SUSAN MORGAN

Being There

Esther McCoy, the Accidental Architectural Historian

"If you lived in New York, it was proper to make fun of Los Angeles," remarked Esther McCoy (1904–1989) fifty years after she'd left Greenwich Village to pursue life on the wrong coast.[1] McCoy was a keen observer, and her sharply attentive writing was elegantly spare, unpretentious, and confident. Her short stories were featured in literary quarterlies and the best of "the slicks," including *Harper's Bazaar* and *The New Yorker*. A contributor to progressive political journals, she also collaborated on several pseudonymously published detective novels and unproduced screenplays. In both her fiction-writing and reporting, McCoy was remarkably adept at portraying the contemporary moment and articulating palpable concerns about how people lived. Her story "The Cape," included in *The Best Short Stories of 1950*,[2] follows an afternoon in the life of a sophisticated, urban divorcee: while undergoing radiation treatment for breast cancer, the woman endures thoughtless remarks from a misogynist doctor and allows her memory to wander over her own richly complex life. For *Epic News*, the weekly paper produced by Upton Sinclair's 1934 EPIC (End Poverty in California) campaign, McCoy wrote about Los Angeles slum clearances and the city's need for low-cost housing.[3]

In 1960 McCoy published *Five California Architects*, her ground-breaking book that clearly identified the significance of American modernist design and its indisputably West Coast origins.[4] Through McCoy's original and well-considered study on the varied work of Irving Gill, Bernard Maybeck, and R. M. Schindler, the richness

Esther McCoy with Albert Robert, 1926.

"My particular field is history, but history of a past so recent that it flows into the present."

Opposite: Esther McCoy's passport.

Esther McCoy in Greece, ca. 1958–1959. Photograph by Tassos Diamantis.

of American modern architecture was clearly recognized. In California, unbound by tradition and inspired by the region, modern architecture developed in its own specific way: houses integrated open plan interiors with easy access to the out of doors; a lexicon of non-European designs—Japanese houses, craftsman bungalows whose style originated in India, and American adobes—was evident; and there was a forward-looking attitude about building materials and engineering techniques that was distinctly twentieth century. "It is not true that there was no California architecture before Esther McCoy," commented critic Paul Goldberger in 1990. "But there was no one writing about it, and that made all the difference."[5]

For over forty years, McCoy's writing focused on the telltale aspects of twentieth-century living and the realties of the built environment: her first magazine article about R. M. Schindler appeared in the autumn of 1945, a month after the bombing of Hiroshima and the surrender of Japan; her last essay was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, for its remarkable 1989 exhibition "Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses." "In Los Angeles, there was an extraordinary amount of provocative architecture within easy reach," she recalled simply, providing a generous space for observation, historical context, and the reader's imagination.[6] "Blueprints for Modern Living" proved to be a landmark show, a thrillingly ambitious installation, an unequivocal appreciation of mid-century modernism by a cultural institution. Organized by curator Elizabeth A. T. Smith, the exhibition chronicled—through the presentation of archival material and re-creations of residential architecture—the pioneering Case Study House program, an experimental design initiative promoted by *Arts and Architecture* magazine under the editorship of John Entenza.

