sequence, moving from left to right, was also broadly chronological, although, again, not strictly. Some of the drawings included were truly impressive, such as the 5-foot-high detail drawing of G. G. Scott’s design for the Nikolaikirche, Hamburg (1844), or the marvelously exotic and exquisitely rendered perspective drawing of William Burges’s original scheme for the Crimean War Memorial Church, Istanbul (1856). Here, in some form or other, were also to be found a number of the “greatest hits” of British imperial architecture, such as the Viceroy’s House and St. Martin’s Garrison Church, Delhi; the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa; and the Victoria Terminus, Bombay. But Hind has also managed to dig out some intriguing and little-known gems, such as Robert Weir Shulz’s neo-Byzantine design for All Saints’ Cathedral, Khartoum (1906–21), and C. F. A. Voysey’s 1905 design for a house for Dr. Leigh Canney in Aswan, Egypt (1905).

Attempting to curate an exhibition dealing with such a large and geographically expansive subject was always bound to run into trouble. For a start, the title Empire Builders was a misnomer. Much of the material exhibited was in locations that were not in fact part of Britain’s empire. This led to confusion as average visitors were left with little sense of what Britain’s empire actually encompassed (unless they knew already, as they perused urban planning schemes from 1820s Kentucky, church designs from 1870s Rome, and cast-iron market halls from late nineteenth-century Chile. If the exhibition was never really intended to be about Britain’s empire, then it ought to have been given an alternative, slightly more innocuous title.

This problem was not helped by the fact that no contextual information was provided about the nature of British imperial expansion and decline. Such context would have helped situate the material much more effectively, both historically and intellectually. To be fair to the curator, he was not given much space. The temporary architecture gallery at the V&A is tiny—far too small for an exhibition of this potential scope. This left little room for explanatory captions, as the walls on both sides of the gallery were taken up almost entirely with drawings. In this respect, the exhibit was only ever going to scratch the surface of this vast subject.

The choice of drawings was at times odd, too. For instance, the section on religion included a pencil sketch of a half-timbered church building erected in Shanghai. The RIBA Drawings Collection has many better images than this, showing structures that not only were located within British colonial territory but also are important examples of climatic adaptation in modern ecclesiological design.

The other problem was that the exhibits seemed to have been restricted to material held in the RIBA collection. The reasons for this were unclear, particularly as the V&A itself has a large and superb collection of historic photographs and architectural drawings that could have been used to supplement the RIBA material. The result was an artificially circumscripted and therefore not particularly representative picture of the type and nature of architecture that constituted the British empire (for example, nothing by Pugin was included). To be sure, what was exhibited was arranged clearly, with appropriate and informative captions, but there simply was not enough of it for the exhibition to present any kind of coherent picture. If the V&A was serious about putting on such an exhibition, it ought to have given Empire Builders greater scope (and space), drawing on material from outside its own collections. In this respect, the exhibition was a missed opportunity.

This situation was in stark contrast, it has to be said, to what was touted as “part two” of this display, The Brits Who Built the Modern World, held down the road at RIBA headquarters, 66 Portland Place, 13 February–27 May 2014. That exhibition showcased the global work of mostly still-living British architects—most notably, Terry Farrell, Norman Foster, Nicholas Grimshaw, Michael Hopkins, and Richard Rogers—a kind of “cool Britannia” for architects. It is clear that many more resources were poured into this exhibition, partly, one can assume, as a self-promotional tool for the RIBA and the architects themselves. If only half as much effort had been put into organizing and curating the V&A exhibit, the outcome might have lived up to its billing—after all, the amount of work carried out by Foster and company’s now almost forgotten predecessors, both in terms of quantity and duration (even quality, in some cases), far outstripped what was on display at Portland Place.

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Wasson-Tucker (acting curator of industrial design, 1944–45) were responsible for a number of exhibitions, including Useful Objects under $10 (1944) and Tomorrow’s Small House (1945). This work, Kinchin lamented, was often overlooked. It was not all bad, though. Many women benefited from participating in a series of design competitions organized by the museum between 1946 and 1951, and they were exhibited in the Good Design shows (1950–55). Between 1946 and 1956, Edgar Kaufmann Jr., director of industrial design, actively collected work by women, including Anni Albers, Ray Eames, and Eva Zeisel, all represented in Designing Modern Women. These inclusions, Kinchin asserted, complicated the definition of modernism propagated by the museum.2 With Designing Modern Women, Kinchin and curatorial assistant Luke Baker attempted to address the issues raised in Kinchin’s essay, extending the period beyond that of the midcentury.

