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# DOCUMENTATION

## Letters between R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra, 1914–1924

Edited by ESTHER McCOY Santa Monica, California

R. M. Schindler<sup>1</sup> (1887–1953) and Richard Neutra (1892–1970) met in 1912 at an exhibition of student work at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna where Schindler's project for a crematorium and chapel caught Neutra's attention. Neutra was then a first year student at the Technische Hochschule, from which Schindler received a degree in 1911; at the time they met, Schindler was within months of receiving his degree from the Academy.

In 1912, Schindler was also employed in the architectural office of Mayr and Mayer, who attributed to him the design of an actors' clubhouse in Vienna. He still was employed there when he answered an advertisement for a position in the Chicago office of Ottenheimer, Stern and Reichert. He left for Chicago in the early months of 1914.

In June of that year, Neutra's studies were interrupted when he was ordered to Trebinje; he served as a lieutenant in the artillery in the Balkans until the end of the war. He took a leave in 1917 to return to the Technische Hochschule to take his final examinations.

The letters cover the period from March 1914 to 2 February 1924, by which time Neutra was already in New York (Fig. 1). Schindler kept carbon copies of only a few of the early letters to Neutra, these for the most part "little papers" on American technology, design, and the architectural profession. Because of their length, most are omitted completely. Deleted from the first letter in the collection is a long account of the construction of skyscrapers in New York.

[Chicago, March 1914<sup>2</sup>]

Now that I have overcome the confusion of the first fortnight the thousand new movements will become habit. It has been a trip into a new strange life ending in New York—which after the long days on the plane of water rose out of the bottom of the bay as an adventure—the city. . . . The endless rows of windows that

The opportunity to edit these letters came through a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. For *JSAH* the length has been reduced from 60,000 words. The entire correspondence will be published next year.

1. Schindler's practice of architecture from 1921 to his death was carried on under the name of R. M. Schindler; I respect his preference for initials as I would that of T. S. Eliot or E. M. Forster. As a matter of fact, in the 1920s his first name was dropped, and he was called by his second, Michael.

2. The date and place of origin do not appear on Schindler's carbon copy but are assumed to be Chicago, early March. Schindler made a practice of omitting salutations, a habit which Neutra soon fell into. His early letters start "Dear Mr. Schindler."

build up against the sky are, close at hand, quite disappointing to the architect because everything is still rough, only calculated for mass effect—no, generated through mass demand.

*Of the exteriors of the buildings he mentions only:*

. . . a full range of styles from plaster ravished into all kinds of ornament to painted tin Gothic—never rough casting, or plain brick which looks even better. Somewhere an architect even cantilevered a full 20 stories in order to put up 18-story non-bearing granite monoliths four feet in diameter, which in addition have a miserable profile.

This letter consists of mere facts only. My impressions are too fresh to allow me to pull them together or judge. I want to wait for that. Of my work I can tell you little. Yet I feel very well and in the best of moods.

Regards—in grateful remembrance of the past two years.

R. Schindler

\*

Gainfarn, April 8, 1914

Dear Mr. Schindler:

. . . You are involved in real work now . . . Loos has come back from Spain but doesn't talk about it with any seriousness. The women have taken over the Loos School—"cultural triflers." I doubt that he will lecture again next year.

Personally I am fine. I now weigh 190 pounds and have struck up a close friendship with Maximilian Fabian.<sup>3</sup> I now study with great enthusiasm and amazement volumes 2 and 3 of O. Wagner's work. It is astonishing how long it took him. Architects evidently stay young longer after they get old. That makes me happy. Today I turned 22, and I have not yet developed fully my artistic feelings and direction. But O. W. needed 50 years longer.

. . . Very often I miss you frightfully in Vienna.

