

Modern rooms of the last fifty years

Author

Kaufmann, Edgar, 1910-1989

Date

1947

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3204

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.



Modern rooms

of the last fifty years

The Museum of Modern Art

Reprinted from INTERIORS, Issue of February, 1947

Modern rooms of the last fifty years

assembled for a circulating exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art

MoMA
337
c. 2



by Edgar Kaufmann

Director, Department of Industrial Design, Museum of Modern Art

The revival of crafts

Modern architects and designers have been studying the art of arranging rooms for many years. These photographs show how ideas of interior design have changed and developed since 1860 and how contemporary designers treat American homes today. In 1860 William Morris (1) was building a new home for his family—new in its approach to every detail. He himself, his architect, Philip Webb, and his friend, the painter and poet Rossetti, made and arranged everything that the household needed. Their work was based on the honest handicraft and devoted artistry of the Middle Ages which they tried to re-create in opposition to the florid, mechanical imitations of baroque and Elizabethan grandeur which flourished around them.

Many kinds of art, either ancient or distant, were admired in 1860 as superior to machine made vulgarities; the newest vogue was for the art of Japan (2). It spread from the modern French painters through Whistler and others to the English art world.

Japonisme added spaciousness and lightness of line and color to the craftsman's ideals of the Morris group. Guided by these influences, the earliest modern rooms were simple, airy, honest about every traditional material, every joint and nail, and wilfully blind to the powerful, ugly influence of industry.

A few years later, while Frank Lloyd Wright in America was independently working in the same spirit, the continent



(2) *Interior 18th century Japanese daimyo's palace (print by Utamaro).*

Courtesy New York Public Library

contributed a further, important achievement to modern design: organized visual unity. Depending at first on curving, plant-like lines, this ideal blended structure, ornament and spatial mastery in the extraordinary work of the Catalan, Antoni Gaudi. These elements, and a lesser theme of angular, geometric ornament, merged as the world drew on to the war of 1914. In these years, modern designers became ever more conscious of the challenge of an industrialized society, ever more aware of the startling, vital beauty of engineering, whose famous and debated monument was the Eiffel Tower.

Philip Webb and William Morris library. 1893. Tangley Manor, near Guilford, Surrey.

In the same year that Morris founded his famous Kelmscott Press, Philip Webb rebuilt and enlarged an Elizabethan house, Tangley Manor, which was furnished by Morris' firm. Morris' personal talent for pattern is shown in the carpet, on an upholstered chair, and at the large window (curtains are pulled over the upper casements). The big, round, coverless table was a favored piece of Morris furniture. The uncluttered arrangement of this room was not as a rule acceptable to Morris' clients, many of whom demanded baronial elaboration and quantities of antiques and mementos. The Tangley Manor library was one of Morris' finest interiors.



(1) Philip Webb and William Morris. Interior. 1860. Morris House, Bexley Heath, Kent.

