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Mapping the Case Study Houses

TRANSLATING HISTORY VIA DESIGN

Samuel Person

*An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for a the degree of*

Bachelor of Fine Arts

in

University Honors

and

Graphic Design

THESIS ADVISER

Meredith James

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

2021

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I detail the process of creating a book titled *The Case Study Houses: A Field Guide*, a project meant to fill a gap in the scholarship on the Case Study Houses, one of the most influential architectural programs of the 20th century. I provide an overview of existing scholarship on the program, in addition to its shortcomings, and how my project addresses these by translating that body of work into an approachable, modern, yet no less informational format. My research process involved concatenating various informational sources into one cohesive whole that provides a standardized presentation of facts about the numerous architecturally significant structures that the program spawned, and leveraging *Arts & Architecture* magazine's superb photography to bridge the gap between the enthusiast audience of sixty years ago and the enthusiast audience of today.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture is an omnipresent force in most people's lives, and I've long had an interest in it for many of the same reasons I'm interested in graphic design; it's a way to combine artistry and function in a way that exerts a foundational and often overlooked force on our lives. Specifically, modern architecture is the style that interests me the most. It's extremely different from almost any other common style of architecture, and during its heyday at the beginning of the 20th century (at least in the United States), modern architecture was awash with innovation and young architects itching to put their radical ideas into practice.

The Case Study House program was borne of artistic scarcity and physical surplus. During World War II, architects were predominantly involved with the war effort and constructing projects that related to it directly or indirectly; by the time the war ended, this restriction had created a buildup of excitement and unexplored intellectual terrain. Wartime left in its wake a number of manufacturing innovations and a surplus of materials and infrastructure, as well as an unprecedented demand for housing that would embody the American Dream of well-kept suburbs accessible to the everyman. So, in the late 1940s, the Case Study House program was dreamt up by John Entenza, the editor of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, to solve multiple problems at once. His plan was to leverage young, innovative architectural talent to produce replicable model homes that would give America's growing middle class stylish, modern, and highly efficient places to live.

The existing body of scholarship on the Case Study Houses is scattershot, with much information existing in wiki articles online or in the form of large, cumbersome monographs that, while attractive to look at and satisfying to pore over, could be intimidating to the new reader, and several of the best were published decades ago, so they are often expensive and/or difficult to find. This, combined with the program's inconsistent naming structure, can make learning about the program tedious, even though

it produced some of the most visually beautiful and conceptually striking residential architecture of the century. This program ended almost 60 years ago; what can I add to that body of work?

My goal was fairly simple: to take that unwieldy mass of information and turn it into a compact field guide that would give an interested reader everything they need to know about the program, and nothing they don't. The information is all there, so it became a challenge of design to make it compact and palatable, and present it in a modern way that doesn't detract from the original aesthetic spirit of the magazine and the structures themselves.

THE RESEARCH

I thought it best to begin my research at the source, by reading through the *Arts & Architecture* entries for each of the buildings. These articles go into great detail about the construction, suppliers, and designers of each house, since its primary function was, after all, a form of advertising to the public. Its originality and quality made it an indispensable resource for my thesis, since it includes tons of great information about each house, its architect, and their designs and constructions. It provides the clearest possible look at how the program was advertised at the time, as well as how it was perceived by and presented to readers. The included articles, in ideal cases written by the architects themselves, place an obvious emphasis on designing houses that will best serve the average American postwar family, with some (most notably Richard Neutra, who paid famously fastidious attention to his clients' personal needs) describing very specific hypothetical families, creating in-depth profiles for each family member.

I additionally read an article by Daniel Martinez titled *Case Study House Program: Industry, Propaganda And Housing*, which provides an extremely thorough examination of the cultural and organizational influences on *Arts & Architecture* and the program at the

time of its development. It includes exploration of the prevailing social conditions that led to the development of the program (namely the return of thousands of soldiers after WWII which resulted in the postwar housing boom), as well as the specific qualities that made *A&A* such a trendsetting magazine under the leadership of John Entenza, who repeatedly emphasized the need for innovation in construction and materials. This contextual and historical evidence made it a useful source when examining the intent behind the program, as well as its perceived usefulness to the broader field of residential architecture and the home-buying populace at large. It also provides insight into the eventual fall of the program, which is a crucial point to examine, especially to emphasize how relatively quickly the endeavor collapsed after Entenza left the magazine in the early 1960s.

Perhaps the most useful source I came across while searching for details about each home was Elizabeth Smith's *Blueprints for Modern Living*. This book concatenates a series of essays by architects and historians relating to the Case Study House program, and includes details about the program, including floor plans, biographies of the architects, and details about each of the 36 proposed model homes. Smith is very thorough in her description of the program, and this book was the primary way I found details such as frame materials, square footage, etc.

