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FROM THE LANDSCAPE TO THE SHIRT DRAWER: THE DAVIES HOUSE BY ANSHEN & ALLEN AS A TOTAL WORK OF ART

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ABSTRACT

Anshen & Allen conceived the Davies House (Woodside, California; 1940-1941) as a synthesis of architecture, landscape, and interior design. The project began with a preexisting garden laid out by Thomas Church and followed a logic of continuity that extended to the handcrafted production of furniture. This article examines the house through the lens of the architect as a comprehensive creator, in which every formal, technical, and material decision was articulated as part of a coherent whole. Based on unpublished documentation held at the Environmental Design Archives (EDA) at UC Berkeley, the project development of this residence is reconstructed as an example of a 'total work of art'. Simultaneously, the house is presented as a turning point between two paradigms: one grounded in disciplinary integration and the other defined by the standardization and fragmentation of domestic space in postwar residential architecture.

KEY WORDS: San Francisco Bay Area; modernism; furniture design; postwar; single-family home.

DEL PAISAJE AL CAJÓN PARA LAS CAMISAS: LA CASA DAVIES DE ANSHEN & ALLEN COMO OBRA DE ARTE TOTAL

RESUMEN

Anshen & Allen concibieron la casa Davies (Woodside, California; 1940-1941) como una síntesis entre arquitectura, paisaje y diseño interior. El proyecto tomó como punto de partida un jardín preexistente diseñado por Thomas Church y siguió una lógica de continuidad que se extendió hasta la producción artesanal del mobiliario. Este artículo examina la casa desde la perspectiva del arquitecto como diseñador integral, donde cada decisión formal, técnica y material se articuló como parte de un conjunto coherente. A partir de documentación inédita custodiada en los Environmental Design Archives (EDA) de UC Berkeley, se reconstruye el proceso de diseño de esta residencia como una 'obra de arte total', al tiempo que se plantea como punto de inflexión entre dos paradigmas: uno basado en la integración disciplinar y otro definido por la estandarización y la fragmentación del espacio doméstico en la arquitectura residencial de posguerra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: área de la Bahía de San Francisco; arquitectura moderna; diseño de mobiliario; posguerra; vivienda unifamiliar.

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Figura 1

Dean Stone. *Exterior view of the Davies House (Woodside, CA; 1940-1941) by Anshen & Allen.* 1941. EDA, UC Berkeley: Anshen & Allen Collection, "R. Davies House: Photos" (Box 6, Folder 51).

By the late 1930s, as Europe descended into war, California was emerging as a laboratory for an alternative form of architectural modernism. In this context, the young architects Robert Anshen (1910-1964) and Steven Allen (1912-1992) received the commission that would define their careers: the Davies House (Woodside, California; 1940-1941). This project marked not only their first major work but also a built manifesto in which architecture, furniture, and landscape formed an inseparable whole (*Fig. 1*).

Commissioned by oil and shipping magnate Ralph K. Davies, the building was conceived like a meticulously tailored suit. The architects designed everything—from the house's siting on its wooded lot to the smallest piece of furniture. Its structure, spatial layout, fenestration, and material palette followed a holistic logic aimed at creating a unified spatial experience in harmony with the site's climatic, topographic, and cultural conditions.

Positioned between the craft sensibility of Bernard Maybeck and Frank Lloyd Wright and the mechanized functionalism of postwar California Modernism, the Davies House was built in a transitional period characterized by growing real estate pressures and the industrialization of domestic life. This article examines how Anshen & Allen implemented their vision of the architect as a comprehensive designer—one who coordinated multiple disciplines while negotiating the demands of the client. It also considers the tensions embedded in this architectural aspiration at a time when Californian design was paradoxically evolving toward more inclusive, standardized models—eventually making such bespoke practices increasingly unsustainable.

STATE OF THE FIELD, SOURCES, AND METHODOLOGY

The historiography of modern architecture has traditionally privileged Southern California—through figures like Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler, as well as experiences such as the Case Study House program—while the region's northern legacy has remained largely overlooked. Among the exceptions is the work of critic and historian Sally Woodbridge, author of seminal regional architectural guides and the influential book *Bay Area houses* (1976)¹, which remains a key reference for understanding the evolution of modern housing in the region. More recently, architect and historian Pierluigi Serraino has deepened the study of what he considers an underrepresented scene within the canonical narrative of North American modernity, as he argues in *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism* (2006)². Also relevant are the studies of José Parra Martínez and John Crosse, which focus on the intellectual and cultural environment that fostered a contextualized reinterpretation of the Modern Movement in the San Francisco Bay Area³.

Despite becoming one of the most active and influential firms in Northern California during the mid-20th century—and, from the 1970s onward, a nationally recognized practice specializing in healthcare architecture—Anshen & Allen have remained largely absent from historical narratives. While there are some partial exceptions, they are fragmented and limited in scope. A few of the firm's houses appear in the works of Woodbridge and Serraino previously discussed; their healthcare designs are the focus of a dedicated monograph, *Modernity in healing and learning: the architecture of Anshen+Allen* (2007)⁴; and their Eichler housing developments have received some media and scholarly attention, most notably in *Eichler: modernism rebuilds the American Dream* (2002)⁵. Beyond these scattered references, however, no comprehensive study has critically examined the full breadth of their work.

