

Open the Box: Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the Domestic Environment

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1. Richard Neutra, Chuey House,
Los Angeles, California, 1956

Sylvia Lavin

Open the Box: Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the Domestic Environment

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The single-family house is commonly thought of as the domesticating repository of postwar technology exemplified by American prefabricated homes bursting at the seams with televisions, vacuum cleaners, and dishwashers. This popular image reinforces two historical truisms since it establishes consumerism as the primary feature of American postwar culture and suggests that commercialized degradation was the inevitable result of the Americanization of European social goals, particularly in relation to domestic architecture.¹ The success of this apparently panoramic view has made it difficult to recognize that the house was not merely a passive receiver of imported technologies but an active producer of new instruments of psychospatial intervention. For this production to take place, an understanding of the psyche as subject to environmental influence was required just as were techniques for exploring the psychological consequences of space. While each of these developments grew out of important European traditions, they attained significant instrumental force only in postwar America when modernist architecture and psychoanalysis became widespread.² Indeed, the single-family house began significantly to affect the wider public realm when, by fusing psychic and spatial design, it generated a new environmental technology.

Although of central importance particularly to American modernity, the relationship between architecture and psy-

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choanalysis has never been recognized as a productive force in the postwar cultural landscape. Richard Neutra was a key figure in establishing this still unexplored territory. He knew Freud as well as many of Freud's early protégés and spent much of his adult life in analysis. More important, Neutra wrote at length on the many parallels between architecture and psychology.³ In fact, the quality and tenor of this writing is almost compulsive. The lack of scholarly attention given to Neutra's obsession is both noteworthy and easily explained. On the one hand, it is now taken for granted that the environment has an impact on psychic life and, indeed, seems a banal observation of pop psychology. On the other hand, Neutra's writings have a frenzied and pseudoscientific air that has isolated them from the architectural mainstream. Thus Neutra's ideas have fallen prey twice: first to the idea that they are too popular to be serious and second to the idea that they are too idiosyncratic to have broad cultural significance.

These interpretations, which focus on the debased and the maniacal in Neutra, parallel the fate of psychoanalysis itself as it immigrated to America. Freud considered the Americanization of psychoanalysis to be synonymous with commercial degeneration and his early followers who thought otherwise were frequently dismissed as insane.⁴ Perhaps the best-known object of this kind of attack was Wilhelm Reich, who, like Neutra, although in a much more extreme way, was both cultishly embraced and paranoiacally dismissed. Despite different historiographical treatment — Neutra is generally thought of as a successful but derivative architect, while Reich is described as either a madman or an underappreciated Marxist — their work circulated through the same cultural milieu.⁵ While it is likely that they met in Vienna, it is certain that clients of Neutra's experimented with Reich's teachings and methods.⁶ Yet far more important than the concrete historical connections that link them, Reich and Neutra should be seen in relation to one another because they both developed new

instruments for acting psychoanalytically on the physical environment. Indeed, their work shared a pronounced interest in the body, its habits and habitats, and both sought to transform human ecology. Historians of architecture and psychoanalysis have usually claimed that the Americanization of their respective disciplines contributed to modern culture primarily mediocrity or madness. The influence of Neutra and Reich on the middle class reveals instead a process of technological materialization.⁷

Neutra's house designs of the 1950s can be used to explore this process since they demonstrate not only the impact on architecture of psychoanalytic ideas but also the degree to which this impact with a material object subjected psychoanalysis to significant transformation.⁸ At the same time, this dialectical transaction equally affected the conventional vocabulary of the modern house. The circulation of these ideas and other cultural forces is particularly legible in the corners of Neutra's domestic architecture. By the 1910s and 1920s, modernism had begun to single out corners as didactic sites demonstrating the possibilities of the new architecture. Moreover, corners often abut windows, which are also privileged sites for exploring the relation of architecture to visibility and systems of representation.⁹ Uniquely in Neutra, however, the corner and the window merge into an indefinite environment complexly articulated through window-walls that offer the inhabitant not just visual opportunities but vectors for bodily and spatial traffic between inside and out.¹⁰

In 1953 Neutra suffered his second heart attack and took to his bed. He designed a special table so he could work without getting up and continued to both write and draw from this position. He entitled one of the texts he wrote at this time "Woman Makes Man Clear."

No man . . . becomes so fully clear to me as he whose woman I have seen. . . . Adolf Loos was pale, sickish and wrinkled looking



... [but] ... Loos was surrounded by young and beautiful women, ... women in the house, in the kitchen, in the ... living room, the bedroom. ... It always remained a puzzle to me what these young women exactly meant to him. ... Twenty years before he had been involved in a court case of homosexuality ... most probably he was innocent. ... Frank Lloyd Wright was fairly innocent too. ... There is no man I know, who ... was more like the dream hero of women — but I did not see him worshipped as a hero by his wives. ... In fact hero worship came to him more from young men. ... This is remarkable and contrary to all fair expectation. I cannot interpret it. ... For Gropius woman has played perhaps the smallest role; smaller even than to Le Corbusier whose late married wife has been the simplest character, ... and perhaps the best cook. Mies has aroused admiration in very intelligent worth-while women, but he goes his way, hardly perturbed, I believe. For some it is hard to take. Eric Mendelsohn told me: 'I must conquer my wife daily, this is my enjoyment' ... ; as to femininity, [Mendelsohn] appeared more determined than any architect I have seen. ... Schindler ... had a uniquely sweet smile under ... his little mustache, ... and always seemed to intimate a little erotic conspiracy — without consequence, but promising. Schindler would hire neatly built girls from the Academy model mart ... and draw them in the nude. ... And he accommodated them, giving willingly, or, shall I say, yielding of his time at all hours ... he would ... deeply look into eyes, prepare and serve coffee and make love, sit in cars through the small hours of the morning, or climb under the car and fix it for the lady.

I have no swollen head whatever, no self flattery. ... Still, what might characterize my own relationship to men and women? And if women are characteristic mirrors of a man's behavior, what may I have to suffer if this test is applied to myself — confidentially speaking to this private paper with a pencil? ... Inspite of being most informal, not leonine, not monumental at all, I grow to heroic dimensions particularly to women. I make no bid for this, it happens unknowingly ... but this IS what happens. There is a tragic touch to the heroism I assume.¹¹

Although this odd, roughly fifteen-page litany of the sexual prowess of modern architects was never published — it remains in manuscript form in the archives of his papers — Neutra originally meant for it to be included in his autobiography. It is held with many other texts, all of which he labeled "biographical notes" and most of which were later published in his *Life and Shape* of 1962.¹² Why these par-

ticular biographical notes were ultimately excluded from publication is uncertain, but it is clear that, despite his assertions to the contrary, Neutra at some point found them sufficiently important to consider making them public.

