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EICHLER HOMES:
MODERN DREAM HOUSE



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On view at the University of Texas School of Architecture from October 1 through October 27, 1997 the exhibition entitled *The Eichler Homes: Building the American Dream* paid homage to an unusual moment of care and taste in mass housing development in America. The exhibition featured photographs and other artifacts from the design, construction, and

marketing of the Northern California tract houses developed by Joe Eichler. It was co-curated by UT faculty members Paul Adamson and Kevin Alter, with a lucid commentary by Alter.¹ Everything about the 12,000 modernist houses built by Eichler in the 1950s and 1960s smacks of efficiency and durability (slab-on-grade foundations, post-and-beam construction).

"Beams vary in depth commensurate to their span, and plywood cladding forms a lightweight diaphragm," Alter's commentary informs us. The post acts as a "universal joint to which glazing, paneling, and door frames can be interchangeably secured." Architects of the Eichler houses turned Federal Housing Administration and Veterans' Administration loan restrictions into virtues: "Construction method remains evident in the final product and the ubiquitous module generates rhythm and meter in the space. The compelling presence of these constructional and fiscal concerns in the completed houses imbue them with a character beyond their identity as minimal dwelling."

The word "character" is the key to appreciating the achievement of these structures. Though minimal by legal definition and built within strict budgetary constraints, the dwellings were not mean in feeling or vision. These modernist houses offered space and style at a price affordable to the middle-class buyer. Eichler chose Quincy Jones and Anshen & Allen, significant architects for such projects, to design his prototypes. Unlike William Levitt's houses in Levittown, New York, also built for World War II veterans and to which Eichler's houses are often compared, Eichler Homes embodied a contemporary aesthetic ideal, not Cape Cod-type houses of the East but Case Study-type houses and the California modernism of Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler.

Each house was entered through a landscaped courtyard, and, because of the abundance of glass, the outdoors seemed part of each room. The open plan and multipurpose central room, which incorporated kitchen and social spaces, encouraged togetherness, yet doors and drapes afforded privacy. The visual continuity in the relatively small space (starting at 1,200 square feet), made the houses seem larger than they were. Against all odds the mass-built Eichler Homes maintained individuality, a challenge that the more lavish and expensive houses of their aesthetic forebears did not face.

Every inch was thought out, and if some of the finish details were not fine, still, great care was taken. A swing-out kitchen table helped transform the family kitchen into a place for entertaining. The radiant heating cast into the foundation slabs made the floor a comfortable place for toddler and adult. Eichler Homes advertised that the floors would "warm your slippers and bathrobe as you slept."

Cork flooring, mahogany veneer walls, cabinets painted in Zol-o-Tone paint (durable, easy to clean, and formulated for Eichler Homes), custom stains specially produced by Cabot — all these details were built into the houses. Joe Eichler, his architects, and his hand-picked construction crews went to a lot of trouble for the houses and the neighborhoods they built. Clearly, Eichler wanted his buildings to make it possible for gracious family living to take place within them. His consistency, practicality, and taste made his developments popular — as they still are nearly 50 years later.

To market his new houses, Eichler formed a talented team of art director Matt Kahn, who still lives in an Eichler house, and photographer Ernest Braun, who produced a series of photographs of the construction process (heroic portraits, almost like Soviet Realist posters of noble workers) and of the finished product to be used in the sales office and for advertising. These photographs make up the bulk of the exhibition along with contemporary shelter magazines; Joe Eichler's business card and stationery; and a sample of post-and-beam construction. The installation is clever: partitions broken by frosted glass, and full-scale images blown up to mimic the walls of the Eichler Homes.

Another type of ad included in the exhibition appears radical even now: instead of a picture of a house, there is a flower, for example, or a vase, and a single evocative word. The exhibition also contains delightful drawings by UT architecture students Ernesto Cragolino and William Jackson (à la David Macauley's madly detailed drawings for his children's books), showing two Eichler houses in current usage, one of them Matt Kahn's. The drawings are playfully detailed down to Kahn's African masks and menorah and express the true flexibility and livability of the original houses.