This study also engages with the notion of the 'total work of art' in the history of modern architecture. Originating in the mid-19th century Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a symphonic aspiration to integrate music, literature, image, and space—, this concept has played a major role in 20th-century architectural discourse. The idea was revived in architecture by the Bauhaus, especially by Walter Gropius, as a principle of synthesis between major and minor arts, built space, and everyday life.⁶ Adolf Behne warned against the aesthetic and political risks of this ideal, particularly its

potential drift toward authoritarian environmental homogenization⁷—a critique that did not prevent much of interwar European modernist architecture from embracing this very formula, as evidenced in the work of Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier, or Mies van der Rohe. In the words of Mark Wigley:

“This point of view produced an extraordinary legacy. Architects have roamed the world, leaving their mark on every tree, lamppost, and fire hydrant. They all have their city plans, furniture, wallpaper, clothes, and coffee pots. Many have cars. Some have ships. From the train designed by Gropius and Adolf Meyer to the airplane and automatic washing machine of Rudolf Schindler, the 20th-century architect admits no limit”⁸.

Later, Christian Norberg-Schulz reinterpreted the notion in phenomenological terms, as a total experience of place⁹; while Kenneth Frampton reformulated it from a tectonic perspective, linked to constructive coherence¹⁰. Though diverse, these interpretations help us understand 'totality' not merely as an exhaustive practice—where architects would simply design 'everything'—but as a project logic, in which scales, materials, and uses are articulated according to a common principle of expressive coherence. The Davies House aligns with this tradition while adding nuance: it is not a heroic or dogmatic total work, but rather a situated expression of cultural integration among architecture, landscape, and domestic life.

The primary documentary source on Anshen & Allen's work is the eponymous collection held at the Environmental Design Archives (EDA) at the University of California, Berkeley. This extensive, largely unpublished archive spans the 1940s to the 1970s and includes photographs, original drawings, correspondence, and technical documents for 143 projects. This material has not been digitized and must be consulted on site.

For this article, the research focused on documents related to the Davies House. The graphic material—large-format drawings, sketches, site plans, furniture layouts, and interior finish details—allows for a complete reconstruction of the design process, from initial site adjustments to the meticulous detailing of individual furniture pieces. This material reveals a conception of the house as an artifact in which every formal, technical, or spatial decision was part of an interdependent system. The collection also includes a series of photographs by Dean Stone, documenting the house upon completion in 1941, along with a later series taken by Maynard Parker in 1955 for *House Beautiful*¹¹. Some of the latter are accessible in the Huntington Library's digital repository.

Supplementing this are other valuable primary sources, such as Steve Allen's recollections of his relationship with Ralph Davies¹² and the oral testimony of his wife, Louise M. Davies¹³. Her words are crucial for understanding the decision-making dynamics during the house's planning and construction, as well as for assessing the client's role as a cultural co-author of the project.

The methodology of this article combines three complementary strategies. First, a historiographic documentary analysis centered on the critical study of unpublished primary sources from the firm's archives, with particular attention to original graphic and photographic material. Second, a design-process approach traces the Davies House's

development from early conception to final execution, emphasizing the mechanisms linking built form, interiors, and garden design. Finally, the article offers an interpretive reading connecting the house to the notion of total design—not as an abstract concept but as an operative strategy shaping both the project’s character and its place within a transitional moment in California Modernism. This combination of documentary, procedural, and interpretive lenses positions the Davies House not only as an object of architectural analysis but as a synthesis of a cultural idea of dwelling.

A HOUSE FOR THE DAVIES: GENESIS OF AN INTEGRAL DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Robert Anshen and Steven Allen met as students at the University of Pennsylvania, where they forged a friendship that was later solidified during a travel fellowship to Italy, Germany, and Japan. In 1937, they settled in San Francisco and began working as draftsmen for local firms. Still without professional licenses or built projects, they secured their first major project in 1939 under rather unusual circumstances¹⁴.

Ralph K. Davies, vice president of the Standard Oil Company of California (now Chevron), was seeking an architect for his family residence in Woodside, south of San Francisco. Rumor had it that Davies had already hired—and fired—six architects: three specializing in Tudor style, two in Spanish, and one in Colonial, none of whom had satisfied him. At just 29 and 27 years old, Anshen and Allen had no built work to their name—hardly the typical candidates for such a commission. Blending irony with calculated audacity, they adopted a bold strategy that would prove key to securing the project: each borrowed fifty dollars, pooled the sum into a certified check for one hundred, and sent Davies a letter.

“There is a matter of great interest to us which we believe is also of interest to you. We would greatly appreciate the opportunity of having a half an hour to discuss it with you. Since we have no idea of the value you place on your time, we enclose a certified check for one hundred dollars which we hope you will find acceptable”¹⁵.

Davies did not cash the check but agreed to meet. During the encounter, Anshen—described by contemporaries as a skilled negotiator—proposed reinterpreting the spirit of traditional English architecture that the businessman admired, without resorting to literal copies. The architects recommended “a house that would have all of the qualities, the warmth, the charm and the spirit of a Tudor house with the amenities, the forms and the techniques of the present day, unhampered by a slavish copying of archaic detail”¹⁶. Impressed by their vision, Davies entrusted them with the project for his home.

