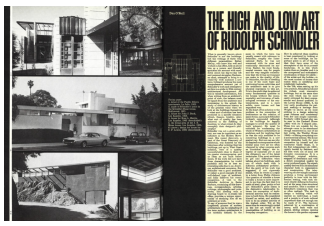
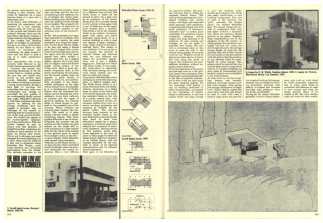
‘To Schindler, the act of dwelling is one of the most basic and continuing human activities’

12 APRIL 1973 **BY DAN O'NEIL ARCHIVE**


THE HIGH AND LOW ART OF RUDOLPH SCHINDLER



Rudolph Schindler's great lesson is the distinctive relationship between his conception of architectural activity and its realization in built form

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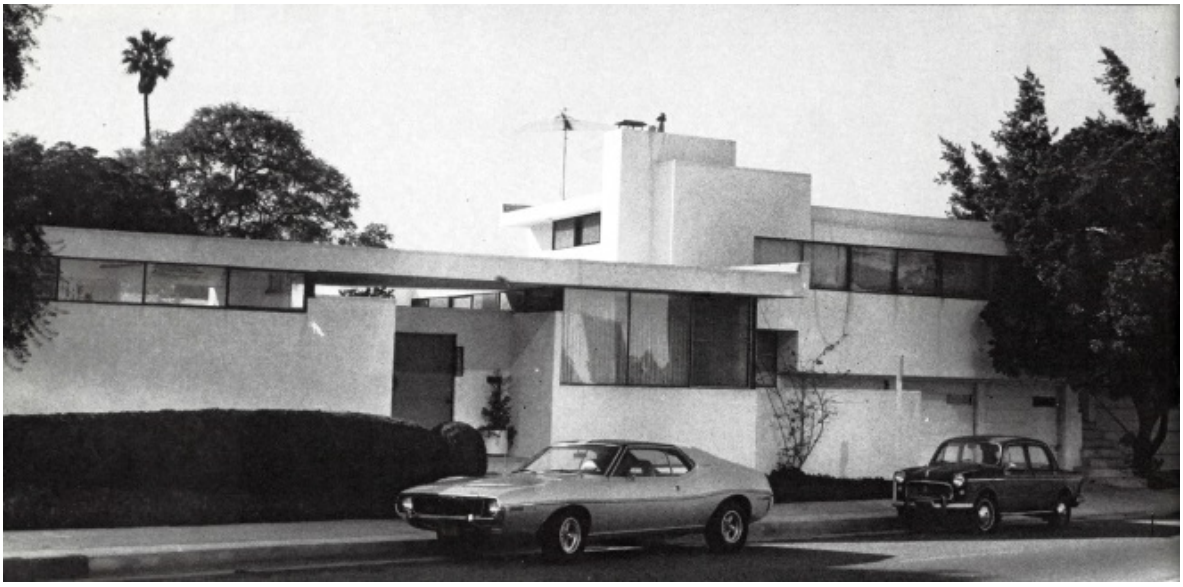
What is generally known about Schindler is not the buildings, but the writings of three very different personalities: Esther McCoy, who knew him well and worked in his office, tells us about him as a person and liberally sprinkles her account with anecdotes about his day-to-day life and personal struggles; Banham, as usual, attempts to bring to a relatively wide audience a new hero; Gebhard produces the most comprehensive account yet of Schindler's work and attempts to set him in a niche in 20th century architectural development. All this is valuable information, but when writing from an architect's point of view, the balance must be tipped from the academic and reminiscing to the actual; the study of architectural history is of the greatest value when we look at the buildings themselves -what sort of solution has been produced in a specific situation (client, finance, locality, site); what sort of quality has been achieved in the fulfilling of function; to what extent do they exemplify their designer's philosophy?

Schindler was not a great architect, nor was he important as an influence in the Modern Movement. His recent discovery, a part of the Great Discovery of California, was fostered by the historians after noticing that his buildings, put up in West Coast isolation, were of a quality uncomfortably close to those of his greater contemporaries, and as often as not built before theirs. If his work did not have these characteristics, he would probably still be at best an interesting side-line in an American architectural excursion. But Schindler was a good architect, or rather a good example of one well-defined type of architect, and fully deserves his recent recognition. A visit to the Schindler Archives in Santa Barbara, containing all his drawings, correspondence, articles, cuttings, photographs and notebooks, and

needing only a drawing board to re-create his office, provides a unique opportunity of studying him as an architect at work.

‘The question of whether a house is really a house is more important to me than the fact that it is made of steel, glass, putty or hot air.’

To say of someone that he was a (neglected) pioneer of modern architecture can be misleading if the term modern architecture is not carefully defined. In the sense in which the term was usually meant with reference to Schindler, roughly the International Style, he was not concerned with its aims and continually denounced its motives. Rather, his most fundamental concern was for people and the very tangible contribution that the living environment can make to the quality of life. To Schindler, the act of dwelling is one of the most basic and continuing human activities, and the architect’s task is to give physical expression to this act. It is to his credit that he achieved many fundamental qualities in his houses without the monumentality and intrusion of technological reverence of his contemporaries, and in a more subtle, more human and less anguished way.



House for John J. Buck, Los Angeles, 1934.

At the heart of his solution to the problem is the conception of architecture as the creation of space forms, a principle Schindler tirelessly expounded (although in his buildings he happily manages to avoid the quality of built polemic). He must be criticized for condemning the whole of Western architecture as sculpture and for implying that he was the only architect to be conceiving buildings in a new spatial way. But one can see why he despised contemporaries whose similar aims were all too often obscured by other concerns such as 'functional design', the integrity of materials *per se* and the obligatory use of the latest techniques. Like most architects he got into difficulties when talking about his buildings, each one of which dealt with 'a different *architectural* problem'. But the spirit of his work was suggested, if not rigorously stated, when he wrote in a reply to a letter from Philip Johnson 'the question of whether a house is really a house is more important to me than the fact that it is made of steel, glass, putty or hot air'.

Schindler's great lesson is the distinctive relationship between his conception of architectural activity and its realization in built form. He considered himself an artist, and architecture to be an artistic activity of the highest order. Yet at the same time he was strongly rooted in the low art world of the practicalities of building as an everyday occupation. How he achieved these qualities is best

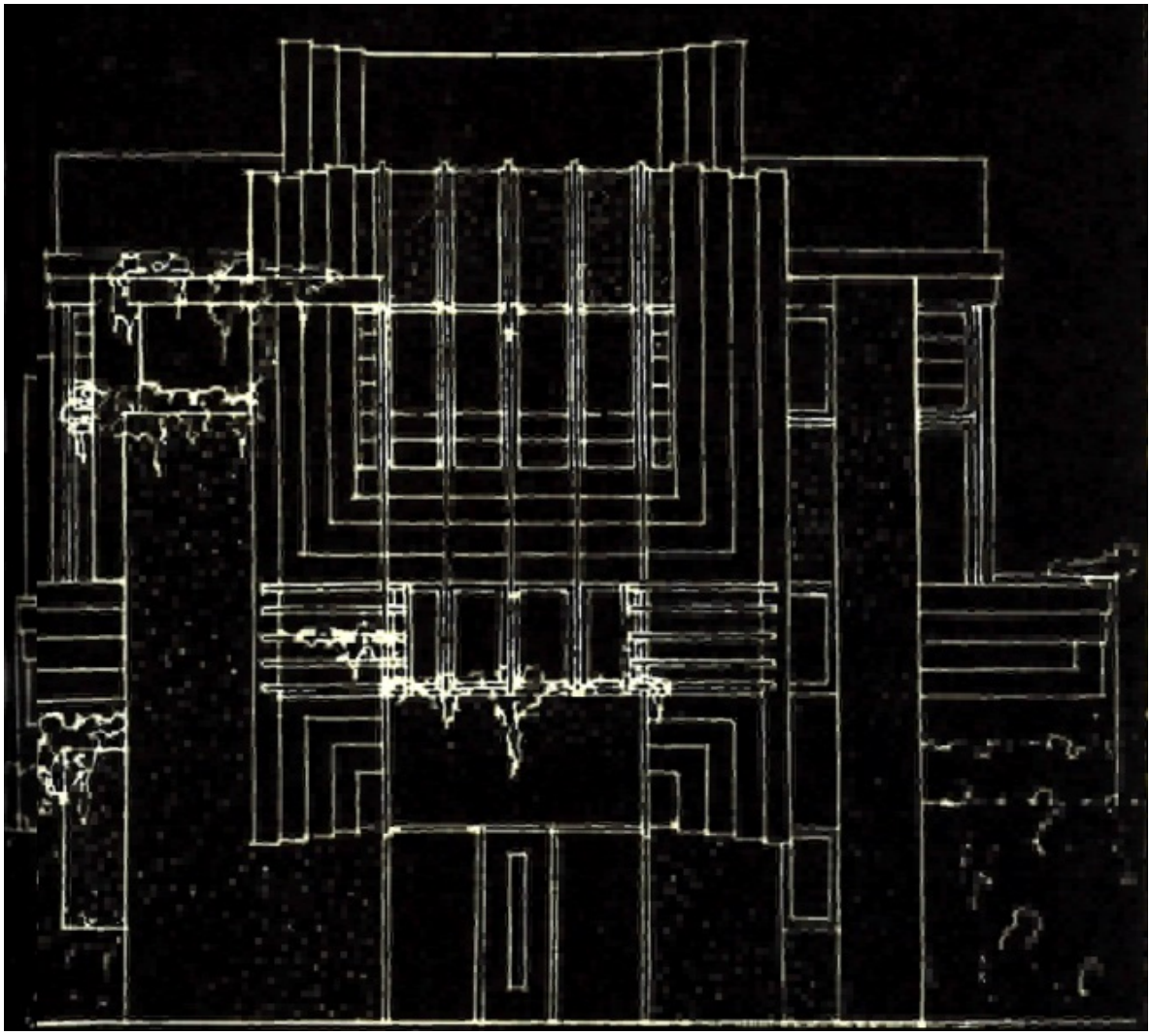
considered by looking at some of the buildings. An important point in all of them is that they have some of the atmosphere of the do-it-yourself handyman. It is this which makes them so *familiar* and it is the unexpected and enthusiastic combination of these two skills of the artist and the builder-in the most modest of houses that makes them so satisfying and indefinitely habitable.

