

JAMES PARDEE HOUSE

1. James T. Pardee
2. 812 West Main Street, Midland, Michigan 48640,
3. category--building, ownership--private, public acquisition--n/a, status--unoccupied, work in progress (restoration--completed), accessible--yes: restricted, present use--other--foundation offices
4. Carl Gerstacker, 3403 Valley Drive, Midland, Michigan 48640.
5. Midland County Courthouse, 301 West Main Street, Midland, Michigan 48640
6. "The Architecture of Alden B. Dow"
7. Description. condition--excellent, altered, original site, 1936

The James Pardee house, set on a gentling sloping corner lot, is one of Alden Dow's most powerful expressions of geometric form and his interpretation of the International style. The rhythmic patterning of the unit block, used in the exterior and interior walls, carries over to the totality of the structure with its rich variety of interacting geometric shapes and building materials. The forms, shapes, and materials compliment each other and provide for a dynamic structure. These elements carry over to the interior. Architectural critic Talbot Hamlin (1942) looked upon the interior as the "most significant" area of the house, "both, in the arrangement of the living room--with its two angles for music and for the fireplace--and in the arrangement of the second floor, where the carrying through

of partitions and mirrors allows the most fascinating and unusual suggestion of unlimited space superbly divided." In 1953, Dow prepared drawings for a rear addition, another geometric structure in harmony with the original building and one that enhanced its total content. During the summer of 1986 the restoration of the Pardee house, in accordance with the original plans, was completed.

Late in 1935, Alden Dow received his largest commission to date. James T. Pardee, the newly elected chairman of the board at Dow Chemical Company, and his wife decided to replace an older home on Main Street with a modern residence. They asked Dow to prepare drawings for them. The initial drawings of a three-story unit block home were sent from his office in January, 1936.

The Pardees were receptive to the architect's suggestions, but they questioned the building material and the volume of windows. Mrs. Pardee did not initially like the use of unit block, and felt that brick would be more attractive and appropriate for the home of Dow Chemical's chairman. "As to the construction material," she wrote to Alden Dow on February 25, 1936, "I have told every one that it is to be of brick. Many of my friends think they do not like cinder block." Mrs. Pardee added that she remained open to the idea of unit block.

Alden Dow sent the Pardees "sketches of the three floor plans and for the time being just a perspective of one elevation." And, he added, "There is one thing that must be

settled right away and that is the construction material." The architect explained his preference for block, writing that "the effects gained by using cinder block like the Heaths' house make it seem a great mistake not to use them. They have a much quieter feeling and create a continuity that is very difficult to get with the bricks because the bricks do not work into any geometric pattern conforming with window openings and the like."

Mrs. Pardee also expressed her concern over the large volume of window space in the house. Writing from their home in Cleveland, she asked Dow if one of the large windows in the Main Street facade could be removed. The architect reassured her, writing "Although in the plans it may appear like a lot of window space in the living room, I am sure that this is not excessive and is one of the features of the house. To cut down this would mean upsetting the whole scheme of this room and the elevation of the house." Mrs. Pardee relented and agreed to the plans. After completion of the house, she complained that the front of that room was too sunny or too cold, adding "Have not been able to entertain my Midland Club at home for fear of a sunny day or a cold one."

Mr. and Mrs. Pardee did agree to have unit block as the major building material for the house. The plans were completed in the spring of 1936, and construction began on June 25th, immediately after the signing of a contract with Bay City Stone Company. The house, bid at \$41,330.00 for the general contracting, was to be "substantially completed" by

March 1, 1937. While the house was under construction, a number of alterations were made at the request of the Pardees, and the final cost reached \$51,965.33. In June, Mr. and Mrs. Pardee moved into the house.

Located on a large corner lot on Main Street, the Pardee house fills the space with a broad T shaped dwelling whose multiple intersecting geometric planes present a strongly sculptural building. Dow's concept was for a bold geometric composition with a series of interlocking elements. The surfaces and planes of these elements were broken up by large windows with vertical wooden mullions, copper awnings, a course of glass block, and capped with a narrow course of windows. All were set at various depths from the front plane of the house. The rhythmic pattern of the unit block provides strong continuity and integrity throughout the structure.

