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The Outdoor Living Room: How Mid–Twentieth Century Architecture Unified Indoor and Outdoor Living Spaces

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Abstract

In the 1940s and 50s, Florida modernist architects developed a regional house—The Florida Tropical Home—that the Miami architect Robert Law Weed (1897–1961) inaugurated with his design of the Florida Tropical Home at the 1933 *Century of Progress Fair* in Chicago. The key attribute of the Florida Tropical Home was the unification of indoor and outdoor spaces. This paper will investigate how the Florida Tropical Home in the 1940s and 50s redefined the relationship between indoors and outdoors—from one of separation to one of unification. The annual architecture magazine—*Florida Architecture*—documented the increasing unification of indoor-outdoor spaces from the 1940s into the 1950s. In the magazine, architects showcased multiple design strategies to achieve fusion of indoors and outdoors. These strategies included experiments with the form of house-plan, creating larger transitional spaces between indoors and outdoors, and increased use of larger screened porches. Through an analysis of these strategies, featured in homes published in *Florida Architecture*, this study concludes that the architects developed a Florida regional architecture that was based on new relationships between indoors and outdoors.

Keywords: Florida regional architecture, outdoor living space, architectural threshold, transition, screened patio

Introduction

After the Second World War, in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s progressive Florida architects—Robert Law Weed (1897–1961), Wahl Snyder (1910–1989), Igor Polevitzky (1911–1978), Robert Little (1915–1982), and Alfred Browning Parker (1916–2011)—developed a new modern residential architecture that was intended to have a seamless relationship with the Florida landscape (Resnikoff, 2018). The key trait of this Florida architecture was the unification of indoors and outdoors. This new type of residential architecture was called the "Florida Tropical Home," which was designed to be specific to Florida and other tropical regions. The key defining aspect of the Tropical Home was to dissolve the separation between indoors and

outdoors, at a time when air-conditioning was not widespread. This indoor-outdoor unification changed the conventional spatial configuration of Florida homes, which provided fewer outdoor spaces for prolonged habitation, which meant that was an "indoors" proper and an "outdoors" proper. Further, these outdoor spaces were appended to the house (Florida Architecture, 1949a). Thus, residents experienced the interior detached from the exterior.

This paper addresses the question of how Florida architects in the 1940s and 50s, through the Florida Tropical Home, redefined the relationship between indoors and outdoors from one of separation to one of unification. This indoor-outdoor unification in the new architecture was achieved through multiple strategies—one, spatial configuration of the house plan; two, expansion of the threshold between interior and exterior; and three, the increased use of larger screened patios. This paper chronicles how these strategies were used to create a house where the transition from indoors to outdoors was not abrupt, but rather smooth to the point of being nearly unnoticeable (Nelson & Wright, 1945). This dissolution of the sudden passage from inside to outside generated a house that was essentially one unified space, which created a symbiosis between the indoors and outdoors. This research was conducted through spatial analyses of examples of Florida Tropical Homes published in *Florida Architecture*, which show how the inside-outside unification was accomplished using the above mentioned three spatial strategies.

Research Method

This paper utilized *Florida Architecture* (1949 to 1957), an annual publication as a key archival source. *Florida Architecture* documented new and noteworthy architectural works that were built in its years of publication. It largely featured residential works, but also exhibited commercial, hospitality, and institutional buildings. Modernist architects working in Florida, such as Robert Law Weed, Wahl Snyder, Igor Polevitzky, Robert Little, Alfred Browning Parker, and others served on the editorial board. Due to the composition of the magazine's editorial board, which comprised modernist architects, it showcased buildings that were progressive in their design, especially with respect to the use of new materials, new technologies, and new spatial configurations.

The reconceptualization of the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces was part of a national trend in domestic architecture. Florida architects led this trend and redefined the conventional notion of where indoors ended and the outdoors began, and consequently

formulated an approach that united the two conditions to create an inside-outside continuum (Florida Architecture, 1949a). *Florida Architecture* published houses that illustrated how the Florida Tropical Home became the site for the experiments in the redefinition of the inside-outside continuum. Therefore, *Florida Architecture* was chosen as the primary archival source for this study to provide data and documentation of the novel concepts that the architects experimented with. The method of research comprised identifying spatial techniques of indoor-outdoor unification, which resulted in three areas of analyses—one, categorization of homes on the basis of plan geometries; two, the transformation of the thresholds that were used to reimagine the indoor-outdoor junction; and three, the changes in the scale and prevalence of screened porches.

Plan Analysis: The Shape of the House Plan 1949–1957

The plans of the homes published in *Florida Architecture* from 1949–1957 demonstrate that was there was a shift in the form of house-plans, also known as the footprint of the building, Here, this refers to the geometry and shape of a building's envelope, whereby the term "envelope" means the external walls, which mark the boundary of inside-outside separation in the building. This concept is illustrated in Figure 1, showing how the three protypes—L-, U-, and H-shaped houses—result in a new sequence of interior and exterior spaces in plan. Architects experimented with these plans to integrate outdoor spaces into the interiors and make the outdoors more livable.

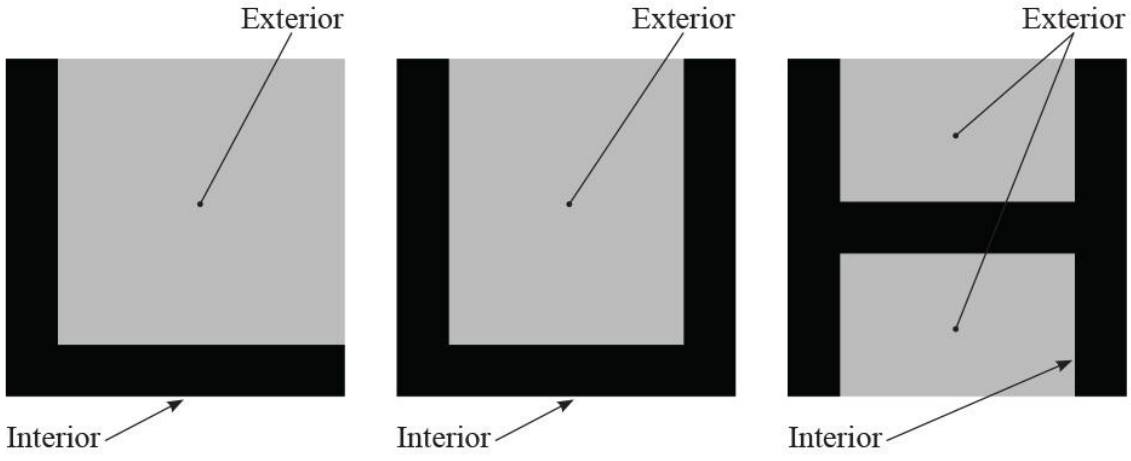

Figure 1. Illustration of L-shaped (left), U-shaped (middle), and H-shaped (right) houses' interior and exterior spaces.

