

# case study house no.

by Richard J. Neutra, A.I.A.

■ Harmonizing with neighboring architecture may often not have been the solution to be recommended in the recent past. Still, it was a mean decision to ignore the neighbors, even though they were painfully misguided, and to try to strike out for happiness just by one's self. It seemed such an unsatisfactory way of life.

Now the situation is getting different. Splendid young talent for sensible design is springing up in many places, and if the battle is not won, victory can be predicted at least without meeting a sneer! It is a period to which some of us have been anxiously looking forward for long years. The experiments we cautiously carried on in a decade of scarcity, bear fruit within an abundance of jobs and an atmosphere receptive to progressiveness. Now, it is the thing to fit one's layout and design to that of one's next door neighbor, especially, as in our case, if there is also an over-all-man of vision, who, conceiving and directing a modern subdivision, has invited a number of conscientious, capable architects to collaborate on the single plot.

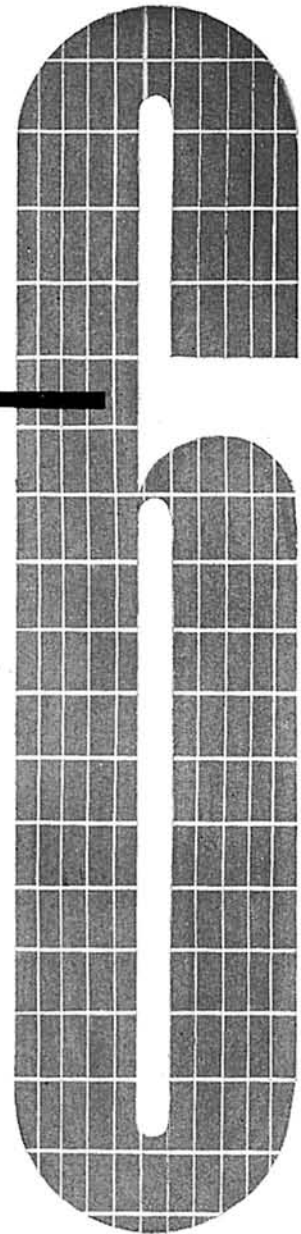
An individual house can here be made an harmonious note in a well developed ensemble, and still it may retain much of its own merit even when repeated elsewhere.

We, particularly, have been lucky in this ensemble matter and are ready to give thanks. A&A blessed us with two brothers-in-law, as case study clients, husbands of two sisters and owners of two adjoining lots. They made their first visit together, Mr. and Mrs. Alpha and Mr. and Mrs. Omega, lovely people, all of them, and interestingly different from each other. We thought; it should turn out to be an inspiring job to get them successfully rooted.

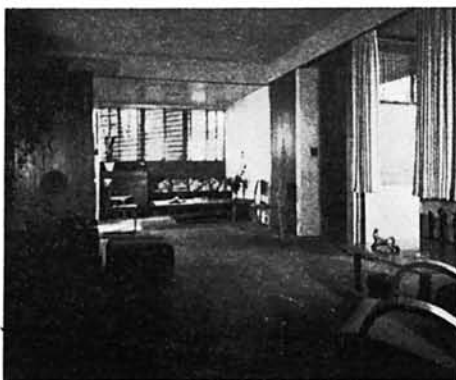
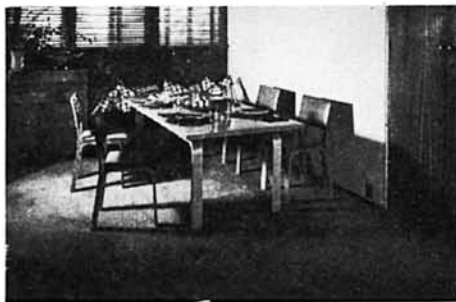
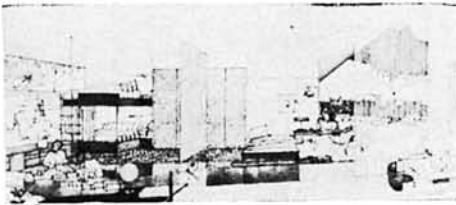
Well, first we deal with the Omegas. It is always an interesting story when the consumers and clients descend on the expert, who makes himself a sponge to absorb all weighty information and also those imponderables, which make us know each other as human beings. Mr. and Mrs. Omega are over their first matrimonial decade, and they have weathered it well. Evidently, their mutual fitting together has not become loosened, rather neatly tightened with the passing of time. If it were not for the fact that they speak of their daughters of ten and nine, and their little boy of five, one might almost take them for newlyweds.

Mr. Omega is—well, perhaps the official calling of a man does not matter here—and Mrs. Omega modestly describes herself as just a housewife with artistic and musical interests. They look like clients to be grateful for: stimulating—even at times, as it came out—refreshingly puzzling. Long standing readers of A&A, they could have taught any architect something, and of course, such a man is continuously eager to learn and to pick up operational and structural details—and details of mental workings as well. I should say that there flows from the many clients and models who sit for an architect, a perpetual wealth of inspiration.

