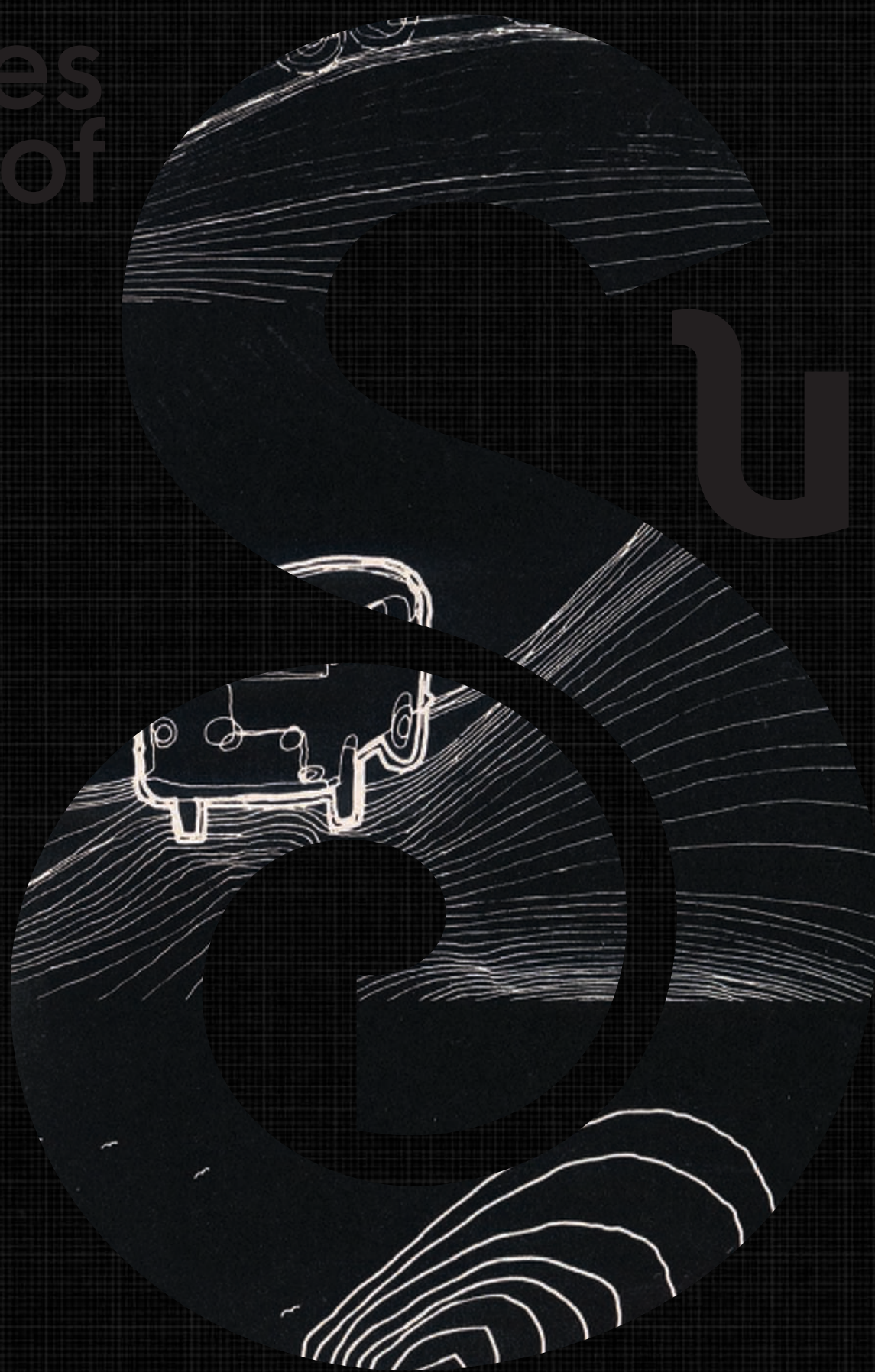


sites  
of



ubw

Domestic Environments  
Between Protest and Poetry  
1968-1977



fig.  
1

John Zemanek, Residence  
at 1723 Colquitt, 1968

# ersion

by Michelangelo Sabatino

During the **1960s** and **'70s** a number of experimental, subversive domestic environments that conflated protest with poetic responses to the political and social upheavals of the Age of Aquarius were constructed by architects, builders, and entrepreneurs in Houston. Although these sites spoke different architectural languages, they shared a countercultural desire to experiment and defy convention.

