

# ART TO ZOO

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## Talking Houses— What They Can Tell You about the People They Shelter



National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

A Cheyenne camp around 1870. Most of the early photographs of Plains Indians were made in the late nineteenth century, several decades after the period described in this issue of ART TO ZOO. For this reason, the photographs you see on these pages include objects and clothing that most Plains Indians of a century and a half ago would not have had. For example, if you look very carefully at this picture, you can see the edge of a wagon wheel peeking out from behind one of the tents.

Houses shaped like onions . . . or covered with such bold designs that the door is hard to find . . . houses with floor plans resembling the human body . . . three- and four-story mud houses that look like giant sand castles . . . "sleeping bag" houses so small that one person lying on his back can barely slide in . . . underground houses . . . houses built on stilts over water . . . on sleigh runners . . . in trees . . . on boats . . .

Houses come in an almost infinite variety of forms, but the purposes behind them are universal. Human beings everywhere need protection from bad weather and danger—a place to be safe. They also want a place to live that enables them to organize their everyday lives in harmony with the way they view the world.

This issue of ART TO ZOO explores how you can help your students learn to look closely at houses from other cultures, and in the process find intriguing hints about the lives of the people who built them.

The Background information starting on this page describes one culture and its housing—the Plains Indians of a century and a half ago, and the tipis they built. This material is followed by a Lesson Plan suggesting how students can examine the information and draw conclusions from it, using an inquiry approach.

The most direct way to put these materials to use is in a social studies unit on Native Americans. However, the approach outlined in the Lesson Plan can easily be adapted to a study of almost any people in any historical period. You might even want to consider the possibility of making houses an ongoing theme in a course on American history or world cultures, introducing each new period or society through its housing. You can base this discussion on pictures of houses, as the Lesson Plan in this issue does. Or you may be able to show your students actual houses, or museum models and dioramas, in your own community. If you are in Washington, D.C., with your class, you can see a real Arapaho tipi—and models of many other houses from around the world—in the anthropological exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History.

Houses make a good point of entry into a society, because they are a tangible product of both the physical and mental lives of the people who built them. Houses also have the advantage of being grounded in the familiar: your students can use their own homes as a basis of understanding and comparison.

Before looking at how you might approach the subject of houses with your students, let's take a trip to the Plains—for some basic background information.

### Background: A Visit to the Plains\*

This journey will be a mind-trip—like a movie that you watch in your imagination. You will be able to move around freely, but will remain invisible to the people you see on your travels. You will be accompanied by an invisible guide who will give explanations.

And now, you're ready to be on your way. . . .

#### The Basics of Survival

. . . You're off! It's about 150 years ago, and you are rapidly flying over the Great Plains. You begin your trip over the tall grasses of the prairies. As you move through the air from east to west, the land slowly rises from sea level, and the climate becomes drier. You are moving along quite low. The only breaks in the smoothness of the landscape are occasional valleys gouged out by rivers. Along these valleys, trees grow (because of the moisture the rivers provide), but elsewhere the land is dry, and the vegetation is mostly short grass and shrubs. However, as you approach the western end of the region, the land rises and becomes more rugged and woody.

Your guide tells you that the weather on the Plains is extreme and variable, with scorching summers and bitterly cold winters. Blizzards, tornados, hailstorms, and flash floods are common. You have to be ready for anything.

Now, however, it is a beautiful sunny afternoon in June. As you fly, you catch glimpses of the animal life that abounds below: deer, antelope, bear, elk and many other creatures . . . including . . . BUFFALO!

The buffalo was the fundamental material resource for the Plains Indians. It provided food, shelter, clothing, utensils, and chemicals. . . . The Indians ate the

animal fresh and preserved its meat by drying it. They manufactured tipi covers and robes from its hide, and thread and bowstrings from its sinew. They made water buckets from its belly, and stuffed saddles with its hair. They used buffalo brains as a tanning agent, and buffalo fat as a base for paint. They transported hot coals from place to place in buffalo horns and prepared tools from the bones. They used the tail as a flyswatter, made runners for sleds from the ribs, and burned the droppings (called *buffalo chips*) as fuel. These are just a few examples. The Plains Indians used the buffalo in over two hundred ways!

At the time of your visit, more than fifty million of these animals are roaming the Plains. Now, as you look down, you catch sight of a huge dark sea streaming across the green landscape, almost blackening it—a buffalo herd! And what are those shapes moving in among the buffalo? You swoop down closer to see: they look like horses. . . . They look like horses with riders. . . . That's what they are. . . . You recognize them now: these are the people you have come to learn about—Indians, Plains Indian hunters.

Watching from above like this, you are appalled to see how dangerous the hunt looks. The buffalo herd, frightened by the hunters, is stampeding, thundering along as fast as the galloping horses. Your guide tells you that adult male buffaloes can weigh as much as small cars—and you see that their horns are gigantic. A hunter has no protection as he rides among these speeding animals. He can easily be gored, or knocked off his horse and trampled to death.

The men do not have reins in their hands. They are using their knees to hold on and guide their horses. The horses are brave too, and clearly know their job: as soon as a hunter shoots an arrow, his horse swerves out of the way of the buffalo.

But now you see a horse stumble. . . . Has it caught its foot? . . . Is the hunter on its back about to be thrown? Instinctively, you close your eyes. . . .

As you fly on this way, you listen to your guide describe how this survival pattern based on horseback buffalo hunting shaped the Plains Indians' lives.

**Nomadic life on the Plains.** The Plains tribes you are learning about did not live in one place, but moved around, each tribe within its own territory, following the buffaloes' movements. In the summer, the mating season, the buffalo formed huge herds; the rest of the year, they scattered more thinly over a very wide area.

Not surprisingly, the Plains Indian hunters moved in a similar pattern. For several weeks during the summer, the whole tribe assembled into a single large encampment; then, when the buffalo herd broke up, the members of the tribe dispersed into smaller groups called *bands*. A band most often numbered between one hundred and two hundred people, who traveled, camped, and hunted together—a mobile village. (And when resources were particularly meager, the band itself might temporarily split up into even smaller hunting groups.)

This way of life was not easy. The climate was harsh and fickle, the buffalo and other game often elusive, and physical danger a constant threat. You had to be skillful and brave, and never relax your vigilance.

But it was a way of life that paid off. The groups who hunted the buffalo this way became more prosperous than they had ever been. In the decades before

*continued on page 2*

\*The region that we will be referring to as *the Plains* is the vast center of the North American continent—bounded in the north by the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba; in the south by the Gulf of Mexico; in the east by the Mississippi River; and in the west by the Rocky Mountains.

Throughout this Background section, we will be speaking of *Plains Indian society*. This term should not mislead you into thinking that Plains Indian culture was either uniform or static.

The Plains region included many different nomadic tribes (like the Blackfoot, the Crow, the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Arapaho, and the Kiowa—to name just a few). There were many differences among these peoples—but there were also important similarities,

and it is on these that we will, for clarity's sake, be focusing.

(There were also non-nomadic tribes in the area, but their lives are another story, which we will not be telling here.)

It is also essential to bear in mind and to make clear to your students that Plains society was in the midst of profound and rapid change. In fact, the way of life described in this issue had reached its full development only in the early 1800s, but by then the seeds of its destruction were already planted—and growing fast.

Nowadays, the descendants of the Plains Indians live in the same types of housing as other Americans do. But they still sometimes set up tipis for special occasions.

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your visit, their success had attracted many tribes into the region. Now these tribes were living side by side there, competing for the area's resources.

**Warfare and social status.** One result was that raiders from hostile neighboring tribes were constantly on the lookout for a chance to launch surprise attacks. It was a responsibility of the men in a group to protect their group against this danger.

Warfare on the Plains was quite different from our own warfare today. It seldom involved long campaigns, but consisted mostly of quick raids carried out by small groups of men. These raids had limited goals—to avenge a death, for example, or to steal horses. Casualties were very low by modern standards.

A particularly striking feature of Plains Indian warfare was the scoring system that had evolved around it. Under this system, a warrior received points for acts of bravery. These gave him the right to wear certain insignia, like feathers notched in a particular way, to show what he had done.

But decorations were not the only reward for such acts of courage. A reputation as an outstanding warrior was an important route to social success. Through his military accomplishments, a young man could earn the right to join a warriors' society (a men's association that served as a military organization; as a social club; and, on occasion, as a police force). He could paint pictures of his exploits on his tipi or on his robes. He was allowed to perform certain roles in ceremonies. And—if he also showed good character in other ways, by being generous and wise, for example—he could eventually become a leader.

The qualities that made a man a good warrior were not very different from those that made him a good hunter: expertise with a bow and arrow, horsemanship, cunning, and courage.

**Tipis and physical survival.** The qualities that made a tipi a good dwelling for warriors were not very different from those that made it good for hunters: in both cases, what was needed was a structure that was quick to put up and take down, and easy to transport from place to place—permitting its occupants to respond quickly to the movements of enemies and of buffalo. The mobility that tipis gave them was essential in helping the Plains Indians meet two basic requirements for survival: protection from their enemies, and a supply of food and raw materials.

Tipis were also a big help in meeting a third survival requirement: protection from harsh weather. Tipis did this job so well that they are usually considered the most sophisticated tent ever built.

Your guide describes some of the clever (and energy-efficient) climate-control features of tipis—speaking quickly, so as to finish before you reach the circle of real tipis that you can now see far ahead of you, near the horizon.

