

# Marin

## Enchanting Eichlers

These truly modern homes are the perfect fit for Marin.

BY BLAIR CAMPBELL

Here's a comparison you don't see every day: Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Eichler. After all, one was a nation's founder and self-taught architect who embraced neoclassical design, while the other was a tract home developer who turned post-and-beam residential construction into a classic style. But the two have more in common than you'd think, says Bill Hansell, a Bay Area architect who was educated at the Jefferson-designed University of Virginia and has renovated five Eichler homes in Marin County, including his own.

"Jefferson had both a practical approach and an interest in the idea that design be simultaneously rooted in use and contemporary meaning," says Hansell. "Similarly, Eichler and his architects sought to be practical — they were building low-cost houses meant for everyday people — but also reflective of contemporary society and, specifically, California living." And while Jefferson had his own architectural playground of sorts in and around Charlottesville, Va., Eichler had the San Francisco Bay Area.

Today, Marin County boasts the largest concentration of Eichler homes in all of California — but Eichler's path to Marin was not a direct one. In his early 40s, just as a full-time stint working as chief financial officer in his wife's family's butter-and-egg business was winding down, Eichler abruptly moved his family of four from their small home in San Mateo to an even smaller rental in neighboring Hillsborough. A mix of aesthetic enchantment and a love of the new seems to have drawn Eichler to the house, which had been designed in the modernist style by none other than Frank Lloyd Wright. It both captured Eichler's imagination and foretold his future.

The family's short stay in the rental drew to a close in 1945 — the same year Eichler began a second career as a developer, at first building and selling unremarkable tract homes in Sunnyvale. By 1949, Eichler had recruited Frank Lloyd Wright disciple Robert Anshen as an architect, and through their collaboration, the first true "Eichlers" — priced just below \$10,000 — came into being.

"A lot of people have asked — and I've even asked myself — where did this come from?" says Joseph Eichler's son Ned, a Tiburon resident who worked for the Eichler Homes company in a number of different roles over the years, ultimately overseeing sales. "There had been no obvious evidence in his life of this interest in modern architecture, except that he kind of liked everything that was new — the latest electric razor, the latest car." Ned Eichler notes that even his father didn't initially make the connection between his success in the real estate business and his affinity for forward thinking design. Joseph Eichler's working relationship with Robert Anshen, however, did offer a clue. The young architect had been working on a home for the Eichler family in the years leading up to their professional collaboration, and it was Anshen's uncharitable appraisal of Eichler's first Sunnyvale tract — his exact words, says Ned, were "Joe, how can a man of your taste build such crap?" — that finally set Eichler in the direction of his true calling.



Clockwise from top: The Rudnick-Fingersh open kitchen and dining area; modern artwork; sitting area with skylight; Hansell and client Julie Fingersh.



Catherine Munson's Upper Lucas Valley Eichler features lots of light and room for a giraffe sculpture.

In the early '50s, Eichler Homes expanded to Palo Alto, San Mateo, Walnut Creek, Sacramento and San Rafael. The first Marin Eichlers were in Terra Linda North, in what remains the largest Eichler development in the county. Subdivisions soon followed in Terra Linda South and Marinwood, both in the late 1950s, and Upper Lucas Valley — which Ned Eichler still regards as the most picturesque of all Eichler developments — in the mid-'60s. There are also Eichlers in the Strawberry and Sleepy Hollow neighborhoods of Mill Valley and San Anselmo, respectively — bringing today's grand total of Marin Eichlers to more than 1,500. While these homes represent a wide range of Eichler floor plans, they all share the plain facades, floor-to-ceiling windows, open common spaces, radiant concrete floors, and post-and-beam, single-story design that make the style so recognizable.

"Single-story living, the connection to the outside — those things really jelled between what Eichler was doing and where he was doing it, and the architectural ideas that inspired him," says Hansell. "The influence of Frank Lloyd Wright on modernism was about connecting back to nature and having houses reflect a way of living where the outside and inside were integrated. Naturally, the best place for that is in a temperate climate."

### The 'Lovely Lifestyle'

The story of Eichlers in Marin and the story of Catherine Munson, founder and CEO of LVPMarin Realtors, are so closely linked that it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. Munson arrived in Marin County in the 1950s with her first husband, Bill Munson, and quickly found herself busy with three young daughters, born between '54 and '58. The family briefly lived in Strawberry before moving first to an Eichler in Terra Linda and later to the Upper Lucas Valley A-frame Munson still occupies today.

Munson fell head over heels for the Eichler aesthetic — an enthusiasm that landed her a job as "hostess" in Eichler's Terra Linda sales office. In her recollection, the position involved extolling the virtues of Eichler homes to prospective buyers and entertaining their children during tours — but Munson was destined for bigger things. In 1958 she earned her real estate license and began selling the homes, first in Terra Linda and Marinwood, and later in Upper Lucas Valley. By 1967, rising costs of building materials and imitative competitors, among other factors, had driven the Eichler Homes business into bankruptcy. Suddenly finding herself without an employer, Munson struck out on her own and founded Lucas Valley Properties (later changing the name to LVPMarin Realtors).

