

THE CHAMBERS

RESIDENCE

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The Chambers Residence

The Robson and Helen Chambers Residence is located at 695 South Warm Sands Drive in the Warm Sands Park tract. Completed in 1946 with additions by Chambers in 1950 and 1956, the home was built as the architect's own personal residence and would remain so throughout his rise to prominence as one of the desert's "Master" architects. In his design of the home, Chambers applied both the philosophy and aims of what was to become the Desert Modernist movement. The home's innovative design was recognized on both a regional and national scale and was published multiple times in newspapers and magazines as well as being chosen by Architectural Record to appear in its 1954 book, *A Treasury of Contemporary Houses*.

Architect Robson Chambers



In 2015, architectural historian and educator Robert Imber wrote an article on Robson Chambers for Palm Springs Life, which he entitled, "The Third Man." The title perfectly captured the position Chambers has held in relation to Albert Frey and John Porter Clark, his much better-known architectural collaborators. Although he worked alongside Frey (1946-1966) and Clark (1946-1956) for decades, helping to design some of Palm Springs' most iconic landmarks, Chambers' contributions often do not receive the same attention as his partners. Chambers, however, appears to have been happy being the "Third Man," content with the work itself and not showing much interest in self-promotion. And while Frey justifiably deserves the lion's share for the collective oeuvre of the trio with Clark a respectable second, Chambers too deserves to receive more attention and exploration of his contributions in a career that spanned four decades.

Chambers was born on March 4, 1919 in Los Angeles, California, however, he was to grow into adulthood in the community of Banning in Riverside County where his father ran the local pharmacy. Chambers was no stranger to Palm Springs, having ventured through the San Geronio Pass on numerous visits and was evidently intrigued by what he saw. Graduating from Banning High School in 1936, Chambers enrolled at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles (USC), where he planned to study architecture. Chambers was no stranger to the profession. His uncle Harold C. Chambers (1885-1971) was one of Southern California's most prominent architect/engineers as part of the venerable firm of Myron Hunt and H.C. Chambers.

The University of Southern California was known for its highly-regarded program in architecture and Chambers excelled at the curriculum, graduating with honors in 1941. As part of the ceremony, Chambers was singled out for an award by the American Institute of Architects for his scholarship. Upon graduation, Chambers was offered a position in his uncle's firm. While it is unknown what specific projects he may have been involved with in these first pre-war months of 1941, it appears he was already working on some of the firm's construction projects for the U.S. military, which only continued in greater intensity once war was declared in December. Between 1941-1942, Chambers served as an architect-planner on Army cantonments and hospitals in Medford, Oregon; Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii; Marysville, California; Fort Huachuca, Arizona; and at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California.

Architect Robson Chambers

By its very nature, military design and construction needed to be fast, efficient and produced using the simplest, cheapest materials available. This proved to be a great training ground for Chambers' later post-war work in designing cost-efficient housing in Palm Springs including that of his own home. In 1942, Chambers left the direct employ of Hunt and Chambers and joined the United States Marine Corps where he attained the rank of Technical Sergeant. The bulk of his time was spent heading a small architectural section at Camp Pendleton near Oceanside in San Diego County. It was during this time, Chambers met and fell in love with his future wife Helen Snow (1916-2004), a graduate of Wells College in New York, who was described in the Escondido Times-Advocate as coming from one of Vista's most prominent families. The pair were married on June 12, 1943. War's end brought a return to civilian projects, but it was soon clear that Chambers would need to make a change in firms as Myron Hunt, nearing 80 and in poor health, was heading to retirement. It was then that an opportunity rose in the form of Albert Frey who offered him a junior position at the Palm Springs firm of Clark & Frey. Chambers welcomed the chance to work with a fellow modernist and fulfill his long-held wish to design structures in a desert environment.

In 1946, the year he joined Clark & Frey and built his own desert home, Chambers was officially licensed as an architect (C-709) by the state of California. He began as an employee of the firm, but within a few years had distinguished himself to such a degree that in January 1948 he was elevated to full partnership under the newly-created firm of Clark, Frey & Chambers. This would last until Clark's departure at the end of 1956 when the firm would be renamed Frey and Chambers. This would mark a period of great creative output which would produce some of the firm's most important work. As Joseph Rosa wrote in his book on Frey, "During the partnership of Frey and Chambers, their larger buildings developed a greater fluidity, with each project expressive of its function."

Because of the collaborative nature of partnerships, it is not always easy to determine the degree of each contribution. However, in 1973, Chambers sketched out some of the major projects where he was a principal:

Schools in Palm Springs, Needles and Banning; three buildings for a new junior college in Palm Desert (College of the Desert); and Social Science and Humanities Building at UC Riverside. Palm Springs City Hall, Desert Hospital; Desert Museum; Palm Springs Aerial Tramway terminal buildings; fire stations, etc.

Architect Robson Chambers

He also listed unspecified "commercial buildings. Hotels, apartments, shopping centers, banks, restaurants," as well as the Red Cross building in Riverside, U.S. Post Office in Blythe, and the Banning Public Library. His accounting focused on commercial and civic projects and neglected to mention the firm's extensive residential commissions which included such important designs as the Cree House II (1955-1956), the Carey Residence (1956); and Frey's own Frey House II (1964), among others. While he did not list them, Chambers was also involved with a number of other important commissions with Frey including the North Shore Yacht Club (1958), St. Michael's-by-the-Sea Church in Carlsbad (1959), the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station (1963), and the Tramway Gas Station (1965).

In 1966, Frey and Chambers amicably dissolved their 20-year partnership, a remarkable association that gave Palm Springs some of its most notable Mid-century landmarks. For Chambers, it meant opening a new chapter, leaving his beloved Palm Springs and starting a new phase of his career as a campus architect for the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was an exciting period for the development and expansion of the campus in which Chambers played a major role. From 1966-1973, he served as Assistant Campus Architect, however, over this time, his responsibilities continued to expand until he became Acting Campus Architect. In 1973, he was officially named to the post and would serve with distinction for the next decade. While the position of Campus Architect was managerial in scope, Chambers was nonetheless actively involved in the design process of a number of new structures built during the school's late 1960s-1970s construction "boom." He also served as project architect, along with Jay Anderson, on several campus projects including Kerr Hall (Marquis & Stoller, executive architects. 1975) and the Santa Ynez Apartments (A. Quincy Jones & Associates, executive architects. 1981)

In 1982, Chambers began another phase of his long and varied career. Desiring to return to active practice, he and Helen moved to the desert community of Borrego Springs. Between 1982 and 1995, Chambers found ready work in the burgeoning community with a steady flow of commissions that ranged from residences to commercial projects. His most notable later work was the St. Barnabas Episcopal Church (1986). Chambers returned to Santa Barbara in 1998 and it was there he passed away at the age of 80 on June 18, 1999. His obituary in the Desert Sun read in part, "The homes (Chambers) designed, unique and timeless, are a testimony to his love of the desert environment and his grace and vision as an architect."

Photos Circa 1946-1954 by Julius Shulman



Exterior circa 1947 facing Warm Sands Drive



Exterior circa 1947 facing Sunny Dunes Drive

Photos Circa 1946-1954 by Julius Shulman



Interior view from "den"