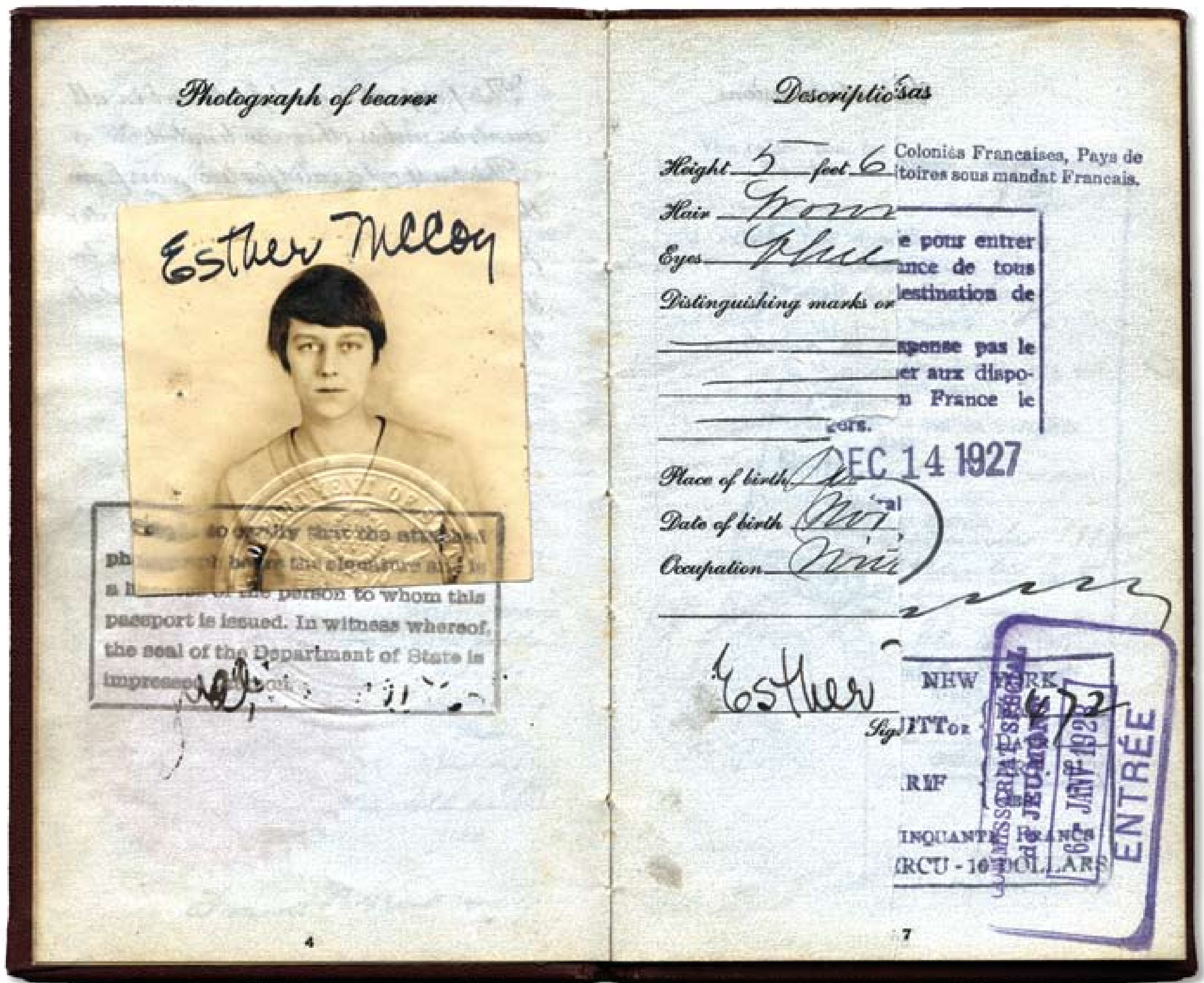
"What man has learned about himself in the last five years will, we are sure, express itself in the way in which he will want to be housed in the future," announced Entenza in the magazine in January 1945.[7] By directly addressing the atmosphere of burgeoning postwar optimism and the need for efficient, affordable housing, the program enlisted California architects—including Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, and Charles and Ray Eames—to envision and produce single-family model homes that would incorporate innovative aesthetics and recent technological advancements in such practical and often low-cost building materials as molded plywood, aluminum, and concrete block. In 1962, Entenza left *Arts and Architecture* to become head of the Graham Foundation in Chicago; the magazine's new editor and publisher, David Travers, continued the program for another four years.

Although McCoy joined the board of *Arts and Architecture* in 1950 and was a regular contributor to the magazine, she and Entenza had already been long acquainted. The two first met in the 1930s, both newly arrived in Los Angeles. Entenza was a Michigan native, the son of a Spanish attorney and a Scottish mining heiress; he'd attended university in the East and trained to be a diplomat before

heading out to Hollywood and a job with MGM's short-lived experimental film division. "We met at a time when Los Angeles was the wrong place to be. San Francisco was all right, but in 1932 L.A., even Santa Monica was déclassé," wrote McCoy. She also remarked that "never" would she have imagined then that "both of their paths would lead to architecture."[8]

"Blueprints for Modern Living" opened on 17 October 1989 at MOCA's Temporary Contemporary; the exhibition space itself—a former municipal warehouse designed by Albert C. Martin, Sr., in 1947, that was converted into a spectacular 40,000-square-foot gallery by Frank O. Gehry in 1983—reflected California design's visionary daring. The show's catalogue opens with McCoy's essay, a finely balanced mix of memoir and scholarship.

