



ERNEST HAMLIN BAKER

“What will the neighbors think?”

**Cover Article on modern architecture for residences,  
Time Magazine, August 15, 1949**

Houses may not be so confining as the shells of scallops, clams and turtles, but neither do they fit, or look, as well. More & more U.S. families, dissatisfied with the shells they live in, are out looking for better ones. In 1948 they bought or built 2.4 million homes. This year prices on new houses are down as much as 10% and business should be almost as good. How good, and how different, will the houses be?

In the 1930's, half the new houses constructed were custom-built, and the new owner consequently had a 50-50 chance to express his own ideas about the practical art of housing himself and his family. Today, such speculative merchant-builders as the David D. Bohannon Organization, which is putting up thousands of moderately priced houses around San Francisco, and the traditional but gadgety Gerholz Community Homes in Flint, Mich, account for 80% of production. Biggest of these merchants, Levitt & Sons, has raised a whole town (Levittown, pop. 27,850) of almost identical \$7,990 bungalows on the flat potato fields of Long Island. The Levitt boys knock a new house together every 16 minutes, adorn their latest model with such creature comforts as fireplaces as well as modern touches, e.g., picture windows and movable walls that double as closets.

Merchant-builders increasingly favor the modern touches—at least on the inside where they won't glaringly show. But the man who wants a house to fit his family as well as the age he lives in still has good reason for building his own.

**Hips & Door Butts.**

Such a man may choose his own lot and design his own house for a contractor to build—if he combines the patience of Job with the energy of Samson. He would begin by learning the necessary background for an intelligent lot-seeker, making it his business to study drainage, zoning, prevailing winds, taxes and prospects for taxes, new developments and proposals for new highways & byways in the county. Before designing the house itself he would cram his head with tables of construction costs (still more than double what they were ten years ago), master the rudiments of architecture, and learn to speak knowingly of furring and flashing, soffits and reveals, muntins and mullions, gambrels, spandrels, hips and door butts.

But if the would-be home-builder does not feel strong enough for all that, he will wind up at the office door of one of the nation's 15,000 practicing architects. For a fee ranging from 5% to 15% of the total cost of the house, the architect will do some or all of the following: help choose a site, help plan the house (or plan it altogether), make drawings so that the prospective owner can see what his house will look like, help choose and deal with the contractor, and supervise the actual construction.

In deciding what sort of house he wants, many a 1949 house-hunter begins with the notion that it ought to be something like Grandmother's. One of the first things he finds out is that the old place needed at least a servant or two to keep it up. Furthermore, it got that spacious look by having a lot of unused space, which Grandmother could afford when her house was built. Perhaps the home-builder should try something new. Flat-roofed, wide-windowed homes that looked queer ten years ago have since become a decorative part of the residential landscape. Every major school of architecture in the U.S. emphasizes the modern, and this year every honor award presented by the American Institute of Architects in the residential field went to a modern house.

### **Why Not Stucco?**

Nonetheless, the average citizen is apt to want to look around a bit, and find out what is going on and consider what his neighbors or potential neighbors think. Last week, one of the best places in the U.S. to watch what was going on was southern California.

"Traditional" houses, built in any one of a dozen old-fashioned styles, were still away out in front. Driving along any street of new, custom-built homes in Los Angeles, the pondering home-builder could see U-shaped ranch houses, French provincials, New England colonials, Pennsylvania Dutch farmhouses and scaled-down copies of Mount Vernon, set in neighborly alignment on 90-or 100-ft lots.

With the residue of still older favorites—from Spanish (and stucco-Spanish) to the gingerbread and rocking-chair porches of Victorianism and an occasional Mediterranean villa—the region showed most of the trials, errors and nostalgias in U S architectural history.

But southern California is also the stamping ground of one of the world's best and most influential moderns—Los Angeles Architect Richard Joseph Neutra. The broad, glassy brows of Neutra's buildings (and those of such onetime Neutra apprentices as Gregory Ain, Raphael Bonano and Harwell Harris) line the Pacific shore, nestle in the canyons and beam down from a hundred hilltops. After 23 years in the neighborhood, 57-year-old Vienna-born Richard Neutra has gone a long way toward making the place one of the hotbeds of the U.S. modern.

### **Why Not Schizophrenia?**

A grey-haired, owl-beaked dynamo of a man who rises at 4 a.m. and has never, since the age of eight, doubted his own mission in life, Neutra takes great satisfaction at the advance of modern designing in all fields. His impatience is with those who come to the new faith haltingly. In his softly accented English he complains:

"A person drives home from a modern office building in a 1949 Studebaker into a fairy-tale garage with artificially caved-in rafters—a hut of the witch in the woods where the babes got lost! Is there nothing wrong with it, this architectural schizophrenia?"

