Another Encounter with the Cheshire Cat

On the secrets and revelations of Charles Moore's Burns House and the legacy of postmodern architecture.

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ART & ARCHITECTURE

> *"All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.*
> —Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

VIEWED FROM ACROSS Santa Monica Canyon, the landmark 2,040-square-foot house that architect Charles Moore designed and built in 1973 for the economist, urban planner, educator, and musician Leland Burns looks like a striving architecture student's first, overeager foamcore model. Its arrangement of stucco-clad blocks and towers hopes to evoke—in the familiar, flat, profile-dependent manner of postmodern architecture generally and Moore's work specifically—something from your memory, a fragment of an Italian hill town, but in a hot mess of pinks and oranges. Each wall surface—there are dozens—is painted a slightly different fleshy shade. The designer Tina Beebe, who developed the color scheme for Moore, specified 26 but told me more were mixed on the spot.

Then, on the uphill, neighborhood side of the house, modesty prevails. The roofs slope down toward relatively low, putty-colored walls, and the whole is surprisingly barnlike and (mostly) reserved. Townscape or barnscape? Those massing logics are tossed out when you're inside, anyhow. The full volume of interior space, up to the undersides of the sloping, board-clad roof planes, is a blank canvas for elaborate plastic invention.

Pool courtyard. Photo by Kevin Keim.

In many Moore buildings, a stairway, freed of convention, initiates a chain reaction of innovations. Here, that stair is a precipitous, three-story, pyramidal slice. One half runs up inside—where it doubles as an impossibly vertical bookshelf—and the other half runs down outside. The stair covers the length of the house, from pipe-organ recital hall(!) to pool courtyard, and even with a severe rake and tiny landings, it ends up being *longer* than the house itself. It would land on the neighboring lot if not for a last-minute 90-degree turn toward the canyon, allowing the final run of steps to come to ground just short of the pool.

At which point you should have a spectacular view from this perch on the north rim of the canyon. But—one last first-year student's perversity!—here the architect has intentionally placed nonstructural walls to block that very expensive vista. You can imagine the professors shaking their heads *NO!* at this much muchness. So, it came as a surprise when the Los Angeles architect Annie Chu told me that the Burns House was the first building new students were taken to see when she was studying at the ever-progressive Southern California Institute of Architecture in the early 1980s. A fundamental, reflexive disdain for Moore's soft-edged populism—for postmodernist architecture in general—was an unspoken covenant in many sectors of critical architecture and architectural education, including my own, at the time. It still is.

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Moore's peripatetic career followed a consistent pattern. A brilliant teacher and writer—you may be using his still on-point book *The City Observed, Los Angeles: A Guide to Its Architecture and Landscapes* (1984)—Moore would accept a teaching position at a prominent university, then start a local firm with bright, young, like-minded architects. This began at UC Berkeley in 1959, where Moore co-founded the firm MLTW (widely known for Sea Ranch); then to Yale in 1965, as dean of the architecture school, where he co-founded Moore Grove Harper, which eventually grew into Centerbrook; next, prompted in part by the opportunity to design the Burns House, to UCLA in 1975, where he co-founded Moore Ruble Yudell; and, finally, to the University of Texas at Austin in 1985, where he co-founded a firm with the architect Arthur Andersson.

Moore maintained working relationships with all these collaborators, allowing him to complete a wide range of commissions, including houses, churches, civic and university buildings, museums, and public spaces. Rejecting the essential elitism of modern architecture, Moore favored the intersection of the messy vitality of life and the rich history of architectural ideas. His designs—including Kresge College at UC Santa Cruz, the Williams College Museum of Art, and the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans—became notorious for an almost pop-cultural use of sign, symbol, and color.

Wherever he landed, Moore would build a new place for himself to live, experimenting with forms of domesticity and their relationship to work. One of the first and most highly regarded of these homes, the Orinda House near Berkeley, is essentially a single square room, the barn-door corners of which roll open to the outside. It's given order—and somehow held up—by two skylit, four-columned mini-temples.

The last home he designed for himself, the Moore/Andersson Compound in Austin, began as the rethinking of an unassuming 1930s bungalow. In final form, it consists of two small houses—one for Moore, one for Arthur Andersson—diagonally flanking a small, freestanding office space used for their architecture firm, all separated by breezeways, under a single roof, organized around a stepped courtyard and lap pool, shaded by a vast, trellised wisteria.

