

The Mary Otis Stevens Collection
A New Gift to the MIT Museum

The MIT Museum has recently received the archives of Mary Otis Stevens (SBArch, 56), one of the most important female architects in the Northeast during the 1960s and 1970s.

Initially a protégé of Walter Gropius, Stevens partnered with her husband Thomas McNulty (MArch 49) from 1956 to 1969. One of their most important projects was the 1965 Lincoln House, designed for themselves and their three small sons, in Lincoln MA.

Perhaps the first house in the US to be built of glass and exposed concrete, it was an instant sensation in the international architectural press on the cover of *Architectural Forum* and *Deutsche Bauzeitung* and widely featured in the large-circulation press, as well. But it rocked the little town of Lincoln the same way the Gropius House had in the late 1930s. (Neighbors speculated since there were no windows facing the street, the occupants must have been nudists.)

For Lincoln House, Stevens and McNulty enlisted movement and hesitation as their basic design concepts. The originality of the house stemmed from the architects' rejection of preset notions of what a house was, freeing them to transfer their own ideas about movement and hesitation on the scale of the city to the scale of the house.

To maximize freedom and movement in the house, for instance, the architects eliminated most interior doors, fostering movement not only between the different areas of the interior, but also between the inside and the outside. "We wanted to make the house into a kind of miniature city", says Stevens. "It was very urban. The idea was to bring people together, not isolate them in boxes on different floors. You had choices all the time."

Apart from the unique space created by using urban concepts of movement in the setting of a single-family house, the Lincoln House was also one of the first with a curvilinear geometry, giving the building a sculptural quality. (Life called it a sculpture for living in.) The Lincoln House also served as a sundial: sited so that its longitudinal axis was exactly N-S, each cloudless day at noon a streak of light would shoot down the stairs and extend its length, as the afternoon wore on, along the pathway leading to the children's area.

In the 1960s, Stevens and McNulty founded iPress, Inc., which Stevens directed from 1968-1978, making a major contribution to architectural and urban theory with books focusing on the social context of architecture, such as *The Ideal Communist City* by Alexei Gutnov and *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment* by Alexander Tzonis.

In 1970, she and McNulty published their own classic work, *World of Variation*, looking at the city as a social realm, identifying then-current problems and possible design solutions. They also collaborated with Gyorgy Kepes, founder of MIT's Center for Advanced Studies, on the design of the *City at Night* exhibit at the 1968 Triennale, where they used moving lines of light, each line programmed with a different time sequence, to turn a 100-foot corridor into a place celebrating human movement.

In 1975, Stevens founded the Design Guild, a collaborative architectural practice focused on non-profit clients, historic preservation and adaptive re-use; the Guild disbanded in 1991.

Last fall, the new museum collection was inventoried and catalogued by Katharina Maria Tanzberger, a 2006 graduate of the University of Applied Arts Vienna, who was introduced to Stevens' work by her professor, Liane Lefaivre. Intrigued by the notion of a house with no doors (Tanzberger was raised in just such a place) she was drawn to exploring Stevens' work further, writing a research paper and eventually coming to MIT to work on the archive.

The collection consists of more than 300 drawings and diagrams, as well as many texts. Of particular interest is the large collection of the sketches over the years, sketches that differ from the architectural drawings of the prewar period in that they were not renderings of facades or elevations but rather diagrams charting the flow of movement.

The Stevens collection is a companion to the McNulty papers held by the MIT Archives. McNulty was a member of MIT's architecture faculty from 1949 to 1956, when he went into private practice with Stevens. For six years he also taught at the University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, as professor of architecture.

This article is based in part on "Living Outside the Box: Marty Otis Stevens and Thomas McNulty's Lincoln House" by Professor Liane Lefaivre, Chair of Architectural History and Theory at the University of Applied Art in Vienna. It appeared in Harvard Design Magazine, Number 24, Spring/Summer 2006.