

Architecture

Rebuilding LA, the Eames way

The 1949 house designed by Charles and Ray Eames is the inspiration for a new generation of prefab homes replacing those destroyed in last year's wildfires



A group of architects from the Case Study: Adapt programme at the Eames House, itself spared in the Pacific Palisades fires © Roger Davies

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The Eames House in LA's Pacific Palisades is an architectural marvel that stands out. But today, it doesn't stand out in the way its architects, Charles and Ray Eames, intended.

The 1949 modernist home was built as part of Arts & Architecture magazine's Case Study House programme, which challenged architects to make affordable, stylish homes using modern materials and techniques. Its aim was also, in part, to goose interest in an area of Los Angeles that was then largely unoccupied. Those efforts worked all too well: soon, the Palisades and nearby Malibu were bywords for breezy, SoCal life, the once scrubland now packed with houses laddering up the hillside and down to the Pacific Ocean. The 77-year-old Eames House stands today almost as it always has amid groves of eucalyptus trees, now operating as a foundation. The difference is in what surrounds it: where once other homes stood, the lots are draped in white tarpaulins, flapping awkwardly in the wind.

The Pacific Palisades was one of the areas worst impacted by the wildfires that swept through LA in January last year. US Geological Survey (USGS) estimates suggest more than 40,000 acres were burned across Greater Los Angeles, displacing 200,000 residents and destroying 12,300 structures. Yet during a brief drive around the Palisades' winding streets — where the median house price was \$3.4mn prior to the fires, according to online real estate marketplace Zillow — it is startling how little progress has been made.



A display in the Eames House shows the designs of 10 LA-based practices working on homes for 16 families © Roger Davies

But some local architects are embracing the opportunity to rebuild with sympathetic gusto. Eastsider Alan Koch, of Lovers Unite, for one, has launched a modular design for homes that's intended to be faster to erect, more fireproof and offer better resilience against the effects of climate change. Former homeowners opting to custom rebuild are anchoring their architect briefs in that same instinct.

It's laying the foundations for some innovative designs — a potential next generation of Eames houses. When the tarpaulins finally come down, the Palisades is shaping up to look very different. Will any of these homes have anything like that cachet in seven or eight decades' time?

The design studio on the Eames House lot is now given over to a display of architectural models. They're previews of the Case Study: Adapt programme, a new iteration of the initiative that helped birth the Eames House. Under its umbrella, 10 LA-based firms, including Bestor Architecture and Marmol Radziner, are working on homes for 16 families. All of them will be 3,000 square feet or less — in a fire-endangered area, bigger is not always better when it comes to new homes, especially when the lot sizes are half an acre or smaller.



Dustin Bramell, a tech entrepreneur, is driving the project: he stands on the ruins of his home, the brutalist mid-century landmark Robert Bridges House © Roger Davies



A render of Bramell's future home, a 2,900 sq ft insulated concrete structure by Woods + Dangaran

Local resident Dustin Bramell is driving the project. He's a veteran tech entrepreneur whose home, a brutalist mid-century landmark known as the Robert Bridges House, was destroyed. "I'm a naturally optimistic person, and looked at this bad thing that had happened and thought, 'What could we make out of it that could be awesome?'" He invited homeowners who lost their properties to apply to work with a number of well-known architects to design replacements for their lost homes. The callout received around 400 applications; of the 16 houses being built, seven have broken ground and one is close to completion, says Bramell, with around six more due to start imminently.

Marmol Radziner, an architecture practice known for the Tadao Ando-designed home formerly owned by Kanye West in Malibu, designed the first finished project. It's a modular house clad in metal, constructed off-site by Washington state-based Method, that was installed in situ in June for musician couple David and Neli Low. They lost their 1920s home in the Alphabet Streets neighbourhood. "[Our] entire neighbourhood was gone except for two houses — that's 500 homes," says David.

Their previous home had been bought by David in the early 1990s as a fixer-upper and had been renovated and extended over the years, spanning a 2,050 sq ft house with an additional 300 sq ft building out back. The couple, who had been asset-rich rather than cash-rich, wanted to rebuild differently — smaller, safer, more sustainably.



