

Simple Luxuries & Seamless Living: The Legacy of the Eichler Homes

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INTRODUCTION

...I have been thinking about the cloudburst of new houses which as soon as the war is ended is going to cover the hills and valleys of New England with so many square miles of prefabricated happiness.'

— Joseph Hudnut, 1945

The 1950s witnessed a coming together of many areas in contemporary life. Industrial growth and prosperity launched an optimistic mass culture energized by the experiments of the early modernists and fortified by universal demands for a new improved world. A mature modernism, confident of popular appeal, developed rapidly in all areas of art, design and architecture. This movement was eagerly expansive in its exploitation of new forms and processes, and generously inclusive in its regard for diverse practitioners. The exuberance of 1950s and the beauty of the quintessential homes of builder Joseph Eichler marks a significant plateau where the fruits of modernization were realized.

Modern ideals accepted in the fields of architecture and design stressed functionality and simplicity in form, and were applied throughout the industrialized world in the period of reconstruction following World War II. The demand for household goods provided an opportunity to develop an industrial design profession based on modern models. The booming economy and abundant employment offered new opportunities for leisure and freedom in living and self-expression. The demand for postwar housing encouraged the use of new materials and construction methods and, along with these, an acceptance of modern ideas in home planning.

SEAMLESS LIVING

Suiting a *family of average means*, *Eichler Homes* offer seamless living in open and fluid spaces. Embracing the ideal of transparency, the transition from inside to outside is rendered seamless by the reduction of demising walls and a predominance of earth tones and spare colour. Flowing light, glass walls, and an open plan suggest new methods of communication and interaction; casual living in concert with the optimism of the times; and contemporary existence in an abstraction of light and shadow.

This freedom of living coincides with a form of lifestyle and social structure common during the period in which these homes were produced. Family and social interaction were encouraged and intensified. The 20th century North American nuclear family and suburban existence called for suitably arranged spaces for living and entertaining. These interiors and exteriors are documents in the history of taste. The gleaminess of the interiors and the dazzling smooth materials and glass illuminate the spectacle of domestic life — a work of architecture of future vision.

The orthodox principles of modern space and the employ of universal techniques of mass production are appropriated to accommodate local exigencies. They define a *Californian* modernism - as initiated by John Entenza and his *Art and Architecture Case-Study* program. Although intended as a prototypical projects, the *Case-Study* program never grew beyond a series of "one-off" buildings. The *Eichlers Homes*, on the other hand, offered mass housing for the middle class.

Joe Eichler was not an architect; he was a developer. The architects he hired to design his homes, while significant, were not the preeminent architects of their day. Although their proposition was radical in the context of merchant building — and indeed they were ridiculed by their competition — it was a *very* successful architectural and financial program. Unlike many of their contemporaries such as the *Levittowns*, they remain popular today.

The *Eichler Homes* were a notable exception to developer housing. Ultimately modern, these buildings provided a background against which the vicissitudes of physical and social circumstance were framed. Conspicuous immediately, the maturing landscape and the occasions of modern living play a generous role in the experience of these buildings and their surroundings. Expressive reticence and unreserved fervor for engaging innovative construction methods throughout the architectural enterprise results here in a collection of modern buildings that are both inconspicuous and powerfully present. Indeed, seen in this light, the Eichler Homes might easily be construed as the most important *modern* housing project ever undertaken in the United States.

SIMPLE LUXURIES

But don't you worry, peace will bring America's lost comforts back - and more. Home will be truly a House of Wonders in this after-Victory world. Science already knows how to make it comfortable beyond our dreams. Invention will fill it with conveniences we have never known. Methods developed by war will improve products and short-cut their manufacture. An abundance of materials, new and old, will make things plentiful.?

— Sparton radio promotion

The post-war promotion of war-time innovation portrayed a fantastic, streamlined, hygienic, and automatic future. Advertisements in magazines like *LIFE* promised new ways of efficient and leisure-filled living. A reciprocity developed between the promotional efforts of corporate America and the burgeoning domestic marketplace, as re-tooled war-time innovations and products made their domestic appearance. Recognizing the "*zeit geist*," an astute Joe Eichler embarked on the measured adaptation of new products

and new architecture to the hillsides of San Francisco. He was committed to realizable technologies and practical construction.