"We would like you to pioneer with moderation, this time," said Mr. Omega, with a



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## From the scrapbook of Mr. Omega:

One-sided gable front of living room opens broadly on a flagstone-paved patio. (Van Cleef house)

Two story bunk-equipped children's room extends to playroom and play court. (Amity Village)

Dual purpose table—up for dining, down for tea. (Barsha house)

House built of H. H. Robertson Steel Elements with radiating floor in 1935. Owner writes: "Our system of hollow floors, whereby heat radiates from a composition slab, has proved to be very satisfactory in practice. It is most pleasant to be able to walk barefoot across warm floors on cold mornings and to enjoy warm feet and legs at all times." signed: William Beard, owner

Photographs by Julius Shulman



little laugh, "because we need the place *now*, you see, in the midst of what I should call the transition period, where things are still less available than in the pre-war. And whatever may be novel in the bracket of 'Availables,'—please go and test only a few of them on me, not all! Of course, I know you have a fine record of never having failed a client for an experiment's sake and all that, but go easy, please!

"We have been watching your work for quite a while. Some of it—now don't be offended—I like less, and some of it more." I wasn't offended—and he produced from his portfolio an amazing mass of clippings and illustrations. With a trembling chill I watched him getting ready to pin me down to the past! "You do not have to follow any of that exactly, but I would like to show you some of your own stuff which my wife and I would pick. You can start from here on.

"I know that all these things have been photographed, so they really can be done. Here is a livingroom-patio-relationship I like (Fig. 1). Here is another idea of yours—a bunk-equipped child's room (Fig. 2), where he takes his nap, and here it extends into a large playroom where he can get busy with his activities; there you have your 'dual purpose table' (Fig. 3), which can be collapsed low for occasional use (Fig. 4), thus changing the dining space into a living room extension where we could serve our guests buffet style."

Going deftly through a lot of magazines, he said, "How did the floor-radiation heating work you tried back in 1935, when the Palmer Construction Company put up for you that steel built house?" (Fig. 5). (He knew everything!) "I see that bygone Mr. Hoover's 'better Homes in America competition' deigned the house a gold medal in those olden days of the grand slump. But what I am really interested in knowing is: *Does the owner like it*, especially that floorheating, I mean. It is now being played up in so many full page advertisements."