In traditional Florida architecture, the separation between indoors and outdoors was clear and abrupt. There was no complexity to the relationship between indoors and outdoors, and the design did not encourage a unification between inside and outside. This can be seen in the traditional Dogtrot house, illustrated in Figure 2. A Dogtrot house traditionally consists of two rooms of the same size separated by a central open breezeway called a "dogtrot." The indoor and outdoor spaces are clearly delineated and generate no intrigue between one another (Katz-Hyman & Rice, 2011). The new shapes illustrated in Figure 1 break from the past by creating more nuanced relationships between interior and exterior. In these new L, U, and H-shaped houses there is a sense of enveloping, of being in a protected garden, and maximizing the views provided by the exterior to the interior, and vice versa.

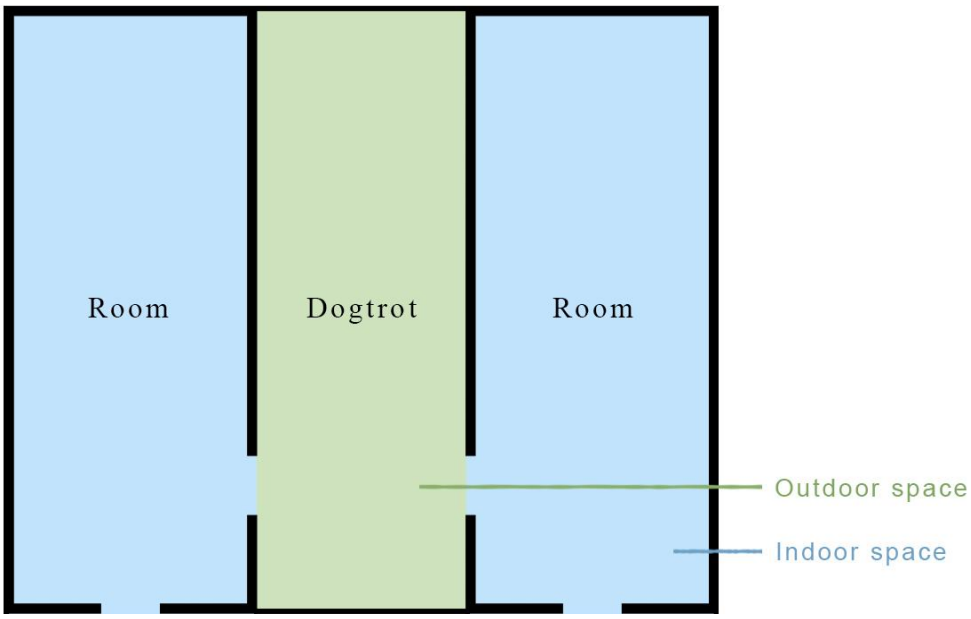

Figure 2. Illustration of a traditional Dogtrot house, based on the description in *World of a Slave: Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States*. Source: Katz-Hyman, M., & Rice, K. S. (2011). *World of a Slave: Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

From 1949–1957, architects designed the home's envelope to accommodate habitable outdoor spaces, rather than an exclusive focus on the interior of the house in the design process (Florida Architecture, 1949b). This is especially evident in Figure 3, where architect Edwin T. Reeder (1908–1963) used an angled U-shape to surround the patio space with the wings of the house, to create a stronger unity between the patio and the interior of the house.

