

ON THE EDGE OF THE BAY

Neil Jackson

JSW

JSW are Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein and Barbara Winslow. They have all worked with Christopher Alexander and their houses put many of his ideas into practice, while consciously drawing on the Bay Area tradition.

It is difficult to think about JSW without first thinking of Christopher Alexander. Murray Silverstein, together with Sara Ishikawa, joined Alexander to found the Centre for Environmental Structure in 1967. Max Jacobson became an Associate at the Centre and took his PhD under Alexander while Barbara Winslow studied under Alexander for a Master's degree at Berkeley. Together with Alexander, Silverstein published *The Oregon Experiment* in 1975 and two years later Jacobson joined them in the publication of *A Pattern Language*. But even before the first publication, Jacobson and Silverstein had left the Centre and gone into practice where they were joined, in 1978, by Winslow.

It is not by chance that JSW continue to work in the San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland conurbation known as the Bay Area. They can be seen as part of a tradition peculiar to the Bay Area, as distinct from Los Angeles (that euphemism for Southern California), or, indeed, the rest of the United States as a whole. It is more than political or social pressures which tend to separate northern and

southern California. Historical accident has cast them as one state, but they appear to remain obstinately different. Los Angeles has always welcomed the folk hero and architectural anarchist—first Wright, then Schindler and Neutra, and more recently, Charles Moore and Frank Gehry. By comparison the architecture of northern California, and more particularly the Bay Area, is subdued but no less revolutionary, traditional but no less modern. Its heroes are craftsmen and builders.

Richard Longstreth entitled his study of 'Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century', *On the Edge of the World*.² Although he borrows the title from Gelett Burgess' essay of 1902,³ he does not recognise, in architecture at least, the provincialism which Burgess saw in this frontier society as a whole. He sees a new and innovative period developing in the 1890s, not so much an expression of regionalism, let alone provincialism, but of individualism, the setting of example rather than the making of style.

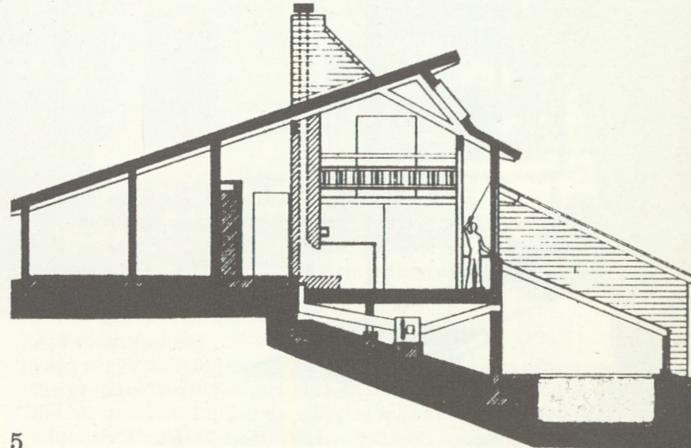
It is to this architectural lineage that JSW respond. 'We design buildings that are fresh in

1, 2, the Lee-Carmichael house, Glen Ellen (1979). Site offers spectacular views to west, so plan is one room deep.

3, Young-Waszinck House, Berkeley: in the Bay Area's Gothic spirit of individuality.

4, Johnson House, Inverness (1977)—arranged to derive maximum benefit from insolation.

5, Johnson house, section.



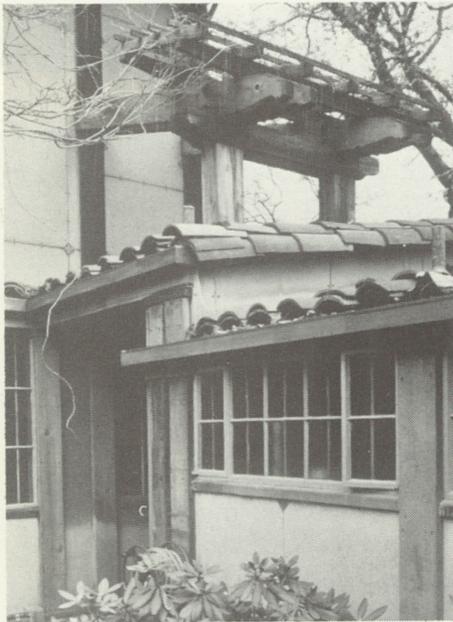


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6, 7, Lee-Carmichael house. The solar collector is here a staircase which acts like a greenhouse from which heat is circulated to the surrounding 'thin-mass' room.

8, Maybeck's First Church of Christ Scientist, Berkeley (1910)—Maybeck was fascinated with the adaptability of materials: here industrial windows and asbestos-cement panels are used in a sacred building.

