

Modernism for the Masses

The midcentury style of Joseph Eichler proves a fitting framework for a contemporary remodel

BY CHARLES MILLER

You might say John Klopff's clients had their priorities in the right order. First, as the parents of three children, they chose to live in Burlingame, Calif., because of its top-quality schools. Second, they wanted an Eichler.

Influenced by architects Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, and Frank Lloyd Wright, developer Joseph Eichler is known for his midcentury California tract homes that brought modernist design to a growing middle class (see "A memorable man creates a signature style," p. 41). Built from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, Eichler's homes featured prominent carports, broad connections to the outdoors, radiant-floor heating, and finished-wood interiors. A central atrium was his signature element.

The clients had worked with Klopff, a San Francisco architect, on the remodel of their ranch house 10 years prior. That project opened their eyes to the appeal of Eichler's designs, and they decided then that when the time was right, they would seek out a house with better potential for a modern makeover. They wanted to find a house that was, in their words, "Klopffable"—one that had the modern style they loved, which the architect could then tune to suit their needs. It would be more than just an Eichler—it would be *their* Eichler.

A practical wish list

Built in 1964, the house they found had been passed on by the original owners to their daughter, who had rented it to the County



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DESIGN VIDEO For an inside look at this home and those behind its design, visit FineHomebuilding.com/houses.

of San Mateo for use as a halfway house. It had endured some wear and tear and had undergone some interior remodeling, but the essential elements remained intact.

The remodel had four initial goals: Update the electrical system; reconfigure a single bathroom into a full bath, a powder room, and a laundry room; enlarge the kitchen; and

repurpose the original family room to meet the new family's needs.

The house's original wiring consisted of 110v service that ran under the concrete slab containing the radiant heating that was typical of Eichler homes. To meet code, new 220v wiring was routed over the roof. New wiring meant gutting the house, so insula-

BEST REMODEL

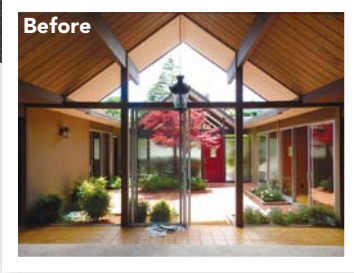
San Francisco architect John Klopf earned top honors with his sensitive remodel of an iconic midcentury home. Klopf showed how it was possible to reimagine a home's aesthetic to match contemporary expectations while celebrating the enduring appeal of its original design.

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AWARD



Eichler's approach. Centered under the house's northernmost gable, the living room (above), owes its spaciousness to a dramatic cathedral ceiling and glass walls that open the view to the yard. By contrast, windows on the front of the house (right) are set high within the shadows of the eaves to enhance privacy. The double gable was a popular Eichler design.





An atrium as you enter. One of Eichler's signature design features was a central atrium open to the sky, seen here from the living room. The original floor-to-ceiling plate glass was replaced with tempered, triple-pane glass that lets light in and keeps the chill out.

tion and drywall were added to increase energy efficiency and decrease flammability. Despite its age, the copper pipe used for the radiant heating had held up well and did not require replacement.

Eichler homes were known for their post-and-beam frames and woody interiors that featured mahogany wall panels and ceilings of gray-washed Douglas fir. The interior of this house had been darkened further with terra-cotta-colored floor tiles. Brightening up the interior seemed an appropriate strategy to contemporize the house while following Eichler's original intent to create open, light-filled spaces. The palette the homeowners chose couldn't be simpler: white and light grays that make the most of the light. The same 2-ft.-sq. floor tiles are used throughout the house, including the atrium, to enhance the sense of openness and to ease transitions between interior and exterior.

No changes were made to the exterior structure of the house except for the south

wall of the atrium, which was pushed back a couple of feet and anchored by the framing of the southern gable. Before this was done, the entire wall shook when the entry door was shut. The original five-panel front wall of the atrium was reconfigured into six panels that line up precisely with the framing of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the opposite wall. The resulting symmetry quietly underscores a sense of the house being at rest, of being a place where nature and shelter, indoors and outdoors, intermingle.

