

Best of the West

By Daniel Gregory

In praise of Eichlers

These classic tract houses of the 1950s and 1960s are fashionable again

■ The Eichler was the Ford Thunderbird of developer house designs—sleek, sexy, and easily mass-produced. Almost 11,000 versions of the compact, open-plan homes were built in Northern and Southern California between 1950 and 1974.

At a time when most tract houses were traditionally styled in clapboard or stucco—and not designed by architects—the Eichler stood out. Characterized by flat roofs and shallow gables, exposed post-and-beam construction, and open, indoor-outdoor one-story floor plans, the architect-designed houses brought fresh, contemporary ideas to the mass housing market. Indeed, the first Eichlers looked like custom-designed houses.

Named for its developer, home builder Joseph Eichler, the house was born of his desire to build a truly contemporary residence with mass appeal. Eichler, influenced by living for a short time in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, hired well-known architects like Anshen + Allen, Jones & Emmons, and Claude Oakland to make his dream a reality.

Sunset profiled many Eichlers over the years because they were both Western and contemporary in their celebration of indoor-outdoor living. Developed in the late 1950s, the atrium plan (with an outdoor room at the center of the house) became one of Eichler's most famous innovations. One such house won an AIA-*Sunset* Western Home Award in 1963.

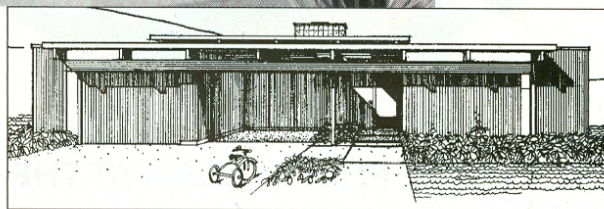
Today, the principles of '50s modern design exempli-



MARVIN WAX; BELOW: ERNEST BRAUN; ILLUSTRATION: CLAUDE OAKLAND



This restored Eichler sports a signature open-air atrium; other notable features of original designs include exposed beams (middle) and simple geometric lines (bottom).



fied by the Eichler—simplicity, functionalism, and an expressive use of contemporary materials—are experiencing a revival. A look at a hot furni-

ture catalog like *Design within Reach* confirms it: Prominently displayed are such icons of the era as the Eames lounge chair and the George

Nelson wall clock, which feel right at home in an Eichler. Like that other '50s icon, the Thunderbird, the Eichler is back in fashion.

Eichler Network is a quarterly newsletter filled with historical anecdotes, repair tips, and interviews with aficionados. Eichler homeowners get it free; the rest of us can subscribe for \$12. Contact publisher Marty Arbutich at (415) 668-0954 or www.eichlernetwork.com. Contact *Design within Reach* at (800) 944-2233 or www.dwr.com. ♦