

## LOCAL HISTORY

# Women helped bring key desert architecture

## Historic importance of houses has kept interest

Tracy Conrad

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Two old friends, once business partners then enemy competitors, were both ailing late in life. They had been estranged for more than two decades, though their lives and careers were inextricably entangled. In an unlikely twist of fate, in 1953 they were both ill and found themselves assigned to the same hospital room. The only report of their interaction in that room was that the two men, famous architects Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler, spoke in German and laughed.

Impossibly improbable, the moment was real but the stuff of fiction. Writer Tom Lazarus imagined the conversation in that room for his stage play, "The Princes of King's Road." Modernism Week's Mark Davis had the idea to bring the play to Palm Springs in 2019, and rightfully so, as both architects produced projects in the desert.

Neutra is now widely known for the Kaufmann House, having procured the commission over his mentor and idol Frank Lloyd Wright, but both Neutra and Schindler designed intimate and interesting houses for equally interesting, yet idiosyncratic female clients in the desert. Those projects represent a triumph of individuality, adventurous spirit and modesty in modern design.

Long before the Kaufmann commission, Neutra designed a house for Grace Lewis Miller in Palm Springs. Widowed in 1935, Miller's life changed dramatically with the death of her physician husband. She threw herself into academic research, studying the history of Meriwether Lewis, with whom she claimed no relation, extensively. To say she was engrossed with his life is an understatement. She spent the next thirty years in libraries, historical societies and archives expanding the understanding of the explorer-scientist beyond the usual documentation of the expedition to the Pacific. Thinking his story underappreciated and wildly dramatic, she wrote a script for a 1938 film and produced numerous articles on various aspects of



Schindler's Maryon Toole house in Palm Desert. COURTESY LUKE LEUSCHNER

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his life ignored by male historians. Her sons donated her research and personal papers to the National Park Service's Jefferson National Expansion Monument Archives.

Contained in those papers are also treasures of extensive correspondence between Miller and Neutra regarding her commission of a small house in the desert of Palm Springs. Choosing Neutra was a radical act, as he had not yet risen to prominence, and demonstrates Miller's sophistication and independence.

Neutra's sense of flexible space and willingness to consider the smallest details made the house extremely personal and well suited to his particular client. Documented in their epistolary exchange are discussions of her daily

routine, contents of her wardrobe and preferences for innumerable appointments. Neutra asked about how many jerseys and hats Miller had, designing drawers of different depths specifically for each.

The house had to accommodate her academic pursuits and varied interests in art and nature. Miller was a practitioner of the Mensendieck System of spinal exercises, developed by Bess Mensendieck, a European-trained female physician where students practiced their postures naked in front of a mirror, hence one wall of the main living space in the house was mirrored. Neutra employed all his knowledge from his Lovell Health House to enhance the therapeutic quality of the Miller house.

Miller knew that she "did not want a

Rubens, wanted a Picasso." Neutra reportedly arrived by car coupled to a trailer in which he was carrying a rotary table for drawing and an awning to study the rotational angles the sun and wind at the site.

The house invents the "open floor plan," with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, with all rooms easily accessed from the outside, which constituted another much larger living space. The spaces were flexible as in Japanese homes, where the function changes according to the time of day and the task at hand, described as "pragmatically elastic."

Miller was delighted by the resulting reflecting pool immediately adjacent to the screened-in porch, "The water attenuates the effect of the brightness of the sun and sometimes cause the nicest reflections dancing on the roof of the hall and the porch." Translucent glass provided privacy and glorious light. Sliding doors created connection to the outdoors and a sense of serenity as it allowed the delicate scent of citrus blossoms to perfume the bedroom enhancing the night's sleep.

While modest in scale, the house perfectly supported Miller's intense and eclectic lifestyle and set an example for efficient living.

Schindler beat Neutra to the desert by 15 years, designing a "cabin" in Coachella for Paul and Betty Popenoe in 1922. Thought to be the first modern structure ever built in the valley, it does not survive. But starting in 1946, contemporaneous with the Kaufmann House, Schindler designed a house for Maryon Toole to be built in Palm Village, an unincorporated area that would become part of Palm Desert.

Not much is known about Toole. Many desert dwellers with idiosyncratic, or alternative, lifestyles wanted it that way. She died at age 69 at Eisenhower Medical Center in 1985. She was one of the first residents of Palm Village and active in the newly merged city of Palm Desert. She was the first postmistress of Indian Wells and was a captain in the Women's Army Corps, serving during World War II and the Korean War. She and her close friend Sharlie "Lee" Andrews owned and operated the El Do-

**Continued on next page**

**22A | SUNDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2021 | THE DESERT SUN**

Continued from previous page

rado Date Gardens in Indian Wells. She worked for a time with Edith Eddy Ward in real estate. There is no record of her marrying; she had no children.

The dramatic house Schindler designed for Toole features stone walls that protrude into the interior of the house, seamlessly incorporating the outdoors. Large glass walls and clerestory windows illuminate the interior while the enormous, cantilevered roof provides respite from the desert sun. Schindler said, "the whole is shaded by an ample but lightly poised roof reminiscent of a giant oak leaf." Under that leaf, Schindler's design concentrated on careful appointment of the interiors and preserved views to the surrounding mountains in all directions. A central fireplace warmed the space during wintry nights. The highly functional design was elegant in the extreme.

Scholar Michael Darling said: "The richness of the Toole house shows an architect in full command of his medium, orchestrating a range of architectural concerns toward a fully integrated whole." The house was finished in 1948.

Just a few years later in 1953, Schindler, assigned by chance to the same hospital room, would laugh with his old friend Neutra. Schindler sadly would not leave the hospital.

That both Neutra and Schindler accepted commissions for small desert houses for single women was indeed modern at a time when women were mostly considered appurtenances to their husbands. The architecture that resulted speaks to the independence and intellect of both Miller and Toole as much as to the ingenuity of their respective architects.

The desert celebrates architecture in a few days with the fall preview weekend of Modernism Week. An easy and unscheduled way to learn more is had by visiting the Historical Society of Palm Desert where may be found new exhibits with previously unseen photographs and ephemera unearthed during the last year's delving into the archive.

*Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.*