

REAL ESTATE AS ART

New Architecture in Venice California

ART

Joseph Giovannini

PHOTOS

Daniel Martinez

PRODUCED BY Tom Sewell

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T. Sewell

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IN VENICE.



TEXT JOSEPH GIOVANNINI

PHOTOGRAPHY
DANIEL MARTINEZ

DESIGN BY
JOHN VAN HAMMERSVELD

PRODUCTION HELEN ENG

PRODUCED BY TOM SEWELL

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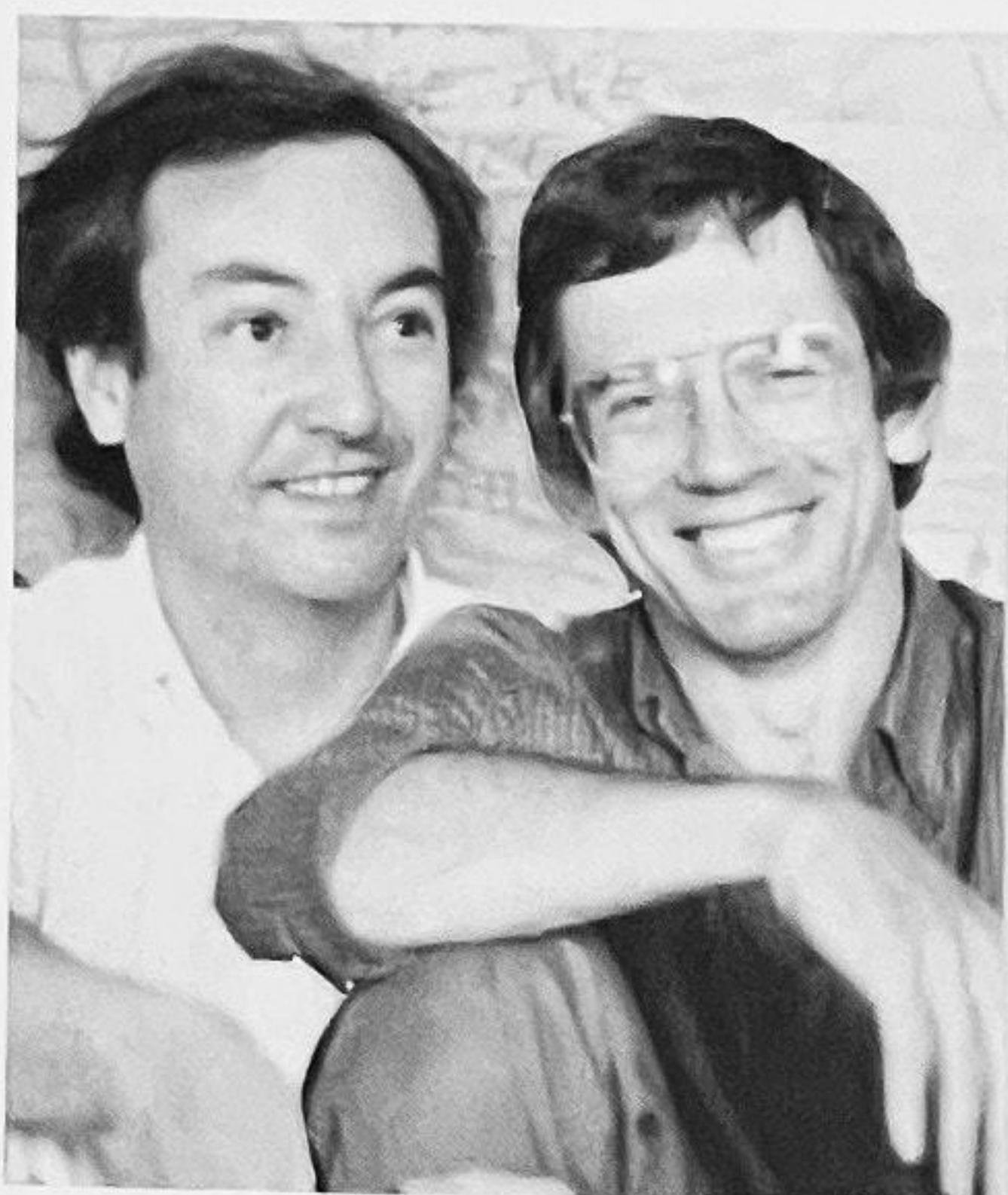
MAY 16 1986



Billy Al Bengston (right) with Mr. and Mrs. Roy Doumani

“There exists today in Venice California a unique phenomenon: a magical blending of art and architecture. It began in the sixties when artists moved to Venice and began to develop studio spaces which often became as important as their art, or more so. From there followed collaboration and mutual stimulation between artists and architects—out of this fertile environment grew some of the projects documented in this book.”

Tom Sewell



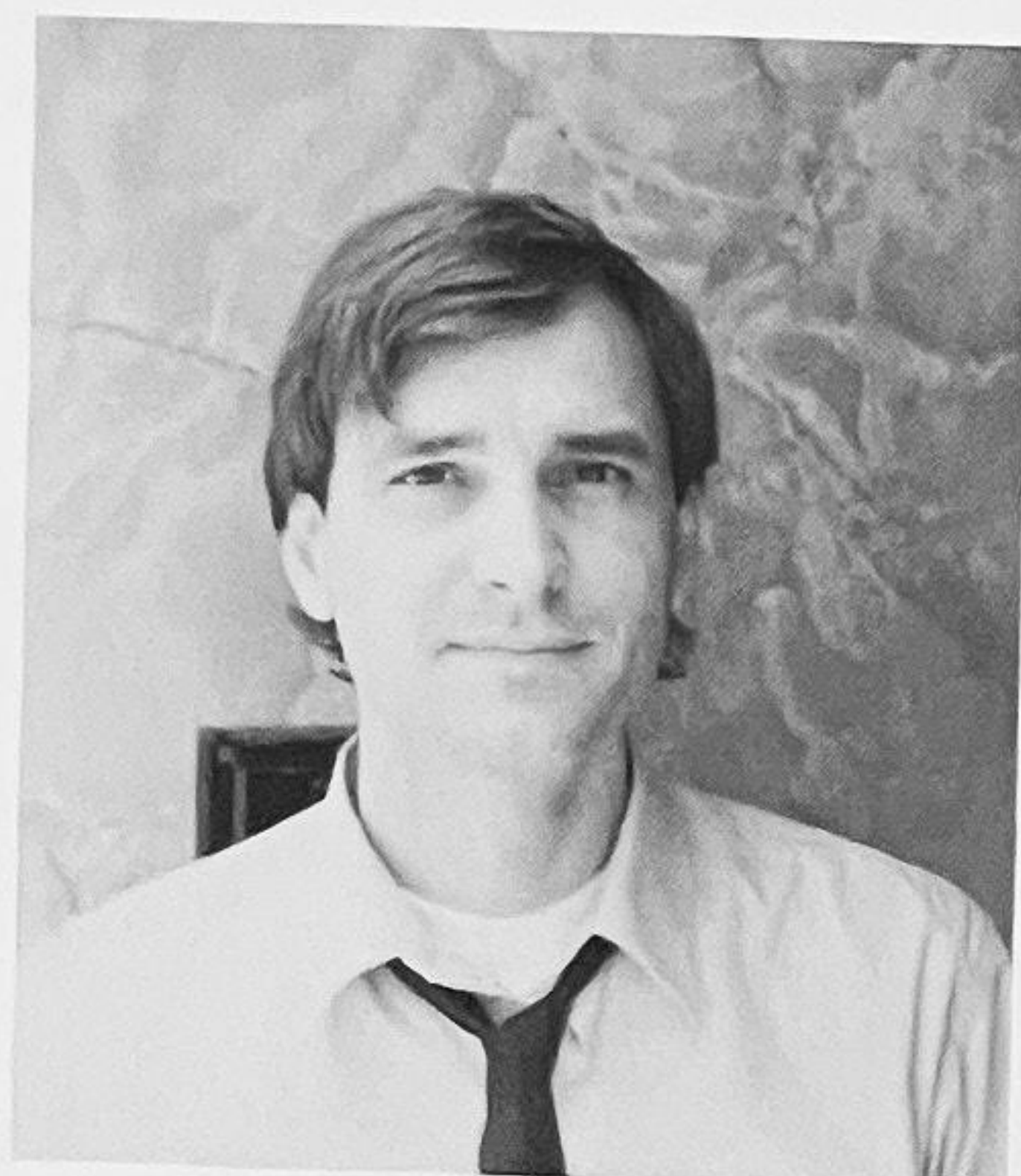
HODGETTS MANGURIAN

Craig Hodgetts and Robert Mangurian's firm, STUDIOWORKS is based in Venice. Hodgetts teaches in Hollywood and Mangurian teaches at SCI ARC. They are designing the Venice interArts building.



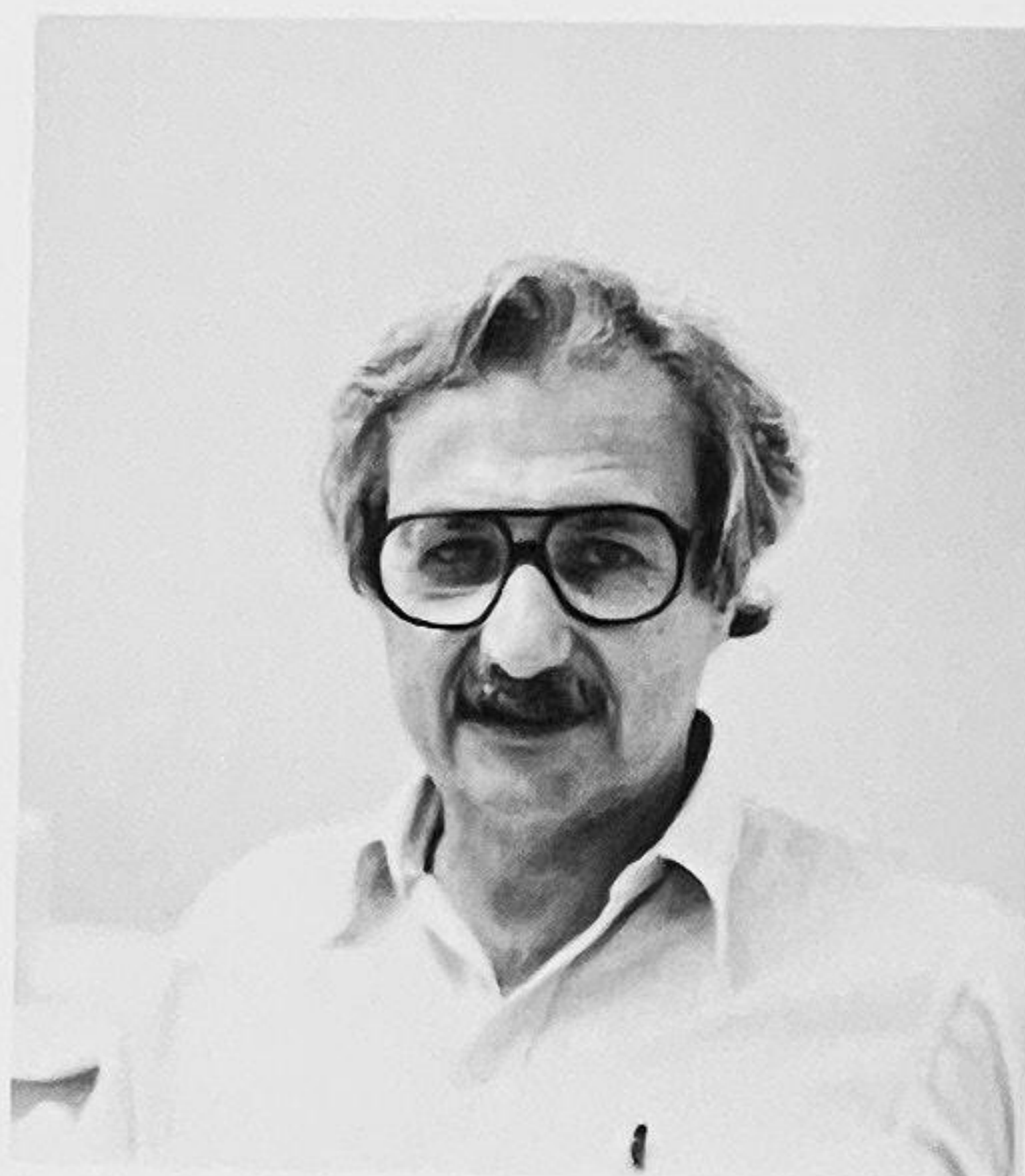
LOWE

David Ming-Li Lowe teaches at L.A. City College. He is finishing a house for a friend in West L.A. The residence combines Viennese-Austrian with the Pacific style and overlooks a Taoist period garden.



FISHER

Frederick Fisher lives and works in Santa Monica. He studied Art at Oberlin College. He is collaborating on a downtown loft with artist Eric Orr and designing a gorilla breeding facility for the L.A. Zoo.



GEHRY

Frank Gehry works out of his firm based in Venice and resides in Santa Monica. He designed the Temporary Contemporary Museum of Art located in two existing warehouse buildings in downtown Los Angeles.



DEDIJER

Milica Dedijer was born in Yugoslavia, and studied architecture at the University of Belgrade. She graduated with a BA from USC. Currently, she teaches at SCI ARC and lives in Venice.



