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Midwestern Houses Exhibited in Chicago

The term "villa" has been regularly used for centuries to refer to distinguished country houses. But in "The Chicago and Midwest Villa," an exhibition on view from March 7 to April 28 at the Chicago Athenaeum, the label is liberally applied to urban and suburban, detached and free-standing, distinguished and banal examples. The 30 projects exhibited, culled from 80 submissions either designed or built after January 1993, are intended to survey recent design trends in residential architecture by architects from Chicago and the Midwest. Selections were made by a jury comprising Nada Andric of Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill; Scott Sevon, president of Chicago's Home Builders Association; and Jared Shlaes, a real estate consultant for Shlaes & Company.

Several trends are discernible from the varied work. The reexploration of the formal properties of the Shingle Style, most clearly articulated by

Robert A.M. Stern, continues unabated in less talented hands. A mediocre private residence by Becker Architects applies some semblance of Shingle Style surface treatments, but lacks the requisite three-dimensional exuberance. Tilton + Lewis Associates' Johnston House captures that formal articulation, but careens badly out of control with a turreted tower that seems inspired by Bruce Goff through a filter of Martian movies. A marginally more developed house by DKL Architecture for Lot 12, Forest Beach, hits closer to the historicist target.

Even more disturbing are those projects that pick and choose from a potpourri of styles in a vain attempt to distinguish themselves. Rudolph & Associates' Burr Ridge Residence resurrects the ghost of Frank Lloyd Wright protégé George Maher, carefully replicating his grandiose and overwrought renditions of the Prairie Style. The Beaubien Residence in Lake Forest by Tilton + Lewis parades the typical suburban French Renaissance style in its most

insipid form. And Morter Architects' house in Mountain Star, Colorado, collages the stone and timber motifs of ski lodges with neither rhyme nor reason.

The architects' own houses are the exhibition's most noteworthy designs. Morgante Wilson Architects' renovation and extension of the Wilmette House, a workmanlike suburban residence, knits together various spaces into a coherent whole. More visually exciting is the Stefan House in Stillwater, Minnesota, designed by Stefan/Larson Associates: constructed as a bridge across a ravine, the house incorporates a tower and a detached garage which stands guard as a gatehouse.

Only two of the 30 projects suggest fertile ground for residential architecture. Salmela Fosdick's Lutz Residence in Duluth, Minnesota, is an exciting composition of disparate parts featuring an active interplay between distinct three-dimensional elements as well as varying surface treatments. Similarly, Florian Architects' Villa I: Michigan in Chicago

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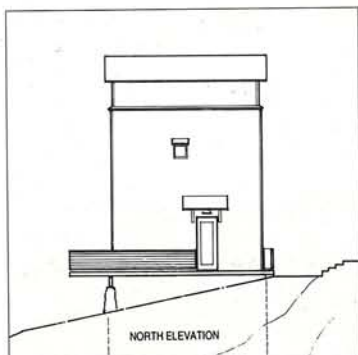
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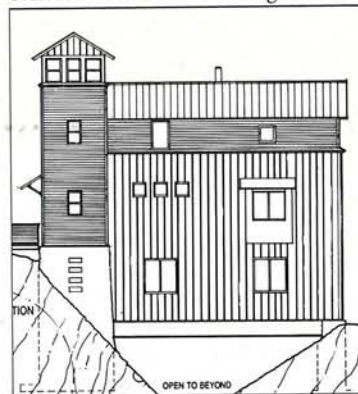
displays a smart, simple composition of plinth, wall, tower, and soaring roof that shows a lot of verve.

"The Chicago and Midwest Villa" is part of a biennial series organized by the Chicago Athenaeum. This format could yield a broad cross-section of work by firms both known and unknown, but curiously, most of the entries came from those neither unrecognized nor distinguished. Where is the new residential work of Chicago architects such as Stuart Cohen, Larry Booth, and Tom Beeby? And why are we left without a clear indication of who their progeny will be?

For the most part, the level of work in "The Midwest Villa" is better suited to an ordinary suburban showcase of homes—and they at least offer real buildings to examine. To display architectural drawings and photographs of mediocrity only degrades the serious exhibitions sorely needed to educate architects and the public as to the theoretical and practical possibilities of houses today.—*Edward Keegan*



STEFAN HOUSE: Tower acts as gatehouse.



STEFAN HOUSE: House bridges ravine.



LUTZ HOUSE: Salmela Fosdick's Duluth design was one of exhibition's best houses.



WILMETTE HOUSE: By Morgante Wilson.



WILMETTE HOUSE: Addition at rear.

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Silver City Galleria, Taunton, MA. ADD, Inc., Architects; Peter Vanderveker, Photo.

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