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**SAILING IN PARADISE:
DOUGLAS HOUSE,
RICHARD MEIER, 1971-73**

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Abstract: The present work aims to document and analyze a modern work from the early 1970s, by the American architect Richard Meier and his team: the Douglas House (1971-73), in Harbor Springs, Michigan, United States. Richard Meier is part of a group of architects who had an important role from the 1960s onwards. His houses incorporate elements of early modernism and are reportedly inspired by Le Corbusier's "white architecture". Douglas House has an interesting history, with ups and downs. It received awards, had several owners, fell into decay, and ended up being restored and declared a national heritage site. Its first owner liked an earlier Meier House, the Smith House, and wanted one like it. Architect and client reached an agreement, and the house is only a close relative of its predecessor. The extremely steep lot required special technology. The solution, on several levels, masterfully explores natural light, surrounding views and nautical motifs. The residence was listed in 2016, along with its site, a lush natural landscape on the shores of Lake Michigan. It is, therefore, a building whose destiny is to remain intact in the midst of the nature that surrounds it, giving it the status of a cultural landscape.

Keywords: Modern single-family house; Douglas House; Richard Meier; Architecture of the 1960s-75s.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this work is to present, document and analyze a house designed and built between 1971 and 1973 by the American architect Richard Meier: the Douglas House, in Harbor Springs, Michigan, United States. After passing through the hands of several owners and having its integrity threatened, the house underwent a thorough restoration and is today part of the modern heritage of

the United States, preserved along with the beautiful site where it stands.

The idea of documenting Douglas House originates from broader research on modern single-family houses from the period 1960-1975, in which it was realized the importance of this house and the existence of rich and scattered material about it. The aim here is to systematize this material, which includes: books and magazines about the author and the residence; publications and websites, some of which feature images by renowned photographers; and official preservation documents for the property and site. The aim is, briefly, to tell the story of the house – from construction to listing – and to analyze its architecture, considering formal structure, spatiality, relationships with the surroundings, use of construction techniques and some of its main architectural precedents.

In the text: "*The modern single-family house*", Comas calls it "*Reform*"¹ the period of modern architecture between the years 1960 and 1975. According to him, this phase is characterized, in general terms, by a review of what was done until then: modern architecture, already established, disseminated and institutionalized, goes through a moment of questions, protests, attempts at transformation and regeneration.

Richard Meier's early work falls within this period. His work began to have relevance within North American architecture from the 1960s onwards, when he and a group of architects began to produce more inclusive buildings, which admit influences and citations from both pre-modern and modern architecture, previous, consecrated between the years 1915-1960.

During this period, Richard Meier participated in the group of architects that became known as *The New York Five*, which also included Peter Eisenman, Michael

1. In: COMAS, ADRIÁ, 2003, p. 20-27. The other periods designated by Comas are: Avant-garde (1915-30); Dissemination (1930-45); and Institutionalization (1945-60).

Graves, Charles Gwathmey and John Hejduk². Between the years 1960 and 75, the quintet produced a series of very speculative single-family houses, testing solutions that would be used in later, larger-scale works. Meier produces at least nine major residences³ in this period, among which the Smith House (1965-67, Darien, Connecticut) and the Douglas House stand out.

Considered by many to be an evolution of Smith, the Douglas House was widely published and received important awards, such as *America's Favorite Architecture* (2007) and the *Governors Award for Historic Preservation* (2017)⁴. It is located in a paradisiacal place – a steep slope, covered by natural forest, on the banks of Lake Michigan – a place that received the preservation seal in 2002⁵.

The residence, in an immaculate white that contrasts with the tones of nature, received the *National Register of Historic Places* in 2016⁶. Its white volume and its nautical motifs refer to the industrial architecture expressed by Le Corbusier in *Towards a new Architecture*⁷, evoking an ocean liner sailing amidst virgin nature. Today, completely restored, it has zealous owners and its own website.⁸

The heritage of the house, as well as the nature around it, makes it worthy of attention. It is a set – architectural object and natural surroundings – that is intended to remain intact forever, achieving the status of cultural landscape.

DOUGLAS HOUSE: HISTORY, PROJECT, PRECEDENTS

HISTORY

The history of Douglas house originates in May 1968, when *Architectural Records* magazine published on its cover Smith House (Darien, Connecticut, 1965-67), also by Richard Meier. The couple James and Jean Douglas, from Grand Rapids – an important city, in the south of the state of Michigan, Kent County – saw the publication and fell in love with the house: they wanted an open and transparent house, with clean and modern lines, exactly like that one (Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 + 2. Smith House, Darien, Connecticut, 1965-67. View NO + View SE.

SUDJIC & BEYERLE, 1999, p. 82-83.