Another interesting source was architectural historian Esther McCoy's extensive article from the Yale architectural research journal *Perspecta* simply titled *Arts & Architecture: Case Study Houses*. It offers a detailed examination of the motives behind the CSH program, as well as the author's contemporary perspective on it, having been published in 1975, less than a decade after the project officially ended. It provides useful background on many of the program's key people, especially Entenza, and includes numerous high-quality images. McCoy was one of the leading scholars on the program, and had even worked in the offices of several of the architects, giving her a firsthand perspective rarely found outside the magazine itself. The perspective of this article is

highly useful, because it is both founded in the age of the CSH program but also long enough after its end to provide clear and reasoned commentary on the processes of the program. McCoy includes personal notes from several of the architects involved, indicating a personal connection with them that can be difficult to find in other summary works. It also makes clear the interconnectedness of the program and the relatively small world of the architects involved. In contextualizing the CSH program amongst other architects working at the time in different styles, it elucidates the influences on the CSH houses which stemmed from other work.

I also used a book from McCoy, *Modern California Houses; Case Study Houses 1945–1962*. While technically published before the end of the program, and thus not fully representative of it, it offers valuable details about nearly every project in the program, as well as floorplans and numerous photographs for each entry. This longer-form work compared to the previous article allows much more in-depth exploration of each building, and McCoy also includes numerous details that were useful for filling in the gaps in Smith's work during my data synthesis.

For each home, I took down the following details: its number in the program, build status, year, architect(s), location, beds/baths, approximate square footage, type of frame/construction method (an important marker between styles of homes and general trends from earlier to later houses), and finally any relevant unique components of the build or design. The numbering system is, by the ex-*A&A* editor David Travers' own admission, somewhat arbitrary and archaic, so some suffixes are added by most scholars to resolve duplicates. The only other exception is Raphael Soriano's Case Study House 1950, which was named after the year of its publication, and the Case Study Apartments, which are numbered separately.

In terms of primary research, I also conducted early on a brief survey distributed via Slack and social media to get a better understanding of the current attitude toward radical

modern architecture as it relates to affordability. The survey consisted of six multiple choice questions (the first only asking their age group), most on a scale, that discussed participants' attitudes toward the importance of both modern architecture and their attitude towards the architectural taste in general of their place of residence. Conducted via Google Forms, the survey included questions about whether participants had a taste for modern architecture, as well as how much the architectural style of their home factored into their decision to live there. It also included a question about price and area, both limiting factors for contractors and builders as well as prospective tenants. Participants were asked the following questions:

WHICH OF THESE ENVIRONMENTS WOULD YOU PREFER TO LIVE IN?

Rural • Suburban • Urban • Doesn't matter

WHEN LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO LIVE, HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU IS THE ARCHITECTURAL STYLE OF THE BUILDING?

1–5 scale from Doesn't Matter to Very Important

WOULD YOU RATHER LIVE IN A BUILDING THAT IS MORE MODERN OR TRADITIONAL?

1–5 scale from Traditional to Modern

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE COST?

1–5 scale from Doesn't Matter to Very Important

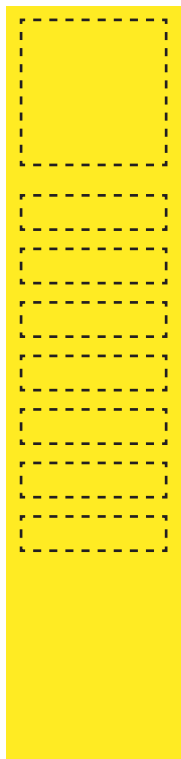
FINALLY, WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO PAY MORE TO LIVE SOMEWHERE THAT FITS YOUR AESTHETIC TASTES?

Not important • A little more • Significantly more

The results indicated that cost was the primary factor by a significant margin, with 70% of respondents ranking it Very Important, while a slight majority preferred building styles that skewed toward modern. This information informed the design of the book later on, as I was able to tailor my aesthetic choices towards a younger demographic with modern-leaning tastes.

THE INFORMATION

That brings me to the first crux of the book itself: the writing. This process added a whole dimension to the project that I really enjoyed, and it was very gratifying to be putting my own text on the page. This is where the bulk of my research was conducted during the prior term, as I needed to gather all the information that I wanted to pare down; since there is a lot of detail one could go into about a program that produced 36 designs over almost two decades, my approach was to use short passages to highlight the most important or unique features of each house, and put the drier information like square footage and physical location into a consistent, easily skimmable sidebar. This allowed me to include highlights from the wealth of interesting information from the original magazine and other sources that put the designs in context with each other and how they exist today, and makes the project as a whole much more complete than just including images and sidebar information with some bulleted points about unique features, or another similar approach.



