

HOW OUR HOUSE WAS BUILT

In 1961 I was still teaching at Harvard, but I had accepted a position at Washington University in St. Louis for the fall, the old city on the Mississippi, the blues and the beginning of *Winnetou* where the German greenhorn acquires his legendary guns. The famous arch was just being erected when we arrived. Consequently, we had to find an abode for the family. At that point, my wife Dorothea happened upon a book entitled *Your Solar House* in which one architect from each state was featured, Harris Armstrong from Missouri. The ever-ready Dorothea immediately wrote him a letter inquiring whether he could build us a house for 18000 dollars within walking distance from the university. This was my expressed wish because I had to travel a dozen of miles daily from Lexington to Cambridge and had stipulated that our next residence should be close to my new work place. But this hope was thwarted again.

Mr. Armstrong replied by return mail, ironically. It was not his custom, he said, to discourage future clients, in this case, however, he had to do it because our request was too unrealistic. For this sum he could not build us a house in the vicinity of the university or anywhere else in St. Louis. He advised us to invest our money in a car instead! Nevertheless, the letter ended in a positive note: We should call him at when in St. Louis.

We used the Spring Recess, a whole free week in March, to look around in St. Louis where friends could put us up. We had farmed out our older children in Massachusetts and took along our two year old Gabi for whom our hostess could look out while we followed around our real estate agent. She showed us a number of fine houses in the university neighborhood but Dorothea found fault with each one of them. They were either too large, too small, too expensive or in too bad shape. Obviously she could not get Mr. Armstrong out of her mind. On the next-to-last morning before our return trip we were shown into a magic, but completely overgrown garden which enchanted Dorothea, but the residence was totally inadequate, too small and jerrybuilt. Dorothea hurried to a telephone in order to ask Harris Armstrong if he could remodel this cabin in accordance with our needs. She returned with the reply that the architect wanted to see her immediately together with her husband.

The very sight of his Japanese style office building with a pond in front and a vaulted bridge discouraged me. It seemed too elegant and too expensive for our circumstances. Mr. Armstrong himself was an imposing older gentleman. As if he had guessed my thoughts he began his speech negatively. He never mentioned the remodeling about which I would have liked to hear his opinion. Instead he explained to us why it wasn't easy for an architect to build a house for university professors. In the first place they did not have money, secondly they move away shortly and thirdly they would marred his work with tasteless tings, as had happened to him recently. He did not require Swedish lamps ... At this point Dorothea interrupted what she felt to be an examination. Would Danish lamps satisfy his expectations? This interjection surprised him lose his thread and changed his attitude. For a while he did not say anything at all but drew something resembling a house with swift and sure strokes on a pad of lined paper. The sketch looked attractive immediately. When we admired it silently he asked: Why don't you say anything? I am drawing your house. Noticing my astonished glance he continued: There were also certain advantages if an architect built our house. For example, we could buy an irregular lot which the average construction company could

not use, thereby saving a few thousand dollars, enough for the architect's fee. At this point Dorothea entered the discussion by answering his earlier question: We needed this and that, we would like to have a bedroom for each of our three children as well as a study for her husband, built-in book shelves and so on. At every mention Mr. Armstrong tore off a sheet and drew in the desired object on the next. Finally, Dorothea spoke of her interest in a garden, which evoked great enthusiasm in Mr. Armstrong. It turned out that he too was a passionate gardener, and the two engaged in a lively exchange about their experiences and predilections. I began to realize that hardly anything could now keep Mr. Armstrong from building a house for us. And so I asked how one could find such an irregular lot. "Nothing easier than that! Peter", he called out, and when one of his employees entered he asked him: "How much do you want for your lot?" Peter mentioned an affordable sum, and when Mr. Armstrong noticed that we were not absolutely shocked, he added: "Peter drive these people to your lot." It was less than two minutes away and consisted of a large hill full of spring flowers and a number of giant oak trees. When we returned he asked us how we liked the place, and we had no reason to deny that we did. "Very well", Mr. Armstrong said, "in that case I could walk to it before breakfast and supervise the construction". If you buy it I'll build you a house on it. It is a deal?" We bought the oak hill in the Village of Oakland the same afternoon and started our return trip the next day.

Before leaving town we were supposed to stop by and get to know the entire Armstrong team. They were all assembled in the courtyard and greeted us with hilarity. Every one of them knew that the famous architect had gotten it into his head to build a residence for "poor people". Even Mrs. Armstrong had come forth from her adjacent home to say "hello". If we didn't have enough money she could lend us some, she said. We had to admit that our legendary 18000 really did not exist in cash but were invested in our house in Lexington, Massachusetts. It had to be sold before we could lay our hands on it. The accommodating Armstrongs consoled us about this difficulty too, assuring us that sooner or later any house could be sold in America.

After our return to Cambridge Mr. Armstrong had to finance the construction with his own funds because the sale of our house was delayed considerably. Not until the end of the summer were we able to complete the transaction after a few failed attempts. In the meantime Mr. he called every day to deliberate with Dorothea about thousands of details because he soon understood that I was much too impractical. The fall semester at Washington University began in August. For this reason we had to rent an apartment temporarily. But we drove to the construction site daily to observe the progress and lend a hand ourselves. We had been promised the house for November 1. On that evening we stood at the entrance with kith and kin but discovered to our dismay that the floors were still moist from varnish. One could not enter the living space upstairs without causing utter damage.

Mr. Armstrong had built the house into the hill, cutting of its top so that one could walk to a terrace and the more or less level backyard. Unfortunately most of the oak trees had had to make room for the house. We burned their wood for decades in our wonderful ceramic stove. The entrance door was on the lower floor, you had to climb a wooden staircase to reach the living quarters. The expression *solar house* referred to the fact that Mr. Armstrong calculated the angle of the sunlight for his design. In winter the sun shone deeply into the livingroom while it kept out of it in summer leaving the house as "cool" as it ever could be in Missouri.

We had no choice but to crowd into a rather small room on the lower floor where we were about to spend the night in our sleeping bags, tight as sardines, when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Armstrong had come to check on us. When she saw how uncomfortable we were she packed us into her car and drew us to her own house where we stayed until the floors had dried.

Now we went about painting the walls, hang the pictures, place our furniture and install the aforementioned lighting fixtures. I remained true to my custom to paint a picture on one of the walls as I had done in every apartment where we had lived. Mr. Armstrong visited us every weekend to perform the improvements every new place requires. Dorothea kept busy for years laboriously transforming the barren construction site into a blossoming garden. Our architect gladly assisted her in this endeavor. The Armstrongs became our good friends as they had really been from the very beginning. They included us in their social circle and often let us use their country place on the Meramec river, until it fell victim to arsonists. Unfortunately both Armstrongs are now dead. We have been living in this place for decades contrary to Mr. Armstrong's prediction. His house is partly to blame. The thought of its genesis and of the Armstrongs themselves helped me to reject many offers from other universities.