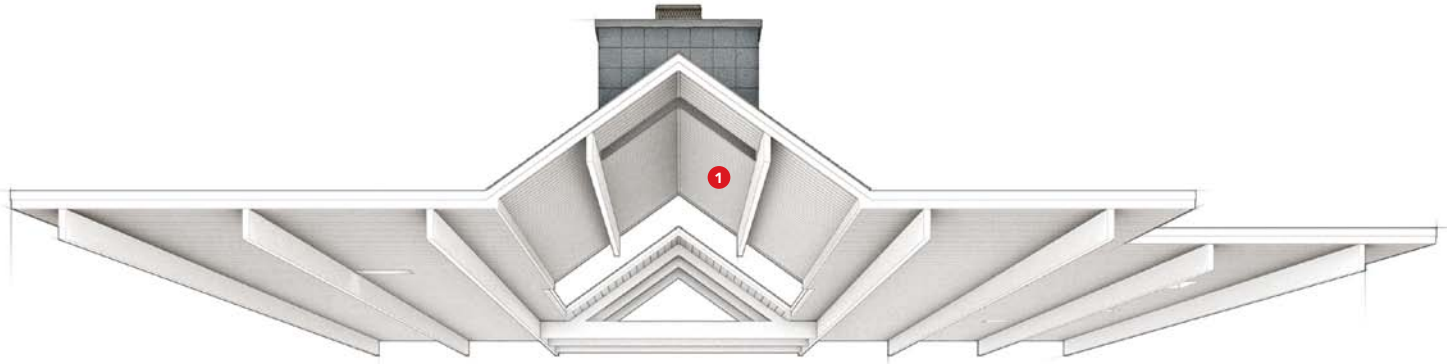
Eichler's enduring elements

Eichler's goal was to construct a "modernist middle-class house" that would make ordinary people feel good about their homes. His collaboration in 1949 with the architectural firm of Anshen & Allen gave birth to many of the features for which Eichler homes became known (drawing, facing page). At the same time, his homes display enduring design strategies that can help any small home feel



Inside, but outdoors. Open to the sky, the atrium in the center of the house functions as an outdoor room. Its tile floor is slightly sloped to allow rainfall to drain away under the wall facing the street.

AN ICON ADAPTS



What makes it an Eichler

1 Double-gable design

In this popular design, the first gable shelters the entry and provides the covered parking spaces required by the city; the second gable makes the living room a vaulted space.

2 Carport

The car is right out in front, reflecting the homeowner's social status in an era when the automobile signaled not just physical but social mobility.