20_B

STATUS
BUILT
YEAR
1958
ARCHITECT
BUFF, STRAUB, &
HENSMAN
LOCATION
ALTADENA, CA
SIZE
3BD/2BA
AREA
1800 SQ. FT
FRAME
WOOD



THE DESIGN

The other pillar of the project is, of course, what makes it a graphic design thesis, the design. There were several concrete steps I took in terms of overall visual direction to accomplish my goal of wrapping the original magazine's aesthetic in a modern package. First and foremost, I decided early on to use almost black-and-white imagery published in the original magazine. These original images are not only the still the best documentation there is of most of these houses, but many of them have since been demolished or remodeled beyond recognition, so it also helps keep everything consistent and gives the book a sparse aesthetic that stays true to *Arts & Architecture's* midcentury minimalism. I limited the color palette to just one bright accent color, neon yellow, to give the design some extra flexibility and to provide maximum contrast against the dark, visibly vintage photography. In terms of typography, my approach was again to gently modernize it by keeping the low-contrast bold sans serifs, but without being excessively retro (it helps that the design of the magazine was so forward-thinking at the time) and so I think mine complements it appropriately. *Arts & Architecture* also made heavy use of typefaces like Futura Bold, as did many modernist graphic designs of the period, so I chose Cosmica for headers to maintain the heavy geometry of Futura with a little more contemporary flair. I used Rama, a condensed sans serif, for my sidebar text, for its midcentury touch as well as to preserve horizontal space, and finally Zeitung Micro for body text as a very functional, attractive sans serif that's easy to read at small point sizes.

The sidebar is both informational and functional, providing a consistent visual anchor for each spread. Since the book's content also comes with its own numbering system, it mostly obviates the need for page numbers since each building's number is in the same spot at the top corner, and page numbers would only add complexity.

22

ARCHITECT
PIERRE KOENIG
LOCATION
LOS ANGELES, CA
SIZE
380/724
AREA
2200 SQ. FT.
FRAME
STEEL

STAHL HOUSE

One of the most dramatic and perhaps best-known designs of the entire Case Study House program, Pierre Koenig's Stahl House is highly emblematic of the program's futuristic persuasions. It contains only one solid exterior wall, facing the street, with the entire rear expanse of the home constructed of glass separated by the smallest number of slender steel pillars Koenig could get away with.

The dramatically cantilevered living room and massive roof overhangs are among the home's several experimental features; the children's bedroom can also be divided by a sliding wall depending on the family's needs. Today, the home is available for guided tours, and stands as an emblem of the kind of home that could have become the norm had the building industry kept up with residential architectural innovation in steel and glass.

22

STAHL HOUSE

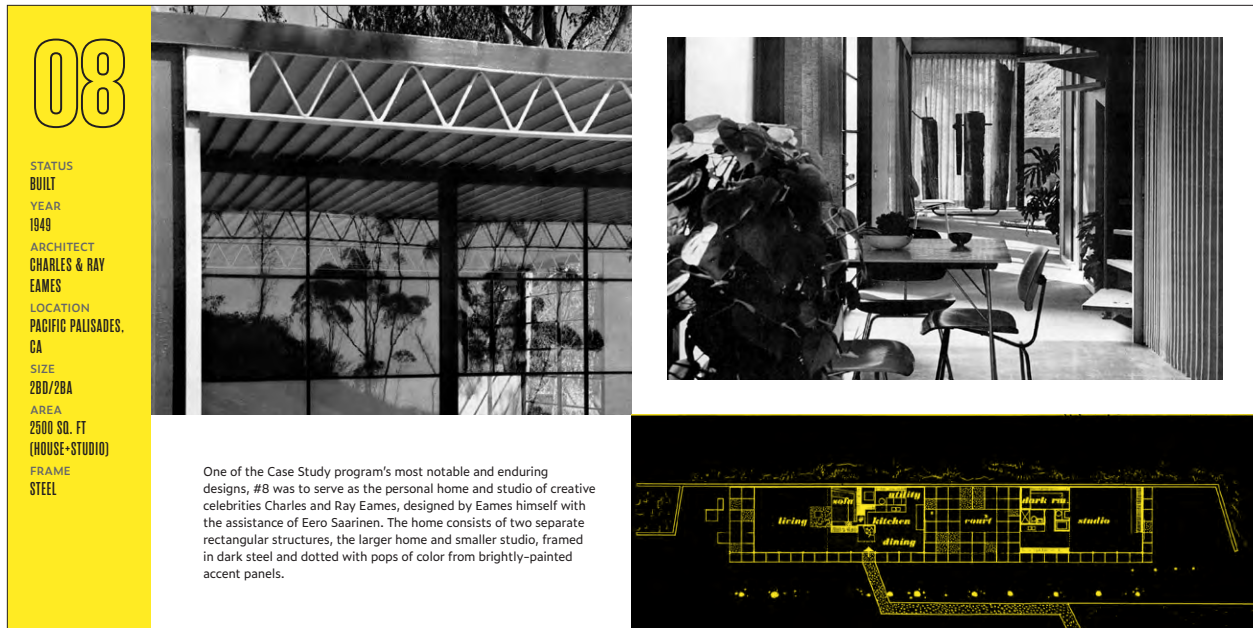
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Early on I experimented with various aspect ratios for the size of the book, and eventually settled on making it square based on feedback from my professor and peers. This creates a natural flow on the page in combination with the sidebar, creating a slightly smaller area on the left page that introduces the eye to the spread before it flows to the more spacious right page. The square aspect ratio at the relatively compact size also adds an element of approachability and tactility; I wanted to deliberately avoid making it feel too much like a larger coffee table book size since several prominent books on the program already use that form factor. Early test pages like the examples shown above also included the names of the houses, but were later removed for reasons of space as well as consistency, since only a portion of the houses have any meaningful moniker.



