

# L.A. MODERN

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RIZZOLI  
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# HOW HOUSE

RUDOLPH SCHINDLER, 1925

Located near Silver Lake, the How residence was designed for Dr. James How, a psychologist from St. Louis. Sited at the crest of a steep slope with a view east to the San Gabriel Mountains, the house is composed of tightly interlocking volumes recalling works by members of the early 1920s Neo-Plastic movement in Europe. (In fact, according to historian David Gebhard in his 1971 biography of Schindler, the architect collected cuttings from European architecture journals of the period, including stylistically related projects by Theo van Doesburg, Adolf Loos, and J. J. P. Oud.) The house's central volume is a cube, with an attached entry and a kitchen wing. The redwood-sheathed structure rises from a concrete base that emerges from the hillside. The concrete was poured and shuttered at 16-inch intervals to match the horizontal module of the redwood battens above, which continue as transoms across window areas, all contributing to a stratified appearance.

A small glazed entry leads into the second-story living room, a dramatic space that expands outward to a terrace offering a spectacular view. Here Schindler pushed the ceiling upwards, adding a vertical dynamic. Entering farther, one becomes aware of a diagonal axis linking the square plan of the living room with the square-shaped terrace outside, articulated by the patterning of the wooden ceiling overhead. These indoor and outdoor spaces are divided by a glass wall that pushes into the interior envelope. The living room fireplace is double-sided, also serving the adjacent dining room. A library is on this level, and bedrooms on the floor below.

The house is now owned by Michael LaFetra, who is particularly fond of Schindler's work: "Whenever I walked into a house by this architect," he

has said, "I saw something magical going on." In 2004 when he first visited the How House, which was then owned by Lionel March, a professor in the UCLA architecture department, he was "overwhelmed" by the interiors. In the course of this visit LaFetra told March, "If you ever decide to sell, be sure not to let it pass into the wrong hands." March promised to keep LaFetra in mind; six months later, March retired, returned to the United Kingdom, and sold his house to LaFetra.

The house needed substantial restoration throughout. For this LaFetra called in Jeff Fink, an architect and contractor who has worked on thirteen Schindler restoration projects. The white-painted exterior redwood cladding, which had deteriorated so extensively that one could push a finger through in places, was replaced, as were the wood-framed windows, the leaky deck, and some rotted beams. Inside, LaFetra was helped by interior designer Kristin Kilmer, who reintroduced soft, earthy colors, matched to traces they found of the original integral plaster. "I wanted to take people out of the 'black and white' images of these houses," says LaFetra, referring to the photographs that make up the historical record of Schindler's original designs. "Schindler loved color from the time he spent in the Southwest; warm-toned adobe buildings were the only examples of native architecture that he found on his travels across America. If you look at his notes, he gives you lots of hints about color." Kilmer also had original furniture and built-ins refabricated from Schindler's drawings. The house is now lovingly restored as close as possible to the soulful spirit with which Schindler first created it more than eighty years ago. Moreover, LaFetra has applied to have the house registered as a historic landmark, which will restrict any changes that can be made by future owners.

The How House is built at the crest of a steep slope. Entry is to the left, below a canopy; the kitchen wing is to the right, above the garage.



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ABOVE LEFT: View from living to terrace. ABOVE RIGHT: Opposing view from terrace into living room. The frame in the foreground encloses a skylight set above the bedroom passage on the floor below. OPPOSITE: Delicate wood detailing on a mitered corner window. These windows had largely disintegrated and were held together by the glass; the Douglas fir framing has since been meticulously rebuilt and restored by new owner Michael LaFetra.





ABOVE: Front elevation with garage; the kitchen wing is to the right. The 16-inch horizontal module expressed in the shuttering concrete substructure is echoed in the wood banding above.  
OPPOSITE: The dining room with reproduction Rudolph Schindler furniture.



**RIGHT:** The redwood upper structure of the How House rises from a concrete base, seen here from the lower slopes. The living room terrace occupies the upper left corner. **OPPOSITE:** The living room with dining room beyond. The fireplace opens to both sides. The ceiling expands upward to add a vertical spatial dynamic.







