

WALLACE NEFF

Architect



Southern California's pre-eminent architects have often enjoyed longevity. Charles and Henry Greene, Myron Hunt and Alfred Heineman all lived well beyond the allotted Biblical span, and Wallace Neff was no exception. (He was born Edwin Wallace, was known in his young years as "E. Wallace," but dropped the "Edwin" completely soon after he started his architectural career.) The son of Edwin D. and Nannie (McNally) Neff, Wallace Neff was born on the family ranch at La Mirada on January 28, 1895, in a house designed by well-known architect Frederick Roehrig. Roehrig had also designed the 1887 Altadena winter home of Neff's grandfather Andrew McNally, founder of the Rand-McNally Map Company, with whom Wallace spent much time during his childhood. Some of Wallace's earliest recollections were of spending endless hours after Sunday dinners in the exotic "Turkish" Smoking Room which his grandfather had purchased from the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and had added to his Altadena mansion. Thus, in typical California fashion, Neff was exposed to eclectic

influences from the start. But he also stored in his memory impressions of the then-unspoiled landscape of Southern California and of the long, low, romantic Spanish Missions and adobes, which were then, as now, greatly admired in the region.

Fortuitously, Wallace Neff's architectural education proceeded in backwards fashion. At the age of fourteen he went with his family to live in Europe (primarily Germany and Switzerland) for five years. Normally an American architect would have taken the Grand Tour after completing his education, but Neff, not knowing exactly what an architectural education was at that early age, took drawing lessons in Europe which stood him in good stead later on. Thus, on his own, he acquired a first-hand knowledge of European architecture.

The family was forced to return to Altadena at the outbreak of World War I, and Wallace decided to pursue architecture in earnest. His own story, perhaps just a good story (he had many good stories), was that he tried to enroll at Caltech and was turned down, and thus was forced to get his architectural education at MIT in Boston. Perhaps it was lucky that Caltech turned him down, as MIT was and still is one of the best American architectural schools. Ralph Adams Cram was head of the school at the time, and Wallace was greatly impressed with some simple small chapels in the Mediterranean vernacular that Cram had designed in the Boston area. Although it has been said Neff never completed his studies at MIT, that institution did grant him an honorary degree many years later.

In 1919, after service in the shipyards of San Pedro during World War I where he designed munitions-transport ships, Neff joined the office of Santa Barbara architect George Washington Smith as a draftsman. Smith's interpretation of Mediterranean styles was to have a major impact on Neff's own developing tastes. Neff stayed with Smith only a short time. He subsequently became associated with the Frank Meline Company of Los Angeles, a major real estate and contracting firm, as its chief designer. In 1920, he moved to Pasadena and established his own firm, although he continued creating designs for the Meline Company until 1922. Neff located his office in the self-designed Neff-Ruppel Building at 180 East California Street. (He was later to re-locate his office to Los Angeles, first around 1935, to 5504

Hollywood Boulevard and then, in the 1940s, to 5927 Franklin Avenue.) His timing in starting his career at that point was impeccable, for, in hindsight, the era of the 1920s was to be called the “golden age” of Southern California architecture. It was a time of unprecedented wealth and growth when innumerable great homes were being built in spectacular locations.

Neff had the knack of appealing to the tastes and expectations of his customers, and his success as a residential architect was almost instantaneous. His skillful, understated, yet elegant renderings entranced clients, and the houses themselves were soundly built and carefully took into account such factors as orientation and the need for cross-ventilation, so necessary in the hot summers before air-conditioning. During his career, Neff’s clients included a number of celebrities and tycoons, including Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks (“Pickfair”), King Vidor, three of the Marx Brothers, Ameleta Galli Curci, Red Skelton, Claudette Colbert, Louis B. Mayer, Darryl Zanuck, Joan Bennett, Frederick March, Charlie Chaplin, as well as the E. L. Doheny, Henry Haldeman, Ralph Chandler, King Gillette and Carol Post families. Some of his other works include what is now the Alverno Academy in Sierra Madre, St. Elizabeth’s Catholic Church in Altadena, the Manreasa Retreat House in Azusa, and the Fairbanks Ranch in Rancho Santa Fe.

Of course what really made Neff’s reputation was his ability to combine diverse elements into a convincing statement. There was warmth (he was a warm man) and an almost impressionistic spontaneity (which sometimes got out of hand) in his work. He was not afraid to mix motifs. For instance, in the house he built in Beverly Hills in 1925 for the handsomely-paid Hearst scriptwriter Frances Marion Thompson and her cowboy actor husband, the engaged columns on either side of the front door extended above the roof and were topped with Islamic finials. The gatehouse was ornamented with a Baroque cartouche, and access to the entrance court was through a parabolic arched passage. He made the parabolic arch part of the vocabulary of 1920s’ Mediterranean architecture in Southern California. Neff homes are also known for their clean, uncluttered façades with minimal openings, often focusing on pieces of elaborate wrought-iron grill-work, and unique treatments of chimneys and fireplaces. This is the style, combining Spanish, Tuscan and other Mediterranean Revival elements, that Neff preferred to call “Californian.” Most critics and laymen loved it, and Neff’s office was soon forced to turn down any job under \$50,000.

