

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

09 | 1999

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## INTERIORS

Indoor Realms from Tranquil to Hot

plus: Refitting a Neutra Classic

Ingenious Interventions

Asking Tough Questions about  
Architectural Education

# A Modernist Masterpiece in

AFTER DECADES OF DECLINE, RICHARD NEUTRA'S CLASSIC PALM SPRINGS ICON IS BACK. ARCHITECTS MARMOL AND RADZINER HAVE REAWAKENED THE KAUFMANN HOUSE'S RICH MATERIALS PALETTE, EXPANSIVE INTERIORS, AND PANORAMIC OUTDOOR ROOMS.

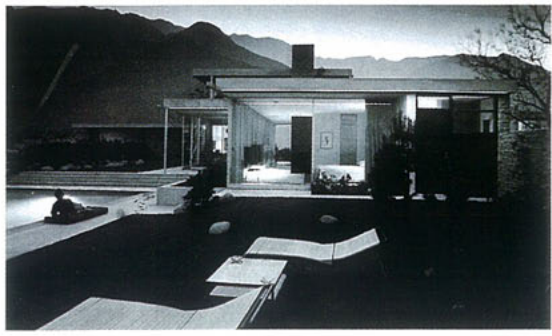
by David Hay

To understand the extraordinary invention that is Richard Neutra's 1946 Kaufmann House, it helps to lie back on a chaise longue atop the gloriette, a sheltered second-floor deck, whose name, the architect believed, referred to the highest deck of a ship. From here, 360-degree views of the rugged mountains and desert around Palm Springs unfold. Shiny sails—55 nine-foot-tall stainless-steel louvers—keep the hot, dry winds and afternoon sun at bay. Creature comforts, a dumb waiter and, for the winter, a fireplace, are housed in two exquisitely laid Utah buff sandstone columns. A tongue-and-groove Douglas Fir ceiling offers shade, while the pool's cool blue surface beckons from below. After a while, a sense of being dreamily at ease with the elemental forces of nature and design takes over. You begin to feel you're floating—a sensation, it turns out, often associated with this house, which an early critic described as a ship riding on rocks and sand.

## Modernist icon radically transformed

Seven years ago, a very different sight greeted the current owners, Brent and Beth Harris, when they walked through the front door. The house had been somewhat tragically transformed since its completion in 1946. The celestial views from the gloriette were interrupted, first by an ugly railing and then by clunky air-conditioning units, rooftop ducts, and even exposed electrical conduits. The slatted wooden floor, which once gave

*David Hay, who lives in Neutra's 1942 Bonnet House, frequently covers architecture and the arts from Los Angeles.*



Remarkably open and expansive, the interiors seem to merge with the surrounding landscape, as in views from the master bedroom toward the pool (right). The same fluid space characterizes Julius Shulman's classic 1947 image from the pool looking back toward the master suite (below left).

PHOTOGRAPHY: © JULIUS SHULMAN (LEFT); DAVID GLOMB (RIGHT)

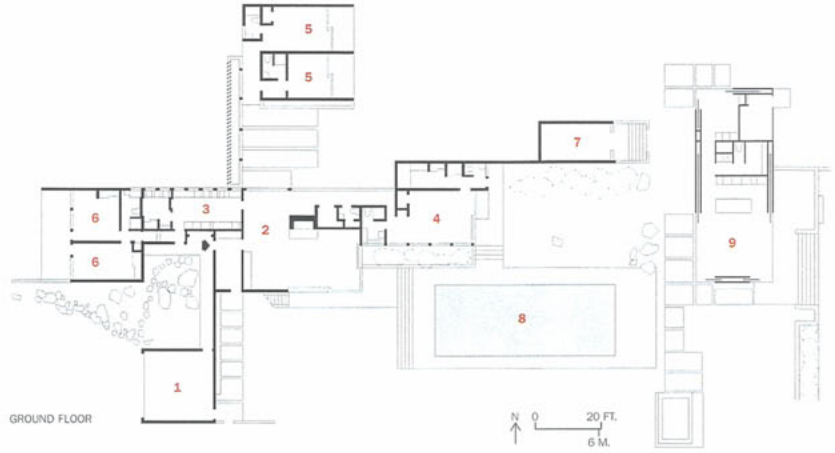


the Desert Is Reborn.



1. Car shelter
2. Dining/Living
3. Küchen
4. Master bedroom
5. Guest room
6. Staff
7. Utility
8. Pool
9. Pool house

Beyond the dining table, designed by Neutra, stands the original Utah buff sandstone chimney. Corner sliding doors, opened to the pool patio, enhance indoor-outdoor ambiguities (below).





the deck its visual lightness, had been replaced by concrete terrazzo. The changes were more than superficial. Successive renovations, increasing the square footage from 3,200 to 5,100, had all but obliterated Neutra's original vision.

