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

Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design
MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles
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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.
The McCoy exhibit was the MAK Center’s contribution to Pacific Standard Time, a multi-institutional, Getty-led initiative to showcase “Art in Los Angeles” from 1945 to 1980. With exhibits staged at over sixty participating institutions, the goal of Pacific Standard Time, according to the Getty brochure, was to celebrate ... how the Southland became a great center for art and culture.” While there is much to celebrate about this art and culture as well as McCoy’s contribution to an appreciation of it, boosterism is inevitable when a region stages such an undertaking. In Sympathetic Seeing, a celebratory tone, rather than contextual analysis, characterized the depiction of McCoy as well as the architects whose work she championed. Taken together, the exhibit and catalog showcased McCoy’s gifts as a writer but also her somewhat insular reading of Southern California architecture.

Touring Schindler’s house is never as satisfying as when one has McCoy’s words to mediate the experience. Wall displays recounted the story of how, upon her first visit to the King’s Road House in 1941, she “could not make out what was happening. The leap from concrete to clerestory to ‘sleeping baskets’ was disorienting.” As she walked through the house, McCoy observed: “the very act of movement began to slow down the images, and the forms unfolded slowly.” This aptly describes both the house and why it served as an ideal backdrop for and accompanying piece to Sympathetic Seeing.

While McCoy is best known for her architectural criticism, little has been written about her pre-1945 pursuits. Meyer and Morgan succeeded in painting a more complete portrait of McCoy through an impressive range of correspondence, short stories, articles, books, and essays penned by McCoy during her time as a draftsperson. Indeed, the exhibit’s strength lies in the juxtaposition of McCoy’s words, read and contemplated, with the context of Schindler’s residence. McCoy combined a rhetorician’s power of persuasion with a poet’s sensibility for interpreting space, and the exhibit is a reminder of the “immediacy and consideration” of her prose, as Morgan writes in the catalog, which allow “a reader to look over her shoulder and revisit where she’s been.”

Clearly, the curators wished for visitors to have this opportunity in the Schindler house. Minor details such as visitor-friendly seating with views into the garden, and McCoy’s books and articles within reach, invited contemplation of McCoy’s and Schindler’s work. In the fourth room, visitors could be seated and read wall panels with McCoy’s vivid descriptions of the room itself.

The first room in the exhibit begins in the early 1960s, with an exploration of McCoy’s role in an unsuccessful effort to prevent the demolition of Irving Gill’s 1916 Walter L. Dodge house. A series of photos of the building are framed by a blow-up display of McCoy’s quote, “The Dodge House is a record of the genius which blossomed in this climate, this place.” Located up the street from Schindler’s residence, the Dodge house came under threat of demolition in the early 1960s, as the value of the land it occupied soared in the wake of a contested zoning change. Photographs, newspaper clippings, and correspondence throughout the 1960s, placed in a display case, tell the story, leading up to the building’s surprise demolition in February 1970. Documents describe interventions by McCoy (and others), as well as her eloquent descriptions of the building and ultimate impression that “losing the Dodge House is like seeing a Braque kicked down the street.”

The reminder of Los Angeles’s early modern masterpiece is striking but offered in isolation. With no additional context on whether McCoy continued in preservation advocacy—given that the Dodge house saga paralleled the 1962 passage of Los Angeles’s Cultural Heritage Ordinance and the 1966 enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act—one is left wondering how (or whether) this story fits within McCoy’s larger project of advocating for Southern California modernism.

An overall lack of context for the documents exploring McCoy’s political activism creates a similar dilemma. Wall displays and an assortment of documents in a display case tell the story of McCoy’s work on behalf of organizations such as International Labor Defense, the legal arm of the Communist Party. Here one also learns that McCoy’s earliest published comments on the built environment centered on critiques of substandard housing and advocacy for the 1937 Wagner-Steagall Housing Act. Poster-size versions of McCoy’s 1937 articles on Los Angeles, such as “Slums Are Cancer Spots” from United Progressive News, illustrate the extent to which, from her earliest years, McCoy’s voice as an advocate was fully formed.

