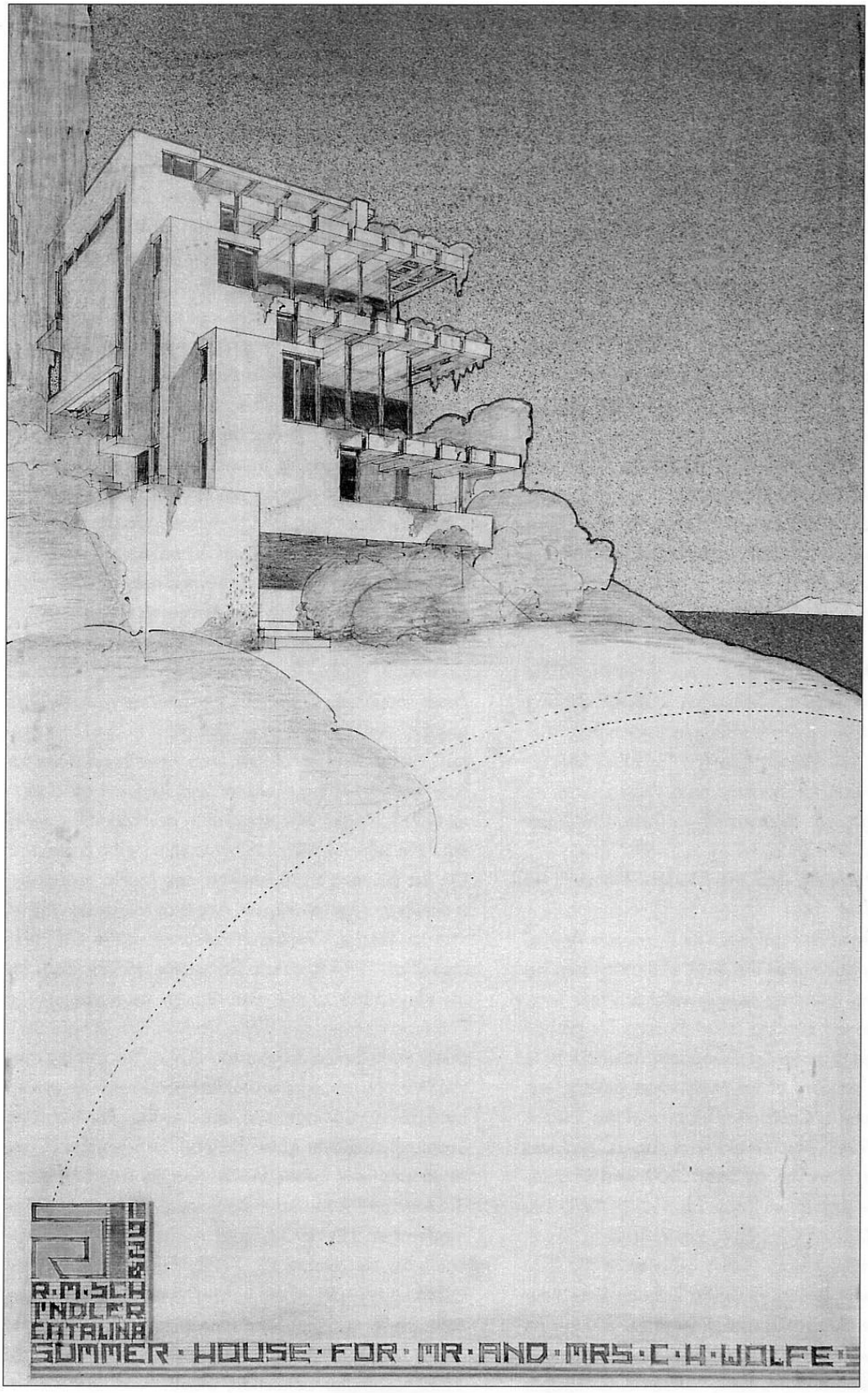


62. Wolfe House. Presentation drawing, 1928.

WOLFE HOUSE
1928-1929
AVALON, CATALINA ISLAND

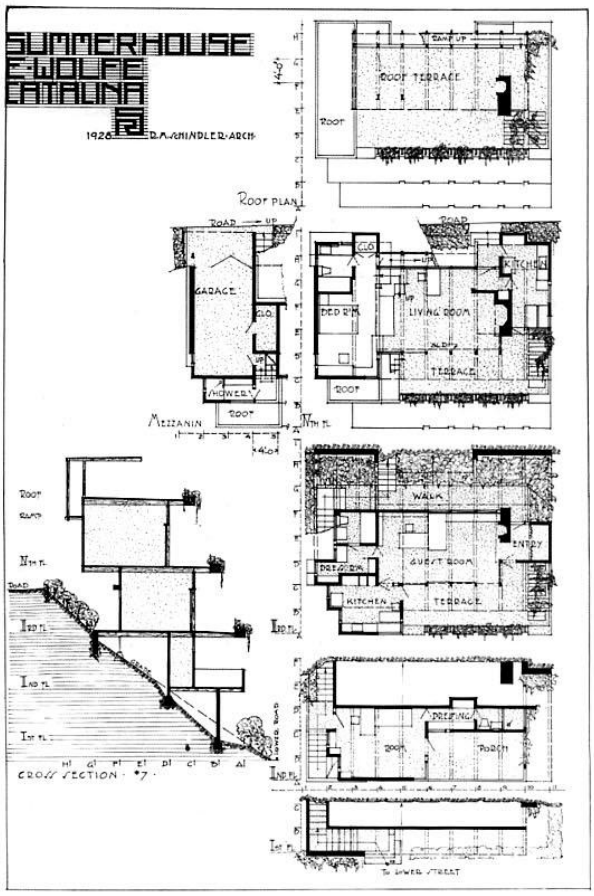
The Architect Observer: The Wolfe House and its Furniture

Furniture design has two aspects: on the one hand, the ideas, design process, and construction methods that have lead to the shaping and the making of the pieces; on the other, the often ignored relationship between the furniture and its users—how the design intention has differed from the way the furniture was actually used, and how the furniture has promoted or inspired certain behaviors and manners of living. If the former is about the object itself, the latter is about its relationship with a subject. While the first aspect is usually well documented, the second is often difficult to pin down because of the lack of data: the way modern architecture has been inhabited has rarely been discussed. Rudolph Schindler's Wolfe House on Santa Catalina Island (Fig. 62) is a rare example of the architect documenting the appropriation of his creation by its users. Two types of documents remain as evidence of this process: the usual sets of working drawings and photos of the built project, and a group of snapshots the architect took during a weekend in the house with his clients.

A Play House

