

## THE SEARCH for the POSTWAR HOUSE

by Thomas Hine

By late 1944, it was becoming clear that Johnny was going to come marching home again someday soon - and in triumph. Americans began to dream about what life after the war would be like, and about where and how they would live.

Despite the terrible pain and human loss of World War II, and the horrible weapon that finally finished it, Americans ended the war in an optimistic spirit. The country was physically unscathed, and Americans, so often culturally cowed by Europeans, felt that they had found within themselves a special genius for figuring out how to do things, and for getting them done. The single-family house, historically a focus of American hopes and aspirations, seemed overdue for a strong dose of Yankee ingenuity.

Even while the war was still on, the "postwar house" began to take shape in the minds of housing reformers, appliance and furniture manufacturers, real estate developers, and great numbers of ordinary people. It was something to save and hope for, and something to think about and plan. It would offer unparalleled convenience, freedom, and opportunity. It would take that same creativity and resourcefulness that had changed the course of the war, bring it back home, and apply it to the improvement of everyday life.

The Case Study House program of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, launched in January 1945, was but one of many efforts to develop and promote new visions of the American home. Department stores, utility companies, universities, materials suppliers, and mass-distribution magazines also got into the act. *Arts & Architecture* was a small magazine that spoke to an elite audience, but the Case Study program proved to be influential, and produced more houses than many efforts that had more money at their disposal.

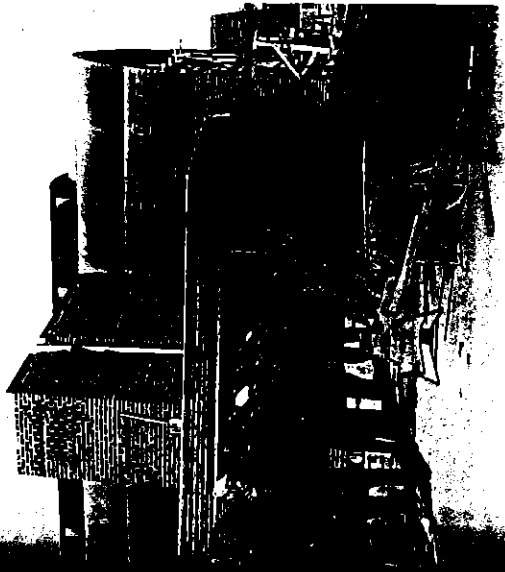
The relatively narrow social and cultural context within which the Case Study program operated contributed to a number of blind spots that prevented the designs from being quite so influential as was hoped. At the same time, they were among the most potent and engaging expressions of some quite widespread assumptions and attitudes about the nature of postwar life. Their matter-of-fact attitude toward technology and their generally practical, middle-class modernism reflected a more general postwar willingness to start new and figure out what works. This spirit dissipated long before the end of the Case Study program, however. By the end of the Korean War, the massive economic boom that had been spurred by a population catching up with consumption and comforts deferred during the depression and World War II was at an end. In the 1950s American manufacturers responded to a declining population of buyers and to an increasing household income by making their products more elaborate, loading on features and decoration.<sup>1</sup> Most of the Case Study houses, even those built after the mid 1950s, were more reflections of the initial postwar idealism than of the superheated consumer culture of the time.

In attempting to provide a sketch of the context for the Case Study houses - the search for the postwar house - I have relied primarily on an examination of the large-circulation shelter magazines of the period. If they do not provide a full and accurate depiction of what actually happened, they do, nonetheless, offer a reliable indication of the ideas promulgated about the postwar house, along with specific examples of ways in which those ideas were popularly applied.

Except for the Eames house (CSII #8, 1945 - 49), the Case Study houses themselves received little national publicity, possibly



Bruce Goff  
Military base chapel, Camp Parks, California, 1945



during the war to take advantage of airplane technology and materials. There were other, less radical, approaches that did not require that people move into round houses with shiny walls. In 1946 Defoe Shipbuilders announced a modern, but still recognizably houselike, prefabricated home, and other prefabricators came up with models that were aggressively cute and cozy.<sup>4</sup> Even some of William Levitt's houses in Long Island and Pennsylvania had metal framing, though buyers often didn't discover it until they decided to add on an extra room.

But the aircraft industry did not wither away nor did metal become a surplus item. The homebuilding industry was barely moving again when the cold war began in earnest. The United States, through the Truman Doctrine, took on the role of world's policeman, and embarked on the creation of a jet-propelled air force. Finally, during the Korean War, the federal government placed a ban on metal building materials to save critical metals for the military.

For many, though not all, the opportunity to rationalize the homebuilding industry presented the opportunity to modernize the houses. The war, it was felt, had made functionalists of nearly everybody — those who had fought, those who had worked in the miraculously productive defense plants, and those who had simply had to improvise and make do in their own homes. Thus, so the magazine articles and advertisements argued, it was time to strip away the clutter and the habits of the past.

Of all Americans, of course, the returning soldier was assumed to be the most changed by the wartime experience. The shelter magazines, because they were primarily women's magazines, attempted to speak to women's anxieties about what their husbands, sons, and boyfriends would be like. One forecast was that the returning soldier would be modern man, whose encounter with older, more backward civilizations would have convinced him of the greatness and possibility of his own. "One thing is plain to the average American," wrote a returning soldier

in a 1945 *House Beautiful* article, "so far as modern homes and the comforts thereof are concerned, you don't reach the 20th century until you pass the Statue of Liberty or the Golden Gate."<sup>5</sup> He argued that the returning soldier would have little patience for refinement and pretense, and would instead demand that his house be comfortable and practical. These were men whose lives had depended on technology, who lived intimately with it; they had no reason to reject technology, or to worship it.

One particularly interesting attribute ascribed to the GIs was their talent for "scrounging." They were said to have developed a genius for using unlikely objects and materials to fashion something new and immediately useful. *House Beautiful* warned wives that their husbands would probably be skillful, but perhaps addicted, scroungers; *House & Garden* devoted four pages to an account of the creativity of the Seabees, who, as American forces moved island by island across the Pacific, proved to be the most gifted scroungers of all. "The Seabees have used these [empty fifty-gallon] oil drums to make smoke stacks, and very fine ones too. To make culverts along the new roads. They've filled the drums with coral and used them as gun revetments and for air raid shelters. They've painted them and used them to make decorative arches. They've cut the ends off and made sign shields."<sup>6</sup> There was something joyous in the surprising things they did with oil drums and Quonset huts that seemed then to open the door to industrial materials and forms used in unexpected ways. Even women could learn to scrounge. One 1946 magazine story told of a Los Angeles secretary named Thelma Brunette (she was, of course, a blond), who bought a double-decker bus that she moved to a rented plot on the beach at Malibu. With the help of her father, a carpenter, she converted it into a house, complete with fireplace.<sup>7</sup>

The scroungers' mentality did contribute to the postwar flurry of self-built houses, begun by returning soldiers made impatient by

104

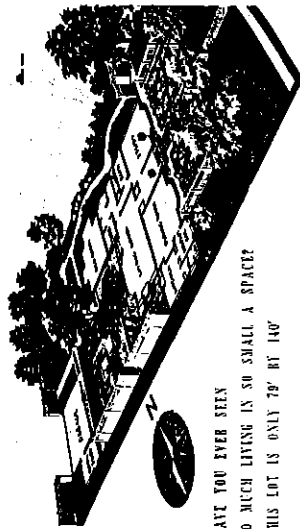


THEY DO DREAM OF HOME . . . PARTICULARLY A HOME  
OF THEIR OWN . . . HERE'S

## A PROPER DREAM HOUSE

FOR ANY VETERAN

For the returning war hero and their families who are eager for that own home, Henry Wright, executive vice president of the Case Study House, has designed a dream house for the postwar generation. The house is a 1 1/2 story, 79' by 140' (approximately a quarter of an acre) lot, built for the Case Study House, Inc., of Los Angeles, California. It is a modern, functional, and comfortable home for the postwar generation. The house is a 1 1/2 story, 79' by 140' (approximately a quarter of an acre) lot, built for the Case Study House, Inc., of Los Angeles, California. It is a modern, functional, and comfortable home for the postwar generation.



