

# V.F. PERKINS

## Upstairs, downstairs: Victor Perkins and Nicholas Ray's domesticity

'The world is full of wonderful actors!'  
V. F. Perkins

### Prelude

Very frequently I find a story standing in wait in the wings of consciousness, so to speak: a glowing ghost, if you will, asking, preparing, positioning itself to be introduced, yet never fully stepping into the light. I wish I had told this to Victor Perkins, who wrote, sensibly enough, in compelling our attention to the filmmaker's 'organisation of the world', that 'stories do not exist except as they are told' (1972: 70). As a writer of stories I think they *do exist*, and before they are told.

I would certainly agree that the form of the story is *owed* to the teller's quirky way of telling it, owed, let us say, to the behavior of the storytelling enunciator one learns to become on occasion, whom I have learned to become. Owed to the enunciation . . . but not exactly formed in it. Victor Perkins is perhaps reading the situation from the point of view of the audience, not the storyteller (and he was sensitive to storytellers). For me the form's ghost is there before the expression, and so I can't believe, as he seems to, that the thing actually doesn't exist outside of its telling. The storyteller is not only

an enunciator but must also be, and first, a listener, always on his perch with ears perked at the darkness well before the throat is cleared or the hand set to letter. What the storyteller-listener gathers up is the story's imaginary existence, its very gatherability, and only once the challenge of gathering is met the thing can be told. A very lovely passage at the beginning of Julio Cortázar's 'Blow-Up' says this with a charming playfulness:

It'll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing. If one might say: I will see the moon rose, or: we hurt me at the back of my eyes, and especially: you the blond woman was the clouds that race before my you're his our yours their faces. What the hell. (1967: 114)

For a writer, the blueprint or anatomy of the story, the imagined and 'heard' entity, even the spirit, that precedes the writing can differ in both trivial and salient ways from the 'told' work. The child that promised to be the man is hiding (but only hiding) in the man's shadows. Between what the listener-dreamer found and the enunciator-artist worked upon is a kind of slippage, something more than a discontinuity and less than a contradiction, and because of which, revision is conceivable. Also possible is a certain terminal dissatisfaction: that no matter what one manages to put into form, it is not enough to bring out – all out – the perfume that can no longer be remembered.

The storyteller / imaginer dreams beyond what he or she is ready to accomplish. So the present moment, every present moment, has its impossibilities.

Perkins suggests – astutely – that told stories have order and credibility. Recognising the need for these does not alter a painful and compelling fact: that there are two orders: one the audience fervently wishes to recognise, a relation between a text and an everyday they already know, and another that the storyteller fervently needs in his trap between the medium and his desire. Should things go well, the audience will be happy enough, but no story ever makes its teller so happy that it can peaceably be filed away. Beyond, behind, perhaps even lost is the germ. Is not the originary story, call it the deep story, the story before the storytelling, something like the book to



George F. Morrell, 'The House That Jack Built' (detail)



Jim Backus (l.) with stairbound James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)

which Poe refers at the beginning of his story 'The Man of the Crowd', a thing that 'does not permit itself to be read,' *'er lässt sich nicht lesen'* (1998: 91). *To be read*, as in pointed out and inscribed. It does not permit itself to be told.

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These two tellers of stories, the impressionable who is touched by experience and the impression-making who works to form, these two lobes of the spirit . . . There are no serious artists, in filmmaking or any other medium, who are not intimately familiar with this pair.

Could they not, one very sensitive to presence and harmony, to deep structural form; and the other laboring to make a credible telling-out, say a musically credible telling – could they not, like any pair of roommates, occupy discreet living spaces, arranged in such a way that some pathway linked them?<sup>1</sup> Moreover, might one such habitation not be above and the other below? That is the arrangement impressionable youngsters saw pictured at the very beginning of the twentieth century, in 'The House That Jack Built', an inspiring series of photogravure illustrations from the magical hand of George F. Morrell. These pictures were cached, and discovered with the greatest delight, in volume after volume of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia* (1908; and many subsequent editions). Morrell (who died in 1962, and whose métier was astoundingly detailed architectonic drawings of, say, ship construction or the solar system) fashioned the human body as a multi-storey house with the control center nestled at the top. In 'Jack At Home in His Wonderful House' (Mee 1910: 5620), for example, we have a dense cluster of nerves running from an atrium just inside the 'hall door' and also from the 'nose window', 'ear window', and 'eye window' upward into the domed 'telephone exchange', where a young clerk in a high collar sits upon what resembles a piano bench to connect wires in a vast switchboard. (The first telephone switchboard was installed in 1877 in Boston.) Dropping down out of frame at the bottom of Morrell's picture, a respectful nod to Victorian prurience, are 'Action, Touch, and general controlling wires

