Session 6

Reconstructing Modernism: Research and Documentation of Los Angeles Architectural Masterworks

April 2, 2001

Art Libraries Society of North America 29th Annual Conference, Los Angeles, CA

Moderators:

Paul Glassman, Director of the Library, New York School of Interior Design
Deborah Husted Koshinsky, Director, Architecture & Environmental Design Library, Arizona State University

Recorder: Sarah McCleskey

Sponsors: Architecture Section; Decorative Arts Round Table

Supporter: HW Wilson Co.

Speakers:


James M. Steele, Associate Professor, School of Architecture, University of Southern California “The Legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright”

Jeffrey Chusid, AIA, Director, Preservation Program, UT, Austin "Reading the Documents of Southern California Modernism"

Lionel March, Professor, Dept. of Design/Media Arts, University of California, Los Angeles "Archival Evidence and Recent Restorations: The Case of R.M. Schindler"

Related Events:


Tours 11 and 17: Ennis-Brown and Schindler-Chase Houses
Tour 13: Palm Springs Art and Architecture

Introduction:

Paul Glassman introduced the session by discussing the importance of the archive of the structural engineer and architect Jaroslav J. Polivka and his structural design solutions for the Guggenheim Museum (the archive is housed at SUNY Buffalo Libraries). He also discussed changes made to Frank Lloyd Wright’s home in Oak Park, Illinois during restoration. The session would focus on which aspects of research and documentation help in making preservation or restoration decisions.

In the 1970s and 1980s scholars questioned the future of “modernism” and many modernist structures were torn down. The temporal nature of some construction materials has caused problems for remaining structures. How can we as information specialists, scholars and writers provide assistance?

Michael Darling

Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Mr. Darling most recently organized the exhibition “The Architecture of R. M. Schindler” at MOCA and contributed to its exhibit catalog.

Mr. Darling’s talk was aimed at raising consciousness of challenges Schindler buildings face. Many Schindler buildings have been torn down recently. Darling emphasized the architectural importance of these structures, especially in Los Angeles. A major lender to the Schindler
exhibition at MOCA is the Architecture and Design Collection of the University Art Museum at the University of California at Santa Barbara (a valuable and deep archive focusing on Southern California-based architects including Schindler, Irving Gill, Kem Weber, and other modernists). The Schindler archive is very thorough, with correspondence, notes, lumber lists, working drawings, photographs, furniture, etc. The archive was founded in 1963 by Dr. David Gebhard (1927-1996), architectural historian and professor in the History of Art and Architecture Department. It is currently under reorganization, and many new materials have become accessible. A complete list of designers represented in the Archive is available at http://www.uam.ucsb.edu/Pages/adc_list.html.

There is considerable documentation for Schindler’s works. A problem in attempting conservation of his works is that he used improvisatory plans and sketches and is known for having been on the site with nails and a hammer, making design changes on the spot. It is very difficult to reinterpret what he actually did, especially compared to someone like Richard Neutra, who made very detailed drawings.

For the exhibit, Mr. Darling and staff at MOCA wanted to make a coherent story, but found that Schindler’s drawings and photos are sometimes hard to explain. Sometimes there weren’t good drawings available in the archive. From a conservation standpoint, many of the drawings are on vellum. The exhibition’s goal was to trace Schindler’s work from his early years in Vienna until his final days in California. (Schindler died in 1953.) Fortunately there was a large budget for conservation. The exhibition will eventually go on tour.

Schindler didn’t design many public buildings. The exhibition designers tried to break down the galleries at MOCA to reflect his style. They used dropped ceilings, cheap laminate, corrugated cardboard, etc. The exhibit hints at Schindlerian concepts like roofs changing into walls, materials coming and going and wrapping around corners.

One challenge for the exhibit designers was the different scales of paper for the designs. To create visual coherence they adopted a system of standardized frame sizes with a panel on top for text. They put preparatory sketches on a drawing-table-like surface. This brought some order to the material. Models were placed adjacent to the drawings. Architecture students in the area created many of the models. The students visited archives and actual houses to create the models.

