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Imaginative Intensity

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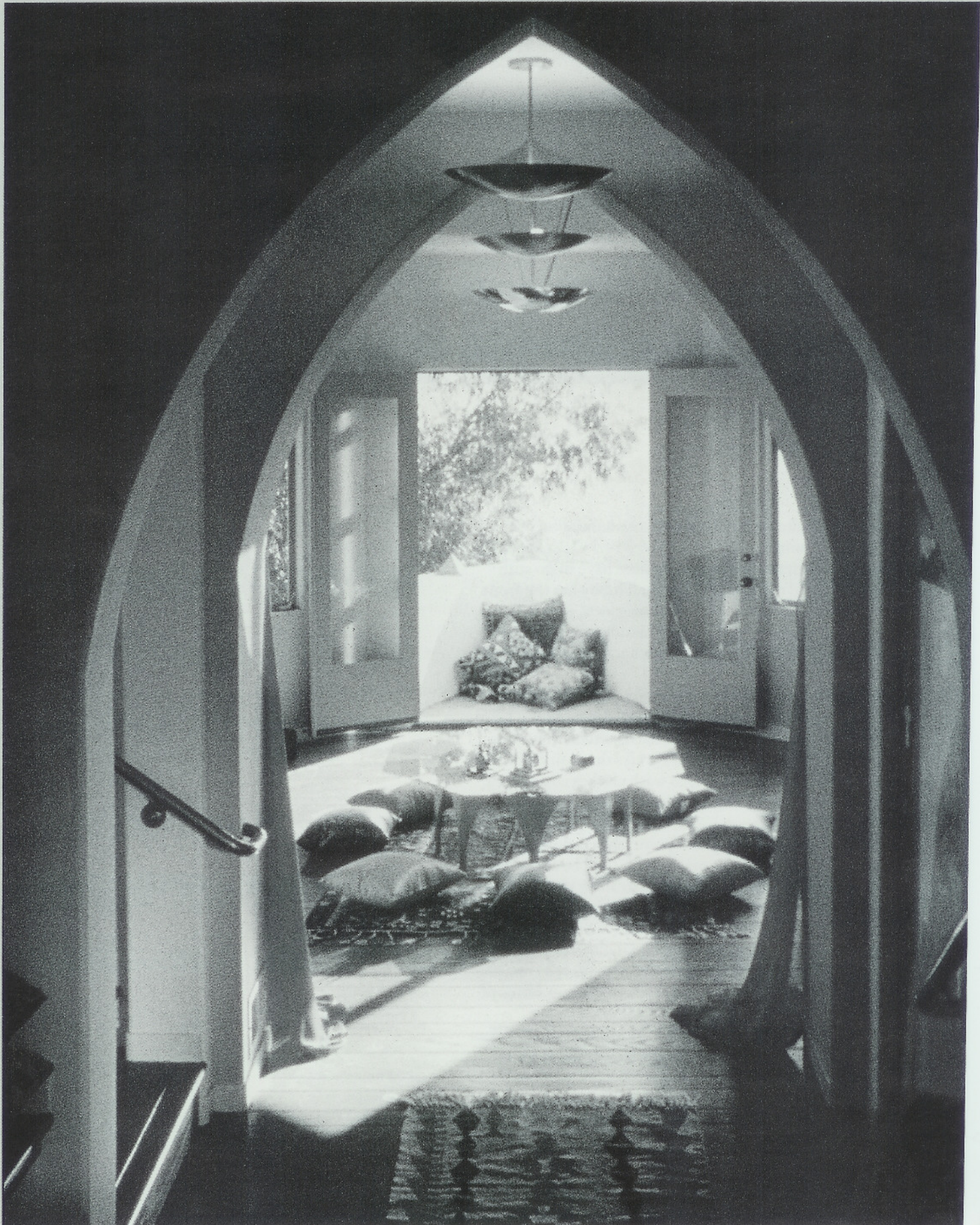
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3. Imaginative Intensity



The intensity with which various parts of the environment are invested with personal dreams and predilections plays a great part in the satisfactions that specific places can afford.

In the private realm, creating spaces and forms with spirit, sometimes with eccentricity, can embolden an individual's claim on his or her space, marking a distinctive dwelling in the world. How others view these vigorous assertions as a part of the outgoings will depend a great deal on their level of interest in others and the particularities of personality. Some will tut about, others will enjoy, the workings of feckless imaginations. It depends a lot on what kind of society one imagines. Ace Architects and their clients, clearly, imagine a society that allows a full measure of loopiness. Lucia Howard and David Weingarten have explored ways to embody their clients' dreams with a candor that few can match. Their invocation of the Order of Dreams leads to a level of intensity that sometimes challenges community discretion.

There is a curious edge created when the outgoings present you with dreams that might ordinarily be confined to private discourse. Howard observes, astutely, that buildings become places when they enter into the public imagination. This doubles the challenge: Buildings must be imaginative enough to direct attention, either to themselves or to the ensemble of which they are a part, and to do so they must either sidle by, or charge past, guardians at the door of public imagination and understanding. Either strategy requires careful attention to both the physical and the cultural context. There, to complicate matters even further, one often finds a changing of the guard.

The Prospect New Town project in Colorado is a particularly interesting case in point. The layout of this new subdivision was based on principles promulgated by the Congress for the New Urbanism, with attendant expectations (prompted by the first buildings) that the houses built there would conform to the traditional template associated with that movement. When the developer and his designer decided to try changing the model to one perceived as modern, some of the owners already there became indignant. They had invested in what they considered to be a comfortable (and economically predictable) image of the outgoings that the community would provide, and were now challenged by wayward intruders at the door, aliens whose imaginative resources they could not readily understand.

The construction of community identity, while it must be central to our concerns, is tricky business, especially now that the imagery that fuels our imaginations is so diffuse, so far-reaching, that neighboring does not necessarily yield common aspirations. It calls for the creation of a resilient and accommodating structure of relationships, more fundamental than the blandishments of initial appearance, and for the patient nurture of public understanding and attention.

In a more privileged and isolated setting, Jim Richter worked with both the commonplace and the unexpected in the creation of his family's summer cabin—juxtaposing the calm, nearly staid, simplicity of conventional form with the bristling spikey branches of untrimmed log columns. To multiply the whimsical associations in the place, he invited guests to each trace a face on the tips of the eave rafters, marking the outer edges of a private domain with emblems of friendship and the recollections of neighborly outgoing.