

## **Elmhurst Art Museum // McCormick House**

### **1995**

Unknown interviewer (PC) interviewing Mary Ann and Ray Fick, the McCormick House's last previous

PC: Did you meet him, at some point?

RF: No we did not, we never met him, he was quite reclusive at the time, and this was three years before his death (1969). And he was not one that you went to see very easily, and this fellow, the other architect said, 'Well, why don't you live there for a couple of years. There are some inconveniences connected with single pane. You get a little condensation in the wintertime, but we think it's probably the best, and we built houses all over and you won't have any heating problem.' We went ahead...oh, he also said that 'if you put thermal pane you're going to find it's going to lose its seal and that's one of the reasons we stay with the single pane.' He said that in about twenty years you are going to have to reglaze your windows because they'll lose their seal and he was absolutely right. Twenty years later we had to reglaze them again.

PC: Wow!

RF: But the heating problem turned in to be more of a construction accident than anything else. As Mary Ann mentioned a block (heating) duct, the heating for the house is forced air. The house is built on a concrete slab and all of the ducts run the perimeter of each section of the house. It is a two-furnace system and in the one wing somebody had crushed the duct, a wheelbarrow or something, and as a result it wasn't getting heat properly and once we finally figured that out, why it was fine. It's been fine ever since. It's been a wonderful house.

PC: You mentioned a wing; actually this house is in two wings.

RF: That's right, ah, this is called, what we're sitting in today is called, "the parent's wing," and the other was "the children's wing." It was designed that way; McCormick had six children when he moved in here and the house, basically, would you like me to describe the house?

PC: Sure, if you would.

RF: Ah, it consists of two rectangular structures that are interconnected and eccentrically juxtaposed to each other in that manner one at the

end is “the parent’s wing,” and the other is “the children’s wing.” The concrete slab is the base component of which we have ceramic tile on the top (originally cork tiles) and the steel frame is constructed and attached to that concrete slab. The steel frame consists of I-beams which are visible in the ceiling, supports the ceiling and then the vertical structures that create the window wall which are built on five-foot-six-inch modules. Since the load is carried from the ceiling, the ceiling beams supporting the room down through the window wall, it means that there are no interior load-bearing walls. And the result is that the construction of the house has elm paneling throughout all the interior walls are elm paneling.

PC: That’s very unusual, isn’t it?

RF: Yes, it is.

PC: Elm paneling.

RF: Yeah, it was something that was consciously designed because of the name of the community and the predominance of the elms at the time and it’s a nice light wood, honey colored, but because they are not load bearing, and this was one of the conceptions that Mies had, is that they can be moved, at will, any one of these walls in this house can be moved to create increased or decreased ...

PC: Have you done this?

RF: Very little, very little. Increase or decrease the size of the rooms, and, or, if you like, just take them out for a total interior space with no room dividers at all. A story that’s interesting, one of the sayings that’s always attributed to Mies is that “form follows function,” in other words, the form will be built for the function.

PC: Right.

RF: Exactly the opposite is true with his philosophy – he is creating a structure, which can be used for a lot of uses. If you want to have total open space or you can have rooms as you see fit and that was his basic conception in building not only his house (but), many of the structures that he’s designed over the years. They’ll be permanent and they have their own beauty of space and light, but you use them as you see fit and it could be multi-functional. This of course is one of the reasons

that the museum, the Elmhurst Fine Arts Museum is interested in the place. Because they can use it and adapt it for their own needs.

PC: Of course, Mies van der Rohe not only designed the house but he designed some of the pieces of furniture that you have here.

MF: Right, we have two Barcelona Chairs, where were his very famous chairs. That he (Mies) designed, actually for the Barcelona Pavilion, which was in the International Exposition in Barcelona in 1929 and they have been world famous ever since and then the companion table is also called the Barcelona Table. I don't think it was actually in the pavilion.

RF: Oh, yes it was.

MF: Was it? Those are the famous Barcelona Chairs and Table.

PC: Were those pieces already in the house then, when you moved in?

MF: Oh, no. No. It was vacant. No, McCormick had moved out. We're not sure if he had them or not. But we thought we would hire a decorator and fortunately she knows an old craftsman (Jerry Griffith who made most of Mies fabricated metal projects) in Chicago that made these chairs and had the OK from Mies, so that's who made our chairs.

PC: To create them! Oh how interesting.

MF: Right.

PC: Are you leaving these chairs when you leave?

MF: No.

PC: They're going with you?

MF: Yes, we treasure them; they're going with us.

PC: I would think that maybe living in a glass house; you mentioned you had an interior decorator and everything...I would think that maybe it would be hard to make it livable, comfortable. Is that true?

MF: Ah...it's a little bit of a problem; you don't want a lot of things around. You want to keep it kind of spare; not austere, but you don't want a

cluttered look. We had the kitchen redesigned and it looks terrible if things are out on the counter.

PC: So you can't cook, right?

MF: I don't do much, but we do have to keep that counter bare – toasters and that sort of thing off, it just don't look right.