Many of the leading architects of the post war period studied and experimented with mass produced houses. Inevitably involving standardized products and repetitive production techniques, these efforts typically failed commercially, as the products lacked individuality. By contrast, the Eichler architects incorporated a standardized *process* of post and beam construction as opposed to a reliance on standard *elements*. Materials rendered the homes characterful: the palette of mahogany veneer panels, cork flooring, and woven reed door finishes were sensitively integrated into the houses, ennobling the whole.

Not all postwar proposals were as coherent and transparent. Buckminster Fuller offered an extreme futuristic example. In seeking to revolutionize and industrialize housing, here refined the *Dymaxion Deployment Unit*, originally intended both for military purposes and as a housing prototype for defense workers. Fuller would have seen families housed in reconfigured grain bins. After the war, the *Beech Aircraft* company tested his unlikely proposals, building the all-aluminum *Wichita* house components parallel to their aircraft assembly lines.³ The Eichler houses were much less radical by comparison. In emphasizing this modest approach, one must consider the pre-war, wartime, and post war experiments in prefabrication, furniture design and materials innovation. William Wurster, for example, had developed a functioning method of prefabrication as early as 1941 for the expedient accommodation for defense workers.⁴ Richard Neutra, Walter Gropius, Konrad Wachsmann, and Rudolf Schindler, among others, contributed significantly to the wartime mass production of prefabricated houses.

The furniture experiments of Eero Saarinen and Charles and Rae Eames were initiated before the war, first gaining national recognition by winning the Museum of Modern Art's October, 1940 *Organic Design in Home Furnishings* competition.⁵ Charles and Ray Eames moved to California (America's frontier) six months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. By invoking molded plywood techniques and methods of mass production, they "...changed the way America sat down."⁶ Sheet plywood and glulam wood beams — enlisted as surrogates for steel — also improved in quality. In July, 1938, Richard Neutra anticipated plywood's broad impact by asserting that "...Plywood is perhaps the most significant of the more recently perfected structural items which usher in a renaissance of wood construction and bring it up-to-date."⁷ *Formica*, invented in 1913, became readily available for domestic use by 1950. "...As early as 1939 the company (*Formica*) sold sheets to Chicago furniture makers who produced the first dinettes, intended to replace those of white porcelain-enameled steel whose finishes marred so easily." Plastic laminates merged effortlessly with the design demands of new efficient live-in kitchens.

Eichler's post and beam structure was innovative for house construction in 1950. Eichler overcame resistant building officials, successfully altering codes to allow this unusual approach to domestic construction. Exposed connections are straightforward (simply fastened with a single metal dowel to slab or ceiling) and eminently flexible. Beams vary in depth commensurate to their span, and plywood cladding forms a lightweight diaphragm. In this system, the post operates as a *universal joint* — to which glazing, paneling, and door frames can be interchangeably secured. The scope of maintenance procedures or even light remodeling is greatly reduced by an interior wall system of lightweight panels, providing the homeowner a sense of independence and self-reliance uncommon in conventional builder homes.

The continuity between technology and intention also worked well in conditions where both climate and soils allowed for almost effortless building. Floors were typically 4 in. cast-in-place concrete slabs on perimeter beams with integral radiant floor heating systems (a system imported from Japan and Korea), and covered with cork and vinyl tile flooring. Wood posts and glu-lam beams were milled

in unassuming rectangular sections. The exterior walls were generally wood (Peninsula) siding or cedar shingles. Floor to ceiling *Arcadia* sliding glass doors and walls enclosed the courtyards. Bracing for lateral stability to the post and beam system was provided by the perimeter "solid" wall. Structural roofs of 2 in. tongue and groove wood decking were exposed on the interior, providing both structural armature and finished surfaces. By thoughtful integration of plan, structure, mechanical systems, infill walls and fittings, the Eichler homes achieved an efficient (and profitable) unity.

Not dissimilar to Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian method, but much simpler in execution, the Eichler team produced an economic product that "looked like a custom home." In both instances, the architectural identity of the work is inextricably intertwined with its structural and fiscal identity. Construed in this fashion, each component of the building performs manifold duties and responds to many pressures. Building was done with great efficiency and speed: construction method remains evident in the final product and the ubiquitous module generates rhythm and meter in the space. The compelling presence of these constructional and fiscal concerns in the completed houses imbue them with a character beyond their identity as minimal dwelling.

