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ARCHITECTURE

RICE UNIVERSITY

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The method of teaching which approaches most nearly the method of investigation is incomparably the best, since, not content with serving up a few barren and lifeless truths, it leads to the stock out of which they grew.

(Burke)

ARCHITECTURE

AT RICE UNIVERSITY

DESIGNATES A SERIES OF REPORTS ON THOUGHTS AND INVESTIGATIONS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE. IT IS PUBLISHED IN THE BELIEF THAT THE EDUCATION OF ARCHITECTS CAN BEST BE ADVANCED IF TEACHERS, STUDENTS, PRACTITIONERS, AND INTERESTED LAYMEN SHARE IN WHAT THEY ARE THINKING AND DOING.

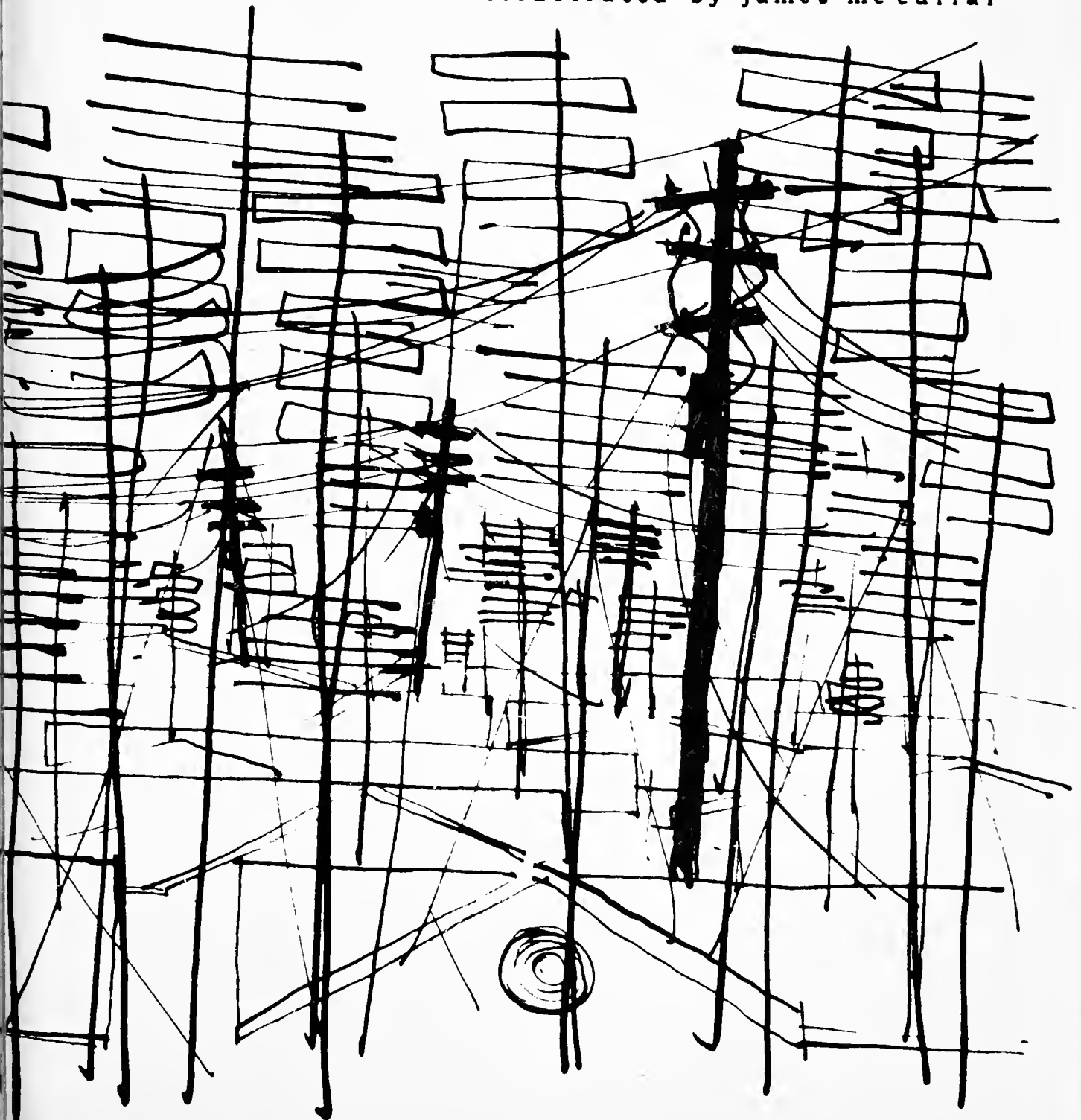


20 JUNE 1962



rchitecture for our times

written by howard eilenberger
illustrated by james mccullar





F O R E W O R D

The architect's task is to recognize a problem and to solve it. After it is solved, he must present the solution convincingly and clearly to the client. Often the architect loses commissions and important design features because of an inability to state his views articulately. This lack of communication is not in graphics but in written and oral communication.

Too often the emphasis in the education of the architect is placed only on architectural delineation: beautiful drawings and scale models. Other equally important means of communication are neglected.

In order to stress the ability to communicate clearly and succinctly, I recently gave my fourth year design class the assignment of designing with words instead of lines. This report is an unabridged version of one student's theme.

The essay covers only one facet of the immense subject, "Architecture for Our Times." It deals primarily with the Houston area, but the problems discussed by Howard Eilenberger are the same throughout the country.

