necessarily private because, “as opposed to pictographic art, [it] is not precise enough: different people could ‘read’ it differently.” Clarity of message is an article of faith for Friedman; it is only when making work for his own pleasure that he allows imagery to be ambiguous. In these surroundings of video art and charming drawings of unicorns, it was difficult to see that Friedman’s life’s work has been dedicated to banishing the romantic figure of the artist-creator from the realm of architecture.

The distorting effect of the elision between Friedman’s art and architectural practices is most clearly seen in the way his politics were eclipsed in the show. For Friedman, mobility means choice, but it also means survival, and architecture is the domain of interpersonal responsibility (in contrast, he calls his narrative art “intraperso-nal”). In the exhibition it was easy to miss the fact that Friedman made far more manuals teaching shelter construction and principles of agriculture for UNESCO than drawings of mythological scenes.

At the opening of the exhibition Friedman sat surrounded by press. Characteristically focused on the future rather than on his retrospective, he pointed to printouts that he had brought with him, sketches for low-cost housing solutions for Syrian refugees. The project is a collaboration with architecture students in Beirut who discovered Friedman on Instagram. According to Friedman, they are figuring out the logistics of producing large-scale metal rings at minimal cost. When linked, these rings form structural skeletons for rooms that can be assembled by people who have no prior knowledge of construction. Unlike the standard tents found in refugee camps, these modules can be configured and clustered to suit the users’ needs (Figure 1). A few floors below Architecture mobile = Architecture vivante, shown simultaneously, was a topical exhibition titled Habiter le campement, on refugee encampments, mobile homes, and other temporary forms of shelter. The cost of unifying Friedman’s private art and public architecture was that no one going from one exhibition to the other would have recognized their connection.

JESSE LOCKARD
University of Chicago

Notes
2. Jordi Colomer, X-Ville, video installation (2015), 23 min.

Playboy Architecture, 1953–1979
Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, Illinois
7 May–28 August 2016

Playboy Architecture, 1953–1979 was an intriguing exhibition that displayed the results of a research project by Beatriz Colomina, her students at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and other collaborators. The project started when Colomina was researching some of the most prominent architects of the 1960s and was surprised to realize how many of them had work for Playboy Enterprises on their résumés. How could the author of books on architecture and its connections with sexuality and the media resist following up? The resulting project has found several outlets, including an exhibition at the Netherlands Architecture Institute Maastricht in 2013, a collection of essays in the architectural journal Volume in 2012, and this exhibition.¹

Although a museum in suburban Chicago might sound like an odd place for such an exhibition, there was a reason officials at the Elmhurst Art Museum thought that it made sense. The museum incorporates the 1952 McCormick House by Mies van der Rohe, and the aim of the exhibition was to examine the connection between Playboy and modern architects and designers like Mies.

The exhibition, curated by Colomina and Pep Aviles, was both intriguing and puzzling. That there was an important connection between modern design and Playboy founder Hugh Hefner, Playboy magazine, and other Playboy enterprises there is no doubt. Given the photos of Playboy bunnies cradled in Womb chairs by Eero Saarinen, designs for Playboy houses and apartments, and articles on prominent architects in Playboy as well as advertisements for Knoll International and other furniture companies, this connection is hard to miss—so hard, in fact, that it is difficult to explain how little attention it had been paid in the past.

In a highly insightful talk given on the occasion of the exhibition at Maastricht, Colomina presented a personal and idiosyncratic tour of the research project, obviously relishing the unexpected connections and bizarre conjunctions that resulted from the collision between the brash, irreverent uptown Hefner, with his empire of hedonistic pleasures, and the often humorless and narrowly prescriptive tastemakers of high art modern architecture.² Displaying for the audience a spread in the July 1961 issue of Playboy showing some of modern architecture’s brightest lights posed with chairs they had designed, Colomina asked what in the world compelled these busy and very serious architects to appear in the pages of a magazine most famous for its nude centerfolds. Here, as elsewhere, Colomina seemed more interested in posing questions than in drawing conclusions. She did, however, draw one very large conclusion: that Playboy was more important than any other single agent in the dissemination of modern architecture. More influential than House & Garden or Life? Hard to imagine. Still, it is an interesting provocation.