# KOENIG CASE STUDY No. 21 (BAILEY HOUSE)

PIERRE KOENIG, 1958

Built into a small canyon site in the Hollywood Hills, the first of Pierre Koenig's two Case Study Houses was designed for psychologist Walter Bailey and his wife, Mary, a couple without children. A diminutive 1,320 square feet, it sits on a correspondingly small site in a Hollywood Hills canyon. Designed with a spare rationality, it was described in the magazine *Arts & Architecture* (which promoted the Case Study program) as possessing "some of the cleanest and most progressive thinking in the development of the small contemporary house."

A severely rational steel and glass box, the house was designed with a broadly spaced module that dictates the divisions between solid and void, and lends simplicity and rationality to the design. The roof is of profiled sheet metal, and the steel framing was prefabricated then assembled and arc-welded on-site. The fully visible joints were carefully ground and given a charcoal finish for a smooth, clean appearance. Walls and ceilings were painted a clean white. So as not to disturb the purity of this Zen aesthetic, the hanging of paintings or photographs on the walls was frowned on by Koenig, who could be a little concierge-like with his clients. Floors were white vinyl, and a white carpet, flush with the floor, was laid in the living room.

The house's somewhat industrial appearance is mitigated by shallow pools placed around its perimeter. These reflect trees and landscape, adding dimension to the architecture. Along the east elevation a row of downspouts, projecting from the roof, casts jets of water into the pool, creating ambient sounds that pass gently through the house.

The Bailey House, often regarded as Koenig's best, has been the subject of a number of awards, not only for its design, but also for the restoration carried out in the mid-1990s, when new owner Dan Cracciolo, a Warner Brothers movie producer, hired Koenig to restore the house he had designed as a young man nearly forty years earlier. This restoration was awarded the Historic Preservation 2000 Award of Excellence by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission. Cracciolo sold the house to Michael LaFetra, who had been looking for a conventional Cape Cod-style cottage. His realtor, perhaps wanting to push him a little, dropped off a pile of architectural magazines, one of which was an *Architectural Digest* featuring Koenig's newly renovated 1958 Case Study House No. 21 in the Hollywood Hills. This, unexpectedly, was a revelation to LaFetra. To use his words, "It leaped off the page."

At a recent auction the house, buffed again by another owner, Mark Hannawy, and sparkling in the clear winter's light, sold for \$3 million. This was when it was photographed unfurnished for this book, resembling an architectural sculpture as much as it did the "home for a childless couple," which was the architect's original brief. The concept of houses-as-art being sold by auction is a relatively new phenomenon; the also minimalist Farnsworth House by Mies van der Rohe is one famous example of a house being part of an art collector's portfolio. It is just possible that the house's new owner, an Asian art dealer, rather than add furnishings, might maintain it as a pristine walk-in sculpture.

A paved path leads over the reflecting pool to the entry door, with the dining room and kitchen beyond. Behind the kitchen is the living room.



**RIGHT:** The pristine 1,600-square-foot Bailey house seen here as pure sculpture, readied for auction. These photographs were taken just before the house sold for \$3 million to an Asian art dealer. All walls, floors, and ceilings are a dazzling pure white, as evident in this view from the carport toward the study. **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT:** The house seen from driveway. The entry is midway along the left facade. A row of downspouts along this facade projects water into the reflecting pool. The carport is at center. **OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT:** The house sits on a compact site set into a steep hillside. **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT:** South elevation showing living room and kitchen. **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** View from carport. The exterior entry is at left, with the path to the front door sheltered by a roof canopy.





# WOLFF HOUSE

JOHN LAUTNER, 1963

Marcus Wolff, having visited Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece in Pennsylvania, was inspired to build a house in Los Angeles, on a site overlooking Sunset Boulevard. Wright himself was either indisposed or just too old to take on the project, so Wolff turned instead to Lautner, a former apprentice of Wright's. The site is very steep, with 20 feet of fill, drilled through using concrete caissons. It is situated within a network of narrow lanes that run up the steep hillsides rising above the Sunset Strip and dotted with houses of every style imaginable. One of these lanes runs beneath the Wolff House, offering a glimpse up at its "Fallingwater" view, and continues upwards, around another curve, before arriving in front of the house, visible only as a broad carport covered by a low-pitched sweep of concrete with the entry tucked to one side. Lautner often said, "I have never done a facade in my life," and, indeed, one looks in vain for one here.