Richard Neutra

\*

Vienna, May 4, 1914

. . . By the way, my architectonic skills now are being revealed. When you see me again: Watch out! . . . If the amount you earn is so little in relation to what you spend, then according to my care-

3. A student at the Technische Hochschule.

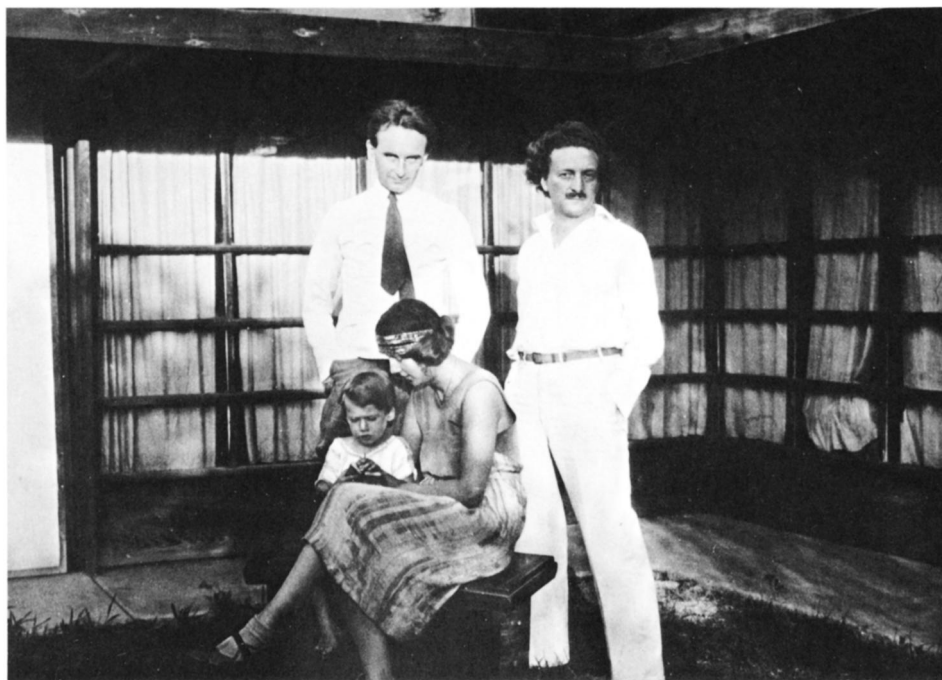


Fig. 1. Neutra, Schindler, Mrs. Neutra, and Frank L. Neutra in the patio of Schindler's house in Kings Road, Los Angeles. The Schindlers and Neutras shared the house from 1925 until 1928, when the Neutras left for Europe (courtesy: Mrs. Dione Neutra).

ful calculation you will be a millionaire in Kronen after 6000 months since you save 150 K a month! You see, I keep an eye on your financial condition. . . .

\*

Vienna, June 2, 1914

Yesterday I went from the Tirsingtal 30 Km to Nödeling, and when I came home I found your letter. . . .

Loos has been sick. He went to Genoa to pick up his wife and when he came back he went directly from the railroad station to the Fango Sanitarium on Lazarettgasse. He had an acute attack of his gastric disorder again, which they say is "only" nerves. In the meantime he didn't neglect his duties; three times a week, without him, there were sightseeing tours through his apartment, with Miss Grete Hentschel in charge.

I went with Finetti to the Fango Institute. Finetti thinks Loos lives in cycles and can be expected to have a period of strength and vitality after this attack. He was already on the ascending curve when we visited him, in spite of the "No Visitors Allowed" sign on the door. Anyway he was lying there in a wornout hospital gown, and through the holes under the arms you could see the dirty blue lining. He was unshaven and his hair was long and stood far out from his head in spirals, showing up the beginning of baldness. The eyelids hung heavy over his shadowed tired eyes and his skin was like brownish fallow tissue paper. It was slightly taut at the corners of his mouth but everywhere else there were many wrinkles. He was lying alone in a room which opens toward a deserted alley. In spite of his financial circumstances he was eating frozen whipped cream and he obviously enjoyed our visit. He had great difficulty in hearing us. Among other things he also talked about you! He told us he had been in Chicago four weeks, and at that time there were no Loos interiors there. This was 16 or 17 years ago, or even longer.<sup>4</sup>

4. Loos was in Chicago in 1893 during the Columbian Exposition.

Finally he went out on a short excursion again and as he was still very weak he had a relapse. Now I believe he has been able to leave the Fango Institute a second time.

We have seen some particularly splendid new apartments of his that are exceptionally beautiful, e.g., those for the painter Horowitz, Friedmann-Bellaria, etc. And we had enough time to study them thoroughly. I in particular looked at everything very carefully, and my knowledge of Loos apartments is extremely good.

