

*At the Edge of Her Time*

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The story of a person can be a story of a city; such is the case with Esther McCoy, a prolific writer who was a powerful proponent of modern architecture in Los Angeles. *Sympathetic Seeing* gives us the opportunity not only to take a closer look at an under-recognized contributor to Southern California culture, but also to excavate a history of Los Angeles and present it for renewed viewing. While the Esther McCoy Papers housed at the Archives of American Art contain many topics of interest, this exhibition highlights her activities in and influence on Los Angeles. They include leftist activism and the politics of the built environment; an inside view of the office of architect R. M. Schindler; a tale of two Kings Road houses; and the relationship between writing and architecture and how popular media is used to interpret space.

**A modern utopian vision blossomed in the United States during the Great Depression** and again after World War II. McCoy, like many of her modernist architect contemporaries, was concerned with the politics of the built environment, insisting that architecture and urban space were not isolated entities but an intrinsic part of the social fabric. Her contributions as a fiction writer, critic, and historian stemmed from her embrace of this worldview. Her interest in leftist politics began early; while still in college, she met writer and avid socialist Theodore Dreiser and became his lifelong friend and sometime research assistant. After her arrival in Los Angeles in 1932, McCoy's activism developed and intensified, and she became involved with the International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal arm of the USA Communist Party. In an unpublished memoir, she describes its office on South Broadway in downtown Los Angeles:

The glass panel in the heavy oak door to the office has been broken so often in police raids that wood strips are nailed inside. The office is raided about once or twice a month, and the desks and the pine kitchen chairs and swivel desk chairs bear endless raid scars. There is little more in the office than a couple of old typewriters, desks, tables, chairs and a telephone.

No files were kept in the office; I think someone even took the letterheads home at night. The Communist Party office on Spring Street was even barer than its legal arm, the ILD.

McCoy details working with Leo Gallagher, a staunch labor rights attorney who worked on IDL cases and ran for the office of superior court judge. Gallagher was well known for defending Tom Mooney, the radical labor leader considered by many to have been wrongly imprisoned for the San Francisco Preparedness Day Bombing of 1916. (Mooney was finally pardoned by the governor of California in 1939.) McCoy wrote various kinds of texts for the IDL, attended community meetings, and helped with Gallagher's campaign. She depicts the "class struggle" not only as difficult, but also as dangerous and violent, with street gatherings broken up by police brutality, and labor movement leaders enduring repeated arrest, beatings, and blacklisting from prominent positions.

Connected to the labor movement were efforts to improve the living conditions of the urban poor, which included advocating for public housing. In the mid-1930s, McCoy spent a year researching the Los Angeles slums, conducting door-to-door surveys, compiling a detailed report, and submitting her findings to the city's housing authority. Many public officials resisted admitting that slums existed, in part because of their commitment to local boosterism and in part because substandard housing in Los Angeles consisted of densely situated, low-rise shacks as opposed to tenement buildings. One city official claimed that only tenements where more than two hundred people were housed under one roof qualified as slums. McCoy published articles and editorials on housing in newspapers and broadsheets, including the leftist publications *United Progressive News* and the *Daily News*. She indicated that in 1937 twenty percent of all residences in Los Angeles were unfit for human habitation and advocated for the enactment of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act, which designated funds for public housing. McCoy's dedication to fair housing led her to apply for a research and writing position with the Research and Statistics Division of the United States Housing Authority in Washington, D.C. Had she been offered and accepted that position, she would have worked under the

powerful public housing advocate Catherine Bauer Wurster (and Southern California architecture may have suffered the loss of her attention).

In the 1960s, McCoy was a defender of both the community of Watts and Simon Rodia's landmark Watts Towers. Her ongoing concern with the conditions of the built environment in low-income neighborhoods is documented in archived notes from her conversations with community members. On August 16, 1965—the last day of the Watts Riots—she spoke with Edgar Goff, an African American architect who had worked for Victor Gruen, an Austrian emigre architect known for designing shopping malls across the United States. Goff complained about the lack of any urban planning in the Watts area while simultaneously fearing clueless city planners. He described the desperate need for parks and schools, and advised the city to “forget for the moment the sociologists and psychologists, and send in a planner who knows how to interpret the people's way of living.” He told McCoy: “I was born in this neighborhood and grew up there. No one has yet listened to what the Negro is saying in his everyday life.”

Through McCoy's involvement with politics, she met Pauline Gibling Schindler in the early 1940s. As the wife of R.M. Schindler, Pauline was a client/collaborator in the making of the Schindler House on Kings Road in West Hollywood, California. She was dedicated to art and architecture as well as radical politics and intellectual spirit. She was a member of the Communist party, and quite active in social and political causes. Shortly after McCoy's application to architecture school at the University of Southern California (USC) was “strongly discouraged” due to her gender and age, Pauline informed her of the opening for a draftsman in Schindler's office. In her descriptions of both the job interview and the job, McCoy draws a picture of the daily life of the Schindler practice. Her stories from the period encapsulate the draftsman's perspective on her boss, the literary talent's story of an architect, and the budding critic's take on modern architecture. In 1945, while working in Schindler's office, McCoy published her first piece of architectural writing, the essay “Schindler, Space Architect,” in *Direction*, a cultural journal with an antifascist editorial position.

