

The Houses Of My Time

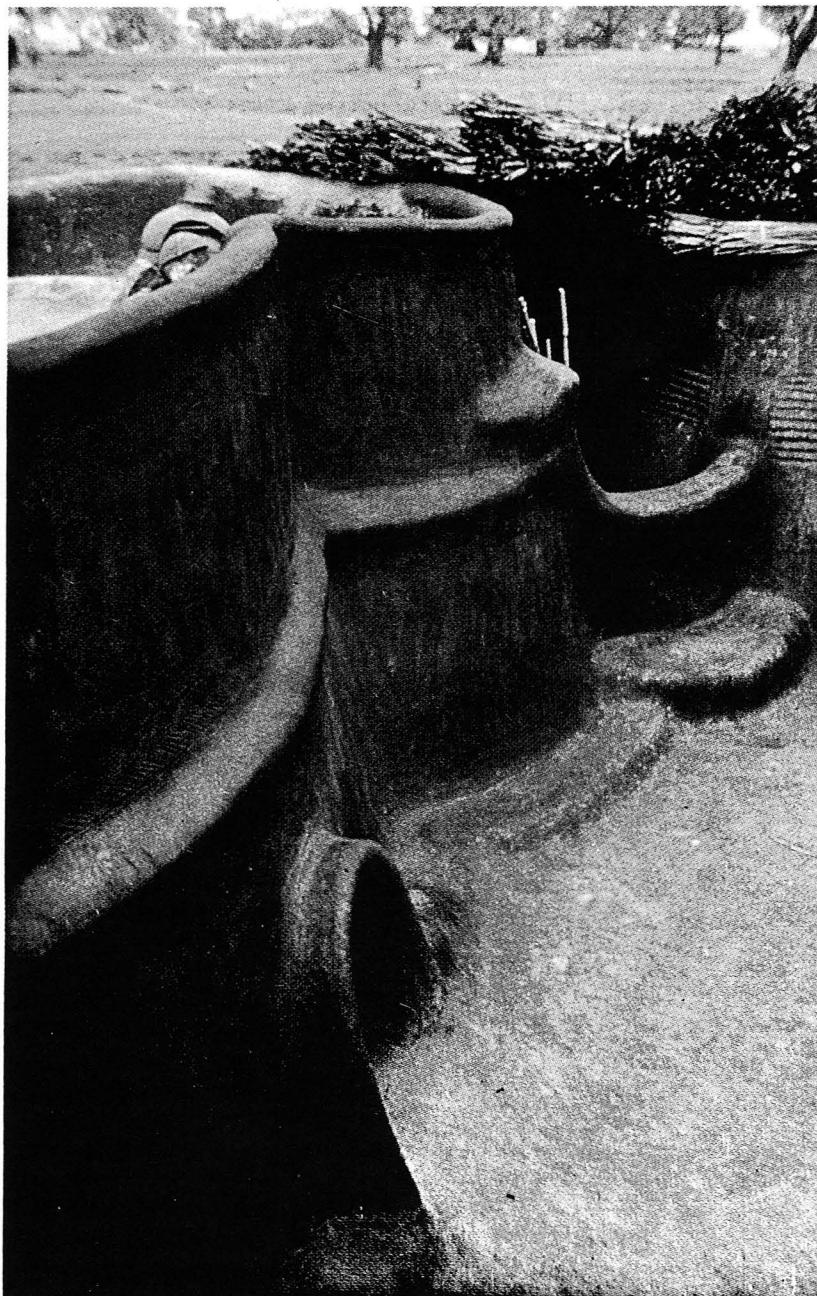
Bob Burnham

The house is the most intimate of buildings. It is strongly related to the nurturing of the individual and the formation of basic attitudes toward life. How the house is provided, occupied, and used is inextricably bound up with the economic and cultural orders of a given place and time.

