WHEN WE WERE

In the mid-20th century, Southern California gave rise to a style of architecture and design still unsurpassed for sleek utility and bold visual dynamism.

BY ROBERT ATKINS

You know, the history of California art doesn't start until about 1961, and that's when [my] photographs start. I mean, we have no history out here. So that's the beginning.
—Dennis Hopper

LIKE MANY SWEEPING GENERALIZATIONS, Hopper's contains a kernel of truth. Still, it might have come as news to curator Walter Hopps or artist Ed Kienholz, who in 1957 cofounded the hip Ferus Gallery, which gave Larry Bell, Wallace Berman, Robert Irwin, Ken Price, Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol, among many others, their first shows. Or perhaps it would have surprised the already-established painters John Altoon, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, or *los tres grandes* (José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros), the internationally renowned Mexican muralists who produced a number of works in California in the 1930s. But

MODERN

it is undeniably true that Los Angeles lacked the modern art infrastructure of New York and San Francisco, cities that long prior to World War II boasted established art schools, adventurous modern museums and wealthy philanthropists willing to support them.

Conventional wisdom describes the L.A. art world of the '60s as adolescent, starting on a long march to maturity. The problem with this view isn't factual inaccuracy: promising art world developments in L.A. did seem jinxed, as with *Artforum*'s move to New York in 1967 (only two years after the magazine arrived in L.A. from San Francisco) and the tribulations of the Pasadena Art Museum (which opened glamorous new quarters in 1969, only to incur bankruptcy, annexation by trustee Norton Simon and reopening in 1974 with Simon's name above the door). Instead, the weakness of the conventional wisdom is its overdependence on too few examples.

Other developments, though widely discussed, were harder to interpret. The County Board of Supervisors threatened to close the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1966 for exhibiting Ed Kienholz's sculptural tableau of a copulating couple, *Back Seat Dodge '38*, while another sort of controversy greeted the Getty Villa's opening in 1974. The eccentric, oversize variation on the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum disconcerted and confused many visitors to the Malibu complex. (Ironically, a few years later, it looked like the prescient embodiment of Robert Venturi's antimodernist ideas about kitsch and the architectural vernacular, spelled out in *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1977.) These bellwether events seemed to foretell a destiny for Los Angeles that resembled its past as a provincial Pacific Rim outpost for art.

HAPPILY, SUCH INCIDENTS proved misleading. Looking back at the Southern California of the '60s and '70s,

I now see a time and a place at the forefront of epochal change, a site of both individual and cultural transformation. The culture of the day (loosely, the third quarter of the century, dating from the Korean War's conclusion in 1953) was characterized by an embrace of the new and untried. It also fostered a reshuffling of Victorian-era hierarchies and a blurring of disciplinary boundaries that, together, signaled an emerging postmodernism. In the '70s, Southern California was at the forefront of contemporary art's coming of age—as its study and teaching, exhibition and acquisition, were institutionalized by the

first museums, auctions and college courses devoted exclusively to current work and theory.

Meanwhile the region had its own, well-established modern architectural history that predated World War II. At the turn of the century, wealthy Easterners came to enjoy Southern California's healthful climate and informal lifestyle. The winter homes they built contrasted sharply with the nearly contemporaneous chateaux of Newport, R.I., which seemed to have derived their inspiration from pre-Revolutionary France.

Arts and Crafts-style residences such as the Greene Brothers' stunning Gamble House (1908) in Pasadena projected entirely different values—the modern yet anti-industrial socialism of John Ruskin and William Morris. Despite their ruinously expensive, handcrafted construction, these sprawling homes embodied the democratic virtues of functional and affordable design, only on a magnified scale. They also offered a prototype for indoor-outdoor living.

