economic advantages they offered in accommodating more students on less land.

Other modern dormitories discussed here include the Julius Silver Residence Center (1956–61), Marcel Breuer’s humane, coed dormitories for New York University’s (temporary) uptown campus in the Bronx, and the oversized Morrill and Lincoln Towers (1963–67) at Ohio State University. When NYU later moved back to Greenwich Village and Bronx Community College moved into its former campus, Breuer’s dormitories became offices—with showers. At Ohio State, Schooley, Corielius, and Schooley’s mammoth, twenty-four-story, honeycomb-shaped towers for 3,840 students were built so large not because the university lacked land, but to complement the equally oversized football stadium on the campus’s opposite side. Every school has its priorities.

UC Santa Cruz’s postmodern Kresge College (1967–73), by Charles Moore and William Turnbull, redefined dormitory living radically. Here, the architects sought “the intimate urbanism of an Italian hill town,” inspired by Giancarlo De Carlo’s plan for Urbino and Eero Saarinen’s Morse and Stiles Colleges at Yale. But they went much further, as did many aspects of this peculiarly experimental college. “Kin groups,” each made up of twenty-five students and two faculty members, one male and one female, occupied buildings with white walls and balconies that overlooked a meandering interior foot path. Earthy brown walls faced the forest beyond. One part of the complex had no interior divisions; students could put “walls” wherever they wanted them. Some tried to create family-like groupings.

Although Living on Campus focuses on college campus housing, it is most interesting for what it reveals about American values in a broader sense, including concepts of class and attitudes toward appropriate roles for male and female students. With this book, Yanni highlights the variety of architectural solutions to a problem as old as campus design itself.

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Note


Monica Penick
Tastemaker: Elizabeth Gordon, House Beautiful, and the Postwar American Home

New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017, 260 pp., 132 color and 55 b/w illus. $65 (cloth), ISBN 9780300221763

In recent years scholars have been actively constructing a new narrative of postwar architecture in the United States, reframing the remarkably resilient architect-centered tale of transplanted European modernism and replacing it with a more complex account that addresses a much broader cast of characters, contexts, and methods of influence and design. Monica Penick’s Tastemaker is an important contribution to this rereading and rewriting of American architectural and cultural history, broadening both the discussion and the dramatis personae.¹

As the subtitle suggests, the book is, at heart, a biography, but it is a departure from those biographical works that lionize well-known designers. Quoting George Nelson, Penick notes that “most of what happens to architecture is out of the hands of architects” (vii). She offers what she describes as a “critical professional biography” of Elizabeth Gordon, the influential editor of House Beautiful from 1941 to 1964 (viii). Chronologically organized around her tenure at the magazine, this monograph highlights Gordon’s work with collaborators in graphic and interior design, photography, architecture, manufacturing, advertising, journalism, and even philosophy and contemporary cultural theory. Together with James Marston Fitch, Frances Heard, John deKoven Hill, Cliff May, Eiko Yuasa, Barbro Nilsson, Maynard Parker, Ezra Stoller, and others, Gordon sought to shape the postwar American way of life by advising and educating the public about home design. Citing Russell Lynes’s 1954 concept of “tastemaker” as a framework, Penick offers a highly detailed, intensively researched, and boldly presented narrative of Gordon’s influential activities as a design propagandist. Through an exploration of Gordon’s editorial activities, this book puts issues of taste formation, influence, and consumption front and center in the interpretation of the postwar suburban landscape.

House Beautiful was more than a source of model plans and decorating advice. Gordon actively engaged with and challenged professional journals as sources of authority on the theory and practice of American architecture. Broad, conceptual topics, including the philosophical relationship between modern design and American culture, the importance of regionalism and climate in contemporary design, and the codification of design principles and beauty, were given in-depth coverage in the 1950s and 1960s. In what seems like a direct response to Banister Fletcher’s “Tree of Architecture” and Alfred Barr’s famous flowchart diagram of cubism and abstract art for New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Gordon, in 1949, codified her own principles in a two-page House Beautiful spread titled “The River of Taste” (90–91). Tributaries of psyche, state of the world, religion, daily living, and science merge into the ebbs and flows of her river’s curves. Such diagrams were not the typical content of shelter magazines during the postwar period.

In 1953, Gordon challenged the stylistic status quo, writing a controversial editorial that cast the International Style and its leading proponents, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, as authoritarian and anti-American. She advocated instead a sort of middle-of-the-road modernism, a “blended aesthetic” that balanced American values of performance, convenience, comfort, and informality with progressive aesthetics (57). Penick skilfully demonstrates the nature of Gordon’s intellectual agenda by analyzing the words, images, and page design of the magazine and contextualizing them within social and cultural history; she argues for the importance and centrality of these words and images, not only in architectural discourse but also in their influence on a broad segment of the American public.

