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Sorry Rudy !

A visit to the exhibition "The Architecture of R.M. Schindler" at MOCA

By David Leclerc

The long overdue exhibition of Rudolph Schindler's work in his adopted city, Los Angeles, is currently on view at MOCA until June. One could only welcome and support MOCA's initiative to organize a retrospective of Schindler's work, at a time when it seems especially relevant to assess his unique contribution to Modernism and the importance of his legacy for today's architectural culture.

Schindler's drawings constitute the core of the exhibition curated by Elizabeth Smith and Michael Darling. Until now, only the few Schindler fans who made the pilgrimage to the Architecture and Design Collection of the Art Museum at UC Santa Barbara and rummaged through the drawers and files of the Schindler Archives, knew the many treasures and exquisite colored renderings that the archives contain. Many of these drawings have never been exhibited or published before. One of the merits of the MOCA show is the exhibition of this material, which allows the public to admire the architect's graphic skills.

The exhibition design by Chu+Gooding Architects should also be commended for providing spatial flow to MOCA's scaleless large exhibition gallery (Schindler would probably have felt more at home at the Geffen Contemporary) and for its sensitive use of materials. But the desire for handsome wall compositions often limits the amount of documentation presented for each project. The emptiness of the entry space, with its monumental overhanging canopy, designed as a mood-setter/ conceptual installation, is also quite foreign to the spirit of Schindler's architecture.

The tone is set in the first exhibition gallery: only a very brief text provides limited information on the architect's education, background, and early works (not much more can be found in the exhibition brochure either). Thankfully, a careful selection of drawings speaks for itself and illustrates the various influences that shaped Schindler's architectural language. One admires the maturity of his student projects at Vienna's Wagner School and his early interest in shaping the modern city and designing large urban projects. The meticulous sketches and photographs made during his 1915 trip to New

Mexico reveal Schindler's interest in the local vernacular. The dialectic between adobe walls and exposed wood structures (such as columns and porches), observed by the architect in buildings in Taos and Santa Fe, would later inspire one of the main architectural themes of his own house on Kings Road in West Hollywood. The dramatic perspective for the Adobe House (1915) - showing the building stretched snake-like between the two expanses of ground and sky - introduces the fundamental ideals of Schindler's architecture: its quest for horizontality as a sign of democracy and his constant questioning of the relationship between the building and its natural environment.

Schindler's interest in the American culture of construction reaches its final development in the fascinating Wrightian reinterpretation of the Log House (1916-18). This traditional construction technique provided him with a reference in modular construction system, while revealing the necessity of the grid as an underlying principle in the composition of space.

The last seminal figure in Schindler's training is Frank Lloyd Wright. But the exhibition provides little information about Schindler's pivotal years at Wright's offices. The few projects on display do not help to clarify the complexity of their relationship. They reveal, nonetheless, that the ease with which Schindler absorbed and mastered Wright's architectural ideas went along with the maturation of his own identity. The Bergen Library (1920), a competition project designed by Schindler outside of Wright's office, provides an interesting example. The building's massing and elevations are clearly influenced by the master, but the L-shaped plan offers a spatial sequence organized along a diagonal axis - a strategy which is very unlike Wright, and clearly prefigures some of Schindler's later projects, such as the How House (1925-26) and the Bethlehem Baptist Church (1944-45).

While the curators have clearly opted for an economy of words in this first room, Schindler is also asked to remain mute. As early as 1911, while still in Vienna, Schindler wrote "A Program," which announces with striking clarity what will become the ideological framework of his entire architectural production. In reading this short manifesto, the visitor could have been aware that long before Schindler arrived in America, discovered Wright's Prairie Houses, and experienced the southwestern landscape and the California climate, he had already made Nature a central idea in his architecture. How can such a seminal document be excluded from "the most comprehensive show of Schindler's work to date?"

The Kings Road House (1921-22) introduces the visitor to the body of work produced by Schindler in Los Angeles from 1922 until his death in 1953. The importance of this house in Schindler's work and in the history of Modern Architecture has been already well assessed. But the exhibition makes little effort

to convey the originality of the design or the social ideas and innovative way of life it promoted. The presentation of this seminal project is reduced to a brief statement, a tasteful selection of drawings, and a few construction photographs. Schindler's own words explaining the architectural theme of the house are absent, as well as most of the period photographs showing the life at the Schindler house in the twenties. The decision to ignore both the architect's ideas and the cultural and social context in which the work was produced is unfortunately consistent throughout the exhibition.

The Lovell Beach House is presented as the first of several projects from the 1920s. The curators have taken the date of the commission and some early sketches from 1922, rather than the date of the final design and its construction in 1926, to locate the project in the chronological order of the exhibition. This compromises an understanding of the transformation of Schindler's ideas and architectural language during the 1920s. The Lovell Beach House's cast-in place frames are Schindler's last experimentation with concrete. The complex enclosure of the house further announces the "skin design" of the 1930s and the architect's problematic relationship with European modernism. The house should therefore be presented after Pueblo Ribera (1923-25), the Packard House (1924), and the How House (1925), which were all built previous to it.

