



## THE CALIFORNIA HOUSE

*by Sally B. Woodbridge*

If Adam and Eve and their descendents had continued to occupy the Garden of Eden, what kinds of houses would they have built? How would they have designed their dwellings to take advantage of a lush natural setting where the climate was ever temperate and healthful, and where all time was leisure time?

These questions are not entirely fanciful. As portrayed by sincere apostles and hired evangelists, California Living had become, by the end of the 19th century, synonymous with the American vision of the Good Life. California's architects have aspired ever since to build the "ideal" home for the citizens of this new Eden. The architectural results have been widely imitated outside the state, even as the concept of the ideal California house continues to evolve.

The evangelism began, in a sense, with the rate war between the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific Railroads during the late 1880s. For a time, the cost of a ticket from Kansas City to Los Angeles fell to \$1. A new kind of settler came to the state. The gold-seekers of '49 had been young bachelors. The men and women who immigrated during the last decades of the 19th century were usually middle-aged and married—solid folk determined to live comfortably on a small plot "under their own vines and fig trees," as the railroad brochures had promised.

The humble remnants of Spanish colonial architecture, though well suited to the region's Mediterranean climate, did not much interest the "Pullman settlers" of the 1880s and '90s. Instead, they lived along the streetcar lines in wooden houses that mimicked Eastern styles. These homes were generally set on raised basements to prevent rot and were often surrounded by luxurious vegetation. The conventional wisdom of the time held that vapors from the earth were poisonous, so porches, piazzas, or verandahs were built to elevate the homeowner to a safe spectator position.

The influx of "Pullman settlers" brought rapid growth. As the inner suburbs of San Francisco (and later, Los Angeles) lost

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their pastoral character, upper-middle-class families—who historically have been America's chief patrons of new residential architecture—fled to the virgin land on the far fringes of California's urban areas. Many of them built rather conventional homes, reflecting the Victorian penchant for gaudy ornament. But a bohemian minority was repelled by stylistic hodgepodge and machine-tooled filigree. They sought to create new settings that would in part reflect the highly popular aesthetic philosophies of Englishmen John Ruskin and William Morris, who emphasized aesthetic moderation, the worth of handicraft, "constructive" use of leisure time, and rejection of the unhealthy complexities of city life.

### Hill-Dwelling Sophisticates

This notion of the Simple Life would one day be embodied in mass-produced "Bungalows." But for the moment it remained the ideal of the affluent. Their new "natural" houses owed much to a handful of local prototypes that perfectly expressed the ideals of what came to be known as the Craftsman Movement. Naturalist John Muir's Yosemite Valley cabin, built in 1869, was one of the pacesetters:

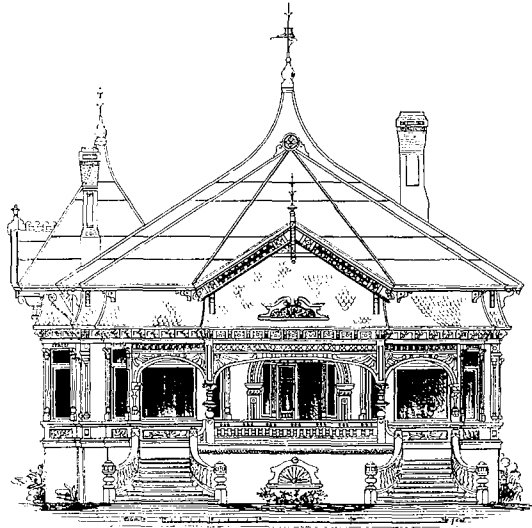
From the Yosemite Creek, near where it first gathers its beaten waters at the foot of the fall, I dug a small ditch and brought a stream into the cabin, entering at one end and flowing out the other with just current enough to allow it to sing and warble in low, sweet tones, delightful at night while I lay in bed. The floor was made of rough slabs, nicely joined and embedded in the ground. In the spring the common pteris ferns pushed up between the joints of the slabs, two of which, growing slender like climbing ferns on account of the subdued light, I trained on threads up the sides and over my window in front of my writing desk in an ornamental arch.

During the 1880s and '90s, clusters of "natural" houses were built in the Bay Area — on San Francisco's Russian Hill, in Berkeley, in Piedmont. Around 1895, architect Bernard Maybeck

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A "Queen Anne" home (c.1884) built in Santa Rosa by Joseph and Samuel Newsom. This "gingerbread" style sparked a drive for simplicity among a generation of young California architects.



From Picturesque California Homes by S. & J. C. Newsom. Published by Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1978.

designed a house that was essentially a set of redwood-shingled pavilions strung along the edge of a slope north of the University of California campus at Berkeley (where he taught). Soon, more brown shingled houses by Maybeck sprang up near the first one. As the colony of hill-dwelling sophisticates grew, they formed a quasi-evangelical organization called the Hillside Club, whose ideal was succinctly stated in its 1906-07 yearbook: "Hillside architecture is landscape gardening around a few rooms for use in case of rain." (Ever determined to fuse indoor and outdoor living, it was Maybeck who developed the sliding glass door.)

