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The Story of Sterling Court

THE STORY OF A LITTLE STREET



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BY ROBERT M. STANTON

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THE STORY OF STERLING COURT

THE STORY OF A LITTLE STREET

BEING AN ELEMENTARY READER

FOR ADULTS

ON CITY PLANNING,

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

BY ROBERT M. STANTON

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Robert M. Stanton
1962

"We take a morsel of illimitable space and wall it in and roof it over. Suddenly it ceases to be a part of God's out-of-doors and becomes an entity with an atmosphere of its own. We warm it with our fires, we animate it with our affections, we furnish it with such things as seem good in our eyes. We do this to get shelter for our bodies, but we acquire as well an instrument for our spirits that reacts on us in turn."

-From "Intensive Living" by Cornelia Comer, in the Atlantic Monthly; quoted by Max Otto in To Own or Be Owned, a sermon delivered upon the opening of the new Meeting House of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin. (Italics added.)

THE STORY OF STERLING COURT

This is the story of a street.

It is not a very long street--just one block long. And it is not a very wide street; it is just wide enough for two cars to pass one another in it. The sidewalks of this street are also very narrow: they are just wide enough for one person to walk on.

But it is a very important street. Because in its story is contained the stories of many other streets all over the country, and indeed all over the world.

The name of this street is Sterling Court. It is located in Madison, Wisconsin.

It is important for you to know that when we talk about a street we do not just mean the pavement of the street, and the sidewalks along it. We also mean the lawns and shrubs and trees which can be seen from the street, and the houses and other buildings which are along the street.

And of course we are also interested in the people who live or work in the buildings that are along the street, and also the people who just use the street as a way of getting from one place to another place.

It is also important for you to know that we are especially interested in what those people do to the street, and what the street does to them. Because they do do something to the street, and it does do something to them, as they live or work on it, or walk or ride upon it. Just by virtue of the fact that they look at it every day, they do something to it, and it does something to them.

We have some special words for that. We call that the interaction between the people and the street. We say that the people interact with the street. It is important for you to remember those words.

There is a man who has said and written many things that help us to understand cities. His name is Victor Gruen.

You may have heard of Mr. Gruen in connection with a plan that he drew up for a city in Texas called Fort Worth. It is a very interesting plan, and, many people think, a very fine plan. But the city of Fort Worth turned down Mr. Gruen's plan.

They said it would cost too much.

Mr. Gruen likes to invent new words and new ways of saying things. Some people who do this don't do it very well, but Mr. Gruen does it very well indeed. One of the new words that he has invented is cityscape. As you see, this word resembles the word landscape. The word landscape means what you see when you are out in the country. Similarly, the word cityscape means what you see as you go about in a city.

That is much more important today than it was a long time ago. Do you know why?

It is because a long time ago over 80 % of the people lived out in the country, and saw landscapes every day--real landscapes, that is, not just pictures of landscapes. But nowadays, around 80 % of the people live in cities (in this country, at least, and in some others too); and at the rate it is going, it will soon be around 90 %.

Landscapes are usually very beautiful. But cityscapes are not always very beautiful, are they?

Now, all those people who live in cities very seldom see landscapes. But they see cityscapes every day. All day, every day, they see cityscapes. And, of course, they interact with the cityscapes that they see. And that does things to them.

It is part of what makes them be what they are.

And that is very important.

Before telling you any more, I should explain that Sterling Court is located in a part of Madison, Wisconsin that is near the University of Wisconsin.

You all know what a university is. It is a big school for grown up people; for people who have finished high school, and who want to learn still more.

The University of Wisconsin is one of the largest universities in the world. It is also one of the busiest, and, many people say, one of the best.

Sterling Court is not actually on the campus, or grounds, of the University of Wisconsin, but it is very near it. Because of that, many of the people who live or work on Sterling Court, or who walk or ride through it, have something to do with the University of Wisconsin. Some of the buildings on Sterling Court have offices or classrooms of the University in them. And many of the people who live in the houses and apartment buildings on Sterling Court are students, or teachers, or are in some other way connected with the University of Wisconsin.

So people often say that Sterling Court and some of the other streets that are near it are in the "campus area".

Now you are going to see Sterling Court.

Unfortunately, many people can not actually go to see Sterling Court. But this book contains some pictures of Sterling Court; and through these pictures everyone can, in a way, go to see Sterling Court.

When you look at these pictures, you will see very much what you would see if you strolled slowly through Sterling Court on a fine summer day, letting it do to you what it does to the people who come through it every day.

You will remember that we said that is called interacting. Through looking at the pictures in this book, you can interact with Sterling Court.

Of course, it is not the same thing as being there yourself, just as looking at a picture of a friend is not the same thing as actually seeing him, or sitting down and talking with him in person. In a similar sense, even if you were to go to Sterling Court, and walk through it just once, that would not be the same thing as walking through it every day, as those people do who live on it, or work on it, or use it as a thoroughfare. Just as meeting someone for a few minutes, and then never seeing him again, is not the same thing as seeing someone every day, and talking to him many times, and really getting to know him.

But looking at these pictures is the next best thing to going to Sterling Court yourself.

After you have seen these pictures, I will have some other interesting things to tell you about Sterling Court.

