

27 May 2025

**Re: Landmark Initiation for the Havens Apartments (Harwell Hamilton Harris, 1949)
at 2000 Blake Street**

Dear fellow commissioners,

As we very well know, so frequently lost in the appreciation and preservation of architecture are the histories of the buildings which seem to assume a posterior role in the built environment: apartment complexes, gas stations, strip malls, storefronts, industrial districts, and the like. This does not mean that the architecture was any less innovative or inventive, but it is the truth that architecture for an everyday audience quickly becomes an inconspicuous fragment of the urban fabric. Its humbleness is so often mistaken for a lack of significance and an absence of “good” design.

This is what I believe to be the story of the apartment complex at the corner of Blake and Milvia, which at first glance appears to be relatively simple mid-century design, but upon further research reveals itself to be a significant work by Harwell Hamilton Harris, one of California’s most notable twentieth century modernists. Designed for Weston Havens (for whom Harris famously designed a hillside home in Berkeley), the complex so succinctly embodies many of the objectives of postwar modernism, which sought to provide the best housing for the most. In a time when housing defines any discussion around California’s built environment, it is apt to be reminded of a period when housing and good design were united in their goals, and as this building illustrates, realized by some of the country’s leading modern architects... and actually built.

The following pages represent my first pass at the research and documentation of this project, which is extensively (and fortuitously) represented in the Harwell Hamilton Harris Collection held at the University of Texas, Austin. I strongly believe that the significance of the apartment complex (which remains substantially preserved with only minor alterations and some deferred maintenance) lies both in its architectural design and its connection to a larger postwar campaign, led by many architects, to conceive of and build the future of housing. I welcome feedback as to areas which may need elaboration or elicit confusion, as I plan to use a substantial portion of this for the landmark nomination itself.

One subject that we have continually discussed is the necessity to landmark more public, everyday spaces and structures — certainly we have seen this with Commissioner Orbuch and Enchill’s work on San Pablo Avenue. I believe that this property strikes a salient union between the architectural significance so typical of the Berkeley Hills and the more everyday structures which cover the flats below them. As it stands, everyone remembers the striking cliffside house that Harris designed for the same client a few years earlier, but few remember the low-slung apartment complex built with units that were meant to rent for \$100 a month.

Regards,

Luke Leuschner

The Architect – Harwell Hamilton Harris

Harwell Hamilton Harris was born in 1903 in Redlands, CA and grew up in a selection of Southern California locales. His father was an architect who practiced in a variety (and at times blend) of Period Revival styles, and while Harris would ultimately choose architecture for a profession, it was not a logical outcome of his upbringing.¹ After graduating from San Bernardino High School in 1921, Harris attended Pomona College, but soon dropped out after his father's death and then came to attend the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, a bastion of modernism where he studied sculpture and became familiarized with the architecture of Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Erich Mendelsohn.² In particular, a visit to Wright's recently completed Hollyhock House in Hollywood (1925) propelled Harris' interest in architecture. Recalling the trip, he noted that it was "sculpture on a completely different scale" and quickly discovered the seminal Wasmuth portfolio of Wright's architecture, like so many modern architects of his generation.³

It was shortly after this formative discovery that Harris found employment with Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler, two Viennese-born architects (and students of both Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner) oft-cited for pioneering modernism on the West Coast. Schindler's seminal King's Road duplex (1921-22) was a low-slung structure constructed from cast concrete, redwood, and sliding canvas doors with influence from Wright, Loos, Irving Gill, the architecture of Japan, and a bohemian spirit advanced by his wife Pauline. Although Neutra, like Schindler, had been a disciple of Wright at the height of his "Organic Architecture," he ultimately developed a starker, machined aesthetic best captured in his Lovell Health House of 1927-29.⁴ Instead of pursuing his architectural education at the University of California, Berkeley as he planned, Harris worked for Neutra and Schindler, attended various classes and lecture series on architecture and engineering, and became part of a small but burgeoning culture of modern architecture developing in Southern California of the 1920s and 30s. Along with his friend and fellow architect Gregory Ain, who also worked in the Neutra office, Harris was a key figure in a constellation of young modern architects centered around Schindler and Neutra. (Neutra's biography would see to him being featured on the cover of *Time Magazine*, while Schindler's would see to him becoming largely forgotten.)

