

SIX MOON HILL
Moon Hill Road
Lexington
Middlesex County
Massachusetts

HALS MA-3
HALS MA-3

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

SIX MOON HILL

HALS NO. MA-3

Location: Moon Hill Road, Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts

Six Moon Hill Historic District
Mid-Century Modern Houses of Lexington, National Register of Historic Places
Multiple Property Documentation Form (2012)
Six Moon Hill Historic District National Register of Historic Places Registration
Form (Nomination pending)

Location of Six Moon Hill Historic District shown on USGS Lexington
Quadrangle, 7.5 Minute Series, 1946 (Refer to Figure 1.)

1. Northern corner of Town of Lexington MA assessors parcel 14-80:
42.42559 N Lat, -71.21131 E Long

3. Eastern corner of Town of Lexington MA assessors parcel 14-82:
42.42503 N Lat, -71.20959 E Long

7. Southern corner of Town of Lexington MA assessors parcel 8-27A:
42.42105 N Lat, -71.21463 E Long

8. Western corner of Town of Lexington MA assessors parcel 8-30:
42.42225 N Lat, -71.21500 E Long

Source: maps.mhc-macris.net (Massachusetts Historical Commission MACRIS
Maps)

Boundary Description:

Except as noted, the boundary follows the property lines of the lots. Specifically, beginning at the northwest corner of 4 Moon Hill Road at the intersection of Moon Hill Road and Moreland Avenue, the boundary runs east and then southwest along the property lines of 4 Moon Hill Road; runs southwesterly along the east property lines of 12 Moon Hill Road, 14 Moon Hill Road, 16 Moon Hill Road, and 24 Moon Hill Road; runs southeast, southwest and northwest along the property line of 24 Moon Hill Road to the intersection with the rear property line of 28 Moon Hill Road; runs southwest along the property lines of 28 Moon Hill Road, 32 Moon Hill Road, 34 Moon Hill Road, 36 Moon Hill Road and 38 Moon Hill Road; to the southwest corner of 38 Moon Hill Road; turns north to run along the west property lines of 38 Moon Hill Road, 40 Moon Hill Road, 39 Moon Hill Road, and 37 Moon Hill Road; turn northeast and continues along the northwest property lines of 37 Moon Hill

Road, 35 Moon Hill Road, 33 Moon Hill Road, 31 Moon Hill Road, 29 Moon Hill Road, and 25 Moon Hill Road; turns northwest and runs along the southwest property line of 8 Bird Hill Road to Bird Hill Road; runs northeast along Bird Hill Road to its intersection with Swan Lane, at a point where 15 Moon Hill Road abuts 24 Swan Lane; continues along the east line of Swan Lane to the intersection with Moreland Avenue, where the boundary then follows the north property line of 1 Moon Hill Road to Moon Hill Road; it then crosses Moon Hill Road to the first point.

(Refer to Figure 2. Six Moon Hill Parcel Map)

Significance: Six Moon Hill is a community of twenty-nine Mid-Century Modern houses designed by members of The Architects Collaborative (TAC), beginning in 1948. An early example of modernism applied to a Post war subdivision development, Six Moon Hill is innovative in its employment of vernacular mid-century modern architecture to create affordable, modest houses integrated into wooded, hilly terrain, and its social conception as a community of homeowners living in a minimally altered wooded landscape.

Six Moon Hill is significant as one of the earliest communities to explicitly employ simplicity, functionality and site sensitivity in the planning, siting, and design of its landscape, providing inspiration and a model for an emerging approach to landscape architecture. The development was established as a corporation, with two per household voting rights and a self-regulating board which protected both architectural and landscape aesthetics and values.

The development illustrates the socially progressive community-focused ethos that was an important aspect of the Modern movement. Ideals of equity and close community are supported by a policy of open, unfenced landscape and access to communal areas within the development.

