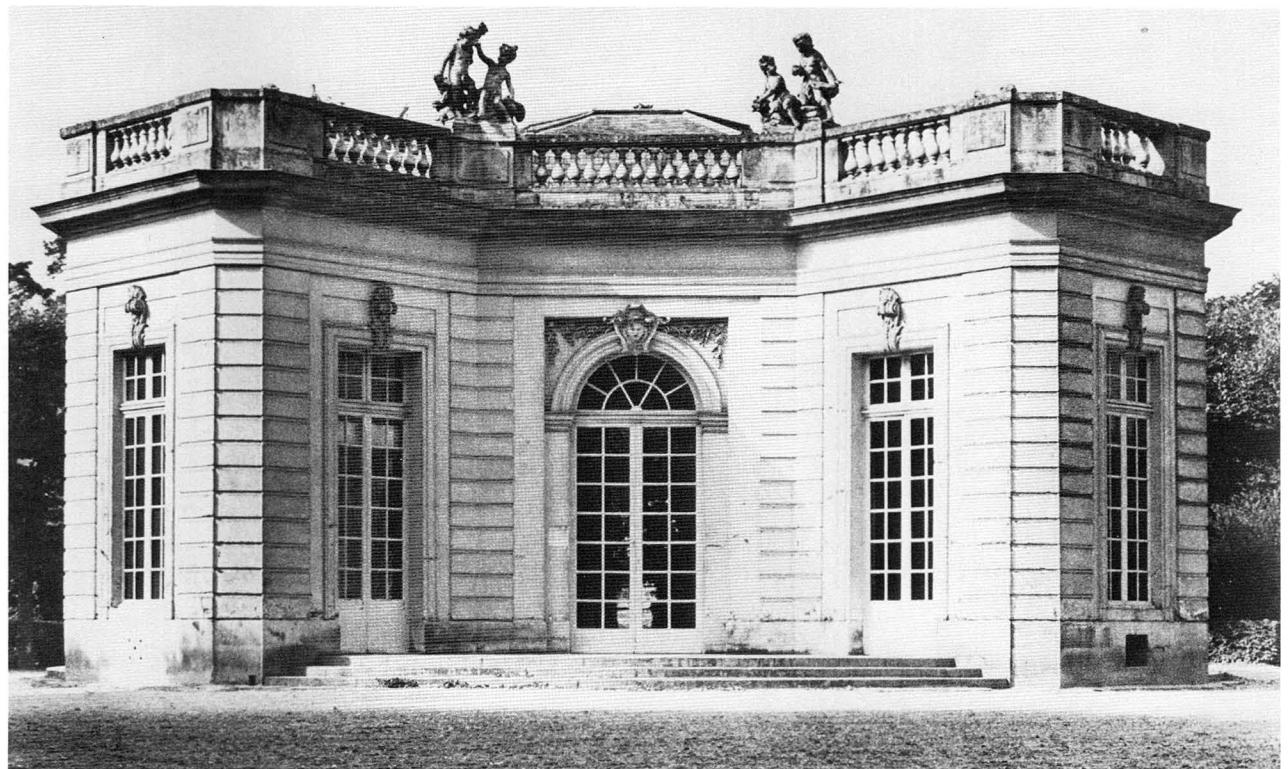


Object and Landscape

Lawrence W. Speck

In several recent projects we have been inspired by an investigation into the roots of the quintessential American building pattern of placing pavilions in the landscape. This pattern, which has dominated American home building, community design, and even urban landscape for three centuries, is a deeply rooted part of the American environmental experience. Unlike more delimiting building elements, the pavilion form is surrounded by space and able to communicate with free landscape on all sides. It represents a dominance of view, spaciousness, freedom, and openness over containment and conventional ordering.

The roots of the American predilection for placing objects in the landscape predates even the earliest colonial building on this continent. There was a fascination in 18th century Europe with things natural and primitive — with the roots and sources of environment and culture. Francois Blondel described the primitive hut — the simplest and most natural of buildings — as a model from which the splendor of architecture had been derived. Marc-Antoine Laugier, in his *Essai sur l'Architecture* of 1753, took appreciation of primitive models a step further and began to advocate a return to early and natural principles in current practices. Of the rustic hut he wrote, "It is through approaching the simplicity of this first model that essential mistakes are avoided and true perfection is achieved."



French Pavillion.

