

BY CAMELA RAYMOND | PHOTOS BY JOHN VALLS

A midcentury developer's California-mod homes are winning a new generation of admirers.

SUMMER OF RUMMER

Indoor-outdoor living as
conceived by California
developer Joseph
Eichler—and emulated
by Portland developer
Robert Rummer





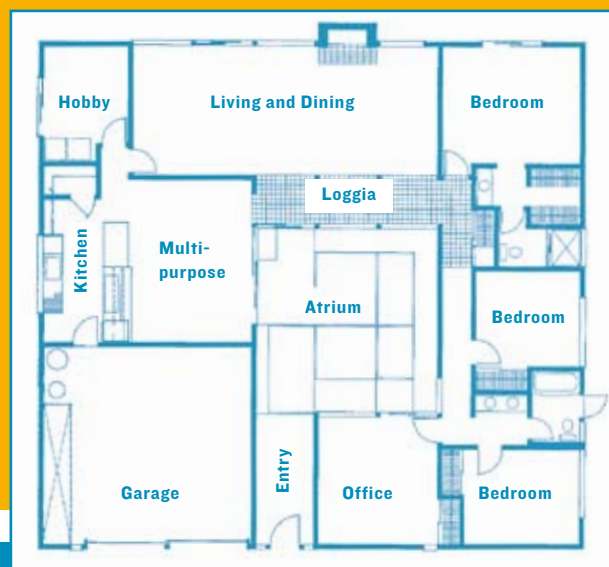
**CARL JONSSON
& ERIN DVORAK**

RUMMER, 1967
MENLO WEST, BEAVERTON

Walk through the front door and step “outside” into the atrium, the central feature of most Rummer homes. Interior courtyards have been common to the residential architecture of warm-climate locales throughout the world from ancient Rome to colonial Latin America. Rummer atriums are designed to let Oregon rains drain outside.

FLOOR SQUARE

The floor plan of Dvorak and Jonsson’s 1,700-square-foot Rummer is strikingly similar to that of the MC-674, below, designed by Claude Oakland for Joseph Eichler’s Lucas Valley development in San Rafael, Calif. The main differences are that the MC-674 is nearly 1,200 square feet larger, and that one bathroom is in a slightly different position.



THE MENLO WEST SUBDIVISION IN BEAVERTON IS possibly named after Menlo Park, the small city in the San Francisco Bay Area where I spent the first seven years of my life. Back in the '70s my mother, father, brother and I lived in a cozy rental on the edge of the Stanford University golf course. It was a minuscule but well-designed ranch, its C-shaped floor plan and generous patios exemplifying then-current notions of modern California living. We all loved it, but on occasion when we hopped in the blue family Dodge Dart and drove through the streets of nearby subdivisions, my mother would point out the window and say, “Look, an Eichler. That’s where I’d like to live.”

Off Menlo Dr in Beaverton stand several residences that are dead ringers for the homes my mother coveted: stylish modern designs that developer Joseph Eichler built by the thousands throughout the Bay Area suburbs from the late '40s to the early '70s, ushering in an informal, indoor-outdoor, affordably elegant way of life for the burgeoning postwar middle class. Here, though, these homes aren’t called Eichlers; they’re known as Rummers. And now that we’ve reached the Aughts of a new century, young Portland families are coveting these copycat tract homes as if it were the middle of the last.

By the time I pull up in front of Erin Dvorak and Carl Jonsson’s house in Menlo West, I’ve visited nine other Rummers already—

RIGHT: A tongue-and-groove ceiling, a globe light and imitation wood paneling (brightened with white paint by Dvorak and Jonsson) are classic Rummer features. The couple replaced the vinyl tile floors with slate, a good match for their radiant heat floors.

BELOW: Here seen from the living room, the glass-walled atrium creates dynamic sightlines in the home's public areas.