This text typifies Neutra's complex relation to psychoanalysis. On the one hand, the text is superficial and anecdotal: there is no sustained analysis of either sexuality itself or its relation to architecture. On the other hand, the relation between the sex drive and creativity is a basic precept of Freudian theory. When Neutra writes of Schindler that "his creative drive in architecture was overwhelming, and he would work through nights in erotic solitude to evolve his often most complicated variations on a space-theme," the libidinal origin of artistic production is clearly implied.¹³ And, moreover, when Neutra describes Irving Gill as a "little troubadour of the American woman, married to a middle-aged California cultist who was rarely in the wonderfully progressive kitchen Gill had dreamed up for the great American housewife, chore-free, flush white and clean," he situates this erotic dynamic in the domestic context.¹⁴

By the time Neutra was writing in the 1950s, American domestic architecture was deeply engaged in a socially pervasive psychosexual dynamic from which it has not fully recovered. A great deal has been written about the transformation of the American house in relation to changing gender roles. The focus of this important discourse has been the reprogramming and replanning of the domestic interior in relation to developments in woman's work both in the home and in the public sphere.¹⁵ Little attention, however, has been paid to the eroticization of domesticity during the postwar period and to the new architectural effects it engendered.¹⁶ In the case of Neutra, the way domestic products were advertised in American culture at large better reveals how sex had become a patent element of domestic satisfaction than the way he addressed the plans of particu-



3. Advertisement for Vitrolite, 1950s

lar houses: for he located bedrooms in unremarkable places and provided them with conventional degrees of privacy both from the public areas of the house and from the children's rooms. Yet the spatial excitement of the glazed corners in Neutra's bedrooms recalls the erotic translucency of new products for the bed and bath and the voyeuristic pleasures of picture windows as represented through photography and advertising.¹⁷

As the popularization of psychoanalysis foregrounded the demands of the id, sex not only sold new products but also transformed what the public expected to receive from house and home. The smells of Mom and apple pie were slowly replaced by images of vixens in the kitchen. In fact, despite

GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL MODERN

CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE

More and more architects, motivated by a philosophy of life, are giving their clients houses that both shelter and enrich the life within. (See, for example, the article in this issue by Harwell Harris on page 11.) They are combining the technical edge of today's mechanical engineering with human understanding of people's needs. They are beautifully designed houses that solve, at the same time, the problems posed by site, climate, budget, and the special requirements of dual owners. You can have houses rising almost organically from the soil like trees with the landscape.

BUT there are other houses on the American landscape like unhappy, unabsorbed Displaced Pillboxes. They are beginning to rust away here and there, rusting away in Europe. Do their owners feel? They are disillusioned and hoping for some unsuspecting architect still taken in by the public relations efforts of the International Modern Movement.

One man, prominent in design and modern art, who lives in a house of this style, has become very bitter about the business. "Those architects," he said, "live in an enchanted world of childhood." The roof of his house had sprung a leak, and he had to move over his bed, because no one had been made for carrying rain water. "My architect," he said, "let me put in a gutter, because he said, 'it would spoil the architecture'."

when modesty demands..

BE SURE THEY'RE LEVOLOR built CUSTOM VENETIANS
for no other window covering in the world

4. Advertisement for Levolor blinds, *House Beautiful*, May 1953

the wary reception Freud received on his trip to the United States in 1909, by the end of the Second World War, psychoanalysis had become an American success story.¹⁸ A burgeoning audience of analysands and a veritable army of new practitioners were transforming psychoanalysis into a mainstay of everyday life. American belief in happiness as a chicken in every pot and self-improvement as a puritan social responsibility began to merge with psychoanalytic notions of libidinal resolution. These developments came to define the house as a mirror not of society or of the family, but of the self. This newly structured subject would expect to receive, and would ultimately demand, nothing short of psychosexual resolution from his domestic realm. Neutra put it succinctly, capturing both the complexity and the im-



5. Richard Neutra, plate from
"Private Life," in *Life and
Human Habitat*, 1956



6. Fashion shoot at Neutra's
Van der Leeuw Research
House, *California Stylist*,
October 1945

possible banality of this development: a good house "is the fulfillment of the search — in space — for happiness."¹⁹ The single-family American home, long since the object of many cultural demands, was becoming a transference object in a new psychoanalytic process. The residential combination of walls, windows, and doors was no longer merely a space to contain and regulate domestic relations but an environment that was to produce pleasure itself.

While the growing influence of psychoanalysis was needed to build up these expectations, a critique of Freud was equally necessary. The theory of drives was the primary conduit Freud had established between the body and the unconscious. But these drives were fundamentally part of the psychic rather than the physiological apparatus. Indeed, the radical nature of Freud's contribution derives precisely from the degree to which he moved away from neurology and lifted the unconscious out of organic life. This separation, however, also lifted psychoanalytic concerns out of the material domain of architecture and the tradition of therapeutic architecture based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of psychic hygiene. Neutra believed that the notion of environment as understood by psychoanalysis and that used by architecture were contradictory. When Neutra told Freud he wanted to study architecture, "Prof. Freud would only smile, because to him the formative and moulding influences of a human mind were primarily human relations. . . . I, on the other hand, could not possibly study architecture if I were to subscribe to this view."²⁰

Neutra neither rejected the psychoanalytic outright nor returned to an architecture that treated psychic phenomena in pathological, moral, or purely physical terms. Instead, he seized Freud's portrait of human relations and infant development and repainted the emergence of psychic life as part of a larger ecology. "Let us take a most intimate human relation . . . which may be formative. For instance, let us con-

