



California Moderne

R.M. SCHINDLER BUILT HIS WEST HOLLYWOOD HOME
AS A UTOPIAN HAVEN FOR SOME OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY'S MOST PROGRESSIVE THINKERS

by LISA ZEIGLER

photographs by GRANT MUDFORD

In the past decade, the work of Austrian architect Rudolph Michael Schindler—especially his own residence at 835 Kings Road in West Hollywood, CA—has drawn belated admiration and scholarship. Considered a maverick in the annals of Modernism, Schindler was preoccupied with the shaping of space, not just its function. If historians now eagerly write and the public avidly reads glossy books about Schindler's architecture and the Kings Road House, its definitive cultural narrative has yet to be written. Architectural historian Robert Sweeney, president of the Friends of the Schindler House, has dedicated his professional life to the preservation of Kings Road. In his writing and research on the subject, he stresses that the house was not just Schindler's masterwork, but also the built evocation of

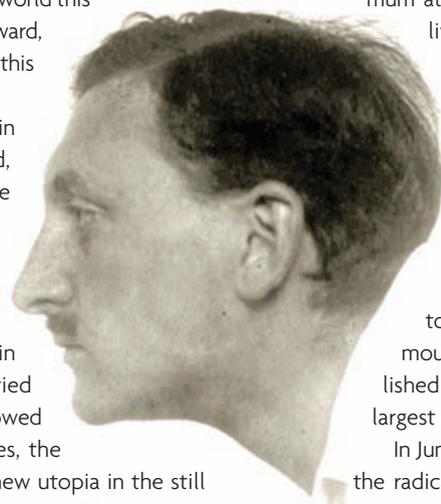


Schindler's collaboration with his wife, Pauline Gibling Schindler.

Thanks to some 13,000 letters written by Pauline Schindler—letters describing her enthusiasms and trials—the social life of the house can now be documented. A volatile woman given to severe mood swings, Pauline is the subject of Sweeney's current project, which he admits will involve deep research into the political—as well as artistic—world this fascinating woman inhabited. From her marriage onward, it was Pauline's explicit desire to have a salon, and in this she succeeded brilliantly.

Pauline Gibling graduated from Smith College in 1915 and began work, along with her closest friend, Marian Da Camara, at Jane Addam's Hull House in Chicago, and then at a progressive school in Ravinia, IL. Both young women were fired with ideals of social progress. Gibling met the young Schindler while he was working in the office of Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago and married him in August 1919. Two years earlier, Marian had married Clyde Chace, a contractor with whom she followed the Schindlers to California in 1921. In Los Angeles, the two couples decided to join forces in creating a new utopia in the still unexploited, breathtaking geography that was Southern California.

The Kings Road House and Studio was constructed between February and June of 1922. On May 12, the Chaces moved into the guest quarters, followed soon after by Pauline and Schindler. The couples lived closely as Schindler had designed the house to promote communal living spaces while providing private sleeping quarters. The unique formal qualities of this house and its use of durable and ephemeral materials—"tilt"



RUDOLPH MICHAEL SCHINDLER'S KINGS ROAD HOUSE AGLOW AT DUSK

slab concrete, slim interstitial windows, redwood panels, and copper ones—are now well known. Described at the time as a "glorified tent," the house was well suited to the California climate, providing the optimum atmosphere for indoor-outdoor living with rooms and living spaces leading out on to an elegant patio looking over a sunken garden.

In tandem with plans for their dream house was the Schindlers' avid pursuit of a meaningful social life with other progressive figures, as well as affiliations with various avant-garde associations and political groups. They found a friend in Gaylord Wilshire, a prominent land developer and active socialist. Many may find the latter startling as today's grand Wilshire Boulevard is a corridor synonymous with vast private wealth. But Wilshire himself published *Wilshire's Magazine* from 1900 to 1915, "which had the largest circulation of any socialist journal at the time."