Ethel and Charles Wolfe came to Los Angeles attracted by the boom of the movie industry and the charm of a new world at the frontier of western civilization. In 1920, they opened the Wolfe School of Costume Designing for stage and cinema in downtown Los Angeles. Through Leah Lovell, Ethel was introduced to Schindler and later commissioned him to design several projects, including the graphic identity of her institution, the remodeling of the school lobby, and a residence in Avalon.[1] In the school catalogue, the house is described as a "studio-home" and "the rendezvous for students during the summer season."[2] In Schindler's mind, the Wolfe House was the seed for a new type of architecture on Catalina Island, one which celebrates play, sports and outdoor life, as did his Lovell Beach House. In 1934, he wrote a letter to Mr. Wrigley, the chewing-gum tycoon who owned the island, to criticize the historical style of most buildings in Avalon: "Catalina should become the playground of the world, the spirit of play together with the climate and the characteristic landscape of Catalina should be sufficient to develop its own style—unique and delightful."[3]

The Wolfes required three separate apartments, one for themselves, one for their guests, and a small one for servants, which could also be used for guests (Fig. 63). Schindler describes



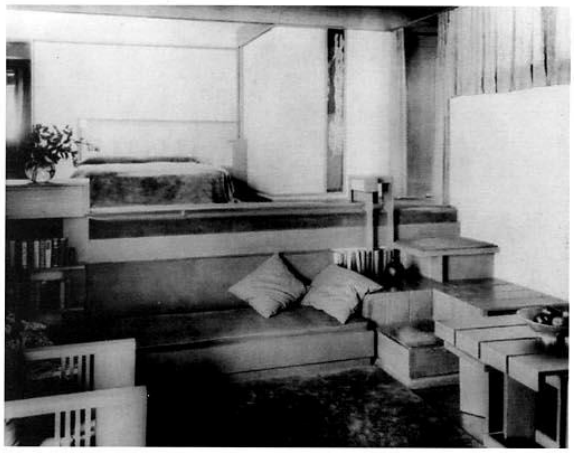
63. Wolfe House. Presentation drawing, 1928.

