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Designer Digs

Long Beach's Architecturally Significant Homes

■BY CHAD GREENE
STAFF WRITER

Early in the 20th century, the charms of Long Beach enticed so many Midwesterners to trade in the cornstalk-stubbed banks of the Mississippi River for the sun-drenched shores of the Pacific Ocean that the city earned the nickname "Iowa by the Sea."

All those people didn't come here to live in apartment buildings.

"The 'California Dream' was a home of your own, a yard, a piece of land," says Ruthann Lehrer, the former neighborhood and historic preservation officer for the City of Long Beach.

Consequentially, no other structure - not the Queen Mary, not the Aquarium of the Pacific - embodies the city's enduring appeal as truly as the single-family home. Unlike the great metropolises of the East Coast, the direction of development in Long Beach - and in its Southern California neighbors - has always been more horizontal than vertical. Think of it as a deliberate loosening of the belt around the urban core that allowed for the spread of residential neighborhoods characterized by small bungalows rather than space-conserving structures such as townhomes - a pattern of development that detractors dismiss as "urban sprawl."

Yet it was on the tree-shaded streets of these quiet subdivisions, not the commercial corridors of downtown, that some of the most renowned architects of the last century left their marks on Long Beach.

"The neighborhoods remain very vibrant repositories of these significant old homes," says Lehrer, who oversaw the designation of many of Long Beach's 17 historic neighborhoods during her 14-year tenure.

To inaugurate "Good Design Is Good Business," the Business Journal has compiled a list which, although it is by no means exhaustive, nonetheless offers a representative sampling of what the staff considers some of the city's most distinguished "designer digs" - single-family homes shaped by the singular visions of architects as diverse as Ray Kappe, the founder of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, and Newton P. Rummond, the creator of what the Guinness Book of World Records recognized as the world's skinniest house.

Although addresses are provided, be aware that - with the exception of the Reeve House - these houses remain private residences.

Bixby Ranch House (1890)

Address: 11 La Linda Dr.

Architects: Ernest and Almeric Coxhead

In the late 19th century, shingles weren't just for roofing.

Cedar shingles sheath the exterior of the Bixby Ranch House, a stately example of the – what else? – Shingle Style designed by Ernest Coxhead. (Although the firm was called Coxhead & Coxhead, older brother Almeric ceded all the designing duties to Ernest.) A classically trained architect, Ernest Coxhead emigrated from England to Southern California around 1888 to design churches for the local Episcopal diocese. Although he relocated to the Bay Area shortly thereafter, an enduring part of his legacy stands inside a gated community in the Bixby Knolls neighborhood of Long Beach.

Built for George Bixby, the ranch house features eight bedrooms, seven bathrooms and six fireplaces. Some of the exterior's American Colonial Revival touches are reflected in a lily pool.

Adelaide Tichenor House (1904)

Address: 852 E. Ocean Blvd.

Architects: Charles and Henry Greene

Jennie Reeve House (1904)

Address: 4260 Country Club Dr.

Architects: Charles and Henry Greene

Californians' decades of devotion to the architecture of Charles and Henry Greene give a whole new meaning to the phrase "brotherly love."

Two years after completing their studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Greens moved across the country to Pasadena. Along the way, they dropped by the 1893 World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago, where they saw examples of Japanese architecture for the first time.

It was in their design for the Adelaide Tichenor House that Greene & Greene first melded that early influence with their emerging Craftsman Style. Built on the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean for the philanthropist who founded such Long Beach institutions as the Tichenor Orthopedic Clinic and the Ebell Club, the Tichenor House originally boasted a Japanese-style garden with an arched bridge spanning a pond.

"The Tichenor House was the first one that had the Japanese influence to a great extent," says Louise Ivers, an art professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills who is writing a book on early Long Beach architecture. "It's really the first so-called, 'California Bungalow,' I would say."

"It was the first one where the Greens were allowed to do their own thing," agrees Stan Poe, an ex-officio member of the Long Beach Cultural Heritage Commission. "All the rest of the houses they had built, they had a lot of [their] clients' influence. . . . Unfortunately, it's been altered somewhat through the years."

Better preserved is the house that the Greens subsequently built for Adelaide Tichenor's friend Jennie Reeve. Originally located in downtown near the intersection of 6th Street and Cedar Avenue, the Reeve House now sits on a large lot near the Virginia Country Club. A picturesque stand of pines accentuates this brown-shingled beauty.

(The third Greene & Greene in Long Beach, a rental cottage also commissioned by Reeve, now stands – barely – at 1265 N. Loma Vista Dr.)

Raymond House (1918)

Address: 2749 E. Ocean Blvd.

Architect: Irving Gill

Irving Gill helped lay the foundations of Modernism – in concrete.

Best known in his adopted hometown of San Diego, the New York native's simplification of the existing Mission Revival Style into a spare aesthetic based on cubes and arches and his innovative use of inexpensive building materials influenced later generations of Modernist architects.

"Gill started out designing buildings in the Mission Style and then he began simplifying them," Ivers says. "[The Raymond House] is a very early example of Modern architecture, although it still has a little Mission Style influence in the arches."