HAVE YOU EVER SEEN  
SO MUCH LIVING IN SO SMALL A SPACE?  
THIS LOT IS ONLY 79' BY 140'

the slow pace of construction. It also contributed to the dramatic rise in popularity of the home workshop, which became nearly standard in the dream house, if not in the typical home. Moreover, the wartime experience had its impact on professionals who participated. Bruce Goff, an architect who reveled in using unexpected building materials and construction techniques, was a Seabee.<sup>8</sup> Charles and Ray Eames, who had manufactured plywood products for the war effort, made use of new wood-molding techniques, glues, and shock mountings for their chairs. And it is tempting to see the influence of wartime functionalism, with its distinctly improvised rather than godly details, on the Case Study houses and other expressions of postwar American modernism.

Propagandists for the postwar house usually discussed it in very solemn and highflown terms. Often, they made it seem as if it was, ultimately, what the war had been about. Only rarely did they use the old, cozy imagery of home and hearth. More often, they spoke of openness and freedom. In September 1945, the architectural historian Talbot Hamlin told *House & Garden* readers that modern architecture is part of "a continuing struggle for growing liberty." For some, if soldiers were to return to old-fashioned houses and enclosed rooms, the fight would have been as good as lost. "Where people were afraid of freedom, they try to give it up," wrote George Nelson and Henry Wright in their 1945

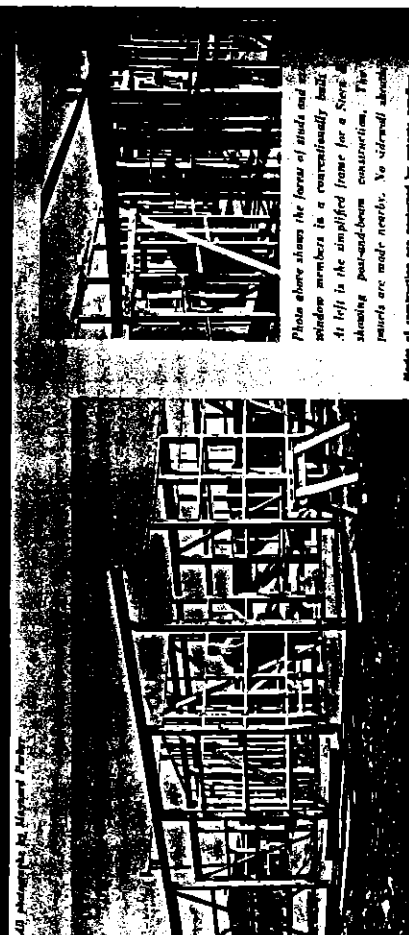


Photo above shows the form of studs and window members in a conventionally built house. At left is the simplified frame for a Seabee house, showing post-and-beam construction. The panels are made nearby. No detail about modes of construction are provided by present panels.



**Cliff May**



*"A Proper Dream House for Any Veteran,"  
published in House Beautiful, Jan. 1945*

*Cliff May and Chris Choate  
Ranch house, Cupertino, California, 1952  
From "Fast selling California ranch houses,"  
published in House & Home. Oct. 1952*

In its January 1945 issue, the same month the Case Study program was announced in *Arts & Architecture*, *House Beautiful* presented a house in Beverly Hills it said was the house to which Johnny dreams of marching home. The article highlighted its decorative fences, its yard with fruit trees, its barbecue for outdoor entertaining, and its workshop attached to the garage; it applauded the placement of the living zone far from the street and the service walk and entry far from living areas. "All of these pluses add up to the American ideal of good living," the magazine concluded. "One of the ideals these veterans have fought for and which they can now look forward to attaining."<sup>21</sup>

Given that one of the chief goals of the Case Study program was to find some contemporary expression that could supplant the white picket fence and early American woodwork as the ideal for American domesticity, it is unlikely that John Entenza or the architects involved in the Case Study program would have approved. Yet, beneath such period superficialities, this house was of a type that would prove a staple in the shelter magazines for several years, and a none-too-distant relative of their own efforts. It was, despite the traditional decorative elements, a California house – characterized by a low profile and a large perimeter, with

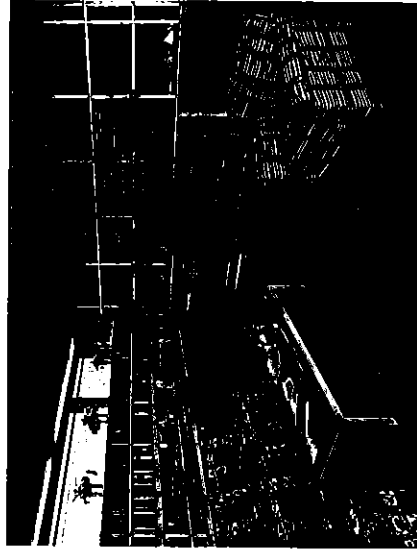
*Fritz B. Burns Research Division  
presents The Postwar House, Beverly Hills, 1946*



designed the landscaping. It had a U-shaped plan; the living-dining room formed the bottom of the U, with the bedrooms on one side and kitchen, laundry, and air-conditioning rooms on the other. With a patio, a covered outdoor space for the barbecue, a service yard, and other specifically defined outdoor spaces, it was the very image of a modern California house.

But, as the magazine told its readers, "the sum of the parts is greater than the whole." In saying this, it was not indulging in architectural criticism. Rather, it was expressing the facts of the case. It was designed to be published and exhibited, not necessarily to be lived in. It is the nature of magazines to show houses as a series of fragments and vignettes with little sense of the whole. When, for example, a Richard Neutra house was published, magazines were more likely to show an enormous window than the view that inspired it.<sup>12</sup> A window can be replicated, a vista can only be shown; the thinking that relates the design of the window to the vista is still harder to generalize for other situations. Great windows that looked out on nothing in particular became a common feature of American homes. They derived from windows that were there for good reason.

