## Gehry House
*Santa Monica, California 1978*

*I wasn't trying to make a big or precious statement about architecture or trying to do an important work: I was trying to build a lot of ideas.*
—Frank Gehry, 1979

Architecture is generally conceived, designed, and discussed as an ordered explication of a single idea, or a compact constellation of ideas, about a program and a site. Those works that weld and translate such ideas into a strong formal order toward which all parts contribute, we have come to understand as our finest achievements. To approach Frank Gehry's house with these critical assumptions in mind is to miss the front door. (In fact, there are two.)

As Duchamp transformed objects of everyday use into "readymades" by "making a new thought for the object," so Gehry took a small pink asbestos-shingled bungalow and "tried to make it more important." A shell—an addition to the first floor—wraps the "dumb little house" on three sides. The effect is to make the old house seem an object *within* a house, a monument on display. The shell adds about eight hundred square feet to the first floor. To the northeast, an elaborated entry vestibule leads either into the old house or down to an asphalt pad on grade. On the latter, along the longer, northwest street frontage, are a dining area, kitchen, and breakfast area. To the southwest, the zone of new construction is a sort of loggia opening onto the enclosed backyard. The exterior of the original house remains intact, even where enclosed by new construction. Its interior has been revised—stripped to lath and framing in some places, amended or preserved in others.

As one enters, the distinction between the new shell and the old house is underscored by the necessity of passing through a second—the original—front door into the old house. From the dining and kitchen areas on the asphalt pad below, the perception of sitting on a driveway looking at and into the old house gives it a prominence it no doubt had not previously enjoyed—and provides a voyeuristic tickle to boot.

Interior elements of the old house were "edited" for selected prominence: framed, painted windows are elevated to icons on the stripped lath walls.

Upstairs, the ceiling was removed and framing exposed to make a big "tree house"—an enormous attic. Fortuitously, the original framing and lath turned out to be redwood, giving the spaces they now define the warmth of local craftsman architecture.

The "memories" of the old house are also honored. In gutting much of the interior and in opening it into the new spaces, Gehry proposed that he had trapped "ghosts" of the original cubic volumes. The window in the kitchen and its chain-link "shadow structure" above were meant "to read as a cube falling out of a box—as if it was trying to escape from the enclosure that was put around the old house."

The distinction between new and old is not made insistently. Explains Gehry, "I wanted to blur the edge between old finishes and new finishes . . . between real and surreal." Similarly, the corrugated metal wall that surrounds the entry and kitchen does not wrap the third side of the new shell; rather, it continues as a screen wall. A window-like opening provides a view into the backyard. From the street, those in the backyard are on stage; however, from the yard the impression is of being backstage looking out through props: both the screen wall and the cactus in midyard are apparently supported by two-by-four-inch bracing.

These "stages" provide a clue to some of the other ideas explored in the house. They follow a line of reasoning, or unreasoning, promoted by Duchamp and explored by a line of twentieth-century artists whom Gehry cites as influences. Duchamp argued that in life one knows and deals only with change and motion, not absolutes and fixity; and that that which is art is equally volatile and amorphous —what he called "something like electricity" between the maker and the observer through the medium of the art work. What Robert Rauschenberg has said of his field—"Painting relates to both life and art. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two."—Gehry has brought to architecture. Thus the house is made for the people moving through it and living in it, its insights and incidents taking precedence over the strengthening of a formal parti. And, as Duchamp's "Large Glass" offers a frequently changing view of itself by virtue of people seen through and reflected by its surface, so the "stage

sets" in Gehry's house are enlivened and changed with the life it houses.

