

CHAPTER 4

SENSE OF IDENTITY

i. Analysis of Sense of Identity:

a. Introduction:

"Who am I?" is a fundamental human question--a question people spend their entire lives consciously or unconsciously answering. What amalgam of qualities makes me unique? What enduring characteristics separate me from others? I am a woman or a man, an author or a craftsman, a romantic or a pragmatist, an introvert or an extrovert, a mother or a father, a conformist or an eccentric, and so on. A fundamental component of a sense of place is the ability of that place to contribute to a person's sense of who she or he is. I am not only a woman or an extrovert or a geographer, I am also a New Yorker, a westerner, a country boy, a Quebecker, an East Ender, a Torontonionian, a Californian, a Dunlopian, and so on. Ted Relph writes:

The most meagre meaning of "sense of place" is the ability to recognize different places and different identities of a place. ...In fact there exists a whole range of possible awareness, from simple recognition for orientation, through the capacity to respond empathetically to the identities of different places, to a profound association with places as cornerstones of human existence and individual identity.¹

Perhaps, as this quote implies, sense of identity is the most

¹E. Relph, Place and Placelessness (London: Pion Limited, 1976), p. 63. The concept of sense of place in this thesis does not include simple recognition of places as places, but involves a deeper relationship between people and place.

fundamental component of sense of place. (See also pp. 28-29.) At the deepest level, Relph writes, association with places (where we were born, where we grew up, where we live now, where we have had moving experiences) seems to "constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world".¹ The Cree hunter of the James Bay area who says, "When you talk about the land you talk about me and my familyWhat part you destroy of the land, you also destroy of me";² the "piney" of the New Jersey pine barrens who says simply, "I'm just a woods boy.";³ and the struggling white farmer in the southern United States who says, "To me the land I have is always there, waiting for me, and it's part of me, way inside me; it's as much me as my own arms and legs"⁴--all derive, largely unconsciously, a sense of who they are

¹Ibid., p. 43.

²Quoted by Boyce Richardson, Strangers Devour the Land: The Cree Hunters of the James Bay Area versus Premier Bourassa and the James Bay Development Corporation (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975), p. 247. Richardson describes how the Cree see themselves as an intimate part of the natural order (p. 7):

Unlike any other kind of human being, the man who earns his subsistence from hunting, who survives, as the Indians say, from the land, depends on knowing where he must stand in the strangely efficient and mysterious balance that is arranged for the propagation of life.

As the book makes clear, the Cree hunter is efficient and competent in the bush and on the land. He knows where he is and who he is in this world; he is not so secure in the Whiteman's world.

³Quoted by John McPhee, The Pine Barrens (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. 56.

⁴Quoted by Robert Coles, Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers - Volume II of Children of Crisis (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 411. The farmer goes on to describe how he and his wife felt when they returned to their farm (when the bank forgave their debts) to start farming again, concluding, "...at last we were back with everything that meant something to us - back to ourselves!"

and where they fit into the scheme of things from their relationships with intimately known places and landscapes.

The sense of identity derived from intimately known places may be more self-consciously felt and expressed. Both examples which follow are accounts of revisiting and reflecting upon the places where the writer grew up. Suzannah Lessard, writing about the subsequent suburbanization of Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York, describes her childhood landscape as a "more or less open domain of fields, woods, marshes and beaches", which she "noticed and savored...with the same tenderness and romantic involvement with which Huck noticed and savored the Mississippi River".¹ After describing this landscape in some detail, she goes on:

This landscape is delicate rather than heroic, touching rather than awesome, its drama in subtle variation rather than in panoramic grandeur. It is characteristic of that middle section of the East Coast from Massachusetts to Virginia, and to some extent defines the boundaries of the region for its natives. For us, the Northeast, land of pines and rockbound coasts, is something else altogether as foreign as the red clay and hillbilly accents of the Deep South. The ways in which a familiar landscape becomes a personal touchstone defy analysis. Suffice it to say that in this landscape I am happy. In a way, it defines my identity - an American identity - realigning my instincts like a shadow Constitution.²

She describes her reaction to the suburbanization of this treasured landscape-- her ability to perceive it selectively, to "drive through old haunts that have been built up for almost two decades and not see what's there...to recreate the old landscape"³ and blank out the new.

¹Suzannah Lessard, "Reflections: The Suburban Landscape: Oyster Bay, Long Island," The New Yorker, October 11, 1976, p. 48.

²Ibid., p. 48.

³Ibid., p. 51.

This becomes necessary to her, because:

When the landscape was whole, it was, for me, something outside myself which was supportive. I drew from it a sense of identity and of being a part of something larger. When it began to break up, it became something I had to combat. I had to edit and pervert the reality in order to create an illusion - to see a landscape that exists, for the most part, inside my own imagination.¹

Wallace Stegner writes about an entirely different landscape, the Saskatchewan prairie, a landscape which, in contrast to Long Island, is vast, dramatic, awesome and panoramic. It is a place, he writes, where "you become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging, upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark."² He goes on to describe his journey back to the place he had left forty years earlier and his attempt to recapture his childhood landscape and perspective. Finally, triggered by the pungent smell of wolf willow, memories come flooding back to him. He discovers, gratefully, that "the sensuous little savage [himself as a perceiving child]...has not been rubbed away or dissolved; he is as solid a part of me as my skeleton",³ and recalls how his early relation with the prairie firmly established his own identity as a separate and distinct person:

And he [the sensuous savage] has a fixed and suitably arrogant relationship with his universe, a relationship geometrical and symbolic. From his center of sensation and question and memory and challenge, the circle of the world is measured, and in that respect the years of experience I have loaded upon my savage have not altered him. Lying on the hillside where I once sprawled

¹Ibid., p. 54.

²Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1955, Laurentian Library #59, 1977), p. 8.

³Ibid., p. 19.

among the crocuses, watching the town herd and snaring May's emerging gophers, I feel how the world still reduces me to a point and then measures itself from me. Perhaps the meadowlark singing from a fence post - a meadowlark whose dialect I recognize - feels the same way. All points on the circumference are equidistant from him; in him all radii begin; all diameters run through him; if he moves, a new geometry creates itself around him.¹

Loss of a particular place to which a person has developed a strong attachment may deal a strong blow to his or her sense of identity, personal happiness and ability to function.² Psychologist Marc Fried discussed this phenomenon as it occurred in Boston's West End when it was redeveloped for urban renewal. He described the reaction of many residents who were forced to move as a genuine "grief response" and argued that, at least among the working class people he was studying, "a sense of spatial identity is fundamental to human functioning"³ and that "one of the important components of the grief response is the fragmentation of the sense of spatial identity".⁴

¹ Ibid., p. 19.