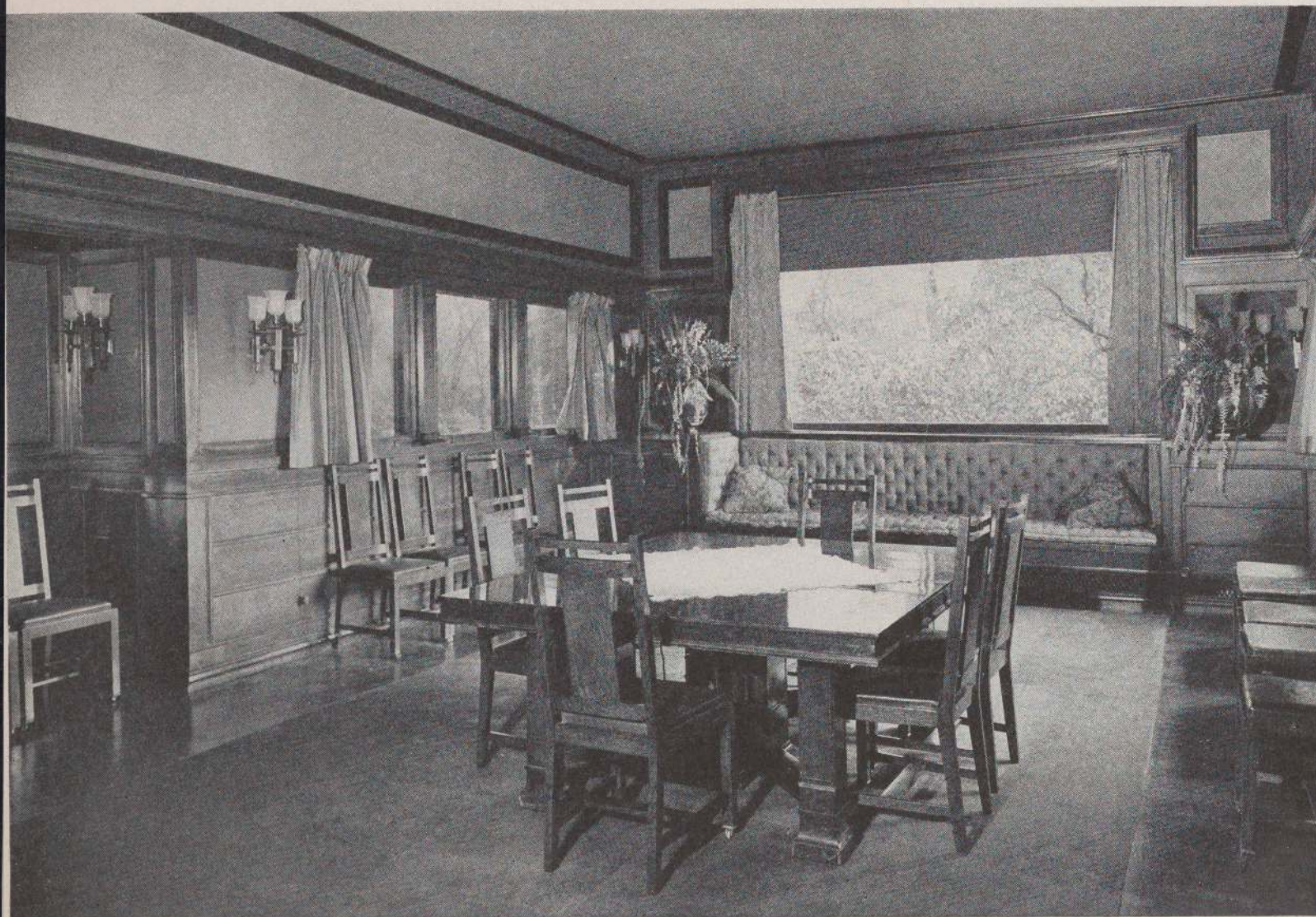
Courtesy Columbia University Libraries

*Courtesy Columbia University Libraries
Photo Eloise Galloway*

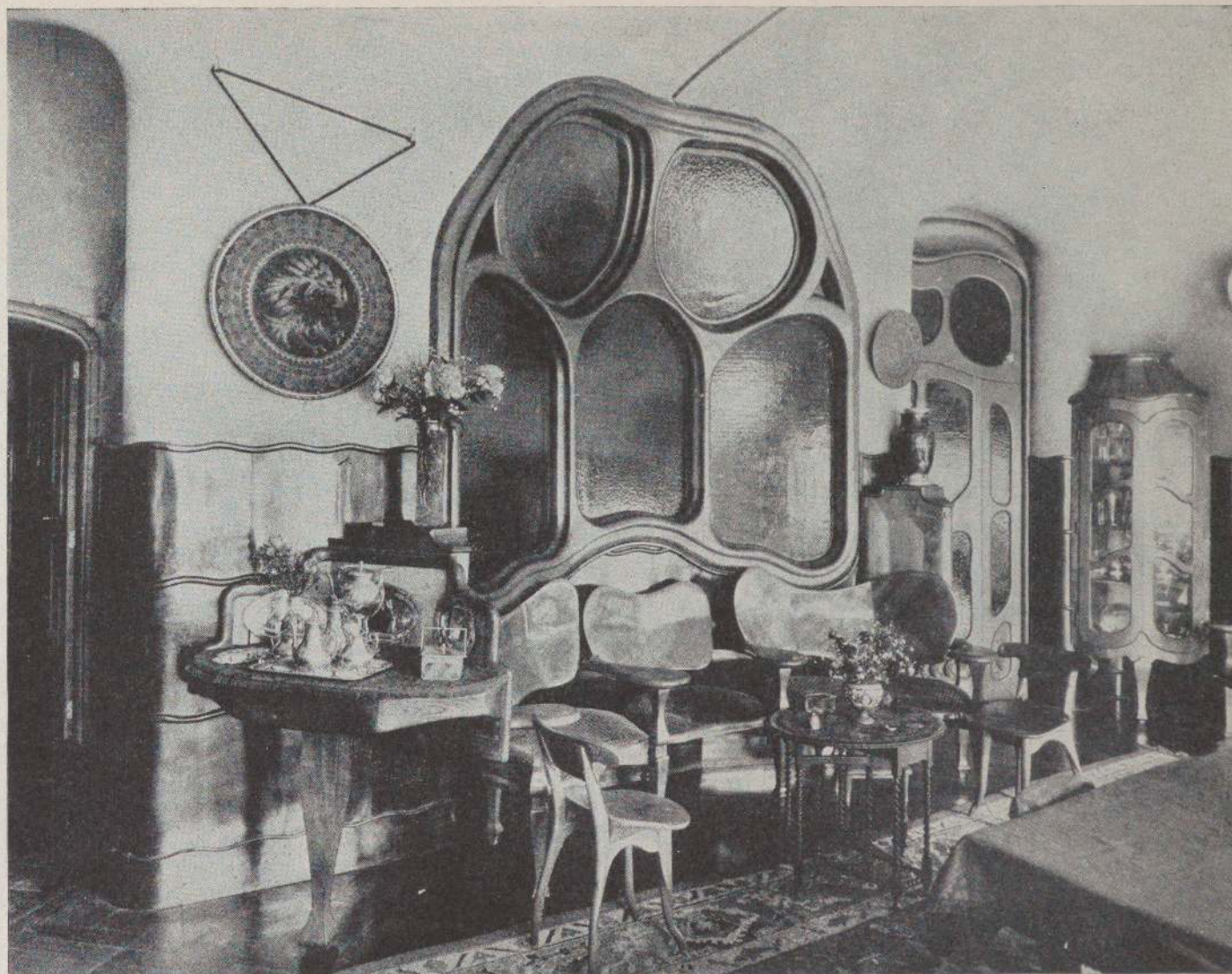


*Frank Lloyd Wright. Dining room. 1899.
Waller house, River Forest, Ill.*

In this room, built on to an existing house, elements used by creative designers all over the world for a good half-century are given coherence and vitality not surpassed anywhere. The horizontal apportioning of wall spaces, the built-in seat, the grill below the seat, the picture window are more harmonious in themselves, better integrated with the architecture than in other works of that day. The room is strong, serene and unified—there is no sense of the past in it; it is addressed to the future.



*Photo Henry Fuermann & Sons
Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Company*



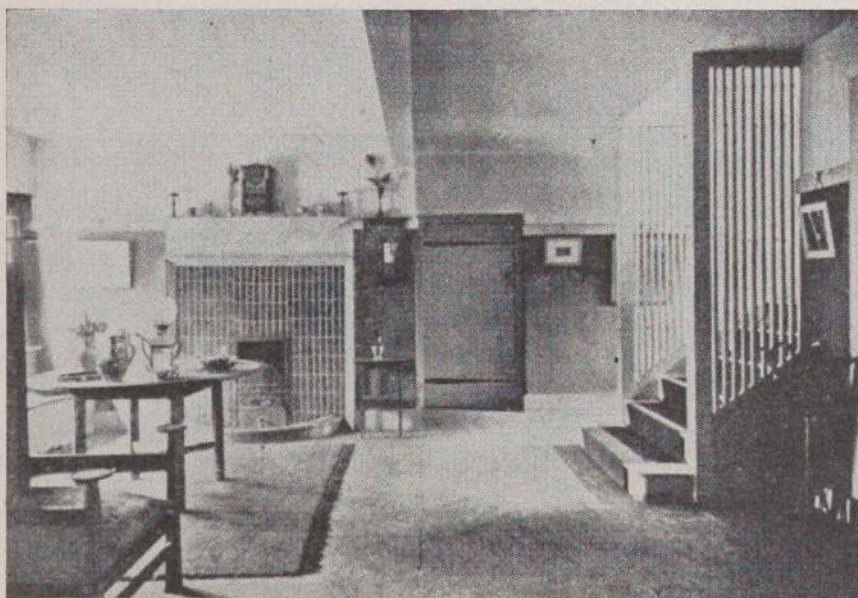
Antoni Gaudí. Dining room. 1907. Casa Batlló, Barcelona.



Although he did not leave his native Catalonia until he was nearly sixty, Gaudí was influenced by Morris, by the extraordinary Catalan architecture of the Middle Ages and by Art Nouveau. With religious intensity he fused architecture and furnishings into rhythmic ensemble, each element molded for the uses of man. In this house he enclosed room spaces in continuous envelopes of plaster, the doors and windows fitted as if in sockets. The entirely original, shaped settee-backs seem almost to have detached themselves like small bubbles from the window. The chairs are shaped like some recently designed by Russel Wright and those, shown here on page 13, by Charles Eames.