2. In: EINSENMAN, 1982.

3. In addition to Smith and Douglas, the following houses can be cited: Hoffman (East Hampton, NY, 1966-67); Saltzman (East Hampton, NY, 1967-69); House at Pound Ridge (Pound Ridge, NY, 1969); House in Old Westbury (Old Westbury, 1969-71); Shamberg (Chappaqua, NY, 1972-74); Suburban Prototype (Concord, Massachusetts, 1976); and Maidman (Sands Point, Long Island, 1971-76). In: RICHARD MEIER, 1984, p. 26-91.

4. In: <https://www.douglashouse.org/accolades>

5. In: STEEP SLOPE PROTECTION, 2002.

6. In: NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, 2016.

7. LE CORBUSIER, 1977, p. 57-68.

8. Official website of Douglas House: www.douglashouse.org.

In 1971, the couple sought out Richard Meier in his studio in New York, asking him for a copy of Smith House. This copy would be installed on a lot they owned, in a luxury condominium in Harbor Springs, Emmet County, northern Michigan. Jim then ran a trucking company created by his father in Grand Rapids. Tired of the hectic pace of life, he was looking for a quieter place, opting for Harbor Springs, a city with a resort feel, on the shores of Lake Michigan. The largest freshwater lake within the borders of the United States and the fifth largest in the world, Michigan is famous for its beautiful beaches. Its water is fresh and clear; the white sands form high dunes; natural parks are located on its banks, part of which belong to forest reserves; the place's climate is temperate, with mild and pleasant summers (Figure 3).

Faced with the couple's unusual request, Meier proposes not a copy, but a new project, inspired by the previous one. Architect and clients end up reaching an agreement, and Meier begins the design of the new residence. The couple gave the architect the authorization to carry out the work: "I wanted a Bauhaus-type house, very open", remembers Jim Douglas. "We did not place any restrictions on the architect, as we thought that this way he would do his job better (MINNER, 2011, p. 1)".

The initial proposal was submitted to the management of the luxury condominium, which had strict laws for buildings and landscaping. The idea of a white house with a flat roof, however, was rejected, given the requirement for a greater relationship with traditional North American architecture. Dissatisfied, Jim and Jean go in search of new land and end up finding it north of Harbor Springs, in a much more dramatic site than the previous one.



Figures 3 + 4. Map of Michigan, USA + Panoramic view of the Douglas House.

Google Earth (2022) + Official website of Douglas House (Note 8).

Meier summarizes the story:

One day I received a letter from Mr. and Mrs. James Douglas, asking if I would sell them the draft plans for the Smith House. I replied that, although I was not prepared to sell the drawings, I would certainly be willing to design a new house for them, along similar lines. They accepted, and I began designing the residence for a place they had purchased in a subdivision in northern Michigan. Once this was done, the businessman responsible for the subdivision insisted on reviewing the design of the houses that would be built within the limits of the subdivision. He asked me to send photographs of my work and refused to allow a house that did not have the prerequisite of the classic pitched roof. To my delight, the Douglas responded to this impasse by immediately selling the land and looking for another site, beginning

a rewarding partnership. (HILL, 2016, p.1-2)

The new land was on a very steep slope, covered in coniferous trees, with a beautiful view and direct access to Lake Michigan. Meier visited the lot and noticed the difficulties to be faced, especially in relation to the topography and the distance from New York, where he had his studio. “It was a very private plot of land completely covered in trees – from the road you could see the lake. It was difficult to know how to build there. It took me a long time to discover (MINNER, 2011, p. 2)”, he recalls. He then decided to send Tod Williams, his employee and former student at the Princeton University School of Architecture, to Michigan, to intermedate the project and take charge of the work.

The new house would not be a copy of the previous one, but an evolution, a kind of sister to Smith House, fully adapted to the new place. Meier began the project in 1971. In the winter of 1972, the pair of architects discussed the initial sketches, Meier in the studio in New York and Williams on site. Afterwards, Sherman Kung and John Colamarino, two other architects on Meier’s team, also participated in the project, developing the drawings that Williams sent to the studio⁹. It was a four-hand job, coordinated by Meier.

The architects’ first challenge was to position the house to remove as few trees as possible. The biggest challenge, however, was overcoming the steep slope of the land, which at first glance was unfeasible for construction. The team proposed foundations made up of a series of telephone poles driven into the ground. The house was completed in 1973, after three arduous years of construction. The four architects created a residence that some consider Meier’s finest. Soon after construction was completed, the extension of the surrounding coastline, on both sides of

the house, was designated “national coastline”, a title that prohibits any urbanization in the vicinity and ensures the isolation of the house for the coming years¹⁰ (Figure 4).

The house has had ups and downs since the Douglas couple sold it in 1981. Its second owner ruined it, with interventions such as: carpeting; adding paper and colorful paintings to the walls; addition of traditional American furniture, very different from the modern furniture proposed by Meier. Closed during the winters, the house quickly deteriorated. In 1985, it was sold to Paul Beitler, a real estate developer from Chicago, who reacted to the treatment given by the former owner: “This guy had no idea what this house was (AN ONLINE CHRONICLE, 2020, p. 1)”. Beitler restored the residence in 1988 and left it in good condition.