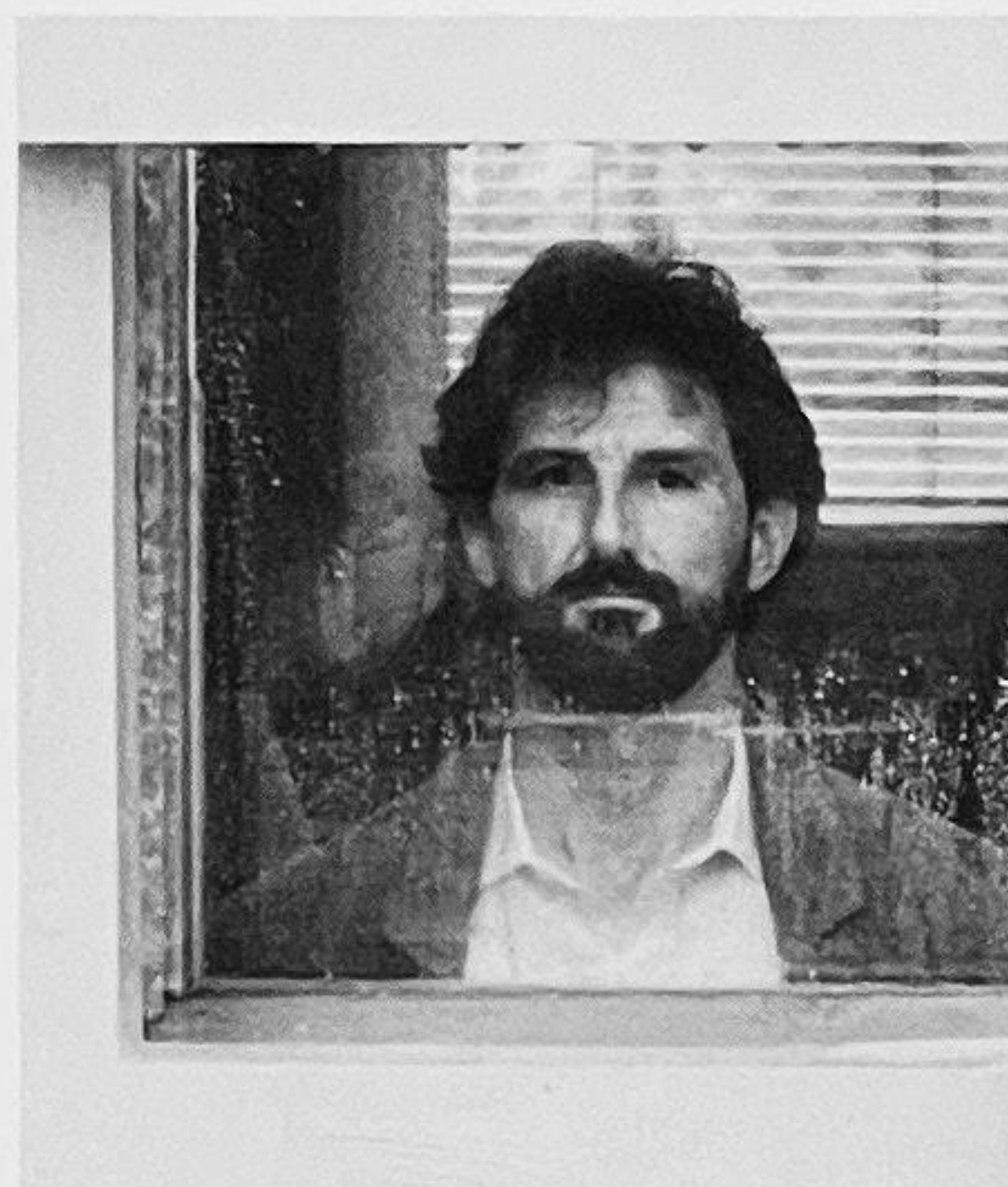
DILL

Guy Dill is a sculptor who lives and works in Venice. His current works are made of cast, colored, reinforced concrete. Presently, he is working on a large commission in Sacramento.



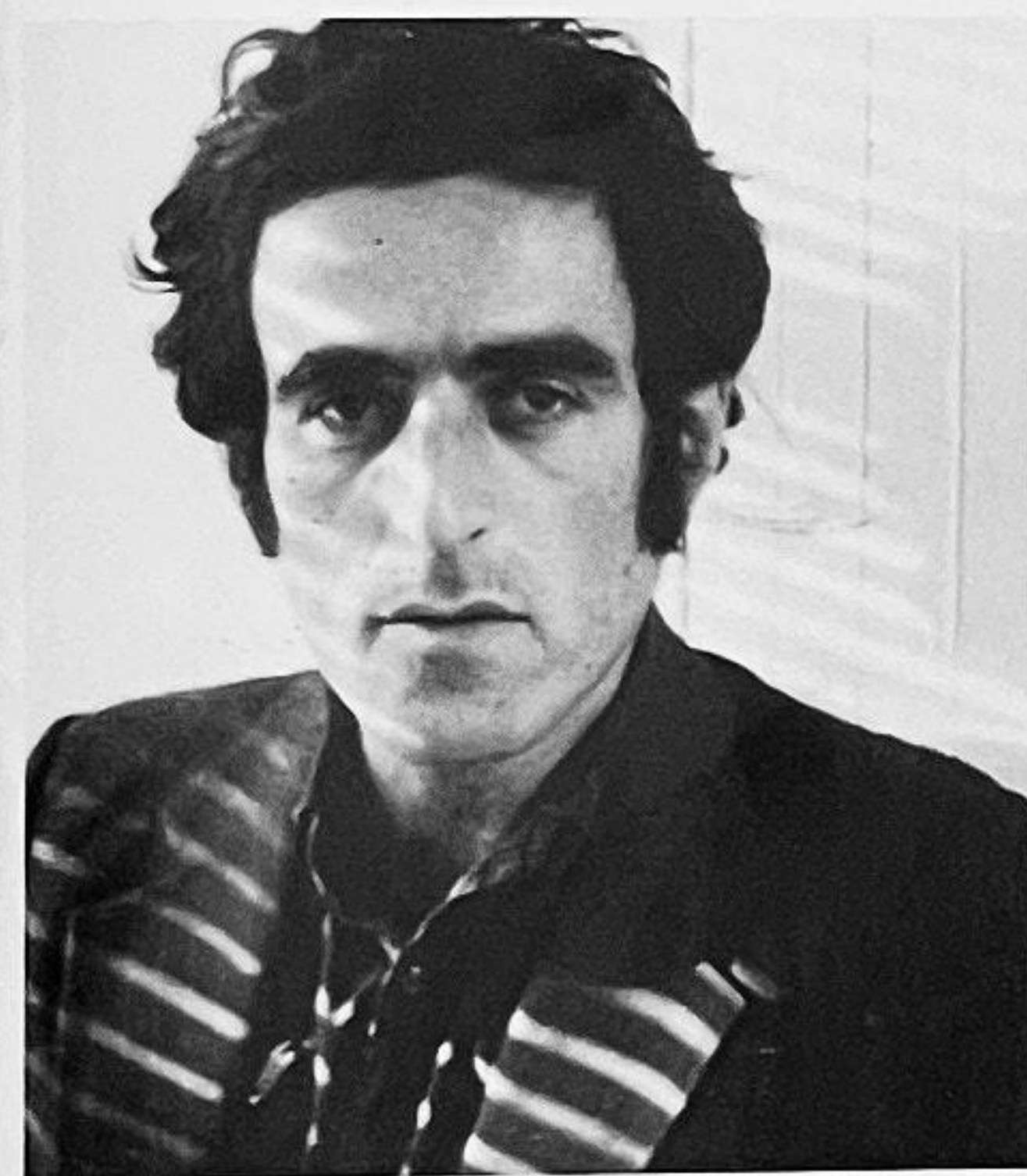
DAY

Carl Day's firm is located in Santa Monica and he resides in Malibu Lake. He graduated from the University of Houston with degrees in Science and Architecture, and taught at Cal State Long Beach.



GRAHAM

Artist Robert Graham lives and works in Venice. The Doumani Beach house was his first architectural commission. He approached the design as a studio artist, familiar with high ceilings, voluminous spaces and skylights.



LIPSON

Michael Lipson resides in Venice. His projects are general remodelling of personal projects. Lipson spends half his time in the film industry as a lighting technician, creating visual references to architecture and film.



MAYNE ROTONDI

Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi work out of their West L.A. based firm, MORPHOSIS. Mayne is one of the founders of SCI ARC. They have designed a restaurant on Market St. in Venice and a facade for the Hennessy and Ingalls book store.



for the L.A. Zoo.

Morphosis I



"I'm into real estate as an art form."

Rodger Webster



"I'm into real estate as an art form," explained Venice perennial Roger Webster to an unsuspecting Los Angeles realtor who telephoned one afternoon about some of Webster's properties.

There was a pause at the other end of the line, then a hasty, "Thank you, good-bye." It was the briefest of conversations.

As in the rest of Los Angeles, there is in Venice a climate of real estate: the price, the deal, the profit. But since Venice's development in the early 1900s, it has always been real estate with a flip. Abbott Kinney built the town in the image of Venice, Italy, attaching a visual theme to real estate, much as Walt Disney would later do to Anaheim. Kinney's theme, however, unlike Disney's, was susceptible to the passage of time. The beach town quickly lapsed from its fictional Venetian ideal, especially after the discovery of oil, and went derelict, then beat, then hip, before recently emerging as chic, and slightly punk. Roger Webster is one of a number of Venice's multi-non-disciplinary irregulars who make Venice what it is, and isn't today. Venice remains a somehow free spirit still tied by trust deed to the L.A. real estate bedrock.

Through all its transitions, one of Venice's grand traditions has been, until recently, affordability. Artists gravitated to Venice, along with the retired people, plain-and-ordinary workers, and various drop-outs, because they could afford this beach town. While Venice's buildings were still new, they could perhaps get by on their youth, but time has revealed Venice's buildings were not all that well constructed, not even well founded, and that they are, as a group, charming but motley.

Today, L.A.'s overpriced real estate market has heated up Venice too, changing everyone's perceptions of Venice's *hors d'oeuvre* real estate — Venice houses are now considered quaint rather than small, vintage rather than old, idiosyncratic rather than sloppy, raw rather than run-down. Although vocal, low-rent activists have tried to keep Venice affordable by obstructing major real estate development, Venice has gradually been infiltrated and gentrified by a younger, affluent crowd, on an apartment-by-apartment basis, and its demography is shifting. Venice — old, run-down, sloppy, small — is now ex-poor and prime.

Over the last decade, Venice has hosted a group of new buildings. More than a dozen houses, house/studios, or studios have been built throughout the town. It is not only that improved property values have made Venice a more fertile ground for building; it is also that Venice has long had artists who need studios, and an artistic climate that encourages experiment. The result is real estate as architecture as an art form.

THE SOUTHERN
APARTMENTS



“Venice
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Although these buildings may share little more than the common 2 X 4, they form, across Venice, an identifiable community of dissimilar buildings, within the already heterogeneous Venice community. They are the chosen houses of Venice's successful Bohemia, and the visible exceptions in the expensive blight.

The only thing these new buildings may have in common is Inspector Gordon Hom, of the Westside Department of Building and Safety. He has inspected most of them over the last several years.

Would he live in any of them?

Well, no, frankly, he prefers his Warmington-built tract house, which has “a floor plan that is tried and true” — one that was corrected and perfected after many tract projects; one that works. Hom says of Charles LeGreco's apartments on Wavecrest, that an architect learns a lot when he or she finally builds his own place. He would prefer not to live in someone else's learning experience.

Hom's concerns are very practical: he notes that the galvanized steel used, for example, on the exterior of the Spiller duplex by Frank Gehry and Associates will easily rust in the salt air, and that because “lightning finds the highest piece of metal,” it may draw lightning. He says that because hot air rises, the Spiller apartments are difficult and expensive to heat — but,

then, “most people in Venice don't turn their heaters on.” Hom observes that although most of these new buildings are of conventional construction, their design requires a lot more work from contractors who often lose money on the jobs because the projects are optimistically, and grossly, underbudgeted. More than once, he says, he and a contractor have chuckled over an unbuildable drawing done by a young architect reaching somewhat beyond his experience. It is possible, he says, to build a working studio that really is conventional (such as 48 Brooks, or 625 Milwood), without all the complications of these showcase buildings. As an inspector, he has to spend much more time on these buildings.

Hom calls them the “crazy buildings” of Venice.

Inspector Hom walks through the climate of thought that generates these houses apparently unaffected and unimpressed. He does not share the values. He does not live in Venice.

It makes perfect sense to build one of these houses, however, if you dine at the West Beach Cafe, have your hair cut at the Palm Salon, and nurse a cappuccino at Charmer's. Architectural designer, Michael Lipson — who designed film producer Tony Bill's

house opposite the Spiller duplex — says that these somehow special houses reinforce a particular Venice experience. It is a life of complementary layers, of reinforcing activities, places and people; it is a performance: the buildings are not objects isolated in Venice or isolated in the lives of their owners, but appropriate housing for a way of life. Lipson says that people in this milieu are vital, intelligent and that their lives are rich. But he notes that richness in itself does not mean anything. "The decadence is getting to me . . . it reminds me of Berlin in the early '30s. It's a terrible game we are playing, giving up human values."

Lipson, who claims he deals "in survival," looks somewhat recycled himself. His well-fingered hat and rumpled clothes are the portrait of a depression aesthetic — one no less complete, or layered, than that of the people who support the West Beach/Palm Salon/Charmer's aesthetic, but one that involves three kids, his own self-described junk yard in Mar Vista, what he calls "human values," and what seems to be a marginal existence that may be more of a voluntary style, or at least a psychology, than he thinks. One can easily imagine this metaphysician/architect picking his way through his junk yard, at home in what is an environment he has shaped for himself. The house he



Gordon Hom

designed for Tony Bill is a strange intersection of their respective aesthetics. "I don't want to sound ridiculous about it," says Lipson, "but it's my personal fantasy for him. This building wouldn't exist without my fantasies." Lipson created a house with cinematic interiors, with a close-up, first-row view that magnifies the scale of architectural parts, as though the house were a three dimensional object on a two-dimensional screen. (Lipson observes that the 17-foot wide house is so minimal as to be two-dimensional.)

“ “Venice is not a blended community of like-thinking, right living, lawn-mowing, pool raking suburbanites, but a pluralistic community living in more or less peaceful co-existence.”

Lipson designed the house using building parts he salvaged from demolished buildings, and sold to Bill from his Mar Vista yards, Mike's Back Lot (which he runs with a partner, also named Mike). Two 45-foot steel trusses, respectively 5' and 3' deep, are the centerpieces of the house — rather odd ingredients in a home, and perhaps an architectural extravagance, until you realize Lipson already had the trusses, and other salvaged building parts, to sell to his client. Lipson claims his design of the house was motivated by greed — his “greed” at a complete design opportunity, from building supplies to a high-profile commission.

This is Venice: Lipson, Tony Bill, Frank Gehry, Gordon Hom, Roger Webster — an invisible network of people you have to know to see. If, as John Donne observed, wit is the unexpected copulation of ideas, Venice is an unexpected juxtaposition of people who are images — a place with wit.

There are other invisible networks, other unexpected juxtapositions. In the alleys behind any of these new houses, one could easily chance onto an abandoned gang weapon — a plug of lead shoved into the end of a

short hose — and know there are other worlds in this world. Tony Bill has film screenings in the brick office building behind his new house, while helicopters police the area at night. He could easily be mugged over the head for \$200 while he has film millions on his mind. There are not only wide social differences among Venice residents, but also entire subcultures — the artists, the gangs, the elderly Jewish, the cafe society, the body builders, the ex-wet set, the weekenders, the gays, the professionals, the blacks, the actors, the chicanos, the health-fooders, the writers, the scriptwriters, the addicts, all the people in between, including people who make a living by working for it. More than in most communities, there are separate little non-aligned republics of thought, with corresponding codes of behavior and dress. Venice is not a blended community of like-thinking, right-living, lawn-mowing, pool-raking suburbanites, but a pluralistic community living in more or less peaceful co-existence. Highly diverse people live in close proximity, on small beach lots, in come-what-may buildings that themselves are architecturally pluralist.



