The Letters of Colin Rowe: Five Decades of Correspondence

Daniel J. Naegele

Iowa State University, naegele@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_books

Part of the Architectural History and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation


http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_books/2

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Books by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
the letters of Colin Rowe  five decades of correspondence
involvement (which did not meet with approval) in the comparison of certain aspects of the thesis "The Theoretical Drawings of Inigo Jones and John Webb" and, extracurricular, at that date, the only student of the late Rudolf Wittkower* in the preparation of a board the reverse of easy and, consequently, an invitation from the Warburg Institute of the University of London to accept a Junior Research Fellowship could only be regarded as an attractive proposition. And the result was his working for two years as, of the apparent, casual speech and suggestive, provocative drawing. For, in a curious, impressionist, nervous and often agitated way, Rowe is perhaps a not unimportant draughtsman who is rapidly able to condense issue after issue into a series of laconic accommodation, have always been part of its stock-in-trade; and it has never shown any favor towards allegedly, 'neutral' research. Indeed and to the contrary, it has always assumed that the making of cities is a process not wholly unlike cooking where, while ideal recipes may, no doubt, be entertained, these are always likely to be defeated by the market offers and, then, only to be salvaged by what may invent.

Rowe has been full Professor at Cornell since 1966 and, since 1963, he has been in charge of Cornell's urban design program which is no way to be confused with Cornell's Department of City and Regional Planning.

So much for a, sometimes, jumpy and spasmodic chronology and now for a characterization. Rowe is something of a straddler. He is not completely an architect, not completely an historian, not exactly a private personality, not wholly a public one. He is, conceivably a teacher rather than a scholar and relatively happy to be so; but, though his published writings have been few, they have enjoyed a reputation and an alleged influence far in excess of their quantity. Indeed, it might almost be said that what is sometimes spoken of as 'the new literacy in American architecture' (a 'literacy' which may begin to be excessive) is to be regarded as a primary result of Rowe's conversations with his students, both past and present. Rowe who is often regarded as simply a formalist critic and a proponent of the positions of Le Corbusier has always been extremely open to any questioning and highly accessible to his students; but he has also conducted almost every project which has involved him with exemplary rigor.
1943

Injury

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Colin Rowe was nineteen years old and studying architecture at the University of Liverpool. In March 1942, he was ‘called up’, served in basic military training, and in December of that year he joined the British Royal Air Force. The following summer he trained as a parachutist in a camp just south of Manchester where—in an early July 1943 practice jump from 700 feet—he severely injured his back, crushing two spinal vertebrae. Hospitalized for nearly six months, he was placed in a plaster cast from his shoulders to his hips. The injury affected him for the rest of his life.

From his hospital bed, Rowe printed a letter by hand on seventeen small sheets of paper to Ursula Mercer, a friend and fellow architecture student at Liverpool. The letter tells of visits to the hospital from friends Bob Maxwell, Sam Biggins, and Bill Kidd and from the Duchess and Duke of Gloucester. ‘Hef you been abroad?’ he said. He is very Hanoverian.

In the letter Rowe poetically describes the sensations of parachuting—the ‘green striking up from below, and an immensity of blue above…a vast three-dimensional ballet’—and recounts the accident in detail. The letter ends with Rowe telling Mercer of the ‘very eclectic selection’ of books on architecture that he has ordered and with an apologetic wish that he ‘didn’t run to such long letters. It’s excess I think really, but I find that I can’t stop myself.’

Section Title
The Letters of Colin Rowe

Was the P.O.W. Edward VII?22

I wish I didn’t run to such long letters. Here I’ve covered 14 pages, it’s excess I think — inseparable really — but I think that that must have been the process.

The two movements, falling and being taken backwards, are so instantaneous as to be

considered intermingled. Which is a square, very hard box.

but the wind took my chute, blew it backwards, my legs slipped on the wet ground

wasn’t able to get under control. In spite of that I made quite a soft sort of grounding,

On Sunday we jumped again twice, and on Monday once more. Tuesday was too wet and windy, but on Wednesday morning we jumped.

I was fed up, uninterested, my chute was caught in the most wild oscillation which I wasn’t able to get under control. In spite of that I made quite a soft sort of grounding, but the wind took my chute, blew it backwards, my legs slipped on the wet ground and I fell and tore my back............... [...] which is a square, very hard box.

The two movements, falling and being taken backwards, are so instantaneous as to be

inseparable really — but I think that that must have been the process.

My first reaction, shameful to say, was that I shouldn’t have to carry the Bren round the

scheme that we were supposed to be doing,15 my next was surprise that I could neither feel nor move my legs. So I remained prostrate, and feebly waving till they brought an

ambulance and a Polish M.O. and then I came here.

If nothing else, Ursula, I’ve left a mark on history — the Parachute Regiment no longer

carries the respirator in the middle of the back — all this because of me.16

——

I wish I didn’t run to such long letters. Here I’ve covered 14 pages, it’s excess I think — really, but I find that I can’t stop myself.

I expect a visit from Robert and Elisabeth, either tomorrow, Saturday, or Sunday.17 The last time they came they traveled First Class, and brought me a box of nectarines. My people were with me at the time, and as Bill Kidd had only just left I felt rather like a French king receiving in bed.18

With regard to other things. Please do keep my library card. You may as well as I can’t do anything with it. The librarian wrote asking me what I wanted. I ordered Worringer’s Form in Gothic, Anthony Blunt’s François Mansart...................... and the second volume of the Œuvre Complete — a very eclectic selection I’m afraid.19

Colin

No. 14366798
Spr Rowe C.F.20
Ward 9, Military Hospital,
Davyhulme, Manchester

P.S. Is Prince of Wales Drive very Prince’s Parky?21

Was the P.O.W. Edward VII?22

---

1 Written by hand in ink on seventeen 4 x 6 inch sheets of paper.
2 Ursula Margaret Mercer* (b. 1923) completed a degree in architecture from Liverpool University in 1945. She was a classmate of Robert Maxwell* (b. 1922), in the year behind Rowe. At the time of this letter, she was a student intern employed in the office of Yuksle and Rosenberg, and lived with her elder sister, Alice, and Alice’s husband, Theodore James Tulley. After graduating from Liverpool in 1945, she returned to London and spent most of her professional life working as an architect for the National Health Service.
3 William Graham Holford (1907–1973), Liverpool architect who designed depots, factories, hostels, barracks, and prisoner of war camps for the Ministry of Supply and the War Office during the first half of World War II. Both Yuksle and Rosenberg, for whom Mercer worked, had at one time worked for Holford.
4 The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) library where E.J. Carter (1902–1982) was the librarian. Carter was also editor of RIBA’s journal.
7 “Bedford Street” was the familiar name for the Civic Design annex to the School of Architecture, Liverpool.
8 Samuel Higgins was a Liverpool classmate of Rowe and Mercer.
10 Godstone School, a preparatory school for girls in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.
11 Vincent Square, Westminster.
12 From June 1940, RAF Ringway (now Manchester International Airport) became the wartime base for the No. 1 Parachute Training School, providing initial training for Allied paratroopers.
13 Saturday, 3 July 1943.
14 Sybil, Hilda, and Robert Maxwell, Liverpool architecture classmate attending a supper party hosted by Ursula Mercer, M.P. Military Police. The Central: Manchester Central, one of the city’s major rail terminals, where Rowe changed trains.
15 The “Bren” was a light machine gun adopted by the British Army in the mid-1930s. Though Rowe’s handwriting is nearly indecipherable here, the “square, very hard box” which he notes in the preceding paragraph was the respirator that all parachutists carried “in the middle of the back”.
16 In e-mails dated # Jun and 7 Feb 2012, David Rowe recalled that his brother’s accident occurred in the first week of July 1943. Two spinal vertebrae were crushed and he was in a plaster cast from his shoulders to his hips for six months. “The top bit,” David wrote, “looked like the top of a strapless ball gown and his party trick, once he started becoming mobile, was to wrap his lower half in the bedspread, ballooning it out, and do a catwalk thing.” On 25 January 1944, Rowe was honorably discharged with a modest disability pension. The crushed vertebrae left him with partial paraplegia in his left leg. As he grew older, a painful spinal stenosis developed.
17 Robert Maxwell and Elizabeth Tilbury.
18 William Kidd was a classmate of Rowe who had enlisted with him at the Queens Barracks, Perth, in early December 1942.
20 “Spr” is the Royal Engineers’ abbreviation for “Sapper,” the designation applied to Rowe on his assignment to a Field Company of the Royal Engineers after basic training in early 1943.
21 Cyril Mansions (1904), where Ursula was staying with her elder sister, Alice, is one of the earliest structures in a row of eight grand apartment buildings (1893–97), which line Prince of Wales Drive for two-thirds of one mile.
22 Rowe wants to know if Prince of Wales Drive was named for Edward VII.
by summer 1951, Rowe had completed his studies in architecture both at the University of Liverpool and at the Warburg Institute in London, and had taught there for three years at Liverpool where Robert Maxwell* and James Stirling* had been his students. In fall 1951, with combined Smith-Mundt and Fulbright scholarships, he left England and traveled to the United States to study at Yale University. Although he did not receive a degree from Yale, he attended the lectures of architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock* who later became his friend and with whom he corresponded regularly for the next five years.

In summer 1952 Rowe set out on a road trip across North America with Brian Richards*, his roommate in New Haven, a fellow Englishman and classmate at Yale, a 1950 graduate from Liverpool. The two visited cities and architecture in the Midwest, California, Texas, Arizona, Mexico, Canada and elsewhere, supporting themselves by working in architectural offices in Vancouver and Bakersfield, California. In spring 1953, as the trip wound down, Rowe met Mrs. Harwell Hamilton Harris in Norman, Oklahoma. The wife of the newly appointed dean of the school of architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, Mrs. Harris suggested Rowe might teach for her husband, a suggestion Rowe pursued with telephone calls to Harris himself from New York City that summer. After Harris hired him by phone, Rowe returned to Europe in fall 1953, visiting his parents in Yorkshire, England, before traveling on to London and Paris.

In January 1954 he returned to the United States and began teaching at Austin, where, he wrote, “quite frequently it is like waiting for the top of Krakatoa to blow off.” With a host of talented new faculty — many of who later were labeled “The Texas Rangers” and became Rowe’s lifelong friends — Rowe introduced Modern architecture to the American West. After only five semesters, however, the department collapsed. Rowe left Texas for New York City, where he taught at Cooper Union for a year while negotiating a position at Cornell University. At this time, while in New York City in January 1957, Rowe learned of his mother’s death.

Rowe moved to Ithaca, New York, in fall 1957, to teach at Cornell for a single academic year. Fulfilling a promise to his parents, he then moved back to England, where he taught for four years under the direction of Leslie Martin at the University of Cambridge.

The letters from the first five years of this period, 1951-56, to his parents and to Henry Russell Hitchcock, describe in detail his impressions of Yale, of Mexico, of the many renowned American buildings that he visits, and especially of America and Americans and the effect his travels had on him. “Before coming here,” he wrote to Hitchcock in 1953, “I was beginning to feel like a gramophone record caught in a Corbu groove. Now, I’ve at least discovered that the groove is of no absolute significance.”

To his parents and to Hitchcock, Rowe wrote — in a different voice to each — of his experiences working in architectural firms, of the drama of teaching in Austin, of his concerns for establishing himself in architectural education, and of the possibility of returning to England. Repeatedly, he advises his parents to move from their Yorkshire home in Bolton-on-Deearne to London, taking special interest in their attempt to find a house appropriate to their situation.

After teaching in Ithaca for six months, in April 1958, Rowe wrote to his friend Sandy Wilson at Cambridge that he feels Cornell “breeds indifference” and that in the United States “one lives the full horror of American relativism.” He had applied for a teaching position at Cambridge and in this letter confided in Wilson that he is “consumed with curiosity and various anxiety neuroses as to how my little cause is proceeding in your part of the world.”

To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe,
Highgate Lane, Bolton-on-Deearne, Yorkshire, England
131 Westwood Road, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Parents,

The largo from Dvorak’s New World Symphony was Mr Edward Harkness’s favourite piece of music. Mr Harkness was Standard Oil, and he was the Pennsylvania State Railroad, and during the 1920’s he was (since he provided the money) the arbiter of the physical form which this university should take. He stamped upon it his expensive passion for small Cotswold manor houses, and in the Harkness Tower his architect celebrated his taste for fifteenth century English Gothic.† The result is a tower more superb, more overwhelming, more convincing in its spuriousness than almost any genuine English fifteenth century tower. Parts of it had to be pulled down because they weren’t expensive enough. The result is heartrending, admirable, but sparing of neither private sentiment nor public feeling.

Every day at 12 noon the Harkness Tower emits chimes and always cloying the air is the largo from the favourite symphony. It’s a sort of systematic bereavement […] a repeated nostalgia for Europe and a warming by the false, throbbing fires of the New World. And all this in commemoration of a commercial dignity […] I mention it because I think it a typical American experience […] they don’t entirely realise its angst-provoking possibilities.

I’ve been going to write for about ten days or so […] but to send a letter across so many miles of water seems to require at least some mildly portentous content […] and I simply haven’t been able to think of the content […] so I’ve been exploring the American mind and trying to think of something to say about it.

Brian Richards* of course, thinks that the American mind is hell. And also America. The poor man, however, has had sinus trouble from the moment of landing about six weeks ago […] and perhaps suffering of this kind rather vitiates judgement. It’s interesting how many Europeans do develop sinus trouble over here (Marinl Marston for instance).† It’s something in the climate I believe, and is basically responsible for the American accent. When one thinks about it American speech isn’t nasal at all […] but the English way is. The thing about the Americans is that they don’t speak through their noses […] because they have a tradition of sinus trouble and they can’t […] American speech is consequently flat, un-accentuated. The English speak through their noses (just try) and they use their noses to produce that resonance which is lacking in American speech […] this amused me quite a lot when I realised it the other day.

To return to the American mind. They are of course sentimental. They are in a lot of ways like sentimental children (if that were possible). I experienced this to the full last Saturday going to the first and last football match which I shall ever attend on this side of the Atlantic. It took place in an enormous arena, rather larger than the Colosseum, and one imagines just as solid […] looking externally rather like the fortsifications of Verona.
This is called the Yale Bowl. The teams were probably Yale and Cornell, and Cornell won (which is by the way, because the game itself was very, very boring). It was the rest of the show which was so incredible and which represented such an idealisation ofinfantilism on the part of people who should know better. There were two brass bands […] one for each team. And two teams of cheer-leaders dressed in white and carrying large, elegant white megaphones, and performing acrobatic ballets on the edge of the field throughout the proceedings. If some catch had been particularly brilliant, one knew all about it, because the cheer-leaders began to perform cartwheels, and entrecrois and double somersaults in the air, so as to illustrate their enthusiasm and arouse that of the crowd. And at the same time one or the other of the bands would burst out into a few appropriately expressive bars of music. The brass bands marched around in the most disciplined fashion, making a great deal of noise and spilling with extraordinary precision C. O. R. N. E. L. L. and Y. A. L. E., and all the time a performing bear and a large bulldog were dragged around as emblems of the two universities. All, as you perceive, incredible.

