

Reflections from Theodor Adorno's Unbuilt House in Pacific Palisades

Volker M. Welter

ON JANUARY 30, 1946, GRETEL Adorno wrote from Los Angeles to her in-laws in New York that she and husband Theodor “are awaiting the start of our house-building with greatest suspense; it is supposed to happen by 10 February.” Mrs. Adorno continued that the still “empty property [...] is especially lovely [...] And the name of the street will also appeal to you: Via de la Paz.”¹ Earlier, on December 7th, 1945, Theodor W. Adorno had explained that the decision to build their own house was triggered by the sale of their rented home at 316 South Kenter Avenue in Brentwood. The Adornos arrived at their decision in consultation with Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock, two colleagues from the Institute for Social Research, which “is enabling us to finance” the new home.² Later in the month, another letter reported that the “house contract will probably be signed next week.”³ For an architectural historian, the January 1946 letter is especially exciting. It identifies the street on which the new home was to rise and notes when construction was to start, which suggests that

a building permit was obtained; two crucial pieces of information with which to begin unraveling the mystery of whether and what kind of house the Adornos may have commissioned, or even built, while in exile in Southern California.

Theodor W. Adorno had lived in exile from April 1934 onward, when he fled Nazi Germany for the United Kingdom. From there, he and Gretel Adorno moved to New York in February 1938 and Los Angeles in November 1941. During the exile, they faced all the difficulties that refugees and émigrés from national socialism had to deal with, including where to live in a foreign country or city, how to make a living, and, especially acute for a philosopher, how to take up again one’s profession using a different language. To have escaped the Holocaust caused Adorno “an enduring sense of guilt at the very fact of his survival.”⁴ What life in exile meant to him can be gathered from Aphorism 18, “Refuge for the Homeless,” from *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, which ends with the often-cited words that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”⁵ To live

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Letters to his Parents 1939–1951*, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz. Translated by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), letter 150, Los Angeles, Jan. 30, 1946, pp. 244–45 (p. 244, 245).

2 Adorno, *Letters to his Parents*, letter 145 Los Angeles, Dec. 7, 1945 (p. 240).

3 Adorno, *Letters to his Parents*, letter 146 Los Angeles, Dec. 23, 1945 (p. 241).

4 Peter E. Gordon, “Adorno’s damaged life: Seventy years after its publication, Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* is a warning against resurgent fascism,” *The New Statesman*, February 1, 2022, www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/02/adornos-damaged-life (accessed August 18, 2024).

5 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, transl. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), pp. 38–39 (p. 39).

rightly does not mean gaining a “true life’ [...] as if there were an authentic substance in contrast to the falsifying social manifestation,” as the last sentence often is misread.⁶ Nor is it an existentialist “inhabit[ing of] social and space-time worlds as embodied beings,”⁷ totally bereft of any links to the exile. Instead, Adorno wrote *Minima Moralia* in Los Angeles between 1944 and 1947; accordingly, behind Aphorism 18 lies “the furnishing of the Adornos’ house in California,”⁸ to which one must add the attempt to build a private home in exile around the turn of 1945 to 1946.

Aphorism 18 paints a dire picture. “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible,” for “traditional residences [...] have grown intolerable” as all the comfort and shelter they once offered no longer liberate but, nowadays, betray knowledge and succumb to family interests, respectively. Purchasing a period-style house as a refuge means to embalm oneself. New approaches to architecture and interiors, such as the Wiener Werkstätten and the Bauhaus, two major design reform movements among the many that existed before and after World War One, lose their significance when considered from the distance of the exile. And “functional modern habitations,” which are severed from history as they are “designed from a tabula rasa, are living-cases manufactured by experts for philistines, or factory sites that have strayed into the consumption sphere.” The way out of the dilemma is to live a private domestic life in an uncommitted, suspended way that fulfills

societal expectations and meets private needs without attaching “weight to it [the domestic life] as something still socially substantial and individually appropriate.”⁹

