

Some Houses of Ill-Repute

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Some Houses of Ill-Repute

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

Housing is good, but houses are bad. This has been a maxim of Modern architecture. While it is true that concentrating on individual houses is socially irresponsible and technologically irrelevant in the context of the continuing housing crisis of our time, within the circumstances of architectural practice as it is for the individual architect, the little house should not be scorned. It is still the first job for most architects, for obvious economic and social reasons: architecture is an expensive medium, therefore conservative clients award big commissions to old architects or big firms. (Ironically, big responsibilities often go to young planners and to young architects in big firms.) The little house for a close friend or relative is usually therefore a first opportunity for the young architect to test theories and expand them. If his practice is slack, this at least allows him to put his heart and soul and a full work week, into developing this one small idea, which is always a deepening experience. And if the client is poor, the years spent refining the plans while waiting for the financing to be arranged can be in the nature of

a personal odyssey for the architect. Of our earlier houses, our beach, mother's and frug houses were, to some extent, odysseys. The Lieb house was an early, not altogether successful, attempt to use a home builders' vernacular in a not-altogether vernacular way.

Norma Evenson has described how in the '20's the young Le Corbusier theorized about La Ville Radieuse while doing nice little houses which he considered the formal prototypes for later urban-scale work of social and technological significance. However, although Le Corbusier saw his individual villas as prototypes for industrial housing, his models and those of Modern architecture in general have only slightly influenced mass housing — at least developers' housing in America — and American architects are still significantly uninvolved in housing. This we believe is due to the unreal outlook which Le Corbusier and his followers brought to the problems of housing; but it does not preclude the possibility that the individual architect, working sympathetically with the merchant builder's real needs

and constraints, his real media and symbols, cannot fulfill today (or at least share with others) the paradigmatic role that the architect has perhaps arrogantly claimed for himself.

Designing a house may also be the only opportunity for the architect to deal with a real user-client as opposed to a corporate committee or representatives of a public agency, and therefore to deal with the irrationalities of emotional needs and values. The richness of this experience is what he has later to depend on (although in the context of different value systems) to eke out his statistical data when working on housing — at least for most projects and until recently, before "community architecture" brought representatives of user groups into architectural decision-making. However, situations are still rare where more-than-lip-service is paid to community participation, or paid at a level which gives architects real information on users. So depending on individual rich clients' emotions to tell you something about collective poor clients' emotions, although imperfect,

is often better than nothing.

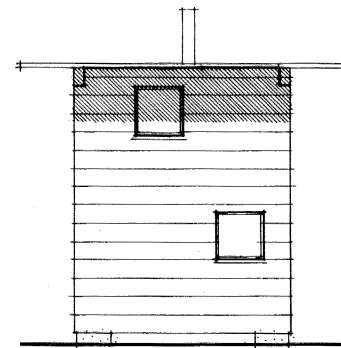
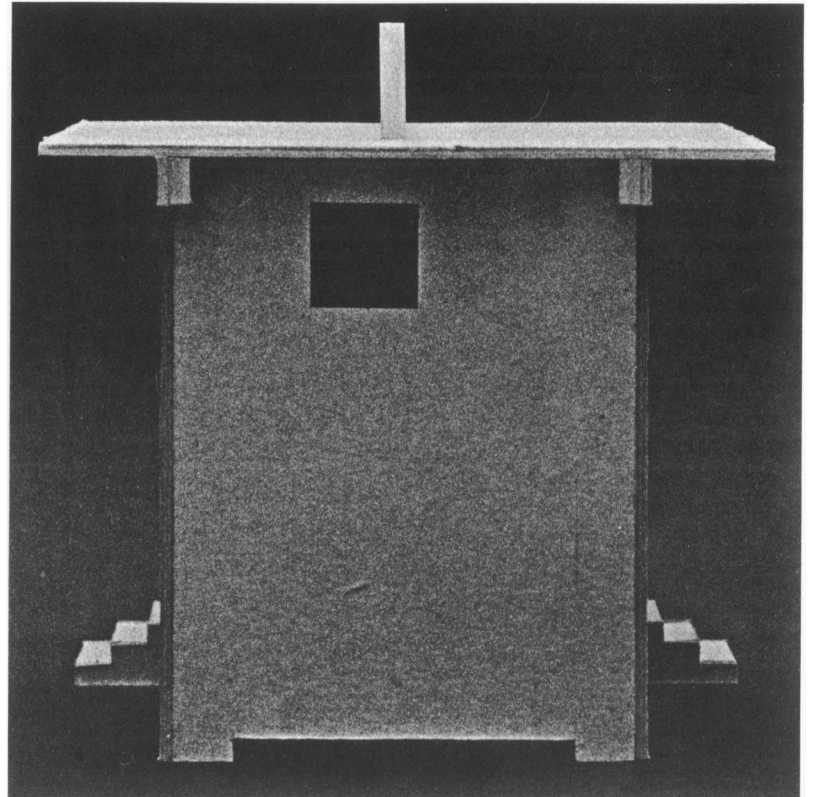
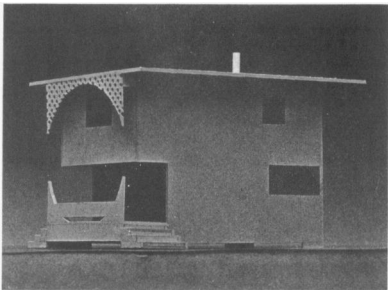
For an architect no longer starting out, a project for a house can serve as a punctuation in his career as well as a point of departure — an opportunity literally to seclude himself in order to focus his thinking; to be able to control the whole in a way that distills and clarifies and informs the bigger work at hand. The five houses illustrated here were just such exercises.

