



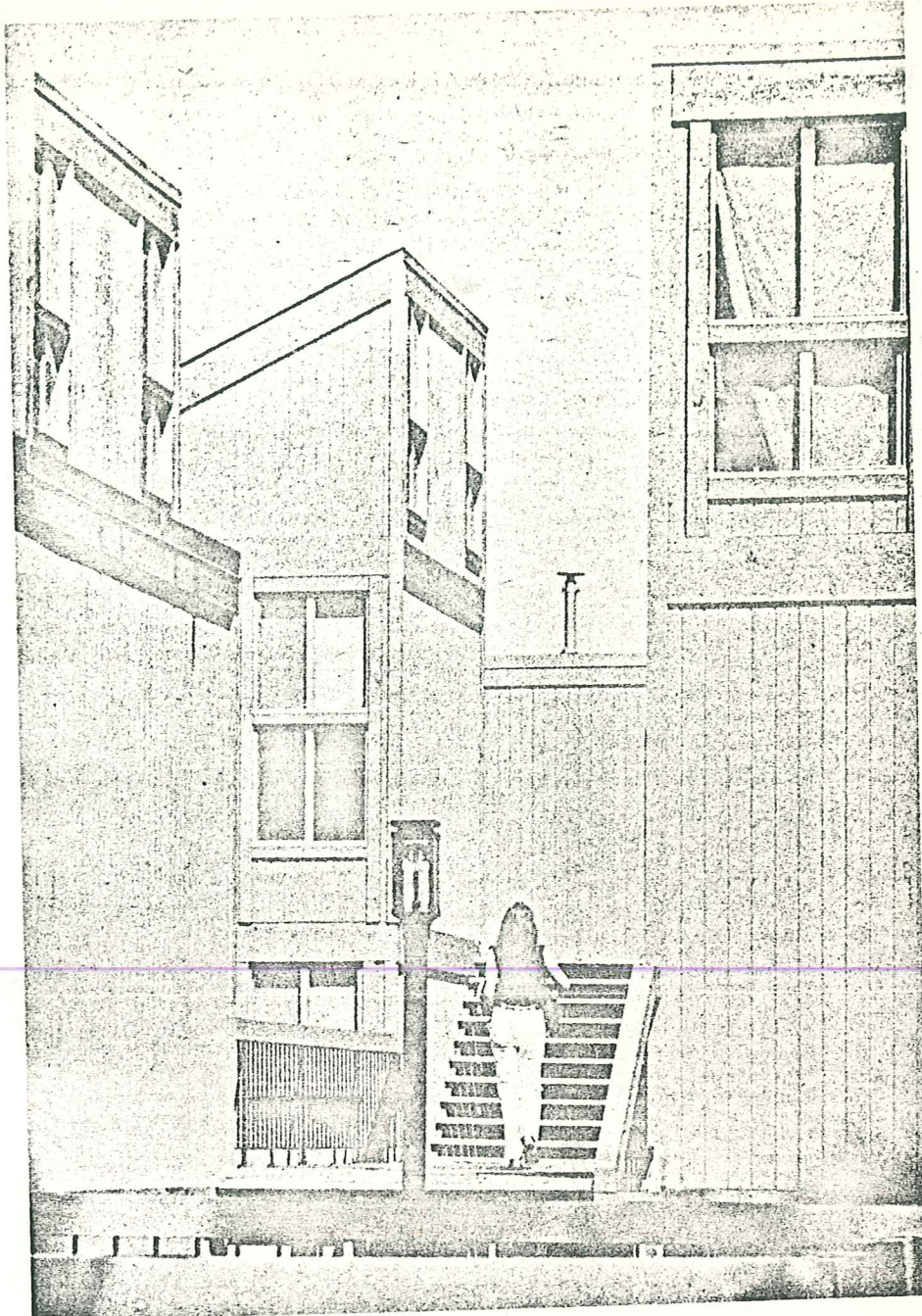
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## Jonathan: Designed to be different

By Fred Anderson

*TreeLoft, an apartment complex in Jonathan that makes use of 13-foot square modules that can be assembled as desired, something in the manner of building blocks.*



**A**LVIN TOFFLER, in his current bestseller *Future Shock*, at one point explains the contrast between the depressing architectural sameness from one supermarket to another and the great diversity of food and packaged products offered on the inside.

The reason, he says, is that "Food and food packaging technology is far more advanced than construction techniques. Indeed, construction has scarcely reached the level of mass production . . . The more advanced the technology, the cheaper it is to introduce variation in output."

As an example of what can happen when new technology is directed toward construction, he cites an apartment house in Washington, D.C. This building was designed by computer. No two floors are alike, there are no straight lines anywhere in the building, and there are 167 different floor plans within a total of 240 apartments.

But the Twin Cities, too, has a budding example of new trends in housing right in its own backyard. Namely, the new town of Jonathan, Henry T. McKnight's projected environmental oasis in the sprawling urban sea of storms, and Chaska's most celebrated suburb.