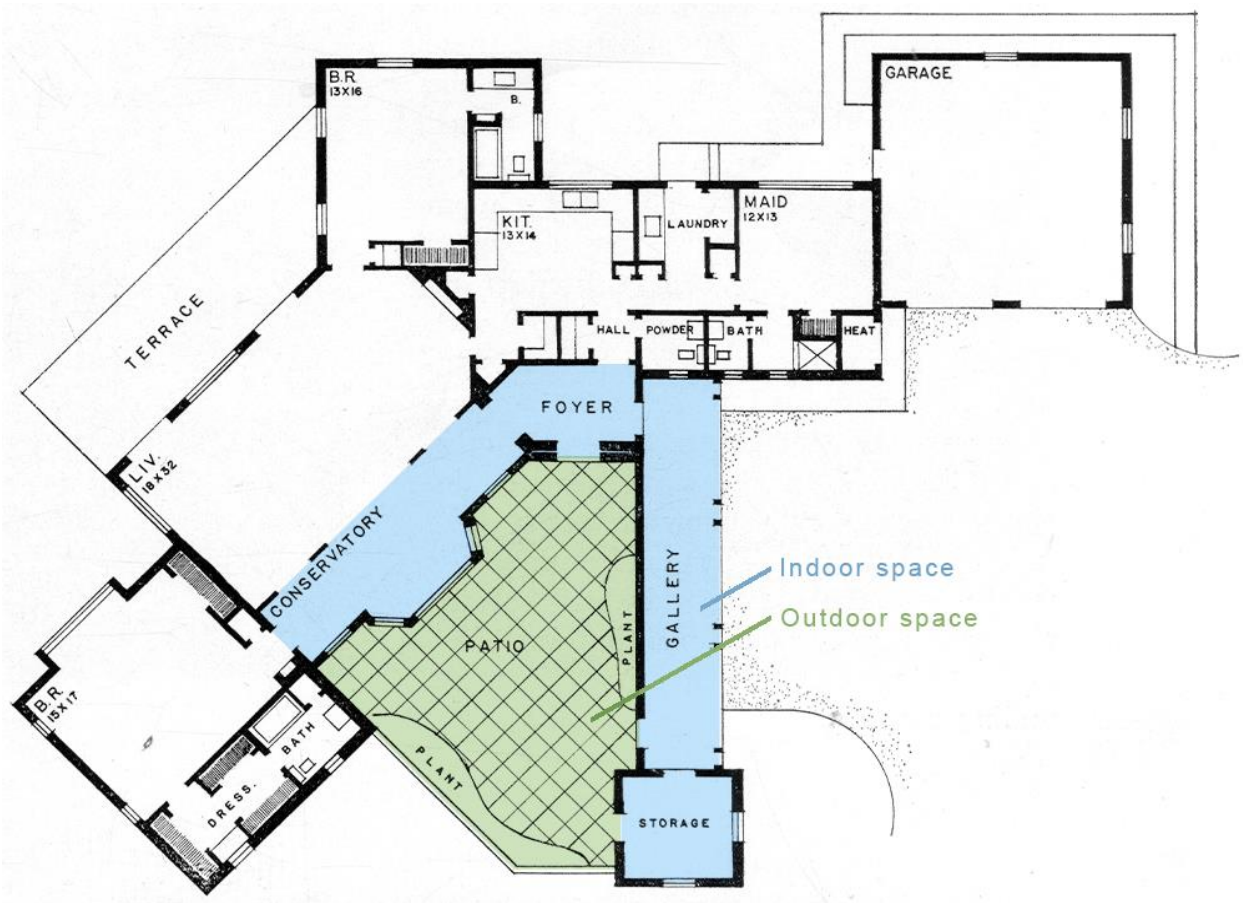

Figure 3. Plan drawing of the Barnes Residence (1953).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1953b). French Colonial Villa; Architects Edwin T. Reeder Associates. *Florida Architecture 1953*, 37–39.

Architects constructed homes with L, U, and H-shaped building envelopes to generate plans in which the wings of the home engulfed an outdoor space, making the indoor and outdoor spaces more interconnected (Florida Architecture, 1953b). The proliferation of these house shapes granted greater possibilities in constructing livable, private outdoor space.

The Protected Garden. A primary concern of the increased use of outdoor space during this time was maintaining privacy. In the fast-developing American suburbia, residents desired increased contact with the outdoors, but simultaneously had concerns about the lack of privacy outdoors. A traditional solution to this problem was the walled garden, an outdoor living space with tall walls and shrubbery, which protected from prying eyes (Goldsmith, 1941). However, in

postwar modernist Florida homes, the house itself was used to maintain the privacy of the outdoor space, through the use of an L-, U-, or H-shaped plan, whereby these configurations provided a natural nook into which the outdoor living space was easily nested. The exterior boundary of the L-, U-, or H-shaped building lent itself to the enclosure of outdoor spaces by the wings of the house to create a privacy. As the L-, U-, or H-shaped building circumscribed the outdoor space, this resulted in a greater number of garden views from within the house; and the building mass cast shadows that made the outdoor space sun-protected. Thus, L-, U-, and H-shaped homes—as opposed to a rectang*ular* or square shape—satisfied the residents' need for *the* outdoors to provide private nooks, sun-protection, and views (Florida Architecture, 1949d). These geometries created a higher level of indoor-outdoor unification, which allowed residents to experience the advantages of outdoors while being indoors, and vice versa.

L-shaped house plan. From 1949–1952, the most common footprint of Florida homes was an L shape, and throughout the 1950s, the number of homes with an L, U, or H shape was comparable. This can be seen in Tables 1, 2, and 3. This shows that there was increased variability in the geometry of the house plans, which coincided with an increased willingness to experiment with new house forms as the decade progressed.

Table 1. L-Shaped Houses featured in *Florida Architecture*, 1949–1957.

Year	Number of Homes Featured in *Florida Architecture*
1949	7
1950	2
1952	6
1953	2
1954	6
1956	3
1957	2

Table 2. U-Shaped Houses featured in *Florida Architecture*, 1949–1957.

Year	Number of Homes Featured in *Florida Architecture*
1949	2
1950	1
1952	2
1953	6
1954	7
1956	2
1957	3

Table 3. H-Shaped Houses featured in *Florida Architecture*, 1949–1957.

Year	Number of Homes Featured in *Florida Architecture*
1949	2
1950	2
1952	1
1957	2

An early example of the L-shaped home is the Rempe Residence (1949) shown in Figure 4, where architect Edward T. Rempe (1907–1994) used a combination of the L and U shapes of the house to extend the interiors into the backyard. As the plan shows, the bedroom and childrens' rooms form a U around a private patio; while the bedrooms and living areas are configured in an L-shaped plan to connect the house more succinctly with the larger back yard (Florida Architecture, 1949d). The L-shaped plan results in a more open geometry, as the house engulfs the yard on only two sides, rather than three as in U- and H-shaped plans.

Figure 4. Plan drawing of the Rempe Residence (1949).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1949d). The Economy House: Easy Maintenance the Objective. *Florida Architecture 1949*, 72.

A similar example of the combination of L and U shapes is the is the Levin Residence (1956) as seen in Figure 5, where architect Stefan H. Zachar (1915–1983) used an L shape and an angled U shape to maximize outdoor spaces, with a Florida room at the back and a patio at the front (Florida Architecture, 1956a). While the L shape offers less privacy to the occupants compared to U or H shapes, it also opens up a much wider range of views to the landscape.