In residential architecture, Neutra's own faith boils down to two main aims:

#### **Spaciousness and compactness combined.**

Lots of glass and livable porches or patios custom-tailored to the landscape make all outdoors seem like part of the house. Drawing and dining rooms are merged into one low, wide and handsome living area, comfortably lined with built-in furniture. But cellars and attics are eliminated, kitchens made smaller and handier, to cut construction costs, heating bills and housekeeping chores.

#### **Honest, "functional" good looks.**

Genuinely modern modern homes are designed for the use and enjoyment of the family inside, not to impress the neighbors. Their beauty, like that of any sea shell, is more than skin-deep—practical, not pretentious. Instead of concealing the purposes and techniques of the construction, it accentuates them. Gingerbread details and fussy panelings are sheared away. One can tell at a glance what the house is made of and how it was put together. Such "functional"

handsomeness is not confined to the modern. Among older U.S. examples: early Cape Cod cottages and Navajo Indian hogans.

### **Yachts v. Cliffs.**

Though no two U.S. architects might agree on the way to say it, those two principles are the common denominators of what the modernists are up to. In Europe after World War I, such topflight architects as Germany's Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and Walter Gropius, and Switzerland's Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret) evolved the "International" style—strict and angular, making fullest possible use of steel, glass and concrete (for maximum light and openness). Le Corbusier's slogan: "The house is a machine for living." Van Der Rohe and Gropius have since set up shop in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the late great Chicago skyscraper-builder, Louis Sullivan, and his famed pupil, Frank Lloyd Wright, had been marking out an architecturally warmer style of their own. To Wright and his followers, the severity of the International style is anathema. (Some of Wright's choice epithets for it: "Dead Sea fruit"; "the flat-bosomed façade"; "the whited sepulchre.")

The average American has a hard time telling the two styles apart. Main difference to the casual eye: International houses, with their blinding rectangles of glass and steel and concrete, outside stairways and rooftop sundecks, are apt to look a little like stranded yachts; Wright's houses, using whatever native materials seem best, generally hug the surrounding landscape, sometimes manage to achieve the look of an inhabited cliff that has stood there forever.

### **Rain in the Desert.**

Neutra's own career has taken him through the 'International style to the outskirts of Wright's camp. After growing up in Vienna he first decided to be an architect, he says, when, at eight, he took a ride on the new Vienna subway and saw what a builder could do. Neutra made his way to the U.S. in 1923. At the funeral of Louis Sullivan, the unknown Neutra presented himself to the world-famous Wright, then squatted on the master's doorstep until Wright took him in for a three-month stay.

The young Viennese architect named his eldest son Frank L. Neutra, but when he moved on to California (he kept remembering the travel poster he

had seen years before, in Switzerland: CALIFORNIA CALLS YOU), he struck out for himself in the International tradition. He quickly saw the architectural possibilities in industrial products, e.g., plywood and sheet metal, and he designed one of the first steel-frame residences in the U.S. By the '40s he had come into his own as one of the world's half-dozen top modern architects.

His creations ranged from lavish jobs for plutocrats, like the moated desert residence for Cinemogul Josef von Sternberg (the patio piped for artificial rain), to cleanly simple defense housing (at a cost of \$2,600 per unit) near the San Pedro shipyards. Like other U.S. moderns, Neutra has more & more followed Wright's lead in using warm-colored woods, bricks and rough-hewn stone; in breaking the severe verticals and horizontals of International with an occasional diagonal roofline, landscaped terraces and complicated softening patterns of light & shade.

Biggest project on his drawing boards last week was the Sanatorio Universitario Italiano to be built by the Italian government in the Alps north of Milan. It will include sanatorium facilities for 300 student-patients, plus a theater, library, recreation lounges, a residential neighborhood for employees, a shopping center, two small hotels and a church for which the Archbishop of Milan has created a new parish. Other Neutra projects range all the way from an \$800 alteration job to a \$175,000 residence in Tulsa, Okla., and a new community housing development in Los Angeles.

### **Away with Antiques.**

Neutra's standards are still too severe for some tastes. One young couple who eventually sold their Neutra house (at a handsome profit) explained their feelings this way: "We were crazy about it at first, it was so pristine, so exquisite. But the truth is, we couldn't live up to it. The place went to pot so quickly—nothing can look more shabby than shabby modern. The kids' fingermarks just didn't look right on the walls, and since there were no door frames the plaster around the doors got bruised."

Neutra wanted to design furniture to go with the house and have it custom-built, but the couple could not afford that, so they compromised on half modern, half hand-me-downs. To Neutra, this was a sad heresy. He walked in one day, spotted a French provincial chair with a quilted slipcover, tapped it disdainfully with his cane and announced: "Unconvincing!"

