

Style; A Destruction Site

By Brad Dunning

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In a move that has stunned, outraged and saddened admirers of modern architecture, the city of Rancho Mirage, Calif., recently approved the demolition of an important 13-room house designed by Richard Neutra in 1963. Neutra, who died in 1970, helped introduce the International style to America, redefining architecture in the 20th century with a series of remarkable residential pavilions. His houses are now cherished in the same way as Frank Lloyd Wright's -- as testaments to a uniquely original vision and a particularly pivotal moment in design history.

The residence of Samuel and Luella Maslon was situated between two fairways on the Tamarisk Country Club golf course. Tamarisk was founded after Jack Benny was refused membership at the nearby Thunderbird because he was a Jew. Frank Sinatra, Ben Hogan and the Marx Brothers all had a helping hand in creating the new club, which quickly became a legend as the Rat Pack's hedonist playground. Seldom was a home afforded

such a perfect site. The Maslons' house was surrounded on all sides by the unworldly green expanse of round-the-clock irrigated turf, isolated like an architectural model and spared the indignity of rubbing elbows with lesser creations. Mrs. Maslon was so enamored of the house (one of only three Neutras in the modernist mecca in and around Palm Springs) and her famous art collection that she stubbornly refused to leave even in the face of failing health. She died last year at home, and the property, still in excellent condition, was put on the market by her heirs and sold through Sotheby's, which is having a sale in May of the couple's art.

The new owner, listed as Richard Rotenberg, of Hopkins, Minn., alarmed local preservationists when word leaked out that he was considering raising some ceilings and enlarging the rooms. On Tuesday, March 19, a contractor walked into Rancho Mirage City Hall and applied for a demolition permit. It was issued that same day with no review and no questions, stamped and approved. Service with a smile. The house was gone within a week.

Courtney Newman, a neighbor, surveyed the damage the morning after: "They appeared to be in such a hurry. The drapes and mattresses -- complete with bedding -- weren't even removed. They're just part of the wreckage. It's an outrage."

Now that important modern architecture has finally achieved iconic stature, this is especially painful. Perhaps 20 years ago this wanton act might have been less shocking; the style had yet to achieve its lofty status. But at this point, when contemporary architecture has moved so far from the idealism and social engineering intended -- and realized -- by these surviving gems, the thought that a house of this caliber would be in jeopardy escaped even the most paranoid preservationists. And this house was no slouch. This was Neutra with deep pockets on a breathtaking site with luxurious appointments. Its soaring, exaggerated (even for Neutra) flat-roof overhangs protected the artwork within from the harsh desert sun. Ingenious built-ins camouflaged resort necessities, like barbecues, charcoal bins and steam trays. Posh living on the links.

"Devastated, absolutely devastated, and embarrassed to have been any part of it," says the understandably upset listing agent for the property, Deirdre Coit, who coordinated the \$2.45 million sale.

"The house was in beautiful condition, important and significant, so appropriate to the site -- what a shame, what a shame," laments the architect Ron Radziner, who with his partner Leo Marmol oversaw the award-winning restoration of Neutra's 1946 Kaufmann house in nearby Palm Springs.

Peter Moruzzi, chairman of the Palm Springs Modern Committee, a preservation group, is constantly urging the city to appreciate and understand their own impressive inventory. He said the Maslon house was "without a doubt the most significant piece of architecture in Rancho Mirage, and now it is gone."

Why Rotenberg had the house demolished remains unknown. He could not be reached for comment. One day, his answering machine informed me that it could not take messages because it was full. (No doubt with people screaming at him!) A message left the next day was not returned. Patrick Pratt, city manager for Rancho Mirage, argued that if the house was so important, why wasn't it on the National Register? (And if Alfred Hitchcock was such a good director, how come he never won an Oscar?) He said he had no idea who the architect was or what the house represented.

The Buddhas are gone in Afghanistan, Palm Springs has approved demolition of a corrugated-metal, glass and concrete-block shopping center designed by Albert Frey, and there's one less obstacle on Tamarisk's 17th hole. Or to paraphrase the songwriter, "A dreamboat became a footnote."

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