The fragmentation of presentation also served the interests of the manufacturers that participated in the house. Most were in the business of selling small parts of the house, not the whole. Indeed, the building restrictions that had gone into effect in October 1945 made it impossible to build such a house, even if one had the money to do so. The magazine encouraged its readers to sift through the house and pick out things here and there that



*Fritz B. Burns Research Division  
Living area of The Postwar House, Beverly Hills, 1946*

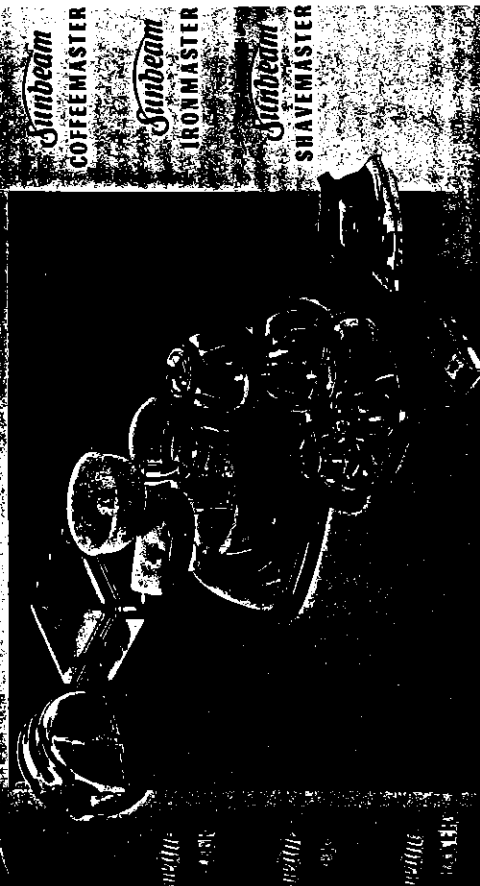
the various elements of its sprawling plan clearly zoned by function. It was, of course, lushly landscaped, with large, private openings into the yard.

Month after month, readers throughout the country were whisked from Silverlake or Brentwood to Beverly Hills, Pasadena, and Hollywood to look at California houses. The *Readers' Guide* lists four times as many references to California domestic architecture as to that of any other state from 1945 to 1947, falling to three times from 1947 to 1949, and to two times between 1949 and 1953. Southern California far outpaced the Bay Area, even though San Francisco, not Los Angeles, was usually cited as the great West Coast metropolis. Some of this advantage had to do with movie stars ("Who wants to live in a pretentious house? Certainly not Olivia de Havilland!"). Moreover, the entertainment and defense industries, heavily concentrated in Southern California, were creating new money to build houses at a time when most other regions were stalled. Nevertheless, much of the allure of these houses had to do with what, twenty-five years later, would be called life style. Sliding open the glass doors and having lunch on the dining terrace next to the avocado tree was an appealing prospect, even if you didn't know what an avocado was. If you were scouting for images of a new, relaxed, and open kind of domestic life, Southern California was a natural.

In May 1946 *House Beautiful* devoted forty-two pages to what it termed "the first postwar house." It was built as an experimental venture by Los Angeles homebuilder Fritz Burns, at Wilshire Boulevard and Highland Avenue. More than one hundred makers and suppliers of building materials and equipment cooperated in the creation of this purely promotional construction. The architects were William Wurdeman and Welton Becket. Eckbo

Advertisement for "merit specified" Sunbeam appliances,  
published in Arts & Architecture,  
Feb. 1948

# AS STANDARD EQUIPMENT ... in Arts & Architecture Case Study Houses



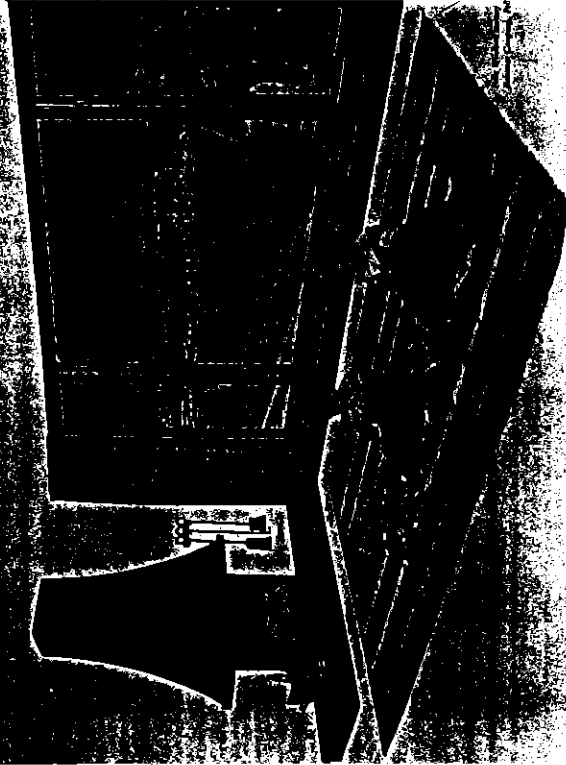
Made and guaranteed by SUNBEAM CORPORATION (Formerly Chicago Harbison Sheet Co.)  
1700 W. Roosevelt Rd., Dept. 140, Chicago, Canada Factory, 321 Weston St., Toronto. Offer Real a Century Making Quality Products

spoke to their needs. This house was conceived as a bundle of features, things that had little to do with any specific site or architectural conception, but a great deal to do with the way those who would visit it, or see it published, would define what modern living would mean.

*Arts & Architecture* also tried to generate new ideas and pass them along to the public. But in the Case Study houses, architecture was paramount. In the Fritz Burns house, as in the experience of most Americans, modern living was likely to be defined in an additive way - in the purchase of new appliances, in the remodeling of an old house, in gradual additions to the small, boxy house that was virtually all that was available to most people immediately after the war. While the Case Study architects were concerned with creating a new technology of the house, most people simply wanted to add technology to the house. The house as a single, convincing aesthetic statement is something few Americans have ever been able to afford. The house as a bundle of features that offer an array of comforts is much more in keeping with our national traditions.

And a feature like the "first postwar house's" fireplace, with its massive stone chimney that rose above the mantle on the other side of a glass wall - thus eroding the line between inside and outside by making what is normally an indoor element part of the view - was probably less important than pressure-type switch-plates and other gadgets. The house was "as full of electrical equipment as a warship's gun turret," *House Beautiful* said. Other aspects of the house, such as a dining area that could be used for other purposes when formal meals were not being served there, were not strictly necessary in a house as sprawling as this one. But it might well have offered some ideas to those who were getting by with very little space and couldn't afford the luxury of a single-

to be truly modern  
your home must have TWINDOW



Advertisement for picture window  
in a standard house, published in The Saturday  
Evening Post, Apr. 26, 1958

purpose dining room. (It was also intended to sway people from aspiring to a dining room; that would deny the informal ethos of which the modern house was said to be so perfect an expression.)

In the Case Study houses, selection of equipment was said to have been based on merit, although *Arts & Architecture* did nothing to discourage suppliers from boasting of their products' "merit specification," and taking advertisements to do so. The "first postwar house" was more frankly promotional and a larger array of products were on view, including some appliances that never caught on and others that never happened. The electrostatic cleaning ray, for example, was presented as a device that would cut housework substantially, and it remained a staple of homes of the future for another fifteen years. When the technology finally did come into regular use, it was for the relatively narrow task of removing cigarette smoke. The electric ironer was heavily promoted during the years after the war, and it enjoyed a certain popularity, but it proved far less important in modern life than the introduction of the new fabrics that rendered it less important.