As architectural historians Robert Winter and David Gebhard first stated unequivocally in 1965, "Our present awareness of Southern California architectural heritage has been due almost to a one-woman crusade upon the part of the critic and historian, Esther McCoy."[9]



Photograph of bearer

Esther McCoy

... so certify that the attached ph... bearer the signature a... the person to whom this passport is issued. In witness whereof, the seal of the Department of State is impressed...

4

Description

Height 5 *feet* 6

Hair Brown

Eyes Blue

Distinguishing marks or

Place of birth

Date of birth

Occupation

Esther

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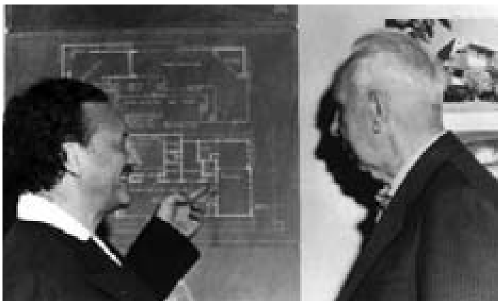
ENTRÉE

7

McCoy's ardent commitment to modern architecture was unparalleled, but her identity as a writer always remained foremost. "My particular field is history, but history of a past so recent that it flows into the present," McCoy stated, "Flow may be an inexact word, for often the transition was tumultuous. But having started with the period from 1900, and having been engaged in writing about architecture for almost a quarter century, I was able to watch the present become the past. It is in terms of the present, the ever-shifting present, that I approach the past."[10]

As McCoy's career evolved, she became an almost accidental architectural historian. "I wrote about people I knew, contemporaries," she explained wryly. "And because history has speeded up, they became history soon." [11] At the end of 1989, just a few months after the opening of "Blueprints for Modern Living," McCoy died at her home in Santa Monica, California.

Born in Horatio, Arkansas, in 1904, Esther McCoy grew up amidst a large book-loving family in Coffeyville, Kansas, and was educated in the Midwest.[12] While still a student at the University of Michigan, she had sent a fan's note to Theodore Dreiser, that fiercely American writer, a rough-hewn product of the "push and shove of the Chicago of the 1890s."[13] Dreiser's raw, ungainly novels and his erratic political allegiances attracted and infuriated a wide range of American readers. Generally regarded as a great novelist who wrote badly, his work also displayed a reverence for frankness, "unpoetic reality," and social justice.[14] Dreiser liked McCoy's bright, enthusiastic letter and told her so: "And I think I can tell you what you are going to be eventually—eventually if not now, —or right soon. A *writer*. Your mental compass seems to point thusly. You have such a flare [*sic*] for the visible scene & present it with so much simplicity & force." He was fifty-three, a denizen of Greenwich Village, a proponent of feminist causes as well as a "varietist" promiscuously advocating free love; she was not quite twenty, living in Arkansas, and considering a move East. "How old are you, anyhow?" asked Dreiser. "You have the brain of a person thirty-five or—if you are by any chance still a kid—a most precocious brain."[15]



R. M. Schindler and Theodore Dreiser.

Schindler's draftsmen: l–r Carl Sullivan, Esther McCoy, Edward Lind, Vick Santochi, Rodney Walker.

By the time McCoy was twenty-two, she had fearlessly transplanted herself into the avant-garde bohemia of lower Manhattan. During her first days in the city, she rode around on the bus, observing neighborhoods, and imagining where she might live. "Gramercy Park looked good," she wrote in a an unpublished memoir. "So I picked the house I liked best, walked up the brownstone steps and rang a bell." She asked to rent a room and the astonished homeowner agreed.[16] McCoy clerked at Brentano's bookstore and, having definitively eluded Dreiser's "varietist" tendencies, went to work as his researcher and remained his lifelong friend. She moved to Patchin Place, a nineteenth-century mews at the heart of Greenwich Village, a cultural hothouse for writers, artists, and radical thinkers. Among her writer neighbors was Boyne Grainger (a journalist-poet, she was an ebullient character born Bonita Ginger in Colorado), who introduced her to editors and publishers, helping her to find work as a

copy editor. McCoy began to write fiction and move freely among various literary circles: she spent five months in Key West and nine months in Paris. Back in Greenwich Village, living on Leroy Street, she was hospitalized with double pneumonia. Her recovery was slow, and Grainger urged her to leave the city, go to Southern California, and recuperate in a warmer climate.[17]

"I started liking California in March 1932 when the train stopped in San Bernardino in the early morning and I stepped out on the platform," she recalled. "There was an overpowering perfume in the air. 'What is it? What is it?' I asked one person after another until someone said, 'The orange groves.'"[18] In Santa Monica she was enchanted by the curve of the coastline and the way that the mountains tipped down into the sea.

