"House Growing out of Site": The Case of Rudolph M. Schindler

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Abstract

Schindler’s career reflects a strong commitment to theory and practice, a respect and appreciation for traditions of architecture, and a sharp wit to transform these lessons to local ends. Schindler searched for an architectural expression that would reflect the climate, landscape, and culture of Southern California. His reputation can be compared to architects like Alvar Aalto, Eileen Gray and Hans Scharoun, as noted in ‘The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture’ by Colin St John Wilson. This paper examines Schindler’s principles that consciously shaped the design of his dwellings. Using Schindler’s own definitions, three programs are categorized in this discussion: locality, materiality, and views.

Keywords: Schindler; locality; material; view; site

1. Introduction

The first consideration in almost any housing design is the environment of the site. Each architectural piece should reflect the unique set of circumstances dictated by the identity of the location. The process of grappling with these nuances of a site allows for creative new designs and architectural innovations to occur. The sense of place is filtered by architects' minds to critically reinterpret its idiosyncrasy in accord with a unique design. Thus, architects must study the land, terrain, and the quality of vegetation existing in it. They must also understand the nature of materials, form, space, color, light, and shade that help form a suitable design for the location and create a pleasing ambience for the inhabitant.

Schindler’s architecture is a prime example of such considerations. Schindler addressed the site specifically methodically, taking seriously the affects it would have on each of his designs. The result was that Schindler produced architecture showed the spirit of location; most notably of Los Angeles, with its ideal climate and its freedom from conventional style. His design prototypes respond to the contextual and natural inheritance of Southern California. His architecture signified a new residential dwelling, predicated on modernity and rooted in the symbol of California outdoor living.

2. Locality

In describing Schindler's work, Carol Aronovici writes, "[Schindler] was content to interpret his vision of the new humanism in its proper perspective in relation to the nature of the site, the economy of materials, the personalities of the occupants and the grace of living … He was one of the few architects of our day who recognized and lived up to the idea that a home is a dwelling place for both the body and the soul". Although "least appreciated" during his time, Schindler's dwellings have become a popular tradition in the region. His design has exerted a profound influence on many contemporary Southern California architects, including Charles Moore, Frank O. Gehry, Michael Rotondi and Franklin D. Israel, who have written in appreciation of Schindler's influence.

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2. Locality

For Schindler the design site is the first space form of emptiness. The spirit of the very first empty site was the first energy for the allocation of his space forms. Its significance for Schindler was visible from the very early period of his career. In his 1916 Lecture Note VII, "Location", Schindler was prone to differentiate three different house types based on his deep consideration of the site and its context: picturesque, academic, and organic. His architecture signified a new residential dwelling, predicated on modernity and rooted in the symbol of California outdoor living.

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the "organic" type which respected the inner laws as well as the outer features while incorporating its surroundings. As a result, Schindler's buildings became extensions of their location. In addition, "an organic building will influence its surroundings". In this case, the "approach, terraces, garden ought to be subdued to laws of composition". He was deeply concerned with the indigenous features of the location and site of the building. His buildings were an extension of the locality.

As extensions of their surroundings, Schindler's experimental cubic forms seemed too foreign to be appreciated at the time; due in part to their abstract forms. The settlement appears not to be an organically grown structure. Whereas primordially pure yet articulated forms, his buildings manifested considerable sensitivity to the "genius loci" of site and place, and responded to the particularities of site, climate, and local culture. Through his creativity, its concrete manifestation of the primordial forms brought together in an aesthetic unity with nature and specific locality. Schindler's buildings complemented the native Californian landscape, contesting and synthesizing the forms to the wildly irregular topography, as demonstrated in his architectural career.

