

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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(Prepared by U.S.H.A.)

Facts Concerning the Houses and Housing Section of Art in Our Time Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street

The United States Housing Authority has cooperated with the Museum of Modern Art in the preparation of the Houses and Housing Exhibition. At the end of the summer, this exhibition will become a travelling exhibition under the Circulating Department of the Museum, and will be shown in a score of cities throughout the country.

In city after city housing is a subject of hot discussion. This issue is no longer, Shall there be public housing? It is, What kind of housing shall be built? Since three years from now almost a million people will be living in houses owned and operated by local housing authorities, it is very important to those who will live in these projects that the buildings be well designed and as handsome as possible in appearance. To help architects and public officials in this work, the Museum has collected a series of housing projects in Europe and America which will be interesting and useful at this time.

The U. S. Housing Authority, in addition to financing local housing authority projects, also serves as a center for housing information and research.

The entire exhibition, Houses and Housing, is definitely a show with an idea. It shows that the modern individual house, built by private clients, has been an important laboratory in which three discoveries have been made which are important to public housing: the development of the open plan, the use of new building materials and the creation of new and standard parts of the house, and the creation of a new style. Research in large scale housing has also shown the architect of individual houses that further efficiency in planning is possible, that orientation to sun and wind should be more considered, and that certain economies in building are possible. The real conclusion is that architects of both houses and housing draw on the same body of information.

If you wonder why so much of our cities are drab, and why modern buildings look fresh and gay by comparison, the Houses and Housing Exhibition has the explanation. The introductory screen to the entire exhibition shows that there was a fine tradition of building up to the end of the XVIII century, when the machine destroyed it. In this period of new adjustments, the factory was uncontrolled and destroyed the landscape and the city, the newly rich built monstrosities of taste, and the workers were herded into monotonous barracks. Gradually the machine was brought under control, and in building the first successful adjustment was in the house of the machine itself -- the factory. Then the individual house was modernized and became beautiful and efficient. And finally, mass production by machine methods is making it possible to build good houses for all.

One of the exhibits in the Houses and Housing exhibition shows the three stages in the development of our ideas about housing. In the first stage a city block was divided into lots for speculation, and people built on them willy-nilly as they chose. The result over a period of uncontrolled growth was chaos and eventually slums. Most of the slums in America are not the tightly built rent barracks of the East Side in New York, but the loosely built shacks of the South and West. In the second stage, as in Sunnyside, Long Island, the architects of early housing projects accepted the city block and tried to make pretty courts inside the block while most of the houses faced the street. In the third stage the city block is ignored as much as possible, traffic banished from the living areas, and each house is located so that it gets the right kind of sun and natural ventilation, and is protected by permanent gardens and green strips. The models of the three city blocks are further explained by an analysis of the community facilities embraced in a modern housing project.

Let the World's Fair have the World of Tomorrow! The Houses and Housing exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art concludes with an impressive exhibit of housing and city planning knowledge of today, not in the light of some esoteric future knowledge but with what we know today. Louis Kahn, the architect, has taken a city of 2,000,000 people and completely re-planned it in terms of new housing, new highways and railroads, new recreation and new industrial uses. The result, while thoroughly practical and realizable today, is extremely exciting and shows that whatever other difficulties may stand in the way of building decent cities, the lack of technical data is not one of them.

A feature of this part of the exhibit, "Housing in the Rational City Plan", is the development of a new type of minimum house, large parts of which may be manufactured and assembled in factories and installed on the site. This is accomplished by a standardized, pre-fabricated kitchen, a standard bathroom on the floor directly above it, and a panel heating unit.

In the experimental days of modern architecture most buildings were scrupulously devoid of decoration of any sort. Architects even went so far as to claim that paintings should not be hung on walls but kept in portfolios and looked at only when desired. Models of two buildings in the Houses and Housing exhibition show a radical departure from this idea. One is a house, and the other is a scheme for a public building. The steel house designed by Paul Nelson has actual work by Miro, Léger and Alexander Calder, both paintings and sculpture. The Community Center scheme designed by Oscar Stonorov has murals, sculpture and other work by many artists. Both buildings are completely and uncompromisingly modern, yet both have murals and sculpture planned as integral parts of the architectural design. The exhibition also shows a large number of housing projects which contain important murals and sculpture, usually by artists of the Federal Art Project or the Treasury Relief Art Project.

