Richard Neutra, Constance Perkins House, Pasadena, California, 1955. © Julius Shulman. The J. Paul Getty Trust, Julius Shulman Photo Archive, 1955

Poker Faces: Seeing Behind the Mask of Convention

BY ALICE T. FRIEDMAN

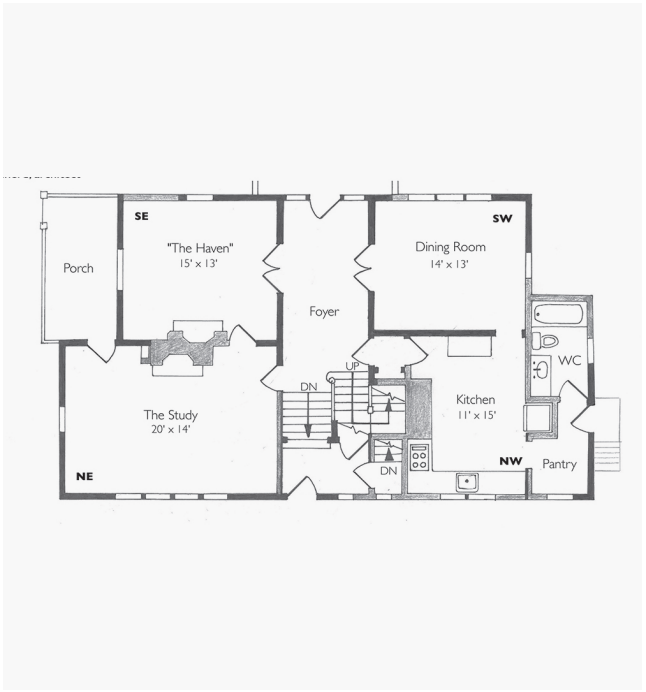
"Poker Faces" interrogates the category of modernity in the history and criticism of domestic architecture, examining the relationship between formal innovation – typically used as our measure of originality – and planning innovation, in which new ways of living and experiencing the home are enabled through the translation of unconventional programs into interior spaces. Two examples of houses built for women clients – William Brainerd's Colonial Revival "SCARAB" in Wellesley, Massachusetts (1907), built as a home for Professor Katharine Lee Bates and her life partner, Professor Katharine Coman; and Richard Neutra's Constance Perkins House, in Pasadena, California (1955) – suggest that sometimes the most radical households lie behind self-protectively diffident façades.

If we examine 20th century houses and housing through the lens of domestic culture, foregrounding program and client expectations rather than the aspirations of the architectural profession, a very different narrative emerges from the one traditionally offered by architectural historians. Using this strategy, as I proposed in *Women and the Making of the Modern House*[1], shifts our understanding of the ways in which "major monuments" of modern architecture like Mies's Farnsworth House (1951) or Johnson's Glass House (1949) — came to be conceived and inhabited. That research suggested a working hypothesis for analyzing modern houses: the more unconventional the program — for example, in cases where women-headed households required hybrid work or living spaces, or in conditions that disrupted hierarchies of function and definitions of gender — the more innovative the design turned out to be. Moreover, applying this client-centered methodology — rooted in the notion that popular culture, social convention, and individual affect are as powerful in form-making as the values of architectural culture — to an even wider range of conditions and typologies, including both historical and 20th century vernacular examples, opens up new questions about what, in fact, constitutes modernity in the domestic realm: how do we understand and interpret extraordinary planning strategies — new ways of living and working — that lie concealed behind "ordinary" or conventional façades? How do we get beyond the mesmerizing effects of modern exteriors of marble, steel and glass to discover the modernity of interiors concealed from the gaze of the state, the neighbor, and the historian?

In this context it is helpful to recall the work of Elizabeth Gordon, the editor of *House Beautiful* magazine in the 1940s/1950s and a champion of Frank Lloyd Wright and Cliff May[2], a prominent designer and entrepreneur credited[3] for the development and elaboration of the Southern California Ranch[4]. In an article entitled "A Home Can be Modern and Not Look It", published in *House Beautiful* in 1945[5], Gordon pushed back against Bauhaus influence, outlining the key elements of modern American design: careful planning and attention to functional details — rather than style or materials — were the essential ingredients for success in domestic architecture, and both could be found in May's distinctive melding of traditional materials, regional style, open planning, and new technologies in his ranch house designs. "A good Modern house fulfills the needs of its occupants", she wrote, adding pointedly that "it isn't enough for a house to work well most of the time... it must function 365 days of the year"[6]. From double sinks in the master bathroom to space-saving "engineered cupboards" in the small but efficient kitchen, the modern American home could be both responsive to the demands of the contemporary American family and tied to the materials and rhythms of nature. Such features as outdoor patios, cross ventilation, "oversized" windows in the living room, and a "glassed *loggia*" overlooking the garden all contributed to a relaxed, common-sense approach. According to Gordon, these amenities would ensure that the house was up-to-date and flexible without sacrificing the relaxed look and feel that made a home distinctively American.

