Finding Aid for the Michael Alexander Gallis papers, 1909-1990

Michael Dominik Hagel
Descriptive Summary
Title: Michael Alexander Gallis papers
Date (inclusive): 1908-1990
Number: 2017.M.49
Creator/Collector: Gallis, Michael Alexander, 1909-2001
Physical Description: 5.25 Linear Feet (11 Boxes)
Repository: The Getty Research Institute
Special Collections
1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 1100
Los Angeles 90049-1688
reference@getty.edu
URL: http://hdl.handle.net/10020/askref
(310) 440-7390

Abstract: The collection comprises personal correspondence, drawings, photographs, draft material for a monograph on Erich Mendelsohn, professional materials and ephemera documenting Gallis's personal and professional life, with particular attention to his years in training at the School of Architecture at the University of Oregon, Eugene, as well as his independent architectural practice after 1953. The collection excludes materials produced while Gallis worked with Erich Mendelsohn.

Request Materials: Request access to the physical materials described in this inventory through the catalog record for this collection. Click here for the access policy.

Language: Collection material is in English with some Russian, Swedish, and French

Biographical Note
Michael Gallis was born Misha Alexander Haimovitch in 1909 to a merchant family in Russian Siberia (present-day Shenyang, China), where the family had established a trading company specializing in machinery and timber. His father was a Jewish merchant from the Minsk area of Russia (now Belarus), and his mother was of Greek origin.

Opposed to the Communist government in Russia, Gallis emigrated with his family to the United States in 1925 where he soon took up work as a set designer in Hollywood, designing sets for film and, later, mansions for members of the industry. Soon after his move to the United States, Misha assumed the Americanized first name Michael, later explaining that both his Russian and Jewish names were the source of prejudice during the 1920s. By 1932 he had also dropped the Haimovitch name and had begun using his middle name as a surname. Michael ultimately assumed his mother's maiden name, Gallis, when he married Britta Christina Anderson in 1934.

In 1929, Michael enrolled as an architecture major at the University of Oregon, Eugene. Under the direction of Dean W. R. B. Wilcox, the school was one of the first in the United States to discard the Beaux-Arts model and embrace modernism in its curriculum. Frank Lloyd Wright gave a number of lectures at the school, as did some of the leading local modernist architects from Portland. During the Depression years, Gallis was forced to interrupt his schooling for stints of employment until 1940 when he completed his degree.

Following graduation Gallis moved to San Francisco, where his first job was with a local architect specializing in Gothic-style churches. A modernist by training, Gallis struggled, for instance, when tasked with producing Beaux-Arts-style renderings for a new church. His next job was better suited to his skills: Gallis found employment at an architectural engineering firm specializing in the design of US military installations around the world. This job was key to his later career, as it was here that he learned how to produce construction documents and to coordinate with the various engineering fields (civil, structural, mechanical, and electrical). Following the end of the war, Gallis, seeking more creative design work, took a job with the noted San Francisco architect John Dinwiddie.

John Dinwiddie introduced Michael Gallis to Erich Mendelsohn in the late 1940s, after Dinwiddie, with Albert Henry Hill, proposed the formation of an architectural partnership on the West Coast. The plans never materialized. Mendelsohn, who had fled Germany in 1933 and had stayed briefly in Holland, London, Palestine, and New York, later asked Gallis to join him in starting a new firm in San Francisco.

At Eric Mendelsohn Architects (the German architect similarly Americanized his first name in his professional capacity), Michael Gallis was intimately involved in every project that the firm completed in the US between 1948 and 1953. Gallis was vital to the practice: his responsibility was to translate Mendelsohn’s visionary sketches into realizable buildings. Mendelsohn often complained about the need to produce construction documents – in Germany, he explained, it was the
architect’s responsibility to produce detailed plans, sections and elevations and it was the contractor’s to produce the necessary construction documents from these drawings. Gallis’s expertise in construction drawings and in managing engineers made him a valuable partner to Mendelsohn, and in 1950 he was promoted to Associate.

The firm’s last two commissions were for commercial and scientific research laboratories. Varian Associates, a technology start-up firm, asked Mendelsohn to design their headquarters at the Stanford Research Park, while the Atomic Energy Commission sought a design for their new research lab on the hill above the University of California campus at Berkeley. Both buildings were in the production phase when Mendelsohn died in 1953, leaving Gallis with the task of completing the contracted work.

The completion of the Atomic Energy Commission and Varian Associates projects shaped Michael Gallis’s practice from 1953 until he closed his office in 1973. In addition to these projects, Gallis did work for NASA at the Ames Research Center and completed two residential commissions, the North House on Tiburon Island with a panoramic view of the San Francisco Bay and his own home in the Forest Hill neighborhood of San Francisco.


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Preferred Citation
http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa2017m49

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Processing Information
The archive was processed by Michael Dominik Hagel under the supervision of Kit Messick in 2018. The collection received mold remediation treatment during processing; particularly dirty items were segregated in boxes 7 and 8.

Scope and Content of Collection
The collection comprises manuscripts, drawings, correspondence, photographs, and ephemera documenting Michael Alexander Gallis’s personal and professional life mainly from 1925 to 1973, totaling approximately 2,400 items.

The family papers, which comprise the bulk of the archive, include letters, postcards, photographs and ephemera chiefly detailing Gallis’s time at the University of Oregon, as well as his relationship to Britta C. Anderson (starting in 1928) whom he married in 1934. Anderson collected not only Gallis’s letters, which constitute the majority of the correspondence, but also those of her family in Sweden, a French pen pal and several suitors, one of whom was a teacher at an agricultural school in Iraq, sharing insight into Baghdadi everyday life in the late 1920s.

