

# Attics, Repositories of the Past, Are Themselves Passing

By DANIELLE FLOOD

There are times when Kathy DiGiovanna feels as if she's living beneath Grand Central Station. They are the times when her children are riding a 16-foot-long, two-foot-high, four-car train on a 50-foot circular track—in her attic.

"The attic holds the whole history of the house, in a way," said Mrs. DiGiovanna.

It is where Claude Kirchner, a former owner of the DiGivonnas' 55-year-old Milbrook, Conn., house and ringmaster in the nineteen-fifties of the children's TV program, "Terrytoon Circus," left the battery operated choo-choo.

"Kirchner left stuff there. The peo-

ple we bought the house from left stuff there. And I suppose when we leave, we'll leave stuff up there," said Mrs. DiGiovanna. "It provides a continuity for the house."

It also provides a continuity for her life and for the lives of her husband and four children. Her attic shelters clothes, tin cans, boxes of photos of her "family growing up," boxes containing each year's school work of each of her children, evidence that Mrs. DiGiovanna is an irrepressible collector.

The attic. Up and away. Secluded. For the child, a place beyond the mother's eye—harbor of a first puff or, perhaps, a first kiss. For the stamp collector, seamstress, painter, reader, writer, the retreat their vocation or avocation sometimes requires.

And then it is a place, traditionally, where things are saved, and once saved, become things of the past, as the thoughts that accompany them become memories. Things and thoughts to be discovered and rediscovered. A place where new ideas are born of combinations of old ideas. A place "of dust and dreams," as the poet Eliza-

beth Akers Allen wrote. But the attic, a link with the past, is itself becoming a part of the past, is giving way to economy by both builder and buyer.

This is not to say there are no attics at all; there are exceptions. And attics, their meaning and function, whether romantic or practical, are relative to whom you talk with, be they architects, historians, builders, psychologists, or solitude and treasure seekers. The attic is a space not strictly defined.

Several dictionaries state that the attic is "the part of a building immediately below the roof." What is the difference between the top floor of an apartment building, a penthouse and an attic? "I don't know," several architects and builders replied.

Ward Bennett, a designer, says the term, "attic, may be applied to a residence (house)" and a penthouse usually has a terrace; "otherwise the top floor of an apartment building is simply the top floor." Once an attic is converted into a living space, say, a bedroom, the space is no longer an attic, he says Mr. Bennett has a duplex

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# Attics, Keepers of Past, Themselves Passing

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apartment just beneath the gabled roof of the Dakota, at 72d Street and Central Park West. Some would call it an attic. He calls it his "pyramid tower."

Jerome Larson, an architect of Red Bank, N. J., says that "in older houses, the whole third floor is an attic; when I was a boy, my bedroom was an attic."

To many the attic is a state of mind. It is "a room in time or space," as one architect put it. For some an attic can be the unoccupied corner in the thrift shop, or the antique store. It can be an "environment" capable of fostering creative thoughts in children, says Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, the child psychologist. A room where memorabilia are stored provides the makings of "an environment a child creates for himself," he said.

For Fred Rudin, of Atlantic Beach, the attic in his 50-year-old house is "sort of like a ship's walk" because its windows face the ocean and it is the highest vantage point in the house.

To Mrs. DiGiovanna, it is the best place for her children, ages 6 through 12, to play "Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots," (toy robots that fight), because they are noisy. She also considers her attic the most informal of the 15 rooms in the house. "It doesn't ever have to look nice," she said. "The clothes bags and boxes are safe, dry and secure. You don't have to worry about it being clean, neat, and observable by people who come into the house."

It is this type of attic, traditionally used for storage, that seems to be yielding to thrift in terms of time, money and space.

"The attic isn't what it used to be," said Milton Smithman, staff vice president for builders' services of the National Association of Home Builders. The old attic with plenty of head room is "typically what we call dead storage areas; where you put things and forget about them," said Mr. Smithman.

"That's not needed anymore," he continued. "The public in this country has become more transient in recent years. They don't live in one house very long. Seven or eight years is the average move time. People just don't collect things like they used to. We've gotten into a market situation where people are more concerned with utilization of space. Put a steep roof up there and it's not a good marketing tactic."

"Since World War II, any attic built with ample head room was built with expansion in mind," he said, "like the ones Levitt built."

"I can't imagine an attic in Levittown still being an attic," said Edward Cortese, a vice president of Levitt Industries. Mr. Cortese estimates that 90 percent of the attics that William Levitt left unfinished in the Long Island houses he sold in the late forties for about \$8,000 have been converted into one or two bedrooms. "They've added dormers and extensions and northern light exposures and radically changed the appearance of the original Cape Cod design," he said.

Levitt introduced this space into his homes as an "expandable ingredient," Mr. Cortese said, "not so much for storage space; that's not needed anymore. Like the passing of the convertible car, it was necessary when you were driving 35 miles an hour and there was no air conditioning and you could put the top down; now everyone is driving 65 miles an hour and they have air conditioning."

"Consider what was kept in the attic our grandparents had," he said. "My parents never threw out anything; it was like tearing things out of their hearts. Old photographs, toys. Nowadays, for some reason, we're not as attached to things. Drive by the neighborhoods in suburbia and you'll see things thrown out by the curb, tag sales, garage sales."

"Maybe one of the reasons why people aren't saving things like they used to is that things are so easily disposable today; the furniture you buy these days doesn't last a decade," said Mary Jane Meyer of Manhattan, whose recollections of an attic she knew 50 years ago indicate that attics may not only reflect, but affect, some life styles.

The attic—"You can always put one more thing in it," said Miss Meyer, 55. "Attics make collectors of people who wouldn't ordinarily be collectors."

Until the age of eight, Miss Meyer, one of five children, played hide and seek in the attic of the 55-room house that is now the Maria Regina High School in Elmsford, N.Y. "During nap time," she said, "reading was forbidden; so we would sneak up in the attic to read with flashlights."

"That place has such memories for me," she said. "In those days, everyone, rich or poor, everyone used to use their attics for drying soap. Great big cakes of yellow brown soap. Kirkman's bar soap. You bought the freshly manufactured soap that was wet and you unwrapped the bars and built them into pyramids with air spaces between them and they dried out in the attic. That way they lasted twice as long. Wet, it dissolves twice as fast." In those days,

These days, coupled with the cost of

paying someone to repair a shingle falling from a steep incline is the expense of sturdy construction itself, construction that would permit the floor of an attic to bear heavy weight. Many builders are opting for prefabricated, lightly constructed trusses for houses. An attic that is meant to be accessible can "raise the price of a house maybe \$2,500," said Stuart Wilkes, executive officer of the Home Builders Association of Fairfield County. "It can keep people from buying a home."

In many cases, the attic is also disappearing from the new homes of those people for whom cost is not a major problem. In some custom homes, architects like to raise ceilings to the roof, so to speak. They create cathedral ceilings by using what would have been an attic area to elicit a spatial effect.

"One of the first things Frank Lloyd Wright did was throw out the attic," said David DeLong, a professor in the historic preservation division of the Columbia School of Architecture and Planning. "To him, attics and basements were part of the paraphernalia of another architecture, eclectic architecture. Everytime you build space and don't use it all the time, it's a luxury."



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