Innovations in building materials, furniture, and finishes became the spring-board for new construction strategies. Joe Eichler succeeded in sifting the realizable technologies from the improbable promises of over-zealous industrialists. His architects synthesizing (and distilled) the profusion of post-war materials and products. Careful screening and an all-inclusive strategy worked to his advantage, and his homes were sold fully equipped with plywood walls, built-in "streamlined" appliances and *Formica* clad kitchen islands, providing an elegant setting for the modern furnishings of the day.

STRATEGIES FOR MODERN LIVING

Fundamentally different from the common and familiar, the *Eichler Homes* proposed peculiar rooms that would change the way conventional family life was construed. Enabled by the conception of home-as-enclave, open plans encouraged newfound interaction between previously segregated activities. The Atrium was a completely new kind of room — adding breadth to the other rooms of the house and facilitating new and individual modes of inhabitation and occasion. The multi-purpose room as common center, incorporating kitchen and living spaces, recognized and encouraged these new conditions of *modern* life.

Comparison between traditional Japanese housing and the Eichler homes reveals analogous conditions in organization and effect. The standardized *Tatami* principles are reiterated in the plan modules of the Eichler bungalow. A characteristic openness and translucency is apparent in both typologies. In plan #304 of the *Ladera* project (1951) by *Quincy Jones* and *Frederick Emmons*, the demising wall between bedroom and living room was offered in three configurations — a fixed wall, a movable screen, or no wall — depending on the needs of the occupant.⁸

The development of the multi-purpose *Family Room* (a title coined in a 1947 *Parents Magazine* article describing experimental house design) as flexible in function, and casual in feel, combined the functions of kitchen, dining room and play — a strategy promoting family togetherness. The private life of the family, on the other hand, was accommodated with equal intelligence and verve. The inclusion of a bedroom entry off the atrium afforded adolescents a sense of independence within the family structure. At the same time, the discretely private realm of the master bedroom was intimately connected with the sense of a continuous domain. The plan fostered complex relationships between the public and private realms of the house: privacy was achieved in full view.

Innovative planning and inventive devices maximized the interior spaces and encouraged new ways to live. Technologies such as

radiant heating cast into the foundation slabs inspired unprecedented use of the floor-surface (there were now no limits to where a toddler could comfortably crawl, and the floor would "warm your slippers and bathrobe as you slept"). The appeal of openness also influenced kitchen arrangements in relation to dining and living space. *Formica* clad "islands" — with sliding masonite door cabinets and flexible pivoting and extending tables attached — mediated between the kitchen and the lived-in spaces, paradoxically both masking and exposing the exigencies of food preparation. The emphasis was on materials that were hygienic and sturdy, applied in standard ways using plywood as a structural base.

These islands had significant social consequences, as Richard Gutman notes: "*Perhaps in reaction to the war, women were transformed from their capable roles as workers in American industry to the 'little ladies' managing the new 'scientific' American kitchens. Open-plan suburban houses made the woman the pilot of the domestic ship, reinforcing this central role.*"¹⁰

In the *Model E-5* (*Ashen and Allen Architects*, 1956) the island was dispensed with entirely, and exposed appliances and cabinetry were stacked along one wall of the "multi-purpose" room. With few clues as to how the room might be used and how the furniture might be arranged, this particular model approached the threshold of open space planning.

The effective use of available materials and technology, a coherent marketing strategy, and the liberation of the plan were ideally synchronized with theoretical "modernist" ambitions. Eichler homes offered "simple luxuries" in the name of social advancement. By wholly integrated design, shrewd marketing strategies, and moderate means, they mediated between over-charged manufacturing interests and domestic appetite; offering Americans "*houses of wonder*" in an "*after-Victory world*."

11,000 EICHLER HOME-BUYERS CAN'T BE WRONG

[Tract] housing developments as an architectural phenomenon seem peculiarly gratuitous. They exist apart from prior standards of "good" architecture. *They were not built to satisfy individual needs or tastes.*"

— Dan Graham

There are other builders who efficiently produce well-built houses and sell at a fair profit. The purchaser of one of these will get a good value. We believe our houses go beyond this because much more thought and care go into them. Nothing is spent for frills and gimmicks. Beauty is achieved by the architect's skill in designing details, his blend of materials and proper dimensions, and above all, the exercise of good taste."