BILL N. LACY
Assistant Chairman
Fourth Year Design Critic





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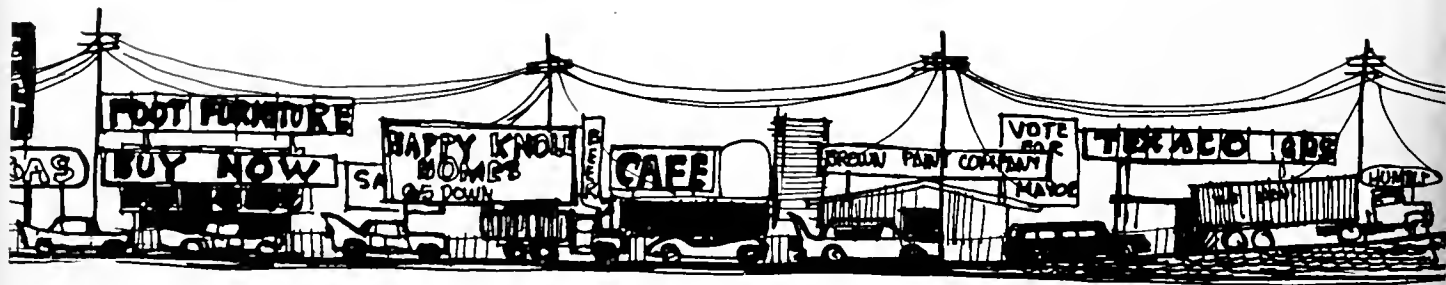
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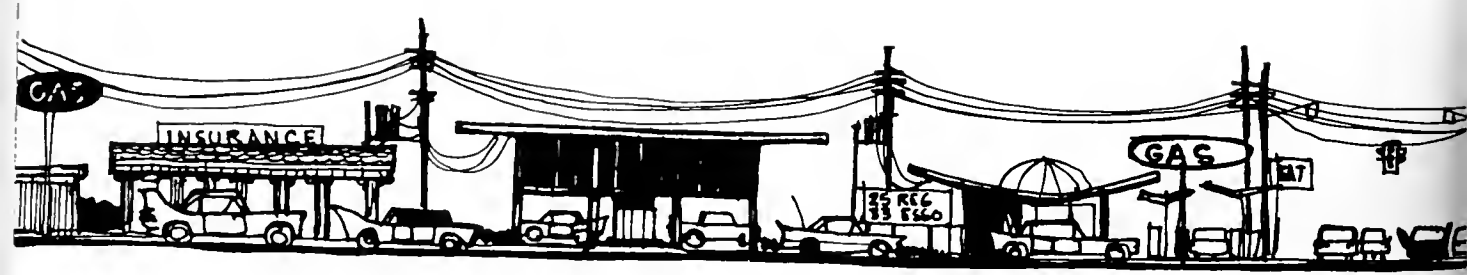


GOOD READER,

If any good is to come from our association, we must accompany each other till the very end; hence I shall do as little as possible to endanger our relationship at the beginning by making you angry. No angry young man am I; however, I make no promises that I shall remain so well tempered, for the nature of this subject makes me literally seeth. I shall, therefore, refrain from typical indictments against our times and architecture. We have all had our fill of Fountainheads, Status Seekers, and Generations of Vipers.

We all know that our architecture is an ugly hodge-podge of cliché and caricature, a mishmash of machined-modern and trumped-up traditional, ensnared in a web of low-slung, high-tension wires draped indiscriminately by the fistfulls from forests of black, creosoted crosses. We all know that our architecture is hidden from discerning eyes by enameled placards exhorting us to "EAT", "BUY", and "SLEEP" at Joe's, Mamma's, and Acme's, who thus punch their points home with every color and form of contorted

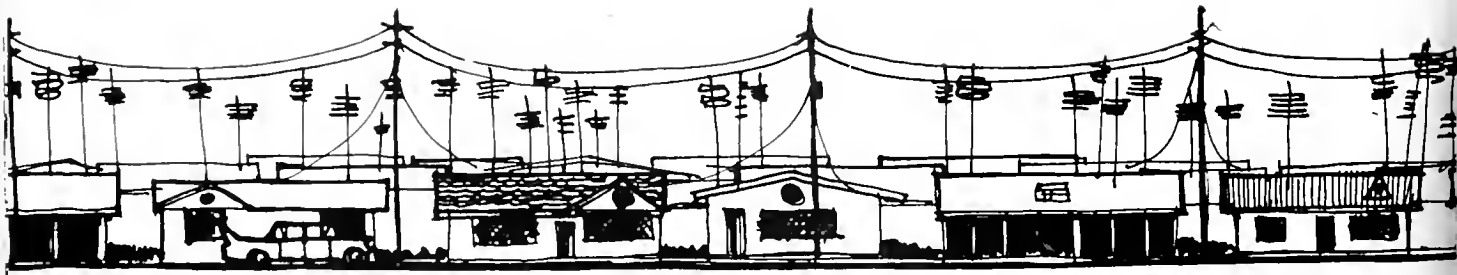




neon tube and agitated fluorescent gas available. We all know painfully well that our homes squat from edge to edge on plots of "divied-up" tracts in an unprecedented suburban sprawl which wantonly feels no compunction for usurping precious land from the crop and the cow.

