

Windshield: Richard Neutra's House for the John Nicholas Brown Family,
February 15, 2002-April 14, 2002

Windshield, the summer home for the family of John Nicholas Brown on Fishers Island, New York, belongs to a group of houses that helped to fundamentally redefine ideas about architecture and residential life in the 1930s. Inspired both by developments in Europe and by a strong desire to find genuine American expressions of modernity, Windshield embraced a new formal language, employed new materials and technologies, and ultimately offered its owners a new way of life, tailored to their tastes, wishes, and interests. The architect, Richard Neutra, an Austrian émigré, was considered the most promising innovator in American architecture at the time and its most articulate spokesman.

Named for the extensive use of glass on its exterior, the house was carefully positioned toward sun exposure and ocean views, which were shared by family and staff alike. Windshield contrasted dramatically with the traditional houses on Fishers Island, among them steeply roofed Victorian mansions or imitations of French châteaux. Rather than evoke distant times and places, Windshield presented a subtle balance of mass and void and of bright and shaded areas under its flat roof and within its rectilinear layout. The long, horizontal rows of casement windows were brought to life by the syncopated rhythm of the different dimensions of aluminum posts, opening wings, and movable screens. Its wooden surfaces were protected by three layers of shiny aluminum paint. Efficiency and clarity took precedence over ornamentation and tradition.

Inside, one light-flooded room after another would display bold choices of color, plenty of built-in cabinets, new materials for floors and windows, and sophisticated lighting devices. Windshield housed what was probably the largest selection of furniture by the Finnish designer Alvar Aalto in the United States at the time and was one of a handful of buildings in the country that used engineer Buckminster Fuller's prefabricated bathroom—and the only one with two of them (see "Dymaxion Bathrooms" wall text). From radios and phonographs to kitchen appliances, Windshield boasted the latest technology; it even had its own meteorological station.

Perhaps the most collaborative of Richard Neutra's designs, Windshield is as important for the process that led to its creations as for its many innovative features. Hundreds of telegrams, letters, and annotated drawings document the intense dialogue between John Nicholas Brown in Providence and Richard Neutra in Los Angeles (see "The Clients" wall text). The Browns' commitment to modernity and experimentation guided many decisions, especially their choices in artwork, furnishings, and equipment.

Windshield's story is punctuated by tragedy. Only weeks after the Brown family moved into the house in August 1938, a powerful hurricane struck and caused severe damage. The house was rebuilt, and the Browns returned in July 1939. The family sold the house in 1963. On New Year's Eve 1973, the house was destroyed by fire. As a result, Windshield has remained one of Richard Neutra's least-known buildings, but it deserves to be recognized as one of the key residential buildings of its time.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Interior perspective of the John Nicholas Brown House, 1936-38

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.6



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Windshield House on Fishers Island, 1937-1938

Wood and plaster model with paint, tin, carpet, sponge, and stone

Gift of John Nicholas Brown 39.001



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Interior Perspective (Music Room) of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House, 1936-1938

Diazo print with colored pencil and graphite

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.10



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective view of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House, 1936-1938

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra office 39.142.9



RISD MUSEUM

Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective view of the John Nicholas Brown 'Windshield House',
1936-1938

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.7



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective View from Southeast of John Nicholas Brown House
(Windshield House), 1936-38

Colored pencil and graphite on paper

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.5

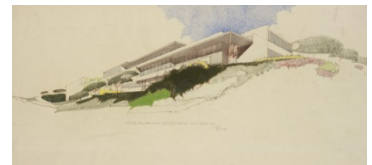


Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective view of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House,
1936-1938

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.4



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective View of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House,
1936-38

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache on paper

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.3



RISD MUSEUM

Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective View of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House, 1936-1938

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache on paper

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.2



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Perspective View of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House, 1936-38

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache on paper

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.8



Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970

Preliminary Plot Plan for John Nicholas Brown House, 1936-38

Diazo print with colored pencils

Gift of the Richard J. Neutra Office 39.142.1