‘Nike designer,’ I think, cutting the engine, as I stalk the newest fans of these copycat homes.

another just down the street, five in the Oak Hills development off Bethany Blvd and three in the Vista Brook subdivision of Raleigh Hills. That this dwelling belongs to the same family of houses is immediately recognizable from its low, one-story profile and its unusual roofline, pitched in the middle and flat on the ends (a gesture that screams “California modern”). And the fresh moss-green exterior paint, the slate stepping stones that cross the front lawn and the Scion xB in the driveway give it away as belonging to members of the young, design-conscious nesting class that I’m particularly stalking, the newest generation to embrace these homes. *Nike designer*, I think, cutting the engine.

I am greeted at the door by Dvorak, a pretty, 30-year-old school-psychologist-in-training. Two of her family members—hairless cats covered in a ghostly white down—trail behind; her husband (a footwear designer at Nike, it turns out) is at work. We’ve never met, but Dvorak responds warmly to my request to take a peek inside.

Even the 10th time in quick succession, stepping through the front door of a Rummer makes a powerful impression. Instead of accessing a dark foyer, we enter a small rectangular courtyard walled mostly in sliding glass doors. But for the heavy roof beam, it’s open to the blue. Straight ahead, the sun-dappled greenery of Dvorak’s backyard is visible through the great floor-to-ceiling panes of glass that form the back wall of her living room.

As with most Rummors, every room in the roughly square building opens onto this central atrium, so that while eating breakfast or typing an e-mail in the home office, Dvorak and her husband

look onto a naturalistic vignette. They've embellished the original planting areas, rectangular depressions in the exposed aggregate floor, with short cypress shrubs and river rock.

Dvorak and I continue through a sliding glass door to the "inside," where the open plan in the living, dining and kitchen areas—made possible by heavy post-and-beam construction—creates long horizontal sightlines. The gabled midsection of the roof gives the living room a dramatically pitched ceiling, and together with the atrium these elements provide the home with an explosively spacious and dynamic feeling for its modest size. Which is precisely the brilliance of Robert Rummer's design.

EXCEPT THAT IT WASN'T RUMMER'S DESIGN; it was Eichler's.

Anyone who owns one of these homes knows the story by heart, and its best chronicler is Joe Barthlow, a Eugene resident who has quietly published on the Eichler Network, a Bay Area Web site for owners and cult followers of the famous California homes.

It was in 1959, Barthlow writes, just after the young Oregon couple Bob and Phyllis Rummer had moved into their custom-designed modern home in Newberg, that a neighbor showed Bob the plans for his new house: a rambly, one-floor, post-and-beam design by Eichler Homes that had been published in *Look* magazine. Phyllis recognized it immediately; she'd toured an Eichler subdivision while visiting her sister in Walnut Creek, Calif., the previous year and had rapturously sung its praises to her husband.

Bob was an insurance man, not a building developer, but he was a fan of modern architecture, and his neighbor's house set him thinking. Soon he was on the phone with one of Eichler's star archi-

TOP: It's easy to identify this Rummer from its roofline—gabled in the middle and flat on the ends—its heavy roof beams and the clerestory windows.

BOTTOM: Rausch and Root used a limited palette of materials, including black Marmoleum flooring, and vibrant color to accentuate the simple, bold geometry of their home's structure.

PETE RAUSCH & DONNA ROOT

RUMMER, 1968
OAK HILLS, BEAVERTON



RIGHT: Skylights keep the upholstery and artwork dry in Rausch and Root's cozy atrium.

BELOW: Most Rummers feature a step-down shower in the master bath; Rausch and Root perked up theirs with glass tile, slate floors and a transparent glass screen.



tects, A. Quincy Jones of Jones & Emmons, and before long Jones had flown up from Los Angeles to show Rummer a handful of residences he'd designed for Portland development company Hallberg Homes. Rummer, in turn, made a visit to Eichler's Walnut Creek development. What happened next isn't exactly clear. But in a short time Rummer had formed a company called Rummer Homes and started constructing what eventually amounted to nearly 300 houses in Beaverton, Portland, Gresham, Lake Oswego and Clackamas. They were virtually indistinguishable from Eichler's.

