

**Obituary, Donald E. Olsen, FAIA
(1919 - 2015)**

By James Samuels

Just as Athena sprung forth fully formed from the head of Zeus, so an architectural philosophy, fully formed, was established by Donald E. Olsen from the inception of his career. His first two buildings—a house for Arthur Kip and for his own house next door on San Diego Road in Berkeley—are a testament to this fully mature design sensibility. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, and he knew this from the very beginning.

In the early 1950s, there were three all-glass houses designed and built in the United States: Philip Johnson's in New Canaan, Connecticut, Mies van der Rohe's in Plano, Illinois, and Donald E. Olsen's in Berkeley, California. Olsen's house for himself and his wife, Helen, boldly states many of the mainstays of modernist architecture created in the 1920's foremost by Le Corbusier: (1) the dematerialization of solids (2) the glorification of pure geometric forms in space (3) the total elimination of exterior decor, and (4) the rejection of all past styles. This is Apollo's triumph over Dionysus, the intellectual over the emotional. To claim, as some have, that Olsen's architecture "blended in with its surrounding environment" is to miss this very important point: architecture, in Olsen's view, declares itself as distinguished from its surroundings: a house is a "machine in the garden", a "machine for living", as Le Corbusier put it.

Besides his own house (his practice was largely residential), he created two other superior designs: the Herman Ruth house on the Uplands in Berkeley (for which he received a national AIA honor award) and the Peter Selz house on Cragmont Road, also in Berkeley. The Ruth house was designed with two major volumes –the public versus the private –connected by a transparent entry hall: the public space is a tall rectanguloid with a signature freestanding fireplace block around which all functions revolve and surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass and built around a giant oak tree. The Selz house is built on the principle of a helix with several levels spiraling around a center core, again, a freestanding fireplace mass. This was built for the original curator of the Berkeley Art Museum and had special places for individual pieces of the owner's prized art collection.

For many years Olsen stood alone in the world of architecture in the East Bay area. Although William Wurster hired him to teach architecture at U.C.

Berkeley, they had an ambivalent relationship—Wurster once referred to Olsen as "the other side" when introducing him at a social gathering, this without mentioning his name.

Olsen was known for his utter lack of compromising his architectural principles. In an area steeped in Maybeck, Morgan, and John Hudson Thomas, Olsen often had to fight with review boards to defend his designs for being "too modern" and not fitting in. Olsen was educated at the University of Minnesota and got a graduate degree from Harvard, then under the influence of Walter Gropius. He worked in many bay area offices before opening his own practice in the 1950s. His fondest recollection of this early time in his career was having worked in the office of the renowned Finnish architect, Eero Saarinen. He remembered visiting Saarinen at his home one week-end to find his entire living room covered with prints with different color schemes for a project. He was to repeat this practice many times -- once for the brightly colored studies for the Fahmie Building on Solano Avenue at the Alameda in Berkeley, a tribute to the "De Stijl" architectural movement of the early 20th-century Netherlands.

Besides architecture, Olsen was deeply interested in philosophy and literature. He once said that the three main literary works that he valued the highest were Dante's *Human Comedy*, Gombrich's *Meditation on a Hobby Horse* and the works of Michael Potter. He often spoke of philosophy to his students in design studios, much to the consternation of some who had come to discuss their projects. These digressions earned Olsen quite a reputation, and in the 1960s a cartoon was pasted next to the elevator in Wurster Hall at U.C. Berkeley with Robin and an Olsen looking Batman: Robin exclaims, "Holy digressions, Oldsman".....