

Architecture

Blue Monday In Los Angeles

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ANOTHER Monday morning wrecking has destroyed Irving Gill's 1916 Dodge House in Los Angeles, considered one of the 15 most significant houses in the history of American domestic architecture. (After Saturday, early Monday is the most popular time for landmark demolition. It has the obvious virtue of catching people napping, while avoiding overtime rates.)

The fight to save the Dodge House failed, and there are two good reasons for telling the story now. One is the obvious, tragic commentary on how we throw our national heritage away. The other is the really revolting way in which it happened, which offers an all-too-clear link between the state of our society and our culture. Take a venal and uncaring officialdom increasingly pressed for operating funds, add conventional real estate mores, and the story almost tells itself. The combination is enough to radicalize a conservative. It does something to explain the crisis of confidence between people and government, and people and real estate—a profession which finds itself, in its growing battles with the public conscience, increasingly without respect or credence. (Who cares, with a pocket full of money?)

The story might as well be told substantially as it appears in the documents of the Historic American Buildings Survey. With the National Register, the HABS is the Federal Government's official record and recognition of the country's historical and architectural landmarks. The Walter Luther Dodge House, built for a wealthy manufacturer of a "tired feet" remedy, appears in both.

This is the HABS summary evaluation. "The Dodge House is an unusually well-preserved (sic) example of the architecture of Irving Gill; it is a culmination of his genius, a rare example of the early manifestations of the International Style, and also one of the great monuments of the early ex-

perimental architecture of reinforced concrete." There is a quotation from Lewis Mumford: "Irving Gill was beyond doubt one of the great leaders of modern architecture, worthy to rank with Sullivan, Wright and Maybeck . . . examples of his work are so few that their preservation should be a matter of national concern as well as local pride."

Esther McCoy, a leading architectural historian and specialist on West Coast building, features Gill in her authoritative book, "Five California Architects." The Dodge House, with its complete garden and rare plantings, was his masterwork.

To continue with the HABS account. "In 1924, the house was sold (by the Dodges) to T. Morrison McKenna and Anita K. McKenna for \$125,000. The Los Angeles High School District condemned the property in 1939, an action fought without success by the McKennas. On June 6, 1939, the property passed to the High School District, the McKennas being paid \$69,000. The High School District, after making a survey of high school age students in the area, found that it was not needed as a high school site and transferred title to the Junior College District."

From 1951 to 1962, the house had mixed and desultory educational use. In 1963, the Board of Education declared the property surplus. Later that year, the Board of Supervisors approved the rezoning of the street and property for higher density, reflecting other area changes, to make it a prime speculative development property.

In spite of protests, including a proposal by the American Institute of Architects for an architectural and historical library in the building, in 1965 the Board of Education put the Dodge house and grounds up for auction. It set a minimum bid of \$778,000 on the property that it had paid \$69,000 for after condemnation for a school site it didn't need, according to a survey taken after the forced sale. Both rezoning and disposition took

place with full knowledge of the nature of the building, and of the movement for its preservation that began immediately after it was declared surplus property.

As news of the threat of demolition spread, the approximately 1,000 American and foreign students, architects and historians that visited the house annually more than tripled. The preservation campaign was backed by the California Art Commission, the City Council of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles and leading historians and critics.

After some postponements under public pressure, the Board of Education sold the property to the Lytton Savings and Loan Association for \$800,000 in 1966. According to Mrs. McCoy, Bart Lytton, head of the company, made a verbal agreement, publicized at that time, to save the house, which gave Lytton preference over another buyer. Lytton Savings and Loan became Equitable Savings and Loan and Mr. Lytton died.

Equitable declared its intention to sell. It would not say that a buyer would be selected who would not destroy the house. The Citizens Committee for the Dodge House brought suit to prevent sale and demolition, and lost. Shortly after, Equitable

sold to the Riviera Management Company of Torrance, Calif., which declined comment on how the property would be used.

Mrs. McCoy says that Equitable disposed of the house "so discreetly" that the public was not immediately aware of the sale. "The office of Charles Wellman, president, refused to say who had bought it, but the County Assessor's office did. The new owner, Riviera, answered no telephone calls or registered letters from preservationists or the A.I.A."

Michael J. Elliott, executive director of the Southern California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects has written of efforts to find and contact the buyer. "Riviera Management has no telephone listing and Torrance City Hall could give us no information about a business license for the firm . . ." They could not find any incorporation. (Just incidentally, when will real estate companies have to list their names, addresses and principals like real people? In New York, pursuit of delinquent owners more often than not leads to a dummy corporation. Another reason why real estate lacks credence.)

Mr. Elliott succeeded in meeting with Riviera representatives on Friday, Feb. 6, and reports that he was told

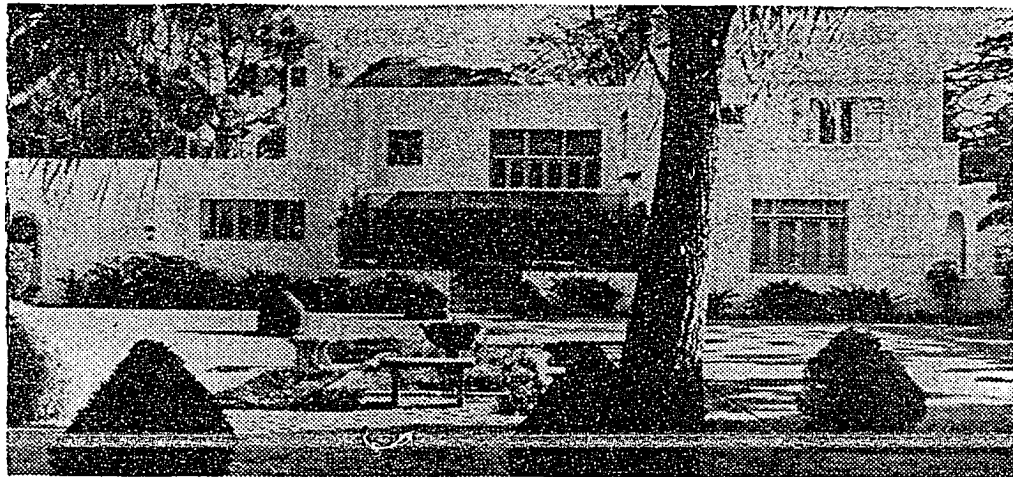
they had no definite plans for the site. "I mentioned a proposed historic easement and that plans had been drawn to allow commercial development and retention of the site and buildings. I offered to discuss these with them and they seemed receptive, but wanted to talk to the other partners. I left the meeting (Friday) believing we would have cooperation even though they did not commit themselves. . ."

The bulldozer moved in unannounced the following Monday morning, Feb. 9, in pouring rain.

On Thursday, Feb. 12, 140 UCLA students came to the Dodge House site on an architectural field trip that had been planned by the school last November. The tour became a wake.

When Gill designed the Dodge House he wrote, "We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to nature, who will trim it with lichens, chisel it with storms, make it gracious and friendly with vines and flower shadows as she does the stone in the meadow." From his teacher, Louis Sullivan, he had learned that architecture is "the luminous idea of simplicity."

He should have added, do not leave it to city officials or real estate developers. It is all rubble now.



The Dodge House as a landmark, top, as a real estate investment, below

