

THE NEUTRAS -Preservation and the View from Inside
Talks for BOSCH AND SIEMENS HOME APPLIANCE GROUP showrooms in Dallas/Houston, TX
2/21/06

This year marks the 80th year in practice for our firm; I'm fresh from surveying an early project of our in Brownsville; the Kraigher House of 1937, the earliest International Style residence built in Texas, and still the most distinguished house in Brownsville.

Before we proceed, I'd like to take a moment to thank Scott Brown and Tina Whiteford representing BSH; a lot of planning has gone into this one day marathon. I'm doing a reprise of this talk later today in Houston!

Since Preservation seems to be the theme of this trip, I'm going to start by telling you a few case histories of preservation and how it went for us. I'll then show you some images to illustrate the growth of our practice over the years.

Let me start with the work of our firm in Texas. The chief pilot of Pan American Airways, Geroge Kraigher, had commissioned by dad in 1936 to design an avant garde residence for him in Brownsville, the site of PAAs headquarters in those days. Somehow dad found the labor to execute this remarkable design in those days so far off center. That was followed in a couple of years with a massive war housing project called Avion Village near the current Dallas/Ft. Worth airport in Grand Prarie. Remnants of that still survive, which we viewed earlier. It would be a good candidate for some sort of preservation efforts.

We were gratified at the situation we found in Brownsville. It was the first time a Neutra had set foot there in 70 years! The city there has concluded a \$1.00 99 year lease with the local branch of the University of Texas. They have on staff a biologist/cum preservationist in the person of Larry Loef, who has been around the block a few times with projects similar to this. He is fortunate in that he has as backing the Provost of the University, Jose Martin, as well as Vice President Ruth Ann Ragland and others at the U, who all seem to agree that this could be a flagship project for them and the City.

While the house is in deplorable condition, everyone seems very determined to patch it back together, leaving as much of the historic fabric intact albeit patched together as needed. If we can succeed with this, it will indeed make the national news as an example of what CAN be done. Stay tuned.

I'm interested in how I can help preserve some of the rest of our best work, much of which dates from the 50s and 60s. The original owners are passing these onto their heirs and sale seems to be the inevitable scenario. I've been spending much of my time in this arena. Some of you may have read in April of 2002 of the tragic loss of MASLON, one of our best 60s houses in Rancho Mirage, CA where heirs sold the family home to a man who promised respect and restore the house after paying over half a million more than market for the house. He bulldozed it a couple of weeks later without bothering to remove the sheets from the beds!

This event made the NY and LA Times and countless periodicals. The preservation community was rocked back on its heels, and vowed to make things better. So far as I know, all that has resulted is that Rancho Mirage has started to do an historic inventory of its treasures; a classic case of locking the door after the horse is out of the barn. By the way, so far no one has been able to ascertain the motive for this crime, although I understand a McMansion has finally risen on the site.

A most classic case of loss of an icon occurred over 30 years ago in 1972. I received a phone call, "Would I have someone who might want to move off the VON STERNBERG residence from its site in Northridge?" I asked what was planned. The party said it had been decided to demolish this house rather than have to mount 24 hr guards to ensure that homeless would not camp there. I agreed to research and get back to them. Before I could even get in touch with the AIA and others, I heard the demolition had proceeded. No one even got coverage of it. Here again, no methodology existed that might have saved this house.

Over the years I kept hoping some views of the demolition would turn up. Guess what; a few years ago I got an Email from a man who was a junior high student back in those days. He lived across Tampa Ave. from the house. He'd just gotten home from school. He saw bulldozers; rushed to grab his folks 8mm camera and shot some footage of the final stages of this demolition! See this on our website 'Demolition Derby' at Neutra.org.

In the early 80s I got a similar call, this time from the client himself, Gene Field from Encino. "My wife is tired of modern; she wants to try Old English; do you know of any way we could move this house off the site?". I asked if there was a way to buy another site nearby and sell this one to an appreciative owner. They didn't want to bother. I called the Cultural Heritage Commission. Long story short; they determined that this was 'not one of Neutra's more significant productions'. Therefore they would not list it. It was demolished shortly thereafter, again, no coverage; not even a delay of execution.

We figure that at least 40 to 50 of our individually designed houses are either demolished or so altered as to no longer qualify as Neutras. In addition, literally thousands of units of public and military housing are gone; victims of 'progress' or other reasons for destruction. At the current rate, there will be precious few of our examples remaining in the face of the greatest period of popularity that we've experienced in the eight decades we've been in practice.

So far, in these decades of record keeping, there STILL is NO federal policy for a coordinated approach to preservation. There are tax incentive programs that are supposed to have this effect, and there are lists you can get on, but none of these actually have funding to intervene and PREVENT DESTRUCTION if push comes to shove; excuse the metaphor.

To date, it has been left to the local communities to devise their own methodologies to deal with this issue. The City of LA has established the Cultural Heritage Commission to screen candidates for preservation and listing on their list of monuments. Unfortunately for the monuments, some 25 to 30% of monument site descriptions start with the words 'Site of former....City Monument No. X'. In other words listing is no guarantee for preservation; only a stay of execution for up to a year.

To illustrate the dichotomy we need go no further than my personal case after the death of my mother. She bequeathed my brother and me each a monument designated multiple unit building in Westwood. One was on Strathmore, the other on Kelton. Our appraiser for the estate tax return estimated the value of these properties based on this restricted use. The IRS challenged these figures suggesting to us that we sell and develop the properties 'to their highest and best use'!!! When reminded that the City had designated these as monuments, the agency offered to give us a one year credit, but insist that ultimately the values were much higher if redeveloped with more units.

This posed two problems; an increase in the tax we were being asked to pay, and the Feds spitting on the intent of a City to preserve its heritage! Long story short, we hired an attorney from DC, who after researching advised us to 'settle' rather than fight in court. We ended up having to liquidate to be able to pay 150K more in taxes without setting any kind of precedent to prevent the same thing from happening again. This left us with a terrible feeling of wretchedness. The monuments still survive, but not because anyone, much less the feds, has a meaningful program to save them.

With more time, I could give countless other examples of "Neutras in Peril" but this presentation would become too long. So on with the last part of our program.

With this introduction you might enjoy seeing some of our images about which we've spoken. They'll illustrate the biography of the firm over the years from the late 20s.

Slide show, beginning with Lovell and ending with Avion Village. Then Q&A. 90 min.