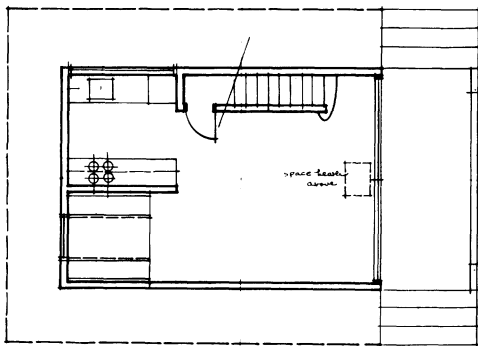
Our brief descriptions will rely a good deal on historical analogy, because the heuristic use of historical models was important in the development of their designs and is therefore helpful in describing them (but not because we think it is necessarily the right method for all architects or for seeing all issues and solving all problems). We unashamedly lift our analogs out of their historical context — picking out for study perhaps only one aspect of their make-up — to create new comparisons, aid analysis and goad invention. This is a traditional methodological device which seems to bother some architects but few historians.

The Hersey House, 1968

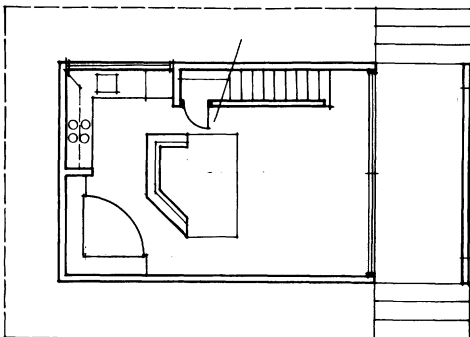
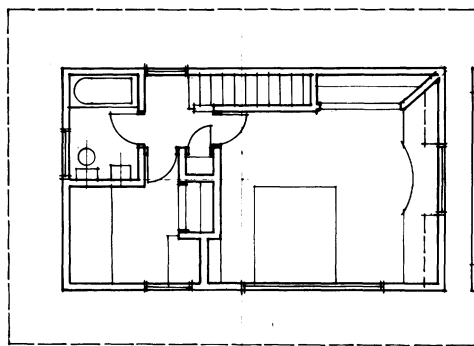
This is literally what we have designated elsewhere as a “decorated shed” and as an appropriate stance for most architectural problems today. To explain, a “decorated shed” city hall would be a conventional loft building, designed for the flexible interior uses of present-day bureaucracies, with rhetorical meaning applied on its outer surfaces in the form of a big sign blinking, “This is a Monument”; and it stands in contradistinction to what we have called a “duck” — that is, a nominally undecorated building, itself distorted into a vast decoration through the contortion of structure and function, to serve an unadmitted decorative aim.

To return to our house: it is a summer beach cabin for a small family on Cape Cod. To satisfy the budget it is a simple box of asbestos shingles with a flat roof and the proverbial Mary Anne behind. We applied ornament to the front porch to increase the scale of the facade: the circular opening suggested by the curve of the lattice above and the rail below extends beyond the sides of the facade and includes both storeys — like the giant order on a classical porch. We hoped to achieve thereby a poignant shed, both little *and* big, and dumb *and* sophisticated — after all, it was to be a cabin for a Yale professor. It is hard for an architect to design a dumb building but we think we succeeded. Unfortunately it was not dumb enough (or we were not clever enough) to meet the budget, and it didn't get built — the fate of many an architectural house of ill-repute.

