

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES



The Maslon House in Rancho Mirage, from the Julius Shulman photography archive, 1936-1997. THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Destroyed Neutra-designed home haunts preservationists

Tracy Conrad Special to The Desert Sun

Commissioned in 1962 by Samuel and Luella Maslon, their Rancho Mirage house featured an open floor plan and dramatic vistas. The couple asked modernist Richard Neutra to design a house that combined their ideas with those of Frank Lloyd Wright and in which they could display their unequalled art collection.

Doug Hoveleson writing in Minneapolis Lawyer magazine noted “Maslon had means, motive and opportunity to purchase great art just as the abstract expressionist movement flowered. He spotted the up-and-comers and bought some pieces from artists early in their careers, before fame struck.”

“Both Maslon and his wife, Luella, were internationally renowned as art collectors and patrons of the arts. Sam and Luella landed in the ranks of the World’s Greatest Art Collectors annual listings by Art News, a bible of the international art world, for years.”

“After Luella died in 2001, preceded in death by Sam, much of the Maslons’ personal art collection was put up for auction in New York by Sotheby’s. The sale included a Giacometti sculpture that Sam purchased in the early 1940s for \$5,000 — the auctioneer had the original receipt — and sold for a reported \$13 million and change.”

With their sophisticated understanding of art, it was natural the Maslons would commission an important architect for an unrivaled house in a spectacular desert setting. The finished house was photographed by Julius Shulman and the images illustrate an elegance and majesty that mere words cannot capture.

Last week the volunteers at the Historical Society of Palm Desert arrived at the firehouse museum they operate to find a wooden sign gently perched against the wall at the front door. Laid there mysteriously overnight, the sign read simply “S. H. Maslon 70-900 Fairway Drive” in iconic aluminum lettering, now known as Neutraface.

The house it marked was brutally destroyed in 2002. (It’s impossible not to speculate about the tens of millions it would be worth today had it survived.) The address sign is haunting reminder from its wreckage. Much has been written about the modern architectural masterpiece and its baffling demise, but the story bears a re-telling. It is deeply mourned by both preservationists and architecture aficionados.

Historian Brad Dunning writing in April 2002 for the New York Times surveyed the destruction. “In a move that has stunned, outraged and saddened admirers of modern architecture, the city of Rancho Mirage, Calif., recently approved the demolition of an important 13-room house designed by Richard



Neutra in 1963. Neutra, who died in 1970, helped introduce the International style to America, redefining architecture in the 20th century with a series of remarkable residential pavilions. His houses are now cherished in the same way as Frank Lloyd Wright’s — as testaments to a uniquely original vision and a particularly pivotal moment in design history.”

“The residence of Samuel and Luella Maslon was situated between two fairways on the Tamarisk Country Club golf course. Tamarisk was founded after Jack Benny was refused membership at

the nearby Thunderbird because he was a Jew. Frank Sinatra, Ben Hogan and the Marx Brothers all had a helping hand in creating the new club, which quickly became a legend as the Rat Pack’s hedonist playground. Seldom was a home afforded such a perfect site. The Maslons’ house was surrounded on all sides by the unworldly green expanse of round-the-clock irrigated turf, isolated like an architectural model and spared the indignity of rubbing elbows with lesser creations. Mrs. Maslon was so enamored of the house (one of only three Neutras in the modernist mecca and

around Palm Springs) and her famous art collection that she stubbornly refused to leave even in the face of failing health. She died last year at home, and the property, still in excellent condition, was put on the market by her heirs and sold through Sotheby’s.”

“The thought that a house of this caliber would be in jeopardy escaped even the most paranoid preservationists. And this house was no slouch. This was Neutra with deep pockets on a breathtaking site with luxurious appointments. Its soaring, exaggerated (even for Neutra) flat-roof overhangs protected the artwork within from the harsh desert sun. Ingenious built-ins camouflaged resort necessities, like barbecues, charcoal bins and steam trays. Posh living on the links.”

Dunning recounts the wind up to its demise, “a contractor walked into Rancho Mirage City Hall and applied for a demolition permit. It was issued that same day with no review and no questions, stamped and approved. Service with a smile. The house was gone within a week.”

The then city manager of Rancho Mirage argued “that if the house was so important, why wasn’t it on the National Register?” To which Dunning wryly pointed out that if Alfred Hitchcock was such a good director, how come he never won an Oscar? The city manager said he had no idea who the architect was or what the house represented.

Daniel Foster writing for the Los Angeles Times in 2017 wondered, “The willful destruction of Richard Neutra’s masterpiece — the 1962 Maslon house — reads like a senseless architectural murder mystery. Richard Rotenberg bought the Rancho Mirage home in 2002 for \$2.45 million, having never set foot inside the incomparable design. Without explanation, he razed it within weeks, eliciting worldwide revulsion. Inflaming that paradox, Rotenberg later sold the lot and left town. For 15 years, the question — why did he do it? — has swirled around what has become legend in architectural circles.”

Rotenberg was from Minnesota as were the Maslons. Was he also an art collector like them? Did they know each other in business? Did Rotenberg know who Neutra was? Why did he buy an architecturally significant house apparently promising to preserve it and then raze it?

Rotenberg never returned Dunning’s calls seeking an explanation. Was there some prequel to the destruction story? No one knows, and as is often the case about incomprehensible acts of destruction, the question of “why” remains. Now 21 years later, it is certainly a moment to again ponder the perplexing story. Is the quietly reappeared address sign a preservation talisman or wistful ghost?