Houses may therefore be seen as reflections of the values and attitudes in the culture of the builders. They may also be viewed as personal frameworks—constructs representing personalty, state of mind, or conditions of life. Changes in ideas or concepts of house occur over time. The changes may be the most telling indications of change in culture or mind.

The concepts of house which I have described below have passed through me in one way or another. Some houses come mainly from my subconscious self. Similar conceptions have emerged from the minds of many, if not all, people. Some of these houses have passed by me in the world. When they have held the promise of meeting my needs, I have taken them in and made them my own. Each idea was modified to suit and reflect me or my perception of my time and eventually sent on its way. We all, I think, behave similarly.

These concepts may therefore indicate who I am and how I have changed or am changing. They



certainly reflect American culture during or around my time. They may be entangled with many more cultures over a much longer period of time. Common themes from the collective human psyche may be represented. They may even say something about each reader of this journal.

The House of Beginning

The first house that came to me lingers on. It is the primordial house, watery womb of beginning, the dark, gentle center of enfoldment. With that house in time comes an awesome breach. I am thrust irrevocably over the threshold to which I may never return, bittersweet initiation to the journey. Often I feel a compelling urge to return to my first house; I long to feel gathered in and perfectly safe. Thus, I am imperfectly recreating this remembered beginning in a little, windowless padded room. In this dim softness I can listen to myself. First I hear the flash and buzz of daily abrasions sparking in my brain, a kind of random refocusing on what Jean says is not real. Slowly the sparks die out. My heart beat washes over me. Briefly, I know with some certainty who and what I am.

All people must have heard and felt this house. The Gurunsi have seen it, perhaps, clearer than I (Figure 1).

