

Sorry Rudy (Part 2)

A one year anniversary of the death of the Wolfe House

Los Angeles, August 2002

It has been already one year since the Wolfe House, Schindler's masterpiece of the late 1920s, built in Avalon on Catalina Island, has been demolished. Having had a close encounter with the house a couple of years before its death, I feel the need today to tell my story.

In April of 1996, I planned a trip to Catalina Island to check the condition of the Wolfe House and to include a description of the building in a guidebook I was writing on the work of Rudolph Schindler. The owner of the house, a lawyer who lived in Long Beach, told me that the top floor apartment, the famous unit designed for the Wolfes, was vacant. He agreed to tell me how to get inside of the apartment in exchange for a report on the building's condition upon my return. Stefanos Polyzoides had already told me a sad story about the house: during his last trip to Catalina Island, a pile of debris was standing in front of the house, waiting for the garbage truck to come; in this pile was some of the furniture Schindler had designed for the Wolfe apartment.

It was a clear spring day and the flowers were blooming. Compared with a period photograph from the 1920s found at the Schindler Archives, the small bay of Avalon did not seem to have changed very much. On arrival by boat from Long Beach, the Wolfe house could still be seen, perched on top of the hillside. In the twenties, it was the only house that dared climb the steep slope to enjoy a panoramic view on the bay and the ocean. Today, many houses have followed the Wolfe house's example, but without learning its lesson: the hillside is invaded by a series of stucco boxes that mostly ignore the slope on which they stand. But thanks to the luxuriant Southern Californian vegetation, the presence of these disruptive neighbors has been tempered.

I had been warned that the house was in poor condition. My fears were confirmed when the house appeared along the curving road. However, in spite of the obvious neglect, the make-up that various owners had put on its face over the years, a bodily posture which expressed the fragility of its prematurely-aging wood frame, the thick synthetic carpeting covering the concrete floor that Schindler was so proud of, and the loss of many pieces of furniture, the house had not lost any of its architectural strength: the genius mind who had designed it was still very much alive in every single aspect of the

building. Unfortunately, this was not the opinion of the neighbors, who considered the run-down property a shame to their community that should be cleaned up, or, preferably, destroyed as soon as possible. The neighbors also complained that the house was sometimes visited by adolescents or squatters for improvised parties: the abandoned Wolfe house had become a lover's lane.

In June 1996, I have a lunch in Paris with Jean Paul Robert, the editor of the magazine *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. I described to him my visit to the house and the emotional discovery of this abandoned masterpiece of modern architecture. I was commissioned to publish a double portrait of the house, in its past and present condition, for the October 1996 issue. Back in LA, I called the owner to get his approval to photograph and publish the house in its current state of decay (for which he was mainly responsible), along with a full analysis of its design and history. His refusal did not surprise me. But after some desperate attempts to convince him, he said he would give it some thought. A couple weeks went by and no answer. No architectural photographer from LA wanted to take the risk to shoot the house without the owner's agreement. Finally, Jean Paul and I decided that memory was more important than liability. A couple weeks later a young architectural photographer, Anne Marie Puga, arrived from Paris, with the assignment to do a portrait of the house.

I returned to Catalina Island with Anne Marie in July 1996. I was concerned that the owner would have locked the secret passage to get into the house or that someone would now occupy the Wolfe apartment. But nothing had changed. One still had to enter the garage through the unlocked aluminum sliding door (which had replaced the original wood one), and take a little stair that Schindler had designed to provide direct access to the terrace of the Wolfe apartment. From there, the spectacular view over the bay of Avalon and the ocean could be enjoyed. Inside, two queen size mattresses were now occupying the small living room, confirming the "lover's lane" activity. Anne Marie decided to work at night to erase the vulgar color scheme the house was painted in and to avoid the harsh summer light. Her mysterious photographs, which used the house as a camera obscura, were shot with very long exposures, using only the moonlight, the headlights of a car passing by, or the glowing street lights from the town below to light the interior space. I worked on my essay inside the house during the day, my laptop computer set on the remains of the rolling table that Schindler had designed for the Wolfe.