Steps deliver the visitor from the street to a covered forecourt and entry vestibule, which leads to a flight of descending stairs. Inspired by Wright's love of dramatic entrances, the entry sequence was carefully staged: first, a constricted low-ceilinged lobby to establish human scale, leading to a narrow passage, and then finally a grand, lofty salon. On one side of the stairs there is a cement wall; on the other a wall of glass brushed by a preexisting eucalyptus tree. The sequence culminates below in a dramatic double-height living room with a balcony which thrusts out to embrace a view of the city, while a seating area to the rear of the space nestles, cave-like, back into the hill. On the other side of the living room is a dining room and kitchen. From here stairs lead down to the master suite. Beyond this is another balcony that overlooks the city and the pool, which is on yet another level below.

The house is geometrically complex. Massive walls zigzag in concertina fashion down the hill to provide structural reinforcement and earthquake

resistance. Copper-clad roofs are cantilevered over balconies and overlaid at angles to one another. Together they form the Fallingwater-inspired composition when seen from the street below.

Throughout his career Lautner manipulated his interior spaces to create a sense of well-being in their occupants. Beginning by establishing a human scale at the entry to ready the visitor for the spatial dramas within, he then designed the inner sanctums to give a sense of shelter. This took the form of a cave-like enfolding of the living space at one end and was a counterpoint to the dramatic opening of space to a major view of city or ocean.

To make it easier to realize these spatial ideas, Lautner began to work in concrete, his material of choice as he moved into the mature phase of his career. Concrete offered him plasticity: it was, in his words, "solid and free," permitting the creation of architecture that could be shaped without modular restriction—roofs could soar and walls disappear. Of the Wolff House, one of his first houses designed with concrete, Lautner said, "The entire environment has no feeling of confinement whatever."

In 2006 Michael LaFetra, a serial collector of modernist houses, bought and carefully restored the Wolff House with the aid of interior designer Kristin Kilmer. (Three other houses owned by LaFetra appear in these pages.) The house itself was extensively renovated, with the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom all reconfigured to meet contemporary needs. LaFetra's contractor estimated that the facing stone, from the nearby San Gabriel Mountains, would cover an acre if laid out flat, and that in taking measurements of the house's structure and comparing notes with the original plans he observed that the structure had moved less than a millimeter between floors since its original construction.

The living room is located at the foot of the entry stairs, seen to the right. It is fully glazed on two sides: one facing the terrace and city view, to the left; the other faces an exterior stone wall, which closes off the extended space of the living room. Sandwiched between the two is a preexisting eucalyptus tree, which creates a moment of visual ambiguity: Is the tree on the inside or the outside?





ABOVE LEFT: The Fallingwater-inspired facade from the street below. ABOVE RIGHT: Slot-like entry stairs descend to the living room, with a stone wall on one side and a glazed wall on the other, and passing a preexisting eucalyptus tree on the way down. OPPOSITE: The living room, looking back to a low, cave-like seating area to the rear of the space.







ABOVE: The terrace off the living room enjoys spectacular views of the city. OPPOSITE: Entry courtyard, with steps from the carport at left; next to this is the entry door. To the right, stone-clad walls zigzag down the hill to provide structural stability. The pool can be glimpsed at the lowest level.



