ON THE EDGE OF THE BAY

JSW

Neil Jackson

JSW are Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein and Barbara Winslow. They have all worked with Christopher Alexander and their houses put many of his ideas into practice, while consciously drawing on the Bay Area tradition.

It is difficult to think about JSW without first thinking of Christopher Alexander. Murray Silverstein, together with Sara Ishikawa, joined Alexander to found the Centre for Environmental Structure in 1967. Max Jacobson became an Associate at the Centre and took his PhD under Alexander while Barbara Winslow studied under Alexander for a Master's degree at Berkeley. Together with Alexander, Silverstein published *The Oregon Experiment* in 1975 and two years later Jacobson joined them in the publication of *A Pattern Language*. But even before the first publication, Jacobson and Silverstein had left the Centre and gone into practice where they were joined, in 1978, by Winslow.

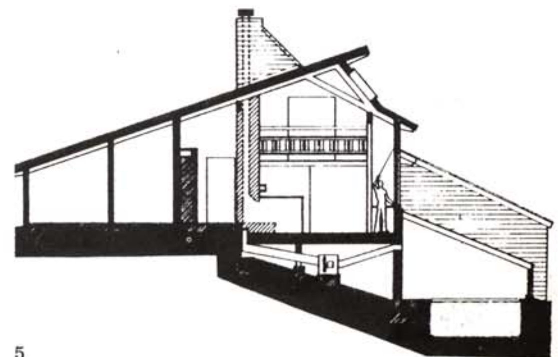
It is not by chance that JSW continue to work in the San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland conurbation known as the Bay Area. They can be seen as part of a tradition peculiar to the Bay Area, as distinct from Los Angeles (that euphemism for Southern California), or, indeed, the rest of the United States as a whole. It is more than political or social pressures which tend to separate northern and southern California. Historical accident has cast them as one state, but they appear to remain obstinately different. Los Angeles has always welcomed the folk hero and architectural anarchist—first Wright, then Schindler and Neutra, and more recently, Charles Moore and Frank Gehry. By comparison the architecture of northern California, and more particularly the Bay Area, is subdued but no less revolutionary, traditional but no less modern. Its heroes are craftsmen and builders.

Richard Longstreth entitled his study of 'Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century',[1] *On the Edge of the World*.[2] Although he borrows the title from Gelett Burgess' essay of 1902,[3] he does not recognise, in architecture at least, the provincialism which Burgess saw in this frontier society as a whole. He sees a new and innovative period developing in the 1890s, not so much an expression of regionalism, let alone provincialism, but of individualism, the setting of example rather than the making of style.

It is to this architectural lineage that JSW respond. 'We design buildings that are fresh in

1, 2, the Lee-Carmichael house, Glen Ellen (1979). Site offers spectacular views to west, so plan is one room deep.
3, Young-Waszinck House, Berkeley: in the Bay Area's Gothic spirit of individuality.
4, Johnson House, Inverness (1977)—arranged to derive maximum benefit from insolation.
5, Johnson house, section.

