

Can you find utopia in a house? The postwar modernists thought so. Today their open-air, industrial-strength designs are back in style.

M O D E R N R E V I

clashed hideously with the character of nearby homes. We decided that modern houses were cold, lifeless, inorganic. All that chrome, glass and concrete—no thank you.

But suddenly—almost overnight, it seems—the trend has reversed itself. New houses are being built in the modern style. Hollywood celebs engage in high-profile bidding wars for homes by “name” architects of the ‘40s, ‘50s and ‘60s, furnishing them with classic Eames chairs and glittery chrome accouterments. Kidney-shaped coffee tables threaten to become, once again, a cliché.

Maybe it’s the general claustrophobia of contemporary life that makes the modernist emphasis on light and air so appealing, or maybe it’s some half-baked longing for the sleek, optimistic future the design seemed to presage.

Ted Wells, president of the Southern California chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians, theorizes, “People love modernism now because it’s a romantic vision of the future from the ‘50s and ‘60s

that never came through. It’s the future that we’re supposed to be living now.”

MODERNISM’S POSTWAR BEGINNINGS

Largely a European import, modernism arrived in America in small wavelets during the years just prior to and just after World War II, brought by young architects drawn by the hope of working with Frank Lloyd Wright, whose ethereal, space-age designs seemed to unite the best of European brilliance and American freedom.

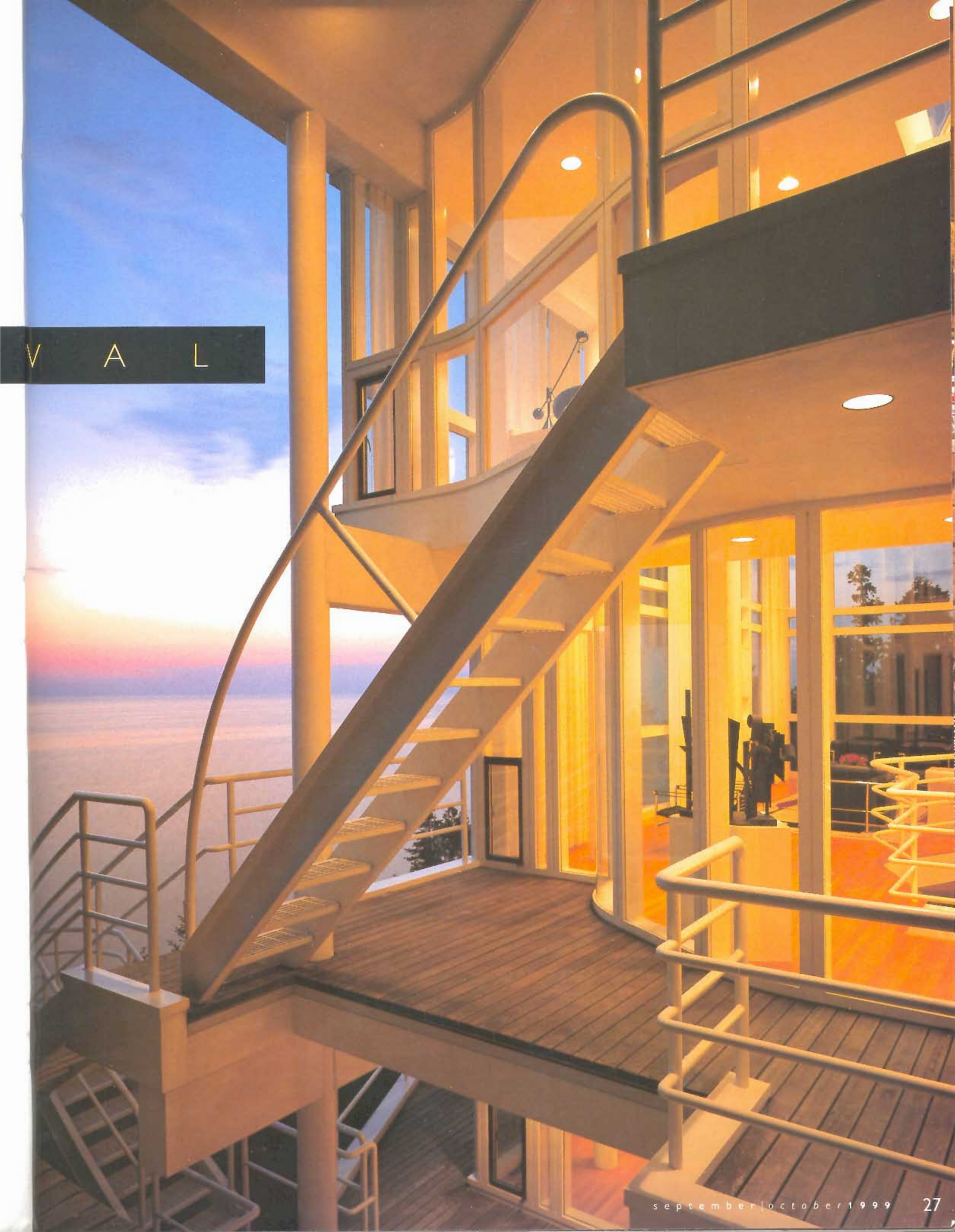
Leaving behind European cities decimated by years of bombing and political ideals shattered by the rise of fascism, these new transplants arrived ready to rebuild the postwar world with machinelike, efficient buildings, emphasizing industrial materials such as glass, steel, even galvanized roofing. As architect Peter Blake wrote in his memoir, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (Norton, 1996), “Modern architecture spoke the language of a free, social-democratic society deeply concerned



HGTV's *American Homestyles: Modernism* premieres Sunday, Sept. 19, at 9 p.m. ET.