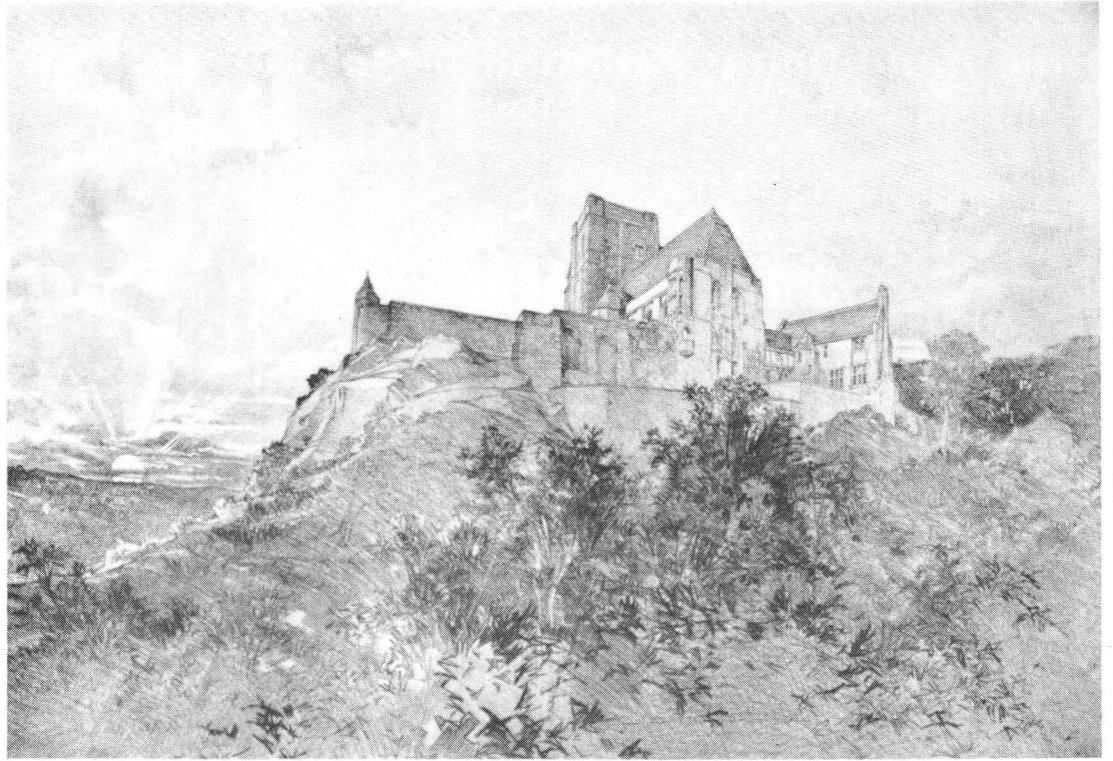


2

The House of Self

The house of self came to me in the first grade when I and my classmates were asked to draw a house. Twenty-two of us made our houses, and they were remarkably similar. Each building was firmly planted on the ground. For the most part, they were simple blocks with gabled or hip shingled roofs. Many had chimneys with streams of smoke rising to a clear blue sky. Bright yellow suns were in many of our skies. Each of the houses had a "face" of "window-eyes" and "door-mouths". Some were painted with rosy "cheeks". A few had stoops and stairs and rails. One had "flower box-ears". Our houses, as we drew them, were portraits of ourselves.

Some houses, like this one in Switzerland, still show the image of the self (Figure 2).



3

The House of Power

The house of power comes to most of us in its time. It commemorates our love of strength, our want to dominate, and, perhaps, our need to serve.

My house of power has a peasant's dream. It sits in the midst of fields and woods, a perfect place of peace, prosperity, and stability. The house rises above its domain, surrounding and mounting a hill. It commands the road. A great stone wall surrounds this house; a swale, which might be a dried up moat, is at its base. This could be a fortress, but it shows none of the signs of a need for vigilance.

The central mass of this house rises above the gate and shows its "face" to the world. It is a calm face and a strong one. The gates form the "mouth". A massive buttress is the "nose". Two large windows are the "eyes". The "brow" is formed by a terraced deck and a great peaked roof.

Within the walls lies a hierarchical world of work, play, and rest. The lowest level consists of a large square surrounded by courts, workshops, barns, and storehouses. Vehicles travel through the courts to and from the fields, forest, and town. The workshops are clean and bright. The machines within them are understandable. They invite a constructive conversion of materials to goods. They foretell a sense of satisfaction in things well made.

The storehouses and barns smell of the things and stuffs that are our treasure. Even the manure in the compost piles contributes to a sense of plenty.

