No Place Like Home –
Huxtable’s ranch house as her housing ideal

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The ranch house can be viewed as an artifact of American society demonstrating values, ideals, attitudes, living patterns, standards of living and historical sequences of a society every bit as much as a pot shard provides information to an archeologist or a bone fragment to a paleontologist. - Historian Roger Clouser

Ada Louise Huxtable had outlined and completed research for a book entitled "Ranch House" before her untimely passing in January 2013. While not a common scholarly topic or one that fits the template of her incisive architectural critiques, the ranch house may be considered not only an extension of the themes in her 2004 book *Frank Lloyd Wright* but also the subject of a house type she lived in for part of each year for three decades. The Wrightian design elements, including the long wall of the principal elevation, the low-pitched roof lines contrasted by the vertical chimney, open interiors and glazed wall screens connecting interior and exterior spaces, found their reflection in the post-war ranch houses in America. Clouser explains how “early literature emphasizes this [latter] point to an extreme:

“This house [type] is designed so you can’t tell where indoors ends and outdoors begins. As a result the house seems “as big as all outdoors” even though it’s a relatively small one. As part of the indoor-outdoor theme, early popular literature on the ranch house encouraged the public not only to use the entire lot for living but also to view the outside areas as room to “amplify indoor ones – terrace for living, dining, entertaining; porch for private retreat; kitchen or play yard for utility.”

Ada Louise Huxtable first came to Marblehead, Massachusetts as a child to visit her cousin in the summer, returning as an adult years later for summer vacations. In her last book, *On Architecture* (2008), the last article, entitled "No Place Like Home" written in 1979, traces the attributes of the setting she and her husband Garth enjoyed in their seaside summer rental home in Marblehead - where she "restores heart and soul here for another year's go at the great metropolis." She adds “But chiefly, it is not a house one worries about. It is an easy house that rewards affection and any kind of care (Figure 1). It is full of old things, and comfortable things, and shabby things – objects that have been used and loved or just discarded gently.” The cottage by the sea is described as “where the living and the style are easy, with lessons for ‘architecture’. ” The article concludes with her statement "I think of that house as the single most beautiful thing that I know".
Soon, however, the summer rental was no longer available and in 1982 the pleasures of a summer dwelling were transferred to a nearby house they purchased. Having summered many years in Marblehead, they were aware of the available stylistic choices in the local real estate market, i.e., First Period, Georgian, Federalist, Greek Revival, Shingle Style, and contemporary structures. The Huxtables settled on a small ranch house constructed in 1958. 33 Neptune Rd. is a one-story three-bedroom structure of about 1800 sq. ft., including an attached garage and screened-in porch that sits on a 6800 sq. ft. lot. The house is perched on the edge of a hill that slopes quickly down among the trees and neighbors’ houses to the shoreline of Salem Harbor, about 175 feet away (Figure 2). In addition, because of the slope, it has a walk-out half-basement in back that provides for a small guest suite of about 500 sq. ft. and a utility room. Viewed from the street, the house appears as a one story traditional ranch house. Upon entering the house at grade one discovers the site drops off at the rear of the property, looking out into the mid-level of the trees and beyond to Salem Harbor.4

Figure 1 - Summer rental at Sparhawk Terrace – “It’s full of old things……”  Photo by Garth Huxtable

After purchasing 33 Neptune Rd. the Huxtables immediately made plans to take advantage of the site’s natural attributes – water view, trees, gardens, prevailing breezes, and light. Narrow windows were opened to a wider view of Salem Harbor and improved summer cross-ventilation, others changed to become bay windows with built-in seating that looked out to an enclosed garden (Figure 3). A small L-shaped pool was added to the lower yard. These improvements demonstrated the flexibility and practicality of this middle-class house-type.
Figure 3 - House plan and pool enclosure sketch by Garth Huxtable, October 11, 1982. Views below.

Figure 4 – Views of entrance and front garden

Photos by Edward Nilsson
The vertical elevation of the site drops off 18 feet from the front to the back garden, providing three distinct levels which one can circumnavigate the house in an architectural promenade. It becomes evident that each façade relates to its particular purpose – the entry path leads to a calming enclosed garden (Figure 4); and the perimeter path then explores the sloping terrain and view to Salem Harbor.