One of the Case Study program's most notable and enduring designs, #8 was to serve as the personal home and studio of creative celebrities Charles and Ray Eames, designed by Eames himself with the assistance of Eero Saarinen. The home consists of two separate rectangular structures, the larger home and smaller studio, framed in dark steel and dotted with pops of color from brightly-painted accent panels.

I worked the layouts around the images and floor plans as much as possible; dark images are often expanded to full bleed with text knocked out, and some of the floor plans incorporate yellow to tie the imagery into the book's visual language without altering the actual photographs. Some structures had a greater quantity or higher-quality photos available depending on how they were archived, and so many of the more dramatic homes get an extra spread to show off the photography. The final piece of the book is a map of currently standing Case Study structures, to give viewers an idea of the program's overall footprint, and to cap off the book with a more functional graphic element. The final product is a 102-page, 6-inch by 6-inch field guide that translates the large mass of information on the CSH program into an easily-digestible, attractive package.

In addition, I wanted to take the project one step beyond a publication to experiment with even more easily-accessible ways to present this body of knowledge. To that end, I created a series of social posts (designed for Instagram, but which could be easily resized) that explore how the CSH designs could be publicized in the digital era, the way they were publicized in the magazine sixty years ago. They combine some of

the more high-level information like the architects and sizes with the beautiful original photography in an interactive way, and the writing sections from the book translate neatly into the captions.


09

CASE STUDY SPOTLIGHT



casestudyspotlight Another collaboration between Eames and Saarinen, #8 was to be the personal residence of *Arts & Architecture* head (and master mind of the CSH program) John Entenza. A somewhat sleeker sibling of #8, the square plan rejects the skeletal prominence of the Eames house, concealing its structural members under plaster and paneling to create a free-flowing and streamlined interior. The bedroom includes a sliding door that allows unobstructed views past the living area to the ocean, as the entire rear wall of the house is glass. The overall impression is that of radical functionality and optimization of space, not without numerous hallmarks of the era such as the sunken conversation area and wood-paneled ceiling.

ARCHITECTS
Charles Eames & Eero Saarinen



LOCATION
Pacific Palisades, CA



SIZE
**2bd/
2ba**



22

CASE STUDY SPOTLIGHT

Los Angeles, CA

Pierre Koenig



**3bd/
2ba**



casestudyspotlight One of the most dramatic and perhaps best-recognized designs of the early Case Study House program, Pierre Koenig's "Koenig House" is highly representative of the program's modernist perspective. It features wide glass exterior walls, rising the entire wall with the entire rear exposure of the home constructed of glass, revealing the smaller number of interior rooms. The glass exterior wall is a striking feature, and the interior is a dramatic play of light and shadow. The house is a prime example of the program's modernist perspective, and it is a true masterpiece of modern architecture.

