

Walter Luther Dodge House
(West Hollywood District, Los Angeles County)
950 North Kings Road
Los Angeles, California

HABS No. CAL-355

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
450 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California

APPENDIX
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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CAL-355

Page 1

WALTER LUTHER DODGE HOUSE

West Hollywood District, Los Angeles County, California

ADDRESS: 950 North Kings Road
OWNER: Los Angeles City Board of Education
OCCUPANT: None
USE: (Original) Residence

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Dodge House is an unusually well-preserved example of the architecture of Irving Gill; it is a culmination of his genius, a rare example of the early manifestations of the International Style, and also one of the great monuments of the early experimental architecture of reinforced concrete.

"Irving Gill was beyond doubt one of the great leaders of modern architecture, worthy to rank with Sullivan, Wright and Maybeck... examples of his work are so few that their preservation should be a matter of national concern as well as local pride." Lewis Mumford.

"Gill's new concepts, only today fully recognized, found their clearest expression in the Dodge House." Dr. Ludwig Glaeser, Assoc. Curator of Architecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

"I believe it to be among the 15 most significant American houses... Perhaps no house built before World War I so clearly anticipated the modern movement as it developed in Europe." Professor Wm. Jordy, Brown University.

"The Dodge House...in its clarity of form and simplicity of means is more premonitory of the next stage of modern architecture than any other American work of its period." Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Historian.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Plans for the house were drawn by Irving John Gill (Charter Member of the San Diego Chapter of the A.I.A.) in 1914 for Walter Luther Dodge, a manufacturer of patent medicine who had come to Southern California to retire; due to delays it was not completed until 1916.

The house was sold on March 1, 1924 by Walter Luther Dodge and Winnie Dodge to T. Morrison McKenna and Anita K. McKenna for \$125,000. The Los Angeles High School District condemned the property in 1939, an action which was fought without success by the McKennas. On June 6, 1939, the property passed to the High School District, the McKennas being paid \$69,000. The High School District, after making a survey of high school age students in the area, found that it was not needed as a high school site and transferred title to the Junior College District.

From 1951 through 1961 the house was used as a household services branch of the school system, and in the 1961-62 school year some of the Fairfax High School Adult Classes were held there; but except for a small youth house on the north-east corner of the property it is unused. There is a report that the Junior College District sold two parcels of the property for \$140,000 for use as home sites.

The present area of the property is 2-3/4 acres. The Board of Education declared the property surplus in 1963, and since that time Aurelio Buenavista, the caretaker who lives in the service quarters with his wife, has continued to open the house for American and foreign students, architects and historians. Over the last five years an estimated 1000 visitors see the house annually.

Since the house has been threatened the number has more than tripled. The Dodge house has always been high on the list of buildings to be seen in the Los Angeles area, and it is in the slide collection of all important architectural schools throughout the world. Fortunately, the Board of Education has made no structural changes in the house; except for such minor changes as new tile work in the kitchen and master bath, and the addition of wall paper to some rooms, the house is in the state in which Gill planned it, except for some patio glazing.

The Historic Buildings Committee of the Southern California Chapter of the A.I.A., and other preservation-minded groups, began looking

CAL-355
Page 3

for ways to preserve the house after it was declared surplus property. Efforts were made to induce county agencies to exchange other property for the Dodge House site with the Board of Education, but this failed. Efforts to save the house were accelerated when in the fall of 1963 there was a threat that Kings Road would be rezoned from R-1 to R-4. An offer made by the A.I.A. for an architectural and Historical Society Library in the house was rejected. On November 12, 1963, the Board of Supervisors approved the rezoning of Kings Road, including the property for which the Board of Education had paid \$69,000 after condemning it in 1939. The Board set a minimum acceptable bid on the property of \$778,000 and set the date of public auction at August 12, 1965. At a meeting of the Board on July 1, 1965, the Historic Buildings Committee of the A.I.A., in an effort to save the house, asked for a postponement of the sale; the Architectural Panel of Los Angeles presented a scheme whereby a large portion of the 2-3/4 acres could be sold and the house preserved. The Board voted to re-set the auction date for August 30, but without a stipulation that the house be preserved.

In July of 1965, with a small group of architects and allied professionals as its nucleus, the Citizens' Committee for the Dodge House was formed as a California non-profit corporation, with the advice and guidance of attorney Jack Levine (who had successfully waged the fight to save Watts Towers). This group, in close cooperation with the A.I.A. and many other civic and cultural groups, generated a community-wide campaign through an intensive public relations program and by personal contact through its membership. Civic bodies such as the California Art Commission, the City Council of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles passed resolutions that avowed the importance of this landmark and the necessity of its being preserved. Prominent individuals such as Chancellor Franklin Murphy of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Sam Hurst, Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California, also placed themselves on record with the Board of Education with strong statements requesting a delay of the scheduled sale of the property. Leading historians, journalists and critics, locally and abroad, sent similar letters of support.