Afterwards I went to three parties which were rather more real. They were all architects’ parties and consequently not seriously interested in the ball game because American architects affect the same hypercritical standards about popular taste and public entertainment as the English ones do.

The Philip Johnson* evening was rather entertaining. Besides Hitchcock* and self there was a David Pleydell-Bouverie and wife.3 He was an architect in England about fifteen years ago …married an Astor and leads the life of a country gentleman in California. The Johnson house is more impressive than I had imagined.4 The Chinese servant performed all the cooking in the living room while we drank Martinis in front of C. P. E. Bach and the occasional table, armour plate glass an inch thick; […] a few other casually disposed works of art: the kitchen, rather like a long low bôtel; and a dining table about fifty feet away, comprised the entire living room.

After dinner we drove back again to New Haven […] about sixty miles […] and then Hitchcock insisted on talking. He’d already been talking since about three in the afternoon almost without stopping but now, stimulated by a bottle of whiskey, a present from David Bouverie, he was able to go on talking throughout the night.

This is the first of nineteen letters written by Rowe to his parents in Bolton-on-Dearne, England between 1951 and 1956, and in 1963. Though nearly all other letters in this collection were transcribed from photocopies or scans of original of the original letter, these nineteen original letters had been typewritten by Rowe. All nineteen original letters had been typeset by Rowe. 100

1 James Gamble Rogers (1867–1947) designed the Harkness Tower, financed in 1917 by a donation from Anna M. Harkness to memorialize her son, Charles William Harkness (graduated from Yale University in 1883), who had died suddenly the year before.
2 Marilyn Manston was a contemporary of Brian Richards* (1928–2004), a founding member of the Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS) in 1933, a graduate of the University of Liverpool who had lived with Rowe in New Haven and had attended classes with him at Yale. For a year, beginning in June 1952, Rowe and Richards traveled together across North America.
3 By 1951, Hitchcock and Johnson had been Harvard College friends, travel companions, and exhibition and publishing colleagues for almost thirty years. David Pleydell-Bouverie (1911–

14 December 1951

31 Westwood Road, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Parents,

It’s so long since I wrote that I feel I must have been carried away by the tide of events, but looking back over the last three weeks I’m not really aware of any very memorable things happening.

Went up to Boston one weekend. Perhaps one had entertained extravagant ideas about Boston, but I found it rather a disappointing town, […] although perhaps it’s unfair to judge a place on the experience of a Saturday afternoon and Sunday. It’s more metropolitan than any English provincial town, […] has rather a cold, chilly, refined sort of atmosphere which a little suggests Edinburgh done over in brick and brownstone rather than in granite. But most of its architecture is neither quaint in a provincial sense, nor refined in an international one, and somehow one had expected it to be both. Harvard too failed to excite. It lacks the concentration of this place.

The landscape on the way has itsScottish moments, and also, according to Brian Richards who also went up, its remote Swedish. It’s unduly, big, uncultivated, scrappily forested and very geographical-looking with big outcrops of rock. How in the world this part of the country got the name New England is rather a complete mystery. Few landscapes could be less similar. All the way […] and that is more than 170 miles, we didn’t see a single cow […] and the same goes for the landscape between here and New York […] nor is there any more than the merest trace of any other agricultural activity. That is because it couldn’t be done on a scale big enough to make it pay […] so that one drives through miles of territory which looks today wilder than it did 150 years ago […] where the milk comes from, God knows, the fruit possibly from Florida, meat and bread etc., apparently from the Mid West. Everything is very probably frozen, and nothing comes from the locality.

You buy all these things in super-markets, which are rather delightful shops in which, as one enters, one takes a small sort of wire perambulator and pushes it around, taking up things as they occur and finally ending up at one of a series of cash desks where you pay a bill. And of course, absolutely everything is packaged, and pasteurised and homogenised and all the rest of it. The meat has probably been dead for years and the vegetables frozen for months. Sometimes you get these shops miles out in the country. There’s one we stopped to look at near Boston that had just been opened about four days before. Parking for four thousand cars, a cinema, an enormous domed market, etc., etc. All life at more than a mile radius from the centre of a town is based on the idea of two cars to a family […] the husband goes to work in one and the wife goes shopping in another […] the Americans will probably soon lose the capacity to walk because they do so little of it. Lots of banks have a porte-cochere up to which you drive, pass in your cheque and get paid without ever having to get out of the car. Also there are lots of open air cinemas where the same thing happens […] you drive up in a car, into the enclosure and watch the show without ever having to stretch your legs […] Out west, I gather there are bars and restaurants upon the same principle […] so you see how mass production and physical ease contrive to destroy any idea of society.
You can see the same results in the organisation of this university here, which is the second wealthiest in the country. The different colleges can neither afford service in their dining rooms, which is served for any other than the public rooms [...] so the dining rooms are completely self-service and if you live in a college you have to clean your own room. Privation doesn’t end here because you eat [...] and this goes for everybody [...] in a way which even in the British Army would be considered crude [...] out of big trays with six divisions tamped in them. They put different parts of the meal into different parts of the tray [...] and then you stagger away with it, and everybody appears to consider this completely normal. This is the sort of thing that logically developed mass production brings you to [...] you can’t afford servants [...] most things are cheap except labour. But you point out to them [...] that this, in England, would be considered the depths of privation, that poor as the English are, they have never descended to this, that on the whole the English would prefer to have the food badly cooked and decently served etc. [...] they say something about its being democratic that way [...] and since they’re adaptable and the frontier is close behind them they don’t seem to sense that anything has been lost.

This is all to do with mass production, obviously [...] but apart from that, Americans seem to have a weakness for things which are too big to cope with. The Sunday New York Times weighs 2½ pounds, it contains 100’s of pages of newspaper and is very exhausting to carry and too big to read. Nobody ever seems to give a small party for about 5-10 people where conversation might conceivably flourish, but nothing less than 50 will do, where noise makes conversation impossible (conversation of course isn’t practised anyway [...] just as soon as it’s got going they tend all to run away [...] with the exception of course of people like Hitchcock who monopolise it for about 15 hours or so). They also have a weakness for huge masses of statistics which no mind can possibly digest [...] and also for enormous steaks which are too big to eat.

Food, of course, is much better cooked than in England, but at the same time always monotonously the same [...] because all rather too rich and lacking in piquancy. There are a lot of rather curious Indian remains, like waffles and wheat cakes and griddle cakes and maple syrup, which all rather go together and which one can eat for breakfast, involving maple syrup with bacon if one wants. There are also rather a dreary collection of pies [...] lemon meringue, blueberry, cranberry, huckleberry, Boston cream and pumpkin. Pumpkin is quite the worst [...] I never want to eat another as long as I live. There are curious indefinite vegetables with names like succotash, cococotash etc. Most vegetables are spoiled by having been deep frozen. Fried potatoes are always called ‘French fries’. There are a series of other exotics called after various nationalities, towns, etc. Thus: “English muffins, London crumpets (neither what you think), French toast (a delicious sort of toast fried in a mixture of batter and raw egg, and served with maple syrup and butter) and of course PIZZA. Pizza is Italian but you can’t get a decent pizza anywhere in Italy north of Naples, whereas in this part of the world it’s almost a national dish, consisting of a sort of pancake baked in a special oven with tomatoes, mushrooms, bacon etc. and eaten with one’s fingers. It’s almost embarrassing to order ice cream. There are so many varieties, including some with names like pecan, that ice cream is obviously a miracle which will never be solved. In all its infinite varieties, however, American ice cream is nothing more than adequate [...] one would never miss anything by not eating it [...] it has nothing to compare with Italian granite”, or torte, or cassata. There are also things like a local soup called Clam Chowder which is sometimes good, and fried oysters which give one an interesting sensation of luxury and conspicuous consumption. The coffee is banal. There are no teapots to be bought. Nor are kettles in general use. The natives use what they call tea.
that one was able to promenade in the evening almost like an Italian town in the late summer. There's been snow for about a month a hundred miles or so to the north but it didn't begin until Friday. It began very gently at about 4 in the afternoon, and by five everything was covered and pretty thick. By Saturday lunchtime, the streets and pavements were immaculately swept, and the snow was all frozen into position with a beautifully swept and smooth-polished sort of surface. The light is brilliant, I've never seen such pleasant snow, the sun shines, the sky is excessively blue — outside it's very cold — about 20° below freezing point. Inside it's subtropical — so that one doesn't feel the winter to anything like the extent one does in England. It's rather pleasant getting up in the morning in an overheated room and looking outside across the roofs of the houses to the West Rock — an enormous sandstone lump — where three of the judges of Charles I hid to escape capture in 1661 — I never look at the thing without thinking of them — after that they disappeared, went west somewhere and were never heard of again — probably eaten by Indians or something of that kind.

New Haven is rather too Christmassy — New York even more so. Christmas trees sprout all over the place — on the steps of churches, on New Haven Green, at prominent cross roads, everything is tricked out in fairy lights, they all sing carols on the slightest provocation, lights are left on in skyscrapers so as to suggest stars and crosses, all the churches have electric candles burning in the windows — and on New Haven Green again, the Italian community have set up a most elaborate stable full of rather sixteen century shepherds, virgins, prophets — which emits gramophone music. What "the company of English Christians led by John Davenport", who founded this town in 1638, would have said if they could have seen this last thing, I don't know. Rome established on their Green.

I imagine, anyway, that it will be rather a relief to escape all this — although conceivably Canada may be even more so. I'll write and tell you all about that anyway. Possibly the train journey will be very interesting — although all the railway carriages are too big to be anything but oppressive. I believe that I shall get off at Niagara Falls on the way, to have a look at the marvels of nature. I believe one goes through Albany, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo — I can't wait to see the latter — I'm quite sure it's crammed with cow boys — or how did it get its name. Will probably go from Toronto, through Ottawa to Montreal, and come back with some people who are going skiing about a hundred miles north of Montreal.

It will be a great relief to have done Canada. It means one doesn't have to go there again. You can always say — 'Canada! But I've been there!'

Was going to send you a lot of tins of ham in a parcel — but was told last week that I had left it rather late — and at the moment haven't got any money until I come back again — so will send you some early in January.

Would you like some Neapolitan wafers?

Dried fruit?
Tinned Butter?
NYLONS? — these can be sent inside letters — if so what size?

Have recently been entertained by the English colony. They are nearly all Cambridge, and tend to presume that Cambridge is the only place on earth where civilization flourishes. A rather patronising, heavy, roaring type from Clare; a pleasant drama student who has just spent a year in Spain, which is apparently entirely crowded with fiercely Fascist, anti-British, Catholic Irishmen (and Irishwomen who say 'when I hear an Englishman speak it makes me ill for a week' — this story never fails to delight Americans); a pleasant man who was a master at Eton last year and is writing a book on American History — he is ex-Guards and all that and is sure to go down well with Ian MacKenzie, who is coming here in January.

Have discovered a feeling for cold snowy countries, and think that I might rather like to go to Sweden.

This letter makes no pretence to any arrangement or sequence — and I think had better stop now.

Do have a nice Christmas and give my love to people.

Celin

1. West Rock, a rock cliff that defines an edge of New Haven, served as the hideout for Edward Whalley and his son-in-law, General William Goffe, who were two of the three “regicide judges.”
4. Ian MacKenzie, a native of Edinburgh, on the administrative staff at Liverpool University where he became a friend of Rowe before joining the publishing house of McMillan & Company in London. MacKenzie transferred to New York in 1952 as managing director and president of St. Martin’s Press, a McMillan subsidiary.

To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe,

Highgate Lane, Bolton-on-Dearne Yorkshire, England

8 January 1952

332 George Street, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Parents,

I got back here from Canada about four days ago. As you see, the address is changed. I also found on arrival the slides which you had posted in October (thank you very much) and which had just arrived, after, I should say, having been rather over-examined by the F.B.I. or something of that kind.

Somehow Christmas in Canada was not conducive to making the extensive tour including Ottawa and Montreal, so that I contented myself with Toronto and trips to Niagara Falls and to Lake Simcoe.

Last time, when I wrote rather over-dramatically about snow I was really wrong, because now it’s all melted again … in fact it melted a day or so before I left for Canada. Rather horrible melting and freezing at the same time, so that in some of the streets one could scarcely remain standing. The day before I left I saw a dead man in a seat on New Haven Green, who had probably expired of cold and not having had anything to eat. Against the luxurious background of Yale, this made the perfect Russian propaganda photograph.

The lower part of the Hudson, going north from New York, is very magnificent (once one gets over the rather unpleasant brown rock). It’s an extremely wide gorge with very steep cliffs and the bottom of the valley almost completely occupied by the river. In places, from time to time, there have been definite attempts by means of elaborate castellated country houses to turn the whole scene into the American version of the Rhine. This sort of scenery goes on for a couple of hours or so, until you reach Albany, where it is replaced by lower hills, rather open landscape and slower rivers with canals. There is a sort of international canal scene which one appears to find throughout the world, and it is perhaps the presence of this sort of landscape which makes the country between Albany and Syracuse so familiar. In Buffalo, one had to wait for hours but since there was a terrific blizzard blowing one had to wait all the time in the station. This was grim because the whole place was so overheated that it was hardly possible to breathe. One’s first view of Canada was an enormous neon advertisement seen across the St. Lawrence. saying ‘ESSO ESSO ESSO CANADA WELCOMES YOU WITH ESSO’. Then because it was quite dark one saw no more until finally the train arrived in Toronto.

Ian MacKenzie, who is coming here in January.


NYLONS? — these can be sent inside letters — if so what size?
Dried fruit?
Tinned Butter?

Dear Parents,

I got back here from Canada about four days ago. As you see, the address is changed. I also found on arrival the slides which you had posted in October (thank you very much) and which had just arrived, after, I should say, having been rather over-examined by the F.B.I. or something of that kind.

Somehow Christmas in Canada was not conducive to making the extensive tour including Ottawa and Montreal, so that I contented myself with Toronto and trips to Niagara Falls and to Lake Simcoe.

Last time, when I wrote rather over-dramatically about snow I was really wrong, because now it’s all melted again … in fact it melted a day or so before I left for Canada. Rather horrible melting and freezing at the same time, so that in some of the streets one could scarcely remain standing. The day before I left I saw a dead man in a seat on New Haven Green, who had probably expired of cold and not having had anything to eat. Against the luxurious background of Yale, this made the perfect Russian propaganda photograph.

