

"Be It Ever So Humble . . ."

Jennifer Clements

*"Mid Pleasures and palaces
though we may roam
Be it ever so humble,
there's no place like home: . . ."*¹

The houses we design are rarely humble. They are noble, provocative and beautiful, but not humble. Should they be? Do our designs really satisfy the dreams of our clients? For whom do we design and how? To examine these questions, I intend to consider three views of the house: the dream house that is the fundamental image of home, the real house where ordinary people live, and the house that is designed by an architect.

The Dream House

If we were to visualize the American Dream, what might we see? A smiling Dad in his new convertible returns home at the end of a busy day at the office. As he pulls into the drive, his faithful hound rushes to greet him. His wife is beginning dinner, and his kids are upstairs doing their homework. What is the setting for this blissful illusion? The house, which is as important as the car, the dog and the family. Although the last payment may never be made, the house is the symbol of success and security. It may be one of a row of twenty or a Georgian mansion, but the significance of hearth and home is universal.

Among the most widely publicized house images in the last decade are those done by the Swedish painter, Carl Larsson at the turn of the century (Figure 1-3). The popular book filled with views of the artist's own house lies on a great many coffee tables. Why? It is not a particularly convenient or stylish house, but it seems to represent the ideal home in some very fundamental way. The house is both creative and domestic, festive and secure. Carved posts and painted mottos are evidence of a family that reverses the traditions and values we hold dear. It is a house embodying humility and joy.

Charles Moore spoke recently at Harvard about houses as the

*recipients of human energy. The energy that is put into the buildings—the care, love, and concern—is held by those buildings and given back. If there is enough to energize them, then they in turn energize us.*²

Carl Larsson's house embodies this idea perfectly. It is a house that is intimately involved with the lives of its family and is more beautiful because of it.

Charles Keeler, in *The Simple House* of 1904, agreed that owner and house were deeply intertwined.

*A large nature may rise above his environment and live in a dream world of his own fashioning, but most of us are mollusks after all, and are shaped and sized by the walls which we build about us.*³

C. J. Jung even saw his own psyche as a house in his famous dream.

I was in a house I did not know, which had two stories. It was "my" house. I found myself in the upper story, where there was a kind of salon furnished with fine old pieces in rococo style... Descending the stairs, I reached the ground floor. There everything was much older and I realized that this part of the house must date from about the fifteenth or sixteenth century... I came upon a heavy door, and opened it. Beyond it, I discovered a stone stairway that led down into the cellar. Descending again, I found myself in a beautifully vaulted room which looked exceedingly ancient... I knew that the walls dated from Roman times... I discovered a ring. When I pulled it, the stone slab lifted and again I saw a stairway of narrow stone steps leading down into the depths... Thick dust lay on the floor, and in the dust were scattered bones

*and broken pottery, like remains of a primitive culture.*⁴

That Jung would see the house as representing the most valuable of all human possessions, the human psyche, certainly reinforces the fundamental importance of the idea of "home." Within each of us there seems to be some deep-rooted notion of an ideal house.

The Real House

What have these images to do with real houses? We do not live in the midst of Swedish craft or in houses with bones in the basement, nor do we wish to. If these ideal dreams exist, shouldn't they somehow be part of the houses we live in? Our disdain for the tract house comes, I think, from its lack of identification with the individual. Nothing distinguishes it from its neighbors, yet we know that every family is unique. Our admiration for Carl Larsson's house seems to come from the clear expression in it of the people who live there. We feel we know them from seeing their house. It is they who made the house remarkable, not daring structure, fine materials, serene setting or intellectual abstraction. Carl Larsson's house suggests breakfast pastries and Christmas traditions. It reflects warmth and love; it is appealing.