Recital hall. Photo by Kevin Keim.

I only began grudgingly appreciating Moore's work when my family stayed in this compound for several months in the mid-1990s, in a separate office annex set just outside the original house/office/house. Moore had died a year-and-a-half earlier. Andersson was still living there, but he'd moved the office elsewhere, while Moore's house was uninhabited. (The Charles Moore Foundation, which now oversees three Moore buildings, including the Burns House, would be founded a few years later.) The annex had been rented to UT's School of Architecture, where I teach, and I got permission to move in as I renovated my own home.

It's hard to describe quickly the architecture of the compound. Moore's house contains a curving, monumental, layered, multicolored cartoon of a classical wall compressed into a tiny, gutted postwar bungalow. Every surface is covered with books, toys, icons, models, shrines, artifacts, artworks, and bric-a-brac. The interior of the Andersson house continues the curving, layered wall, but in white. The book-lined architecture office, set between, is a regular room in plan—though packed with models, tools, and ephemera—but its ceiling takes remarkable liberties with conventional residential framing. Our children could roam it all freely. Accustomed to the severity of most architects' houses, they were quicker than me to appreciate living there. They *loved* it.

The School of Architecture and various professional organizations would rent the Moore house portion of the compound to host conferences and receptions for architects. Those events were invariably cautious and stiff. The house seemed more eager to play than the architects, who treated it as a subject to parse rather than a setting. Andersson's girlfriend at the time was a graduate student in art at UT. One evening, with Arthur out of town for client meetings, she threw a big party in the house for her student cohort. The contrast would be difficult to overstate. Instead of decoding the house, the art students used it as a stage. With its veiled layers, prurient cutout windows, ambiguous surfaces, and suggestive infrastructure—every built-in couch is also essentially a bed, for example—the house finally exposed its splendid capacity.

I suddenly realized that Moore's work might have something to offer adults. Inspired by its Wonderland explorations of scale, surface, and syntax, I started referring to the house as the Cheshire Cat. Cartoonishly nice when you first meet, it fades in memory to a sinister grin. I started to think of the late, bewhiskered Moore that way as well—and I finally stopped avoiding his work.

I recently spent two weeks living as a scholar in residence at the Burns House—another encounter with the Cheshire Cat, so to speak. During that stay, I found myself considering some of my lingering uncertainties about Moore's architecture. He wrote at length about spatial and architectural memory, and his designs constantly utilize allusion to older buildings from all over the world, hoping to offer a meaningful alternative to the anti-historical, anti-contextual purism of puritanical modernism. But a Moore building has yet to transport me somewhere else or to another time. Hyper-idiosyncratic, his buildings are unmistakably their own places.

Stair to master suite and study. Photo by David Heymann.

I also remain skeptical of Moore's frequent spatial overcomplications. While invariably astonishing, the complexity and consequences of his Rube Goldbergian contrivances often result in strangely inflexible spaces. It's not just that furniture placement is tight and there's a lot of complicated dusting. The charming stage-set quality of his interiors depends on the temporary illusion generated from overlays of many small, shaped pieces of inexpensive trim, as well as many colors of paint—a kind of fantastic overstatement made necessary by the rigid specificity of these spaces.

