Impossible to Hold

Women and Culture in the 1960s

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Building Utopia

Mary Otis Stevens and the Lincoln, Massachusetts, House

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The built environment was both a literal and symbolic battleground in the mid–1960s, when Mary Otis Stevens and her partner and husband built a house that became and remains a model for rethinking domestic environments. It was a time of incipient ecological awareness, exemplified by Buckminster Fuller's concept of "Spaceship Earth" and of challenges to the boundaries between the public and private worlds. One of the most rigid of these boundaries was the one between the spaces for the daily lives of men and women, the city being defined as (men's) work place and the suburb as (women's) private residential haven. The suburban single-family house was both symbol and actual physical expression of enclosure of the women and their children. The mass-produced conformity of such houses made comparisons with "the Joneses" both possible and more invidious.

Two pieces of legislation from the previous decade had been largely responsible for the cultural, social, and racial segregation embodied in the suburban private dwelling. The Housing Act of 1949 had promised "a decent house and suitable living environment for every American family,"[1] while the Highway Trust Act of 1956 gave a 90 percent federal subsidy to state and local governments to build an interstate highway system, deemed a defense measure and intended to boost the economy. The first of these measures, coupled with the state's power to expropriate private property for public benefit, led to the fast-paced development of remote and inexpensive tracts of land into homogeneous residential suburbs. The second encouraged the ripping apart of huge areas in major cities, mostly inhabited by the urban poor, for highway construction. These so-called slum clearances spurred the creation of tenant unions and

neighborhood organizations to fight the massive displacement of people and the destruction of viable urban neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, architecture and planning, the disciplines responsible for theorizing the organization and form of the built environment, were also being challenged from within and outside academia. Buckminster Fuller, the maverick inventor, scientist, engineer, mathematician, educator, and philosopher best known for his invention of the geodesic dome, was becoming influential in architectural schools, while in California and elsewhere hippie communes sprouted "Drop Cities" made out of domes. White youth rebelled against the conformity symbolized and perpetuated by the suburban house and the nuclear family that inhabited it, while American blacks protested their exclusion from the "American dream" that the suburbs had come to exemplify. Critics such as Jane Jacobs and professionals such as Shadrach Woods, known for his designs for open city forms,[2] and Robert Goodman, who had called architects and planners the "soft cops" of oppression in his influential book *After the Planners*, challenged the authoritarian, top-down assumptions of planning.[3] Meanwhile, student activists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and elsewhere were helping tenants threatened with relocation to build "Tent Cities" in empty parking lots and successfully managing to get neighborhood committees included in the planning process. Some architects were proposing small-town designs, precursors of the late-1980s New Urbanism, as alternatives to the design of isolated suburban communities,[4] while others promoted alternate forms of settlement influenced by Fourier, the garden cities movement, and the American utopian socialists.

Although many women were becoming more visible and audible in cultural and political debates, they were having a harder time in architecture, especially when they sought to go beyond helpmate roles. Thus, the unconventional house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, that Mary Otis Stevens designed for her family in equal partnership with her partner and husband, Thomas McNulty, constituted an exceptional incursion into the dominant practice and discourse of architecture, one that could be claimed by later feminist discourse on "critical domesticity."[5]

The Architect

Mary Otis Stevens was thirty-six years old when she started the design of the Lincoln house.[6] A maverick since childhood, she discovered that

Fig. 2.1. Mary Otis Stevens in 1965. *Courtesy of Mary Otis Stevens*

physical order could be achieved by design during her junior-year trip to France, where Baron Haussman's plan for Paris led her to "dream of an order suitable for Americans [. . .] one that was not just rational but emotional as well." Upon her return to Smith College she tried, unsuccessfully, to change her major from philosophy to architecture. After graduation in 1949, Stevens moved to New York City, where her drafting course instructor encouraged her to apply to the school of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Stevens's father and his friend Eric Gugler, the architect of the White House's West Wing renovation, conspired to discourage her from pursuing architecture, assuming that

she would marry and soon forget her professional ambitions. But their effort backfired when one of Gugler's colleagues confided to her that he enjoyed seeing through walls, inspiring her to want to do the same. She was accepted at MIT in 1950, just as she had decided to marry a socially acceptable suitor. Stevens entered architectural school in 1953, after a brief interlude when she and her first husband, William Vaughn Moody Fawcett, both born to privilege, became blue-collar workers.