The Citizens Committee, through its attorney Jack Levine, appealed to the Board of Education on August 16, 1965 for a six months postponement to allow time for the study of various possible methods of acquiring the property for its preservation as an appropriate public, cultural facility.

CAL-355

Page 4

The Citizens Committee together with allied groups and individuals are continuing their intensive preservation efforts, and with sufficient time feel confident that some solution will be found to save this world-famous landmark for the education and enjoyment of the public and the generations to follow.

REFERENCES

Five California Architects, Esther McCoy, Reinhold Publications, 1960, Library of Congress Catalogue, Card No. 60-10551.

Irving Gill, Esther McCoy, a Los Angeles County Museum publication in collaboration with the Art Center of La Jolla, 1958.

Research of County Records and interviews with descendants of the Gill family, by Esther McCoy.

Historic American Buildings Survey Inventory, report by Raymond Girvagian, Preservation Officer, Southern California Chapter, The American Institute of Architects.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - The main 2-story block is 56' x 60', minus an 18'-6" x 28' recessed terrace on the north. The 1-story service wing is 24' x 52', and attached to this is a 24' x 30'-3" car garage; attached to the east end of the garage is a raised swimming pool 22' x 32'.

Wall Construction - Reinforced concrete.

Porches - An 18'-6" x 28' raised concrete terrace on north, opens onto a 7'-6" x 66' continuation, the whole forming a T-shape; the horizontal of the T ends on the west with an arch, through which one enters onto the west porch (street side) which is 8' x 63'-6"; A porch above the porte cochere on the south is 20' x 24'; the entrance porch (roofed and partially glazed) leading from porte

CAL-355
Page 5

cochere to front door is 17'-6", cut into by two 4'-9" x 3'-4" closets, which narrow the entrance porch and funnel in to front door; a narrow porch off the master bedroom, facing north; and a small porch off the east bedroom.

Chimneys - Reinforced concrete.

Doorways and Doors - French doors: three leading to west porch, from game room to north terrace, from dining room to dining court and breakfast room to breakfast court; all others are glazed with panels of glass on either side except for a round-headed door from service wing to service court. All doors are wood, or wood covered with sheet metal. All openings for doors or windows are sheet metal set in place before concrete was poured. There are 15 exterior doors.

Windows - All casements or fixed glass with wood frames; mullions of thin sheet metal cast in place.

Roof - Flat roof of concrete slab, covered with composition paper; parapet walls.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan - First floor: entry porch leads to a 16' x 22' central hall which has open well stairway to second floor bedrooms; an arched entrance on left to 19'-3" x 29'-8" living room; door at center to a glazed room facing recessed terrace on north; and on right a large rectangular opening to dining room. The living room leads through a large opening to the 20'-6" x 24'-8" game room, which opens onto the recessed north terrace. The dining room has doors leading to a 11'-6" x 13' breakfast room and to a kitchen. The service wing consists of kitchen, pantry, laundry, hall to basement and exterior, two servants rooms, bath and social room for servants. The basement has an area of 800 square feet.

Second floor: from a landing, stairs lead to master bedroom on right, and stairs on left lead to hall, off which are three bedrooms. All bedrooms have their own baths, except that the northwest and southwest bedrooms share a compartmented bathroom comprising two dressing rooms, two toilets in skylighted cubicles, and a skylighted room with tub and shower.

CAL-355
Page 6

Flooring - 1x2 oak T&G

Walls - Concrete and hollow ceramic tile, concrete plaster; flush mahogany paneling used as veneer and wainscot on many walls.

Ceilings - Concrete slabs.

Doorways and Doors - $1\frac{1}{4}$ " slab doors of Honduras mahogany except for door from central hall to glazed room opening onto north raised terrace, which is a French door with glass panels, and the swinging door from dining room to kitchen, which has a glass panel made up of vertical strips set in lead, with diamond-shaped pieces at top. An arched opening connects hall and living room, while large rectangular openings lead from hall to dining room and from living room to game room.

Trim - None.

Hardware - Latches on windows, French doors, etc., designed by Gill and sand cast under his supervision.

Miscellaneous - Among the other notable interior features are the following: the simple, mission arched entrance to the living room; the custom designed tile facing at the library fireplace; the unique hardwood stairway with simple square ballusters and handrail; the flush mahogany paneling - years in advance of its time; the closets with floors raised for ease of maintenance and sanitation; the flush panel built-in casework with custom hardware.