Robson and Helen Chambers

Photos Circa 1946-1954 by Julius Shulman



Exterior backyard facing east



Interior living room

Photos Circa 1946-1954 by Julius Shulman



Exterior enclosed patio area circa 1954



Interior of the then newly enclosed patio circa 1954

Restoration 2018-2022



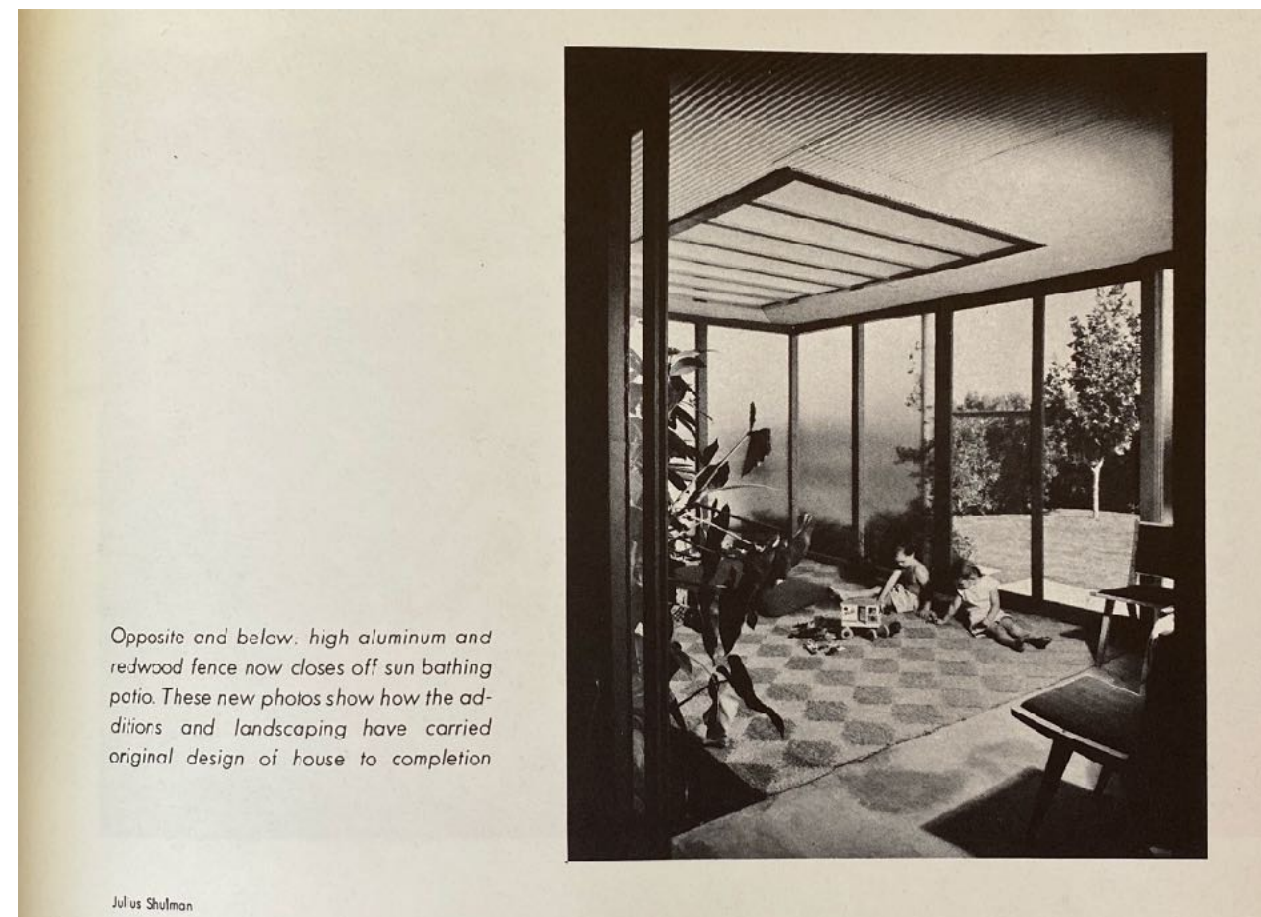
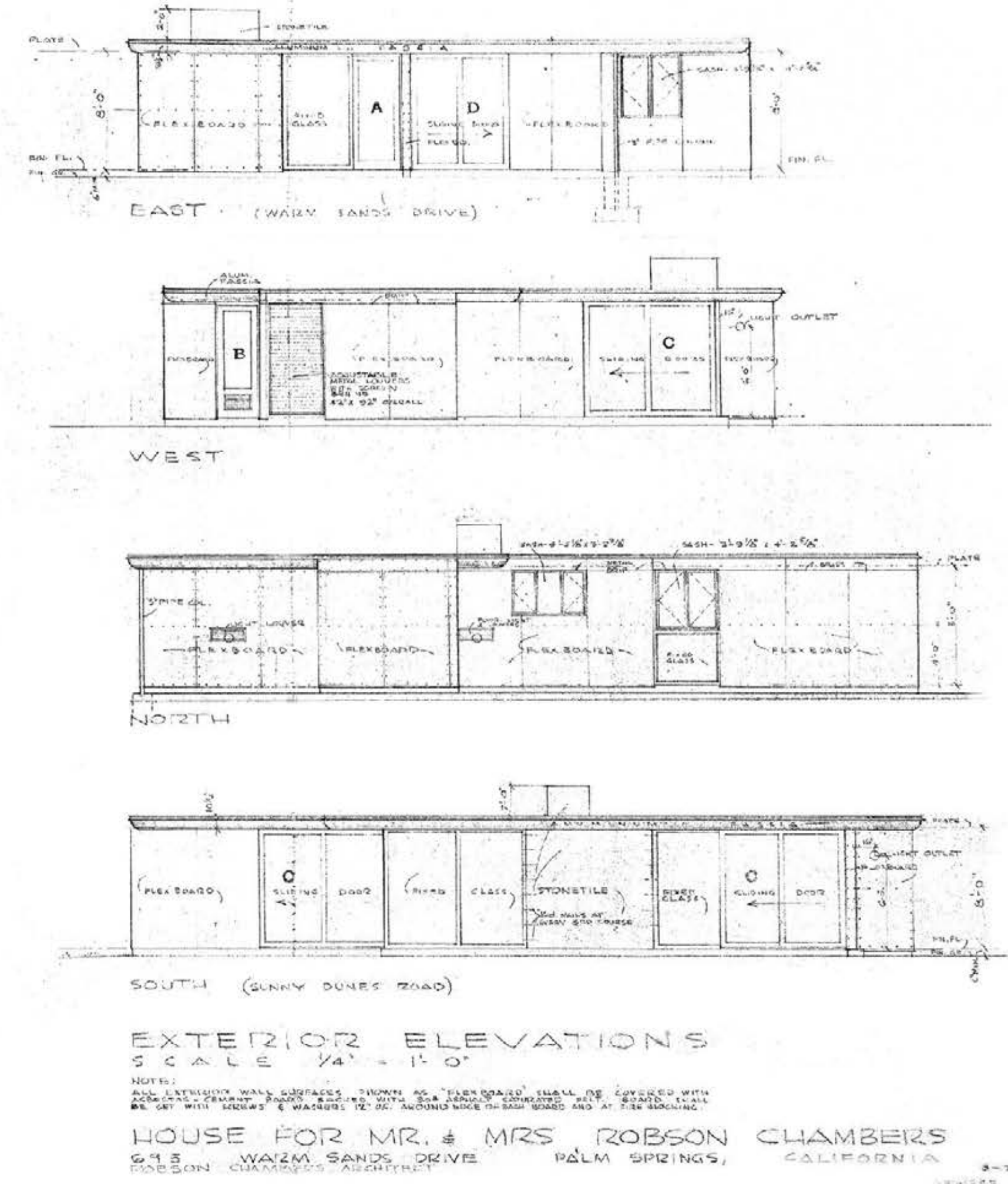
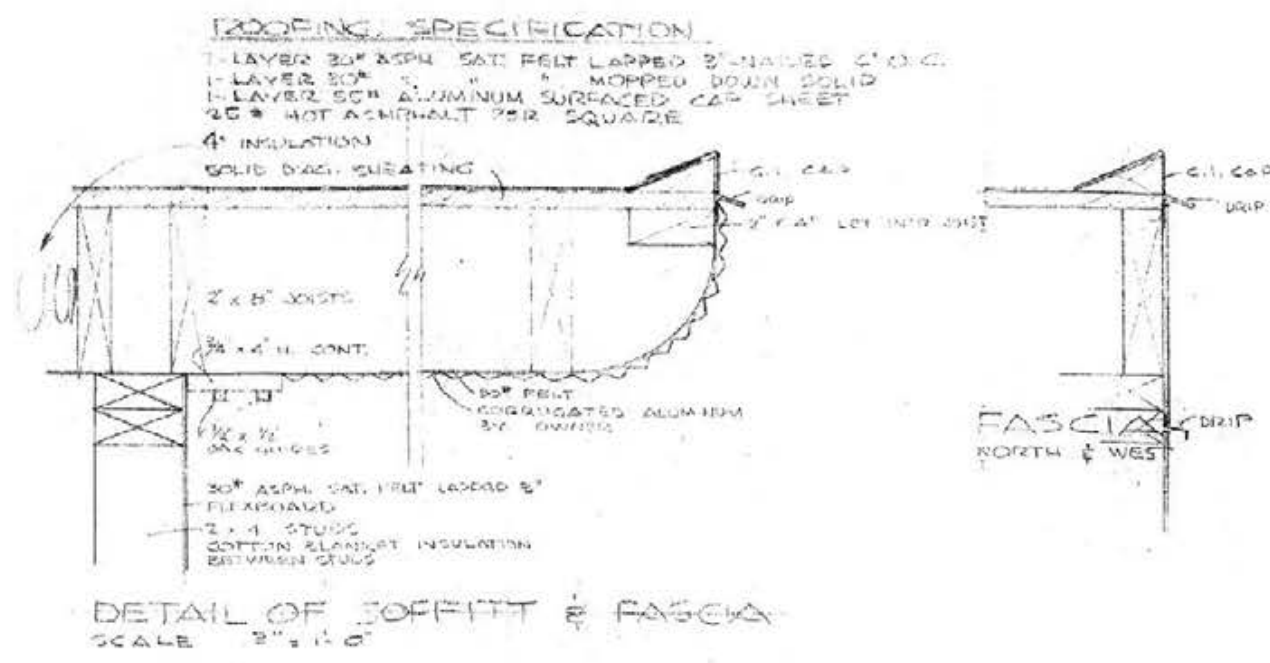
Exterior 2018 facing Warm Sands Drive



Interior living room area 2018

We purchased the house in the summer of 2018. At the time, the house had some aesthetic changes not in line with the original design, as well as had fallen into some neglect.