With no formal training and only a brief period of apprenticeship, Harris launched his own practice in 1933, designing a series of homes that combined Wright's Prairie style, Schindler's emphasis on contextualism, and Neutra's interest in modern materials and modularity. His first great success was his Fellowship Park House of 1936, a one-room Japanese-inspired pavilion wrapped in glass. The house, which Harris designed for himself, won numerous awards, including an Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects (of which Harris was not even yet a member).⁵ This project was immediately followed by a home in Santa Monica Canyon for John Entenza, the publisher behind *California Arts & Architecture* who would pioneer its seminal Case Study House Program only a few years later. Designed in a machined, more European idiom of architectural modernism, however, the Entenza house strayed from the style that Harris was developing for himself, which gravitated towards a more organic architecture typical of Schindler and Wright. His works like the Blair house (1939), Hawk house (1939), Birtcher house (1941-42) were designed on a low-slung, sprawling format with

¹ Lisa Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, Austin, 1985), 10-12.

² Lisa Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 15-19.

³ Harwell Hamilton Harris, "Architecture as Art," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (November 1952), 216-219, quoted in Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1991), 22.

⁴ Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1991),

⁵ Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1985), 32-25.

horizontal redwood siding that would become typical of his contextual yet modern work. By the end of the 1930s, Harris was an established and widely published architect, known mostly for his more thoughtful, regionally sensitive modernism.

In 1939, Harris was commissioned by Weston Havens, a real estate heir, to design a hillside house on Panoramic Hill in Berkeley. Completed in December of 1941, the home became the most important of his career. For Havens, who was deeply interested in modern design, Harris designed a house that seemed to valiantly extend off its hillside site into the horizon of the Bay Area. Essentially consisting of three stacked wedge-shaped volumes, the home was designed to maximize views and sunlight, sheathed in redwood, and connected to the street by an angular bridge cantilevered nearly two stories above a central interior courtyard. Upon its completion, the “Sky House” (as Havens initially called it) was featured on the cover of *California Arts & Architecture*, photographed by surrealist Man Ray, and written up in nearly every other architectural publication.⁶ In 1956, the Havens house was selected by the AIA as one of the most important structures of the preceding one hundred years.⁷ Harris would design a selection of other projects in Berkeley including the Naylor house (1940), just below the Havens house, and the Havens apartments (1949).

Havens practice continued to grow through the 1940s, during which period he mostly designed large custom residential work but experimented with other types of projects. During World War Two, like many modern architects, he became interested in well-designed mass housing, including his conceptual Segmental House designed as part of *Architectural Forum*'s “194X” program, which sought to imagine the future of architecture and housing after the war.⁸ Another twist in Harris's biography was his discovery of Greene and Greene in 1939, which further took hold in the late 1940s, when he and his wife, Jean Murray Bangs, a writer and architectural historian, led the efforts to document and archive the brothers' work. In projects like the Johnson house (1947-48), Loeb pavilion (1947), Mulvillhill house (1948), and Wyle house (1946-48), Harris's work of the late 1940s easily recalls a modernized version of Greene and Greene's pioneering variety of the Arts & Crafts.