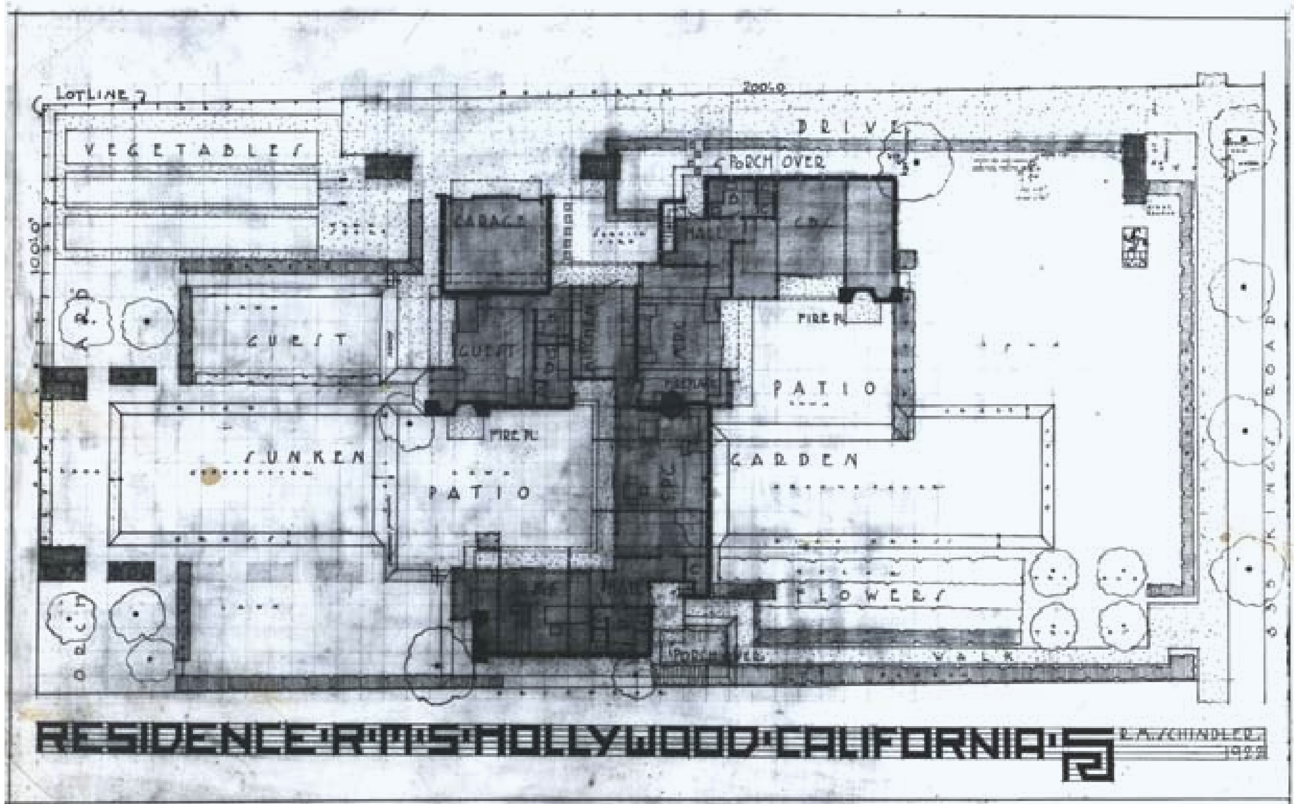
Esther McCoy, ca. 1945.

