

WALLACE NEFF

In *Wallace Neff* the authors focus on one of the most admired and influential residential architects to ever practice in Southern California. In a remarkable career that spanned over six decades, Wallace Neff produced hundreds of exceptional designs that ranged from vernacular styles to grand mansions, reaching from Bel-Air to Santa Barbara to Hollywood and Hancock Park, with a proliferation of homes in the Pasadena area. Neff's European training and keen eye for historical styles gave him the ability to combine Spanish, Tuscan, Mediterranean, Islamic, and other design elements that melded seamlessly into something he called "The California Style."

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APPLETON
PARSONS • SCHRADER



MASTER ARCHITECTS — OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA 1920-1940

WALLACE NEFF



MARC APPLETON • BRET PARSONS • ELEANOR SCHRADER



Wallace Neff

WALLACE NEFF, FAIA (1895–1982)

DEFINING THE CALIFORNIA STYLE

In April 2019, the *Los Angeles Times* spread the news that the Beverly Hills estate designed by Wallace Neff and once owned by actors Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt was on the market for \$56 million, citing a “marquee of former star owners.” A deft mix of French Normandy and English Tudor Revival elements, the 12,000-square-foot residence was originally built in the 1930s for Fredric March, one of the biggest movie stars of the day. Subsequent owners were Shirley Burden—who was a descendant of Cornelius Vanderbilt—and Wallis Annenberg, the philanthropist and *TV Guide* heiress. Pitt and Aniston purchased the house for approximately \$13.5 million, and they lived there from 2001 to 2006.

Not long thereafter, Neff’s last great project, the Singleton Estate built in Holmby Hills in 1970, hit the market for \$77 million.

What is behind the magic of the Wallace Neff name? As the *Los Angeles Times* noted in 2004:

The Neff pedigree, along with a visual grandeur that it is unobtainable with modern construction techniques, has caused prices on his properties to skyrocket, as house-proud Hollywood stars including Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, Madonna, Barbra Streisand, and Diane Keaton spend millions buying Neffs.

But there’s more to his long-lasting appeal than his association with celebrities. Indeed, after decades of relative obscurity, Wallace Neff’s architecture has found a new generation of devotees among Los Angeles’s architecturally literate community. The residences he designed have held sway over the landscape of Southern California for the better part of a century. Although he adapted a range of European vernacular styles, Neff, along with George Washington Smith in Santa Barbara, were arguably the two California architects who best employed the Spanish Colonial Revival style in the early twentieth century. It is interesting in evaluating each of their life’s work, that Smith’s brief eleven-year career—which began late in his life in 1919 and ended with his death in 1930—was barely a fifth of Neff’s, which began in 1919, as well, but lasted into the 1970s.

While Smith’s clients came predominantly from the local aristocratic social and financial circles of Santa Barbara, many of Neff’s clients were Hollywood celebrities. Both were private personalities, but Neff—by nature a more self-conscious and ambitious practitioner—carefully cultivated his clientele. Notably, in the early issues of *The Architectural Digest*, Neff had more of his work published than any other architect, except Paul Williams, who also catered to Hollywood society.

Younger by at least a decade than many of Southern California’s leading architects in the 1920s and 1930s, Neff held the distinction of being a native of Southern California. His success was built on a career primarily focused on residential architecture (the Ojai Valley Country Club, a ninety-minute drive northeast of Los Angeles, which later evolved into the Ojai Valley Inn had a home-like feel). Neff’s career was in stark contrast to those of residential architects who pursued many commercial projects, including Gordon B. Kaufmann (who designed Santa Anita Park, Scripps College, two buildings at California Institute of Technology, and Hoover Dam), Roland B. Coate (whose work included a host of commercial projects and churches), and Williams (noted

RESIDENCES





House of Frances Marion Thompson, Beverly Hills—Wallace Neff, Architect

Photo, Padilla Co.

Completely furnished by: *The Cheeswright Studios, Inc.*

Plants: *Paul J. Howard's Horticultural Establishment*

Interior Plastering: *L. F. Robinson Co.*
 Painting and Decorating: *Bliss Paint & Paper Co.*
 Roofing Contractors: *French & Meloeny*
 Tile Contractors: *Western Tile & Marble, Inc.*

Disappearing Roller Screens: *B. A. Northrup Co., Inc.*
 Dumb Waiter: *C. A. Naismith*
 Exterior, GUNITE Veneer: *L. A. Cement Gun Co.*
 Exterior Wrought Iron Lighting Fixtures on House and Grounds:
The Meyberg Company
 Finished Hardware: *West & Co.*
 Heating System: *Ohrmund Brothers—Pasadena Gas Appliance Co., Inc.*
 Hygea Medicine Cabinets: *B. A. Northrup Co., Inc.*
 "In-vis-o" Roller Screens: *Disappearing Roller Screen Co.*
 Ironcraft Work: *Julius Deitzmann*
 Lighting Fixtures: *B. B. Bell & Company*
 Lime: *Nevada Lime & Rock Corporation*
 Mexican Tile: *Spanish Polychrome Mosaic Co.*
 Plumbing Fixtures: *Crane Co.*
 Quarry Tile: *Gladding, McBean & Co.*
 Roof Tile: *Gladding, McBean & Co.*
 Rugs: *John S. Keshishyan*
 Ruud Water Heater: *Otto Neisser, Distributor*
 Servel Electric Refrigeration: *Servel Corporation*
 Special Doors, Dining Room Furniture: *Geo. S. Hunt*

MARION-THOMSON HOUSE
 BEVERLY HILLS
 1925

The estate belonging to Frances Marion, a two-time Academy Award-winning screenwriter and her husband, Fred Thomson, a silent movie cowboy star (with degrees from Occidental College and Princeton Theological Seminary), was certainly worthy of their standing in the entertainment industry. Requiring space for Thomson's dozen horses, the couple purchased four acres in the Beverly Terrace tract above Benedict Canyon for \$1,600. They subsequently purchased twenty more acres at the skyrocketing price of \$4,500 per acre and then more land, enlarging their holdings to 120 acres.

In her book, *Off With Their Heads, A Serio-Comic Tale of Hollywood*, Marion recalled that they first hired an architect who was leaving for a year in Mexico. "At parting," Marion wrote, "I assured him our plans would remain unchanged, he grinned and recommended Wallace Neff, whose Spanish houses were attracting a great deal of attention in Pasadena."

Neff initially designed guest and servants quarters as well as a gatehouse. The couple was so pleased that they asked him to design the main house, which Neff executed in Spanish Colonial Revival style with exterior Islamic minarets topped with finials. In the motor court entrance, the architect employed a massive rounded archway that would become one of his trademarks. As noted in *Wallace Neff: The Romance of Regional Architecture*, a 1989 Huntington Library catalogue, the Thomsons devised a coat of arms over the entrance that consisted of a "roll of film rampant over a horse's head" and emblazoned with a horseshoe "for the good luck needed in Hollywood." The couple christened their home Enchanted Hill.

The interior was just as dazzling as the exterior, thanks to the work of the Pasadena

BUILT: 1925
DEMOLISHED: 2000
FORMER OWNERS INCLUDE:
 Frances Marion and Fred Thomson
 William Lejene Barnes
 Paul Kollsman and Eva Kollsman
 Paul Allen

The Architectural Digest original publication: 1927, Vol. VI, No. 3

