



“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.

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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? ■

