The Gropius House
Lincoln, MA
Photos: Jonathan Hale

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light/shade/walls/space
The Gropius House

from The Old Way of Seeing

by Jonathan Hale

On a hill in Lincoln, Massachusetts, the house Walter Gropius built when he came to America in 1937 still gleams fresh and bright. But over the years the house has come to seem more and more isolated in time and place. It belongs, now, to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. The house is beautiful and subtle and delicate, but, in a way, it stands for the failure of Modernism to reintroduce the old way of seeing.

In his writings and teachings, Walter Gropius seemed to advocate an egalitarian simplicity. But the Gropius house cannot help being suave, sophisticated, complex. A little extension of the roof will slide out and stand on a pole, just because it was necessary, visually necessary, or seemed that way to Gropius and Breuer—Marcel Breuer collaborated on the design. The house is all small subtleties, because all the large things, and all the usual equipment of architecture that make it possible to blur the perceptions, are gone. We are left only with the shape of this window, the indentation of that wall. Whether the roof overhangs six inches or twelve inches becomes a major decision,
because there are no other decisions to be made. The house is stripped to the barest elegance. The Gropius house fails as an example to any but the most talented designers; if you do not have access to that underlying elegance, then such a design strips down to nothing.

But the Gropius House does come alive. You expect the house to be a sort of reliquary of sacred Bauhaus objects, because it is full of the ancient Bauhaus furnishings. But it feels neither old nor new. It does not feel like a museum, and there is nothing of death in it, of a house that someone has left. There is a sense of Gropius in the house, the presence of the man, surprisingly and gratifyingly strong.

The interiors are multiple shades of gray, black, tan, and white. There are no other colors, yet the house feels very rich. There is one exception: the inside of one wall of the deck is pink, the color of reflected light. The story is the pink was not coming out right, so Gropius asked Lionel Feininger to mix it. It is that kind of house, and that kind of pink.

One is made aware of every color, shape, pattern. The exterior, on its hill, is such a Pronouncement, it is easy to assume that the outside of the house is the main point. But the inside is more important than the exterior; it has more to teach; and what a pleasure to be taught by Gropius. The perceptions and patterns pile up. One comes away with a heightened sense of all colors, patterns, and shadows. One is reminded of the Japanese sensibility for subtle shades and shadows, but here things, as well as light and darkness, make the patterns.

The Gropius House is not a humorless
exposition of theories. The house is alive and subtle and complicated and fun to be in. It is fun. It is not witty. Its mysteries are in the relationships among the parts, unexpected connections, surprising views.

Seeing the house from outside, conspicuous on its hill, you think the primary reason for its placement is to be seen; you don't realize that from the inside, every room has a wonderful view. There is a particularly fine framed view from the upper deck, looking out at a big tree beyond which are meadows. From the outside, the artificiality of that unglazed frame, looks arty, but from the deck itself it is a little experience in how one's eyes see.

The house may be self-conscious and didactic, but it also plays. It tells you, "Look! How do you like the way that gray relates to that brown? You didn't expect that view over there!" It is not afraid to wear its happiness on its sleeve. Under its sophisticated shell, the Gropius house is innocent.

Gropius had come to America to take over the design program at Harvard, but he found, somewhat to his surprise, that he had come to take over the direction of architecture in the United States. He and the other ex-Bauhaus luminaries, notably Mies and Breuer, went from one great success to another. It began to seem as if all the steps before had led inevitably to that moment, in which Modernism was to triumph.

Not since Abbot Suger had introduced the Gothic in 1130 had a new style been so overwhelmingly successful as the International Style now became. And Walter Gropius was its Suger. His protestations of denial must have looked like modesty: "Every so often I feel a strong urge to shake off this
growing crust so that the man behind the tag and the label may become visible again." Gropius did enjoy his celebrity, but it was urgently important to him that he not be famous for the wrong thing.

The International Style did solve the problem of how to express the machine in architecture, at least as machines were in 1925. But, as Gropius said, to express the machine was not the central problem. The problem was, and still is, how to express life in buildings and cities in an age of machines.

Now that we are no longer dazzled by the International Style, it is easier to recognize that Gropius's worst fear was borne out: he had set out to teach a vision, but had given the world a style. The vision he offered is what remains fresh. He wrote:

I believe that every healthy human being is capable of conceiving form. The problem seems to me not at all one of existence of creative ability but more one of finding the key to release it.