





Lutah Maria Riggs

Local Legend of Architecture

BY CLAUDIA LAPIN

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LUTAH MARIA RIGGS may have preferred to be known simply as a good architect, rather than one of the nation's first women architects and only the second woman named as a Fellow in the American Institute of Architects (after Louise Bethune in 1889). But she was both. And her story is fascinating.

She lived and defined the Santa Barbara lifestyle, incorporating it into her architecture long before there was such a thing as a lifestyle. A number of her buildings still exist in Montecito and Santa Barbara, showcasing her admiration of simplicity and majesty of site and beauty without ostentation, another Santa Barbara specialty.

Riggs's family hailed from Ohio; her physician father abandoned them and moved west to pursue a better climate for his declining health. We seldom think of people joining cults in the early 1900s, but her father found one in Pasadena—or they found him. Letters to the family show his mind slipping from science to emotions, but not the emotional realm of hearth and home. Her mother became dependent upon extended family for help, possibly influencing Riggs to prepare to earn a living at a time when most women stayed home. After her father's death, Riggs's mother married a man whose work brought him to Santa Barbara in 1914. Riggs never spoke

of her father or stepfather, and never married.

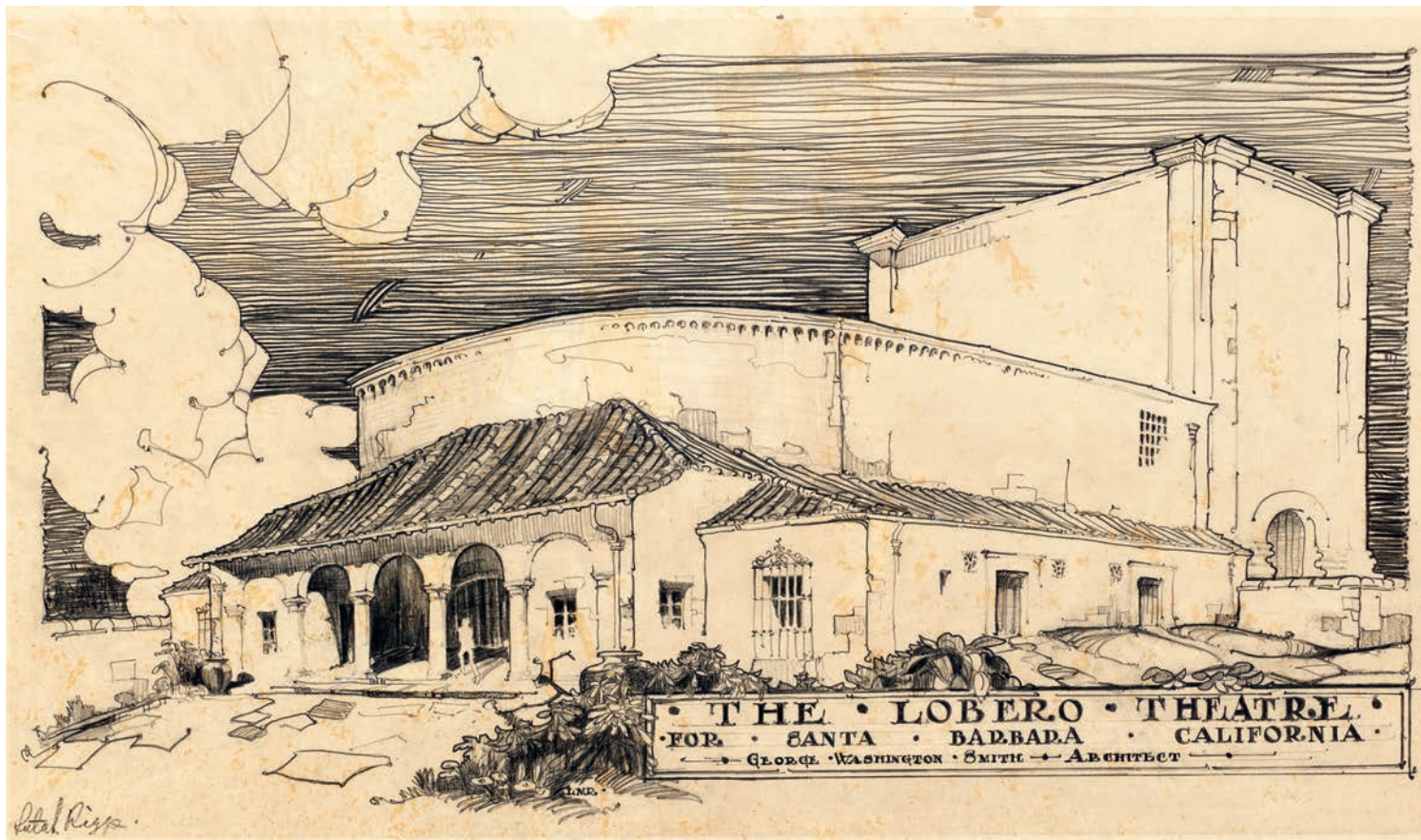
Riggs attended a state-sponsored teachers' school, The Santa Barbara Normal School, and worked part-time as bookkeeper at Woolworth's on State Street, where she won a contest to attend UC Berkeley by selling the most subscriptions to *Santa Barbara Daily News*. She became a thoroughly competent drafts person and won the Alumni Prize that essentially funded her second year at Berkeley, where the romantic, wood-shingled temporary home of the Architecture Department was called The Ark. The handful of female students evidently enjoyed social and educational equality, and Riggs soon became one of the top students. Her calendar, which functioned as a diary, records hikes in Golden Gate Park and north Marin County, outings to Mary Pickford movies and a full range of social events.

American architecture programs of the day were modeled after the French *École des Beaux Arts*, but in the casual American West, international classical design met regional influences. This coexistence of tradition and woodsy Modernism—the California ranch house interpreted with glass and framed views—found expression in her commissions. Riggs is known for her post-and-beam grid entrances and panels of louvers within walls, and also for Mediterranean classical details in tile, iron, stone and



Left: Lutah Maria Riggs executed designs for 18 homes in 1939, the year this photo was taken in her home office. This Montecito residence (above), which Riggs designed for Alice Erving in 1951, is well known for its unique siting that maintains privacy while opening up to expansive views of the surrounding mountains.





In short order Riggs became chief designer for George Washington Smith and made partner in his office by 1924. Practically a member of the Smith family, she traveled with them to Mexico and Europe, noting details of rural villas and gardens.



doorframes. She was responsible, in fact, for much of George Washington Smith's iconic design. She graduated in 1919, along with three other women.

Riggs was hired as a drafts person by architect Ralph D. Taylor in prosperous Susanville, CA, and lived with the Taylor family. There she worked on a bathhouse, a county garage, a hospital addition, a mountain lodge, a public library and a bank.

Returning to the Bay Area after about eight months in Susanville, she was turned down by many potential employers. Despite bleak job prospects, by summer's end in 1921, she was determined to return to Santa Barbara or Los Angeles in search of drafting work. While in Susanville, she'd seen an illustration in *Architectural Record* for George Washington Smith's own home that impressed her with its romanticism tinged with an abstract rendering of historic forms, and she intended to seek work in his office. He was impressed with her, but deferred making a decision, so she proceeded to Los Angeles. Shortly after, however, Smith hired her, although she also balanced a part-time job teaching a class of ten students at Casitas Pass rural school.

In short order, she became chief designer for Smith and made partner in his office by 1924. Practically a member of the Smith family, she traveled with them to Mexico and Europe, noting details of rural villas and gardens. Riggs was responsible for the columns and capitals of the Lobero Theatre remodel and for design elements of the historic El Paseo complex and Casa del Herrero. Smith financed her second commission, her own home called Clavelitos in Montecito.

Her evolving "lifestyle" presaged the way many of us live today, balancing a number of work options. She loved the freedom of driving her own Chevy Roadster and was an early coastal commuter. She obtained her architecture license in 1928—the first female in Santa Barbara to do so—just before the stock market crash and Smith's premature death in 1930.

Riggs formed a partnership with Harold Edmonson to continue Smith's practice, but it was unsuccessful, due to the Great

Depression and the nature of their combined personalities. Apparently, Edmonson was somewhat sexist, but Riggs ignored it, focusing instead on the work.

The time had come for her own practice.

