NOT LONG AGO MARISTELLA CASCIATO, a senior curator at the Getty Research Institute, came for lunch at the Los Angeles condominium architect Charles Moore designed for himself in 1975. When she arrived, she instinctively climbed all the way to the top of its highest staircase. “Charles Moore,” she said, looking back down through the layers of spaces, “really knew how to make you feel like you inhabit an architectural section! Le Corbusier and Moore shared this ability.”

The entire condo is really one gigantic staircase that just happens to have living spaces ingeniously twisted around and under the steps. Knowing that Maristella has long lived in Rome, I recalled to her that when Robert A. M. Stern first visited the condo, he said to Moore, “You’re trying to squeeze the Spanish Steps into 1,200 square feet!” If only. Had there been more square footage Moore might have gotten closer, but he could squeeze in only forty-five stair risers, exactly one-third of the Spanish Steps’ 135. And just as the Spanish Steps seem so much grander after one emerges from a narrow Roman street into the Piazza di Spagna, here the sense of monumentality is intensified by being stuffed into an improbably small stucco shell.

The condominium project originated in 1974, when Moore left Yale University, where he had served as a professor and dean of the School of Architecture, to join the faculty at UCLA. He would live in the condo for about ten years, until he moved to Austin, Texas, where he would live until his death in 1993. (Moore was famously incapable of staying in one place, sprinting continentally through academic posts and a series of eight homes he designed for himself.)
Katharine Welsh purchased the condo from Moore in 1984. To her great credit, she lovingly maintained the place, changing practically nothing about it over her thirty-two-year occupancy. When she moved to Texas this past year, many were concerned that the condo’s availability on the charged Los Angeles real estate market would result in its swift purchase and severe alteration, probably radically and irrevocably.

Architectural preservation kicked out. Perfect timing, combined with their love of design, inspired the architectural and landscape writer and publisher James Trulove and his partner Mallory Duncan to rescue the residence, even as potential buyers were lining up on the sidewalk. They would freshen up the interior and use it while visiting family and friends in the city, if the Charles Moore Foundation would help organize academic residencies in its absence, just as the foundation does with Moore’s home and studio in Austin. (Trulove and Duncan also own a unit in the Sea Ranch Condominium, completed by Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker in 1965 as the first building codes would require an independent fire stair, shared as a secondary means of egress. He planned a sunken courtyard, with room for cars, a fountain, and pots of bougainvillea. Eugene Johnson, a Williams College art historian, once observed that Moore’s architecture “is always a process, sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical, sometimes both.” This is a case of the vertical, made puzzle-like. Frank Gehry once recalled having dinner there, and then at his own breakfast table the next morning being unable to draw it, to figure it out.

First one enters the motor court, paved with concentric brick rings. Then there is a smaller private walled garden, whose glass doors provide entry into the Moore condo. Just inside, the first flight of stairs veers straight up, with a glimpse of a distant arch thirty-five feet above. Underneath the stair, Moore had just enough space to wedge in a hot tub and spacious shower room of galvanized corrugated tin. A freestanding wall conceals a tiny bunkroom, accommodations for an unceasing parade of visitors, most astute, guidebooks: "The City Observed, Los Angeles: A Guide to Its Architecture and Landscapes, (1984)."

Just after Moore arrived to begin teaching in LA, two other professors and their wives approached him, familiar with a remarkable house he was designing for yet another UCLA professor, Los Burzyn, on a steep, narrow, wedge of land in Santa Monica. “We can see you are good with tight sites. We own a small property in Westwood, where we want to build a duplex,” they told him.

Moore took a look. The Selby Avenue property, roughly 50 by 130 feet, was hemmed in on three sides by houses and apartment buildings. For months Moore had also been searching in vain for an affordable place for himself to live in West Los Angeles, clinging by the fingernails to financial solvency amid a miserable 1970s economy that was mercilessly cruel to architects. Maybe this was an opportunity to acquire a place to live. “I’m so good with tight sites,” he reported back, “I can get a triplex on it.” The others welcomed him in, and they formed a tiny condominium association.

Moore enlisted Richard Chylinski in the effort. Chylinski had helped with projects such as wind studies for the Sea Ranch Condominium’s courtyard. For the condo project, Chylinski would be draftsman and construction contractor. Over meals at a nearby Greek diner, Moore began sketching his ideas.

Moore adored Southern California’s Spanish colonial heritage and its subsequent revival, and the condo would be a perfect opportunity to abstract and layer some of these themes. Since his future neighbors insisted on views of the Pacific (all the way across Santa Monica), Moore would devote the site’s western end to their side-by-side units, which would each be roughly twice the size of his own bachelor pad. He would claim the site’s eastern end along the street for his unit. The units had to stack vertically to gain the necessary square footage. Building codes would require an independent fire stair, shared as a secondary means of egress. He planned a sunken courtyard, with room for cars, a fountain, and pots of bougainvillea.
As the stairs ascend to the second floor each step brings more and more layers above into focus. The steps have particleboard treads and glazed tile risers that flash green if sunlight happens to strike them just so. Otherwise they are graphic black stripes that exaggerate the extreme spatial compression and recession. After scaling this flight of steps, one arrives, some-
dwhat out of breath, on the piano nobile, where the stratified staircase suddenly takes on baroque preten-
sions, spilling and splaying into a tiny dining area that Moore fit in by clamping a “saddlebag” alcove onto the stairs. The pendant and perforated tin chandelier (which never left the apartment and with which Moore outfitted with ordinary plastic fittings) is from Morelia, Mexico.

Guests, collaborators, and coauthors streaming back and forth from LAX.

At the very top of the credenza, a window frames the Los Angeles Mormon Temple, while below, an interior opening provides serenissimo views all the way back down to the entrance, from justly so sacred, a shaft visual that makes the temple float weightlessly above Moore’s dining table.

The Slat-Back chair Moore designed in 1989 requires only one 4-by-8 sheet of birch plywood to construct. The perforation and pressed-and-crosslacquered folk art mixed in with the books, is the equivalent of two stories, yet another staircase was necessary, only inches wider than a standard set of shoulders. Now at the very, very top of the stairs, one can gingerly turn around, mountains-gentle like, flip down a hinged plank, and sidestep behind the arch to get to the books and folk art on the opposite side.

Moore arranged his abundant folk art and childhood toys everywhere—on every square inch of horizontal surface: on pedestals, floors, window-sills, countertops, nightstands, tables, steps, the mantel, atop the crossing beams. Never was this to be misinterpreted as clutter. Like Charles and Ray Eames, Moore understood that these miniatures and monuments offered enchantments of scale, worlds within worlds.

Along the staircase, massive sculptures are carved into the wall to form a niche, covered with Beebe’s wallpaper. The door at the left leads into the narrow study where Moore organized his massive collection of architectural lecture slides. The Wedail chandelier is an Eames design of 1960. The ceramic sculpture of four mermaids is signed by Peruvian artist Antonio Falero Cádiz, Pátzcuaro, Mexico.

A wall of galvanized metal repeats the entry from the front door. The scraper chest from Ollantay, Peru, are from the Steelwarden and Caragonne collections.

Peering down from the summit, one sees that the entire condo is one volume in which Moore has ingeniously knit plan and section together, so the two are really indistinguishable. The section cannot be understood without the plan; the plan makes no sense without the section. We are made instantly aware that we inhabit space. It is a reminder that to be modern is to be present.