The architect John Zemanek designed his house in Montrose (1968, **fig. 1**) by embracing an aesthetic of modesty, materialized in his skillful deployment of untreated wood and cement board panels. Joe Mashburn, Jerry Lunow, and Charles Keith, while working for Charles Tapley, adopted an anti-architecture mobile stance for their award-winning project “Take Me to the Mountain” (1970, **fig. 2**) that proposed a flexible dwelling for their client, Camille Waters, involving a Volkswagen van on a site in the Texas Hill Country. The architect Eugene Aubry championed the hybrid with his Roy Avenue Townhouses (S. I. Morris & Associates, 1974, **fig. 3**) in Houston’s West End, where he appropriated corrugated, galvanized sheet iron siding from the neighborhood’s industrial vernacular buildings to create a loft-like domestic environment, somewhere between gallery and workshop. In the suburban neighborhood of Southampton near Rice University, architect Barry Moore grafted a zome (Steve Baer’s version of Buckminster

Fuller’s geodesic dome) onto the back alley garage he designed for the brothers Albert and Tim Maher (**fig. 4**). Hippie builder Jon Patrick Lewis and his wife, Cheryl, relied on Fuller’s formulas to economically build a quirky geodesic dome in the fields southeast of Houston (1977, **fig. 5**). During the same years, John Milkovich, a retired upholsterer for the Southern Pacific Railway, transformed an ordinary working-class bungalow of the 1920s with a flattened-beer-can patchwork (1974, **fig. 6**).

Whether single-family houses or additions and alterations to extant buildings, and whether anti-establishment or environmentalist in approach, these initiatives were premised on a rejection of the mainstream modernist fixation on “good design.” Working against the grain of large-scale commercial and institutional projects as the Astrodome (1965), NASA’s Manned Spacecraft Center (now the Johnson Space Center) (1964), and the Galleria (1969-71), these small, subtle domestic environments found a receptive

constituency, marking Houston as a center of counterculture activity. Relatively low real estate prices helped, as did an environment characterized by the coexistence of high and low cultures in close proximity to each other, a juxtaposition made possible by Houston’s opportunistic embrace of “de-regulation” (i.e. no zoning) and only occasionally countered by government sponsored large-scale initiatives and neighborhood “covenants” that establish limited forms of control over development.

#### An Architecture of Modesty

During the late 1960s and '70s, it was not uncommon for architects to romanticize the primitive ingenuity of vernacular builders in reaction to positivist visions of a future that had surrendered to science and space travel, a world in thrall to “progress.” Architecture schools, led by Yale, developed design-build practicums aimed at breaking down the barriers between studio education and the realities of the construction