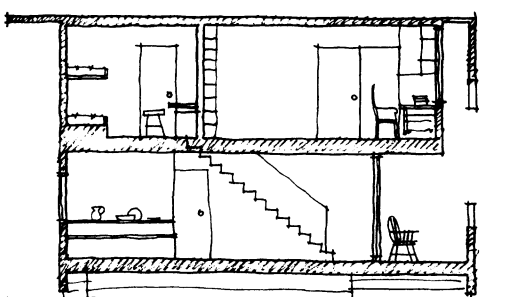
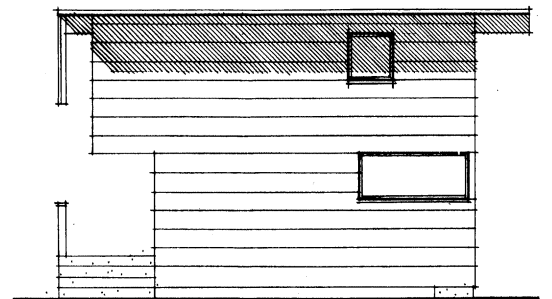
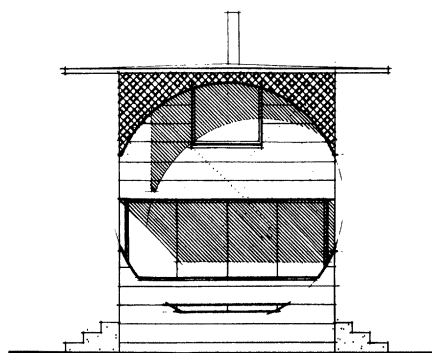
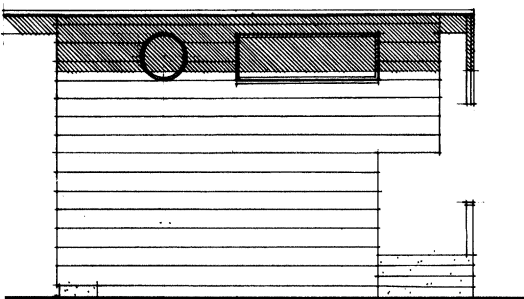
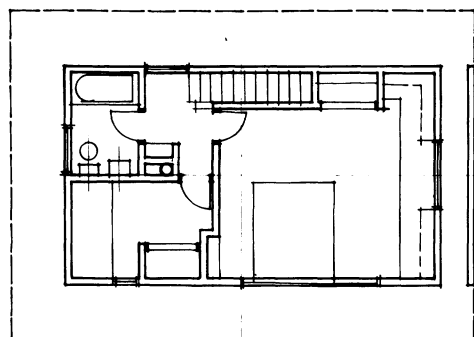




Scheme A

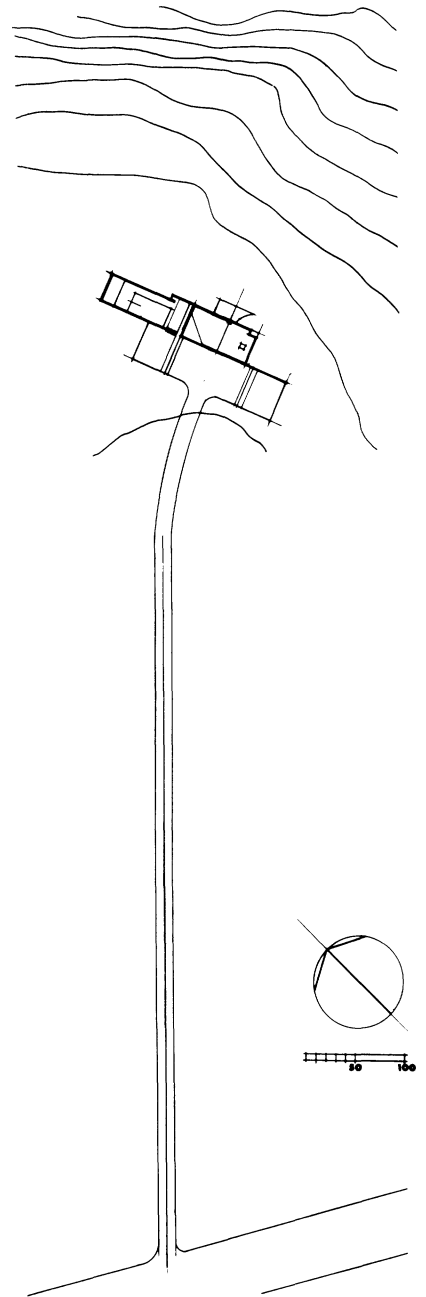
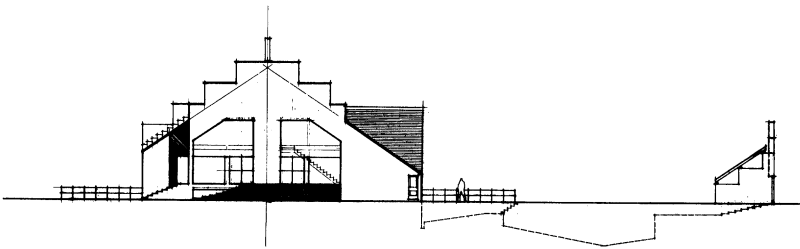