Of the many houses erected in the spirit of the Hillside Club, none captured it so imaginatively as the Boynton family's "Temple of the Wings," in North Berkeley, designed by Maybeck but infused with the ideas of Florence Boynton, a friend and follower of dancer Isadora Duncan. In 1918, *Sunset Magazine* interviewed the Boyntons about life in the spare but elegant structure they had occupied for about four years. The "house" consisted of two round, temple-like pavilions, with roofs supported by a Corinthian colonnade. The flagstone floor was warmed by hot air circulating through hollow tiles underneath. In rainy weather, canvas awnings were unfurled between the columns; otherwise, the interiors were open to the elements.

Domestic drudgery and conventional dress had been

banished. The spirited Boynton women wore flowing garments like the ancient Greeks and wove garlands of flowers into their hair. Mr. Boynton, a successful San Francisco lawyer, wore a three-piece suit to the city; he donned robes in the privacy of the temple. He described their simple diet: raisins, dried figs, prunes, almonds, English walnuts, fresh fruits in season, cheese, honey, and milk. "We cook one article of food: we roast peanuts, a fifteen minutes' task daily." It was the Simple Life.

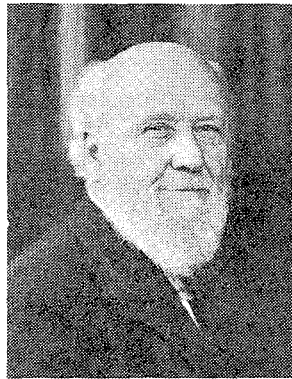
The Southern California counterpart of Berkeley's natural houses sprang up at the eastern edges of the Pasadena Arroyo among the orange and olive groves. Here, during the first decade or so of the 20th century, Charles and Henry Greene built California's first mansion-sized "Bungalows," roughly patterned on the East Indian dwellings of the same name. In a 1908 redwood-shingled Bungalow designed by Greene & Greene, long rounded beam ends protruding from under the roof eaves stretched like fingers to the outside world; dark hollows on the upper levels became cave-like sleeping porches. Skirting the ground level were verandahs and terraces embroidered with exotic plantings. The craftsmanship—elaborate wood joinery, stained glass, brick garden walls studded with granite river boulders—was expressionistic to the point of ostentation.

During the early years of this century, the California Bungalow—the state's first brand-name housing commodity—so captivated the nation that a far more modest, low-cost, shoebox version (in wood and stucco) spread eastward. Never mind that its flimsiness did not suit harsh Midwestern and Northeastern winters. It caught on anyway.



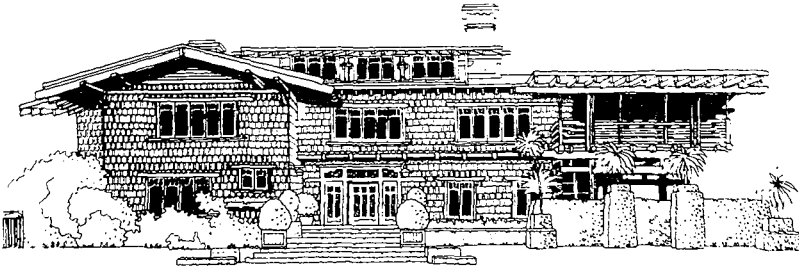
*Courtesy of the American Institute of Architects.*

*Charles and Henry Greene.*

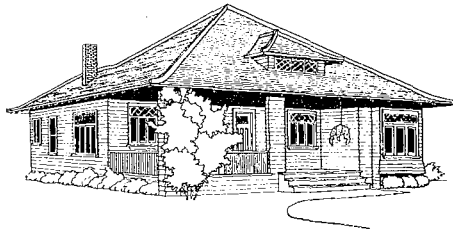


*From Five California Architects by Esther McCoy. Reprinted courtesy of the author.*

*Bernard Maybeck.*



Above, Greene and Greene's mansion-sized Pasadena "Bungalow" (1908) for the David B. Gambles; below, their economy version for the average family.



