

Strick House
1911 La Mesa Drive
Santa Monica, California
City Landmark Assessment Report

Evaluation Report
Building Permit History
Tax Assessor Map
Photographs
Sanborn Map



Prepared for:
City of Santa Monica
Planning Division

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Santa Monica, California

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Strick House

1911 La Mesa Drive

City of Santa Monica, CA 90402

APN: 4407-017-042

City Landmark Assessment and Evaluation

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Description of site or structure, note any major alterations and dates of alterations

The subject property is situated on the north side of La Mesa Drive on a portion of Lot 8 in Tract 7233 and a portion of Lot 8 in Tract 10163 (once part of the Canyon Vista Tract) within the City of Santa Monica. The lot size is approximately 105 feet by 246 feet. Sited on a flat parcel atop a steep bluff overlooking the Riviera Country Club fairways, the building fronts south and is located in a primarily single-family residential neighborhood richly landscaped with mature Moreton Bay fig trees.

The subject property has not been previously identified or evaluated in any of the City's historical resources inventory surveys.

A notable interpretation of the International Style characterizes this one-story single-family residence. T-shaped in plan, the dwelling is capped by a flat roof and is sheathed in glass, brick, and stucco. One of the most prominent features is the row of tall, narrow exposed rafters that cover the entire roof in a serrated pattern and project beyond the overhangs of the primary (south) and rear (north) elevations. The study, living room, dining room, and kitchen are located in the long east-west stem of the "T" with a roof height elevated above the perpendicular bedroom wings. On the primary elevation, large vertical panes of transparent fixed glass with clerestory windows feature tubular steel mullions. The windows are located west of the entrance and are fronted by non-original adjustable vertical metal louvers. The floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the study, on the west end of the primary facade, previously faced a cantilevered balcony that has been removed. The original study and the enclosed garage below are being converted into a two-story library while a new garage addition is constructed towards the street. The rear, north-facing elevation overlooks a swimming pool and a panoramic view of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Riviera Country Club fairways. The main communal living area of the house is set back from La Mesa Drive and is landscaped with a meandering concrete path and decorative boulders. The primary concrete entrance path leading from the sidewalk parallels a brick, west-facing wall that is shaded by a cantilevered slat wood canopy. The L-shaped wall (originally unpainted red brick) encloses both a courtyard shared by the west bedrooms and the south wall of one of the bedrooms, topped by clerestories.

Building permits on file show that in May 1964 a building permit was issued for a 4,200 square foot single-family residence and garage to be erected on vacant land for a cost of approximately \$70,000. According to the permit, the architect of record was Ulrich Plaut and the owner was listed as Joe Strick. In July 1964, a permit was issued for the construction of a 20-foot by 36-foot swimming pool at a cost of \$3,880. A building permit dated December 1964 includes an attached sketch showing a minor alteration of the interior space

in the southwest corner of the living room with an estimated cost of \$250. In 2003, permitted alterations include the removal of the cantilevered balcony on the west end of the south elevation, the conversion of the garage and study into a two-story library, and the construction of a new garage addition with an open balcony above. The installation of the vertical metal louvers along the front façade in October 2003 was unpermitted.

Statement of Architectural Significance

The property at 1911 La Mesa Drive is an excellent example of the International Style as interpreted by renowned Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in a residential design. The International Style emerged as one of the architectural responses to the Modern Movement that began in Europe in the 1920s and spread throughout the world, culminating in the middle decades of the twentieth century. European leaders of the movement included Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Marcel Breuer, many of whom emigrated to the United States and influenced several generations of American architects. Le Corbusier's design tenets were especially influential in Latin America, where he collaborated on projects with local architects including Brazil's Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer. Characteristics of the International Style include a rejection of historical references and applied ornamentation, and an embrace of steel, glass, concrete, flat roofs, smooth wall surfaces, asymmetry, open floor plans, indoor-outdoor spaces, ribbon windows, and an openness towards new engineering methods and new materials. In the United States, there were significant regional interpretations of the International Style with architects in Southern California taking advantage of the favorable climate by emphasizing large expanses of glass and indoor-outdoor living spaces.

