Topics: Symbols, Aged and Altered
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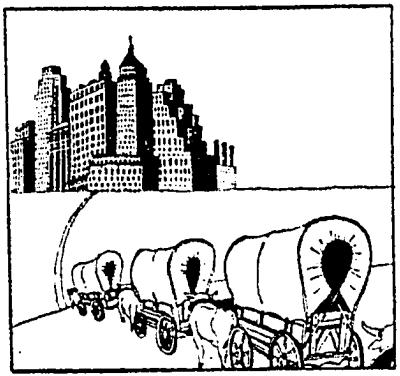
Topics

Symbols, Aged and Altered

Suddenly, last year, the American frontier was gone, It was, in fact, officially dispatched. Buried in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 was the repeal of the Homestead Act of 1862. For 114 years, the Homestead Act was both statute and symbol. It meant that there was always a future, as long as there was an American West; there was always fresh land for a fresh start. For anyone who could survive the hardships of the untamed frontier for five years, there was the promise, from the Government, of 160 acres of his own. Everything the frontier meant—freedom, optimism, the conquest of odds, the sober joy of possession—was part of homesteading, part of the country's youth and pride.

Today there is a new frontier—a reverse frontier—not on the land but in the cities. For a small sum, a number of our larger cities will sell to anyone who wants it a battered and abandoned house; and if he fixes it up and lives in it from three to five years, depending on the law and his endurance, he can call it his own. This is urban homesteading, and survival is still the name of the game.

The future is no longer in the open West. It is rooted in the past, in places grown old and shabby, in once-grand, derelict neighborhoods. As



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little as a dollar buys a dream in default, a promise aborted, another chance. There are hardships—vandalism, crime, inadequate services—instead of the trials of weather and nature. There is the hostile city street instead of the resistant soil.

Yet there is still hope—or there would be no homesteading. It takes street skills, sweat equity and an iron resolve. But anyone who can survive in today's inner city for five years deserves his coonskin cap; he is the successful urban pioneer.

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The future grows old quickly. Two symbols of modernism, Lever House and jet travel, marked their 25th year this month. The silver anniversary they share recalls the bright promise of the 1950's: The miracle of the seven-hour trip to Europe and the equal miracle of the sleek glass-and-metal skyscraper were meant to change the world.

And they did. Today, glass buildings line the streets of cities everywhere and rise perversely even in the deserts of the Middle East. They are filled with jet-age businessmen and tourists who calculate time by air hours and places by Hilton Internationals.

There are now two airborne generations that think Lever House, like the pyramids, was always there. It is hard to remember how that structure startled Park Avenue and New York with its slender tower and shining skin, or to realize that this building, together with the glass slab of the United Nations, started an urban and architectural revolution.

Cities and countries age like people; there is a sense of irretrievable time, of beauty lost, of a future that is past. But Lever House is a landmark (undesignated) that isn't showing its age a bit. On the occasion of this anniversary, the corporation has publicly reaffirmed its commitment to New York. And the quality of its architecture stands as an act of faith.

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