THE DONALD AND HELEN OLSEN HOUSE
771 San Diego Road, Berkeley, California

APPLICATION FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION
FEBRUARY, 2009

ITEM 4.C
ATTACHMENT 1
# THE DONALD AND HELEN OLSEN HOUSE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cover</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application Form</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exterior Photographs</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application Narrative</td>
<td>5-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor Plans</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1: Antecedents</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2: Early Modernist Houses</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3: Mid-Century Houses</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4: Site Plan, Original Photograph, Section</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5: Construction Photograph &amp; Details</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6: Connection Photographs</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7: Interior Photographs</td>
<td>17-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8: Other Houses by Donald Olsen</td>
<td>19-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9: Railing Details</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Information by ARG</td>
<td>23-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LANDMARK PRESERVATION COMMISSION

**Landmark, Structure of Merit or Historic District Designation Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Street Address: 771 SAN DIEGO RD</th>
<th>ZIP: 94707</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Original owner's or business's name: DONALD &amp; HELEN OLSEN</td>
<td>Present common name: DONALD &amp; HELEN OLSEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original owner: DONALD &amp; HELEN OLSEN</td>
<td>Present owner's name &amp; address: DONALD &amp; HELEN OLSEN 771 SAN DIEGO RD, BERKELEY CA, 94707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original use: HOUSE</td>
<td>Present use: HOUSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Is property on any survey?  
  - National Register ☐  
  - California Register ☐  
  - State Historic Resources Inventory ☐  

- Neighborhood:  
  - Urban Conservation Survey Plan ☐  
  - BAHA Tours, Neighborhood or Area Plan ☐

**Application for landmark includes:**  
- Building(s) ☐  
- Garden(s) ☐  
- Historic Site ☐  
- District ☐  
- Parcel ☐  
- Landscape or Open Space ☐  

- Other:  

- Is the property endangered?  
  - Yes ☐  
  - No ☐

**If yes, please explain:**

- Date of construction: 1954  
  - Factual ☐  
  - Approximate ☐  
  - Source of information: OWNER BUILT HOUSE

- Architect: DONALD E. OLSEN, FAIA  
  - Style: MODERNIST

- Historic Value:  
  - National ☐  
  - State ☐  
  - County ☐  
  - City ☐  
  - Neighborhood ☐

- Architectural Value:  
  - National ☐  
  - State ☐  
  - County ☐  
  - City ☐  
  - Neighborhood ☐

**Present Condition of Property:**  
- Exterior: Excellent ☐  
- Good ☐  
- Fair ☐  
- Poor ☐

- Interior: Excellent ☐  
- Good ☐  
- Fair ☐  
- Poor ☐

- Grounds: Excellent ☐  
- Good ☐  
- Fair ☐  
- Poor ☐

**Survey prepared by:** JAMES H. SAMUELS, ARCHITECT  
**Signature:** Jim Samuels  
**Date:** 12/2008

**Address:** 1135 WALNUT ST, BERKELEY, CA  
**Phone:** (510) 524-9440  
**E-mail:** JimSamuels@mindspring.com

---

For Staff Use Only

- **Date:** 1/1  
- **LPC Application #:**  
- **Intake Planner:**  
- **Receipt #:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landmarks Preservation Commission Fees - Required for all Designation Proposals:</th>
<th>Fee Amount</th>
<th>Amount Due:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landmark or Structure of Merit Initiation:</td>
<td>$83.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic District</td>
<td>$133.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total fees:**

---

If you have any questions, please contact the Land Use Planning Division at:
2120 Milvia Street, Berkeley CA 94704  
(510) 981-7440, Fax (510) 981-7420  
e-mail: tiague@ci.berkeley.ca.us

Land Use Planning 2120 Milvia Street, Berkeley, CA 94704  
Tel: 510.981.7440 TDD: 510.981.7474 Fax: 510.981.7420 Email: Planning@ci.berkeley.ca.us

2
THE DONALD AND HELEN OLSEN HOUSE: AN OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN ARCHITECTURE

The Olsen House is one of the best examples of modernist domestic architecture in the San Francisco Bay Area. The house is a striking work of art that exhibits many of the basic tenets of the modern movement in a pristine and unadulterated form. The modernist aspects of the house, each of which will be discussed in detail, are as follows:

1. The modernist spirit: the break with the past.
2. An aesthetic based on proportion and pure geometric forms. The elimination of ornament. The interplay of solids and voids.
3. Minimalism: Mies’s “less is more.” The universal space.
4. The illusion of weightlessness. Dematerialization.
5. A unique structural system: the moment resisting frame.
8. The place of the Olsen House in history.

