





SIGNATURE STYLE: John Hans Ostwald / Modern ski chalet / John Hans Ostwald brought a touch of Europe to the Bay Area
Dave Weinstein, Special to The Chronicle

Published 4:00 am, Saturday, January 28, 2006



Chronicle / Lacy Atkins

For years after World War II, European intellectuals in the United States commanded unusual respect. John Hans Ostwald knew that, and took advantage of it. Born in Berlin, raised in Vienna and educated in Switzerland, Ostwald adapted quickly to America, taking on the name "John" (though everyone called him "Hans"), and adopting the woodsy, modern Bay Region Style as his own. He always retained a touch of Europe, however.

"At his best, he married the Swiss chalet architecture with modern architecture," says architect Walter Thomas Brooks, a former associate. "He was like a transition. He made it easy for people to enjoy modern architecture."

By the late 1940s Ostwald and his small office were churning out modern homes, generally five to 10 a year plus many additions and remodels and occasional commercial projects. His clients loved his work, and many of them loved him. Contemporary architects marveled at his success.

"He was a very, very good salesman, in a soft kind of way," says former partner, E. Paul Kelly, who watched Ostwald schmooze many a client. "He had just enough of the accent to make it interesting to the client, and at times he would exaggerate it a bit."

Ostwald, trim and athletic, short and elegantly dressed, a superb skier and classical pianist, carried himself like a leader -- or a professor. He was warm with his clients, spending days asking about their

families and their desires before sketching a floor plan. If they objected to his open plan or other modern touches, Oswald would patiently explain their benefits.

"The minute he started to talk you felt total respect. He is an incredible teacher, and that is his secret, I think," says Tito Moruza, who has enjoyed his Oswald house, with its spiral stairs and cantilevered wraparound deck, in the Oakland hills for 46 years.

"When the house was done," says Tito's wife, Margaret, "we felt like he was our father."

An Oswald house is likely to splay across the landscape shaped like a lazy U or V built around a courtyard or pool. Oswald's angles are often oblique and his plans complex -- often to accommodate a difficult site. Many of his houses are hexagonal, recalling Frank Lloyd Wright. Oswald's decks are often shaped like a ship's prow. His decks are distinctive, often wrapping around two or three sides of a house and with open slats as floorboards.

But Oswald also designed improbably modest, rectangular houses and knew the pleasures that could derive from a cube. He gave Piedmont straightforward ranch-style houses, and he claimed a Viennese heritage for his compact townhouses.

Oswald topped his houses with flat roofs, low-pitched, glass-filled gables, or with pyramids. Pyramidal rooms are among his most dramatic spaces, with exposed beams converging on a central skylight.

Wherever the site allowed for additional courtyards, Oswald provided them. His houses are often paired pavilions connected by glassed-in breezeways -- "terrace halls," he called them, or "garden rooms." Connie Heller's house in the Berkeley hills seems like two houses from the street, one flat-roofed and reserved, the other butterfly-roofed and jocular. They are connected by a glass-walled hallway and adjoining dining room.

Steep hillsides attracted Oswald houses, many of which provide one floor of living space above entry-level work space or (originally unfinished) guest room. "Where mountain goats fear to tread" is how the Oakland Tribune described the site of Dr. Ralph Weilerstein's house. Cantilevered steel spiral staircases sometimes led upstairs.

His houses are often redwood-sided, natural or painted, or shingled with the living areas often floating above a brick basement. Some are paneled and appear Japanese -- especially when they are cantilevered above the garden. Oswald's garages are often concrete block, which he also used as the primary material for some houses and for the South Branch of the Berkeley Library.

Ostwald creates poetry from straight lines, woodsy color and natural texture -- dark beams supporting rough-textured cedar ceiling planks, artful arrangements of slats beneath eaves, wooden piers paired for aesthetic effect (and sometimes separated by textured amber or gold glass), more rugged red brick than most of his contemporaries used, and composition board panels held in place by wooden slats suggesting Japanese shoji screens.

But he threw in curves as well -- semi-circular brick walls that extend from inside to outside in Heller's home, a circular entryway in the Weilerstein house in Berkeley, his characteristic spiral stairs.

Ostwald's primary interest was the plan and the siting of the house. He often left detailing to his associates, Kelly says, though the style of his detailing remains consistent -- and marvelous.

Weilerstein's copper fireplace still glows. Copper doors are common. Ostwald often used lights designed by friend and fellow Jewish émigré Hans Shaper. All his works use luxurious, natural textures.

