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The Vernacular Landscape is on the Move... Again

Architecture, especially interior architecture, tends to formalize and institutionalize certain relationships. Why this should be the case I have no clear idea, but I am convinced that the Western world — in particular the U.S. — is in the midst of a radical shift in attitude toward architectural or designed spaces.

For centuries our civilization has relied upon enclosed spaces to establish relationships and identities, but now we are turning away from them in favor of ones that are either more natural or less formal. The vernacular or workaday spaces that we will use in the future will of course include buildings. But we will prefer open spaces such as streets, highways, fields and even the desert.

For 80 years I have lived (along with other Americans) in a world largely composed of enclosed spaces, all of them well-defined and characterized by a greater or lesser degree of accessibility: the church, the school, the library, the dwelling, even the workplace. All were careful to isolate themselves from the street and what it stood for. People of my generation can recall a time when all Americans of middle-class background were taught to distrust the street and street life, and to believe in the sanctity of the home.

We had heard of the fascinations of street life and had a highly romanticized image of its wickedness and its freedom, but we rarely ventured into it. Once we were home and had closed the front door we had the happy feeling of being where we belonged. Home was where each room, each passage, had its own unique character and where every space, every hour of the day, imposed its own appropriate behavior. An important part of the joy of being home was that we could control who had access to it and who could be excluded.

My memories of the houses in which I have lived, and of the houses of friends and relatives, are still so vivid that there was a brief time when as a student of American domestic architecture I supposed that I could identify and describe the prototype exte-

Photos courtesy
Frederic Lewis.



**The middle-class vernacular house,
is a fixed focus for stable social relationships,
codes of behavior and even morality.**

rior of the American dwelling. I soon found that I could do nothing of the sort. Take at random a dozen middle-class American families of a generation ago, all living in the same town, all with the same education and much the same income, and you will find one living in a white, clapboard, two-story house, another in a Tudor cottage, another in their parents' Victorian house and still another living in a scaled-down version of a Southern plantation.

But once I learned to think of the prototype interior, I was on safe ground. The middle-class home I learned to identify was simply a composition of rooms or spaces accommodating certain cherished domestic values: privacy, family continuity, undisputed possession and, most cherished of all, the ability to offer formal hospitality.

In this type of house one would find the formal entrance lobby, very often the parlor, a so-called "powder room" and a guest room and bath upstairs (in those days most houses had two floors). The small dining room (rarely used by the modern middle-class family) would contain a handsome table and a set of chairs that would seat eight people (even though the family counted only four). There would be a display of silver and company china. The massive front door with its bell, chimes, or knocker was also part of the equipment for hospitality, and in those far-off days there even would be a place where guests could park their car. Many of the houses I am describing emphasized their limited accessibility by small signs saying "No Soliciting," "No Salesmen," or "Tradesmen's entrance in the rear," meaning at the kitchen door.

The custom of hospitality, the spaces it requires and its various forms and schedules, offers the best way of defining a dwelling and the status of its occupants. Standard middle-class hospitality indicates that the house is a territory, a domain with restricted access and its own rules and customs. Neither neighbors nor business associates are automatically invited. Formality in the shape of a sit-down dinner or a catered cocktail party implies no celebration or any ulterior motive; it is simply a tactful way of showing how you live and protecting the house from too much casual dropping in. Privacy is a precious commodity.

Formal hospitality of the kind that calls for invitations well in advance of the event and elaborate preparations in the kitchen is not common in working-class households, not only because of the expense of such meals, but also because the

working-class home includes no special rooms for hospitality. If you are a friend you are made welcome even if your visit is a surprise. What takes the place of formal hospitality is a banquet or dance at a nearby restaurant or social organization, and such an event is usually a celebration of a family birthday or wedding or graduation. It calls for no reciprocity.

Among the rich and famous hospitality is on a lavish, not to say boastful scale, and is meant to accomplish several well-defined objectives: negotiate deals and alliances, social as well as in the business world, display the owner's wealth and position, and process people who might be candidates for membership in the power structure. If you pass muster you will be invited to a smaller, more select party. If you fail you are never invited again.