Unfortunately, in the concrete three-dimensional form of the exhibition, minus the elliptical and humorous asides possible in a lecture, the strengths of the project were harder to discern. The Mies house, however much it might have seemed at first glance to be an ideal venue for this exhibition, turned out to present several problems. The extensive window walls led the exhibition’s designers, the architecture firm of Amunátegui Valdés, to place most of the objects on platforms in the centers of the rooms, resulting in tight clusters that, combined with the glare, made some objects difficult to see (Figure 1).

Moreover, although the Mies building might represent one kind of modernism favored by Hefner and Playboy in the 1950s, the materials in the exhibition actually seemed to suggest that Hefner and his associates were, from the beginning, less interested in Miesian minimalism than they were in more exuberant versions of modernism, such as Scandinavian furniture and the futuristic designs of Eero Saarinen and John Lautner. In addition, conspicuously missing from the exhibition was any serious
examination of the context of the work of the architects who actually created some of the most important designs for the magazine and the Playboy empire, for example, James E. Tucker, who designed the Playboy Penthouse and Weekend Hideaway; R. Donald Jaye, who designed the Playboy Townhouse; and Ron Dismith, who worked on designs for the grotto at the Playboy Mansion West, the Playboy offices and Playboy Club in Chicago, and the “Big Bunny” jet. The reason, it would appear, is that these architects did not do the kind of work that would have met the criteria for modernism laid down by such arbiters as New York’s Museum of Modern Art. There were also ample indications that even when Playboy was presenting design objects acceptable to MoMA curators, such as Saarinen’s Womb chair, it promoted them less for their aesthetic qualities and more as luxury objects, class markers, and status symbols—much as the magazine presented the women in the chairs.

Perhaps the biggest problem was presented by the exhibition’s structure. It took the story from 1953 through 1979, a period that saw some of the most profound changes in social and sexual mores in American history. The decision to organize the exhibition thematically rather than chronologically, however, meant that the highly charged sexual transgressions of the 1950s sat cheek by jowl with features from the 1970s, when Playboy was increasingly being seen as a conservative throwback. Likewise, this organization led to high modernist designs of the 1950s sitting in uncomfortable proximity to works of the 1970s that were clearly based on a strong reaction against Miesian modernism.

For viewers who both lived through this period and were familiar with the history of modern design, none of this presented insurmountable obstacles. At first glance, however, it was difficult to imagine what anyone outside the rarefied world of architectural discourse could have made of the exhibition. Yet observation of the visitors suggested that there was more than enough to entertain and enlighten. There was, for example, a remarkably evocative cluster of artifacts from the collection of 1976 Playboy bunny of the year and later journalist Candace Collins Jordan that spoke volumes about Hefner’s design sensibilities and the complex relationship between the Playboy enterprise and the bunnies who became its most conspicuous design product. Also, some of the tongue-in-cheek irreverence of the Playboy enterprise was nicely captured by a video, newly made for the exhibition, that translated into moving images a feature from the magazine called “Playboy’s Progress.”

It would appear that the biggest draw was a collection of the magazines themselves. Set out on shelves to be viewed at will by visitors, these magazines, with their potent mix of class aspirations and teenage rebellion, blatant display of women as objects and repeated calls for women’s rights, obvious interest in high-minded design and crass consumerism, meticulous attention to propriety and flagrant disregard of expected pieties, are endlessly fascinating artifacts of what today seems a long-lost world. Because these magazines are now difficult to find, this display alone would undoubtedly have made the trip to Elmhurst worthwhile for those without Playboy caches of their own.

ROBERT BRUEGMANN
University of Illinois at Chicago

Notes

House Housing: An Untimely History of Architecture and Real Estate in Thirty-One Episodes

MAK Center for Art and Architecture at Schindler House, West Hollywood, California
9 April–8 May 2016

If architecture is a complicated phenomenon, housing is its most complex manifestation. At once personal shelter, aesthetic expression, social indicator, cultural artifact, economic engine, and ideological cauldron, housing influences (and is influenced by) multiple forms of organized and individual activity. Historians of housing are familiar with this diversity as they work to identify and then explain causes and effects, relationships and contingencies. Due diligence means uncovering and examining a vast array of sources, often in multiple media.

In an inventive presentation, House Housing, sponsored by the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, explored this topical thicket. This was the exhibition component of a larger project titled The Art of Inequality undertaken by a team of researchers at Columbia University. Their task here was to sample a wide variety of sources that illustrate discrete component events, or episodes, that add up (states the catalogue) to “locate housing at the center of the current,