In June 1921, Pauline wrote, "We are so far and so deeply 'in' the radical movement these days that we never have an evening at home any more.... Committee meetings for the Worker's Defence [sic] League, for the Walt Whitman School...to the hospital to visit an IWW [a member of the Industrial Workers of the World] who has been a month in jail waiting for trial..." The Workers' Defense League sought to defend unions against the criminal syndicalism law which forbade them. And the Walt Whitman School was a "working men's children's school" located in Boyle Heights, at that time a ghetto

Saving a Modernist Masterpiece

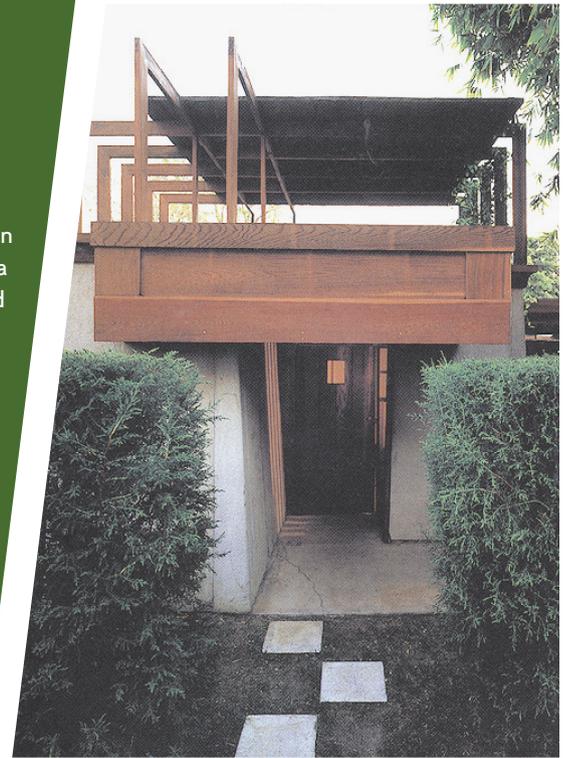
With the death of Pauline Schindler in 1977, the Schindler House on Kings Road stood vacant and badly in need of restoration. Painted a garish pink, the house languished under the towering bamboos and overgrown gardens which surround it. A concerned group of Schindler enthusiasts, led by architect and historian Bob Sweeney, established the Friends of the Schindler House, with the intention of saving the nationally registered landmark from destruction. The group acquired the house in 1980 from the estate of Pauline Schindler and set to work restoring the house to its original state and developing a way to ensure its future preservation. Since then, the Friends have fought an uphill battle to achieve their goals. Funds were first slow in coming, but grants from the city of West Hollywood and the California Department of Parks and Recreation helped keep the momentum going enough to allow for essential repairs and upkeep.

In 1994, the Friends were given a further boost through a unique international cooperative agreement with the Austrian Museum of Applied and Contemporary Arts. The agreement not only included a \$250,000 commitment from the Austrian government, but also led to the creation of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in L.A. the following year. With the new funding, the Friends were able to carry out further restorations and alterations to make the house and its role as the MAK Center a viable enterprise. For the past few years the house has been open to the public and operated by the MAK Center, which, in the tradition of Pauline Schindler, uses its rooms for exhibitions, lectures, and debates exploring the intersections of art and architecture.

Although open to the public, the Schindler House continued to deteriorate. Differential settlement due to poor site drainage caused the concrete slab foundation to crack and the concrete portions of the outer walls to sink. This caused the framing members of the house to separate, creating damage to the roof and allowing water to penetrate into the structure. Inclusion of the house on WMF's 2002 list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites raised awareness of the plight of the house and helped the Friends and the MAK Center receive a planning grant from the Getty Grant Program for a conservation master-plan, emergency roof repair, and preservation training program.

With the conservation master plan now nearing completion, the Schindler House now needs to launch a campaign to raise for the funds for the comprehensive conservation and restoration program as well as pursue funds for an endowment, which will keep the house funded in perpetuity. The case of the Schindler House is not unique in Los Angeles. Friends groups and other preservation organizations representing historic modern properties in the city share similar struggles in pursuit of preservation. There is a growing need for an association of modern house museums and landmarks to provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas about heritage preservation and funding while also acting as a collective voice to lobby the support of local government on issues that affect them all. Perhaps in the future, such an association can be organized—in the meantime, the Schindler House continues to sink.