By 2007, however, the house had fallen into disrepair again. That’s when couple Michael McCarthy and Marcia Myers found it, in a state of abandonment, but structurally sound. “We saw this white house listed online, with lots of glass and a view of the lake,” said Myers, who, along with her husband, had been looking for a waterfront property for years. They continued exploring houses in other places, but eventually returned to the Harbor Springs house. “The price continued to fall, while in other places it rose sharply (MINNER, 2011, p. 1)”, she continues.

They traveled to Lake Michigan to see the house in person. The house had problems, but McCarthy, an engineer by training, cataloged them all and used the data to negotiate a lower price. In search of more information, before making the purchase, he contacted the three previous owners. It was only then that he began to discern the pedigree of the residence and ended up closing the deal. Friends began to praise the purchase and architects and teachers began to knock on his

9. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 9.

10. RICHARD MEIER, 1984, p. 77.

door, requesting visits. “That was when we realized that we had acquired an American masterpiece (MINNER, 2011, p. 1)”, declared Myers.

Once the deal was closed, the difficulties faced were great. On the market for years, the house was covered in bugs and mold; There were all sorts of problems, with the roof, the floors, the frames, the access walkway, the structure. But the couple was undeterred and contacted Meier’s office in New York. The architect suggested hiring a company and having it restored by local engineers. The new owners followed the guidance, while also establishing an informal relationship with a then-Meier employee, Michigan native, Michael Trudeau. If they had questions, they called Trudeau, who contacted Meier for clarification. “They wanted to maintain the original project (MINNER, 2011, p. 2),” said Trudeau. A meticulous and heroic renovation process began, with maximum attention to the integrity of the original project.

The restoration process lasted four years (Figure 5). Among many other things, the team removed the steel windows, then reinstalled them with thermal glass and hardware obtained from the original supplier; the damaged wood on the facades was replaced and painted in the original white; steel reinforcement was added to the access walkway; air conditioning systems were replaced with energy-efficient equipment; some furniture was restored and a sofa designed by Meier for the living room was reupholstered¹¹.

Before the renovation was completed, the couple contacted state and national preservation organizations to ensure the home’s future. In 2002, an ordinance was issued to preserve Region 5 of Emmet County, where the house is located, which protects the

integrity of the steep slopes of Lake Michigan¹². In July 2016, the Douglas House was added to the National Register of Historic Places¹³, federal list of cultural resources worthy of preservation in the United States. Since then, it has remained intact, with no additions or modifications to its physical structure and no changes in uses or layouts.



Figure 5. Douglas House. Restoration in 2008. Official website of Douglas House (Note 8).

Nowadays, with the house impeccably restored, the couple plans to create a foundation that will care for it forever and allow others to benefit from its architecture. As an additional measure, McCarthy and Myers purchased an adjacent property, with a structure capable of providing space for employees and a library¹⁴. His first step was to create a website entirely dedicated to the house – project, history, restoration –, with stunning images and art

11. MINNER, 2011, p. 2.

12. STEEP SLOPE PROTECTION, 2002.

13. In: LYNCH, 2016, p.1.

14. AN ONLINE CHRONICLE, p.2.

direction by renowned photographer James Haefner¹⁵.

Forty years after its creation, therefore, Douglas House returns to its original condition. The impeccable restoration allows you to discover one of the 150 best works in America, according to the AIA's 2007 list of *America's Favorite Architectural Structures*¹⁶, which contains only 20 single-family homes. The renovation gave the house legal status to be maintained for generations. Today, it has a private character and is not open to visitors. But the plans for the future, it seems, are to open it to the public and, perhaps, elevate it to the status of house museum.

PROJECT

The Douglas House, as seen, was born from the previous Smith House (1965-67), in Darien, Connecticut (Figures 1 and 2). In fact, the two residences, perhaps Richard Meier's best, have a very strong kinship, especially in terms of functional organization, rear access via a walkway and contrast between opaque background and transparent front. But Douglas's much more dramatic site, with dense conifer vegetation and a slope of about 40 degrees from the access road¹⁷, represented a much greater challenge in technical and architectural terms. And the result was surprising: the sister, although younger, appears bolder, more impetuous, with a stronger personality.

The house is located on the west side of the narrow and winding route M-119 – South Lake Shore Drive – which runs along cliffs on the east coast of Lake Michigan, amid dense native coniferous forest. On the banks of the highway, two lines of trees form a

large vegetation arch, which makes it known as the *Tunnel of Trees*¹⁸. Declared *Scenic Heritage Route*¹⁹ by the state of Michigan, the road is protected against standard highway engineering standards, allowing it to maintain its highly scenic character. From the road, the rocky, densely wooded cliff slopes down to the western edge of the site, where there is a private beach just over 295m long²⁰, bathed by the turquoise water of Lake Michigan. Due to the steep slope, passers-by walking along M-119 will only see the highest floor and the walkway leading to the residence (Figure 6).