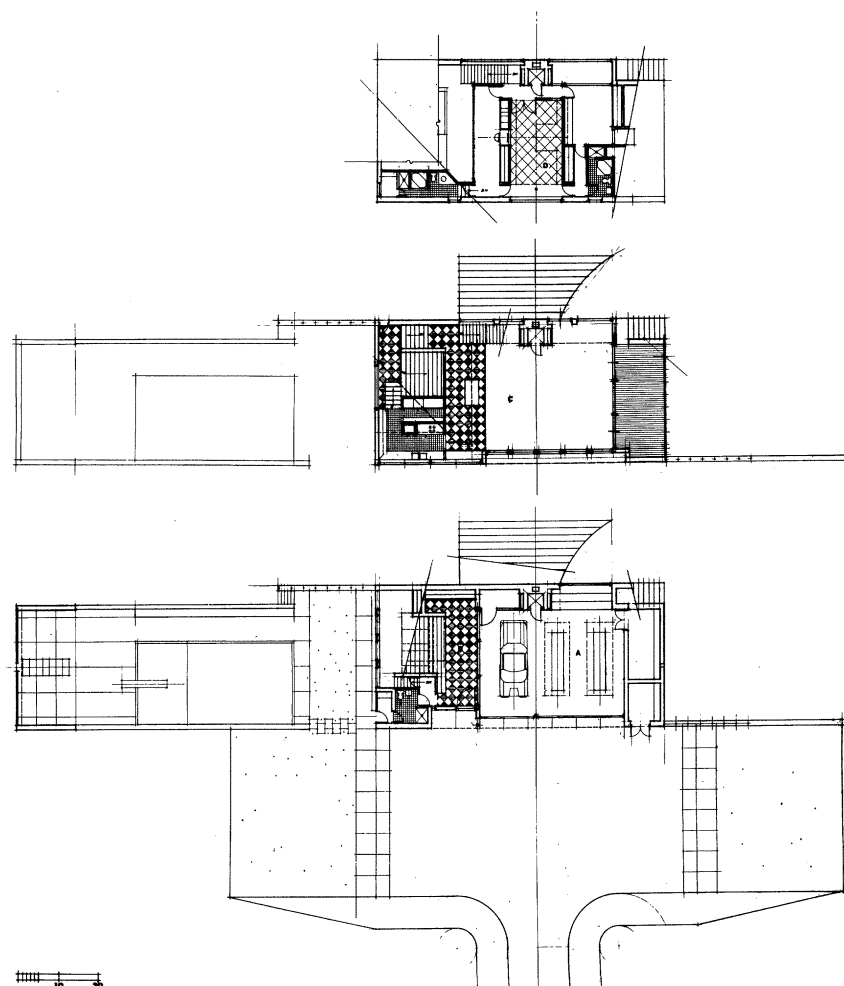
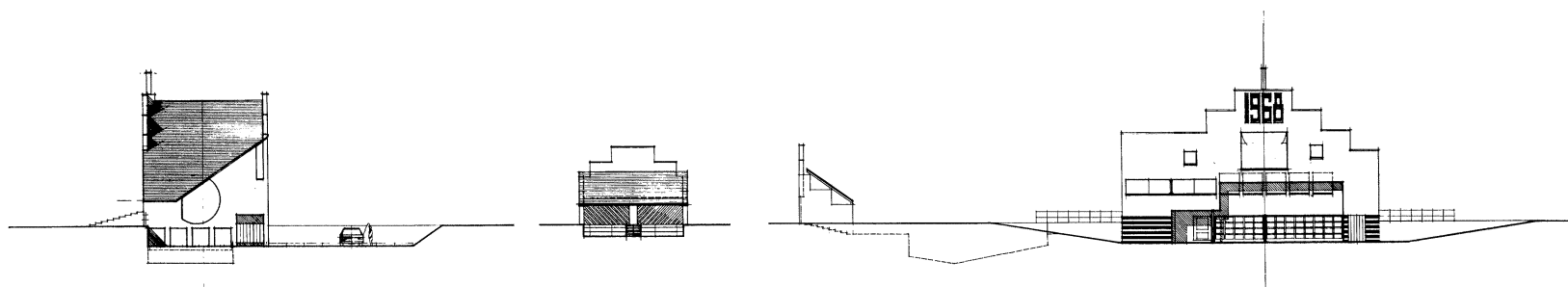
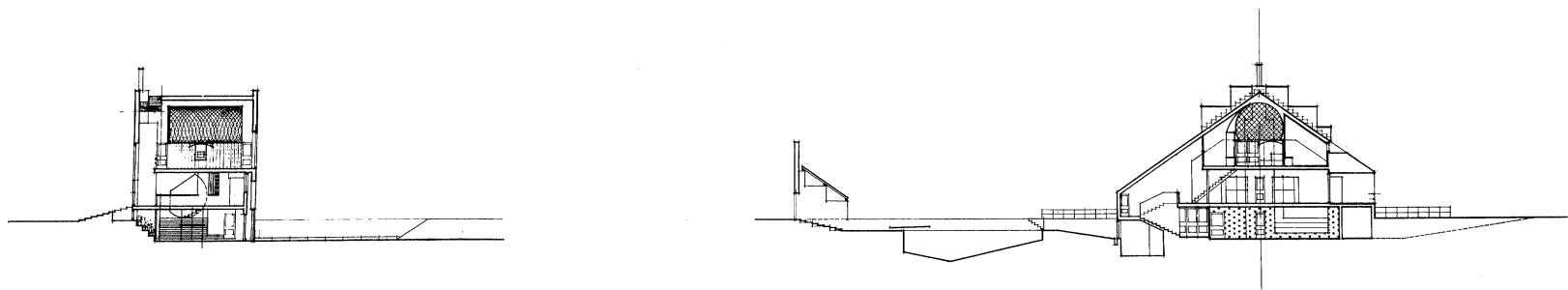
Scheme B