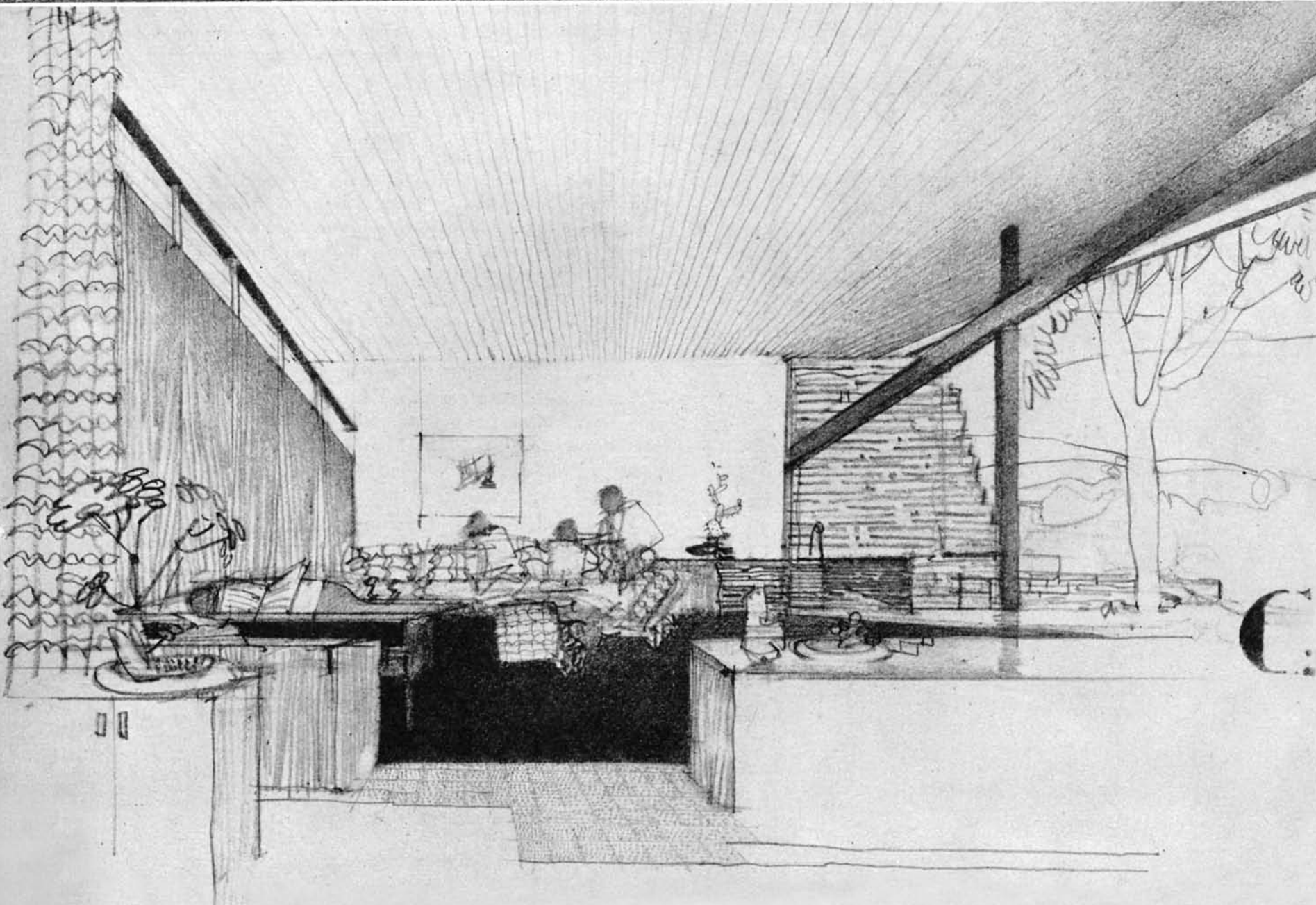
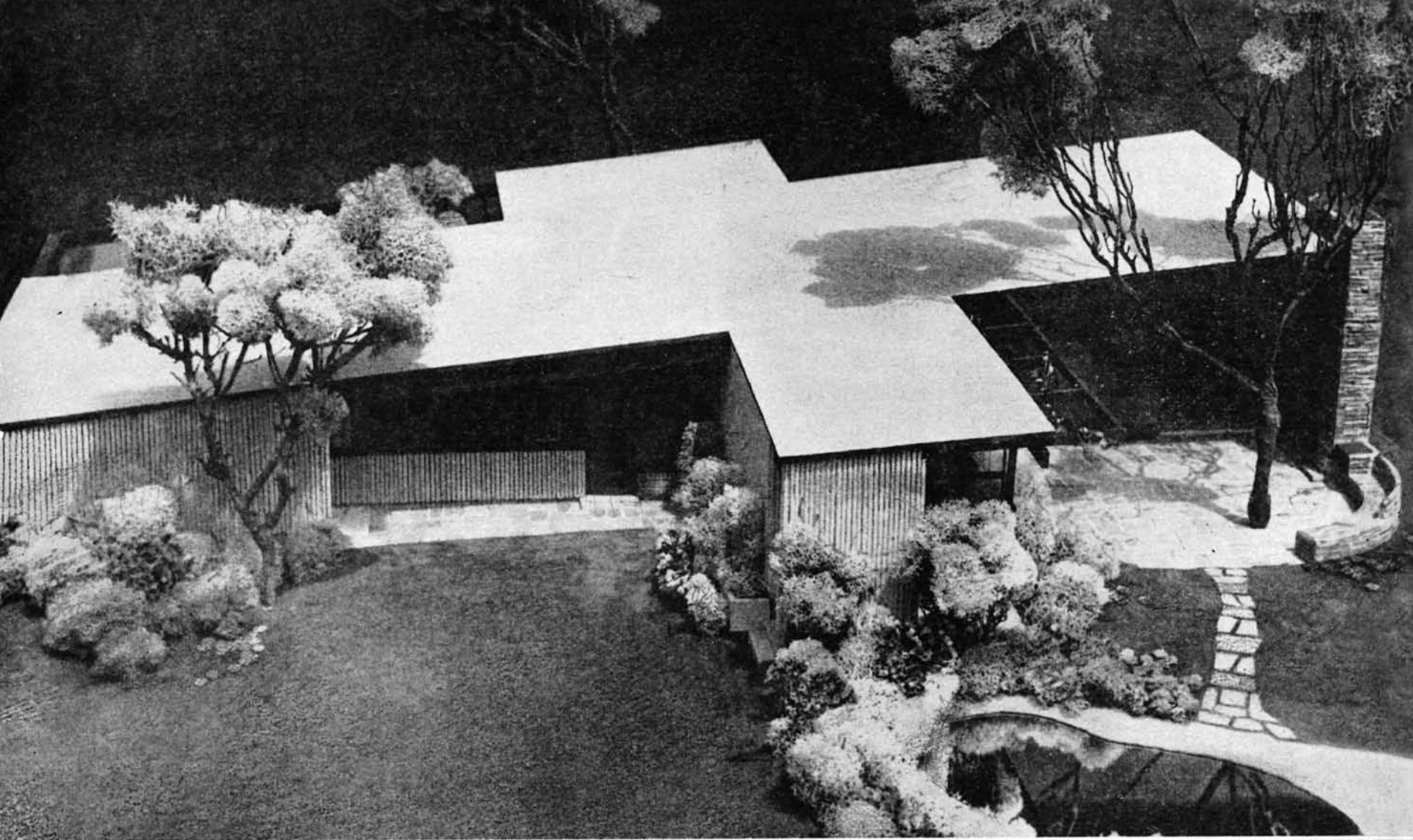
"In some cases," and he threateningly shook the magazine clippings in his hand, "I tell you the truth, I have taken the trouble to telephone or visit the owners."

