

Edward Weston, portrait  
of Rudolph Schindler  
circa 1930.

This article originally appeared in *Criticat* 6 (September 2010).

David Leclerc is an architect and an associate professor at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Versailles. A former resident of Los Angeles, he is a specialist of Schindler's work.

After training as an architect in Vienna, Rudolph Schindler went to the United States in 1914, eventually settling in Los Angeles, where all of his works were built. The discovery of an unknown portrait of Schindler from the 1930s by the renowned American photographer Edward Weston serves as an opportunity to look back on the trajectories of these two figures and their intersecting cultural spheres.

## Hands On: A Portrait of Rudolph Schindler by Edward Weston David Leclerc

While doing research in the Rudolph Schindler archives during the summer of 1997, I stumbled upon an undated letter from Edward Weston, addressed to the Californian architect: "I'm sorry to have left you in suspense, but I had hoped to do the work up till the last moment: in fact had looked forward to the trip, having never seen Catalina. But every moment has been taken..."<sup>1</sup> It is reasonable to deduce, therefore, that Schindler had asked Weston to photograph his most recent work, the Wolfe House, built in 1929 on the small island of Catalina off the coast of Los Angeles, on a hill overlooking Avalon Bay.<sup>2</sup>

Edward Weston was a long-time friend of Rudolph Schindler and his wife Pauline, and one of the first visitors to their home on Kings Road, West Hollywood, where the couple had moved in the spring of 1922. The deeply experimental nature of this house apparently made a great impression on Weston.<sup>3</sup> Built for two couples, the Schindlers and their friends the Chaces, this house was composed of four "studios" associated with patios treated as living spaces in their own right. The traditional divisions and hierarchies of domestic space were abolished in favour of a symbiosis between community life and private living areas. This new philosophy of habitat sought to promote a lifestyle closer to nature, progressive ideas on education, health and outdoor life, as well as emancipating dress codes from the shackles of the past. The house became a gathering place for many artists, intellectuals and visitors passing through Los Angeles, an activity that was especially encouraged by Pauline, who was very involved with social causes and the radical socialist

1. Undated letter from Edward Weston to Schindler. Rudolph Schindler's archives are kept at the University Art Museum, University of California at Santa Barbara.

2. See David Leclerc, "Schindler: La Maison Wolfe", *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 307, October 1996. The Wolfe House was destroyed in 2001.

3. As evidenced by a letter Pauline wrote to her parents on 16 July 1922. Pauline Schindler Collection, University Art Museum, University of California at Santa Barbara.