Six Moon Hill was influential in Massachusetts as the first neighborhood of modernist houses that deliberately protected and privileged the topography and natural landscape setting. The houses at Six Moon Hill sit *in* the landscape, not *on* it. Receiving extensive coverage in both the professional and popular press, at local and national levels, Six Moon Hill served as an example for a surge of Modernist neighborhoods in Lexington, resulting in one of the largest collections of Modern neighborhoods in any town in New England.

Description: Six Moon Hill is a grouping of 29 Mid-Century Modern architect-designed houses and one 21st-century house on 22 acres in the southeast quadrant of Lexington, Massachusetts. (Figure 3) The property was purchased by the TAC architects in 1947 so they could build inexpensive homes for themselves, their growing families and their friends, and express Modernist socially progressive ideals. A corporation was formed, creating by-laws affecting future

development, maintenance and communal responsibilities.

The parcel was originally part of a farm, and while the land was initially used for grazing, the steeper areas had reverted to forest at the time of the purchase. Most of Moon Hill is on a ridge with rocky outcrops, wooded with oak and conifers. The impact of construction has been minimized, leaving the site as natural and undisturbed as possible. (Figure 3)

Moon Hill Road, the main spine of the development, winds up a modest slope to a circular turnaround at its summit. (Figure 4) On the west side of the road, near the entrance to the development, the land rises very steeply, and six houses sited near the top of this ridge are accessed from two roads above, Bird Hill Lane, and Swan Road. Moon Hill Road serves as circulation for vehicles as well as pedestrians, creating a corridor of close interaction between members of the community. (Figure 5)

The lowest lying low area of the site was designated for common land, midway up Moon Hill Road. A large bowl-shaped area surrounded by woods and marsh provides a large open area for games and gatherings. Together with an adjacent fenced swimming pool and pool house these common areas are managed and maintained cooperatively. (Figures 6 & 7)

The siting of each the houses demonstrates extreme respect for the finely grained terrain. Lot lines were drawn to take into account views and topography, so the shapes of the lots vary. Each house is positioned into the existing terrain to take advantage of grade changes, ensuring that no home faces onto a neighbor's. (Figure 8) A few houses are quite close to the road, some set well back, and many hidden by vegetation in the summer.

The footprint of the original houses are small; many have multiple levels, or consist of two blocks, connected by a passageway. (Figure 9.) The combination of small footprints and the use of multiple levels allows for domestic spaces closely tied to the terrain and the wooded landscape, creating a unique setting for each house. (Figure 10) All houses have southern orientation for passive solar gain, deep overhangs, and make extensive use of large glass windows. Open plan living areas as well as bedrooms have views into the landscape. (Figure 11). The large expanses of glass permit daily visual contact with nature, supporting an 'outside/inside' experience throughout the seasons.

The location of front entrances were determined by the optimal orientation of the plan to the terrain, rather than privileging an entrance orientation to the street. (Figure 12)

Existing vegetation closely surrounds the houses. In many instances, trees

dictated the placement of the house, walks or paths. (Figure 13) Small terraces are set in accordance with the location of sliding glass doors, and relate architecturally and materially to the house. Generally constructed of bluestone, terraces often flow directly from the inside areas to the outside at grade. Paths are informal, with ground covers or pine needles blanketing the ground surrounding the house. There is very little hardscape immediately around the houses, only enough to offer a path to the doors from the street or garage.

As one drives up Moon Hill Road, houses are glimpsed partially through woods or up hills; only a few have front entrances readily visible from the street. The overall impression of the neighborhood is rural, dominated by hills, woods and outcrops; the houses, except those close to the road, appear almost as accents within the landscape. No fences or obvious boundary plantings suggest property lines. (Figure 14) The existing landscape reads as a cohesive environment, and is singular in its effect on both the community and visitors.

