

Los Angeles Filmforum presents:

A Film is Not a Building

Film and book viewing online Saturday, July 17–Sunday, July 25, 2021
Conversation Sunday, July 25th at 10am PDT / 7pm (19:00) CEST
Curated by Kate Brown

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest-running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2021 is our 46th year.
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“A Film is Not a Building” surveys three films on four buildings, each one a modernist house.

The subjects are: Irving Gill’s 1916 Dodge House, in Los Angeles; the 1929 Warsaw residence designed by Bohdan Lachert and Józef Szanajca; and the Migishi Atelier and the Bunzo Yamaguchi House, in Tokyo, designed by Iwao Yamawaki and Bunzo Yamaguchi, respectively, in the 1930s and ‘40s. The filmmakers are: writer, Esther McCoy; artist, Susanne Bürner; and architect and professor at the Bauhaus-Universität, Weimar, Verena von Beckerath, in collaboration with colleagues Niklas Fanelas, Momoko Yasaka, Maximilian von Zepelin, and Jens Franke—themselves artists, architects, designers, and filmmakers.

The program looks at the way these building films are used to understand, record, and transmit an experience of architectural space. Two of the three films operate in parallel with a text. McCoy wrote about the Dodge House in her 1960 book *Five California Architects*. She wrote an essay about the building for the American Institute of Architects, published the same year as the film, 1965. And, she wrote the essay that is the film’s script. These latter efforts were part of her campaign to save the house from destruction. The film was a tool for publicity. Accompanying von Beckerath’s film is a book of photographs, architectural drawings, and interviews that lend context to the film and the buildings, and that further explore the interaction between the Bauhaus and Japan. Yamaguchi was a colleague of Walter Gropius; Yamawaki was a student at the Bauhaus. Bürner didn’t make a book, but Lachert and Szanajca weren’t just architects. They were influential participants in the Praesens group, a collective of artists and architects in Poland most active between 1926–1929. They sought a synthesis of the arts and they called for it in print. The cover of the highly graphical 1930 magazine, “Praesens” number 2, is printed over and over, in different languages, with the following text: “architecture picture [painting] photo theater film poetry”.

Present to discuss the work:

Susan Morgan, writer and editor of *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader* (East of Borneo, 2012) will talk about McCoy's film, a film which Morgan, in turn, saved. Artist **Susanne Börner** will discuss the architects, the building, and her film, "A House of One's Own". **Verena von Beckerath** will present the "Two Houses" research project. Curator **Kate Brown** will join the discussion.

Program notes:

Dodge House, 1916

Written and produced by Esther McCoy
Directed by Robert Snyder
Cinematography by Baylis Glascock
Still photography by Mavin Rand
1965 / 16mm transferred to digital / 17 minutes

The film documents the Walter Luther Dodge house in West Hollywood, Los Angeles, California, and the life of its architect, Irving John Gill. The house was built in 1916 and destroyed in 1970.

From **Susan Morgan**:

As a writer researching a writer I revere, working with the [Esther McCoy papers](#) is an incomparable experience: the more I learn, the better it gets. Best-known for her landmark book *Five California Architects* (1960), McCoy identified the distinctly West Coast roots of American modernist architecture. Among that book's featured five was [Irving J. Gill](#) (1870–1936), a master of machine age efficiency, essential forms, and refined aesthetics. Although Gill's designs boldly anticipated mid-century modernism, his reputation was sadly eclipsed within his own lifetime.

When McCoy started researching Gill's architecture during the early 1950s, she sought out his unheralded buildings, interviewed his surviving colleagues and supporters, published articles about his work, and curated a retrospective of his work (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1958). Following the Irving Gill trail through the McCoy papers is a riveting and often heart-breaking saga. Throughout the 1960s, McCoy spearheaded a campaign to save Gill's Walter L. Dodge House (1916)—the first truly modernist residence in the West, a stunning 6,500 square foot house on nearly three landscaped acres in the heart of West Hollywood. In 1939, the house and grounds were acquired by the city of Los Angeles through eminent domain and a municipal order set to build a school on the site. The school plan, however, was soon abandoned and the property shuffled between city and county agencies. For years, the house remained intact and was used

as classrooms by a technical college: institutional-scale baking was taught in the kitchen and apprentice car mechanics practiced their trade on the grounds.