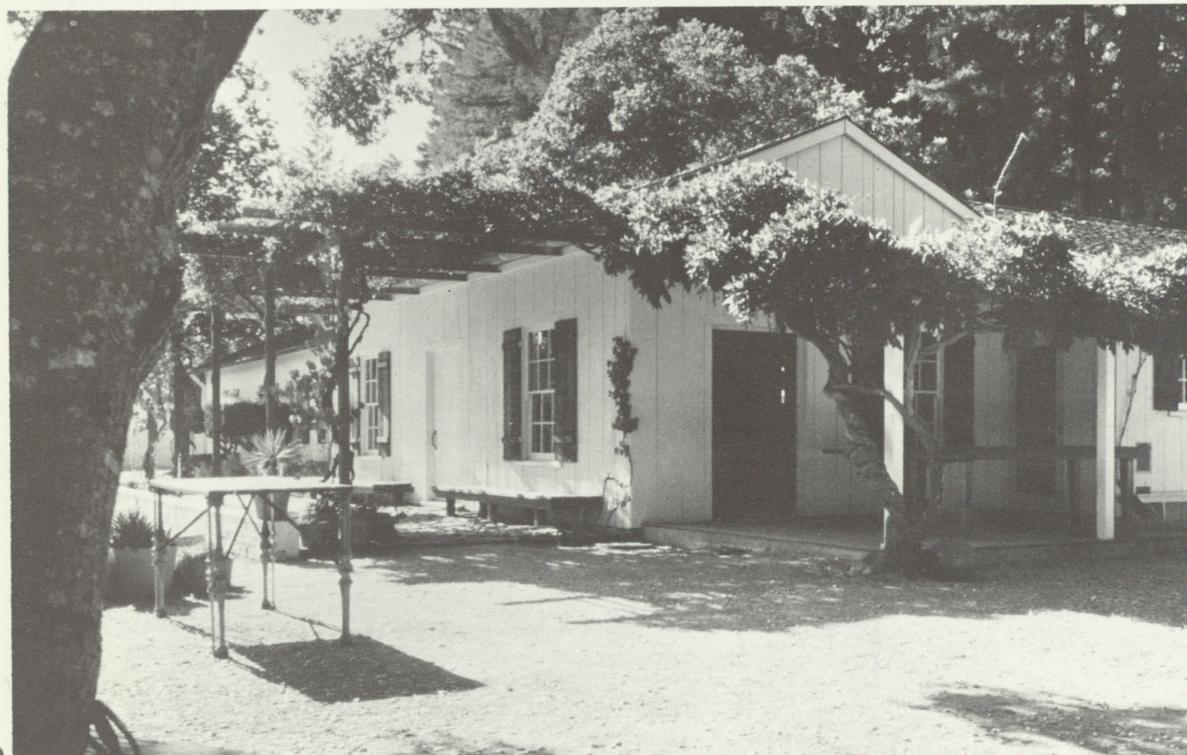
9, William Wurster's Gregory farm house, Scotts Valley (1927)—domestic qualities that transcend local vernaculars.



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feeling and form', they write, 'but which also draw upon the past, and, like the newest member of an old family, vaguely remind you of another building in another place.'⁴

Buildings in the Bay Area are, by and large, of timber-frame construction with plasterboard walls internally and stucco or redwood finish externally. That much is traditional. But in their pursuance of passive solar gain architecture, JSW have adapted the traditional building form and have developed what they call the 'thin mass' house. In effect they have taken the traditional structure and inverted it: thus cement becomes the internal wall finish and upper floors are given a 75 mm coat of concrete. The result is that the building has both the constructional and cost benefits of a lightweight structure and the insulative qualities of a masonry building. The other half of the formula is to arrange the building in the proper manner and location to derive maximum benefit from solar gain. A straightforward example of this is the Johnson house in Inverness, California (1977), 4. Here the solar collector, in effect a great greenhouse, runs along the length of the building at the lowest level. Looking perhaps more like a cucumber frame than anything, it contains a 25-yard long swimming pool which acts as a heat-store from which warm air is drawn off and circulated around the house, 5. Essentially the same principles are applied at the Lee-Carmichael house in Glen Ellen, California (1979), 1,2,6,7. But here the greenhouse is arranged vertically in the centre of the south side: it contains the staircase. The site, high on an escarpment, offered the most spectacular views to the west, so the house was placed on an east/west axis, never more than one room deep and with each room opening onto the stairs. Thus the heat generated within the greenhouse could be easily transferred to the 'thin mass' structure at all levels and its circulation is simply controlled by the opening and closing of doors, 7. It would be wrong to think of these buildings as 'aggressively solar': the very structure which regulates the heat provides an atmosphere of gentle acoustic sobriety. These timber-frame buildings do not creak nor can footsteps be heard from the floor above. For here there is the quietness of masonry construction unfamiliar in much contemporary California building.

The architectural tradition of which JSW partake grew up in the Bay Area at the turn of the century. It was essentially an architecture of Arts and Crafts although one of its major figures, Bernard Maybeck, was Beaux Arts trained. It was an architecture which was neither pioneer nor provincial: it did not develop in the red-neck manner of frontier towns nor did it seek to emulate the fashionable architecture of the world left behind. Thus it was different to the architecture of both the mid-west and the east coast.