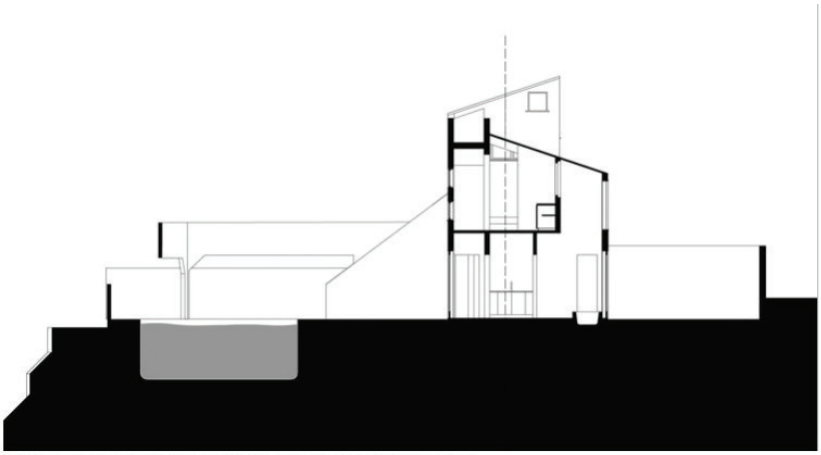
I have, however, developed a deep respect for two other, interrelated aspects of Moore's architectural intelligence. First, he understood what his clients wanted, and how architecture could frame a world of experience to liberate those desires. Second, he could really stretch a budget. Moore had a fundamental knowledge of mundane building realities, like how structural members conspire in framing, which allowed him to experiment freely. You typically cannot perceive exactly how Moore spaces stay standing up—a captivating quality hard to capture in photographs—because there's a lot of hidden activity going on in the carpentry.

That Moore actually understood construction is a reflection of the crucial role affordability played in the postmodern architecture of the early 1970s to ’80s. That period saw rising inflation drive mortgage and construction loan rates from roughly four to seven percent in the 1950s and ’60s into the mid-teens. The material signature of postmodernism—maximizing the inexpensive possibilities of paint on stucco and Sheetrock over two-dimensionally shaped wood-framed walls—is one logical consequence. So is foregrounding many of your client’s possessions on built-in shelves or ledges, as Moore would invariably do. While solving a functional problem, it’s a cheap way to draw attention away from the paucity of the building’s palette.

By way of contrast, the architectural period we’re currently in, sometimes termed the after-modern, is characterized by fine materials, laborious assembly, and minimal evident personal effects. This is partly due to interest rates dropping back to single digits in the 1990s and holding at all-time lows through much of this century. It’s the absurd stamina of this revived cash flow valve that allows current architects to sniff at the shabbiness of postmodern architectural construction. But whenever there’s a downturn—I’m betting on a terrible one soon!—I again appreciate the value of postmodern architectural desperation.

All in, the Burns House was built for a hard budget of $100,000, just over $40 per square foot, inexpensive for a custom-built house at the time. In current dollars, that translates to about $725,000, roughly $300 per square foot. In Los Angeles today, you’d be hard-pressed to build a custom house (with pool) for $600 per square foot—$900 is possible but tight. At $1,200, an architect’s heart rate finally slows. In fact, $300 is less per square foot than the average selling price for *all* houses, new or old, in Los Angeles currently. And that goes for prefire prices too.

Of course, factors beyond inflation have driven architectural construction prices well above the cost-of-living index slope. They include expanding average house size, material expectations, population growth increasing demand and land cost, and the collapse of competitive bidding by contractors, which is in part a consequence of the concentration of wealth in the United States over the same period. Affordability for Moore, however, was more than simply a reflection of economic conditions. It was central to his architectural sensibility. He *began* cheap, rather than designing expensive and cutting back, as many architects tend to do.



Section at master bath/guest bath. Credit: David Heymann.

For example, some simple cabinetwork aside, the Burns House is designed essentially without finish carpentry, a big-budget hit in most custom houses. There's no baseboard: wall just meets floor. Most of the doors are off-the-shelf standard sizes, all the same size, and set into the walls without trim. Most of the windows are fixed glass panes set with simple wood stops directly onto the 2 × 6–inch head, jamb, and sill blocking of the window openings—all work that can be done by framing carpenters rather than pricier finish carpenters. Then the openings are boxed in with Sheetrock (inside) and stucco (outside), again without trim. To save further, there's a single, central heating and cooling core "tower," so no lateral ducts are required. This means dropped ceilings aren't necessary—another savings—so the spaces obtain their shape in cross section from the variously angled roof slopes.

The aesthetic consequence that arises directly from all this budget consciousness? The cartoonishly flat elevations of the house—into which doors and window openings read as simple cutouts—obtain meaning from their shaped profiles, the full circle of budget and style in postmodern architecture completing itself. Maybe the architects of that period sought to reference the past while maintaining the advantages of two-dimensional abstraction, explaining their reliance on flat signs and symbols. Or maybe the limitations under which they were working necessitated the approach. Robert Venturi, an early progenitor of the style, interned with the great modernists Eero Saarinen and Louis Kahn. Don't you think Venturi and his partner, Denise Scott Brown, would have loved to design around their kinds of budgets?

