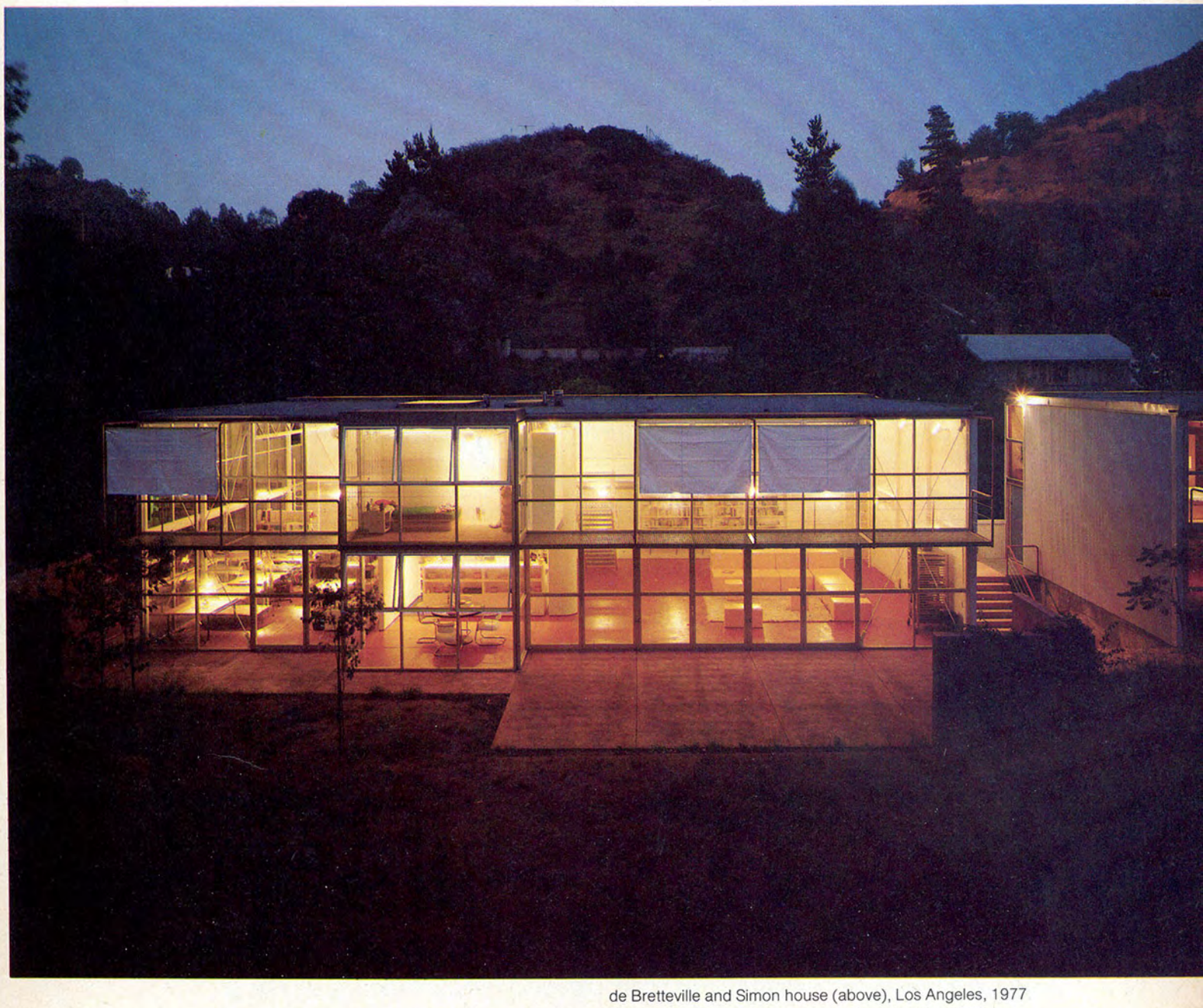


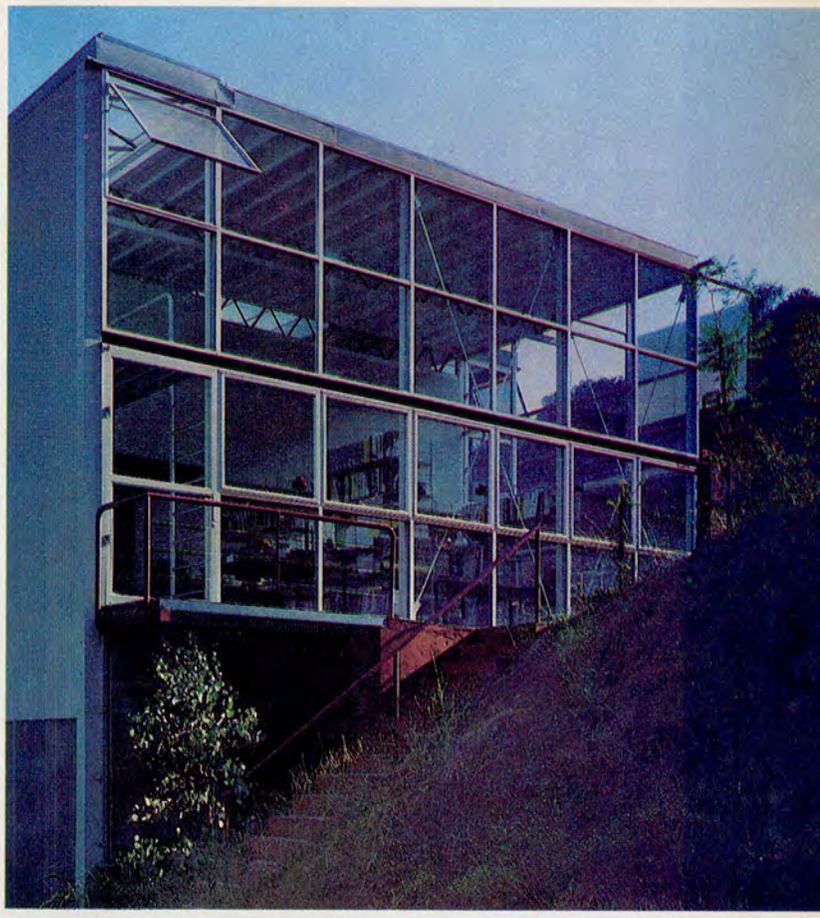
de Bretteville and Simon house (above), Los Angeles, 1977
Schulitz house (facing page, top), Beverly Hills, 1977.
Eames house (facing page, bottom), Santa Monica, 1949.

