

# Constructing Visibility: Esther Born's Photography beyond the Archives



## Konstruiranje vidljivosti: fotografija Esther Born izvan arhiva

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### SAŽETAK

Esther Baum Born bila je američka fotografkinja koja je radila u Sjedinjenim Državama i Meksiku. Počevši od 1920-ih, redovito je izlagala svoje radove u njujorškim galerijama i objavljivala fotografije u širokom spektru arhitektonskih časopisa. Njezina knjiga *The New Architecture in Mexico* [Nova arhitektura u Meksiku] (1937.) stoji kao neosporan spomenik njezinim kreativnim uvidima i predstavlja vrijedan izvor naj-suvremenijih ideja o modernoj gradnji. Ono što je znanstvenoj zajednici manje poznato jesu tankočutni portreti koje je Born snimala u vlastitom umjetničkom miljeu: pred njezinim fotoaparatom pojavljivali su se Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera i Frank Lloyd Wright, da spomenemo samo neke. Autor smatra da te fotografije predstavljaju građu za buduća istraživanja. U svakom slučaju, kreativni procvat Esther Born uvelike je zasjenjen nakon što se pridružila vrlo uspješnoj arhitektonskoj praksi svoga supruga Ernesta Borna. Kako bi podržala njegov rad, 1940-tih se potpuno odrekla fotografije.

Nasljeđe oboje Bornovih još je uvijek prilično dobro poznato studentima arhitekture područja Bay Area, koji se mogu diviti njihovom doprinosu javnom prijevozu (projektiranje željezničkih postaja), urbanoj obnovi (razvoj glavnih planskih dokumenata) i dizajnu knjiga (kao što je *Plan of St. Gall* [Plan St. Gallena], nastao u koautorstvu s povjesničarem umjetnosti Walterom Hornom). Velik dio zajedničke karijere braćnog para Born dokumentiran je u zasnovanim arhivima diljem Sjedinjenih Država i Kanade, iako treba reći da se najveće zasluge za taj rad obično pripisuju Ernestu Bornu. Rani radovi Esther Born iz područja fotografije također se nalaze u tim arhivima, ali na punu procjenu njezine ostavštine kao fotografkinje tek se čeka. Ovaj rad predstavlja pokušaj povećanja vidljivosti njezinih ambicija kao i dugotrajnih posljedica pozicioniranja njezinoga rada u mnogim arhivima u kojima se danas nalazi.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI  
ostavštine vizualnih umjetnika, arhivi umjetničkih kolekcija, biografija prije i poslije akvizicije, fotografski predmeti, muzejska fotografija, fotografije izvan kolekcija

### ABSTRACT

Esther Baum Born was an American photographer who worked in both the United States and Mexico. Beginning in the 1920s, she exhibited her work regularly in New York galleries and saw her photographs published in a broad spectrum of architectural journals. Born's book, *The New Architecture in Mexico* (1937), stands as an undisputed monument to her creative insights and a respected source for cutting-edge ideas about modern building. Less well known to the scholarly community are the sensitive portraits that Born took of her own artistic milieu: Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Frank Lloyd Wright, to name only a few, appeared before her camera. The author argues that these images represent an area for future research. In any event, Born's creative flourishing was largely eclipsed once she joined the highly successful architectural practice of her husband, Ernest Born. She gave up photography entirely in the 1940s to support his work.

The legacy of both Borns remains fairly well-known to students of Bay Area architecture, who have admired their contributions to public transportation (designing train stations), urban renewal (developing master planning documents), and book design (such as the *Plan of St. Gall*, co-authored with art historian, Walter Horn). Much of the couple's joint career is documented in established archives throughout the United States and Canada, although it needs to be said that Ernest Born is typically given top billing for the work. Esther Born's early efforts as a photographer sit in these archives, too. A full assessment of her legacy as a photographer waits to be written. This paper attempts to give greater visibility to her ambitions as well as to the lasting consequence of her work's placement within the many archival situations where it can be found today.

