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INTERVIEW

BARBARA LAMPRECHT



Barbara Lamprecht, M. Arch., Ph. D. is a writer and teacher on architectural history. She focuses on modernism and dedicates her work to researching and writing on Richard Neutra's architecture. Her website, Modern Resources, hosts essays and articles on architecture and Neutra's work specifically. She is a major proponent for sustainability and life in architecture.

GLUE: Could you tell us about your career and how you got here?

LAMPRECHT: In a quite haphazard fashion, I started life out as a journalist, but one of my favorite courses in college was architectural history. A while into my journalism career, I decided I would go back to school and get a master's in architecture, which I did at Cal Poly Pomona. I practiced for a while, but I had done some framing, construction, and carpentry and really enjoyed getting my hands dirty and being on the job site. I really didn't like being behind a CAD machine all the time. It was too sedentary for me, and so I decided that I would go back to school again, and at USC

they have a special accelerated course in how to become a qualified architectural historian, and that's a very professional degree. I had already written a book on Richard Neutra that turned out to be wildly successful and opened all kinds of doors for me. That got a lot of publicity and attention, which led to a really great day job. I evaluate buildings for historic significance, consult with Neutra owners on how best to update their houses without losing design integrity; I write the cultural resource section for EIR's and historic research assessment reports, and nominate buildings to the National Register of Historic Places. Right now, I am a historical consultant on the Lovell Health House and the Jardinette

Apartments. The Jardinette was completed in 1928; Lovell was completed the next year, but they couldn't be more different. One was a 43-unit apartment building and not in a great section of Hollywood. It was intended for up-and-coming industry people, and the Lovell Health House was for a very well-off client. It is this huge bird that cantilevers off into a canyon in Los Feliz, which is a very wooded area of Hollywood up in the hills, not too far from the Hollywood sign. I think my time as an architect really helps me as a historian because I can look at details and appreciate when extra craft has been taken, or when it hasn't been. I'm always looking at things slightly differently than someone who is only trained in architectural history. And along the way I got a PH.D... at the University of Liverpool because I used to live in England and my advisor happened to be in Liverpool.

GLUE: How do you think having such a wide variety of backgrounds has affected your perspective through the architectural lens?

LAMPRECHT: When we're doing drawings, we sometimes omit certain types of information.

Neutra was quite adept at changing up what he thought would be more appropriate names for spaces. For example, the three bedrooms at the Lovell Health House in his drawings of April 1928 are labeled living rooms. We're always making choices in architecture. This window, this inch: all of that matters. In terms of being persuasive in an argument, being adept at the English language and knowing how to be persuasive about something, either in favor of a building's significance or not, is incredibly important, and a lot of people don't have these skills anymore. In architecture, you're standing in front of your jury for a crit, you know you have to be persuasive. You're out there naked, you're being judged, and you have to be able to present your design as meaningful and relevant and explain why you've done certain things.

GLUE: What do you believe are the formulas/rules of architecture?

LAMPRECHT: When preserving Neutra buildings, one of our big questions is climate change. We're all talking about fire-hardening right now. Harwell Hamilton Harris was a protégé of Richard

Neutra and a very gentle, thoughtful person who went on to be the Dean of Architecture at the University of Austin among other things. His 1934 Lowe House was an elegant and very delicate essay in melding Modernism with Japanese architecture. It is very much Clear All Heart redwood, and it went up like a matchstick. So, we're all asking questions in the preservation community: What are the building codes going to be? Can we have special building codes that replicate the conditions of 1934 so that these historically significant, priceless, wonderful, iconic buildings can be replicated? I've thought a lot about the question of what architecture is. My definition of architecture is designing a kinetic canvas for human endeavor. That canvas should deliver more than what the client thought they wanted. The second point is that architecture should not be based so much on formal values, or what it looks like, or whether it can be photographed. Architecture should not be based so much on formal values, or what it looks like, or whether it can be photographed. Architecture should be based on human experience and the body moving in space, attention

to all the senses, not just vision, but tactility, hapticity, views, light, cross-ventilation, all those things that have to do with the senses. I think that there's a real shift in design culture from looking only at formal values – an object in space – and then really considering the body in space.

GLUE: What value does Richard Neutra's architecture bring to the field of architecture as a whole?

LAMPRECHT: The relationship of the interior to the exterior is very popular now, and has been for a long time, but people talk about it without understanding its import. The reason Neutra thought that was important was because he's looking at it through the lens of evolutionary biology, and he's arguing that we have to be cognizant of the needs of the contemporary human while also addressing and understanding those physiological and cognitive constructs we still carry within us. He argues furthermore that we evolved on the savannas of east Africa, a composite landscape of prairie grasses, and moving clouds, and copses of trees, and that we

are related to the horizon line. So, in our environments, we need to be aware of what those attributes are that will help us be more fully human, and those that compromise our humanity by the decisions that we make in design. For example, you're looking at a sea of grasses that are placid, and all of a sudden, you see a sudden shift. There's some void that's created; there's something moving in there. We've already apprehended that to our brains. Now, all our senses are engaged because the ancient human being understood that that might be a predator. Things like access to the horizon line and all these other attributes that Neutra is thinking about are what he brought to the table. For example, he was a big believer in reflecting pools, and these would not only produce a little bit of a micro-climate but would also reflect those moving clouds. This would be your own little body of water that responds to evolutionary biology. He was studying physiological psychology, medicine, and biology. He wasn't leading architectural magazines; he just wanted to be published in them. Even if we maintain exterior hardscape and it becomes the interior, what does that mean to

us psychologically? What happens when we break that up, when we go from pebbled aggregate to a carpet? How do you deal with liminal space, transitional space? His connection to landscape was key. He thought it was important that you understand something about psychology, especially environmental, behavioral, and physiological psychology. Those are all the fields that are now deeply engaged with architecture.

GLUE: How do you feel about buildings that are not as integrated as what Richard Neutra designed?

LAMPRECHT: When we go to Europe or any number of east coast cities and we fall in love with classical architecture, what many of us crave is the gradation of scale. It doesn't have to be classical ornament or ornament in the traditional sense at all, but it has to give us a humane connection to a building rather than a blank wall that overpowers you and gives you no purchase. We long for that. For example, when we look at an old brick building, the windows might be deeply set in, four to five inches from the outer plane of the building. That gives you relief, it gives you light and shadow. These things are gradations in scale and are often

what is missing today.

GLUE: In an ideal world, where would you want architecture to head in the future?

LAMPRECHT: I would like architects to read more science and less trade magazines and know more about landscape. To be effective to the community, you have to bring more to the table Pamplona, Spain, is one of the most amazing cities I have ever been in. The pedestrian sidewalks in some places had to be 30 feet wide. There was a gradation of median spaces for cars, trees, and real spaces for pedestrians How do you facilitate that and take care of this repertoire of human needs?