At MIT, as Mary S. Fawcett, Stevens thrived in the interdisciplinary environment and the creative problem solving fostered there. She rekindled her friendship with her childhood mentor, Buckminster Fuller, a friend of her father and frequent visitor to the institute, and reconnected with her relative Samuel Eliot Morison, the Harvard historian, who became a father figure and adviser until his death in 1976. MIT's Department of Architecture was then receptive to new ideas and experimentation, in sharp contrast with the Bauhaus-inspired orthodoxy of Harvard's architecture school under Walter Gropius. A number of innovative thinkers and designers taught there, including the planning theorist Kevin Lynch, who had just been hired, and regular visitors included such internationally known architects as Louis Kahn, Eero Saarinen, and Alvar Aalto. Aalto had completed Baker House, a new dormitory building for MIT.

Stevens continued to test the boundaries of permissibility at the school of architecture, just as she had at Smith College. This time, and in spite of the open atmosphere, she encountered stronger resistance. She was discouraged from pursuing formal experimentation with curvilinear geometries and from undertaking the design of a model maternity hospital—a birthing center *avant la lettre*—as her thesis project. Nor was the institute welcoming to women: some graduating classes had none at all, and, consequently, there were no dormitory accommodations for them. A women's lounge, with cots on which to get a few hours' sleep during extended "charrettes," or around-the-clock design work before project presentation deadlines, was all the institute offered. Stevens worked mostly at home, to be back in time to cook supper for her husband, and thus missed out on the camaraderie developed by her classmates in the late-night work.

When she graduated in 1956, Stevens became the first architect in her family, with a thesis for a World Trade Center to revitalize the Boston waterfront (before City Hall and the expressway had been built). However, urban design was not then an approved area of study, and the

faculty review committee demanded that she fulfill the customary building thesis's technical requirements, made more burdensome because of her project's size. The summer of her graduation, Stevens began her professional apprenticeship at The Architectural Collaborative (TAC) in Boston, an office established eleven years earlier by Walter Gropius and several young architects, including two women, Sarah Pillsbury Harkness and Jean Bodman Fletcher. These women, whose husbands were also TAC co-founders, managed their domestic lives and large families with ample domestic help and part-time presence in the office.

By the time Stevens started working for the firm as a lowly model-maker and draftsperson, TAC's early informality had morphed into a rigid corporate environment. There, Stevens had a hard time working on projects that violated her sense of relevance and meaning, such as high-rise, high-maintenance buildings for the University of Baghdad, or the Civic Center of Tallahassee, Florida, patterned after the Piazza San Marco in Venice. "Where were the Doges?" Stevens wondered, as she looked at photos of the design team scampering for shade in the project's site.

Unable to reconcile such contradictions, Stevens left to work on Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign, which he lost in 1956 to Dwight Eisenhower, the popular incumbent. After the unsuccessful campaign, she resumed her architectural career in the office of Thomas McNulty, a Midwestern "working-class genius"[7] and former MIT assistant professor whose ideas she respected and whose fledgling firm included several MIT graduates. Her proposal for a pre-fabricated house competition won the first prize, creating a buzz about the firm and attracting clients for houses designed on the same principles of her winning entry.

Stevens obtained a divorce from Fawcett in 1958 and married McNulty shortly thereafter, also becoming his professional partner. During 1961–62, enabled by her inheritance from her father, they took time off to work in Ravello, Italy. There they worked on a book of ideas that was published almost a decade later under the title *World of Variation*, and on the design of their future house for the property in Lincoln that Stevens had purchased just before leaving. In Ravello they lived at L'Episcopio (Villa Di Sangro), a former bishop's palace with a great architectural library, including a collection of French nineteenth-century folio-size volumes documenting the great buildings Napoleon had found in his campaigns. This experience would become an inspiration for her incursion into publishing architectural books.

