

figure 1
The Miller House, Frank Lloyd Wright.
The house grows out of the garden – it is
impossible to tell where one begins and
the other ends.

Architecture and the Landscape Obligation

PETER ALDINGTON

RECENTLY a landscape architect friend started enthusing about a part-time teaching job he is doing in a school of architecture. He explained that the (final-year) students were part of a 'Landscape Option' – in other words they opt to pay particular attention to landscape as part of their on-going design projects. But, I said, "isn't there an obligation – not an option – for all of us, students or not, to consider the landscape, whether it's a rural or an urban one, in everything we design? Isn't it impossible to design any form of construction, either above, below or over the ground without it affecting that ground and its immediate environs?" "Yes," my friend replied, "but at least it's a start and I'm able to get at some students before their ideas about landscape become too fixed and we find dialogue impossible, because your profession and mine speak different languages". What a damning indictment of the schism which has grown between our two professions.

This encounter reawakened an old hobbyhorse of mine about the inevitability of involving the landscape every time we design anything. In the days of my frequent visits to schools of architecture, as either visiting critic or external examiner, I was constantly amazed to find that the only consideration students gave to the environment of their designs was that of the paper they were drawn on. They frequently told me that they had lectures about landscape, but that these seemed to have little relevance to their design work. It rarely occurred to them that we inevitably affect the environment when we build, and that at the very least we have an obligation to respect it. Neither did they seem to be taught that today's technology provides us with opportunities to use external space in ways which could not have been dreamt of before the twentieth century.

Prior to the advent of twentieth-century technology, building designers were constrained by the necessity to build massive external walls to support and create enclosure. In other words they had little choice but to build boxes, and create openings in them for light and passage. Even with this huge constraint many of them realised the importance of the landscape in creating a suitable setting to enhance the enjoyment of their buildings.

But today, no such constraint exists. We have total freedom to add or remove walls as we please. Walls can be opaque, transparent or translucent, massive and heavy or lightweight and delicate, fixed or moveable. But what do most of us do with this unexploited freedom? We build stylised boxes, we chop holes in them for windows and doors, and we all too frequently ignore what goes on outside the box.

The early Modern Masters didn't do this. They saw twentieth-century technology as the great liberator from the constraint of the enclosing wall, and they started to unify interior and exterior space. The barriers between inside and outside had been lifted and architecture was able to embrace a whole new dimension. The pioneers of Modern architecture had great visions that living with nature might be made possible by technology:

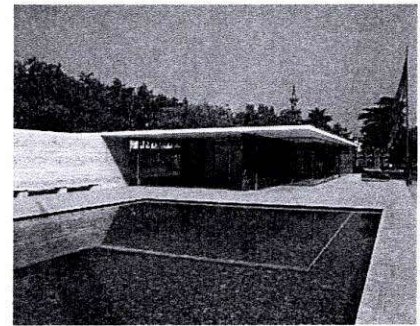


figure 2

The Barcelona Pavilion, Mies van der Rohe, 1929. Still a supreme example and a poetic vision of what might have been. Never before and rarely since has the maxim that 'less is more' been so beautifully realised. No plants, but landscape none the less. (Photo of reconstruction of original building)

"The room must be seen as architecture, or we have non architecture. We have no longer an outside and an inside as two separate things. Now the outside may come inside and the inside may and does go outside. They are of each other. Form and function thus become one in design and execution if the nature of materials and method and purpose are all in unison."

"This dawning sense of the Within as reality when it is clearly seen as Nature will by way of glass make the garden be the building as much as the building will be the garden: the sky as treasured a feature of daily indoor life as the ground itself."

"You may see that walls are vanishing. The cave for human dwelling purposes is at last disappearing."

"Walls themselves because of glass will become windows and windows as we used to know them as holes in walls will be seen no more."

The Natural House, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1954

Or:

"... the introduction of the completely free standing wall in Mies van der Rohe's 1923 project for a Brick Country House... In this work the walls were treated as clearly defined individual load bearing entities, placed in a semi-overlapping manner in order that any one area of the house was not rigidly enclosed, but rather subtly defined in its relationship with other areas. By this decellularisation, the space flowed freely as a continuum throughout the house, and since walls were often pulled out beyond the roof plane into the landscape, the defining line between interior and exterior was minimised. This liberation of interior space was developed further in 1929 at the Barcelona Pavilion."

