

GLASS ACT  
by  
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Folly on the Sands

"Tempt the waters from their bed/...along that wilderness of glass--"  
--Edgar Allan Poe, "The City in the Sea"

The world is full of glass houses. Made possible by industrial construction methods, Crystal Palaces and Dymaxion Houses and Biospheres have dotted the landscape from Victorian times to the present.

But not many of them feature three-story curving exterior walls so delicately artful that they seem to float in space, topped by transparent swatches of roof. Not many of them are built in prime hurricane territory. And hardly any of the rare vitreous residences braving the extremes of Storm Alley are positioned smack dab on the often wildly tempestuous shoreline of a barrier island.

But if the extravagant dreams of two architects--Ronald Krueck and Mark Sexton--impelled by the whims of their mysterious patrons--a couple concealing their cherished privacy behind the pseudonym of Mr. and Mrs. Fish--ever make the jump into reality, in a little over two years from now just such a grandiose structure will rise in the small town of Pensacola Beach, Florida.

To get a better picture of the Fish dream residence as idealized by Krueck and Sexton, follow this simple recipe:

Take a 180-foot-long three-story glass box with the proportions of a stack of Fig Newtons and raise it up on stilts. Bend it a third of the way down its length at a slight angle. Grab its long north and south exterior glass walls and distort them into convex arcs stretching above and below the house frame. Mount an aerodynamic spoiler on its roof. Carve away various asymmetrical bays and porches, alcoves and terraces. Fill the interior with cantilevered rooms, criss-crossing corridors and staircases, being sure to leave several large open atria.

You now have a faint idea of what these insanely ambitious architects have envisioned as their answer to Mr. and Mrs. Fish's initial simple desire for a "large, really cool house with a wraparound view of the water." (Although to be fair to the architects, the Fishes's wish list for desirable features in their new home did eventually amount to 88 items.)

The word "folly," in an unprejudicial architectural context, generally conveys a structure where fantastical caprices and bold, eye-catching gestures outweigh mere utilitarian concerns. A folly somehow embodies the personalities of its owners and builders. One thinks of the English writer Horace Walpole's private Gothic castle, Strawberry Hill, or Antoni Gaudi's Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona.

Is the Florida Fish residence as designed by Krueck and Sexton a modernist folly, or merely a brave attempt to establish a beachhead for Bauhausian beauty in a hostile terrain?

Becoming familiar with the principals and their contrasting environments, accompanying them on the early stages of their journey from drawing board to groundbreaking, might be the only method of answering this question.

### They Did It Mies Way

The firm of Krueck and Sexton is headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, a town that takes its architecture seriously and pridefully. (A recent essay by *Chicago Tribune* columnist John Kass brashly proclaimed that the city possessed "the most beautiful skyline in the world.") Almost completely destroyed by the famous fire of 1871, Chicago rebounded to become an architectural proving ground. Taking advantage of the new technology of fire-proof steel frames, Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan practically invented the skyscraper here. (The Sears Tower was only recently eclipsed by Malaysia's Petronas complex as world's tallest building, a fact which must rankle loyal Chicagoans). And the influence of Adler and Sullivan's brightest student, Frank Lloyd Wright, radiated outward from his Chicago beginnings. But perhaps the most significant milestone in this city's love affair with architecture was the thirty-year presence after 1938 in the city of German Bauhausian expatriate Mies van der Rohe, modernist builder supreme.

One of the many van der Rohe sites in the city is the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology, which just happens to be the alma mater of Krueck and Sexton. Freely acknowledging themselves as deep-dyed Miesians, Sexton and Krueck would probably agree with van der Rohe's statement in a 1950 speech that: "Whenever technology reaches its real fulfillment, it transcends into architecture." These designers have obviously counted on just such a technological transcendence in their past ventures.

The reader opening the glossy pages of *Krueck Sexton* (The Monacelli Press, 1997), a retrospective compendium of projects dating over the architects' fifteen-year partnership, is immediately sucked into a futuristic world ruled by their trademark hyperlucid geometry, an esthetic that tempers severe machined lines and surfaces with an occasional dash of the sinuously organic. The world as configured and decorated and furnished by Ronald Krueck and Mark Sexton features residential and commercial buildings sheathed and lined with coolly elegant materials. Burnished stainless steel, polished exotic granites, matte aluminum, speckled terrazo, reflective paints, and, first and foremost, infinite varieties of glass, the architects' favorite material.