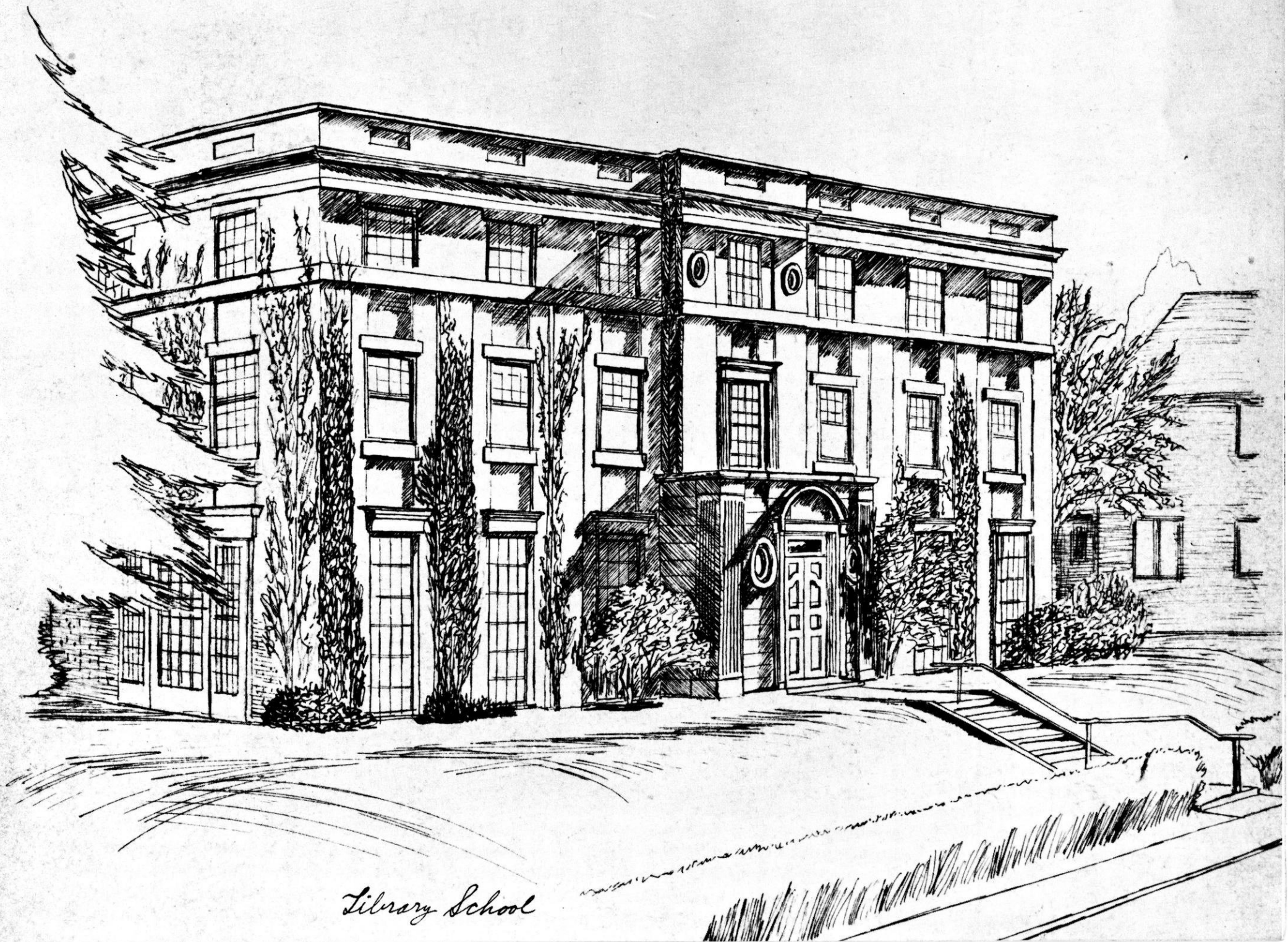
This is one of the first buildings that you will see as you come into Sterling Court from the north end, which is where it intersects State Street. It is on the east side of Sterling Court, and it is called The Library School. It contains the offices of the Department of Library Science of the University of Wisconsin, the offices of several other departments, some classrooms, and a small library.

Although the style of this building is basically rather formal, its proportions, its details, and its warm, rich color all combine to create a very pleasant visual effect. (The ivy growing on its walls also contributes to this.) The rich texture of these walls comes in part from the variations in color of the individual bricks, as well as from the special pattern of the brickwork in most parts of the walls. (This pattern, in which every other brick is turned endways, is called Flemish Bond.) Notice the square columns, called pilasters, at the corners of the entry; and the windows of the first story, which extend right down to the level of the ground.

7 In preparing this book, there was not time to do the amount and kind of historical research that I would like to have done on the buildings on Sterling Court. However, from some old records that are available, I was able to learn a few things about some of these buildings, and I will mention some of the more interesting items in the appropriate places.

It seems very probable, for example, that Sterling Court was named for Professor John W. Sterling. Professor Sterling became the first professor of the University of Wisconsin when it was begun in 1849, and he continued as professor of mathematics until his death in 1885. He also served as vice chancellor of the University beginning in 1865. Professor Sterling and his family lived in a house that formerly stood approximately on the present site of The Library School, and which presumably faced on State Street, its address being 811 State Street. Besides Professor Sterling and his wife, Harriet Dean Sterling, the names and occupations of others members of their family who are listed as living at this address about 1883 are: Charles G. Sterling, theological student; Grace F. Sterling, artist; and Susan A. Sterling, teacher. Later records list Susan A. Sterling as an instructor of German at the University of Wisconsin.

In 1903 the Sterling home was purchased by the Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity, which replaced it with this present building in 1922. Then, about 1938, it was purchased by the University of Wisconsin.



Next to the Library School (still on the east side of Sterling Court) you will see the buildings shown in this picture. They are both apartment buildings, although they are so very different. Do not be surprised if many of the buildings on Sterling Court are very different in size, architectural style, etc. This combination of contrasting types of buildings is part of what makes Sterling Court so visually interesting.

The building on the left is called The Sterling. It is a rather old building--in fact, it was one of the first buildings built on Sterling Court--but I think it is a very nice one. Notice especially the details of the front porch. The Sterling is the kind of house that the first people who came to Wisconsin used to build, a long time ago. It now contains several apartments. Although it is rather small, and quite informal in appearance, it fits into the cityscape of Sterling Court very well.

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The building on the right is called The Clark. It is one of the largest buildings on Sterling Court. Its appearance contributes very much to the formal, urban aspect of Sterling Court. Notice the cornice which extends along the front wall of this building, near the top. It consists of a number of moldings, one above the other. One of these moldings consists of a series of small, rectangular projections called dentils. This type of molding, called a denticulated molding, is of very ancient origin, but is quite commonly seen on buildings today.