One may read the aphorism as a retrospective glance at the fierce architectural debates of the Weimar Republic, pitching traditional and period dwellings versus modernist housing estates. The references to once-meaningful traditional homes also recall Adorno’s pre-exile Frankfurt homes.¹⁰ The aphorism is undoubtedly a comment on the situation of war-destroyed European cities, for example, when Adorno claims that “labour and concentration camps” anticipated a future in which “the house is past.” At the same time, the aphorism traces surprisingly well the contemporary California architectural scene that the Adornos as house-hunters, even potential home builders will have encountered, including the fear of émigrés ending up in “furnished rooms, [...] trailers, cars, camps, or the open air.”¹¹

In the later 1940s, Los Angeles architecture was still dominated by traditional buildings from upper California’s Spanish and Mexican colonial periods, and the popular revival-style edifices that cited, from the late nineteenth century onwards, Spanish, Mexican, and American colonial architecture. Since the 1920s, modernist architecture has increasingly inserted itself into this urban fabric, initially with designs by European immigrant architects like Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, and American architects like Irving Gill. By the mid-1940s, the modernist Case Study House program aimed at setting standards for domestic architecture that would lastingly modernize California’s detached homes, by revolutionizing their construction with industrially produced materials and

6 Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One last Genius*, transl. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), p. 184. The German text credits the misreading of the final sentence to “Generationen von Studenten und Journalisten;” the English edition renders this incorrectly as “generations of German students.” (Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno Ein letztes Genie* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2003), pp. 222–23; Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One last Genius*, p. 184.)

7 Matt Waggoner, “How not to be in One’s Home: Adorno’s Critique of Architectural Reason,” *Architecture Philosophy*, vol. 4 No.1 2019: 27–46 (27).

8 Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One last Genius*, p. 285.

9 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp. 38–39.

10 Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One last Genius*, p. 285.

11 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 39.

prefabricated parts. Along with this in the rapidly expanding metropolitan region of Los Angeles were developer-built, architecturally non-descript homes of all sizes and sorts, buildings that architectural history tends to ignore unless the discipline condemns them for their association with growing suburbia. Where does the Adornos' house fall within this contemporary architectural scene of Los Angeles? And where within the range of homes and housing Adorno juxtaposed in Aphorism 18?

Pacific Palisades is on the western edge of the City of Los Angeles, wedged between Malibu further west and the City of Santa Monica to the southeast. To the south, it borders the Pacific Ocean; to the north, it reaches high up into the rugged Santa Monica Mountains. Via de la Paz runs north to south on the neighborhood's eastern side, dividing a slice of land between Temescal Canyon and Potrero Canyon before ending high above the Pacific Coast Highway. Via de la Paz's intersection with Sunset Boulevard marks Palisades Village, the quasi-downtown area of the neighborhood. The early beginnings of modern Pacific Palisades in this area hark back to the movie industry; in the early 1920s, members of the Methodist Church began building it up as a residential neighborhood. From the mid-1930s on, Pacific Palisades was increasingly home to many émigrés and refugees from national socialism; in the mid-1940s, when the Adornos thought about building a new house, the neighborhood around Via de la Paz was on the cusp of full development, even if new houses were then still randomly sprinkled throughout the area (Figure 1).

One of the major attractions of Pacific Palisades and adjacent neighborhoods was the distinct suburban character of the stunning landscape. In a letter from late 1941, when he lived on Kenter Avenue, Adorno wrote enthusiastically about the closeness to the

ocean compared to Los Angeles proper, which is thirty miles or so inland. The landscape's physical beauty made him recall the French Riviera, San Remo, and Tuscany. He admired the "more southern style of architecture" and that "the houses, all bungalows and never offensive to look at, are spaced far apart." He concluded that "the entire wider vicinity here is somewhere between city and country," which allowed him to take numerous walks but also made driving a necessity to get to anywhere and anybody, such as Max Horkheimer, who lived a ten-minute drive away.¹² To appreciate the American suburban lifestyle based on individually owned automobiles was not unique to Adorno and his fellow émigrés. Instead, it was already popular with modernist central European architects in the 1920s. Fritz Block, a Hamburg-based architect, edited in 1928 an anthology on modernist housing in which fellow modernist architect Adolf Rading admired the urban form of the loosened-up (*aufgelockerte*) US-American city, an urbanistic consequence of car ownership.