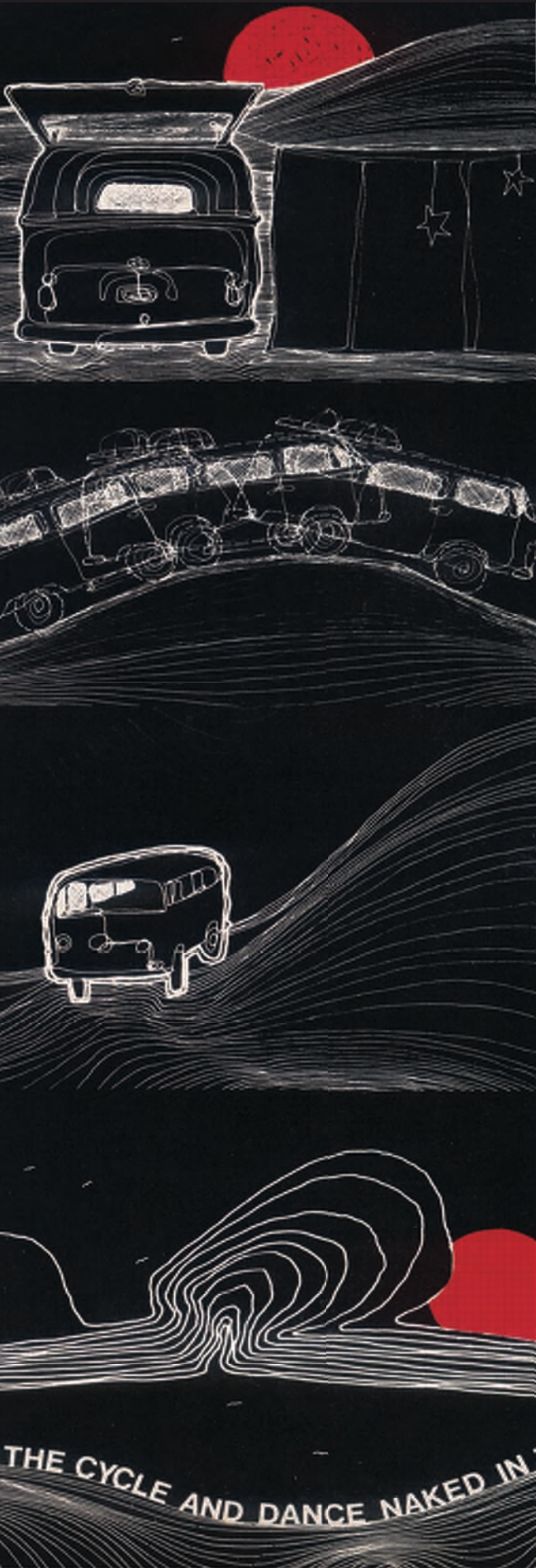


fig.  
2

Presentation Drawings, “Take Me to the Mountain,” Charles Tapley and Associates (Joseph L. Mashburn, Jerry M. Lunow, Charles A. Keith, and Camille Waters), 1970.

site. Charles W. Moore, Dean of the Yale School of Architecture, initiated the program in 1967, travelling with students to New Zion, Kentucky, to build community structures designed in consultation with New Zion residents, which is documented in Richard W. Hayes’s *The Yale Building Project: The First 40 Years* (2007). A similar effort unfolded when John Zemanek, Professor of Architecture at the University of Houston, was asked by Houston’s Mayor Louis Welch to design and build the 3-H Services Center for Bordersville, a rural African-American community near Humble. Completed in 1977, the project won Zemanek and his collaborators a national design award from the American Institute of Architects. The University of Houston fourth-year studio student-led initiative (supported and developed by Zemanek) for the auspices of HOPE (Human Organization for Political and Economic Development) was completed in 1970 and covered by C. Ray Smith in the November 1970 issue of *Progressive Architecture*. It involved restoring a ramshackle building (and adding a playground) on Lyons Avenue in Houston’s African-American Fifth Ward neighborhood. Together with the students, Zemanek demonstrated that architects teaching at public institutions could (and should) subvert mainstream expectations and contribute to counterculture with concrete initiatives that carried a political message.