# STEVENS HOUSE

JOHN LAUTNER, 1968

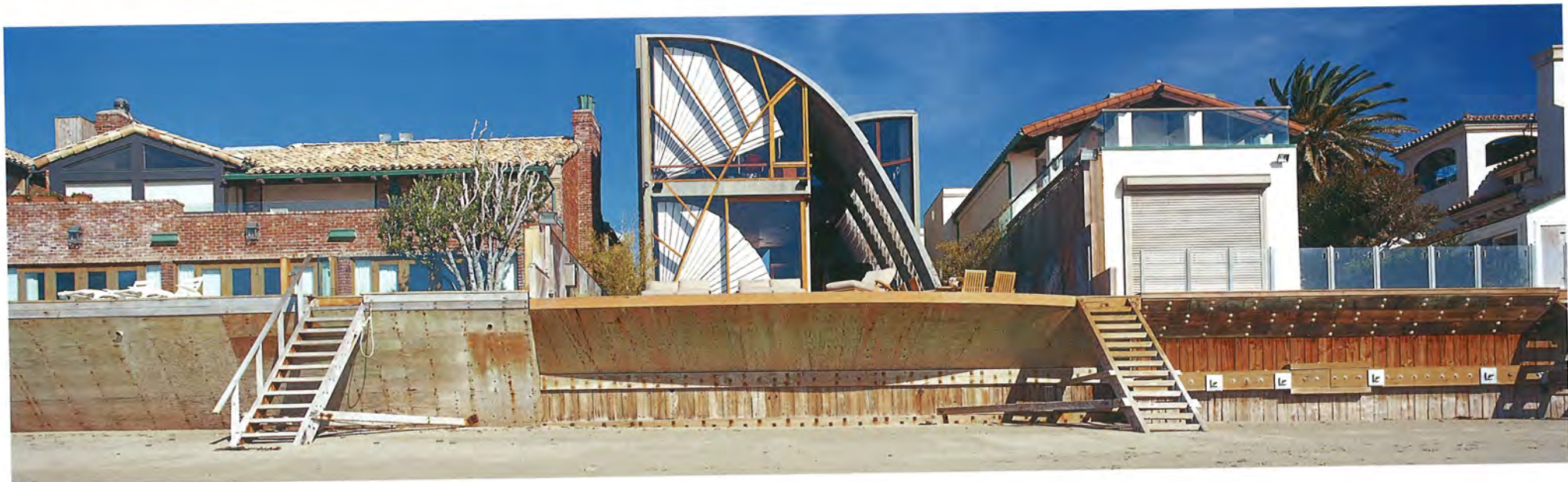
The Stevens House occupies a tight 32-foot-wide lot in Malibu Colony. Facing the ocean, it stands out from the condo-like beach houses and motley cottages that line the oceanfront on either side. (Architectural taste in Malibu is in inverse proportion to the wealth it represents.) Michael LaFetra, who already knew and loved the house, bought it in 2007, finding it in reasonable condition but nonetheless in need of cosmetic restoration. The house has now been fully renovated to the usual high LaFetra standards. Interior designer Kristin Kilmer restored the finishes to their original condition and introduced furnishings in the spirit of the period in which the house was built.

Lautner built the house of concrete for low maintenance, a critical factor on the oceanfront, and conceived its catenary curved shell to resemble a wave. The shell reverses in the middle of the house revealing vistas of mountains to the rear and the ocean to the front, and the interior also conjures the impression of being inside an inverted boat. The sound of the waves is a constant presence, and sunlight, reflected off the water, penetrates far inside. These impressions gently

reinforce the nautical ambience, and the whimsically exotic window blinds evoke the sails of a Chinese ship.

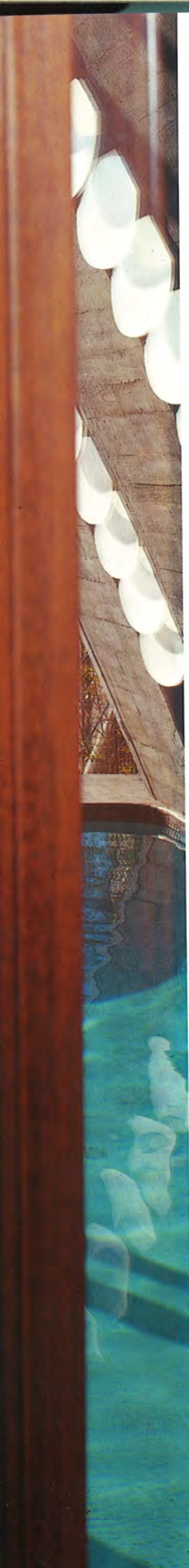
Lautner's planning is ingenious and well resolved. He gave the living room pride of place on the ground floor. Behind this is a dining area, raised to enjoy a view over the living room to the ocean beyond. The lofty concrete roof curves downward, an enfolding gesture both soothing and protective. Its cool surface is warmed by the presence everywhere of redwood framing and paneling. A lap pool is squeezed into the slot between the living room's glazed wall and the downward-curving roof. Above is the master bedroom, its full-length glass windows overlooking the pool and the waves breaking beyond the terrace. A row of other bedrooms is tucked along a passage that overhangs the lower living area.

**BELOW:** The house occupies a narrow beachfront property in Malibu Colony. **OPPOSITE:** On the beach facade, the catenary roof shelters a lap pool, to the right. The whimsical blinds evoke a Chinese sailing ship.









OPPOSITE: The lap pool sheltered by the catenary roof, which frames a view of terrace and ocean. ABOVE LEFT: Glass discs diffuse sunlight entering the pool area. ABOVE RIGHT: The pool fits tightly alongside the living room, to the left.