Angle of Schindler's patio in the Schindelr-Chase house, Hollywood, 1921.

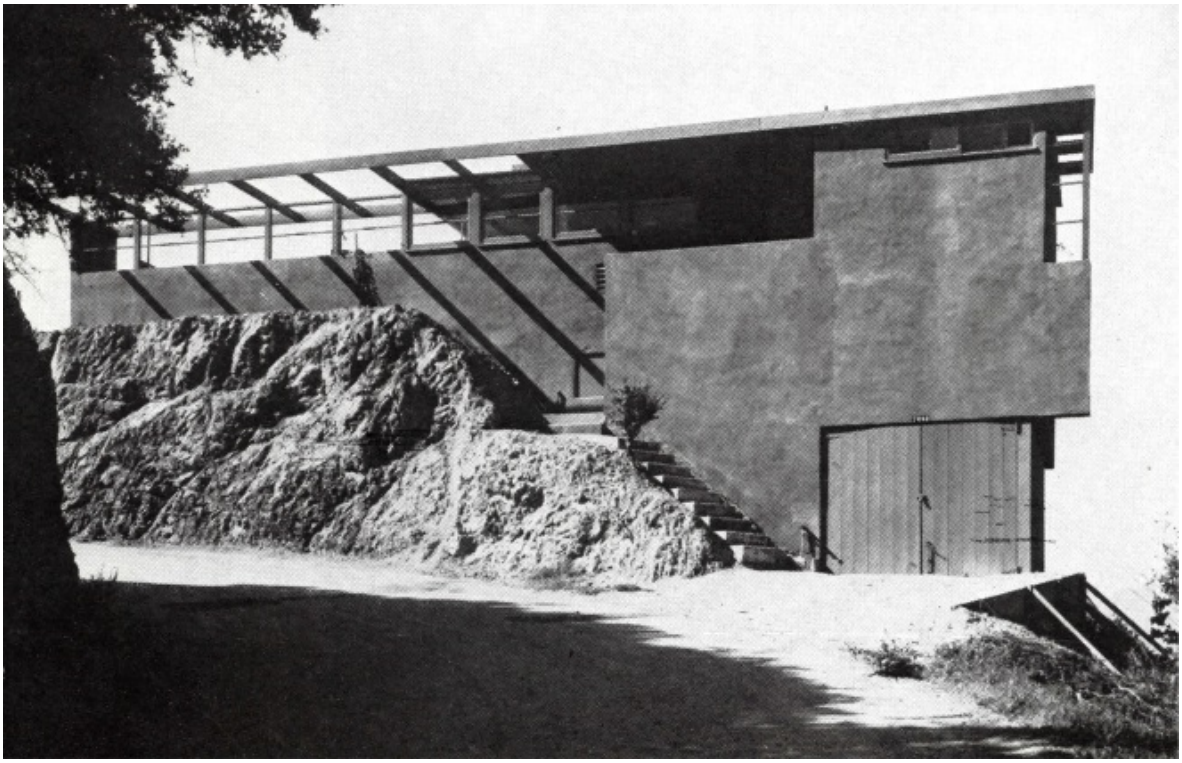
In the '20s, when setting up his own practice, Schindler produced his richest, most innovative buildings, but at the same time the ones which can be most easily criticized for their expressionist and formal qualities. In the Lowes House (1923), his very early predilection for pattern making-a heritage from Wright-is shown at its most striking in a design achieving great richness and consistency with few and simple materials. Similarly wilful formal play can be seen in the Packard House (1924) with its Y-shaped plan. These two are notable for the attempt-soon to be abandoned though resurrected in one of his last works, the Tischler House (1949)-of fitting everything into a symmetrical scheme. The house which Schindler built for joint occupation by himself and the contractor Clyde Chase, is his first independent job (1921), rightly lauded by Banham, and his best work out of some 150 domestic commissions. It is a startlingly original solution, stripped of decoration and with a direct conceptual quality he never produced again.

Its superb quality derives from its elemental character both in organization and construction. The interweaving of a few simple materials produces a living environment perfectly in tune with its Californian setting, with each element clearly defining its function and at the same time structural and symbolic. This is another of Schindler's intentions that was so often realized: 'The task to design a

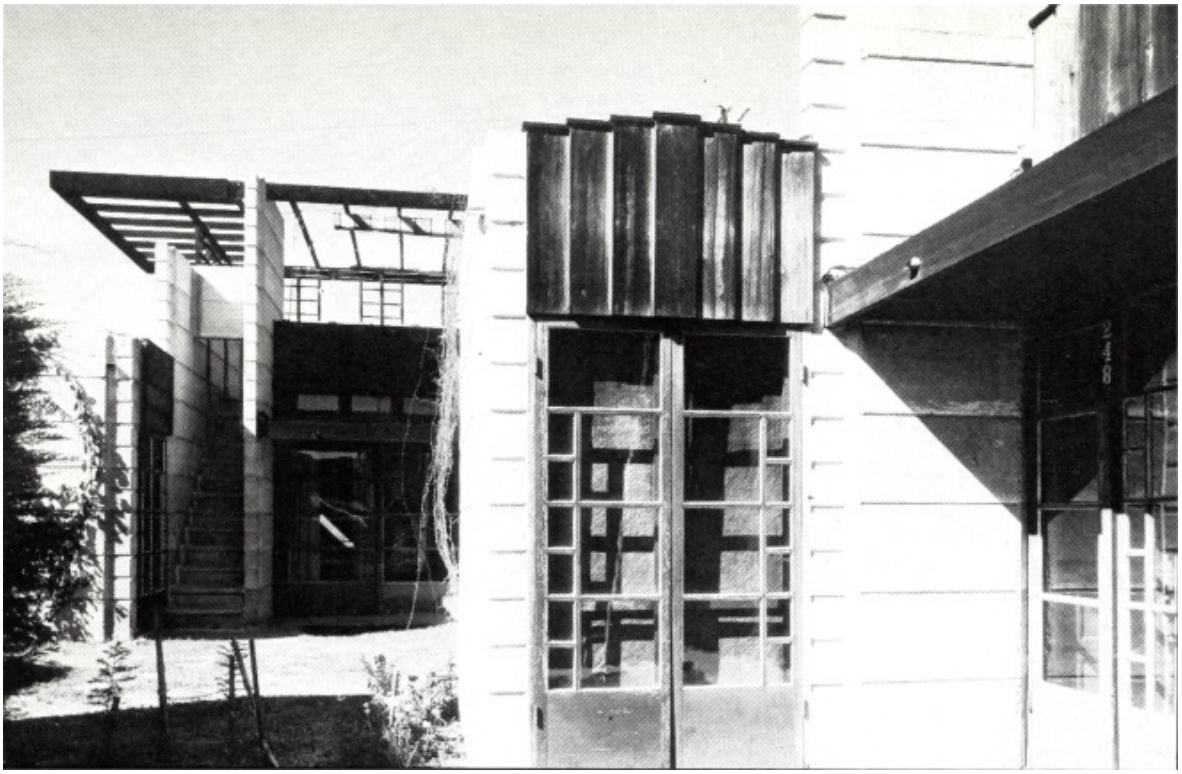
building which will express an individual, a locale and a people is of such cultural importance that not enough can be made of it'. The harmony achieved by a combination of heavy, solid back walls and glazed, sliding screens opening the house to the garden expresses the human requirements for a dwelling in that climate, described by Schindler as a cross between those of a cave and a lightweight tent.



Design for house for C. P. Lowes, 1923 (demolished).



