

Living with Neutra

I was Associate Dean at the College of Environmental Design at Cal Poly Pomona when ownership of the house was transferred to the college. We knew there was much to be learned from the house and we were optimistic that we could find a way to maintain it. Mark Dillon was the resident scholar, living in the main house, and I rented the Garden House. Rental income from the Garden House paid for utilities and other minor expenses.

I have so many memories of life at the Neutra house. There was the gritty reality of trying to take care of the house with the limited ability of the college to pay for maintenance. I remember Mark Dillon and I digging a 10-foot trench in the driveway to get to a broken pipe so that we could spare the college the cost of paying someone else to do it, or battling the invasive ivy that perpetually threatened to unhinge a screen or work its way into a crack in the stucco. There was always some seed or leaf or twig that got lodged in a track preventing a screen from sliding open or a glass door or window from gliding closed. And we won't get into the water problems from the roof top pond or from the roof itself. In those days, we each felt like Hans Brinker staving off the inevitable flood. Deferred maintenance was taking its toll.

And yet, what a glorious place in which to live. No matter the hour, there was a place in the house that was magical. Watching the patterns that animated the surfaces when the sun played across the cat's eye marbles embedded in a shallow pond, Watching the sun set on the Silverlake Reservoir or contemplating life, as you imagine Richard Neutra did, at the edge of the reflecting pond on the roof deck. There was nothing like the breezes that played across the living spaces when all of the glass doors were open and the rustle of leaves worked to disguise the hum of the traffic whizzing by below.

We tried to keep the entrance pond filled with koi and courtyard pond filled with lily pads. The koi learned to hide under the rock shelf, out of reach of the raccoons, but the lily pads were fair game. I came home one evening and walked into my living room separated by the sliding glass door from a very fat and satisfied raccoon. He was solidly planted in the center of the courtyard pond feasting on the lily pads he held in each paw.

I learned a lot about architecture in those years. The house was an experiment in urban living and the lessons learned there have never left me. The house celebrated living. The sleeping quarters were small, almost Pullman car sized, but what was sacrificed in sleeping area, was gained in living area. The openness made the living spaces seem palatial. Our last supper in the house was a multi-course meal prepared in the three ovens in the house. The meal for twelve began on the roof with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres as the sun set behind the hills leaving a reflection of the sky on the reservoir. The main meal was

served on the living level and dessert and music in the lower courtyard. The house could embrace a few people or a crowd and not feel congested. It was a house that opened itself up to the carefully orchestrated outdoors. It was a house that allowed itself to be experienced on multiple levels, each hour of the day offering a different vista and matching your mood to the changing light and sounds surrounding you.

I am heartened that the house may survive to continue to teach future generations about the timeless beauty of a fine piece of architecture.

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