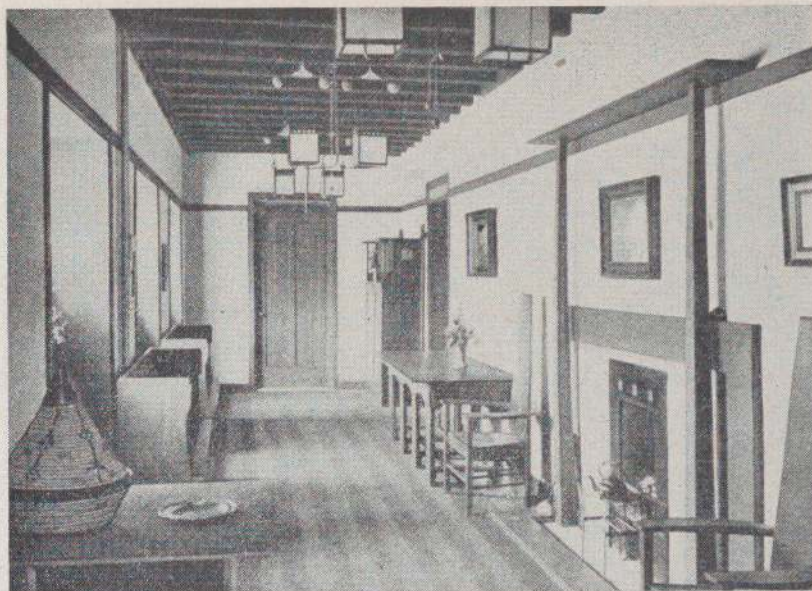
Richard Riemerschmid. Study area of a music room. 1899. Exhibition of German Art, Dresden.

The fusion of architecture and room arrangement shows clearly here. The study table and window are built together, and the outline of the desk is echoed in the window mullions. The large electric ceiling fixture allows artificial light to be evenly distributed through the whole room without too great an intensity at any one source. The springy lines of this fixture are repeated in the painted wall frieze almost as if multiple shadows had been thrown by the lights. The light, structural forms of the desk and chairs, are still surprisingly good looking. The simple floor covering recalls Japanese matting.



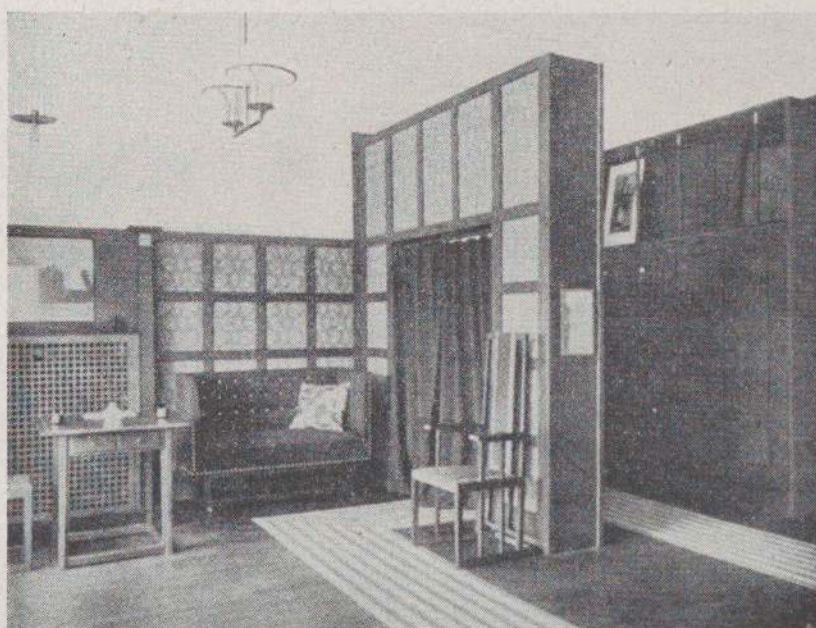
C. F. A. Voysey. Hall. 1900. Own house, Chorley Wood, Hertfordshire.

Rich red and softer tones of purple, green, and peacock blue brightened this room. Its sober handmade excellence marks the greatest opposition to Victorian theatricality, and its strictness forecasts rooms of the 1920's. The realities of industrial life were as carefully avoided as was any romantic recreation of the past. Innovations such as the stair grill or the plate-like finials of the armchair were discreet and rational; lamps and ornaments were selected with care. Repeated vertical lines in the chimney tiles and stair grill are the only strong pattern; space and light were used admirably. The reserve of this English interior is unlike contemporary work of the Glasgow school shown on the next panel.



*Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Hallway. 1903.
Davidson house, Kilmalcolm, near
Glasgow.*

This interior seems more fitted into the architecture than part of it, though Mackintosh designed both. The mantel and the cupboard, with its frame emerging at the top from encasing panels, show imaginative expression of structure. The square chandeliers and broadly striped matting are characteristic of Mackintosh at his best. A horizontal strip divides wall and frieze, clearly differentiating the areas but with less logic than in Wright's room. In the Voysey room this detail is part of the decorating, characteristically unassimilated to the architecture. Mackintosh lies between these two extremes.



*Josef Hoffmann. Photographic studio. 1904.
Villa Spitzer, Vienna.*

Hoffmann, a great admirer of Mackintosh, led the Viennese designers, internationally known through their modern crafts shops, the *Wiener Werkstaetten*. Forty years ago in this room Hoffmann used now familiar devices such as a screen wall dividing the storage alcove from the studio, built-in cupboards and trim rectangular shapes in the upholstered bench. Quite modern, too, are Hoffmann's repetition of units as a decorative device and his boldly striped carpet emphasizing traffic lanes. The light fixtures are unusually functional for their day and together with the radiator grill show an early interest in the appearance of machine products. This interior remains separate from the architecture in which it is placed.



