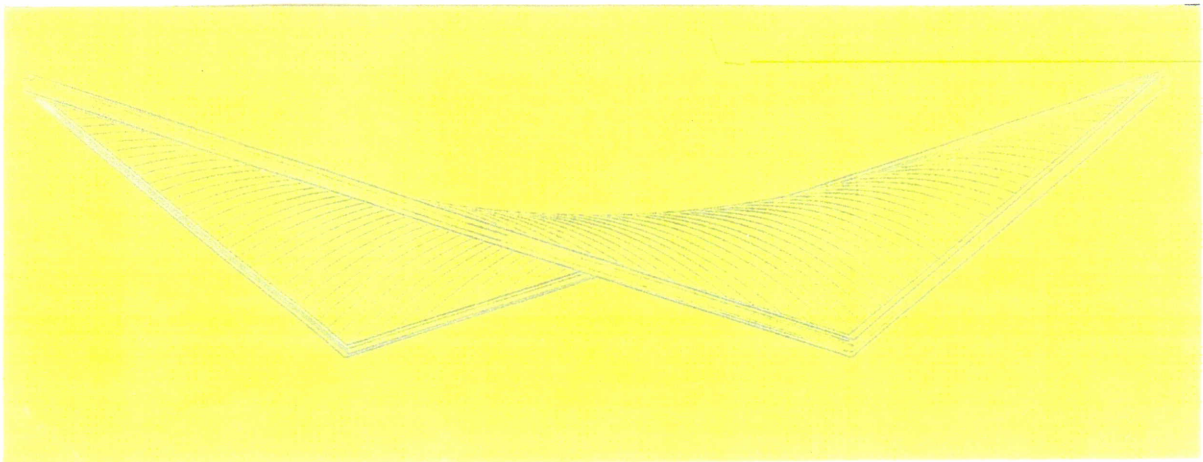


FINE THOUGHTS

A STORY ABOUT A HOUSE

AND A VISION



BY
Arch E Lynch Jr
Raleigh, North Carolina

FOREWORD

Commenting on the structural techniques of master builders Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, architectural historian Peter Blake observed:

Great buildings tend to have several lives. Life One begins as the building is completed; its success or failure is then judged according to whether or not the building works. Life Two begins a generation or two later, when everyone has forgotten whether the building worked out particularly well in terms of budget, comfort, or planning; by that time it is looked upon simply as a work of art - good, bad, or indifferent. Sometimes there is a Life Three that begins much, much later; any building that lasts until Life Three gets a real break, for in Life Three the mere fact that a building is very old makes it valuable - even though it may be as ugly as sin.

Continuing,

People still look at them in terms of how much they cost, how well they function, whether they are too hot or too cold - in short, whether the roof leaks or doesn't. To select these three men and call them outstanding architects of their epoch is taking something of a risk. Yet there is one measure that can be applied to gauge the greatness of an artist even during his lifetime; that is to ask how strongly he has influenced his contemporaries, how visible an imprint he has left upon his time.

Blake, Peter
The Master Builders
W.W. Norton & Company,
1976, Preface, at page xiv.

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IN MEMORY OF ARCHITECT AND A MASTERPIECE

**A
VISION**

A PERSONAL MEMORIAM

INTRODUCTORY TO REFLECTIVE MOMENTS

PERSONAL, OBJECTIVES

There will always be an appropriate time to pause and reflect back on moments or events which affect us in a meaningful and personal way. For me, some of these moments came out of the pursuit of a legal career for over fifty years. These moments, as well as others that relate back to past personal events, have a different reflective meaning now than in the past. My personal "reflect back" focuses on two happenings that took place in the 1970's - first, a breakup of my marriage in 1975 - second, the selection of a new and different place to live with the purchase of the Catalano House in 1978. These two events are totally unrelated. Yet, the second would never have happened without the occurrence of the first.

Focus on past events calls to mind other things which just randomly happen at the time without reason or purpose. However, these events take on greater significance later, as relates to the decision I make some twenty years later to become the proud owner of the Catalano House. There can be no question. The Catalano House is recognized as one of the most significant residential dwellings ever built in the United States. In spite of this recognition, it was demolished in 2001 as a place no longer safe to occupy as a residential dwelling. This is a place where I will live for eighteen years with ownership continuing another four years.