the house as "a composition of space units in and of the atmosphere above the hill."[4] The house is raised above the ground, avoiding expensive excavation and retaining walls. However, its cascading composition follows the natural contour of the site, thus appearing like an abstraction of the hillside itself. Each apartment is a single room flanked by a small bathroom and a kitchen. The largest one, for the Wolfes, is organized on two levels due to a car garage which is tucked in between the two upper apartments along the western façade of the building. A clear distinction is therefore introduced between day and night areas within the same room. Due to the steep slope of the site and the small dimensions of the lot, the outdoor living space for each apartment is limited to a private terrace overlooking the bay of Avalon to the south and the Pacific Ocean to the east. A partly covered roof terrace is accessed by a ramp from the owners' apartment. Within the spatial constraints of these small living quarters, furniture was bound to play an important role.[5]

A Sheltered Space for Living, which Means Movement [6]

The Wolfes' apartment exemplifies Schindler's ideas about the house as an "organism" in which, "every detail, including the furniture, is related to the whole and to the idea which is its source."[7] Schindler clearly differentiates "movable" from "stationary" furniture, the latter functioning as part of the architecture "until it is impossible to tell where the house ends and the furniture begins."[8] In the Wolfe apartment, a complex set of built-ins folds around the bedroom, defining both the change of levels and the limits between it and the living room below (Fig. 64). Not only is this built-in furniture practical in providing all the necessary amenities for a small *pied à terre*—dresser, bench, bookshelves, sofa, lamp, stair, storage area—but it also ingeniously saves space by offering multiple uses—the dresser includes a small stool which "disappears" when stored beneath it, the bench opens up for storage, the stair is a side table for the couch and a cupboard as well. The built-in furniture also emphasizes the orientation of the building envelope—the bedroom bench (Fig. 65) focuses attention on the corner window and the dramatic view over the bay and the ocean, while the stairs

suggests a diagonal axis through the living room towards the corner of the "L"-shaped terrace. Built-in furniture is not limited to indoor spaces; two wood benches covered with pillows were designed for the terrace, one of them large enough to sleep on.



64. Wolfe House. Living room and bedroom.

Schindler establishes a dimensional relationship between the built-in furniture and its room in order to visually tie them together—using one-by-eight inch planks of pine, he creates an eight-inch module—a subdivision of the typical four-foot grid on which the house is designed (see Fig. 63).[9] As the actual width of a one-by-eight inch is 7 1/4 inches, Schindler adds a one-by-one inch (actual size: 3/4 inch by 3/4 inch) in between the one-by-eight inch to maintain an eight-inch increment. He recesses the one-by-one inch by 1/16 or 1/8 inch, generating a pattern of "scored" lines which both express the module and its assembly. This modular construction doesn't imply a dry Cartesian design; on the contrary, the built-in furniture unfolds around the room with an organic sensuality, merging into one another, constantly changing forms, proportions and orientations. By remaining at the perimeter of the room, the furniture "clears out" the center, offering greater freedom of movement throughout the interior space.

65. Wolfe House. Bedroom.
Photograph by Brett Weston.

Types

While the design of the built-in furniture is site specific, the movable furniture further develops types established by Schindler in several previous projects. In Schindler's work, a type would evolve, to be reinvented for each new house according to specific requirements of the place, allowing him an opportunity to improve previous versions. The Wolfe House's "Club Chairs"[10] and stools are a development of those designed for the Kings Road House, with their proportions and details changed (Fig. 66). In order to be visually consistent, the built-in as well as the movable furniture use the