David and Neli Low with their children in front of their 1920s home, destroyed in the fires



Their new modular home by Marmol Radziner architects being installed



A render of the finished two-storey corrugated metal-clad house

Marmol Radziner suggested a prefab. “They had a compassionate understanding of what we were going through,” says David, who is astonishingly upbeat after 18 gruelling months without a home. “The first rendering fulfilled our needs — a separate potentially soundproof studio, communal space and an outdoor space.” Kohler and Fisher & Paykel offered discounted or donated appliances, another cost offset. “My wife and I feel blessed,” he smiles.

Their two-storey corrugated metal-clad house will make a statement in the neighbourhood, a clear break from the aesthetic that previously dominated. Fibre cement soffits and screened vents also act defensively, as does the Zone 0 garden, which consists of gravel, flagstone and native oaks. There’s climate-change resilience evident in other ways: the deep overhangs, sliding doors and cross-ventilation are aimed at foregrounding passive cooling.

Architect Barbara Bestor, who has earned renown for her playful riffs on SoCal modernist design, is working on two CSA projects, both with empty-nester families. One couple has opted to build a 3,000 sq ft home; around 25 per cent smaller in footprint than the previous structure. “A lot of people are downsizing; a rebuild to suit the last third of life,” notes Bestor. The other family has replaced their single dwelling with a series of three interconnected buildings, to better make use of indoor-outdoor living. Bestor loves the nod back to the original postwar programme. “It’s very much a modernist ethos, that Case Study house flow — the inside and the outside always connected.”



A 3,000 sq ft design by Bestor Architecture for empty nesters is around 25 per cent smaller in footprint than their previous home: ‘A lot of people are downsizing; a rebuild to suit the last third of life,’ says Barbara Bestor © Render



This Bestor design replaces a single dwelling with three interconnected modernist buildings; both designs include features that will make the homes more fireproof and resilient to climate change © Render

But Bestor’s designs will eschew other details typical of the area, such as wide overhangs. These designs provide much-needed shade but also create a need for ventilation mechanisms in the roofs. These often suck in embers from surrounding fires: small enough to pass through the filters but large enough to remain burning as they land in an attic. The designs of those two homes vary: one will be a more traditional shingled building which Bestor describes as “Anne of Green Gables”; the second will be modernist, the three small buildings connected via the garage, with a design that nods to that Eames compound.

Architecturally innovative new-builds aren't limited to the Case Study: Adapt programme. Alan Koch's Lovers Modular home was a long-gestating project; he'd tinkered with it for more than a decade. He's already sold three, foregrounding their affordability and speed, a nod to the vision of the original Case Study project. Koch says that putting up one of these homes takes around seven months, or two-thirds the time of a typical project, with per-square-foot costs at \$530 for a move-in ready home compared with a minimum of \$750 for a custom house. Prices on the latter soar, too, if hillside engineering is required, a major factor in the Palisades. Lovers Modular also incorporates fire-resistant elements, developed in partnership with Gordon Polon, a retired engineer and specialist in fire damage.

Modular homes like these come in various configurations, in this case from one- to three-bedrooms, but are otherwise standard issue, an unexpected bonus in this scenario. Clients forced to rebuild after fire damage are emotionally drained; the dizzying blizzard of decisions needed in a custom build often feels overwhelming.

Koch, who works with his wife Linda Taalman, says that the pair had therapy to help navigate their experiences meeting potential clients after the fire. Two or three people each day would arrive at their office, sharing stories of losing their homes and asking for help to rebuild. "We'd be destroyed at the end of the day. We had to have therapy about the trauma that came to our office." They're determined to power through and champion a modular approach to rebuilding across the area.



Alan Koch's Modular house by Lovers Unite incorporates fire-resistant elements and comes in three sizes © Render



Koch works with his wife Linda Taalman; of his distraught clients he says, 'We had to have therapy about the trauma that came to our office' © Render

For many of the architects and homeowners working on CSA homes, rebuilding has been more arduous and time-consuming than they had envisioned. It's a complex web of bureaucracy, emotions and money — especially money. Lee Ann Daly moved to the area 12 years ago and lost her home in the fires; she now helps lead Team Palisades, a residents' advocacy group formed in the wake of the disaster.