As originally constructed, most of the houses made provision for one or more automobiles. Several of the houses have freestanding shed-roofed garages with the same type of siding found on the house itself; the architecture of the houses is also reflected in the pronounced overhang of most garages' roofs. Another type is the flat- or shed-roofed attached garage, integrated into the overall form of the house. A third set of houses has flat-roofed carports, either freestanding or attached to the house. Finally, a number of the houses that are set into slopes have the garages on the lower level, integrated into the form of the house, and are usually approached through the side or rear. The garages are all either original to the houses' construction or early modifications carried out under the development's design-approval process

Current conditions

All the houses but one have been added to over time. The corporation's architectural guidelines anticipated additions, recommending placement to the north or west, protecting the glass walls and views of the southern and eastern exposures. A review board, approving all additions and renovations, has assured an ongoing consistent style of low key, unobtrusive architecture perpetuating the Mid-Century Modern aesthetic. Many of the additions were designed by members of TAC still living at Six Moon Hill; the last was Sarah Harkness, in residence until 2013.

Additions or expansions to the rear of the houses entailed relocation of patio locations. In most cases the opportunity to relocate offered a chance to enlarge the space to accommodate more furniture or tables. Enlarged patios are of the same material – fieldstone or bluestone. There is a noticeable lack of complex landscape installations featuring built in barbecues, hot tubs, fire pits, etc. Half of the homeowners have informal flower beds in and around walls or patios

where the sun exposure offers the most possibilities.

The rustic, wooded, ‘undesigned’ feel of the landscape is pervasive throughout the site. Only three of the properties have been professionally landscaped, presenting a markedly different aesthetic. (Figure 15) With no restrictions or guidelines regarding landscape treatment, it is indicative of the sentiment of the majority of homeowners that the naturalized, unaffected approach to managing the landscape maintains a high value.

History:

The creation of Six Moon Hill is the result of the intersection of the Post War baby boom with the design professions’ growing exploration of Modern design philosophies and social agendas.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the study of architecture as well as landscape architecture was significantly affected by the advent of the International Style, by practitioners such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler, and by the Modernist social vision espoused by the Bauhaus, represented by Gropius. The practice of landscape architecture during the 1930s and 1940s was incrementally moving away from an approach based on classical and historicist styles, and interpreting and adapting the tenets of modernism employed in architecture. The definition of what constituted a ‘modern’ approach to landscape design was refined through key exhibits and published articles.

In 1937, Henry Russell Hitchcock mounted an exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Art, “Contemporary Landscape Architecture and its Sources,” modeled after his enormously successful show at MOMA, “The International Style.” In the exhibit catalog, Hitchcock’s article, “Gardens in Relation to Modern Architecture,” puts forth the essential principals:

“...the preservation of all possible values previously in existence in the landscape setting with the addition of only the simplest and most practical provisions for specific human needs. The essence of sound modern gardening is neither embellishment nor ‘improvement’, it is the frank addition of those necessary features for the owner’s use which no natural site can possibly offer.”

Variations and expansions on these ideas were expressed two years later by Garret Eckbo, James Rose and Dan Kiley in manifestoes published in *Pencil Points*, supporting the view of landscape as key to healthy living. Aware of Christopher Tunnard’s treatise, *Gardens in the Modern Landscape*, published in 1938, they urged Harvard’s dean, Joseph Hudnut, to bring Tunnard to teach at Harvard. Tunnard arrived at Harvard in 1939 and stayed through 1943, publishing another influential piece in *Landscape Architecture Magazine* in January, 1942: “Modern Gardens for Modern Houses: Reflections on Current

Trends in Landscape Architecture.” His landscape designs for several Harvard faculty in the Boston area were published in the LAM article and a 1948 revision of his book.

The founding members of TAC were at Harvard during these pivotal years, absorbing and ultimately expressing through their design work these ideas, pioneering them especially in their development of Six Moon Hill.

