

# THE NEW REAL

## CALIFORNIA DREAMING

A newly published facsimile of the leading postwar design magazine in the U.S. prompts reflections on the bold promise of an everyday modernism.

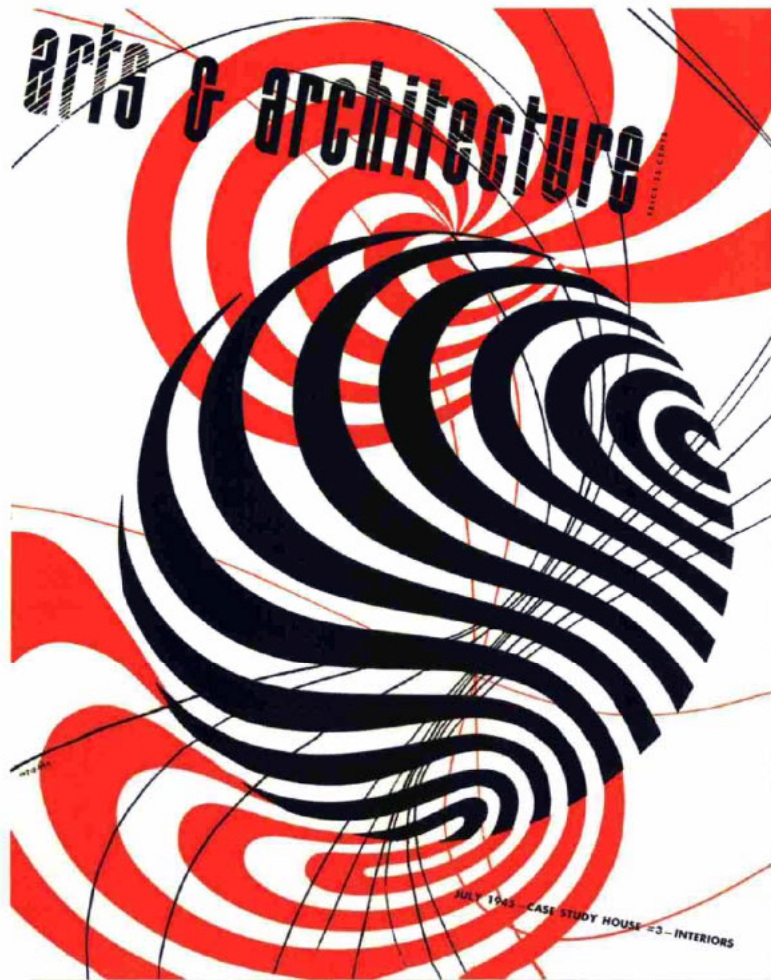
BY AARON BETSKY

RETRO-MODERNISM is the style of the decade. Not only are buildings and artworks from the original movement being copied, but so too are some of the documents that first made modernism fashionable. The latest Taschen facsimile project, part of a series ranging from Renaissance books of maps to illustrated botanical guides, aims to make the modernist dream available again. Unfortunately, it turns that once forward-looking reverie into nostalgia. The boxed-set reprint of a decade (1945-54) of issues of *Arts & Architecture* magazine can currently be had—in a limited edition of 5,000 numbered copies, with an introduction by former publisher David F. Travers—for a mere \$700. A second selection of issues, covering 1955-67, is slated to appear at the end of this year.

*Arts & Architecture*, published monthly almost without interruption between 1938 and 1967, and after that periodically until 1985, in Los Angeles, was the serial bible and high-design Sears catalogue of an expansive American Dream: the belief that we could use technology to quite literally build a better world.

For some of us, the dream remains, despite recent economic events. I, for one, have always had the gauzy impression that *Arts & Architecture* embodied the best of what we once aspired to become. Now, with Taschen's choice of a central decade of issues, I see that it was a magazine with faults like any other. Filled with great projects and art, it was also rife with mediocre and justly forgotten works and even worse writing. In a way, I wish I had not plowed through the Taschen facsimile of hope, because now I can no longer remember the dream. Instead, I realize that the periodical's fairy-tale world was never quite real.

