

LEONARD J. CURRIE (1913-1996)

Leonard James Currie headed the Department of Architecture, in the College of Engineering, at Virginia Tech from 1956 until 1962. Before leaving for the University of Illinois at Chicago, he worked with President T. Marshall Hahn to separate architecture from engineering and establish the College of Architecture, which later became the College of Architecture and Urban Studies.

Leonard met his wife, Virginia, at the University of Minnesota, where they both studied for their undergraduate degrees in architecture. They married on February 8, 1937.

This exhibit highlights the expertise and world view that Currie brought to Virginia Tech and the houses he designed for his family throughout his career. The photographs are from a collection of 35mm slides that the Currie family donated to the Art and Architecture Library. They are now in Special Collections and University Archives.

Leonard Currie took the photographs unless otherwise stated or he is portrayed in them.

LEONARD AND FAMILY

top **Leonard and Virginia Currie at the gate of Currie House II
March 1988**

bottom **Currie Family at Havana Airport
June 1951**

**Barbara, Bob, Betty
Virginia, Leonard**



HARVARD

In 1937 Currie entered the graduate program at Harvard, where he studied architecture with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. He graduated in 1938.

top

Drawings by Leonard Currie, 1938

**Hagerty House, Cohasset, Massachusetts,
Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, architects.
Completed 1938.**

Currie credited Breuer with the design on a slide mount.

COPÁN

Currie then worked with Gropius and Breuer for close to three years until he received Harvard's Wheelwright Traveling Fellowship and joined the Carnegie Institute's expedition to restore the Mayan ruins at Copán in Honduras. There were no roads to the ruins, so Leonard and Virginia traveled many hours on horseback with their two small children to reach them.

middle

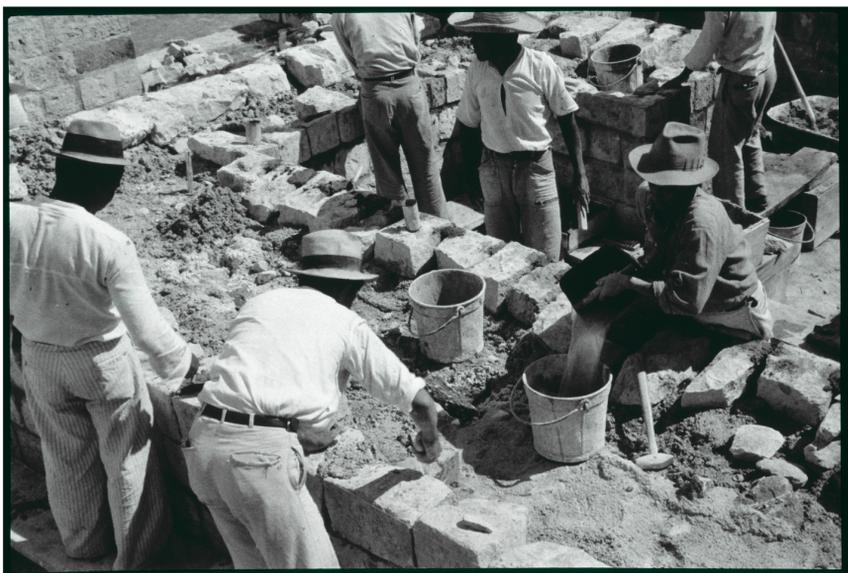
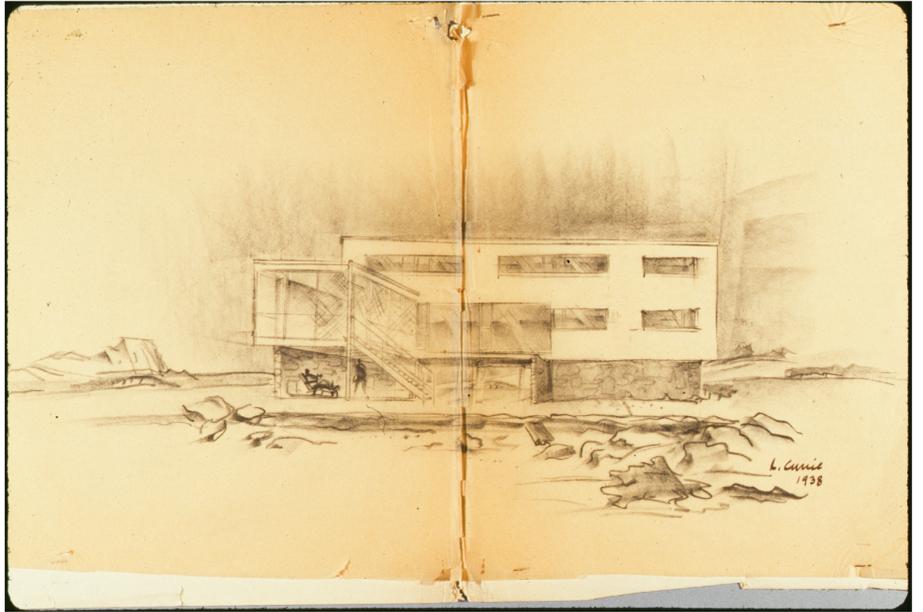
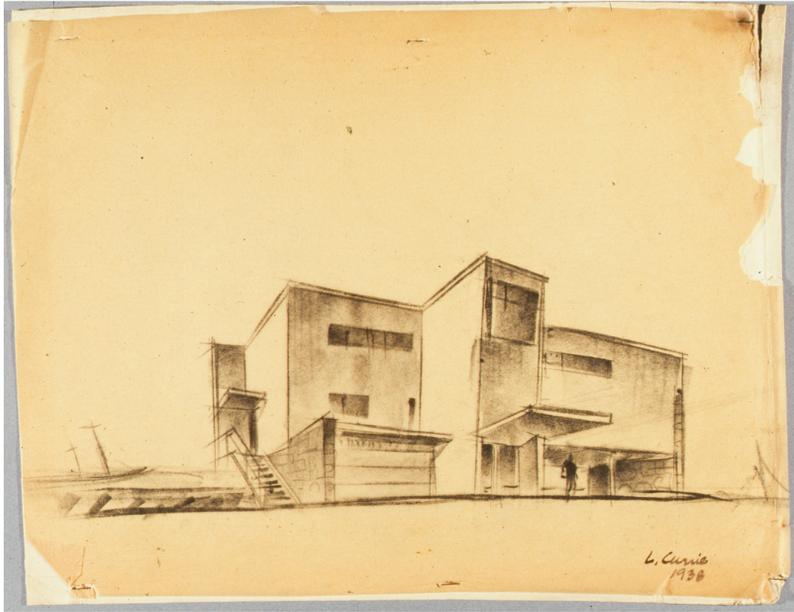
**Leonard Currie restoring a maize god sculpture
1941**