In America, the car as a means of mass transportation has already made possible a quite different pattern of expansion of cities compared to ours and much lower densities in the outer suburbs that are not dependent on the efficiency of a public transport system.¹³

Block and Rading were forced to emigrate within a decade: Rading and his Jewish wife went to Palestine and later to the United Kingdom, and Block to Los Angeles. Other émigrés in California joined the appreciative suburban chorus, for example, the theatre director Max Reinhardt, who planned a vast music and arts complex for a new Salzburg-

12 Adorno, *Letters to his Parents*, letter 44 Los Angeles, 30.11.1941, pp. 69–72 (p. 70).

13 Adolf Rading, "Die Typenbildung and ihre städtebaulichen Folgerungen," in *Probleme des Bauens: Der Wohnbau*, ed. by Fritz Block (Potsdam: Müller & Kiepenheuer, 1928), p. 76 (translation by Iain Boyd Whyte).



Figure 1 Pacific Palisades in 1944. Via de la Paz is the long street in the center of the image. The junction with De Pauw Street where the Adornos wanted to build their home is marked. Image: Flight C-8666, frame 3-40 (detail), January 5, 1944. Courtesy of University of California Santa Barbara Library Geospatial Collection.

1

APPLICATION TO ERECT A NEW BUILDING

CITY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT
OF
BUILDING AND SAFETY
BUILDING DIVISION

Lot No. 30
Block 15
Tract 9300

Location of Building 581 VIA DE LA PAZ
(Block Number and Street)

Approved by
City Engineer
D. J. A.
Deputy

Between what cross streets S. W. O. R. DE PAUN ST.

USE INK OR INDELIBLE PENCIL

- Purpose of building Business & Garage Families 1 Rooms 6
(Store, Dwelling, Apartment House, Hotel or other purpose)
- Owner M. ADORNO Phone 10,300
(Print Name)
- Owner's address 443 So. La Brea P.O. L. A. 36
- Certificated Architect State License No. Phone
- Licensed Engineer State License No. Phone
- Contractor Perfection Home Sales State License No. 39579 Phone BR 23276
- Contractor's address 443 So. La Brea Ave. L. A. 36

8. VALUATION OF PROPOSED WORK: 10,300
(Including all labor and material and all permanent lighting, heating, ventilating, water supply, plumbing, fire sprinkler, electrical wiring and elevator equipment therein or thereon.)

9. State how many buildings NOW on lot and give use of each. None
(Store, Dwelling, Apartment House, Hotel, or other purpose)

10. Size of new building 21'-6" x 14'-0" No. Stories 1 Height to highest point 7.3 Size lot 50 x 110

11. Material Exterior Walls Frame Type of Roofing Shingle

12. Buildings and similar structures

- (a) Footing: Width 18" Depth in Ground 18" Width of Wall 8"
- (b) Size of Studs 2 x 4 Material of Floor Wood
- (c) Size of Floor Joists 2 x 6 Size of Rafters 2 x 4

I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge and belief the above application is correct and that this building or construction work will comply with all laws, and that in the doing of the work authorized thereby I will not employ any person in violation of the Labor Code of the State of California relating to Workmen's Compensation Insurance.

Plans, Specifications and other data must be filed. Sign here Perfection Home Sales (Owner or Authorized Agent) By Sam Frank

FOR DEPARTMENT USE ONLY						
(1) PLAN CHECKING		(2) REINFORCED CONCRETE		(3) The building referred to in this Application will be more than 100 feet from		
Receipt No. <u>608</u>		Ebb. Content		Street		
Valuation \$ <u>70300</u>		Tons of Reinforcing Steel		Sign here		
Fee Paid \$ <u>25</u>				(Owner or Authorized Agent)		
TYPE	GROUP	Maximum No. Occupants	Inside Lot	Key Lot	Lot Area	Pl. rear alleys
<u>V</u>	<u>R</u>		<u>Corner Lot</u>	Corner Lot Keyed	<u>60x110</u>	<u>Yes</u>
PERMIT No. <u>2828</u>		Plans and Specifications checked		Area	Fire Driveway	District Map No. <u>7167</u>
		Corrective Verdict		Area	Street Widening	Fee <u>33.00</u>
		Plans, Specifications and Application rechecked and approved		Application checked and approved		
PLAN		For Plans Fee	Filed with	Conditions	Specified - Required	Valuation Insured: Yes - No

Figure 2 City of Los Angeles, Dept of Building Safety, Building Division. "Application to Erect a new Building, Permit 2828, 31 January 1946", (<https://ladbsdoc.lacity.org/>, "Search by Address," 581 Via de la Paz).

