

ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION

A QUICK STUDY IN THE CELEBRATION OF SPACE

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This past fall I traveled to southern California visiting museums, furniture showrooms, and houses in both Los Angeles and Palm Springs. It was an inspiring and educational trip, with a diverse range of experiences. The IIDA Northern Pacific Chapter, provided me with a grant through their Emerging Professional program that allowed me to travel and spend time surrounded by the great history, architecture, and forward-thinking artists and designers of the area. The value of visiting in-person places I have studied and admired from afar was even greater than I had anticipated thanks in large part to the amazing conversations I was able to have with curators, caretakers, and representatives at each stop.

Each house I visited deepened my understanding of the architects and designers who created it, but also served as a unique example of architectural preservation in the United States today. Much of a visitor's experience of any of these homes is controlled by the individual philosophy of architectural preservation held by the individual or groups in charge of maintaining the homes. To be able to view such a rich slice of American architecture and design in a short period of time allowed me to experience these buildings not just as individual works but also as part of an ongoing, changing, living cultural heritage.

The Gamble House by Greene & Greene, Pasadena, CA:

This amazing home (in a historic neighborhood just outside of downtown Pasadena, with many homes by architects Charles & Henry Greene) is owned by the City of Pasadena and run as a museum by the University of Southern California. The Gamble house sees as many as 400 visitors each day, almost all on group tours led by docents (part of the Docent Council of the Gamble House). The home is known as the grandest example of Greene & Greene's work, featuring their signature woodworking and beautiful woodwork details.

This is a carefully and cautiously managed home. At the beginning of the tour instructions are given: do NOT touch the woodworking, do NOT step on the edges of the rugs, do NOT sit on the furniture, do NOT leave the tour group, do NOT forget you are in a museum. As a result, the home is a beautiful and impeccably



preserved example of American Arts & Crafts architecture. But little time is allowed to soak in each wonderfully crafted and cared for detail.



Schindler House

In striking contrast to the Gamble House, the Schindler house is open for touching, exploring, interacting. You can even use the bathrooms! (I'm sure my Gamble House tour guide gets nightmares from the mere thought of this.) The garage here also serves as bookstore, and someone will sell you a book or mug, but after

that you are basically on your own. The artists-in-residence with the MAK/Center for Art & Architecture install work inside the house, so there may be a series of photographs hung in several rooms and a sound and video installation running in another.

There is almost no furniture in the house, and you wander from room to room unguided. The woodwork is worn and splintering. The kitchen is full of present day glasses & dishes (the house and grounds are used for events). You hear a creak above you and realize someone is on the roof. You open doors yourself; you exchange cautious smiles with other visitors exploring the former studio and home of R.M. Schindler. This home was designed and built to be a place of creativity and interaction (designed to be shared between two married couples, with one room for each person to "express his or her individuality", plus guest quarter, sleeping porches on the roof, and patios as the communal living spaces). It's a masterpiece of early modern architecture and a rare delight to get to explore and enjoy a space of that magnitude so casually. But you might worry as you wander around the house, will it withstand another 90 years? Will all this use and handling speed up the need for woodwork, doors, and windows to be replaced? Even if restoration is done with care, is there something lost when all the original pieces are replaced?

The Eames House: Case Study house #8

I knew visiting the Eames House would be one of the highlights of my trip to southern California. A student trip to LA in my Sophomore year of the Interior Design program at Washington State University included an exterior tour of this classic piece of architecture and served to fuel my passion for the Eames as impeccable design (and life) role models. The majority of visitors to the Eames house are only treated to an exterior tour, but thanks to Gwen Crane at CDA & Julie Shimizu at Herman Miller I was able to take a guided interior tour of the house and studio with no less of a guide than Ann Enkoji, a woman who had began her career working directly for the Eames' office in the 1960s. Although we were limited to the main floor of the house and the studio, it was an intimate and personalized tour with time for soaking in the many details.

The Eames foundation operates this Case Study house and they've chosen to maintain the house much as it was in 1988, when Charles Eames died. The original furniture is surrounded by the art work and mementos collected by the Eames and carefully arranged



by Ray. The foundation works to handle any needed maintenance or repairs as unobtrusively as possible, leaving the house and furniture to age. There is an unwrapped present, it's wrapping slowly deteriorating. The story is that when Ray received the gift, she loved the beautiful wrapping so much she displayed it in her house & never opened the gift. Years later the Foundation carefully cleans around the yellowed and crumbling paper. The furniture is a bit worn, with the clear exception of a brand new Eames lounge & ottoman that had recently replaced the original. Ann talked about the long discussions that went on surrounding the decision to replace the lounge. How much wear was too much? When is intervention the duty of the caretakers of a piece of architectural history and when should things be left as is to age and show the passage of time?



The Stahl House, Case Study House #22

The great gift of the Emerging Professional grant money was that it enabled me to experience these houses in unique and personal ways. If I had taken a trip to Southern California without this grant, I would have most likely taken an exterior tour of the Eames House (and missed not only the interior and studio views but also the chance to speak for so long with someone who intimately knew and loved the house), I would have probably driven myself around Palm Springs (but never gone inside any homes or been able to fill in the history and personality connecting each home and neighborhood), and I might have missed the Stahl house all together. Instead, thanks to the grant, I signed up for the sunset tour and, along with a small group of 7 other visitors, was allowed to enjoy the house casually, slowly. Led by Scott Sterling with Sterling Construction, the contractor who has worked with the Stahl family to upkeep and maintain the house over the years, the visit also included Mark Stahl stopping by the house and engaging visitors for a Q & A.

The Stahl family actively works to maintain the house in perfect condition. Both the Stahl house & the Eames house are two different types of fascinating (and beautiful) architectural time capsules. Visiting the Eames house, everything is in its place as it was left over 30 years ago and so you see furniture wearing out, sun fading fabrics, years pass even if the furniture is not rearranged. The Stahl family works to care for and honor their family's home by continually repairing, replacing, and restoring. The family works with Design Within Reach, who supplies mid century design classics to furnish the house, rotating new furniture in on a seasonal basis. You walk through the gate and suddenly it's 1959 and you're hanging out at a brand new and glamorous home.

The VDL House

The VDL house, designed by Richard Neutra (and later a portion was re-designed by his son, Dion Neutra), was left to the Cal Poly Pomona College of Environmental Design. Architecture students lead tours through the house and the university has completed a number of restoration projects at the house. Much needed repairs to roofs, walls and the exterior of the house have been completed and restoration of the interior will be used as a further learning tool for both Cal Poly architecture students



and interested community members. The day I visited the house, Dion Neutra was also there, chatting with visitors. The VDL House in many ways felt like a balance of some of the more extreme philosophies guiding the other houses I visited. Repairs are being made, mindfully and with a careful sense of duty to history. Currently visitors were allowed to touch and explore the house freely although perhaps after the interior is more fully restored that will change as well.

Each house I visited was a unique living example of architectural preservation. Each is obviously treasured and respected, even as different approaches are taken in attempts to best celebrate each space.