bottom left

**Restoring walls
1941**

bottom right

**Temple
1941**



HARVARD GRADUATE CENTER

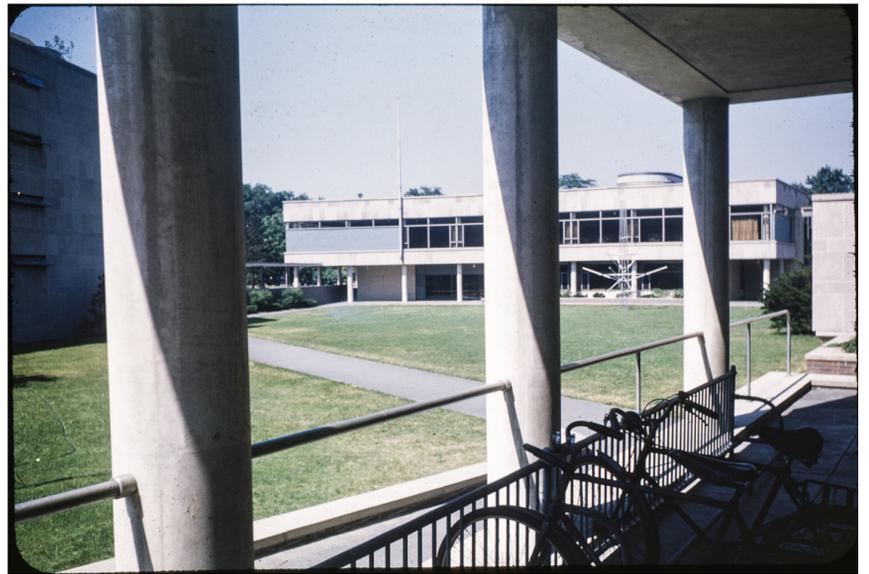
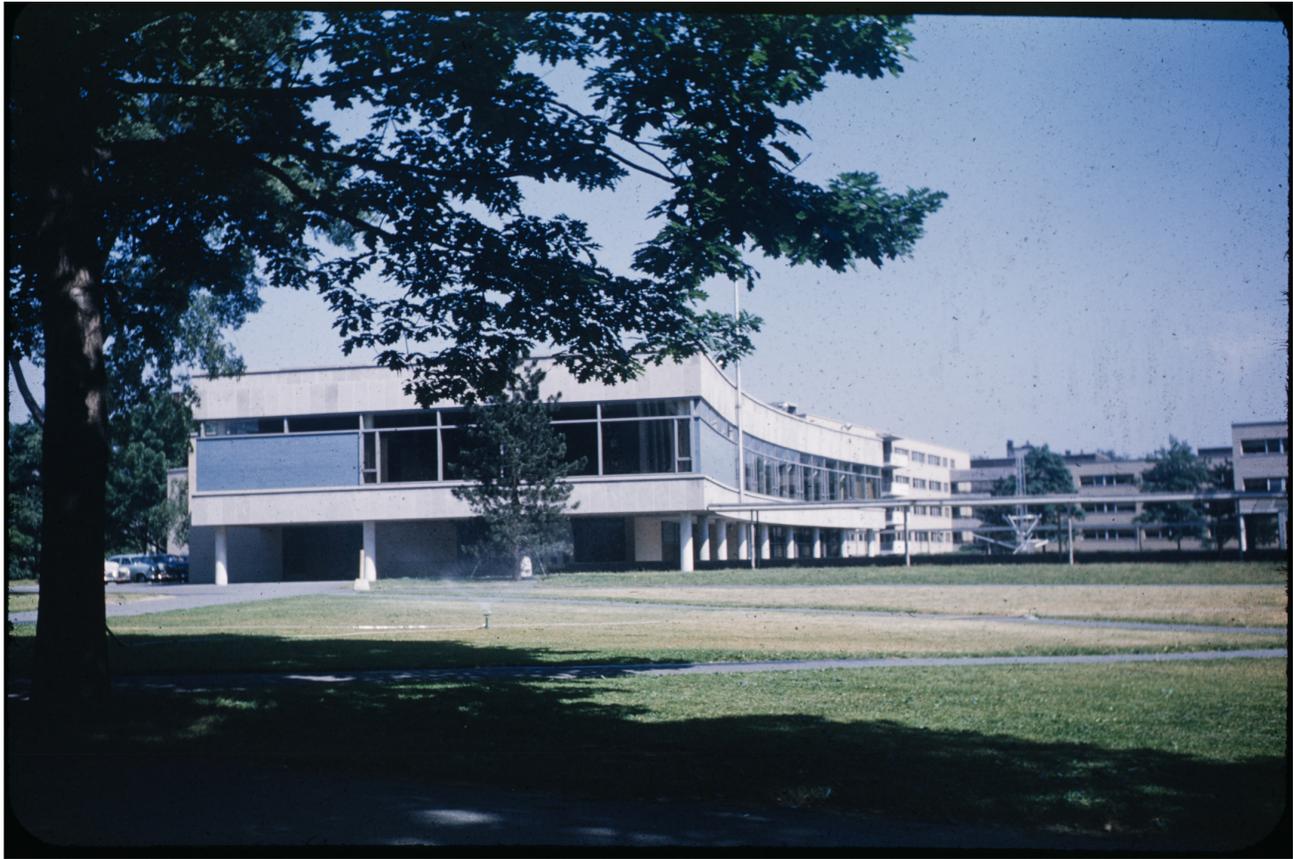
The Architects Collaborative, architects