I used to live in this building. I lived in it for a long time. It was my home for a long time. A lot of the important things that happened to me in my life happened while I lived every day in this building on Sterling Court. That is part of the reason that I care very much what happens to Sterling Court.

I am sure you can understand that.



The Sterling

The Clark

On the west side of Sterling Court, just across from The Sterling, you will see the two buildings shown in this picture. They are office buildings of the University of Wisconsin, although a long time ago they were sorority houses. The one on the left is called the University Press. The one on the right is called the University Housing Bureau.

Notice the details of these buildings. Notice especially the pillars and window frames of the University Press. These pillars are very ornate, with both bands and recessed sides. But it is the capitals, or tops, of these pillars that make them so very remarkable. The window frames of the second story also have the banded design, and have keystone motifs at the top. Notice also the dormer with a round roof at the top of this building; that is a rather unusual feature.

∞ The University Housing Bureau, though not so ornate as the University Press, is also an attractive building; if anything it is a little more formal than the University Press. Its pillars also have recessed sides, but they do not have any bands, and their tops are plain. Notice that this building has a gambrel roof (one with two different pitches), and has three dormers at the front.

You should learn to notice the details of the buildings that you see. They are often extremely important to the appearance that a building presents, even when they are small or otherwise quite inconspicuous. In fact, sometimes details of a building which are of the greatest importance in determining its appearance are so inconspicuous that you are not likely to notice them consciously at all unless you make a special effort to do so. But if they were not there, the building would look very different.

Notice the tree which is shown in the extreme right in this picture. It is just across Sterling Court from the entrance of the Library School. It is a Sugar Maple tree. In autumn its leaves change from green to a beautiful golden yellow color; then, in most years, they change to a deep red color; and then, finally, they change to brown.



This building is next to the University Press, on the west side of Sterling Court. It is called Squire House. I think it is a most remarkably beautiful and interesting building. I do not think you can fully appreciate this building in just a few minutes, or indeed even the first few times you see it. Like many other beautiful things, it has something new to present each time you look at it.

It was even difficult to decide from which side or angle to make a sketch of it for this book. From almost any angle it presents an interesting combination of shapes and planes. Walk around Squire House slowly, and note the way in which it seems to change, always becoming something just a little different, but always intriguing, from whatever point you may view it. On the following page you will see another view of it.

Squire House now contains the offices and classrooms of several departments of the University of Wisconsin.

Squire House was formerly a dormitory for women students. Together with two other houses, pictures of which you will also see in this book (White House and Hodag House), it was part of a group of three such dormitories that together were called "The Badger Club."

All three of these houses actually face on another little street, called Irving Place, which intersects Sterling Court just about at its center. The cityscape of Irving Place merges with that of Sterling Court in a most interesting way, a way that adds to the attractiveness of both. Because of the relationship between these streets, Squire House and White House, although they face on Irving Place, are very much part of the cityscape of Sterling Court. Only Hodag House is exclusively on Irving Place.

When women students lived in the houses that made up The Badger Club, they sometimes had dances out in the street on summer evenings; that is, out in Irving Place and Sterling Court. Everyone had a good time at those dances, and the sound of music and laughter filled the two little streets.

But now that doesn't happen anymore.

You can very well spend a great deal of time observing the details of Squire House; for example, the great eaves with their fascia boards and carved brackets, the leaded windows with their diagonal panes, and of course, most noticeable of all, the "plaster and exposed timber" type of construction. Notice also the drain pipes. Many people might think that a drain pipe is not an attractive object. But the fact is that such functional details, if they are properly located and designed, can be very important assets to the appearance of a building. They can add interest at a point where it is otherwise plain, and their forms can complement the forms of the building itself. The drain pipes on Squire House are not ugly at all; they add considerably to the stately beauty of the building.

Notice the heavy wooden facing around the bottom of Squire House. You can learn something important from that. Go up to it and touch it with your hand. (Do not be afraid of getting your hand dirty. More important things are at stake.) Feel the rough, straight surfaces of those boards. Too often we just stand back and look at a house. We should touch the boards or bricks of its walls in order to really appreciate it fully.

When you touch those boards, remember that they did not grow up out of the earth that way.

A man made them.

There is something important to be learned from that. Can you understand it?



Squire House

This is another view of Squire House, as seen from just around the corner of Irving Place.



Squire House

This building, next to The Clark on the east side of Sterling Court, is The Orvis House. From about 1907 until 1940, it was the home of William H. Orvis, who was assistant librarian of the Wisconsin State Library. From 1940 until 1956, it was the house of the Delta Theta Fraternity, which is a fraternity especially for students of agriculture. The Orvis House is now an Office building of the University of Wisconsin; it is used as the Annex of the Accounting Department of the University.

At first glance this appears to be a rather plain building. But on closer inspection you will see that it has some quite interesting details. Notice first of all the columns. They are fluted; that is, they have narrow, concave channels out into them. This is a traditional way of ornamenting columns, dating back to the classical architecture of ancient Greece.

Notice also the capitals of these columns. They have spiral-shaped ornaments called volutes. You may have learned in school that the various types of columns have names, depending on the design of the capitals, and that these names refer to various "orders" or styles of architecture which were originated in ancient Greece. The name for columns having volutes as their chief ornament is Ionic. These are Ionic columns. (There are two other styles of columns--called Corinthian and Composite--which also have volutes; but in those styles the volutes are much smaller, and they are not the chief ornaments. In those styles, representations of leaves are the chief ornaments.) As you see, these columns are not full-height; they stand on square pedestals.

Some other features of this building which you should notice are: the denticulated molding at the front edge of the porch roof; the diagonal panes of the small leaded windows on the second story; and the very large dormer at the top of the building.

The other building which you can see in this picture is called The Irving. You will see more of it in two other pictures in this book. For the moment, notice the interesting shapes and angles of this side of the building, especially the upper portion of it.