I am very distressed about Loos himself, and I believe that in spite of his abundant social life he is lonely and abandoned! While he lies sick his wife and his friends amuse themselves until dawn. As you see, it is not only in a foreign city that one can be left all alone.

Good luck.

Richard Neutra

\*

Vienna, June 14, 1914

. . . I have been engrossed in a portfolio on Frank Lloyd Wright. It is intensely interesting. I was immediately struck with this man's ability to be both serious and monumental without stressing symmetry.

It seems to me that the cultivated American requires much more from the floor plan than we do. I see the refinement of Wright's plans as coming out of these more sophisticated requirements. Obviously, too, a guest is free to go from the entry into all other living areas with the exception of the bedrooms, and is not restricted as is the case with us to a selected few which have been elaborately prepared for presentation. I think of the houses as all being far away in free nature and not in residential districts. Often I can't understand the chimney ducts or the wall volumes which, it seems, have no function whatsoever and are only there to im-



Fig. 2. R. M. Schindler, photograph, described in his handwriting on the back as "Kitchen Wing, Taliesin, 1918" (Schindler Archive, University of California at Santa Barbara).

press. The frequent use of glass mosaic and the exaggeratedly low ceilings of the large rooms are unpleasant to me. . . .

Good luck in your future ventures.

Richard Neutra

*During the war years only four postcards from Neutra reached Schindler. By the time their correspondence resumed, Schindler was working in the office of Frank Lloyd Wright (Figs. 2–3).*

Wernli and Stäger, Architects  
Wädenswil, Lake of Zurich  
Sept. 20, 1919

Dear Mr. Schindler:

I was overjoyed to have news of you. . . . Around the time of the collapse I came to Switzerland, and before coming and afterward I have had to endure a lot. . . . But I didn't waste my time. I became a sort of garden specialist, working the first eight months with one firm as a gardener and landscape architect.<sup>5</sup> An interesting field, with more to learn than one thinks at first. Now I work in the architects' office shown above. But there is little to do. . . . A legion of people in the field of building, literally dead of hunger, forced out of an art which now seems as far away as heaven. . . . Here in Zurich there has been a great furor over the construction

5. Under Gustav Ammann.

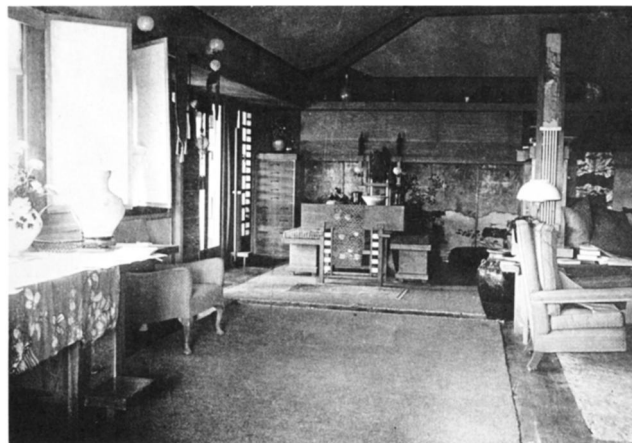


Fig. 3. R. M. Schindler, photograph, described in his handwriting on the back as "Living Room, Taliesin, 1918" (Schindler Archive).

of a model of a "people's house" in the middle of town. A deplorable wooden hut. . . . Very few architects will be needed to do this.

I have looked zealously for a position for a long time, and in vain. . . . I studied one semester with Professor Moser at the Polytechnic in Zurich.

If I could just get over there—how much I would like that. . . . I greet you with all my heart.

Yours,  
R. N.

You haven't heard yet that some time ago I passed my official examination with distinction!

\*

Wädenswil, Nov. 10, 1919

Dear Mr. Schindler:

. . . I am certain that you haven't the faintest idea what you are doing for me. . . . Now I sit in a miserable basement room, unheated because I lack funds, and with a north exposure, often 12 hours a day. . . . I have the horrible premonition: what if patience is only stupidity! A young man has to act, not wait, not dry up in an out of the way place. . . . I got off one day and went to the American Consulate in Zurich, but they said briefly that an immigration petition would have to originate with my American friend; obviously from a citizen. In case you are not already one could you not find someone else to do this? . . . Nowhere would I learn nearly as much as over there in your surroundings. I hope with all my energy to repay you. Concerning the amount of the loan, you can estimate this best. . . .