Constructed 1949 - 1950

Photos June 1953

Following Copán, Currie worked with Pan American Airways and the United States government to build airports in Nicaragua and Guatemala. During World War II he served with the Allied Forces in Europe.

In 1946 Currie returned to Harvard to teach with Gropius. From 1948 to 1950 Currie joined The Architects Collaborative (TAC), a firm that included Gropius and younger architects, where he worked on the Harvard Graduate Center and the Six Moon Hill housing development.



CURRIE HOUSE AT SIX MOON HILL, LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Leonard Currie, architect

Construction 1948

Currie was a leading figure in the development of Six Moon Hill, a planned community with egalitarian ideals. The houses were affordable for young professionals with children and experimental in design. Currie and the TAC architects each built houses for their families at Six Moon Hill, except for Gropius, who lived in Lexington. Hallmarks of the homes were large glass windows and experimental polymer skylights.

top	Currie House, main facade January 1949
middle left	Chimney and entrance Spring 1951
right	Exterior stairs, added by 1950 January 1956
bottom left	Balcony suspended by 2x4s August 1954



LAS MERCEDES AIRPORT, MANAGUA, NICARAGUA

Leonard Currie, architect

Built 1942

Currie built Las Mercedes Airport at Managua after Copán. These photos were taken on later visits to Nicaragua while he was working on housing in Latin America.

left **February 1956**

top right **October 1952**

middle right **September 1951**

COSTA RICA

Currie's engagement with housing in Latin America began with a housing study in Costa Rica for a U.S. foreign aid agency – the Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA) – and the Costa Rica Government.

bottom **Typical street scene, San José**
June 1951



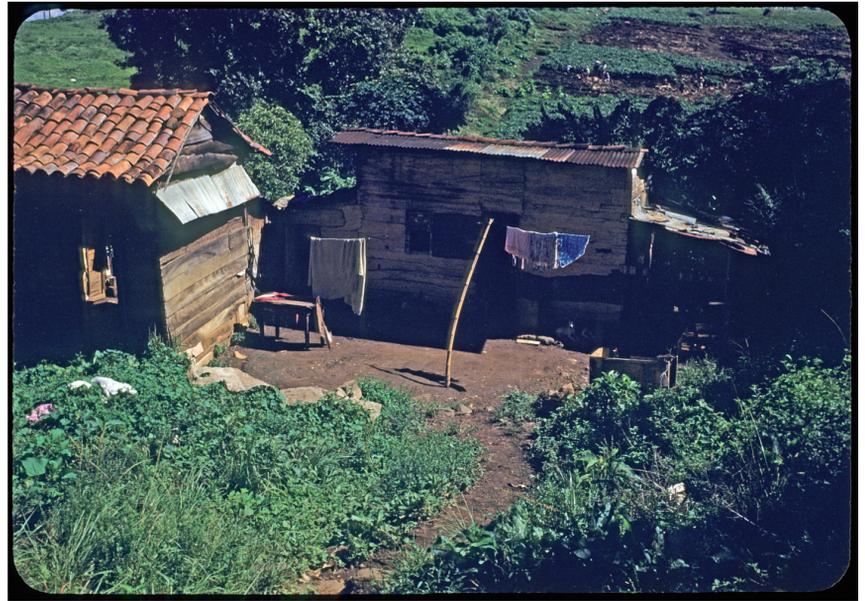
COSTA RICA

- top left **Ideal type of old farmhouse, Meseta Central
August 1951**
- top right **Slum Shacks, Bank of Rio Torres, San José
June 1951**
- middle left **Mixing clay for making tiles - under open shed,
Liberia, Guanacaste.
August 31, 1951**
- middle right **Making a brick kiln for the public works department,
Liberia, Guanacaste.
August 31, 1951**

PUERTO RICO

In 1951 Currie became the founding director of the Inter-American Housing Center (CINVA) in Bogotá, Colombia, an Organization of American States (OAS) program to address a severe shortage of low-cost housing throughout Latin America. He traveled to Puerto Rico to see “Aided self-help” housing, which was central to the Center’s approach. Aided self-help meant that national governments and local communities shared costs and responsibilities.

