

Wheels of Fortune

Eichler architect comes full circle with his radical site plan of concentric rings and curving Palo Alto streets

Story: Dave Weinstein

Lead photography: David Toerge

FROM THE AIR, Fairmeadow looks like a work of abstract art, circles within circles encased in a not-quite square. A glance at a roadmap of Palo Alto reveals immediately that this neighborhood, which started construction in 1952, is something different—and that's the way builder Joe Eichler wanted it.

Fairmeadow clearly marked Eichler, early in his career, as one of the few tract homebuilders who was willing to sacrifice profit—it's been said he gave up 57 potential home sites to provide room for a circular street plan—to produce more attractive, livable, and safer neighborhoods.

"The real guy who took the chance here was Eichler," says Walter Thomas Brooks, the architect who designed the street layout in 1950. "This isn't as efficient as a grid pattern."

Brooks recalls the assignment as given him by his boss, Bob Anshen, an original co-partner of the architectural firm Anshen & Allen. "Bob said, 'We have this tract. Inside, we don't want any grid streets. We want all curving streets.' The idea was to get as many houses in the space without any straight streets."

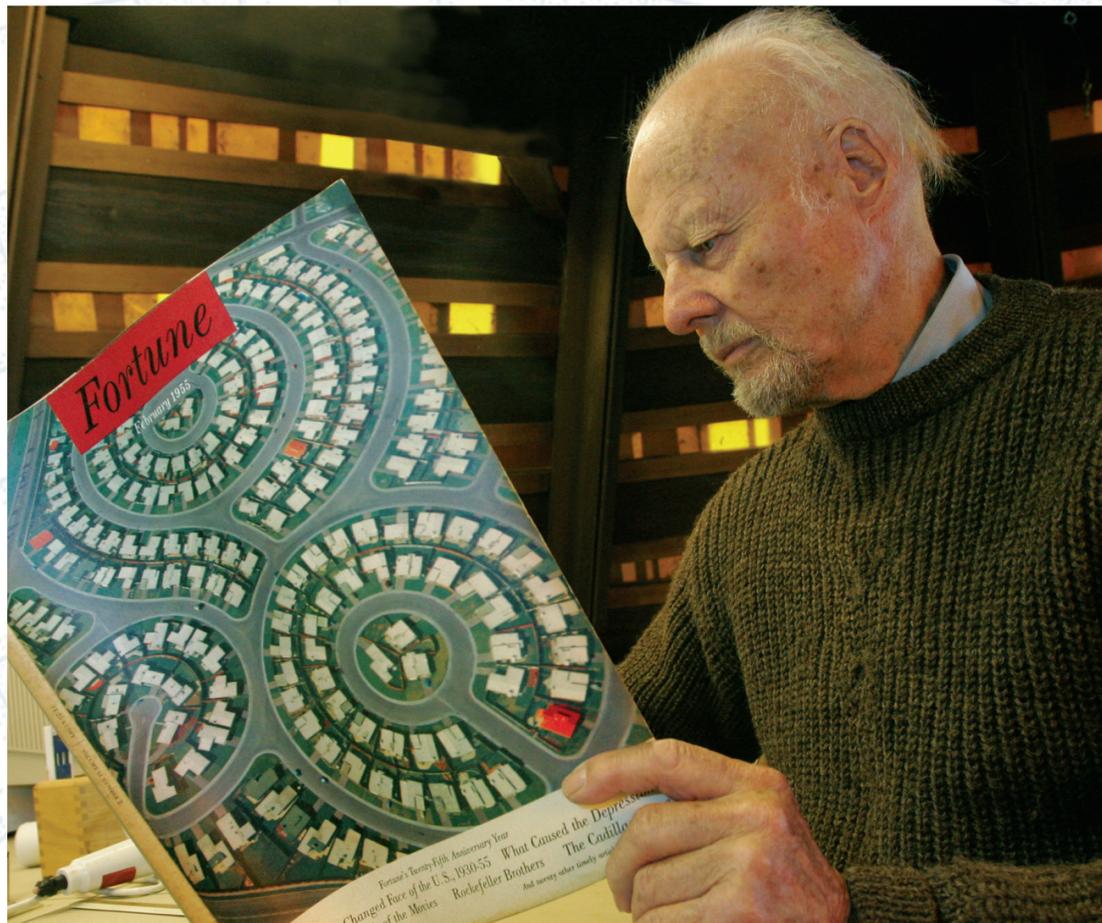
"Architects at the time didn't want to be thought of as developers' architects, as builders' architects, because builders had a reputation for building squares, square houses, and grids," Brooks says. "That was the criticism of mass building at the time. We were structuring our society in these rectangular grids, and that was not good."