“Fisher shaped the roof like a wave cresting toward the Pacific.”



Venice looks chaotic; perhaps it is. Some architects have certainly used the look of chaos, designing it into their buildings. Gehry's Spiller duplex is a matchbox of 2 X 4s and a collision of architectural volumes — a building that may not look like a house but is perfectly at home in a neighborhood that does not look like a neighborhood. Frederick Fisher, who worked for Gehry before opening his own Santa Monica office, and who is the young practitioner of the romantic architectural gesture, designed Venice's episodic informality onto the front and back facades of his house for Lauren and Laurie Caplin, between Westminster and San Juan. The front facade is almost facial in its shyness, a non-threatening, architecturally bashful presence in a transitional neighborhood that could not support high architectural fashion. Fisher shaped the roof like a wave,



cresting toward the Pacific, off-centering the house. This is not like the symmetrically placed vault on a new canal house by Alex Mlikotin (an architect-designed house built for speculative sale) — a vault that monumentalizes the house, making it much grander than its modest canal neighborhood.

Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi — the principals of a young, intellectual Santa Monica based firm, Morphosis — quote the chaos of Venice, or at least its unpredictable admixture, on the exterior of two small alley buildings, by cladding them as a collage of materials characteristic of their alley neighborhood. The Sedlak studio has wood-siding, stucco, and ribbed sheet metal, and is a composition of lined



Mlikotin's
Canal House

surfaces; the 2-4-6-8 studio has a concrete block, one-story podium and is surfaced in vinyl shingle and concrete block. The architects, who both teach at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, have given these buildings some of the materials and coloring, if not the shape, of their neighborhoods. Already the houses are well-established **musts** on the visiting lists of foreign and national architectural students.

Venice is a town of alleys. Because many streets are walk-streets, for pedestrians only, the back alleys function as real, vehicular streets. Many lots are serviced at the back. The sense of rawness one feels over a long time in the area comes from the garages, the garbage cans, the graffiti, the cracked pavement, the telephone and power lines, and the general architectural melt-down that occurs at the backs of buildings, as opposed to their composed fronts.

“Lipson designed the house using building parts he salvaged from demolished buildings.”



Tony Bill House

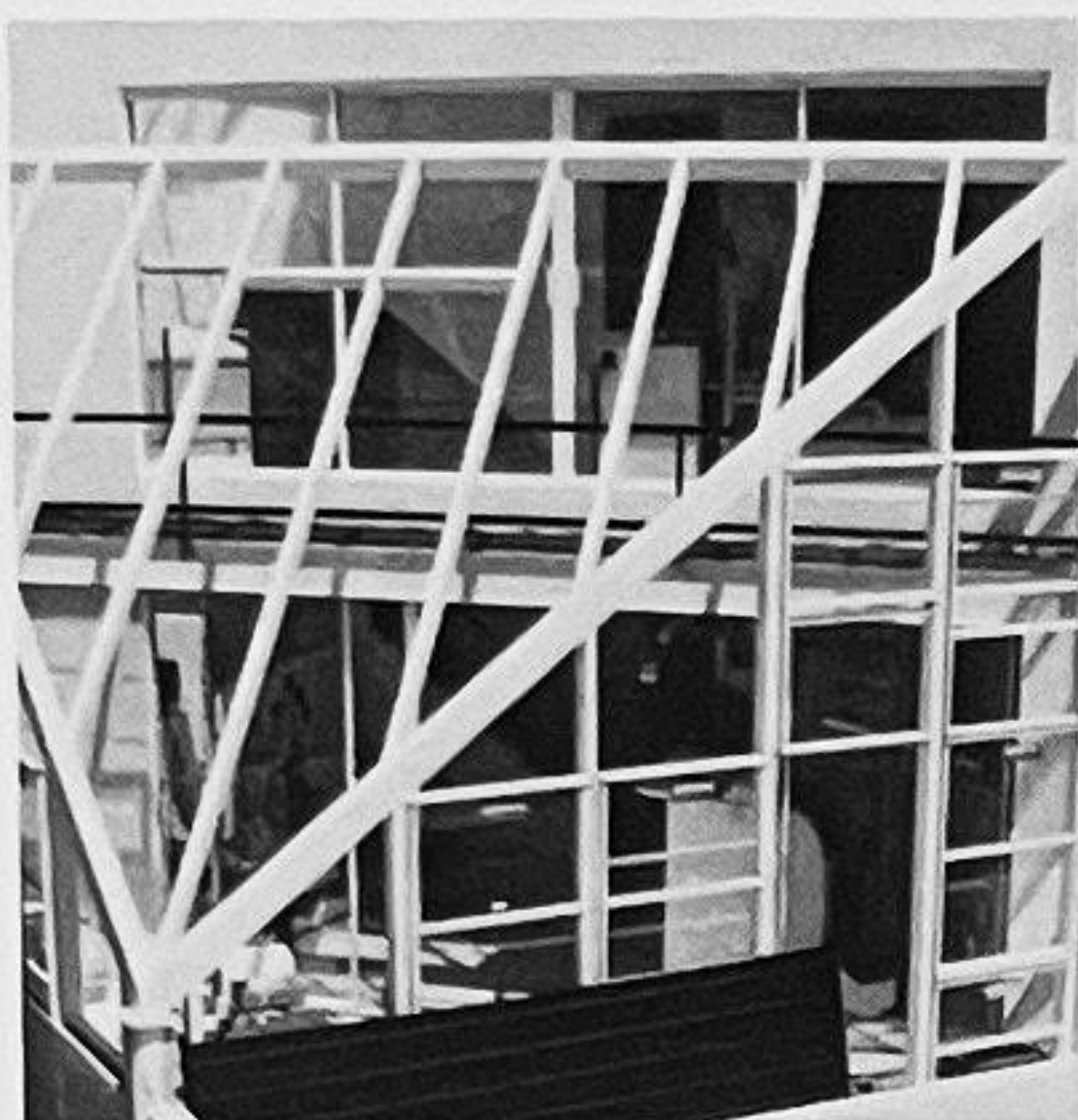
Gagosian Gallery



Gagosian Gallery — designed for art dealer Larry Gagosian by Craig Hodgetts and Robert Mangurian, of Venice's Studioworks — exemplifies this composed-front, melted-back dichotomy. The balanced, symmetrical, classicized facade fronts a building that, at the back, breaks down into an asymmetrical cross between the thought of a Mediterranean village and the immediate reality of a Venice alley. Not the least of its alley character is its two-car garage and its tight security design. The sides of the Gagosian Gallery share a party wall with its neighbors on the ground floor; the upper two floors — the residential part of the three story building — steps back from the side property lines. The "design" in the Gagosian building, and in most of the others, occurs at the front and rear, not on the sides, because the tight lots limit views of the sides.

Michael Lipson, with his usual salvaged wit, designed a quite wonderful, alley-side facade for the Bill house, suggesting to Bill a huge, sliding, metal-plated, recycled service door, with a separate walk-through door in it — which Lipson would, of course, sell to Bill. Bill demurred. The door, at the moment of this writing, is leaning against a wall in the Market Street alley as the brilliant import it is. Lipson has a particular gift for working within Venice's alley aesthetic, with his **architecture trouvee**. Like many of America's best decorators, who warehouse their "pieces" in their own homes before selling them, Lipson has his own back-lot stockpile. Lipson may be reticent about Venice's decadence, but he turns with a natural ease in its alleys. Tony Bill is noted for discovering and encouraging new talent, especially writers, and in the case of Lipson, he seems to have come across one of the most original, and obscure, of L.A.'s architectural talents.

Frank Gehry and Frederick Fisher capture Venice's feeling of alleys by leaving materials raw, allowing the buildings to look unfinished, and the designs, tossed off. Their gestures of spontaneity, even their sense of accident, are no less successful for being studied and precise.



Dedijer House

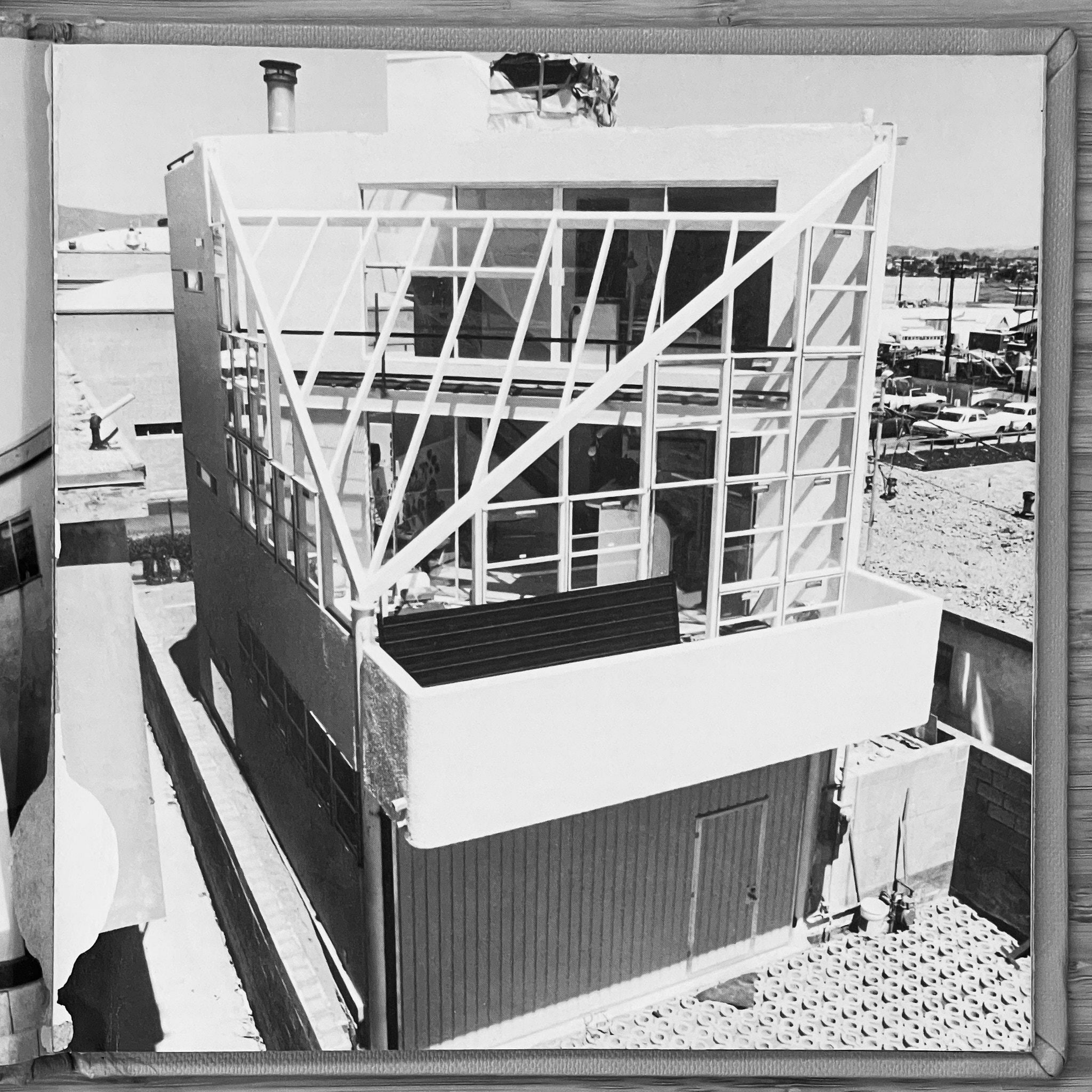
Milica Dedijer, a Yugoslav architect who teaches at the USC architecture school, disapproves. She announces, at the door of the elegant, very international-style, solar-oriented house she designed for herself, architect Glen Small and their family, that her house is not punk. Indeed it is not; it is catholic about its architecture, and is a health house in the best tradition of Los Angeles health houses. Its pristine forms, ship rails, and glass-and-steel greenhouse manage sublimely to overlook the house's situation between what are, effectively, two alleys.

This again is Venice — that unexpected juxtaposition: an apparently derelict street, chain link fence, black top everywhere, herds of buses, and a well thought out, isolated building that in many ways is an architectural totem.

Dedijer's house — along with the Kahn/Albuquerque studio on Rose Avenue, the David Lowe building on Venice Way, the LeGreco apartments, and perhaps Robert Graham's Doumani beach house on the Marina Peninsula — declare style and theory war within Venice against those new buildings that have lapsed from clarity. Wearing a lovely Marimekko print dress quite appropriate for the white interiors of her home (but perhaps a little eccentric in this alley town), Dedijer explains, with her Mediterranean vivacity, that psychological studies have demonstrated that chaos (though people can live in it and tolerate it for a while) finally wears on people, and that, cumulatively, it is an unhealthy, tension-causing experience. If her house does not meet the Venice alleys on their terms, it is because, she feels it is wrong to indulge with chaos.

“The free standing, highly sculptural volumes face the L.A. bus yards and its all night garage.”







Instead Dedijer tries to calm the disorder with order. Her building is a highly controlled design statement — not that Gehry's or Fisher's is not, but hers looks controlled. Dedijer also manages, at the same time, to wile a very livable, even clever, house out of a substandard lot. She does not overload the building with "architecture" — frequently a problem with young architects unaware of the aesthetic bearing capacity of any one building — but complements the volumetric play with tolerable amounts of railings, industrial floor surfaces and lighting fixtures. Her house overlooks its immediate context, and it overlooks the other new houses by Fisher, Lipson, Gehry, et al. The house has more in common with the Case Study houses sponsored by **Arts and Architecture** magazine in the 1950s and '60s — houses designed to be replicable, industrially-produced

prototypes. These houses were not idiosyncratic or hermetically personal, but rational, neutral and cool — or at least they had the look of reason and neutrality. They were not intended to be one-of-a-kind signature art pieces, though that is what they turned out to be; the Case Study houses did not launch a long line of comparable houses.

The Dedijer house engaged a building like the Caplin house, by Fisher, in some of the architectural debates going on internationally. Catholic modernists are being challenged by agnostics who are not practicing a system of beliefs so much as a series of unique building responses. In Venice, even the same architects change their architectural idioms quite drastically from building to building. Frank Gehry's Indiana Street studios — separate boxes with an exaggerated architectural conceit on each (a chimney, a staircase, a Dutch gable), like kindergarten forms — is very different from his Spiller duplex, which is more material and constructivist than imagistic. Fisher is finishing a \$20 per square foot studio in the back yard of a ghetto property he owns, and it is rudimentary compared to the complex spaces and forms of the Caplin house. Morphosis, within two blocks, uses quite different architectural idioms in two projects, and both differ greatly from Morphosis' third "high tech" remodelling

effort of several years before, on the Delmer House (on the alley off 19th Ave. & Pacific). Fisher and Morphosis firm reinvent wheels rather than seeking inventive designs within established architectural conventions. Although the Dedijer house, the Kahn/Albuquerque studio, the LeGreco apartments belong to the new-long tradition of International Style architecture, the Gehry, Fisher and Morphosis efforts, though very local and contextual, have been of more interest to today's international architectural community. The buildings have been widely published.