The Orvis House

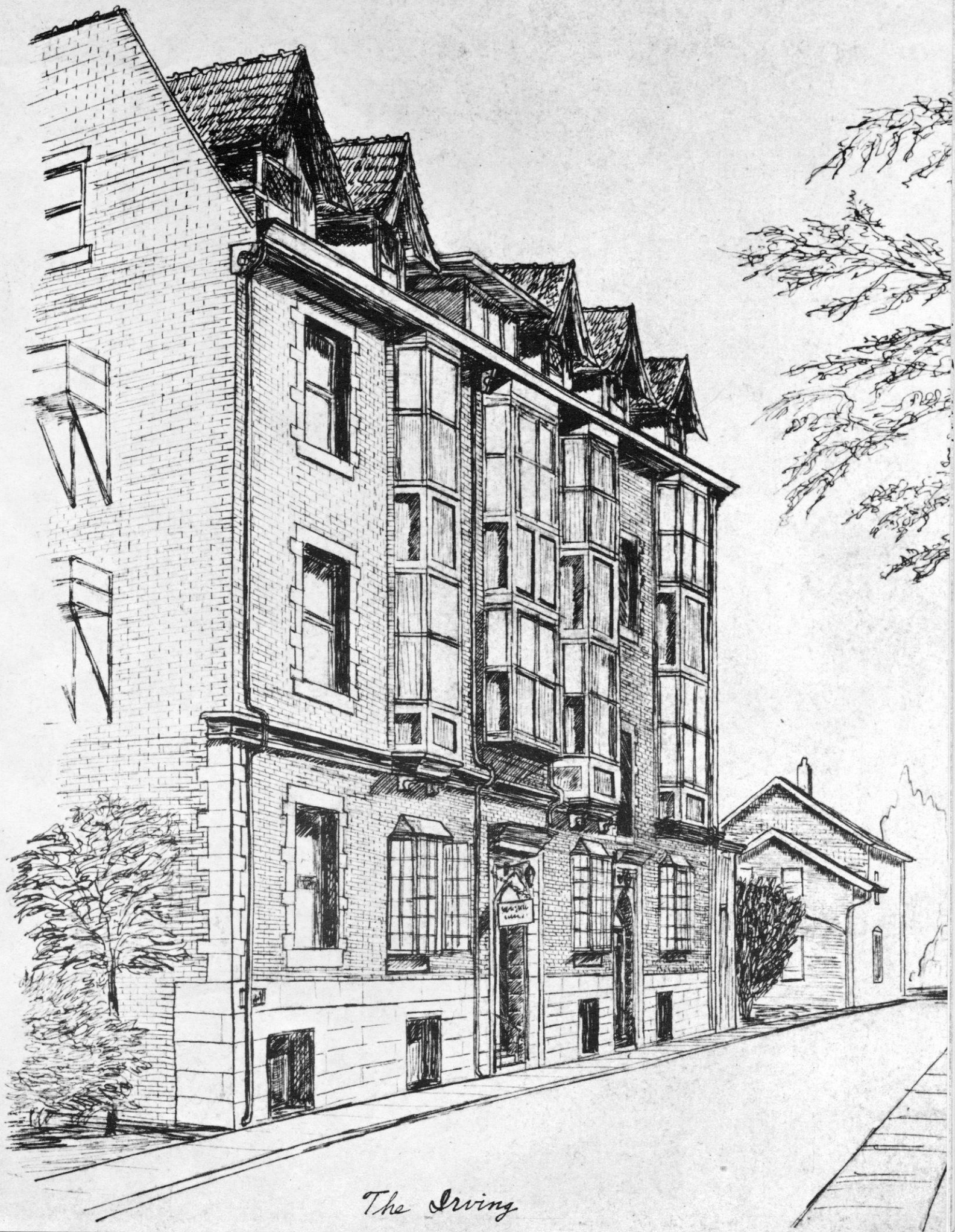
This building, next to The Orvis House on the east side of Sterling Court, is called The Irving. It is an apartment building, and it is the largest building on Sterling Court. I think that The Irving is one of the most distinctive and attractive buildings I have ever seen anywhere, and it is certainly one that makes a major contribution to the urban character of Sterling Court.

Like Squire House, The Irving is a building that will amply repay time spent observing its many interesting details. Notice, for example, the windows, some of which are in bays; the decorative use of a combination of brick and stone construction; and of course the dormers at the top of the building with their tile roofs and fascia boards.

Notice the way in which the many planes and angles of the various parts of The Irving combine to form a unified and interesting whole. You will also see this same characteristic in another picture of this building, which comes a bit later, and which shows a different portion of it.

The building that you see beyond The Irving in this picture is called Thesis Manor. It is part of the cityscape of Sterling Court, although it faces on another street (University Avenue) at the south end of Sterling Court; but I do not show a closer view of it in this book. It is an interesting old building, and contains some small apartments. At one time it also contained a small bookstore.

Old records show that from about 1919 to 1923, Professor John R. Commons and his wife, Ella D. Commons, lived on the second floor of this building. Professor Commons was a very well known economist, and one of the most widely known professors who ever taught at the University of Wisconsin.



The Irving

This building is called White House. It is on the corner of Sterling Court and Irving Place, opposite The Irving. As I mentioned, it was formerly part of the Badger Club dormitory group. It is presently occupied by the Planning Department of the University of Wisconsin.

White House is a stately, gracious building. One feature which contributes to its gracious appearance is the French windows at the front, which are very pleasant to have open on summer days. The entry is especially beautiful, with full-height, fluted columns. Notice the lamps on either side of the door, attached to the columns. Lamps are among the most important of the small details which a building may have. They remind us of the coming and going of many people to and from those buildings, and that life is lived in those buildings.

Be sure not to miss the details of the eaves of this building: the carved rafter ends, and the denticulated molding just below them.



White House

This building is called Hodag House. It is around the corner on Irving Place, right next to White House. Along with Squire House and White House, it was also once part of the Badger Club dormitory group for women students. (You may be interested to know that a hodag is a ferocious, mythical animal of Wisconsin. Well, at least some people say that it is mythical; others say that it is real. But this is not the place to go into that.) Hodag House is presently occupied by the University of Wisconsin Research Guidance Laboratory for Superior Students.