But even more problematic is the single period photograph of the interior of the Lovell Beach House on display and the absence of models, preventing any clear understanding of the complex sectional idea of the building. Nothing is said either about the unique personality of Schindler's client, Dr. Lovell, one of the great supporters of modern architecture in Southern California, and his wild ideas about health, sexuality and living nude in the open, which deeply influenced the organization of the interior spaces.

The rest of the exhibition confirms this rather dry, insensitive, and superficial presentation of Schindler's residential work. The projects' presentation relies mainly on Schindler's color renderings and an eclectic collection of models with no consistency of craft or scale. The large detail models, for example, are helpful to understand the tectonic qualities of some buildings, but they should have been presented along with a model of the house on its site, so one can visualize how the detail relates to the whole.

By leaving aside some precious photographic material from the archives, one cannot appreciate the inner spatial and tectonic qualities of Schindler's architecture. Only two photographs illustrate most projects (one outdoor view and one indoor view). Some houses don't even have that privilege: the Buck House, for example, one of Schindler's most famous projects of the 1930s, is denied any interior photographs or a model, while it is presented on large horizontal plane mostly left vacant! The wonderful

photographic survey of the Wolfe House, by Brett Weston, son of the famous photographer Edward Weston, is missing, as well as the set of snapshots of the interior, taken by Schindler himself during a weekend in Catalina with the Wolfes, when there is plenty of empty space on the board to present this material. These photographs would have offered a unique opportunity to understand the spatial and tectonic qualities of the interior spaces, to observe the Wolfe's casual and relax life-style, to reveal their joy in living in Schindler's architecture, and to finally remind the public of the importance of this house, which is today in a complete state of decay.

Nothing is said in the exhibition, either, of Schindler's ideas for the design of apartment buildings: his desire to make them part of the hillside, and the architect's mastery in providing each unit with private access, multiple exposures, outdoor private spaces and views. There is no documentation of the Sachs Apartments or the extraordinary apartment building built for S.T. Falk in 1939 on a triangular corner lot in Silverlake (only an unbuilt project from 1943 for the same client is presented in the exhibition).

The role of furniture in Schindler's space architecture is also neglected. Rather than presenting some orphaned pieces of furniture scattered throughout the show, and mixing original pieces with questionable contemporary reproductions, it would have been more interesting to recreate an interior space, in order to illustrate the intricate relationship that Schindler is able to create between the architecture of a room and its furniture. Schindler's profound belief that architecture is designed from inside out is precisely what the curators of this exhibition have consistently ignored. The word "space" or "Space Architecture," which is how Schindler named his architectural theory, does not appear once in the exhibition statements or in the brochure. Quotations from the many essays Schindler wrote during his life to explain and clarify his ideas could have been easily included in the exhibition material to reveal the thinking behind the architecture.

Aside from the disappointing presentation of the residential work, the exhibition, nonetheless, provides an interesting opportunity to discover some less known aspects of Schindler's work, including his interest in the design of the American city and its commercial strips. Following the early commercial projects such as Sardi's dinner, Schindler designed many of the building types found in American roadside architecture: a steak house (1932-34), which ironically anticipates Robert Venturi's "Learning from Las Vegas" (the name of the restaurant chain, Lindy's, is built as facade); a rational proposal for a highway bungalow motel (1931); some constructivist design for Standard Oil Company service stations (1932); and, finally, the wonderful trailer project of 1942.

Another example of this great diversity of building types is the project for the Beach Colony in Santa Monica (1937), of which a reconstruction of one of the units is presented in the exhibition. But no documentation seems to have survived of the furniture scheme for the interior and the unit remains empty and closed, posing the question of whether it was the right sample of Schindler's architecture to present full-scale in the exhibition gallery.

The feeling that remains from a visit to the exhibition is one of Schindler as a skillful draftsman and the author of a quite eclectic architectural production. His projects are presented like the pieces of an unresolved puzzle, leaving the visitor unaware that they all come together to form a quite coherent and unique body of work. The exhibition is a handsome portfolio of projects, a beautiful drawing show, but provides very few clues to understanding the depth and the richness of Schindler's architecture. Finally, the well designed and illustrated catalog is utterly disappointing in its lack of new substantial criticism, with the exception of Michael Darling's sensitive essay on the roots of Schindler's architecture in local culture.

As for the relevance of Schindler's work to today's architectural culture, described as a central issue of the exhibition in the brochure, one can only conclude that this exhibition is symptomatic of the weakness that often characterizes today's architectural culture, more interested in form than content. As Schindler once said: "They forget that architecture as an art may have the much more important meaning of serving as a cultural agent - stimulating and fulfilling the urge for growth and extension of our own selves." ("Space Architecture," *Dune Forum*, 1934)

D.L.

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