Within Venice, all these new houses and studios form an identifiable community of fresh buildings that Inspector Hom may group together as the crazies. But the differences in the group also reflect that the community is as much one of binding disagreement as it is one of agreement. The architects here are not always admiring of one another's work; feelings sometimes run high.

Most of the architects designing these buildings are underbuilt young professionals anxious to showcase their ideas and talents. Mayne and Rotondi, who have many more ideas than their two-car-garage-plus-studio should be asked to handle, elaborate their 600 square foot commissions to intellectual capacity. Both buildings are an environment of ideas as well as simple rooms.

The Venice clients — many artists themselves, or intellectuals, have been commendable for respecting the artist in the architect, and for giving him more design latitude than most clients ideally, normally allow. Architects would prefer that clients limit their involvement to prompt payment, and these Venice commissions approach that ideal state only in that the clients have been generally understanding (if not prompt or flush). Because the houses and studios would be occupied by their owner, they do not suffer from the blandness that frequently results from an absentee ego. The clients generally wanted buildings of character because they would occupy the structures themselves, rather than lease or resell them. There were, of course, intrusions: Lipson, who says that Tony Bill was a "fantastically patient client" is himself impatient with Bill acting as a movie director/producer in his design — "Bill remodelled the house before it was constructed." David Ming-Li Lowe, who observes that he is perhaps too selfish, admits he does not want clients.

“The Venice clients many artists themselves or intellectuals (not that they are exclusive) – have been commendable for respecting the artist in the architect.”

Dill Studio



These Venice clients, too, often had specific spatial requirements because of their interests. Guy Dill's telephone pole studio, one of the most powerful buildings in the group, is truly a studio — a voluminous interior space for sculpting. The Caplins — she, a sculptor (and fashion model); he, a musician (and real estate developer) — each wanted separate work studios (before the couple separated). Stephen Kahn and Lita Albuquerque — he, a photographer/artist; she, a painter — wanted a quiet library outside of their existing house, with plenty of shelf space for books (before they, too, separated). The (single) owner of the 2-4-6-8 studio wanted a large but minimalist room for the practice of martial arts. Gagosian wanted a gallery space. Chuck Arnoldi, the artist/owner/developer of the Indian Street studios, wanted to build, on spec, a set of artist studio/houses, which required large, luminous work spaces. Dedijer

was certainly influenced by Glen Small, inventor of a proposed, ecologically self-sufficient, residential megastructure prototype projected for old Pacific Electric property on Venice Boulevard; their house has its own self-contained, low technology ecological system.

The forms of all these buildings do not result from only style or theory, serendipity or da-da, but simply programmatic requirements.

Stepping into some of these buildings is like stepping into someone's mind, or at least into a system of thought. Just as a storyteller can cast a spell, a good architect can build one, and the best of these environments, especially on the inside, are provinces of the mind.



Kahn/Albuquerque Building

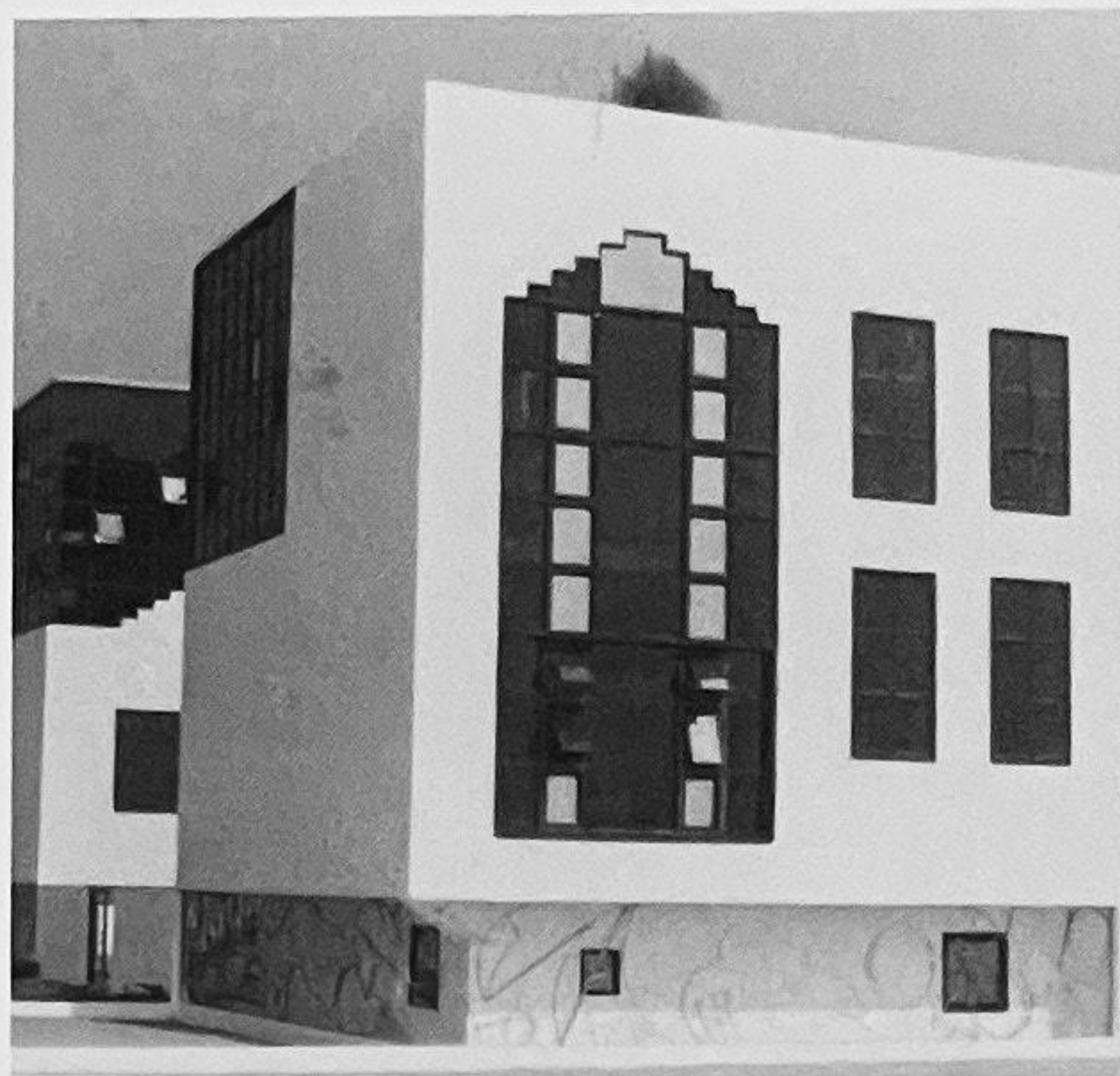
The studio spaces of the Kahn/Albuquerque building establish a contemplative quiet with their high, white walls and clerestory windows — and despite busy Rose Avenue and a child-filled neighborhood, the spaces themselves encourage concentration: they look quiet, if austere; the unbroken walls contain one's thoughts, and the thoughts become the environment. If the thoughts are the photographic images of Kahn, or the painted ones of Albuquerque, then those images become the environment. The studios are galleries, and vice versa. The building has, by no coincidence, the most photographic sensibility of all the Venice studios and a black-gray-white palette, no doubt deriving from Kahn working closely with the architect, Carl Day. In addition to the surface color being a photographic gray, there is a neatness and order to the crisp, white interiors appropriate for a building that houses a photo lab at its center. Some of Kahn's photographic work has a strong architectural content, and he has done some pieces with building parts, like stuccoed doors — as though building the studio provoked an architectural response in his art. Albuquerque, Dill and other Venice artists say that the spaces or buildings in which they have worked have influenced the content of their art.

“In addition to the surface color being a photographic gray, there is a neatness and order to the crisp, white interiors appropriate for a building that houses, at its center, a photo lab.”





“This is art and architecture in its own context of architecture and art – an integrated interactive, somewhat self-referential environment.”



Graham's
Doumani Beach House

The Doumani beach house, designed by sculptor Robert Graham, has a comparable containment in its back living room — with its large skylight, and stark, high, uninterrupted back walls. However, this space is not a studio space, and not even intended as a gallery, though there will be art — it is simply a space of considerable power and concentration. The house has murals, glass work, and mosaics by David Novros, Billy Al Bengston, Joanna Pousette-Dart, Anthony Berlant, Terry Schonehen and Graham himself — work that is painted on, or built into, the building itself, like a Renaissance building. The works were commissioned for specific places in the house rather than bought, and resellable, in a gallery: these pieces are committed to their locations, and the locations have effected their content. After Novros finished the large entry mural, Graham commented that Bengston would have to react to the mural in designing his perimeter fence: this is art and architecture in its own context of architecture and art — an integrated, interactive, somewhat self-referential environment. The building has little to do with any context outside that it establishes for itself: it is its own province.

Michael Lipson, who is his own microcosm, originally designed the Bill residence as a microcosmic place, sealing all apertures with glass block, so that only light and somewhat underwater views of the outside would filter into the interiors. Lipson would, of course, sell Bill the (salvaged) glass block to close off the openings. Anyone who wanted to look outside would have to do so deliberately, by going onto the recycled "Spanish" wrought-iron balcony, or up to the roof deck, where the view is circumferential. Mr. Bill, again, demurred. Some glass block has given way to operable windows, although large expanses of it still fills the building's archway along Pacific Avenue. Like the back rooms in the Doumani house, and the Kahn/Albuquerque studios, the interior spaces of the Bill house are very containing.

Environmental quiet has been contrary to the dominant environmental images of this motor-driven century. Characterized by power, motion and speed, as brought to people by constantly upscaled machines, the twentieth century sensibility has preferred the dynamic to the static. A building, as any cameraman knows, does not move: a building makes good photographs, perhaps, but bad movies, even though spaces can be designed to

look dynamic. Gehry, Fisher and Dedijer all create dynamic forms and spaces in, respectively, the Spiller, Caplin and Dedijer houses. Gehry energizes space with diagonalized views and twisted or distorted forms. Fisher off-centers the vaulted roof of the Caplin house and turns the central court off the building's orthogonal. The interior is in constant shift as one walks through it. Dedijer terraces her interior spaces up half-levels so that one enters the next space by stepping up to it: there are overviews, some multiple.

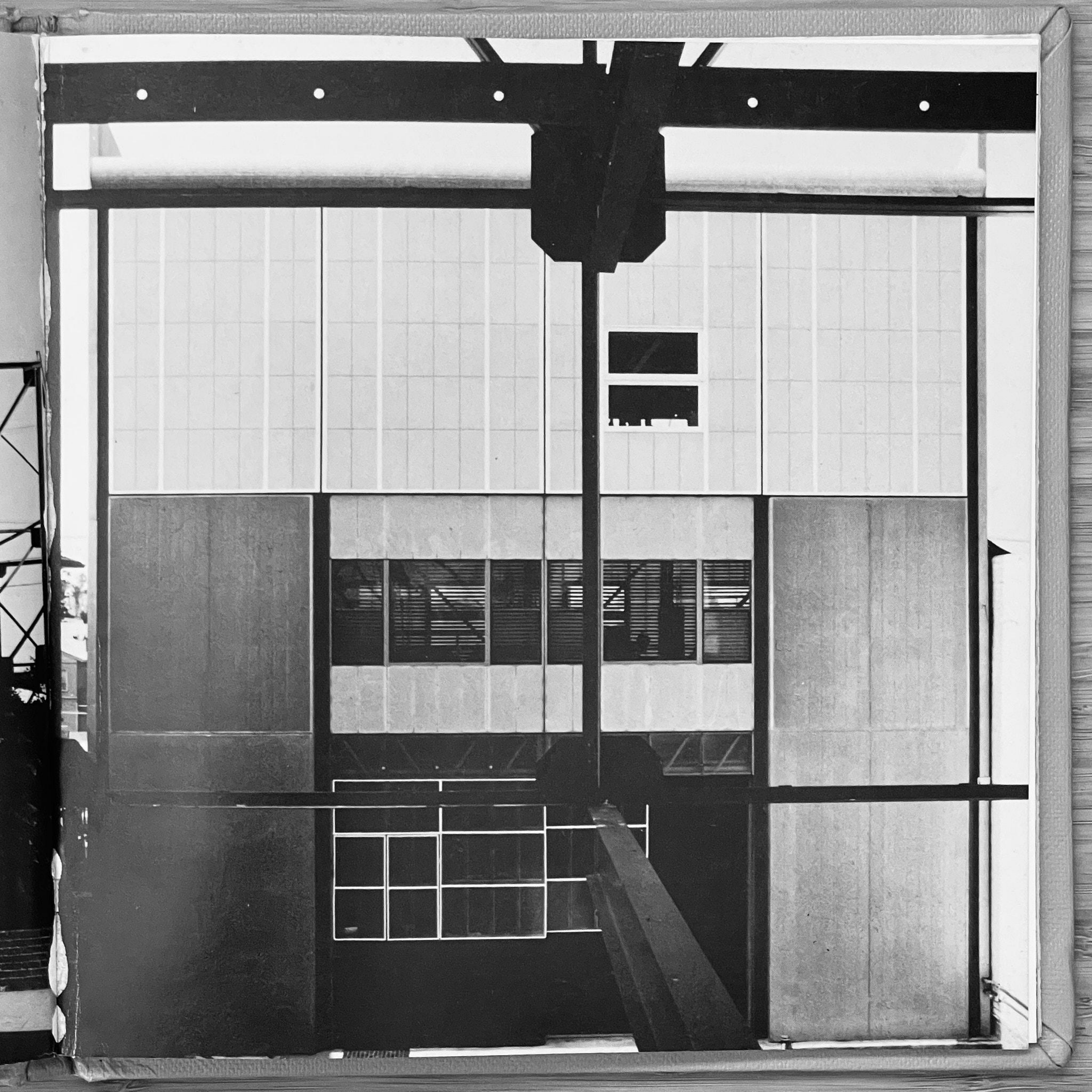
In the Gagosian Gallery, Craig Hodgetts and Robert Mangurian put the pieces and spaces back together again, reassembling the room into a place with basically four walls and continuous surfaces: although Graham, Lipson and Day achieve spatial containment and concentration in a basically modernist idiom, Hodgetts and Mangurian do it by recreating what are essentially classical rooms that predate the machine age. Their building — symmetrically composed in the front, with centrally placed windows and doors inside — achieves an overall effect of balance, and it centers, finally, on the person walking through it.

“Gehry energizes space with diagonalized views and twisted or distorted forms.”