The division of the housing market today into the traditional "three-thirds of a nation" -- made famous by President Roosevelt -- is well shown in the Houses and Housing exhibition. The upper third can be housed by private building practices now current. The others cannot, without some form of government aid. For the middle third there is the FHA scheme of mortgage insurance by means of which people with moderate incomes would be able to build and own such houses as the Jacobs House, designed by the well-known architect Frank Lloyd Wright. For the lowest third only government aid, such as that now being granted by the U. S. Housing Authority through local housing authorities to nearly 160,000 homes, will make decent housing possible. Houses and Housing shows homes in all three income groups, and a concluding exhibition on housing and city planning shows how all three are necessary if everyone is to live in a good house.

The new project exhibited which the Camden Housing Authority is building embodies a new idea for placing the service elements in a row house block. In the center of a row of ten or twelve houses is a unit which contains an incinerator for

refuse, a heating unit, a common laundry with an adjacent drying yard and a small playground which can be seen from the laundry so that mothers can watch their children while doing the family wash. This is a very efficient and economical unit and results in a practical and convenient service to tenants.

Models of two experimental houses are exhibited by the Museum which are interesting because neither was designed to be built, and both contain elements which will influence housing of the future: the so-called "Dymaxion House" designed by Buckminster Fuller more than twelve years ago; and the "Space House" designed last year by Paul Nelson. Fuller's house is an effort to produce a house which can be prefabricated, and which will be completely independent of the site. Features of the house are its construction around a mast, its hexagonal shape, its advanced ventilation system, the fact that although three stories high living is confined to the second floor, the first serving as a car shelter and the top as a roof dock. The entire house turns by machinery to catch the shifting wind and sun. Nelson's house has an articulated steel construction and an extremely ingenious plan. It also represents a conscious effort of the designer to incorporate modern art in the building. Paintings by Miro and Léger and a sculptural 'mobile' by Alexander Calder are included in the model.

A "take-apart" model was necessary to explain the complicated housing problem of the Pittsburgh Housing Authority being shown in the Museum of Modern Art. The project is on three hills near the heart of Pittsburgh, in one of which was a burning coal mine. The plans of the Pittsburgh Housing Authority call for literally cutting the tops off the hills, putting out the fire in the mine, and filling the valleys between the hills with the earth taken from the hilltops. The model is shown in three stages. The first stage shows the site as it originally was. The second stage shows the earth moving process which has just been completed. And the third stage shows the houses in place on the new site.

The work of the eminent Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, including a new house in Finland and photographs and drawings of his housing projects is shown. Aalto's new house is important because it embodies many fresh and new ideas: the divisions between the various living rooms are replaced by movable partitions, in some of which paintings may be stored; the building employs many new materials, and old materials used in new and exciting ways; there is a more direct and purposeful relationship between the inside and the outside of the building, the living areas flowing directly into the gardens and terraces.

Aalto's ideas on housing and city planning, which he recently explained in Washington to a distinguished audience of technicians and Federal officials engaged in housing and city planning, are expressed in his housing development for mill workers in Finland, photographs of which are included in the exhibition; and in his two housing projects, one of which embraces new ideas of land use and hillside planning, and the other of which is a new conception of the high apartment house. Aalto's concern with the protection of individual privacy is shown by his unit plans in the pulp mill workers' development, and his concern for the protection of the family's privacy and individuality against "the psychological pressure of the mass" is shown by his planning of carefully secluded balconies and the way in which each house -- even in row houses -- is kept private from the others.

Aalto is the designer of the Finnish exhibit in the World's Fair. He is famous for his new uses of wood, and will shortly go to Madison, Wisconsin, to visit the U. S. Forest Products Laboratory, the principal wood research center in the United States.