The migration to Southern California of some of Europe's most talented architects presaged a global shift in architectural influence after World War II. Three key figures who settled in the U.S. well before the war were Albert Frey (a Swiss-born disciple of Le Corbusier), Richard Neutra (a Bauhaus instructor and disciple of Erich Mendelsohn) and Rudolph Schindler (like Neutra a student of Adolf Loos in Vienna). Loos, author of the radically functionalist *Ornament and Crime*, counseled the latter two to seek out Frank Lloyd Wright, who would employ them both—Neutra only briefly but Schindler for several years, culminating in his supervision of the construction of the Hollyhock House (1918-21) in Los Angeles while Wright was in Japan.

After World War II, it wasn't just the players but the architectural game itself that changed. As soldiers returned, suburbs proliferated to meet pent-up demand, making housing the highest priority of postwar architecture, in contrast to the signature skyscrapers and factory forms of early modernism. John Entenza, the editor of Los Angeles's *Arts & Architecture* magazine, initiated the Case Study Houses project (1945-66). Intended to create affordable, technologically up-to-date and environmentally sensitive homes, the CSH program sponsored the design of 36 houses—most of which were built, the majority in Los Angeles. Participants included stellar architects such as Eero Saarinen and Charles and Ray Eames, as well as emerging talents like Raphael Soriano, Craig Ellwood and Pierre Koenig.

Interest in the CSH scheme was so intense that in 1948 some 350,000 visitors toured the first six completed homes. Eventually, the most visited was Case Study House #8, which Charles and Ray Eames built for themselves in 1949, in Pacific Palisades, on a woodsy bluff overlooking the ocean. Considered among the most significant structures of the mid-20th century, the steel-frame house was assembled from prefabricated industrial parts in just a few days. Yet the couple lived in it for decades without making significant alterations.

THE EAMESES, WIDELY RESPECTED for their innovative designs for everything from toys to textiles, occupy a large place in the cultural consciousness of the postwar era, especially in Los Angeles. Probably best known for their furniture, they pushed the limits of new materials and techniques—including molded plywood, plastic and

THE EAMESES INJECTED FUN INTO FUNCTION, MAKING DESIGN MORE WIDELY ACCESSIBLE. "TAKE YOUR PLEASURES SERIOUSLY," CHARLES SAID.

Above, Charles and Ray Eames: Case Study House #8, 1949. Photo Julius Shulman. © J. Paul Getty Trust.

Opposite top, *Ray and Charles Eames with ampersand and exclamation point*, 1962. Courtesy Eames Office.

Left, view into the Eames living room. Courtesy Eames Office.

fiberglass—to create many classics of midcentury modernism. In addition, they refined new forms of knowledge production by popularizing exhibitions devoted to scientific and mathematical research, formulating experimental curricula for multimedia courses at universities, including UCLA, and making dozens of short films that transcend their educational purpose. (Most notable is *Powers of Ten*, 1968, an exploration of orders of magnitude in the universe.) At their office in Venice, Calif., the pair mentored innovative designers like Harry Bertoia.

They were also goodwill ambassadors, traveling to the USSR in 1959, at the height of the Cold War, to mount *Glimpses of the USA*, a seven-screen presentation about everyday life in America. But they did not entirely escape the conservative sexual politics of the day. Their progressive professional demeanor misleadingly implied a relatively ungendered partnership, but mention of Ray's role in their furniture designs was omitted entirely from commercial catalogues of the late '40s and early '50s, and Charles's name would invariably precede hers in full attributions of their work. Charles's status as a married engineer-builder helped "normalize" his image at a time when male designers were often subject to homophobic prejudice.

Simply by virtue of their multiple identities as artists, designers, architects and filmmakers, the Eameses were role models of independent, critical thinking. They assaulted the status quo

ALBERT FREY, A DISCIPLE OF LE CORBUSIER, DESIGNED SOME 200 BUILDINGS IN THE PALM SPRINGS AREA, INCLUDING TWO HOUSES FOR HIMSELF.

This spread, two views of Frey House II, 1963. Photos Dan Chavkin. Courtesy Palm Springs Art Museum.

by undermining the binaries of high art and popular culture, vernacular and modernist architecture, even work and play. By injecting fun into function they helped make design accessible to a broad audience. "Take your pleasures seriously," Charles is reported to have said. And I, for one, still find pleasure in the Hang-It-All coatrack—the one that incorporates impaled miniature spheres—that I've had since age 10.