- bottom left **Rural Housing - Puerto Rico Land Authority.
Aided-self-help larger unit (16 occupants).
July 1951**
- bottom right **Rural Housing - Puerto Rico Land Authority.
Aided-self-help.
July 1951**



INTER-AMERICAN HOUSING CENTER (CINVA)

Centro Interamericano de Vivienda y Planeamiento

CINVA Building, Bogotá, Colombia.

Designed by CINVA staff, including Guillermo de Roux of Panama (design), Leonard Currie (landscape design and job captain), and others.

Construction 1952 - 1953.

The Organization of American States formed the Inter-American Housing Center as a technical assistance, research, and educational program to address the urgent need for low-cost housing in Latin America. As the director, Currie led the Center with a holistic approach to solving problems that was consistent with the education he received with Gropius and Breuer. Research was multidisciplinary, from anthropology through developing low-cost, low-tech construction methods. Graduate students came from all over Latin America and became a generation of professionals who developed urban and rural infrastructures.

top

**Main entrance
December 1954**

middle left

**View from the front of the complex.
Renderings by Irene Baron, Virginia Tech '21**

middle right

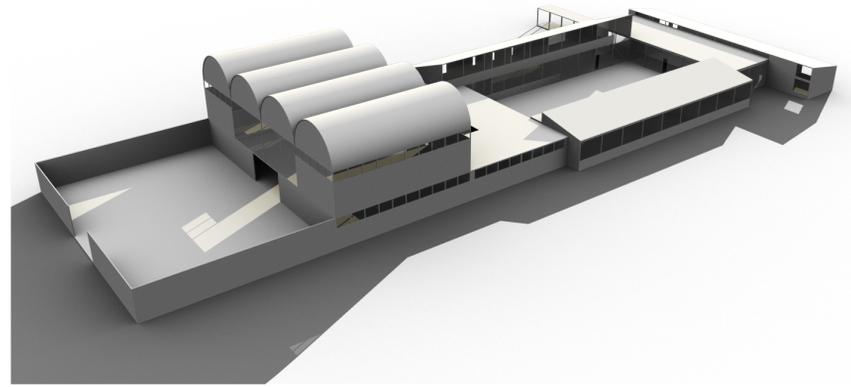
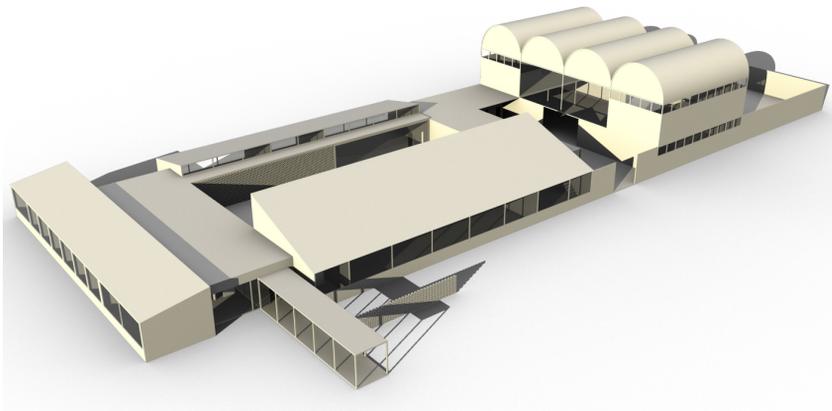
**Elevated view from the back, showing the experimental
and garden patios.**

bottom left

**Garden patio
May 1954**

bottom right

**Garden patio
April 14, 1955**



EXPERIMENTAL CONSTRUCTION LAB

- top **Experimental construction lab and wall of the experimental patio.
April 1956**
- middle left **Constructing the lab's thin-shell concrete roof.
June 1953**
- middle right **Experimental construction lab interior with experimental house.
Photo by H. Fisher, 1954**
- bottom left **Experimental precast concrete stair.
Photo by H. Fisher, 1954**
- bottom right **Concrete cantilevered roof on the experimental patio.
March 1956**



HOUSING STUDIES

BOGOTÁ

Barrio Perseverancia was an impoverished neighbourhood in Bogotá.