The House as a Moral Unit

What do notions of hospitality have to do with the future of the vernacular landscape? I could answer in one word: territoriality. But a better answer involves the history of both concepts. I know of no study more fascinating for the amateur of landscape history than the evolution of the middle-class dwelling and its changing relationship with the land. That evolution has in my opinion come to an end, but we can see through history not only how the house developed architecturally, but also in authority and prestige; how it gradually became a symbol of stability, attachment to the land, manners and codes of conduct and even morality.

When the Roman Empire had disintegrated as a landscape and the Dark Ages had overtaken northwestern Europe, the large agricultural estates, once worked by slaves, were abandoned or used for grazing. By the seventh and eighth centuries of a new kind of agricultural enterprise began to evolve on some of the extensive monastic estates. A suitable amount of farm land was granted in perpetuity to a family that agreed to live on it, work it, pay taxes and perform occasional military service. These requirements created what is sometimes known as a "moral unit" — a permanent territory with a religious and social and economic identity capable of entering into an agreement with the sovereign power.

Most of those early medieval homesteads were small and poor. But if they ranked far below the larger feudal estates,

they were much superior to the dwellings and plots of land of the rural proletariat or the urban worker. Their status was given official recognition: The crown granted them the right to “keep the King’s Peace,” that is, to enforce the law and maintain order without police interference, discipline and protect their workers, punish trespassers and defend their boundaries. We might call this privilege an early recognition of the right to domestic privacy; we might also call it an early recognition of the right to offer hospitality, for it meant the privileged landowner could control access to his house and land.

In its Dark Ages beginnings, the home of the yeoman farmer was simply a container, a house with no specific function other than that of providing shelter. But over time a number of radically new construction techniques evolved and combined with a better knowledge of local climate and materials to produce a house capable of withstanding the weather and of lasting for decades. This house could have a preconceived plan for both domestic needs and large open, unencumbered interior spaces. It was well suited to local farming practices, to a self-contained family life and to the public status of its occupants; it provided spaces for storage, privacy, work and hospitality.

The Landscape of Mobility

It would be a mistake to assume that this house is the only kind of dwelling there was throughout this thousand-year period. The nobility and the church had their own, more complicated architectural tradition, which the average yeoman farmer could only admire from a distance. There was also a tradition, far older, far more generally diffused, of a very different kind of dwelling: that of families that possessed little land, who supported themselves by working for others and who therefore had a different relationship to the land and its resources. This landless element seems to have constituted at least a third of the medieval population. Its size gradually increased until, in the late eighteenth century, it comprised almost half the population.

The house of the wage earner is what we now call vernacular, not only because it was crudely constructed out of local materials, but also because it was the dwelling of the poorest class. (Unfortunately, the word “vernacular” still suggests infe-

riority, the substandard version of the correct, and thus distorts the difference. But the term persists, and to be understood we must use it.)

The yeoman’s farmhouse and the wage earner’s house were unlike not only as to size and construction, but also unlike in the role each of them played in the lives of their occupants and how each was valued. The house of the laborer did not participate in the structural evolution of the middle-class house, remaining stubbornly loyal to a housing tradition originating in the remote, unchronicled pre-Roman past.

The typical house of those times, which we identify with the Barbarian invasions of northwestern Europe, was crude, easily built and without any individuality — a construction of vertical planks, quickly put together out of timber from the surrounding forest, with a heavy thatch roof supported by poles. There was a hearth and a fireplace on the dirt floor, but no chimney and no ceiling. There were usually two rooms, one of them occupied by livestock. Outside was a small primitive garden and a number of sheds, outhouses and barns.

An extended family would live in a cluster of such houses. All land and resources were owned in common; small wheat fields were allotted to each household. Raising cattle, hunting, fishing and warfare were the main occupations. When the local resources of grass and timber were exhausted, or when an unfriendly group threatened invasion, the so-called village moved on. Mobility was so much a part of the lives of these people that their sacred structure was a small shed or shrine on wheels. A tribe in Scythia lived entirely in wagons on the move: They were known as *bamaxobii* (those who live in wagons), a term that academics might adopt when discussing the mobile home.