108

Advertisement for "merit specified" Kaiser Dishwasher and Instant Disposal Unit,  
published in Arts & Architecture, May 1948

Look twice...  
they're both  
KAISERS

**KAISER**  
—the 5-minute dishwasher—  
—the instant disposal unit—

Looking to save money? Look no further than the Kaiser Dishwasher and Instant Disposal Unit. The Kaiser Dishwasher is a built-in unit that washes dishes in just 5 minutes. The Instant Disposal Unit is a built-in unit that disposes of food waste in just 5 minutes. Both units are made of stainless steel and are available in white or chrome finishes. They are also available in different sizes to fit your kitchen. For more information, contact your local Kaiser distributor.

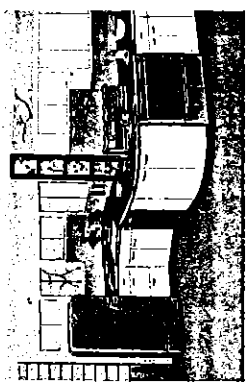
# Now! Only Hotpoint bring in so many colors plu



High kitchen note. See how all the Hotpoint appliances, including automatic washer and dryer, are finished in lovely Coral Pink. Add a few dot color touches to cabinets and woodwork... and a neatly modern kitchen-laundry is yours!



Efficient use of space makes this arrangement wonderfully handy! Sunburst built-in refrigerator and built-in dishwasher. Note how both use 30-inch Hotpoint Range and the built-in dishwasher make use of built-in space.



Deep, rich, handsons are these smart Woodland Brown Hotpoint appliances for your kitchen and laundry. Everyone will admire the contrasting colors of the built-in refrigerator, built-in dishwasher and range against a colored background.

The prefabricated corner toilet unit, complete with built-in magazine rack, ashtray, and a radio not tied to the house's centralized sound system was, alas, not to be.

The appliances that are familiar to us today were present in what seems to be a strangely prehistoric form. The Kaiser Cargo Fleetways dishwasher, which was also used in some of the earliest Case Study houses, was cylinder-shaped, and the dishes were placed into a rack that rose from the counter. There was also a lot of button-pushing necessary to make the thing work. Another machine, the Thor Automagic, washed clothes and dishes, at different times using different baskets. There were also cylindrical deep-freeze units.

Like most of the Case Study houses, this demonstration house went to extremes to provide sweeping, uninterrupted kitchen work surfaces. The refrigerator was tucked entirely under the counter, and the stove burners were lined up across the back to leave counter space in front. The aesthetic requirement that appliances be fully integrated into the design was undermined by the very rapid evolution of the appliances themselves. Their shape, size, and features were changing very rapidly, and by the early 1950s, the manufacturers were also introducing new colors and styling innovations to encourage people to change them more rapidly. At around the same time, shapes and sizes began to stabilize and become standardized, so a designer could confidently leave a space for a particular appliance and know it would fit. But the immediate postwar desire to integrate the machinery fully into the architecture looked more practical than it probably was. In the name of getting a feeling of openness, it resulted in a tightness and inflexibility in the design.

for 

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a multi-story building, possibly a school or institutional structure. The building features a prominent entrance with a large, textured wall section on the left. The image is heavily stylized, with deep blacks and bright whites, giving it a graphic, almost abstract quality. The architecture includes multiple windows and a complex roofline. The overall composition is vertical, with the building occupying most of the frame.

penders for time in . . . and that does her tasks so

[illegible]

110  
~~TOP SECRET~~



*"Sight and Sound Room,"  
published in House & Garden, Oct. 1945*



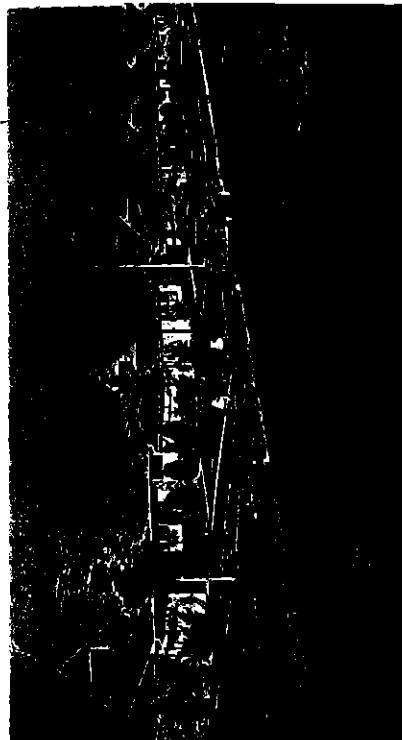
The appliance that most changed postwar American life, and most disrupted room designs and living habits, was the television set. The Case Study architects generally ignored it, although they paid attention to sound systems. And even this promotional house tucked the television into an obtrusive cabinet, situated inconveniently low at one end of a built-in sofa. Television had been introduced at the 1939 New York World's Fair, and its development had been delayed by World War II. Thus, although the precise way in which television would reach across the country did not become established until 1948, people knew it was coming. In October 1945 *House & Garden* had predicted "a new kind of living room" it called the Sight and Sound Room, with high, built-in loudspeakers, a fold-up, reflective television screen, and facilities for home movies. Though the actual postwar living room was not so self-conscious about it, it did become more a place where people saw and heard things happening elsewhere than a center of family activities. It became an essential part of the suburban environment, since it allowed people living far from their families in wholly new and unfamiliar places to participate in the national culture, to get clues on how to behave and what to buy.

Television caused people to refocus their rooms and reorganize their lives far more directly and powerfully than most of the other forces presumed to be shaping the postwar house. Although bulletins in television sets were often shown in home magazines, in practice, television resisted being quietly integrated, partly because



Visitors to a model home at the Exhibit Center  
Levittown, 1956

Levittown street, Pennsylvania, 1950s



shapes and screens kept changing, but mostly because it demanded to be in a place where it could be seen clearly by several people at once. But certain habits usually assumed to have been caused by television may have been the result of the relaxed California life style. Architect Cliff May, generally regarded as the inventor of the modern ranch house, and his wife Jean were presented by *House Beautiful* in April 1946 as "a family that really knows how to live." "If there's a good program on the radio," they wrote, "we have dinner on trays in the living room, around the big coffee table, on the sofa arms or on our carry-about end tables."<sup>12</sup>

May's houses were extremely well-publicized in the immediate postwar years, although it was not so much architecture as attitude that was being extolled. They were informal, not fussy, all on one level, and easily copied almost anywhere. And the term "ranch house" was as good as a brand name, easy to remember and endowed with a certain cachet. It is worth noting that although May's houses were novel and basically modern, they were also linked to the conveniently vague heritage of the California ranch. Their modernness was not insistent. They embodied the idea that if one shouldn't be burdened by tradition, one shouldn't entirely ignore it either. "A true modern," a 1945 *Russwin Hardware* advertisement called the ranch house, "this free-flowing, beautifully functionalized house born of our 19th Century West."<sup>13</sup> The ranch house's ascribed melding of modern and traditional, Tomorrowland and Frontierland, spoke to a very persistent impulse of postwar America. "It's really a contemporary version of the California ranch style," May wrote of his house. "This window is 14 feet long. Imagine that in a strictly authentic house! But imagine a house, these days, without big, big windows - as big as you can get."<sup>14</sup>

At a time when banks in many parts of the country were reluctant to grant mortgages on modern houses, the ranch-style house was winning acceptance as a standard housing type. They could be built very simply with shallow gabled roofs to domesticate them; they came out something like crushed and stretched Cape Cods. These versions did not deliver "a whole kingdom" on a one-acre lot, as the Mays' house was said to do, but practical boxes on half- or quarter-acre lots.

