

Richard Joseph Neutra

By: David Gebhard

Neutra, Richard Joseph (8 Apr. 1892-16 Apr. 1970), architect, was born in Vienna, Austria, the son of Samuel Neutra, the owner and designer of a metal foundry, and Elizabeth Glazer. During Richard Neutra's early life, Vienna enjoyed an impressive renaissance in music, literature, art, and architecture. In these pre-World War I years the architectural figures who most directly influenced him were Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann, and Adolf Loos. What caught Neutra's imagination about the works of these Austrian designers was their abstract simplicity, coupled with a Viennese sense of restraint and refined elegance. Though he never studied or worked for Hoffmann, Neutra's mature work as a designer comes closest to this Viennese master in his concern for elegant, polished details.

As happened with his slightly older friend, Rudolph M. Schindler, Neutra was encouraged to immigrate to the United States both by Loos's admiration for American architecture and by the 1910 publication in Berlin of Frank Lloyd Wright's famous *Ausgefuehrete Bauten und Entwurte*, often called the Wasmuth portfolio. Perhaps because of his father's fondness for machines, Neutra as a young man did not study architecture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts but at the Technische Hochschule, which he entered in 1911. As a reserve officer, he was called to active duty in the Austrian army in 1914. Because of ill health he was granted a leave, during which he completed his degree at the Hochschule in 1918. In 1919 he went to Zurich, Switzerland, where he worked in Otto Froebel's nursery. There, under the direction of the horticulturist and landscape designer Gustav Ammann, he developed what was to become a hallmark of his approach to design: the treatment of the landscape and the building as a single entity through a union of interior and exterior space. While in Switzerland he met Dione Niedermann; they were married in Germany in 1922 and had three children.

In 1921 Neutra obtained the position of city architect in the small town of Luckenwalde, near Berlin. Later in the same year he entered the Berlin office of Erich Mendelsohn, where he remained through the fall of 1923. What part Neutra played in Mendelsohn's designs of these years remains conjectural. One can assume that Neutra probably did contribute to the design of such buildings as the 1921-1923 additions to the Berliner Tageblatt (later altered), but the basic concept of this design and others is purely Mendelsohn's.

In 1923, with Schindler's help and encouragement, Neutra did come to the United States. Arriving in New York, he worked briefly for several architects before he went to Chicago, where he hoped to realize one of his goals in America: to meet Louis H. Sullivan and, above all, Frank Lloyd Wright. In Chicago he obtained a position with the large and prestigious commercial firm of Holabird and Roche. He met Sullivan, but their acquaintance was brief because the Chicago master died in April 1924. At Sullivan's

funeral he finally met Wright and in the fall of 1924 went to live and work with him at "Taliesin" in Wisconsin. In January 1925 Neutra arrived in California with his wife and first child, who had joined him in Chicago the year before. They lived with Schindler and his wife Pauline at their Hollywood house on Kings Road.

Schindler provided Neutra with opportunities to collaborate as a landscape architect on several projects. Especially important for him were his garden designs for the 1925 Howe house in the Silver Lake district of Los Angeles and the 1922-1926 Lovell house at Newport Beach. Eventually Neutra, Schindler, and the planner Carol Aronovici formed a design team to pursue large projects; they called themselves the Architectural Group for Industry and Commerce (AGIC). The best-known project of this collaboration was their entry in the League of Nations Building Competition of 1926; it was among those selected for inclusion in the exhibition that traveled through Europe.

While working with Schindler and Aronovici, Neutra further developed his vision of architecture and city planning in his ideal urban plan, which he satirically called "Rush City Reformed." In this homage to the machine and modernist solution to the chaos and rush of city life, he projected a science-fiction city of the future, which drew on much earlier urban designs--the visual implication of speed of the futurist Antonio Sant'Elia, the rationalist city of Charles Garnier, and the city of skyscrapers of Le Corbusier.

Neutra established his reputation as America's foremost modernist with his 1929 steel-frame design for the Lovell house in Los Angeles. As was the case with Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye at Poissy (1929-1930), the Lovell house became internationally known via photographs published in newspapers, magazines, and books throughout Europe and the United States. The Lovell house was one of the few American examples included in Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's modernist 1932 exhibition, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*, which was held at the newly opened Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

When the Lovell house was finished, Neutra went on a world tour, lecturing in Japan and in Europe. Although American building activities were dramatically reduced during the depression years of the 1930s, Neutra was able to enhance his worldwide reputation through a remarkable array of small-scaled buildings, mostly single-family houses and small apartment buildings. His admiration for the machine was displayed in such designs as his own 1932 Los Angeles house (the VDL Research house), the prefabricated metal Beard house (Altadena, 1934), the Plywood Model House (Los Angeles, 1936), and above all his streamline moderne Von Sternberg house (Northridge, 1936), which suggested a beached oceanliner. All of these houses, as well as his other designs of this decade, reveal Neutra's efforts toward a fusion of the landscape with the building.

As was true of many other exponents of the modern, a number of Neutra's houses of the late 1930s and early 1940s were less insistently committed to the image of the machine. This is especially evident in such designs as the brick-and-wood-clad Nesbitt house (Brentwood, 1942) and in the extensive wartime housing he designed for

the Channel Heights project in San Pedro in 1942. In the years after World War II, Neutra's designs continued to reflect his dualism, sometimes epitomizing the machine aesthetic, as in his Kaufmann house of 1946 in Palm Springs, and at other times exhibiting a more easygoing and milder modernism, as in his Treweek house of 1949, overlooking Silver Lake in Los Angeles.

In 1949 Neutra formed a partnership that lasted eleven years with the much younger planner and architect Robert Alexander. He hoped that through such a partnership he would at last obtain large-scale planning and architectural commissions. This goal was realized in part with such structures as the U.S. Embassy in Karachi, West Pakistan (1959), and the Los Angeles County Hall of Records, Los Angeles (1962). Generally, though, his larger-scaled late buildings are a disappointment, especially compared to his earlier work of the 1930s. Exceptions to the general blandness of his late commercial and institutional work were his small residential commissions, many of which continued to maintain the design quality of his previous work.

During the last years of his life Neutra joined in architectural practice with his son and continued to design, write, and lecture until his death in Wuppertal, Germany. Although his stature as a preeminent modernist was somewhat diminished in the 1960s, his reputation as an exponent of modernism continues as strong as in the 1930s.

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