Mobility was the ruling element. All things that moved — flowing water, vegetation, fire — were held in common. Even the grass that the cattle ate was common property, since it moved in the wind. Perhaps as a result of the notion that much of the natural environment belonged to everyone who used it, custom held that none of those spaces so necessary to survival were to be altered: no trees cut down or planted, no water damned, no wells dug and no fences built, except around the fields to keep out livestock.

How much of this pagan tradition carried over among the rank and file of the Middle Ages is hard to say. It is easy to see

resemblances between the primitive barbarian house and the medieval cottage, at least in construction. The cottage was a crude one-or-two room frame structure of mud and brush with a thatch roof. With no crops to store and no animals to feed it was little more than a shelter, a container for the elementary needs of the family. It was easily disassembled and reassembled elsewhere, wherever there might be a job. It epitomized a vernacular culture based on mobility and a hand-to-mouth way of life.

The vernacular cottage, and the people who lived within it, were almost entirely dependent on the resources, social as well as material, of their immediate environment. The occupants spent much of the day outdoors. Village authorities or nobles offered (for a fee) a remarkable number of facilities — the public grist mill, the public wine press or brewery, the bathing establishment, the public outdoor laundry facilities, the market. Villagers had use of the common for grazing cows or geese, they could collect fallen branches in the communal forest for fuel, and they could cut a certain number of trees (under strict rationing rules) for building or repairing a house.

This philanthropic arrangement seems to have been intended to keep the vernacular element satisfied with its lot, for any attempt to live in a more private manner was discouraged. The police raided cottages without warning to put an end to too much hospitality. On the other hand, the ancient tradition of downplaying the role of the house accounted in part for the public delight in using (borrowing) public spaces for a brief time and then leaving them unaltered. The church, the churchyard, the village green and even certain rooms in the houses of the nobility, were freely used, on occasion, by all of the villagers.

The consequence of this prolonged outdoor living and absence from home was an animated and sometimes disorderly street scene. Medieval public spaces were used not only for sociability and relaxation but also for work, the exchange of goods and services and information, and even violent and competitive sports and games. When we now talk about the use of public space we usually have in mind friendly interaction and innocent recreation. We have forgotten these spaces once served to supplement domestic life with all its needs and desires, just as we have forgotten the ancestral belief that all empty spaces were the property of the local families.

Permanence versus Accessibility in the Landscape

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought a new, more complicated, more expensive architecture (of stone and brick with more specialized rooms and spaces) that all but eliminated the amateur home builder. The laborer's or peasant's house was the product of the crown or of a well-to-do employer, and much of the architecture that we label vernacular was the work of civil or military engineers or professional builders. This was true in Colonial New England and in Virginia. The slave quarters, though built by the slaves themselves, were designed by the plantation owners, and a study of the houses of Massachusetts Bay suggests that many of them were built by professional carpenters and cabinetmakers.

It was a time of planned villages and uniform street facades, a time when people who travelled from town to town looking for jobs were severely punished and ordered to stay where they belonged, and a time when many spaces hitherto open to the public — gardens, forests, churches, palaces — were declared out of bounds. The street, once the scene of so much activity, was redesigned for through traffic and as a work of urban art.

