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Case Study House Lessons: Radical Recycled Midcentury Design

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

Seventy-five years ago this month, Arts and Architecture magazine announced the [Case Study House Program](#), a radical post-war housing experiment. Its prototype homes had an ambitious target demographic: the masses staring down a looming housing shortage.

The 24 homes realized (most are in Los Angeles) used unconventional materials and novel post-and-beam construction to achieve an urbane elegance spun from glass-rich lines. Designed by such prominent architects as Richard Neutra, Charles and Ray Eames and Raphael Soriano, the affordable exemplars were mandated to be capable of quick duplication “and in no sense be an individual performance,” stated the program’s [1945 program announcement](#).

The three-quarter century mark gives reason to re-examine the program – not in terms of its spectacular architectural success in launching timeless mid-century design – but of its dismal failure and what can be learned from it. The homes performed so well they were never copied. They instead became grails venerated by the architectural cognoscenti.

Homes just keep getting larger

The failure to mass-produce such efficient and affordable designs lies partly in Americans’ hunger for space – [the average size of new U.S. homes](#) has increased 1,000 square feet since 1973, now clocking in at 2,687 square feet. Case Study Homes were forever modest, often well under 2,000 square feet. With open floor plans and the easy grace of seamless indoor-outdoor living, the homes were a cheap yet elegant way to live.

“We don’t need these enormous houses with five bedrooms and six baths – that’s ridiculous; It’s too much resource being spent on things you really don’t need,” PBS’ “This Old House” creator Russell Morash [told me in an interview last year](#). “We’re going to have to find ways to live smaller.”

As the epicenter of a second gilded age, Los Angeles, however, has become the Brobdingnag of oversized homes with its [surplus of mega-mansions](#) – epitomized in the messianically monikered “The One,” a 20-bedroom, 100,000-square-foot Bel-Air hilltop colossus developed by Nile Niami that’s nearing completion with an asking price of \$500 million.

Paul McClean, the home’s architect, draws from Case Study House concepts – he punches his homes with light, achieving a severe beauty via vanished boundaries. Thanks to advanced glazing

systems, the Case Study Houses of yore have become the titanic glass houses of today.

Many of Los Angeles' mega and giga-mansions are ugly blunders compared to McClean's coveted designs. They languish on the market for years as buyer pools grow shallow. Spec developers and the increasingly tax-free rich build them simply because they can. Should they build them, however, is a moral question worth examining.



Hope on Alvarado / Photo: KTG Architecture + Planning

A return to Case Study House lessons

The good news: despite harboring such homes, Los Angeles is perhaps returning to those crucial Case Study House lessons we largely abandoned, with smaller homes as one component of that equation. The better news would be for this city and others to triple and not just double down on these quick-build, affordable solutions that offer dignified ways to live.

Witness the 84-unit “[Hope on Alvarado](#)” opening next month in Westlake near downtown Los Angeles that uses modular design pioneered by the Case Study House Program. Built from steel modules sourced in China, the transit-close project was fast-tracked by the city and has taken an unprecedented one year to complete.

Modules with customized interiors (right down to the kitchen backsplash) are manufactured off-site and are pre-plumbed and wired. The modules are then crane-lifted into place onto a pre-built “podium” that includes a lobby and common areas. Electrical and plumbing systems are then plugged in – like snapping together a bunch of Legos. In that regard, the five-story project resembles an elegant stack of Case Study Houses.

The apartments have expansive wall-windows, further drawing on that midcentury Case Study prototype look. Steel tube frames allow “for as much glass as you want,” said Mark Oberholzer, associate principal of one of the project's partners, KTG Architecture + Planning.



A crane lifts a module onto the Hope on Alvarado project / Photo: KTG Architecture + Planning

A midcentury dignity for-all approach

Oh, and the project is for the homeless. In truth, any young urban professional would snatch up the classy-minimalist 400 to 480-square-foot units – one sign among others that the city is shunning abhorrent high-rise public housing solutions in favor of a kind of midcentury dignity-for-all approach.

Small. Simple. Speedy. Sophisticated. “And very replicable,” said Mr. Oberholzer, who expects construction times to plummet further as designs are refined.

Those Case Study Program tenets – what I term radical recycled midcentury design – can well serve Los Angeles and indeed any city facing a housing affordability crunch.

And yes, you might cringe at the thought of living in a small metallicized modular home. Consider, however, that Pierre Koenig's 1959 [Case Study House No. 21](#) resembles a couple of shipping containers boxed together. At a mere 1,280 square feet, it sold [last year for \\$3.26 million](#).

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Top image: Case Study House No. 8 by Charles and Ray Eames, 1949, Chautauqua Boulevard, Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles / Photo: Gunnar Klack via Wikimedia Commons / <http://bit.ly/2O0iksO>

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