Glazing is used throughout because of its changing reflections, refractions, and shadows. Wire glass was used in conjunction with chain-link panels to intensify those effects. The kitchen and some of the bedroom windows frame the movements and shadows of a stand of Cedars of Lebanon. Other bedroom windows look through the slats, openings, and chain-link screens of the rear loggia. The reflections off the windows of the old house, left intact between interior spaces, are particularly evocative; the old window reglazed with mirror and installed as a medicine cabinet is its endgame. One of the vaguely perpendicular panes making up the dining room window at the front corner slides by, unframed, that which it might have abutted. The result of looking through two sheets of glass set at different angles is a refraction of things seen through it, giving them the sort of kinetic torque Gehry identifies as that of Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." The angling of the window was one of Gehry's most calculated endeavors. As he describes it, "That slight angle allows the window to be perpendicular to a streetlight that's across the road. In the evening one looks out that window and all the interior lights in the house are reflected in that window and point toward that streetlight. The illusion is that the house is tilted toward the streetlight and it is one of the reflections I did plan. Most of the others are either intuitive or accidental, but they work equally well."

To extend the capacity of the house to surprise, and to allow the observer as much speculation and intrigue as possible, Gehry chose his rough materials and the "deconstruction" of the old house. As he explains it, "I was concerned with maintaining a 'freshness' in the house. Often this freshness is lost—in over-finishing them, their vitality is lost. I wanted to avoid this by emphasizing the feeling that the details are still in the process: that the building hasn't stopped. The very finished building has security and it's predictable. I wanted to try something different. I like playing at the edge of disaster."
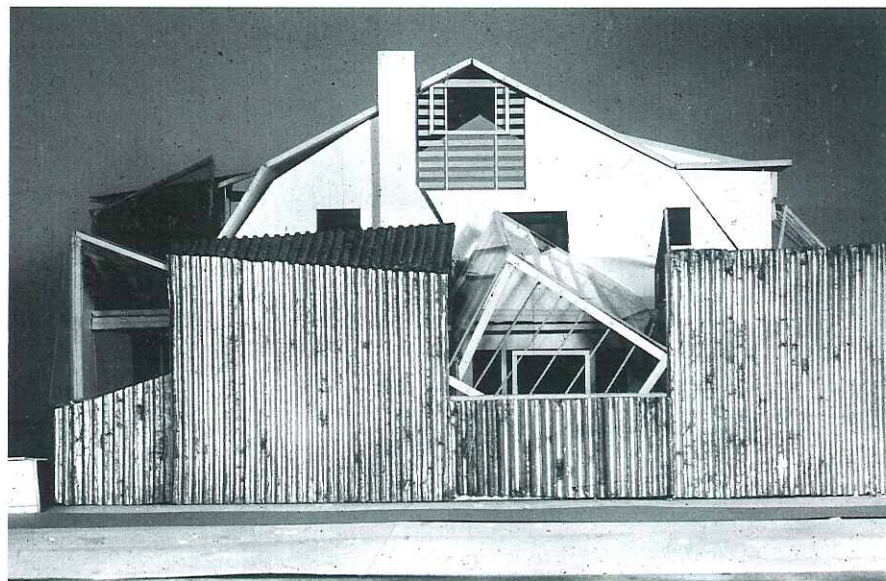
*1.Kitchen window*