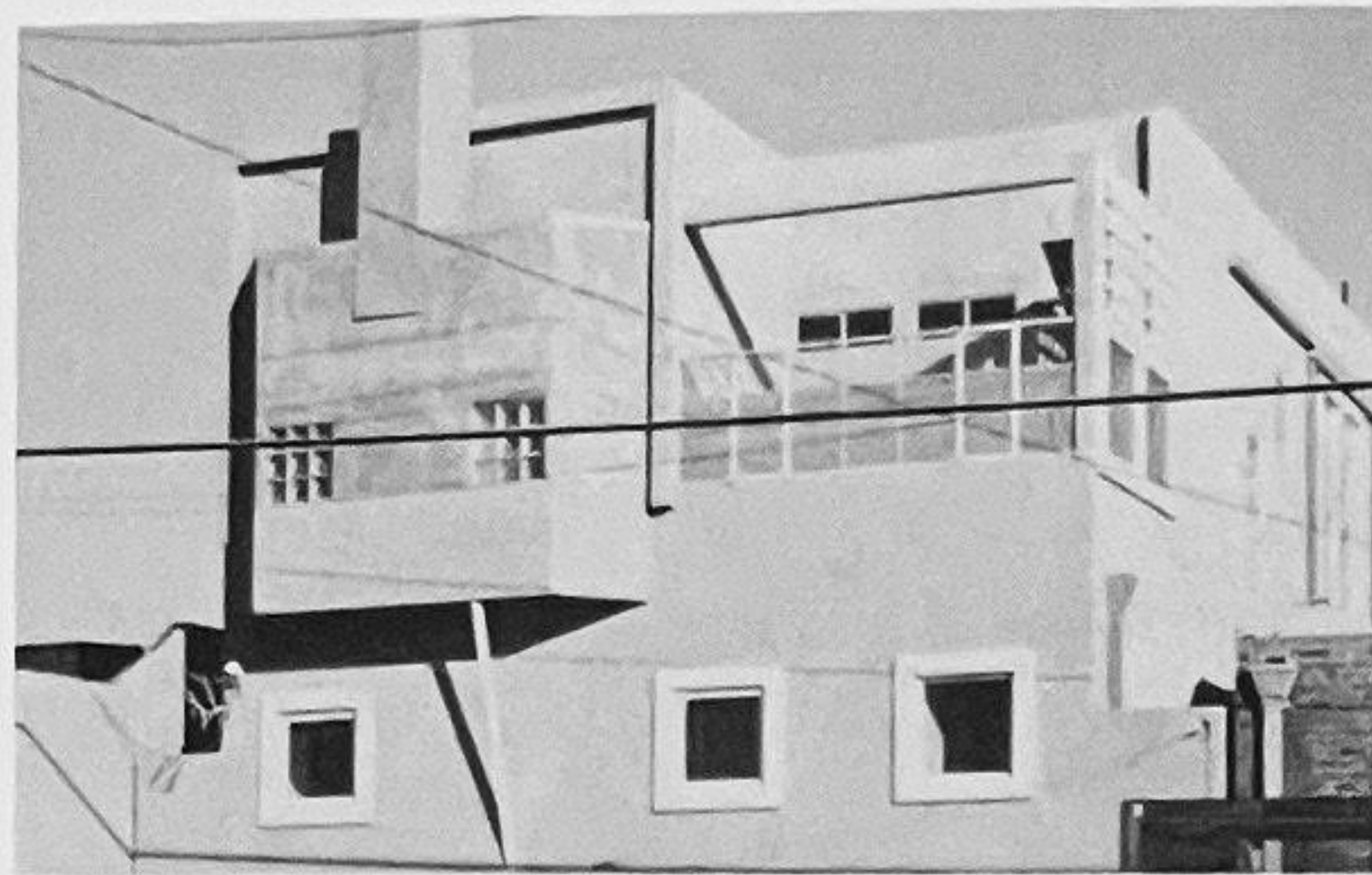








“Nearly all these Venice projects were conceived years before being built, and were delayed by Coastal Commission or other agency approvals.”



Gagosian Gallery

A person framed by a doorway, itself centered in the room, becomes the central reference of the room and building — like Leonardo da Vinci's man inscribed within the circle. This is humanist, rather than machine-derived architecture — man is the measure of the building. Hodgetts and Mangurian carve this da Vinci circle out of the second and third floors of the Gagosian building, vertically, in the form of a two-story cylindrical courtyard open to the sky. You walk into this architectural cylinder and it focuses on you, an anthropocentric volume. This is perhaps the most balanced and classical space in all of new, even old, Venice. The space is a void, but a void treated as a positive object. It is the reverse image of a building like Bramante's Tempietto in Rome — a freestanding, circular temple that Hodgetts and Mangurian here have

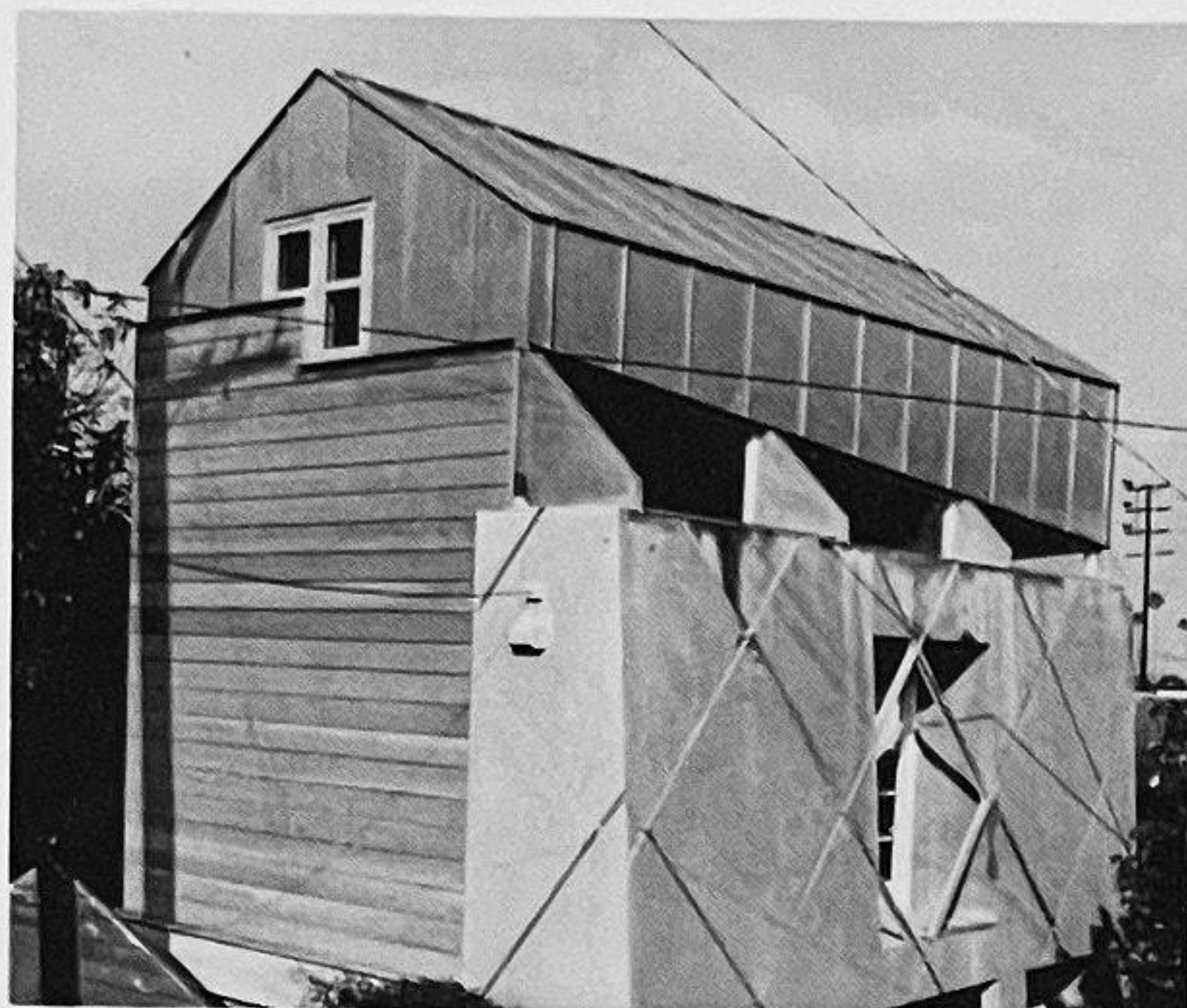
created as a space within a solid volume. The spatial enclosure and isolation of the cylinder establish the same calm found in the Kahn/Albuquerque studios, but it also relates the centered person, through its vertical axis, to the sky, and through the bedroom doors, to a tiled Roman bath, and the bed beyond. The architecturally literary Hodgetts and Mangurian establish an almost Jungian axis from bed to water to air to sky.

The progression would be only a dry intellectual gesture were the experience of the centering space not physically satisfying, and true. The cylinder establishes the focused concentration that the spatially dynamic houses by Gehry, Fisher and Dedijer do not have. (Gagosian Gallery was featured, with another Studioworks building in Ohio, in *Progressive Architecture*.)

Using a primary shape like the cylinder and classical design was a fairly radical design approach when Studioworks designed the gallery. Nearly all these Venice projects were conceived years before being built, and were delayed by Coastal Commission or other agency approvals (the Bill house, much to Lipson's desperation, was interminably bogged down bureaucratically). Although other firms in the U.S. have been interested in classical designs

and primary forms, Studioworks was among the first, nationally and within Los Angeles.

Ideas on the Westside cross-pollinate quickly, sometimes carried by draftsmen who migrate from good office to good office, or sometimes just exchanged over coffee at Charmer's. At about the same time that Studioworks built Gagosian Gallery, Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi built 2-4-6-8 on Amorosa Place, and they used, in this tiny garage/studio, equally primary platonic volumes: the cube and the pyramid. The single room above the garage is a cube beneath a pyramidal roof, and again the space is contained, allowing the concentration necessary for the owner's martial arts sessions. Like the Gagosian Gallery, which is clad in a concrete-looking blue/gray stucco, 2-4-6-8 uses materials that give a feeling of substance to the forms. The meticulously-detailed building is an essay in weight — an anchor of a building on an otherwise flyaway alley. It gathers weight from the top down — from lightweight ribbed metal roofing, to a heavier looking asphalt shingle siding, to a base of concrete block. This modest back-lot, alley-side addition is monumentalized by its simple forms and materials, and by the obvious seriousness of intent. While Gehry



Sedlak house

has had enough work and experience to relax somewhat in his Indiana Street studios, the younger Mayne and Rotondi are investing in this building enough ratiocination to satisfy a building many times its size.

In a subsequent garage/studio two alleys over, Morphosis writes the opposite composition — an essay in architectural disequilibrium rather than solidity and weight — the garage and library/studio eschews primary forms and disregards gravity in favor of sliding-off, leaned-to forms: the architects cant a wall vertically, splay it horizontally, detail it to look like a topiary hedge, then cap it with the fragment of a traditional house, itself

“This modest back-lot, alley-side addition is monumentalized by its simple forms and materials.”

sawn at a diagonal. Curiously, the Sedlaks, who had a background of research in Japan and wanted a library that would give them quiet, objected to the splayed, canted wall, and the architects righted the interior disturbance by building a second perfectly orthogonal wall inside: there is no hint inside of the jar outside; the interior space is architecturally quiet, and contemplative, with a peaked ceiling that looks somewhat like a cathedral interior. The interior works very well as the study it is supposed to be. The architects use traditional house forms on the outside to connote domesticity. At night, the second-story gable stands sentinel over the one-story, toy-sized beach cottage neighborhood.

The calm and concentration of the Kahn/Albuquerque studio, the Graham house, the Gagosian Gallery, and the 2-4-6-8 interiors partially derives from the abstraction of their smooth, unbroken surfaces and forms, and not only their geometries. That abstraction in the interiors owes as much to finishing interiors in inexpensive sheet rock as it does to any conscious intention. Using sheet rock conventionally neutralizes interiors and casts them abstractly, a surface without incident.

Of all the new houses in Venice, only two are intentionally and consistently abstract — a surprisingly low percentage given the abstraction and minimalism of mainline art and architecture this century. The Kahn/Albuquerque studio is simply a large volume of a building, with exterior shapes that contain the generous interior spaces. Carl Day leaves its stucco skin undecorated, and except for an occasional industrial light fixture, intercom grill, and ceilings supported by metal joists, the building is neutral to the point of abstraction: flat surfaces, clean stucco and sheet rock surfaces, suppressed detailing.

