"Austin is a happy place, sort of; foreigners and easterners surrender their affections to Austin more readily than to any other place in the state. They come reluctantly, drawn by the fragrance of our cash, and a great many of them stay. It is a pretty, sunny town, the climate warm, the sky blue and unsmogged."

Larry McMurtry, "A Handful of Roses"

"Almost all of us are new-comers in the place where we are, wanderers bringing what used to be called a Yankee ingenious responsiveness to our dealings with a new place but we also bring dreams and maybe even homesick fantasies about some place far away from which we've come or some place far away in both time and space about which perhaps we've read."

Charles Moore, "The Temple, the Cabin, and the Trailer"

No architect in recent memory has been as compulsively peripatetic as Charles Moore, nor as consumed by the nesting instinct. In the space of slightly more than three decades, Moore built four new houses and radically reconfigured two others for his own day-to-day use, in addition to two vacation retreats. These pieds-à-voie were scattered in places as far apart, geographically and culturally, as southern and northern California, Connecticut, and finally Austin (Cité, Spring 1986), where he was appointed O'Neil Ford Centennial Professor of Architecture at the University of Texas in 1984. Moore's Austin house, which he occupied from 1985 until his death last year at age 68, is "in many ways his finest," Paul Goldberger wrote not long ago in the New York Times in an effort to call attention to its uncertain future.1

The Austin house is actually part of a compound that includes a small professional office and a junior partner's house, blending vernacular and more refined themes with Moore's indelible sleight of hand - ranch on the outside, Borromini and Schinkel on the inside. It also serves as a repository for the architect's prodigious collection of toys and folk artifacts culled from flea markets worldwide, as well as his drawings, library, and more than 80,000 slides. Moore's U-Sane-ian trove and its container - "a glowing example of a great architect's passions" in Goldberger's words - is now at risk, even though it may well "contain more joy per square foot than any other building in Texas [and] is also one of that rarest of breeds, a first-rate house designed by a first-rate architect for his own use." For emphasis, Goldberger takes another sentence to run through "the short list" - Jefferson's Monticello, Sir John Soane's house in London, Frank Lloyd Wright's two Taliesins, Philip Johnson's Glass House, and Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica - "all buildings that carry an importance in the history of architecture that far outweighs their size."2
Slept Here

In one sense, Moore's conception of his Austin treasure house began when, as a precocious teenager in Battle Creek, Michigan, he drew up plans for special built-in units to display an already considerable inventory of "souvenirs, projects, collections and junk" in his new room taking shape over the garage of "his parents' 1932 colonial-style house." The small, two-story house on Elm Street, c. 1860, in New Haven that Moore essentially gutted and remodeled inside (1966) while serving as dean of the School of Art and Architecture at Yale no longer survives in its altered state except in the photographs of John T. Hill and Norman McGrath. It remains, however, one of Moore's most extraordinary realizations, theatrically introverted in response to an "alien turf" embellished only by a "panoramic [backyard] vista of the adjacent Holiday Inn." The shell of the dark, unassuming house was converted to a single barnlike room filled to almost overflowing with three demonstratively cut out plywood towers, amplifying notions first explored, on a more limited basis, in the vacation condominium Moore had built for himself at Sea Ranch in Sonoma County, California (1963-65).

As choreographed in New Haven, the tight vertical spaces, illusionistic special effects, and void display of architectural fragments of mostly wreckage-yard provenance, alongside "photographs, drawings, statues, favored objects, and especially toys inhabiting the ... layered and interweaving walls at every available scale," shared a bargain-base kitchen with the cramped wizardry of the Soane museum, which Moore admired in The Place of Houses (written with Gerald Allen and Donlyn Lyndon) for its "disciplined abandon" and "collector's passion ... too strong to be constrained by conventional precedent or regular arrangements of space." Moore's saber-saw prodigy was featured in glossy magazines from Art in America ("Chaos as Architecture") to Playboy ("Amid Connecticut's Early Americana, a Bachelor Architect Fashions a Flipped-Out Domain"), but it also proved lamentably burglar prone. At the turn of the decade, Moore abandoned the horrors of Elm Street for a milder-mannered, smaller redo in Essex, Connecticut (1970-73), best remembered for the coup de théâtre of its attic-filling, split-pyramid display-case bed box, whose proto-Memphis showmanship by then came naturally to the author of "Plug It In, Rameses, and See If It Lights Up, Because We Aren't Going to Keep It Unless It Works."*8