The lower part of the Hudson, going north from New York, is very magnificent (once one gets over the rather unpleasant brown rock). It’s an extremely wide gorge with very steep cliffs and the bottom of the valley almost completely occupied by the river. In places, from time to time, there have been definite attempts by means of elaborate castellated country houses to turn the whole scene into the American version of the Rhine. This sort of scenery goes on for a couple of hours or so, until you reach Albany, where it is replaced by lower hills, rather open landscape and slower rivers with canals. There is a sort of international canal scene which one appears to find throughout the world, and it is perhaps the presence of this sort of landscape which makes the country between Albany and Syracuse so familiar. In Buffalo, one had to wait for hours but since there was a terrific blizzard blowing one had to wait all the time in the station. This was grim because the whole place was so overheated that it was hardly possible to breathe. One’s first view of Canada was an enormous neon advertisement seen across the St. Lawrence. saying ‘ESSO ESSO ESSO CANADA WELCOMES YOU WITH ESSO’. Then because it was quite dark one saw no more until finally the train arrived in Toronto.

Ian MacKenzie, who is coming here in January.


NYLONS? — these can be sent inside letters — if so what size?
Dried fruit?
Tinned Butter?

Dear Parents,

I got back here from Canada about four days ago. As you see, the address is changed. I also found on arrival the slides which you had posted in October (thank you very much) and which had just arrived, after, I should say, having been rather over-examined by the F.B.I. or something of that kind.

Somehow Christmas in Canada was not conducive to making the extensive tour including Ottawa and Montreal, so that I contented myself with Toronto and trips to Niagara Falls and to Lake Simcoe.

Last time, when I wrote rather over-dramatically about snow I was really wrong, because now it’s all melted again … in fact it melted a day or so before I left for Canada. Rather horrible melting and freezing at the same time, so that in some of the streets one could scarcely remain standing. The day before I left I saw a dead man in a seat on New Haven Green, who had probably expired of cold and not having had anything to eat. Against the luxurious background of Yale, this made the perfect Russian propaganda photograph.

The lower part of the Hudson, going north from New York, is very magnificent (once one gets over the rather unpleasant brown rock). It’s an extremely wide gorge with very steep cliffs and the bottom of the valley almost completely occupied by the river. In places, from time to time, there have been definite attempts by means of elaborate castellated country houses to turn the whole scene into the American version of the Rhine. This sort of scenery goes on for a couple of hours or so, until you reach Albany, where it is replaced by lower hills, rather open landscape and slower rivers with canals. There is a sort of international canal scene which one appears to find throughout the world, and it is perhaps the presence of this sort of landscape which makes the country between Albany and Syracuse so familiar. In Buffalo, one had to wait for hours but since there was a terrific blizzard blowing one had to wait all the time in the station. This was grim because the whole place was so overheated that it was hardly possible to breathe. One’s first view of Canada was an enormous neon advertisement seen across the St. Lawrence. saying ‘ESSO ESSO ESSO CANADA WELCOMES YOU WITH ESSO’. Then because it was quite dark one saw no more until finally the train arrived in Toronto.

Ian MacKenzie, who is coming here in January.
Toronto is rather a meagre, sprawling, frontier kind of town where Scottish caution has been too deeply ingrained for so long that it is extremely unlikely that anything very splendid will ever happen. Imagine the late nineteenth century suburbs of London, add a twentieth century suburbia, make no allowance for any centre to the town, provide narrow streets with tram cars and overhead telegraph wires, and you have something like Toronto. The shopkeepers, for the most part, have no comprehension that it ever will matter, nor have they any confidence that they will ever be very much of a financial success. So lacking the wholesome American extravagance, for a very long time nothing has happened. However, one gathers lately that Toronto has struck a boom, which will result in its complete Americanisation.

As it is, visiting Toronto at the moment is rather like going to the Mid-West to get half a dozen midget gag, because however much it may be a frontier town, in half its sympathies it is excessively English. They talk about London even if they actually go to New York. This allows one to feel like the principal personage of a royal tour all the time. Also the Canadians are on the whole quieter, less aggressive and more polite than the Americans. In some ways this is very restful, but in other ways rather a bore, since it makes things, if easier, a little less stimulating.

It wasn’t as cold in Toronto as down here in New England, and indoors of course one never noticed the cold at all, but the Keys had arranged so many things for me to do that it was quite impossible to go on to Montreal. There appeared to be at least one party every night, sometimes two or three, and by the time the end of my fortnight was finished I sank back into the New York train in a state of complete exhaustion. One had discovered that Toronto, socially, was a much more complicated sort of town than it might appear on first observation. Most interesting people were perhaps a Frenchwoman called Mrs Sachs, who’s just settled there, and has developed round herself rather a fabulous small collection of modern paintings [...] one or two early Picasso's, Matisse, Chagall, Renoir, several Klee's, some Modigliani drawings etc. etc. etc. Another Frenchwoman married to a White Russian sculptor [...] is selling paintings like mad [...] I went there to tea, or at least, I had expected that it was going to be tea [...] instead it was a white Bordeaux with caviar and truffled foie gras on slices of pumpernickel, followed by meringues [...] afterwards, in spite of feeling slightly sick one did feel that one was floating on air (I should like to reproduce this kind of tea as soon as possible). There was also rather an extensive sort of dowager who had a dining room laden with Dufy’s and who talked about nothing but architecture and Victorian furniture [...] all of which seems rather strange and exotic in Toronto.

Niagara Falls is one of the most amusing of anti-climaxes. It might be impressive if, after having gone out for a walk in the woods one day you’d discovered it all for yourself, but as it is, it completely fails to look big. The Southern Ontario country through which you approach it is dead flat and reminds one a little of Lincolnshire. Then you climb an escarpment and get into another dead flat country. After going through that for some miles you arrive at the Falls, which is really a sort of residential resort, half in America, half in Canada, with a waterfall and rather a wide river in between. You approach it all through a little landscape park with gate lodges and places where you get picture postcards, you buy tickets and go down in an elevator to a room where a man dresses you up in rubber boots, capes, sou’wester and things, after which you go down still further, to emerge into an artificial tunnel rather like a London tube. From time to time in here you get occasional glimpses of the reverse side of the Falls, which allow you to see that, after all, there is quite a lot of water going over. The river below the Falls was frozen all over and so were the edges of the waterfall. It was excessively icy, cold and damp. Afterwards, one retires to the dining room on the twelfth floor of the General Brock House, which one soon realises gives one quite the most impressive view but I think that at Niagara one has to be very imaginative indeed to be in any way moved by the thing. Afterwards, one drove to a rather delightful late eighteenth century village in the flat Dutch Ontario country, called Niagara-by-the-Lake. It was then just about time to dash back along the beautifully swept roads to Toronto.

The main roads are immediately swept and cleaned after any fall of snow by a whole range of snow-ploughs, sweeping machines and things, so that there is absolutely no trouble in driving at sixty miles an hour through an otherwise snowbound landscape. And since the cars and the houses are all warmed, one really does feel the cold far less than in England.
to wear a pullover and a jacket […] and even when it’s cold, to have more than two blankets on a bed is unendurable. It was the same in Canada too.

The dining room rather more eclectic, with Venetian eighteenth century furniture and decoration, and a superb French Gothic birdcage which had artificial birds in it, done by Calder, and which stood between the windows […] Don’t think that I’ve ever before been in such an immaculate, precise house […] very little there, but everything, glasses, trays, drinks, food, pictures, servants etc. […] the best that could be bought.

The landscape outside the house has been redone quite recently by Christopher Tunnard, who is a delightful person who is Professor of Town Planning over here. He was in England before the war […] was a Canadian citizen […] Mrs T was also Canadian by birth, became American by accident […] spent months getting Canadian citizenship again, and then married him just as he’d become naturalised American. He is Montreal, she Boston. She is very proper Boston […] which means that she calls the town Boorston (as opposed to the New Yorkers, who call it Barston) but otherwise speaks English, and presumably like other Bostonians considers that only two cities in the English-speaking world are worth her notice […] London and Boston […] New York is apparently beneath contempt […] she is a second cousin of Hitchcock’s and has all that family’s volubility and physical presence, which I think her poor dear husband finds a little trying. She’s his third wife since she came over here 12 years ago […] which is extraordinary since he’s so mild and easy going and quiet […] in a sort of super English way […] but I think she has him for good. They of course, do not entertain in the grand Soby manner […] instead, you’re taken into the kitchen at the end of dinner to see the dishwasher in operation.

American houses are all completely en-suite on the ground floor with no doors […] and this tradition goes back for more than a hundred years […] they tend to have one or two small rooms […] and perhaps one or two large ones […] but you usually are able to sit in one and look into two others at the same time […] the floors are always superb … and they tend to have loose mats. The Tunnard’s drawing room was, again, enormous, one and look into two others at the same time […] the floors are always superb ..and small rooms ..and perhaps one or two large ones […] but you usually are able to sit in this tradition goes back for more than a hundred years […] they tend to have one or two American houses are all completely en-suite on the ground floor with no doors […] and this tradition goes back for more than a hundred years […] they tend to have one or two small rooms […] and perhaps one or two large ones […] but you usually are able to sit in one and look into two others at the same time […] the floors are always superb … and they tend to have loose mats. The Tunnard’s drawing room was, again, enormous, one and look into two others at the same time […] the floors are always superb ..and small rooms ..and perhaps one or two large ones […] but you usually are able to sit in the grand Soby manner […] instead, you’re taken into the kitchen at the end of dinner to see the dishwasher in operation.

The Saturday Review of Literature
There's nothing really very metropolitan about America [...] all its towns are provincial [...] New York [...] in Paris or London terms, certainly is [...] but the question of being provincial doesn't enter into it. A provincial town which has struck a boom doesn't become a capital city [...] but it can, depending on the scale of its boom [...] buy up the capital. In some ways this is precisely America. Naturally it wasn’t surprising that all the peasants in Europe should do so [...] that New York should become the peasant Mecca, the third Rome. Just as the system required peasant labourers to work, in its beginnings it needed peasant consumers, and all American manufacturers really assume a market only one generation removed from the peasant [...] consequently the gaudy packaging, the tins, the artificiality of the deep freezes [...] consequently the fact that except in delicatessens you can’t buy a crusty loaf in the whole of this town [...] they’re all soft, or almost like cake.

The big success, and why it has destroyed Europe. The mere existence of the American frontier in the nineteenth century destroyed any European social pattern which had escaped Napoleon. It’s only recently of course, that the Europeans have become conscious of this [...] but the American frontier (which also destroyed what there was of American aristocracy) absolutely completed the European debacle [...] more so, I think, really, than the two wars. It created a new social order, and if you consumed Chicago’s tinned meat it meant you ultimately would have to accept the new standards [...] you wouldn’t be able to survive otherwise [...] it’s just no question of right or wrong [...] because obviously Europe and the older America were right.

By abandoning an old social order based on certain ritual observances, by seeing things directly rather than symbolically, the Americans were able to create mass production of comfort and prosperity if only you threw them over the old system. Naturally it wasn’t surprising that all the peasants in Europe should do so [...] New York is certainly an anomaly. The question of its being a capital city doesn’t enter into it. A provincial town which has struck a boom doesn’t become a capital city [...] but it can, depending on the scale of its boom [...] buy up the capital. In some ways this is precisely America.

Bill Osmum is very amusing about New York, but I quite forget the sort of things he says. However, he is very amusing on the English selling themselves out to the U.S. Do no faction [...] sat sampled comfort and prosperity if only you threw them over the old system. Naturally it wasn’t surprising that all the peasants in Europe should do so [...] that New York should become the peasant Mecca, the third Rome. Just as the system required peasant labourers to work, in its beginnings it needed peasant consumers, and all American manufacturers really assume a market only one generation removed from the peasant [...] consequently the gaudy packaging, the tins, the artificiality of the deep freezes [...] consequently the fact that except in delicatessens you can’t buy a crusty loaf in the whole of this town [...] they’re all soft, or almost like cake.

There’s nothing really very metropolitan about America [...] all its towns are provincial [...] New York [...] in Paris or London terms, certainly is [...] but the question of being provincial doesn’t enter into it. A provincial town which has struck a boom doesn’t become a capital city [...] but it can, depending on the scale of its boom [...] buy up the capital. In some ways this is precisely America.

Bill Osmun is very amusing about New York, but I quite forget the sort of things he says. However, he is very amusing on the English selling themselves out to the U.S. Do no faction [...] sat sampled comfort and prosperity if only you threw them over the old system. Naturally it wasn’t surprising that all the peasants in Europe should do so [...] that New York should become the peasant Mecca, the third Rome. Just as the system required peasant labourers to work, in its beginnings it needed peasant consumers, and all American manufacturers really assume a market only one generation removed from the peasant [...] consequently the gaudy packaging, the tins, the artificiality of the deep freezes [...] consequently the fact that except in delicatessens you can’t buy a crusty loaf in the whole of this town [...] they’re all soft, or almost like cake.

There’s nothing really very metropolitan about America [...] all its towns are provincial [...] New York, Paris or London terms, certainly is [...] but the question of being provincial doesn’t enter into it. A provincial town which has struck a boom doesn’t become a capital city [...] but it can, depending on the scale of its boom [...] buy up the capital. In some ways this is precisely America.
house of 1884 which had been abandoned for 10 years was in a state of complete decay. We climbed in through a broken shutter. Inside, everything had just been left for 10 years when we arrived. The front door had been locked for the last time. Outside, enormous Sycamores, which had sprouted like weeds, had broken up the paving, the driveway had disappeared, the boards of the verandas were beginning gently to rot away […] it was quite astonishing […] the end of an epoch feeling.

Christopher Tunnard told me to go and look at a garden he'd designed for another rather charming town house. Here everything was scrupulous, and after all the Catholicism and rot it was an immense relief. He'd installed a little modern garden with 4 fountains which led out of another French garden made fifty years ago by a Monsieur Greber, who was rather good. Inside, the house, which was Georgian, had been Frenchised about fifty years ago, and then modernised by the woman who lived there now. Everything perfect. The woman was called Warren, and since Mr Landsberg had been Frenchified about fifty years ago, and then modernised by the woman who was up from Princeton with a rather naïve and very Americanised Australian called Geoff Summerhayes, also a Princeton architect. The Australians are very directed and urbane. Ostensibly, he is a visiting critic at Harvard, but Hitchcock thinks that he is hanging around to be in at the death. That is Gropius's metaphorical death, since he's disappeared, the boards of the verandas were beginning gently to rot away […] it was quite astonishing […] the end of an epoch feeling.

To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe,

[Address]

Dear Parents,

I rather suspect, how they are not working out. Please don't get caught.

Please write and tell me what you are doing and how things have worked out […] or as I rather suspect, how they are not working out. Please don't get caught.

Love,

Colin


2 Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895), architect; Stanford White (1853–1906) of McKim, Mead, and White.

