



# THE MYSTERY OF CASE STUDY HOUSE NO. 13

**Evidence suggests that Richard Neutra's unrealized design is actually built, leading a quiet family life in Southern California.** by Barbara Lamprecht

Working at a feverish production pace, *Arts & Architecture* magazine published the first eight of its 36 experimental Case Study Houses in 1945. The explosive premiere immediately established the schemes as a powerful influence in residential design. It advanced the ambitious goal of editor-in-chief John Entenza to subvert "the lethargy of western civilization," according to one of the program's best-known architects, Pierre Koenig. "If you're going to negate something—take it away—you also have to give something back. And John did." The avant-garde, graphically brilliant magazine became a global voice for modernism and for how to live, design, and think modern in the postwar years.

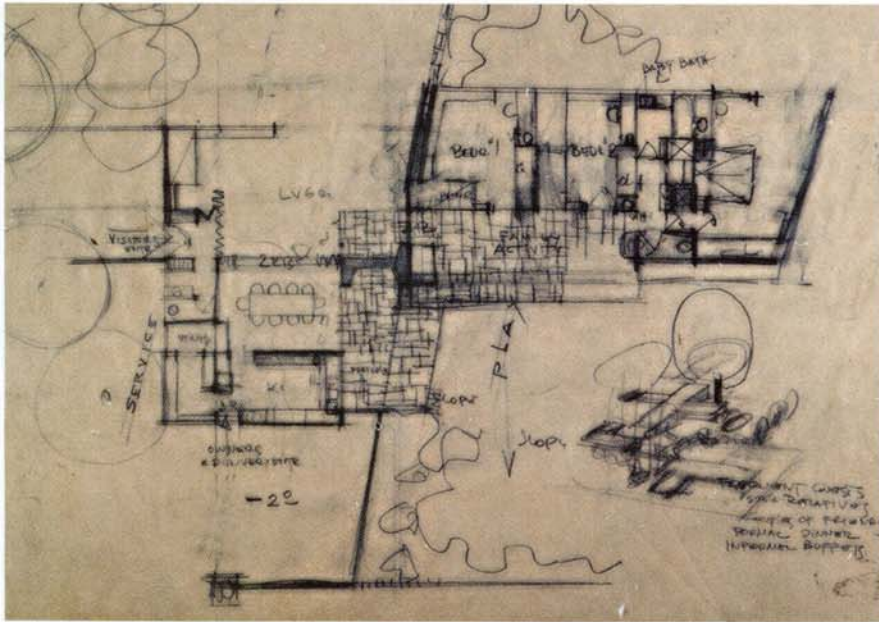
The Case Study House (CSH) program ended in 1966, but its progressive design and urban values live on in various settings, from architecture schools to firms "dissatisfied with the status quo," as the still-practicing Koenig puts it. Given that the CSH program was privately funded and launched during wartime when "critical materials" were restricted, it is remarkable that any of the residences were built at all. Indeed, eight of the designs were not. Richard Neutra designed three of these. Only his 1948 Bailey House, CSH No. 20, was built according to his wishes. CSH No. 19 was so botched in its execution that the architect and Entenza disavowed it. Neutra's CSH No. 6 and CSH No. 13 were both relegated to history's "never realized" folder. Or so it was believed.

Neutra conceived CSH No. 13 (for the "Alpha" family) and CSH No. 6 (for the "Omega" family) as a pair on adjacent lots, their inhabitants' names a conceit for an architecture that could accommodate humanity from A to Z. Number 13 was a one-story, L-shaped house; a large covered flagstone breezeway both bisected and

