

George Hodel, Lloyd Wright, the Black Dahlia Murder, and the J. A. Konrad bill for cement work

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December 5, 2008

In *Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder*, we argue that whoever murdered Elizabeth Short may have damaged and posed her body as an homage to Surrealism, and we present George Hodel as a viable candidate for having committed that crime. We also suggest that artists close to Hodel may have alluded to the murder in artworks made afterward. On the endpapers of the book we present a diagram called “Los Angeles 1935–1950: A Web of Connections.” This diagram and its corresponding appendix support our thesis by situating George Hodel among the elite and closely knit artistic communities of Los Angeles in the years before and after the murder. We expand this idea in an interactive map on our Web site (exquisitecorpsebook.com) that illustrates the geographical proximity between Hodel and the characters we describe in our book.

At the time of the book’s publication (September 2006) we presumed that George Hodel knew the architect Lloyd Wright (son of Frank Lloyd Wright) because Hodel owned one of Lloyd Wright’s signature buildings, the Sowden House, 5121 Franklin Avenue, Los Angeles. We were aware of the Lloyd Wright Papers housed in the Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA, but were unable to view them at that time. On October 21, 2008, Steve Hodel visited that library and discovered documents relevant to the case he made against his father in his book *Black Dahlia Avenger*. These documents are similarly significant to the thesis we present in *Exquisite Corpse*.

This paper will briefly review the following topics:

- *George Hodel, Lloyd Wright, and the Sowden House*
- *Documents that relate to George Hodel in the Lloyd Wright Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA*
- *The cement sack found at the Black Dahlia crime scene*

After reviewing these topics, this paper will make the argument that one of the newly discovered documents strengthens the case that George Hodel murdered Elizabeth Short.

George Hodel, Lloyd Wright, and the Sowden House

Early in the 1920s Frank Lloyd Wright and his son, Lloyd Wright, developed and refined the revolutionary “knit-block” and “slip-form” methods of building with concrete, and both men put the material to innovative structural and ornamental use in dozens of buildings proposed or built in the following years. The younger Wright’s Sowden House (figs. 1, 2) is among his most spectacular concrete buildings.

Designed and built for John Sowden in 1926, the house had three other owners before George Hodel took possession of it in 1945. Hodel lived in the house at the time that the body of Elizabeth Short was discovered, on January 15th, 1947, and sold it at a fraction of its value while under investigation for her murder, in 1950.

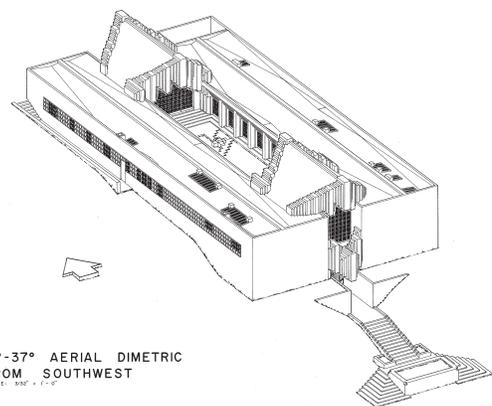
In an essay by Thomas S. Hines titled “The Blessing and the Curse: The Achievement of Lloyd Wright” in the book *Lloyd Wright: The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright Jr.*, by Alan Weintraub, Hines writes: “. . . [Lloyd Wright’s] Deco-Expressionist penchant was best expressed in [six] Los Angeles-area houses of the mid-1920s, which collectively represented the pinnacle of his life’s work. . . .”¹ He observes that “These buildings [including the Sowden House of 1926] epitomized [Wright’s] talent for merging his own brand of Expressionism, akin to contemporary European developments, with his and his father’s interest in Southwest Indian cultures as expressed in modern materials, particularly reinforced concrete.”² Citing David Gebhard’s and Harriette Von Breton’s *Lloyd Wright, Architect: Twentieth Century Architecture in an Organic Exhibition*, Hines notes that “[Wright] wished, according to Gebhard, ‘to establish a link . . . with that which was architecturally indigenous to America. Lloyd quite openly referred to his buildings as objects which sought to convey the spirit of the American Indian [and chose concrete as the material that came closest] in feeling to adobe and stone and the lime cement structures erected by the Maya.’”³

Indeed resembling a Mayan temple, the Sowden House is inwardly oriented and fully encloses a courtyard that originally featured an elaborate fountain. It has seven bedrooms (two of which were



