



LIVING NEUTRA

A Los Angeles homeowner honors a Richard Neutra masterwork with a careful renovation.





The Hammerman House becomes one with nature through a refrain of expansive floor-to-ceiling windows. The current owners reworked the front yard, far right, with a landscape of boulders, stepping stones and colorful grasses. Opposite page: The painted steel stair case, left, achieves Neutra's signature "lightness of design." The black concrete deck fronting the living room, right, cantilevers over the back yard.



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What becomes a legend most? That is the question confronting buyers of homes designed by architectural heroes. In Southern California, where the latest high-status acquisition is a modern home by one of the masters of architecture who practiced in the middle of the last century, that question has become a mantra. Few architectural masterpieces, from Los Angeles to Palm Springs, are more prized than those designed by Austrian émigré Richard Neutra, whose glass-and-steel box-shaped homes helped define the very lifestyle of Los Angeles. Yet purchasing such a rare commodity is not unlike owning a vintage Ferrari. Such desirables, once attained, come with their own set of demands.

Although Neutra's designs, with their multimillion-dollar price tags, have become synonymous with privilege, many of his homes were built for clients who had more taste than cash. Few of his houses have retained their original finishes—thin wood paneling, cork floors or built-in furniture. But when these delicate materials have survived, they tend to age poorly.

In short, buying a Neutra home is a challenge, but one could do worse than investing in an architectural work of art whose value continues to increase. The Hammerman House is a case in point.

When the Hammermans hired Neutra in 1954, Los Angeles was a string of nascent suburbs. The house, mounted on a bluff in Bel Air, was designed to incorporate

LIVING NEUTRA

its abundant natural surroundings with views of the Pacific Ocean in the front and an expanse of patio and pool in the back.

Adele Binder was unusually fortunate when she bought the 4,400-square-foot Hammerman House in 2002, along with the plans that Neutra had drawn for a second story that was never added. Those plans essentially gave her de facto permission to enlarge the house. "In 1954, many things weren't built as well as they are now," says Binder, who once owned a furniture company called L.A. Haute. "In addition, the previous owners were budget-conscious. I was able to update what was not working and to bring it up to 2004. The layout is exactly the same. We just completed the second story."

To modernize the home while retaining its original sensibility, Binder hired L.A.-based architect John Bertram, who has renovated several Neutra houses. "The biggest challenge is not only getting the alignments and finishes that Neutra was obsessed with, but in building an addition it is trying to [maintain] the thinness of structure," Bertram says, referring to the steel framing favored by midcentury architects to create a lighter, more airy look. Los Angeles building codes in the 1950s were not rigorous, allowing architects to experiment freely. However,

those freedoms make current renovations a challenge. "Today's seismic and structural codes make that very difficult," Bertram adds.

Through the years, the original owners altered the interior, and in many ways Binder and Bertram brought the home back to the spirit, if not to the letter of Neutra's law. Binder painted the interior of the front door in silver metallic paint, which she used in the powder room as well. She borrowed the idea from Neutra, who used a similar hue on overhead beams, wood posts and window frames for projects in which he could not afford to use steel.

The floating brick fireplace, characteristic of Neutra homes, had been covered in white plaster, but Binder defined it anew in brushed stainless steel and added a row of cabinets to the side. Binder also remedied the home's storage deficit by adding storage options throughout, but concealed

Drawing from Neutra's sketches, the owners added a row of floating shelves, below, to divide the kitchen from the dining area. Opposite page: Steel-framed sliding glass doors open the living room, top, to the pool and ocean view. The fold-out bar was replicated from the original plans with a few modifications. Enlarged but similar in scope, the kitchen, bottom, is equipped with Gaggenau and Sub-Zero appliances.



LIVING NEUTRA



them in keeping with Neutra's design philosophy.

The dark slate floor laid in Neutra's own crazy quiltlike pattern has been extended throughout much of the house, although Binder replaced Neutra's traditional square cork tiles in the kitchen with a parquetlike pattern. Neutra closed off the kitchen from the living room with a wall, which was replaced with rows of suspended bleached ash shelves to create a sense of room division within the open floor plan. "I bring practical experience after all those years of being a woman alone in the kitchen," Binder explains. Instead of bringing a kitchen table into the space, she expanded the stainless steel island. An adjacent laundry room is now a pantry that accommodates work space and supplies for entertaining. "Our lifestyles are different now," she says. "Entertaining at home is different as well."

For furnishings in the living, dining and kitchen areas,

Binder went with classic Italian modern pieces: a white sofa and shag rug in the living room and a glass-top dining table surrounded by white leather chairs. It is a restrained, minimal aesthetic that suits the sleek architecture well.

The windows at the back of the house look onto a spacious patio of aggregate concrete and a signature Neutra pool that looks as if it has been bent in half. The pool area is protected by a wall of frosted glass and aluminum, a departure from the dark wood originally installed by Neutra.

The master bedroom is surrounded in glass to welcome in views of treetops and ocean mists. The white leather chairs and a tulip chair add sculptural presence, while the orange Plexiglas-topped table contributes color and life. An old bathroom is now a grand closet with an island of drawers. "Today's woman, or man, needs closets and a dressing room," Binder insists.

LIVING NEUTRA



The house was constructed with typically poky postwar bathrooms. On this front, there is little disagreement about the need for improved standards of comfort, so all were changed. An old sitting room has been converted into a master bath, complete with a sunken tub encircled by white CaesarStone. Two vanities on opposite sides of the room mirror one another. The glass-enclosed shower opens onto a garden; celadon glass tiles reflect the verdant outdoors.

These days, no home is without an elaborate media room. Here, a converted downstairs bedroom does the job with a flat-screen television and a concealed audio system. A white leather sofa and a black woven leather chair by Sawaya & Moroni provide comfortable seating. "Neutra was very interested in technology and I think that had he had access to much of what is available today, he would have used it—controlled lighting systems, motorized shades," Bertram says. "In those days, there was no such

Neutra's design is a play of planes. The transparency of the living room and stairway provide a juxtaposition with the wall of aluminum and glass separating the carport from the deck. The renovated pool is reflective of the original pool's design.

thing as a minimalist faucet or toilet. I think he would have approved."

Bertram followed Neutra's plans, installing cork-lined white stairs that lead to the second story and two additional bedrooms, with windows encased in the 1950s-style steel frames favored by Neutra, which lend authenticity and continuity to the space. The effect here and elsewhere in the house is pure and powerful. □

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The home is currently listed at \$5.4 million with Blair Chang of Coldwell Banker Previews International (310.281.4510).