

*The Row House Revival Is Going  
To Town—Not to Mention Country*

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DOING Shakespeare's rose one better, that which we used to call a (sh-h-h!) "row house" sells far more sweetly under another name—"town house."

You may smile at the guile of the crafty promoters. This simple change in nomenclature has already saved us untold square miles of precious open country. It gives untold families more usable green space and shared recreation. And it has, by and large, given us a far more handsome architecture than most detached suburban houses offer.

Some outstanding examples of "The Row House Revival" will be on view in a photographic exhibition at the National Housing Center beginning Tuesday. The exhibit was created by the Architectural League of New York and is being circulated about the country by the American Federation of Arts.

Row houses are of course, among the oldest housing types in civilization. In former times the houses of common people huddled together mainly for mutual protection, not only against outside enemies but also in the Mediterranean cultures, against the hot sun. Then arrow streets between the rows provided shade. And the atrium within the houses provided far more

privacy than most of our present-day suburban backyard patios.

AS THE ELEGANT houses at Pompeii prove, living in rows could be a most elegant affair. And it was soon discovered that beyond the necessities of common defense, there was great convenience in living close together because it enabled one to share close-by facilities and amenities.

The most charming row houses in modern times were built on this idea as speculative developments in Bath, a small town in England. Here, in the mid-18th century, a father and son team (John Wood the elder and John Wood the younger) created the Royal Crescent and other rows of houses that faced not their counterparts across the street, but open, park like country and elegant squares. A lot of people could thus enjoy fine views. And by building a whole block of houses all run together and treated as an architectural whole, comparatively small houses could be given all the dignity of a palace. Royal Crescent is one of the most elegant examples of Georgian architecture.

The English still call such row house developments "terraces." Town houses in those days were the in-town palaces of the wealthy whose primary seat of splendor was the country manor.

And that, of course, is what the growing American middle-class aspired to when it moved out to suburbia. We wanted our own little manors on our own little estates, though Mother has to run the place without servants, Father has to keep it up without handymen and Johnny and Jane have no place to play once they have outgrown the postage stamp-size yard.

Besides, the front lawn and narrow side yards of these miniature manor estates are pretty useless. And all the thousands of other, often identical suburban houses create ever-lengthening distances to most of the other things you want to do besides sleep, watch TV and roast hot dogs.

SO IN THE PAST few years the row house came back and all was forgiven, or nearly all. The name "town house," of course, is not quite accurate because the majority of them are built out in the country. They have the advantage of saving land and travel distances. They do away with the useless front lawns and side yards and put this saving in open space so trees, brooks and ponds can be preserved. Here the kids can really roam and the management worries about the upkeep.

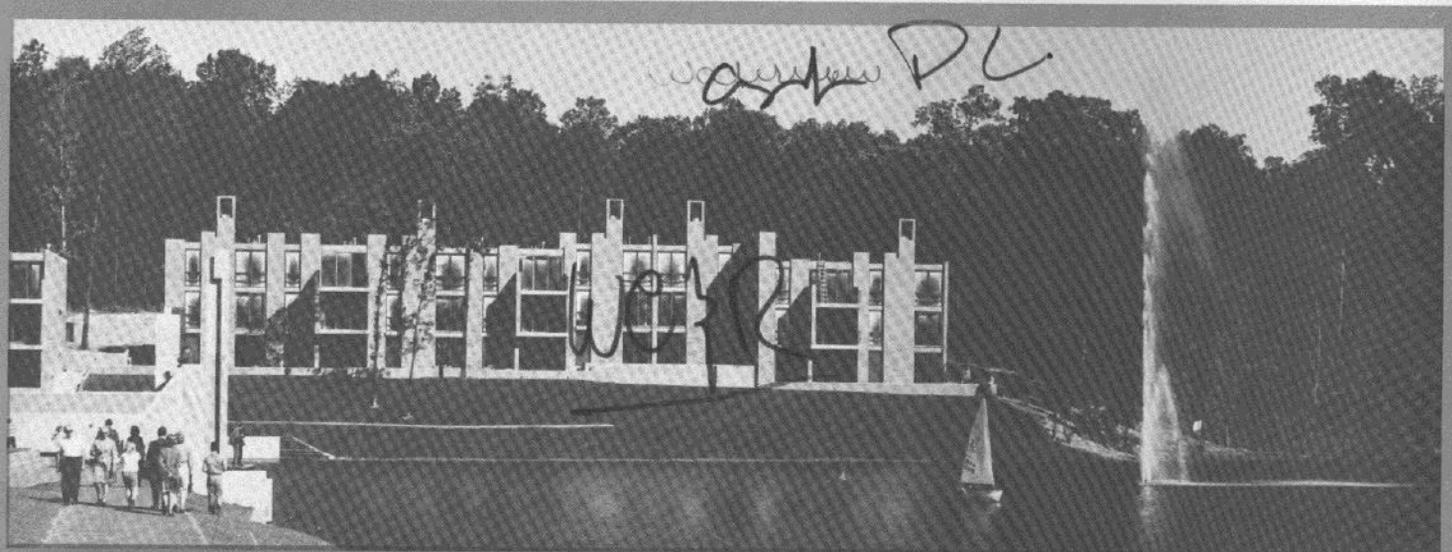
Planned development permits screened parking, swimming pools and community

