Charlotte and Peter Fiell, editors

domus
Cologne: Taschen, 2006, 12 vols., 7,000 pp., 20,000 color and b/w illus., CD-Rom master index, $600, ISBN 978-3-8228-3027-7

No one ever accused German publishing magnate Benedikt Taschen of excessive modesty. The website and advertisements of his global empire proudly quote from reviews that praise Taschen as “the coolest publisher” of the “most beautiful books on the planet.” Today it is difficult to walk into any bookstore with an art or architecture section and not encounter his publications in abundance; sometimes titles by other presses are nowhere to be seen, as if a particularly aggressive fish had devoured all of the lake’s competing species.

Taschen’s business philosophy of making no small plans is evident not only in the increasing dominance of his company in the global book business but also in the physical size of the books he publishes. A connoisseur of architecture who lives in John Lautner’s Chemosphere House in Los Angeles, he changed the direction of his company from soft-core prurience to hard-edged modernism and conspicuously entered architectural publishing with two oversized and copiously illustrated volumes on the Case Study Houses and Richard Neutra.1

The imposing bulk of those books now seems restrained in comparison with the 2006 publication of the twelve-volume reprint/anthology of the Italian architectural journal domus. Weighing nearly 70 pounds, it required four rounds of unpacking and lifting to carry through my front door. If Taschen previously sought to trade on the prestige of West Coast modernists, this publication raises the stakes by chronicling the reception of global architecture and design in Italy’s most influential magazine, if not the trajectory and significance of modernism in the twentieth century.

Comprising over seven thousand pages and twenty thousand images, Taschen’s domus exudes comprehensiveness, yet this initial impression is deceptive. As editors Charlotte and Peter Fiell note in their introduction, a complete run of the magazine from its appearance in 1928 to 1999 comprises two hundred thousand pages and requires more than 20 meters to shelf. Incredibly, their formidable anthology comprises only about 3.5 percent of this published content, and thus any assessment of it raises issues of selection criteria and values, questions to which I will return.

Founded in 1928 by Gio Ponti and businessman Gianni Mazzocchi, domus began as a lifestyle magazine that printed articles on cooking, gardening, animal husbandry, film, even dog breeding, as well as on architecture, design, and urbanism. In the assessment of the Fiells, “At domus, design encompasses everything—‘from the spoon to the city’—and to be worthy of inclusion on its pages a project must have graceful beauty, practical function, spatial clarity, intellectual persuasion and/or relevant originality” (1:6).

Initially laid out in a severe neoclassical format, the magazine loosened up visually by the late 1930s and became as prototypical of the trends it simultaneously chronicled and established. Ponti, himself a gifted architect and designer, in whose studio the magazine was published, had a keen eye for talent. William Klein, Herbert Bayer, Gordon Matta-Clark, Saul Steinberg, Charles Eames, James Rosenquist, and Gillo Dorfles are but some of the collaborators he enlisted. To scan the useful spreads of each year’s covers at the front of every volume is the equivalent of paging through a flipbook of twentieth-century visual culture.

Unlike its arch rival, Casabella, also established in 1928 and purchased by Mazzocchi in 1934, domus, under Ponti’s direction, was less enamored with Italian Rationalism. Imbued with the spirit of democratic humanism, the magazine in its early years looked to Weimar Germany for precedents, and in its first issue articles treat the 1927 Weissenhofsiedlung and Bruno Taut’s own house in Dahlewitz. Stylistic diversity and an international focus soon became the norm. Published work by Erich Mendelsohn, Le Corbusier, Hans Scharoun, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Johannes Duiker, George Howe, Fritz Höger, Josef Hoffmann, Martin Ehläser, and Boris and Michail Barchin confirms the catholicity of Ponti’s taste, although a few surprising absences—Eileen Gray, Hugo Häring, Berthold Lubetkin, Heinrich Tessenow—make clear that he also had his blind spots.

Where domus and the Fiells’ selection from it unquestionably shine is in the presentation of work by Italian architects and designers. Here projects by recognized figures such as Giuseppe Terragni, Pier Luigi Nervi, Franco Albini, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Studio BBPR, as well as Ponti’s own designs, are joined by the efforts of lesser known practitioners such as Luigi Vietti, Gino Levi Montalcini, Mario Ridolfi, and Vittorio Viganò. Long renowned for witty and sensuous furniture and product design, epitomized by the work of Ettore Sottsass Jr., Gaetano Pesce, and Gae Aulenti, heavily published in domus during the 1960s and 1970s, Italy produced numerous equally remarkable modern buildings, whose architects this reprint convincingly suggests as worthy of more prominent treatment in future histories of modernism.