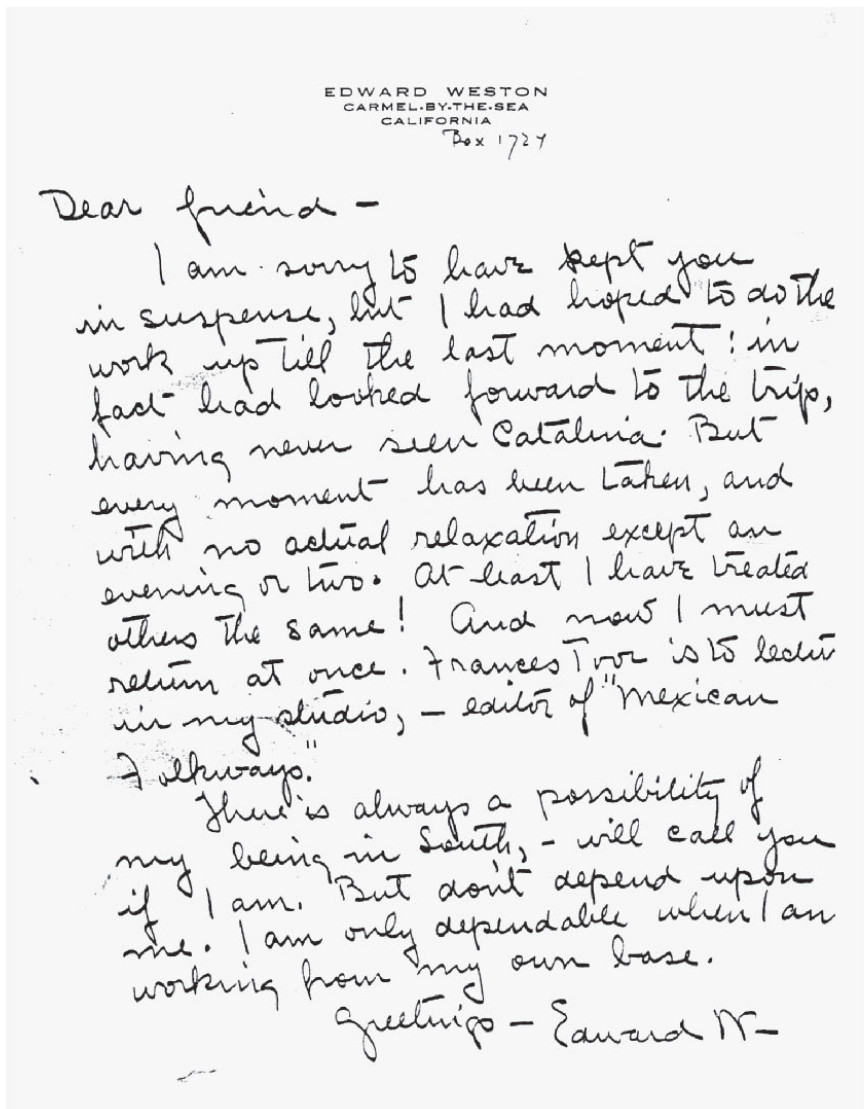
movement of the time. According to some accounts, this seemingly ephemeral and spontaneous architecture had something magical about it and inspired a sense of freedom in the people it received.<sup>4</sup> Weston regularly showed his photography work there.<sup>5</sup>

Schindler tended to neglect the photographic documentation of his buildings. For each project he went to the trouble of doing a perspective line drawing rendered in gouache and coloured pencil, a technique he had learned during his training at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, headed by Otto Wagner at the time, and later while working with his American master, Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>6</sup> The perspective drawing of the Wolfe house is particularly striking: it shows the building thrusting skywards, surrounded by bushes that look like clouds, torn between its desire to follow the slope of the land and its

4. The architect Harwell Hamilton Harris speaks of it in these terms in the monograph devoted to him by Lysa Germany, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1991.

5. See Esther McCoy, *Vienna to Los Angeles: Two Journeys*, Los Angeles: Arts + Architecture Press, 1979, p. 14.

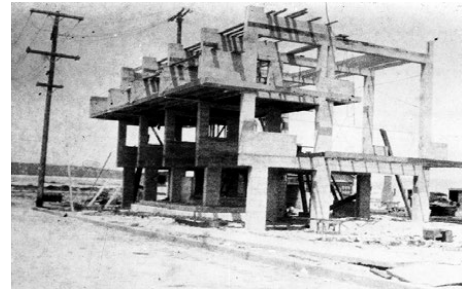
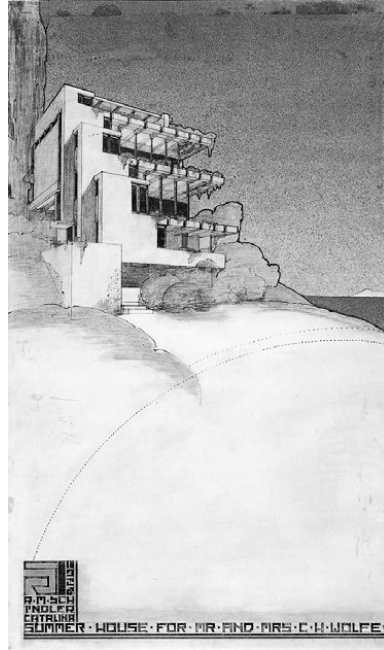
6. Schindler worked for Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin East from 1917 to 1919, then in Los Angeles from 1919 to 1921.



Letter from Edward Weston to Rudolph Schindler.