top left **Barrio Perseverancia, Bogotá**
March 1953

top right **Barrio Perseverancia, Bogotá**
March 1953

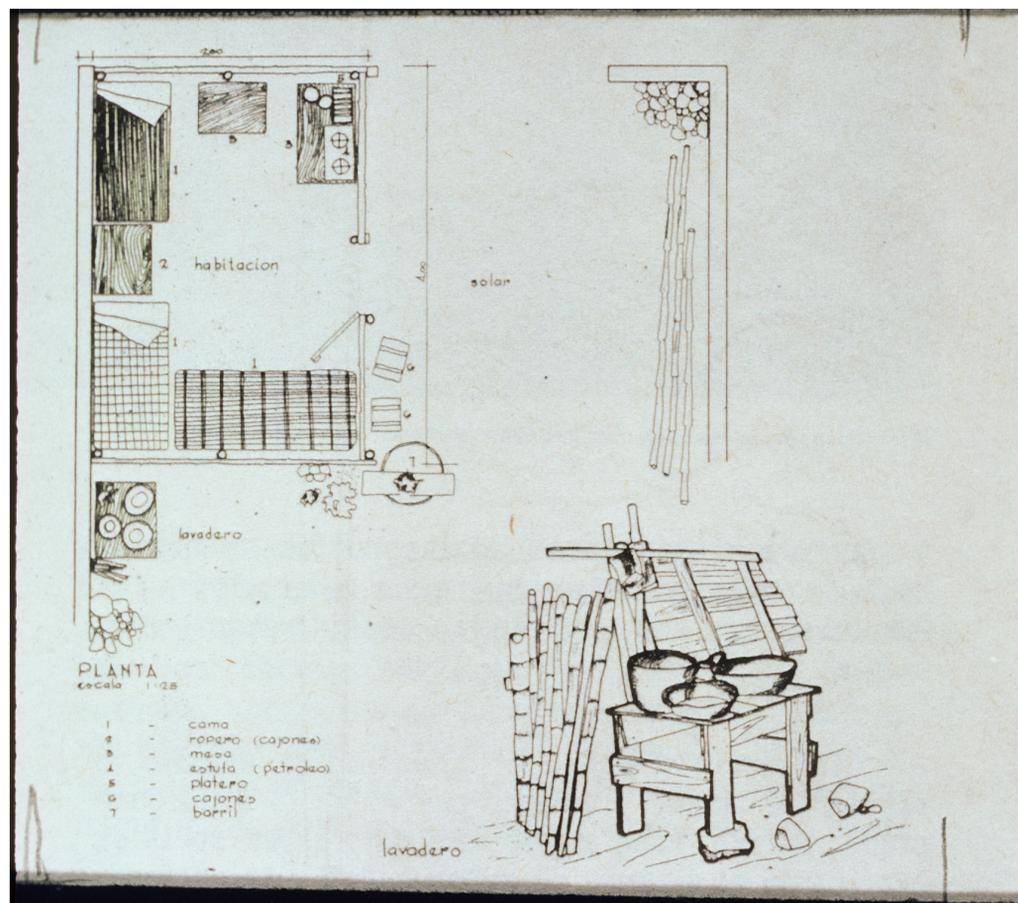
RURAL COLOMBIA

CINVA worked extensively in rural Colombia. Natural resources for producing steel were discovered in Boyacá Department and a new steel plant drove a need for low-cost housing.

middle **Plan of an existing house**
Drawing by CINVA student ca. 1954

bottom left **Steel plant. Acerías Paz del Río, Boyacá.**
August 1955

bottom right **House built by owner, vicinity of Sogamoso and Nobsa,**
Boyacá.
October 1955