**A**S A Minnesota state senator some years ago McKnight worked with bills on conservation and preservation.

"The more you get into conservation," he says, "the more you become aware that the problem is one of accommodating more and more people on static amounts of land. My thinking led me to the new town concept, which is actually in some ways rather old-fashioned. We believe in the old-fashioned values of community and neighborliness, which we seem to have gotten away from in the world these days."

"What we're trying to do," he continues, "is take these tried and true values and set them in a natural environmental setting, and then add modern conveniences. Innovation just follows from there, in housing, appliances, financing and so on."

Jonathan is one of the two dozen or so "new towns" presently dotting this country. There are many more abroad, notably in England and Sweden. The main thrust of the new town concept is that of planned, coordinated development aimed at circumventing urban sprawl, environmental blight and uncontrolled growth. Jonathan, on its 8,000-acre site just north of Chaska, 25 miles southwest of the Twin Cities, projects a 20-year growth plan aimed at a population of 50,000 people in five villages surrounding a



central "megapolis" structure; a vast complex which will provide offices, shops and industry, and house 15,000 people, all under one roof.

**T**HE TOWN celebrated its first anniversary of construction and occupancy in mid-October of this year. Presently only one village has been completed. Right now some 700 people live at Jonathan. The press of construction is ever-present, however, and visits spaced only a few weeks apart can reveal new buildings and roads that weren't there before.

A person considering a move to Jonathan has several possibilities in choice of housing. Alternatives include, at the more affluent end of things, custom-built houses offered by the New Town Builders, an association of six private contractors, or the Jonathan Housing Corp. itself. Jonathan Housing, generally speaking, is more involved with housing innovation than are the New Town Builders, although anything at Jonathan can hardly be called staid. But the corporation has final design approval over everything built at Jonathan, and their guiding philosophy is one of preference for modern and contemporary approaches rather than the more traditional.

In addition to custom housing, there are a number of alternatives in rentals. Jonathan Housing has launched apartment complexes of its own for general rental, with other apartment rental housing being undertaken by private contractors under the corporation's auspices. Both low-income rental townhouses and homes for purchase are available as well, with federal rent subsidies available for those whose incomes qualify.

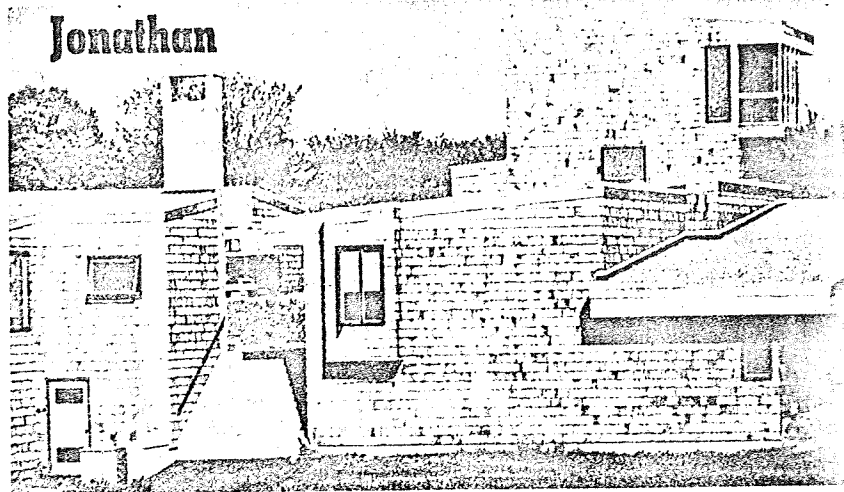
"We are involved in developing and demonstrating innovative systems of construction and business management related to shelter," says Ben H. Cunningham, treasurer and general manager of the Jonathan Housing Corp. At present, their innovative energy is directed primarily toward the concept of non-obsolescent, modular housing.

Toffler's *Future Shock* defines modularism "as the attempt to lend whole structures greater permanence at the cost of making their sub-structures less permanent." In other words, the thing itself, be it a house, institution or TV set, will never become obsolete because its component parts can be readily replaced when worn out, rearranged to form something new, or eliminated entirely and replaced by new component parts that still fit into the same space.

**C**UNNINGHAM explains how he sees this happening at Jonathan. "Let's say your stove breaks. A maintenance man comes to your home and removes the stove module and checks it on the spot. If it's easily fixed he simply repairs it and puts it back in place. If not, he returns it to the shop, installing a new stove module in your kitchen before he leaves. At the shop, the module can be discarded if its defects prove it obsolete. In this case, new model stove modules would be added to inventory, but would still fit your kitchen. Or the original module could be repaired and added to inventory, or it could be modified and added to inventory. Over a given period of time your kitchen is always technologically current, and you're always able to cook with a minimum of down time."

"This concept," he adds, "is easiest to implement with mechanical gadgets. But it can be applied further, to bedroom or nursery modules, for example, that could be added to your home as your need for them develops. This results in a new kind of neighborhood. The houses themselves are organic; they change and grow with a family's needs."

