

Spiller House

John Hans Ostwald, Architect

The Spiller House, built in 1963, is an iconic example of John Ostwald's work in the Bay Regional Style, and of regional modernism in Marin County. The house has an important place in the progression of the mid-century California tradition, and Ostwald's forward-thinking design was progressive for the time. The result is a house that is still relevant half a century after it was built.

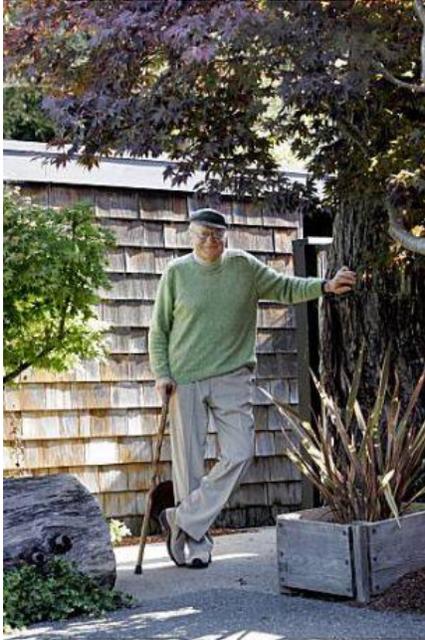
This custom design builds on the historic precedents of such luminaries as Rudolph Schindler, Frank Lloyd Wright and John Lautner, and puts Ostwald, who worked for a time under modernist visionary Richard Neutra, in company of such northern California contemporaries as Joseph Esherick. The design mixes decidedly Pacific aesthetics with Ostwald's signature European references. The expression of honest details, including exposed wood framing and paneled siding, are a note to Japanese influence while the woodsy interior materials show the Swiss ski chalet style typical of Ostwald's work.

The open floor plan is of a decentralized layout with public and private areas separated by a breezeway, a common feature in Ostwald's designs. Thoughtful placement of the building in the site, another Ostwald hallmark, is complemented by a landscape design of trellises, decks and terraced gardens. The result is a custom built home that promotes quintessential California version of modern living. Minimalist custom windows with large expanses of glass serve to dissolve the separation between interior and exterior, while a low-rising roof with expansive eaves stretch the living space out into the site. A continuous floor plan that extends out to the surrounding patios and garden further de-emphasizes the boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces. Elements of the exterior environment are brought inside via an interior planting trough, jalousie windows and skylights.

-Owner-

Robert Royston, landscape architect, dies

Kelly Zito, Chronicle - September 21, 2008



Penni Gladstone / The Chronicle

ROYSTON_garden Robert Royston stands below a beautiful Maple tree. Landscape architect Robert Royston at home. Royston is one of the first modern landscape architects focused on residential gardens Event on 10/11/06 in Mill Valley. Penni Gladstone / The Chronicle Photo: Penni Gladstone / The Chronicle

Robert Royston, one of the leading modernist landscape architects in the country, died at his Mill Valley home on Friday. He was 90.

Mr. Royston was renowned for blending the indoor and outdoor in his garden "rooms," for using patterns from modern architecture and art and for thoughtful, lively park designs - especially in play areas for children.

In one park, for instance, Mr. Royston designed a wading pool in which the middle was the shallowest area, so that when children were the farthest from the edge, they were also the safest.

"There was enormous depth to his thinking, and that was one of the things that is so spectacular about his work," said **J.C. Miller**, a former co-worker and author of the book "Modern Public Gardens: Robert Royston and the Suburban Park." "His works weren't just art for art's sake." Some Bay Area parks that bear Mr. Royston's stamp are St. Mary's Square in San Francisco, Mitchell Park in Palo Alto and Central Park in Santa Clara.

Mr. Royston was born in San Francisco in 1918 and spent his early years on a farm near Morgan Hill. Though he displayed natural abilities in drama and athletics, he focused on design and the natural environment.

After graduating from UC Berkeley, Mr. Royston in the 1940s worked with **Thomas Church**, a pioneering landscape architect whose ideas about aesthetic simplicity and viewing the home and

garden as a unit changed the field. There, Mr. Royston played a role in projects such as the Valencia Gardens housing development in San Francisco's Mission District and Parkmerced [Apartments](#) near San Francisco State.

During World War II, Mr. Royston served in the Navy, returning to the Bay Area to continue his work and teach at UC Berkeley. However, his stint at the [university](#) ended in 1951, after only four years, because he refused to sign an anti-communist loyalty oath. A short time later, he began teaching at [Stanford University](#). In all, his teaching career took him to 25 colleges and universities across the United States.

While residential design constituted much of his early career, Mr. Royston later branched out into larger and more ambitious projects such as parks and campuses. One of his most significant projects was Sunriver in Oregon, a 5,500-acre planned community.

Despite differences in scale, Mr. Royston's projects shared many common characteristics. His designs were usually painterly and abstract - influenced by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and [Joan Miro](#). And they emphasized the important confluence between structure and environment.

"If there is a Bay Area style, it is to make the transition between the building and nature as quickly as possible, by actual line, form and space," Mr. Royston wrote in 1986 in the magazine *Landscape Architecture*. "The nature comes in and the structure goes out."

His own home in Mill Valley typified those ideals. Utilizing a mural as a screen and maple trees as part of a wall, Mr. Royston created a patio that felt like another room in the house.

"It's this amazing little glass pavilion, and the walls extend out into the landscape and become streams or hedges," Miller said. "It's very organic."

Mr. Royston enjoyed travel, visiting dozens of places over the years, including Norway, Singapore and Corsica each summer. When he wasn't in Mill Valley, Mr. Royston escaped to his ranch in Shasta County to relax and fish.

Mr. Royston's career spanned so many projects and so many eras that he was often called upon to update his own work. Several years ago, Miller and Mr. Royston worked together to modernize a roof deck at 601 California St., an office building in San Francisco's Financial District.

"It's a testament to his work," said [Danielle Machotka](#), Mr. Royston's stepdaughter. "A lot of times, those things just get redone and no one thinks anything about it because times change and tastes change."

Although he was sidelined last year by a hip injury and a bout with pneumonia, Mr. Royston remained in good spirits.

"He had a way of enjoying the moment," said his son, Curtis Royston. "There was no anxiety about the past or the future. It was, 'We're here today. It's a beautiful day. Let's move forward.' "