*Josef Frank. Study. 1939. Swedish
Pavilion, World's Fair, New York.*

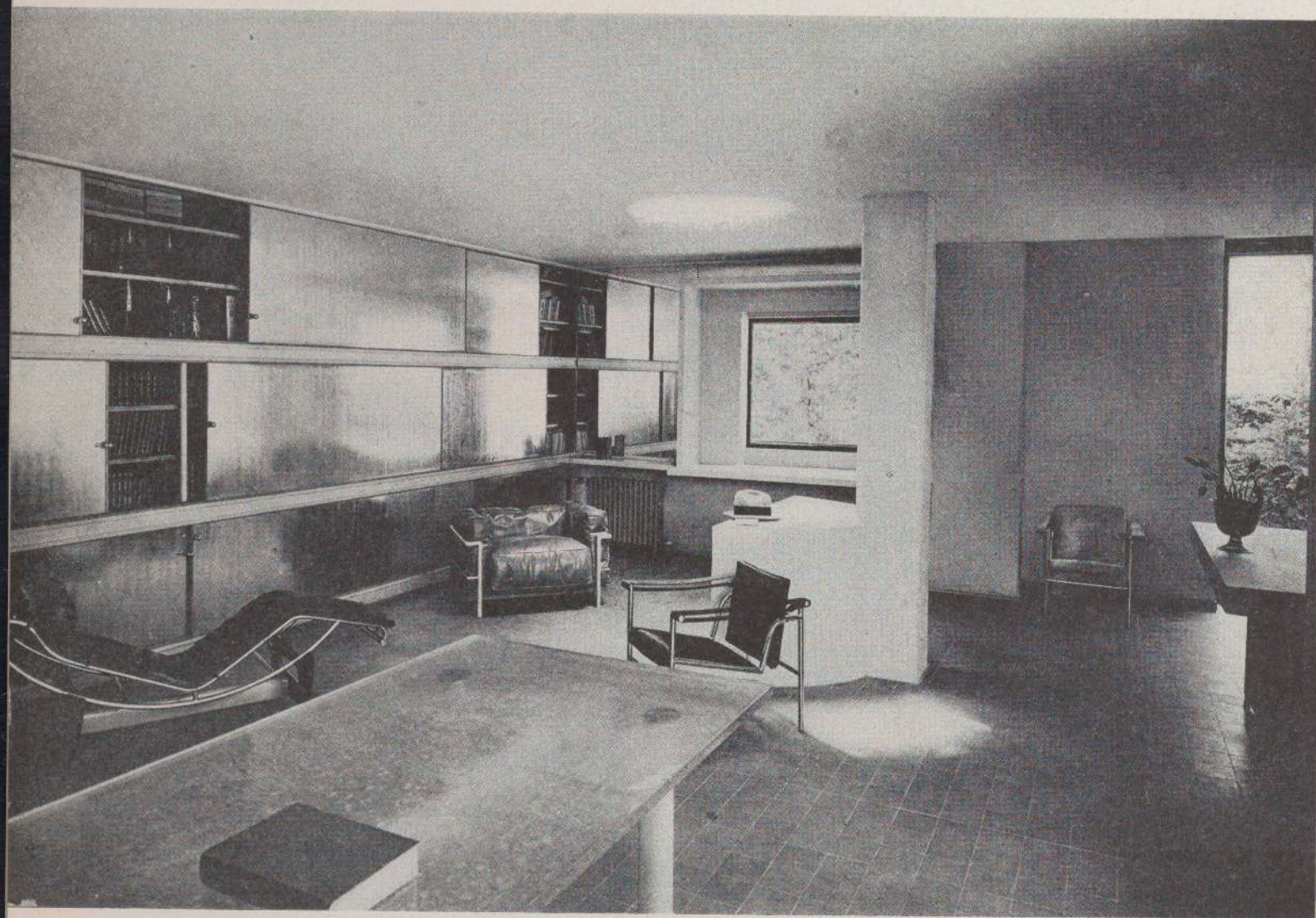
A second generation continued to refine the tradition initiated by Mackintosh, Hoffmann, and the Austrian *Sezession* group. One of the leading Viennese designers, Josef Frank, left for Sweden when the Nazis came. For many years before that the Scandinavians had found inspiration in the Viennese tradition. This room shows how extraordinary virtuosity in handicrafts was blended with the thin lines and openness typical of the more mechanical modernism of the 1920's. The Viennese flair for bold line and pattern is evident.

The influence of industry

When the first World War was over, a wholly new, very strong synthesis of modern design ideals sprang up and became embodied in the work of artists' groups in Holland, in Germany, and in France. The Germans organized a school for all arts, the Bauhaus, whose influence has been preponderant. By 1920 modern designers were bringing to the fore three elements hitherto little developed—the acceptance of mass production, the forms and materials of engineering, and the predilection for geo-

metric shapes. As before, the organization of visual unity was considered an essential tenet. The lightness and spaciousness learned from Japan seemed more desirable than ever. And from Morris and the craftsmen, they retained the basic ideal of honesty in materials and construction translated to new conditions. A new element, poverty, was added by the 1914 war itself; from a matter of necessity, it became a matter of pride for people to live comfortably and graciously in the least space,

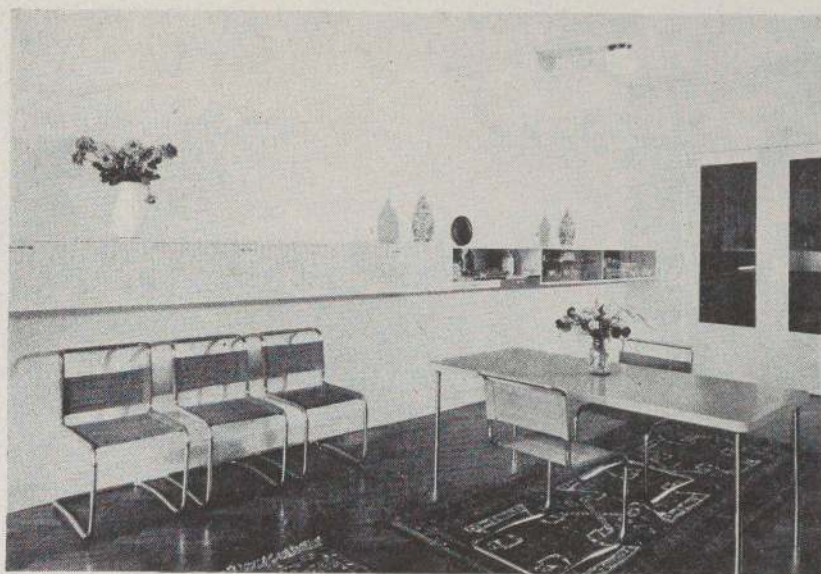
with the least equipment. The words *efficient* and *minimal* became synonymous. But the modern style was finally free of the echoes of ancient or distant arts, finally in tune with the society of its time; this was clearly expressed in the modern rooms of the day. The most beautiful rooms of this epoch were by Mies van der Rohe, who used the elements mentioned here with great freedom and virtuosity.



Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Living room. 1928-29. Furniture in collaboration with Charlotte Perriand. Church house annex, Ville d'Avray, France.