This is not to say that nostalgia is altogether a bad thing, unable to produce good art and architec-



*Arts & Architecture*, July 1945, cover designed by Herbert Matter. All images this article © David Travers.

ture. Drawing from this great source book, today's artists, architects and designers can surely create compelling forms and images, using everything from the magazine's advertisements to its terse project descriptions. Yet the facsimile perhaps too vividly reminds us of another time and place. The 118 slim issues together conjure up a Southern California in which every-

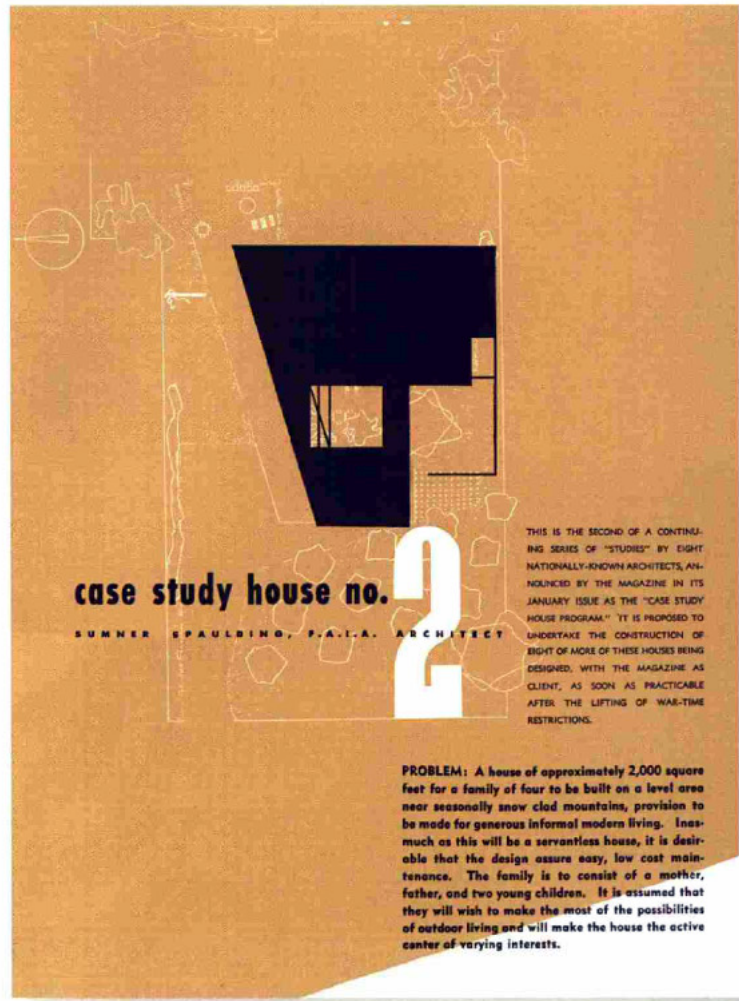
thing was new and modern. It was new because the region was then in the middle of turning itself into the country's largest megalopolis, a great engine of technological innovation powered by its aerospace industry and the place where

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America's self-image was defined by the movie business.

*Arts & Architecture* promoted a style to go with that new reality, in its coverage of—and practical support for—buildings, art and furnishings as well as in the design of the magazine itself. At the center of this new vision was a particular idea of modern living. To promote its everyday esthetic, *Arts & Architecture* went beyond offering texts and pictures; the publication started commissioning houses that were shown to the public and then sold. The 1945-62 "Case Study" program, epitomizing a belief that the domestication of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* lies at the core of modernism, is the magazine's true legacy. The program spawned designs for 28 houses, all but one of them constructed, and two completed apartment buildings. The Taschen reprint embeds the majority of those livable monuments, most of which still stand in and around Los Angeles, in the wider cultural context of the period.