Schindler made presentation drawings for the A.E. Rose Beach Colony in 1937. It was never built, but the archive has lots of information about it. It had individual cabanas, and the exhibit features a full-scale recreation of a cabana. This has been one of the most successful parts of the exhibit. It is built of very simple materials, mostly wood and canvas. This demonstrates how a properly maintained archive can yield new insights into an architect’s work.

After the exhibition closes at MOCA, it will go to National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. then on to a museum in Vienna.

James Steele
Associate Professor, School of Architecture, University of Southern California

Professor Steele has published widely, with an emphasis on Schindler. In 1999 his monograph R.M. Schindler was published by Taschen. His topic for this session was “The Legacy of F.L. Wright in Los Angeles.”

Steele’s work on the Hollyhock (Aline Barnsdall) House showed him the difficulty of getting information on Frank Lloyd Wright Los Angeles. There is a Special Collections Archive at the Getty Research Institute that has 23,000 photos and correspondence (10,300 on microfiche). However, these were eventually controlled by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation at Taliesin West and made somewhat less accessible; a charge was added for each photo to be published.

Hollyhock House was a reinvention of Wright’s persona after the failure of his firm in Chicago. He was overwhelmed by the natural phenomena in Los Angeles … earth, air, fire, water. The Hollyhock House represents these elements. It is an anomaly in his work, very different from Prairie School houses. Wright used Mayan architectural expression (indigenous American) in the design, although he never called it that. This house had an enormous effect on other architects, such as Frank Gehry in the Schnabel House.

In addition to research at the Getty, Professor Steele also worked with curator of the Hollyhock House. The Getty had some documentation. There is a floor plan and an elevation, but they are not easily read. The Getty also had some drawings; these were important because the structure looks like a concrete house but in fact is wood frame with stucco.

Wright’s Samuel Freeman House has been another case study. Documentation of its design is lacking. The Northridge earthquake caused extensive damage to the structural system of the house, already vulnerable because of its unique construction system. Acid rain and smog have caused deterioration of the porous concrete block. Deferred maintenance and some expedient alterations have also exacted a price.

The University of Southern California now owns the Freeman House and is restoring it. The process has been very frustrating because the documentation is not thorough. USC. faculty and students did some computer drawings of plans and elevations to assist in the restoration. The house should be structurally stable by May 2001. It was actually sliding down toward Highland Avenue, and the walls were bulging to the point of failure. Engineers also had to do a set of drawings for the work. The restoration cost 1.5 million dollars and focused on bolting the walls on the
with structures like big grain elevators on rivers that are no longer used? Some modernist structures are still functional (e.g., Hoover Dam). The Research Tower at Wright's Johnson Wax Building is no longer functional. It has only one staircase and does not meet fire codes.

Train stations when an appliance in a significant modernist home is no longer functional? What if you can't find light bulbs to fit fixtures? What should be done?

A structure such as the Salk Institute (a laboratory) is a machine, as are houses (e.g., kitchens with stoves, refrigerators, etc.). What should be done when an appliance in a significant modernist home is no longer functional? What if you can’t find light bulbs to fit fixtures? What should be done with structures like big grain elevators on rivers that are no longer used? Some modernist structures are still functional (e.g., Hoover Dam). The Research Tower at Wright’s Johnson Wax Building is no longer functional. It has only one staircase and does not meet fire codes. Train stations are also disappearing. Transportation venues (stairs, roads, etc.) raise technological issues.

Modernist design also raises lifestyle issues. The Morgan House (Irving Gill, 1907) was designed with the health of the inhabitants in mind. There are no window sills to gather dust. All the walls have curved corners. The structure is very clean and stripped down. The living area is
design to be both inside and outside: nature became a benign force and accommodated the inhabitant’s life style in the garden.