The members of TAC who initiated the purchase of the Moon Hill parcel were: Leonard J. Currie, Jean Bodman Fletcher, Norman Fletcher, William E. Haible, John C. Harkness, Sarah Pillsbury Harkness, Louis A. McMillen, Robert S. McMillan, and Benjamin C. Thompson. Before forming TAC, all were students together at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, and were fervent Modernists under the tutelage of Walter Gropius, head of the GSD’s School of Architecture.

The firm’s approach to landscape was integral to their design methodology. Two members of the firm, Sarah Harkness and Jean Fletcher, were initially students at the all-women’s Smith College Graduate School for Architecture and Landscape Architecture, also known as the Cambridge School due to its location in the Cambridge office the program’s first faculty, Henry Frost, an architect, GSD faculty member and an early advocate of modernism. Unique to the Cambridge School’s curriculum was the integration of architecture and landscape architecture in the first two years of study. When the school closed in 1942, current students were accepted as the first women in Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Harvard had begun to stress the relationship between architecture and landscape architecture under Dean Hudnut, and the two women arrived at the GSD already predisposed and sensitive to issues of landscape design and siting in principal.

In particular, Sarah Harkness’s work before joining TAC demonstrated a strong relationship between architecture and landscape architecture. The design principles evident at Six Moon Hill were continued in the architects’ later work, and for the architects themselves, as well as later scholars, Six Moon Hill continued to represent a major work within their overall careers.

While landscape architects endeavoring to design in a Modern idiom generally experimented with geometries and formal spatial arrangements within enclosed spaces, an opposite approach was employed in the creation of Six Moon Hill to create a democratic setting emphasizing the larger landscape rather than the individual private garden. Subsequent neighborhoods in Lexington – Five Fields (also by TAC), Peacock Farm, Upper Turning Mill, Rumford Road, the Glen at Countryside, the Grove, and Pleasant Brook following this approach.

Sources

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The Architects Collaborative archives (correspondence, drawings and images) are on deposit with MIT Museum's Architecture and Design Collection.
<http://web.mit.edu/museum/collections/architecture.html>

The Ezra Stoller Collection at ESTO.com contains 63 black and white images of Six Moon Hill taken in 1950. Images can be viewed at:
<http://estostock.com/SwishSearch?Keywords=Six%20Moon%20Hill>

Historians: Pamela Hartford, Marion Pressley

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July 31, 2015.