We know all that. It is self-evident. Therefore, I shall not offend your sensibilities by slapping you in the face with the whole sordid picture of modern architecture and saying to you, "Let's make it all rosy again." For rosy, it never was. Perhaps way back on the primitive scene, when people lived in picturesque, traditional huts midst their pigs and poi and and squatted on tatami mats smoking marijuana weeds and spitting streams of betel-nut juice at random flies and gnats, it was rosy; but those rosy, simple days are no more -- alack, except, perhaps, in Arkansas. So why dream? Neither stacking our "created-equal" people into communal skyscraper honeycombs or rushing headlong back into the rural milieu to re-acquaint ourselves with Mamma Nature like prodical sons will solve the problem at hand, i.e., that of our floundering architecture.



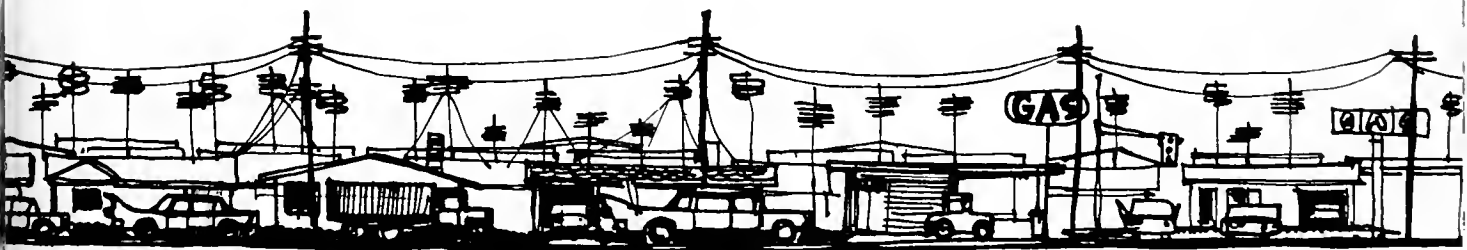


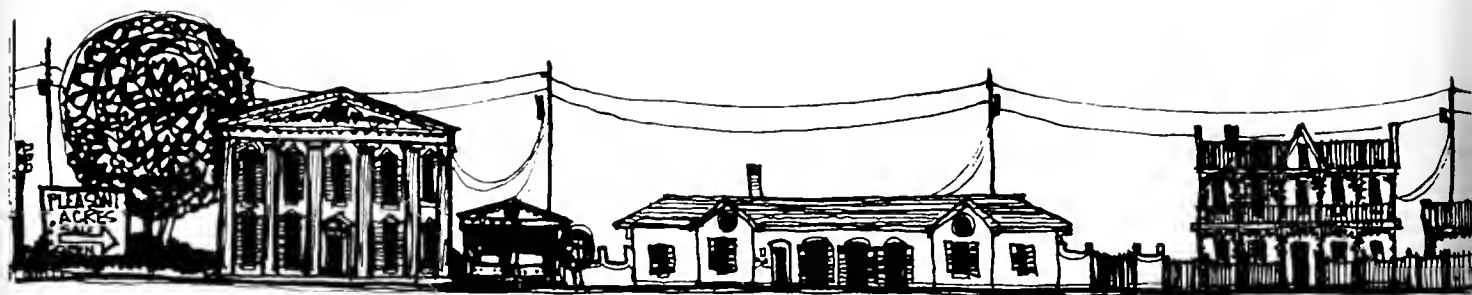
Let us make certain we are still thinking in unison. Just what is architecture any way? Is it the vast collection of buildings which have been built to please the various lords of mankind? No, I think not. I agree with Frank Lloyd Wright when he exclaimed:

"I know that architecture is life; or at least it is life itself taking form, and therefore it is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today, or ever will be lived. So architecture I know to be a Great Spirit. Architecture is that great living creative spirit which from generation to generation, from age to age, proceeds, persists, creates, according to the nature of man and his circumstances as they change."

Frank Lloyd Wright, ON ARCHITECTURE.

An architecture for our times, then, is synonymous with an architecture of our times; for the manner we work and live dictates what we build. Our sociologists, psychiatrists, ministers, and matrons are all filling our journals, dailies and ladies magazines chock-full of the sordid facts behind our prosperous, fatted and benign national image. Ugly are our morals, and superficial are our motives, they cry. Ugly and superficial is our architecture to boot. And why not? Architecture, according to the nature of man and his circumstances, can hardly help but indict modern man when his esthetic sensitivity has failed to keep pace with his pursuit of financial security.





Americans are, on the whole, money-grubbers shinnying up a burgeoning industrial money-tree. We all want, and deserve, the Good Life. A nation of fast earners, and even faster spenders, we fill our heads with notions from Ben Franklin's ALMANAC to assure ourselves of our hard-headed practicality while we empty our pockets for such "necessities" as \$3,000 tin lizzies which depreciate \$1,000 as soon as we flip the ignition switch and combust 200-or-so-horses-worth of petrol power at a phenomenal rate, only to spew it out the rear end in the form of noxious fumes and squealing tires. On the whole, the architecture Mr. American purchases is about as practical.

WHAT PRICE CULTURE ?

Oh this love of money is a many-splendored thing. To prove it, just look at all the fins and gee-gaws, the gingerbread and assorted fripperies we insist on displaying in ego-assertion of our misguided affluence.

We have failed to learn that culture comes from being, not buying.