Mies van der Rohe at Work, Peter Carter, 1972

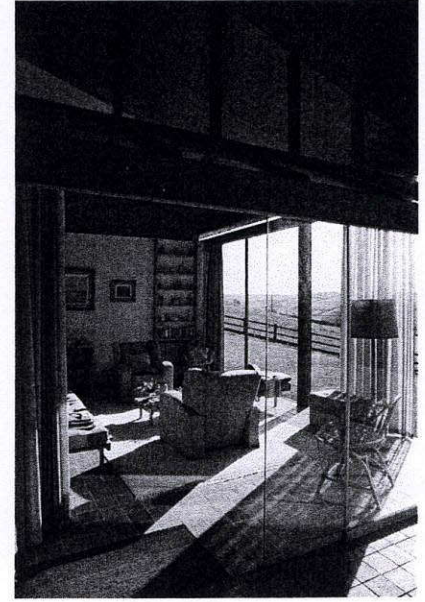
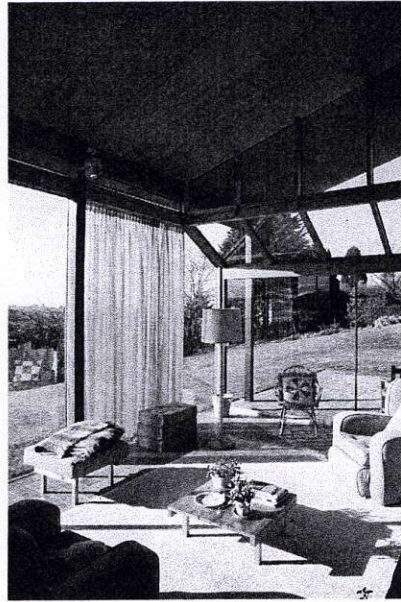
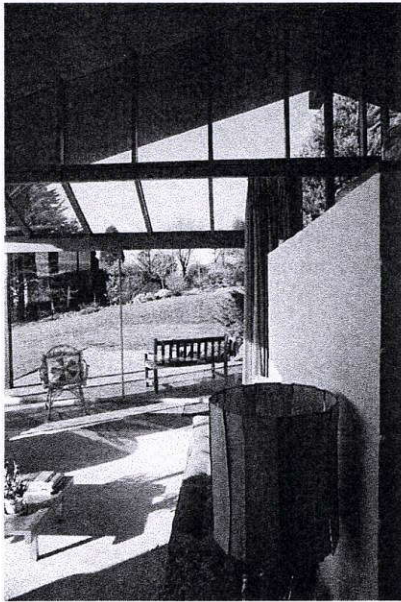
figure 3
Barnstaple House. This early photograph shows the different building 'edges' defined by the various elements. (Photo Richard Einzig)



Now, more than 50 years on, it is clear that we have failed to exploit our ability to integrate exterior and interior space. We have ignored much of what the early Modern architects were telling us, preferring instead to see Modernism as a superficial style, rather than understanding the philosophy which led to the creation of the forms. We are still producing boxes and ignoring the external spaces or, at best, treating them as optional extras. In failing to develop and build on the ideas and ideals of this pioneering generation we have lost over half a century. There are very few houses or buildings of any kind which better these early ex-

amples of internal and external spatial integration. We have the technology to perform wonders, and the best of our architecture uses technology in exciting and creative ways, but when it comes to thinking about the spaces round and between our buildings we are frequently to be found wanting. Why? Could it possibly have something to do with education? If landscape is an 'option' in our schools of architecture, an option which attracts only a small percentage of the total design mark, then what hope is there for an understanding of the design potential of outside space?

The ideas, ideals and examples of the modern pioneers provided much of the inspiration for the work of my own practice. Perhaps the nearest we came to an



integration of inside and outside spaces was in a small house designed in the early 1970s just outside Barnstaple in North Devon. The fairly complex spaces sit under a simple double-pitched roof, supported by three rows of timber posts. This means that none of the walls is load bearing and they do not have to reach the roof for reasons other than privacy. Our clients were used to large high-ceilinged rooms, and they were loath to lose the spaciousness these provided; yet they also wanted a small house to retire into. By using a frame and a tent-like roof, we were able to make a living room with a small footprint into an apparently endless space. More than half of the 200 sq metre roof is visible from the twenty sq metre living area and the visual space continues out into the valley. The cut in the valley side which contains the house continues out at living area level, and is partially enclosed on two sides by grass banks, the third side being the valley view. The tiled floor reaches out into this space with no level change and minimum visual interruption. The roof over-sails part of the external floor, but its supporting posts are back from the edge. The sliding glass wall is on another line and the curtains are another still. So there is no one definable 'edge' to this corner of the house and our clients were able to achieve their desire both to live 'in' the valley and to have a small yet spacious house.