— Joseph L. Eichler

Like most housing built in North America after World War II, *Eichler Homes* are detached suburban houses built in an industrially efficient manner in large tracts by a merchant homebuilder for profit. *Eichler Homes, Inc.* became one of America's biggest merchant homebuilders. Joe Eichler — the West Coast's counterpart to Bill Levitt of *Levittown* fame — gained such renown that his houses are popularly referred to as *Eichlers*. That works of modernist architecture could be "popular" is itself an anathema, fitting neither modernist nor anti-modernist conceptions. Proponents championed modern architecture as a "great cause" that was above matters of popular taste. Modernism's detractors, on the other hand, argued that it is precisely modern architecture's *lack* of popular appeal that renders it problematic.¹³

It is often lamented that the modern movement lost its social conscience when many of its architects fled to America from Europe in the thirties and forties, and that Modernism was commercialized and co-opted by corporate interests. While this may be true in

general, the very fact that *Eichler Homes* were a relatively freely exercised consumer-choice and not state-instituted social housing legitimizes Modernism here. Whereas the design of social housing projects does not involve having to "attract" potential homebuyers, Eichler Homes had to compete on the basis of perceived value, "curb appeal," and all the other nebulous and fickle factors that drive the real estate industry. Joe Eichler sought to gain an advantage over his competitors' "Cape Cod" and "Ranch"-style tract houses precisely on the basis of design innovation, a far riskier venture than if his houses were more typical designs. The fact that he succeeded commercially should not be lamented, but should be seen precisely as a vindication for innovative architecture. As Joe Eichler's son explains it:

All of the large-scale postwar home-builders streamlined the process of building through labor specialization, product standardization, and vastly improved supply planning and organization. ... They despised and avoided architects, who espoused and tried to impose architectural principles that complicated construction. [Eichler], on the other hand, embraced them, hiring first [Robert] Anshen and later A. Quincy Jones, two highly respected young advocates of modern architecture."

The *Eichler Home's* nearly-flat roof, generous eaves and flush ground floor convey an expression of horizontality; a striving to be grounded in landscape. Today many of these houses are so surrounded by greenery that they are largely hidden from view. Together with their many natural, unfinished materials, the *Eichler Homes* can be said to emulate a "landform" more so than a figurative object or pavilion, for which landscape serves as a contrasting backdrop. This clearly betrays the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright not only on architects Anshen and Jones, who were trained in the office of Wright, but also on Joe Eichler, who lived in a house designed by Wright before becoming a homebuilder.

Interior courtyards and atriums are the main socio-spatial focus of many models. This is an inversion of the Anglo-Saxon conception of the house as a pavilion overlooking nature: the Eichler Home is introspective. Its courtyard mediates between the public car port and the private house. In a typical *Eichler*, the "front door" is a garden gate leading directly into the courtyard. The courtyard, protected from winds, noise and the eyes of neighbors, establishes an artificial microcosm of nature within the heart of the dwelling. Rooms that face a courtyard enjoy a direct visual connection to the rest of the house. However there is little communication with the street outside, or with neighbors, creating a degree of urban like privacy and anonymity, and taking the maxim "*good fences make for good neighbors*" to extremes.

While the courtyard dwelling has ancient roots in Northern Africa, China, Rome and Greece, this type of house was built in the region that is now the American Southwest (then a part of Mexico) for centuries. The Spanish Colonial courtyard house was built of adobe and had its rooms organized around a central 'patio'. Later, early twentieth-century California architects such as Irving Gill, the Greene Brothers and Rudolf Schindler designed many variations on the Spanish "patio" house.¹⁵ *The Eichlers* were also informed by the *Arts and Architecture Case Study Houses* of Ralf Rapson, Gregory Ain and others.¹⁶ The *Eichler Homes* perpetuated a Californian tradition.

In consideration of the socio-political mood of the day, the greater privacy afforded by an *Eichler Home* could well have been one of the most attractive features for many homebuyers. This was the McCarthy era of stifling conformism in American society characterized, among other things, by policies of systematic racial discrimination. "*Eichler Homes* was the first large tract builder to sell houses to African-Americans" and Joe Eichler "*resigned from the Association of Home Builders in 1958 in protest of racial discrimination policies and, according to reports from long-time Eichler owners, offered to buy back homes from those who had trouble accepting their [Afri-*

can-American]neighbors.”¹⁸

Eichler Homes continue to be in high demand. Since 1993, *The EichlerNetwork* publishes newsletters and a web site that put Eichler owners in contact with one another as well as with contractors specializing in the repair and maintenance of *Modernist* houses. They may well be even more popular now than ever before with the current vogue for retro lounging. Whatever the fashion, they are a lasting testament to the successful coupling of entrepreneurial spirit with progressive social ideals.

