
There is a certain irony that the compelling catalog Modernism and its popular offshoot The Modernist Home were produced in London by mostly British authors (Wilk is American), for modernism was at first resisted in the Anglophone lands of Britain and America, with their anxieties about tradition and their fixation on the private family home. Thus few buildings from either country are represented in these publications. For a view of architectural events during the interwar period in the British Isles, one turns to Alan Powers who, in his habitually perceptive, sensitive, and persuasive prose, explains how cultural singularities shaped responses to modernist architecture in the United Kingdom.

At first glance, Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain appears chiefly to be a picture book; certainly the illustrations are lavish in number and quality. However, these images are an indispensable accompaniment to Powers’s instructive exposition, for Albion’s relatively few modernist buildings are little known even on its own soil and rarely celebrated elsewhere. Yet, the peculiar and precarious trajectory of modern architecture in the British Isles supplies an important coda to the larger history and evaluation of modernism itself and prefigures its anomalous fortunes in the present. The hostility and confusion that the movement provoked are telling symptoms of its reign.

Like Modernism, Powers’s book is shaped by an overarching conceptual construct, the modern movement, with its multifarious sources and outcomes. Yet, instead of a carefully distilled assemblage of modernist icons, we encounter a pluralistic potpourri of physiognomically distinct buildings that may be modern (qualified by adjectives like medieval, ambiguous, classical, or deco) but not necessarily modernist (generally designated “formalist”). The text is narrower chronologically, for Powers concentrates on the decade of the 1930s when Britain finally could boast some modern buildings, but is more inclusive as to the philosophies represented. To deal with the “unavoidable confusions of the period,” Powers inevitably resorts to the unfashionable notion of style, which certainly is a required tactic in Britain’s case (19). He does not, however, neglect the critically important social, political, and economic factors. He also provides a welcome account of professional education, as by the early twentieth century, architectural schools were becoming an increasingly important influence on practice.

Works by English or Commonwealth architects like Edwin Maxwell Fry, Patrick Gwynn, Welles Coates, and Connell, Ward, & Lucas could have graced the pages of The International Style, though only one, by Emberton, was actually chosen for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition. Others were inspired by alternative twentieth-century manifestations, like the Amsterdam School and the International Exposition des Art Décoratifs, or maintained continuities with a major source of modernism, the Arts and Crafts movement, without jettisoning its handicraft ethos. Of the émigrés who endowed England with her first unarguably Modernist buildings in the 1930s, Berthold Lubetkin, Peter Moro, and Ernö Goldfinger chose to stay while Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Serge Chermayeff, William Lescaze, and Mendelsohn (via Palestine) eventually left for the United States. The Modernists were represented by the MARS (Modern Architecture Research) Group, founded in 1933 to represent Britain at CIAM. Its name suggested a reliance on scientific inquiry as opposed to aesthetic speculation, a complex disposition that influenced the famous London plans of the 1940s and postwar rebuilding, much of it reviled today. After an informative introductory narrative, Powers offers work produced between 1930 and 1939 in an alphabetically organized array of ninety-one architects and firms, supplying biographical data and particulars on each of the buildings. To his credit, he is at pains to include women architects and comes up with nine, some of whom practiced with male partners. Four pages summarize the “Post-War Legacy,” and two pages address conservation, a burning issue in Britain because of a general unwillingness to appreciate twentieth-century modern buildings.

The V&A’s Modernism deserves a prominent place among the multitude of books on the topic. Powers’s Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain admirably fills a sorry gap where the volumes on British architecture are waiting to be shelved.

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Notes
2. Art Deco and Art Nouveau were reviewed in JSAH 63, no. 1 (Mar. 2004), 114–16; International Arts and Crafts was reviewed in JSAH 64, no. 4 (Dec. 2005), 580–81.

Michael John Gorman

Buckminster Fuller: Designing for Mobility

One of R. Buckminster Fuller’s most memorable drawings depicts a giant scale on which a traditional single-family house outweighs a novel multiistory apartment tower designed according to the principles outlined in the early manifesto 4D Time Lock (1928). In this sketch for a potential advertisement, the tower’s light weight emblemizes its many “four-dimensional” efficiency advantages, including speedy erection, easy maintenance, extensive daylighting, shared recreational amenities, and unprecedented mobility, since the tower would be light enough for a dirigible to transport from place to place according to need and desire. The mobilization of
families through airborne housing, Fuller imagined, would eradicate neofeudal bonds of debt, taxation, even of citizenship itself as the state dissolved into a self-optimizing industrial economy in which consumers enjoyed an unmediated relationship with transnational corporations. Lightness, mobility, and freedom remained hallmarks of Fuller’s work, culminating from the 1950s forward in the many geodesic domes Fuller ultimately imagined as giant spherical enclosures floating like the airships he had once counted on to deliver his Dymaxion houses.