Clean, sparse and masculine, this room shows a sense of formal respect for the living which takes place in it. There is strict separation between the straight lines of supporting framework and the large taut sheets of material spanned between; this feeling is carried through the details of the wall cabinets, the furniture, and the

building itself. In spite of the great interest in industrial materials, these are blended with wood, leather, and tile. The greatest amount of space is left for people to move in, and, in the same sense, the greatest freedom is left for the eye and the mind to move without hindrance. The final effect is controlled clarity.



*Marcel Breuer. Dining room. 1930.
Boroschek apartment, Berlin.*

A long thin storage cabinet enlivens the architecture by sharp perspective lines (seen also in the Corbusier room) over which the eye slides as quickly as over the gleaming chromium tubes of the furniture. As in a number of the rooms shown so far, repetition of standard elements is used decoratively—for example, the one-two-two-one of the chair legs, and the three closed cabinets, each the same smooth length, followed by equal open spaces. The little touch of contrast at the silver drawer is typical of Breuer. Especially noteworthy are the S-shaped chairs. At the same time as Miës, Breuer originated cantilevered tube-metal chairs; for the first time a chair *frame* contributed actively to the comfort of the user. Here Breuer has used traditional patterns in the oriental rugs, and in two porcelain jars on the cabinets. Each item—decorated or plain—is allowed to speak its full story in this uncluttered arrangement, so unlike an earlier generation's accumulation of decorated objects three deep, to create a "rich effect." Breuer's ability to organize a room clearly is again shown on two later panels.

Photo Emelie Danielson Nicholson



*Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Library corner.
1930. Johnson apartment, New York City.*

Miës, one of the great originators of chromium furniture, uses space and materials more sumptuously than any other modern designer. In the Corbusier bookcases, sliding doors maintain the desired simple surfaces. Here Miës has called on the variegated books to act as decoration; their repeated verticals are subordinate to the dark shelves, just as the soft striations of the raw silk drapery are governed by widely-spaced vertical pleats. The silk is navy blue; the cowhide table top is black, the chair is covered in creamy parchment, while on the floor is spread Japanese matting. The elegance of this room is unforced and friendly.

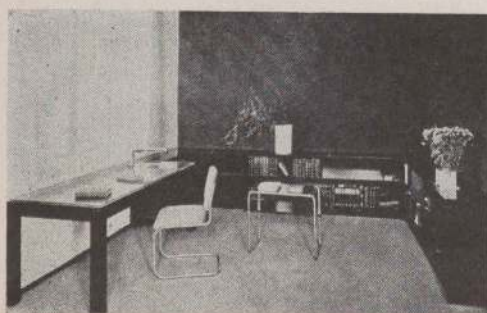


Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Living room. 1930. Tugendhat house, Brno, Czechoslovakia.

Unlike the New York apartment, here in a building of his own design, Mies is more assertive. Limitless unbroken planes sweep by overhead and underfoot. The beauty of accidental patterning—seen before in the random books and raw silk—is now luxuriously presented in a polished onyx screen. Near this, the hangings and rugs are severely plain, as is the beautifully propor-

tioned cabinet with sliding panels. Its heavy black rectangle is carefully floated amid all the light, polished, and richly figured surfaces nearby. Even more than in the Breuer room every single component of this area is so contrasted and so spaced that its esthetic value registers fully. Probably justly, no other modern interior has become as famous as this one.

Erwin Gutkind. Study. Before 1934. Apartment, probably in Berlin.



The austerity typical of the best modern rooms around 1930 could easily take on a barren look if deprived of space and rich materials, yet this and the next photograph show how able designers handle the problem. Gutkind has created spaciousness in a small area by keeping the fixed furniture in one unbroken mass whose low top provides a big display and work surface. The floor area is left clear in the center for a light metal chair and

occasional table. Large clear fields of white, black, and two intermediate tones are so disposed that an even simpler division into two areas results: the black cases unite with the dark middle tone, and the carpet and window wall are thrown together. Books and flowers are the only ornaments, but again each object and surface is allowed its maximum effect, and this heightens even ordinary materials till they have a decorative intensity.

Richard J. Neutra. *All-purpose room*. 1938.
Gill house. Glendale, California.

In the same spirit as Gutkind, Neutra designed this room for a low cost home. Instead of tonal contrasts Neutra relied on the sweeping vistas, but he has used dark color to unite the furniture which is once again kept low and close to the wall. Books and flowers play their accustomed roles, as do the grass matting and the thin, neat metal tubes. The room has become a clean reticent frame for the changing drama of the landscape, as well as a quiet background for life and thoughts, as in the Corbusier villa.

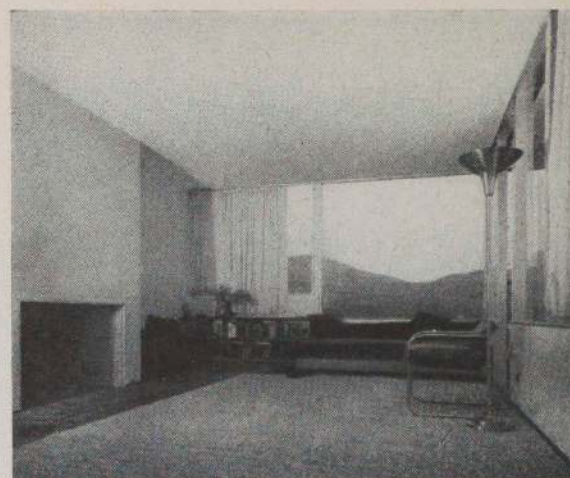


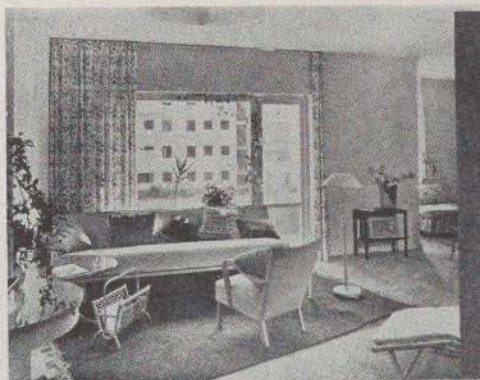
Photo by Richard J. Neutra

The present synthesis

The very strictness and purity of the great modern work of the 20's and early 30's inevitably led to a reaction; many designers returned in some degree to the freely curved lines and forms neglected since the turn of the century, and to traditional craft materials and processes. The whole arts and crafts movement had remained alive in modern design, flourishing first in London, then Glasgow, then carried by the strong talent of C. R. Mackintosh to Vienna,

whence it spread to Scandinavia. But after 1918 this had been a marginal trend, while the leading modern designers were exploring industrial materials and processes. By 1935 a satisfactory synthesis of both tendencies was noticeable, especially in furniture from Finland by Alvar and Aino Aalto, and from Sweden by Bruno Mathsson. Since then modern design and modern rooms have shown a consistent trend, blending craft with industry, free curves with

stricter shapes, still guided by the same principles that have prevailed ever since the earliest modern efforts—honesty of means, simplicity, clarity, lightness, unity. Throughout this long development, one American has been a master of the art of arranging rooms that embody these ideals—Frank Lloyd Wright has created beautiful modern interiors from the 1890's right down to 1946.