The coming of fascism and the arrival of World War II register only sporadically in the selections from the magazine from the years 1938 to 1945. Opulent brass and marble details in Giuseppe Mazzoleni and Antonio Carminati’s Villa Ponziani published in April 1941 and the June 1942 advertisement for Ansaldo warships are among the few visible signs of grandeur and militarism. Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig’s design for Boccioni University in Milan, featured in the February 1942 issue—shortly before his 1943 resignation from the fascist party and his death in a concentration camp in 1945—is a notable reminder of political and stylistic nonconformism during the period. Otherwise, the early 1940s are marked largely by the continued prominence of architects earlier advocated by Ponti such as Terragni and Neutra.

No less striking are the hyperbolic...
to champion the always 291 will most important and championed work by daz-

ers, including Alessandro Mendini, Deyan Sudjic, and Vittorio Magnago

tors, including Alessandro Mendini, Deyan Sudjic, and Vittorio Magnago

cold war struggle for the hearts and minds of international design profes-
sionals and members of the intelligentsia. A changing cast of subsequent edi-
tors, including Alessandro Mendini, Deyan Sudjic, and Vittorio Magnago

explaining their selection criteria, the fiells write: “firstly, we tried to
choose the best of the best—the most influential projects by the most impor-
tant designers and architects. secondly, we allowed a small degree of personal sub-
jectivity to creep in. We chose what we liked, so lots of Carlo Mollino, charles
Eames, Joe Colombo, Angelo Mangiarotti, and ettore sotsass Jr. as well as
some more obscure work that we felt had particular merit” (1:6). Apart from the
immediate objection that the first and second criteria blur—the question of
which projects, designers, and architects have been most influential always has
been contentious, a moving target rather than a settled matter of fact—approach-
ing modern architecture and design as a hit parade is problematic for other rea-
sons. Such a retrospective imposition of value judgments impedes the historian’s
efforts to understand actors and institutions on their own terms. With the pas-
sage of time, losers and options not pursued often prove more illuminating
than the heroes, victors, and “spirit” of an age.

Despite the admirable efforts by the fiells to include articles on lesser known
figures, as well as reproductions of period advertisements, their selection remains
skewed by the values of personality and reputation associated with design-world
tastemaking rather than with the detachment and objectivity of scholarship. To
be fair, I doubt that any anthologization could have entirely circumvented this
objection, although my own preference would have been to include more
obscure figures and less work by Eames, Colombo, and Neutra. Promoting
favorites and celebrating the new were always integral to domus, and one can
hardly chastise the fiells for faithfully presenting these concerns in a limited
amount of space. If their decisions are no substitute for the balance attained by a
scholar patiently sifting through original issues of the magazine, this will perhaps
encourage more research on its rich and intriguing history.

Each of the twelve volumes is intro-
duced with perfunctory overview essays and recollections by former editors and
contributors, which accomplish little more than set out basic chronology and
present personal remembrances. Many, but regrettably not all, of the original
texts in Italian are translated into English and appended as back matter.
Abstracts of the content of each article are provided in English at the bottom of
the page, although the erroneous identi-
fication of Le corbusier as the architect of
the united nations building does not
inspire confidence in the accuracy of translations. The quality of reproduc-
tions is generally high, except when sev-
eral two-page spreads have been reduced to fit on a single page and the legibility of
plans suffers. A useful CD-ROM master
index is slipcased into the final volume of
the set.

Clearly, these limitations underscore that this reprint/anthology was not
produced with a scholarly readership in mind. One can only hope that a complete
searchable digital edition of domus will become available in the future. Mean-
while, this book is all that the noninstitu-
tional user has, and without the huge
audience that Taschen reaches—arguably
better than any other contemporary pub-
lisher given the ease with which its
image-driven program negotiates lin-
guistic boundaries—it is doubtful that it
would have been financially viable.

