

# ELIZABETH SCHEU CLOSE: A LIFE IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE

## About the Exhibition

Elizabeth “Lisl” Scheu Close, FAIA (1912–2011), Minnesota’s first modern architect, was in the forefront of professionally-trained women architects nationally and internationally. Her almost century-long life, which began in pre-World War I Austria during the reign of Emperor Franz Joseph I and ended in Minneapolis in the heyday of Prince, was shaped by the artistic, political, social, and economic upheavals of the twentieth century. During her prolific career, she designed more than 250 modern residences, as well as numerous state-of-the-art hospitals, laboratories, and other commercial buildings.

Born in Vienna, Austria, Lisl was raised in the Scheu House (1912), a seminal, early modern residence designed for her family by iconoclastic architect Adolf Loos. The experience of living in the house led to her choice of career. In 1932, she immigrated to the United States and completed her architectural education at MIT.

She moved to Minneapolis in 1936 to work for the firm of Magney and Tusler on Sumner Field Homes, a Public Works Administration (PWA) housing project in the city. Two years later, with her future husband Winston “Win” Close (1906–1997), she cofounded Close and Scheu, renamed Elizabeth and Winston Close, Architects (today Close Associates), after they married in 1938. It was the first practice in Minnesota dedicated to modern architecture. For the next fifty years, she designed buildings that were well-planned, efficient, durable, and “fit the modern style of living.”

In 2002, Lisl became the first woman to receive AIA Minnesota’s highest honor, the Gold Medal, awarded in recognition of “a lifetime of distinguished achievement and significant contributions to architecture.” Although she attained several “firsts” during her career and remains a role model for women in the profession today, she disliked being labelled a “woman architect,” and preferred “an architect who happens to be a woman.” She believed her talents and accomplishments as an architect needed neither embellishment nor qualification because of her sex.

JANE KING HESSION, GUEST CURATOR

## GUEST CURATOR

Jane King Hession

**Guest Curator, Author**

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# Vienna



Six-year-old Lisl Scheu welcomes dignitaries from the American Relief Administration's European Children's Fund to Vienna. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



Entrance to the Augarten in Vienna where the ceremony was held on June 2, 1919. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

## THE SCHEU HOUSE

Elizabeth “Lisl” Scheu was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1912 to a politically active family. Her mother, Helene Scheu-Riesz, a publisher of children’s books, was involved with international suffrage and peace movements. Her father, Gustav Scheu, a lawyer and ardent Social Democrat, had an interest in city planning and housing reform.

In 1919, her father was appointed councilor for housing matters for the city of Vienna, or “Red Vienna” as the era of Social Democratic leadership between 1919 and 1934 was known. Scheu, whose father, Josef Scheu, was a founder of the Austrian Social Democratic party, was well-qualified for the job. Prior to World War I, he traveled to England to study the work of British town planning visionaries Ebenezer Howard, Raymond Unwin, and others. Howard’s garden city principles influenced Scheu’s own position on housing reform and led to his role as a founder of the Garden City Association in Austria.

At the time of his appointment, Vienna was plagued by post-World War I food and housing shortages; children were particularly hard hit. In 1919, Scheu enlisted his six-year-old daughter, Lisl, in relief efforts. On behalf of the children of Vienna, he assigned her the task of reading a welcome poem, in English, to Austrian dignitaries and representatives of the American Relief Administration’s European Children’s Fund at a large gathering. The experience, and her father’s commitment to social betterment through housing reform, made a lasting impression on Lisl. She attributed her life-long interest in the design of public housing to his work in Vienna.

Surprisingly, for one so young, the Augarten gathering was not the first occasion on which Lisl found herself in the company of Vienna’s political and cultural elite. Previously, several of the officials in attendance that day, along with many other noted national and international visitors, had been guests in her family’s home in Vienna.



Elizabeth Scheu, Vienna, 1919. Photograph by Franz Löwy. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



Garden view of the Scheu House, Vienna Austria, 2010. Photograph by William B. Olexy.

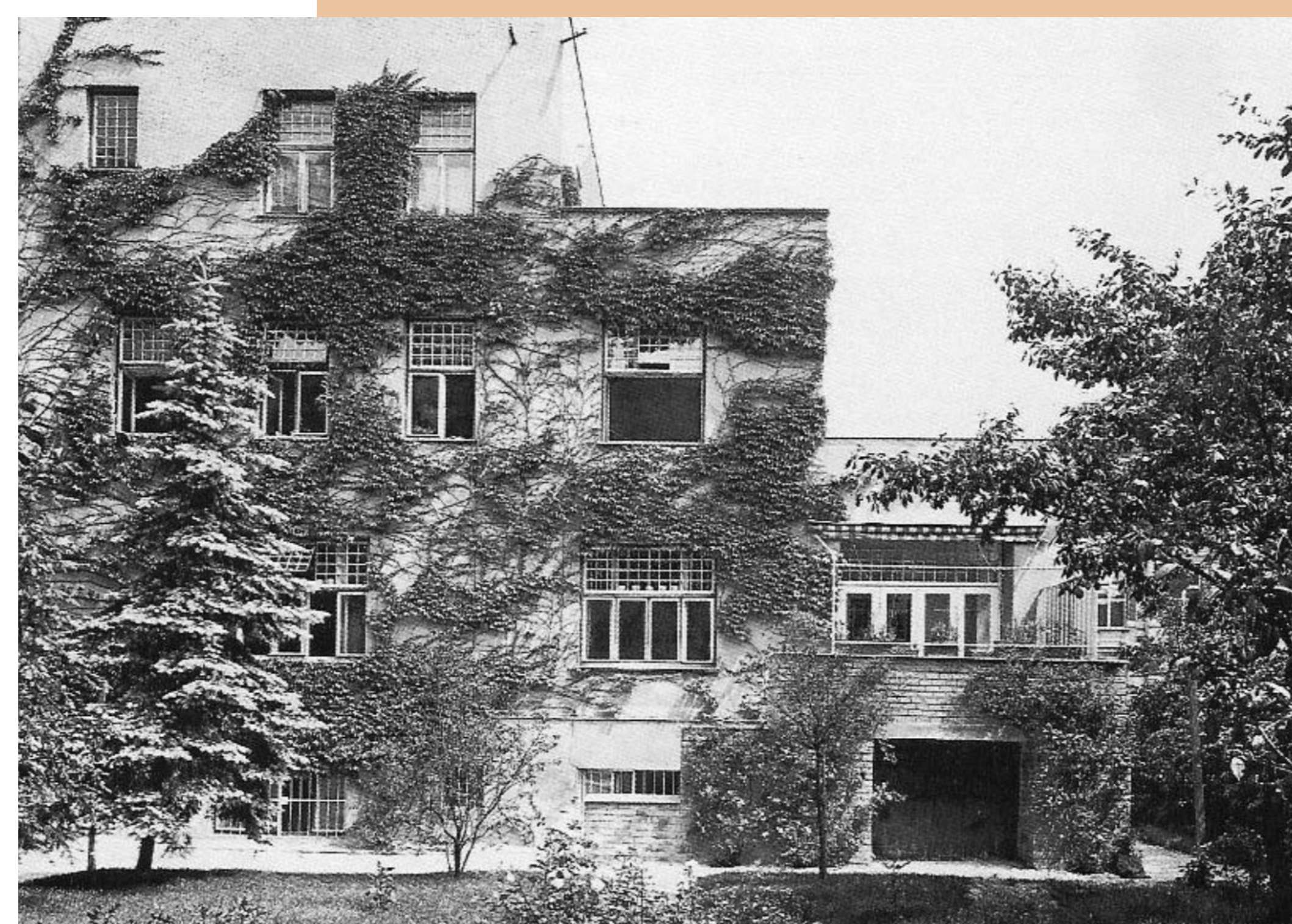
In 1912, Lisl's parents commissioned architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) to design a home for their family at 3 Larohegasse in Vienna's Hietzing neighborhood. In stark contrast to the Baroque architecture that prevailed in Hietzing, Loos designed a strikingly modern villa for the Scheus that was characterized by severe geometry, an absence of ornamentation, and a flat roof. Of the house Loos later wrote, "it aroused general disapproval . . . one person went to the Municipal Council to ask if this type of building was permitted by law."

The Scheus and Loos were well matched as clients and architect, as all three were nonconformists who were uninterested in current architectural styles. Loos was particularly clear on this point. In his 1908 manifesto *Ornament and Crime*, he railed against—and personally attacked—the artists and architects of the prevailing Viennese Secessionist style, which, in his view, was characterized by florid surface decoration. Not only did Loos believe ornamentation was a waste of time, labor, and material, he argued it also was a deterrent to a civilization's advancement. "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects," he stated. He applied a similar school of thought to architectural design, as the Scheus well knew.

The three-story, 3,300 square-foot house Loos designed for the Scheus was radical in several ways. Primary among them was its stepped conformation, which allowed Loos to include roof terraces in his scheme. Because such terraces lacked precedent in Central Europe, they provoked outrage in the city. Loos later wrote: "It was thought that this type of building would have been fine in Algiers, but not in Vienna." The house was derogatorily nicknamed "the giant's staircase." According to Lisl, the city granted her mother a building permit on the condition that the Scheus grow ivy up the bare, white exterior walls. However, Loos scholar Ralf Bock has observed the architect often wrapped his villas in a tangle of vines as he believed greenery provided a kind of protective "skin" on a house and a measure of privacy from "neighbors' gazes."



Architect Adolf Loos designed a controversial modern house for the Scheu family in Vienna in 1912. Photograph by Otto Mayer, circa 1904. Wikimedia Commons.



According to Lisl, the city granted her mother a permit to build the house on the condition that she grow ivy up its walls. Photograph circa 1920s. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



The Scheu House hall. Photograph by William B. Olexy.

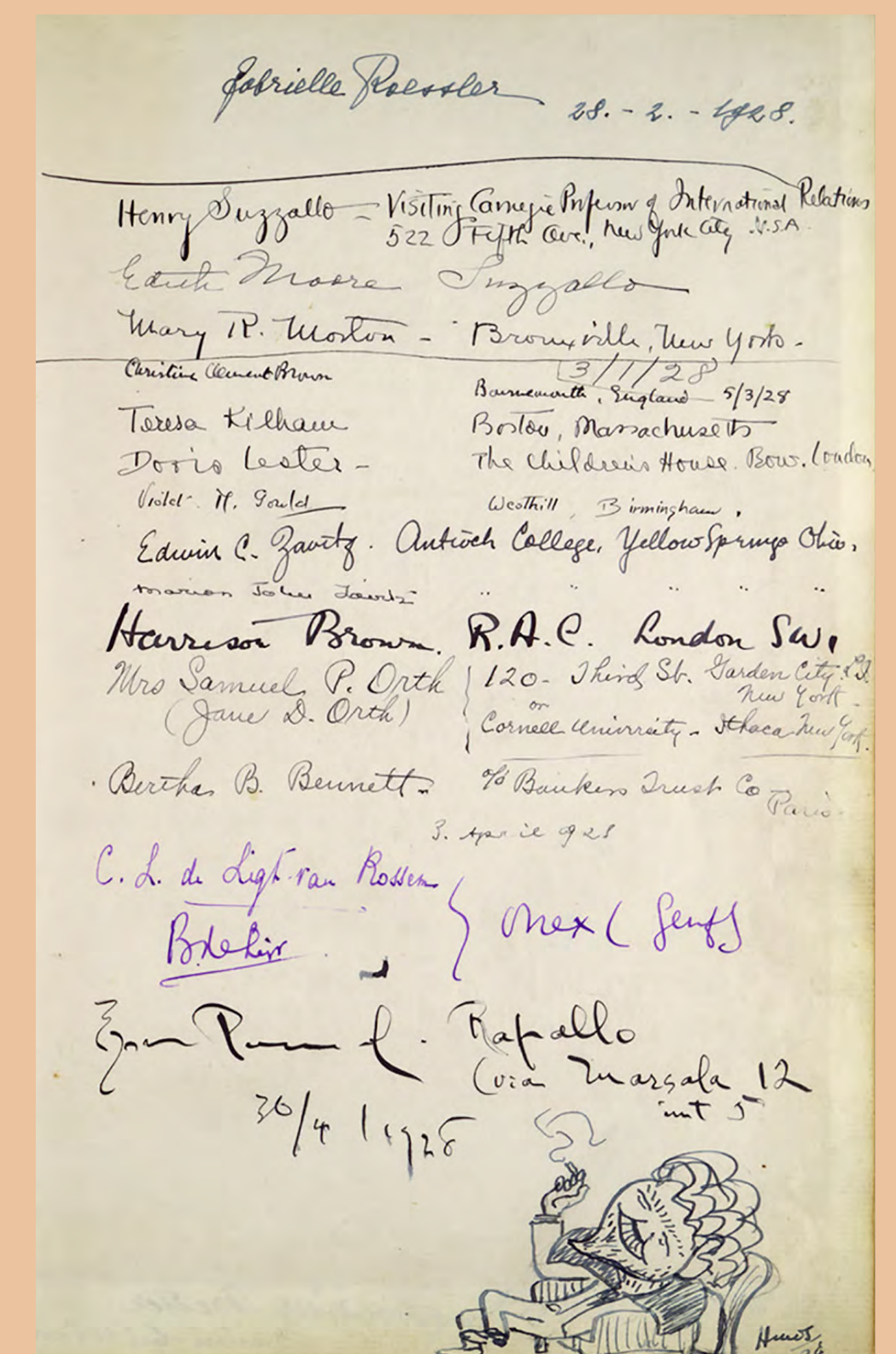


Loos dropped the ceiling in the inglenook to create an intimate and inviting space. Photograph by William B. Olexy.