Over the next two years, they worked intensively on the 6,000-square-foot (557-square-meter) residence. The oft-repeated phrase that summarized their dynamic—“Bob talks, and I [Steve] draw”¹⁷—captures the division of labor that defined their collaboration: Anshen, charismatic and persuasive, handled client relations; Allen, introspective and meticulous, translated every aspect of the project onto paper. The Davies House would become, in many ways, the foundational testbed of their working method and their understanding of architecture as a unified discipline.



Figura 2

Anshen & Allen. *Ground floor of the Davies House integrated into Thomas Church's garden.*

c. 1940. EDA, UC Berkeley: Anshen & Allen Collection, “R. Davies House: Drawings” (Drawer R 23.4, Flat-File 26).



Figura 3

Anshen & Allen. *Landscape study.*

c. 1940. EDA, UC Berkeley: Anshen & Allen Collection, “R. Davies House: Drawings” (Drawer R 23.4, Flat-File 26).

TOTAL DESIGN AND SPATIAL LOGIC: LANDSCAPE, ARCHITECTURE, AND FURNITURE AS A SYSTEM

One of the most singular aspects of the Davies House is that its conceptualization began with the garden surrounding it. In 1936, Ralph Davies’ wife Louise had commissioned renowned landscape architect Thomas Church to design the sprawling Woodside property, where Church “connected the long expanse of lawn to the secluded pool garden through a graceful grade change and ramp”¹⁸. When Anshen & Allen received the commission in 1939, they encountered a fully configured landscape that would decisively inform their project. The architects did not start with a predefined building concept. Instead, they meticulously studied the terrain, mapped contour lines, located existing trees, and identified privileged views, letting the natural conditions guide them (Figs. 2 and 3).

DAVIES HOUSE

WOODSIDE CALIFORNIA

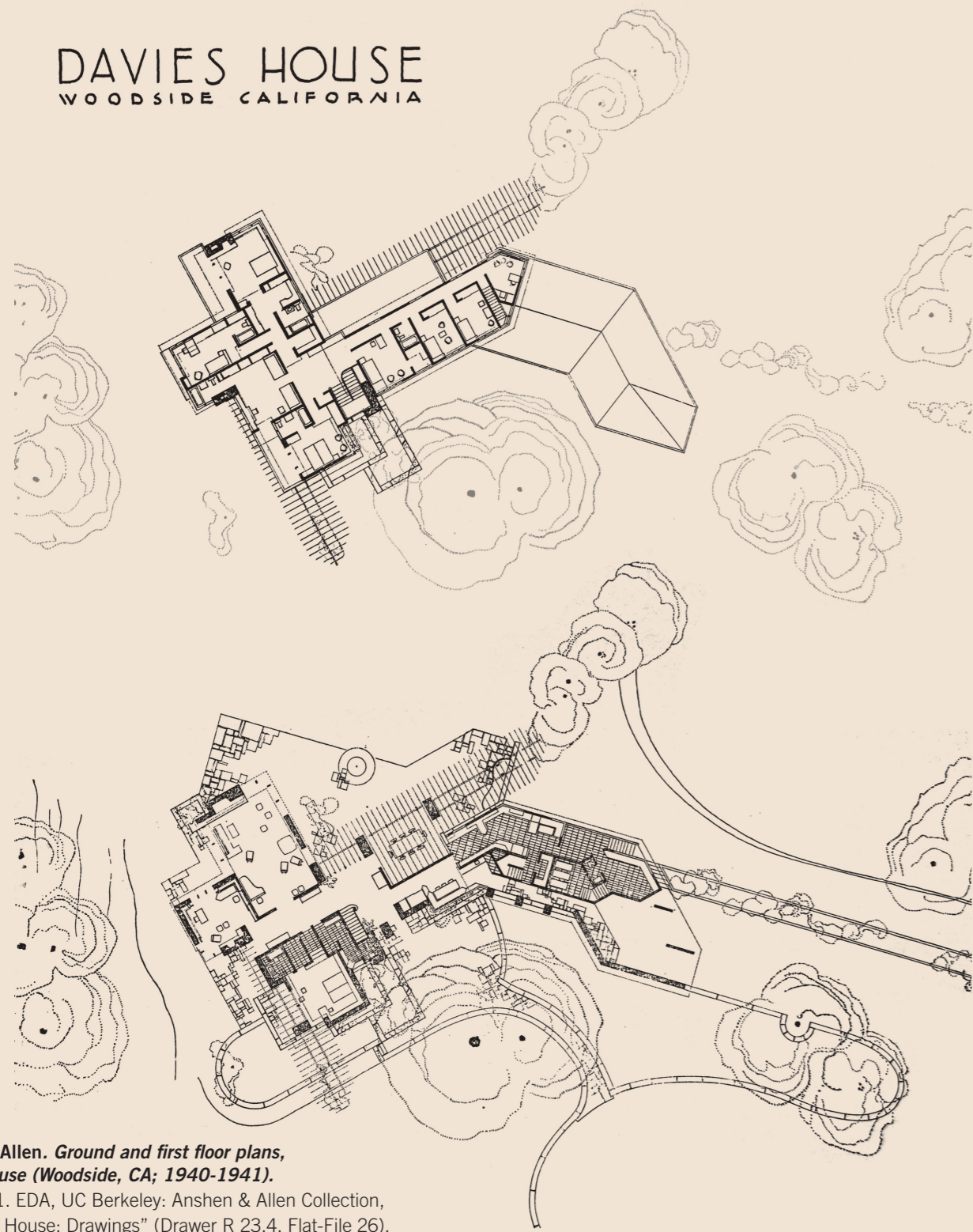


Figura 4

Anshen & Allen. *Ground and first floor plans, Davies House (Woodside, CA; 1940-1941)*. 1940-1941. EDA, UC Berkeley: Anshen & Allen Collection, "R. Davies House: Drawings" (Drawer R 23.4, Flat-File 26).