- **Orientation.** Most tribes faced their tipis eastward, so that the doors opened away from the direction in which the wind was usually blowing. This helped prevent drafts.

- **Overall shape.** Tipis were not perfect cones. They were tilted slightly, to make it difficult for the wind to blow them over. Tipis were very stable during storms, and even during tornados. To increase their stability even further, they were held by an anchor rope.

- **Tipi cover.** To close up any gaps that might let drafts in, the base of the tipi cover was weighted down by rocks where it lay on the ground. In hot weather, the cover could be rolled up three or four feet, opening the tipi to breezes.

- **Smoke flaps.** These were the parts of the tipi that stick up like ears near the top. They worked the same way as do the lapels of a coat: moving the poles attached to them adjusted their angle to keep wind and rain out of the fire. The smoke hole could even be closed completely in a downpour or in very cold weather. (The tipi would then become smoky inside, but it was so well designed that opening up the smoke hole for just three minutes was enough to air it out.)

- **Tipi lining.** The tipi lining, which hung from about shoulder height down to the floor, was attached inside, all around the tipi cover.

This lining served several purposes. It kept drafts and rain from coming in under the cover. It kept dew from condensing on the inside wall. And it provided extra insulation by creating an air space between itself and the tipi cover (this space was sometimes loosely stuffed with dry grass in cold weather to increase insulation even more).

This air space between lining and cover also helped ventilate the tipi: warm air inside would rise through this space, helping the fire draw, and helping keep the tipi clear of smoke without lowering the temperature where people were sitting.

(The lining also acted as a safety screen. At night, people sitting around a fire inside an unlined tipi cast shadows on the tipi cover. An enemy lurking outside could shoot people by aiming at their shadows. A lining prevented these shadows from being visible from outside.)

- **Auxiliary structures.** In summer, when the weather

was hot, a shelter could be built nearby. This provided shade and a place to cook without heating up the tipi. Sometimes a separate tipi just for cooking was set up.

In winter, a windbreak was sometimes built around a tipi or even around a whole encampment.

### Domestic Necessities and Amenities

Now you are zooming in low, approaching the tipi village. You are beginning to be able to see it quite clearly: the tipis are pitched in a circle, with an opening on the circle's eastern side. In the center of this circle is a smaller ring of tipis that your guide says are for special purposes—the chief's tipi, the tipi where the tribal council meets, tipis belonging to warrior societies, and some special painted tipis that your guide promises to tell you more about later.

(Your guide mentions that if you had visited a Plains Indian village in winter, you would have seen quite a different sight. At that time of year, there would have been fewer tipis, and they would probably not have been pitched in this formal pattern.)

. . . Now you are landing. . . Now your feet are on the ground. . . You can hardly believe that you are standing here—in the past, a century and a half ago—looking up at a real tipi.

It is paler and bigger than you had expected—the lightest of cream colors, and definitely the size of a house rather than of a single room. You can't resist reaching out to feel how soft the cover is. . . .

But why wait? The door is open. . . . Go right in . . . no one is home.



Not exactly a common structure! This gilded barge once belonged to the King of Burma.

National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution



A Zulu village. Houses like this are still built.

National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

## Lesson Plan

### Step 1: Introducing Houses

Introduce the topic of houses by asking the class: what are houses for? (People need houses for protection from bad weather, and from animal and human enemies.)

Do all people build the same kinds of houses? What are some of the different kinds of houses that your students can think of? (Log cabins, apartments, igloos, trailers, and houseboats are just a few.)

Now have the children examine the houses shown on this page. Ask them to point out some of the ways

You look around—what a cozy place!

The first thing you notice is the glow that fills the tipi as the late afternoon sun shines through its upper wall. What you notice next is how good the tipi smells; someone, your guide tells you, has been burning sweet grass in the fireplace near the center of the room. And you notice how soft the floor looks, with its covering of many kinds of fur. . . .

You feel like settling right down in this comfortable, cheerful place—like stretching out on one of the buffalo hide beds along the walls—or maybe sitting up and relaxing against one of the willow-rod backrests at either end of the beds. . . .

Your guide explains that because the people who live here need to be able to move at short notice if necessary, they avoid accumulating too many possessions, and they keep those they do have in good order. Everything has its place.

Each family member has his own area of the tipi where he can keep his clothing and personal possessions and stash away his sleeping robe during the day. Much of this property is stored in big rawhide envelopes painted with fancy designs. Other things are kept in soft quilled\* saddlebags or pouches, many of which hang from the tipi poles. There are special bags for different items such as sewing tools and toilet articles.

\*Quilled means decorated with dyed porcupine quills that have been sewn on.



This is not an unusual European castle, but an African home made of mud. It was built by the Dogon, in Mali.

National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution



Intricate decorations like the ones on this house front are typical of the Hausa people.

(visible in these photographs) that these houses differ from the houses they themselves live in—and from each other. Then ask why there are so many different forms of houses, when what human beings need to survive is the same everywhere. (Environments differ from place to place: the weather varies and there are different dangers. The available construction materials, labor, and technologies also vary. So do people's values, which their houses express.)

### Step 2: Making Guesses

Tell the children that they are now going to study one example of how a people's culture is revealed in the

### Worksheet

Answer Evidence for Answer What does this help you guess about the Plains Indians' way of life?

#### OVERALL STRUCTURE:

- How big was a tipi?
- What were tipis made of?
- How long did it take to put up a tipi?
- Who built tipis—men, women, or children?

#### INSIDE A TIPI:

- How many rooms did a tipi have?
- What furnishings were usual in a tipi?
- How did a tipi provide light and air?
- How did a tipi help people stay comfortable in bad weather?
- How did people store their things in a tipi?

#### PEOPLE AND TIPIS:

- Who owned a tipi?
- Who usually lived together in one tipi?
- Did tipis show distinctions of rank? If so, how?
- Did tipis provide privacy? If so, how?
- Did tipis reflect people's spiritual beliefs? If so, how?

#### TIPIS AND THEIR SURROUNDINGS:

- Which way did a tipi face?
- How were tipis arranged in a camp?

The women's belongings are stored on the tipi's south side, where most of the food and household articles are also kept. At the back, in the place of honor, sacred objects are stored. Your guide explains that men often keep their weapons on a tripod near the doorway, where they can grab them fast in case of enemy attack.

A water bag made from the lining of a buffalo's belly is hanging from a tipi pole near the entrance, in easy reach of anyone who is thirsty. There is no bathroom, your guide tells you; people just go outside to the prairie or the underbrush near the camp. This does not cause sanitation problems, because the location of the village changes so often.

**Women's roles.** Your guide points out that when you look at a tipi, you are seeing a house built by women. Once her husband has killed enough buffaloes to provide skins for the tipi cover, his contribution to making the tipi is over. From this point on, women carry out all the steps that change a pile of animal skins into a handsome new home.

Tipi-making was an especially respected women's skill among Plains Indians. Creative abilities were also very highly regarded.\*

\*When a Plains woman created a pair of elaborately quilled mocasins or painted intricate designs on a rawhide container, she was making an object for practical use in everyday life. It wasn't part of her way of thinking to conceive of *art objects*—of a class of items with no purpose but to provide aesthetic pleasure. But of

In some Plains groups, women had skill-related societies rather like men's warrior societies—reflecting the fact that being a good worker was considered a basic virtue for a woman, just as being a good hunter and warrior was for a man.

Only certain women in certain tribes belonged to this kind of society, your guide tells you, but *all* women in *all* tribes had many, many responsibilities in and around the tipi. They put the tipi up and took it down again when moves were made. They unpacked and set up the furnishings and packed them again when the time came to shift camp. They prepared food; cared for children; gathered wild fruits and vegetables; and made and decorated clothing, shoes, containers, and other household items. Girls learned the many skills involved by helping their mothers and by playing at women's activities.

A woman's reputation as a housemaker and housekeeper was very important to her. It was an important basis of her standing in the community, just as her husband's reputation as a warrior and a hunter was of his.

Neither sex was regarded as more important than the other. Men and women were thought to be two complementary aspects of a single whole—after all,

course we now do have such a category, so it feels natural to us to classify as art many of the objects that the Plains craftswomen created with such skill. In the context of *our* way of thinking, women were the main artists in Plains Indian society.

one couldn't exist without the other, and everyone knew that the skills of both were necessary in daily life.

**Tipis and social values.** Physical comforts are only one part of life at home. Everyday interactions with people are just as important, and in a tipi, your guide explains, these involve a number of formal rules of behavior.

For example, you don't sit, or sleep, or move just anywhere. The man of the tipi usually sits opposite the door, and it is an honor to be invited to sit next to him. The other men usually sit along the north side of the tipi, and the women along the south side. When you come in the door, the polite way to go to your place, if you are a man, is by turning right; and if you are a woman, by turning left. It is rude to pass between another person and the fire; you are supposed to pass behind the person, who should lean forward to let you by.