In "The Painted Apartment," the client's desire "to live within a painting" is satisfied by twisty steel forms and glass-brick walls lit from within. In both "A Victorian Townhouse Extended" and "Untitled No. 3," pre-existing structures go under the surgical hands of Krueck and Sexton and emerge as cyborg creations, part nineteenth century, part twenty-first. The dry financial transactions normally conducted in "A Bank for the Northern Trust Company of California" now occur beneath a lyrically arched parabola of curly maple veneer. And anyone inhabiting the duplex known as "The Stainless Steel Apartment" must surely feel he's wandered into oversized version of HAL's lucite intelligence matrix. (Many of these spaces, in fact, demand to be filled by leggy, monied spacegirl debutantes in lurex miniskirts just back from the Mars-to-Venus Regatta.)

Krueck and Sexton's conception for the Fish residence is a fairly straightforward extension of their past endeavors. But the difference this time is that they are working in territory where they possess few established business connections that might cushion the rigors of construction, and where nature is ready to throw incredible challenges at them.

### In the Walls of Eryx

For Krueck and Sexton, the early stages of this project consist of days stuffed with a seemingly endless series of nonstop meetings with various sober engineering experts and with cautiously hungry Florida general contractors lured by a mix of profit-seeking

and genuine curiosity about the alien intrusion in their backyard. The whirlwind activity begins at their home base.

Number 213 West Institute Place is a large spruced-up brick building, the former home of a Schwinn bicycle factory, flanked by a rumbling spur of the Chicago El and located in a reclaimed district now home to art galleries and French bistros. Anstiss Krueck, wife to the senior partner, a tall, slim, smiling woman in her early fifties wearing a stylish nubby sweater, greets visitors at the office door.

The working quarters of Krueck and Sexton are a far cry from any of their exotic signature spaces. Beyond the receptionist's desk opens up a long wood-floored loft with sand-scoured wooden ceiling beams, brick walls, and windows on south and west sides; the loft is subdivided in rows by standard black metal office desks topped with a variety of computers and with filing cabinets designed to hold architectural drawings. Only typical veal-pen partitioning separates Mark Sexton's desk from the workstations of the five or six junior architects busily constructing models in both electrons and plastic. Ron Krueck disdains even such minimal shielding, and is often found borrowing a seat among his employees.

Ron Krueck (his last name, pronounced "krick," is German, and originally meant "crutch," an architectural item in the paintings of Salvador Dali, if nowhere else) is 51. Tall, with flyaway hair sticking up around a central bald spot, he resembles a cross between poet Allen Ginsberg, metafictionist John Barth, and cosmopolitan hyper-realist Umberto Eco. With a neat salt-and-pepper beard and thick rimless glasses, he projects a slightly fuzzy, professorial, sophisticated sensibility (Krueck teaches at the IIT), a dreamer's attitude not incompatible with acute perceptions and on-target rejoinders. Today Krueck wears luxurious grey pants and an impeccable black shirt.

Mark Sexton, 42, is a trim, voluble and energetic fellow of average height. Intense blue eyes dominate a longish, planar face topped with curly black hair showing the slightest grey around the ears. In an ivory mock-turtleneck and herringbone pants, Sexton practically vibrates with excitement when he speaks about this challenging project. A Dennis Hopper vibe of barely leashed energy sparks off him, and his vociferous raps at times assume a Lenny Bruce intensity.

The backstory of the anomalous Fish assignment possesses its share of strange mystery.

One day in December of last year, Krueck and Sexton received an unsolicited letter from a man with the improbable name of Phillip Morris. Morris was acting as paid intermediary for shy and wealthy clients. Morris's letter recounted how, in October, Mr. and Mrs. Fish and their children had been burned out of their new home in Pensacola Beach, Florida, escaping from the spectacular night-time blaze with no more than the clothes on their backs. Now the Fishes desired to build a new home on the devastated site of their prior one. They were soliciting proposals from various architects.

Somewhat skeptical at this unheard-of solicitation by distant strangers, even imagining it to be a hoax, Krueck and Sexton submitted their book as calling card and portfolio combined. To their surprise, they won the competition. (Sexton expresses some doubt about how seriously any other firm even responded to this offbeat invitation, perhaps narrowing the field radically in their favor.)

