

Neutra's widow remembers life with a genius

By Cathy Curtis
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In 1922, an idealistic young architect gave his young bride a typewriter. It was, of course, an entirely selfish gift. With it, she was destined to abandon her fledgling career as a singer and cellist to spend long hours typing up the non-stop correspondence, notes and book drafts Richard Neutra would spew out in his search for immortality.

Neutra (pronounced "noytra") was a self-centered and frighteningly moody man who loved architecture more than anything — or anyone — on earth. The gleam in his eye was a new kind of domestic architecture, a flat-topped, glass-enclosed, aluminum-and-concrete modern paradise on easy terms with the great outdoors.

But the road to fame was a long and tortuous one, and he was looking for a special sort of woman. In a 1922 letter to Dione Niedermann, his Swiss wife-to-be, he put the situation to her bluntly:

"My wife shall above all fortify me and unequivocally let me feel that she knows the good which is in me and in my gifts. Nothing romantic — rather something ETERNAL," he wrote.

And so it was, for 48 years, until Neutra's death in 1970.



Hal Stoelzle/The Register

Dione Neutra, 85, architect's widow.

But despite what might seem a long-suffering marriage, Dione Neutra has no regrets. Anxious to tell Neutra's story from her sympathetic viewpoint, she collected his early letters to her, with her replies, in "Richard Neutra: Promise and Fulfillment 1919-1923," recently published by Southern Illinois University Press.

"Ours was, I realize it, not a regular case," she explains. "Because after all, Mr. Neutra was considered a genius and he was a very creative person. I mean, if you are just married to a regular person who just wants to make a living without any particular ideas to make a better world, there is not enough reason for a woman to really devote her life. I think that is a difficulty."

These ideas are the nervous

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Disco may be dead, but on its 10-year anniversary, punk rock is still kicking. Sure, it may not be in the Top 10, but its radical influences are still being felt/H3

Arthur C. Clarke, the dean of living writers, has done it again with "The Sc Earth," a story about mankind's survivor

NEUTRA: Architect sought immortality with wife

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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 lavishly glass-enclosed house adapted (after 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 singer in the world or the most famous cellist in the world, I still would rather be married to you.' At the end of his life, he said to me, 'People think I admire you because you have helped me so much, but nobody knows how . . . you had always time to listen to me and you immediately understood me.'

"Because his recreation was to develop ideas. For instance, we would be driving along — I would always drive — and we would see a girl coming out of a beauty parlor with one of those big things they used to have (she gestures to show a beehive hairdo). Well, he would immediately take out his notebook and that triggered some association which he would connect with this apparition. . . . I had a file of such ideas."

Neutra's ideas were part of the legacy of the modern movement that revolutionized architecture in our century. Born in 1892 in Imperial Vienna, he worked for architects in Switzerland and Germany before leaving for the United States in 1923 to make contact with noted architects Louis Henry Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright.

America was a revelation. New York, he wrote to his bride, was "filled with a wild accidental beauty." In Chicago "horrible nude figures and tasteless obscenities are on posters on every corner and wall." Finally reunited with his wife in 1925, he worked briefly for Wright before striking out for Cali-

Neutra legacy includes Sch

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 1968 (which he shared with his son Dion, with whom he was in partnership). Dione 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 Hines, 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 1961 for evangelist Robert Schuller, who wanted to combine the casualness of the sermons he'd been 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

fornia, where he hoped to begin his career in earnest.

Wright, a notable curmudgeon, sent the couple a letter 32 years later that reflected his disappointment at Neutra's youthful independence. "I have always felt Richard neglected his best interests in not making more of his relationship to me and my work, and trying like most young men to prove me old and themselves new," he wrote. "I know that it is inevitable in America and so no indictment."

In Los Angeles, Neutra began his habit of rising at dawn to snatch some time for the development of his own architectural ideas, before working at the few projects he could find to bring in a bit of money for his family, which would soon include three sons. ("I simply cannot find any free time to work for myself," he wrote in anguish to Mrs. Neutra's mother.) According to Mrs. Neutra, every one of his 14 books was written between 4 and 8 a.m.

Later, Neutra would become one of the leading modernists in his profession, designing critically acclaimed homes as well as public

buildings (including the Orange County Courthouse in Santa Ana, portions of Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa and the Garden Grove Community Church). In 1949, his picture graced the cover of Time magazine.

But in the early years, clients with the vision and bravery to risk having a "modern" house built for them — especially by an architect who so far had created more theories than buildings — were particularly scarce. Finally in 1932, he received his first commission. His pleased clients would write to praise the "vitality" of their home and its ability to teach them "the value of living in space."

