

# Schindler,

## *space architect*

*by Esther McCoy*

One day Schindler was looking at the floor plan of a house that had just been developed in quarter scale from the rough plan he had made directly on the surveyor's eight scale contour map.

It was a plan with two axes, the living-room axis angling off at 45° from the rest of the house. The bedrooms forward from the intersection, were on a slope, with the garage under them. The kitchen, service area and the patio side of the long livingroom were level with the natural grade. The garden flowed into the livingroom through sliding glass doors. The rest of the house stepped down with the earth, following its contours.

Who else had that respect for the land, its moods and dignity? Who else had listened to it? Who else had let the land dictate the house, rather than imposing the house on the land? Wright, yes. Who else? Very few. There was but a small group, most of them living in California, proving ground of all that was new in architecture.

Schindler is an architect's architect, perhaps the most borrowed from of all the moderns in America, just as Wright is the most influential. It is not only his conception of space that makes him unique. He has developed construction methods and usages that are now in general practice. He was the first to introduce wall cabinets as prefabricated partitions; the first to use unit furniture; his *tilt-slab* house was the first of the prefabricated houses; he developed the bar-sash window, which does away with the clumsy posts of the double hung sash and the heavy meeting rail at eye-level, or the obvious disadvantages of the casement window—it is a horizontally sliding metal sash which allows grouping in continuous rows.

Not until contemporary architecture is



in such favor that one need not construct a *tour de force* to achieve attention will Schindler receive a full credit for his work. Wright has a growing taste for the full orchestra. Schindler composes for the single voice. Even his public buildings, apartment houses, medical buildings, have an intimacy and lack of ostentation that is rare.

In the Bethlehem Baptist Church, a Negro church in the east part of Los Angeles, he has discarded all the clichés of ecclesiastical usage without on the other hand indulging in extraneous brilliant techniques. He simply made a gracious statement in wood and glass.

He pulled down the drafting machine, clicked it at 45° and moved the scales rapidly along the drawing. He clicked it again, then cruised between 45° and 90° for a while.

This was the point, he had once said, where most architects sent their draftsmen to the library to research and draw up perspectives so the client could choose between playing a Spanish peasant, a French king or a colonial plantation owner.

He stands at his high drafting board after his draftsmen have finished, talking and effortlessly drawing construction details. Dust collects on his reference books. I never saw him open one; there are no magazines around of the work of other designers, unless his draftsmen bring them in. There are only two things he uses to work with, the contour map of the lot, which shows every variation in levels, and the Los Angeles Building Ordinances.

He got up and tore off a strip of tracing paper against a scale. He taped it over the floor plan. He began spinning the arms of the drafting machine over it again.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"The roof," he said.

"Do you work out the roof before the elevations?"

"They are the same thing. You don't set a roof on a house. A house is its roof. Just as a house is its foundation."

He began drawing the lines of the roof levels, widening the overhang on the west, cutting the square of the bedroom-kitchen-dining axis with another square,

setting it diagonally on the first.

"Why do you do that?"

He showed me how the square of the roof, cutting diagonally the square of the plan, would be raised above the lower level roof, lighting and extending the room. Standing in the rooms looking up, one's eyes would touch first the lower level (six foot eight) and when it stepped up, instead of touching blank wall or ceiling at the eight foot height, you escaped through the glass. I realized all at once that when I put my pencil down I did not look through the open doors to the patio with its green lawn and pittosporum tree, and the bamboo hedge that gave it privacy, but to the strip of glass set high in the walls. Also it produced the distinctive space forms that are Schindler's unique expression. Schindler has an approach which he stated first as a young architectural student in Vienna, and which he has developed and exploited in all his works. He designs and builds in terms of space forms rather than mass forms. His houses are wrapped around space. You can quickly see in his space forms how he has created a new definition for space; a Schindler house is in movement; it is in becoming. Form emerges from form. It is like a bird that has just touched earth, its wings still spread, but at once part of the earth.

He labelled the levels from the datum point: 114 for the finished floor, then the various roof levels, one growing out and up from another, a level widened to give spaciousness to a doorway, lowered for a balcony. He stopped. He began to erase. He had to give the lowest level a new form because it cut across a bathroom. He swung the arm of the drafting machine again to find a form that would give the bathroom a minimum of seven six height required by the building code.

When he found it he got up. He was feeling very good. "Draw it up," he said.

Later I found a folder in the files containing articles written by him and about him, and a number of unanswered letters from publications asking for photographs of his work. "I'd rather design another house than take care of that," he had once said.

There was a list of his houses and buildings. I noticed that many of his houses were for musicians, and wondered

if there was something in his space forms that appealed especially to a musician.

He had made a number of notations on architecture. "Architecture in its historical sculptural form has died."

Space architecture. To define it perhaps one would have to stand in the same relation to his methods of work as the witness stands to the height of a building in a perspective. To narrow and precise space you began with the contour map and building code; developed it through the character of the land and the way of life of the client. Space forms had their roots there, and were not arbitrary or extraneous to them.

Schindler came over and began adding a pool to the plot plan. He couldn't find the scale at once, so took his steel carpenter's scale from his pocket. He supervised all construction himself, and knew all the methods and possibilities and how to squeeze every bit of juice out of them. He put in the pool, changed it, took up the contour map again and drew it in between the 106 and 107 contour lines, curving it with them.

I blew up the eighth scale contour map to quarter scale and dotted it onto the floor plan. I took it over to Schindler. He was drawing an elevation.

I thought of one of the letters in the file. It was from a prominent modern, an importer of the International Style from Europe to the East Coast.

It said, "Your attitude toward architecture is undoubtedly colored by life in California. It is of great advantage for architects to travel to different parts of the country and so vary their surroundings and broaden their views."

It was an amazing thing for an architect to say. How could *not* the life of an architect be colored by his surroundings? That was exactly why Schindler was a great architect. He had dug into the place where he had settled. He knew its temperatures and winds and all its caprices. As Thoreau once said of Concord. Schindler had traveled far in Los Angeles. Any place he might have gone—Texas, Canada, New York—his ideas would have been colored by the terrain. For building was his medium of expres-

sion, and for him to build was to build for the land.

The other draftsman and I went over and looked at the elevation. The house followed perfectly the grade line. Very little excavation would be necessary. He had sculpted the house out of the hillside.



*Residence of H. Rodakiewicz, one of the many California houses designed by Schindler and peculiarly well adapted to the mountain terrain around Hollywood, where more truly modern and functional houses are to be seen than in any other residential locality of the United States. Schindler has been a pioneer in bringing modern architecture to the West and has created his own style which many have sought to follow and emulate.*

**DIRECTION**

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