66. Wolfe House. Living room with Ethel Wolfe.

same modular principle. In the Wolfe House, the Club Chair (or box chair) is deeper than its predecessors so as to be more comfortable.[11] Schindler designed two different versions: "Club Chair A" appears on the construction documents, but cannot be found on the photos, suggesting that only "Club Chair B" was built. Four vertical one-by-one inch slats were nailed on the side of "Club Chair B" to reduce the cantilever of the back, which was due to the increase in depth. The stools are similar to those at Kings Road, but the seat is now made of two one-by-eight inch planks with a one-by-one inch in between them and one-by-two inch at

the border. The table is designed to lean against the north wall of the living room, but was intended to be movable; two wheels enable one person to roll it to the outdoor terrace. While the reading lamp is specific to the house (see Figs. 66-69), it is obviously derived from one previously designed for the Lovell Beach House.[12] The table, the stools, and the lamp exemplify Schindler's skills in weaving together regular pieces of wood, with standard joints, to create a visually rich and complex object. The table was built slightly differently from its construction documents.[13] Here and there a piece has moved, a detail has been simplified, suggesting that Schindler had an active role in the construction process.

A single motif unifies the furniture and the house. The table, bedroom dresser, reading lamp, and book shelves were all designed with a profile defining a folded plane, or inverted "L". Similarly, the profile of the club chair is an asymmetrically open and closed figure. This jib-shaped motif is not arbitrary, it unites the entire building. The shaping of the bathroom and kitchen volumes along the access road exemplifies this strategy. Here again, Schindler's furniture is not added to the architecture, it *is* architecture, and therefore subject to the same design principles.

Social Comfort

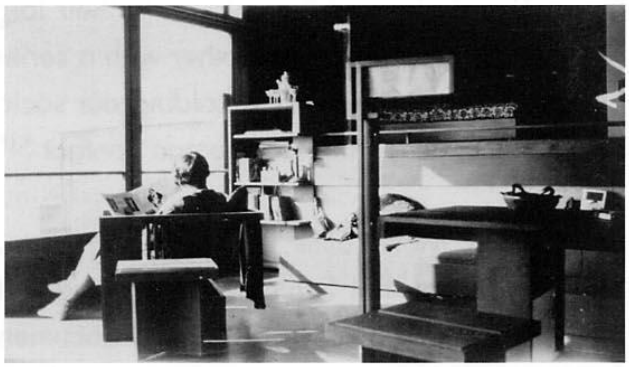
"We are again able to sit on the floor without physical, and especially, without social discomfort. The furniture is growing lower and lower."[14] In the Wolfe House, the floors are two inches of concrete poured on corrugated metal used as a lost form, both materials left exposed. Tectonically different from the rest of the enclosure, these concrete floors emphasize the importance of the expression of a "ground" in the articulation of the interior space, although the house is raised above the hillside. Tinted ocher yellow, the floor blended with the color of the pine wood of the built-in furniture, while the corrugated ceiling had a gold patina.[15] The furniture is kept low in order to preserve the spatial development of the room, heights set according to an eight inch increment to line up with the other features of the room—window mullions, fireplace opening, level change between the living room and bedroom. The chairs and the sofa, with their large pillows, suggest informal bodily positions: "Instead of impressing each other with a series of conventional postures and manners, certifying good ancestors and upholding our social prestige, we are trying to relax together, as the only way of getting real human contact."[16]

Still Lives vs. Movie Stills

It is unfortunate that Schindler, practicing in the capital of the movie industry, never used motion picture film as a medium to document his work, since his architecture so strongly focuses on and expresses experience and movement. In the case of the Wolfe House, two different sets of photos exist, one taken by professional photographer(s) for publication, the

67. Wolfe House. Living room with Charles Wolfe.
Photograph by R.M. Schindler.

other by Schindler himself, both showing the house in strikingly opposite ways. The Wolfes intended to use their summer house in Catalina as a promotional device for their school of costume design, and requested that Schindler publish it in at least one leading architectural magazine in the United States.[17] Schindler asked his friend Edward Weston to photograph it.[18] Overwhelmed with work, the famous photographer declined the invitation and his son Brett went instead. It is not clear, however, if Brett Weston took all the interior views of that set. Only the one showing the corner of the bedroom with the dresser is signed by him (see Fig. 65). The publication photos thoroughly document the interior of the Wolfes' apartment. It is through the display of certain objects—flowers in a vase, apples in a bowl, logs in the fireplace, that the presence of its inhabitants is suggested. The only exception is Ethel Wolfe who appears posing in one of the club chairs in the living room (see Fig. 66). But she seems mysteriously absent from the scene, turning her back to the camera, absorbed in her reading. In complying with the convention of architectural photography, these views are meant to enhance the work of the architect.