As things turned out, although many of them obtained new houses, postwar Americans had to settle for considerably less than the touted postwar house. The census reported a 23.6 percent increase in dwelling units between 1940 and 1950 nationwide, 44.7 percent in the western states, and 57.2 percent in California. The great majority of this increase of about 8.7 million dwelling units was after 1945. (Total population increased 14.3 percent during this time. This was the great age of the "little boxes on the hillside" and everywhere else, an age in which, when Levitt unveiled a new model, the line to see it might reach for a mile.)

In houses, as in most other consumer goods, it was a seller's market. Virtually anything that could be produced could be sold. Low-paying jobs were dropping out of the economy, being

111  
112  
113  
114

*Five Star Home No. 1805,  
published in Better Homes & Gardens,  
May 1948*



*The back porch, which is the best feature of the house, is shown in the photograph above. The house is shown in the photograph above.*

*Better Homes & Gardens Five Star Home No. 1805*

... shows how on a 50-foot lot you can have a wall of

**glass, a terrace, outdoor living, and privacy**

Even though the years immediately following World War II were marked by enormous gains in industrial productivity, and an accompanying, unprecedented gain in real personal income, houses during the first postwar decade were, in some key respects, worse than those built before the war. The postwar house tended to cover fewer square feet, and typically had only one bathroom; before the war, two bathrooms had become the standard.<sup>17</sup> This was perhaps an economy made possible by the proliferation of houses with only one finished floor, while prewar houses tended to have two. But it was also the result of a far wider segment of the population entering the housing market, particularly people who were leaving even smaller and less well-equipped houses in the cities. Those buying new houses before the war - during the depression - were the well-off. After the war, nearly everybody seemed to expect to have a better house, and veterans had benefits that put houses within reach.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that, in view of materials and labor shortages, attention should have been focused on improving the quality of existing housing stock, especially in cities and towns. At the time, it was scarcely considered. And those who tried to do it found that they were unable to get financing or needed federal mortgage insurance to do the job. There were many reasons for this, among them the argument that the wartime experience of aerial bombing indicated that a population spread thinly across the landscape would be safer than one packed tightly into cities. Federal housing policy was to relieve overcrowding in the slums and to encourage the building of new, though not necessarily innovative, houses. Postwar optimism, with its exhilarating sense of starting new, had very bleak consequences for older cities, because the postwar house was at least quasi-suburban in nature.

replaced by more skilled and higher-paying jobs. The nation's wealth was being distributed more democratically than it had been before the war, which raised expectations of material improvement. Consumer demand had never been stronger.<sup>18</sup> That's why there was a sudden proliferation of automobile makes, appliance manufacturers, and furniture makers, many of which disappeared once the prewar giants were producing at capacity and the extraordinary demand slackened off. Full peacetime production was a long time in coming, in no small part because one of the key events of the postwar period was a war, officially a "police action," in Korea. The move from a seller's to a buyer's market did not really get under way until 1953.

These phenomena had their most pronounced effect in housing, which was experiencing much greater price inflation than most other industries. Nearly everybody wanted a house, but the industry was suffering from materials shortages and a lack of skilled labor. The first kept the anticipated prefabrication boom, which was predicated on using materials not traditionally associated with housing, from being realized. Frequently revised regulations governing the size and cost of houses and the allocation of materials compressed the plans of houses and made the sprawling, large perimeter houses of California dreams virtually impossible. And labor shortages, along with people's willingness to buy almost anything, kept conventionally built houses plain and repetitive.

In 1951 *House & Garden* unintentionally dramatized the problems and high costs of construction when it commissioned a House of Ideas for a site in Long Island. The imaginary client was a couple in their early thirties, with two sons, eight and four, able to spend \$45,000 on house and land. This was quite a lot of money at a time when a \$7500 salary was considered upper income. Yet, by the time the magazine was building the rambling, double-winged, 2500-square-foot house, the cost had grown to \$56,137.96, "not counting land." The house was open throughout the summer of 1951, and thousands came to take a look. But even for the upper-income readers it was not something they could try at home.

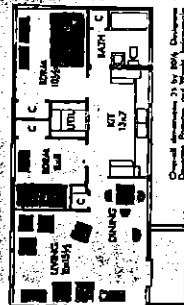
112  
Hinc

Five Star Home No. 1809,  
published in Better Homes & Gardens,  
Sept. 1948



Better Homes & Gardens

## Minimum-cost house



What's the cost? That depends on what you want. This house has 612 square feet. Cost of materials and labor, \$1,000. Cost of finishing, \$1,000. Total cost, \$2,000.

See the 1948 edition of Better Homes & Gardens for more plans. Write for your free copy. 1948 edition, \$1.00. 1949 edition, \$1.50.

In this, the Case Study program was very much in tune with its times. Of the early Case Studies, only Ralph Rapson's unexecuted Greenbelt House, Case Study House #4 (1945), addressed the question of small city lots and groups of houses. This is better than most of the shelter magazines did in approaching the matter.

The way in which limitations on size, budget, and materials were most often discussed by the magazines was as a first step to a larger conception. There were plans showing small houses that would eventually be the two-car garage of a sprawling dream-house, and plans for houses whose first phase, consisting of one room serving as living, dining, and bedroom, a kitchen and a bath, pushed informality, openness, and multiple use of spaces and furniture beyond an acceptable limit.<sup>18</sup> Such approaches also involved an up-front investment in design that most people settling for such minimal living arrangements would probably not be in a position to make. Today it is very rare to find a house of the immediate postwar era that has not been added to at least once, and often several times. Such a long-term strategy was probably lacking in the majority of cases.

The magazine-sponsored program that probably came closest to dealing with the real concerns of postwar home-seekers was the *Better Homes & Gardens Five Star Home* series. A fixture of the magazine since the 1930s, it illustrated a completed, architect-designed house, described its virtues and features, and sold working drawings for five dollars a set. It also sent a series of scale models of the homes to department stores in large- and middle-sized cities, where, between 1945 and 1947, they were seen by two million people. In 1947 the magazine boasted that every 57.6 seconds, a family obtained a set of drawings for a Five Star Home.<sup>19</sup>

Most of these houses had been ones that architects had done for private clients, which were then selected by the magazine, but for several years in the late 1940s, the designs were said to be based on a survey the magazine conducted involving 4900 families. This produced the kind of laundry-list of features with which magazines, families, and the building industry were comfortable.