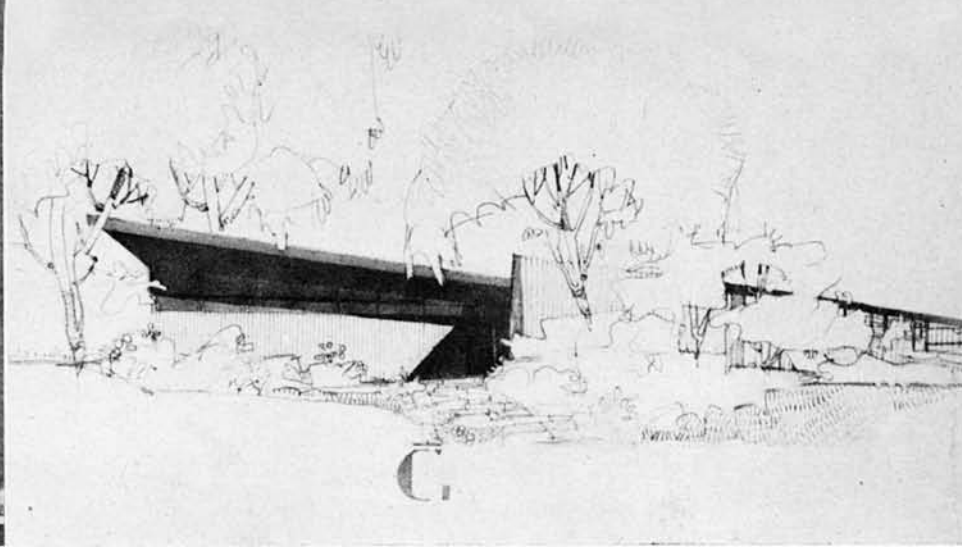
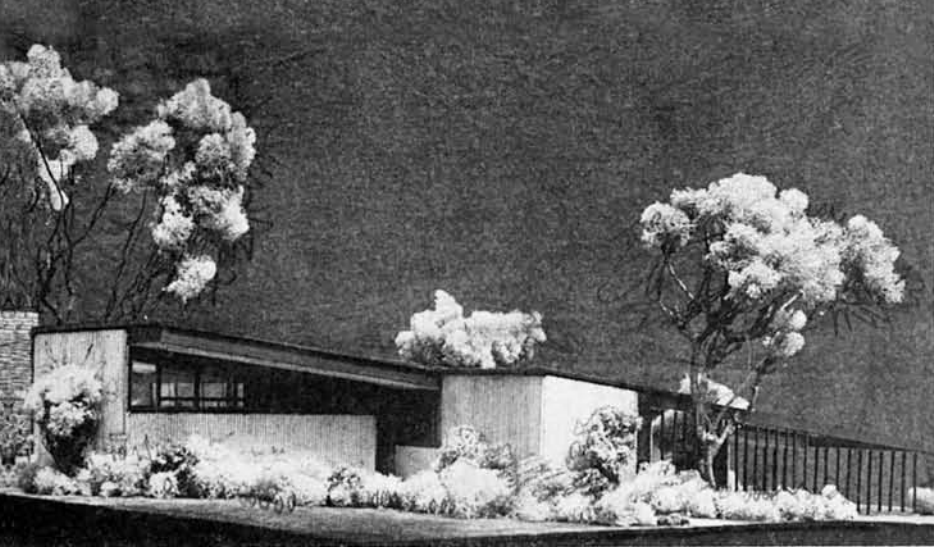
"But sir," I said, "what is the use of bothering these people? Did you not notice yourself, how different you are from the Joneses, the A's, the B's or the C's, who surely are quite different from anyone I ever met? Really and truly, all of my clients are in a way, different from anyone else I have ever met." I get quite enthusiastic in placing the accent on individuality on the consumer, rather than the producer. The author of *The Fountainhead* lives in one of my houses, and I went out of the way to supplement her views.

"Well, well! We are not altogether different! You know, in a book of the great French art philosopher, now—what is his name, Mary? Oh—Ozenfant, that's it—my wife showed me the other night a passage on "*human constants*," traits quite common to the species—by the way, we want some handy bookshelves just at arm's reach from our beds. Mary and I, we are before-falling-asleep-readers. Now, don't make a cartoon of us as such, or when we take a sunbath! You architects sometimes have a tendency to cartoon your clients in humor-sketches: take us seriously, if you please."

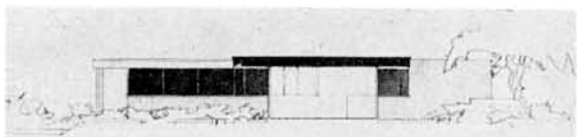
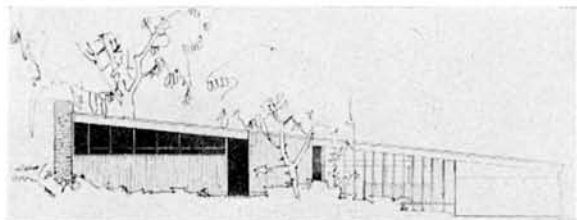
I started to show them my more daring post-war projects, but they shrank back and I sighed. He overheard my sigh, and again, with a heartfelt kindness, said, "I know they tell stories of how you design things without a pencil, thinking them out while lying on a couch; and how some of your happiest clients, I hear never saw