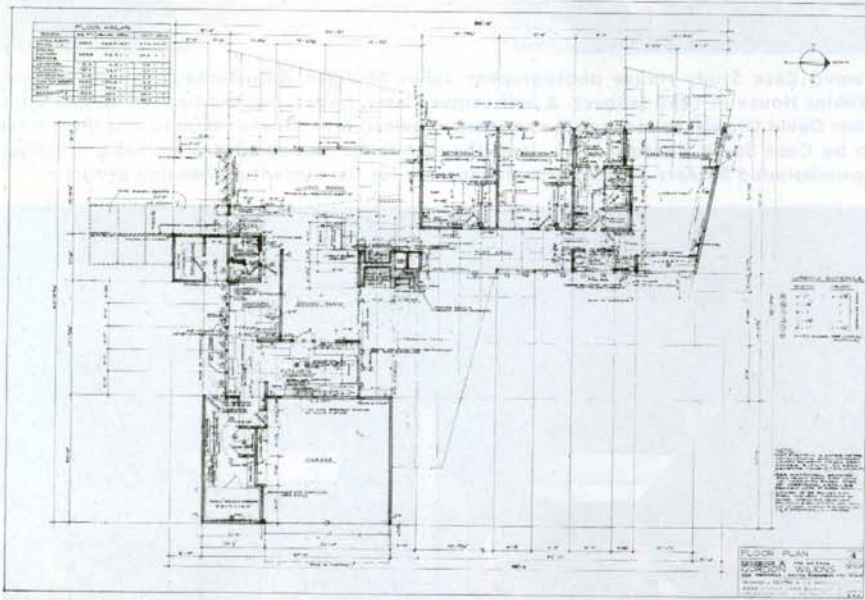


Famed Case Study House photographer Julius Shulman documented Richard Neutra's Wilkins House in 1950 (above). A half-century later, he was invited back (with photographer David Glomb) to reshoot the residence (below) after it was restored and discovered to be Case Study House No. 13, long thought to be among several unrealized designs commissioned by *Arts & Architecture* magazine for its midcentury housing program.





A comparison of Neutra's floor plan for Case Study House No. 13 (above) and the working drawings for his Wilkins House (below) reveal an uncanny resemblance. In fact, they line up almost to the inch.



joined the two legs of the L before running outside to form linked angled terraces.

Neutra used to say that he had to “fall in love a little” with all his clients, even the fictitious ones. These imaginary families (two sisters with husbands and children) were no exception. He composed their elaborate biographies because he knew that the more human they became, the tighter his architectural response would be. The Alphas and Omegas, sparking with quirkiness, debuted in the October 1945

issue of *Arts & Architecture*, chatting about Le Corbusier's house for dadaist Amédée Ozenfant. They asked Neutra the kinds of questions he loved to answer, such as how the pueblo dwellings of the Shoshone Indians were related to flat modernist roofs and how flat roofs are superior to pitched ones. They also requested solutions he had long advanced. For example, the Omegas requested an “articulated house” rather than a simple box. The couples wanted him to use identical architectural elements

in varied ways for both houses in order to confer a larger neighborhood identity. This, of course, suited the architect perfectly. Neutra advocated a universal architecture “harmoniously sited” to conserve land, provide views, and maintain privacy, all of these tailored to the individual. (“No one says trees are too similar and boring,” he would argue.) He detailed the models and drawings for CSH No. 6 and CSH No. 13 so carefully—down to the tangent of the front door's peephole—that in the archival setting of the Department of Special Collections at the University of California, Los Angeles, they look as real as those for a built project would.

For all their suburban correctness, the two fictitious couples cast a slightly bohemian shadow. “They are over their first matrimonial decade, but they have weathered it well,” Neutra observed, sounding like a therapist, a role he believed every architect assumed sooner or later. “Evidently their mutual fitting has not loosened but neatly tightened.” They required that their living quarters be “able to accommodate a guest but as far removed from the family quarters as possible. Amongst themselves, they are not very prudish but they think that their negligé behavior might be bothersome and embarrassing to an adult guest.” Not a problem for Neutra: “A monogamist can be happy too if he has the right kind of architect.” The request led to a multifunction, all-weather breezeway, separating public and private areas. Mrs. Alpha requested flagstone, because “on the occasion of picnic parties, with youngsters about, there would probably be continuous traffic from one open-air terrace to the other, root beer to spill and greasy sandwiches to drip.”

