

*Organic Vision: The Architecture of Peter Berndtson.* By DONALD MILLER and AARON SHEON. (Pittsburgh: The Hexagon Press, 1980. Pp. 80. List of donors, acknowledgments, photographic credits, notes, checklist of Peter Berndtson's projects, 1942-1972. \$12.00.)

In the annals of Pittsburgh architecture, the name of Peter Berndtson (1909-1972) occupies a prominent place as one who has made notable contributions to the landscape of the city and the surrounding countryside. A distinguished disciple of the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959), Peter Berndtson was well known and much appreciated by a discriminating group of his friends, many of whom were also clients. Berndtson specialized in designing houses — places for living — where he could apply and adapt the Organic and Usonian principles that he learned from Wright.

As one of the authors of this memorial volume, Aaron Sheon, states in his conclusion, "A great architect's work is, in the best of cases, more than the sum of his buildings. Continually inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's ideals, Peter sought to build homes that provided much more than shelter. He sought an architecture that would enhance and enrich people's lives. He never lost sight of this idealism in his buildings" (p. 77).

Wright's principle of organic architecture was central to his philosophy and practice, as it was also to Berndtson's. In his theory the house grows out of the land, and by allying itself with nature becomes part of its environment. Most educated Americans today are used to the concept of Wright's organic house: the long, low lines, the low-pitched or flat overhanging roof, with walls of brick or stone or wood — all natural materials — and much glass to let natural light penetrate the interiors. Such houses, built to order, were often expensive, and Wright in the 1930s invented the Usonian house, which could be scaled to the needs and uses of the average man and which constituted Wright's concept of a genuinely democratic order of American architecture. Berndtson was no mere copyist, and although he followed Wrightian principles, he was so thoroughly versed in them that he was able to work creatively within the master's design frame.

Berndtson was not a Pittsburgher, having been born in Massachusetts in 1909 of Scandinavian forebears. He studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for two years, but his

architectural career did not really begin to develop until he joined, in 1938, the Taliesin Fellowship near Spring Green, Wisconsin, which had been established by Wright to disseminate his theories among young architects. During his early stay at Taliesin, he married, in 1939, Cornelia Brierly of Pittsburgh, a former architectural student at Carnegie Institute of Technology, and one of the first people to join the Taliesin Fellowship. With the supervision of Frank Lloyd Wright, the new Mrs. Berndtson designed a home for her aunts, the Notz sisters, in West Mifflin, a Pittsburgh suburb. Shortly after their marriage, the couple came to Pittsburgh to visit, but stayed to supervise the construction of the house. When it was finished they returned to Taliesin.

In 1943 the Berndtsons returned to Pittsburgh where they designed a cooperative community in West Mifflin called Meadow Circles, but it was only partially completed. The later and larger community project, Hillside, on Mount Washington, designed by Berndtson with Emery Bacon in 1957, met with no better fate; in fact it never got off the ground. Although Cornelia Brierly Berndtson had often worked with her husband on their projects, it is often difficult to assess her contributions. In any event, she decided in 1957 to return to Taliesin with her two daughters, and from then on Berndtson was on his own. I did not get to know Berndtson until the late 1950s and I never met Cornelia.

It is for his houses of the 1950s and 1960s that he will be chiefly remembered, and they constitute a group of "organic" buildings that any city would be proud to possess. The Abraam Steinberg house of 1951 and the Douglas house of 1962, in the fullness of their Wrightian beauty, are yet masterful evidence of Berndtson's major talent. In this brief review it would be folly to try to describe them. The reader who would know more about Peter Berndtson's work is urged to procure the book, which is not only attractively printed but also contains a number of fine photographs of his best houses, as well as a number of Peter's own sketches and drawings.

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