

Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture. John Sergeant. New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1976. 207 pp. \$24.50.

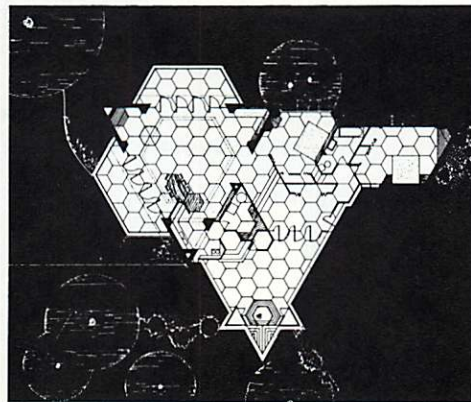
Something happens when you read about Frank Lloyd Wright's little houses that makes you want one. These are not his well-known Prairie houses, but his later, smaller homes which he called "Usonians." They were designed between 1936 and 1943 to meet tight budgets, but great expectations.

Sergeant's book presents an unusual opportunity to look at this period of Wright's work, and these fine houses, in particular. The Usonians are studies in economy—economy of cost gained through economy of design. The first one was the Herbert Jacobs house in Madison, Wis., 1,500 square feet, built in 1936 at a cost of \$5,500. Twenty-six Usonians were completed and 31 more were designed but not built. The Jacobs house and those that followed shared a modular planning grid, board and batten wall construction, and radiant heating provided by hot water pipes sealed into a concrete "floormat." There were no radiators, no basements, no attics, no downspouts and no gutters, and there was no plaster and no paint. Even in Wisconsin, there were no garages; cars did not require a room, Wright thought, so he devised carports for them.

Wright simplified the construction process to permit people to build as much of their houses as possible themselves. He simplified the components to make maximum use of prefabrication, though building codes hindered his efforts, and banks were reluctant to invest in such avant-garde features as cantilevered roofs and unpainted woodwork. Wright also asked his clients to simplify their own needs to make their living arrangements compatible with the design. The Usonians definitely were not designed for families with many possessions. Actually, for those lucky enough to own them, the houses themselves became most prized possessions. In 1940, Wright designed a house overlooking the Des Plaines River in Libertyville, Ill., for his friend Lloyd Lewis. "The tragedy that befell so many of my clients," Wright wrote, "happened

to the Lloyd Lewises. They just liked to stay in their house and didn't care to go out anywhere unless they had to."

Economy of design did not mean a lack of architectural innovation. In particular, Wright used these projects to explore new ways of conserving energy. He said his houses airconditioned themselves, and nearly all of his clients agreed. With careful site planning to catch breezes, and flat, overhanging roofs to create shade, he relied on the thermal mass of masonry and concrete to minimize extreme changes in hot and cold. He also relied on his



clients to dress properly for cold weather and not to expect their heating system to do the job of a sweater. As American homeowners scrutinize their thermostats 40 years later, there is much to be learned from Wright's experiments with what he called his "solar-hemicycle," a curved house built into an insulating hill of earth or rock on its exposed north side and glazed to amplify sunlight on its south side. As an example of this type, Sergeant illustrates the second Jacobs house, designed in 1943, but this and the others like it deserve much more in-depth attention than the glimpse that Sergeant provides.

Natural materials, exposed brick and cypress wood, used most of the time, gave the Usonian interiors a cozy and comfortable feeling. Scaled small, they had a remarkable spaciousness, due largely to the way Wright managed to create a flow between the inside and the surrounding exteriors.

The house plans, showing the intricate interlocking geometry of each design, are probably what makes this book most valuable to architects. Sergeant, a British

architect, visited the houses and put together this first such published selection, despite the fact that nearly all of Wright's plans, working drawings and papers still remain inaccessible in the archives at Taliesin. The many black and white photographs of the houses are essential companions to the plans. Obviously, it was difficult for the author to locate all the photographs he would have wanted, and the quality is not uniformly high. Some look as if he took them himself with a telephoto lens while concealed in a far-off shrub. Still, the visual materials alone make the volume worthwhile.

The text is more of a collection of facts and figures than a unified book. It does not pretend to be a biography but would benefit from a more complete picture of Wright and his work before the 1930s. The most intriguing tidbit about his early years is the reference to the Froebelian blocks he played with as a child and the way they set him thinking in terms of geometric modules.