Very early experiments with breaking down the inside-outside barriers were made at a house in Prestwood, Buckinghamshire. Here we defined two categories of space – those which required privacy or semi privacy, and those which could be more 'open' and possibly less well defined. The private spaces are enclosed by brick 'boxes', some becoming towers and reaching up through two floors, where they have a stabilising function for the timber-framed first floor.

figure 4 a,b & c
Barnstaple House [a & b] "The tiled floor reaches out ... with no level change and minimal visual interruption. The roof over-sails part of the external floor, but its supporting posts are back from the edge. The sliding glass wall is on another line and the curtains another sill". [c] "A small footprint into an apparently endless space".
(Photos Peter Aldington)

The more open spaces weave between and are loosely defined by the 'boxes', but are not enclosed by them in any formal sense. These spaces are also 'transitional' between the fully or partially enclosed 'private' areas and the outside. Sliding glass walls open onto a water garden, partly covered by the overhanging first floor, which acts as another transition between inside and outside, leading the eye from one to the other and inviting a journey across its stepping stones.

Building design and garden design are both about manipulating space. The skills needed to design covered spaces (buildings) and uncovered spaces (gardens) are the same. In our designs we have tried to create a continuum: the building doesn't stop at its enclosing wall and the garden doesn't necessarily start there either. The inside and outside spaces are equal components of the living environment, and often the two are inextricably intertwined.

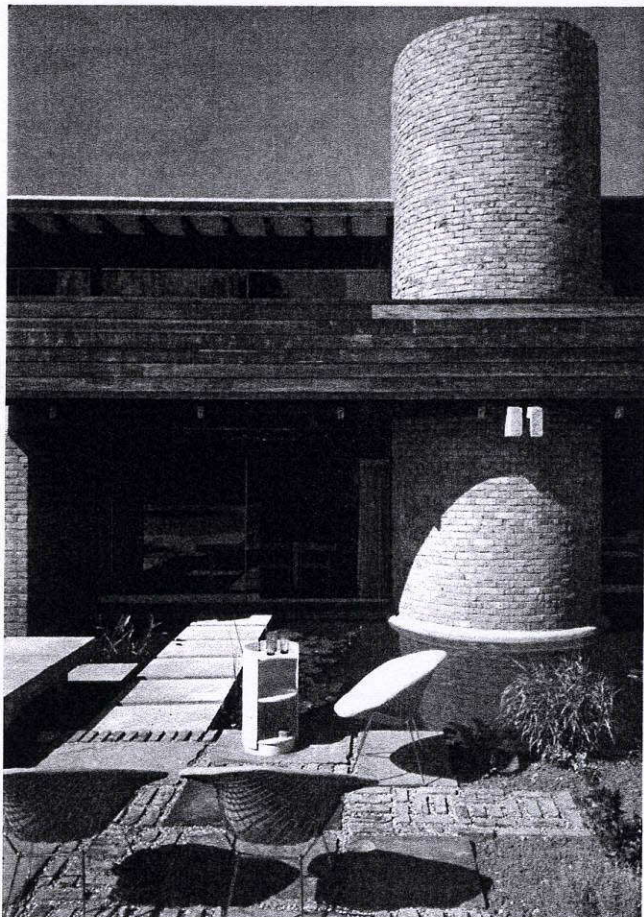


figure 5
Prestwood House. Stepping stones
'inviting a journey'.
(Photo Richard Einzig)

figure 6
Prestwood House. The water garden acts
as a transition. (Photo Richard Einzig)

My beliefs about architecture and design have developed over the years taken to design and make three houses and a garden at Haddenham. To understand these it is important to know something about the place. Haddenham is a village of strong and individual character. Its houses are, in the main, built out of 'wychert', which is made from the local clay puddled with straw. This material and the way it has to be used (how it 'speaks' to those who use it) determine the character of the village. The village literally 'grew' out of the earth it stands on, and it feels like that too. There are miles of walls – not hedges, but walls, defining boundaries, providing enclosure and creating privacy. These walls are rendered, have stone bases and tiled tops to prevent damp rising and rain soaking.