This site-responsive approach resulted in a project where architecture was conceived as an extension of Thomas Church's garden. The house adapted to the site's conditions and established a constant dialogue with its surroundings, with many key decisions shaped by the preexisting garden's layout and sightlines (Fig. 4). Window openings framed the best landscape views, while glazed corners and large glass panes—often arranged in opposing or angled planes—blurred the transition between interior and exterior, reinforcing the perception of the house as a habitable extension of the landscape rather than a closed volume (Fig. 5). The floor plan followed the same fluid logic, with an open layout minimizing traditional compartmentalization and favoring air circulation and natural light (Fig. 6). Patios, pergolas, terraces, and balconies were integrated into the architectural scheme as outdoor extensions of interior spaces (Fig. 7).



Figura 5

Maynard L. Parker. *Exterior view of the living room*. 1955. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



Figura 6

Maynard L. Parker. *View of the dining room*. 1955. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



Figura 7

Dean Stone. *Patio of the main bedroom*. 1941. EDA, UC Berkeley: Anshen & Allen Collection, "R. Davies House: Photos" (Box 6, Folder 51).

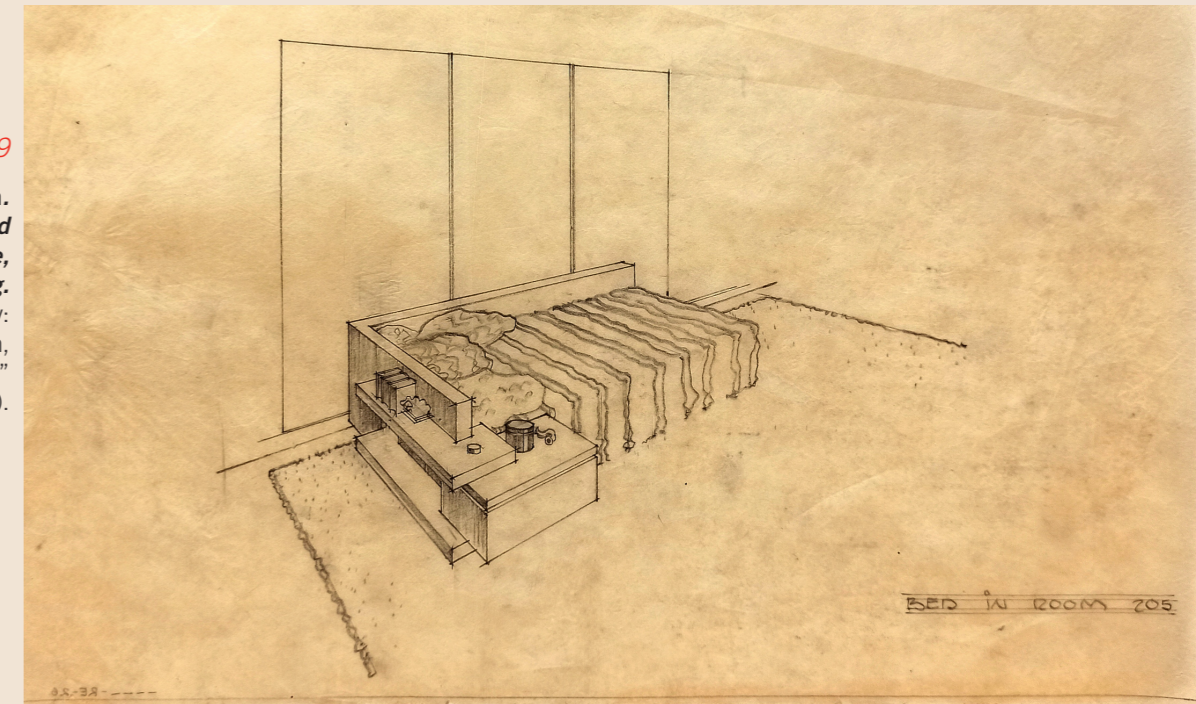
Figura 8

Dean Stone.
Exterior view looking
toward the living room,
with its large
stone-clad fireplace
in the foreground.
1941. EDA, UC Berkeley;
Anshen & Allen Collection,
"R. Davies House: Photos"
(Box 6, Folder 51).



Figura 9

Anshen & Allen.
Bed unit with integrated
nightstand, storage,
and shelving.
c. 1940. EDA, UC Berkeley;
Anshen & Allen Collection,
"R. Davies House: Drawings"
(Drawer R 23.4, Flat-File 26).



Material selection, meanwhile, reflected a tactile and visual continuity with the environment. The lower-level walls were clad in Utah sandstone and Sonoma stone, while the upper-level vertical surfaces featured oak and redwood, also used in the structure and pergolas (Fig. 8). This choice unified the house's image, as if carved from a single block of stone and wood, while fostering an immersive experience of integration with nature.

Finally, custom furniture represented the most radical aspect of Anshen & Allen's integral approach. As they declared in *New Pencil Points*: "Furnishings throughout are unified by planned repetition and variation. The subdivision of a house into rooms should be lessened, not heightened, by the furnishings. Design and color of furnishings should blend from room to room, just as the rooms blend the one into another"¹⁹.

