



Courtesy MOCA and California Polytechnic, Pomona

Rear patio, Case Study House no. 18, Craig Ellwood, architect, 1956-58.

A Long Good-bye

Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses
Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989, 256 pp., illus., \$50

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

Blueprints for Modern Living is the catalogue of an exhibition on the Case Study Houses, a program invented by John Entenza while he was publisher and editor of the Los Angeles magazine *Arts & Architecture*. In 1945 Entenza announced that *Arts & Architecture* would sponsor the construction of nine houses designed for medium-income families. His desire was to promote modern architecture to prospective buyers and builders of new houses in southern California. Although only five of the original nine were built, Entenza's concept was so appealing that the Case Study Houses program was perpetuated. Eventually 36 projects were announced, of which 26 houses and one apartment complex were built. The last project was completed in 1966, four years after Entenza sold the magazine. Several of the houses attracted international attention, especially the house of Ray and Charles Eames (number 8, of 1949) and six steel-framed houses that were not part of the original program, built between 1950 and 1960 to the designs of Raphael Soriano, Craig Ellwood, and Pierre Koenig. These houses conferred upon the entire program a kind of mythical status that kept the memory of the Case Study Houses alive and compelled the retrieval and reassessment that this publication documents. A survey of the catalogue's eight essays indicates that the efforts of many of the essayists to reconstruct a historical context within which to interpret and evaluate the program are problematic, because of confusion over what constitutes the historical context.

Esther McCoy and Reyner Banham contributed essays that are as much personal memoir as historical analysis. Scholarly obligations are not ignored, but it is the "I was there" tone that animates both essays. Miss McCoy's piece is an expand-

ed version of her introduction to the 1977 reissue of the 1962 monograph *Case Study Houses 1945-1962*. It provides an overview of the origin of the program, its vicissitudes, and the architects, designs, and buildings that it involved. Banham contrasts the orientations and attitudes of the most influential Case Study architects (Eames, Soriano, Ellwood, and Koenig) with those of the Team X generation in Great Britain and the long-term influence of the Californians, culminating in Renzo Piano's Menil Collection museum.

Thomas S. Hines and Elizabeth A. T. Smith provide the most satisfactory historical essays. Hines outlines the modern antecedents to the Case Study Houses, those houses built in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s in Los Angeles and surrounding communities by Schindler, Neutra, Harris, Ain, and Soriano, emphasizing especially Neutra's role as pioneer, promoter, and mentor (Neutra and his one-time pupil Soriano both designed Case Study houses). Miss Smith provides an illuminating account of the vanguard cultural milieu of Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s, which Entenza championed through *Arts & Architecture*.

Kevin Starr's essay on the urban development of Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s is not merely unsatisfactory, it is irresponsible. His fatuous rhetorical style fails to conceal the poverty of his research and his lack of interpretive insight. Starr diverges from his rap long enough to suggest that the evolution of the aircraft industry in southern California in the 1940s exercised a persuasive fascination on a number of the Case Study architects. But he fails to pursue this notion and instead lapses back into hype, leaving his crucial subject virtually unaddressed.

Three other essays – by Helen Searing on demonstration dwellings of modern design, Thomas Hine on post-World War II mass housing in the United States, and Dolores Hayden on what might be described as the ideology of the Case Study Houses program – strive to put into place essential parts of the program's historical context. Yet none succeeds entirely. Searing and Hine both tend to address the Case Study Houses obliquely. The program is not at the center of either discussion and thus seems peripheral to the "contexts" in which each situates it. Hayden's, the most provocative of the essays, challenges the program's assumptions and thus those of most of the early houses: its middle-class bias, its retarded conception of domestic life, its rigid aesthetic prescriptiveness, and its misunderstanding of institutionalized housing production for the middle-class market. She does not, however, encompass recent, more general critical considerations of this period. Jackson Lears, in particular, describes the devil's pact under which modern culture flourished in the United States during the Cold War period, its critical tendencies diverted from social issues to questions of technique, style, and taste, thus rendering it acceptable to elite patronage.¹ The narrow conception of social obligation embodied in the Case Study Houses program distanced the program from the concerns of Neutra and Ain among the earlier generation of Los Angeles modernists. Technique and, by the late 1950s, unabashed formalism subsumed the modest social aspirations with which the program was begun.