G. A. Berg. *Living room*. 1938. *Swedish Arts and Crafts Society exhibition, Malmö, Sweden*. Below, also by G. A. Berg. *Living room-kitchen of a farmhouse*. 1939. *Swedish Pavilion, World's Fair, New York*.



The Swedish modern tradition is not limited to the kind of decorative exaggerations used for the World's Fair by Frank; simplicity and unpretentiousness are its notable virtues. Almost every form in this room is directly influenced by modern design of the 20's and its interest in industrial problems. All is transmuted, however, to craft materials and techniques—only the restraint and spaciousness remain. Old-fashioned fussiness is to be seen in the way the rug is placed out of line with the walls and in the vine at the door where, however attractive, it must be a nuisance. The typical Swedish modern chair is particularly shaped to the human form as few chairs had been since those of Gaudi. The continuous line of the arm-and-leg pieces shows the influence of tube metal frames on wood design; the separation of frame and upholstery is exceptionally clear.

Marcel Breuer. Living room. 1939. Own house, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

In this house, designed with Walter Gropius (whose own living room of the same time is shown on page 15), a designer formerly interested mostly in industrial processes and materials blends them masterfully with wood and handiwork.

Breuer experimented with curving plywood to fit the human shape just as Aalto was doing (and as American manufacturers had done back in 1884). The influence of spring steel can be seen in the armchair; comfort derives primarily from the frame. Compare this chair with Berg's. Here the curves are more carefully composed, the separation of structure and padding is much clearer, the use of wood is entirely dependent on power machines, yet the forms and surfaces are in no sense mechanical-looking. The machine is at last producing objects suitable to human needs and sentiments, without the dishonest imitation of handcraft that Morris had set out to counteract. The long struggle is beginning to pay off. In the background Breuer has used the insistent parallel lines which we saw first in Voysey's room. Here they are lavishly varied in vertical and horizontal combinations.

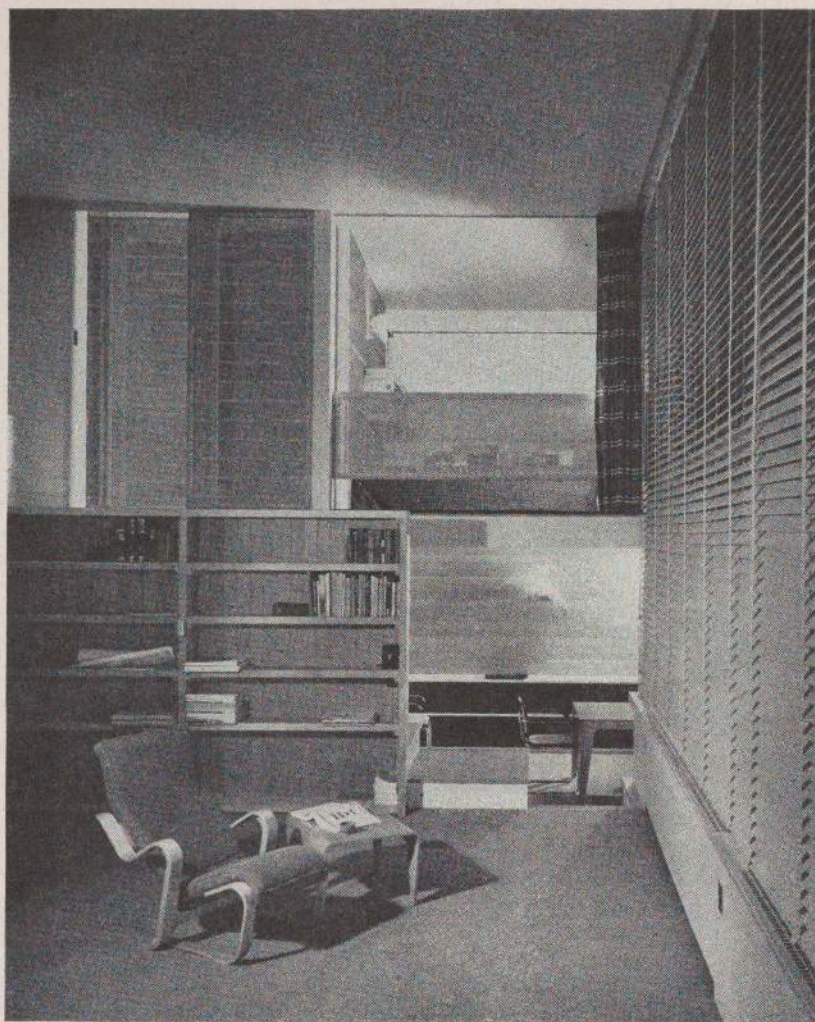


Photo Ezra Stoller

Marcel Breuer, in collaboration with F. R. S. Yorke. Living-dining room. 1936. Royal Agricultural show, Bristol.

Plywood, featured in this pavilion, is not the only example of an old craft material reappearing in unusual form. Rough stone walls once carried with them such connotations of chill utility that it would have been unthinkable not to cover them in any dwelling except that of a poor peasant. Today the list of architects who use the homely strength of stonework to enrich their interiors would include most of the capable modernists. At Bristol it is used as a foil for the silky veneers that cover floor and ceiling, divide the rooms, and sheathe the cabinets. The easy spacing of this interior allows the contrast of materials to show vividly.



*Frank Lloyd Wright. Living room. 1946.
Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin.*

This great room, recently rearranged, is anchored in the stone wall; most of the other walls are windows. The warmth, comfort and beauties that Wright considers necessary to human living are heaped around lavishly but not carelessly, and the large space under the sloping roof dominates and unifies the parts. So far when a room seemed clearly arranged it was because each component part was given due place and concordance; clarity here depends on a mighty blending enlivened by accents—contrasted light and shade, beautiful works of art, or a counter-movement in the long lines of cypress wood. Other rooms seem clear because there are no hidden corners, no unexplained spaces; in Wright's work mystery is part of the scheme. The great structure and handsome materials promise to be just as fine around the corner, and this gives an unequalled sense of fullness and excitement to Wright's work.