For his own house on Colquitt (1968, **fig. 7**), Zemanek’s plans and sections combined the materiality and spatial qualities of the modest, yet dignified agrarian buildings familiar from his youth in Fort Bend County—“Pioneer Texas Buildings,” to use the title of Clovis Heimsath’s 1968 book—with the spirituality of the temples, gardens, and houses he had discovered in Japan. Between 1951 and 1952, Zemanek worked for the American architects Raymond & Rado, best known for their poetic integration of European and Japanese building principles. Leaving behind the slick corporate modernism of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) who completed a number of tall-buildings in Houston during the late 1960s and ’70s and the media-savvy presentation that made Ant Farm’s House of the Century (1972, **fig. 9**) outside Angleton a countercultural icon, Zemanek chose introspective silence over performance. His decision to employ wood (mainly left untreated and “raw”) as the primary structural and four-by-eight-foot and ten-by-twelve-foot cement boards for the house led Zemanek away from the crisp industrial steel and glass aesthetic that dominated mid-century modernism, modeled on

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House of 1951. Though its expression aligned itself with the vernacular modernism of Condominium One at The Sea Ranch, completed in 1965 by Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker (MLTW), Zemanek’s austere approach to designing and building his three-pavilion, 1,500-square-foot house echoed the ethical precept that Mies had so famously pronounced: “Less is more.”

#### Toward an Anti-Architecture

Commenting on the *Progressive Architecture* (P/A) Award jury’s decision to present a design award to Joe Mashburn, Jerry Lunow, Charlie Keith, and their client, Camille Waters, for their hand-drawn scheme “Take Me to the Mountain,” juror Edward Larrabee Barnes stated: “I feel a little as though we are jumping on something that is a fashionable bandwagon. But this is something that you want to have people see. It is on the way to something—as a way of life. I think this is being cited for a process—we are not judging a finished design.” The central ecological concerns of “Take Me to the Mountain” led to its anti-architecture stance. (During that same year, Ant Farm’s “media van and self-contained life support unit” was deployed by the group to do research for their “Truckstop” project, an initiative promoting a lifestyle of frugality and mobility.) When Waters expressed the desire to live on her 55-acre Hill Country property (**fig. 8**), the three architects (all working for Charles Tapley & Associates, under whose name the project was submitted for the P/A Award) suggested that instead of constructing a house, she could temporarily inhabit three different sites by using a Volkswagen van and elements such as a tent and hammock. Rather than setting out to transform the site with “irreversible design,” the four architects took an approach that synthesized rural ingenuity and urban sophistication. Not by coincidence, their title echoed the 1969 album *Take Me to the Mountain* by the Austin psychedelic-rock group Shiva’s Headband (the band continues to perform in Austin under the name of Shiva’s Headband Experience). In an interview for the July 23, 2009, issue of *Architect Magazine*, Mashburn, the head designer and project coordinator, reported that Waters eventually built “a very small, unplumbed cabin” and continued to maintain the site unaltered until she sold it.

This embrace of a “on-the-road” dwelling culture (campers, vans, and motor homes) speaks to the valuing of discovery and freedom over convention and immobility. To some extent the project was aligned with the counterculture

mes) speaks to the valuing of discovery and freedom over convention and immobility.



fig. 3

Roy Avenue Townhouses, Eugene Aubry, 1974.