Loos made a clear distinction between the exterior of a house, which he believed should reveal little of a personal nature about its occupants, and the interior where individuality could be expressed. This was true at the Scheu House where warm, textured interiors stood in direct contrast to the plain white “shell” of the exterior. He used honey-colored oak extensively throughout the house, and created intimately-scaled seating areas, including an inglenook with a red brick fireplace and upholstered banquettes, within the bookcase-lined rooms. Lisl’s bedroom opened onto one of the controversial terraces. As a child, she used it as a play area and sleeping porch in fair weather. She claimed to have been “indoctrinated” by the house and understood, at an early age, the power of architecture to shape one’s perception of space, movement, light, and habitation.

The house was an architectural magnet for those interested in modern design and a gathering place for the Scheus’ many friends and associates. According to Red Vienna historian Eve Blau, it was “the intellectual and spiritual center of the Austrian garden city movement,” and “a gathering place for left-leaning intellectuals and artists.”

Loos presented the Scheus with a leather-bound guest book the day they moved into the house. He was the first of an astonishing array of individuals to sign it. Among those whose conversations enlivened the Scheu House salon for more than half a century were future Nobel Peace Prize-winner Jane Addams, founder of Chicago’s Hull House, expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka, composers Alban Berg and Anton Webern, authors Thornton Wilder and John Gunther, architects Aldo van Eyck and Richard Neutra, Academy Award-winning actress Luise Rainer, filmmaker (and reputed spy) Ivor Montagu, and poet Ezra Pound, who signed the book and added a whimsical self-portrait in 1928. Many visitors were, or would become, world renowned. Others met tragic fates, like German children’s book author Josefa Metz who would perish in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Aside from being a remarkable historic document, the book also offers an indelible impression, from the perspective of one extraordinary house and family, of the richly creative, politically volatile city that was Vienna before, between, and after two world wars.



Visitors to the Scheu House signed a guest book given to the family by Loos. In 1928, writer Ezra Pound added his autograph and a playful self-portrait. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



The Scheu family in the garden of 3 Larohegasse, 1928. From left to right: Gustav Scheu, Helene Scheu-Riesz, Lisl Scheu, family friend Denise Olivier, and Friedrich Scheu. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

The house inspired Lisl to pursue a career in modern architecture, although she did not know of a single woman architect when she decided to enter the field. She considered studying at the Bauhaus, but instead enrolled at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna, where she faced challenging conditions due to a hostile all-male faculty. Of even greater concern was the rising Nazi influence in Europe and the fact that Lisl's mother had been born to a Jewish family. For these reasons, Lisl left Austria in 1932. With the encouragement and financial support of a family friend, Boston department store magnate Edward Filene, she immigrated to the United States where she enrolled at MIT.

Gustav Scheu died in Vienna in 1935, and Helene moved to New York two years later. Lisl's brother Friedrich, a Vienna-based correspondent for the *London Daily Herald*, who was at risk for his outspoken views, narrowly escaped the country in 1938.

Miraculously, the Scheu House survived World War II intact and in the possession of a member of the extended Scheu family who was "close to the Nazis." In 1954 Friedrich, his family, and Helene returned to Vienna and the Scheu House to live. Helene remained in the house, which is no longer owned by the Scheu family, until 1970.

Lisl returned to Vienna for the last time in April 2001 to return the guest book to the city "where it was born." It is now in the collection of the Wien Museum.



Dining room of the Scheu House. Loos specified oak for the room's Chippendale furniture. Undated photograph. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



Elizabeth Scheu's passport. Lisl left Vienna in early August 1932 and arrived in New York on August 29. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

# Becoming an Architect

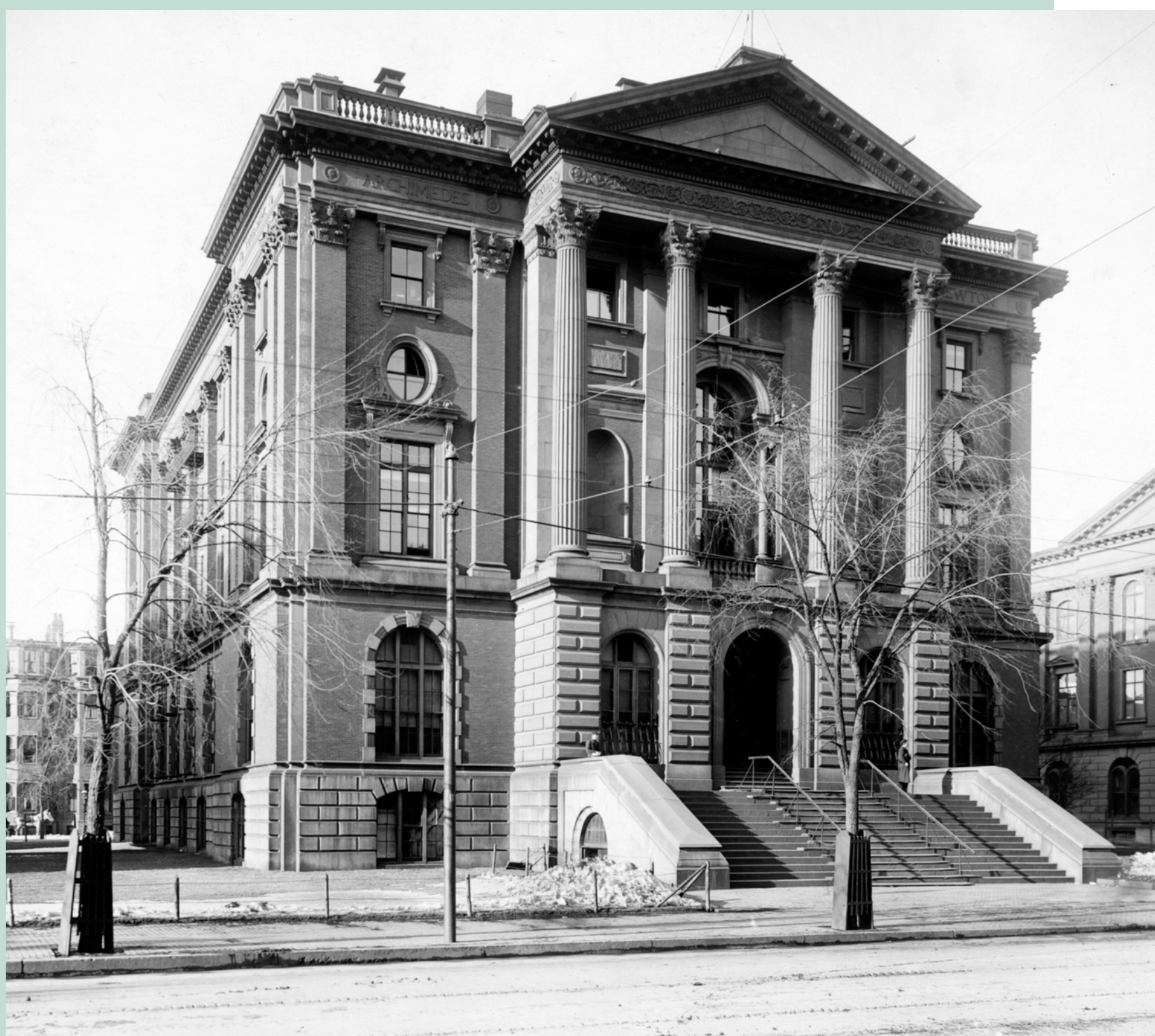


Terraced houses by Josef Hoffmann at the Werkbundsiedlung (1932), Vienna, Austria. Lisl visited the Siedlung, a historically important display of Austrian modernism, shortly before leaving Vienna for the United States. ÖNB Vienna: 423.013D.

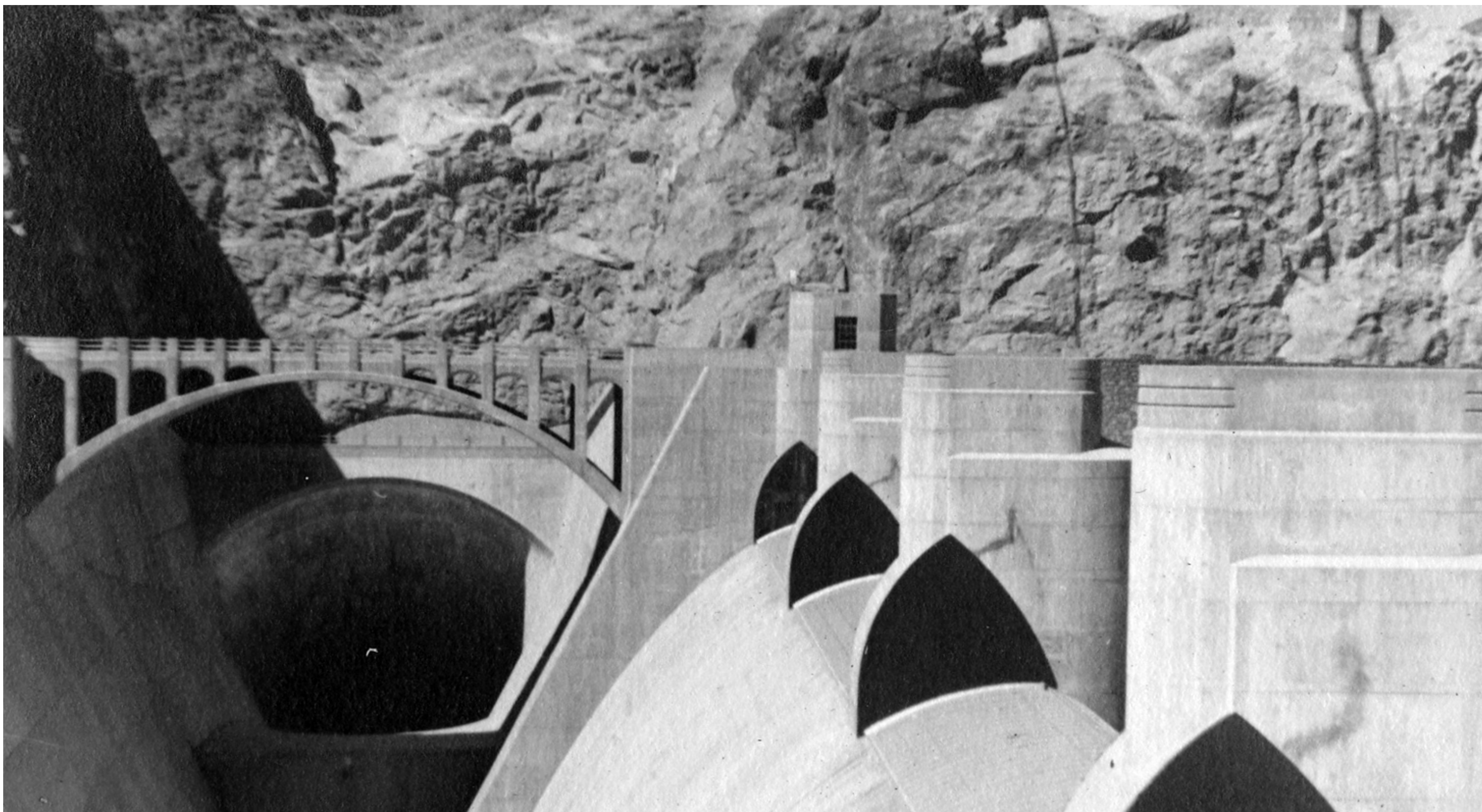
## EDUCATION IN AMERICA

In 1932, the year Lisl began her studies at MIT, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted its groundbreaking show *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*. The exhibition not only introduced Americans to a radical new take on architecture but also coined the movement's best-known name: the International Style. Its architects rejected historical styles and traditional methods of construction in favor of new machine age materials and technologies more suited to modern life. Prior to leaving Austria, Lisl would have been familiar with the work several of the influential European modern architects featured in the show, including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Although those men would soon immigrate to the United States, take positions at leading universities, and begin to move architectural education from Beaux-Arts classicism to modernism, when Lisl enrolled at MIT, that transition had not yet begun. By 1935, she earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture. In graduate school, where she was the only woman in her class, she met Minnesota-born Winston "Win" Close, who would become her life and professional partner for more than six decades.

Lisl's own architectural beliefs were shaped by the International Style, but they were refined by an intimate knowledge of the buildings of Loos and exposure to Austrian modernism of the 1920s and 1930s. Before leaving Vienna, she visited the Werkbundsiedlung, an experimental housing development in Hietzing, not far from her home. The Siedlung, or settlement, was organized by architect Josef Frank, a leading proponent of Viennese modernism (and a Scheu House guest). It comprised seventy single-family dwellings and row houses designed by Frank, Loos, Richard Neutra, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, Oskar Strnad, Oskar Wlach, Josef Hoffmann, and other influential Austrian architects. For Lisl, the Werkbundsiedlung was an opportunity to consider the ways in which multiple architects applied modern ideas and technologies to residential design. It was also a built expression of the Neues Bauen, or "New Building" era in Vienna, a movement more concerned with the individual needs of occupants than it was with "aesthetic or theoretical principles of design and form." As Austrian architect Judith Eiblmayr has observed, Lisl was influenced by the Viennese school of architecture, "a kind of modernism that always had a social agenda."