The following is a discussion of the aesthetic and technical characteristics of the Olsen House, which taken together, forcefully justifies its designation as a Berkeley landmark. This is supplemented by a discussion prepared by Architectural Resources Group as part of a parallel submission for National landmark recognition.

1. **THE MODERNIST SPIRIT: THE BREAK WITH THE PAST**

Coming upon the Olsen House, one is immediately reminded of the revolution which occurred in all the arts at the beginning of the last century, no more forcefully than in architecture. The architectural revolutionaries that come to mind are Walter Gropius (the Shoë-Last Factory, Alfeld an der Leine, 1911 [Fig. 1] and Bauhaus School, Dessau, 1926), Pierre Jenneret [Le Corbusier] (radical domestic architecture in Paris of the 1920’s), and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (the Barcelona Pavillion, 1929 [Fig. 1]). What these architects had in common was their revolt against the previous century of eclectic design which often depended on the superficial application of the Greco-Roman orders, Gothic romanticism, Renaissance classicism, and vernacular domestic architecture. Their intention was to sweep the slate clean and virtually start all over again with a new spirit and new attitude which strove to reflect “modern” times and new technological possibilities. This certainly did not happen overnight, but the early efforts of these men opened the way for what we think of as modernism today, and pointedly, the Olsen House, which derives from these early efforts. Donald Olsen was part of the second generation of modern architects which included Alvar Aalto, Richard Neutra, Eero Saarinen, and Richard Meier who further developed and brought to fruition some of the early revolutionary experiments of the first masters during what some refer to as the “heroic period” of modern architecture.
2. AN AESTHETIC BASED ON PROPORTION AND PURE GEOMETRIC FORMS.
THE ELIMINATION OF ORNAMENT. THE INTERPLAY OF SOLIDS AND
VOIDS.

A tenet of the early modernist aesthetic was the focus on geometry; this had a “purist” aspect to it partly because geometric forms are among the simplest intellectual constructions possible, especially if one has dispensed with aesthetic arrangements based on organized systems of ornaments. Modernism was undoubtedly affected in this by, amongst many sources, the other arts such as Cubism, by the literature of the time (eg., Adolf Loos’s “Ornament and Crime,”), and by precursors such as Pierre-Nicholas Ledoux who envisioned fantastic geometric designs in a former era, [Fig. 1], etc. In fact, Le Corbusier once defined architecture as essentially “geometric forms in light.” The Olsen House participates in this aesthetic based on geometry, a pure rectangular shape, void of the ornament of previous eras, whose success is largely dependant on its carefully studied proportions and the modulations of its divisions into bays. Also central to the Olsen House design is how the geometry of the upper living area is articulated by juxtaposition with the negative space (void) of the parking area below.