House for Rose L. Harris, Los Angeles, 1942 (demolished).
In the heavy walls Schindler is beginning his experiment with concrete as a new material. Tapered slabs 4ft wide are cast on the ground and hoisted into position. Between them are 3in gaps filled with sheets of glass, a simple method of giving glimpses of the outside and allowing shafts of sunlight to penetrate. But as in so many of his future details, he has failed to take account of movement and weathering; the glass tended to crack and was fixed in such a way as to make replacement difficult.

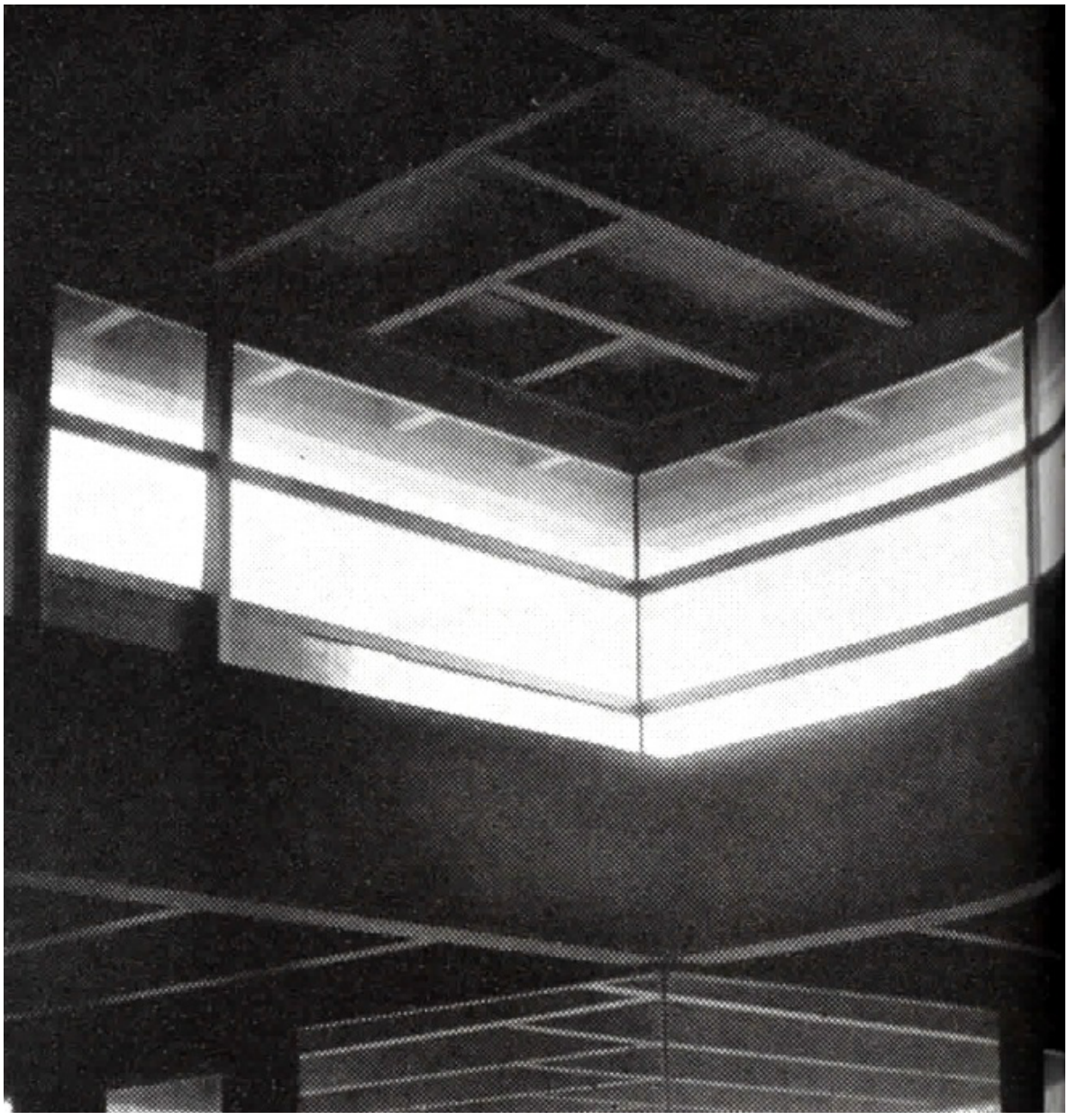


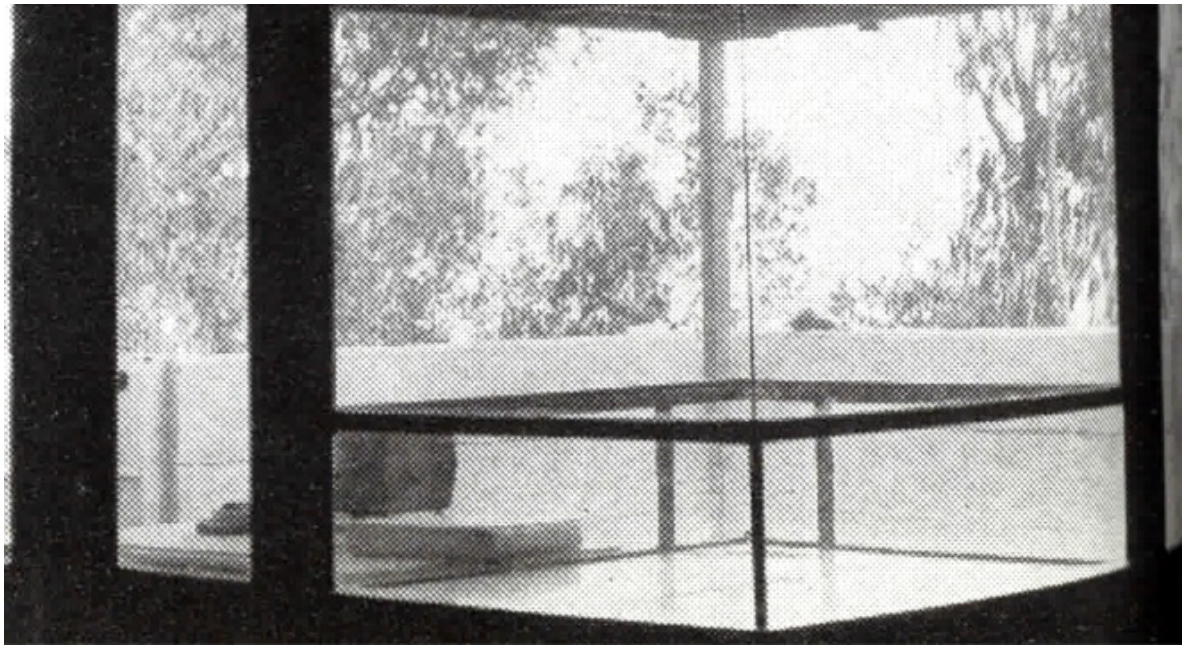
Detail of the Pueblo Ribera apartment, La Jolla, 1923.

More experiments with in situ concrete walls followed in the Pueblo Ribera apartments (1923). Concrete was poured into horizontal shuttering of 1ft 4in boards fixed to vertical guides; the next day the boards were moved up and another layer poured. Schindler emphasized the method of casting to produce a strong visual pattern. He had a hard fight to convince the authorities that such walls were weathertight and, though he succeeded, the poor quality of the workmanship finally proved them right. Schindler's attitude in both these instances had been typical: by catering for the average conditions (and Los Angeles is generally easy on buildings) he out corners on detailing that for a small proportion of the year proved troublesome. We would look aghast at the knock-together carpentry feel of the construction.