The houses were to be built in the middle of a village born out of the needs and ways of life of a very different age, a village grown gradually over many centuries, with buildings of all ages telling their own stories. The buildings we were

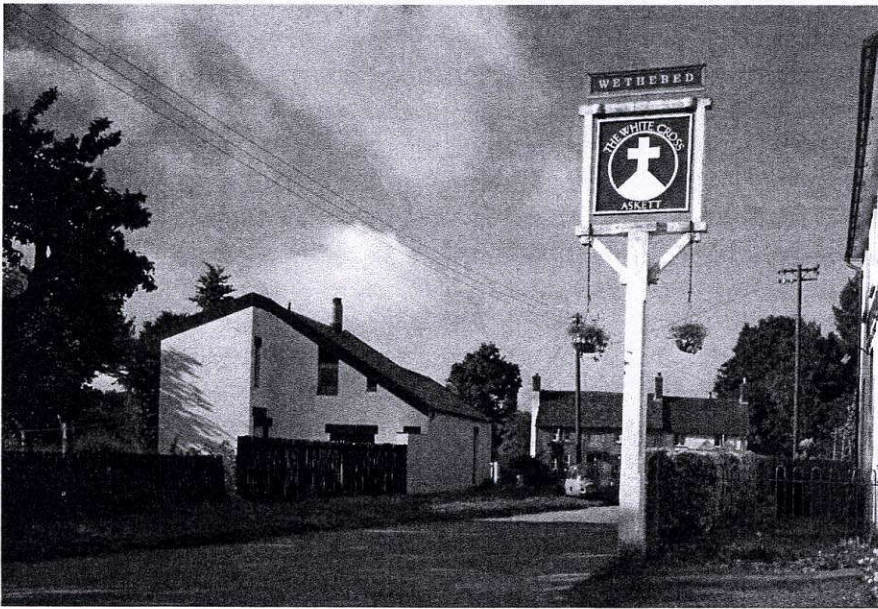


figure 7
Askett Green. My first village house, a
box which contains the structure.
(Photo Richard Einzig)

going to add to this tapestry had to tell their own story also, but it must be today's story, not yesterday's negotiated with adding icing sugar. Yet their story must also be firmly based on the stories told by the other buildings, a continuation of a living tradition.

The site is between two village streets, Townside and High Street, and has its own strong character, providing many constraints which have helped shape the design. There is a group of tall trees on the east boundary, emphasising a bend in the High Street. We are the guardians of this important feature in the village. A large horse chestnut and two walnuts in the centre, a group of acacias on the southern boundary, a wychert wall dividing an old orchard from a vegetable garden and a cottage at the south-west corner flanking the only entry point, all had a determining role to play in considering the building layouts. The aim was to create here an environment of today for today's car-borne commuter/business man who lives a fast and stressful life and whose house, I felt, should be a spiritual haven away from that world, and yet clearly grown out of it.

As well as being a response to what I felt and saw in Haddenham the design is a reaction to, and development of, the work done and lessons (some subconscious) learned from the first house I had built, three years earlier, Askett Green. There, a structure-based aesthetic had been developed, and this was further refined at Haddenham; but the principal change is that at Haddenham the buildings are made to 'embrace' outside spaces by not building a 'box' which contains the structure, but allowing the structure to speak outside, and using it to define external spaces which use the same materials as the internal ones.

The masonry 'box' has been disintegrated, windows are no longer 'holes in walls' to let light in, but gaps between walls which are closed with folding glazed doors or large areas of glass. There are still some tiny holes punched through the walls, but these are to provide lighting interest or views at specific places as a contrast rather than a main theme. The material chosen for the masonry elements is a foamed concrete block, which creates a bold scale but is not weather resistant, needing the protection of external render to protect it from rain and frost erosion, just as the native material of Haddenham does.