de Bretteville and Simon Houses, Los Angeles, Ca.

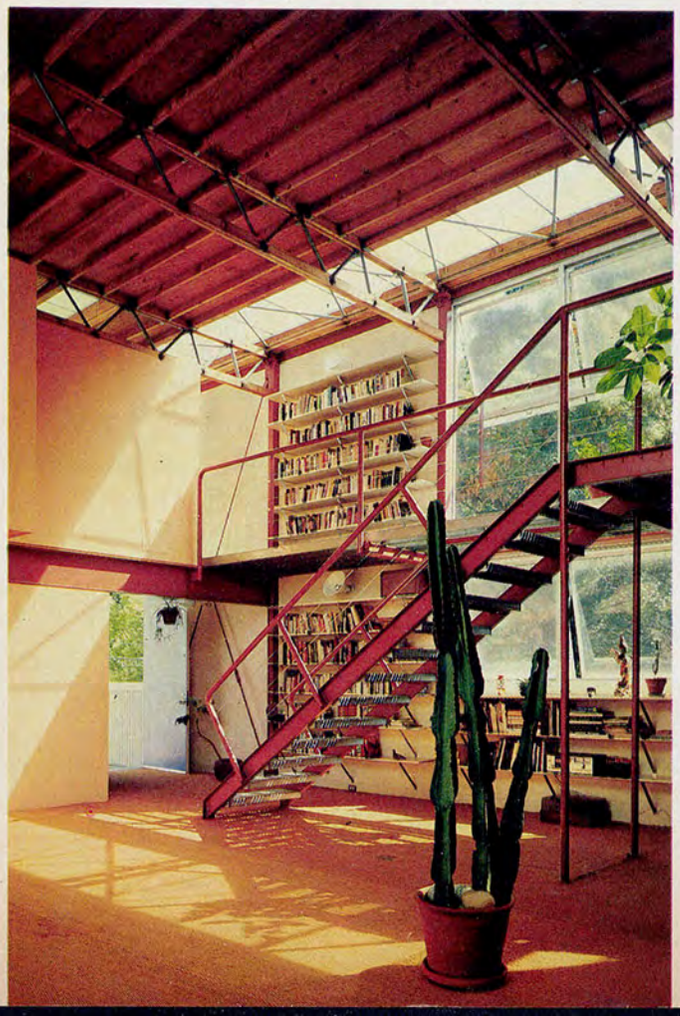
People who live in glass houses

The old idea of the two-family house is updated in California and given a new high-tech image as it recalls elements of Los Angeles' architectural past.