Prepared by,

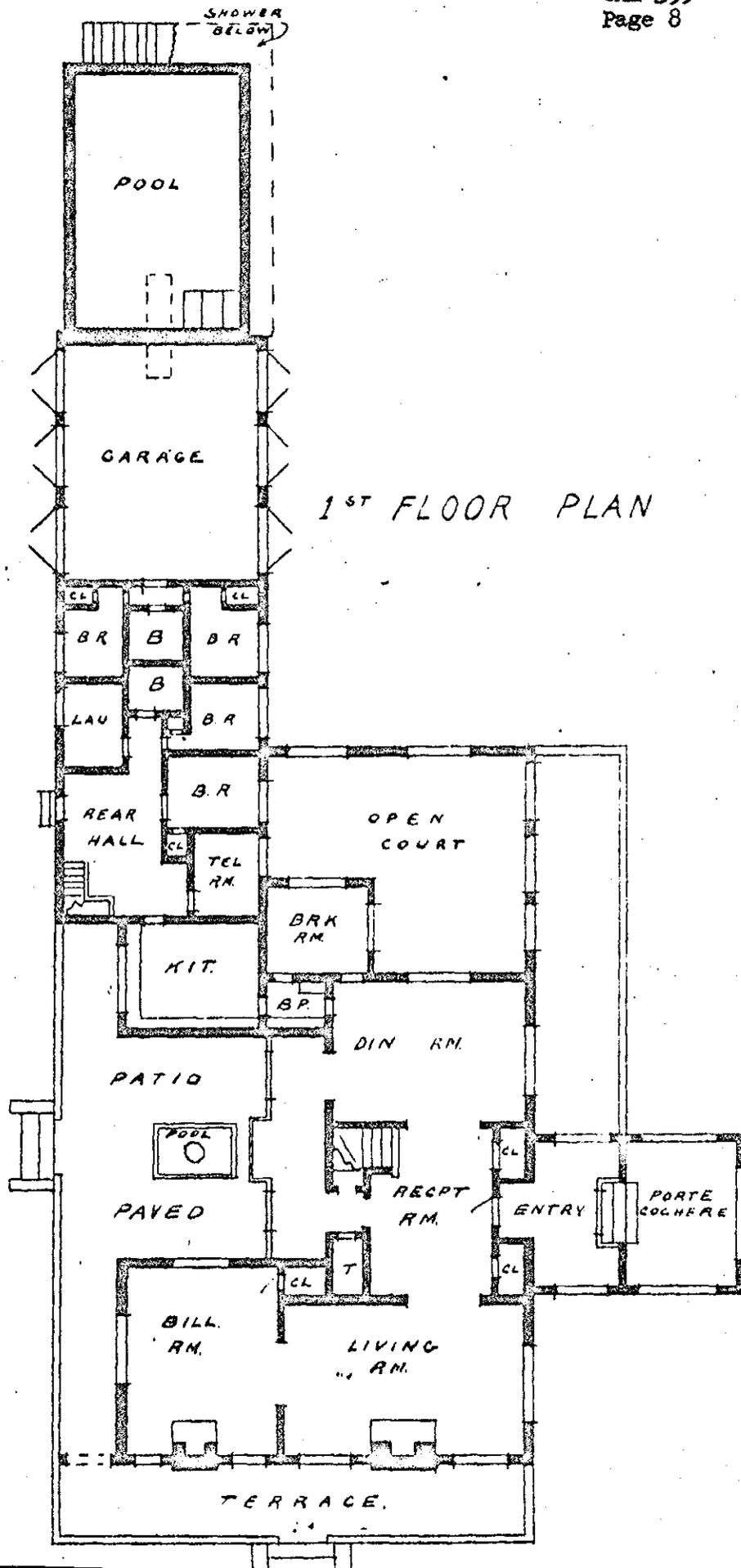
Esther McCoy
Esther McCoy

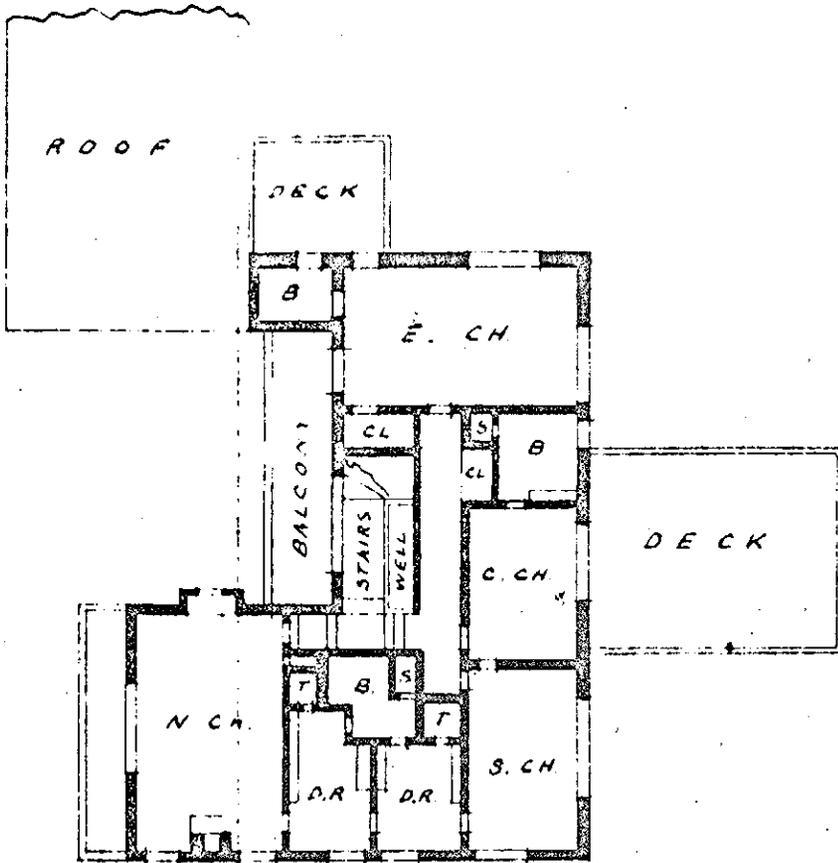
Edited and Submitted by,

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Preservation Officer,
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APPROVED: *Charles S. Pope*
Charles S. Pope, AIA
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, Design and Construction
National Park Service

DATE: *September 30, 1965*





2ND FLOOR PLAN

PROBLEMS IN THE PRESERVATION
OF EARLY MODERN ARCHITECTURE
Chairman Charles B. Hosmer, Jr.
Principia College

THE DODGE HOUSE

William Woollett, Architect and
Member, Los Angeles City
Cultural Heritage Board

The Dodge House, the so-called "Robie House of the West", has been at last put in safe-keeping and a story unique in the annals of architectural preservation can now be told.

The house has been considered by authorities to be an outstanding example of early modern American architecture. Lewis Mumford says, "Irving Gill, was beyond doubt one of the great leaders of modern Architecture, worthy to rank with Sullivan, Wright and Maybeck. examples of his work are so few that their preservation should be a matter of national concern as well as of local pride." Henry-Russell Hitchcock, writing in Architecture of the 19th and 20th Centuries, says, "In his best work the Dodge House...The whole effect, in its clarity of form and simplicity of means is more premonitory of the next stage of modern architecture than any other American work of its period....[Gill's] best houses extend very notably the range of achievement of the first generation of modern architects in America."

The Dodge property, with building designed in 1916 by Gill as a luxury residence, later purchased by the Los Angeles City Board of Education as a high school site, was up for sale. Sparked originally by the Historic Buildings Committee of the Southern California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the Architectural panel, progress toward preservation of the house was slow. However the dramatic statement of a private citizen who at a previous meeting had said, "We're all for the Dodge House, but so far no one has put his money where his mouth is," now arose saying, "I came not to praise the Dodge House but to buy it," and then walked down the aisle with a check for \$800,000 between his lips to make the purchase. This was the unexpected and electric conclusion of a citywide campaign.

Architect Richard Neutra said at the meeting, "The destruction of the house for commercial purposes would not be a passing event; it would become an epic, and international scandal." He reminded the Board of Education that "in time of war buildings are destroyed indeed, but this is not war". The Board replied, "We need the money to build schools; recognition as a benefactor to heritage we do not need."

The Dodge House will now hopefully find itself placed in its original plantings as the entrance feature to a carefully and tastefully designed two-story apartment complex.

