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Revisit Eames House

Having narrowly escaped the Palisades wildfires, Ray and Charles Eames' famed Case Study House 8 has reopened with wider access to new areas, writes *Mimi Zeiger*



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Ray and Charles Eames' home and studio, constructed in 1949 in LA's Pacific Palisades (opposite), was very nearly destroyed in the 2025 Eaton and Palisades wildfires. The couple are pictured posing on its distinctive steel framework (right)

In late October this year, dozens of neighbours, designers, architects, scholars and arts leaders gathered in a meadow atop a Pacific Palisades bluff. Feet softly crushing the grass and pungent dry eucalyptus leaves, they were there to celebrate the reopening of Ray and Charles Eames' Case Study House 8 – better known today as the Eames House – to the public. Of all the homes produced for the Case Study House programme, the Eames House may be the most improbable: two metal boxes – a home and studio – on the edge of the Pacific Rim.

A few months earlier, in January 2025, wind whipped urban wildfires that destroyed thousands of Los Angeles structures. Residences just a couple of doors away succumbed to the conflagration, but the Eames House survived unscathed – a near miracle that Eames Demetrios, grandson and director of the Eames Office, ascribes to luck, not design. 'You can easily imagine a scenario where the wind shifts or is blowing faster,' he says. 'It could have ended very differently.'

Built in 1949, the house is a product of postwar ingenuity that strikes an extraordinary balance between frailty and robustness, even now – especially now – when hundreds of architects across LA are looking for solutions to rebuild parts of the city after the Palisades and Eaton fires.

Architectural Design dedicated their September 1966 issue to Ray and Charles Eames. Another wife and husband duo, Alison and Peter Smithson, edited the special issue and in their celebratory introduction captured the dual character of the Eameses' home. 'When the Santa Monica house was first published, Europeans assumed its look of fragility was a consequence of being able to not worry about the weather problems in an equable climate,' they wrote. 'But in reality it is stoutly built, and equipped to bourgeois standards. Its lightness, its flicker of change, is its style.'

It is odd to talk about style in 2025, when mid-century design is so wholly mainstream that the Eameses' most famous pieces – the leather loungers or fibreglass chairs –

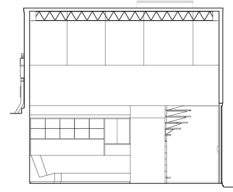
The home began its life as Case Study 8 in the *Arts & Architecture* magazine's Case Study House programme, launched by editor and designer John Entenza. During its lifetime, the house became something of a set promoting the Eameses' work and lifestyle, as demonstrated in Julius Shulman's photographs of the couple for *Life* magazine (opposite). Today, visitors can view the famous living room (below) from the outside, through glazing



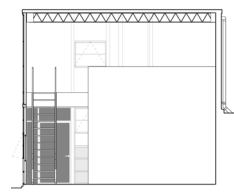
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JULIUS SHULMAN © J. PAUL GETTY TRUST GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES (2004 R.10)



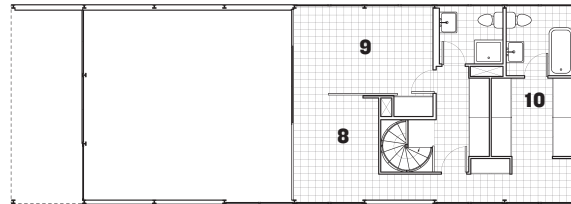
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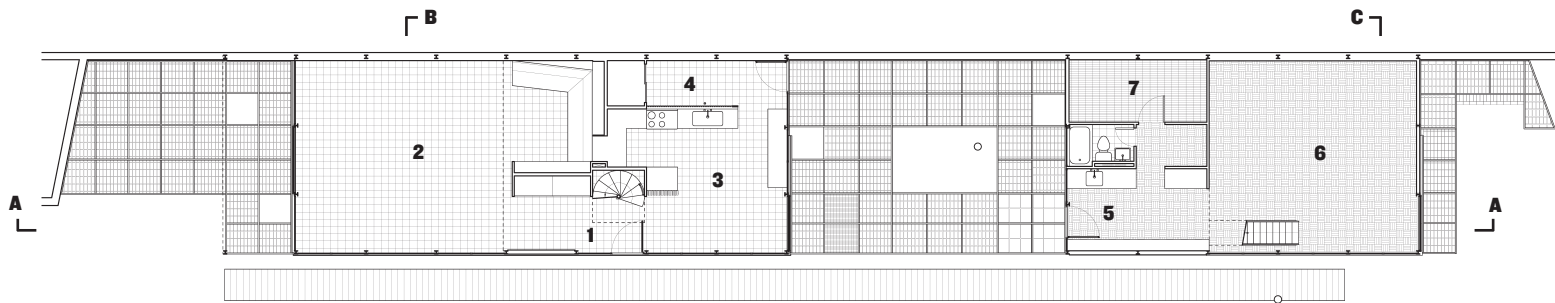
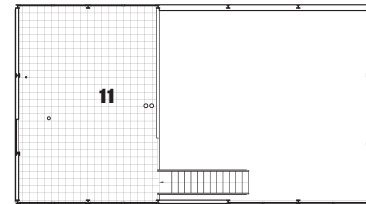
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section AA



