

ART REVIEW: A legend in her own time, world and town

The late, great Santa Barbara-based architect Lutah Maria Riggs is paid tribute in a show at the Santa Barbara Historical Museum

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Lutah Maria Riggs, 1912, at the drafting
table
Santa Barbara Historical Museum



Lutah Maria Riggs submitted around 20

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"Under the Umbrella:

Lutah Maria Riggs & Her Santa Barbara Style"

When: through spring 2015

Where: Santa Barbara Historical Museum, 136 E. De la Guerra St.

Gallery hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tues.-Sat., 12-5 p.m. Sun.

Information: 966-1601, santabarbaramuseum.com

It makes perfect sense that the important 20th century West Coast architect Lutah Maria Riggs would be periodically celebrated and re-examined in our museum spaces in Santa Barbara, where she lived and did much of her significant work for over 50 years. We've seen large exhibitions at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in the '90s (with a fine catalogue written by the late architectural scholar David Gebhard and published by Capra Press). Almost exactly ten years ago, the UCSB Art Museum presented the show "Picturing Tradition: Lutah Maria Riggs Encounters Mexican Architecture," exploring a specific angle in the architect's versatile body of work and stylistic interests.

It also makes sense that both those institutions would pay respects, given the architect's credibility and even expanding reputation as times goes by. Her work — including the masterful Vedanta Temple in Montecito as well as notable private houses there — gains a patina of timeless style and vision.

Although the current Santa Barbara Historical museum show "Under the Umbrella: Lutah Maria Riggs and her Santa Barbara Style" is a somewhat modest affair, its context tells more of the story than might have been imagined. The show, an ideal, easily-graspable introduction to her work and context, is a collaborative effort between the Historical Museum, the UCSB Art, Architecture & Design Museum (whose archives include Ms. Riggs' materials) and the Lutah Maria Riggs Society, and deserves a look, however much or little one knows about this great Santa Barbaran architect.

As implied by the show's title, the entertaining overview of Ms. Riggs life, times and work deals with her impressive imprint on Santa Barbara. To find a Riggs show in a museum with a broader focus on Santa Barbara's heritage, and in a beautiful historical building nearby such history-entrenched spaces as the Meridian Studios and El Paseo — for which Ms. Riggs redesigned the State Street entrance — takes on added centering presence.

rendering sketches of various designs to the von Rombergs. As constructed the house showcases Ms. Riggs' move towards modernism in her use of glass and indirect lighting. Meanwhile, the home's arches, courtyards, and Spanish tile echo a continued interest in the Spanish Revival Architecture and Design Collection Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara

The stylistically versatile Ms. Riggs was informed by and informing of the architectural story of her adopted home town, and from both sides of the "Big One." As even casual observers of Santa Barbara's architectural history know, the major earthquake in 1925 was a catalyst in the very look and feel of our city, with the Spanish Colonial and Mediterranean design becoming a unifying and governing force (sometimes to a detriment).

Born in Toledo, Ohio, she came to Santa Barbara with her family in 1914, and was one of the few women in that period who flung themselves into the practice of architecture. (Julia Morgan's career began just shortly before hers). After graduating from UC Berkeley, Ms. Riggs returned to Santa Barbara and was quickly talent-scouted and hired by George Washington Smith — responsible for some of Santa Barbara's landmark structures — in 1924.

While working with that master, she asserted more design work than she was credited for with such still-commanding structures as the Daily News building (the present-day News-Press building, from whence this review emanates) in 1922, and the new Lobero Theater, in 1924. In the Historical Museum show there is a Riggs-designed poster from 1924 for the theater production of "The Beggar on Horseback," which opened the second Lobero (replacing the original theater).

She went on to become a quiet but powerful creative force after that celebrated architect's death, finally making a distinctive name for herself, including through her '30s work for the estate of Maximilian von Romberg in Montecito. "Max was very happy," she commented later, with a touch of wryness. "It was modern enough but not too modern, and he was paying the bills."

Her reputation expanded and paved her way, becoming an AIA Fellow and then president of the Santa Barbara Chapter, in 1941. In the Great Depression, Ms. Riggs — who sometimes moved back and forth from her home studio in Montecito, in her "Clavelitas" house created in 1926, to work in Los Angeles — channeling her fluid design talents into work for Hollywood, including the dazzling sets of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and "Quo Vadis."

In Santa Barbara, her work includes two major and more modernist-leaning Montecito houses, which are seen in model form in the museum — the mid 1970s "October Hill" house for Wright Ludington (of Ludington Court fame in the SBMA) — and the Alice Erving House, whose elegant volumes and geometries are also appreciable in wood model form here.

Of the public spaces she was involved in, we can still partake of the library and herbarium of the Santa Barbara Botanical Garden. Undoubtedly the most lasting and inspiring — not to mention exotic and tranquil — of her publicly accessible work, though, is her fascinating design for the Vedanta Temple, up on a view-endowed plot of land on Ladera Lane in Montecito. Built between 1954 and '56, her temple is beautifully designed from a combination of Japanese and Indian influences, befitting the Vedantic doctrines' accepting and open-ended religious/spiritual policy. She wisely brought together the site and architectural solutions, and the temple is still very much in operation today, and worth a savoring visit, for spiritual, restorative purposes, or even just the satisfaction of the architecturally curious.

Her last house was the Jack Antrim house, finished in 1980. In a 1981 interview with the News-Press, she explained, in retrospect, that "If it gives me a sense of joy, or a feeling of nothing — that's the way I test its success or lack of it." She aimed for inspired, illuminating simplicity, grace and touches of surprise in her work.

As a final coup de grace, with her death in 1984, she was interred inside the much-celebrated Mediterranean-styled chapel building of the Santa Barbara Cemetery, which she helped design with her early mentor/collaborator Mr. Smith. He is also buried there, alongside his wife.

As this exhibition richly reminds us, Ms. Riggs' story is very much a Santa Barbara story, made in her own self-inventing image and leaving its legacy behind for all to see, and enter.