CONCLUSION

Anticipating the *needs* of post-war America, rather than simply meeting market demand, Eichler and his architects designed ambitious buildings that far surpassed the requirements necessary to sell houses. Counter to the prevailing opinion and the *wisdom* of established developers, the *Eichler Homes* embraced many risks — flat roofs, exposed concrete floor-slabs, modern appearance, and experimental domestic construction methods. However they proved to be exceptionally successful.

Prompted in large measure by exceptionally strict budgetary constraints, the work possesses many qualities which recommend it for contemporary study. In the clear and considered embrace of landscape, forthright enthusiasm for innovative building methods, and through its essential modesty and expressive reticence the architecture bears witness to ambitions worthy of our attention. Almost 50 years after the first buildings were constructed, the *Eichler Homes* provide the armature for the reappraisal of an architecture that is simultaneously modern and deliberately engaged with a sense of construction, locale, circumstance, and life. In this case, the promises of modernity — the social emancipation by technical and industrial means — and their material expression have become obscured in favor of accounts of the life lived in these innovative houses. The architectural artifact is understood as inseparable from life, construction, circumstance, and social consequence; abstraction becomes the means for both embracing and critiquing culture.

NOTES

- ¹ Josep Hudnut, "The Post-Modern House," *Architectural Record* 97 (May 1945): 70-73.
- ² Robert Friedel, "Scarcity and Promise," in *World War II and the American Dream* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 77.

- ³ Robert W. Marks, *The Dymaxion World of Buckminster Fuller* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, and London, Amsterdam: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1960).
- ⁴ Peter S. Reed, *Enlisting Modernism, in World War II and the American Dream* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 15 (reprinted from *Architectural Forum*, October, 1941).
- ⁵ Donald Albrecht, *Design is a Method of Action, in A Legacy of Invention: The Work of Charles and Ray Eames* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), p. 21.
- ⁶ Donald Albrecht, *A Legacy of Invention: The Work of Charles and Ray Eames* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), p. 14.
- ⁷ Quoted by Christoph Bignens in "Plywood as Determinant of Form," *Daidalos: Architektur Kunst Kultur, Magie der Werkstoffe: Magic of Materials*, Bertelsmann Fachzeitschriften GmbH (June 1995): 75.
- ⁸ Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Plastics. in Formica & Design: From the Counter Top to High Art*, edited by Susan Grant Lewin (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 50.
- ⁹ Barbara Goldstein, *Arts and Architecture: The Entenza Years* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press), p. 133.
- ¹⁰ Richard J. S. Gutman, *Formica and Diners, in Formica & Design...*, p. 90.
- ¹¹ Dan Graham, "Homes for America," *Arts Magazine* (Dec. 1966-Jan. 1967).
- ¹² Joseph Eichler as cited in *Ditto*, Jerry Lanning Stern, and Marvin Wax. *Design for Living: The Eichler Homes* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), p. 16.
- ¹³ see Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972) for a populist critique of modern architecture.
- ¹⁴ Ned Eichler, "A Cherished Legacy" in *Ditto* et al, pp. 62-67.
- ¹⁵ see Macintosh, Duncan "The Modern Courtyard House", *Architectural Association Paper* Number 9 (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1973) for a more thorough historical study of courtyard houses.
- ¹⁶ Gregory Ain was in fact commissioned by the Advance Development Company to design a series of prototypical house plans for tracts in the Los Angeles area in 1948, the same year that Eichler Homes was founded in San Francisco. See Entenza, John. "One Hundred Houses" *Arts and Architecture* (May 1948).
- ¹⁷ Ned Eichler, "A Cherished Legacy," in *Ditto* et al, p. 97.
- ¹⁸ Marty Arbunich, "The Wonderful World of Eichler Homes" Eichler Network. Available: www.eichlernetwork.com/ENHist.html. (10 August 1998).