

Architect's Widow to Share Her Work-of-Art House in Silver Lake

By LARRY GORDON, *Times Staff Writer*

Dione Neutra is used to the world knocking on her front door. Her home on the eastern shore of the Silver Lake reservoir is a landmark of modernist design, a shrine to the international set and to her late husband, architect Richard Neutra, whose remains are buried in the backyard.

"I know I'm very lucky to live in a beautiful house, so I don't mind sharing it," she said, preparing for a small army of visitors expected for today's Los Angeles Conservancy tour of six innovative homes in Silver Lake, a neighborhood known for avante-garde design since the 1920s.

A three-story stack of glass, stucco and balconies, the house is praised by critics for its sensitive blending with the lake and nearby hills. It was built in 1933 but burned in an electrical fire in 1963 and was rebuilt a year later under the guidance of Richard Neutra and his architect son Dion. Dione Neutra gave the house to California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, in 1969 for seminars and guest quarters, with the provisions that she could spend the rest of her life there and that the building would never be changed.

"You never think of changing the Mona Lisa or putting a mustache on a Picasso," she said, the accent of her native Switzerland still strong. "But for some reason, people do things like that with houses."

Not Just Decorative

Even in this time of rebellion against modernist architecture, Neutra still stokes the flame of her husband's philosophy: that design should be rational, that it benefit human health and emotions and not just be decorative. After all, she was his secretary and aide-de-camp in the battles of commission and construction. With her help, he became one of the most influential architects in the nation, changing especially the look of Southern California by bringing clean industrial lines to home building.

But in the 15 years since his death, something else has happened as she rides the worldwide lecture circuit. Neutra has become a beloved matriarch of the Los Angeles design community and a living symbol of how pre-World War II European culture flowered in Southern California.

Beginning with today's house tour, this will be an exciting week for Neutra. Monday is her 85th birthday. And on Tuesday night, five university schools of architecture and the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architects are sponsoring a dinner at the Biltmore Hotel honoring her and the publication of her new book, a collection of excerpted letters, mainly between her and her husband from 1919 to 1932.

A singer who has the rare skill of accompanying herself on the cello,

she is also getting ready for what she says will be the last of the annual concerts she has given at home since 1972. "The reason is because I don't think I can sing anymore," she recently told the 60 friends and acquaintances at the first of two farewell performances.

She had hit some undeniably sour, wavering notes and stopped in disgust. But at the audience's urging, she continued with a Swiss folk song, yodeling in a sweet and clear voice that finally elicited cheers. Then, dressed in a blue and silver brocaded gown, she went off to help serve apple juice and tea.

"I was always the wife of the famous architect. Mr. Neutra was the one who inspired people," said Neutra, a solidly built woman with silver hair. "But now people tell me I've become the inspiration and I'm surprised by that."

Others are not.

'A Remarkable Survivor'

"I think she is, at age 85, a remarkable survivor," said Thomas Hines, a UCLA professor and biographer of Richard Neutra. "She has led a rich life, but not a life without pain. She has come out as a significant person in her own right and remains one of the most optimistic people I've ever met."

"She's one of those historical people who can say, 'When I sat with Frank Lloyd Wright in his garden . . .,'" said Los Angeles architect Bernard Zimmerman, a professor at Cal Poly Pomona, where Richard Neutra taught the last year of his life. He added jokingly, "I offered her to marry me and help me with my career. But she turned me down and said she had helped one architect and that's enough. I think she will inspire women who are worried about being secondary to a man and losing their identity."

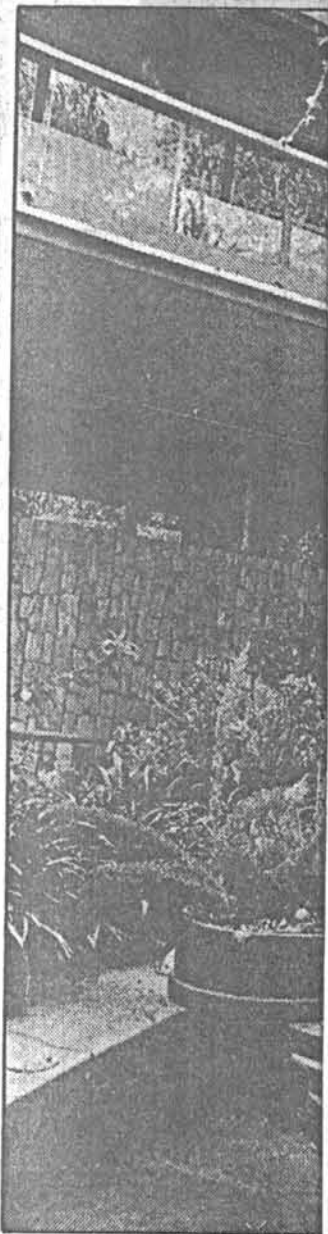
Neutra says she got the idea for the book, "Richard Neutra: Promise and Fulfillment, 1919-1931" (Southern Illinois University Press) a few weeks after his death, when she found a forgotten carton of her letters in the basement.

Portrait of a Couple

What eventually emerged, with editing and the addition of some of Neutra's professional correspondence, is a portrait of a young couple, struggling through separations and the Depression but driven by new ideas and the dream of America, particularly California, as the place to put those ideas into practice.

