



1927–1929 • Health House

Philip and Lea Lovell House

► 4616 Dundee Lane, Los Angeles, California

Opposite page:

The famous double-height glassed staircase with the embedded Ford automobile headlight leads from the street/private level down (instead of the conventional up) to the piano nobile.

Looking west from Dundee Drive across the bridge to the hills beyond. The staircase is to the right in the image.



The Lovell Health House is recognized as one of the most important houses of the 20th century. It is the first American residence in steel and is based on the skyscraper technology Neutra devoured as a draftsman and observer in New York and Chicago. Here Neutra broke with the Wrightian box horizontally and vertically. And while the *pilotis* of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye lift the villa into the air, they do so in using trabeated construction not dissimilar to that of the Parthenon. Neutra's site is so audacious that he needed to conceive the process to construct it. Like an ocean liner at berth, it hovers, tethered over a steep ravine in Los Angeles.

A concrete "gangplank" bridges street and entry. Here one steps into a low-ceilinged, dark wood-paneled space, and then plunges down a large, glass-enclosed staircase into light and modern living, a metaphor taken up on the stair with the embedded Ford headlight, beacon of American capitalism.

The voyage ends on the lowest level with the concrete swimming pool—perhaps the real "living" room, one end anchored in the very womb of the house, the other jutting out over the valley, so that a swimmer moves back and forth between the bright air and the bowels of the building in a dialectic of liberation and protection. In a sense, Neutra has simply upended Le Corbusier's rooftop terrace, now under the house.

The design is further tied to the hill by the pergola and garage, which extend south and hug the slope, but, by placing the house perpendicular to the hill, Neutra ensured views in every direction. However, by locating the master suite at the southwest corner, with the best view but with no western overhangs, Neutra's move incurred the clients'



1946–1947 • Kaufmann House

470 West Vista de Chino, Palm Springs, California

A decade after Edgar Kaufmann, Sr., hired Frank Lloyd Wright to design the renowned Falling Water at Bear Run, he wanted to establish a West Coast base. Not impressed with Taleisin West—Wright's summer atelier hunkered into the Arizona bedrock—he turned to Richard Neutra, anticipating an equally brilliant voice but a lighter touch in Palm Springs, a town better known for frivolity than morality. (Unsurprisingly, Wright, who had once called Neutra's work "cheap and thin," was outraged.) Since the 1920s, the city at the foot of Mount San Jacinto drew Hollywood types seeking a getaway. Albert Frey, Le Corbusier's protégé, built his own house here in 1940; Neutra's tiny Miller House was completed in 1937, but the \$348,000, 3,200-sq.-ft. Kaufmann House reigns today as a grand Modernist villa, a recently landed silver aircraft on a green carpet weighted down only by carefully positioned boulders on this "moonscape," as Neutra called it.

The "Wüstenlandschaft," or the desert, or more precisely, the wilderness around Palm Springs, fascinated Neutra. In his 1927 book *Wie baut Amerika* he concluded with images of pueblos in New Mexico and Arizona, praising their stacked rooms with rooftop terraces and the ability of mudbrick masses to respond to a punishing climate. Despite the polished precision of the Kaufmann House, it suggests the spirit of the pueblos he admired.

Though both Falling Water and the Kaufmann House share a use of stone masonry and a floating weightlessness, Neutra emphasized his architectural distance from Wright in that his buildings were "made, not grown." He "inserted" the house into this harsh backdrop. It was "set on footings," whose juxtaposition of artifice and artificial climate underscored "the weather, the silver-white moonlight, and the starry sky."

Like other seminal 1940s projects, here the volumes relax into the site without relinquishing the taut quality of his earlier work. The Kaufmann House distills space into silver horizontal planes sliding above transparent glass. The only pronounced vertical is the chimney flanking the "gloriette," as Neutra called it. This is the rooftop space that crowns the house, a man-made mountain peak with a hearth. (As with his own house, Neutra deftly evaded a second-story prohibition by eliminating the gloriette's walls except for the fireplace and the movable vertical aluminum louvers. Aesthetically, they define a diaphanous plane; functionally, they act as a wind shield. He also had the foundations dug and permits pulled just before a wartime building moratorium began.)

Neutra's original drawing of the pinwheel floorplan reveals other contrasts. Using loose curves, the landscaping percolates through the orthogonal design. In contrast, taut parallel lines drawn on the diagonal represent the high winds and sand storms so common at the northern end of Palm Springs. This move animates the drawing but also reflects reality: the winds from the northwest are relentless, blasting whatever they can carry into the house even today, despite the upgrades, louvers, and solid walls. (And though having so much unprotected glass on the dwelling's south side may seem perverse in the desert, the house was to be used for one month a year—January.)

Opposite page:

View from the southeast

Master bedroom to the right and beyond the pool. Bronze window screens softened the composition's silvery gleam.