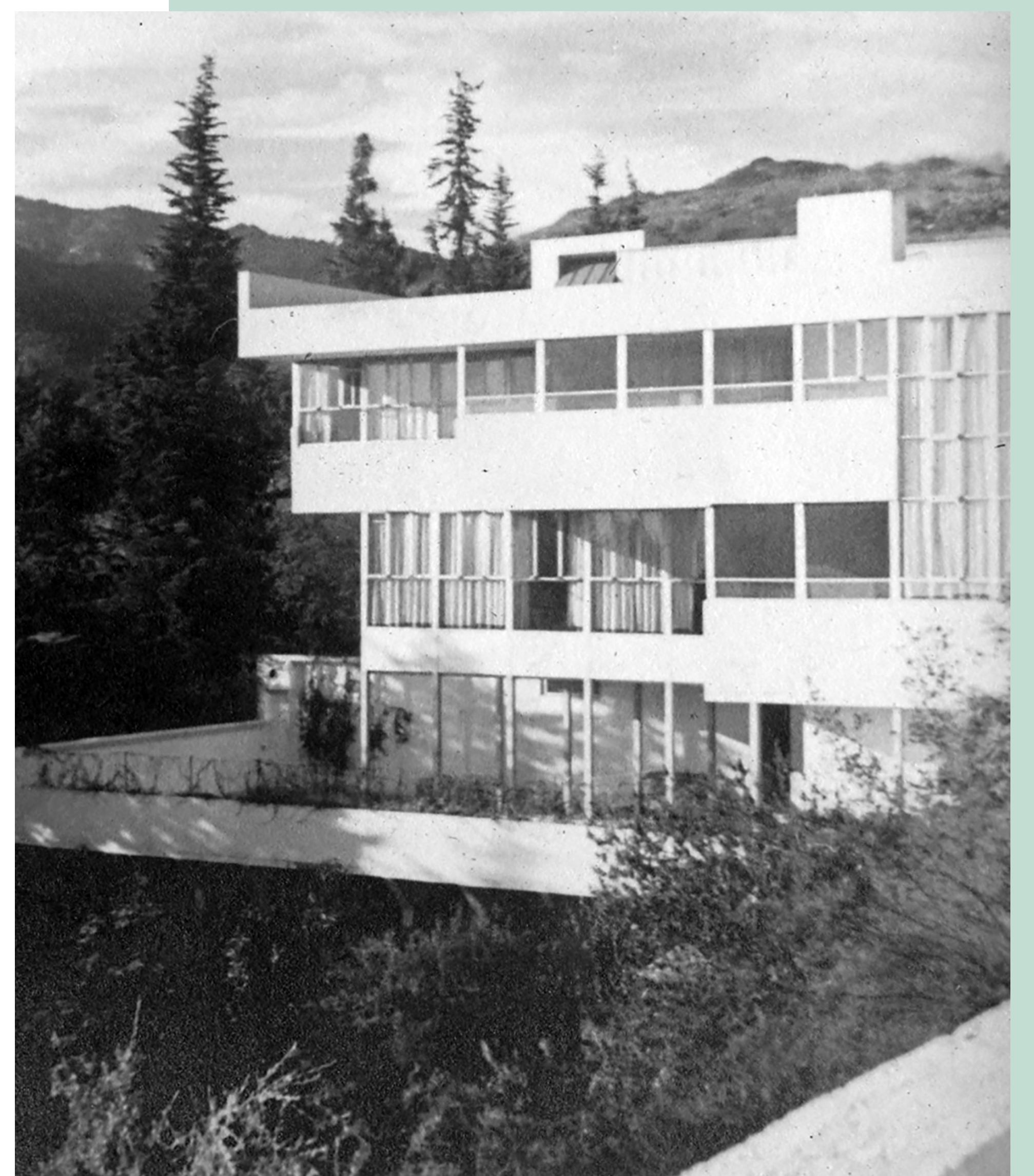
The Rogers Building on Boylston Street in Boston, seen here in a 1905 photograph, was home to MIT's School of Architecture until 1938. Photograph by Thomas E. Marr. Boston Pictorial Archive, Boston Public Library.



On a trip to the Southwest in the mid-1930s, Lisl visited San Francisco de Asis Mission Church in Rancho de Taos (top), and the Hoover Dam. She found both structures to be modern in their simplicity and strength. Photographs by Elizabeth Scheu. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

Lisl also broadened her knowledge through travel. While at MIT, she and a friend embarked on a cross-country driving trip. After passing through the Dust Bowl–parched southern plains, the women arrived in the Southwest. Lisl found modernity in the simple, strong lines of the eighteenth-century San Francisco de Asis Mission Church in Taos, New Mexico, and the soon-to-be completed Hoover Dam on the Arizona/Nevada border. She also visited the 1929 Lovell House by Neutra, an iconic International Style building in Los Angeles.

The built and natural wonders she encountered on the journey made an immediate and lasting impression on her: “They became part of my architectural education,” she stated. Lisl documented her discoveries in a series of striking black-and-white photographs, three of which are seen here.



International Style buildings, such as the Lovell House in Los Angeles (1929), designed by Richard Neutra, influenced Lisl's architectural aesthetic. Photograph by Elizabeth Scheu, circa 1935. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



For Oskar Stonorov, Lisl worked on Westfield Acres (1938) in Camden, New Jersey, a PWA-sponsored project. In this photograph of the social room, a model of Westfield Acres can be seen at right. American muralist Marion Greenwood painted the labor-inspired scene on the wall. Westfield Acres Housing Project Social Room Murals, Camden, New Jersey, 1935–43; Treasury Relief Art Project: Missouri, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York; Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

## A WOMAN IN ARCHITECTURE

Lisl began her search for employment during the Great Depression, the worst economic downturn in American history. She restricted her already limited options to practices doing modern design or public housing. She applied to three firms: New York-based William Lescaze would not hire her because he believed a woman would be a distraction in the drafting room. Richard Neutra told her she would be welcome to work in his Los Angeles office, but she would have to pay \$20 a month for the privilege. European émigré Oskar Stonorov, of the Philadelphia firm of Kastner & Stonorov, hired her. For Stonorov she worked on Westfield Acres, a Federal Housing Development project in Camden, New Jersey.

In the mid-1930s, women architects were few and far between. To understand the scarcity of women in the field, the challenges they encountered, and Lisl's relative position within that history, some context is necessary.

According to Sarah Allaback's 2008 study of the subject, *The First American Women Architects*, Mary Louisa Page, who graduated from the University of Illinois in 1879, was the first woman to earn an architecture degree from an accredited American university. She identifies Lisl as one of seventy-two women to do so over the next fifty-five years, or by 1934. In 1948, *Architectural Record* canvassed the nation's architecture schools and the Women's Architectural Association to determine how many women architects there were in the country at that time. It identified 1,119 women who had studied architecture to date. Lisl was one of ten women architects who were featured in the March 1948 issue of the magazine where these findings were announced. Because the magazine described architecture as "traditionally, a field for men," the "ladies" were specifically asked about "difficulties they encountered because of their sex." The article stated, "Quite a few reported the occasional trouble with contractors and laborers in the field, and several admitted to having been taken more or less frequently as secretaries in their own offices." None regretted her choice of career.

Ten years later, a survey based on data collected from state architectural examining boards identified 320 registered women architects (including Lisl) in the country, or 1 percent of the total number of registered architects. It further revealed that seven states—Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming—could not claim a single woman architect in 1958.





Elizabeth Scheu Close in her Minneapolis office, circa 1940. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

When Lisl arrived in Minnesota in 1936, she was not the first university-trained woman architect in the state. By then, forty-eight women had graduated from the University of Minnesota's School of Architecture, the first in 1921, and a handful were in practice. One was Dorothy Brink, who graduated from the university in 1924 and became a drafts person in the office of architect William Ingemann, whom she later married. Nor was Lisl the first woman to open an architecture office in the state. Marion Parker set up a solo practice in 1919, which she closed in the 1920s, and Emma Brunson opened a one-person office in 1920, which she retained until her retirement in 1968.

Still, as a professional woman in a traditionally male-dominated field, Lisl was a rare bird and an object of curiosity for the press and public alike. In the 1940s and 1950s, she was the subject of several human-interest stories in local publications. Although the articles did raise awareness of her professional stature, they often bore dismaying (and dismissive) headlines. A 1949 piece in the *Minneapolis Star* titled "Doctor, Lawyer, Dentist, Architect Agree: Women Are Own Worst Enemy" considered the question "Why don't more college-trained women reach the top of their profession?" and posited "the biggest problem a professional woman faces is the prejudice of other women." Four years later, as part of a series on "the wives of men prominent in the community," the *Star* published "Woman behind the Man: Her Blueprint for Living Calls for Architectural Teamwork." The article noted of Mrs. Winston Close, "She's an architect, too."

Lisl was professionally trained, but she encountered additional obstacles as an architect because she was a woman. Although she described houses as "probably my primary interest," she gravitated toward residential design because "people [have] less reserves about letting a woman design a house or a residence or an apartment because it is not so formidable as a technical problem," she said. "And so, in trying to get a job it makes it easier." This prejudice-induced dilemma was one also shared by other female architects who as "newcomers" to the field were seen, by some, as being less qualified for the business of architecture than their male counterparts.

#### WOMAN BEHIND THE MAN

## Her Blueprint for Living Calls for Architectural Teamwork

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is one of a series of feature interviews with the wives of men prominent in the community. The stories appear Wednesday in the *Minneapolis Star*.

By JACQUELINE LARKIN  
Minneapolis Star Staff Writer

Mrs. Winston Close is a woman-beside-the-man.

Her name appears beside that of her husband on a sign outside their architectural firm at 3101 E. Franklin avenue. And within, she works beside him, designing houses.

Friendly Mrs. Close decided to be an architect before she met her husband. She decided as a girl in Vienna, Austria, her home, and she took two years of work toward her career there.

Then she came to the United States to complete her course at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass. It was after she entered graduate school there that she met her husband, also a graduate student in architecture.

He is a native of Minnesota, so the Twin Cities area was a natural place for "Elizabeth and Winston Close, architects."

Their home, designed, of course, by themselves, is in Falcon Heights, at 1588 Fulham street. The location is handy to University of Minnesota, where Mr. Close is advisory architect to the board of regents and on the staff of the school of architecture.

Are there problems for a woman in the field of architecture?

One of the most trivial ones is actually among the most annoying, says Mrs. Close. Nylon stockings just are not a practical costume for roaming through brambly sites of future homes. She wears them anyway.

Persons who laugh at a woman architect don't worry Mrs. Close any more. Neither do skeptical or suspicious workmen constructing the homes she designs.

Her buildings are primarily homes. She and her husband work separately but "we always try to get each other's opinions."

Although her work demands five eight-hour days a week, plus some evenings and week-ends, it is not Mrs. Close's only interest.

She is the mother of Ann, 15; Roy, 12,



MRS. WINSTON CLOSE  
She's an architect, too

and Bob, 8. Summer Sundays are for swimming with the children, Sunday evenings for popcorn and ice cream instead of a conventional meal. The latter event has become a household tradition to which the children invite their friends.

Cello practice also gets a share of Mrs. Close's time. She must keep up with her music in order to fulfill her duties as a cellist with Minneapolis Civic orchestra. She also likes to play chamber music. And she enjoys listening to every kind of music.

Last year the Closes had "a typically American vacation." They drove out west.

This year, for the first time since she came here to school in the mid 1930's, Mrs. Close will return to Vienna on vacation. With her will go Mr. Close and Ann.

The vacation will afford her not only a chance to see her mother and brother, but to take to the Alps for skiing, a sport she's had little opportunity to participate in here.

In 1956, the *Minneapolis Star* featured Lisl in a series on "the wives of men prominent in the community." Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

# Modernism in Minnesota



One of Close and Scheu's first projects was University Terrace (1938), a low-cost group housing complex. It was not built. Watercolor perspective by Elizabeth Scheu. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

## EARLY WORK

In 1938, when Close and Scheu opened in Minneapolis as a modern architecture practice, it had little to no professional competition in the state. However, to build a successful business, the firm needed to find like-minded clients. Fortunately, the University of Minnesota, where Win was an instructor, proved to be a fertile source. Clients included several professors who were not only trailblazers in their respective fields, but also interested in avant-garde ideas in architecture.

Although modernism would begin to infiltrate the curriculum at the University of Minnesota in the mid-1930s, the architecture school would not be headed by a devout modern architect until Ralph Rapson arrived in 1954. Today, buildings by masters of the modern movement, such as Edward Larrabee Barnes, Pietro Belluschi, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Erich Mendelsohn, Rapson, and Eliel and Eero Saarinen, stand in the Minnesota. But none of these men had a single building—or the promise of a commission—in the state in 1938 when Close and Scheu completed its first project: an unabashedly International Style house in Minneapolis.

Before opening their firm, Lisl and Win designed two unrealized housing projects. In their simple geometries, flat roofs, and absence of ornamentation, the buildings show the influence of European modernism. For the University of Minnesota, they developed preliminary plans for “University Terrace,” a community of low-cost group houses, consisting of sixteen four- and five-room, two-story units with garages. For the Cooperative Housing Study Group, they planned a neighborhood of rowhouses and selected a building site in St. Paul, near where Luther Seminary now stands. The mission of the Study Group, which was inspired by the principles of the nineteenth-century cooperative movement in the United Kingdom, was to provide quality, low-cost housing through cooperative efforts and ownership.