22-24 and 34-36

² See also Introduction, pp. 22-24 and 34-36 and Sense of Change, pp. 369 ff. , for reactions to the destruction of places.

³ Marc Fried, "Grieving For a Lost Home," in The Urban Condition, ed. Leonard J. Duhl (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 151-171, reprinted in People and Buildings, ed. Robert Gutman (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 234.

⁴ Ibid., p. 245. See also M. Fried and P. Gleicher, "Some Sources of Residential Satisfaction In An Urban Slum," Journal of the American Institute of Planners 27 (1961), pp. 305-315. Fried argues that it is hard for middle class people "to appreciate the intensity of meaning, the basic sense of identity involved in living in the particular area" (p. 232). Although the working class may feel more strongly, it is hard to reach such a conclusion on the basis of this study. We have seen examples of strong sense of place among people from different classes (including the Toronto Islanders, who are mostly middle class). Information about the working class, however, may be more extensive because it is usually the working class--not the middle or upper classes--who have been subjected to forced relocation (e.g., for urban renewal) and whose reactions have therefore been more readily apparent and documented.

Toronto Islanders know that they are "Islanders". In response to a question about whether there was anything special about living on an island, Hank Hanger said simply and succinctly: "They call us 'Islanders'." This is a fact so obvious to Island residents that they usually fail to mention it as something important or to reflect on just what it means to them. It is perhaps hard to put into words. They use the term all the time and respond to questions about "Islanders"; but they usually do not come out and discuss what being an "Islander" means to them in the same way that they discuss what the Island environment or the Island community means to them. In a sense, this entire thesis is a search for just what it means to be an Islander.

Occasionally, however, Islanders do reveal how important being an Islander is to their sense of identity. Bob Kotyck who was not born on the Island but was drawn to it in 1971 "for personal and psychological things",¹ reflects on its attraction and meaning for him:

It's like a village; you can get a sense of identity and self-worth. We have to make our own activities, too; it's not packaged for us.²

Freya Godard recalls her reactions to the vote of Metro Council on December 11, 1973 to support the policy of demolishing the remaining Island homes in order to extend the park. The decision has since been stalled: but, at the time, it looked as if she was about to lose her home and her community:

I remember one of the things I thought after the vote in December was that I wouldn't be an Islander any longer. I'll be just like everybody else on the subway. I feel my identity very much as an Islander, rather than, you know, my occupation or sex or age or anything like that.

¹Quoted in John Spears, "Islanders' Last Stand," Star, September 2, 1978.

²Ibid.

And Elizabeth Amer, who has lived year-round on the Island for over twenty years with only temporary absences (and during the summers before that), discusses the symbolic value of living on an island and recalls one of the reasons why she was so unhappy during the year she spent in the small town of Newcastle, Ontario:

I think [living on an island] is symbolic of a certain temperament or a certain approach to things and maybe certain people are attracted to the idea of living on an island. And maybe when they get there, they become somehow changed by living on an islandI guess if you want to identify yourself or if thinking of yourself as an individual separate from the mass is important to you, there may be some sense in which living on an island reinforces that effort. I can remember when I lived in Newcastle for a year. I really, I think I've almost taken on the aspect of a professional Islander, because I almost felt I didn't have any identity at all. I almost felt as though I had no identity at all, I so identified myself as an Islander.

Island children are also acutely aware of being "Islanders".¹

Author and former Toronto Island resident, Harry Bruce, describes this strong sense of themselves as being different and special:

Toronto high school teachers used to complain that Island kids were more troublesome than city kids. They were lippier. They were not exactly mean, but they were unruly. Their attitude was annoying. It was said they knew they were special because their hometown [Toronto Island] was special. They never wore shoes in the summertime and, like their parents, they knew they had it good.²

¹Jack Hodgins (author of Spit Delaney's Island, The Invention of the World and The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne, all set partly or completely on Vancouver Island) has lived all his life on Vancouver Island and, in addition to writing fiction, also has taught high school there for more than fifteen years. In a conversation about "Island mentality" (obviously a special interest of his), he observed that "Islanders" have a keen sense of where they are from (a strong sense of identity). He said, for example, that he could always tell who were the children from Gabriola Island (a small island off the coast of Vancouver Island), not only because they tend to be fifteen minutes late in the morning because of the ferry, but, more generally and more importantly, because they always mention Gabriola Island when they speak.

²Harry Bruce, "How To Kill Your Friendly Neighbourhood Slum: (1) Toronto Island," reprinted in The Toronto Book: An Anthology of Writings Past and Present, ed. William Kilbourn (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), p. 271.

Wendy Hanger recalls, with some embarrassment, how younger Island children, at the Island Public School used to, and still do, distinguish themselves from non-Islanders:

When we were kids, we used to say, "Oh, here come the City slickers" and Hank used to call them "picnickers" and I notice my kids, the kids at School, doing this with the Science School kids. And we used to do it. I don't like it. It makes me mad when the kids do it now. But I remember we did it too. You know, they set themselves apart....Ya, you have that [a sense of identity].

Ron Mazza, who grew up on Algonquin Island, says simply, "I was always sort of aware of being an Islander." And Elizabeth Amer, recalling her girlhood acquaintances, confirms this: "People were 'Islanders', you know. They were very conscious of the fact that they were 'Islanders' and that was something special."

Sense of identity is, of course, related to other components of sense of place. A person's sense of identity is nourished and formed, for example, by knowing one's antecedents (sense of history),¹ by belonging to a group or a community (sense of community), by experiencing a particular environment in a particular and intensely personal way (sense of environment), and by exercising a measure of control over one's environment (sense of control). One's sense of identity may even be sharpened by the knowledge that it, or some aspect of it, is threatened (sense of change)--as was the case with both Freya Godard's fear of losing her Island home and Elizabeth Amer's experience of being away from the Island. Why may Toronto Islanders have a strong sense of identity? Some of the main reasons are discussed in the following sections.