Fig. 1 (left): The Sowden House, entrance, axial view Photograph 3 (of 18 total) in the Historic American Buildings Survey (Survey no. CA-1940), commissioned by the Library of Congress and the National Park Service Photographer: Marvin Rand, 1971

Fig. 2 (right): A dimetric drawing based on Lloyd Wright’s original plans (slightly modified to reflect the built structure) created for the same survey by Jeffrey B. Lentz, 1969.



first considered servant's quarters), four baths, a large living room and dining room, and a study with a hidden closet (likely designed with Prohibition era restrictions in mind). The residence was extensively documented for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), a project jointly commissioned by the Library of Congress and the National Park Service. Eighteen photographs, eight measured drawings, and seven data pages about the home are available at on the Library of Congress Web site. These materials clearly show the extensive and elaborate use of concrete in the building.⁴

Documents that relate to George Hodel in the Lloyd Wright Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA

In the Lloyd Wright Papers there are a number of relatively banal documents related to George Hodel's ownership of Sowden house. Primarily, they concern the building's intermittent but ongoing repair and renovation, which was overseen by Wright. Two of these documents, however, are relevant to the argument presented in *Exquisite Corpse* generally, and in this paper specifically.

The first document of importance is a letter to Lloyd Wright, written by George Hodel from his post at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in Hankow, China on April 20, 1946 (fig. 3). Though formal, this letter indicates that Hodel and Wright knew each other and that enough of a relationship existed between the men for Hodel to make inquiries into Chinese commissions for Wright. In it, Hodel explains that he is planning on staying in China until the Spring of 1947 but, in fact,

UNITED NATIONS
RELIEF AND REHABILITATION ADMINISTRATION
Anlee House,
Sze Wei & Han Chung Roads,
Hankow, China.
20 April, 1946.

Lloyd Wright,
858 Doheny Drive,
Los Angeles 46,
California.

Dear Mr. Wright:

In pursuance of my promise, I have made inquiries as to the possibility of your being brought to China for city planning work. I am informed that a firm request has been made by the Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration for at least two city planning experts, and that the Washington headquarters of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration may soon be recruiting these specialists.

If you are interested, it is suggested that you write to Franklin Ray, Director, Far Eastern Division, UNRRA, Dupont Circle Building, Washington, D.C.

It might also be well to write to Ha Shiung-Wen, Vice-Minister, Ministry of the Interior, Nanking, China. I know Mr. Ha, but did not discuss your interest in China with him because I was not aware, during the occasions on which I spoke with him, that he was in charge of city planning work.

I expect to remain here until the spring of 1947. It would be a pleasure to hear from you, and I am naturally very much interested to know how my house is coming along.

With cordial personal regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

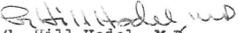

G. Hill Hodel, M.D.,
Chief Regional Medical Officer,
Hankow Regional Office, UNRRA.

Fig. 3: A letter from George Hodel to Lloyd Wright, April 20, 1946. Lloyd Wright Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA

COPY

(J.A.KONRAD to DR. HODEL)
 Date: Jan. 9, 1947

cement work completed at the above address (5121 Franklin Ave.)

1/9/47

| | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Walton, 8 hrs. | @ 2.00..... | 16.00 |
| Walker, 8 hrs. | @ 1.50 | 12.00 |
| Seals, 8 hrs. | @ 1.50 | 12.00 |
| Carlisle, 4 hrs. | @ 1.50 | 6.00 |
| | | |
| Pock & sand, 3 tons @ \$2.00 | | 6.00 |
| cement 8 sks @ 80¢ | | 6.40 |
| pyramid 2 gal. @ 1.50 | | 3.00 |

1/10/47

| | | |
|----------------------|--------|-----------|
| Walton, 8 hrs. | @ 2.00 | 16.00 |
| Seals, 8 hrs. | @ 1.50 | 12.00 |
| | | |
| pyramid waterproof | | |
| 1 1/2 gal. @ \$1.50 | | 2.25 |
| sand 500 lbs @ 2.00 | | .50 |
| cement, 2 sks. @ 80¢ | | 1.60 |
| | | |
| | | \$93.75 |
| 10%..... | | 9.37 |
| | | 103.12 |
| 15%..... | | 15.47 |
| | | \$ 118.59 |

| | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| Bill of 12/31/46 | \$230.52 |
| Bill of 1/21/47 | <u>\$118.59</u> |
| total amount due | \$349.11 |

Fig. 4: A bill from J. A. Konrad to George Hodel for cement work completed at Hodel's home on January 9, and January 10, 1947. Lloyd Wright Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA

he returned earlier, and was back in Los Angeles by late Summer or early Fall of 1946.⁵ Hodel also inquires after the progress on his house and signs it “With cordial personal regards, I am Sincerely yours, G. Hill Hodel, M.D.” The discovery of this letter (along with other Hodel-related documents in the Lloyd Wright Papers) means that Wright and Hodel can now be firmly linked on the “Web of Connections.”