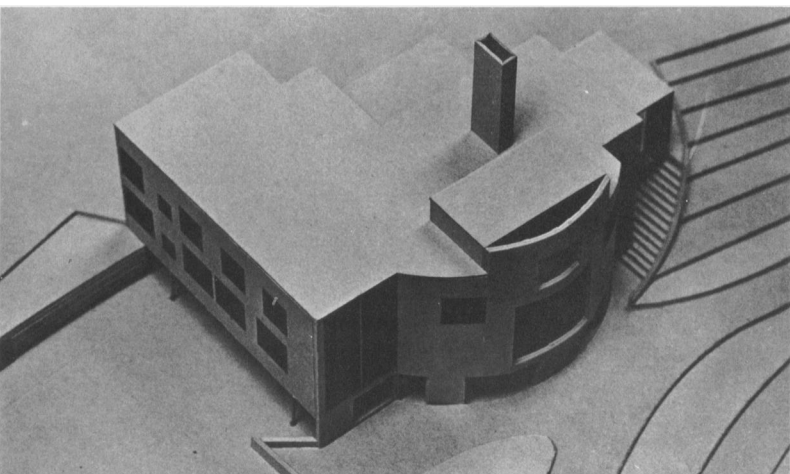
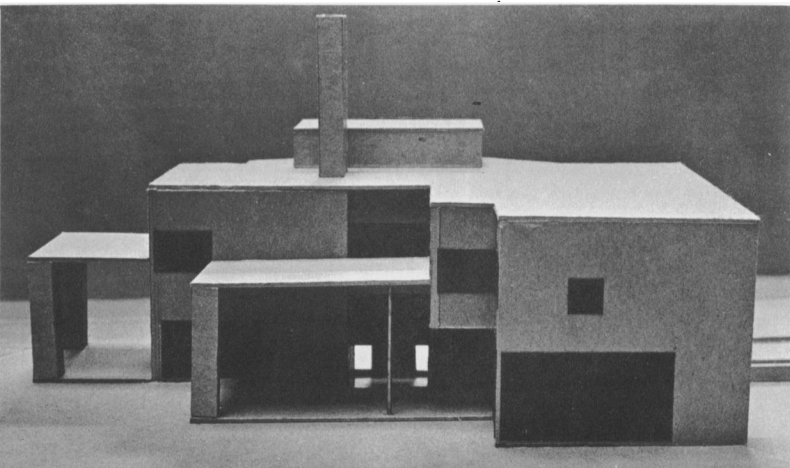
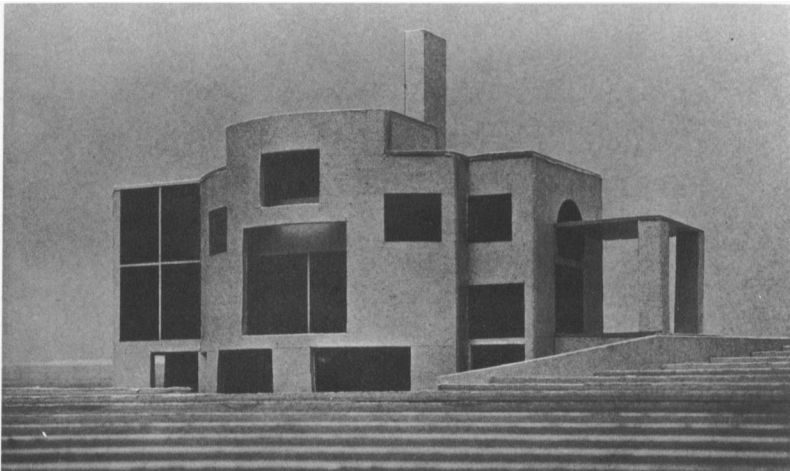
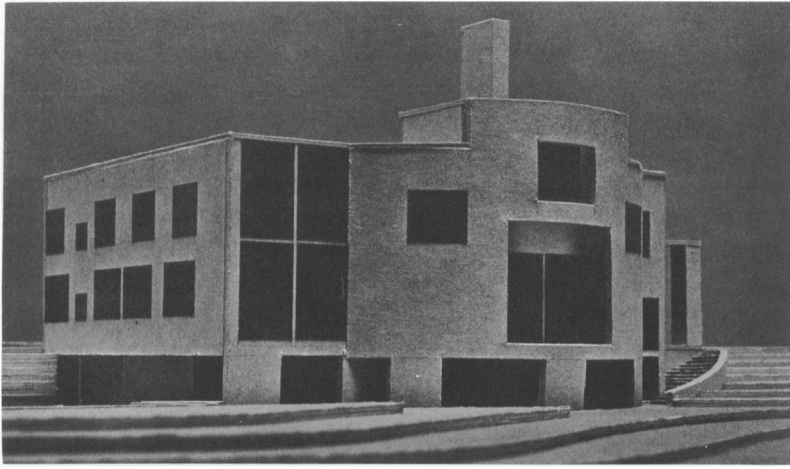