KEYWORDS  
visual artists' estates, art collections' archives, pre- and post-acquisition biography, photographic objects, museum photography, non-collection photography

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## BORN FRAMED

This paper considers the photographs and associated concerns of Esther Baum Born (1902–1987), a figure about whose practice I expect most scholars will know little. That condition only slightly concerns me, however. My goal here is not so much to increase appreciation of Born's life work in art historical circles, although it would please me if that were one outcome of this research. Rather, my hope is to provide an instructive example of the ways in which some women photographers, like Born, are embedded tentatively within archival situations, so much so that the spectrum of visibility constructed around them narrows, reducing possibilities for their fuller contextualization, or their more complex recognition as creative beings.

In pursuing this case study, I am reminded of the admonition of the great theorist Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019), who argued that institutional archives only ever achieve what is at best a semblance of permanency — he terms it “a concrete domain” — for what would otherwise steadfastly remain ephemeral representations.<sup>1</sup> That Enwezor relies on Jacques Derrida's formulation of the “principle of domiciliation”<sup>2</sup> as a defining feature of these archival “houses” returns us to the fevered theme of the Zagreb conference at which these ideas were first presented;<sup>3</sup> it also directly links these ideas to the professional pursuits of Esther Born. She is perhaps best known today as a recorder of 20th-century domestic architecture. That her reputation is tethered to a select group of institutional archives within which her photographs serve the purpose of documenting 20th-century architects and their determining contexts will become obvious in the remarks that follow. Along the way, I aim to underscore a few of the places where Born's practice exceeds those archivally-fixed determinations, however, leaving room for somewhat wider evaluations of her ultimate contributions to and impacts upon accounts of modern image-making.

## BIOGRAPHY

Permit me to start with the briefest of biographical sketches.<sup>4</sup> Esther Baum was born in Palo Alto, California and was raised in the Bay Area during the first quarter of the 20th century. (Fig. 1) She enjoyed a comfortable childhood, attending Oakland High School before moving on to study architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, where she was a pupil of John Galen Howard (1864–1931). Howard had a mixed reputation for supporting the women who showed an interest in entering the architectural profession; he was, for example, instrumental in promoting Julia Morgan (1872–1957) in the early stages of her career but never forgave her after the successful architect opted to branch out on her own without him.<sup>5</sup> For her part, Baum graduated from Cal's Architecture School with a degree in Civil Engineering in 1926. While in Howard's atelier, she met a young graduate of the same program who, like her, had recently



Sl. / Fig. 1 Nepoznati fotograf / Unknown photographer, Portrait of Esther Baum Born, oko / c. 1930. Želatinski srebrni otisak / Gelatin silver print. Ljubaznošću / Courtesy of University Galleries, University of San Diego. Poklonili / Gift of Beatrice and Thomas Roberts ↑

BRINGING DOWN THE "ARCHIVE FEVER"

1 Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, 18. Particularly cf. "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument".

2 *Ibid.*, 16–17.

3 I seize this opportunity to express my appreciation to the organizing committee of the conference *Bringing Down the Archive Fever* held in Zagreb in 2021. In particular, I would like to thank Ana Čurić and Lucija Habuš for their many months of encouragement for this endeavor. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Tom Roberts.

4 The fullest account of Esther and Ernest Born's many achievements can be found in Olsberg, *Architects and Artists: The Work of Ernest and Esther Born*. I am deeply indebted to Olsberg for his original research and generous counsel, as I am to Bea Roberts, Born's daughter, who has shared reminiscences of her mother with me over several years. The biographical details provided here are drawn primarily from those two reliable sources, but especially from the chronology in Olsberg's monograph (259–262).

5 On Morgan's difficult relationship with Howard, see McNeill, "Julia Morgan: Gender, Architecture, and Professional Style", 255.

6 For a summary of Born's forays into various printmaking techniques and their intersection with his early married life, see Murphy, *Ernest Born: The Architect's Eye*, esp. 5–12.

7 Rabinovitch (1884–1964) was a fixture within New York's pictorialist photography community and even authored a popular textbook, *How to Learn Photography*. Today, Rabinovitch's photographs are in many New York art museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum.

8 See the entry on Esther Born in the Center for Creative Photography's Online Collection page: <http://ccp-emuseum.catnet.arizona.edu/view/people/asitem/items@:8354> (date of access July 14, 2022).

