

INLAND ARCHITECT

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PETER LANDON ARCHITECTS

By Edward Keegan



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The remodeled living area of the Davis Residence (top) brings light into the center of the house. New dormers in the bedrooms (bottom) open onto a balcony.

There is a pervasive appropriation of the "vernacular" in the work of many architects today. The sources for these forms can be found in the 19th-century American building tradition that produced both the barnyard compound and the urban row house. Vernacular structures were built by workers unschooled in architecture who often set their carpenter's skills to the task of executing designs found in pattern books. The intersection of the pattern books' sophistication and the carpenters' *naiveté* had mixed results: there were builders whose *naiveté* moderated the pretentiousness of European precedent on the prairie, and there were those whose slavish devotion to pattern books produced work of dubious quality. It is clear that Peter Landon falls in the first category. He, however, unlike most builders of vernacular structures in the late 19th century, has been schooled in architecture.

The work of Peter Landon is very much a product of his particular history. Raised in a North Shore suburb of Chicago, Peter eschewed what he calls the "eastern orientation" of his upbringing to attend the University of Kansas. Prior to beginning his professional career, he worked for three years as a carpenter. During this time he took a

two-week photographic "road trip" through Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, ostensibly to record the projects of the firm where he worked. He spent much of the trip photographing the vernacular architecture of the prairies, which was a formative experience.

Returning to Chicago, he worked a short time for Harry Weese and Associates before joining Weese Seegers Hickey Weese in its infancy. He rose to the level of principal during his 10-year apprenticeship before establishing Peter Landon Architects Ltd. in May 1987.

Typical of most young firms, Landon's early commissions have tended to be small structures and remodelings of existing construction. His work is stylistically diverse, although it expresses a clear preference for the vernacular tradition that he considers indigenous to the heartland. Regardless of style, Landon arrives at quirky and idiosyncratic solutions. He expresses a subtle irony in his choice of simple, craftsmanlike things.

The Davis Residence in Union Pier, Michigan, a renovation of an existing summer cottage, was completed in August 1988. The cottage was originally a rather dark and undistinguished structure. Landon addressed this problem by removing the central por-

A newly opened porch graces the front of the Davis Residence.



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The Martin/Savage Studio (right) has a presence and well-crafted detailing which belie its simple program.



Peter Landon

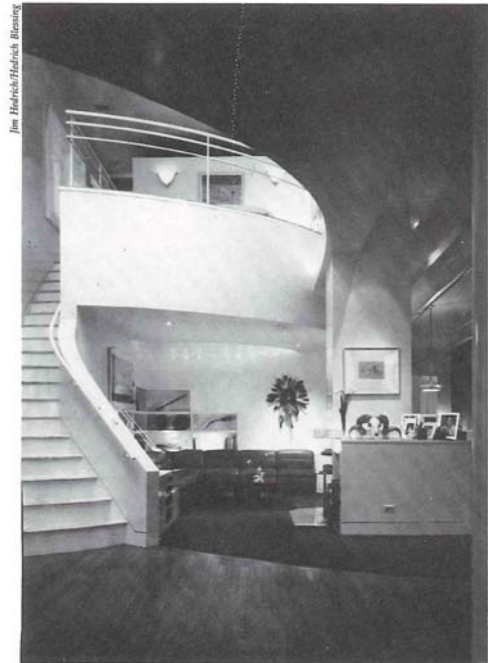


Peter Landon

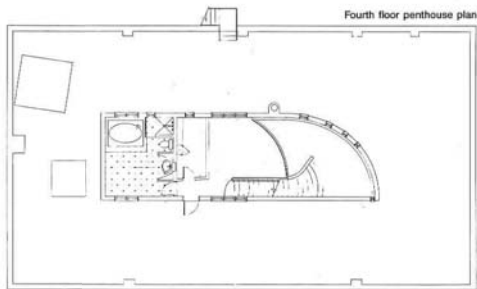
tion of the lakeside elevation, opening a through-house living room to light and views. A general reorganization of interior space centered on this move, and access to a central hall above is now provided by a tight confined stairway.

The Martin/Savage Studio is a new free-standing garage/studio situated on an alleyway in Oak Park. Completed this past December, it is a simple volume which is inflected to particularize both the interior and surrounding exterior spaces. Built on an extremely tight budget, this studio is sheathed in exterior redwood panels set in a grid of galvanized metal beads. The interior is dominated by a two-story space and a stair which occupies the inflected corner of the structure. The stair, while peripheral to the main space, is central to the experience of the building.

But Landon's architectural interests are broader than these two projects would indicate. As Peter often tells his clients, "I like modern, too." The Manarchy Studio, a renovation of a third-floor loft space in the River West area, is an example of modernism. Completed in June 1986, it is an apartment for a noted photographer and his wife. The main living spaces occupy the entire top

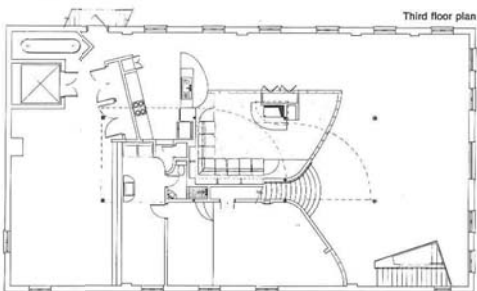


Jim Heinrich/Hadrich Blomberg



Fourth floor penthouse plan

The Manachy loft (left) embodies Landon's characteristic spatial development with uncharacteristically high-style details.



Third floor plan

floor of the building, and a new rooftop pavilion contains bedroom and bath. An existing grid of columns divides the space into three bays, with the pavilion occurring within the center bay. The outer edge of the pavilion's envelope curves in the direction of the view towards the Loop, and all openings between the two floor levels are curved to reinforce this bias. The stair is inserted along the center bay's western edge to permit maximum usable space above; its base splays out to create a monumental effect. The curve of the stair is juxtaposed against the curved opening above and the order of the grid below. It is a grand gesture within a loose composition, providing a strong focus for the divergent space.

Tom Beeby once remarked that Ben Weese tries to present himself as a "primitive," playing down the sophistication of his work. Peter Landon's work reflects the sensibility of his mentor. It is neither overwrought nor overstudied in its careful production. Regardless of style, it appears to be as "natural" as a well-built barn or row house. In his work Peter Landon explores enduring themes of building and creates an architecture of subtle and sophisticated understatement. ♦

Edward Keegan is an architect who has written for Chicago Magazine.



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The Shotwell House addition encloses a tiny new room and brings light deep into the house. The interior of the Shotwell addition combines Arts and Crafts detailing with inventions like stair treads which extend to hold books.