His interiors blend elegance, even formality, with the rustic. The dining "room" in the Weilerstein house closes from the living room by sliding a curtain along a track. The house's simple plywood cabinetry suggests a dorm room, or an Alpine lodge.

Freestanding fireplaces in many of his homes add to the ski chalet feeling.

Ostwald's houses may have been stylistically modest, but the man himself was not. He had an immense ego but seemed content -- or almost content -- to design primarily houses.

"He liked to do houses because he liked the interchange with people," says his former partner, Kelly.

Raised by a prosperous banker father and a mother who held salons featuring artists and writers, Hans was destined for banking -- until he discovered the architecture of Alvar Aalto.

As Nazism rose in Europe and things became tough for Jews -- even assimilated Jews, like the Ostwalds -- Hans finished his studies in Switzerland, where he met his wife Rosemarie, who was getting a doctorate in chemistry. The Ostwald clan made it to America, bringing their artwork and furnishings along.

Ostwald worked briefly for Viennese-born architect Richard Neutra in California, then for the modern firm Anshen + Allen in San Francisco. During the war he designed refinery buildings for Standard Oil.

By 1947 he was a junior partner with Frederick Confer, a busy and socially well-connected architect. Ostwald became chief designer for the firm's homes. The Ostwalds belonged to a circle of émigrés who

were intellectual, left of center, and artistic. Many became his clients. Other clients were associated with UC Berkeley, where Rosemarie was a professor.

By 1954 Ostwald was on his own. The firm generally had six to seven people, and in 1965 became a partnership, Ostwald & Kelly.

Hans and Rosemarie raised three boys in a typical Berkeley brown shingle house, that Ostwald did absolutely nothing to, complete with a Beckstein piano. His sense of minimalism when it came to his own property was noticed by Sunset magazine, which wrote up the vacation retreat the Ostwalds maintained on Lake Tahoe -- five acres with outdoor dining and sleeping, a tentlike shower, and only one building: a privy.

Ostwald hiked, skied, played tennis, and swam in the ocean off Bolinas. Jovial and outgoing with his clients and associates, he was more reserved at home. His son David remembers him as honest, upright, a man of his word. "You could count on him," David says, "but at a slight distance."

"They were extremely cerebral rather than fun," longtime friend Hanni Lederer says of Hans and Rosemarie.

"He loved to pun," David says. "We made a rule -- he was only allowed to pun at elevations above 5,000 feet." He adds: "Our moments of closeness tended to be when we were in the mountains."

At work, Kelly says, "Hans was a very ebullient, positive person who taught me a lot about life by just following what he did." Architect Sara Ishikawa, who worked for Ostwald as a student, remembers how cultured he was, and the joy of cruising to a job in his Jaguar listening to classical music on the Blaupunkt. "It was one of the first times I experienced a good radio in the car."

At dinner, Ostwald's son Peter remembers, he would complain about recalcitrant clients. "A lot of his job was educating them to want something he knew would be good," Peter says.

"He was given to being a bit of a lecturer," Lederer says.

But other than a course at UC Extension, Ostwald never had an academic career. "That was his big disappointment," David says. Kelly believes Ostwald didn't get along with William Wurster, the dean of the [university's](#) architecture school.

Ostwald's first heart attack came at age 48 while riding a ski lift at Sun Valley. The man next to him was a doctor, and that saved his life, Peter says. He was in bed for six months and had to stop skiing.

At tennis, he switched to doubles. "He could just cope with Lake Tahoe," David says. Oswald died 10 years later after a second heart attack.

To relax after the first heart attack, Oswald took art classes, played more piano, and adopted a poodle. He also focused on his legacy, David says, going after larger projects. These included libraries, a large county office building in Hayward (Kelly was the designer), and several churches. Kelly believes that St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, his last project and built posthumously, is Oswald's finest work.

Today, Oswald houses remain much loved. Many have been unaltered. But the man himself has been largely forgotten. He wouldn't have liked that, his son David says. "He would have liked to have been famous."

John Hans Oswald, F.A.I.A. (1913-1973)

Style: Bay Region Modern meets Austrian mountain house. Variety.

Active: Oswald designed 97 houses (22 of them in Piedmont) and 115 remodels and additions between the 1940s and 1973, as well as stores, libraries and churches. He built throughout the Bay Area, and around Lake Tahoe.

Known for: Redwood or shingled houses with open plans and terraces and dramatic woodsy interiors.

Resources: "John Hans Oswald, Architect," by Donald Reay and Peter Paret, a portfolio and appreciation published after the architect's death, is available at the Environmental Design Library of UC Berkeley.

Hearst Newspapers © [Copyright Hearst Communications, Inc.](#)