¹"To be open to the past," Cole Harris has written, "is, simply, to be open to the roots of what we are." Cole Harris, "The Historical Mind and the Practice of Geography," in Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems, eds. David Ley and Marwyn Samuels (Chicago: Maaroufa Press, Inc., 1978), p. 124.

b. Boundaries, Visibility and Contrast:

Ralph argues that the quality of "insiderness" is a fundamental component of place (and, by extension, sense of place):

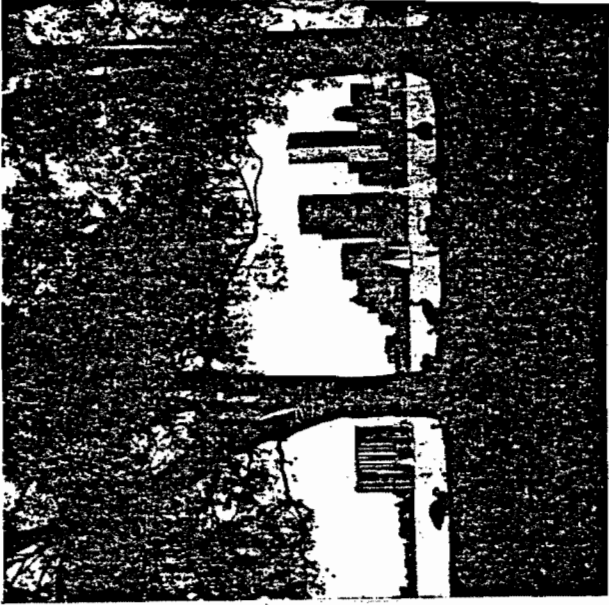
The essence of place lies...in the experience of an "inside" that is distinct from an "outside"; more than anything else, this is what sets places apart in space and defines a particular system of physical features, activities, and meanings. To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place.¹

This sense of "insiderness" is not created only by physical features (like clear boundaries, distinctive architecture, contrast to other physical areas, and so on). It is also created by distinctive environmental life-styles, community values and rituals and intense personal experience with the place. But distinctive physical features certainly help create a clear sense of "insiderness" and a clear sense, as novelist Jack Hodgins phrased it, of "knowing where you are from".

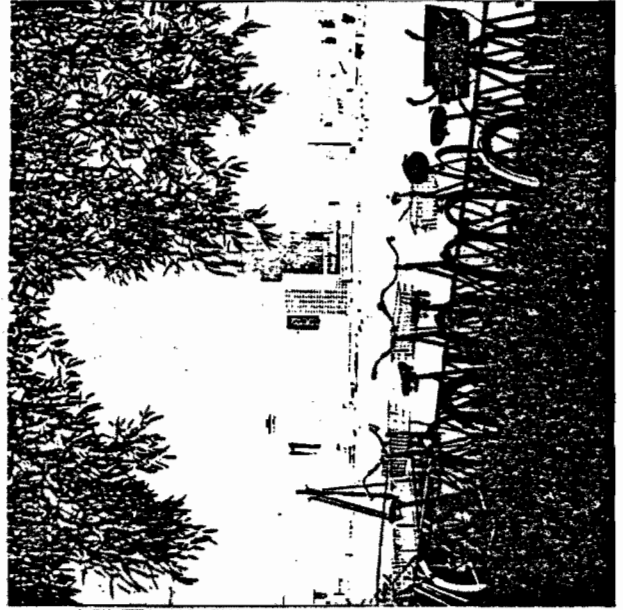
Boundaries are probably the most important single feature. They clearly divide inside from outside and Islander from non-Islander. Toronto Islanders are "Islanders", of course, because they live on an island and the distinguishing characteristic of an island is, of course, that it is surrounded by water. (See Illustration 23.) It is very easy for an Islander, unlike people living in less clearly bounded areas, to know where she or he is from, to know who is an insider and who is an outsider. This clear boundary is emphasized by the fact that the only access is by boat. There are no bridges or tunnels to this island. Everyone who comes there must make a break in his or her journey to board the boat and cross the Bay. Everyone coming to

¹Ralph, Place and Placelessness, op. cit., p. 49.

