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The Museum of Modern Art

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The House in the Museum Garden. Marcel Breuer, Architect

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# The House in the Museum Garden

Marcel Breuer *Architect*

*Grounds and Interiors also Designed by the Architect*

Last year the Museum of Modern Art commissioned the internationally known architect, Marcel Breuer, to build a one-family house in the east end of its sculpture garden on West 54th Street, New York. The problem which the Museum presented to Mr. Breuer was to design a moderately priced house for a man who works in a large city and commutes to a so-called "dormitory town" on its outskirts where he lives with his family.

Since the Museum feels that the practical problems confronting potential home-builders are frequently misunderstood, it asked Mr. Breuer to demonstrate how much good living and good design can be purchased for how many dollars. The House in the Museum Garden is not a minimum house. It is a custom-built, architect-designed solution for a middle-income family. Mr. Breuer and the Museum believe that the problem of the minimum house must be solved primarily in industrial terms, which are not within the province of a museum of art.

## THE PLAN

The House in the Museum Garden was designed for a hypothetical suburban site approximately one acre in size. Its plan, like that of all well designed houses, presupposes a correct orientation which, incidentally, suggests that home builders will do well to consult with their

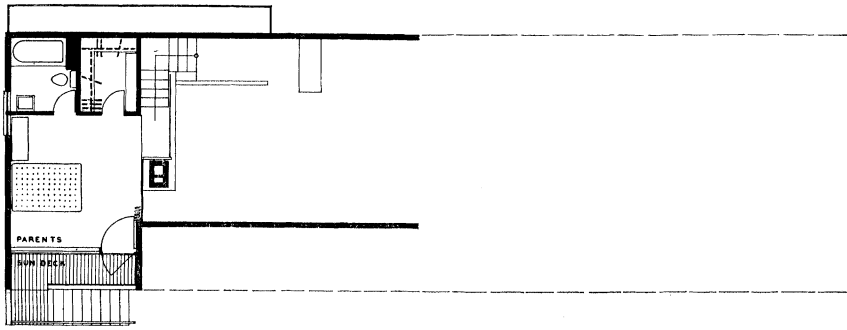
architects before deciding upon the land on which to build. The plan of the house is closely fitted to the requirements of a typical American family. Such a family may go through two major cycles in the course of its existence, and Mr. Breuer's house was therefore planned to be built in two major phases which correspond to these cycles.

## FLEXIBILITY

The first phase of this house incorporates only two bedrooms at one end: the larger bedroom is intended for the parents while the smaller one is for the children. In addition the playroom, which can be supervised from the kitchen through a glass panel, gives the children space for undisturbed activity.

In the second phase of the house, a bedroom suite and garage are added at the living room end. The upward sweep of the roof permits the house to rise to two stories at this end, the lower story being occupied by a garage and heater room while the upper story contains the parents' bedroom and balcony as well as a dressing room and bath.

At this stage it is possible literally to separate the house into two apartments. The earlier bedroom and playroom end becomes the children's apartment, with the former playroom acting as a small living room in which the children can entertain their own friends.