Sergeant tries hard to separate the Usonian houses into categories according to shape, with "pollywogs," Ls, Ts, "heads" and "tails" in various combinations, but it is really the plans themselves which best reveal the underlying geometry. The Sundt house, for example, is based on a hexagonal module with layers of overlapping triangles. Sergeant notes that its "acute corners were to be brick masses containing fireplaces, ducts and storage." Although it was never built, Sergeant wisely includes its plan (left) and model. The dramatic geometry of the Sundt house bears a striking resemblance to I.M. Pei's addition to the National Gallery of Art, now under construction in Washington, D.C.

The booklet *The Pope-Leighey House* (published in 1969 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation) is a logical mate to Sergeant's overview. Loren Pope asked Wright to design for him a "Jacobs-style house" for \$5,500, and Wright designed the house in 1940. Taliesin released architect-client correspondence and drawings for the booklet, which also contains observations by the two owners, the Taliesin supervisor of construction and

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the master craftsman who built, dismantled, moved and rebuilt the house on the grounds of Woodlawn Plantation near Mount Vernon, Va.

Mrs. Marjorie F. Leighey, the second owner, offers a concise and moving comment on what it feels like to live in the house and the extraordinary demands it places on its occupants. "Comes a time of rebellion," she says, "an anger at any dwelling-place that presumes to dictate how its occupants live." It was not easy to live with no storage space, to entertain at most four guests for dinner or to do the laundry with no washer or dryer. But she and her husband accepted Wright's challenge, and gained a sort of spiritual satisfaction through it. These collected comments on the actual experience of creating and living in a Usonian house offer the best possible case for organic architecture. *Jane Canter Loeffler, Consultant in Planning and Design, Washington, D.C.*

A Gift to the Street. Photographs by Carol Olwell, commentary by Judith Lynch Waldhorn. San Francisco: Antelope Island Press (P.O. Box 31508, San Francisco, Calif. 94131), 1976. 212 pp. \$12.95.

This first publication of the Antelope Island Press is a handsome and com-

mendable contribution to the study of Victorian architecture. San Francisco has been blessed with its many carpenter-built



houses of the late 19th century, and here they are portrayed in all their glory. The commentary is readable and informative prose, and the illustrative materials, including details of doorways, windows, columns, newel posts, etc., add tremendously to the reader's pleasure. Congratulations, Antelope Island Press!

Architecture, Problems, and Purposes: Architectural Design as a Basic Problem Solving Process. John W. Wade. New York: Wiley, 1977. 350 pp. \$20.

Not many people who have written about design as "problem solving" have shown the respect (perhaps even reverence) that Professor John W. Wade, AIA, of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, holds for the strengths of the traditional so-called intuitive process of designing buildings. He believes that the crucial element of design, the creative imagining of forms and spaces, remains a mystery resistant to analysis. The stated purpose of his book is not to provide a method or theory for design, but to provide a better way to analyze and explain the results of the design process.

Wade draws upon the concepts and vocabulary of systems analysis, decision theory and behavioral science for his method of describing and explaining architectural design. Although the book is liberally larded with examples of familiar design problems, Wade's main points are made at a rather high level of abstraction, such as one usually finds in discussions of scientific theory. And, at that level, the analysis is often elegant.

To make his ideas more accessible, the chapters are structured in three tiers of complexity and sophistication. Sections

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Studies in Italian Renaissance Architecture

by Wolfgang Lotz

Introduction by James S. Ackerman

Wolfgang Lotz acquired his training as a scholar in his native Germany, and he has been for a number of years Director of the Hertzianna Library in Rome, a major research center in the field of Italian art. All but two of the nine essays in this volume originally appeared in German or Italian and are now available for the first time in English.

The essays are illuminated by 130 illustrations, many of them plans and perspective and elevation drawings executed during the period.

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The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays

by Colin Rowe

Charles Jencks wrote in *Modern Movements in Architecture* (1973): "... when Colin Rowe published his article 'The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa' in 1947 those who had been following the emergent Neo-Platonism, that is, those close to the Warburg [Institute], were not surprised. Here was New Palladianism fully born right from the top of Corbusier's head."

In addition to this influential essay, the book contains eight others on architecture, classical and modern.

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