

## Architecture

# Standing Room Only

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

MARBLEHEAD, Mass.

IT'S standing room only in this pre-Revolutionary town, but then, it always has been. "Old Town's" narrow streets were built up early, a clapboard-to-clapboard sequence of Colonial, Federal and Greek Revival houses of stern simplicity in the best New England tradition, to which little could be added or subtracted. Things have remained crowded, austere and beautiful for several hundred years.

It seemed as if age and density were a natural protection against anything except normal, evolutionary change. But Marblehead's closeness to Boston has inevitably made it a bedroom community and suburbia has expanded around its historic heart, bringing assorted domestic architectural atrocities common to the rest of the country. Density and demand have sent real estate prices zooming into the ludicrous range, with builders' banal worth \$30,000 jacked up to \$90,000 if it has any suggestion of a view. For \$100,000 upward you can get a rather nice waterfront place. There is no shame.

If there is a handkerchief of land anywhere, people build. Streets that seemed permanently settled into a close mix of classical and Victorian suddenly sprout intruders in someone's garden; speculators seize the edges of the town dump and the cemeteries. Zoning and historic controls are fairly recent concerns. The "sold" sign goes up before construction is finished, and the only way to get a historical property is to become a close friend and caretaker to a dying native.

The old houses are beauties and the new ones are bastards. Among the latter, the precut "colonial" model with overhanging, 17th-century-type second story for shooting Indians is very popular with traditionalists. For the more "progressive," there is quasi-modern. The developers' product has moved from the sinking-into-the-ground number, with a kind of half story at the bottom that looks as if its windows are just disappearing into the earth, permitting a story-and-a-half "decorative" phony pedimented entrance, to an extraordinary combination of fake mansards and lally columns.

The false mansard disease is the current epidemic in and out of town. It seems to have infected the entire northeast. It appears on everything from domestic to commercial structures, as a shingled (usually higgledy-piggledy imitation handmade) horizontal box topping supermarkets, gas stations and homes for the aged. The ever-proliferating roadside eating places, from pancake houses to "pubs," are all fake-mansarded on the outside and real plastic on the inside, food included. Shopping centers (mansarded) split and multiply where woodland stood. Roadside farm stands (no mansards) with native produce dwindle every year.

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This instant vernacular is not a builder's rational simplification of clearly understood, more aristocratic styles, as on the streets of historic Marblehead, for a result of logic and elegance. It is a builder's shrewd invention of a schlocky gimmick meant to evoke the older, legitimate vernacular with consummate shoddiness of execution and intent.

While building booms, traffic increases. Marblehead's one way, winding streets that accommodate nothing larger than a Volkswagen have always been a potential driver's nightmare. "Casual" country driving habits include wrong side of the street parking and blithe ignoring of "stop" signs. Private ways are like Route 128. Bucolic lanes have bumper-to-bumper parking. The town recommends bicycle use as an alternative to car use, and that compounds chaos.

As a gesture to order, at least for the lost and strayed, there is a travelers' information booth in the center of town. After several seasons when it was manned by students, the radical innovation was made this year of using senior citizens. Complaints have dropped, absenteeism on good beach days is no longer a problem, and the new staff is a mine of local lore. It may be the beginning of a trend. So much for the youth cult.

You have to be middle-aged, at least, in Marblehead to remember Abby May's homemade candies (caramels not made in damp weather). The shop gave way to a piz-