In 1951, Harris moved to Texas to accept position as the director of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas, Austin. During this formative period of the school's development, Harris hired such seminal voices as the historian Colin Rowe and architect John Hejduk, reoriented the curriculum to contextualize contemporary practice in history, and invited speakers ranging from Wright to Buckminster Fuller.⁹ One of his notable projects of this period, completed with a group of students, was the Pace Setter House developed for *House Beautiful* and built at the Dallas State Fair in 1955.¹⁰ The same year, Harris resigned from his post at UT Austin and pursued an architectural practice in Fort Worth and Dallas, where he continued to design custom residential homes in addition to a selection of civic and commercial projects. In this later phase of his architectural career, from the 1950s into the early 1960s, his work markedly became more Wrightian in works like the Stevenson house (1955-56), Eisenberg house (1957-58), the Greenwood Mausoleum (1956), and First Unitarian Church of Dallas (1961-63). It was also in these final years that Harris worked on some of the larger works of his career, including Saint Mary's Episcopal Church in Big Spring, TX (1960), the Trade Mart Court in Dallas (1959), and even an unbuilt U.S. Embassy in Helsinki (1957-58).

⁶ Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1991), 85-89.

⁷ Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1991), 90.

⁸ See Andrew Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture on the American Home Front* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁹ Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1991), 141-145.

¹⁰ Germany, *Harwell Hamilton Harris* (1991), 148-149.

For the final phase of his career, Harris relocated to Raleigh, North Carolina to accept a teaching position at the North Carolina State University. He also continued his architecture practice on the side, designing modern homes throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s for a numbers of professors and professionals in the region, before formally retiring in 1975. Upon his death in 1990, Harris was remembered as a pioneer of a distinctly American strain of modernism, one that emphasized regional sensitivity, organicism, and embraced references ranging from Schindler to Wright to Greene and Greene. In 1984, the famed California historian Esther McCoy published her survey *The Second Generation* which situated Harris among three other architects (J.R. Davidson, Raphael Soriano, and Gregory Ain) responsible for continuing the modernist project begun by their predecessors and mentors, Schindler and Neutra. Since the publication of that book, Harris has been the subject of two monographs, in addition to countless mentions on any survey of California modernism.

The Client – Weston Havens

John Weston Havens Jr. was born in 1903 into one of Berkeley's oldest and most formidable families. His grandfather was Francis Kittredge Shattuck (1825-1898) and his father was Shattuck's nephew and heir, John Weston Havens. Shattuck was among the first of Berkeley's landowners of Anglo origin, becoming a formidable developer, booster, and political figure, as well as serving variously as a mayor, councilman, and county supervisor in Oakland. As Berkeley's "most important mover and shaker during the late nineteenth century," he saw to the development of the downtown (for which he is immortalized in the namesake thoroughfare), and such projects as the city's first public library and even Berkeley's railroad spur, constructed after his negotiations with Leland Stanford.¹¹ Over his life, stretching back to the original 160-acre parcel he acquired on the Peralta ranch (on which he was essentially a squatter) in 1852, Shattuck became one of the East Bay's largest landholders.¹² This property and legacy was passed onto his nephew John Weston Havens (1860-1929), who in turn passed it onto his son.

The younger Weston Havens (who always went by his middle name) was raised by his father and grew up in Berkeley, coming to attend the University of California, from which he graduated in 1925 with a degree in economics.¹³ After his father's death in 1929, Havens (who was the last in the Shattuck line) came to inherit the family fortune and its extensive real estate holdings in Berkeley and Oakland. He spent his life managing and growing the property holdings, but also became a patron of modern art and architecture. As a young man, Havens had traveled extensively in Europe and developed an avid interest in modernism, apparently meeting Le Corbusier on one such trip in 1938.¹⁴ It was after that 1938 trip that he purchased the a steep hillside parcel off Panoramic Way and hired the modern architect Harwell Hamilton Harris to design him a house in 1939. At that point, Harris was a young but upstart modern architect whose residential works had already been published in magazines like *California Arts & Architecture* and *Architectural Record*.

¹¹ Charles Wollenberg, *Berkeley: A City in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 40-41.

¹² Wollenberg, *Berkeley*, 11-12.

¹³ Annemarie Adams, "Sex and the Single Building: The Weston Havens House, 1941-2001," *Buildings & Landscapes* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 85.