The tenth anniversary of the Catalano House's destruction will take place in March 2011. At this time, I feel it appropriate to revisit some of the happenings that took place over my ownership period of some twenty years. I am frank to say; this is a difficult task. It involves a recollection of different feelings, and even emotions, that were experienced during my stay there. Questions also are there that require a search of my innermost feelings for credible responses. I must undertake to recall specific events like, when did that happen and why? I did this, or didn't do that, during my stay. All of these are personal inquiries, which I have directed to myself on numerous occasions. So how do I go about doing this? Is there an acceptable format? Should emphasis be placed on this factor as opposed to some other circumstance? What overall purpose is to be served by delving back into something that has happened and is gone or perhaps forgotten? Should I take a position that this story should be limited in scope to a review of what it's like to live in a unique place recognized for its architectural distinctiveness? Do I have the right to simply enjoy living there, as would be the case if I had elected to live at a less regarded place? Have I forced upon myself the role of a caretaker or custodian simply because I decide to live there? Are economic restraints relevant in decision-making associated with its continuing viability as a residential dwelling? Does the place deserve a better fate simply because of its status as an architectural masterpiece? All of these inquisitive concerns are real. At the same time, there are reasonable limitations that may intervene. Paradoxically, a masterpiece may be subject to limitations because there are limits to the creativity which brought about its very existence.

The current year also marks the first anniversary of the passing of the architect, Eduardo Catalano. This untimely event does cause me and many others, and rightly so, to pause and reflect back on the real and significant loss that has taken place from this somber occurrence. This loss also leads to a resurrection of attention to the 2001 destruction of

what I believe he considered the “crown jewel” of all the acclaimed architectural gems he had created.

Notwithstanding, the purpose of this story is not to explain why the deterioration and later demolition of the Catalano House happened. For that determination, the architects, civil engineers and other experts may be able to come up with an accurate and reliable assessment of the cause or, for that matter, a succession of causes. Moreover, it is not the purpose of this story to resort to a second-guess of decisions that were made, nor to question the authenticity of methodologies and technologies, nor the interactions among architects, designers and technicians in a world of creativity through applications of technological advances. In these instances, I can give a clear response of a “certainly not,” simply for the reason I’m not qualified to address these subjects. But what I can do, however, is attempt to relate certain facts and circumstances which, to my best personal knowledge or recollection, did take place in the course of my stay there. Equally as important, I am uniquely in position to state what was done, or for that matter, what was not done in the course of my response to unanticipated events that took place during my stay there. In any event, what was done was directed to avoiding, or at least forestalling, its ultimate demolition in 2001.

Certain matters that did occur during the course of my stay at the Catalano House are very personal in nature. I may consider them as such and, perhaps, may decide they should stay that way. In any event, I will attempt to stay on course and deal with these subjects fairly and openly, and to that end, in the manner that I may choose.

This revisit to the above subjects does encourage me, in a light-hearted way, to recall some of the anecdotes that are told, for example, about houses with leaky roofs designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. One of the most popular, had to do with the call Wright receives from a client who informs Wright that he really enjoys his house, but while having dinner with guests his head got soaked from a roof leak. When he asks for advice as to what he should do, Wright responds, “Move the table.”

In a spirit of joviality, I have managed to adopt one or two “wise sayings” of my own. At the same time, I suggest some state of concern, frustration and consternation in my own behalf. Rather than the horns of a dilemma, or between a rock and hard place, I give thought to something like the following expressions: Sometimes, I feel like the guy who bought a yacht and couldn’t afford the gas - may have a ring of truth. As this story unfolds, I begin to feel like the guy who didn’t have enough thumbs to stick in the dike - may have a similar ring.

DESCRIPTION OF A MASTERPIECE

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES, FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

In order to know what the Catalano House is about, some recognition must be given to what the Catalano House is or what it represents. This understanding does relate to and involve subjects of architecture and design technology that play an important role from its inception as well as the aftermath.

The Catalano House is comprised of a hyperbolic parabolic-shaped roof system. The

terms, or comparables, of “unique roof” and “glass box” are descriptive only in an “at first blush” or appearance sense. They are not used to suggest the Catalano House is some inert object. It is far greater and a more complex living “thing” than that, as I hope this story will reveal.