#### FACT AND FICTION

Coincidentally, a Mrs. Gordon Wilkins (a real client) voiced word-for-word the same concerns Mrs. Alpha raised about root beer and greasy sandwiches. (This real client, who, with her husband, purchased a wooded double lot in South Pasadena in the mid-1940s, is documented in Neutra's project description.) She, too, wanted her new home sited “in harmonious relationship” with another Neutra-designed house; the only difference was that the Wilkins's neigh-

bors were to be real in-laws, not the virtual family of the Omega's brother-in-law. Like Mrs. Alpha, it was also Mrs. Wilkins's "specific wish," according to the architect's project description, that there be a "psychological connection"—classic Neutra-speak—between the two terraces. The architect responded with a breezeway identical to that for CSH No. 13. Neutra's Wilkins drawings are dated November 14, 1947, just two years later than the November 1945 dates for the CSH No. 13 plans, which were published in *Arts & Architecture* in March 1946. (CSH No. 6 remained unbuilt, and the companion house for the Wilkins family was nothing like it, though it did "avoid mutual visual nuisances.")

#### ON THE TRAIL OF CSH NO. 13

Two years ago, the new owners of the Wilkins House, Stacey and Jeff Mann, called me with a request, excitement in their voices. I recalled their house as a sad thing, virtually unrecognizable as a Neutra, having weathered many owners and hack renovations. The Manns had bought it in 2000 and hired Los Angeles-based architect John Bertram, who as a consultant to local firm Studio Bau:ton had been project architect for a renovation of Neutra's 1949 Freedman House. The Manns were interested in tracking down period fixtures and products for the house, and so for a while Bertram's studio was filled with magazines and Neutra books, among them old copies of *Arts & Architecture*. Scouring the issues, the architect found an ad for Square D electrical components that featured a plan for CSH No. 13. Fresh from a site visit that included review of the original Wilkins plans, he was struck by the resemblance between the two designs.

Asked to confirm Bertram's hunch, I was wary: After all, a pulled-apart L footprint was a common Neutra device. And who wouldn't want to align their house with the famous program, even as an unpedigreed relation? But I was intrigued, too. In any case, the evidence would speak for itself. At UCLA's Neutra archives, I laid one piece of trace of one plan over the other. (Conveniently, both were drawn at the nice fat scale of one quarter inch, so that any differences would easily show.) The plans lined up almost perfectly, with only one inch discrepancy on a wall almost 23 feet

## NEUTRA, CONVERTED—FROM STEEL TO WOOD

In their experiments for *Arts & Architecture's* Case Study House (CSH) program, younger CSH practitioners such as Pierre Koenig, Charles and Ray Eames, and Craig Ellwood were poised to torch "stick" construction, as fellow CSH architect Rafael Soriano sarcastically referred to conventional wood-stud framing. But Neutra had long abandoned the belief that steel was a necessary component in defining what was modern.

In the 1920s, the Vienna-born architect embarked on his own personal case-study house program that not only embraced technological innovation but also social issues and urban planning. The results ranged from unbuilt migrant worker housing made of wood fruit crates and low-cost housing systems that employed diatomaceous earth to the steel-paneled, radiant-heated 1934 Beard House in Altadena, California. Harnessing local architect Vincent Palmer's low-tech system of corrugated floor decking sandwiched between thin steel panels, Neutra made small holes at the base of the exterior panels to admit cool air which exhausted through holes in the parapets, so that the walls "breathed" like the shell of a beetle. In addition, adds Manhattan Beach-based John Blanton, one of Neutra's leading project/design architects, after World War Two, Neutra knew that steel afforded poor protection against the area's salt air and earthquakes and, at least in his office, added 25 percent to the cost of a house.