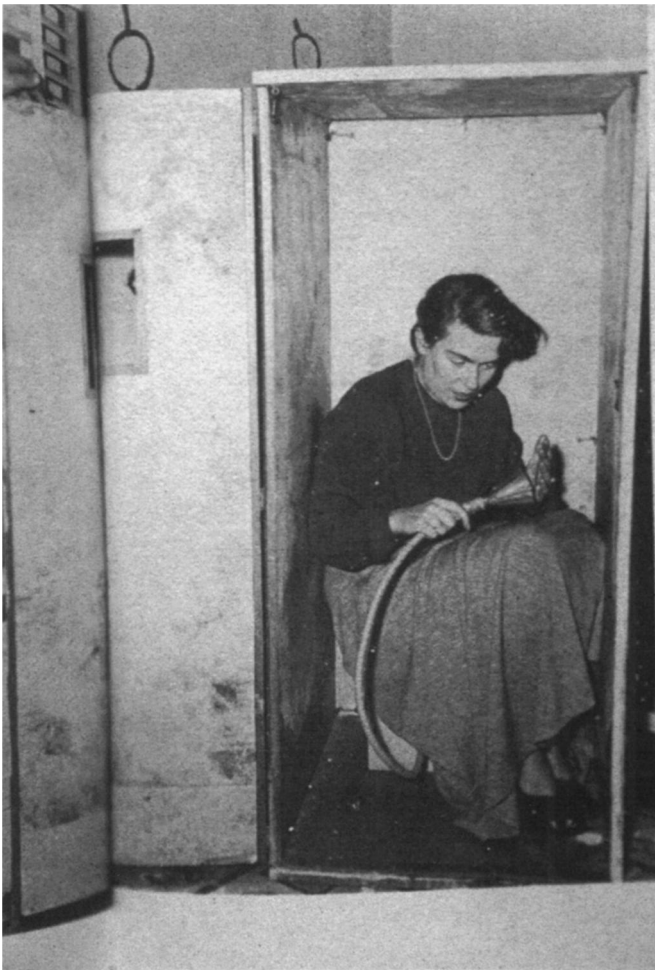
sider a baby held by the mother on her arm. Let us note how it is supported with her right palm at its bottom while her left lower arm tenderly supports the shoulder girdle, and also the baby's head a little. She starts suckling it — this kind of relationship of a mother suckling a baby I would consider a very self-dependent primary thing." Neutra plays a bizarre experiment with this psychologically potent scene. He imagines slowly raising the temperature and doubling the humidity content of their habitat. Ultimately, he hypothesizes that "the baby [will] fall off the nipple, and the mother is not even going to notice it."²¹ Conflict and friction in the form of separation has been introduced into the relation between mother and child, but a conflict that is physiologically rather than oedipally induced.²² With conflict redefined in this way, the contradiction between psychoanalysis and architecture is resolved by a new notion of environment that establishes continuity between material and psychic energy.

Wilhelm Reich was absorbed by a parallel operation of psychoenvironmental analysis. Traces of this interest can be seen in even his early work when he was still one of Freud's primary protégés. In his work on character analysis and resistance, Reich became interested in "body armor," those various bodily expressions, movements, and tensions that strive to protect the ego. Another of his preoccupations, equally influential but that would lead ultimately to a schism with Freud, involved genitality and what Reich called "orgiastic potency." Rather than see sexual malfunction as a symptom of neuroses, as Freud did, Reich found in phenomena such as impotence or frigidity a physiological cause of neurosis. He saw sex as an energy exchange, whereby genital excitation was ultimately redistributed and dispelled throughout the entire body. In an orgiastically potent individual the amount of "energy stored up in the organism prior to orgasm, and the amount that is released during the orgasm" are equal. For Reich, any remaining or unreleased tension is the energy source of neurosis.

Although even in Freud's work the libido is considered a quasi-bioelectrical phenomenon, Reich took this physiological stance further, hoping to establish a quantifiable and hence scientific basis for the libido. By 1940 Reich had discovered what he called "orgone energy," a neologism derived from the words *orgasm* and *organism*. He established the Orgonon Laboratory and Institute in Maine, where he began to study the energy not only of sex and bioelectricity, but of radioactive particles and of the atmosphere and landscape itself. He ultimately determined that this universal orgone energy could alter ecosystems — making rain to transform deserts into habitable environments — could cure cancer, and could even act as a general antidote to nuclear radiation. To this end, Reich designed and developed the orgone energy accumulator, popularly known as the "orgone box."

Starting in 1940, Reich had human-size boxes fabricated from a combination of, primarily, organic materials, which both possessed orgone energy and absorbed it from the atmosphere, and, secondarily, metals, which deflected and directed the energy. These boxes made of cotton, glass, wood, rock, polyethylene, steel wool, and galvanized sheet metal would collect and intensify orgone energy, passing it on to the subject within for a generally healthful effect on the blood and body tissue. The orgone box was popularly thought of as a device that raised one's orgiastic potency and sex appeal and conservatively accused of leading to anarchy. Indeed, an article published in 1947, "The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy," linked the orgone box to a wave of bohemianism that was sweeping California in particular.²³

These bohemians were Neutra's clients and they turned to him in droves because he promised to give them architecture that, like the orgone accumulator, would offer climate control, better sex, improved health, and happiness itself. These were the comprehensive satisfactions that Neutra claimed he alone could provide. In "Woman Makes Man



7. Orgone box

Clear,” Neutra evaluates the orgiastic potency of his colleagues based on the relationships between these male architects and women. Assessing the profession’s capacity to make architecture that benefited biological, physiological, and psychological complexes in relation to sexual satisfaction, he concludes with the assertion that he is more beloved by women than any other modern architect, including the greatly impressive Frank Lloyd Wright. Neutra was enormously indebted to Wright in many ways but also competitive with this father figure. Thus Neutra ambivalently both defended and diminished Wright, describing him as “never the philanderer . . . brought up in an inhibited congregation with all the morality of the Midwest.”²⁴ While Wright had real affairs with clients, his architecture provided moral constraint. Neutra’s intercourse with clients, in contrast, was safely surrounded by an architectural prophylactic, but his

buildings were to provide actual bodily pleasure. The key to this production involved the relation between inside and outside, a relation that Wright had done much to establish as primary for architecture. From the early Prairie houses of the turn of the century to the Guggenheim Museum of 1946–59, Wright was consistently committed to representing the forces of nature through the characteristics of the American landscape. Yet just as Neutra rejected Freud’s semiotics of the unconscious, he also rejected Wright’s preoccupation with the representation of nature and turned instead to a fluid merging of interior and exterior.

