

## Beyond San Jose: Monte Sereno's remote cluster of 'mystery houses'

Call them Winchester 'mystery houses,' that remote cluster of inexplicable Eichlers located 12 miles south of San Jose, in the tiny town of Monte Sereno.

When I was a kid, Monte Sereno used to seem so far away. On those drives south, I remember seeing the moon base-like domes of the Century theaters silhouetted against the twilight sky. It was different universe back then for sure, along that oh-so-familiar Highway 17 stretch to Santa Cruz.

Somehow Eichler's Northern California saga managed to extend all the way to Monte Sereno, and paused just long enough to record Joe Eichler building 16 homes on a quiet cul de sac off of Winchester Boulevard. According to records of architect Claude Oakland, who designed the 16 Eichlers on Via Sereno, the development was originally dubbed Sereno Foothills when it was built back in 1970, towards the end of Joe Eichler's career.

But why did Eichler build only a handful of homes there? When we visited Monte Sereno recently, we noted that this tree-endowed area seemed to be a perfect spot for a full-blown tract. "By that time, into the 1970s, property wasn't easy to come by, and I'm sure Joe got what he could," explains architect Kinji Imada, who worked alongside Oakland for many years.

Information has been hard to uncover. Among the Via Sereno 16 there does not appear to be any original owners left who can help shed light on the tract's origins. Nonetheless, I did manage to visit several of the residents now living there, and each has a fascinating

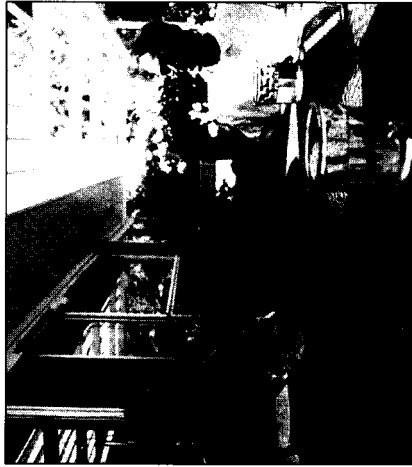


## Wally Field's Eichlerholic

Visit Wally in the Eichlerholics on the Eichler Network Online, and on his own website at [www.wallys.com/eichler.htm](http://www.wallys.com/eichler.htm)

and different story to tell.

Carol and Don Thornton and their kids Maggie and Brad love their Claude Oakland MS-144, especially the roomy cen-



**Social call.** Above: The Eichlerholic and Monte Sereno Eichler owner Don Thornton (right) relax for a chat on the Thorntons patio. Right: With the Mekechuks, Bryan (center) and Jo-Anne (right), inside the living room of their Claude Oakland model 334.

tral gallery and fireplace. The Thorntons have a penchant for outdoor showers in the woods, so they continued the Eichler tradition of lots of glass by putting a glass slider in their bathroom, complete with a deck outside affording a ringside porcelain seat view of the tall redwoods outside.

A visiting friend recently seemed concerned. "What if someone walks by in the side yard while I'm using the facilities?" she asked. "Just wave and say hi!" responded an unconcerned Carol.

worse than a hole smashed through the wall to the garage (to allow access for a fire hose) and some slightly damaged furniture.

Other than that, their home was pristine. Unlike many late-era Eichlers, their drywall was wood paneled, affording both warmth and safety.

The Gaults' insurance company promises they'll rebuild the damaged garage and walls exactly as they were before, down to re-milling the siding. Not so replaceable are the many years of Marian's watercolor painting.

Bryan Mekechuk and Jo-Anne Sinclair and their young ones, Nikolas and Kate, have lived in their Claude Oakland MS-334 since 1997. Like the Gaults, Bryan and Jo-Anne have been concerned about preserving their Eichler, but with a different focus.