3 The garden was located at the Warren Residence, a Georgian house built in 1819, located at 118 Mill Street in Newport.


5 Katherine Urquhart Warren (1897–1976), art collector and historic preservationist.

6 Albert Clinton Landsberg (1889–1965).

7 The Marble House, designed by Richard Morris Hunt for William K. Vanderbilt.


10 Geoffrey Eden Summerruethes (1928–2010), architect from Perth, Western Australia.


12 This “Hitchcock paper” was probably an early version of Rowe’s “Character and Composition; or Some Vicissitudes of Architectural Vocabulary in the Nineteenth Century.” Nikolaus Pevsner did not publish it in Architectural Review. It was first published in Oppositions, no. 2 (1974): 41–60.


To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe,

Highgate Lane, Bolton-on-Dearse, Yorkshire, England

20 May 1952

334 George Street, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Parents,

The heat in this place has become appalling, so that one perceives that only with summer does America become specifically American. All one’s resistance collapses, so that one is obliged to buy seersucker, nylon socks and all the rest of it. (Actually nylon socks are rather a good thing and never wear out or require mending—they probably suddenly dissolve.)

Last week, Bill came up to see an exhibition of Italian pictures in the gallery here,1 and we introduced him to Hitchcock, who was at the reception for the opening of the exhibition. As soon as Hitchcock realised that Bill came from London, he was on his way to New Haven and was able to sell the book (four volumes of it, for 50 dollars) but the review is really too good for where it’s going. Also, I’m writing another article for Nikolaus which should be more exciting, and which will be a good thing in about September or so. I2

So as you see, things here have become finally quite stimulating, and we are hoping to get some money to travel to Chicago with.

For all these reasons it’s been rather difficult to write. Also, since I’ve been finishing off the Hitchcock paper, which I shall send to Nikolaus in a week or two for him to put in the Arch. Rev.3 Also, I’ve been writing a long review of a new book called Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture which is to be put in a periodical called The Art Bulletin.4 I shall be able to sell the book (four volumes of it, for 50 dollars) but the review is really too good for where it’s going. Also, I’m writing another article for Nikolaus which should be more exciting, and which will be a good thing in about September or so.5

To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe,

Love,

Colin
Martin Charteris, who is the Queen's Private Secretary, hope dawned. The hope was heard that he is coming over to Europe and wants to sell his car, which is a nice little coming to America rather absurd. So in the last 10 days or so our ideas have rather August, but now it seems to be a good idea to come back in January or early February. About three weeks ago, one was making arrangements to come back in July or early (Indians, bears, etc.), but the tour, presumably, is vaguely educational, and although it the thought of Lloyd Wright in Wisconsin, Mies Van der Rohe in Chicago, and so on. The thought of to Chicago, St Louis, Minneapolis and places, and look around. It's not quite certain yet, at the end of it all one sank back, convinced that America and Russia must be very alike, after all […] the same sort of inconsequential madness, pursuit of the ego, etc., that it. There have been, as they say here …traumatic …(traumatic, very much used, is a psycho-analytical term for harrowing), Vincent can't make up his mind, requires help, flaps at all suggestions, we can't do this and therefore we can. All this in the School of Architecture here, a Gothic building, against a perpetual background of Italian operatic records from the other end of the studio. Yesterday was the worst of all, a perpetual noise of Hitchcock bellowing from the garden down below, a girl who spent most of the day climbing the ivy so that she was able to get in two floors up by a variety of unusual means, another man sobbing with George Howe, the Professor, because he thought his marks weren't high enough. Lees Brown, the First Year Tutor, lurching around in an obese and faintly drunk condition throughout the day, two Russians arguing with Wu* (Charles Chen's friend, who instructs Third Year) because they thought they had been unjustly criticised, and all the time a coming and going of various drifting morons. The Letters of Colin Rowe
Please don’t think this is a bad thing — David will tell you it’s not.

The Letters of Colin Rowe

I want 150 dollars quick (towards an automobile).1

MY DEAR BOB AND MARGARET ,

The School of Architecture, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

To

Margaret

Robert

, St George’s Terrace, Primrose Hill, London June, 1952

&

Maxwell

Please write and say what is happening at B.O.D.15

Please write and say what is happening at B.O.D.15

It has to be got from England.

This is a business note. I want 150 dollars quick (towards an automobile).1

There is a desperate girl here, going over, who will let me have 150 dollars if I let her have £50 in London. I would rather not write a cheque to her direct...conceivably it could be queried. But if she came over there furnished with a cheque from me payable to either one or the other of you, could you cash it and let her have the money. (This cheque won’t bounce). Would you be about in late June to do this sort of thing? Would you do it?

Can you write and let me know immediately. Time is short.

Also, if you can, where she should contact you. Suggest no more than a lunch meeting… I’ve met her about twice and she’s hell.

If you can’t who could?

Have told Hitchcock to look you up?

Love,

Colin

1 Rowe needed American currency to purchase William Jordy’s Willys Jeep station wagon in which he and Brian Richards planned to tour North America. A “desperate girl” had offered to give Rowe $150 in U.S. currency in Connecticut in exchange for Maxwell giving her £50 on her arrival in London in late June 1952.

1 Rowe needed American currency to purchase William Jordy’s Willys Jeep station wagon in which he and Brian Richards planned to tour North America. A “desperate girl” had offered to give Rowe $150 in U.S. currency in Connecticut in exchange for Maxwell giving her £50 on her arrival in London in late June 1952.

To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe, 37 Highgate Lane, Bolton upon Dearne, Yorkshire, England 15 September 1952

Wright, Metcalf & Parsons, Architects, 2000 26th Street, Bakersfield, California.

Dear Parents,

At last, after three months, have achieved a settled address to which it is possible to write, and from which it is probable to receive a reply. Arrived here two days ago, and shall work here until Christmas, that is if the architects here can stand us or we can stand them for quite so long. However, if one does stay until Christmas it will be reasonable enough. There’s nothing to spend money on here except trips to San Francisco, Los Angeles and the Yosemite and one is paid 450 dollars a month, which will allow one to return through the Southern States in comfort and ease. However I’ll tell you all about Bakersfield in another letter. I think that I’d better send letters in a series of instalments describing the trip.

First day was New Haven to Rome, New York. We took with us the obese Lees Brown who lives at Rome where his people own a soap factory. Drove up the Connecticut River to Northampton, where called on Hitchcock. Northampton is rather a charming town. Western Massachusetts...one of the few picturesque landscapes and mature settlements in America. From Northampton to Williamstown and to Amherst, Massachusetts, to see houses by Frank Lloyd Wright and Marcel Breuer. Both of these are college towns and, before that, residential towns of extraordinary opulence. Late eighteenth century houses, immaculate lawns, huge elms and, quite soon, outside the settlements, rough mountains and jungle. From there, across the Berkshires to the Hudson Valley and crossed the river north of Albany at Troy. Troy was a boomtown of the 1840s and ’50s, a river port when steam navigation opened up upper New York State. It was the metropolis and the sin city of the neighbourhood. Now it’s a
crude, abandoned, decaying little place. Neglected, with fine buildings if one cared to look for them, but not a place in which anyone lives. At Troy you definitely feel that you're in the back of England. You come down quite steep slopes from the Berkshires, you cross the bridge and you drive out into a rolling, bigger country which rapidly becomes flatter and flatter. You feel here, for the first time, that you've struck the great horizon of the continent and you feel, too, in this vastness, that the ties with Europe have been quite definitely severed. A mild feeling of alarm and a growing distaste throughout all this country. We got to Troy quite late, only to discover that we were not to dine with the Browns at home but at the country club instead. (All American towns have country clubs and everybody seems to go there.) But this is full of distaste for Rome, his family, his relations, his club, etc. However, we are fed enormous steaks at great expense, taken on by papa and step-mamma to a night club where none of us wanted to go, etc. Step-mamma rather the OK style of thing. Papa disposed to talk of Republican politics. The next day we see Troy in the daylight. The wide, long, crude, rough main street, huge warehouse buildings of the 1840's, a vogue about things which reminds one a little of Rome, Italy. The Catholic Irish Monsignor walking down the street with buckles on his shoes, and talking to Lees in a mildly reproving tone as one of the impenitent members of the church. The gaudy with windows overlooking the street and a prisoner in a tee-shirt sitting in each window, exchanging casual words with the passers-by. Rome, like Troy, was a port for barge traffic, but is a dead flat site in an apparently dead flat plain. Again, just behind the main street, the usual opulent, elm lined suburban streets. Lunch at another club, again on Papa's account. Interior of the place with splendid lugubrious Victorian fittings, outside with the usual portico. In the evening Mrs Brown rises to a barbecue, again steak, after which Lees shows us the town.

Next day, on to Buffalo, through towns with names like Syracuse, Ravenna, Verona, Illion etc. All these towns are early nineteenth century settlements. Those that haven't ground down on charm, the country is not quite as flat as first appears. It rolls about but there are no hills. In Buffalo, see three Frank Lloyd Wright houses, and a wonderful office block of Louis Sullivan's dating from the '80's. But Buffalo, such a horror of filth, traffic, hoardings, neon, that we flee through the industrial squalor to wonderful office block of Louis Sullivan's dating from the '90's. But Buffalo, such a grown have a certain charm, the country is not quite as flat as first appears. It rolls from dining room window, wash, are served drinks by a maid, and shown to the table. The Browns are in the best part of town [...] the whole ground floor made over into one big living room. We ring up some people called Boyden whose daughter Katrina had arranged for us to stay with, since they had a charming apartment in their basement which used to be Katrina's before she infuriated them by insisting on going off to Europe. We went round in a couple of hours or so. The Boyden house a stone terrace affair of the 1880's in the best part of town [...] the whole ground floor made over into one big living room. We arrived as a cocktail party was in progress, and just at the moment when old man Boyden, Chicago's leading divorce lawyer, had passed out on the stairs and people were trying to put him into bed. This was a source of confusion and embarrassment that was quite unexpected. However after half an hour or so Mrs Boyden rallied and was more or less able to cope.

Also staying in the house was a bad script writer and novelist called Harlan Ware, plus his family. Harlan, I think, had at an earlier age been rather addicted to Mrs B. but now seemed to spend most of his time reading his novels to anyone who would listen. The worst sort of American funny books [...] you know the sort of thing, only the most fantastic contortions of the muscles round about the mouth can make one seem to be amused. Harlan would say 'Now boys listen to this, this is funny' [...] His daughters would sit in corners and moan and say 'Oh no Daddy, not that' etc. From time to time, Mrs M. conversing with the natives [...] one hadn't quite expected so feudal a setup in Canada.

We stayed for two days and then everything breaks up. Conson inspects on providing an escort half way to Toronto. So we follow her car, which includes a dog, two maids, a parrot cage, and a lot of baskets of strawberries. After that we fork right and drive through northern Ontario, Guelph and places to Sarnia where we cross into Michigan. Northern Ontario is thin and cold looking, a clear strong light but very little colouring. A rolling country with so very decided hills.

Northern Michigan is just hell. Leggy, weedy trees. Messy settlements and lots of traffic along the eight or ten lanes of traffic into Detroit. Are so at least decide to return. However, go on to Detroit and look in at the Cranbrook Academy, where impose upon a mild and sensitive architectural student and spend the night. Next day is very hot, and see houses by Wright, by Saarinen, the new General Motors building and other things. Drive on with increasing disgust to Toledo, Ohio, where the Willy's Jeepster place is, in the hope that they can fit the car with new piston rings. However, they won't, and next day leave for Kalamazoo. Country in Southern Michigan becomes unexpectedly charming. A sustained pastoral landscape with elegant towns and finished buildings. Albion and Marshall are towns of this kind. Kalamazoo not so nice. Guests of Norman Carver, a Yalie architect. Arrive early and immediately whisked away to the country club where become immersed in the pool. Also in the pool are three dreadful Frenchmen whom we ignore (they have rubber flippers on their feet) and also the girl from Kalamazoo to whom we were introduced. Next day leave Kalamazoo, see one or two furniture factories, a couple of Wright houses, and arrive in Chicago in the late afternoon. Alarming volumes of traffic flowing through an outer industrial zone, suddenly one emerges on the fabulous Lake Shore Drive which runs along the Lake front. Terrifying road with eight or ten lanes of traffic, a beach and blue water to one side, yachts, etc, gardens on the other side with big apartment blocks, offices and so on.

We ring up some people called Boyden whose daughter Katrina had arranged for us to stay with, since they had a charming apartment in their basement which used to be Katrina's before she infuriated them by insisting on going off to Europe. We went round in a couple of hours or so. The Boyden house a stone terrace affair of the 1880's in the best part of town [...] the whole ground floor made over into one big living room. We arrived as a cocktail party was in progress, and just at the moment when old man Boyden, Chicago's leading divorce lawyer, had passed out on the stairs and people were trying to put him into bed. This was a source of confusion and embarrassment that was quite unexpected. However after half an hour or so Mrs Boyden rallied and was more or less able to cope.
Dr. Edith Farnsworth for whom the house was built is about 45, unmarried, a former student of the violin in Siena, and a very successful G.P. with a taste for the arts. She inherited a certain amount of money and presumably has made more. She is keen on love with Mies and commissioned the house. It was the foyer of what she hoped for herself to be going to be their liaison. The original contract was for 35,000 dollars. Mies, the perfectionist, continually played upon her feelings, the details of the house became more and more immaculate, the expense increased accordingly. At 60,000 she wasn’t having any more, she paid him his fee, he spent it on the house, he said her for non-payment of fees, she is suing him for deceit. The case is proceeding and Edith sits in the house, in a marble volume as perfect as the Parthenon, surrounded by King Charles’ spaniels, while the case is lost itself out in the local courthouse. She is a friend of Hitchcock’s and was charming. Kept us for a whole evening, gave us a lot to drink but fed us exclusively on anchovies because the refrigerator isn’t big enough. The whole thing is a most suave comedy in the Somerset Maugham manner. She is torn between her delight in the house which she obviously can’t afford, her chagrin about Mies, and her fury because she feels she’s been tricked. Everything is acted out on the highest level, politeness and feeling for quality on both sides is quite extreme.9

Also in Chicago, learned from a man who teaches at Harvard that Mrs Holford had gone quite off her rocker. Just before they were due to leave Boston she caught viral flu.9 Also in Chicago, learned from a man who teaches at Harvard that Mrs Holford had gone quite off her rocker. Just before they were due to leave Boston she caught viral flu.9 Also in Chicago, learned from a man who teaches at Harvard that Mrs Holford had gone quite off her rocker. Just before they were due to leave Boston she caught viral flu.9

One is impressed in California by the provincialism of most things that are done… that is with the exception of Neutra… also it seems rather curious that he has never really succeeded in founding a school about himself. The Bay Region, one has to face it, is rather trite’ and Wurster just a little too much a clever operator disguised as a wooly bear intellectual. Do you know anything about a man, Ernest Born? Everyone in San Francisco speaks of him with awe. We called at his office but he has no work and no business is only one of plans… when elevations are reached I presume that the balloon will really go up… but meanwhile the project is becoming punctuated by our series of victories.