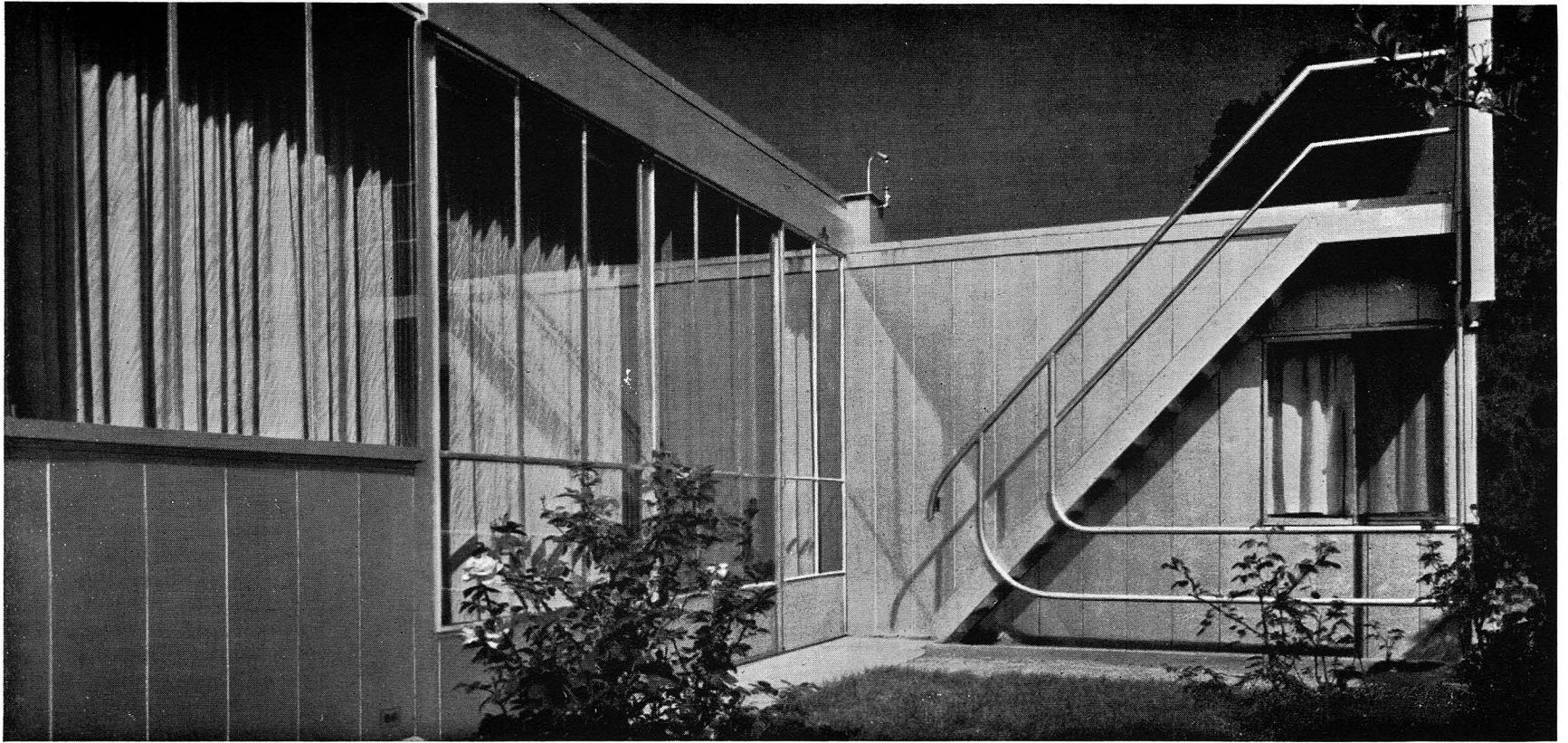
Ramps rise up from the square to several upper levels. Cozy living quarters of well made rooms open out to balconies above the square—many balconies for the many people who live here together.

The great hall is the heart of my house of power. Here the people gather to feast and deliberate. It

is primarily here that the timeless cycles of their world are celebrated: the making, the using, the births, the deaths. The hall is made of stone and carries on its walls mementos of the people, their heroes and their trials. Tower windows light the hall by day, and at night the same windows glow in its face.

There is, of course, another level above this hall, for such a world as this must have its benevolent parents. Their place is at the top where they can watch over the people and represent them. These are my rooms in this house where I live while I serve and am served in my time.

Others know this house. Edwin Lutyens, Bertram Goodhue, and Richard Morris Hunt knew it well (Figure 3).



4

The House of Competence

The house of competence occupied several of my years. This house has taught to me, and I embraced it lovingly, for I thought it could ensure my acceptance in this world.

The house of competence was made to solve problems: the perfect technical response. It begins with standards for efficiency—areas adjusted to respond to the proper number of occupants and their activities, rooms zoned carefully for privacy. The kitchen is a miniature factory; time/motion studies assure its practicality. Implements, appliances, and

materials are carefully grouped in work centers where the components of meals are assembled.

This house is designed with systems built to make more effective use of materials and technical process. Its components, assemblies, and subsystems are designed to be mass produced and assembled in a variety of plan configurations. The manufacturing and construction processes are fully rationalized. The parts are clipped, snapped, and bolted together with incredible ease and speed. Subsystems are carefully graded and made to wear out when they will become technically obsolete; at

which time, they are snapped out and reprocessed to make new, more useful parts.