style music festival in Los Angeles because the “rapidly expanding city” and the surrounding towns “promised to grow into the grandest and most beautiful *horizontal* city on Earth.”¹⁴

Searching for a building permit is not the most thrilling task for an architectural historian, and considering the length of Via de la Paz, I braced myself to look for a considerable time through documents for each lot on the street on the Online Building Records database of Los Angeles’ Department of Building and Safety. A strategic error on my end extended this time, for when I reached the junction with De Pauw Street, I turned to the eastern sections of the Via de la Paz until I approached the same intersection for the second time. The very last set of records for the ultimate lot in the junction’s southwestern corner finally noted as the owner “M.[argarete] Adorno” (Figure 2).

Permit 2828 for 581 Via de la Paz was approved on January 31, 1946, only a day after Gretel Adorno had written to her in-laws about the project.¹⁵ The Adornos had acquired a corner lot of 50 by 110 feet, with one shorter side facing Via de la Paz, and the other abutting the adjacent lot on North Mount Holyoke Avenue over to the west (Figure 3). A neighbor to the south had already built a house in 1939 (destroyed 2025). The Adornos planned a one-story, one-family building of thirty-five feet, six inches by thirty feet, six inches, resulting in a little over a thousand square feet of enclosed space, or six rooms. The shingle

roof of the wood frame structure would rise to a maximum of twenty-three feet. The material of the facades remains unspecified; it may have been stucco or wood sidings, comparable to the cladding of the neighbor’s home. The new house was valued at \$10,300. The permit form reminds applicants that “Plans, Specifications and other data must be filed,” though none have survived. After looking through the other permits for this street address, it was quickly apparent that the Adorno house was never built; instead, a different house by another builder for a new owner was permitted in 1951. This house was torn down when the present building was erected in the early 2000s (destroyed 2025). Finally, permit 2828 does not record any architect’s name, which is not unusual, as even today, it is possible to build smaller houses in California without a licensed architect. Instead, the permit was signed by Sam Fink of *Perfection Home Builders*, a developer-construction business.

Perfection Home Builders was among many developers and builders who regularly advertised their design-and-build services before and after World War Two. Classified ads placed by the company and the occasional news article in *The Los Angeles Times* about recently completed buildings illustrate the range of homes Perfection Home Builders offered (Figures 4). Usually depicted are one-story houses with hipped roofs and stuccoed exteriors, quite similar to the home shown in Figure 5; some wood siding may create architectural accents, but outstanding or daring architectural designs do not characterize these homes. Even rarer are examples of distinct architectural styles, such as homes reminiscent of Spanish and Mexican colonial architecture. The ads regularly point out the affordability of building with Perfection Home Builders, regardless of whether the company or the clients furnished the building sites and plans. Many ads also invite prospective homeowners to write in for a free brochure. It is tempting to picture Herr

14 Reinhardt quoted in Volker M. Welter, “Salzburg in Los Angeles: Max Reinhardt and Paul László’s vision of a *Festpielstadt* in the Hollywood Hills,” in *Wie sich Salzburg inszeniert: Vom Werden einer Musiktheaterstadt*, ed. by Sigrid Brandt and Thomas Wozonig (Vienna: Hollitzer, 2023), pp. 242–56 (p. 255).

15 City of Los Angeles, Dept of Building Safety, Building Division. “Application to Erect a new Building, Permit 2828, January 31, 1946” (<https://ladbsdoc.lacity.org/>, “Search by Address,” 581 Via de la Paz). Unless noted otherwise, all details about the house in this paragraph come from this permit.



Figure 3 Aerial view of subdivisions at the intersection of Radcliffe Avenue and Haverford Avenue in Pacific Palisades, California, 1940. The site for the Adorno house on the south-western lot at the junction of Via de La Paz and De Pauw Street has been marked. Courtesy of Santa Monica Public Library Image Archives, Pacific Palisades Historical Society Clearwater Collection.

Adorno enjoying his morning coffee while perusing the real estate sections of *The Los Angeles Times*, marking relevant ads with a stubby pencil to alert Frau Adorno about which brochures to write for.