In the forms, the interior and exterior spaces were both intertwined. The interior spaces flowed into each other, providing various directional views. On the exterior, simple and rectilinear space forms were interlocked hugging surrounding landscapes and interacting with the outdoors. Accordingly, it was often hard to distinguish where the building started or ended, as it frequently lacked a clear main façade. It was his intention that the dwellings show "no clear front or back", opening to various spectacles in the given site. Their relation creates a rhythm of permutations inside and out, forming a dynamic between form and space. This equilibrium neutralizes and annihilates the solid form, smoothing over the local particulars of place.

Schindler treated the outdoor space as a room in much the same way he viewed a street as a room in a city. Accordingly, he continued: "Since a composition in space deals with the out-of-doors as its raw material, it is obvious that the building should melt into its surroundings and that these define the character of the interior as well." Schindler illuminated the possibility of the outdoors as another formal element. The consequence was that the indoors and out-of-doors became a continuum of space. With the use of plain transparent window materials without decoration, the exterior garden could be reflected into the interior room. In his unpublished 1952 article, Visual Techniques, Schindler denied the use of "the art-glass window of the past". Schindler also offered a half open porch as an intermediate space between the inside and the outside. The porch itself merely marked a threshold between two spaces.

The Kings Road House (1921-2) is the best representation of his 'organic' type of dwelling. As opposed to the modern imposing structure, the simplicity of its volume is in tune with its environment, creating a refined refuge from the bustle of the city of Los Angeles. The house lies in a densely wooded grove. Two L-shape units are arranged in a pattern based on a 200 by 100-foot lot, forming a courtyard with enclosed patios and outdoor fireplaces. It appears as if primitive boxes are resting in their natural place. Schindler writes, "The shape of rooms, their relation to the patios and the alternating roof levels, create an entirely new spatial interlocking between the interior and the garden". In addition, there is almost zero ground level difference between the ground floor and the garden, expressing infinite extension to the open ground in accordance with the character of land. In his words, "The floor is understood to be part and continuation of the ground outside". Schindler's 'organic' type building is fully realized in the house. Both the house and the outdoor unite in perfect rapport to embrace its extraordinary surroundings.

![Fig.1. The Kings Road House, 1920. A ¼-in Scale Basswood Model](image1)

![Fig.2. Diagrams of the Relation between House and Garden in the Kings Road House. The Grey Areas Represent the Garden](image2)
The structural components of the house are simple: raised concrete walls from one side and two wooden posts from the other side support all ceilings made of exposed redwood. "All partitions and patio walls are non-supporting screens composed of a wooden skeleton filled in with glass or with a removable 'insulate' partition." These basic materials are used in a lucid way to form "the cave-tent shelter of concrete, wood and canvas" which relate the projects to the climate, region and the surroundings. The simplicity of materials and its structural skeleton reminds one of the nostalgia of Laugier's primitive hut where he considered the hut with natural materials and techniques as the essence of architecture.\(^{15} \) Opposed to thick walls, the thin canvas encloses the open-air sleeping porch on the rooftop, and the transparent boundary of glass windows and doors define the threshold between garden and living area. Here, the walls have been dematerialized so that no physical boundary exists between inside and outside! The very notion of Gottfried Semper's "hanging carpet" is linked to this conception of the shelter.\(^{14} \) Schindler appears to erect a modern hut by examining the immemorial relationship between humanity and nature. It is a true sustainable aesthetic.

Furthermore, Schindler pays special attention to topographical considerations as part of his formal schema. Rather than excavating for a basement, Schindler took advantage of the characteristic Los Angeles sloped hillside. Schindler was against having a basement saying, "The basement is another insane reminder of past limitations. Why anyone should build such an expensive, unventilatable, moist, dark room in the ground is not understandable".\(^{15} \) Accordingly, many of his buildings touch on the site with structural poles or extended foundations with units terracing down the slope to minimize foundation depth. At times, cantilevered posts or posts on piers form the substructure rather than continuous wall foundations. Schindler formally took the slope of the site into consideration as his design vocabulary and formulated three different potential housing types on a sloping site: balancing above the hill (the Wolfe House of 1928),\(^{16} \) rising up in a counter motion (the Van Patten House of 1934/35 and the Wilson House of 1935-39), and cascading down the slope (the Walker House of 1935/36).\(^{17} \)