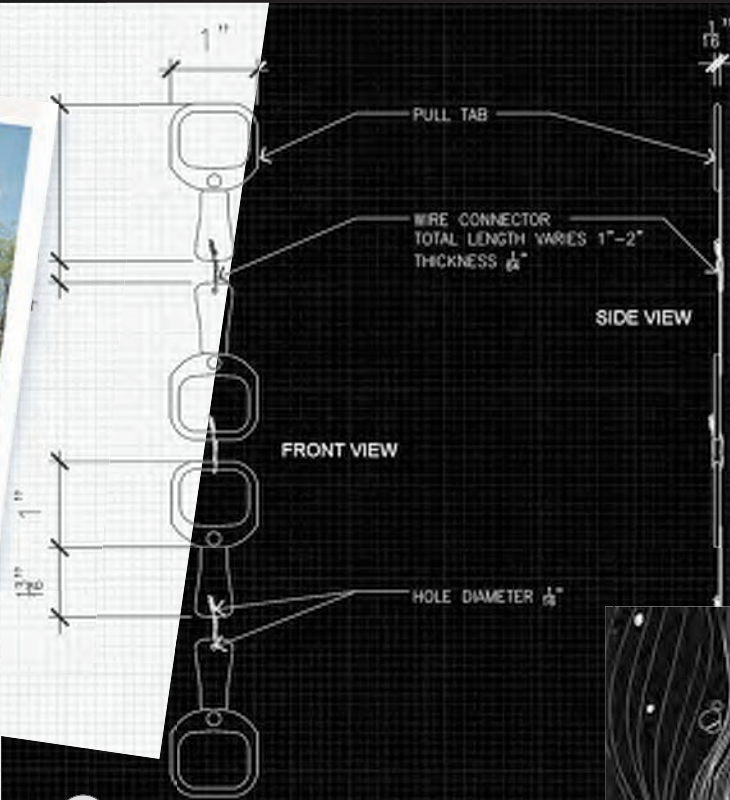


fig. 7

John Zemanek Residence, Interior



fig. 6

Beer Can House, John Milkovich, 1974.

fig. 4

Albert and Tim Maher Zome, Barry Moore, 1971.



SITE 1



SITE 2

Jon Patric Lewis, Geodesic Dome, 1977.

fig. 5



fig. 8

Presentation Drawings, Site 1, 2, 3: 'Take Me to the Mountain', Charles Tapley and Associates



SITE 3

zeitgeist: an anti-corporate “architecture without architects” self-reliance had prompted the publication of a profusion of do-it-yourself manuals in the late 1960s and ’70s (fig. 10). For example, *Shelter*, published in 1973, was a scrapbook of dwelling environments ranging from tree houses to adobe structures, gathered and edited by Lloyd Kahn (followed by *Shelter II* in 1978). In response to Reyner Banham’s “architecture of the well-tempered environment” and Rachel Carson’s environmentalist call to action with *Silent Spring* (1962), *Shelter* and *Whole Earth Catalog* (1969)—followed by *Last Whole Earth Catalog* (1971) and *Whole Earth Epilog* (1974), among other editions—became bibles for off-the-grid, counterculture, “green” enthusiasts around the country who understood that they were the custodians of a “limited planet,” to use Jon Naar and Norma Skurka’s term. It is worth recalling that environmental activist organization Greenpeace was founded in the early ’70s.

Less concerned with cutting-edge architecture than with the beneficial impact of master planning, the independent oilman George P. Mitchell founded The Woodlands in 1974 well north of Houston. The environmentalist attitude of Mitchell’s primary planning consultant, the Philadelphia landscape architect Ian McHarg, guided development of The Woodlands, intended to offer a soothing “green” alternative to Houston’s visual and spatial chaos.

#### An Architecture of Hybridity

Furthering the idea that drove the design of the Menil-sponsored “Art Barn” and Rice Media



Westfalia Marketing Brochure, 1955.

Center at Rice University (1969–70, designed with his then partner Howard Barnstone), Eugene Aubry of S. I. Morris Associates made utilitarian space the new residential chic in Houston. Commissioned by his sister-in-law, the art dealer Fredericka Hunter, along with her partner Ian Glennie and Simone Swan, then Vice President of the Menil Foundation, Aubry appropriated the material and spatial qualities of the pre-engineered metal industrial buildings built in the city’s West End for his design of two houses sharing a party wall (fig. 11). Clad with galvanized sheet iron (years before Frank Gehry combined corrugated metal and chain link for his Santa Monica residence, 1977–78) and defined by boxy volumes capped by shed roofs, the loft-like houses’

understated exterior gave way to abstract, rather monumental gallery-like interior spaces sheathed in drywall.