The couple's Do-Nothing Machine (1957), commissioned by Alcoa, entertainingly showcases the aluminum company's product. More significantly, the charming Rube Goldberg-style contraption—replete with colorful whirligigs, pulleys and rotating disks—runs on solar energy. Today we'd call it sculpture—it was probably the first solar-powered sculpture—or we might not even bother categorizing it. The Eameses, after all, would have found such a descriptor unnecessary.

The pair's exhilarating do-it-yourself approach, their ability to place hands-on skills in service of both pragmatism and imagination, mirrored the appeal of the space program for many Americans—and especially Angelenos. (Thanks to NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and other California research facilities, L.A. residents often viewed the space race as a source of hometown pride.) Although the influences of Hollywood and the automobile on L.A. art and culture have been endlessly discussed, that of the space program and its culmination in the moon landing of 1969 tends to be mentioned only as part of the historical context for LACMA's Art and Technology Program (1967-71), which paired technically oriented artists and companies. In addition, from time to time, space engineering is evoked to help account for the smooth surfaces of Finish Fetish work or the atmospheric interventions of Light and Space art.

Soon after moving to Southern California in 1966, Happenings founder Allan Kaprow—in a high-profile trio of articles collectively titled "Education of the Un-Artist" (1971-74)—speculated about the changing character of art and artists in the media age. Pondering the riveting spectacle of the moon landing, he advised artists to abandon outmoded processes and projects, and even to consider a practice centered not on the studio but on public sites.

One artist who gave up his studio is Robert Irwin, whose influence on Southern California art of the '70s has been crucial [see Lawrence Weschler's article this issue]. He was a catalyst for the founding of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and a participant in the planning of the Getty Center. An untitled 1980 installation he created in Venice, Calif., was paradigmatic. Knocking out the front

CERTAIN MIDCENTURY HOMES BECAME SITES OF HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR, LIKE JOHN LAUTNER'S CIRCULAR ELROD HOUSE, SEEN IN THE BOND FILM *DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER*.

wall of a gallery in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, he replaced the barrier with a translucent scrim. The work, at once picture frame and room-size container, captured a sensuous duel of fog and illumination, along with a swirl of spontaneous interior and exterior events. In retrospect, the highly experiential piece seems to have been perfectly timed. Created a few months before Ronald Reagan's presidential election, it could be seen as a swan song for an era when regional differences had not yet been entirely subsumed by postmodern, global capitalism.

Above, pool area of Albert Frey's Loewy House, 1946–47. Photo Bill Anderson. Courtesy Palm Springs Art Museum.

Right, interior view of Albert Frey's Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station, 1963. Photo Julius Shulman. © J. Paul Getty Trust.

TO CALL LOS ANGELES VAST is a gross understatement. Its metropolitan area occupies nearly 500 square miles, and the greater L.A. region extends across a distance comparable to the slightly more than 200 miles separating New York and Washington, D.C. It is bounded (at a range of roughly 100 miles each from downtown L.A.) by Santa Barbara to the north, San Diego to the south and Palm Springs to the east (where I spent much time as a child and now live several months each year). In artistic matters as in many others, L.A. the city and L.A. the region are synonymous.

The story of modernist architecture in Palm Springs dates back to 1939, when Frey, the Le Corbusier disciple, came to live there full-time. In addition to Frey and Neutra, principal figures in postwar architecture of the desert include Robson C. Chambers, John Porter Clark, A. Quincy Jones, Hugh Kaptur, William Krisel, John Lautner, Donald Wexler, E. Stewart Williams and William F. Cody. What Florence is to architecture of the early Renaissance, Palm Springs is to midcentury modernism.

