

# Perpetuating the California Mythology of Progress

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Since it morphed from a Mexican Pueblo to a young American city in 1848, Los Angeles had long suffered the civic equivalent of an inferiority complex, quite aware of its dearth of cultural institutions. Invariably labeled “Tinseltown” or “LaLaLand” because of its burgeoning entertainment industry, Los Angeles has often been viewed as superficial and vapid, lacking the cultural capital of its more glamorous and substantive alter ego, New York City, on the country’s opposite shore.

This complex and the perception which it generated started to change, slowly and almost imperceptibly, right after World War II. A decade later, the Ferus Gallery—founded by Walter Hopps, Edward Kienholz, and Robert Alexander in 1957—held landmark exhibitions, including the first individual showing of Andy Warhol’s work on the west coast. The experimental enterprise closed in 1966, but during that brief period, it nurtured such young talent as Edward Ruscha and Robert Irwin and became a formative *Salon* for nascent architect, Frank Gehry.

Then in 1979, City Councilor Joel Wachs, recognizing the city’s rising stature as a center of contemporary artistic expression and as antipode to the Big Apple, convinced Mayor Tom Bradley that Los Angeles needed a Museum of Contemporary Art. In 1986, a world-class design by Japanese Architect Arata Isozaki was finally built to house it, on Grand Avenue. In the following year, the Disney Concert Hall was proposed by the family it honors, but realizing Frank Gehry’s design for the structure took another 16 years. The delay resulted from a “Perils of Pauline” style saga, in which a spectacular museum of the same stylistic genre by Gehry was first built in Bilbao, Spain. The civic shame and anger that this *coup* generated was finally enough to galvanize the local intelligentsia into action, and the immense hole in the ground across the street from Isozaki’s gem finally started to be replaced with construction. An aluminum apparition filled it, becoming the glistening urban icon that Gehry had first envisioned.

Similar cultural success stories then started to follow, fast and furiously, as if a critical mass of aesthetic awareness had finally been reached. The most dramatic of these tales, following Disney Hall, has surely been the monumental construction of the spectacular, 110-acre Getty Center in the Santa Monica Mountains north of Brentwood, which was completed in 2003. The institution selected Richard Meier as its architect in 1984, and construction started in 1989.

From the start, the Getty Center has exemplified the philanthropic intentions of its founder, and the Pacific Standard Time initiative continues to demonstrate that mission. The intention of the Getty's leaders, in launching the Pacific Standard Time campaign, is to use a range of media to identify, collect, document, and preserve post-World War II art and artifacts in Los Angeles and the Southern California region. Because even one generation's artifacts are considered to represent ancient history in Los Angeles, this collection risks falling into the category of archeology; and as a result of this artificially foreshortened perception of time, the fear is that items from this era are now threatened with being scattered, lost, or destroyed.

In addition to its own exhibition, held in its lofty Brentwood redoubt and titled "Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in LA Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970," the Getty Center has reportedly distributed approximately \$10 million among more than 60 other venues around the city. An exhibition titled "Living in a Modern Way: California Design, 1930–1965," which is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), is one of these.<sup>1</sup> Curated by Wendy Kaplan and Bobbye Tigerman under the Directorship of Michael Govan, the exhibition can be seen from October 1, 2011, to June 3, 2012.

### **Consolidating a Threatened Heritage**

The Pacific Standard Time initiative coincides with a discernable collective awareness of the singular role that Los Angeles designers in all realms of the arts played in creating a distinct, modern aesthetic, both during and immediately after World War II. In the midst of the more than 60 institutions participating in this ambitious institutional effort, the LACMA show plays a special role in the historic panoply of events now taking place across the city, in part because it neatly brackets, or expands upon another similar, in-depth retrospective titled "Blueprints for Modern Living: The History and Legacy of the Case Study House Program," which was on display from October 17, 1989, to February 18, 1990; the exhibition was curated by Elizabeth Smith and researched by Amelia Jones for the Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles.

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<sup>1</sup> Roberta Smith, "California: A New Pin on the Art Map," *The New York Times* (November 13, 2011), 22.