The second document of importance is a bill to George Hodel from J. A. Konrad dated January 9, 1947 (fig. 4) for cement work at the Hodel home that was subcontracted to Konrad by Lloyd Wright and completed on January 10 of that year, five days before murder of Elizabeth Short. The bill notes that a total of ten sacks of cement were used on the job. A detailed argument for the importance of this document is presented in the Argument and Conclusion section of this paper.

The cement sack found at the Black Dahlia crime scene

The discovery of a cement sack at the Black Dahlia crime scene is related in most versions of the Black Dahlia story.⁶ It is included, for example, in John Gilmore's *Severed: The True Story of the Black Dahlia* (1994), Mary Pacios's *Childhood Shadows: The Hidden Story of the Black Dahlia Murder* (1999), Steve Hodel's *Black Dahlia Avenger* (2003), and Donald Wolfe's *The Black Dahlia Files: The Mob, the Mogul, and the Murder That Transfixed Los Angeles* (2005). Though the passages in these books show a tendency toward literary embellishment, and generally do not cite specific source material, it is clear that this piece of evidence — an

empty cement sack with blood on it — was found at the crime scene next to the body of Elizabeth Short. It is also clear that officers believed the murder had occurred elsewhere, that the body had been moved from the murder site to the site of its discovery in an automotive vehicle, and that the cement sack found at the scene was used (in some manner) to transport the body to and from that vehicle. During the formal inquest held on the body of Elizabeth Short at the Hall of Justice, Los Angeles, California, January 22, 1947, Detective Lieutenant Jesse W. Haskins, L.A.P.D., interviewed under oath, testified as follows:

Q: *Did you find any blood or tracks or anything of that nature at the scene?*

A: *We did. Down this driveway which leads from where [sic] the body was found to the street there was a tire track right up against the curbing and there was what appeared to be a possible bloody heel mark in this tire mark; and on the curbing which is very low there was one spot of blood; and there was an empty paper cement sack lying in the driveway and it also had a spot of blood on it.*

Q: *Any other container or sack or cloth that the body might have been transported in?*

A: *There was not.*

Q: *From your examination of the body would you be able to form any opinion as to whether the crime had been committed at this scene or brought there from some other location?*

A: *It had been brought there from some other location.⁷*

The object commonly understood to be the cement sack is visible in many photographs of the site at Norton Avenue where the body of Elizabeth Short was discovered, though it should be noted that the object changes position in relation to the body in different photographs, suggesting that it was moved while investigators and reporters were standing near the body.⁸

Argument and Conclusion

Cement is a common building material; the sack in which it is delivered is ordinary and ubiquitous. In the 1940s, as today, any adult could access sack of cement under a variety of perfectly normal and premeditated circumstances: *“There are cracks in my front walk. I’ll buy some cement mix so I can repair it.”* However, a murderer’s ease of access to a cement sack immediately after he or she has committed murder is more likely determined by previous circumstance than by premeditation on his or her part. It is difficult, for example, to imagine someone thinking: *“Later I’m going to kill someone, cut their body in half, and move their body parts to a different location. I’d better go and get an empty cement sack to carry their body parts on.”* In simple terms, a murderer is more likely to use an empty cement sack to move body parts if it is readily available and already empty at the time of the murder.

The following points lay out an argument for the importance of J. A. Konrad’s bill to George Hodel when considering the guilt or innocence of George Hodel in the murder of Elizabeth Short:

1. It is a fact that the bisected body of Elizabeth Short was discovered in a vacant lot on the west side of Norton Avenue between Coliseum and 39th Streets in Los Angeles on January 15, 1947.
2. It is a fact that George Hodel, a physician and surgeon, was a prime suspect in the murder of Elizabeth Short.⁹
3. It is accepted as fact, and stands plainly to reason, that Elizabeth Short was killed at a different location from where her body parts were discovered.
4. It is a fact that a cement sack with a blood on it was found next to Elizabeth Short's body parts.
5. It is a fact that officers investigating the murder deduced that Elizabeth Short's body parts had been transported from the murder site to the discovery site in an automotive vehicle, and to and from that vehicle on the cement sack found next to the body parts.
6. It stands to reason that the officers were correct in deducing that Elizabeth Short's body parts were moved from the murder site to the site of their discovery in an automotive vehicle.
7. It stands to reason that the investigating officers were correct in deducing that the cement sack found at the scene was used (in some manner) to move the body parts to and from the vehicle.
8. It is a fact that investigating officers at the scene believed that the body parts had been "washed off" prior to having been placed at the scene.¹⁰
9. It stands to reason that a person placing body parts in an automotive vehicle would use some device (such as a cement sack) to prevent soiling of the vehicle by residual fluids from the body parts.
10. It stands to reason that a person moving body parts would use some device (such as a cement sack) to prevent soiling of their person by residual fluids from the body parts.
11. It is a fact that after the body parts of Elizabeth Short were discovered her weight was listed on varying documents as 115 and 118 pounds.
12. It stands to reason that the individual halves of Elizabeth Short's body (each weighing approximately 60lbs.) would have been moveable by an adult of average strength over the short distance from the automotive vehicle to the grass.¹¹
13. It is a fact that in order to move body parts on (or wrapped in) an empty cement sack, a person (or persons) moving the body parts would need access to such a sack.
14. It stands to reason that a person would have easier access to an empty cement sack if he (or she) first had easy access to a site in which cement work is underway or had recently been completed.

15. It stands to reason that cement sacks are discarded after they are empty. Therefore, it also stands to reason that the more time passes after a cement sack has been emptied, the less likely it becomes that the sack will be used for another purpose (such as carrying body parts).
16. It is a fact that, at the time of the murder, George Hodel owned and lived in the Lloyd Wright-designed Sowden House, at 5121 Franklin Avenue, in Los Angeles — a building renowned for its structural and ornamental use of concrete.
17. It is a fact that the architect Lloyd Wright subcontracted cement work on George Hodel's home renovation to J. A. Konrad.
18. It is a fact that J. A. Konrad's employees (names: Walton, Walker, Seals, and Carlisle) completed cement work begun in late 1946 on January 9th and January 10th, 1947 during two full-day shifts, five days before Elizabeth Short's body was discovered.
19. It is a fact that J. A. Konrad's employees used a total of ten (10) cement sacks and charged George Hodel eighty cents each for the cement in those sacks.
20. It is a fact that no other suspect in the murder of Elizabeth Short besides George Hodel has been directly linked to a site in which cement work was recently completed or then underway.

Understanding all of the above statements to be either factual or standing to reason, the following concluding statement can be made:

A document showing that ten sacks of cement were used for cement work that was completed at the home of George Hodel, on January 10th, 1947, five days before the bisected body of Elizabeth Short was discovered next to a bloodstained cement sack, on January 15, 1947, increases the probability that Hodel — a prime suspect in the murder — killed Elizabeth Short.

NOTES

1. See Thomas S. Hines, "The Blessing and the Curse," in Alan Weintraub, *Lloyd Wright: The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright Jr.*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), p. 21.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, pp. 21–22.

4. For an overview of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) see the National Park Service Web site <http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/habs/index.htm>. To access Sowden House materials directly, see the Library of Congress Web site at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/hhh.ca0267>.

5. There are differing anecdotal suggestions that Hodel became ill (possibly from Malaria or Hepatitis) while working in China in 1946, perhaps prompting his early return. No documentation is currently known to exist regarding his discharge from UNRRA, so it is unclear whether any illness actually occurred or what kind of illness it might have been. It is also not known how much such an illness would have affected his immediate and long-term health — though he did live vigorously to the age of 92 — or whether or not it would have affected his ability to murder Elizabeth Short. While Hodel's health at the time is worthy of further consideration when attempting to establish

whether or not he is guilty, his whereabouts at the time are consistent with the possibility of his guilt. It is clear that Hodel was in Los Angeles and living alone in the Sowden House at the time of the murder. See the “Statement of Dorothy Harvey Hodel taken at 410 Santa Monica Pier, Santa Monica by Lt. Frank B. Jemison at 12:15 P.M. on March 22, 1950,” in the Los Angeles District Attorney’s files on the Black Dahlia Murder.

6. The “cement sack” should not be confused with the handled “ice bag” found six days later “at Ninth Ave. and the Pacific Electric right of way.” For references to the ice bag see, for example, “Police Quiz Chum of Black Dahlia,” in the *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1947, and “Dahlia Clues Fail; Inquest Conducted,” in the *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1947. A photograph of the ice bag accompanies the article of January 22.