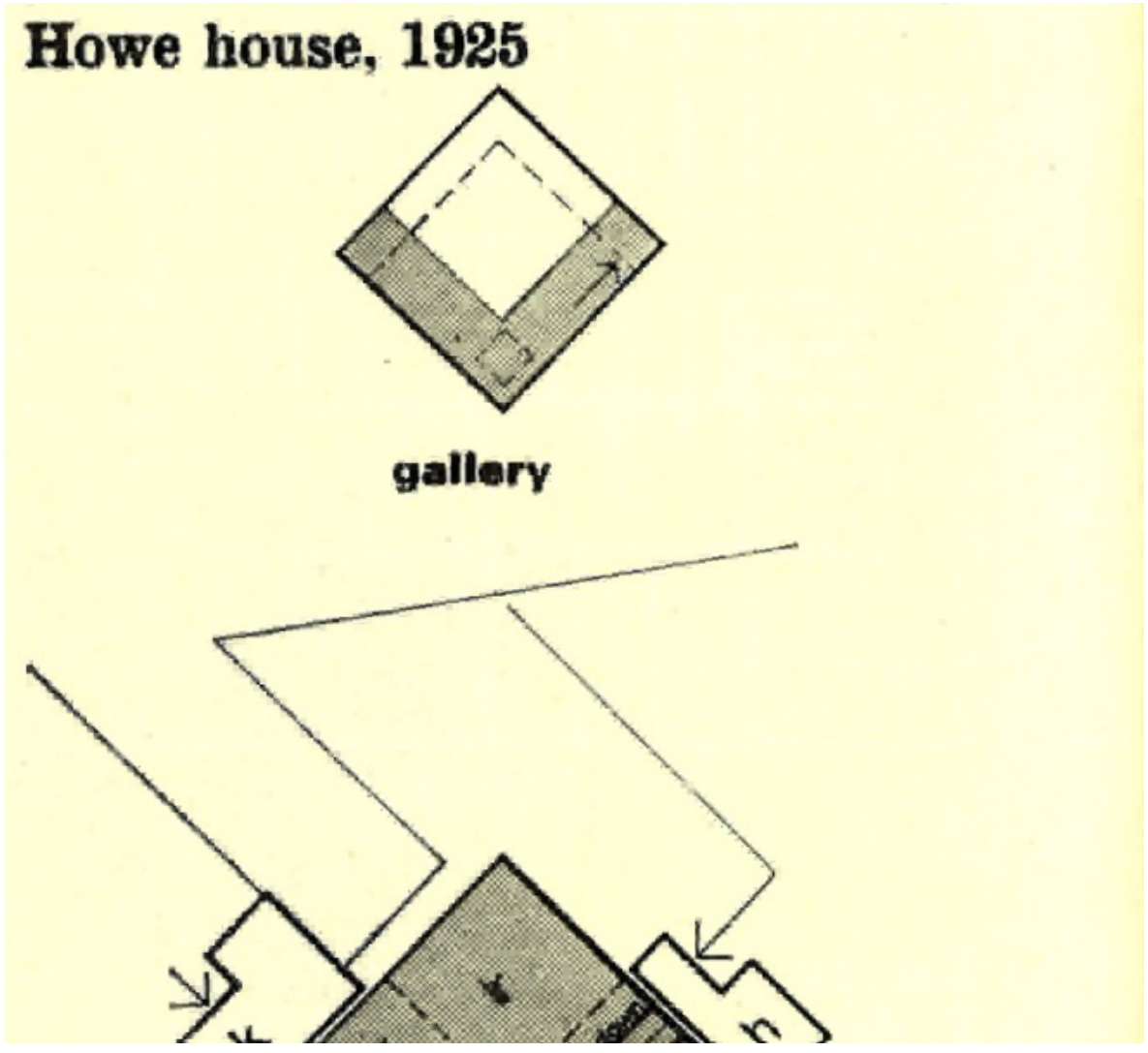
With the limited budgets he had, he always took this direction of delightful crudity, subjecting the dictates of 'good practice' to the desire for strong clear forms. This is not to advocate universal

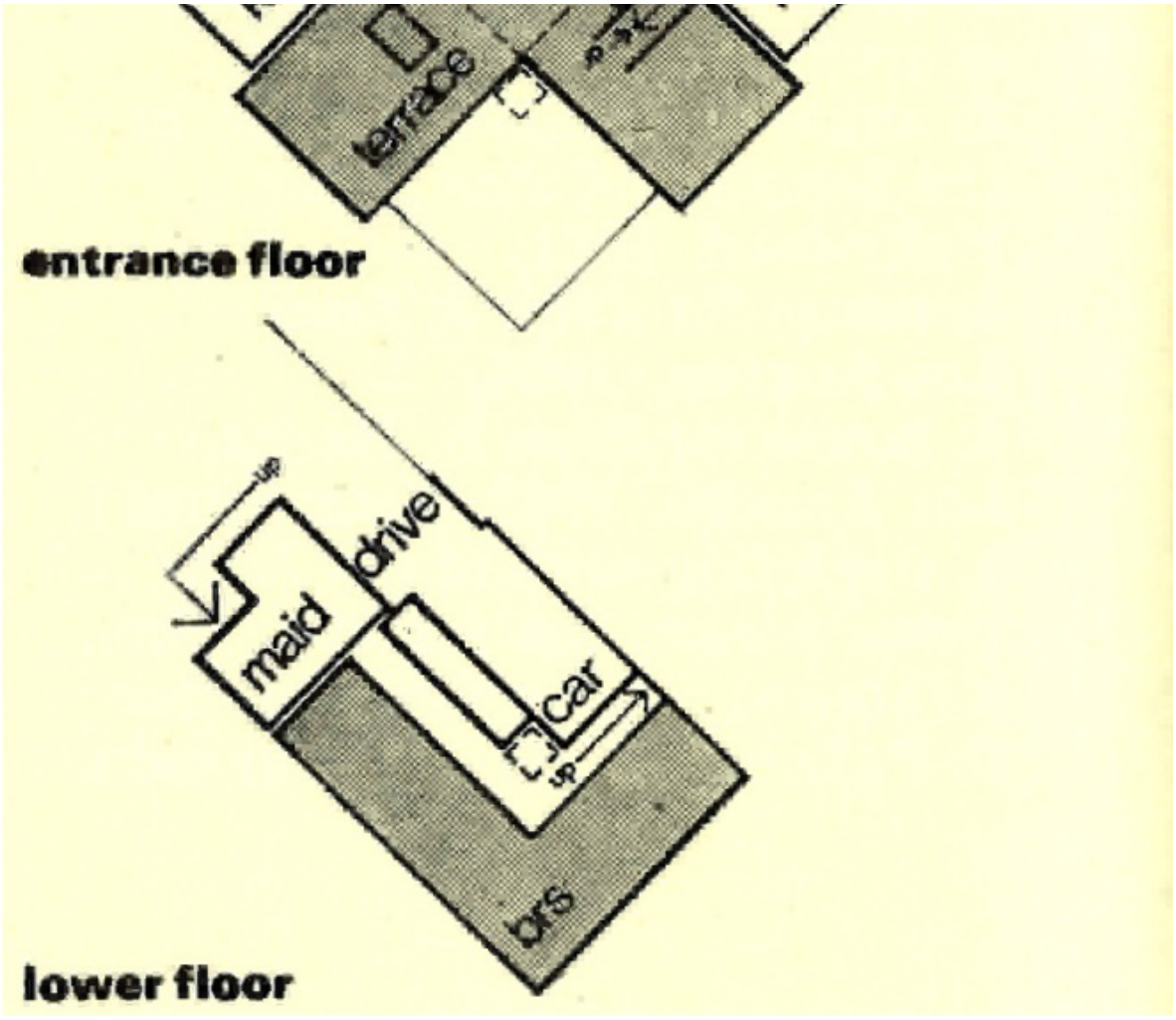
disregard for sound detailing, but to show what could be achieved in this way in situations where Schindler, like Wright, could evoke devotion and continuing participation from his clients. This attitude extended to his experiments with concrete, which were not done just for the love of exploiting a new material, but to investigate the visual possibilities arising from the different ways the material could *actually be put together*. The necessity for only two sets of formwork at Pueblo Ribera testifies to the economic sense of his inventiveness.





The living-area of the J. E. Howe house, Los Angeles, 1925.

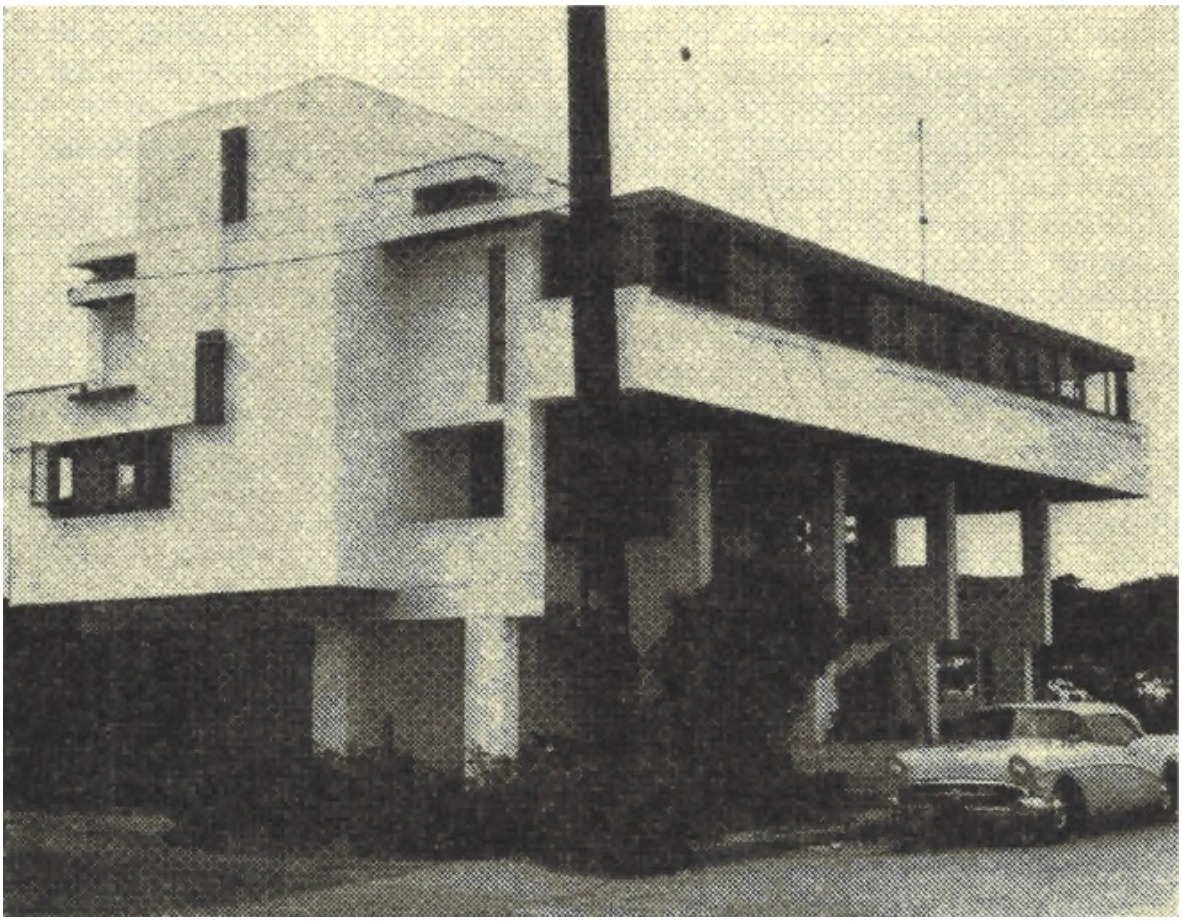




Howe house, 1925.