Taking Elizabeth Gordon's assertion that "a good modern house fulfills the needs of its occupants" in multiple directions that she would never have approved, we can now consider the hidden modernities of a handful of houses, built in various architectural styles for a range of occupants — gay couples, groups of adults, or single women, for example — whose "lifestyles" fell far outside the boundaries of social conventions. Two US examples, conceived and built in very different regional and historical conditions, offer rich opportunities for study: both serve as a paradigms for the application of client-centered methodology, not only in the analysis of historical cases, but also, perhaps, in the development of new hierarchies and policies of historic preservation and housing design.

01–02 William Brainerd, The *Scarab*, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 1907. © Harry Connolly, 2010.



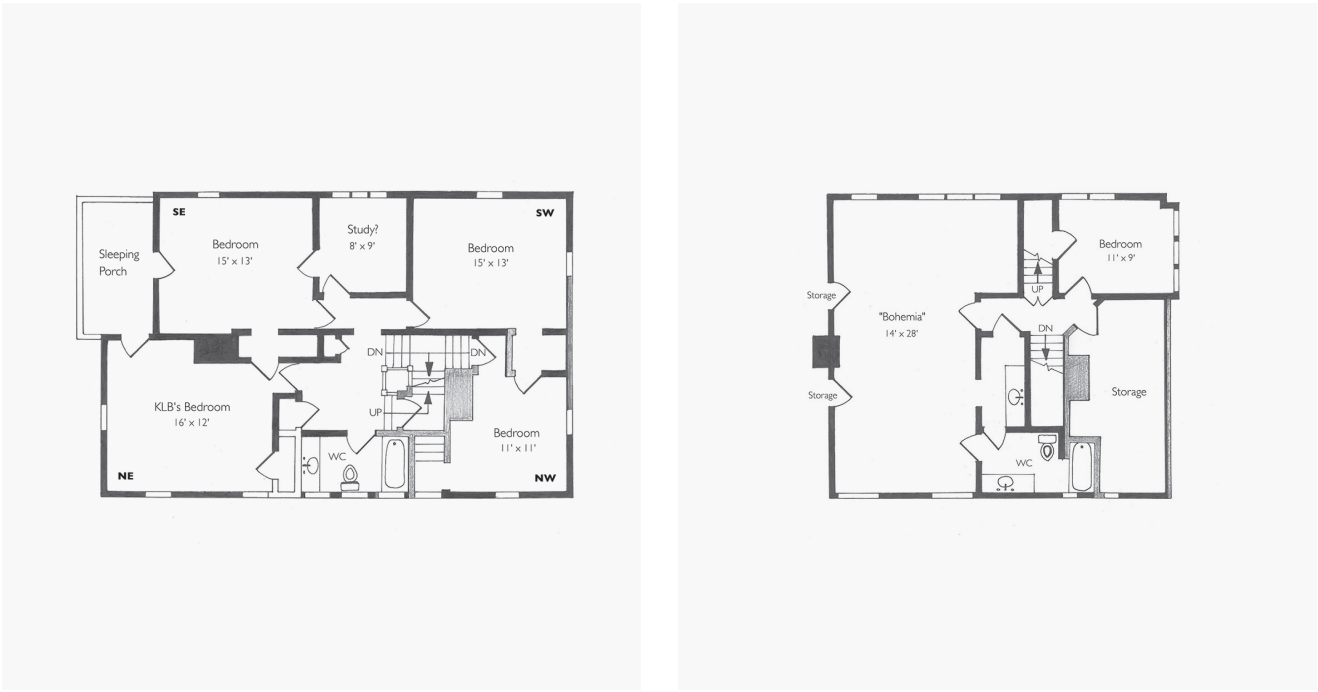
03 William Brainerd, The *Scarab*, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 1907. Plans: Ground Floor © Drawn by Naureen Mazumdar and Alice T. Friedman, 2014.