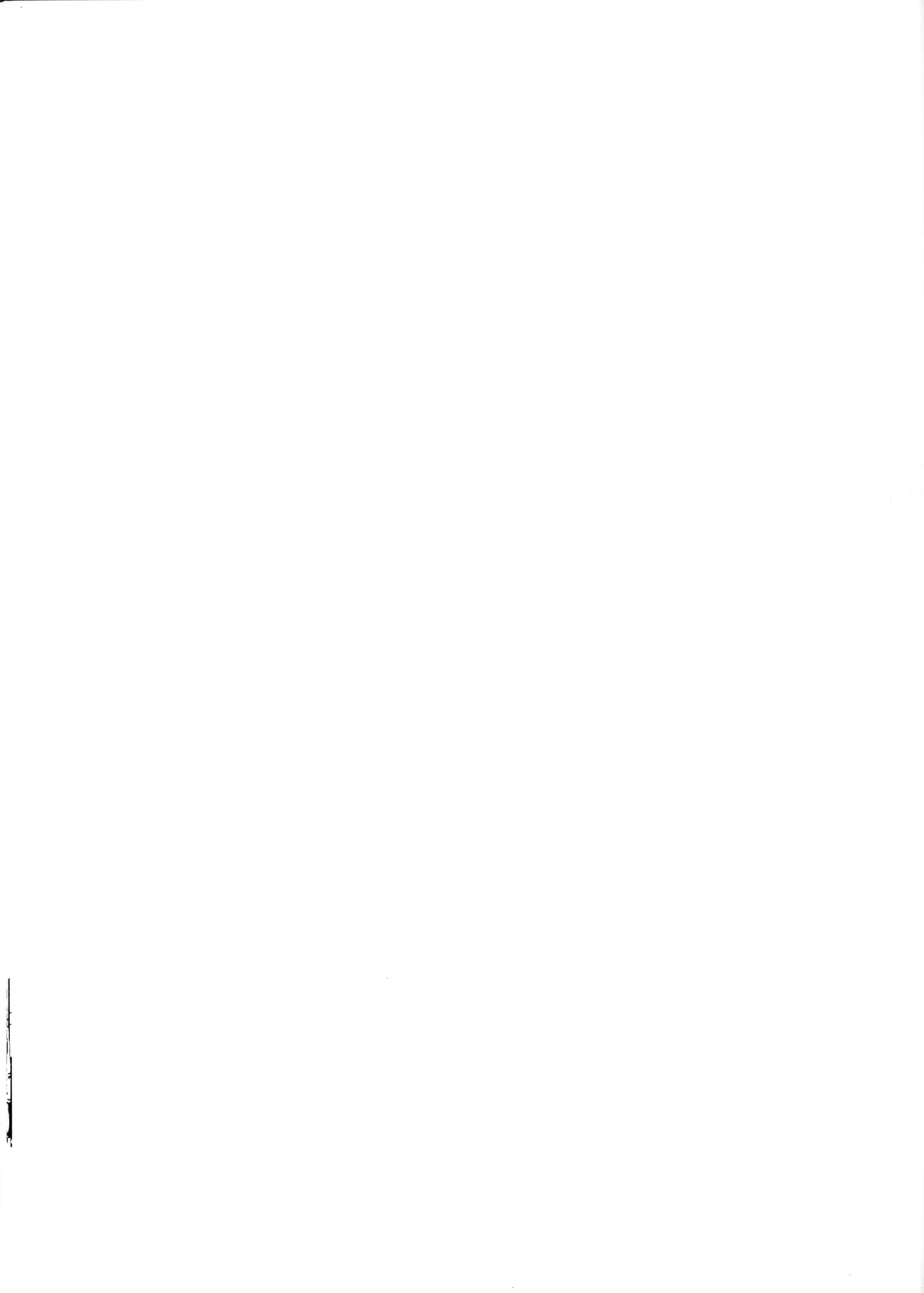
Little wonder is it that in the architecture for our times commercial standards rule in place of artistic standards? Craftsmanship has priced itself out of the market (Its exit hastened by the union boss!). In residential architecture the contractor and the promoter-sharpies have usurped the architect by virtue of the quick-sell alone.