How much worth while this sort of thing is I never really know and one begins to wonder whether one’s own experience must always be the experience of other people’s stupidity. We are anxious to get inside the Millard House and possibly the Ennis House.4 We are anxious to get inside the Millard House and possibly the Ennis House.4 We are anxious to get inside the Millard House and possibly the Ennis House.4 We are anxious to get inside the Millard House and possibly the Ennis House.4 We are anxious to get inside the Millard House and possibly the Ennis House.4

Thank you for your letter. I’m glad England was so enjoyable. We enclose a small cutting from an Architects Journal which you may or may not have seen but which in any case should be gratifying and amusing.7 I forget whether I told you what we are doing here. The principals of this firm are the world’s worst architects who have on their hands a seven million dollar campus job.8 They can’t cope and a bad landscape architect from Los Angeles has provided them with a workable but intrinsically stupid part.8 We can’t deviate from this stupid part much, but all our effort goes into trying to make it appear reasonably plausible. So far the business is only one of plans… when elevations are reached I presume that the balloon will really go up… but meanwhile the project is becoming punctuated by our series of victories.

One is impressed in California by the provincialism of most things that are done… that is with the exception of Neutra… also it seems rather curious that he has never really succeeded in founding a school about himself. The Bay Region, one has to face it, is rather trite’ and Wurster just a little too much a clever operator disguised as a wooly bear intellectual. Do you know anything about a man, Ernest Born? Everyone in San Francisco speaks of him with awe. We called at his office but he has no work and no assistants, and was consumed by self-deprecation and an apparent sense of failure. He has built a charming and very European group of workers apartment houses.10

But California is so far away from the centres of authority. Nearly everyone here who is anybody can do a successful and highly personable small house. Beyond that they really cannot go and the great lay out is quite beyond them. I.T. and General Motors seem to have almost no reverberations over here.11 In this expressionist wilderness you do see what legislative achievements these are.

One is also interested by the American hesitancy in handling any purely plastic thing. This stands out quite sharp and clear all the way across the country, so that the dis-relationship between structural and plastic disciplines seems to be one of the
whether you could provide us with his address.16 Kaufmann House which Neutra did is at all related to Edgar Kaufmann and if so
The Letters of Colin Rowe
With best wishes,

Colin

P.S. Brian wonders whether you got to Kilmacolm!17 Also asks me to enquire if the Kaufmann House which Neutra did is at all related to Edgar Kaufmann and if so whether you could provide us with his address.18

1 The enclosure is lost. “We” refers to Rowe and Brian Richards, his traveling companion.
2 The “campus job” Bakersfield Community College, located on a 153-acre plat in Northeast Bakersfield. It opened in 1916.
3 Paris, French decision, course, choice; in architecture Paris denotes the salient aspects of a scheme, primarily its plan.
4 Both are “textile block” house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Millard House (La Miniatura), Millard, California, 1923–24; Ennis House, Los Angeles, California, 1924.
5 Eugene Masselink (1910–1962) was secretary and business manager to Frank Lloyd Wright since the mid-1930s.
6 Richard Neutra (1892–1970), Austrian-American architect in Los Angeles whose remarkable residential work, most notably his Lovell House of 1927–29, established him as a pioneer in the early Modern movement. His work was included in the “International Style” MoMA exhibition on modern architecture curated by Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in 1932.
7 triste, French: disconsolate.
8 William Wilson Wurster (1895–1973), an exponent of the Bay Region style, dean of the University of California, Berkeley, from 1950 to 1963.
9 Ernest Born (1898–1992), San Francisco architect, artist, and teacher.
10 North Beach Place, 1942–43, San Francisco: a low-income housing complex designed by Born in collaboration with Henry Gueterres.
11 ITT: Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Mies van der Rohe; General Motors Technical Center, Detroit, Eliel and Eero Saarinen, 1948–55. See Rowe’s letter dated 19 September 1952 to his parents (p. XX in this vol.). At this time the famed ‘Case Study Houses’ — many of them subscribing to Miesian aesthetics — were being built in Southern California.
13 Robert McCormick House, Illinahurst, Illinois, designed in 1931–32 by Mies van der Rohe as a possible model for manufactured housing.
14 Warren D. Tremaine House, Santa Barbara, California, 1948, by Richard Neutra.
15 Brian Richards had studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, near Kilmacolm, in the west central lowlands of Scotland. 16 The Kaufmann House, Palm Springs, California, 1946, designed by Richard Neutra as a vacation house for Edgar J. Kaufmann Sr., who in 1933–38 had built Fallingwater, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, in Western Pennsylvania.
17 To Mr & Mrs Frederick Rowe,
Highgate Lane, Bolton upon Dearne, Yorkshire, England

Dear Parents,

This is really a continuation of the letter that began rather more than a fortnight ago when I’d taken you up to Madison Wisconsin. I don’t think that I’d taken you any further than that.

Madison is a very elegant, completely residential city, situated between three excessively blue lakes. The dome of the State Capitol dominates all, and everyone appears to live in a condition of idleness and affluence. The University of Wisconsin which is situated there by one of the lakes is particularly fabulous and disgustingly rich. At Madison we saw a lot of houses and also went out to Taliesin to see Frank Lloyd Wright.

At Taliesin Wright owns all the land which you can see from the terrace of the house and it’s all a curiously English landscape. The Taliesin setup is surely the most feudal thing to be found on the north American continent, and Wright is the most complete autocrat in the middle of it all. The students pay 1500 dollars a year for the privilege of working for Wright and he keeps a lot of them just working in the fields.

Approaching the house you rather get the feeling of approaching Chatsworth or something of that kind.1 You sense the autocracy in the middle of it all. You pass farms and stables and all the towering dependencies of a great establishment. Wright has never stopped building the house or altering the landscape in the last sixty years and the result is that it’s so enormous that some parts are entirely forgotten, roofless and falling into ruin, while others are still in the process of erection. Mr Wright emerges some mornings and has a wall pulled down, or can’t wait another day until a particular window is made […] the result is that there is no plan, and no rhyme or consequence about the play […] it’s just an extraordinary un-American fantasy, which suggests something like Warwick Castle, or the Palace of the Dalai Lama, or the chateau of the Popes at Avignon. Internally the furnishings are of incredible richness. Wright spent about half a million dollars on Chinese carpets in 1916 and presumably at that time one still did get something for an expense of this kind.

We met Wright but he is really quite senile, and Taliesin would have been something of a desolation if it hadn’t been for Edgar Kaufmann who was staying in the house (being treated like dirt and very bored).1 Kaufmann is writing a book on Wright, is the son of a Pittsburgh millionaire and had persuaded his father about ten years back to build one of the most famous of Wright houses.2 He showed us lots of plans, was witty, sympathetic, and disloyal to his host.

It’s not until leaving Wisconsin behind that you really enter the prairie. Michigan and Wisconsin are rather a delightful pastoral interlude as regards scenery. Taliesin is situated in the first hills of any size after leaving New York State behind. From Madison we went in one day through to Des Moines. Here you definitely begin to hit prairie. You cross the Mississippi at Dubuque, a dirty town with a crazy bridge. The
bridge is 100 feet above the river but made of iron slats, so that you see through it as you drive across. Dubuque to Cedar Rapids is high rolling country because the river is very low and the land is level. After Cedar Rapids we really hit prairie in the most exciting circumstances with an unreal sunset. The great heat of the day cooling off, the glitter of the chromium a little subdued, a note of nocturnal anxiety suggested by the noon of the motels, and nothing but corn fireflies and the headlights of cars. All this seemed basic prairie [...] only of course to be modified next day by even more extreme and more basic prairie. Next day we crossed the Missouri at Omaha to drive to Lincoln, Nebraska. Omaha, the start of the principal trails West a hundred years ago, has a certain sepulchral charm, a lugubrious splendour and seems quite incapable of shaking off the recollections of a glorious Victorian past. Lincoln itself, is quite different, brassy, neon lit and baked in an Italianate heat. The next day when we left at five in the morning for Denver, Colorado is completely memorable. I can't tell you how delightful it is to drive for an entire day through five hundred miles of the most interminable, unwanted, excessive monotony. You’ve only got to believe that it’s terrific. The sensation of land extending on every side is overwhelming, you begin to believe that you are involved in a deliberate landscape in which all purely decorative incident has been thrown out in order to insist on the natural eloquence of the one single horizontal theme. All day you drive imperceptibly uphill. There’s almost no traffic [...] this for 500 miles [...] and about four O’clock you suddenly find yourself at the edge of an enormous trough with the Rockies at the other side and awful Denver in the hollow in between.

The Rockies are an awful bore, green, Alpine and banal, but once across them into Colorado proper you are in a wonderful country. Oasis valleys surrounded by blue mountains alternate with fantastically jagged deserts, in which without any warning at all the road suddenly plunges into quite terrifying canyons. There are stretches of 100 miles or so with no towns at all, and only very occasionally, strange peasant shacks from which incredible hoboos emerge [...] what they live on is rather a mystery. But one can understand why this country has generated a whole mythology of western films, and also one can understand people never wanting to leave it. It’s the only part of America about which I can feel like this.

Salt Lake which we entered in pitch blackness through the most prolonged and winding canyons proved to be the most hospitable and entertaining of cities. It’s got a population of 300,000. There’s nowhere of equal size until Calgary, 1,000 miles to the North, Mexico City 1800 miles to the South, Denver 600 miles to the East, and Sacramento 700 miles to the West. These figures and the desert that you come through to approach the town make you aware of how great the Mormon achievement was in founding so elegant a city here 100 years ago. The shadow of Brigham Young still lies heavily over the place, his name crops up in conversation at least twice every evening, his activities are the epic which makes Salt Lake quite different from other American Cities.

A charming man from Yale, Robbie Wicks, had invited us to stay with them. We descended on the Wicks’ at breakfast time, to a most elegant meal in a little circular dining room. A charming elderly military type called Colonel Sweeney had been there for the last 6 years. He was writing a book on tactics, had been in the American Air Force, the French Foreign Legion, the Italian Army, and had lived in Paris until 1940. He had organised the Eagle Squadron in England in both wars, and had a very fine collection of Mauze drawings which he was delighted to show. [...] and that’s saying a lot.

Banff and the Canadian Rockies, the Chateau Lake Louise, and all the rest of it are disgusting towns on the North American continent...and that’s saying a lot.

But everyone in Salt Lake is fantastic, eccentric, and un-American. Mrs Wicks surprisingly turned out to be a cousin of Nancy Astor’s; but she quite paled into insignificance by the side of the fabulous Dorothy Allen. [...] We went with Robbie to stay in a summer cottage at a place called Brighton 9,000 feet up at the top of a canyon, and there complete with horse one day arrived our nearest neighbour, a Jewess who looked like a Toulouse-Lautrec circus artist. In her mid-fifties, she was a native of Salt Lake, had married into the American diplomatic corps, and had spent years in Lima, had danced with the Prince of Wales, etc. etc. etc. represented the 1920’s in their most complete form. She had a house that looked like something out of the film Sunset Boulevard, a wonderful, huge, elliptical swimming pool which she didn’t use because she was frightened of water, and a positive menagerie of people who frequented her house. A charming elderly military type called Colonel Sweeney had been there for the last 6 years. He was writing a book on tactics, had been in the American Air Force, the French Foreign Legion, the Italian Army, and had lived in Paris until 1940. He had organised the Eagle Squadron in England in both wars, and had a very fine collection of Mauze drawings which he was delighted to show. [...] and that’s saying a lot.

You get the idea of Salt Lake. Eccentric individuals who have no idea of their eccentricity. Following every whim. Isolated by 500 miles of desert which exaggerates all their attitudes to the point of caricature. All this conducted against a background where the memories of the polygamists’ rigrours of the Mormons are still very close.

You become aware of how great a man Brigham Young was. A sort of mixture of Moses and Garibaldi. Ingenious, calculating and enthusiastic, quite ruthless. You realise how heroic was the trek through 2,000 miles of desert to found a city in the wilderness. Quite one of the major epics of the American nineteenth century. They thought of it as the trek from Egypt. The Mississippi was the Red Sea. The inland valley of Utah was the valley of the Jordan, the Salt Lake in which you can’t sink was the Dead Sea. It’s all quite extraordinary.

From Salt Lake we went north rapidly, through Idaho, Yellowstone, Montana, into Alberta. The Canadians of Alberta are very unpleasant, and Calgary is one of the most disgusting towns on the North American continent...and that’s saying a lot.

Canada really belongs to another letter which I will write in a day or so.

Love to everybody,

Colin

P.S. I’m sure you are still writing to New Haven. Why?

1 Chatsworth House in North Derbyshire, England, rebuilt 1687-1707. Taliesin had been built by Wright in 1911-1914 and was severely damaged by fire in 1914 and again in 1925. It was rebuilt, modified and extended several times during Wright’s life.
2 Edgar Kaufmann Jr. (1910-1989) studied and apprenticed at Wright’s Taliesin, educated at Wright’s Taliesin, encouraging the commissioning of Wright by his father to design the famed Fallingwater. After World War II, Kaufmann was head of MoMA’s Industrial Design department and from 1963 to 1986 he served as adjunct professor of Architecture and Art History at Columbia University.
3 Fallingwater, 1938.
4 Nancy Witcher Astor (1879-1964).
5 Dorothy Allen (1896-1970), American movie actress active in the 1920s.
6 Mercenary Colonel Charles Francis Sweeney (1910-1993).

The Letters of Colin Rowe

Section Title
000

To Mr. & Mrs. Frederick Rowe,

Highgate Lane, Bolton-upon-Dearne, Yorkshire, England

4 November 1952

Wright, Metcalf & Parsons, Architects, Bakersfield, California

Dear Parents,

I shall give up any attempt to carry this letter on as a description of Canada etc. etc. Vancouver was amusing in a way. The situation of the city is superb but is steadily being ruined by appalling buildings and as a town in its shops and things it is about as primitive as Barnsley.1 You notice the change all the time you step over into America, particularly when you leave British Columbia for the Pacific North West. The Pacific North West is rather like England and all the settlements have a certain air of old established opulence which makes places like Vancouver and New Westminster appear extraordinarily tawdry.2 Victoria is ridiculous.3

The Pacific coast in Oregon is damp and miserable. Internally Oregon is more splendid.

We spent a night in a place called Eugene then two nights in Reno, Nevada. This is one of the most awful places of all time. Gambling is completely mechanised. There is none of the colour or distinction of a European casino but just a lot of slot machines into which people put money and hope to get something out. The most fantastic thing seen was a circular bar. The gamblers sat round, each with a drink and a slot machine let into the bar. There was utterly no excitement and no animation. The slot machines occur everywhere. In blocks in the streets, in supermarkets and drug stores, and the entire population from the age of twelve or so upwards is continually using them. You get queues in a lot of places to put money into them.

From Reno to San Francisco via two very distinguished Nevada cities [...]. Virginia City and Carson City.