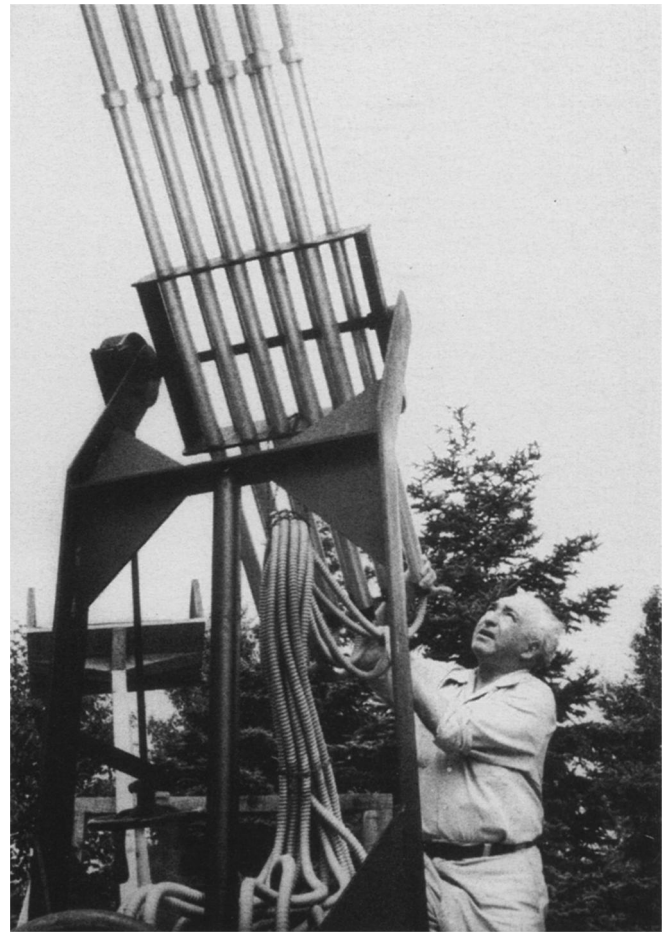
The shift from Wright’s moral and metaphorical nature to Neutra’s appetite for sensual pleasure had an intermediate step in Reich’s own building in Maine, designed by James B. Bell of the Manhattan firm of Gillette and Bell and now on the National Register of Historic Places. The Orgonon Institute responded to various functional requirements related to Reich’s use of scientific instruments but it was Wrightian in general massing and in its use of local stone. While developing the Wrightian idiom, the architect was instructed by Reich to design a building that could “not only serve a very practical scientific purpose, but also be representative of the scope of the work.” To this end, Reich wanted nothing to obstruct the view through the windows and desired large, unenclosed porches to permit experimental work in the open.²⁵ This easy visual and atmospheric interaction between inside and outside characterizes Neutra’s late work, as does the diminished use of hard materials such as concrete and metal in favor of more wood and stone.²⁶ These developments have been seen as a “softening” of Neutra’s modernist ideals in the service of the rising middle class in the postwar United States, and their importance indeed derives from the widespread popularity they gained in American architecture generally.²⁷ But this episode in architecture’s long negotiation between inside and outside more productively demonstrates two unprecedented phe-



8. Orgonon, Rangeley, Maine

nomena: architecture's establishment of a new intimacy in its engagement with the environment and architecture's invention of a human subject understood in psychophysiological rather than platonic or mechanical terms.

These developments came to a climax in the American desert in 1953–54. With a combination of paranoia and foresight generated by Hiroshima, Reich had developed extreme anxiety about the devastation being wrought by everything from atomic radiation to UFOs. As part of continuing experiments on the healthful and restorative effects of orgone energy, he traveled to Arizona with his cloud-busting machines in an effort to produce rain and purify the atmosphere. While attempting to heal the environment, Reich drew parallels between the arid terrain of the desert and what he called the “emotional desert” of modern life.²⁸ Neutra, too, was driving around the western desert in 1953 when he wrote “Woman Makes Man Clear,” traveling between the sites of several houses he had under construction.²⁹ Neutra expected these houses, like Reich’s cloud busters, to transform their local ecologies, and he fantasized about a time “when weather makers or artificial house-climate installations might be found everywhere, and whole



9. Wilhelm Reich and a cloud buster, 1956

neighborhoods might go underground with windowless apartments befitting an age of atomic warfare.”³⁰ Perhaps most important, as Reich arrived in Arizona, Neutra was putting the finishing touches on *Survival Through Design*, the publication in which he developed most fully his ideas on what would become environmental psychology.³¹ Although the American desert has been considered the quintessential modernist space, it was precisely in the desert that modernist space was transformed, becoming “not just an abstract concept of mathematical physics” but a “throbbing psychosomatic phenomenon.”³²

By 1953 Neutra’s houses had been fully transformed into boxes whose walls and planes dynamically slip and slide as if moved by some unseen energy source. In place of steel, concrete, and aluminum, these later houses were all built increasingly of organomic materials that establish the very



10. Neutra, Kramer House,
Norco, California, 1953

fabric of the architecture as biogenetically productive. Water became a progressively more central material whose proliferating reflective surfaces, along with glass and mirrors, transform these structures into architectural energy catchers. Being in such environments was meant to activate, according to Neutra, “vegetative functions,” involuntary sensory responses that Reich thought of as the biophysical basis of pleasure. Although Neutra’s earlier work, most notably the Lovell Health House, was also interested in the relation between architecture and the body, it would take until after the Second World War for a society generally amenable to psychological influence and desirous of a psychotherapeutic architecture to develop. Only then could Neutra turn his attention to fulfilling what he saw as his destiny, becoming an architectural therapist that had society as a whole as his analysand. Thus, if the Lovell house focused on the inner workings of the human and architectural organism — the steel frame acts as a structural equivalent to sturdy intestinal hygiene — Neutra’s postwar work further embraced the psychic effects of these bodies. His later houses did not just provide a place to eat macrobiotically and do calisthenics but, Neutra claimed, also enhanced what he called “psycho-physiological wholesomeness.” With this development he offered his clients a newly conceived architectural choice: they could opt for houses designed as “life-supporting, life-protecting parcels of a wider setting” or they could end up in “the psychiatrist’s waiting room, like nine million unhappy Americans each year.”³³