The Case Study House Program, launched by Modernist proselytizer John Entenza in 1945 in his newly acquired *Arts and Architecture* magazine, plays the leading role in a regional mythology that “Living in a Modern Way” identifies and celebrates; nevertheless, a majority of the architects involved in that program are noticeably absent from the exhibition even though the dates covered by “Blueprints” and “Living in a Modern Way” overlap by two decades. Like the “Blueprints” effort more than 20 years ago, the “Living in a Modern Way” exhibition uses full-scale architectural reproduction as a means of presenting context and meaning; for example, it includes a life-size mock-up of the Charles and Ray Eames House of 1949. However, the mock-up is used as the *denouement* of the entire experience, rather than being an integral part of it. In contrast, for “Blueprints,” Smith cleverly transformed architectural icons of the period, such as Case Study House #22 by Pierre Koenig, the Unbuilt Ralph Rapson Case Study #4, or Greenbelt House commissioned in 1944, into commentaries not only on their own meaning but also on their wider significance. She commissioned Craig Hodgetts and Ming Fung to recreate and realize her reinterpretations, as well as asking other leading architects, such as Adele Naude Santos, Itsuko Hasegawa Toyo Ito, Robert Mangurian, and Eric Owen Moss to reexamine and update the entire Case Study House ethos, with schemes of their own for a site in Los Angeles.

One more historical strand of this multi-colored skein should be mentioned before considering “Living in a Modern Way” more closely: the exhibition titled “Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design and Culture at Midcentury,” which was held at the Oakland Museum of California from May 17, 2008 to August 17, 2008. This event—organized by Chief Curator of the Orange County Museum of Art Elizabeth Armstrong and with a title inspired by a Miles Davis album of the same name—comprised architecture, furniture, and decorative arts, as well as painting, graphic arts, film, and music. In its own campaign to put Los Angeles forward as the nexus of mid-twentieth century Modernism, the exhibition used more than 150 objects, as well as the recreation of a 1950s Jazz Lounge designed by Frederick Fischer, to examine the creative interaction between artists, architects, designers, filmmakers, and musicians that helped to produce an iconic California style. The 2008 book, by the German publisher Prestel—of the same name as the show, and which accompanied it—has now become part of regional scripture, as has the highly collectible *Blueprints for Modern Living* text that preceded it.

### Seeing a Challenge as an Opportunity

Herein lies both the paradox and the strength of the “Living in a Modern Way: California Design 1930-1965” concept: It stands on the shoulders of both the Elizabeth Smith and *Birth of the Cool* achievements, which have now reached legendary status in Los Angeles. Serving as a subliminal rather than overt reference, as well as a foil, “Living in a Modern Way” finds the fertile interstitial space that was left unexplored in the earlier events. To some extent, it must be judged on that basis, but it also certainly stands as a remarkable achievement in its own right, in spite of several notable omissions.

The LACMA exhibition, which is the result of five years of research and an extraordinarily difficult curatorial effort, is based on the premise that “the California of our collective imagination” as a “democratic utopia where a benign climate permitted life to be led informally and largely outdoors” was transmuted into a material culture that defined an entire era, not just in Southern California, but also throughout America and the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup> To support this premise, the Exhibition is organized into the four distinct themes of “Shaping,” “Making,” “Living,” and “Selling,” each of which has its own zone in the gallery.

The setting in the Resnick Pavilion—which was designed by Renzo Piano is significant in itself, in that the Resnick is the latest addition to the sprawling, eight-building Los Angeles County Museum of Art campus and a resounding reaffirmation of the continuity of the Modernist tradition in the city. The theme zones, in the order given, are aligned on both sides of a central, vertically ribbed aluminum spine, which is laid out in a stretched “S” curve that runs diagonally across an entire, rectilinear area. This voluminous space has a fully glazed window wall overlooking a garden at the end, opposite the entrance; the designers have used the windows to full advantage by having spectators move from a darker, more confined entry along the divider, toward the light. The central, luminously spectral, evocative divider, as well the replica of part of the Eames House at its terminal point, were designed by Craig Hodgetts and Ming Fung, providing one more hint of the influence that the earlier MOCA show has had here.

After entering the gallery, an introductory panel proclaims that “after 1945, a burgeoning, newly prosperous population that was intoxicated by the power to purchase after the deprivation years of the Great Depression... turned the state into America’s most important center for progressive architecture and furnishings.” This characterization sets the stage for the central contention of the show, which is that California then became the primary source of a material culture that shaped an entire era in American history.<sup>3</sup>

2 Michael Govan, “Forward,” in *Living in a Modern Way: California Design 1930-1965*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), 22.

3 Exhibition panel, *Living in a Modern Way: California Design 1930-1965*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Without giving away the punch line of the show entirely, suffice it to say that the architectonic sensibility made evident by the elegant skeletal wall is initially reinforced by the first of two spectacular vehicular bookends. Beside the introductory panel is a pristine, 1936 Wallace Airstream Trailer, manufactured by Wallace Byam. His company had been one of the few trailer manufacturers to survive the Great Depression, having been incorporated only five years earlier. Byam had also bought the struggling Bowlus aircraft company, which had built Charles Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis," which may explain the signature aerodynamics of the Airstream's riveted aluminum hull. The presence of the trailer elegantly encapsulates not just the growing automobile culture of Southern California that began to flourish at the time it was built, but also the nascent aerospace industry that was established and grew there during the War and that would come to future prominence in the region, as well as the growing mobility of the nation as a whole.