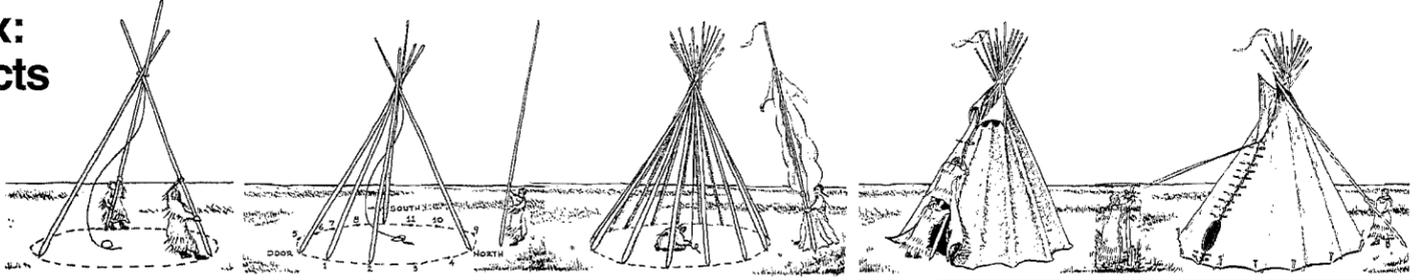
Food too is served in an established sequence. At a feast, the men are served first, then the women. However, very old people of both sexes are served before anyone. A host and hostess never eat until after their guests have eaten.

Your guide now takes a moment to describe a basic difference between tipis and our own houses in the twentieth century: in a tipi, it was not the structure that controlled people's behavior or indicated their rank. By contrast, most American houses in the 1980s

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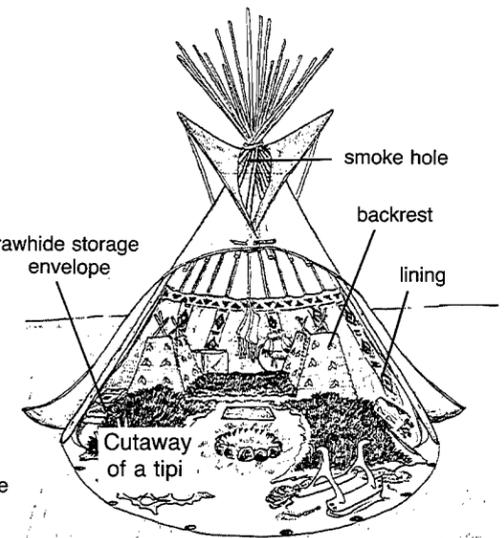
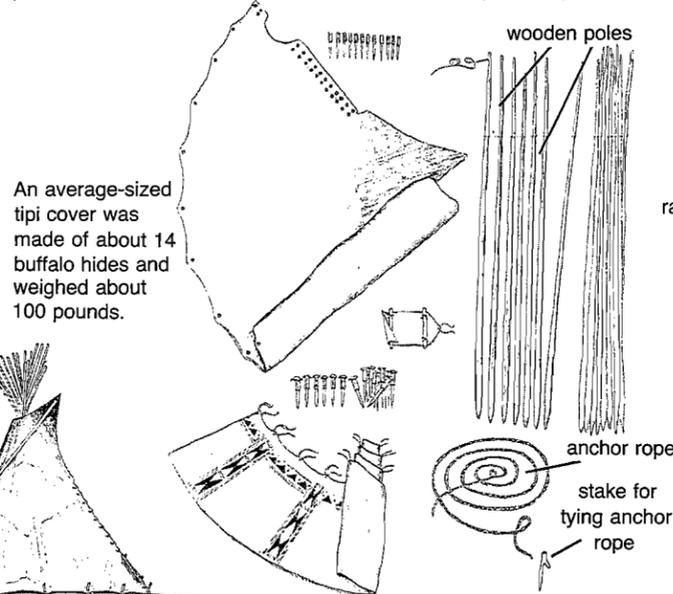
## Evidence Box: Basic Tipi Facts

It took expert women as little as ten minutes to complete this process.



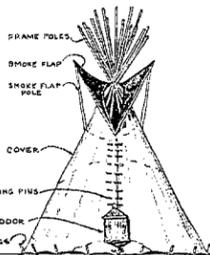
How Plains Indians moved their tipis.  
National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

The parts of a tipi  
(find each of them in at least one of the other pictures).



From *The Tipi: A Center of Native American Life* by David and Charlotte Yue. Copyright © 1984 by David and Charlotte Yue. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Front view  
of a tipi



Side view  
of a tipi



houses they build. The particular people they will be examining are the Plains Indians of a century and a half ago—whose houses were called tipis.

To begin this inquiry, each child needs a worksheet like the one on page 2. Then the children should, working individually, use the information in the Evidence Box (on this page) to answer as many of the questions as possible in the first two columns.

Encourage the students to make guesses, but emphasize that there must be solid evidence for each guess. Tell them that they should not expect to be able to answer *all* the questions; the Evidence Box does not provide enough information to do so.

You may want to explain certain questions, but do *not* give explanations about the materials in the Evidence Box, which are meant to be used as raw data, to give the children practice in drawing conclusions from limited information.

When the students have completed as much as possible of the two columns, have them compare their answers.

Now they are ready to work as a group at filling in the *third column*—discussing, with your guidance, what tentative conclusions they may reasonably draw (based on this evidence) about Plains Indian life. This step too will involve guesswork. A few answers that now seem reasonable may turn out to be wrong. For example, the students might conclude that because tipi poles were made of wood, trees were plentiful on the Plains. Actually, much of the area was treeless, and some tribes had to travel quite far to find the wood they needed.

Here are a few of the correct conclusions that the children may draw: the Plains Indians hunted buffalo;

they moved around a lot; they had enough free time to decorate things; women played an important part in their society; tipis didn't provide a lot of privacy. . . .

### Step 3: A Visit to the Plains

Now your students are ready to expand what they know, by paying a visit to the Plains of a century and a half ago. Draw on the Background information that begins on page 1 to take your class on this trip. You may want to retell the visit in your own words; or you may choose to use the piece as a script, reading it aloud—and perhaps asking the children to close their eyes as they listen, to make it easier to visualize what they are hearing. You may decide that a combination of these two approaches would work best: reading the easier and more dramatic parts, and supplying the context in your own words.

After the visit is over, give the children a chance to make changes and add new answers to their worksheets.

### Step 4: How Are Our Houses Different?

As a final exercise, to bring the significance of the Plains materials into sharper focus, give the students a chance to apply the same approach to the houses in which they themselves live. Ask them to imagine that anthropologists from the future have come back in a time machine to study the houses where Americans lived in the late twentieth century.

If you don't want to spend much time on this last step, it can consist simply of a class discussion.

However, a more elaborate—and more fun—way

to handle this activity is for the kids to actually produce an "anthropologists' report." This document should not only contain their generalizations about the houses they see every day, here, but should also include drawings or photographs to illustrate their findings. It should have a final section in which the anthropologists draw conclusions (based on their observations) about the lives and values of late-twentieth-century Americans.

Here are some of the key points that these anthropologists may observe:

- People here live in many different kinds of houses.
- Most houses are boxlike in shape.
- Houses now are built mostly of manmade materials. They contain many standardized parts designed to fit together. This makes it difficult—and expensive—for a person to build an unusual house.
- In most places, building codes regulate how houses may be built.
- Houses are built by specialists who are paid for doing the job.
- Most houses depend on external systems, maintained by communities, for the water, gas, and electricity that provide light, heat, cooling, ventilation, communications (telephones, doorbells, intercoms), and even in-house transportation (elevators).
- Our houses indicate that we value private space and private property, and that we are not trusting. Individuals often have rooms of their own, and locks and security devices are common.
- Our houses often include a space for parking cars.
- Houses in our society do not usually have a major role in people's religious lives.
- Most people now expect to live in several different houses over the course of a lifetime.

The Yellow Buffalo tipi, a modern Blackfoot version made of canvas, painted by Howard Pepion.



Indian Arts and Crafts Board, U.S. Department of the Interior

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have walls and doors and locks that tell you where you may and may not go. Houses now also usually have big, comfortable, well-furnished rooms for people of high status, and smaller, plainer rooms for people of lower status. (Parents, for example, often have fancier rooms than do their children.)

In a tipi, there were no such distinctions. There was just one shared open space. All the seats were located about the same distance from the fire. The place of honor was only slightly more comfortable than other places (because it was less drafty, and out of people's paths). There were no separate rooms, and no locks—and yet theft within a tribe was very rare. In other words, people were not forced by the architecture of a tipi to respect the status and possessions of others, but they were expected to *discipline themselves* to do so.

Your guide points out that this self-discipline is in keeping with how the Plains Indians acted in other areas of their lives. For example, within the huge open space of the Plains, a man was expected to discipline himself to face danger from buffaloes and enemies; in the much smaller circle of the tipi, he was again expected to discipline himself, this time to preserve the order of the group.

And the group was absolutely essential to the Plains Indians. Your guide takes a moment to explain why.

Survival on the Plains depended on the buffalo. Success in buffalo hunting in turn depended on the skill and bravery of every hunter—so boys were trained to develop these qualities. Individual know-how and courage were rewarded—in boys and in men.

However, when people are encouraged to value very highly their achievements as individuals, a potential danger to the group is created. Will people become destructive of each other in their push for individual achievement? Will the weak and poor be trampled underfoot?

In the demanding and warlike environment of the Plains, any threat to the group was a serious danger, for an individual could not survive long alone. Even a family alone could not survive. The larger group was absolutely essential.

In other words, *survival on the Plains required both strong individuals and a strong group*, so it comes as no surprise that people were rewarded not only for their individual achievements (as we have seen), but also for behavior that helped preserve the group.

