

voices of the hill

The true basis for any serious study of the area of architecture still lies in those indigenous, more humble buildings everywhere that are to architecture what folklore is to literature or folksong is to music and with which academic architects are seldom concerned. Though often slight, their virtue is intimately related to the environment and to the heartlife of the people. Functions are truthfully conceived and rendered with natural feeling. Results are often beautiful and always constructive.

Frank Lloyd Wright, 1910

What nobility and simplicity, what a lack of rhetoric and pompousness. Everything is cut to human proportions. Never have grace and power merged as organically as they do here, in this austere and smiling land of Greece.

Nikos Kazantzakis (1885-1957)

Here I must say, a little anyhow: what I can barely hope to bear out in the record: that a house of simple people which stands empty and silent in the vast Southern country morning sunlight, and everything which on this morning in eternal space it by chance contains, all thus left open and defenseless to a reverent and cold-laboring spy, shines quietly forth such grandeur, such sorrowful holiness of its exactitudes in existence, as no human consciousness shall ever rightly perceive, far less impart to another: that there can be more beauty and more deep wonder in the standings and spacings of mute furnishings on a bare floor between the squaring bourns of walls than in any music ever made: that this square home, as it stands in unshadowed earth between the winding years of heaven, is, not to me but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence: that this beauty is made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties and needs of human existence in this uncured time, and is inextricable among these, and as impossible without them as a saint born in paradise. It stands just sufficiently short of vertical that every leaf of shingle, at its edges, and every edge of horizontal plank (blocked, at each center, with squared verticals) is a most black and cutting ink: and every surface struck by light is thus: such an intensity and splendor of silver in the silver light, it seems to burn, and burns and blinds into the eyes almost as snow; yet in none of that burnishment or blazing whereby detail is lost: each texture in the wood, like those of bone, is distinct in the eye as a razor: each nail-head is distinct: each seam and split; and each slight warping; each random knot and knothole: and in each board, as lovely a music as a contour map and unique as a thumbprint, its grain, which was its living strength, and these wild creeks cut stiff across by saws; and moving nearer, the close-laid arcs and shadows even of those tearing wheels: and this, more poor and plain than bone, more naked and noble than sternest Doric, more rich and more variant than watered silk, is the fabric and the stature of a house. It is put together out of the cheapest available pine lumber, and the least of this is used which shall stretch a skin of one thickness alone against the earth and air; and this is all done according to one of the three or four simplest, stingiest, and thus most classical plans contrivable, which are all traditional to that country: and the work is done by half-skilled, half-paid men under no need to do well, who therefore take such vengeance on the world as they may in a cynical and part willful apathy; and this is what comes of it: Most naïve, most massive symmetry and simpleness. Enough lines, enough off-true, that this symmetry is strongly yet subtly sprained against its centers, into something more powerful than either full symmetry or deliberate breaking and balancing of 'monotonies' can hope to be. A look of being most earnestly hand-made, as a child's drawing, a thing created out of need, love,

patience, and strained skill in the innocence of a race. Nowhere one ounce or inch spent with ornament, not one trace of relief or of disguise: a matchless monotony, and in it a matchless variety and this again throughout restrained, held rigid: and all of this, nothing which is not intrinsic between the materials of structure, the earth, and the open heaven. The major lines of structure, each horizontal of each board, and edge of shingle, the strictness yet subtle dishevelment of the shingles, the nail-heads, which are driven according to geometric need, yet are not in perfect order, the grain, differing in each foot of each board and in each board from any other, the many knots in this cheap lumber; all these fluencies and irregularities, all these shadows of pattern upon each piece of wood, all these in rectilinear ribbons caught into one squared, angled, and curled music, compounding a chord of four chambers upon a soul and center of clean air: and upon all these masses and edges and chances and flowerings of grain, the changes of colorings of all weathers, and the slow complexions and marchings of pure light.

James Agee, 1939 / 1941

The Hill is composed of a working class neighborhood of thirty to forty thousand people living in tiny houses on small lots that most any place else would have become a slum. When after visiting St. Louis' other leading attractions, foreign visitors on tour from Johns Hopkins had seen the City's fertility symbol the Arch, its sports palace, Busch Stadium, and Pruitt-Igoe, they were brought to the Hill to see one healthy, hopeful part of the City. Here, despite old houses and low incomes, the houses were well kept up, the streets clean, people helping each other, well brought up kids and, most impressive, safe streets, one of the few places in the city or county where housing values were stable and rising. But when the foreign officials on tour asked at a neighborhood party given for them what the city, state and federal governments had done for them, they said, 'not a god damned thing.' Then recollecting the fact they said, 'yes, the federal government, the city and the state had driven a super-highway right through their neighborhood and they had to fight like hell to get...a bridge to keep the neighborhood together.

Norton Long, 1977

The difference between style and form is the difference between a statement and a language. An architectural statement is limited to a few stylistic words and depends on originality for its impact, whereas a vernacular form unleashes the power of a whole, tested grammar.

Stewart Brand, 1994