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 1950s Los Angeles, McCoy summed up the aspirations of the era’s architects as either “European inspired” or “Wright inspired” (133). Although miscast, 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.

DEBI HOWELL-ARDILA
South Pasadena, California

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...
Covering about three decades of Nelson’s career, corresponding to the most active years of his office, the traveling exhibition included over 220 objects presented in thematic groups: the two largest addressed furniture for the home and systems for the office; there were also a wall devoted to clocks and an area devoted to the 1959 United States Information Agency (USIA) exhibit in Moscow. Nelson’s work in graphic design was displayed throughout, primarily in the form of brochures and catalogs related to the adjacent pieces. Similarly, his contributions to multimedia were shown through videos located according to subject.

In his first decade as a designer, Nelson focused primarily on the home. Reflecting his interest in standardization and modularity, he developed furniture lines based on relatively few basic forms and dimensions, and a limited number of standardized parts that could be assembled to produce a variety of furniture pieces. These characteristics were evident in the Basic Cabinet series (begun 1946), the Rosewood Case series (1952), a group of “miniature chests” on pedestals (1954), and one example of a modular storage system. Although chairs from Nelson’s Steelframe group were included, most of the chairs and sofas on display reflected the singularity of Nelson’s designs for seating: the Slat Bench (1945), Coconut Chair (1955), Kangaroo Chair (1956), Marshmallow Sofa (1956), Pretzel Chair (1958), and others. Hanging from the ceiling was a cluster of Bubble Lamps (1952)—iconic examples of midcentury modern design. Nearby, a model of the Experimental Home project (1957) showed how Nelson applied the ideas of standardization, modularity, and assembly of prefabricated parts to architecture in this unrealized project.

Vitra provided much of the casework along with the objects. In the home furnishings area, objects were exhibited at floor level and at a second level, 58 inches above the floor. Some objects were, therefore, above eye level, exposing their undersides to viewers—not normally the way furniture would be seen.

The second major area reflected Nelson’s focus on the workspace, culminating in his Action Office system of the early 1960s. Nelson’s early Herman Miller furniture included an L-shaped desk, a concept he introduced in 1948. Nelson’s office furniture systems, the Executive Office Group (1949) and the colorful Modern Management Group (originally Middle Management Group, 1955), again applied the ideas of standardization and modularity. But office design evolved rapidly as a result of the open office plan, based on rationalization of office processes and workflow, developed by the Quickborn Team in Germany about 1952. In response, Nelson’s office collaborated with the Herman Miller Research Corporation, headed by Robert Probst, to develop the Action Office line (1964, later renamed Action Office 1). Nelson, Probst, and Herman Miller argued that Action Office was fundamentally different from earlier office furniture, creating a total office environment, with multiple types of work tables, shelf and storage units, roll-top desks, and related elements. Although Action Office 2 (1968) added a panelized partition system, allowing full realization of an office landscape, it was largely Probst’s work, not Nelson’s, and therefore was not included in the exhibition.

The breadth of Nelson’s activities was reflected in a wall display of clocks, products of Nelson’s thirty-five-year collaboration with the Howard Miller Clock Company beginning in 1947. Nelson argued that people tell time primarily by the position of the clock hands, not by reading the numbers. Nelson’s office produced an extraordinary number of clocks from the functional to the fanciful—virtually all without numerals.

Nelson’s contributions to exhibition and showroom design were illustrated by focusing on the American National Exhibition in Moscow (1959). The largest exhibit of American culture ever shown in the Soviet Union, it prompted the famous Kitchen Debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev. The USIA, a frequent client, appointed Nelson chief designer. Nelson’s office created a modular cubical “jungle gym” of 1%-by-1%-inch steel angles within which it was possible to display a wide variety of objects, drawings, and photographs. The Vitra show included a model of a large portion of the jungle.
gym, a full-scale reconstruction of a small portion (four cubes) to give a sense of its actual scale, and a video that showed its installation in Moscow.

Other videos located throughout the third-floor galleries highlighted Nelson’s creative use of media as well as his interest in the entire human-made environment, and at times, conveyed his sense of humor. Several videos, _Art-X_ (1952), _Countdown_ and _Requiem_ (1961), and _The Civilized City_ (1974) displayed his fascination with images and with the character of the American environment. The most powerful of the videos was the twenty-minute _A Problem of Design: How to Kill People_, shown on public television in 1960, in which Nelson presented the history of weapons technology as an example of what designers can do. His fundamental argument was that designers shape the things that society wants and for which it will pay; the underlying message was a sharp critique of the arms race in the era of the Cold War.

Overall, the show was visually rich presentation of Nelson’s three decades of design leadership. Short texts introduced the exhibition and each major thematic area. Occasional quotations from Nelson, inscribed on a wall, helped to interpret the exhibits. The residential furniture display, for example, was accompanied by Nelson’s 1953 statement about the house:

_The house_ has evolved into a construction of almost alarming delicacy and fragility. Its walls have become thin posts between sheets of glass. Its rooms are being absorbed into spaces whose edges are hard to define, and its interior and exterior are becoming increasingly hard to disentangle. When the walls disappear, the only place left for furniture is out in the open. Hence silhouette becomes important. Lack of weight, relative transparency and very elegant silhouettes are qualities of the best of contemporary designs.

Captions adjacent to each object identified the name and dates of design and production; longer descriptive texts in small type were found on the nearest wall.

With its thematic organization, the show conveyed the extraordinary range of Nelson’s interests. In contrast to what can be found on the web, where a search would likely yield images of objects individually, more than two hundred objects could seen as a group and compared across categories. It was more difficult, however, for visitors to capture a sense of the trajectory of Nelson’s career and his evolution as a designer, or to understand how he was able to produce such diversity of objects.

Those who sought deeper understanding of the history or context of the exhibit could turn to the accompanying book, _George Nelson: Architect, Writer, Designer, Teacher_. With an introduction, eight essays by scholars and curators, a comprehensive list of works, bibliography, and index, this catalog provides a much deeper scholarly framework for understanding Nelson’s career. Together the show and the catalog convey the breadth of Nelson’s creative achievement and fill a significant gap in the history of midcentury modern design.

JEFFREY KARL OCHSNER
University of Washington

**Related Publication**