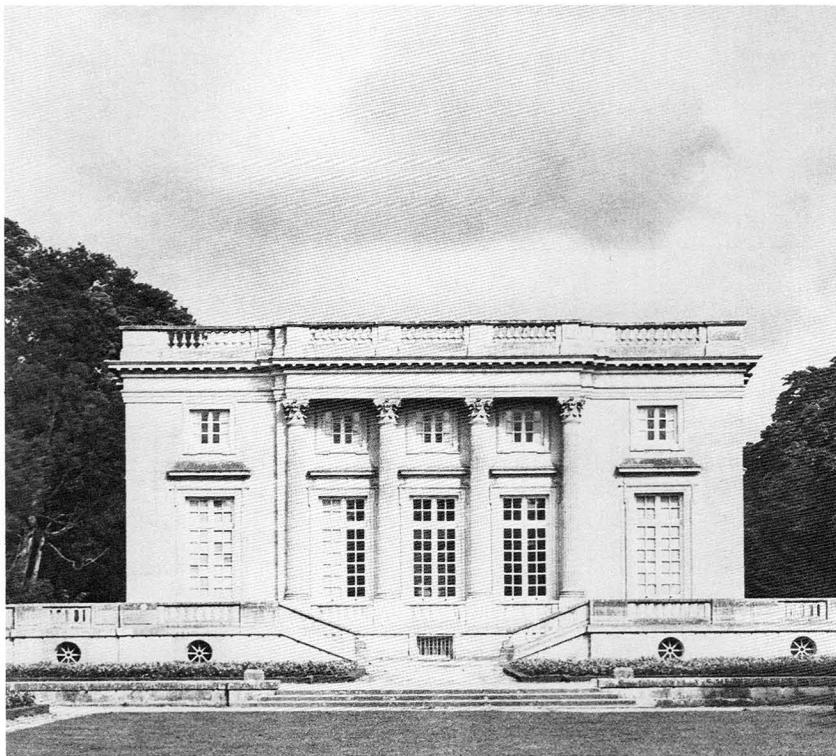
A new attitude toward inhabitation of the natural environment was emerging. A new appreciation for nature in its unaffected state and for man's most gentle and primitive living with nature was developing. Exposure to the "wilds" of far-flung colonial territories and their native inhabitants sparked in Europeans a renewed esteem for the relaxed, graceful beauties of natural landscape and for the simple, spontaneous pavilions of man inhabiting it.

This appreciation is perhaps first

manifested in design in the gardens of William Kent of the 1730's. Although still studied and at times even classical, they demonstrated a love for shaded woods, green meadows, pretty viewpoints, and murmuring brooks. For the time, this was a giant step away from the order and rigor of Baroque garden planning and toward the free and relaxed way in which nature itself arranges its elements.

Buildings in the 18th century can be seen to transform from space- and edge-

defining elements to objects placed in the landscape. This transition is evident in buildings in Versailles from mid-17th to mid-18th century. The main chateau, largely the product of 17th century planning, is a building which encloses and delineates spaces. The courtyards, the side parterres and, to an extent, the head of the canal are bounded by the long, straight walls of the building. Even Mansart's Grand Trianon of 1688, which was placed in the woods and intended for more rustic festivities, maintains a formal enclosure of space with linear



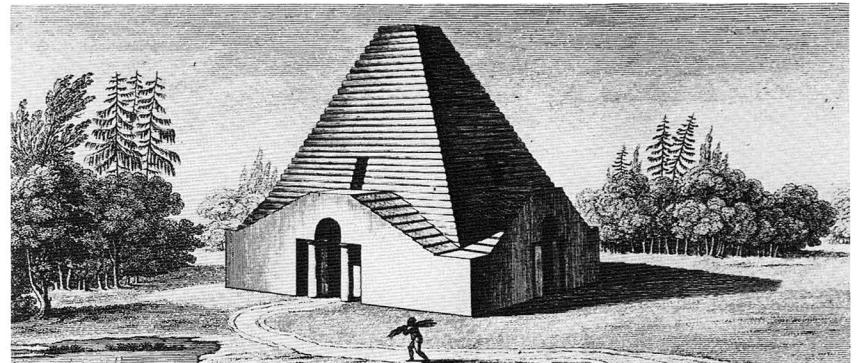
Petit Trianon.

galleries and wings delimiting gardens and enclosing its central court.

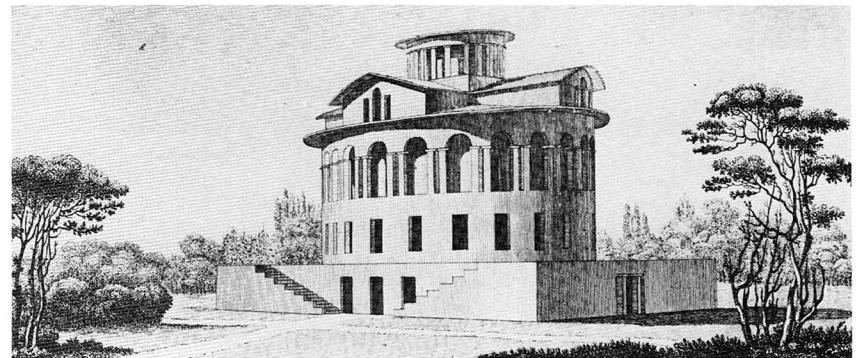
Building modes had been significantly altered by the time Gabriel built the little French Pavilion in 1750. This is an object surrounded by space. The cross-shaped plan terminates axes, but as a node rather than as an edge. The freedom and continuity of outdoor space dominates, and the space-enclosing capacities of the buildings are diminished. The Petit Trianon of a decade later, also by Gabriel, similarly adopts

a pavilion form rather than a linear, space-enclosing form. It is a hut for a queen — a simple, primitive mass, square in plan, and identifiable as an object from every vantage.