As the ’20s progressed, he began that exploration of hillside sites which was to receive his most successful and long-lived attention. In the Howe House (1925), he was still using a formal plan. Two L-shaped units, on the lower level the bedrooms, and on the upper level the living areas oppose each other around a central light-well. An L-shaped gallery opposes the living level and is wrapped round the double height central section of the living room. Here is great geometric complexity down to the clever interlocking of roof joists, but the formal quality does not oppress. A great variety of spaces is achieved, and particularly successful is the inside-outside ambiguity of the light well at terrace level. Structurally it is a development of Pueblo Ribera with the horizontal discipline carried through the whole enclosure.

Lower level walls are of concrete and the upper of plywood cladding, the jointing strips of which project in contrast to the recessed joint of the concrete. Where windows are required glass replaces the plywood. The result is of great formal richness within a simple controlling scheme. This house typifies Schindler's use of colour. Originally the concrete was left natural and the timber was dark stained (as the inside still is, with something of a 19th century feel), but the whole of the outside is now painted green to match the eucalyptus trees on the sit-a colour scheme which Schindler used several times elsewhere.

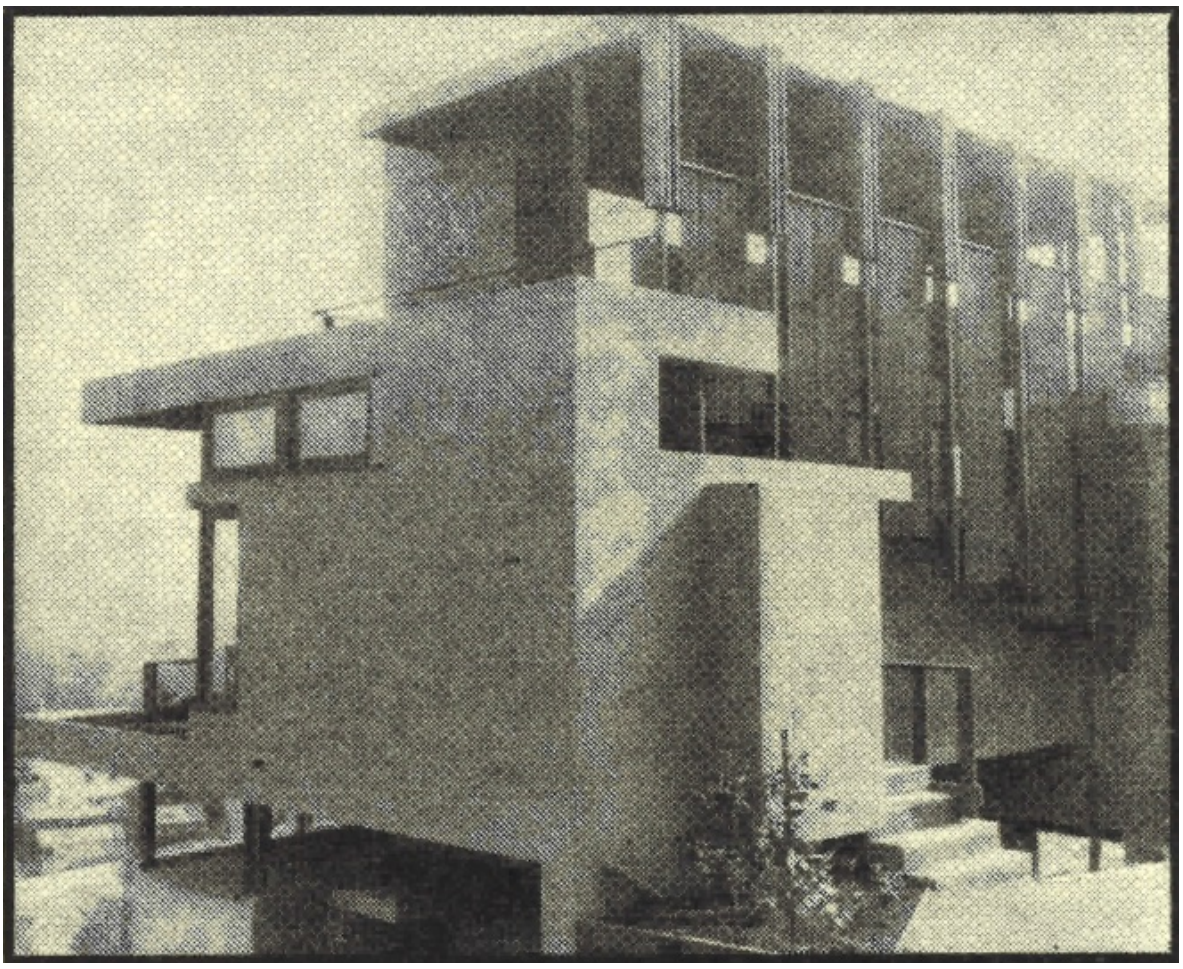


Lovell beach house, Newport Beach, 1925-26.

With the Lovell Beach House, we have the last of the controlled formal buildings where the structure dominates the formal expression. Here a very different three dimensional form responds to a different kind of site. The whole house is lifted off the ground to allow for a

play area as an extension of the beach. Slung from five concrete frames is a two-storey living space with a row of bedrooms at the upper level reached from a balcony. This forms a lid to the entrance which is an outdoor two-storey space with major and minor staircases rising freely.

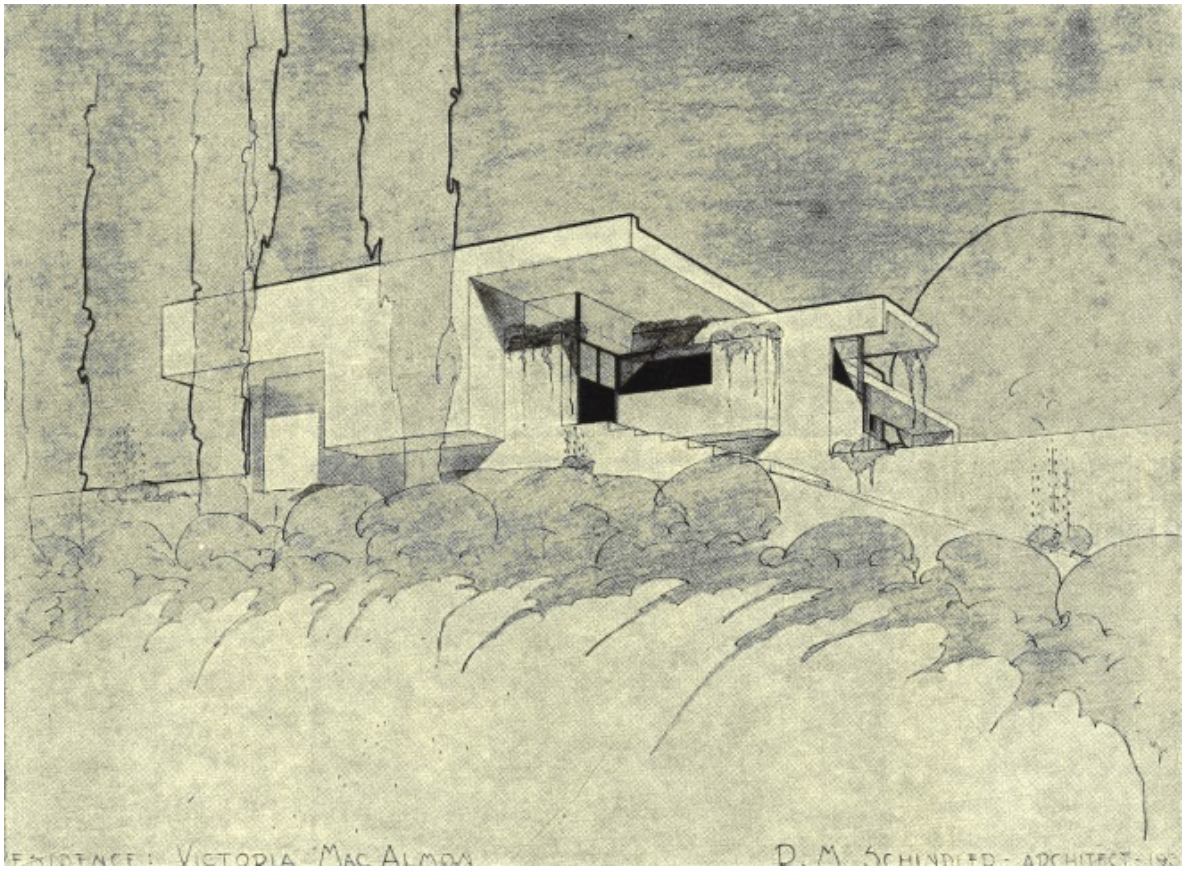
It is a curious building to visit in that one expects a large, dramatic, crisp, white object of the International Style. The reality is very different. It is not as big as one expects, the textures of concrete frames and stuccoed walls are very different and negate the monolithic appearance, and it has a slightly sagging air. Although now white with green timber, it was originally sand-colour to harmonize with its beach setting, the woodwork being natural and the fabrics russet and orange.