The D'Agostino House, 1968

This is an admitted duck for a unique program, a rural site and a generous budget. It is for a couple who want to enjoy the varied views surrounding a beautiful plateau in northern New York State. The main floor is therefore raised half a level above grade with opportunities to see out all around. The house is made of grey glazed brick to match the color of the weathered planks of a barn nearby. The facade toward the long approach forms a bold silhouette with a stepped parapet reminiscent of Dutch architecture. The bold scale must accommodate the automobile as well, since the garage is the usual entrance in this snowy climate. You enter therefore into a "beautiful" garage (white glazed brick with black headers) onto a "grand" stairway and up to the *piano nobile*, as if from the carriage-way of an 18th century Neapolitan villa rather than via a mean garage into a back door to the kitchen. The sunken auto court has sloped sides to facilitate snow plowing and the swimming pool, sunken too, to protect bathers from prevailing winds, is on a side axis, recalling the sunken gardens of a George Howe Norman house. The pavilion at the end of the pool is a little parody of the big house. The bedroom on the top floor is vaulted in wood — Polish synagogues of the 18th century. We hope this one gets built.

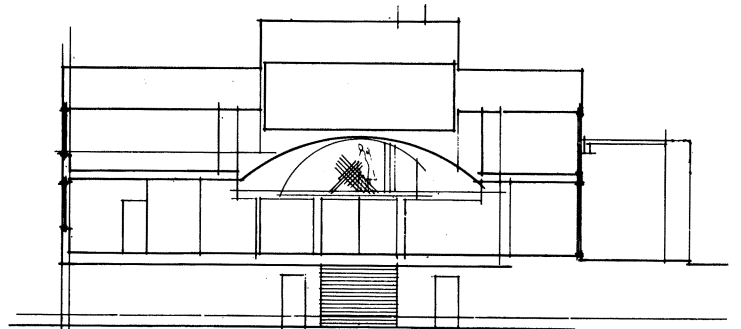
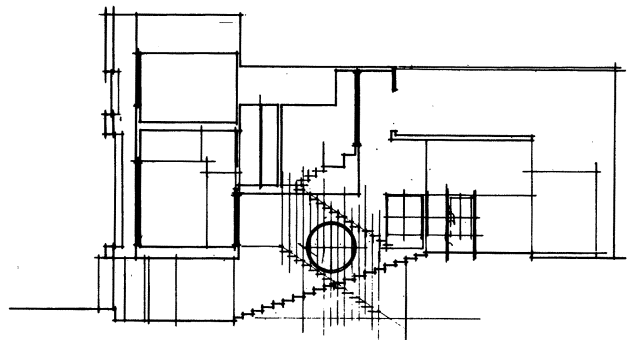
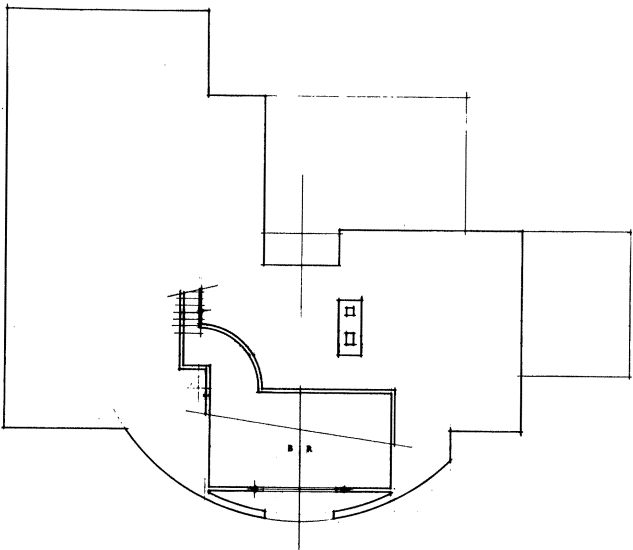
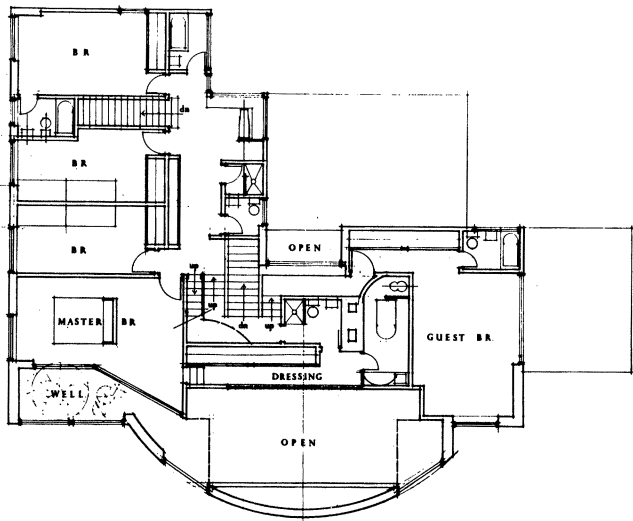
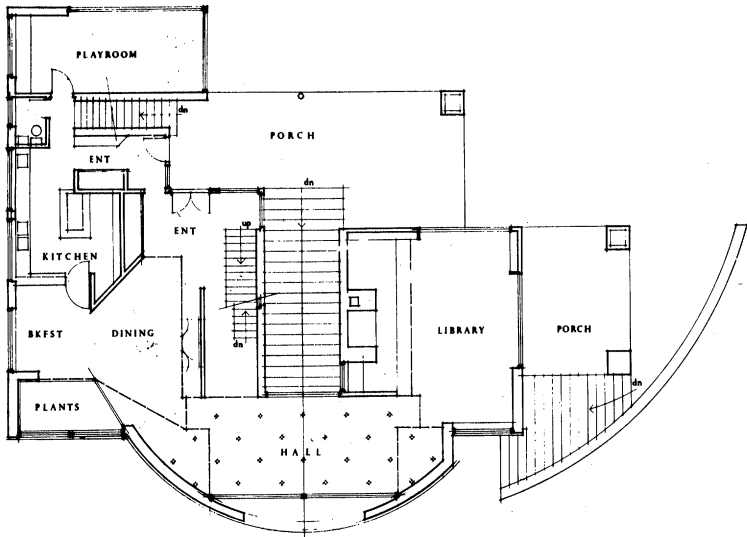
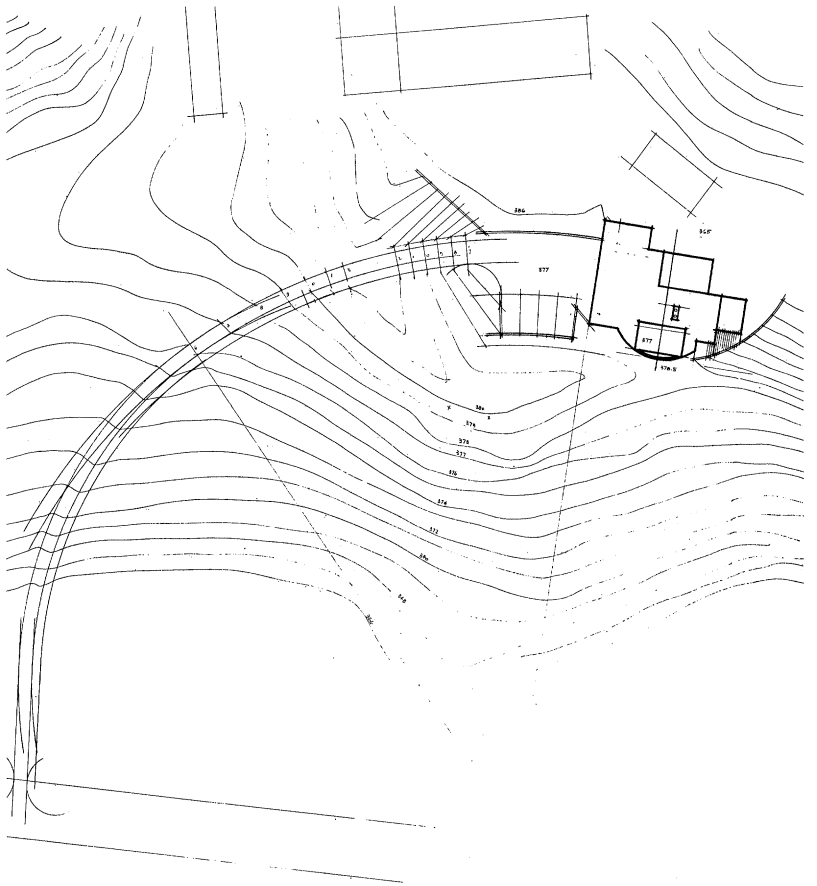
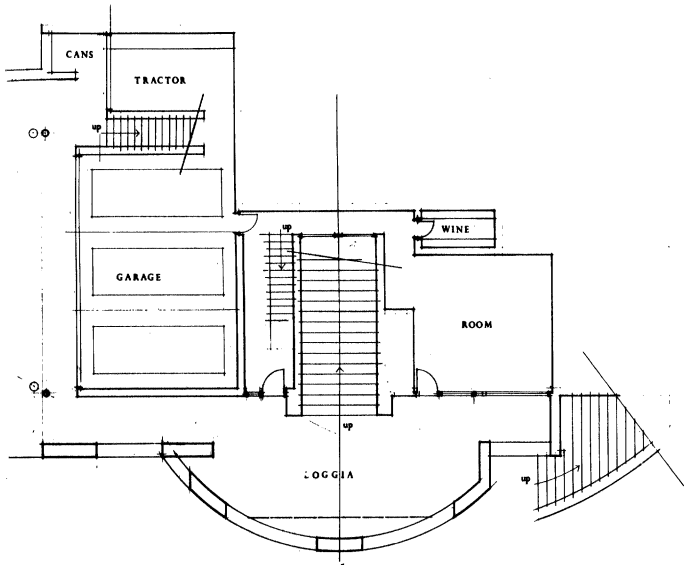