Sited foursquare next to a steeply winding road in Los Angeles' Laurel Canyon, the connected de Bretteville and Simon houses present an initial image of surprising directness. In an area where residential development is generally woodsy and picturesque, their public face is a sheer two-story, 124-ft-long continuous surface of corrugated asbestos and fiberglass panels. The twin boxes mark a place different from others, although the differences are more than just skin deep. What is proposed in their design at once takes a stance with respect to the current scene, as it



The de Bretteville and Simon houses are based on a 4-ft module, which is clearly visible at the north façade (above) looking into de Bretteville's studio. Given their initial similarities, the houses are actually quite different, especially in terms of their finishing, as seen in living rooms of Simon house (left) and the de Bretteville house (right). The houses are also dissimilar in function, as shown in the plans (p. 74).



recollects elements of LA's past architectural events, all in the unique synthesis of the needs of two particular families.

Apparent connections exist to the milestone Santa Monica house and studio of Charles and Ray Eames (p. 80). The superficial similarity of two boxes with a space between, apparently constructed from standardized elements, does not justly credit the 28-year-old achievement of the Eameses, nor is it an adequate or complete reading of de Bretteville's design. Other associations exist, moreover, in terms of the concept behind the project's program. The notion of two families in the creative arts sharing a homesite recollects the concept for the original Schindler house on Kings Road. Moreover, de Bretteville's attitude, in the actual detailed resolution of this project, has more in common with Schindler's casual mix of building elements than with any purely "high-tech" systems building approach. The project is not a nostalgic revival of the *Arts and Architecture* Case Study Houses aesthetic, but the result of a thoughtful yet evolving process acknowledging the realities of these antecedents while it reflects the attitudes of a contemporary architect.

Programmatically, there is nothing radical in either of the two houses. (Peter de Bretteville, the architect, and Sheila, a graphic designer, wanted studio space as part of their house; screenwriters Roger and Dyanne Simon decided to separate their office on the lower level.) What is unique was the decision to organize them so that they began to exhibit nearly urbanistic qualities. While the site consists essentially of two lots zoned R1 and totaling only one-half acre, the two families deliberately set out to live somewhat cooperatively, reacting against the suburban isolation of Los Angeles. (Their initial interest extended back to the Horatio West Apartments restoration (P/A, Nov. 1976, p. 68), but spaces there didn't suit their needs and, rather than modify the spirit of Gill's buildings, the families decided to build their own.)

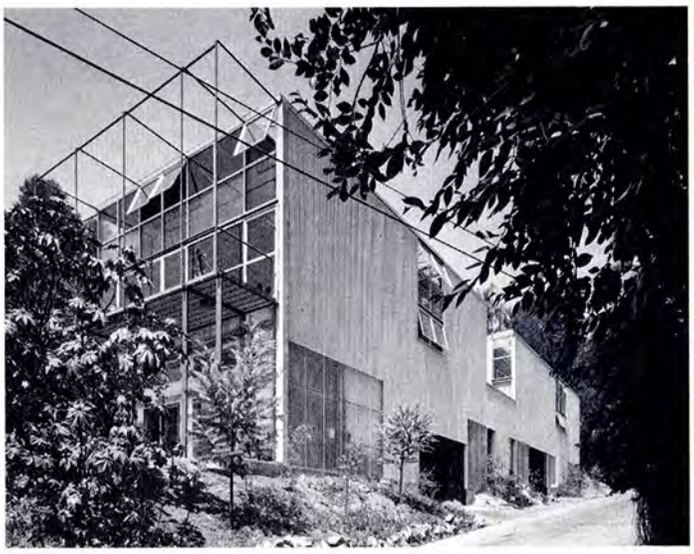
The houses are organized around a common public entry "notch," with secondary entrances at the extreme end of each building. This notch acknowledges the separation required by building code. The main level of each house consists of a double-height volume, enclosed on two sides by glass. Particular functions such as bathrooms, kitchen, storage, and so forth are treated as cores, and the upper-level bedrooms appear as platforms hung off the cores. Two balconies run the length of each house, the interior one on the back a circulation spine and the exterior one on the front doubling as a sunscreen.