At the height of the Great Depression, McCoy embarked on the itinerant life of a freelance writer, acquiring assignments, part-time work, and temporary homes. While living in a rustic cottage on an empty stretch of beach ten miles north of Malibu, she wrote to writer Josephine Herbst: "It is a desolate swell-looking place for a pauper. I got it through some crazy fluke, and may stay here most the winter though I am always ready to move at a moment's notice."[19] In 1941, she found a turn-of-the-century bungalow, sited on a rise with a view of the sea, in the Ocean Park section of Santa Monica; the selling price was $1,500. With money she'd saved from working for Dreiser, she bought the house and lived there for the rest of her life.[20]

"I started liking California in March 1932 when the train stopped in San Bernardino in the early morning and I stepped out on the platform…"

During World War II, McCoy found a job as an engineering draftsman at Douglas Aircraft; her immediate supervisor was Rodney Walker, an architectural designer and building contractor who had previously worked in R. M. Schindler's office.[21] As the war was ending, McCoy hoped to study architecture at the University of Southern California.[22] Founded in 1916 as the first architecture school in Southern California, the USC architecture school was established as a college in 1945 and introduced a newly developed curriculum focusing on new materials and construction techniques, progressive social theories about urban planning, the immediate affordable-housing crisis, and developing a distinctly Californian residential style.[23] However, as a woman over forty, McCoy's application was "discouraged."[24] Upon hearing that Schindler's only draftsman had been called into the armed services, she went to his studio with her drawings and applied for the job; braced for rejection, she was stunned when he spoke to her as a fellow designer and hired her on the spot.[25]

Schindler's 1922 studio-house at 835 North Kings Road in West Hollywood remains the inspired prototype for classic California

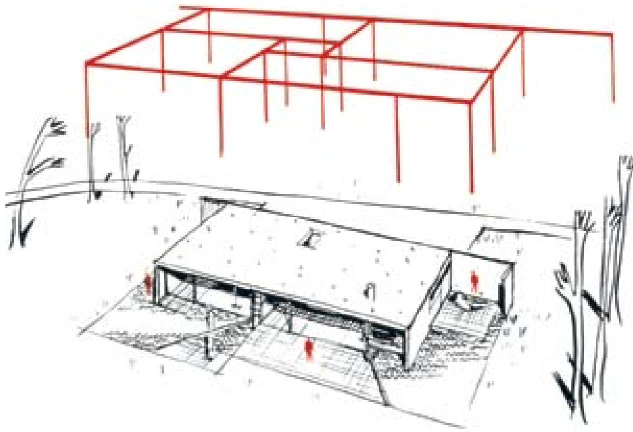


Above and opposite: Plan for, and interior of, R. M. Schindler's studio-house, 1922.

modernism. As the Vienna-born architect told McCoy in 1952, "When I first came to live & work in California, I camped under the redwood, on the beach, the foothills & the desert. I tested its adobe, its granite & its sky. And out of a carefully built up conception of how the human being could grow roots in this soil—unique & delightful—I built my house."[26] With its wide sliding doors, patio living areas, glass walls, and concrete slab floors, the Schindler house—"four studios for four working artists"—presents a lyrical manifesto about how to figure enclosed spaces and acknowledge the natural surroundings.[27]

From the spring of 1944 through 1947, McCoy worked at Schindler's office. Her mornings were reserved for writing fiction, but by eleven she was at North Kings Road, drafting architectural plans and welcoming the camaraderie of the studio.[28] Schindler initially teased her about the painstaking precision of her drawing technique: he preferred loose sketching with a soft pencil and great flourishes; she drew with a sharpened, hard pencil point. "Don't etch!" he ordered, cajoling her.[29]

In 1945, the East Coast-based magazine *Direction* asked McCoy for a story about Southern California. *Direction*, founded in 1937 with a stated anti-fascist editorial position, was as an independent cultural magazine dedicated to "the arts and letters of the left." Published and edited by Marguerite Tjader Harris, a writer and former literary assistant to Theodore Dreiser, the magazine was produced irregularly over a period of eight years. Among *Direction*'s contributors were John Dos Passos, Langston Hughes, Le Corbusier,



Top: Shot that shows a bedroom and patio of Craig Ellwood's Case Study House no. 16, 1952.

Above: Steel frame and perspective drawing for John Entenza's Case Study House no. 9, 1949.

and Bertolt Brecht; Paul Rand, the graphic artist greatly responsible for the refined look of twentieth-century American print media, designed the magazine's covers.