of the Lower Storeys'. A caption charmingly reads, 'This is a picture of Jack in his study at the top of the wonderful house which builds itself'.<sup>2</sup>

In the vertical structure imagined and visualised here, certain popular social arrangements are presumed: between modern comfort and home ownership; between various higher functions (the switchboard as moral arbiter) and the 'upstairs' zone; between the body as structure and the principles of architecture; and between upstairs and downstairs. In 1971, when *Film as Film* was in the process of being published, this verticality and its implications gained particular attention in America. Here, in an early case of British cultural arrangements being sold as commodity to ravenous American audiences (on the Public Broadcasting System, by way of WGBH-Boston's *Masterpiece Theatre* hosted by the transatlantic personality Alistair Cooke), viewers of London Weekend Television's *Upstairs, Downstairs* (ITV, 1971) by Jean Marsh and Eileen Atkins came to know the tricky insides of the domestic vertical arrangement that was already long-lived in the United Kingdom. But the seminal American filmmaker Nicholas Ray (1911-1979), who had studied architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright, knew about building forms on top of forms (the gaze down off the cliff after the 'chickie run') quite as well as he recognised the challenges of another aesthetic principle, the horizontal, which took on centrality in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) once Warner Bros. made arrangements to use CinemaScope. 'The wide screen, in particular, extended the film-maker's resources for the organisation of action within a single shot', writes Perkins (1972: 56). Here, we can see the stairs leading up and the spanning bannister holding safe the landing, all in unity, so it is true that the wide screen helped; but what it was helping with was the explicit invocation of two worlds, one atop the other, and the passageway between them.

Imagine mounting a staircase upward from a hall or atrium that links the world outside to a private zone above. This vertical division of domestic space centers the Victorian 'two up / two down', with bedrooms floating on high and reception space beneath. Persons finding their way through the front

door would not, as a matter of course, be walking up into the most personal of family spaces. 'Upstairs' was a local privilege, related to ownership and propriety, to being a stair climber, to moving into the sublime territory invoked in *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956) where waits, for Perkins, a haven of 'privacy, rest, fantasy and male dominance' (1972: 91) and, in Ray's own words, 'possible refuge, serenity and joy' (qtd. in Perkins 1972: 91). As far back as 1842, Robert Browning had published 'Up at a Villa – Down in the City', a poem extolling (some say satirising) the delights of city life, the excitements of a place where 'all day long, one's life is a perfect feast' (1896: 120); and frowning at the much more private residential possibility of the country seat, where 'T is May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off the heights' (1896: 121): 'down' for Browning and his fellow countrymen of the time is exciting, bustling, spontaneously intoxicating, and 'up' is private, sedate, natural, but also without the friction of stimulus.

Upstairs spaces in film are refracted in the structural 'above' to be seen in dramas of the upper class (a magnetic class subject to copying, the behavior of 'uppers' being imitated, less elaborately but with fervor, by managers and workers below). Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1959) give a well-known example. 'Upstairs' privacy implies body management and therefore exclusion: preparing for and gaining rest; cleansing and other rituals of toilet; and clandestine, confidential conversation about things in circulation downstairs that can be discussed only when they are at a remove. What lingers and festers outside the house is attached to – part of – a 'lower' world: the visitor imports it from the doorstep. The homeowner's body and thoughts, uninfluenced by social intercourse, belong above, in Morrell's 'telephone exchange', a zone if not clear surely organically ordered. 'Downstairs' life outside the house requires masks, training, discipline. Ascending the stairs, one shifts from role-playing and the strict morality of situations into a condition of feeling, self-concern, and intimacy, a coalition of secrets. There is a moment in *Rebel Without a Cause* when harassed Plato, a sensitive and confused boy, rushes into his home and races up the carpeted stairs to the carpeted sanctuary of his parents' bedroom and

their sacrosanct coral pink bed – sacrosanct even though they are no longer a couple.

