

Elmhurst Art Museum // McCormick House

Interview March 17, 2006

Dudley Fisher interviewing Mary Ann and Ray Fick, the McCormick House's last private owners.

DF: First of all, thank you for taking the time to visit us here in your old home, the McCormick House.

RF: It is our pleasure.

DF: Can you recall when you were first aware of the McCormick House?

MF: Well it was, what? (Reacting to Ray's body language)

RF: The foliage in the front was such that you would drive by or walk by and see this white house floating back there (pointing to the back of the property) and you would say, "My God, that is a different house."

We were going to move from Elmhurst to LaGrange because of a job I was taking, or a client we had picked up, and that fell through. Thank God! And then, Mary Ann had become in mood of looking for houses. She had been looking as she was doing in LaGrange, so she got ahold of a lady and started looking around for another house.

MF: So we looked all over Elmhurst – and I had. Well I saw this house, [McCormick House] dimly lit. Nobody ever showed us the house, because the realtor said, 'Oh, well, that is hard to show.' I finally saw it and saw the "for sale" sign. I said (to the realtor), 'What about that (the McCormick House)?' 'Oh I will look into it,' and it was because it was rented. Well the family that lived on Winthrop thought about buying the Mies house, they both had back problems and they need a ranch house. They thought they would like it, but they hated it. But anyway, the rental contract said you could show it once a week on Tuesday. So our realtor got an appointment. And I looked at it. I think before you did (referring to Ray Fick).

RF: Oh you did, yes.

MF: I thought it looked great!

DF: What did the house look like inside?

MF: It was a hodgepodge inside. This woman [the tenant] had five or six children. The house really wasn't that big. So, they had bedrooms in what had been an office. You know McCormick had six children. They divided the space with what we called the gray rayon curtains, throughout the house. The area bedrooms, family room, clothes closets and the other open areas they made it a little more private by the curtains that swung back and forth.

DF: Now were your bedrooms in this volume* or the other (*referring to eastern module).

RF: In this volume, this would have been the living room.

MF: OK, we are in the living room. They (bedrooms) would have been back there (pointing to the back of the eastern sided volume).

RF: Except you have expanded the walls, they have been moved. The living room was a pretty good-sized space.

DF: Now, looking at some of these vintage photos, you can see the cork flooring, which I understand you replaced. With ceramic tiles, correct?

RF: Yes, but we had the cork flooring a long time.

MF: The *Chicago Tribune* did a piece on the house and that is where these (photos) came from. These photos are of the original kitchen (looking at Hedrich Blessing images). We remodeled the kitchen.

RF: These are Hedrich Blessing. Our space ran the panels on the I-Beams, our bedroom had three windows. The paneling throughout the house had been painted a very dull tan. Remember that, Mary Ann?

MF: Oh, yeah, we could not understand it (paneling) probably needed a little fixing up, but what they did is to paint over it!

RF: When we moved into the house and started working...I knew it was painted, but one time I just started using a little sandpaper and solvent and of course, this wonderful gorgeous honey color. I spent six months cleaning up the paint. Hardest I have ever worked in my life and I always thought they looked beautiful with the Mies brick (referring to the buff brick walls) white steel and glass windows. Why they painted them was beyond me!

MF: Well, I think it was to just brighten up the house for rent. You know he (Robert McCormick) tried to sell it! It didn't sell, so it was a two-year rental and she had provisions to buy it. She liked it! But she didn't like it and there was a serious heating problem in the family room (western volume). But she did like the house. She tried to talk us out of buying it. We bought it!

DF: Do you remember meeting Robert McCormick before you bought the house?

RF: Mary Ann never met him.

MF: You met him.

RF: I did, but it was many years after we had been in the house and this guy walks up with two kids. Kids, they were two young adults. He said 'Hi. I am Bob McCormick and just happened to be in the area and the kids wanted to see the house.' Now the house was in a God-awful mess. I said, 'Come on in, Mr. McCormick.' He came in with these kids and they were pointing to where their beds had been and they were all quite excited.

DF: What memories do you have of the McCormick House before you bought it? Was there anything left in the house?

MF: No. It was completely empty. There were some bookshelves here (living room area), but they were gone when we took the house over.

RF: Now the bathrooms were interesting. The bathrooms were completely wood. When you would go into take a shower they were completely wood.

MF: They were spar varnished.

RF: Yes, spar varnished.