Built for an Oklahoma banker named Samuel Raymond who retired to Long Beach, the Bluff Park home was likely constructed using the "tilt-up" method of concrete construction pioneered by Gill, whereby entire walls would be fabricated on the ground and then raised into place. Like many of Gill's later homes, it also featured a concrete floor.

"The Skinny House" (1932)

Address: 708 Gladys Ave.

Architect: Newton P. Rummond

Here's the skinny on the Newton P. Rummond House: the 10-foot-by-50-foot partial lot acquired by its namesake designer/builder as repayment of a \$100 debt during the Great Depression was created by mistake during an earlier real estate transaction.

When Rummond's friends teased him that the property was useless, he set out to prove them wrong by building a home that is three stories tall – and nine-and-a-half feet wide. Declared the country's narrowest house by both Ripley's Believe It or Not and the Guinness Book of World Records, the Skinny House attracted thousands of curious visitors after it was completed in 1932, including Walt Disney.

While many people might dismiss Rummond's compact creation as little more than an oddity, Lehrer praises his concise design. "It's built like a ship – very tightly built, with a lot of built-ins. Beautifully designed, and truly an original creation," she says. "I think it's a wonderful house."

Kimpson/Nixon House (1940)

Address: 380 Orlena Ave.

Architect: Raphael Soriano

In the world of modernist architecture, Raphael Soriano was the Colossus of Rhodes. A native of that ancient Greek city, Soriano moved to Southern California in 1924 and eventually earned an invitation to participate in the seminal Case Study House program sponsored by Arts & Architecture magazine.

The Kimpson/Nixon House has been hailed as "one of the purest expressions of early modernism in the city" by Cara Mullio and Jennifer Volland, the authors of "Long Beach Architecture: The Unexpected Metropolis." Located on a quiet street near the Colorado Lagoon, the house is characterized by rectilinear lines and unadorned stucco walls lined with rigid rows of windows.

"Fabulous," Lehrer raves. "Completely intact and pristine."

Matlock House (1950)

Address: 1560 Ramillo Ave.

Architect: Richard Neutra

Moore/Hafley Twin Houses (1952–53)

Address: 5551 and 5561 La Pasada St.

Architect: Richard Neutra

Three's indeed a company in Park Estates, the East Long Beach neighborhood that boasts a trio of residences designed by another Case Study architect: Richard Neutra, the Austrian émigré credited with introducing the International Style to American architecture.

While Neutras don't exactly grow on trees, the Moore/Hafley Twin Houses represent an exceptionally rare fruit – adjoining homes with a communal backyard. The story goes that Neutra was originally commissioned by Olin and Aida Hafley, but asked them to persuade the neighboring property owner, Bethuel Moore, to build a similar house in order to justify the architect's weekly commute to Long Beach during construction.

Like the nearby Matlock House, the exteriors of the twin houses feature somewhat blank stucco walls enlivened by vertical wood slats. Unlike many of the single-family homes designed by Neutra, all three feature pitched roofs, which were mandated by the original building regulations in Park Estates.

Opdahl House (1958)

Address: 5576 Vesuvian Walk

Architect: Edward Killingsworth

Frank House (1963)

Address: 82 Rivo Alto Canal

Architect: Edward Killingsworth

It's fitting that visitors need to walk across water to reach the front doors of the Frank House and the Opdahl House, because both buildings are modernist miracles.

Designed by Long Beach's most prominent architect, Edward A. Killingsworth, these Naples Island residences feature one of his signature aesthetic touches: raised steppingstones emerging from a shallow reflecting pool. Few architects could conjure an artful anticipation of arrival as masterfully as Killingsworth, a fact evidenced by the 17-foot-tall door of the Frank House, also known as Case Study House No. 25. In 1964, this rectilinear residence with clean, clear lines was named one of the 16 best buildings erected in the United States.

Even more highly honored was the Opdahl House, located just across the Rivo Alto Canal from the Frank House. Named one of the five best buildings in the U.S. shortly after it was built in 1958, the residence is tucked away on two-block-long street. Killingsworth was able to create a remarkable feeling of privacy on a small lot by situating the home at the rear of the property. Sidewalls make the trademark reflecting pool and garden terrace seem like an outdoor extension of the living space behind the two-story expanse of glass framed by post-and-beam construction.

Robinson House (1976)

Address: 218 Rivo Alto Canal

Architect: Ray Kappe

It's appropriate that architect Ray Kappe chose redwood to frame the glass walls of the Robinson House, because it towers over the Rivo Alto Canal.

The founder of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, or SCI-Arc, Kappe later designed a residence at 5610 Naples Canal, but it's the Robinson House that remains the big draw. Poe, who recently led a sold-out tour of six of Naples Island's most distinguished homes, reports that some of those who signed up did so expressly for an opportunity to visit the home formerly known as the Penn/Crowell House.

"That house, once you get in it, you realize how fantastic it is," Poe says. "Once you're in it, you realize that there's only one of these in the world."

Set at a dramatic diagonal to the lines of its lot, the exterior of the Robinson House isn't too shabby, either, with its two striking steel-framed boxes of tinted glass.