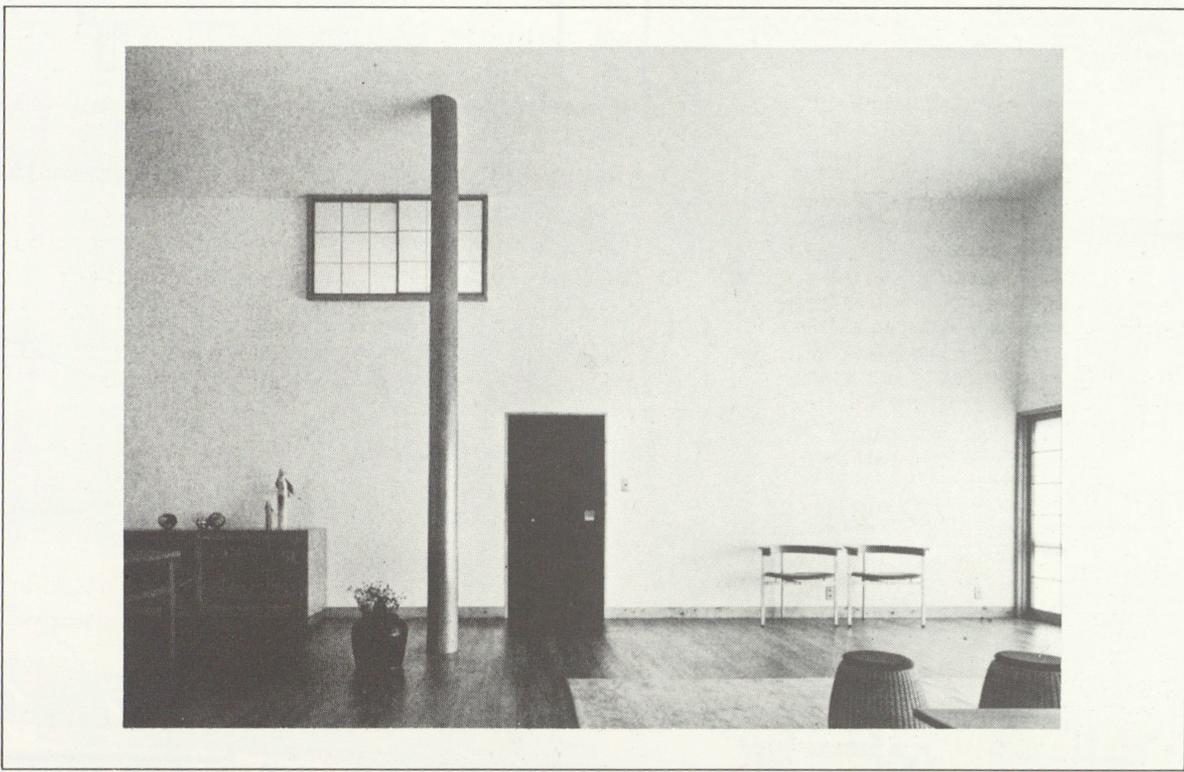
Bernard Maybeck's first client was Charles Keeler, a romantic and robust individualist. At this time Berkeley was seen by its growing intelligentsia as 'the Athens of the West'. This was not in deference to Classicism, but to the power of the intellect. The folk of this new university town expressed their aspirations through societies: Keeler founded the Ruskin Club in 1896; the Hillside Club, a local city-beautiful society, was founded by a group of women in 1898 and then reorganised so as to include men such as Keeler and Maybeck in 1902. Keeler became its president and in 1904 published *The Simple House*, a statement of the architectural direction demanded by the Hillside Club and a veneration of the simple life. Of the local building tradition he wrote: 'The houses are painted with uncovered shingles, brick or plaster with open timber work and are characterised within by a

10, Kuperman house: galleried core of children's house.

11, Young and Waszinck's inspiration: a Shinohara house seen in 'Progressive Architecture' and what resulted, 12, looking towards the living room from kitchen in the completed Young-Waszinck house.



10



11



12

careful study of proportions and extreme simplicity of finish.⁵

The continuity of this tradition to the present day, although in a more builder-like than craftsman manner, can be traced through the work of William Wurster (1895-1973), whose modest homes for the Gregory family at Scotts Valley, California (1927, 1931 and 1963), 9, and for Marian Hollins at nearby Pasatiempo (1931), indicate an appreciation of domestic qualities which go beyond the use of local vernaculars. Here there is the use of a language in the design which transcends style: it is essentially that language of patterns which Alexander and his colleagues at the Centre for Environmental Structure were to recognise in the early 1970s. In writing down these patterns Alexander, with Silverstein, Jacobson and the others, only expressed what was inherent in much Arts and Crafts values. Indeed, many of the points such as: 117 Sheltering Roof; 181 The Fire; 221 Natural doors and windows; 223 Deep Reveals; 224 Low Doorways and 239 Small Panes, were made by C. F. A. Voysey in his book *Individuality* (1915).

It was, in many ways, a question of *Individuality*, as Voysey used the word, which caused Silverstein and Jacobson to break from Alexander in 1974. Alexander has recalled how 'the constructional patterns disturbed people quite a bit, apart from the fact that Murray and Max did not want to work on them'.⁶ Silverstein and Jacobson did, in fact, work on them but Alexander was now moving towards a more Ruskinian approach to building, the utilisation of Savageness as in the *Nature of Gothic*.⁷ For Jacobson and Silverstein the physical act of building was to become too time-consuming and Alexander remains the only licensed building contractor on the staff of the Department of Architecture at UC Berkeley.