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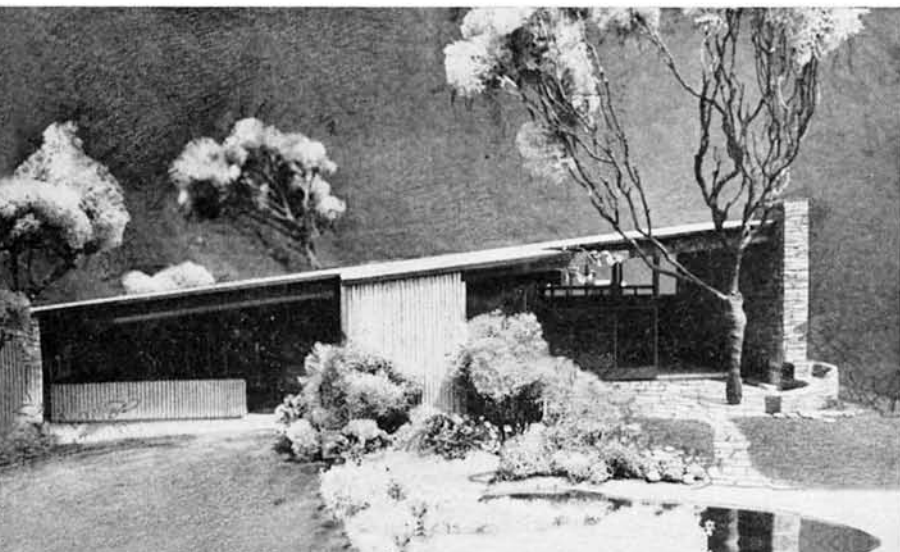


■ As to features and materials which appear to the eye and which give the impressions characteristic for the Omega house, they may be summed up in the following manner: A gently sloping flat roof is covered with white, heat reflecting and heat penetration retarding gravel. The "roof-ceiling-hollow-core-slab" is amply opened on the soffit of its over-hanging projections east, west and south, in order to permit continuous super ceiling air changes, with the help of the slightest breeze in any one of the prevalent wind directions. The visible ceiling material is assumed to be 3/8 x 4 inch T&G ceiling boards, slightly V-grooved, and as all finished woodwork, blond bleached redwood, waxed or flat varnished. On roof projections appear the mentioned air intake slots, protected by plastic screen strips and also where a combination interior-exterior-illumination is desired, the ribbons of diffusing glass behind which the "Slim-line" lighting is concealed. The reflected roof plan shows these features. The heliotropic, light attracted, night flying beetles by sheer instinct will hang around these outside light sources and keep the interiors unmolested even though doors and windows are open.

The exterior shell consists of fire-resistant and integrally finished corrugated asbestos, and of course, of glass where transparency or translucidity is required. Non-corrosive white metal sash and sliding doors, permit ventilation, passage, and where most useful a true combination of inner and outer living spaces, now a rather well accepted novelty of years ago. The large semi-exterior fireplace with oven, barbecue at its side, and an adjoining sitting bench, is constructed of flagstone, with split machine brick used for the fire opening. Flagstone is also the owners' choice for pavement in patio, on entrance walk, and the ground about the outdoor eating place.

This brings us once more to the functions of the four courts which we should briefly describe and illustrate, while also giving a word to the interior functioning of the house itself in close relation to them. The entrance court forms a quiet approach, without any low reaching windows to infringe on interior