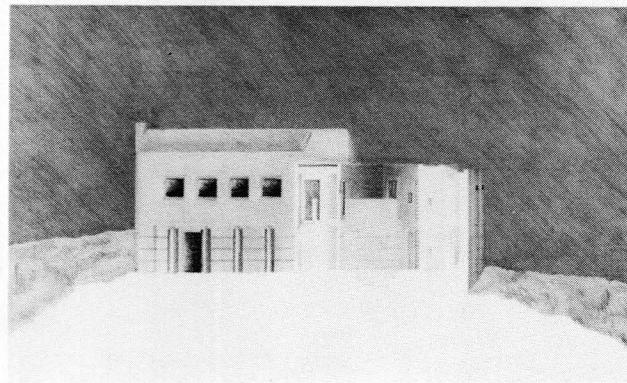
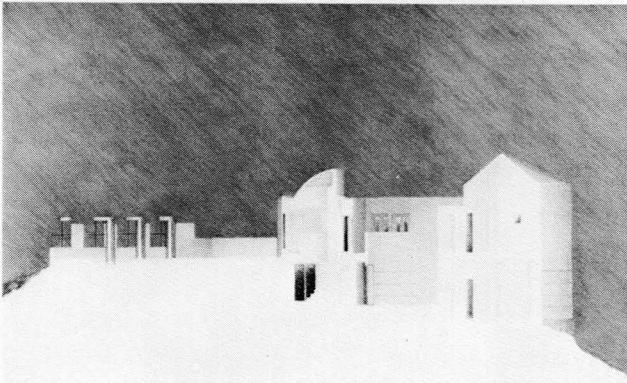
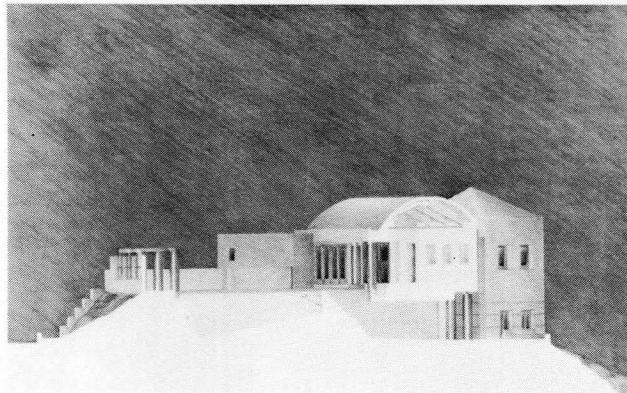
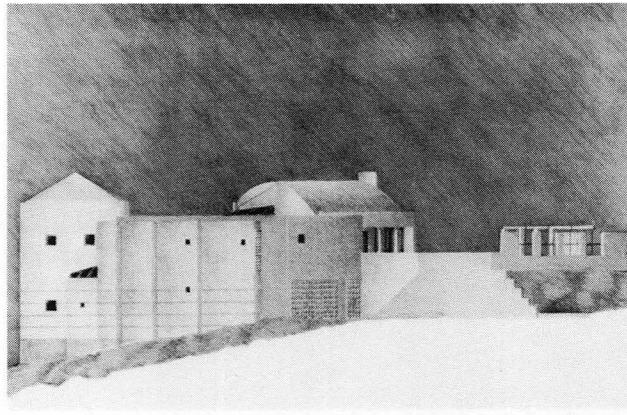
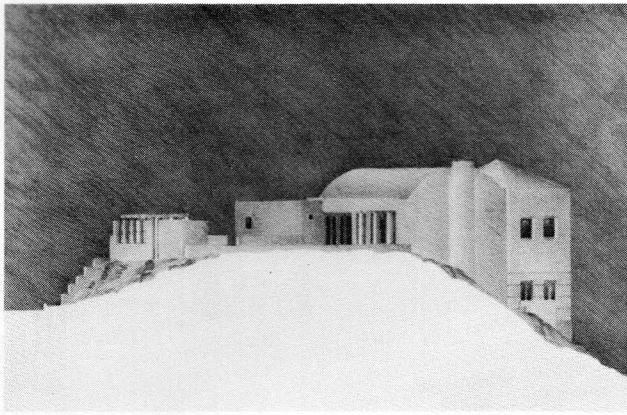
This kind of house touches down on its site on pile foundations made with minimum excavation. It is situated for a perfect microclimatic exposure: the winter sun is let in; the late afternoon summer sun is screened out; winter winds are thwarted; summer breezes are treasured. Ingenious systems of vents and ducts are arranged to employ solar power to move air about the house.