*Arts & Architecture's* guiding light was its editor between 1938 and 1962, John Entenza. The son of a Scottish mining heiress and a Spanish attorney, he came to Southern California, like so many others, to work in the film industry. During the Depression, his interest drifted toward architecture, and right before World War II, at the age of 35, he took over what was then a fairly sleepy provincial magazine called *California Arts & Architecture*. Entenza soon set about remaking it into a gazette for all things modernist. He hired the graphic designer Alvin Lustig

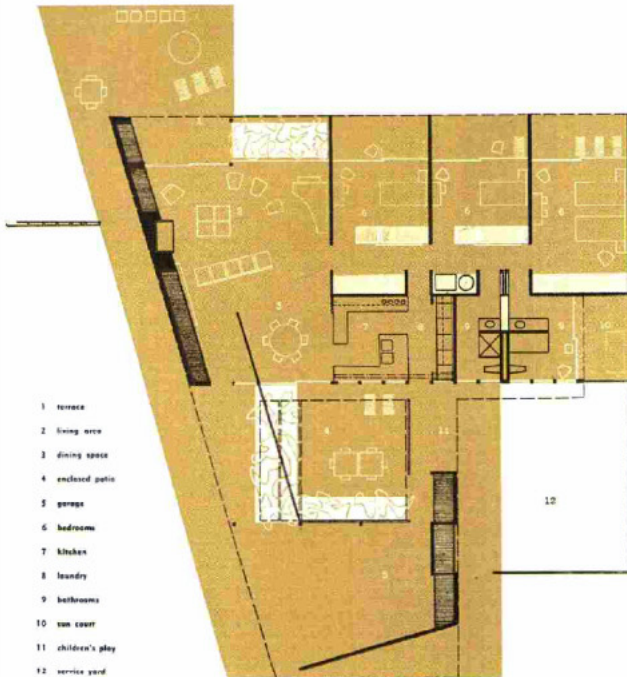


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**ARTS & ARCHITECTURE PROMOTED A STYLE TO GO WITH AMERICA'S NEW REALITY, EXPRESSED IN BUILDINGS, ART, FURNISHINGS AND THE MAGAZINE'S OWN DESIGN.**

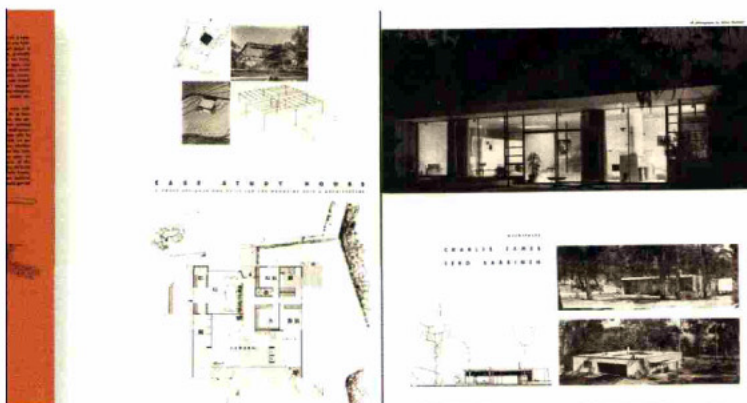
CASE STUDY HOUSE NO. 2 continued

**SOLUTION:** This, the second house in the Case Study Program, is designed to achieve low maintenance cost and still provide the elements necessary for the relaxed, expanded living that hitherto has been possible only for families of considerable means. We have assumed that the servant age is past—that domestic services will be rendered by the family itself—that cooking, cleaning, and allied tasks requiring household skills must be accomplished with an economy of energy and convenience—that space ample for a family of four or five is desirable—that a large part of the active living of the family will take place out of doors—that flexibility in use is essential to the main living areas—that the bath should be as generous and pleasant as any other room in the house.



to create large-format, clean spreads with vectors often sweeping from one end of the page to the other. Within this open field, neat blocks of text anchored drawings and photographs of buildings, which tended more and more to look like lines in space, and art objects that, by contrast, seemed to become heavier, more expressive and more enigmatic over the years.