The architects designed every piece of furniture specifically for the house, treating it as an extension of the architecture itself (Fig. 9). Their attention to craftsmanship—both in finishes and construction details—reflected a commitment to material excellence, with carefully chosen textures reinforcing a cohesive spatial atmosphere. Every room was meticulously planned, equipped with drawers, shelves, tables, and cabinets that seemed to emerge naturally from the walls, aligning with the rhythm of the structure and windows. This strategy not only optimized space but also reinforced aesthetic cohesion and the idea of total architecture. The furniture was not mere decoration: it was a fundamental part of the work, intended to create a direct relationship between architecture and user. A key example is the master bedroom closets, where they arranged nine shallow drawers fitted for six shirts apiece and a narrow, removable tie rack, demonstrating an exacting attention to custom detail and functionality (Fig. 10).

The resonances between the Davies House and Frank Lloyd Wright's work are unavoidable. The exterior volumetric configuration, landscape integration, L-shaped floor plan, spatial fluidity, dissolution of indoor-outdoor boundaries, and emphasis on built-in furniture are all basic principles of Usonian orthodoxy, seen in early works like the Jacobs House (Madison, Wisconsin; 1937) or the Rosenbaum House (Florence, Alabama; 1939). However, the Davies House operates at a scale entirely alien to the domestic ideals of those middle-class homes,

both in terms of size and materiality. Unlike Wright's use of brick or plywood as an economic strategy, Anshen & Allen employed fine materials and high-cost artisanal finishes befitting a client like Ralph Davies.

Similarly, echoes of Wright's Prairie Houses can be traced in the volumetric fragmentation and in the centrality of the fireplace—both as an organizing element in the floor plan and as a sculptural object. They are further evident in the global, integral conception of the project, an endeavor requiring the coordination of multiple disciplines and trades. As Kenneth Frampton recalls:

"In these fertile years Wright carefully assembled an atelier of technicians and artist-craftsmen to design and realize his vision of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a 'total work of art'. This team included the engineer Paul Mueller, the landscape architect Wilhelm Miller, the cabinetmaker George Niedecken, the mosaic designer Catherine Ostertag, the sculptors Richard Bock and Alfonso Iannelli, and the talented Orlando Gianni, who served as Wright's fabricator of glass and textiles from 1892"²⁰.

Figura 10

Anshen & Allen.
Interior perspective
of a bedroom storage area.
c. 1940. EDA, UC Berkeley;
Anshen & Allen Collection,
"R. Davies House: Drawings"
(Drawer R 23.4, Flat-File 26).

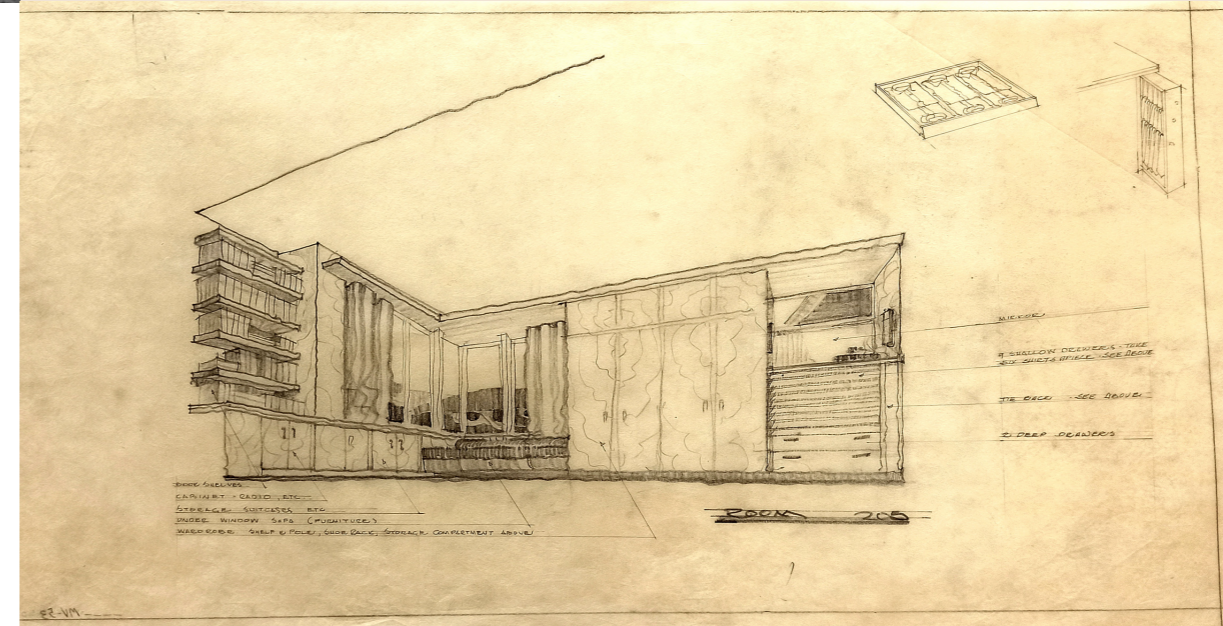


Figura 11

Maynard L. Parker.
View of the library with its
distinctive checkerboard ceiling.