Everything about this house looks clean, cool, and abstract. The parts and fixtures that touch our

bodies are shaped to serve by ergonomics: door handles are the reciprocals of hands; chairs the impressions of bottoms and backs.

The elevations are all planes. There are no windows, just opaque and transparent walls. The art of this house is in the perfectly proportioned and integrated patterns of its walls.

Most of our teachers have dreamed of or worked with this house. Richard Neutra made many houses of competence. The Beard residence is one (Figure 4).



5

The House of Tongues

I went through a period not long ago when I was overcome by the voices and languages, the babble and eloquence of houses. As I opened my ears to the multitude of tongues, they began to crowd me, holding a great raucous party in my mind.

Some shouted their messages to all who would listen; some whispered of refinement and manners. Sociable houses wanted

to have dialogues with the neighbors; conventional types were careful not to offend. Elitists wanted to impress the neighbors. A few motherly ones wanted only to provide warm and loving shelter to those within.

Making theaters of the moment was for some a central aim. They saw gardens, courtyards, porches, bridges, and stairs as stages for the festivals of daily life. Towers, chimneys, and aediculas were the markers of our domestic rituals.

Some houses pointed out their resemblance to human beings and the social scene: through their grouping, positions or features, and the connotations of flashing eyebrows, crowded rows, sprawling forms, and open arms.

Historian houses extolled the virtues of the past. Many believed that the wisdom gained and lessons learned in other times made them the best teachers for our time. They felt that principles and patterns of universal impor-

tance had already been identified and must be preserved. Some had a taste for "historical soup", composed of favorite bits from several times floating on a pasteboard goop.

Every party has its eccentric too. This one had a house who talked to no one, but kept shouting out "Birds of Paradise! Toraja boats! Coal and chunks of glass!" and other outlandish things. Over and over he yelled these crazy things until finally the others paused to listen. A few nodded, as if they understood.

A group of houses performed a symbolic dance for me, led by the great white ocean liner houses with decks, flying bridges, and rounded tower-stacks that spoke of vacations in sunny places. Houses with barn and foundry faces danced a stolid *pas de deux*. A chorus line of mandalas, cosmic domes, and poetic stones proclaimed a hope of universal and timeless communication.

Eschewing mere symbolism, another group turned its back on the dance to revel in the delights of abstraction and transformation. For them it seemed that mathematical sculpture was a great intellectual consummation.

When I finally understood these houses well, it was clear they shared one consuming passion: they love the arts of speaking and conversation (Figure 5).

The House of Us

I cannot see the outside of our house. It is a house of rooms, a place of inner essences. There are both indoor and outdoor rooms, but there is no face to the world.

One of our collection of rooms is a great "lap" where Jean, Nial, and I are forever gathered. Whose "lap" it is we cannot say, but we must know. This room is bathed in golden sun and gathered about an orange core—a ceramic tile stove. This stove is the center of the "lap"—perhaps its owner's solar plexus—from which energies rise and then return. Above our warm center is a delicate web, a filagree of vines, flowers, and birds.

Our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters are there on the wall and elsewhere. Our friends come and go. They bring with them small things which are left behind: a limp, a laugh, a tear, a stone. All things and bits of us are carefully molded into the walls, left there as if cast in molten glass.