9 Cf. Olsberg, *Architects and Artists*, 85.

10 For the Getty holdings, see the search tool for the GRI: [https://primo.getty.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?vid=GRI&search\\_scope=COMBINED&tab=all\\_gri&docid=GETTY\\_ALMA21116747000001551&lang=en\\_US&context=L&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&query=sub,exact,%20Uxmal%20Site%20\(Mexico\)%20--%20Antiquities&sortby=rank&mode=simple](https://primo.getty.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?vid=GRI&search_scope=COMBINED&tab=all_gri&docid=GETTY_ALMA21116747000001551&lang=en_US&context=L&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&query=sub,exact,%20Uxmal%20Site%20(Mexico)%20--%20Antiquities&sortby=rank&mode=simple) (date of access July 14, 2022).

11 At the Canadian Centre for Architecture, over 250 photographs by Born are archived, along with correspondence and research materials related to Ernest Born: <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search?query=Esther%20Born> (date of access July 14, 2022).

12 Cf. ref. 8.

13 At her alma mater, Born's work is gathered together with her husband's and, to an extent, subsumed by the massive holdings devoted to the architectural practice that bore his name: <https://archives.ced.berkeley.edu/collections/born-ernest-esther> (date of access July 14, 2022).

14 See Stanford Library's Special Collections database where Born's work is presented as part of the documentation surrounding the nearby Hanna House: [https://searchworks.stanford.edu/catalog?q=%22Born%2C+Esther%2C+1902-1987%22&search\\_field=search\\_author](https://searchworks.stanford.edu/catalog?q=%22Born%2C+Esther%2C+1902-1987%22&search_field=search_author) (date of access July 14, 2022).

15 A group of Born's portraits and snapshots of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo constitute the largest portion of Born's photographs presented in our online catalogue: <https://collections.sandiego.edu/search/Esther%20Born?filter=peopleFilter%3A3140#filters> (date of access July 14, 2022). Additional research materials related to both Borns are still being catalogued.

returned from a year abroad in Europe: Ernest Born (1898–1992). Esther and Ernest married almost immediately upon graduation. Shortly afterwards, they returned to Europe for what amounted to a year-long combination of honeymoon and study trip. The couple traveled extensively together through Italy, France, and Spain, before returning to the US in 1929 and settling in Greenwich Village. Ernest then worked as a draftsman for a series of respected New York architectural firms — he collaborated with Arthur Loomis Harmon (1878–1958) on elements of design for the Empire State Building, for instance — and during this time was engaged with experiments in printmaking — both etching and lithography.<sup>6</sup> Esther continued to pursue architectural studies at Columbia University and took courses with Ben Magid Rabinovitch (1884–1964), who ran the private Studio Gallery Photography School on West 57th street.<sup>7</sup> It is not known whether Esther had picked up a camera for any purpose other than taking snapshots before the early 1930s, but Rabinovitch once described his pupil by noting “whatever it is she is photographing — her approach is always architectural.”<sup>8</sup> She showed regularly in group exhibitions consistently for the next decade, however. Rabinovitch mounted large exhibitions of Born's work which were extensively reviewed by critics in 1933 and 1934, for example, and those published accounts indicate that she exhibited both portrait studies and architectural views on these occasions.<sup>9</sup> By the early 1950s, Esther Born practically gave up professional photography in order to support her husband's flourishing architectural practice and, with him, to raise their family. By that time, the Borns had moved back to the Bay Area for the rest of their remaining years together.

Esther and Ernest Born had one child, who ended up being a critical player in this narrative. Throughout their adult lives, the Borns' career reputations were intertwined with one another and, to some degree, appear inseparable. After the deaths of both her parents, however, the couple's daughter, Beatrice (Bea) Roberts, devoted herself to their archival legacies. Roberts worked to place their works deliberately in what she felt were prestigious situations, that is to say, institutions that would care for these records according to the identifications deemed most representative to her: in the case of Bea's mother, this has meant photographic archives and, in the case of her father, architectural/design archives. These destinations, indeed, represent esteemed venues, including the Getty Research Institute, in which the Born materials include both original photographs by Esther as well as books by and about the professional work of both husband and wife.<sup>10</sup> Similar repositories can be found in databases at the Canadian Centre for Architecture,<sup>11</sup> Center for Creative Photography,<sup>12</sup> UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design,<sup>13</sup> Stanford University's Library,<sup>14</sup> and somewhat anomalously, the University of San Diego,<sup>15</sup> where I teach.