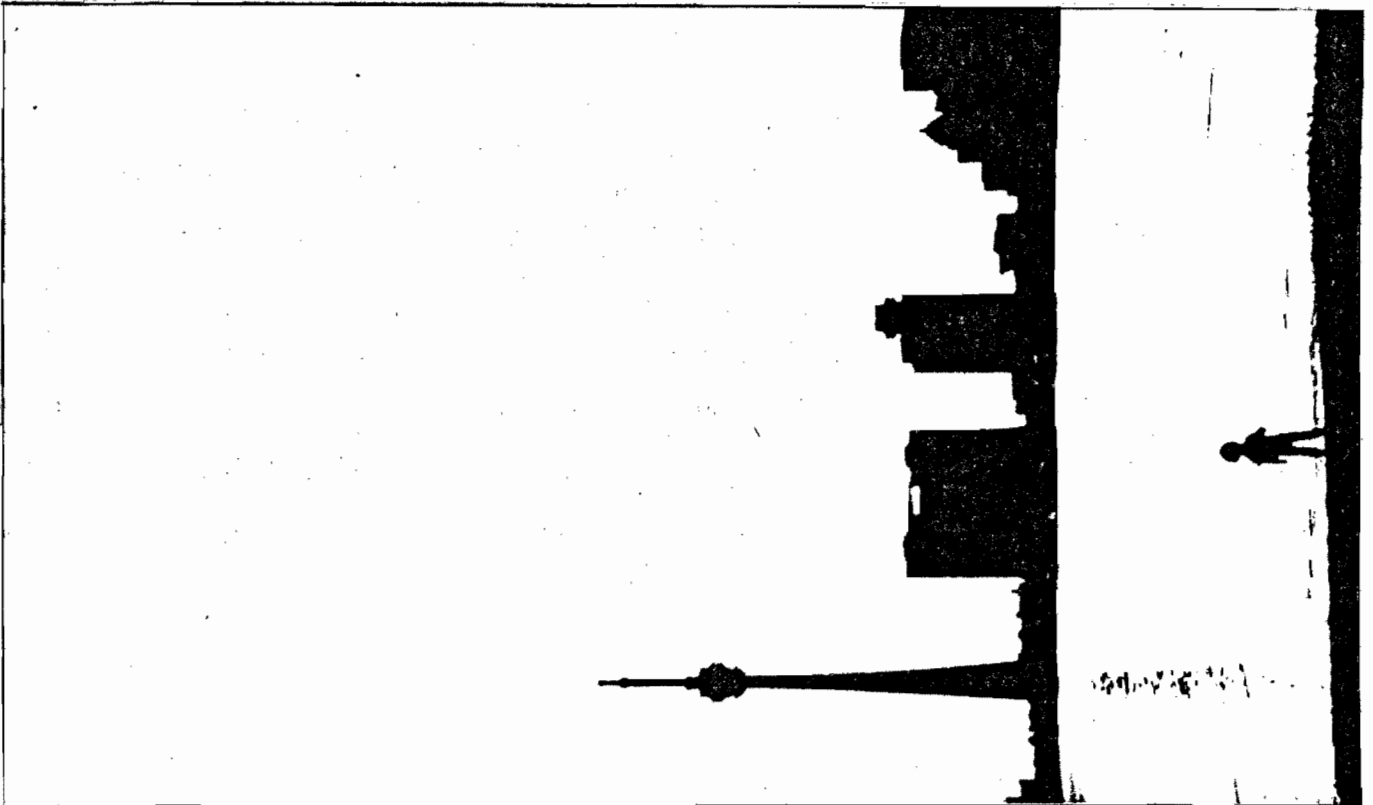
BOUNDARY AND CONTRAST



Toronto's Island Park Neighbourhoods,
cover



Toronto Island Archives



Toronto Island Archives

the Island is acutely aware of its separateness and of coming to a separate and distinct place. All of this forms the basis of an Island identity for both individuals and the community as a whole. (See also Chapter 5, Sense of Community.)

The Toronto Island also has "high visibility"--that is, unlike most urban neighbourhoods, it has a distinct profile, which can be seen in its entirety from the boat as it ploughs across the Bay. Viewing the Island from the boat is one of the most distinctive Island experiences and, like the clear boundaries, reinforces Islanders' individual and group sense of distinctiveness--both aspects of sense of identity.¹

The obvious physical contrast between the Island (with its distinctive wooden cottage architecture, little carless streets, proximity to nature and so on) and the City (with its towering glass and steel skyscrapers, broad car-clogged streets, removal from water, grass and trees, and so on) also clarifies "inside" versus "outside" and heightens Islanders' individual and communal sense of separateness,

¹Yi-Fu Tuan observes that, unlike cities, "Neighbourhoods lack sharp physically defined boundaries, and they have no distinctive skylines that can be seen from vantage points outside themselves." (in "Place: An Experiential Perspective," The Geographical Review LXV (April 1975), p. 156.) The Toronto Island is an exception to this statement, which explains, in part, why Islanders probably have a stronger sense of place and identity than residents of most other urban neighbourhoods. Tuan discusses the value of "visibility" in creating a sense of place and observes: "Although an external event, such as urban renewal, enables a people to see the larger unit [the neighbourhood], this perception becomes vividly real if the unit, in fact, has strong local flavor, visual character, and clear boundaries. Houses and streets do not of themselves create a sense of place, but if they are distinctive this perceptual quality would greatly help the inhabitants to develop the larger place consciousness." Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 171.

distinctiveness and identity. The contrast between self and others, us and them, inside and outside, is a fundamental way of identifying the special characteristics of each and highlighting what makes me (or us) different from him (or them). Yi-Fu Tuan writes on this theme:

To the local people [of a village] sense of place is promoted not only by their settlement's physical circumscription in space; an awareness of other settlements and rivalry with them significantly enhance their feelings of uniqueness and identity.¹

¹Tuan, Space and Place, *op. cit.*, p. 166. Anselm Strauss takes up this theme in a discussion of "the promotion of city reputation" and provides an urban example in the form of boosterism:

Residents' presentation of their city to the world - and to outside groups judged important to the city - is often affected by the specific other cities they take to be rivals. Self and other become linked in a single set of imagery; and both get presented in contrasting or competitive terms.

Anselm Strauss, Images of the American City (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p. 204.

R.D. Laing, discussing the formation and maintenance of individual identity, writes:

Every relationship implies a definition of self by other and other by self....A person's "own" identity cannot be completely abstracted from his identity-for-others. His identity-for-himself; the identity others ascribe to him; the identities he attributes to them; the identity or identities he thinks they attribute to him; what he thinks they think he thinks they think....

R.D. Laing, Self and Others (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p.86.

Tuan, discussing fundamental spatial ideas, writes:

"Back and front" is one antinomic pair, among many, in man's categorization of his world....It is the essence of these binaries that though the two elements of each pair are opposed, they are nonetheless necessary to each other for meaning.

Yi-Fu Tuan, "Geography, Phenomenology and the Study of Human Nature," in Canadian Geographer 15 (1971), p. 188; and in Topophilia, *op. cit.*, p. 16. Tuan argues that "The human mind appears to be disposed to organize human phenomena not only in segments but to arrange them in opposite pairs." All of this contributes to the notion that contrast (physical and/or social) contributes to a definition of an individual's or a group's identity.

In the case of the Toronto Island, with the City skyline looming across the Bay, the difference is given concrete form.¹ (See Illustration 23.)

c. Island Houses:

Perhaps the most visible and concrete way that Islanders affirm and proclaim their individual (and collective) identity is through their houses. They are constantly redecorating and remodelling them and the results, by most urban standards or comparison, are highly idiosyncratic and personal.

Clare Cooper Marcus, dissatisfied with her sociological surveys of people's responses to the design of their houses because she had the nagging feeling that she was "merely scratching the surface of the true meaning of 'the house'",² began to investigate the idea of the "house as symbol of the self". She writes:

Although impossible for most of us to define or describe, we are all aware of the existence of something we call "self": the inner heart of our being, our soul, our uniqueness - however we want to describe it. It is in the nature of man that he constantly seeks a rational explanation of the inexplicable, and so he struggles with the questions: What is self? Why here? Why now? In trying to comprehend this most basic of archetypes - self - to give it concrete substance, man grasps at physical forms or symbols which are close and meaningful to him, and which are visible and definable. The first and most consciously selected form to represent self is the body, for it appears to be both the outward manifestation, and the encloser, of self. On a less conscious level, I believe, man often frequently selects the house, that basic

¹ See also Sense of Community and Sense of Environment for a discussion of the social and physical contrast between Islanders and others--i.e., city, suburbs and small towns.