Fuller characterized his lightening of architecture as part of a modern process of “ephemeralization” through which industrial society progressively increased the efficiency with which it translated materials and energy into human well-being.1 What, then, should we make of the verbose and increasingly heavy documents with which Fuller justified his lightweight designs? Already by 1928, Fuller’s Chronofile—a 3,000 page scrap book of photographs and advertisements showing the fourth dimensional progress of various industries throughout the world—had grown to 35 volumes.2 At Fuller’s death, in 1983, it included 847 volumes, augmented by files and databases through which Fuller and his collaborators sought to distill principles for progressively increasing industrial productivity. The archive of Fuller’s papers, acquired by Stanford University in 1999 from the Buckminster Fuller Institute, is estimated to weigh 45 tons. Fuller characterized the Chronofile and his other documentation projects, like the multivolume World Design Science Decade (1965–75), as tools for the objective analysis of society and of his own activities. But, as with the famously long lectures Fuller gave throughout his career, these artifacts also bespeak a powerful desire for control—not only over design but also over discourse, knowledge, and history.

The contrast between lightweight designs and heavy justifications epitomizes a larger set of paradoxes that make interpretation of this maverick of modern architecture complex and compelling. Fuller was an altruistic humanitarian and a megalomaniacal businessman, a libertarian and a technocrat, an internationalist and a cold warrior, a counterculture hero and a military-industrial consultant. Depending on how we interpret his goals and achievements, Fuller can seem to represent the best or the worst of modernity.

The volume of interpretive literature on Fuller may never exceed the archive’s 45 tons, but it is growing. At just over 3½ pounds, Michael John Gorman’s book Buckminster Fuller: Designing for Mobility is neither light enough to carry around in pocket nor so heavy as to claim encyclopedic authority. Designed to sit on the coffee table, it provides a good overview of Fuller’s career and the paradoxes that structured it. In an introduction and eight short chapters, Gorman develops a chronological narrative of Fuller’s life and work appealing in its coherence, concision, and readability. A stronger selling point of the book is its illustration program. Gorman selected from the Fuller Papers some 250 images—many of which have not previously been published—for high-quality reproduction on glossy paper. The illustrations parallel the text but are not tied into it so that a reader can easily explore them independently, especially in extended image sequences that run for up to forty-one consecutive pages between chapters.

Most of the story Gorman relates is familiar from earlier accounts by E. J. Applewhite, Jay Baldwin, Alden Hatch, Hugh Kenner, Robert Marks, John McHale, Lloyd Stevens, and others. The narrative begins with the existential crisis that spurred Fuller, at the age of thirty-two, to pursue the humanitarian project of modernizing the housing field. After backtracking briefly in chapter one to sketch his subject’s early biography, Gorman moves forward at a brisk pace. He devotes a chapter each to the 4D Time Lock, the Dymaxion House, and the run of projects Fuller developed from the Depression through World War II, including Shelter magazine, the Dymaxion Car, the Dymaxion Deployment Unit, and the Wichita House. The remaining four chapters trace the development and construction of geodesic domes and tensegrity spheres of many kinds, for uses ranging from military radar installations to exposition pavilions to handmade “dome homes.” Gorman’s most original contribution is to convey the way Fuller used partnerships, spin-off companies, and university teaching appointments to open new lines of investigation into the design and application of geodesic structures. He insightfully highlights Fuller’s use of intellectual property contracts and patent laws to claim ownership of ideas and designs developed jointly with collaborators, some of whom later felt they had been exploited.

Gorman’s training is in the history of science, focusing on its relations with art and culture, and so he recognizes the complex political and philosophical questions at stake in interpreting the new relations among design, consumption, and control that Fuller constructed. But while Gorman acknowledges the many paradoxes attending Fuller’s career, he does not confront directly their significance for our understanding of Fuller’s work and of the larger social processes with which it engaged. Would Fuller’s industrialized housing have dispersed power more broadly across the social field or concentrated it more heavily in the hands of large-scale investors? Who benefited from the redistribution of efficiency achieved by Fuller’s designs, many of which were realized by the United States government and its military branches? Unfortunately, Gorman does not pursue these questions. Because his book withholds judgment on the most compelling political and social questions raised by its subject, it ultimately has little to say about the meaning, effect, and contemporary relevance of Fuller’s ideas and designs.