PC: Of course you love the modern.

MF: We like that look. We like contemporary.

PC: So did that make it easier for you? I mean you know that you're sitting in a Mies van der Rohe home, it's such a unique piece, is it threatening what you choose to put up, I mean... do you ...

RF: Hmm, yes. (Hand written, possibly by PC after the interview) No – we do what we want. Not intimidated by the name ...

PC: You made some changes.

MF: We had to because the original floor was cork tile, which maybe was very beautiful and probably was beautiful when it was put in; by the time we got here, it was in very poor condition. Water was spotting it, we couldn't have it refinished and so we did replace (ceramic tiles) that throughout the entire house. And the other thing, we had to replace, they had grey drapes that I did not like; I thought they clashed with the brown cork tile. And we finally got those replaced, but they were the same drapes that he (Mies) has in his 860-900 Lake Shore Drive Buildings.

RF: The ones that were replaced.

MF: Yes, the ones that were replaced with gray rayon.

PC: And you air conditioned?

RF: And air conditioned, yes, it was not air-conditioned.

PC: None of the windows opened?

MF: The bottom windows do.

PC: So the outside really does come in, not just in look. I mean you have the complete feel. Has it been fun living in this home?

MF: Yes. It's been...it's...you know, it is such a great location. We love the location, love the lot, all the trees, and just, we've enjoyed it! It's very quiet, very private, too, which is nice, the house is amazingly quiet. When it rains, we can hardly hear the rain.

RF: Very well constructed. Really very quiet; I can't believe it, as we all know in Elmhurst, planes go overhead and we don't hear them inside.

PC: You know you have lived here now, what, almost twenty-nine years?

MF: Twenty-nine years.

RF: Twenty-nine years.

PC: Was this a good design? Should they have gone on with it? Do you think?

RF: Oh, yes, oh very much so. I am sorry that it did not go forward. Obviously, as technology has developed new techniques that are things that we look at a house that's forty years old, and it was really at the state-of-the-art at the time, for example, the window sealing and things like that, that would undoubtedly would be improved today, but as far as the design is concerned, it's just been wonderful.

PC: Well now, some very exciting things are going to be happening...

RF: Yes.

PC: ...to your home.

RF: Right.

PC: To your home – I don't know how that makes you feel? The proposal is now that this home will be in Wilder Park as a part of the fine arts museum that will be there eventually. What does that feel like? To know, that your home...

RF: Eerie.

PC: Is it?

RF: Yes

RF: Yes. We are very, very pleased because this will give us the opportunity to come back and visit our house and to see the fruition of Mies' philosophy. That he's building a permanent structure that is timeless in design; it can be used for different functions.

MF: I think Mies would be very pleased.

RF: Yes.

PC: How did this happen?

MF: It came about just, almost by chance. We were...I was at a neighborhood luncheon, at Marcia Goltermann's house and some of the other neighbors were there, and three of the women there were members of the Elmhurst Art Museum, they were on the board. So, we were talking about the museum and where they were going to put it in Wilder Park and so on, and they were saying 'Gee, we've got to really get started and get something done,' and one of the other neighbors was trying to sell her house and we were talking about putting this house on the market and then, Holly Cohn, who is an artist herself in this area, said, 'Gee, the art museum should buy the Mies house and make that their museum,' and we all just kind of sat there and all of a sudden we said 'Yes. That's a great idea.' And so I came home and told Ray that night. I was all enthused and he said 'What are you talking about? They couldn't move this house,' and he kinda threw cold water on it. But these women persevered with the ideas that they suggested to the entire board got some people, architects looking at it and that's how it came about.

RF: A member of the board is Fred Scheler who lives in town and is an architect of some renown himself. And he was the one that made the investigation along with others and found it would be absolutely feasible to move it. The way it's built lent itself to being moved.

PC: I've heard grand plans to even move this by helicopter. You've heard that too, right? What does that do to you?

RF: That makes us very nervous. The house by the way is already sold to the fine arts museum. We've been living here and we're moving out in a couple of weeks to our new home in Florida. But, I don't think that the current plan is to move it by helicopter. I would like to see it moved by

helicopter if it were feasible and economical to do it because then you would be able to pluck it up and be able to save some of the trees. If they remove it by flatbed, I suspect they're probably not going to be able to save as many trees as they otherwise would. I hope they will, but the helicopter thing, I think, is not the current plan.

MF: They'll cut it in two and move it on two flat beds is what they're thinking of right now, I think.'

PC: In your mind you must see it in the future just a little bit, don't you, because you love modern art.

MF: Yes. From the first, it would look great in Wilder Park. And I hope they place it there so you really can see it from a distance.

RF: There will be another building; they regard it as part of the total building complex for the museum and also as an exhibit; a piece of art for the community. So, but, we're not familiar with the plans. Just how they're going to merge another building, which they are going to build with our house when they move it. What it's going to look like or anything like that, we really haven't seen it, or anything.

MF: We'll be very curious.

RF: Very curious.