7. For images of relevant passages of the transcript of Detective Lieutenant Jesse W. Haskins’s sworn testimony at the coroner’s inquest see Donald Wolfe, *The Black Dahlia Files: The Mob, The Mogul, and the Murder That Transfixed Los Angeles* (New York: ReganBooks/HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 329–30. Wolfe has been rightly criticized by Black Dahlia theorist Larry Harnisch for having manipulated some of the “official” documents pictured in his book. The two pages we reference here appear unaltered.

8. Compare, for example, the orientation of the cement sack in relation to the body of Elizabeth Short in the photograph on page 2 of the first coated paper insert in Wolfe’s *The Black Dahlia Files*, with the orientation of the same sack to the same body in the photographs on pages 14 and 127, respectively, of our own *Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder* (New York: Bulfinch, 2006). Note, also, that the photographs on page 14 of *Exquisite Corpse* illustrate the spacial relationships among the driveway, the body, and the cement sack. Regardless of whether or not the sack had been moved a few feet away from its original location by the time these photographs were taken, the pictures clearly show why officers at the scene would have deduced that the body had been carried from an automotive vehicle to the grass on (or wrapped in) that sack.

9. At the time of Elizabeth Short’s murder, George Hodel maintained three practices simultaneously: his private practice was in the Roosevelt Building, 727 W. 7th St. Suite 1242, Los Angeles, CA 90012. He also took appointments at the First Street Medical Clinic, 369 East 1st St. Los Angeles, CA 90012, and at the Los Angeles County Health Department, 808 North Spring Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012. Because George Hodel had become a specialist in venereal disease, a frequent but misinformed criticism of *Black Dahlia Avenger* is that Hodel would have had no interest or training in surgery. For detailed documentation of George Hodel’s surgical training see the paper *George Hodel, Surgical Experience and Practice*, published on our Web site (exquisitecorpsebook.com) in March, 2007. Note, also, that while the summary of the coroner’s report describes a “clean” bisection, the level of surgical skill with which the bisecting cuts were made is still very open to debate.

10. Though it has often been written that Elizabeth Short’s body was “drained” of blood, it is important to note that this is only true using a loose, colloquial definition of the word. The undated “Summary of the Elizabeth (Beth) Short Murder Investigation” in the Los Angeles District Attorney’s files on the Black Dahlia Murder describes her body parts as having been “washed.” It is obvious that bisecting a body will cause that body to passively “drain” a great quantity of blood and other bodily fluids. Given the specifics of how Elizabeth Short’s body parts were found, it is reasonable to presume that her murderer “washed” them, in part, to facilitate the moving of her body. However, there is no evidence that Elizabeth Short’s killer attempted to *technically* or *methodically* “drain” all fluids from her body. Autopsy photographs clearly show that body was still passively draining fluid on the dissecting table in the coroner’s office a day later, and the summary of the coroner’s report shows that Elizabeth Short’s organs still contained various bodily fluids. If the sack is still extant, this distinction might be relevant in considering the manner or duration in which the cement sack was in contact with her body.

11. The specifics of how a cement sack was used to move the body parts of Elizabeth Short are debatable and easily prone to conjecture. It is usually written that her remains were carried *on*, not *in*, the cement sack. In certain versions of the Black Dahlia story, for example, investigating officers are described as having believed that only the *lower* half of Elizabeth Short’s body was carried on the sack. It has also been suggested that the officers believed the sack was carried as a hospital stretcher would be — by two people. However, little can be stated definitively regarding the methodology or physics involved in this transaction. While a cement sack can be designed to support 60 pounds of weight in particulate form (evenly distributed inside) it is not necessarily true that the same sack could support body parts of the same total weight distributed unevenly on top of it. In crime scene photographs the cement sack looks to have been quite large, but no record of its actual size is known to exist so no real measure can be confirmed regarding its load-bearing capacity. Crime scene photographs do clearly show the minimal distance over which the body parts would have traveled on the sack but because the actual orientation of the vehicle is not known this distance can not be stated definitively. (We approximate this distance as being between 3 and 15 feet, depending on whether the vehicle had pulled into the driveway or was parked on the street.) Even if it could be stated definitively that the sack was *unable* to support 60 lbs. of weight, the load-bearing capacity of the sack is likely irrelevant since 60 lbs. of weight can be moved without tremendous difficulty by an adult of average strength.