

# Singular Points: Considering the Life and Work of Joseph Allen Stein, 1912-

STEPHEN WHITE  
Roger Williams University

*"At rare intervals, the most significant factors in determining the future occur in infinitesimal quantities on unique occasions... At these points, (a) small force, through its character and position in the whole constellation of events, is able to bring about a change of almost unbelievable magnitude, as with a pebble starting a landslide..."*

—Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man*

This paper focuses on several ideals and individuals that are relatively marginal in the legendary saga of modernism in architecture. Specifically, those involved have pursued the search for modest means and forms to achieve a decent environment for many, without spoiling the surroundings. While the main thrust of modernist historiography established landmarks and masters of a first generation—a kind of "Big 4 or 5" of LeCorbusier, Gropius, Mies, Wright and Aalto that in many ways paralleled Churchill, Roosevelt, DeGaulle, and Stalin, and whose territories paralleled those of the Great Powers—the aggrandizing scale of this kind of historiography has done harm, and underestimated the potential scope of later generations and many modernist goals that still contain unfulfilled vitality.

The compelling and still relevant elements of modernism—inclusive of modern architecture and art, the modern political revolutions and subsequent overthrow of colonialism and slavery since the 18<sup>th</sup> century—involve the creation of meaningful work and environment in many places and societies around the world, reflective of transformed personal and political identities and greater freedoms for increasing numbers of people. We need the continuity that these ideals and the example of these individuals offer, as there are so many people now, with raised expectations for a good life in a decent environment, in a world where change is so extensive that almost every country could now be considered to be emerging.

This paper is organized into four parts: an introduction outlining an alternative historiography of modernism based upon a hybrid sense of identity and working principles; an over view of works of Joseph Allen Stein in California and India; parallels between Stein's life history and selected 20<sup>th</sup> century events; and conclusions.

## INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HYBRID IDENTITY FOR ANOTHER HISTORIOGRAPHY

Within the iconic story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are a constellation of relatively singular individuals who have created subtle contributions to architecture and environment, in many places around the world. They have done so by harmonizing relations between individuals, cultures, and between the manmade and natural worlds. Architects ranging from Laurie Baker to Aldo van Eyck, from Bruno Taut to Balkrishna Doshi, from Richard Neutra to Antonin Raymond, from William Wurster to Shadrach Woods, from Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin to Joseph Allen Stein come to mind. None of these figures can

be described as the product of any one culture or place, or to have a singular identity in conventional definitions of nationality or ethnicity. To understand the aims and values of their work, and its continuing vitality, attention needs to be redirected toward understanding the kind of hybrid vision each developed. This vision has been engendered from a responsiveness between these people and specific places, emerges from an aesthetic of balance, and demonstrates the poise that can be achieved between the manmade and the natural, the local and the universal. Here I will focus on the life and work of Joseph Allen Stein, whom I have had a close association with since the mid-1980's.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 Joseph Allen Stein, 1987. Drawing by Marion White

The presentation of a single person's life and work such as Stein's, who has spent the first half of his life in the United States, and the second half in northern India, is conceived to identify elements that could still be valid for contemporary work, and attainable by many. Stein's work includes the following hybrid principles:

- the seeking of beauty with simplicity
- the equation of functionalism with conservation
- a balance of structure and nature
- a collaborative work ethic

Issues both of life and work are important here. Eliel Saarinen, whom Stein studied with at the Cranbrook Academy in the 1930's, wrote in the middle of the last century:

*"It is fundamental that whatever forms a man brings forth through honest work, those forms will not be altogether convincing unless they are a true expression of his life—his emotions, his thoughts, and his aspirations. His art, at best, is a significant testimony of his integrity of mind and spirit, the product of his real personality."<sup>5</sup>*

Stein has been relatively closed about the specifics of his life, particularly its first 40 years, though identified here are several meaningful events and turning points. In the broadest perspective, Stein's life story illustrates how in the United States some of the milder and more penetrating goals of modernism's social agenda—the design of communities of modest dwellings and an interest in environmental planning—were undone or relegated to the periphery by the mid-century paranoia that such ideals were potentially dangerous, "foreign", and even, communist ideology. It illustrates how in India the same gentle sensibilities have been revered, and periodically marginalized since they were brought forth by a "foreigner" such as Stein. These principles and the work, ultimately, have been underestimated in a world cultural climate that struggles with the idea that there may be limits to growth.