### **Shaping and Making**

This sleek and evocatively symbolic artifact acts as a fittingly totemic gateway into the "Shaping" zone, which sets the stage for the zones that follow. It tells the story of the dramatic growth that took place in California during the 1920s, using "before" and "after" photographs of Los Angeles to prove this point. This period was the heyday of the Real Estate Boosters, characterized so well by Kevin Starr in his book, *Material Dreams: California Through the 1920s*—the period prior to the crash of 1929 and the Depression that followed. During this explosive decade, all these new residents needed housing and furnishings, and this demand was the impetus for the design revolution that followed. By the end of the 1930s, at the outset of World War II, the characteristics of optimism, experimentation, and an affinity for new materials, as well as the vibrancy that has come to be associated with California design, were well established.

"Making," which is the second of the four themes presented in the Exhibition, is a loaded term for architects. Recent technological advances in the sourcing, manufacturing, and production of materials and their integration into the design process, have profoundly changed what has until recently been an elemental, almost existential relationship with materials. This enduring empathy is due, in large part, to the widespread pedagogical effect of the *Vorkurs*, or Basic Course, introduced by Johannes Itten at the Weimar Bauhaus in 1920 and taught by him until he left for Switzerland in 1923. Itten believed that everyone was inherently

creative, under the right circumstances and with the proper encouragement, and that this innate creativity was effectively elicited through the study of the nature of materials. This perspective was consistent with the principles of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, who hired Itten, and with his belief in the necessity of combining handcraft, technology, and design.<sup>4</sup>

Now, however, as Borden and Meredith have described the changes that are taking place in the architect's relationship to materiality and making, "[t]he design application limits of a particular material are no longer seen as inherent within the material itself, but rather as functions of surrounding processes."<sup>5</sup> The observation suggests that the process by which an entire material culture has been created in Southern California and throughout the world seems to be in danger of being lost—rather than the artifacts of that culture themselves. The change in perspective is clear from Itten's emphasis on the importance of discovering the nature of a particular material and expressing it in design; here, Itten was echoing the Arts and Crafts mandate of truthfulness beyond mere functionality—penetrating into the material's very essence.<sup>6</sup>

Wendy Kaplan, the LACMA Director of Decorative Arts and Curator of the *California Design* exhibition, has explored this crucial Arts and Crafts connection in great detail in both a previous show at the museum (December 19, 2004 to April 3, 2005) titled, "The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America, 1880-1920: Design for the Modern World," and as editor of the Thames and Hudson catalog of the exhibition that accompanied it. In her introduction to that book, she thoroughly traces the Arts and Crafts belief in "the spiritual benefits of work done by hand," in contrast to the German view of craft as the first step in the creation of an object-type or model that could then be mass produced.<sup>7</sup>

Kaplan brings that same sensibility and wealth of historical background knowledge to bear on the transformative Post-War period in Southern California, in which all of these various strands were seamlessly woven together. Then, as now, there were innovative, new materials being introduced that had been hastily conceived and tested in the crucible of battle. In addition, many émigrés such as Richard Neutra came to the region from Europe bringing with them the technological ideology of the International Style, and its faith in mass production. Despite this influx of foreign design philosophies, local designers nevertheless continued also to channel the Arts and Crafts legacy of the Greene and Greene brothers, as well as the Bay Area tradition of Bernard Maybeck and the heritage of Frank Lloyd Wright (who spent a short but decisive period of his life in Los Angeles) into their work to create a variant that was uniquely their own.

4 Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus: 1919-1933* (Berlin: Benedikt Taschen, 1990), 25.

5 Gail Peter Borden and Michael Meredith, *Matter Material Processes in Architectural Production* (London: Routledge, 2011), 2.

6 William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), 121.

7 Wendy Kaplan, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 13.

## Living

The pattern of movement that the exhibition designers and curators have established, which funnels visitors seamlessly from the wide entrance to the gallery, along the diagonal spine toward the large garden-facing window at the back of the room, also wends its way through several sleek and exquisitely streamlined islands that serve as vitrines for the display of objects related to each theme. These displays contribute immeasurably to the architectonic feel of the show, perpetuating the legacy of the *Blueprints for Modern Living* benchmark, which the show recalls. They also punctuate the path, contributing an element of surprise as patrons approach and encounter the unexpected surprise of the entire experience which is the centerpiece of the living segment.