House for C. H. Wolfe, Catalina Island, 1928.

From about 1930 Schindler starts indulging in much freer planning, often on difficult hillside sites. The Wolfe House (1928), is a series of terraces built, incredibly, without excavation on a 45deg slope. In place of the earlier and more formal approach, the building enclosure takes on the role of a purely neutral skin, with whatever structural devices are necessary hidden from view in a stucco envelope projecting and recessing as dictated by the spaces within. The enforced recourse from concrete to the standard timber frame in the post-Depression economic climate went hand in hand with Schindler's search for a plastic expression of internal space that retained few overtones of structural expression. Having arrived at this position, house after house appeared in the next 10 years in what might be called his classic period. Each is a variation on an endless theme, with the concept generated by the site, both in terms of its physical characteristics and its inherent formal expression.

Here again we see Schindler as the practical builder. His problem was how best to utilize the standard balloon frame. 'The balloon frame presupposes a box shaped building and cubicle rooms, with large wall areas and small openings, solid partitions, a superimposed sloping roof with small projection of decorative character only'-a system quite unsuitable for structures having constantly changing ceiling heights and large openings in all positions. To save cutting and wastage, he cut all studs to standard door height (6ft Sin) with a horizontal plate at this level; to raise the wall to the desired ceiling height, short studs could be cut. Windows could be placed anywhere above or below this line using the studs as frames. He considered this gave sufficient discipline without imposing undue restriction.

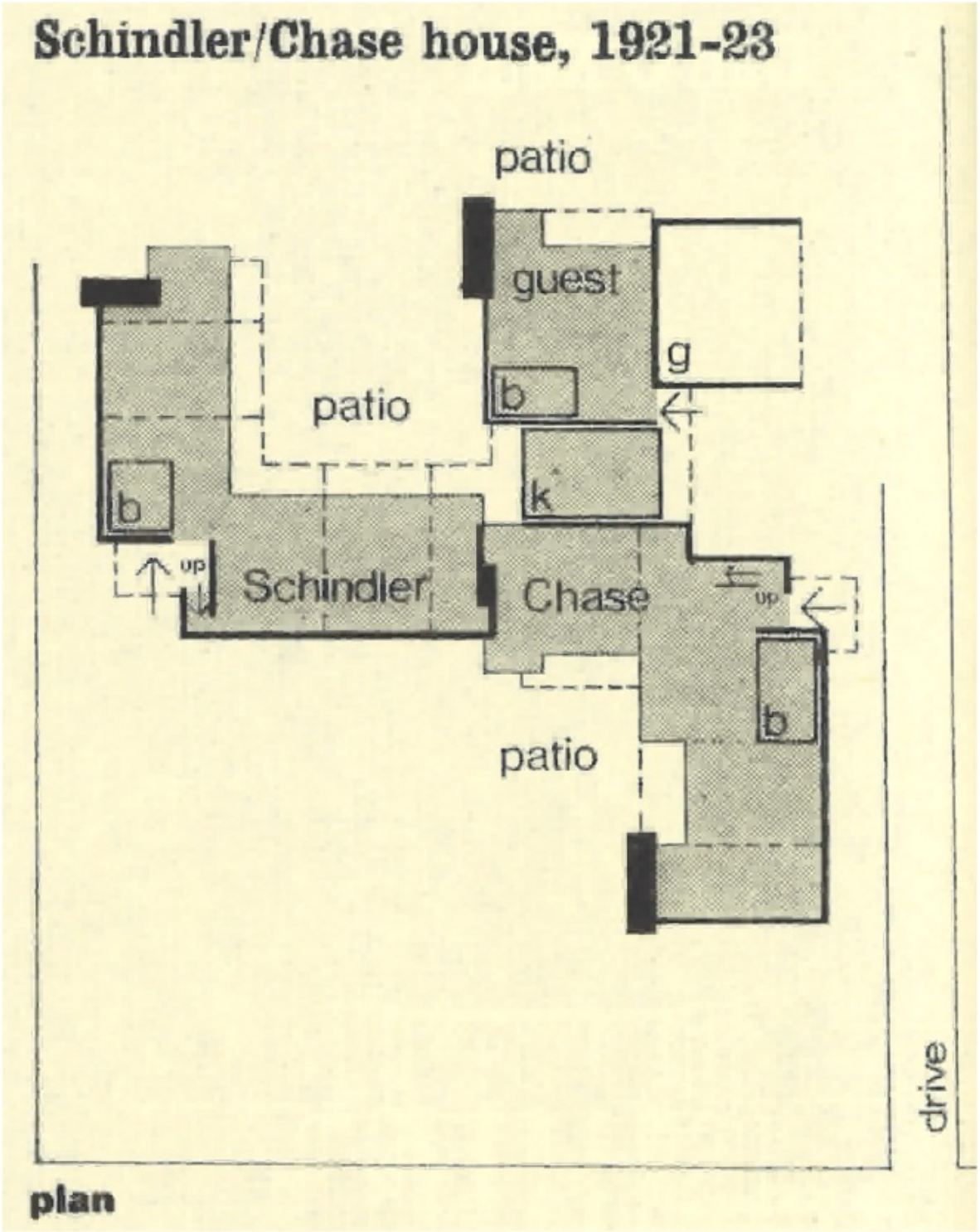


Design for Victoria MacAlmon House, Los Angeles, 1935.

From the beginning of his career his drawings were on a 4ft grid. Like many other architects of his time he gave considerable thought to the idea of modular systems; but to him it did not have quite the same mystical quality. He was concerned with finding a way of enabling architects to think dimensionally, unimpeded by the intricacies of quarter inches or millimeters. A unit was needed which was large enough to give the building 'scale, rhythm and cohesion', but which was easily subdivisible to suit building components. The unit of scale in the building was 'quite naturally the human figure'.

On rhythm Schindler says 'We human beings are unable to understand both time and space without a rhythmic key, which the architect should provide on his plans'. Together these considerations led to the adoption of the 4ft module, on which system the standard room height becomes two units, the door height limits, the average human height it units etc. He specified that the builder should lay out boards on the site marked with the grid so that the position of any

