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The Owner-Built Home - Chapter 2 - Volume IV - Design and Structure - Planning Systems: The Court-Garden House

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Planning Systems: The Court-Garden House

By Ken Kern

We often think that when we have completed our study of one we know all about two, because "two" is "one and one." We forget that we have still to make a study of "and."

—Eddington: *The Nature of the Physical World*

As one advances from house planning to actual building, he soon discovers that the design of a house cannot be divorced from its structural purpose. The 18th century sculptor, Horatio Greenough, recommended that man-made designs, like those found in nature, should follow the function of the structure. This "form follows function" concept implies that the actual beauty of a building is relative to the degree to which it meets the demands of its function. A home with a high degree of living efficiency is almost always esthetically pleasing.

One should not, however, confuse simple, efficient house beauty with the sort of rational purism that currently passes off as modern architecture. In some quarters we find a revolt against rational materialism in favor of more poetry and imagination in designing dwellings. Architectural schools too often foster among students an academism of ascetic impoverishment which reduces the rising young architect (in Eric Gill's terms) to a "subhuman condition of intellectual irresponsibility."

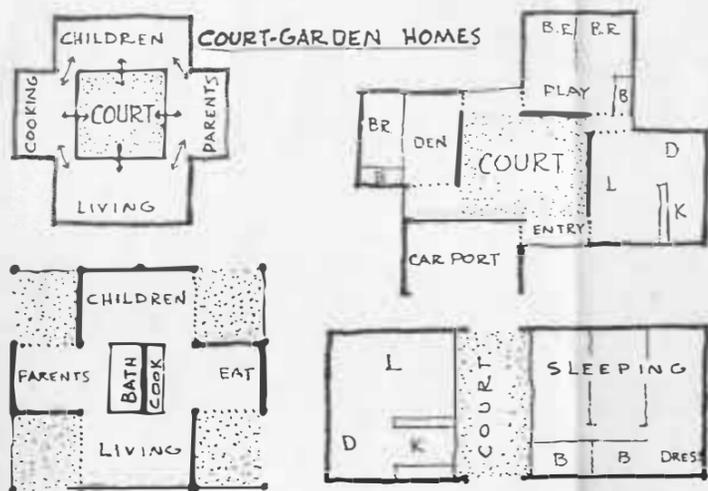
The rejection of the box house with its meaningless decoration ("applied art") was first successfully achieved by the Spanish architect, Antonio Gaudi. In 1915 Gaudi independently developed a flowing sculptural, plastic quality in building that remains unique to this day. He showed that superfluous design elements can be used if quality and measure control their integration. There is apparently a need in man for things that are not strictly necessary. In prehistoric times man painted the cavern ceilings before he knew how to build roofs.

But prior to cave dwelling, man lived in the open spaces under the sun. The cave was a protective shelter rather than a place where life was carried on. Man's craving for living in the outdoors continues to be strong. Open space is superfluous to man's shelter needs, yet inner garden-courts were built in ancient Egypt and China long before houses were fully developed as protective and sheltering privacy areas. The Greek peristyle house led to the Roman atrium and the Spanish patio.

The first court-garden house was built in the 1930's in Germany by architect Mies van de Rohe. Very little was done with this architectural form until after World War II, despite its many advantages. A court-garden house offers maximum privacy and separation of living functions. Solar exposure and cross-ventilation are improved, and the fewer wall openings and shorter spans offer major structural savings. Being inward-directed, the court-garden house has few or no openings on its exterior sides.

The court-garden house is merely one system of planning developed to produce a livable and economical environment. Another system, the free-form, will be discussed in the following chapter. Both systems represent thinking founded upon basic design concepts universally applicable.

Such a concept is the optimum circulation path, a universal constant in design and structure economy. A circulation path may be a closed-in hall or an imaginary "traffic lane." The Small Homes Council found that when the circulation path area of a house exceeds 15% of the total floor area, the total layout suffers. Besides being direct and as short as possible, a main circulation path should be centrally located and should radiate to the various parts of the house. Ideally, one should be able to go to any part of the house from the main entry, without passing through any other part.



(continued next month)

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Letters, cont'd

settle the "land question" justly means losing all land to the totalitarian state. . . . Our people don't know what is going on. We don't have any reform program — nothing except to safeguard the system for the landlords. Vietnam is only the beginning. What will happen when the pot boils in South America among the great aristocratic landholdings, and those of the church? . . . Despite our complaining how hard it is for young people to get land in this country, it is far easier than almost

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Protective, cont'd

ugly—just like actual smallpox."

Con. This, it seems to me, is an excellent reason for not giving the shots to the five year olds either. When they are old enough not to scratch, and the question comes up (perhaps for army, passport, etc.), they can decide for themselves. (Shots are not necessary for passports either, although customs officials are not always aware of the fact; ask them to check the rules.) We have no intention of letting our children get shots, and if we should live in a place where they were mandatory, we would be willing to go to court about it, educate the children at home or at a private school, or move somewhere else. We feel that strongly about it.

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any place else. Our people didn't have any great institutions or classes to take over immediately after the Indians had been run off. So we are better off. Seattle has over half its homes owned by their residents. It is less in the East and in many places in Europe where hordes of people don't own anything. And this homelessness puts a terrible burden on the political system. Next time you come West, come North! — Wesley Smith, 3710 S.W. Donovan, Seattle, Wash.

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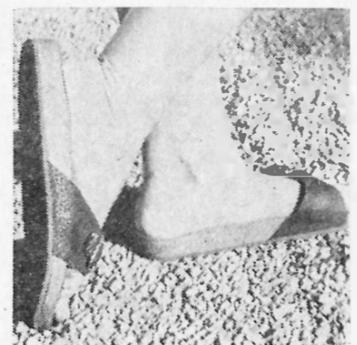
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