centers. Town houses, furthermore, can be built more economically because they have common foundations, walls and roofs, as well as heating and cooling. They save the government money because municipal services are closer together, the street area is reduced and the postman doesn't have to walk so far.

People obviously like them and more and more builders are therefore converted to the idea. We could have far more suburban town house developments if only our confused and reactionary local governments would change their zoning laws to permit them. But most of the great statesmen on our county councils saw their counties get rich and fat on conventional subdivisions and haven't discovered yet that these have long ago started to make us poor. We pay for them not only with tax money but also with "deproved" schools, services and quality of life.

The one thing we wouldn't forgive the old row house was its drab, monotonous look. No one since the Royal Crescent has treated it quite like a palace. But even if some architect had, we don't really want to live in palaces any more but feel entitled to the individuality of kings and noblemen in our own right, though we seldom get it.

But when the row house became a town house, a number of creative, modern architects came to the rescue. They have contributed little to our suburban housing, partly because it doesn't pay them and partly because the builders feel they can get along without them. But for



the town house the builders have sought professional help. And as the exhibition at the Housing Center shows, the results are very encouraging.

A FEW OF the architects in the show, to be sure, seem more interested in architecture than in people. An example is Mies van der Rohe, whose Lafayette Park in Detroit creates a most handsome environment. But this modern Versailles shows little respect for the individuality of the town house owner. You don't really live in a house. You live behind a seemingly endless glass facade. Mies just sliced up his apartment house boxes and strung each story along the street. The apartment box has an elevator. Along the street you must walk.

Chloethiel Woodard Smith, in contrast, managed at Capitol Park in Washington's Southwest to give her town houses remarkable individual variety within a wonderful unity of composition. Charles M. Goodman's houses at River Park, in the same urban renewal area, are more uniform. But his is a uniformity rich with almost playful delight.

There are twenty town house designs by almost as many architects and from all parts of the country in the exhibition. And it is amazing how varied and inventive they are both in appearance and interior layout. There is, in fact, as much variety here as in contemporary detached houses. The quality of design is, however, immeasurably superior.

Some of the best new town houses I have seen however, are not included in this exhibition, presumably because they were not completed at the time it was assembled. They are the clusters by Chloethiel W. Smith and by Whittlesey & Conklin that are mirrored in Laké Ann at Reston, Va., America's new-



1. Townhouses at Reston designed by Whittlesey & Conklin
2. Townhouses designed for Reston by Louis Sauer
3. Reston townhouses designed by Chloethiel W. Smith
4. Chloethiel Woodward Smith townhouses at Reston
5. One of the Charles M. Goodman townhouses at Reston

est New Town. While the Smith cluster nostalgically echoes the soft charm of Portofino, Conklin's has much of the urbane elegance of Bath. In both there is, if that's what you want, far more of Western man's cultural tradition in every single brick than in a whole Levittown of phoney Colonial houses.

Though, perhaps just a little less familiar at first glance, the same is true of Reston's latest architectural feat, the new town houses by Louis Sauer, overlooking Reston's golf course.

IT HAS BEEN a long time since the architecture of our day has accomplished as much for human livability. You'll find here not just exciting and dramatic shapes to serve the noble art of architecture, but shapes that serve the joys of being at home.

Huge windows bring in views and heighten a sense of spaciousness. Both indoors and out, there are well defined spaces for family "togetherness," what with sun decks, balconies and a well secluded patio. The arrangement of these spaces is so commodious and clever that family members will hardly get into each other's way.

Most of all, however, Sauer's splendid design, at relatively moderate prices, should remove the last reasonable objections to the row house idea. The houses appear wide on the inside, rather than narrow and vertical. And each has an unmistakably individual entrance, not just a kind of apartment door out on the street. I am almost tempted to call the Sauer town houses a new breakthrough in town house design.

At any event, the new name has already considerably changed and improved the monotonous, drab, old-shucks, let's not even mention the word any more.