3. Materiality

Material honesty prevailed under Schindler's insistence that the essence of space forms should be attributed to the use of natural forms and materials. One of the most important aspects of Schindler's design is his interest in using local and regional materials. Schindler refused to employ attached facings that offer the illusion of another material, believing that materials must portray their true appearance without unnecessary shielding or facings. Schindler often used shorter life materials in his buildings in the belief that the significant part of the house is its immaterial aspect. Although the architecture can disappear and be destroyed over time, the architect's forms of thought will endure. This underlies his metaphysical thinking of immaterial eternity. In his discussion of monumentality, following his 1912 Manifesto, he wrote: "Essential parts [built] for eternity" [do] not mean "durable material but the eternal conception of room." In other words, "The timeless of architecture is in [its] form and its expression".\(^{18} \) For Schindler, the important quest in the process of creating architecture was to make something tangible out of thinking.

Schindler's use of common materials in an uncommon way\(^{19} \) has been widely acknowledged. He thought that a particular material was only appropriate for a certain form, saying, "Not all forms are able to be executed in all materials. He continued, "A certain form is asking for a definite material," and "A certain material is asking for a definite form,"\(^{20} \) This idea was integral to Schindler's design theories since materials, although inert, shaped his notion of space architecture. This idea also seemed to foreshadow much of Louis Kahn's thinking: "I asked the brick what it liked, and the brick said, 'I like an arch'"\(^{21} \). "... I could have souped up the brick with interior rods, but instead I allowed the brick to be brick and built the way brick wants to express itself".\(^{22} \) Schindler felt that an "artist who is the 'intensifier' considers materials by
The honest use of materials was a measure of the inherent value of the artistic quality of a building, since the original texture of the material "may soften the outline of the space form, making the room less confining and giving it imaginative interest." In addition, the natural quality of a material could not be imitated since "every material has effects on feeling-instinct." To Schindler, imitations created through the use of facings were always wrong and misleading. Decorative facings that camouflage the structural material might be appreciated in classical architecture, but not in modern times. He made it clear that the facing material functions as assistance only and is not form giving.

In his "Visual Technique," Schindler iterated that the various facings applied to conceal the structural material eliminate "the possibility of growth, [becoming] an impersonal and ageless spectre." This approach was so distinctive in its difference from the trend of the decorative surface of Secession or Art Nouveau that Schindler was familiar with during this period. For Schindler, materials are a source of emotions and the basis of the resident's psychic existence as well. Thus, a 'building must grow old' with the resident and then, "the work of the architecture grows better and nobler with age." Designed in such a way, "life will regain its fluidity" with the house.

Schindler regarded texture and color to be fundamentally different. Each had its own purpose. The coloring of a material was an effect of the eye, depending on light and surface appearance. Coloring materials was only possible on the temporary parts of architectural components. Instead, texture was the primary determinant of a space's form and character. Each material, whether it was brick, stone, or wood contributed to the form through its qualities and texture. Schindler felt color to be appropriate only for less permanent components such as cloth. Wood should be stained, and stone should never be touched. He meant that color was understood to be a timed, light-influenced emotional element, whereas texture was an "eternal form." Later, this idea would lead Schindler to use untreated materials rather than manufactured materials, and to discredit the superfluous and unnecessary use of colors and decorations altogether. To him, the artificial application of these elements brought a crude effect to a building. Arguing that excessive ornament detracted from the spatial quality of architecture, he preferred a simple, natural, and plain scheme. He felt that, "an interesting plainness is the most difficult and most precious thing to achieve."

