1 HISTORY BY CHOICE

… the author actually had to say
everything that I made him say.
—Gilles Deleuze, "Lettre à Michel Cressole"

Richard Neutra was a founder of environmental design. That should appear an odd way to begin this study, since architecture generally considers environmental design to be repulsive, an odious amalgam of pseudoscience, bad form, and moralism. But while the disciplinary and pedagogical aims of the many environmental design programs that began to develop during the 1960s are often thus characterized, the concept of environment and its design opened—and still opens—architecture to an entirely different set of issues. What came to be called environmental design was originally in the 1950s—and even before—a radical reconsideration of one of modernism's primary preoccupations and claims, namely that architecture was ideally the construction of universal space. By the 1950s, for some architects and designers, this abstract void had become instead an affective environment. Neutra was a key figure in the production of this saturated plenum, and it is in that sense that one may productively claim rather than castigate him as a founder of environmental design.

The idea that modernism was monolithic has long since given way to the view that modernism was internally divided. Moreover, there is increasing understanding that modernism was also self-critical and that, at least by the 1940s, modernism launched a series of reorientations in its own project. Some of the better-known examples are the new monumentality in public buildings and what might be called the new domesticity in projects such as the Case Study Houses.[1] None of these phenomena rejected modernism, but they did seek to expand its agility in the face either of new developments, such as World War II, or of previously underrecognized conditions, such as the impact of consumer culture on design. A shared feature of these many

internal reconsiderations of modernism was the sense that what had been thought of as pure space was in fact traversed, constrained, polluted, agitated, and modified by a whole range of forces. Once thus seen as interactive and as part of a dynamic system, space became environment.

This study focuses specifically on the infiltration into space of an affective sensibility, and the correlated design of environments characterized above all by their sense of mood.[2] This architecture of affective environment was not a return to previous sentimentalities, architectures of sensation or association.[3] While certainly related to these traditions, as will be discussed below, affective environments relied additionally on ideas of the unconscious and on the notion that design effects could induce subliminal moods precisely because of the operations of the unconscious. The development of affective environments was thus an innovation and an intellectual achievement that had to work through not only psychoanalysis itself, but the dissemination of psychoanalysis into a more broadly psychologized culture. This is not to say that no architecture before the postwar period has mood—but it is to say that the design of mood-producing effects could not and did not become a deliberate architectural technique until an understanding of the relation between the unconscious and the environment had emerged.

The environmental and mood-inducing qualities of the projects in this study are the main impetus behind the recent dramatic upsurge of interest in Richard Neutra's work and are related to the mid-twentieth-century creation of a category of design called "contemporary."[4] The concept of contemporaneity as distinct from modernity reaches back into the 1930s, but the displacement of modernity by contemporaneity was an intellectual event that took place later and was more or less complete by 1954.[5] In that year, Sigfried Giedion published the second edition of his 1951 book *A Decade of New Architecture* but with the new title *A Decade of Contemporary Architecture,* in which he describes the "consolidation of the whole movement." This publication reveals a distinct struggle with the nomenclature of a phenomenon that Giedion argues began in 1947, with its titles shifting between "new," "recent," "modern," and so forth, settling down uneasily and with reservations to "contemporary" in 1954.[6] That same year, the editors of *Architectural Record* compiled *A Treasury of Contemporary Houses.*[7] While all the featured houses were described as modern, the editors also claimed that these houses resisted and exceeded doctrinaire definitions of the modern:

"Why should a modern house have to have a flat roof? Or a glass wall? Or an open kitchen? Why should it have to have its structure exposed? Why shouldn't it have anything its owners really want, including a curve or two, even a Victorian curve?"[8]

For the editors of *Architectural Record,* the contemporaneity of these houses lay in this excess desire. Unlike Giedion, whose struggle to define the contemporary led him to extend modern categories like structure, urbanism, and social improvement, the editors of *Architectural Record* asserted the specifically extramodern character of the contemporary: these modern houses had become contemporary by acquiring nothing more (but nothing less) than a "new look." Replacing the prewar emphasis on firmness and commodity, they seized upon the element of the Vitruvian triad that the modern movement had neglected, arguing that "*delight* is the current fashion."[9] When modern architecture became contemporary, it shifted allegiance away from industrial production, the fortitude of engineering, and an ethos of purification, forging new relationships with interior design, decoration, fashion, and the designed obsolescences of consumer culture.[10] Above all, contemporary design focused on delight, the design of pleasures, affective mise-en-scènes, or what I will call environments.