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

THE DODGE HOUSE, 1916

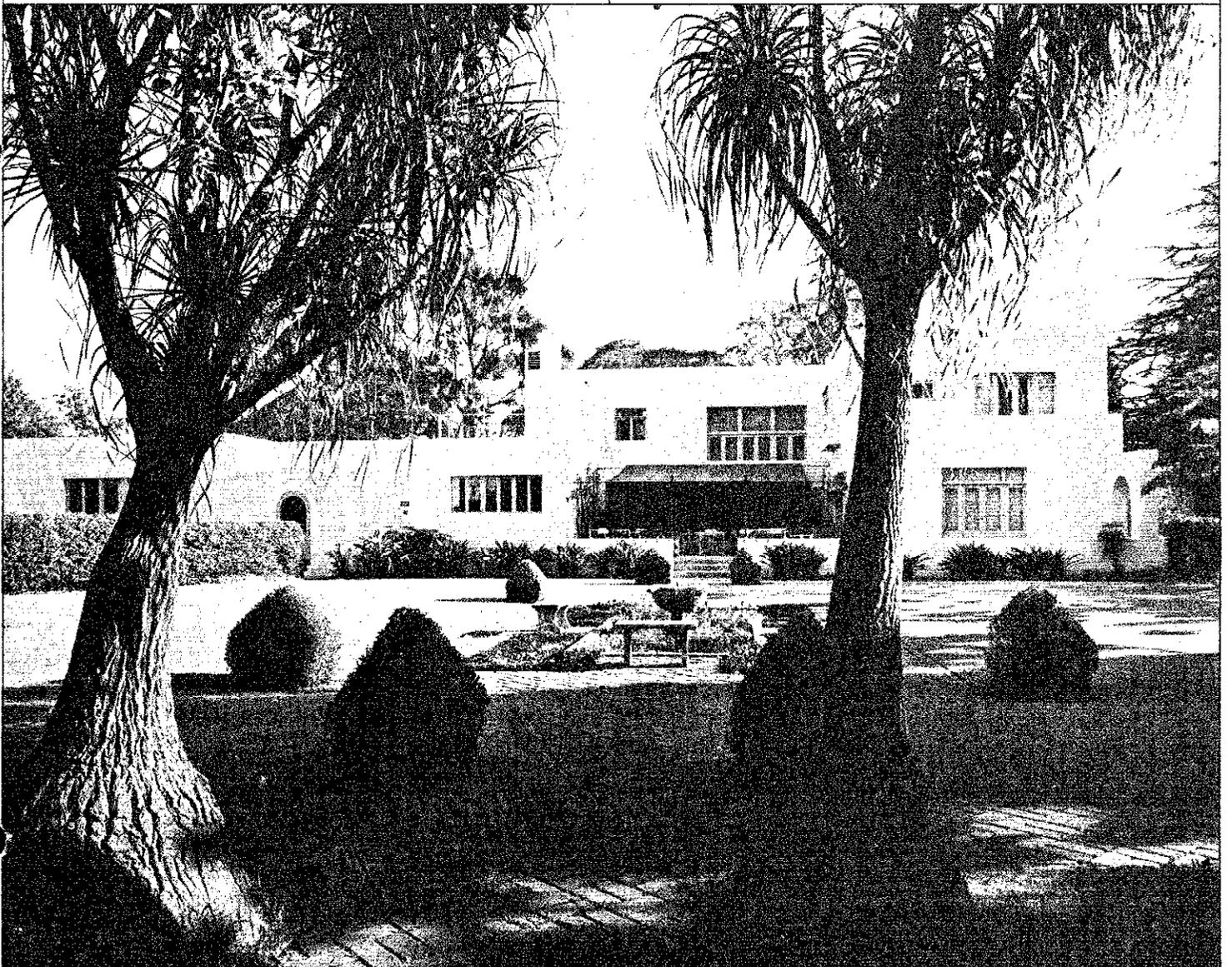
Architect: Irving Gill 1870-1936

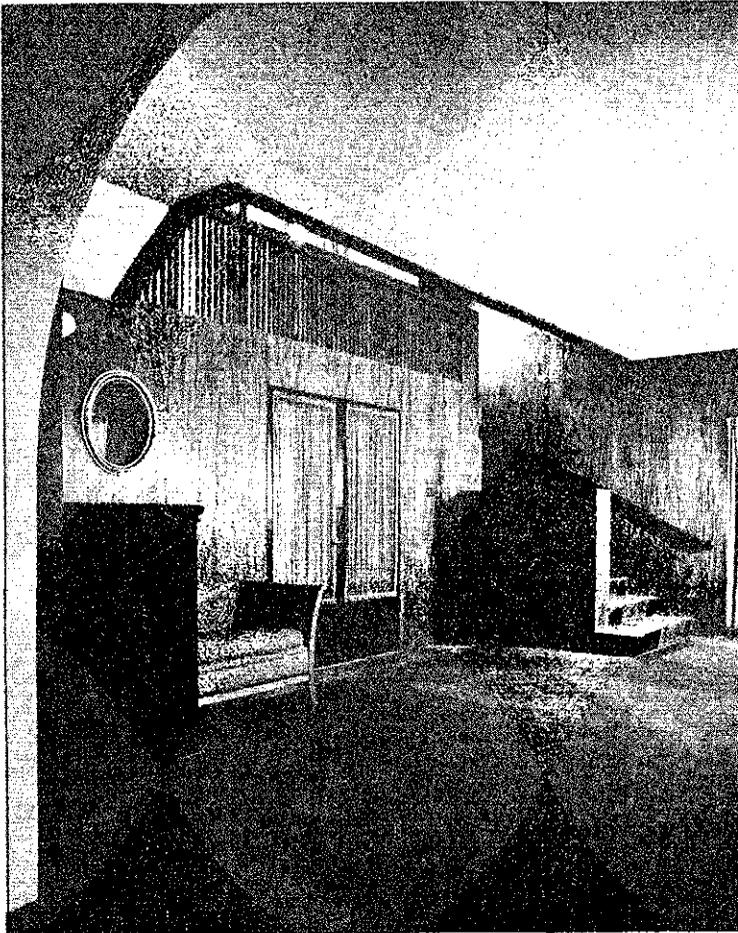
“... among the fifteen most significant American houses...”

PROFESSOR WILLIAM JORDY,
Brown University

“We cannot as a society continue to destroy beauty of nature and the reflection of man’s genius in the name of progress.”

FRANKLIN D. MURPHY,
Chancellor, University of California, Los Angeles





The Dodge house is a fine example of a certain style, a certain period, but like all works of art it surmounts style and period while at the same time speaking intimately of the times which produced it.

We prize most the things of the distant past and present, but what is great in the immediate past waits in the wings to be officially accredited. Paintings can wait, and sculpture, but buildings fall under the wrecker's ball. Then there is a hole in the fabric of history, the continuity is broken and our heritage is diminished.