A very important example of such a reward for altruistic behavior was the social prestige people could earn by giving away their possessions—by sharing meat with a widow, for example, or by giving a horse to a poor family to help them hunt and transport their things. On occasion, people even gave away *all* their possessions to honor a dead relative. This brought them credit. (And, after they had stripped themselves of everything, their neighbors would give them enough new things to make a fresh start.) A person who acquired wealth and gave it away was respected; a person who acquired wealth and hoarded it was looked on with contempt.

### Spiritual Dimensions

Most of the objects you see in the tipi have familiar everyday purposes. But you also notice a few things whose purpose isn't clear to you. What is that square of bare earth behind the firepit? What is the leather package that your guide called a *sacred bundle*? What about the dried, split leg of a buffalo, with a bunch of hoof tips tied to it, that hangs just outside the tipi door?

Your guide explains that the square of bare earth is an altar; that the sacred bundle contains objects that have spiritual meaning for their owner; and that the buffalo leg is both a door knocker and a device that is believed to attract buffalo into the area.

The tipi's occupants, your guide says, keep objects like these in their home because such objects embody the connection they feel to a spiritual dimension that is as real to them as the physical. Indeed, the Plains Indians do not consider the spiritual and the physical to be separate, but rather to be two aspects of the same, single reality: a fact is a fact, whether it occurs in everyday waking life or in a dream. For them, the

sacred is everywhere in physical objects—and the tipi itself is no exception. Its doorway faces east to keep the prevailing winds out, but also to face the rising sun, the source of life. The tipi's occupants know that its floors, walls, and poles define the physical space where they live. At the same time, however, they experience the floor as the earth; the walls as the sky; and the poles as the paths that lead from the earth to the spirit world. In the same way, common domestic activities like building or decorating a tipi often involve religious rituals.

Your guide tries to help you understand the Plains Indians' attitude toward the nonhuman world (of nature and the supernatural) by pointing out that their surroundings made it clear to them that a human being is a tiny creature at the mercy of vast forces. Living in a harsh and precarious environment, they knew that it was not possible to control nature. What was possible, though, was to learn to live in harmony with nature.

Your guide points out that to live in harmony with something, you need to understand how that thing operates, so you can fit as smoothly as possible into its scheme. How do you learn to understand it? By *paying attention*.

To succeed as hunters the Plains Indians had, of course, to pay close attention to the natural world. As for the supernatural, they were constantly alert for communications from it and actively sought such communications through personal and public rituals.

A vision was one communication of this kind that was particularly important in Plains Indian life. It was common for a teenage boy to deliberately seek a vision. (Older men and women sometimes did too.) The young man would first purify himself by taking a ritual sweatbath and then spending several days alone in a remote place, fasting and praying for a vision. Sometimes his efforts failed, but generally a supernatural being appeared to him and offered him a gift of some of its power. This extra power (beyond the small amount that every human being was born with) was thought to give its owner a major advantage in everyday life—for example, to protect him from being killed in war. More generally, power was what permitted a person to be successful; lack of power was what caused failure.

Having the vision was, however, only the first step. Just as important was to bring the vision into the physical world, by carrying out its instructions. A person might be told in the vision to assemble certain sacred objects, or to perform certain rituals, or he might be taught songs to pass on to others. Occasionally, he might be instructed to make a special kind of tipi.

**Painted medicine\* tipis.** Can you imagine living in a neighborhood where every owner had decorated his house with a huge painting that had appeared to him in a dream? That is what some Plains Indians did. Tipis of this special kind, which were particularly common among the Blackfoot and the Kiowa, were often pitched together in the center of the camp circle.

The Yellow Buffalo tipi shown on this page began this way. The story behind this tipi is that one day, a Blackfoot Indian man looked into a river and saw the tops of some tipi poles. He dove in to investigate and found a tipi underwater. He entered it. Inside, a man welcomed him and made him a gift of the design of the tipi, as well as of some rituals and songs to go with it. Together, these presents would help the young Blackfoot bring buffalo near his camp. He was warned, though, of certain things he must make sure did *not* happen to the tipi: dogs must never be let into it; no one must ever hit its outside wall; its fire must never burn out. . . . As long as he carried out these instructions, the tipi would protect and help him. But beware

\*The word *medicine* does not here refer to drugs, but to what is spiritual or supernatural.

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if he failed! Then disaster would befall him and his family.

No one but the owner could reproduce the design on a medicine tipi. He could pass on this right to his descendants, or even lend or sell it to a friend. But in all cases, the tipi design was transferred as part of a sacred group of activities and taboos. It would be very dangerous to paint the picture without carrying out the requirements that went with it. When the cover of a medicine tipi wore out, it was destroyed (in contrast to a regular tipi cover, which was usually recycled—given to a poor family or cut up to make waterproof clothing).

Owning a painted medicine tipi was a mark of distinction, but because of the responsibilities and dangers associated with it, many people preferred to live in a plain tipi.



Your guide pauses and looks at the sky. It is getting dark. It is time to leave. You walk slowly to the edge of the village . . . then turn and look back at the tipis. The firelight inside them makes them glow like lampshades in the dusk. You sniff the fragrance of smoke and peer at a group of children running past. You wish you could stay longer and make friends.

But you cannot. You have to return to your own time and place.

As you stand there taking one last look, your guide tells you how, when the Kiowa Indians were about to leave a campsite that they had particularly liked, they sometimes hung a small present—a little leather pouch, for example, or a string of beads—from a branch, as a gift to the place that had made them happy. Maybe that would be a good way for you, too, to say goodbye.

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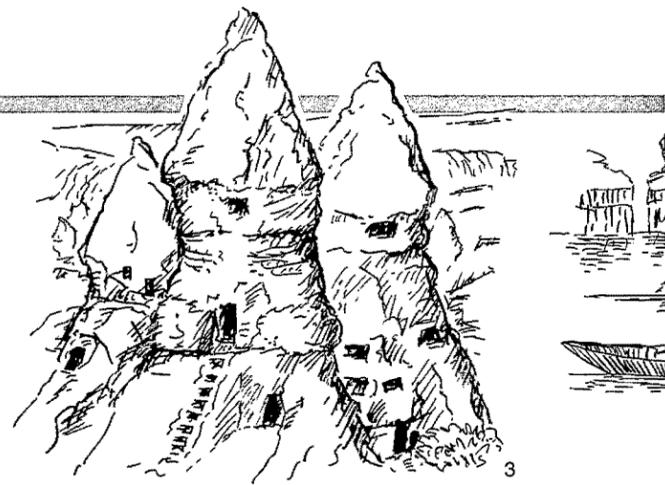
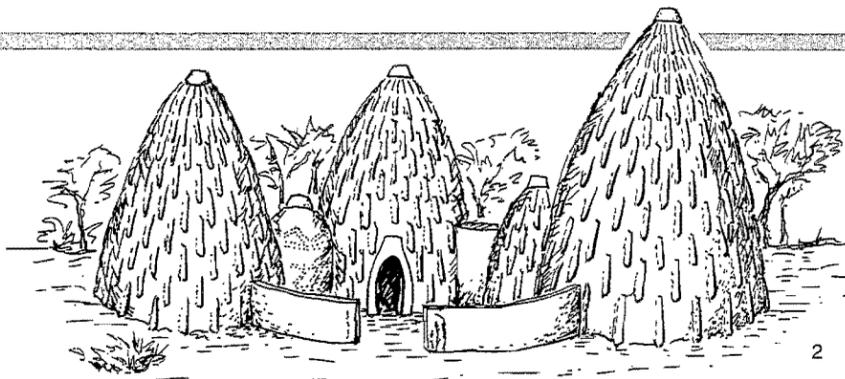
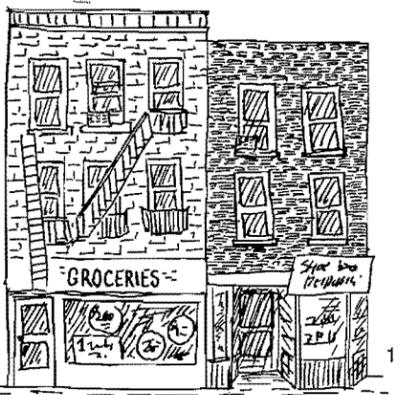
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## Dream up a house . . .

Now it's *your* turn to dream up a house!

Pretend you are a member of a society that you have created in your imagination—living at any time, any place in the world.

Think about where this imaginary society is located, what people there need in order to survive, how they spend their time, and what their values are. The house you dream up must be designed to take all these factors into account.

And everything about your society and your house must fit *so that it all makes sense together*. (For example, if your house is built on stilts over water, it can't be located in a desert; if the people in your society believe in sharing everything, your house shouldn't be full of locked closets; and so on. . . .)

Here are some questions to help you plan your house. Think about the questions, and jot down *very short* answers to them BEFORE making your drawings.

