

California Dreamers

Case Study Houses: The Complete CSH Program, 1945–1966. Edited by Peter Goessel. Introduction by Elizabeth Smith. Taschen America, 2002. 440 pp., illustrated, oversized. \$150.

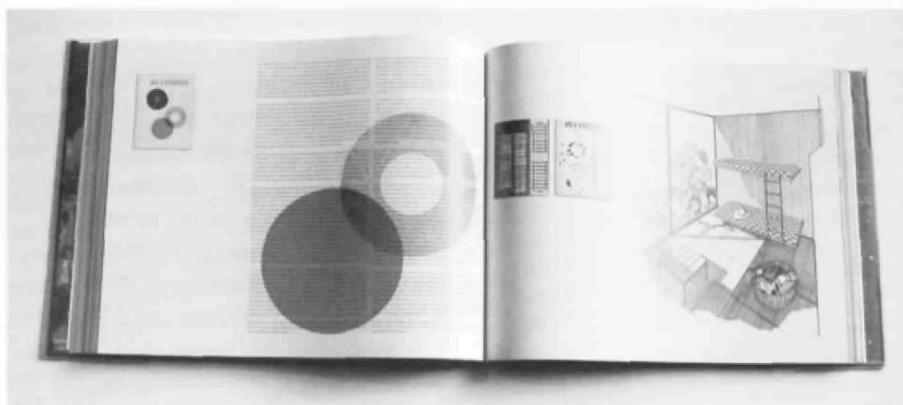
Reviewed by David Hay

John Entenza's Case Study House program, famous for its coolly rational Modernist solutions to residential design, began as a clarion call for innovation following World War II. "What man has learned about himself in the last five years will, we are sure, express itself in the way he wants to be housed in the future," wrote Entenza, an editor and publisher, in January 1945. For the next two decades, he published the plans for the program's 36 prototypes in his magazine, *Arts & Architecture*. But by 1966, the social imperative that spawned the idea — the quest for affordable and coherent design for the millions of homes needed for the burgeoning workforce of the post-war economy — had faded. So, too, had the idea of building a single-family residence oneself. Such a decision was now firmly in the hands of suburban developers, most of whom showed scant interest in the glass and wood and steel houses with egalitarian floor plans espoused by architects in the Case Study program.

By the early 1970s this almost mathematical design ideology fell afoul of the Sixties generation, many of whom, ignorant that the houses promoted equality of social relations, resented their conceptual tidiness. I recall one of the contributors to the Case Study House program, Pierre Koenig, exploding at the excesses of this period, accusing its adherents of nothing less than bringing down Modernism.

By the late 1980s, however, the thoughtful elegance of the designs created by these architects, most of whom were based in Southern California, began to be recognized again. But it wasn't developers or first time homebuilders who re-popularized this design tradition. Rather it was cultural sophisticates, again mainly in Southern California, whose ranks grew to include Hollywood stars and fashion designers. The acquisition of such Modernist icons was now a sign of savvy good taste.

Given such an audience, it's not surprising that the most comprehensive accounting of this program, *Case Study Houses* — with an introductory essay by



Elizabeth A.T. Smith, many a wonderful photograph by Julius Shulman and others, and edited by Peter Goessel — is being sold for \$150.

For those who want a superbly rendered, highly detailed archive of this program, the book is well worth its price. Smith's short introduction goes beyond mere description, arguing that renewed interest in Entenza's vision has led young contemporary architects to be excited once again by the experimental possibilities of residential design. Some of the photographic treatments, especially that of Case Study House #8 — the Eames House — are breathtaking. Even Entenza's original manifesto is reprinted in the same typeface as it was in *Arts & Architecture*.

Each design comes with the exact sober introduction that it was given in the magazine — along with a small text by Smith — and also spread around are the delightful pop-Modernist covers of the issue in which each house is featured.

But this seemingly comprehensive, archival approach has its limitations. It fails to acknowledge the extensive critical commentary already afforded Entenza's program. Much of this has come from Elizabeth A.T. Smith herself, currently the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. In late 1989, Smith, then at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, assembled the seminal exhibition, *Blueprints for Modern Living*, a show about the Case Study houses. Two of its most inspired designs, Koenig's #22, and Ralph Rapson's Greenbelt House, #4, were reconstructed inside the then Temporary

Contemporary. Rapson, a Minneapolis-based architect, envisioned a house whose open courtyard joined the bedrooms with the living area serving as a critical social space. This radical, somewhat impractical design was published in *Arts & Architecture* but, like many of the prototypes, was never built.

It was an outstanding show and its catalogue, *Blueprints for Modern Living - History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*, which included essays by Smith, Thomas S. Hines, and Reyner Banham, among others, illustrates the shortcomings of the new Taschen publication. The latter eschews any examination of the success or failure of Entenza's program, its historical antecedents, and its debatable contribution to housing design in the mass market. The Case Study House program never satisfactorily addressed the economics of scale with regard to, say, lot size, materials, and community organization that ventures such as Levittown attempted to solve.

It is odd that the editors at Taschen would overlook this. In Taschen's earlier but similarly expensive *Neutra — Complete Works*, author Barbara Mac Lamprecht provides fresh conceptual insight into her subject. She writes fluently of the architect's embrace of 'biorealism' — his profound curiosity about the human species as a guiding force in his design — as well as his always-present social concern. Thus prepared, I approached the textual introductions and handsome illustrations with considerable zeal.

I felt the same way after reading the first book on Entenza's program, *Case Study Houses 1945-1962*, recently re-

issued by Hennessey + Ingalls. Written by Esther McCoy, its reproductions are less than sharp and have none of the visual impact of the Taschen volume. (The latter's lush images glorify the houses in ways that mimic photographs of European palaces, giving off a grandiosity not entirely appropriate for a program that had, at least in its origins, the idea of creating housing for the mass market.) The wit and verve of McCoy's commentary captures the excitement of its subject. Similarly, she places this innovative program in a context and sees its death knell — who wants an individually designed house when a developer can offer you a much cheaper one? — as a warning sign.

Interestingly, Taschen's book offers further evidence of the uncritical nature of respect heaped on the Case Study house program, although in the form of an epilogue written by Julius Shulman and carefully tucked away on page 436. Shulman, who photographed 15 of the 24 realized Case Study Houses, takes issue with those who see Entenza's program as providing a definitive blueprint for low-cost housing. He notes that many houses, paid for by clients, many reasonably well-heeled, suffered from inevitable compromises and did not adhere to some of the program's imperatives. Further, Shulman viewed Entenza's choice of architects to be included as often quixotic and exclusionary. Shulman says, for instance, that Entenza never gave a nod to Gregory Ain, the architect most interested in low-cost housing in Southern California, owing to Entenza's disapproval of Ain's left-wing leanings. The photographer further argues that public reaction to these houses, while staggering in numbers — in the first three years of the program, 368,554 people toured the initial six homes — was less than laudatory, remaining cautious, if not critical.

With this all this information in mind, I turn the pages of the new book with greater curiosity, understanding, and some pain, knowing that even with the best of intentions, the Case Study House program was a valuable but mixed success. Nonetheless, such knowledge brings these houses to life, situates them in design history and adds excitement to the otherwise definitive but strictly literal treatment given them in *Case Study Houses*.