The House

Even before it was finished in August 1965, the house attracted polemics. Although hidden from view, this strange dwelling in their vicinity annoyed the neighbors, and banks, following standard practice of the time, denied a construction loan on the grounds of its unconventionality. Its predominant material—concrete—suggested lowly basement construction. Town folk resented the proclivity to use personal resources to flaunt social norms. They had barely gotten accustomed to the house that Walter Gropius, founder of the German Bauhaus and an exile, had built in Lincoln in 1938. Neighbors had nicknamed it "the chicken coop" for its unadorned white surfaces and flat roof. Over time, Gropius's deanship at Harvard and his house's conventionally bourgeois layout—with sewing room for the wife, a study for the husband, and servants' quarters—won his neighbors' acceptance. But Stevens's house was something else, for its open plan suggested a lifestyle lacking in propriety, where the conventional meaning of privacy was profoundly contradicted.

Lincoln, Massachusetts, was—and remains—a small, conservative, but predominantly Democrat residential suburb of Boston, steeped in the American Revolution's early history and still including a yearly open town meeting in its governance. It is a town that passed a resolution in 1968 against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and pioneered the private land trust to preserve the low density of its origins as a rural farming community. Lincoln's sense of place and its history resonated with the history of those of Stevens's own ancestors who had championed the American Revolution,[8] and it appealed to her as a setting in which to live, practice architecture, and raise her sons.

When Stevens and her family moved into the finished house in the summer of 1965, they were followed by a *Life* magazine photographic crew. First appearing in December of that year in *Life*'s series "Ideas in Houses," the house received worldwide attention.[9] What drew the media's interest was, first of all, the novelty of the house's open geometry. This was an inversion of the historic New England compact structures, tightly bound around a hearth to withstand the rigors of hostile winters. The expansive curves, with their asymptotes reaching out and opening onto the landscape, turned the house into a kind of built topography, a constructed landscape form. Instead of surrounding and cloaking interior space, the graceful walls were designed to embrace and shelter the out-

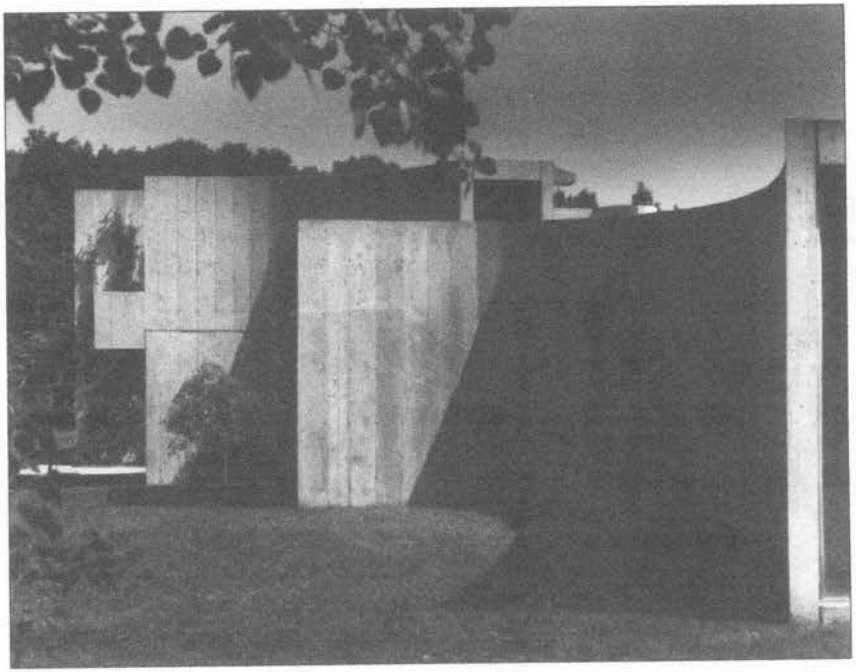

Fig. 2.2. Mary Otis Stevens and Thomas McNulty, exterior view, house at Lincoln, Massachusetts, 1962-65. *Photograph by Julius Shulman*

doors in its concave recesses, creating a place were Stevens could cultivate a "middle landscape"[10] garden as a transition to a landscape that had been historically shaped by farming, and then left untouched.