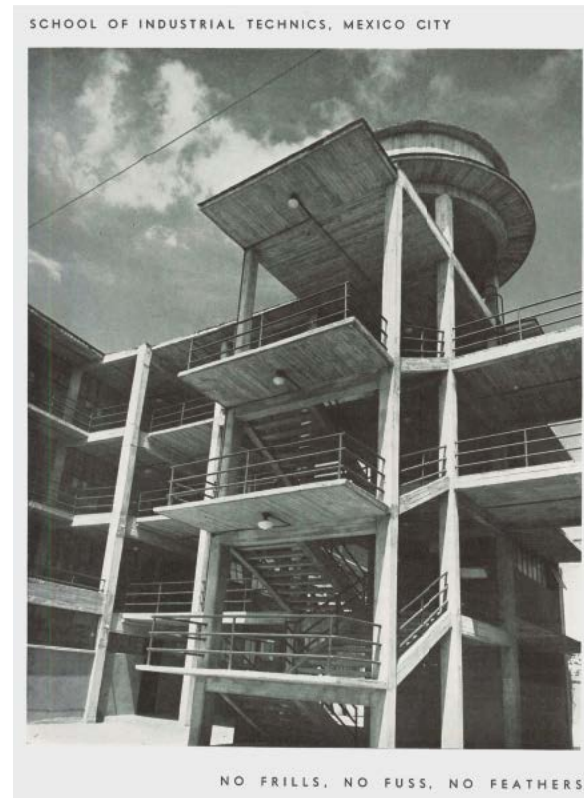
## BORN INTO ARCHITECTURE

I pause to make the point that the career moves undertaken by both architect (Ernest) and photographer (Esther) were shared because, from an early date, the couple passionately reinforced each other's professional pursuits. Ernest Born served as a design editor for both *Architecture Forum* and *The Architectural Record* for nearly two decades, and while occupying these roles, he provided Esther with steady opportunities to publish photographs in these magazines. The most notable of these assignments appeared in the April 1937 issue of the *Record*, which amounted to an entire issue of the 150-page journal devoted primarily to Esther Born's photographs of "The New Architecture in Mexico". (Fig. 2) A year later, that content was reprinted, with editorial additions, as a stand-alone monograph for the global arts community.

*The New Architecture in Mexico* became a legendary showcase for vanguard building in concrete and steel. Esther had been personally guided to these projects by the likes of Luis Barragán (1902–1988), Juan O'Gorman (1905–1982), Diego Rivera (1886–1957) and Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). She met the latter two artists when they were in New York, Rivera working on a commission to create a major public work at Rockefeller Center. During their time in New York City, the Borns took pride in hosting the distinguished Mexican artists. Back home in Coyoacán, the Kahlo-Riveras reciprocated by opening their home and studios — which are featured in Born's monograph as emblematic creative spaces — and also by introducing their American friends to their creative milieu, which included leading architects like Barragán and their current building projects.

Taken together, the issue of the journal and the subsequent book promote a bold image of Mexican visual culture of the 1930s that resonates with some of the captioning — "no frills, no fuss, no feathers". We know from contact sheets produced during the same travel abroad that Esther Born was as interested in traditional Mexican cultural manifestations — bullfights and open-air markets — situations where feathers might indeed have made appearances. Many of the views shot in Mexico are more scenic than architectural, *pace* Rabinovitch, and Born often conveys her keen interest in crowd-filled rings and the attendant pageantry of the national blood sport.

Arguably less familiar to the handful of scholars who already admire Born's images of Mexican architectural innovation are the photographs produced alongside while in the company of Rivera and Kahlo that show their immersion in the agrarian political movements of the time. Rivera's official place within the Mexican Communist Party was already on shaky ground by 1934, when the Borns were his guests. Born's photographs of the artist speaking to crowds show his active efforts to reinsert himself into popular debates. (Fig. 3) Similar photographs by Tina Modotti (1896–1942) were made slightly earlier and, like those better-known



Sl. / Fig. 2 Esther Born, "School of Industrial Technics, Mexico City", u / in *The Architectural Record*, 74 (April 1937), p. 24. Copley Library, University of San Diego.

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Sl. / Fig. 3 Esther Born, *Diego Rivera Speaking to Agrarian Meeting, Mexico*, oko / c. 1934–35. Želatinski srebrni otisak / Gelatin silver print. Ljubaznošću / Courtesy of University Galleries, University of San Diego. Poklonili / Gift of Beatrice and Thomas Roberts.