The destruction of the Dodge house would leave such a hole.

Irving Gill was one of the very few architects in the United States to create a wholly original style. Like all new styles it grew out of the decay of old forms and the need to create new ones to take their place. Often — and in Gill's case — a new style emerges in the wake of new inventions, new materials. Gill's style arose out of a struggle to find a harmony between tradition and the dawning technology of the turn of the century. The energy of his vision is clear in the Dodge house, in which he made new methods and new materials the servant of art.

Gill's genius did not appear full blown at the time he set out to design the Dodge house: it was the culmination of two decades of experimentation. By 1907 he had begun to find his way toward his mature style; by then he was certain that the idea must start with structure itself — the walls must rise out of the new industrial discoveries. It was the wall which was to become the psyche and the soma of his architecture.

Louis Sullivan, Gill's teacher and master, instilled in him "the luminous idea of simplicity"; and in 1893 when Gill moved westward he found in the California Missions and the early adobes a further clue to what he wished to achieve.

Gill wrote of the Missions: "In their long low lines, graceful arcades and walled gardens we find a most expressive medium for retaining tradition, history and romance." The memory of the Missions is clear in the Dodge house.

The floor plan of the house also has its roots in the tradition of the anonymous builders of early California: the plan around a court of "Ramona's Marriage Place." Gill said of this landmark: "Built around three sides of an open space, this plan gives privacy, protection and beauty. It is hard to devise a better, cozier, more convenient or practical scheme for a house."

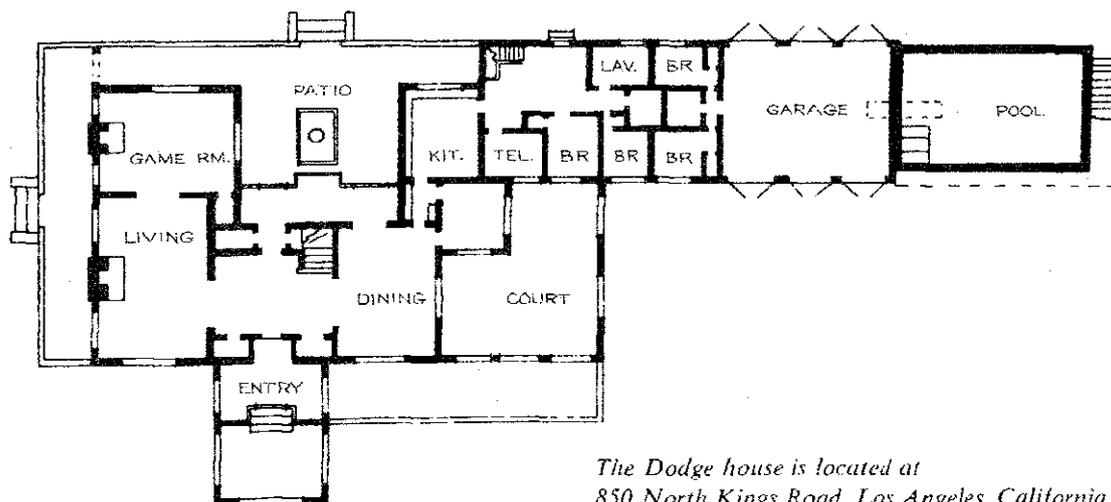
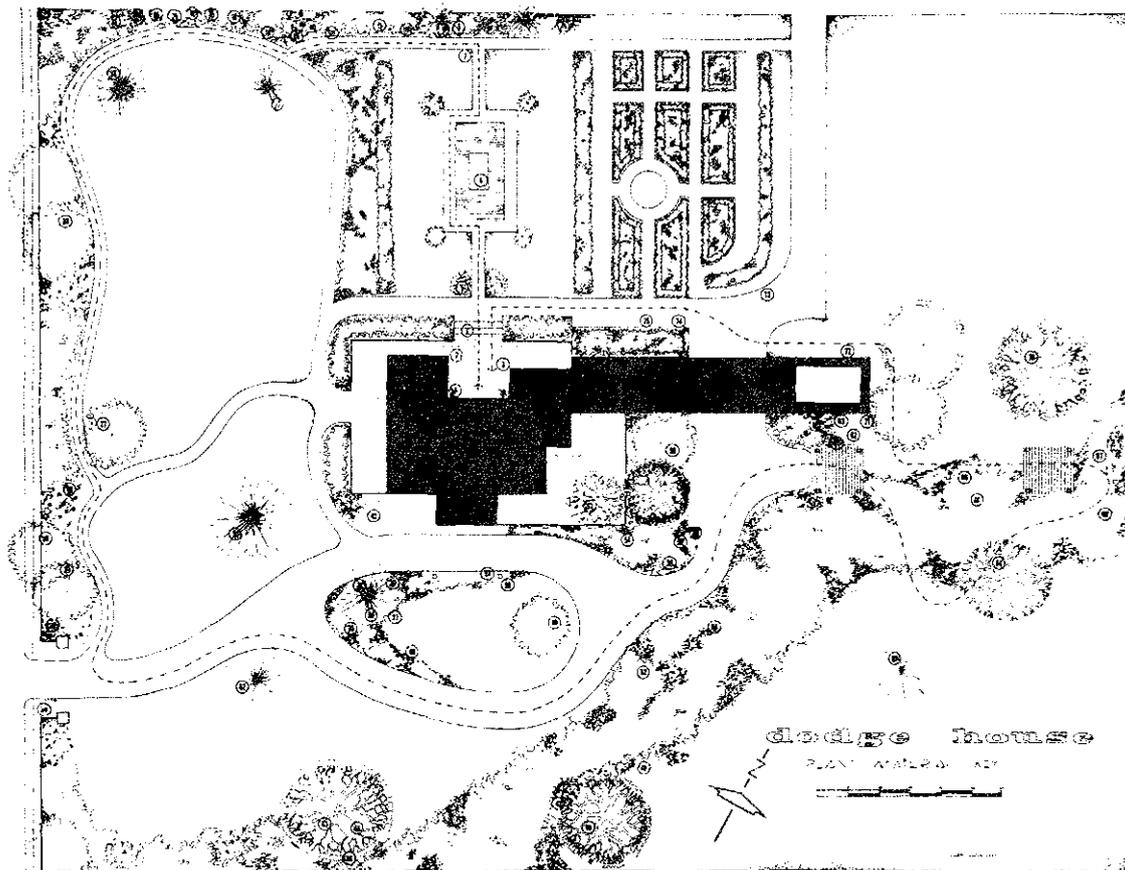
Gill interpreted tradition in what was then the new material — reinforced concrete. This required him to become an inventor, a role for which he was fitted by nature. He invented endless parts for use in concrete construction, to say nothing of a garbage disposal for the sink in 1907, an overhead car wash for the family car, and placed in each room vacuum cleaner outlets leading to a basement furnace. He coved concrete walls into floors to avoid joints where dust could collect; bathtubs were coved into walls and floor, and kitchen floors had a drain so walls could be washed down. He made the kitchen his province, skylighted it and gave it broad windows with a view to the garden.