Many of Neutra’s clients of this period share the profile of orgone box users: such as the Logars, vegetarian home schoolers; the Chueys, a poetess and a painter who used their house as a gathering spot for early aficionados of Timothy Leary and his experiments with LSD; or the Moores, wealthy followers of Krishnamurti. But what most significantly unifies this collection of otherwise peculiar characters is their quest for therapeutic self-improvement based on ideas of psychophysical parallelism. His clients believed that

their psychic health was to be improved by domestic contact with an environment physically saturated with natural energy. The Logars, for example, embraced the feeling of “freedom” derived from the fact that “the inside is thrown out to the distance.” In such a house, Mrs. Logar argued, “there are no material irritations that wear you down. Home living would consequently rise to a higher plane, resulting in harmony and progress.”³⁴ The houses of this period might well have come with the following instructions regarding how much time to spend in an orgone box: “One should continue with the organotic irradiation as long as one feels comfortable and ‘glowing.’ The sensitive person will, after a while, have ‘had enough.’ This manifests itself in the feeling of ‘nothing happening any longer.’ It is explained by the fact that, in a truly self-regulatory manner, the organism will absorb only as much orgone energy as it requires.”³⁵

The parallels that can be drawn between Reich and Neutra can be traced, in part, to Neutra’s interest in Wilhelm Wundt’s *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, first published in 1874.³⁶ Often described as the founder of experimental psychology because of the laboratory he founded in Leipzig in 1879, Wundt helped shift theories of mind away from the realm of pure metaphysics by reactivating a tradition of understanding mental functions as tied to human physiology. At the same time, wanting to avoid the positivist reduction of inner experience to a mechanistic model of biological determinism, Wundt developed the notion of psychophysical parallelism. In this view, the physiopsychologist studied simultaneously the material structure of psychic phenomena and the subjective perception of these events. Neutra never ceased to cite Wundt and the idea of psychophysiology with great reverence. Indeed, Neutra, Reich, and Wundt all shared an interest in the relation of the subject, the body, and the environment. But Reich introduced to this nexus the operations of the unconscious and, through the link between the libido and orgonomy, a continuity between psychic interiority and

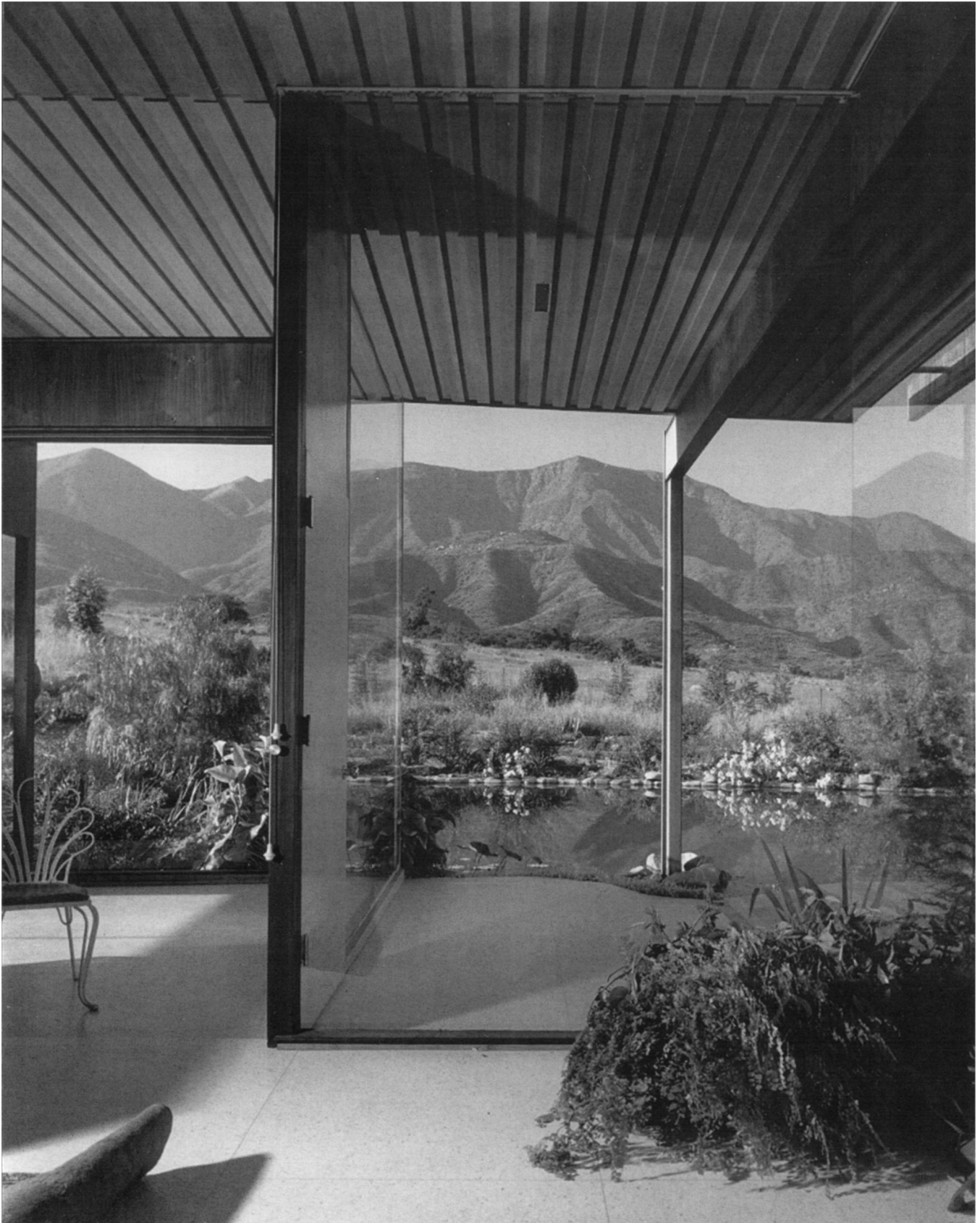
the exterior space of the world. Neutra, on the other hand, used architecture as an instrument for acting on and modifying the psychophysiological dynamic of this environment.