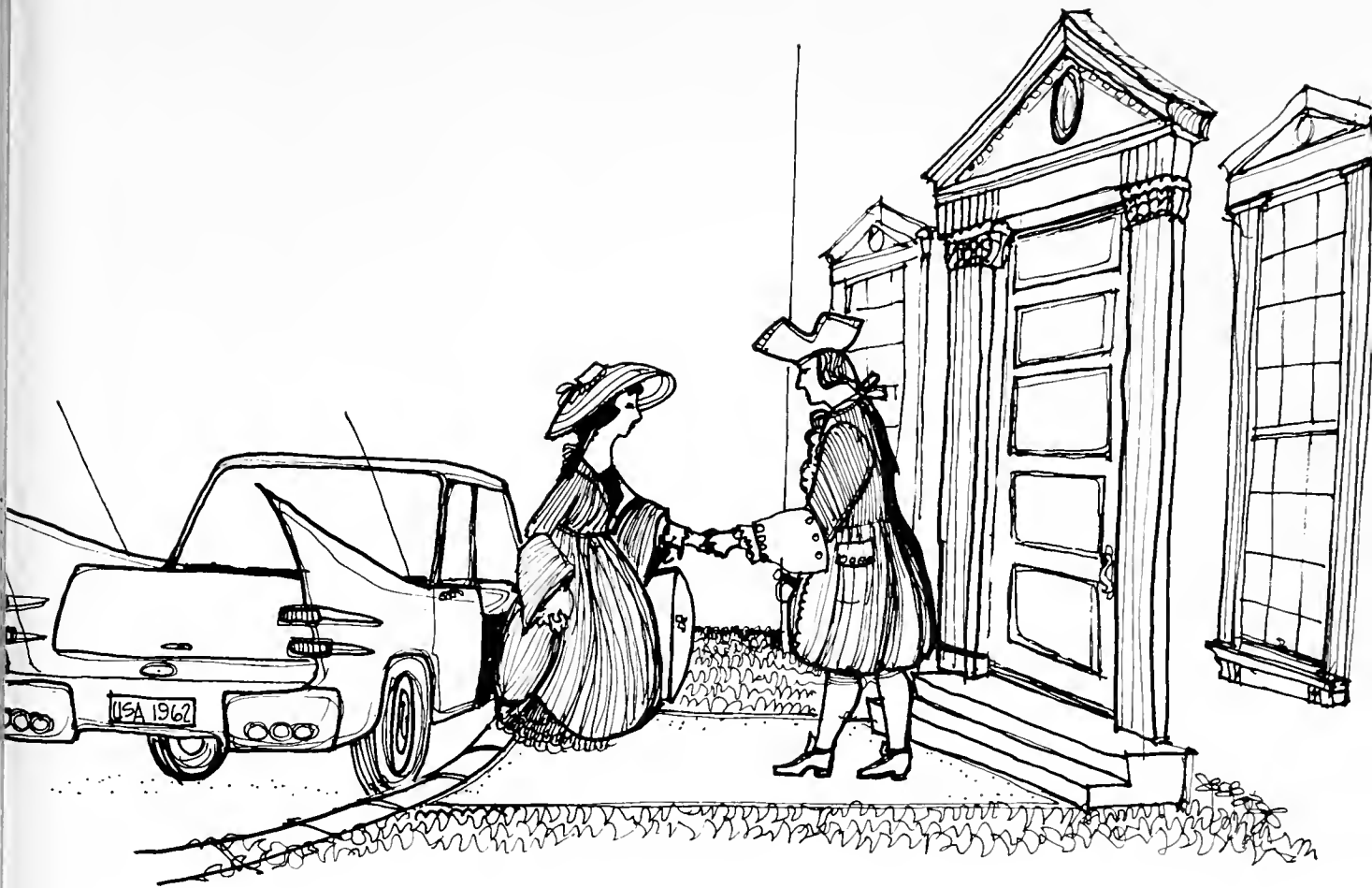
Let us talk about residential architecture for our times.

Modern architecture in home design just ain't, at least not to any great extent. Maybe all those high-flown, long-blown words issued in the 30's to the effect that the house is a "machine for living" continue to scare off prospective builders. At any rate, there has been a headlong rush back into the arms of traditionalism similar to that of the industrial nouveau riche of the late 1800's. Now really, are we in Houston going to persist in plundering the past of all its finery too, and dress ourselves up in it as a kind of masquerade?

I fail to imagine anyone entering many of our new homes other than in costume. Great fun, but very expensive!

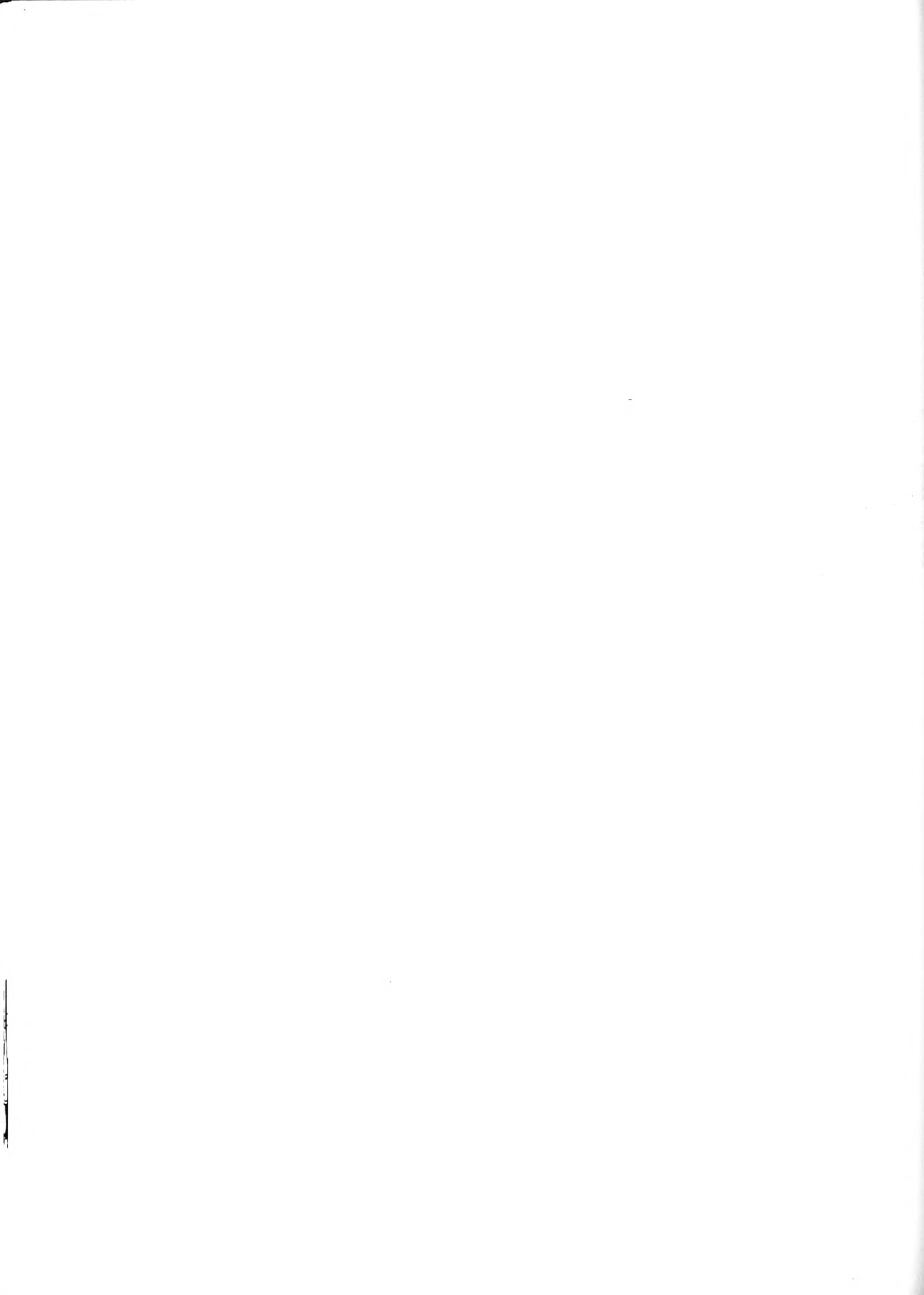
This same careless, prosperous dishonesty characterizes the cultural fabric of America just as it does of Houston. This dishonesty is to a large part perpetrated by insensitive promoters and their over-eager contractor sidekicks. Together they glut our house market with cheap imitations of "home sweet home" with eaves that are all but touching and with about as