The principles of the Cooperative movement inspired this unbuilt row house project (1938), which was intended for a site in St. Paul. Watercolor perspective by Elizabeth Scheu. Courtesy of Gar Hargens/Close Associates.



With its flat roof, stark exterior, and blue-tinted concrete driveway, the Ray Faulkner House (1938) was a controversial addition to the Prospect Park neighborhood of Minneapolis. Photograph by Jane King Hession.

## OPUS ONE

The Faulkner House, the firm's "Opus One," was commissioned by Ray Faulkner, Edwin Ziegfeld, and Gerald Hill, all three of whom were teaching at the university. In 1941, they would collaborate on the book *Art Today: An Introduction to the Fine and Functional Arts*, an outgrowth of their courses on modern trends in the arts and music. As clients, the men brought a sophisticated knowledge of design to the project and were committed to building a modern house.

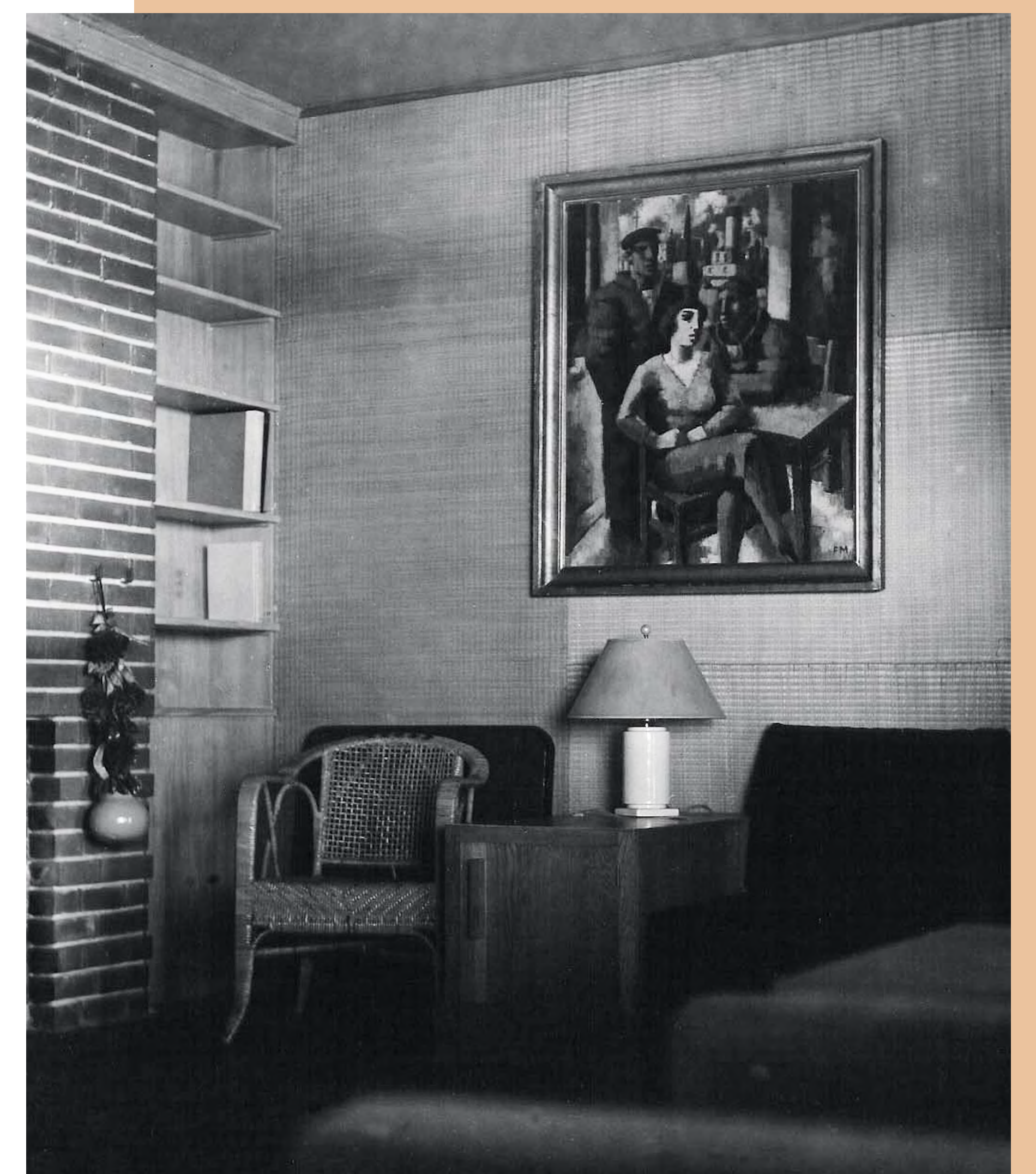
For them, Close and Scheu designed the first International Style house in Minneapolis. It featured rectangular geometry, a flat roof, strip windows, and use of unconventional materials. To complement the plain volumes of the residence, materials that fit its "very simple character," were chosen. They included redwood siding and resin-bonded plywood. To add color, blue-tinted concrete was used for the driveway. While intended as a bit of whimsy on the part of the architects, after a passerby suffered a fatal heart attack in front of the house, the *Minnesota Daily* speculated that the shocking blue concrete might have been to blame. Interior finishes included brick, gumwood veneer, and Homasote, a pressed cardboard wall board not commonly used for residential purposes.

Financing the house was a challenge. The lenders feared the boxy, flat-roofed house, which cost a little over \$12,000 to build, would have no resale value—a concern that would soon prove to be unfounded. In 1939, the three men, who were relocating, sold the house to university professor Benjamin Lippincott and his wife, Gertrude, a modern dancer. A year later the Lippincotts hired the Closes to design an addition for the residence.

The house, which initiated debate about the role of modern architecture in residential design, would not have happened, without clients who shared the Closes' progressive views. As art historian Lauren Soth has observed, "All five individuals were committed to modernism in the arts. The house they collaborated on was a physical manifesto of their beliefs."



To complement the simple geometric forms of the Faulkner House, the architects specified durable, unfussy construction materials, including redwood siding and resin-bonded plywood. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Living room of the Faulkner House. Interior finishes included Homasote, gumwood veneer, and brick. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Artist Charles Biederman created three large-scale reliefs for the architecturally modern Interstate Clinic (1940) in Red Wing, Minnesota. One them, #7, *New York*, is seen here on display in the waiting room. HB-06586-H, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection.

## INTERSTATE CLINIC

In 1940, Drs. Edward Juers and Raymond Hedin, who admired the Faulkner House, hired the Closes to design the Interstate Clinic in Red Wing, Minnesota. The building, which was the Closes' first commission for a medical facility, was a fusion of functional planning, cutting-edge medical technology, and world-class modern art.

Programmatically, it was planned to address the needs of a small group practice, which included offices and examining rooms for six physicians, a dentist, and an x-ray specialist. Tile, birch, and pine plywood were used for interior finishes. Original three-dimensional constructions by Charles Biederman, an internationally-known artist from the area, adorned the waiting room walls.

The exterior of the L-shaped, flat-roofed building was sheathed in glazed white tile. Access to the visually arresting building was via a stairway that was partially sheltered by a cantilevered overhang. Hedrich-Blessing, an architectural photography firm based in Chicago, captured the building in a series of black-and-white images that were published in *The Architectural Forum* in 1942.

By the late 1960s, the expanded and renamed Interstate Medical Center had outgrown its original building and moved to a larger facility. The handsome Close-designed clinic was demolished in 1985.



Close and Scheu used birch plywood throughout the building to handsome effect, including for the stair rail and pharmacy walls. HB-06586-P, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection.



Glazed white tiles sheathed the simple, geometric volumes of the building. HB-06586-A, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection.



Skywater, the Joseph and Dagmar Beach Cabin (1941), in Osceola, Wisconsin, was built into a hillside high above the St. Croix River. Photograph by Jane King Hession.

## SKYWATER

In 1941 Joseph Warren Beach, head of the University of Minnesota's English department, and his wife, Dagmar Doneghy Beach, a writer, asked the Closes to design a small cabin for an isolated site on the St. Croix River near Osceola, Wisconsin. Lisl described the steep, wooded site as "a magical place in many ways" but "daunting" as a construction site because there was no access road, water, or electricity. The site's location, on a bluff high above the river, inspired the cabin's poetic name, "Skywater," as Dagmar believed it stood midway between sky and water.

According to Lisl, the cabin's design was essentially a question. Should it be dug into the hillside like a cave or project out from it like a treehouse? Ultimately, they decided to build into the hill on a ridge 150 feet above the river. The 576-square-foot sod roof cabin cost \$1,200 to build and was constructed of native stone and redwood. It blends seamlessly into the landscape.

To stay within the project's low, Depression-era budget required considerable creativity. Stone gathered on the site was used for the fireplace and exposed walls and inexpensive hollow tile was employed for the floors. A trash can, horizontally recessed in the earthen wall of the kitchen, became the "refrigerator." Win and Lisl came up with an inexpensive and ingenious furniture design in which one chair and one table could be produced from a single sheet of plywood; clothesline strung across the chair frame created its back. An article on the "peaceful retreat," with photographs by Hedrich-Blessing, was published in *Progressive Architecture* in 1948.

In 1961, Dagmar asked Lisl to design a second cabin on-site. This time, she built the light-frame structure out from the hill. In 1983, the Closes purchased Skywater from the Northrop family. It remains in the family today.

During World War II, the Closes suspended their practice for three years while Win served in the Naval Reserve. When the firm reopened in 1946, Win embarked on a teaching career at the University of Minnesota. In 1950, he became the university's head of campus planning and in 1959, its advisory architect—a position he held until 1971. In that capacity, he led several major campus expansion efforts, including the master planning of the University's West Bank campus and Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis, and its campuses in Duluth and Morris. During those years, Lisl ran the firm and was its principal designer.



Skywater living room. Local stone, gathered on-site, was used for the fireplace and interior walls. HB-10242-B, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection, and Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Elizabeth and Winston Close in the 1940s. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



Lisl and Win created an efficient and economical design for Skywater's furniture. All components for one chair and one table were cut from a single sheet of plywood. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



The second Skywater cabin (1961), built as a guesthouse, projects out from the hillside. Photograph by Jane King Hession.

# Designs for Prefabrication



View of the Page & Hill factory in Shakopee, Minnesota. Norton & Peel, Interior, Shakopee Workshop, 1942. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

## PAGE & HILL

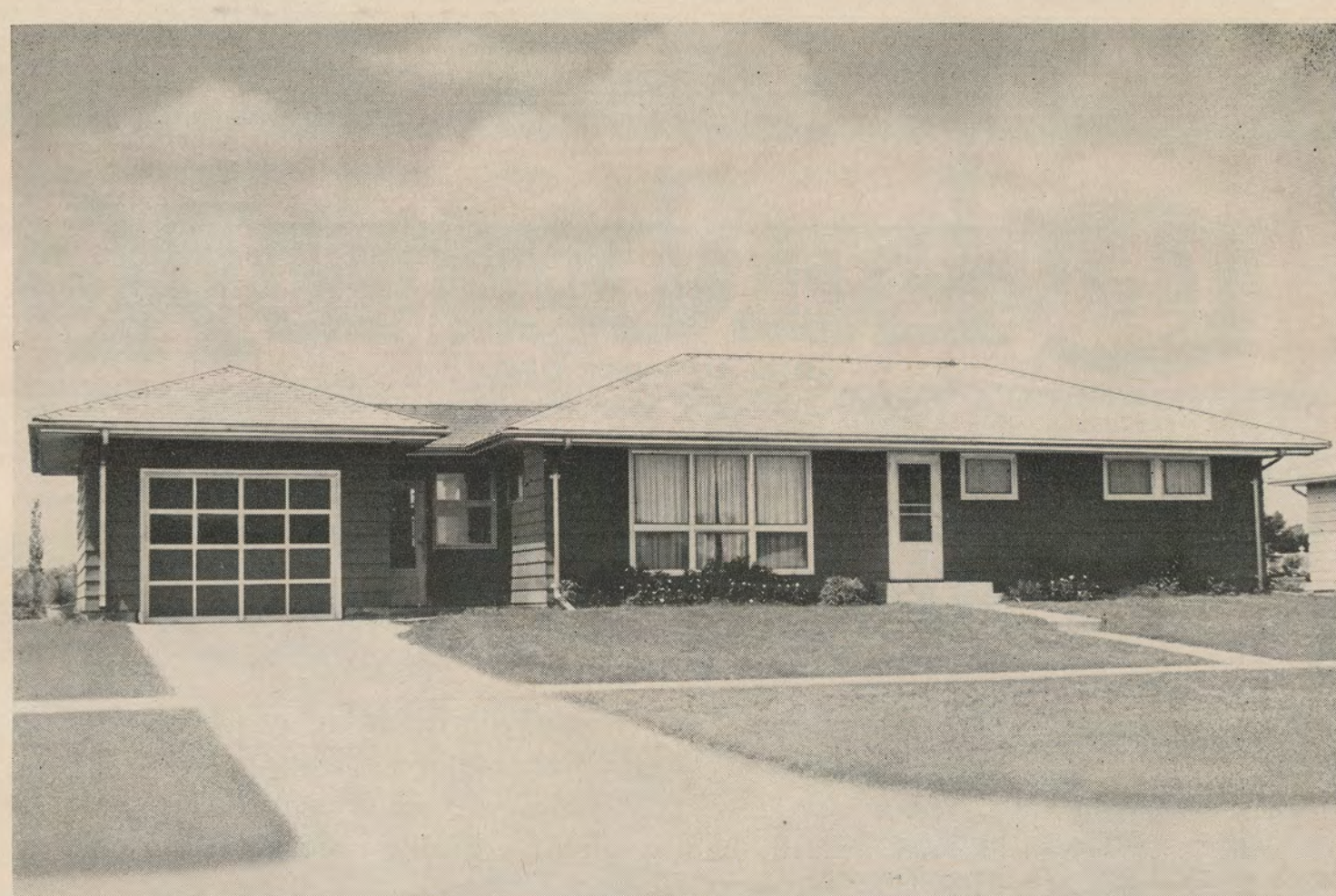
A thesis was a requirement for an undergraduate degree in architecture at MIT. Lisl's chosen topic was "A Production Plant for Pre-Fabricated Houses." The choice was significant for two reasons. First, her argument for producing factory-made homes to improve living conditions likely sprang from her Social Democratic roots. Second, the thesis uniquely qualified her for future employment. In 1941, when the Page & Hill Company of Shakopee, Minnesota was looking for an architect to design a series of factory-made houses, it hired Lisl, in part, on the strength of her work at MIT.