I think the ideal "real" house can

and should mirror the dreams of its owner. It is the most intimate place of one's life. It is the setting for arguments and love, for family dinners and all-night parties. It offers support and challenge. It stimulates growth, while it sustains tradition. In her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, Margaret Mead says,

The need to define who you are by the place in which you live remains intact, even when that place is defined by a single object, like the small blue vase that used to mean home to one of my friends, the daughter of a widowed trained nurse who continually moved from one place to another.⁵

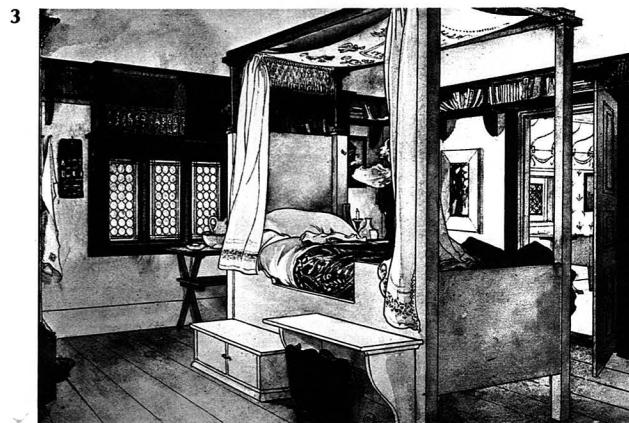
The Architect Designed House

We can blame the failures of the tract house on budget and anonymity. Does this mean that houses by architects for specific clients come closer to being the intimate and satisfying abodes their owners would like to have? Tom Wolfe seem to think not.

Every new \$900,000 summer house in the north woods of Michigan or on the shore of Long Island has so many pipe railings, ramps, hob-tread spiral stairways, sheets of industrial plate glass, banks of tungsten-halogen lamps and white cylindrical shapes, it looks like an insecticides refinery.⁶

Budget is no excuse here. What's wrong? The house Wolfe describes is a high art factory. It shows no indication that real people live there. This is certainly a long way from Carl Larsson's house. No mottos, no pastries. Where are the kids' toys?

Now, if one agrees that the Carl Larsson approach is better than the insecticide refinery approach



(which is a subject for future and lengthy debate), how does one go about achieving it? If we take a lesson from the Swedish painter, the house that most reflects its owner is the one that incorporates human experience into its design. Window seats, inglenooks and brick chimneys suggest activities that we associate with a comfortable life. We choose the house that shows us the human qualities we admire, whether it be warmth or power.

The first book to make this point for me was *The Place of Houses*. In discussing Jung's design for his own house, the authors emphasize:

The structure of the house became a symbol for his knowledge of himself. These are processes far more profound than those which nowadays try to reproduce the "dream" of a Georgian house by barely approximating its external appearance...

Easy travel, books, glossy magazines, films, and television have revealed an almost unlimited array of styles our own houses might embody... Conspicuously absent among most of these images are heartfelt, personal convictions about what a house really should be like... You must expose your dreams and fantasies. Luckily, perhaps, it is impossible to recreate them, or the environment for them, whole. The expression of dreams is accomplished by transmutation, developing the dream so that only its essence remains, and by miniaturization, reducing the pieces to a compass you can accommodate and afford. But what is left, transmuted, miniaturized, and fused with your other concerns, is the home for your imagination.⁷

It is clear that the authors believe in dreams as the stuff of fine design. This is a brave departure from design based on structure, materials, Democracy, site, history or art, and I applaud it. I think, however, that I would part company from the authors of this fine book in their apparent disregard for literal images. An image that is abstracted too far is neither recognizable nor valuable. The abstraction of a Palladian window is not a Palladian window. Our response to this bit of history is by association and an intellectual abstraction may not suffice.

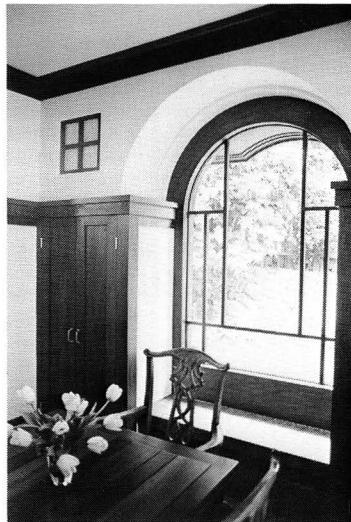
We have a great fear, I sense, of being too literal. We do not want to be caught designing fairytale castles. High-tech spaces like the ones in the magazines seem more dignified. Besides, our ambition urges us to move forward and develop new ideas. This seriously inhibits our ability to use literal versions of comfortable old images. We risk the patronizing

smiles of our associates when we dabble in these old-fashioned modes.