architectural validity as a movie stage set. But the people buy them by the tract-full and the money rolls in. Why? Because people cannot windowshop for an architect's goods, nor can they move in the kiddies and both TV's within hours of plunking down that first \$90 payment when an architect is involved.

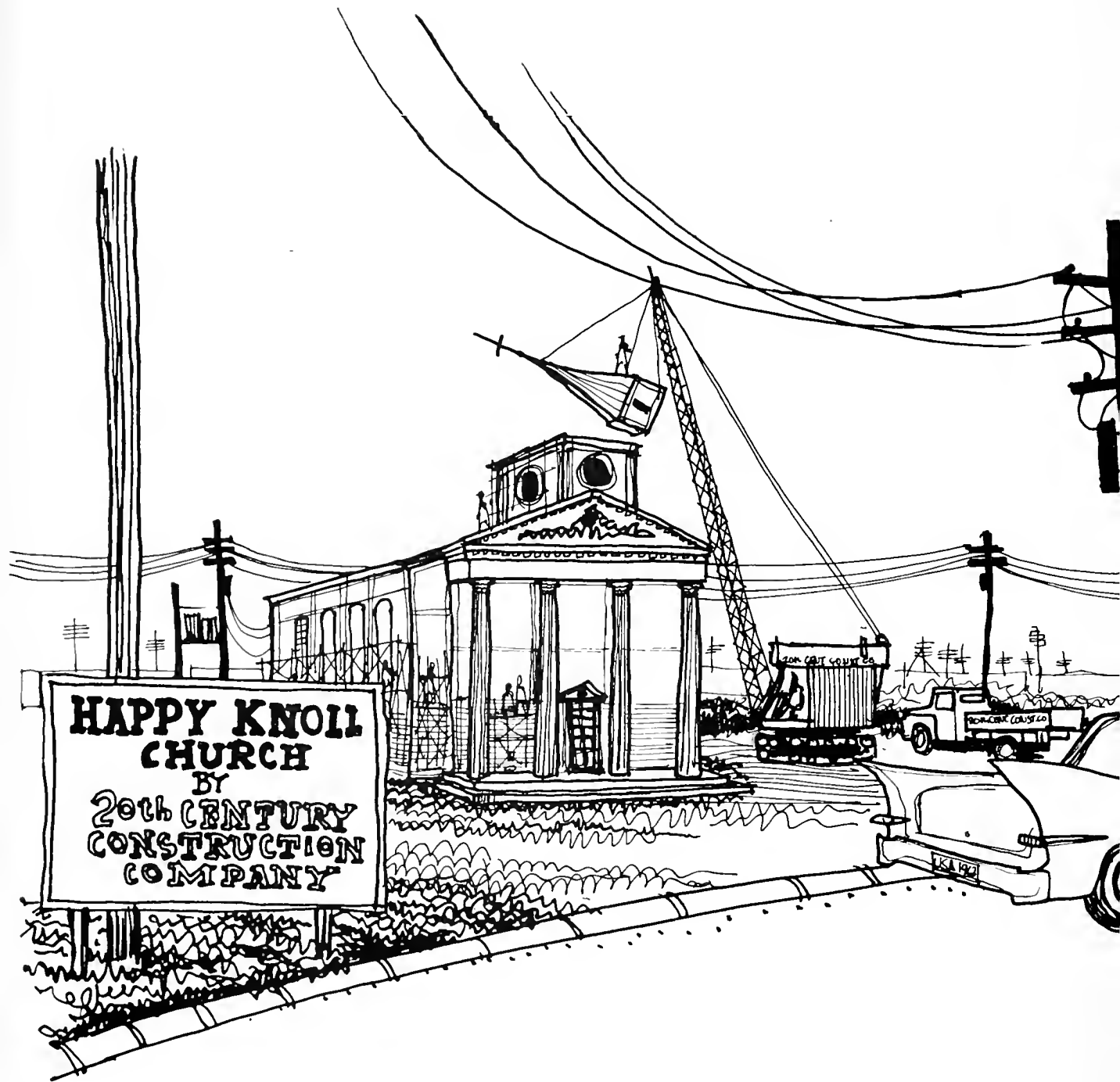
Quality and individuality take time to produce, and time is accepted by most Americans only when it comes to making payments. They cannot wait for a tailor-made home when they (1) need it



immediately and (2) plan to leave it in quest of career advancement within so many years anyway. So Mr. and Mrs. American buy what is available: that nice, new, psuedo Cape Cod or Southern Colonial or American-non-descript out in Heavenly Acres or Sharpietowne (no personal offense to Mr. Sharpe).

