

# The best houses in the world

There are many reasons why you might reasonably expect to find the world's best houses in the unworldly west of the U.S. It is a rich, sunny, populous, open region, like Australia without flies. It has bred a race of outdoor-loving homebodies.

These people favor apartment-living no more than Australians do. They have more mass-produced, monotonous tract house developments than we, but also a higher proportion of homebuilders who are willing to pay for professional, highly individual design.

The west has 15 per cent of the U.S. population but 25 per cent of its house market.

As a result of all this, house design in the Western states has been described by sober academic critics as "certainly the liveliest in all the world" and "probably the world's most thoughtful and intelligent domestic architecture."

Every other year for ten years the American Institute of Architects, in conjunction with *Sunset* magazine, has held a competition and given awards to the best houses of this best area, as judged by an independent panel of architects and planners.

## Awards

This year I was invited to join the judging panel. We studied 364 recently-built houses that had been entered, mostly by their architects. Four of them were selected for honor awards and 22 more for merit awards.

Results have just been announced, and an exhibition of these winners will soon tour the States.

The object of the awards programme is to commend superior architecture to public attention. But not only that, it is also to look at the whole field of western home design and "to seek out ideas that are new and promising." It focuses attention,

as they say, on domestic architecture's growing edge.

And how does this fresh green growing edge of ideas look in the year 1965? What sort of houses are these, which are judged the best of the newest of the best?

Considering that Beverly Hills is in the area, no one could be blamed for expecting a proportion of exceptionally luxurious confections, if not actually marble statues and heart-shaped swimming pools.

The fascinating truth was, on the contrary, a complete absence of Hollywood style opulence. There was hardly one swimming pool in the 364 entries. Most of the houses combined quiet comfort of a high order with an impressive lack of pretentiousness.

## Timber

Of course there are uncomfortable houses and pretentious houses on the coast, but they were not in this company of the best of the best.

Nearly all were built of timber, as to be expected, for the West Coast is the home of the mighty redwood, whose timber we now import extensively in some quantity. It is cheap there, it is a common native; and it is magnificent timber which can outlive many a brick.

For decades it has been used for the structural framing as well as for the wall covering and the roofing. For the latter, the redwood traditionally has been cut neatly into shingles, or split into thick, uneven rustic "shakes".

This year, 1965, is the year of the shingle. It has crept from the roof and clings all over the walls of a great number of award-winning houses. Some-

times it is left natural to weather a warm grey and sometimes, oddly, it is painted white on the walls of houses that look as if they might have been designed for construction in concrete or plastic, so trim and square are they.

What is new in planning? Nothing controversial; there are still the customary number of familiar rooms and usually only two bathrooms. However, two architectural tendencies have developed in the last year or so to the proportions of popular movements.

One of these is something which *Sunset* magazine describes as "the inside-out idea", by which it means that, in planning, the inside requirements rule the outside.

There may seem to be nothing new in that; it is one of the oldest bits of architectural dogma, applicable to a Gothic cathedral or an L-shaped cottage.

What is comparatively new in these houses is that the interior has been subjected to a great deal of modernizing.

Most of the award-winning houses are two-storeyed and the interiors are handsomely

designed for views within and beyond themselves.

As you walk through, a constantly changing sequence of space "experiences" (to use the "in" word) open up. Ceiling heights are rarely the regulation minimum. The living room is likely to be double height, and overlooked from a landing of the stairs, and again, from higher up, by the master bedroom.

Rooms are not cubicles, but bulge out in square bay windows or interlock with each other like a square-cut jigsaw puzzle.

## Exterior

And all of this playfulness is sensed on the outside because most of the bulges and the changes of level are duly and dutifully expressed externally.

The glass wall appears less frequently than a few years ago. Windows generally are smaller and unpredictable, for the principle is to put a small window where it favors the best view rather than a cinemascope picture window to gorge the lot.

These small windows conse-

quently are not lined up in neat rows, as once windows were, but appear anywhere and come in all sizes and shapes; tall and narrow being the favourite.

Their apparently haphazard spotting of the exterior of the house reflects the free distribution of the interior spaces.

