Ated and their almost transcendental relationship to the landscape. In this realm the curators have been remarkably successful, creating a display of both substance and wonder that captivates the viewer in a way that architectural exhibitions rarely do.

Perhaps by intent, however, neither the exhibition nor catalog help to place the work of Lautner within the dynamic context of postwar Los Angeles, with, for example, its Case Study Program, the late work of Schindler and Neutra, and the early work of Frank Gehry; nor does it situate him well within a wider national and international context. It also largely overlooks the nature of Lautner’s patrons and their aspirations. While he self-consciously positioned himself as an outsider and iconoclast, especially during his later years, he often worked for clients of substantial means who rarely seemed to fit that mold. Several almost went bankrupt trying to complete structures that greatly exceeded initial budgets, while others presumably received homes that more modestly fulfilled their needs and expectations, whatever those may have been. Much, then, remains to be done to understand this man, who ferociously shielded himself from just such scrutiny. With its deep and sympathetic insights into the actual buildings, however, Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner gives future scholars solid ground from which to proceed.

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Related publication

Living under the Crescent Moon: Domestic Culture in the Arab World
Vitra Design Museum, Berlin
21 July 2003–18 January 2004
IVAM, Valencia
17 June–22 August 2004
Kunsthall Rotterdam
23 September 2004–9 January 2005
MART, Rovereto
11 June–18 September 2005
Arquerias de Nuevos Ministerios, Madrid
2 December 2005–22 January 2006
TCDC Thailand Creative and Design Centre, Bangkok
23 November 2006–4 February 2007
National Museum of Singapore
23 March–27 May 2007
Ex Cathédrale du Sacré Coeur, Casablanca
16 November–8 December 2007
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein
23 February–31 August 2008

Fewer than eighteen hours before I arrived at the entrance to the Vitra Design Museum in the German town of Weil am Rhein, just north of Basel, I had been to an IKEA in the heart of the country’s northwestern rustbelt. Some of the immigrant and working-class customers were there precisely because their accents, clothing, or skin color made them suspect that they might not be treated graciously at the kinds of shops that stock Vitra furniture (the Vitra company is a major sponsor of the Vitra Foundation, which runs the Design Museum, but the Foundation is legally distinct from the company). Despite its association with social progress, modern design is often used in contemporary Germany to define social and intellectual status, to separate “cultured” Germans from those whom they view as not like themselves. At the ticket counter I found a German couple literally screaming that they had traveled two hours to the Frank Gehry–designed temple of avant-garde design to see chairs, not the exhibit Living under the Crescent Moon: Domestic Culture in the Arab World. The woman’s cropped gray hair, elegant black tunic, and beautifully crafted silver brooch almost certainly identified them as architects. They got their money back but not their dignity.

Should they choose to return in 2010, they will be able to view the Vitra company’s entire product line in a new showroom by Herzog and de Meuron, currently under construction only a few hundred feet from the Design Museum. Astonishingly, neither the company nor the foundation has turned before to local talent. Instead they were both Gehry and Tadao Ando’s first European clients. The campus, one of the world’s great showcases of contemporary design, also includes factories by Gehry, Nicholas Grimshaw, and Alvaro Siza, and pavilions by Buckminster Fuller and Jean Prouvé. Had the angry architects been able to endure a ninety-minute wait in the café, below models of vernacular Arab dwellings as well as Gehry’s convoluted ceiling profiles, they would have had the pleasure of one of the best architectural tours I have ever taken.

Although it is almost impossible to walk down the street of any German-speaking city and not see people whose families come from Africa and Asia, it is rare to have their presence addressed within the walls of major art institutions. As one of the most important European organizers of traveling design exhibitions, the Vitra Design Museum is to be commended for being such a noteworthy exception, in this case in collaboration with the Institute Valencià d’Art Modern and the Kunsthall Rotterdam.

The beautifully installed and visually entrancing exhibit had but one major limitation. By focusing in turn on nomads, village dwellers, the inhabitants of pre-colonial cities, and finally on the modern city, it made contemporary Arab life more exotic than it probably usually is. For the curators, the tent, although occupied today by only a small minority, remains the paradigmatic Arab dwelling. Here, because each object within the dwelling as
well as the tent itself must be capable of being packed up and transported, a minimum of furnishings, including most notably textiles of various weights and degrees of decoration, are supplemented by saddles and litters, bags and containers, and objects for hospitality, particularly the rituals associated with brewing coffee.

Perhaps the most compelling section was the survey of rural houses. Here a wide array of vernacular buildings types was illustrated in careful detail, through drawn plans and sections as well as vibrant photographs of interiors, exteriors, and whole villagescapes. Climate and the local availability of particular building materials accounted for some of the great variety displayed here, but so did social mores. The balance struck between the hospitality prized throughout the Arab world and the privacy of the family, including the partial shielding in many cases of the hair and even faces of its adult female members of the household from public view, mandates no single design solution.