Frey designed some 200 buildings and homes in the area, including a house for industrial designer Raymond Loewy and two for himself (one is owned by the Palms Springs Art Museum), the Palm Springs City Hall (1952), the First Church of Christ Scientist (1956), the North Shore Yacht Club (1958) and the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station (1963), which incorporated a stream running through it. Rapidly growing Palm Springs and its environs—it was only one of a half-dozen incorporated cities in the 45-mile-long Coachella Valley—probably offered a broader variety of commissions than those available anywhere save for the contemporaneous, purpose-built cities of Brasília in Brazil and Chandigarh in India. Palm Springs provided architects so much work that many specialized. William F. Cody, for instance, developed a thriving practice, with three satellite offices focusing exclusively on lucrative country club subdivisions—the hybrid residential/recreational type of development he helped pioneer.

Until the advent of modernism, no architectural approach had fully exploited photography for its dissemination. Modern structures served as the backdrops for publicity pictures of celebrities lounging beside their private pools in Palm Springs or as locations for Hollywood movies in which the most extravagant midcentury modern homes became sites of glamour and—not infrequently—evil, as with John Lautner's circular Elrod House (1968), seen in the 1971 James Bond thriller *Diamonds Are Forever*.

The most accomplished and instantly recognizable images of midcentury modern architecture are Julius Shulman's

DREAMLIKE, MANY EXAMPLES OF DESERT MODERNISM STILL SERVE AS DESIGN INSPIRATIONS AND POINTS OF DEPARTURE FOR NEW RESEARCH.

asymmetrical, dramatically lit, black-and-white pictures of buildings like Pierre Koenig's Case Study House #22 (1960). In Shulman's famous night shot of this house in the Hollywood Hills, two attractive women sitting at the outer edge of the living room appear to be vertiginously cantilevered out over the city and its twinkling lights. Shulman almost always enhanced his compositions with props—occasionally people but usually the modern furniture or eucalyptus branches he carried with him to jobs. Never before (or since) has a photographer been so central to representing—and putting across—an architectural style, translating it into pictures that have come to represent an entire era.

Frey, too, lives on, with the conversion of his Tramway Gas Station (1965) into the Palm Springs Visitors Center. Nicknamed the Flying Wedge, the structure's swooping form suggests movement and, for many, the architectural vitality associated with the area. The very existence of a modernist icon that's been recycled into a postmodern variant of itself is a reminder of the mutability of identity. The Visitors Center is an elegantly practical repurposing of a building too formally bold and too historically freighted to demolish.

I invoke practicality because it's essential to recall why so much modernist architecture was built in Southern California in the first place. The regional building boom was ignited not primarily because the new style looked so fresh and sleek, but because it kept its promise of being economical and cost-effective. Straightforward in their construction methods and techniques, the designs utilized low-maintenance, high-strength materials including concrete and tempered steel. Featuring low ceilings, windows placed to minimize the need for air-conditioning and an early adoption of solar power, midcentury modernism was—in effect—green before its time.

The fact that many examples still serve as design inspirations and points of departure for new research is particularly heartening. In the face of dystopian predictions, worldwide recession and the postmodern gigantism of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997) or Rem Koolhaas's China Central Television Headquarters (2008), desert modern functionalism seems surprisingly prone to endure. How ironic that potent emblems of a future that never quite came to pass might assume—in altered form like Frey's Tramway Gas Station—the status of a much-needed reality check. Perhaps only in California could dreams be so sovereign. ○

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

"Julius Shulman: 80 Years of Photography," Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, Sept. 10-Oct. 29. "Eames Designs: The Guest Host Relationship," A+D Architecture and Design Museum, Los Angeles, Oct. 1, 2011-Jan. 16, 2012. "California Design, 1930-1965: 'Living in a Modern Way,'" Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Oct. 1, 2011-Mar. 25, 2012. "Indoor Ecologies: The Evolution of the Eames House Living Room," Eames House Foundation, Pacific Palisades, Oct. 1, 2011-Apr. 30, 2012. "Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool in Southern California Photography, 1945-1982," Palm Springs Art Museum, Jan. 21-May 27, 2012.

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Richard Neutra: Kaufmann House, 1946. Photo Julius Shulman. © J. Paul Getty Trust.