Walter Hopps, the first Director of the Menil Collection, and his wife, Caroline Huber, subsequently lived in the house built for Hunter, contributing to the transformation of the West End into a hotbed of political and artistic activism in the 1980s and ’90s. This hybrid of industrial and civic building types was also evident in the sleek stainless steel panels of the Contemporary Arts Museum (1972), designed by Gunnar Birkerts. In *Gunnar Birkerts: Buildings, Projects, and Thoughts: 1960–1985*, Birkerts described his minimalist museum as “caught between residential and commercial” and asserted that the stainless steel walls were meant to “reflect and deflect traffic.” Aubry’s use of metal surfacing was purposefully not sleek, however. Its raw look aligned what Hunter humorously nicknamed the “Tin Houses” with the working-class landscape of the West End, an anti-domestic hybrid of the neighborhood’s humble dwellings and its spaces of production.

#### Toward an Adhoc Architecture

In the wake of the excitement over the economic and spatial potential of geodesic domes and zomes, the brothers Albert and Tim Maher charged architect Barry Moore of Harvin C. Moore & Barry Moore with rehabilitating a 1920s house in the Southampton neighborhood near Rice University, which included adding a backyard garage with a zome on top. Moore recalled their visit with Steve Baer, the residential designer



fig. 9 Ant Farm’s House of the Century, 1972



These initiatives were premised on a rejection of the mainstream modernist fixation on "good design."

who invented the multifaceted geometric zome: "We flew to New Mexico in [the Mahers'] father's Lear jet and spent two days with the inventor—enough for me to figure out how to work with the system and get a building permit." Today, the zome still stands, although it is somewhat difficult to spot amid the now profuse vegetation.

During those years, thanks to his friendship with Howard Barnstone, Buckminster Fuller visited Houston and interacted with the students of the University of Houston. Under Fuller's supervision, undergraduate architecture students John R. Dossey and Guillermo L. Trotti designed "Counterpoint—A Lunar Colony," entirely based on principles of "space architecture." In the preface of the students' thesis Fuller wrote on April 18, 1974: "You are thinking and formulating in ways I discipline myself to pursue. Don't loath to discard your 'beautifully complex' solutions and substitute your undramatically simplest solutions and do that again and again until it all looks so obviously simple that everyone will say 'anybody could design that.' And they will never know what you went through how much God went through before evolving his hydrogen atoms and blades of grass and eggs."

Decidely not as "beautifully complex" but nonetheless ingenuous in its realization, some years later, Cheryl and Jon Patrick Lewis built their own geodesic dome in Webster, just minutes from NASA's Johnson Space Center. Today the dome stands, although it is in a state of disrepair that threatens its survival.

During the 1960s and early '70s, domes (and zomes) were viewed as the next frontier, especially by the hippie generation, whose members rejected the middle-class conventions of privacy identified with their parents: the dome and zome design offered clients (who were oftentimes the builders as well) an opportunity to forego subdividing houses into discrete rooms and thus promote informal, collective living. The most noteworthy experiment that involved domes and zomes was the artists' community called Drop City in Trinidad, Colorado. In 1966 Buckminster Fuller gave it the Dymaxion Award, citing its "poetically economic" response to the need for dwellings. In the introduction to *Domebook 2* (1971), Lloyd Kahn wrote: "This is a story of a new indigenous architecture in the deserts, valleys and mountains of America. This book is an information net among builders

and communities, a sharing of our experiences with these new shelters, which approximate curves."

#### An Outsider Architecture

Combining a sensitivity to handcraft and cladding (a skill he developed during years of employment as an upholsterer) with the offbeat material of ordinary aluminum beer cans, John Milkovich made his "outsider" contribution to Houston's countercultural dwellings of the period. The Beer Can House, a 1920s bungalow sheathed in flattened beer cans and garlands of the same material, brings an Airstream sensibility (fig. 12) together with the whimsy of ready-made Adhocism, a concept developed by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, incorporating both modern and anti-modern attributes. Milkovich, a self-trained artist who turned to his masterpiece after retiring from his full-time job, is quoted on beercanhouse.org: "some people say this is sculpture, but I didn't go to no expensive school to get these crazy notions." Houston postman turned artist-inventor Jeff McKissack, who began building the Orange Show in 1956 and worked on it until his death in 1980, echoed this "architecture without architects" sentiment when, as quoted at orangeshow.org, he asserted, "You could take 100,000 architects and 100,000 engineers and all of them put together couldn't conceive of a work like this."