Restoration 2018-2022

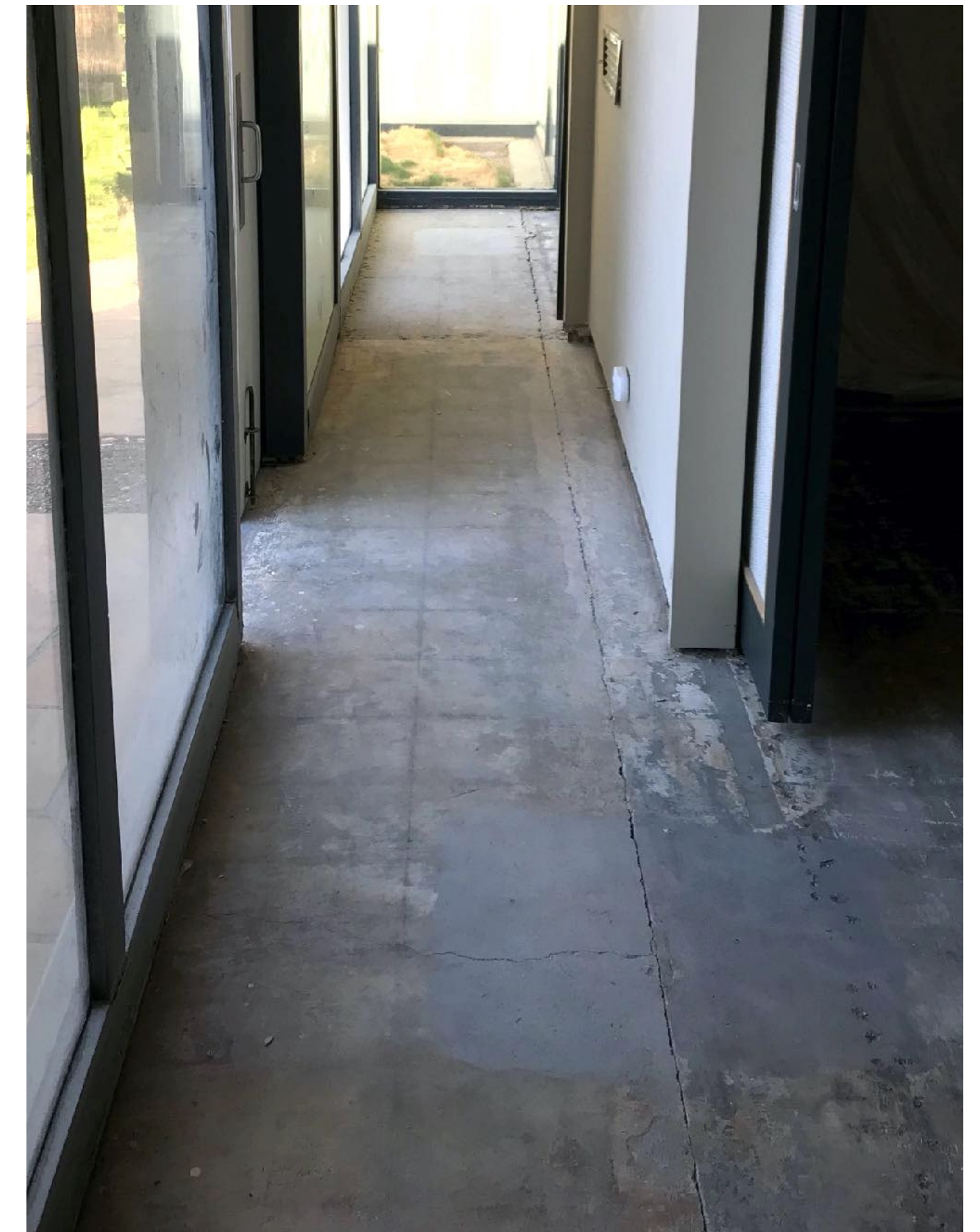


Opposite and below, high aluminum and redwood fence now closes off sun bathing patio. These new photos show how the additions and landscaping have carried original design of house to completion

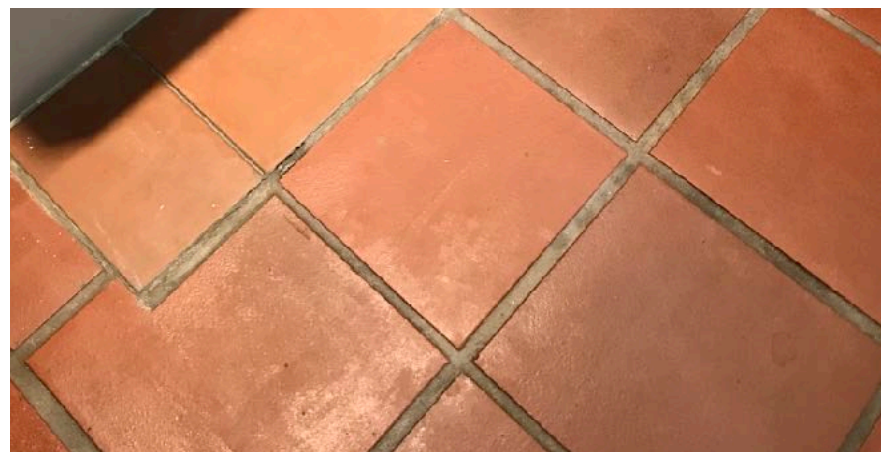
Julius Shulman

We started our restoration process by visiting U.C. Santa Barbara campus to view Robson Chambers' personal archives, which contained Chambers original architectural plans, articles about the property from various books and magazines, correspondence with partners, and original Julius Shulman photos.

Restoration 2018-2022



Top and below: worn saltillo tile 2018



Right: tile removed and prepped
For resurfacing



Our first restoration step was to remove all of the worn saltillo tiles and various carpets installed at some point circa the 1970's. We wanted to get back to the original concrete slab as the Chambers had, however, there was significant tile ghosting, as well as exposed cold joints that would remain no matter how much we polished it down. With the original slab no longer in good aesthetic condition, we began to research various applications such as "scenic epoxy" and other concrete substitutes. We found that none suitable, until coming across a newly released concrete leveler containing aggregate. We found a concrete installer that had worked with similar products from the manufacturer, however, had yet to work with this new product. We conducted various tests, and found it ideal for the surface.

Restoration 2018-2022



New concrete floor 2021 photo



Restoration 2018-2022



Exterior fin wall off primary bedroom removal and replacement of rotted T&G



Rebuilding of structurally compromised interior fin wall

The original "fin" walls, clad in tongue and groove planks, were in disrepair. At some point, a previous owner had cut an interior window, disregarding its structural needs. We had to replace that wall. The exterior of the fin walls T&G planks were rotten, so we removed them and restored with new T&G.

Restoration 2018-2022



Rebuilding of structurally compromised interior fin wall



2022 restored front fin wall

Restoration 2018-2022



Listing photos from 2018 showing primary bedroom with mirrored wall



Removal of mirrored wall exposing original tongue and groove planks

The T&G planks carry over into the primary bedroom from the outside wall. We removed a mirrored wall installed sometime circa 1970's, exposing the original and viable T&G. This was sanded and restored to the original intent.