SECOND FLOOR

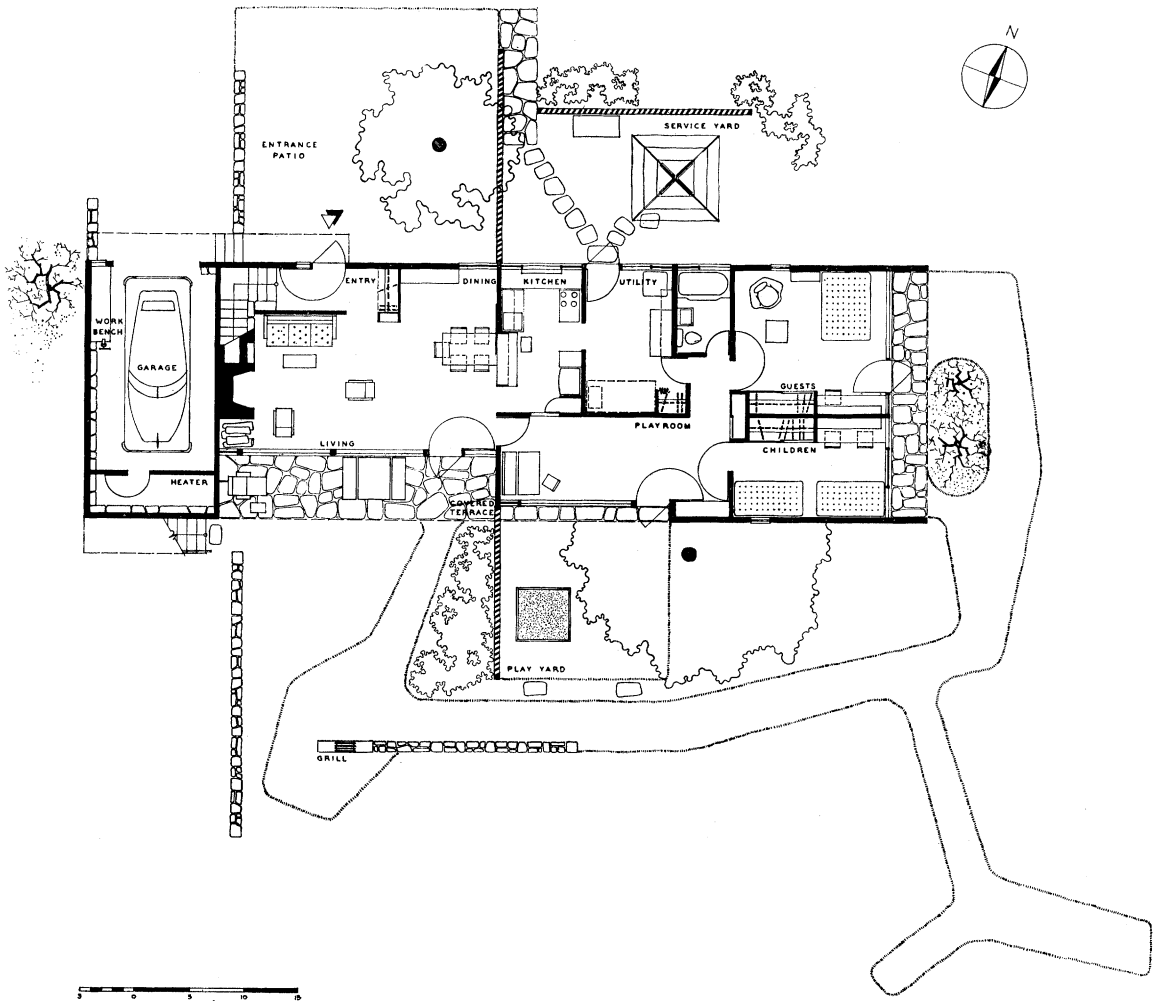


Photo by Merit Studios, Inc.

Meanwhile the living room, with its added master bedroom suite, becomes the parents' apartment and can, if necessary, be kept quite separate from the rest of the house. The kitchen and utility room which are a kind of central service core in both the smaller and expanded phases of the house, continue to serve both "apartments."

#### SPACIOUSNESS

Yet, while the interior of the house can thus, in both phases, be clearly sub-divided into different zones of privacy and activity, the house as a whole never loses the sense of spaciousness and lightness characteristic of the best in modern architecture. Mr. Breuer has achieved this spaciousness by making the sloping ceiling an important and attractive feature. Few partitions reach up to meet this inclined roof plane, with the result that you are always conscious of larger spaces beyond the room you happen to be in. In the second phase, especially, the openness of the master bedroom suite gives the living room an appearance of greater size.

#### FURNISHINGS

Mr. Breuer designed some of the furniture and selected all the rest of the furnishings. The furniture groupings in the house are extremely flexible and were arranged with a view to numerous future variations to suit changing family requirements as they arise.

The living-dining area arrangement, for example, can be changed to incorporate a free-standing dining table and different seating arrangements around the fireplace. So too, the upstairs bedroom can be converted into an additional study or music room if desired. The furniture of the playroom was designed for maximum flexibility to fit the needs of children from playpen to high school age. After that the playroom can be converted into a fully equipped living room for young people. At about this time also, the small bedroom adjoin-

ing this space can become an efficient study area and the utility room can occasionally double as an emergency bedroom.