This touches directly on the ambiguous, equivocal nature of the Case Study Houses program. It failed to provide an alternative model for mass housing but succeeded as architectural production of a high order. The essays in this catalogue were to have provided the historical context in which this paradox developed, but too much evidence is either lacking or not entirely relevant. Basic data are not presented. One has no clear idea of the mechanics of the program and how they changed over time. Similar efforts that successfully brought innovative modern design to the middle-class housing market are not examined, despite the fact that such builders as Joseph Eichler did deliver entire communities of modern houses within the institutional system. And Eichler and his architects, Jones & Emmons, were responsible for a Case Study project.

The architectural-historical context of the Case Study period is neglected. Even the obvious – describing the three basic chronological and stylistic phases of the program (California modern, the Case Study style, and neoformalism) – is only alluded to, never made explicit. Parallels that might relate the Los Angeles scene to that of other centers of architectural activity in the U.S. are not drawn (for instance, that Entenza used *Arts & Architecture* and the Case Study program to promote architects he admired much as Philip Johnson used – and still uses – the Museum of Modern Art to do so). The essays display little curiosity about American architects who produced modern houses comparable in aims and techniques to the Case Study houses outside Los Angeles (such Texans as John York of Harlingen and Milton Ryan of San Antonio among them, to say nothing of the Phoenix architect Alfred N. Beadle, who was himself a Case Study architect). Such omissions make the Case Study houses seem more isolated and exceptional than they were, without clarifying what it was that indeed made them distinct. One has little sense that the Case Study houses were continuous with the work of their respective architects, which also was extensively covered in *Arts & Architecture*.

Despite the commendable ambition with which the subject was approached, the essays in *Blueprints for Modern Living* serve more as points of departure for the formulation of critical questions than a repository of authoritative interpretations. The catalogue is an important document, however, beautifully laid out and produced under the guidance of *Cite's* former designer, Lorraine Wild. Under Elizabeth A. T. Smith's curatorial direction, it recovers an important episode in the development of modern architecture in the United States, although one that awaits grounding in its historical situation. ■

Notes

- 1 Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in Lary Mays, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 38-57.

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12 January – 18 February 1990

Reviewed by Lynn M. Herbert

In 1986, John Brinckerhoff Jackson came to Rice as the second Craig Francis Cullinan Visiting Professor. A cultural geographer, Jackson lectured on the history of the vernacular house; while at Rice he met Peter Brown, a photographer with similar interests. The two men decided to collaborate on a book project: Jackson would supply the words, Brown would supply the photographs. As often happens with collaborative efforts, the friendship grew along with the project.

That summer Brown visited Jackson at his home in New Mexico. Brown had been photographing in Arizona, Nevada, and California and showed Jackson his work, which illustrated the mobile homes and other elements of the vernacular landscape that Jackson had discussed at Rice. The two men decided to shift their focus eastward to the southern high plains of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

In the fall, Jackson, in his eighties, and Brown, in his thirties, hit the road together and drove through the high plains of Texas and New Mexico. As they approached a town, Jackson, like a Sherlock Holmes of the vernacular landscape, would paint for Brown a historical portrait of the town before they even got out of the car, basing it on clues such as the placement of railroads, Main Street, and interstate highways; the condition of grain silos; and the architectural styles still in evidence. Jackson would chat with the townspeople about the evolution of the town, and Brown would take pictures. Sometimes Jackson would ask Brown to photograph a certain building or aspect of the town. Then, back in the car, the two would set off once more to make the journey from countryside to town.

Since their travels together, each man has nurtured the other's work: rough texts by Jackson have inspired Brown to look for different aspects of the landscape, and photographs by Brown have led Jackson



Peter Brown,
Henry Beard Stadium, View,
Texas, 1989.

to additional topics. The collaborative book, titled *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*, is due to be published in the spring of 1991. This exhibition was a preview of Brown's contribution to the book.

