Most architectural history textbooks put history on a need-to-know basis. Rarely is monetary history used to give meaning to bank buildings, nor are changes in governance enlisted to elucidate city halls. Architectural historians even use history scenographically—the way other historians sometimes use images—saying just enough to provide background for the history of buildings and their makers. In *The Architecture of America: A Social Interpretation* (1961) John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown severed the *corpus callosum*; in each chapter, design and construction history are separated from social history. On the other end of the spectrum, Dell Upton abandoned chronology in his brilliant, quirky *Architecture in the United States* (1998). His engaging themes—community, nature, money—come deeply enmeshed in history, but with no pretense of comprehensiveness. Along the way, by necessity, key buildings and historical episodes are elided.1

Recently the architectural canon has been obliged to admit new actors, and not just in cameo roles: keywords, networks, and disembodied forces like surveillance, as well as the larger realities of real estate, bureaucracy, consumer culture, and a host of hitherto secondary players such as developers, now drive narratives—or dissolve them into phenomenology. Gwendolyn Wright’s work, like Dell Upton’s, has been at the epicenter of this shift. Her *USA/Modern Architectures in History* is the first text on American architecture to reconcile a comprehensive and chronological narrative of both buildings and history with the emerging historical methods of recent years. While it sometimes strains under the complexity of the project, Wright’s book does “unstiffen” architectural history “in order to expand canonical histories, reframe customary narratives, unravel tangled ambiguities” (10).

A master of social history, Wright sets up each chapter with a sketch of the social changes most pertinent to the built environment of the period. She pushes back the frame of modernity—her subject—to Reconstruction. While readers will readily recognize the Civil War as the pivotal divide of American history, it is a generous bracket for architectural modernism, or “Modernisms,” as she has chosen. If such pluralization seems unnecessary—are the words *modernism* and *architecture* complicated enough already?—the point is well taken. What stylistic analysis could never convincingly do—make the postbellum architecture of Frank Furness cohere with the post-9/11 buildings of Frank Gehry—Wright gracefully achieves through social history. By dividing each of her chronological chapters into the spaces of work, domestic spaces, and public spaces, she invites a stunning range of ideas into the conversation that even the most critical histories of architecture typically omit.

Wright’s focus on space allows for an inclusive history, melding vernacular architecture, preservation, landscape and regional analysis, and urbanism with more familiar buildings. In fact, the seamless way her text moves between buildings and larger urban phenomena is a model of such writing. The schema also allows her to return to the nearly forgotten study of typologies, mostly to good effect: schools are understood in terms of education, hospitals in terms of health. These are two of the central institutions of modernity, yet their status as such is usually overlooked. Some readers will want her to push this analytical framework even further, the way she does with housing, where she interweaves history with close readings of plans and the body language of these buildings. One wishes she might have done the same with other key institutions of American modernity: banks, shops, supermarkets, malls, community centers, motels, etc.

Commercial and popular culture figure prominently, dissolving high-low dichotomies. Wright emphasizes the fact that architects operate within the commercial sphere, and she repatriates buildings to their economic context. Since the building industry is one of the nation’s largest, only in some socialist (or formalist) dream can architects operate outside of the commercial realm. (Oddly, in the introduction, commercial and popular culture are nearly equated [11], a confusion that is understandable but misleading, since commercial culture is also an elitist sphere of cultural production.)

Industrial processes, as well, take their rightful place in architectural history, free from the heroic teleology of Sigfried Giedion and without reinforcing false divisions between high design, vernacular, avant-garde, and socially engaged architecture: Ant Farm shares a line of inquiry with the farm-workers housing of Sanford Hirshen and Slim van der Ryn. Wright’s frame also admits rich discussions of home economics, the role of research, graphic standards, and the diagrammatic imagination. Architectural magazines play a role, along with their editors, as do paper architecture and the plan books that once threatened architectural practice.

With all of these ideas, buildings, and personalities to synthesize, the organizational logic occasionally falters. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Johnson Wax Administration Building appears in a section on public works during the New Deal. Fallingwater; the Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts; and H. H. Harris’s Havens House in Berkeley all fall under “Housing in Hard Times.” The U.N. Building is one of Wright’s “Spaces for Leisure and Learning,” as are the embassy projects of the Cold War, which she calls “emphatically modern” when many of them were simultaneously historicized (181). More importantly, in spite of the spatial categories, spatial analysis is not the main focus. Here is a missed opportunity, especially for an astute observer like Wright, who could, by probing more plans, sections, and interiors, deliver a sustained dissection of American spaces and spatial practices.

Learned, broad, wise, and open in her approach, Wright nevertheless occasionally comes across as a true believer in the ideals of heroic modernism. She extols progress, repeatedly condemns capitalism (the word *contamination* is used three times to refer to commercial influence on high design, a category she aimed to destabilize), and echoes modernism’s persistent moral tone. She offers Paul Rudolph’s
Sarasota High School as an example of a southern school that ignored the outlawing of “separate but equal” facilities in Brown v. Board of Education. “Its gravity-defying concrete screens” shielded classrooms “from the sun—and from black classmates. Formal brilliance can sometimes short-circuit social change” (188).

While the morality of this is unassailable, the logic is not: should Rudolph have allowed a social agenda to short-circuit environmental necessities? The problem is surely rooted more in social practices and the plan than in Rudolph’s screens, which he used in other contexts.

The text renovates some of the expected chestnuts of the canon. In place of the customary dramatic encounter between giants, we see Louis Sullivan turning to H. H. Richardson’s Marshall Field Warehouse as a source for the Auditorium Building because the client, Ferdinand Peck, encouraged him to do so. In another revealing example, Wright situates Frank Lloyd Wright’s prairie houses in the context of his larger vision of suburban development. Other buildings, however, remain curiously mute. Frank Furness’s Provident Life and Trust Building tantalizes us silently. It is there to illustrate a point about the role of postbellum business in birthing the wondrous commercial architecture of the period, but it needs help from the author. Elsewhere, engaging passages of text go by without illustration: riveting sections on the Chicago World’s Fair and home economics, for instance, including the diagrams of Christine Frederick, which influenced Bruno Taut; or the “feminist sympathies” of Irving Gill’s innovative plans (67). These discussions deserve to be illustrated, although this may well be a limitation imposed by the press. Another specification of the publisher, the decision to do without numbered figures, is nitsome: text and image sometimes drift apart. The disorientation that results can undercut Wright’s project, particularly when she takes aim at the narrow formalism that weaves its way through modernism, and which, at the moment, is ascendant. Formal analysis, paradoxically, is the tool that can deliver us from—or at least, deconstruct—formalism, but only if we use it without shame, to reveal the layers of meaning packed into plan, section, and the myriad ways a building shows itself to the world. When Wright does talk us through a building, she is brilliant and original. The “play-court” at Rudolph Schindler’s Lovell Beach House becomes a “primal hearth with its outdoor fireplace,” and the “textures of the concrete and untreated wood were rough and tactile, for this was a primitive shelter, not a ‘machine for living in’” (98).

Whatever its faults, USA is a mighty achievement: an accessible, smart textbook about American architectural modernism informed by the insights of postmodern scholarship. Wright assembles an ambitious range of ideas and buildings with obvious delight. Unlike most texts, which are bludgeoned into a generic voice by over-editing or the absence of authorial pleasure, USA reveals Wright’s joy as a scholar and urbanite. She writes with a great sense of pace, and her prose reveals the vital personality behind it. This alone will allow the book to endure.

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Note