Prefabrication, defined as "the mass production of interchangeable building parts," was not a new idea. Architects in America and Europe had been experimenting with some measure of the technology for years. Lisl cited at least thirty sources in her thesis bibliography including experimentations by R. Buckminster Fuller, Richard Neutra, and George Fred Keck. The innovative materials and construction methods used in a group of modern houses constructed for the 1933-1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago, also provided timely inspiration.

Her 1934 thesis argued that prefabricated houses could meet the "urgent social and economic need" for better housing. Critical to their affordable production was the use of as few materials as possible; ideally only those that combined "the necessary qualities [of] strength, insulation value, hardness." To this end she focused on new "plastic" materials, specifically Bakelite, as an ideal choice. Invented in 1907 by Belgian chemist Leo Baekeland, Bakelite was a nearly indestructible synthetic product that could be precisely machined. Her proposed use of Bakelite was prescient as subsequent twentieth-century applications of thermoplastic materials would prove.

The Page & Hill Company was founded in 1903 as a manufacturer of Western red cedar utility poles, and later a producer of factory-made log homes. During World War II, when the government placed restrictions on any residential construction other than defense housing, Page & Hill resolved to produce the kind of houses the government would fund. The company already possessed expertise in manufacturing factory-made components, but it lacked the architectural skill to design attractive, contemporary model homes. When it learned of Lisl's MIT thesis and her credentials as an architect, it hired her to design prefabricated houses at a salary of two dollars per hour.

The design and production of a Page & Hill prefab involved complexities that differed from those of conventional construction. One was the requirement that each house be designed to pack and ship in a single truckload for delivery to a completed foundation on an owner's lot. Page & Hill also aimed for the highest degree of shop fabrication possible. Lisl was charged with designing exterior wall systems in which windows, doors, and screens were inserted, and hardware, siding, and finishes applied at the company's main plant in Shakopee. The company wanted to make the entire process as seamless and rapid as possible; its best time from model sale to owner move-in was twenty-seven days.



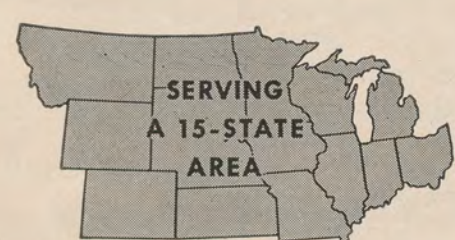
Norfolk 3-bedroom model, built by Page & Hill, Pipestone, Minnesota, in a development of Page & Hill Homes.

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PF—THE MAGAZINE OF PREFABRICATION

From 1941 until the late 1950s, Lisl designed prefabricated houses for Page & Hill of Shakopee, Minnesota. As this advertisement from 1956 states, Page & Hill Homes were marketed in fifteen states. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

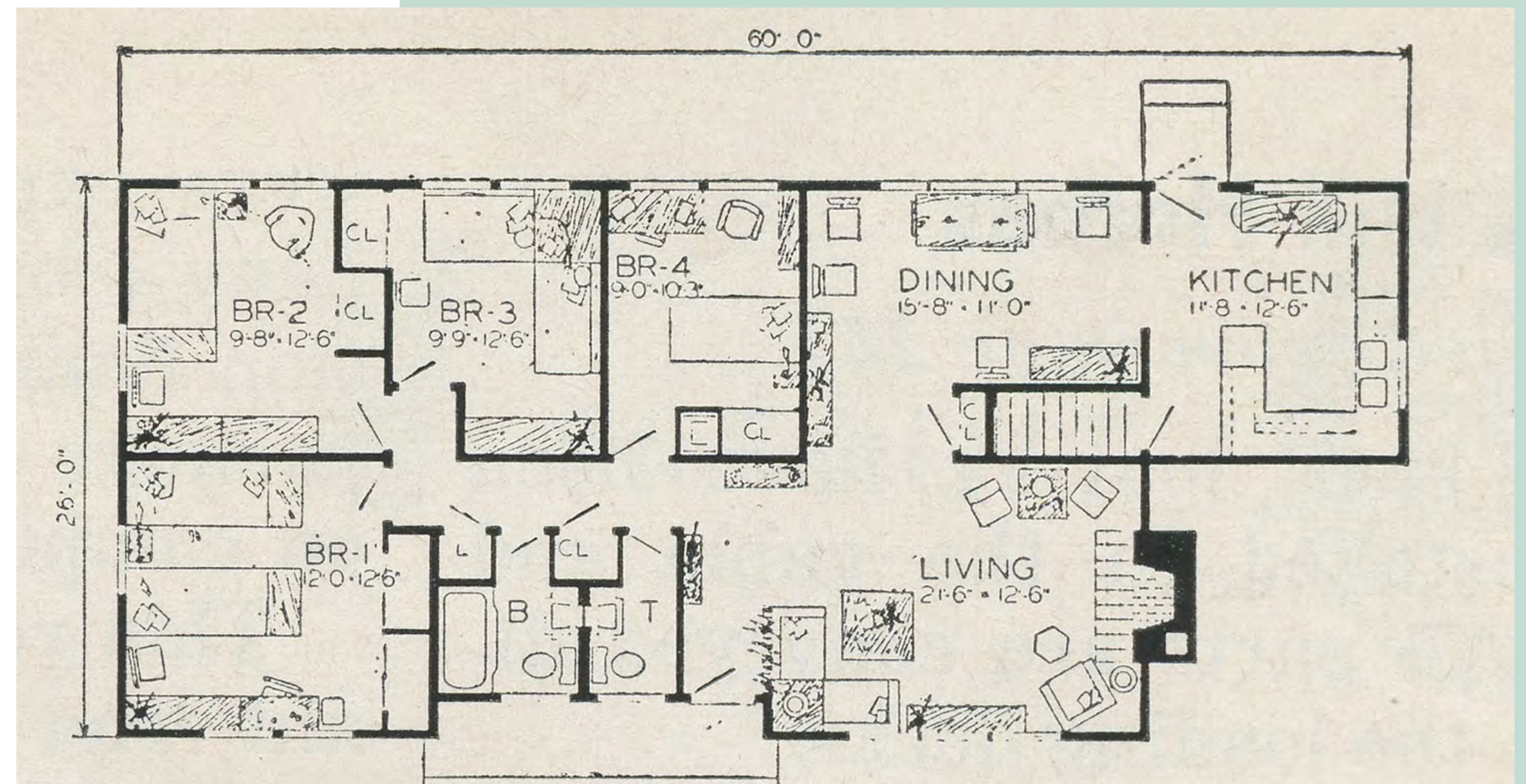


Prefabrication  
and  
Individualism



*Prefabrication in the Northwest (above and page 21)*  
*Analysis of 'Housing Act of 1956' - By T. B. King* August, 1956

The cover of the August 1956 issue of *PF-The Magazine of Prefabrication* featured a row of Page & Hill homes in an unidentified Minneapolis subdivision. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.



Floor plan for the four-bedroom, one-level Close-designed "Devonshire" model Page & Hill Home. Courtesy of Roy M. Close Family Papers.

Over the next two decades, Lisl designed several lines of prefabricated houses that were sold by the company. The one-, two-, and split-level houses were marketed under such vaguely evocative names as "Andover," "Hiawatha," and "Jubilaire." A typical house was 40 x 24 feet, with three bedrooms, a fireplace, and a kitchen.

According to Lisl, the inexpensive houses weren't very modern in style, but they did address a pressing contemporary need; the rapid mass production of affordable housing for those in need of shelter. More than ten thousand Page & Hill houses of Lisl's design were shipped to fifteen states. Developers purchased units to quickly and affordably populate entire neighborhoods in America's burgeoning suburbs. Local Twin Cities examples include the Vista View neighborhood in Burnsville, and Acorn Ridge, a community of Page & Hill homes in Minnetonka. Prefabs were also an ideal way to shelter an influx of workers in a new company town. In 1956, the company shipped more than one thousand dwellings to taconite mining sites on the Iron Range in northern Minnesota, including the newly incorporated town of Hoyt Lakes.



A Page & Hill model home built in Acorn Ridge, a development in the Minneapolis suburb of Minnetonka. Norton & Peel, House on Acorn Ridge, 1956. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.



In 1964, Lisl designed the "Atrium Contemporary," a prefabricated house for national distribution for the Weyerhaeuser Company. Seen here as built in Lawton, Oklahoma. Photograph by O. Philip Roedel. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