Entry 2015 HALS Challenge: Documenting Modernist Landscapes

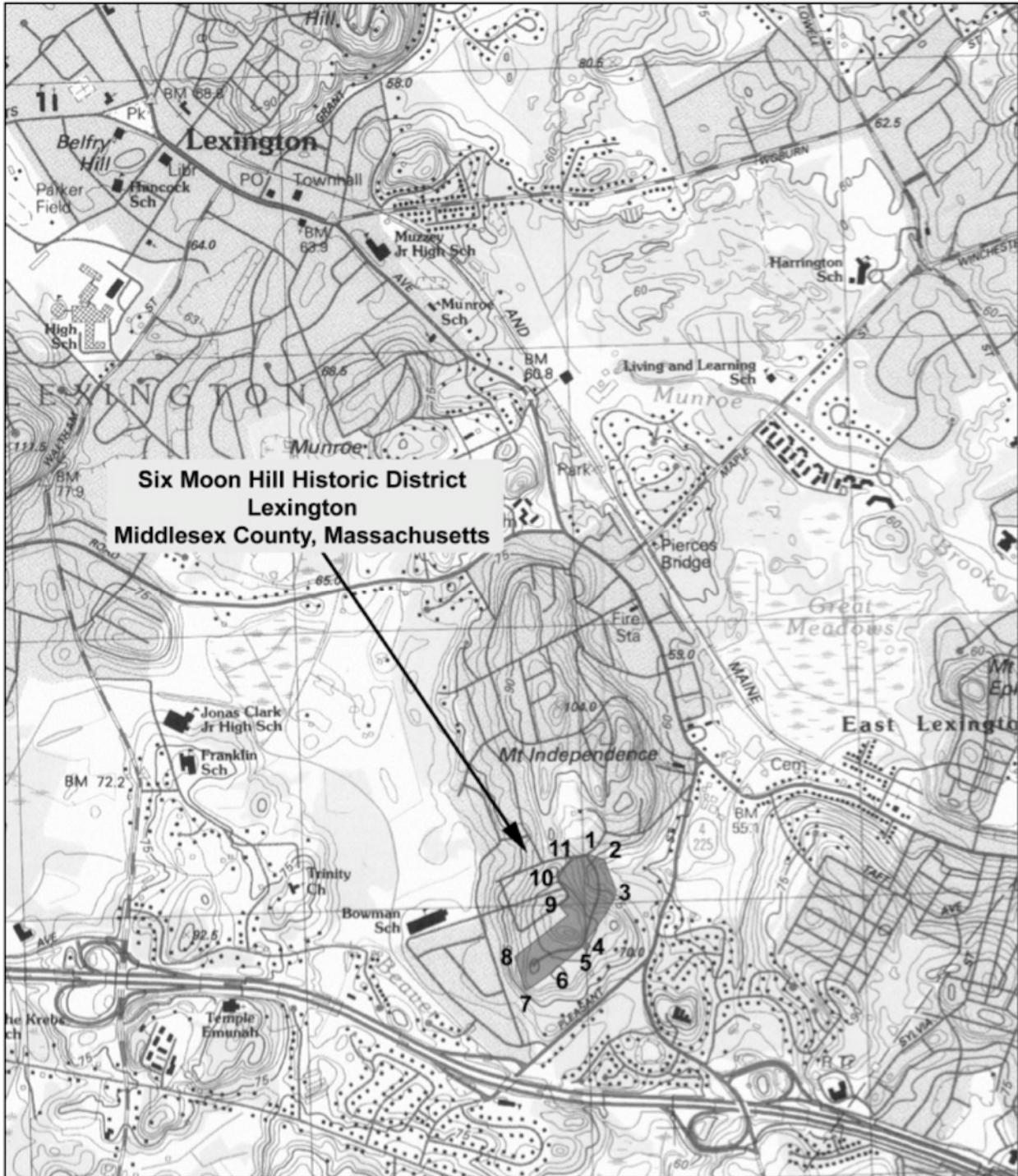


Figure 1. Location of Six Moon Hill Historic District shown on USGS Lexington Quadrangle, 7.5 Minute Series, 1946. Points 1, 3, 7 and 8 reference Long/Lat (Cloutte, Bruce. Six Moon Hill Historic District, Draft National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, June 2015)



Figure 2. Six Moon Hill Parcel Map showing road and parcel boundaries (Town of Lexington online GIS, <http://www.mapgeo.com/lexingtonma/>)



Figure 3. Site condition between two houses on Moon Hill Road, showing remains of historic stone wall winding uphill (from left) and outcrops at base of hill, right. (Pamela Hartford 2015)

