

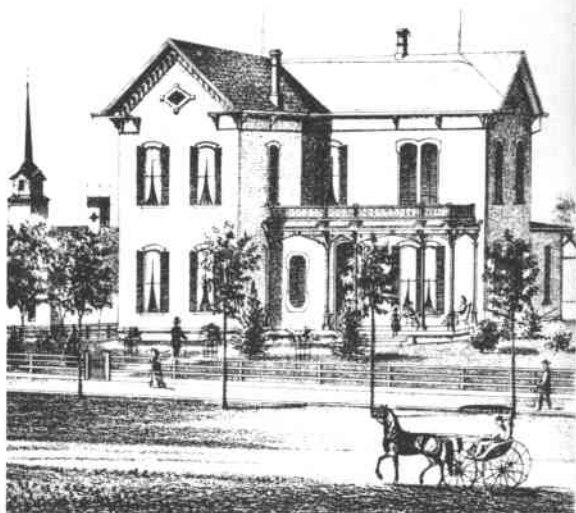
FROM PORCH TO PATIO

by Richard H. Thomas

Two assumptions are basic to understanding the role of architecture in our lives: first, domestic dwellings in their construction and design reflect the prevailing cultural notions of what a *home* should be (the reflection of what the owner sees as being essential to his style of life); second, a house is not only a shelter, but it may be viewed also as a statement of the way personal and social life is organized.

The century between 1860 and 1960 saw many changes in technology, values, population, land use, and the structure of social and political institutions. These changes were often rather rapid and accompanied by new tensions between the desire for privacy and the need to be public enough to enjoy the benefits of community life. The home architecture of what can be termed the "gentry" (the social and economic upper class who were the architectural style leaders as well as the business and often the intellectual elite) demonstrated some of these changing notions of privacy and community. There is no question that the other socio-economic classes attempted to imitate the lead of the gentry and designed their homes with features that resembled the houses of their "betters" (to use the nineteenth-century term).

It is enlightening to look at one particular feature of architectural design: the porch. The gradual movement of the porch from the front of the house to the back (where it became the modern patio) illustrates the importance of new technology in home building and tells us a great deal about the social meaning of homes. Focusing just on the porch leaves out many important elements of the home, such as the arrangement of rooms within the structure or the evolution of the nineteenth-century parlor into the modern den. However, a concentrated look at the porch enables us to see how the use of new materials and an increasing desire for privacy modified not only the artistic design of the house, but suggested new forms of social relations with one's



The porch of the M. Heisey residence in Anamosa, Iowa was relatively small, but clearly the center of much social activity (from Andreas Atlas, 1875).



Brucemoor, an elegant gentry house, now owned by Mrs. Howard Hall of Cedar Rapids.

neighbors. This in turn may illustrate shifting ideas about what is meant by a sense of community or belonging to a particular place.

A central social development during the century between 1860 and 1960 was the compression of time and distance, accelerating the tempo of life. In the late nineteenth century, most of the gentry class built homes on large lots, usually facing the street. The homes were designed to be viewed from a horse-drawn buggy as it approached and passed at a slow pace, thus letting the viewer see

and appreciate the entire home including its many points of interest and intricate designs. Many of these homes today are crowded by other structures, and when the passerby travels at an average speed of 25 miles per hour, viewing time is reduced to approximately six to ten seconds. We often fail to appreciate some of the grandeur of these homes because of the speed at which we are accustomed to traveling and the congestion of other structures. The porch is especially important in this context of speed. In an earlier day the viewer riding in a carriage



A marvelous porch, which extended across the entire front of the house, and which could accommodate the entire family, plus visitors. Note the low fence between sidewalk and yard.

or the citizen walking past the house saw the building for a long time and was well aware of the presence or absence of the residents on the porch.

The city or country porch presented opportunities for social intercourse at several levels. When a family member was on the porch it was possible to exchange a wave or a trivial greeting with those passing by. On the other hand, it was also possible to invite the passerby to stop and come up onto the porch for extended conversation. The person on the porch was very much in control of this interaction, as the porch was seen as an extension of the living quarters of the family. Often, a hedge or fence separated the porch from the street or board sidewalk, providing a physical barrier for privacy, yet low enough to permit conversa-

tion. The porch served many important social functions in addition to advertising the availability of its inhabitants. A well-shaded porch provided a cool place in the heat of the day for the women to enjoy a rest from household chores. They could exchange gossip or share problems without having to arrange a "neighborhood coffee" or a "bridge party." The porch also provided a courting place within earshot of protective parents. A boy and a girl could be close on a porch swing, yet still observed, and many a proposal of marriage was made on a porch swing. Older persons derived great pleasure from sitting on the porch, watching the world go by, or seeing the neighborhood children at play. The gentry homes were intentionally designed to provide a place for entertainment, and a summer porch

was often the location of such gatherings.

The humblest of homes could not do without some form of a porch. It was a pervasive architectural form which disappeared slowly. Part of the resistance toward abandoning the porch as an essential part of the home can be attributed to the primary group relationships that permeated both the large and small communities. It was important to know one's neighbors and be known by them. The porch was a platform from which to observe the activities of others. It also facilitated and symbolized a set of social relationships and the strong bond of community feeling which people during the nineteenth century supposed was the way God intended life to be lived.

Slowly, technology and changes both

in taste and social structure began to alter the form and the meaning of the porch. By the turn of the century a well established sash and door industry, new building materials, and innovative construction techniques granted home builders an even greater variety of porch styles from which to select. Labor was still cheaper than material. The gentry maintained their social and economic position, constructing homes much along the lines of the previous 30 years. Those with power and wealth seemed unafraid to let others know their status by constructing large and elaborate homes, but taste had begun to change. A few years before the dawn of the century Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others were searching for a new architecture which would



The women of the household relax on the porch of the Baptist parsonage in Vinton, Iowa. The spacious lawn and upper porch give an air of relaxed elegance to this example of the "porch" society.