MF: They were much darker (referring to the elm veneer paneling that was throughout the house.)

RF: Yes, darker.

MF: It's not what you normally would put around a shower.

RF: Our decorator, what was her name? Jody...

MF: Jody Kingery.

RF: Yes, she through they were great! She was a great one for furnishings.

MF: We still have some of the things that (she told us) we moved them with us. (Moved to Florida.)

DF: Now, is she the one who had your Barcelona Chairs made by a local fabricator? (Jerry Griffith of Chicago who made all of Mies furniture prior to the Knoll contract.)

RF: Yes.

DF: Do you still like them?

RF and MF: Yes.

DF: Do you own any other Mies furniture?

RF: We now have four MR Chairs, but we didn't in the (McCormick) house. Since we were in Florida and in our decidedly un-Miesian house we went to a consignment store and bought them for our dining room.

DF: (Looking at a *Chicago Tribune* photo) Is that the way your living room looked?

RF: Yes.

MF: This is our chair and tables. (Referring to the Jerry Griffith fabricator Barcelona Chairs.)

DF: You had the two chairs and the Barcelona Table, is that a Danish Modern couch? (Again referring to the *Chicago Tribune* photo.)

MF: Yes. There were also gray curtains. We also got this modern table from Jody (Kingery).

DF: Do you know when Mr. McCormick took possession of the house? (Building history July 1951-August 1952).

MF: Well, I don't think we know that, but our neighbor would have, but she is deceased. When the house was finished the McCormick's had an open house for the neighbors. Well, I actually don't know who it was for, but anyway, Emily (the deceased neighbor?) said Mies was there and they asked him about storm windows. He said something to the effect that, 'Storm windows are for peasants!'

DF: When you organized the layout of the house and determined where you wanted to live, cook, eat, etc. Did you actually think about moving the partitions?

RF: We never moved the partitions.

MF: We never did. We painted a lot, though. The McCormicks had a maid's room. When we first moved in there, our youngest son was only about three months old. So, we put him in his crib in that room (maid's room). Well, there was a larger room next to it, and we used it as a playroom – we had an older boy and he was at the end. There was a playroom in-between and when Doug (youngest son) got a little older, we moved him into the playroom and we used the maid's room as our dining room.

RF: It was not very convenient.

MF: Before that we used one end of the living room. (As the McCormick House is currently sited, the living room is in the eastern volume.)

DF: From the *Chicago Tribune* photographs it appears that you had a set of Saarinen chairs and table.

RF: Yes.

MF: We got those from Jody (Kingery).

DF: I would like to learn about your take on living in an iconic modernist box.

RF: It's beautiful!

MF: The brick walls and the shelf, that was very important. (Referring to a long horizontal freestanding shelf located in the living room currently the eastern volume.) In fact, we had a cabinet built for this wall (referring to the opposite side of what would have been the living room)

and we put travertine marble on top. This wood (referring to the wall the cabinet was to be installed on) had somewhat damaged, so we had thoughts of putting travertine marble on that.

RF: We worked with this interior designer who had gone to IIT. He was a student of Mies. He thought it was OK and then he said 'No.' It would make the shelf a little too high.

MF: But, we wanted a cabinet because if I was having a party, I needed something I could serve from. We put this beautiful fabric on top of this large cabinet and we put the stereo speakers at either end and in between we had space for shelves, tablecloths and stuff. It was very interesting looking and we did move it – the museum didn't want it, so we put it in our house in Florida.

DF: You mentioned the house was not air-conditioned and the clogged ductwork in the western volume.

RF: Yes, the house was not air-conditioned.

MF: That is one of the reasons the renter, the woman, disliked it so much. In the winter it was so hard to heat.

RF: You heard the story – one day during construction a workman ran his wheelbarrow over the ductwork and bent the duct?

DF: Yes, I have that in my files.

RF: I still have the original article (*Chicago Tribune*) about the house in my file.

MF: (To Ray) You have a set of these photographs.

DF: I have spoken to several others who have lived in architecturally significant homes and they all have stories of people visiting their home. Did you have similar instances?

MF: Oh yeah! We had many more people visiting from Europe than from this country!

RF: All the time.

MF: There was one woman who was writing a book about Mrs. McCormick (see Don's interview), who was a poet. I do not know if the book was ever published, do you know?

DF: No, I am sorry, I do not (turns out it was).