² Clare Cooper, "House As Symbol of the Self," in Designing For Human Behavior - Architecture And the Behavioral Sciences, eds. Jon Lang, Charles Burnett, Walter Moleski, David Vachon (Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, Inc., 1974), p. 130.

protector of his internal environment (beyond skin and clothing) to represent and symbolize what is tantalizingly unrepresentable.¹

She goes on to discuss the phenomenon of moving to a new house and making it one's own:

But why in this particular box should we be ourselves more than in any other? It seems as though the personal space bubble which we carry with us and which is an almost tangible extension of our self expands to embrace the house we have designated as ours. And as we become accustomed to, and lay claim to, this little niche in the world, we project something of ourselves onto its physical fabric. The furniture we install, the way we arrange it, the pictures we hang, the plants we buy and tend, all are messages about ourselves that we want to convey back to ourselves, and to the few intimates that we invite into this, our house. Thus the house might be viewed as both an avowal of the self - that is, the psychic messages are moving from the self to the objective symbol of self - and as a revelation of the nature of self - that is the messages are moving from the objective symbol back to the self. It is almost as if the house-self continuum could be thought of as both the negative and the positive of a film simultaneously.²

The houses we choose, the way we decorate and arrange them, both inside and out, express not only how we view ourselves (our identity), but also how we wish the rest of the world to view us as well.³ (See Illustration 24.)

The need, or desire, to express our own identity--to "personalize" space, to leave our imprint on the spaces we live in and work in--is a theme taken up by various researchers and designers. Robert

¹Ibid., p. 131.

²Ibid., pp. 131-132. My underlinings.

³Commenting on the many studies which indicate that people in the United States, England and Australia tend to describe a free-standing, square, detached, single family house and yard as their "ideal" house, she suggests that the high rise apartment is rejected, at least in part, because "it is perceived unconsciously as a threat to one's self-image as a separate and unique personality....[It is] not a symbol-of-self, but of a stereotyped, anonymous filing collection of selves, which people fear they are becoming." Ibid., p. 134.

Sommer writes:

When we studied facilities occupied for longer periods such as college dormitory rooms, the need for individual personalization was readily apparent. Students resented built-in desks, lockers, and book cases which could not be moved or altered to meet unique individual needs. The students wanted to be able to express an individual identity in the room through posters, decoration, and even repainting the room to fit mood and personality.¹

There are several reasons why Island houses can be seen as particularly strong statements of personal identity. First of all, living on the Island is relatively cheap. By and large, people who live on the Island choose to live there. They are not excluded from the area because of the high cost of living. Secondly, most Islanders own their houses and therefore can decorate them as they wish (unlike, for example, apartment tenants whose options are limited). Third, for many years the houses have had very low resale value, because of the uncertain political situation. Islanders can therefore give freer rein to self-expression than they might elsewhere. They do not have to judge everything by how it might affect their ability to sell the house sometime in the future. Finally, there is an ethos of expression. Islanders see themselves as individuals--as being out of the mainstream--and personal, even idiosyncratic, expression is not only tolerated, but encouraged by group values. This is buttressed by a "conserver society" attitude which encourages people to "make do" with what they have or can find and to recycle old bricks or windows or found lumber,

¹Robert Sommer, "Looking Back At Personal Space," in Designing For Human Behavior, eds. Lang et al, op. cit., p. 208. See also Robert Sommer, Tight Spaces - Hard Architecture and How to Humanize It (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974). Island architecture is "soft architecture" par excellence - highly personalized, flexible architecture which reflects the needs and desires of the users. The "human imprint" is felt everywhere, rather than obliterated.

all of which can lead to some creative and unusual results.¹ (See Illustration 24.)

This is not to say that every house on the Island looks bizarre. There are many trim, neat, conventional little bungalows (which also reflect the values and personalities of their owners). (See Illustration 24.) There are also some run-down looking houses, which have surprised—even shocked—outsiders (like politicians). Interestingly, some of the outwardly run-down places have beautifully renovated interiors, if somewhat ignored exteriors. Many Island homes, however, do display unusual elements, which range from displaying smaller items like hand-made drift-wood gates and signs, to creating exotic colour schemes, painting large murals on the facade, and building entire rooms with unusual shapes and materials. There seems to be an especially strong desire to proclaim, through the medium of the house, that this is me; this is my house; I found this driftwood or I built this chimney.

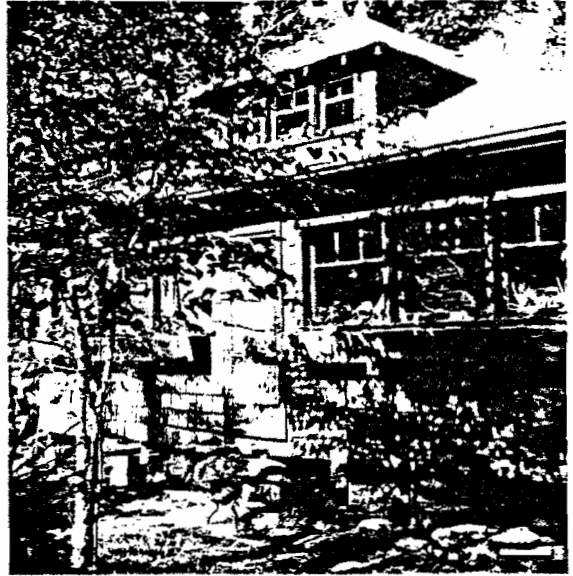
Elizabeth Amer describes at some length how Island houses reflect the people who live in them and some of the qualities of Island houses that particularly appeal to her--their scale, flexibility and opportunities for personal expression:

I feel comfortable in this environment. The house is of a scale that I can enjoy and the houses are very flexible. Well, you can look around you and see. For instance, this summer Clark and Michael renovated this house with found lumber. These were two rooms that we're sitting in and now they're one. And all the beams that you see are beams that they found floated up on the beach in various places and dragged them back here and made the renovations themselves. And there's a certain amount of individuality about the way we [did it].