**2bd/
3ba**



casestudyspotlight #25 is one of the most urban Case Studies, situated along a densely populated canal in Long Beach. It is unassuming from the outside, with only a handful of large, uninterupted planes visible from outside. Interior light comes from the sides in the roof over the two-story atrium, flanked by glass-walled living areas that create a sense of airy, interrupted open space throughout the interior. Killingsworth considered it one of the best houses of his career, and it admirably utilizes the small parcel of land to create an unparalleled sense of flexibility and openness, with the signature atrium being one of the most dramatic single spaces in the entire Case Study program.




17B


CASE STUDY SPOTLIGHT

Beverly Hills, CA


Craig Ellwood

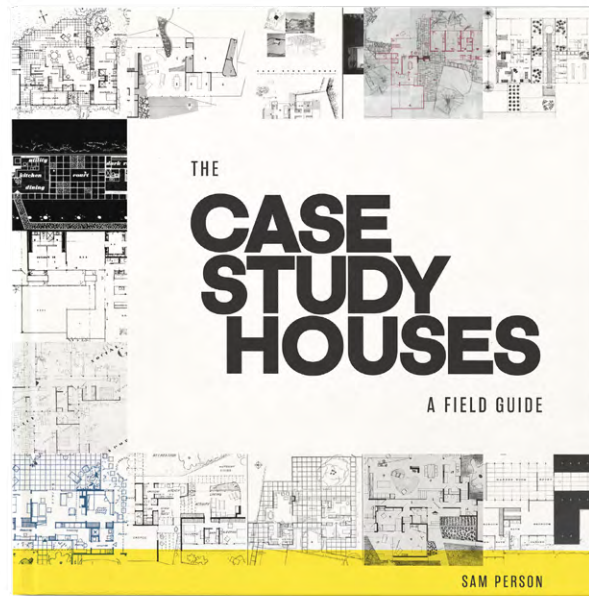


**8bd/
5ba**



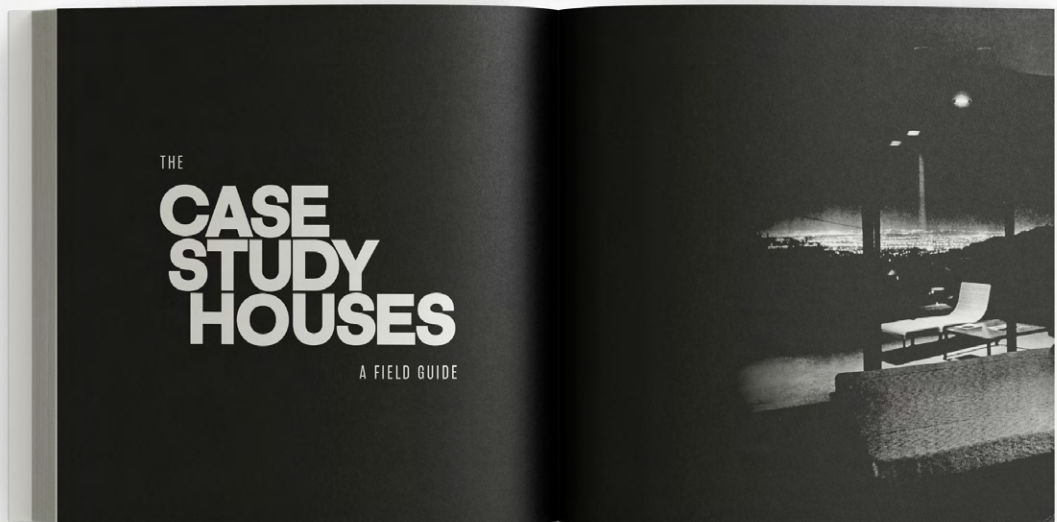
casestudyspotlight Ellwood's #17 is not only the most dramatic, but the best, but for the most part, the most representative representative of the Case Study program. The house, designed for a family with a children, measures about 3,000 square feet, and features a glass exterior that provides the house with a sense of openness and flexibility. The house is a prime example of the program's modernist perspective, and it is a true masterpiece of modern architecture.





CONCLUSION

This project provides a glimpse into a prime example of 20th-century optimism, recontextualized for the modern reader. Its length and the content density of its subject also presented a welcome and engaging design challenge. The Case Study Program was an ode to a philosophy, one which, although arguably myopic and having failed to accomplish its stated goal, left a lasting imprint on American residential architecture and helped establish numerous names that helped filter modernism into almost every aspect of our design culture to some degree. My research illuminated the vast amount of work and thought that was put into this program without, in many cases, ever seeing the light of day, which only increases the need to enshrine its intellectual and aesthetic contributions to American architecture at large. My field guide is at once an exercise in design and writing, a humble contribution to this particular sphere of information, and my own tribute to this pivotal collaboration.





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