"Obviously the ill-designed cracker-box houses that have mushroomed across the face of the nation are not what anybody wants," the magazine concluded. "Most families want houses that are low and ground-hugging instead of high and boxy. They want at least three bedrooms. They want picture windows. . . . They want not imprisoning cells for living rooms but rooms big enough to relax in, entertain in, live in." Other desires expressed were the possibility of indoor-outdoor living, no more than one room on the second floor, a utility room, and an attached garage.<sup>20</sup>

Although such well-known architects as Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, identified as designers of "the Oak Ridge atomic bomb community,"<sup>21</sup> designed Five Star houses, they were not architecturally innovative or distinguished. They were, however, sensible explorations of what was practical for most of their readers. Five Star Home 1805, for example, was designed to "show how on a 50-foot lot, you can have a wall of glass, a terrace, outdoor living and privacy," all in a house with 750 square feet of interior space. A few months later, the magazine presented number 1809, a small, utilitarian, horizontal box that a developer would probably have labeled a ranch-style house. "It may not be your idea of a dream house, but it has clear straightforward lines and simplified construction that cut costs to the bone," the accompanying copy advised. "A house you can live in comfortably is finer than any home still in the dream stage."<sup>22</sup>

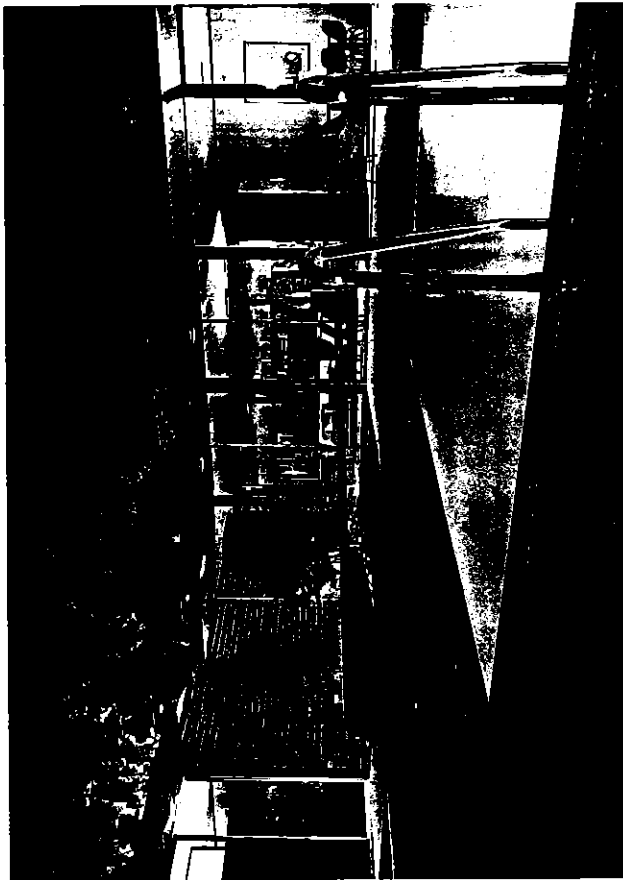
Despite their modesty, the Five Star Homes still show many of the same tendencies embodied more forcefully in the Case Study houses. They all assumed an active, house-centered family, with diverse interests but little need for formality. Many of them did not try very hard to make an impression on the street, although they were not usually hidden from view, as some of the Case

You can buy complete plans for this or any

Craig Ellwood  
Case Study House #17, Beverly Hills, 1954 - 55

Study houses were. Most were stripped of applied period decorations, although shallow, gabled roofs were common, made modern by their association with ranch houses. Multiple-use spaces were necessary in houses this small, and outdoor spaces were used as inexpensive ways to extend the activities of the house in good weather, and expand its perceived size all the time. Even the traditional designs had a modern touch. A Cape Cod, for example, sprouted a family room and a garage, with only the upstairs bedroom at one end and the shutters on the window recalling the style. The magazine even updated one of its 1937 models, a Cape Cod, for use in 1947. It stripped off the shutters and pushed the garage out against the street to provide privacy. The corner of the living room had floor-to-ceiling windows, and the shallowly pitched roof made an overhang. The quest for coziness had been replaced by one for openness, but the plan was not overwhelmingly changed.

The Five Star Home program was an example of what Entenza termed an attempt "to ride into the future piggy back on the status quo," and because of that it provided information many people could use. In contrast, the Case Study program was conceived as an attempt to mediate between those who saw no change and those predicting the millennium. It did not address many of the key issues of postwar housing - particularly the creation of a new kind of mass suburbia. Although widely condemned as ugly even while it was happening, and deplored for its impact on the land, suburbia never got the kind of serious scrutiny and experimentation it deserved. The Case Study program, with its increasing concentration on large houses on choice hillside sites, paid only slight attention to the sprawl happening in the valleys. Yet the Case Study houses remain among the best embodiments of the spirit of the immediate postwar era, a time marked by ingenuity, technological optimism, openness to change, and a sense of boundless possibilities.



1. In *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), I discuss at some length, especially in Chapter 2, the demographic factors that distinguished the immediate postwar years from 1954 - 64, the period that is the subject of the book. Here, I have concentrated on the immediate postwar years, what I have termed, "the catch-up decade" because these are most relevant to the ideals and goals of the Case Study program.

2. For Ropson's design, see *House & Garden*, Aug. 1945, pp. 33 - 39.

3. Elizabeth B. Mack, *If You Want to Build a House* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 49.

4. Both the Fuller and Delos designs are shown in *House & Garden*, Oct. 1946, pp. 120 - 24.

5. Major Arthur Gordon, "The House I Left Behind Me," *House Beautiful*, Jan. 1945, p. 44.

6. "Builders at War," *House & Garden*, Sept. 1945, pp. 88 - 89.

7. Marjorie Frankenthaler, "How a Secretary Solved the Housing Shortage," *House Beautiful*, Sept. 1945, pp. 114 - 15.

8. Muriel Emanuel, ed., *Contemporary Architects* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 290 - 92.

9. George Nelson and Henry Wright, *Tomorrow's House: How to Plan Your Postwar Home Now* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), p. 6.

10. Mack, *If You Want to Build a House* (note 3), p. 9.

11. Irene Moore, "A Proper Dream House for Any Veteran," *House Beautiful*, Jan. 1945, pp. 34ff.

12. See the presentation of the Neutra house in *Polos Vardas* (for Grant Beckstrand) in *House & Garden*, Aug. 1946, p. 38.

13. Jean May, "We Eat All Over the House," *House Beautiful*, Apr. 1946, p. 83.

14. The advertisement ran in July 1945 in several magazines. See, for example, *House & Garden*, July 1945, p. 13.

15. "We Don't like Pretentious Architecture," *House Beautiful*, Apr. 1946, p. 94.

16. See *Editors of Fortune*, *The Changing American Market* (New York: Time Inc., 1954). This is a collection of articles that originally ran in *Fortune* magazine during 1953 and 1954; it contains a wealth of data on productivity increases, income distribution, real annual income, and housing and consumer desires.

17. Federal Housing Administration, *What People Want When They Buy a House* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953). This report blames the lowering of bathroom standards almost entirely on postwar materials shortages. Multiple baths were becoming standard again at the time it was written.

18. See, for example, "A Garage Today, a House Tomorrow," *House Beautiful*, Sept. 1946, p. 106. Also see William Wurster, "Building Now," *House & Garden*, May 1946, pp. 74ff.

19. Bob Jones, "A Five Star Home is Born," *Better Homes & Gardens* 26, no. 3 (Nov. 1947), 42ff. The F.H.A. report, *What People Want* (note 17), referred to a 1950 study that showed seventy-four percent of people surveyed wanted a single-story house, including eighty percent who would buy a low-priced house under \$7500. American Home also developed and distributed study plans, which were featured monthly and available for fifty cents. These had a modesty similar to the Five Star homes.