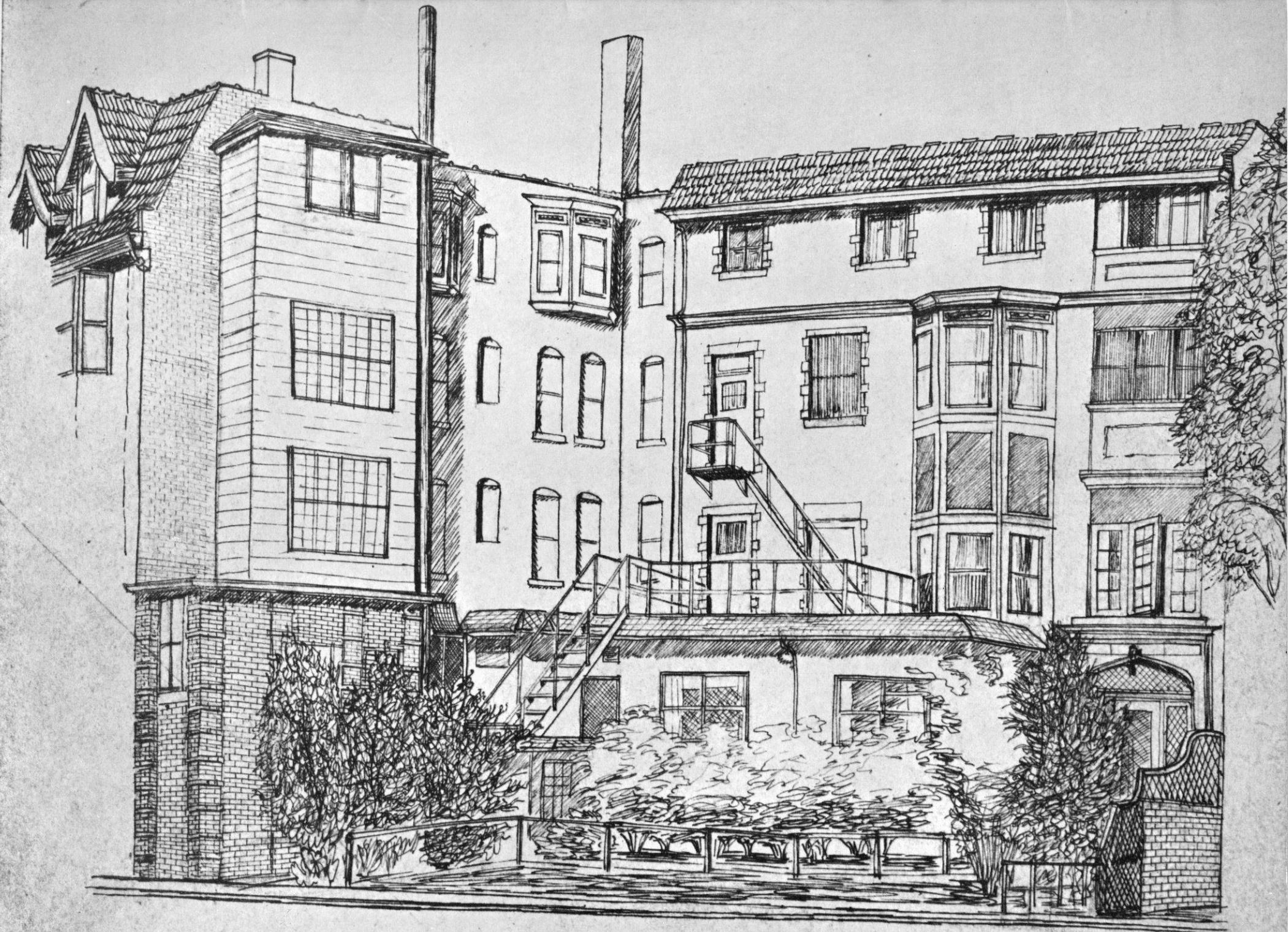
In contrast with White House, Hodag House has a rugged, massive appearance. Notice the great low porch, with its weathered boards, and the enormous brick piers at its corners. It looks as though it would be a wonderful place to sit outdoors with ones friends on a summer evening, doesn't it? Notice also the heavy timber moldings and window framing, and the large pilasters (square pillars) at the front corners.



Hodaa House

This picture shows a view of another portion of The Irving, which extends beyond that shown in the previous picture of it. As in the other views of The Irving, you can see the manner in which the various parts of this building, while distinct in form, texture, color, etc., combine harmoniously to produce a unified whole which is almost endlessly interesting.

Notice that even the steel fire escape adds to, rather than detracts from, the total visual effect of this building. This is another example (like the drain pipes referred to previously) or functional details making a positive contribution to a building whose design is already fundamentally good from an esthetic standpoint.



The Irving

Now you have seen Sterling Court. I hope you enjoyed seeing it.

Most of the people who have seen Sterling Court like it very much. What most people say they like about Sterling Court is its atmosphere of dignity and quiet beauty. They also say that they like its peacefulness and its feeling of stability.

However, perhaps you may have felt that, for all its peacefulness, there was something else there--something different beneath the peacefulness and quiet; a kind of excitement, though not in the usual meaning of that word. One of the names that we have for this feeling is "a sense of vitality." That means that it feels like there is life there.

Another feeling people say they get from Sterling Court is what we call "a sense of urbanity." That means that it gives you a sense of being in a city. It is a very different feeling than the feeling that you get out in the country or in a little town.

Perhaps now you are beginning to get some idea of the difference between the feeling that you get from a cityscape and the feeling that you get from a landscape. The feeling that you get from a cityscape is quite different, isn't it?

Whatever it is, or whatever you might prefer to call it, it is clear that this feeling we have been talking about is something that Sterling Court does to you. While you have been looking at these pictures, Sterling Court, through them, has been doing something to you.

That feeling is Sterling Court interacting with you.

Perhaps you never knew before that a street could do something like that to you. Perhaps you just never thought about that before.

Now comes the sad part of this story.

They are going to destroy Sterling Court.

I know you will find that difficult to believe. But it is true.

They are going to destroy Sterling Court.