In 1912 for the Banning house in Los Angeles he experimented with lift-slab walls, and he used them again for the Women's Club in La Jolla. In 1914 he lifted walls 60 feet long into place in the La Jolla Community House. Then he turned to 8-inch reinforced concrete walls with an embedded membrane which would insure dryness. Such are the walls of the Dodge house.

He wrote at the time it was built: "We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to nature, who will trim it with lichens, chisel it with storms, make it gracious and friendly with vines and flower shadows as she does the stone in the meadow."

If Gill had been interested in techniques to the exclusion of esthetics there would not be the concerted effort today to save the Dodge house. Its beauty is austere, but house and park were conceived as one by the architect, the trees to cast shadows on sheer walls, a tracery of vines, pergolaed walks, vistas. From the recessed patio is a brick-paved walk to a pool, then on to an arbor with a fountain covered with mosaic tile from Gill's design. Each room has its court, its deck or porches which look out upon the park.

One enters the central hall of the house from shadow to light, the steady north light from high windows in the open stairwell. Light plays on the patterns of the Honduras mahogany paneling, pristine in its detailing, and lifts the eye to the source. Square mahogany sticking of balusters and the squared handrail repeat themselves in the second floor balustrade, and the same light bathes the flush storage cabinet in the upper hall.



*The Dodge house is located at
850 North Kings Road, Los Angeles, California*

The central hall and recessed patio are keys to the free circulation of the floor plan. One room flows into another and onto the patio. Of special interest is the game room with its fine cabinetwork and handmade tiles, designed by the architect. The spaciousness and dignity of all the rooms makes the house adaptable for use half a century after it was conceived.

