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# The Moderns

From Lautner to Schindler and Gehry to Wright, an open house tour of the West Coast's most phenomenal—and architecturally vital—residences.

**James Sanders** moves in.

**I**t is a truism, of course, that Los Angeles is profoundly different from older, more established world cities. Like most truisms, this one rests largely on the truth. The city is different from places like New York, London, and Paris—and not least because the kind of building that symbolizes it most is not a major public landmark (think Empire State Building, Big Ben, the Paris Opéra), but the ordinary, single-family house. L.A. is a city of houses, and to truly know the place, in some sense, is to know its houses. This is especially true for the city's extraordinary heritage of modern homes, which, taken together, rival—or even surpass—any others on Earth. Here, then, is a selection of the city's greatest modern houses, constructed across much of the 20th century, by some of the world's best-known architects, in nearly every kind of setting the city has to offer, from the beaches to the hills to the flats. Though no selection like this can possibly be complete, these are, we feel, the essential modern houses, the ones that best define the exciting new ways of building—and living—that this surprising, inventive city has been pioneering for more than a century.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NOAH WEBB



**Philip Lovell House**  
Richard J. Neutra, 1929, Los Angeles

Though enamored with the vacation house architect Rudolph Schindler had built for him, Dr. Philip M. Lovell selected Schindler's friend, former housemate, and sometime design partner Richard Neutra to design the larger and far more prominent house he was building in the Hollywood Hills—causing a permanent rift between the two great, Vienna-born designers. Seeking to outdo Schindler's daring essays in concrete, and working with a steep hillside site, Neutra designed the first steel-framed modern house ever built in America—a series of cantilevered white volumes and balconies that seem to float weightlessly over the surrounding landscape. Oriented toward the sun, and filled with terraces to encourage sunbathing and exercise, the so-called "Health House" became a sensation upon its opening in late 1929, especially after Lovell—a forward-thinking physician whose Sunday *L.A. Times* column, "The Care of the Body," promulgated such radical ideas as a healthy, low-fat diet and plenty of exercise—invited his readers to visit the place. Over two weekends, Neutra conducted tours for an estimated 15,000 people, most of whom had never been inside a Modern house before. Still visually striking six decades later, the Lovell house provided the perfect cinematic residence for the powerful, sophisticated, yet shady character of Pierce Morehouse Patchett (David Strathairn) in 1997's *L.A. Confidential*.



### Schindler House Rudolph Schindler, 1922, West Hollywood

Arriving in Los Angeles to assist Frank Lloyd Wright with his concrete-block houses, the Vienna-born architect Rudolph Schindler soon began work on a new home for himself: a kind of urban campsite, conceived during a vacation in a rented cabin in Yosemite, that could house his family and another couple. Featuring wide, sliding doors and canvas screens that opened onto landscaped patios, the low-slung structure advanced the ideal of indoor-outdoor living that Schindler believed (correctly) represented the future of Southern California. Some of the more fanciful ideas were not especially successful, such as the open porches on the roof that Schindler called "sleeping baskets." And the second family soon moved away to conventional quarters. But the house, as the architect Charles Moore wrote, "reveals so openly the love and struggle that went into it that the flaws seem unimportant." Many of its features—the concrete floor slab placed level with the garden, the wide overhanging roofs, and, above all, the fluid mix of interior and exterior spaces—would go on to exert profound influence over the region for decades to come. Today, the Kings Road house has been opened to the public, making it possible for everyone to enjoy what the critic Reyner Banham called "perhaps the most unobtrusively enjoyable domestic habitat ever created in Los Angeles."



**"La Miniatura"**  
Mrs. George Madison Millard House  
Frank Lloyd Wright, 1923, Pasadena

Rising serenely from the base of a lushly planted ravine, the exquisite jewel box known as La Miniatura is the first—and arguably the greatest—of the five extraordinary houses Frank Lloyd Wright designed and built in Los Angeles from 1917 to 1923. Though the period proved one of the low points—emotionally and financially—in his epic career, Wright managed to leave behind an enduring legacy in these five domestic landmarks, all employing a stunning new way of building: the use of precast concrete blocks, shaped into rich geometric patterns, and assembled into complex sculptural masses, vaguely recalling Mayan temples. Wright created the masterpiece of the group, for Alice Millard, the refined but high-spirited widow of a mid-western rare-book dealer, a structure the architecture critic Brendan Gill described as "assuredly among the most beautiful houses to be found in the world, regardless of size." A double-height living room opens onto a terrace that in turn overlooks a small manmade pond, whose shimmering water reflects back the image of the tiny but grandly scaled building—"slipping it all," as one architect later wrote, "into the realm of dreams."