CURRIE HOUSE I

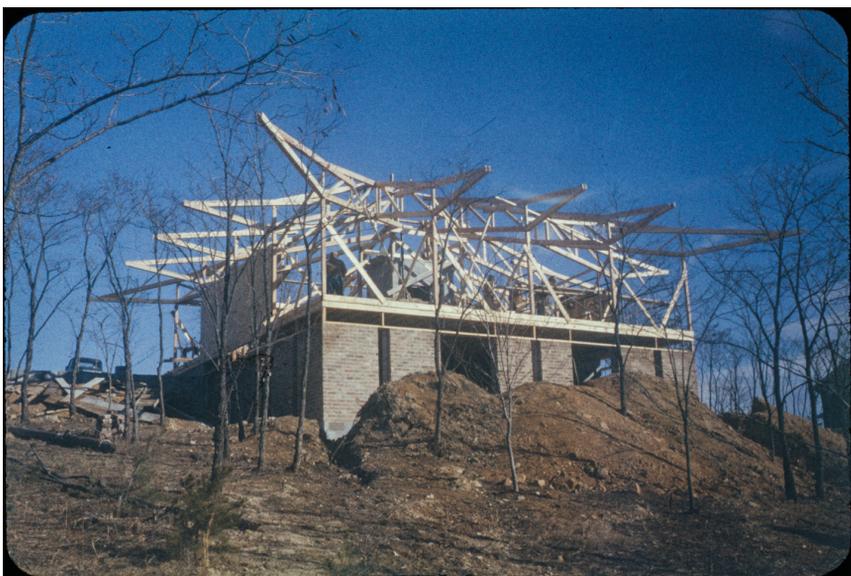
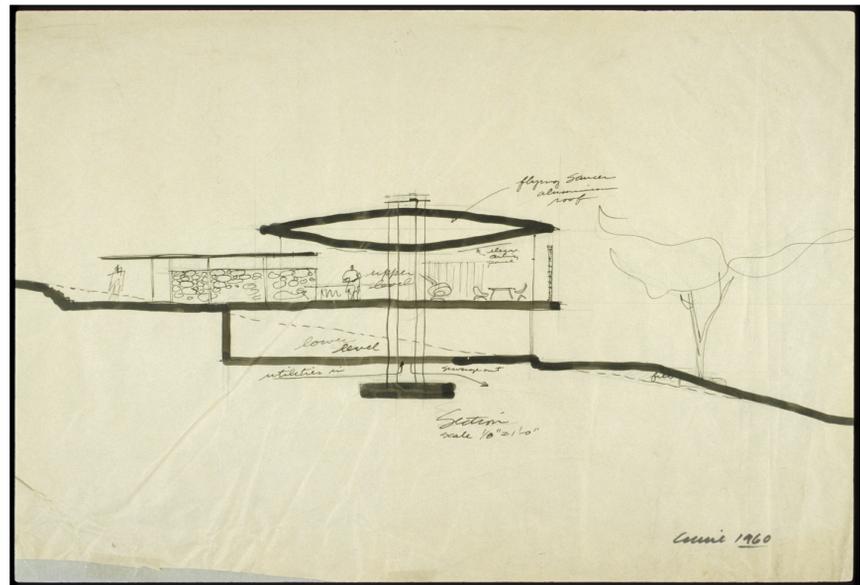
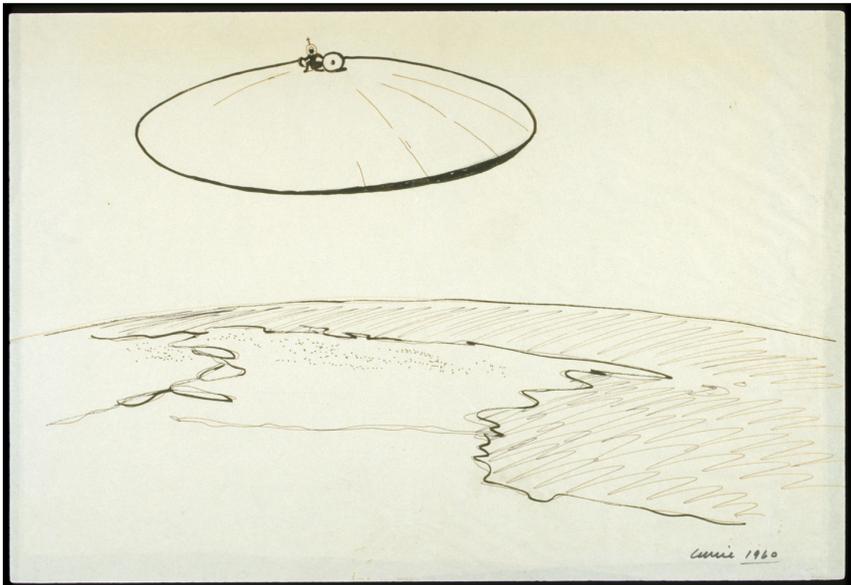
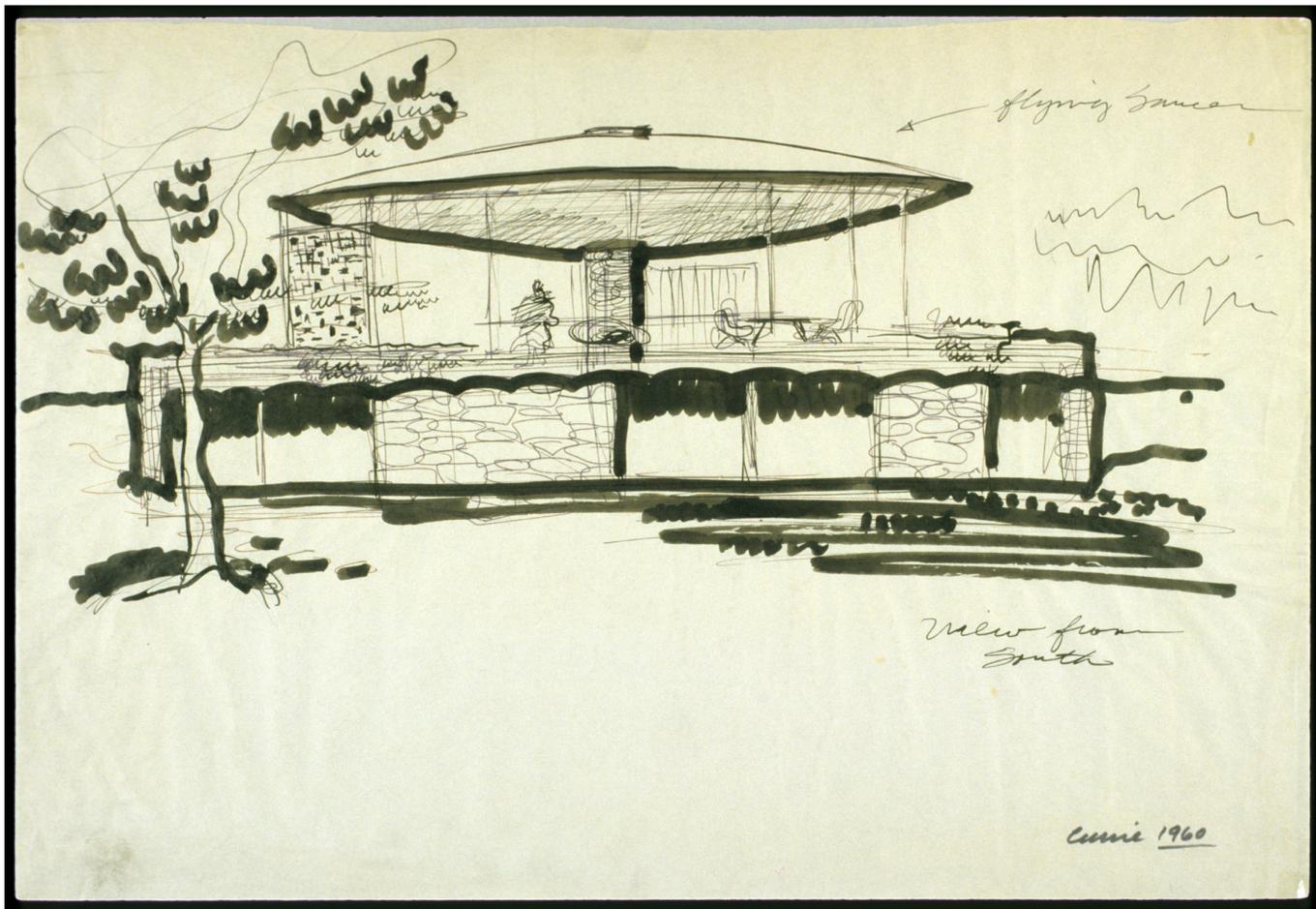
Blacksburg, Virginia
Leonard Currie, architect
Construction 1960 - 1961

Currie arrived at Virginia Tech in 1956 to succeed Clinton Cowgill as head of the Architecture Department. A former student, Jim Ritter, FAIA, remembers that Currie required all freshmen to write an essay on "The Williamsburg Blight", a reference to the proliferation of faux-colonial houses being built in Virginia. The home Leonard and Virginia built for their family in Blacksburg was their contribution to moving the Commonwealth past nostalgia for Williamsburg.

