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 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.

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.

“Our was, I realize it, not a regular case,” she explains.

“But 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

Please see NEUTRA/H8
Neutra legacy includes Schindler's legacy.

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). Dion Neutra says his 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...
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."

"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."

"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."