



**The Eichler Dilemma.** What does it mean to restore an architectural classic? Who gets to make the design rules? And using what standards?



In 2003, Adriene Biondo joined forces with John Eng and Marty Arbunich, the director and publisher of the Eichler Network, to purchase the X-100, the one-of-a-kind prototype steel Eichler built as an exhibition/showcase house. The trio is now working to secure its spot on the National Register of Historic Places.



Eichler's X-100 Experimental Research House in San Mateo, California is shown here in 1956, and 2003 (inset). Designed by Case Study architect A. Quincy Jones, the X-100 Eichler has been maintained in its original condition. Some homeowners wonder if that always has to be the case.

In the 1950s and 1960s, developer Joseph Eichler brought modern architecture to mass-market suburban houses. Built by the thousands in Northern California, and in smaller numbers in Southern California, Eichler homes faced the street with modest, usually windowless façades. They had flat or low-pitched roofs, post-and-beam construction, and flat front doors that often led into open-air atriums. The blending of inside and outside continued at the back of the house, where the living room and backyard met in a wall of glass.

"The whole idea was to have a simple, geometric design that was really subdued relative to the nature around it," says Frank LaHorgue, who worked for the developer in the 1960s and now lives in an Eichler home in Marin County's Lucas Valley neighborhood.

Architecturally distinctive but popular in their day, Eichler homes epitomize nice modernism. But for all his aesthetic idealism, Eichler was a businessman with a knack for marketing. He attracted buyers not with rigid theory but with the promise of pleasure: affordable houses suited to the way real Californians lived.

Nearly a half century later, the drive to preserve Eichler homes is casting modernists in an unaccustomed role. Typically, people who want modern homes run up against city regulations or neighborhood design guidelines that restrict buildings to "authentic" or "compatible" forms and materials. In this scenario, neighborhood preservationists are the bad guys, squelching creativity in an attempt to freeze architecture in the past while the modernists are the nice nonconformists. In Eichler neighborhoods, however, modernists are the conservatives. They're the ones talking about authenticity and compatibility, trying to stamp out any colors, forms, materials, and alterations opposing the master's vision.

In Lucas Valley, the homeowners' association's design review guidelines dictate vertical wood siding, plain doors, and a palette of grayish earth tones. "With sixteen Eichler home designs and twenty-five approvable colors, in thousands of possible combinations, individuality is easily attainable," declare the guidelines. Tell that to someone who wants a yellow house.

After decades of design review, Lucas Valley looks remarkably consistent. But LaHorgue notices the aes-

thetic deviants—products of slack enforcement or outright defiance—and they bother him: white paint, panel doors, "decorative copper goodies attached to the front of the house," a fence of plastic panels. The neighborhood, he says, is "a lot different than it was originally."

Eichler fans disagree about how much change is too much. Down in Palo Alto, Carroll Rankin sounds every bit the purist. "These houses are structurally honest," says Rankin, a retired architect. "If you accept such a thing as style in architecture," he says, "you are in trouble with authenticity."

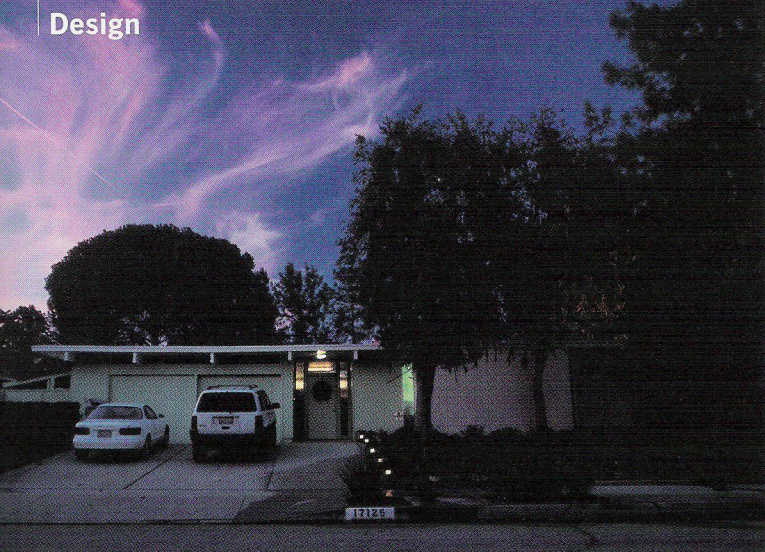
Like LaHorgue, Rankin serves on his association's architectural review committee, and he has campaigned unsuccessfully for tougher city controls. But as we walk out his front door into his atrium, I notice that the door has panels and is lit by a coach lamp—affronts to LaHorgue's version of authenticity.