The work of Claude Ledoux of the same period also illustrates a predilection for the pavilion and an intrigue with objects that sit in free space surrounded by landscape. Ledoux's building projects for the town of Chaux are remarkable for their individuality and for their independence and separateness in the context of



Woodcutter's house and workshop.



Stockbroker's house.

visionary town planning. One could easily expect that a woodcutter's house might take the form of a simple pavilion in the forest, but the vision of a stockbroker similarly inhabiting a grand hut in the woods was a striking innovation. Outside its industrial core, Chaux was a garden city with buildings occupying a romantic natural landscape. Even in an urban setting such as the Marquis de Saiseval's houses in Paris built in 1786, Ledoux shows an allegiance to the pavilion form as a means of expressing individuality and as a way of allowing

free exterior space to dominate over enclosure.

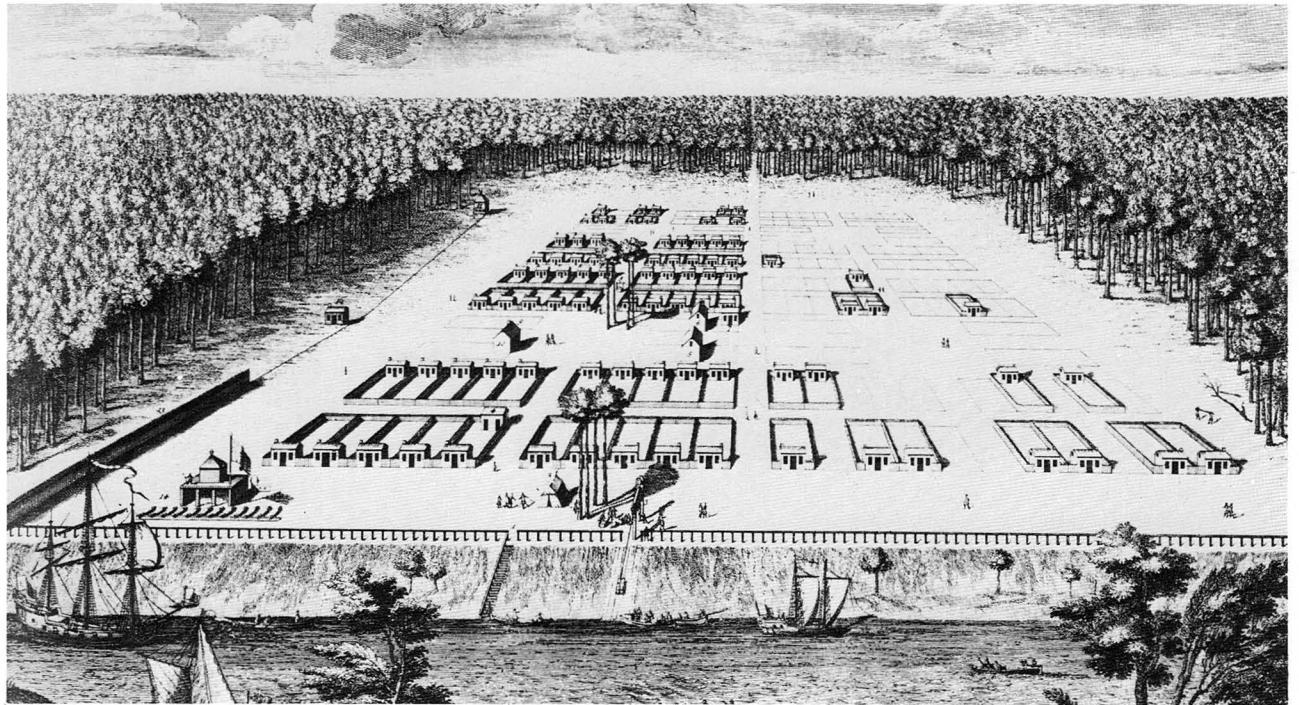
Ledoux's work illustrates an emerging maturity in late 18th century European thought that brought together the renewed esteem of nature and simple primitive living proposed earlier in philosophy and literature with the developing notions of individual identity and democracy present in the political ideology of the period. The physical environment that grew from this merger was more romantic, more

dispersed, more individualistic, and more diverse than its immediate predecessors. Rigidity, systemization, and formalism in site planning began to give way to expressiveness, accommodation, serendipity, and even wit.

As this transition was taking place in European environmental thought, towns were, of course, rapidly being built in European colonies in America. Here the beauties of primitive living and unaffected nature were abundant. Here, as well, the individual had new freedom, new independence. Indeed, it was to a large extent dissident rebels and adventurers who were settling colonial territories. The new environmental thought, provoked in part by the colonial movement, as has been noted, was natural and appropriate to building in the New World. It found fertile ground and flourished.