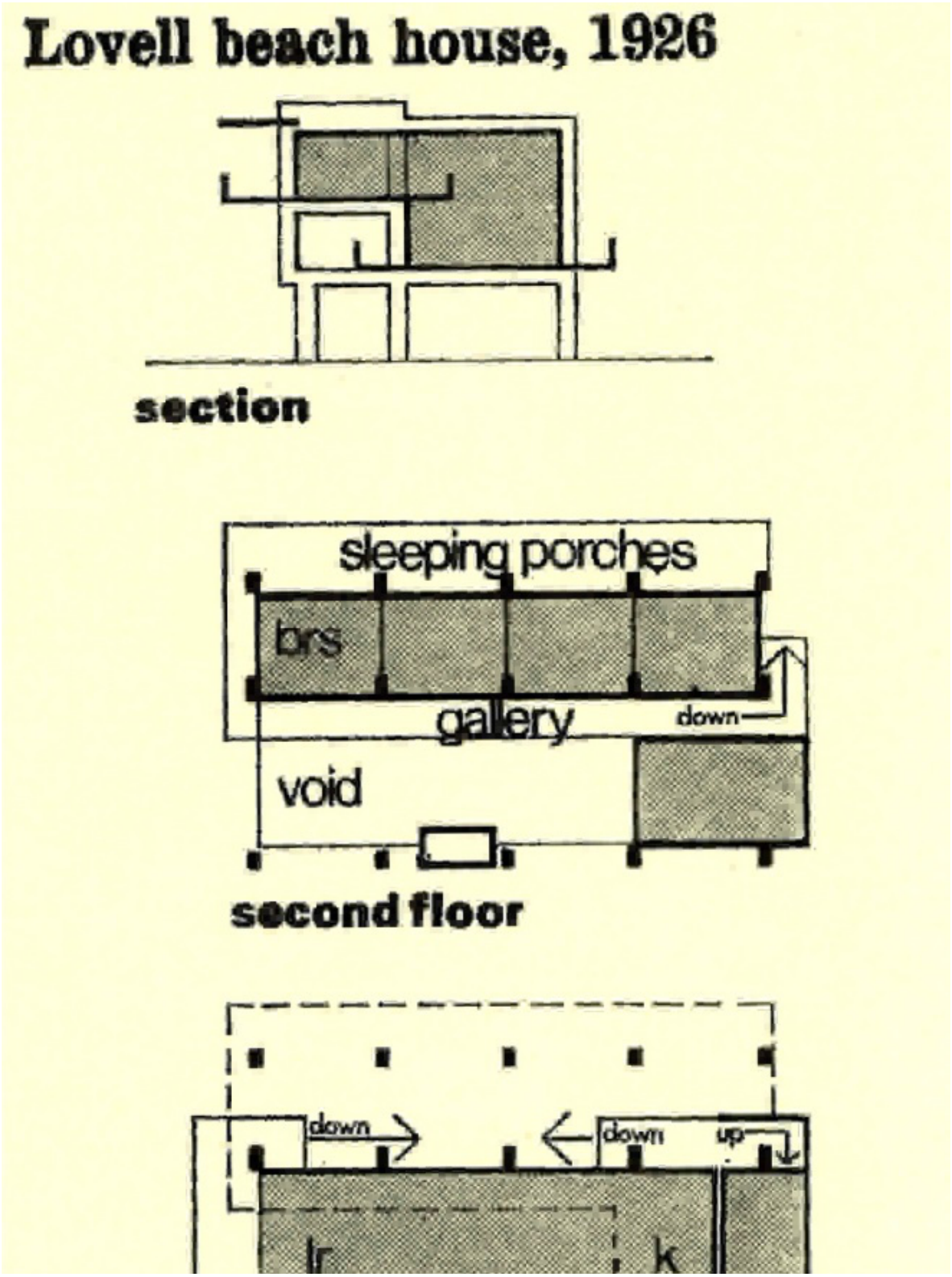
element could be ascertained by using strings. This system could be carried into the vertical plane and in conjunction with it, on complex buildings, he drew plans at intermediate grid levels to make it more intelligible to his local builders.

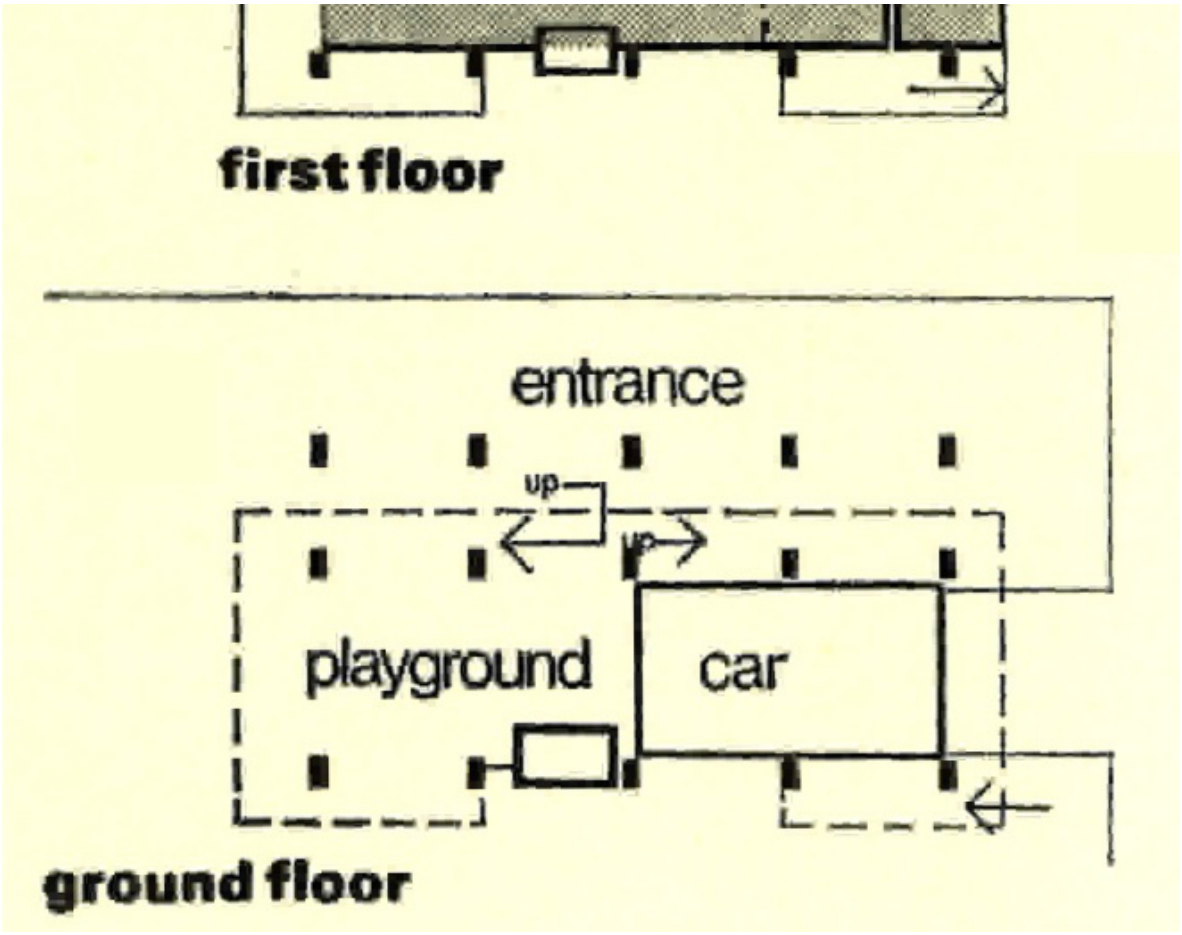


Chase house, 1921-23.

As time went on, and his buildings become less formally planned, drawings became more and more scrappy, often giving just enough information to begin work. Esther McCoy makes the observation that the only things he used to work with were a contour map of the site and the Los Angeles Building Ordinances. Designs were developed as

building proceeded, drawings were hastily re-worked and accurate drawings only produced when the house was finished.



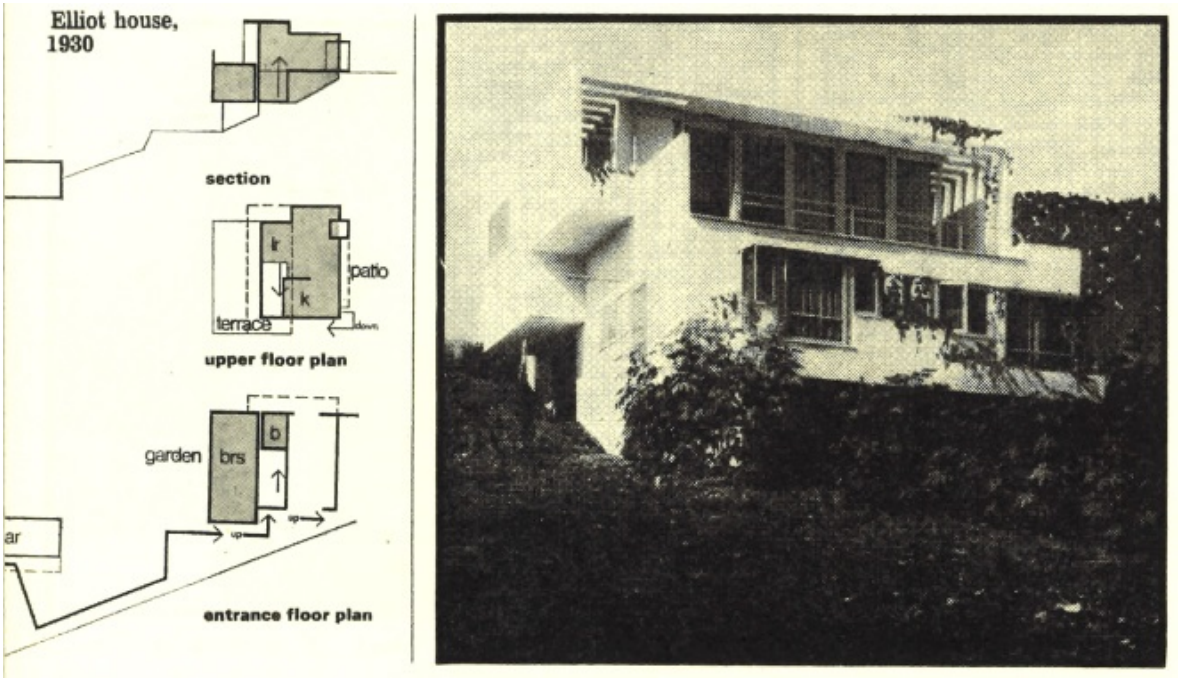


Lovell beach house, 1926.

