

## El Sobrante's Canyon Park Neighborhood – The “Flat-top” Smith Legacy

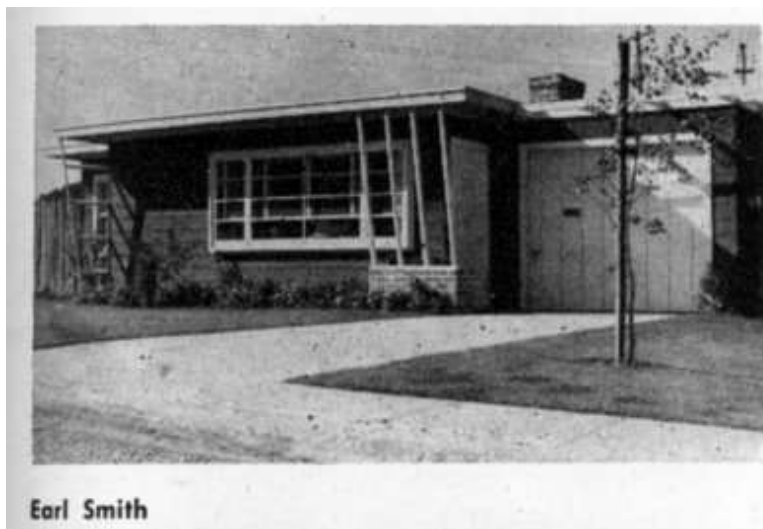
By: Maurice Abraham, October 16, 2010

Earl Smith, one of the Bay Area's largest post-war home builders, was an early influence on two nationally acclaimed builders, California's Joseph Eichler and Kansas City Builder, Donald Drummond. Eichler and Drummond homes from the 50's and 60's today have a dedicated, cult-like following of owners -- many artists, designers, architects, and realtors among them -- who appreciate their open plans, post-and-beam structure, and expansive glass.

In the early 50's, Earl Smith's homes stood out; he employed flat roofs on his houses, a choice that earned him the nickname "Flat Top" Smith. It was those Earl Smith home designs that initially inspired Eichler and Drummond to start building unconventionally modern tract homes. And those milestone Smith designs can be seen locally in El Sobrante's Canyon Park subdivision. Canyon Park, a relatively secluded early 1950's neighborhood of modest flat-roofed homes, is situated just southwest of the San Pablo Dam Road and Clark Road intersection.

Joseph Eichler studied the construction techniques of Earl Smith, especially the poured concrete floors and flat roofs Smith had used in constructing defense worker's housing in Richmond<sup>1</sup>. He would go on to use the Smith flat-roof design for his earliest housing development, 104-unit Sunnyvale Manor, in the South Bay's Sunnyvale, community<sup>2</sup>. For Donald Drummond, it would be his wife that would first see a Smith flat-top and introduce the design to him.

During a 1951 visit to San Francisco, Francie Drummond met “Flat-top” Smith and toured his East Bay houses. She was quite impressed, particularly by the way his new house plan functioned, and return home to Kansas City with copies of Smith's flat-top plans. Don liked what he saw and began building flat-



Front view of a 50's Earl Smith home

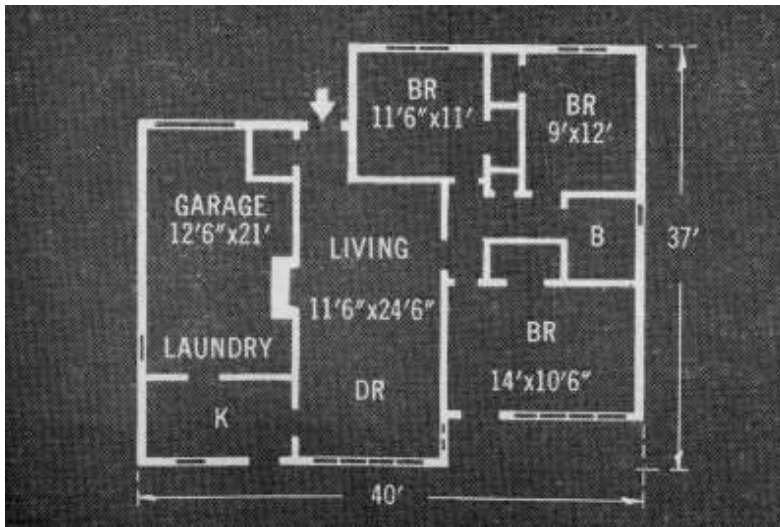
---

<sup>1</sup> Golden Dreams – California in an Age of Abundance: 1950 – 1963 by Kevin Starr, Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Draft Report for Heritage Preservation Commission, City of Sunnyvale, CA April 1, 2009



Rear view of a 50's Earl Smith home



An Earl Smith 50's home floor plan

top homes from Smith's design<sup>3</sup>. However, Kansas City's more harsh weather demanded changes in materials and structure, but the overall Smith design was not compromised. The vintage photos shown here are a Smith model and floor plan of that era<sup>4</sup>.

