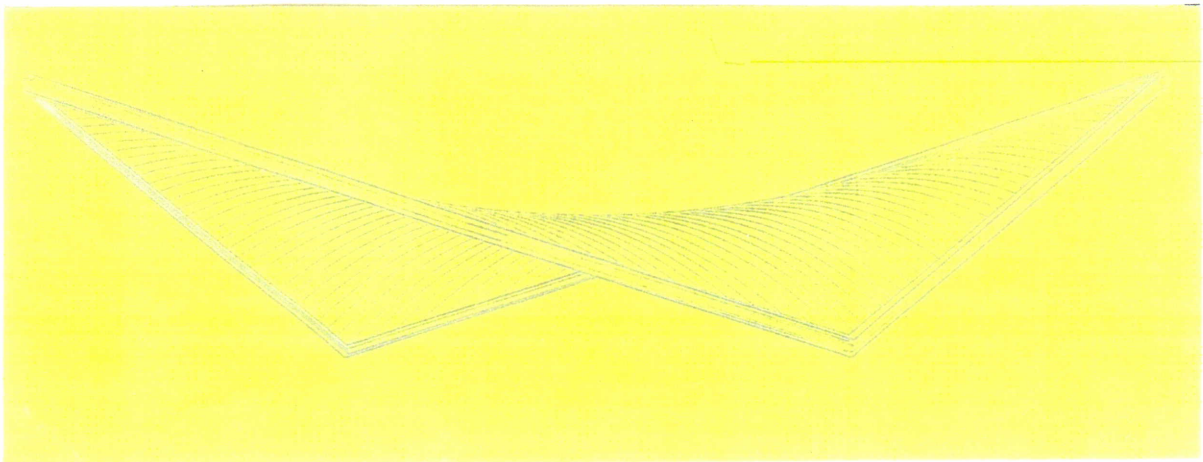


FINE THOUGHTS

A STORY ABOUT A HOUSE

AND A VISION



BY
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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

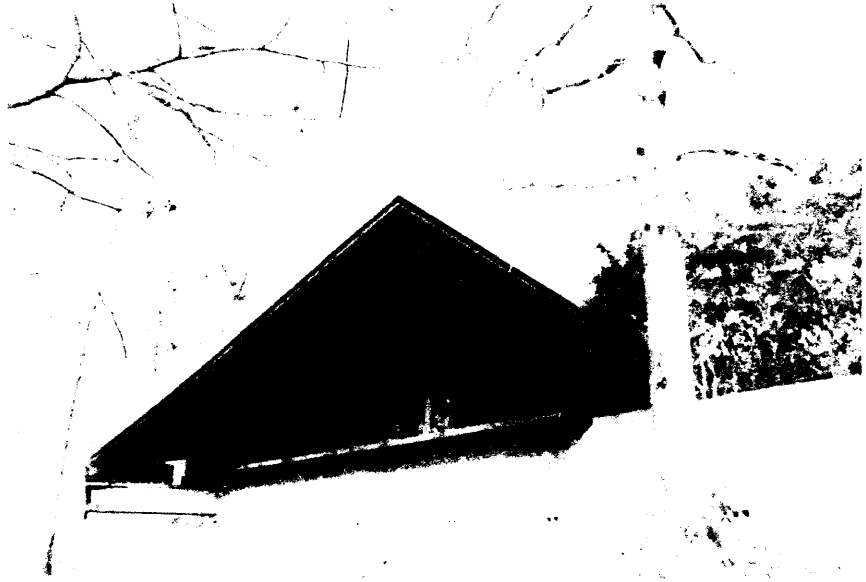
CONTACTS, OWNERSHIP, SHORTCOMINGS

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.