San Francisco is the most finished of American cities. This is quite without a doubt. All white buildings looking mostly like large scale confectionary, a good deal of refinement of detail throughout the town, an extremely feminine atmosphere [...] this is very noticeable after Chicago and the Mid-West [...] but in San Francisco [...] dowagers parade the streets. The most shocking thing about the town though is the fog. It comes in between five and six every night. It is deadly. You see it creeping over the place in great white waves [...] rather like the spirit of the Lord visiting Elijah [...] and immediately it becomes uncomfortably cold. You can be crossing the Golden Gate Bridge and see neither the water, nor the pylons of the bridge, nor the other side. This seems to be the great drawback to San Francisco. It is a nightly occurrence and it makes it impossible to go out in the evening in any degree of comfort.

The other thing about San Francisco was that it was quite impossible to get a job there because there was absolutely no work. One had the most excellent introductions, the entire to the most delightful societies but all to no use. However perhaps it was as well, as one would conceivably never have got away. Bill Crocker for instance I'd met in Italy. He was at Yale some time back and is now at Stanford.4 The Crocker's are banking in California. It's the name that opens all doors. Bill took us to Sunday lunch at the beginning of the month, just in fact before going up to San Francisco for a weekend. That's what brought us to Bakersfield which, since it was earthquake this summer, is booming.5 We are designing a whole State College which is to cost 9 million dollars and also getting a reasonably free hand.6 However Bakersfield is quite devoid of society, so that although one can have money here one can meet absolutely no congenial people here. The sensitive in San Francisco shrink in horror at the name, and the fashionable like the Crockers flatly don't believe that anyone lives here. So what is one to do?

Bakersfield was founded in the 1860's by an Englishman, Colonel Baker, who fought for the Confederates in the Civil War. It is absolutely dead flat and is situated in the most disgusting, fertile plain in America. There isn't the vestige of a hill for ten miles if you travel East, or for 25 if you choose to go West. There are merely fields of cotton, orange, alfalfa, etc. etc. [...] all this interspersed with oil wells and also with Negroes, Mexicans and Okies who work in the fields. This is an amazingly peasant spectacle, particularly the Okies. They are the lowest of the low. There are Okies and Arkies. They are the people who migrated from Oklahoma and Arkansas in the 1930's. They are much the same and are quite shiftless. All Californians loathe and deplore all Okies, and the Okies spend their year doing casual labour up and down the valley all the summer and then committing a minor crime so that they can spend their winters in the State Prisons. This is completely Steinbeck country.7 The ignorance in the small towns is unbelievable. For instance at Arvin, 20 miles from here, the mountain has produced an enormous chasm since the earthquake. It was widely believed that last Tuesday was to be the end of the world and that premonial monsters were going to come up out of the earth and going to make an end of all. There were ceremonies of prayer and everything else to keep off the evil day, and since it didn't happen they are now all doubly confirmed in their faith and have apparently been rolling and rocking quite frenziedly ever since.

Now if this was to happen in Africa you might believe it. But it isn't fantastic less than eighty miles from Los Angeles! [...]
Main Street which is a very dreary novel but amazingly evocative of the American small town. Then you’d understand how complicated the position is with regard to the Cowley’s. So you begin to get some idea of the complexities of the situation. The other day for instance we were fired, that is because we told Metcalf that he was ‘ludicrous and inept.’ So we said O.K. However the building committee went up in smoke … said that it should never have happened […] and the other two partners were only too willing to take us back, both to propitiate the committee and as a crushing sort of snub to Metcalf. However we managed the lot by insisting on $25 extra a week or we wouldn’t dream of coming back. The result now is that we are not on speaking terms with Metcalf but Wright’s wife can’t enthuse too much over what has happened. So you see political excitements of this kind add a certain amusement and stimulus to life but perhaps hardly sufficient to compensate for a basically fatuous situation. Imagine the three partners in this firm. An $8,000,000 college to design and they are hardly interested in it. The fees on the completed work will be in the region of $600,000 and even split three ways to $200,000 is not to be sneezed at. And yet if it hadn’t been for the work we’ve done they’d certainly have lost the job. The situation is tragically inept. If one were an American citizen and sufficiently unscrupulous one could get the job away from under them and also get an international reputation for the finished work. As it is one has to fight all the time to prevent them making the most awful botch. However the elimination of Metcalf has made this a good deal easier.

While we were fired we made a trip to Death Valley which is awful and forbidding, like driving on the moon. You can go for sixty miles or so without any signs of life and absolutely no birds. You pass white lakes entirely of borax which look as though the enormous sand dunes, canyons, rocks with notices like ‘Jesus Saves’ or ‘Prepare to Meet Thy God’ painted on them, and nothing in fact but utter desolation on the most enormous scale. Fifty years from now all this will most probably be irrigated, a lot of things in Mexico are quite close to Mexico City. Mercifully most things in Mexico are quite close to Mexico City. Puebla, Taxco, Cholula, Cuernavaca; everyone says should be seen. It would be pleasant to go on to Yucatan (possibly) before coming back.

The joy of all this is that one will completely miss the winter. Here apart from a few occasional fogs it’s still like an English September, in Mexico City it should be like a North Italian August. There also will be something to write about … which is rather close to Mexico City, to see the Grand Canyon, and the Bryce Canyon and the Navajo Indian country. If possible to get some Navajo rugs cheap and then to go down to El Paso and through Chihuahua to Mexico City. Mercifully most things in Mexico are quite close to Mexico City. Puebla, Taxco, Cholula, Cuernavaca; everyone says should be seen. It would be pleasant to go on to Yucatan (possibly) before coming back.

The joy of all this is that one will completely miss the winter. Here apart from a few occasional fogs it’s still like an English September, in Mexico City it should be like a North Italian August. There also will be something to write about … which is rather more than can be said for Southern California. Really I don’t know what you can do in B.O.D. Can’t Grandma be sent back to a nursing home again? I really see no reason why not. Other old women are. But in the Californian phrase, bungalows in Bridlington are ‘for the birds.’

Californian American is rather different, by the way, from other kinds. Everything in California is a ‘deal’. ‘There are raw deals, slick deals, rugged deals, tough deals, swell deals, lousy deals, big deals, patio deals, two storied deals. When it isn’t a deal it’s a ‘situation’. In that case you can apply all the same adjectives all over again. There is also ‘darn tootin’. ‘I said to him ‘darn tootin’ you’re right.’ ‘Darn tootin I will’. This means ‘you can be sure I will’, or ‘I completely agree with you’. You can also, to signify approval, keep on nodding your head and saying ‘Slick, slick, slick, oh slick’. You can also, to emphasise things, say ‘man oh man’ or ‘brother’ (with emphasis on the last syllable). There’s also, and I’d almost forgotten it, ‘regular’. There are ‘regular deals’, ‘regular guys’, etc. etc. etc. Lots of these terms are quite old forms of speech one imagines […] certainly one wouldn’t hear them in the East. California I think imports its speech from the Mid-West. From Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas (pronounced Arkansas), and Oklahoma. That is because this part of the world is the paradise of the Mid-West. The Mid-Westerners when they can no longer stand their prairie or their climate come out here to retire. They build themselves little bungalows on Long Beach, or Pasadena and then they are perfectly happy. Los Angeles is all they ever dreamt of, or all they ever could have wanted.
Those are the reasonably well off ones. The others, the real Okies come to the valley and not to the coast. They too are well off, although you wouldn't imagine. They drive Cadillacs and eat steak every night so I told them. They live in shacks, but they keep their food stored in refrigerators and deep freezers. They are fundamentalist in religion, prolific and puritan, and they believe the Bible is entirely true. Jim Hicks, who works in the office, was telling me about a little Okie child the other day. He asked it its name. He said W.A. He said that couldn’t be. The child persisted Doublyouay. He still didn’t believe it. But its mother who had just come up said of course that’s what it was. W.A... The letters stood for nothing but themselves. That’s the peasantry of the San Joaquin Valley and of all the Mid-West. Isn’t it quite fantastic.

You can go into any supermarket here and see them prosperous and buying, essentially transplanted peasants, from Hungary, Ireland, and Italy, Scotland, Sweden. They have a common style. American as opposed to that of the country they’ve originated from. But their behaviour is still that of a very prosperous peasant community. Basically they believe in food, fear God, and have no regard for art. It’s very interesting.

The week before Christmas here all the local schools have a parade. Each school is preceded by the school band, by little girls swaying like a corps de ballet and dressed in the briefest little bits of luminous nylon. There are floats with little Gothic churches on them and groups of girls in white nightgowns with wings. On these it might say “Daughters of Job (Bethel Lodge)" or something equally incredible. There were other floats with children from the local Indian reservation on them [...] these in luminous nylon too. Far old men dressed up as hussars. The whole thing extravagant and indescribable. Something that you could never see in France or England. The peasant festival done without regard for New York or San Francisco. In a way, although very laughable, also rather amusing. The grotesqueness of the situation is that all the peasants have Cadillacs.

Colin

1 Sinclair Lewis, Main Street, The Story of Carol Kennicott (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920).
3 The Ciudad Universitaria, designed by Mario Pani, Enrique del Moral, and others, was built in the early 1950s and located in the southern part of Mexico City on an ancient solidified lava bed.
4 B.O.D. Bolton-on-Dearne.
5 Bridlington, where Rowe was taken on holiday as a child, is a minor fishing port and popular seaside resort near Yorkshire, England.
6 corps de ballet, French: in ballet, the group of dancers who are not soloists.
large shuttered eighteenth century haciendas. Finally Durango came as suddenly as Chihuahua had the night before.

It is rather a Sitwellian town of baroque facades, elaborate patios, and unlit side streets, and here it was quite a joy to sit in the gloomy elegance of the principal restaurant and eat what was to turn out to be the best cooked filet mignon that we were ever to get. The restaurant had been made by roofing over the patio of one of the most splendid palaces in town, and although it was draughty and someone was tuning the piano, and we were literally the only people there, the whole meal had a certain atmosphere of achievement, which may be the cook felt as much as we did.

The next morning we had breakfast in a dubious little place surprisingly run by a Chinese and apparently extensively patronised by the police. Then again the same interminable road which by now was beginning to provoke a quite pleasant monotony. South of Durango the land gets higher and the Indians more gay. There were lots of them about and they always in this part of the country wave to anyone who goes by. Alongside the road from time to time you see the carcasses of a dead donkey which the vultures are finishing off. Always there are peasants trotting along with donkeys. Just south of Fresnillo you cross the Tropic of Cancer, of which I’ll send you a picture, and fairly soon about lunchtime you reach Zacatecas. This place is all of red brown stone, and is fitted out with aqueducts, entrance gates, cathedrals, churches and bridges, all of the most elaborate opulence. The Spanish thought a lot of Zacatecas, and from now on you are in Colonial Mexico, the part of the country which they really settled and subdued. From now on the churches all have domes, the distances are shorter and the towns increasingly grandiose, although the Indians seem just as poor.

I wish I could give you an idea of this extensive, continuous brown country and how extraordinary it is, but I suppose that it’s quite useless to try. You go on and it goes, extraordinary it is, but I suppose that it’s quite useless to try. You go on and it goes, it has all the things you expect in a capital, including an imitation Elysées. It has appalling slums and being very high above sea level people tend to get tired and go to bed early so that by 9 o’clock at night the streets are deserted. It’s built on what used to be a lake and which is improperly drained, so that within the next ten years, according to competent engineers, the whole place is going to subside. No one appears to worry about this although buildings show alarming cracks and quite new ones are already eight or nine feet out of true.

It is not a particularly gay place and after getting the car looked after, and after paying our respects to the British Council, where we left a lot of luggage, we left for Cuernavaca and Taxco.

Cuernavaca is the Mexican equivalent of Richmond or Versailles or Tivoli. The semi-suburban town where people have villas. It’s about eighty miles away and you approach it by two roads. One is quite good, a fairly normal Mexican road. The other is superb, a toll road with four lane highway that gets you there in no time at all. Specially built by the last president and his party to get them to Cuernavaca in the least possible time.

All over Mexico you come across things that the last president did. He was Miguel Aleman and had a passion for building. Wherever you go you can’t avoid his works. He was apparently very popular, brought a lot of money into the country and even for a President of Mexico contrived to embezzle an extraordinary amount. During the six years of his presidency the British Embassy believes that he got together about £40,000,000. He now is a very rich man and lives in Rome.

In Cuernavaca we didn’t stop, rather unwisely as afterwards we had to make a special trip to look at it and it wasn’t worthwhile. It is the place where the more seduced section of the foreign colony live and indulge in literary attitudes, etc. They, and the majority of Americans rave about it, and no doubt it is a charming place to live, but the town itself is quite squalid.
From Cuernavaca to Taxco is about 80 miles and a drive through wonderful tropical scenery. You know the engravings in that old book of *Robinson Crusoe*. I was amazed how true they are because everything looks just like that. Rocks, feathers, trees, and little thatched cabins. All this is at a considerably lower altitude than Mexico City and has a delightful climate which never varies the whole year round from a steady 70 degrees. The little Indian houses down here are really no more than sunshades. The roofs are thatched with palm trees and the walls are just bamboo slatting which you can see straight through. The landscape is incredibly luxuriant with banana palms, blue flowering Jacarandas, and a lot of other quite unknown things.

Taxco was an old silver mining town in the eighteenth century which has now rather struck a tourist boom. It is another very complicated hill town, but you don’t sense the tourist presence. It has a pleasant atmosphere of Guanajuato. We had been advised to stay at a place called “Casa Humboldt”, formerly the Bishop’s Palace and where the Baron von Humboldt stayed when he came to Taxco in about 1806. It was very amusing but rather too long to describe. It belongs to a bogus architect, Alex von Wuthenau, who used to be a Counsellor of the German embassy in Washington, and his wife, who used to be married to an S.S. man (or at least so they say in Mexico City), runs it as a pension.

They are very German, very anti-American, and rather charming. The house is a delight. An elegant street front, a hall about 90 feet long, vaulted rooms, and a back which falls in a series of terraces into a ravine. Little Indian maids who are paid almost nothing do all the work, and the von Wuthenau’s are left with nothing except a rather tedious leisure during which Alex occasionally restores a church. For our benefit he wore a tartan shooting jacket which his father had got on a trip to Scotland in 1898.

From Taxco a trip to Acapulco two hundred miles away on the coast was an absolute necessity. It’s the place where all good Americans go (by air) and which they rave about. Pau is the town which is quite close to Taxco through hostile Indian country and not really very pleasant. But the whole road, Indians or not, is now being made into a superhighway although at the moment this seems to be more of an idea than a fact. For fifty miles before Acapulco there is really no road at all. You just drive through sand. These road works have been going on for years and sometimes you have to stop until they bulldoze a way through. Quite fantastic. All the time it keeps on getting hotter and hotter and the Indians get blacker and the total effect rather more tropical.