1955. Courtesy of The Huntington Library,
San Marino, California.

Figura 12 >

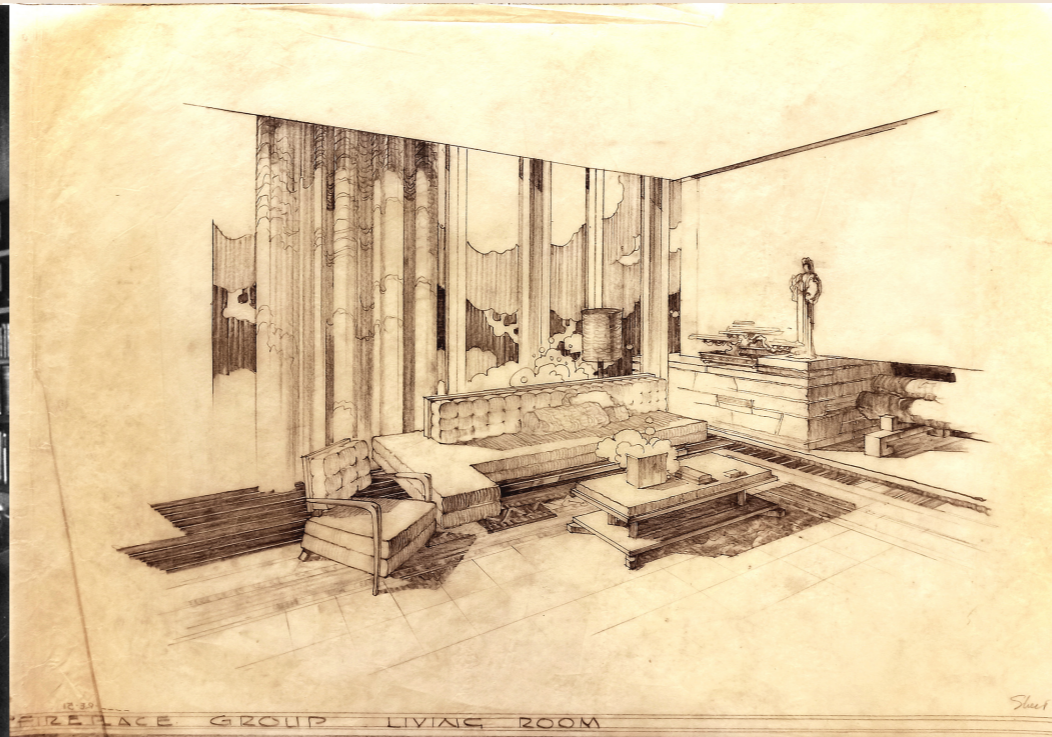
Anshen & Allen.
Interior perspective of the living room.

c. 1940. EDA,
UC Berkeley: Anshen & Allen Collection,
R. Davies House: Drawings”
(Drawer R 23.4, Flat-File 26).

Figura 13 >>

Maynard L. Parker.
Louise Davies posing
by her living room fireplace.

1955. EDA, UC Berkeley:
Anshen & Allen Collection,
“R. Davies House: Photos”
(Box 6, Folder 51).



TENSIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS: THE LIMITS OF INTEGRAL DESIGN

Louise Davies emerged as the principal challenge to Anshen & Allen’s rigorous vision of integrated design. Her involvement had begun years earlier, when she clashed with landscape architect Thomas Church over the estate’s garden. Dissatisfied with his initial proposals, she demanded a freer, more organic layout. As she recalled years later in an oral history interview, her views were unequivocal:

“[Church] He was just getting known when he was here. He built the garden in 1936. He wasn’t anything like as well-known as he was later. He had, though, a great deal of determination. He gave me about three plans which I didn’t like at all. He had gone to Europe and studied French gardens which were rather formal. I said, ‘Look, Tommy’ —we got to know each other very well— ‘I’m not a formal person, and I don’t think this hill is formal. It has a contour’. He said, ‘All right’. Then when he came back, and I can see him now, bless his heart, he threw down these plans and he said, ‘If you don’t like that you’d better get another landscape gardener’. And it was what we liked”²¹.

Louise Davies’ engagement intensified during construction. As Steve Allen later recalled:

“She had her concerns about the design of the house. The talk of stone and redwood exteriors, not to mention similar materials in the interior, gave her a foreboding of a grimness that she felt she could not live in and enjoy. This feeling perhaps reached a peak with the erection of the stone walls. They went up first, and indeed did, standing alone, look grim. Stonehenge was graceful by comparison. However, as construction developed and the more delicate interior finishes were being applied her apprehensions diminished somewhat. At that point Ralph made a timely and characteristic decision. ‘Bob and Steve, get together with Louise and work out all of the interior color schemes and finishes to your mutual satisfaction; I will stand aside completely’. He did”²².

Allen would later acknowledge that Louise’s input had “a significant influence on the end result”, lending the house “a more refined treatment, susceptible to the feminine touch”²³. Among her most visible contributions were the library’s checkerboard oak ceiling (Fig. 11) and the commissioning of a mural by painter Lucien Labaudt for the dining room. Allen described this as a genuinely collaborative process:

“The four of us, Louise, Lucien, Bob and I, considered the colors and treatments of the many other spaces. Lucien had a marvelous little machine, a motor-operated disc to which wedge-shaped color samples could be attached in varying proportions. Push the button and the colors fused. Adjust the proportions and produce a subtle color variation. This activity was carried out in a series of meetings at the house, was enjoyed by all, and turned Louise’s apprehensions to a pleasure with the final result of the efforts of all of us”²⁴.

