

United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Olsen, Donald and Helen, House
other names/site number: 771 San Diego Road

2. Location

street and number 771 San Diego Road
city or town Berkeley
state California code CA county Alameda code 001 zip code 94707

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

Signature of certifying official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:
entered in the National Register
determined eligible for the National Register
determined not eligible for the National Register
removed from the National Register
other (explain):

**5. Classification**

<p><b>Ownership of Property</b> (check as many boxes as apply)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private  <input type="checkbox"/> public-local  <input type="checkbox"/> public-State  <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal</p>	<p><b>Category of Property</b> (Check only one)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)  <input type="checkbox"/> district  <input type="checkbox"/> site  <input type="checkbox"/> structure  <input type="checkbox"/> object</p>	<p><b>Number of Resources within Property</b> (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">contributing</td> <td style="text-align: center;">noncontributing</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....1.....</td> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: right;">buildings</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: right;">sites</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: right;">structures</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: right;">objects</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....1.....</td> <td style="text-align: center;">.....0.....</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Total</td> </tr> </table>	contributing	noncontributing		.....1.....	.....0.....	buildings	.....0.....	.....0.....	sites	.....0.....	.....0.....	structures	.....0.....	.....0.....	objects	.....1.....	.....0.....	Total
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<p><b>Name of related multiple property listing</b> (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)</p> <p>N/A.....</p>		<p><b>Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register</b></p> <p>0.....</p>																		

**6. Function or Use**

<p><b>Historic Functions</b> (Enter categories from instructions.)</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Category</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Sub</td> </tr> <tr> <td>DOMESTIC.....</td> <td>Single dwelling.....</td> </tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> </table>	Category	Sub	DOMESTIC.....	Single dwelling.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	<p><b>Current Functions</b> (Enter categories from instructions.)</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Category</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Sub</td> </tr> <tr> <td>DOMESTIC.....</td> <td>Single dwelling.....</td> </tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> <tr><td>.....</td><td>.....</td></tr> </table>	Category	Sub	DOMESTIC.....	Single dwelling.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
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**7. Description**

<p><b>Architectural Classification</b> (Enter categories from instructions)</p> <p>Modern Movement / International Style.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Materials</b> (Enter categories from instructions)</p> <p>foundation CONCRETE.....</p> <p>roof OTHER: Composition.....</p> <p>walls GLASS.....</p> <p>WOOD.....</p> <p>other .....</p>
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**Narrative Description**  
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

See Continuation Sheet.

### 8. Statement of Significance

#### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

#### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

#### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

#### Period of Significance

1954.....  
 .....  
 .....

#### Significant Dates

.....  
 1954.....  
 .....

#### Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A.....

#### Cultural Affiliation

N/A.....

#### Architect/Builder

Architect: Olsen, Donald.....

Builder: Foster, Willis.....

#### Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See Continuation Sheet.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed on National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey  
# .....
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record  
# .....

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

University of California, Berkeley, Environmental Design...  
Archives and Environmental Design Library.....

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property:** .....

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 10..... 0563975..... 4194517.....  
Zone Easting Northing  
2 .....

3 .....  
Zone Easting Northing  
4 .....

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title 1) Kate Lyndon, Jaclyn Dab, Tiffany Monk, Architectural Students; 2) Bruce D. Judd, FAIA, Principal  
organization 1) CED, UC Berkeley; 2) Architectural Resources Group..... date 1) 11/08/06; 2) revisions 6/1/08.....  
street & number 1) 230 Wurster Hall, #1820; 2) Pier 9, The Embarcadero..... telephone 1) 510-524-5764; 2) 415-421-1680.....  
city or town 1) Berkeley; 2) San Francisco..... state CA..... zip code 1) 94720; 2) 94111.....

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's locations

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property

Additional items (check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

name Donald and Helen Olsen  
street & number 771 San Diego Road telephone  
city or town Berkeley state CA zip code 94707

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**DESCRIPTION**

**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION SUMMARY**

The Donald and Helen Olsen House is a single-family residence designed and built in the Modernist style. The house's brand of Modernism is specifically the International style popularized in Europe by architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier. The Olsen House displays the geometries, ethos, strict formalism and rigor that embody the utopian style. With its smooth facades, flat roof, boxy volume, cantilevered form, extensive fenestration and lack of ornamentation, the Olsen House reflects the Miesian ideals of the International style of Modernism.