Summoned like wizards to a distraught king and queen, Krueck and Sexton learned of the unique requirements and constraints of the as-yet-nebulous house-to-be. Then began the design process, a laborious and lengthy tango among three forces: the

esthetics of the architects, the desires of the clients, and the demands of the site and the physical materials. It's a dance still in flux, one that will never really end until the last day of construction.

Preliminary conceptions offered to the Fishes included a vibrant impressionistic abstraction in colored pencils by Krueck and three early cardboard-and-plastic models. A fourth model began to hew closer to finality. Now, a fifth model is under construction. In its intricacy, this fifth model conjures up a little-known H. P. Lovecraft story, "In the Walls of Eryx."

A human explorer on a habitable Venus, traipsing across a desert, comes upon an utterly invisible barrier composed of a "perfectly transparent, non-refractive solid." Tracing the wall by touch, he finds a portal. Alas, he enters. Proceeding deeper, past one turning after another, he realizes too late that he's trapped in a sinister labyrinth composed with "uncanny architectural skill." Unable to extricate himself, after several days he dies of thirst within plain sight of freedom.

Is this design Krueck and Sexton's Eryx? Will anyone emerge from this ambitious project with sanity intact?

Maybe only the engineers can answer that.

### **Deflection Criteria in Coupled Structures**

One of the first pivotal meetings involves structural engineers Roger Reckers and Brian Spencer, from the firm of Tylk, Gustafson and Associates. These are the experts in steel and concrete who will help the architects translate their Platonic conceptions into a hurricane-resistant, potentially buildable structure.

Roger Reckers is the senior engineer, a cheerful ashy-blond man wearing a blue shirt, gold tie and linen pants. His assistant, Brian Spencer, a burly young guy with strawberry-blond hair, totes a top-of-the-line laptop on which he can model loads and performances with a software package known as RISA. Like all the engineers and construction men involved in this project, Reckers and Spencer exhibit a kind of hard-nosed playfulness, a respect for the ineluctable powers and limits of nature combined with a desire to push the envelope in creative ways.

Tacked to the wall of the K&S conference room are 30" by 42" floorplans and cross-sections of the Fish project. These plans all exist as computer files, which are modemed as necessary to a local firm called Digital Imaging, which possesses the specialized printers to produce the large output. Messengers rush the printouts back within twenty minutes. Over the course of this multi-year, multi-million-dollar project, the architects will generate about 10,000 of these hardcopies, at US\$2.00 a pop.

Spencer massages data on the fly, while Reckers proceeds to outline the possibilities Tylk, Gustafson has developed. Piles will be driven into the sandy Florida soil. Atop these underground supports, trapezoidal concrete plinths ten feet in height will rise to a concrete bed, on which the actual house will rest. Think of this bed as cakeplate supporting the confection of the house itself. This elevation is demanded by FEMA and Florida building codes, to raise the house above potential storm surges. Steel girders will project upward and outward from the cakeplate. Curved steel splines will be pinned at top and bottom to the girders every ten feet, forming the coupled support system for the outer glass walls. Theoretically, the whole structure will withstand 145 MPH winds, moving back and forth with only three-quarters of an inch deflection from the vertical.

None of these components, not even the cement, are off the shelf. The unique shaping of the steel to can only be handled by a few "boutique" mills, all of them up north, necessitating long-distance shipment to the construction site. The surface finish of the steel, as well as of the cement, is critical. In a Krueck and Sexton dwelling, components normally hidden in conventional homes remain exposed. "These girders become your living room walls," Krueck explains. The glass must be pre-stressed and tested to insure it will survive not only everyday heating and cooling and its own weight, but also the impact of flying storm debris. The architects believe only Pilkington Glass, located in Pilkington, UK, has the necessary expertise to create such a tough yet beautiful carapace. So the lines of supply now extend across the Atlantic.

The architects are not happy with the required dimensions of the girders that will form the house's skeleton, envisioning the bulky columns chewing up precious interior space. "I think you need a new computer," Krueck says. "A twenty-story apartment building doesn't have a column that big. I'm a little flipped out." Reckers shrugs, as if to say, *You designed this white elephant*. After hours of wrangling, the structural engineers are sent off to refine their figures.