#### OUTDOOR LIVING

To increase the feeling of spaciousness, which is so important in a small house, Mr. Breuer has opened each of his interior areas to the surrounding garden spaces. On the periphery of the house itself he has planned certain outdoor areas for very specific purposes, and these, especially in the summer, will help to increase the useable areas of the overall plan. As you approach the house from 54th Street, you enter through a court that leads to the main door. Beyond this court, to the east, a louvered screen fences off the service yard. This yard is directly accessible from the utility room. On the east end of the house, where the bedrooms open out to catch the morning sun, there is an intimate garden area protected by planting and screen walls that project beyond the house on each of its sides.

The southern exposure of the building is divided into two main areas; the first, which is accessible directly from the playroom, is a small play-yard with a sandbox. This play-yard, like the playroom itself, can be surveyed from the kitchen where the mother spends much of her time. Another louvered screen separates the play-yard from the covered terrace which forms an extension of the living room itself.

#### CONSTRUCTION AND MATERIALS

The type of construction used in Mr. Breuer's house is familiar to builders in all parts of the country. Its standard wood frame is insulated, in the walls, by two layers of insulation board, and in the roof by glass wool. The concrete floor slab has been designed to contain radiant heating coils (omitted in this exhibition house). The floors in most of the house have been covered with blue-stone flagging—a surface that is easy to keep in presentable condition and that never

wears off. The ceiling has been covered with cypress siding or with plywood, except in the bathrooms, where electric heating panels were used. The perforated plywood vents are required only in the exhibition house. Ordinarily, they would be omitted. The walls throughout were finished with a variety of plywood panels.

The butterfly roof, that gives this house its striking shape, also permits, as we have seen, the use of a two-story arrangement at its highest end. In addition, this type of roof can be served by a single drain centrally located in its lowest point which carries off rain and melting snow through a stack in the center of the house.

The exterior of the house is finished with

narrow vertical cypress siding. Large plate glass areas in fixed frames connect the garden and the interior living area.

To relieve the large scale of the architectural forms, Mr. Breuer designed a delicate railing of tension cables above and behind the stone fireplace to separate the master bedroom from the living room. A sculpture by Jean Arp in the living room, as well as a stabile by Alexander Calder on the west wall of the building are experiments in relating sculpture and architecture. The exterior steel stair which leads down from the master bedroom to the covered terrace is another example of the elegant design for which Mr. Breuer is famous.

PETER BLAKE

## Biographical Note

Marcel Breuer was born in Hungary forty-seven years ago. His original ambition was to be a painter or a sculptor. But soon after he arrived at the famous Bauhaus school in Weimar, Germany, he decided to become an architect and furniture designer instead. The Bauhaus, under the direction of Walter Gropius, turned out a number of designers who have become leaders in their fields all over the world. Marcel Breuer was one of them, and he first asserted this leadership when, in 1925, at the age of twenty-three, he built the first chair made entirely of chromium plated tubular steel.

Shortly thereafter Mr. Breuer concentrated on the design of prefabricated houses and of apartment interiors. His first executed house was built in Germany in 1932 and represented an important landmark in the development of modern architecture. In subsequent years he designed apartment houses and stores in Switzerland and residences as well as exhibition

pavilions in England. Throughout this time he also continued his interest in furniture and some of his chairs and tables of aluminum and laminated wood represent revolutionary developments in that field.

In 1937, when Walter Gropius was appointed Chairman of the School of Architecture at Harvard, he asked Marcel Breuer to join him, and Breuer came to the United States. His place in the development of the new architecture in Europe was by that time fully established, and his contributions to its development were a part of its history. He was then only thirty-five years old.

Marcel Breuer stayed at Harvard for nine years and, in partnership with Walter Gropius until 1941, designed some of the finest modern houses in this country. Since 1945, he has been practicing in New York City and has added to the increasing number of first-rate examples of modern architecture in America.