—BRIAN CURRAN





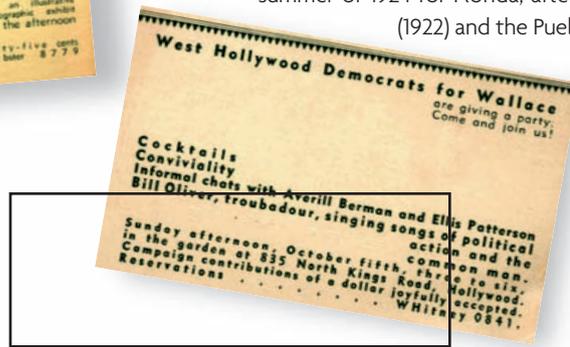
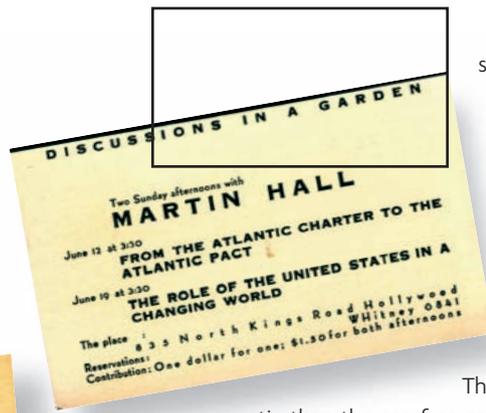
of Russian Jews.

But the Schindlers' social life was not entirely consumed by Pauline's passion for politics. In 1922, the couple joined the Hollywood Art Association, which sought to establish an art museum in Hollywood, while offering exhibitions and lectures, the latter sometimes delivered by Rudolph Schindler himself. As hostess of 835 Kings Road, Pauline was in her element, catering to an ever-changing entourage of eminent guests. These included the Swiss architect Werner Moser and his wife, Sylwa (en route to Taliesin), and Maurice Brown, founder of the Chicago Little Theatre. As a venue for performances and readings, the house was magical at night, with its seamless demarcations between house and garden, and with, as Pauline wrote, "all the fires burning brightly...and the evening warm enough for the house to be wide-open. Many exceedingly interesting people were among the guests and the evening had great charm."

Sweeney notes that despite the radical nature of their home and activities, the Kings Road was also a family home where the Schindlers and Chaces worked together. Both families produced children in 1922. While Pauline commanded the social aspects of the house, Marian Chace handled many of the domestic affairs, especially cooking, although the kitchen was intended to be a central facility in which cooking and cleaning would be

FACING PAGE FROM TOP: THE ENTRANCE TO CHACE STUDIOS WITH A SLEEPING BASKET ABOVE; A VIEW FROM MARIAN CHACE'S STUDIO LOOKING TOWARD THE NURSERY; AN AUSTERE BATHROOM, ITS TUB AND COUNTER OF MAGNESITE. PAULINE SCHINDLER'S STUDIO, ABOVE, WITH ITS COPPER-CLAD FIREPLACE AND A DOOR OPEN TO A CENTRAL PASSAGEWAY

A VERITABLE SALON, THE SCHINDLERS' RESIDENCE OFTEN SERVED AS A VENUE FOR DANCE, THEATER, READINGS, AND PRESENTATIONS BY PROGRESSIVE THINKERS OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY.



shared. The Schindlers celebrated traditional holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, with Pauline holding carol evenings between 1922 and 1924. From July 1922 to summer 1925, Pauline's sister, Dorothy Gibling, lived at Kings Road for a few months while teaching physical education at the University of California Southern Branch, the antecedent of UCLA. In a letter, she described Kings Road as "an artistic household, unhampered by regular hours, which takes a reorganization of your whole scheme [but led to] a very delightful life."