The therapeutic doctrine that Neutra developed with the greatest determination focused precisely on the relationship between his client, now understood as a human organism, and domestic space, now understood as an environment that energetically acted on the nervous system and through it the psyche. The architectural techniques Neutra deployed to manipulate this relationship concentrated on the glass corners of his postwar houses, especially in the public rooms and, to a lesser extent, in the bedrooms. At these corners, two planes of floor-to-ceiling expanses of plate glass join in a mitered edge to produce a glazed environment of intense spatial ambiguity. Oscillation between opacity and transparency, interiority and exteriority, solidity and fluidity generates perceptual confusion. These psychic and visual effects of what Neutra called “throbbing” intensity are further multiplied by the accumulation in the corner of a series of architectural details. Spider legs extend rafters and ceiling beams to the exterior, displacing and confusing the location of structure. The use of glass represses the distinction among walls, doors, and windows, combining visually as well as functionally these normally distinct architectural elements. Large exterior overhangs prohibit reflections from forming on the glass surfaces. At night, exterior lights maintain surface transparency and thus spatial continuity. Materials move without interruption from inside to outside and across both floors and ceilings. Even the photographs taken by Julius Shulman under the direction of Neutra never frame views of the houses, but rather, look through them with dynamic vision. Finally, mirrors placed strategically adjacent to windows multiply ad infinitum these elements of energetic ambiguity.

High modernism had, since the earliest years of the century, fantasized about the transformative power of glass structures; but for the most part, the goal of architects had been to pro-

duce clarity and purity. Le Corbusier described the need for window-walls but foresaw these elements as static structures sealing the interior within.³⁷ Advances in glazing technology had long since permitted windows to expand in scale and to proliferate in even modest homes: no self-respecting postwar suburban house lacked a picture window.³⁸ But only with Neutra does the window both expand beyond the scale of a picture yet refrain from transforming the whole structure into a glass box. The window-wall corner no longer primarily frames a view, as with Le Corbusier, nor delineates a classically conceived or geometrically precise space. Instead, Neutra’s corners suggest an amorphous leak in the structure of the house — a topological billowing of a domestic membrane that creates a highly indeterminate and almost viscous environment. Neutra maintained that in these corners, saturated with Reich’s orgone energy, architectural physiognomy would interact with human physiology to produce psychological satisfaction and pleasure. Architecture here became, according to Neutra, applied biology and psychological treatment.³⁹

When Neutra encouraged the expectation that his architecture would provide a good sex life, ensure the production of psychically healthy children, prevent physical distress and illness, as well as ecologically improve the environment, he turned the American house into the equivalent of an orgone box. Architecture had been assigned therapeutic tasks before and indeed the salutary impact of architecture is a key to understanding the entire Enlightenment project. During the eighteenth century, for example, hospitals were designed as medical machines promoting good health and social welfare. Psychiatric hospitals, well into the twentieth century, were also conceived as instruments of healing.⁴⁰ This tradition of modern therapeutic architecture focused, above all, on the physiological effects of the environment. The house as orgone box draws precisely on this legacy and it is his insistence on architecture’s capacity to intervene in the human organism that reveals Neutra’s commitment to classical modernism.





12. Chuey House, 1956



13. Neutra, Logar House,
Los Angeles, 1951



14. Neutra, Singleton House,
Los Angeles, 1959



15. Neutra, Tremaine House,
Montecito, California, 1948

Moreover, this same insistence is what led Freud to “condescendingly smile” when Neutra said that he wanted to provide patients with therapy through “environmental impact.”⁴¹

On the other hand, what distinguishes Neutra’s organomic architecture from this tradition of physiological intervention is its depathologization and individualization of mental states. Not interested in mental disease as a sign of social degeneration, Neutra believed in the importance of childhood trauma, in the effects of the unconscious on daily life, and in the need to analyze personal intrasubjective experience. He never maintained that he could cure the extreme psychiatric conditions found in most turn-of-the-century mental hospitals but focused instead on resolving everyday neuroses. As a result, Neutra suggested that “the best thing would be if every architect would work in partnership with a psychiatrist,” and he identified all kinds of techniques that the architect shared with the analyst. He argued, for example, that “persons coming to the doctor are in a depressive state. . . . The architect’s clients, on the other hand, are in a manic state of overoptimism. . . . Handling a depressive begging for his life is easier in many ways than guiding the path of people in a state of emotional exaltation. It will be the architect’s job to unroll a picture of a more realistic future and ‘house it.’”⁴²

Although Freud dismissed the impact of physical space on psychic life, he called attention to the importance of every detail of the domestic environment in the shaping of the unconscious. By the end of the Second World War, this link had become so accepted and generalized that Neutra could claim analysis as the foundation of good architecture: “everybody is in need of psychiatry, certainly before you build a house.”⁴³

After many years of neglect, Neutra’s residential architecture has become popular once again and this resurgence sheds light on the general neomodernist wave that is washing over contemporary culture. Certainly, Neutra’s staunch belief in progress and enlightenment makes him a reassuring figure,

just as Prozac offers a stabilizing alternative to the uncertainties of psychoanalysis. Yet the most celebrated feature of Neutra’s architecture is precisely the corner where instabilities and uncertainties collect and where desires, both psychic and organic, are projected. Perhaps it is more exactly this combination of optimism and anxiety that generates today’s renewed infatuation with Neutra. Although this internally divided state appeals to contemporary sensibilities, the sense of conflict was already built into the corner. Neutra described dropping by the Nesbitt House in 1953 after it had a new set of owners and wondered why the window-walls were shut. “I got up and unlocked a shot-bolt at the bottom track of the large sliding glass front and made it glide aside. A multi-voiced shout of joy went to the tree-tops, and beyond into the sky, perhaps to heaven. . . . I hardly could believe it: this lady had lovingly lived in this house for a year and did not know that this glass-front could slide wide open. It was like magic to her, a discovery of a new spring of life, like someone discovering, imagine, that he can spread wings and fly! There was wild dancing on the lawn: I received a kiss, several kisses and we all got drunk.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, and despite their initial satisfaction, Mrs. Logar wrote to Neutra in 1956 to say that she and her husband wanted to sell their house. “It looks messy all the time and there is no place to hide things away; we are entirely exposed to view from all sides. This is just about right for some executive and his wife, and that is all. . . . I think I prefer to live in an old hidden away place for a couple of years to clear my thoughts.”⁴⁵ Both sets of reactions demonstrate an unprecedented psychic investment in the domestic interior: quests for architectural happiness either thwarted or satisfied and a transference to the architect more profound than normal professional services should generate. The impact of psychoanalysis on American everyday life can be measured by its negotiations with the intimate spaces of domesticity; indeed, psychic and spatial conditions merged in the single-family house to produce a new sense of psycho-



16. Home Design issue of *New York Times Magazine*, Spring 1998, featuring a renovation of Neutra's Taylor House, Glendale, California, 1964

physical environment. Neutra may have been one of the first to recognize this production as one of the many technologies unleashed after the Second World War, and projected so energetically in his corners, but it remains a fundamental aspect of American fantasies about house and home. Just as the space of psychoanalysis staged the public confrontation with a new phase of modernity, the postwar single-family house staged a private confrontation with one of classical modernity's concluding chapters.

