

## Panic

MY FIRST YEAR AS A TWENTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD assistant professor at Berkeley was filled with frenzy and moments of heart-stopping anxiety. In that year, I also undertook my first independent architectural commissions. A young architect's first house is like most people's first sexual experience—the culmination of an apparently endless period of fantasy, preparation, and anticipation. One's entire persona is wrapped up in the outcome, *so it better be good*. I worked with a slightly older friend named Colin Wright, who I thought had more than my meager knowledge of how to put buildings together. Together we devised a neat system of hillside construction, made of big timber posts and beams. We thought it was absolutely radiant with Tectonic Truth, which we, as products of good architectural schools, thought was a virtue of the highest order. We believed to the bottom of our souls in the morality of its intrinsic thing-hood.

One day, when the house was partially built, the contractor called and said that I needed to meet with the electrician. Colin was not around. The electrician was a crusty old bird, and he walked around the half-built house with a strange appraising look. "Very interesting," he said, "the way you have exposed all these posts and beams and structural decking—but where do you run wiring in this kind of a house?" My mouth fell open, and every organ between my esophagus and my bowels went into spasm. I managed to ask weakly, "You mean ... you don't know?"

The second wave of panic came when the academic year started (fall 1967) and I learned that I would be teaching a lecture course for two hundred students that met three times a week. At that point, the sum total of my knowledge and thoughts about every subject in the world could have been stated nicely in about an hour and a quarter, so what was I going to do with thirty hours of lectures to two hundred people?

The most anxious moment came at the end of the academic year in June, when I was summoned to the office of Dean William Wheaton. Wheaton was a very distinguished, impressive man with whom I had exchanged two words and one handshake back in September. In his office, he was seated behind a big imposing desk, and I was offered the kind of spindly chair that leaves you with the question of what to do with your hands. He began the conversation by telling me that he had leukemia and that morning had had all of his blood changed. He knew he couldn't last much longer, but he felt fine after his transfusions.

While I was processing this information and trying to figure out the least graceless way to respond to it, he picked up what appeared to be my personnel file. "It says here," he said peering over an elegant pair of half glasses, "that you are the chairman of the Wurster Hall Public

Spaces Committee. I know you have been busy, but it appears that this committee has not had a single meeting all year.”

I think my poised and articulate retort was something like “ulp” or “glub.””

“I’m going to give you a chance to make amends,” he said. “Can you design the base for a piece of sculpture?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “I can do that just fine.”

He took a big tape measure out of a drawer and pushed it across the desk to me. “First,” he said, “you have to measure Catherine.” He then unveiled a bust of a lively looking middle-aged lady, which the inscription identified as Catherine Bauer Wurster. I learned later that this was the second casting of the bust by Oscar Stonorov that stands in the lobby of HUD in Washington. After I had measured her every which way and dutifully recorded the measurements, he said, “Now, you have to measure me. Catherine is going to live in the Environmental Design Library. I have the key to the library. Every night I want to kiss her good night, on the forehead, so measure me and get the base just the right height.” He stood and leaned forward, and I measured the exact distance from the floor to his lips. My high anxiety suddenly melted into this touching moment of incredible sweetness.

My god, what was there about this woman that would make this august man go to such pains to be able to kiss her effigy on the forehead each night of his last months on earth?

I had first learned about Catherine Bauer Wurster at the time of her death, two years before. I was working for the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin on a joint venture they were doing with Wurster, Bernardi, and Emmons. We were working in a miserable basement connected to the rest of the world and the Wurster office upstairs by a loudspeaker system. The other young denizens of this lowest level of architectural purgatory included Arthur Gensler, founder and now CEO of one of the world’s largest architectural firms; Sandy Hirshen, later dean of architecture at the University of British Columbia; and Christopher Alexander, author of *The Pattern Language*, *The Timeless Way of Building*, and *The Nature of Order*.