James Oglethorpe's plan of Savannah of 1733 was one of the earliest attempts to incorporate the circumstances and ideals of new colonial America into a cohesive environmental scheme. It is a plan which acknowledges the abundance of space and the value of open green areas in the city. It is a plan made for pavilion buildings, expressive of the independence of their individual owners and commodious for ventilation in a hot and humid climate. It is a plan which incorporates ideals of self-reliance and democracy. It is pragmatic and flexible, dependent for its success less on formalistic strictures than on an underlying structure rich in information and opportunity.

Although the focus on open spaces in the scheme has been compared to that of residential squares in London of the late 17th and early 19th centuries, the fabric of Savannah and the feeling of the individual squares is radically different. Whereas the London squares are voids within a solidly walled fabric, the Savannah squares are part of a continuous, unbroken continuity of open space in which object buildings are placed. The



View of Savannah, Georgia, 1734.



View of Savannah, Georgia, 1855.

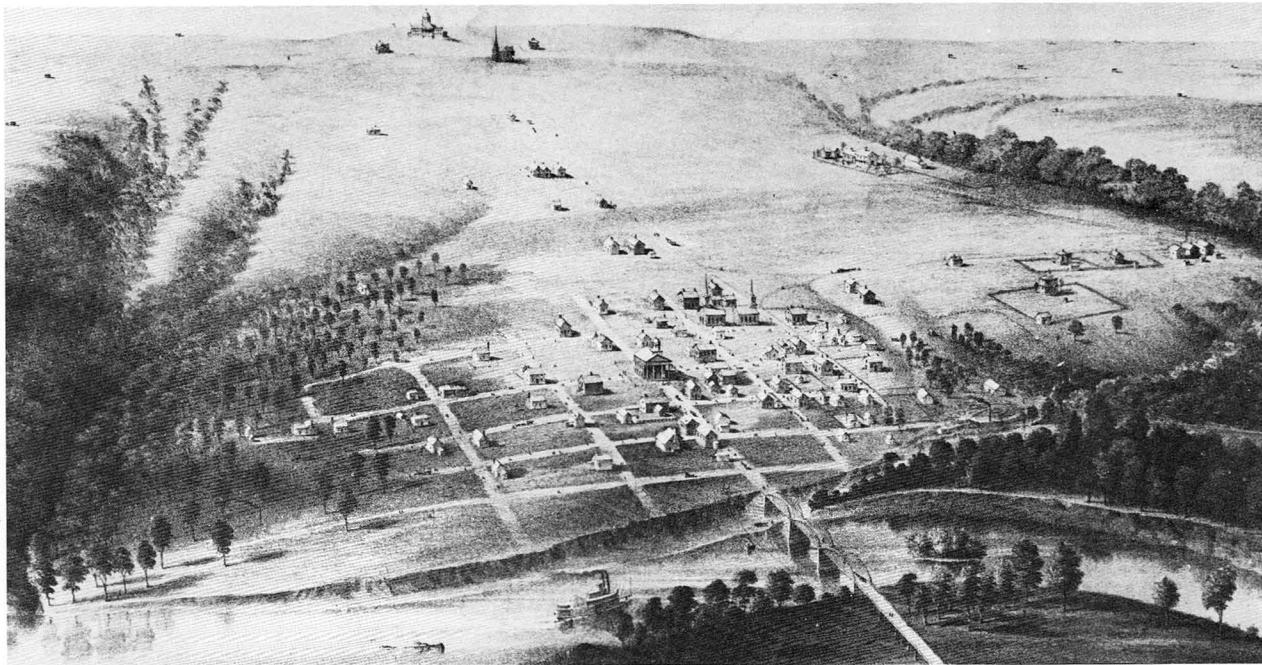
plan almost dictates this character. Individual "blocks" in Savannah are very small. The street grid compulsively breaks continuity of building edges to disallow the capturing of space by building walls. Initial construction in Savannah was primitive huts on individual lots. Subsequent building has

generally been larger, more elaborate pavilions on the original land parceling.