3. MINIMALISM: MIES’S “LESS IS MORE.” THE UNIVERSAL SPACE

One of the goals Mies van der Rohe strove for from the very beginning of his career and through all his executed work was the reduction of the pallet of materials and number of elements he employed to an absolute minimum. His dictum “less is more” meant that the fewer elements and materials employed the clearer and simpler the design would be; his Barcelona Pavilion of 1929 [Fig. 1] well illustrates this intention: the space is organized and modulated by a small number of walls and columns, and the materials are limited to steel, glass, and marble. Similarly, the Olsen House has an extremely limited pallet of materials: steel columns, wooden beams, glass, and limited areas of cement plaster. This reductionist aspect of the Olsen House to a minimum number of elements and materials is squarely in the Miesian tradition of modernist design: “Less is more” has thus guided the Olsen House design. Of Mies, Peter Blake wrote in 1947, “Mies appeals to an almost rarified type of intellect...There is something quite terrifying in his work, a clarity and decisiveness of vision that brushes aside everything that is not brutally honest, and ends up with a monumental simplicity....” Mies was a proponent of the “universal space”, spaces that could be used in countless variations without the encumbrance of columns or walls. Gerrit Rietveld joined him in this concept in the Schroder House in Utrecht (1924) [Fig. 2] where the major area could be used as one uninterrupted space or subdivided into smaller ones by sliding partitions. This concept found its final fruition in Mies’s square National Gallery in Berlin (1968), an uninterrupted space made possible by 5 foot deep two way trusses spanning hundreds of feet and supported by 8 exterior columns. In the Olsen House, his own “universal space” was also achieved in the public areas by use of sliding partitions to close off the kitchen from the living, dining, and office areas. In 1975, twenty years after its construction, the sense of space in the house was considerably affected by the elimination of the continuous decks on the north and south side of the house [Fig. A & Fig. 4]; this completed the geometric volume on the exterior and added a new spaciousness to the interior as well as providing room for a harpsicord built by the Olsen’s son Alan. Alan also designed and built a splendid and elaborate headboard structure in one of the expanded bedrooms (see interior photo). Other changes occurred in 1994,
when one parking space was enclosed to form a studio for Helen Olsen, a painter, and a ground floor bathroom was also created at this time [Fig. A & exterior photo].

4. THE ILLUSION OF WEIGHTLESSNESS. DEMATERIALIZATION.

Part of the early revolution in architecture was a reaction to the severe heaviness of so many 19th century structures, especially those constructed of masonry. So lightness became a goal of many designs; this was especially the case with one of Le Corbusier’s most famous houses of the 1920's, the Villa Savoye at Poissy, just outside of Paris [Fig. 2]. Although constructed of concrete and masonry, the mass of the house seems to float in midair, appearing so light that it required only the slenderest of supports which Le Corbusier called “pilotis.” By employing these elements in this fashion, the illusion of weightlessness was achieved. This same aim and achievement occurs at the Olsen House. A significant mass is “floated” over very slender pipe columns giving the house an air of lightness that is basic to the whole parti. The clerestory windows bring lightness to the interior as well as providing ventilation. But what further the quality of lightness is the fact that the glass comes to the corners without being interrupted; from the interior, this reduces the demarcation of the volume, and because of reflections, etc., the transparency allows the space to appear limitless; the space just “keeps going” as if infinite. In the Olsen House, completed some twenty five years after the completion of the Villa Savoye [Fig. 2], the dematerialization of solid volumes has been taken a significant step further, and a new level of “lightness” has been achieved.

5. A UNIQUE STRUCTURAL SYSTEM: THE MOMENT RESISTING FRAME.

What made the Olsen design possible is a structural system not often employed in domestic architecture: the moment resistant frame. The system consists of a primary structure made up solely of columns and beams with extremely rigid connections between these elements. In the Olsen design, the columns are steel pipes, the beams (for economy) are pairs of wood members; the connections are large steel plates (placed between the paired beams) with two rows of bolts on either side of the columns [Fig.s 5 & 6]. The system is capable of resisting all imposed loads and, because this offers significant advantages, it is worth looking at more closely. First, there are vertical load imposed on a structure by the weight of the floor, upper walls, and roof. The Gothic builders discovered that the weight of heavy stone vaulting, when transmitted to individual piers instead of heavy exterior walls as was done in Romanesque times, allowed the possibility of unlimited stained glass windows between the piers as at St. Chapelle in Paris. Similarly, at the Olsen House, all vertical loads were focused on sixteen pipe columns thus allowing unlimited glass at the exterior of the structure. But it is when we consider lateral loads, that is, those generated by wind or especially earthquakes, that the full advantage of the moment resisting frame becomes clear. To absorb lateral loads, most structures require earthquake resisting elements most often in the form of shear walls that transfer the loads to the foundation below. With a moment resisting frame, these wall are not required – the loads are resisted by the rigid connections between beams and columns. So beyond the need for privacy, the Olsen House required no walls of any kind: the moment resisting frame in fact made the design of this house possible.
6. STRUCTURAL EXPRESSIONISM. THE MACHINE AESTHETIC. THE JOINING OF MATERIALS

