at other institutions will be comparably
diligent, reflective, and imaginative in
bringing to light their local traditions of
architectural knowledge long recorded in
beautiful books.

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Related Publication
Nicholas Adams, ed., The Architect's Library: A
Collection of Notable Books on Architecture at Vassar
College (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Vassar College,
2014), 143 pp., 8 color and 96 b/w illus. $22.50
(paper), ISBN 9780615885162

Designing Home: Jews and
Midcentury Modernism
Contemporary Jewish Museum,
San Francisco
4 April–6 October 2014

A slide show of modern houses and interi-
ors greeted visitors to the exhibition
Designing Home: Jews and Midcentury Mod-
erism. Among the images were the Idea
House II, a demonstration house com-
missioned in 1948 by the Walker Art Center
in Minneapolis; Marcel Breuer’s interior
for the House in the Museum Garden
from 1949 and Gregory Ain’s Exhibition
House from the following year, both
shown at the Museum of Modern Art in
New York; and a prototype building by
A. Quincy Jones and Frederick E. Emmons
for developer Joseph Eichler’s X-100
House from 1956. Yet the exhibition’s
concept was more complex than this ini-
tial display of ideal modern homes as
imagined by architects suggested.

The goal of curator Donald Albrecht
was, as stated in the introductory wall text,
to present “the role of Jewish architects
and designers in the creation of a distinctly
modern American domestic landscape.”
The “home” of the exhibition’s title indi-
cated not just the house but a domestic
continuum stretching from the suburban
subdivision to single-family houses, along
with their furnishings and household
goods, to, finally, marketing images as
propagated in magazines and movies. Con-
sequently, “designing home” referred to
the creation of the plethora of designer-
conceived functional objects and consumer
goods with which homeowners filled their
domestic spaces once they had moved in.

This domestic landscape was a col-
laborative effort that brought together—
sometimes according to a plan, sometimes
by accident—architects, designers, and
clients.

Eschewing highbrow theorizing about,
for example, identity, ethnicity, or even
race when assessing the role of Jewish
designers, the exhibition emphasized the
formal and informal networks that emerged
within the American design world around the middle of the last cen-
tury. This focus recalls the contemporary
fascination with cybernetics and networks.
It also allowed the curator to structure the
exhibition around the biographies of indi-
vidual designers who, within the context of
the period, became exemplary instances of
how humans create the circumstances that
so often appear to later generations as
anonymous forces determining history.

Politically, the period was characterized by
the struggle of Jews both for general
acceptance into mainstream American
society and against obstacles they faced as
individuals, especially, but not only, those
who had fled National Socialism and fas-
cism. Culturally, Jewish designers shared
common ground with their gentile col-
leagues, as the Jewish architect Paul Good-
man pointed out when he stated in 1961 (as
quoted in an exhibition wall text), “Avant-
garde belongs neither to Gentile nor Jew,
but is the plight of everybody who must
rebel in order to breathe again.”

The exhibition proper opened with a
display of furniture and domestic objects
by designers who either were born in the
United States (e.g., Muriel Coleman, Alvin
Lustig, Henry Dreyfuss, and George Nelson)
or had arrived from abroad at different
times and for different reasons (e.g.,
Rudolph M. Schindler, Paul T. Frankl,
Marcel Breuer, Anni Albers, and Ruth
Adler Schnee). The exhibits in this section
included design classics—objects easily
identified as the work of their designers,
such as the Skyscraper Bookshelf (ca. 1925)
by Frankl—as well as decorative and func-
tional objects that were instantly recogniz-
able as modern even if their designers have
remained anonymous or relatively little
known. Dreyfuss’s pink Princess Phone
(1959) and gold-shimmering T86 Round
thermostat (ca. 1953), abstract place mats
(ca. 1960) by Marli Ehman, and textiles
such as Cuneiforms (1947–48) by Adler
Schnee are good examples of objects occu-
pying the fluid boundaries between
designed objects, sometimes almost art
objects, and the mass market’s orientation
toward consumer goods. The eclectic
assembly of numerous objects—pots,
mugs, jugs, vases, book covers, record cov-
ers, wallpapers, and cigarette packages, to
name just a few—in a large display case
worthy of any well-stocked department
store emphasized as well the degree to
which the production of modern consumer
goods relied on designers and, accordingly,
the ample opportunities it provided the
latter to shape the taste of the period.

The largest section of the exhibition
was dedicated to six networks that illus-
trated the cultural context in which Jewish
designers thrived. These networks crystal-
ized around art and educational organiza-
tions such as the Museum of Modern Art,
New York; the Institute of Design/New
Bauhaus, Chicago; Black Mountain Col-
lege, Asheville, North Carolina; Walker
Art Center, Minneapolis; Pond Farm,
Guerneville, California; and the Case
Study House program of John Entenza
and his Los Angeles–based Arts & Architec-
ture magazine. Those Jewish designers
who had taught or worked in these institu-
tions were represented in the exhibition by
exemplary works and plenty of biographi-
cal information.

The German Bauhaus loomed large
over many of these institutions and the
lives of many of the portrayed individuals.
In the case of the architect Harry Rosen-
thal the exhibition unfortunately perpetu-
ated the myth that every modernist
designer must have been a Bauhaus stu-
dent. While Rosenthal never studied at
that school, his cubic furniture for the
Schiff family’s Berlin home, some of which
was shown in the exhibition, is witness to
the reach of these informal networks across
continents, even if in this case the connec-
tion was an accidental consequence of
German politics.1 Once the Schiff family
had fled Nazi Germany, they asked Rich-
ard Neutra to design their new San Fran-
cisco home around Rosenthal’s furniture.
Rosenthal, in the meantime, had fled to
Palestine, and from there he moved to
Great Britain.

In summary, the exhibition succeeded
well in arguing that Jewish designers
had an important impact on American
mid-twentieth-century domestic design and architecture. Its concept also contributed to art historical methodology, as the exhibition showed that biographical studies, when placed into the appropriate probing context, ask best the important questions of agency, authorship, and responsibility in history. Ideas may have consequences, but only if humans try to live and act according to them.

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Related Publication

Note