

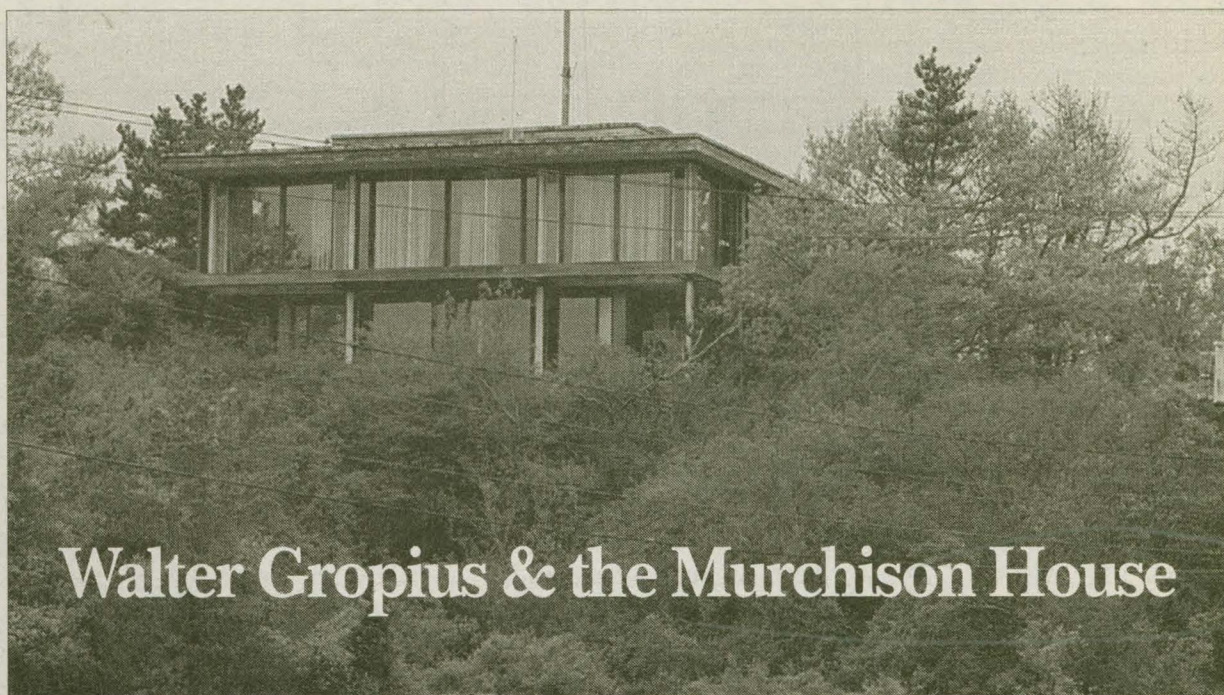
History Highlights

BY LAUREL GUADAZNO

Architect Walter Gropius was born in Germany on May 18, 1883. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1937 and became a professor of architecture at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Gropius introduced the screen wall system that used a structural steel frame to support the floors of a building and thus allow large expanses of external glass walls to continue without interruption. Between 1938 and 1941 Gropius worked on a number of houses with Marcel Breuer. In 1945 he founded The Architects Collaborative, a well-respected firm of architects located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gropius primarily designed large public buildings such as the Pan Am Building (now the Met Life Building) in New York. His biographer Reginald Isaacs describes him as a "pioneer of the glass curtain wall and prefabricated housing; founder of the single most influential force on modern design, the Bauhaus."

What does this great modern architect have to do with Provincetown history? Provincetown is home to one of a few private homes designed by Walter Gropius, the Murchison House at 2 Commercial Street. Carl Murchison and his wife built the present house to replace a previous home destroyed by fire early in the morning on May 1, 1956.

Like many people I have often gazed up at this private home and wondered if what I had heard about the house was true. When I chanced upon an article on the house at the library I was pleased to have my curiosity satisfied.



Walter Gropius & the Murchison House

PHOTO VINCENT GUADAZNO

The Murchison House at 2 Commercial Street, designed by architect Walter Gropius.

In the article "Record Houses of 1959" from the Architectural Record magazine, the house is described as follows: "Built on a hilltop site in the midst of historic and festive Provincetown, Massachusetts, this large residence points a new direction in contemporary design that seems remarkably at home in its setting. The house also marks a subtle change of design direction for its architects, previously best known for a highly sophisticated simplicity in their work."

A Japanese temple was used as the inspiration for the home. The house's canopied entrance, not visible from the street below, and the two roofs further evoke the oriental character. The Architectural Record article goes on to say: "The plan of the living areas also suggests the Japanese. There are no rooms in the conventional sense, but rather living spaces which blend together, and are linked by a broad gallery. The house has an architectural impressiveness not often seen today."

To take advantage of the views, the top floor of the house contains the main living areas. The bottom floor was reserved for functional and service areas such as Mr. Murchison's office and guest rooms. The house was built with every amenity. Service areas included a refrigerated room for the storage of woolens and furs, a food storage area, an air conditioning system and emergency power generator. The site also has a terrace surrounding three sides of the house and a swimming pool.

The Architects Collaborative and Design Research planned the furniture specifically for the house and its owners. The article explains, "As all was designed to fit

the occupants, a problem was encountered with the sofa, for Mr. Murchison is tall and Mrs. Murchison is petite. Thus, a 'Murchison Sofa' was devised with a movable pillow which can be turned back as part of the seat."

Only the most sumptuous materials were used throughout the house. Mr. and Mrs. Murchison must have enjoyed entertaining, for the Architectural Record article also states: "Interior finishes as well as the spaces, are planned with an eye to ease of upkeep, as well as ease of entertaining large groups of people. Walls are teak, walnut, brick; floors are brick, slate, carpet in the 'alcoves.'" Italian marble was used to surround the fireplace and across the floor in front of the fireplace.

Finally, the article enlightens us about the two buildings near the street, "Three hundred feet down the driveway leading to the street is a modern four-car garage and living quarters for household workers. At the entrance to the driveway at the street is a six-room utility house containing a two-car garage and a workshop."

Now when you gaze up at this lovely home you'll have a better idea what it is like, but, please, respect the privacy of the owner and don't trespass to get a better view.

[Laurel Guadagno is Visitor Services Manager for the Pilgrim Monument & Provincetown Museum. She also writes and narrates "History Highlights," heard regularly on WOMR, 92.1 FM.]