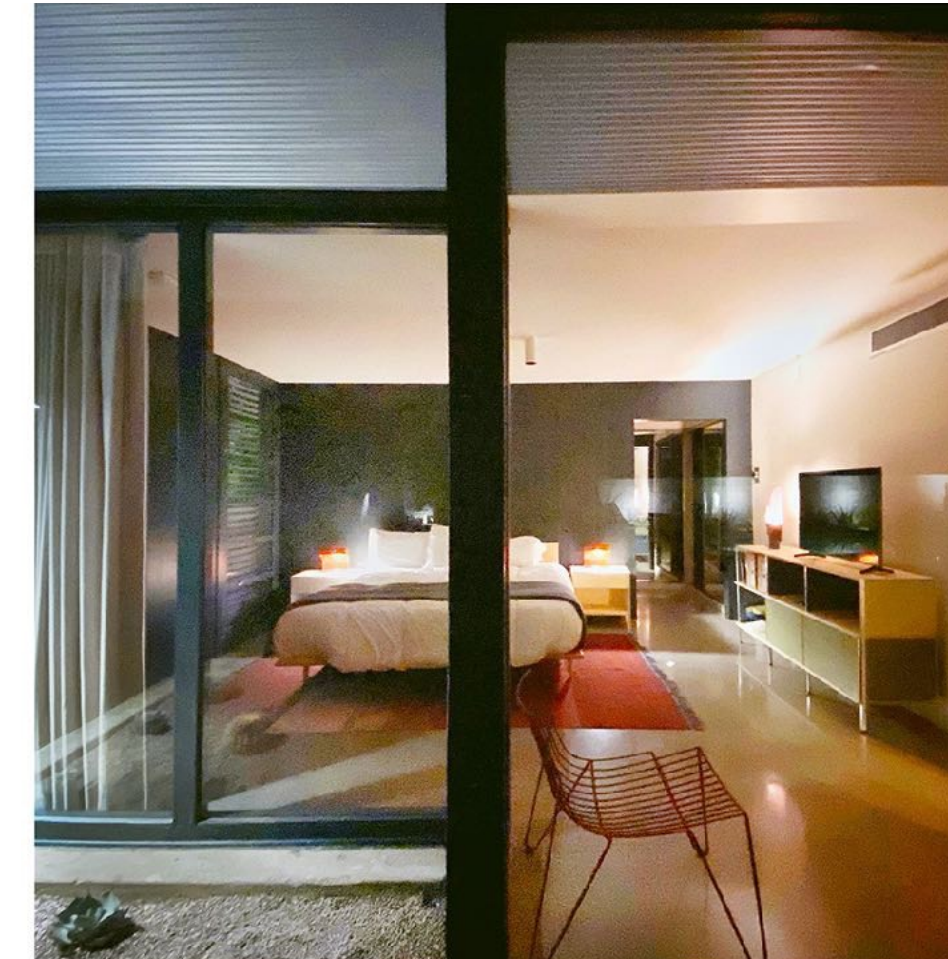
Restoration 2018-2022



Before and during restoration 2018



2022 final back fin and primary room T&G restored



Restoration 2018-2022



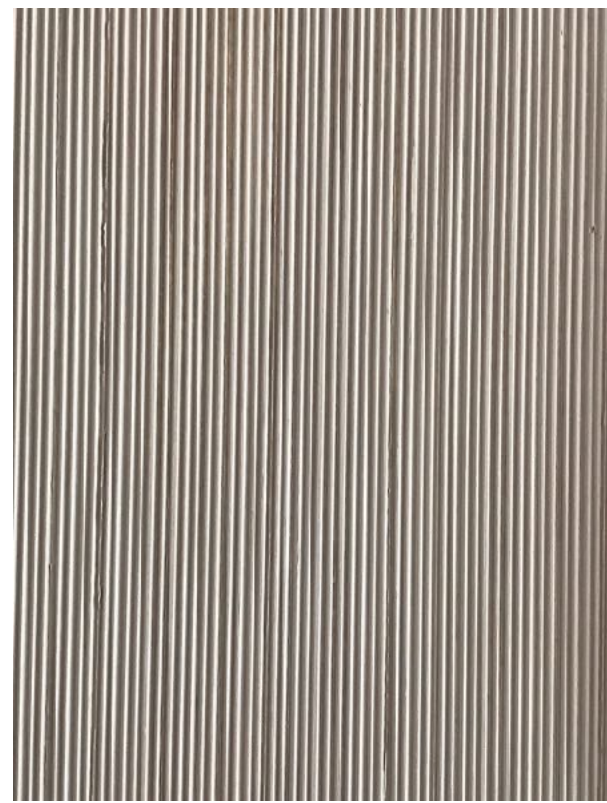
Kitchen 2018 from listing photo



Renovated kitchen 2022

We replaced the worn formica and chipboard kitchen cabinets with maple plywood cabinets, simple notches instead of pulls, and stainless steel countertops. The kitchen had been renovated a few times over the years, and we could not find any photographs of the original. We kept the original footprint of the kitchen so as to retain the original interior vent lights that are unique to the home (see page 22). We felt this update is a suitable homage to Chambers and his contemporaries, Albert Frey and Richard Neutra.

Restoration 2018-2022



Detail of striated AKA combed plywood



2022 Final living room section with combed plywood clad walls. The walls were painted an approximation to the original LA times article's description of a "chocolate, rose colored hue"

Originally, the main living areas of the house's walls were clad with striated, or combed plywood. Over time, these were removed, or covered up with drywall and maple plywood sheets in an attempt to give it a "Frey II" house style. We were able to source from one of the only two manufacturers of combed plywood, and restored it throughout the original placements of the home.

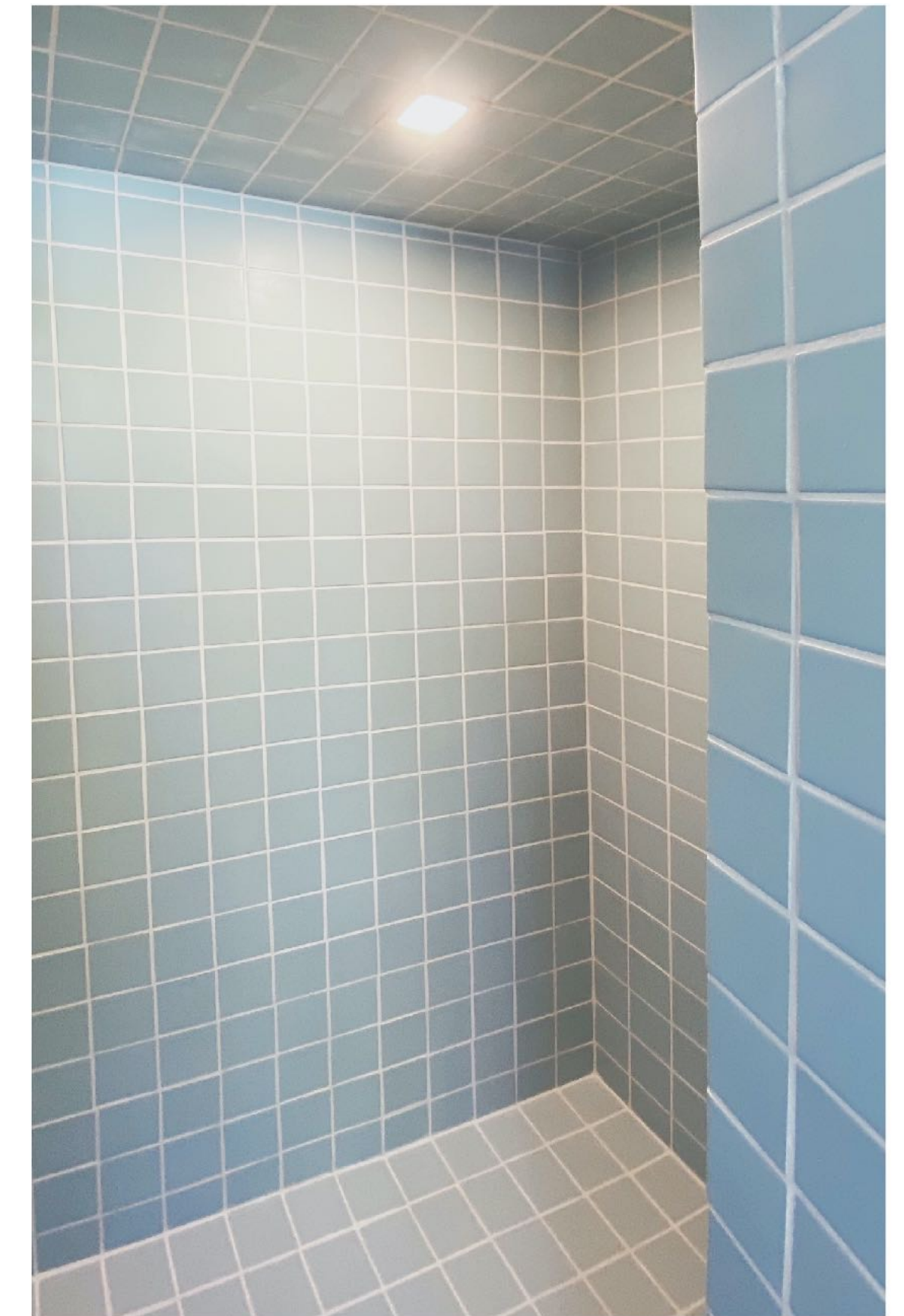
Restoration 2018-2022



Primary bathroom from 2018 listing photo.



2022 final primary bathroom detail



2022 Interior of shower primary bathroom

We restored both the primary bathroom and the guest bathroom with era appropriate tiling and color. The primary bathroom had its original Crane sink, however, we replaced the Ikea faucet with a vintage Crane one sourced from eBay. We kept the original cabinets in the primary bathroom, and just refitted and repainted them. Metal framed glass shower door was restored with reeded glass in a nod to the reeded glass used in the dining room. The shower knobs were replaced with original Crane Drexel style ones.