Schindler's stress on the honest use of material appeared to originate from his association with Adolf Loos in Vienna. Loos emphasized "every material possesses its own language of forms, and none may lay claim for itself to the forms of another material," and also, "covering material" should be distinguished from "material covered." Mallgrave concurred, saying, "one should never paint wood the color of wood or score stucco to imitate masonry." The natural wood without facings exposed the true forms of the house. He argued, "Mechanically achieved textures soon become commonplace and tiresome. A texture made by the loom, being part of the weaving process, is less objectionable. Only the natural grain of wood is a unique impression of the warp and woof of growth, with each piece partaking of the personal dignity of the parent tree."

Schindler continuously asserted the artistic superiority of natural material over machine made material, stating natural materials as "all signs of eruptive birth." Instead of using a color formula or theory like that of Itten's color circle, Schindler used landscape and locality as his own codified color palette. He states, "Nature will give us another clue … the house that should not be satisfied remains a foreign object on the earth-sky and will have to join the basic color character of its setting."

Fig.5. Left. The Droste House, Los Angeles, 1940. Interior with Exposed Wooden Roof Structure with Various Earth Color Tones; Right, a Remodeling House for Peter Yates, Silver Lake, 1938. Stained Wooden Structure Exposing the Grain

Schindler's choice of building materials strongly corresponded with the regional environment surrounding the building. In his discussion of "locality," Schindler emphasized the integrity of the parts and the whole, both inside and outside. This early idea thrived visibly to the end of his career. Schindler wrote, "The conventional house is conceived as a solid mass growing out of the ground. The space house as a space form becomes a part of the room formed by the lot, the surroundings, contours, and firmament."
4. Views

The significance of natural factors including prevailing winds and sunlight in relation to the placement of a house are any architect's concern. Yet the creativity of a spatial spectacle, which evokes certain emotional factors while addressing those things, creates the unique aura of the house and distinguishes one architect from another. While never formally written, Schindler's works provide a clear glimpse into his intentions in this regard.

Once one passes the threshold of a Schindler home, they will find there is no true limit to the three-dimensionality of the internal space. With open and punctured interior spaces a common feature, the viewer catches glimpses of small and large windows and spaces beyond. Schindler also articulates roof and floor levels vertically in relation to the exterior landscape. Varying levels of room heights and roofs lead natural lights to illuminate the internal rooms with ambient daylight. More importantly, subtle level changes offer varied spatial sequences and eliminate a repetitive identity form forming. Due to various levels and constantly shifting spatial orientations, each space is oriented toward a different vista. This provides a dynamic spatial experience, as opposed to the horizontal datum structure and "self-referential" spatial experience found in works such as Le Corbusier's Domino diagram.

Views and orientations are significant issues when considering the movement and the observation of the resident. The understanding of the physical structure of the house originates from the residents' bodily experiences of perception, movement, and interaction within. For example, in his spatial arrangement of the Wolfe House, Schindler emphasizes "the house faces in the direction of the two most important views, towards the bay and the ocean." In all rooms, the openings and furniture are designed in such a way as to make enjoyment of the outlook easy and natural. It is through bodily movement that the residents perceive the interior as well as the surroundings. Also it is through the house's orientation that the residents perceive different kinds of view in the setting.

A house should be formed to shape and enhance the human experience— for the people who use it. Schindler was fully aware of the significance of this. As a result, his houses provided a full array of new spatial experiences, and, at times, unexpected surprises due to the complexity of the spatial flow. His instructions in creating rooms were clear in his design process: "Do not start to draw before everything is shaped in its form." This could only be done in a "mature" architect's mind. Architects arrange a space with the advance consciousness of what the residents will experience every day. On a daily basis the residents in the house depend upon their surroundings for an emotional sense of living there. They should observe, feel, see, and smell their surroundings inside and out through their daily pattern of activities and routines.