The Pardee house with its strong horizontal accent seems to hug the ground. This feeling of compactness and total control is carried beyond the house and into the yard with the low unit block walls and planter. The horizontal plane is emphasized further by the roof eave that extends out over the entryway. It provides a long and sheltered corridor leading to the front door. Those entering the house must walk along this terrace and thereby sense its comfort and security before even entering the structure. The unit block stairs leading up to this terrace wrap around it at the corner and taper down to a point. The house thereby

gradually dissolves into the yard and driveway. The transition is easy, subtle and natural.

Alden Dow placed the entryway at the intersection of two of the main blocks of the house. The main door is as wide as the terrace and the ceiling of the overhanging roof low. There is no spacious vestibule. This detail heightens the spacious effect of the interior. The location of the entry disguises the intersection of the two major blocks of the house. While the distinction between them had been apparent from the street, and the entry hidden, the setting is now reversed. The terrace and the entry dominate.

The long narrow section behind the terrace housed the maid's quarters. In 1953 an addition designed by Alden Dow was constructed behind and above it. The addition, with its narrow course of windows, steps above the front section. This was a private area of the house, and therefore it remained subtle. Projecting at a right angle from this section and reaching out into the yard was the major element of the house. It culminated in front with a bay window of floor to ceiling windows capped by a copper awning. These windows reached around to the side of the house. This area, while inviting, is marked off from the street by a long narrow unit block wall. It does not obstruct the view, but simply defines an element of privacy. The forward most section contains the living room and lounge. The front door opens into the rear of this space.

The bay window wraps around the side of the house and

introduces another unit block wall that extends the length of the house. The flat plane of this wall is interrupted by a narrow light well at its base and a narrow course of windows that start about 15 feet behind the bay window. The windows nicely cap the wall. The rear of the house opens onto a driveway/parking area and garage. Cars could be parked here, hidden from view from the front of the house. While this might be identified as a service courtyard, the details are striking and the concept of this area exciting with its interplay of materials and forms.

The front entrance opens onto a spacious hallway which is defined by the chimney and a low flight of stairs leading to the kitchen/dining areas, the sitting room and the bedrooms. The openness of the living room with its bay windows guides the visitor and attracts the eye to that area. The more private areas of the house are situated in the rear zone, with the bedrooms relocated in the upstairs 1953 addition. Talbot Hamlin was impressed with Dow's treatment. "The handling of the interior space in the Pardee house is significant," he wrote in 1942, "both in arrangement of the living room and in the arrangement of the second floor, where the carrying through of partitions and mirrors suggest unlimited space superbly divided." The carefully disciplined scale of the outside is contrasted by the soaring nature of the interior.

The various levels of the Pardee house project outward from the entry staircase. The levels are well defined, and

the effect of these horizontal planes is heightened by the massive unit block chimney opposite the entry door and the staircase behind it. The levels radiate from this location. At this point, Alden Dow also reveals the materials, textures, and forms used throughout the house. The carpeted floors, the wood trim and rails, the plaster walls and unit block chimney converge here without one element overpowering any other.

B. Significance. period--1900-, specific dates--March, 1937 - March, 1938; October, 1953 - June 1954, builder--Bay City Stone Company (1936-1937), Branson Builders (1953-1954), architect--Alden B. Dow

The James Pardee house is an outstanding example of Alden Dow's interpretation of the International style. The placement of the house on the sloping corner lot, well back from the two streets, with a clear view of its carefully controlled geometric elements, with the driveway running at the side and rear of the house where it does not obstruct or interrupt the view of the house, and with the long and low unit block in front of the house which looks like a pedestal, the house appears very much like a sculpture on exhibit. Dow was a master of site planning. The low wall in the front of the house and the terraced front steps ease the transition between the house and the yard. Although highly geometric, the house does not challenge or conflict with nature. This large unit block home on Main Street proudly announced to the entire community the architectural style and achievement of

Alden Dow, an accomplishment recognized by an important architectural critic.

9. Sidney Robinson, The Architecture of Alden B. Dow.
Talbot F. Hamlin, "The Architect and House--Alden B. Dow of Michigan," Pencil Points (May, 1942), pp. 276, 280, 281.
"James T. Pardee File," Dow-How-Gilmore Associates Archive.
"James T. Pardee Drawings," Dow-Howell-Gilmore Associates Archive.