During all his career, Schindler generally worked without assistance, only took on work which he could personally supervise, and in many cases acted as contractor and labourer in order to save money and keep the design flexible. Many of his clients of the ’30s were intellectuals not noted for their wealth. Schindler was himself always on hand, going round with tools and materials in the back of his car to carry out maintenance.

Within a basically constant generic solution many variations can be found exemplifying his ability to compose in response to a site: for example, the Harris House (1940) on a rocky outcrop, the Buck House (1934) on a flat city lot, or the MacAlmon House (1935) on the brow of a hill. Quality of detailing and complexity of design varied with the budget, from the large expansive Rodakiewicz House (1937) to the Kahn Beach House (1934), a simple wooden box covered with horizontal strips of roofing felt. Typical of this group is the Elliot

House (1930), on a sloping site (his houses seem to be divisible into those sloping up from the road, sloping down from the road, and poised above the site). It shows his typical response to a few parameters particular to the site-view, ventilation, orientation, vegetation and the possibility of different types of open space.

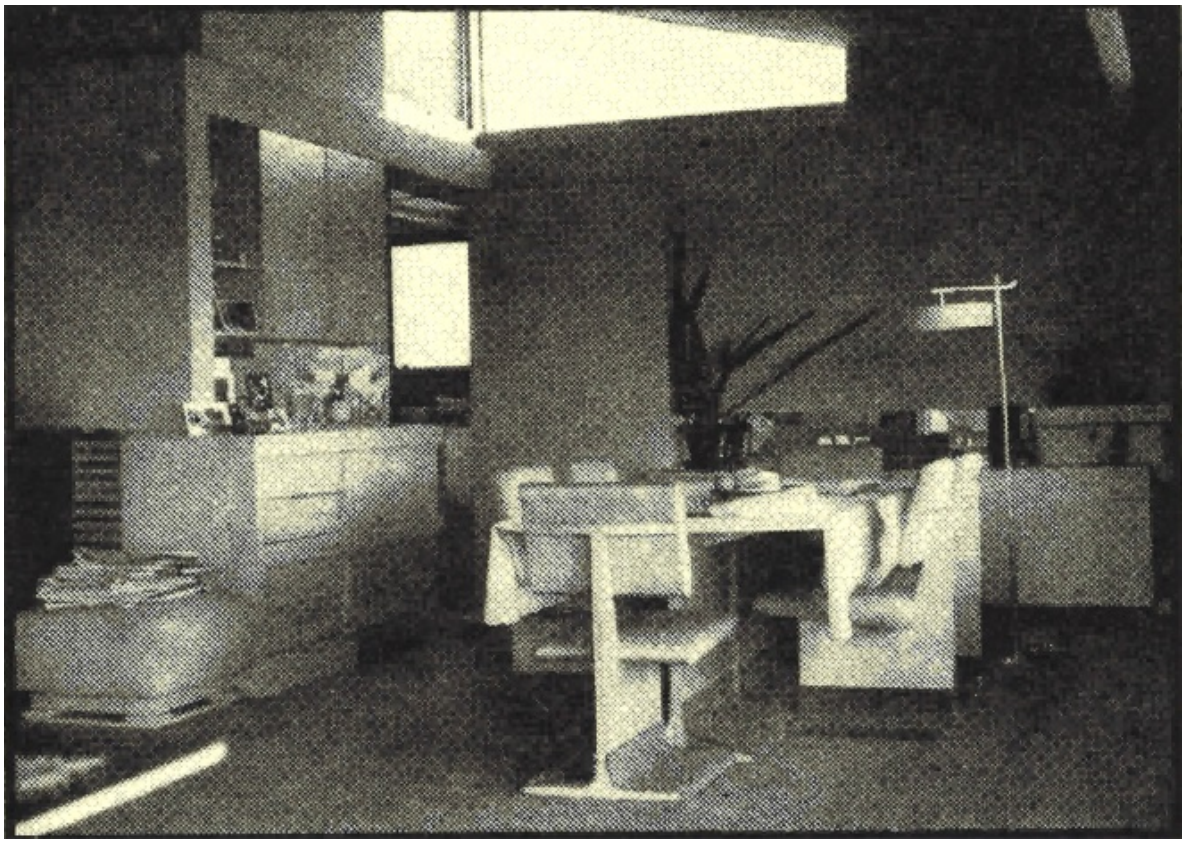


House for R. F. Elliot, Los Angeles, 1930.

Internal fittings he always tried to keep as a background to the main spatial design, but his interiors are filled with endless cupboards, shelves, drawers and recesses, echoing the geometry in a retiring way. Such furnishing as had to be free-standing he designed himself, with varied success, keeping it to a minimum where possible. He hated shiny knobs and fixtures as a negation of texture; similarly light fittings were integral with other fittings and often recessed.

Such an interior is the Walker House, where his neutral use of colour extends to shades of greyish green and beige, matching the green of the exterior which itself blends with the green of the eucalyptus trees on the site. Later in his career, when he was tiring of his prewar style,

and bitter at his exclusion by other architects and critics (not helped by his self-inflicted isolation) his work again became experimental, freer and expressionist.

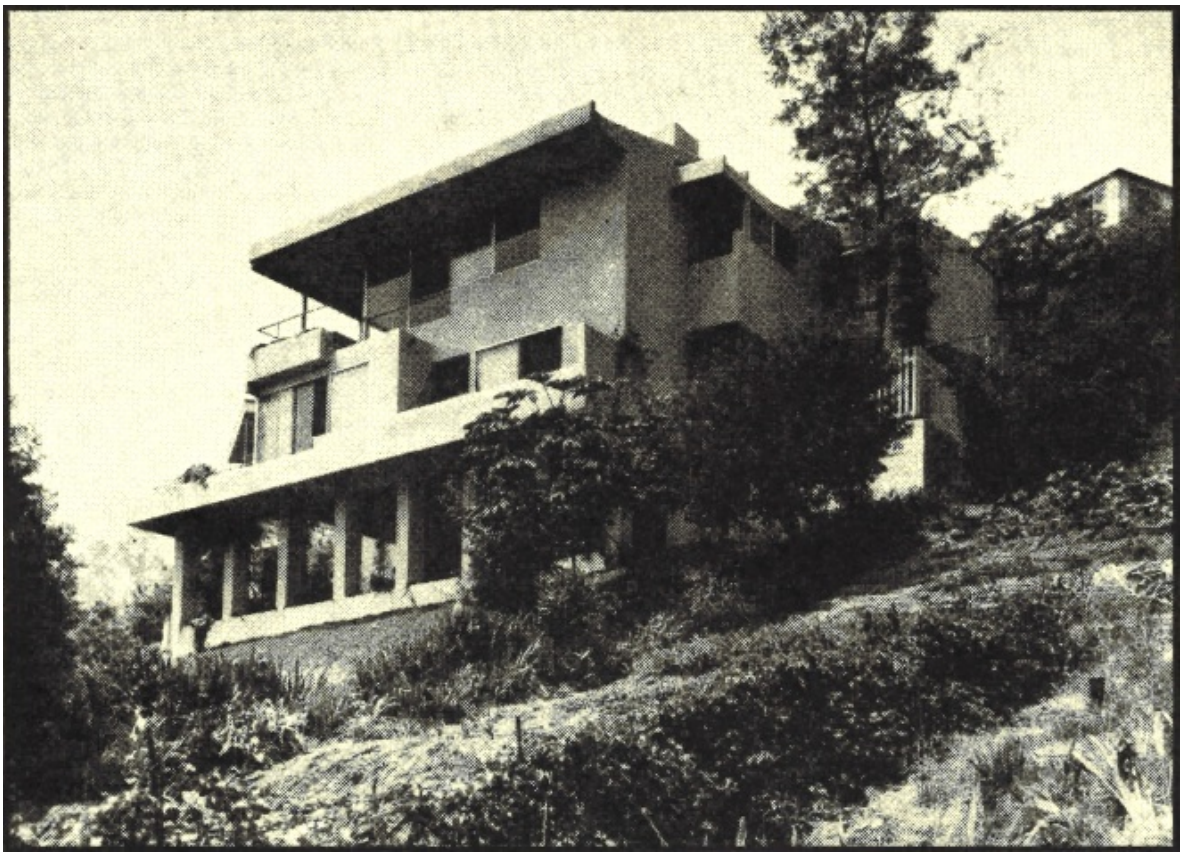


Dining end of the Walker house.

To see the buildings is to understand his proposition that 'The modern house will not have been achieved until also it achieves that ultimate trait of personal integration-*charm'*, and to realize that he really had achieved 'a quiet, flexible background for a harmonious life'. It would be unreasonable to condone actual constructional failure, or the non-implementation of certain domestic technologies, like air-conditioning, in which he was far behind-partly one suspects because he thought he could do without them.

Some of his buildings still leak on occasions, but they are still occupied by the people for whom they were built 30 years ago, and

these people are living there because they want to, not because they can't sell them. They are very much in demand, and surely this is what matters?



House for Ralph G. Walker, Los Angeles, 1935-36.