El Greco Apartments

Proceeding Pages

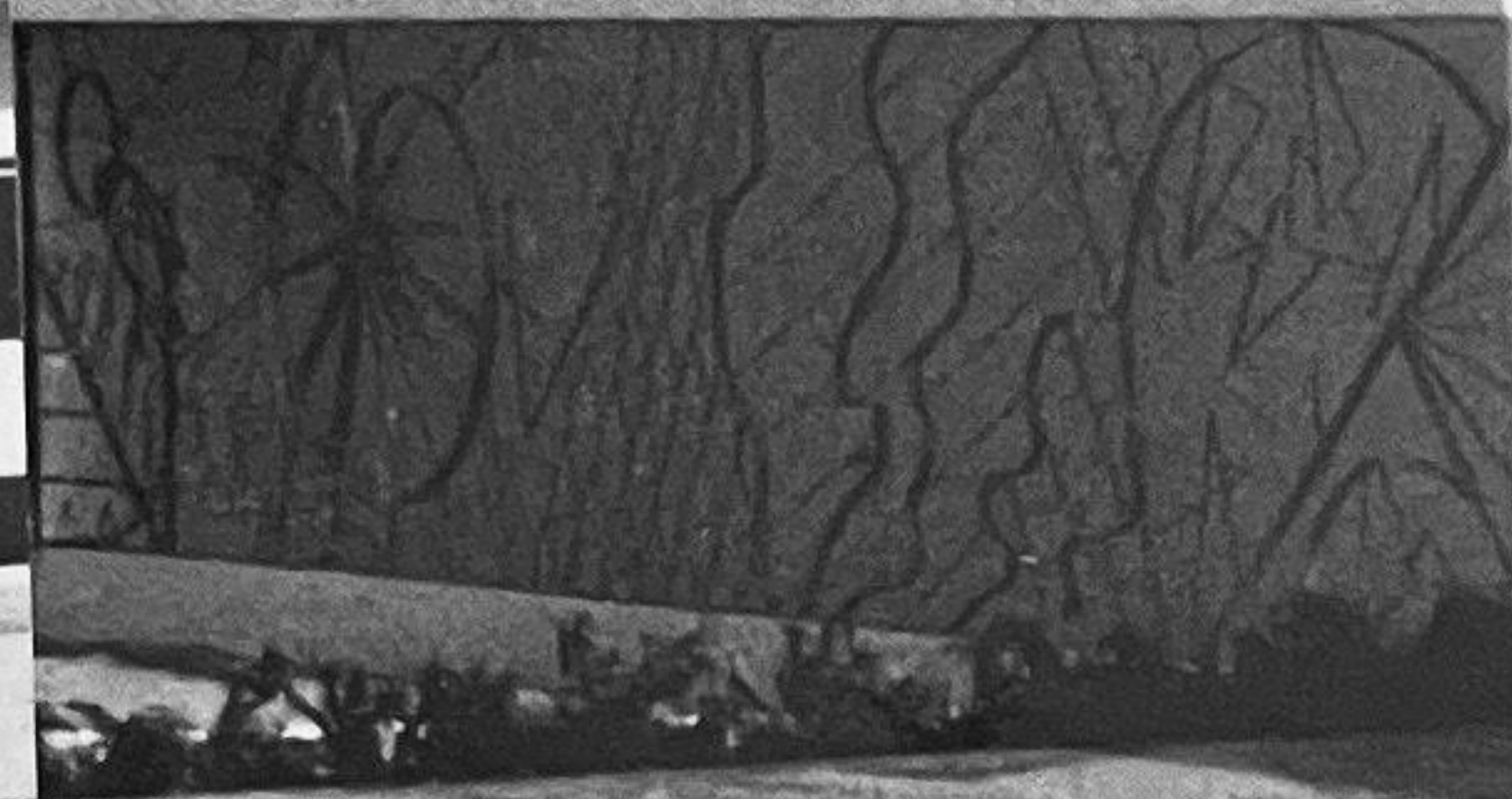
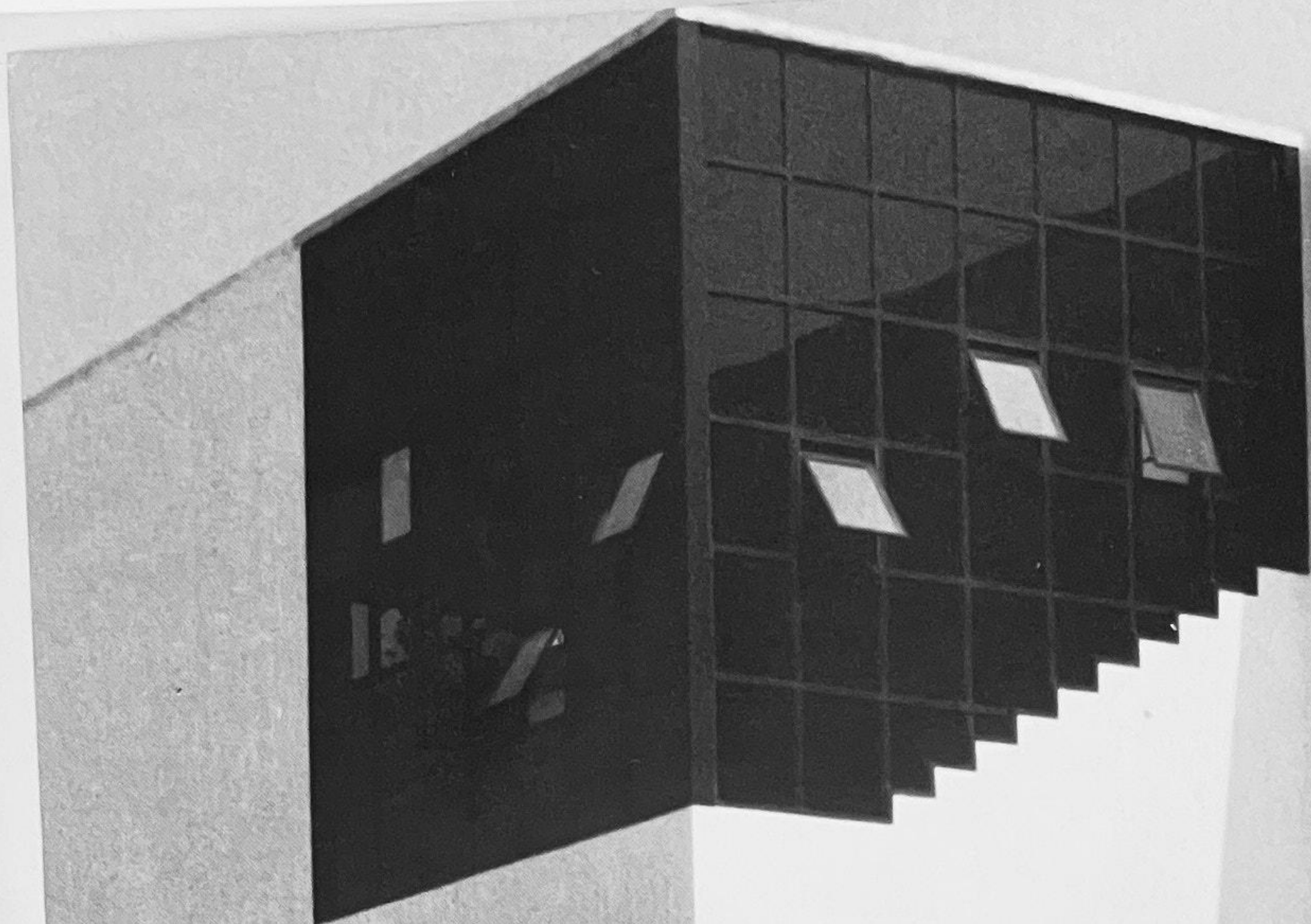
Kahn/Albuquerque Studio
Gehry's Norton Residence
Graham's Doumani Beach House

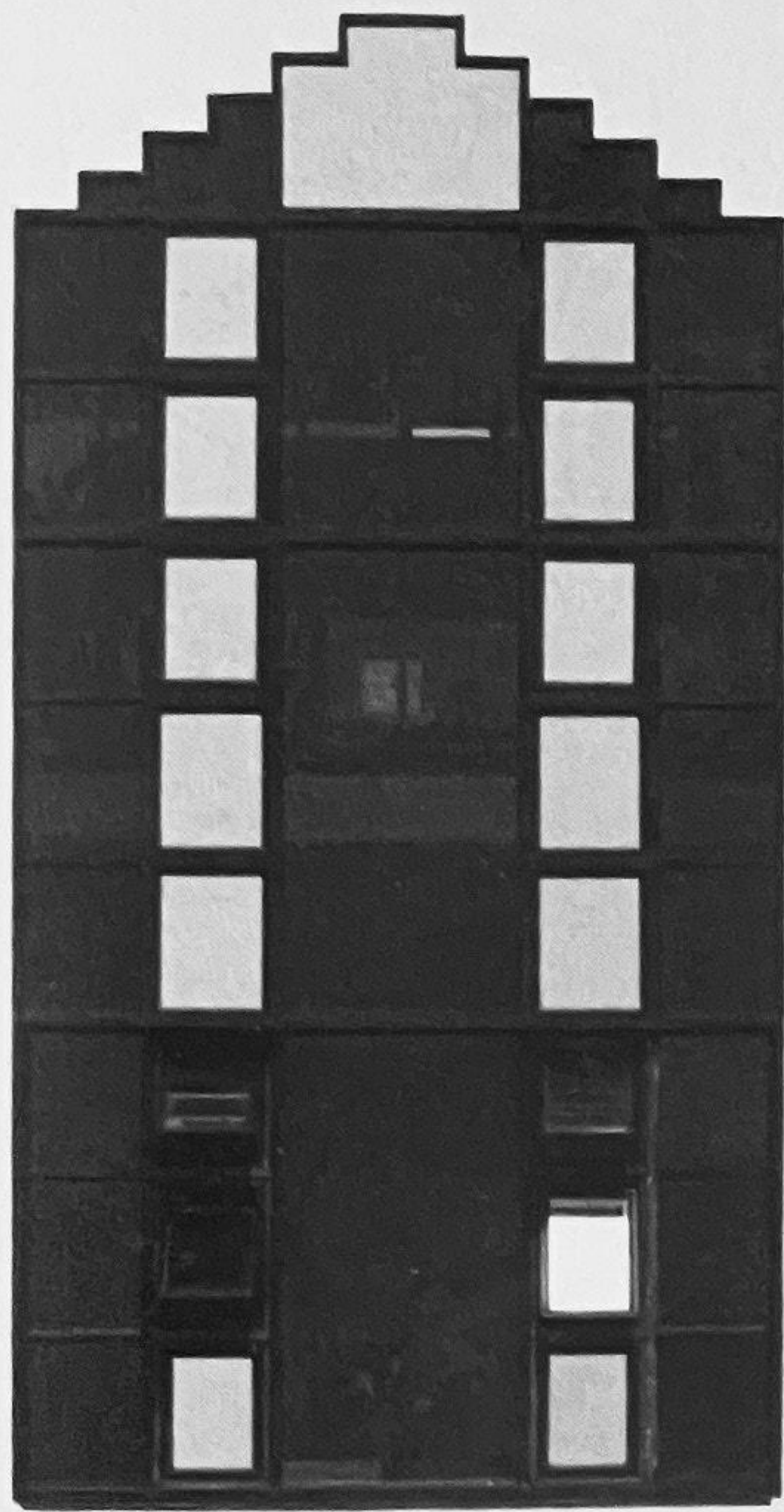






2509





**“The house,
as
architectural
historian
Esther McCoy
has
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in
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female way.”**

Dedijer uses the aesthetics of abstraction more assertively, and the house, despite its sobriety, is an art object worthy of any Bel-Air cul de sac. Despite its exemplary behavior as a passive and active solar organism, Dedijer designed what is an abstract, three dimensional sculpture of pure form: stucco tautly wrapped around a complex of bold shapes, with occasional window punctures. As you walk around this composition of forms, its parts take on different visual relationships. Dedijer admits, with embarrassment written on her social conscience, that hers is an elitist building — elitist certainly by its villa self-image, if not simply because it is an architect-designed, single-family dwelling — something of a social and ecological spendthrift.

Dedijer lives in her home with Glen Small, a radical environmental technologist/architect seriously committed to saving energy and to mass housing through industrially produced building components.

His work area in the house is alive in biomorphic models of habitable structures that could replicate their way across the landscape. The scale at which Small evidently prefers to think is large, and these single-family, one-of-a-kind Venice efforts must, to him, seem trivial, when he is seeking

much broader solutions to social problems. Nonetheless the Dedijer house interior is an environmental organism beneath its artistic skin, one that for Small may be “stone technology, but is systematic architecture, functional, and in some way intellectually satisfying and environmentally moral. The house architectural historian Esther McCoy has pointed out, is also nurturing in an almost female way. It has a greenhouse at the back for a “liberty” garden; its glass-enclosed space captures heat, which the house circulates and stores. The terraces, green house, and roof deck have enough plantable space to support a family of four, year round (though Dedijer admits she does not have the time to keep up a garden). Only the triangulated metal frame greenhouse at the rear of the house reveals that it is in some way an environmental lung as well as an art object.

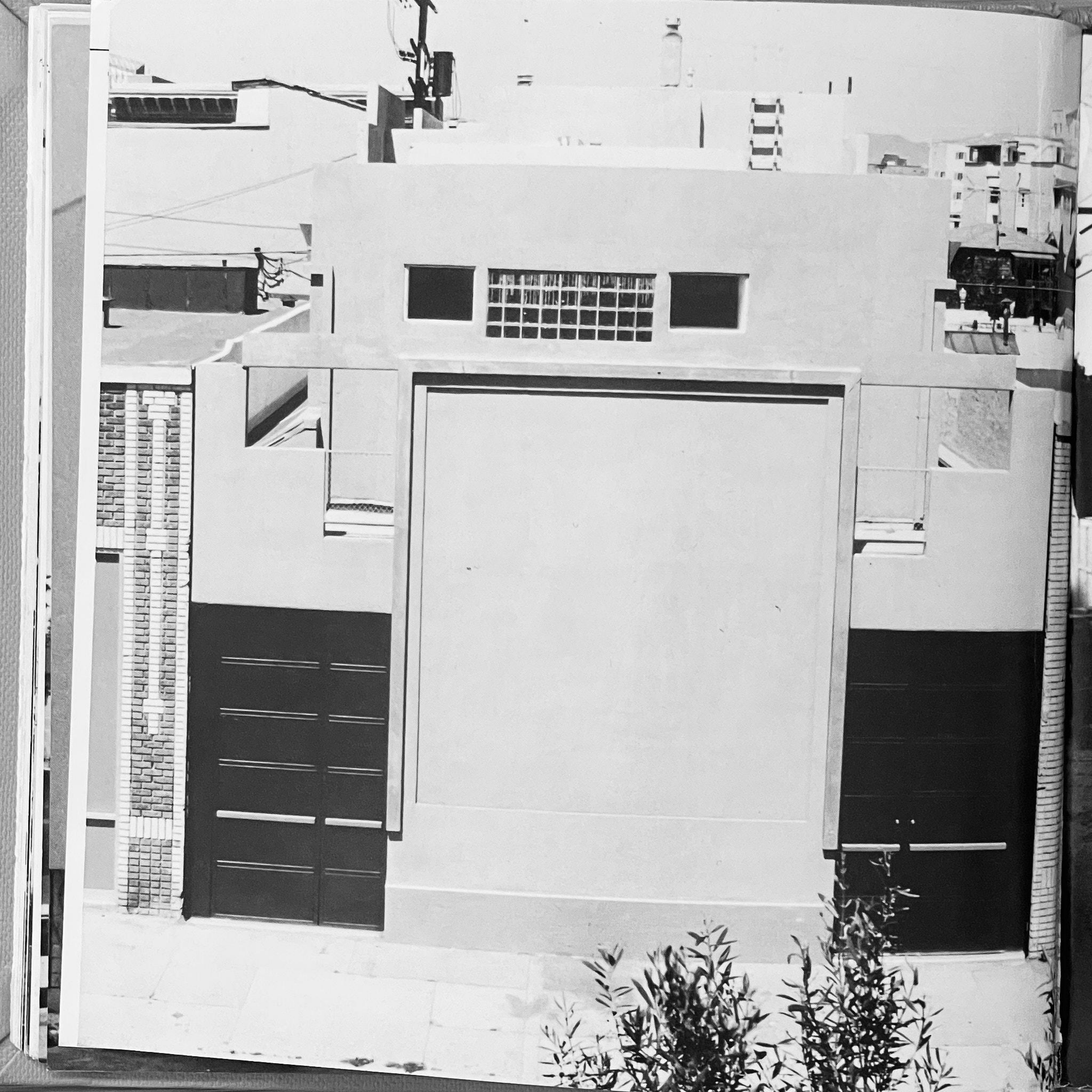
ough the 1970s was the
of high tech, few of these
borrow images from tech-
Dedijer did consider framing
house in wood rather than
the steel was difficult to
but Small dissuaded her,
finally field-measured and
it the steel, and achieved the
ed machined look. In their
er house addition of 1977,
ne and Rotondi consciously used
machine/industrial aesthetic, for no
purpose other than their own liking: a
high finish, corrugated aluminum
exterior, with machine-tooled corners,
pipe railing, exposed cross bracing,
metal exhaust pipes. But the effort is
only a stunning image, especially in
the sun, rather than the expression of
any mechanism in the building:
Morphosis has parked an air-stream
trailer atop an existing frame building.
Gehry, in the Spiller duplex, uses an
unfinished corrugated steel that will
weather — a material that evoked
images of industrial sheds in lower
Santa Monica; in Venice, the building
becomes a beach barn.