The Elliot House of 1930 best represents the unique spatial experience of Schindleresque houses. The house is positioned upon a slope. The dazzling stucco trellises of the garage and pergola attract all upon entry from the street. The pergola shields direct view of the house as it blocks most of the facade and sequential path to the house. Therefore, from the street, the house's shape is not revealed. Unlike the frontal entries of most houses, the route to the entry is circuitous and engaging. (Fig.7.) It is common that Schindler's entries are set into the side of the building for privacy and to dramatize the entry process. Here again, the entry sequence is complex and unpredictable. Schindler does not focus on facilitating the approach or building's orientation to the road, but rather on making the relationship of the landscape and space forms more integrated than would be possible otherwise.

Schindler's spatial design is generally depicted as a dynamic movement of spatial stimulus rather than a static experience. The sequence to the main house is arranged to wind up the hilly slope, turning direction of its path in zigzag patterns, thus providing different viewing experiences and spectacles at each node. Although the direction of the path is linear, the flow of space is experienced spatially rather than linearly. The movement evokes the spectacle event, one where the eye carefully follows the path of movement. The path allows the residents to experience the spatial plan in a constant state of motion. When one moves through the internal space, the focus is also on the direction in which one moves. Space contracts towards the entry, thereby expanding the periphery in the living room. A stair from the entry leads up to the living room. The living room opens to a patio at the rear of the site and to the roof terrace facing the street. This signifies the point of spatial climax.

The transparent spatial organization in the Elliot House is also exquisite. From the patio, one can see through the living room, the front terrace, the valley, and eventually the cityscape. It is also noticeable that the roof of the house and the slight ridge of the hilly landscape snuggle into the patio. The Elliot House celebrates the essence of the path as temporal and spatial flux, assisting with the integration of inside and the outside, both visually and spatially.

Another unique characteristic of Schindler's interior space is that one continually finds new spaces with a variety of openings and roof level changes. The unpredictable experience is due to Schindler's strategies of space forms shown in the sectional diagrams below (Fig.8.). Schindler splits the floor and roof plates to create changing levels. Schindler's subtle treatment of the lowered ceilings provides clerestory lighting from the roof level. His recessed and projecting walls create "several successive floor plans on different levels between floor and ceiling."
In the interior, one is also drawn toward the exterior through large windows. The windows are not only a source of light, but just as importantly, views. At times, the double hung large windowpanes in two-story high living rooms of his houses provide visual access toward the neighbors from both the first and second floor. This is particularly true in the Lovell House. Schindler's modern house and the outdoor space achieve an almost uninterrupted flow from the interior to the exterior. Through the level changes, various openings, unique spaces and dynamic forms, become an event. Furthermore, the approach to the house follows a meandering path that is extended through the structure.

Schindler offers different spatial experiences in his homes by opening rooms to the landscape. Each room is planned with regard to the exterior conditions and the effect that these will have on the comfort of the people within. While the rooms are clustered, each has its own patio extension into the garden area.

The Popenoe Cabin of 1922 accurately reflects this concept. The single story desert cabin was planned for Paul Popenoe at Coachella, California. The basic character of the design is derived from the Kings Road House where "a marriage between the solid permanent cave and the open lightweight tent" is achieved. Schindler significantly increases the views by setting the pinwheel ground plan at a 45-degree angle to the boundaries of the lot and the road frontage; as he did in both the How House of 1925 and the Oliver House of 1931.

In the cabin, the living room is located in the center of the house and is surrounded by various activity areas, including the kitchen, bedrooms and a utility room. Thin internal walls and sliding doors provide spatial flow and flexibility within a minimum area and optimize the use of space. Four porches, each with its own entrance door, are situated in a spiral manner around the main body of the house, creating intermediate spaces for an interaction between interior and exterior. Corridors in the pinwheel format connect four additional screened porches, indicated on the plan as Living, Sleeping, Kitchen, and Dining. Each room is oriented in a different direction, having its own directional view and patio. The four porches and corridors are designed so that they can be closed when desired. The deliberate hierarchy of the spatial layers becomes clear from the diagram in Fig. 9.