In the exhibit and catalog, the documents celebrating McCoy’s political activism largely begin and end with the 1930s, as the tone of her postwar architectural criticism favored a style-driven, rather than sociopolitical, interpretation. This invites speculation as to what McCoy wrote (or believed) about the demise of public housing in Los Angeles or the personal and professional fall-out as its proponents, some of whom were architects admired by McCoy, were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The catalog includes a bulleted timeline, but these events are not always tied to McCoy’s work (and the catalog, with no index, complicates the task of searching for answers). In the exhibit’s final room, we learn that the FBI kept a dossier on McCoy during the McCarthy era. As remarkable as these documents are individually, without context they shed insufficient light on the depth of McCoy’s political engagement and career. Additional background research might have helped clarify these questions, given the curators’ goal of placing
McCoy in the larger context of American modernism.

These issues reflect the challenge of designing an exhibit around someone who devoted their career to commenting on the work of others. Yet one would have hoped to read slightly less of McCoy’s views on John Entenza or Schindler and more from others commenting on McCoy herself. An inordinate amount of material seems devoted to Entenza and his Case Study House program, for example, while the exhibit does not (though the catalog does briefly) contextualize McCoy’s many columns in the popular Los Angeles Times Home magazine, whose weekly explorations of the region’s midcentury modernism are likely to have done more to increase public acceptance for new ideas than Arts and Architecture.

Melding advocacy and architectural history, McCoy became the most articulate author of an implication that California’s regional modernism was, in fact, regionally exceptional. This tone was subtle but also discernible in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s own contribution to Pacific Standard Time, California Design 1930–1965: “Living in a Modern Way.” McCoy’s expansive narratives on the region’s architecture contrast with her easy generalizations about “Eastern” architects, editors and critics, or “the Europeans.” Indeed, when referring to the myriad responses to modernism in the 1950s Los Angeles, McCoy summed up the aspirations of the era’s architects as either “European inspired” or “Wright inspired” (133). Although misconceived, McCoy’s comments reflect the long-time divide between those favoring individual, expressionistic design and those arguing for universal, machine-age aesthetics, a schism that had been part of the discourse on modernism going back to the earliest years of the German Werkbund.

Yet, what stood out in Sympathetic Seeing was not just how breezily McCoy’s findings were delivered, but how little context was offered in their presentation. In the audio lecture playing in the exhibit’s second room, McCoy argued that Schindler was not popular with editors “from the East” or Europe because their preferred “style” was the International Style. While it is unclear where this left European architects such as Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn, or Alvar Aalto, the comments reflect an us-versus-them approach to Californian architecture that remains unquestioned in both the exhibit and the catalog.

In fact, elsewhere Morgan has argued that McCoy’s seminal 1960 study Five California Architects (1960) identified the “indisputably West Coast origins” of modern architectural design. Although McCoy might have agreed with the notion of a special path made possible by “this climate, this place,” as she said of Irving Gill’s Dodge house of 1914–16, not even she went this far in her conclusions.

It is a testament to McCoy’s influence that a thread of regional exceptionalism became woven through much of the body of architectural history on Southern California. The logic of the argument seemed impeccable. In Southern California, as McCoy once wrote, “pressed by climate and way of life,” an idiom emerged blending the “high road” of Mies van der Rohe and the Case Study House program with the more organic, expressionistic “low road” of architects such as Schindler, Frank Lloyd Wright, and John Lautner.3 McCoy asserted that Los Angeles, “much more than any place else” had “so much interesting work” (126). What went unexplored in McCoy’s work and the MAK Center exhibit about her, though, was the movement’s wider scope, which is apparent in a glance through Elizabeth Mock’s 1944 Built in USA or any number of postwar architectural magazines.4 Given Meyer and Morgan’s desire to situate McCoy within the context of American modernism, this might have provided an entry point for exploring the bigger picture.

If Sympathetic Seeing tended to celebrate rather than critically examine McCoy’s work, though, it was pioneering in its own way. It reaffirmed McCoy’s gifts as a writer and rhetorician, and her legacy and influence, thus far largely unexamined, in putting California’s architecture on the map. The task of placing the work she championed into a broader, more comparative context falls to today’s historians.

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Related Publication

Notes
2. Ibid., 104.
3. As quoted in Meyer and Morgan, Sympathetic Seeing, 78.

George Nelson: Architect, Writer, Designer, Teacher
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany
12 September 2008–3 May 2009
Fundacion Pedro Barrie de la Maza, A Coruna, Spain
15 June–29 November 2009
Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma
2 February–1 May 2011
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas
6 June–29 September 2011
Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington
29 October 2011–12 February 2012
Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
16 June–14 October 2012

In 1946 D. J. De Pree, director of the furniture company Herman Miller, hired George Nelson (1908–1986) as a furniture designer, and a year later he created the position of design director especially for...