A further note about structure is relevant to our discussion, one involving the desire of the early modernists to express or bring attention to structural elements. The idea that the structure of a building should be exposed and demonstrate how that part of the design functions had long fascinated the early moderns, especially van der Rohe; the most recent large scale example of this effort can be seen at the Pompidou Center in Paris where the entire structural system is exposed as well as the mechanical duct and electrical distribution systems. At the Olsen House, the primary structure of beams and columns and their connections are exposed on both the exterior and interior of the house throughout; to achieve this, the tops of walls in some cases were cut away to reveal the bolted connection between column and beams [Fig.s 5 & 6]; and on the exterior, it is possible to trace the structural columns continuously from the ground up to the roof. A further structural motif worthy of note is the cantilevered deck on the west side of the house; the load of this deck is partly supported by diagonal rods suspended from the tops of the columns -- an oft repeated motif in early modernist designs; this added an industrial or machine-like element to a design which had no other such reference; this particular device was often used in the early structures to support entry canopies such as the one on Le Corbusier’s Villa Stein in Garches (1927); in fact Le Corbusier referred to the house as “a machine to live in.” Another element of the Olsen House related to the machine aesthetic is the way industrial lamp holders are integrated into the entry stair railing [Fig. 9], lamp holders that would ordinarily be exposed in a factory setting. Related to this discussion of the details of construction is the modernist concern with how different materials fit together or are joined. Mies was known to spend countless hours focusing on how glass should be joined to structural elements. In the Olsen house, there is this same special focus and attention to how materials are joined together, eg., how very small steel channels hold very large panels of glass and attach them to the steel structure; this study of the juncture of materials was a primary focus of modernist architects from the very beginning of the movement in the early part of the last century.

7. A NEW RELATION TO NATURE

As with the best of modern architecture, in the Olsen House, the relation of interior space to the outside has been newly defined: the separation between the two has been all but eliminated. Situated on a majestic site overlooking John Hinkel Park to the south and Laurel Lane Creek to the north, the Olsen House, with its floor to ceiling glass, allows a direct connection to the outdoors; one literally sits in the midst of nature, the house acting as a framework for viewing and experiencing nature directly. The views from the house are in all directions – this was made possible partly because Olsen designed the houses on either side of his, although the one on the west was not carried through to fruition [Fig. 4]. As opposed to several glass houses designed by his contemporaries, Olsen did not have the luxury of several acres of land to separate his design from neighbors; he did however, have the benefit of many mature trees, a creek, and a large park across from the site on the south side that helped create the privacy he needed.
8. THE PLACE OF THE OLSEN HOUSE IN HISTORY

The discussion above commenced with the revolution in architecture that occurred in the early 1900’s. The early pioneers produced several landmark houses which were to have a significant influence on future architects. Among these were Rietveld’s Schoeder House in Utrecht (1924) [Fig. 2], Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in Poissy (1929) [Fig. 2], and Mies’s Tugendhat House in Brno, [then] Czechoslovakia (1929) [Fig. 2]. The next important junction in the development of the modernist movement occurred at mid-century. At that time, three important all glass houses were designed that brought together many of the modernist tendencies developed in the preceding quarter century: Mies’s Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois (1948) [Fig. 3], Philip Johnson’s own house in New Canaan, Connecticut (1949) [Fig. 3], and most relevant to our discussion, the Olsen House in Berkeley, California (1954). These houses took advantage of technologies not available in former times. But more importantly, they brought to a further level the aesthetic of extreme simplicity and pure geometric, transparent design that sought a new unity with the out-of doors. Mies and Johnson built their houses on flat sites on huge properties where there were no immediate neighbors; Olsen’s house was built on a steep hillside in a comparatively dense suburban location in north Berkeley. The Olsen House thus represents the local manifestation of a particular moment in the development of mid-century modernism in domestic architecture. Since its construction, the house has achieved international recognition — published abroad in Architectural publications such as the Swiss magazine Bauen + Wohnen and in the Japanese magazine A+U; it has been visited by people from all over the world and is still the subject of many house tours. Donald Olsen, a professor of Architecture at UC Berkeley for 36 years, was also invited to teach and lecture at various European Universities during his active career and affected several generations of young architects in the Bay Area and abroad. Donald Olsen was a student of Walter Gropius at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the 1940’s and worked early on in the office of Eero Saarinen and in SOM’s San Francisco Office. He was elected to be a Fellow in the American Institute of Architects and received a National AIA Honor Award for the Herman Ruth House in 1968 (Fig. 8). In 1954, he managed to create an uncompromised work of art and a true landmark of modern architecture with the design for his own house at 771 San Diego Road in Berkeley.
FIGURE NO. 1: ANTECEDENTS