4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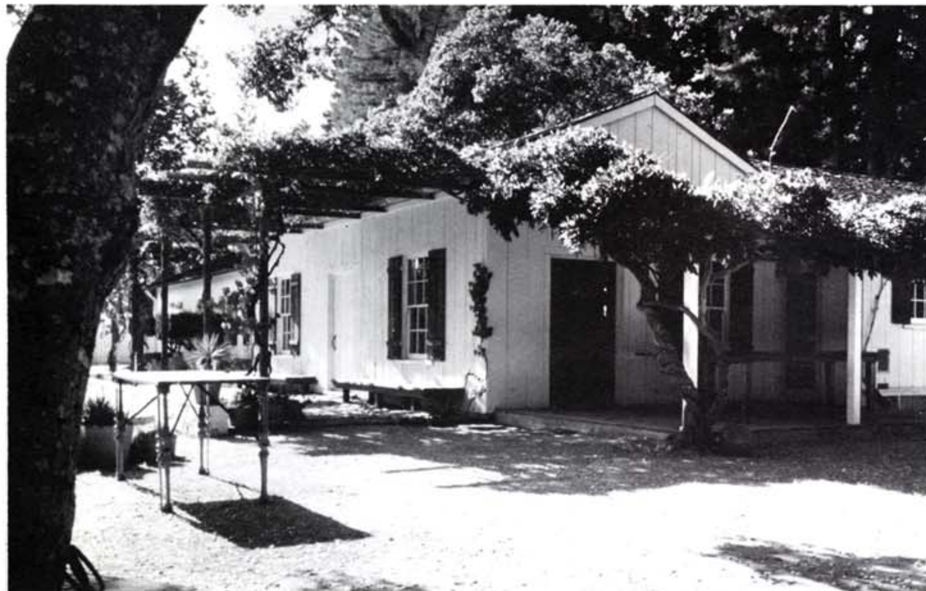
6, 7, Lee-Carmichael house. The solar collector is here a staircase which acts like a greenhouse from which heat is circulated to the surrounding 'thin-mass' room.
8, Maybeck's First Church of Christ Scientist, Berkeley (1910)—Maybeck was fascinated with the adaptability of materials: here industrial windows and asbestos-cement panels are used in a sacred building.
9, William Wurster's Gregory farm house, Scotts Valley (1927)—domestic qualities that transcend local vernaculars.



feeling and form', they write, 'but which also draw upon the past, and, like the newest member of an old family, vaguely remind you of another building in another place.'[4]

Buildings in the Bay Area are, by and large, of timber-frame construction with plasterboard walls internally and stucco or redwood finish externally. That much is traditional. But in their pursuance of passive solar gain architecture, JSW have adapted the traditional building form and have developed what they call the 'thin mass' house. In effect they have taken the traditional structure and inverted it: thus cement becomes the internal wall finish and upper floors are given a 75 mm coat of concrete. The result is that the building has both the constructional and cost benefits of a lightweight structure and the insulative qualities of a masonry building. The other half of the formula is to arrange the building in the proper manner and location to derive maximum benefit from solar gain. A straightforward example of this is the Johnson house in Inverness, California (1977), 4. Here the solar collector, in effect a great greenhouse, runs along the length of the building at the lowest level. Looking perhaps more like a cucumber frame than anything, it contains a 25-yard long swimming pool which acts as a heat-store from which warm air is drawn off and circulated around the house, 5. Essentially the same principles are applied at the Lee-Carmichael house in Glen Ellen, California (1979), 1,2,6,7. But here the greenhouse is arranged vertically in the centre of the south side: it contains the staircase. The site, high on an escarpment, offered the most spectacular views to the west, so the house was placed on an east/west axis, never more than one room deep and with each room opening onto the stairs. Thus the heat generated within the greenhouse could be easily transferred to the 'thin mass' structure at all levels and its circulation is simply controlled by the opening and closing of doors, 7. It would be wrong to think of these buildings as 'aggressively solar': the very structure which regulates the heat provides an atmosphere of gentle acoustic sobriety. These timber-frame buildings do not creak nor can footsteps be heard from the floor above. For here there is the quietness of masonry construction unfamiliar in much contemporary California building.

The architectural tradition of which JSW partake grew up in the Bay Area at the turn of the century. It was essentially an architecture of Arts and Crafts although one of its major figures, Bernard Maybeck, was Beaux Arts trained. It was an architecture which was neither pioneer nor provincial: it did not develop in the red-neck manner of frontier towns nor did it seek to emulate the fashionable architecture of the world left behind. Thus it was different to the architecture of both the mid-west and the east coast.

Bernard Maybeck's first client was Charles Keeler, a romantic and robust individualist. At this time Berkeley was seen by its growing intelligentsia as 'the Athens of the West'. This was not in deference to Classicism, but to the power of the intellect. The folk of this new university town expressed their aspirations through societies: Keeler founded the Ruskin Club in 1896; the Hillside Club, a local city-beautiful society, was founded by a group of women in 1898 and then reorganised so as to include men such as Keeler and Maybeck in 1902. Keeler became its president and in 1904 published *The Simple House,* a statement of the architectural direction demanded by the Hillside Club and a veneration of the simple life. Of the local building tradition he wrote: 'The houses are painted with uncovered shingles, brick or plaster with open timber work and are characterised within by a