

## **Elmhurst Art Museum // McCormick House Interviewed August 24, 2015**

SAIC professor Andrew Santa Lucia interviewing Mary Ann and Ray Fick. This interview was conducted for the *Lessons from the Fick Home* 2015 Exhibition investigating the social and cultural implications of the McCormick House on its former residents, the Ficks, who made the house their home for 30 years.

MF: Yes yes and we were going to move because we were going to my husband originally had a client that he thought was in another area. So we were going to move out of Elmhurst. But that fell through so I was in the mood for looking. So I did we did start looking and we thought we liked Elmhurst so we didn't want to leave it. So I started looking all over Elmhurst for something modern. And I guess you've been to Elmhurst.

ASL: Yes I have.

MF: You know there is very little modern at least when we left it.

ASL: Very little.

MF: And although we were in the one modern section we had but we wanted a little bigger house. And so I contacted a broker and she showed me a few things which really were not what I wanted. And we were driving along Prospect (?) and she was talking to me about what I wanted and I said well, I want a modern house. And we happened to be going by the Mies House at that exact same time and I said I want a house like that and I pointed to it. And I thought well that's you know I couldn't dream if it were for sale. And she said well I think that's for sale.

ASL: (Chuckles)

MF: So I (Laughs) I swallowed and said 'Oh really?' So she looked it up and then she brought us the information and we did look at the house. And you I'm sure know this McCormick had been trying to was rented with a family that had five children and it was completely unsuitable for their family. And it did have problems and so the woman they didn't want the house at all. They wanted a single, they wanted a one story house but it didn't work out for them. So she was very anxious they had a two-year lease. She was pretty anxious to get out of there. So then we started talking and figuring the price and all that.

RF: And it worked out.

MF: Yes and he had set a price and it had been on the market for quite a while and it hadn't had much interest and I don't know why. Partly I think it was because people didn't even know the house was there.

ASL: Oh yeah.

MF: The it was very hard to see because I always say when people ask you, ask us, what it was like living there, it was like living in a park because there, there were elms, there were what it was twenty-three elms. All over.

RF: Twenty-three elms.

MF: Big elms.

RF: They had arranged the placement of the house within an area that was just covered with trees. I don't know how they did it but they did it.

MF: (Indecipherable) I think it was completely Mies. There were big elms. Two or three big elms in the rear of the house and three big elms at the front. So we had elms all around us and we had shade and it was great.

RF: Yeah it really was. It was like living in a park. And then we, when Mies originally built the house, or had it built, he got a landscape designer from IIT where he was of course teaching.

ASL: Mhm.

RF: And he planted all the plantings around there and it was marvelous. And it was a lot of bushes in the front...I don't think it's that way any more.

MF: (Indecipherable) Well that had to be done.

RF: Yeah. It was like being, like you're looking at the old park. It was just beautiful.

MF: And there were bushes and quite a wild area in the rear. And we didn't have any alley you see is, well you probably know this, it's over a half acre – the lot.

ASL: Yeah.

MF: So there is a lot of room for trees and bushes and...

RF: Unfortunately, of those twenty-three elms, by the time we'd left, twenty-two of them died of the Dutch elm disease.

ASL: Oh my gosh.

MF: Yeah they were all gone. When we left they were all gone.

RF: I think there was one left. But whatever. Yeah.

MF: Yeah they, I had a guy that thought he could save the elms, but nobody could save the elms.

ASL: Nope.

MF: It was all cut down and it was, we needed to (Indecipherable) but it did.

RF: But we were very comfortable in the house. We thought that we should have thermal panes. And we (laughs) we went down...

MF: Because it was so cold!

RF: Yeah. Went down to the Mies office and said what do you think about replacing these and it was quarter-inch plate glass. What do you think about replacing them with thermal finish and he said 'It's not necessary, don't do it!'

ASL: (Laughs)

MF: Yeah (Chuckles)

RF: Yeah and he said in twenty years, about ten or twenty, it would lose its seal you would have to replace the glass. Which is exactly what happened by the way.

ASL: Wow.

MF: But we need did it, you know it was cold and hot, and of course we didn't have any air conditioning either. So it was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. (Indecipherable)...dripping!

ASL: Yeah I mean we've studied it in you know using technology that's able to actually find out the weather patterns of a certain year and the heat and the cooling. And we've discerned that it was obviously very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Right, so the exact opposites.

MF: You got that right.

ASL: You know, I mean I think a really important question for me and you started to touch upon it – can you describe like you went to Mies's office. What year did you buy the house?

RF: 1963.

ASL: Okay so it was before Mies passed away.

RF: Oh yeah...Yes, around.

ASL: Did you get meet with Mies?

RF: We didn't meet him, we met his senior guy. I can't remember his name right now.