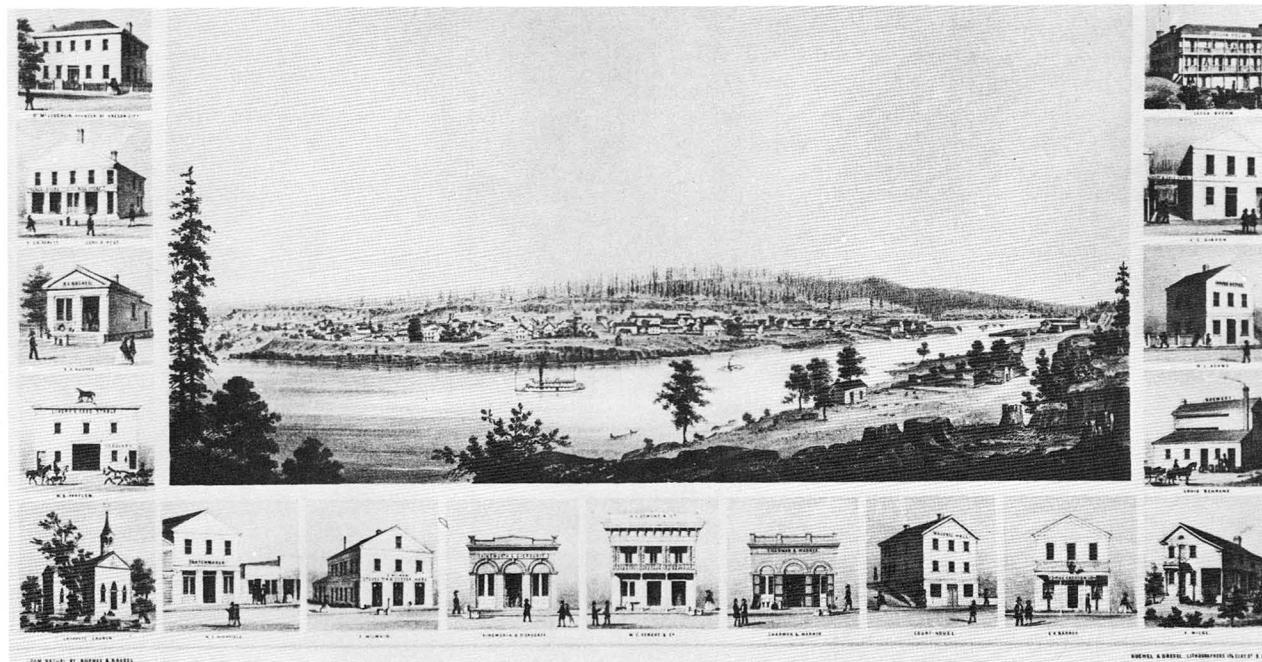
Savannah is a garden city. As its grid expanded through the 18th and 19th centuries, its pattern of pavilions in the landscape became well established, incorporating ideals of nature and in-

dividuality not unlike those advocated by Ledoux in his plan for Chaux.

The fundamental change here between 17th century European planning and 18th century American planning is not so much in the geometry of the ground plan itself as in the manner in which the



View of Tecumseh, Kansas, 1859.



View of Oregon City, Oregon, 1858.

buildings elaborate the ground plan. In Baroque town planning, buildings filled out blocks and streets, making rooms at the scale of the city. In American town planning, space was open and continuous. Pavilion buildings inhabited that open space according to a much less constraining spatial structure. The

preference for detachment and sparse, almost scattered, distribution of buildings through the landscape is clear.

Many explanations could be offered for this dogged colonial tendency. Building in wood was certainly safer in small, detached elements which deterred the

spread of fire. Gardening was, of course, important even in towns and required some space interspersed throughout built areas. But to settlers who christened their towns with names like Eden or Savannah there must also have been an aesthetic concern that had something to do with living "on the land." And for

a developing democracy, the overt private ownership and individuality must also have had a symbolic appeal.

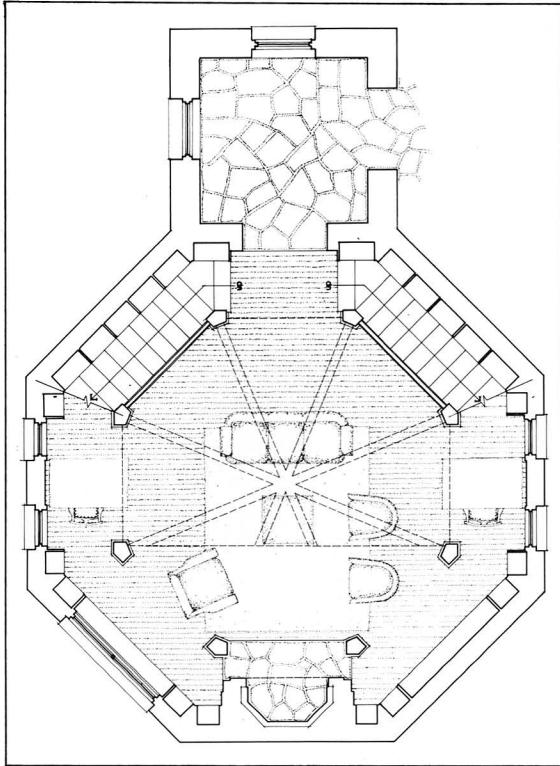
If the typical 18th century tendency in America was to build huts, the typical 19th century tendency was to build temples. A very striking vision of the town of Tecumseh, Kansas, produced in 1859, projects a territorial capitol made up of temples and huts in romantic isolation on the prairie. The city aspires to dignity by the production of simple temples to commerce, government, religion, and even to its leading citizens.