If Rummer appropriated Eichler's designs, which it seems he must have (not, however, through Jones, Barthlow believes), he got away with it. Attempted legal action by Claude Oakland, one of Eichler's architects, went nowhere. But it wasn't an easy way to turn a buck. Actually, Rummer was only taking the first step in a quixotic campaign to challenge the status quo in Oregon's residential building industry, just as Eichler had done on a much larger scale in California a few years earlier.

"IT IS THE GENIUS OF THIS REGION to be more than ordinarily aware and more than ordinarily free," asserted California architect Harwell Harris, addressing the Oregon chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1954 on the subject of California modernism, as quoted in Paul Adamson and Martin Arbunich's book *Eichler: Modernism Rebuilds the American Dream*. It's hard to say

whether Harris's explanation for California's prodigious contribution to the still-founding cause of modern architecture in the United States was accurate. But it's certain that the geometrically streamlined, glass-walled houses that Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler and William Wurster built for California's liberal-minded upper classes were stunningly different from anything previously seen on that landscape. And as Adamson and Arbunich argue in the book, the frequent appearances of these houses in architectural and lifestyle magazines like *House Beautiful* and *Sunset* helped prime the market for Eichler's bold designs.

Eichler, however, was building not custom houses for the social elite, but middle-class suburban tract houses, an industry focused more on issues of quantity than quality. In 1947, the year Eichler began his career as a developer selling prefabricated homes, the demand for new housing had been pent up over a decade and a half of economic depression and war, and with housing purchases being subsidized by new federally assisted loans and California's economy beginning a huge growth curve, most developers weren't stopping to ponder matters of design. Nonetheless, the conditions that presented themselves—thousands of buyers instilled with postwar optimism and dreams of self-reinvention flocking to

CRAIG OLSON & SEAN IGO

RUMMER, 1968
VISTA BROOK, PORTLAND



ABOVE: The steeply pitched gable and deeply overhanging eaves of this Rummer model appeared in architect A. Quincy Jones' designs for Portland development company Hallberg Homes before Jones went to work for Eichler.

RIGHT: Sean Igo (left), who owns the stylish downtown boutique Canoe with partner Craig Olson (middle), the regional sales director of modern furniture mart Design Within Reach, says the couple have resisted turning their home into a "showroom." Since moving into their Rummer four years ago, they've taken a gradual approach to renovating and decorating. In their living and dining areas, vintage Danish modern pieces collected over the years mingle with new reproductions that include an Eames Surfboard table and a Niels Bendtsen Neo sofa, a comfortable seat for neighbor Niles Snyder.



freshly graded tracts of land—provided an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the American detached home.

The average merchant builder had good reason to balk at flights of architectural creativity. A previous generation of high-minded attempts to translate modern architectural concepts into affordable family homes, undertaken in both Europe and the United States, had resulted in a succession of nearly unqualified failures. Even the most pragmatic designs had been stymied by a residential building industry ill equipped to work with innovative materials and methods, a situation that hadn't changed by the late '40s.

But Joseph Eichler wasn't the average merchant builder. His fascination with the cutting-edge architecture of his time had been piqued during several months spent renting the Bazett house in Hillsborough, Calif. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1940, it was a house, he later recalled, that "each day offered new living experiences that were a revelation to me." Intent on bringing these kinds of experiences into the lives of his buyers, Eichler hired some of Los Angeles and the Bay Area's most progressive archi-

An architecture of formal elegance and economy, suited to a mild climate and a casual style of living

UNIVERSAL APPEAL

Rummer owners share an adventurous spirit; otherwise, they're an eclectic bunch. Brooke Bryant (top) decked out her home with Chinese antiques and ethnic art. Carol Cox (bottom), prefers antiques and wicker. A retired French professor who moved to Portland from Michigan, Bryant loves the way her international friends feel at home in her atrium. "They're accustomed to courtyards in their homes. It's a universal design."



tects—Anshen & Allen, Jones & Emmons and Claude Oakland—to help him see his vision through.