Then, there was the unorthodox use of reinforced concrete as a residential building material above ground. The cast-in-place concrete walls, floors, and roofs reinforced the idea of house-as-landscape. And, as in nature, sunlight altered significantly the perception of space inside the house. Every sunny day at noon "a line of light ran down the center" of the house's open long axis, oriented north–south, and light also entered through linear skylights and clerestories, animating the curved planes with a play of shade and shadow. Ordinarily, concrete does not come alive with sunlight as natural stone does, so Stevens and McNulty picked the kind of cement that is usually employed in basement construction, which has an unpredictably wide range of coloration. Surface variation was extended

by allowing "leakage" lines—the result of pressure from the wet concrete onto the joints of the wooden form—to become a texture on the walls. Because of the lack of material differentiation in the interior planes, the house could feel like a cave, an igloo, a tent, or a topiary maze in different seasons and weather—qualities that required experience over time and thus were elusive to the casual visitor, and practically impossible to document in publications. Exceptional as it was, the house nonetheless shared an architectural language of materials, form, and the use of natural light with buildings by Louis Kahn, Alvar Aalto, and Eero Saarinen, the internationally acclaimed architects that had influenced Stevens at MIT, although far more evocative of the human body in its suggestion of a birth canal or maternal cave than most Modern architects would ever wish to acknowledge in their work.[11]

But the most radical aspect of the house's design and the most talked-about feature in magazine articles was its lack of doors and well-defined rooms. The interior space was actually a kind of indoor pathway off of which areas for different activities unfolded. It was not entered from one end, like the axial hallways of classically planned houses, with rooms to either side. Rather, like a bazaar in Istanbul or Isfahan, the main axis could be entered from many different places, the typical primacy of the "front" door barely acknowledged in the interior by a small fountain and skylight. The plan resembled a rhizome. The space for movement and the spaces for activities flowed into one another, with negotiable, changing boundaries. Only bathrooms and a small guest room were afforded the conventional privacy of lockable doors. The lower floor was used for gathering, cooking, and eating, and housed areas for the children. The upper floor was for the parents. A taller, cylindrical form created a more definite enclosure for the library and the architectural office above, spaces for introspective activities and sustained concentration, less forgiving of unwanted interruptions.

What disturbed some neighbors in Lincoln, and attracted the interest of the architects and students who frequently visited the house, was the vision of family life the house implied. It was a vision that seemed to be, and was in fact, subversive of the forced togetherness of families, not only in the typical suburban home but also in the alternative hippie dwellings during the 1960s. Nor did it support a patriarchal hierarchy. This was a house for chance encounters, where strategically placed obstacles would let intruders know not to trespass, where "privacy was a

Fig. 2.3. Mary Otis Stevens and Thomas McNulty, interior view, house at Lincoln, Massachusetts, 1962-65. *Photograph by Julius Shulman*

state of mind" instead of a physical isolation behind closed doors. Each individual's privacy required that other family members acknowledge invisible boundaries. Thus the children grew accustomed to forms of sharing and withdrawing they could not recognize in other houses with separate rooms. The drawback was that the house could not—without losing its basic premise—provide for multiple and simultaneous needs for separation as a means of identity building as the boys grew to become teenagers. Thus the oldest son claimed the guest room as his own, the only one with a door he could close.

The interior organization, a reverse of the typical suburban home, could be seen as driving the exterior form. The ideas informing its design were closer to the philosophical discourse of Guy Debord and the Situationists than to the prevalent architectural discourse, focused on the construction of a renewed Modern vocabulary that was regionally based. The house's "psychogeographical" topography seemed to be designed for the kind of experience described by Guy Debord in his 1958 theory of the *dérive*:

> One of the basic Situationist practices is the *dérive* [literally: "drifting"], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve

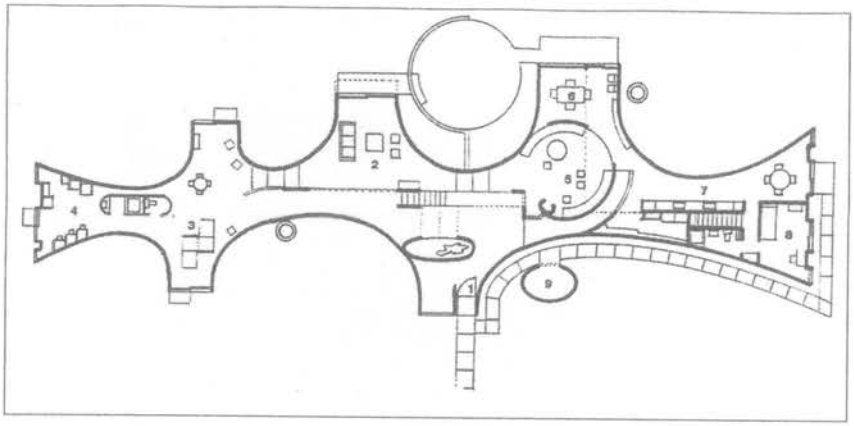

Fig. 2.4. Mary Otis Stevens and Thomas McNulty, lower level plan, house at Lincoln, MA, 1962-65. LEGEND: 1. Entry; 2. Living room; 3. Children's sleeping area; 4.Children's play area; 5. Library; 6. Dining area; 7. Kitchen; 8. Guest room; 9. Water tank. *Courtesy of Mary Otis Stevens*

> playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. But the *dérive* includes both this letting-go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities.[12]

Like the Situationists, Stevens and McNulty were critical of the "society of spectacle"[13] and consumption, and this was reflected in the house's ability to support the erection of temporary props such as giant posters as backdrop for their children's rock guitar performances, while rejecting the display of possessions, which looked out of place on the austere, curved walls.[14]

Although it became a pilgrimage site for architects and students for many years, the house later faded from the discipline's memory. The critical inscription of women's architectural designs had not yet begun.

Architecture as a Multiplicity of Practices

The thirteen years between 1965 and 1978, when Stevens and her family lived in their Lincoln house, were bracketed by the escalation of the Vietnam War and the protest movement to end it, on the one hand, and the abrupt end of Nixon's presidency in the Watergate scandal, on the other. During this period Stevens adopted many public roles, while also raising her sons. In their architectural practice, she and McNulty were able, among other projects, to expand their experimental ideas in three additional concrete houses for sophisticated clients. One of these houses, the curvilinear Torf house in Weston, Massachusetts, is still inhabited by the original owner. As a political activist, Stevens joined others in her community to found an anti-war group and participated in the McGovern presidential campaign and promoting local low-income housing programs. And as a member of The New City, a project of the Cambridge Institute, she integrated a planning effort to create a new, alternative community. She also held Sunday salons attended by long-time mentors Buckminster Fuller and Samuel Eliot Morison, the heads and faculty of Harvard and MIT's architecture schools and their spouses, and the many prominent local and foreign architects who came to visit her house.

Her most enduring work during these years remains the creation of i press, which published, among other books, *The Ideal Communist City*, a collection of utopian plans by young Soviet architects and planners; Alexander Tzonis's *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment*, a critique of the Bauhaus and its legacy; Doris Cole's *From Tipi to Skyscraper*, the first history of women in architecture; and Stevens and McNulty's theoretical book developed in Ravello, *World of Variation*. At the time, i press was the only American publishing house for books of ideas in architecture, similar to longer-established venues such as Il Saggiatore in Italy, under the direction of Gian Carlo de Carlo, a noted architect and frequent visiting professor at MIT. In spite of the good reception abroad and the translation of its books into other languages, i press failed to generate initial profits, and Stevens was forced to close it in 1974 when she could no longer support it from her dwindling inheritance. Within its short life,

however, it had achieved the publication and dissemination in the United States of books that remain landmarks in the discourse on architecture and social issues. But the optimistic, risk-taking ethos of the 1960s had waned, and political and cultural moods, both in society and in the architectural academic and professional worlds, had turned conservative.

