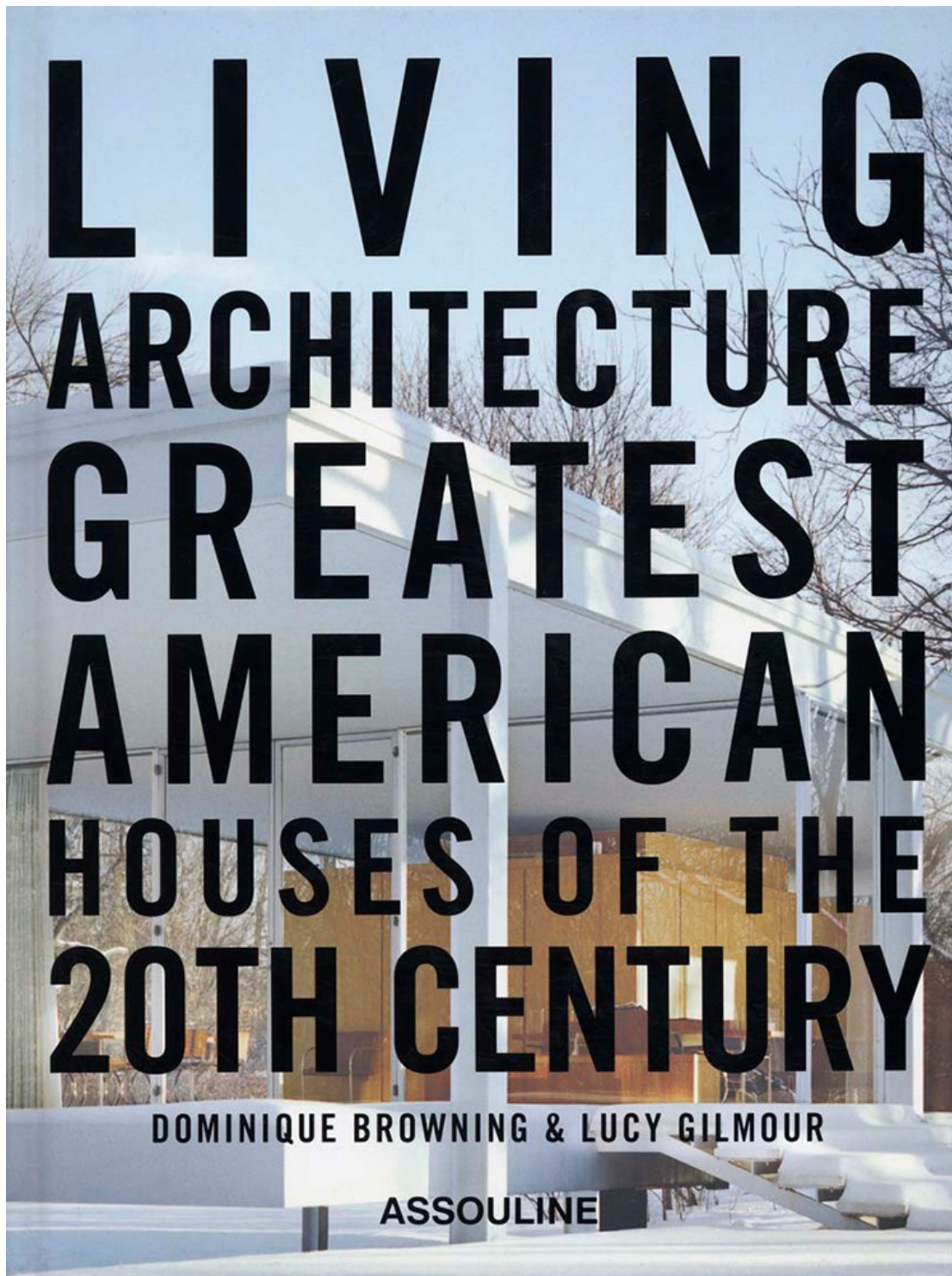


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COHEN HOUSE

Paul Rudolph | Sarasota, Florida | 1955

Photographed by Martyn Thompson

Were he alive today, Paul Rudolph might be considered a “green” architect. He was ahead of his time, experimenting in his smaller mid-century projects with such things as passive solar systems, air ventilation, and water conservation. In the mid-1950s, Rudolph studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Design with Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius. Upon getting his master’s degree he moved to Florida, where he was an important member of what became known as the Sarasota School of Architecture.

Built in 1955 for local patrons of the arts who wanted a tranquil space to balance their stimulating lives, the Cohen House is one of Rudolph’s early buildings. It is a classically modern, flat-roofed, one-story building whose façade is clean and unadorned, with long panes of sheet glass tracing a fine, nearly invisible line between indoors and out. Its interiors are surprisingly sensual: The walls are richly paneled, the detailing on the cabinetry is simple but strong, and some of the seating, shelving, and furniture is built in. The highly polished concrete floor has a watery sheen, mirroring the flat expanse of the canal that sits just at the edge of the house. The floor plan is fairly open and flowing. Sheer curtains can be drawn across the walls to shade the rooms from the strong sun while clerestory windows let in light. Rudolph was innovative in finding ways to ventilate naturally, using skylights, covered walkways, and sliding glass doors; the house opens gracefully to nature. The owners, though, wanted air-conditioning; mold was often a problem in the unremittingly hot, damp air of this coastal city.

The Cohen House was followed closely by the Riverview High School in Sarasota, Rudolph’s first large-scale project, which attracted the notice of a larger architectural community. The surprising thing about the Sarasota work is how unrelated it seems to his later, more sculptural work, superficially at least. Rudolph was appointed dean of the prestigious Yale School of Architecture in 1958. The Yale Art and Architecture Building he designed was completed in 1963, and is widely considered to be his masterpiece. Made entirely of ribbed, bush-hammered concrete, it ushered in a period of monumental brutalist buildings. While some praised it as a tour de force, others found the style oppressive. Rudolph went on to design the controversial Government Service Center in Boston and the main campus of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Although the brutalist style fell out of favor by the late seventies, a new generation of architects has begun to refer to it as heroic.

The Sarasota buildings have, for the most part, been ill-fated, victims to the demolition ball. However, after being subjected to years of bungled renovations, the Cohen House was restored to its original elegance by a new owner in 2006. It sits lightly, seamlessly on its grounds, timelessly chic, an alluring retreat from the buzz of the world.

Opposite: The breakfast nook as seen from a hallway, of built-in, wood-paneled storage space on the left and a paneled kitchen divider wall on the right. *Pages 206-207:* The terraced roof levels create deep, open overhangs and covered walkways.

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