Photographs by Julius Shulman



**Exterior renderings with corresponding views of model:**

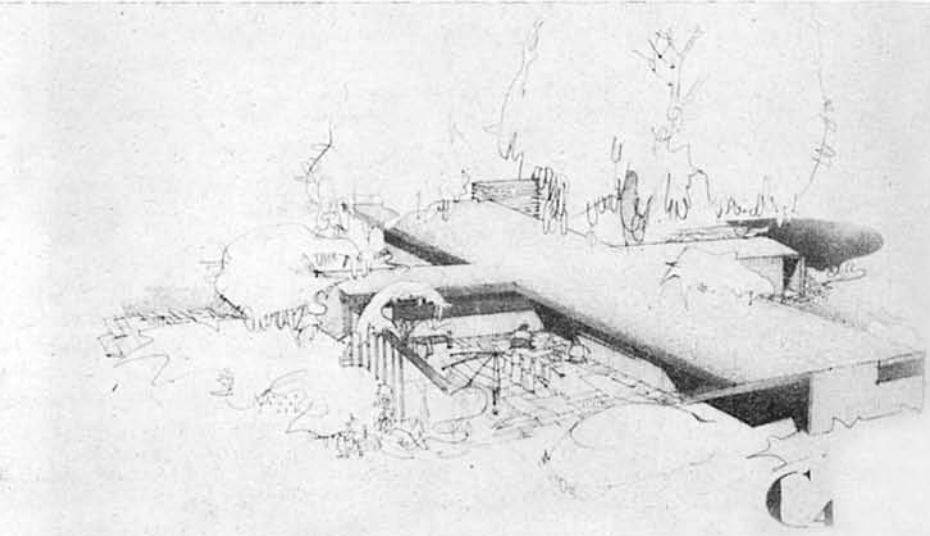
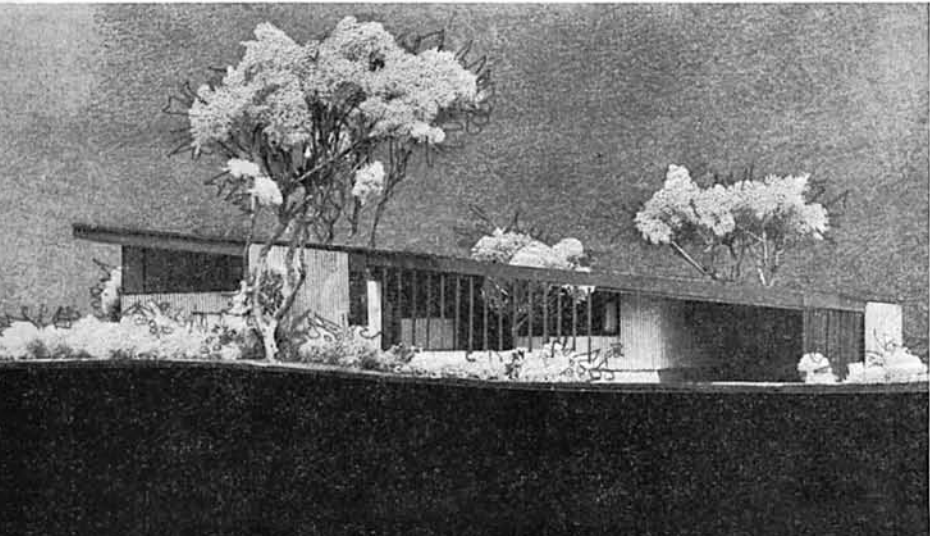
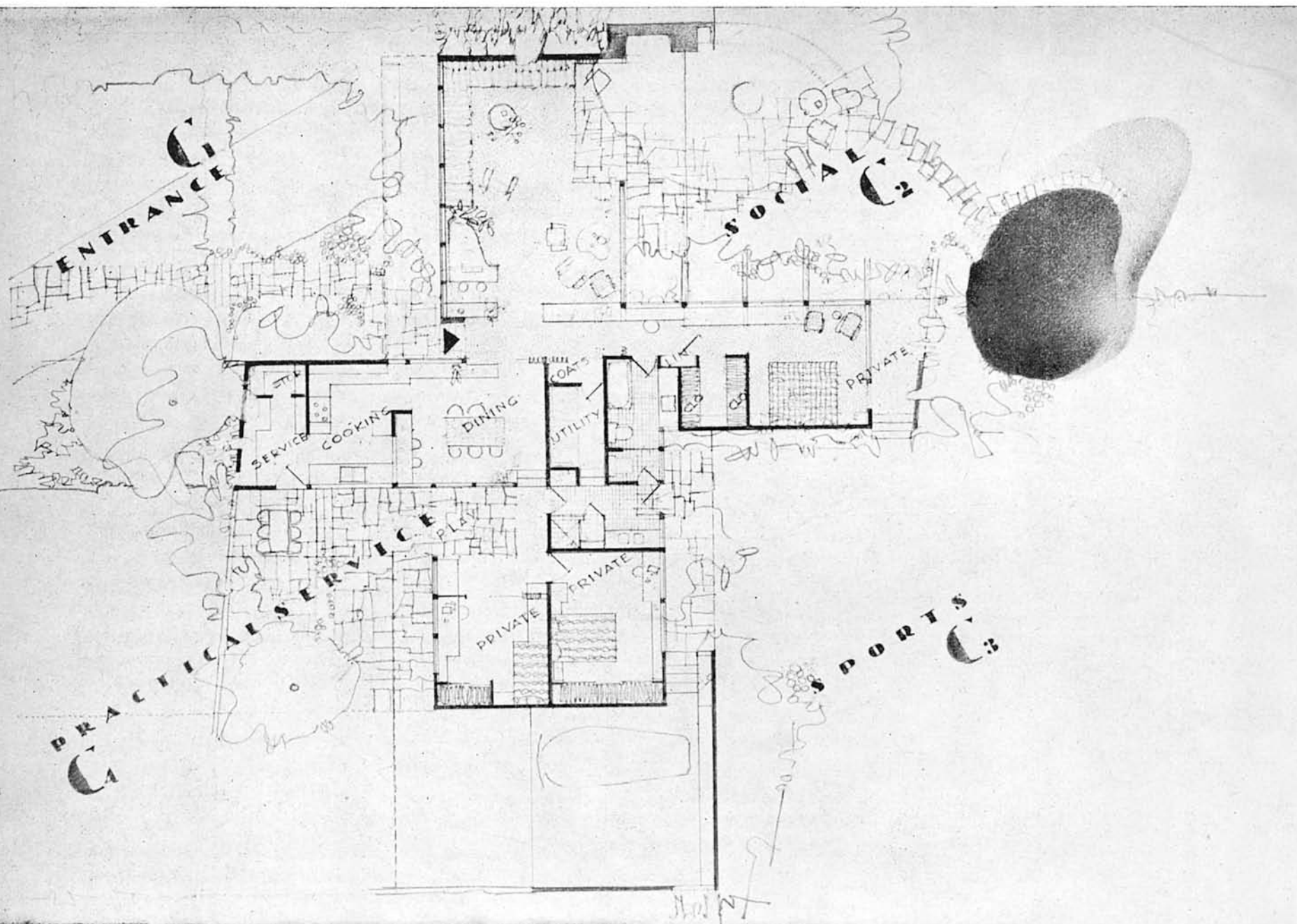
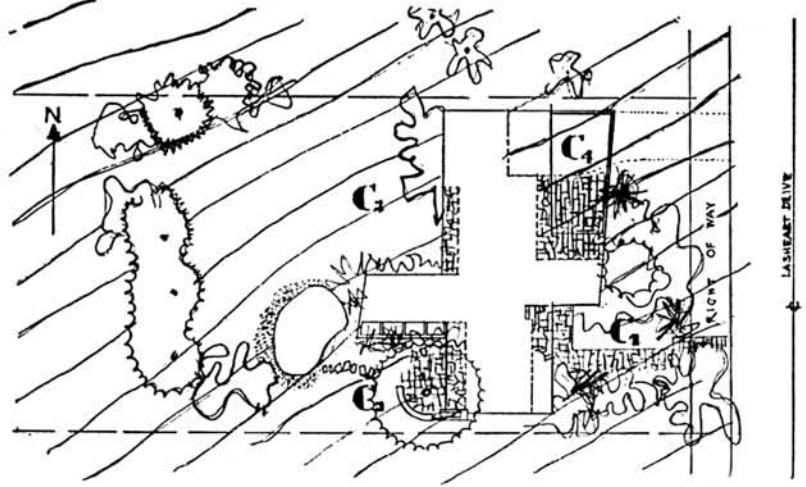
**opposite page, above:** The entrance court (C1) preserves and respects the privacy of the others.