They are going to tear down the dignified, beautiful buildings. They are going to tear up the pavements, and they are going to cut down the tall, stately trees. They are going to build other buildings where Sterling Court is.

Why are they going to do that?

It is so that they can put up those other buildings, which they say are needed in the "campus area." Let me tell you about those other buildings.

One of them is an Art Center. (An Art Center is a building where beautiful things are put on display.) One design for this building has already been drawn up. If it is built according to that design, then perhaps it will be a beautiful building. This building will not be more beautiful than Sterling Court is now; just beautiful in a different way. In this respect we are very, very fortunate--because this new building may, perhaps, be beautiful.

Most new buildings are not very beautiful, are they?

But even so, it is difficult to understand why it is necessary to destroy one beautiful cityscape in order to have another one. And it seems incongruous that a building whose purpose is to display rare and beautiful things should be made the reason (or part of the reason) for destroying one of the rarest beautiful things that we have, a beautiful cityscape.

As though we had an over-supply of beautiful things.

It is important for you to know that the Art Center alone would not require the destruction of all of Sterling Court, although it would require the destruction of some of the buildings on one side of it. However, although the Art Center alone would not completely destroy Sterling Court, it would change its "character" considerably; Sterling Court would no longer be the same place that it is now.

But what will require the complete destruction of Sterling Court is what is called "The Plan for the Lower Campus", and especially a proposed building called "The New Administration Building". This will be a very large building. It will be full of offices. It will be very tall and narrow, and very long. From anywhere behind it--that is, on the side away from Lake Mendota--it will

not be possible to see the lake at all anymore. This building may be made of shiny glass and metal, or it may be made of shiny glass and a new material that looks like stone but is not stone.

This new building will shine in the sun. It will shine so hard it will hurt your eyes to look at it. In fact, it will hurt your eyes whether the sun is shining or not. And there will also be some other buildings of a very similar type near it.

You have all seen buildings like that before, or at least pictures of them. They have built some of them in almost every city now. (On the next page there is a picture of a building of this type.)

Some people like them. They call them "modern". (No one knows what that means, unless it means that they are new; and that is merely stating the obvious, isn't it?)

The architects and the men who build buildings like them. They say that they are "handsome". (Some people disagree with that.) The architects and builders also say that they are "economical" to build. (I do not know of anyone who disagrees with that.) The builders especially like the fact that they are "economical" to build.

But some other people do not like them at all. They do not think that they are "handsome", much less beautiful. They have invented a name for them; they call them "the egg-crates". (Sometimes, when such buildings are made mostly of glass, people call them "the glass egg-crates".)

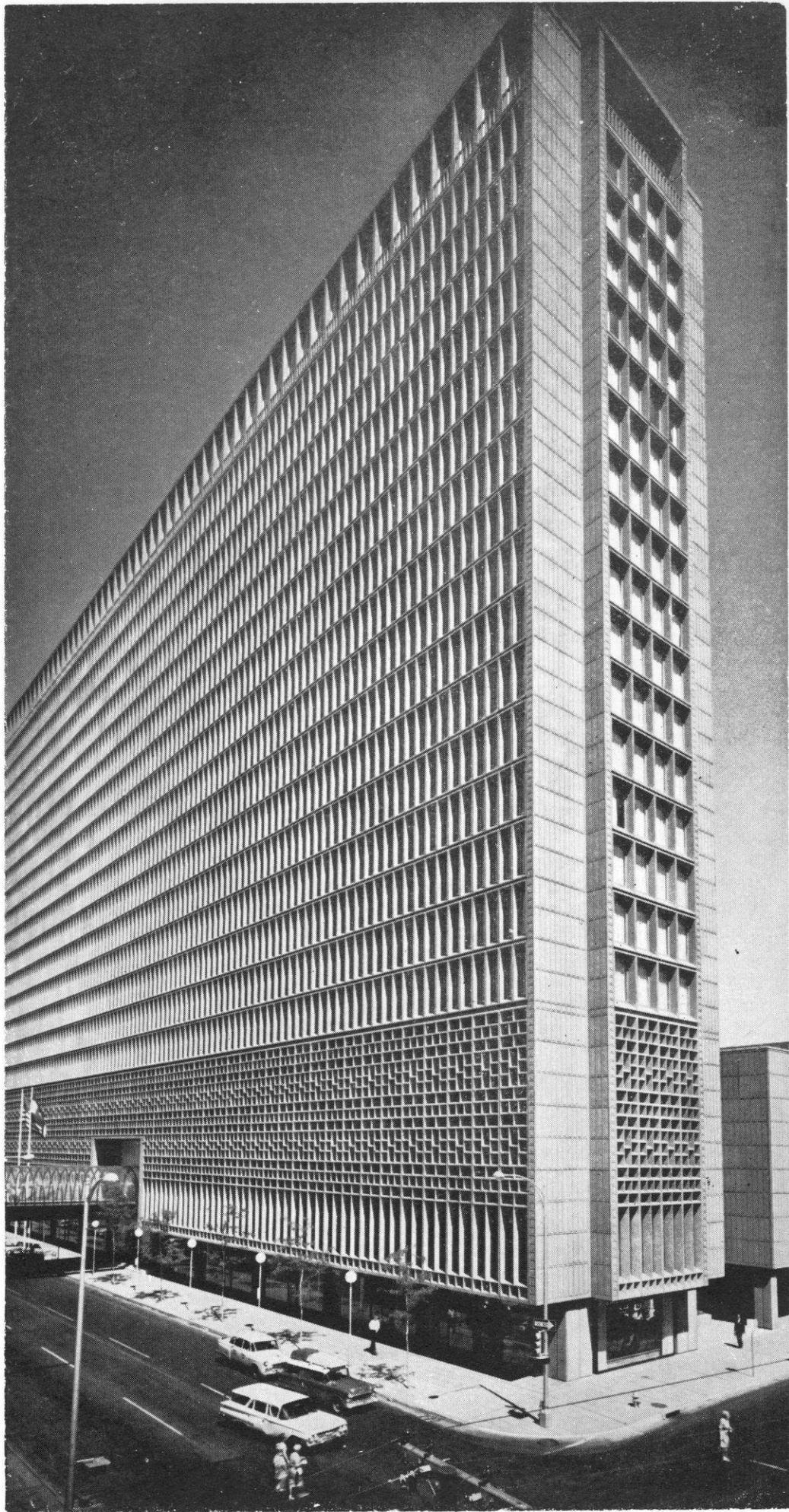
You all know what an egg-crate is. It is a big wooden box in which eggs are shipped from the farm to the market. It has lots of "sections" in it: little square sections, each one just big enough for one egg. All the sections are exactly the same size and shape. That is because all eggs are the same size and shape--or very nearly so.