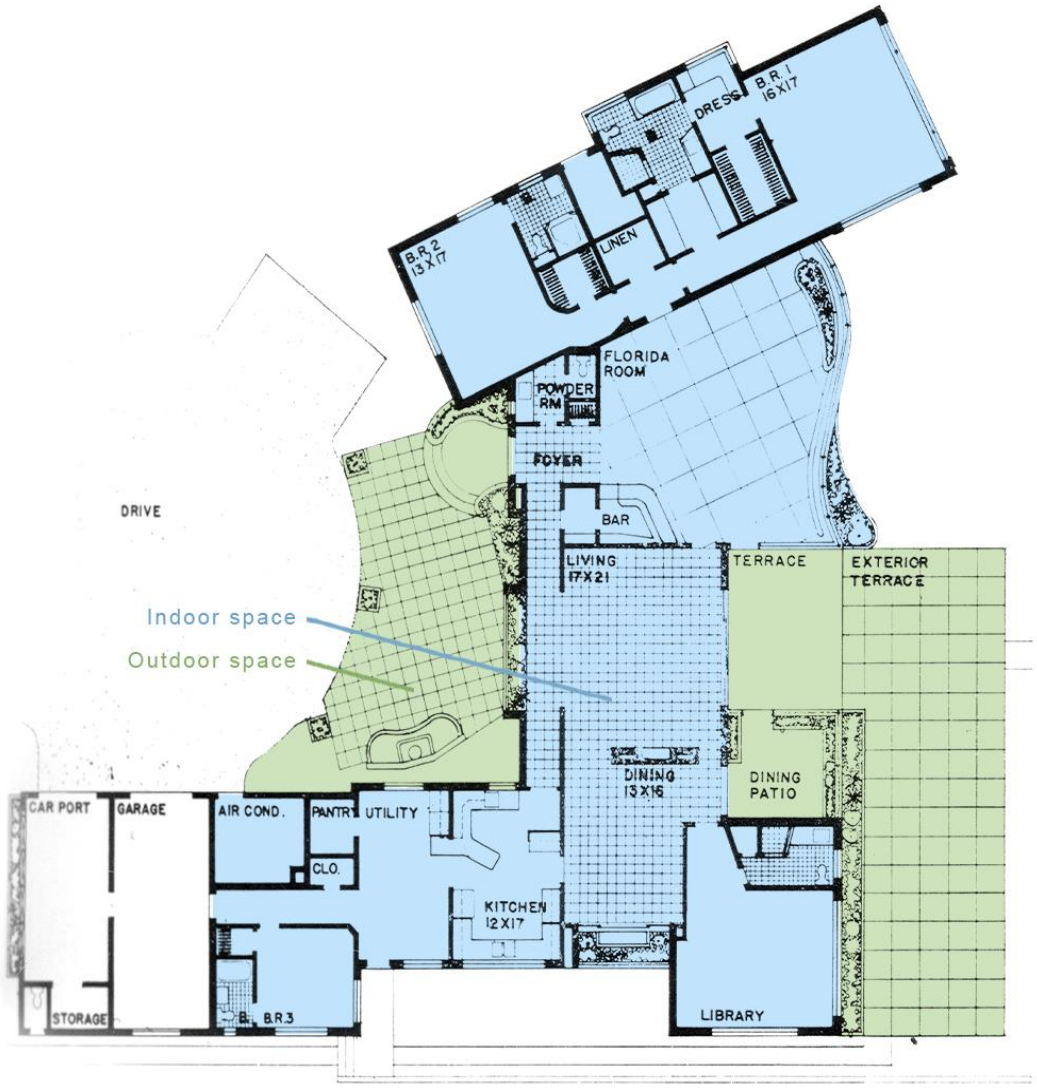

Figure 5. Plan drawing of the Levin Residence (1956).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1956a). Sunset Lake; Architect Stefan H. Zachar. *Florida Architecture 1956*, 30–33.

U-shaped house plan. The U-shaped home was an extension of the L-shaped plan that became prevalent in the late 1940s and early 1950s and was often used in combination with the L shape. From 1952–1954, the number of U-shaped homes showcased in *Florida Architecture* more than tripled, shown in Table 2, as experiments revealed how the U-shaped home could unify indoor and outdoor spaces. The increased privacy provided by the U-shaped wings of the building envelope not only created a more integrated and private outdoor space, but also provided more exterior wall surface area that opened onto the outdoor space (Florida Architecture, 1949b). This increased contact between the interiors and exteriors created more interaction between indoor and outdoor activities.

H-shaped house plan. Though somewhat rarer in *Florida Architecture*'s homes than the L or U-shaped homes, H-shaped homes had design qualities that created distinct opportunities. The H shape, which had two parallel indoor spaces joined by a perpendicular bar, allowed architects to use the building envelope to create two nestled outdoor spaces, rather than the single nestled space provided by the L and U shapes. These separate outdoor spaces within the H-shaped plan allow for the creation of a continuum of outdoor spaces that are punctuated by the interior space of the horizontal bar in the H-shape. This brings the indoors and outdoors into closer contact and unifies them. For example, in the Williamson Residence (1957) in Figure 6, the architect Mark Hampton (1924–2015) used the H-shape of the interior to circumscribe the outdoor spaces such as the pool in the front of the house and screened porch at the back of the house, which he placed along the length of the house. The horizontal bar of the H-shape contains the entry and dining rooms and allows a moment of pause (Florida Architecture, 1957c).