The installation took viewers on the evolutionary journey from countryside to town by illustrating the current state of agriculture, the roads laid out on the land, the towns, the architecture, and the people. *Henry Beard Stadium, View, Texas* is a wonderful example of Brown's subtle photographic style mixing perfectly with Jackson's interests. In this photograph there are both Main and Grand streets. Each street, as the signs indicate, is also a county road, an artery connecting town to countryside. The bald brown field is staked out with informally designated spots for the home and visiting teams behind the chain-link backstop. The lone installed utility bench does not suggest large crowds. In the sparse background are a formal building (perhaps a community hall), a home, and a mesa. The photograph has the quietness and sensitivity to light that Brown is so good at capturing, and it is loaded with Jacksonian clues about the evolution of this landscape.

The vision of two men – 50 years apart in age, one a writer and one a photographer – driving through the barren countryside sharing a passion sounds like the opening scene of a future Steven Spielberg film. Failing such a film, we'll have to wait for the book as a permanent record of their collaboration. ■

Another Little Piece of the South

Southern Comfort: The Garden District of New Orleans, 1800-1900, by S. Frederick Starr. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989. 312 pp., 171 illus., \$35

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

S. Frederick Starr has redressed a long-standing want: he has written an architectural history that treats a portion of New Orleans's 19th-century architectural heritage with insight and intelligence. This is a singular achievement. Renowned for its 18th- and 19th-century architectural and urban patrimony, New Orleans has lacked a satisfactory account of much of its heritage. Samuel Wilson, Jr., has written perceptively about the French colonial building traditions of the 18th century, and specialized studies have dealt with specific subjects – Arthur Scully on the Greek Revival architects James and Charles Dakin, for instance. But despite extensive research into primary documents, efforts to publish such research have been inadequate – the result, some New Orleanians suggest, of insufficient local support for serious scholarly publication. Starr, in his account of the Garden District, has overcome this deficiency. And breaking out of the narrow constraints of much American architectural historical scholarship, he deals with buildings in the contexts of politics and war, ethnic rivalries, economic cycles, and domestic manners. Moreover, he writes with such fluency and grace that his book will appeal to general readers as well as academics. This is so critical to building a constituency for serious architectural history in New Orleans that it makes one indulge Starr's besetting sin: he exploits his own rhetorical facility to engage in myth-making when the available facts cannot sustain a good story.

Paradoxically, it is the dead hand of romantic myth that Starr sets out to dislodge in his historical account of the neighborhood. The charming anecdotal histories by Lyle Saxon of the 1920s and Harnett T. Kane of the 1940s still engulf New Orleans in a gardenia-sweet haze of nostalgia to which residents have become habituated; Starr is at pains to clear the air. To that end he pieces together a complex historical mosaic describing the florescence of the Garden District, the uptown

neighborhood that emerged at the middle of the 19th century as the preferred residential district of the city's newly rich mercantile elite and retains a large number of imposing houses from the late 1840s through the mid-1870s, the period on which Starr focuses. The tract, composed of former plantation lands, was subdivided and platted in the 1830s but not extensively improved until the early 1850s, when the suburban city of Lafayette, where it lay, was annexed by the city of New Orleans. The largest houses tended to be built by self-made men, cotton factors and importers who quickly made (and lost) substantial fortunes. Many of these men were originally from the Border and Mid-Atlantic states, New England, Great Britain, or Ireland, rather than Louisiana or the South. The architects, like their clients, also were recent immigrants to the South; many had been trained in New York. German immigrants were prominent among the building contractors. Starr seeks to demonstrate the extra-Southern origins of those responsible for what is now popularly apprehended as a quintessential Southern place, a circumstance paralleled in other Gulf port cities, including Galveston and Houston. Starr emphasizes the number of opulent, wrought-iron-bedecked houses in the district that are not even antebellum, but date from what Mark Twain and Dudley Warner caustically designated the Gilded Age, the period of heady economic expansion that began after the Civil War and ended with the Panic of 1873. The Civil War itself occasioned conflicted and ambiguous conduct on the part of the Garden District plutocrats, some of whom left town while others made their peace with the U.S. Army, which occupied New Orleans for most of the war. Only in the 1880s was a "Southern" cultural style formulated, charged in part with retroactively infusing the past with a mythic consistency that it lacked the first time around.