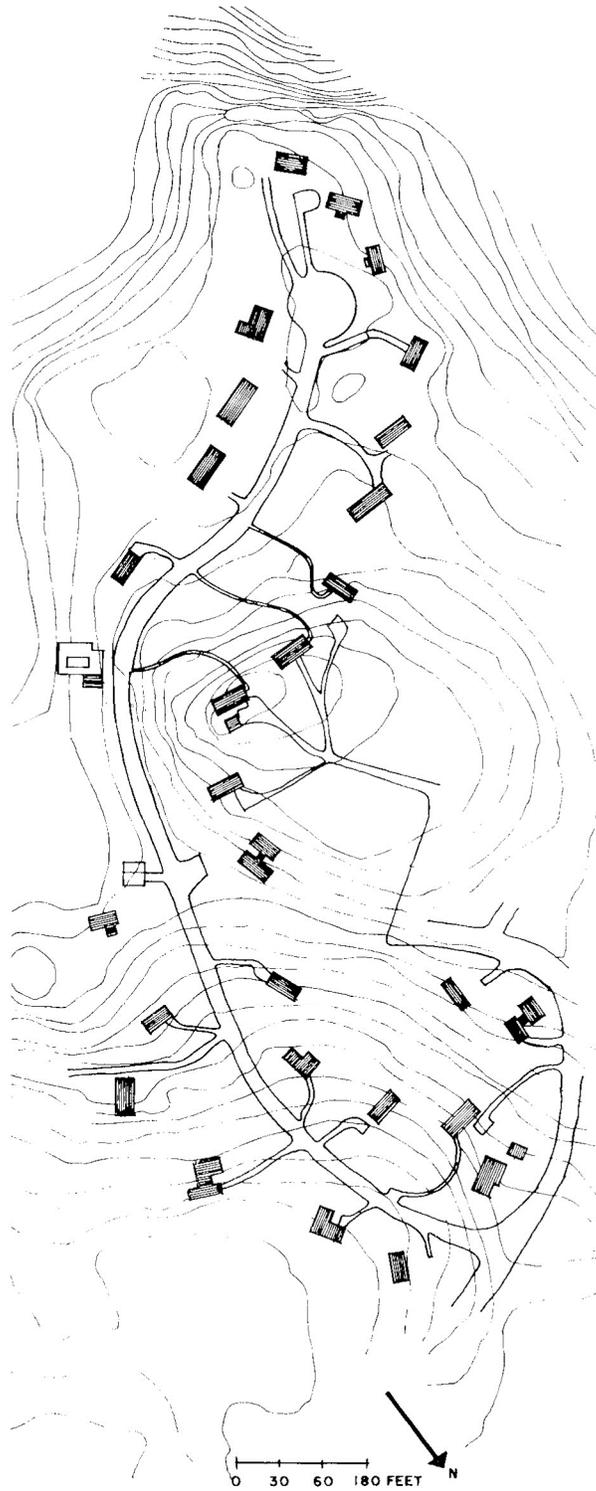


Figure 4. Six Moon Hill Site Plan. (Gropius, Walter et al, ed. *The Architects Collaborative 1945-1965*. New York: Architectural Publishing Co 1966. Courtesy MIT Museum).



Figure 5. View of Moon Hill Road, facing uphill (south) toward turnaround.
(Pamela Hartford 2015)



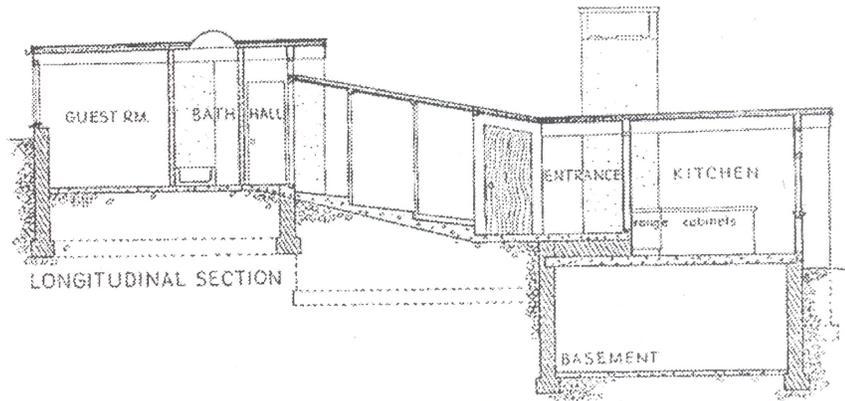
Figure 6. Common area; pool house far right. (Pamela Hartford 2015)



Figure 7. Pool with pool house to the left. (Pamela Hartford 2015)



Figure 8. #16 Moon Hill Road, showing siting of a house into ledge. (Pamela Hartford 2015)