The historic city was detailed with enormous respect in galleries that showed not only housing but also the hammam, or public bath. Both the exhibit and the accompanying catalog paid particular attention to the issue of water in cities that typically occupied arid sites. The boundary between the historic and modern city was fixed more commonly by the introduction of modernist architecture from Europe, especially after World War II, than at the start of colonization, as early as 1830, when the French began to colonize Algeria.

Less attention was paid to the interiors of urban buildings, and to the politics of their construction, than to the conditions shaping the house types that predominated until recently in their hinterlands. At the end of the exhibition, praise for the work of Hassan Fathy and his followers co-existed with an acknowledgment of the challenges that the wealth of the Gulf States pose to the preservation of architectural solutions that were born out of an attentiveness to limited resources.

The 123 objects of daily use included in the exhibition, almost all of them handcrafted, generally dated to the middle of the last century. They were thus examples of a recent, still-remembered past. What was most remarkable was their humbleness; most clearly they were not luxury objects available only to a wealthy few. The selection revealed the curators’ admiration for the “modesty, be it in reduced basic shapes, in multi-functional solutions, in air-conditioning systems or devices to control water consumption” that they describe as characterizing Arab architecture and design. The text of this wall label, which subtly oscillates between Orientalism and admiration for the vitality of the present, also praises the “sensuality, love of color, and abundance of design solutions [that] can also provide inspiration” for contemporary designers throughout the world.

The most dynamic and original aspect of the exhibition was the explication of the buildings in which individual objects had been and continue to be used. In addition to clearly drawn plans and sections of a wide range of vernacular housing types from countries stretching from Mauritania to Oman, recent photographs and films gave visitors windows into distant places and introduced them to their inhabitants. The short films, displayed on small monitors inserted into the structure of the installation, were joined by longer interviews, presented on larger screens. The faces of the interviewees and the sounds of their voices filled the galleries. Ranging from a prominent young Lebanese architect and an Egyptian interior designer who lives in a Fathy-designed house to villagers and businessmen, these people spoke passionately about the places that mattered to them. The careful attention paid to surveying the possessions displayed within contemporary interiors highlighted the complex ways in which ordinary Arabs define their identities and, coupled with the imposingly scaled talking heads floating above them, defied categorization of them as Others. Tent dwellers watch televisions perched on cardboard boxes or sit around a sewing machine; an electric pink tricycle stands below the beautiful basketwork in a Nubian interior; ornate patterns are jumbled together in the stacks of bedding that symbolize the wealth of many Arab families. Although many photographs and films illustrated understated designs that
are as much the product of relative poverty as of traditional taste, others unabashedly present the clutter of cherished comforts. Rooms that have very few pieces of furniture can nonetheless contain hundreds of objects: carpets, cushions, hangings, and vessels, including in one case a prized collection of thermos flasks.

The fact that not all Arabs are Muslim and that Arab cities, in particular, have historically housed substantial religious minorities, was scarcely alluded to in an exhibition that treated Islam itself with great sensitivity. Throughout women were presented as agents in the construction, decoration, and control of their own domestic environments. The photographs and videos showed people of both genders, all ages, and various degrees of orthodoxy proudly present in and in front of homes that they clearly cherish. With the exception of the blank photographs of modern Casablanca, taken shortly after the construction of modernist icons whose appearance has long since been transformed by their inhabitants, the vitality and material variety of contemporary Arab life was effectively set forth as an appropriate subject for unsentimental celebration.

Living under the Crescent Moon was probably not conceived solely to educate Europeans about their neighbors—although that theme dominated the introductions by the directors of the institutions which organized it—or even to celebrate and help sustain endangered vernaculars, in part by encouraging Western appreciation, as seems to have been the chief goal of the curators, Mateo Kreis and Alexander von Vegesack. The Arab world has become a major market for European design. This is not ground that Vitra wants to cede to IKEA. Although Living under the Crescent Moon occasionally took a nostalgic view of Arab architecture and design, the proximity of the museum to a disconcertingly brash fire station designed by an Iraqi woman certainly confirms contemporary Arab mastery of modernism. Furthermore, at the time of my visit, Zaha Hadid’s first building housed a temporary exhibition that uncritically offered a very different perspective on Arab domesticity than that on view in the Design Museum. Curated by Rem Koolhaas and Jack Persekian, it consisted largely of photographs and films by contemporary artists based in Dubai that document the modernity of life there as well as the varied aesthetics of its inhabitants. If modernism is to retain any relationship to the new, rather than become its own sort of historicist pastiche, it will have to engage the vigor of places like this, rather than smugly critiquing their bad taste and, less often but with more validity, their social inequalities and considerable environmental limitations. Both halves of the Vitra promise to be in the forefront of this effort.

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