The ideas they presented weren't entirely new, but their synthesis and execution were revolutionary. Eichler homes incorporated the outdoor patios that had been common in California homes since the 1920s, as well as elements familiar to Wright: flat roofs, radiant floor-heating systems, carports, slab-on-grade foundations. Their open plans had even been seen in more traditionally dressed tract homes such as those developed by William J. Levitt on the East Coast. But Eichler's architects combined and transformed these elements into an architecture of formal elegance and economy, creating houses ideally suited to the California climate and their owners' casual, family-oriented way of life. As Adamson and Arbunich point out, the huge glass windows and atriums in these homes imbued residential life with a dynamism that countered

the regularity of the suburban landscape. And the strategic use of inexpensive, modern materials such as masonite cabinetry and plastic laminate countertops helped keep them affordable.

Ka-ching? Not quite. Well-conceived as these homes were, delivering them to buyers proved devilish in the details. Atypical residential building forms, such as exposed post-and-beam framing, demanded extra attention from construction workers, and to keep costs down Eichler had to create a controlled, assembly-line-style production system. Bankers and federal home-loan officials had to be lobbied to finance these atypical structures. And buyers, any of whom could have saved money by going with a more conventional ranch, had to be coaxed with sophisticated marketing.

Still, by the mid-'50s Eichler was being hailed by the architectural media as one of the best builders in the nation. His homes met not just with critical acclaim, but also with the enthusiastic embrace of the liberal-minded, upwardly mobile professionals who took the leap and signed their deeds.

But it didn't last. By the time Eichler died in 1974, his business had crashed after further experiments in multifamily urban housing failed miserably. Eichler proved that it was possible to deliver innovative architecture to the middle class, but only at great risk. "Ultimately the concept of the modernist middle-class home died with him," writes Adamson. Few developers attempted to take up his mantle. Robert Rummer was one of them.

"I GOT KIND OF OBSESSED," confesses Erin Dvorak, showing me her new slate tile floors (a good, though expensive, conductor for the radiant heat system underneath), the intricate tile job on her "Roman" shower (another signature Rummer feature, the step-down bathing area in the master suite is sheathed from the side yard by a near-floor-to-ceiling pane of translucent glass), the freshly landscaped backyard and the new roof system.

As Adamson and Arbunich point out in their book, Eichler homes are an exquisite expression of Charles Eames' famous 1950 dictum that the role of the designer in the industrial age was to "get the most of the best to the greatest number of people for the least." The same can be said of Rummers, of course. Their floor

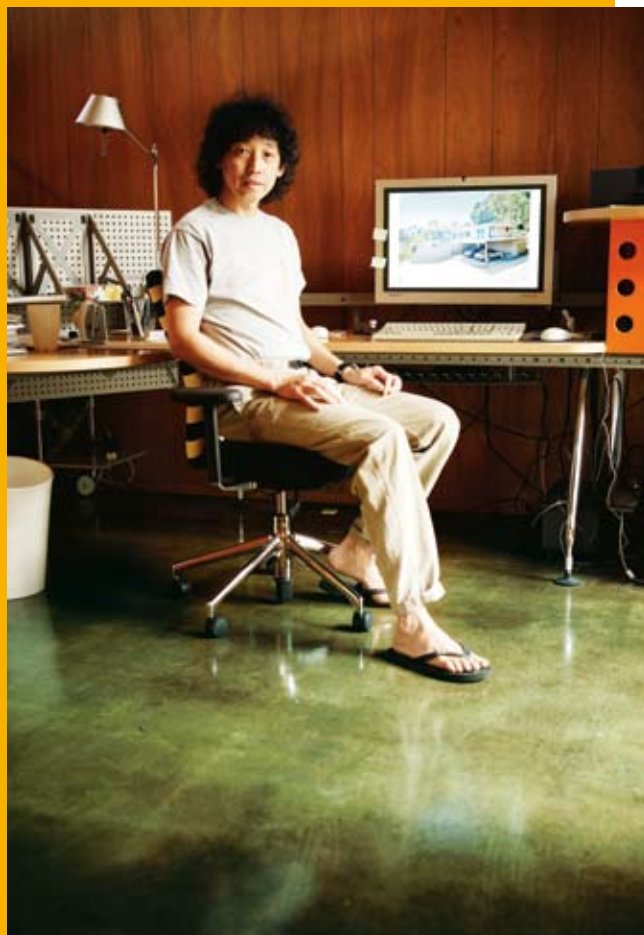
Eichler seduced prospective buyers with photographer Ernest Braun's gleeful images of suburban life.