A different moment in *Rebel* caught Perkins' always extraordinarily sensitive eye. Jim Stark has heard a sudden clatter above his head. Going upstairs he finds his father Frank (Jim Backus) stooping to clean up the mess from a breakfast tray he has accidentally dropped to the floor. Frank is wearing a housewife's apron over his suit pants and white shirt because, as we may assume, he has just been nursing his migraine-beset wife – this film having come out just over a year after *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), one might speculate on a possible reference to the caregiver Lars Thorwald – and has dressed himself 'properly', at least as she would, for domestic chores: chores, that is work undertaken in her domain by the proper controller of domesticity in 1955, Mom. Doing this spate of housework Frank Stark is, briefly at least, the 'domesticated American male', a figure anointed by *Life* magazine in 1954 (May [1988] 2008: 139). Yet the distinct irony of his garb also manages to underline the brutal patriarchal division of labor and compensation prevalent in the culture, a cause of both his privilege and his torment. Ray was not inventing the man in the apron as a screen image. The character type had, in fact, graced the corridors of popular culture since at least 1945, when Danny Kaye unselfconsciously wore a pale blue apron in Virginia Mayo's kitchen in *Wonder Man* (H Bruce Humberstone); and he showed up once again January 20, 1954 when on *The Web* (CBS, 1950-54) Jim Backus wore a domestic apron as Judge Bradley Stevens conversing with his mother (Norma Varden) in the episode 'I Married Joan'. The spillage confronting aproned Frank is distinctive, a real *mac-ula*, and he panics to clean it as quickly and undetectably as he can. 'Let her see it', Jim says. A challenge to both parents at once.

In 'The Cinema of Nicholas Ray', Perkins is specifically interested in Ray's use of the 'upstairs' setting for this fragile scene, as well as in the filmmaker's other uses of the 'upstairs' in *Bigger Than Life*, *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957). His discussion notes a particular post-Victorian organisation of bourgeois life that settles the family in a private or semi-private two-level home, an arrangement shown in most of the house interiors in *Rebel* but already well-known among working- and lower-middle-class

members of the British audience for whom, after the privations and destructions of war and the postwar move toward urban renewal (focused quite famously on the rebuilding of Coventry), a feverishly desired value was ownership of a domicile with its own self-contained living space: interior water closets, an equipped kitchen, a tiny garden plot. David Kynaston quotes a fifty-year-old woman living in an upper tenement flat (with a husband, two working children, and two children at school):

I'd like a sitting-room-kitchen, so that you could have meals in it, and a nice garden at the back for vegetables and chickens, and a flower garden in front. A nice bathroom all done with lino [. . .]. Coal fire in the living room and none in the bedrooms, I don't think fires in a bedroom are healthy. I'd like a sort of sunshine paper, if you know what I mean, with just a little heading round the top, flowers or fruit. That for the sitting room, and blue for the bedrooms. (2008: 50)

As Perkins points out knowingly about the two up / two down, having grown up in one himself, 'upstairs suggests both the possibility of a normal family life and the temporary retreat from responsibilities' (1976: 254). Having experienced his childhood during the war, Perkins may be intending to convey a great deal with the phrase 'a normal family life'. It was perhaps a condition of which he had only dreamed. The specter of a delectable breakfast spilled clumsily on the floor would have reverberated for Perkins, who from the age of four had eaten rationed food, falling into more and more deprivation as the years progressed: hungry, chilled with coal on the ration, and in fact seeing no end to rationing until he was eighteen (and *Rebel* came out). He told me he sometimes had baths while visiting a chum's house. Since in Britain the bedrooms and closet space were typically in the upstairs zone, with toilet outside, while public accommodation, access for visitors, a lounging and dining area, and the work zone of the kitchen – a fountainhead of responsibilities – were on the street level below, Ray's projection of the Starks' domestic space could have seemed familiar and logical enough to Perkins the British viewer: familiar if on the sumptuous side. The English house was very often cramped, narrow, minimally decorated, and cold, and a bath (preparation for circulation outside) was typically had downstairs in a tub in the parlour next to the fireplace. In the England of Perkins' childhood, the

downstairs domestic sphere was the one that abutted – that led directly to – the grim wartime world outside, and to head upstairs was to retreat from that dark chaos; to become, not a figure anxiously dancing public ritual and subject to moral review but, a private, largely undisclosed person, a body requiring management using space for playing out the intimate impetus of the deep self.

