Neutra legacy includes Schuller church

In Orange County, Richard Neutra's legacy consists of public commissions carried out late in his career. His widow recalled how he flashed his special-occasion charm to obtain the Orange County Courthouse commission of 1965 (which he shared with his son Dion, with whom he was in partnership). Diane Neutra says her husband made a point of finding out and casually mentioning the personal interests of the local commissioners who would choose the project architect.

At discussions concerning Orange Coast Community College, however, Neutra was out of his element when it came to the requirements of the athletic facility (which he designed, along with the theater and business education and science buildings, between the years 1950 and 1956). Thomas Schuller, the architect's biographer, quotes him as describing the game of football—which he had never seen, but heard plenty about—from the building committee—as "a pagan ceremony full of tribal rites and ritual."

Garden Grove Community Church (now used as the fellowship hall annex of Philip Johnson's Crystal Cathedral) was built in 1963 for evangelist Robert Schuller, who wanted to combine the aesthetics of his temples he was giving at a drive-in movie theater with a standard church architecture. So Neutra put the pulpit in the northeast corner of the sanctuary where glass walls looked out to the parking lot.

Four streamlined elements that repeat the monumental verticality of the huge cross rise up far above Neutra's trademark flat roof and, appropriately, suggest the aerodynamics of cars of the era.

Although illness calls this structure the most celebrated large building of Neutra's last decade, he also notes that the vertical pattern of stones set end to end in the long wall dominated the facade Looks unnatural. Seemingly an attempt to warm up his chilly pared-down approach to architecture, the wall is an example of his finding sensitivity to human sensory perception, the leitmotif of his brilliant career.

Cathy Curtis

Richard Neutra Incorporated the feel of Grove Community Church he designed in 1961:

"I was always so amused," said Mrs. Neutra, reminding about those "client meetings," during which she took notes. "Like a cat going around a hot dish, he was going to try to find out who was the dominant part of the matrimony."

"Well, the woman would say, "Oh, my husband agreed completely with me," so (Neutra) would very gingerly try to find out what the husband wanted, you know."

"He took the architect's profession like that of a physician," continued Mrs. Neutra. "If you go to a physician and you think you have told him all your symptoms and then he comes up with a symptom which you had not mentioned: then you have the feeling, that's my doctor..."

"(Claudia) would get the feeling... "Here is someone who is interested in our life and listens to us."

But however fascinated he might have been by these people, he was also frustrated by them. In 1924, after visiting some of Wright's clients, he wrote: "I had always hoped that this new architecture would produce a different kind of human being. I am sorry, to be proved wrong."

Neutra's glory years were the 1930s and '40s. His later architecture, made at a time when the "modern" style had become as

thread running through the book, which offers an intimate glimpse into Neutra's early career struggles and his evolving philosophy of life and art. At the same time, the letters reveal the efforts of a young couple to forge the most idealistic kind of relationship despite the hardships of poverty and work-enforced separation.

Now a serene, comfortable-looking woman of 85, Mrs. Neutra lives across from the Silverlake Reservoir in Los Angeles, in a lovely glass-enclosed house adapted (af a fire) by her architect son Dion from the original structure Neutra designed in 1932. On a sunny April day, she spoke in the deliberate cadences of a native German speaker about what her long marriage meant to her.

"I always told him, 'If I have a choice of being the most famous sculptor in the world, or the most famous sculptor in the world, I would rather be married to him.'"

"In Chicago..."