The format of city map illustrations in the 19th century is telling of the nature of the contemporary American city. A general bird's-eye view is often framed by individual views of the city's primary architectural "events." Each house, public building, store, or even factory is shown as an independent and free-standing object. Even buildings which must have filled their parcels like storefronts are often depicted in isolation.

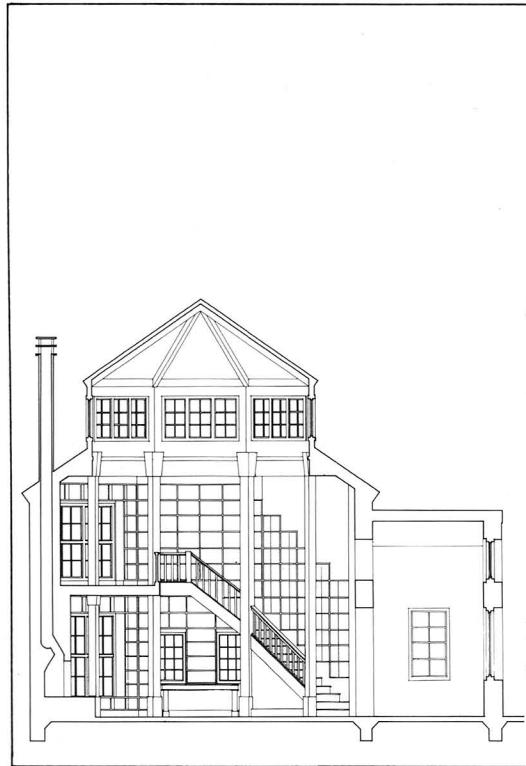
Through the 18th and 19th centuries, American culture established a sense of itself, and its environmental expressions were true to that sense. Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman lauded the beauties of nature and the potency of a simple, independent life surrounded by nature. They extended a tradition. They confirmed what their European predecessors had projected. Walden Pond could almost have been Laugier's hut.

The emerging pioneer West nurtured a rugged individualism. Its vast open spaces could not be conquered or contained — only occupied. The paintings of Alfred Bierstadt and Frederick Church depict the isolation of man and the enormity of the landscape. Buildings in this context could only be objects — elements staking a claim under an overwhelming canopy of sky.

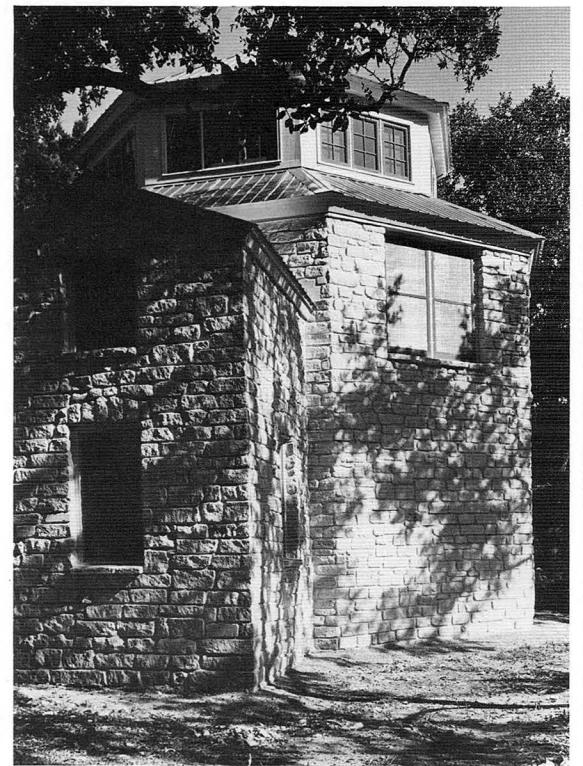
These attitudes toward the individual,



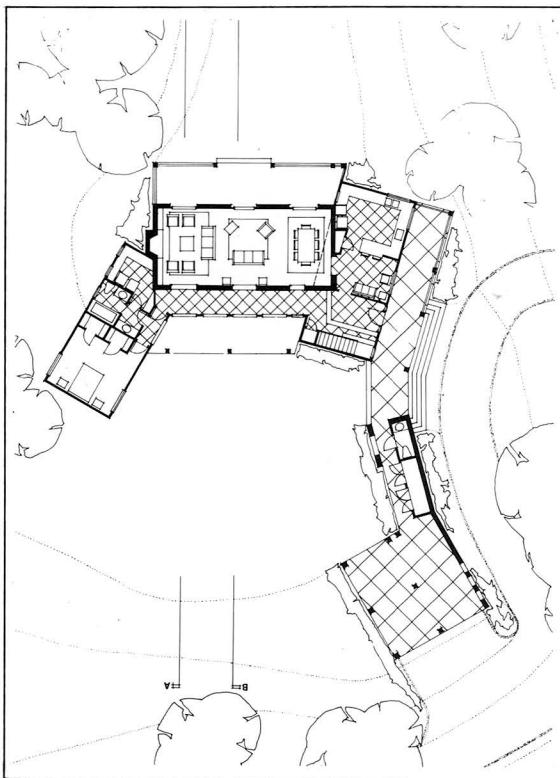
Cable library plan.