For years, it seemed that when it came to houses, the word *modern* was inextricably linked with the word *monstrosity*. Newspapers were forever carrying stories of neighbors fighting the construction of some concrete-and-glass “eyesore” that opponents felt

V A L





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with the problems of the post-war years. Neoclassical architecture, on the other hand, spoke the language of elitism and totalitarianism.” In other words, rectangles were in, Doric columns and statuesque flourishes were out. It was no longer acceptable to look to the past for inspiration: the future was everything.

This futuristic leap led modern architects to tailor their designs minutely to the angles and opportunities of the chosen site and to introduce innovations like glass walls and ceilings that don’t break at the roofline, thus allowing completely unobstructed views. Most significantly of all, the new designs emphasized wide-open spaces interrupted by far fewer internal walls than in a traditional house.

“In a truly modern house, there is a lightness, an openness: there’s air coming in. There aren’t any hallways or other confining spaces. Instead, it’s space that you move through,” says Pierre Koenig, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, who has been designing modernist houses since he built his first exposed-steel-and-glass house in 1950. What people miss when they look at the often forbidding exteriors of modernist houses, says Koenig, is how pleasant it is to live in one.



PAUL ROCHÉ/LEAU

“It’s a lot more fun than an ordinary house. Once you learn how to live in a modern house, you don’t want to leave it.”

THE SEARCH FOR THE GOOD LIFE

The emphasis on shared space had its beginnings in dreams of utopian openness: The Los Angeles house that Viennese architect Rudolph Schindler built, for instance, didn’t even have bedrooms, but instead offered small “sleeping baskets” or open-air porches, extending off the vast communal living space. He shared the open plan with his architect pal (and eventual rival) Richard Neutra and both their wives—as well as with an endlessly revolving

coterie of bohemian friends.

“Schindler and others like him really believed that architecture could help us live better, make us be better people, put us more in touch with the best parts of ourselves,” says Wells. Part of that search, he adds, was the attempt “to break down the barrier of what was perceived as indoor space and out.”

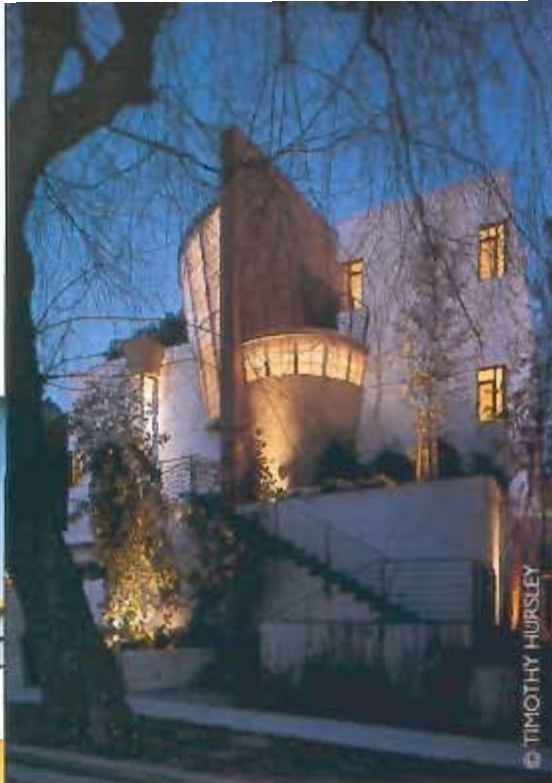
Unfortunately, since those heady days our view of what defines a modernist house has become muddled, confused by the large-scale cut-rate copy-cattling that went on well into the ‘60s. At their best, the blocks of boxlike structures euphemistically dubbed *modern* had a few interesting angles. At their worst, the cheap imitations were without style or substance, Northern California’s Eichler knockoffs being a case in point.

What really defined, and



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Taking advantage of the views and the breezes makes this modernistic living room downright cool.



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continues to define, modernism—as seen in the work of much-admired contemporary practitioners such as Frank Gehry and Jim Jennings—is the emphasis on individual expression and on the endless search for innovation and good living.

“My clients know a lot about architecture,” says Koenig, who currently has five projects under construction. “They like my houses because they’re pretty, but more than that, because they work. They’re environmentally sound and require low upkeep.”

Though modern houses did at one point get a reputation for being expensive to heat, that’s no longer a problem, Koenig says. “We know how to control that now, how to take advantage of breezes.” The house he designed for himself in Los Angeles doesn’t even have air-conditioning. “It’s all air-cooled,” he says.

Upon moving into a modern house, what clients discover, says Koenig, is that “the practical stuff takes care of itself.” And what’s left is the excitement of a new home, the promise of a new life. They find it’s a welcome challenge, he says, “to go from something conservative to something very exciting and dynamic.” ●

MELANIE HAIKEN wrote “Bungalow Style” in the May/June issue. She lives in Northern California.