McCoy replied to this open invitation by deciding to write about Schindler. In Schindler's dynamic designs, she noticed how shapes pivoted and new forms were created. "His houses are wrapped around space," McCoy noted with admiration. "A Schindler house is in movement; it is in becoming. Form emerges from form. It is like a bird that has just touched earth, its wings still spread, but at once part of the earth."[30] Through her firsthand understanding of Schindler's work, McCoy realized with wonder that space itself was one of architecture's essential building materials. After her story was filed, Schindler asked why she hadn't submitted it to him for approval. "Don't you want it to be right, he demanded," she recalled later. "No," she answered. "I want it to be mine."[31] "Schindler: Space Architect," her first architectural feature, appeared in the autumn issue of *Direction*.

During the last week of 1945, Theodore Dreiser died at his home at 1015 North Kings Road, where for five years he'd been living in a neo-colonial Spanish house with a red tile roof just two blocks north of Schindler's studio. McCoy was a regular visitor and later recalled the loss of her friend with an achingly plain poignancy: "He carried luck pieces in his pocket," she wrote, "Sometimes we exchanged pennies, silver dollars, or Chinese luck pieces when he went on a journey or I was hopeful about something. After he was dead and his wife handed me his suit to lay in the pasteboard carton for the undertaker, I found two nickels in the vest pocket, which are now in the spool case in my sewing kit. I have dreamed several times that I spent them, but whenever I look they are still there."[32]

In the years following Dreiser's death, a steady wave of Dreiseriana, biographical studies, and critical texts have appeared. Among the more idiosyncratic volumes was *My Uncle Theodore*, a memoir by his niece, psychologist Vera Dreiser Scott. When she recounts one of her author-uncle's conversations, the anecdote seems to glow with the spellbinding exactitude of a fairy tale:

> *Once when we were alone Uncle Theo told me a story which I thought was a fiction. It was the story of a writer-architect who had neither much money or worldly goods. She lived as a squatter on a beach, nibbling stale crackers and sitting on wooden crates, sleeping on bare floors or the sandy shore. She became ill, suffering from malnutrition and the agonies of poverty . . . over the years, her health and writing improved considerably. "A lovely fantasy," I thought, until one day Uncle Theo took me to the lady's house in Santa Monica. She was brilliant, charming, sensitive.* [33]

And as fiction turned to fact, the indelible presence of Esther McCoy came clearly into view.

1 Esther McCoy, unpublished memoir, n.d., box 6, page 4, Esther McCoy papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter cited as McCoy papers).

2 Martha Foley, ed., The Best Short Stories of 1950 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 308–316.

3 A Finding Aid to the Esther McCoy Papers (Washington, D.C.: Archives of American Art, 1993), 4.

4 Esther McCoy, Five California Architects (New York: Reinhold Book Corporation, 1960).

5 Paul Goldberger, "Architecture View: Learning to Take California Seriously," New York Times, 14 January 1990.

6 Esther McCoy in Elizabeth A. T. Smith, ed., "Thirty-six Case Study Projects," in Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 16.

7 John Entenza, "Announcement: The Case Study Program," Arts and Architecture, January 1945, 39.

8 Barbara Goldstein, ed., "Introduction" and "Epilogue," in Arts and Architecture: The Entenza Years (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), n.p.

9 David Gebhard and Robert Winter, A Guide to Architecture in Southern California (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1965), 17.

10 McCoy to Graham Foundation, 17 April 1971, box 26, McCoy papers.

11 McCoy quoted in Paul J. Karlstrom, A Finding Aid to the Esther McCoy Papers (Washington, D.C.: Archives of American Art, 1993), 2.

12 McCoy, "Family Reading: Circa 1919," Los Angeles Times, 30 March 1958. "In a house with seven children, evenings could be pretty noisy and my father—a rugged man with delicate nerves—the kind who would leave the table if a plate was dropped—hated turmoil. We were packed off to our reading after super so he could have a little peace. He did his own reading sometime after midnight." Between 1950 and 1968, McCoy frequently contributed essays and architectural stories to the Los Angeles Times and its Home magazine.

13 McCoy, "The Life of Dreiser's Last Party," Los Angeles Times, 21 August 1977.

14 Saul Bellow, "Dreiser and the Triumph of Art," in Stature of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Survey of the Man and His Work, eds. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1955), 146.

15 Theodore Dreiser in Theodore Dreiser: Letters to Women, New Letters, ed. Thomas P. Riggio (Urbana and Chicago, Ill.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2: 181.

16 McCoy, unpublished memoir, box 6, page 1, McCoy papers; also see, Esther McCoy, "Patchin Place," undated text with note "New York in the mid 1920s," box 7, McCoy papers, later published in Grand Street 7, no. 2 (Winter 1988), 73–85.