**opposite page, below:** The social court (C2) is a liberal extension of the living quarters and serves also for quiet informal meals and conversation. Sunbathers may lounge at water hole and spray pool.

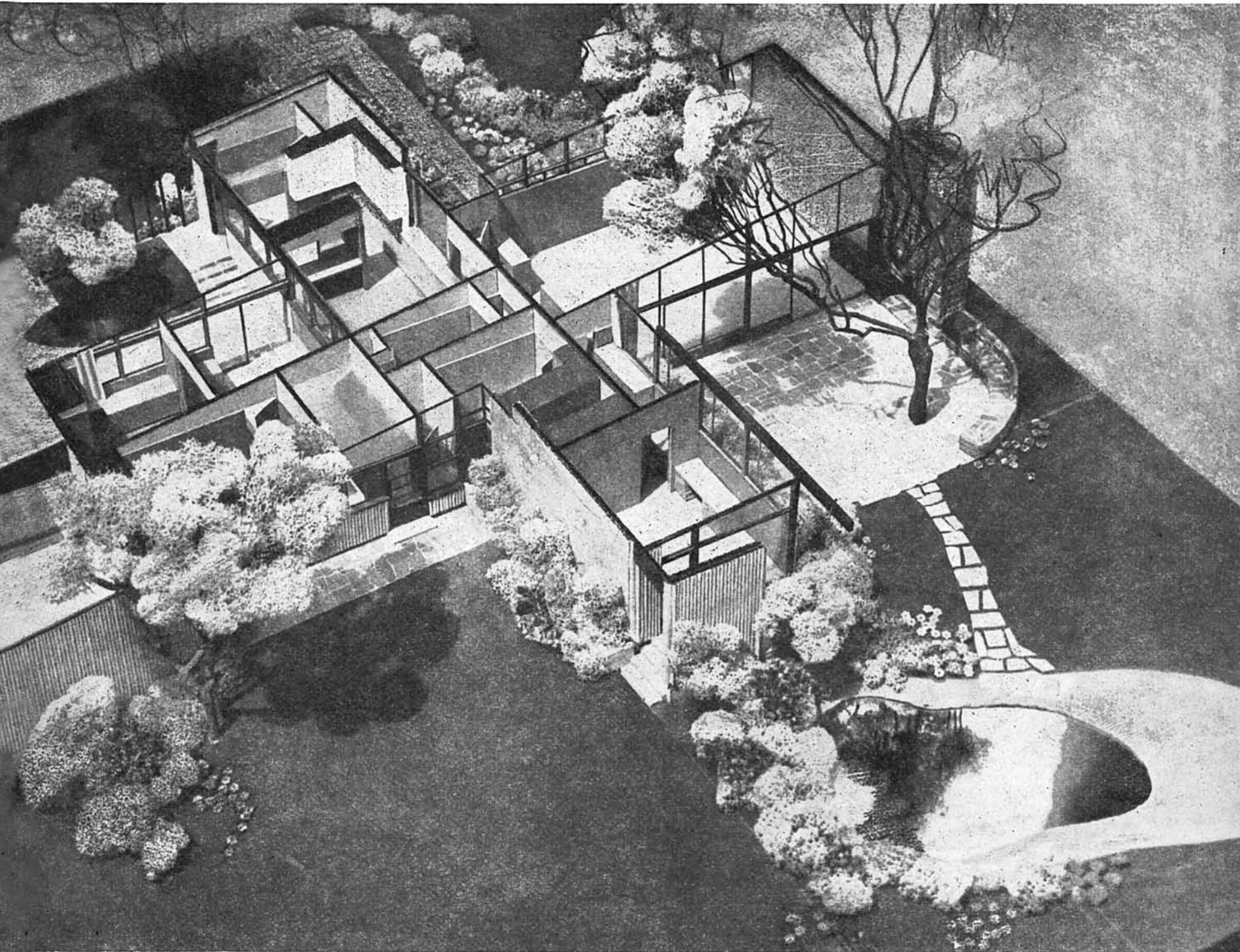
**below:** The fourth court (C4) adjacent to the service wing lends itself to practical services and can be reached under cover from the garage. The children's play area also opens to the court to permit the active mother-housekeeper an easy supervision of her youngsters.