This shortcoming may reflect the decision by Gorman and his publisher to address general readers, a choice apparent from the minimal scholarly apparatus of Designing for Mobility. Gorman’s limited use of footnotes sometimes makes it hard to identify sources for quotations, the one-page selected bibliography is
erratic in its choice of entries, and there is no index to aid readers in navigating the text. More frustrating is Gorman’s provision of only a single blanket credit for the many illustrations he has gathered from the Fuller Papers, giving scholars interested in pursuing further research no guidance in locating specific images within the 1200 linear feet of materials at Stanford.

For more sustained analysis of Fuller’s work, readers can turn to publications of the past decade edited by Reinhold Martin, and Joachim Krausse and Claude Lichtenstein.1 These and other recent analyses help us to see Fuller’s works not only as the “light, self-sufficient structures” Gorman describes (205), but also as compelling nets drawing consumers into new relations of power. Since the questions of globalization and ecological sustainability that Fuller engaged are of increasingly widespread concern, it is likely that his significance will only grow—as an inspiration or cautionary tale, depending on what we learn from the expanding field of historical and critical research.

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Notes
1. R. Buckminster Fuller, Nine Chains to the Moon (Garden City, 1971), 256–59.

C. Ford Peatross, editor, with Pamela Scott, Diane Tepfer, and Leslie Freudenheim


The completed cataloging of some forty thousand drawings, prints, and photographs depicting the greater Washington area is cause for celebration, and Johns Hopkins University Press has produced a fitting volume to mark the occasion. Lavishly illustrated and carefully documented, this introduction to the Washington Collection at the Library of Congress represents much more than a guide book. Addressing high and vernacular form, six distinguished authors examine and evaluate many unfamiliar and intriguing elements of the capital region’s built environment. In doing so, they not only draw attention to the Library’s collection, but they offer their own insights on subjects of ongoing interest in the field of Washington area studies.

As befits such an auspicious occasion, C. Ford Peatross, curator of Architecture, Design, and Engineering at the Library of Congress, serves as exuberant host for his collection’s debut. Peatross’s opening essay on the unbuilt city is wry, witty, and provocative. While some of the images he chooses have been previously published, notably through a series of essays in Washington History, the journal of the Historical Society of Washington, most are entirely unknown. In showing both inappropriate treatments of iconic monuments and a number of projects he wishes had been completed, including an extravagant apartment and hotel complex designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Peatross reveals the considerable range of works suggested for the city. He does so in a lively manner, describing a proposed monument to mothers as evocative of Batman’s Gotham City and a post-World War II treatment of the Capitol as emasculating “the building’s baroque qualities in a manner that is both coolly elegant and dishon-est. It is to architecture what a stretch limo is to automobile design. Longer sometimes is no more than that” (48).

The essays that follow on two of Washington’s most iconic buildings—the Capitol, discussed by Damie Stillman, and the White House, addressed by William Seale—are both more sober and less suggestive. Each draws from the Library collection to test received wisdom about their subject’s evolution. While the range of images related to the White House is more limited, both Seale’s and Stillman’s essays use visual material as a guide to construction. Some of the pictures, especially those included in the fifty-five color plates, are stunning. Specialists will undoubtedly want to follow the authors’ arguments with care, and even the general reader will appreciate the great skill involved in creating such beautiful renderings. Pamela Scott’s essay on the Vietnam Memorial stands more narrowly as an invitation to examine the various design proposals from the memorial’s competition, which are held in the Library’s collection.

The most useful essays for seeing how the Library of Congress’s images advance our understanding of the capital region are those by Richard Longstreth on commercial structures and Gwendolyn Wright on twentieth-century residential architecture. Their surveys of major collections from lesser-known architects such as Arthur Heaton and George N. Ray help reveal a collective portrait of the city and its adjacent suburbs. In his assessment, Longstreth is especially strong at incorporating previous work on shopping centers and even the general reader will appreciate the great skill involved in creating such beautiful renderings. Pamela Scott’s essay on the Vietnam Memorial stands more narrowly as an invitation to examine the various design proposals from the memorial’s competition, which are held in the Library’s collection.

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