Yours,  
Richard Neutra

Residence: Stäfa Erholungsheim

\*

Stäfa, Nov. 17, 1919

. . . You can hardly imagine how badly timed your idea of returning here seems to me. To say nothing of the material ruin here, the psychological collapse is so total that it affects even the healthiest like a contagious disease. . . . I am not so much broken as deeply uprooted in my whole being. Everything in me cries for impregnation while I am surrounded by the saddest impotence.

. . . I have been hoping ardently that you would write a book. But one thing I must say, though I am younger than you: wait. One or two years won't matter; it will mature even more, and for important things there is always a right time. I have gained the right to speak about patience. It would give me the greatest pleasure to help you in this endeavor with all my efforts and all my knowledge (I have studied a lot since you last saw me and I would like you to take advantage of it).<sup>6</sup> It would be very hard for me to bear if you thought it was only because I feel grateful to you. It is a reason much closer to my heart.

Yours,  
Richard Neutra

*Eight letters from Neutra to Schindler in the first four months of 1920 are devoted to his efforts to immigrate to America. Miss Gibling (by then Mrs. Schindler) made and then renewed a petition in his behalf, but in late April Neutra, by that time in Vienna, wrote that he could proceed no further until an American firm supported his petition with an offer of employment. He wrote of Vienna:*

. . . inflation surpasses itself. The political and earning conditions are desolate. Construction activity is nil. Otto Wagner's chair is at present still vacant since Leopold Bauer was fired. It seems that the faculty had always been hostile to him. . . .

\*

Vienna, July 15, 1920

I would like to know more about American architecture than just the names Richardson, Sullivan, Wright. Help me in this! Send me something to study! I believe as you do that the new objectives will come from America. Above all, I believe in you! As for Wright, I still have the uncertain feeling that he carries Dutch matter-of-factness and Anglo-Saxon progressiveness to an *even more* universal level. I think he must love the south in some way, which I believe is unusual with an American. He carries forward the rough casting of the Roman building. (Also the stonework is Roman.) The Anglo-Saxons are everywhere foreign elements except in the Mediterranean zone. In Wright's buildings I have the inmost feeling that man in the beginning lived in a warm climate, and that the greatest, most harmonious, and most beautiful people didn't live around fireplaces and didn't die in bedrooms. Besides their comfort, it seems to me his buildings combine everything that is of value to human beings; that religion is so strongly expressed that it becomes alive, that Buddha is no longer exotic and the Bible not just a Sunday School text. When I recall his wide shading roofs, the free unstrained harmony that bubbles from his schemes, it seems to me to be a renaissance of the spirit of the south—with the peculiar contradiction, however, that southerners hardly ever had harmonious dwellings. But they had harmonious minds and a *really* philosophical soul, with closer ties to the earth and also the sky. I think one also notices that he has gone beyond the southern character of East Asia where, as I said, it is moderate and the sun is no longer essential to survival.

How happy I would be to see his work. Certainly it is a part of world citizenship, as is any true art. There is something higher in it than the American smile and American comfort, even the bustling activity. In landscape art as well I found that we have to get over

6. Schindler planned to write a book on building technology in the U.S.

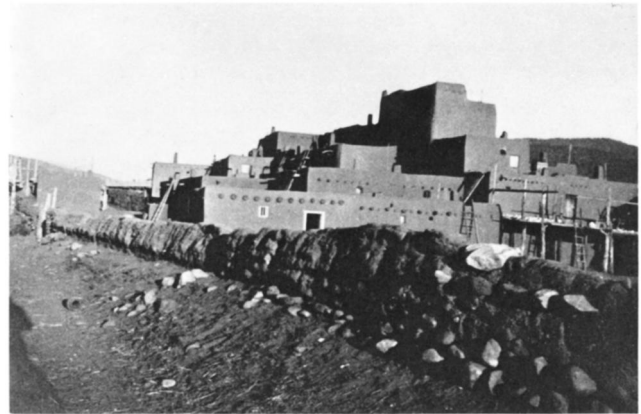


Fig. 4. Pueblo, Taos, New Mexico. Photograph by R. M. Schindler, 1915 (Schindler Archive). The photograph suggests Schindler's growing interest in pure cubic forms.

the pleasant uses of comfort as a goal. The Chinese of the Sung and Tang eras planned their gardens as places where they could be lifted beyond themselves, and not just outdoor spaces where they open their vests every evening. Important the need for a shelter, a home—sensed, felt, experienced; comfort should be self evident, not the importunate objective of the art.