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You see these details in many of Moore's houses. What sets the architecture of the Burns House apart are the astonishing and singular spatial mechanisms Moore used to liberate his client's desires. Burns loved working with Moore and was instrumental in the architect's move to Los Angeles. Happy in and proud of the house, Burns willed it to the Charles Moore Foundation upon his death in 2021. Staying at the house, where I am writing this essay, has made clear how its architectural order, both cartoonish and adult, sets up a precise frame for a way to live.

That slice-of-pyramid stair activates the house's complicated interior. It starts just inside the visitor entry, dividing a small vestibule from the large recital hall, then shoots up between vertical voids over a sitting and dining area to the master suite entrance on the second floor. After jogging to the canyon side to make a reading corner, it continues up precipitously to a study on the third floor that has marvelous views west to the ocean. The stair then restarts outside across that small room, dropping to a covered entry door at the master bath on the second floor. Finally, turning toward the canyon, the stair proceeds down to the pool courtyard.

That courtyard is in turn accessed on the ground floor from the sitting area, dining room, and guest bath through French doors set in a space that, when looked at from the courtyard, appears to be inscribed by the monumental triangle of the stair. So laid out, the stair fluidly connects every significant space in the house to the recital hall and the lap pool courtyard—the two more extravagant features that Burns required.

The 450-square-foot recital hall, set perpendicular to the long run of the house and courtyard, was designed as a living room and concert salon. Burns, an accomplished musician who played professionally on occasion, had commissioned the wooden pipe organ from Germany—the instrument prompted his need for a new house. Moore accommodated it on a shrine-like stepped platform, above which the raked ceiling also steps up, daylighting the organ from behind. The hall, which can be isolated with vast barn doors, is mostly enclosed. But with the brilliant asymmetrical placement of big windows, it feels open.

The adjacent pool courtyard—the other great public space of the house—is its opposite: it's mostly open but feels enclosed. Bounded to the north by the long three-story volume of the house, its short ends are shut off on the east by the blank wall of the recital hall and an adjacent belvedere tower (pool equipment below, pool and ocean view above), and on the west by that last stair run and a property-line wall just beyond. The courtyard's remarkable architectural aspect is that Moore blocked most of its long south edge against the lovely canyon below and the idyllic Santa Monica townscape along Adelaide Drive on the distant side. Across the opening, he placed a tall, semi-freestanding yellow-ochre wall with a central cutout just in front of and slightly askew to a lower pink garden wall, leaving only a slot view of trees in the middle- and background.

The proportions of the colored solid/void/solid bands being about equal at sitting eye level, the effect is more like a super-graphic flag than a three-dimensional barrier. Still, given the view, placing anything opaque here is counterintuitive. But the consequence is instructive. The walls clearly serve to block views *in*. Without them, the pool courtyard would maximize consumable view from the private realm, a conventional L.A. architectural strategy. With them, the space—in conjunction with the outside stair, the connected programs, the Belvedere, and the big windows in the overhanging facade—is charged with an explicit sense of voyeuristic possibility. Like at that Austin student party, the architecture becomes a stage.

Burns, who led an active social life centered on classical music and his teaching at UCLA, hosted frequent, relatively staid receptions here. But that was far from its only function. According to Burns, in a 1978 essay for *The Work of Charles Moore* describing how the design developed, he instructed Moore that, though the pool should serve for a "serious swim," spaces should be provided for "cavorting in and around it" to support the "hedonistic affairs of the pool."

Burns, who was gay, also regularly threw less staid parties that revolved around the pool and courtyard. These gatherings were well known within the gay community of Los Angeles, and were hardly a secret to the world beyond. Burns would often send out mimeographed invitations; one, for example, calls for a dress code of collegiate T-shirts and jockstraps.

If Burns was comfortable with the capacity of Moore's design to handle this range of uses, articles written when the house was built only allude to the larger program while entirely avoiding specifics. Paul Goldberger, writing for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1975, mentions the "sybaritic pool," which Tina Beebe called "sybaritic and private" in an article on her color scheme for *House & Garden*. While many of the articles refer to a "bachelor owner," for its photo shoot, *Sunset Magazine* staged a conventional, heterosexual soiree, accompanying an article complete with recipes for hors d'oeuvres.