Printed, according to the company
website, in an edition of around one hun-
dred thousand copies, a staggering figure
for any design publication, it is a powerful signal of how the globalization of the book trade, the emergence of English as the lingua franca of high culture, and the seemingly limitless international appetite for publications on modern architecture already impact its reception and study. Time will tell whether architecture and design journals such as domus remain relevant in an increasingly diverse and polycentric world or reinvent themselves as blogs, websites, and forms of communication we cannot yet imagine.

EDWARD DIMENDBERG
University of California, Irvine

Note

Mark Crinson
Modern Architecture and the End of Empire

At the turn of the 1990s, the almost-simultaneous publication of books on colonialism and architecture by Norma Evenson, Gwendolyn Wright, Timothy Mitchell, and Zeynep Celik all provided stimulus for more research on the subject. Using Edward Said’s concept that specular alterity—the dichotomy of “self” and “other”—was the dominant form of power through which imperialism asserted itself at home and abroad, many subsequent “postcolonialist” works on architecture and display have periodically claimed to complicate and extend this dichotomy. At the same time, they offer few hints of any other possible analytical frameworks through which the history of empire and globalization could be understood. Mark Crinson’s earlier book, Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture (1996), was a well-researched installment in that Saidian frame; his current offering, Modern Architecture and the End of Empire, is a kind of sequel to that book, and it brings us up to date, mutatis mutandis, on developments in British architecture in the twentieth century. It makes available essential historical chapters whose import, if pursued further from the specific instances examined here, can help us tremendously in understanding the complex relationships between architecture and globalization.

The book’s most original contributions appear in four sections covering areas of research where the author has gone beyond the standard fare of train stations, city halls, and triumphal arches when it comes to examining questions of power. Crinson calls attention to the contributions and influences of the Liverpool school of architecture; the architectural politics embodied in a company town built by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now a British protectorate) in Abadan in pre-Mussadîq Iran; and the efforts of the British, after the loss of India, to secure a legacy (and the continuity of investments) through managed forms of decolonization in both Ghana and in Malaya-Singapore. In this late-imperial penumbra, a whole new slew of architectural actors come to light—sahibs white and brown—and though they are not necessarily recognizable within the usual modernist canon, they are nonetheless in complex ways still of it.

The first generation of native architects in Ghana and Malaya are faithfully rendered as classic “mimic men,” caught between imperatives of global capital (of which the nation-state is arguably an effect) and their charge of producing the cultural content, the fabulous narratives of origin, that gave legitimacy to specific national projects. Mediatory mechanisms such as “tropical” modernism—at the time deemed particularly apropos for former colonies—are the center of attention here, although we are not provided with reasons as to why such epistemological formations may have “emerged” in this period. In this context, two names that will be recognizable to modernist historians, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, and their prolific work across varied continental contexts, receive a much-awaited but (for the interests of at least this reviewer) all-too-brief consideration. Crinson’s contribution makes us want to know more about the lives and practices of this extraordinary partnership. The book delivers a parting shot at contemporary (Blairite) “multiculturalism,” which as an element in protracted postcoloniality deserves much more scrutiny than is its wont from those who deplore its supposed lapses. Crinson’s research, strongly circumscribed by the debate within British journals, nonetheless brings up much fascinating detail about them.

Some of the literary citations in the book are also dazzling: Kingsley Martin in South Africa, Anthony Burgess in Malaya, and so on, not least Virginia Woolf, who viewed empire as an aberrance among the forces of nature, one that will eventually erode under their cosmic onslaught. Here is Woolf, quoted by Crinson, on the Wembley Exhibition of 1924: “Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the contours of its decay” (79).

Nonetheless, the theoretical claims of Crinson’s book should be seen more as organizing rubrics rather than theoretical innovations. One of its axioms is that in order to make itself present, empire must represent, and architecture is a key device of such representation. Another seeks to loosen a frequently conflated political shift from an aesthetic one, emphasizing how the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism was marked by the move toward modernism in both metropolis and colony. These commonplaces, posed here as straw men, provide the author with the license to pursue several empirical vignettes of architectural transition from colony to postcolony whose relationship to these inoffensive claims is only anecdotal. Without the burden of elaborating a theory of historical causation or transition, however, what results is a freewheeling taxonomy of the stylistic lurches that accompany or constitute shifts of power.

The content of this power, in terms of its theoretical elucidation, remains