CHARLES + RAY EAMES

ANALYSIS OF THEIR MODERNIST APPROACH IN
CASE STUDY #8 HOUSE

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THESIS

In spite of the minimalist conception of Charles and Ray Eames’ Case Study #8 house, unlike European modern architects, the Eames’ proved that minimalist architecture can create warm living and working environments through their inclusion of color, texture, and abundant interior furnishings.

BACKGROUND

Charles and Ray Eames were famous designers in Los Angeles, California from the 1940s until the 1980s. They designed across a broad spectrum of creative mediums and were known as pioneers of affordable mass production methods for their designs, particularly for their furniture.

PHILOSOPHY

According to a New York Times article, Charles and Ray Eames believed that design enhances life’s simple pleasures. Many themes of the designer’s work include the guest/host relationship, the honest use of materials, universalizing from the specific, and the learn-by-doing process.

THE GUEST/HOST RELATIONSHIP

Charles Eames described the role of the designer as being “that of a very good, thoughtful host, all of whose energy goes into trying to anticipate the needs of his guests.”
THE HONEST USE OF MATERIALS

This philosophy implies that the characteristics of a material should influence the form for which it is used. (Kauffman, 1955) Thus, materials should be chosen with regard to their properties (Nesbitt, 1996) The Eames’ designs often expressed the materials of which they were constructed in a very obvious way. For example, much of their furniture design was influenced by the pliability of the different types of wood they used for each piece.

UNIVERSALIZING FROM THE SPECIFIC

Coinciding with the purpose of the guest/host relationship philosophy, this philosophy involves an approach to design that considers the broad range of needs for the space early in the design process. As a result, designers will produce a final product that is universal and can be used for a wide variety of purposes without adaptation (Center for Universal Design, 1997).

THE LEARN-BY-DOING PROCESS

The Eameses believed that “design is a process, rather than a single outcome – a process that’s never really over.” Thus, each project they began was the start of a learning process, and from one project a new project could be born. This iterative form of design allows for the modification and refining of designs in order to reach better and better versions of what the designers set out to create. Most of Charles’ and Ray’s work emerged from experimentation with materials and forms that suited different functions, and even when they found that a task required new skills, they would “rather learn how to do it themselves than send it out” (Ray and Charles Eames, 2011).
VISUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Charles and Ray Eames’ design style can be labeled as “California Modernism,” a term that is often used interchangeably with “Mid-Century Modernism.” This distinct style embodied an approach to design that opposed the “social conscience” of the Bauhaus in order to embrace looser, warmer design which was both more expressive of local character and in touch with the realities of commerce and salesmanship (Hawthorne, 2011). According to the article, “Mid-Century Modern”, “This style emphasized creating structures with ample windows and open floor-plans with the intention of opening up interior spaces and bringing the outdoors in. Warmth was emitted with the consideration of color, texture, and other materials utilized in the construction and expression of the Eames’ designs. Moreover, this design style illustrates the concept of “form follows function” both in materials and space planning, as there was an emphasis of addressing the needs of the average American family (Mid-century Modern..., n.d.)
CASE STUDY

OVERVIEW OF DESIGN PREMISE

The focus of this analysis, Case Study #8 or what is better known as Eames House, was designed by Charles and Ray Eames for *Arts & Architecture* magazine’s Case Study House program, a low-cost housing project. (Eames House, n.d.) In response to the premise of the study, the Eames’ utilized prefabricated, standardized materials that allowed for cheap, speedy construction. The result of this savvy design-build effort became a spacious, light, versatile, and vividly colored home (Charles + Ray Eames, n.d.) which resonated with the Eames’ own requirements as a young married couple who needed a single place where they could live, work, and entertain effortlessly and in harmony with the surrounding nature. (Eames House, n.d.)