Different strokes

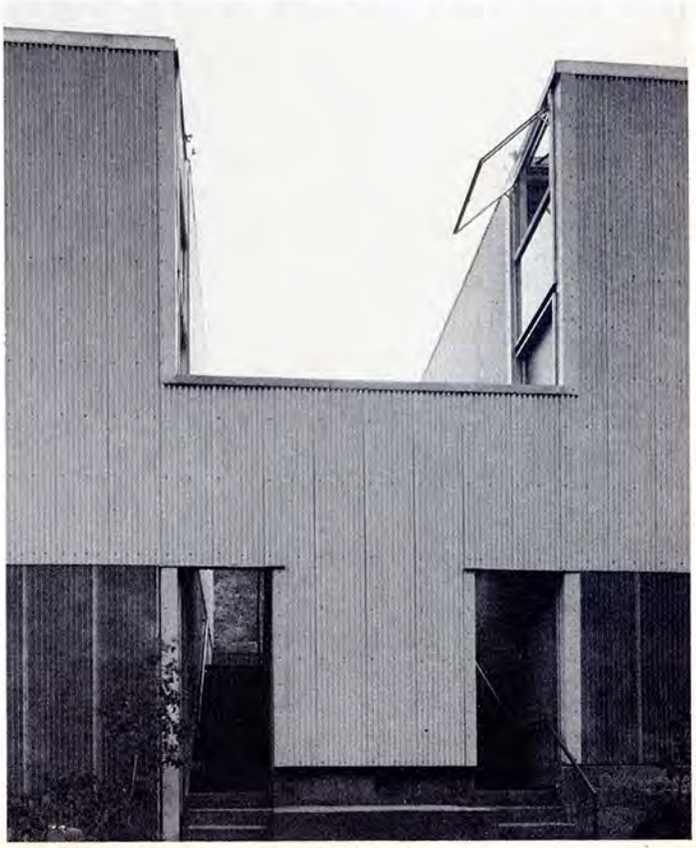
A detailed analysis of the specific treatment of each function, and the relationship of this to the whole concept, points out how actually different the two houses are, given their initial similarities.

One basic difference was the inclusion, in the de Bretteville house, of the studio as part of the main volume. Coupled with their need for only two bedrooms and one and one-third bathrooms, this gives the de Bretteville house a true "core" reading of the secondary spaces. In the Simon house, a more conventional arrangement and a higher ratio of bathrooms, plus the separation of children from adults, in a sense resulted in the "core" being the positive space of the living room.

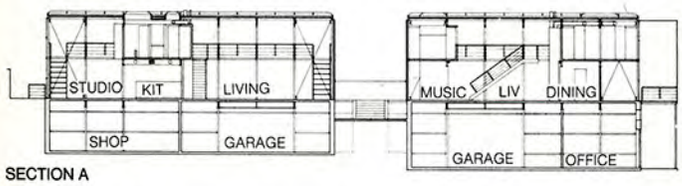
West façade (above) contrasts sharply with east entrance façade (below).



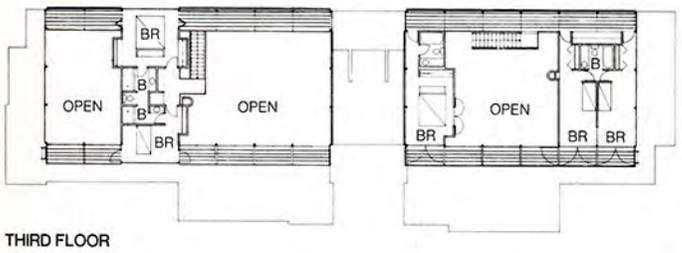
Entry notch (below) serves both houses; stairs descend to Willow Glen Road and ascend to landing serving both front doors at blank-wall entry.