Modernism for Currie was sincere use of methods and materials tailored to the time and place, and also innovation. In Currie House, one of the innovations is the flying saucer roof that hovers overhead.

The flying saucer construction is a network of wooden beams that cantilever from a central service core that supports them. The structure allows for an expanse of glass that offers a mountainous vista.

top	Rendition with flying saucer Drawing 1960
middle left	Flying saucer Drawing 1960
middle right	Section with flying saucer Drawing 1960
lower left	Cantilevered roof beams around the service core Fall 1960
lower right	Fireplace in the service core Photo by Henry Wiss, March 1962



CURRIE HOUSE I

top

**Upper level with the main entrance
Photo December 1961**

Clerestory windows and overhanging eaves enhance an illusion of aerodynamic lift.

middle left

**View from the south with glass wall on the upper level
January 1962**

middle right

**View of the mountains
January 1962**

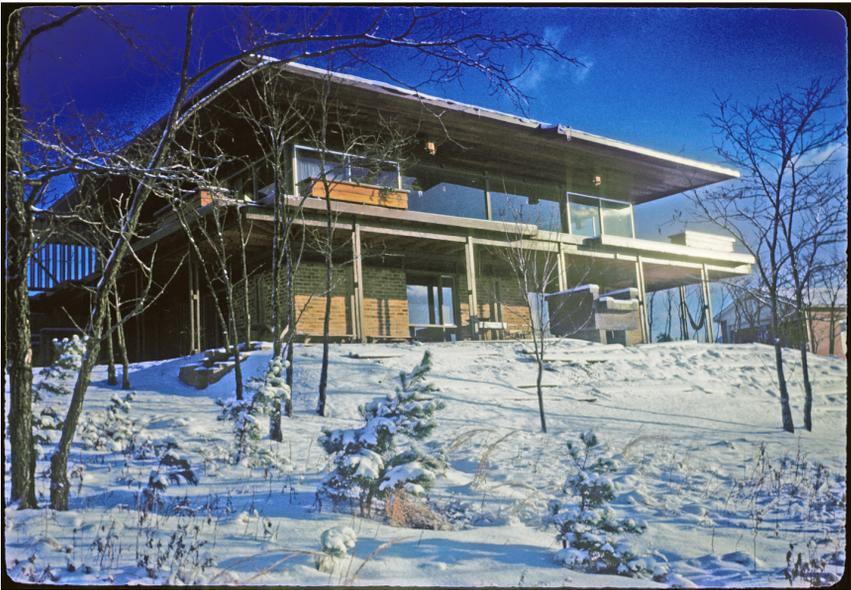
bottom left

**Deck and eaves with waterspout
Summer 1962**

Rainwater flows through spouts on the roof into concrete basins below.

bottom right

**Cantilevered granite stairs and rain basin
July 1961**



CURRIE HOUSE, CHICAGO

W. Lexington and S. Lytle Streets, Little Italy neighborhood

Leonard Currie, rehabilitation architect

Currie's earliest photos February 1964 or a little before

Rehabilitation 1965 - 1966

Leonard and Virginia moved to Chicago in 1962, where Leonard was the founding dean of the College of Architecture and Art at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). A year or two later, the Curries purchased a spacious house in need of repair near the new Circle campus, where UIC would be moving. The Curries' renovation sparked the renovation of Chicago's Little Italy.

top **Exterior with porch and steps added by Currie
May 1968**

middle left **Downstairs apartment
March 1967**

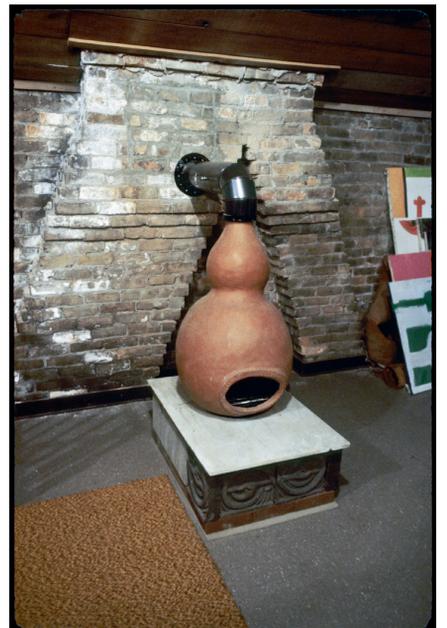
middle right **Dining room
April 1967**

Currie converted an adjacent bedroom to a kitchen and opened a pass-through to the dining room (beside the fabric hanging).

bottom left **Living room fireplace
October 1978**

bottom center **A sitting room
March 1967**

bottom right **Attic fireplace
October 1978**



CURRIE HOUSE II

Blacksburg, Virginia

Leonard Currie, architect

Virginia Currie, interior design

Design 1980, construction late 1980 - 1981

Leonard retired from UIC in 1981 and returned to Blacksburg, where he and Virginia built their second Blacksburg home. Leonard set up a private architectural practice, designing homes and working for businesses.