### First, consider how the people in your society live and think:

- What is the land like where you are? (Hilly or flat? Any rivers, lakes, or other bodies of water? What are the plants and animals?) \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the climate like? \_\_\_\_\_
- What dangers are common? \_\_\_\_\_
- What do people do for a living? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do people tend to always live in the same place, or to move around a lot? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do people tend to have lots of possessions? If so, what kind? \_\_\_\_\_
- What building materials are available? \_\_\_\_\_
- How many people will live in your house . . . and will all of these people belong to the same family? \_\_\_\_\_
- Is privacy an important value in your society? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are some people in your society of a higher rank than others? If so, on what is high rank based? (money? family? age? bravery? hunting ability? artistic or spiritual achievements?) \_\_\_\_\_
- How do people usually spend their free time? \_\_\_\_\_

### Now consider the house itself:

- How many rooms will it need? \_\_\_\_\_
- How will it provide light and air? \_\_\_\_\_
- How will it protect you from bad weather? \_\_\_\_\_
- How will it protect you from danger? \_\_\_\_\_
- How will it help you get your work done? \_\_\_\_\_
- How will it help you store things? \_\_\_\_\_
- What will the furnishings be like? Can they be moved around easily? \_\_\_\_\_
- Will your house provide privacy—from outsiders? from other occupants? from being seen? from being heard? \_\_\_\_\_
- Will some of the people living in your house have better space than others? If so, who? What about this space will be better? \_\_\_\_\_
- Will your house be different from houses belonging to people of higher or lower rank? If so, in what ways? \_\_\_\_\_
- Will guests be entertained in your house? If so, where? \_\_\_\_\_
- Will your house (or parts of it) have religious uses? \_\_\_\_\_

When you have finished the questions, go on to the drawings. If you want to make drawings bigger than the boxes here, use separate sheets.

Draw a map of the site. In roundings (hills, water, roads, etc.)

Draw a picture of the outside of your house.

## . . . and mail it in!

Want to share your imaginary house? If so, send us your pictures of it—on this page or on separate sheets. Be sure to give your name, age, and school. Mail your pictures\* (by December 31, 1987) to:

House Pictures, ART TO ZOO  
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Arts and Industries Building, Room 1163  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560

\*Note: Pictures will not be returned.

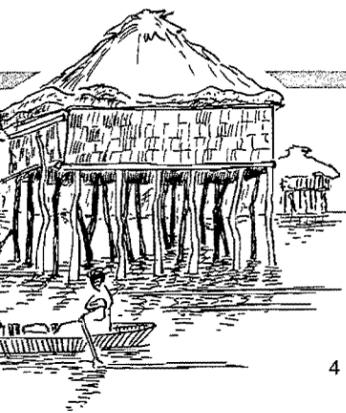
The Spring 1988 issue of ART TO ZOO will include a special picture page showing some of the houses our readers have dreamed up!

1. Apartments above city stores (United States); 2. clay houses of Mousgoum people (Cameroon); 3. house carved out of natural rock formation (Cappadocia, Italy); 4. house on stilts over water (Ganvié, Benin); 5. painted house of Ndebele people (Transvaal, South Africa); 6. contemporary suburban brick house (United States); 7. tent of Tekna people (Morocco); 8. mud houses in market town (Yemen Arab Republic).  
Illustrations by Joan Wolbier.

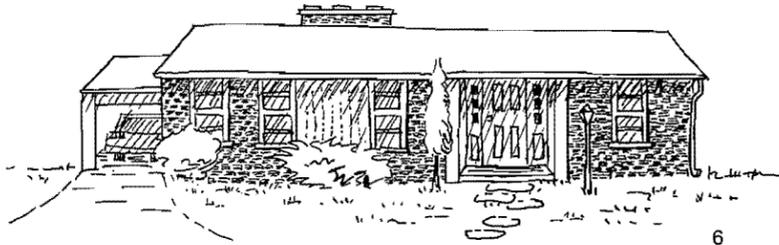
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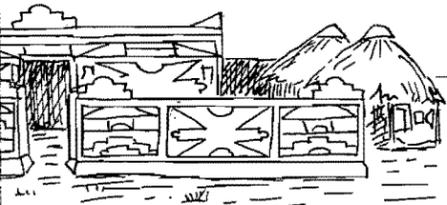
ART TO ZOO Spring 1987  
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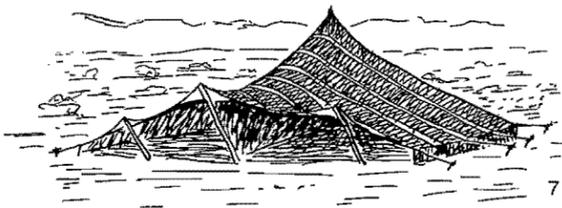
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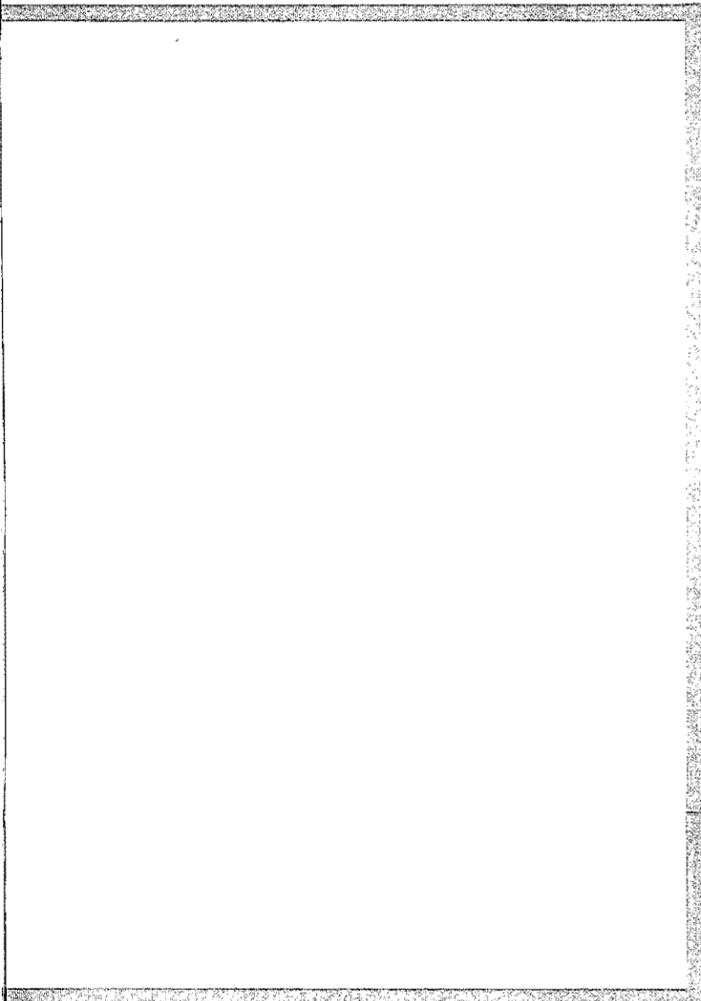
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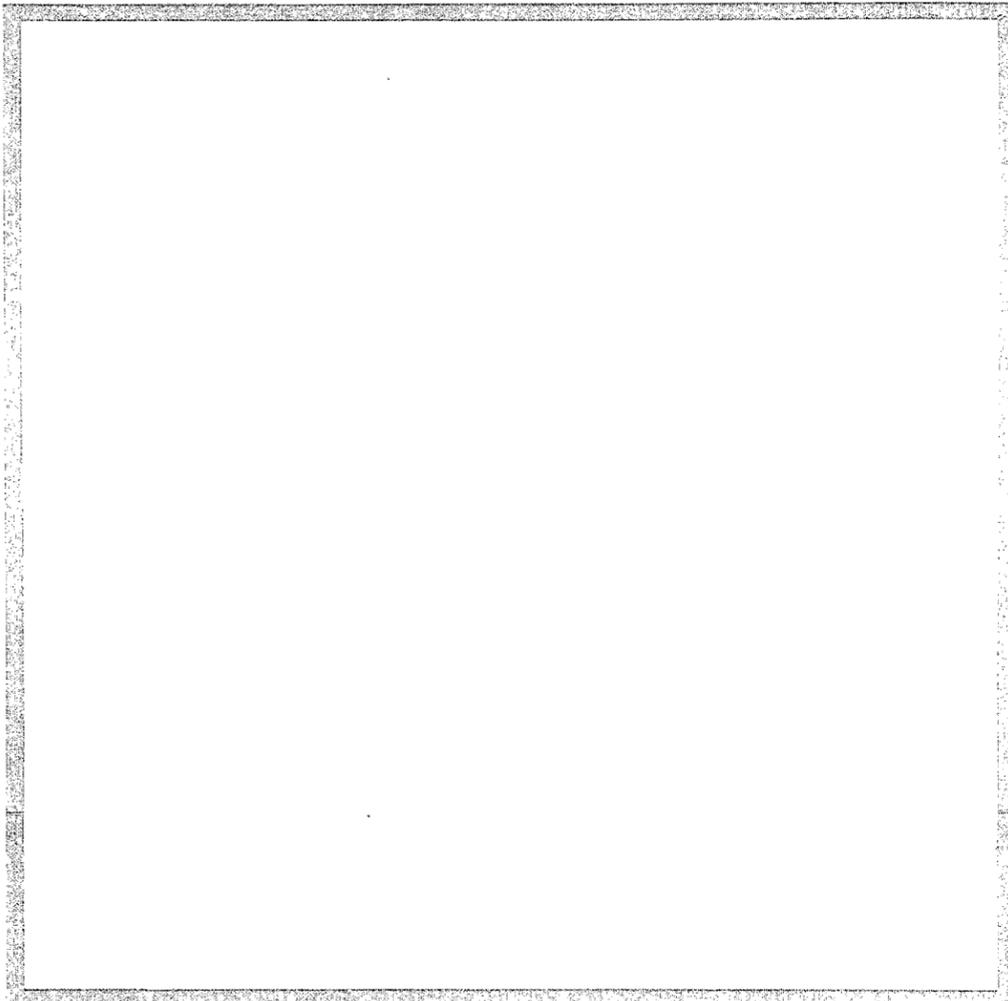
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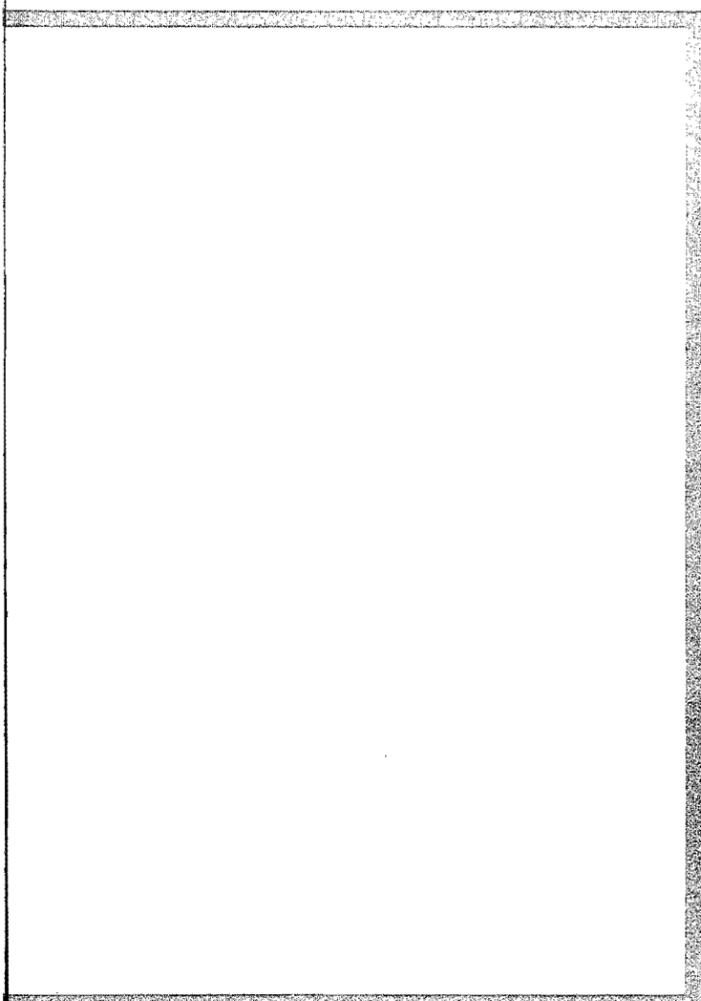
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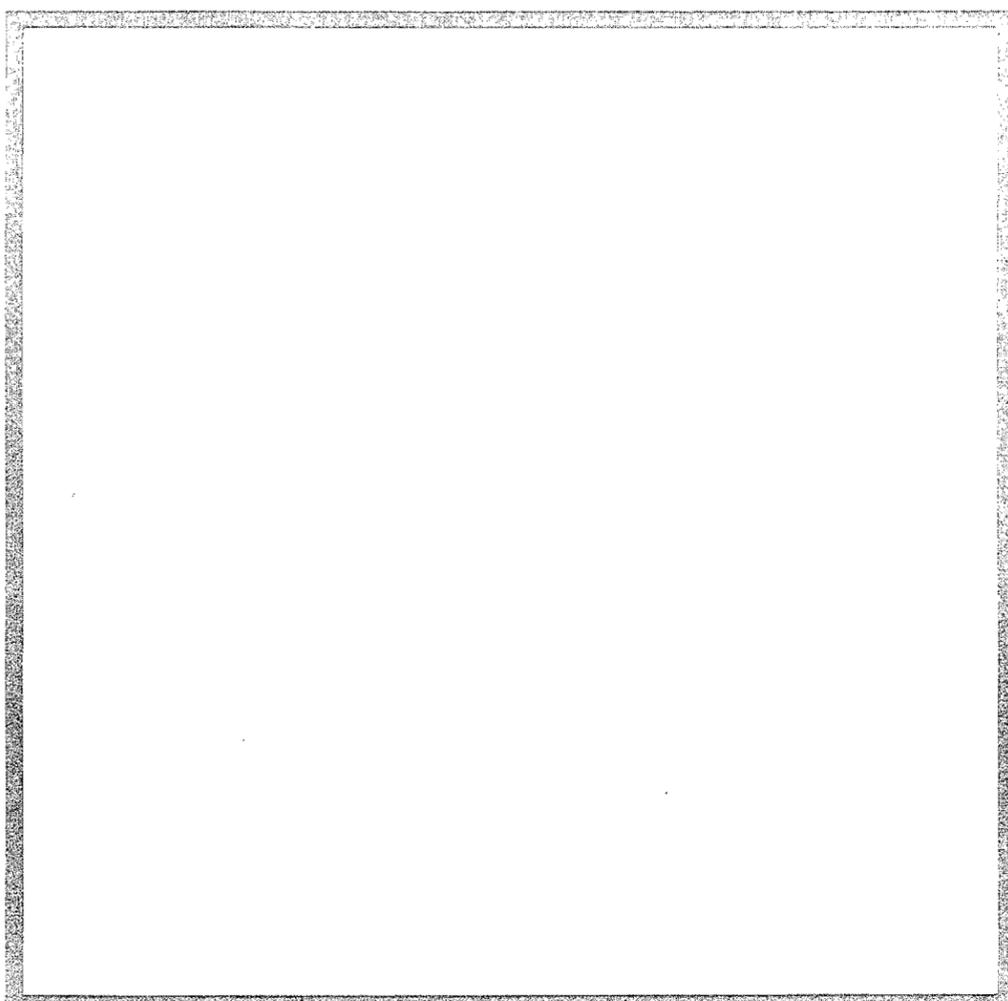
clude the house itself, and the main features of its surroundings, etc.). If there are other buildings nearby, put them in



