

michael webb

modernism reborn mid-century american houses



principal photography by roger straus III

case study house #21

74

hollywood, california

pierre koenig

1958–59

restored, 1997–98

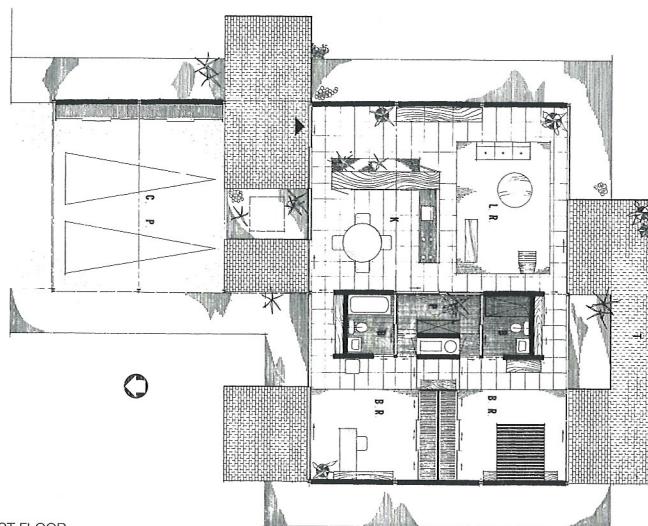
For Pierre Koenig, “steel is a way of life, not something you pick up or put down.” He has stayed true to his principles ever since he defied his instructors at the University of Southern California School of Architecture and built a steel-framed bungalow for himself in 1950. His mentor, Raphael Soriano, and other men of steel, such as Mies and Ellwood, are gone, but Koenig is unwaveringly rigorous in his practice. Yet his reputation is largely sustained by an iconic

image of the 1960 Case Study House #22. Julius Shulman immortalized the house in his nighttime photograph of two women in white conversing within a glass-walled living room that is cantilevered out above a magic carpet of lights. In contrast to that dramatic structure, this earlier house seems almost Japanese in its austerity and restraint.

Outside and in, it is a minimalist, monochromatic box. An exposed steel frame supports a flat steel deck, windowless steel walls to east and west, and sliding glass walls to north and south. Water spouts from gutters into a moat that reflects light onto the walls and ceiling and is recycled back. Brick terraces extend to the north and

south, and the frame embraces a double carport. Koolshade (micro-louver sliding screens) on the south face provide shade in summer and can be removed in winter for passive solar heating. The structural columns and beams are painted charcoal,

establishing a modular rhythm within the all-white interior. Living areas and two bedrooms are separated by a central core of bathrooms and mechanical services, clad with blue mosaic tiles and divided by a light well that is open to the sky. The pure lines,



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Opposite Water spouts from a gutter into the moat and is recycled.





Above Sliding window walls open the living area to the south terrace.



precise geometry, and expanses of white (Koenig refuses to countenance pictures on his bare walls) heighten the impact of the plantings and throw every object into sharp relief.

Walter Bailey, a leading psychotherapist, and his wife, Mary, chose the site because this was a cooperative housing project that actively fostered modern architecture, disallowing picket fences and shingled roofs, and was one of only two racially unrestricted developments in Los Angeles. The project was launched by four musicians after the war. Incredible as it now seems, their liberal policy was contested by the city, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the

Federal Housing Authority, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which finally granted an exception to the racist policies of that time. The Baileys told Koenig to do what he wanted as long as it cost no more than \$22,000, but then spent a year struggling to secure a mortgage.

The house survived the neglect of subsequent owners in shabby but structurally sound condition. It was bought in 1997 by Dan Cracchioli, who coproduced *The Matrix*; he commissioned Koenig to restore it to its pristine condition. Work stretched out over eighteen months, twice what it took for construction, so frustrating was the quest for original materials and so exacting the replacement

Top Approached over a moat, this all-steel house has a Japanese austerity and restraint.

Opposite Entry court and kitchen: an alternation of opaque and transparent planes







Opposite Exposed black beams and white decking are used throughout the house.

Above View from the open kitchen into the dining area

of mechanical elements and lighting. New white vinyl floor tiles and bathroom mosaics were installed, together with kitchen appliances scaled to the long-vanished originals. Bathroom doors gave way to sliders of translucent laminated glass, and bedroom mirrors to sliding screens of masonite. A fountain will be added, as originally intended, in the light well. "There was a weird sense of déjà vu after 40 years," says the architect, "but also a wonderful feeling about getting it right again."

Cracchioli needed more than 1,320 square feet and has commissioned a larger house from Koenig. The new owner of the house, actor Michael LaFetra, matches Cracchioli's enthusiasm. "I grew up in a 1960s

house and was always interested in technologies that made living simpler," he explains. "This house is functional without a lot of fuss, and it makes you live within reasonable constraints—like a vacation cabin—though I do have another house in Malibu. When I moved to California I said I would take only what I could carry, and though I didn't stick to that, this house allows me to feel I did. It's my fortress of solitude, out in nature, yet close to the center of town."

Top The carport is treated as another room in the house.