¹⁴ Adams, *Weston Havens*, 85.

Completed a week before Pearl Harbor, in December of 1941, Havens' house quickly became one of the most seminal works of California modernism (see preceding Harris biography) and integral to Havens' biography. The home, which he lived in until his death in 2001, was filled with Havens' international collection of modern art and furniture, its walls lined with an extensive library. It became a gathering place for Berkeley's artists, architects, and intelligentsia. The home, moreover, embodied another key aspect of Havens' biography: that he was gay. As the architectural historian Annemarie Adams has examined about the home's "queerness," its bedrooms were arranged on non-hierarchical plan, the home was sited to maximize privacy and create a "cave-like" character, and Havens tightly controlled the home's (wide) media circulation, altogether creating a "house that occupied an overlapping space between queer space and dominant, normative space."¹⁵

Havens maintained a close personal friendship with Harris and his wife Jean Murray Bangs throughout his life, and would commission the architect for other projects in addition to a selection of alterations and renovations to the house. The first of the later projects (detailed in depth below) was a set of Berkeley apartments completed in 1949, and the second was a row of fountains in the median of Shattuck Avenue named the Havens Fountain Plaza. Completed in 1961, Havens had donated the Harris-designed fountains to the City of Berkeley in honor of his father, but they were demolished not long after for the construction of BART.¹⁶

Havens died in 2001, bequeathing his iconic home to the College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley. The Havens Family Foundation was established to distribute his fortune.

¹⁵ Adams, *Weston Havens*, 94.

¹⁶ "Havens Fountain Plaza Dedication Set Tonight," *The Berkeley Gazette*, October 26, 1961; J.R. Ward, "What in the World...," *The Berkeley Gazette*, May 20, 1968. Harris designed another set of fountains to replace the original ones between 1969 and 1970, but they were ultimately unbuilt.

The Building (or Landmark?) – Havens Apartments

Among the many Berkeley properties that Weston Havens owned was an empty corner at the intersection of Blake and Milvia. It had been part of his grandfather Francis Kittredge Shattuck's "Shattuck Tract" — among the city's earliest subdivisions — and had never been developed. In 1948, amidst a building boom that had been provoked by the end of the Second World War, Havens decided to develop the parcel (consisting of three lots and a portion of a fourth) as an income property. For the project, Havens commissioned Harwell Hamilton Harris, who had just designed Havens' famed hillside home prior to the war.

Harris was tasked with designing a complex of six apartments arranged in an adjoining quadplex and duplex, with each unit intended to be rentable for \$90-100 a month.¹⁷ The neighborhood very much embodied the direction of postwar development in Berkeley, which was seeing to a proliferation of housing types and varieties, and Havens' decision to develop an apartment complex seemed entirely logical for the neighborhood. The apartments were to be less than a block west of Shattuck Avenue and conveniently located to public transportation (then street cars). As the program explained, "the project must be for apartments as [the] neighborhood is too old for single-family houses, and not yet zoned for business."¹⁸ Moreover, the units were conceived for families, and each was labeled as a "Family Unit" on the blueprints accordingly.

Havens commissioned Harris in December of 1948, telling him to "go ahead full blast on the plans" so that construction, under Berkeley contractor Bud Reininghaus, could begin in January of 1949 and the units could be completed and rented by June (before Havens' scheduled trip to Sweden).¹⁹ While such an advanced timeline seems nearly unthinkable, it was not particularly aspirational considering the actual timeline. Harris completed the full set of working drawings by the first week of February, and construction had commenced by the end of the month. Judging by the collection of correspondence in Harris' papers, the design and construction process seems to have proceeded with almost no interruption or complication. Havens, for his part, did not make any requests to the design proposed by Harris (but was seemingly very concerned and attentive to the upholstery color for his pair of Eero Saarinen-designed Womb Chairs in the same letters). The full set of apartments were completed by July, only one month after Havens' initial plan, and rented by the end of 1949.