After Garth’s passing in 1989, she became aware of zoning problems associated with the fact that the entrance to her house faced onto a private way, requiring her to drive across strips of land of two different owners in order to get to a public way (Figure 5). She had no easement to allow her to do this. As there was much local controversy about this land she was unsure how it would affect her. Her lawyer advised that selling the house could be a problem without legal access from a public way. Fortunately, the side of her house opened onto a 20 foot strip along a public way.

As a local architect and former Marblehead planning board chairman, I first met Ada Louise Huxtable in the mid 1980’s not long after she and her husband Garth acquired 33 Neptune Rd. Remembering that several years earlier she had written about development’s intrusion into this once sleepy but now quickly gentrifying town, I soon began a correspondence with her about planning and development in Marblehead. Years later, in 1994, I was asked to provide architectural services to assist in resolving the zoning problem with her ranch house. After studying several alternatives the plan was finalized and a request was made and granted from the Zoning Board of Appeals to allow moving the driveway and building a new garage within the zoning setback area but opening out onto the public way.
The floor plan (Figure 6) reveals how compact the house is – the dining room is just under ten feet wide but not uncomfortable as it opens to the living room and adjacent deck (Figure 7). In the decision to relocate the garage I posed the question of what to do with the vacated garage space. What was she otherwise missing from her house? She replied that a home office was desirable, especially now that Internet access was just becoming available. The original garage space was then divided into an enlarged screened porch for visiting guests and friends, and a 11’-8” x 12’-6” office. Both of these new rooms faced south and introduced increased daylight into the house – in effect architecturally adding a fourth façade to what was previously an under-utilized end of the house (Figures 9 and 10). Her daily work station was placed a few steps from the garden storage workroom and front garden in one direction, and the screened porch and outside deck leading to the lower level swimming pool in the other direction. And in the adjacent new garage was Garth and Ada Louise’s classic 1979 BMW for short hops around town. Of note to the plan was her decision not to connect the office directly to the house, but to have it separated by an all-weather screened porch that one had to traverse through first.

Figure 6 - First floor plan

A site survey during the Town approval process revealed a discrepancy in the location of the fence abutting her neighbor’s lot. The rear lot line was actually 8 feet longer which allowed for an extended garden path on the southwest corner. At the same time, clarification of a property owner’s rights where a lot abuts an unbuilt “paper” street added more usable land to her property that enabled an expanded garden path on the southeast corner as well. At the lowest level the path explores the hillside plantings, dipping below the wooden pool deck to reappear at the southeast end of the property, winding its way back up through the garden to street level.
Figure 7 – Garden circulation plan

Figure 8 - Views circum-navigating site

Photos by Peter Vanderwarker
The Huxtables planned their garden to take advantage of existing established vegetation, such as an ancient apple tree and a black cherry tree at the end of the pool. Evergreens, such as hemlocks and threadleaf cypress were added for structure, while her favorite pink and white climbing roses provided color. Variegated hostas brightened the shade and cooking herbs and different shades of pink impatiens filled the pots near the doors and the pool. The changes in 1995 enabled her to remove overgrown shrubs and add a greater variety of plants and flowers.
Generally shrubs and small trees were chosen and installed with the help of garden centers. The Japanese maples, a popular plant at the time, were placed on either side of the front door to draw you to the entrance (Figure 11). But perennials were gleaned from friends’ gardens and landscapers’ discards at the town dump. New plants and shrubs were tested, moved or discarded but always chosen for their summer and fall qualities of bloom, color and scent. Early spring bloomers were avoided unless they provided summer or fall interest.6

Figure 11 - Views of entry path and enclosed garden
Photos by Lucy Chen

Figure 12 - Views of screened porch and office looking out into landscape
Photos by Lucy Chen
Ada Louise Huxtable believed in the dignity of the environment as a reflection of the dignity of man – and like a garden it has to be continuously renewed. In her description of the Riverbend Houses development in upper Manhattan by New York architects Davis & Brody she says:

“Imagine if you can in New York, duplex apartments designed like townhouses, each with its own front door reached through a small walled terrace from an outside gallery that runs the length of the building, or from a “sky street” for duplexes stacked above. There are spectacular river views or an outlook on a landscaped plaza connecting the buildings like a private park for tenant use.”

Her view of a very special single family house environment is recalled in her invitation by Edgar Kaufman Jr. to stay at Frank Lloyd Wright’s masterpiece Fallingwater just before it was turned over to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy in 1963. She described the magic of the house in a quote by Neil Levine: “This is a house”, he writes, “about the cumulative effect of stone, water, trees, leaves, mist, clouds, and sky.” Her own house (Figure 13) highlights some of these same natural attributes - water views, trees, gardens, prevailing breezes, and light.