Starr on occasion engages in questionable excursions, in a style that can glide smoothly to insupportable conclusions. One example suffices: he cites language in sets of specifications by Henry Howard and deduces from these that Howard arrogated to himself a far greater degree of professional superiority than did earlier New Orleans architects. This ignores a more down-to-earth interpretation, that Howard merely employed standard contractual language to distinguish work covered by the contract from that which was not. Such instances generally lead Starr to anachronistic rationalizations for actions whose causes have been insuffi-



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ciently researched. The effect is a subtle enhancement of the subject (e.g., the proud, "professional" architect) that ultimately serves to mythologize.

What I missed most in Starr's otherwise far-ranging discourse is attention to the urban character of the Garden District. One rarely gets a sense of the whole as opposed to details; indeed, only two historic photographs of street scenes in the district are included. Thus, although Starr mentions several times that the Garden District contained moderate-income housing, one has little sense of its physical consequences, of how block fronts were composed (the large houses on which he concentrates seem to have been built consistently on corner sites). Yet in an early chapter on the Irish Channel, Starr strongly evokes its mixed urban landscape. He later implies that the shotgun house is a characteristic feature of the Garden District, though again one has little sense of the streetscapes that resulted. Starr notes that the Garden District contained no axial streets or focal squares or parks to which the biggest houses gravitated. However, if one plots out the biggest houses, most line up on four streets in the eastern half of the district. Starr does not address this fact and recognizes no distinctions between sections within the district. He mentions on several occasions the presence of churches in the Garden District without being specific about how they fit in. The same is true of black property owners and tenants. Starr concludes his narrative prematurely, following a discussion of the Garden District houses of New Orleans's foremost late-19th-century architect, Thomas Sully. He gives no indications of the vicissitudes that the neighborhood has experienced in the 20th century. In fact, he fails to explain when the term "Garden District" first gained currency.

Yet even when reservations are registered, *Southern Comfort* compels admiration. Starr's enthusiasm for his topic, his commitment to revealing historical complexities rather than confirming trite myths, and his skill in communicating his findings make this volume very welcome. ■



Frank Welch, *Steps in Montmartre*, 1953.

French Postcards

A Paris Album –
Photographs by Frank D. Welch
Rice Media Center
February 15 – March 30

Reviewed by Lynn M. Herbert

Frank Welch is a successful Texas architect, which might lead one to ask, What is he doing exhibiting photographs? In 1952, Welch went to Paris on a Fulbright fellowship to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Disappointed with the program there, he asked his adviser if he could photograph Paris instead. Welch had just seen Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Images à la Sauvette* and was inspired to try his own hand at photography. Borrowing Cartier-Bresson's concept of the "decisive moment," he bought himself a Leica and began his self-education in the medium. As he remembers, "I was just exploring this glorious city and having a wonderful adventure." He worked intensively for the remaining six months of his fellowship, shooting about 50 rolls of film, and then returned to the United States. Twenty-five years later, architect Welch returned to spend 30 days photographing the City of Light once again.

Welch's vignettes depict the Paris the way we love to see it. No Type A personalities here: people stroll down cobblestoned streets, smooch by the Seine, daydream in the park, play cards on the sidewalk, read *Le Figaro*, and pass time at outdoor bistros. His Paris is peopled by elderly men and women with fascinating faces, chic ladies, amorous couples, and playful children. Yet, while the characters in his play are interesting, it's the sets that steal the show.

Welch's architect's eye has captured the sensuous and varied textures that make Paris unique. The creamy limestone with its subtly rough texture, always cool to the touch, of so many façades; the elaborate wrought-iron work gracing even the humblest alleys; the gravel paths in parks with their comforting crunch underfoot; the peculiarly French wicker and wrought-iron chairs in bistros and parks; the smooth curves of cobblestones; the collages of ancient advertisements layered on walls; the steps worn concave by centuries of feet; and the raucous modernity of the Centre Pompidou – this exhibition offered an opportunity to steep for a while in the almost tactile qualities of a beautiful city. Cheers to Frank Welch for pursuing a passion. ■

Green Spans

Money Matters: A Critical Look
at Bank Architecture
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
4 February – 15 April 1990

Reviewed by Lynn M. Herbert

Money Matters was a multidisciplinary project that explored bank architecture from the vantage points of architecture, photography, aesthetics, and history. The exhibition portion presented the work of 11 photographers from the United States and Canada, and the generously illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition includes substantial critical essays by architectural critic Brendan Gill, sociologist Robert Nisbet, and the exhibition's curator, Anne Tucker, curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Anyone having even the slightest interest in banks (which most of us do, if only out of necessity) was sure to find something to be fascinated by in this project.