A porch extending around two sides of the house at the C. E. Gillette home in Mt. Vernon, Iowa.

become distinctly American. Both men found patrons among the Iowa gentry for commercial as well as domestic buildings. The influence of Wright's Prairie School of design is most evident in a series of structures in the Mason City area. Most of Iowa's gentry, however, preferred to modify the styles of the late nineteenth century rather than adopt the avant-garde notions of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Most Iowans were not of the gentry class and could not afford the opulent displays of wealth prevalent among the social aristocracy. Many, however, began to build bungalows or single-story dwellings which were made economically feasible by the increasing mechanization of the millwork industry. Yet, a large proportion of these

modest structures continued the tradition of some form of the porch.

By the 1920s, signs of a new architectural style were evident. The slow breakdown of many of the values of the late nineteenth century continued, and the gentry classes lost power. This was accompanied by massive technological changes symbolized by electricity and the internal combustion engine. The two decades of social and economic change which followed World War I created markets for small, single-family dwellings. Population in rural areas continued to shift toward the cities, and with the coming of the industrial expansion of World War II, pressing needs for low-cost housing brought the techniques of mass produc-



Backyard patios near Cedar Rapids.

tion into the housing industry as never before. Federal subsidies for housing further stimulated the building boom. The population explosion following World War II and a spiraling economic cycle gave added thrust to home construction. At the edge of cities, planned and unplanned communities sprang up without the homes or the influence of the once powerful and respected gentry class who in an earlier day had set the example of the most desirable homes and fixed the patterns of social relations.

The demand for new housing, the presence of a large number of trained architects, and vast subsidies for middle-class housing, together with new financial resources all contributed to a massive build-

ing boom. In the new suburbia land was costly, labor more expensive than any of the new materials available to contractors, and architects were often the hirelings of large development corporations whose profits rested heavily on standardized construction and prefabrication. These new communities were frequently "bedroom cities" which lacked established social structures and the ingredients of community building prevalent in the older towns and villages. Many suburbanites were refugees from the city, seeking a style of single-family dwelling which would maintain the privacy afforded by the anonymity of urban culture.

Mass production, however, left little room for innovation or creation. Young



The modern style is exemplified by the Len Walworth residence in Burlington (courtesy of McConnell, Steveley, & Anderson Architects, Cedar Rapids, Iowa).

persons in the planned communities wanted to make their homes distinguishable from the same models down the street, and they wanted also to make their homes private. Perhaps the most frequently used device in the search for uniqueness and privacy was the backyard patio. In communities with a high rate of mobility, one did not often want to know his neighbor. The constant turn-over of neighbors worked against the long-term relationships which are essential to a sense of belonging. The patio, walled on one, two, or three sides, was a barrier for privacy and a means of self-expression.

The patio was an extension of the house, but far less public than the porch. It was easy to greet a stranger from the porch

but exceedingly difficult to do so from the backyard patio. While the porch was designed in an era of slow movement, the patio is part of a world which places a premium on speed and ease of access. The father of a nineteenth-century family might stop on the porch on his way into the house, but the suburban man wishes to enter the house as rapidly as possible to accept the shelter that the house provides from the mass of people he may deal with all day.

In this transition from porch to patio there is an irony. Nineteenth-century families were expected to be public and fought to achieve their privacy. Part of the sense of community that often characterized the nineteenth-century village re-

sulted from the forms of social interaction that the porch facilitated. Twentieth-century man has achieved the sense of privacy in his patio, but in doing so he has lost part of his public nature which is essential to strong attachments and a deep sense of belonging or feelings of community. Whether the patio is surrounded by walls or left open, it usually remains in the rear of the house, providing privacy but creating a barrier to informal social contacts once provided by the porch. In the hurried flight from commuter vehicle to the sanctuary of the home there is no time or real desire for informal contacts without which a sense of belonging is difficult to establish and maintain. Today social forms revolve around the car and the ability to maintain friendships over a wide geographic area. The modern home has moved the "car-barn" into the house itself. Today's home embraces the car, providing it almost as much shelter as the family. The carriage house of the past century was usually on the back of the lot, and while the horse was in some sense a part of the family, it did not occupy the living space as does the car and the garage of today. Another irony here is that the car has both freed us and enslaved us.

The preoccupation of the commuter as he speeds through suburbia is how to pick out of the hundreds of similar models the single dwelling that is indeed *his* home. He lives in a world that gives only a three

second view of houses as he looks from his car window. He finds himself in a sterile environment where domestic architectural creativity is restricted by very high building costs. Thus he takes to the "do-it-yourself" skills involving a small saw, paint, and wallpaper.

It should be noted that now as in the past many architects continue to find patrons among the new upper-middle class who are anxious to separate themselves from the masses and want homes that reflect their status and taste. Doctors, lawyers, and rising business executives provide the capital for innovative structures. This new gentry seems committed to the privacy of the patio, and many of their homes reflect backyard areas open on three sides because the owners have purchased enough land to protect their privacy or view of the landscape.

The old cliché says, "A man's home is his castle." If this be true, the nineteenth-century porch was a drawbridge across which many passed in their daily lives. The modern patio is in many ways a closed courtyard that suggests that the king and his family are tired of the world and seek only the companionship of their immediate family or intimate peers. The tension between the need for privacy and the desire to belong to a community is still with us. The resolution of this seemingly ever-present conflict in needs and values is, and will be, mirrored in the design of whatever is called a house. □