20. John Narmie, "One story - but three bedrooms," *Better Homes & Gardens* 26, no. 3 (Nov. 1947), 46.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

22. John Narmie, "Minimum-Cost House," *Better Homes & Gardens* 27, no. 1 (Sept. 1948), 56.

114  
Ellwood

9/8/97

FICTION

## SPUTNIK

*A small tribute to Jell-O, the most American of American foods, on its centenary.*

BY DON DELILLO



HE Demings were home this afternoon, busy at various tasks in their split-level house, a long low two-tone colonial with a picture window, a breezeway, and bright siding.

Erica was in the kitchen making Jell-O chicken mousse for dinner. Three cups chicken broth or three chicken-bouillon cubes dissolved in three cups boiling water. Two packages Jell-O lemon gelatine. One teaspoon salt. One-eighth teaspoon cayenne. Three tablespoons vinegar. One and a third cups whipped-topping mix. Two-thirds cup mayonnaise. Two cups finely diced cooked chicken. Two cups finely chopped celery. Two tablespoons chopped pimiento.

Then boil and pour and stir and blend. Fold spiced and chilled gelatine into chicken thing. Spoon into nine-by-five-inch loaf pan. Chill until firm. Unmold. Garnish with crisp lettuce and stuffed olives (if desired). Makes six entrée salads.

Do not reuse this bottle for storing liquids.

Erica did things with Jell-O that took people's breath away. Even now, as she prepared the chicken mousse for final chilling, there were nine parfait glasses in the two-tone Kelvinator. This was dessert for the next three evenings. Each glass was tilted at a forty-five-degree angle either against the wall of the refrigerator or against another object. This tilting method, handed down from her grandmother and her mother, allowed Erica to do Jell-O desserts in a number of colorful diagonal stripes, working the combinations among half a dozen flavors. She might put black-raspberry Jell-O, slightly thickened, into a parfait glass. She puts the glass in the fridge, tilting it at forty-five degrees. After the gelatine chills and fully thickens she folds in a

swath of lime Jell-O, and then maybe orange, and then strawberry or black cherry. At the end of the process she has nine multistriped desserts, all different, all so vividly attractive.

Doing things with Jell-O was just about the best way to improve her mood, which was oddly gloomy today—she couldn't figure out why.

From the kitchen window she could see the lawn, neat and trimmed, low-hedged, open and approachable. The trees at the edge of the lawn were new, like everything else in the area. All up and down the curving streets there were young trees and small new box shrubs and a sense of openness, a sense of seeing everything there is to see at a single glance, with nothing shrouded or walled or protected from the glare.

Nothing shrouded or secret except for young Eric, who sat in his room, behind drawn fibreglass curtains, jerking off into a condom. He liked using a condom because it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile with a warhead that carried yields of up to fifty kilotons.

Avoid contact with eyes, open cuts, or running sores.

He sat sprawled in a butterfly chair and thought nobody could ever guess what he was doing, especially the condom part. Nobody could ever guess it, know it, imagine it, or associate him with it. But what happens, he thought, if you die someday and it turns out that everything you've ever done in private becomes general knowledge in the hereafter? Everybody automatically knows everything you ever did when you thought you were totally and sneakily and safely unseen.

Prolonged exposure to sun may cause bursting.

They put thermal pads on the Honest John to heat the solid fuel in preparation for firing. Then they remove the pads and launch the missile from a gir-

derlike launch rail in a grassy field somewhere in the Free World. And the missile's infallible flight, the way it sweeps out precise volumes of mathematical space, it's so saintly and sun-tipped, swinging out of its apex to dive to earth, and the way the fireball haloes out above its column of smoke and roar, like some nameless faceless whatever. It made him want to be a Catholic.

Plus she'd have three chicken-mousse salads for leftovers later in the week.

Out in the breezeway husband Rick was simonizing their two-tone Ford Fairlane convertible, brand-new, like the houses and the trees, with white-wall tires and stripes of jet-streak chrome that fairly crackled when the car was in motion.

Erica kept her Jell-O molds in the seashell-beige cabinet over the range. She had fluted molds, ring molds, crown molds in a number of sizes, she had notes and diagrams, mold techniques, offer forms for special decorative molds that she intended to fill out and mail at her earliest convenience.

If swallowed, induce vomiting at once.

Eric stroked his dick in a conscientious manner, sombre and methodical. The condom was feely in a way he'd had to get used to, rubbery dumb and disaffecting. On the floor between his feet was a photo of Jayne Mansfield with her knockers coming out a sequinned gown. He wanted to sandwich his dick between her breasts until it went *whew*. But he wouldn't just walk out the door when it was over. He would talk to her breasts. Be tender and lovey. Tell them what his longings were, his hopes and dreams.

There was one mold Erica had never used, sort of guided-missile-like, because it made her feel uneasy somehow.

The face in the picture was all painted mouth and smudgy lashes, and at a certain point in the furtherance of his business Eric deflected his attention from the swooping breasts and focussed on the fa-

cial Jayne, on her eyebrows and lashes and puckered lips. The breasts were real, the face was put together out of a thousand thermoplastic things. And in the evolving scan of his eros, it was the masking waxes, liners, glosses, and creams that became the soft moist mechanisms of release.

Intentional misuse by deliberately inhaling contents can be harmful or fatal.

Erica wore a swirly blue skirt and buttoned blouse that happened to match the colors of their Fairlane.

Rick was still in the breezeway, running a shammy over the chromework. This was something, basically, he could do forever. He could look at himself in a strip of chrome, warp-eyed and hydrocephalic, and feel some of the power of the automobile, the horsepower, the decibel rumble of dual exhausts, the pedal tension of Ford-O-Matic drive. The sneaky thing about this car was that, yes, you drove it sensibly to the dentist and occasionally carpooled with the Andersons and took Eric to the science fair but beneath the routine family applications was the crouched power of the machine, top down, eating up the landscape.

Danger. Contents under pressure.

One of Erica's favorite words in the language was "breezeway." It spoke of ease and breeze and being contemporary and having something others did not. Another word she loved was "crisper." The Kelvinator had a nice roomy crisper and she liked to tell the men that such-and-such was in the crisper. Not the refrigerator, the crisper. The carrots are in the crisper, Rick. There were people out there on the Old Farm Road, where the front porches sag badly and the grass goes unmowed and the Duck River Baptists worship in a squat building that sits in the weeds on the way to the dump, who didn't know what a crisper was, who had iceboxes instead of refrigerators, or who had refrigerators that lacked crispers, or who had crispers in their refrigerators but didn't know what they were for or what they were called, who put tubs of butter in the crisper instead of lettuce, or eggs instead of carrots.

He came in from the breezeway.

"The carrots are in the crisper, Rick."

He liked to nibble on a raw carrot after he'd waxed and buffed the car.

He stood looking at the strontium-white loaf that sat on a bed of lettuce in-

side a cake pan in the middle of the table.

"Wuff, what is it?"

"It's my Jell-O chicken mousse."

"Hey, great," he said.

Sometimes she called it her Jell-O chicken mousse and sometimes she called it her chicken-mousse Jell-O. This was one of a thousand convenient things about Jell-O. The word went anywhere, front or back or in the middle. It was a push-button word, the way so many things were push-button now, the way the whole world opened behind a button that you pushed.