When the war was over, Entenza found himself the prophet of a new world that was actually under construction. Hundreds of thousands of veterans who had passed through California during the war, factory workers who had settled there "temporarily" to produce the planes and bombs that helped win the war, and untold thousands more who were uprooted by the long years of economic and political unrest now took up full-time residence in the area. They needed new homes, new schools, new everything. Tract houses spread through the semi-arid valleys, along with all the kitchen equipment, bedroom sets and coffee tables they required. Developers and manufacturers needed a lot quickly, and designers at every level convinced them to adopt simple, clean-lined, mass-produced forms using such wartime materials as ply-



Above, April 1945 issue, announcement of Case Study House No. 2, designed by Sumner Spaulding.

Far left, January 1945 issue, John Entenza's announcement of the Case Study House Program and its founding architects: J.R. Davidson, Sumner Spaulding, Richard J. Neutra, Eero Saarinen, William W. Wurster, Charles Eames and Ralph Rapson.

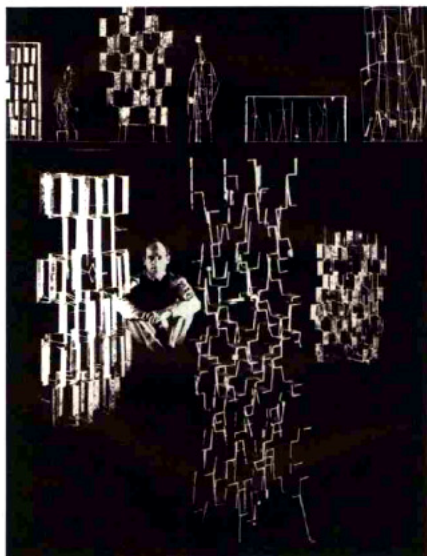
Center, June 1945 issue, announcement of Case Study House No. 3, designed by William W. Wurster.

Left, July 1950 issue, announcement of Case Study House No. 9, designed by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen.

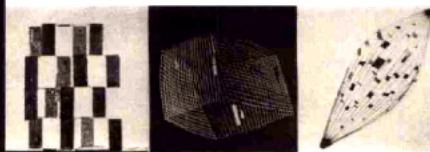
THE NEW REAL

THIS VERSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM, USING TECHNOLOGY TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD, IS REALLY AN ELITE FANTASY DESTINED TO BE REALIZED ONLY BY THE EDUCATED AND MONEYED FEW.

wood and aluminum. Leafing through the pages of *Arts & Architecture*, you can find all sorts of historical tidbits, from the homes of Edward Fickett, now unknown but once the holder of the Guinness record for the most building permits issued to any architect, to the knock-off Scandinavian Modern items sold by better furniture emporia. The real joy of the Taschen set (even though the 1945-54 run does not cover all the best architecture and design of the postwar period) is the presence of revealing incidentals. There are pictures of Kwikset locks that secured these mass-produced packages for living and



HARRY BERTOIA



Further, geometric sculpture designer Harry Bertoia... (The text is small and partially illegible, but appears to be a caption or short article snippet.)

Pacific Telephone ads urging builders to hide wiring inside houses. Landscape architect Garrett Eckbo argues that the living room can extend into each suburbanite's slice of Southern California's Eden, while reviews of films, art shows and concerts suggest that a coherent culture was arising in and around the area's colleges and universities.

It is all of a piece, and it all made sense at the time. The work that Entenza and his band of editors and correspondents chose to feature (including the ads, which the staff vetted as closely as the editorial material) was on the whole efficient, logical and well put together. However, in promoting their view, the team also managed for a while to suppress other realities. A good decade passed before critics began to complain that the magazine represented a European-inspired, radically austere level of design—one that opponents aspired to rise above with more traditional forms. By the 1980s, *Arts & Architecture*, once a prophetic journal, had become a stylistically entrenched publication arguing against a rising tide of mansionettes.

The real disappointment in surveying the first postwar

decade, when the modernist dream seemed believable, is the art Entenza showed. Though he paid attention to artists, such as Isamu Noguchi, who ventured into design, and had Dore Ashton and others note the emergence of the Abstract Expressionists, most of the art he showed is now utterly obscure, and with cause. Entenza had a timely penchant for primitivizing forms and geometric compositions but often chose ham-fisted examples.

