

This "doublewide" model for National Homes is designed by The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, as are the interiors in the following pages.

## The Mobile Home Industry Viewed by an Architect

by VERNON D. SWABACK

*Some people have been inclined to look upon mobile homes as poor relations of so-called conventional housing. But increasingly the potential of quality design in modular dwellings is being realized. Consequently, some radical changes in the mobile home industry can be expected in the near future.*

For the past six years The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation has been independently researching and working with manufacturers of both mobile and modular homes. Our idealism and enthusiasm for the potential of the manufactured housing industry have undergone some rather brutal moments and have been disciplined by knocking our heads against the religion known as "the bottom line." One manufacturer summed up his sense of values by saying, "I believe in motherhood—if it sells!" In spite of this, we remain convinced that the '70s is the time when it will be possible to end the crippling polarity between design and production.

The entire housing endeavor has been victimized by this polarization. At one pole we have had the products of contractors and mobile home manufacturers which at best are hygienic but dull and uninspiring. At the other are the architects who continue to create lonely works of art with absolutely no mass production possibilities. We deserve and will get something better.

The new ingredient is the informed consumer who is no longer content with the achievements of the past. He has a taste



of progress in many things and now expects this quality to be reflected in his housing. Concerned architects have been convincing manufacturers that this new climate makes it immensely profitable to invest in the future and do it in a better way. A fast changing market has otherwise complacent manufacturers looking cautiously at what lies ahead.

The immediate future for mobile home sales constitutes a rosy picture. Last year there were 496,570 shipments; for 1972



the number should increase to a record-breaking 585,000. The next five years will see demographic changes favorable to the current mobile home market with the largest age group increases in purchases being under 35 and over 55 years of age. Seventy-five percent of all Americans prefer single-family dwellings and about half of these, if for no other reason than economics, are looking at mobile homes.

The manufacture, sale and utilization of mobile homes is the greatest inadvertent experiment that the mass shelter industry has ever seen. It has demonstrated what is possible when arbitrary restrictions are kept to a minimum. Before we get too pleased with this experiment, however, we should note that it has been a built-in time bomb for everyone concerned.

The meteoric rise of the mobile home industry, as it skimmed the cream off a market with no competition, is a condition of the past. The next 10 years will see a greater demand for increased quality in housing. There is no question that the consumerism movement will exert pressure on the industry. Mobile home manufacturers have traditionally discounted any serious threat from modular production. However, in spite of its low profile on Wall Street, the modular industry is making significant strides. There were 29,000 three-dimensional modular dwellings produced during 1970. Last year this figure was doubled. Reasonable predictions for this year place modular production in excess of 100,000 units, with another 300,000 housing units produced which involve significant factory production of panels and components.

In the early 1900s Frank Lloyd Wright stated that architecture was the blind spot of the nation. He demonstrated that architectural values were nothing abstract. They were real and could be felt by the ordinary citizen. These ideas have found their way into the marketplace.

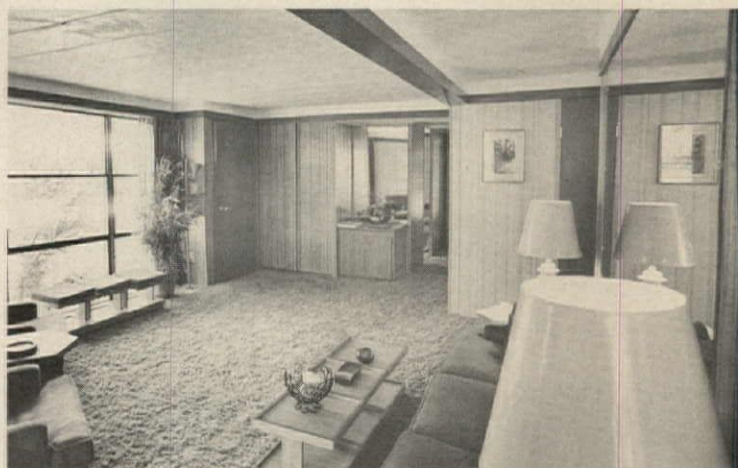
There are four influences which will be acting on the mobile

**Mr. Swaback** is an architect associated with The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. His observations are adapted from a keynote address given at the 1972 Southwest Mobile/Modular Home Show in Dallas, where mobile homes designed by the foundation for the National Mobile Homes division of National Homes Corporation were displayed.

home industry during the '70s which are either totally new or are of greatly increased intensity:

1. Greater awareness of the public for quality in housing and a predictable amount of consumerism lawsuits to make this awareness felt.
2. Competition from unleashed modular production and the increased scale of conventional builders.
3. More uniform considerations concerning financing, taxation and land use. There will be significant legislation aimed at removing artificial barriers to industrialized housing.
4. Last but not least, a totally new awareness of the quality of architectural design.

