

BACKSTORY CASE HISTORY

By Jim Lochner

CASE STUDY HOUSE NO. 22 REMAINS AN ENDURING SNAPSHOT OF MID-CENTURY MODERN DESIGN.



Left to right: Julius Shulman's photo of the Stahl House interior; the view of Los Angeles today (photo: Charlotte Wiederholt); Shulman's iconic 1960 image.

High in the Hollywood Hills, 200 feet above Sunset Boulevard, sits one of the most iconic design destinations in Los Angeles. Located at 1635 Woods Drive, Case Study House No. 22, as it is known in architectural circles, is simply referred to as the Stahl House to the family that has lived there for the last 55 years.

In 1954, Buck Stahl, a purchasing agent for Hughes Aircraft and a graphic designer and sign painter by trade, was renting a house nearby when he spotted grading equipment on an empty lot nearby. Two hours after going over to investigate, he had purchased the lot for \$13,500 and a handshake. On weekends, Buck and his wife Carlotta carted leftover broken-up concrete from local construction sites in the back of their Cadillac convertible to keep the land in place and grade the property.

Stahl's daring vision for his house—a curved, L-shaped design over a cantilevered foundation with one wing precariously jutting out ten feet in mid-air—needed an equally daring designer. After interviewing a number of candidates, Stahl hired Pierre Koenig, a graduate of the University of Southern California, who had worked with noted California architects Raphael Soriano and A. Quincy Jones.

Koenig went to John Entenza, editor of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, to inquire about including the house in the magazine's Case Study House (CSH) program. The CSH program began in January 1945 in response to the housing boom that was looming in the waning months of World War II. Eight nationally known architects were commissioned to “take a plot of God's green earth and create ‘good’ living conditions for eight American families” and “to fulfil [sic] the specifications of a special living problem in the Southern California area.” The project eventually spanned 20 years and encompassed 30 designs (including two apartments), many of which were never constructed.

Case Study House No. 22 was adopted into the program in early 1959, one month before groundbreaking. Koenig flattened Stahl's original curved design,

making it a true “L” shape, with a single hallway connecting the two wings separating the private and public spaces. To honor Stahl's insistence on a 270-degree uninterrupted view of the city below, Koenig installed dramatic floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows on three sides using the largest pieces of glass available at the time. Radiant-heated concrete floors helped warm up the interior's cool, sleek look. Thirteen months later—and for a mere \$37,500—the 2,200-square-foot, 2-bed/2-bath house was move-in ready.

As part of the CSH program, the house was open to the public for two months. (Tours can still be booked today.) The house gained nationwide prominence when architectural photographer Julius Shulman snapped his now-iconic photo in 1960. Shulman's striking black-and-white image features two women seated in the home's living room seemingly floating in mid-air, engaged in cool, casual conversation while the nighttime lights of the Los Angeles basin twinkle below.

The house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2013, and its classic mid-century modern look and spectacular views have been featured in over 1,200 newspaper and magazine articles, journals and books, films, television shows, and even video games. Shatterproof glass eventually replaced the more fragile pane glass windows, while the concrete floors have been covered with wall-to-wall carpet and a narrow walkway was added around the living room's perimeter to accommodate window washers.

“[I]t is our guess,” Entenza said in his *Arts & Architecture* editorial about the Case Study House program, “that after all of the witches have stirred up the broth, the house that will come out of the vapors will be conceived within the spirit of our time, using as far as practicable, many war-born techniques and materials best suited to the expression of man's life in the modern world.”

After 55 years, the legendary Case Study House No. 22 has certainly “come out of the vapors” to serve as a case study in “the expression of man's life in the modern world.”