Certainly Neutra's plan, an extrovert in the landscape, owes much to Wright. With the living area at the hub, the pinwheel ensures that the four spines of single-volume rooms get both daylight and cross-ventilation. However, the pinwheel's arms, terminating with bedrooms and patios, also reveal a specific social order. Hosts, servants, children and guests are granted "extreme" privacy. Their opportunities to mingle occur in shaded walkways, living areas and the outdoor patios. The louvers flanking the long, dark lily pond connect the guest wing to the rest of the house, creating a sand-protected and water-cooled patio.

Radiant heat extends to the pool area; Neutra even placed it in the low seating wall linking house and pool, a socially magnanimous gesture that ensures the party continues on a chilly winter's night for shivering wet bathers or formally dressed party-goers.

To enhance the design's famous floating quality, the structural system combines wood and steel in such a way that the number of requisite vertical supports (which are slender in any case) are minimized. This is most emphatic in the southeast living room, whose glass-and-steel walls slide away while the roof and the beam supporting the sliders stretch out, spatially linking the house and the pool. This "outrigger" detail

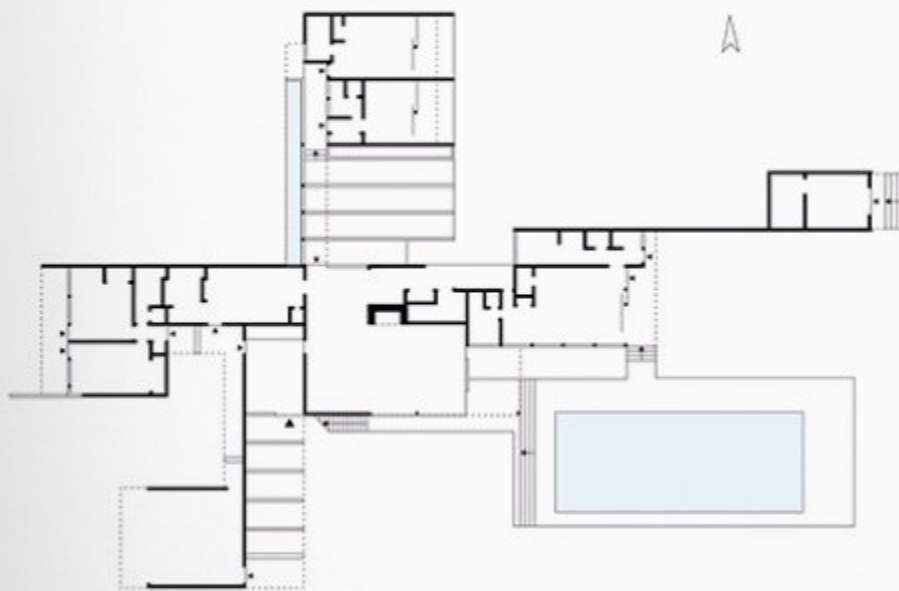


The "gloriette"

Top:
View from master bedroom to pool



The living-room wall and the aligned dining table define the airy walkway to the master suite, left, and the living area with Neutra's prototypical "spider leg," right.



Plan
Strong desert winds come from the northwest, hence Neutra placed aluminum louvers connecting the guest wing, north, with the house as well as in the open gloriette on the second "floor."



Dale Bailey's bedroom became the south end of the new dining room with a fireplace suspended from the roof and surrounded by daylight.

"My wife and I thought weeks about it," Stuart Bailey said, "and Neutra took three minutes."

—Neutra's CSH houses were conventional post-and-beam, whose explorations were spatial, not structural.

Stuart Bailey, a 30-year-old dentist, bought his lot from Entenza for \$9,000. For the new family man, part of the program's appeal was gifts and discounts from manufacturers such as three 12 x 8' sliding glass-and-steel doors and a prefabricated utility core called the Ingersoll that centrally massed plumbing and heating equipment that "still works fine after 55 years." The compact house (1,320 sq. ft. for \$19,600 or \$14.85 per sq. ft.) began as two offset redwood, white stucco and brick rectangles. To accommodate the future children, Neutra anticipated additions beginning with a freestanding two-bedroom unit connected by a walkway in 1950. Others followed in 1958 and 1962, adding 1,650 sq. ft. The home now sports four articulated wings jutting out into the landscape. The resulting outdoor "four courts" included social quarters, playing quarters, dining quarters and working quarters, essentially doubling its "square foot livability index," a favorite RJN measure.



Living room viewed from the southeast

Neutra regularly applied Gestalt theories to alter spatial perceptions, but young Bailey didn't know that when he innocently asked if the closet interiors could be painted white, to see things better. "Mr. Bailey," Neutra sternly replied, "the closets must recede. If you paint them white, I will remove my name from the project." (They remain dark brown.)

"The thing I like about this house," said Dr. Bailey recently, nodding to the trees beyond the glass walls, "is that there is no house."