The architecture, on the other hand, was often of the highest order. In the 1940s, Entenza became friends with the two guiding lights of California modernism, Charles and Ray Eames. Their spirit, their interests and their network of friends, meshing with Entenza's, pervade the magazine's best years, including the ones reprinted here. Charles and Ray Eames created the greatest Case Study House, No. 8, for themselves, in 1949. *Arts & Architecture* became the magazine version of the work, documenting every plan and physical component the couple assembled. The house was an example, though not one anybody followed

Above, January 1953 issue, spread from an article on artist and designer Harry Bertoia.

Left, October 1954 issue, back cover advertisement for Kwikset locks.

up on, of metal-panel prefabrication. It also showcased the ability of modernist architecture to create a completely open and simple environment—essentially a box—that was beautiful. Through the composition of the multicolored panels and glass planes, the articulation of the connections and the placement of the whole package on its site, the couple created an infinitely rich collection of places, some contained within the house, some implied in the landscape through the framing of views. The Eameses then filled the house with their own furniture and pieces commissioned by Entenza's great rival as a modernist impresario, George Nelson of the Herman Miller company. They also added tchotchkes gathered in Mexico and other exotic locations. The same year, Entenza commissioned Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen to design Case Study House No. 9 for himself on the meadow right in front of the Eames house.

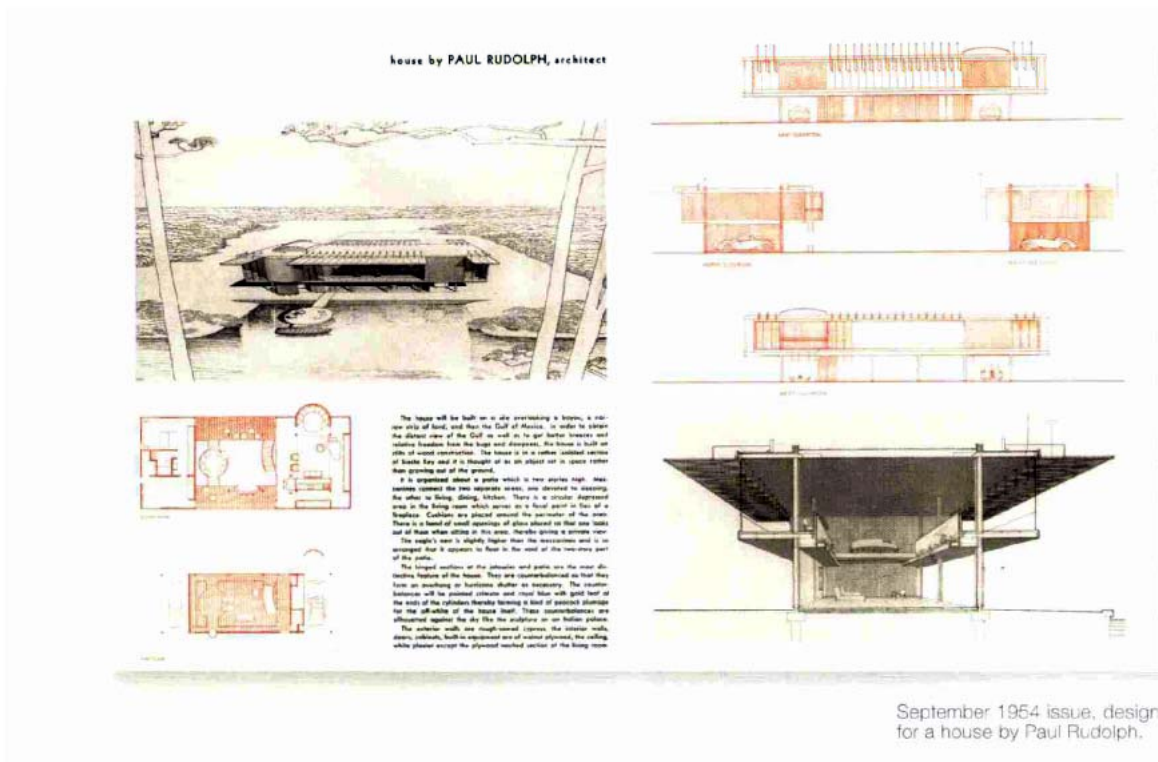
If the Eames project showed how *Arts & Architecture* sought to present a complete domestic environment, Case Study House No. 22, designed by the young architect Pierre Koenig, represented the magazine's most ambitious sweep. Located not on

