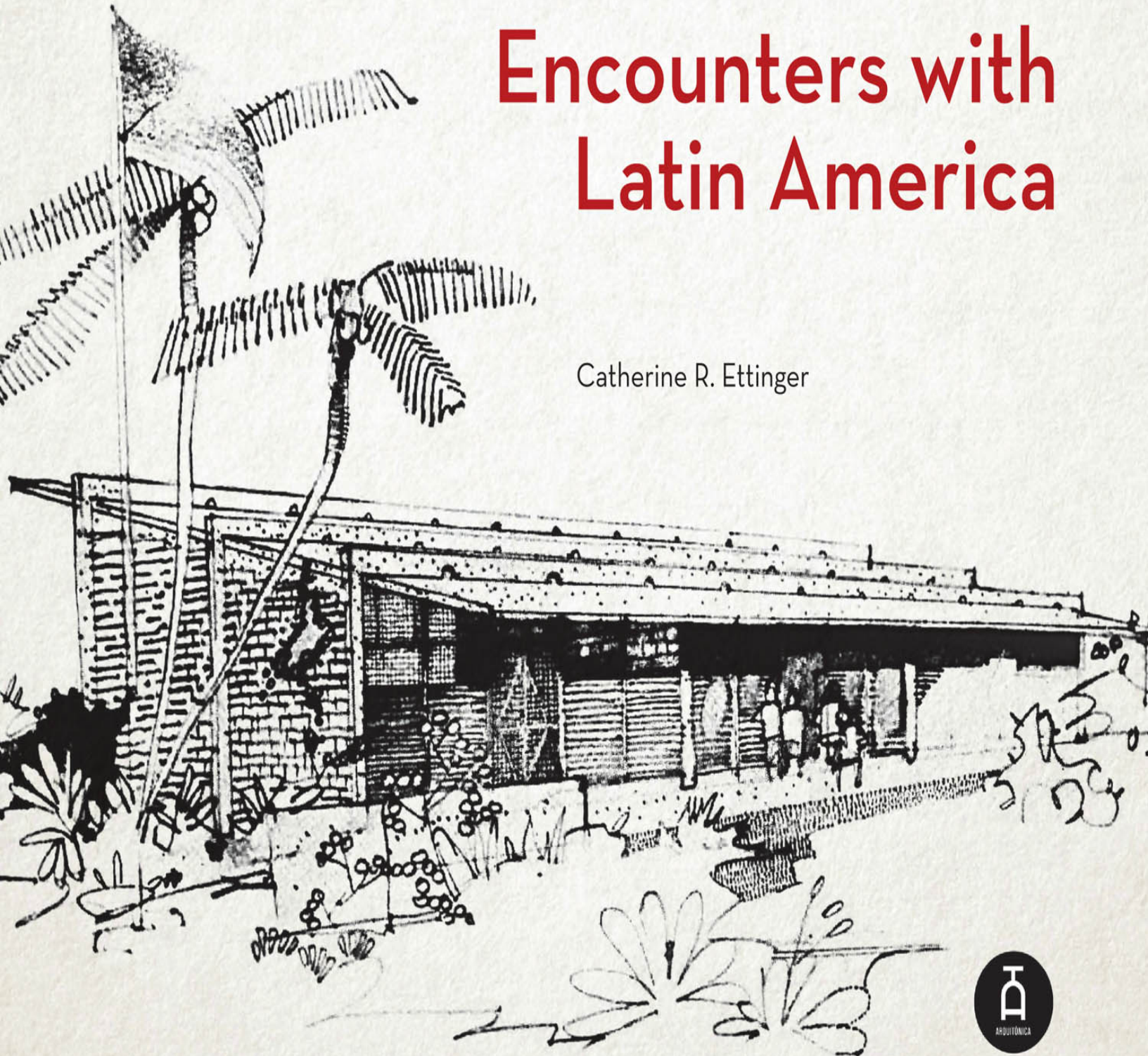


RICHARD
NEUTRA

**Encounters with
Latin America**

Catherine R. Ettinger



RICHARD NEUTRA
ENCOUNTERS WITH LATIN AMERICA

CATHERINE R. ETTINGER



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Survival through Design

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FOREWORD

The forays of my father into Puerto Rico and throughout Latin America that Professor Ettinger has documented in this fine book, were not his first encounter with regional cultures. His youth in the pre-World War I Habsburg capital of Vienna exposed him to the nationalistic aspirations of Czechs, Hungarians, Serbs, Zionist Jews and rightwing German speakers. His wartime travels on horseback through Croatia, Serbia, Muslim Bosnia and Albania brought him to exotic and primitive “hinterlands.” His reaction to all this was a sympathetic curiosity, and this attitude he brought with him also, to Latin America. His approach to regionalism in architecture was characteristically results-oriented. “Do what works.” In this he may have been influenced by his mentor Adolf Loos, who, in his 1913 essay “Rules for Those Building in The Mountains,” wrote this:

“Don’t think about the roof, but instead about rain and snow. That’s how the farmer thinks. So in the mountains he builds the flattest roof possible, according to his technical experience. In the mountains the snow mustn’t slide off when it wants to, but when the farmer wants it to. He must be able to climb onto the roof to clear the snow away without putting his life in danger. We too have to make the flattest roof possible with our technical experience.”¹

When I was a boy, my father gave me the same justification for the flat roof of his 1952 Auerbacher cabin in the San Gabriel Mountains of California as if it was his own original justification. His flat roof violated the local

“tradition” of the imitated Swiss Chalets in the other houses of that rural development, but it still works seventy years later.