The afternoon engineering session is devoted to MEP: mechanical, electrical, and plumbing concerns. The bearer of bad tidings this time is David Lehman, of LDC Consultants. A brown-haired bearish fellow, Lehman arrives hefting a bag of bakery macaroons as a peace offering. As architects and consultant munch cookies, Lehman reports on possible heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems: HVAC. Powerplant choices are put aside for the moment to concentrate on how to deliver the necessary quantities of processed air necessitated by the Florida climate. (Pensacola temperatures range from freezing to tropical.) The main problem: a lack of interior walls in which to hide the ugly pipes and ducts. If they surmount this dilemma, the architects are still left with Mr. Fish's expressed intention to open his windows in good weather. Such old-fashioned desires play havoc with any respectable cybernetic HVAC system, where sensors automatically attempt to compensate for "unnatural" fluctuations.

Lehman announces, "This house is twelve-thousand square feet. Most houses over five thousand square feet, you have to treat like a museum." Lehman wants the residence hermetically sealed, no stray inputs or outputs to disturb the balance of the system. The architects wince, imagining how they will convey this professional opinion to their nature-loving client.

Presented with a bewildering variety of delivery systems, Krueck finally demands, "Which one would you pick if this were your house and your money?"

"If this were my house? I'd be living in a tent on the beach with my money invested in the stock market."

On this sagacious note, the final decision is postponed. So much remains ungraspable at this stage, and will for the next several months. Lehman departs, and the architects hustle to a different project site.

The Merchandise Mart of Chicago, home to over 600 wholesale showrooms, contains 4.2 million square feet, second in size only to the Pentagon. On the third floor, the showroom for the Herman Miller furniture company is getting a facelift. A "fractured" transparent glass wall zigzags across the floorspace. Frosted glass panels separate interior areas. The plywood foundation for a decorative glass "waterfall" is in place. Sexton is soon on his knees, examining joints between panes. To the untrained

eye, everything might look jake. But Sexton spots an eighth-of-an-inch misalignment partway down the zigzag that has thrown off everything afterwards.

Such annoying glitches are fairly easy to catch and correct on a daily basis when they occur in the architects' backyard. But will long-distance supervision of the Fish project be like trying to steer the Mars Rover in realtime from Houston? Everything depends on the people down in Pensacola.

### **Porches to the North, Beaches to the South**

The architects have adopted an optimistic attitude about Mr. and Mrs Fish. They are said to be "the ideal clients," meaning sophisticated, patient, wealthy and hands-on. ("The most scary client we've ever had," Krueck maintains, "was the one who said, 'Just do it.' We didn't know how to please him.") The middle-aged Mr. Fish strikes them as a quiet, "spiritual" person, his younger wife (it's a second marriage for both) as a "tomboy" and Corvette-driving gal who knows how to raise some dust. Blessed with more money than they can readily spend and an uncommon share of imagination, pushed by disaster into new realms of thought, the Fishes are earnestly and hopefully relying on the honesty and skills of two nearly foreign professional magicians to deliver a crystal castle where they can kick their shoes off and open the windows.

Yet Krueck and Sexton still seem simultaneously in awe of and a bit baffled by their patrons. Although both the Fishes are transplanted Midwesterners, their adaptation to local ways has rendered them strange to the Chicago urbanites. Krueck and Sexton cannot help but feel deracinated below the Mason-Dixon line, uncertain what to expect from all the crucial local people on whose backs success or failure rides.

Their views on the potential contractors show a similar reserved hopefulness. The Fish residence presents unique construction problems, and will demand a high level of expertise from crews more used to tossing up hasty condos. Only by close interviews will the Chicagoans be able to pick a winning team. Which explains why today finds the pair hustling themselves down south.

Without much self-mockery, locals call the coastline of the Florida Panhandle the Redneck Riviera. Retirees, sick of lower Florida's overpopulation and ugly heat, have relocated to the temperate northern Panhandle, where the living is cheap and the golfing is nonstop. Neighboring Alabamans drift over too. New condos are going up on beachfront real estate everywhere, but major population increases are limited by a lack of jobs. With several bases in the area, Eglin chief among them, the military is the largest employer. Their vast land-holdings also check development to a certain degree.

Ninth Avenue south from the airport is typical urban blight-strip: chain restaurants and retailers, a small mall. But a few miles further on, the sight of typical native residences is illuminating.