Left: Schindler's perspective drawing of the Wolfe House.

Right: Two construction site snapshots taken by Schindler: the Kings Road House, 1921 (top) and the Lovell House, 1926 (bottom).



aspiration to lift off from it. Apart from a few photos taken by professionals, many of the pictures of his projects from the 1920s were taken by the architect himself. Schindler's snapshots show the construction site rather than the finished work: in one, two workmen are using a tripod and pulley to raise a concrete slab for the wall of the Kings Road house; in a second, the five porticos of the Lovell House stick out like a skeleton washed up on the seashore, awaiting the incorporation of the timber frame. When a house was finished, Schindler liked to go and see how it became lived in and how his clients used its space and furniture.<sup>7</sup>

7. See David Leclerc, "The Architect Observer: The Wolfe House and its furniture", published in the catalogue *The Furniture of R.M. Schindler*, Santa Barbara, CA: University Art Museum, 1997, pp. 91–99.

8. *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, volume II: California, New York: Aperture, 1961, p. 33.

### From Balboa to Catalina

In 1926, Schindler finished his beach house in Balboa for Dr Philip Lovell, a media personality who preached nudism, heliotherapy and outdoor living in his column in the *Los Angeles Times* and who invited Schindler to submit articles. Lovell, who was passionate about modern architecture, commissioned the two most famous Californian houses of the 1920s: the house by Schindler and Neutra's Health House, built in the foothills of Griffith Park in Los Angeles in 1929. In a diary entry from August 1927, Weston wrote: "Yesterday I did the first work at Balboa beach, — the home of Dr. Lovell. I responded fully to Schindler's construction. It was an admirably planned beach home with a purity of form seldom found in contemporary houses..."<sup>8</sup> The admiration was mutual, and Schindler had attended several of Weston's lectures. It was therefore not surprising that he asked him to photograph the Wolfe House, which constituted a turning point in Schindler's work.



Photo by Rudolph Schindler of Charles Wolfe in his Avalon house, 1929.

It was the first house he built on a steeply sloping site: in this respect it was a forerunner for the many projects he was to design in the 1930s in the Hollywood Hills and Silver Lake in Los Angeles. The architect also renounced using concrete as a structural material due to technical difficulties and the prohibitive cost he encountered in his first projects, reverting instead to a balloon frame, a framing method he had once criticised but which remained the most economical building system.<sup>9</sup> It was through Dr Lovell that Schindler first met Ethel Wolfe, the co-founder, along with her husband, of a design school specialising in theatre and film costumes. Ethel perceived in Schindler's work the spirit of modernity she wanted to promote in her school and asked the architect to build her a summer house on the island of Catalina, which at the time had become a favourite vacationing spot for Hollywood stars and producers. Schindler described his project as "a composition of space units in and of the atmosphere above the hill".<sup>10</sup> Out of respect for the site and to keep costs down he wanted the house to be light and so avoided foundations and retaining walls. In the school brochure the house is described as a "studio-home" and "the rendezvous for students during the summer season".<sup>11</sup> The Wolfes were also keen to use it as a promotional tool for their school and insisted that it be widely published. As a result it was featured in numerous magazines and became one of Schindler's most famous houses.

The photographic documentation of the Wolfe house was therefore a matter of great importance for Schindler. But why did the architect solicit the services of a photographer who, while his friend, was known for his portraits and still lifes and not for his architectural photography? Weston was interested in industrial and vernacular architecture for its visual and formal qualities, but had not developed a vision of the modern architectural space, as Julius Shulman was to do from 1936. Richard Neutra, who had met Weston through Schindler and with whom he had become good friends, had asked him to shoot

9. The Wolfe House, however, used poured concrete floors over a corrugated iron permanent formwork.

10. R M Schindler, description of the Wolfe House, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

11. Wolfe School of Costume Designing catalogue, Schindler Collection, UCSB.

Photo by Brett Weston  
of the interior of the  
Wolfe House, 1929.