An invitation to spend an afternoon looking at 175 photographs of banks might not sound enticing, but expecting the worst, I was pleasantly surprised. Each of the 11 photographers was assigned several banks, given an outline of each bank's historical and architectural significance, and instructed to document each bank's façade. Although many of the resulting photographs are predictably factual and dry, some are decidedly not. Len Jenshel's banks all look so charming that you want to book a weekend getaway in them. His photographs highlight interior and exterior ornamentation, and he always seems to find a point of view framed by palm trees or cascading ivy. James Iska's formidable Greek Revival banks, in which you *know* your money will be safe, are presented in such sharp detail that their monumental weight and enormity are chilling. Perhaps sensing this, Iska includes civic banners, cars, and gaping passersby in his photographs to remind us that we are not looking at something atop Mount Olympus.

George Tice manages to do just the opposite in his photographs: his intricate banks and cityscapes become miniatures, like complex constructions by a maker of architectural models, and the buildings with patterned façades look like the work of a Legomaniac. This unreal quality is artfully presented in his series of the Toronto skyline at sunset, at twilight, at night, and under an overcast sky.

Serge Hambourg, assigned a number of banks in the Beaux-Arts style, highlights



Parnassus Foundation

David Miller, *Escalator to Banking Hall, Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, 1987.*

their quirkiness and unusual details: in one photograph, a real lion (post taxidermist) keeps a watchful eye from a balcony on the banking floor of the Winona National Bank. Robert Bourdeau's small, toned black-and-white prints are reminiscent of Eugène Atget's "empty street" documentation of Paris buildings. David Miller's black-and-white photographs are all unusually crisp. Either he has concocted darkroom chemicals that rid the atmosphere of air pollution, or bank employees were polishing their interiors and exteriors for weeks before he came. And Catherine Wagner gives her banks that recognizably stark yet luminous quality that can also be seen in her series on classrooms.

Anyone with a keen interest in bank architecture undoubtedly had a field day with this exhibition. For the rest of us doubting Thomases, it was a delightful surprise. ■

Matinee Idylls

Palaces of Dreams:
The Movie Theatres of John
Eberson, Architect
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio
16 September 1989 – 15 February 1990

Reviewed by Michael E. Wilson

Palaces of Dreams was a treat for those interested in the architecture of entertainment. The exhibition coincided with additional restoration and reopening of one of Eberson's masterpieces, the Majestic Theatre in San Antonio. The McNay Museum and Robert L. B. Tobin sponsored the showing; materials were loaned by Max Protetch Gallery and the University of Pennsylvania. The show was curated by Jane Preddy, a native Texan now living in New York, who is completing a book about Eberson. On display were 22 large ink-on-linen working drawings, 50 panels consisting mainly of original prints of documentary photographs (mounted one or two per panel), and a number of color drawings of details for decorative plaster on proscenium arches, side wall boxes, and door, ceiling, and fountain surrounds.

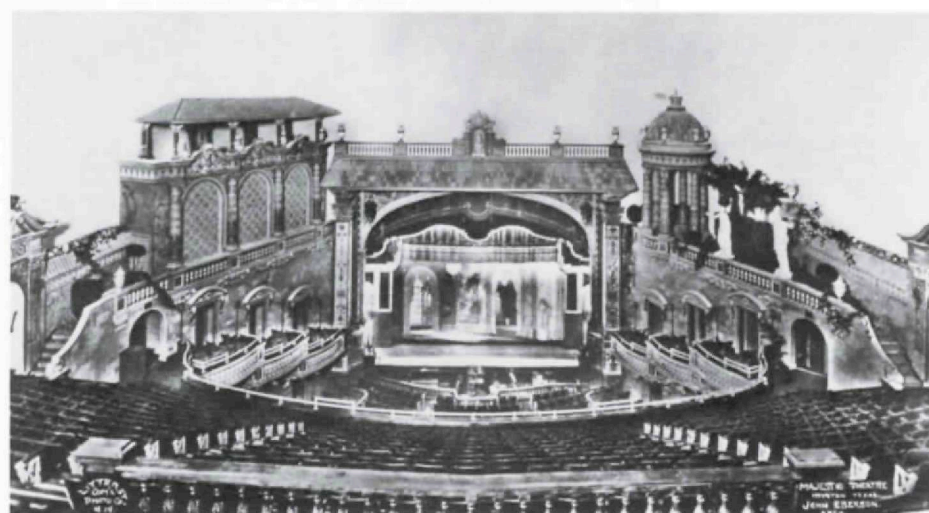
The European-born Eberson (1875-1954) was educated in Dresden and Vienna. He immigrated to the United States in 1901, practicing architecture in St. Louis, Hamilton, Ohio, and Chicago from 1910 to 1926, then in New York and Connecticut until his death. His son, Drew, became his partner during the 1920s, continuing the firm after 1954.