Photographs include not only family portraits, but also travel snapshots of the American West, Mexico, China, and Iraq. Miscellaneous documents include receipts and financial records (mostly from a flower business Anderson ran in 1936), immigration and travel records for both Anderson and Gallis, newspaper clippings, business cards, greetings cards, and picture postcards.

The professional papers contain an album of freehand perspective sketches and drawings from the period of Gallis’s training at the University of Oregon; and a small quantity of material related to Gallis’s own firm, Michael A. Gallis, Architect. Also included in this series is a manuscript titled "Triumph & Tragedy: Eric Mendelsohn: U.S.A. 1946-1953," which Gallis prepared around 1960, recapitulating his cooperation with the Jewish German émigré. The file contains photocopies of a typescript of a detailed draft for a monograph, as well as copies of typescripts for chapters focusing on the Varian Associates building, Maimonides Hospital and the Russell Residence.

Arrangement
The archive is arranged in two series: ; .Series I: Family papers, 1909-1938Series II: Professional papers, 1931-1990

Subjects - Names
Mendelsohn, Erich

Subjects - Topics
Architecture -- United States -- 20th century
Series I. **Family papers, 1909-1938, 1990**  
Physical Description: 2.9 Linear Feet (7 Boxes)  
Scope and Content Note  
Contains family correspondence, photographs, and miscellaneous documents.  
Arrangement  
Material is arranged chronologically with undated or conjecturally dated material at the end. Particularly dirty material has been segregated in boxes 7 and 8, resulting in overlap of dates in the container list.

**Correspondence, 1922-1937**  
Scope and Content Note  
Contains personal correspondence mainly collected by Michael A. Gallis's wife, Britta C. Anderson.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 1</th>
<th>1922-1925</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 2</td>
<td>1926</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 3-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 7, Folder 1</td>
<td>1927</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 5</td>
<td>1928</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 7, Folder 2</td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 6</td>
<td>1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 7-8</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 7, Folder 3</td>
<td>1929-1930</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 2, Folder 1-4</td>
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<td>Box 7, Folder 4</td>
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<td>Box 2, Folder 5-6</td>
<td>1932</td>
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<td>Box 2, Folder 7</td>
<td>1933</td>
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<td>Box 3, Folder 1-5</td>
<td>1934</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 1-6</td>
<td>1936</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 7, Folder 7</td>
<td>1936 January-March</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 8, Folder 1-2</td>
<td>1936 May-November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 5, Folder 1-4</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
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<td>Box 8, Folder 4</td>
<td>1937</td>
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<td>Box 5, folder 5-7</td>
<td>1938-1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 8, folder 5</td>
<td>1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 5, folder 9</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scope and Content Note  
One letter from Michael Gallis to his son, also named Michael Gallis, describes two Christmas cards from Erich and Luise Mendelsohn which featured drawings of the San Francisco Bay area. The cards referenced in the letter are not present in the collection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 5, Folder 8</th>
<th>Undated correspondence approximately 1930-1936</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 8, Folder 3</td>
<td>Undated correspondence approximately 1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 6, Folder 6</td>
<td>Empty envelops approximately 1931-1937</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Photographs, approximately 1920-1938**
  - Scope and Content Note
    - Contains professional and amateur family photographs as well as travel snapshots from China (Harbin, Zhengding); Iraq (Baghdad); Mexico (Agua Caliente, Tijuana); California (Carmel, Berkeley, Stanford, Griffith Park, San Diego, Balboa Park, Death Valley, Sequoia National Park); New Mexico (Zuni villages); and Nevada (Rhyolite, Lake Tahoe, Red Rock Canyon).

- **Miscellaneous documents and ephemera, 1908-1939, undated**
  - Scope and Content Note
    - Contains school reports; financial documents, rental contracts, and material related to a flower shop run by Britta Anderson in 1936; several documents and ephemera relating to the University of Oregon and U.C. Berkeley; travel documents; postcards; greeting cards; and tourist guides to Sweden. There is overlap in contents between boxes 6 and 8 as some material was segregated in box 8 due to fragility.

- **Vital and legal documents 1917-1938**
  - Scope and Content Note
    - As of May 2018, several documents have been removed due to fragility and mold damage. Digitized surrogates will be made available as soon as possible.

- **Ephemera 1908-1939, undated**

- **Ephemera 1909-1936**

- **Vital and legal documents 1917-1926**

Series II. Professional papers, 1931-1990

- **Architectural drawings, 1931-1938**
  - Scope and Content Note
    - Contains an album titled "Freehand Perspective" (23 pages, pencil on paper); 49 architectural drawings on tracing paper from Gallis's time at the University of Oregon; and other drawings including a sketch and floor plan for Gallis's first commission for a cottage in 1932. Dates for some drawings are conjectural.

- **Manuscripts on Mendelsohn, ca. 1960**
  - Oversize material

- **Michael A. Gallis, Architect, 1940, approximately 1970**
  - Scope and Content Note
    - Contains documents related Gallis's independent work. Later material includes a complete press kit.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 6, folder 2</th>
<th>Correspondence and documents, 1940</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 11, folder 12</td>
<td>Press kit, approximately 1970</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 11, folder 13</td>
<td>Presentation book, undated</td>
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</tbody>
</table>