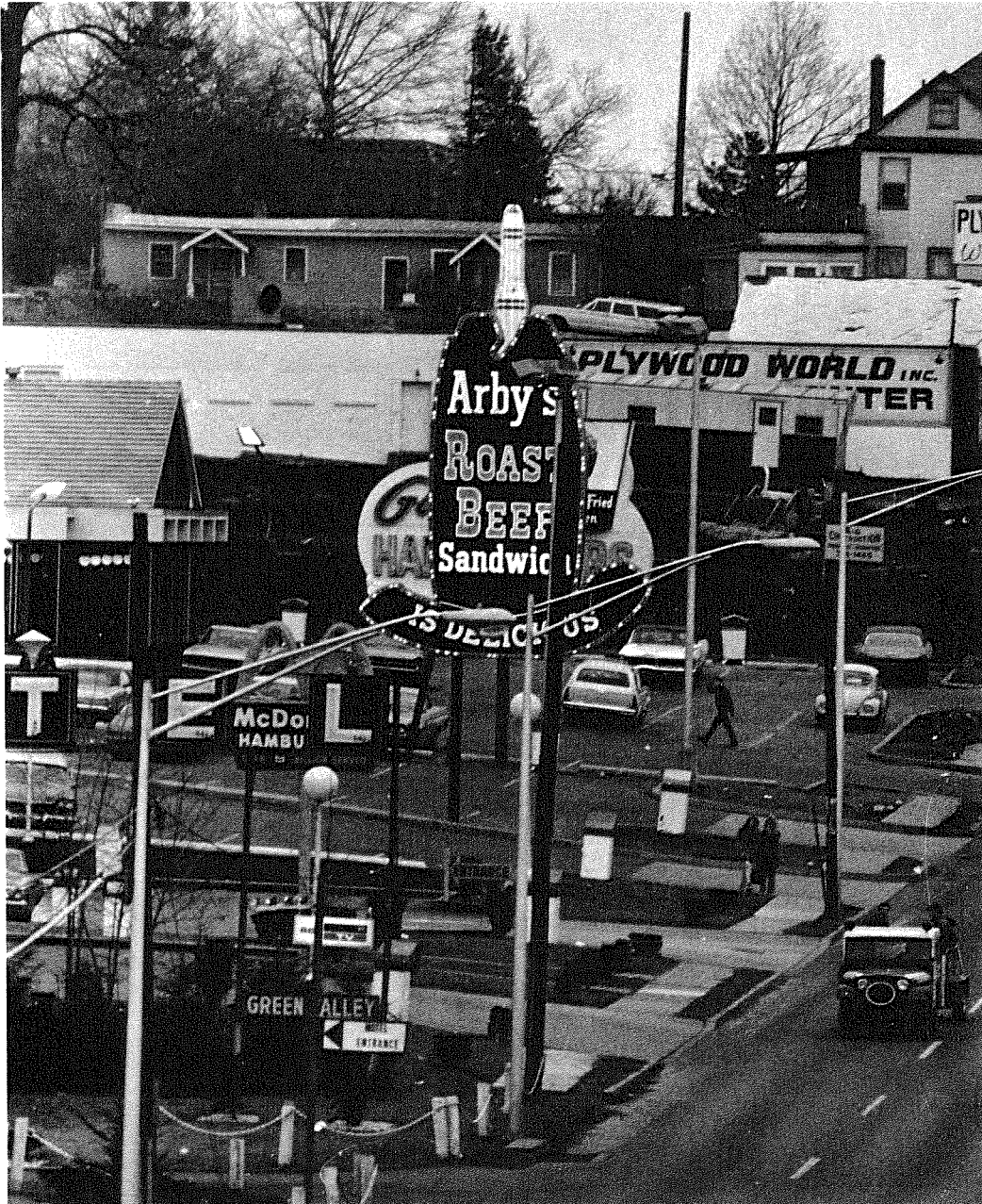
Many of these reforms had the welfare of the public, particularly the poorer public, in mind, but the emphasis was on fostering middle-class standards in the home and public life, and the ideal was all too often the mythical village of self-sufficient households in a bucolic setting. Vernacular architecture meant village architecture, the architecture of landowners, who had clear-cut ideas of the sanctity of private property and the necessity for having roots in the land. The house became a shrine to this religion of permanence.

These attitudes toward vernacular architecture and the house prevailed in my youth a half century ago. But by that time a reappraisal of the importance of the house had long been underway. Historians have pointed out that as early as the 1820s in this country the old triad, living on the land, working the land, owing the land — ways of celebrating the role of the house — was beginning to be meaningless. House and land and family, the moral unit first formulated in the Dark Ages 10 centuries ago, was giving way to a separation between house and work and land. The old traditional landscape was beginning to crumble, first of all here in America.

