

THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

House of Intrigue

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East German design objects were subtly incorporated into the VDL House's kitchen, entryway, living room, and other spaces. David Hartwell

Competing Utopias at the Neutra VDL Research House enlivens the often-static house museum by filling the home office with 350 artifacts and household items culled from the archives of Culver City's Wende Museum and Archive of the Cold War. The result is an entertaining mash-up of East meets West that's reminiscent of a movie set. (After all, this is Los Angeles.)

The exhibition sparks the imagination by allowing viewers to create stories about the fictitious East German family who has "moved" into Neutra's house. Simultaneously, it forces questions about the West's perception of Eastern bloc design and the origin and ownership of modernism.

Upon entering the home, one encounters a DMV-like waiting room replete with an askew portrait of a bureaucratic boss flanked by chairs. First impressions indicate communist red tape, inefficiency, and a nod to the grey, concrete characteristics of Soviet-era architecture. But a closer look at the chairs reveals an elegant cantilevered design of tubular metal that illustrates that East German industrial design was not just about function. In fact, these chairs were originally from the Palast Der Republik, an icon of German Democratic Republic (GDR) architecture that housed Parliament and was also used for cultural events.

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David Hartwell; Laure Joliet

Steps away a phone nook showcases a 1968 Garden Egg Chair rendered in plastic. The bright color and comforting scale is an invitation to settle in, chat on an orange plastic phone and smoke a cigarette from a pack that's sitting atop a slightly psychedelic graphic black and white Formica side table. Heading upstairs to the living quarters, visitors encounter rooms filled with more plastics in more bold colors—toys, record players, books, magazines, kitchen appliances, typewriters, molded chairs—as well as closets full of clothing and bedrooms with personal affects that reveal clues. Does the father, a pilot for the East German airline Interflug, know about the Stasi style surveillance system present on the floor above? Could his wife be a spy? And does the child—a member of the Young Pioneers, an East German scout organization—embrace the Socialist doctrine she's being taught?



David Hartwell; Laure Joliet

In a time when cultural institutions place a premium on interactivity, this exhibit excels. But it's also striking how seamlessly these objects fit into Neutra's world, and into the American modern movement in general. It becomes clear that both East and West carried on the Bauhaus tradition of form and function while embracing futurism, accessibility, and the technology of new materials.

In Neutra's case, for example, his preference for inexpensive materials like Formica and laminate and his high tech automated louver window and intercom systems fall in line with the East German notion that another new material—plastic—could be used to produce affordable consumer products that were well designed, aesthetically pleasing, and functional. Such examples show us that the Cold War was fought on the design front too.

Yet in the West we can be paternalistic, placing a premium on legendary modern masters like Neutra, Schindler, and the like as the geniuses who reshaped the world of design and architecture. *Competing Utopias* looks at modernism with a fresh eye and reveals that the competition may have been stiffer than we thought. And in the end, we may not be as different as we think.



Soviet-era record player, drinks, and glassware.
David Hartwell

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