Although Harris would become known for his regional, American variation of modernism best seen in his custom-built estates, his design for the Havens apartments exemplified his accompanying and complementary interest in economy and modern materials. Like many other modern architects of the period, delivering thoughtful yet economical architecture for postwar families was an immediate concern (and overwhelming demand), and one that had been previously explored by Harris in projects like his Segmental House, featured as part of *Architectural Forum's* "194X" program, and a number of other conceptual works featured in publications like *Sunset Magazine*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping*. A common theme in conceptual postwar domestic architecture was an emphasis on technology, modularity, and standardization (which had certainly been exemplified by Harris' expandable Segmental House), all of which formed the basis of the design for the Havens apartments.

¹⁷ "Requirements, Havens Apartments," ca. 1948, HHH Collection / UT Austin.

¹⁸ "Requirements," 1948.

¹⁹ Letter from Weston Havens to Harwell Hamilton Harris, January 6, 1949, HHH Collection / UT Austin.

The design of the apartment complex was essentially conceived around the contemporary material Cemesto, a composite cement board (surfaced with asbestos²⁰) manufactured by the Celotex Corporation and beloved by architects for its standard sizes (typically 4' x 8') and affordability. Cemesto, which Harris had also used in the Havens house, was a particularly popular building material used in postwar experimental housing, ranging from works of high modern design to mass-produced Minimal Traditional suburban tracts. The very same year that Harris was designing the Havens apartments, Charles and Ray Eames' Case Study House No. 8 was completed and prominently featured Cemesto panels on its exterior steel grid, and even ten years prior, Richard Neutra had extensively incorporated Cemesto into his design for the Scioberetti house in Berkeley (1939).

For the Havens apartments, Harris essentially designed a wooden frame on a four foot module, into which was inserted either Cemesto panels, doors, and windows, or a combination. (The novel Cemesto system which Harris devised was at first questioned by the City of Berkeley's building inspector, who ultimately acquiesced.²¹) Some 398 Cemesto panels — of which 203 were the standard 4' x 8' size — were used to construct the core of the two buildings. This modular system was very clearly expressed in the design of the interior and exterior, giving the low-slung complex a clear uniformity. In the quadraplex facing Blake Street, which was the most visible portion of the complex, a set of carports constructed in brick extended from the building's core and also provided a service yard/interior courtyard for each unit. These brick portions of the structure also created an elongated walkway to the front doors which were emphasized by an overhang with cutouts. From the street, these brick volumes appeared nearly hermetic, giving the otherwise simple modular design a dramatically austere appearance. Harris also turned the structure inwards (a trick he likely learned from his time spent under Schindler and Neutra) to preserve privacy. From the street, the primary facade contained very few windows and mostly solid volumes of brick and Cemesto panels. However, the rear facade facing the private gardens inverted to nearly an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling glass, broken up by the even spacing of the wooden frame. In doing so, Harris effectively created a complex that maximized both the usage of space for housing and the needs of privacy.

In addition to the standardized building system, the floor plans of the units also provided further unification. Each "Family Unit" contained a modest living room with attached kitchen, two equally sized bedrooms, one bathroom, and a fenced-in private terrace at the rear. Like the exterior of the structure, the wood frame system was expressed throughout the interior, which was appointed with modern cabinetry, detailing, and appliances. The floor plans were identical within both the quadraplex and duplex, and each unit was less than 1,000 square feet. The quadraplex prominently faced Blake Street, while the duplex was sited on the rear portion of the lot, accessible from Milvia Street, and divided from the quadraplex by an alleyway. Harris also developed a landscape scheme for the entire site, completed near the end of construction in June of 1949, consisting of beds of ivy bordered by even rows of Japanese cheesewood, a low scheme which emphasized the horizontal nature of the structure.