Joseph Allen Stein's life and work is a story of a kind of collaborative vision transcendent of narrower architectural or nationalistic identities. He represents a synthesis of cross-cultural and professional experiences from his early life, through education and early professional work, maturity, and now the stage where at 89 he struggles to maintain his integrity. It is a story which Balkrishna Doshi, one of Stein's partners in India in the firm of Stein, Doshi and Bhalla between 1977-1993 describes:

*"With Joe, it is as if you planted a tree in a different land and then it grows, but it grows in a very different way. Eventually, it becomes of that land, but it is unique. A kind of uniqueness comes, that is how I see his work, where you look at things from a point of view that is detached and yet involved. Joe kept his identity, and yet wanted to have a re-interpretation of the issues which are of this land."<sup>6</sup>*

## WORKS OF JOSEPH ALLEN STEIN IN CALIFORNIA AND INDIA

Joseph Allen Stein was first a major figure in the establishment of a regional modern architecture in the San Francisco Bay Region of California during the early days of the environmental design movement in the 1940's and 1950's, following studies at the Cranbrook Academy in Michigan with architect-planner Eliel Saarinen and sculptor Carl Milles, and work with Richard Neutra in Los Angeles. After collaborative work at the end of the Depression in the late 1930's and early 1940's on low cost housing with architect Gregory Ain in Los Angeles, Stein opened his own office in San Francisco. There, architects Stein and John Funk and landscape architects Garrett Eckbo, Robert Royston and Ed Williams in the war and post-war years often worked together, designing small houses, gardens and neighborhood community plans whose hallmark was the integration of structure and nature in what Garrett Eckbo called a "landscape for living". Stein's work in California achieved a modest beauty typical of the Bay Area scene, through planar forms and compact interior dimensions, meticulous detailing in a variety of

materials and structural systems, and by the integration of indoor spaces and outdoor gardens. Together with many others, works of these designers made significant contributions toward the post-war environmental design movement in California, which ultimately led to the founding of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California at Berkeley in 1959.



Fig. 2 Stein Residence, California, 1947

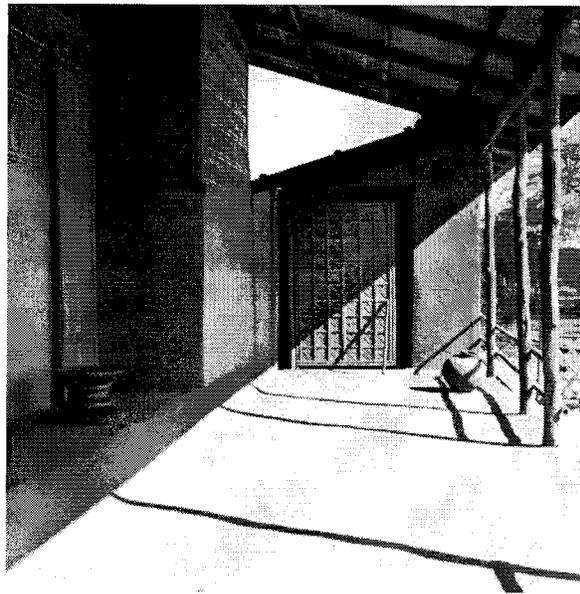


Fig. 3 . Low Cost House Prototype, Joseph Allen Stein and students, India, 1954

Stein's work in architecture and environmental conservation has assumed greater scope in India, where he taught and practiced between 1952-1999. The principles of integration of site and local culture first expressed in his California works has been central to the approach Stein expressed in India. Arriving first in Calcutta to head the Department of Architecture at Bengal Engineering College, Stein has remained in India until early this year, guided by an answer to a question he is frequently asked:

*"Why do I continue to live and work in India? I think India offers the great possibility of beauty with simplicity. This is a rare and little understood thing in the world today, yet one sees it here in so many different ways."<sup>7</sup>*

Stein's work for major developments of post-Independence India—garden city townships for Nehru's industrial development program, arts centers, factories, housing and universities, and buildings for international institutions such as the India International Centre, the Ford Foundation, the United Nations and the World Wide Fund for Nature—are among the first expressions of modern architecture in India, and represent rare examples of the stream of modernism responsive to the local environment. What has become most identifiable about Stein's Indian works is the development of an architectural vocabulary of discrete elements for creating space and filtering light; inventive, minimal structures including experimental shell construction systems for industrial buildings; a diverse palette of materials; and integration of man-made construction with site and landscape, including "vertical gardens", a unique and widely used feature of Stein's architecture from small houses to large urban campuses.

