A project of the Organization of Women Architects
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November 1982

IN CELEBRATION OF
WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE

The Tenth Anniversary of the OWA
Organization of Women Architects
and Design Professionals
INTRODUCTION

As the OWA celebrates its tenth anniversary, we would like to begin a tradition of examining the works of accomplished women architects, first those in California and eventually others throughout the United States. Many members wish to know more about women architects' works. Questions are asked frequently about the number of women architects who have done significant projects and about the lack of adequate record. This year, we look to two women who were pioneers in the architectural profession in Southern California: Lutah Maria Riggs, born in 1896, and Edla Muir, 1906-1971.

Riggs worked with an architect/painter following a traditional architectural education, while Muir entered the field through apprenticeship studying with a gifted builder/architect. Both became respected partners before opening their own offices, and both spent the majority of their careers as independent practitioners. Their works are in the collections of the University of California, Santa Barbara Art Museum.

The accomplishments of these two women are only beginning to receive the attention they deserve. In remembering Lutah Maria Riggs and Edla Muir, their exemplary work will continue to inspire us in our individual efforts toward excellence in design.

November 6, 1982
LUTAH MARIA RIGGS

Nancy Baker and Mui Ho visited Lutah Maria Riggs in Montecito near Santa Barbara, where she lives in the house she built for herself 56 years ago. It was exciting to see her in this remarkable environment, and we would like to share our experience with you.

Recently retired, Riggs reminisced with us about her early days in Santa Barbara where she arrived as a high school graduate from Indiana. Having had classes in drafting and mathematics, it was quite natural for her to enroll in the School of Architecture at the University of California. In 1914 she went to Berkeley to begin her training in the Beaux Arts.

Upon graduating in 1919, she answered an employment notice by an architect seeking a student to work for a season. She was hired by Ralph D. Taylor who practiced in the small Sierra town of Susanville and boarded with his family until October, when heavy snows threatened to close in the town. She fondly remembers that time as one of her happiest. "It was a very friendly place," she recalls. "There were dances at the one hotel every week and I knew everyone in town."
A sense of humor and a self-assured inventiveness mark Riggs’ work. Her own house, built in 1926, early in her career, would still be considered a daring and artistic interpretation of flexible space. The studio-office and garage stand at the foreground of the approach to the house, forming a section of the walled compound enclosing the garden. Thus, clients coming to her office also experienced the unusual interior organization of her own house, unfettered by irrelevant convention. Passing through the gated wall beyond the office and into the side entry door one immediately focuses across the room on a poetic wooden circular stair, too precipitous to be more than a very private passage to the loft rooms overhead, its only handrail a thick rope looped along the steep inner rise of the treads themselves.

The house has in essence two very grand rooms, the larger more public, the smaller a private retreat. “I don’t like a lot of little rooms,” Riggs explained. Thick double-stud walls form deep reveals around the Paris-green window sash and doors, the color used as an adjective to direct attention. In the bathroom she merges the wallbase and wooden floor into a watery metaphor by enamelling them both in a deep-blue wave pattern. The south wall, framing tall, iron-clad windows overlooking a boxwood maze, was painted by Riggs herself in transparent layers of four colors. Soft calcimine undertones of blue, peach and cream are randomly revealed through a thin surface wash of pale yellow, leaving a mellow impression of age and history. This scenographic intimation of a remembered past would be well-employed in later years during the forties, when she designed movie sets for MGM.

Garden entry to Rigg’s House
Lutah Maria Riggs must have been very sensitive to the client as well as the site for hers is a truly distinctive regional style embracing many of the architectural influences from Asia, the Mediterranean and Mexico that are expressed in the culture, climate and population of Southern California. As she was quoted in the AIA Journal of September, 1977: "Each assignment presents its problem; I aim to solve them the best way possible, and also provide enough beauty to lift the spirit."

Riggs’ contribution to the environs of Santa Barbara has been significant, although the greater part of her work remains to be published. We will have the opportunity to see more of it in a major retrospective planned for early in 1984, in Santa Barbara, when Riggs herself will be able to join in reviewing the handsome buildings she has produced during the 61 years of her practice.

Riggs has received wide recognition for her achievements. In 1960 she was elected a fellow of the AIA, cited duly for excellence in design and service to the profession. In 1961 she was appointed by the governor to the California Board of Architectural Examiners. In 1967 she was selected as a "Woman of the Year" by the Los Angeles Times, the first architect to receive that honor. In 1977 "The Architectural Drawings of Lutah Maria Riggs" were shown at the University of California, Santa Barbara Art Museum.
EDLA MUIR

Edla Muir was born in San Francisco and moved to New York just before the great earthquake in 1906. She found her career early when she began working, at the age of 13, in the office of John Byers, a well-known craftsman/designer in Los Angeles. At that time Byers had a tile factory in Santa Monica and had just begun to experiment with adobe buildings. Muir continued working weekends and vacations through her high-school years. Her later work indicates how thorough her instruction must have been in the craft of building.
After World War II, Muir opened her own office in West Los Angeles doing primarily residential and some commercial work. She worked closely with her clients and was particularly skillful at assembling their ideas and possessions into an architectural whole. Two of her clients at that time were Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor. Although she employed many traditional styles, it is her fine modern work that has been published most extensively. Most noted is the 1951 Zola Hall house built on the site of an old botanical garden in Mandeville Canyon. As is typical of her projects, The Hall house is beautifully sited, filled with light and integrated with the garden, all architectural responses particularly appropriate to the lush vegetation and climate of Los Angeles.

With the exception of a four-year interval of work in Washington State (1953-1957), Muir continued working in Los Angeles until her death in 1971 at the age of 65.

She was married to the late Clyde Lambie and is survived by her son, Alex.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