CLAUDE-NICHOLAS LEDOUX: DESIGN FOR A HOUSE (ca. 1773)

WALTER GROPIUS: SHOE-LAST FACTORY, Alfeld-an-der-Leine, Germany (1911)

MIES VAN DER ROHE: BARCELONA PAVILLION (1929)
GERRIT RIETVELD: SCHOEDER HOUSE, Utrecht, The Netherlands (1924)

MIES VAN DER ROHE: TUGENDHAT HOUSE, Brno, Czechoslovakia (1929)

LE CORBUSIER: VILLA SAVOYE, Poissy-sur-Seine (1929)

FIGURE NO. 2: EARLY MODERNIST HOUSES
MIES VAN DER ROHE: FARNSWORTH HOUSE, Plano, Illinois (1949)

PHILLIP JOHNSON: JOHNSON HOUSE, New Canaan, Connecticut (1949)

FIGURE NO. 3: MID-CENTURY MODERNIST HOUSES
SITE PLAN

1954 PHOTO OF ORIGINAL HOUSE, SOUTH FACADE
Note continuous deck and railing

CROSS-SECTION

FIGURE NO. 4: SITE PLAN, EARLY PHOTO, SECTION
FIGURE NO. 5: CONSTRUCTION PHOTOS & DETAILS
DONALD OLSEN: RUTH HOUSE, Berkeley, California (1968)
Note: This house won a national AIA award

FIGURE NO. 8: OTHER HOUSES BY DONALD OLSEN
(3 pages)
DONALD OLSEN: SELZ HOUSE, Berkeley, California (1966)
DONALD OLSEN: CAVALIER HOUSE, Ross, California (1962)

DONALD OLSEN: TOOMER HOUSE, Berkeley, California (1974)
The following information was submitted to the California State Historic Preservation Office under a separate application for National Landmark Registry and is included for reference and supplemental information purposes. It was prepared by Bruce Judd of Architectural Resources Group and by three architectural students: Kate Lyndon, Jacyln Dab, and Tiffany Monk.
NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION SUMMARY

The Donald and Helen Olsen House is a single-story house built in the modernist style. Situated upon a hillside lot, bounded by a creek to the north and by the hillside to the east, the house once faced views of the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate Bridge; today the view is obscured by the now mature trees in the park across the street. The interior and exterior spaces of the house have been painted white and stand out against the hillside onto which it is perched. Three bedrooms utilize the hill for not only structural support, but privacy as well; the remainder of the house, office, living room, dining room, and kitchen, jut out of the hill and are supported by steel columns. At the time of its construction, modern structural framework of steel columns and wood beams allowed for an open plan of nine bays and glass walls around the perimeter. On the interior, the sparse use of permanent walls and implementation of moveable panels allow for flexibility of spatial orientation. This innovative approach speaks to the modern style as it allows for space to be easily adaptable to any particular use at any time. The house is sited on the wedge-shaped lot of 771 San Diego Road in Berkeley, California. The Donald and Helen Olsen House joins the vast array of architecturally significant houses in Berkeley through its elegant use of the modern ethos, a design factor that is still current today.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The Donald and Helen Olsen House is elegantly perched on a slope in the North Berkeley hills facing a winding street and the undeveloped upper reaches of John Hinkel Park. The white color of the house stands out against the surrounding trees and greenery. Privately nestled into a small, wedge-shaped lot with a creek running through the north, the house is accessed by a steep driveway. Park visitors and passersby often remark upon its glass box design, unusual for a single-family residence in the Berkeley.