The house is sited on a wedge-shaped lot at 771 San Diego Road in Berkeley, California. Situated upon a hillside lot, bounded by a creek to the north and a hillside slope to the east, the main floor of the house is raised over the ground level and was originally constructed to take advantage of views of the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate Bridge. Today the view is obscured by mature trees that surround the house. The house's exterior and interior have been painted white and stand out against the hillside. The topography of the site provides structural support for the rear part of the house where the three bedrooms are located in addition to privacy found at the back of the lot. The remaining interior spaces: house, office, living room, dining room, and kitchen project beyond the plane of the hill and are supported by steel columns. At the time of its construction, a structural framework of steel columns and wood beams allowed for an open plan of nine bays and glass walls around the perimeter that would be difficult to replicate today due to stricter code requirements. On the interior, limited use of permanent walls and implementation of moveable panels allow for flexibility of spatial organization. This innovative approach speaks to the Modern style as it allows for space to be easily adaptable to any particular use at any time. Through its elegant use of the Modern, International style ethos, siting, and materials, the Donald and Helen Olsen House is one of several architecturally significant Modernist houses in Berkeley. It is singular, however, in its reflection of Miesian ideals.

**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION**

The Donald and Helen Olsen House is sited on a hillside slope in the North Berkeley hills on a winding street adjacent to the undeveloped upper reaches of John Hinkel Park. The house's white palette stands out against the surrounding trees and greenery. Nestled into a small, wedge-shaped lot with a creek running through the north end, the house is accessed by a steep driveway. Park visitors and passersby often remark upon its glass box design, unusual for a single-family residence in the Berkeley Hills.

The structural techniques employed by the architect were uncommon for residential design. The sixteen supporting steel I-beam columns organize the rectangular plan into nine bays. The walls are wood and painted white. The columns allow for unobstructed interior spaces that also afford views of the park-like surroundings. Because the columns bear the load, the exterior walls could be composed of glass panels. The house's street side elevation is comprised of three 8'x12' glass panels. The house's

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northeast and southeast elevations have three 8'x13'4" glass panels. The glass is held in place by channels in the steel columns and stone. The rear wall is comprised of cabinets measuring 4' high with 4' high glass panels above. For cost efficiency, the architect used standard-sized materials. Panels are made of recycled glass.

The entrance to the house is on the lower level, at the center bay, at the top of the driveway. Carports are located on either side of the entrance, protected from the weather by the projecting second story. Immediately inside the ground floor, a stair with a return ascends to the living quarters. A double-height oil-on-canvas mural, painted for the space by artist Claire Falkenstein, fills the entire rear wall of the stairwell and draws the eye upward. From the stairs, the open plan of the western part of the house becomes visible. Light streams into the central bay through the stairwell's own clerestory windows, which provide light and air circulation.

The western part of the house does not have interior walls. The house is supported by sixteen 3.5" diameter columns, so bearing walls are unnecessary, creating spaces that are flexible due to the openness. The open plan allows light to flow in from the glass walls of the perimeter. The large windows face west toward the San Francisco Bay, originally intended to capture sweeping views from East Oakland to the Golden Gate Bridge. Trees in the immediate vicinity now obstruct most of the view.

The public spaces occupy the west half of the house. The dining room is in the northwest corner and the living room is in the southwest corner. An office occupies the south side of the open central bay. The interior is furnished with iconic designer furniture.

The private spaces of the house are enclosed by partition walls. The rooms are located in the rear of the house and are accessed by a hallway along the perimeter of the core bay. Two small bathrooms located in the core bay benefit from the clerestory for natural light. The three rooms are similar in size and were originally designed as bedrooms. All rooms have been enlarged from the original size by a 1975 conversion of the rear balcony into interior living space. The master bedroom is the largest of the three and has an entrance at the end of the hallway. The east wall comprises a white built-in cabinet and a window with views of the ivy-filled hillside.