In the early 50's Bay Area, Earl "Flat-top" Smith had achieved remarkable volume with his modestly modern houses; he built 2700 new homes in 1953 in over fourteen different Bay Area cities. Smith's 1953 houses ranged in price from \$7000 to just over \$8,000, while Eichler's Bay Area models during that

<sup>3</sup> Source: KC Modern website [www.kcmodern.com](http://www.kcmodern.com)

<sup>4</sup> Ditto 3

year cost between \$14,000 and \$20,000<sup>5</sup>. In time, both Eichler and Drummond dropped the original Smith design in favor of a more modern and pricier architect-designed product. The Eichler firm built over 11,000 homes in both Northern and Southern California; the Drummond firm, building in a smaller more conservative market, constructed 1,100 homes<sup>6</sup>. Both builders clearly left a lasting legacy.



A mid-50's South Bay Eichler Home

There is yet another fascinating, albeit indirect, connection to Earl Smith and his Canyon Park homes. His unusual flat-top homes appear to have been inspired in part by the work of architectural-great Frank Lloyd Wright. Earl Smith's use of the flat-roof with wide overhangs, large windows that visually brought outdoors in and concrete slab-on-grade floor with radiant heating were all characteristic of Wright's "Usonian Homes".

The "Usonian Homes" were a group of approximately sixty middle-income family homes designed by Wright beginning in 1936 with the Jacobs House in Madison, Wisconsin and widely dispersed throughout the United States. The "Usonian Homes" were typically small, single-story dwellings without a garage or much storage, L-shaped to fit around a garden terrace on odd (and cheap) lots, with native materials, flat roofs and large cantilevered overhangs for passive solar heating and natural cooling, natural lighting with clerestory windows, and radiant-floor heating<sup>7</sup>.



A 1930' "Usonian" Home

---

<sup>5</sup> Eichler – Modernism Rebuilds the American Dream by Paul Adamson.

<sup>6</sup> Eichler, Jones and Drummond by Robert McLaughlin; Eichler Network Newsletter

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia – Usonia and Usonian Houses

A strong visual connection between the interior and exterior spaces is an important characteristic of all “Usonian Homes”. Variants of the Jacobs House design are still in existence today and do not look overly dated. The Usonian design is considered among the aesthetic origins of the popular “ranch” tract home popular in the American west of the 1950s<sup>8</sup>.

There is also documented evidence of Wright’s influence on Joseph Eichler and his homes. In 1943, Eichler moved his family into a rented Wright-designed home (the 1939 Bazett House) in Hillsborough, California. About living in that Wright house, Eichler once said, “I admired Wright’s rich design, with its wooden walls and beamed ceiling, and I asked myself if such houses could be built for ordinary people”.<sup>9</sup>

However, neither Smith’s nor Eichler’s early homes could approach the overall design, character and quality of Wright’s homes. After all, they were mass producing homes for the average post-war buyer, not for the more financially well-off market that eagerly sought out Wright’s talent. What Smith and Eichler clearly did do was borrow certain design elements (flat roofs, wide overhangs, large glass areas) and construction details (slab floors with radiant heat, open beam ceilings) that could be cost-effectively incorporated into a mass-market product.

Knowing the origin of El Sobrante’s Canyon Park neighborhood casts its homes in a new light. While many of the Canyon Park flat-tops have been extensively altered, including pitched roofs and in some instances second stories added. Some well preserved and maintained examples still exist, and owners of the remaining flat-top homes may gain a new appreciation for the heritage of their home and their neighborhood. That appreciation may inspire continued preservation and restoration of these homes to their original character. And those home buyers inclined toward mid-century modern design might find the Canyon Park neighborhood an attractive, affordable choice to buy into.

---

<sup>8</sup> Eichler, Jones and Drummond by Robert McLaughlin; Eichler Network Newsletter

<sup>9</sup> Draft Report for Heritage Preservation Commission, City of Sunnyvale, CA April 1, 2009