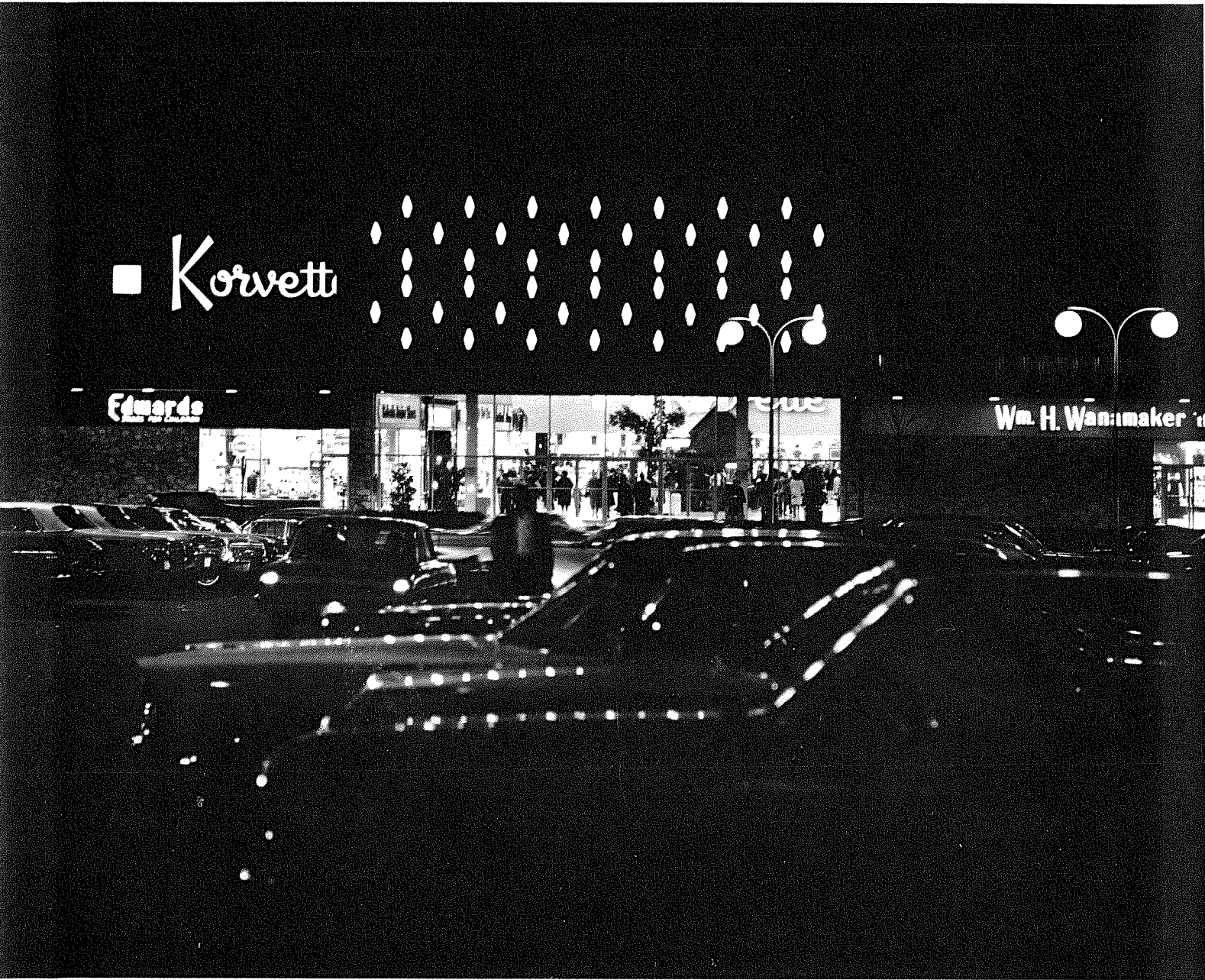
The demise of the dwelling as a moral unit was connected to our growing taste for the exterior experience of architec-



The landscape of the house and stability is giving way to the landscape of the automobile and mobility.