However, she offered a less harmonious version: “Anshen and Allen couldn’t stand what I told him [Labaudt] to do. They never spoke to him! [laughter] They wanted something quite different, but I said: ‘No, this is what I want’. They didn’t like what he did. They were very, very opinionated”²⁵.

This episode was no exception. Louise Davies’ recollections reveal recurring tensions with the architects that underscore the limits of a formally rigorous design vision, which sometimes clashed with the messier realities of domestic life. The fiercest disagreements centered on furniture, which Anshen & Allen considered inseparable from the architecture itself. “This is a Frank Lloyd Wright idea”, she said. “He thought that all the furniture ought to go with the house. I disagreed with him heartily”²⁶. Some pieces, like the laminated maple dining table, were cherished by Louise, who kept them for decades. Others, like the living room sofa, were swiftly discarded for their rigidity and discomfort (Fig. 12). “I got rid of it when we could afford another one. I hated it! [...] It was very architectural, very stiff. [It] Looked like the architecture. Not comfortable at all”²⁷.

Despite these differences, she remembered the process with warmth and affection: “They were two years building this place, you know. We became very good friends, naturally”²⁸. Though she insisted that “this house was really done by Anshen & Allen”, her deep involvement—in both landscape and interiors—shows that the Davies were not passive clients but co-authors of the creative process. Their home cannot be understood solely as a ‘total work’ conceived by two ambitious young architects; it is also the product of a complex negotiation among design intention, cultural expectations, and lived experience. Ultimately, the role of the architect-as-integrator had to accommodate not just different disciplines and trades, but also the aspirations and sensibilities of those who would inhabit the space (Fig. 13).

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ANSHEN & ALLEN
San Francisco

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CROWLEY COMPANY
YO 7-5578
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THATCHER NURSERY
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- SNACK BAR in kitchen
- GUEST CLOSET
- FENCED SERVICE YARD
- STEEL CASEMENT WINDOWS
- INSULATED CEILING
- STREETS, SEWERS and SIDE-WALKS PAID.
- NEAR SCHOOL, SHOPPING

Figura 14

Advertisement for Eichler's Sunnyvale Manor II development.
Showcasing the AA-1 model home designed by Anshen & Allen.
Daily Palo Alto Times, February 2, 1950. Palo Alto Historical Association.

FROM DAVIES TO EICHLER: THE TWILIGHT OF AN IDEAL

Beyond matters of taste, the archival record reveals the pragmatic limits of integral design. The meticulous process employed in the Davies House was economically unsustainable for emerging firms like Anshen & Allen and their typical clients. Although no construction cost documents have survived, the use of noble materials and highly skilled artisans—particularly carpenters and woodworkers—significantly increased costs. Even Ralph Davies, despite his considerable resources, had to impose constraints: delays and cost overruns forced him to substitute the originally planned copper standing-seam roof with a more affordable shingle alternative²⁹. This model proved rare and ultimately unsustainable on a larger scale.

The house was completed on November 30, 1941. Only seven days later, the attack on Pearl Harbor thrust the United States into World War II, marking a symbolic turning point. The tensions during construction not only foreshadowed a shift in design methods but also reflected a broader cultural transition. In the postwar era, Anshen & Allen adapted lessons learned from the Davies House into a new housing typology: accessible, replicable, and rational. By abandoning artisanal construction, the spatial principles tested at Woodside—open plans, indoor-outdoor continuity, and landscape integration—could now be reinterpreted for changing times.

In 1949, developer Joseph Eichler commissioned them to design 51 homes for Sunnyvale Manor II (Fig. 14). The success of this project led to a long-term collaboration, resulting in over a dozen developments across the Bay Area suburbs. Eichler Homes democratized modern architecture: preserving its core values while dispensing with material exclusivity. The ideal of absolute unity between architecture, furniture, and setting gave way to a more open, flexible model tailored to an emerging middle class³⁰. Therefore, where the Davies House employed solid redwood, Eichler used prefabricated panels; where Anshen & Allen designed custom furniture, homeowners now chose pieces from catalogs.

Domestic space ceased to be conceived as a cohesive whole, becoming instead an open stage where inhabitants mixed styles, objects, and brands according to personal taste and budget. This shift paralleled the growing influence of industrial production and consumer culture, which accelerated the adoption of modular, lightweight, and affordable materials such as molded plywood, fiberglass, and synthetic resins in furniture design. Unlike handcrafted pieces meant to endure a lifetime, postwar furniture embodied flexibility, mobility, and planned obsolescence. In California, this transformation found its own idiom: the new 'California Look' celebrated eclecticism, heterogeneity, and personalization, rejecting architect-controlled coherence in favor of a collage of forms, colors, and cultural references. The home no longer demanded a singular narrative but became a flexible backdrop for individual expression—an outcome of consumer-driven domesticity within a democratic capitalist society.

Within this new context, the artisanal ideal embodied by the Davies House—exemplified by custom-built drawers for shirts and ties—became untenable. Modern housing served as a neutral framework adaptable to the changing needs of its occupants. Sensory coherence gave way to variety; unity yielded to diversity; the total work gave way to a more open-ended stage. Thus, the Davies House stands at the threshold between two worlds: architecture as total art and architecture as accessible service. It marks the conclusion of one design ethos and the beginning of another.