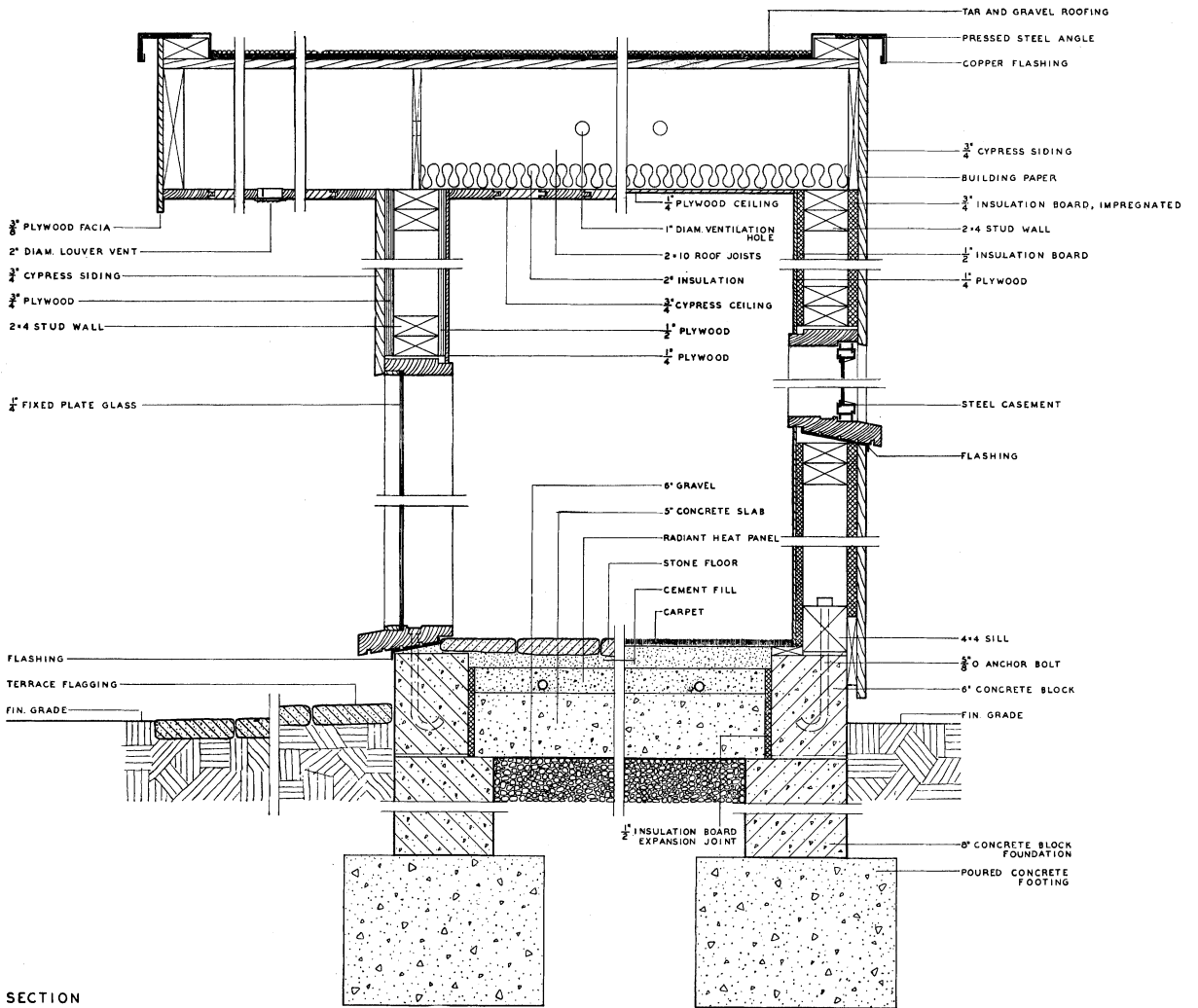