Now I think you understand why people call these buildings "the egg-crates".

There is another reason, too. Real egg-crates are not made of the best material, as a fine chair or table would be. Just good enough to get by with, so the eggs don't crack.

Some people have said that the way a civilization designs its buildings and lays out its cities tells something about what it thinks of human beings. I do not know whether that is true or not.

Do you suppose it could be true?



Of course, it is very understandable that the University should want to expand, and acquire more buildings. For more students are coming to the University now than ever came before. And as we look into the future, we can see that more and more will be coming, and at an ever-increasing rate, for as far ahead as we can make reasonable predictions. So it would seem that, if anything, the University is behind schedule in acquiring more buildings.

But it certainly seems reasonable to ask, before we trade away some valuable thing, whether what we will receive in exchange will be worth it. More specifically, if we are going to destroy one set of surroundings, and replace them with another, it seems reasonable to ask whether the surroundings we will have afterwards will really be better than those which we have now; to say nothing of their being worth the enormous amount of money and effort which must be expended in order to effect the exchange.

Very relevant to this matter are some things that Mr. Jan C. Rowan, the editor of a magazine for architects, has written. In a very interesting article, he has said:

"Over-sized boxes scattered among stretches of grass and trees undoubtedly make for a most healthy environment; but they also create an environment that is anti-urban and boring to the extreme."

"To live pigeon-holed within a 'rectangle standing on end' from which there is no place to go except into a car and onto a highway, or for a walk along a continuous stretch of grass, is not urban living at all."

"Modern urbanism, reacting to the squalor of the typical 19th Century cityscape, eliminated the traditional street pattern without offering a satisfactory substitute, and in so doing, it eliminated the interest and excitement from city life; it managed to create a grassy, well-lit, wind-swept, kindergartenish utopia in which real adults feel lost."¹

And since we are considering university housing, I think you will also be interested in what a lecturer associated with Columbia University said recently:

"A central purpose of education is the cultivation of the private life of the mind. In general, student housing . . . has paid too little attention to noise suppression and to the need for privacy. Esthetic considerations and other intangibles are often scanted very badly.

"These deficiencies constitute an important negative educational influence. . . . A student's living quarters and his eating arrangements are integral parts of his educational experience. Their influence should be on the positive, not the negative side."²

1 Jan C. Rowan, "New Blues and New Trends", Progressive Architecture, October, 1961, p. 134 (Italics added).

2 Dr. Henry M. Wriston, President of The American Assembly, Columbia University, speaking on "What is Aid to Higher Education?", third of a series of programs on higher education, distributed by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters; broadcast by the Wisconsin State Broadcasting Service, October 20, 1962, 10:45 A.M., C.S.T. (Italics added).

As you saw, the buildings on Sterling Court are warm, human, dignified, appealing buildings. People like to live and work in buildings like that.

Some of the buildings on Sterling Court are apartment buildings. They contain many apartments, some of them small, some of them not so small. Others, such as Squire House, White House, and Hodag House, were dormitories before they were used as office buildings.

Strangely enough, just a few blocks away from Sterling Court, the University (the very same University that is planning to destroy Sterling Court) is building new dormitory buildings for students to live in. They will be typical "modern" architecture: ugly, monotonous, sterile, and un-human. They will be surrounded--for a few feet--by what city planners and architects call "an open space": a lawn with a few trees. That is, a pathetic, infantile, and futile gesture in the direction of making that place into a visually satisfying cityscape.

The buildings on Sterling Court do not seem to need "open spaces" around them in order to be visually pleasing, do they?

Why do you suppose that is?

Perhaps you wonder why the University does not build their new dormitories and other buildings to be like the buildings on Sterling Court, or like other buildings that form part of good cityscapes elsewhere. There are two reasons, but they are both difficult to understand; to really understand, that is.

One is that, supposedly, it would not be "economical". Today, so they say, we can not afford to build buildings the way they did a long time ago. That is very difficult to understand, because our society is much richer today than it was a long time ago--for example, when Sterling Court was built. Why is it that we can not afford to do today, when we are so much richer, what we could afford to do long ago, when we were not so rich? That is a mystery, isn't it? I can not explain it.

The other reason is that they do not want to build buildings that way, even if they thought we could afford to. Because, so they say, that would not be "modern" (whatever that means). To build new buildings that would be like older buildings in form and style--even though they would be very good buildings, both functional and esthetically satisfying--would cause all the architects to throw up their hands in holy horror.

And we wouldn't want that, would we?

A few days ago I went over to the place where they are going to put up some of those new dormitories. In one area they were tearing down some older buildings to make room for the new dormitories. In another area they were working on one of the new buildings which was already under construction.

It was very sad to watch. A few of the old buildings were not in very good condition. They would have had to be torn down in a few years anyway. But many of them were in very good condition. And some of them were really beautiful houses.

It was very sad to see them being destroyed.

One of them in particular was very beautiful. (It was made of brick. A brick house is usually quite a beautiful house, isn't it? Even a very old brick house, that is almost crumbling away, still has a kind of rough charm about it.) But they were tearing it down anyway.

It made me feel very bad.

In another area nearby, men were working on one of the new buildings that was already partly finished. Some men were digging in the clay, others were setting reinforcing rods, and still others were pouring concrete for the new building. Although the new building was not finished yet, I could see its shape. It was going to be very large. It was at least as large as a battleship. In fact, it looked something like a battleship. Except that you do not usually see battleships up on the land, do you?