The first is the *Scarab*, a Shingle Style / Colonial Revival home built in 1907 in the town of Wellesley, Massachusetts — about a kilometre from the Wellesley College campus — for Katharine Lee Bates, an eminent poet and professor[7]. The core household that Bates gathered around herself consisted of her life-partner Katharine Coman, professor of History and Economics at Wellesley College, with whom she had lived for nearly 15 years prior to building the house, and Bates's elderly mother and younger sister, whose job was to keep house: lady professors, whose work kept them at College and in their studies (both on campus and at home) for long hours every day, clearly needed lots of help with the daily chores of living. But despite its unconventional household, the *Scarab*, covered with wooden shingles and massed irregularly across the contours of its rocky, hillside site, appears quite unremarkable in size and scale within the context of the surrounding suburban neighborhood of single-family, Colonial Revival homes of the same period.

The two women whose relationship and work occupied the center of the project, both conceptually and functionally, were about the same age — in their late forties — when the home was completed. By this time, Bates had made enough money publishing her poems and stories to supplement her Wellesley College salary, and she borrowed the rest of the money from her brother, a lawyer who lived in Portland, Maine: it was this brother who oversaw the construction of the house during a year when the two ladies were travelling abroad in Europe and the Middle East. Then, as now, was extraordinary for two women to build their own home, and even more unusual for them to devise a program and a plan that would suit their own purposes. Bates, an expert on the work of the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, hired local architect and Wellesley neighbor, William Brainerd, to design her house. He based the project on an imaginative recreation of the sprawling home at the center of Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables*[8]. although her motives for this romantic conception are not known, she may have been drawn to the idea — made vivid in the novel — of a sprawling, old home filled with nooks and crannies where multiple occupants could work and live quite separately as well as together.

Despite this camouflage, the program for the house was most definitely unconventional: in addition to the core household described above, it accommodated temporary living quarters for visiting students, young professors, writers, and teachers, as well as an ample dining room, library and "common room" in which friends and students gathered for conversation, and even for the weekly meetings of Bates's upper-level seminar on English literature. A cook and housekeeper also lived in, and there were ample service rooms for storage, laundry and cleaning in the basement: between the work of the household staff and that of Bates's own sister, freedom from domestic chores was guaranteed for the professors, allowing living their life of sisterhood, good fellowship, and original ideas.

The ground floor centered on three large rooms and a substantial kitchen: the ample dining room was furnished with a table that was large enough to accommodate the large numbers of friends and neighbors who gathered there nightly. On this floor there was also a large living room and library, christened "the Haven" in which women could work or read the latest journals and newspapers, and a large terrace on the garden side. The scale and use of these spaces made the house seem more like a women's club than a private home, and it did in fact function as an extension of Wellesley's College Hall and of the campus nearby. Thus it should not be surprising to learn either that Bates left her house to the College in her will of 1928, or that the College



04–05 William Brainerd, The *Scarab*, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 1907. Plans: First Floor, Second Floor. © Drawn by Naureen Mazumdar and Alice T. Friedman, 2014.

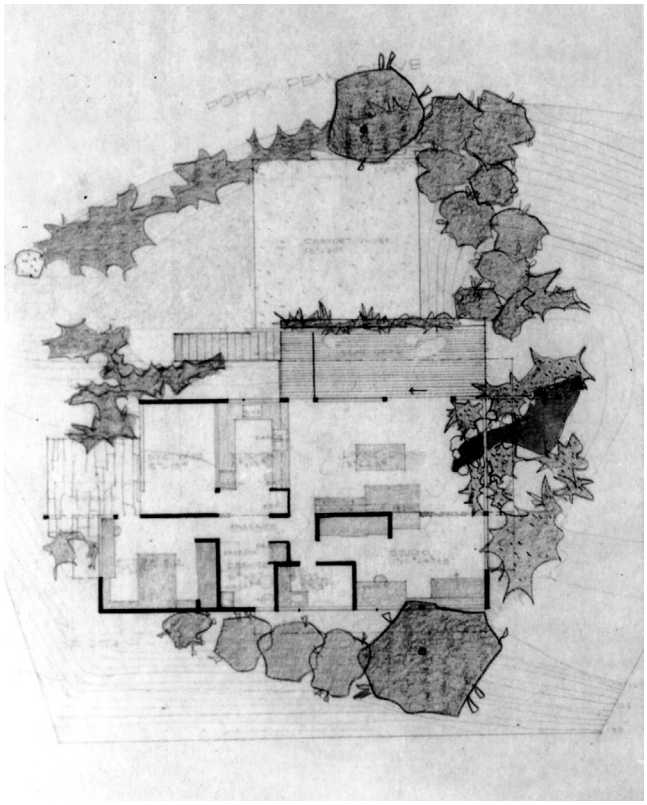
ultimately sold the house off in the 1950s, having used it as a rooming house for years, but ultimately recognizing that its peculiar interior arrangement no longer served the needs of faculty or students, who expected both more privacy and more conventional separation of public and private space. The house, which was largely un-touched throughout its history, was bought by its current owner — an architect, public interest planner, and single parent with three daughters — in 2007; like Bates and Coman, she opens her home to Wellesley students and younger colleagues, frequently hosting meetings and working retreats in the house and garden.