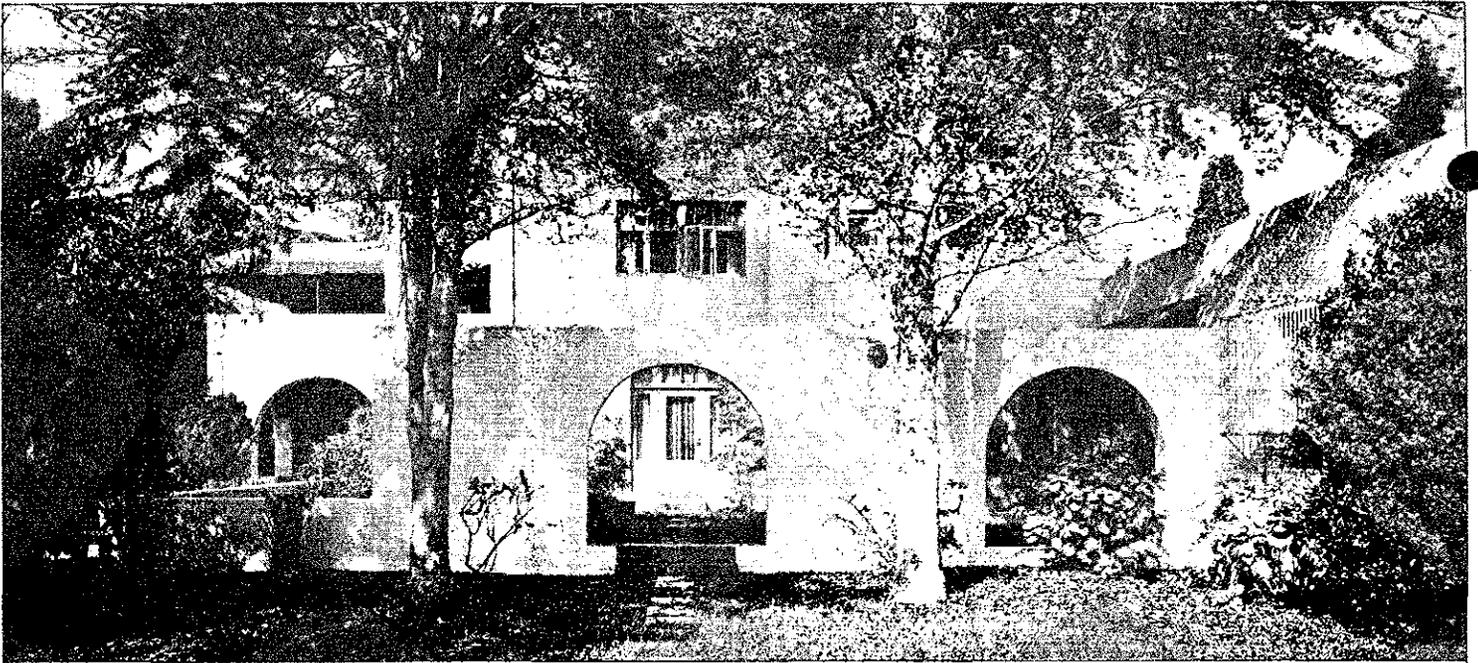
Seldom has a house of historic importance offered so generously to serve the present. Substantial as a boulder, it makes few demands for upkeep; it is not a precious monument but a sturdy one to be used to the fullest. And never

have we had within our reach an important house whose gardens are mature and intact.

It has been called one of the fifteen most significant American houses by Professor William Jordy of Brown University, for it represents not only an esthetic experience but is a milestone in architectural history which draws to it students from all over the world.

The past teaches the present. What we do about the Dodge house is a measure of our concern for the future.

Esther McCoy



COMMENTS ON THE DODGE HOUSE

LEWIS MUMFORD, *internationally famous architectural historian*: "Irving Gill was beyond doubt one of the great leaders of modern architecture, worthy to rank with Sullivan, Wright and Maybeck . . . Examples of his work are so few that their preservation should be a matter of national concern as well as local pride."

LUDWIG GLAESER, *Associate Curator of Architecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York*: "Gill's new concepts, only today fully recognized, found their clearest expression in the Dodge house. Everyone must support the effort to preserve this outstanding historical monument and major architectural achievement."

HENRY-RUSSELL HITCHCOCK, *author*: "The Dodge house, in its clarity of form and simplicity of means is more premonitory of the next stage of modern architecture than any other American work of its period."

SO. CALIF. CHAPTER OF AIA: "The Dodge house, the best preserved of Gill's work, with its spacious surrounding grounds must be saved for use as an outstanding and unique cultural park."

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY, *Department of Interior*: "The individual character of Gill's work on Kings

Road was evolved from a comprehension of Southern California climate's possibilities, a respect for such indigenous, unselfconscious architecture as that of the Missions . . ."

CULTURAL HERITAGE BOARD OF LOS ANGELES: "The Dodge residence stands as one of the finest and best preserved examples of the genius of architect Irving John Gill . . . its loss would be irreplaceable: it is one of the outstanding remaining buildings of the early 20th century in Los Angeles."

RICHARD NEUTRA, *architect and author*: "I have always admired Gill as a great architect who found his great flowering in California."

JAMES ELLIOTT, *Chief Curator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art*: "I would encourage every effort to recognize the building as a monument in architectural history."

MIV SCHAAF, *Chairman, The Architectural Panel*: "We can only blame ourselves if the face of the future is ugly: we do not let our politicians know what we want."

VALLEY KNUDSEN, *Chairman, Los Angeles Beautiful*: "The Dodge house is a landmark of American progress in architectural design. Its destruction would be a great loss."

The Citizens Committee for the Dodge House is a non-profit educational corporation. It is governed by a Board of Directors and membership is open to the public. Donations are needed for further work of the Committee and may be sent to:

CITIZENS COMMITTEE FOR THE DODGE HOUSE
Miv Schaaf, Director
230 Mantua Road, Pacific Palisades, California 90272

contributions to the Committee are tax deductible

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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