When Moore moved to Los Angeles in 1975 to head the architectural program at UCLA, the real estate market was especially forbidding: "private houses near the campus [were] as expensive as any in the United States," and "vacant building lots [were] nonexistent," in the testimony of David Littlejohn's biography, Architect: The Life and Work of Charles W. Moore. For three years, Moore was obliged to camp out in a series of rented apartments, each filled to overflowing with his library, his papers, and warehouse loads of treasured trivia: the toys, the models, the Mexican ceramics, the tin soldiers, the wooden chests.

In Austin, Charles Moore's last, and many say best, house for himself and its amazing collection of folk art, drawings, and models is endangered unless money can be raised to retire the mortgage and furnish an endowment.

The triplex was not among the four examples of Moore's work singled out in his characteristically inclusive guide to Los Angeles architecture, prepared for the series The City Observed with Peter Becker and Regula Campbell.*9

In truth, the California that Moore as a youth had visited every year or so, with his parents, where he had begun his professional life in various Bay Area offices (1947-49), and where he had first achieved national recognition as chairman of the Department of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley (1961-65), and as the designer, in partnership with Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker, of the Sea Ranch Condominiums (1963-65), was no longer as free or open or affordable as before.*1 By the early eighties, even the "tall, narrow town house" he had willed into being in Westwood seemed to be "fitting rather too tightly, ... [its] walls pressing closer and closer."*12 So when the opportunity came to relocate to Austin on more advantageous terms while still retaining his professional ties with the firm of Moore, Ruble & Yudell in Los Angeles, Moore took it — pausing only to scan the Official Airline Guide for signs of life at Austin International (by the grace of Mexico) Airport. Nor was he the first well-known architect of midwestern birth to find the charms of Los Angeles subsiding in later life and to eventually take refuge in a less cluttered corner of the American Southwest.

The first glimpses of the house Moore came to build in Austin can be found in a project for a U-shaped courtyard house for himself in Essex (with Marvin Buchanan, 1970) and in a sketch plan for the unbuilt Goodman House (Montauk, Long Island, 1969), in which the cavity of an L-shaped, essentially open (except for bedroom and bath) first floor is filled in with an elliptically curved deck (bedrooms also sprout upstairs at either end of the interior L).*13 But the Austin "spread," as Moore sometimes referred to it, actually begins to approach its finished state only with the design of a house for a hypothetical Texas site that Moore prepared (with the help of Jim Winkler and Michael Bernard of the Urban Innovations Group at UCLA) for the exhibition Houses for Sale, held at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1980. By Littlejohn's account, although the gallery

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insisted that the plans and drawings were in fact available for clients to buy and build, . . . the contributions of several of the participants better known for their theoretical than their actual houses, [were] certain to remain "art" and not architecture. . . . Moore . . . came up with a house design I can actually imagine building and happily living in, . . . a house that maintains a lively, livable tension between classical archetypes and the forms of a comfortable southwestern ranch house.14