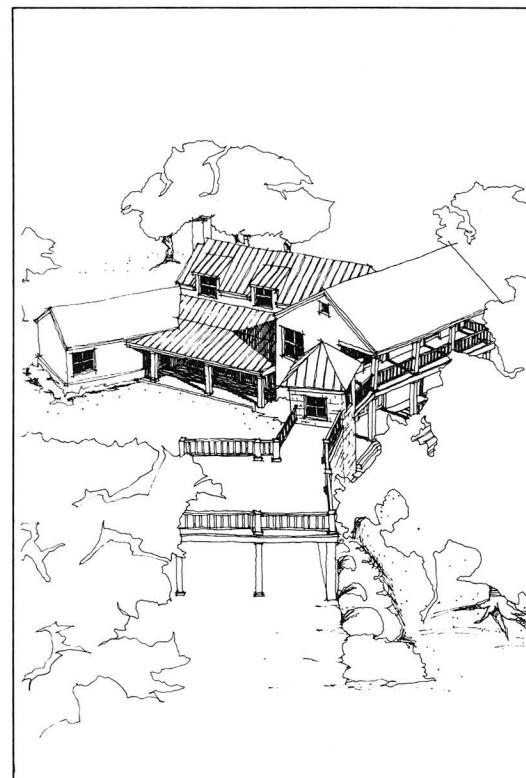
Cable library section.



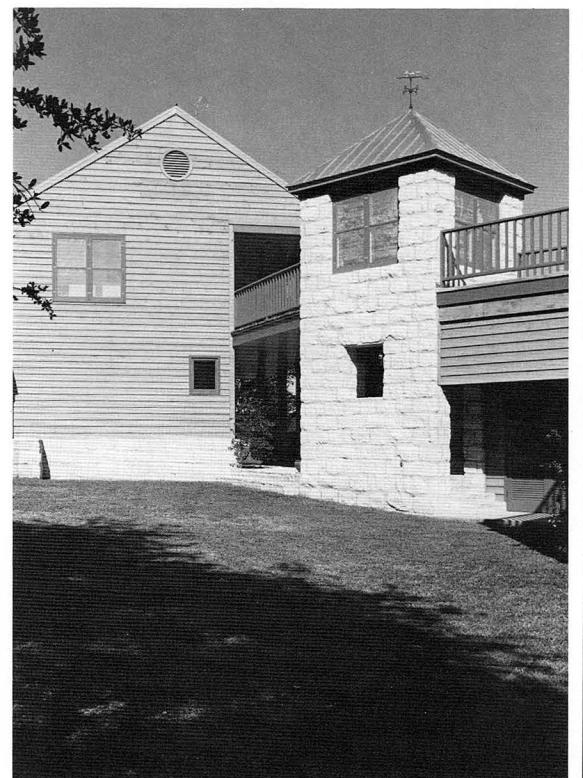
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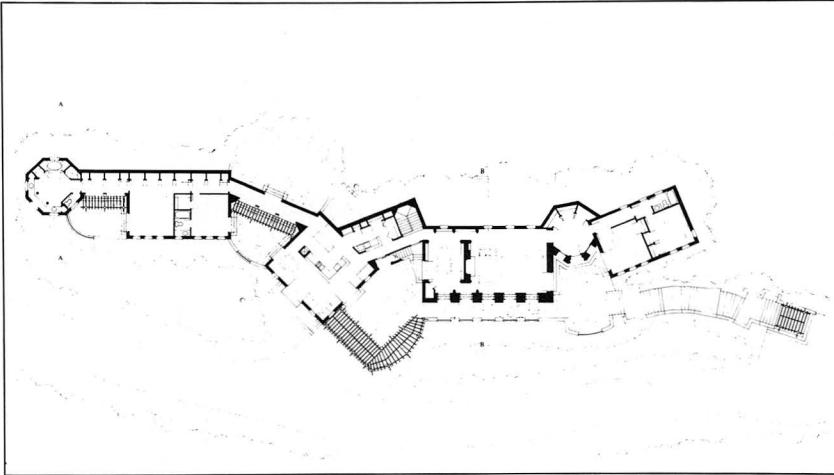
Matthews House plan.



Matthews House perspective.



Matthews House, view of tower.



Lakeside House plan.

nature, and democracy seem still deeply embedded in the American psyche today — especially outside East Coast metropolitan centers. Richardson, Sullivan, and Wright drew significantly on these ideals in a search for appropriately American expressions of architecture a century ago. A reinvestigation of their potential in inspiring an American Architecture today seems both timely and appropriate.