While I watched the activities of the men who were working there, of course I did not forget about the city planners and administrators who, in their offices somewhere, had planned all this activity, and were, in the main, responsible for it. Even though they were not actually there, at the site where the old buildings were being destroyed, and the new ones erected, they were also part of that activity. It would not have been fair to have forgotten about them, would it?

Some people, I am sure, would have thought it was all very wonderful. "It is progress", they would say. And I myself, under other circumstances, might also think such activities wonderful. For constructing great buildings and other structures is not in itself bad; sometimes it is very good. It just depends on the circumstances.

But as it is, I could not help thinking: It is just a group of human beings, making a great mistake. A terrible, irrevocable mistake.

Because we will never in this world get back the fine buildings and desirable cityscapes that are being destroyed. (That is not just true of Sterling Court and the places near it, but everywhere that this process is taking place--which is practically everywhere there are cities.) And what is worse, not many new, desirable cityscapes are being created anymore. Not here, certainly, in the interiors of cities, where the old ones are being destroyed. And not on the outskirts of cities either, which is where most of the growth of cities is taking place.

Do you remember what I told you Mr. Rowan said about all this? If you do not remember, please go back and read it again. It is very important that you do not forget what Mr. Rowan said.

At the beginning of this story, I told you that it is important because it contains the stories of many other streets in many other places. That is true.

The same thing that is happening to Sterling Court is happening everywhere there are cities. Beautiful buildings and desirable cityscapes are being destroyed; and new, ugly buildings are being erected, and new, sterile cityscapes being created.

In this connection, it is interesting to remember that every year many Americans travel several thousand miles to go to Europe, and that among the things that they go to see are the many fascinating and appealing cityscapes there, which have at once both vitality and dignity.

But even over there, some old, interesting cityscapes have been destroyed, and some sterile, "modern" architecture built. But the process has been slower over there than it has here.

They are more backward than we are.

The reasons for this situation are many and complex, and not all of them are well understood, although many books and articles have been written about the subject.

Some people blame the city planners, since it is their job to promote the betterment of cities, and to prevent their worsening.

"Why don't they do their job right?" these people say.

But the city planners do not seem to really understand how it should be done any more than the rest of us, although of course they would not like to have you think that. What is worse, they are often caught in a situation in which it is in their interest to encourage the dreadful game of more and more demolition and more and more reconstruction, instead of discouraging it.

But the result of all this, of course, present day architectural design being what it is, is simply worse and worse cityscapes.

Other people blame the architects. "How can they design such ghastly monstrosities?" these people say.

But the architects can only design what their clients want--or will stand for--and they have to stay within the budget that is provided. So it is not altogether their fault either.

Still other people blame it on "economics". But saying that it is the fault of economic factors does not really solve anything. It simply indicates that there is something wrong with our "scale of values". (That means the way in which we value some things more than others, and by how much.)

That is easier to understand when we remember that what we mean after all when we say that one way of doing something is "more economical" than another is simply that one way saves us more of something that we want to have saved (for example, time, or money, or effort) than the other way does.

So when something goes wrong because of "economic factors", that simply tells us that something is wrong with our scale of values.

Look again at the pictures of Sterling Court in this book. Surely something is wrong with our scale of values when we can think it is "economical" to destroy cityscapes such as these.

One day I took a friend of mine to see Sterling Court. When I told him that they were going to destroy it, he became very sad.

Then he became very angry. He said, "Only a race of idiots would want to destroy a place like this!"

Sometimes the things that people say when they are very angry are not right. But this time I thought that my friend was completely right.

What do you think?

That is not all of the story of Sterling Court. But it is all that I can tell you now.

I can not tell you the ending because the ending has not happened yet.

But I can tell you this: If you possibly can, you should go to see Sterling Court.

And you should do it soon.

Because if you wait too long, Sterling Court will be gone.

E P I L O G U E

Some of you who have read this book may want to actually go to see Sterling Court before it is too late. I certainly hope that you will do so, and I would like to make a few further comments about that.

The very best time to see Sterling Court is on a fine day in summer. But spring and autumn are also good times to see it--especially autumn, when the leaves are changing colors. Many of the trees on or near Sterling Court have especially beautiful colors at that time--for example, the Sugar Maple tree just across Sterling Court from the entrance of the Library School, which I mentioned in connection with the picture of the University Housing Bureau and the University Press. The trees on the side of the Library School toward State Street are also very colorful. They are also Sugar Maple trees, and about October they turn a beautiful golden yellow.

Sterling Court is also a visually interesting place in winter, although there are no leaves on the deciduous trees then. But, of course, the evergreen trees, such as the one in front of The Sterling, keep their needles all winter.

Even on a rainy day, or a dark day, or just a dreary day, Sterling Court still keeps its atmosphere of vitality and urbanity. That is one of the tests of a good cityscape.

And I should add that it is very interesting to see Sterling Court at night, when lights are shining from the many windows along the street, and the street lamps and porch lamps are lit.

And since you have come--perhaps a long way--to see Sterling Court, I think you might be interested in noting some of the views on Murray Street, which is just east of Sterling Court, and parallel to it.

A very good view can be seen by standing on Murray Street just a little north of University Avenue, and looking north toward the lake. Notice how tall the trees on Murray Street are, and how they arch over the street. Some of them have branches so long that they reach halfway back down to the street again. For example, notice the tree at approximately 421 N. Murray; it is a Slippery Elm tree.

In summer, as you look north on Murray Street, you can see the fountain on the mall of the University of Wisconsin. It is almost in line with Murray Street, and this fact makes for a very good view indeed.

Be sure that you do not miss seeing the tree that is at 433 N. Murray; it is also a Slippery Elm tree. Notice how enormous its trunk is. You should learn to notice trees; they are often very important parts of cityscapes.

You should learn to be aware of cityscapes all the time. You are probably going to be surrounded by cityscapes most of your life. You will be interacting with them whether you are aware of it or not. In general it is better to be aware of what it is you are interacting with. It is part of what makes you what you are.



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