68. Wolfe House. Living room with Ethel Wolfe.
Photograph by R.M. Schindler.

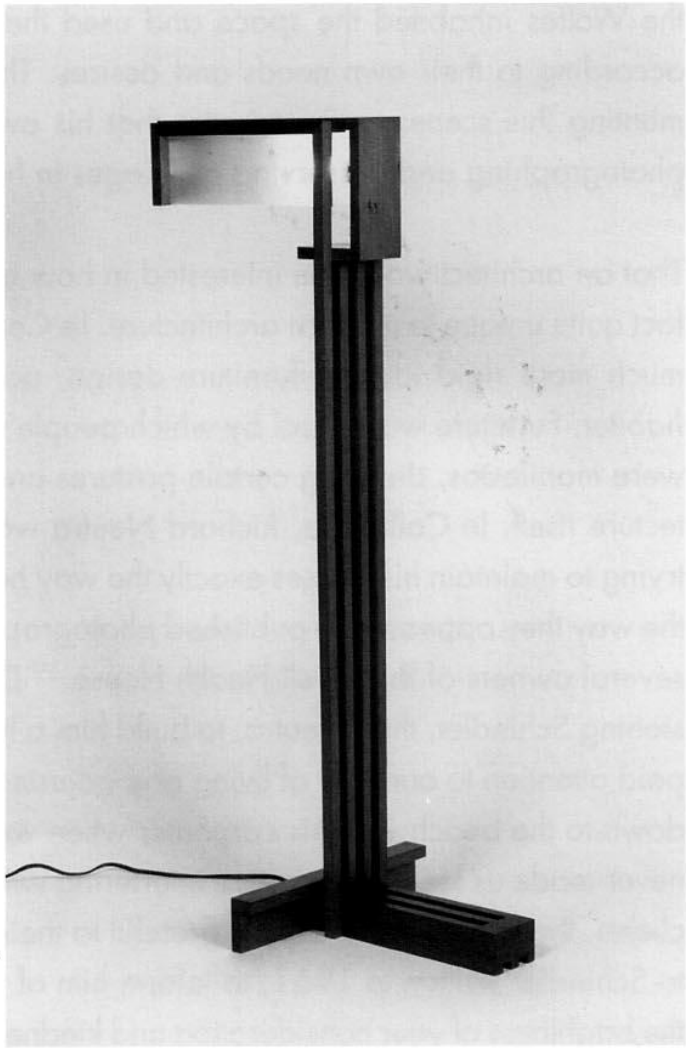
They are composed like still lifes, each objects has an assigned location in space. The use of a wide-angle lens makes the apartment appear much larger than it is in reality.

The second set is a series of snapshots that Schindler took with his camera during a weekend with the Wolfes. They depict a very different, lived-in scene: Charles is seated at a table wearing a bathing suit, smiling at the camera (Fig. 67); Ethel, comfortably nested in one of the club chairs, is browsing through a fashion magazine (Fig. 68). She is casually dressed, rather than in the formal gown worn in the publication photo. The furniture is placed randomly, jammed in the middle of the living room. Sunlight bursts into the room, hits the object surfaces, casting deep shadows onto the floor. The viewer's eye is low, to reinforce the presence of the furniture in the room. Schindler's snapshots have the look of movie stills. They are images of frozen movements, capturing moments when life, space, and furniture enhance each other, rather than celebrating architecture for its own sake. Schindler was aware of the frame of the camera as a limit: by leaving parts of the furniture and the room outside of the photo, he suggests that something just left the frame and something else will soon enter it, implying therefore an idea of sequence. These snapshots demonstrate the freedom with which the Wolfes inhabited the space and used their furniture, unafraid of moving them around according to their own needs and desires. They further reveal Schindler's interest in documenting this scene: an awareness that his own designs would encourage behavior worth photographing and preserving as images in his own files.