One of the favored local designs consists of cinderblocks stacked one-story high and capped with a flat roof. Undoubtedly, these squat buildings stand up well to storms. Painted in bright idiosyncratically clashing colors typically associated with Caribbean islands, these dwellings seem to represent the low end of middle-class existence. Spelling "POVERTY" in capital letters are the innumerable tumbledown shotgun shacks with overgrown, debris-cluttered yards. In the cruel shadow of an expressway, a family of African-Americans sit stoically on their porch in a squad of busted furniture, as if sketched by Robert Crumb.

Downtown Pensacola, excluding Colonial districts such as the charming live-oak-bordered Seville Square, is tediously mundane. The architects leave it behind, reaching the edge of Pensacola Bay and the three-mile-long bridge (paralleled by "The World's Longest Fishing Pier") that brings travelers across the waters to the peninsula town of Gulf Breeze. On the outskirts of that town rears the sign announcing the turnoff for Pensacola Beach: a giant image, circa 1963, of a leaping swordfish and the legend: "The World's Whitest Beaches." A second, shorter bridge delivers drivers over the Intracoastal Waterway to Santa Rosa Island and Pensacola Beach, whose first landmark is a mushroom-style water tower painted to resemble a striped beachball.

Honkytonk beach resorts all share a similar timeless ambiance dictated by the environment and the available options for fun. Starting in Maine in June, the diligent beachbum could follow the recreational season south along the coast all the way to Pensacola Beach without really stepping out of an eternal frieze of souvenir and surfing shops, cheap motels, dunes, boardwalks, fried-fish and fried-clam restaurants, all populated by swimsuit-clad vacationers. Here, palm trees, oleanders, and the effluvia of thousands of recently departed horny Spring Break students are all that distinguish the surroundings from, say, Narragansett, Rhode Island.

Krueck and Sexton have rooms booked at the Hampton Inn, a large masonry structure painted mint-green and coral-pink, backed onto the snowy sands of the Gulfside of this narrow barrier island. They consider the place cheesy, but ultimately their temporary lodgings will hardly impact on them, as they hasten from one throwdown to another.

#### The Harold Salmon Traveling Medicine Show

The first meeting is to take place at Mr. Fish's business. (Mrs. Fish is an MD with a flourishing practice.) Ironically, Mr. Fish manufactures an architectural component--call it vinyl siding--which would never in a million years be used in a K&S composition. Chairing this confab is go-between Phillip Morris, an affable Brit of NBA dimensions who obviously plays Jeeves to Mr. Fish's Bertie.

This meeting is the first of three interviews with possible building contractors. If the client can be seen as the President and the architects as the generals, then the contractors--along with any specialist subcontractors they subsequently bring onboard--are the officers and the grunts responsible for actually winning the war. Picking the right contractor is perhaps the most crucial decision to be made, and although Krueck and Sexton have several firms they rely on back home, down here they're operating semi-blindly.

Present in the large conference room is the first construction candidate--but not Mr. Fish, who is tied up meeting with insurance agents regarding his burnt-out house.

Harold Salmon is head honcho of Sundance Homes. His tanned and seamed face, topped with thick silver hair and bisected by oval eyeglasses, possesses a stern and minatory mien. A Florida native with an accent thick as palmbark, he's accompanied by Paul Wilson, a rubicund ex-Mobilian whose contrasting accent is little heard throughout the meeting.

Over the next two hours, Salmon will be exhaustively grilled on his means, morals and methods. Morris, Sexton and Krueck will lob blunt and forthright questions in volleys at him. Can he find the talented local craftsmen necessary to work on such an exacting project? How involved will he become? What will his response be to

emergencies and delays? Is he savvy enough to maintain a digital connection with Chicago? (The architects plan to e-mail updated schematics and receive digi-cam images of the work in progress to supplement weekly visits in person.) Does he feel simpatico with the architects, with the clients? All that the inquisitors fail to demand is his hat-size.

Essentially, Salmon is up to the challenge. A confidently brusque self-made man, he gives as good as he gets. His husky cornpone voice sometimes soars to emotional heights, as when he replies to the query about how he'd react to a balky subcontractor. "What I'd do is tell him his behavior is totally unacceptable, and he'd better be there the next morning if I have to get a sheriff's car to escort him to the job site!"

Partway through the meeting, Mr. Fish enters.