The houses open into and embrace outdoor living spaces, which are extensions of the interior spaces. Living areas face south and west into these courts, but receive high-level east light from the other side, even when this is 'borrowed' from the neighbouring garden. Bedrooms which face north, away from the out-

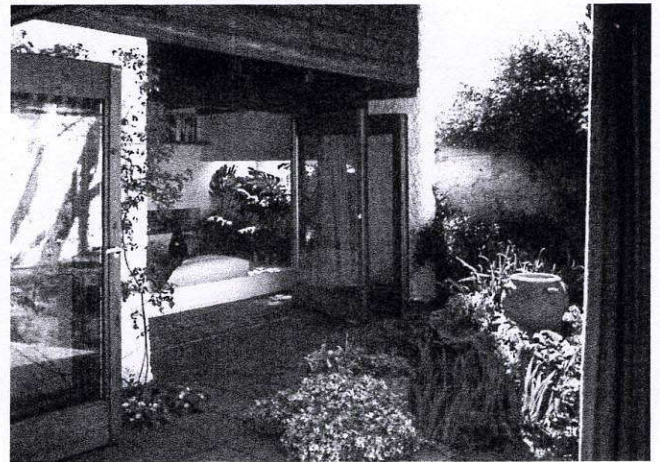
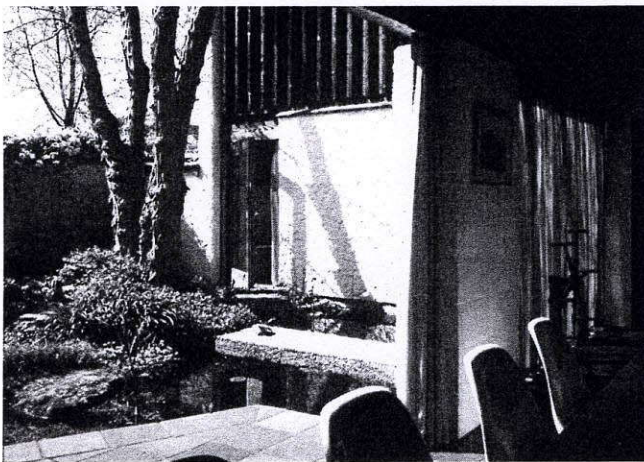
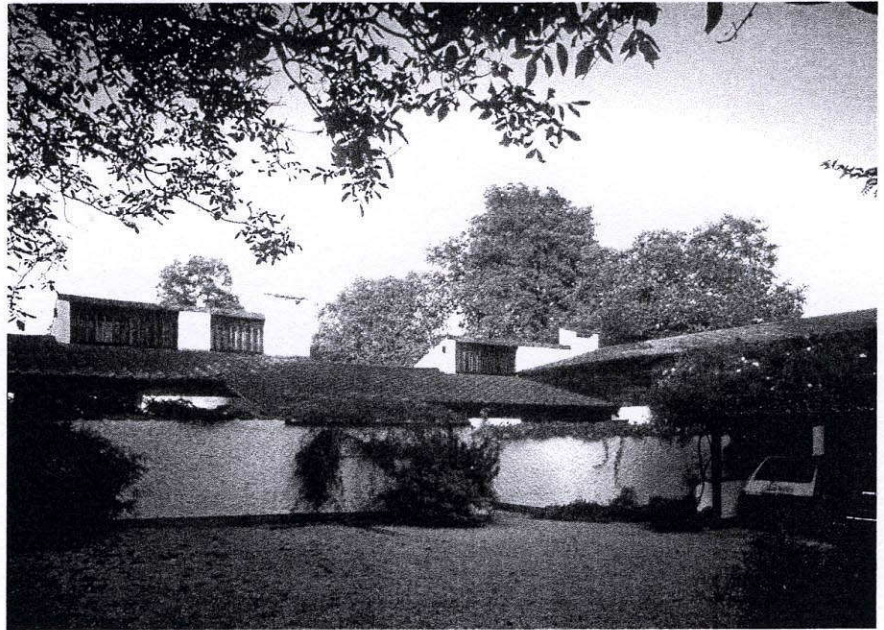
door living spaces, look over gardens from a slightly raised floor level. Living areas and bedrooms are linked by the third element, circulation/dining/kitchen, with the kitchen area in the centre of the house creating a focus for all its activities yet visually and spiritually a part of the outside.