#### The house's illustrious beginnings

Designed for Pittsburgh department store owner Edgar Kaufmann—famous for commissioning Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, six years earlier—this Palm Springs house was one of the purest realizations of Neutra's Modernist ideals. Expressively incorporating the latest industrial materials, the house promoted his concept of easy, flowing spaces for the increasingly nonhierarchical 20th-century family. Harmony between man and nature, between interior and exterior was also essential. Here, on a

With its unsightly accretions removed, the newly rebuilt glori-ette—a second-story deck or outdoor living room—now offers unobstructed panoramic views (above). An open-riser stair, along the side of the house, leads from the patio up to the glori-ette (below).

## KAUFMANN CORRESPONDED WITH NEUTRA ALMOST DAILY AND LAVISHED \$100 PER SQUARE FOOT ON THE PROJECT WHEN THE AVERAGE HOME COST \$6 PER SQUARE FOOT.

hillside street in a small town, these ideas all came together in a design that elegantly balanced glass and steel, wood and sandstone, and whose plan roughly resembled a pinwheel.

This desert site—which Neutra described as the most "rugged and almost uninhabitable" place imaginable next to the moon—truly inspired him. But, unlike Wright, he saw his building as a "machine in the garden," rather than a form echoing the landscape. But, as the views from the glori-ette and interiors suggest, Neutra also considered the house a sanctuary from which to embrace the natural surroundings.

The design's success owed much to an unusually supportive and astute client. Kaufmann corresponded with his architect almost daily during construction and lavished \$300,000 on the project, roughly \$100 per





## JULIUS SHULMAN'S TWILIGHT SHOT — ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN IMAGES OF MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE — ENHANCED THE HOUSE'S FAME AND REPUTATION.

square foot—an astronomical sum at a time when the average American home cost \$6 per square foot.

### A photographic ideal vs. subsequent incarnations

Even if buried, Neutra's vision was still discernible in 1992, when Beth Harris, a PhD candidate in architectural history at UCLA, and her husband, Brent, a financial executive in Los Angeles, entered the living room. There, recalls Brent Harris, "we saw immediately how the window walls met in the corner without anything between them. We slid back the windows—with some difficulty—and went out to the end of the pool and looked back. If you squinted, the house looked pretty much the way it appeared in the photograph."

The photograph, of course, is the classic twilight image by Julius Shulman. One of the best-known portraits of California Modernist architecture, it has enhanced the Kaufmann House's fame and reputation.

But beyond the remnants of the photographic ideal, the Harrises could see how awkward additions had overwhelmed the plan's original clarity and interrupted the consistency of such materials as birch veneer. The changes included a new dressing room off the master bedroom for the wardrobe of Nelda Linsk, a realtor—famed for her poolside fashion shows—who sold the home four times, once to herself. Someone



New windows edge the way to the master bedroom (top left). Birch-veneer panels (left) match the original grain. Based on Neutra's drawings, the kitchen countertops and floor are faced with cork (above right). In a child's room (opposite top) and throughout the house, the cabinets are replicas, and the paint colors were remixed by Neutra's original supplier. The perforated panel (opposite bottom) originally fronted a hi-fi, but now hides an air-conditioning duct.



had enclosed the patio between the living quarters and guest wing. And Barry Manilow, the owner preceding the Harrises, had decorated each room in a different theme, including a bedroom with an English garden motif and a living room with faux French Regency furnishings.

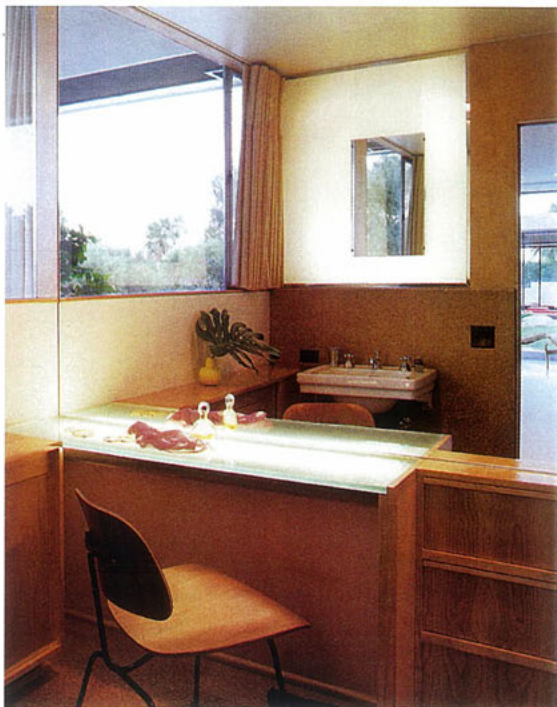
But those who owned the house after Edgar Kaufmann's death there in 1955 were not simply imposing their tastes on a masterpiece. They were also attempting to make a winter retreat livable all year-round. Though Neutra installed radiant heating in the floors, he'd met his client's request for a seasonal home and supplied no air conditioning—an essential amenity in a region where summer temperatures hit 120 degrees.

#### **The new owners' bold approach**

When Brent and Beth Harris bought the house and evaluated the repairs necessary to keep it from disintegrating, they made a bold decision. They would go further, bringing the architecture back to the moment they felt most clearly coincided with Neutra's original intent. That was the twilight evening in 1947 when Julius Shulman fortuitously asked Mrs. Kaufmann to lie by the pool—to block a light—and took the photograph.