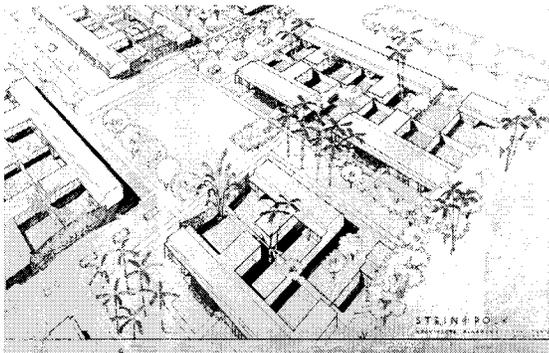


Fig. 4 Housing and Neighborhood Plan, Rourkela, India, Stein and Polk, 1955

Beyond the limits of architectural practice, Joseph Allen Stein in the 1970's was the first to call attention to Himalayan deforestation and to note its potential consequences. His call of alarm along with Corneille Jest of France and Klaus Lampe of Germany to John Fobes of UNESCO led to the first International Conference on Mountain Environment, held in Munich in 1974. Stein has since been involved in efforts to protect the cultural and environmental heritage of the Himalayas, undertaking planning, conservation and architectural works in Kashmir, and in Bhutan, where he was brought in to develop guidelines for a modern Bhutanese architecture by the King of Bhutan in 1970.

## PARALLELS OF STEIN'S LIFE HISTORY AND SELECTED 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY EVENTS

Joseph Allen Stein's has been a life that has been shaped by his origins, exposure and positions on political and environmental affairs. It is important to recognize the relations between many of these, both for their meaning to his own story, and to better establish a more complete picture of the forces that have sometimes energized 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and architecture into seeking the establishment of a decent environment on a broad scale.

### Beginnings, 1912

- Joseph Allen Stein was born in Omaha, Nebraska, into a Jewish family.
- His father was a photographer. Stein's father purchased his business from a photographer who recorded the massacre of Native Americans by US troops at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1890, which Stein found prints of in the attic of his boyhood home. These images periodically still come to his mind.

- Attends the University of Illinois, and wins a scholarship to Fountainebleau, France in 1933-34. Stein tied for the scholarship with a Finnish-American student, Eero Saarinen. Stein has described the tension of being in Europe at this time, when Hitler came to power.

- Studies at Cranbrook in 1935-36 with Eliel Saarinen, and Swedish sculptor Carl Milles. Models for Milles' fountain at St. Louis, "The Meeting of the Waters", serving as the figure engraved with the inscription "...and he saw the people..."

- Moves to Los Angeles in the late 1930's. Works for Richard Neutra, Hamilton Harwell Harris and the Los Angeles Housing Authority. Witnesses the environmental degradation and migration out of the Dust Bowl of the central United States to California. Completes housing studies for migrant workers with architect Gregory Ain, becoming acutely aware of addressing issues of social justice in architectural design. Stein's Low Cost House Prototype for the Southwest is published in *Architectural Forum* in 1940, an attempt to bring the cost of housing down to that of the automobile. He is invited to Taliesin West to meet Frank Lloyd Wright.

- Relocates to San Francisco in the mid-1940's, sharing an office with architect John Funk and landscape architect Garrett Eckbo. Funk's work is featured on the cover of the Museum of Modern Art's first book on American modern architecture, *Built in the USA*. Stein meets architects Edward Larrabee Barnes and Mary Barnes, Eric Mendelsohn, Hannes Meyer, artist Diego Rivera, photographer Imogen Cunningham; and planner Fran Viollich, Jack Kent, and others who go onto form Telesis, a group dedicated to "progress intelligently planned". With Viollich and Barnes, Stein teaches at the California Labor School, founded by labor unions whose emphasis includes working to prepare students to design and build their own homes and gardens once the War is over. Guest lecturers included Neutra, Wright, Meyer, Rivera.