Some of JSW's bread-and-butter work, particularly in the Bay Area, is taken up with additions and alterations to their earlier schemes: that much is good for it shows that their architecture is part of a continuous process in which form is never finite. If their architecture will, as they hope, 'pass the test of time without becoming dated'⁸ they need to avoid what Stanley Tigerman has referred to as 'the pretensions of the western *nouveaux riches* . . . an architectural amalgam of Palladian mannerism in combination with Gothic inspiration.'⁸ It was the Gothic spirit of bold individuality which gave northern California and, more particularly, the Bay Area, its identity. Such individuality has marked the work of JSW to date, and as they become established this freshness of approach should not be neglected.

References

- 1 These four architects were Ernest Coxhead, Willis Polk, A. C. Schweinfurth and Bernard Maybeck.
- 2 Richard Longstreth, *On the Edge of the World, Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century*, Architectural History Foundation and MIT, 1983.
- 3 Gelett Burgess, 'On the Edge of the World; *Sunset Magazine*, August 1902, pp233-234 and discussed in Longstreth, *op cit*, pp1-2.
- 4 Max Jacobson *et al*, *Jacobson, Silverstein, Winslow, Architects*, office brochure, Berkeley, nd, p3.
- 5 Charles Keeler, 'The Passing of the Wild and Woolly West', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 January 1903, quoted in Longstreth, *op cit*, p314.
- 6 Stephen Grabow, *Christopher Alexander, The Search for a New Paradigm in Architecture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p178.
- 7 See John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol II, ch3. 1853.
- 8 Max Jacobson, *op cit*, p3.
- 9 Stanley Tigerman. Review printed on rear cover of Longstreth, *op cit*.

Acknowledgment

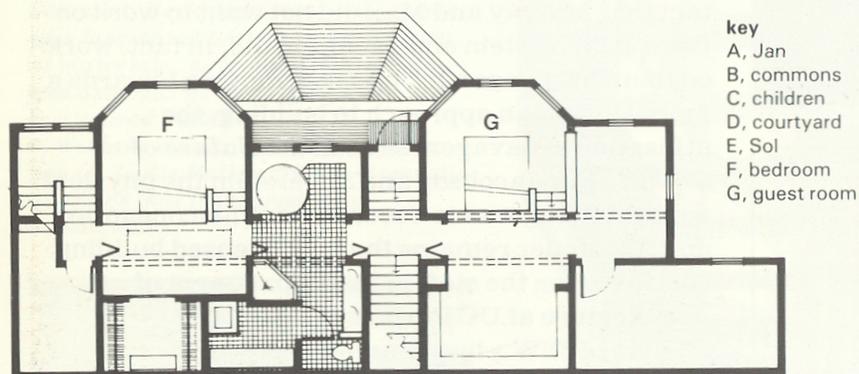
I am very much indebted to JSW for making their office open to me in the preparation of this article and to Max Jacobson for sharing with me his forthcoming paper *A House in the Berkeley Tradition* from which much information has been drawn.

KUPERMAN HOUSE, MORAGA, CALIFORNIA

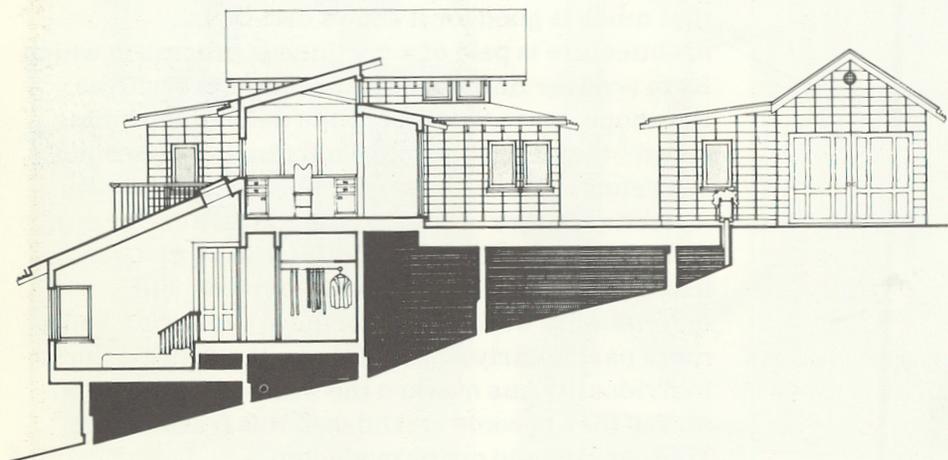
The house Jacobson and Silverstein built for Sol and Jan Kuperman in 1974, before Winslow joined the practice, was in many ways the *Pattern Language* house. It evolved as a joint effort of architect and client and through the guidance of an early draft of *A Pattern Language*. From the beginning Sol and Jan knew the arrangement they wished their house to take. Each part of the family was to have its own space, its own building in fact: these they described as 'houses'. (Patterns: 136 Couple's Realm, 137 Children's Realm), 13. These were to be separate spaces, easily definable, and connected by something similar to what Jan, a Japanese-American, described as an *engawa*—a zone which not only bound spaces together but served as a space in its own right. (Patterns: 131. The

below. (Soil tests had shown the sloping hillside to be unstable: piled foundations would allow the topsoil to move freely under the house). Meanwhile Sol made a wooden site model and arranged blocks on it, representing the house as seemed best: and Jan, working at 1/2 in: 1 ft, made cardboard furniture and, using scaled photograph cut-out figures of the family, planned the interiors.