While Munson was hitting her stride as an Eichler evangelist, she was also thriving as an Eichler inhabitant. "The light that came in through the glass walls was literally transforming," she recalls of those early years in her home. "You didn't have to look out a window to the exterior of your property. The outside of the house was part of the house." Munson acknowledges that there were plenty of Eichler naysayers, objecting to everything from the look of the beam ceilings to the abundance of glass, which they wrongly assumed made the houses difficult to heat. "What they didn't understand," she says, "was the personal joy that one would come to experience living in an Eichler — the lovely lifestyle."

Middle-class families like the Munsons were the typical Eichler homeowners during the company's heyday in the mid- and late '50s and early '60s. Some had an eye for design and appreciated the Eichler aesthetic; others were simply happy to find an attractive, affordable home in a comfortable climate. The family-friendly aspect, however, was a universal selling point.

"They were wonderful houses to raise children in then, and they're wonderful now in exactly the same ways," says Munson. "If you think about it, the Eichler home is a lifestyle house, but it's perfect for a young family with a baby or babies, because kids play on the floor all the time, and they love that warm floor." In addition to the floors, says Munson, the lack of stairs, sense of openness and ease of walking outdoors all enhance the experience of living in an Eichler with children.

### Eichlers Past and Present

That family-friendly quality has certainly been a boon for furniture designer Alice Tacheny and her husband, clinical research consultant Michael Lynn. The couple and their young sons, ages 3 and 5, have lived in a Terra Linda North Eichler for the past two years. Unlike Bill Hansell, who stumbled upon a Lucas Valley Eichler when his Marin-based house hunt led him northward in pursuit of better prices and weather, Tacheny and Lynn were focused on buying an Eichler almost from the start.

"About 10 years ago we were living in Santa Rosa, contemplating buying a house," explains Tacheny. "I had read a little piece in *Dwell* magazine about a couple who had purchased an Eichler. The house was in original condition, and everything they loved about the place — the windows, the design, the openness — sounded wonderful. I was hooked."

Tacheny and Lynn relocated from California to Minnesota in 2002, but when they decided to move back west several years later, Eichlers were on the agenda. Working with Renee Adelmann, founder and owner of Marin Modern Real Estate, the couple came to Marin for a long weekend to tour both Eichlers and non-Eichlers. Although they didn't find their dream that weekend, Adelmann called a few days later with the news that an E-11 model Eichler, with a floor plan featuring four bedrooms, two baths and an entry leading directly into an atrium, would soon be on the market. With their limited budget, Tacheny and Lynn couldn't fly out again to see it, so Adelmann led them through detailed video tours.

"We decided to go for it," says Tacheny. "It was crazy to make a decision to buy a house without ever having set foot in it, but because we had been through that model before, we felt like we knew the layout well enough. Lucky for us everything worked out, and we love the house!"

The couple have made some minor improvements since moving in, including removing carpet and floor tile, painting and putting up some modernist-motif wallpaper in the dining room to create an accent wall. "We take an eclectic approach," says Lynn. "We like to maintain the integrity of the house and floor plan, but we like the updated look of today's modern design." He notes their use of pieces such as a mid-century Danish teak credenza and furnishings from Tacheny's own line, Alice Tacheny Design. "Much of today's furniture and home design is reflective of this mid-century time period," Lynn notes, "which makes it quite easy to furnish."

Given their efforts to embrace the intended style of their Eichler and its original elements, Tacheny and Lynn would likely be considered ideal homeowners by the many Eichler acolytes devoted to the mission of preserving these homes. And there are many. Blogs like Eichlerific ([eichlerific.com](http://eichlerific.com)), EichlerEichler ([eichlereichler.blogspot.com](http://eichlereichler.blogspot.com)), and Eichler Bug ([eichlerbug.blogspot.com](http://eichlerbug.blogspot.com)) chronicle preservation efforts, while the San Francisco-based Eichler Network works to "support the lifestyle" through publications ([EichlerNetwork.com](http://EichlerNetwork.com) and *CA-Modern* magazine), a lively online forum, and a specialized home maintenance referral service and directory.

To an Eichler purist, there are no dirtier words than "second story addition" — an ordinance now prevents this type of construction in San Rafael — and no greater sin than putting a roof on the atrium. But between those extreme changes and the often impractical choice of leaving the homes untouched lies a wide range of renovation options and what can feel like a minefield of judgment calls.

Bill Hansell recalls that when he first moved into his Eichler, his initial instinct was to make restorative changes only — such as updating worn finishes and various hardscape elements. "I appreciated the architecture as it was," Hansell says. "It took me a few years to realize that certain things have changed about how we live now. You can renovate these houses and keep the same spirit but not be too literal about it — which would go against the very idea of modernism anyway. So that's what my work has been about, and that's what my own house is about." The trick, then, for homeowners like Tacheny and Lynn and architects like Hansell, is to walk a careful line between adherence to original plans and upgrades that adapt the houses to a more modern way of life.

Taking inspiration from the past while moving steadily forward? Surely Eichler — and Jefferson — would approve.



Clockwise from top: The dining room in Alice Tacheny and Michael Lynn's Terra Linda North Eichler; a fireplace next to a vertical window; lots of light in the hallway; Tacheny and Lynn.