By 1963, the Los Angeles Board of Education declared the Dodge House “surplus” and the County Board of Supervisors re-zoned the area from R-1 to R-4, from single-family homes to apartment buildings. While the street underwent a radical condominium-ization, the Dodge House was slated for the wrecking ball. Unannounced, on a February morning in 1970, the entire property was demolished. A neighbor who witnessed the destruction reported: “I went out in the morning and when I came back two hours later the wrecking crew was there. They beat it and beat it and it wouldn’t go down. It was like an animal being beaten. They kept beating and beating and it finally cracked up. The trees didn’t want to go either but they beat them until by late afternoon everything was gone.” Gill believed that a “house should be simple, plain, and substantial as a boulder.” The Dodge House, with its serenely unadorned surfaces and eight inch thick reinforced concrete walls, was the fulfillment of that vision. Then, in a single day, it was gone forever.

Among McCoy’s papers, I came across a print of [the 1965 film she’d written and produced](#) as part of her campaign to save the Dodge House. Directed by [Robert Snyder](#) (1916–2004), an Academy Award–winning documentarian and son-in-law of Buckminster Fuller, this film—like the house itself—was almost lost. The Snyder collection at the Motion Picture Academy holds just one print, a silent, reversal master that can’t be screened. [Baylis Glascock](#), the young filmmaker who served as the project’s camera man/editor/general factotum, didn’t own a copy and had reached various dead ends while searching for one. McCoy’s personal copy, a 16 mm reel inside a splitting cardboard box held together by a desiccated rubber band, had been in archival storage for more than twenty years; and I had no way of knowing what shape that print was in, when it was last projected, or whether it had been damaged over time by ordinary household indignities—spilled coffee, dust bunnies, or ashes from stray cigarettes. When I expressed my concerns to Megan McShea, the Archives of American Art’s audiovisual archivist, she took McCoy’s Dodge House film under her remarkably sympathetic and tech-savvy wing.

With a grant from the Women in Film Preservation Fund, Megan ingeniously facilitated the restoration of this important film. In the autumn of 2011, I presented the new, beautifully restored print twice: at the [R.M. Schindler House](#) (1922) on Kings Road in West Hollywood, a block away from where the Dodge House once stood, and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York during their annual film preservation program. Each time, the audience reaction was tremendously moving: people were astonished by Gill’s design, McCoy’s awareness and dedication, and Glascock’s tender view of a now vanished place. In the Dodge House, Gill had tinted the plaster walls to capture changing shadows and daylight. His windows and porches framed garden views, mosaic-tiled fountains, and distant mountain vistas. The house’s cabinetry conveyed a Shaker simplicity; the Honduran mahogany glowed as warm as amber. As architectural historian Robert Winter, a dear friend and colleague of McCoy’s lamented recently, recalling the demolition: “If only they had warned us. I remember Esther called and said, ‘if we’d known, we could have at least taken out the banisters and saved them.

In McCoy’s script for the Dodge House film, the final lines are strong and poignant: “We prize the distant past,” she observed. “But if the immediate past is ripped away there will be no distant past for the future. Our heritage is diminished. And there is a hole in the fabric of history.” Hearing those words, I’m reminded once again of my gratitude to the Archives of American Art and how I much I treasure McCoy’s life and work.—Susan Morgan



Dodge House, photograph by Marvin Rand, Library of Congress



Still from *A House of One's Own—Me and My Neighbours*, (2013, 28 min), Courtesy of Susanne Bürner

A House of One's Own—Me and My Neighbors

by Susanne Bürner

2013 / digital / 28 minutes

Los Angeles premiere!