The house was designed as a permanent residence for the Douglas couple and three children²¹. The program is organized in a volume of four floors – roof and three main floors – completely white. It is opaque and more closed to the back, facing the access road to the east, and transparent and open to the front, with stunning views of Lake Michigan to the west. Predominantly vertical, the volume appears as a parallelepiped with a rectangular base, four floors high, on a ramp base that adapts it to the steep slope of the land. Far from being a pure volume, like some of Le Corbusier's white houses, it undergoes a series of additions and subtractions that make it quite complex. Access walkways, protruding stairs, prominent chimneys, terraces with nautical railings, create strong volumetric movement. And the game of full and empty, advances and retreats, is even more accentuated by the great contrast between opacity and transparency of the opposite facades, to the east and west (Figures 6 and 7).

15. See the website: www.douglashouse.org.

16. AIA = American Institute of Architects. In: NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 11.

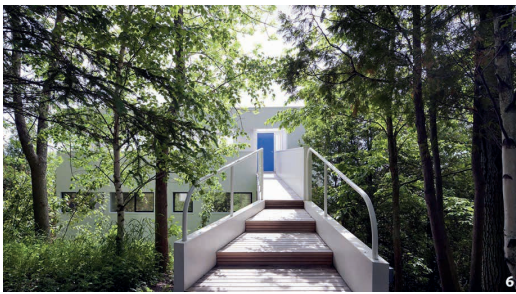
17. The approximate slope was measured based on project drawings available in publications.

18. In: REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 3.

19. Ibid.

20. MINNER, 2011, p. 1.

21. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 9.



Figures 6 + 7. Douglas House. Road view (East) + Lake view (West).

Official Website of Douglas House (Note 8).

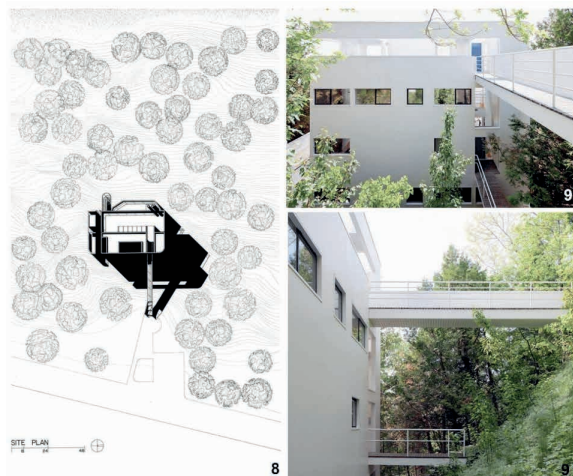
With approximately 280m² of projection area²², the house is located on a lot that originally had 3.25 acres or 13 152.28m². Most of it was to the west of the road, next to the lake, where the house is located (Figure 8). Two vehicles could park on the west side, on a small gravel road, close to the entrance to the house. There was no garage or other facilities associated with the residence, just a tennis court and a small storage shed, which mimicked the prismatic shape of the residence. The shed and the court were east of M-119, where the topography is flatter²³. Later, the current owners incorporated an annexed land, and the lot became 8 acres or 32 375m²⁴.

22. In: <https://www.douglashouse.org/story>

23. In: REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 5.

24. In: <https://www.douglashouse.org/story>

25. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 6.



Figures 8 + 9. Douglas House. Implantation + Access walkways.

GA, n. 34, 1975, p. 42 + Official website of Douglas House (Note 8).

Access to the house is via a suspended walkway, approximately 13m long²⁵, which starts from the road to the east and ends at the roof of the house, at the highest level of the land. The entrance door, therefore, is on the upper floor, and the movement through the space is from top to bottom, a kind of descending promenade, full of plays of light, multiple heights and surprising views, both for the internal space and for the outdoor landscape. Alternatively, the visitor can enter the house two floors below, where another smaller walkway, exactly below the first, gives direct access to the living area. To do this you will have to go down a side staircase, which starts from the road, stops at the lowest walkway and continues downhill to the beach (Figure 9).

The rectangular plans are organized into three longitudinal strips of different widths (Figure 10). The eastern strip, close to the road, is intermediate in width and contains the main staircase, at the northern end of the plan. It also includes access on the upper floor;

intimate sector on the third and second floors, with the three children's bedrooms above the couple's suite; and guest suite and kitchen on the lower floor.

