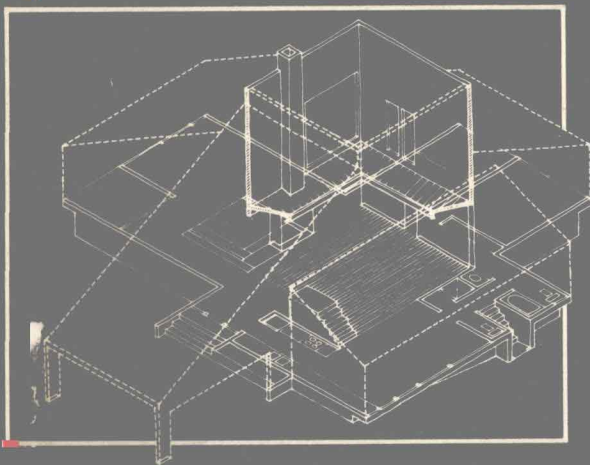
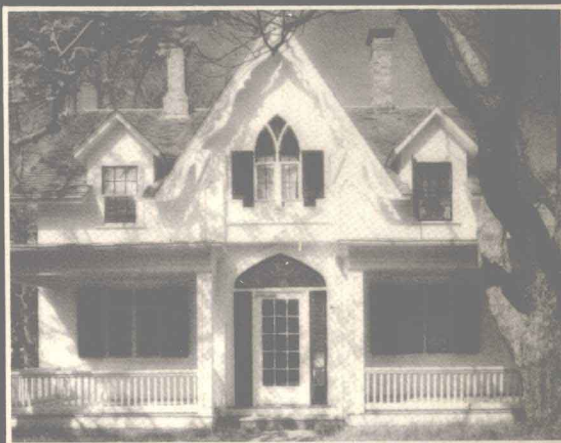


THE PLACE OF HOUSES

Three architects suggest ways to build and inhabit houses

Charles Moore
Gerald Allen
Donlyn Lyndon



The place of houses

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With Axonometric Drawings

by William Turnbull



An Owl Book

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Dorothy Alexander, 119 (11)

Gerald Allen, 20 (1-2), 21 (3-4, 6), 22 (7-8), 23 (9-11), 24 (13-14), 25 (15-18), 26 (19-20), 27 (21-22), 33 (1), 34 (4), 41 (19-20), 42 (22), 43 (23), 44 (25-26), 46 (27-29), 96 (29-30), 106 (48), 107 (49), 112 (3), 128 (5), 149 (1-3), 185 (11), 191 (6), 192 (7), 193 (9), 194 (10), 196 (13), 200 (18), 201 (19), 202 (20), 212 (7), 215 (12), 236 (12)

Archiv Prestel Verlag, Munich, 120 (12)

Morley Baer, 28 (23-26), 30 (27), 36 (6-7), 38 (11-13), 39 (14-15), 47 (30), 53 (7), 54 (8), 55 (9-10), 56 (12-14), 57 (15-16), 58 (18-19), 60 (21), 61 (22-23), 62 (24), 64 (29-30), 65 (31-33), 66 (34), 90 (20-22), 116 (8-10), 120 (13), 122 (14), 151 (5-6), 156 (13), 157 (14), 178 (3), 179 (5), 180 (6), 181 (7)

Louis M. S. Beal, 264 (4)

Biltmore House and Gardens, 111 (2)

Paul David Birnbaum, 51 (2)

Buckingham Palace, 97 (31)

Country Life, 85 (14)

Roy Flamm, 97 (32)

Alexandre Georges, 135 (17)

John T. Hill, 63 (26-28)

Cortland V. D. Hubbard, 134 (13-15)

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 131 (8)

Balthazar Korab, 137 (21-22), 191 (5)

Rollin LaFrance, 211 (6)

Maynard Lyndon, 236 (11)

Bill Maris, 161 (19-20), 162 (21), 163 (22), 217 (13),

218 (15), 219 (16-17), 220 (18)

Norman McGrath, 110 (1)

Charles Moore, 40 (18), 103 (45), 131 (9-10),

195 (11-12), 246 (1), 251 (2), 264 (3), 272 (1)

Museum of Modern Art, 139 (24-25), 177 (2)

Frederick E. Paton, 227 (1)

Robert Perron, 222 (20), 223 (21), 228 (2)