12. Richard Neutra in his introductory essay to Julius Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*, Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 2000, p. vii.

one of his projects: “Edward Weston... was no architectural photographer! Innocently he fell in love with stunning cracks in buckly plaster. His wonderful photos could have served as evidence in court against a plastering contractor. Architectural photography is an applied art. Architectural photographers like Julius Shulman apply themselves to the art of the befriended architect. They must be selective so as only to retain the essential images that will remain in our memory.”<sup>12</sup>

Knowing his passion for the relationship between abstract forms and nature, we can still imagine that Weston was seduced by the brilliant volumetric composition of the Wolfe House and by the complex dialogue it engaged with its site. Forced to abandon his trip to Catalina, Weston sent his second son, Brett, in his place. Brett Weston was only 18 years old in 1929 but already an experienced photographer, having trained with his father during

their stay in Mexico and exhibited alongside him since 1927. The interior shots of the Wolfe's living quarter, one of which is signed by hand, are professional but rather conventional.

### Portraits

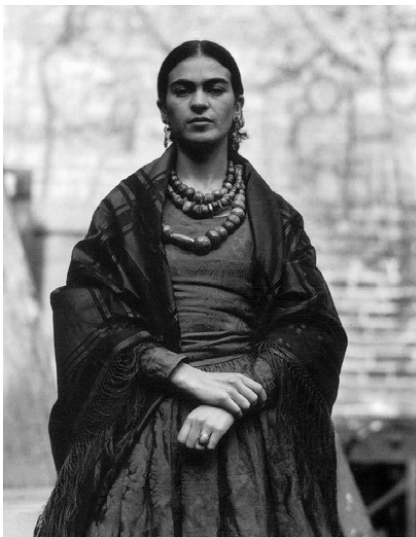
Were there other photographs of Rudolph Schindler's architecture by Edward Weston? None were preserved in the architect's archives, but what of the photographer's? The discovery of this letter and the bonds of friendship between Schindler and Weston made it very likely. The Center for Creative Photography, where the photographer's records are held, informed me that seven nitrate negatives had been found under the name of Schindler.<sup>13</sup> But none showed a building. They were several portraits of the architect taken around 1930.

The portrait is an important part of Weston's practice. During his three years in Mexico, from 1923 to 1926, he came in contact with leading figures of the flourishing artistic and political scene of the 1920s. He was close to intellectuals and artists including Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, both of whom he photographed. While in Mexico he lived as a bohemian with his mistress, the Italian actress Tina Modotti, who, through Weston, discovered her vocation as a photographer, later becoming a revolutionary figure.<sup>14</sup> The sensual photos of Modotti's body are among Weston's most moving images from this period.

In 1926, the couple separated and Weston returned to Los Angeles with his son Brett. Two years later, he moved to the small town of Carmel-by-the-Sea, on the stunning coastline between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the chosen retreat of a marginal artistic community since the beginning of the century. To earn a living, Weston decided to open a portrait studio, careful to point out that he didn't alter the photographs. But his eye was drawn more to the

**13.** The Center for Creative Photography is located in the University of Arizona, Tucson.

**14.** Tina Modotti was a militant communist in post-revolution Mexico; she later turned up in Spain during the Civil War, fighting with the antifascists; she died in Mexico in 1942.



Edward Weston, portraits of Frida Kahlo, 1930, and James Cagney, 1933.

Rudolph and Pauline Schindler with the Gibling family at Kings Road during the summer of 1923.



extraordinary richness and diversity of geometries and forms he discovered in the roots of cypress trees, or the rocks, pebbles and shells found along the rocky coast at Point Lobos. His famous still lifes with vegetables (peppers, eggplants, artichokes, cabbage) also date from this period. Weston had contacts among many artists and European immigrants living in California during these years, doing their portraits when they passed through Carmel: the painters José Clemente Orozco (1930) and Carlos Merida (1934), the photographer Imogen Cunningham (1933), the actor James Cagney (1933), the American poet E E Cummings (1935), the composers Igor Stravinsky (1935) and Arnold Schoenberg (1936). Weston did his shooting outdoors in natural light, with the subject placed in front of a black background. The portraits of



Schindler respect this rule and were probably taken in Carmel in 1930.<sup>15</sup> The architect was 43 at the time.