Ironically, as midcentury architecture ages, the Harrises, like others, set out to historically restore or recapture Modernism: a philosophically ahistorical style.





Recreating Neutra's finishes, Marmol and Radziner paved Mrs. Kaufmann's (left) and the other bathrooms in cork—and even tiled the floor and walls of her husband's shower stall with this luxuriant (and improbable) material.

heat impact. Marmol and Radziner contacted the U.S. Bureau of Mines to locate current sources for the mineral. Matching wall samples with those from active mines, they painstakingly replicated Neutra's recipe and devised a fabrication technique: Moments after one painter lay on new glazing compound, another would spray on the mineral.

The architects not only rebuilt birch-veneer cabinets throughout the house, but also identified the grain of each panel from photographs and matched it precisely. In a daring display of luxury, Neutra had even lined Mr. Kaufmann's shower stall with cork—a finish that Marmol and Radziner recreated with urethane coatings to prevent water damage.

The installation of a sophisticated heating and cooling system presented another challenge. Not wishing to interfere with the aesthetic integrity of Neutra's design—a visually and conceptually thin piece of architecture without plenum or crawl space—the architects tunneled ducts under the house, channeling cool air from a unit in a new pool house that they designed. They cleverly used built-in furniture to hide other vents and ductwork. A huge return-air outlet lurks behind a perforated panel in a living-room cabinet, which had concealed a hi-fi speaker in its first incarnation.

This project, an extraordinary act of rejuvenation, taking more than five years, certainly cost many times the original \$300,000. (The Harrises decline to disclose their budget publicly, but *Vanity Fair* has cited a "rumored \$4.5 million" price tag.) One result of placing new historically correct materials alongside original intact elements is a contrast in patinas. The concrete path from the front gate into the entrance hall, for example, displays its age, whereas the recently poured concrete floor in the living room, which abuts it, has a bright sheen. Until time melds the patinas, many of the interior details will announce themselves as replicas.

The Harrises, all too familiar with the house's checkered past, made a gesture of patronage worthy of Edgar Kaufmann. Swearing to keep history from repeating itself, they are determined to protect the building from future deterioration. To reinforce the structure, they placed steel reinforcing beams in the plaster walls where space allowed. Their complex new heating and air-conditioning system will slow the aging process accelerated by the harsh desert climate. New drains, sunken and hidden from view in the flat roofs, assist water runoff. The Harrises purchased two adjacent lots and landscaped them to protect future views.

This Modernist icon now serves as a weekend retreat for the owners and their two small children. Contemporary Californians, they spend considerable time in the new pool house, which contains, among other amenities, a spa. The olive-green, open-air structure was consciously designed not to compete with the main house. But even from here, as from the wonderfully primordial desert garden, which now surrounds the house, Neutra's reinvented masterpiece is never far from its guardians' watchful eyes. ■

Their decision to reclaim a 1947 ideal challenged a traditional approach to architectural restoration, which demands a more straightforward refurbishment of what remains on-site. In the Kaufmann House, however, so many original elements had been destroyed that pure restoration was out of the question. But what was the house like in 1947? What records would show it in full detail? To carry out the revitalization, the Harrises engaged the Santa Monica firm of Marmol and Radziner, which had restored Neutra's 1950 Kun House #2 in the Hollywood Hills.

By 1995, the Kaufmann House "resembled a carcass," says Ron Radziner, AIA, the effervescent, long-haired architect, who, with partner Leo Marmol, AIA, had already started down the long road of revitalizing it. They demolished the additions and shipped away many original surfaces for refurbishing. In fact, they tore down so much that many onlookers perceived the architects and their clients as destructive, but few could have predicted the lengths to which the design team would go to preserve what remained and accurately replicate what had been lost.

Marmol and Radziner began at the UCLA Research Library's Special Collections Branch, where the original drawings were kept. Denied permission by Neutra's son Dion to photocopy them, they hand-copied the sketches, including every notation down to paint colors. They interviewed those who knew the house well: architect Albert Frey, who designed a home for Raymond Loewy on the adjacent lot, and the Moorten family, who had landscaped the original garden.

The most accurate record of what had actually been installed lay in Julius Shulman's 1947 photographs, some of which had never before been printed. But perhaps the greatest map to the house lay buried in its own walls and floors. In a servant's rooms, for instance, the word "oyster," the color used, was penciled onto the plaster beneath many coats of paint. "It was like an archeological dig," recalls Radziner.

On the exterior, Neutra had applied a plaster-and-mica mixture. He thought the shiny mica flecks would reflect sunlight and thus reduce

**Project:** *The Kaufmann House Restoration*

**Architect, interior designer, contractor:** *Marmol and Radziner Architects—Leo Marmol, AIA, and Ron Radziner, AIA, principals*  
**Client:** *Brent and Beth Harris*

**Consultants:** *Cass Rogers (structural); Mel Bilow & Associates (mechanical); John Snyder & Associates (electrical); Seebohm Ltd. (architectural conservation); Reginald Hough (concrete); Eric Lamers and William Kopelk (landscape)*