



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

SOCIETY OF  
ARCHITECTURAL  
HISTORIANS

---

Review: The Architect's Library: Notable Books on Architectural Themes in the Vassar College Library

**The Architect's Library: Notable Books on Architectural Themes in the Vassar College Library**

Review by: Joseph M. Siry

*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (March 2015), pp. 129-131

Published by: [University of California Press](http://www.ucpress.edu) on behalf of the [Society of Architectural Historians](http://www.jsah.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jsah.2015.74.1.129>

Accessed: 21/03/2015 08:52

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press and Society of Architectural Historians are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

exhibition on William Chambers at the Courtauld Gallery in 1997.

The problem with the exhibition's approach was that it fell between two stools, satisfying, I suspect, neither the general public nor the specialist. On one hand, the exhibition missed the opportunity to present its professed theme of "designing Georgian Britain" to a broader public, something that one can see addressed far more convincingly in the V&A's own galleries. On the other hand, those with knowledge of the exhibition's subject will have struggled to find much new information or interpretation. The selection of drawings did little to go beyond the well-known, and—given the predominance of the two-dimensional—offered little analysis of Kent's range of illustrative techniques, which might have provided one avenue for discussion. The coverage throughout was far too generalized and never went beyond introducing different types of schemes without singling out a few for more in-depth discussion. Given the interest the *Houghton Hall Revisited* exhibition at Houghton aroused last year, the relationship between political influence, wealth, and architectural display in London and East Anglia might have been one possibility. Nowhere were such connections and interconnections addressed at more than a superficial level. Even the astonishing Stone Hall at Houghton and the staircase at 44 Berkley Square—two indubitable showstoppers—passed almost without comment and, in the case of the latter, minimal illustration.

The exhibition catalog is an unusually lavish and large-scale production, even by Yale University Press's generous standards, and seems to be packed full of interesting new analyses of Kent, as well as wonderful photographs. It is a great pity that some of those images did not find their way into the exhibition itself, which desperately needed some color and visual excitement. Kensington Palace, for example, one of Kent's most accessible surviving interiors, was represented only by a few small prints from William Pyne's *Royal Residences* (1816–19). It is hard not to conclude that some of the new research and enormous effort expended on the catalog should have translated through to the exhibition itself. A small free or

inexpensive pamphlet should also have been made available to complement such a weighty tome. Some of the new thinking is revealed on the V&A website, which includes an excellent video presentation of Frank Salmon discussing the Parliament House designs of the 1730s. Why exclude this or similar material from the exhibition? Sadly, the powers that be may well have deduced from the Kent show that eighteenth-century architecture and design do not sell. While it might never hope to match the crowds attending the adjacent *Italian Fashion* exhibition, an excitingly presented and more compelling event could have pulled in the crowds, as the British Library did with its *Georgians Revealed* exhibition earlier in the year. Architecture has always been notoriously difficult to display, but, surprisingly for an exhibition curated by the V&A, *William Kent* represents a step back rather than forward, not least in its eschewal of the possibilities of interactive interpretation. One hopes that the incoming curator of design at the museum will rise anew to the challenge of producing displays that are both scholarly and enticing—or at least, if not both, one or the other.

ELIZABETH MCKELLAR  
*Open University*

#### Related Publication

Susan Weber, ed., *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 656 pp., 624 color illus. \$85, ISBN 9780300196184