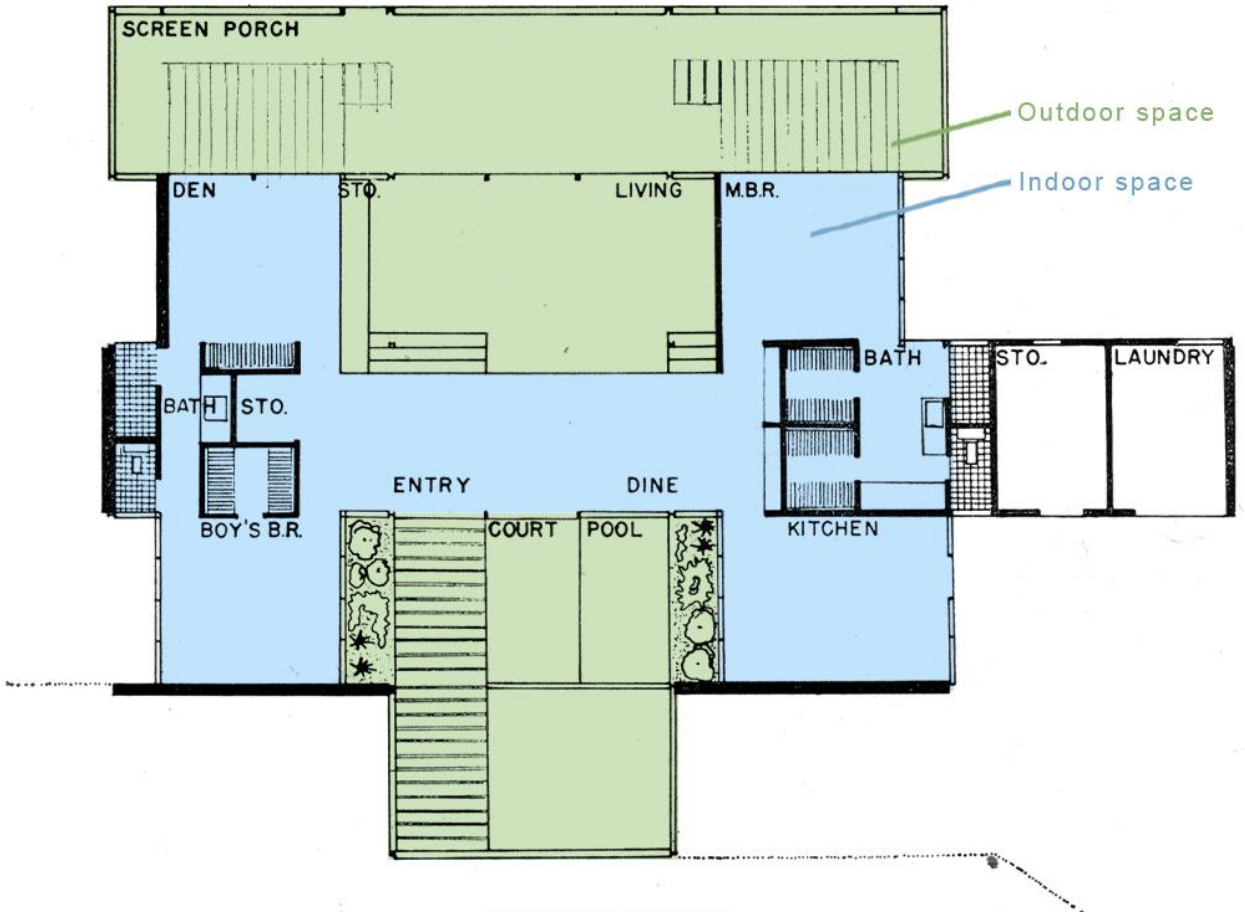

Figure 6. Plan drawing of the Williamson Residence (1957).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1957c). Williamson Residence; Architect Mark Hampton. *Florida Architecture 1957*, 36–33.

Thus, the indoor-outdoor spaces were punctuated and alternated to create a sequence of exterior-interior-exterior continuum.

Maximizing Views from the Home. The L, U, or H shapes generated configurations that allowed for comfortable and protected spaces that were designed as livable outdoor spaces. However, also of great importance was the outside edge of the house shape. The L, U, or H-shaped building envelopes created increased the perimeter of the external walls of the home. This increase in the boundary maximized the extent of the external walls, which were fitted with large expanses of glass or screen to create views from within the house and to take advantage of vistas. This was especially true if the windows were south-facing, so as to minimize the heat and sunlight exposure in the summer and maximize solar radiation intake in the winter, due to the different angles of the sun in summer and winter. The L, U, or H-shaped building envelopes not only increased the external wall areas but also opened up views on multiple surfaces of the

house, which further brought the outdoors inside (Florida Architecture, 1949c). Through a visual connection with the outside, a more cogent connection was created between the interior and exterior of the house.

Expanding the Threshold

Architects developed the unification of indoor and outdoor spaces in Florida homes through a redefinition of the threshold between interiors and exteriors (Baweja, 2015). Till Boettger notes that thresholds are architectural elements and in-between spaces that allow passage from one space to another, thus they are junctions between different spatial conditions (Boettger, 2014). Thresholds are points of progression where a person moves from one zone to another. For example, a door is a threshold from inside to outside; and a stairway is a threshold from upstairs to downstairs. In the transitional spaces from absolute indoors to absolute outdoors—patios, porches, stoops, steps, terraces, verandas, colonnades, and loggias—constitute habitable thresholds. They are meant for dwelling, rather than passing through. In the Florida homes of the 1950s, as opposed to a harsh inside-outside boundary, the architects expanded the threshold between indoors and outdoors. The line between the two spatial conditions was blurred, making the inhabitant unsure of where exactly the outdoors ended and the indoors began. Architects created spaces where the outdoors were a part of the indoors, and thus unified what, in conventional architecture, were two seemingly opposite spatial conditions (Baweja, 2015). These extended thresholds became dominant in the houses, irrespective of their location. They were large in size, often located in carefully calculated spatial sequences between indoors and outdoors and comprised of multiple transitional spaces. An example of this is the Wien Residence (1953) in Figure 7, where architect Edwin T. Reeder created a sequence of spaces to transition from absolute indoors to absolute outdoors using multiple thresholds. The living and dining rooms, which comprise absolute indoors, open into a screened porch that functions as semi-indoors and opens into a patio that functions as semi-outdoors, which opens into absolute outdoors (Florida Architecture, 1953a). Thus, there is a spatial sequence of indoors, semi-indoors, semi-outdoors, and absolute outdoors with two threshold spaces—the screened porch and the patio—where the screened porch became a secondary threshold, and the patio a primary threshold.

Figure 7. Plan drawing of the Wien Residence (1953).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1953a). Residences: An Indigenous House; Architect Edwin T. Reeder. *Florida Architecture 1953*, 6–9.

In addition to the use of multiple threshold spaces and the gradation of transitions between what was primarily indoors and what was primarily outdoors, architects used single-room depth plans and opted for geometries that would maximize the interface between indoor and outdoor spaces. For example, in the Parker Residence (1956) in Figure 8, the architect Robert E. Hansen (1914–2006) used an elongated rectangular living and dining room which opened to the east and west terraces along the longer edge of the rectangle (Florida Architecture, 1956b). By opening a long rectangular space on two sides, the architect maximized the circulation between indoors and outdoors, both visually and spatially.