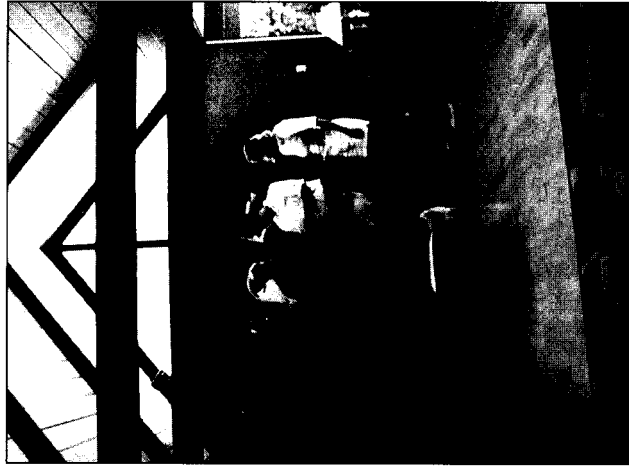
While the exterior of this rare, double-hipped (and turned sideways) gable model has not been modified, I was amazed to discover that Bryan and Jo-Anne have done sort of a 'reverse engineered' reworking inside, opening up the interior by removing walls and bringing in even more light. The overall effect seems to emulate the look of the earlier Eichler interiors.

The first thing to go was a fireplace, once positioned five feet from the back window and blocking the view through the rear glass. Next they removed two walls between the kitchen/dining area and the living area in the back, and in the process eliminated the formal dining space. They even removed horizontal beams, 26 inches off the ground, which divided their rear windows into two.

One of the sideways-facing gables spans Bryan and Jo-Anne's atrium, the other their living area. A wood-paneled

-Continued on back page

Down the block, the story of Ned and Marian Gault is more serious, but very hopeful. Their garage caught fire recently due to a faulty plug leading to the refrigerator. The Gaults were away at the time, but neighbors rose to the occasion and brought in the fire department, which caught the fire before it spread to the rest of the house and the nearby trees.



photos: Mark Watson

But the Gaults' inherent home design apparently helped to save itself. The same gallery model as the Thornton's, the Gaults' Eichler was erected under 1970s building code conditions, and had drywall installed rather than hollow walls of mahogany paneling. When I walked in, I saw nothing

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## Eichlerhoic finds Monte Sereno

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wall under the interior gable sports a huge painting by Belinda Chlouber that is illuminated from the gable, the atrium, and the back of the house.

Besides preserving the openness of their interior, Bryan and Jo-Anne have been working on another form of preservation: for the single-story integrity of their neighborhood.

Actually, the history behind what the couple is looking to preserve is quite interesting. Twenty years before Eichler arrived, several senior military officers after World War II bought the land that now comprises Monte Sereno, and in the mid '50s, the town of Los Gatos attempted to annex it.

But the residents, knowing that their property taxes would likely be raised if annexation occurred, de-listed themselves as voters, thus reducing their population density (on paper, at least) and preventing the annexation.

Then, in 1957, the local homeowners formed the City of Monte Sereno, a 'contract city' with no business district and no infrastructure. They turned to Los Gatos for fire and police protection.

Over the years, the senior officers subdivided and sold the land. A part of the land adjoining the northwestern corner of Via Sereno had already been subdivided and a cul de sac created, and one neighbor built a second-story addition which obstructed the previous open view through the back glass of one of the local Eichlers.

Presently the land near the northeastern corner — in fact, where Via Sereno

One of the garden's treasures looks like an authentic Asian bell. It actually comes from the old Nut Tree, once a popular restaurant on Interstate 80. "I always wanted

meets Winchester and the Mekechuk's house stands — is facing a similar fate. This prompted Bryan and Jo-Anne to do some digging, and they uncovered a 30-year-old Eichler CC&R's document prohibiting neighborhood multi-level additions. This applied to the adjoining lots as well.

The Mekechuks are determined to revive Eichler's architectural control committee and prevent the second coming of the

monster home. Hopefully they'll succeed.

So, my visit to Sereno Foothills was productive, and educational; and those 'mystery houses' of Monte Sereno are a bit less mysterious than they used to be.

And I came away with a good feeling. The cul de sac's restoration and preservation activities seem to suggest that the Eichlers of Monte Sereno are alive and well, thanks to some special owners who care.

—David Weinstein

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