Today, these midcentury environments have a peculiar characteristic: they seem current (figure 1). A good example of this old-is-new-again condition is Neutra's Kaufmann house.[11] Indeed, the history of the revivification of midcentury design could begin with the renovation of the Kaufmann house, which took place in almost excruciating detail during the course of the 1990s. After its widely publicized renovation, which ultimately spawned a cottage industry in the renovation of midcentury houses, the Kaufmann house appeared to have been made flesh again with almost perfect historical accuracy and apparently devoid of any interpretive reformulation.[12] The many publications on the house are paradoxical, focusing at once on the restoration—in other words, on the oldness of the house—but equally on the newness of the house. The Kaufmann house is presented as fresh today as the day it was designed—fresher, even. This is not the case with other moments of modernism or even with other works by Neutra, which are framed as objects of historical curiosity, however important they may now be. In other words, the current interest in midcentury design is not perceived as a revival, and choosing to live in a Neutra house today is generally not considered nostalgic. In fact,

it is generally perceived as progressive. Even more specifically, it is seen as a contemporary choice.

The conclusion I draw from this quite astonishing resistance to the patina of historicism is that the current interest in the midcentury—of which my own interest in Neutra is an example—is not exclusively historical. Finding a truer or more accurate modernism, a more masterful or comprehensive historical narrative, or other normative goals of historical scholarship has become an inadequate pretext for looking at the past. This transformation in historical regard is parallel to something that Reyner Banham argued happened to design itself during the 1950s. He described a new territory confronted by architects at midcentury who could no longer claim to be responsible for all aspects of design because much of the interior had been taken over by industrial designers and others. Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright or Neutra dreamed of total design—and developed techniques like built-in furniture to guarantee that control—architects at midcentury had Florence Knoll, Herman Miller, and the Eameses to rely on or to contend with. Banham argued that this development did not limit the architectural field, as most architects feared it did. Rather, he

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1 "A Modernist Masterpiece in the Desert Is Reborn," *Architectural Record,* September 1999. Renovation of Richard Neutra's Kaufmann house.

saw it as changing the rules of the game: no longer master creator, the architect had to become master selector, choosing with increased acumen the accoutrements of his interior. Banham's term for this new reality of midcentury architecture was "design by choice."[13]

Banham's characterization of this design technique that emerged during the 1950s can be extended to describe a technique of the current observer of midcentury design who selectively arranges the past and considers the effects of her design. As Banham argued about the architect, so likewise the *historian* "no longer attempts to impersonate all the characters in the drama of history, . . . but becomes the producer of the play."[14] This, I will argue, is history by choice. In keeping with this idea, my study deliberately avoids any claim to be a comprehensive study of Neutra—Thomas S. Hines has already produced the definitive comprehensive work—or even of midcentury Neutra.[15] This study does not argue that previous views of Neutra are deficient, demanding (and satisfying the need for) a more accurate portrait. Perhaps most importantly this study does not feel obligated to produce a portrait that Neutra—or his heirs—would recognize and attest to. While my effort is scholarly in nature and follows the standards of accountability and rigor thereby implied, it is equally speculative.[16] I have attempted to explore the possible effects on the history of architecture of a particular Neutra, the Neutra who survived environmental design, a Neutra whom I have selectively organized into a "history by choice."

If my current history by choice is authorized by its relation to the historical development of design by choice, the two phenomena should share some results. And indeed, they both produce the category of the contemporary: not a time period for design, like the present, but an approach to design and to the duration of design effects. Contemporary architecture of the 1950s was an architecture of environment design that embraced the consumer objects—and the consumers themselves—of Banham's design by choice. For example, Banham helped architects understand the spatial and functional implications of the arrival of TV by turning their focus away from the design of the TV set itself and toward the location of the plug (figure 2).[17] But contemporary architecture was not limited to the mere integration of objects designed by others into an otherwise traditionally modernist interior, as Banham ultimately advocated. Contemporary architecture became environmental design when it staged Banham's objects and their consumers in relation

not to function but to an affective mise-en-scène. The placement of the plug was only the first step in understanding the wide range of especially ambient effects that a TV could have on the character of a house. This study seeks to explore the zones of affective intensity that came to infiltrate the cool and neutral spaces of modernism. History by choice provides a way to understand the role that the stylized placement of a TV and the hot corner windows of a postwar Neutra house played in giving to modernism moments of contemporaneity.

2 Richard Neutra, Goodman house, San Bernardino, 1952.