THE ARCHITECTS COLLABORATIVE

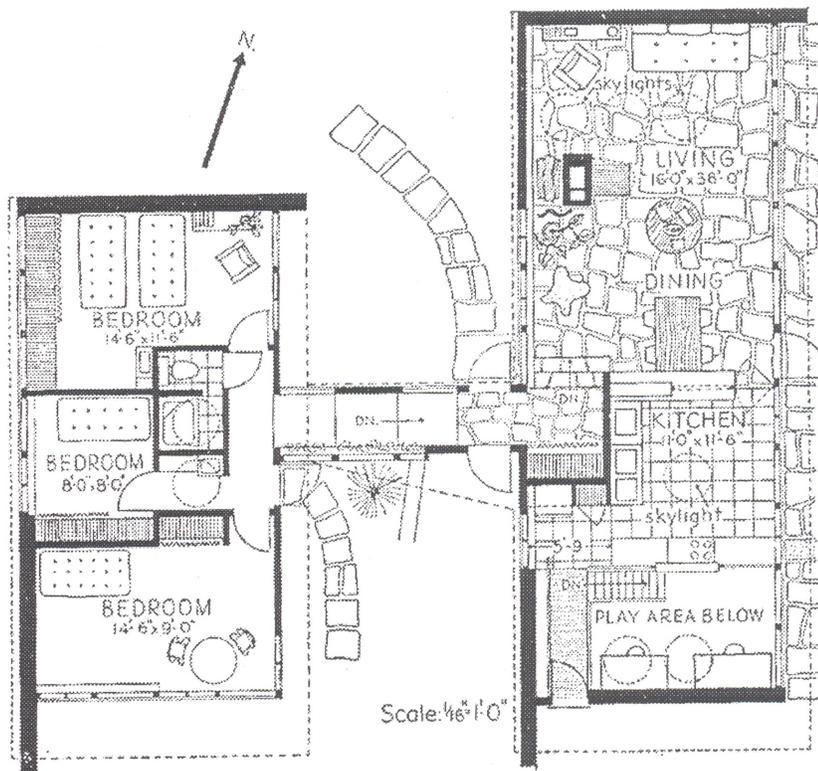


Figure 9. Plan and section of #17 Moon Hill Road showing two blocks connected by a covered connecting stair, and entrance from the uphill side into the (lower) living level. (*Architectural Forum*, 92 June 1950. Courtesy MIT Museum).



Figure 10. View of #17 looking up from Moon Hill Road. Owner is developing an informal 'native' planting perennial garden on the hillside. (Pamela Hartford 2015)