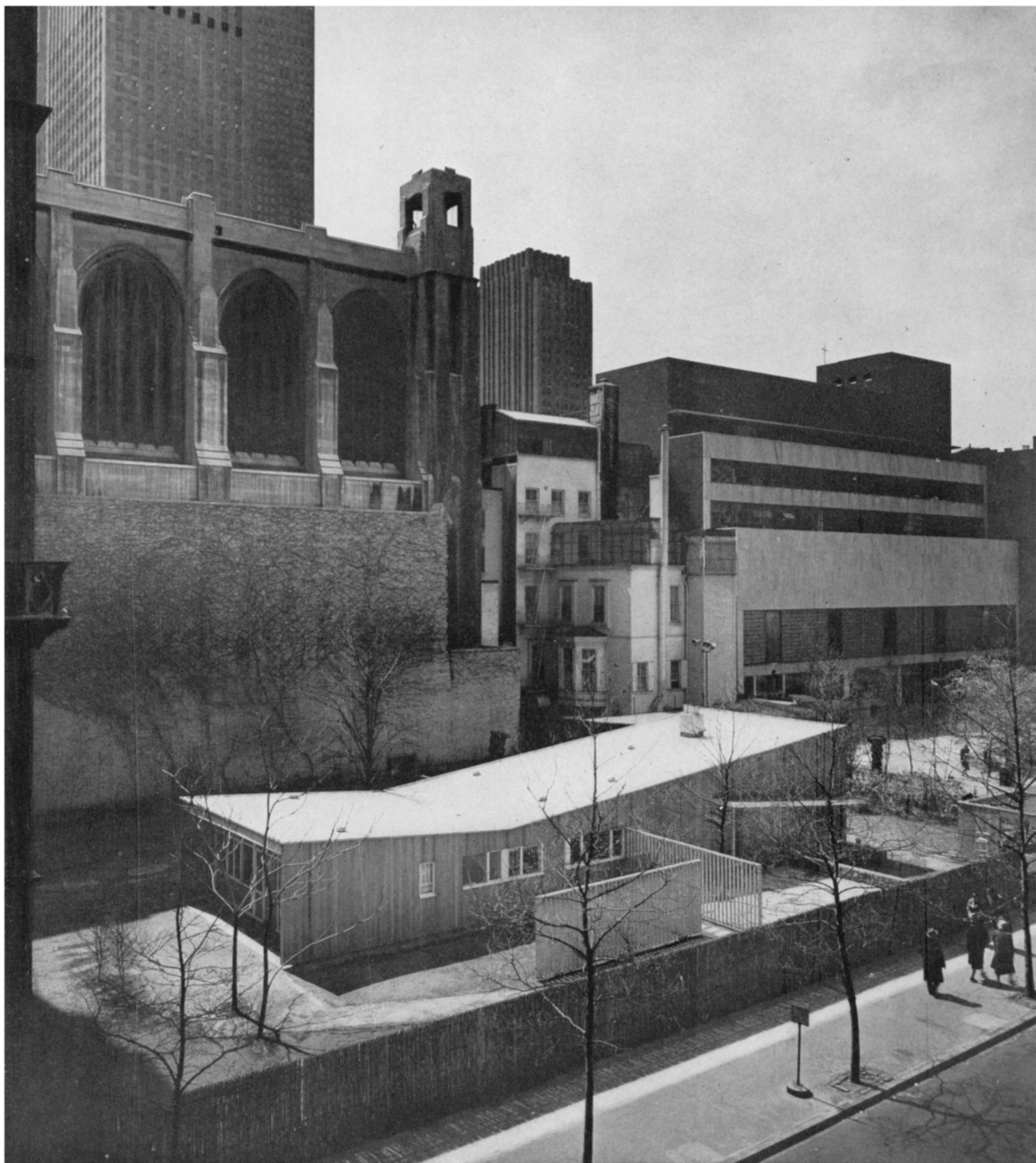
Photo by Merit Studios, Inc.