3 Atrium

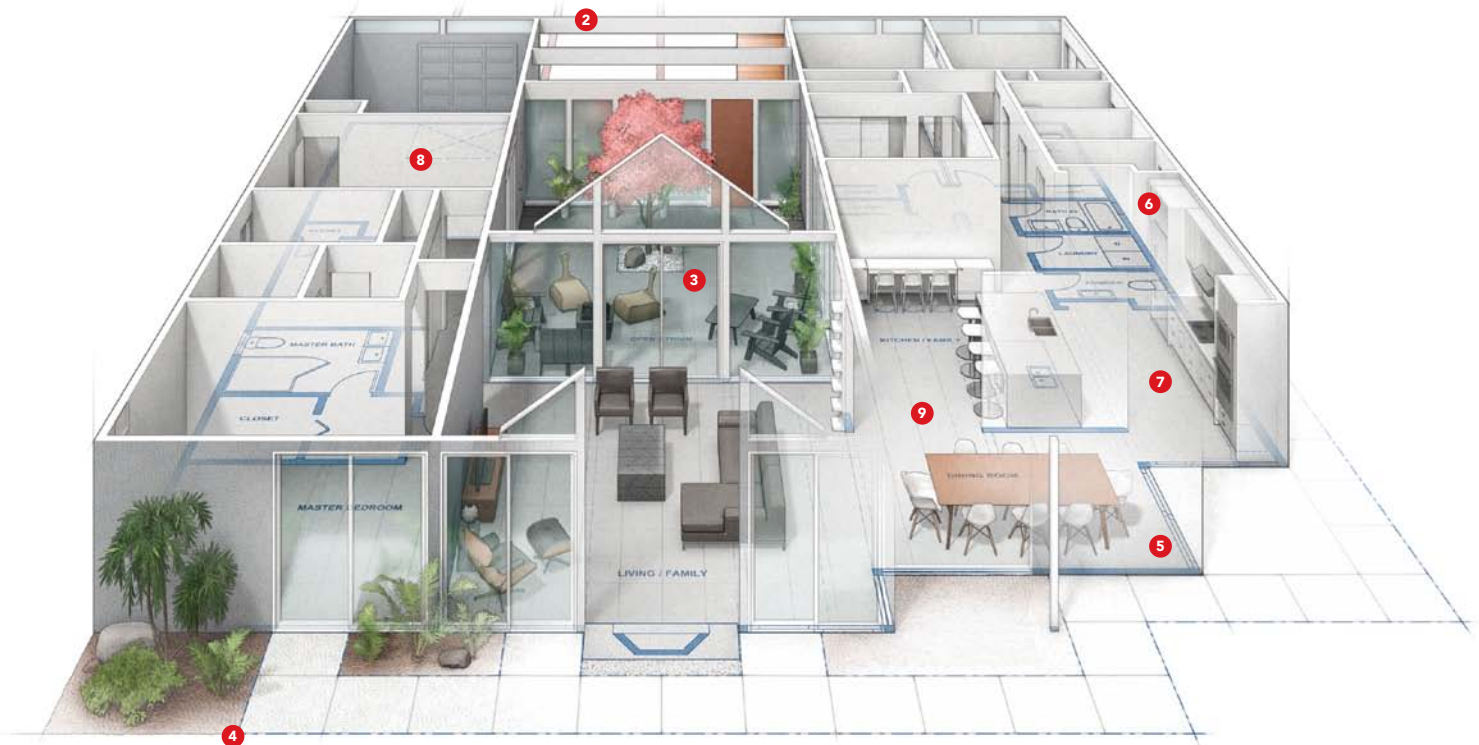
One of Eichler's signature design features was a room open to the sky.

4 Landscaping

Eichler homes came already landscaped. The developer saw landscaping as an essential element of the homes and made it part of the design and construction process.

5 Radiant heating

Eichler homes typically featured slab-on-grade radiant heating.



What makes it better

6 A better bath

The original bath was divided into two parts, with sinks in one room and the tub and toilet in another. Reconfiguring this space made an additional half-bath and laundry room possible. A deep linen closet was added to compensate for lost storage space.

7 A larger, more functional kitchen

The original galley kitchen had a sink along the wall and a stove in the peninsula opposite. The remodel widened the peninsula and pushed it back 18 in., making the kitchen work area feel more expansive. The skylight that illuminates this area was part of the original Eichler design. Seating and storage were added to the peninsula, and the cooktop was relocated.

8 A family-room solution

The remodel opened the kitchen to the living room and recast what was the family room as a dining and study area. A more secluded activity space was created by converting an extra bedroom near the master-bedroom suite for use as a family room or guest room.

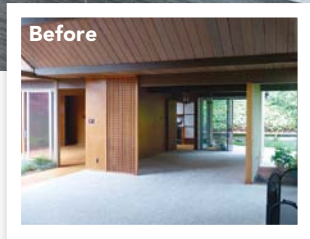
9 Enhanced sightlines

An additional line of sight from the living room through the dining room and the kitchen was added by removing a section of wall.