The video is a psychograph of a modernist family house built in Saska Kępa, Warsaw, in 1929, which was once the private residence of one of its two architects, Bohdan Lachert. Josef Szanajca, Lachert's fellow architect, died at a young age at the beginning of World War II. Both were important figures in modernist Warsaw, contributing to, among other publications, the influential "Praesens" magazine.

The video presents the systemic constellation sessions that took place to "discover" the house, with the participants taking on the roles of the house, the objects connected to it, and the other buildings in the neighborhood. The dynamics between these elements reveal unfamiliar perspectives on the building and raise fundamental questions with regard to its conception and architectural context. The building "speaks" as it becomes animated through the systematic constellation sessions.

Two Houses

Director: Verena von Beckerath

Assistant directors: Niklas Fanelso, Momoko Yasaka,
& Maximilian von Zepelin

Camera, Sound, Editing: Jens Franke

Produced by: Bauhaus-Universität Weimar

2019 / digital / 38 minutes

US premiere!

The Two Houses research project at the Chair of Design and Housing at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar focuses on the interaction between the Bauhaus and Japan, based on two houses in the suburbs of Tokyo – Migishi Atelier and Bunzo Yamaguchi House. Both houses were designed in the 1930s and 40s by Japanese architect Iwao Yamawaki (1898–1987), a student at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and Bunzo Yamaguchi (1902–1978), who worked in Walter Gropius' practice at that time, and are still privately owned today.

The Bunzo Yamaguchi House appears autonomous and timeless with its windowless facade made of light brick, only interrupted by another entrance to the upper floor, a garage door, an anterior area, which is truncated on one side, meeting a flush, shallow roof slope. The wood-clad side view looks like a rural farmhouse and reveals the traditional Japanese Minka joinery. The Janus-faced architecture combines European and Japanese influences that extend to original and contemporary uses in the garden and the outbuildings as well as to the interior of the building, where extensions and fixtures were added in the 1970s. The owners live on the upper floor of Bunzo Yamaguchi House, while the ground floor and the garden are sometimes used for photo shoots and salon concerts.

The Migishi Atelier features a light and sculptural steel spiral staircase immediately behind a large, ceiling-high, south-facing studio window; it leads to a Tatami room on the gallery level. The influence of the Bauhaus in Dessau is unmistakable. The studio is partly furnished and contains some personal objects, but it is unoccupied. Some walls show signs of settlement; the paint is peeling off others. The Migishi Atelier was converted after Kotaro Migishi died at an early age and his wife, the painter Setsuko Migishi, needed more rooms for herself and her family. Long abandoned, since the family had moved to an apartment house it had built at the back of the property after returning from an extended stay in Europe, it is now open to the public, used for temporary exhibitions and let as a photo studio. The film *Two Houses* documents the buildings' architecture and tells the story of their inhabitants, providing glimpses of life in and with the buildings. It is accompanied by the publication *Two Houses – Texts* which includes interviews with Helena Capková, Terunobu Fujimori, Taishi Watanabe and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto as well as texts and images from the film and drawings of the houses in different stages.



Migishi Atelier, Still from *Two Houses* (2019, 38 min), Director: Verena von Beckerath



Bunzo Yamaguchi House, Still from *Two Houses* (2019, 38 min), Director: Verena von Beckerath

Bios

Susan Morgan has written extensively about art, design, and cultural biography. With artist Thomas Lawson, she coedited REAL LIFE Magazine, an alternative art publication produced in New York throughout the 1980s. A former contributing editor at Interview, Mirabella, Elle, and Metropolitan Home, Morgan has also been a longtime contributor to the photography journal Aperture. In addition to authoring artist monographs, profiles, and essays, Morgan edited and introduced *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader* (East of Borneo Books, 2012) and, with Kimberli Meyer, Director of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture at the Schindler House, co-curated *Sympathetic Seeing* (2011), the first exhibition about the groundbreaking work of writer and social critic Esther McCoy.

