

# interiors

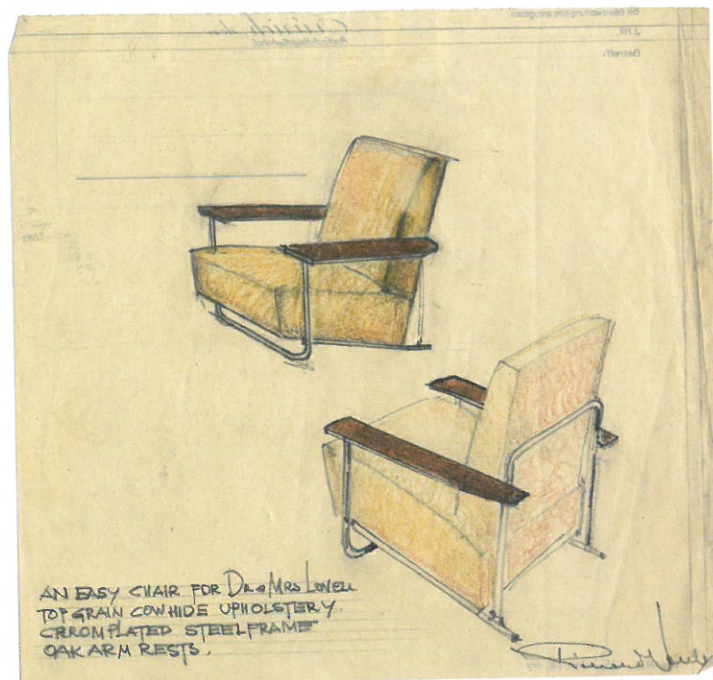
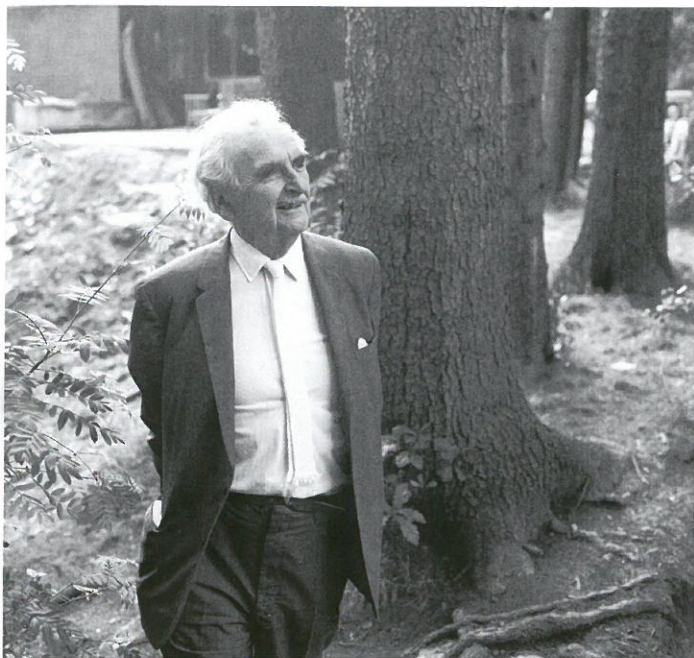
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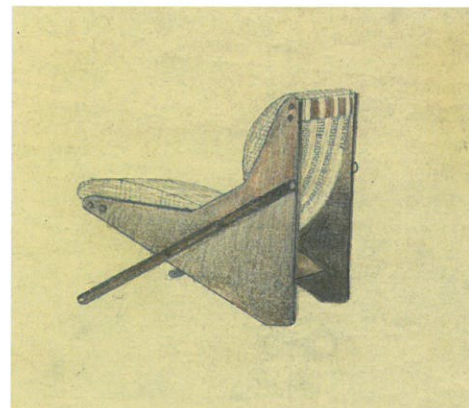
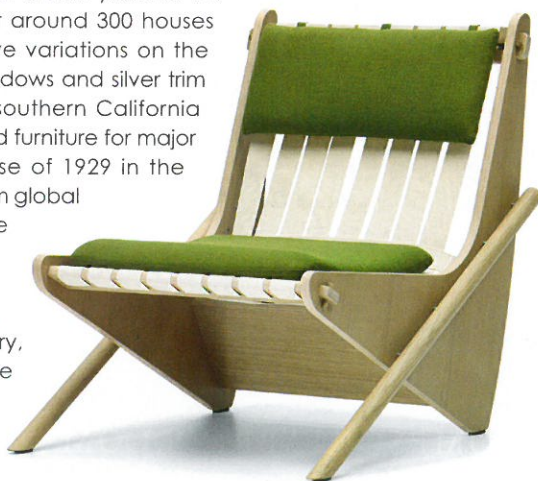
## NEUTRA DESIGNS REBORN