Ernest Braun's black-and-white photographs have a life of their own, apart from the moment they portray in architectural history. The photographs do not show buildings as empty architectural objects but as houses lived in by admirable, yet familiar, people in ideal, yet possible, activities. Kahn chose good-looking models, well-designed furniture (Eames chairs and cabinets, for example), and other props to articulate the best features of the house and to narrate stories of life within them. The crisp and beautifully composed photographs are not the still equivalent of home movies, for they are



Eichler Home, Lucas Valley, California, Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons, architects, ca. 1960.

deliberately posed, nor are they overextended fashion photographs. They do their job, pulling us into the life in the house, expressing a way of life made possible by the buildings. The buildings themselves are not the dominating objects. The photographs instruct us not to desire the house as a beautiful object, but to want it for the life it frames and perhaps makes possible. The life portrayed is, for those who grew up in the fifties and sixties, a familiar yet idealized post-war hopefulness, chillingly accurate. The people in the photographs feel on top of the world, ready to make a sophisticated, self-fulfilled, slightly avant-garde, and wholly unironical life in their new neighborhood.

In one nighttime scene, photographed from outside, one sees two generations of a family — a young couple with a friend, or perhaps a younger sister, and visiting parents — singing together to the accompaniment of a guitar slung over the shoulder of the young husband. In another, a teenage girl in a nasty shag haircut lies on her bed, her back to the rest of the house, and talks on the phone. She is apart from the family, but she is still safe at home. As another expression of the possibilities of middle-class life, a young wife in treader pants, pony tail, and an odd ear-muff-like hairdo sits weaving at her loom. She has leisure time. She is able, in her Eichler house, to express herself. In another photo a man is painting, his finished canvases resting on the wall behind his easel. Through the open doorway the multipurpose room, the fireplace, the shag rug are visible. He is a Sunday painter par excellence, nurtured within the house. In an outdoor shot, a young couple is decorating the fence of their tiny yard with abstract cut-outs.

In a party scene no children are in evidence, only adults, together in the kitchen area of the multipurpose room. The grilled chicken and potato salad, the stack of Russel Wright dinner plates are ready for dinner. For cocktail snacks there are olives, pickles, and celery sticks. Everyone is drinking highballs. Many of the people are laughing. There is an atmosphere of freedom, sexuality, and the possibility of being interrupted at any moment. These are not single people, after all. These are

men returned from war, women turning their hands to raising children and keeping house. In the same kitchen, but opened up to show the rest of the house, a different scene, the lighting of a child's birthday cake.

Most interesting of all is the message the photographs send about family life. One would hardly expect a marketing campaign based on photographs of family fights, but there is a mute acknowledgment of the strains of family life. Often family members are in one another's line of sight yet stay apart, in separate rooms. In the foreground of one photo, which might be titled "Sunday Afternoon," a mother (a dead ringer for Jeanne Crain) sits, mending basket in her lap, sewing in hand. Next to her is her young daughter. Mother and daughter look at each other, engaged. Beyond them, in the same room, the young son watches television, his eyes on the tube, his body across a bench. In the next room, Father reads the paper. He can see his family and his family can see him, but he doesn't have to talk to them.

The people in Braun's photographs are looking through the house at other family members in their solitude or togetherness or looking through the entrance courtyard at nature enclosed by the house. Photographs are silent, of course. In reality, the ensemble separateness of family life would have been impinged on by the smell of dinner in the oven and by sound: Daddy's new hi-fi, the boy's TV, and possibly Elvis on an unseen teenager's radio. In the silence of the photographs the family is at peace in their Eichler Home, together and apart simultaneously, the perfect solution to family life. ■

1. No catalogue was produced for this exhibition. Kevin Alter's comments were in the form of legends accompanying items in the exhibition.