- Eckbo works on migrant worker housing for the US government, and on what would become Japanese internment camps. He resigns when the nature of the project becomes apparent. Telesis holds an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art, "Space for Living", which has a major impact on the architecture, planning and environmental awareness of the San Francisco Bay Region for years to come. The United Nations is founded in San Francisco in 1945. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is published in *Arts & Architecture* magazine by John Entenza in 1949. Stein builds his home and garden in Mill Valley, to similar dimensions as his earlier low cost housing studies. He hires a young Charles Moore to his first architectural job.

### Turning Point, c. 1950: The Denial of Cooperative Values in the United States

- Ladera, 1944-1948. The environmental design work of Funk, Stein, Eckbo and Royston reaches an idealistic height in the design of a cooperative neighborhood near Palo Alto, California. The 400 family community includes Ed Ginzton, a pioneer of microwave technology, writer/environmentalist/ Pulitzer Prize winner Wallace Stegner, and planner Ed Spangle, who had worked on the Roosevelt Administration's Greenbelt settlements on the East Coast. Ladera was conceived as a mixed

race community inclusive of several Japanese and African-American families among its 400 family membership. The community's prospectus stated:

*"This cooperative housing project is blazing a new pattern of living as vital to America's future as were the pioneering trails of our forefathers. It's economic democracy in action—people like you and me cooperating together to build a better community for better living—truly this is of, by and for the people."*<sup>6</sup>

Ladera is denied access to loans due to its mixed race ethnic composition, and disbands. The concept of "Un-American Activities" in the McCarthy era reaches a height, and many individuals and ethnic groups are subjected to scrutiny and blacklisting. In 1951, Erik Erikson, later a renowned psychoanalyst, resigns his position at the University of California along with other faculty due to newly imposed loyalty oath requirements. Stein and his family leave the San Francisco Bay Region. Among their belongings is the *Arts & Architecture* magazine containing *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

- Mexico, Israel, France, Switzerland, 1950-1952. Stein and his family visit Mexico and Israel, and stay for a period in France and in Switzerland with Stanley White and then Hannes Meyer. Stein draws plans for ideal communities of small dwellings in the tropics and in the mountains, to be built through self-help and cooperation among neighbors. In France, he meets a young Indian architect named B.V. Doshi who is working for LeCorbusier.

#### TURNING POINT, 1952: THE INDIA OF NEHRU AND RADHAKRISHNAN

- Calcutta, 1952-1955. Neutra recommends Stein to lead the Department of Architecture at Bengal Engineering College. Stein founds a firm that becomes Stein, Chatterjee and Polk, Architects, Engineers Planners. Polk had worked on Gandhi's rural reconstruction program. Stein completes urban and rural demonstration housing projects, visited by Nehru. Stein's rural design is similar to Gandhi's settlement at Wardha, conceived as an example of attainable simplicity to support Indian democracy. Nehru commissions two capital cities and four industrial townships to establish a new India: LeCorbusier designs one capital in the northwest (Chandigarh), Stein and Polk three garden city industrial towns in eastern India (Durgapur, Rourkela, Jamshedpur).

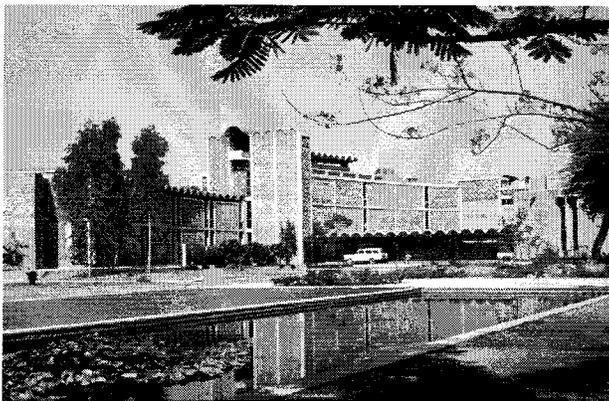


Fig. 5 India International Centre, New Delhi, Joseph Allen Stein and Associates, 1962



Fig. 6 Motorscooter Factory, Escorts Ltd., New Delhi, Joseph Allen Stein and Associates, 1962