ASL: Okay.

RF: But, that was the only time, and he, he never showed up, he never showed up at the house right before he died. But...

ASL: Well, maybe one question that I have is what made you want to live in a Mies house? Like you know, Mary Anne you brought up that you wanted to live in a modern home. What was it about modernism that you all wanted?

MF: Well we had, we particularly had come from a home where the mother had lots of little doodads around and all those things. My family had just a traditional home but it was not modern and fortunately both of us liked the clean, uncluttered look. Which we considered modern. And that's what we wanted.

RF: And we bought a lot of Mies furniture. To...

MF: Well that was after we were in the house.

RF: That was after we were in the house, yeah. Yeah. And we really appreciate it, and quite, we both studied up on these a lot. And really appreciated his architecture.

MF: The people, the people from the Mies office did visit our house once. Because they were redesigning, you're familiar with the Farnsworth house?

ASL: Of course.

MF: And these people had thought, I forgotten exactly the connection, they were from the Mies's other place, somebody had contacted them – What were the drapes like? And they wanted to know. And we, and our house, our drapes were like the Farnsworth House. Which I had no way of knowing. They were terrible. We didn't care for them at all they were silver. And they all were stained and just individual. They weren't one big drape they were just kind of more individual.

RF: (Indecipherable) Happened that they don't like...the windows.

MF: Well we got those, it didn't, they weren't.

RF: Yeah, actually the drapes were fine at least I thought they were. The trouble is that because there was so much condensation from the, in the wintertime with those plate glass windows that they got very stained. So we replaced all the drapes.

MF: Well yeah we felt we had to.

ASL: Could you maybe describe the, if can, if you remember, what a typical summer day was in the house? I'm very interested in the livability in the house. And you've described a little bit about the heating and cooling issues. But I'm really interested in seeing how you guys kind of lived through the house. Did you use the floor plan exactly the way it was intended to be used? Like there was a playroom initially...like tell me about that.

MF: The, what we used as a dining room was the maid's room wasn't it?

RF: Yeah.

MF: Which was, well, although it was bland it was a maid's room. But there was one, well you've seen it, there was that one big bedroom, that one

larger in the children's wing that was my son's room and the next bedroom was our other son's. And then next to the kitchen was what we called the family room. Which is where we had our television and a comfortable sofa.

RF: And a library.

MF: And a library and then there was the kitchen. And the, what was the nurse's room and the maid's room was, we became our dining room, which was kind of small but it worked. You know we had a table and that worked fine for us. You know it was close really, to the kitchen. And then the other was the, what do we call it, the master wing?

RF: I forgot.

MF: Our living room. Our formal living room was in that section. The larger section. Which was lovely because we had those big windows on either side.

RF: The Barcelona chairs.

MF: And we had that wood, wood, what do you call it, along the wall. The brick wall. There was that wood, you know...

ASL: The mantle. The mantle.

RF: Yeah, yeah.

MF: Yeah, okay the mantle. And originally I understand there was bookshelves in the...were they in the?

RF: They were in the living room...

MF: They were.

RF: Yeah we took them off. And we fortunately had the advice of a designer who was a student at IIT under Mies. And he helped a lot in suggesting what we should buy and how we should decorate it. He added a lot to it.

MF: And that was uh, what was his name?

RF: Ron Petrolli (Indiscernible)

MF: Yes, and he made a beautiful cabinet for us. And he was very careful, to think well, Mies would like this. And I'd say something like I wanted and he said well no that wouldn't go. So he was careful for what he did for us. And we loved what he did for us. The pieces he made.

RF: The other major change we made was that we had, you know there were two furnaces, each wing has their own furnace, and we did put in air conditioning in each wing which was very helpful because it did get hot in the summer. And it was a lovely place to live.

MF: Yeah putting in the, you know, heating ducts were in the floor, in the cement.

ASL: Yes.

MF: And then I had a furnace man over there trying to help us and he came back and forth all the time and he said, finally he said it's got to be in that duct, you know, below the family room there.

RF: Well it was cold in the children's wing. We didn't know why. And turned out that one of the ducts, the heating ducts, apparently somebody ran a wheelbarrow over it when the place was being built. And they had to tear up the floor, the concrete and replace it which was a real mess.

ASL: Oh wow.

MF: Yeah it was a real mess.

ASL: Well that's incredible, like, those anecdotes are important to me because I think that the cleanliness, you know like the sleek line, the cleanliness of modernism the things that we all know are a part of the history of modernism. I believe that a part of that is true and the other part of that is that we make it messy, but it's already messy when we get it. Just like you said it wasn't suitable for the family before you with five kids. You know, I think it's, what is your take on this sort of messiness of Mies's modernism that you lived in I mean, you are one of, let's say, very few people that lived inside of a Mies House. Of course there are a lot of Mies apartments and Mies offices, but a Mies House, this idea, this place where you allow your life to unfold. How, can you speak a little bit to the messiness and how, it maybe allowed for it to be, it was easier to sort of deal with it you on a day to day. And I mean

messiness not just like literally like trash but I also mean all the messy parts of living. You know?