the kind of standard tract lot that the magazine claimed to address but on a hillside with a sweeping view over what the critic Reyner Banham would later call "the Plains of Id," the house was all glass planes. Barely contained by thin metal and wood scaffolding, it cantilevered out over the cliff with a bravura that suggested technology could conquer any terrain. Completed in 1960, No. 22 burned itself into the popular imagination through the photographs of *Arts & Architecture's* house photographer, Julius Schulman. In particular, the nighttime shot of two women in cocktail dresses—the pair perched over the grid of lights that was Los Angeles, supported by only a hint of glass and beams reaching out into darkness—has become one of the great icons of the elegant new world that modernism once promised us.

This much is known, and has been documented in many of the annals of modernism, from Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980) to Esther McCoy's *The Second Generation* (1984). More detailed studies include McCoy's early *Modern California Houses: Case Study Houses, 1945-1962* (1962); *Arts & Architecture: The Entenza Years* (1990), a selection

of articles edited by Barbara Goldstein; and Taschen's own *Case Study Houses: The Complete CSH Program, 1945-1966* (2002) by Elizabeth A.T. Smith. The 1989 exhibition "Blueprints for Modern Living," which Smith organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, included issues of the magazine along with furniture and other work published in *Arts & Architecture*, plus a full-scale reproduction of the Koenig Case Study House, created by Hodgetts & Fung Design Associates. The Taschen reprint evokes the milieu in which moments we now remember in isolation first appeared. The graphic design and some of Schulman's photographs continue to amaze through their crisp, reductive composition. It certainly is fascinating to move from the presentation of each year's Case Study House to the advertisements for locks and Van Keppel and Green furniture. But what surprises a reader across a half-century divide is the lax quality of so much else that was *Arts & Architecture* magazine.

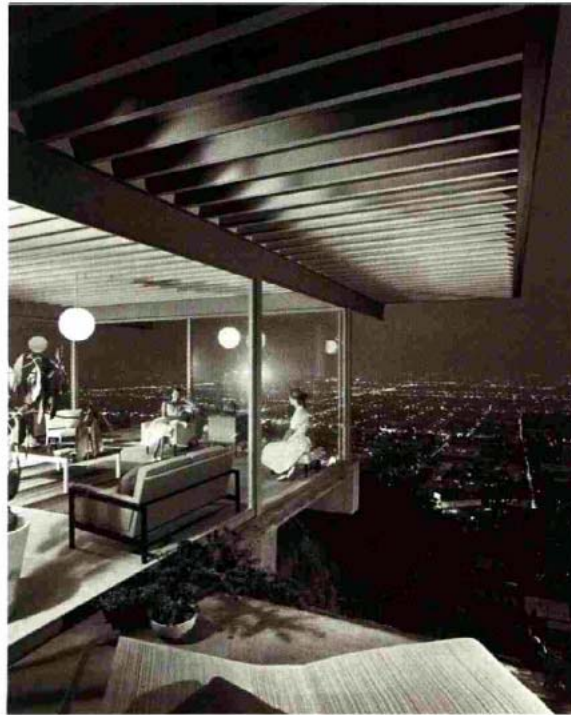
The writing, for one thing, is atrocious. The unsigned descriptions of the architecture are innocuous and to the point, but the signed essays are meandering, unfocused and badly edited. For a good three-year stretch,