## A Spectacular, Hidden Centerpiece

This *pièce de résistance* is nothing less than a full-scale recreation of part of Case Study House #8, the Charles and Ray Eames residence in Pacific Palisades of 1949, which was one of the first projects realized in that Program and has had worldwide influence ever since. One of the most remarkable things about this partial reproduction is that all of the furniture, as well as the hundreds of artifacts in the living room collected during the Eameses' many travels, have been moved from the original house and lovingly placed here. This feat is especially noteworthy because the Eames family is understandably protective of the Palisades house, which is one of the few buildings the couple ever realized; the family not only restricts the number of visitors who can see it, but has also put the interior off limits, allowing it to be viewed only from the outside. Thus, their cooperation in recreating this vignette—in the removal and eventual replacement of all of the contents of the main living space, in recording the location of all the artifacts, packing them, moving them, setting them up within the simulacra, repacking them, and replacing them in the actual house, all under the critical eye of the Eames family—is staggering in its magnitude.

The number of artifacts in the space, and the range of their provenance, is also significant in the context of the story being told here. British architects Richard Rogers and Norman Foster, who visited Los Angeles during their student days, each recall not only the profound effect that the Eames house had on them, but also the importance of the lesson of how the Eameses humanized their ultra-modernist surroundings with mementos of their daily life. This approach was at odds with the minimalism then imposed on clients by others, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who insisted that he dictate the contents of each house he designed and that the space be as Spartan as possible.

The Eames house, then, in being selected as the centerpiece of the *California Design 1930-1965* exhibition, clearly condenses its essential message: The casual post-war lifestyle in Southern California which verged on barely contained hedonism and was borne of both the benign climate and its sense of being the “final frontier” of the historical westward growth—was a formative influence on every aspect of design in the United States during that period. This casual lifestyle set it apart from the development of modernism in other parts of the world, especially in its repressed, Bauhaus-based birthplace. It is difficult to imagine Mies van der Rohe in a bathing suit, and probably best not even to try.

As an added bonus for making it to the end of this rich, temptation-laden, object-filled gauntlet, laid out for visitors’ edification and pleasure, the exhibition organizers have placed a pristine Avanti (designed for Studebaker by Raymond Lowey and Associates) between the Eames House corner and the terminating garden-filled window, on a broad apron that recalls a driveway. The 1962 automobile, which seems futuristic even now, serves not just as a vehicular echo of the 1936 Airstream Trailer at the exhibition’s entrance, but also with the Airstream serves to neatly bracket the intended chronology of the show itself.

### **Selling**

One lap to go, as visitors are directed by the installation panels around to the left at the end of the central spine and its Eames House terminus, and back to the Resnick Pavilion entrance. Despite the city’s newly acquired veneer of cultural sophistication, literary allusion in Los Angeles is usually still restricted to movie references. In this case, the Eames segment is analogous to the end of the “Spina” in the chariot race of “Ben Hur” with equal amounts of jockeying for position after people round the living room turn. An enticing bookstore/gift shop is strategically located along the final lap, and stress levels begin to rise as soon as it comes into sight because of the lure of mementos for sale and the desire to get to them first. This final segment, quite appropriately, is dedicated to the selling part of the exhibition narrative and is succinctly introduced with a quote by photographer Julius Shulman, who famously said: “Good design is seldom accepted, it has to be sold.”<sup>8</sup> The actual marketing of the products that were unique to California was an essential part of mythologizing the state.

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8 Exhibition panel: *Living in a Modern Way: California Design 1930-1965*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



In pre-war America, we were still shaking ourselves out of the doldrums of the Depression; in the post-war period, we experienced a national explosion of consumer culture. The premise of this final “Selling” section is that, because of its preparatory, creative phase, California was perfectly primed to fulfill consumers’ needs. The enormous “pent-up demand for new products was fueled by the lifting of restrictions on domestic consumption,” and advertising and the media (of which *Art and Architecture* magazine, which promoted modernism through the Case Study House Program, was a crucial part) grew exponentially in response to this pent up desire to consume.<sup>9</sup> What separates this exhibition from those that have preceded it is its contention that it is that the California version of modernism transformed the European, Bauhaus-inspired idea of “Making” into something uniquely regional, rather than being bullied into copying it. The show closes with the thought that, by the mid-1960s, the design ethos of the region had become so ingrained in our national consciousness that selling the products of California could not easily be separated from the selling of the idea of California itself.

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9 Ibid.