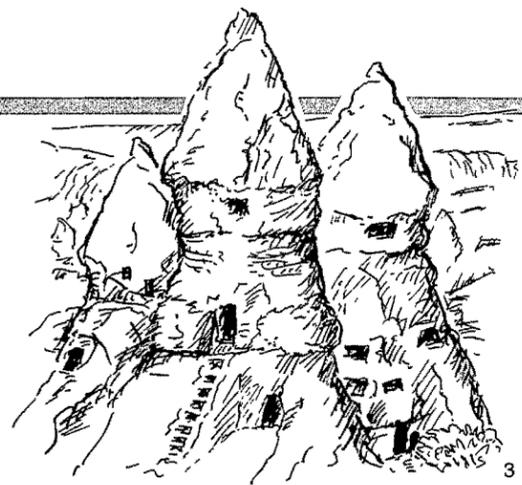
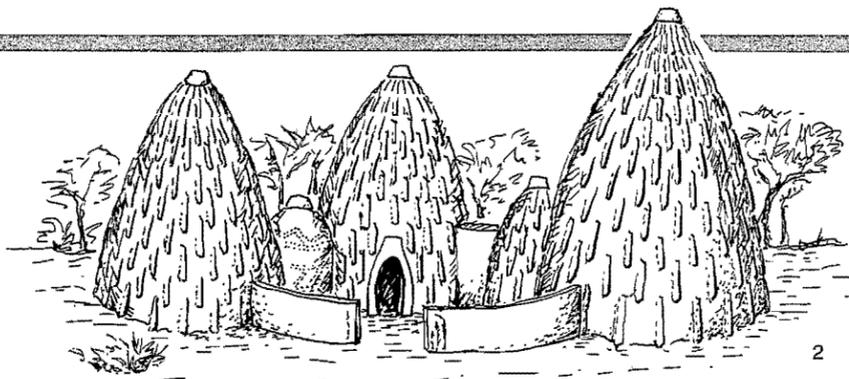
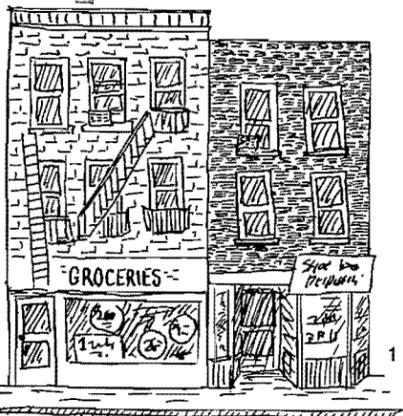
Draw a floor plan of the house here, showing where the rooms, doors, windows, and most important furnishings are.



the front of the house here.



Draw a picture of the side of the house here.



# Imagina una casa . . .

Traducido por Ricardo Inestroza, Ed.D.

¡Ahora te toca imaginar una casa!

Pretende que eres miembro de una sociedad que tú has creado en tu imaginación—viviendo en cualquier época, en cualquier parte del mundo.

Piensa adónde está localizada esta sociedad imaginaria, lo que la gente allí necesita para sobrevivir, cómo pasan su tiempo, y cuáles son sus valores. La casa que tú imagines debe tener en cuenta todos estos factores.