The auto-vernacular lifestyle brings people together in open spaces designed for cars.



Everywhere access is easy and alluring.



Could the auto-vernacular lifestyle beget a landscape of visual beauty?



ture, our new street life here in America. All of these developments are leading to the spread of a new kind of landscape, based less on territoriality and specialized spaces with restricted access, and more on that vernacular liking for mobility and the temporary use of public or semi-public spaces.

I first noticed this great change in America when I came back after three years overseas during World War II. I was amazed by how our cities had grown, how crowded and full of life the streets were, how many new uses of public places had come into being and how a new popular architecture was spreading across the country.

One of the first essays I wrote in *Landscape* was an attempt to understand the commercial strip. One of its characteristics was accessibility, another was the new-style exterior of the buildings: gaudy, unconventional and obviously designed to attract the mobile consumer and lure him into stopping. The strip was merely the earliest example of a kind of architecture meant to be experienced from the outside and to appeal to the passing motorist: We soon invented the drive-in bank, the drive-in movie theater and the drive-in church. Then there was the super truck stop, the super motel, the supermarket and (what is still evolving) the super service center for automobiles — an elaborately planned landscape containing every possible auto-oriented business, from tire repair to paint jobs to auto sales.

Everywhere access was made easier and more alluring. The new architecture allowed us to have immediate contact with whatever we were looking for: no more waiting for a clerk to come and ask what you wanted, no more waiting for a server to take a request to the kitchen. Nor was there a need for the formality that governed our interaction with clerks or waiters, the social rituals that were to department stores or restaurants what hospitality was to the home. We helped ourselves; instant accessibility was the watchword.

The popularity of exterior architectural spaces — pedestrian walkways, mini-plazas, skyways and tunnels inserted between massive buildings — alerts us to the fact that the new kind of street culture has already made an impact on the urban scene and is telling us that the space of the street is the heart of the city, not green and spacious parks or the the blocks of masonry in which people work and live.

Even contemporary urban parks and public squares have

recently undergone a radical change in their functions.¹ The more our houses and tenements overflow into the street, the more the street will serve as a spacious extension and substitute for domestic activities and relationships. Public spaces are no longer quiet and respectable: They have become the setting for political confrontations, informal instantaneous contacts, buying, selling, and the exchange of ideas. Public spaces are more and more the setting for work, white collar as well as manual. Our social position depends less on our ability to provide hospitality than it does our ability to know the nuances of life on the street.

The Auto-Vernacular Landscape

It is no longer realistic, it seems to me, to discuss the vernacular dwelling as having distinct architectural characteristics. More and more the dwellings of lower-income groups (wage earners and workers in many service industries) are all but identical, at least when seen from the outside, to the dwellings of the middle class. All that we can rely on as a definition of the vernacular house is the way it is lived in and its relationship with its immediate daily environment.

Nevertheless, I continue to look for some visual clue to the nature of the contemporary American vernacular house, and I think I have found one. I think a vernacular house is one that is surrounded by a large number of cars. They are parked on a driveway that leads to the garage, in the back yard, sometimes on the front lawn, and along the curb. The husband has a car to go to work in (often his car is a truck or van that he uses all day long — delivering, collecting, hauling, servicing and transporting people and freight). The wife has a car to go to her job in. One of the children drives to school in his or her own car.

The cars, pickups and Jeeps surrounding the house represent small-scale investment. Bought at a low price from a dealer or auctioneer, they are tuned up, modified, customized and sold at a profit, a small beginning of capital accumulation. The spectacle in certain neighborhoods of the infestation of cars is not attractive, but I find consolation of a sort in the notion that all those automobiles stand for liberation from the constraints imposed by the house: the prospect of easier contact with the surrounding world, the prospect of showing off

and the most important prospect of all, achieving privacy.