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Sl. / Fig. 4 Esther Born, *Frida Kahlo*, 1933. Palatinotipija / Platinum print. Ljubaznošću / Courtesy of University Galleries, University of San Diego. Poklonili / Gift of Bea and Tom Roberts.

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16

The story of Rivera's ill-fated mural commission in central Manhattan has been told many times. For recent scholarship on the controversy and its lasting stain on public art history, see Paquette, *At the Crossroads: Diego Rivera and His Patrons at MoMA, Rockefeller Center, and the Palace of Fine Arts*; Quijano and Soto, *Man at the Crossroads: Diego Rivera's Mural at Rockefeller Center*; and Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*.

works, Esther Born's images place the viewer in the middle of demonstrations with Rivera and Kahlo even after their formal expulsion from the Communist Party.

I am interested in these particular photographs and their clear implications of an activist engagement or, at least, sympathy with Rivera and Kahlo that they reflect. Immediately prior to embarking on *The New Architecture in Mexico* essay, Esther Born witnessed a less visible work of Rivera's, which she duly memorialized. An early opportunity to document the Mexican painter came through the January 1934 issue of *The Architectural Forum*. Esther was asked to photograph his murals in process at Rockefeller Center prior to their being whitewashed because their revolutionary content failed to please the patron — Rockefeller himself. As a result, Esther Born's images of Rivera's unfinished fresco, *Man at the Crossroads* and the subsequent mural he created at the New Workers School, *Portrait of America*, stand as exceedingly rare glimpses of the artist's working process at a pivotal moment in the public unraveling of those controversial commissions.<sup>16</sup>

## ARCHIVING THE ARTIST

Taken together, it seems indisputable that the photographs Esther Born produced for architectural journals during the mid-1930s represent her best-known contributions, something well supported through the archival situations in which they can be found today. During the shared time in New York, however, Rivera and Kahlo were more than just a passing assignment. The Borns helped translate and disseminate protest letters in reaction to the Rockefeller Center murals' destruction. The couples' friendship continued back in Mexico City when Kahlo sat for a large number of portrait sessions with Esther Born. (Fig. 4) Rivera posed too, somewhat less memorably, but taken together, these images testify to two archival blind spots: 1) the broad omission/neglect of portrait photography as a significant part of Born's practice and 2) the liminal place of the Borns within a cosmopolitan circle of radical artists — in both the aesthetic and political senses — within mid-century North America.

As further proof of this occluded archival framing, let me briefly gesture toward another instance of Esther Born's photographic engagement, this time as it relates to the well-known work of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959). The assignment to create another photo-essay began shortly after her work in Mexico City came to an end and coincided with the Borns' return to California. At the time, Ernest was working on the Golden Gate International Exposition, again with Rivera, and had started teaching at his alma mater, UC Berkeley. All the while, he remained a consultant/art director for *Architectural Record*. Esther was tasked with the documentation of several domestic architectural projects that Wright was promoting in Northern California at the moment.

BORN'S ARCHIVAL  
DWELLING

Sl. / Fig. 5 Esther Born, *Children Playing in the Hanna House*, 1938. Želatinski srebrni otisak / Gelatin silver print. Zbirka / Collection of Bea and Tom Roberts.

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Cf. p. ex. Hanna and Hanna, *Building Spelling Power* (Chicago: Scott Foresman Publishers, 1956); Hanna and Hanna, *First Steps: A Speller for Beginners* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), or Hanna, Hanna, and Hodges, *Spelling: Structure and Strategies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971).

18  
Cf. Hanna and Hanna, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Hanna House: The Clients' Report*. Esther Born's portrait of Wright appears on page 94 in this text as well.

19  
Horn and Born, and presumably Esther Born as well, worked on the "monumental" project for close to 20 years before it finally saw publication. A series of jointly-authored essays appeared in art historical journals leading up to the University of California's multi-volume magnum opus. Cf. Horn and Born, "The Dimensional Inconsistencies of the Plan of St. Gall and the Problem of Scale", 285–308. They continued to publish on this topic long after the books appeared. Cf. Horn and Born, "The Medieval Monastery as a Setting for the Production of Manuscripts", 16–47.