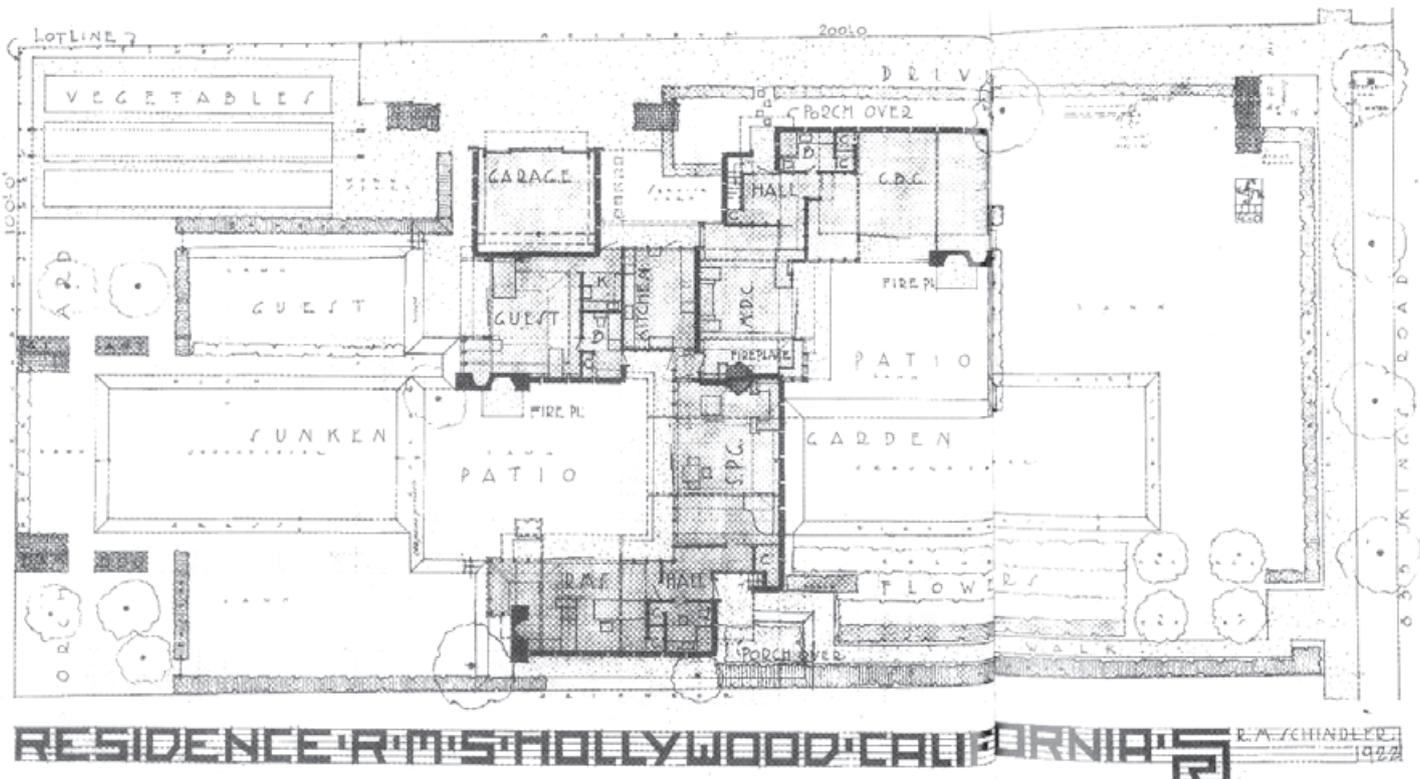
The intimate life of Kings Road, however, was more problematic than the carefree gaiety and idealism of its fetes would indicate. For Pauline was a creature who, as her mother wrote, suffered from "white heats of intensity that send you to hospitals and sanitariums [sic]." Meanwhile, the Chaces left Kings Road in the summer of 1924 for Florida, after Clyde had helped Schindler build the Popenoe Cabin (1922) and the Pueblo Ribera Courts (1923–1925). Their parting was friendly,

however, and indeed, Clyde returned to California in the 1930s to act again as Schindler's contractor.