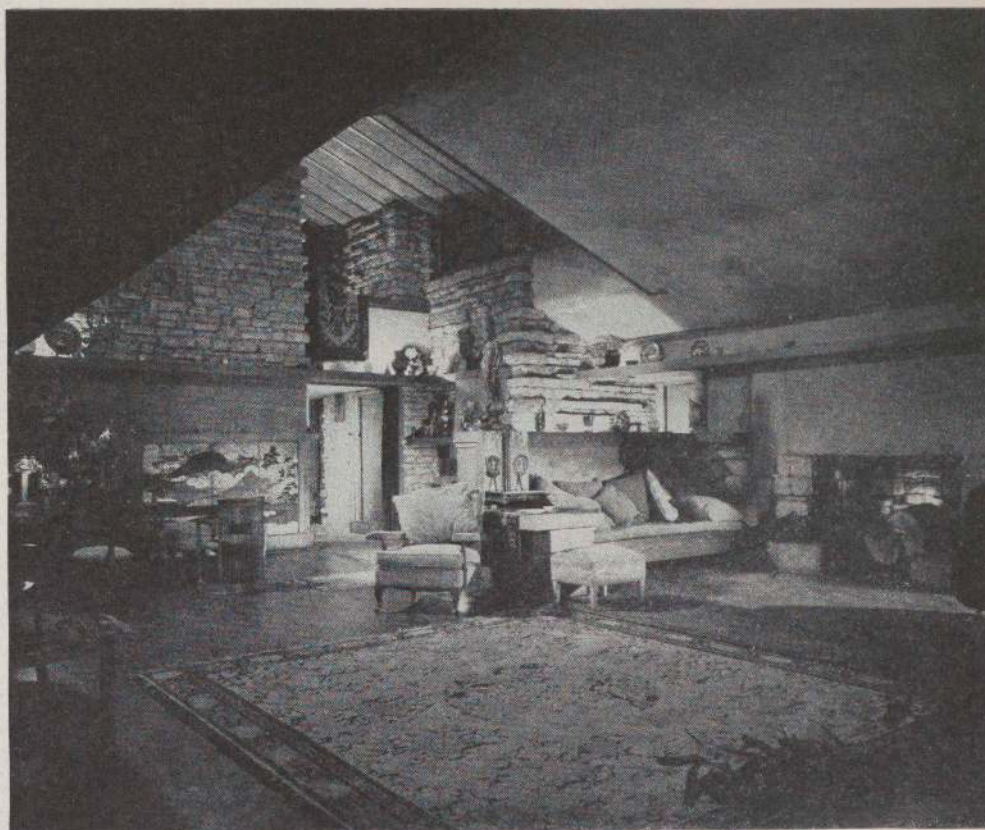
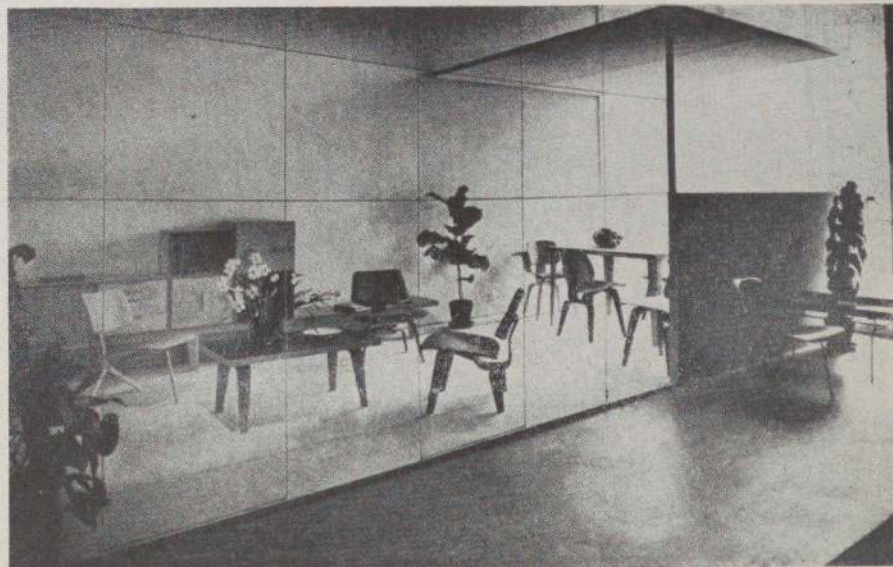


Photo Ezra Stoller, courtesy Fortune magazine

*Charles Eames. Living-dining group. 1946.
Museum of Modern Art exhibition,
New York City.*

Linear rhythmic edges give special liveliness to these chairs; this and the form-fitting shapes recall the furniture of Gaudi. Since that day, designers have learned to separate the supporting framework clearly from the seats and backs. Here Eames uses the joint between them as the comfort-giving element; resilient rubber discs weld the parts together and flex with a sitter's movements. With these thin planes hovering in mid-air a new expression is possible in modern rooms.



*Richard J. Neutra. All-purpose room. 1941.
Kelton apartments, Westwood, California.*

Color contrasts and large draperies give dignified spaciousness to a small room; the flat woven matting does not clog it up as would a pile carpet. The outdoors is brought in by many plants and cut flowers; the fireplace is in simple brick. The central area remains free.



Photo Julius Shulman

*Edward D. Stone. Bedroom. 1939.
Goodyear house, Old Westbury,
Long Island.*

There is an art in allowing each element of a room to speak for itself and in harmony with other elements. That even old and new can be joined in such a concord is beautifully clear in this photograph. The Windsor chair and the Lehmbruck statue stand there with equal authority; the traditional patterns of the bedspread and rugs would seem isolated without the strong lines of the Burchfield watercolor. The uncrowded room echoes the uncrowded landscape outside. The balances here are so precise that it would be hard, for example, to imagine the Burchfield replaced by an oil painting.