Wade Perry, 2 (1), 5 (3-4), 6 (5-6), 7 (7), 8 (8-9),

9 (10-11), 10 (12, 14), 12 (15), 13 (16), 15 (17-19),

16 (20-21), 17 (22), 18 (23), 100 (41), 105 (47),

130 (6-7), 235 (10)

James Richter, 51 (1), 168 (29), 197 (15), 198 (16)

Louis Schwarz, courtesy of Historic Charleston Foundation, 113 (4)

Maurice Smith, 229 (3)

Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, 104 (46), 230 (4), 231 (6), 232 (7), 233 (8), 234 (9)

Sports Illustrated Photo by Marvin E. Newman © Time, Inc., 33 (2)

Ezra Stoller, 136 (18-19), 137 (20), 210 (2-4), 211 (5), 214 (9-10), 215 (11)

A. Youngmeister, 34 (3)

The place of houses

Foreword

Good taste, we are told, is a singularly important factor in the design of a house. We are usually told this by someone who is assumed to possess it, and who generally makes a considerable point of the rest of the assumption: that there are people who don't have it, that that includes you, and that you will have to pay dearly to be suitably worked over. We submit that all of this is arrant nonsense. Our traditions are far less confining than the "tastemakers" would have us believe. Traditions have great power precisely because they present us with possibilities and guides that can support invention (Thou Shalt . . .), while good taste seeks to intimidate us with rules and limitations that stifle personal choice (Thou Shalt Not . . .).

The main premise of this book is that any one who cares enough can create a house of great worth—no anointment is required. *If you care enough* you just do it. You bind the goods and trappings of your life together with your dreams to make a place that is uniquely your own. In doing so you build a semblance of the world you know, adding it to the community that surrounds you.

This is not at all to minimize the importance of expertise, only to discredit its mysteries. Certainly, expertise does inform choice. If you care about snuff boxes, brass hinges, or Chippendale chairs, you will soon develop a capacity for distinguishing the real from the fake, the superior from the ordinary. You have no need to be told whether your taste is good or not. If you are moved by the light from a particular window, or by the shape of the opening, you will learn to note its dimensions and orientation and compare them with others. You become expert by caring and working, not by the receipt of any gift from on high.

In areas where you don't care enough to develop expertise, the chances are that other traditional limits will quite automatically assert themselves. If, for instance, chairs are your passion you already know which ones mean the most to you—antique Etruscan ones, maybe, or fine classic modern ones that please your eyes and your body, or incredibly ingenious ones that employ surprising principles of balance. If, on the other hand, chairs are not your passion, why fake it? You can buy extraordinarily comfortable

ones made of canvas on a folding frame for under twenty dollars, and save your money and time for something you do care about.

This book is based on the assumption that your house is of great interest and importance to you. We discuss things we know about in order that you may augment your expertise and gain confidence in your own observations and experience as a suitable basis for creating a house that is your own. If our assumption is wrong, and you do not care all that much, we can be of no help. You should then find a suitable furnished apartment and forget it.

We started out to write a pattern book for houses, inspired by the nineteenth-century pattern books that described a set of houses for people to emulate. We began with the premise that houses built today are mostly careless and terrible, that they had been built well in the past, and that pattern books had helped make them so. Therefore, a new pattern book was called for, and we set about devising one. As we considered what a new pattern book might include and how it might be helpful, we realized that it was not so much the patterns themselves that mattered but the way in which they were useful in focusing energy. The crucial ingredient is concern, care for the way that a house is built and the shape that it gives to your life. Pattern books had helped in the past by setting out the range of decisions to be made, directing attention to the several aspects of the house deemed most critical: roof, floor-plan and window types, usually, and the general stylistic trappings of the whole. For the nineteenth century this may have been, and for some people still is, enough. But our experience as architects leads us to believe that houses can and should be more completely suited to the lives

of their inhabitants and to the specific places where they are built. No simple or even complex set of house patterns, however ingenious and skillful, would do.