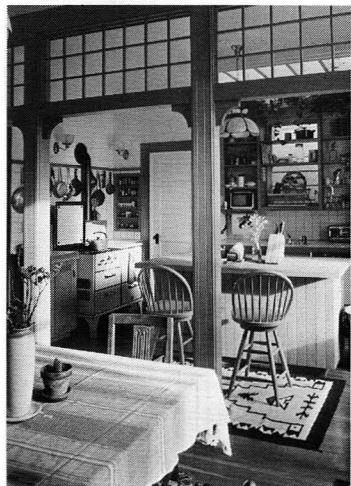
If we decide that dreams are to be the legitimate foundation of our designs, how do we get them? Even a sympathetic client would be surprised and entertained to be asked to report on the images of his dream world. Yet the house design can hardly be based on the ideas of the architect alone. If the house is to reflect its owner, then he must be a full partner in its design. His feelings about fireside and sunlight must be plumbed.

My own approach is rather simple. My clients and I talk about how they use their house. What are their favorite parts of the day? Are there times in the year when family traditions are important? What are their hobbies? Do they want places to be alone? Some people respond with enthusiasm to these discussions. Others see them as unnecessary and even scary. I also use a scrapbook of pictures clipped from magazines and books. The photos are arranged in order from most woodsy and down-home to most elegant and high-tech. Even a relatively non-verbal client has a lot to say about these pictures. Some images strike him as ridiculous and others as ideal. The first pictures in the book will always seem dumb and the last ones repellant, but somewhere in the middle will be pictures that appeal to his basic notion of what his house should look like. He couldn't have described it, but he can recognize it when he sees it. The book is simply another device to involve a client in the design so that the house is his and not mine.

The discussion of birthday pageants and the pictures of backyard barbecues are only methods. Most important is the ability to see the house through the eyes of the person who will live there by making an honest effort to understand what



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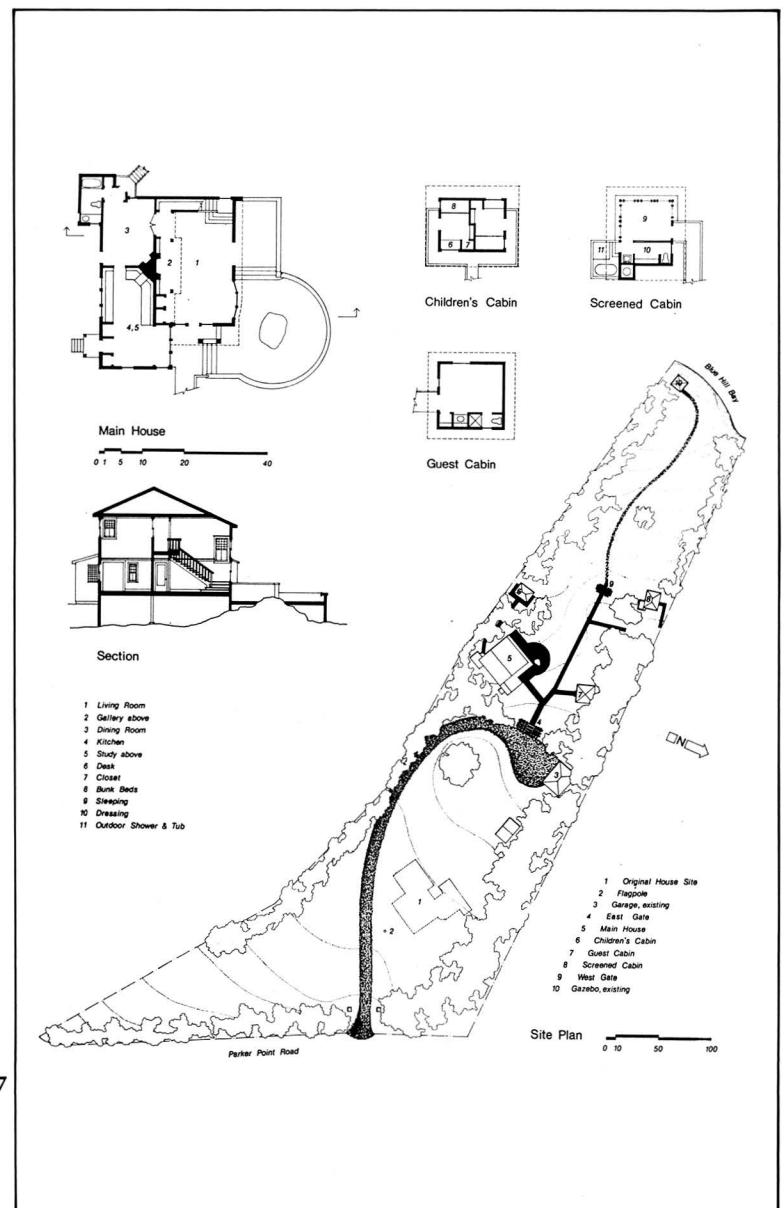
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qualities and associations are fundamental to their ideal house.