The subject property at 1911 La Mesa Drive displays many of the architectural features associated with the International Style in its design and configuration. These features include the flat roof, extensive use of steel-framed glass panels, open floor plan, and unornamented exterior surfaces. The dwelling's horizontality and extensive use of floor-to-ceiling plate glass facing the dramatic rear (north) view of the Santa Monica Mountains is a response to the spectacular site. The *National Register of Historic Places Bulletin 15 "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation"* defines integrity as the ability of a property to convey its significance. Of the seven qualities that affect the integrity of a building, the attachment of exterior vertical louvers to the living room windows of the south elevation affects the design of the residence most directly. An International Style building of this type typically expresses voids honestly, without applied external sun treatments. While several of Niemeyer's buildings incorporate vertical louvers, particularly his non-residential buildings, the architect did not design such a solution for the subject property. When the louvers are opened, the differentiation between solids and voids is still expressed and the key features of the International Style (horizontality, use of glass panels) remain. Despite the application of the louvers, which appear to be removable, the design integrity of the residence has not been seriously compromised. Therefore, the Strick House remains an excellent example of the International Style as applied to residential architecture, one of the

few examples of its type in the La Mesa Drive neighborhood, and the only Niemeyer-designed residence constructed in Santa Monica and the United States.¹

Statement of Historical Importance

Santa Monica. In 1875, the original townsite of Santa Monica was surveyed, including all the land extending from Colorado Street on the south to Montana on the north, and from 26th Street on the east to the Pacific Ocean on the west. Between 1893 and the 1920s, the community operated as a tourist attraction, visited by mostly wealthy patrons. Those areas just outside of the incorporated city limits were semi-rural in setting and were populated with scattered residences. After the advent of the automobile in the 1920s, Santa Monica experienced a significant building boom, with homes being constructed in the tracts north of Montana and east of Seventh Street for year-round residents.

La Mesa Drive. Located at the northeast edge of the City of Santa Monica, La Mesa Drive is an intact, six block long, curving street of large and gracious homes mostly dating from the 1920s and 1930s. The street is parallel to San Vicente Boulevard, with access to it at each end and in the middle. Mature Moreton Bay fig trees, with their overhanging canopy of leaves and their large, intricate root systems, line both sides of the street. Vintage post top street lamps, with paired lanterns at the ends of the drive and single ones on the interior, illuminate La Mesa during the evening hours. Opened in 1923, as the Canyon Vista Tract (now Tract 7233), a development of the Santa Monica Land and Water Company, La Mesa quickly became one of the most sought after addresses in Santa Monica. Several noted architects were commissioned to design the homes that soon lined La Mesa. Most prominent among the designers were Santa Monica's native son, John Byers, who is responsible for eight houses, including his own at 2034 La Mesa Drive. Byers' work on La Mesa showed him at his most characteristic, exploring the possibilities of Spanish, Mexican, and Monterey styling. Two important Pasadena architectural firms are also represented on La Mesa: Marston, Van Pelt and Maybury (2202) and Palmer Sabin (2233). In many ways La Mesa Drive was comparable to the elegant residential neighborhoods of Pasadena, which were made outstanding by the work of these firms, among others. Another architectural luminary who worked on La Mesa Drive was Paul Williams (2201, 2209) who was to Los Angeles residential architecture in the 1920s and 1930s what John Byers was to Santa Monica. Williams, more than any other single architect, created the upper middle class elegance of neighborhood districts such as Hancock Park. The 1930s and 1940s on La Mesa saw the construction of two homes in the International Style by two architects of great stature in Los Angeles, Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright (2323 La Mesa Drive) and a prolific and innovative architect on his own, and J. R. Davidson, a talented European expatriate who formed one of the circles associated with Richard Neutra (2501 La Mesa Drive). In addition, several less well-known designers put forth their efforts on La Mesa, most notably Gable and Wyant (1923). This tradition of hiring renowned architects continued well into the 1960s with the construction of the Strick House by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in 1964 (1911 La Mesa Drive).

¹ Hess, Alan. *Unpublished letter to the New York Times, August 15, 2002.*

Person(s) of Historical Importance

Joseph and Anne Strick were the original owners of the property at 1911 La Mesa Drive. As previously noted, Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer designed this house for the Stricks in 1964. Following the couple's separation during construction, Mrs. Strick raised her three children in the house, occupying the dwelling until 2002 when the property was sold to Jon Monkash. The house was sold to current owner Michael and Gabrielle Boyd in 2003.