PLATE I



**REAL ESTATE AGENT PRESENTATION
1978**

PLATE I
(cont'd)



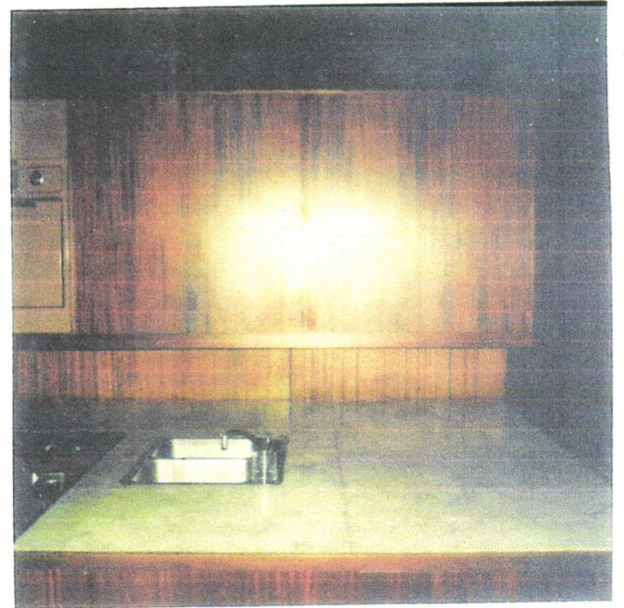
**REAL ESTATE AGENT PRESENTATION
1978**

PLATE II



**EXTERIOR FIREPLACE
AND UTILITY/STORAGE FACILITY
1978**

PLATE III



ORIGINAL KITCHEN APPEARANCE
At 1978

Later, a local roofing company gave an estimate of \$500 to fix one or two existing leaks and billed \$280 for the repair work actually done. Expecting that other leaks would soon develop, and they did in a matter of weeks, the roofing company was reluctant to do any more repair work. In early 1979, I approached the same company about an estimate on a new roof membrane cover and insulation. One was given at approximately \$12,000. It was not financially feasible for me to have the work done at that time. I still had to sell the other house that I had just left and continued to own. I concluded that if the roofing company could fix leaks with the use of a tar bucket, I could do the same for the foreseeable future.

An immediate move into the Catalano House had to be postponed until the kitchen renovation work had been completed. More photos were taken of appliances that had to be replaced. Dimensional drawings and sketches in relocating selected substitute appliances were made, along with changes to built-in cabinetry to accommodate the new appliances. Instead of the old refrigeration system that had been installed in upper cabinets, two refrigeration units were selected for installation in lower cabinets and a third freezer/icemaker unit for installation in upper cabinets. Work on the updated kitchen was completed by a local contractor at a cost of approximately \$5,000. I was pleased with the result.

As living in the Catalano House commenced, it became obvious that other problems had to be dealt with. These problem areas related to washer/dryer service, lack of adequate heating, absence of cooling, clogged drains, and cracked water closet. Contractors were brought in to help solve these problems. An air conditioning company advised that ducts built into concrete terrazzo covered floors were clogged due to collapse of some interior form of lining, such that a proper level of air flow would be impractical, if not impossible, and that the only way to provide for an effective cooling system would be through overhead ductwork. This curative approach was not a viable or acceptable solution. I might add that at least five years later, a window air conditioning unit was placed in the main bedroom and helped cool things down. A heating contractor suggested that the old and worn-out oil-fired furnace and under ground storage tank should be pulled and a new, more efficient gas furnace substituted. This was done years later, but propane gas with above ground storage tank had to be used because natural gas people would not extend a gas line to premises just to accommodate a single user. In efforts to provide laundry service at premises, a plumbing contractor indicated the drain line was clogged and any effort to clear would likely damage or break the worn out piping located below the concrete floor. Laundry services were provided locally and after 1988, at the beach condo that I had purchased. The cracked toilet was replaced. Due to concerns about the purity level of water derived from the private well, for some 12 years bottled water was brought in for drinking purposes.

Other minor renovations and corrective changes were later made to make the Catalano House a more practical place for a single person. The partition wall between the two children's rooms was removed to provide for a new main bedroom. The old main bedroom was changed to a study/dining room with mirrors added to walls to enhance size appearance. The added room formed by enclosing the rear patio was updated by covering old wood paneled walls with fabric and black plastic panels. A framed mirror was placed over the mantle. The family room was renamed the "media room." It seem appropriate.

In addition to a continuing concern about the condition of the roof system, another problem area had to do with interior flooding. The Catalano House was situated at a level below the grade of two on-premise, unimproved access roads or paths. One path was used to allow for parking close to entry to the patio on the south side of premises. The other path led downhill for entry into carport area along the north side of premises. In case of a heavy rain, both of these paths carried a heavy volume of water runoff from the higher elevation. Through the early 1980s, excess water runoff on occasions would flood the interior through side entry door on east side of premises, as well as side entry door on north side of premises at rear of carport area. Many times, I would return from work after a heavy rain and find the interior area flooded. I would get the towels and sponge the floor dry. If the rain storm took place at night, I would man the push broom and attempt to sweep the water away to avoid the threat. Something had to be done to alleviate or curtail this problem. This was done through landscaping efforts undertaken during the 1984-5 years as later described.