For this, Mr. American can not be blamed. He niether has the time, nor the sense to demand anything better. The promoter-contractor duo can be blamed; however, just as Detroit can be blamed by refusing to raise their products' aesthetic and honest-value standards. An architect can not foist his plans on the public. He needs a client. A contractor needs only a promoter, and he can fill suburbia with a thousand good or bad homes at a whack. People will buy these houses because they are available!

An outstanding example of what can be done in tract home design has been set by Mr. Eichler on the West Coast. His standards are excellent, but, of course, it took the labor of many creative architectural consultants to establish them. Eichler Homes are modern in essence; for their broad, simple surfaces and highly conventionalized forms provide a foil for life: more truly simple and more articulate with less labor than any other tract home around. These homes depend on the personality of each family, not the quaintness or psuedo-elegance of a bygone style, to give them their individuality. Thus these tract homes exist on their sites in harmony with each other minus the chaotic clammering for attention found in most American housing developments.



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USA 1962

S O M E T H I N G D I F F E R E N T - A N D I N A H U R R Y !

These standards we call Modern (logic, simplicity, honesty) have come closest to realization on a large scale in our commercial and industrial architecture. Just as automation and ruthless competition have pared away most excesses and inefficiencies in our business world, so the architects have responded by eliminating the ponderous, "fleshy" masonry which needlessly encumbered our tall buildings. Now all we have left is concrete, steel and glass skeletons. As any body stripped naked, these buildings in most cases are defenseless against sun and cold until their cloaks are drawn around them, inside now, in the form of draperies or venetian blinds. These skyscraper-temples of high finance and corporate wealth are the symbols of our time: they dominate our skylines; they are almost built to last longer than 50 years!

Who thinks now of the squalid slums that surround the Acropolis? Or the insipid rubble heaps which smothered the Pantheon? Similarly, in a hundred-or-so years, all the Westberries and Sharpie-townes will be buried from memory under the weight of Humble's 42 floors of questionable grandeur. Does this added responsibility sober our Scrooges and Daddies Warbuck into taking their architecture seriously?

Clean and pure as a naked, new-born babe, the skyscrapers may be,



but more and more they are becoming like those "assorted" cookies that "differ from one another only in shape and shade, whereby their shrewd makers ensnare the salivating consumer in a mad Pavlovian world where, at no extra cost, variations in simple visual values influence and gradually replace flavor, which thus goes the way of talent and truth."¹ Corporations, desperate to project a corporate image, demand of the architect "something different -- and in a hurry!"

C U R B T H A T U R G E !

Since the majority of us, whether corporation or individual, has to live within the city limits, we must learn to express ourselves in harmony with our neighbors and our environment. If we are an unhumble Humble, we must curb the urge to dwarf downtown Houston. If we place our buildings so they intercept great quantities of hot sun, we must stop imitating cool New York City's glass facades and seek an architecture indigenous to our latitude. If we are to quit living in vulgar crackerboxes with just enough nostalgic face-lifting to make them palatable (and sellable) to the sentimentalist, we must not only teach Johnny to read, write and manipulate the sliderule, but also to take notice of his environment, to love the beauty and nature of materials, and to respond sensitively to spaces, colors and forms. We must teach Johnny that

1. Vladimir Nabokov, "Lance," NABOKOV'S DOZEN, pg. 149, 1952.

architecture is one measure of a society's greatness, and that he, and you, and we, determine what America's architecture will be by what We the People demand as much or more than by what a few of us design.