Director, producer, and screenwriter Joseph Strick and his wife, writer Anne Strick, were living in the Gregory Ain-designed Mar Vista tract of modern houses when they contacted Niemeyer to design their new house.² Having purchased their Mar Vista dwelling in 1953 (located at 3562 Meier Street) for its indoor-outdoor qualities and Modern design aesthetic, they were intent on selecting an architect fluent in the language of modernism.³ The Stricks were inspired by Niemeyer's achievements in Brasilia and also in the design of his own home in Rio, but they were also seeking to further another goal. Politically progressive, Joseph and Anne Strick were appalled by the inability of Oscar Niemeyer to work in or travel to the United States due to his political beliefs. Said Mrs. Strick, "The choice of Niemeyer was not only an aesthetic one, but, in part, a way of thumbing our noses at the whole McCarthy era because it seemed so reprehensible that a man, simply because of his political views, could be prevented from working in this country."⁴ The design of the house was carried out entirely by letter; neither the Stricks nor the architect ever met face to face.⁵ The September 1964 issue of *Arts and Architecture* magazine chronicled Niemeyer's design process for the residence from his earliest plan (a two-story dwelling with a free-form roof and bedrooms recessed into the face of the bluff for access to views), to the final plan accepted by the client and the City. According to a letter by Niemeyer to Joseph Strick reprinted in the magazine, the City of Santa Monica rejected the architect's first two plans because below grade bedrooms were not allowed. In addition, Mrs. Strick was not attracted to the subterranean bedrooms and use of stairs in the initial two plans and, through her husband, sent a rough sketch to the architect suggesting ideas more sympathetic to her wishes. Accompanying the third set of plans submitted to the client, which were the ones used to build the house, was a note from Niemeyer to Joseph Strick, which stated "The plan that I am sending you respects the functional lines of the 'sketch' sent to me. It is simple, and constructive, economical and beautiful."

Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, winner of the 1988 Pritzker Prize, architecture's highest honor, is one of the greatest masters of twentieth century modernism. Born in 1907, his career spans seven decades. Career highlights include his collaboration with Le Corbusier in the 1936 design of the Ministry of Health and Education Building in Rio de Janeiro, collaborative work, again with Le Corbusier, on the 1947-52 United Nations buildings, the design of the new capital city of Brasilia with his mentor Lucio Costa in the late 1950s, and the Contemporary Art Museum constructed in 1996 in Niteroi outside of Rio. An avowed Communist, Niemeyer was forced into exile in 1964 by Brazil's military government,

² *The Gregory Ain Mar Vista Tract was declared a City of Los Angeles Historic Preservation Overlay Zone on 05/07/03.*

³ *Interview with Anne Strick, October 20, 2003.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

returning to Brazil in the 1970s. Niemeyer's architectural philosophy "centers on his conception of architecture as a plastic art freed from all traditionalism by the technical and material advances of modern society."⁶ With this freedom, Niemeyer created architectural forms that are often organically rooted with sinuous curves echoing the mountains and seashore of his native Rio.

Los Angeles architect Ulrich Plaut was hired to do the working drawings of the house in the spring of 1964. Anne Strick oversaw the completion of the residence with the collaboration of Interior Designer Amir Farr. Together they redesigned the fireplace and built-in bench area (noted in the permit dated December 1964) and determined the fixtures, finishes, and furnishings of the residence.

According to architectural critic, author, and Niemeyer authority Alan Hess, the Strick House is the only known Niemeyer-designed residence constructed in the United States.⁷ The only other completed work by Niemeyer in America was the United Nations complex, which he designed in collaboration with others. Following the 1964 *Arts and Architecture* article, the Strick House was never again published due to the wishes of Mrs. Strick who was raising a family there. When the house was "rediscovered" in Santa Monica in 2002, Hess wrote in an August 2002 letter to the *New York Times*, "It's as if we suddenly learned of a Frank Lloyd Wright house in China." He continued, "In my opinion it is an excellent piece of design, the equal of the best Case Study houses of the same period...."

As stated above, Mr. Strick was involved with the entertainment industry, Mrs. Strick was a writer, and together the couple shared strong political and social ideals. However, despite the Strick's professional and political associations, they do not appear to have achieved prominence as persons of historical importance. The dwelling's connection with famed architect Oscar Niemeyer, however, strongly supports the contention that the subject property is associated with a person of historical importance.

Statement of other significance

The property does appear to meet criteria for high aesthetic or artistic value as it is defined in *National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*. The property articulates a particular concept of design and an aesthetic ideal, the International Style, in several of its elements. Specifically, the building's lack of applied ornamentation, its embrace of steel and glass, flat roof, smooth wall surfaces, asymmetry, and indoor-outdoor spaces are all character-defining features associated with the style. The tenets of the International Style emphasize that form should not allude to historical precedents, but, instead, embrace utility and function. The design of the subject property, as interpreted by architect Oscar Niemeyer, embraces these tenets.

⁶ Underwood, David K.: *International Dictionary of Architect and Architecture* (1993), Vol.2, p.4.

⁷ A substantial project planned for client Burton Tremaine by Niemeyer in Santa Barbara was published in the March 1949 issue of *Arts and Architecture*, but was never built. Richard Neutra obtained the commission.