Fig. 1. Auerbacher cabin. Photograph: John Berley.



Fig. 2. School in Loreto, Baja California. Photograph: Raymond Richard Neutra.

Today we are still trying to resolve how the functioning and appearance of the built and designed environment ought to vary from region to region. Is it a bad thing that the wide-eaves of the standardly-designed reinforced concrete schools scattered around Mexico do not sport the pitched tile roofs that the Spanish conquerors imported from their homeland? The nice shade would remain the same, but the appearance would seem “more Mexican.” As a public health physician, I know to accommodate the irrational but treasured habits of those whose health behavior I want to improve. I think Loos and my father were less patient with what they saw as “irrationalities.”

Raymond Richard Neutra

1. Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, London, Penguin Book, 2019, p.216.

INTRODUCTION

In December 1919, feeling discouraged, Richard Neutra wrote in his diary:

“I shall never live with fewer worries, never have time to develop ideas. I wish I could get out of Europe and get to an idyllic tropical island where one does not have to fear the winter; where one does not have to slave, but find time to think and, more importantly, to be a free spirit.”¹

This journal entry, made when Neutra’s desire to emigrate to the United States was frustrated, reflects his view of the New World as an auspicious setting for the development of modern architecture in tandem with evolving ideas in Europe. The reference to the tropical landscape through the evocation of an idyllic island has implications beyond climate, including the idea of the tropics as a space for liberation and self-realization. Although largely invisible in the historiography, the tropics occupied a central place in Neutra’s work and thought.

Richard Josef Neutra (1892-1970) is recognized throughout the world for the spectacular modern houses designed and built for a wealthy California clientele in the 1930s and 1940s. His attention to detail — particularly in technical solutions—, interest in adaptation to the mild California climate, and development of fluid spatial solutions with blurred boundaries between indoor and outdoor space have been widely documented. The Lovell Health House became an obligatory architectural reference as the first domestic structure in America built using a steel frame and his Kaufmann House in Palm Springs — through the iconic photograph of Julius Shulman— became

one of the most recognized examples of his talent.² However, there is a lesser-known facet of Neutra, that of an architect committed to the poor who proposed the solution of social problems through architectural design and modern technology. He considered this to be central to his work, although it has been overshadowed in the historiography of his architecture by the more glamorous works mentioned above. The designs he developed for Puerto Rico, his written proposals focused on Latin American countries, his visits to the region, and the speeches he gave at universities and meetings of professionals attest to his enormous interest in Latin America and its problems. Conversely, his experiences in the region contributed to the formulation of his ideas on technology, climate and region as related to architecture, as well as to specific solutions he implemented in his later work.

The historiographical construction of Neutra and his work stems from Hitchcock's consideration of Neutra as a key player in the modern movement and the inclusion of his work in *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* published in 1929.³ Hitchcock described Neutra as "a worthy disciple of Wright" who showed that "the new manner can cope individually and effectively with American conditions." Neutra's place in architectural history was consolidated through the inclusion of the Lovell Health House in the 1932 exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and the subsequent publication of the book *The International Style* by Hitchcock and Johnson.⁴

Although his work is present in practically all the histories of modern architecture, Neutra usually appears as a minor figure. The historiographical construction of the modern movement revolved around the great masters, as in the monographic chapters that elevated figures such as

Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto in Gideon's *Space, Time and Architecture*. While Neutra receives mention in major works, references to his architecture are often cursory. In 1949 Giedion briefly considered him as one of "a few modern-minded European architects who [had] settled in the United States" and was involved in a "hard fight for contemporary architecture in Southern California."⁵ Bruno Zevi in his 1954 monograph on Neutra revealed a critical attitude towards other proponents of architectural modernity. He wrote: "they have invented modern architecture, but only he [Neutra] has given it respectability and prestige."⁶ Despite the quality of his work, his innovation in technical and spatial solutions, and the numerous publications that disseminated his theoretical approaches—including ideas that foreshadowed the notion of sustainability in architecture—⁷ Neutra continued to occupy a secondary place. As Silvia Lavin noted, Neutra was "always cast in a supporting role: helping structure triumph over decoration but doing so less vigorously than Mies; pursuing the social program of the avant-garde but with less engagement than Gropius; and blazing the trail of the New Pioneers but with less clarity than Le Corbusier."⁸



Fig. 1. The Lovell Health House, the first residential project in the United States built with a steel frame. Photograph: Courtesy Michael Locke.