Y todo acerca de tu sociedad y tu casa debe concordar *para que todo tenga sentido*. (Por ejemplo, si tu casa está construída sobre pilotes en el agua, no puede estar situada en el desierto; si la gente en tu sociedad cree que debe de compartir todo, la casa no debe de tener closets con llave; y así sucesivamente. . . .)

Aquí hay algunas preguntas que te van a ayudar a planear tu casa. Piensa acerca de estas preguntas y anota respuestas *breves* ANTES de hacer tus dibujos.

## Primero, considera como la gente en tu sociedad vive y piensa:

- ¿Cómo es el terreno donde estás? ¿Accidentado o plano? ¿Hay ríos, lagos u otras formaciones de agua? ¿Qué plantas y animales hay? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo es el clima? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cuáles son los peligros comunes? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Qué trabajo hace la gente para vivir? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Vive la gente en un mismo lugar o se mudan a menudo? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Tienen los habitantes muchos bienes o cosas? Si es así, ¿Qué tipo de cosas tienen? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Qué materiales de construcción hay disponibles? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cuánta gente vive en tu casa? . . . Pertenece todos a una misma familia? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Es la privacidad un valor importante en tu sociedad? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Hay personas de más alto rango que otras en tu sociedad? Si es así, ¿En qué se basa este alto rango? (¿Dinero? ¿Familia? ¿Edad? ¿Valentía? ¿Habilidad para cazar? ¿Logros artísticos o espirituales?) \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Qué hace la gente en su tiempo libre? \_\_\_\_\_

## Ahora considera la casa misma:

- ¿Cuántos cuartos va a necesitar? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo se proveerá de luz y aire? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo se protegerá del mal tiempo? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo se protegerá del peligro? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo te ayudará a hacer el trabajo? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Qué habrá para guardar cosas? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo van a ser los muebles? ¿Se pueden mover fácilmente? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Cómo va a proveer privacidad—de extraños? ¿De otros residentes? ¿De ser vista? ¿De ser oída? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Alguna gente que vive en tu casa va a tener mejor espacio que otra? Si es así, ¿Quién o quiénes? ¿Qué va a ser mejor de este espacio? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Va a ser diferente tu casa de las casas de personas de rango más alto o más bajo? Se es así, ¿En qué forma va a ser diferente? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Vas a agasajar invitados en tu casa? Si es así, ¿En qué parte de la casa? \_\_\_\_\_
- ¿Va a tener tu casa (o partes de tu casa) usos religiosos? \_\_\_\_\_

Cuando hayas terminado estas preguntas haz los dibujos. Si quieres hacer dibujos más grandes que los recuadros, házlos en hojas por separado.

Dibuja un mapa del sitio, los alrededores (colinas, etc.) también.

# . . . y envíanoslos por correo!

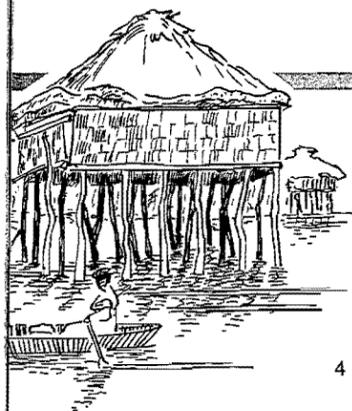
¿Quieres compartir tu casa imaginaria? Si es así, envíanos tus dibujos—puedes hacerlos en esta página o en hojas por separado. Asegúrate de escribir tu nombre, edad, y el nombre de tu escuela. Envíanos tus dibujos\* (antes del 31 de diciembre de 1987) a:

House Pictures, ART TO ZOO  
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Arts and Industries Building, Room 1163  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560

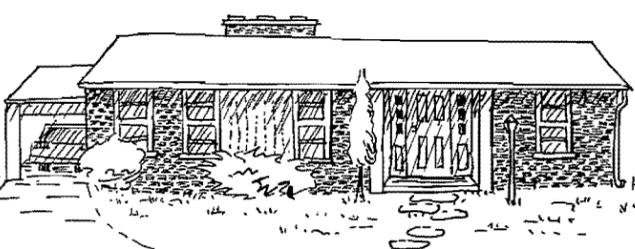
\*Nota: Los dibujos no serán devueltos.

La publicación de ART TO ZOO de la primavera de 1988 va a incluir una página especial que mostrará algunas de las casas que nuestros lectores han imaginado.

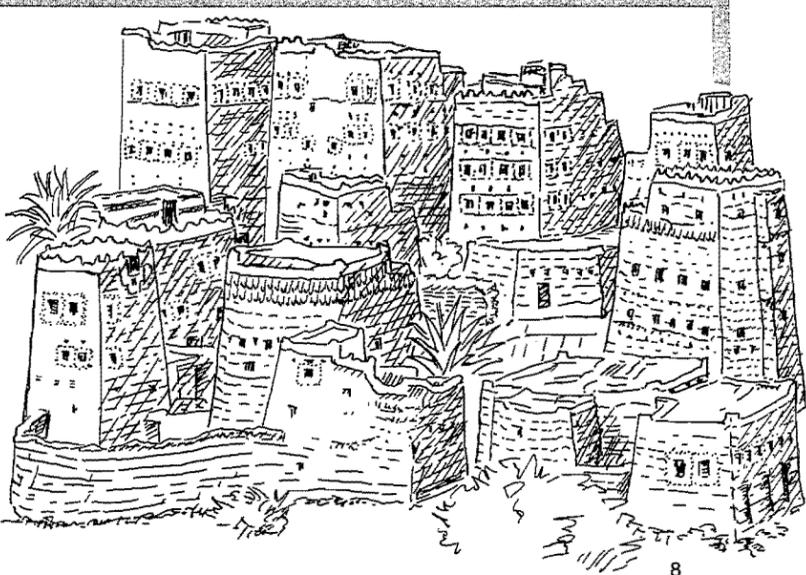
1. Apartamentos sobre almacenes urbanos (Estados Unidos); 2. casas de arcilla de la gente Mousgoum (Camerún); 3. casa excavada en una formación rocosa natural (Cappadocia, Italia); 4. casa sobre pilotes sobre el agua (Ganvié, Benin); 5. casa pintada de la gente Ndebele (Transvaal, Sudáfrica); 6. casa contemporánea suburbana de ladrillos (Estados Unidos); 7. tienda de la gente Tekna (Marruecos); 8. casas de barro en un pueblo del mercado (República Árabe de Yemén).  
Ilustraciones de Joan Wolbier.