A very similar idea is applied in the Packard House of 1924. The floor plan of the house is divided into tri-axial zones, with a kitchen located at its hub. Three wings extend radially and embrace the outside yard. From the central point, a spatial distribution of the floor plan is anchored and defined. The three wings form the playroom, parent's room, and living room, each with porches opening directly onto the patios. Windows are abundant and patio doors have minimal wall planes. Schindler explained, "The three-winged plan treats the exterior walls not as facades of a convex mass, but as inside walls of outdoor rooms (patios). The design of the house makes maximum use of the available light and prevailing breezes that the California climate offers."
5. Conclusion
This article paid special attention to Schindler's three programs in a dwelling: locality, materiality, and views, portraying how each was integrated in his various designs. It has sought to recapture the enduring contributions of Schindler's theory and practice on human dwellings; most notably how Schindler's houses grow out of the particulars of the site. What Schindler accomplished is a testament to his incorporating the site's place, local materials and regional characteristics throughout the building design process. Although his projects differ, Schindler's tri-partite programmatic approach remains remarkably consistent from the beginning of his career to the end. Ultimately Schindler's whole system is a product of his place and time. Southern California offered Schindler an ideal stage for his experiments in dwelling typologies for 'California living'. Today, his ideas and designs have become staples of Southern California living and serve as precedents for the work of many contemporary architects in the region, playing a key role in sustaining and promoting progressive residential thought. 42

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References

Notes
2) In a statement for the Memorial Exhibit of the work of Schindler arranged at the Landau Gallery in Los Angeles: Source from the Architectural Drawing Collection (ADC), University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB).
6) In his discussion, Schindler referred to John Ruskin's book, Poetry in Architecture in the discussion of color and landscape. See Schindler's 1916 Lecture notes where he documented a series of lectures at the Church school in a booklet of his handwritten notes. The size of the booklet is about 8 1/2 by 5 3/4 inches. Some of them were written on the Henry L. Ottenheimer Architect's stationery. The lecture notes are housed in the Schindler Archive, ADC, UCSB.
7) Schindler's approach is contrasted with Adolf Loos's approach that shows a great contrast between the simplicity of the exterior and the complexity of the interior spaces.
8) Alberti, (1986), "If (as the philosophers maintain) the city is like some large house, and the house is in turn like some small city, cannot the various parts of the house – atria, xysti, dining rooms, porticos, and so on – be considered miniature buildings?" p.23.
10) Schindler's view became clear when he criticized Erich Mendelsohn's architecture in a letter to Richard Neutra in March 12, 1921: "I can hardly believe that … his abstract black-and-white presentation without 'environment' is characteristic of the 'non-architect' but it may also be the result of lack of real jobs." JSAH, XXXIII, No. 3, (October, 1974), pp.219-224.
12) Rudolph M. Schindler, "Furniture and the Modern House"


18. William W. Wurster and Harwell Hamilton Harris expressed the same opinion of the work of Schindler in their letters for the memorial exhibition.

19. Schindler, 1916, Lecture X: "Form Creation"


24. In his 1916 lecture notes, Lecture X: "Form Creation," Schindler provided two principles in facing materials: 1) "The material for facing must be different in texture from the supporting one;" and 2) "The facing material must have its own form in spite of showing its character of facing." When a brick floor or wall is faced with carpet or wallpaper, it would lose its original quality. In woodwork, if one paints wood, then the natural wood texture will disappear. Instead, it becomes a work of painting rather than being a beautiful woodwork, since the paintwork never imitates the original quality of wood texture.

25. Schindler's argument of facings relies on Semper's theory. When Schindler discussed the classical examples in his lecture notes, he wrote "See Semper" many times.

26. Modern architecture has nothing to do with "facings" but "development of space."

27. Lecture notes, XI: "Decoration".

28. Lecture notes, XII: "Building and Purpose".


31. Schindler referred to Loos' article, "Ornament and Crime."


34. Schindler, 1952.

35. R. M. Schindler, (1949). "Answer to questionnaire from the school of Architecture, University of Southern California," ADC, UCSB.
