

NEW REPUBLIC

The Analytic Prose That Defined the Architecture of Southern California

By Jed Perl

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Architecture is a great subject for an aesthete with a flair for dialectical thought. And Esther McCoy, in the collection of her writings just published by East of Borneo Books, knows how to invigorate art-for-art's-sake hothouse subjects with a cooling blast of analytical precision. McCoy, who was in her mid-eighties when she died in 1989, has long been a hero among students of modern architecture in southern California, a subject scarcely defined until she came along. The exhibition devoted to her career at the Schindler House in Los Angeles—which offered tantalizing glimpses of this woman who was both a political activist and an unabashed aesthete—was a highlight of Pacific Standard Time, last fall's salute to the arts in mid-twentieth-century southern California. What has not yet been recognized, or at least not sufficiently recognized, is the subdued power of McCoy's prose. Now, with the publication of *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader*, we can see deep into McCoy's complex imagination.

Reading through *Piecing Together Los Angeles*, edited by Susan Morgan, we are in the company of a writer with a reach that takes her way beyond architecture. Among the strongest pieces included are a series of memoirs, in which McCoy describes friends and personal experiences with the same exactitude she brings to buildings and architectural ideas. The opening essay, "Patchin Place: A Memoir," with its small cast of oddball characters, is one of the best things ever written about Greenwich Village in the late 1920s. McCoy composes a portrait in miniature of Bonnie Grainger, a novelist who ran a speakeasy

in her home and “also played the guitar—cowboy songs, sea shanties, English folk songs and, after hearing Pablo Casals, she searched through second hand music stores for Bach scores, which she played.” McCoy’s memories are sharp and concise. Her few pages about living on Zuma Beach in Malibu in the 1930s, when “everybody who stopped off at the beach cottage...was looking for work,” convey a melancholy no longer easy to associate with that part of the world. And she offers a beautiful account of the death of Theodore Dreiser, for whom she had worked on and off as a researcher for years. Everything is glinting suggestions, nothing is held too long. She recalls Helen, Dreiser’s wife, saying “You know why Teddy likes you, don’t you?” And McCoy continues: “for some reason, not wanting to hear why, I had laughed, and she had joined me in laughter and so I never really knew. It was unlike me to guard myself against knowing; but I had.”

McCoy’s writing is difficult to quote in brief, because it is all too easy to lose track of her subtle shifts in emphasis and attention. You might say of her writing, as she wrote of the Kings Road house by R. M. Schindler—for whom she worked as a draftsman during World War II—that it “did not explain itself at first glance. It required an effort to understand.” There is an extraordinary delicacy in the way McCoy moves from the idea of architecture to the reality. “The modern architect, from the beginning,” she explains, “did not search for beauty but rather for a meaning in terms of modern society. The well-accomplished derivative styles in which beauty was the aim did not satisfy the modern architect. He was not particularly interested in how a building looked. For a number of reasons the modern style was not easy to read. It took time to understand it, as it did, say, the poems of Rilke or the then-new music of Schoenberg. Schindler, even in the ’40s, put off as long as possible making renderings of buildings being planned. It was more important for the client to know first what a building is than how it looks.” Yet after making this eloquent argument that understanding must precede seeing, McCoy plunges deep into sight itself, exulting in a house that has “both richness and leanness,” a counterpoint of modular panels and dissolved corners, of “exposed concrete” and “clerestories and broad openings to closed gardens.”

Although most of the writing in this collection was produced in the second half of the century, there is no question that McCoy was very much a product of the 1930s; she had turned thirty in 1934. In the deep background of all her work is that decade’s combustible mix of Marxism and modernism, which McCoy reconciled by bringing a dialectical rigor to her analysis of the beauties of architecture, that supremely social art. There is a quality of invigorated aestheticism in McCoy’s finest writing that reminds me of the work of a number of other critics who were shaped by the 1930s, especially the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby and the painter and art critic Fairfield Porter. That the politics of the 1930s posed grave dangers for artists and critics who wanted to preserve art’s freestanding value is undoubtedly true. But the dialectical method may have also had a subtler effect on artistic and literary thought in the 1930s and 1940s—an underground effect, you might say. Denby once observed of the Marxism of the 1930s that “what was interesting was the peremptoriness and paranoia of Marxism as a ferment or method of rhetoric.” I think what Denby was suggesting was that dialectical thinking could sharpen all kinds of responses. Could it be that the aesthetes, who found themselves in what seemed like a life-and-death battle with the Marxists, were saved from irrelevance by the necessity of waging that ferocious fight? For someone like Esther McCoy, who was herself active on the Left, the rival claims of art and politics were reconciled not only through the social nature of her subject matter but through the very rhythms of her prose. Decades later, writing about the life and death of beauty in Los Angeles, she was liberating the old radical hopes from the old cant and cliché.

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