The work of Eberson was by no means limited to theater designs. His many office buildings, of which Houston's Niels Esperson Building (1925) is an important example, shared the exuberance, quality of color, materials, and detail that he lavished on theaters.

Eberson's strong ties to Texas and Houston were due in large measure to the patronage of Karl Hoblitzelle, owner of the Interstate Amusement Corporation. Hoblitzelle employed him as early as 1915 to design the Majestic (later Paramount) Theatre in Austin, followed in 1921 by the Majestic in Dallas. It was with Houston's now departed Majestic Theatre in 1923 that Eberson introduced the atmospheric ceiling – a smooth surface, painted blue, with twinkling electric stars and moving clouds projected across it to create the illusion of a night sky. It was an instant success and brought Eberson many more lavish commissions.

The handsome 18-page catalogue was well researched, designed, and printed. The exhibition itself, despite good organization, suffered from problems of presentation. Only about two-thirds of the drawings were matted and framed, and wall space in the McNay's Tobin Gallery was insufficient for so many large pieces. The remaining drawings were simply laid into flat cases, sometimes rolled over or up the back of the case. Lighting was uneven, a problem with drawings that had darkened with age. Nonetheless, these were minor defects considering the magnitude of the project and the elegance of the materials on display. ■

Interior, Majestic Theatre, Houston, John Eberson, architect, 1923.



Litterest-Dixon Collection, Harris County Heritage Society Photographic Collection

Made to Measure

Architecture and Its Image:
Four Centuries of Architectural
Representation. Works from the
Collection of the Canadian Centre
for Architecture
Dallas Museum of Art
18 February – 22 April 1990

Reviewed by Jay C. Henry

This enormous exhibition of 158 catalogue entries, comprising hundreds of separate book illustrations, drawings, photographs, urban prospects, computer graphics, and occasional models, threatened to exhaust the visitor who tried to look at everything carefully. Fortunately, just as one's energy began to flag, surprises turned up around the next bend.

The exhibition was organized somewhat nebulously into three sections: Architecture in Place and Time, Architecture in Process, and Architecture in Three Dimensions. In each section, images from different periods were juxtaposed without regard for chronology, a method that proved both frustrating and provocative. In a memorable sequence in Architecture in Process, one passed from Robert Venturi to Hans Poelzig, Mies van der Rohe, Filippo Juvarra, Louis Kahn, and John Wellborn Root. Root's early proposals for the Monadnock Building might just as appropriately have been compared with Jules Hardouin-Mansart's drawings for the chapel at the Invalides – also not the executed version. Instead, after Mansart one quickly encountered John Hedjuk's design for the North-East-West-South House, a pairing used also on the catalogue cover.

As the exhibition was assembled from the holdings of a single museum, it necessarily reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the parent collection. Some of the inclusions seemed inconsequential – construction documents for the Palace of Justice in Montreal, for instance – whereas major omissions stood out: no works of Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Sullivan were included. A smaller and more tightly organized exhibition drawing upon other collections might also have fit into the amorphous gallery space of the Dallas Museum of Art without encroaching on Claes Oldenburg's *Stake Hitch* in the vast and noisy vaulted hall. If these reservations indicate that *Architecture and Its Image* was not a blockbuster, the exhibition was nevertheless well worth a visit. It repaid both careful scrutiny and casual browsing. ■

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