Fourteen chapters detail Gordon’s evolving ideas and projects and the creative ways she sought to promote them in the public sphere. This biography begins,
as biographies frequently do, with the subject’s background: Gordon’s entry into journalism is described, and her beginnings in the world of advertising are highlighted, as is her development of expertise in the field of housing. The impact of these beginnings is clear in the subsequent chapters, which detail her use of surveys, contests, product placement, and other business techniques, as well as her mastery of the tools of communication and persuasion. Chapters follow on House Beautiful’s multiyear “Pace Setter” model home program and its partnership with furnishings and building materials companies, and the magazine’s research into and promotion of climate control and other home technologies. Other chapters focus on Gordon’s favored architects and designers, including Alfred Browning Parker, Harwell Hamilton Harris, and Frank Lloyd Wright. A final chapter on Gordon’s embrace of the Japanese principle of shibui (simple, unobtrusive beauty), the subject of two special issues of the magazine in the early 1960s, signals her search for something beyond modernism and foreshadows the emergence of postmodernism by the end of her tenure as editor.

Penick’s coverage of the magazine’s editorial content is broad and deep—at times a little too broad, as it can be difficult for the reader to hold in mind all of the themes and topics while the argument progresses. On the other hand, the varied focus of the chapters and the large cast of characters help to temper the tendency toward hagiography in architectural biography. The book does, however, include several photographs of Gordon standing in compelling poses at Taliesin West, which cast her in the mold of Wright, her host, as a prophetess and seer. Gordon emerges as a visionary and a complex and important figure in American culture.

The value of Penick’s book lies not only in the story of Gordon and House Beautiful; it also requires us to look in new ways at other well-known stories of institutions’ activities and engagement with consumers, such as the famous tract developments built by Levitt & Sons on Long Island and in Pennsylvania, MoMA’s Good Design exhibitions, and the well-known programs of more elite shelter magazines, such as John Entenza’s Arts & Architecture. Compelling archival research, oral histories, and the “backdrop” (as Penick describes it) of political and cultural history make this book both an important source on the postwar period and an excellent model for future architectural biographies. Penick convincingly situates and contextualizes the story of a single individual within a larger historical narrative and, in doing so, highlights the role of magazine editors as propagandists in the history of American and modern architecture and design.

Complementing Penick’s innovative focus on Gordon and House Beautiful is the book’s splendid design. Yale University Press has produced a lavish, beautifully illustrated volume that brings the subject artfully to life. Missing, however, is a bibliography. Penick does briefly refer to supporting and complementing works in endnotes and acknowledgments, but she could have done more to situate her contribution within the growing literature in this field. The same is true with regard to the magazine’s readership. References to readers’ responses to certain issues and programs are sprinkled throughout, and Penick mentions letters to the editor, but she takes little notice of the people who actually subscribed to and read the magazine. Nor does she offer much discussion of the Hearst Corporation, the magazine’s publisher. In any book devoted to the issue of “influence,” attention should be paid to such individuals and corporate entities. Penick might have presented examples of houses inspired by the Pace Setter program as a measure of the magazine’s influence. More problematic is her glossing over of issues pertaining to housing in the age of white flight. The “American Way of Life,” discussed extensively, is presented as a monolithic thing, and Penick’s discussions of class differences and racial divides in housing are minimal at best. The book’s framework makes big claims for Gordon’s contributions to the fundamental architectural issues of the day, and Penick argues persuasively that Gordon cannot be ignored simply because she edited a “mere” shelter magazine. At the same time, Gordon and her magazine failed to address major issues in housing, public spaces, and commercial architecture, choosing instead to focus on an individualistic, materialistic, isolated, white-oriented ideal: “the American Dream.” A clearer acknowledgment of the limited sphere of House Beautiful in defining what constituted America and American modern architecture would make this impressive book still stronger and more complete.

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Note

1. Recent years have seen significant and innovative scholarly work in the areas of housing, development, real estate, style, and taste—all subjects addressed in the book under review. In her acknowledgments, Penick recognizes the work of Alice Friedman, Dianne Harris, Andrew Shanken, Barbara Miller Lane, and James Jacobs. Yet she overlooks other key sources, such as the following: Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Greg Castillo, Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); John Archer, Paul J. P. Sandul, and Katherine Solomonson, eds., Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); David Monteyne, Fallout Shelter: Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Sara Stevens, Developing Expertise: Architecture and Real Estate in Metropolitan America (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016).

Kenneth I. Helphand
Lawrence Halprin

Lawrence Halprin (1916–2009) was recognized during his lifetime as one of the preeminent American practitioners of landscape architecture, planning, and urban design. His extensive corpus of written, built, and visionary projects celebrated designing for human experience. Halprin shaped the built environment through design practices inspired by the arts and by the patterns of the natural world. Keenly attuned to the cultural context of his era, Halprin spent his career addressing social issues, the dilemmas of urbanization, and environmental concerns. In his recent, incisive monograph, Kenneth I. Helphand, professor emeritus of landscape architecture at the University of Oregon and fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, introduces readers to Halprin’s professional oeuvre and legacy through careful analysis of his most influential and enduring projects.