²⁰ The preservation challenges presented by Cemesto, which contains asbestos, has been the subject of a selection of studies. See Cesar Bagues Ballester, Laura Matarese, and Chandler McCoy, *Eames House Conservation Project: Cemesto Panels Investigation Phase 1, Research Report* (Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 2023); Kallie Kothmann, *Wall Assembly Deterioration: Asbestos-Cement, Modernism, and Panel Construction* (Master's Thesis), University of Pennsylvania, 2019.

²¹ Letter from H. S. Neighbor to Harwell Hamilton Harris, January 19, 1949, HHH Collection / UT Austin.

By the time construction was completed, each unit had cost about \$11,000 to build (about \$150,000 adjusted for inflation) including Harris' architect's fee.²² The apartments were rented by the end of 1949, and, as intended, a selection of middle-class families and professionals moved in almost immediately. Tenants included a high school librarian, a purchasing agent for a local company, a UC Berkeley instructor in business administration, and an assistant secretary at a local Bank of America branch. The only documented classified listing for one of the units (advertised by a businesswoman looking for a roommate) described them as "very modernistic."²³

Shortly after the completion of the apartments, the photographer Rondal Partridge photographed Harris' design extensively for publication. Partridge, the son of famed Group f.64 photographer Imogen Cunningham and assistant to fellow members Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange, worked as a freelance architectural photographer in the late 1940s, photographing works for William Wurster, Thomas Church, Mario Ciampi, and other architectural luminaries of the region. His photographs of the Havens apartments emphasize the low-slung volumes, deep shadows, and finished edges of the precise yet thoughtful modern design. In one particularly evocative image, the sprawling, flat-roofed apartment complex is juxtaposed against a background of two-story homes with hip and gable roofs: a visual rhetoric which proposes the future of postwar housing. Despite Partridge's photography — whether he was hired by either Havens or Harris is unclear — the complex was never featured in any documented publications. *Architectural Forum* requested to publish the project in a January 1950 issue dedicated to apartment housing, but the feature never materialized.²⁴ Likewise, the company behind Cemesto had requested, even before construction was complete, a set of plans to be used for promotion of the product. Whether they were indeed used by the company remains unclear, although Neutra's nearby Scioberetti house (1939) was a frequent feature in the company's advertisements and sales materials.

Despite the lack of recognition, the Havens apartments are a remarkable example of postwar architecture in their dedication to providing good, economical design tailored to the demands for efficient, modern, and livable housing. Moreover, they appear to be Harris' most successful attempt at realizing (affordable) housing for a popular audience, and their existence accentuates an impulse in many postwar modern architects to deliver that very type of housing.

²² Memoranda of Procedure, ca. 1948, HHH Collection / UT Austin; Another document in the Harris papers puts the construction price per apartment at \$8,745, although this figure does not seem to account for the architect's fee among other things.