In Moore's nevertheless unsold "House for Sale," the advocated L. of the Goodman project was restocked with three bedroom, a study, and a curving glass-roofed conservatory that, together with a pair of small, square pavilions, formed a picturesque compound in the shape of a U with one side slipped forward. The pavilion closest to the dormitory L was a detached living room analogous to the freestanding "ornamental salon" of Schinkel's gardener's house at the Schloss Charlottenhof near Potsdam (1834); the other was a two-car garage. A long, narrow pool bisected the compound's sunken, amphitheatre-like courtyard (which Moore, significantly, referred to in Castelli's prospectus-catalogue as a "semi-circular piazza") before emptying into a nearby creek. In further explanation of the Texas "House for Sale," Moore likened it to those "delicacies" in New Orleans with double sources [in that it] relies on two traditions, the ranch house and the Renaissance model, with occasional surprise inventions that would have to be described as 'modern.' It is made of ordinary stuff — stucco or smooth boards, painted; a roof of metal (I'd like it to be ordinary corrugated aluminum, not painted; but I have never yet been able to talk a client into that); wood windows; 6-by-6-inch wooden porch posts; a floor of concrete. Karl Friedrich Schinkel serves as a source for the pleasures at the head of the wondos in the living room pavilion, where (as in Schinkel's Pavilion at the Charlottenburg Palace) a tiny incised line and in this case a change of color make an ordinary wall a classical quotation, with giant pilasters and entablature that will wash out, in the bright southwestern sun, into an ordinary wall again.15

(Alternate color schemes devised with Tina Beebe were illustrated in two pairs of dioramic shadow-box models. One pair, with walls rendered in the Romanish ochre of Schinkel's gardener's house, sold from the exhibition; the other, cast in gray, did not and was later installed in a place of pride next to the entrance to the house in Austin.)

settled on little more than an acre on Quarry Road on the fringes of Tarrytown, a once-again-fashionable part of west Austin, Moore's

"added only one big one. A pitched roof was added over the flat one" of the 1949 addition. The original 1936 wood and 1949 concrete floors were also kept and painted all over with "a net of colors in a pattern of squares and circles" suggested by "the handsome patterns of mastic left after the green asphalt tile was peeled off."19

The exteriors of the three buildings of the compound proper (an innocuous over-flow studio was later added at a far end of the property) alternated gray stucco with Yankee-Texas board-and-batten, also gray, although the courtyard faces have since been painted blue and panels and trelis have been applied selectively to both outside and courtyard faces of the compound. The roofs are galvanized but standing-seam, presumably in deference to the mortgage company, while the overflow studio is clad entirely in sheet metal. The ceremonial entry into the courtyard is not arched like that of the "House for Sale" by spanning chimneys in the manner of Stratford Hall (Westmoreland County, Virginia, c. 1725), but takes its cue from the wagon entrance to the Sherwood Ranch in Salinas, California, known to Moore from "an old Roger Sturtevant photograph." This portal is customized with a cutout "lintel" supported by triangular brackets — a motif earlier used for the mock tower gates of Kresge College at the University of California, Santa Cruz (MLTW/Moore-Turnbull, 1966-74).20 The sequential arrangement of rooms in Moore's L-shaped unit is for all intents and purposes a reflected version of the plan of Alvar Aalto's summer house at Moutarataslo, Finland (1952-53). The curve of the conservatory of the "House for Sale" is moved indoors as a small wonderwall, defining the only continuous edge of an abbreviated long gallery and screening it from everything else in the house like an elongated, three-dimensional parenthesis. The other longitudinal edge of the gallery is an irregular piece along the courtyard face of the L, producing a succession of small, double-exposure alcoves in the manner of the Ninomaru of the Niho Castle (Kyoto, early 17th century), which Moore et al. commend in The Place of Houses.

The most striking aspect of Moore's gallery ("as precise in its own way as anything designed by Mies van der Rohe," in Goldberger's estimation) is the procession of armorial "pillars" lining the wonderwall — trophy cases derived more or less explicitly from the spear-framed, trophy-accented acrrotia of Schinkel's second project for the Neue Wache, Berlin (1816).21 (Moore's napkin}

Entrance portal to Moore's compound in Austin, which he called the Lazy O.