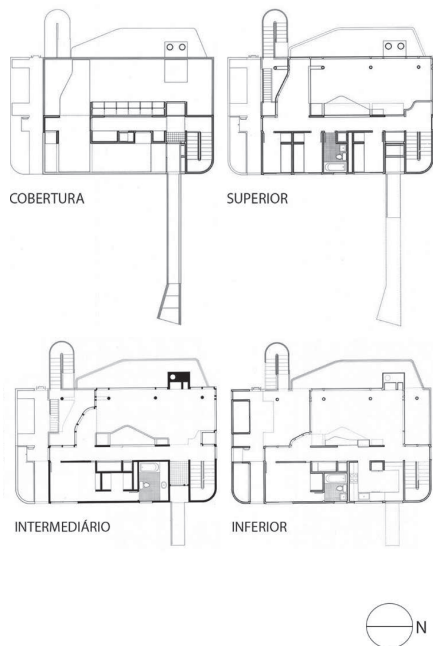


Figure 10. Douglas House. Plans.

GA, n. 34, 1975, p. 42-43.

The central strip, narrower, constitutes a longitudinal circulation corridor, which mediates between intimate and social sectors, respectively on the rear east and front west sides of the residence. This corridor is open to the social sector, creating a double height area and relating to the front view, which overlooks Lake Michigan.

The third strip, to the west, is wider and contains the social sector, wide, fluid, transparent and with a view of the lake. On the roof, this strip is dominated by a large open terrace, which serves as a lookout for the landscape; on the third floor, there is just an office to the south, open to a large void above the living room. At the end of this void, right at the heart of the residence, a skylight located on the roof, sheds light through a triple-height triangular slit, reaching the three floors below

26. In: REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 9; and MINNER, 2011, p. 2.

(Figure 11). This creates a central spotlight, which resonates throughout the corridor and across the entire height of the social area, reinforcing a dividing line that separates public and private sectors of the residence. The dining room is on the lower floor, below the living room. There are those who say that Douglas is, above all, a “house of light”, in which Meier exploits the sun and natural light to the extreme.



Figure 11. Douglas House. Central skylight.

Official website of Douglas House (Note 8).

Meier's biggest construction challenge was placing the house on the steep and rocky slope, with a predominance of shale. To do this, he proposed stable foundations, with 28 wooden telephone poles, which function as 16-inch (40.64 cm) cylindrical stakes driven deep into the ground²⁶. “There was a crane operator who positioned the piles, a real crane cowboy,” said Tod Williams. Many stakes were damaged. “The resulting support structure was like a chaotic forest of telephone poles,” he continues. “I was inclined to leave it exposed, but the house was on such a steep slope that

we added a kind of protective skirt. Meier said the base needed to be closed, and he was right (THE DOUGLAS HOUSE, <http://www.douglashouse.org/details>)” (Figure 12).

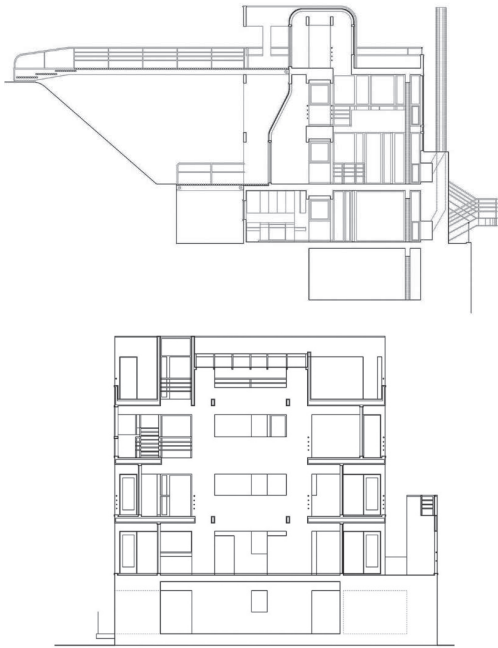


Figure 12. Douglas House. Sections.

GA, n. 34, 1975, p. 46-47.

The house has a metal structure and glass and wood enclosures. The walls, balloon-frame type²⁷, they are made of solid, tongue-and-groove redwood boards measuring 3 and ¼ inches – just over 8 cm wide – painted white. The flat roof, covered with rubber sealant, is covered with redwood deck flooring, in a natural color. In the middle of it, there is a large glass skylight, with a curvilinear shape. The windows have black metal frames. Below the first floor, at the base of the residence, there are rooms with facilities, water, electricity and storage services²⁸.

According to Williams: “The contractor, Jordan Shepard, was a great craftsman from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and drove his crew over 200 miles to the site every week. (...) He

27. FRAMPTON, 2008, p. 185. Balloon frame is a type of light structure, composed of wooden pieces fitted together, widely used in residential architecture in the United States.

28. NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 4-5.

29. JENCKS, 1988, p. 77-78.

was intelligent, and the house is an exquisite piece of carpentry (THE DOUGLAS HOUSE, <http://www.douglashouse.org/details>)”. The floors, except in the bathrooms, are also made of wooden slats, left in a natural color, more polished on the inside and rougher on the terraces and roof decks. The tubular handrails were reportedly inspired by Le Corbusier’s ideas about mechanistic aesthetics – the “transatlantic”, from *Towards a new architecture* – which Meier also explored in Smith house and other later projects.

Transparency predominates on the west facade, facing the lake, expressed through large, double-glazed windows from floor to ceiling. The frame modules, according to Jencks, have a syncopated rhythm, and can be read, from left to right, as A-A-B-A-C-A-B. The eroded right corner creates a negative edge²⁹. There is no element of sun protection and summer shading is provided by the dense surrounding vegetation. The large transparent surfaces are interrupted only by the white metal beams and the large fireplace chimney, which has an opaque base and is finished off by metal tubes in a natural silver color. On the east facade, next to the road, the windows are smaller and appear as square holes or ribbon windows on the opaque wooden surface painted white (Figures 6 and 7). The north and south sides, with an inclined base due to the slope, are half opaque and half transparent, corresponding to the treatment given to the east and west sides, respectively (Figure 13). External walkways and stairs project boldly from the prismatic volume, the first anchored in the hillside, the second as if suspended in the air. In addition to the protruding external stairs, there is a sailor’s ladder attached to the base of the house, allowing direct access to the lake. “Very similar to a tree house, a way

to descend into the forest (THE DOUGLAS HOUSE, <http://www.douglashouse.org/details>),” stated Tod Williams.

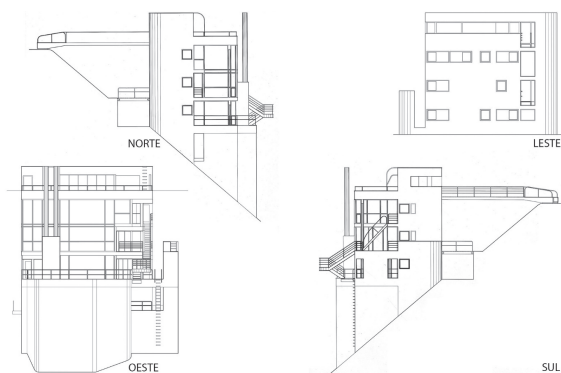


Figure 13. Douglas House. Facades.

GA, n. 34, 1975, p. 44-45.

The interiors were also proposed by Meier and the furniture strongly expresses the modernity of the house. Some pieces were designed by the architect himself – sofa in the living room, coffee and dining tables – and others were designed by important colleagues, such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer and Alvar Aalto, among others³⁰ (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Douglas House. Internal views: dining, living, mezzanine.

Official website of Douglas House (Note 8).

PRECEDENTS

Although Smith house is the precedent *par excellence* of Douglas house, there are other works that serve as a reference, declared or not. In Meier’s own words: “In my generation, everyone was influenced by Aalto, Wright and Le Corbusier” (MINNER, 2011, p. 2).

From Smith House, Douglas inherits the general image: the cubic volume, immaculate white, amid exuberant nature (Figures 1 and 2). Smith, however, is more restrained, lower, located on a less dramatic plot, with a gentler slope. It is located in the flattest area of the land, close to the Connecticut coast, and did not require major structural changes. But the frontal transparency, seeking the view of the sea, contrasted with the opacity at the back, next to the access road, are analogous. The entrance walkway is also similar, although in the previous one it is smaller and leads directly to the social area, to the center, without creating the descending route of Douglas (Figure 15).

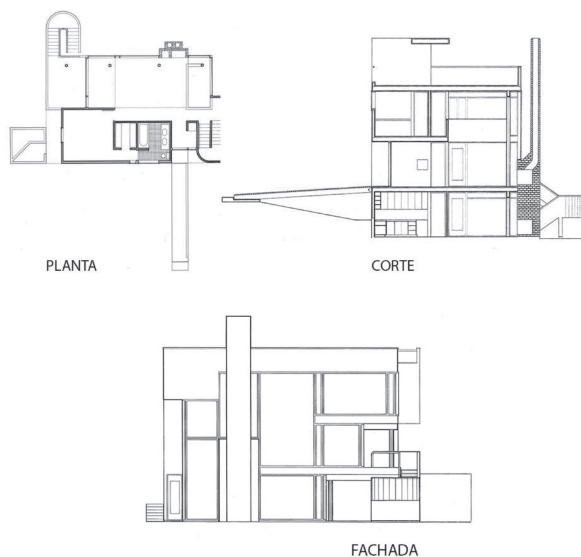


Figure 15. Smith House. Plan, section, and facade.

EISENMAN, 1982, p. 112-113.