Because of the unique design and structural characteristics of the above referenced roof structure, the roof system is the most significant feature of the House. It’s effectiveness as a place of abode is totally dependent upon the structural integrity of its roof system. It is composed of layered deck-type plywood panels faced on the interior side with “tongue and groove” hardwood flooring, which serves in appearance as the finished ceiling. The exterior surface is covered with protective lining, insulation and rolled asbestos as primary roofing materials. This structural composition affords internal tensile strength and flexibility characteristics of a hardened shell. The structured decking is then encased or “sandwiched” between two “over” and “under” steel beams located around the entire perimeter of the roof structure. The exposed exterior ends of the decking, positioned within this “bite” of the steel beams, are sealed from exposure to weather. A supporting steel beam is placed vertically at each of the two high points of the roof system. Each of these two supporting beams is recessed at the 12 foot overhang line to form a corner of the enclosed glass “box” below. The two low points of the system are wedged and “locked in” between two massive concrete buttresses. Except for bolted metal plates that tie the two stabilizing steel beams to the roof decking, the roof system is not dependent on any other means of vertical or lateral support. There is no contact with any other load-bearing materials or otherwise, inclusive of the metal framing that holds in place the plate glass walls (or plate glass panels) that enclose the glass “box” below. These structural features give an appearance that the deck system is suspended in midair and “floats” over the perimeter line of the formal house enclosure. The structural elements of the roof shell afford the requisite tensile strength needed to span the entire area covered by the roof system with the above limited means of support.

The following is based on reliable source information heard from future architects, engineers and others, who at the time participated in or were present during the 1954 construction of this unique roof system. The roof system with supporting scaffolding is first constructed and suspended at the proper height level before the enclosed glass box is assembled and put in place. However, when the supporting scaffolding is removed, the two high points of the system began to droop or sag. To remedy the situation, a decision is made to fix a steel cable diagonally between the two high points. Each end of the cable is coupled with a 10- inch turnbuckle for use as a manual means to place the cable under tension, and eliminate or curtail any further droop or sag of these two points.

This “floating” appearance of the roof system mentioned above caught my attention when I first began negotiations for the purchase of the Catalano House in 1978. I had the same or similar impression of the roof system, and that continued until changed by deteriorating roof conditions as later observed.

After I had moved and settled down in the Catalano House, I always was fascinated by certain features of the roof system and, particularly, the manner in which the shell form roof/ceiling with all of its contours and shapes could position in the same plane over the straight and even-lined curtain glass walls and glass wall panels of the 38x38 foot square glass “box” below. It may be that’s what the term “parabolic” is all about.

Another interesting feature of the roof structure is the way the roof system moves in counter response to gusty winds and seasonal changes. Significantly, from the time I move in until years later, there is a 3-4 inch space or void that separates the underside of the roof/ceiling from any direct contact with the metal frame that supports the glass walls and glass panels below. This void or open space is filled with a flexible tube-like membrane. At that time, I could only conclude that the open space allows for adjustments to the up and down movements of the roof system to accommodate the forces mentioned above, and also to meet normal expansion and contraction of the melded steel beam/wood decking materials. The fill membrane inserted in this open space also affords insulation from the elements.

With a layman's description and understanding of the Catalano House and its roof system, it may be informative to go back in years before 1978 to identify contacts I previously had with the Catalano House.

A NEW JOURNEY CONTACTS, OWNERSHIP, SHORTCOMINGS

The initiation of my legal career in 1957 led my wife and I to select Raleigh, N. C. as our place to live, and that started at a duplex on Lewis Farm Road. It did not take long for my longtime interest in contemporary architecture to realize that an architectural gem was located a little more than a mile away - off Ridge Road. My intuitive instincts directed me on two occasions to go over and just take a look. I did, and was amazed. Later, we were invited by friends to go as their guests to a social function of the Ezra Meirs (then owners). We went and again, I was impressed. I never forgot that visit.

After the passing of many years, and having separated following some twenty years of marriage, I bought a small place in North Raleigh that had some semblance of a contemporary house. In 1978, restless in anticipation of something more real, I began to look around for a new and different place to live. After months with no success, I ran across a real estate sales brochure which showed the Catalano House was on the market. My first reaction, "My God, It's for sale!"

I arranged for an initial "walk through" visit to the Catalano House with the real estate agent, who had given me some promotional materials about its status as an architectural gem. The materials included some photos of premises that focused on the exterior features (See Plate I). This rather hurried visit called for a return. This time, I had a personal friend go with me for advice on whether or not to buy. Some serious talk then took place. More photos were taken, which showed the fireplace (added as part of a rear patio enclosure by former owner) to be tilted and out of alignment, and the exterior utility shed walls to be in need of repair (See Plate II). Even additional pictures were taken of the interior and, particularly, the kitchen area (See Plate III). At that time, it was readily apparent the condition of the roof would require some work because of noticeable leaks. I gave another day or two of thought about a purchase. Weighed against needed repairs, and a replacement of kitchen appliances (worn and antiquated), I made the decision to buy. The offer of \$60,500 for the Catalano House is accepted with the understanding that at the Closing, \$1,000 from the purchase money would be held in escrow to fix the leaky roof.