People who consciously attempt to extend their lives by caring for their house would not be served by a book that offered whole house patterns for the taking. Tract builders already do that, with dismaying results. They substitute stereotype for personality, relentlessly casting the house buyer into a minimal exchange with his surroundings. They offer the inhabitant little, and he asks less, till finally the buyer's interest in making a house the center of his own world is reduced to nothing. We are writing for those of you who still think it important to make a place of your own and who have the energy to struggle with the problems of making it, whether with your own hands, or with the aid of an architect and builder, or by renovating a place already built. Our task, now, is to clarify choices, to focus your energy so that it will not all be spent trying to find a way through the muddle of building decisions, but instead can be used to bring your own personal concerns to bear. We are certain by now that care, liberated by knowledge and confidence and invested in a house, is an investment returnable with interest. As with long-standing beliefs about bread cast on the waters, this confidence is an act of faith. We believe that the contents of this book sustain that faith and describe the decisions that would translate needs and dreams, even follies and pretensions, into patterns of choice about your house.

The first chapters of the book describe three towns we admire greatly, each quite different, yet each enjoying a very special quality of shared architectural purpose. We look closely at these to see how they

came to be, what lessons they offer, and where they fail. All three places are American; Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard has a clarity that comes from three centuries of general agreement among the inhabitants about what a good town might be like, as they made their separate houses; Santa Barbara, California, has an eccentric specialness consciously established during one moment in time when the inhabitants agreed to invent a form for the town that would connect it with a synthetic, romantic past; and Sea Ranch on the northern California coast is the product of an agreement among developers and consultants about the nature of the site, an agreement contrived before any inhabitants were present.

These three places, together with some individual houses that we've designed, set the stage for the central part of the book, our attempt to delineate the three conceptual building blocks from which houses are made:

rooms to live in, machines that serve life, and the inhabitants' dreams made manifest.

We detail the finite number of ways that rooms can be assembled, be related to machines, and fitted to the land. We also discuss, with examples, some of the nearly infinite number of ways in which rooms can be adjusted for the special interest of those who inhabit them. A checklist is then included to help reveal to you the patterns of living your house must accommodate and to set you on the path to organizing the place that your house may become.

So this is a pattern book after all, but not in the sense we had first imagined. This one describes patterns that help you think about houses; we are not trying to impose shapes. If we put any new limits on your search for a good house then we will have failed. But if we have managed to make your search easier, or even more interesting, we can count our purpose achieved.

A note on the drawings

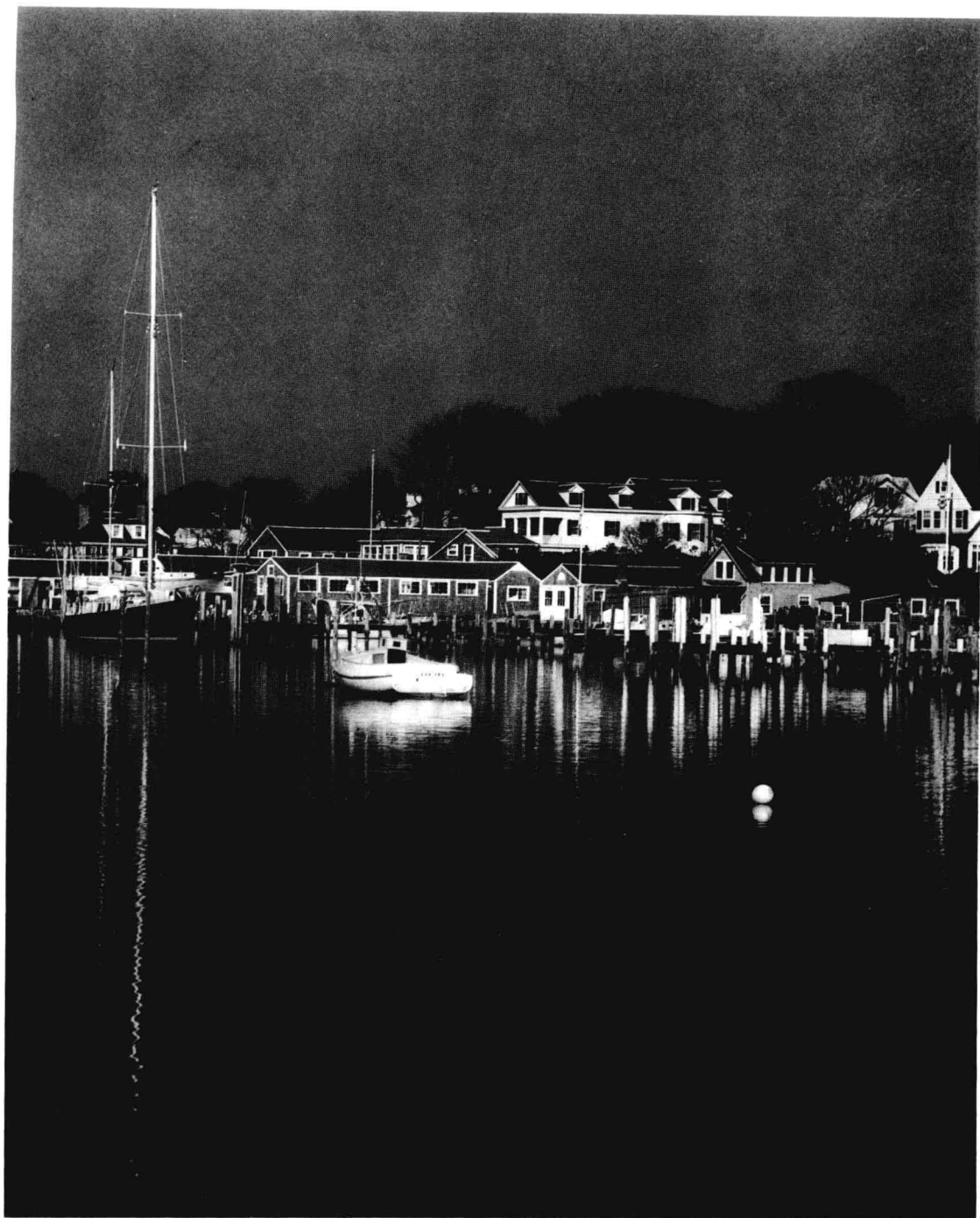
All axonometric drawings, floor plans, elevations, and sections (but not site plans, section perspectives, or diagrams) are reproduced at the same scale—32 feet to the inch.