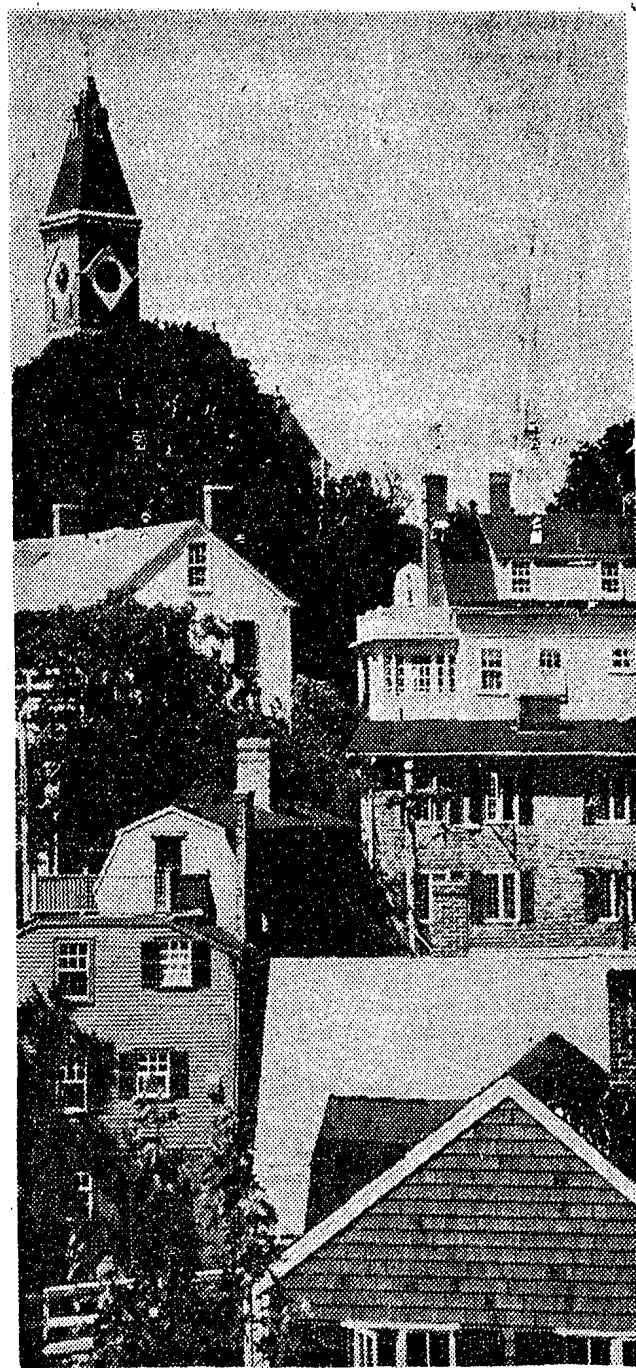
za parlor long ago. Cameron's local breads have been gone for many seasons, and the Bide-A-Wee restaurant, where little old ladies have come in vintage hats for luncheons of broiled scrod and grape-nuts pudding since time began, turned into a dog grooming shop this year. (The signs were clear when Bide-A-Wee succumbed to cake mix.) The old hardware store, where a night-blooming cereus on the sidewalk outside was a once-a-summer Marblehead nocturnal event, is now a craft handprint fabric shop. Boutiques proliferate.

But Marblehead is not without its bucolic aspects. There is a miniature farm next door to us, the source of neighborly contributions to our table, and animals have been depleting the vegetables. The owner, assisted by Marblehead's finest, spent several of summer's most glorious weeks trapping and shooting skunks. Try that under your window. Mornings dawned with an anxious inspection of the trap to see if an execution was imminent. The police arrived at breakfast time, lights flashing, guns at the ready. Not exactly one of your urban problems.

This was also the summer when it became next-to-impossible to get The New York Times. Other years brought it by slow freight, days late, to the local post office. Now it comes by plane and by truck, erratically and in insufficient numbers, but on the right day, to assorted stores, where it is snapped up as if news were going out of style. Chasing it daily keeps one from getting soft, and the gamble is exciting.

One suspects, from glimpses of an unprecedented influx of Beautiful People (all Times readers, no doubt) that the very worst may be happening to Marblehead: it may finally be getting chic. At the other end of the scale, the tourists who usually bypassed Marblehead are increasingly finding their way to its intimate waterfront in cruiser-size station wagons and Martian sport clothes.

They are also trekking to nearby Salem to line up en masse at the "Witch House," an over-reconstructed 17th-century landmark, complete with café curtains, at a corner marked by maximum



Garth Huxtable

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heat, seedy commercialism and an endless traffic impasse. There is little waiting at the handsome McIntyre and other historic houses in which the city abounds.

Salem, which now assiduously advertises itself as "historic Salem," has just as assiduously destroyed or sabotaged a good part of its past. Today it is a series of demolition sites, mudholes and dust-pockets, due to the final (?) "fruition" of its urban renewal plans.

Plagued by the common small-city problems of central business-district decay, insoluble traffic and the draining of the retail area by outlying shopping centers, Salem has been in the throes of urban renewal for 15 years, with a track record of doing everything wrong, and currently backtracking in a desperate attempt to do it right.

Some of the pieces that have been saved: the Peabody Museum's Japanese garden, originally scheduled to be eliminated for road extension, and the environs of the Bulfinch-style market, now getting brick paving and trees.

The pieces are still intact in Marblehead; they are just being elbowed briskly. The tiny gardens bloom brilliantly, the High Victorian red brick tower of Abbott Hall tops a low skyline of Federal and Grecian graces, and sunrises and sunsets are magical over one of the most breathtaking of small harbors, bridged by sailboats from shore to shore. A stroll along the streets (never on Sunday) is a lesson in history, art and taste, and the continuity that is genuine urban life. This is one of the wonder spots of the world, but the spoiling has begun.