The house which evolved from this personal and pragmatic approach has a sense of timelessness about it. The plan, around the open courtyard, cranks slightly to let more sun into the centre of the building (Patterns: 105 South-facing outdoors; 106 Positive outdoor space; 107 Wings of light; 115 Courtyards which live). Yet the impression is one of this having happened accidentally—as if when one house was laid out it was not quite lined up with the rest (Patterns: 37 House cluster; 160 Building edge), 16. Different



lower level plan



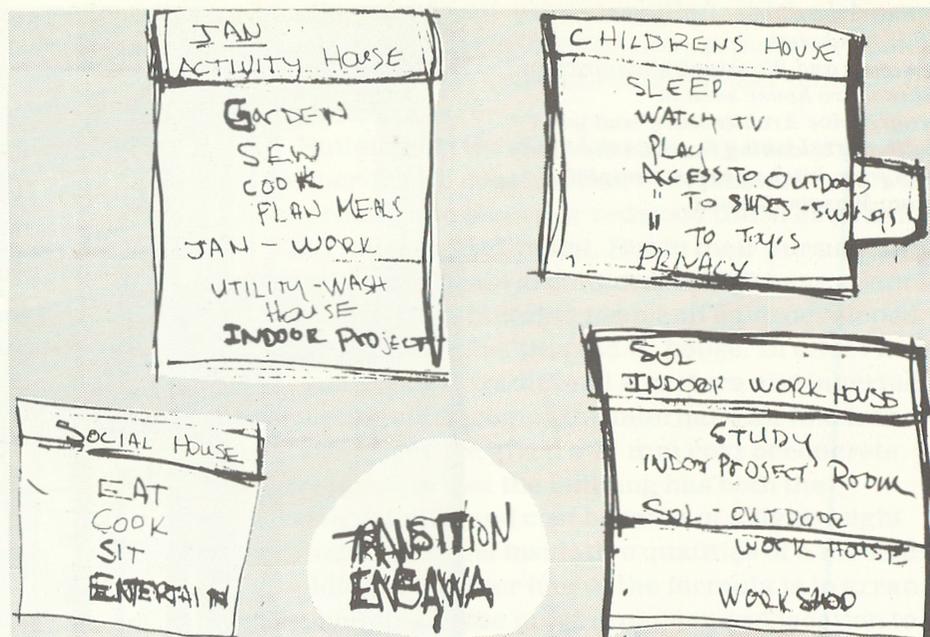
north-south section

flow through rooms, 132 Short Passages, 134 Zen View, 135 Light and Dark, 142 Sequence of sitting spaces). Thus the house evolved as a village, buildings along a street (Patterns: 95 Building Complex, 108 Connected Buildings, 109 Long Thin House), 14.

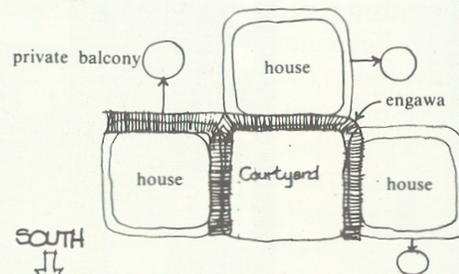
The site was on the north face of a gully shrouded by large trees. The site stepped down steeply from the southern rim, presenting only two flat shelves for building—one mid-way down and one at the bottom where a stream ran all year-round. Rather than absorb the only flat land on the site, it was decided to build on the steeply sloping ground between the two plateaux. Thus the house would stand high on piles, a continuation of the upper plateau, with the daytime rooms above and the bedrooms

roof pitches and heights clearly mark the individual houses (Patterns: 116 Cascade of roofs; 117 Sheltering roof; 205 Structure follows social space; 209 Roof layout) and such honesty of form is clearly carried through to the external structure, where vertical battens set on the exterior of the building reveal the rhythm of the underlying studs, and the knee braces which resist the outward thrust of the pitched roof are exposed as another layer of detail (Patterns: 227 Column connections; 234 Lapped outside walls).