He was known for his individualistic, romantic and somewhat bohemian character. Unlike his compatriot Richard Neutra, whose career took off as soon as he arrived in Los Angeles in 1925, making him the hero of the new international style in California, Schindler's work was long overlooked and little published. Philip Johnson's refusal to include the Lovell Beach House in the International Style exhibition at MoMA in 1932, under the pretext that the details were "neo-Wrightian", was to marginalise Schindler and cause him to be fiercely critical of the functionalists and their "empty slogan".

Schindler preferred constructing his work to promoting it. Few portraits of him exist. There are some anonymous shots of life at Kings Road during the 1920s that show him in private or with friends or relatives. In 1923, a family photo taken in one of the patios of their new home shows Schindler and Pauline posing proudly in profile, deliberately avoiding to look at the camera, while the architect's in-laws, the Giblings, look much more naturally at the photographer. The few portraits Schindler used for his publications are always taken in profile or in three-quarter view. Is this an expression of discomfort in relation to the camera or simply an act of vanity, a desire to present himself in the most favourable light? The historian Esther McCoy, who worked for Schindler during the 1940s and was the first to write about his work, described him as warm, enthusiastic and humorous; she recounts that when posed, he used to raise his head and stretch his neck, which was too short for his liking.<sup>16</sup>

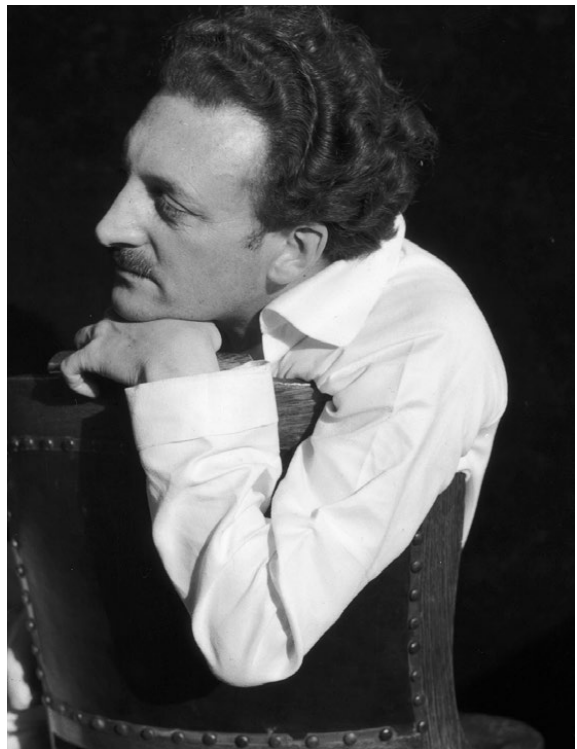
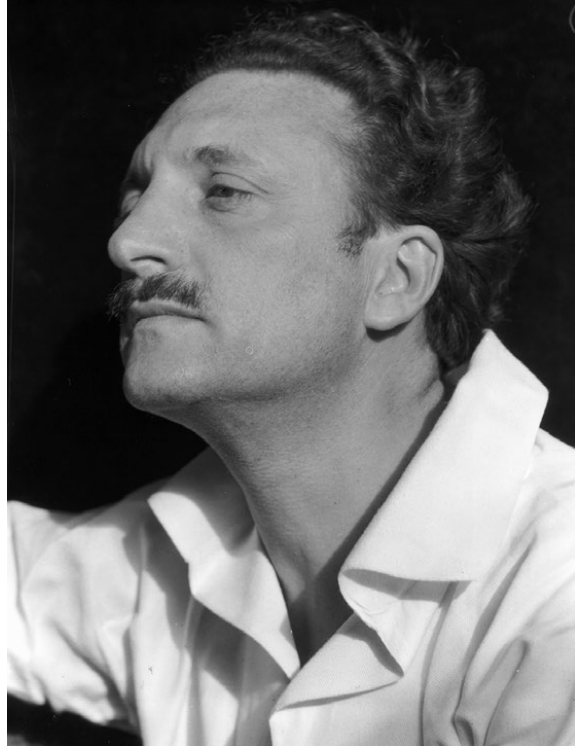
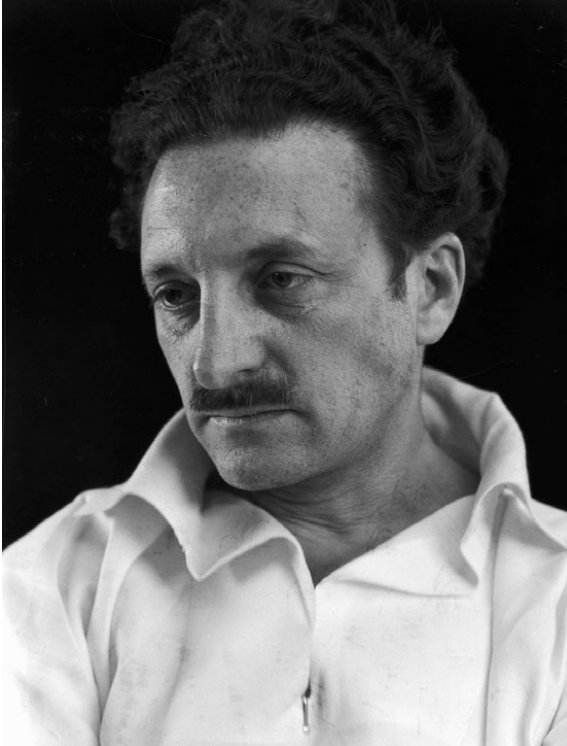
### Poses