first floor



ground floor plan

Far from a showroom, the Eames House was a functional home, with a mezzanine level accessed via a spiral staircase (opposite left) and small kitchen on the ground floor (opposite right). Alison and Peter

Smithson, writing in a 1966 issue of *Architectural Design*, noted that despite the light appearance of the house – it is, in essence, a glazed steel-frame box – it is ‘stoutly built, and equipped to bourgeois standards’

- 1 house entrance
- 2 living room
- 3 kitchen / dining room
- 4 utility room
- 5 studio entrance
- 6 studio
- 7 darkroom
- 8 main bedroom
- 9 child's bedroom
- 10 wardrobe
- 11 mezzanine



are ubiquitous to the point of cliché. Yet to consider lightness and a ‘flicker of change’ raises different, more ineffable questions. What does the Eames House teach us about conservation, care and resilience over time?

Julius Shulman’s photographs of the Eames House from 1958 capture life in Technicolor: vivid red and burgundy rugs, oranges in a blue bowl, candy-striped textiles, pink roses, glossy green ficus leaves. These interiors confirm an exuberant image of the Eameses. Their creative practice fills every bit of their home and studio. Each object, from hanging tumbleweed to lacquered chest, represents a synthetic vision of how they saw the world: curiosity as *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Editor John Entenza commissioned the house as part of the Case Study House programme launched by magazine *Arts & Architecture*. But the house as we know it – two volumes for living and working casually connected by courtyards and a path made of railway sleepers edged by potted plants – began life as a more formal affair. The first design for Case Study House 8, by Charles

Eames and Eero Saarinen, with structural engineer Edgardo Contini, was a ‘bridge house’. That scheme, published in a 1945 issue of the magazine, depicted an elevated bar structure balanced on spindly legs. A perspective drawing shows a steel-and-glass rectangle extending 90° from the slope in order to catch views of Santa Monica Bay.

It was one of two proposed homes designed by Eames and Saarinen intended to share a large plot, with a communal meadow in between. Case Study 9 was for Entenza himself – a house for a single man. An accompanying article described the client for Case Study 8 as a ‘married couple both occupied professionally with mechanical experiment and graphic design presentation’. Or, Ray and Charles.

The couple completely redesigned the home in 1948, working with the fabricated components that had already been delivered to the site, and treating the steel Truscon joists, H-columns, prefabricated windows and infill panels as a kit of parts. Ray’s sketches from the period are iterative

experiments. Her facade compositions are patched together as if assembling a quilt. Ultimately, the final design brought the floating structure down to earth and rotated it so that it nestled within the hillside and the mature eucalyptus grove planted by land developer Abbot Kinney in the 1880s. Various accounts try to rationalise why. Some note a more efficient use of steel. Others trade in vanity, suggesting that Charles changed the original design because it too closely resembled a sketch by Mies van der Rohe. The most compelling reason explains that by reorienting the house the meadow could be left untouched.

Indoor-outdoor living is perhaps the most defining trope of California modernism. But in execution it often manifests as ‘modern man’ dominating nature – decks overlooking a striking view or a controlled garden hemmed in by patios, walls and other architectural features. What is unique about the Eames House is how the relationship between architecture and site feels loose and not overly determined. Certainly, there



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is a retaining wall to hold back the hillside, but then the meadow sprawls down the slope. ‘They live in nature and its reflections and reflections of reflections,’ writes critic Esther McCoy in *Modern California Houses* (1962), her classic account of the programme.

In 2018, the Getty Conservation Institute published the Eames House Conservation Management Plan. Developed in conjunction with the Eames Foundation, the 200-plus-page document offers a detailed history establishing the significance of the house and lays forth careful analysis and strategies for steering the house through the 21st century and beyond. Although the plan focuses on the heritage value and preservation of the buildings and landscape, it also includes immaterial conditions: the social and atmospheric qualities of the house.

Post-fire, those intangibles are more important than ever. With much of the Palisades erased by fire, the house and its landscape are precious reminders of a particular history. The Eames Foundation was founded in 2004 by Charles’s daughter

Lucia and rebranded this year, adding Ray and Charles to the title. The Charles and Ray Eames Foundation carries forward a mission to protect the site with a renewed mandate to share the culture of education and connectedness imbued in the Eameses’ work. (The foundation is separate from the Eames Institute of Infinite Curiosity, a Northern California initiative. Founded in 2022, with backing from Airbnb co-founder Joe Gebbia and blessings from the family and the Eames Office, it holds a significant Eames archive.)

Recently appointed executive director Adrienne Luce is the first non-family member to steward the non-profit. She was still in the interview process when the Palisades fire broke out, and came on board as months of assessment and recovery were needed before anyone could visit the property. Her task was immediately twofold: to maintain the integrity of the foundation’s mission while positioning the modernist house – still standing while much else was ash – to be a haven for neighbours.

‘We want Palisades families to find solace and beauty,’ says Luce.

The foundation was created to preserve the house, but prior to the fires and reopening, access was a bit difficult. Bookings were limited and visitors could only tour the exterior. One big change at the Eames House is that the detached studio Ray and Charles used for much of their film and photography is now open to visitors. (Alas, living spaces are still off limits and can be viewed through the large glass windows.) Bookings for a one-hour, guided group or private tour are available on the foundation website. Tickets are \$55 for adults and \$25 for students, however wildfire survivors and first responders get in free.

Entering the Eameses’ atelier – actually being inside – allows one to imagine it buzzing with activity. A signboard painted with ‘Celestial Mechanics’ hangs from a roof truss, presumably from *Mathematica: A World of Numbers ... and Beyond*, the first exhibition the Eames Office produced for IBM in the early 1960s. Atop a cabinet in the corner of the double-height space



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Visitors cannot currently access the mezzanine level of the main house (above), which makes room for a child’s bedroom (left) and a main bedroom next to it. After a temporary closure following the wildfires, the newly rebranded

Charles and Ray Eames Foundation, which is tasked with preserving the house, opted to open the studio building (opposite) to the public. Tours now take visitors into the heart of the Eameses’ creative practice





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there is a ball of twine and a chunky vintage paper cutter. Its drawers are labelled with photo equipment: lenses, Bolex, Polaroid.

What makes the room so special is the spare envelope: parquet floors, metal roof, black steel-frame windows. From the mezzanine window you can see the ocean; trees brush against the thin roof. It would be a nice place for creative work. ‘Opening the studio to the public shows the power of place – you’re enveloped and encompassed in this space,’ says Luce.

Luce and the foundation hope to actively programme the studio in the coming seasons. Outreach has begun to develop partnerships with organisations including the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and there are plans to mark the 50th anniversary of the Eameses’ 1977 film *Powers of Ten*. Resilience, however, seems to be the dominant theme.

In the months after the fires, the Eames House hosted displaced neighbours. They gathered in the meadow in need of a place to reconnect. Fittingly, perhaps, the first

official event in the studio was a convening of 10 architecture practices as part of Case Study: Adapt. The group, inspired by Entenza’s programme, asked designers to create new homes for 16 Altadena and Palisades families to replace those lost in the urban wildfires.

‘That spirit of resilience – that grit, determination and creativity – is so uniquely Californian, as were Charles and Ray’s ideas,’ says Luce. Reconceptualising the site as a refuge is pragmatic and optimistic. After years of being celebrated for the preciousness of its design, the house now represents the hub of a larger social, cultural, even ecological mandate in the face of climate crisis. But that robust mission still comes with fragility. Wildfires occur circularly in LA. The Eames House survived the Palisades fire and others in the past; what nature has in store in the future is unpredictable. For now the Eames House persists, despite fire and time, as an impossibly thin assembly of steel and glass on a bluff above the Pacific.

The studio, as it appears today (opposite), gives an idea of the buzz of activity that would have characterised the site. A photograph from 1955 (below) shows its central double-height space in use – this is where the Eameses staged many of their films



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Three of the Eameses' grandchildren spent the summer of 1958 living in the studio space. The couple installed soft parquet flooring to encourage safe play, covering the hard concrete originally installed

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