Internally, Occident and Orient come together in natural harmony. A bedroom is a space which requires no more than a bed (a futon, perhaps?) and a bench to sit upon (Patterns: 187 Marriage bed; 188 Bed alcove; 189 Dressing room); bathing, a



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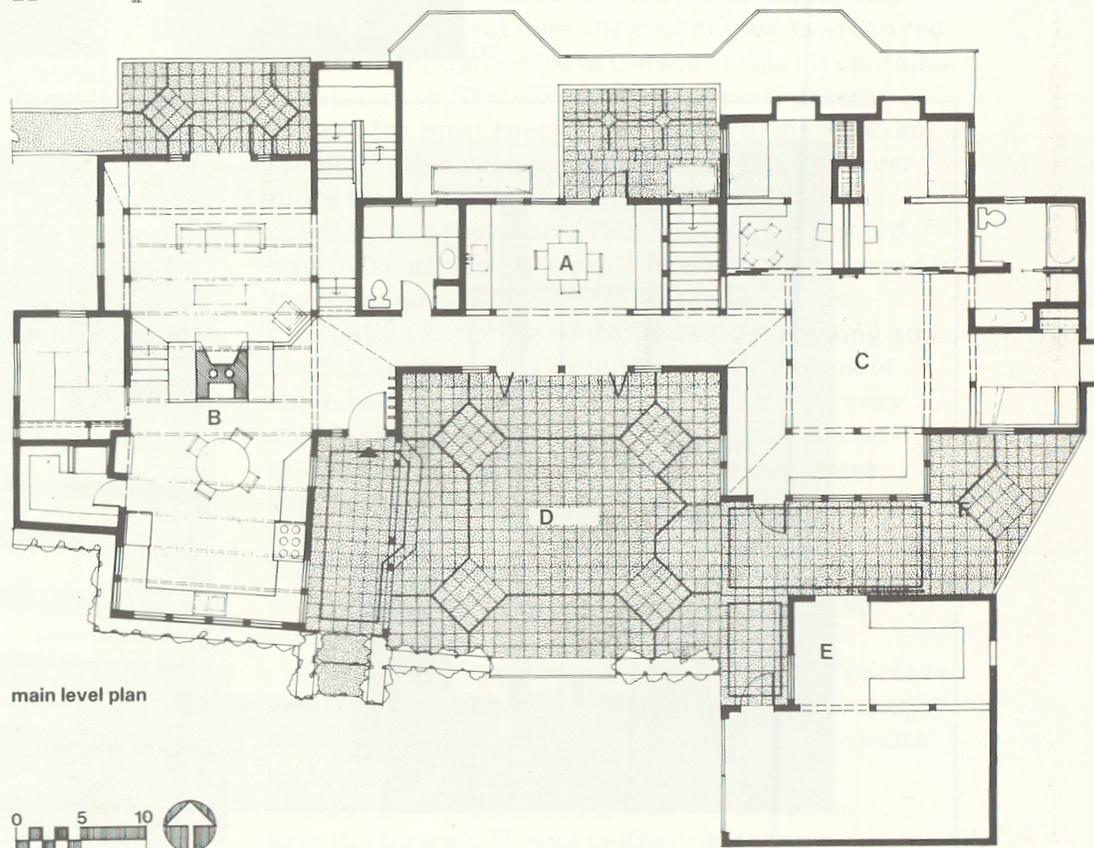


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13, client's original sketch—from the first each part of the family was to have its own space.

14, plan sketch showing *engawa*—a zone which edges space, yet is a space in its own right.

15, 16, the individual 'houses' within the house can be clearly distinguished externally. The whole complex gives a feeling of having grown up accidentally over a period.



main level plan

family activity, is the most important function to be found on the lower, sleeping level (Patterns: 114 Bathing room). On the principal floor, in the children's house, screen walls slide back around a galleried core to reveal private spaces for the children (Patterns: 137 Children's realm; 179 Alcoves; 188 Bed alcove), 10. Jan's house, flanked by the *engawa*, lies between the children's and the common house (Patterns: 136 Couple's realm; 152 Half privatised office; 183 Workshop enclosure; 192 Windows overlooking life) where, in the traditional Wrightian manner, the focal point is the fireplace around which wraps the staircase (Patterns: 129 Common areas at the heart; 139 Farmhouse kitchen; 181 The Fire). Beyond, a counterpart to the *engawa*, is

found the *tatami* room (Patterns: 151 Small meeting room; 204 Secret place).

Only Sol, one would think, is not accommodated. But his house stands to one side across an open terrace (Patterns: 106 Positive outdoor space) from the children's house (Patterns: 154 Teenager's cottage). Here he keeps his woodworking machinery, making simple tracery for the windows, and ignoring the function which the local zoning required of his house—that of a garage (Patterns: 136 Couple's realm; 156 Settled work; 157 Home workshop).

Note
The Patterns referred to are those given in Christopher Alexander et al, *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, 1977. Other patterns, which are not listed here, may be detected in the building.