Acapulco used to be the place where the Manila galleons unloaded, and their stuff was brought across on pack horses to Mexico City and Vera Cruz for trans-shipment to Spain. There are very few Indian women quite close to Taxco lie through hostile Indian country and are not really very pleasant. But the whole road, Indians or not, is now being made into a superhighway although at the moment this seems to be more of an idea than a fact. For fifty miles before Acapulco there is really no road at all. You just drive through sand. These road works have been going on for years and sometimes you have to stop until they bulldoze a way through. Quite fantastic. All the time it keeps on getting hotter and hotter and the Indians get blacker and the total effect rather more tropical.

On from Taxco a trip to Cuernavaca was about 80 miles and a drive through wonderful tropical scenery. You know the engravings in that old book of *Robinson Crusoe*. I was amazed how true they are because everything looks just like that. Rocks, feathers, trees, and little thatched cabins. All this is at a considerably lower altitude than Mexico City and has a delightful climate which never varies the whole year round from a steady 70 degrees. The little Indian houses down here are really no more than sunshades. The roofs are thatched with palm trees and the walls are just bamboo slatting which you can see straight through. The landscape is incredibly luxuriant with banana palms, blue flowering Jacarandas, and a lot of other quite unknown things.

Taxco was an old silver mining town in the eighteenth century which has now rather struck a tourist boom. It is another very complicated hill town, but you don’t sense the tourist presence. It has a pleasant atmosphere of Guanajuato. We had been advised to stay at a place called “Casa Humboldt”, formerly the Bishop’s Palace and where the Baron von Humboldt stayed when he came to Taxco in about 1806. It was very amusing but rather too long to describe. It belongs to a bogus architect, Alex von Wuthenau, who used to be a Counsellor of the German embassy in Washington, and his wife, who used to be married to an S.S. man (or at least so they say in Mexico City), runs it as a pension.

They are very German, very anti-American, and rather charming. The house is a delight. An elegant street front, a hall about 90 feet long, vaulted rooms, and a back which falls in a series of terraces into a ravine. Little Indian maids who are paid almost nothing do all the work, and the von Wuthenau’s are left with nothing except a rather tedious leisure during which Alex occasionally restores a church. For our benefit he wore a tartan shooting jacket which his father had got on a trip to Scotland in 1898.

From Taxco a trip to Acapulco two hundred miles away on the coast was an absolute necessity. It’s the place where all good Americans go (by air) and which they rave about. Pau is the town which is quite close to Taxco through hostile Indian country and not really very pleasant. But the whole road, Indians or not, is now being made into a superhighway although at the moment this seems to be more of an idea than a fact. For fifty miles before Acapulco there is really no road at all. You just drive through sand. These road works have been going on for years and sometimes you have to stop until they bulldoze a way through. Quite fantastic. All the time it keeps on getting hotter and hotter and the Indians get blacker and the total effect rather more tropical.

Acapulco used to be the place where the Manila galleons unloaded, and their stuff was brought across on pack horses to Mexico City and Vera Cruz for trans-shipment to Spain. There are very few Indian women quite close to Taxco lie through hostile Indian country and are not really very pleasant. But the whole road, Indians or not, is now being made into a superhighway although at the moment this seems to be more of an idea than a fact. For fifty miles before Acapulco there is really no road at all. You just drive through sand. These road works have been going on for years and sometimes you have to stop until they bulldoze a way through. Quite fantastic. All the time it keeps on getting hotter and hotter and the Indians get blacker and the total effect rather more tropical.

On from Taxco a trip to Cuernavaca was about 80 miles and a drive through wonderful tropical scenery. You know the engravings in that old book of *Robinson Crusoe*. I was amazed how true they are because everything looks just like that. Rocks, feathers, trees, and little thatched cabins. All this is at a considerably lower altitude than Mexico City and has a delightful climate which never varies the whole year round from a steady 70 degrees. The little Indian houses down here are really no more than sunshades. The roofs are thatched with palm trees and the walls are just bamboo slatting which you can see straight through. The landscape is incredibly luxuriant with banana palms, blue flowering Jacarandas, and a lot of other quite unknown things.

Taxco was an old silver mining town in the eighteenth century which has now rather struck a tourist boom. It is another very complicated hill town, but you don’t sense the tourist presence. It has a pleasant atmosphere of Guanajuato. We had been advised to stay at a place called “Casa Humboldt”, formerly the Bishop’s Palace and where the Baron von Humboldt stayed when he came to Taxco in about 1806. It was very amusing but rather too long to describe. It belongs to a bogus architect, Alex von Wuthenau, who used to be a Counsellor of the German embassy in Washington, and his wife, who used to be married to an S.S. man (or at least so they say in Mexico City), runs it as a pension.

They are very German, very anti-American, and rather charming. The house is a delight. An elegant street front, a hall about 90 feet long, vaulted rooms, and a back which falls in a series of terraces into a ravine. Little Indian maids who are paid almost nothing do all the work, and the von Wuthenau’s are left with nothing except a rather tedious leisure during which Alex occasionally restores a church. For our benefit he wore a tartan shooting jacket which his father had got on a trip to Scotland in 1898.

From Taxco a trip to Cuernavaca was about 80 miles and a drive through wonderful tropical scenery. You know the engravings in that old book of *Robinson Crusoe*. I was amazed how true they are because everything looks just like that. Rocks, feathers, trees, and little thatched cabins. All this is at a considerably lower altitude than Mexico City and has a delightful climate which never varies the whole year round from a steady 70 degrees. The little Indian houses down here are really no more than sunshades. The roofs are thatched with palm trees and the walls are just bamboo slatting which you can see straight through. The landscape is incredibly luxuriant with banana palms, blue flowering Jacarandas, and a lot of other quite unknown things.

Taxco was an old silver mining town in the eighteenth century which has now rather struck a tourist boom. It is another very complicated hill town, but you don’t sense the tourist presence. It has a pleasant atmosphere of Guanajuato. We had been advised to stay at a place called “Casa Humboldt”, formerly the Bishop’s Palace and where the Baron von Humboldt stayed when he came to Taxco in about 1806. It was very amusing but rather too long to describe. It belongs to a bogus architect, Alex von Wuthenau, who used to be a Counsellor of the German embassy in Washington, and his wife, who used to be married to an S.S. man (or at least so they say in Mexico City), runs it as a pension.

They are very German, very anti-American, and rather charming. The house is a delight. An elegant street front, a hall about 90 feet long, vaulted rooms, and a back which falls in a series of terraces into a ravine. Little Indian maids who are paid almost nothing do all the work, and the von Wuthenau’s are left with nothing except a rather tedious leisure during which Alex occasionally restores a church. For our benefit he wore a tartan shooting jacket which his father had got on a trip to Scotland in 1898.

From Taxco a trip to Acapulco was about 80 miles and a drive through wonderful tropical scenery. You know the engravings in that old book of *Robinson Crusoe*. I was amazed how true they are because everything looks just like that. Rocks, feathers, trees, and little thatched cabins. All this is at a considerably lower altitude than Mexico City and has a delightful climate which never varies the whole year round from a steady 70 degrees. The little Indian houses down here are really no more than sunshades. The roofs are thatched with palm trees and the walls are just bamboo slatting which you can see straight through. The landscape is incredibly luxuriant with banana palms, blue flowering Jacarandas, and a lot of other quite unknown things.

Taxco was an old silver mining town in the eighteenth century which has now rather struck a tourist boom. It is another very complicated hill town, but you don’t sense the tourist presence. It has a pleasant atmosphere of Guanajuato. We had been advised to stay at a place called “Casa Humboldt”, formerly the Bishop’s Palace and where the Baron von Humboldt stayed when he came to Taxco in about 1806. It was very amusing but rather too long to describe. It belongs to a bogus architect, Alex von Wuthenau, who used to be a Counsellor of the German embassy in Washington, and his wife, who used to be married to an S.S. man (or at least so they say in Mexico City), runs it as a pension.

They are very German, very anti-American, and rather charming. The house is a delight. An elegant street front, a hall about 90 feet long, vaulted rooms, and a back which falls in a series of terraces into a ravine. Little Indian maids who are paid almost nothing do all the work, and the von Wuthenau’s are left with nothing except a rather tedious leisure during which Alex occasionally restores a church. For our benefit he wore a tartan shooting jacket which his father had got on a trip to Scotland in 1898.
The Letters of Colin Rowe

...over a dozen at a time. The boatmen just wade about in the mud. By the way, all the people around here have their eye teeth gold-plated which increases the general effect of a rather exotic barbarism. Finally we reached Coatzalcoalcos. Since there are no cars in the town, it’s rather odd that Coatzalcoalcos should have wide concrete streets, double carriageways and all the effect of a new suburban development.

It seemed an unlikely place to have a British Consul but Jim Papworth had advised us to look up a Doctor Sparks there who had been consul since about 1908. This we did. He lived in a rather rundown wooden house overlooking the beach, with applied to the front all the usual consular insignia, the royal coat of arms and all the rest of it. The door was opened by his wife who had a rather timid manner with some antiquated mode of Kensingtonian refinement. When her husband was awake he came down. Fifty years ago Coatzalcoalcos was going to be a great port. The Panama Canal hadn’t been built but a railway across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was going to carry all the trade of the Pacific. None of this ever really materialised and the hopes of Coatzalcoalcos and of the Isthmian railroad were blasted by the opening of the canal. Still in the few years in which there had been hope, he, a Newfoundland and a physician had arrived as consul.

He had never wanted to leave, and apart from a few years spent in Boston he never had left. He was completely adored and respected by the Indians and had a fine collection of pre-Colombian sculpture which would have distinguished any museum but whose wife wouldn’t let him keep in the drawing room. They had a powerful radio with which they listened every day to the news direct from London. Isn’t it a complete fantasy?

But into the middle of this suddenly breezed the daughter. W.V.S. type determined, vigorous, precisely the American idea of what every English woman is. She said it was stuffy and promptly opened the windows. Married to a Frenchman with an estate in Burgundy, she lived in New York and was shortly leaving for Teheran!

The whole place had an English atmosphere, at once exotic, charming and totally depressing. How well and in how unlikely a place they had to establish this atmosphere of a London suburb, how pathetic were they in the belief that Edwardian England, in which they still lived, would re-establish itself again [...].

Natural we stayed to dinner, and naturally they gave their advice as to how to catch the train [...] which only leaves three times in the week and was due to go the following morning. The problem was when did the train leave and from where. Did it leave from Coatzalcoalcos or from Allende on the other side of the river (another river this time). Sparks had his ideas, Mrs Sparks had hers, the servants were of a whole variety of opinions. The railway station, telephone, telegraph didn’t really seem to know, nor were they quite sure at the hotel. It seemed to be the situation of the last night all over again.

However we got up at five o’clock and by now people did begin to think that the train left from the other side of the river. So that in the pitch blackness we went down to the quay and took a boat with about twenty other people for the other side. The scene was lurid. Oil jets flaring and just lighting up the tops of palm trees. The boat which left from the other side of the river (another river this time) had a little outboard motor wouldn’t start and began, alarmingly to drift, out to sea.

The peasants stood up and stamped and waved their arms and shouted “freno” and one really thought that the whole thing was going to capsize. Mercifully another boat came up and towed us across [...] the river by the way, about three times wider than the Thames, with alligators and probably other monsters too. At the other side there was neither landing stage nor railway station, just a track and a train. You jumped off the boat into the sand. Indians in the darkness all around, Mexicans cursing, and the oil flares the only means of light. Don’t you think this is all rather gay? The Indians, some of whom had been squatting for days waiting for the train to come.

You can go to the Yucatan by three ways:

By air which is terribly expensive.

By the newly made railway which runs through the state of Tabasco to Campeche. Jim Papworth suggested we try this route.

From Vera Cruz a properly surfaced road runs as far as Alvarado, after that it is a dirt road to a place called Minatitlan. After that there is no road at all. But at Coatzalcoalcos across the river from Minatitlan the railway begins.

We were advised to leave the car at Vera Cruz after that no one is really to be trusted until you get to Merida.

So we left by bus. The bus must have quite twenty years, without windows and without springs and bounced along to Alvarado where it crossed a river of enormous width on a completely antiquated ferry.

From here we plunged on through marsh and jungle until it began to get dark and we also began to get into hilly country. At San Andres Tuxtla it stopped. This is where springs and bounced along to Alvarado where it crossed a river of enormous width on a completely antiquated ferry.

So we left by bus. The bus must have quite twenty years, without windows and without springs and bounced along to Alvarado where it crossed a river of enormous width on a completely antiquated ferry.

So we left by bus. The bus must have quite twenty years, without windows and without springs and bounced along to Alvarado where it crossed a river of enormous width on a completely antiquated ferry.

From here we plunged on through marsh and jungle until it began to get dark and we also began to get into hilly country. At San Andres Tuxtla it stopped. This is where
We crawled into the First Class compartment. Again there was nothing to eat, and resigned ourselves to slow starvation for the rest of the trip. No one seemed to know how long it would last for. Finally after about two hours of waiting we were able to start. The train lumbered off, achieved a speed of about twenty miles an hour, which it never improved upon, and off we went, the whole thing lurching rather like a ship.

About the middle of the morning one summoned up enough vitality to explore the train. The Second and Third classes were indescribable [...] with the usual fantastic Indian cooking little things or attempting to sell each other little cakes. No Italian train could compare with it. That was on one side, but beyond our compartment somehow a dining car had been joined onto the train, and beyond that the alleged super luxury of a Pullman coach. A guard was stationed at the door so that only the right people got in.

The dining car was a wonderful discovery since no one had mentioned it. It was minute, antiquated, and we were the only people to use it. One had rather the feeling of a royal personage in a prison train as this thing swayed down the single line track and windows were brushed by the banana palms [...] its dense jungle on either side of the track, but we had an altogether excellent lunch which made the joy all the more complete. One can’t go on boring you with all these details. At about two in the afternoon a charming German family got on the train and finally in conversation persuaded us to get off at Palenque to see the ruins there. We had no idea the line went by Palenque or that the ruins were in any way accessible, but they were travelling to see them.

Well I told you about Palenque. We were there for two days until the train came again to take us on to Campeche. It was still an overnight journey of 14 hours to get there, and once again the town was enough to put one to flight. The “Grand Hotel Cuauhtemoc” was just a slum, with dirty old men spitting around in the patio. The only thing was once more the peasant bus. This time to Merida.

Yucatan reveals itself as quite deadly and, except for its ruins completely uninteresting.

There are only two towns, Merida and Campeche, and between these the life of a good cenote

They live in charming houses and have neither water supply nor drainage. The infant mortality rate is very high. The theory is that the sewage just seeps away into the limestone as indeed it does, but the water comes out of the limestone too, which complicates matters, so that you have to drink only bottled water which gets a little tiring or beer which rather tends to send you to sleep. The Meridians accept all this as in the natural order of things, and of the Meridians quite one of the most outstanding turned out to be the British Consul.