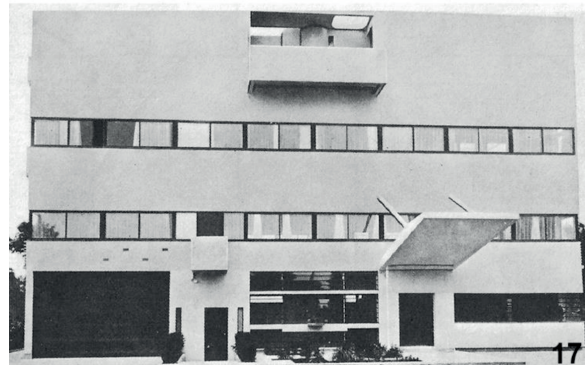
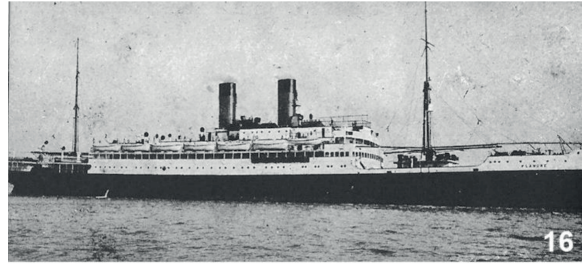
30. The following are original to the house: 2 LC4 lounge chairs (Cassina); 3 LC2 armchairs; 2 LC1 sling chairs (LC=Le Corbusier); 1 sofa made on site and Meier dining table; 10 cantilevered steel dining chairs by Mies van der Rohe; 5 wooden chairs 66 from Aalto; and a large white, modern coffee table by Meier. In: NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, p. 6.

The structure of the plan, in three parallel longitudinal strips, is the same in both residences: intimate area and services in the opaque strip, next to the road; open hallway to living area in narrow lane to center; wide, fluid and transparent social zone in the area closest to the water. Support and closures are also similar in both, with metal in the structure and wood in the seals and coverings. But the use of large wooden decks and metal railings in white painted tubes gain emphasis in Douglas house, bringing it even closer to the aesthetics of the Corbusian ship. Likewise, the prominent elements on the front facade – fireplace chimney on the left and curvilinear staircase on the right of those looking from the water’s point of view – amidst the large glass panels, serve the same logic in both residences, but are more exuberant and gain obvious “nautical significance” in Douglas House, which seems to sail in the middle of virgin forest. Master Le Corbusier said in *Towards a new architecture*: “A house on the dunes of Normandy, designed like these ships, would be more appropriate than the great ‘Norman roofs’, so old, so old (LE CORBUSIER, 1977, page: 63)!” (Figure 16)

The Douglas House is often compared to the Stein House, in Garches (1927), also by the French-Swiss master, to whom Meier pays deep reverence. The idea of the white prism, with a rectangular base, more transparent on one side than the other, with large terraces and prominent stairs, is present in both works, as well as the frames and metallic sills with naval allusions (Figure 17). Another work by Le Corbusier that can be mentioned is the small Villa Le Lac, designed for his parents, on the edge of Lake Lemán (1925), Switzerland. It has another scale, it is much more modest, but conceptually close to Douglas due to its relationship with the natural landscape and the contrast between the opaque wall that separates it from the road and transparency

31. AV MONOGRAFÍAS, n. 59, mai-jun. 1996, p. 4-6.

for the view of the lake on the opposite side (Figure 18)³¹.



Figures 16 + 17.: Transatlantic, Le Corbusier + Stein House, Garches, 1927. Street and garden views.

LE CORBUSIER, 1977, p. 58 + BOESIGER, 1982, p. 42.

One cannot fail to mention the Tugendhat House (1928-30), by Mies van der Rohe, in Brno, Czech Republic. It has in common with Douglas the sloped land, which makes it less visible from the access street than from the back patio. Both appear as white prismatic volumes, more closed and opaquer in the access area and open and transparent on

the opposite side, where the social sector is located. Tugendhat also has a metal structure, terrace and staircase prominent in the transparent part and guardrails made of metal tubes (Figure 19).

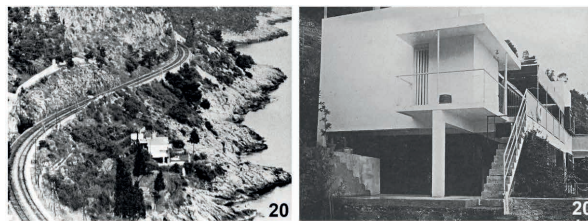


Figures 18 + 19. Villa Le Lac, Le Corbusier, 1925 + Tugendhat House, Mies van der Rohe, 1928-30.

BOESIGER, 1982, p. 26 + ZIMMERMAN, 2006, p. 46-47.

Another work worthy of reference, both for its prismatic, white volume and the metaphor of the ship, but mainly for its dramatic site, on

a vertiginous slope to the seaside, is E.1027 House (1926-1929), by Irish architect and designer Eileen Gray. Located in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, French Riviera, E.1027, like Douglas, has access from the road at the back and opens onto a large terrace facing the sea, accessed by a prominent staircase (Figure 20).