RF: Yeah, well. The house did not give itself to messiness. We were very careful with that don't you think Mary Ann?

MF: Yeah but the children's wing was one thing because the kid had their toys and we had a great big German Shepherd that roamed around. And there was only so much you could do. But the living room area once we got those bookcases out, which we for some reason we thought was a big mistake to put them there. It looked so clean, you know we had the Barcelona Chairs, and a sofa in the one. And then we put a rug in between the chairs and the sofa and the Barcelona Table which was in the middle. And so we had great views you know, from the front, in the back, it was all trees and nobody could see in really. And that was just we though was very neat and we kept it that way.

ASL: That's great. It definitely that is something that I think about quite often. Can you describe you know for somebody that wants to know, what are the fondest and clearest memories that you have of the house? Is there anything that just sort of sticks with you?

RF: Go ahead Mary.

MF: Well we didn't, it was a very intimate, as it worked out we made the one room a dining room and it was a comfortable place to live in. You know there was no steps. We I thought I would like a car port, we had the car port rather than a garage, and it worked out fine for us. And there was a parking area in the driveway where we put our other car, when we had another car. And the long driveway, which we, which we, I guess was regular white gravel when we got it. We put pink gravel in, which everyone seemed to like, even some artist we knew seemed to approve of our choice. And we though that did spice it up a little. But there were still trees and bushes all over and it was a long driveway. We felt very secluded in the house that nobody, people didn't even know it was there, nobody not many people came to visit us that weren't invited.

RF: A lot of architecture students came to visit us. Showed up.

MF: Yeah. And from foreign countries more often. They did come, yeah. And they all liked it.



RF: Our experience was excellent. In the whole house it really was I can't think of anything was really. It wasn't a large house. I think it was about 2200 square feet but it worked out really well for us and for our family. It really did.

MF: And the utility room which was not large but they had the washer and dryer in it and we had some shelves there. And it worked out fine too. It was all we really needed.

ASL: That's a great way to put it, all you need, you know. That's definitely a part of modernism, you know, not too much.

MF: Right.

RF: Yeah. We had, Mr. McCormick had built a very fancy tree house in one of the trees in the backyard and our kids just loved it they were climbing all over it and one day...what happened Mary?

MF: Well there were five boys, you know we had two sons and there were three other boys there and the tree you know it was kind of bent over a little bit. And 'cus then the kids jumping on it all the time. And I was in the house and I heard it cracking and I just knew exactly what it was. The kids had broken the limb and it was falling down, you know, with them in the tree house. So I went over and yelled at them 'Stay where you are!' You know it was falling very very slowly – fortunately. You know, 'Hold on don't jump.' And so they all stayed except one kid was scared he got out and ran away. We had to find him later and I think that he started the, the kids were jumping up and down. You know.

RF: The tree was about ten feet off the ground.

MF: It had little steps they put on the tree to get up there. And it was easy to get up there we had a dinner party there. Well we had an outdoor dinner party once and we put a table up in the tree and we a had a table for four and some of our guests ate in the tree house. And it looked like fun!

RF: All I remember as good as a house. We were so happy that after we lived there.

ASL: That's fantastic. I got two more questions. The first one is when and why did you finally decide to move out?

MF: Well we wanted to go to Florida. Otherwise we wouldn't have moved.

RF: No.

MF: We were there for eternity. You know, as long as we were in the area.

ASL: Nice.

RF: We were tired of winter.

ASL: I understand that you know I am from Miami, originally so..

RF: (Laughs) You went the other way!

ASL: I did! I'm a reverse snowbird, I chased the snow. And then I guess my last question is when and how did you decide to gift it to the art museum?

MF: Oh yeah, well I'm sure you heard this story but perhaps not, we were, well you know Marcia Goltermann I'm sure.

ASL: Mhm

MF: Our next door neighbor and Marcia was having a little luncheon for some neighbors and friends. There were maybe seven or eight of us, I don't know, just sitting around.

RF: All women.

MF: Yeah, all women, just having a nice lunch at Marcia's. And we were talking, maybe we were thinking of moving there.

RF: Yeah we were.

MF: That's right. And our friends, the people knew we were moving. And Marcia, Holly Comb, you may have heard the name, who was an artist that lived right down the street from us said the museum should buy your house and put it in the park. And we looked around at each other and thought 'Hey! That sounds like a good idea!' And that really originated how it came to be I think.