In 1978, Stevens and McNulty sold the house in Lincoln to its second and last occupant, Sarah Caldwell, the opera director and conductor who, at age twenty-nine, had founded the Opera Company of Boston and, at forty-eight, became the first woman to conduct at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.[15] They had had trouble attracting buyers for their unusual house, but Caldwell, who was Stevens's contemporary, liked its uniqueness and lived there with her mother, having previously requested from Stevens the design of an acoustical wood ceiling to dampen down the too-live sound of the house.

Mary Otis Stevens and Thomas McNulty went their separate professional and personal ways after the sale of the house, and she moved with her sons to Cambridge, near Harvard Square, where she remains today. In 1975, Stevens founded a new collaborative practice, Design Guild, with her former students at the Boston Architectural Center. Its clients were mostly non-profit organizations, with projects requiring historic preservation and the reuse of significant older buildings. Late in 1978 she married Jesse R. Fillman, a widower, former member of i press's board of directors, and a prominent lawyer who was a leading sponsor of civil rights and the arts in Boston. She remained active in political and sustainable design issues in the organization Architects for Social Responsibility. In 1991, Jesse Fillman died, and a major economic recession took a heavy toll on clients and architects alike. Stevens, then aged sixty-three, and her colleagues disbanded the Design Guild, and, as Mary Fillman, she started a new career as a musician and composer. After learning "how to see through walls" she has, forever inquisitive, learned to "see what one hears and hear what one sees," designing her musical compositions as an "invisible architecture."

In 2001, a newly wealthy owner, intent on amassing lakefront property for a faux-traditional estate, bought the Lincoln house and surreptitiously demolished it. Only afterward did the town start requiring permits for tearing buildings down.

NOTES

1. Wolf Von Eckhart, *A Place to Live* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1967), 291.

2. See Shadrach Woods, *The Man in the Street: A Polemic on Urbanism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975).

3. See Robert Goodman, *After the Planners* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

4. Among the better-known of these projects is La Clede Town, St. Louis, Missouri, designed by Cloethiel Woodard Smith & Associated Architects in 1967. See Ellen Perry Berkeley, "La Clede Town: The Most Vital Town in Town," *Architectural Forum* 129 (November 1968): 58.

5. Liane Lefaivre, "Critical Domesticity: An Interview with Mary Otis Stevens," *Thresholds* (an MIT student journal), no. 19 (2000): 22–25.

6. All the biographical references and sentences in quotation marks without attribution in this essay are based on an unpublished manuscript by Mary Otis Stevens, titled "Biographical Chronology," dated "10.7.02." It is based on an interview of April 2002 with Susana Torre and is available at the International Archive of Women in Architecture, http://spec.lib.vt.edu/spec/iawa/. For additional analysis of Mary Otis Stevens's work, see Jane McGroarty and Susana Torre, "New Professional Identities: Four Women in the Sixties," chap. 8 of Susana Torre, ed., *Women in Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), 115–31.

7. The term was used by William Wurster, the MIT head of the Department of Architecture who had hired McNulty to teach there. McNulty was later denied tenure at MIT.

8. They were Ebenezer Stevens, who served under General Washington during the War of Independence; Mercy Otis Warren; and her brother James Otis.

9. See "A Sculpture for Living," *Life*, December 3, 1965, 122–29. The house was also published in the November 1965 issue of the *Architectural Forum* (U.S.A.), the February–March issue of *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui* (France), the March 1966 issue of *Bauwelt* (Germany), and the October 1966 issue of *Domus* (Italy), among many other publications.

10. Leo Marx's expression refers to "the ordering of meaning and value around the contrast between two styles of life, one identified with a rural and the other with an urban setting." See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 94.

11. See Christopher Reed, ed., *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), a collection of essays examining the antagonism of Modernism toward domesticity and the human body as a sensuous entity.

12. See Guy-Ernest Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*," at http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/314.

13. See Guy, Debord, *Society of the Spectacle (*Detroit: Black & Red, 1967).

14. On this subject, Mary Otis Stevens wrote a book proposal on the topic of austerity, including references to different world cultures, and an unpublished essay entitled "Consumer Addiction and the Earth Culture," both available at the International Archive of Women in Architecture. See note 6, above.

15. From Sarah Caldwell's biographical notes at http://www2.worldbook.com/features/whm/html/whm068.html.