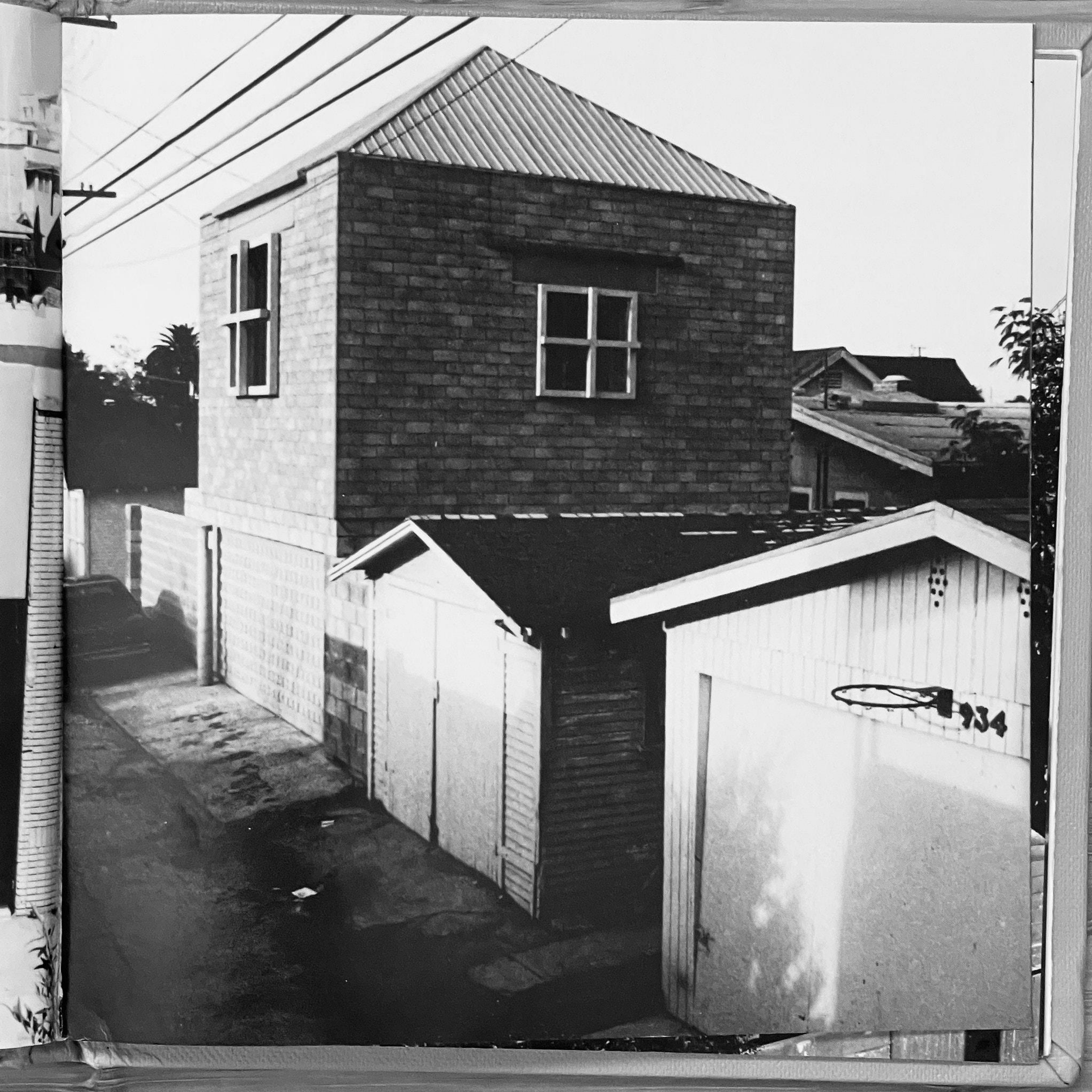
The LeGreco apartments have
some porthole windows and metal
outriggering on the front terraces, and
corners that look machined, but the
technological imagery only decorates

a building that is, in fact, stud-and-
stucco. Only David Ming-Li Lowe,
Venice's long-established incognito
architect, who built the steel-framed,
panel-infilled commercial structure on
Venice Way, regrets that during the
70's, the machine aesthetic became
diverted into the voguishness of high
tech. The fad, he believes, clouds the
public's mind about the purity of the
machine ("I love steel") and com-
promises the tradition of steel con-
struction that comes to the twentieth
century straight from Telford Bridge
("You can't tell me you're a serious
architecture critic, and not know
about Telford Bridge!")

Lowe, who has been working on
his structure for years (he finances
construction out of his own pocket;
money is slow), likes the idea of being
an architect guerrilla, working in
secret. "I've not cared too much
about clients' wishes. I don't want to
have clients. I'm not suited to have
clients. Maybe I'm more willful than I
should be." This man, like Lipson,
would not have his hair cut at the
Palm Salon, but he is still "right" in
Venice, like Lipson — as an arch
individualist and fringe eccentric. The
two, in fact, have met only through
Lipson's building for Tony Bill: "I
walked into it; I thought it was
curious; but it is not important. It's not
a building seriously devoted to the
truss."

**"I've
not cared
too much
about clients'
wishes."**





“He says that all he would need to make it into a house is a microwave oven.”



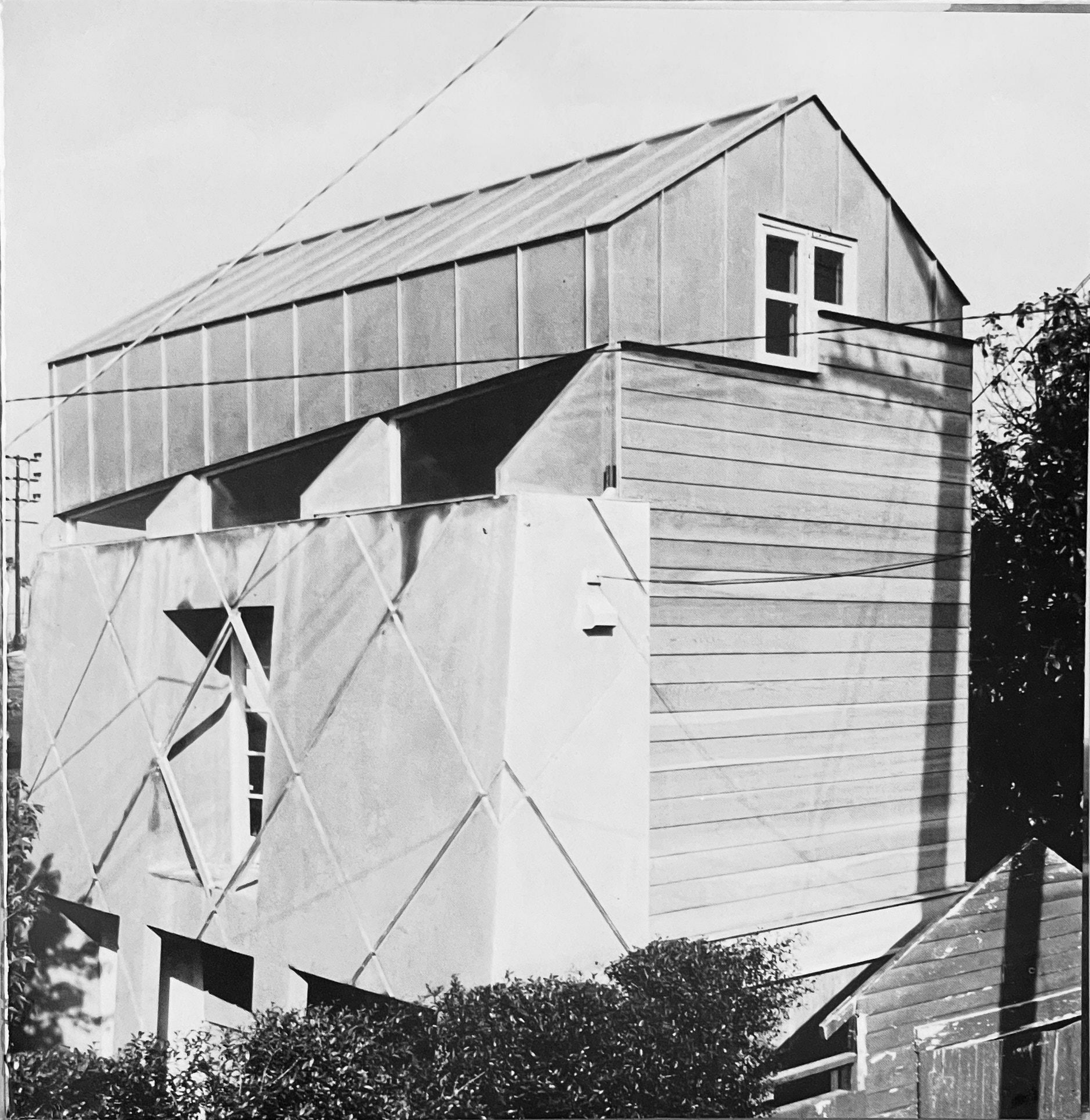
Lowe studio

Lowe's building is a serious essay in steel construction. While Lipson's steel "falls off the truck" into carefully composed configurations, Lowe's building is engineered. Early in his career, Lowe worked on airplane hangers, and he remains incredulous that so few true, clear-span skeletal steel buildings are built in Los Angeles, and it is "really such a simple-minded, obvious idea." Steel, he says, is competitively priced, and capable of long spans.

Lowe designed a reproducible building on Venice Way — one, he says, you can phone in. The modular structure can be built in any low technology country, not to mention on any commercial lot in L.A. — on any C-2 property with 35' frontage and variable depth. The building has mirror-image front and back sections with a central "green space" courtyard — that yard can be expanded on deeper lots by pulling the two sections farther apart. Lowe's

building is of indeterminate use: unlike Morphosis' Sedlak studio, which is capped by a gabled roof that signals the house-ness of the building, Lowe's building has an indeterminate ambiguity: studio? office? warehouse? factory? He says that all he would need to make it into a house is a microwave oven. The building is really a structure. The street front has a roll-up, double garage door that is scaled to accommodate international shipping containers, two abreast: 8' X 8'6" X 20' (or 24') including, Lowe adds, a refrigeration unit. Lowe believes that all one's possessions should fit in such a container; he would like to be able to ship his household anywhere, and plug it into a building. He notes that pharaohs went into eternity with gold-plated container boxes about 12' X 12' X 24', and if that was sufficient for a pharaoh

Although Lowe regrets that the notion of a machine aesthetic is now in disfavor, he does not limit himself to steel technology, or the image of technology. He has built in wood (in Malibu), and believes the steel building on Venice Way carries him through 1920s technology. He looks forward to an inflatable effort (the 1960s), after which he would like to catch up to the present day with a sojourn in Japan, studying instantaneous architecture.



“It was a natural sequitor for these people to want their new buildings to make an artistic gesture.”

Lowe's building, although it is intended to be a duplicable, and a prototype, is infused with an intensely individualistic sensibility. This individuality marks most of the other buildings among these “crazy” house/studios, yet, despite their uniqueness, they do not disrupt their architecturally unassuming streets. The houses integrate into their neighborhoods primarily because they are in scale. They are not projects done by developers interested in the economies possible through land assembly and large-scale development, but one-of-a-kind, lot-by-lot, efforts that blend rather quietly into the existing fabric. The houses all respect the old lot sizes, and are (technically) incremental, in-fill projects. The sometimes chaotic character of the community is sufficiently established to absorb whatever shock these buildings, with their unexpected styles, bring to their streets.

These buildings — mostly residences and/or studios built for occupant/owners — house Venice's successful Bohemia, artists who established themselves in Venice over a decade ago and who prospered enough to build spaces to their own specifications on residential lots. The expectations of many of these clients were nurtured by years of living and working in “found” loft spaces —

open, raw, industrial or commercial spaces that suited the alternative lifestyles led by people in some way involved with the art world. It was a natural sequitor for these people to want their new buildings to make an artistic gesture, and as members of an artistic milieu, they sought out members of the local architecture community to help them. For Los Angeles, the new Venice houses are the 1970s and 1980s equivalents of houses done in a comparable, though more middle class district — Silverlake — in the 1920s and 1930s, by architects R.M. Schindler, Richard Neutra, Raphael Soriano, among others.

These Venice buildings, though new — and though they are pioneer buildings within Venice's changed real estate markets — are outgrowths of a long-established artists' community. Some of them may be conceived in the International Style, and some may be of national and international interest, but they are also as Venetian as the beach cottage, and the artists, next door. Cumulatively, they form their own architectural block across Venice, imbued with their respective philosophies of space, light, materials and shape — real estate as an art form.