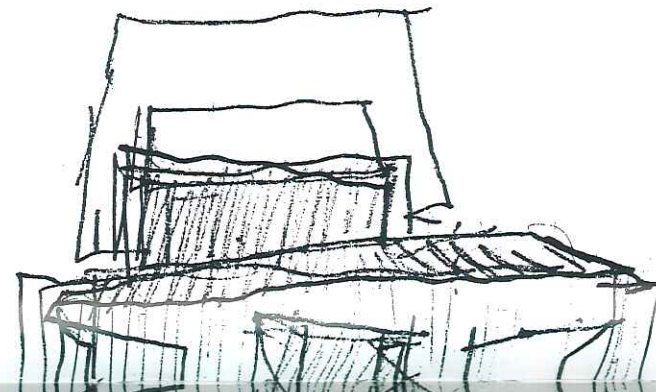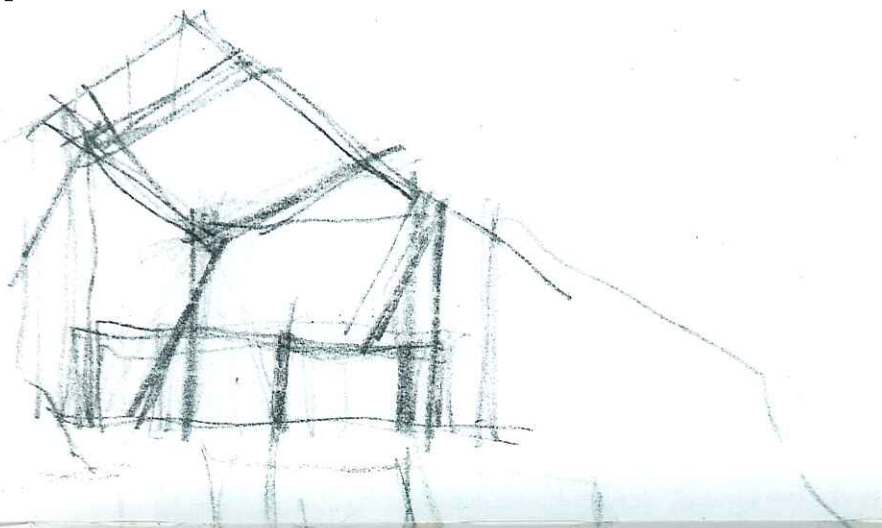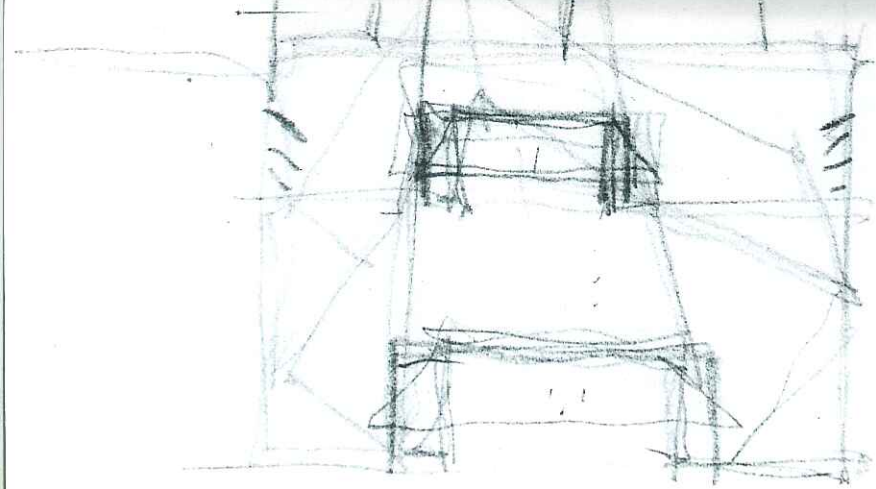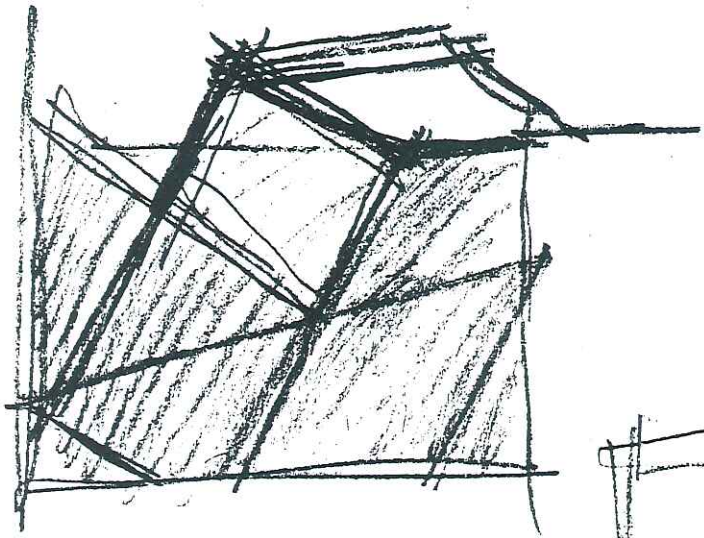1."A dumb little house with charm"  2-3.Study
models  4-7.Design sketches