**Leonard J. Malin House**  
(“Chemosphere” House)  
John Lautner, 1960,  
Los Angeles

Located on a secluded Laurel Canyon ravine, the Malin House (better known by its science-fiction-style nickname, the Chemosphere), carries the cliffside gymnastics to incredible—one might say absurd—extremes. Sitting atop a single stalk-like column, the house has been likened by some to “a thickened Frisbee,” or a “pumpkin pie with windows.” Others have compared it to a flying saucer, or the mission-control structure of some James Bond-type

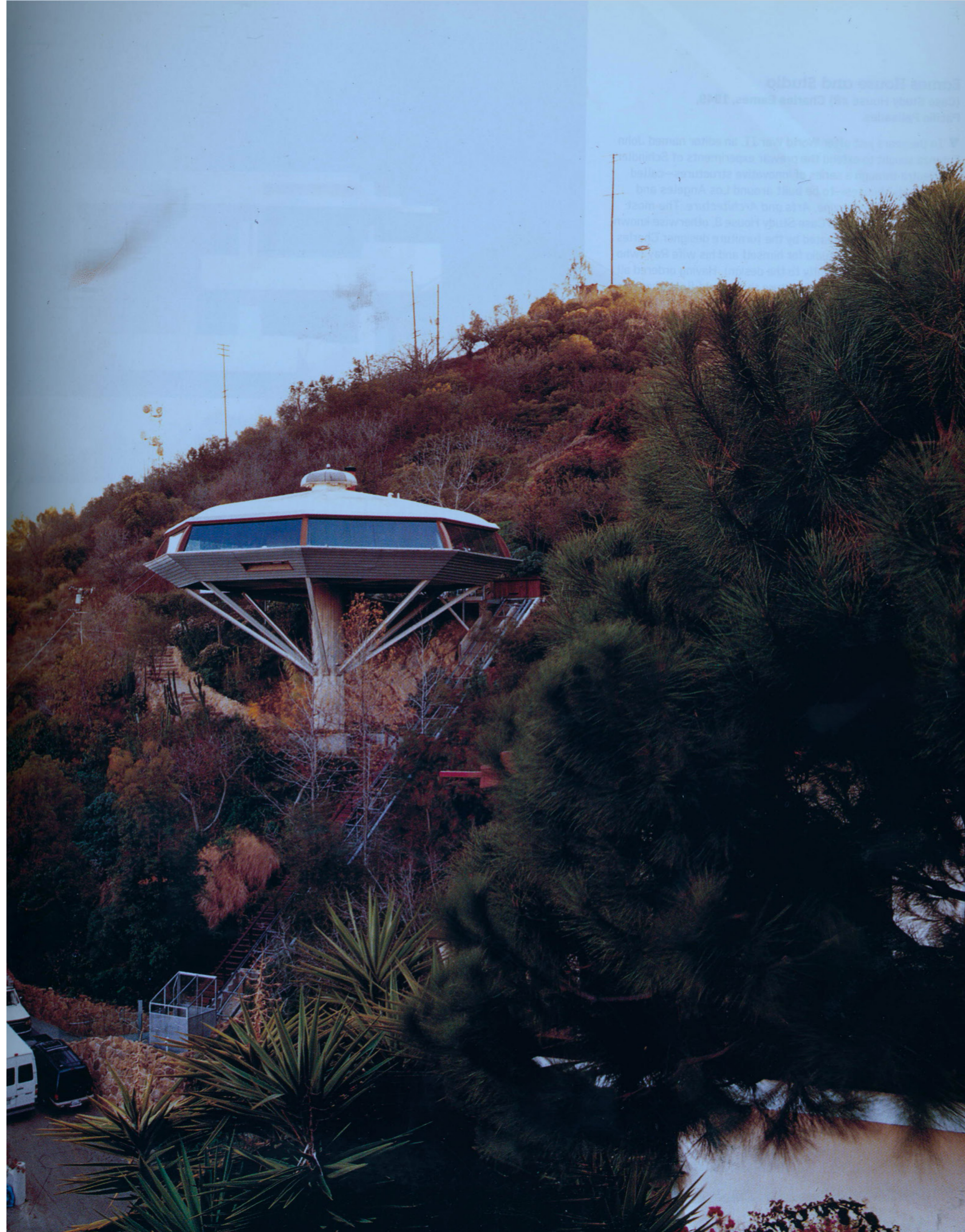
adventure film. As much as any among the more high-minded modern houses, however, this futuristic design by architect John Lautner (who apprenticed as a young man with Frank Lloyd Wright) honestly exemplifies the distinct architectural culture of Los Angeles’s hillside communities, in which the combination of semi-secluded sites, impossibly steep topography, and the potential for extraordinary views has given license to unbridled architectural fantasy. And for all its cartoon-like appeal (visitors reach its front door, for example, by way of a Disneyland-style cable car that rises up the

hillside from the street below), the Malin house actually a surprisingly functional and comfortable residence, with three bedrooms, two baths, and a large living/dining room with an adjoining kitchen. Needless to say, its unusual appearance has long made it a favorite with Hollywood art directors, notably for the 1984 Brian De Palma thriller, *Body Double*.