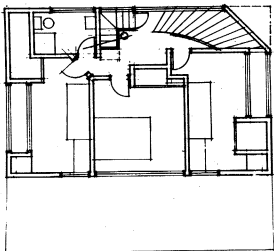
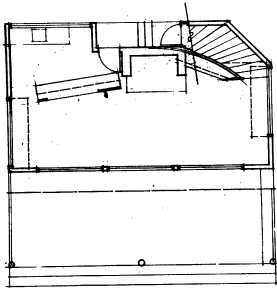
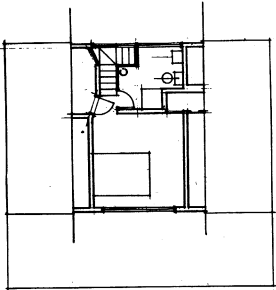
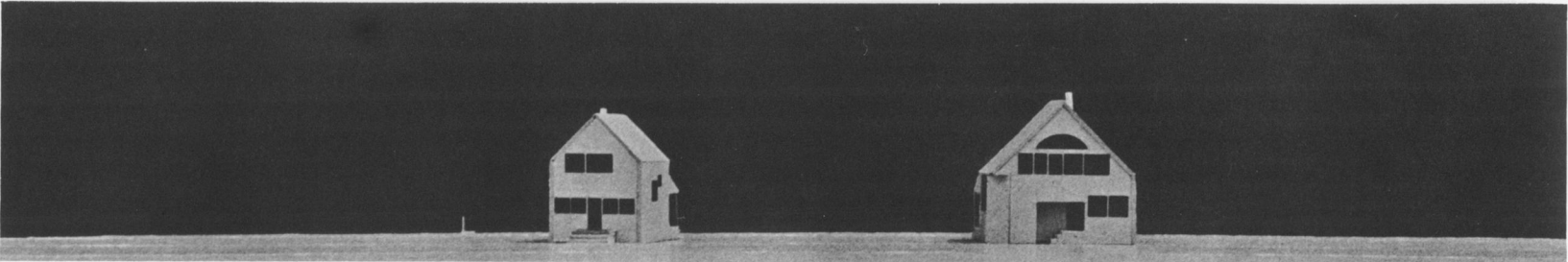
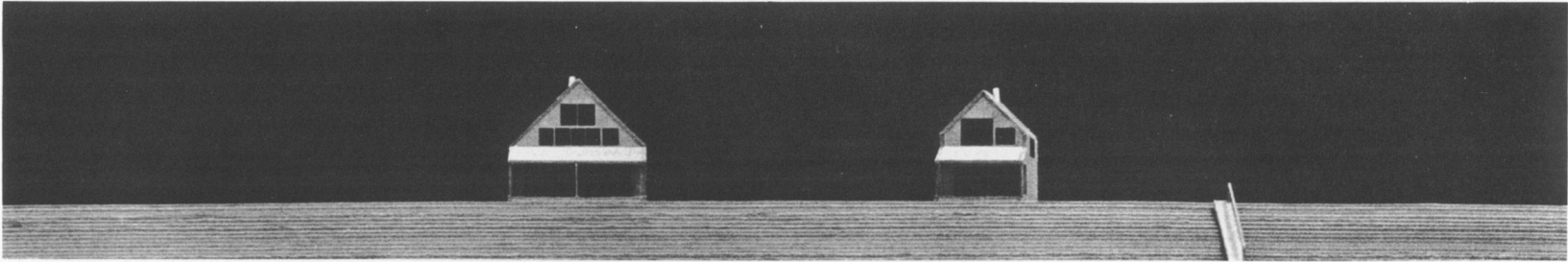




The Wike House, 1969

Another duck that significantly won't get built because the housing market in suburban Philadelphia abounds in good, old, big houses. Our clients found a beautiful Queen Anne manor, circa 1931, on 12 acres, about the time we firmed up the estimate of our schematic design, and they naturally bought the manor because it was twice the size of our design and one-third the price. The program for this family with three small children and a live-in children's nurse was Lutyens-like in scope: a central hall for entertaining, only a little narrower than the gallery at Syon (but considerably shorter), one-and-one-half stories high, shallowly vaulted and spanning the long way, and with a window facing the central exterior stair well. There is a library remote from the children, a breakfast room with a south-east exposure for plants, and a kitchen which, despite the Edwardian complexity of the plan, was to control the entrances and dominate the main floor almost in the manner of a Usonian "work space." The clients wanted a "formal" setting for their 18th century antiques and therefore the plan starts out symmetrically. Note particularly the venturi effect of the exterior stair which splits the house from the lower loggia in the front to the upper entrance in the rear (you have to fight your way into this house). We made the front of the house like a bold Vanbrugh manor with deep shadows to be read from the road down the hill. The auto entrance facade, with its rectangular geometry of big, frequent windows, is like an Elizabethan manor house, but without the symmetry, and the back, with its functional accommodations to inside needs and the swimming pool-play area outside, is pre-TAC Gropius. Facades were to be yellow brick like Holkham Hall. The porch side and the back were to be frame construction clad with flush boards painted the same color as the brick.





The Trubeck and Wislocki Houses, 1970

Two summer houses for another Yale professor, his family and a related family. The position of the smaller house blocks the sight of a neighbor's house to the west. The side elevations of the larger house have windows like the other windows in the house but much bigger: their sills are 4'-3" high to enhance and obscure the scale. These are Siasconset fishermen's cottages with some Shingle Style and Art Nouveau complexities inside. They are also two little temples on the plain, by the sea at Selinus, with three, bigger than usual, porch steps in front to sit on.