He also sees the housing corporation itself as a continuing institution in which all residents may eventually buy chunks of the company itself while essentially renting the services and shelter it provides. The equity then results as much from being part-owner of the whole system as from owning physical property itself. Consumers are rent-



ing or buying the total services of the entire housing organization, rather than purchasing a completed house from a conventional developer, for example, and then having no recourse but their own independent action when it needs repair or renovation.

But at Jonathan presently the still embryonic state of its development makes full implementation of these ideas financially difficult. "The software side (money and management)," Cunningham says, "needs 200 houses at a time, rather than 20, to really innovate." Much of what has been built at Jonathan thus far are prototype designs for what will follow.

**T**HE TREELOFT apartment complex is an example. It is based on a 13-foot square module which can conceivably be preassembled and fitted together with others as needed, somewhat like big building blocks. An apartment can be tailored to individual specifications. At some point in the future, when sufficient numbers make it financially feasible, a prospective resident may order whatever configuration of rooms he wants in his apartment, and it will be assembled from modules and added to the already existing building.

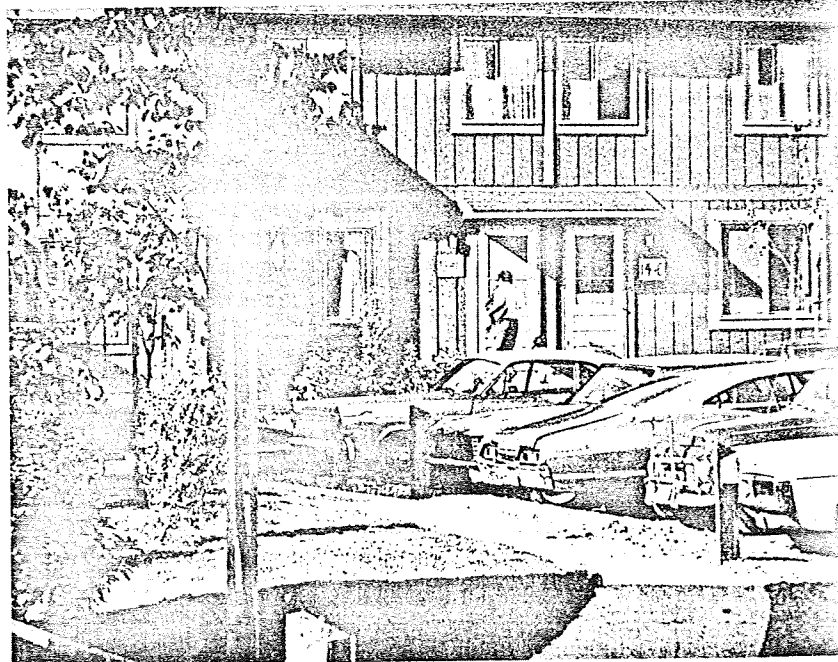
"What we have established up to this point," Cunningham says, "is that the modular box design concept can be marketed. When we can work in greater quantities we can do more with it, offering more options and a better price range."

Treeloft has also served to point out some items of de-

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Henry T. M.



# Jonathan

sign that they feel will need changes when the next one is built. Spiral staircases between levels in the apartments, for example, have proved a bit too narrow.

But housing innovation at Jonathan does not mean experimentation with new materials or techniques of construction so much as it does experimentation with ideas of how present materials and techniques may be best utilized. So far everything at Jonathan is constructed from conventional materials.

This approach seems to hold more promise for true innovation than does using a conventional approach with exotic materials. An urban slum, for example, would still be an urban slum, everything else being equal, if it had been constructed originally out of spun fiberglass instead of lumber and brick.

Jonathan at this stage somewhat resembles a paint-by-number set with only a few colors painted in. You can see the picture if you look carefully, but there are still blank spaces waiting their turn. As the canvas takes on more color over the years to come undoubtedly Jonathan's growth will be substantial, and many current ideas will have materialized. Perhaps Jonathan itself will prove to be as organic as some of its houses, altering and changing its plan as it grows.

**N**OR IS it unreasonable to expect the housing industry in general will adopt a modular concept and other innovations in housing for already existing "old towns." A point of interest is whether or not this will work effectively without the coordination and planning that a community-wide effort such as Jonathan can provide. Or, if successful in the long run, can the new town concept itself be applied to already existing communities? And taken one step further, how feasible is it for a multi-community metropolitan area to merge into one governmental unit, as Winnipeg, Canada, will try next January 1st?

With both housing and local politics and community organization being hotbeds of contemporary discussion, we are likely to see many more tentative solutions in the years to come. The creation of new towns over the past several years has been one intriguing way to avoid existing urban problems—by starting from scratch.

"All of us in the new town business are very keen on sharing ideas and experiences," says Henry T. McKnight at Jonathan. "Because it's a new field, you have to write the book as you go along."

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