In fairness, it is hard to imagine any mainstream publication at the time explicitly describing the full purpose of the courtyard, which is likely why none of those writers mentions the far more hedonistic and architecturally astonishing double- and triple-height sectional constructs that define the private life of the uphill side of the house, where the master suite sits over the guest bedroom suite. Here the floors, linked by the stair on the courtyard side, are connected by a sequence of narrow two- and three-story shafts of interior space. The first and tamest of these is at the edge of the public realm: a tiny, grand, double-height vestibule for the kitchen and laundry, off a garden hidden between the alley and the guest bedroom end of the house, where inhabitants most often enter. The two adjacent double-height spaces, however, are far from tame, generating startling programmatic linkages. Masked to the neighborhood by a proper elevation of regularly spaced doors and windows—while inside they are mostly hidden behind doors and walls—these spaces restructure private relationships within the house in an interplay of sight lines and interactions.

The second shaft rises over the shower and in-floor tub in the guest bathroom. As this space also serves as the pool shower, it originally had two interior doors, one opening in from a hallway linking the public rooms and courtyard to the guest bedroom, the other directly from the guest bedroom. According to Burns, the tall cross section here prompted the visiting bather downstairs to "gaze heavenward and simultaneously discharge the dual obligations of cleanliness and godliness without compromising either." The godliness is perhaps a bit compromised. An interior window cut high on the inboard side of this double-height space—ostensibly to allow natural light from the exterior window into the upstairs master bath—sits over the upper bathroom's sink counter. That window swings out into the guest bath, allowing Burns a view—or a conversation—from the master bathroom to the guest bathtub below.

Master bedroom linked to "Concubine Room." Photo by David Heymann.

The third shaft links the guest bedroom below to what must be one of the oddest spaces in the annals of postmodern architecture, on the second floor. A small bed/closet/altar/balcony called the "Concubine Room" is accessed directly through a closet door in the master bath at a point immediately adjacent to both a landing on the pool stair and the master shower. A twin mattress fills this closet balcony. One can lower a counterweighted extension ladder, designed by the architect, to the bedroom below. The Concubine Room is itself a two-story space, defined by a high clerestory window over an altar-like cabinet—designed to accommodate the ladder's counterweight—that serves as the bed's footboard.

The tower volume over the Concubine Room extends west to enclose the last of these private sectional inventions: the master shower on the second floor, another two-story heavenly ablution shaft with impossibly high windows. The sun in the late afternoon sets its bright orange tiles ablaze—the only, if daily, clue to the hidden life of the house for neighbors moving along the alley.

Following one after another over a remarkably short distance, these surprisingly grand sectional variations collectively define a discrete and perceptible spatial zone, one that serves to settle the architectural logic of the house, which would make little sense without it. The blinding smile of the courtyard on the south is balanced by this darker, invisible presence on the north.

If it was hard for writers in the early 1970s to be frank about the pool courtyard, it must have been impossible to even hint at these fantastic inventions. In a 1975 essay for *Progressive Architecture*, the architect Robert A. M. Stern sidestepped their nature entirely, dismissing the bedrooms as "functional." While semantically true, this intentionally misleads the reader, who would assume the term's mundane usage. Stern, while still equivocating, was more suggestive in his summary: the house is "cosmopolitan in the best meaning of the word," supporting "a cultivated man's life."

In laying out the core beliefs of his architecture, Moore wrote: "The urge to inhabit, to make a place of one's own at the center of the universe, must be one of the most basic of human urges." The Burns House is the world of a secure man who knows exactly how he wants to live but needs a place of his own to center his universe. Its astonishing and absurdly complex "cosmopolitan" spatial organization is at once deeply personal and a remarkably frank and precise map of fraught and complicated social dynamics at a transformative moment. Designed a few years after the Stonewall uprising, the Burns House is not quite as loud and proud as the courtyard might suggest. The architecture comprises veils and secrets but also openings and revelations, registering the shifting politics of its time with remarkable precision.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

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