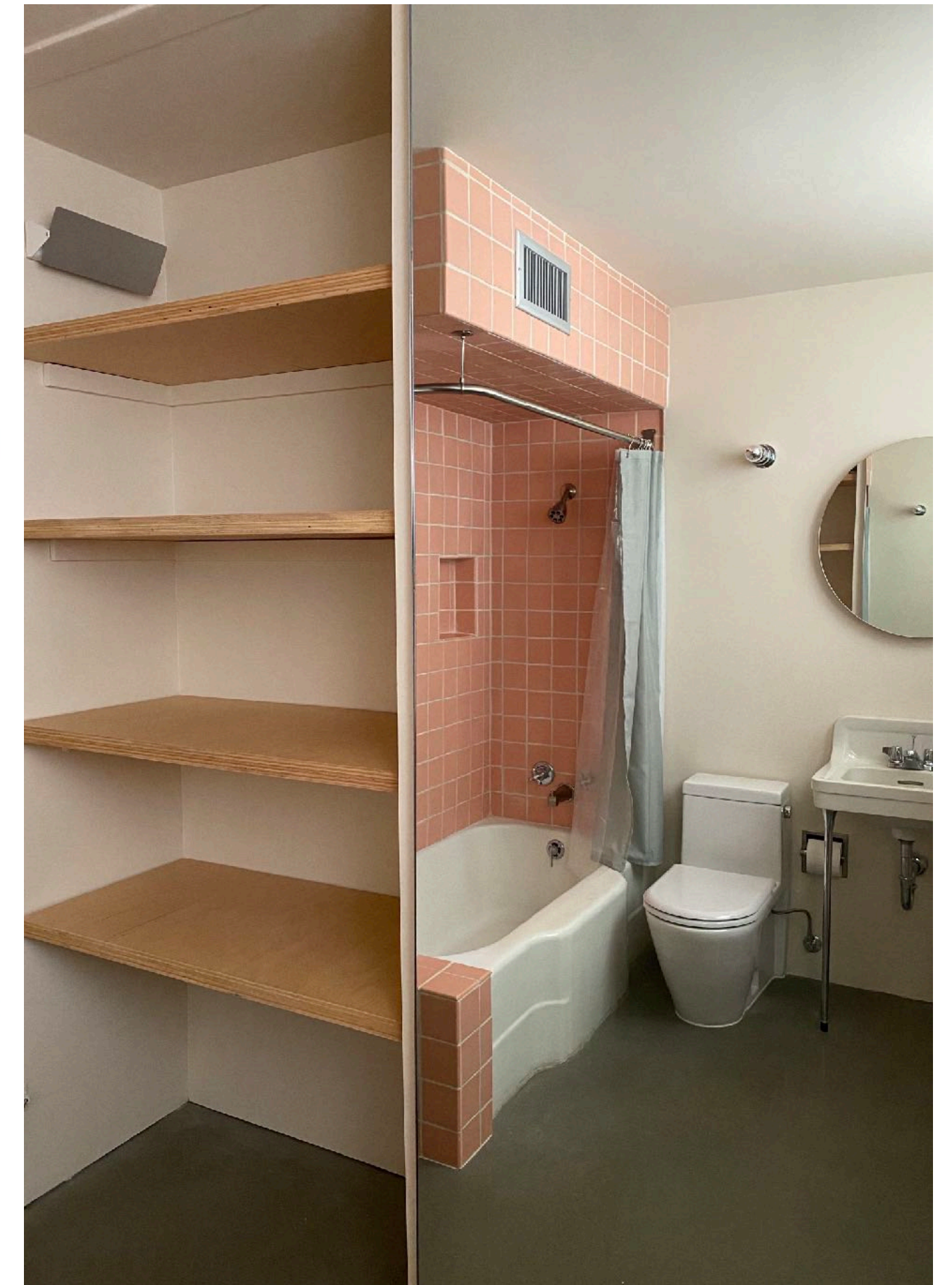
Restoration 2018-2022



Guest bathroom from 2018 listing photo.



Details of final guest bathroom 2022



We restored both the primary bathroom and the guest bathroom with era appropriate tiling and color. The guest bathroom's Ikea sink was replaced with per the original architectural plan's Crane sink, which we sourced from a architectural salvage shop. We kept the original bathtub, but removed damaged glass enclosure that had been installed sometime in the 1970's.

Restoration 2018-2022



Top and center, Chambers residence original louver dimmers 2021



Louver light fixture exposed with installation of combed ply



Hallway louver light



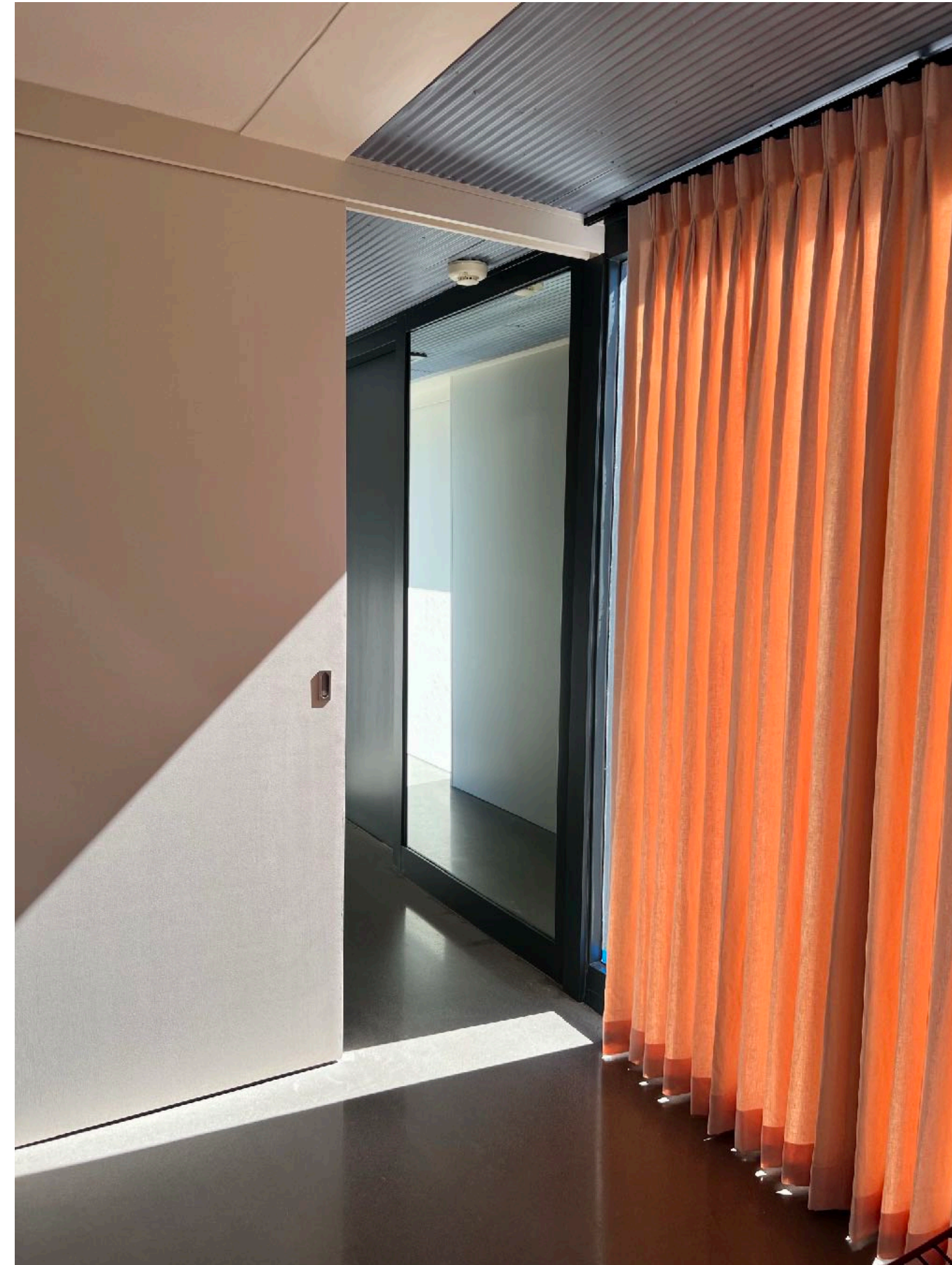
Frey House I circa 1950's ...louver lighting shown. Ph: J. Shulman

The house was built before home dimmer switches were available. Chambers installed custom interior louver lighting in various parts of the house, allowing dimmable mood lighting throughout. Working closely with Albert Frey, it's likely that the idea of the louver was inspired by the lost Frey House I, as well as the lost Hatton House. Care was taken to maintain these original pieces, as to our knowledge, this house is the last example of this manual louver.