- Delhi, 1955-1977, Joseph Allen Stein and Associates. A succession of Stein's works are achieved at New Delhi's Lodhi Estate, noted for their balance of building and garden. Stein enjoys the intellectual and artistic community of the India International Centre and Triveni Kala Sangam, which his work has helped to establish. Poet-scholar Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan becomes President of India. In 1966, Stein brings Garrett Eckbo to India for the master plan of the Lodhi Gardens and the landscape of the Ford Foundation's India headquarters by Stein, built simultaneously to Ford's New York building by Kevin Roche.
- Stein returns to the Bay Area in 1962, his first trip to the US since 1950, to give a lecture at the University of California, entitled "The Responsibility for Environment". Stein states:

*"It appears to me that we have a firm basis for developing richer and more varied communities. I have come to think that in architecture and planning, regionalism allows scope for all that is positive and functional in modern architecture, and also can provide stimulus for the enrichment and particularization that gives architecture its appeal to the multitudes, while also meeting the highest standards of the profession."*<sup>7</sup>

- Stein meets Erik and Joan Erikson, in India to write *Gandhi's Truth*, for which Erik Erikson would win the Pulitzer Prize in 1969.
- Martin Luther King is assassinated in 1968. In 1969, Stein proposes and convinces the Ford Foundation to build his design for a Memorial Plaza in New Delhi, commemorating "Man's Quest for Equality through Non-Violence", with memorial inscriptions by Gandhi and King. This is the first memorial to King built anywhere in the world.

#### TURNING POINT, 1977: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF STEIN DOSHI AND BHALLA, NEW DELHI AND AHMEDABAD

- Delhi, Ahmedabad, 1977-1993. The establishment of the firm of Stein Doshi and Bhalla. In addition to major works across the country, the firm establishes a research component in each office. In Delhi, Stein researches mountain environment, in Ahmedabad, Doshi explores Indian conditions, and enriches the education of a generation of Indian architects through undertaking research into Indian traditions.

- 1977-88. Years of the promise and failure of Stein's design for the Kashmir Conference Center. Stein also engages Isamu Noguchi for Kashmir, whose scheme for a modern hillside garden goes unbuilt. Stein's Kashmir Conference Center complex, completed in 1984, is later occupied by the Indian Army, controlling the site's strategic position on Dal Lake against insurgents.

- 1993. *Building in the Garden: The Architecture of Joseph Allen Stein in India and California* is published by Oxford University Press. Garrett Eckbo, and Erik and Joan Erikson, write forewords. Eckbo's includes: "We need a new age of interlocking sensitivity between nature and human culture, ecology and economics, environmental progress and political sensitivity, construction integrated with earth, rock, water, and vegetation..." The Eriksons' states: "Stein has taught us, I think, that we human beings are, in fact, a living memorial to the causes we care for most." This is the last published writing by Erik Erikson.

- The firm of Stein Doshi and Bhalla dissolves, 1993-2001. Stein is disillusioned about their collaboration. Major final works in New Delhi, India Habitat Centre and the National Trade Centre, are completed.

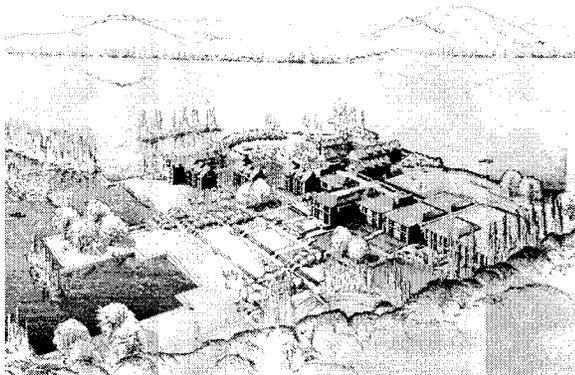


Fig. 7 Kashmir Conference Centre, Srinagar, Stein Doshi and Bhalla, 1977-84

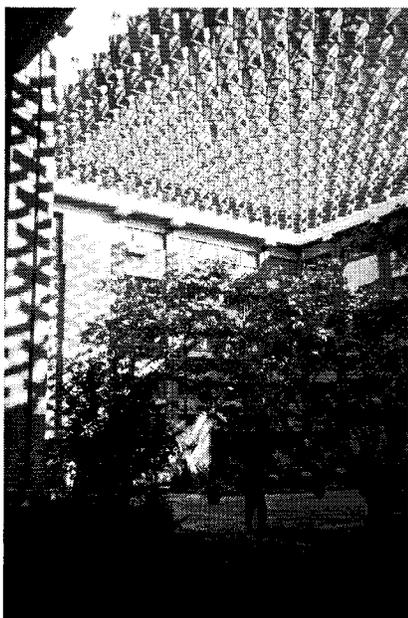


Fig. 8 India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, Stein Doshi and Bhalla, 1984-95