The largest of the walnut trees is in the geometric centre of the site, and this became one of the strongest influences on the eventual layout. The houses, which wrap round a private 'public' court, join in an echelon shape on their east sides. So the east wall is always a boundary, except at Turn End, our own house, where it forms a wall to the garden. There is a view right through from the entrance in the west to this east wall, which has been pierced with a glazed door leading out into a contrasting world ... a spring woodland garden. The eye fo-

figure 8
Turn End. The houses define a public/private court. (Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 9
Turn End. The kitchen/dining/circulation space looking into the outside living space or court. (Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 10
Turn End. Inside and outside living spaces flow smoothly together. Notice the continuous floor tiling. (Photo Richard Bryant)



cuses on a large urn by Monica Young placed on the axis of this east/west route. This pot is central to the whole design: it draws you through the house and into the garden, and once you are there it provides a reference point back to the house.

A woodland path leads from the garden door to a grass 'glade' which curves diagonally across the site to create the longest vista possible. This element is used to tie together all the other garden elements or 'rooms'. The urn is also at a focal point of the view down the glade, as well as terminating a subsidiary grass walk. None of these visual axes is reflected in the ground plan. They are just there as

sight lines, and provide a structure to what otherwise might easily become an amorphous collection of spaces.

Other more formal areas have developed as the garden was enlarged, and the designs for these have reacted to and grown out of the buildings and spaces around them. New axes have been set up by making openings through walls or building pergolas or piercing buildings, but they all lead eventually back to the initial glade, or 'ribbon', which ties the whole composition together. Trees have been carefully added to reinforce the axes and to take over when the inevitable happens and the apple trees die or fall over.

The central walnut tree still stands, clearly demonstrating its pivotal role in the whole layout. The group of acacias became the generator for Turn End's court. There is now only one of these, as about fifteen years later they became too large to be realistic in such a small space. The pond is the result of a direct decision to move a young walnut from here to its present site in the entrance.

I believe that the structure of a design, whether it involves buildings and interior spaces or gardens and exterior spaces, should be powerful enough to allow furnishing or planting to be flamboyant, or even apparently out of control, without masking the basic structure. So whether planting is doing a job, like enclosing, screening or emphasising, or is disciplined in colour, shape or texture, it can be allowed to 'happen'. Over the years we have added rugs, pictures and the inevitable trivia of a lifetime to the interior, plants have been added to the garden in their hundreds, even the birds and the bees (and the judicious use of home-made compost!) have made some wonderful contributions, but the designs have been strong enough to accept these changes.

I have used these examples to try to demonstrate something of the thinking of myself and my former practice. I have concentrated on just one small aspect of that thinking. It would be too simplistic to assume that the exploitation of interior space was our only concern in the complex business of creating architecture; in the same way that it is wrong – and dangerous – for students to be led to believe that landscape is an 'option'. There is an obligation for all architects

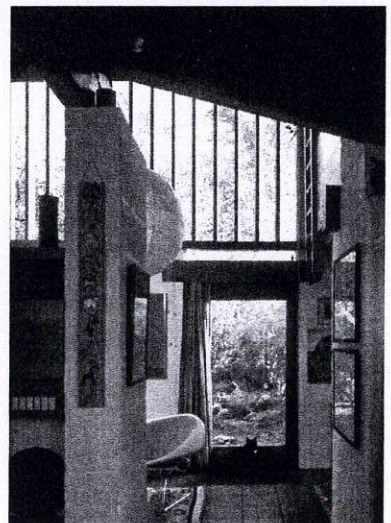
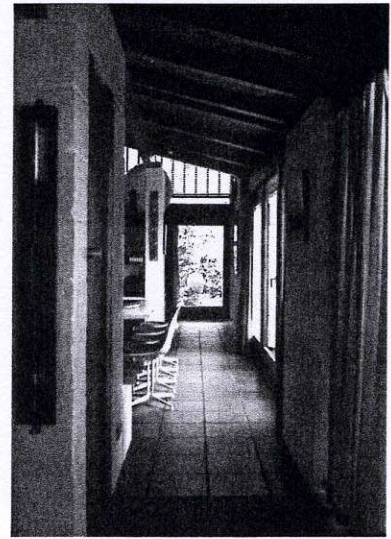


figure 11
Turn End. The west/east vista through the house and onto the garden to the urn. (Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 12
Turn End. The east wall is pierced to reveal the woodland garden beyond. (Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 13
Turn End. The east wall of Turn End from the spring woodland garden. (Photo Richard Bryant)

