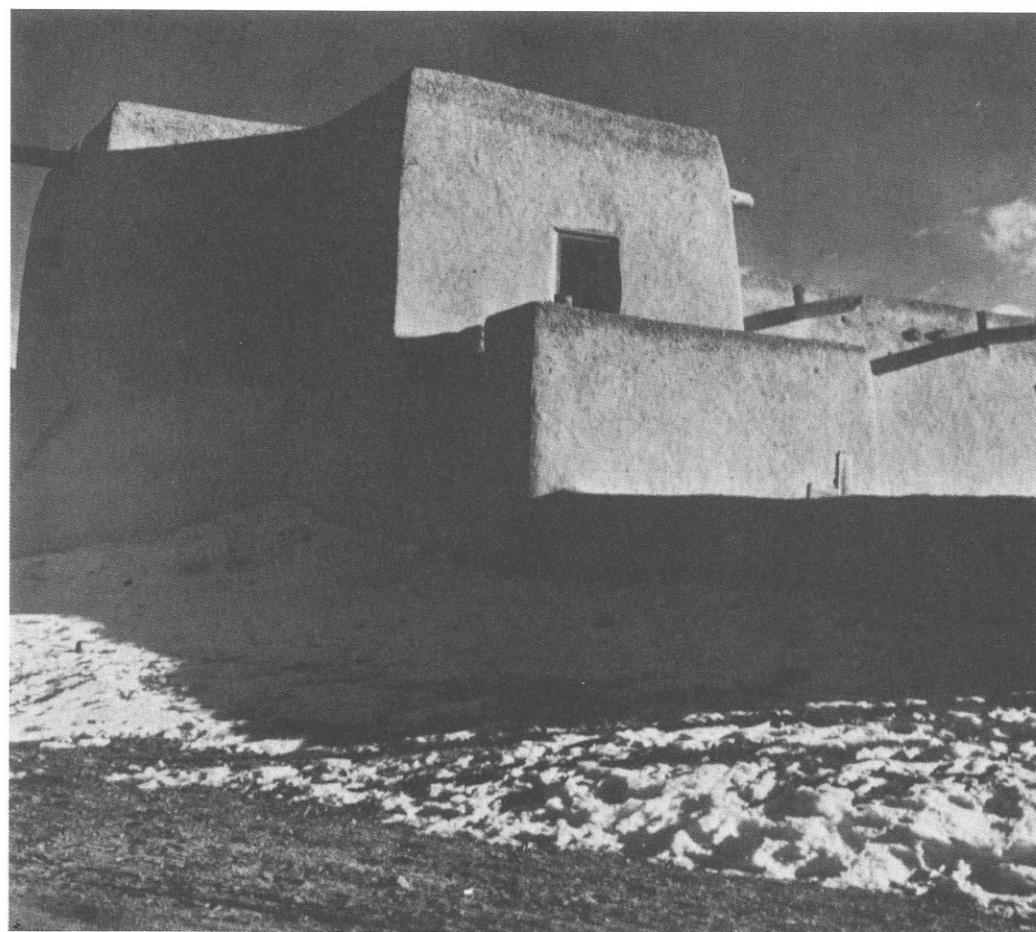
These are characteristics which can also be found in some modern designed buildings, but it is the purity of their expression that indicates the native builder. The clearest distinction between European village architecture and that of the American settlements is exemplified by these four points. In the Old World the application of decorative motifs, religious or secular, stressed submission to the church by invoking through signs and symbols divine protection, and the anonymous design repeated, almost automatically, traditional patterns of stylized forms (Plate 13). There also develops in post-medieval village and

13. WALL DECORATIONS IN MITTENWALD, GERMANY



town houses a “classical” tendency, adhering to a strictly axial plan, regardless of interior space distribution (Plate 14). It was a conscious emulation of the taste of the ruling class. The anonymous builders of the New World had no state religion and no Palladio to go by. They spun the sheltering skin around the inner space like a cocoon. The plan can be read from the walls as if they were transparent (Plate 15).

14.
16TH CENTURY INN,
SWITZERLAND



15. CHURCH AT TRAMPAS, NEW MEXICO

Any attempt to present the existing wealth of vernacular buildings on this continent can be no more than an introduction, a mere sampling. Each example shown in this book is characteristic but it is not necessarily the best in existence. An unknown number of houses have never been recorded and are vanishing fast under the victorious bulldozer. They defy the cataloguing zeal of the historian. All classifications applied to anonymous architecture must remain arbitrary and unsatisfactory. It is the very nature of an intuitive work that it expresses all characteristics of its kind with faultless coherence. It was merely for the sake of concise presentation that the material was organized into three main groups, based on the principal criteria of *expression of site and climate, expression of form and function, expression of materials and skills*. These groups form the three sections of this book. They try to answer at least in part the where, why, and how of anonymous architecture.

part two

SITE AND CLIMATE

When we speak of a "desirable" building site, we usually mean *location*, related to supply centers, communication, and real estate values. *Site* is actually something else. It is part of the physiognomy of the earth, a combination of features that make a piece of land as distinctive as a human face. The reaction produced in the land-taker by these indigenous characteristics sharply separates the settler from the speculator. The speculator lines up bulldozers and cement mixers and then poses the challenge: "What can I do to the land?" The settler asked: "What can the land do for me?" Where we use technology to subdue nature, the settler reached the same goal by observation and coordination. Like a hunter he stalked the site. Gradually he came to know all its assets and shortcomings, and he coordinated them according to the image of the final settlement.

The land-taker of the New World never shared the intensely spiritual concept of Oriental people toward the site. Chinese "Wu Wei," the reverential passivity that will not disturb nature, was at all times alien to him; and he would have justly doubted modern site mysticism that tries to revive: "the ancient's thought that the vital assets (of the site) were spirits. By listening intently you can hear them miraculously breathe in their slumber. You may subtly awaken them to startling