Restoration 2018-2022



2019 guest bedroom



2022 Primary bedroom detail of pocket door



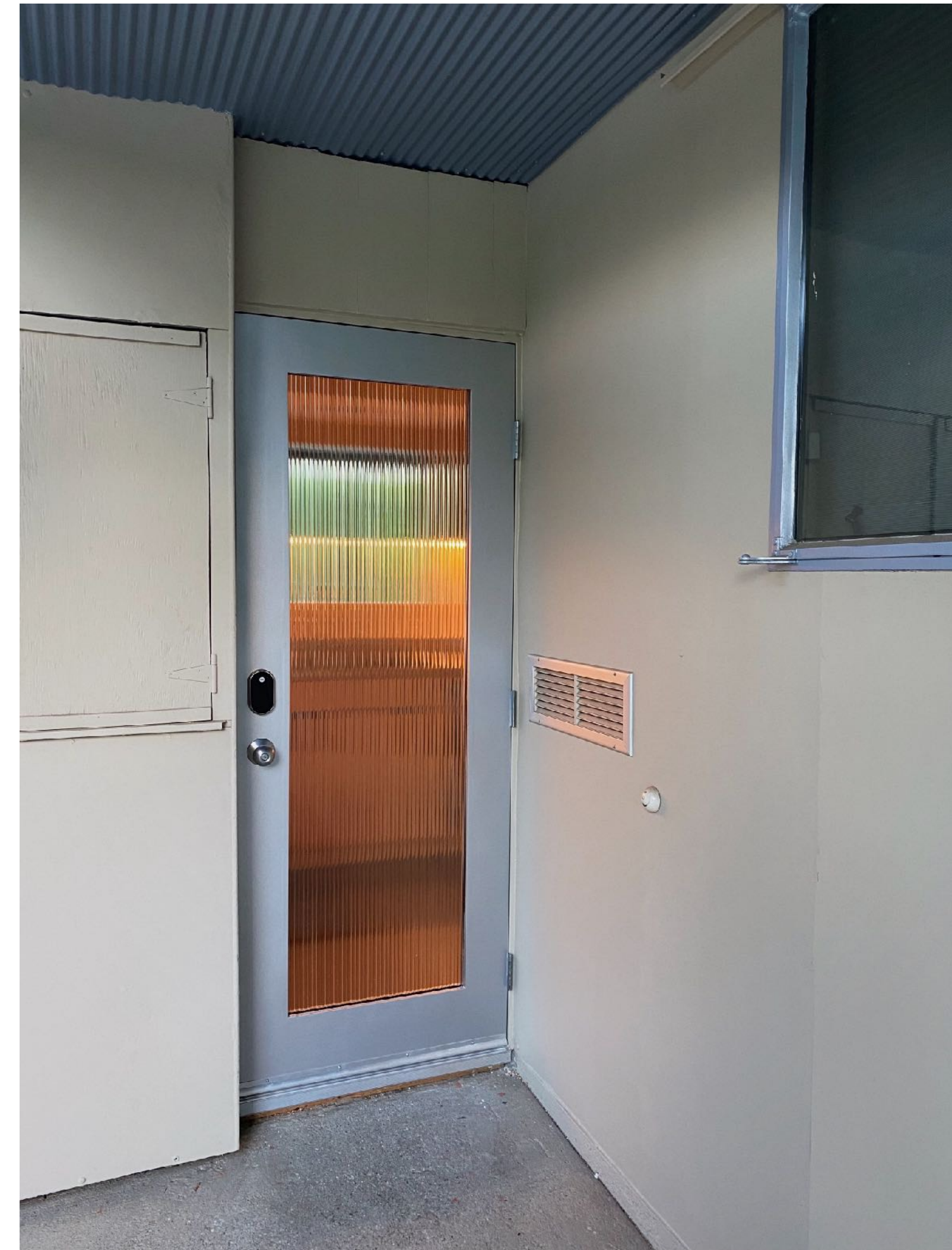
2022 Guest bedroom detail of pocket door and hallway at night

New pocket and sliding walls were restored in the primary bedroom, den, and guest bedroom (shown above). We kept the original ceiling battens in the guest bedroom that used to be throughout the house.

Restoration 2018-2022



2022 glass front door



2022 reeded glass kitchen door

We replaced the solid front and kitchen doors with the original intended glass doors.

Restoration 2018-2022



2018 hardscape front of house



2020 restoration work in progress

We removed the worn, cracked and stained concrete from the front yard and poured new concrete hardscape to be more harmonious with the linear style of the home.

Restoration 2018-2022



2018 hardscape front of house



2020 view of front yard new hardscape facing south

Restoration 2018-2022



2018 hardscape back of the house



2021 hardscape back of the house

We removed the old flagstone hardscape from the backyard, and poured new concrete hardscape more harmonious with the linear style of the home.

Restoration 2018-2022



2018 hardscape back of the house



2021 hardscape back of the house

Restoration 2018-2022



2018 damaged corrugated eaves

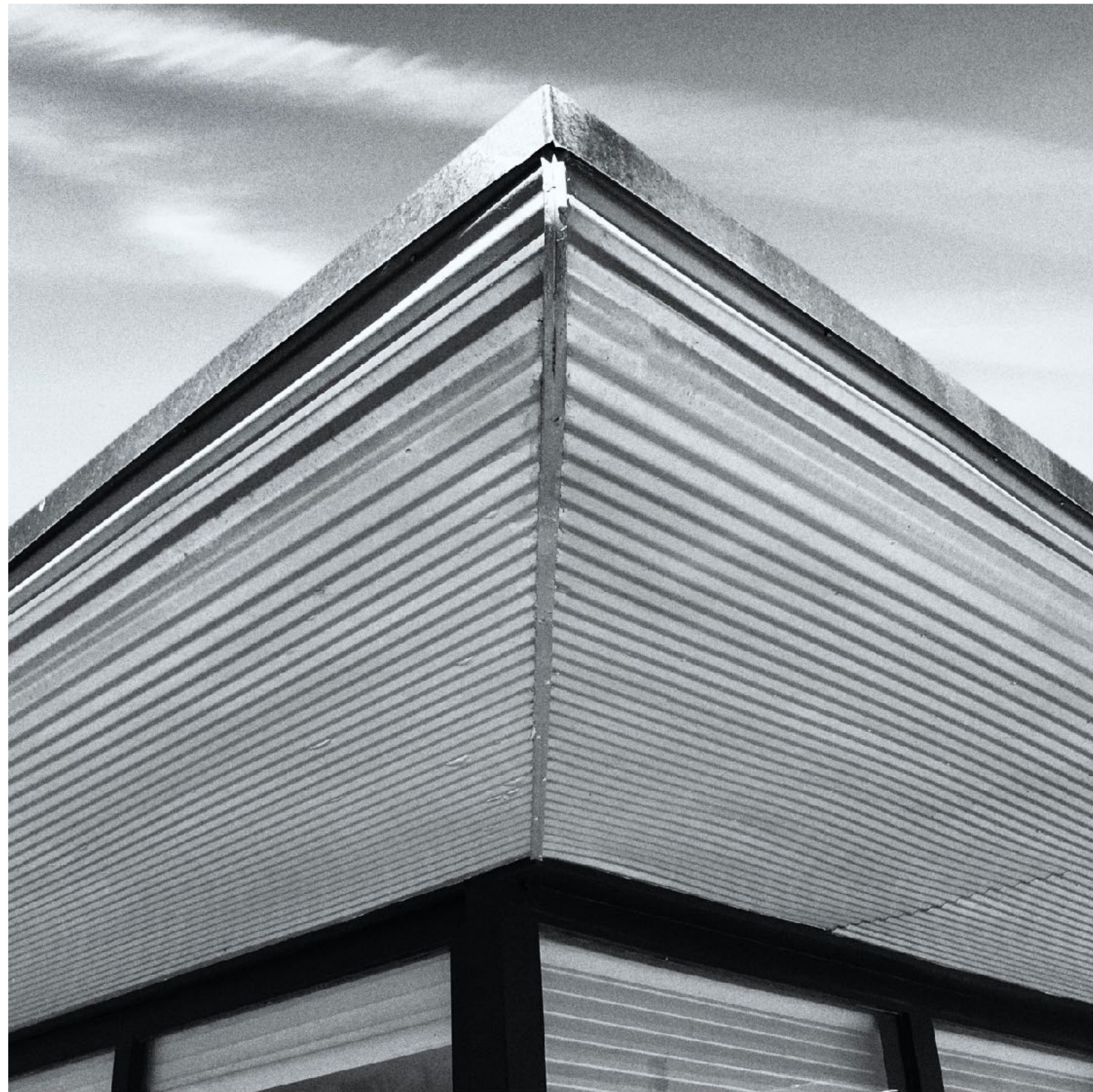


2019 replacement of sections of eaves



One of the most distinct features of the house are the curved corrugated metal eaves. We sourced the correct gauge and ridge size to replace damaged areas, as well as areas where previous repairs were done using the incorrect corrugated gauge spacing.