Figura 15

Marc Treib.

View of the entrance from the front garden.
c. 1989. Courtesy of Marc Treib.

CONCLUSION

Envisioned as a deliberate, unified work in every detail, the Davies House represents both the culmination and the demise of an architectural practice understood as integral design. Anshen & Allen embraced a philosophy that blurred disciplinary boundaries, where every decision followed a systemic logic. The presence of Thomas Church's preexisting garden forced the architects to treat the landscape as a fixed condition, resulting in exceptional architecture-site integration (Fig. 15). The house also reveals the expressive potential of a harmonious material palette, producing spatial continuity and sensory effects unattainable through standardized solutions. Finally, the tensions introduced by Louise Davies' active involvement challenged the notion of architectural authorship, highlighting the need to incorporate subjective, cultural, and domestic dimensions into the design process.

The Davies House can be seen as a late manifestation of the modern ideal of the total work of art, reimagined for Northern California's particular prewar context. Conceived during this transitional period, it embodies a vision that remained viable but was increasingly challenged by evolving social, technical, and economic conditions. The postwar era ushered in a paradigm shift toward an industrial logic that prioritized prefabrication, standardization, and mass-consumer adaptability. However, this shift did not diminish Anshen & Allen's main premise; on the contrary, it profoundly influenced their approach. Even as they transitioned to serial production in their Eichler Homes, they retained a holistic understanding of architecture as a synthesis of space, structure, materials, and experience.

The fate of this creative philosophy is reflected in the house itself. After Louise Davies' death in 1998, the property has been listed multiple times. In 2005, it was offered for \$18 million, with an estimated \$10 million more required for restoration³¹. Today, the house stands overgrown with weeds, covered in graffiti, and partially roofless. This physical decay mirrors the symbolic decline of a resource-intensive architectural model that is now virtually impossible to replicate.

While the Davies House may not serve as a practical model within today's context of hyper-specialization, accelerated timelines, and technical standardization, it continues to offer insights of enduring relevance. Its project development affirms the value of interdisciplinary planning from the outset—even without explicit collaboration. From a historiographical perspective, the house remains a vital testament to a reflective, place-specific practice. Unlike the heroic or hegemonic visions of modernism often associated with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it proposes a more restrained, situated interpretation of totality: one defined by a sensitive articulation of scale, expressive coherence among materials, and an ear—however imperfect—for the users of space. In this sense, Anshen & Allen's project may be understood not as a total work in the absolute sense, but as a 'situated totality', born of the interplay between craft, local culture, and domestic negotiation. This reframing may offer an enduring lesson for architectural practice today.

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- ⁵ ADAMSON, P. and ARBUNICH, M., *Eichler: modernism rebuilds the American dream*, Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith, 2002.
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⁸ WIGLEY, M., “Whatever happened to total design?”, *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 5, Summer 1998. <https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/articles/whatever-happened-to-total-design/> (last accessed June 6, 2025).

⁹ NORBERG-SCHULZ, C., *Genius Loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1980.

¹⁰ FRAMPTON, K., *Studies in tectonic culture: the poetics of construction in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1995.

¹¹ BARRY, J. A., “The graceful growth of a good house”, *House Beautiful*, no. 97, June 1955, pp. 86-91, 181.

¹² ALLEN, S., “Ralph K. Davies as I knew him”, in DAVIES, L. (coord.), *Ralph K. Davies, as we knew him: biographical recollections and remembrances of R.K.D. as man and businessman*, San Francisco, self-published, 1976, pp. 107-113. Available at Doe Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹³ RIESS, S. B., “‘Louise M. Davies. From Quincy to Woodside: Memories of Family and Friends’, an oral history conducted in 1983-1985 by Suzanne B. Riess”, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1986.

¹⁴ The entire account regarding the history of the commission and the relationship between the architects and Ralph Davies as presented in this section is recorded in ALLEN, S., *op. cit.* To avoid disrupting the flow of the article, only direct quotations from the text are included in the footnotes.

¹⁵ ALLEN, S., *op. cit.*, p. 109.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ PARKER, D., *Anshen + Allen: vignettes of an architectural practice*, unpublished manuscript, 2022, p. 5. Available at the Environmental Design Archives (EDA), University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁸ TREIB, M. (ed.), *Thomas Church, landscape architect: designing a modern California landscape*, San Francisco, William Stout, 2003, p. 29.

¹⁹ “Comfort produced by coordinated plan and equipment”, *New Pencil Points*, vol. 24, no. 10, October 1943, p. 61.

²⁰ FRAMPTON, K. *Modern architecture: a critical history*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1980, p. 62.

²¹ RIESS, S. B., *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²² ALLEN, S., *op. cit.*, p. 109.

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ RIESS, S. B., *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ KNOERLE, J. "Architect's modernist legacy debated", *Almanac News* [online], February 24, 1999. https://www.almanacnews.com/morgue/1999/1999_02_24.adavies.html (last accessed April 11, 2025).

³⁰ ADAMSON, P. and ARBUNICH, M., *Eichler: modernism rebuilds the American dream*, Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith, 2002.

³¹ ZITO, K., "\$18 million, needs work / Davies home goes on the block as handyman's special", *SFGATE* [online], June 14, 2005. <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/18-million-needs-work-Davies-home-goes-on-the-2662580.php> (last accessed April 11, 2025).

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