Architect's Widow to Share Her Work-of-Art House in Silver Lake

By LARRY GORDON, Times Staff Writer

Dione Neutra is used to the world knocking on her front door. Her home, on the eastern shore of the Silver Lake reservoir is a landmark of modernist design, a shrine to the international set and to her late husband, architect Richard Neutra, whose remains are buried in the backyard.

"I know I'm very lucky to live in a beautiful house, so I don't mind sharing it," she said, preparing for a small army of visitors expected for today's Los Angeles Conservancy tour of six innovative homes in Silver Lake, a neighborhood known for avant-garde design since the 1920s.

A three-story stack of glass, stucco and balconies, the house is probably bitterly ironic to his sensitive blending with the lake and nearby hills. It was built in 1933 but burned in an electrical fire in 1933 and was rebuilt a year later under the guidance of Richard Neutra and his architect son Dion. Dione Neutra gave the house to California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, in 1963 for seminars and work. It was one of the houses that he could spend the rest of her life there and that the building would never be changed.

"You never think of changing the Mona Lisa or putting a mustache on a Picasso," she said, the accent of her native Switzerland still strong. "But for some reason, people do things like that with houses."

Not Just Decorative

Even in this time of rebellion against modernist architecture, Neutra still stokes the flame of her husband's philosophy: that design should be rational, that it benefit human health and emotions and not just be decorative. After all, she was his secretary and side-deck in the battles of commission and architectural practice. With her help, he became one of the most influential architects in the nation, changing especially the look of Southern California and bringing clean industrial lines to home building.

But in the 15 years since his death, something else has happened as she rides the worldwide lecture circuit. Neutra has become a beloved matriarch of the Los Angeles design community and a living symbol of how pre-World War II European culture flowered in Southern California.

Beginning with today's house tour, this will be an exciting week for Neutra. Monday is her 85th birthday. And on Tuesday night, five university schools of architecture and the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architects are sponsoring a dinner at the Hillstrom Hotel honoring her and the publication of her new book, a collection of excerpted letters, mainly between her and her husband from 1919 to 1932.

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The house was built on Dundee Drive in the nearby Las Feliz hills. Home of Dr. Philip Lovell, the holistic

Dione Neutra

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Moreover, the book serves as a reminder of what has been lost in the telephone age.

"If we hadn't exchanged letters, I really wouldn't have understood him. I might have become a professional musician and not as involved with his ideas. How can you exchange any philosophical ideas on the telephone?" she asked.

The book ends with the construction of the house at 2300 Silver Lake Blvd. in 1935, 10 years after Neutra moved from Vienna to America and eight years after he moved to Los Angeles. It is called the VDL Research House, after C.H. Van der Leuw, a wealthy Dutch industrialist who helped finance Neutra's vision of a utilitarian, compact home and office where people could blend with nature and improve themselves. Neutra called his philosophy "bio-realism" and "survival through design."

Small, Austere Rooms

The rooms in the house are small and have austere, built-in furni

She's one of those historical people who can say, "When I sat with Frank Lloyd Wright in his garden..." —Bernard Zimmerman, L.A. architect
House was built on Dundee Drive in the nearby Los Feliz hills. Home of Dr. Philip Lovell, the holistic health columnist for the Los Angeles Times, that complex grid of glass, steel, concrete and stucco attracted 15,000 visitors in its first three weekends. The Silver Lake-Los Feliz area eventually became peppered with Neutra houses, along with those of his one-time partner and later rival, Rudolph Schindler, and of Frank Lloyd Wright, for whom he briefly worked in Chicago. There are nine Neutra houses within a block or two of Diane Neutra’s home.

International Style of ’20s

Some critics called Neutra America’s greatest designer of homes in the austere International Style of the 1920s through 1940s. But his later work was criticized for becoming similar to the suburban glass boxes his work had inspired under lesser talents. And some of his public buildings, like the Hall of Records in downtown Los Angeles, were not considered as successful as his homes. His later years were marked by bouts of depression that biographer Hines said put great strains on the family.

Meanwhile, tastes have shifted back to the ornamentation of Victorian and neoclassic styles he hated. Diane Neutra says her husband “would be horrified” by that trend. “There are no ideas, no direction, just whimsical designs,” she complains.

When she lectures about her husband’s work, she usually brings her cello along to play and sing.

“My purpose in life was to help my husband for 45 years to accomplish as much as possible of what he felt was his mission in life, namely, to provide a more healthful, pleasing, natural environment for his clients,” she said. “Now, nearing 85 years of age, I ask myself, what is my purpose in life? It seems to be to show my younger friends that life in old age can be worthwhile.”

The conservancy reports that limited space remains on the van tour of Silver Lake homes, which costs $25 for members and $35 for others. For further information, call 1-213-CITY.