Restoration 2018-2022

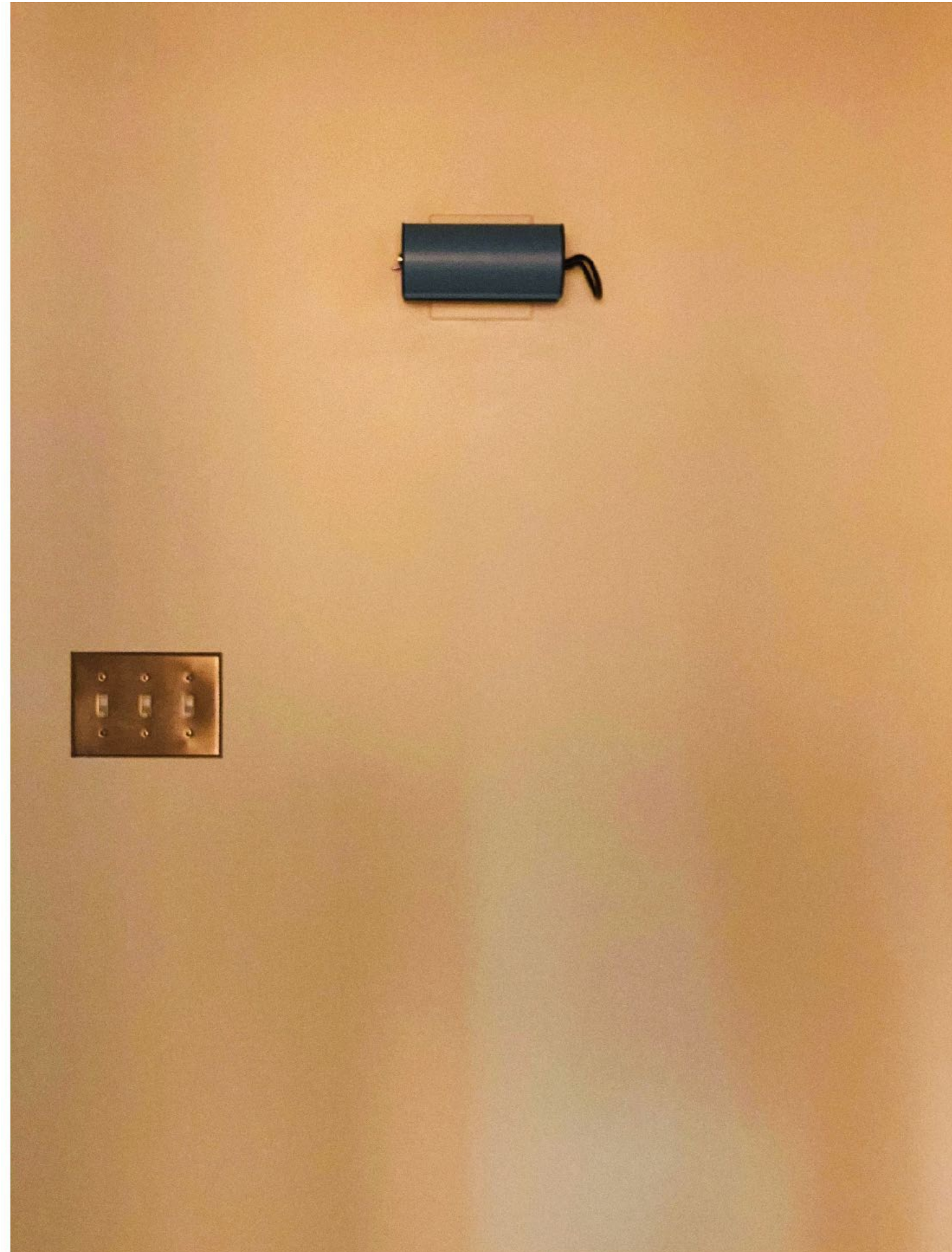


2019 repaired

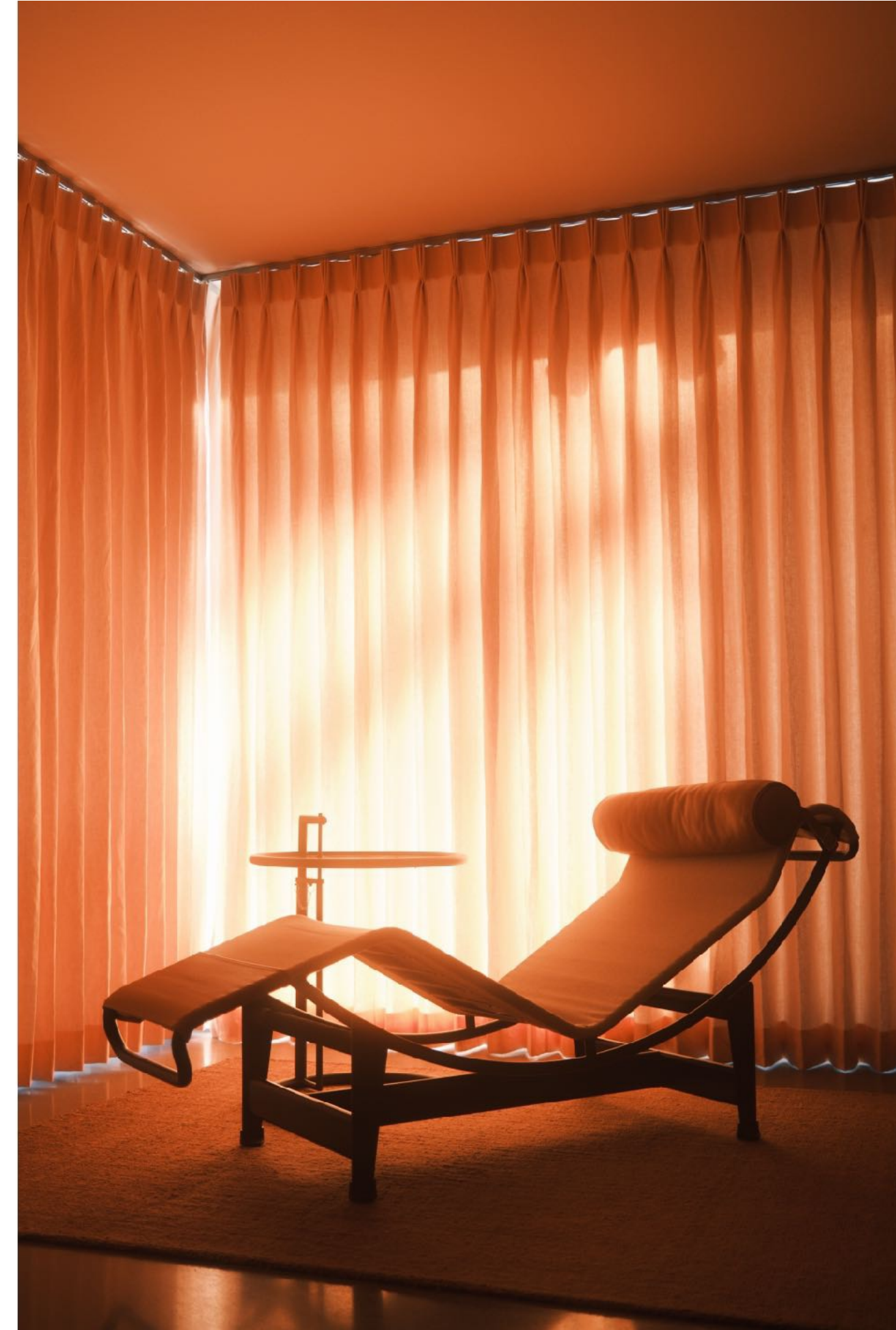


2021 view of backyard eaves at night

Restoration 2018-2022



2021 group of three single pull light switches, with C. Perriand light fixture



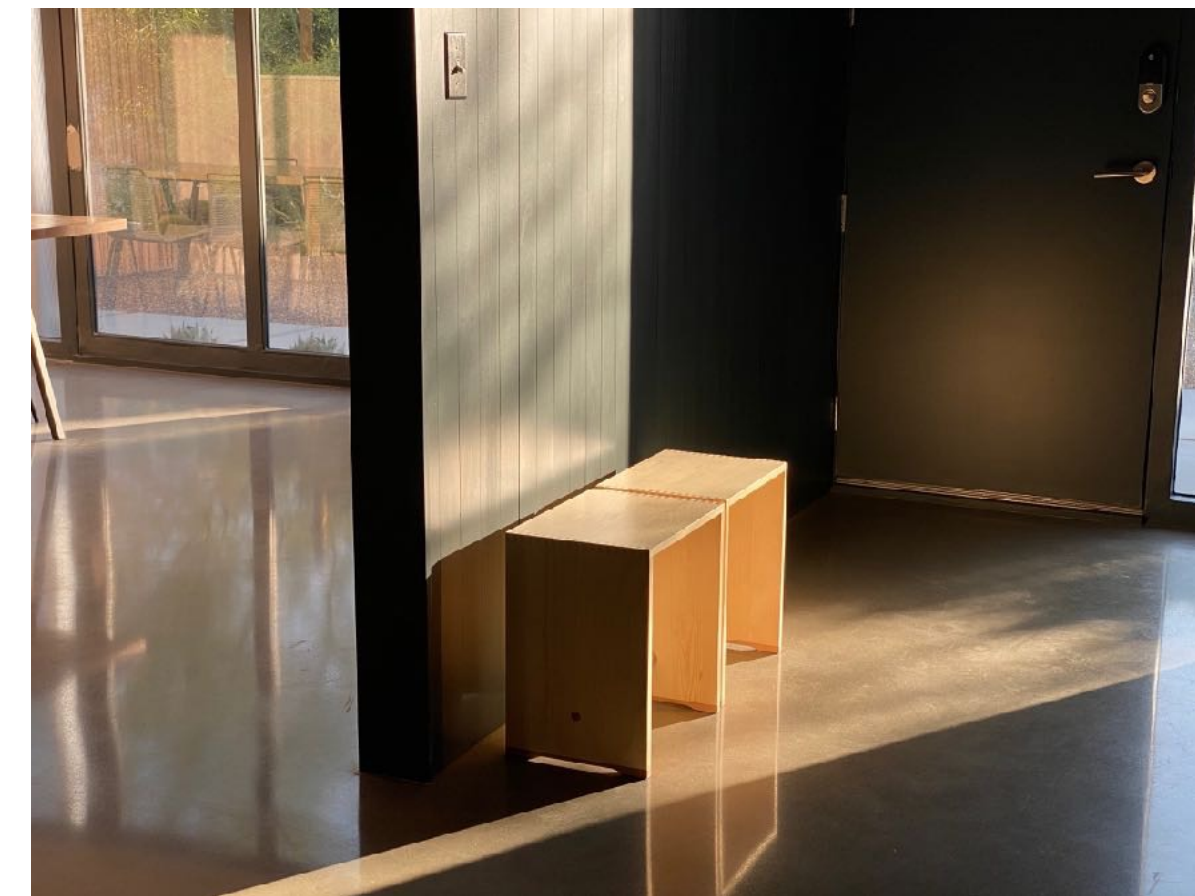
2022 detail of pleated curtains in den

Replaced decades of mismatched light switches of various technologies to simple, era appropriate, single pull switches.
Replaced the contemporary style, worn widow shades with era appropriate pleated curtains, as the home originally had throughout.