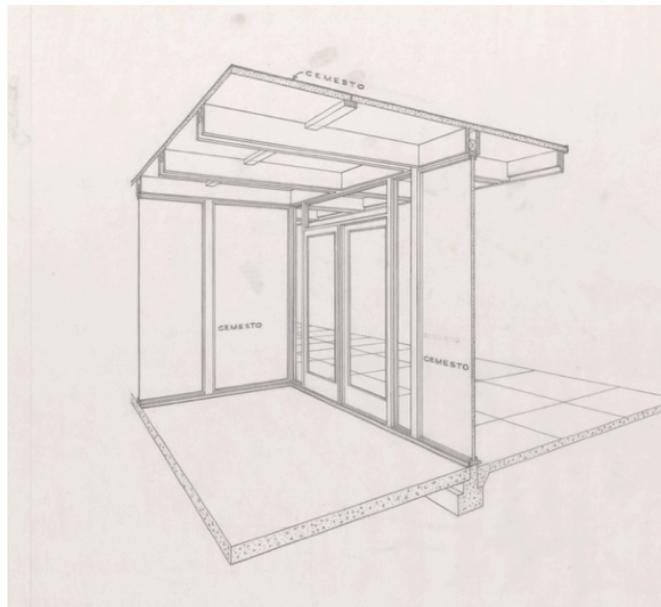
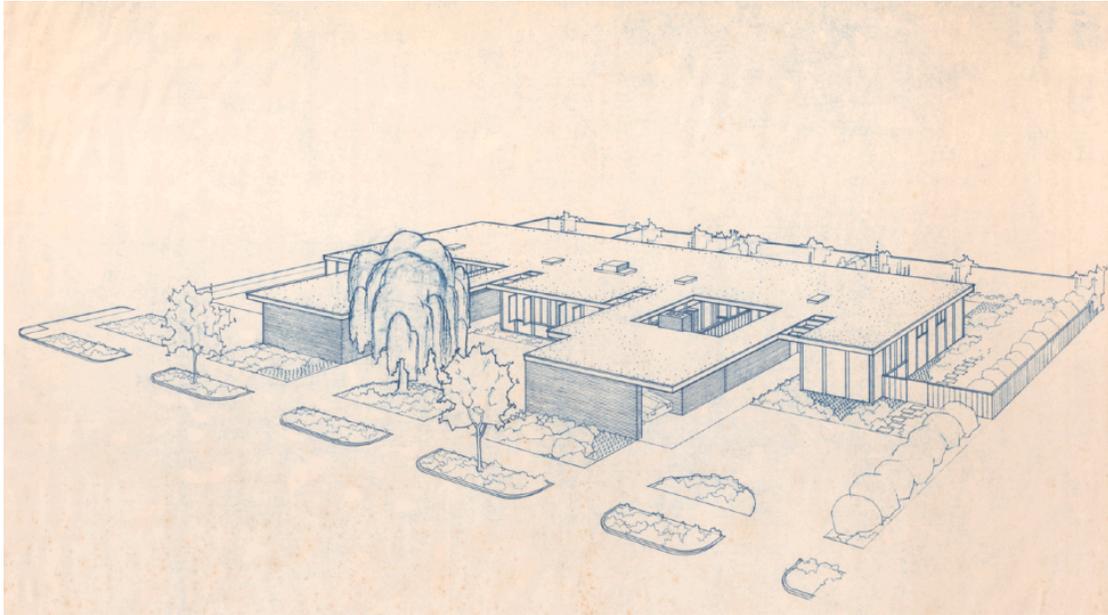
²³ Classified advertisement for 2002 Blake Street, *Berkeley Gazette*, January 31, 1950.