Is the structure representative of a style in the City that is no longer prevalent?

This large, single-family residence is a good, highly representative example of the International Style as interpreted by architect Oscar Niemeyer. There exists, however, other examples of residences influenced by the International Style within the City.

Does the structure contribute to a potential historic district?

A potential historic district in which the subject property is located has been previously identified in the City's *1985-1986 Historical Resources Inventory* as the "La Mesa Historic District." Although not previously identified as a contributor to the district, the building's rediscovery and subsequent architectural and historic acclaim appear to qualify the building as a contributor to the district. The district is significant for its physical and historical characteristics, including its architecture, association with prominent architects and Santa Monica residents, and its location.

CONCLUSION

In summary, based on current research and the above assessment, the property located at 1911 La Mesa Drive appears to meet one of more of the City of Santa Monica's Landmark Criteria. The property was evaluated according to statutory criteria as follows:

Landmark Criteria:

9.36.100(a)(1) It exemplifies, symbolizes, or manifests elements of the cultural, social, economic, political or architectural history of the City.

The subject property is an excellent example of the International Style as interpreted by architect Oscar Niemeyer in domestic architecture. The property at 1911 La Mesa Drive retains sufficient contextual and architectural integrity to manifest the residential development and architectural history of La Mesa Drive. Additionally, this property is representative of the City's overall development and architectural history. Therefore, the subject property appears to satisfy this criterion.

9.36.100(a)(2) It has aesthetic or artistic interest or value, or other noteworthy interest or value.

The property appears to satisfy this criterion because it so fully articulates a particular theory of design (the International Style), which is an aesthetic and philosophical ideal that form should follow function. These ideals are expressed in the building's lack of applied ornamentation, its embrace of steel and glass, flat roof, smooth wall surfaces, asymmetry, and indoor-outdoor spaces.

9.36.100(a)(3) It is identified with historic personages or with important events in local, state or national history.

Although commissioned by producer, director, and screenwriter Joseph Strick and his wife, writer Anne Strick, they do not appear to have achieved prominence as historic personages. In addition, the residence is not identified with important events in local, state or national history. Hence, the subject property does not appear eligible for local landmark designation under this criterion.

9.36.100(a)(4) It embodies distinguishing architectural characteristics valuable to a study of a period, style, method of construction, or the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship, or is a unique or rare example of an architectural design, detail or historical type valuable to such a study.

The property appears to satisfy this criterion. The subject property is an excellent example of the International Style of architecture. It embodies many of the key distinguishing architectural characteristics valuable to a study of the period, style, and method of construction including lack of applied ornamentation, a flat roof, horizontality, extensive use of steel-framed glass panels (many of which are floor-to-ceiling), and an open floor plan. It is a rare example of an architectural design in its incorporation of exposed rafters that cover the roof in a serrated pattern and project beyond the overhangs. Even with the attachment of vertical louvers to the primary (south) elevation, the residence still embodies the design tenets of the International Style, a high level of architectural integrity and context.

9.36.100(a)(5) It is a significant or a representative example of the work or product of a notable builder, designer or architect.

The subject property appears to satisfy this criterion. The residence at 1911 La Mesa Drive was designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, the winner of the 1988 Pritzker Prize, architecture's highest honor. Niemeyer is primarily associated with an organic, free-form approach to Modern design that became known as Brazilian Modernism. The Strick House is not typical of Niemeyer's work in that it is more obviously influenced by the International Style in its angularity and lack of organic form. This makes the residence a significant example of Niemeyer's work in the rarity of its design in the architect's overall oeuvre, in addition to its status as the only known example of Niemeyer's residential work in the United States.

9.36.100(a)(6) It has a unique location, a singular physical characteristic, or is an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City.

Though the subject property is located along La Mesa Drive, a very distinctive street itself, most of the dwellings in this neighborhood are of similar scale, massing, and proportion. Further, many of the homes along La Mesa Drive were designed by noted architects making the entire street, not just one of two homes, an architectural showcase. Therefore, in applying this criterion it does not appear that the subject property itself has a unique location.

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PHOTOGRAPHS



Setting view from La Mesa Drive, looking northwest



Primary (south) elevation, looking northeast

PHOTOGRAPHS



Primary (south) elevation, living room louvers closed, looking north



Primary (south) elevation, living room louvers open, looking north

PHOTOGRAPHS



Southwest corner of residence, garage with study above, looking north



Southeast corner of residence, bedrooms and courtyard, looking northwest

MISCELLENOUS ATTACHMENTS