The structural techniques employed by the architect are uncommon for houses. The sixteen steel columns that support the house organize the rectangular plan into nine bays. The walls are wood, painted white. The columns allow for unobstructed interior spaces that also afford views of the park-like surroundings. In addition, because the columns bear the load, the exterior walls can be glass. The street side of the house has three 8 feet by 12 feet glass panels. The northeast and southeast sides of the house have three 8 feet by 13 feet by 4 inch glass panels. The glass is held in place by channels in the steel columns and stone. The rear wall has four feet tall cabinets with four feet tall glass panels above. The architect used materials in standard sizes because it was more cost efficient. Also, the glass panels are made of recycled glass. The entrance to the house is on the lower level, at the center bay, at the top of the driveway. On either side of the entrance are carports, protected from the weather by the second story which projects over the slope. Immediately inside, a staircase ascends to the living quarters. The staircase is such that it has one switchback with a mid-point landing. A two-story mural, oil on canvas, that was painted for the space by Claire Falkenstein fills the entire back wall of the
stairwell and draws the eye upward. From the stairs, the open plan of the western part of the house becomes visible. Light streams into the central bay through the stairwell’s own clerestory windows, which provide light and air circulation.

The western part of the house does not have interior walls. The house is supported by sixteen 3.5-inch diameter columns, so bearing walls are unnecessary, creating spaces that are flexible due to the openness. The open plan allows light to flow in from the glass walls of the perimeter. The large windows face west toward the San Francisco Bay, to capture sweeping vies from East Oakland to the Golden Gate Bridge when the house was first built. Currently, the trees in the park across the street have grown much taller over forty years and obstruct most of the view.

The social spaces occupy this open part of the house. The dining room is in the northwest corner and the living room is in the southwest corner. A notable small-scale white harpsichord is in the bay in between them and seems inseparable from the architectural interior. In the central bay on the south side of the same open sweep of living space is an office area. All spaces are furnished with iconic modern designer furniture in keeping with the architecture of the house and enhancing the aesthetic expression and experience.

The private spaces of the house are enclosed by partition walls. These rooms are located on the eastern side, or rear, of the house and are accessed by a hallway along the perimeter of the core bay. Two bathrooms located in the core bay are models of compact efficiency and benefit from the clerestory for natural light. The three rooms are similar in size and, while typically imagined as bedrooms, can and do accommodate various uses. All have been enlarged from the original by the Olsen’s converting the original five-foot deep rear balcony into interior living space in about 1975. The master bedroom in the northeast corner has an entrance at the end of the hallway, so it is somewhat larger than the two other rooms along the east wall. There is a white built-in cabinet on the east wall where the wall meets the hillside with a window above the cabinet allowing a view of the ivy-filled hillside. The floor-to-ceiling windows on the north side of the room overlook the creek below.

The center bay, or room, on the east side is used as a study. Against the east wall is a white desk and shelf the entire length of the wall. The window above the desk allows for a view of the hillside, but neighbors cannot see in due to the angle of the hill. The north wall of the study is lined with a bookshelf, and there is a twin bed in the southwest corner of the room allowing for multiple uses in the space such as work and rest.

The southeast bay is a guest bedroom. It has a bookshelf on the north wall. The east wall is lined by a built-in ornamental seat designed by the Olsen’s son, with windows above looking at the hillside. The south wall is all windows and looks out upon the landscape.

On the north side of the house, a balcony cantilevers from the kitchen and overlooks the creek and the greenery of the landscape. From the balcony one observes the way the white glass box juts out over the slope toward the street. In addition, the transparency of the house is evident as one can see through the corner of the building.