The book also details the Neutras' anguish over the discovery that Frank, the eldest of their three sons—named after Frank Lloyd Wright—was born brain-damaged. (Their second son, Dion, still heads the Neutra architecture firm on Glendale Boulevard, while the youngest, Raymond, is an epidemiologist.)

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View from patio shows a

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CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times

Dione Neutra

NEUTRA: Art Preserved in Silver Lake

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Moreover, the book serves as a reminder of what has been lost in the telephone age.

"If we hadn't exchanged letters, I really wouldn't have understood him. I might have become a professional musician and not as involved with his ideas. How can you exchange any philosophical ideas on the telephone?" she asked.

The book ends with the construction of the house at 2300 Silver Lake Blvd. in 1933, 10 years after Neutra moved from Vienna to America and eight years after he moved to Los Angeles. It is called the VDL Research House, after C. H. Van der Leeuw, a wealthy Dutch industrialist who helped finance Neutra's vision of a utilitarian, compact home and office where people could blend with nature and improve themselves. Neutra called his philosophy "bio-realism" and "survival through design."

Small, Austere Rooms

The rooms in the house are small and have austere, built-in furniture, all in neutral tones. But they all receive a tremendous amount of light and are arranged around an open staircase. Added in 1964 were a tiny penthouse and, on the roof of the second level, a shallow pond echoing the lake. A separate guest house in the rear is reached through a multilevel garden. All around is thick vegetation.

The house was Neutra's third commission in America, and came four years after his Lovell Health

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—Bernard Zimmerman, L.A. architect

House was built on Dundee Drive in the nearby Los Feliz hills. Home of Dr. Philip Lovell, the holistic

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The Silver Lake-Los Feliz area eventually became peppered with Neutra houses, along with those of his one-time partner and later rival, Rudolph Schindler, and of Frank Lloyd Wright, for whom he briefly worked in Chicago. There are nine Neutra houses within a block or two of Dione Neutra's home.

International Style of '20s

Some critics called Neutra America's greatest designer of homes in the austere International Style of the 1920s through 1940s. But his later work was criticized for becoming similar to the suburban glass boxes his work had inspired under lesser talents. And some of his public buildings, like the Hall of Records in downtown Los Angeles, were not considered as successful as his homes. His later years were marked by bouts of depression that biographer Hines said put great strains on the family.

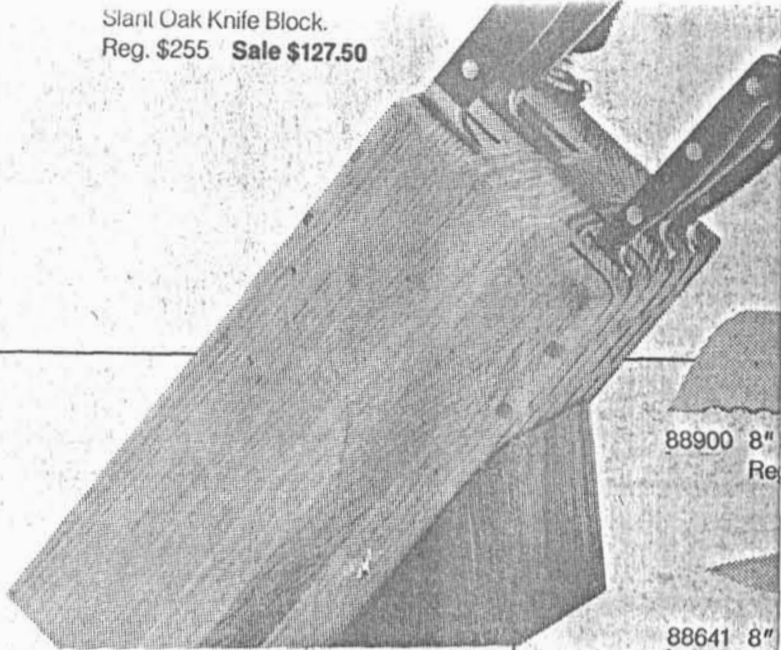
Meanwhile, tastes have shifted back to the ornamentation of Victorian and neoclassic styles he hated. Dione Neutra says her husband "would be horrified" by that trend. "There are no ideas, no direction, just whimsical designs," she complains.

When she lectures about her husband's work, she usually brings her cello along to play and sing.

"My purpose of life was to help my husband for 48 years to accomplish as much as possible of what he felt was his mission in life, namely, to provide a more healthful, pleasing, natural environment for his clients," she said. "Now, nearing 85 years of age, I ask myself, what is my purpose in life? It seems to be to show my younger friends that life in old age can be worthwhile."

The conservancy reports that limited space remains on the van tour of Silver Lake homes, which costs \$25 for members and \$35 for others. For further information, call 1-213-CITY.

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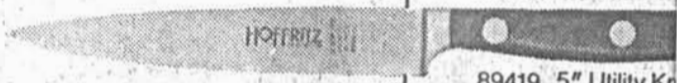


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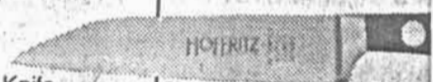


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