

# THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

## The Great Communicator

Michael Webb on the "The Mother of Us All," Esther McCoy.

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ESTHER MCCOY AT HER DRAFTING TABLE, 1940S. COURTESY SMITHSONIAN ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART/MAK CENTER

Reyner Banham called her “the mother of us all,” and no one did more than Esther McCoy to win respect for Southern California modernism. David Gebhard and Robert Winter, who produced the definitive guide to LA architecture, praised her “one-woman crusade” to raise awareness of the city’s modernist heritage through her books on several generations of talent. Her essays and journalism were equally brilliant and even more influential, and the best of those short pieces are assembled in this anthology.

Don’t try reading it in bed or you may never get to sleep: the temptation to turn every page is too great. Lyrical, impassioned, alive with sharp phrases and insights, McCoy’s writing carries you along as it introduces a wonderful cast of characters: the Greene brothers, Frank Gehry, Irving Gill, Konrad Wachsmann, J.R. Davidson, and Cesar Pelli. There’s wonder in her voice as she describes the Bradbury Building as “a vast hall full of light” at a time when it languished in obscurity. She evokes the quirky spirit of Grandma Prisbey’s Bottle Village in Simi Valley and the mastery of Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute in La Jolla. “Flat as a tortilla and sleek as a Bugatti” is her memorable description of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, and she matches that phrase with her sketch of its publisher, John Entenza: “His shoes and his mind were always nicely polished. Forever urban, no one was ever less seduced by the

California sun. Yet it was the California sun rather than the hearth that was at the base of the Case Study Houses.”

Born in 1904, McCoy grew up in the Midwest and moved at age 21 to New York’s Greenwich Village, where she supported herself as a writer by doing research for Theodore Dreiser, accompanying him to Moscow and Berlin. In 1932, she took a train to California and, emerging at a stop in San Bernardino, was seduced by the aroma of the orange groves. During the war she worked as an engineering draftsman at Douglas Aircraft and then became R. M. Schindler’s sole assistant, having failed to gain admittance to USC’s School of Architecture. “Less to unlearn,” was his comment as he hired her at \$1 an hour. Working on Schindler’s drawings in the Kings Road house introduced her to the potential of architecture, as an art and a discipline, and launched her on a new career as a critic—though she continued to write fiction. *Five California Architects*, published in 1960, made her reputation. Her last essay, written a few months before her death in 1988 and reprinted here, was an introduction to the Museum of Contemporary Art’s Case Study House exhibition catalog.

“California changes everyone,” wrote McCoy. “The messages sent to the East hit the Rockies and bounced back. We were on our own, no one was watching.” That was not literally true—LA was closer in spirit to Europe than New York in the mid-20th century. Its exiles were able to realize their ideas and transmit them worldwide. McCoy called it a “private proving ground” that fostered experimentation. Sadly, that has become much less common as the city has grown and its arteries have hardened.

As editor of this anthology, and co-curator of a recent exhibition on McCoy at the MAK Center, Susan Morgan has immersed herself in her subject, culling a mass of material to select pieces that reinforce each other and contributing graceful introductory texts. Like Banham, who approached McCoy in 1965 with a sense of awe and then found her to be a wonderful companion, you’ll be dazzled by her erudition and imbued with her sense of joy. Nobody has brought architecture to life in words as well as she did for more than four decades.

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