RF: And two gentlemen from the museum came up and took a look and said 'This is very feasible; we can move it quite easily.'

MF: Oh yeah they sawed it in two I'm sure you knew that.

ALS: Oh yeah. Well we have a drawing in the exhibition. One of my students created a drawing about the history of the McCormick House and the drawing shows how it was first thought of as a slice from the 860/880 Lake Shore Drive apartment tower and then it was an idea. And then the next drawing shows it being sited on Prospect Avenue. The next drawing, we actually drew the exact truck and the building being pulled down the street, and finally the last drawing is it as the museum. To my knowledge it is the only Mies van der Rohe project that has ever been moved from the mind or the myth of a tower, then installed as a suburban house, and then uprooted taken down the street and become a museum. I have never ever heard...in my opinion, it is the most unique Mies van der Rohe project ever. That's my opinion.

MF: Yeah that's probably right. (Chuckles)

ALS: Is there anything else you would like to add? These are all my questions and they're very straight forward. Is there anything you'd like to say in addition?

RF: You got a list of the...

MF: The heating ducts, but you don't want to know about we problems. A lot of it is about the too much is about mainly the heating. And I don't know if you are interested in this. Mies put in cork...

RF: Cork tile.

MF: Cork tile that he brought from Switzerland, I understand, which supposedly was supposedly very expensive. But by the time we got there, how long was Allison there before we got there...?

RF: Roughly 11 years.

MF: And well of course McCormick and his family lived there for, oh they must've lived there, you have a record of how long they lived there. And then the renters lived there for two years and then so there were a number of people living there and then there were five kids running around. But the cork it was just in really poor condition, and it had kind of holes, and it was coming up it looked very...I didn't like it at all, and I thought it was a very unsuitable thing to put in there in that house. It

was so dark and everything was so light, you know all the glass. And I didn't from the moment we walked in that was the one thing we really didn't like about the house. It was too good to repair or move right away, and also we thought it would be expensive. Which it was. But we finally...

RF: We put the tile in.

MF: Yeah and had that taken out and that put in. Well you may have a picture of. We put in tile, what tile did we put it in?

RF: I don't remember.

MF: Well somebody told us we should've used squares or maybe we should. But we didn't know any better. So we put in...we loved the white. You know it was so much brighter with the new tile. And also we had to have the kitchen redone because you know kitchens get out of shape and with new dishwashers and so on. And we had this fellow from IIT...

RF: Ron Petro...

MF: Who designed a new kitchen for it. And he thought it was right and very much keeping what Mies would've wanted. He put in all wood cabinets and he let us paint them whatever color we wanted.

ALS: What color did you paint it?

MF: And he put in you know stainless steel sink and everything. Which was quite a modern feel. And we had a Gen Air top oven, you know, and nothing was kind of, free counter space with white Formica. It was very attractive, I thought, the kitchen. The one thing that did bother me is as you walk up to the, as you walked in from the driveway and into the house. That was the first thing that people saw. Well it was all clean and uncluttered and I think it was something, you know, that wouldn't be too disturbing if someone walked up and saw it. Until my husband (chuckles) and my boys had the great idea we had to get a microwave. So the only place we had to put that was in front of the windows there. And I thought that really destroyed the look that I achieved.

RF: (Laughs) Yeah.

MF: But we had the microwave.

ALS: Anything else, is there anything else, Ray that you'd like to add?

RF: No, no. I still think that we had the experience of living there. It was just beautiful, really was. Gorgeous neighborhood and the house itself was just great. It was so nice to be able to live among the trees and bushes. It was just fine.

MF: Now somebody told me, I think it was the next door neighbor, that there had been an open house at one time do you have knowledge of that.

ALS: What I do know obviously is a little bit of what you already mentioned is that the McCormicks had it and then '52 right? And they were only in it for about two years on and off and then the renters before you all.

MF: Yeah that's right.

ALS: So but that's a lot that's like '54 to '63 that's a lot of time. So I don't know about an open house.

RF: Yeah right. I can't remember the McCormick's...how many?

ALS: Two years.

RF: Two years really?

ALS: That was it. '52 to '54.

RF: Oh, I'll be darned I didn't know that.

MF: And the wife ran off to meet a poet in Boston. But you probably have heard that and she left him with all the kids!

ALS: Oh my gosh! Gossip, it's modern gossip.

MF: Right. But that house was on the market for a while too. Nobody else wanted it.

RF: Well we don't know that.

MF: Well it wasn't sold. And in fact my realtor who was a sharp realtor she knew it was for sale. But a lot of the other realtors were probably, you know, sleepy eye probably didn't know it was for sale because there was no for sale sign.

RF: Oh well he wouldn't do that.

MF: No. He wouldn't.