"The community is misunderstood," she says. Like David Low and his wife, many residents were not cash rich. The median income of homeowners in the Palisades is \$155,400 per year, per LA City Planning data 2018-2022, but their homes were worth several million dollars after decades of appreciation. "People who bought homes in the 1990s when they cost less than \$500,000? They were doing things like tutoring maths out of their homes or offering piano lessons. They're not flashy people with a six-figure cash flow."

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Many, then, must wait for their insurance money to start over, often tussling to secure what they feel they were due. Others were underinsured or not insured at all. Daly was one of them. "I was dropped by my insurer 18 days before my house burned down," she says.

Data from research company Extruct shows that more than 30 major insurers, including State Farm and Allstate, either exited California, stopped issuing new policies or have been winding down their operations there since before the fire. This

contraction, prompted in large part by the increased risk of natural disasters such as fires, shunted Daly and her fellow homeowners on to what's known as FAIR (Fair Access to Insurance Requirements), a last-resort plan operated by the state that offers meagre coverage. It caps payouts for residential homes at \$3mn and often pays far less.

The bureaucracy hurdles aren't limited to private insurance. Although the city of Los Angeles has set up a website to act as a one-stop resource for affected residents, critics say that there is much more it should do to help. Daly is leading a campaign for the permitting fees charged to approve new homes to be abated; the minimum cost for such approvals is \$13,000, she says, but can easily climb. "Nobody is voluntarily rebuilding their home so why should they have to pay that permit fee?"



Complicating the rebuilding effort is that costs of materials and labour have skyrocketed in the wake of Trump's tariff wars and the Iran intervention © Mario Tama/Getty Images

Rebuilding costs have also skyrocketed in the wake of the Trump government's tariff wars and, more recently, conflict with Iran. Fred Fisher, an architect working on several rebuilding projects, says that material and labour price increases have driven building costs up by 50 per cent per square foot since 2019. "It was probably \$800 and now \$1,200 would be more realistic," he says. "The supply chain has been disrupted — tariffs are a big part of it — and there's a finite pool of contractors, and everyone wants the same good plumber and electrician."

Prices for raw materials have risen, he says, between 10-35 per cent since the fires, with copper wiring and piping seeing particular hikes. His employees openly fret they can't afford to drive supplies around in their dependable but gas-guzzling trucks as a result of the Iran war. This month, American Automobile Association (AAA) data showed the average price for regular gasoline in LA County as \$6.2 per gallon, barely shy of the all-time high of \$6.49 in October 2022.

While pockets of optimism persist in some architectural quarters, the larger question looms: can the Palisades and adjoining areas rebound as well as rebuild?

Real estate agent Lynda Marsolek says that around 60 of the 87 homes in her Malibu neighbourhood perished during the fire, including her own, and that only 10 per cent plan to rebuild in situ. Those who want to leave, though, won't likely find a plethora of eager buyers anytime soon. In the first year, Marsolek says she completed a couple of sales nearby, beyond the fire-affected area, but nothing close to the damage. One of the 10 or so homeowners who retained their property had planned to sell in January 2025, priced at \$3.5mn. After remediating the smoke damage post-fire, she put it back on the market in December, priced at \$2.985mn.



Reconstruction in Pacific Palisades in June © Mario Tama/Getty Images

Data from real estate analytics company Miller Samuel shows that the average sales price for a home in the Palisades in Q2 2026 was \$4.53mn; down around 10 per cent from Q4 2024, right before the fires. In Malibu, the fall was less steep, down \$40,000 to \$4.95mn. That might change, though, given the surge in supply; 246 homes are now listed in Malibu versus 150 in Q4 2024; in the Palisades, for the same period, it has climbed from 70 homes to 83.

No wonder, then, that Marsolek encouraged her client to lower the price on that still-standing property. At \$2.8mn it still had no offers. A steep drop to close to \$1mn has tempted a buyer. “It’s a beautiful, move-in ready home,” she says, but “all the comments were ‘We’re going to be living in a construction zone for the next 10 years.’”

Perhaps, though, that’s something to be hopeful about.

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