It is not that Adorno did not know what the new house should be. In 1941, he described in great detail to his parents the home at 316 South Kenter Avenue, the first abode of the couple in exile in Los Angeles.

The house we have rented is one half of a semi-detached house, two-storey. [...] On the ground floor we have our

double garage [...]. On the upper ground floor[,] a very large, bright living room, a small dining room, a kitchen with side rooms. [...] On the first floor: Gretel's bedroom, my bedroom, my study (wood) and the bathroom with shower.

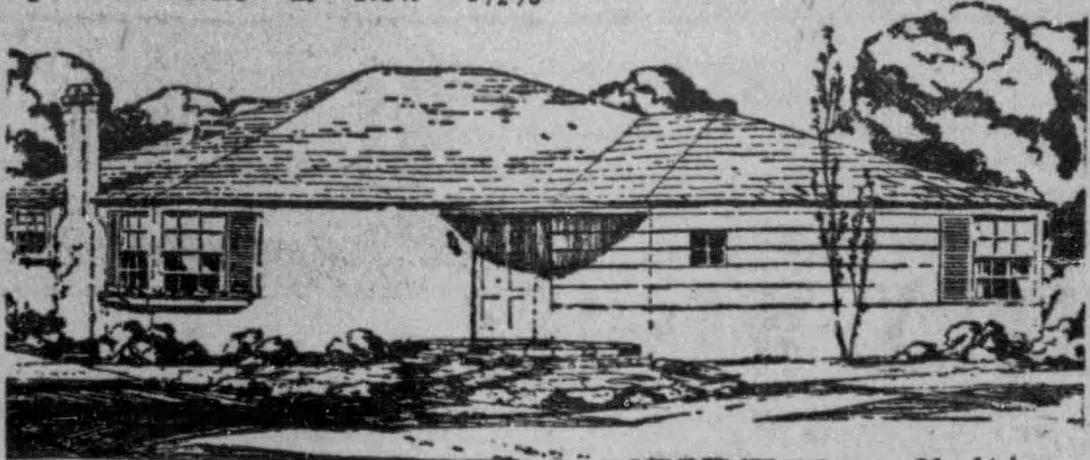
He emphasized that “everything [was] furnished in the most modern and practical fashion, and with genuinely useful *gadgets*.”¹⁶ Architecturally, the house exemplifies a Colonial Revival style with brick chimneys

¹⁶ Adorno, *Letters to his Parents*, letter 44 Los Angeles, Nov. 30, 1941, pp. 69–72 (p. 71, words in italics in English in German original).

WE BUILD HOMES THAT SATISFY

On Your Lot, or a Lot Selected
by You—Title 2, New 4½%

F. H. A. FINANCING



\$2750

THIS

5 Room F.H.A. Home

Complete With Garage
and Cement Drive

Same price in Los Angeles City and County
and many other communities.

Pay \$22 monthly, including interest, principal, taxes & insurance

See this and many other equally attractive plans at our office

STURDY CONSTRUCTION—HONEST DEALINGS—SATISFIED CLIENTS.

OUR BEST RECOMMENDATION

UNQUESTIONABLE FINANCIAL REFERENCES

FREE BOOKLET

PERFECTION HOME BUILDERS

110½ S. La Brea

Open Sat. & Sun. 9 to 5
Week days 9 A.M. to 9 P.M.

Walnut 1939

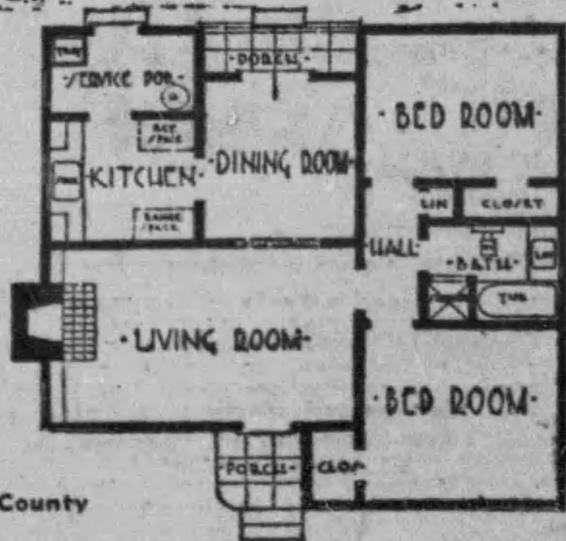


Figure 4 A typical display of Perfection Home Builders illustrating the modest types of homes they build and advertising the free brochure. *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1940, Part 2, p. 9.