Esther McCoy (1904–1989) was a gifted literary stylist, acerbic social critic, and one of America's foremost architectural writers. McCoy recognized the Western roots of American modernism and witnessed the birth of mid-century design. As Reyner Banham, the ebullient Englishman who successfully hybridized architectural history and cultural critique, observed: "Until about 1960, the rest of the world had practically no idea at all about architecture in California, what it was like, how good it was, if it even existed. Then this extraordinary book came out in 1960, and suddenly—California architecture had heroes, history, and character." That milestone publication – for Banham and a continually widening audience—was McCoy's classic *Five California Architects*. "It was clear that she knew her stuff, was a real scholar, though she seemed to belong to no known academic faction or school of thought, and could write," he declared. "The book was so damned readable it was in a different league than most architectural literature."

McCoy's prolific career had started out in the progressive circles of Greenwich Village during the 1920s and went on to flourish in the West for nearly 60 years; her six published books about architecture are regarded as "a Balzacian cycle," an unfolding epic of the figures, ideas and issues populating a significant American scene. (SM)

Susanne Bürner is based in Berlin working in photography, film and artist books. Over a wide range of subject matter, Bürner explores the psychological dimensions of images, directing the viewer's attention to questions of presence and absence, as well as to the projection of the viewer herself. Architecture plays a key role in her work as the human attempt of structuring space and society, as a method and attempt of ordering life.

Verena von Beckerath is an architect based in Berlin and a co-founder of the architecture firm Heide & von Beckerath. She pursued studies in sociology, art theory and psychology in Paris and Hamburg and studied architecture at TU Berlin. She was teaching and research assistant at UDK Berlin and visiting professor at TU Braunschweig. She held fellowships at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart and at the German Academy in Rome Villa Massimo and was visiting professor at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. Since 2016, she has been a professor of architecture at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar where she holds the Chair of Design and Housing.

Niklas Fanelisa is an architect and founder of the architecture practice Atelier Fanelisa in Berlin and Gerswalde. He studied architecture at RWTH Aachen and Tokyo Institute of Technology. After his studies he worked for De Vylder Vinck Taillieu in Gent and TBBK in Berlin. He was teaching and research assistant at RWTH Aachen University, BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg and at the Chair for Design and Housing at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. In 2019/20, he was emerging curator at the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal.

Momoko Yasaka studied scenography, display and fashion design at Musashino Art University Tokyo and architecture at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. During and after her studies she worked for Heide & von Beckerath and Studio Karin Sander in Berlin. She was co-editor and co-curator of Horizonte – Journal for Architectural Discourse and Horizonte – Lecture series and graduate assistant at the Chair for Design and Housing at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. Currently she is working for Weyell Zipse in Basel.

Maximilian von Zepelin studied architecture at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. During his studies he worked for Jägnefält Milton in Stockholm. He was co-editor and co-curator of Horizonte – Journal for Architectural Discourse and Horizonte – Lecture series. He was graduate assistant at Archiv der Moderne and at the Chair for Design and Housing at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. Currently he is working for Edelaar Mosayebi Inderbitzin in Zurich.

Jens Franke lives and works as an artist in Berlin. In 2014 he completed his studies at Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg in the classes of Jeanne Faust and Thomas Demand. His films have been screened at Kasseler Dokfest, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Bundeskunsthalle, the Japan Pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice and Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof among others. His work focuses on topics concerning architecture and urban planning. A number of film projects have been realised in collaboration with architects.

Kate Brown is an artist and filmmaker living in Los Angeles. A programmer with Los Angeles Filmforum, she recently hosted Babette Mangolte for two screenings, in 2019. In 2018, Kate made a film on Marcel Breuer's last building, the Atlanta Central Library. She is working on a book on the same subject, now. She received an MFA in film from the California Institute of the Arts and a BA in landscape studies from Harvard.

Los Angeles Filmforum screenings are supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles, the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, the California State Relief Fund, the National Endowment of the Arts, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, and the California Community Foundation. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

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