1953 • Auerbacher House

121 Sierra Vista Drive, Redlands, California

Opposite page:
Looking southeast from playroom/solarium
along the building's north face

Right:
The ashlar fireplace's deliberate asymmetry
was a classic Neutra imperative.

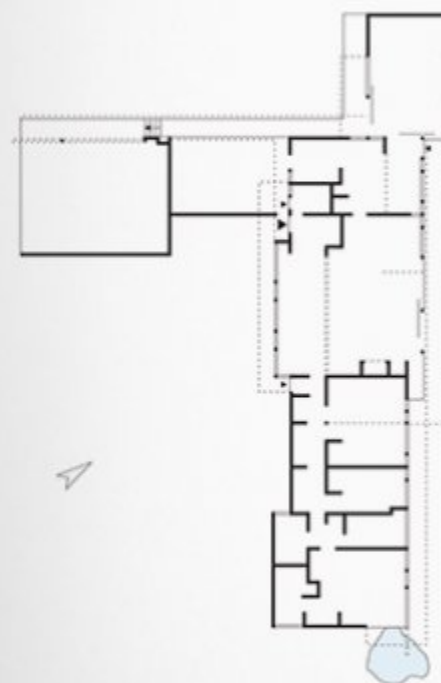
Far right:
Master bedroom viewed from the southeast



The 2,300-sq.-ft. house commissioned by Frederick and Mary Jane Auerbacher sits above orange layers of suburban sprawl and below the grade of a winding street. One wall of this narrow box is almost a continuous plane of glass facing a mountain range while the reclusive street side is closed except for clerestories. Some internal walls running at right angles to this long rectangle appear not to touch the "view" wall because floor-to-ceiling glass is used for the last two feet of these short walls. The gesture animates an interior visual corridor, confers a sense of transparency throughout the house, and demonstrates Neutra's idea on the role of peripheral vision in accessing nature.

While the house is thus aesthetically bisected longitudinally, it is laterally bisected functionally. A carefully orchestrated spine of rooms is terminated by a tranquil master bedroom at the east end of the house, where a mitered glass corner leads the eye out to a corner pool and intimate landscaping (as at the Tremaine House, Neutra typically exploited nearby greenery for bedrooms and horizons for public areas). At the west end lies a sturdy, light-filled work and play room off the kitchen, where the sink played "central command post" for watching children in any area. While the bedrooms are painted in flat whites, dark browns and greens, the living and dining area combine birch paneling, redwood tongue-and-groove ceiling and a flagstone fireplace. (Mary Jane Auerbacher said that Neutra admonished the stonemason, who had also built the fireplace at the Neutra-designed Auerbacher Lodge, 1952, to be sure to lay the stone so that none commanded a center position or achieved symmetry.) Neutra also provided a "music nook" in the living area for her, a professional musician, that is attuned to every possible need for sheet music and instrument storage. Here the room juts out with a full height, short glass wall, again providing a slice of dark, "near greenery." Neutra designed all the furniture; for two prominent living-room chairs, he added side wood pieces to cover the cross-braced diagonal, which he hated. To make other furniture appear to float, he made their legs as thin as possible. In the dining area, Neutra placed a low mirror behind the dining room table (aligned along the window wall) so that all guests could enjoy the mountain view.

Plan





Opposite page:
View southwest across the reflecting pool,
which was meant to “merge” visually with
Silverlake in the background.

1965–1966 • VDL Research House II

2300 E. Silverlake Boulevard, Los Angeles, California

The loss of the first VDL building, with its decades of drawings and client records, devastated the Neutras . . . and then they rebuilt it. The phoenix, VDL II, is more complex than its predecessor, more varied in section and has fewer “soft” materials. Though more transparent, it is also more introverted, addressing the internal garden more than the passerby on the boulevard. It plays more tricks of spatial illusion, and the addition of balconies makes the second design feel more like a tree house than a townhouse. Los Angeles had grown. Neutra’s nemesis, “rolling traffic,” and its accompanying pollution, now lay just beyond the front door. After the fire there were no buffers to shield the house from the strong western sun. The reservoir had been downsized so that its cooling presence stood 600’ away. Two-story, electronically controlled aluminum “airplane” louvers rise from a curving pool at the entrance, providing immediate relief from the strong afternoon sun. The office and practice moved to the nearby Glendale office. Dion designed much of the new building while the Neutras traveled in Europe, Richard editing the work from abroad.

Once again, the Neutras adroitly sidestepped building codes, arguing that since the guesthouse and middle portion survived, more than 50 percent of the house remained, meaning they could use the existing footprint and floor joists.

The new design included a generous office, aligned with the guesthouse and separated from it by a carport. Inside the main house, a glass wall flanking an open-tread staircase replaced the solid walls of the original interior staircase. A 10’-wide, screened window near the upstairs breakfast nook slides entirely outside the building, bringing

Street facade