In the three modest projects illustrated here we have attempted such a reinvestigation. All three are located on beautiful, generous sites in the Hill Country of central Texas. All are carefully placed on their sites to take maximum advantage of view, breeze, and orientation. They are integral with the landscape, but do not mimic it. They sit, in the tradition of pavilions, as man-made objects in space.

In the tiny Cable Library on a wooded hilltop site near Austin, we reveled in a rediscovery of the primitive hut set in nature. The noncompetitive separation of building and landscape bespeaks the American tradition of “occupying” and staking inhabitation of its occupants. The romantic yet elemental simplicity of the volume in space is sympathetic to the ideal of Laugier, Ledoux, Emerson, and Thoreau.

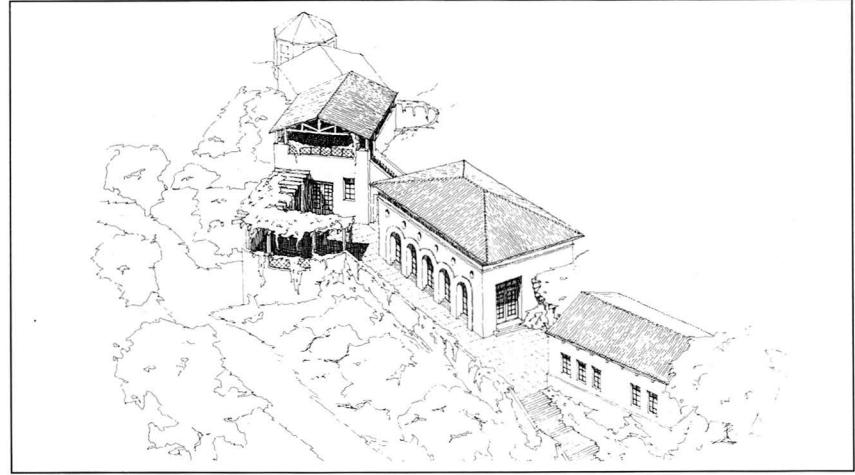
The library nestles under the canopy of the live oaks which populate its site. In-

side, it is a single tall room lined by the owner’s collection of books and drawings. The requirement of a relatively small floor area but extensive and accessible wall space for shelves and display generated the double stairs which rise on either side of the entry and give access to the reading loft above. A focal fireplace, made of rocks gathered on the site, reasserts the conceptual notion of the building as a primal object.

The Matthews Ranch House rests on the dominant ridge of a small cattle and goat ranch. The site offers commanding views of rolling hills to the north and of an ascending approach road and small pond to the southeast. The house is broken into five small building elements, each of which maintains freedom to respond to the specific requirements of its uses in terms of view, orientation, volumetric proportion, and privacy.

A central wood-clad, two-story element marks the terminus of the winding ranch road approach and enfronts the pond below. It houses the entry, the kitchen, and a small conversation nook on the first floor and the children’s bedrooms above. Its deep double-decked porch catches southeast breezes off the pond and serves as the traditional “front porch” on the lower floor and sleeping/play porch off the bedrooms above.

To the south of the central volume are



Lakeside House perspective.

a stone tower (housing a washroom on the lower floor and a “doll house” off the play porch on the upper floor) and a carport which can double as an outdoor entertainment pavilion. These elements work with existing trees to define an auto approach and gate on one side and a protected inner court on the other.

To the west of the central pavilion is a tall single-story stone volume with dormer windows housing a large living/dining room, the internal focus of the house. A wide gallery and deep winter porch raised two steps up on the south side provide connections both to other parts of the house and to the outdoor court. The summer porch to the north displays a panoramic view of the ranch’s tree dotted hills.

The fifth and westernmost building element is a gabled, wood-clad volume housing the master bedroom and bath. Its angle closes the outdoor court spatially and shields it from the western sun. The house’s vocabulary of simple forms loosely aggregated in response to exigencies of site and function is consistent with rural traditions of the region where farm complexes are often collections of pavilions which have accumulated over time.

The Lakeside House in Austin is located on a steeply-sloped six and one-half acre hillside tract facing Lake Austin. In order

to minimize cutting into the site’s limestone substrata, the building is strung along the contours. It is less than 25 feet wide in most places, but over 220 feet long.

Similar to the Matthews House, each of the building’s five pavilions houses a group of related functions — bathing, sleeping, eating/family life, entertaining, and guest quarters. Between the pavilions are indoor links bermed into the hill and generous terraces which create outdoor extensions of most of the rooms of the house. The slight cusp of the hillside chosen for the house site allows spectacular views not only across the lake and to the hills beyond, but also up and down the linear lake. The fragmentation of the plan allows most rooms to have two quite different long views.

These three projects revel not only in the tradition of the pavilion but also in its amenity and its delight. The scale, the clarity, the object quality of the pavilion evoke longstanding associations with man’s most direct and basic inhabitation of nature. The simple forms symbolize the act of occupation. There is a freedom, individuality, and assertiveness in this attitude which is genuinely American and which represents a positive aspect of our often negligent claiming of the *American Landscape*.