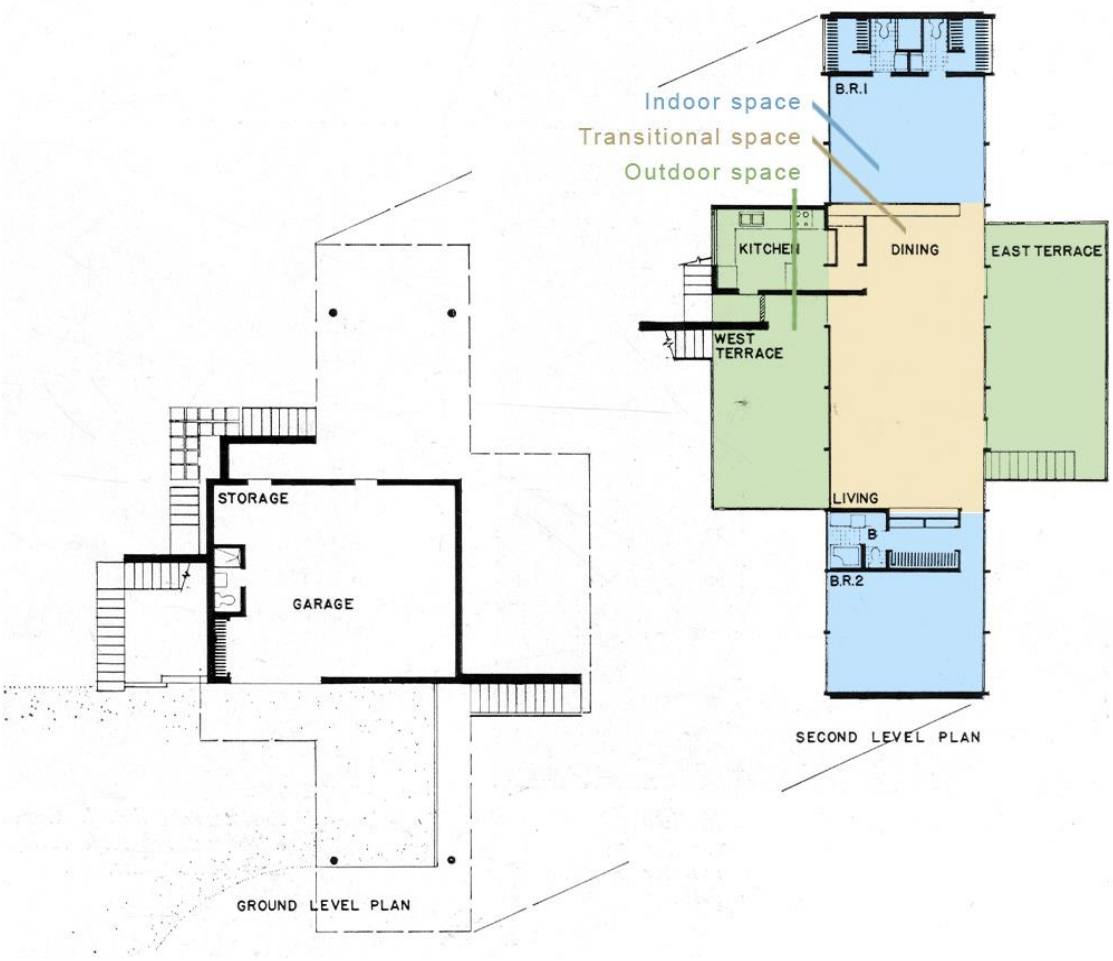

Figure 8. Plan drawing of the Parker Residence (1956).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1956b). Beach Hammock; Architect Robert E. Hansen. *Florida Architecture 1956*, 58–61.

Screened Patios and Porches

In the mid-1950s there was an increase both in the number of screened patios and porches and in their scale. Roofed-over and screened transitional spaces such as patios, porches, loggias, and breezeways provided mosquito-proof, rain-shielded, and sun-protected spaces. Architects often used combinations of multiple screened and unscreened transitional spaces. This is evident in the Ferendino Residence (1957) in Figure 9, where the architects Pancoast, Ferendino, Sheels, and Burnham used an open unscreened loggia, and two screened loggias. The entrance to the house is through an open loggia, which leads into a screened loggia, and finally indoors. Thus, the screened loggia became a secondary threshold, in addition to the open loggia, which was a

primary threshold (Florida Architecture, 1957d). These spaces combined the sense of enclosure of indoor spaces with the sensory experiences of the outdoors.

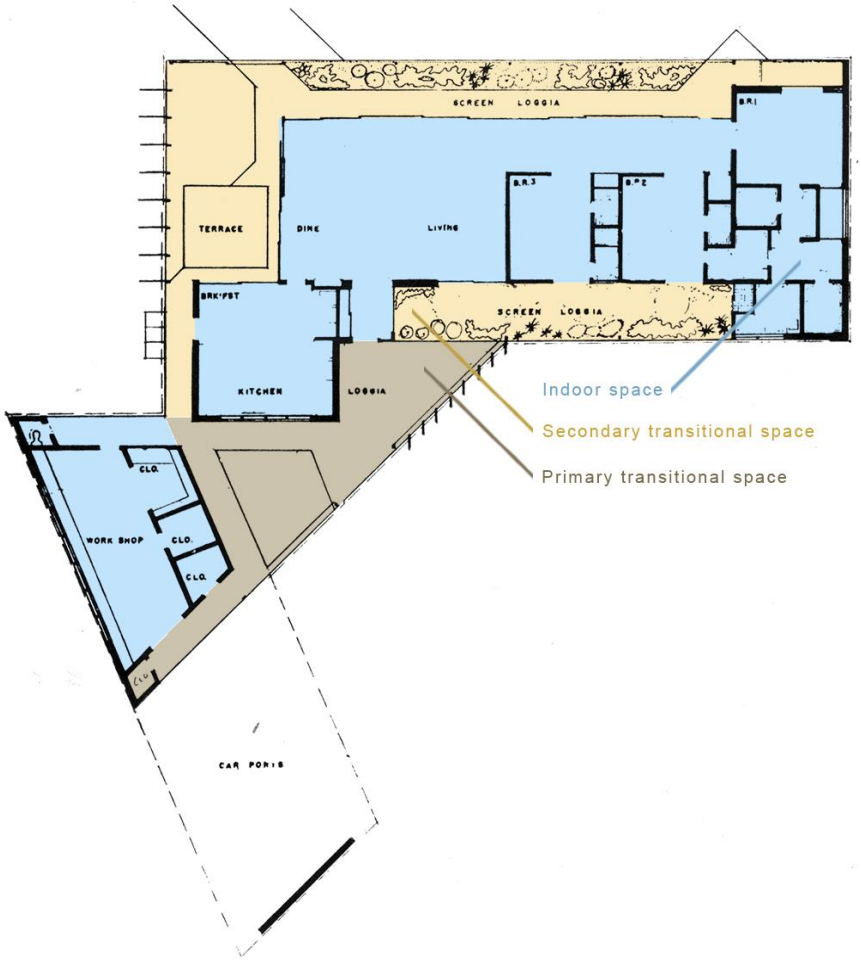

Figure 9. Plan drawing of the Ferendino Residence (1957).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1957d). Ferendino Residence; Architects Pancoast, Ferendino, Sheels & Burnham. *Florida Architecture 1957*, 40–43.

The effectiveness of a large, screened space is visible in the Miami Residence (1957) in Figure 10, where architect Curtis E. Haley (1900–1971) used a screened terrace that spanned almost the entire length of the house to create a large, screened space for leisure with a swimming pool (Florida Architecture, 1957b). The in-between spaces, such as screened patios, loggias, and breezeways, connected the house to the landscape through large openings that allowed breeze and natural light into the house.