#### The Architect's Library: Notable Books on Architectural Themes in the Vassar College Library

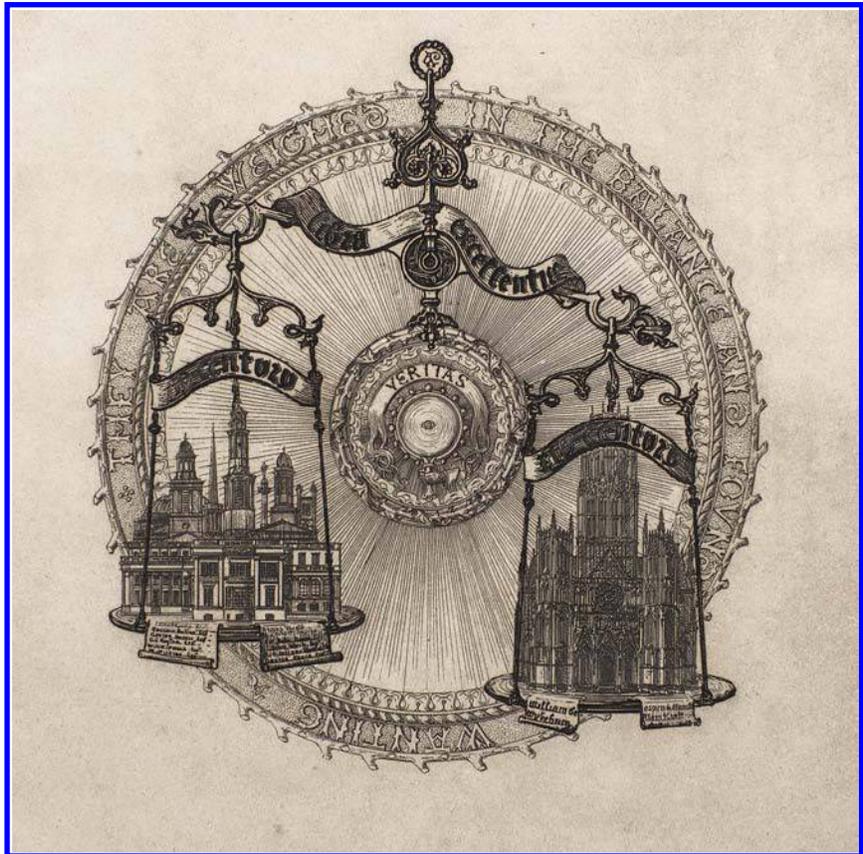
Vassar College Library and Art Center  
21 January–15 June 2014

Over the past several years a combination of serendipitous discoveries and systematic searching has revealed that Vassar College has an extraordinary collection of rare architectural books from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. It includes early editions of canonical works by Vignola, Alberti, Palladio, Piranesi, and other Italian Renaissance and baroque architects, theorists, and printmakers; a rich collection of titles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including

a full set on the Gothic Revival with the major works of Augustus Pugin (Figure 1), John Ruskin, William Morris, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, and many other lesser-known figures; nineteenth-century American treatises and pattern books, including works on domestic and landscape architecture by A. J. Downing, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Calvert Vaux, and Gervase Wheeler; and a wealth of original editions of canonical works of the modern movement, including books by Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius, among many others. This unusually rich collection derives from a series of donations going back to those of the college's founder, Matthew Vassar, and extending through the gifts of Professor John McAndrew, who taught at Vassar from 1931 to 1937 before becoming director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition displayed a selection of these holdings in four locations on the Vassar campus: the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, the Thompson Library's main gallery and Special Collections room, and the Art Library. A beautifully designed and generously illustrated catalog includes helpful interpretive essays by the exhibition's curator, Professor Nicholas Adams, and his colleague Professor Brian Lukacher, detailed entries by Vassar faculty, students, and alumni on more than ninety authors, and an expanded list of almost four hundred titles in the college's holdings.

The exhibition and the accompanying catalog sparked insights into our assumptions about the role of the book as the primary means of sustaining, altering, and renewing Western architectural discourse over the past five centuries. This exhibition made vivid what we know but do not often see: that books as a medium for conveying ideas have changed markedly and progressively in terms of their size as printed volumes, format, paper quality, binding, image production and reproduction, typographic choices, signs of ownership, methods of distribution, and venues for their collection. The sight of these books opened to their title pages or other representative images suggested many questions about the changing scope of libraries for architects, builders, patrons, and clients;

**Figure 1** A. W. N. Pugin, "They Are Weighed in the Balance and Found Wanting," tailpiece from *Contrasts; or, A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day*, 1836 (Archives & Special Collections Library, Vassar College).



about audience and readership; and about interactions between authors and readers recorded in marginal notes. More poignant still was evidence of dialogue and debate between successive authors on similar topics, such as the different schools of interpretation of the Gothic in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or the vibrancy of exchange of positions through books among the leading architects, critics, and historians of the interwar Modern movement. In the twenty-first century, with some exceptions, such as the books of Rem Koolhaas, books are no longer the leading medium for the exchange of new ideas in architecture. Their role was gradually superseded through the twentieth century by architectural journals, which are now in turn being succeeded by online venues.

The book as the site of canonicity and debate from Vignola to Robert Venturi was the overarching theme of the exhibition, one of whose contributions was to remind us that the design of the book itself participated powerfully in projecting the artistic attitudes that shaped its content. There are

excellent compendia and histories of architectural theory from the Renaissance to the present that cite many of the books displayed in this exhibition. But at a removal from the books themselves, their contents survive in historical consciousness as "texts" studied for the "positions" they advocated. From this perspective, the words of architects and theorists across the centuries come to us with a flattened equivalence. They are only successive utterances, once printed to be sure, but contemplated by us as dissociated from their original presentation in books whose every detail was intended to reinforce their larger intellectual message. For example, looking in the exhibition at the title page of the original edition of Pugin's *Contrasts* (1836), we see how carefully he chose contrasting typefaces, type sizes, and type colors to present ever more forcefully his larger thesis represented by the book's title. And we see how much Morris's choices about book design and typography color the reader's appreciation for the message that he wanted to convey in his edition of Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic."