Cars are not confined to the vernacular population; nine families out of ten possess them. But nowhere have they really improved a lifestyle as much as in blue-collar neighborhoods. The car has taken over, emptying the house of its noisy population, providing a privacy hitherto unknown and relieving the house of its burden of chores and responsibilities: taking the family to the day care center, the laundromat, the supermarket, the drive-in restaurant, the emergency room at the hospital. All that is left of the house is an environment dedicated to leisure and childhood pleasures.

The new landscape can be called the “auto-vernacular landscape.” Though primarily urban, it is spreading across the country. (Even the old-fashioned rural and small town vernacular that we recognize as “agro-vernacular,” devoted to land and stability, is being replaced by a landscape devoted to mobility and short-term planning.) It is reminiscent not only of the medieval prototype but also of the Barbaric prototype, with its obsessive wandering, its casual attitude toward the house and other traditional institutions, and, above all, its habit of sharing or borrowing public spaces.

The real challenge is defining the auto-vernacular landscape. At the moment I see it as composed of structures and spaces designed to accommodate the auto as distinguished from spaces designed to accommodate people: the interstate, the parking lot, the strip, the gas station, the downtown multiple level garage, the race track and innumerable storage and transit facilities. The mobile consumer is at the wheel, but the layout of space is designed for vernacular movement, which does not occur at human scale. Similar places are by no means lacking in the countryside; a field modified to suit the tractors or a landing strip for planes, has the same impersonal, empty beauty and attraction.

I am struck by the number of outdoor public spaces that owe their existence to the car and the number of structures and spaces, created by the automobile, that bring us together. Having worked in a gas station, I am aware of a very definite sense of place in many of them and of a sense of fraternity that can develop in even the least slightly of roadside installations. In spite of my weakness for truck stops and service stations I hesitate to think of them as the modern equivalent of the “moral unit.” Still, they are places where strangers come

together and where they often turn for help, advice and companionship. There is promise in many parts of the auto-vernacular landscape, with its emphasis on mobility and borrowed space, a promise of a place or institution that fosters what might be called a sodality, a society based not on territoriality and position and inaccessibility but on shared interests and mutual help.

The vitality of our car and street culture, its ability to evolve and to discipline itself, contrasts sharply with the decay of that part of our culture that is based on the dwelling and the permanent community. As our stock of houses decreases every year in quantity and quality, as our slums expand and the homeless can no longer be numbered, certain characteristics of our landscape seem to disintegrate before our eyes. One part of it sprouts new office buildings, superhighways, superparking lots and condominiums, while the rows of shabby and crowded inner-city dwellings, abandoned tenements, abandoned schools and churches wait to be bulldozed out of existence. No wonder we resent the new tyranny of the street and the automobile.

Yet on a certain very modest level these two elements sometimes come together to form what might be called a new kind of mini-urban landscape. You catch a glimpse of it in the fringe neighborhoods every American town and city now has: areas where the newest, the poorest and least skilled of minority families live. Often it is no more than several clusters of beat-up trailers, mobile homes and campers, or sometimes hastily built shanties — much too crude to qualify as vernacular. Along a short, unpaved street or formless public space you find a convenience store, a laundromat, a day care center, a bilingual evangelical church and a building called “Heart and Hands” or “Bright Tomorrow.” That is where there are posters sternly warning us to lay off drugs. Inside volunteers listen to tales of beatings and dress knife wounds.

But there is also a gas station, a used car lot, shop where radiators are repaired and even a car wash. At the end of the day driveways and alleys are filled with cars and trucks being worked on, and lowriders or their equivalent with flashy paint jobs roar up and down the street, giving off clouds of blue exhaust. The neighborhood, such as it is, comes to life, and you begin to think this is a world where community and cars belong together, like bread and butter or ham and eggs.

A thousand years ago out of desperation we tried to devise a new arrangement: house and land. After a rough start it took hold, and as we all know, it created a rich and beautiful landscape. Perhaps we can do it again.

Note

1. An excellent discussion of how this has happened and how vernacular type of activity has transformed many streets is Mike Helm and George Tukel, “Restoring Cities from the Bottom Up: A Bi-Coastal View from the Street,” *The Whole Earth* (Spring, 1990).