

UNIVERSE

michael webb

modernism reborn mid-century american houses



principal photography by roger straus III

## dubin-cheselka house

**188** mar vista, california  
ain, johnson, & day  
1946–49  
restored by david hertz /  
syndesis, 1997–99

Huge shade trees tower over tiny cubic houses with flat roofs extending out to unfenced front yards on three parallel streets. Together, they form an idyllic, tight-knit community that has been carefully maintained and sensitively enhanced. Conceived as an enlightened speculative development that would bring good design to the masses, the principal architect of this project was Gregory Ain, a social activist who apprenticed with Neutra and opened his L. A. office in 1935.

Ain's houses were always plain and practical, and every one of the 1,050 square feet in these affordable homes was intensively used. Movable walls turned one bedroom into a pair or would fold back to unite living room and den. The pass-through counter from the kitchen could seat six or serve as a buffet bar. Expansive windows, shaded by a projecting canopy, opened onto a rear patio that served as an outdoor room. The houses sold for about \$13,000, which was well above average at that time, and the strongest appeal was to architects, academics, and engineers at the nearby Douglas Aircraft plant.

Prices now range up to \$650,000, but the young professionals who are reinventing

this West Los Angeles neighborhood still find it a great place to bring up kids, socialize with neighbors, and enjoy Ain's spare yet elastic spaces. That's the reaction of Mitch Dubin, a camera operator, and his artist wife, Kim Cheselka. "We had a clean

open loft in New York, and didn't want a cottage with boxy little rooms," she says. "This was in funky condition but the bones were good. We worked like maniacs for a few months, stripping away cheap ply, shag rug, asbestos ceiling tile, and a

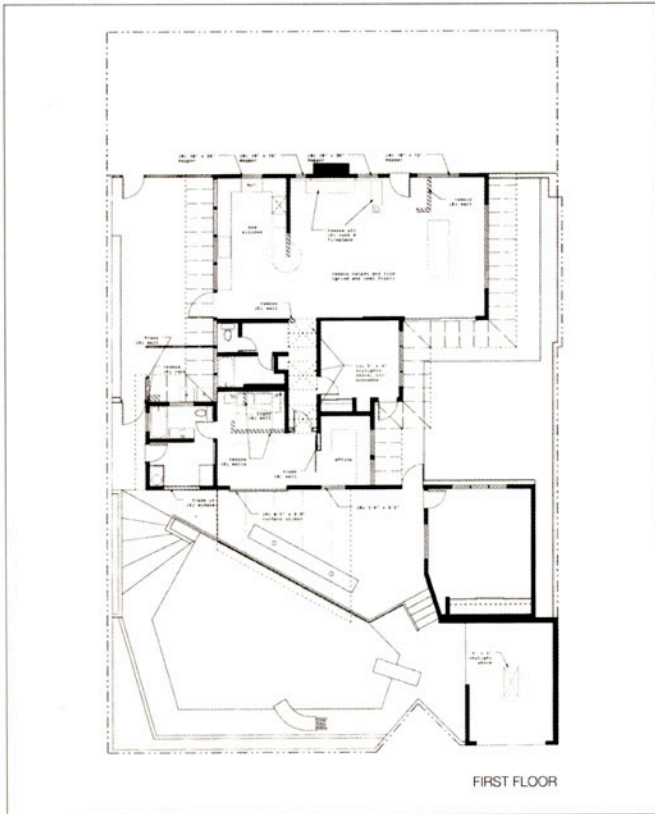


**Above** Hertz added an angled pergola to Ain's plain, practical cottage.

**Opposite** The shaded deck overlooks the pool and serves as an outdoor room.







walk-in closet that blocked the light in the 350-square-foot addition to the rear. David is a big fan of Aia, so we asked him to take it back to what it was.”

The sliding walls that were an important feature of the original design had been removed and were not replaced. Hertz took out another wall and opened the kitchen up to the living room, substituting a laminated ply disc for the pass through. To wash the center of the house with light, he added and enlarged windows and skylights. A side window frames a bamboo-screened courtyard, and the master bedroom opens onto a new redwood deck through a sliding glass barn door, with a tiny window placed high in one corner for a glimpse

of tree tops. The furniture is a mix of vintage modern and contemporary craft.

“We live minimally, so stripping away and opening up was the obvious course, pulling in light and breezes, with perimeter walls to ensure privacy,” says Dubin. “Then we waited eighteen months to catch our breath and enjoy the experience of living here before upgrading the exterior. We sandblasted the spray-on coating and replaced it with integrally colored stucco in as dark an olive green as we could get, and added a redwood pergola over the deck. The studio-garage will be rebuilt in phase three.”

**Opposite** A circular breakfast table links the kitchen to the expansive living-dining area.

**Above** Walls were removed to create an open plan, within which a sitting area is defined by sofas.