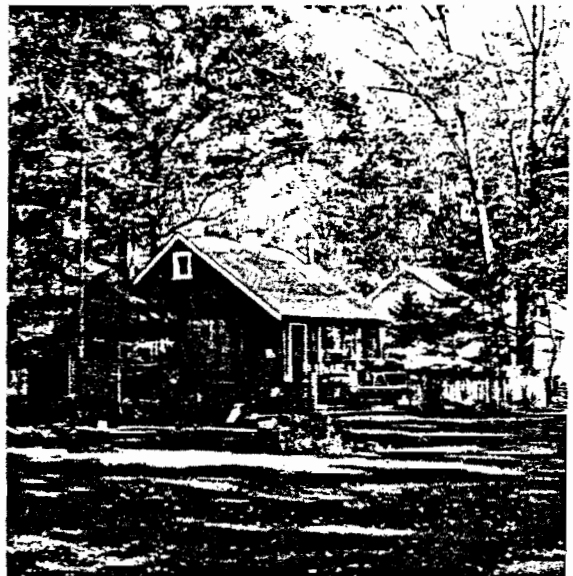
¹See also Sense of Community: "Some Community Values", pp. 203 ff.

ILLUSTRATION 24

HOUSE AS SYMBOL OF SELF



Ward's Island



Algonquin Island

I suppose if you were in a City house, you'd always have to have an eye to resale. And if you have an eye to resale, well, you can't do anything too kooky in the place, because the next guy coming in may not like it and it may prevent you from selling it. But it's never a question of that here. You can't sell it much anyway...you can never make a profit on it or anything like that.

And I just like being able to mould the house to your needs, whatever they may be, and to the changes in your life. And it's really rather pleasant....I think that no matter what your style is, people here can really make the house reflect that and make it express them.

David Harris, who grew up in a large house in North Toronto, describes how his view of housing has changed as a result of living on the Island and how surprised he was by the level of creativity in the houses:

I was surprised that the houses were as creatively done inside, that the workmanship was as [good]. In other words, I guess I had the idea that a nice house had to be an expensive house and it really was interesting to see that rather than spending fifty dollars a square yard for a fantastic panelling, people could go down to the beach and pick up drift wood and creatively put it on their walls....I was surprised by the level of creativity that people had here, of making something with very little.

Jenny DeTolly, who was trained as an architect, has been especially impressed by the creativity of some Ward's Island houses. She describes some of them:

On Ward's I have been in some really, really beautiful houses. The houses there are smaller [than on Algonquin]; they are not in as good condition because a lot of them are built very close to the ground and a lot of them are older than the Algonquin ones. Because, on Algonquin, other than on the periphery, there are mainly houses built from 1948 on, which makes them a totally different kettle of fish. [The Ward's ones] being old and essentially summer cottages.

People who have done things to the insides of the houses have done it in a marvellously loose way. It's had a lot to do with the whole idea of the house having very little return value in terms of selling. And they've tended to make these places a very personal expression of themselves. There's a book called "Hand-made Houses" where they've done much the same kind of thing.

There's one on Ward's, for instance, where they've opened up most of the ceiling and the bare roof boards and roof rafters are exposed.

[They] are really lovely, because, being old, they are beautifully seasoned old wood. Apart from two bedrooms and the bathroom, the ceiling is open to the large roof space. And they've got a little sleeping platform in one part. They've used pieces of driftwood to prop up parts of the roof where it might otherwise sag. And there are hundreds of plants all over the show. You'll find that in most of the Ward's houses that you go into. Just masses and masses of plants all over the place. And a lot of very raggedy, but very interesting, furniture. You will seldom in an Island house find a living room suite, for instance. But you'll find a lot of eccentric, bitty pieces of furniture and chairs and things like that. And very often lots of sunlight. A couple of places in Ward's have put skylights in. And, for instance, Bob and Ann Kotyck have the most super little greenhouse off their bedroom, which is just made up of a whole lot of old windows. The most lovely little space, particularly in wintertime.

d. Island Neighbourhood:

People move to (or choose to remain in) places for a variety of reasons--economics, convenience, social status and so on. To a certain extent, the places we choose to live (when an element of choice is available) reflect our images of ourselves and an attempt to match that image with our image of a certain neighbourhood. The trendy, swinging single who chooses to live in an ultra-modern, high rise apartment complex, the executive-on-the-rise with wife and children who chooses to live in a well-appointed suburb, the professional couple who chooses to live in a chic "white-painted" central city neighbourhood, the college drop-out who chooses to live in a rural commune, all reveal something about themselves by their residential choice. To a certain extent, therefore, residential choice is a statement of personal identity.

Christopher Winters elaborates on this theme. Describing a growing phenomenon of the 1970's--the rejuvenation (or "gentrification") of many neighbourhoods in American cities--Winters identifies a number of distinct neighbourhood types which have emerged in such places as Boston, New York, Washington and San Francisco: the self-consciously

heterogeneous neighbourhood, the chic neighbourhood, the gay neighbourhood, the artists' neighbourhood, the family neighbourhood, and so on. He attributes the emergence of these socially-distinct neighbourhoods, in part, to people's search for and desire to express their personal identity:

[N]eighbourhoods undergoing rejuvenation are particularly likely to acquire a special social character, because these neighbourhoods experience a great deal of voluntary and highly self-conscious in-migration in a very short period. The decision to live in a rejuvenating area is rarely based on economic factors alone. Most socially distinct neighbourhoods result from people's need to identify and express themselves by their residential choice and during the 1970's the possibilities for self-identification have grown luxuriantly....

Many [middle class Americans] incorporate their residential location into the self-identification process. They search for community with propinquity. The result has been the blossoming of urban neighbourhoods reflecting personal identities.¹

As discussed elsewhere, the Island, over the years, has appealed to people who see themselves as independent, self-reliant, "out of the mainstream", not materially ambitious, tolerant, casual, valuers of "lifestyle over workstyle", lovers of nature and the outdoors, and, in some cases, romantic, artistic, and pioneering. Their choice of the Island as a place to live--with its little houses that need constant attention, carless streets, proximity to water and nature, distinctive architecture, heterogeneous community, and generally unusual lifestyle--reflects and reinforces these views of themselves.²

In the following passage, for example, one resident explains how his choice of living on the Island reflects his image of himself as a

¹Christopher Winters, "The Social Identity of Evolving Neighborhoods," Landscape 23 (1979), pp. 8, 14.