Good design is a completely different issue. It has nothing to do with image or even with the client. The formation of the consistent image that will serve as a guide throughout the design process is not a guarantee of good or bad design, but is the basis for the design vocabulary, the building blocks which will then become a masterpiece or another piece of humdrum design depending on the inspiration of the designer. The image is simply another good tool.



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I offer a few examples of work done using this process. The first project is the remodeling of a fine house in Berkeley, designed by a distinguished local architect, John Hudson Thomas, in the early twentieth century. As a whole, the house is exquisite. The owners wanted to make the nightmare kitchen match the rest of the house. Image was easy here. I had only to repeat the existing details elsewhere in the new room

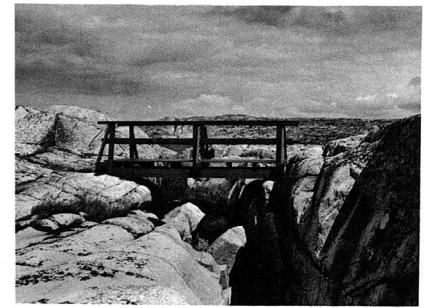
(Figure 4). At the same time, I was working on another kitchen with clients who chose a very different image. At first they announced they wanted a Victorian kitchen to match their house. A quick trip through the scrapbook, however, soon made it clear that their preferences were far from Victorian. They found themselves comfortable with images much closer to the high-tech end of the spectrum, so a very different



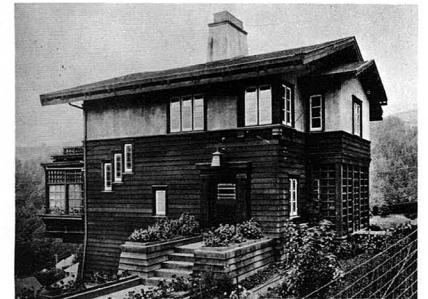
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design emerged (Figure 5). I enjoy comparing these two kitchens. Their programs were identical, but the character of each is entirely different.

Working with the owner of a San Francisco cottage, we arrived at a design for a kitchen that strongly resembles the Victorian era (Figure 6). He was willing to sacrifice convenience to maintain the old-fashioned qualities he admired.