Victor Perkins was three years old when World War II began. Nicholas Ray was three years old at the beginning of World War I. Two personalities separated in time but still mirror images of each other, because to be three years old when one's world changes is the same wherever and whenever you are. I was three years old when the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb.

Perkins finds it aesthetically and ideologically appropriate – correctly so, I think – that the father-son confrontation about the spilled food should take place on, of all places, the landing outside the bedrooms, up at the top of the stairs (while of course Ray could just as well have set it in the kitchen below). There is enough liminality in the space to accommodate the presence of food. And as we see it, there is a dramaturgically helpful, but strange, capaciousness. Many of the Stark home scenes of the film were shot in Ray's own Bungalow No. 2 at the Chateau Marmont, a very tiny little home (as I observed), which only a wide-angle lens (not used to a great degree in the filming) could have made seem spacious. The landing scene was made on a Warner Bros. soundstage designed to mock up the bungalow: but on a stage designers could take some liberties. In this key moment both the idea of eating and the deeply personal – maybe too clean – relationship between the husband and his wife are being openly alluded to, in front of the son. It is not only that Mrs. Stark has been what Jim would think too obsessive about tidiness at home; she has tucked the organicism, the unshaped truth of human life, away. Perkins' evaluation of this space has wish in it, too, because his own upstairs was far too confined a place for action like this. As Jim argues with his father he shows his own growing manhood and invokes a way, quite unspoken at the time, for Frank to co-exist with his wife: 'Let her see it!' Jim is offering a new dispensation of power, his command riddled with a sexual innuendo that Ray and Dean would both have understood. The scene must have burned in Perkins' imagination. Marriage

in its core, Ray is saying to his young watcher Perkins, the arrangement that settles what men are to women and women are to men, is here, right here, in this mess, on the floor. This 'it' is the 'it' of all of us. Upstairs the spill and soil of emotional truth are usually hidden away; the family secret – definitely also a matter of organicism and mess – is kept safe from the eyes of outsiders. 'I sometimes think I see', wrote Norman O. Brown, 'that civilizations originate in the disclosure of some mystery, some secret; and expand with the progressive publication of their secret; and end in exhaustion when there is no longer any secret, when the mystery has been divulged, that is to say, profaned' (1991: 4).

If Jim is subtly confessing the sort of man he would like to be, one who would 'let her see it', a British boy in late adolescence may have sensed him pointing to the man he wished he could be, too, the man Jim does not think he is yet though he is on the path. Think of this scene as a radical textbook on 1955 masculinity, a sharper pointer than even the film as a whole or Ray's other very explicitly critical work. The film 'uses upstairs to point the failure of a man through his weakness as both husband and father', Perkins suggests, but in this use of setting, 'the spectator does not have to strain to make the required connections' because the upstairs / downstairs relationship is, for them as for the characters, 'common property' (1972: 91). Later in the story, at the empty mansion, we see Jim's radical 'husband' character rehearsed as he engages with his 'wife' and 'son' (Judy [Natalie Wood] and Plato [Sal Mineo]) in open-hearted play, behavior staged in an equivocal space with only figurative depths and heights: Jim and Judy never quite get all the way up the stairs, and jumping down into the empty swimming pool offers Jim the too-dry reality of concrete, not the mythic oceanic dream.