Another room in this collection is mostly me, I guess. There are doors on all the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. The doors are many sizes and shapes, some as small as my hand, others taller than my head. They have many different faces. One is a flush oak panel. Another has herringbone



pattern paneling in pine. A third is made of onyx and carved with vines.

I can sit in the middle of this room and see these doors and think of what I know or wish is behind each one. The two largest doors cover endless rows of books read and unread: some have made me more knowing; a few have made my cry; one has never left its box—I know what is in it, but I cannot read it.

One small polished metal door covers an old and beautiful watch; it was once a champion and now is nearly dead. Another small door hides a broken hand, and still another has a conch shell which harbors its own little collection of smaller shells.

The large doors in the ceiling can be opened to the sky. When I sit beneath their opening, I can still believe in heaven despite cosmonauts and space shuttles. A door on the west wall opens to

show me my neighbor's greenhouse next door. One on the south wall shows me an image of a garden I am forever planning.

One last room in my collection of essences can only be reached by a long corridor and a small stair. It is a refuge, a place of perfect peace. A great bed grows out of its floor. The bedboard joins the walls and surrounds the entire room in bands of blue and violet. A bookshelf cornice tops these bands. The cats might sleep there

HOUSE OF DREAMS (Bob's House of Us)

I built myself a house of dreams
with windows wide and tall
so sun could lie upon the rugs
and decorate the walls.
Ferns and flowers, cats and dog
are breathing in the day.
Here I sing a song to you
and watch it light your face
in my pretty house of dreams,
in my pretty house of dreams.

Lovely dreamers come and go
but leave themselves behind.
At lessons learned and bridges
burned
we laugh so hard we cry.
Gifts of things and gifts of time
are glowing on the shelves.
The air is sweet with memories
of how we found ourselves
in my pretty house of dreams,
in my pretty house of dreams.

The house of dreams has no
outside;
you'll never find the door.
But love will always bring you
here
and love is what it's for.
Rooms are here for resting in
and rooms to be alone,
for celebrating, meditating,
talking to your soul,
in my pretty house of dreams,
in my pretty house of dreams.

The ceiling opens to the sky,
to clouds and sun and stars.
Silent music rains on us
and honors what we are.
Joy and peace and truth and love
are shining in our eyes
as we join our minds as one
and gladly realize
this is a pretty house of dreams,
this is just a pretty house of
dreams.

Jean Burnham
February 1983



1. Reprinted from *Progressive Architecture*, August 1982, courtesy of Jean-Paul Bourdier.
2. Reprinted from *Psychology of the House* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1977), p. 66.
3. Reprinted from *Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue-Architect* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, Inc., 1925), plate LVIII.
4. Reprinted from *Richard Neutra* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), p. 33.
5. Reprinted from *California Counterpoint: Architecture 1982*, courtesy of The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies.
6. Reprinted from *Carl Larsson's Home* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978).
7. Front of a Buddhist Shrine, Chinese, Sui dynasty (581-618).

7

if they could reach it, curled beside other essential cornerstones of near reality. A pyramid rises from this fragile shelf to completely cover the resting place. Perhaps it won't keep the edges of razor blades perpetually sharp, but it centers and contains the energies of resting.

There are other rooms here, but I haven't seen them clearly or can't tell about them. Other people have their own collections of

rooms, each different from ours and yet in some ways the same. I am reminded of Carl and Karin Larsson's house of their essences (Figure 6).

The House of Ending

A final house must come to me. I know little about it, yet it rests in the shadows of my mind. I can glimpse the door, but little beyond it. Here is another momentous threshold, surround-

ed thickly by my anxieties. I have heard numerous versions of what lies within. My mother's Aunt Alice saw it full of fire and fiends and gave me many awful nights. One of Jean's songs (or all of them?) promise me this house will return me to the One. I can't tell the truth yet in these or other explanations. The best I can do now is see the door draped with garlands of creatures and counter creatures from my fears. A Chinese sculptor has seen this door before (Figure 7).