The authors especially thank William Turnbull, who drew the axonometrics, and William Durkee, who made nearly all of the other drawings. They are also grateful to T. W. Kleinsasser, who supplied the documents from which the drawings of Fonthill (Mercer's Castle) on page 133 were made, and to Philippe Boudon, whose research on Le Corbusier's housing at Pessac and Lège, published in *Lived-in Architecture* (Cambridge, 1972), provided the basis for the drawings on pages 141-142.

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	vii	Setting out choices	
		Assembling the rooms	147
Houses in several places		Including the machines	176
Edgartown	3	Fitting the house to the land	188
Santa Barbara	19	Inflecting the scheme	
The Sea Ranch	31	Mapping	207
The place of houses	49	Collecting	225
Ours	50	Yours	241
The three orders		Inhabiting	269
The order of rooms	71		
The order of machines	108		
The order of dreams	124	<i>Index</i>	275

Houses in several places



1. Edgartown from the harbor

Edgartown

Edgartown, on Martha's Vineyard off the Massachusetts coast, is an old and very elegant village that is a testament to the art of building well. (1) It is so pleasant, so memorable, so redolent of a sense of place that it rewards not only continuing visits but detailed examination.

In 1671 the town was named for the infant son of James, Duke of York. Although Prince Edgar had unfortunately died some weeks before, the town has borne his name through three centuries of modest growth and striking change. In the eighteenth century, Edgartown was a center of agriculture and maritime commerce. Later on, and more luxuriously, it became a whaling port second in importance only to Nantucket. Today, more luxuriously still, it is a busy vacation resort where the houses, streets, and harbor, remnants of an industrious mercantile past, provide blandishments for summer residents and tourists.

Visitors almost always come to Edgartown by way of Vineyard Haven, where the largest ferries land. They drive along a small, straight road through scrub growth and pine thickets and, in due course,

through predictably bland modern outskirts with their filling stations and garages and nondescript houses. The road from Vineyard Haven is simply something to be traveled along to get somewhere. At a spot marked by a flagpole it becomes a place to be, Edgartown's Main Street. (2)

Facing the intersection where the flagpole stands is the Joshua Snow house, simply and, to our eyes, admirably built in 1838 according to the traditional pattern of most other houses in Edgartown and indeed in all of New England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (3) A wooden box a story and a half high with a gable roof, it contains a set of rooms around an entrance hall on the ground floor and secondary rooms above. Two slender chimneys pierce the roof just in front of its peak and vent the fireplaces in the house. Except for their tidy black caps they are painted white, like the boards of the house itself. Almost all the distinguishing details on the outside—the chimney caps, the shutters, the scroll brackets supporting the canopy over the front door—perform or at least recall some specific, useful, as well as decorative service.