Notes

1. The question of Americanization in architecture is variously dealt with in Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Rizzoli and Columbia Books on Architecture, 1992), Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge, 1893–1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), and *Exiles and Émigrés*, ed. Stephanie Barron (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997).
2. In fact, the convergence of these matters can meaningfully be traced to Austria in particular. Not only did Freud develop psychoanalysis in Vienna, but a long tradition of psychologically oriented art and architectural theory also flourished in

Vienna, best known through the work of Alois Riegl. Austria was also the site of several influential buildings concerned with mental health, including the eighteenth-century asylum popularly known as the Fool's Tower, Josef Hoffmann's Purkersdorf Sanatorium, and, most famously, Otto Wagner's Am Steinhof Hospital. See Peter Haiko, Harald Leupold-Lowenthal, and Mara Reissberger, "The White City—The Steinhof in Vienna: Architecture as a Reflection of the Attitude towards Mental Illness," *Sigmund Freud House Bulletin* (Winter 1981): 10–41, and Leslie Topp, "An Architecture for Modern Nerves: Josef Hoffmann's Purkersdorf Sanatorium," *JSAH* (December 1997): 414–37.

3. Neutra wrote several essays directly on this topic, both unpublished and published. See, for example, his "Client Interrogation: An Art and a Science," *AIA Journal* (June 1958): 285–86, and "Architektur als angewandte physiologie" in *Baukunst und Werkform/Die neue Stadt* (n.p., 1955). His papers, held in the Richard J. Neutra Archive, Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, hereafter referred to as Neutra Archive, contain countless sheets of what he called "Ideas," many of which are devoted to exploring the relationship between architecture and various forms of psychiatry, some in quite elaborate detail. This material is further discussed in my essays "House as Habitat: Richard Neutra's Moore Residence," *Casabella* (December 1998): 146–59, "From Architecture to Environment: Richard Neutra and the Post-War House," *Daidalos* (June 1998): 68–76, "The Avant-Garde Is Not at Home: Richard Neutra and the American Psychologizing of Modernity," in *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America*, ed. R. E. Somol (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 180–98, and in my book on Neutra forthcoming from the MIT Press.

4. Freud's attitude toward America was most recently discussed in Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917–1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

5. Work on Reich generally falls into two camps. On the one hand, there are apologias conducted by his loyal followers, which, although full of interesting information, lack critical distance. See, for example, David Boadella, *Wilhelm Reich: The Evolution of His Work* (London: Vision Press, 1973), Colin Wilson, *The Quest for Wilhelm Reich* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981), and Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth: A Biography of Wilhelm Reich* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). From a scholarly point of view, Reich has been important to the Frankfurt School and others in the attempt to unite Freud and Marx. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), Gad Horowitz, *Repression: Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory: Freud, Reich, and Marcuse* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977), Ira H. Cohen, *Ideology and Unconsciousness: Reich, Freud, and Marx* (New York: New York University Press, 1982), and Russell Jacoby, *The Repression of Psy-*

choanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Both schools of thought treat Reich as an exceptional figure and thus neither adequately integrate him into the history of psychoanalysis and its reception in the United States nor address his popular rather than political appeal.

6. Neutra's papers often refer to the amount of time he spent at the Freud household, his discussions with Freud, and his contacts with the first circle of Freudian analysts. He wrote, for example, that "as a young man I was often in and out of the house of Professor Sigmund Freud. . . . I was a young man then, and Anna Freud, the great child psychologist today in London was at that time fourteen years old. There was his grand group of followers from Jung to Rank and Adler, all in those days at his house, all still peaceful disciples." See the interview with Neutra in *Transition* (February–March 1967): 31. If Neutra and Reich never actually met in this context, it is inconceivable that Neutra did not at least know of Reich's work. Moreover, in an interview conducted in 1997, Mrs. Josephine Chuey described the use of orgone boxes among the circle of friends who gathered at her house.

7. While psychoanalysis was of interest to Neutra's clients of the 1930s, neither psychoanalysis nor Neutra had gained popularity with the middle class at that time. Yet it is precisely the wider dissemination of early avant-garde modernism that is at issue here.

8. A complete list of Neutra's designs during this period can be found in the essential biography by Thomas S. Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (Berkeley: University of Cali-

fornia Press, 1982). The scores of commissions Neutra received during this period produced designs of several basic types. This essay focuses on the single-story, elongated bar, and largely glazed type, characterized by the Chuey, Moore, and Kramer houses, among others.

9. The debate between Le Corbusier and Auguste Perret on the proper shape of the modern window sparked an important discourse about the modern reorganization of the visual field. See Bruno Reichlin, "The Pros and Cons of Horizontal Windows: The Perret–Le Corbusier Controversy," *Daidalos* 13 (September 1984): 65–78, and Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994). This discussion should be expanded to include the relation of the window to the corner. In Frank Lloyd Wright, Rudolf Schindler, Neutra, and others, the glazing of the corner, rather than only the shape of the window itself, was a potent element in reconfiguring both the structural and optical effects of modern architecture.

10. In his "Techniques Are the Very Basis of Poetry" (1929), in *Precisions: On the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, trans. E. S. Aujame (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 35–66, and his "A Small Contribution to the Study of a Modern Window" and "Appeal to Industrialists," both from *Almanach d'Architecture Moderne* (1925), Le Corbusier uses the term "window-wall." His description, however, which emphasizes a non-loadbearing screen made of inoperable glass, is closer to what in English is normally called a curtain wall rather than Neutra's combination in a single glass surface of the functions of window, wall, and door. The possibility of movement through this surface,

rather than its visual effects as a screen, marks an important distinction between the two types of window-wall. Moreover, Le Corbusier's type migrated quickly to commercial and corporate architecture whereas Neutra's type remained ensconced in the domestic context.

11. "Woman Makes Man Clear," "Biographical Notes," 13 November 1953, first version, Neutra Archive.

12. Richard Neutra, *Life and Shape* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962).

13. Neutra, "Woman Makes Man Clear," 9.

14. *Ibid.*, 4.