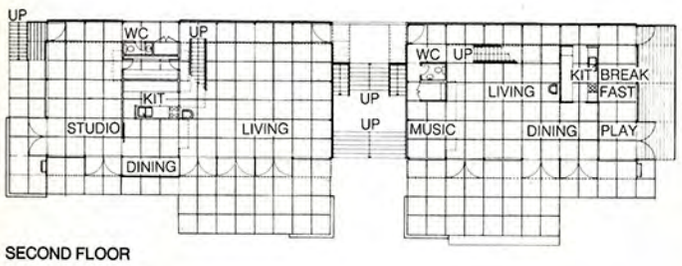
de Bretteville and Simon Houses



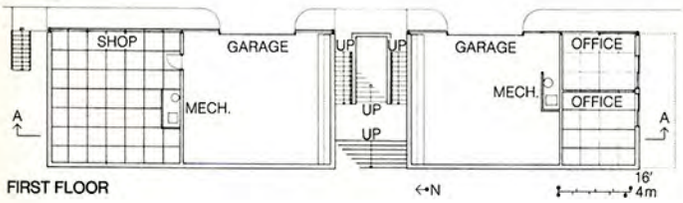
SECTION A



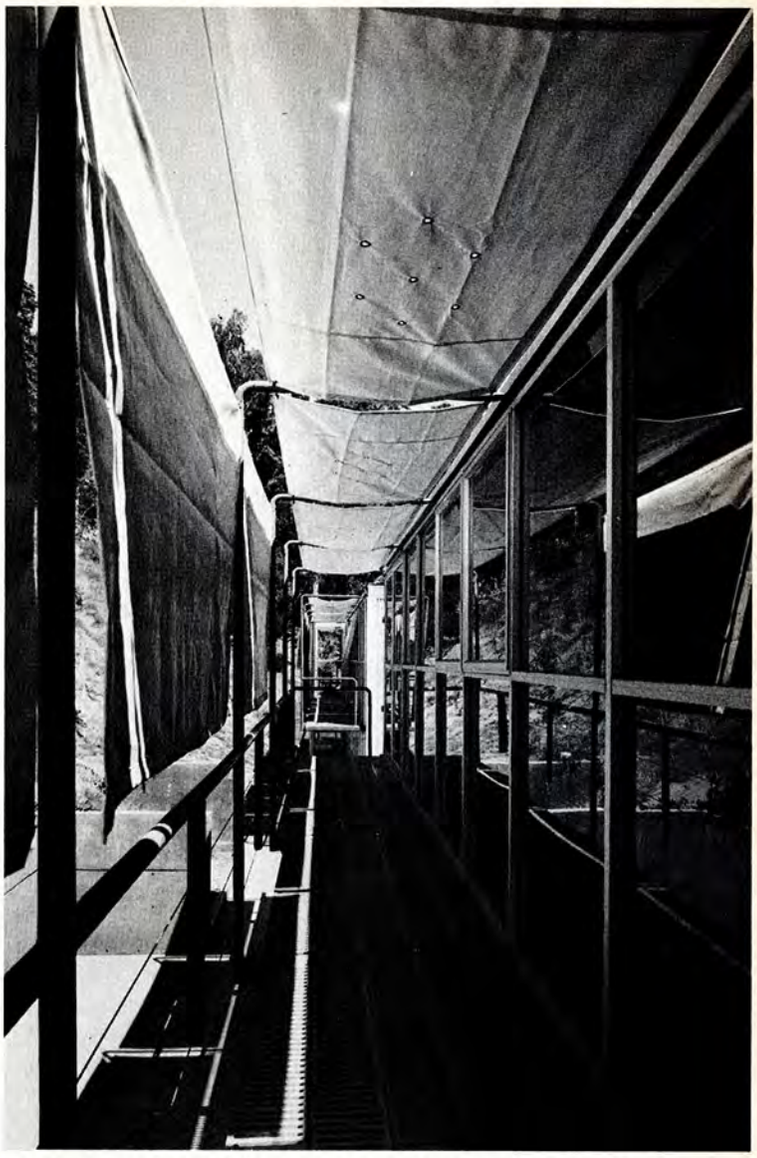
THIRD FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR ←N


On private west façade 4-ft module is extended to balcony, canopies, and . . .

Beating the system

The similarities yet differences between the two houses particularly extend down to the level of details. Additionally, it is here, in the tectonic resolution and development of the design, that the project might be contrasted meaningfully to the antecedent of Eames and the contemporary project of Schulitz (p. 76).

Based initially on a 4-ft cubic module, the design underwent various minor adjustments and accommodations to specific requirements of components selected for use. For example, the corrugated panels used for exterior sheathing did not quite fit the module, but were not rejected for this reason. Steel was chosen as the basic framing for both its visual lightness and the concept of the twin balconies in section. However, the principal span is framed by open-web joists (having 2x4 wood top and bottom chords, with ½-in. steel pipe between) and the actual roof is framed by 2x4s, 16 in. on center on joist hangers with plywood over. What results is an extremely composite structure, which becomes lighter in weight from foundation to roof. Peter de Bretteville remarks that he likes the composite nature, for the tectonics are just an aspect, not the whole statement.

The built quality of the object was not the sole means to an end, and this attitude operates at many levels for both houses. The correspondence between framing and enclosure—"structure ending where space ends"—also came from attitudinal reasons: by fixing the perimeter de Bretteville dealt with the notion of a dense particular capsule set in generalized volumes.

