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. Ticker, 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.

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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,
neoliberal economic regime, with the United States as an influential node in a transnational network [that] designs and produces the inequalities that are lived everywhere today.\textsuperscript{31}

Real estate here is used as shorthand to capture the subject of money or wealth in its many forms and processes relating to residential architecture. This includes investment capital flows and availability; financial risk management and effects on dwelling design; costs of land, construction, and ownership; economic interventions by the state, and industry reactions thereto; marketing and the shaping of popular tastes for consumption; and profitability and its uneven impacts on different groups.

The episodes include the 1918 establishment of the U.S. Housing Corporation and the federal government's first foray into housing production during World War I; the 1934 publication of Catherine Bauer's Modern Housing, documenting European projects and policies in an attempt to enlighten American audiences; the 1939 Federal Housing Administration's denial of mortgage insurance for several Frank Lloyd Wright–designed Usonian houses in Michigan; the 1944 commission in California Arts and Architecture magazine charging architects with creating designs for convenient, modern, and affordable housing; the 1962 opening of the high-rise William Green Homes public housing development in Chicago; the 1978 Frank Gehry design deconstructing a traditional suburban house; and the 2012 shooting of an African American teenager in a Florida gated community. Across these and two dozen other installments, economic themes appeared and reappeared, reflecting the influence of financial conditions on government, business, and personal decisions regarding who could live where and in what kinds of dwellings. The “American Dream” promoting single-family-house production and consumption was among recurrent narratives dissected and placed under a microscope.

The exhibition was mounted at Rudolph Schindler's iconic Kings Road House—a modernist experiment in cooperative housing completed in 1922. The building's four original live-work studios are dramatically shaped from concrete, wood, glass, and canvas. Normally unfurnished, each space served here as a gallery and was staged as a conventional living room “set,” with nondescript couch and coffee table, to display various items in a stylized domestic setting (Figure 1). Each studio/gallery held a door-sized panel announcing the titles of its several episodes, all illustrated by numerous materials in print, graphic, sound, and video formats. These were presented creatively via a slew of devices that spanned a half century of household technology. Video clips ran in loops on an old portable television, a computer screen, an iPad. Sound clips emanated from a clock radio, an answering machine, a boom box. Photographs and printed matter were displayed in a photo album, a three-ring binder, a typewriter, a digital picture frame, from a carousel slide projector. Between the miscellaneous gadgets, dozens of individual pieces were available for inspection: copies of popular magazines, trade journals, city plans, technical reports, blueprints, books, newspaper clippings, postcards, and other ephemera somehow related to houses and housing. These were loose and unmounted, allowing casual perusal and essentially forcing rearrangement for the next viewer.

The exhibition’s self-described “immersive, fragmentary nature” was compelling but challenging. In an attempt to discourage narrow interpretation, the curators included no didactic labels, so helpful background was limited to the catalogue. As a result, no convenient exposition connected the portentous 911 recording of George Zimmerman reporting a black stranger in his neighborhood, a framed photo of Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City model, blueprints of a high-rise housing tower in Chicago, a brochure promoting prefabricated houses, and many other items gathered together in one of the galleries. Likewise in another space displaying a plan diagram of the 1932 Modern Architecture exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, midcentury postcards from the German industrial town of Hoyerswerda, and a video clip of Frank Gehry recalling his middle-class upbringing. Minus helpful explanations in place, a trained historian could well interpret and situate these various primary sources in context. An educated layperson could recognize major themes, but not necessarily the connections between them. And a casual observer would have had trouble making sense of the visual miscellany.

The curators’ inclusion of so much different material was laudable, and indeed necessary for a show illuminating complex
relationships among real estate, housing, and architecture. Content was sometimes bunched: Frank Lloyd Wright was the subject of four of the thirty-one episodes, and the appearance of various publications the focus of another six. Still, a good range of moments and subjects appeared overall.

Architecture is one crucial step of several in the larger process of residential development—whether a single dwelling or a thousand. House Housing’s chief contribution was its illustration of this undeniable yet typically unexplored fact of economic life. And while canonical figures such as Schindler, Wright, Gehry, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Charles and Ray Eames were favored over non-luminaries in the exhibition, the conjoining of celebrated architects to the often-routine policies, procedures, and practices of housing’s production, consumption, regulation, representation, and exclusion is very important. As to the theme of inequalities reproduced by the system, viewers needed to infer specific causal connections, given the exhibition’s reticent design. The related publication The Art of Inequality, produced as part of the larger program that includes House Housing, provides a broader range of topics and elaborated discussions.

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Related Publication

Note
1. Reinhold Martin, “An Introduction,” in House Housing: An Untimely History of Architecture and Real Estate in Thirty-One Episodes (West Hollywood, Calif.: MAK Center for Art and Architecture at Schindler House, 2016), n.p. The material in this publication, a brochure provided to visitors at the exhibition, is largely contained in The Art of Inequality, the exhibition-related publication noted above.