Who, then, gets to make the design rules, and using what standards? The answer depends, in part, on why you want to preserve Eichlers in the first place. Is it because their architecture represents some higher good? Or is it simply because people love them?

In broader terms, can modernism be one style among many, offering pleasure and meaning to some while leaving others aesthetically unimpressed—or ready to sue? To put the question politically, is modernism authoritarian and *radical*, a movement that seeks to remake human behavior according to a new standard, or is it pluralist and *liberal*, a movement that advances individuality, tolerance, and choice?

Both strands existed in 20th-century modernism, but radicalism ruled. For all its aesthetic innovation and progressive rhetoric, historic modernism was an intolerant design ideology. Its advocates preached absolutist principles like "truth in materials," rejecting pleasure as an autonomous value. They believed in a hierarchy of taste, ignoring the differences among individuals. Modern architecture got a bad reputation because radical modernists told the public they had to accept buildings they hated and give up buildings they loved.

Today, some Eichler enthusiasts sound just as absolutist. "Art has to be genuine and true and pure and essential, and that's what Eichlers are," says Mark Marcinik, ►



“I’m not a purist,” says Adriene Biondo, the owner of not one but two Eichlers. “I don’t want anybody to have to live a different way, just like I wouldn’t want to be told to change the color of my house.”

Different strokes for different folks? Top left: Adriene Biondo’s Eichler is “correct” save for the pistachio paint selected to match her vintage car. Top right: Architect Mark Marcinik’s pristine renovation of a client’s Palo Alto Eichler reflects his view that Eichlers are “genuine and true and pure and essential.” The paint options (at right) offered by the Lucas Valley homeowners’ association represent some sort of middle ground.

a Palo Alto architect who with his wife and partner, K.C., has renovated around 70 Eichlers. He despises the old-fashioned tastes of the typical Bay Area resident.

“How can you justify the most radical thinker when they live in a Victorian with antiques around? Essentially the guy’s a fake,” he says. But what if you just like Victorian architecture and antiques? “Then you’re immoral,” says Marcinik. Of such views are absolutist design regulations born.

Eichler preservationists do come in a more tolerant version. Their modernism is about optimism and fun—the unrestrained self-expression of Southern California. “Our family was upbeat and quirky,” says Adriene Biondo, reflecting on why she bought and restored an Eichler (which had been remodeled in a ’70s Spanish/wrought-iron theme), and has since bought another.

Biondo is campaigning to have the Los Angeles city government designate her San Fernando Valley neighborhood a Historic Preservation Overlay Zone. The Eichlers that haven’t yet been altered would have to get city approval for exterior changes. Biondo’s goal is to draw attention to the architecture’s distinctive value and to teach people how to preserve it, not to impose her favorite style on everyone. She is, after all, an aesthetic deviant: She and her husband, John Eng, painted their own Eichler pistachio green to match their 1956 Olds Rocket. You couldn’t do that under Lucas Valley rules.

“I’m not a purist,” Biondo says. “I don’t want anybody to have to live a different way, just like I wouldn’t want to be told to change the color of my house.” She sympa-

thizes not only with the movie art director who painted his house black with gold trim but also with the Middle Eastern immigrants who installed columns, glass brick, and a red-tile roof.

“They love the house,” she says. “They haven’t done those things to it because they don’t love it. Part of me wants to be able to protect their view of it.”

Oddly enough, the not-so-nice modernists in Northern California have stumbled on an arrangement that comes closer to making everyone as happy as possible. The homeowners’ associations established by Eichler have broad powers to regulate how the neighborhood’s houses look. But associations aren’t governments. They can’t arrest or fine deviants. They have to sue them. Courts generally uphold associations’ rules, but lawsuits take time and money. Association funds are limited, and board members are volunteers. So homeowners who really want a plastic fence, bright blue paint, or copper trellises can—and do—take their chances and defy the board. So far, the association will sue only if the offense is so egregious that the whole neighborhood is upset.

As a result, the design review process achieves pretty much what Biondo wants from her overlay zone: It teaches people how to keep their homes looking like Eichlers. Most homeowners follow the committee’s guidance. Eichler’s nice modernism makes them happy, and they want to preserve it. The deviations are small. A pink house or a panel door does not a neighborhood destroy. Unless, of course, you’re an architectural fundamentalist. And what, in the 21st century, is modern about that? ■