1



2



3

4

5

6

7

1



2

BEDROOM

BEDROOM

GARAGE

LIVING AREA

② 

DINING

KITCHEN

① 

BEDROOM

CLOSET

DN

MASTER BEDROOM

② 

OUTDOOR DECK

① 

2

3



4



5



6
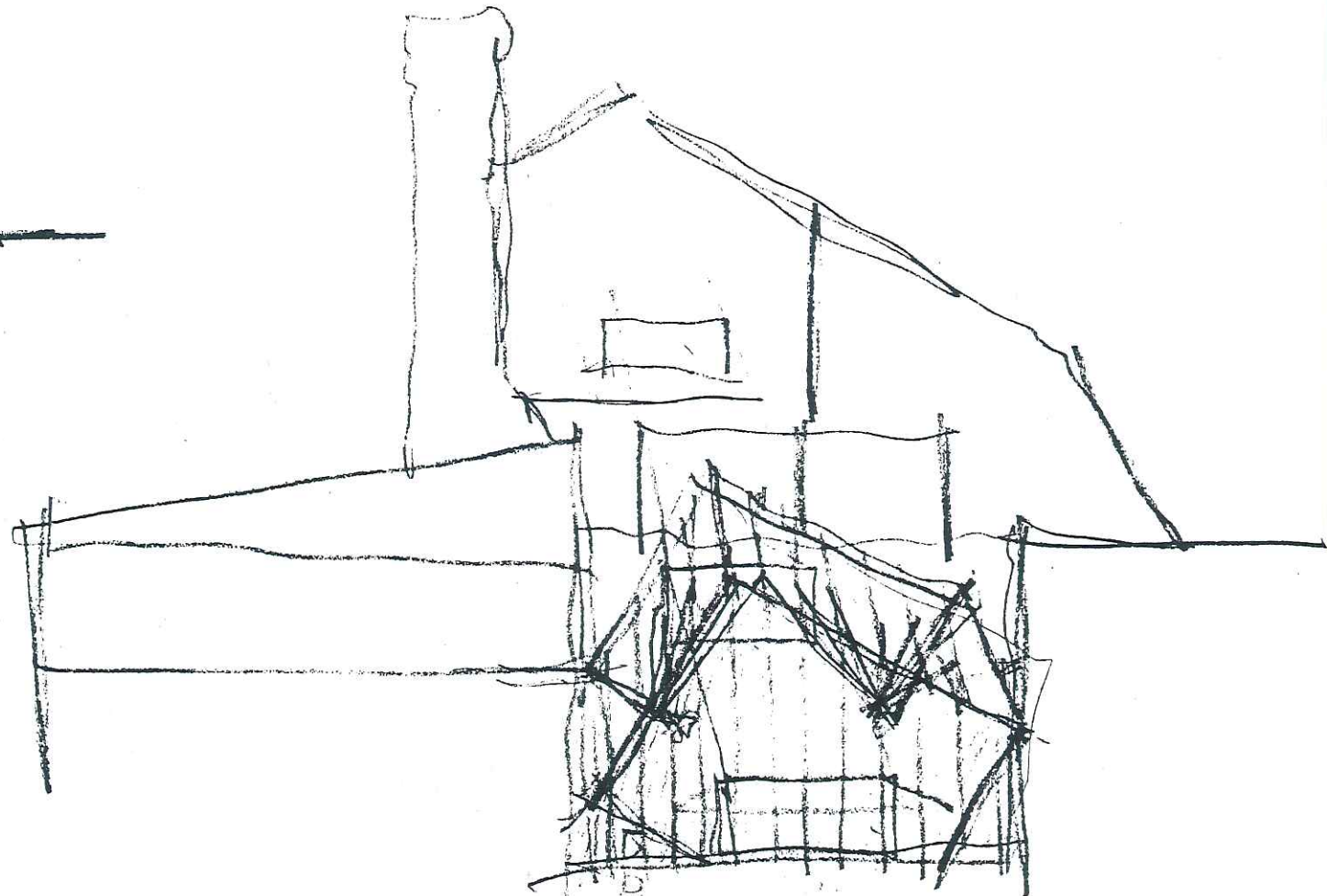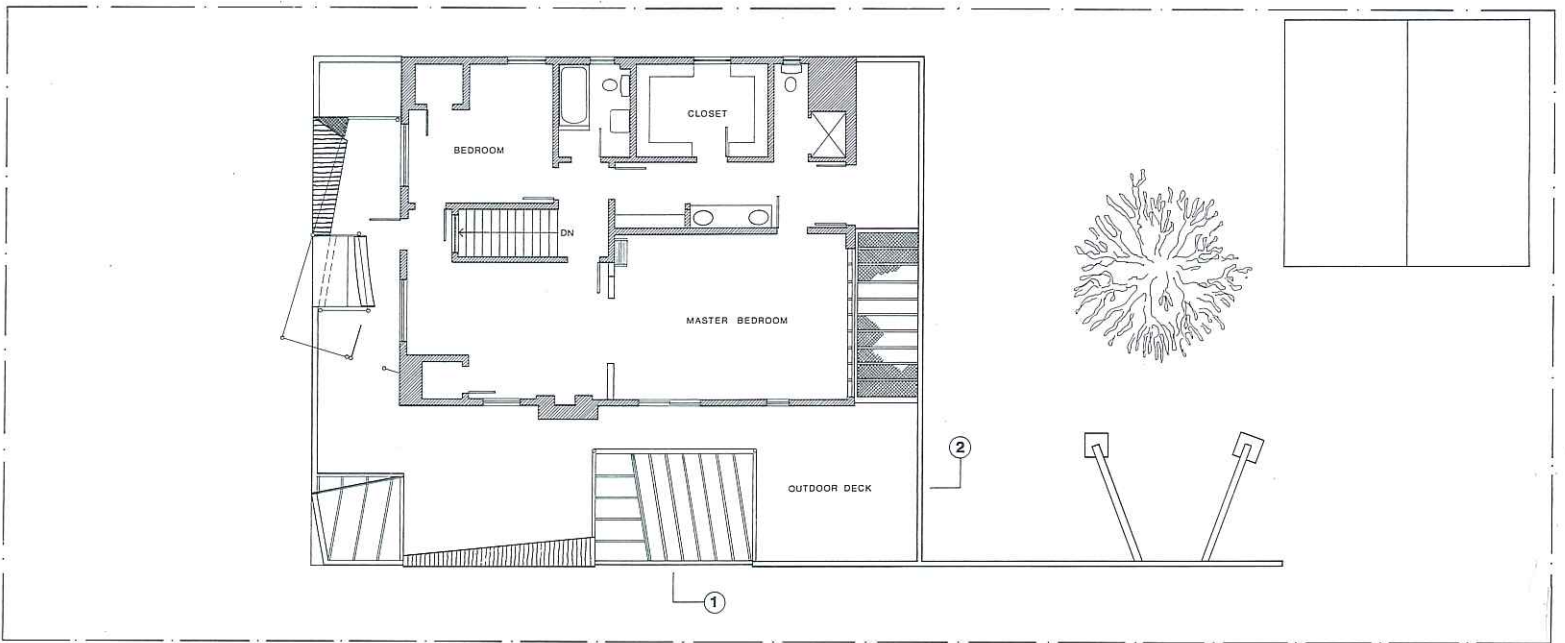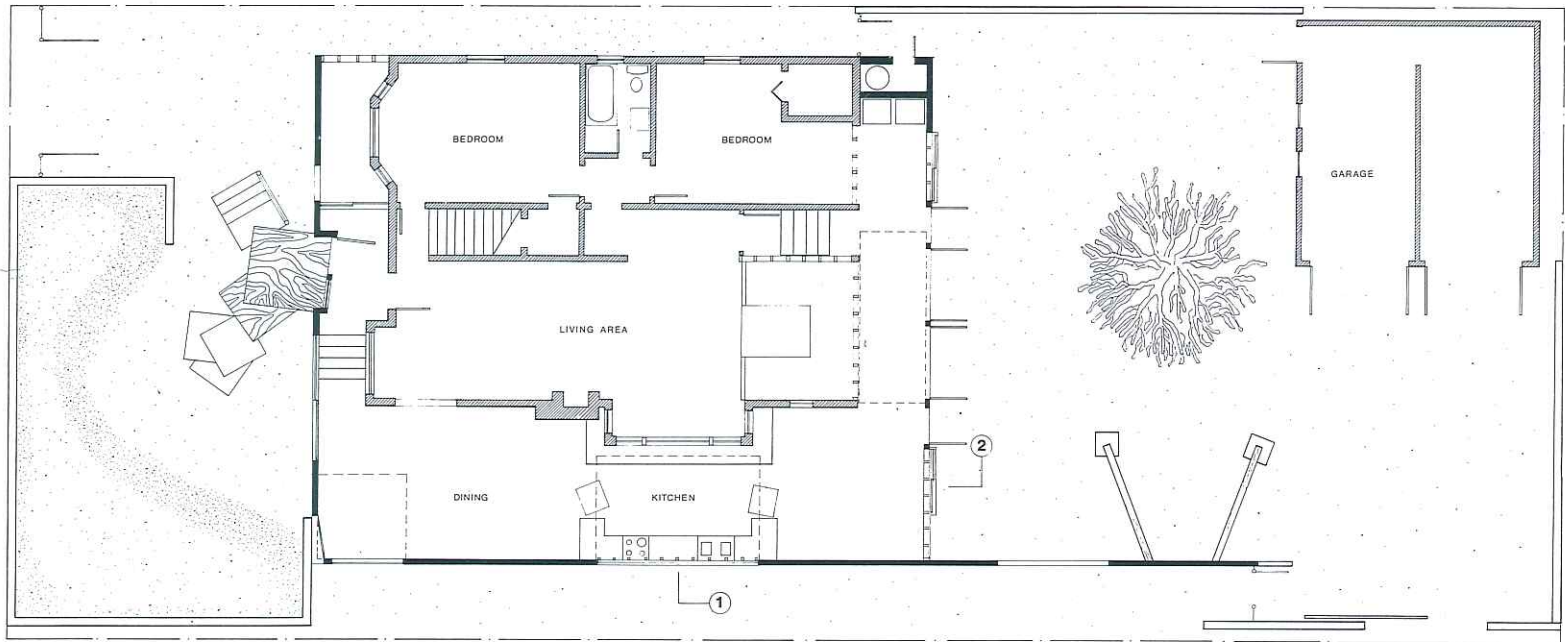