![Figure 13 – Garden plan](image)
Huxtable’s fellow critic and friend, Robert Campbell, wrote after her passing:

“Ada Louise lived in two places. She spent half the year in a high-rise apartment on Park Avenue, which was furnished in part with elegant Modernist pieces by her late husband, the industrial designer Garth Huxtable. The other half, including the summer months, she lived in an ordinary, unpretentious one-story house in the seaside village of Marblehead, Massachusetts, with a view through trees to the harbor. There was no trace of "architecture" about the latter. There she worked, cooked, gardened, and entertained guests.9 [Elsewhere he goes on to add that] Her house was livable but ordinary, thus fitting right into Marblehead. I think she was secretly proud that it lacked the slightest trace of architectural finery.”10

![Interior views of living room, dining room, and office looking out into garden](Figure 14)

Ada Louise Huxtable loved to go “saling”, not the kind one might imagine in this seaside town of Marblehead, but “yard-saling” where, with two or three good friends, she would visit the posted yard sales of local residents and pick out the hidden gems their owners thought were good to trade for ready cash. It certainly used her adept powers of visual discernment to separate the wheat from the chaff. When a friend showed her a brightly colored fan she had picked up for a few dollars Huxtable informed her it was an original Joan Miro design. Her friend, knowing Ada Louise would appreciate it, gave it to her as a gift. Among her furnishings were valuable antiques, Hitchcock chairs and inlaid chests inherited from her mother, painted rattan from yard sales, porcelain and glass from her mother with more crystal and plates, again from yard sales (Figure 15).
Her friend and agent, Stuart Denenberg, captured this idea of an eclectic mix in an excerpt from a poem he wrote in a tribute to Ada Louise last June in New York City:

“Fulbright honored, Pulitzer honored,
Guggenheim honored, MacArthur honored,
honorary doctorates filled your closet with
gorgeous velvet snoods, but dining with the King of Spain
you loved the pin you wore, fifty-cents in Marblehead where,
happily less known, you loved the garden you now are.”

Figure 15 – Interior and exterior views

Photos by Lucy Chen
Campbell’s assessment of the house’s ordinariness is like the fifty-cent pin she wore dining with the King of Spain - she made the ordinary extra-ordinary. What more useful message could one discover but that the “lessons for architecture” could be found within modest elements? While initially commonplace, her house is like the plants from the town compost site that she and her friends rescued and enjoyed. Her renewed interest and research on the ranch house, and her own experimentation with it, brings back into focus a truly American house type that is being re-discovered by one generation down-sizing their homes and by another looking for a house that expresses openness, adaptability at an affordable price.

Whether it be the fifty-cent pin, the ranch house-type, or the preservation movement, which she championed in Salem and New York, the message is the same and reflected in her advice to “love what you have rather than have what you love.” The home at 33 Neptune Rd., small and compact as it is, fit Ada Louise like a glove. In addition to the personal artifacts, both traditional and modern, it reflects attributes needed for all housing: efficiency, modest cost, convenience, and access to light, air, and nature.

Figure 16 - Aerial view and street approach to entrance path  Photos by [www.bing.com](http://www.bing.com) and Lucy Chen

Figure 17 – Locus plan of Sparhawk Terr. rental (A) and 33 Neptune Rd. (B) overlooking Salem Harbor
Notes

1 Roger A. Clouser, “The Ranch House in America” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1984), p.2, University Microfilms (8424353)
2 Ibid, p.58.
4 While Marblehead was her home for half of each year, Huxtable was also strongly identified with neighboring Salem, MA. Huxtable’s Oct. 1965 NY Times article decried urban renewal’s impact on historic properties in Salem. The article was very influential in helping to expand federal policy to fund historic rehabilitation and not used just for demolition and new construction. She effectively saved downtown Salem from intrusion by multi-lane highways and the destruction of many historic buildings. Both her earlier summer rental and her ranch house in Marblehead overlooked Salem Harbor and the city she helped preserve. See Figure 17, above.
5 Huxtable, Ada Louise, letter to Marblehead Zoning Board of Appeals requesting Special Permit, September 27, 1994.
6 Frances Nilsson (from conversations with Ada Louise Huxtable) in discussion with the author, January 2014.
7 Huxtable, Ada Louise, *Will They Ever Finish Bruckner Boulevard*, p.73