## The Cost of Construction

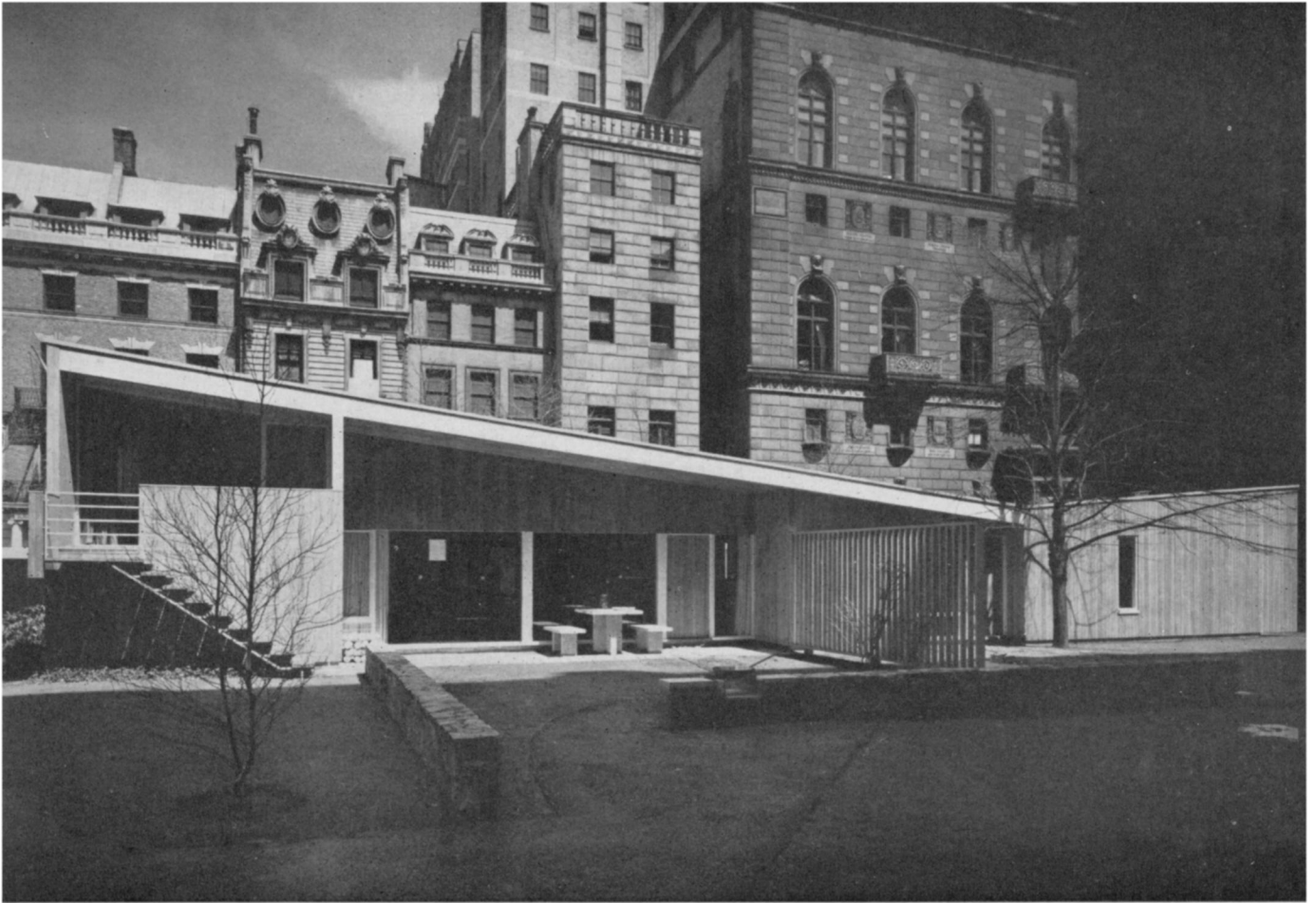
The architect has received fixed bids for the construction of four variations of the House in the Museum Garden from a highly reputable construction company which is prepared to build the house in Connecticut, New Jersey and southern New York State. The following prices are listed here for the information of would-be clients of the architect:

Three-bedroom house	\$27,475
<i>Similar to the House in the Museum Garden (except for certain details included for exhibition purposes only)</i>	
Same three-bedroom house	25,110
<i>Wall, ceiling and floor finishes of alternate materials</i>	
Two-bedroom house; without garage and third bedroom	21,960
<i>Wall, ceiling and floor finishes similar to the House in the Museum Garden</i>	
Same two-bedroom house	19,975
<i>Wall, ceiling and floor finishes of alternate materials</i>	

These figures are based on the building costs of March 1949 in Westchester and Nassau Counties, New York, and detailed specifications are available from the architect upon request. The prices will be slightly lower if the house is built in Connecticut or northern New Jersey, and somewhat higher if built within the limits of metropolitan New York. They do not include the architect's fee nor the cost of land, landscaping and service connections from the street to the house. In view of the instability of building costs, the Museum of Modern Art can assume no responsibility for the prices quoted above.