Lavin attributes this impoverished view of Neutra to the lack of attention paid to his numerous theoretical writings and the richness of their reflections, as well as to the works generally used to represent him —the Lovell Health House and the Kaufmann House. The first example “initiated a discourse that linked Neutra to functionality, the formal repertoire of high modernism, and technical details of both construction and professional practice”, while the second led to his portrayal as a regionalist (figures 1 and 2).⁹



Fig. 2. The Kaufmann House, Neutra's iconic work in the California desert, as portrayed in Julius Shulman's photograph. Source: ©J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004R10).

The first monograph on Neutra was published in 1950 after an exhibit staged at the São Paulo Art Museum. The book, edited by Gregori Warchavchik, was published in Brazil and addressed Neutra's residential architecture.¹⁰ This was followed in 1954 by a more comprehensive text on Neutra's life and work by Bruno Zevi. Zevi's portrait of Neutra also emphasized his residential work, contrasting it with that of Wright.¹¹ Between 1951 and 1966 Willy Boesiger edited, at the behest of Neutra, three volumes of

his works and projects that helped promote knowledge of his work, mainly in Europe.¹²

In 1960, the Californian architecture critic Esther McCoy published *Richard Neutra*, which helped familiarize an English-speaking audience with the architect's work. It contained a brief profile of his life and work followed by a section of photographs of his main projects. Additionally, McCoy included a selection of sketches done by Neutra during his travels, a bibliography and a chronology of his work.¹³ In the same year, Leonardo Benevolo dedicated several pages to Neutra in his *Storia dell'architettura Moderna*, with photographs of paradigmatic works such as the Lovell Health House and the Corona Elementary School in Bell, California. Benevolo characterized Neutra as a technician, concerned with construction details, the proper functioning of windows, and the reduction of costs.¹⁴ From the review of his work in California he concluded:

“Not being a theoretician, Neutra did not waste time on general discussions and used facts to show the advantages that could be gained by using industrial elements according to their true nature; he shows that the modern architecture worked better than the old, produces less expensive houses that were easier to maintain, windows that closed well, installations that did not easily go wrong.”¹⁵

Although Benevolo recognized the importance of Neutra's attention to his clients and their emotional needs, his understanding of Neutra was limited, as revealed in his assertion that “the exploration of social motives, which characterized the European movement after 1930, was partly foreign to him.”¹⁶ Thus, Benevolo reinforced an image of Neutra that was derived solely from the houses built for his Southern California clientele, an image also disseminated through the Case Study House Program¹⁷ and

the photograph of Julius Shulman. Neutra's writings and projects focused on social issues remained largely invisible.

Even Thomas Hines's *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture*,¹⁸ which established a clear chronology of his life and projects based on a review of the architect's personal writings, devoted very little attention to Neutra's work in Puerto Rico. Hines's biography of Neutra was complemented a few decades later by *Neutra. Complete Works* by Barbara Lamprecht.¹⁹ Lamprecht's book, in addition to showcasing a large number of plans and photographs of Neutra's work, provides technical information for many of them and identifies the architect's contributions to spatial and formal solutions.

More recent publications with novel approaches — despite providing new perspectives on a complex man— have not diluted the glamorous image of Neutra established through previous works. Books such as *Form Follows Libido. Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture* by Sylvia Lavin, and *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* by Alice Friedman²⁰ present new insights into Neutra's work. Sylvia Lavin used Neutra's theoretical texts, many of them unpublished, to argue the influence of psychoanalysis in the way he approached both projects and clients. The examples she used to support her thesis reinforce Neutra's image as the architect of an elite Southern California clientele. Alice Friedman explored in depth the Kaufmann House, an iconic work that she used as the cover image for her book dealing with the relationship between mid-century modern architecture and the culture of glamour in the United States, through works by Johnson, Saarinen, Lapidus and Wright. In another recent formulation, Jean-Louis Cohen reviewed Neutra's reception of early texts on American architecture.²¹



Fig. 3. The photographer Julius Shulman, seen here with Neutra, contributed to the creation of the glamorous image of Neutra's work in California. Source: © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004R10).

Uncommon Ground by David Leatherbarrow and *Landscapes of Modern Architecture* by Marc Treib provide novel approaches to Neutra that challenge the historiography of architectural modernity. Leatherbarrow argues that, despite the use of prefabricated elements and standardized solutions, modern architecture was understood in relation to the site.²² Treib refutes the idea of modern architects' indifference to the natural landscape through the writings and works of Wright, Mies, Aalto, Barragán and Neutra.²³ Francis Mallgrave also included

Neutra in his work on phenomenology and architecture, analyzing the contribution of *Survival through Design* and his formulation of biorealism.²⁴