In a particular sense Frank Stark is visible in stark nakedness at the top of the stairs; certainly he is without his habitual appurtenances. We have entered a fragmentary bubble in which his authority is fully stripped away and his paternal identity fully confused, not only because of that apron – many men wear aprons when they work – but by way of the frilly, feminised design of the thing. In truth this is one of his wife's aprons, and in donning it he has become her for the moment: ill-disposed now, she would normally – by social

dictate – demand of herself the debasement he is self-inflicting in rushing toward tidiness at the cost of dignity. Instead of relaxing into the mess of life, Frank – as Backus performs him – is nervous, ashamed in his klutziness, a weak man who has let the side down. Stooping, he loses his manhood doubly, becoming an epitome of the hen-pecked husband (a figuration mocked at the time in comic strip caricatures and Hollywood films) and, as his wise son is trying to point out, a denier of nature, repressing the shapelessness he really has inside and that the world has everywhere, and rejecting himself. All of this happens in the part of the house where sacred objects routinely fall from their perches, clothing drops away from the skin, lipstick is wiped off, the food that went politely into the mouth falls, as Hitchcock's Vandamm has it, 'from a great height' (James Mason in *North by Northwest* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1959]).

Given that Perkins noticed Nicholas Ray's penchant for setting scenes upstairs, making exquisite sense of the setting of a scene as underpainting for its action, we might ask how our moving forward to watch and think about film is illuminated and assisted, but perhaps also a little obstructed, by Victor's sensitivity to the *above*.

Looking up, especially looking up for moral clarity or domestic harmony, can be a signal feature of a childhood, an observation Claes Oldenburg made about his own massive sculptures as related to a world he saw long before (1969: 33). Looking up the social ladder to more luxuriant climes moves many young people as they grow, especially young people caught in the brittle, constraining English class structure we find described so artfully in Orwell's 'Such, Such Were the Joys', or working-class boys trapped in northern factory towns like Albert Finney's desperate Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960). In the delusion of social panic, *out* seems to be *up*, 'up' as in status-enriched. But for the two up / two down resident status is gained only by heading 'out', which is to say, 'down in the city'. The social climb is fraught with dangers. Victor Perkins told me that the comfortably respectable life of the intellectual that he lived as an adult was one for which he had to change himself, learning, as he surely did, and quite painstakingly, that for gaining passage to the airy echelons of the academy he

had to systematically extirpate and replace certain elements of his early class identity, for example his pronunciation of English, this to the degree that the accents of his childhood speech became inaccessible to him. Thus the real, lost Victor Perkins remained beneath what he became, but 'beneath' metaphorically, in the safe upstairs bedroom where his original relation to the world was always assured. This self-denial, this domestic confinement away from the action, is what Ray shows us in Frank's trouble with the food spill: a forced and immediate self-invention, making oneself up for the world beyond the middle-class home, cleaning up the family smear for showing off 'properly' in public life. This 'housekeeping' is 'Elevation' but in a *downstairs mode*, a prelude to the pumping up of social status, propriety, ownership. Frank performs it by 'going down the stairs', as it were repressing the bedroom talk that will not pass muster in the board room, but Jim is hinting to him that the repression is dishonesty.

When one goes upstairs, as Jim Stark does to make contact, let us argue to make primal contact, with his father, one is in retreat from the public gaze, Jim, for example, tucked away from his gang with their relentless demands upon his honor: retreat from a civic hierarchy, an intemperate moralism, where one carries enforced responsibilities and a masqueraded self, to a cache where ethics and personal conviction rule. There is a liminal zone that is only part-way up or part-way down the stairs, Jim meets Judy there in the mansion and they have a candle; but this zone is like a waiting room, it exists only to be passed through. If they mounted to the bedroom, they could play at growing up (being what Jim thinks his father has failed to be), but upstairs they would in truth be children again, protected, stowed away. The child in each of us is 'upstairs' of the adult, who, having learned the world, is always just as prepared to open the door and invite the stranger in as to wander outside and make a living.