The unhappy pair had some fine old silver of which they were particularly proud, and wanted a sideboard on which to display it, but Neutra said no, sideboards were "bourgeois." They had no mantelpiece either—Neutra frowned on mantels. At last one day their little boy came and said: "Ma, why can't we live in a regular house?" That helped them decide. They moved to a farm.

### **"CowShed Modern."**

Mr. B., a Los Angeles stockbroker, and his family are more typical of Neutra's clients. The B.s lived in a conventional house, furnished with antiques and larger than they needed, since their 21-year-old son was away at college most of the time. A year ago they decided to build something small and modern on a steep lot in the hills near Coldwater Canyon. Mr. B. was afraid of getting what he described as "cowshed modern," so they called the best man they knew of, Neutra. They were afraid he might not be interested in such a small project, but as it happened, Neutra was.

"I want your husband and son to come and see me too," Neutra told Mrs. B. on the phone. "You know this house is to be for every one of you." After the first get-acquainted conference in the "lakeview room" of Neutra's own wide-windowed house (where the architect lounged against the pillows of a deep-seated couch and his visitors were made comfortable in plainly modern chairs of Neutra's own design), he asked all three members of the family to write him a detailed account of their activities for an entire week.

### **Till Judgment Day.**

From the diaries and from subsequent interviews Neutra gleaned a hundred details about their tastes and way of life, some of which he was able to provide for in his design. On their side the B.s learned something of Neutra's philosophy of architecture.

He objects to the old "machine-for-living" slogan. "I try to make a house like a flower pot, in which you can root something and out of which family life will bloom," he tells his clients. "It's not so much a question of ornamenting the flower pot as of fabricating it in such a way that something healthy and beautiful can grow in and out of it. The overall design should be simple, but it depends on neat execution. I want every house I build to be a stepping stone to the future, and modern architecture gets a black eye if it's not backed by minute structural documentation." (Neutra has been known to provide up to 150 blueprint pages for a single two-bedroom house.)

"The designer may never be found out until the day of judgment," Neutra goes on, "but if he supplies his victims with a daily round of tiny or coarse irritations, unwittingly or not, he's a menace. It's the little sore we overlook which later proves malignant. To be used to having a telephone pole in front of your view window does not make it wholesome. Bad acoustics can lead to shouting, and this calls forth an argumentative mood."

When the B.s shyly inquired about costs, Neutra made a rough guess that their house would come to \$16,000 (it grew to \$19,500, not including patio, garden and subsequent extras, but Neutra based his 10% fee on the lower figure).

The B.s were not worried about the investment. The resale value of Neutra houses has been demonstrated time & again. Real-estate agents never fail to insert the words "Neutra House" when they advertise one for sale. Says Neutra: "I consider myself literally conservative, dependable over the amortization period."

### **Indoors & Out.**

Neutra's house for the B.s had been finished and occupied by last week. Viewed from the street it lay along the hillside like an airy fort, constructed of redwood, rosy-beige stucco and plate glass. A solidly railed, angular deck jutted out at one side; a larger, unrailed deck of slat-grill redwood served as the entrance porch. The living room was an 18 by 32 ft. rectangle staggered irregularly by a guest closet, bookcases, birch-trimmed dining alcove and flagstone hearth. Along one wall were 27 ft. of plate glass windows, with sliding draperies. The opposite wall, facing out into a patio and three-tiered garden, was 32 ft. of almost solid glass.

The two bedrooms were contrastingly tiny—only 12 by 14 ft.—and so was the 8 by 19 ft. kitchen, but with their built-in furniture they had the neat efficiency of cruiser cabins and galley. There was nothing to sweep under, and no space to mislay things. The two bathrooms had overhead infra-red lamps to take the chill off. Neutra, with his characteristic attention to detail, had taken down a hanging from his own house to show Mrs. B. how the living-room draperies should be made.

The 1,250 sq. ft. of house were more than doubled by the accessible decks, patio and garden. The B.s agreed that it cut down on housework and let a lot more sun, space and air into their lives. It would not date—at least not

for a long time—it fitted all their special needs, and it was handsome in a boldly simple way. When they had sold their antiques and moved in, Mrs. B. could think of only one word to describe the way she felt about it: "Liberation."

With the B.s, as with most topflight architects, the contest of modern v. traditional may be all over, with the verdict going to the modernists. The general public has still to be convinced. Architecturally, argue modernists like Neutra, the public has nothing to lose but its chains. But to millions of Americans the chains the modern architect removes are still among the comforts of life: the overstuffed warmth of their living rooms; bedrooms big enough to serve as separate castles—and a refuge from the rest of the family; space to putter and store things in attics and cellars; walls that shut the outdoors out and make the inside cozy.

If what is now called "modern" eventually becomes traditional in the U.S., it will be not merely because more & more people have learned to like it. Modern architects will have been learning, too, merging clean lines, common-sense convenience and liberating openness of style with the warm overtones of home.