He's an aging Harrison Ford in a lichen-and-olive striped shirt and pinwheel-patterned tie that reflect modest good taste. Wavy grey hair and big hands, a square jaw and broad nose. Half-glasses for reading compel him to peer owlishly over their rims. He is indeed remarkably quiet and unassuming, listening intently to the discussion, venturing only a mild comment or two.

The interrogation winds down. Harold Salmon launches into a fervent peroration, finally asserting, "If I don't say it, nobody's gonna say it for me. But I know that I'm totally qualified to build what I'm seeing. We are all creators here, and I will be personally consumed by this project!"

Salmon and Wilson are ushered out. The postmortem reveals that Salmon's brand of confidence-building snake-oil was not totally palatable. Left hanging in the air is the unspoken question: is this fried-oyster town really compatible with a champagne cocktail house?

### **Spider Island**

Over coffee and cereal in the Hampton Inn at 7 AM the next morning, the architects prepare for a backbreaking twelve-hour day. Their schedule will include their third visit to the actual site, two contractor interviews, a consultation with a soil engineer, and, finally, an evening rundown with the Fishes in the temporary residence where the family set up housekeeping after the fire. Curiously, this intermediate home is directly next door to the site of the October inferno, and the image of Mr. and Mrs. Fish waking each day and looking across the lawn to the sad carnage, wondering if their new place will ever get built, is a piquant one.

Wiry Mark Sexton is pumped and ready for action, drawing energy from a seemingly bottomless well. A semi-stooped Ron Krueck, who's just learned by phone that one of his dogs has unexpectedly died back in Chicago, is a trifle dispirited. It seems impossible they can run at this pace for the entire length of the project, but no relief is in sight. After choosing a contractor by week's end, the architects and their new representatives in Pensacola will do preliminary work until January, 1999, firming up their designs as much as possible and trying to anticipate all contingencies. Actual construction will take the succeeding twelve or fourteen months, delivering the Fishes into their showplace home early in the next millennium, appropriately enough for such a revolutionary and forward-looking dwelling.

A visit to the site is the first order of business. On the way, not far from the hotel, sits someone's idea of a groovy bachelor pad: a corroded white metal ovoid complete with porthole windows, like something out of a 1967 *Playboy* feature on the Swinging Lifestyle. The imperious architects snort derisively.

At the dune formation known as the Sugarbowl, they turn off Via Deluna, Santa Rosa's main drag. Around a curve is the site.

The fire that claimed the Fishes's old house could be seen from the mainland, and made the national news. It left a partially drained swimming pool, spalled concrete platforms, cracked outdoor tiles, scorched loblolly pines around the perimeter, and melted stainless steel. (Temperatures have to soar past 1500 degrees Fahrenheit for stainless steel to melt.)

Krueck and Sexton kick around the charred property for half an hour, enthusiastically pacing off rooms. Ten times or more a year, this portion of the coast is subjected to forty MPH winds that can rip a sheet of plywood out of a laborer's grip. The waterline is only about twenty yards distant, and it's easy to picture galloping, wind-driven waves lusting after Krueck and Sexton's glass and steel baby.

The offices of general contractors Terhaar and Cronley lie up near the airport. The architects are greeted by the owners. Tony Terhaar wears a blue denim shirt, a big class ring, and a serious expression. He resembles Adam West in his prime. His partner, Jim Cronley, who could pass for the twin brother of George Page, PBS's *Nature* spokesman, seems more easygoing. Both are tanned and fit, obviously not chair-jockeys by preference, but rather experienced field operatives. With Phillip Morris, they gather at a round mahogany table and await the much-in-demand Mr. Fish.

Upon the arrival of the man responsible for writing the checks, the interrogation begins. Terhaar and Cronley are put through the same exhaustive drill as Salmon was yesterday. They bear it well, presenting cogent replies to all speculative and experiential queries. At one point, four subordinates who would be involved in the Fish project--Leo, Jim, Dick, and Roy--are brought in to present their own stories and strengths. By the end of the meeting, it's obvious that this larger firm has Harold Salmon and Sundance outclassed by a country mile.

Toward the close of the session, Sexton bluntly asks the contractors, "Are you guys still interested in this project after what you've heard?"

Jim Cronley replies, "I'm more excited about it now than I was before."

Tony Terhaar's answer is more cautious: "I want to be able, ten years from now, to drive by the Fish house and say, 'I had something to do with that.' But I have a feeling of trepidation that I hope I maintain throughout the entire job."

