

## LIPSHY HOUSE

Dallas architect Howard Meyer belonged to the second generation of American modernists, those who, like the Californian Harwell Hamilton Harris and the Houstonian Karl Kamrath, mingled the lessons of Frank Lloyd Wright with those of Europe's modern masters. Meyer tempered Wright's influence with Le Corbusier, Harris with Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler, and Kamrath, to some small extent, with Dutch architect Willem Dudok, before his absolute conversion to Wright in 1947. In the 1950s all three were producing some of Texas's best modern houses, all the while grappling with the harsh elements. Harris, accustomed to the temperate climate of Los Angeles, was designing inward-looking brick houses for Big Spring and Abilene and very deep eaves for Fort Worth and Dallas; Kamrath, in his never-ending quest to emulate Wright, was cantilevering his clients' living rooms into the dense shade of Houston's River Oaks and Memorial; and Howard Meyer? Well, Meyer was designing houses like this one—blending outside and inside so seamlessly and elegantly that the sun and its heat appeared almost negligible.

Knowing how to make a house livable was one thing, but having the vision (and the courage) to interpret Texas

in a modern idiom was something else. These architects may have been second generation in the larger scheme of things, but in Texas, particularly the conservative Dallas, they were pioneers. In fact, Meyer single-handedly brought the modern movement to Dallas in the 1930s, and although his life and work have never been sufficiently chronicled, he is widely credited with endowing the city with two of its most beloved buildings—the high-rise apartment building 3525 Turtle Creek (where Harris lived during an interval of work in Dallas) and the award-winning Temple Emanu-El, considered to be one of the most beautiful and important synagogues in the country.

Meyer had impeccable modernist credentials. A New Yorker by birth, he had attended architecture school at Columbia, where he worked with prominent modernist William Lescaze, who was designing his entry in the landmark League of Nations design competition. Meyer graduated in 1928 and headed to Europe with his bride (a native of Waco) to meet Le Corbusier, whose book *Towards a New Architecture* he had read while still a student. He was dazzled by the man who, he said, convinced him “that the new forms had great meaning.” Corbu made it possible for the

ARCHITECTURE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE VARIOUS “STYLES.” THE STYLES OF LOUIS IV, XV, XVI, OR GOTHIC ARE TO ARCHITECTURE WHAT A FEATHER IS ON A WOMAN’S HEAD; IT IS SOMETIMES PRETTY, THOUGH NOT ALWAYS, AND NEVER ANYTHING MORE. ARCHITECTURE HAS GRAVER ENDS, CAPABLE OF THE SUBLIME.

—LE CORBUSIER, FROM *Towards a New Architecture*, 1927



Meyers to see his recently completed homes, the Villa Stein and the Villa Savoye, and these houses, along with the work of others—Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe in Germany and other modernists in the Netherlands and Switzerland—rounded out and confirmed his sense of being part of a movement.

Back in New York, with his modern sensibility honed, Meyer designed two houses that received widespread publicity, and he began work at the firm Thompson and Churchill, where Frank Lloyd Wright officed when he was in New York. It seemed like a charmed life for a young architect, but very soon afterward the realities of the Depression hit hard and he succumbed to his wife's advice to give Dallas a try. They arrived in Texas in 1935, and, before the decade was over, he found himself designing a red-brick Georgian house.

This was surely a low point for Meyer with his modernist zeal, but Dallas, as conservative as it was, was also diverse, and along the way his reputation grew and clients began to seek Meyer out, eager to have a house that broke the mold of the more prevalent period-style homes that dominated the landscape. The late 1930s and the entire decade of the 1940s saw one modern house after another emerge from Meyer's small office. By the 1950s, his work had impressed a man named Ben Lipshy, who had purchased a corner lot filled with trees. The house Meyer gave him would, in later years, be labeled "the finest international modernist house in Texas."

It was not "the International Style" of white stucco and steel of the Bauhaus architects and their acolytes but the warm materials and compositional elements that referred to a specific place. Le Corbusier had written, "Mass and surface are determined by the plan. The plan is the generator. So much the worse for those who lack imagination!"

Working without a net—that is, a formula of predetermined stylistic elements, Meyer traced a plan that corresponded imaginatively to his client's needs and a fresh interpretation of contemporary life. But for a master bedroom (now a study) and a kitchen, the first floor was open, and movement through it was modulated by low, exquisitely crafted cabinets; partial walls of the pinkish, beige brick of the exterior; and a staircase hovering above a pool—a sculptural element that had as much to do with the Zen-like mood of the house as it did with transporting dwellers to bedrooms above. Wide expanses of plate glass, sliding doors, and casement windows opened broadly to the softer light of the south and north. The glass cubes of the second floor emerged from a wide redwood fascia that united and organized the disparate forms of the whole.

The great irony of Modernism is that it purported to be architecture devoid of style when, of course, its very earnest quest for purity of form and the plans that made life within more serene constituted a specific stylistic message. And as a style, it could suffer the ignominy of going out of style. And so it was that Dallas reasserted itself, and like a jungle waiting to reclaim an encroaching civilization, it overcame the Lipshy house and formalized it. The interior brick was painted white, the birch cabinets removed, the modern furniture replaced with Louis XIV chairs, and Meyer's soft, hidden lighting augmented with crystal chandeliers.