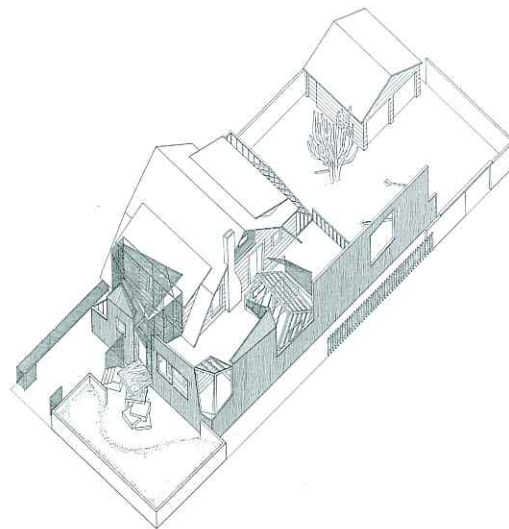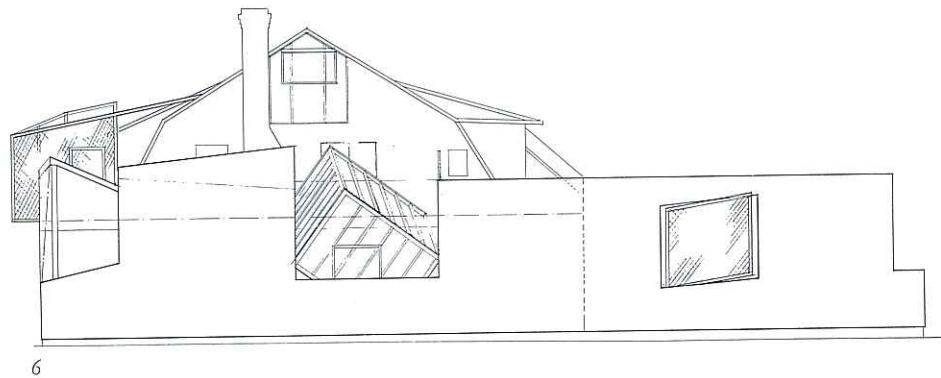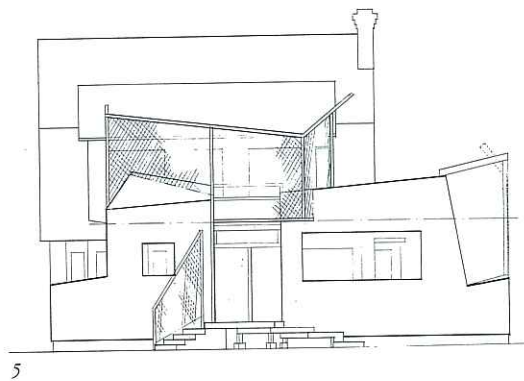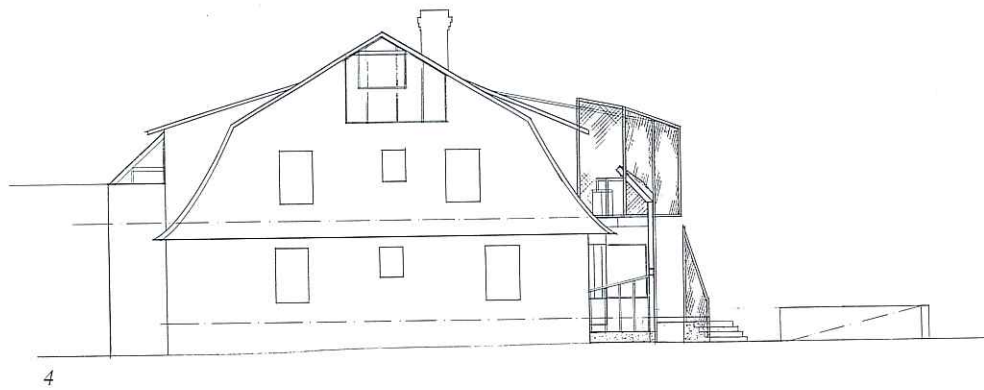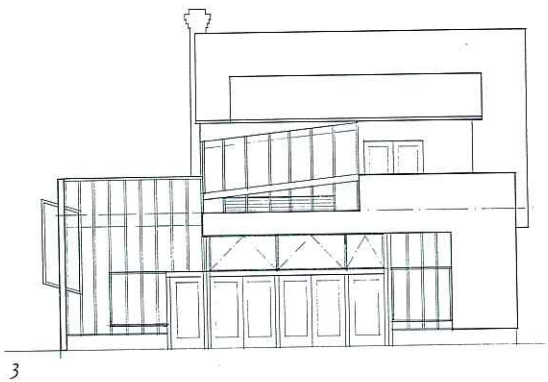
1.1st floor  2.2nd floor  3.West elevation  4.South
elevation  5.East elevation  6.North elevation
7.Axonometric