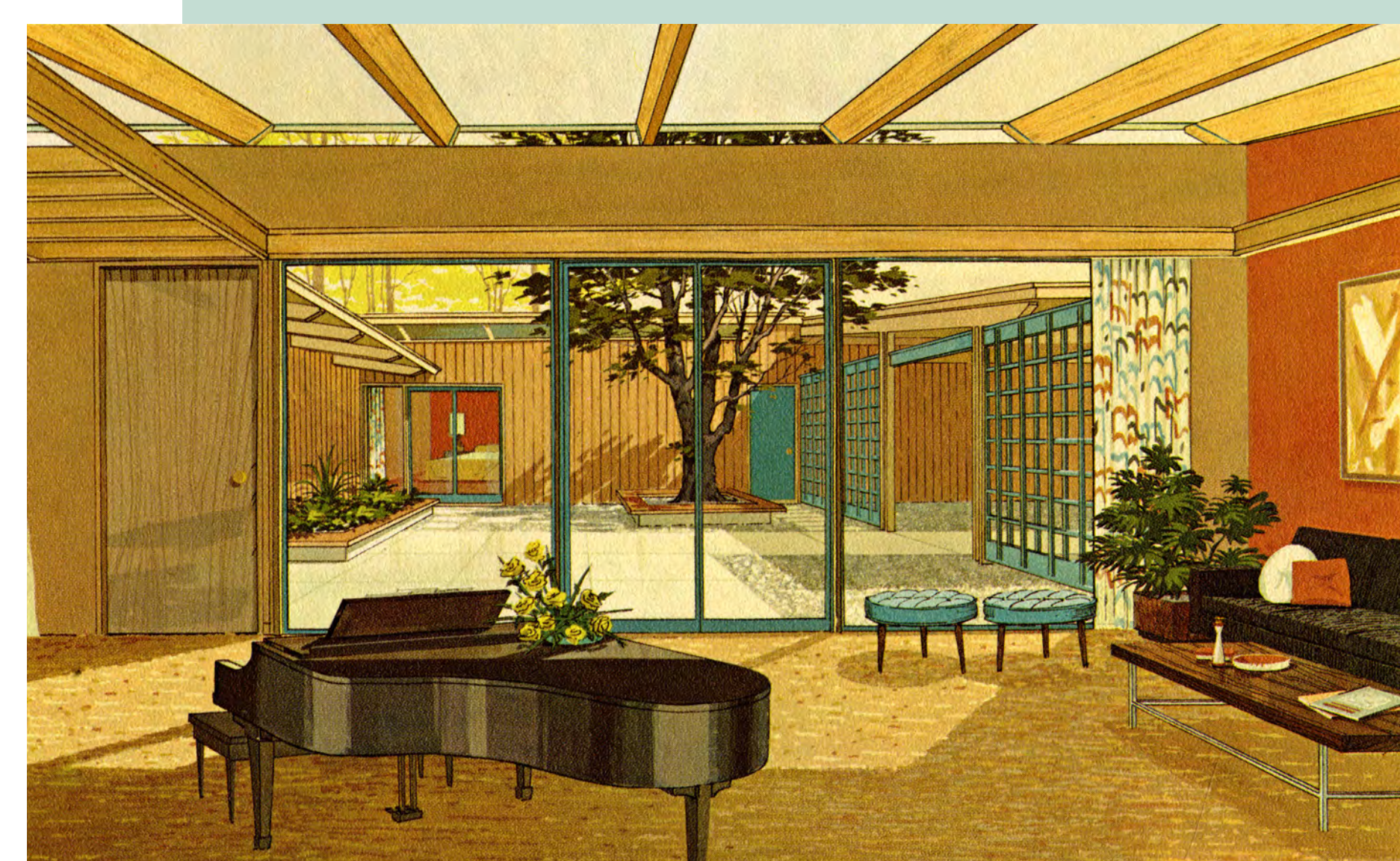
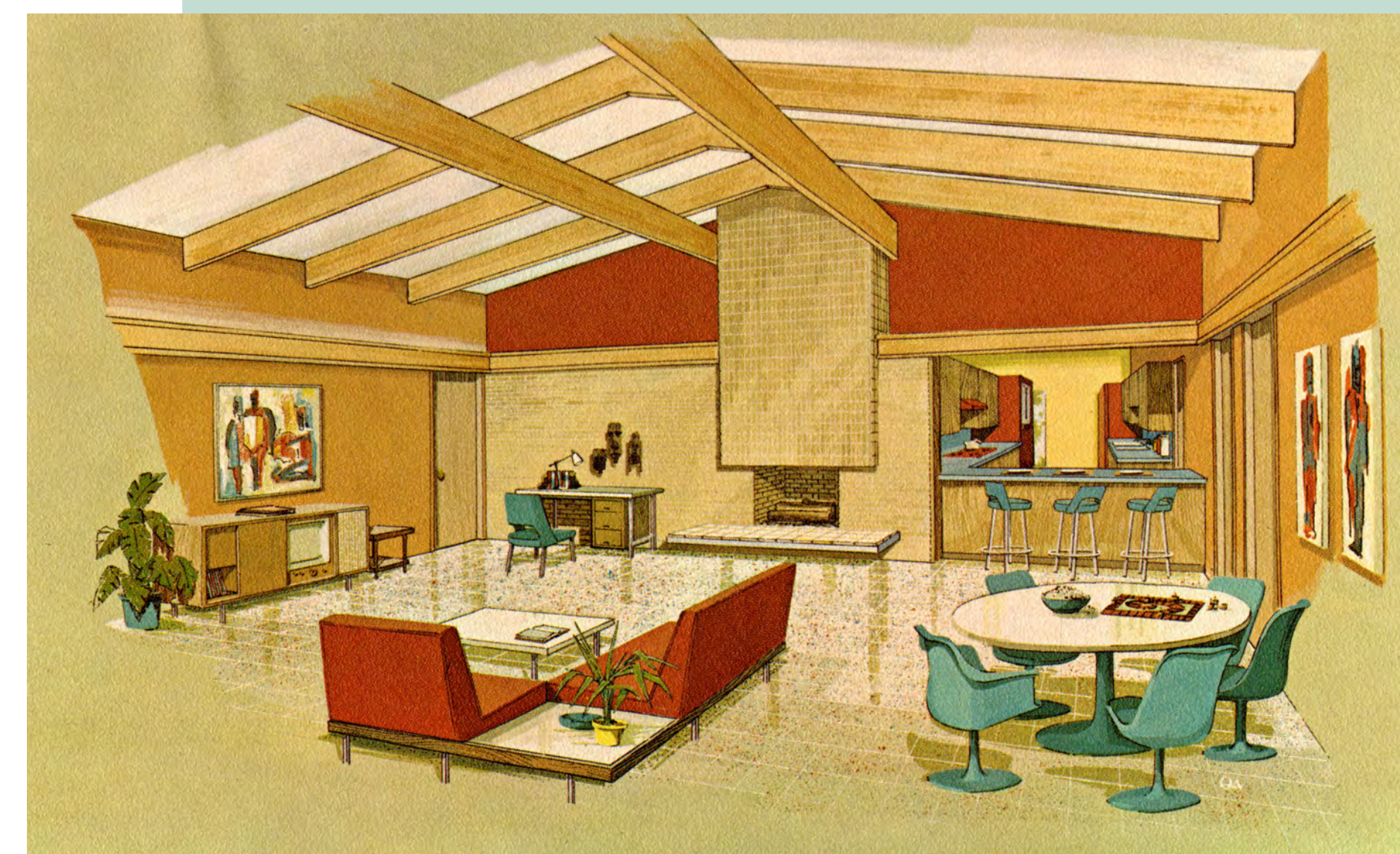
During the 1950s and 1960s, Lisl developed prefabricated plans for other companies, including "Precision-bilt System" houses for the Fullerton Lumber Company of Minneapolis; prototype factory-built mobile homes for the Iseman Corporation of Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and a prefabricated contemporary atrium home for Weyerhaeuser's nationally distributed "Registered Home" series. She also conducted research and development on the architectural uses and machine production of plastic structural elements for Polystructures, a Minnesota-based company.

## A "JUBILAIRE" GOES TO BERLIN

During the Cold War, one of Lisl's Page & Hill designs played an extraordinary role in a propagandistic display of the comforts of life under the American system of democracy; a potent statement at a time when Europe was recovering from the ravages of World War II, and the Iron Curtain ideologically separated East from West.

By the summer of 1950, the United States Department of State had well-formed plans for the American contribution to the first German International Industrial Exhibition in Berlin, then a politically divided city. The undisputed showcase was to be the George C. Marshall House, which "symbolized" the European Recovery Program and America's role in it.

But two months before the exhibition opened on October 1, plans expanded to include an US-designed prefabricated "Model American Home." The stated goal was to "graphically represent the high living standard of the American wage-earner," and by extension "the fruits of American democracy and free enterprise." The sum of \$25,000 was allotted for the purchase of a "Jubilaire" model, its furnishings, and shipment from Minnesota. Shortly before the opening of the fair, it arrived in Berlin in ninety-four crates. It was assembled in ten days.



Interior perspectives of the "Atrium Contemporary" illustrate the airy spaciousness of the plan and the relationship between interior rooms and the outdoor atrium. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



In 1950, the U.S. State Department shipped a "Jubilaire" Page & Hill house from Minnesota to Cold War Berlin to serve as the "Model American Home" at the German International Industrial Exhibition. Here, workers in Berlin unload boxes containing prefabricated sections of the house. National Archives, Text Division, RG59, 862A.191, box 5225.





During the exhibition's two-week run, 43,000 people visited the "Model American House." National Archives, Text Division, RG59, 862A.191, box 5225.

The six-room ranch house with breezeway and garage, was fully equipped with the most up-to-date conveniences of American domestic life, including a thermostat-controlled furnace, electric range, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, Mixmaster, and television. Roughly 43,000 "enthralled" visitors—many from the Soviet sector of the city—were guided through the house during the fair's two-week run.

In pairing the International Style Marshall House and the prefabricated Page & Hill house, the State Department inextricably linked the two, in what one newspaper described as a "striking joint display of American economic strength on the international front and social achievement on the home front."

At the end of the fair, the State Department explored various reuses for the small house, which could not remain on its site. However, a Page & Hill representative determined, paradoxically, that the house, which had been assembled from prefabricated parts, could not be disassembled. It had to be moved as a unit or demolished. The fate of the house is not known.

State Department documents do not credit Lisl for the design of the house. Nor, apparently, was anyone involved in the process aware that the house shipped from Minnesota to Germany to epitomize the freedoms of American democracy, was designed by a young woman who had left Austria for the United States to escape Nazi aggression. Had they known, her story would have made a useful addition to the more than 100 tons of propaganda material that was disseminated during the fair.

The Model American Home was the only structure Lisl designed that was built in Europe.



A student from the Berlin Free University demonstrates a television set for visitors. National Archives, Text Division, RG59, 862A.191, box 5225.



The brochure "America at Home" for the 1950 Berlin International Industrial Exhibition featured a prefabricated house, designed by Lisl, on its cover. European Recovery Agency, Amerika zu Hause: Zur Erinnerung an die Deutsche Industrie Ausstellung (Berlin, 1950).

# Residential Design

## FUNDAMENTALS OF A CLOSE HOUSE

When it came to home design, Lisl was a practical, efficient architect interested in solving a problem. She believed many residences were “full of design errors,” from the outset. To correct that she avoided superfluous elements, such as gutters that trapped leaves, shingles that loosened over time, or finishes that required upkeep. “That was to me, a starting point. To get rid of the problems,” she said. She selected materials that were attractive, easy to maintain, and would serve a homeowner well in the long run. She appreciated the beauty and character of natural materials, especially redwood, a material she used extensively. But she also used resin-bonded plywood and Homasote for residential finishes because they were durable and utilitarian.

Functional design was a priority for Lisl, who believed a residence should be as efficiently programmed for use as a laboratory. “Nobody would think of building a skyscraper without a program, but in those days, everybody just bought their house off a shelf or [from] a catalog,” she said.

Every Close-designed house was grounded in an understanding of a site’s characteristics and potential, including topography, exposure, and opportunities for privacy and views. “Usually, we tried to orient houses so that the living areas got as much sunshine as possible in the winter and not too much in the summer, so we took advantage of shading devices and trees, particularly foliage,” Lisl explained. She believed site planning was critical to good design and often collaborated with landscape architects early in the process.



The Dr. Ruth Boynton and Prudence Cutright House (1948) in Bloomington, Minnesota. Photograph by Lucian H. Brown. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



In 1939 the Closes designed the Tracy F. Tyler House, their first completed project in University Grove in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. Photograph by William B. Olexy.

## UNIVERSITY GROVE

One of the largest concentrations of Close-designed houses stands in University Grove, a neighborhood of 103 single-family homes built on University of Minnesota–owned land in Falcon Heights. It was established in 1928 when the University’s comptroller William Middlebrook set aside a conveniently located parcel of land for an academic housing village. The wooded, rolling landscape was within walking distance of the University’s St. Paul campus and a streetcar ride away from the Minneapolis campus. Curving streets and common areas for community recreation distinguish the plan. The Closes designed fifteen houses in the Grove, more than any other architect or firm.

Qualified members of the faculty and administration were eligible to build architect-designed houses on the lots. To keep prices affordable and to ensure residences were similarly sized, the University set a cap, which included the architect’s fee, on the cost of house construction. The cap escalated over time from \$10,000 in the 1920s and 1930s, to \$48,500 by 1970. Designs were subject to university approval—a responsibility Win assumed when he became the University’s advisory architect. Over several decades, many noted architects, including Carl Graffunder, Liebenberg and Kaplan, Edwin Lundie, and Ralph Rapson, contributed houses in a diverse range of historical and modern styles. This prompted the *New York Times* to describe the Grove as “an architectural time capsule.”

The Close firm’s first Grove house was a 1939 residence for Tracy F. Tyler, an associate professor of education at the University. The flat-roof, two-story, three-bedroom house with a tuck-under garage was carefully sited to preserve seven of the eight existing oak trees on the property. It was sheathed in brick and horizontal redwood siding on the first floor, and vertical board and batten redwood on the upper level. The house was built for \$13,000, which included the Closes’ 7 percent fee of \$850.

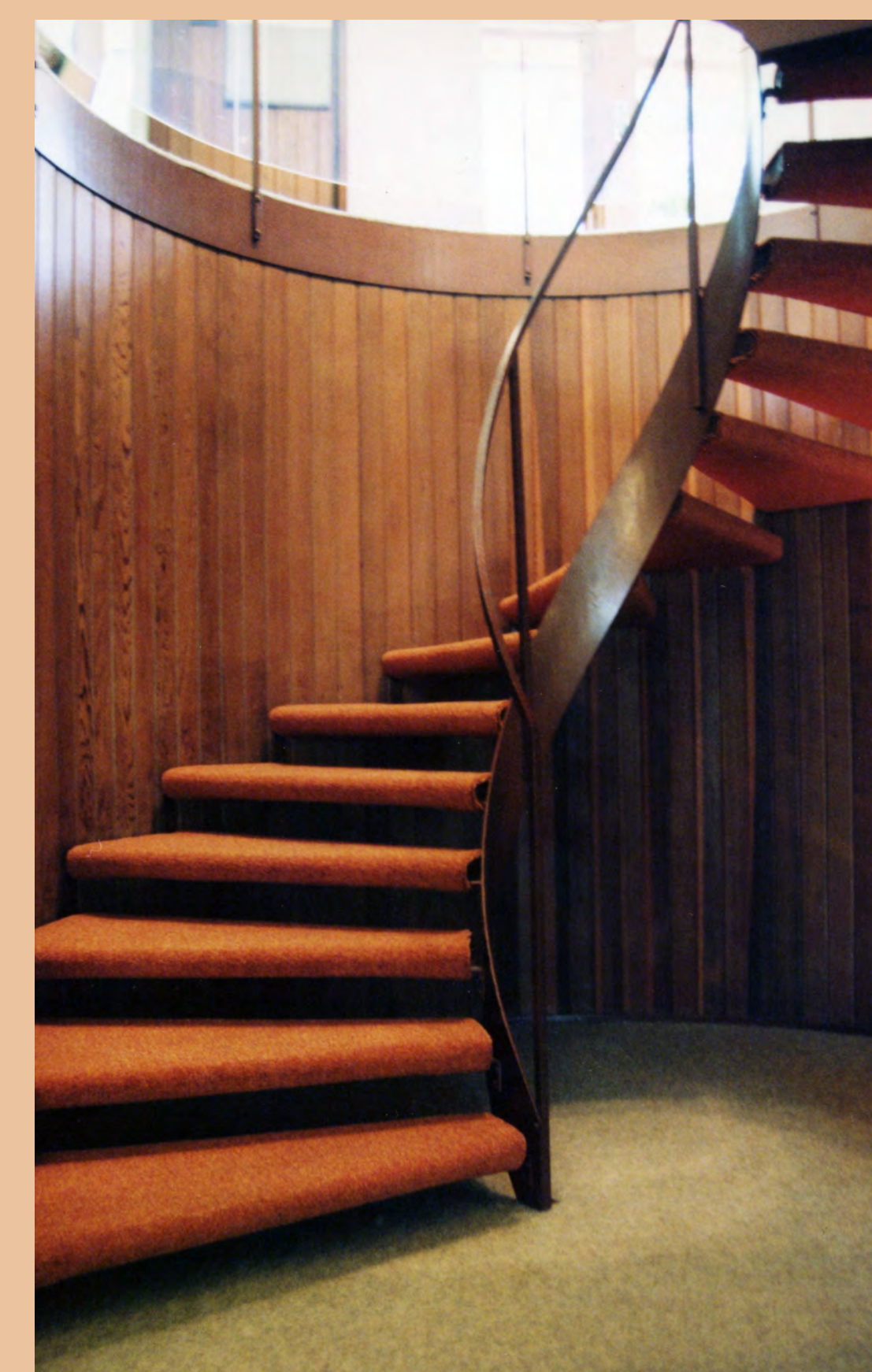


The Elizabeth and Winston Close House (1953) in University Grove. Photograph by William B. Olexy.