But the circle eventually came round again and two subsequent owners have brought back its original beauty. The first couple, Jim and Carolyn Clark, engaged Meyer himself in 1982. Although he was in his eighties then, he painstakingly re-created the birch cabinets, the pool at the base of the staircase (that had been covered over); pulled the original, trusted metalsmith out of retirement to restore the steel casement windows; and painted the interior brick a color

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** While architect Howard Meyer rarely allowed his admiration for Frank Lloyd Wright to have too great an influence over his own designs, the Lipshy house is an exception. The horizontality of Wright's Prairie Style houses is clearly at work here.

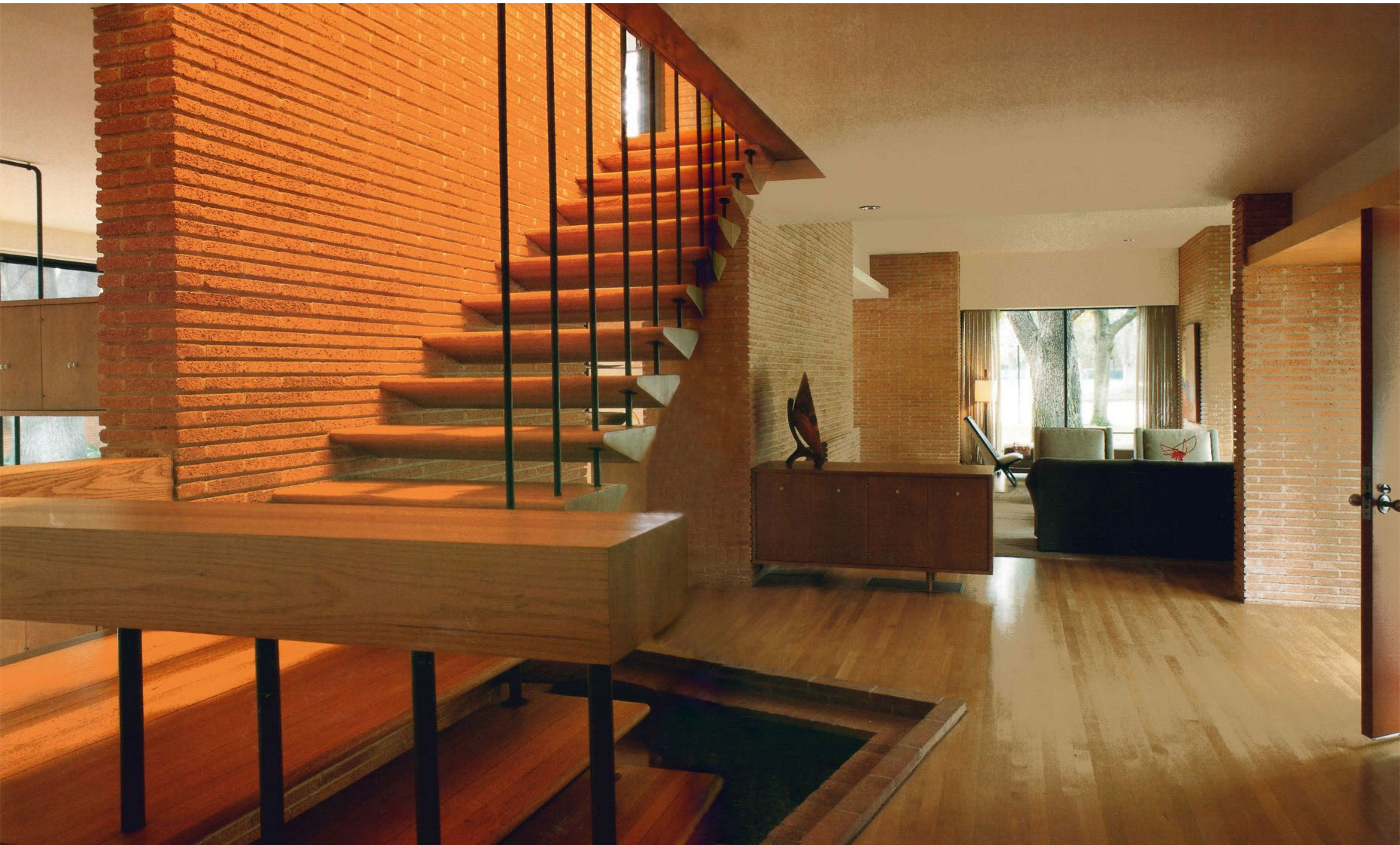
**BELOW:** The large sliding-glass doors stretching across the back of the house appear more like sliding-glass walls, blurring the lines between inside and out.

**OVERLEAF:** In the context of Meyer's open plan, this staircase is a focal point. Hovering above a serene pool of water, its seeming weightlessness is enhanced by the steel rods that descend from above and penetrate each step.



that approximated the original natural color. Then in 2001, Temple and Mickey Ashmore worked with the Dallas firm of Bodron and Fruit to take the restoration further, essentially gutting the house, only to rebuild it (using the original plans)

as faithfully as possible. Now in its pristine state, Meyer's Lipshy house takes its place among the best period houses in the state, illustrating Le Corbusier's point that architecture is "capable of the sublime."



BELOW: The sound of water in Meyer's fountain is as minimal and Zen-like as the rest of the house. From this perspective, one has a prospect of the dining room and back patio.

OPPOSITE: These built-in birch cabinets, which seem to hover just above the floor, eliminate the need for doors and walls, or any other bulky barricades.