To Henry-Russell Hitchcock, The Museum of Art, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. 6 May 1953
c/o Howard Barnstone, Lovett Boulevard, Houston, Texas

Dear Russell,

I have been intending to write to you for some months but have been a little uncertain as to your silence. I have been wondering whether you find this continuous jaunt around the North American continent irresponsible, or whether you were offended by a bad collage upon a Balmoral theme which we sent to you, or whether you think that by now I should have published something about the compositional style. Possibly I am wrong in all these guesses, and you are simply absorbed in all sorts of work. In any case I do feel that I should have written to you before now to let you know what I was doing.

We left Bakersfield towards the end of January. The place has now, in memory, become the dramatic symbol of the smaller American town. It was really, in spite of everything, an enjoyable heroic nightmare. To some extent we succeeded in imposing order upon the campus, beyond that I don’t think that we should have ever been able to continue our success. We were used as a plan factory, and once we had gone it was naturally assumed that the elevations might take upon themselves, a more humane, less Miesian form.

We went by way of Phoenix, Arizona, where Mr. Wright was very affable, and showed us the North American continent irresponsible, or whether you were offended by a bad
collage upon a Balmoral theme which we sent to you, or whether you think that by now I should have published something about the compositional style. Possibly I am wrong in all these guesses, and you are simply absorbed in all sorts of work. In any case I do feel that I should have written to you before now to let you know what I was doing.

We left Bakersfield towards the end of January. The place has now, in memory, become the dramatic symbol of the smaller American town. It was really, in spite of everything, an enjoyable heroic nightmare. To some extent we succeeded in imposing order upon the campus, beyond that I don’t think that we should have ever been able to continue our success. We were used as a plan factory, and once we had gone it was naturally assumed that the elevations might take upon themselves, a more humane, less Miesian form.

We went by way of Phoenix, Arizona, where Mr. Wright was very affable, and showed us the designs for a palace on the Grand Canal that he’s working on. Talesim West seemed to me more aloof than other Wright houses which I have seen — a very Edwardian quality, like that uncompromising tierra desconocida5 which women of the period so often possessed. One had never expected to find it so acceptable a photographic background for Vague models. Most impressive, I think, was the little auditorium, which has qualities of dryness and control that I haven’t seen in any other Wright. It lacks that over-all softness which one so often finds in his things. That play of the Buddhist head in the roundel, the slots in the roof, and the Byzantine elegance of the seating arrangements is a complete joy.

From Phoenix there was the long drive to El Paso, and from there via Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas,Queretaro, etc., to Mexico City. You’ve never been to Latin America. One can’t help thinking that some people are protected by their intuitions of horror, which make it unnecessary for them to explore such places. Colonial Mexico is really a great bore. All the towns possess the almost identical Baroque profile, which is very exciting as you approach them over the plain. Here, you always feel, is to be the revelation, but always it’s a disappointment. As you approach the illusion dissipates itself, although if you drive through, something of it still remains, and you are still

2 “Sitwellian,” presumably a reference to Sacheverell Sitwell, Spanish Baroque Art, with Buildings in Portugal, Mexico, and Other Colonies (London: Duckworth, 1931).

3 Maximilian I (1832–1867), proclaimed Emperor of Mexico in April 1864, was executed in Queretaro in 1867.

4 Miguel Aleman Valdes (1908–1983), president of Mexico from 1946 to 1952.

5 Schutzstaffel, a paramilitary organization under the German Nazi Party, 1929–45.

6 Alexander von Wuthenau-Hohenthurm (b. 1900) and Beatrix Pietsch von Sidonienburg (b. 1919). Von Wuthenau was professor of Art History in Mexico City from 1939 to 1965.

7 The Casa Humboldt became Taxco’s Viceregal Museum.

8 Cenotes, Spanish: natural wells.

9 The Casa Humboldt became Taxco’s Viceregal Museum.

10 The Casa Humboldt became Taxco’s Viceregal Museum.

11 WVS: Women’s Voluntary Service was founded in 1938 as a women’s organization to aid civilians.

12 Jone, Spanish: stop.

13 Cenotes, Spanish: unknown land.

14 To Henry-Russell Hitchcock, The Museum of Art, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. 6 May 1953

c/o Howard Barnstone, Lovett Boulevard, Houston, Texas

Dear Russell,

I have been intending to write to you for some months but have been a little uncertain as to your silence. I have been wondering whether you find this continuous jaunt around the North American continent irresponsible, or whether you were offended by a bad
collage upon a Balmoral theme which we sent to you, or whether you think that by now I should have published something about the compositional style. Possibly I am wrong in all these guesses, and you are simply absorbed in all sorts of work. In any case I do feel that I should have written to you before now to let you know what I was doing.

We left Bakersfield towards the end of January. The place has now, in memory, become the dramatic symbol of the smaller American town. It was really, in spite of everything, an enjoyable heroic nightmare. To some extent we succeeded in imposing order upon the campus, beyond that I don’t think that we should have ever been able to continue our success. We were used as a plan factory, and once we had gone it was naturally assumed that the elevations might take upon themselves, a more humane, less Miesian form.

We went by way of Phoenix, Arizona, where Mr. Wright was very affable, and showed us the designs for a palace on the Grand Canal that he’s working on. Talesim West seemed to me more aloof than other Wright houses which I have seen — a very Edwardian quality, like that uncompromising tierra desconocida5 which women of the period so often possessed. One had never expected to find it so acceptable a photographic background for Vague models. Most impressive, I think, was the little auditorium, which has qualities of dryness and control that I haven’t seen in any other Wright. It lacks that over-all softness which one so often finds in his things. That play of the Buddhist head in the roundel, the slots in the roof, and the Byzantine elegance of the seating arrangements is a complete joy.

From Phoenix there was the long drive to El Paso, and from there via Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas,Queretaro, etc., to Mexico City. You’ve never been to Latin America. One can’t help thinking that some people are protected by their intuitions of horror, which make it unnecessary for them to explore such places. Colonial Mexico is really a great bore. All the towns possess the almost identical Baroque profile, which is very exciting as you approach them over the plain. Here, you always feel, is to be the revelation, but always it’s a disappointment. As you approach the illusion dissipates itself, although if you drive through, something of it still remains, and you are still
Mind believes in some life-enhancing building you might have overlooked. If you stop, discourses begin to mount, and if you go into one of the buildings the impression found in different minds. There is no substance, no reality behind it all, although perhaps this is really a restful state of affairs, since you come to realize that a Mexican tour can only be a voyage pittoresque, and that, unlike Italy, a personal exertion isn’t really necessary.

The University, as the third major layout on the North American continent, is what one principally went down to see. Again, this is not a necessary journey. In spite of Barragan’s very brilliant landscape, he has not really been able to conceal the basically vapid layout. The stadium is not so fine as appears, since it is set in a hollow which conceals its real shape, and is being steadily defaced by Rivera’s enormous bas-relief. Aral’s playing fields, fronton courts, and swimming pool are very good, but the general impression – eclectic the campus makes is that of provincial and undugest Corbus.

Internally, all the buildings are empty, since under the new regime funds are not yet available to continue the work.

There are some interesting things being done in Mexico City, principally by Juan Sordo Madeleno. He has just completed two elegant office blocks, one admittedly looking like a rather chic apartment house, the other a very distinguished small tower, a sort of miniature Mies tower, with an ingenious overlay in the ground floor and mezzanine of Milanese elements. Madaleno is always his own client, since he has apparently the means to realize any of the building which he chooses. He is rather despised by less fortunate professionals, is looked upon as the arch-dilettante, etc., but is much the most interesting architect practicing in Mexico City.

Juan O’Gorman, though, is someone who might amuse you. I think perhaps only in his own house. This, in the Pedregal, is still under construction, and is surely the most complete Guadian fantasy of modern times. Partly dynamited out of the rock and partly imposed upon it, it is really a grotto, from within which an exterior is generated. All is to be either natural rock or mosaic covered concrete.

Tropical Mexico, experienced en route to Yucatan, is a complete trauma, but was worth it, in that we saw Palenque, Chichen, and Uxmal. These and other pre-Columbian sites, together with the natural magnificence of the landscape, are really the best things about Mexico, although it is really doubtful whether they make up for all the hardships of the hotels and lack of food.

We have now been back in the United States for some three weeks, relieved to find about Mexico, although it is really doubtful whether they make up for all the hardships of the hotels and lack of food.

We have now been back in the United States for some three weeks, relieved to find ourselves once more in an aseptic and rational atmosphere. We have fairly thoroughly ‘done’ Texas and Oklahoma, which are both, after the real west, rather depressing. I think that you were very right in not advising the South. For me it certainly lacks stimulus. Rank and small scale, without either delicacy or magnificence. Dallas, in spite of the Neiman-Marcus myth, failed to excite, but Tulsa, Oklahoma, is one of the most distinguished small cities. (The Lloyd Jones house is surprisingly impressive.)

It was the combination of Philip’s De Menil House,3 the rumours of his church, Neuhaus’ patio house, and Barthelme’s West Columbia School, which brought us down here. The combination suggested that something might be happening. I’m not sure whether it is, but meeting Howard Barnstone down here has been a great pleasure. He is entirely delightful, ex-Yale, a Mies devotee, and carried out the final supervision on the De Menil House.

This house is very, very good, and something which I think you should see. I gather that at first Philip was opposed to the decoration, but has now come to approve of it. One has never realized how admirable and how suave a background his architecture forms for a little system of furnishing. The house is intricate, with a delightful feeling of privy passages and hidden rooms. Going round, and sitting in it, you do feel that every possible nuance has been explored. Everything has the appearance of calculated and subtle understatement. Barcelona chairs and stools are used casually, as though no particular significance were attached to them. The living room is very large, but so well scaled that its size is not apparent, and it becomes merely a salon of modest magnificence. Sketches by Miro, Renoir, Picasso, are carefully concealed in a small drinks closet, only to reveal themselves to whoever is engaged in the intimate operations of mixing a martini. It is all a fabulous performance of opulent restraint. We hope to see Philip when he is down here in a few days time about his church.

Do you propose leaving soon for Europe? And are you to give a talk at the R.I.B.A.? One can only envy you those certainties. I feel now left with the satisfaction of having very thoroughly explored the North American continent. There is after this, a glow of conscientiousness, but a feeling of complete inability to take any more travel. I can’t make up my mind at the moment as to whether to go back to England, whether to work down here for some time longer and return to a leisurely rate to New York, or whether to attach myself once again to some university. America, I think, has had a delightfully expanding effect. Before coming here I was beginning to feel like a gramophone record caught in a Corbu groove. Now, I’ve at least discovered that the groove is of no absolute significance.

I would very much like you hear from you,

With very best wishes,

Colin

(handwritten)

P.S. Please give my regards to Bill Jordy4 if he has not already left on his travels.

---

1 Howard Barnstone (1923–1987) was a Houston architect and a graduate of the Yale School of Architecture class of 1948.
2 On Hitchcock’s attempt to get into Balmoral Castle, see Rowe’s 20 May 1952 letter to his parents (p. XX in this vol.).
3 Hitchcock had been encouraging Rowe to publish “Character and Composition.”
4 Frank Lloyd Wright lived part of the year at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona, near Phoenix. The “palace” design for the Fondazione Masteli was for a residence and library for architecture students to be located in Venice. It was never built.
5 texan, French: holding.
6 voyage pittoresque, French: scenic journey.
8 Juan Sordo Madeleno (1916–1985), Mexican architect.
9 “Gaudian” like the work of Antoni Gaudi (1852–1926), Spanish architect of often curvaceous and colorfully tiled buildings.
10 Richard Lloyd Jones house, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1929, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.
11 John and Dominique De Menil house; Houston, Texas, 1939, designed by Philip Johnson.
12 The “decoration,” vivid wall colors, and unique furniture designed specifically for the house by Charles James, New York designer.

To Henry Russell Hitchcock, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Mass. 17 May 1953

Apartment 3, 3403, Roseland Street, Houston, Texas

Dear Russell,

Thank you very much indeed for your letter. It was delightful to hear from you and to know that the East still exists. I was very sorry to hear about John Phillips, most
have an idea that there would be a job available at Austin. 3 If one were really modest, For instance, one has got to know the Harwell Harrises rather well down here and I is a library .

somewhere worthwhile, where the student has a certain intelligence and where there viable in this country . On the other hand, if I did stay on in the U.S., I should like it to be

Obviously my qualifications are good… obviously to borrow a term of yours I am now without any academic standing.

get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one

inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The further problems revolve around whether one stays here longer, and on these I would really value your advice. If I stay it means that I have to look around for a degree of permanence and commodity… after a year of movement and of the west you find of-term and pre-vacation confusion; but, I wonder, if, in the middle of an architectural inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The tour of the North American continent has now gone on long enough. To some extent in the first case it may have been an escape, but it has been very necessary and rewarding. One has learned a great deal, one’s criteria have changed quite a lot, and the pleasure of travel and of buildings has often been extreme. The Mexican tour was altogether more blâse and less necessary. Further travel of this kind will I know be superfluous and irresponsible.

As I am sure you guess, the major problem revolves around America or England. On that I have no right to ask or expect your advice. I have at the moment a strong inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The further problems revolve around whether one stays here longer, and on these I would really value your advice. If I stay it means that I have to look around for a degree of permanence and commodity… after a year of movement and of the west you find of-term and pre-vacation confusion; but, I wonder, if, in the middle of an architectural inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The tour of the North American continent has now gone on long enough. To some extent in the first case it may have been an escape, but it has been very necessary and rewarding. One has learned a great deal, one’s criteria have changed quite a lot, and the pleasure of travel and of buildings has often been extreme. The Mexican tour was altogether more blâse and less necessary. Further travel of this kind will I know be superfluous and irresponsible.

As I am sure you guess, the major problem revolves around America or England. On that I have no right to ask or expect your advice. I have at the moment a strong inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The further problems revolve around whether one stays here longer, and on these I would really value your advice. If I stay it means that I have to look around for a degree of permanence and commodity… after a year of movement and of the west you find of-term and pre-vacation confusion; but, I wonder, if, in the middle of an architectural inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The tour of the North American continent has now gone on long enough. To some extent in the first case it may have been an escape, but it has been very necessary and rewarding. One has learned a great deal, one’s criteria have changed quite a lot, and the pleasure of travel and of buildings has often been extreme. The Mexican tour was altogether more blâse and less necessary. Further travel of this kind will I know be superfluous and irresponsible.

As I am sure you guess, the major problem revolves around America or England. On that I have no right to ask or expect your advice. I have at the moment a strong inclination to go back to England, to the known situation, and all the rest of it. Having seen America one could now justifiably return …which last summer was not the case. I am entirely uncertain as to the state of affairs in England, but assume that I could get along. Ultimately of course one has to go back, so as to know whether or not one wishes to stay over here.

The further problems revolve around whether one stays here longer, and on these I would really value your advice. If I stay it means that I have to look around for a degree of permanence and commodity… after a year of movement and of the west you find of-term and pre-vacation confusion; but, I wonder, if, in the middle of an architectural