²See, for example Sense of Community: "Some Community Values", pp. 203 ff. and Sense of Control: "Inconveniences", pp. 322 ff.

nonconformist, a sort of renegade from Rosedale:

I had to wear a tie from about the age of seven on, as I went to private school, and that was sort of my parents' thing and I really didn't like it. Then I got into photography rather than go into business like my father did, you know, that kind of thing. And I can remember wearing jeans to film in, strictly because I got sick of wearing suits and getting them dirty, because you have to lie down for a shot or you'd be in a dirty area, and that kind of thing. And I started wearing jeans long before they became fashionable to wear. So, I guess I like the rural-pioneer flavour of this community.

I had to spend the summer in the City this last year and I went to Cabbagetown and spent a lot of money to rent a house in Cabbagetown and it was nice and great for [some] people. I'm not knocking it. But, for me, I just couldn't wait to get back to the Island. And I was in, you know, a \$90,000 house. Just didn't dig it. I like a little bit of stained glass--we put in a piece here. But it just seems there's so much in Cabbagetown. It's so art-directed.

Yorkville. I bought a building in Yorkville for my office, way back ten years ago [c. 1965], when Yorkville had, you know, the hippies, at the beginning. And I saw the whole transformation of Yorkville, from what was a nice, casual, relaxed sort of thing, through the let's-go-down-and-see-the-hippies, the streets crowded and jammed with people and coffee houses and all that stuff, go through to what it is now--a place that I would not even bother going to, where it's just plastic and expensive. They've taken any charm that Yorkville had and ruined it, as far as I'm concerned. And that's a bit of what's happening in Don Vale, the Cabbagetown area. It's becoming a bit chi-chi.

I hated Rosedale. I've lived in Rosedale and I found it was too up-tight, the people, too much concern for money and image and that kind of stuff.

By contrasting the Island with these other places, he reveals what he values and how he views both himself and the Island.

e. Personal History and Association With Place:

Sense of place, like sense of identity, is built up over time. "To know a place", Tuan writes, "is also to know the past: one's own past preserved in schoolhouse, corner drug store, swimming pool, and first home."¹ Personal history is an integral part of personal

¹Yi-Fu Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," op. cit., p.164.

identity. As Lowenthal suggests, "Buffeted by change, we retain traces of our past to be sure of our enduring identity."¹ I am who I am because I have done this, thought this, experienced this, and so on. And personal experiences and associations with places are an integral part of this personal history and sense of identity. Places, in fact, are particularly potent symbols of personal history, for one tree or one building or one view or one smell can trigger a flood of memories and personal associations.²

Places gain significance for us by their association with major life events (like the church where you were married, the house where you gave birth, the room where your grandmother died), with yearly rituals (like Christmas or Gala Day or Winter Carnival), with "peak experiences" or "topophilic" experiences of landscape (like standing alone, in mid-winter, on the boardwalk, looking out over ice-covered rocks and an angry lake to the gray horizon and feeling the pounding of the surf and experiencing a mixture of awe, fear, and exhilaration)³ and with gradual accumulation of apparently non-spectacular but personally significant "place memories" (like the shimmer of wet stones on the beach, the view of ships from the bathroom window, the lagoon where

¹David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," The Geographical Review LXV (January 1975), p. 9.

²See, for example, Jimmy Jones' account of a recent visit to Hanlan's Point when seeing one particular tree reminded him of everything that used to be there and certain things that he and friends had done there many years before. Sense of Environment: "Hidden Landscapes", pp. 280-281.

³E. Relph, Place and Placelessness, op. cit., p. 123, writes: "the impact [of such experiences] is deep and can lead to a change in self-awareness or constitute a touchstone by which we can judge all our other experiences of landscape."

you were tossed to learn to swim, the tree where you built a fort, the shed behind which you sneaked your first smoke, the view of the Island as you commute home on the boat, the fence where you saw a hummingbird, and so on). "In particular," Relph writes (and some of these examples indicate), "the places of childhood constitute vital reference points for many individuals."¹ Islanders' interviews are replete with descriptions of personal associations (both childhood and adult memories) of this sort and many are quoted elsewhere.

f. Group Identity:

Finally, a strong element in a sense of identity is the sense of belonging to a group, of partaking of a group identity. Relph writes about the link between individual and community identity:

An authentic sense of place is above all being inside and belonging to your place both as an individual and as a member of a community and to know this without reflecting upon it. This might be so for home, for hometown or region, or for the nation. Such an authentic and unselfconscious sense of place is perhaps as important and necessary in contemporary societies as it was in any previous societies, for it provides an important source of identity for individuals and, through them, for communities.²

Freya Godard describes some of the things that, over time, have made her feel like "an Islander":

Well, it's the sharing of experiences with other Islanders, experiences that are unique to the Island, such as the ferry - especially the winter ferry, where the cabins are very small and cosy and you're jammed in with a lot of people and you see the same people, so you get to know them. And going to Metro Council meetings and sharing that very intense experience with people makes you feel part of the Island. All sorts of group events, large events on the Island, like dances, the Christmas Boutique, where you see more than your next door neighbour or your best friend - a lot of Islanders together doing the same kind of things. I have the feeling very strongly every time I've been away for a while and, coming back, coming off the boat, especially in the winter, and almost every face is familiar. They're all friends....When things happen

¹Ibid., p. 37.

²Ibid., pp. 65-66.

to friends. _____ just died and she was a part of a very large family. Just being able to go share that with them and with a lot of other friends she had made me feel very much part of the community....And things like sandbagging the flat [to keep out high water]....[Without some of the inconveniences] you'd be missing some of the shared experiences of great difficulty or working together to help people. I think there would be less feeling of being an Islander, because it's the experiences which are unique to the Island that give it its own special quality.

The next chapter elaborates on some of the things that bind Islanders together as a group and give them a strong sense of community.

ii. Sense of Identity - Defense of Place:

Sense of identity and defense of place are mutually reinforcing. First, and perhaps most importantly, sense of identity may provide the general motivation for defense of place. Because a threat to a special and personally significant place is also a threat to a person's identity--the sense of who she or he is at a deeply personal level--that person may be strongly motivated to protect and defend that place. Life-long Islander, Ron Mazza, whose father built a house on Algonquin Island after the Second World War and who became Chairman of the Toronto Island Residents Association, illustrates very clearly this important link between sense of identity and defense of place:

It's home, eh?...It's unique, and if you did lose the Island you just wouldn't find another way of life like it anywhere. It's the only one I've known, and I'm going to fight damn hard to keep it.