Flexibility is a notion that governs design in the house. The wall of the office area is a bookshelf, but as the architect described, has dimensions to be able to become a closet if there is a need for another bedroom. Also, the office has moveable panels.
Olsen, Donald and Helen, House  
Name of Property  
Alameda, CA  
County and State  
NPS Form 10-900-a  
OMB Approval No. 1024-0019  
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet  
Section number 8 Page 1  

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Donald and Helen Olsen House (1954) in Berkeley, California, designed by architect Donald Olsen for his own family, has a significant place in the history of architecture and design on the local level and complies fully with Criterion C. Donald Olsen (b. 1919) is an important figure in the history of mid-twentieth century Bay Area architecture. His body of mostly residential work, guided by the principles and aesthetics of Modernism, served as a graceful counterpoint to the prevailing Bay Tradition. It is a work of a master and is important for its groundbreaking style and form.

The dominant Bay Region style, first designated by critic Lewis Mumford in 1947, was defined by a vernacular, woodsy vocabulary with an attention to craft, an orientation to views, and an openness made possible by the gentle climate. It often found precedent in the work of Bernard Maybeck and the Arts and Crafts movement. Though Olsen was an integral member of the University of California at Berkeley architecture faculty, alongside prominent practitioners of the Bay Region style, he aligned himself with modernists from Europe, many of whom he had trained with at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The clarity, transparency, flexibility, and efficiency of the Modernist aesthetic is exemplified by the Donald and Helen Olsen House, which reveals a philosophically rigorous belief in the responsibility of architecture to reflect and further the social and material advances of one's time. The house establishes the belief that beauty may be attained through the massing and machine like form rather than relying on ornament.

Originally from Minnesota, Donald and his wife Helen, a graphic designer and painter, first established a connection with the Bay Area during World War II when Olsen worked as an architect in the war effort headquartered in Richmond (he designed buildings for the Kaiser shipyards). After the war, Olsen studied at Harvard with Walter Gropius who had emigrated from Germany in the 1930s. As Chair of the School of Architecture, Gropius brought the visionary tenets of Modernism to Harvard's Graduate School of Design. The former head of the Bauhaus, Gropius espoused "a humane physical environment consonant with and expressive of modern technology."1 Gropius, and his vision of Modernism as aesthetically pure, intellectually progressivism, and dynamic, has remained a key influence on Olsen throughout his life.

After graduate school, Olsen worked as a designer in the offices of several influential modern architects, including Eero Saarinen (in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan) and at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (in San Francisco). He and Helen spent extended periods in Europe; Olsen received several grants for travel, including prestigious A.W. Wheelwright Fellowship from Harvard and later studied philosophy at the London School of Economics. While in Europe, the Olsens absorbed works by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and others dedicated to a new architecture based on modern materials, methods of construction, and ways of living—often termed the International Style. In 1953, Donald opened his own practice in Berkeley, the same year that the Olsens bought a small, irregularly shaped parcel of land in the North Berkeley Hills. Though designed and built early in his career, the Donald and Helen Olsen House represents the purest expression of Olsen's intellectual and constructive philosophy and qualifies for listing under
Criterion C.

As a work of architecture, the Donald and Helen Olsen House is distinctive for its structure, volumetric form, relationship to site, flexible internal plan, and sense of efficiency. The single-story house, essentially a floating glass box, is perched high in the trees on a steeply sloped site bounded by a creek to the west and by the hillside to the north. Only a cantilevered deck that extends from the kitchen over the creek – used for dining outdoors – breaks the box. Columns position the house high enough to enjoy the view across the Bay and allow for carports and a sheltered entry staircase to the house above. When built, it overlooked the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate Bridge panorama, a view now filtered through tall trees which have grown up in the park across the street.

Shaped by the Modernist ethos, the design of the Donald and Helen Olsen House was dictated by economy. Building for his own family (the Olsens have one son), the budget was tight. An entirely steel frame was prohibitively expensive, the structure is steel columns and wood beams. The sixteen white-painted 3-1/2” diameter steel columns, which recall the pilothis at Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, delineate nine equal bays – eight glassed-in perimeter bays and one core.