All of this indicates a revival rather than a revolution: a revival of the 50-year old idea of Functionalism, which was all but overthrown a few fashionable years ago. It is a young revival but it is a sensible one, and this is a healthy and surprising turn of events, which must leave Walter Gropius pleased and puzzled.

The second main movement noticeable in the design of these houses is the "multiple plan," or "pavilion plan." The simplest and oldest variation of this is to split the house into two: living and bedroom sections. They are built in separate pavilions, with their own roofs, and are linked by a hall or glazed gallery or covered way.

More elaborate variations break the house into three: living, sleeping, and working-dining pavilions. Or more: an

extra one for guests and another for the cars.

In all cases the pavilion idea serves the purpose of bringing a sense of order to the complex of a sizeable house. Each pavilion can be a neat block of manageable size.

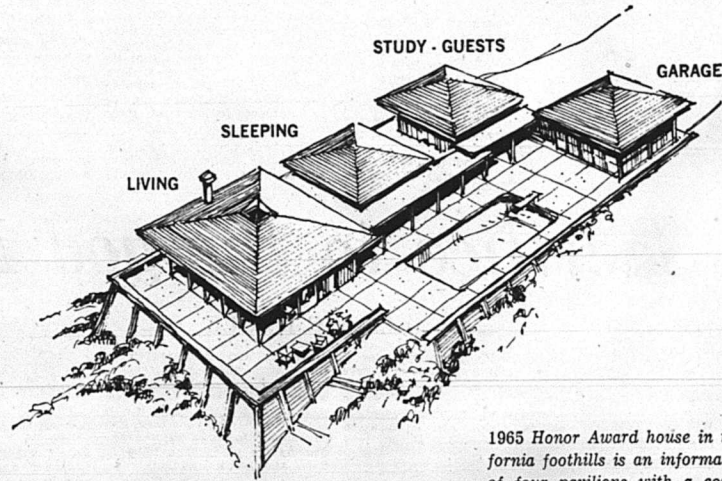
Walking may be slightly extended but housework may be reduced because of the zoning of activities and the fact that, to a great extent, only one pavilion is in use at a time. Two of the four winners of honor awards had four-pavilion plans.

And how do our best Australian houses of 1965 measure up to these of the U.S. West?

## Tasteful

Architecturally, I think, very creditably. It is not difficult, and not especially odious, to compare these winners with, say, the recent winners of Wilkinson House Awards in Sydney.

Many conditions are as different as redwood from clinker brick, but the quality of ideas, inventiveness and taste can be compared between the



1965 Honor Award house in the California foothills is an informal cluster of four pavilions with a connecting roofed passage and a great platform terrace.

And, according to ROBIN BOYD, the distinguished Australian architect who helped to judge them...

## OURS MEASURE UP QUITE WELL

two regions. And I doubt if anyone could tell them apart.

The inside-out idea, the pavilion idea, and all the others, are being done here, too, and well done.

However, in one aspect of design, only partly architectural, the advanced houses of the west leave the advanced houses of Australia standing in the mud. That is the landscape design.

It is not that the West Coast has spectacular botanists or goes in for giant floral displays. There is color, but the overall impression is a monochrome of greens. Without much doubt the region has the Western world's most cultivated approach to gardening.

It designs the grounds around almost every building as carefully as the building itself, but not in an artificial, architectonic way. Its landscape character is all its own, about midway between the English and the Japanese styles; an urban extension of nature.

Landscape architecture is a flourishing profession there (while there is not one full-time private practising consultant in the whole of Australia).

They, as we, have culled the world for the plants that love their warm climate. As a result California is, as our youngest TV fan must have observed, stacked with gum trees.

## Gardens

These line new freeways and suburban avenues. They make forests in parklands and crowd many private gardens. They get far more respect there, of course, than they get at home. But the gum is not our only return gift to Hollywood.

"Do you have acacias in Australia?" a tree-loving architect of Los Angeles asked me.

We were standing in a beautiful garden, largely furnished with Australian natives: wattles, bottlebrushes, ti-tree, melaleuca. It was a typical western U.S. garden - and how un-Australian.