I went to see Loos so I could answer you. I also was introduced to his third wife, a dancer. I think that your judgment of him is good. He wants to become acquainted with the Quakers through me but they are so busy that I really can't help him. Incidentally I don't think he is being quite straightforward with me. I think he wants more from them than he admits. Strangely enough, he tells me he wants to invite them to introduce oatmeal here—the heart of the American family-table mores and the base of juvenile health. Maybe he doesn't mean it seriously but just wants to use them. He plans to build on speculation the first unit of a row house in Ottakring and open it to visitors for a fee. Without basement; instead of front bearing walls double frame walls with many windows, with beams from firewall to firewall, which he claims is American. It approximates the typical low-cost layout. By the way, the project is far in the future, as is everything that is promised in Vienna. To comply with the familiar view restrictions of the Gartenbau Grunde he plans a one-story colonnade flanked by two skyscrapers as administration offices. I myself would prefer that the administration offices be at least ten stories underground. . . .

Yours,  
R.N.

*Schindler's response was a "little paper" on American architecture. (Across the top of his carbon copy he had pencilled 1922, probably some years after writing it, for he wrote Neutra on 3 March 1921 to ask if he had received it and Neutra replied on 25 April 1921 that he had.) Excerpts from the "little paper" follow:*

. . . There are a few beginnings but architecture has never been wedded to America, and the few skyscrapers . . . have nothing human about them. The only buildings which testify to the deep feeling for the soil on which they stand are the sunbaked adobe buildings of the first immigrants and their successors—Spanish and Mexican—in the southwestern part of the country [Fig. 4]. . . .

[Richardson] places in the middle of the ugly cities large monumental square buildings which appear like meteors from other planets. . . . [Louis Sullivan] tries to give the skyscraper a more appropriate form. . . . His buildings represent the peak of the possible—for an architect who has not yet understood completely the third dimension. . . . Frank Lloyd Wright has no relation to the south as you imagined. . . . his art is spatial art in the true sense of the word and has completely shed the characteristics of sculpture which all architecture of the past possessed. His buildings are organisms in which every part or member finds its natural expression, and they are compositions in which each form resounds through the whole building or finds its harmonies. . . .

\*

Berlin, Dec. 26, 1920

. . . For more than three months I have been in Berlin, the most American city in Europe. For a while I collaborated on interior designs, even expensive ones, for East Prussia. Then this project came to an end and now I have to try all kinds of things. Mainly I do advertising graphics for an electro-technical factory. . . .

Loos could not use the Sullivan manuscript. I tried to get the Quakers interested in it without success. I have made inquiries here myself and find that no publishers want to induce a printer to make a bid. To date, I know no one who would take *The Chats* in English. If you know Sullivan and should see him again, please give him my most respectful greetings. I shall leave nothing undone. Do you know to whom the manuscript has been sent? The whole matter is very problematical. . . .

Yours,  
R.N.

*Apparently an offer to publish Sullivan's manuscript reached Schindler in Los Angeles, where he went in late 1920 to take charge of construction of the Barnsdall house. He wrote on 12 March 1921 that it did not meet the conditions, which were that the book should be printed on good quality paper, in good type, the lines about 1/2 cm. apart, the cover cardboard or flexible leather, the whole edition not to exceed one thousand and only five hundred to be bound.*

I would like to see Sullivan's second book, *Democracy*, published at the same time, thus making the whole thing less expensive. It should be the same size and treated in the same way, then both books can go on sale at the same time. Would you try to get a new estimate—or could you send me the address of the printer? . . .

Wright is in Japan—works on the hotel and will soon design a hospital. A short while ago I wrote to ask him to invite you to Japan to work with him there. He has your address. If he invites you I hope you accept—he (or I) would probably advance travel expenses. . . .

I have much work to do—I told you in my last letter which you evidently did not receive that I have to supervise for Wright the construction of 19 houses and a commercial building with 40 shops—a \$400,000 enterprise. I am still not at home here yet and I have to get used to everything slowly. Later I will try to open my own office. There is enough building here.

R.S.

\*

Luckenwalde, Apr. 25, 1921

. . . I'm working here on a Brandenburg provincial industrial town for the Municipal Building Department. We have been zealously executing some settlement housing, a forest cemetery [Fig. 5], a hospital, and quite a bit of garden site planning.<sup>7</sup> I am studying economical building methods. . . .

Thank you for recommending me to Mr. Wright. I would certainly accept any proposal. . . .

I thank you sincerely for all your efforts.

Richard Neutra

\*

Los Angeles, June 12, 1921

. . . I just talked to Mr. Wright and he is willing to take you into his office in Japan—even though I don't know yet how we go about it. He can't make definite commitments as to salary without knowing your work, but you can count on his fairness on this point. The question is whether you would be risking too much in taking such a long trip. As far as I could learn here the fare would cost \$500. I could lend you \$200., and as long as you are with Wright you can earn enough to take care of these debts in one or two years. But what would you do if something happened to Wright? This disturbs me—even though I hear that some foreign architects have enough to do in Japan.

I myself shall go to Japan, according to Wright, and take over the work there. I won't mind doing it for a year—and it would be

7. The settlement was planned around vegetable gardens for each unit, somewhat like the terrace housing project by Loos mentioned in Neutra's letter of 15 July 1920.

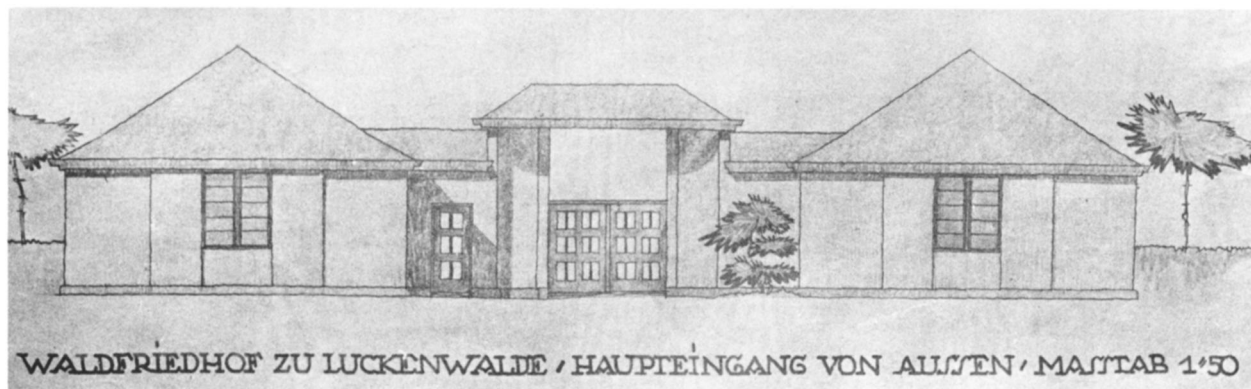


Fig. 5. Richard Neutra, Forest Cemetery, Luckenwalde, 1921. Main entrance (Neutra Collection, UCLA). Designed for the Brandenburg Municipal Building Department.

fine if the two of us could do it together. The only question is if you would dare to risk the money to go and return—without any other security except that Wright will hire you. Would you be alarmed at the prospect of spending half a dozen years in Japan?

Wright (and I) will probably start for Japan in September and should arrive at about the same time. . . . Times here are not the best, and in case plans do not go ahead immediately even Wright has nothing to do here. (The first group of buildings will be finished in July.)

How is it over there—with work? I still can't accept the idea of spending all my life here.

Regards,  
R.S.

Loos informs me that Sullivan's manuscript is with a gentleman in Berlin—are you the "gentleman?" I would love to know where the manuscript is.