The house is characterized by a number of other peculiarities. To begin with, the four grandest bedrooms, which occupied the first floor could be reached either from the central landing or via passageways through the closets between each pair, an arrangement that was certainly unusual, though not altogether unheard of in comparable single-family homes. While the exact assignment of these rooms isn't certain, it is clear that the largest room was for Bates herself, and near that were rooms used by her mother, and her sister. Perhaps the fourth bedroom on the first floor was used by Coman, who paid her share of monthly expenses, but it may also have served as a guest room, adjacent to the small "office" or library on the second floor garden side.

Part of the reason for this uncertainty is that Coman, the more prominent scholar of the two, evidently had the use of the entire second floor for her study, teaching space, and library: this top-floor area, which included a darkroom in which Coman printed her own original photographs (creating another echo of the *The House of Seven Gables*, with its resident photographer in the attic) was referred to by everyone as "Bohemia" — a term that both encoded and romanticized Bates's and Coman's unconventional life partnership — a partnership which was both hidden and fore-grounded in the planning of the home. Next to "Bohemia" was a small room with a single bed like a student's room in a college dormitory; for Coman, it served as a retreat when she worked late, or wished to remain separate from the bustling household below. All of the rooms on this floor, like those on the level below, could be used for both work and living space. Indeed, visitors sometimes slept on mattresses on the floor, or in cots that folded up and were put away when not in use; conversations happened in formal and informal spaces, and a spirited household came and went every day, full of energy and idea. This tradition continues to the present day when the owner hosts groups of up to 18 young architects and urban planners at twice-yearly gatherings for study, conversation, and sociability.

Katharine Coman died of breast cancer in the small upstairs room in January 1915, and it is to this secluded area of the house that Bates withdrew until her own death in 1929, mourning her partner in unaccustomed solitude. Although she continued to entertain and teach in the house during the remaining 13 years of her life, life at the *Scarab* would never be the same for anyone. Indeed, Bates's letters and poems are filled with the sad evidence of her mourning, and they bear witness to the loss of a partnership that was, both explicitly and tacitly, acknowledged by the couple's many friends and colleagues. Referring to Coman as "Joy of Life", Bates published a memorial volume of poems entitled *Yellow Clover* in 1922[9]; the book celebrates their years together, their travels, their romance, and their extraordinary household. Bates even published a biography of the couple's dog, a large Collie named Sigurd, using the story of the dog's life to chronicle the happy days she spent with her family, her partner, her many friends and pets, up on a hill in the house that she had built for herself and the people she loved. Even Bates's official portrait, taken for publication in Welles-

06–07 Richard Neutra, Constance Perkins House, Pasadena, California, 1955. © Julius Shulman. The J. Paul Getty Trust, Julius Shulman Photo Archive, 1955.



08 Richard Neutra, Constance Perkins House, Pasadena, California, 1955. © Julius Shulman. The J. Paul Getty Trust, Julius Shulman Photo Archive, 1955.

09 Richard Neutra, Constance Perkins House, Pasadena, California, 1955. © Constance Perkins Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

ley's official handbooks and brochures, made reference to Coman and their relationship — Coman's photograph was placed prominently on Bates's desk.

Ultimately, the lessons that we learn from this fascinating example are threefold: first, the house reflects a new housing type modeled on the use of space and the creation of community in American colleges by a new generation of feminist, professional women. Second, the Bates house suggests that there can be a significant disconnect between modern planning and traditional architectural style: indeed, the conservatism of the architecture at the *Scarab* functioned as a screen behind which the unconventional household could thrive in the climate of increasing intolerance of "other" or "queer" communities after WWI. Finally, the house offers an example of a type-form that may be a model for current practice: it is a project not in any way confined to the paradigms of hetero-normative architecture. As such, the *Scarab* increases in significance beyond its modest architectural merits.