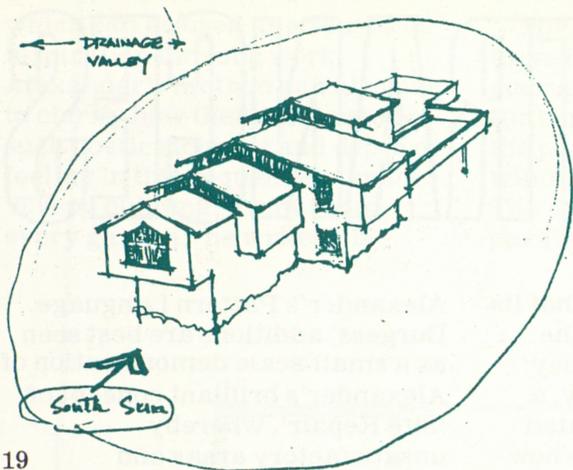
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17, south-west corner of the Young-Waszinck house—use of materials is reminiscent of *Maybeck*.

18, the common bathroom, where all the bedrooms meet, with 'garage-door' wall in position—compare with 23 opposite.

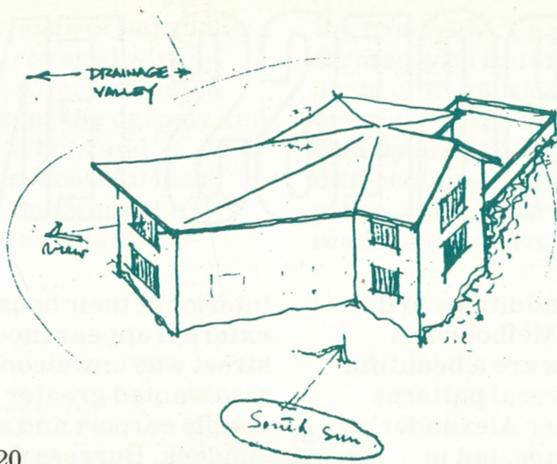


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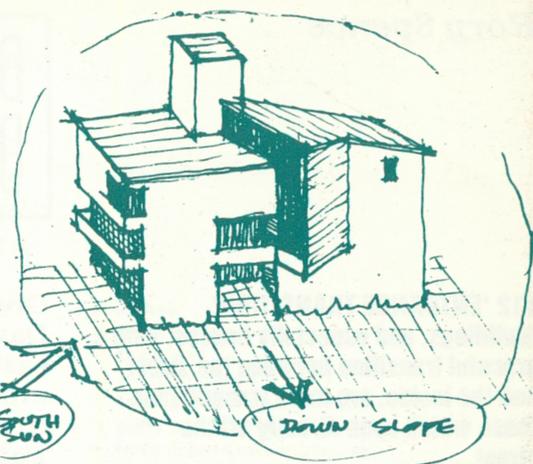


19

19, architects' first sketch design.
20, the clients' counter-proposal, orientated to sun and view.
21, design revised again to save costs—balconies rather than terraces.
22, trunking is exposed and raw, linking spaces.
23, the common bathroom with wall rolled away to expose bather to eucalyptus valley below.



20



21

YOUNG-WASZINCK HOUSE, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

The house built for Paul Young and Carol Waszinck in 1981 evolved in response to client involvement-like the Kuperman house. This was no *Pattern Language* house, although the book's influence, at times, can be clearly seen. By now Winslow

had joined the partnership and, while it would be inappropriate to try to detect a new style in their architecture, the two original partners had moved on some way from their more strictly Alexandrian approach and were responding, in a very contemporary way, to the romantic and practical ideologies which had given Berkeley its architecture almost a century before.

From the May 1980 issue of *Progressive Architecture* Young and Waszinck had cut out an image of the house they wanted. It was a 'House in White', 11, designed by Kazuo Shinohara and built in Japan in 1960. Like this example, they wanted their house to be honest, simple, efficient and, so they said, a little daring.

The building should surprise but also reassure: the materials could be industrial in quality, a reflection perhaps, of Young's interest in sculpture and an attempt to work within a very limited budget.