Brooks was only 23, but had already laid out suburban tracts for a developer in the Midwest and had done site plans for San Francisco modern architect Gardner Dailey. He was given Fairmeadow on his first day on the job. In fact, it was the day he was hired. He imagines it may have been the reason he was hired.

"I walked in at 10 o'clock in the morning. Bob Anshen looked at my work and said, 'Could you start at 1?' He really liked my stuff." The firm had about 12 architects at the time, Brooks recalls.

It was Anshen who came up with the idea of curving streets, but, Brooks says, "He let me go to town."

"All he said were, 'curved streets,'



YESTERDAY & TODAY. This scene takes veteran Bay Area architect Walter Thomas Brooks (above) back more than 50 years, when his progressive site plan design for Eichler's Fairmeadow tract of Palo Alto made the cover of *Fortune*, one of the nation's top business magazines, in 1955. His plan remains a marvel today.

and I did three or four layouts, and this was the one that was picked. It was a series of trials to see which has the least pavement and the most houses, and would be the most striking in design."

Brooks' plan differed slightly from the neighborhood that finally got built. Two of the circles' centers, for example, were reserved for parks in the plan, instead of houses.

Brooks said the design took three or four weeks. Then, he says, "I went on to something else." The job of aligning houses on the lots fell to Claude Oakland, who oversaw Anshen & Allen's Eichler work at that time, and later ran his own firm designing houses for Eichler. Brooks left Anshen & Allen about a year later.

A committed modernist much influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, Brooks had already worked for Skidmore

Owings & Merrill when he sought Anshen & Allen out. "Anshen had a reputation for doing pretty nice stuff," Brooks says, "and he was oriented to organic architecture."

Fairmeadow arrays about 284 homes on several streets that are complete circles—some surrounding inner, concentric circles; on several outer streets that are segments of incomplete circles; and on several cul-de-sacs that reach into the circles. Although Eichler created many other neighborhoods of curving streets and cul de sacs, he never again produced a street plan as geometrically stylized as Fairmeadow.

Brooks later ran his own small firm, designing civic and community buildings and many individual homes in an individualistic, modern style that blended Wright, California modernism, and his particular take on organic

architecture, inspired by natural forms, including seashells and crystals. He designed an un-built subdivision that arrayed homes not in circles but on curved streets that resemble the veins in the wing of a dragonfly.

Brooks is not entirely happy with Fairmeadow's layout. "I still feel it was too mechanical. But put some street trees in here," he says, "and you take away the mechanical aspect."

The neighborhood quickly won fans, both among the people who took up residence and in the popular and professional press.

In naming Eichler's Palo Alto houses 'Subdivision of the Year' in December 1950, the magazine *Architectural Forum* praised Eichler's "fresh design," variety of plans and exteriors, and site plans by Anshen & Allen. Among the illustrations was Brooks' site plan for

Fairmeadow, even though it wouldn't be built for another two years.

It was the *Architectural Forum* article that claimed "Eichler willingly sacrificed 57 lots to provide room for the curvaceous roads."

"They have been given a free hand by Eichler," the magazine said of the

image of Fairmeadow for the cover of its 25th anniversary edition, February 1955. The photographer was William A. Garnett.

Inside, a photo essay by Ezra Stoller, 'Since 1930,' provides the issue with its thematic focus: 'The American Breakthrough,' how America has

your perspective is always changing—new houses, new gardens ever floating into view. Curved 'corner' lots—where the entry streets enter the circles—provide a wide cushion between street and house. They are filled in many cases with mini-forests or extensive plantings that provide a casual, outdoorsy effect. The neighbor-

hood adapting modern architecture for the middle class. Eichler adapted principles of modern planning.

Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons, Eichler's other team of architects that began designing for him in the early 1950s, also contributed house designs to Fairmeadow. Their 1957 book, *Builders Homes for Better Living*, enunciated the modern principles of suburban design that Eichler strove to follow.

They opened their chapter 'The Planned Environment' with the 'concentric circle site plan' for Fairmeadow, contrasting it with a grid of Levittown-style Cape Cod houses.

"The most efficient layout will almost always result in a grid plan which provides rows of identically shaped lots in a pattern familiar to everyone," Jones and Emmons wrote. "This method can hardly be expected to produce any result except unrelied monotony."