17 McCoy, unpublished memoir, box 6, page 4, McCoy papers.

18 McCoy to Denise Scott Brown, 2 November 1988, box 1, McCoy papers. Architect Scott Brown (b. 1931), principal Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, interviewed McCoy for Progressive Architecture. McCoy responded to an early draft of the story, sent to her before publication, with a list of corrections and comments. McCoy's remarks are organized with such droll topic headings as "Money," "Smoking," and "Hair." Under "Poverty," she noted: "The house, by the way, I bought before I met Berkeley, from earnings from work for Dreiser."

McCoy also corrects Scott Brown's misrepresentations regarding her relationships with Schindler and Dreiser and McCoy's writing career. "There is a suggestion on p. 4 that my relation to Schindler and Dreiser was sexual when you jump directly from queries about what men were to me to a quote from me (apocryphal) about sex. The picture of me handing over to someone else an inheritance is very funny.

19 McCoy to Josephine Herbst, Erwinna, Penn., n.d., box 4, page 2, McCoy papers.

20 Anna Underhill to "Mrs. Esther Robert" [McCoy], 9 July 1941, regarding receipt of $25 for purchase of house at 2424 Beverly Avenue, Santa Monica, California, box 4, McCoy papers. See also McCoy to Scott Brown, 2 November 1988, 2 November 1988, box 1, McCoy papers.

21 Esther McCoy, Case Study Houses: 1945–1962 (Santa Monica, Calif.: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1977), 209.

22 McCoy, interview conducted by Makoto Watanabe, n.d., box 24, page 1, McCoy papers. "I was very interested in architecture; during the war I had been working as an engineering draftsman on a postwar plane, C-74, detailing wings and other parts of the plane. I worked there two years, decided to study architecture, and was discouraged at USC, so I got a job, instead, with Schindler, who happened to need someone then." See also McCoy, "Happy Birthday RMS," box 6, page 2, McCoy papers, "After VE day I concentrated on fiction and on shifting from engineering to architectural drafting. I had learned to draft in the first place because of my passion for architecture. Now I set up a drafting board next to my typewriter and began to design a house."

23 In a tour brochure, Pasadena Modern (Pasadena, Calif.: Pasadena Heritage, March 2005), writer and architectural historian Barbara Lamprecht notes that the USC College of Architecture, under the leadership of Dean Arthur B. Gallion, was transformed in 1945 and became "the region's flashpoint of agile curiosity." Barbara Lamprecht and Daniel Paul also report that "the circumstances in postwar Southern California provided young, eager, and mutually supportive architects the opportunity to develop a new design direction and construction system that continues to influence architecture today" in Barbara Lamprecht and Daniel Paul, "A Report of the National Historic Places: Residential Architecture of the Recent Past in Pasadena, 1935–1968," filed with the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Los Angeles, 2 April 2008, Section E, 15.

24 "Happy Birthday RMS," box 6, page 6, McCoy papers.

"I said in apology, 'I tried to get into USC but they discouraged me.'"

"The less to unlearn," he [Schindler] replied. "Come in tomorrow at eleven."

"It took some courage to go ask for a job. . . . What did I expect? A cool dismissal."

25 Transcript of keynote speech, "Schindler: From Vienna to Los Angeles, The Colloquium," 21 May 1988, box 28, page 6, McCoy papers, "One day [Pauline Schindler] phoned me to say that Schindler's only draftsman had been called up into the armed service and so I might want to try."

26 Schindler to McCoy, 18 February 1952, Collection of Rudolph M. Schindler, Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, California.

27 McCoy, "Vienna to Los Angeles," box 28, page 8, McCoy papers.

28 Ibid., 10; Joseph Giovannini, "A Chronicler of California Architecture," New York Times, 21 June 1984.

29 McCoy, "Happy Birthday RMS," box 6, page 7, McCoy papers.

30 McCoy, "Schindler: Space Architect," Direction: A Magazine of the Arts Quarterly 8, no. 1 (Fall 1945), 14–15.

31 McCoy, "Happy Birthday RMS," box 6, page 18, McCoy papers.

32 McCoy, "Outward Journey," handwritten note "sent out xmas 1946 after TD's death," box 8, page 2, McCoy papers.

33 Vera Dreiser, My Uncle Theodore (Plainview, N.Y.: Nash Publishing, 1976), 205.