The following analysis of interior, exterior, and furniture aspects of the Eames Case Study #8 House will explore the expression of Charles and Ray Eames’ “California Modern” minimalist design. The analysis will note the ways in which their expression of minimalism differs from traditional minimalism rooted in European modernism.
The exterior of Eames House is inviting from every angle. This is due to the lush landscaping, pops of color on the façade, and the way in which the large windows provide a glimpse inside. The abundant, warmly colored interior decorations act as exterior ornamentations due to the view through the glass. The tendency of the open interior spaces to invite the outdoors in represents a key visual characteristic of the California Modernist style. This is achieved with the traditional modernist steel frame construction, along with the application of ample windows, another key California Modernist visual characteristic. Nearly 90% of the exterior surface consists of windows from the angle pictured above.

The image on the far left further highlights the presence of color and the natural setting of the Eames House. The next image represents the philosophy of the honest use of materials. The full integrity of the materials is apparent, particularly in the overhanging roof. It is obvious that the materials are universal, or standardized, industrial products that were chosen for both their functional and aesthetic appeal.
The interior structure of Eames House conveys traditional European modernist principles of white walls lacking ornamentation, but it is the artifacts that fill the space which subvert traditional minimalism. Many critics of the Eames House who appreciate the warm, livable space attribute the inviting space to these worldly items. Traditional modern architecture would require that a minimalist space contain only “necessary” objects, while the Eames House contains artifacts of current and past projects, travels, and Charles’ and Rays’ other life experiences. In addition to their abundance, the aesthetic quality of these objects softens the harsh lines of the enclosing structure with their warm, earthy tones.

The layout of the living room follows the Eames’ philosophy of Universalizing from the Specific as it could easily accommodate a number of different functions. Gatherings of any purpose and size would be comfortable in this space. The style of the living room has become rather eclectic with its varying textures and colors. In addition to the artifacts that fill the room, the vegetation, furniture and textures on wall, window, and floor coverings provide additional warmth. The potted plants placed throughout the room further connect the indoors with the outdoors. The furniture consists of various volumes and forms which are rooted in the Eames’ learn-by-doing process and their experimentation with a broad range of materials in their furniture designs. Consequently, the furniture also represents their philosophy of honest use of materials.
FURNITURE

One piece of furniture which sets the tone of Charles and Rays’ style resides in the Eames House living room. The Lounge Chair is placed in the perimeter of the room. Not only does the relaxed form, with its reclined back and soft, round lines, indicate warmth and comfort uncommon in modern design, but the materials of which it is built also lend themselves to comfort.

According to Charles Eames, “Another thing we came to realize in our search for this kind of comfort is that feathers and down are pretty good materials. Like few others they give one the feeling of settling in and when you get up, feathers and down do not instantly pop back into place as though you had never been there. The leather cushions do have built-in wrinkles to start with, but that is a clue that spells comfort to come, like the warm receptive look of a well-used first baseman’s mitt” (Pacific Standard Time – Indoor Ecologies, n.d.).

This statement illustrates Charles’ application of his design philosophy of the honest use of materials. Moreover, it implies that, in addition to the form, the textures and colors of the materials used in the Lounge Chair are two features which afford warmth and opposition from traditional European minimalism.
SUMMARY

While Eames House contains traditional modern features that signify minimalism such as steel framed construction, window walls, and white surfaces on many of its interior and exterior walls, the aspects which are representative of Eames’ California Modernism have been investigated in this analysis. The following table summarizes the ways in which Eames House exemplifies California Modernism and its opposition to European Modernism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EUROPEAN MODERNISM</th>
<th>EXTERIOR</th>
<th>INTERIOR</th>
<th>FURNITURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of color</td>
<td>Colorful</td>
<td>Colorful</td>
<td>Color introduced to molded fiberglass chairs and within wood grains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of ornamentation</td>
<td>Ornamentation in metalwork; lush landscaping</td>
<td>Artifacts displayed &amp; plentiful</td>
<td>Incorporation of bold wood grains and color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stark, cold design</td>
<td>Setting and embellishments soften structure</td>
<td>Warmth of materials and rich textures</td>
<td>Warmth/comfort of materials</td>
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CONCLUSION

In spite of the minimalist conception of Charles and Ray Eames’ Case Study #8 house, unlike European modern architects, the Eames’ proved that minimalist architecture can create warm living and working environments through their inclusion of color, texture, and abundant interior furnishings.
REFERENCES