PHOTOGRAPH REAR LEFT BY ERNIE BRAUN / COURTESY EICHLER NETWORK ARCHIVES

THIS NEW HOUSE

It takes dedication to get a handle on the forward-thinking features of Rummer homes. Vincent So (top) spent countless hours experimenting with stain for his concrete floors. Dave Castagno (bottom), a Rummer resident for 25 years, swears his new roof system will finally keep water from pooling on his home's flat top.



plans make the most of space; their copious windows make the most of Oregon winter light; their clean lines make the most of designer furniture; and their less-than-custom-built prices make the most of a budget. (The prices are rising, by the way.) But even at a typical size of about 2,000 square feet, Rummers can be a bit all-consuming. It's hard to resist maximizing the potential of such a superlative house, and equally difficult to ignore its forward-thinking quirks.

Donna Root and Peter Rausch's obsession began before they ever set foot in their Oak Hills Rummer. Root, a marketing director at Intel, and Rausch, a stay-at-home dad, liked modern architecture

and wanted to raise their young daughter in the suburbs, but they sought escape from their 3,500-square-foot Cedar Mill McMansion. When they heard about the Rummers in a nearby '60s-era planned community—Oak Hills was the “la-la” subdivision of its time, says Root, a place where families still set up tents for summer sleepovers by the community pool—they knew the homes were for them. “I would drive around to look for ‘For Sale by Owners’ after work,” Root recalls.

Once they got title to their home—the second they bid on—the couple remodeled every inch of it, ripping the walls down to the studs to replace the original imitation wood paneling with wall-board, with Rausch doing much of the work himself. They gave special consideration to correcting their schizophrenic floor—“There

Even at a typical size of 2,000 square feet, Rummers can be all-consuming.

was peach tile in the atrium, white tile with black grout in the kitchen, berber carpet in the living room and brown Pergo in the hallway and master bedroom,” Root recalls—finally settling on an expanse of black Marmoleum for the living area, grey slate for the atrium and sufficiently retro white shag in the master bedroom.

Vincent So also knows about floors. The consumer-electronics product designer for Intel has devoted untold hours to his since moving into his 1965 Rummer in Vista Brook, a Raleigh Hills subdivision. The easy part was ripping out the original asbestos tile and replacing it with marble tile in the living and dining areas and bedrooms. Elsewhere, he applied stain directly to the existing concrete slab, a grueling process that required stripping the floor twice (the first stain he chose reacted poorly with the chemical agent used to remove the vestigial strips of glue). Now So's floor is a gleaming dark green—and probably the envy of his neighbors—and he's thinking about the next task, repairing the roof.

For his part, Dave Castagno is sure he's finally dispensed with the pools of water on the flats of his roof. The new top on the Oak Hills Rummer that he's shared with his wife, Darla, for 27 years incorporates a membrane covering graded insulation and internal drainage grooves called “crickets.” And he's not the only obsessive member of the household. Darla says she'll stop before “swallowing the Kool-Aid,” but she's reinstating the progressive parties that used to occur occasionally among the two dozen or so Oak Hills Rummer owners. The purpose is to share maintenance tips (How do you fix a leak in a pipe embedded in concrete slab?) and decorating approaches (the Castagnos' atrium holds a pool table, for example). Donna Root made the flyers for the first meeting, and Darla would like to invite Rummer himself, who is still alive but elusive, rumored to live somewhere near Medford. She could show him the typewritten list of the original Rummer Club members and the thick file of purchase offers that have arrived at her door over the years.

“In the last year it's really come on; it's better than sliced bread,” Root enthuses. “We've loved it the whole time, and they all just caught on. I love the name they've tagged on: midcentury modern *historical*.”

But not yet relegated to the past. ■