The seven photographs taken by Edward Weston, probably all from a single sitting (Schindler is wearing the same white shirt in the seven portraits) reveal different aspects of the architect's physiognomy and personality. He used only one of them for lecture announcements and some publications during this time. It's a three-quarter pose, head raised and gazing into the distance. The style is somewhat reminiscent of the portraits of Hollywood stars of this period. Of the other six shots, two are profile portraits, similar to the first one. In another, the architect looks sad and subdued. Two photographs show Schindler sitting on a wooden chair with leather upholstery, his arm draped over the back: the pose is much more natural, the expression is lively, the architect is relaxed and smiling.

The final portrait captures our attention because it breaks with the profile or three-quarter pose Schindler systematically adopts. It is framed on his chest, with Schindler gazing straight into the lens. His body is leaning slightly forward, forming a background against which his hands stand out; they are joined with his head resting on them. The focus of the image is on the foreground, precisely rendering the lower part of his face, his moustache, his hands, his

15. Schindler's name appears several times in Weston's *Daybook* during 1930: Rudolph Schindler and Galka Scheyer visited him in Carmel on 7 April. In early September, Schindler gave a lecture on modern architecture in Carmel "to a contemptible audience". But the portrait sitting isn't mentioned. *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, volume II: California, pp. 151 and 187.

16. Esther McCoy, *Five California Architects* (1960), Los Angeles: Hennessey + Ingalls Inc., 1987, p. 151.



Edward Weston, portraits of Rudolph Schindler circa 1930.

watch and the pleats of his shirt. His large, receding forehead remains a little fuzzy, while his dark, wavy hair merges with the black background. The facial expression is still difficult to read: he looks at us, but seems to be elsewhere. The portrait is of a rare intensity but also strangely mysterious. Was it Weston who suggested this pose to Schindler? The art critic Beaumont Newhall, who was photographed by Weston on several occasions, described his own experience as a model: “Weston gave no stage directions. He did not ask me to look to the right or to the left. He did not tell me how to hold my head or where to place my hands. He did not adjust my clothing or surround me with reflectors. He waited patiently for things to happen in a natural way.”<sup>17</sup>

