

# READY MADE

## An Architect Embraces Neutra

By Andrea Truppin

Photography by Art Gray and Benny Chan

C.J. Bonura was a young architect with a wife, a baby and a small design-build firm when he set out in 1995 to find a modest modernist style home that he could redesign into something better. Instead, he discovered a house by Richard Neutra for sale by the original owners in the architect's Silver Lake Colony at the same price as any three bedroom, two bath split-level in the days just before the boom in the modernist home market. The house is one of eight that Neutra developed near the scenic Silver Lake

reservoir, between downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood, selling the building lots and his design services together.

Bonura's house was built in 1959–61 for the Ohara family, a young couple with two daughters. Instead of attempting to alter the house, Bonura sought to fulfill Neutra's original vision by restoring the home's finishes and adding elements the architect specified that the original owners had not been able to afford. "I had mixed feelings about being a custodian, but I wasn't going

The living room, like most rooms in the house, has three exposures. Balcony, at left, retains original roll-down green canvas shade. Furniture includes a vintage George Nelson hanging Bubble lamp, and Arne Jacobsen's Egg chair and a standing lamp he designed for the SAS Royal Hotel in Copenhagen in 1958. The built-in sofa was designed by Neutra and recovered with a red fabric by Knoll.



Photo by Benny Chan/Sobomark

Richard Neutra designed the Ohara house for his Los Angeles Silver Lake Colony in 1959. Second owner, architect and builder C.J. Bonura, who purchased the house in 1995, added the reflecting pool and steps. The balcony leads into the living room.



Photo by Art Gray





Photo by Barry Chasz/Stormworks

to be the first to change the house," Bonura says. "At the same time, it was a good thing that all we had to do was restore the house and we would have instant architecture. I wouldn't have to create it." He became obsessed with refurbishing the house "down to the brass tacks because it was so unmolested," he says. "I was able to see exactly the way it was in 1959, with all the original colors, even the original cracks from earthquakes."

The 1,600-square-foot house, its exterior a mix of redwood, smooth steel troweled plaster and sprayed stucco, has typical Neutra elements, such as a spider leg post and beam that supports the deep roof overhang of the master bedroom. But it was the house's particularly successful integration of indoors and outdoors that Bonura found most striking. Terraced on three levels on a sloping site — children's bedrooms at the top, living areas in the middle and master bedroom at the bottom — the house has three exposures in almost every room; the living room, for example, has a picture window at one end, and eight-by-twelve foot sliding glass walls fronting a deck on one side and a terrace on the other. "You always have the feeling that you are living outside with the birds and the trees," says Bonura. The windows of the staggered rooms also provide views to other parts of the house, so

**Opposite** The middle level of the house has stairs that lead to children's bedrooms. Not visible in the photograph is the living room, to left, and dining area, to right. Steel tube-frame stools are by Dorothy Schindele from the 1960s.

**Left** Neutra placed a breezeway between the carport, left, and the third level of the house, which contains the children's bedrooms, and is accessed through the birch wood door at right. Black door leads behind the house.

**Below** Roof of master bedroom on lowest level is supported by a signature Neutra spider leg post and beam. Bonura added landscaping, including a grass tray



Photo by Barry Chasz/Stormworks



that one experiences the interior and exterior architecture simultaneously.

An attractive and useful Bonura-designed addition to the house is a reflecting pool in the front garden crossed by broad stepping stones inspired by other Neutra projects like the Singleton House in Los Angeles, also from 1959. "Aside from the aesthetic value," says Bonura, "the evaporating water cools the breeze from the lake as it blows into the house, making it cooler than houses in the rest of the neighborhood."

Following Neutra's plans, which he acquired from the Oharas, Bonura installed thin cantilevered slab steps of exposed concrete aggregate leading up to the house, placing lighting in between each step so that they appear to float at night. In one upstairs bedroom, he added Neutra-designed built-in cabinetry of Baltic birch. To replace the Oharas' light brown linoleum with the staggered nine-inch-square white linoleum tiles that Neutra specified, Bonura cut down off-the-shelf twelve-inch-square tiles.

After living in the house for almost ten years, Bonura sold it last year for a tidy sum — enough to move to architect John Kelsey's house in Pasadena, designed in 1961 by Kelsey and his partner Thornton Ladd. To be continued ... ■

**Opposite** Eucalyptus tree grows through slats in eaves outside children's bedrooms. Living room is to right.

**Left** The living room viewed from patio.

**Below** Dining and work area, with Neutra-designed built-in furniture, and Tulip chairs and table by Eero Saarinen, vintage Bubble lamp by George Nelson and a vintage LCW birch and molded plywood desk chair by Charles and Ray Eames.



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