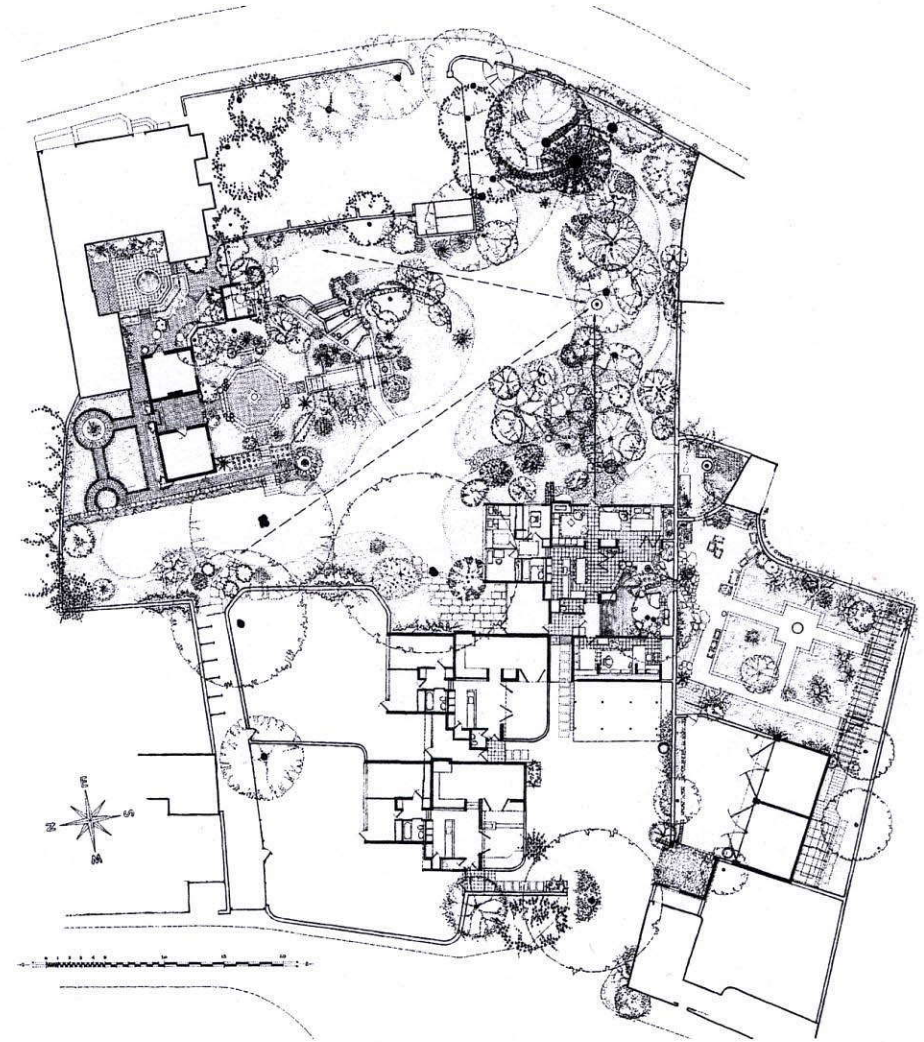


figure 14
Turn End. The diagonal grass glade also focuses on the urn.
(Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 15
Turn End. Holes in the walls have been made and other axes set up, the house from the formal gravel garden to the south. (Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 16
Turn End. An axis created through an existing garden building.
(Photo Richard Bryant)

figure 17
Plan of the houses at Haddenham and Turn End garden showing principal visual axes. Other more formally structured axes are not marked.
(Plan by Ronald Wilson)



to concern themselves with exterior spaces and the immediate environs of buildings. This just may be beginning to happen, for I sense a new awakening of interest in the landscape and its relation to architecture. Maybe all is not lost; but we architects need to get off our backsides – we have over half a century to make up!

The garden at Turn End is open three times a year for the National Gardens Scheme. The house and garden are usually open once a year around mid summer. The photographs of Turn End illustrating this article are from a set of colour pictures taken by Richard Bryant during the past three years for a book, *A Garden and Three Houses*, written by Jane Brown, published by Garden Art Press. The Landmark Trust is in the process of acquiring the house near Barnstaple, which is one of the projects featured in the Landmark Appeal, launched in May 2000. For further information contact the Trust on 01628 825920.