SPECS

Bedrooms: 4, plus flex room **Bathrooms:** 2½ **Size:** 2504 sq. ft. **Year built:** original, 1964; renovated, 2014 **Location:** Burlingame, Calif. **Architect:** John Klopf, klopfachitecture.com **Builder:** Flegel Construction **Interior designer:** client



expansive, including open spaces, ample daylight, simple finishes, and long views.

The atrium and the rooms surrounding it on three sides are flooded with natural light. Rooms that don't share a wall with the atrium get a generous dose of illumination from windows that face the side yard or backyard. Though he liked the face of his homes to be blank to the street, Eichler also made use of long, narrow windows beneath the flat-roofed wings of the front of the house to bring light into the garage and the bedrooms that face the street.

The home's open plan allows many interior views, but the longest line of sight runs from the front door straight through the atrium and living room all the way to the landscaped backyard. Another line of sight, enhanced by removing a portion of wall, connects the kitchen and dining area to both the atrium and the living room. The blazing-red fall foliage of the Japanese maple smack in the middle of the atrium is visible from all of these vantage points. It is all just as Joseph Eichler would have planned it. □

Charles Miller is an editor at large. Photos by the author, except where noted.

The view enhanced. Removing a portion of wall between the dining room and kitchen lengthened the view from the living room. Dark wood ceilings were painted white to lighten and simplify the palette. Large 2-ft. by 2-ft. tiles were used throughout the house as well as in the atrium to ease transitions and enhance the sense of space.



A more practical kitchen. To enlarge the original galley-style kitchen, the existing peninsula was pushed back 18 in., giving the cook room to maneuver while preserving generous prep, cleanup, storage, and eating space. The cooktop and sink switched places for a more family-friendly design.

A memorable man creates a signature style

Joseph Eichler was a tough-talking, cigar-smoking New Yorker—a “Good Brooklynite” in the words of a friend from the same borough—who moved to California in 1925 to work in his family’s food business. When four members of the company were arrested for fraud in 1943, Eichler and his family were cut off from their livelihood.

Needing a place to live, they rented a home in Hillsborough that was one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian houses. Living in it sent a strong message to Eichler about what modern houses could do. He decided then to go into the business of building them.

Eichler first used draftsmen to draw plans for his houses, but in 1949 he began working

with architects Robert Anshen and Stephen Allen. One of the first tracts built with an Anshen & Allen design was the 1950 Sunnyvale Manor Addition. Although small at 1044 sq. ft., the homes had the signature features Eichler would become known for: flat roofs, carports, slab-on-grade radiant-floor heating, post-and-beam frames, and finished wood interiors. Despite the cost of these features, Eichler managed to keep his prices at \$9 per sq. ft., including the land.

By the mid-1950s, Eichler was on a roll. Home magazines loved his work, and he hired other architects, including A. Quincy Jones and Frederick E. Emmons. By 1959, Eichler homes were twice the price of

other tract houses, but they still sold well.

Known for asking, “Why can’t we do this?” in a brusque tone, Eichler was a hands-on businessman who tweaked designs constantly. When his popular atrium was criticized by builders because of its tendency to leak, Eichler refused to eliminate it, choosing to work through the problems instead.