TEXT: MICHAEL WEBB



PROGRESSIVE ARCHITECTS STRIVE TO MAKE EACH HOUSE a total work of art. Frank Lloyd Wright went further than most, designing every detail from chairs and rugs to hardware and stained glass windows—even prescribing what art his clients might put on their walls. Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland and the Greene brothers in Pasadena followed his example, and today one of their original chairs or cabinets can sell for as much as a house. Pioneer modernists like Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier felt compelled to design furniture for their light, airy structures because there was nothing on the market that felt at home. Some of these pieces, crafted in batches for specific projects, were put into production after the war and became widely available. The chairs of Marcel Breuer, Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen and Jean Prouvé are in fact better known than their buildings.

For Austrian émigré Richard Neutra it was the reverse. As an architect, he achieved success within a few years of his arrival in Los Angeles in 1925. He built around 300 houses in his 45-year career, and his inventive variations on the sleek white stucco box with ribbon windows and silver trim defined the image of modernism in southern California and beyond. Like his peers, he designed furniture for major projects, from the Lovell Health House of 1929 in the Hollywood Hills, an icon that brought him global recognition, to the expansive Tremaine House of 1948 in Montecito, California. Distinctive chairs and tables were sketched and a few were fabricated as needed, much as his contemporary, Kem Weber, made hundreds of Airline chairs for the new Walt Disney Studio. But Neutra never took the designs further.







Few people knew much about Neutra's furniture until now. Dion Neutra made two efforts to put his father's designs into production, and he succeeded on his third try. VS, a century-old German manufacturer of school and office furniture with a satellite facility in Charlotte, North Carolina, has acquired exclusive rights to the architect's work. As a co-founder of the German Werkbund in 1910, VS has worked with a succession of architects, from Bruno Paul to the contemporary Stefan Behnisch. In Germany, the VS name is synonymous with modernism, and the firm has furnished offices for the government and leading corporations. In February, after working from sketches and patent drawings, VS presented 20 examples of Neutra's seating and tables, making subtle improvements to designs that had never been realized or had never progressed beyond the prototype stage. Neutra scholar Barbara Lamprecht collaborated with VS, and this spring Wasmuth is publishing her book *The Furniture of Richard Neutra: The Body and the Role of the Senses*.

As Mies observed, "designing a good chair is as difficult as designing a building," and the models that have endured have often gone through many different iterations. Charles and Ray Eames were obsessive about perfecting their prototypes before they allowed Herman Miller to produce them, and all the classics have been revised over the decades. As Charles remarked, "Details are not just details; they make the job." That concern is evident in the new version of Neutra's Boomerang chair, his most idiosyncratic design. First introduced in 1942 as basic furnishing for Channel Heights Housing, a low-budget project for shipyard workers in San Pedro, California, it was meant to be so simple that the residents could knock it off in a weekend, but the simplicity was deceptive. It reappeared in the Tremaine House, where Lamprecht describes "six of the chairs cavorting and chatting to each other in a conversation pit."

Dion Neutra, who was his father's partner, made improvements, and the VS version is a casual masterpiece. On each side, a wooden boomerang is balanced by a pole

that's attached by steel washers. The bars at front and top that support the webbing seat are slotted into the boomerangs with pegged dowels, and the sling can be dressed up with cushions. A square wood stool, also designed for Channel Heights, has an X base that has now been chamfered to refine this humble object without compromising its integrity. Nothing better exemplifies the democratic spirit of the early modernists, who wanted everyone to enjoy clean-lined simplicity. The Camel table of 1951 was inspired by the sight of that animal sitting down, and Neutra developed a tubular metal frame that folds inward to turn a dining table on legs into a coffee table on skids.

"Beauty and utility are not two things in nature," wrote Neutra. "There is no line where a tree stops being beautiful and becomes utilitarian." Though his houses were rigorously orthogonal, the architect loved nature and sought a biological approach to design. He likened his houses to "machines in the garden," and lush plantings soften the sharp edges. In the same way, his cantilever chair has a curved spring that links the seat to the wood or tubular metal frame, allowing seat and back to move independently. A low organic table he made for his own house was presented to the public in a 1945 issue of *Women's Day* magazine, an early example of the surge of public interest in rational design in the post-war decade. That was the era when George Nelson, Florence Knoll and the Eames launched a revolution in American furniture design, and the Case Study houses and Eichler Homes offered an intelligent alternative to the retro mediocrity of tract builders. Sadly, those architectural ventures never won wide acceptance, but Neutra's furniture has finally joined the pantheon of classic modern design. ■

VS America, [vs-network.com](http://vs-network.com)