Finally, I show the house whose origins I understand best since it is the one where I spend every summer (Figures 7-9). My husband and I bought a late nineteenth century house in Maine, which had been considerably altered (Figure 10). We thought of tearing it down, but local sentiment persuaded us to remodel it instead. Our initial image was one of rustic cottages in the woods; however, there were other influences on the design. Carl Larsson's hand-crafted house

played a large part. An article by Lars Lerup showing the wooden bridges and walkways to the sea in the Swedish town of Smögen impressed me deeply (Figure 11). The beauty of the Maine Coast commands a high respect from us and made us decide on a house that would not compromise that landscape. Probably the most noticeable influence is that of the turn-of-the-century houses in the San Francisco Bay area. Our house is a San Francisco house on vacation in Maine. The easy elegance of those dwellings guided the design of the interiors and the gates. A. Page Brown's Swedenborgian Church in San Francisco (1894) and Louis Mullgardt's Evans house in nearby Marin County (1907) were influential, as was the work of Greene & Greene in Pasadena (Figures 12-13). Thus, our place is sometimes referred to as "that Japanese house."

The house lay in a broad lawn facing a view that had become



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obscured by trees. We decided to clip the building of the wings it had accumulated over the years and move it into the pines and blueberries. We surround it with sleeping cabins, keeping the house as a gathering place for family and friends. The whole complex is linked by a series of paths, walkways and gates. The drive leads to the first gate, beyond which is a walk that connects the cabins and the house (Figures 14-16). At the far end of the walk, on axis with the flagpole and the handsome double pine, is the far gate, which is smaller to give the illusion of distance. Beyond is a rocky path to the gazebo, down at the water's edge.

The gates imply movement and growth in a way that is beyond anything I had in mind. I am excited by their effect. The establishment has a life of its own. Its submission to the landscape makes it change every year. Last summer I planted

wisteria on a big gate, and every year I must prune the miniature forest that grows by the deck.

The house is an example of non-architecture. It is not greater than the people who live there. To me, the successful parts of the house are those that are most a part of our lives. The deck reminds me of our yearly party where a hundred people crowd around the huge rock that we allowed to protrude through the floor boards (Figure 17). Behind the bay window is the game table where my son plays "Topple" for hours on end (Figures 18-19). The small gate somehow reminds me I have dreaming to do, and the dining room is the site of untold hours of friendly chatter (Figure 20). I go down to the gazebo for an hour or two on a sunny afternoon where it seems I am a million miles from anyone. It is a house that provides for all our moods. It reflects us, and it cares for us. It is, I think, "ever so humble."



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NOTES

1. John Howard Payne, "Home Sweet Home," in *The Family Book of Best Loved Poems*, David L. George, ed. Garden City, New York, 1952, p. 152.
2. "Charles Moore's Two Agendas," *HGSD News*, Spring 1982, p. 11
3. Charles Keeler, *The Simple House*, reprinted. Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City, 1979, p. 3.
4. C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York 1965, p. 158.
5. Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, New York, 1972, p. 11.
6. Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*. New York, 1981, p. 3.
7. Charles Moore, Gerald Allen & Donlyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses*. New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, 1974, pp. 129, 132, & 144.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

The Kitchen, Old Anna, and Papa's Room, reproduced courtesy of Peacock Books. Smögen bridge reproduced courtesy of Lars Lerup.

Figure 13 reproduced from *Louis Christian Mullgardt. The Regents*, University of California, p. 24.

Figures 8, 9, 10, and 12 published courtesy of Richard Longstreth.

All others, the author.



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1. *The Kitchen*, 1900, Carl Larsson, National Museum, Stockholm
2. *Old Anna*, 1900, National Museum, Stockholm
3. *Papa's Room*, 1900, National Museum, Stockholm
4. Neo-John Hudson Thomas kitchen, Berkeley, 1979

5. Modern kitchen, San Francisco, 1979
6. Victorian kitchen, San Francisco, 1980
7. Seven Oaks, Blue Hill Maine, plans and section
8. Seven Oaks, view from drive
9. Seven Oaks, main house
10. Seven Oaks, original house, ca. 1888
11. Smögen bridge

12. A. Page Brown, Church of the New Jerusalem, San Francisco, 1894, interior
13. Louis Mullgardt, Evans house, Mill Valley, Marin County, 1907.
14. Seven Oaks, main gate
15. Seven Oaks, path to children's cabin
16. Seven Oaks, children's cabin

17. Seven Oaks, main house
18. Seven Oaks, living room
19. Seven Oaks, dining room
20. Seven Oaks, dining room