Orange Show Center for Visionary Art



View of Roy Avenue Townhouses, Eugene Aubry, 1974.

acquired the Beer Can House after Milkovich died. Mark Bradford, a nationally acclaimed art car artist, lived in and maintained the house until the Orange Show began its conservation work, then created his own version of countercultural domesticity on Heights Boulevard across from the Art Car Museum (the house was recently demolished).

Today it is difficult to find contemporary examples of the experimental architecture that generated the counterculture sites of the past. The excitement and unease of those times has largely disappeared, retaining little power or influence on our present lives. Yet those who attended the most recent RDA architecture tour and saw the single-family house designed by Strasser/Ragni Architects with Emily Sing have evidence that the counterculture has not been forgotten altogether. Several posters from *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, the 1968 play by James Rado and Gerome Ragni, adorn its walls. Although the luxurious minimalism of the house shares little with the experimental qualities of the 1960s counterculture architecture discussed in this article, these posters bring us back in time to the Age of Aquarius, when tribes of men and women (and architects) combined protest with poetry to produce sites of domestic subversion. 🚌

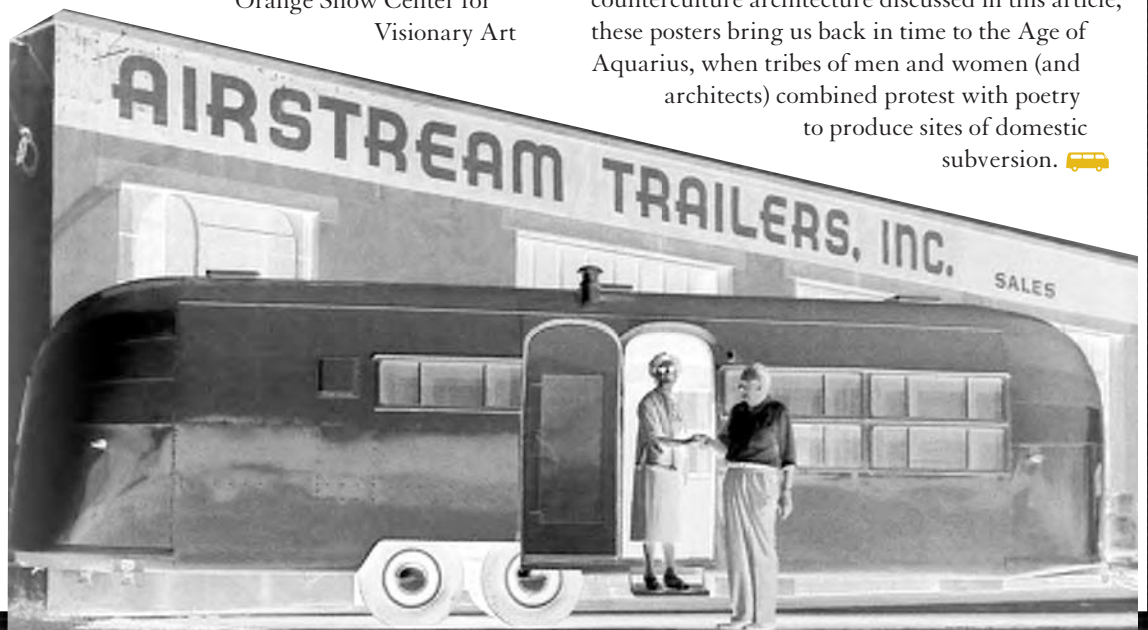


fig. 12 Airstream, outside the factory.