In addition to large openings, architects employed an interior to the exterior continuum of—one, materials; two, colors; three, furniture; and four, vegetation to break down the conventional

dichotomy between inside and outside (Florida Architecture, 1952). This was best exemplified in Richardson Residence (1957) shown in Figure 11, where the architect Wahl Snyder used identical tile flooring throughout the dining room, living room, lanai, and garden to create a continuity throughout the home to achieve unified indoor and outdoor spaces. The roof of the house extended over the lanai as an overhang at the back of the house, and at the front of the walls of the entry and a bedroom gave privacy to the house and the walled garden. The walled garden, living-dining room, lanai, and terrace were seamlessly connected (Florida Architecture, 1957a). The small enclosed garden and expansive open lanai had vastly different characters, yet an effective transition between these diverse spaces established a fluid interdependence between indoors and outdoors.

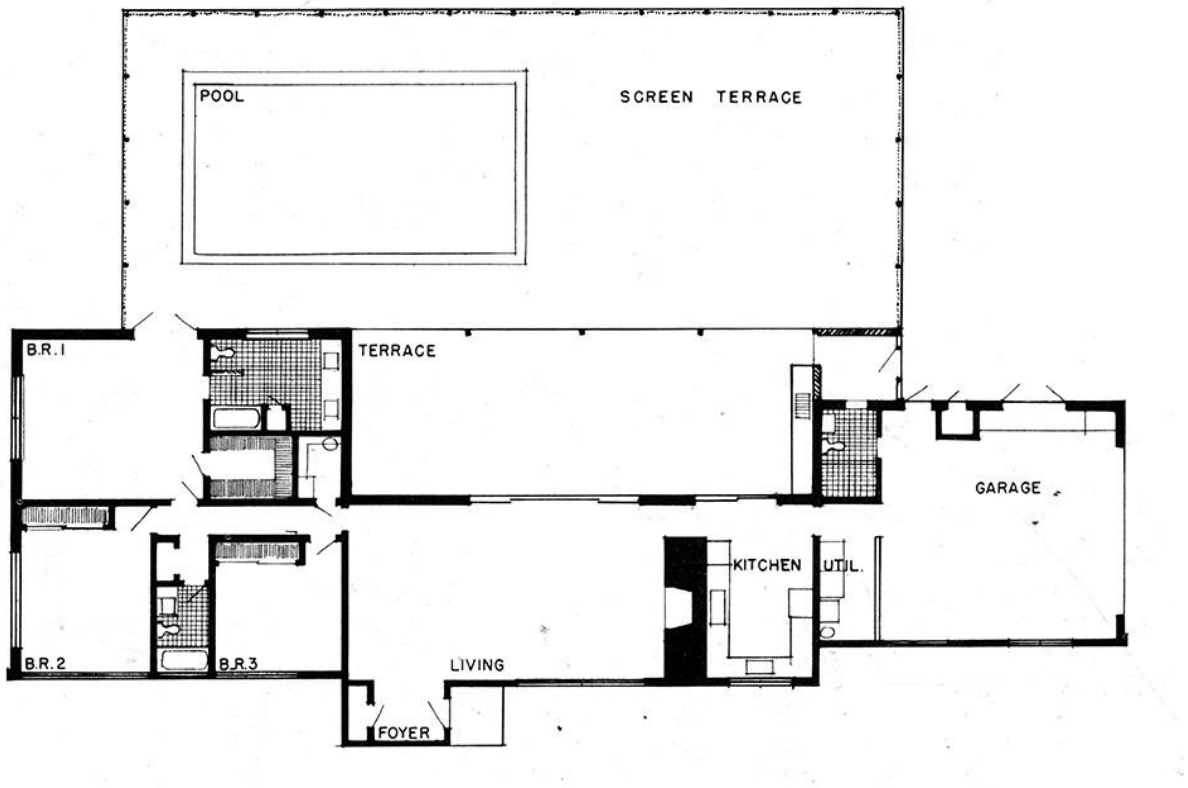

Figure 10. Plan drawing of the Miami Residence (1957).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1957b). "Togetherness;" Architect Curtis E. Haley. *Florida Architecture 1957*, 22–26.