That an architect would be interested in how his furniture "lives" may seem normal, but is in fact quite unique in modern architecture. Le Corbusier and Marcel Breuer, for instance, had a much more rigid idea of furniture design, according to the overall concept of *machine à habiter*. Furniture was a tool by which people's lives and behaviors could be changed. They were manifestos, dictating certain postures and ways of living in compliance with the architecture itself. In California, Richard Neutra was well known for his neurotic obsession with trying to maintain his houses exactly the way he designed and furnished them (and therefore, the way they appeared in published photographs), evident in his autocratic behavior towards several owners of the Lovell Health House.[19] Dr. Lovell, who had the opportunity of commissioning Schindler, then Neutra, to build him a house, pointed out their differences: "Schindler paid attention to our way of living and adjusted to it, which Neutra didn't...RMS would drive down to the beach with his carpenter when we wanted something changed or repaired. He never made us feel that we were interfering with a work of art."[20] As with most of Schindler's clients, the Wolfes were deeply grateful to their architect, as testified by a letter from Charles to Schindler written in 1951, to inform him of the sale of their house: "The years do not dim the brightness of your consideration and kindness...Cheerio, Mr. Good Architect (and I MEAN it), and come in and say 'Howdy' when you're down here in the smoggy jungle."[21]

In his description of the Wolfe House Schindler writes that its "character...as a play house is emphasized by its form."[22] Is this playful theme present in the design of its furniture as well? The freedom with which the pieces can be moved or be grouped together, or remain separate, allows a certain playfulness strategically located, as in a chess game, or randomly scattered like dice thrown on a table, the patterns they create mirror the life of the house's inhabitants.

David Leclerc



69. Wolfe House. Floor lamp (reproduction). Photograph by Wayne McCall.

NOTES

[1] According to an undated letter from Leah Lovell to Schindler, inviting him to a tea party at their beach house to meet with Ethel Wolfe, R.M. Schindler Collection, Architectural Drawing Collection, University Art Museum, UCSB. Thanks to Marianne Stockbrand and Robert Weiner at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, for their hospitality during the redaction of this article in August 1996, and to Françoise Fromonot and Ramón García for their valuable editorial assistance.

[2] Wolfe School of Costume Designing catalogue, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

[3] Letter from R.M. Schindler to P.K. Wrigley dated February 24, 1934, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

[4] R.M. Schindler, description of the Wolfe House, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

[5] Documentation of the two lower units is lacking (our discussion will focus on the Wolfes' apartment). According to Schindler's furniture plan, the movable furniture (i.e., table, stool, club chair, lamp) was used in all three apartments. The only photo of the guest apartment, taken by Schindler, nonetheless shows a difference in the design of the table and a single bed specific to that unit.

[6] R.M. Schindler, "Care of the Body: 'About Furniture,'" *Los Angeles Times* (April 18, 1926).

[7] R.M. Schindler, "Furniture and the Modern House: A Theory of Interior Design," (Part 1) *The Architect and Engineer* 123 (1935): 22.

[8] R.M. Schindler, "The Contemporary House," *The Architect and Engineer* (January 1936): 25.

[9] R.M. Schindler, specifications for the cabinet work of the Wolfe House, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

[10] "Club Chair" is the name used by Schindler on the construction documents of the Wolfe House.

[11] The Kings Road House box chairs are 27 inches deep. According to the construction documents, the Wolfe House club chairs A and B were 32 inches deep.

[12] David Gebhard, ed., *The Architectural Drawings of R.M. Schindler* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), drawing #2041.

[13] According to a survey of the table by the author.

[14] Schindler, "About Furniture."

[15] According to a sample found by the author at the house.

[16] Schindler, "About Furniture."

[17] Consequently, the Wolfe house was one of Schindler's most published houses during the 1930s. According to Schindler's own publication list, it appeared in the Japanese review *Kokusai Kenchiku* (1931), *Architectural Record* (September 1931), *Creative Art* (February 1932), and *Architectural Review* (March 1933).

[18] According to an undated letter from Edward Weston to R.M. Schindler, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

[19] The current owner, Mrs. Topper, told the author in 1991 that Neutra would come without notice with some clients and furiously complain that her children had left some of their toys in the living room.

[20] Esther McCoy, *Vienna to Los Angeles: Two Journeys* (Santa Monica: Arts + Architecture Press, 1979), 68.

[21] Letter from Charles Wolfe to R.M. Schindler dated April 12, 1951, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

[22] R.M. Schindler, description of the Wolfe House.