Advanced suburban planning, of course, was about more than curved streets. "The complete community," they wrote, "provides facilities for education, worship, shopping, recreation, and play." Some later Eichler communities would include community centers, pools, parks, and sites for schools. One, not far from Fairmeadow, even included an adjacent Eichler-built shopping center.

More than 50 years after its birth, Fairmeadow still appeals to young parents who like a safe, quiet neighborhood. Fairmeadow has natural boundaries, says Zelkha, who remembers bicycling Redwood Circle as a girl, when she knew all her neighbors.

Mothers often push strollers down the streets, she says, and older kids follow on their tricycles. On a recent Sunday, a few children were skateboarding and playing basketball on the streets.

"Visually we have a lot of privacy," Zelkha says.

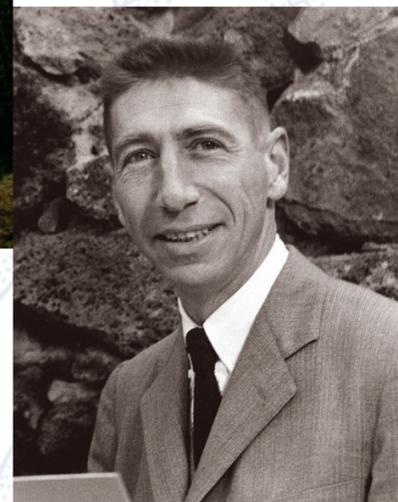
Stephanie Mulqueen, who moved into the neighborhood three years ago with her husband Brian and daughter Juliette, enjoys the street plan for aesthetic reasons. "I think it's nice that they tried something different," she says. "They were creative."

And even the circles' downside—they make for a confusing traffic pattern—is something residents appreciate. "Almost everyone gets lost around here," Zelkha says. "People who don't live in the neighborhood don't come through here." ■

Additional photography: Ernie Braun



ABSTRACT ART. Walter Brooks' first Anshen & Allen assignment—on his first day on the job, in 1950—was straightforward. "No grid streets—we want all curving streets," boss Bob Anshen (below) told him.



changed since *Fortune's* debut. Stoller's photos included Levittown from the air, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the United Nations Building, and the Pentagon, and a trend-setting modern high rise, George Howe and William Lescaze's Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building. "Modern architecture, so new, so controversial in 1930, is the accepted style in 1955," the text claimed.

The editors chose Fairmeadow as their cover image because it provided "a dramatic aerial glimpse of the changed face of the U.S." They may also have been influenced by the magazine's private iconography. The first issue of *Fortune*, which is illustrated inside, featured a cover shot of a ferris wheel, dubbed 'the Classic Wheel of Fortune.' It resembles the wheels that make up Fairmeadow.

What the birds-eye photo doesn't catch, however, is how well the Fairmeadow neighborhood functions at human-eye level, and how livable it really is. From the main roads that border the development, there's a sense of mystery as you look into 'the circles,' as the neighborhood is often called. You glimpse only a few houses before the lazily curving streets curl out of site.

Walking or bicycling along the circles,

hood has no shared parkland, but there is a sense of space, softness, even luxury. Adding to the soft feeling are the low, rolled curbs. Utility lines aren't buried, but they are hidden on poles that run behind the houses, so views over the broad roadways are uncluttered.

As the *Fortune* cover suggests, the site was barren when developed. Today it is forested with spruce, deciduous trees, redwood groves, and a handful of palms. On Redwood Circle, where architect Mila Zelkha grew up, and where she lives today with her husband and son, bicyclists pedal through every fall to enjoy some of Palo Alto's most colorful foliage.

Fairmeadow is part of a tradition of suburban development with roots in the mid-19th century. In America, Frederick Law Olmsted, and in England, the garden city designers, created neighborhoods of slowly curving streets, well landscaped with wide medians, and mini-parks that often occupied the corners. Throughout the 1910s and '20s, American developers adopted the theme in such neighborhoods as St. Francis Wood in San Francisco.

But these were generally precincts for the well heeled, not for typical postwar tract buyers. But along with

architects, "to pioneer more versatile layouts with streets that form cul de sacs, loops, and concentric circles. Though not derived from contours (all tracts are on flat land to cut costs), these curvilinear street plans create a spacious, informal effect, slow traffic within the development, reduce dangerous crossings, and improve house orientation."

The publication that really caught Brooks' eye, however, was *Fortune*, then as now the nation's top popular business magazine. Brooks was startled to see his striking, circular design staring out from a newsstand. *Fortune* had chosen an aerial