Texas spread (designed and developed with his partner in practice, Arthur Andersons, as mortgagee of the second, smaller house, 1984-87), retains the notion of a U-shaped, three-building compound from the "House for Sale," as well as the long, skinny pool. The court is no longer terraced and sunken, and the pool is a self-contained "tank" such as Moore remembered from the office of the architect Geoffry Bawa in Colombo, Sri Lanka.16 As it to compensate for this topographic reserve, a giant ellipse is sent careering around the courtyard and through two of the constituent buildings (Moore's thick, L-shaped unit and Andersons' compact, prismatic one) with the abandon of the rogue oval from the discarded first scheme for the Piazza d'Italia, New Orleans (Moore, Grover, Harper, 1975). (Borromini had done something of the sort in a project of 1642 for the Palazzo Carpegna near the Trevi Fountain in Rome, employing an oval courtyard to straddle the street between the initial block purchased by Ambrogio Carpegna and a second block Carpegna had managed to acquire once planning had begun.)17 Dominant though the ellipse is in plan — Moore named the compound the "Lazy O" after it in cattle brandese — its progress is scarcely perceptible out of doors.

In fact, the feeling of the compound as a whole is noticeably relaxed compared with much of Moore's work. As Moore told a group of Yale students in 1980:

Most architecture must be normative so that you can be quirky against it. And even when I'm quirky against it, it seems to me I have to do my bit by making more of the normative stuff than I am accustomed to. . . . In this choreography of the familiar and the surprising, it does seem to me as I get older that a little bit of surprise really goes a long way. That is, it's alright to do almost everything familiar. I think there has to be a little bit of surprise if it's going to interest anybody. I think that we as architects would be untrue to ourselves if we didn't look for the places where the surprise ought to be, but I think the surprise can come in a familiar and comfortable body of stuff.18

As at Elm Street, Moore's personal slice of the Austin compound is carved almost entirely out of a preexisting structure, in this instance a lackluster cottage built in 1936 and added onto in 1949. (Borromini had incorporated the pre-existing Palazzo Vaino into the plans for the Palazzo Carpegna.) But unlike Elm Street, Moore approached the pre-enlarged cottage with a frugal and curious "kind of archaeologist's morality. . . . Awful as I thought it was, I didn't want to cover up anything or to change anything unless I had to . . . Most of the remodeling was very selective erasure." The ceilings were opened up, revealing the underside of a roof that was "complex, contradictory, and mostly just confused" but that struck the architect as "a suitable foil to the single-minded sweep of the enveloping ellipse." All but two of the original windows were left as they were; Moore
diagram of the Austin premises, felt-tipped for the benefit of Heinrich Klotz, is inscribed “Neue Wache III.”22 The breastplates of Moore’s pilasters, cut from plywood and painted by his students, contain niches for statuettes of Texas heroes, giant kachina dolls, and the like. Above, where Schinkel hangs a helmet, Moore fixes a tribal mask or the stuffed head of a deer or a cow; below, where Schinkel attatches centurion-length armored skirting, Moore experiments with a pattern language of off-loom harlequinades and eyedazzlers; a light bulb and reflector are “ensconced” in each belt holding the strands of the skirt together. Schinkel is also present in the dept alcoving of the (kitchen) corner and the application of reflective surfaces to the lower half of the pilasters, corresponding to the study alcove and mirrored pilasters of Schinkel’s redecoration of the Crown Princess Elisabeth’s private drawing room in the Königliche Schloss, Berlin (c. 1825).23

Moore prized his Austin house as not only somewhat larger (2,300 square feet) but “more comfortable [and] inhabitable than its predecessors.”24 But it is also plainly a house in search of a museum. Discussing the phenomenon of the English long gallery in The Place of Houses, Moore et al. wrote that, unlike most rooms, which “are meant to be places to be in, to do something alone or with other people,... a long narrow room may generate an unsettling sense of motion.”25 Moore’s curving of his own gallery around a compact promontory loft subdivide the space just enough to effect a countervailing stasis without cutting off the flow of the room entirely. “Awash with objects,” the gallery of the Austin lodgings fabricates an ancestral illusion of its own, not too far removed from what Moore appreciated as the Soane Museum’s “paignant exaltation of the almost trivial.”26 “From earliest youth,” he confided to the readers of House and Garden,

I have collected the things that appealed to me: miniature buildings and figures and objects, puppets and cars and ornaments, kachina dolls and pictures — mostly toys. They are souvenirs of places I’ve been, they form pieces of miniature cities or of little scenes with staggering contrasts of scale. I used to see myself as a pack rat, and only lately has anyone called me a collector. So the next step is to figure out how to insinuate into this house miracles of organization: vitrines, glass-top tables, and new ways to look at little objects made into miniature worlds. If I don’t take charge, they will. Or maybe they have.”27