All this is to say that design quality and imagination are going to have to be essential factors in the continued growth of the industry. It has not been so in the past, and the result is the negative image which haunts the industry in spite of increased production. Manufacturers are going to have to spend some money on design if they want to survive the next 10 years. If the mobile home industry capitalizes on its nationwide system of manufacturing, distributing and marketing, it can enjoy a true advantage by introducing imaginative and carefully conceived prod-



ucts to provide "better" rather than "cheaper" units. If the industry continues to exploit its present market, it will soon decline.

Most industry projections show a lessening in the percentage of growth starting about mid-decade. There is no mystery about this. The mobile home industry has experienced a dramatic growth. All dramatic growth industries eventually reach a period of maturity which is accompanied by a leveling off of sales, *unless* the growth industry succeeds in revitalizing its product.

For the mobile home industry, this period of maturity will



occur in the mid-70s and will coincide with new competition which it may or may not be able to dominate. No one has yet written the rules. All we know is that starting at the mid-decade there will be a vigorous battleground in which all shelter suppliers compete for the attention of the informed consumer who has increased buying power and a determination that his housing should deliver far more exciting provisions than possible in the past.

Architects and planners are interested in the mobile home industry for two reasons. First, it has clearly demonstrated that it fills a need where all other provisions have failed; second, the mobile home product lends itself to innovations which would be far more difficult to program into on-site construction.

The housing industry has suffered from a lack of cooperation and organization. Individuals as well as corporate entities are hampered by a lack of funds. But, while focusing on problems such as codes, zoning and labor restrictions, we have overlooked the most crippling disability of all: a thorough lack of imagination. The message needs to be stated clearly. We face a cataclysmic change in our housing patterns which can either be an irreparable loss for humanity or the brightest spot on the environmental horizon.

The mobile home industry is in for a period of rapid change. Transformations that may be expected in the near future are:

1. Mobile home dealers and park developers will give up the fiction that the appearance of mobility remains a necessary component in mobile home living. Much of the unfavorable image



surrounding mobile homes has resulted from trying to promote the concept of mobility long after it ceased to be a reality.

2. Inasmuch as mobile homes spend less than 1 percent of their useful life on the highway, they will be renamed. We have suggested the name "production dwellings" as being both accurate and open-ended enough to embrace the new potential of the industry.
3. Mobile home parks will begin to be replaced by planned unit developments in which the land under the unit is owned by the occupant and the common garden areas are maintained by a homeowner's association. Mobile home subdivisions currently represent only 3 to 4 percent of the total number of park spaces, but the trend is in this direction.
4. Average densities for the mobile home communities of the future will range from 4 to 6.5 units per acre.
5. The design of mobile homes has been cheapened by trying to use metals and plastics to imitate natural materials. Instead of the dreary look of fake wood paneling, we will have solid colors and beautiful bright patterns. Instead of plastic imitating stone,

it will be used intelligently, showing its own unique variety of shapes and textures. Instead of shiny aluminum or gloss painted metal siding, the units will feature matte-finished metal products rolled into shapes which not only increase their visual appeal but also give added strength. Mobile homes of the past have tried to imitate everything from Swiss chalets to English coach houses. In the future, they are going to just be themselves, and we will all be surprised to see how beautiful that can be.

There are those who see mobile homes as having no overlap with the modular market. Their contention is that there is a special kind of human being who is attracted only to mobile homes. This is nothing short of absurd. The entire manufactured housing industry is one market, separated only by price and performance. It is time to stop underestimating the ability of the consumer to make an intelligent decision. It is also time to stop being apologetic about factory production.

In the early 1900s, Henry Ford told us that we could have any color as long as it was black. One of the greatest contributions



of industrialization has also been one of its most surprising elements. Instead of standardized look-alike products, it has produced the greatest variety known to the mass market. As technology becomes more sophisticated, the cost of introducing variations declines.

There is every reason to be optimistic about the future. There has never been a better time for a combination of architectural considerations with increased production.

A few months ago The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and National Homes Corporation held joint press conferences in both New York City and Washington, D.C., to announce a new alliance between architecture and industry. It was a dream of Wright's that technology could be put in the service of human values rather than the other way around. In the early '30s he said, "I do not believe any architecture in the time of commercialism, of industrialism and of huge organization can be an architecture true to the spirit of those times unless it includes the use of all of these great tools of modern life."

There is a growing popular awareness that good design may no longer be dismissed as being too luxurious. Today's consumer is surrounded with evidence that it is a necessary ingredient for survival. Environmental awareness has entered the marketplace. We all know the word ecology, and we talk knowingly about the total environment. To implement the necessary goals, architects and planners are going to have to learn more about highly competitive markets; and the merchants are going to have to take their eyes off the bottom line long enough to realize that the world is turning and that the old tricks won't work any more. □