Attempt was made to meet the ongoing deteriorating condition of the roof system by installing a new roof cover system in early 1983. Recognizing that rolled asphalt had been used as the basic roof cover material, I began a study to determine if some form of elastomeric membrane could be used as an effective materials cover for the roof. I also looked into the possibility of using a form of spray elastomeric foam system that could be applied over the rolled asbestos roof as a possible solution to the deteriorating roof condition. I called a roofing contractor in Southern Pines, N. C, who specialized in that form of applications system. A representative visited premises to evaluate the effectiveness of that type system and, if favorable, to give a firm estimate as to costs. The representative indicated the spray polyurethane system, followed by a spray protective elastomeric cover, would work. I asked if it would be possible to add a second coat of the spray foam limited to the roof area directly above the enclosed interior as added insulation. He indicated that could be done with a taper of the added coat edge to avoid a seam appearance. I thought it would be helpful if I discussed the matter with an architect in Southern Pines, who I had met through business dealings in the area. Since he was a N. C. State graduate, he was generally familiar with the Catalano House. He indicated he had used this roofing firm on occasions and found the firm was reliable and did quality work. He thought that the elastomeric system would probably be effective (but admittedly not certain for lack of a comprehensive knowledge about all the underlying circumstances that would be involved in the application). In any event, I decided to proceed with the roofing firm's proposal. During April 1983, the application of this new roofing system was completed at a cost of \$5,800. Nothing seems to "go right" without something else happening.

The morning after the new roof system had been installed, I observed what appeared to be loose wiring hanging off the edge of the roof. I thought it was probably some electrical or telephone line. I went out to take a look at the new roof cover. I was wrong. It was not wiring. The diagonally positioned support cable between the two high points of the roof system had broken (or had been severed). After an immediate call to the roofing firm for an explanation, I got the classic answer, "It was broke when we got there." Almost speechless in giving a response, I did manage to pose the question of how a steel cable in place for some 30 years could "decide to break" within hours before the time his crew arrived to do work that became easier without the presence of the cable. No response was given, and I really didn't expect one.

My first impulse after this cable break, was to call Frank Walser, the original builder of the Catalano House to get the broken cable fixed. Luckily, I was able to reach him. After explaining the situation, he informed that he did not initially install the cable in the course of constructing the house, but would come over and see what he could do. A day or two later, he came over to see what could be done. At the time, my only instruction to him was just make sure the new cable was placed under as much tension as possible, because the cable supported the two high points of the roof system. The cable was replaced. However, I know nothing about the steps, if any, he undertook to see that a proper cable tension level had been restored.

The remainder of 1983 and years 1984-5 were spent on miscellaneous repair and improvement projects within the south side patio area of premises. These undertakings involved: (i) replacing the deteriorated trail deck located along the south border; (ii) replacing and repairing the two side entry trail decks; (iii) designing and constructing a 7 foot high wooden screen (consisting of 3 panels made from 1½ inch square wood stringers, with 1½ square block insertions in a tree-design motif), and to be attached with support posts along the south border cinder block retaining wall as a “privacy” screen for the “just occupied” and recently constructed dwelling located on the adjacent lot; (iv) planting of shrubbery, including two hemlocks at both corners of patio area; and (v) painting all trail decks, including elevated 12x12 foot deck and connecting trail deck that ran across the west side of premises. Decorative sculpture pieces were added to patio area, including a Buddha statute, a metal bird -in -flight wire sculpture, and a white free form sculpture that I had created from a 125 lb. pouring of plaster of paris into a styrofoam box that had housed a Mercedes engine block. Surprisingly, the sculpture turned out fine. In a more subtle effort, the main cedar (6'-8' width) at the entry was shaped and clipped into a Bonsai form. The patio area had been brought around in impressive style (See Plate IV).