Virginia, educated as an architect herself, doubtless participated informally in designing all of the Curries' houses. She received formal credit for the interior design of Currie House II.

top left **Conservatory, with solar roof under construction**
December 1981

The first house in Blacksburg with solar electricity

middle left **Front facade with entrance gate**
December 1981

top right **Virginia in the conservatory**
Photo by Sally Harkness, November 1986

bottom left **Wall near the entrance gate.**
Frank Lloyd Wright. Fragment of decorative tile from Francis
Apartments, Chicago (Constructed 1895 - 1896, demolished
1971).
Photo October 28, 1985

bottom center **Dining room**
Undated photo

bottom right **Inner side of the gate lintel. Pre-Columbian stone**
sculpture of a warrior holding a trophy head.
Probably from Costa Rica.
Photo January 1982



OFFICE

top left

**Leonard Currie at his computer
April 10, 1996**

Currie is referring to Exequiel Ezcurra & Marisa Mazari-Hiriart (1996) *Are Mega Cities Viable? A Cautionary Tale from Mexico City*, *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 38:1, 6-35, DOI:10.1080/00139157.1996.9930972

top right

**Preston Place, Blacksburg, before renovation
Undated photo. 1988 or earlier.**

middle right

**Preston Place after renovation
Undated photo. August 1988 or later.**

Currie's office was in Preston Place and he was the renovation architect.

bottom left

**Habitat for Humanity property in Blacksburg
January 14, 1987**

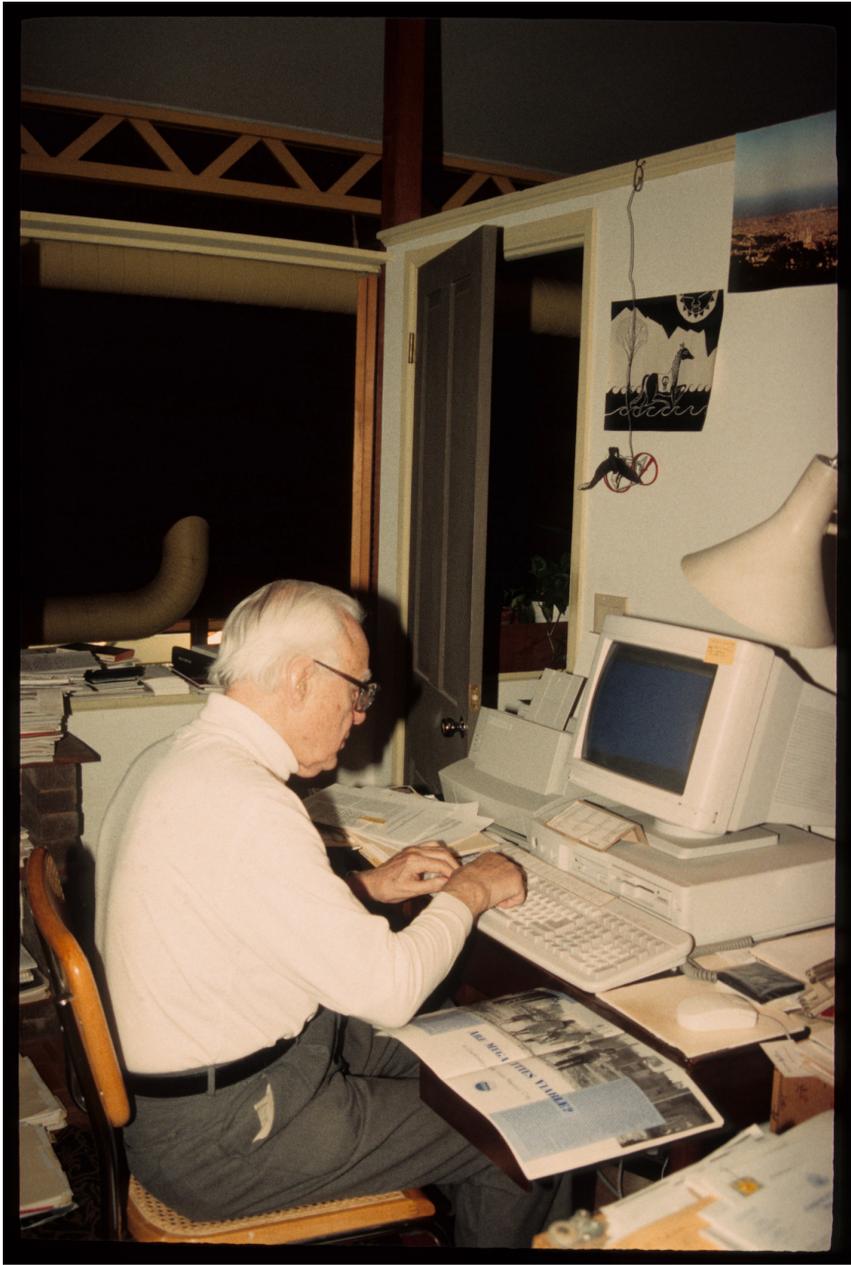
Currie was active with Habitat for Humanity in the New River Valley.

bottom right

**Free Architecture Clinic. Currie with a participant.
May 1987**

On Friday mornings Currie, and his staff who wanted to, volunteered their time for people who could not afford an architect.

Leonard J. Currie died in hospital on April 23, 1996



ONLINE EXHIBITS

Currie Slide Collection



WordPress site includes the Art + Architecture Library exhibition and more information about Leonard Currie and related topics.

<https://blogs.lt.vt.edu/currieslides/>

Virginia Tech Digital Library Virtual Exhibit

An Artsteps site has exhibits of the Taubman Museum of Art, Reynolds Homestead, and the Currie slides in a virtual exhibition space.

Artsteps tends to work more easily on computers than mobile phones. Please visit artsteps.com and search Virginia Tech.