Until the Great Depression put an end to this phase of his career, Neff, who did all his own designing, concentrated on single-family houses, and left apartments and courts to other architects such as Robert Ainsworth and Everett Phipps Babcock, who had been trained in his office. In the 1930s and later, Neff employed English Tudor, French farmhouse, and American Colonial elements in warm, homey horizontal combinations. He seemed to favor the contrast of white brick walls with dark shake roofs. He also began to incorporate circular rooms and staircases into his interiors. In the depths of the Depression, Neff became interested in the problems of low-cost housing. He designed a mobile home, surely one of the first, but the company soon went out of business. His next venture was the invention of a round “bubble house” of concrete sprayed onto a rubber balloon which was deflated when the concrete had set. This Airform construction method met with great success, and was used for defense housing during World War II and after the war as quickly-built, low-cost housing in such developing countries as South Africa, Brazil, and Pakistan.

After World War II, Neff resumed his flourishing residential practice, which was more than ever keyed to the Hollywood stars. He turned out so many jobs in a number of styles (including the Modern) that they are hard to classify. But his first love, undoubtedly, was his “Californian” style, and the last house he did, in Big Canyon at Newport Beach, played off the simple stucco-covered horizontal masses against tall, elongated chimneys in typical Neff fashion.

Until the last couple of years Neff lived in Pasadena in one of his “bubble houses,” which had originally been designed for his brother. Although the “bubble” technique worked most of the time, there were

occasional setbacks. In this particular house, the concrete happened to collapse the first time after the balloon had been deflated. The next day, Wallace Neff, a tall distinguished figure dressed as always in black shoes, dark suit, and plain dark tie (he hated anything that was not simple and restrained, and this included his wardrobe) was out surveying the disaster and planning the removal of the mess and the re-inflating of the balloon for the next (and more successful) try at unconventional building. Wallace Neff was usually undaunted, and Pasadena can feel fortunate in counting this man who gave it so many beautiful buildings, as one of its most distinguished architects.

Neff lived most of his life in Pasadena, Altadena and San Marino. He was honored during his own lifetime by the American Institute of Architects, which he had joined in 1924. In 1956 they conferred on him the status of Fellow for his many contributions of excellence in design. Articles and photographs of his projects appeared in many national and regional architectural magazines. Neff was not particularly active in civic organizations, but he was a member of the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce and the Annandale Country Club. He had married Louise (Up de Graff) Neff in 1924 and they had three children. Wallace Neff retired in 1975 and died in Pasadena June 8, 1982 at the age of 87. Some of his professional records are at the Huntington Library.

(Note: This summary of the life and work of Wallace Neff is largely based on an essay published in the Spring 1982 edition of the Pasadena Heritage newsletter.)

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There is perhaps no one who contributes more directly to improving and beautifying a city than does the architect whose ability can be expressed in terms of adornment as well as of utility and whose experience can enable him to wisely direct the thoughts of his patrons in the matter of building construction. In this connection Wallace Neff is well known, for he has attained a creditable place among the well known architects of Pasadena.

California numbers him among her native sons, his birth having occurred in La Mirada, January 27, 1895. His parents, Edwin D. and Nannie (McNally) Neff, were born in Chicago and from that city Andrew McNally, grandfather of Wallace Neff, removed with his family to California on an early day. He built the first house erected in Altadena and was closely associated with the pioneer development of that section. Mr. and Mrs. Edwin D. Neff removed to Pasadena

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dena, where they still make their home and where he has been associated with various business interests. Their family numbers four sons and a daughter: Wallace, Andrew, William, John and Della.

The graded and high schools of Altadena accorded Wallace Neff his educational opportunities and after leaving school he was sent to various architectural centers of learning in Europe, studying for six years in Germany, Italy, Austria and England and acquainting himself with the finest architectural examples of the old world. With his return to America he entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a member of the class of 1918 and after studying there for a time was assigned to duty with the shipping board of the United States army in the construction department, remaining in the government service until 1920. In that year he returned to his native state and began the practice of his profession in Pasadena, where as an architect he has won prominence and success. He erected the handsome residence of King C. Gillette, of Gillette Razor fame, Calabasas, California, the Keith Spalding residence at Pasadena, the residence on the country estate of E. L. Doheny near Santa Paula, California, and many of the beautiful homes for which Pasadena is so justly famed. He was also the architect of the California Security Loan building, St. Elizabeth's church at Altadena and designed the interior of the residence of Douglas and Mary (Pickford) Fairbanks at Beverly Hills. Many other of the fine public and private structures of this section of the state stand as monuments to his skill and capability, and his professional rank is indicated in the fact that he holds membership in the American Institute of Architects. In October, 1929, he completed a commodious and up-to-date fire-proof building for his studio and office at No. 180 East California street, Pasadena. It is of brick and concrete construction and two stories in height.

In 1924 Mr. Neff was married to Miss Louise Updegraff, daughter of Dr. T. S. Updegraff, of Pasadena. They have one child, Phyllis, born in Pasadena in 1926.

Mr. Neff is a Roman Catholic in religious faith, and in politics he maintains an independent course, but his interest

in community welfare is shown in his membership in the Chamber of Commerce. Appreciative of the social amenities of life, he has membership in the Annandale Country and Golf Club but the major part of his time and attention is given to his business and professional interests, along which line he has made steady and commendable progress.