The exhibition filled half of MoMA’s third-floor design gallery. Drawing on objects from the museum’s collection, the curators organized the material into six thematic sections, arranged chronologically around the room: “New Women, New Design 1890–1939,” “Representing the New Woman 1890–1938,” “Kitchen Transformations 1920–1950,” “Humanizing Modernism 1940–1960,” “Pop and Plastic 1960s,” and “Punk to Postmodernism 1970–1990.” At the center of the room was a display case with smaller items, mostly ceramics and pottery.

Famous collaborations were highlighted throughout the exhibition. Chairs represented the work of wife-and-husband teams Margaret MacDonald and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Aino and Alvar Aalto, Ray and Charles Eames, and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. Other collaborations included those of Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier, and Brownie Wise and Earl Tupper. “Kitchen Transformations” revisited the 2010–11 exhibition Counter Space.3 One new addition was Perriand’s kitchen for the Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles (1952), recently acquired by MoMA. Perriand, who worked in Le Corbusier’s studio from 1927 to 1937, was inspired by Japanese and French kitchens.

Her design was both efficient and comfortable, responding to critiques of earlier modern kitchens for being too laboratory-like. It was Tupper and not Wise who invented the ubiquitous plastic containers, but it was Wise’s marketing strategy—Tupperware Home Parties, illustrated in the exhibition with a video—that made Tupperware a household name.

Female patrons and consumers were also given credit in the exhibition. The Schröder House (1923–24), by Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schröder-Schräder, was represented with a model. Schröder was a recent widow when she commissioned the house from Rietveld, and then worked alongside him to develop the innovative program and design. A clerestory window by Frank Lloyd Wright was included in the exhibition because it was commissioned by Queene Ferry Cooney for a playhouse. Consuming Women (Women as Consumers), a 1967 film by the Jam Handy Organization, was also part of the exhibition.

The work of curators Mock and Wasson-Tucker was presented in “Humanizing Modernism.” The title of this section, ambiguous on its own, came from one of Kinchin’s arguments in the 2010 essay. According to Kinchin, Kaufmann’s program of competitions and exhibitions “humanized” the design ideals of modernism. Kaufmann introduced softer items such as “plants, textiles, and ceramics” into domestic tableaus and directly addressed female consumers through the media.4

Although the curators of Designing Modern Women are to be commended for their ambition, this ultimately was the shortcoming of the exhibition. The curators themselves, in the introductory wall text, recognized the limitations of the collection on which they were drawing. The broad time span allowed for very little depth of analysis. Any one of the six sections could have made a good exhibition on its own, and one more appropriately focused for the scale of the space.

The most interesting items were in the “Punk to Postmodernism” section. They included a Guerrilla Girls poster, magazine covers for various feminist art magazines, Sheila Levant de Bretteville’s poster for a 1975 conference at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, and Joanne Stamerra’s “Erase Sexism at MoMA.” These were all represented through photographs, and none had identification labels. Labeling them would have required addressing the explicit attacks on established institutions raised by these images. Despite efforts by MoMA to include women in its collections and exhibitions, Designing Modern Women only reinforced their ghettoization within the institution. Why, for instance, was Perriand’s kitchen not included in the recent exhibition on Le Corbusier? It is one thing to explore the role of collaborations in an exhibition on women, but one can only hope that MoMA’s curators change how they approach every exhibition. Identifying feminist critiques would be a good place to start.

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Notes
2. Ibid., 286, 295, 298.

Museo delle Terre Nuove
(Museum of New Towns)
San Giovanni Valdarno
Inaugurated 21 December 2013

The Museum of New Towns is housed in the prestigious Palazzo di Arnolfo in the town of San Giovanni Valdarno, 20 miles southeast of Florence, Italy. Its thirteen galleries introduce the public to one of the most fascinating developments in medieval urban planning: the foundation of new towns during the three centuries following the demographic and urban renewal that occurred ca. 1000. The curators who successfully responded to the