15. The basic literature includes Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), and Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

16. An exception is Beatriz Colomina's work on Loos in "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 73–130.

17. The importance of Julius Shulman's photography in representing Neutra's work has often been noted, but Shulman's relation to developments in advertising techniques remains unexplored. See Julius Shulman, *Architecture and its Photography*, ed. Peter Gössel (Cologne: Taschen, 1998), and Joseph Rosa, *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994.) There is no question that Shulman's photographs functioned not only to represent Neutra's architectural am-

bitions in formal terms but also to advertise Neutra's practice in commercial terms. The photographs, like advertisements, helped to create an audience filled with desire for a new domestic fantasy. The linchpin of this nexus of cultural phenomena, embracing photography, psychoanalysis, architecture, advertising, and Austrian émigrés, may have been Edward L. Bernays, who was Freud's nephew. After coming to the United States, Bernays became a leading public relations expert famous for the application of psychoanalytic concepts to advertising and the modification of public opinion. See Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), and Edward L. Bernays, *The Engineering of Consent* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955). On the history of advertising in America, see Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

18. In addition to Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States*, see Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), and Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1995).

19. The first sentences of Neutra's *Life and Human Habitat/Mensch und wohnen* (Stuttgart: Verlagsanstalt, 1956), 15, are "Human Habitat in the deepest sense is much more than mere shelter. It is the fulfillment of the search — in space — for happiness and emotional equilibrium."

20. See the interview with Neutra in *Transition*, 31.
21. See *ibid.*
22. It is worth noting that Neutra was almost obsessed with the relation between mother and infant and often derived architectural principles from this psychodynamic. See my "The Avant-Garde Is Not at Home," 180–98.
23. The article was one of two written by Mildred Edie Brady and published in the April 1947 issue of *Harper's*. On the impact of these publications, see Jerome Greenfield, *Wilhelm Reich vs. the USA* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 56–60.
24. Neutra, "Woman Makes Man Clear," 4–5.
25. Mary Boyd Higgins, director of The Wilhelm Reich Museum, Orgonon, Rangeley, Maine, kindly provided this information from the Reich archive to me.
26. A diminished emphasis on the metropolis and greater focus on the single-family home accompanied this change of materials.
27. See Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture*, 253.
28. See the chapter "Climate and Landscape," in Boadella, *Wilhelm Reich*, 287–312.
29. He seems, in particular, to have been on the road to Norco, California, to the home of Dr. Kramer, a physician for whom Neutra also designed professional offices.
30. Neutra, *Life and Human Habitat*, 27. In fact, Neutra directly compared his houses with air-raid shelters, contrasting their accessibility to the outer world but establishing continuity through their protective functions. "An air-raid shelter is a sanctuary because it is completely separated from the world at large, possibly equipped with a filter sluice against gamma rays. In contrast, I have always attempted to incorporate parts of the surrounding countryside into the protective area of a home" (*ibid.*, 23).
31. See Richard Neutra, *Survival Through Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).
32. This was a definition provided by Dion Neutra in the 1983–84 issue of the *Journal* published by the School of Environmental Design, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona Institute for Survival Through Design, Los Angeles, in the context of a translation of Richard and Dion Neutra's *Bauen und die Sinneswelt* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1980). On modernism and the American desert, see Alessandra Ponte, "The House of Light and Entropy: Inhabiting the American Desert," *Assemblage* 30 (August 1996): 12–31.
33. Neutra, *Life and Human Habitat*, 23.
34. Mrs. James F. Logar to Richard Neutra, 14 March 1951, Neutra Archive.
35. This description is from the instructions on how to use the orgone accumulator that came with the device. See Greenfield, *Wilhelm Reich vs. the USA*, 373.
36. For some recent literature on Wundt, see Wolfgang G. Bringmann and Ryan D. Tweney, eds., *Wundt Studies: A Centennial Collection* (Toronto: C. J. Hogrefe, 1980), Daniel N. Robinson, "Wilhelm Wundt," in *Toward a Science of Human Nature* (New York: Columbia, 1982), 127–72, and *idem*, "First Among Equals: Wundt," in Morton Hunt, *The Story of Psychology* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 127–43.
37. See above, n. 10.
38. See Daniel Boorstin, "Walls become Windows," in *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), 336–45, and Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
39. Several pages from *Life and Shape* are devoted to Neutra's recollection of being at the window as a small boy. He describes what he called the "male carpentry tricks" of grooves and jambs as well as the "feminine rituals" of sashes and cushions. He recalls his frustration at not being able to work the hardware — it "troubled my inside feelings of the world outside" — as well as the pain of hitting his head on the sharp corner of the window frames. He claims to have loved mirrors almost as much as windows, since both expanded the space of his interior world. Sitting near the window, Neutra wrote, "here was pleasure." Neutra, *Life and Shape*, 36–38.
40. On what might be called psychiatric architecture, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), and above, n. 2.
41. See the interview with Neutra in *Transition*, 31.
42. Neutra is quoted on p. 5 of a manuscript entitled "Fitting Life with a Shell" by Ruth Beebe Hill, a client of Neutra's, located in the Neutra Archive.
43. On 4 November 1953 Neutra gave a lecture entitled "The Creative Process in Architecture" at the Hacker Foundation, during which he said: "Of course, the best thing would be if every architect would work in partnership with a psychiatrist. I don't know whether the people would still have some funds left. The best thing would be to get first well. And you can get well, by the proper analysis of your background, of course also of your infantile background. The architect more than anybody is aware of the need for psychiatry. I don't wish to make a joke out of this at all. I am in need of it too. I just finished the child guidance clinic as a charity job. (My oldest son had to go to that place.) Everybody is in need of psychiatry, certainly before you build a house." Transcript of lecture, 6–7, Neutra Archive.
44. Richard Neutra, manuscript entitled "Ideas: The Wide-Open Door," 8 September 1953, Neutra Archive.
45. Mrs. James F. Logar to Richard Neutra, 1 February 1956, Neutra Archive.

Figure Credits

- 1, 2, 10–15. Courtesy of Julius Shulman.
3. Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Co.
4. *House Beautiful* (May 1953).
5. *Life and Human Habitat/Mensch und wohnen* (Stuttgart: Verlagsanstalt, 1956).
6. *California Stylist* (October 1945).
- 7–9. Courtesy of The Wilhelm Reich Museum, Rangeley, Maine.
16. *New York Times Magazine*, pt. 2, *Home Design*, Spring 1998.