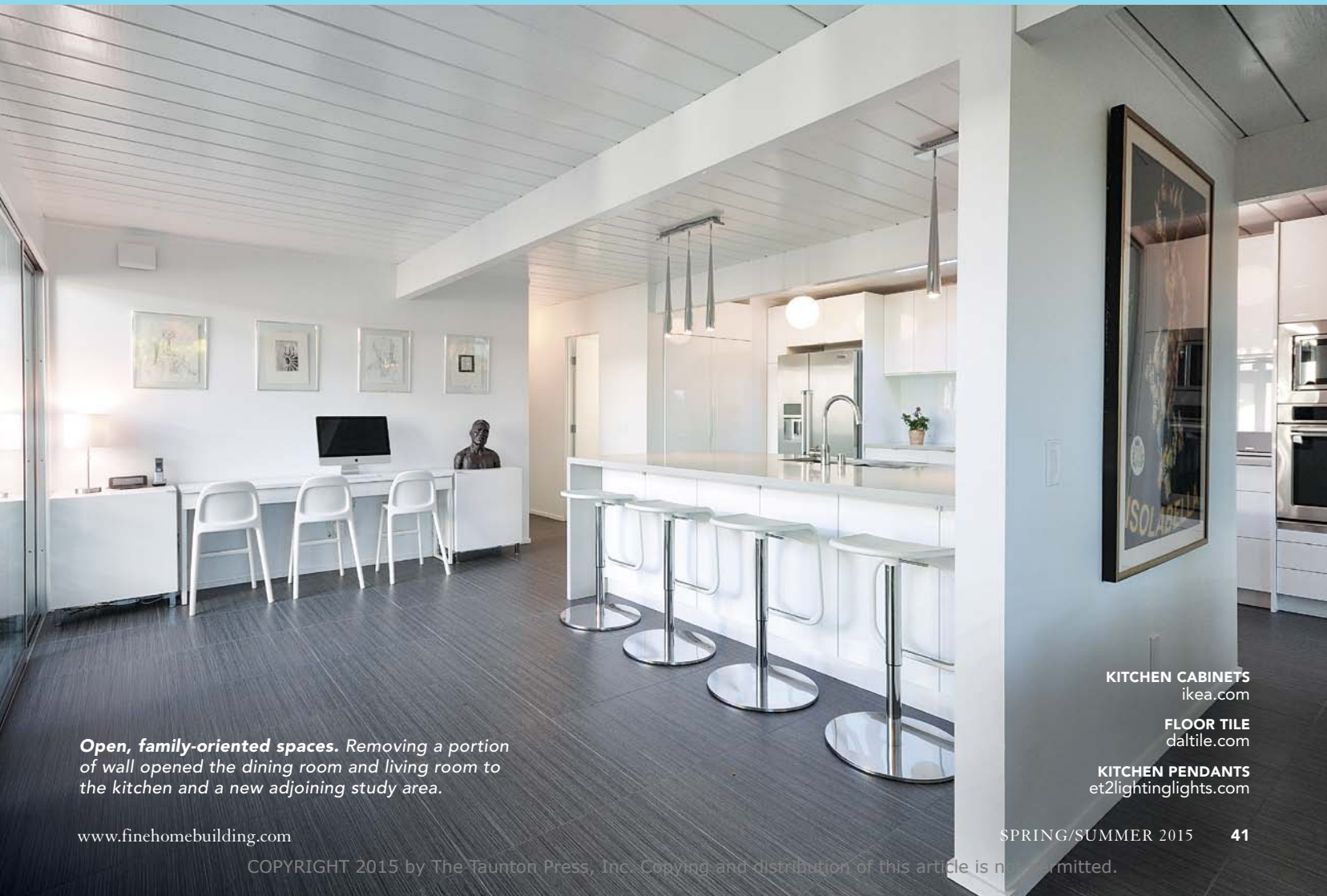
One story illustrates just how tenacious Eichler could be. When a black family purchased a house in Eichler’s Terra Linda subdivision in Marin County, residents protested. Eichler sent his son Ned to reason with them with instructions not to back down. After pointing



out to the neighbors that anybody who could afford to live in the subdivision could do so, Ned offered to buy back their houses, which

ended the dispute.

For 15 years, Joseph Eichler ran a tough yet inspired construction company that built 11,000 homes. Most were in the San Francisco area, but he also built homes in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and even Chestnut Ridge, N.Y. By 1967, however, he was bankrupt—a sad conclusion to the career of a man who gave so much to bringing the beauty and functionalism of modernist architecture to middle-class families.



Open, family-oriented spaces. Removing a portion of wall opened the dining room and living room to the kitchen and a new adjoining study area.

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