By 1953 Win's administrative role at the University meant his family, which by then included three children, were eligible to build a home in the Grove. Because the house was built into a sloping lot, main living areas were on the second floor, and opened to a private patio and wooded community space beyond. The four-bedroom residence abounded in practical and cleverly designed elements: a space-saving spiral staircase, an efficient galley kitchen, Masonite panels used for sliding cabinet doors; and a storage system for sheet music and art. Members of the Close family lived in the house for more than sixty years.

Conceptually, the Wolf House (1959) was perhaps the most unusual Close-designed house in the Grove. It was created for John B. Wolf, a professor of European history at the University of Minnesota, and his wife Theta, a psychology professor. The limitations of the site, which was one block deep and sandwiched between two streets, suggested an 'introverted' house. Lisl's design response was to modernize an ancient typology: the Roman atrium house because it solved a problem as effectively in 1959 as it did in an earlier millennium.

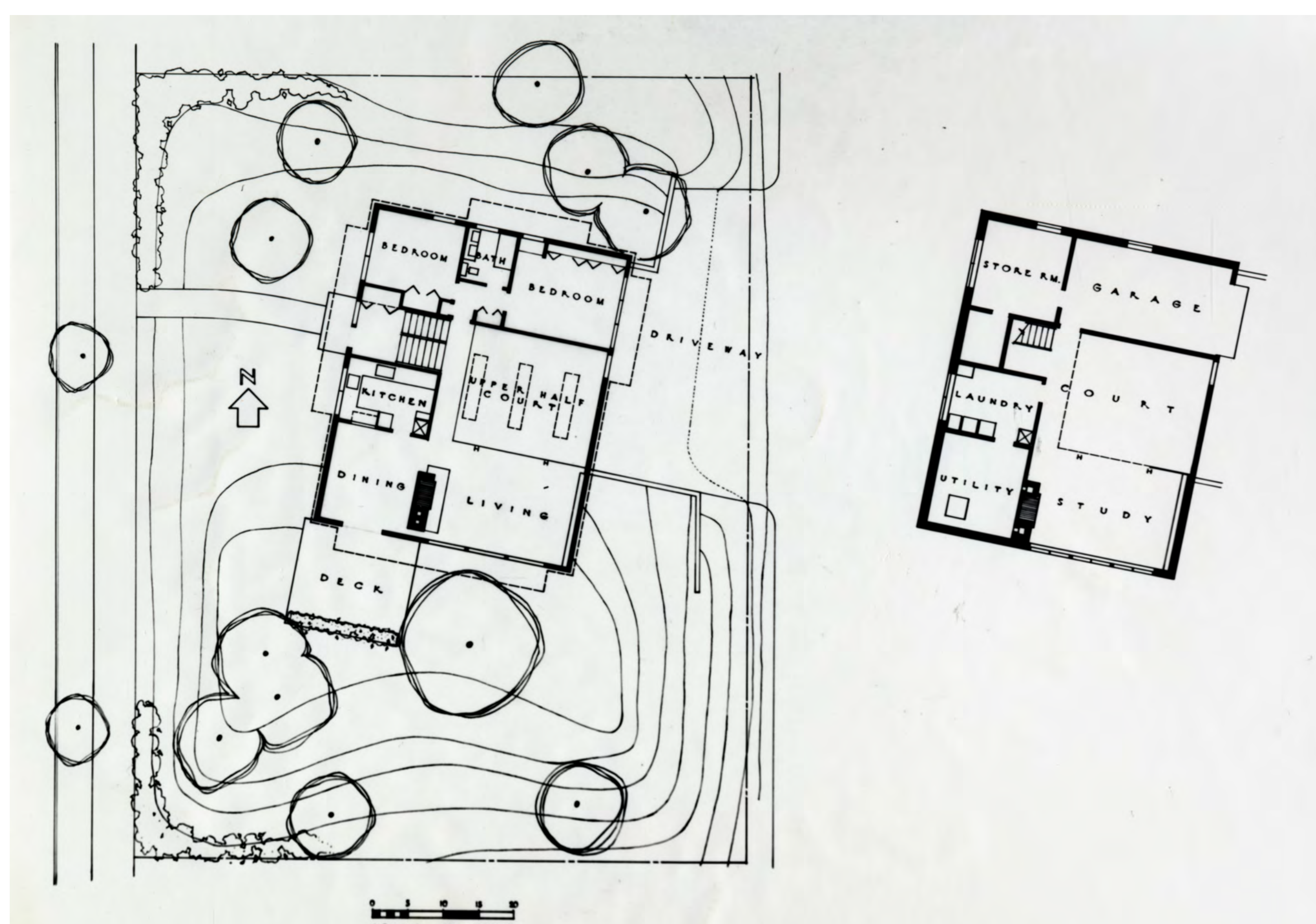
An open-tread staircase linked the two-story courtyard-level of the house and the upper floor. Lisl, who excelled at finding unconventional uses for conventional materials, incorporated hollow core doors, installed horizontally, as a railing system above the atrium.



A space-saving spiral staircase rises from the ground floor to upper-level living areas. Clear Plexiglas was used for its nearly invisible railing system on the upper floor. Photograph by Jane King Hession.



Living room of the Close House. Photograph by William B. Olexy.



As the Wolf House floor plans show, rooms in the residence pinwheel around the atrium. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



The two-story atrium space of the John and Theta Wolf House (1959) in University Grove. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



The Dorothy and John Rood House (1947) on Lowry Hill in Minneapolis. HB-14358-A, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection.



View from the terrace of the Rood House to Rood's studio. HB-14358-F, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection.



The Rood House gallery, featuring art by John Rood. HB-14358-K, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection.

## WORKING WITH THE SITE

In 1947, John and Dorothy Rood possessed one of the most impressive lots in Minneapolis: a one-acre site on Lowry Hill that fell off precipitously to the northeast and offered enviable views of the city skyline. The Roods had an ambitious building program that, in addition to basic living spaces, required a gallery for their art collection and a studio and workshop for John Rood, a well-known sculptor. The L-shaped house wrapped around a paved automobile court. On the ground floor, a central hallway extended from the main house to become a long, curved gallery for the display of art. The arc of the gallery played off an existing curved stone wall that defined the outdoor sculpture court where several of Rood's sculptures were installed.

In the early 1960s, Lisl took on the challenge of designing a house for an "impossible" site for Hendrik J. Oskam, a University of Minnesota physicist, and his wife, Marri. Due to its location, well below a main road in the Indian Hills neighborhood of Edina, the steep site presented both design and access issues. The upper level of the 1,731-square-foot, open-plan house contained main living areas and a study/library. The lower level consisted of two bedrooms and an outdoor terrace. On the lakeside of the house, a butterfly roof framed expansive views to the water. Lisl chose redwood boards for the exterior of the house but, unconventionally, had them installed "wrong side out" because she liked the long, textural grooving that was produced on that side during the milling process.



The Hendrik and Marri Oskam House (1962), Edina, Minnesota, as viewed from Indianhead Lake. Photograph by William B. Olexy.



Glazed Dutch brick, built-in seating, and a wood beamed ceiling bring warmth to the modern interior of the Oskam House. Photograph by William B. Olexy.



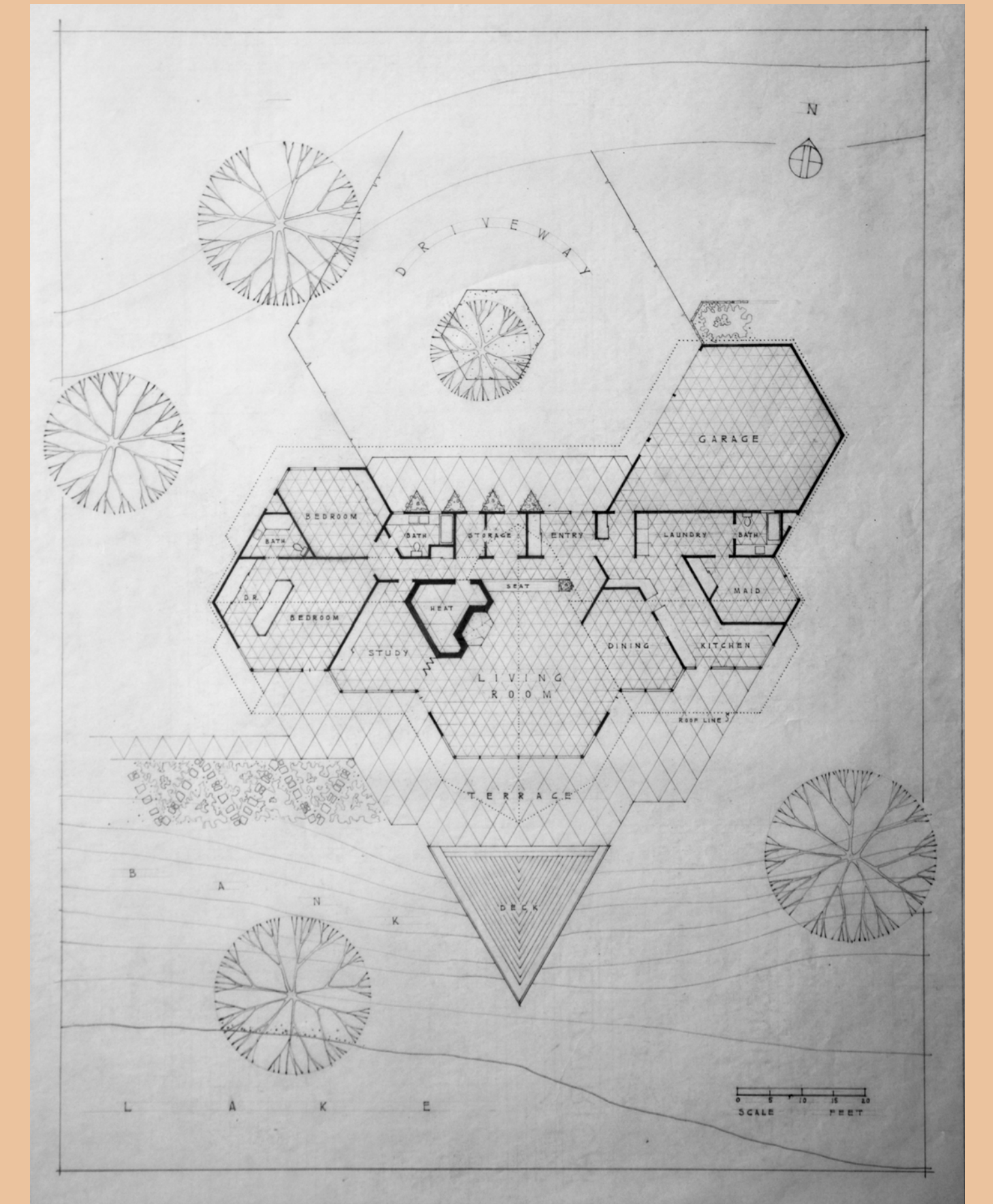
The Helen and Philip Duff House (1955) on Lake Marion in Wayzata, Minnesota, received an AIA Minnesota 25-Year Award in 1989. Photograph by George Miles Ryan Studios, Inc. Courtesy of Gar Hargens/Close Associates and Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota

In 2015, fearing escalating land values could put her house at risk of being a teardown, Marri, then widowed, led a successful campaign to have it designated an Edina Heritage Landmark. It is the only modern house among eleven protected properties in that city.

In 1955, when Philip and Helen Duff decided to build a retirement house they chose a sylvan, multiacre lot on Lake Marion in Wayzata, Minnesota. As requested by the client, Lisl used a diamond grid to generate the plan of the house. A dynamic roof, composed of flat, shed, and low-slope gable portions, animated both the exterior and interior spaces of the house. As she did for other clients, Lisl designed the house interiors sourcing textiles and furnishings from such legendary midcentury talents as Jens Risom Design, Dan Cooper Design, F. Schumacher & Co., Knoll Associates, and Herman Miller.

The Duff House earned the firm its only AIA Minnesota 25-Year Award. Unfortunately, it would not survive another twenty-five years. It went on the market in 2012 and was demolished for new construction. In an increasingly prevalent preservation conundrum, the fate of the Duff House—and many other architecturally significant properties in Minnesota—was sealed by the continuing allure of the very site that inspired its design in the first place.

Golden Age Housing in Minneapolis was designed for the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority in 1959. The low-rent, public housing project consisted of twenty-four apartments for seniors. Units were massed in six clusters of four one-bedroom apartments each. Clusters were spaced on the site to allow the creation of private courts, gardens, and off-street parking.