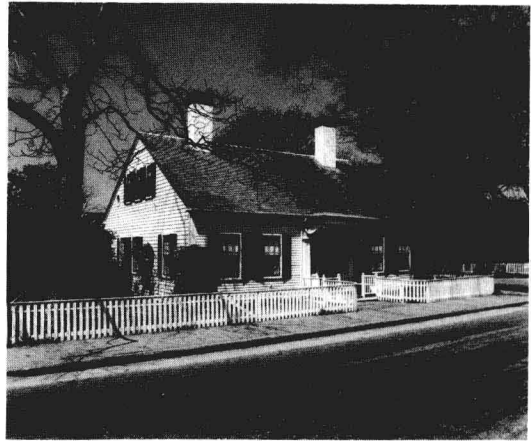


2. Plan of Edgartown, Main and Water Streets shaded

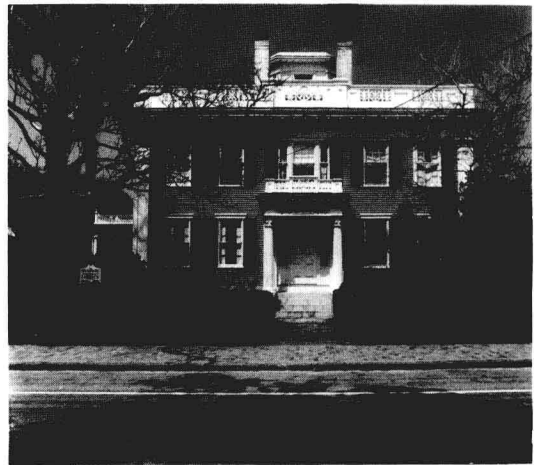
Even the white picket fence on either side of the front walk and along the sidewalk marks a boundary between the public realm and the private realm of the inhabitants.

The house is quite without overt attempts to be special, or even distinguishable from its neighbors. Edgartown in fact preserves the decorum of a black-tie dinner, where everyone manages to look his best while dressing very much like everyone else. Certain limited extravagances are allowed, like frills on a shirt or even a madras cummerbund, but there is a large area of agreement about forms, encouraged by an active and continuing tradition. There is pretty substantial agreement, too, about what cannot be included: no bare feet, or even clip-on ties or their residential equivalent: shutters nailed to the wall. Nothing in the Snow house is out of place; nothing is there without some point or conviction, some need, actual or remembered, and the house, because of all this good sense, speaks with a particularly strong voice.

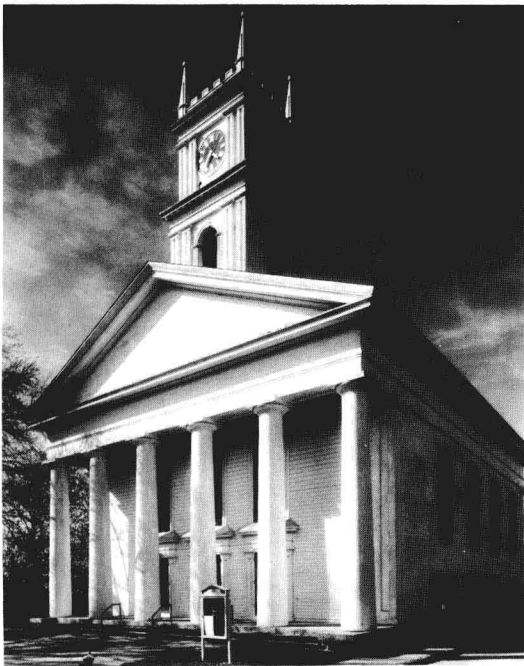
Two doors down Main Street is the Daniel Fisher house, which speaks in rather different terms. (4) Dr. Fisher was a founder and first president of the Martha's Vineyard National Bank, and when he built his house he made it out of seasoned Maine pine fastened together entirely with brass and copper nails. With its carefully carved doorway and porch, the massive wood pilasters accenting each corner of the house, and the heavy cornice under the balustrade at the edge of the roof, it is much more elaborate than the Joshua Snow house up the street. Yet it, too, is simply a box which encloses a set of rooms around a central hall. Reproduced in New England timber, it takes much of its inspiration from the great stone houses of England, the villas of sixteenth-century Italy, or even the details of the architecture of Greece and Rome.