The room at the center bay is used as a study. The east wall comprises a white desk and a wall-to-wall shelving unit. The window above the desk overlooks the hillside, while its angle affords privacy. The north wall of the study is lined with a bookshelf, and there is a twin bed in the southwest corner of the room. The southeast bay is a guest bedroom. It has a bookshelf on the north wall. A built-in ornamental seat, designed by the Olsen's son, lines the east wall. The south wall is composed entirely of windows and looks out upon the landscape.

A balcony overlooking the landscape cantilevers from the kitchen on the north elevation. The balcony highlights the cantilevered design of the house and its overall openness and transparency.

Flexibility governs the house design. The office wall comprises a bookshelf, but according to the architect's original plans, it has the dimensions to become a closet in a potential additional bedroom. The office has moveable panels. Such options echo the Modern ethos since the space can be adapted to diverse or temporary uses. The kitchen, too, has a flexible design. For example, a three-part sliding panel door provides the option to keep the kitchen open to the dining room or to separate it. The panels are constructed of an innovative translucent material.

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Cost efficiency was part of the original design concept and construction. Not only did the modest size of the house limit the quantity of material needed, but the use of concrete, glass, and wood was economical and in keeping with the utilitarian ideals of the style. The common characteristics of the International style include a radical simplification of form, a rejection of ornament, and adoption of glass, steel and concrete as preferred materials. The honest expression of the building's structure and use of industrial techniques was in keeping with the International style's design philosophy. In addition, Donald Olsen had a resourceful working relationship with the builder, Willis Foster. Because a great portion of the house is open in plan, it feels larger than its true footprint. The original design had a balcony on the west and east elevations. The Olsens enclosed the balconies in 1963 and expanded the square footage on the interior of the main floor. Two alterations at the lower level include a small-scale bathroom (c. 2003) and a studio (1994). These changes do not compromise the overall design or integrity of the house and were accomplished in a manner in keeping with the original architecture.

The notion of flexibility and integrity of materials are fundamental design elements. While guided by economy, the architecture achieves a feeling of spaciousness and elegance. The steel columns allow for open public spaces with views, and the orientation on the sloped landscape provides privacy. At every turn, the experience of the Olsen house is of intact pure Modernism, a movement thoughtfully expressed in architecture, furnishings, artwork and lifestyle. The Donald and Helen Olsen House is a single-family residence that epitomizes the Modern, International style ethos through its expression of structure, lightness, materials and the enclosure of dynamic interior spaces.

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**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Donald and Helen House is significant at the local level under Criterion C, as it is the work of an important figure in the history of mid-twentieth century Bay Area architecture and is representative of the International Style. Architecturally, the house is significant in the evolution of residential development and design on the local level. The building's design quality and Mid-century Modern detailing are such that it represents a type, period, and method of construction emblematic of its era. The house exhibits distinctive design details associated with an architect-designed building. Olsen's body of predominantly residential work, guided by the principles and aesthetics of Modernism, served as an aesthetic and theoretical counterpoint to the prevailing Bay Tradition. Though designed and built early in his career, the Donald and Helen Olsen House represents the purest expression of Olsen's intellectual and constructive philosophy and qualifies for listing under Criterion C.

The Donald and Helen Olsen House was constructed in 1954 in Berkeley, California. The house was designed by Donald Olsen for his own family. Originally from Minnesota, Donald and his wife Helen, a graphic designer and painter, established ties to the Bay Area during the Second World War, when Olsen designed buildings for the Kaiser shipyards in Richmond as part of the war effort. After the war, Olsen studied at Harvard with Walter Gropius. As Chair of the School of Architecture, Gropius brought the visionary tenets of Modernism to Harvard's Graduate School of Design. The former head of the Bauhaus, Gropius espoused "a humane physical environment consonant with and expressive of modern technology."<sup>1</sup> Gropius, and his vision of aesthetically pure, intellectually progressive, and dynamic Modernism has remained a key influence on Olsen throughout his life.