### The abstracting eye

Schindler’s shirt, which takes up a large portion of the image, is similar to the one he wears in the 1923 family photo. The cut is wide but precise. The generous size is enhanced by the quality of the fabric, a thick silk or cotton. The architect designed his own clothes and had them made by a tailor.<sup>18</sup> Weston treats the folds of the fabric with the same sensuality as the peppers in his still lifes or the curves of his mistress’ body. Weston’s “abstracting eye”, as Susan Sontag puts it, creates abstract compositions from close-up views of objects or forms derived from nature and seeks to reveal their intrinsic life.<sup>19</sup> This approach is also perceptible in the importance Weston gives to hands in his work. Weston’s photo *Hands*, 1924, taken during his stay in Mexico, already emphasises the evocative power of this part of the body. The recurring presence of hands in the portraits of actors, composers and artists he did during the 1930s is far from anecdotal. Hands play a key role in understanding the physical and psychological dimensions of the subject. They are presented,

17. Beaumont Newhall is the author of *History of Photography* and organised the first retrospective on this theme at the MoMA in 1937. He was a close friend of Weston.

18. According to Esther McCoy, *Five California Architects*, p. 151.

19. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977), New York: Anchor Books, 1990.



Comparison of Rudolph Schindler’s logo (left; detail of drawing on page 257) with his hands in the Weston portrait (right, photograph on page 254).

in the same terms as the face, as a sign of identity. Whether they complement or contradict facial expression, they add a level of complexity to the portrait, sometimes revealing something that the face cannot express.

The epicentre of Schindler's portrait is not his head but the hands on which it rests. They are joined, the left folded on itself, while the right envelops it at a right angle. At first glance, this pose seems to be a natural way of creating a rest to support the head. But if one takes a second look (and especially if one tries to imitate Schindler), it is clear that the clenched fist of the right hand sheltered by the T-square formed by the left is a premeditated gesture to produce a precise geometric figure.

### Stratagem

Is Schindler giving us a clue to his personality or a message about his architecture? It is difficult not to see in the figure formed by hands a resemblance to the logo that appears in the title block of his drawings, consisting of his initials R S drawn in a continuous line, the S wrapping around the R. This same figure references a recurring motif in his architecture and furniture design, dubbed the "open key pattern" by David Gebhard.<sup>20</sup> The McAlmon House, built in 1935 in the Hollywood Hills, is the most striking architectural transcription of this figure.

Far from being the expression of an unconscious act or mere coincidence, this pose seems rather to have been deliberately intended by the architect to identify himself: if you cannot read my eyes or my lips, read my hands, such could have been the caption of this portrait. The strong presence of the hands contrasts with the blank stare of the architect, suggesting that man is above all his works, as signified by his hands. Weston contributed to this

20. See David Gebhard, *Schindler*, Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith Inc., 1980, p. 105.

McAlmon House,  
Los Angeles, 1935.



brilliant architectural staging with his rendering of the shirt, photographed as a landscape of hills, the chosen terrain for many of Schindler's houses and of the Wolfe house in particular. As in his still lives, Weston reveals an aspect of reality that only photography can capture. Why was this portrait never published? Did Schindler consider the composition too posed in the end? Or did he not like this front view of his face? Absent from the architect's archives, the portrait remained forgotten for a very long time in those of the photographer.

### Space

Beyond the playful allusion, is this figure revealing something more fundamental about Schindler's architecture? Why does Schindler inscribe his initials in his geometry, join his hands to celebrate its form and use it repeatedly in his houses? Might it be the paradigm of his architecture? This spatial figure simultaneously evokes the need for a protective space and the desire to open up to the outside world. This theme is pervasive in many of his projects. At Kings Road, Schindler talks about the opposition between the concrete walls that protect the interior space and the wood frame that opens it onto the garden and lets light in, as a means to bring together the two archetypes of shelter: the cave and the tent.<sup>21</sup> In his houses of the 1930s, this dialectic is complemented by a more sophisticated modulation of the envelope while reacting to the rugged character of the sites. Most often closed on the side facing the street or neighbours, the interior gradually opens up to take in specific views. Schindler's training in the Vienna of the early twentieth century, but especially his great admiration for Adolf Loos, with whom he was acquainted during his studies at the Wagnerschule, were probably decisive in informing his way of conceiving space and influenced his conviction that it takes precedence over structure.<sup>22</sup> Beyond its functional aspect, architecture meets needs of a fundamentally physiological nature: "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."<sup>23</sup> Schindler's interest in furniture attests to the central role the body takes in his architecture. From a spatial as well as from a constructive point of view, his furniture is conceived of as a natural extension of the architectural enclosure.