Figure 5 Private home, possible developer designed, Pacific Palisades, 1940. Courtesy of Santa Monica Public Library Image Archives, Pacific Palisades Historical Society Clearwater Collection.



Figure 6 *Adorno House*, South Kenter Avenue, Los Angeles, built 1939. Street façade as seen in 2025. The Adornos occupied the left half of the duplex building. Photo: Content Production.



Figure 7 Richard Neutra, *Freedman House*, Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, 1949. Photograph: Julius Shulman © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

rising at either narrow end, and porches stretching across the Kenter Avenue façade on the two levels above the garages. The lower half of the house was stuccoed, and the upper half was covered with horizontal wood siding, all painted in a light color (Figure 6).

In 1945, the Kenter Avenue house became the model for the Via de la Paz home, which Adorno envisions as “a little house, divided roughly the same as now, 2-storey: downstairs a little forecourt, garage, kitchen, *savic* [service] porch, living room, upstairs 2 bedrooms, den (study) and sunporch.” He added, “We will have a splendid view of the mountains and the ocean from there,”¹⁷ meaning the new home

¹⁷ Adorno, Letters to his Parents, letter 145 Los Angeles, Dec. 12, 1945, p. 240 (Words in italics in English in German original. The meaning of “*savic* porch” is unclear, see endnote 1 on p. 240. Most likely it means service porch usually adjacent to a kitchen.).

provided an additional feature that the Kenter Avenue home did not offer to the same degree.¹⁸

Compared to such specific ideas about rooms, their adjacencies, and placements within the two-story home, Adorno had little to say about the overall architectural appearance of the new house. However, some details about the kind of home he might have had in mind can be found in Aphorism 19, “Do not knock,” from *Minima Moralia*. Like its immediate predecessor, this aphorism comments on the contemporary California architectural scene, especially on the increasingly popular modernist architecture. An exemplar of modernist domestic design, Richard Neutra, the Austrian architect of

¹⁸ Adorno's letter and Permit 2828 note different numbers of floor levels. The permit also notes different lot sizes: 50 ft x 110 ft and 60 ft x 110 ft.

Jewish background who had immigrated for economic and professional reasons to the U.S. in the early 1920s, would soon build on Via de la Paz. Located three blocks south of Adorno's site, the Freedman house (1948–9, destroyed 2025) occupied the southernmost lot of its block, coincidentally also a corner lot. Neutra's design aimed to merge indoors and outdoors, visually through floor-to-ceiling plate glass walls and practically with the help of sliding glass panels that extend the internal flow of space to the outside and vice versa (Figure 7).

Architects tend to celebrate the functional and spatial changes brought about by modern technology as improvements. For Adorno, they were nothing but the imposition of precision on human life, which subjected humans to the rule of objects and expelled "hesitation, deliberation, civility" from human gestures and movements. Adorno illustrates the consequences of this imposition by drawing on such details as sliding glass doors, which were becoming increasingly popular in contemporary Californian domestic architecture. Modern technology makes humans lose "the ability [...] to close a door quietly and discreetly, yet firmly." Slamming doors is terrible enough; even worse is that modern doors "have the tendency to snap shut by themselves," which imposes "on those entering the bad manners of not looking behind them, not shielding the interior of the house which receives them." Adorno continues:

"What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove, no gentle latches but turnable handles, no forecourt, no doorsteps before the street, no wall around the garden?"¹⁹

Windows and doors that swing open, door handles that push down rather than knobs that turn, front yards, auto courts, and flights of steps leading from a sidewalk to the private

property through an opening in a garden wall; these are some of the architectural elements and details that Adorno seemed to cherish, whether as elements of dwelling in general, or for his own house.