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Then came the automobile, with its promise of freedom and mobility. California's cities spread out, and new suburbs sprang up between the streetcar lines. During the surge of U.S. interest in European culture that followed World War I, the Bungalow yielded its popularity, in California as elsewhere, to a variety of cottage styles loosely based on European prototypes: the English Cotswold Cottage, the French Norman Farmhouse, and the tile-roofed Andalusian Hacienda—the latter a throwback to California's Spanish colonial heritage.\*

A different kind of European style also crossed the Atlantic—Modernism, christened the "International Style" by American critics Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson. Modernism called for the same kind of moral commitment that the Craftsman Movement had espoused: the honest use of materials to serve basic needs, free of antiquarianism. For a variety of

\*As noted above, the architecture of California's Spanish period was not highly prized during the first decades after statehood. But as urbanization progressed during the late 19th century, nostalgia for a pastoral, preindustrial past (that few of the state's residents could actually remember) suffused the Spanish colonial buildings with a new charm. The change in opinion is reflected in promotional literature. "An adobe house," wrote Charles Nordhoff in 1873, "no matter what is the wealth or condition of the Californian who lives in it, is simply a long range of rooms." By 1913, Herbert Croley could write that, "Rudimentary as these buildings were . . . they attain both by what they avoid and what they achieve, the essentials of good domestic architecture." Today, restored Spanish missions and old adobe homes are regarded in California as local shrines.

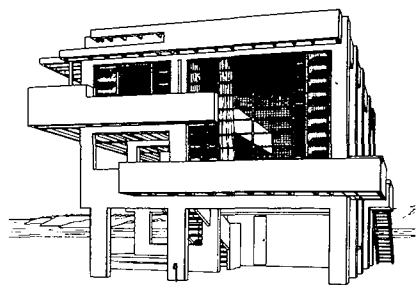
reasons, it was California that first embraced, and then popularized, the International Style.

To most Americans, it made no sense to apply words like "functional," "clean," and "honest" to a house; a man's home was still his castle and required stylistic trappings to prove it. In California, however, a growing respect for the solid architecture of the Spanish missions and Mexican *ranchos*, combined with the ideal of the Simple Life, had already spawned a natural, clean-lined, "proto-Modernism"; it was best exemplified in the San Diego and Los Angeles houses of the architect Irving Gill. Gill's cubist house for Mrs. Mary Banning was described in *Sunset Magazine* as being absolutely sincere and independent, "free from the distracting, feverish attempt to divert attention by means of excessive ornamentation."

The residential work of Irving Gill and the more exotic cubist houses that Frank Lloyd Wright built in Los Angeles during the early 1920s foreshadowed the machine-age style that Austrian-born architects Richard Neutra and R. N. Schindler would introduce during the '30s. Neutra and Schindler designed homes for members of Southern California's film and art worlds. Though stark and sometimes metallic, these International Style houses, like the earlier warm, redwood Craftsman houses, blended easily into their natural setting. Large expanses of plate glass helped to dissolve the barrier between indoors and out.

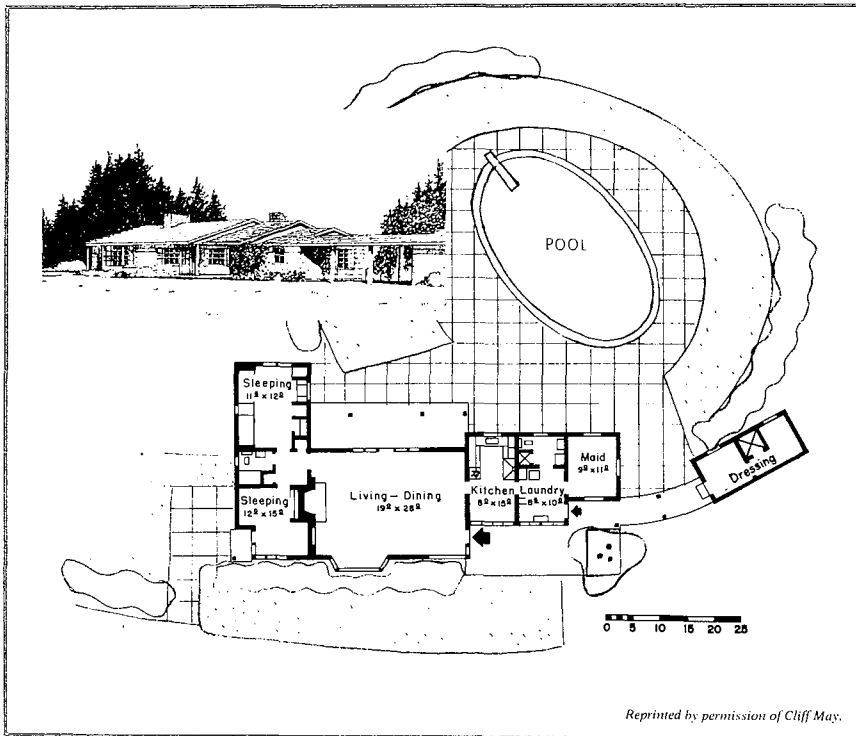
Northern California's most influential architect at this time was William W. Wurster, who regarded his professional role as that of the native son merging traditional aspects of California architecture with the European avant-garde. Beginning in the late 1920s, Wurster designed scores of houses that revolved around three features he called "the living porch," "the glazed gallery," and "the garden living room."

