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San Diego Biographies

Lilian Janette Rice (1888-1938)



Born in 1888 in National City, California, Lilian Jenette Rice grew to become one of the first two women to graduate from the University of California at Berkeley School of Architecture. At a time when few would have considered the field of architecture a likely career for a woman, Lilian found support for her aspirations in strong-minded and devoted parents.

A respected educator, Lilian's father, Julius, worked hard to further the advancement of education in the National City and San Diego public schools. Additional interests of Julius Rice included involvement in civic affairs, real

estate, and building. His talented wife, Laura, became known for her abilities as an artist, particularly in the field of interior design. Lilian Rice's parents combined to give their daughter the incentive and encouragement to face the difficult and challenging years at Berkeley.

After receiving her degree in 1910, Lilian returned home with a set of architectural ideals that reflected not only the Beaux Arts philosophy then popular at Berkeley, but a Bay Area philosophy which called for structures to be in harmony with their environment and the utilization of natural materials indigenous to the land.

Various teaching jobs and part-time employment with architectural firms occupied Lilian's early career. Her association with Hazel Waterman, a former apprentice of Irving Gill, gave Lilian a knowledge of the principles of employing reinforced concrete and plain geometric surfaces. Lilian's involvement with the firm of Richard Requa and Herbert Jackson, however, proved to be invaluable and gave her career direction and the opportunity to showcase her architectural skills.

During the early 1920s, Requa and Jackson received a commission from the Santa Fe Land and Improvement Company, a division of the Santa Fe Railroad, to design a community based on the California-Spanish style. Located on the site of a former Spanish land grant, Rancho Santa Fe's colorful history and gently rolling terrain provided a perfect setting for a designed community. The firm sent their associate, Lilian Rice, to plan and supervise

the initial development. Later, the entire project fell into her capable hands.

A wide-landscaped avenue provided the focal point for the community's center. The use of adobe wall construction, tiled roofs, inner courtyards, and grillwork around windows and doorways give the impression of a transplanted Spanish village. Townhouses and commercial buildings blended harmoniously with the surrounding topography.

Over the years, residential designs occupied most of Lilian's creative energies. Whether a modest dwelling or a stately residence, her homes expressed the desire for a style suited to Southern California traditions and to its environment. She stressed the need for a building's exterior appearance to blend with nature. This could best be accomplished when both house and garden conformed to the contours of the land. Preservation of natural features such as rocks and trees enhanced the idea that the structure should be but a detail in the landscape. Interior floor plans further complimented this impression. Open-beamed ceilings, textured walls, and varied floor levels added interest to the design without detracting from the visual harmony uniting interior floor plan with the outdoor environment.

A modest woman, Lilian quietly and successfully challenged a male-dominated profession. Dedication to her architectural ideals remained constant until her tragic death in 1938. While Lilian's work at Rancho Santa Fe stands as her greatest achievement, her talents as an architect can be seen throughout much of San Diego County today.

Buildings include:

- The Robinson House, 1600 Ludington Lane, La Jolla, a clapboard house which contains an interior space arranged on a variety of different levels (1919)
- Bingham Residence, Valle Plateada, Rancho Santa Fe (1920s)
- La Morada, now the Inn at Rancho Santa Fe (1923)
- The Valencia Apartments, La Granda, Rancho Santa Fe (1923)
- Four Rancho Santa Fe Townhouses, Paseo Delicia between La randa and El Tordo, Rancho Santa Fe (1923-1924)
- Zlac Rowing Club, 1111 Pacific Beach Drive, Mission Bay area (1929), the new boathouse was designed by Sim Richards in 1963
- Six Rancho Santa Fe buildings designed by Rice were placed on the U.S. National Register in 1991

[from *San Diego Architects 1868-1939* by Raymond S. Brandes, Ph.D., University of San Diego]

See [Commentary by Will Chandler, Architectural Historian](#)

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