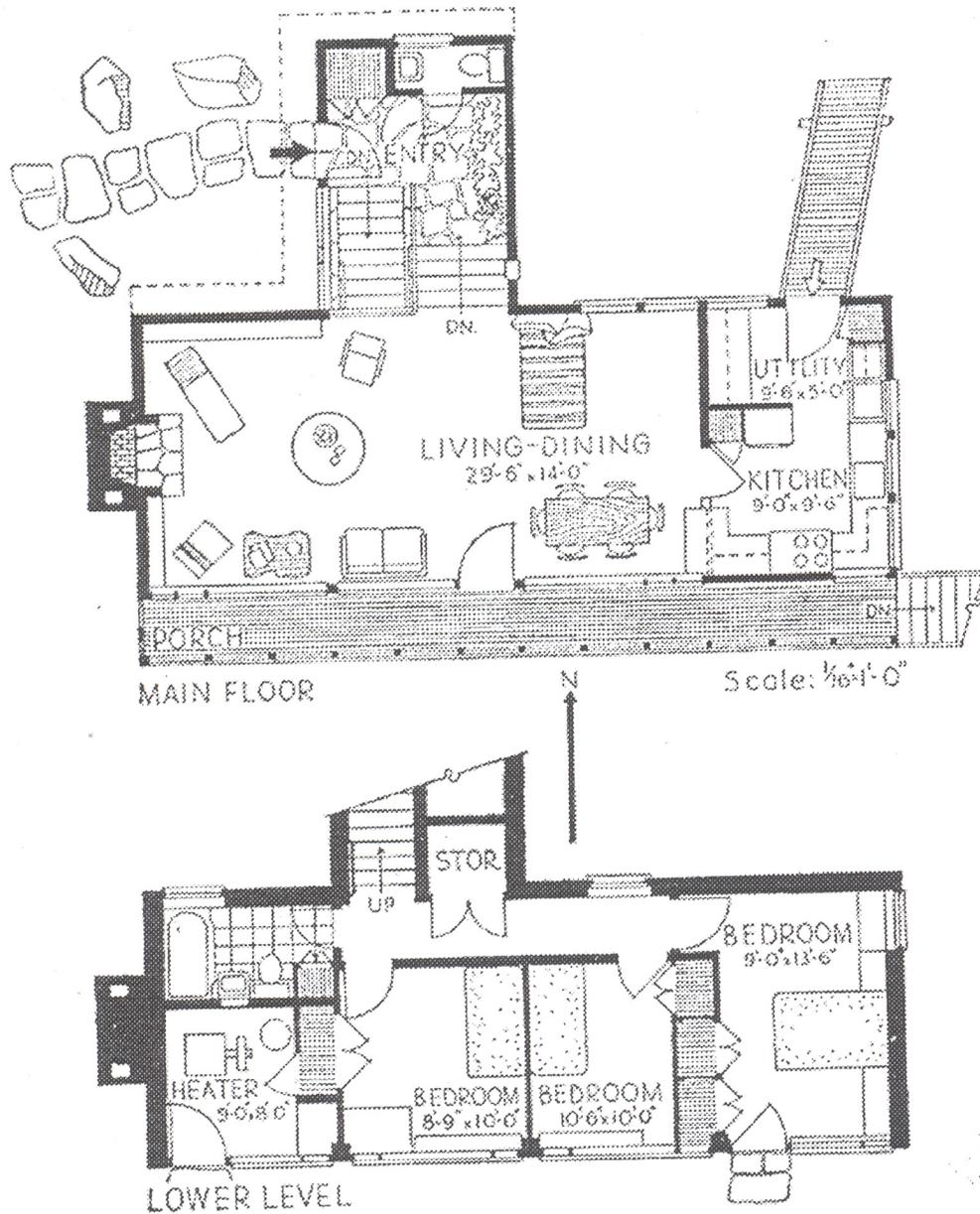


Figure 11. Plan for #16 showing front entry in corner and window wall on south elevation. (*Architectural Forum*, 92 June 1950, Courtesy MIT Museum).



Figure 12. 16 Moon Hill Road looking into entry area. Note sympathetic addition to the left. (Frederica Cushman 2009)



Figure 13. #28 Moon Hill Road, with naturalized landscape closely surrounding house. Note lower level to the right – space for car park under the house. (Pamela Hartford 2015)



Figure 13. #34 Moon Hill Road, showing simple treatment of entrance with minimal hardscape and soft edges. Low wall defines entrance path, which angles from front door through trees toward the road. Design of screen relates it to the house through materials and scale, creating exterior space for use by the owners in summer when vine clothes the screen. (Frederica Cushman 2009)



Figure 14. An informal service road leads past a freestanding garage to the main house which is set far back from Moon Hill Road (footpath to garage at left) (Pamela Hartford 2015)



Figure 15. A recently designed landscape with deliberate massing of ground cover, pattern through tree and shrub placement, and vertical contrast, and crisp hardscape with defined edges and a constructed edge separating the path from the street. The composition reads 'designed' rather than 'natural,' creating a clear visual distinction between the landscape of this house and separating its landscape from the fabric of the community. (Frederica Cushman 2009)