I can't imagine losing the Island, because so much of what I am is here.¹

On the negative side is the fact that Islanders' strong sense of identity--of being "Islanders" and feeling that this is important, even an enviable mark of distinction--has perhaps made Islanders

¹Quoted in Spears, September 2, 1978, op. cit.

appear to some people (including politicians and journalists) as "arrogant" or "sanctimonious",¹ thereby losing political support. For example, one City Hall insider (who in spite of this, was pro-Islander) made the following comment in an interview after the 1974 Spring Campaign:

_____ [is] known as the archtypical Islander that the suburbs hate ...wealthy, snotty, roughing-it-by-choice, summer-only residence, holier-than-thou...is the attitude. And, notwithstanding the fact that I like _____ a great deal, I think that description is very accurate, because he is incredibly supercilious to people he feels are not up to snuff.

And, on June 24, 1980 (when Metro Council was about to meet to decide whether or not to proceed with evicting Islanders), the Toronto Sun changed its former stand in favour of keeping residents on the Island and recommended that Islanders now be removed. It noted:

Meanwhile those like columnist John Downing remained aggressively unconvinced by the Sun's [former] editorial tolerance [of Island residents] and continue to scold the islanders, watchdog their antics, document their elitism, their arrogance, their disregard for law, their almost unctious sanctimony.²

References to Islanders' "elitism", "arrogance", "selfishness" and so on are found throughout the political history of the issue and derive, at least in part, from Islanders' apparent sense of superiority and assurance that being "an Islander" is something special.

Some politicians, however, understand the importance of the link between place and personal identity and their understanding has shaped their political behaviour. For example, reform alderman (later mayor) and urban activist, John Sewell, who has been involved in a number of campaigns to preserve neighbourhoods threatened by public urban renewal

¹The reaction is not unlike the reaction of teachers to Island children, which was discussed p. 166.

²"Island Farewell," Sun, June 24, 1980.

or private redevelopment projects, discusses his own boyhood neighborhood, the Beach, and the sense of identity he gained from living there and subsequently in Cabbagetown:

It was relatively calm and quiet - it was seen as a place of its own, self-contained. Even when you reached high school and had to go somewhere else in the city, it was like entering foreign territory....It gives you a sense of identity. The neighbourhoods break the city down into units that each of us can deal with.¹

One of the neighbourhoods Mr. Sewell has helped defend is the Toronto Island.

Islanders' defense of place, in turn, has had a marked effect on their sense of identity. Simply experiencing the extreme anxiety of the political uncertainty and attending long, emotional Metro Council meetings with other Islanders, are among those "shared experiences of great difficulty [and] working together" that contribute to feeling like "an Islander", as Freya Godard indicated earlier (on pp. 180-181).

The Island defense has extended and reinforced the notion of house-as-symbol-of-self--of using the house as a means of self-expression--in this case, as a way of proclaiming defiance of Metro and an intention to stay on the Island. Since at least 1974 when the first eviction notices were sent to Islanders from Metro, many Island houses have virtually become personal billboards. The eviction notices were posted in prominent places and left long after the named date (August 31, 1974). And numerous other signs (sometimes created specifically

¹"Introduction to 'The Neighbourhoods' Series," Star, February 10, 1979.

for the house, like "Lake Ward's Yacht Club"¹ and sometimes kept as mementos of participation in various events, like a "Godfrey Is A Home Wrecker" sign from a City Hall demonstration, left in a front window) are displayed. At a rally on July 1, 1980 (where over 2,000 people gathered to protest Metro's decision to evict Islanders as soon as possible after June 30, 1980), Island houses were festooned with signs--like "It Takes A Big Man, Mr. Godfrey, To Change His Mind" or "Let's Ward Off The Sheriff" or "We Will Not Move"--some simply posted for the occasion and others mounted more permanently. (See Illustration 25.)

Finally, participating in the defense of the Island may change a person's sense of who she or he is. For some, being involved forced them to "flex muscles" they did not know they had, as one person put it. They had to do things--like speak in public or confront politicians--that they did not realize they could do. For another, such experiences and such involvement generally "has given me a kind of identity that I didn't have before", as she put it. "It opened up my world, I guess. But only in a limited way, in that it's only here." Beyond this, by participating in the defense of the Island, one is no longer simply an "Islander", but also an "Island defender" or, even, more generally, a "political activist". Some Islanders may welcome

¹This sign is posted over the door of a house which looks out over a wet meadow that from time to time becomes flooded and has been dubbed "Lake Ward's". The yacht club designation is a reference to the fact that the private yacht clubs on the Island are being treated better than the residents by Metro; their leases have regularly been renewed and they would receive compensation if the leases were terminated. Islanders, like this household, have wittily suggested that they should declare themselves to be a yacht club in order to benefit from similar treatment.

the chance to express themselves as fighters and political activists, but for others the transition is more difficult. Shortly after the December 11, 1973 Metro Council vote to terminate Island leases, Bill Metcalfe told his neighbours at a public meeting, "I've never considered myself a political activist, but, by God, if I have to chain myself to my front door ...they'll have to drag me away."¹ In June 1980, Anne Lise de Haas, a thirty year Island resident who did not fight to save her former home on Centre Island, planned to save her Ward's Island home from the most recent threat, "I'm not a fighter by nature but I'll fight for the Island."² And sixty year old Maude Wideman, an Island resident for twenty-three years, was preparing to break the law for the first time in her life:

As far as I'm concerned, we're staying....I feel I'm in it for the fight all the way....If the sheriff nails up the door, I guess I'll just come in the window at night. I'll buy a good strong crowbar....And if the bulldozers come, I'll chain myself to the door. A lock, a chain, and a crowbar--that's going on my list right now.³

In conclusion, defense of the Island, for some, may be the anvil upon which their sense of identity is forged.

¹Quoted in Pat Sykes, "Lastman's 'Conscience' Gives Islanders Hope," Star, December 13, 1973.

²Quoted in Patricia Hluchy and Virginia Corner, "Island Plans Resistance 'People Could Be Hurt'," Star, June 25, 1980.

³Quoted in "'We'll Defy the Law'," Sun, June 25, 1980.

ILLUSTRATION 25

HOUSE AS SYMBOL OF POLITICAL SELF



"Lake Ward's Yacht Club"



July 1, 1980