

# BUILT IN THE USA

## THE POSTWAR HOUSE

**BEATRIZ COLOMINA**  
*Princeton University*

It was beautiful while it lasted. For a brief period, the span of about five years following the end of World War Two, America seemed to embrace modern architecture, it wasn't, as with the so-called "International Style" exhibition of 1932, the importation of some European ideas repackaged as a style. It was the development; of a whole new mode of operation, one that fascinated Europe in the same way that European models had once fascinated the U.S. Indeed, it would seem that Europeans were more fascinated by the new American models than Americans themselves. As the Smithsons put it:

*There has been much reflection in England on the Eames House. For the Eames House was a cultural gift parcel received here at a particularly useful time. The bright wrapper has made most people - especially Americans-throw the content away as not sustaining. But we have been brooding on it - working on it - feeding on it.*

How are we to understand this phenomena? What precise role was played by the institutions that supported it? The Eames House were part of the Case Study Program of exhibition houses in Los Angeles, sponsored by the magazine *Arts & Architecture* under John Entenza. Meanwhile on the East Coast, the Museum of Modern Art played a crucial role by sponsoring a series of exhibition houses to be built in the garden of the museum. Both programs were related to war. On the one hand, industry was recycling the products and techniques that it had developed and tested at war. On the other hand, the architects themselves had been involved in the development of these military products.

The Museum of Modern Art program was a direct extension of the institution's wartime operations. It began with Buckminster Fuller's deployment units that were developed for the navy, reconfigured for a nuclear family and exhibited in the museum in 1941 with the title "Defense House." This mentality of the soldier as client, the civilian as soldier, quickly passed from the wartime exhibitions to the peace time ones. It runs thorough the exhibition "Wartime Housing" (1942), "Useful Objects in Wartime" (1943), to "Tomorrows Small House" (1945), to Marcel Breuer's house in the garden of 1949 and

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Fig. 1. Advertisement in *Architectural Record*, 1949.

Gregory Ain's house of 1950. "Tomorrow's Small House" was the turning point from war to peace. War does not go away. Rather it is carried out in the consumption of mass produced spin offs of military technology and efficiency. The museum's sustained attempt to produce an idealized image of postwar domesticity was a surrogate military campaign, a vital part or the cold war.

The Case Study Houses likewise emerged out of wartime activities on the part of the journal that sponsored them, the architects and the industries involved. During

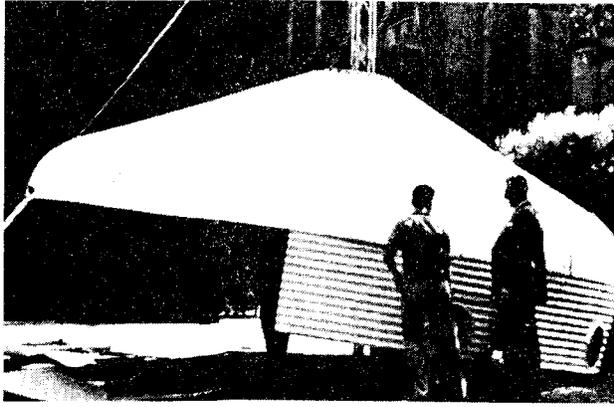


Fig. 2. Buckminster Fuller's deployment unit (Defense House) in garden of Museum of Modern Art, 1942.

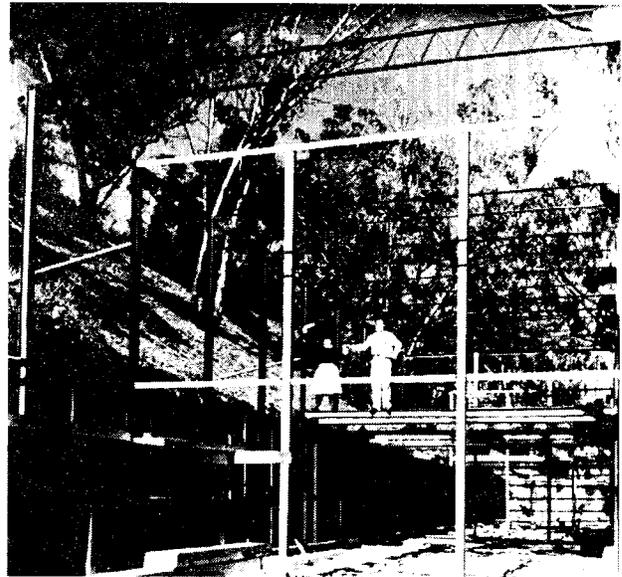


Fig. 4. Charles and Ray Eames on the steel frame of the Eames House during construction, 1949.

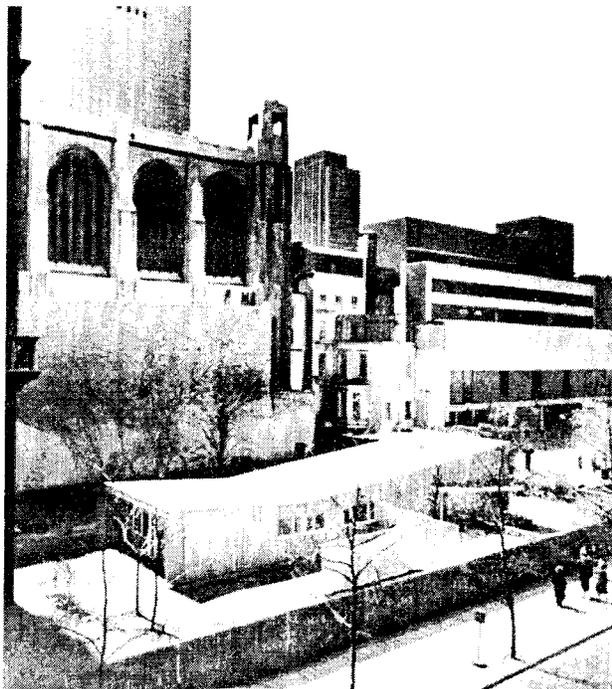


Fig. 3. Marcel Breuer's House in the Garden, Museum of Modern Art, 1949.

the war, Charles and Ray Eames, for example, had formed a company with John Entenza to produce plywood war products. In 1941-42 they developed a molded splint for the US Navy to replace a metal leg splint used in the field that did not sufficiently secure the leg, causing gangrene. The navy accepted Eames's prototype and

with the financial support of Entenza and the help of other architects like Gregory Ain, began designing the equipment needed for mass production and put 150,000 units into service. By 1945 the Eames were producing lightweight plywood cabinets and molded plywood chairs and table based on the technology they had developed for the military. Military equipment became the basis of domestic equipment. This obvious displacement from war to architecture can be found throughout the Case study House program in more subtle forms, as in the very idea of standardization. Every component of the Eames house, for example, was selected from a steel manufacturer's catalog and bolted together like a Meccano set.

The Museum of Modern Art likewise committed itself to the ideal of standardization after the war, no longer simply representing architecture as a high art. Both institutions targeted the middle-class consumer, understood as a completely new figure, a "modern man," as Entenza put it, who upon returning from the war would prefer to live in a modern environment utilizing the most advanced technologies rather than return to live in "old fashioned houses with enclosed rooms." It was as if the war had educated the taste, the aesthetic sensibility of the public. It was war that finally brought modern architecture to the U.S. This late arrival has to be carefully reconsidered in terms of the architecture of the historical avant-garde that was itself explicitly produced in response to World War I.