After graduate school, Olsen worked as a designer in the offices of several influential modern architects, including Eero Saarinen (in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan) and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (in San Francisco). The Olsens spent extended periods in Europe; Olsen received several grants for travel, including the prestigious A.W. Wheelwright Fellowship from Harvard, and later studied philosophy at the London School of Economics. While in Europe, the Olsens absorbed works by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and other architects of the International Style. In 1953, Donald opened his own practice, later known as Donald E. Olsen, FAIA & Associates, in Berkeley. In the same year, the Olsens bought a small, irregularly-shaped parcel of land in the North Berkeley hills. Olsen's practice was known for single and multi-unit residences as well as commercial and educational buildings. Notable projects include Wurster Hall at the University of California, Berkeley and numerous single family residences in the Bay Area.

The design of the Olsen House is in sharp contrast to the Bay Region Style, the dominant design aesthetic of Northern California at the time of its construction. The Bay Region Style, first designated as such by critic Lewis Mumford in 1947, was defined by a vernacular, rustic vocabulary with an attention to craftsmanship, an orientation to views, and an indoor-outdoor relationship made possible by a gentle climate. Precedents included the work of Bernard Maybeck and the Arts and Crafts movement. Though Olsen was a faculty member at the University of California at Berkeley architecture school, alongside prominent practitioners of the Bay Region style, he aligned himself with Modernists from Europe, many of whom had been his colleagues at the Harvard

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Graduate School of Design. The Donald and Helen Olsen House exemplifies the clarity, transparency, flexibility, and efficiency of the Modernist aesthetic, which reveals a philosophically rigorous belief in the responsibility of architecture to reflect and further the social and material advances of one's time.

Upon completion, the Donald and Helen Olsen House was widely published in architecture journals in the U.S. and abroad, as were many of Donald Olsen's subsequent projects. Olsen forged a path parallel to Bay Area architects working in a more regional style, carving a respected place as the bearer of the Modernist ethos in Northern California. Respected both as an architect and as a professor, Olsen recently donated his drawings and papers to the U.C. Berkeley Environmental Design Archives. The Donald and Helen Olsen House continues to be featured on museum and architectural tours of the Bay Area. Prominent colleagues (including Jean Prouve, Felix Candela, Richard Rogers, Robert Smithson, and Richard Meier) as well as architecture students visit the Donald and Helen Olsen House regularly. The house is prominently featured in Pierluigi Serraino's 2006 book, *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism*.

The rigorously modern, clean lines of this luminous design have set it apart from the architectural landscape of Berkeley and the region since construction. Olsen's other work, mostly confined to the Bay Area, furnishes the only local parallels. Immediately adjacent to the Olsen House sits the Kip House, which Olsen designed and built for family friends, Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Kip, two years before completing the Olsen House. The Kip House, also a white rectilinear building in the International Style, is of more conventional construction. In its unswerving purity and focus on flexible volumes made possible by steel structure, the Donald and Helen Olsen House resembles Los Angeles Modernist architecture. The work of Richard Neutra and Charles and Ray Eames are clear parallels, and it shares with the Case Study Houses (initiated in 1945) an interest in economy and efficiency via mass-produced components.

Donald and Helen Olsen continue to live in the house. They have maintained it in its original condition as designed except for the few modifications noted earlier.

With regard to Donald Olsen's career, Olsen (b. 1919) began teaching at University of California, Berkeley, College of Environmental Design in 1954. He was named Professor Emeritus in 1990 and retired from private practice in 1996. Professor Olsen is in his 90s and he has concluded his professional career. At the time of this writing, it has been 13 years since he practiced, a sufficient amount of time to objectively assess his overall career, his active participation in the practice and teaching of architecture. His contributions to the practice of architecture may be fully understood at the present time. Since he is no longer in practice, it is possible to measure his completed body of work.

The Donald and Helen Olsen House can now be publicly recognized as perhaps the most pure and successful domestic expression of the International Style in the Bay Area, and, as such, is most worthy of listing on the National Register.

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MAPS

1. Assessor's Map 61
2. USGS Map

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**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

The house is sited on a wedge-shaped lot at 771 San Diego Road in Berkeley, California.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The house was designed specifically for this location and site.