At the same time, I came up with a plan to solve the water runoff and flooding issue. This would be done in two phases. First, the level of carport area would be raised through use of custom made concrete beams, 2x6s, 9 feet plus in length, for a layout that would form nine 3 foot squares, each to contain gravel fill and drop-in of nine custom made white concrete, graveled- faced pavers. The new patio area was set back from north exterior wall to allow for movement of doors to outside storage cabinets. The entry to carport area was then closed by use of additional concrete beams to prevent flooding into side entry door in the east wall and side entry door at the back of carport area. Second, two loose stone retaining walls were placed in lower path to parking area close to front patio area with fill dirt added behind the 3 foot in height retaining wall to remove the downward slope of that area. A third loose stone retaining wall was added at highest point of the ridge, which point was leveled with additional fill dirt to form a new parking area overlooking premises. These changes and additions effectively solved the flooding problem.

A beautification project was undertaken to improve the hard-pan ground area surrounding the front entry and east side of premises. The project also embraced the slope area and plateau area located along the east property line. This plateau area is bounded on the south side by a 20 foot square concrete slab that was intended by former owner Ezra Meir to form the base for a studio building he planned to construct there. He never did. The concrete slab is located a few feet from the rear of an old Barn structure located on premises. The project directed to these yard areas involved hauling in by dump truck of over 100 cubic yards of fill dirt and top soil. After break-up of the hard-pan ground surface, top soil was distributed to these areas. Fill dirt was used to form berm and other

PLATE IV



VIEW OF PATIO AREA
19985

mound forms for aesthetic reasons. Satisfied with the “lay of the land,” sod was then trucked in by deliveries spread over a couple of weeks for placement timing reasons. After the sod program was completed, over 3,000 sq. ft. of sod had been laid. This was the most satisfying part of the project. The appearance change to premises was striking. Custom pavers and runners were added to form a new outside entry from upper parking area to patio area (See Plate V).

As a final touch, heavy brush and small saplings on the east slope beneath the upper plateau were cleaned out. Topsoil was added and 30-40 azaleas were planted. This slope later became a very scenic spot.

After all the above had been done, ordinary maintenance of premises continued routinely. One of the maintenance jobs from the very beginning was the roof itself. Because of its size, the roof area collected a lot of fallen sticks, leaves and other debris. It was important that all roof debris be moved at regular intervals to avoid blocking the roof drainage system. A drain cutout hole lined with metal penetrates the roofing deck at each of the two anchored low points of the roof system. At the front low point, a buried drain pipe carries water runoff to a point beyond the concrete entry and steps leading into the patio area. On occasions, this drain line, as well as the drain hole, would clog, forcing runoff water to overflow and flood the patio area. A similar drainage layout is in place at the back low point of the roof system. However, overflow by clogged conditions there is simply directed downward into the wooded area.

The surrounding trees gave the Catalano House an attractive appearance in many ways. However, as the trees matured in size and height, the potential for problems was there. Their closeness to the House could have some impact on the viability of the roof system itself. Certainly, over time the volume of leaves covering the roof on a seasonal basis substantially increased. The time the roof was exposed to warmth by direct exposure to the sun gradually diminished. The best way I found to handle the removal of leaves was to collect in roof piles, place on tarps, and carry away and dump at the deepest point along the rear property line. The blower approach was not used, because leaves that accumulated close to premises caused vines and underbrush thickets, and that was not good. A lot of tarp loads was necessary to “clear the deck.” The work was never a problem; nothing but time. I can’t evaluate what the reduced amount of time exposed to the sun may have done insofar as any adverse effect on a “drying out” process. That process could have been helpful in the control of dampness that had permeated the roof decking structure.

As the yard matured, mowing the grass was added to the agenda, but that was not work. It was a delight. Oftentimes, I would finish the mowing, say as dusk moved in, would stretch out on the grassy knoll and simply stare in amazement at the beauty of the Catalano House, silhouetted against the setting sun. The House always had given me the impression of a space ship on its pad about to launch. As I stared in anticipation of a “blast off,” I could only give a muted response, “Beam me up, Scotty.” Mowing the grass was just the price of admission to enjoy a very special moment.

After subsequent roof deterioration issues had developed and were continuing, I thought it advisable to have some tree-clearing work done out of some concern about the reduction in sun exposure issue, but also for general maintenance and aesthetic reasons, and simply to improve access to that woody area of premises. In June 1994, I retained a tree service company to remove eight trees and underbrush growth, some of which had sprung forth

PLATE V



LANDSCAPE IMPROVEMENTS
1984-1985