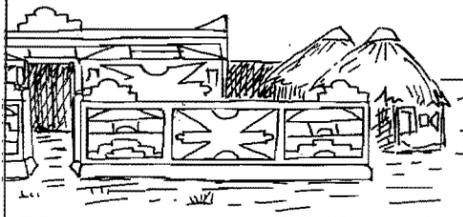
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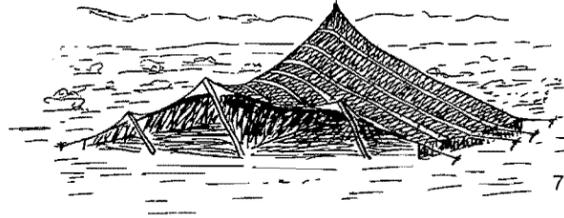
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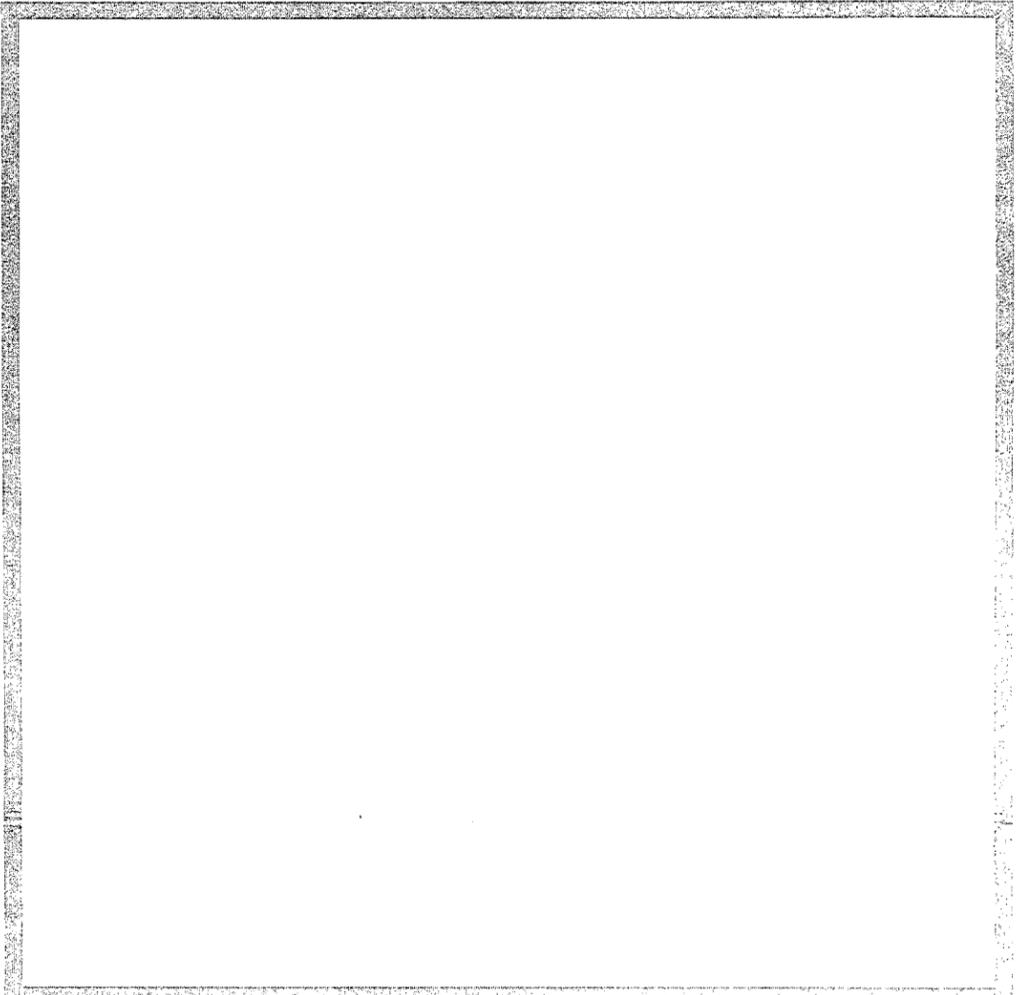
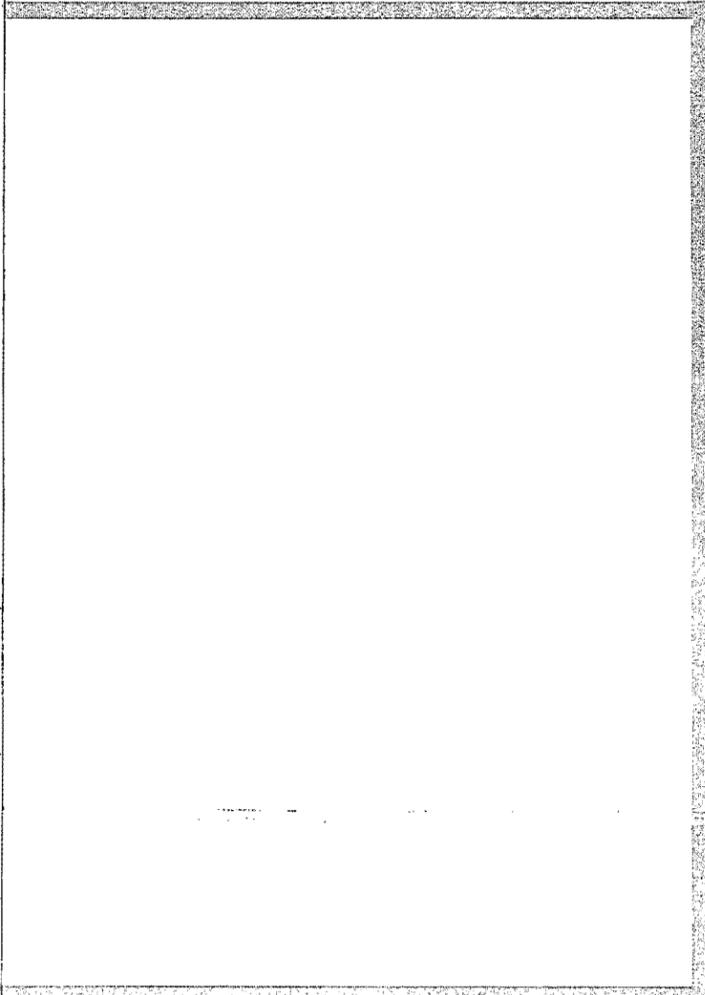
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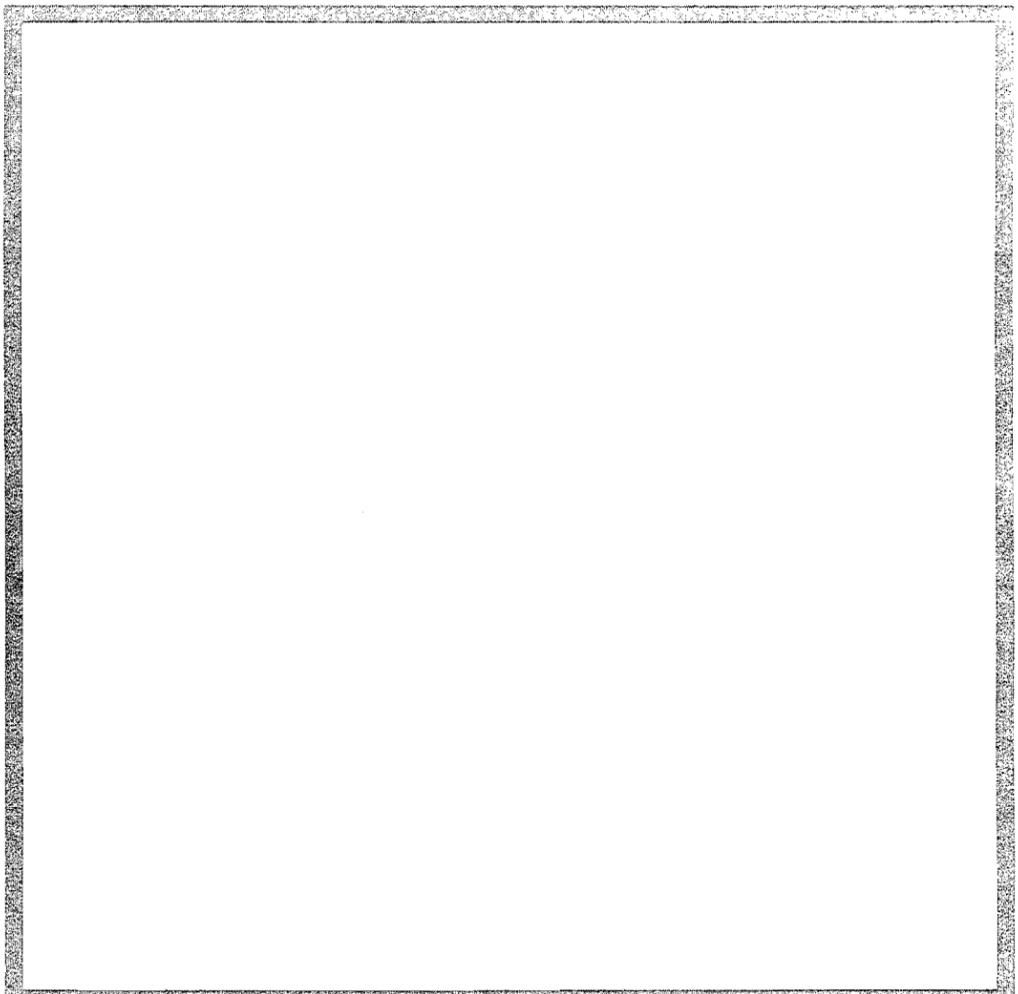
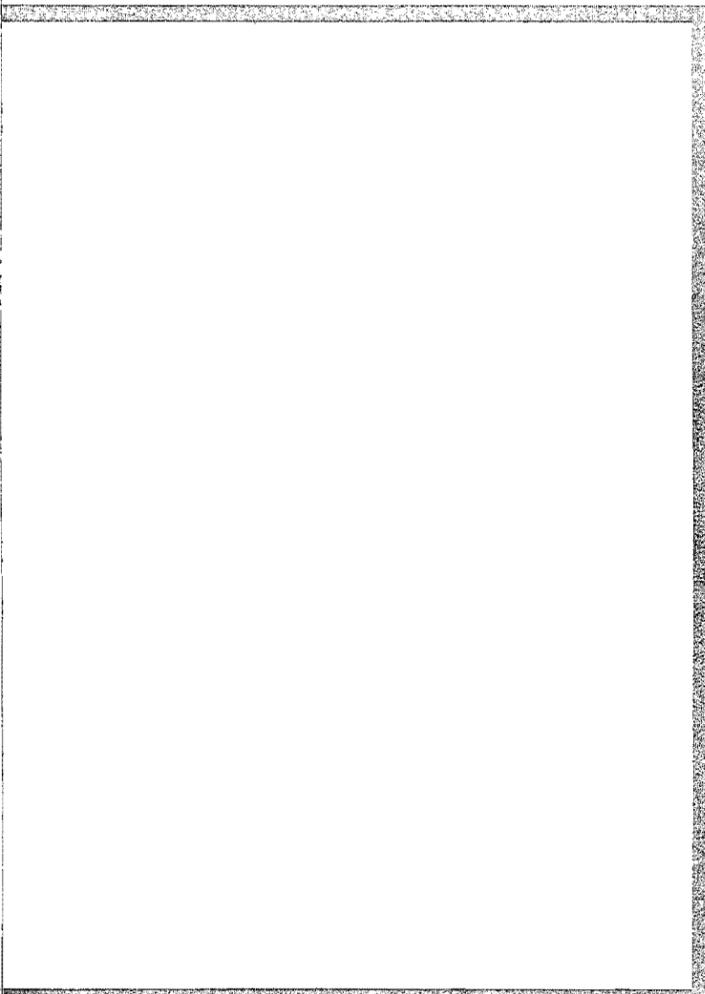


7



Incluye la casa misma y las características principales de (agua, carreteras, etc.) Si hay edificios cerca dibújalos

Haz un dibujo del plano de tu casa aquí. Muestra dónde están los cuartos, puertas, ventanas, y los muebles más importantes.



da de tu casa aquí.

Haz un dibujo del costado de tu casa aquí.