### Hands on

Beyond the figure they represent, are these hands not also the symbol of a way to practise architecture? Schindler's work reflects an approach that leaves room for circumstances and sometimes even chance. The architect worked alone, helped only by a few designers, often students or recent graduates, such as Gregory Ain or Harwell Hamilton Harris. "A work like mine can only be done personally not by splitting responsibilities."<sup>24</sup> He visited his projects

21. Schindler, description of the Kings Road House, Schindler Archives.

22. "Loos was his greatest idol. He had boundless admiration for him. Loos also had a very high opinion of Rudolf and predicted he would have a great future. It was as a result of Loos' advice that he decided to go to America." Interview of Schindler's sister by Esther McCoy, 2 September 1958. Esther McCoy Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

23. Schindler, "Space Architecture", *Dune Forum*, 1934, reproduced in Gebhard, p. 194.

24. Letter written by Schindler on 6 June 1930. Quoted by Esther McCoy, *Vienna to Los Angeles*, p. 59.

daily, taking along his dog, Prince. Most often acting as designer and builder, he worked with contractors who were familiar with his construction details. Most of his decisions were made on site, with construction drawings reduced to the minimum and rarely updated. This investment *in situ* allowed him to constantly experiment with space, materials and their implementation and to develop the project as it was being built.<sup>25</sup>

25. See the moving description of Schindler at work by McCoy, "R. M. Schindler", *Five California Architects*, pp. 150 and 151.

Following the 1929 crash, California sunk into a deep economic crisis. During the 1930s, Schindler had mainly middle class clients with limited budgets. The architect always looked for savings in construction costs through the use of simple and ordinary industrial materials such as plywood, plaster and, later, corrugated iron, which he liked to leave visible so as to reveal their intrinsic qualities.

26. Schindler, 1912 Manifesto, reproduced in Gebhard, p. 192.

From 1912, in the manifesto he wrote in Vienna before leaving for the United States, Schindler expressed, with surprising lucidity, a conviction that runs through all his work: "The modern dwelling will not freeze temporary whims of owner or designer into permanent tiresome features. It will be a quiet, flexible background for a harmonious life."<sup>26</sup> The house must be able to respond to the changing needs and lifestyles of its inhabitants. Many of his clients came back to see him about building an extension, completing the interior design of their home or designing new furniture. "Schindler paid attention to our way of living and adjusted to it. He 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", Philip Lovell recalled.<sup>27</sup> By agreeing to transform the specific and changing needs of daily life into architecture rather than resisting them, Schindler created an architecture sensitive to human nature and to the many forms that the act of inhabiting can take: a modernity without dogma, unlike the functionalist style which at the time was beginning to assume its hegemonic position in the New World.

27. McCoy, *Vienna to Los Angeles*, p. 68.

Reyner Banham emphasised the anguish that characterised the work of this avant-garde in Europe, due, in his view, to the tension between intention and realisation. In contrast, he qualifies Schindler as a "pioneer without tears".<sup>28</sup> "To look for that tension in Schindler's work is to miss the point", he writes, insisting on the "liberating experience" many architects, artists and writers encountered in Southern California between the two wars. Schindler's work, like that of Weston, was deeply nurtured by this experience. McCoy had noticed a sentence in Schindler's notebook, in 1928, which in her opinion sums up his vision of architecture: "The sense for the perception of architecture is not the eyes — but living. Our life is its image."<sup>29</sup> D.L.

28. Reyner Banham, "Rudolph Schindler: a pioneer without tears", *Architectural Design*, no. 37, December 1967.

29. McCoy, *Five California Architects*, p. 149.