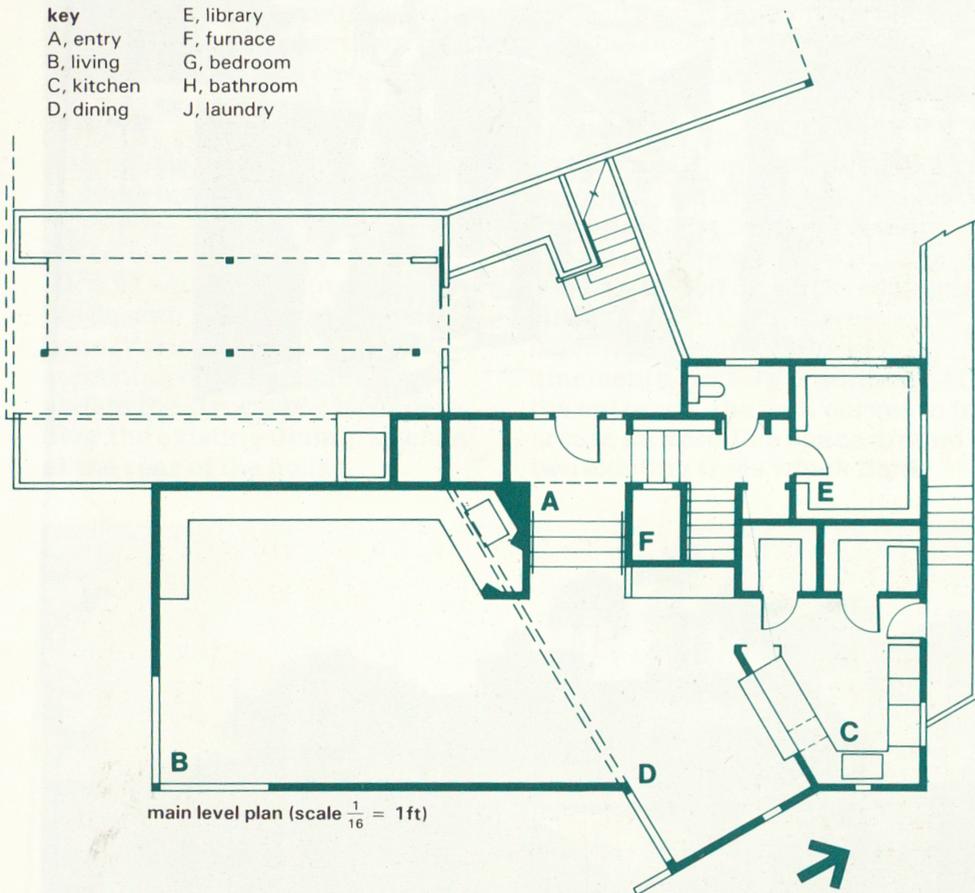
At this time Young was working as a building cost estimator and must have proved the most watchful of clients. Early designs were tested and rejected as too expensive. The architects' initial response to the site had been to arrange a long, stepped building, 19, along the steep site's north/south axis but the considerable earthworks and retaining walls which this necessitated shattered the budget. In an attempt to save on substructure costs, the client himself provided a design, orientated in part towards the sun and, part towards the view, 20. Yet Young found that this, once worked up, also failed his own cost test and thus the solution became apparent: the building could not afford to hug the land but must rise upwards and offer balconies to the outside rather than terraces, 21. Young's plan was adopted and adapted and thus the building developed. The complexities resulting from the different requirements of orientation (to the south) and view (of the Bay Bridge to the west) were to be resolved in the timber-framed superstructure rather than in the massively expensive substructure.

Thus the building is seen to rise from the hillside like a tower or bastion, 17. The immediate impression is of the unexpected, not just at the boldness of the

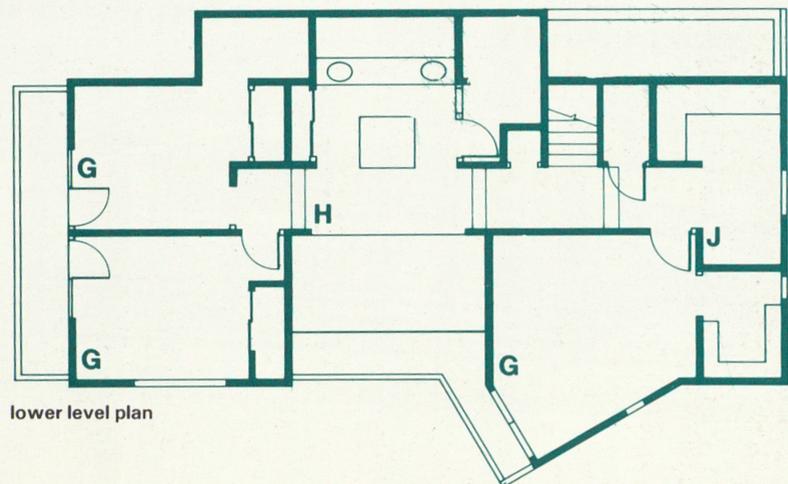
structure but at the use of materials. The walls were clad in fire-resistant asphalt roof shingles, much to the surprise of the roofer; the windows remain, apparently, wood-primer pink and the eaves, Cuprinol-green. Here the materials can be seen to be used for what they offer, as Maybeck would have done, and not always for how they would appear, 3.

Internally there is the quietness usually found in masonry buildings, for this one is of 'thin mass' construction. Throughout the building major trunking remains exposed and raw. It runs along ceilings like an arrow, linking the spaces together, 22. There is an openness of plan in the upper floor which contrasts with the carefully placed cameo windows, 12. On the lower, more private floor, balconies provide the openness as well as the real and visual links to the outside. Central to the plan is the common bathroom where all the bedrooms meet, 18. And here is the greatest paradox of all: not only does an unglazed lightshaft run up from above the bath-tub to the heart of the high-ceilinged entrance lobby, but the whole bathroom wall rolls away as an up-and-over garage door to expose the bather to the heart of the eucalyptus valley beyond, 23. Here nature and domestic life are fused through the use of simple industrial elements. How cars would ever get to this inaccessible opening high above the steeply sloping hillside, was more than the men who delivered the garage door could ever imagine.

- key
- A, entry
 - B, living
 - C, kitchen
 - D, dining
 - E, library
 - F, furnace
 - G, bedroom
 - H, bathroom
 - J, laundry



main level plan (scale $\frac{1}{16} = 1\text{ft}$)



lower level plan



22



23

THE ARCHITECTURAL

REVIEW

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