been possible,” as the panel put it. Apart from the lavatories, often called the “English corners,” there were small back stairways and mezzanine spaces, where the servants’ rooms were located, often close to their masters and mistresses. Corridors were rare; they became popular in Paris only with the emergence in the nineteenth century of the bourgeois apartment. Although the toilets were rarely described, by the middle of the seventeenth century they appeared frequently in plans, notably in those of the engraver Jean Marot.

The cabinet presented in the exhibition was decorated with eighteenth-century wood panels originally from Hôtel de Polignac. It was a small room connected to the chamber but more private, and used to store and display rare and precious objects. It could be the culminating point of a suite of rooms as in the seventeenth-century Hôtel de Lauzun, or a small pavilion facing the garden, even an overhang as in Hôtel de Retz. Larger cabinets also existed; they were used frequently in the eighteenth century to hold private meetings and to engage in business. The Enlightenment saw the development of scholars’ cabinets used as libraries or natural science collections.

The final room of the exhibition’s suite was the gallery. Paved in black-and-white mosaic, its contents included a Franz-Xaver Winterhalter portrait of banker and art collector Édouard André. The gallery was the space to display paintings, statues, furniture, and other precious objects. After all but disappearing following the reign of Louis XIV, it was reintroduced on a much larger scale in the nineteenth century as a ballroom. The gallery usually faced the garden, which was simulated here by a space with a green carpeted floor with vases, mirrors, and a trellised wall.

The chronological section of the exhibition used large models, plans, sections, and elevations to present in considerable detail four emblematic Parisian hôtels: the medieval Hôtel de Cluny (1480–1510), the Baroque Hôtel Lambert (1639–44), designed by Le Vau; the Neoclassical Hôtel de Thélusson (1779–80), designed by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, and finally the nineteenth-century Palais Rose (1896), designed by Ernest Sanson for the dandy Boni de Castellane on Avenue Foch, which was demolished in 1969.

The six thematic niches at the end of the exhibition were dedicated to the complex relationship between the hôtel and the city. If one aspect of the typical hôtel, situated between courtyard and garden, was protected from the burdens of street life, the sites chosen for these sometimes monumental structures, which often faced the Seine, also demonstrated a desire to make pleasurable use of the city’s scenery and the theater of everyday urban life in order to see without being seen. Carefully designed portals provide further evidence of the owners’ will to be noticed. Plans, engravings, and paintings presented here also explain architects’ difficult task slotting these mansions into the urban fabric that often presented them with extremely irregular blocks. Such a difficulty was overcome by buying adjacent lots, as in Henri IV’s Place Royale, or by trellises in the garden, which could impart a sense of depth to boundary walls. Parisian hôtels eventually suffered from the city’s social and economic transformations. Many, such as the Hôtel de Brienne and the Hôtel de la Vrillière, survive as foreign embassies and governmental offices, but these adaptations inevitably damaged the original design; others have been progressively occupied at ground level by shops, while their upper stories have been broken into apartments. Even artisans and small industry may find a place in their courtyards, as often happened in the Marais. Many were demolished altogether. The exhibition particularly stressed the idea of the mansion devoured by the city, with its new occupants erecting partition walls, and adding new stories or mezzanines.

Other niches focused upon the architectural façades, the splendors of interior decoration and the transformations of the pleasure garden, where one could stroll and gratify the senses. Even on these narrow plots, which were always enclosed and planted with trees, it proved possible to insert entire English gardens, as occurred in the Hôtel Beaumarchais.

Visitors wanting to know about the formal and artistic characteristics of this key Parisian architectural type across the last six centuries, as well as the social rituals staged within them and the tastes of the owners, were more than satisfied. Much work, however, remains to be done to understand the structure of the households that occupied these mansions. We know too little about the place accorded to children and the elderly and even less about how the spaces of work and service. These stories, although they would be accompanied by a less aesthetically stunning range of objects, should prove equally engaging.

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Related Publication

Architectures 80: Une chronique métropolitaine (Architecture of the 80s: A metropolitan chronology)
Pavillon de l’Arsenal, Paris
3 May–25 September 2011

Architectural postmodernism has become topical in recent years and it seems it will remain so for some time. On the one hand, the proliferation of publications and exhibitions reflects the recent research led by historians who were often themselves educated during the two last decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the public seems to enjoy rediscovering the architecture from a time near enough to evoke nostalgia, yet old enough for its worst failures to be forgotten. The blooming of postmodernism coincided in France with the political, economic, and cultural upheavals that followed the change of government of 1981. An exhibit on view the Pavillon de l’Arsenal in Paris during the summer of 2011 confirmed this growing interest in a recent architectural past, which still needs to be fully documented.

Architectures 80: Une chronique métropolitaine was curated by Lionel Engrand and Soline Nivet, two researchers of the ACS Lab of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris–Malaquais, and designed by architect Christian Biecher.
This exhibit offered a chronology rather than an analytic history of the architecture built in Paris and in its metropolitan area in the 1980s. The portrayal of factual events outweighed an explanation of their causes; the curators presented architectural and urban projects according to completion and publication dates, rather than when they were conceived. Mainly assembled with press materials from the period, the show was a kind of “the very best of,” reminiscent of collections of pop music from the period. The selection of the projects did not really challenge the established hierarchies in the way that a critical examination of postmodernism in France might have done.

The exhibition was nevertheless enjoyable for many French visitors because they could come across old figures of national pride, such as Alain Sarfati, Claude Vasconi, and Paul Chemetov; international stars such as Ricardo Bofill, Ieoh Ming Pei, and Aldo Rossi; and also some young guns of the period, including Jean Nouvel, Philippe Starck, and Dominique Perrault (Figure 1). All of them took part in the quarrel between the old modernists and the young postmodernists that invigorated the Parisian scene in the 1980s. One side, represented by Henri Ciriani, still claimed a social agenda and promoted a stylistic revival of early Corbusier. On the other side, architects such as Christian de Portzamparc played with eclecticism and gradually freed themselves from political commitment.

In the French capital, and even more so in its suburbs, works from this period, such as Chemetov’s Ministère des Finances, Nouvel’s Institut du Monde Arabe, Spreckelsen’s Grande Arche de la Défense, and Bofill’s Palais d’Abraxas were expressionist and monumental (Figure 2). The exhibition included many smaller projects as well, which relied on historical quotations and ironical winks to announce their postmodern stance. Later in the decade, the doctrinal and professional crises were offset by the unprecedented attention paid to architecture by the media in France. Newspapers and television, in particular, gave new prominence to architects as was shown in the Pavillon de l’Arsenal exhibition.

The few original documents were displayed in a separate section devoted to drawings. Here one could discover sketches and sophisticated presentation drawings, including those by Bernard Tschumi for the Parc de la Villette. Many of those drawings, valuable in and of themselves and unrelated to any work in existence, fed a booming art market. Toward the end of the decade, architects were as much cultural celebrities as fashion designers and pop stars.

Overall, the exhibition was possibly more impressive than instructive. It captured the spirit of the time, but did not really enlighten the visitor about the forces in power, the source of real or feigned antagonisms, or the major stylistic tendencies. One could walk by the figure of François Mitterrand several times without
understanding what the arrival of left-wing politicians to power implied for architects, especially in a city that remained governed by their conservative opponents. Fortunately, the exhibition catalog fills in the gaps. A dozen essays written by renowned academics such as Jean-Louis Violeau, Pierre Chabard, and André Lortie pierced the surface of the subject and enhanced an understanding of the major issues of postmodernism in France. These included the return and then the end of history, the increasing role of images and of the media, and the profound changes in urban policy in Paris with the rise of the Zones d’Aménagement Concerté (ZAC). It offered a well-balanced account, divided between a nostalgic photo album and a multidisciplinary examination of the less visual aspects of the French architecture and urbanism of the 1980s. Here the Pavillon de l’Arsenal stretched a little beyond its usual role of promoting municipal policy in architecture and urbanism and began to reestablish itself as an institution which welcomes enlightening exhibitions.

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Related Publication

Figure 1 Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design

Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design
MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles
September 2011–January 2012

Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design presented a retrospective of the work of writer, architecture critic, and unabashed booster of Southern California modernism Esther McCoy (Figures 1, 2). The exhibition was housed in the building that inspired McCoy’s initial foray into architectural criticism: Rudolph M. Schindler’s 1922 King’s Road residence in Los Angeles. Drawing from the McCoy papers in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, curators Kimberli Meyer and Susan Morgan presented a wide range of her writings in order to affirm her “unassailable role as a key figure in American modernism,” as introductory wall copy explained. With its Los Angeles-centric focus, however, Sympathetic Seeing at best indirectly made the case for McCoy’s national profile. The exhibit was nonetheless a reminder of McCoy’s prodigious talent and range as a writer and of her tireless crusade to win for California architects the accolades she believed they deserved but had long been denied. Indeed, when she turned to architectural criticism in 1945, McCoy became one of the first to argue that California architecture warranted serious consideration and study.