Once in a while, someone would knock at the door. Uncomfortable at being surprised during our unauthorized occupation, I offered the visitors a small tour of the house. I would explain to them Schindler's ingenious sectional idea: the volumes stepping down the slope, almost without touching it to avoid any excavation. But also his clever secret trick: by manipulating the ceiling heights along the

western facade, the architect was able to insert an additional mezzanine level between the guest quarters and the main apartment, for use as a single car garage. As a result, the Wolfe bedroom, located over the garage, was raised four feet above the living room, creating a Loosian spatial interplay and becoming the theme for an elaborate composition of built-in furniture. I told my guest about the clients, Ethel and Charles Wolfe, who had established a school of costume design in downtown Los Angeles. They met Schindler at a party in his recently completed Lovell Beach House on the Balboa Peninsula. Ethel, seduced as much by the architect as by his architecture, commissioned from Schindler a summer house on Catalina Island, which would also be a rendez-vous for their students during the summer months. Dedicated to the informal beach life, the program called for three independent living areas: an apartment for the Wolfes, an apartment for their guests, and a small servant's quarters.

During three days, the house was discussed, documented, and admired. The neighbors, intrigued by this sudden interest in a building that they always considered a disgrace to their environment, came in, asking questions about the house and the architect's ideas. The downstairs tenant, a surfer dude who had transformed the guest apartment into a beach cabana, became friendlier and saw our illegal activities as revenge on his careless landlord.

I knew the house was condemned. Too many years of neglect had compromised its structural integrity. The corrugated metal sheets, used as a lost form to pour the thin concrete slab onto the wood beams, were rusted to the point of disintegration. But restoration is always possible. What really threatened the house – even more than was the case with the recently destroyed Maslon House – was the value of the land on which it stood: a magnificent triple lot with an unobstructed view on the harbor and the ocean, a dream lot for any developer wanting to build condominiums for vacation rental. Neither the owner, nor the city of Avalon, was interested in protecting the building, (and the LA Conservancy can not intervene outside of LA City). Avalon is not Palm Springs, where one can hope to find a rich and enlightened patron of modern architecture to buy and restore a house, as it has been done in recent years.

But one can still feel guilty to not have done more to save this unique testimony of Schindler architecture. It was especially surprising, at a time when the work of Rudolph Schindler is finally getting the attention it deserves, that this "crime," committed just a few months after the closing of the MOCA's media-acclaimed exhibit, did not raise more reactions and protests. The recent scandal provoked by the savage demolition of Neutra's Maslon house in Rancho Mirage was covered by several newspapers, including a photo survey of the house "before and after" demolition in the Los Angeles Times Magazine. It helped lend exposure to an act of architectural and cultural barbarism, hopefully raising the public

awareness of the importance of the preservation of modern architecture. But the demolition of Schindler's Wolfe House, during the summer of 2001, has been mostly ignored by the media. Why did this tragic event not get the attention it deserved? Was it because of its remote location, on an island which has today become a tourist trap? Was it because of its poor condition? Or was it simply a reenactment of the grand Hollywood tradition of aged movie stars, who, having once basked in the limelight, are eventually forgotten by all?

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David Leclerc is an architect and critic. He has written and published several essays on Schindler's architecture:

Schindler Guide, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, Prestel 1995 - Schindler: La maison Wolfe, n°307, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Octobre 1996 - The Architect Observer, The Furniture of R.M. Schindler, University of California Santa Barbara, 1997 - The Cave and the Tent : An introduction to Schindler's domestic architecture, Kenchiku Bunka, 1999 - Sorry Rudy (Part 1), a review of the exhibition "Rudolph Schindler Architect" at MOCA, Los Angeles 2001, www.laforum.org, Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design.