between 1950 and 1953, Entenza, who later became director of the Graham Foundation in Chicago, seemed to be gunning for a post at UNESCO, as every editorial is either a vague paean to the organization's efforts to support culture and freedom of speech, or a quote from its director general. The worst prose is that of the regular music critic, Peter Yates, whom Entenza allowed to write thousands of words in nearly every issue. Combining overly technical description with unclear points, Yates makes you feel that classical music will forever remain the province of an intellectual elite. Reviews of art exhibitions are often indiscriminate listings of the good, the bad and the long gone. Even the Hemingway of architectural criticism, Esther McCoy, who started writing for the magazine in 1953, sounds dull in these pages. Now and then you encounter a set piece, in which the great and good as they were then are given

a chance to talk endlessly about such issues as collaboration (Walter Gropius) or the necessity of craft and the beauty of materiality (Lawrence B. Anderson).

It is much better, really, to flip through these magazines with one's feet on a reproduction Noguchi coffee table, not looking too often at the re-issued George Nelson Atomic Clock on the wall. There's a thrill to coming upon images of new buildings under construction at the University of Mexico, even without imagining what happened later when hundreds of students died during the 1968 Olympics massacre. You can find reports on *la dolce vita* being expressed in new buildings, interiors and furnishings in Milan in 1950 and meet Simon Rodia, also known as "Sam of Watts," as he builds the Watts Towers. Having lived in Los Angeles from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, I was especially pleased to find a now obscure and probably torn-down drive-in restaurant given the same loving treatment as the Robinson's store, which opened in 1952 in Beverly Hills. If you flip without pausing, you do get a sense that



Julius Shulman: *Pierre Koenig's Case Study House No. 22*, 1960, black-and-white print, 5 by 4 inches. Julius Shulman Photography Archive/Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. © J. Paul Getty Trust.

everything will be new and, in being new, will be beautiful.

There are also discoveries to be made, such as Greta Magnusson Grossman. An architect and decorator who moved to L.A. from her native Sweden right before World War II, she worked for many years with the Barker Brothers, whose furniture was a staple of *Arts & Architecture*. I did not know that she was also an accomplished architect whose carefully calibrated homes, starting with her 1949 Hillside House, showed up in the magazine with great regularity. We get to see young architects such as Paul Rudolph, then designing his first homes in Florida, immediately open up a new esthetic within the modernist canon, as he focuses more on structural bones and less on glass skins. Masterpieces such as Richard Neutra's Tremaine House in Santa Barbara mix with honest attempts to create tract housing in working-class Ladera, and the construction of Eames furniture gets equal billing with visits to factories such

as the one where you can see workers making those Kwikset locks.

To make use of this version of *Arts & Architecture*, I would further suggest a good bottle of California wine, perhaps some of the music Stravinsky composed in exile in L.A. and an Eames lounge. That would complete the setting and remind us that we still live with the legacy that *Arts & Architecture* documents. We have, in fact, gone back to some of its central precepts after rejecting them for many years. It turns out that the translation of modernist principles into domestic implements, made possible by new materials and technologies, is something that still helps us feel at home. Clear organization, whether of images on a page or spaces in an office building, again seems like the right thing. The belief that such choices could add up to a better world in a real and immediate sense, and that

a new culture could gather the best elements from around the globe into an integrated environment, still rings true.

But with that feeling comes also the realization that this version of the American Dream is an elite one destined to be realized only by the educated and moneyed few. In fact, this is an isolationist dream, to be had on a Sunday afternoon in one's own cocoon of modernist comfort. If you want to distill from the reams of *Arts & Architecture's* pages the essence of what is to be done out there in the real world, you will need guides that are more concise. I would suggest the charter of Entenza's beloved UNESCO, together with Siegfried Giedion's 1948 *Mechanization Takes Command*, and perhaps that very Eames chair in which you are sitting. They could save you the time and money you might otherwise

spend on Taschen's evocation of what should be a vital dream but is now just a comfy memory of the home in which all true modernists wish they had grown up. ○

**AARON BETSKY**, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, organized the 11th International Architecture Biennale in Venice (2008).