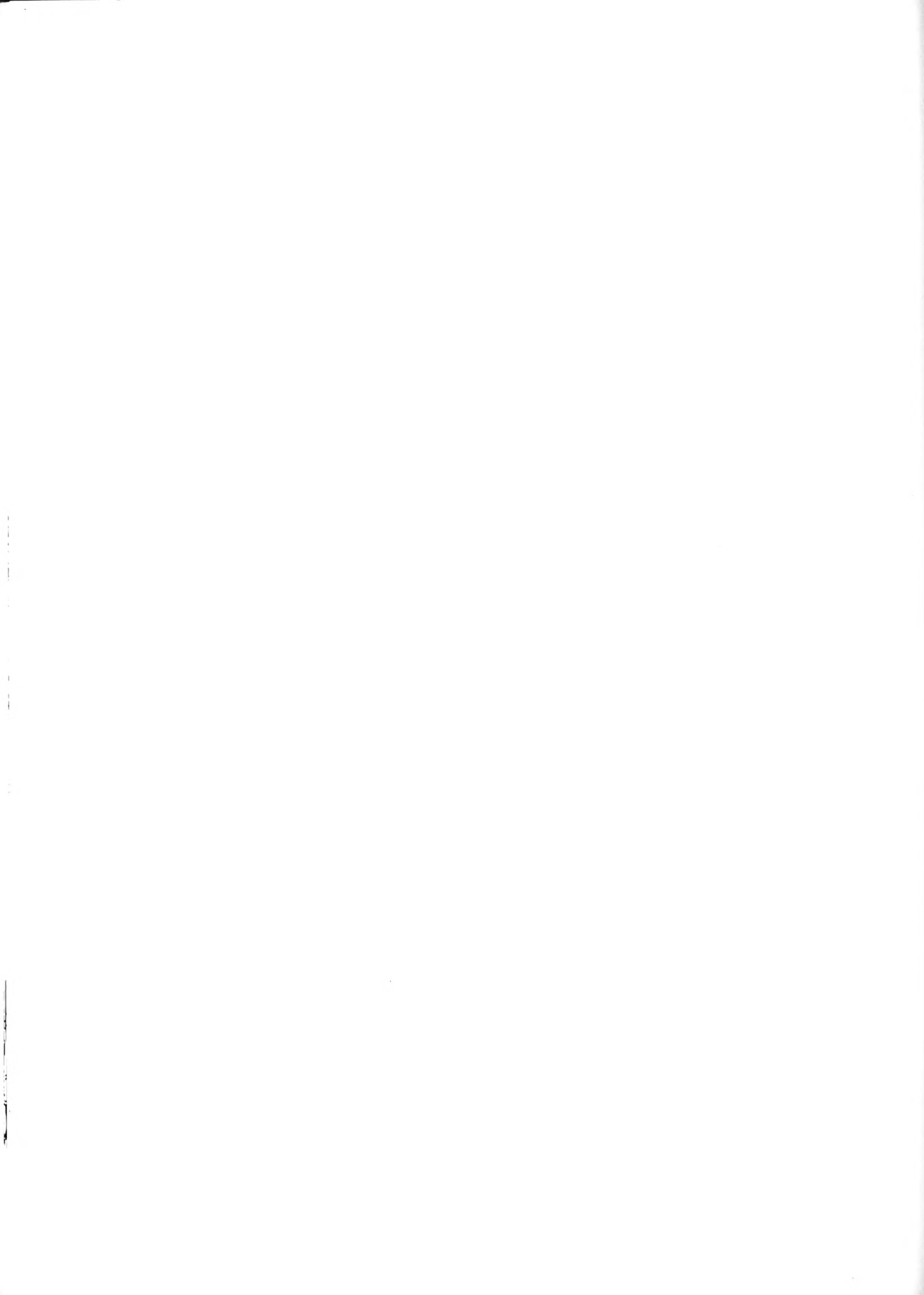
L E A R N T O D I S C E R N

In the area of architecture, Americans are still re-enacting a very infamous Manhattan Island tableau in which they barter their hard-earned cash for architectural baubles and beads. To the uninitiated, they are "purty" all strung there row-upon-row in our residential tracts or one above the other in a frenzied attempt to outreach the neighbor in a chaotic clammering for Mammon's attention.

Yes, baubles and beads may be "purty," but their value derives only from ignorance or whimsy. In our architecture we can not rely on either.

Whimsy on a large scale in architecture would be akin to a diet of cotton candy and Cracker Jax ("Urp!" is exactly right!). We must not allow this yearning for Fantasy Land to over-extend itself (whether it be manifested in neo-medieval castles, Colonial mansions, or "Space Gothic" pavilions). That can all be comfortably contained within the boundaries of Disneyland.

Continued ignorance will propagate slums and ugly patchwork quilts





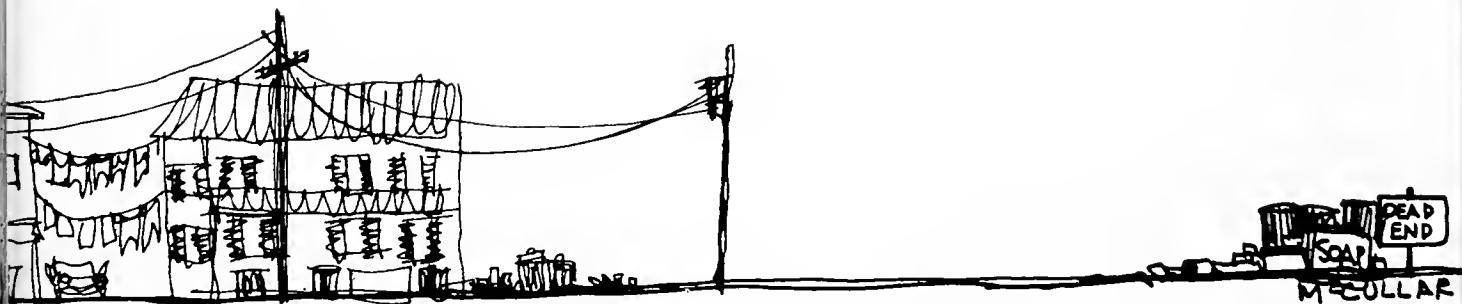
of interwoven eyesores. Ignorance will produce an esthetically degenerate society which would rather watch TV in its cars than look at the mess we have created in our cities and along our highways as far as the eye can see.

The moral of these many foibles is clear: we Americans must learn to discern between the baubles and the jewels in our architecture.

We must demand logic and honesty and integrity; for as we demand, so shall our architects and planners design. The moral is merely a repeat of that old saw, "Ask and ye shall receive." I submit, "Learn to discern that you may demand that you may receive."

When that happens, the architect will have his heyday, for his talents will be demanded and he will again exist as an artist, not as a businessman. And further, architecture for those times will elicit more than the comments of evangelical old practitioners and angry young men.

HOWARD E. EILENBERGER





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