

HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE REPORT

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125 Rametto Road

Santa Barbara, California

Designation Status: Added to the Potential Historic Resources List in 2009

Assessor Parcel Number: 015-211-011

Constructed: 1955

Historic Name: Elsie B. Davis House

Architect: Lulah Maria Riggs

Builder: N/A

Architectural Style: Postwar Modernist California

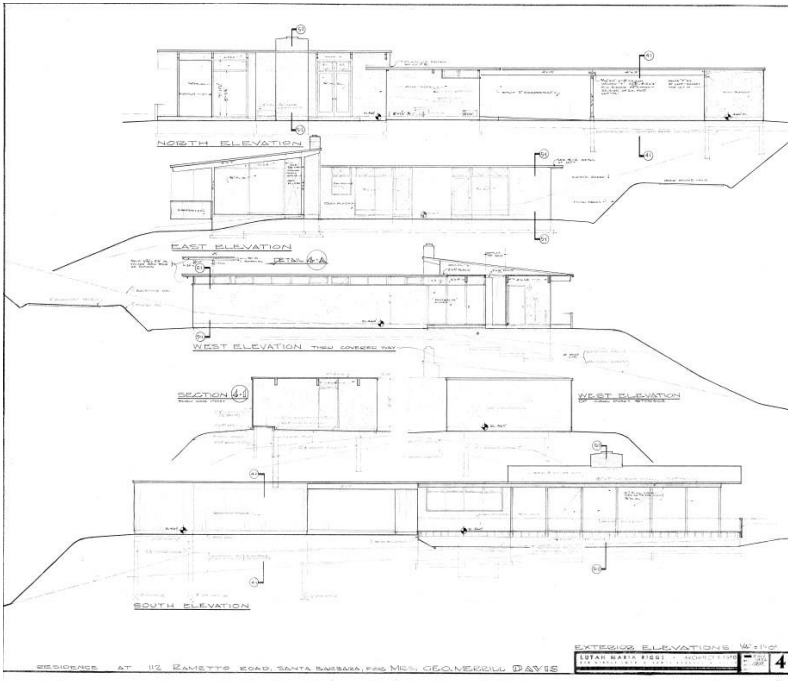
Property Type: Single Family Residence

Original Use: Single Family Residence

What Makes this Place Historic?

The modernist house was designed by famed Montecito architect Lulah Maria Riggs, and it was built in 1954 for Elsie B. Davis, the widow of





1955 Drawings of elevations by Lulah Maria Riggs

George Merrill Davis, who had formerly lived nearby at 2515 Summit Road. It is unknown how Mrs. Davis met and hired Lulah Riggs to build the home. The original address was 112 Rametto Road, and was not changed to the present number 125 until 1965.

As the Sanborn Maps (photos to the right) of Montecito, California, demonstrate, this section of Rametto Road above the Country Club remained undeveloped for the first few decades of the twentieth century, and then slowly grew into a suburban nexus around the time of World War II. Neither of these maps depicts the house at 125 Rametto Road because it had not yet been built, nor had the land been designated.

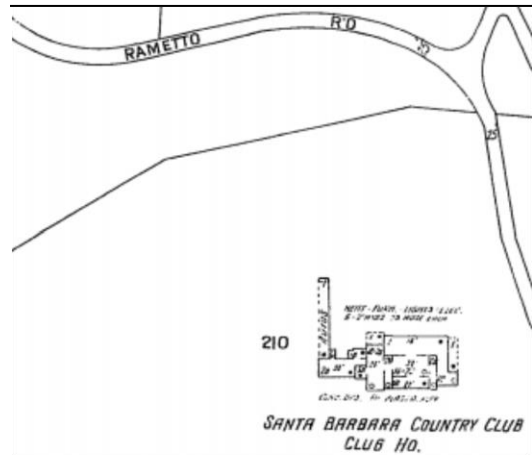
By 1960, according to City Directories, Herbert M. and Sally Hooker lived in the house. Herbert Hooker was the manager for Dr. J. C. Campbell of Campbell Credit Dentist. Mrs. Hooker lived in the house until her death in 1999. The home was then purchased by James Scheinfeld and his wife, who made a number of alterations, carried out by designer Peter Kavoian.

Property Description:

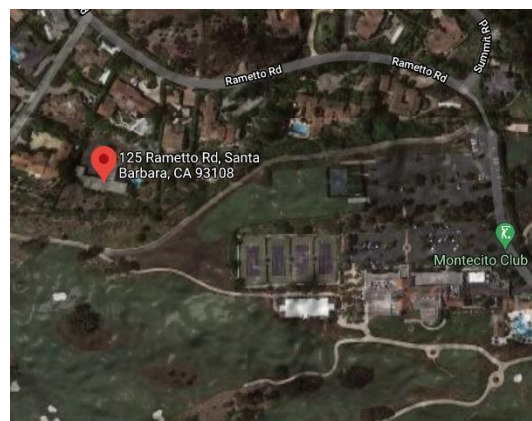
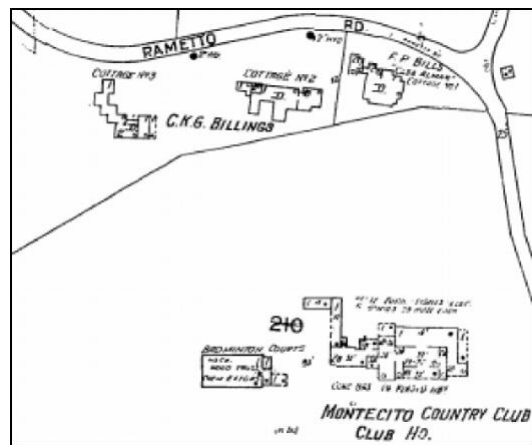
The house at 125 Rametto Road is accessible via a driveway right-of-way easement over the property at 129 Rametto Road. The road curves down a steep incline to end at a level parking area and turnaround in front of the house. The modern ranch-style house is T-shaped, containing both public and private courtyards that are flanked by the home's wings. The west and north wings have flat roofs, contrasting with the taller shed roof of the living room wing. The wood-frame is covered with stucco cladding that has been painted a light gray. A garage is located at the end of the west wing.

The public side of the house presents a closed wall along the north wing, lit only by a series of transom windows at the eave lines. The private side of the house features a courtyard that is framed by the living room and bedroom wings, and it opens with many large glass doors onto a patio and a free-form swimming pool. Glass doors also open onto a wooden balcony to the south, overlooking the Montecito Country Club, the Bird Refuge, and the Pacific Ocean.

A large exterior brick chimney, painted gray to match the stucco walls, is located on the north side of the living room wing. The windows and doors along the north wall of the living room and the east wall of the bedroom wing are floor-to-ceiling glass, topped by



1918 Sanborn Map (above) and 1942 Sanborn Map (below)



transoms. The front entrance, altered in 1999, consists of a tripartite system reminiscent of those on the east side of the north wing, with two floor-to-ceiling fixed windows adjacent to the single pane floor-to-ceiling door that is set into the crook of the north and west wings.

There were a number of alterations made in 1999, including the infilling of the existing carport with a master bedroom and bathroom, the enclosing of the east end screen porch, the changing of the front door from the north wing to the west wing, the addition of several new windows, the widening of the deck along the south side, and a brand-new free-standing garage at the northwest side. As per the Historic Structures/Sites Report accepted by the Historic Landmarks Commission in 2009, these additions were found at the time to be compatible with the Lutah Riggs design and met the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the building remained historically significant.

Significance: City of Santa Barbara establishes historical significance as provided by the Municipal Code, Section 30.157.025. Any historic building that meets one or more of the five criteria established for a City Landmark, or a City Structure of Merit can be considered significant. The structure may be significant as a Structure of Merit per the following criteria:

Historic Integrity

125 Rametto Road is in good condition. It appears to have retained its original configuration and most of its original materials. The house conveys integrity of location, design, setting, materials, feeling and association so that it can convey the Modernist California Style and its original 1955 appearance.

Criterion 3. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, architectural style or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic or historic value, or represents a significant and distinguishable collection whose individual components may lack distinction;)

The home at 125 Rametto Road is built in the unique Post-World War II Modernist California Style, incorporating a wide variety of influences into one cohesive whole. Riggs was a proponent of this particular fusion of styles, and she incorporated elements of informal woodsy traditions within a streamlined mid-century modern aesthetic, anticipating the popularity of "pure" geometric forms in mid-century American architecture. Her homes around this time employed stucco or board-and-batten walling, and perhaps most crucially, exposed wood structure, conveying an atmosphere akin to that of traditional Japanese wood houses.

The Davis House in particular represents a number of post-World War II modernist ideals, such as the open plan, the linking of indoors and outdoors, the orientation of the house towards gardens or courtyards, and an informal floor plan. The home is quintessential of the "California Style" that developed in the late 1940s, with flat roofs, single-sloped shed roofs, plaster and stucco walls, and extensive use of glass. The final design achieved a functional simplicity within the T-shape, with public and private sides of the house differentiated on the exterior, and private and public rooms separated within the interior.

The Modernist California Style emphasized the prominence of “pure” geometric forms, often contrasting disparate elements in order to contribute to a holistic modernist aesthetic. The homes of this tradition maximize outdoor features—such as patios, terraces, balconies, and gardens—while maintaining a certain degree of privacy and formality. This structure may qualify under Criterion D due to the following character-defining features:

- **Roof:** The home features very low-pitched roofing—the east and west wings feature flat roofs, while the living room area features a taller shed roof.
- **Wall Materials:** The walls are plain gray stucco, mimicking the thick white plaster of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style while retaining a modernist twist.
- **Outdoor Space:** In keeping with the Modernist California Style, the home practically extends into the outdoors, making good use of its natural surroundings. The south elevation features a long wrap around balcony, which offers expansive views of the Pacific Ocean, the adjacent Country Club, and the rest of Montecito. The balcony is fenced in with an iron railing, and is complimented by a series of floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doors. The overhanging eaves provide some shade from the sun. The other notable outdoor feature at 125 Rametto Road is the pool area. The pool sits within a spectacular private patio area, which is enclosed on all sides by different wings of the house, and a number of interior rooms provide direct access to this area through large glass doors.
- **Eaves:** The home features some dramatically overhanging eaves, which are supported by brackets made of long, thick-cut slabs of wood. In other parts of the home, the eaves overhang significantly less, so the brackets in these segments are far smaller and less decorative.
- **Windows:** The fenestration tends to be composed of large, single-pane glass with thin, wood trim returns. The windows are often paired with similarly finished transoms. The home features windows on all of its sides, offering an impressive amount of sunlight at any time of day.



- **Doors:** The doors are made of large, single-pane, floor-to-ceiling glass, and are spaced thoughtfully throughout the house in order to maximize access to the outdoor features. The front entrance is nestled in the corner between two of the wings, and it features a pair of floor-to-ceiling glass doors, topped by matching transoms and surrounded by a thin wood trim.

Lutah Maria Riggs studied education at the Santa Barbara Normal School before winning a scholarship to attend the University of California, Berkeley in 1918, where she embarked on her architectural studies with only four other women in the program. The architecture department at that time was a direct outgrowth of the French L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts classical architecture school. Riggs moved back to Santa Barbara, where she worked as a draftsman for an iconic local architect, George Washington Smith, who worked mainly in the Spanish Colonial Revival Style. Smith and his wife took such a liking to Riggs that she became a quasi-surrogate daughter, travelling with the family on their architectural study trips to Mexico and Europe. In 1924, Smith named Riggs a partner in the firm, granting her the title of Chief Draftswoman. She became increasingly influential in the firm's design work, in some cases bearing full responsibility for the design of commissions. She contributed to some of Smith's best known buildings, including the Lobero Theater.

In 1928, Riggs obtained her own architectural license. She continued to work for Smith through 1930, when he died after a sudden heart attack. Riggs tried out a short stint working in partnership with colleagues before starting her own firm in 1931, which she ran until 1942. Riggs completed a fair amount of residential work for wealthy clients in the greater Santa Barbara and Montecito area, as well as some commercial and institutional work, including Blaksley Library at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. She also designed modest residences for the Rolling Hills development on the Palos Verdes Peninsula in southern Los Angeles County. During World War II, Riggs worked briefly as a set designer on MGM and Warner Brothers films.

After World War II, Riggs continued to produce some traditional designs, but generally turned toward modernism. In 1945, she began a six-year partnership with Arvin Shaw, focusing on modernist residential work. Her work from 1945 to the 1950s was influenced by the mid-century modern aesthetic, and incorporated elements of an informal and woodsy tradition. The exterior walls tended to be board-and-batten or stucco, the glass was intricately and extensively patterned, and the interiors were restrained and formal. Her use of wood sheathing and, above all, exposed wood structure, convey an atmosphere shared with the traditional wood houses of Japan. As noted by architectural historian David Gebhard, Riggs's designs around this time shared qualities of several of America's modernists of the late forties, while also anticipating the fascination with "pure" geometric forms which expanded in the American architecture of the 1950s.

In 1951, she again ventured out to work on her own, designing some of her most famous residential and commercial buildings. The Vedanta Temple (1956) in Santa Barbara is one such structure, noted in particular for its reflection of early South Indian wooden temple architecture. She also built the house at 1400 Dover Lane, a structure of merit, around this time.

Riggs was active in her local AIA chapter, serving on the California Architects' Board as both a member and a Commissioner. In 1960, she was named a Fellow of the AIA for "excellence in design and service to the profession." In 1967, the *Los Angeles Times* named her "Woman of the Year," marking the first time an architect was chosen for this honor. Riggs continued to practice through 1980, and she died in Montecito, California in 1984. The Architectural Foundation of Santa

Barbara funded a yearly scholarship in Riggs's name to be given to architectural students, with special consideration for women. Riggs's architectural legacy is still growing. In 2013, Santa Barbara citizens created the Lulah Maria Riggs Society to celebrate the courage and creative brilliance of the architect for whom the Society is named. Her remarkable work should command an important position in the history of American architecture, and yet until 2013 it had gone largely unrecognized. With the expertise of Lulah archivist and historian Melinda Gandara, the Society has engaged hundreds of community members to share stories, memories, and places that went into an exciting documentary film, *Lulah, A Passion for Architecture: A Life in Design* (2014).

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Work Cited

Cole, Alexandra C. "Historic Structures/Sites Report For 125 Rametto Road, Santa Barbara, California," Preservation Planning Associates. 3 July 2007.

Sanborn Map Company. Montecito, Santa Barbara County, CA, 1918. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1918. "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps".

Sanborn Map Company. Montecito, Santa Barbara County, CA, 1942. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1942. "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps".