easier. Cromley rarely explains the reasons for the examples she includes, so it is not clear how representative she understands them to be. Fuller attention to fewer structures and more explicit rationales for inclusion might have produced greater clarity.

It may be petty to note, but one aspect of the book that seems ill-conceived is the term “food axis.” Most definitions of axis hinge on the idea of a line. Cromley admits this but argues that an axis may also be “a partnership, an alliance, or a group of elements with related interests” (2). Maybe so, but I think she is swimming upstream here. Political connotations of axis also may generate reader resistance. At the very least, “food axis” does not seem particularly felicitous. Its frequent appearance in the text always had a jarring effect on me.

Cromley’s account of domestic continuities and changes in the much-studied early period is solid and readable but the text becomes decidedly livelier when it moves beyond the middle of the nineteenth century. The very rich (and many others) still had servants and the very poor were still marginal but the rising middle classes now had access to increasingly sophisticated technology to aid in preserving and preparing food. And here dramatic and demonstrable changes occurred. Cromley traces the transitions that eventually resulted in our contemporary preoccupation with immense and glorious kitchens that are frequently the most elegant and expensive rooms in the house. The apparent historical reversal here is remarkable. What was once back is today front. Once working-class and rural people gathered in kitchens, while the genteel chatted in parlors or drawing rooms and ate in distinctively and expensively furnished dining rooms. Now the affluent have what Cromley calls “the boundaryless kitchen” that spills over “into all the other rooms in the house” (222). It sounds so radically different yet, in some strange way, not wholly unlike great rooms in center-chimney houses of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Cromley deserves credit for writing a history of American domestic architecture with food as the organizing theme. The concept may be novel but it is also eminently reasonable. Foodways are one aspect of domestic life everyone shares, one way or another. History told from the stomach outward is as valid as any other. Without food, after all, there can be little else. And, perhaps needless to say, popular and academic interest in foods and foodways is currently at an all-time high.

The Food Axis is a provocative and timely book, rich in insights and observations about the place of foodways in American housing and liberally furnished with instructive commentary from primary and secondary sources. It would be nice if I could also say that it is splendidly illustrated with house plans and images but, in truth, the illustrations are neither numerous nor particularly informative. On the other hand, twenty-three pages of notes offer ample direction for those who might wish to read—and see—more. The Food Axis may not offer much to specialist historians of American housing but it should prove informative to those with limited familiarity with the subject and any who might like to rethink the entire matter from the perspective of foodways. In the end, the book is likely to prompt reflection and rumination, and that is a good thing.

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Jeffrey Plank
Crombie Taylor: Modern Architecture, Building Restoration and the Rediscovery of Louis Sullivan
Richmond, California: William Stout, 2010, 324 pp., 54 color and 111 b/w illus. $65, ISBN 9780979550812

John Caserta and Lynnette Widder, editors
Ira Rakatansky: As Modern as Tomorrow
Richmond, California: William Stout and Rhode Island School of Design, 2010, 207 pp., 74 color and 100 b/w illus. $40, ISBN 9780981966700

Though the global economy has crippled commercial architectural publishing in recent years, the monograph remains a surprisingly durable genre, and minor figures from the modern period continue to arouse the interests of scholars and audiences. The latest beneficiaries of this trend are Crombie Taylor of Chicago and Ira Rakatansky of Providence, two mid-century architects with clear connections to modernist masters.

Taylor is the more significant of the two, and Jeffrey Plank provides the more serious and extensive study. Crombie Taylor: Modern Architecture, Building Restoration and The Rediscovery of Louis Sullivan is a big book in every sense: well-researched, beautifully designed and printed. Charles Crombie Taylor (1914–1999) was a man of many interests and abilities. While he designed “spare, even severe” houses (13) that evoke a more reductive Mies van der Rohe, he also devoted many years to restoring Louis Sullivan masterworks and reconstructing Sullivan’s method of creating pattern and ornament. He did double-duty as an architectural historian and color photographer, earning NEH and NEA grants for experimental multiscreen presentations of historic buildings. He also served as director for Chicago’s Institute of Design (New Bauhaus), and later taught architectural history at the University of Southern California (USC) for several years. Plus he loved the English countryside. Plank weaves these “contradictory” facets together to create a seamless portrait of Taylor where each aspect of his work seems to complement and enrich the others (15).

If you have visited Adler & Sullivan’s Auditorium Building—the banquet hall, the Sullivan room, or the auditorium itself—you have experienced Taylor’s great achievement. He led the restoration work from 1954 to 1963, and that project clearly remains a masterwork in the field of historic preservation. When Taylor began, many original elements had been lost, and in particular the original polychromatic stencils were unknown and covered by as many as twenty coats of paint. As Plank documents, Taylor completed the restoration with “extraordinary fidelity,” giving attention to details “that were of no interest to modern architects” (58). One episode finds the architect delicately working sandpaper over a section of plaster all night long to finally reveal the original pattern. Taylor continued his “heroic advocacy for Sullivan” (88) with the restoration of the
Van Allen Department Store in Clinton, Iowa, where he initiated and managed the entire civic effort after finding the building vacant and in danger. “He tugged and pulled and charmed our citizens into a cadre of strong supporters,” the town’s mayor remarked (91).

Taylor developed a deep understanding of how Sullivan created ornament and pattern, with color and light, to provoke specific psychological effects. The book includes an especially important manuscript by Taylor entitled “Systems of Stencil Ornament of Louis Sullivan” (from a 1968 lecture at the Smithsonian Institution). For anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Sullivan’s design strategies, Taylor offers numerous clear insights previously unavailable. Plank also examines in detail how Taylor carefully photographed Sullivan’s buildings to accurately “reproduce the luminous quality” of the effects (84). Finally Plank concludes: “Taylor’s contributions to Sullivan studies with his building photographs and multi-screen slide programs are without peer in the second half of the twentieth century. No scholar produced more new visual evidence than Taylor. No scholar produced more visual information about Sullivan’s architectural polychromy than Taylor. No scholar described or interpreted Sullivan’s interiors with more fidelity to visual evidence than Taylor” (87).

By contrast, Taylor sought to “strip modernism to a quotidian clarity” (14) in his houses of the 1950s. It is difficult to imagine a more “platonic” architecture than Taylor achieved. Though reasonably well-published in their time, these houses seem to have been overlooked since then. A dozen are presented here, and Plank frames them, perhaps too briefly, in relation to “Mies’ towering presence” and as “important demonstrations of the limits of modernism” (14). These points could sustain much more elaboration. Surely other scholars will soon extend this work by analyzing Taylor’s houses in different contexts. A comparison to Craig Ellwood’s houses would be especially productive.

Plank has also uncovered a great deal of fascinating and historically significant supplemental information. He reveals, for instance, that Konrad Wachsmann photographed some of Taylor’s houses, and from the dozen-or-so photographs included here, it appears that Wachsmann could be included among the great modernist architectural photographers. Plank then extends the analysis by relating both Taylor’s buildings and Wachsmann’s representations to Bauhaus aesthetic principles. Elsewhere, a sidebar on Robert Bruce Tague and George Fred Keck explains more about Keck’s architecture (including Sigfried Giedeon’s dismissal of it) than any other secondary source in recent years.

A great monograph portrays the subject with both intimacy and critical distance, and here Plank has succeeded despite serious danger, since he collaborated with Taylor intermittently for more than twenty years. At times, Plank even needed to treat himself as a character in the story, and he seems to have avoided the problems that often accompany insider accounts. Crombie Taylor left a record of big ideas and impressive accomplishments; Jeffrey Plank has documented and interpreted these with a level of care and craft befitting his subject.

Ira Rakatansky (born 1919) practiced in Providence beginning in 1946, and editors John Caserta and Lynnette Widder demonstrate that “his work is the most direct example of Modernism in Rhode Island” (leaf). *Ira Rakatansky: As Modern as Tomorrow* recalls a solo practitioner strongly and directly influenced by Marcel Breuer. Rakatansky’s finest homes, like Breuer’s, assimilated Bauhaus austerity, Cubist spatial complexity, American construction practices, and midcentury domestic touches such as flagstone, redwood siding, and Knoll furniture. Though it is not a biography, Rakatansky emerges in a variety of guises: a fastidious draftsman who “was not part of a like-minded architectural community” (11), a wheelbarrow-pushing laborer, a witty and clever personality beloved by his clients.

A principal strength of the Rakatansky book is its attention to the modernist milieu at the Harvard GSD, where Rakatansky studied in the 1930s, and Breuer’s office, where he worked in the 1940s. Walter Gropius looms large in the background and occasionally the foreground. A notable anecdote: at Harvard Rakatansky designed a synagogue as his bachelor’s thesis. One evening, Gropius stopped at his drafting table to examine a shading detail comprised of aluminum louvers. He “returned the next morning with a series of his own studies of the detail problem,” Rakatansky recalled vividly in a recent interview (36). Elsewhere, revealing details are offered about the emphasis on construction methods at Harvard in the thirties and forties, and curricular disputes between Gropius and Joseph Hudnut.

Joan Ockman’s introductory essay “Why Is a Modern House” delivers some essential perspective and context. (Ockman borrowed the title from a 1949 *Splendor* magazine article where “why” was capitalized, because the question “what is a modern house?” had already been exhaustively answered at that time.) The essay compensates for the book’s unfortunately-futuristic subtitle by emphasizing Rakatansky’s “practical idealism” and showing how his houses “precisely answered the needs of the postwar family” (25).

While his importance to Rhode Island’s architectural history is clear, Rakatansky’s larger critical and creative contribution is difficult to discern. Did he innovate? In a series of essays entitled “Construction Transparency,” which are peppered among twenty-one selected projects, Widder argues that Rakatansky’s great achievement is to be found in his working drawings, particularly the custom-designed details, as they reflect his deep knowledge of building practices and craft. His hand-drawn plans and sections comprise an unusually large portion of the book’s imagery. Widder finds these documents “a source of real pleasure” (31), and she offers highly-detailed analyses of specific construction details. She even takes one project sheet by sheet. While such a treatment clearly establishes Rakatansky’s competence and sensitivity, it is not clear that these qualities differentiated him from his more accomplished peers.

Due to the emphasis on construction details, the editors unfortunately overlooked some important social issues. Rakatansky’s minority status as a Jew is mentioned but not seriously pursued. Was the Jewish community in Providence crucially supportive to his career? How did his
synagogue plans embody an attitude toward the religion? Also, and perhaps most provocatively, Rakatansky’s oeuvre includes at least six buildings for unions or labor activities. None of these is even mentioned outside the appendix, and the larger issue of the possible concordance between modern architecture and organized labor—which is of immense interest—again goes unexplored.

Ultimately Rakatansky’s buildings, while tasteful, resonate mainly for their ordinariness. Elsewhere, Ockman has developed the term “normative” to describe the typical works by minor figures that define a movement or style.1 In this sense, Ira Rakatansky surveys the career of a quintessentially normative midcentury modernist.

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Note

Michael W. Fazio
Landscape of Transformations: Architecture and Birmingham, Alabama
Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010, 300 pp., 10 color and 111 b/w illus. $44.95, ISBN 9781572336872

Allen R. Durough
The Architectural Legacy of Wallace A. Rayfield, Pioneer Black Architect of Birmingham, Alabama
Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010, 176 pp., 159 b/w illus. $32.95, ISBN 9780817316839

Birmingham, Alabama, still struggles with the ghosts of the 1960s, when its name became synonymous with racial strife and injustice. Two new books deal with the city’s complex legacy as manifested in its architecture. One is an architectural and landscape history of exceptional breadth and insight, the other an introduction to the city’s premier early-twentieth-century African American architect.

In Landscape of Transformations: Architecture and Birmingham, Alabama, Michael Fazio, emeritus professor of architecture at Mississippi State University, has produced an absorbing book, a nuanced and many-sided account of an evolving urban setting. The author quickly tells us what the book is not: “neither a guidebook nor a comprehensive survey of Birmingham’s architecture” (xiii). Hence its subtitle, “Architecture and Birmingham,” rather than “Architecture of Birmingham.” The distinction is important. For Fazio, who combines the sensibilities of a social historian and cultural geographer with the eye of an architect, Birmingham’s built environment and natural setting become the means by which to interpret its star-crossed history.

This is a book much in the spirit of Peirce Lewis’s 1975 study, New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape. Key personalities, local and national events, and the physical landscape move in and out of a lively narrative like the actors and stage sets of a play, their interactivity crystallized through a skillful and judicious selection of signature buildings that help tell the Birmingham story. Within the narrow constraints of a purely architectural perspective, few if any of these structures would rise to a level of national significance. But in the hands of a scholar attuned to broader historical currents and to the associational attributes of buildings and place, they illuminate the life of an upstart post–Civil War southern industrial city of vaunting ambition, a community often hobbled by circumstances beyond its control and by a pervasive, self-destructive ethos rooted in racial and socioeconomic injustices. This is a complex tale that could have founded in the hands of a lesser scholar, but Fazio handles it beautifully, not least because he possesses a graceful and lucid writing style.

Fazio’s prologue, provocatively titled “The Birmingham Problem,” sets the scene by recounting the observations of critics who, from the city’s earliest decades to the volatile 1960s, noted both the promise and problems of a place the local Babbitry called “the Magic City” or, more soberly, “the Pittsburgh of the South.” Resident progressives and outsiders alike encountered a political culture loath to acknowledge, much less confront, issues such as public health, sanitation, and access to civic amenities—issues exacerbated in a racially segregated society. Fazio shows us how these problems were mirrored in Birmingham’s built environment.

The book’s chronologically organized chapters move us forward from Birmingham’s preindustrial origins to the opening years of the twenty-first century. Along the way, by never losing the human thread of the story, the author makes even esoteric industrial processes and related construction interesting and accessible. In chapters headed “Depression in the City of Perpetual Promise” and “The Setting for Civil Rights,” we read about a mid-twentieth century downtown landscape of surprising urbanity, of commercial architecture that drew inspiration from Chicago and New York, and about the city’s grudging acceptance of New Deal public housing. In “Shaping the Residential Landscape,” we learn of early-twentieth-century developers who—envisioning elite residential enclaves that would blanket the hills overlooking the city center—engaged first-rate landscape talent such as the Olmsteds, New York’s Samuel Parsons, and Boston’s Warren Manning to turn dream into reality. Meanwhile, a large percentage of those laboring in Birmingham’s mills, mines, and furnaces—especially African Americans—lived in conditions as fetid as any in urban America. Eventually Birmingham’s industrial foundations would collapse, and Fazio’s narrative concludes by looking at the city’s more recent reorientation around a hi-tech, university-based economy.

Says Fazio: “I took the manmade constructions and natural landscapes as my ‘text’” (xiii). Thus the associational and symbolic qualities of a building or landscape—not just its inherent artistic or aesthetic merit—assume significance. A nondescript Trailways Bus Station—scene of a violent incident during the 1961 Freedom Ride—becomes part of Fazio’s text alongside the city’s Holabird and Root skyscraper courthouse of 1932, or its High Victorian...