On a Monday morning, the loudspeaker informed us that Mrs. Wurster had not returned from a Sunday afternoon hike and that people from the office would be out because they were part of a search party. In an increasingly despairing voice, the loudspeaker kept us informed throughout the day about the search for this woman, whom we youngsters knew of only as the wife of the man desperately ill with Parkinson’s disease that we saw being wheeled into the office each day.

I don’t remember whether it was late that afternoon or Tuesday morning that the loudspeaker informed us, “The search is over.” Catherine Bauer Wurster’s body had been found on a remote spot on Mt. Tamalpais above Stinson Beach. I do remember a wailing explosion of grief, like the funeral of a martyr, broadcast to us through the loudspeaker. Later, as we mingled on the street

with the people from upstairs, it was clear that this terrible grief was genuine on the part of the senior people who really knew Mrs. Wurster, and perhaps a little feigned by people who knew her less well. Without doubt, there was something special about this woman.

I heard fragments of her remarkable story over many years, but it was not until the publication of Peter Oberlander's biography, *Houser*, in 2000 that I learned how the fragments fit together and how extraordinary she really was. In 1932, when she was just twenty-six years old, she was hard at work on writings that became *Modern Housing*, the classic book that laid the groundwork for the New Deal's program of public housing. She published articles in *Fortune*, *the Nation*, *New Republic*, and *Arts Weekly*. She also curated the much-praised housing section of the Museum of Modern Art's seminal 1932 exhibition of Modern Architecture. In the midst of all this, she found time to conduct her long and torrid affair with Lewis Mumford, who was at the peak of his career and very much a married man. This routine must be a still standing world record for precocious brilliance and perhaps for sheer energy. *Houser* contains excerpts from the correspondence she carried on with Mumford until the end of her life, and it is fascinating to read Mumford's somewhat ponderous attempts to animate the normal gravitas of his prose to keep up with the ruthless psychological acumen and unbridled sexual gaiety of her amazing letters.

It was her brilliance and energy that so captivated Bill Wheaton's dying heart and that had propelled the things she believed in into the mainstream of American public policy. Her passions and her legacy were shaped by two long European trips she made between 1929 and 1932. On these trips she met many of the brightest lights among the architectural avant-garde of Germany, Holland, and France, saw their work, and became completely swept up in what they were trying to do. Their message became her mission for America.

Catherine Bauer's European journeys and Le Corbusier's 1935 trip to America were essential elements of the cross-fertilization of European ideas and American opportunity that produced the dominant conventions of city building in both the United States and Western Europe after World War II. As one reads accounts of these seminal voyages of discovery, one cannot fail to notice some striking similarities. For one thing, both of these remarkable people were, by today's standards, wildly promiscuous. Almost everywhere they went, both of them seemed to have someone new and interesting to jump in the sack with. In the 1930's, it seems, being modern was lots of fun. Sexual liberation was a great emblem worn like a merit badge, standing for a larger liberation from the proprieties, stuffiness, and artistic canons of the ancien regimes.

It is tempting to speculate what the history of American public housing and urban renewal might have been had Catherine Bauer's journeys taken her to Vienna instead of Amsterdam, Berlin, and Frankfurt. What if it were Viennese, not German and Dutch, housing models that were introduced by her through the Museum of Modern Art in 1932? What if reconstruction and modification of the traditional city as it was practiced in Vienna, not eradication and replacement as the German, Dutch, and French modernists preached, had been introduced to America

with the same vigor and brilliance? What if the housing legislation of 1937 written by Catherine Bauer had championed Viennese, not German, models. Perhaps there would be no need fifty years later to tear down all that was built. Perhaps, as in Vienna, the public housing of America would have been a cherished, impeccably maintained address for generations of working poor, new immigrants, disabled citizens, and others.

I have never known anyone who wielded the power over others that Catherine Bauer Wurster did. She was much too smart not to have known that her great quest and that of her proud, heroic generation ended so very badly. Surely there is some inextricable connection between the high moral purpose of my first posts and beams and the infectious vigor of Catherine Bauer Wurster's convictions. They are two sides of that flawed but totally compelling modernity that we have yet to fully understand or recover from.