In Palos Verdes, Peninsula developer Frank Vanderlip continued phase two of his project for a planned community, despite the economy, hiring Riggs to work on golf course outbuildings and to lay out housing and a plaza. She was sent to study Catalina Island and found it beautiful but "mercenary in its development." This hinted at her future interest in historical preservation. She was passionate in her belief that our superb stretch of coastline was the equal to Italy's Amalfi Coast. Her designs continued to reflect a preoccupation with restful calm and a sense of retreat.

Her most important commission of the 30s, said by some to

be the zenith of her career, was Baron Maximilian von Romberg's palatial villa and estate in Montecito. She also designed gardens in Los Angeles; the Wayside Drinking Fountain in Sycamore Canyon; and everything from English Regency to crenellated castles, Art Deco Moderne and Italian country houses. There was more travel to Europe. Like many successful architects, she did not solicit commissions, but instead let clients find her, working from a home office. In many ways, she followed an unusual lifestyle for her time, one that we recognize and embrace today.

Riggs executed 18 designs in 1939, including one for Greta Garbo in Los Angeles. It was a small Colonial ranch house with privacy built into the site and reinforced by garden elements.

The Swedish star's famous declaration

"I want to be alone" found some possibility at last.

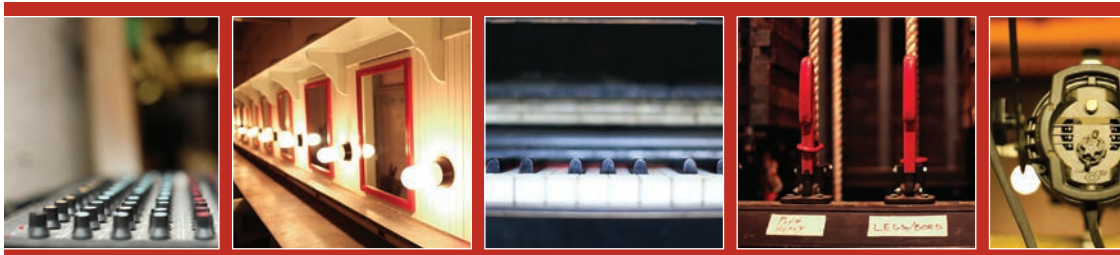
During the lean postwar forties, when Riggs could not obtain draftsmen or structural engineers, she moved to Los Angeles to design film sets, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Back in Santa Barbara by the 1950s, Riggs's legacy of California design features uncluttered space that is livable and beautiful in an understated way. Prominent outdoor space features porches and terraces, with gardens and glass integrated into the



Lutah Maria Riggs, above, in a 1920 Christmas portrait. Her detailed sketches for projects such as (opposite, clockwise from top) Lobero Theatre, El Paseo, El Mercado De la Fiesta (now De La Guerra Plaza) and El Paseo are now considered works of art.

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play between interior and exterior. We see tranquility at the Riggs-designed Vedanta Temple in Montecito, where Frank Lloyd Wright advised her on garden layout. The first such temple to welcome female disciples, it features wood sheathing and exposed wooden structure similar to traditional houses of Japan.

This is echoed at the Kiler residence on Las Canoas Road. Traditional formal interiors are offset by a modern blur between indoors and out. Even the wood and canvas shade structure known as a Santa Barbara umbrella was her creation. Riggs moved fluidly from building and film-set design to garden layout and finish details such as ironwork, tile patterns, even a Fiesta poster. Her sketches are now considered works of art.

This multi-task approach to design in many fields may be the very thing that has obscured Riggs's reputation as an architect mere decades after her death in 1987. While Santa Barbara architectural cognoscenti know of and celebrate Lutah Maria Riggs, her legacy of years of service to organizations in her field and to planning commissions and preservation societies have all faded. Certainly, she was responsible for a great many elements of George Washington Smith's designs, but it is his signature that history remembers more frequently.

In her final years, Riggs was known around town as an eccentric in a black wool coat, no matter the season, but we have her to thank for joining with Pearl Chase to institute the General Plan for our city and maintaining a hand in Architectural Review. She was named *Los Angeles Times*' Woman of the Year in 1967, but today many people would ask "Lutah who?" if the subject of Lutah Maria Riggs arose in architectural conversation. Yet when you're standing in any of the beautiful places she left behind, they leave an unforgettable impression. ✨