

Documenting Neutra's Kraigher House

MEASURED
DRAWINGS BY
DAVID PAYNE

The Kraigher House was designed and built in 1937 on what were then the outskirts of Brownsville. Today, the compact, two-story house sits in the middle of a lightly wooded six-acre tract that faces Paredes Line Road and is in sight of the U.S. 77-83 Expressway. Yet looking out the south-facing ribbon windows of the living room, or standing on the expansive second-floor terrace deck, it is possible to imagine oneself in the country, where the loudest sound is



Detail of entrance.

the rustling of mesquite and palm trees in the constant Gulf breeze.

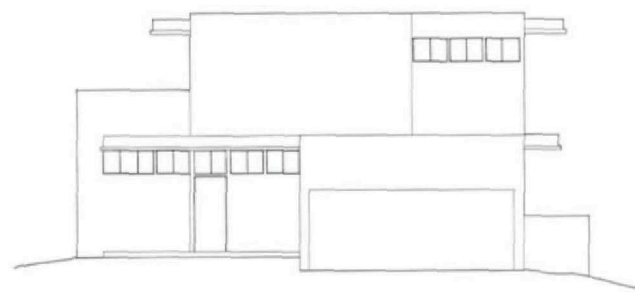
George Kraigher, who built the house, was an executive of Pan American World Airways, which maintained a section of its Latin American division in Brownsville between 1929 and 1944. Los Angeles architectural historian Thomas S. Hines interviewed George Kraigher in 1977 while preparing his book, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (1982). Kraigher told Hines that he was impressed by a modern house he saw while on a visit to Los Angeles in 1936, tracked down the name of its architect, Richard Neutra, and commissioned Neutra, one of the most influential proponents of the Modern Movement in the U.S., to design his house in Brownsville. According to Hines, this was the first building constructed to Neutra's design in the U.S. outside California. It was also the first Modern house in Texas. Kraigher, who eventually had Neutra design a retirement house for him in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1958, gave Hines two renderings that Neutra made of the design: the first for a one-story house, the second of the house as built. The Brownsville contractor A. W. Neck & Sons built the Kraigher House for the contract sum of \$5,000. Neutra never traveled to Brownsville. Construction was supervised by the Brownsville architect Frank L. Godwin. The Kraigher House was published in the May 1939 issue of *Architectural Record* as "Open-Planned, Window-Walled House in

Southwest." In 1939 Neutra submitted a slightly enlarged version of the Kraigher House design to the *Ladies' Home Journal's* National Small House Competition.

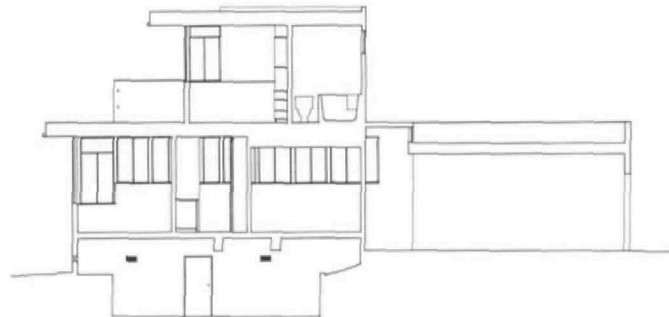
The Kraigher House is a tightly-packed composition of interlocking L-planned spaces, containing 2,446 square feet of livable space (this does not count the terrace deck or two-car garage). Neutra's planning was so adroit, however, that the interiors seem open and expansive rather than compressed. What most distinguishes the Kraigher House from Neutra's California houses is its lack of ground-level, outdoor living space. There is a small porch off the living room, but neither a patio nor a screened loggia, which were characteristic of Neutra houses in the more benign, less insect-ridden climate of Southern California.

Since the 1970s the Kraigher House has been used as rental property. During the 1970s, Paredes Line Road ceased being a country highway and became instead a commercial strip. Thus the value of the six-acre site is considered by its owners, the Franke Realty Company, as highest for commercial use. The property is listed for sale for \$600,000. In 1992, the year of Neutra's centenary, local concern over the condition of the house led to a feature article in the *Brownsville Herald* by reporter Roberto C. González, which precipitated stories in *Texas Architect*, *Architecture*, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's newspaper, *Historic Preservation News*. Brownsville preservation activist T. Ashley Gonzales and the city's heritage officer, Mark Lund, have monitored the condition of the house, which is now vacant, windowless, and unsecured. This spring, Brownsville architect Roberto Ruiz, president of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, arranged for measurements of the house to be taken. University of Houston architecture student David Payne, who was involved in the measuring, produced these drawings, which describe the present appearance of the Kraigher House, one of the most significant works of modern architecture in Texas.

Stephen Fox

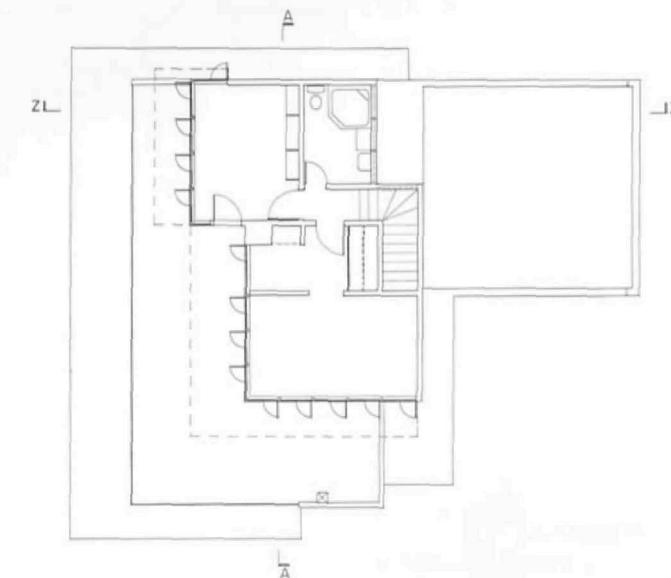


North elevation.

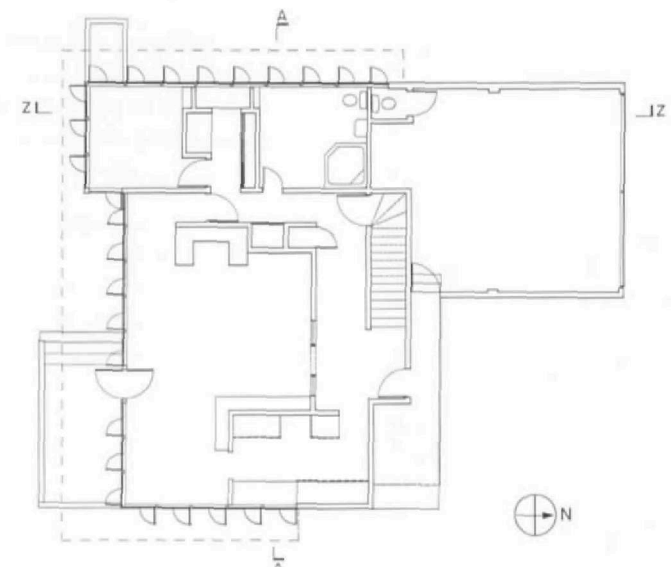


0 10 FT.

Cross section (Z - Z).



Second-floor plan.



First-floor plan.