The rented place on Kenter Avenue was initially attractive because of the ample space it provided the newly arrived émigrés.²⁰ Irrespective of the building's colonial architectural appearance, the modesty of the design is comparable to houses usually built by Perfection Home Builders. Indeed, almost any design by the Adornos' contractor for the Via de la Paz home would have blended into the neighborhood, as a street view from the early 1940s illustrates (Figure 8). Adorno will also have been familiar with new homes commissioned by fellow émigrés in the suburban areas in and around Los Angeles. Among these was most notably Max and Rose "Maidon" Horkheimer's house (1941, demolished 1995) on D'Este Drive in Pacific Palisades, a one-story building with seven rooms arranged in an H-shaped floorplan (Figure 9). The low bungalow was clad in horizontal wood siding and protected by a hipped roof covered with shingles. The construction company Structon and the structural engineer Gerald Marsac built the edifice. Architectural historians describe the latter as not "a figure of generally recognized greatness in his field, or a craftsman of consummate skill."²¹ A little earlier, in 1938, the Jewish-German émigré journalist and writer Rolf Nürnberg from Berlin had a local California builder—"architect" construct a new home in Pacific Palisades. Adorno knew Nürnberg; both men had participated in a seminar on the theory of needs organized by

20 Adorno, *Letters to his Parents 1939–1951*, letter 44 Los Angeles, Nov. 30, 1941, pp. 69–72 (p. 71).

21 Historic Resources Group, *Bellwood Apartments*, May 2019, Appendix IS-2: Historical Resources Assessment Report, p. 43 (https://planning.lacity.gov/eir/nops/SrResidentialComm_TheBellwood/Appendix%20IS-2.pdf, accessed 30 August 2024).

19 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 40.



Figure 8 Looking up Via de La Paz, north of Sunset Blvd. in Pacific Palisades, California, 1945
Courtesy of Santa Monica Public Library Image Archives, Pacific Palisades Historical Society
Clearwater Collection



Figure 9 Struction with Gerald Marsac, *Max and Rose "Maidon" Horkheimer House*, D'Este Drive, Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, 1941 (demolished 1995). Garden façade with an additional room added in 1945 (on the right) and partial enclosure of the porch in 1954 (middle ground left).
Photograph: © Rolf Wiggershaus, 1980



Figure 10 Liane Zimbler, Ernst Toch House, Santa Monica, 1941, street façade.
 Photograph: Julius Shulman © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute,
 Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

Pollock and the Institute of Social Research in Los Angeles in the summer of 1942.²² In nearby Santa Monica, the émigré composer Ernst Toch commissioned in 1941 a house designed by the Austrian-Jewish émigré architect Liane Zimbler (Figure 10).

The Nürnberg and Toch houses are two stories tall with plain stuccoed facades and low-hipped, shingled roofs, and bereft of any architecturally distinguishing features. Many more buildings of precisely such inconspicuousness built for émigré clients or designed by émigré architects could be named and located; they all share an architectural appearance that barely registered within their streets and neighborhoods and has indeed not registered at all with architectural history. They were often fine, very well-laid-out homes,

but their architectural blandness was a deliberate choice. It signaled professionalism in cases of émigré architects designing these houses, which often were their first projects in exile, and respectability for the émigrés commissioning them.

The inconspicuousness of these houses defies any simplistic, even stereotyping, expectations that émigrés would have opted for modernist architecture, or even for fellow émigré modernist architects as the designers of their homes in exile. Instead, like many other homes on the suburban fringes of Los Angeles, these émigré houses evoke traditional images of domestic architecture. To this end, they relied on stylistic details, without regressing to the always-popular revival styles, while simultaneously avoiding progressing to architectural modernism. This characteristic may have attracted Adorno because the physically and architecturally inconspicuous appearance of a house erected by Perfection

22 Gretel Adorno, "Records of a Discussion of the Theory of Needs 30 June 1942", transl. by David Fernbach, *New Left Review*, 128, March-April 2021, pp. 71–78 (p. 73).

The discipline has barely taken notice of the multitude and variety of houses that émigré architects designed, and émigré clients commissioned, all over metropolitan Los Angeles and beyond.