The Hanna House (also known as the Honeycomb House) was built for a Stanford Professor of Childhood Education, Paul Robert Hanna (1902–1988), and his spouse, Jean Shuman Hanna (1902–1987), who, like Esther, frequently collaborated with her husband on publications and research products.<sup>17</sup> Also like Esther, Jean frequently settled for secondary recognition in these instances. The Hanna House is a fabled, single-story, brick and wood construction, built from polyhedral shapes spread across a hilltop overlooking the Stanford campus. The project had a long gestation; the original meeting between the Hannas and Wright took place in 1931. By 1938, construction was coming to an end, and Esther Born was sent to document the results in a 15-page illustrated essay for readers of the *Record*. Born's images in black and white document the open floor plan, natural surroundings, and long, transparent views that distinguished the home from so much of the suburban housing of this time in the western United States.

Because of Hanna's longstanding research relationship with Stanford, the complete blueprints, documentation of the construction, and correspondence with Wright were archived in his home institution's library. Additionally, because of steps taken by Born's daughter, Bea Roberts, related photographic materials have since been placed — Enwezor would insist "domiciled" — at Stanford. These stand as counterpoints to the official narratives of academic patronage and an inspired, if testy, star-architect that pervade these resources.

I have already indicated the short shrift given to Esther Born's talents as a portraitist as a potential missed opportunity for historians of photography. In addition to her depictions of Mexican artists and architects, Wright was also induced to sit for her on the corner of the Hanna House's fireplace, awash in California sunlight and streaked by dramatic shadows. It is possible to think of this kind of imagery as obligatory, something done in the service of architectural promotion and creative mythmaking. Maybe. I am equally interested in the significance of other, less recognized and, so far, unresearched images that appear on these same rolls of film. For instance, her daughter Beatrice appears playing with the slightly older Hanna children on Wright's honeycomb-patterned floor in several of these prints. (Fig. 5) We might easily imagine that her mother brought her along for the day's photoshoot and thought nothing of including her daughter in exposures that were, after all, intended to celebrate the family-friendly nature of Wright's innovative and open domestic space. It is worth noting that these were among the images that were contemporaneously reproduced in periodicals documenting the construction and that Born's photography ultimately played a role in recording the life of Wright's building from the owner's perspective.<sup>18</sup>

In moving to a conclusion, I want to sketch the final phases of Esther Born's archival domiciliation. Upon returning to the San Francisco Bay Area, it merits repeating, Ernest Born's architectural practice took off. Esther was soon conscripted to help manage his many projects. She was, after all, also a trained architect, one who shared most perspectives on modernism and the built environment with her husband. These projects ultimately included consulting on the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (known as BART), for which Born designed several award-winning stations of brutalist design. He also collaborated with colleagues in UC Berkeley's History of Art Department, Walter Horn (1908–1955) especially, with whom he published multiple treatises on Medieval architecture. Horn and Born's multi-volume *Plan of St. Gall* (1979) stands out as one of the great examples of architectural recreation/speculation and is a landmark in the history of modern academic publishing.<sup>19</sup> Together with Esther, Ernest Born also designed a landmark residence for their family along San Francisco's beachfront boulevard, the Great Highway, which was completed in 1949 and considered today one of the great examples of mid-century modern construction (the spare home recently sold for \$8 million in San Francisco's bubbling real estate market). In all of these just-named creations, Ernest Born is customarily given first credit as the primary author, whereas it is hard to find Esther Born's name mentioned, except occasionally on photo captions in archives otherwise devoted to her husband.

Esther Born's identity in archival spaces has thus been pre-constructed and subsequently reinforced uncritically as an architectural photographer. It has also, less self-consciously, been rendered subordinate to the practice of Ernest Born.

This delimited view is in the process of being corrected both inside and beyond the archives, that domiciled space in which she is nevertheless feverishly kept. Only in recent years, largely because of the publication of Nicholas Olsberg's monograph, *Architects and Artists: The Work of Ernest and Esther Born* (2015), has energy been put toward reconciling Esther's significant contributions with her husband's better-known efforts. While complementary in some ways, the life work of Ernest and Esther Born benefits from separate consideration. Only then will her photographic practice command the more nuanced attention it deserves and become truly, independently visible.

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