

NOMINATION FOR THE 2023 HISTORIC PRESERVATION AWARD

Submitted by Penny and Roy Lave

April 7, 2023

We are nominating King Lear for the 2023 Historic Preservation Award. Our nominee spent the years from late 2005 – 2023, volunteering to preserve, repurpose, and activate a small house designed in 1935 by the renowned California architect Richard Neutra, which was completed in 1939.

Now, after all these years of managing the Neutra House project as a volunteer, King has retired as of January 2023. He continues to work on documenting the history of the house and the lives of the architect and his clients and is available for consultation and house tours when asked.



1. Demonstration of pioneering or innovative efforts in historic preservation or education

In 2005, the Los Altos Community Foundation, with the urging of city commissioners and the present owner of the land on which the Neutra House sat, asked the city for a new location for the Neutra House which the Foundation wished to move. The land on which the house sat on Marvin Avenue was to be sold. The city offered 5,000 sq. ft. of land at the Civic Center on which to locate the Neutra House, if \$100,000 could be raised immediately to ensure there was no financial cost to the city. This was near the end of King's eight years on the city Council, but he stepped forward to say he would raise those funds -- and he did.

That was just the beginning. There had to be a place for those funds. King worked with Roy Lave, Founder of the Los Altos Community Foundation, to set up a fiscal sponsorship to handle the funds. In the end, more than 65 families and organizations donated from \$50-\$50,000, to meet the funding goal. King and his team also led two modern house tours in Los Altos/Los Altos Hills, a three

year architectural speakers series at Hillview Community Center, and a one week Design Camp for junior high students inside the Neutra house for two years. While these benefitted the fundraising, they also brought more people to visit and learn about the Neutra House.

The project took two years and eight months, costing approximately \$700K including the fair market value of donated services and materials. A construction loan was obtained, which enabled the project to be completed in an efficient manner while the fundraising continued.

The economic model that helped save this house was the donor-supported capital investment and rental-supported operations and maintenance. Through personal asks of community members and businesses, King raised the major gifts of \$500,000, including his own financial contribution. He wrote the grant to the Santa Clara County Historical Heritage Commission documenting the Neutra House project which resulted in receiving \$50,000 over a two-year period.

Working together with a contractor, an architect, and a small team of talented community members, the project was completed and a public meeting room was created for use as a community meeting place.

For the 15 years following, King took complete care of the Neutra House. He managed the online scheduling, briefing renters on how to use the A/V and kitchen amenities. He cleaned up after each renter, taking out the garbage and making sure the house was ready for the next group. When the kitchen or bathroom floors needed washing, he did that. He made sure the toilet was cleaned. He purchased the paper goods. He takes pride in his ability to spot clean the carpet and, when needed, arranged for it to be professionally cleaned. He managed the weekly gardeners. When he did yard work himself, it always led to good conversations with passing neighbors who were curious about the house and its use. With help on the ladders, King swept the roof of leaves several times each year. When the house exterior needed refinishing, he worked with the professionals to find the right stain or oil to keep the color true.



2. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the treatment of historic properties

California Department of Parks and Recreation. Office of Historic Preservation "Making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical values." The project was defined as "adaptive reuse" so the interior could be optimized for its new mission as a small conference center. The exterior has been restored to be historically correct with a few exceptions required to accommodate the reuse function.

3. Community Value of the Completed Project

Education: This historic house and small conference center attracts many visitors. A self-guided Architecture History video program in the conference room was developed to complement the house which itself is an exhibit. The video covers Richard Neutra and his lifework, the story of his Los Altos projects, and the context of this work within the overall history of modern architecture. An Architecture History Committee of distinguished architects oversaw the content and goals of this exhibit. A house tour, introductory talk, and ten-minute project story video take about a half hour.

The American Institute of Architects, Santa Clara Valley, endorses this goal: "...we support this architectural "exhibit" as one that should help educate the public on what architecture is all about and as a very positive outreach toward the promotion of good design. We hope educational programs will be developed for school children and others - class tours, etc. - that will help future generations develop an appreciation for the simple, honest architectural expression so evident in all of Neutra's work."

- Kent Mather, Director, speaking for the board, 2007.

History: This project preserves a historic design by a renowned architect. This 1935 design was an interesting milestone in suburban, affordable, California modern residential design. It was a precursor to the popular Eichler homes, some of which are located in south Los Altos. The history of poets Jacqueline Johnson and Clayton Stafford and their unique commission for Neutra is being researched.

Public meeting room: This project contributes additional meeting facilities to the City inventory at the Hillview Community Center. The facility is being managed to

be affordable for non-profit users. The main meeting room will seat up to 35 people, or more for a stand-up reception.

Small conference center: This facility is a unique small conference center with a private home-like atmosphere. The indoor and outdoor spaces including bathroom and kitchen are ideal for an all-day retreat for a management team. The audio/video set-up presenting the Architectural History story is also available for conference use by connecting with a laptop computer provided by the users. Cable HDTV, music, and DVD playback and wireless internet connection are available. The sound system is Dolby 7.1 with the quality of a small theater.

Receptions and Dining: The house and grounds are excellent for hosting receptions, supported by the full kitchen. The main conference room will also support dining events for up to 30 persons. The A/V system will, of course, be available for entertainment. The conference room can be closed-off leaving access to the kitchen via the back door. Food and refreshment preparations need not interfere with an ongoing meeting.

4. Impact to the City of Los Altos

The impact has shown itself over these many years through active use of the house by dozens of groups on a one-time or continuing basis. The city is also known among architects and those who love architecture as having this unique building preserved.



Ribbon Cutting for Neutra House September 2008

Mayor Val Carpenter with scissors. Back row, City Manager Doug Schmidt, Los Altos Community Foundation Executive Director Roy Lave, Council member Megan Satterlee, Historical Commissioner Justin Drews. Front row, Parks & Rec Commissioner Marion Cooper, Chamber Ambassador Fran Vella, Parks and Recreation & Commissioner Lynette Lee Eng & son, LACF Board Members Coeta Chambers and Louise Spangler.

Photo by King Lear