It was this decision which perhaps is as important an aspect to compare the project with the earlier Eames House, as the casual attitude to building systems is useful in comparison with the Schulitz House. The cores and their appendages create, in de Bretteville's intentions, an intermediate scale which intrudes into the volume. This "building scale" operates particularly from the cores, from which the closets have been pushed out like pods hanging off the core. This not only provides a flush interior wall surface for the sleeping alcoves, but more importantly was chosen as a way of activating the principal interior volumes. Likewise the relative locations and relationships with the principal stairs operate on this building scale. In Eames, the scale is different, nearly furniturelike, and this may be seen best by the spiral staircase being unobtrusively tucked away into a wall. Compositional issues, handled by Eames in a near painterly way, are somewhat sidestepped by de Bretteville in his rigorous gridding off of the exterior skin on the private side of the houses. Yet, the extensions

. . . handrails seen in Simon house (left) and de Bretteville house (above).

of the grid into the strut balcony, handrails, and canopies make this container more plastic than the delicate package of the Eames house.

Principles and process

The program and its armature underwent an evolutionary interactive process. The idea of "container" was somewhat transcended as a notion of a general model of environment. Rather than exhibiting the optimism of a neutral solution to complex problems, the houses became more and more specific within their vocabulary.

Aside from the conceptual schematic differences between the projects, the furnishing of each house by the particular families has yielded nearly completely different environments. The de Brettevilles felt that an auto body shop actually suited their needs, were informed on the warehouse idea, and particularly like hardware items. Consequently, their house is essentially white on the interior, including all wood items: counters and cabinets are white plastic laminate, rubber stud tile floors in wet areas are black. Color is not used systematically to "explain" relationships (as in Schulitz) but in a subtle manner. The core walls are slightly gray, steel beams are yellow, there is a pink staircase and doors are chalkboard-green. The industrial design effect is completed by the concrete floor, sealed to a rusty color. Where certain standard items didn't suit the design, de Bretteville designed his own, such as the improvised "Brion Vega" grilles for forced air registers.

In the Simon house, all steel was left shop-primered, the truss and wooden roof were left natural. Rubber studded tile is rust color, all counter tops in the kitchen are butcher block, and cabinet surfaces are a natural wood veneer. Interior core walls are painted a peach color, with buff-tan on the lower portion. The Simons' house is as warm and soft as the de Brettevilles' is cool. Combining this warmer color scheme with a more conventional arrangement of parts, the Simon house probably answers most people's definition of what a home might be. In articulating their own house, and perhaps in clarifying the idea of the core, the de Brettevilles provided an interior where the big spaces are really big, while the sleeping zones are mere alcoves.

However, the Willow Glen houses show that a box can have a lot to offer. Two boxes together can create a context that transcends suburbia and provides options of living choice. While the paved "street" fronts on both houses and is generally serviced by skateboard circulation, the entry notch, while symbolic of community, actually functions as an insulator, with its blank wall visually separating the houses. Both community and privacy become states of mind rather than exclusive alternatives.

Developed with industrial materials, the design does not have the integration of all components as its only end. The materials are only the palette from which choices were made. Their composite combinations reflect a spirit of accommodation which runs through the design at all levels. What appear to be identical packages turn out to be diverse and complex, specific solutions to differing needs; this divergence between initial impression and actual fact adds to the reading of the design. Peter de Bretteville, who not only designed the project but also constructed portions of it himself, observes, "I feel like I'm at the beginning now." Not bad for a start, at that. [Peter Papademetriou]

Data

Project: de Bretteville and Simon Houses, Los Angeles, Ca.
Architect: Peter de Bretteville; Robin Wilson, collaborator.
Site: two R1 lots on a sloping half acre in Laurel Canyon.
Program: two single-family dwellings for close friends who wish to live cooperatively, but with appropriate degree of autonomy and privacy.
Structural system: square tubular steel columns on 8′ x 28′ bays carry steel beams supporting a concrete slab on first floor and trussjoists at the roof with exposed 2x4s on joist hangers. The second level infill, where required, is a floor of solid 2x4s on edge carried on steel beams.
Major materials: concrete, painted steel, wood, corrugated steel and fiber glass, sheetrock on studs. (See Building materials, p. 116.)
Mechanical system: forced hot air heating.
Consultants: Dimitry K. Vergun, structural.
General contractor: owners.
Clients: Roger and Dyanne Simon, Peter and Sheila de Bretteville.
Costs: withheld.
Photography: Marvin Rand, except top right, p. 73, Norman McGrath.