Writing a regular column in the *Los Angeles Times*, publishing books, and contributing frequently to professional and mainstream magazines about architecture, McCoy developed a wide audience for California's architectural legacy and its then-new experiments in modern architecture. In discussing contemporary design and its place in the modern home, she spoke directly to female readers about their traditional domain. Architecture must take hold of the public imagination in order to survive, and McCoy's strong and consistent voice enticed a reading public to expand their ideas about architecture and space. This was (and is) particularly important in Los Angeles, where the forces of real estate speculation so often trump architecture.

For McCoy, architectural advocacy sometimes meant taking a preservationist stance. From 1963 to 1970, she was deeply involved with the cause to save the Dodge House on North Kings Road, just up the street from the Schindler House. Irving Gill built the house for Walter Luther Dodge in 1916. Having written about it in her book *Five California Architects*, McCoy well understood its significance as perhaps the first modern house of the American West. She chronicled its history and importance in her narrative on the house for the Historic American Buildings Survey. The Dodge House was sold to the McKenna Family in 1924 for \$125,000. In 1939, the Los Angeles High School District, wanting to acquire the property for a high school, condemned it against the McKennas' will. After the family was paid \$69,000, the district reversed its decision about a Kings Road school, and transferred title to the junior college district. For decades, it was used as a domestic training facility for the Los Angeles Trade Technical College, and remained intact. In 1963, when the Board of Education declared the property surplus, efforts to preserve the house went into full force. In the fall of 1963, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a zoning change for North Kings Road between Melrose Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard. The controversial change from R-1 to R-3 greatly increased the property values on the street, and paved the way for the demolition of single-family residences and the construction of condominiums.

The heartbreaking conclusion of the Dodge House story is seen in the photos taken on Monday, February 9, 1970, when, in the quiet of a rainy morning, the magnificent structure was bulldozed. Nobody saw it coming that particular morning, so it was a relatively quick death, with few witnesses. A *Los Angeles Times* story tells of architecture students from USC making a scheduled visit on Wednesday, February 11, to the Dodge House only to find it gone, transforming a "tour into a wake." In McCoy's papers, the conversations about the Dodge House from 1963 to 1970 have been collected and carefully preserved. These files include wide-ranging correspondence with cultural leaders across the continent and appeals to finance a documentary film that would raise awareness and rally support for the Dodge House. For *Sympathetic Seeing*, a selection of these documents appears in the exhibition and as a booklet within the catalog. They offer a series of vignettes of the process of defining and defending architecture that reveal the complexities of assigning value to architecture's existence relative to greater urban forces.

In the great condominium-ization of North Kings Road, there is a reason why the existential crisis of the Dodge House did not extend to the Schindler House: Pauline Schindler. Even after she was divorced from R.M., Pauline continued to be a strong admirer of his work. Her vision of the Schindler House extended from the conception of a cooperative, two-family dwelling built to accommodate dialogue across difference, through decades of hosting and housing artistic intellectuals and their activities, to the physical and discursive preservation of the house. Pauline had the foresight to anticipate the transformations of the city and saw to it that the Schindler House would be protected after her death. A radical homemaker, Pauline was part of a phenomenon of women coming out of the Left who were staking a claim in architecture. Her cohorts included patrons Aline Barnsdall and the Press sisters Leah Lovell and Harriet Freeman, who, between the three of them, commissioned a passel of significant works by Frank Lloyd Wright, R. M. Schindler, and Richard Neutra in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

When Esther McCoy stepped off the train in Los Angeles in 1932, she entered a city bursting with innovative architectural ideas and engaged

in an energetic battle for the rights of the poor and working classes. McCoy embraced this spirit and her willingness to fight for a more democratic system ultimately helped make a difference. In 1935, The Wagner Act, or National Labor Relations Act, gave workers the right to organize for collective bargaining. In 1937, the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act became law, opening the door for subsidized public housing. (The name of Representative Henry B. Steagall [R-AL] is often in the news these days because of the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, which regulated banks and would have prevented the 2008 economic collapse had it not been repealed under the Clinton administration in 1999.) McCoy's work may remind the contemporary reader that enormous risks have been taken, basic freedoms have been hard won, and although much ground has been gained, much of that is under threat.

*Sympathetic Seeing* is a kind of local excavation where past and present mingle. The MAK Center's practice is rooted in its relationship with the Schindler House, and in this show the house is one of the primary objects in the exhibition. It was the workplace of several of our exhibition's cast of characters. It was influenced and aided by the Dodge House, which is now lost to us despite McCoy's efforts. And it embodies the best of the modernist project: influential experimentation in architecture and a program for social justice in space. This exhibition is a coming-together of old comrades, starring a woman at the edge of her time who challenged many to open their minds and think forward.