Perkins grew up on Church Road in the Alphington area of Exeter in the late 1930s and early 1940s, one of those children terrified and forever marked by the so-called Baedeker blitz of late April and early May 1942, when the Luftwaffe targeted Britain's landmarks of historic charm such as St. Paul's in London and noteworthy sites in the west. Too young was he to appreciate the acerbity of Mollie Panter-Downes, the *New*



*Yorker's* observer, who made a wry note May 9, 1942 about the Germans' 'new cultural policy of visiting Britain with an open Baedeker propped above their bomb sights': 'The general feeling seemed to be that much as one might lament the disintegration of a gem of eighteenth-century English architecture, it was more sensible to reflect that Nash's elegant inspirations had served a good purpose as bait to draw more German bombers away from the Russian front' ([1942] 2014: 275). With bombers not so far away in the sky, young Victor may well have developed a disenchantment, if enchanted he had ever really been, with the terraced two-up / two-down experience so many in England shared in those years and for decades thereafter, chiseling out life with a certain restrictive diligence, a constant putting of things aside against a more destitute tomorrow and a suspending of desire in order to keep on the alert. The war was forcing consciousness to leave the house even if the body crouched behind blackout curtains.

It is possible – say, from across the sea – to bear for Perkins genuine and intensive admiration without at the same time fully occupying his point of view. For some critical intelligences there never was a stairway such as we find in Jim Stark's house. I am one of those who, through childhood, youth, and adulthood, until I was about forty years old, lived in a single-storey apartment, what in England are called, with an aptness Ray might have chuckled at, flats. While I may have climbed the stairs of a building to get to the door of my home – and not so many stairs at that – once I was inside everything was dispersed laterally, not vertically. Above and below one's apartment were people from another world. One neither snuck *down* to the kitchen to grab a midnight snack nor experienced the vertical privacy (and piety) of a bedroom upstairs. The kitchen was east of my bedroom, and between the two *endroits* was the piano at which I practiced with my back to the public, and very clean, seats in the living room. The piano's guts were as though part of my private space. I thought of my best friends as living, not outside but, beside, one further east, one further west. Downstairs, as I knew it, was a strange and gothic zone of elderly residents who kept African violets lining their street-level windowsill and a dusty, creepy chamber containing wood-slatted lockers. Perhaps the

clear distinction between an 'upstairs self' and a 'downstairs self' is one I never learned to make.

But my point is not to insinuate my own biography as a critique of Victor's. It is to note a fact easily apparent to me because of that biography yet perhaps more exotically unfamiliar to those who grew up living vertically, say, to the English whose childhood was early in World War II: that cinema itself, the sacred screen, *has no upstairs*. It is always on a single level, directly before the viewer's eyes, and the gravitational experience we can have with architectural elevations can be only an onscreen allusion (and illusion), not a given. When I mount a staircase in the actual world I feel the blood shifting in my thighs and calves. In the movie theater we sit in the dark and look forward and only forward at movement: up / down, left / right, toward the camera or away, around and around in circles . . . but in looking we neither climb nor fall. In his use of CinemaScope Ray was sensitive to this fact of planar experience. When Perkins claims for places 'a structural as well as a symbolic or evocative value' (1976: 255) has he forgotten, perhaps, along with the accent of his childhood, the way beyond structure places onscreen can have an evocative value as well? Because migrating into the private zone 'above' is greater than narrative.

What remains mysteriously exciting for me about Frank Stark spilling his food tray 'up there', mysterious as in the perfume of a story imagined by an author but not committed to expression, is that even if we conceive 'upstairs' action as a domestic retreat and challenge, we also experience it as flowing directly from – and by way of a tactile movement directly affiliated with – all the other visions in the film, which form a single culminating, horizontal train, not really unlike life in a universe with only one storey. It is the action of *Rebel*, up and down, that leads our experience of the story as told, the story that for Perkins *exists*, but this telling, this *existing*, flows from a perfumed hint of something deeper and not told, an arrangement of space so very elemental, deriving so fully from long ago, that it seems to be nature itself. Whilst we can *imagine* ourselves moving up with Jim to meet his father, the scene as we watch it carries us only forward: forward, forward, and further forward, across the border.

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\_\_\_\_\_ (2019) 'Hide, Jonathan, Seek', *Film International* 17: 4 (December), 96-110.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of an elegant and fascinating approach to this dualism see my 'Hide, Jonathan, Seek' (2019)

<sup>2</sup> The nearest social arrangements came to Morrell's farsighted design was in March 1947, when the first of Levittown's mass-produced homes was sold. Not quite building the self, these homes were assembled with extraordinary swiftness, flowing from an assembly line.