The site, surrounded by trees and ample shrubbery, offered the opportunity for transparency without sacrificing privacy. Olsen’s orchestration of daylight is remarkable – the entry staircase is brilliantly lit by clerestories on all four sides; at the top of the stair, living and dining room flow into one generous space, dappled by light filtering in through the surrounding trees. Three bedrooms, each occupying a single glass-enclosed bay, rest lightly on the hillside at the back of the house. Dramatic and spare, the house has an ethereal quality, particularly at night.

The plan of the house exhibits a clear geometry; the staircase is at the exact center and shares the core bay with two bathrooms and mechanical services. The modern structural framework (more often used at the time in commercial construction), similar to that at Mies van Der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1951) in which all vertical and horizontal loads are taken down by the steel columns, means that walls are non-structural and makes possible the dramatic floor-to-ceiling glass perimeter. Interior walls can thus be moved to adjust the nature of spaces desired. The kitchen is separated from the dining room by sliding screens, and the bay adjacent to the living room was designed for potential conversion into an additional bedroom, with the addition of solid or sliding walls. The rigorous, yet flexible, plan demonstrates a Modernist understanding of space as efficient and adaptable.

The Donald and Helen Olsen House displays the inspired purity that is a hallmark of the International Style. It is compact yet airy, precise yet flexible, carefully composed of standard, repeated elements, yet poetic. Although the glass walls are the most striking external feature, the exterior is white-painted wood, with dark gray trim. In the well-preserved interior, walls are white, sometimes accented by the bright primary colors favored by Le Corbusier (the guest bath has a mirrored wall of red and yellow). Stained oak floors add warmth. It is furnished in the Modernist style, with a collection of pieces by the Olsen’s mid-century peers and influences: George Nelson sofas, Marcel Breuer armchairs, and art by friends and collected in their travels. The house, in which Donald and Helen Olsen have lived since 1954, exudes a serene informality; the open plan and the interiors reflect an expansive, shared modern life.
Upon completion, the Donald and Helen Olsen House was published widely in architecture journals in the U.S. and abroad, as were many of Donald Olsen’s subsequent projects. Olsen forged a path parallel to Bay Area architects working in a more regional style, carving a unique and respected place as the bearer of the Modernist ethos in Northern California. Greatly respected as a professor at U.C. Berkeley, as well as an architect, Olsen recently donated his drawings and papers to the U.C. Berkeley Environmental Design Archives. The Donald and Helen Olsen House continues to be featured on museum and architectural tours of the Bay Area. Prominent architecture colleagues (including Jean Prouve, Felix Candela, Richard Rogers, Robert Smithson, and Richard Meier) as well as architecture students, visit the Donald and Helen Olsen House regularly.

The rigorously modern, clean lines of this luminous glass box have set it apart from the architectural landscape of Berkeley and the region since it was built. Olsen’s own work, found scattered throughout the Bay Area, furnishes the only local parallels. Immediately adjacent and two years earlier than the Donald and Helen Olsen House, he designed and built a house for family friends Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Kip. A white rectilinear building in the International Style as well, the Kip House is of more conventional construction. In its unswerving purity and focus on flexible volumes made possible by steel structure, the Donald and Helen Olsen House finds a kinship to the Los Angeles Modernist architecture. The work of Richard Neutra and Charles and Ray Eames are clear parallels, and it shares with the Case Study Houses (initiated in 1945) an interest in economy and efficiency via mass-produced components.

The Donald and Helen Olsen House can now be publicly recognized as perhaps the most pure and successful domestic expression of the International Style in the Bay Area, and, as such, is most worthy of listing on the National Register.

Donald Olsen still lives in the house with his wife and they have maintained it in its original condition as designed except for the few modifications noted earlier.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Weinstein, Dave. “Out of Fashion, Still Adored: Revisiting Mid-Century Modern as Bay Area
Architects Envisioned It.” *San Francisco Chronicle.* Saturday, April 27, 2002.


MAPS
1. Assessor’s Map 61
2. USGS Map