The qualities for which Neutra was most acclaimed were those hardest to see in a photograph or a plan. His skill in landscaping and siting homes was legendary. Huge glass windows receptive to light and wafting breezes, reflecting pools and "water roofs" (shallow, breeze-rippled pools viewable from the sun deck or solarium) made his houses receptive to the outdoors.

Inside, mirrors made small

e's devotion

uller church

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 aerodynamic design of cars of the era.

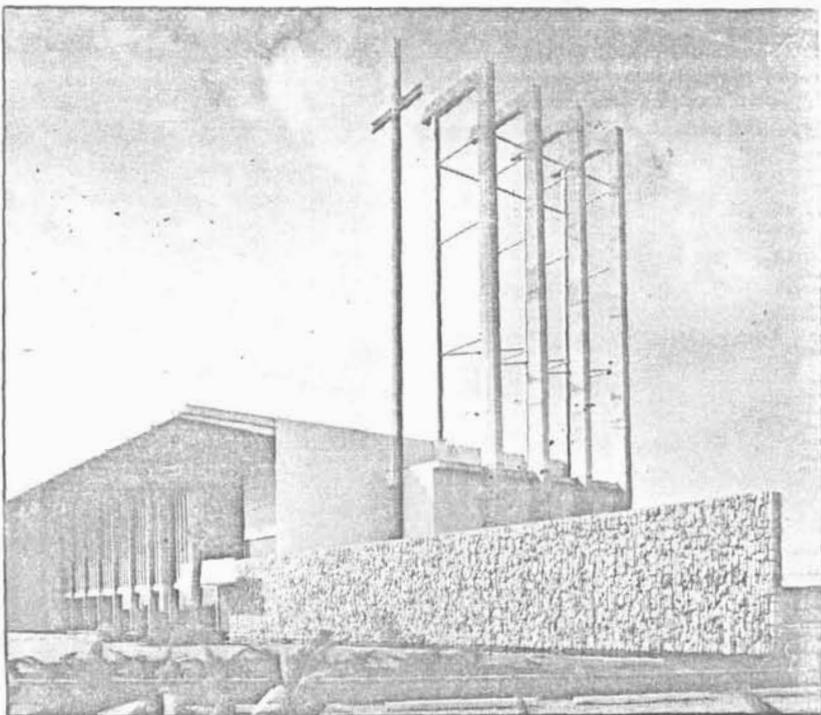
Although Hines calls this structure "the most celebrated large building of Neutra's last decade," he also notes that the vertical pattern of stones set end to end in the long wall dominating the facade looks unnatural. Seemingly an attempt to warm up his tensely pared-down approach to architecture, the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

Cathy Curtis

spaces look like larger ones and — at least in the earlier houses — Neutra's non-doctrinaire spaces made it possible for clients to use furniture of any period — in contrast to the less forgiving architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

"A well-designed house affects our entire sense of space," he wrote to his wife in 1920. "It is composed of many ingredients . . . a sense of smell, of touch, of hearing, of temperature and the eye, also an obscure sense for materials. . . . A current of air, a draft, a breeze . . . the exhalation of plaster, stone heated by the sun, a musty basement or underground water odor . . . the reverberation of my steps, the echo from tapestries or flagstones . . . all this affects the heart more than a view."

In designing private dwellings, Neutra combined this sensual, poetic sensibility with enormous care in ferreting out his clients' every need. His biographer, Thomas Hines, has written that Neutra found it necessary to "fall in love" with clients and "to weave a kind of legend around their lives which had little to do with reality."



Richard Neutra incorporated the feel of a drive-in theater in the Garden Grove Community Church he designed for evangelist Robert Schuller in 1961.

"I was always so amused," said Mrs. Neutra, reminiscing 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 agrees 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 . . . you have the feeling, that's my doctor . . . (Clients) 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 houses, he wrote peevishly, "I had always hoped that this new architecture would produce a different 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 popular as outdoor barbecues to

middle-class Americans, often seems lifeless and didactic. Of course, he was hardly alone. The initial vigor of the entire modernist movement had largely dwindled into rote gesture, paving the way for the new vision known as "post-modernism."

At the same time, Neutra's behavior — always subject to severe mood swings, as shown in his drastically contrasting letters — had become increasingly erratic and tyrannical. Now he was not above staging heart attacks or demanding bedside meetings with clients as a ploy to elicit sympathy.

But the legacy of his creative thinking — and his buildings of the 1930s and '40s — remains. As he wrote in his most famous book, "Survival Through Design," architecture has everything to do with the effect of sensory stimuli on human beings.

Taking as an example a wide sliding door that leads to a garden, he says that the benefit of having such a door "cannot be measured by counting how often and how steadily the door is used, or how many hours it stays open." Far more important is the way the door offers "the first deep breath of liberation . . . before breakfast or on the first warm and scented spring day."