**Horatio West Court**  
Irving J. Gill, 1919, Santa Monica

For all the stunning variety of the modern dwellings presented on the previous pages, they share something crucial in common: They are single-family houses, sitting on their own lots. (Only the Schindler house on Kings Road was occupied by a second family). As such, they are a part of the residential tradition that in many ways has defined Los Angeles ever since it became a real city about a century ago. But it is also a tradition that, for better or worse, may represent the past more than the future. Over the last decades, as Los Angeles has expanded in population and land has grown ever scarcer, the direction has been unmistakable: The city is growing denser. Even now, most new residential construction in L.A. is for multi-family units, a trend that will only increase with time. The impact of all this on the essential character of the city—on what might be considered its soul—remains to be seen. In the meantime, the multi-family project, not the traditional single-family house, has arisen as the city’s greatest design challenge. To address it, today’s planners could do far worse than study the superb four-unit rental project that Irving Gill built a few blocks from the beach back in 1919. Executed in an especially forward-looking vocabulary, Horatio Court West features a central driveway and garage flanked by a pair of two-story, five-room houses on each side. Though the houses differ subtly from each other, all feature living rooms upstairs, with windows on three sides carefully placed to capture the magnificent views of the ocean and the mountains that first drew newcomers to this unique landscape.



**Eames House and Studio**  
(Case Study House #8) Charles Eames, 1949,  
Pacific Palisades

▼ In the years just after World War II, an editor named John Entenza sought to extend the prewar experiments of Schindler and Neutra through a series of innovative structures—called “Case Study” houses—to be built around Los Angeles and published in his magazine, *Arts and Architecture*. The most influential of these was Case Study House 8, otherwise known as the Eames House, created by the furniture designer Charles Eames as a home and studio for himself and his wife Ray (who also contributed significantly to the design). Having ordered all the steel for a bridge-type structure that would float above their sloping site near the Pacific, the Eameses decided, once the steel had arrived, to build a different house entirely—using all the same pieces. (In the end they needed only one additional beam.) The result was a pair of elegant cubes running along the ridge of the site, screened by a line of eucalyptus trees and separated by a small garden. One of the first modern homes built to the scale and budget of a middle-class family, the Eames House quickly impressed architects and critics around the world, who marveled at the disciplined yet playful use of colored infill wall panels (reminiscent of a Mondrian painting), the airy open-web truss roofing, and the refreshingly cluttered interiors, filled with hundreds of carefully arranged artworks, fabrics, furniture, and other objets collected by the remarkable husband-and-wife team. Occasionally open to the public for house tours, it is “the only place in Southern California,” Charles Moore has written, “where the real and the romantic are both operating full tilt.”



**Lovell Beach House**  
Rudolph Schindler, 1926,  
Newport Beach

▲ Soon after completing his own house on Kings Road, the architect Rudolph Schindler found an almost ideal client in Dr. Lovell. For Lovell’s seaside vacation house in Newport Beach, Schindler extended his experiments with concrete to create the first house in America built in the modern “International Style” sweeping across Europe. Employing five concrete frames, or “cradles,” Schindler lifted the living, dining and sleeping rooms of the house well above the bustle of the public beach, while offering dramatic elevated views of the Pacific through bands of windows and wide balconies. With its dazzling white walls, sleek lines, and daring cantilevers, the structure inevitably suggests a kind of ship, seeking somehow to break free of its site and sail out over the ocean—“European architecture,” one critic later wrote, “going with the flow of the California dream.”



**Gehry House**  
Frank O. Gehry, 1978,  
Santa Monica

Renowned today around the world for his immense museums and concert halls, Frank Gehry’s reputation started in many ways with this relatively modest structure—his own home—located on a quiet street corner in Santa Monica. Interrogating the nature of a typical Los Angeles house even as he transformed it into something completely extraordinary, Gehry took an ordinary asbestos-shingled bungalow and began ripping it apart, revealing its construction, then surrounded it with a membrane of industrial materials—corrugated metal sheeting, cyclone fencing, asphalt floors—that represented the very opposite of conventional residential elegance. The result was not only a commentary on the modern American landscape—calling our attention to materials we normally ignore or avoid—but a remarkable architectural composition, in which the original house, still visible within its second skin, inevitably engages in a tense but provocative dialogue with the edgy, unsettling elements surrounding it. Propelling the city’s modern

residential tradition in a striking new direction, the Gehry house suggested a series of design approaches—and ideas about Southern California—that have been taken up in the years since by architects such as Eric Owen Moss, Koning/Eizenberg, Michael Rotondi, Thom Mayne and still younger practitioners, who have chosen to reflect and even celebrate in their own projects the striking, sometimes bizarre paradoxes and disjunctions of their city’s urban landscape.