Home Builders, for example, would have precluded considering such a home as “socially substantial and individually appropriate.” Instead, it allowed “one not to be at home in one’s home,” perhaps the only form of dwelling that made life in exile somewhat bearable.²³

Philosophers and historians of architecture sometimes claim that “more immediate connections to architecture” of Adorno have yet to be uncovered.²⁴ Yet in the case of his new home in exile, the philosopher directly engaged with architecture, for example, when he envisioned the new home by imagining how to dwell in it, drawing on his experience of the rented abode and his observations of life in California houses in general. Significantly, Adorno did not adopt a train of thought similar to the “design process in which an architect is occupied with architecture as such,”²⁵ meaning, for example, specific architectural-aesthetic concerns that often also guide architectural history. It is not surprising, then, that the discipline has not only overlooked Adorno’s attempt to build a new home in exile—which was easy to miss as the house was never constructed—but has yet to realize that modest, developer-built suburban houses were accepted and even favored by many of those émigrés who designed, commissioned, or acquired new homes in exile.

²³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 39.

²⁴ Waggoner, “How not to be in One’s Home,” p. 27.

²⁵ Hilde Heynen, “Architecture between Modernity and Dwelling: Reflections on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*,” *Assemblage*, April 1992, No. 17, 78–91 (p. 85).

Coda

This article is part of a larger research project into the domestic architecture that central-European, German-speaking émigré architects and émigré clients created in California from the late 1930s onward. It was researched, written, and submitted for publication well before the destructive wildfires that swept through Pacific Palisades, Altadena, and elsewhere in Los Angeles County and nearby in January 2025. The Pacific Palisades fire spared none of the twenty-one blocks of Via de la Paz; the preliminary *Palisades Fire Damage Maps*²⁶ records currently just six houses on the street as remaining without damage and five with minor damage. All homes are destroyed at the corner of Via de la Paz with De Pauw Street, including the one that occupied the lot once owned by the Adornos.

An unbuilt house fire cannot take, but other houses commissioned by émigré and immigrant clients or designed by émigré architects were not spared. The Meier house in Pacific Palisades, just up the road from the

²⁶ County of Los Angeles, *Palisades Fire Damage Map* (Esri Community Maps Contributors, County of Los Angeles, California State Parks, © OpenStreetMap, Microsoft, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, Bureau of Land Management, EPA, NPS, US Census Bureau, USDA, USFWS), <https://recovery.lacounty.gov/palisades-fire/>, accessed January 18, 2025. See also County of Los Angeles, *Eaton Fire Damage Map* (City of Pasadena, CA, County of Los Angeles, California State Parks, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, Bureau of Land Management, EPA, NPS, USDA, USFWS), <https://recovery.lacounty.gov/eaton-fire/>, accessed January 18, 2025.

Adorno lot, is gone. Its client was a German-speaking immigrant coppersmith whose career took him into airplane manufacturing. Its designer was the émigré architect Rolf Sklarek, the sole architect practicing in California with a rare Bauhaus diploma in architecture until Herbert Bayer's retirement to Santa Barbara in the 1970s. Further inland, the Eaton Fire destroyed the modest home that the Austrian émigré architect Fredric Frankel had designed for his family in Altadena. Frankel had come to Los Angeles from London, to where he had escaped from German concentration camps in 1939.

Sklarek and Frankel designed homes in Pacific Palisades, Altadena, and elsewhere on the edges of Los Angeles when those neighborhoods were not yet enclaves of multi-million-dollar houses. Indeed, they and such German-speaking émigré architect colleagues as, in alphabetical order, Herbert Cordier, Leopold Fischer, Ulrich Plaut, Frederick Reichl, William Wolf, and Liane Zimble—to name only a few—usually created modest houses that émigré clients such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Nürnberg, and of course other clients, could afford in exile.

California architectural history has ignored

this kind of émigré architecture in favor of a narrow, even stereotyping assumption that if and when central-European, German-speaking architects arrived in California, they were on a mission of bringing architectural modernism to the state. Accordingly, the discipline has barely taken notice of the multitude and variety of houses that émigré architects designed and émigré clients commissioned all over metropolitan Los Angeles and beyond. The current fires may reinforce such an historical viewpoint, as it may never be known how many to date unidentified works by émigrés architects, and commissions by emigre clients, may be lost to their owners, occupants, and the history of architecture. ■

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank for their support the Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin; the Nachlass Max Horkheimer, Universitätsbibliothek J.C. Senckenberg, Frankfurt am Main; the Pacific Palisades Historical Society; the Santa Monica Public Library; Vernon Price, and, finally, Dr. Rolf Wiggershaus.

All houses and homes mentioned in the text are privately owned and not open to the public. Please respect the privacy of the owners and inhabitants.