Wurster saw his clients' homelife as revolving around the



*A cubist beach house  
(1926) in Newport Beach,  
designed by Rudolph  
Schindler.*

© 1980 by Mary Mix Foley. From *The American House*.  
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Americans from colder climes, noted Sunset in 1946, once “laughed when anyone mentioned the [California] ranch house. . . . But zone heating changed some ideas.” Ranch houses are now ubiquitous in America, even as high energy prices prompt second thoughts.

great outdoors rather than the hearth. In the September 1949 issue of *Architectural Forum*, he wrote:

The most predominant single desire for most people is for personally controlled out-of-door space, where the family can have a flower or vegetable garden at its door . . . where young children can make mud pies.

Most of the houses Wurster designed from the 1930s through the '50s drew on regional rural traditions. California's early architecture—the white-washed adobe of Monterey, for example—was sufficiently “elemental” to serve as the basis for a simple Modern Style. Clients who found the familiar historical details of European and American Colonial revival houses both

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fussy and false, yet who had no taste for avant-garde Modernism, could be comfortable with an informal, vaguely rustic style that reflected the region's heritage.

At first, recognizably Modern houses were designed exclusively for sophisticated or at least affluent clients. The massive influx of migrants to California from all over the country after World War II changed that.

The postwar style-setters looked to the future, not the past. New technology for the home and a "progressive" attitude toward family relationships demanded (or so the architectural writers said) a new domestic setting. No publication was more successful than *Sunset Magazine* in selling California to prospective immigrants as the new frontier. *Sunset's* features encompassed everything from houses to plant boxes to barbecues, gardens, patios, and redwood decks. The annual *Sunset* design awards for the best houses for "Western Living" began during the early 1950s and continue to this day.

### Eden for Everyman

The house that *Sunset* made synonymous with Western Living in the glowing postwar period was the California Ranch House, which resembled in its floor plan, if not its physical aspect, the old adobe Mexican *ranchos*. Like its predecessor, the Bungalow, the ranch house soon spread all over the United States. And like the Bungalow, it was difficult to characterize. The editors of the 1955 book, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, tried anyway:

Most of us describe any one-story house with a low, close-to-the-ground silhouette as a ranch house. When a long, wide porch is added to this form, almost everyone accepts the name. . . . Wide protected porches immediately suggest outdoor living—lazy summer afternoons, informal entertaining—but if those porches face the street and are, therefore, without privacy, you merely have a house that looks like a ranch house but does not function as one.

Prospective homeowners did not always worry about such distinctions. Wherever relatively cheap land remained on the fringes of urban areas, entrepreneurs built variations on the "indoor-outdoor" ranch house in vast tracts. Now young middle-class families could enjoy a house systematically zoned and labeled by the architect for appropriate use: outdoor living room, landscaped garden, boy's room, girl's room, patio, ter-



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race, deck, swimming pool, barbecue, car-port, solarium, shop. It was not just "housing" but a "leisure center," a self-contained family spa, a "natural" retreat from the industrial age.

The California Ranch House became a symbol of the good life in the 1950s and early '60s, whether it was built in Orange County, California, or Shaker Heights, Ohio. In those prosperous days, when young couples were bringing up the largest generation in U.S. history, and most middle-class wives stayed home to mind the kids, there was perhaps a rationale for a house that promised a kind of mini-Eden. But life is different in the '80s. The housing market now includes vast numbers of single professionals and retired folk. Families are smaller, houses are more expensive, and many women aspire to careers outside the home. The idealized California Ranch House may no longer fit the times.

The latest California export—clustered, high-density residences in a park-like setting—is a response to shifts to smaller families, a harsher economy, and a threatened environment. The first of these prototype communities was the Sea Ranch condominium complex on the Mendocino County coast, designed by Moore/Lyndon/Turnbull/Whitaker in 1963.

The concept soon captivated architects and planners throughout California, who were increasingly aware of the costs of saturating the landscape with single-family tract homes. The idea, again, moved east. Today, clusters of wooden or stuccoed shed-roofed boxes dot the landscape from coast to coast, from the San Francisco Bay area's Foster City to Columbia, Maryland. In California, the ideal of the indoor-outdoor house lives on, although roof gardens, balconies, and hot tubs have succeeded terraces, patios, and pools.

And it is, after all, just that—an ideal. California Living, with its implicit assumption of leisured affluence in a lush natural setting, is as far from the daily experience of as many people in California as it is in New York.

But this vision has been a vision too long simply to founder on reality. Set in stone, glass, and redwood, it has taken tangible form and spread from California across America. Enter a man's house, Bernard Maybeck once wrote, and you will see his dreams.