The Duffs requested their house be planned using nonrectilinear geometry, as evidenced in the floor plan. Courtesy Gar Hargens/Close Associates and Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Living room of the Duff House. Photograph by George Miles Ryan Studios Inc. Courtesy Gar Hargens/Close Associates and Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Golden Age Housing (1959), Minneapolis. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

# Beyond the House



Architectural models from the 1947 exhibit *Designs for Idea Houses III through VIII* in the Everyday Art Gallery at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Elizabeth and Winston Close, Architects, was one of six firms invited to participate in the show. Rolphe Dauphin for Walker Art Center.

## DESIGNS FOR THE WALKER ART CENTER

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis was one of the first art institutions in the country to view residential design as a subject worthy of museum study. In 1947, the Close firm was invited to participate in the Idea House Project, a Walker initiative to “educate the middle-class consumer about the advantages and availability of modern design.” Director Daniel S. Defenbacher conceived the program in 1941 when the Idea House, a full-scale demonstration house, was constructed on land adjacent to the museum. It was the first of its kind in the United States.

Six years later, during the postwar housing boom, the Walker revisited the concept and built Idea House II, which was accompanied by *Designs for Idea Houses III through VIII*, an exhibition of plans and models created by local architects. Each was asked to design a contemporary house for hypothetical clients. Lisl’s task was to design a \$15,000 to \$20,000 house for a couple with two children and a live-in mother-in-law.

The Idea House II project was published nationally, including in *McCall’s* magazine. Defenbacher attempted to interest editors there in a related venture to build all six houses, plus two additional architect-designed prefabricated houses, in the Glendale addition to the Tyrol Hills neighborhood in Golden Valley, Minnesota. He hoped to begin construction in the spring of 1948 with financing from the Home Institute of Northwestern National Bank, and to sell the houses following their public exhibition. Sadly, none of the modern houses in this unique collaboration were built.

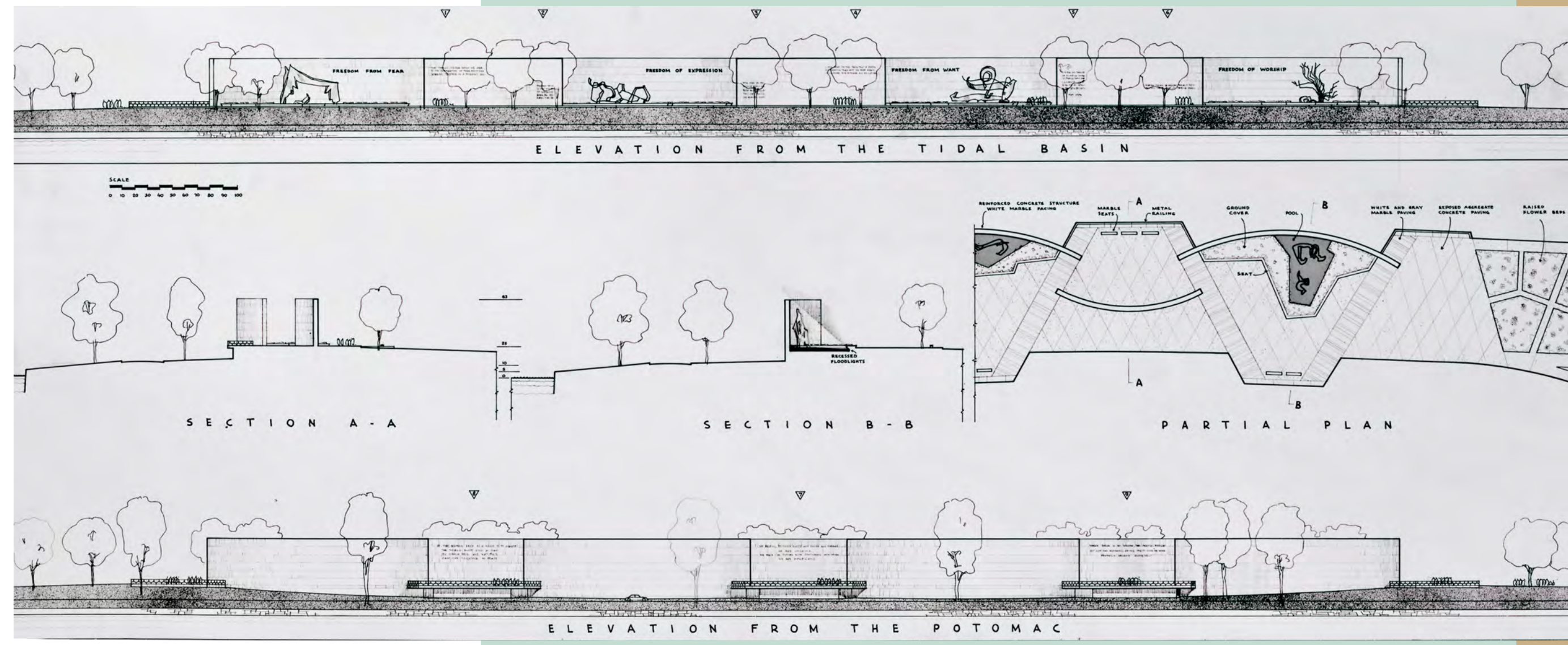
In 1952, the Close firm participated in *The Architects’ Workshop*, a second Walker exhibition that showcased drawings and models of residences by local talent. In a companion essay published in *Everyday Art Quarterly*, historian Donald R. Torbert wrote, “Buildings like those now published by the Walker Art Center can function as guideposts that point to the possibility of a finer urban environment than we have yet developed.”



Idea House model by Elizabeth and Winston Close, Architects, 1947. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Model for the Closes' entry for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Competition (1960), Washington, D.C. The design was organized as a serpentine progression through a series of outdoor rooms. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Sections and elevations of the Closes' competition entry. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

## FDR MEMORIAL COMPETITION

In 1960, Lisl and Win collaborated on a competition design for the Frank Delano Roosevelt Memorial. They did so because they admired Roosevelt. The competition drew 574 entries, most by “sizable teams, not individuals,” which alone set the Closes’ design apart.

They based their concept on Roosevelt’s 1941 “Four Freedoms” speech. Their scheme, which was a serpentine progression of fountains and curved walls, was divided into four sections, each bearing an inscribed freedom text. They considered the proximity to the Washington Monument and Jefferson and Lincoln memorials to the proposed site to be an important element of the design. For this reason, they created “an extended horizontal composition, which would incorporate the other monuments in the overall composition.” A significant and singular aspect of the Closes’ design was that it recognized Roosevelt’s disability. “It seemed at the time that [the memorial] should be easily maneuverable because he was in a wheelchair,” Lisl said.

A panel of jurors selected six projects to advance to the finals. Although the Closes’ design was not among them, it was chosen as one of twenty-two honorable mentions—a remarkable achievement for a firm of its size.

## BUILDINGS FOR RECREATION

In 1957, Lyman E. Wakefield Jr., the “father of figure skating in Minnesota,” asked Lisl to design a multiple-use skating arena in Golden Valley. For the steel-framed building, known as the Ice Center, she used one-hundred-foot-long bowstring trusses to span the interior, thereby eliminating the need for interior columns. A movable partition suspended from an overhead trolley permitted the ice to be subdivided for more than one use at a time. When it opened, the building was one of few indoor ice arenas in the western metropolitan area.

Two years later, she designed another recreational facility; a park building at Bossen Field for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. The small but striking modern building consisted of three freestanding wings linked by a triangular roof. It housed an office, restroom facilities, and a storage area. It was recently restored for continued use.



When it opened in 1957 in Golden Valley, the Ice Center was one of few indoor ice arenas in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



The Bossen Field Park Shelter (1959) was designed for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. Courtesy of Gar Hargens/Close Associates and Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



The Metropolitan Medical Center (1967) in Minneapolis. Close Associates Papers (N 78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Lobby, Metropolitan Medical Center. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

## HOSPITALS AND LABORATORIES

In the late 1960s and early 70s, Lisl worked on several projects for the Metropolitan Medical Center in Minneapolis, an entity created by the merger of St. Barnabas and Swedish hospitals. The multi-year project was a joint venture with Horty, Elving & Associates. Around the same time, she designed two research laboratories, each of which required state-of-the-art buildings to accommodate complex scientific programs.

In 1966, the Peavey Company, a Minneapolis-based grain merchandising and processing firm, hired Close Associates to design a modern research facility. Lisl led the multiyear project, which involved programming, site selection, and the design of a 50,000-square-foot building in Chaska, Minnesota, dedicated to the company's diversification and product development initiatives. The simple masses of the two-level, L-shaped research facility were constructed of poured-in-place concrete to provide the stability essential to laboratory requirements. Vertical structural fins gave rhythmic interest to the facade and doubled as shading devices. Today, the former Peavey Technical Center is owned by the Eastern Carver County Schools and serves as its district education center.

In 1968, Richard Gray cofounded the Freshwater Biological Research Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to basic research on problems relating to freshwater in lakes, rivers, and marshes. That same year, he hired Lisl to design a cutting-edge research laboratory for a site on the shore of Lake Minnetonka's Lafayette Bay in Navarre, Minnesota.



The Peavey Technical Center (1966), Chaska, Minnesota, was designed as a research and laboratory facility. Photograph by Phillip MacMillan James & Associates. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.



Concrete fins function as shading devices to protect interior spaces from excess sunlight. Photograph by Phillip MacMillan James & Associates. Close Associates Papers (N78), Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.





The Freshwater Biological Institute was dedicated to research problems related to freshwater lakes, rivers, and marshes. In her design, Lisl broke the mass of the building into loosely connected pavilions. Photograph by William B. Olexy.

The marshy five-acre site for the Freshwater Biological Institute was ideally situated for its purpose, but it was located in a residential zone. To respect the neighborhood's character and scale, Lisl kept the building low to the ground and broke its mass into four loosely connected pavilions. The program called for twelve laboratories for microbiology, chemistry, and algae study for resident scientists, and six additional labs for visiting researchers. Shared laboratory functions and areas for multidisciplinary interaction were placed in the "groin" spaces that linked the pavilions. The firm also designed housing for visiting faculty and a boathouse for the site, neither of which was built.

The building received the firm's only AIA Minnesota Honor Award in 1975. One of the jurors noted, "The challenge of a most exceptional site has been met with a quiet building, of angular plan, adapting to the land. It is a human's environment for study, thought and accomplishment."

## A SCHOOL FOR MUSIC

After Win's retirement from the University of Minnesota in 1971, he and Lisl had the opportunity to work together to design Donald N. Ferguson Hall—a new home for the University's School of Music on the West Bank. It would be their first and only campus building. As musicians—Lisl played cello and Win was a violist—they were eager to collaborate on a building dedicated to music education and performance.

The primary advantage of the West Bank site was its location on a ridge above a bluff of the Mississippi River with a view to the East Bank campus. A potential drawback was the near heroic scale of the brick and concrete buildings that already stood in that quadrant of the West Bank campus, notably Rarig Center for Performing Arts and Radio-Television Facility.

The Closes kept the brick-and-concrete building relatively low but rimmed Ferguson's roof planes with thinner, lighter versions of Rarig's dominant cornice. They animated the façade with rhythmically placed concrete fins that also functioned as sun shades. They worked with landscape architects Herb Baldwin and Bob Close to carve an outdoor amphitheater, which was completed in 1986, into a hillside at the north end of the building.



Lobby of the Freshwater Biological Institute (1974) in Navarre, Minnesota. The building received an AIA Minnesota Honor Award in 1975. Photograph by William B. Olexy.



Donald N. Ferguson Hall (1986), home to the music school at the University of Minnesota, was the only building Close Associates designed for the University. Photograph by Alexis Horatius, Wikimedia Commons.



Lisl, a cellist, tested the acoustics of a practice room at Ferguson Hall. Courtesy of the University of Minnesota Archives, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

# Epilogue



Lisl Close, circa 1972, on-site during the construction of the Freshwater Biological Institute in Navarre, Minnesota. Courtesy of Freshwater.

During her long career as a practicing architect, Lisl held many leadership roles in the profession. In 1983, she became the first woman president of MSAIA (today AIA Minnesota), and chaired several chapter committees, including those on home building, urban design, residential architecture, and hospital and health care. Nationally, she served on AIA committees on housing and architectural building information services, and on a Federal Housing Administration advisory panel on residential design.

Lisl and Win officially retired from Close Associates in 1992, after fifty-four years in practice. Gar Hargens, AIA, who joined the firm in 1968, leads it today.

When Lisl died in 2011 at age ninety-nine, she was remembered as an architect who was “more interested in good design than high design,” by educator Julia Robinson, FAIA. “She had a special talent for taking ordinary materials and making them into architecture.” Joan Soranno, FAIA, admired Lisl “not only because she was a successful woman architect but because she fully embraced modernism and never wavered from that conviction.”

Lisl never gave much thought to her role in the broader context of architecture. She did not think herself remarkable for forging a career in the early 1930s in a male-dominated profession. She seemed unaware of being a role model for the next generation of women who “happened to be architects.” Yet she, and other pioneering women architects in the field, did indeed lead the way.

As Georgia Bizios, FAIA, observed, “By the time I worked with Lisl she was very well established. I valued that because it made it easier for me that I didn’t have to be the first. I didn’t have to prove to them that women can be architects. Lisl had already done that.”

The book, *Elizabeth Scheu Close: A Life in Modern Architecture* by Jane King Hession, will be published by University of Minnesota Press in Spring 2020.



## ELIZABETH SCHEU CLOSE A LIFE IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE



JANE KING HESSION  
FOREWORD BY JOAN SORANNO