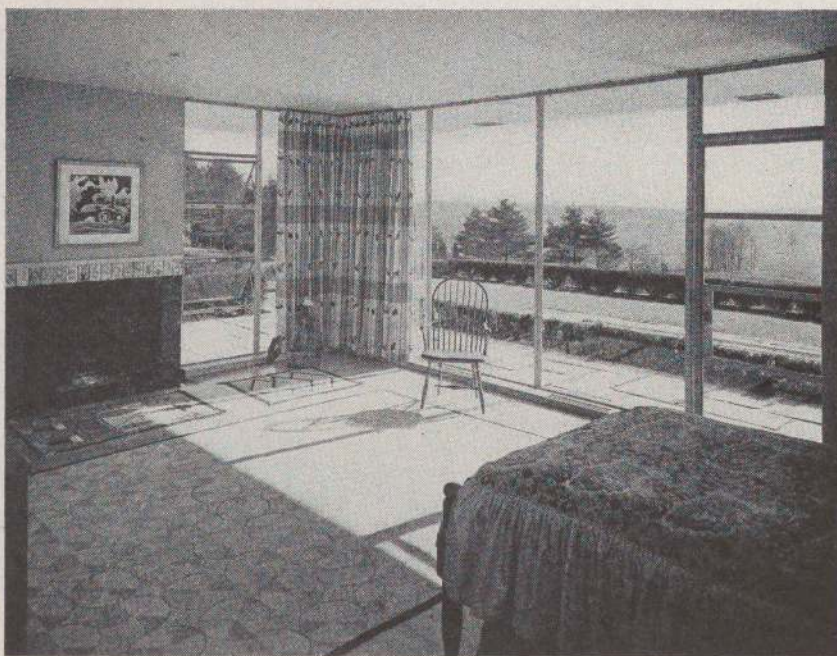


Photo Ezra Stoller

*George Fred Keck. Living room. 1941.
House in Menasha, Wisconsin.*

An expanse of lake is seen beyond strong tree trunks from this upper floor room which, at this end, happily harmonizes with the view.

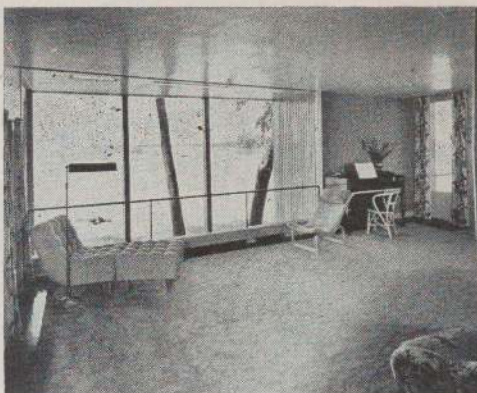


Photo Hedrich Blessing Studios

*Walter F. Bogner. Living room. 1939.
Own house, Lincoln, Massachusetts.*

This is the third room in this exhibition taken from a group of modern houses built near the home of Walter Gropius, now Chairman of the Architecture Department of Harvard University. Mr. Bogner has used lightweight furniture by Mathsson and Aalto in the open part of his room, while where it is enclosed the furniture is built in.

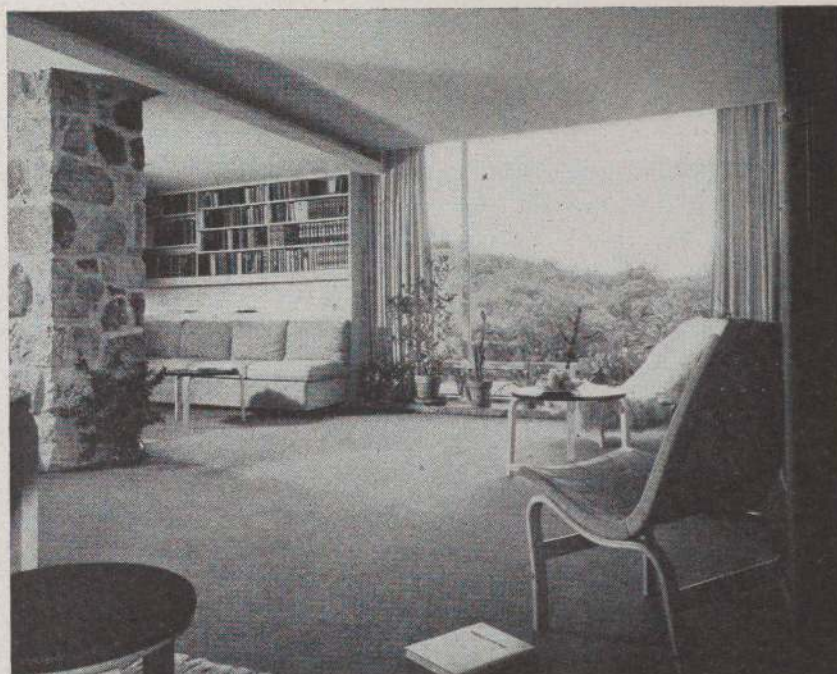


Photo Ezra Stoller

Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. Living room. 1938. Gropius house, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

The strictness usually associated with the Bauhaus, which Gropius directed from 1919 to 1928, is not evident in this fireplace group any more than in the library or dining areas which complete the room. The simplicity of the background, the use of the view as a major decoration, the quite Japanese-looking recess next to the chimney, the natural pattern in the fur, these elements devolve from work shown earlier. Less expected is the massiveness of the small sofas, or their symmetrical placing on either side of a central feature—lined up in a row would be more conventionally modern. This capacity for new experiments and adaptations enlivens modern design.



Photo Paul Davis, George H. Davis Studio

*Frank Lloyd Wright. Living room. 1939.
Winkler-Goetsch house, Okemos, Michigan.*

Even in an inexpensive house, Wright creates some of the confusing wizardry of his own living room. Long horizontal lines, unorthodox light sources, and built-in upholstered seats and cabinets are his main elements here too. The concrete floor is colored to express the warmth carried by heating pipes embedded in it.

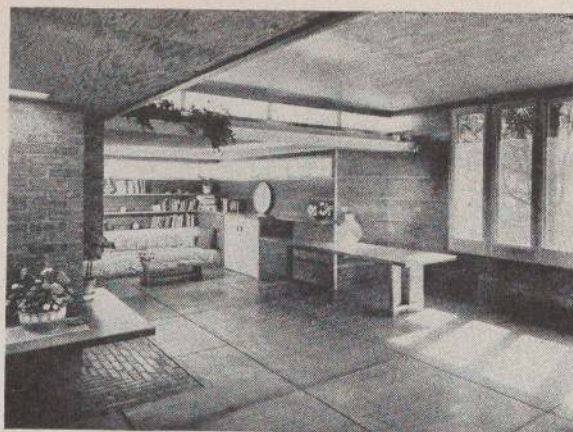


Photo Hedrich-Blessing Studios

Photo P. E. Guerrero



*Frank Lloyd Wright. Living room. 1938.
Taliesin West, near Phoenix, Arizona.*

Space has never been more poetically handled than here. Structure and materials are shown honestly and without the least pretension; nothing in view is precious by itself, unlike the oriental art in Wright's Wisconsin home. The lumber is rip-sawed and stained, the golden desert rocks are

piled in forms with concrete, and wood frames are double-faced with canvas to cool the light as it passes through. The carpets and fabrics are ordinary commercial products. The art lies in the way these things are combined. It is great art to arrange rooms well.