May cause discoloration of urine or feces.

Eric sidled along the wall and slipped into the bathroom, palming the sloppy condom. He washed it out in the sink and then fitted it over his middle finger and aimed the finger at his mouth so he could blow the condom dry. And in the movie version of his life he imagined how everything is projected on a Cinema-Scope screen, all the secret things he did alone over the years, and now that he is dead it's all available for public viewing and all his dead relatives and friends and teachers and ministers can watch him with his finger in his mouth, more or less, and a condom on his finger, and he is panting rhythmically to dry it off.

He heard his mother call his name.

He had to wash it and reuse it because this was the only one he had, borrowed from another boy, Danny Anderson, who'd taken it from his father's hiding place, under the balled socks, and who swore he'd never used it himself—a thing that wouldn't be fully established until both boys were dead and Eric had a chance to see the footage.

To avoid suffocation keep out of reach of small children.

Eric hid the rubber in his room, pressed into a box of playing cards. He took a long look at Jayne Mansfield's picture before he slipped it into the world atlas on his desk. He realized that Jayne's breasts were not as real-looking as he'd thought in his emotionally vulnerable state, dick in hand. They reminded him of something, but what? And then he saw it. The bumper bullets on a Cadillac.

He went into the kitchen and opened the fridge, just to see what was going on in there. The bright colors, the product names and logos, the array of familiar shapes, the tinsel glitter of things in foil wrap, the general sense of benevolent

gleam, of eyeball surprise, the sense of a tiny holiday taking place on the shelves and in the slots, a world unspoiled and ever renewable. But there was something else as well, faintly unnerving. The throb, perhaps. Maybe it was the informational flow contained in that endless motorized throb. Open the great white vaultlike door and feel the cool breezelet of systems at work, converting current into power, talking to each other day and night across superhuman spaces, a thing he felt outside of, not yet attuned to, and it confused him just a bit.

Except their Kelvinator wasn't white, of course. Not on the outside, anyway. It was Bermuda pink and dawn gray.

He looked inside. He saw the nine tilted parfait glasses and felt a little dizzy. He got disoriented sometimes by the tilted Jell-O desserts. It was as if a science-fiction force had entered the house and made some things askew while sparing others.

They sat down to dinner and Rick carved the mousse and doled out portions. They drank iced tea with a slice of lemon wedged to the rim of each glass, one of Erica's effortless extra touches.

Rick said to Eric, "Whacha been up to all afternoon? Big homework day?"

"Hey, Dad. Saw you simonizing the car."

"Got an idea. After dinner we'll take the binoculars and drive out on the Old Farm Road and see if we can spot it."

"Spot what?" Erica said.

"The baby moon. What else? The satellite they put up there. Supposed to be visible on clear nights."

It wasn't until this moment that Erica understood why her day had felt shadowed and ominous from the time she opened her eyes and stared at the mikado-yellow walls with patina-green fleecing. Yes, that satellite they put into orbit a few days ago. Rick took a scientific interest and wanted Eric to do the same. Sure, Rick was surprised and upset, just as she was, but he was willing to stand in a meadow somewhere and try to spot the object as it floated over. Erica felt a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours. It flew at an amazing rate of speed over the North Pole, *beep beep beep*, passing just above us, evidently, at certain times. She could not understand how this could happen. Were there other surprises coming, things we haven't been told about them? Did they

have crispers and breezeways? It was not a simple matter, adjusting to the news.

Rick said, "What about it, Eric? Want to drive on out?"

"Hey, Dad. G-g-g-great."

A pall fell over the table, displacing Erica's Sputnik funk. She thought Eric's occasional stuttering had something to do with the time he spent alone in his room. Hitting the books too hard, Rick thought. He was hitting something too hard, but Erica tried not to form detailed images.

Do not puncture or incinerate.

The boy could sit in the family room and watch their super-console TV, which was compatible with the knotty-pine panelling, and he could anticipate the dialogue on every show. Newscasts, ballgames, comedy hours. He did whatever voice the announcer or actor used, matching the words nearly seamlessly, and he never stuttered.

All the other kids ate Oreo cookies. Eric ate Hydrox cookies, because the name sounded like rocket fuel.

One of her kitchen gloves was missing—she had many pairs—and she wanted to believe Eric had borrowed it for one of his chemistry assignments. But she was afraid to ask. And she didn't think she looked forward to getting it back.

Yesterday he'd dunked a Hydrox

cookie in milk, held it dripping over the glass, and said thickly, "Is verry gud we poot Roosian moon in U.S. sky."

Then he took a bite and swallowed.

The men went out to find the orbiting satellite. Erica cleared the table, put on her rubberoid gloves, and began to do the dishes. Rick had kidded her about the gloves a number of times. The kitchen was equipped with an automatic dishwasher, of course. But she felt compelled as a homemaker to do a preliminary round of hand-washing and scouring, because if you don't get every smidge of organic murk off the fork tines and out of the pans before you run the dishwasher, it could come back to haunt you in the morning.

Flush eyes with water and call physician at once.

And the gloves protected her from scalding water and the touch of food scraps. Erica loved her gloves. The gloves were indestructible, basically, made of the same kind of materials used in counter-tops and TV tubes, in the electrical insulation in the basement and the vulcanized tires on the car. The gloves were important to her despite the way they felt, clammy but also dry, a feeling that defied innate contradiction.

All the things around her were impor-

tant. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by.

Breezeway

Crisper

Sectional

Car pools

Bridge parties

Broadloom

When she finished up in the kitchen she decided to vacuum the living-room rug but then realized this would make her bad mood worse. She'd recently bought a new satellite-shaped vacuum cleaner that she loved to push across the room because it hummed softly and seemed futuristic and hopeful, but she was forced to regard it ruefully now, after Sputnik, a clunky object filled with self-remorse.

Stacking chairs

Scatter cushions

Storage walls

Room divider

Fruit juicer

Cookie sheet

She thought she'd lift her spirits by doing something for the church social on Saturday to pep up the event a little.

Do not use in enclosed space.

She would prepare half a dozen serving bowls of her Jell-O antipasto salad. Six packages of Jell-O lemon gelatine. Six teaspoons salt. Six cups boiling water. Six tablespoons vinegar. Twelve cups ice cubes. Three cups finely cut salami. Two cups finely cut Swiss cheese. One and a half cups chopped celery. One and a half cups chopped onion. Twelve tablespoons sliced ripe olive.

She remembered coming home one day about six months ago and finding Eric with his head in a bowl of her antipasto salad. He said he was trying to eat it from the inside out to test a scientific theory of his. The explanation was so crazy and unconvincing that it was weirdly believable. But she didn't believe it. She didn't know what to believe. Was this a form of sexual curiosity? Was he pretending the Jell-O was a sort of lickable female body part? And was he engaged in an act of unnatural oral stimulation? He had jellified gunk all over his mouth and tongue. She looked at him. She had people skills. Erica was a person who related to people. But she had to put on gloves just to talk to him.

She set to work in the kitchen now, listening all the while for the reassuring sound of her men coming home, car doors closing in the breezeway, the solid clunk of well-made parts swinging firmly shut. ♦