**Plot plan, showing relation of house to site with existing trees and street.**

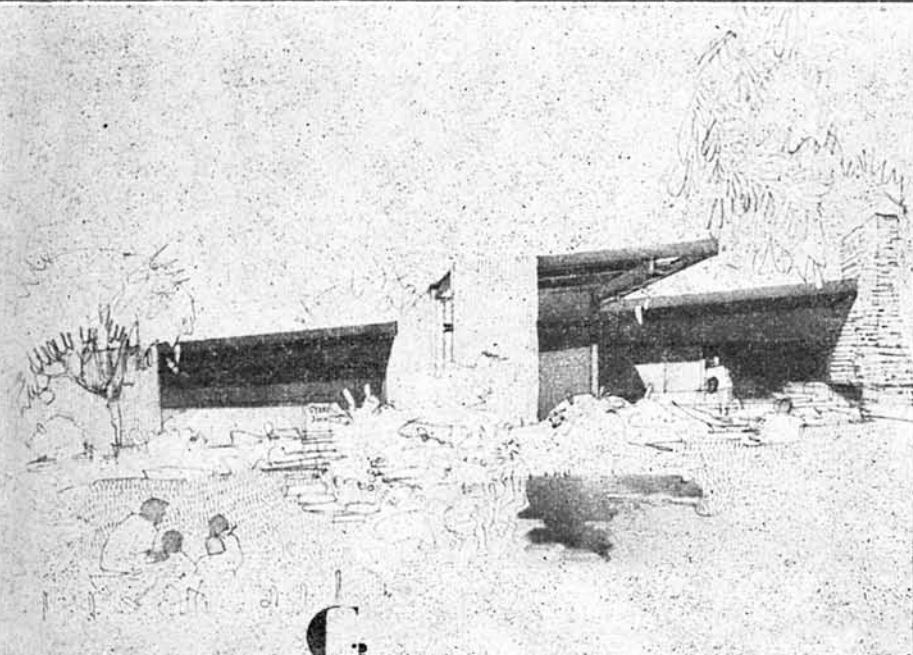
**Floor plan:** Four distinct courts are part of the otherwise modestly sized house that extends into the California outdoors in order to gain in living area.



opposite page  
top: Master bedroom opens to its own porch overlooking pool and garden.  
center: Dining area with dining table set for small party. Children may be fed earlier at counter. With table collapsed to occasional height, guest may use counter as bar.  
below right: View from bath into "sport court."  
below left: View from center of house to play area.



Model by Jack Eddington. Shulman photographs.



**privacy.** It is a well segregated and lovely landscaped outdoor anteroom—the first, and a friendly impression for the visitor. The social court for the quiet and relaxed being together, primarily of adults, naturally has its broad connection to living quarters. It is endowed with the mentioned outdoor hearth and cooking devices. Its location and shape is determined by the large existing tree, which is the welcome and grand adornment of the site.

The sports court, C-3, is the one where children and adults may pleasurably mix, and where they and their guests, again children and adults, may get rough and physically active and play together space-taking games. In California bathing suits and water spray are social features. A swimming pool, the Omegas

Sports court (C3) for active pastimes connects directly with bath facilities. above: Birdseye view of model.

hope, will be added in the future. Meanwhile, the "water hole" with its hose-spray and "sunning beach" will do well; it lies between and separates the social and the sports court. This sports court has its vital connection with the house: the children's shower, wash-and-toilet room. To have these facilities so handy to the outdoors is a trick to reduce house-dirtying and thus house cleaning.

The last of the courts, C-4, may be called the practical operations and all-purpose service court. Deliveries come in here, laundry is dried, the smallest child plays in the sun or in the shade, right in view of the kitchen window. Its playroom—an enlargement of the bedroom which can be segregated by a fold away fabric door, to yield quieter afternoon naps—broadly and under a roof overhang opens out on Court Four. Family meals are informally taken on the upper level at a table under the roof projection and the Chinese elm tree. A vine covered trellis protects this outdoor nook from the external view.

The general layout has been sufficiently described. In particular we may note, that the living room has a music bay with piano and score cabinet. There is further a "visual and accoustical appliance" cabinet whence the electronic fireworks may originate and where apparatus for television, radio, music reproduction and color picture projection finds its place. The opposite living room wall is treated as a glass bead screen and projection plane. The ceiling slopes up to it.

The spacious sitting corner of fitted-in seats with sponge rubber cushions needs only the supplementation of a few easy chairs to harbor a good sized party, which will with ease extend through the wide opening of the sliding door to the patio under the big tree and about the fireplace.

The dressing room and bath of the master suite also will serve visiting guests. The utility room is very centrally located, to supply heated water to lavatories, showers, tubs, sinks, and circulates hot air through short ducts into the subfloor plenum space, to make the entire floor a radiating panel.

Dining space and kitchen communicate through a wide porthole as well as a walking opening, but at will can also be segregated.

The bedroom of the two older children has its desks and library shelves; the youngest one sleeps in the lower of a two story bunkset. The Omegas believe in the educational value of a child guest, visiting and boarding with the family for a couple of days—a shining example of table manners and a stimulus to new modes of playing through the long day.