Seeking to emphasize the shared risk, Sexton responds, "There's no way we'll ever be compensated for all the hours *we're* going to put in on this project. But out of twenty million homes built over the next two years in the United States, this is going to be Number One."

The parties leave it at that.

Back at the Fish factory conference room awaits Mike Martin, the final contractor candidate, a gaunt-faced yet amiable fellow who's been in Florida since 1954, and who's known Mr. Fish for fifteen years. Martin is a one-man operation, hasn't even seen the plans or model of the project yet, and he seems to have been invited only as a courtesy. In the light of Terhaar and Cronley's outstanding performance, his grilling is perfunctory.

Three o'clock finds Krueck and Sexton wearily resting in the office of Dan Henderson, Laboratory Manager for Larry Jacobs & Associates. Ensconced behind a scarred wooden desk, beneath a clock shaped like the state of Georgia and bearing a Bulldogs decal, Henderson is an elfish chap sporting a thick white mustache. Henderson supervised the original soil testing for the Fish site years ago, and pronounces himself

happy to share those findings and redo any necessary tests. With this out of the way, he proceeds to regale the visitors with juicy gossip about Santa Rosa Island, replete with tales of incarcerated developers and straying spouses.

"Santa Rosa's got the nickname of Spider Island because of all the webs they weave out there," Henderson says slyly, intimating that this project is adding its own sticky strands. Whether the Chicagoans are flies or spiders remains to be determined.

By five PM, the architects and Philip Morris are pulling up to the Fish home adjoining the hauntingly debris-laden lot. Welcoming them is Mrs. Fish, a striking, Olympian blonde woman with a direct and piercing gaze. Fresh from her office, clad in a tulip-yellow skirted suit, she kicks off her shoes, revealing bare feet. Soon the cabal of visionaries are sharing crackers, cheese and drinks. Out of its travel case comes the latest physical model of the dreamhouse. By now the architects must feel they've lived in the imaginary building their entire life. Shrunken to the proper scale, they could surely find their way around inside blindfolded. Indeed, both men have often felt a sense of vicarious ownership, experienced sadness at turning a finished house over to the client.

After a couple of hours in which Morris and the Fishes closely question Krueck and Sexton--Mr. Fish mutedly practical, Mrs. Fish more boisterous--a look of relieved satisfaction emerges on all faces. The patrons and their agent, as well as the architects, feel the past days have moved this gargantuan project decidedly closer to reality.

Raising their glasses, they do not think that a largescale ancestor of their dreamhouse lies moldering only a few miles away.

### **"A labyrinth without a clew"**

The western ten miles of Santa Rosa Island comprise a federal park. With the condos and hotels left behind, the visitor enters a near-virgin stretch of dunes and scrubland rich with birdsong. At one point the island narrows to less than a hundred flat yards: the contending lines of surf seem ready to leap the gap and devour the land. How much scarier must this spot be during a hurricane?

This very tip of the island hosts the tourist-accessible ruins of Fort Pickens.

In 1829, the Federal government began to construct this guardian of Pensacola Bay. First, the Feds shamelessly brought in a massive slave workforce, having discovered that white men would not work in an unhealthy climate where yellow fever reigned. Next, the government imported materials from around the country. Millions of bricks from New Orleans and Mobile; lime from Maine; lead from Illinois; copper and granite from New York. The construction occupied the following four years. The result: a massive pentagonal fortification enclosing a parade ground seven acres in extent.

Here then is a local ancestor to rival the complexities and echo the themes of the Fish house.

Today, the base consists of nitre-dripping, barrel-vaulted, still impressive ruins. Here can be seen a clever system that collected rainwater to feed cisterns. Here the "reverse arch"--a U of masonry buried below ground--helped distribute the downward forces of the formidable pile across the sandy soil. The Yankees occupied this place throughout the Civil War, northerners like Krueck and Sexton. And in this room with plaster crumbling from its walls, Geronimo once walked, prisoner after his 1886 defeat.

Will the Fish house last one hundred and fifty years, acquiring such a rich history in the process? Will it survive as many hurricanes as Fort Pickens has?

Not long after the completion of Fort Pickens, an amateur architect named Thoreau wrote in his *Walden*: "If one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clew, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead."

A copy of *Walden* might yet come in handy aside the blueprints for this folly on the sands.