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Creative Salon in the Hidden Arroyo

Rick Meghiddo · Thursday, April 11th, 2013

This is a story about a contemporary salon in a unique place, created by a unique couple. It is called “The Salon of the Spiritually Creative Life.” One may drive the Ventura Freeway over the Arroyo Seco for years without ever becoming aware of the idyllic place that Carol Soucek King and Richard King have created underneath. The eye is usually caught by the Colorado Bridge’s distinctive arches, lights and railings, designed in 1913 in a Beaux Arts style. It is not until one reaches its hidden location under the Ventura Freeway Bridge that one realizes its uniqueness. The majesty of the bridge’s engineering emerges at its base surrounded by a gentle brook and native vegetation. The feeling is that of being in a cathedral without walls.

The Arroyo Seco was one of the Los Angeles River tributaries explored by Gaspar de Portola in 1770. The sounds of birds and flowing water make it hard to imagine that anything capable of living in harmony with nature could be built there. And yet in 1979 architects Conrad Buff III and Don Hensman designed a house for Carol and Richard King that both fits into and enhances its surroundings. It is a contemporary architecture of simplicity. It that does not try to make a signature statement. It limits itself to provide a stage for a gathering of people in respect of its surroundings. This is an architecture of place, one that must be discovered. The exterior becomes a natural interior in the middle of the city.



The site’s two acres (approximately 8,000 m²) bordering the Arroyo Seco is a non-ostentatious residence that has one-bedroom and a study, a detached pavilion that functions as a workplace, a tennis court and a gazebo. These components are held together by sensitive landscape design created by Howard Oshiyama that invites contemplation and repose.

The salon is an Italian invention of the 16th century that flourished in France throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. It was predominantly the creation of aristocratic women that during the Age of Enlightenment evolved into the intellectual hubs of an ambitious middle class. At a time when society was regulated almost entirely by men, women could be a powerful influence in the salon. They selected the guests and decided the subjects of the meetings, which usually were social, literary and political.

Although its main centers were in France and in Italy, they also flourished in many other countries: Russia, Poland, Spain. During the 18th and 19th centuries many important salons in Germany were hosted by Jewish women. The salon culture reached as far away as Buenos Aires. It was at Mariquita Sanchez’s salon that the Argentine National Anthem was first sung in 1813. A century later Victoria Ocampo, publisher of the legendary literary magazine SUR, hosted among many other guests, people like Igor Stravinsky, Andre Malraux, Rabindranath Tagore, Antoine de Saint-

Exupery and Le Corbusier.



Not many people would chose to build a house under a freeway, since the sound of zooming cars never stops. And yet it is not distracting. A peaceful feeling is achieved right away, the kind of place that Carol King dreamed for the salon she wanted to create.

As the Editor-in-Chief of *Designers West* magazine from 1978 to 1993, Carol Soucek King was continuously in touch with creative people in architecture, design and the arts, yet the scope of the salon she had in mind had to be much broader. Speakers came from many fields. It included among others author/futurist Ray Bradbury, women rights activist Malena Ruth, classic guitarist and composer Liona Boyd, sculptor Christopher Slatoff and USC's Dean of the School of Architecture, Qingyun Ma. Richard King, who for over thirty years has been active in the international trade and investment field, brought into the discussion subjects that connected the worlds of commerce with and those of spirituality.

Does the salon's institution have a future in a time dominated by social media? Carol King firmly believes it does. She gives advice on how to create your own salon in her book *Under the Bridges of Arroyo del Rey*, and maintains that social media through internet makes the salon concept available to people across the world.

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