The spell of Moore’s concave muscrom room and the compound to which it belongs is still, for the time being, unbroken, although the future of the Lazy O, as Goldberger reported, is far from certain. A mortgage balance of approximately $350,000 remains against the property, which even so could be profitably sold for redevelopment. (Moore had himself wrested the land, with the help of several dozen occupationally litigious residents of Tarrentown, from the clutches of developers who planned to build 17 condominiums there.)28 Should the property be sold, the contents of Moore’s house and studio would be transferred to one of several universities — Yale, UCLA, UC Berkeley, and Michigan (where he studied as an undergraduate) — that have already expressed an interest in establishing a Moore archive. Although Moore’s heirs and his Austin partner, Arthur Andersson, wish to avoid such a disposition, the University of Texas has rejected an initial proposal to pay off the mortgage and preserve the compound as a study center and museum complete with guesthouse—caretaker’s cottage and the added inducement of Moore’s library, slides, drawings, and astonishing collection of “statues, favored objects and especially toys.”29

The university, with an institutional wisdom all its own, has countered with an offer to simply take the contents of the house and studio and install or otherwise accommodate them on campus in a specially dedicated gallery “renovated in the style of Charles Moore,” which the president of the university, Robert Berdahl, promised would “recapture the personality that’s expressed in the house.” This, he admitted, would be “hard to replicate. But I truly believe for students it’s preferable to have these objects as a resource on campus than in a house two miles away.”30 It must also be admitted that the University of Texas is not inexperienced in such matters, having reconstructed the study of Erle Stanley Gardner and the office of Fleur Cowlis, founding editor of Flair magazine, in its Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, as well as a 7/8-scale replica of the Oval Office of the White House in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

A bsent a sufficient endowment for the upkeep and operation of the compound (or maybe even with it), the University of Texas seems unlikely to overcome its “reluctance to accept residential property off campus,” a reluctance that the University of Chicago somehow managed to overcome in the case of Wright’s Robie House, as did the State University of New York at Buffalo with Wright’s Martin House and the University of Southern California (in partnership with the city of Pasadena) with Greene and Greene’s Gamble House.31 The Austin chapter of the American Institute of Architects has formed a task force to explore options for saving the property as is and would be amenable to occupying one of the studios as a long-term tenant. The School of Architecture would also be inclined to add to the stream of income by using the smaller house for visiting lecturers and taking additional space to house part of its research program.

In the hope of holding everything together, Moore’s cross-country network of collaborators, friends, and admirers has organized the Charles W. Moore Foundation as a vehicle for retiring the mortgage and raising an endowment for operations and maintenance of approximately $1.5 million, an amount roughly equivalent to the investment needed to sustain a distinguished professor or half a football coach.

Few architects have had the resources to ensure the survival of such specimen houses as they infrequently make for themselves. Sir John Soane was able, over the objection of his heirs, not only to endow his remarkable warren of rooms in Lincoln’s Inn Fields but to have it established by act of Parliament as a national museum (a denouement that does not go unmentioned in The Place of Houses); Philip Johnson has been similarly privileged to deed his Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, along with an ample seven-figure endowment comprising the residue of his estate. But most architects, including the gentle conjuror of the Lazy O, can best be described as fiscally “challenged” rather than “enabled.”

The odds against a domicile as erudite and enchanting as the Lazy O falling to earth in Austin, Texas, are exceedingly long — indeed, there is no house remotely comparable anywhere in Texas. But Moore, who so conspicuously ornamented the architecture faculty of the University of Texas while still at the height of his powers, was a realist as much as a fantasist. While he certainly would have been dismayed, neither would he have been completely surprised by the present turn of events, counseling as he did from experience that one does better to trust people, not institutions. If the eyes of Texas are blind to the unique opportuni ties presented by the Lazy O, perhaps others will point the way. ■

2 Ibid., p. B8.
(continued on page 48)