specific building types and ultimately the history of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century American architecture.

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Kristina Wilson
Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression

Historians tend to emphasize either continuity or change. Kristina Wilson is a bridge builder in this study of the assimilation of modernism as a middle-class decorative vernacular in 1930s America. She seeks to broaden the canon of the modern design “monolith” (5) to include mid-market modernism, and to place its multivalent designs within an ongoing history of American furniture. Wilson coins the phrase “livable modernism” to refer to a kind of design that addresses the average user’s concern for familiarity, physical and psychological comfort, and affordability—with the implication that market research into “the non-ideal desires of consumers” (12) is an important and valid aspect of the design process. As a contribution to the sociology of modernist taste in America, this book is a complement to those that foreground the niche of early adopters of a new formal language. Wilson’s approach contributes to our understanding of how forms acquire meaning; how those meanings change as an expressive formal language is absorbed into different class contexts; and what happens when a style becomes one fashion choice among many.

The intellectual scaffolding is unobtrusive in Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression, an engaging and accessible book filled with period illustrations. The book accompanied an exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery, and the project reveals its museum origins. Wilson’s initial brief as a curatorial fellow to study depression-era design and consult on museum acquisitions resulted in the book’s emphasis on furniture and tabletop design. This bias is sympathetic to Yale’s existing strengths in American furniture and the general curatorial aversion to anything too industrial or mass-produced.

The three chapters of Livable Modernism focus on the interior decoration of rooms for living, dining, and sleeping. There are no refrigerators, radios, or telephones in this book. With the exception of an interesting section on the bedroom alarm clock, there is no new technology. Wilson justifies this omission by arguing that the adoption of modernist forms for appliances in the kitchen, for example, was less problematic than for living-room furniture precisely because this coupling of new form and new technology allowed consumers to more easily break with tradition.

However, her argument sidesteps the role of the new total-package styling, annual model changes, and planned obsolescence that are such a key feature of appliance design in the 1930s. These approaches, however, undoubtedly influenced the conception and marketing of suites of modernist furniture in a new and important way. Wilson points out that Russel Wright, like many industrial designers of the period, started out in theater design. There, Wright first learned the importance of “a coherent aesthetic experience” (30). Wilson quotes a journalist commenting in 1934 that “equipping rooms down to the smallest accessory has become a favorite way of showing merchandise” (56). The appearance of 1930s appliances and that of mid-market modern furniture probably have more in common than this study allows. It seems possible that the total design in new bathrooms of the period, outfitted with a coordinated suite of modernist “furniture,” conditioned mid-market consumers to embrace modernism. The bias shown here is in part reflective of ongoing museum collecting practices that privilege furniture over refrigerators. However, it deflects attention from the problem of what changed in American consumer culture to explain the sudden ascendance of the industrial designer/stylist in the 1930s, and what the impact of this change was on the design process for, and marketing of, modernist furniture interiors. How did mid-market users experience the decorated house as a total entity in the middle of the Great Depression, as stylish new forms appeared from the driveway to the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom, in reality and as an aspiration?

This caveat aside, Wilson has done a stellar job of covering a wide range of issues in the book. The work is scholarly, well organized, free of jargon, and filled with good analysis. For example, the chapter on the living room moves easily from examination of functionalist concerns with modularity, lightness, and mobility to sociological issues around the psychological meaning of comfort and the gendering of space in modest, open plans. Wilson’s analysis is particularly compelling in this latter section, and in her extended discussion of new bedroom interiors conceived as places of private retreat and experimentation with expressive individualism. This allows her to tease apart the changing sociological meaning, or reception, of modernism at different points in time. For example, after quickly establishing the importance newly placed on the companionate marriage, Wilson convincingly presents the challenge that couples faced in decorating a small, shared living room in a way that was neither too feminine nor too masculine. She discusses the marketing tactics used in the 1930s to reposition modernist design, which had become too closely associated with the excessively feminine and austerely theatrical. With new wisdom, a 1930s livable modernism could allow the man “to stew the Sunday paper about” and the woman to indulge a sensual desire for gleaming surface finishes (42).

Wilson’s excellent chapters on the dining room and bedroom further develop the theme of the house as a stage for the self-presentation of private and public selves. Wilson’s discussions of the buffet party and the vanity table are particularly persuasive and will probably
become standard references on the subjects. What was possible in each room would conform to social norms but permit a bit of experimentation as well. For example, the budgetary constraints placed on hostesses during the 1930s allowed them to break down traditional expectations of what a dinner party would look like, paving the way for the depression-era innovation of the buffet. Similarly, the addition of a vanity table in the bedroom allowed women to engage in fantasies of the self, fueled both by media and private imagination. Yet it remains unclear if this was a pressured injunction for the housewife to remain sexually desirable or an unmediated opportunity for the woman to engage in her own fantasies of self-presentation, or both.

Finally, there is the issue of agency. As the examples of the buffet party and vanity table highlight, research that contextualizes objects within the genre of advice literature always runs the risk of assigning meaning to people's lives at variance with the complex lived experience of real individuals. Wilson has mastered the popular magazines, advertisements, and marketing brochures of the period. It is history from the bottom up, but not really. In the absence of the companion archival research foregrounding the personal voice of the user found in diaries, letters, and home snapshots, or a data-focused consumer ethnography about the class and demographic status of buyers, lookers, and dreamers, it remains important to take a chastened view of what we can really say about the meaning of "livable modernism" to its myriad consumers.

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