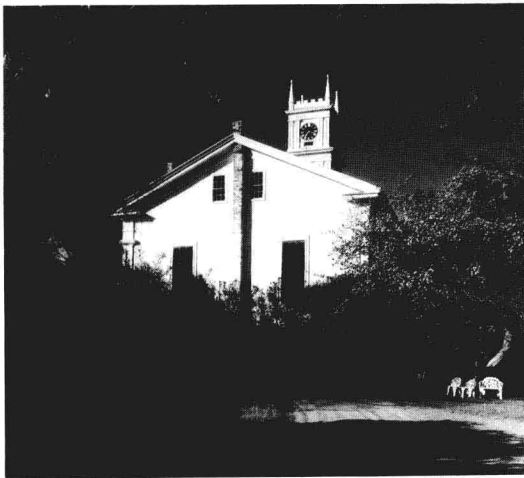
3. Snow house, 1838



4. Fisher house, ca. 1855



5. Methodist Church, 1842



6. Back of the Methodist Church

One door farther down Main Street, and one door farther down even than that, are two public buildings which are, again, simple rectangular boxes, but detailed and ornamented in special ways that signal their importance in the town. The Methodist Church, built in 1842 and paid for mostly by whaling captains, is organized like a very large barn. (5) Inside on the ground floor is a series of small meeting rooms. The main meeting room, the church, is in, as it were, the loft. But the effect from the front is of only one story, not two. With its high portico and triangular pediment supported by six gigantic wood columns, the building is made to seem less like a barn and more like a classical temple reborn on Main Street. There is a commonsense economy here, too, for on the back of the church where the message seems less urgent, all pretensions have been abandoned. There is no cornice, no pediment, and no decorations—only four windows to let in the light, and two utilitarian brick chimneys. (6)

The form of the church, a box, provides a place for people to sit and listen and talk as part of a deliberately simple ceremony. But the care and energy its builders spent on embellishing the form—in the portico and, separately, in the tower which finally was graced with little Gothic spires—serves an equally important function. These embellishments proclaim, with a set of symbols recognizable to all, the place of the church in the life of the community.

The symbols of the courthouse next door on Main Street are more subdued. The size of the whole building and its scale—that is, the relative size of its windows, doors, and portico—are both smaller than those of the church. Perhaps to seem more enduring the courthouse is built of brick, but strangely its effect is not much less domestic than that of any house in Edgartown. (7)



7. *Dukes County Courthouse, ca. 1840*



8. *The length of Main Street*



9. *Lower Main Street*

All four of these buildings—the two houses, the church, and the courthouse—are essentially similar. Each is a set of greater or lesser rooms put together to make a box with a roof on top. When it was deemed appropriate, various decorations were put on the outside surfaces. Because these buildings were made in similar ways by people with similar attitudes, they are all good neighbors. But because each was made for a different reason, each has its special meaning. The two houses reflect two families' very different senses of themselves (Captain Snow is said to have paid for his house with profits from selling his wife's homemade candy). The church and the courthouse, one very grand and the other surprisingly modest, tell something not just about churches and courthouses, but about their relationship to the town.

Main Street runs from the flagpole downhill to the harbor. It thus has a well-defined beginning and end. (8) This is the principal commercial street in Edgartown, though there are houses and institutional buildings all along it. At the lower end of the street the commercial buildings are woven together into a dense fabric. Each of them encloses something of its own, an office or a shop or a bank. Together they all help enclose the street itself by making walls on either side of it. The buildings here seem almost to have been eroded by the continuous stream of pedestrian traffic along their fronts. The shops, which people enter most, have glassy display windows and deep-set doors which invite entrance. The offices, resisting erosion more, have smaller windows and doors which simply open onto the street and look as though they allow access only when necessary. (9)

One block above the harbor, Main Street intersects Water Street at a ninety-degree angle. This is Four Corners, the crossroads