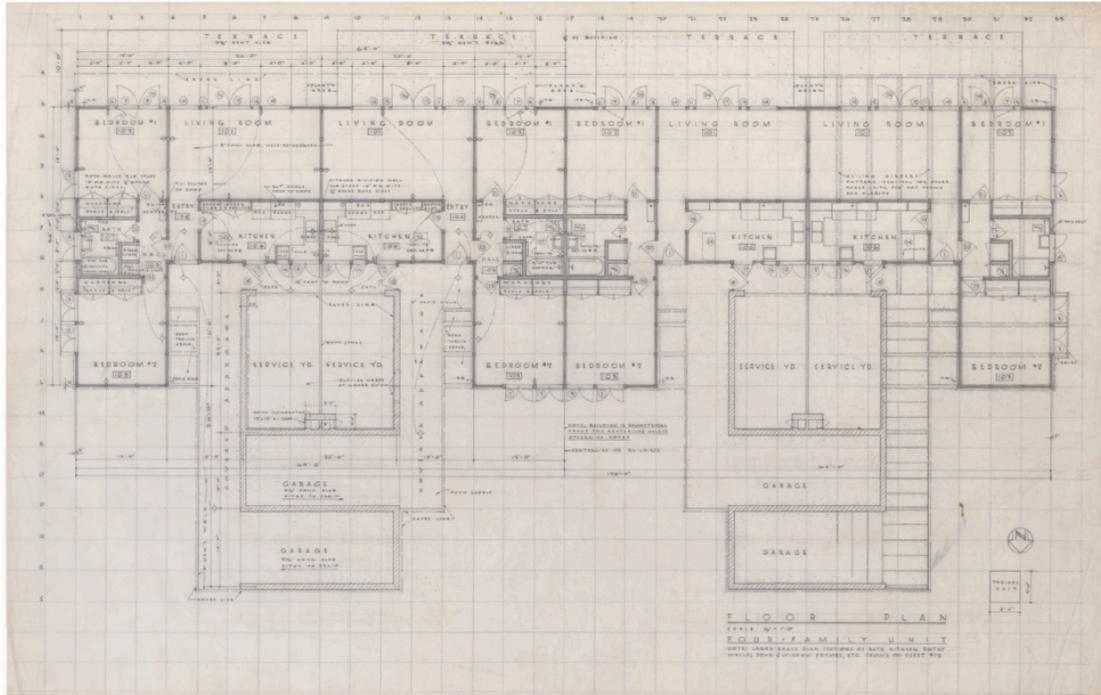
²⁴ Letter from Eleanor Bitterman to Harwell Hamilton Harris, December 1, 1949, HHH Collection / UT Austin.

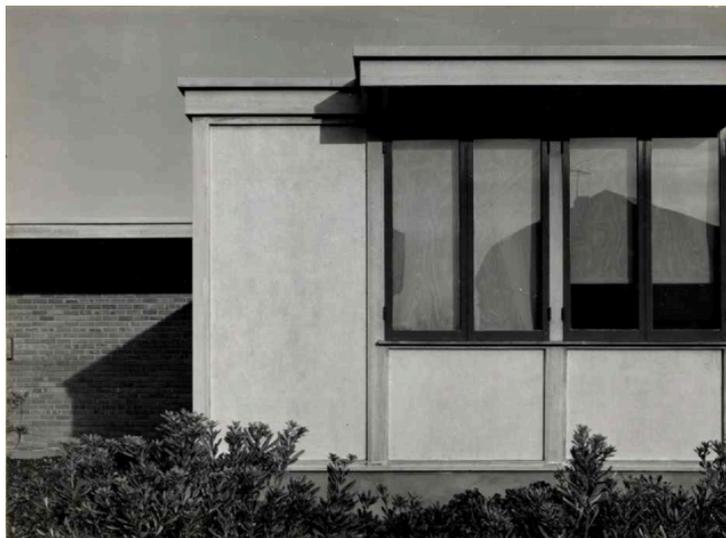
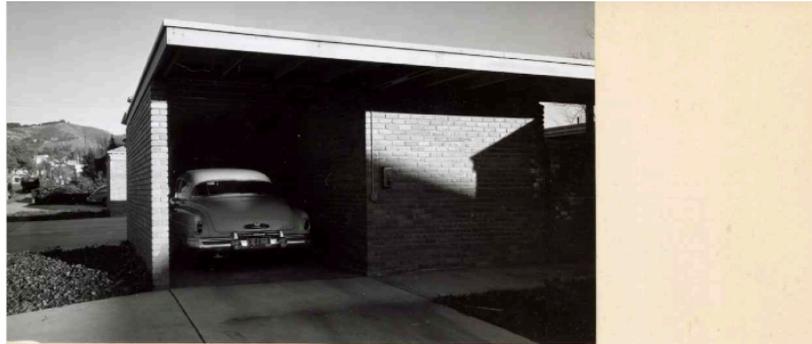
Appendix A: Selection of Historic Photographs and Materials

All materials from the Harwell Hamilton Harris Collection provided courtesy of the Alexander Architectural Archives at the University of Texas, Austin.

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Appendix B: Contemporary Photographs