1.Living room, toward backyard   2.Master bedroom
3.Living room wall   4.Medicine cabinet   5.Window
upstairs   6."Loggia" roof   7.Kitchen, toward
backyard   8.View toward entrance from dining room
9.Door   10.Kitchen, toward dining room



1



2
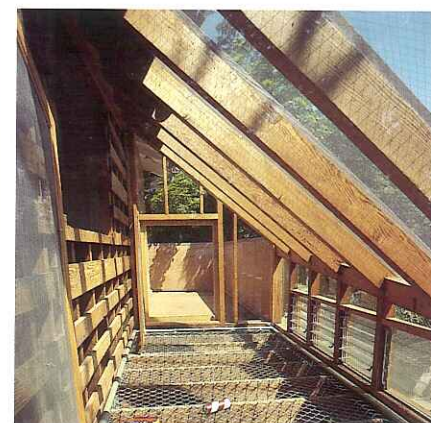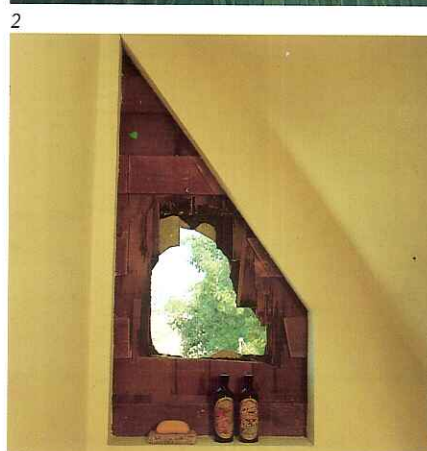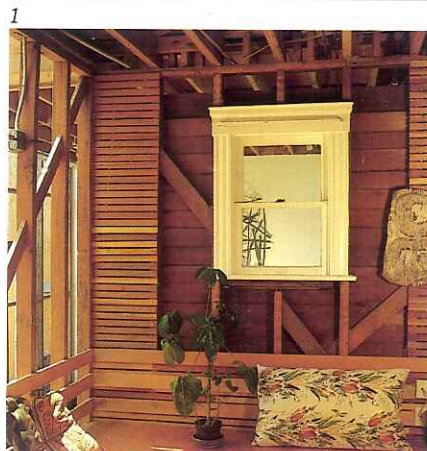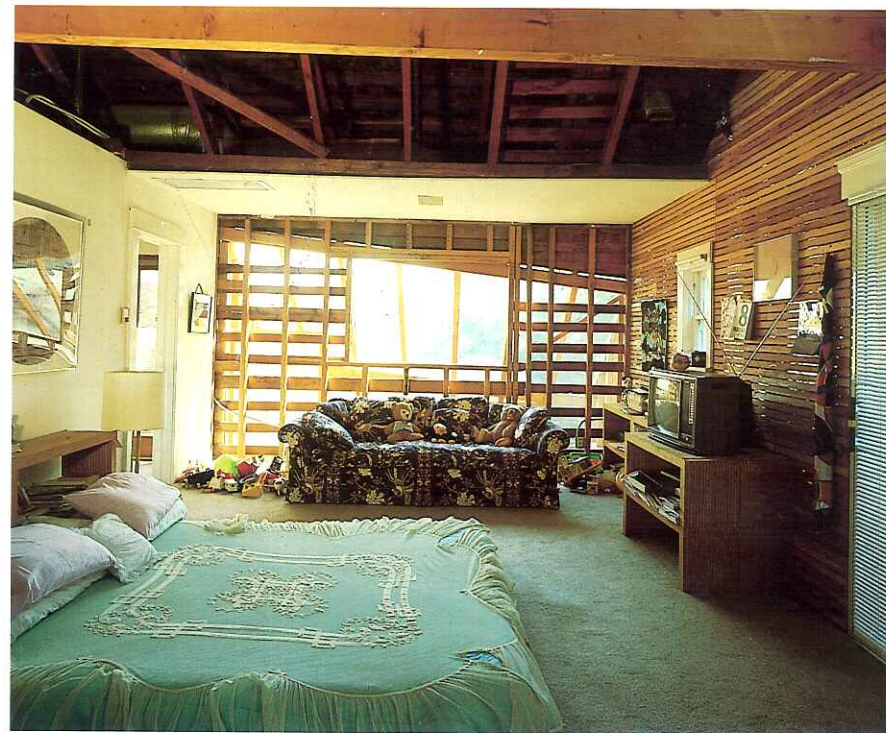


3



4



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6

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10

1.View into backyard from street  2.View of rear
elevation from street  3.Roofscape



1



2

3