\*

Luckenwalde, July 9, 1921

Thank you very much for interceding with Wright. Without hesitation I would be willing to come to Tokyo, and I don't consider it to be of greater risk than what life has offered me in the last seven years. . . . For you and your security I want to say the following . . . if you would lend me the full sum for my traveling expenses I would assign you a guarantor for your security. . . . I am absolutely determined not to harm you through our friendship and to repay in time the confidence you have placed in me. . . . For the immigration to Japan I would require a work permit and I would hope that Mr. Wright will be so kind as to make a declaration for this purpose. . . .

. . . *What interests me most in all the architecture here is merely technique!* It has been of benefit to act as a building advisor for the entire city, and I can exert much influence. However, concerning style I am still bridled by the Building Commissioner. . . . At the moment there are under construction eight small houses from my constrained design, and a generously conceived plan for a forest cemetery in a pine woods. . . . I had the woods cleared in such a way as to create effective open spaces—sort of negative space-shaping architecture. I designed a path to the clearing and had it laid out to follow the contours. . . . The main thing to me of course is the planting arrangement, and if I am still here I will try to lower the chapel so it all blends together. . . .

The manuscript<sup>8</sup> is in my hands.

\*

Los Angeles, Aug. 10, 1921

. . . Concerning the money for the trip: I am hardly able to send you \$500.—because it would be too large a part of what I possess. All the guarantees you offer are much too businesslike. I am basically against any speculations, safe as they may be. This

8. Sullivan's *Kindergarten Chats*. After Neutra's death Mrs. Neutra gave the letters received by him from Schindler between 1921 and 1924 to David Gebhard for the Schindler Archive at the University of California at Santa Barbara. They clear up the matter of who had the manuscript, unknown to me when I edited Sullivan's letters to Schindler (*JSAH*, xx [December 1961], 179). In Neutra's autobiography (*Life and Shape* [New York, 1962], p. 191) I read that he had personally delivered the manuscript to Sullivan in 1924 in Chicago, but now it appears that the manuscript was in his sole possession after it was turned over to him by Adolf Loos.

could deprive me of my peace. If I send you money it must be as a loan out of pure friendship, one which does not burden you too much and which I can forget about without great anxiety if worse comes to worse. Therefore I wrote asking Wright to send you part of the money for the trip as a sort of loan. . . .

I didn't know that you had the Sullivan manuscript. Please guard it carefully.

Greetings,

RS

\*

Yosemite, Oct. 1921

. . . I have not yet heard from Wright. The work there was interrupted after the completion of the first part, just as I was supposed to go to Japan. . . . Anyway, everything will be decided in the next two weeks—and in case I do not go there I will open my own office in Los Angeles. . . .

Mr. Sullivan wants his manuscript returned. Loos has disappointed him. I would therefore like to ask you to send it back registered or insured. I enclose money for the costs. . . .

RS

\*

Los Angeles, Nov. 10, 1921

Well, our trip to Japan fell through. Just received a letter from Wright which says he is not willing to start much other work in Japan after the hotel. The climate makes him sick and conditions are not particularly favorable. . . .

Wright did not mention you but he may do so when he returns in the spring. To advise you to come over here and take a chance is hard to do with 6 million unemployed. Since I have no work myself I cannot help you very much. My income is now uncertain. I am trying to keep my savings from dissolving in the construction of my studio. But you may be assured that the slightest change for the better will be enough for me to ask you to come over. I personally would love to have you close by. . . .

Mr. Sullivan is worried about his manuscript. I hope you received my last letter asking you to send it to me. . . .

RS

\*

Los Angeles, Jun. 16, 1922

. . . I still hope to make it possible for you to come over here as soon as I have a few dollars. . . .

My house is an interesting experiment and successful. The concrete walls are poured in sections on the concrete floor and then tilted. I put glass between the panels, with the result that the 3" openings repeat decoratively. This treatment creates a new feeling for the wall of a house. . . .

RMS

\*

Los Angeles, Feb. 2, 1924

Wright is still here—Beverly Hills Hotel—and will be here until the end of this month. Although no one knows—probably neither does he—"nothing certain." Yet it does seem certain that he will build a skyscraper in Chicago, and in any case his office will be in Chicago, and it is certain that he will hire you if you call on him at the right time. . . . My advice is to wait in New York until he has established himself in Chicago. . . .

RMS