Our second example is the Constance Perkins house, designed by Richard Neutra, and built in Pasadena — a suburb of Los Angeles — in 1952–1955[10]. Commissioned by a single, woman professor who wanted a private place in which she could live and work, the house is perched on a steep hillside, turning its back to the street. Instead of a front garden, it greets passersby with views of a spacious garage and a flight of stairs, tucked in close, which lead to the front door. Small and relatively inexpensive for its time, the house was, like the *Scarab*, conceived as a hybrid of domestic and institutional typologies, giving it an importance beyond its modest budget and design. Designed to blend into its neighborhood, which was filled with modern, wood and glass houses in the Southern California modern vernacular of the time, its diffident exterior belied its interior spaciousness and glamour.

Perkins, an art professor at Occidental College, was committed to building networks of community as both artist and teacher. She wanted a place where she could hold small seminars and parties, and a space in which she could display paintings, prints, and sculpture made by herself and her friends. Moreover, the house is remarkable for its intimate relationship with the small surrounding site — the elegant reflecting pool that meanders from inside to outside under a wall of glass expands the view of the extremely constricted site, and the mature plantings at the edge of the garden conceal the garage of the next-door neighbor's house, only a few metres away.

Like Aline Barnsdall, whose mixed-use home and arts center was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the 1920s, Perkins was far less interested in having her own private bedroom — much less a master bedroom celebrating a heterosexual couple — than she was in having an ample living room and a studio for gathering with friends. As I discovered when I interviewed Perkins in the late 1980s, the bank from which she got her mortgage loan had forced her to add a master bedroom to the project — without which, they said, the house had no resale value[11]. What Perkins was interested in most of all was the open space of the studio and the seclusion of the site — she was content with her artist's table, with its adjustable lamp, a single bed that could double as a couch, a small desk for her papers, and an adjustable "camel table" designed by Neutra, which could convert from a coffee table to a dining table by flipping up the legs.

The Constance Perkins house represents one of Neutra's most beautifully resolved small projects. Here the hybrid program made it possible for the client to live as she chose, and it gave the architect an opportunity to develop his architecture in new directions, one that would ultimately make him famous in such glamorous and spectacular examples as the Stahl House — Case Study House #22 (1961), well-known from Julius Shulman's famous photograph. Like the Stahl House, the tiny Perkins House is original and innovative: it frames the view of the extraordinary landscape, and it makes the individuals who inhabit it interact and experience their surroundings in a new way, creating a modern consciousness through form and materials that break with the past. Like the *Scarab*, the Perkins House expresses the unconventionality of its modern, feminist program through radical design strategies belied by the "poker face" of its conventional exterior. ▮

Notes

1 Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Cultural History*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1998.

2 For an overview of Cliff May's work, see Nicholas Olsberg; Jocelyn Gibbs (ed.), *Carefree California: Cliff May and the Romance of the Ranch House*, New York, Rizzoli, 2012, including Alice T. Friedman, "Rancho Moderne: Style and Lifestyle in the Postwar American Home", p. 239–247. For Gordon's long and influential career as editor of the magazine, see Dianne Harris, "Making Your Private World: Modern Landscape Architecture and House Beautiful, 1945–1965", in Mark Treib (ed.), *The Architecture of Landscape 1940–1960*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, p. 180–205.

3 Among others, including the woman architect Lutah Maria Riggs (1896–1984). About Lutah Maria Riggs, see David Gebhard, *Lutah Maria Riggs: A Woman in Architecture 1921–80*, Santa Barbara, Capra Press, 1992, and http://www.lutah.org.

4 The American "Ranch House" began as a vernacular house type in 19th-century California, but became a staple of the suburban housing market throughout the US after WWII.

5 Elizabeth Gordon, "A Home Can Be Modern and Not Look It", *House Beautiful,* October 1945, p. 109–115.

6 *Idem.*

7 Alice T. Friedman, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Life, Love and the Queering of Domesticity in Early 20th— Century New England", *Home Cultures*, Summer 2015 (forthcoming).

8 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables*, Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1851.

9 Katharine Lee Bates, *Yellow Clover*, New York, E.P. Dutton & Company, 1922.

10 Alice T. Friedman, "Southern California Modern: The Constance Perkins House", in *Women and the Making of the Modern House*, *op. cit.,* p. 160–187.

11 *Idem.*

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