Confounded by the inertia of American residential construction, Neutra refined a unique post-and-beam system of wood and steel suited to shifting lines and planes in asymmetric compositions. He continued to champion industrial building methods in print and in lectures, but experience with clients and government agencies led him to believe that new methods would succeed only if they won over popular taste rather than dismissed it. His later, relaxed floor plans didn't overthrow middle-class paradigms, so much as nudge them a little, delivering smooth spatial solutions firmly wedded to nature. The only real innovation at the Bailey House, for example, was non-structural: a prefabricated utility core that "still works fine, thank you," according to Dr. Stuart Bailey, who has lived there for 56 years. **Barbara Lamprecht**

long. The odd angles on the terraces also matched. I then compared the model photographs of "House W-I-S" published in Neutra's 1956 *Life and Human Habitat* with those of the CSH No. 13 model in Esther McCoy's *Case Study Houses 1945-1962*. (In his book, Neutra devised a rather transparent way to conceal identities, using letters in the client's name, e.g., W-I-S for Wilkins, to denote a house.) Though the photos were taken from different perspectives, it was obviously the same model. Thus, the text, plans, and models all confirmed Bertram's thesis.

It is important to note that Neutra never claimed the Wilkins House as part of the CSH canon. Perhaps he didn't tell the Wilkinses that he was recycling the design, sensing that they might not want to be involved in the hoopla surrounding the program or even that they simply didn't run in the fashionable CSH circles; perhaps he did tell them and they refused to be aligned

with the program. (I vote for the former: the Wilkinses secured building permits that reined in the Neutra strategy of indoor-outdoor integration, e.g., enclosing the open patio, as early as 1954.) In any case, Neutra clearly did not want this carefully crafted design to die. He saw a chance to use it appropriately and ran with it successfully.

When searching for a new home, the Manns weren't looking for a Neutra, a Case Study House, or even a modern design. They were hunting for a scenario with room for offices and family, and found it in the Wilkins House, which was listed for sale as a Neutra design. The house found its saviors, who have restored all of Neutra's original elements almost completely. It suffered "not so much butchery, more like bakery, with more and more stuff layered on," says Jeff Mann. The brick fireplace's role as the home's freestanding lynchpin had been smothered when the patio was enclosed and the living room cut off from



The new owners have filled Neutra's Wilkins House with period furnishings (above), and enhanced some elements, such as wider openings for the original screened panels (below), which bring more cool air inside thanks to a new lever that allows more space between wall and panel.



the breezeway by built-in cabinetry. The redwood tongue-and-groove ceiling had been painted white. In a dismissal of Neutra's insistence on the homemaker's access to nature, even the wide-open pass-through from the kitchen to the back garden had been walled off. So had an ele-

gant ventilation device—a bank of screened birch panels below casement windows—employed in both the living room and master bedroom. Hinged at floor level, the panels opened to a slight angle into the room, permitting fresh air inside and eliminating the need for window

screens, which Neutra generally avoided.

The Manns began their work with a "three-day rampage" of demolition, dumpsters, and laborers. Hours poring over Neutra's drawings and photographs taken by Julius Shulman in August 1950 informed their design decisions, with Bertram suggesting and facilitating details. His self-effacing expertise complemented the clients' tenacious attitude toward restoration and knowledge gleaned from their work as movie art directors and production designers. Together they invented replacements for missing hardware and furniture when the details weren't available. For example, the Manns devised a lever for the birch panels that allows a greater range of movement than the original. Jeff Mann used aerodynamic spun-aluminum hub-caps, originally designed for land speed-racing trials, for recessed lighting trim in ceiling openings whose idiosyncratic diameter defied available products. Bringing back the terrazzo floor, ruined by hundreds of carpet nails, however, exceeded the budget, so cork was installed instead. The north patio remains enclosed, but the Manns removed the heavy-handed trim and hid the ersatz brickwork under drywall so that its effect is far less invasive.

A little reluctantly at first, the Manns even restored the eccentric bathroom layout near the entry, identical in both the hypothetical and real versions of Neutra's design. Like a telltale birthmark, a small wall sink is mounted in front of coats hanging in the doorless hall closet, while the toilet (for Mr. Alpha, a "chronic horticulturist who promised to use it Saturdays," Neutra wrote) had its own separate door. The arrangement clearly strained the proprieties of one interim owner, who added a closet door and painted the walls all one color, slurring two formerly distinct planes. Door removed, repainted in a contrasting tone, the closet again reads as a crisp volume against the birch plywood wall, happily articulating space in its suburban identity.

Case closed.

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