## TURNING POINT, 2001: RETURN TO IDEALISTIC SURROUNDINGS, AND A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

- In May 2001, Stein at 89 returns with his son and daughter-in-law to the United States, to live with my family in Newport, Rhode Island. This last perhaps reveals Stein's ultimate attachments. To a place on earth like the New England coast, with its balance of land, water and sky similar in many ways to that of the San Francisco Bay Region. To a circle of friends and mutual responsiveness in a kind of extended family with my wife and I and two daughters, a desire to be among those who care for each other, and who have an instinct to care for the immediate surroundings and the wider world. To a place dedicated initially to a tolerant, inclusive vision as Roger Williams' founding of Rhode Island in the 1600's was as a colony for religious freedom. Qualities of place, colleagues, and ideals were for Stein the attractions of California in the 1940's, of the prodigious aspirations emergent in the independent India in the 1950's, of the dawning awareness of the fragility of the entire world environment in the 1960's and 1970's, which for Stein was revealed in particular in the condition of mountain environment.

## CONCLUSIONS

- *The fragile nature of Stein's world view.* A hybrid vision of man-made, natural, and cross-cultural elements such as Stein's is vulnerable in most places. Hopes of the magnitude of Stein's are always coupled with despair. The oases which Stein's work creates are vulnerable unless continually tended.
- *There has been a tremendous lowering of architectural expectations in the last 30 years,* from a sense of responsibility for the entire environment, and seeking the establishment of surroundings worthy of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to a contemporary aimlessness. It is hoped that we could engage in more dialogue and collaboration such as this conference offers, of cross cultural interchange on social and environmental issues, that can help establish architectural patterns which could allow us to live and work without exhausting the environment.
- *We need an expansion of vision.* Until our own vision is enlarged to encompass the reciprocity of humanity and environment, assisted by the expansion fellowship offers, the full identity of figures such as Joseph Allen Stein will remain more or less invisible—as will, perhaps, our own.
- *Three ideals have yet to achieve full architectural expression—* two from the Memorial Plaza to Gandhi and King in New Delhi designed by Joseph Allen Stein, and one from Stein.

### From Gandhi:

*For us today there can be no sacrifice higher than to forget distinctions of high and low and to realize the equality of all men*

### From King:

*True peace is not merely the absence of tension but it is the presence of justice and brotherhood.*

**From Stein:**

*The environment, depending on how sensitively we manage its complement of resources, can either erode or strengthen our sanity and civility, and these are as essential to survival, in any meaningful and lasting sense, as clean air and water...A vitality-enhancing environment, providing a regenerative equilibrium between our surroundings and inner life, must be architecture's fundamental objective.<sup>10</sup>*

We will value the contributions of these singular points, and of our own potentials, when we come to value not the Old World, the New World or the Third World from which we have originated, but the single world which is all around us.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man*, as quoted in White, Stephen, *Building in the Garden: The Architecture of Joseph Allen Stein in India and California*, p 342.

<sup>2</sup>Much of the basic information included in this article comes from interviews between Stein and myself between 1985-2001. These formed the basis for my book, *Building In The Garden: The Architecture of Joseph Allen Stein in India and California* (Delhi/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), with further clarifications and details since.

<sup>3</sup>Eliel Saarinen, in "The Cranbrook Door", *Bulletin of the Cranbrook Academy of Art*, 1963, as quoted in White, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup>Balkrishna Doshi, interview with the author, 14 November 1988, in White, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Allen Stein, interview with the author, 23 November 1988, in White, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>Frank Skillman, as quoted in *Ladera Lore*, a privately published history of the 1940's Los Altos, California cooperative community, in White, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Allen Stein, "The Responsibility for Environment", lecture given at the University of California, October 1962, in White, *op. cit.*, 359.

<sup>8</sup>Garrett Eckbo, Foreword, as quoted in White, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Erik and Joan Erikson, "An Appreciation", as quoted in White, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Allen Stein, in White, *op. cit.*, p. 315.