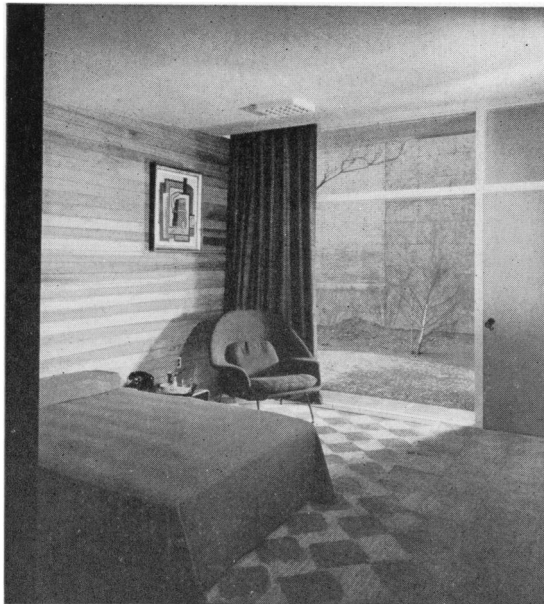
*Photos of the House in the Museum Garden by Ezra Stoller: Pictor*



**South side**



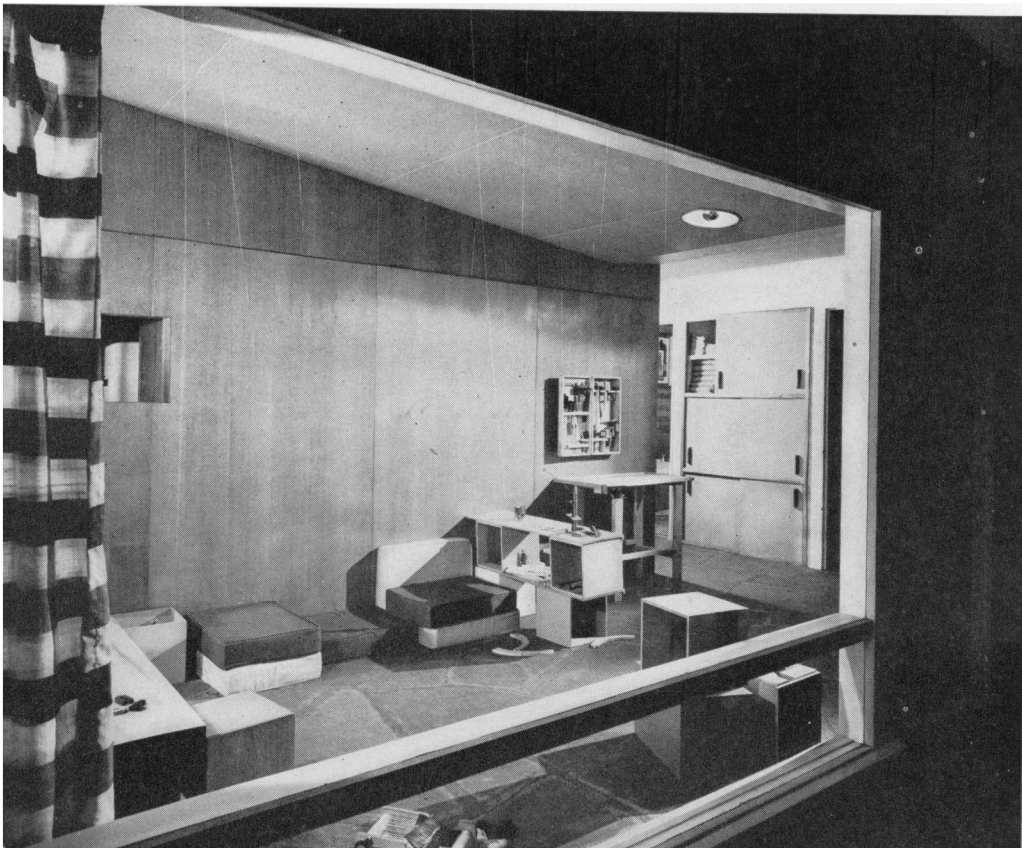
**View of living room with upstairs bedroom beyond**



**Bedroom facing east**



**Dining area**



**Playroom**