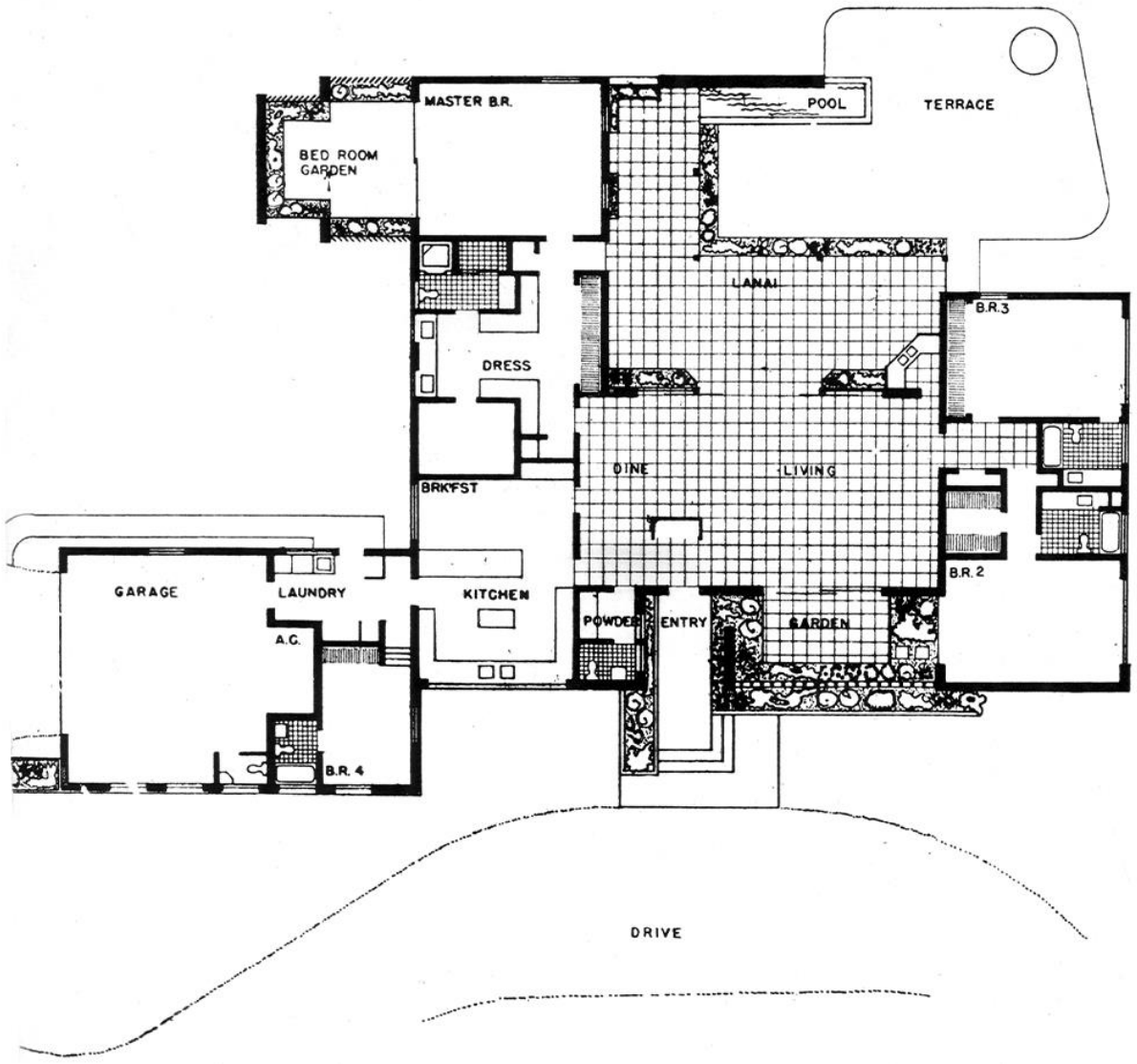

Figure 11. Plan drawing of the Richardson Residence (1957).
Source: Florida Architecture. (1957a). Richardson Residence; Architects Wahl Snyder & Associates. *Florida Architecture 1957*, 12–17.

The enlargement of thresholds between interior and exterior met its logical conclusion in the Birdcage House (1949). In this house, shown in Figure 12, architect Igor Polevitzky completely challenged the notion of the traditional definition of indoors and outdoors. The garden reached far inside, bringing trees and grass into its expansive screened space. The indoor spaces were minimized and subordinated to the screened porch, which acted as both the main living space and as an open outdoor patio, to discourage time spent indoors (Ford & Creighton, 1951). Rather than having an expansive indoors, the house was engulfed by the screen. This house was the epitome of emphasizing outdoor living.

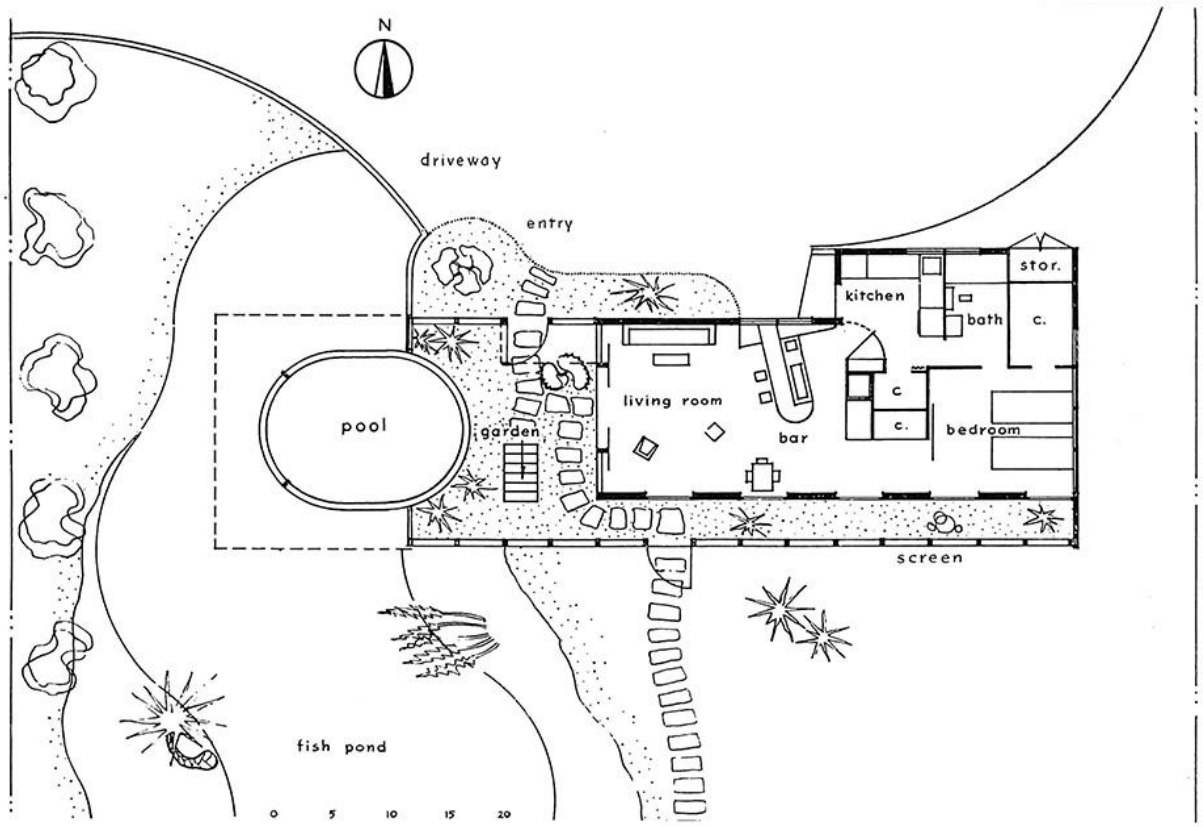

Figure 12. Plan drawing of the Birdcage House (1949).
Source: Ford, K. M., & Creighton, T. H. (1951). *The American House Today*. Architectural Book Publishing Company.

Conclusion

To conclude and discuss, in the 1940s and 50s, *Florida Architecture* magazine showcased houses that redefined the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces. Architects used multiple strategies, such as the shape of the home plan, the scale of the transitional spaces, the sequence of thresholds, and an increase in the number of screened threshold spaces. These strategies had important implications, comprising how architecture within Florida would adapt to its unique climate. These innovations resulted in a house type, that architects at the time called the Florida Tropical Home, which was based on new relationships between indoors and outdoors.

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