Additional Photographs



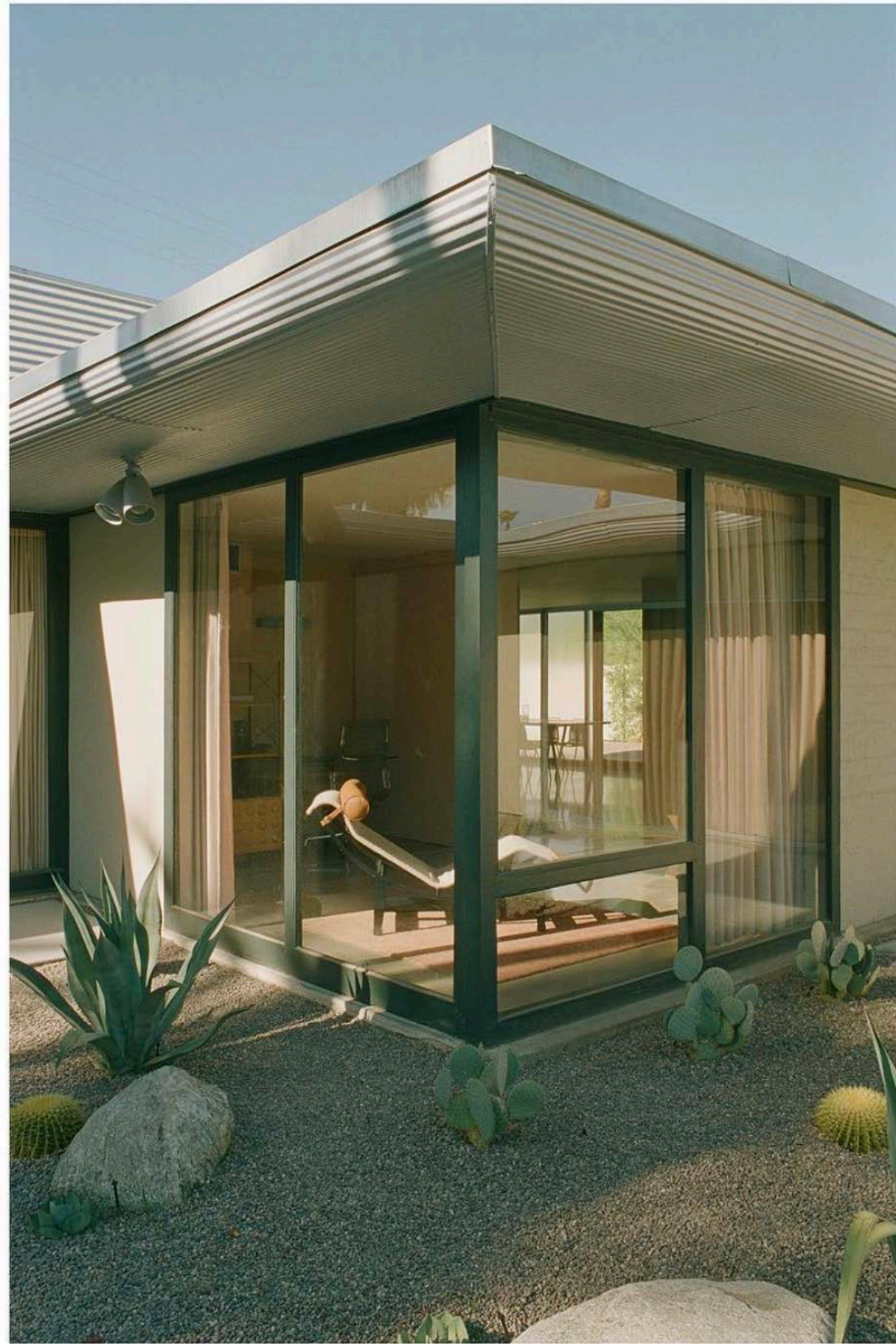
Additional Photographs



Additional Photographs



Additional Photographs



Additional Photographs



Additional Photographs



Comparison Side by Side 1946, 1954 and 2022



1954 © Julius Shulman

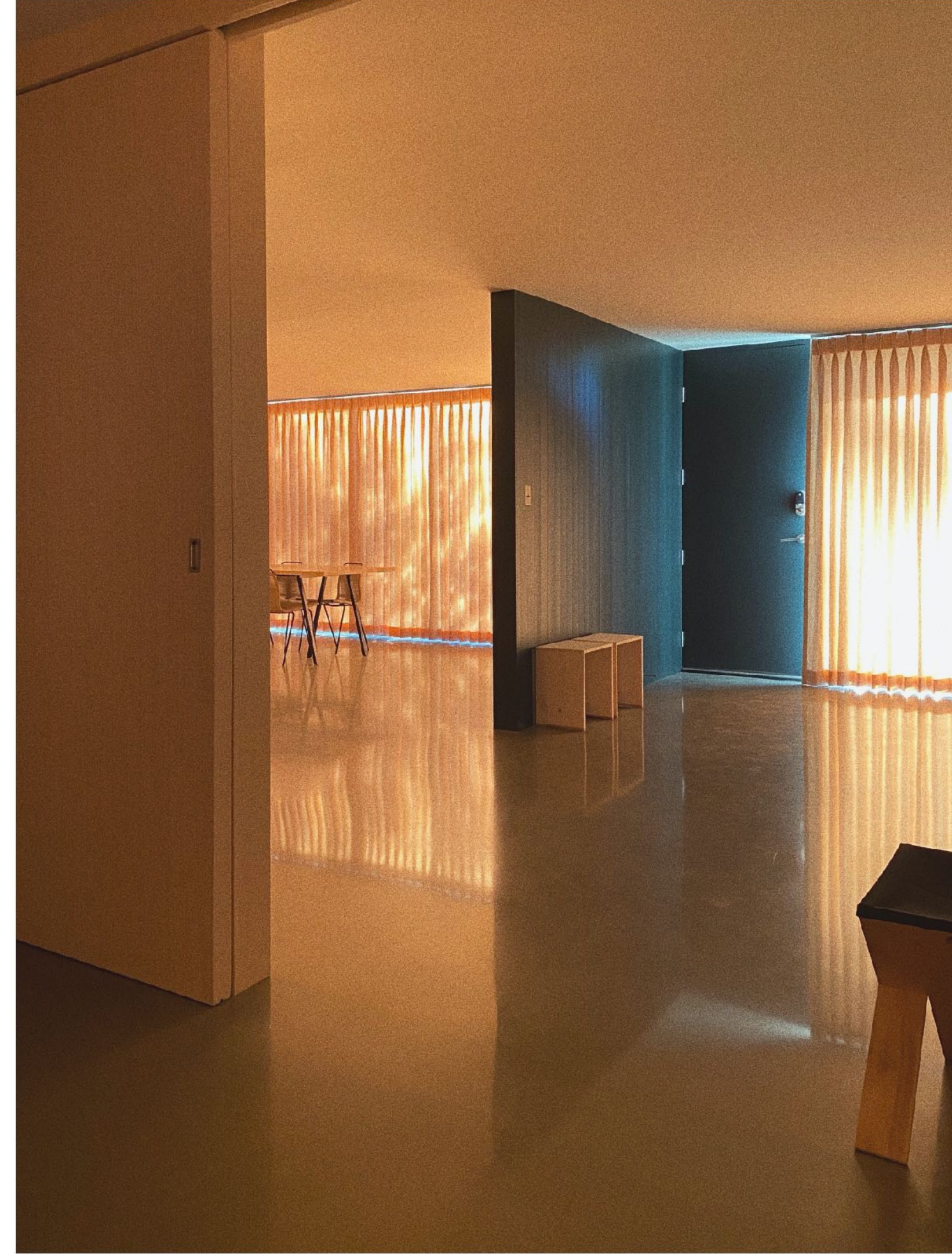


2021 © Carlos Serrao + Monica May

Comparison Side by Side 1946, 1954 and 2022



1954 © Julius Shulman



2021 © Carlos Serrao + Monica May

Notes for PSMODCOM

This restoration was a passion project we embarked on ourselves. We researched and oversaw all the work. However, a few individuals and companies played a part:

Yolac & Lloyd landscaping and hardscaping

DBGC

Oliver Parker

Chuck Rienhart tile

DVS Plumbing

For any engraving :

Carlos Serrao and Monica May

THANK YOU