Once the Chaces were gone, their quarters became a rental unit through which paraded many Hollywood luminaries of the time. The actor Arthur Rankin and his wife, Ruth, moved in, while the guest quarters harbored another actor, George O'Hara, who parked a Rolls Royce in the garage. John Cage lived there for a short time but could not afford the rent.

In February 1925, a new couple arrived—architect Richard Neutra and his wife, Dione. On October 26, Dione Neutra rhapsodized about a nighttime garden soiree: "...they would dance practically in the nude...but it was very beautiful. At night they would illuminate the garden and for music they had gongs..." At their parties, the terraces served as stages for musical and dance performances; in the audiences were many aspiring California artists and writers.

During this period, the new lifestyle embodied in Schindler's design for his house was observed by the Schindler and Neutra families through diet and exercise, psy-





RUDOLPH MICHAEL SCHINDLER'S
STUDIO WITH A CHILD'S CHAIR,
BENCH, AND CUBE CHAIR

choanalysis, education, and the arts. The outdoor courts were dining rooms and playrooms for their toddlers, who ran free under the sun year-round. They slept in the open air, ate simple meals of fruits and vegetables by the fireplaces, and wore loose-fitting garments of natural fibers closed with ties rather than buttons.

Together Schindler and Neutra produced the two Lovell vacation houses, the Jardinette Apartments, and the Translucent House for Aline Barnsdall. But, as Sweeney points out, "Schindler was inventive but built crudely; Neutra was formulaic but technically proficient...." Schindler had designed three vacation houses for Philip and Leah Lovell, and was anticipating the commission for a large residence in Los Angeles. The project, however, went to Neutra, and the Neutras departed from Kings Road in 1930. Schindler and Neutra remained colleagues, albeit more distant than before. While Neutra was praised by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock in their Museum of Modern Art exhibition on the International Style, Schindler's work was blatantly omitted from the show, for Johnson and Hitchcock shortsightedly judged Schindler as a "mediocre" follower of Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the De Stijl architects. The exhibition lionized Neutra, and so the Schindler-Neutra household dissolved, although Schindler would continue to collaborate with Neutra. It was yet another eminent houseguest, Galka Scheyer, who mediated the breakup of the Schindler-Neutra household. Scheyer herself represented the painters known as the Blue Four—Lyonel Feininger, Alexei von Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee.

Meanwhile, Rudolph Schindler's personal life was to undergo drastic

change. In August 1927, Pauline packed her things and left Kings Road for Halcyon, a utopian Theosophist community near San Luis Obispo. On October 19, she moved to the artistic community of Carmel, where she stayed for two years and became involved with the Theatre of the Golden Bough and The Carmel Playhouse. Pauline became a noted writer and editor, working first for the *Carmel Pine Cone*, then as drama critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*. A new progressive weekly, *The Carmelite*, of which Pauline eventually became editor, was a liberal radical weekly, in whose pages the visiting or resident intelligentsia, from Lincoln Steffens to Robinson Jeffers, all had a word. But Pauline lost control of the paper by 1929 and left Carmel. For the next decade, she drifted like a gypsy between Halcyon and Ojai, where her son was at school. She also wandered to Santa Fe, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Los Angeles. During Pauline's travels, Kings Road remained a lively bohemian salon. The photographer Edward Weston was a regular guest, as was the rag-tag poet Sadakichi Hartmann, a crony of John Barrymore, who gave readings, including one of *The Tell-Tale Heart* in which he impersonated Edgar Allan Poe. In 1940, Pauline and Rudolph Schindler finally divorced—but, ironically, the couple took up cohabitation once more, this time as friends. Pauline moved back to her studio at Kings Road and, putting their private differences aside, became the greatest advocate of Schindler's architecture in magazine articles she wrote. As Robert Sweeney puts it, "Schindler and Pauline were strangely together to the end." Rudolf Schindler died in 1953. Pauline stayed on, her salon intact, until her death in 1977. ■