

MAYHEM IN HOUSING

BY GEORGE FRED KECK

George Fred Keck was graduated from the University of Illinois in 1920 as an architectural engineer. Since 1926 Keck's private architectural practice in Chicago has been significant. He is probably best-known for his "House of Tomorrow" which received distinction at the World's Fair in 1933.

It was not unusual that the Architectural Record should select for the front-page position of its Building News Section in the February issue Keck's remarkable design and work on "Bruning House." Seldom has there been a project over which the architect was allowed such complete control even to the design of the furniture.—Ed.

The small house construction industry is beginning to build again. It will presently build about 2,000,000 living units averaging about \$3,500 each. The normal yearly demand is several hundred thousand units. Here is an industry comparable to motors and steel in size. It is the most loosely organized disintegrated and neglected industry in the world.

This industry is neglected alike by the architect, contractor, real estate operator, and building material manufacturer largely because the operating practice of these four major departments of the building industry is keyed to a larger unit than the \$3,500 house. To date these departments have attempted to solve this small house problem unsuccessfully in terms of the larger unit.

Failing to solve the problem, the deeply entrenched departments either give up in disgust or fall back upon it whenever larger work stops; consequently, it attracts only those who fail elsewhere. They think of only one alternative—building many units. There are obvious drawbacks here, because this solution requires building speculatively and to individual order. The field to be covered by this department is so enormous and the problems so numerous and diverse and complex that only the briefest mention can be made below of some of the attendant evils in the small-house construction industry. Recommendations for improvement will undoubtedly appear in future articles.

It is doubtful whether anyone connected with this industry has any fondness for the work he is doing, but would be glad to get into other work the moment opportunity knocked. An architect who does small houses is held in disrespect by his fellows as a man of low intelligence who cannot get the bigger plums in the industry. So with contractors, carpenters, masons, plasterers, plumbers, and realtors. We will not here argue that there are no good souls in the industry. There are. Most of them want to do a good job. But they are much like the fifth rate Chamber of Commerce man making an oration about progress—he means well, but he hasn't the slightest notion of the real implications of the word.

Probably the greatest single factor in bad hous-

ing is evident long before construction begins. The promotional type of real-estate operator buys a farm rather close to a town for "development." He lays out streets, alleys, walks, and subdivides the property in a manner that will allow the maximum number of lots and therefore, the largest profit to himself. He paints a glowing picture to the city fathers—hundreds of new homes,—prosperity for the community and has his plan adopted and recorded; in fact, in many cases, the community mortgages its future by bonding itself to install utilities in these badly and selfishly planned real-estate subdivisions, which well-informed economists know cannot be fully occupied by the normal growth of the city for years to come. (There is enough subdivided property in the environs of Chicago to take care of the normal growth of the city for the next 150 years). Such stupidity is beyond comprehension. Fortunately zoning laws have been enacted and city fathers have become wary. Here is fertile ground for a competent city planner, and he is badly needed. The good planner will see that first of all a new sub-division is necessary, a sub-division fits into the whole scheme of the community including transportation, schools, churches, shops, manufacturing and parks.

At the moment, the industry wanders aimlessly in a stupor, stimulated after a fashion by the lumber and coal yards and real estate operators, who exhibit fifth-rate houses from catalogues printed by the manufacturers of building materials. An architect is not called in because it is axiomatic that he is an unnecessary expense, a trouble-maker, an interferer. The field is not financially attractive because the builder is practically unable to make a profit—he can never deliver a good house for an owner interested in cheap prices. He is more or less a "defeatist," accepting the job with the knowledge that he will not and cannot please the owner and that the transaction will inevitably end in a disagreement. The profits in such an undertaking are taken by the financing agents, the real-estate interests and the material concerns. The small contractor periodically finds himself in receivership. The jerry-builder, on the other hand,

(Continued on page 83)

George Fred Keck, prominent modern architect, known through his "House of Tomorrow" at the Century of Progress 1933 sees The New Bauhaus as the guiding genius in the development of the new technique in construction.