Figures 20 + 21. E.1027 House, Eileen Gray, 1926-29 + Müller House, Adolf Loos, 1928-30.

CONSTANT, 2000, p. 92 and 96 + SARNITZ, 2009, p. 70 and 74.

The Douglas House certainly incorporates elements from many other important works and authors. Frampton mentions the emphasis given to the fireplace's chimney, which brings it closer to the concept of the burning fire at the heart of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Prairie Houses*³². The idea of continuity and interpenetration of spaces on various levels and with various heights, according to their hierarchy and function, is also present in the concept of *Raumplan* by Adolf Loos, so well explored in Müller House (Prague, 1928-30). By the way, located on land with a slope, the Müller is also a white prism, more open and overlooking the landscape at the front, where there is a terrace and an external staircase (Figure 21).

This rich set of elements and concepts, used in both the Douglas and the Smith House, will be developed in Meier's later projects,

32. FRAMPTON, 2008, p. 192.

both residential and non-residential. Many of these ideas, on the other hand, gave rise to plagiarism and were imitated exhaustively by other architects.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In 1984, at just 49 years old, Richard Meier received the Pritzker Prize, the main distinction in architecture. The jury declared that Meier “had created structures that were personal, vigorous and original.” After that, he received other awards for his works and held several exhibitions, being recognized around the world. Douglas House, like other single-family residences by the architect, is part of this set of “personal, vigorous and original structures” and can be considered one of the most ambitious and influential buildings of his early years. It refines and develops ideas first explored at Smith House, its generating matrix, and later used in much more ambitious programs, such as museums and cultural centers.

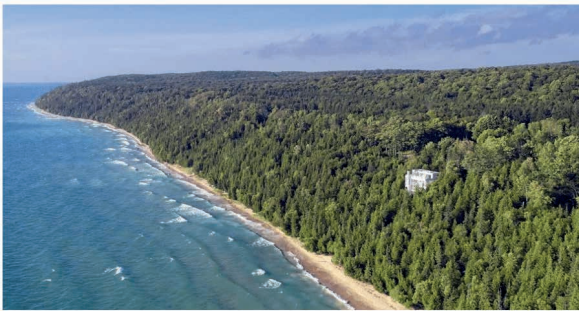


Figure 22. Douglas House in the landscape.
Official website of Douglas House (Note 8)

This is probably the most photographed single-family house in Meier. The dichotomy between the geometric whiteness of its volume and the intense green of the natural landscape, framed by the blue waters of Lake Michigan, creates a very photogenic scene (Figure 22). According to Jencks, it is the

33. JENCKS, 1988, p. 77.

34. <https://meierpartners.com//>

35. <https://www.douglashouse.org/>

apotheosis of the Corbusian villa standing out from the organic world, the opposite of Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture, which seeks a continuum between nature and culture³³. Furthermore, it is one of the first residences in which the author emphatically uses the ship metaphor, with nautical railings, dramatic wooden decks, and tall metal chimneys. Scott Frances’ masterful photos, published on the Richard Meier & Partners website³⁴, are largely responsible for its popularity. But the most recent photos, by James Haefner, available on the house’s official website³⁵, they also reinforce the contrast between dramatic site and modern residence and rival Frances’s in beauty and professionalism.

Douglas was born from Smith House, but the challenges posed by the site make it even more complex and innovative. Richard Meier defines the originality of the work itself well:

Typically, when you enter a home, you expect the outside to be brought inside. At Douglas House, however, the opposite occurs: we are transported outside, over the lake and into the forest. It is, in fact, a house of opposites: to get out of it, we go up instead of down (LYNCH, 2016, p. 2).

The listed status of the house, together with the landscape that surrounds it, make it special and worthy of mention. Brian Conway, Historic Preservation Officer for the State of Michigan, says:

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Richard Meier’s Douglas House is perhaps his best-known residential work. Its striking modern design and white form contrast with the dramatic natural hillside landscape overlooking Lake Michigan. It is among the most significant modern residential projects in the country (DOUGLAS HOUSE, <http://www.douglashouse.org/accolades>).

But among so many important modern

houses, including Meier's own, why did Douglas deserve the preservation seal? There are at least three factors that contributed to this. Firstly, the landscape quality of the site – vegetation, topography, view – and the fact that it is also preserved by law. Secondly, the author's renown and the architectural quality of the house, which stands out both for its volumetric composition, as well as for its spatial organization and structural boldness.

Thirdly, there is the dedication of the current owners, who have committed themselves to returning the house to its original features, from the implantation to the interior treatment. And, apparently, if it depends on their wishes, they will open it to the public in the near future, giving them the opportunity to fully participate in this architectural experience.

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