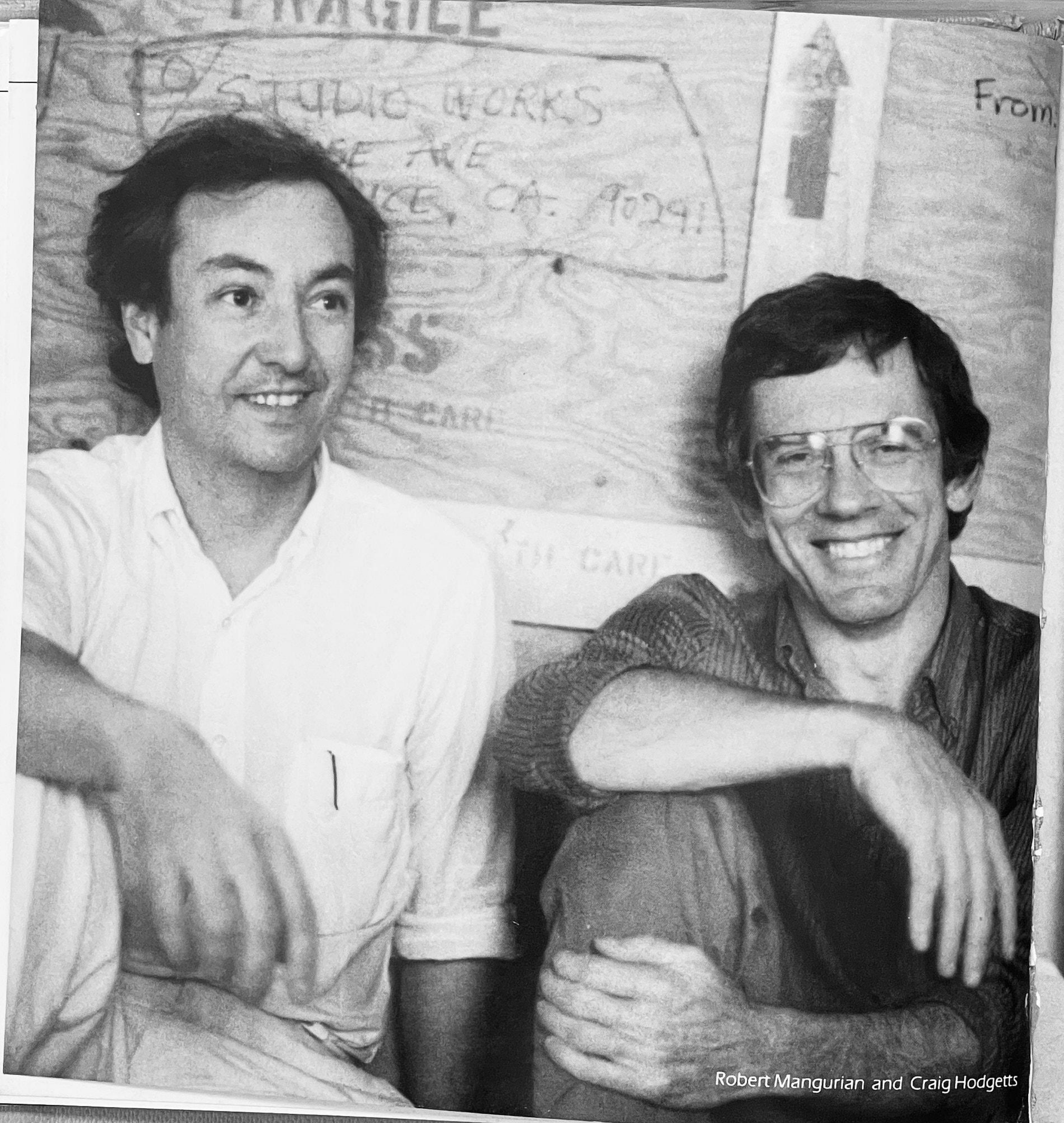
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Robert Mangurian and Craig Hodgetts



Carl Day



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Frederick Fisher



Milica Dedijer



Frank Gehry

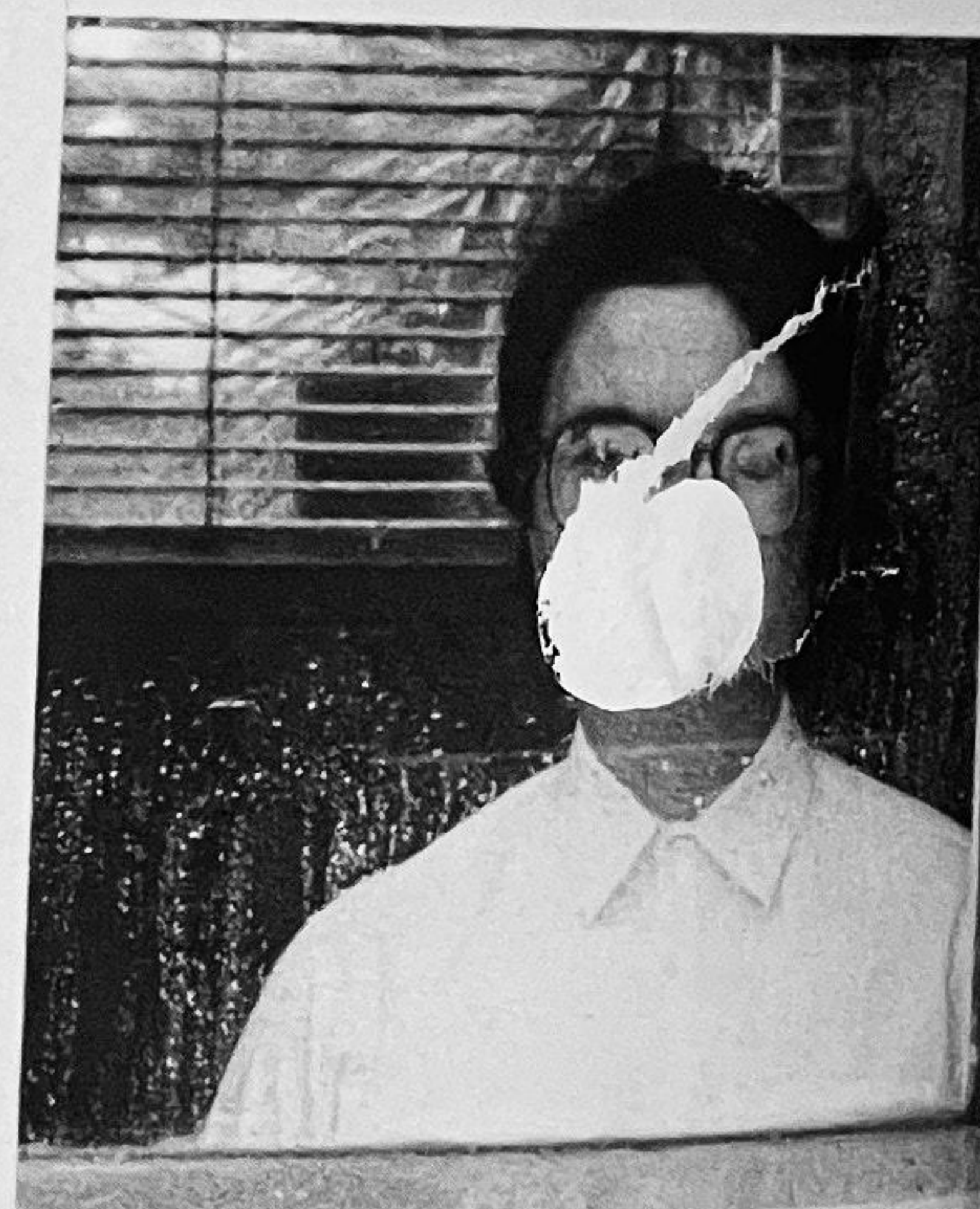
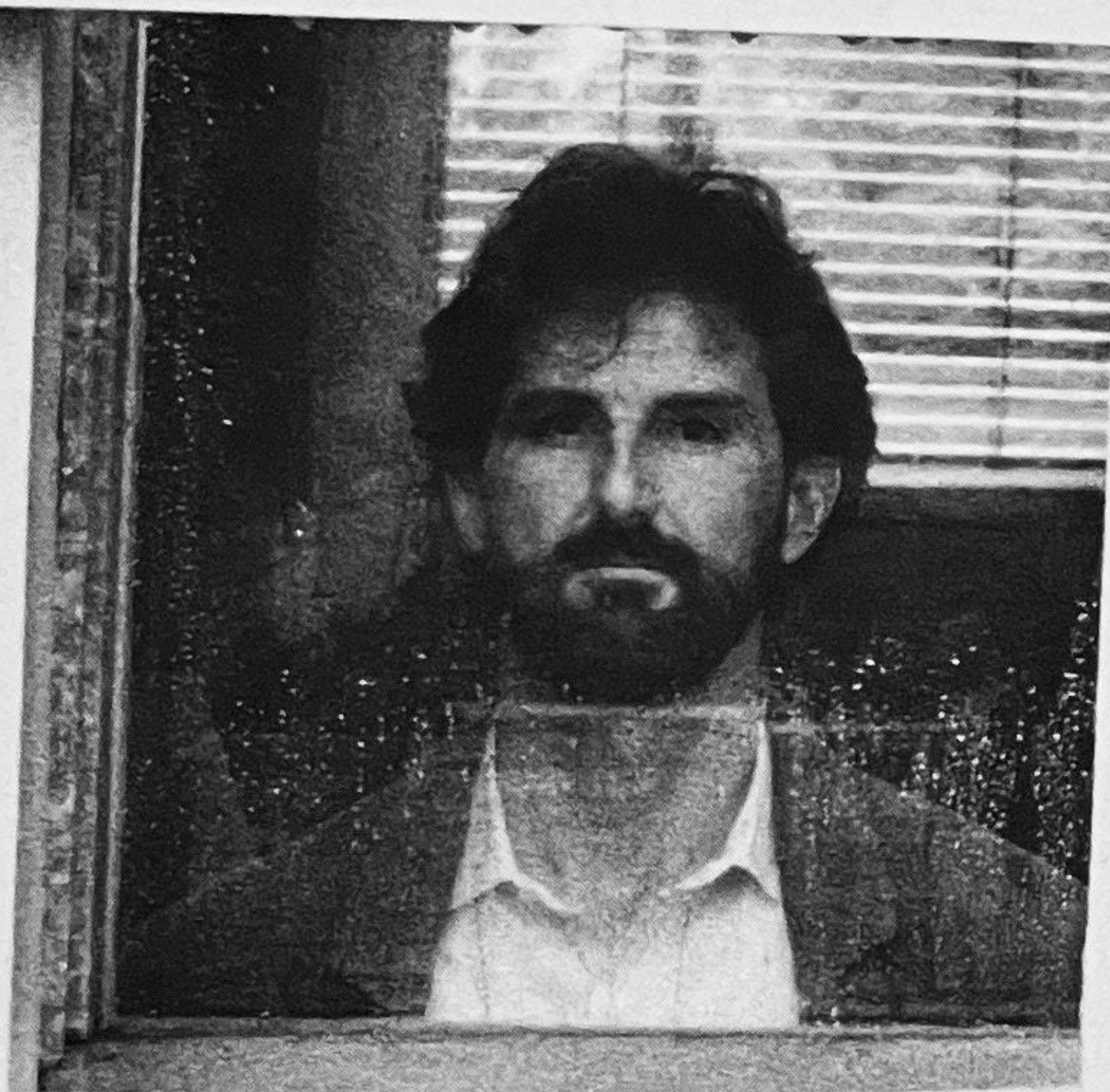


Michael Lipson





David Ming-Li Lowe



Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondo

Following photos by Tom Sewell:

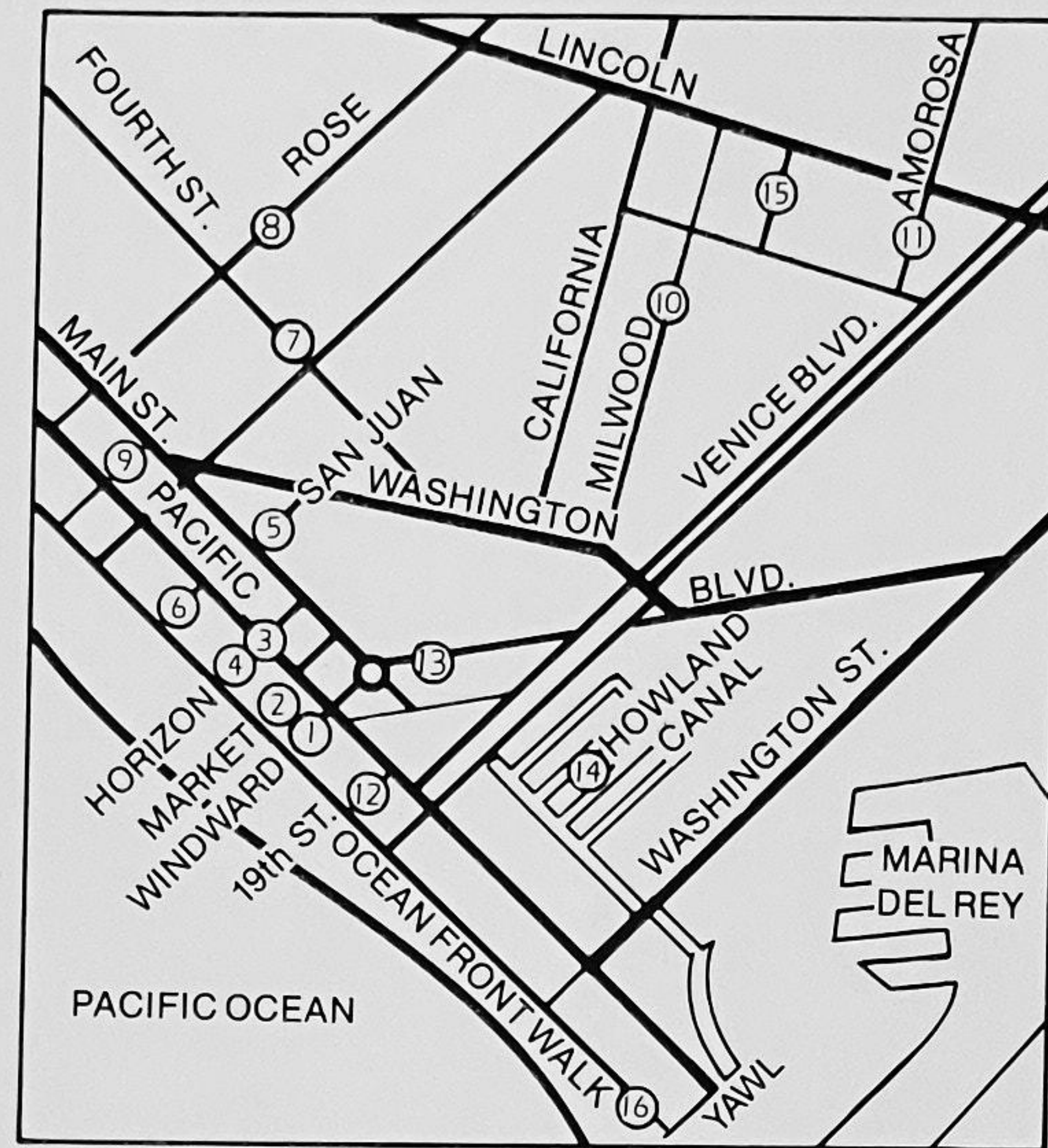
Bengston & Doumanis, Webster, Hom

Hodgetts & Mangurian, Lowe, Fisher

Gehry, Dedijer, Dill, Day, Graham, Lipson,

Canal House, Bill House, Doumani House

Norton House, Graham House.



1 MILE

1. Graham House - Windward
2. Gagosian Gallery - Market St.
3. Tony Bill House - Horizon and Pacific
4. Spiller House - Horizon
5. Caplan House - 229 San Juan
6. El Greco Apartments - Wavecrest
7. Indiana Studios - 4th and Indiana
8. Kahn/Albuquerque Studio - 5th and Rose
9. Dedijer/Small House - 120 Thornton Place
10. Dill Studio - 819 Milwood
11. 2-4-6-8 - Amorsosa Court
12. Morphosis I - 19th Street
13. Lowe Studio - 308 Venice Way
14. Canal House - Howland Canal and Dell
15. Hedge House - Superba
16. Doumani Beach House - Ocean Front Walk & Yawl