In the social context of the growing population of Los Angeles in the 1920s, Frank Lloyd Wright was trying to make a mark. The eclectic 1920s architectural styles gave him lots of choices. Wright designed the Freeman House in 1924; then he went back to Chicago and left his son to figure out his design and make it work. The hillside house overlooks the city. It was meant to be a do-it-yourself kit house! It is one of the smallest houses Wright designed, without maid’s quarters or other service spaces, yet it has the rigorous geometries Wright was so interested in. The plan is divided into four 28-foot squares.

The concrete block system and glazed openings are important in the Freeman House. The visitor goes inside through a narrow dark passage with light at the end, arrives at the hearth, the center of the home, and then moves to a wall that overlooks the city. It has been said that the structure has the “appearance of honesty” rather than the “honesty of appearance.” The corner windows form a glass curtain wall, draped two stories tall, with very thin mullions. A thin block of oak had to be situated at the corner to receive the joints. Schindler, Neutra, and Lautner also worked on this house. The windows had big gaps. Metal was wrapped over the roof to prevent leaks that plagued the house from early on. The light through the clerestories inside is stunning. One can tell the time of day and time of year a photo was taken from the quality of the light.

The Freeman House has lots of Schindler furnishings (lamp, tea cart, and a coffee table that Wright designed as a dining table but that Schindler cut down). Schindler created “apartments” within the house, basically to help his clients pay the rent. Schindler liked to do things cheaply and help his clients pay. He put an apartment downstairs and built a small kitchenette into a cabinet down there. This raises the question of whether you keep the structural changes or take them away during restoration.

Unfortunately, the Freeman House has been deteriorating from the day it was built. There are many telegrams back and forth describing problems and cost overruns. Lots of problems had to do with the blocks. They were hand-created, 75-100 per day, and 11,000 were needed to complete the whole house. There were 54 varieties of blocks, and a big hole in side of the structure dates from 1925.

Preservation of the Freeman House raises some major issues facing conservators. Are the architect’s intentions more important than technology or actual historic fabric? In modern architecture, often materials are off-the-shelf or experimental, and to replace them with a custom piece would be very expensive. Replacing materials with manufactured material is cheaper, but it would not be the original material. The Europeans tend to think that the architect’s intentions are paramount; their American counterparts think that the historic fabric is more important, probably because we’re a younger nation.

Lionel March was scheduled to speak but was not able to attend.

Questions:

1) How we can collect and preserve drawings for things that are being built today? Computer aided design adds more problems to the issue. Also, what makes something significant or historic? Libraries and archives can try to stay in touch with firms about collecting significant drawings. Measured, as-built drawings assist researchers to follow through the course of a building and understand its design and structure.

2) There was a request for more information about work on the archive at UCSB. Materials in the archive have been more rigorously organized than in the past, with new folders, better boxes, and better finding aids.

3) Do State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs) support conservation of modern buildings (with funding)? Most do not do this yet. There is so much sense of urgency to preserve older things and people think there are so many modernist structures around that they don’t need to attempt preservation. An example is Albert Frey’s gas station at the bottom of the Palm Springs Tramway. It has been saved, but only after a rancorous campaign. The question of historical materials raises real issues. For example, if there is a plastic skylight that’s cracked, Europeans would probably throw it away and replace it; the U.S. Park service would save it to show the material and how it performed over time. Often there is a lot of political pressure, where the mayor or another official is telling the historical commission what to do.

4) There are a great variety of sources. Which can we rely on? To what degree can we rely on memory for things like color for achieving historical accuracy? It’s very necessary to have more than one source, and to go to original sources when possible. You have to dig a lot and get as many points of information as you can. Documented sources are better than relying on memory if you can get them. Often if you talk to different people about the same project you get different versions. Mies van der Rohe said “Less is more,” and this can apply to preservation as well. Elements of preservation are rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. The less we change things, the less we mess them up.