Book design recorded cultural sentiment, authority, and conflict in ways parallel to and reinforcing of the ideas put forth in text and images. In this light, the modernist revolt in architecture was played out in the details of its books' typography, formats, and images. And the contrasting sensibilities of major figures, such as Wright and Le Corbusier, read clearly in the different conventions of their book designs as much as in their actual texts.

Another important lesson of this exhibition was that it provided a model for what might be done at other institutions with comparable holdings. The libraries of older universities and colleges often have collections of historical depth that may have eluded consistent cataloging over time, to the point where the libraries are not fully aware of what they have. This exhibition showed that the study of what libraries own in the field of architecture, how titles were acquired or received through donation, and the significance of a collection for an institution's identity and development are worthy educational topics. One hopes that architectural historians

at other institutions will be comparably diligent, reflective, and imaginative in bringing to light their local traditions of architectural knowledge long recorded in beautiful books.

JOSEPH M. SIRY  
Wesleyan University

### Related Publication

Nicholas Adams, ed., *The Architect's Library: A Collection of Notable Books on Architecture at Vassar College* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Vassar College, 2014), 143 pp., 8 color and 96 b/w illus. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 9780615885162

### Designing Home: Jews and Midcentury Modernism

Contemporary Jewish Museum,  
San Francisco  
4 April–6 October 2014

A slide show of modern houses and interiors greeted visitors to the exhibition *Designing Home: Jews and Midcentury Modernism*. Among the images were the Idea House II, a demonstration house commissioned in 1948 by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; Marcel Breuer's interior for the House in the Museum Garden from 1949 and Gregory Ain's Exhibition House from the following year, both shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and a prototype building by A. Quincy Jones and Frederick E. Emmons for developer Joseph Eichler's X-100 House from 1956. Yet the exhibition's concept was more complex than this initial display of ideal modern homes as imagined by architects suggested.

The goal of curator Donald Albrecht was, as stated in the introductory wall text, to present "the role of Jewish architects and designers in the creation of a distinctly modern American domestic landscape." The "home" of the exhibition's title indicated not just the house but a domestic continuum stretching from the suburban subdivision to single-family houses, along with their furnishings and household goods, to, finally, marketing images as propagated in magazines and movies. Consequently, "designing home" referred to the creation of the plethora of designer-conceived functional objects and consumer goods with which homeowners filled their domestic spaces once they had moved in.

This domestic landscape was a collaborative effort that brought together—sometimes according to a plan, sometimes by accident—architects, designers, and clients.

Eschewing highbrow theorizing about, for example, identity, ethnicity, or even race when assessing the role of Jewish designers, the exhibition emphasized the formal and informal networks that emerged within the American design world around the middle of the last century. This focus recalls the contemporary fascination with cybernetics and networks. It also allowed the curator to structure the exhibition around the biographies of individual designers who, within the context of the period, became exemplary instances of how humans create the circumstances that so often appear to later generations as anonymous forces determining history. Politically, the period was characterized by the struggle of Jews both for general acceptance into mainstream American society and against obstacles they faced as individuals, especially, but not only, those who had fled National Socialism and fascism. Culturally, Jewish designers shared common ground with their gentile colleagues, as the Jewish architect Paul Goodman pointed out when he stated in 1961 (as quoted in an exhibition wall text), "*Avant-garde* belongs neither to Gentile nor Jew, but is the plight of everybody who must rebel in order to breathe again."

The exhibition proper opened with a display of furniture and domestic objects by designers who either were born in the United States (e.g., Muriel Coleman, Alvin Lustig, Henry Dreyfuss, and George Nelson) or had arrived from abroad at different times and for different reasons (e.g., Rudolph M. Schindler, Paul T. Frankl, Marcel Breuer, Anni Albers, and Ruth Adler Schnee). The exhibits in this section included design classics—objects easily identified as the work of their designers, such as the Skyscraper Bookshelf (ca. 1925) by Frankl—as well as decorative and functional objects that were instantly recognizable as *modern* even if their designers have remained anonymous or relatively little known. Dreyfuss's pink Princess Phone (1959) and gold-shimmering T86 Round thermostat (ca. 1953), abstract place mats (ca. 1960) by Marli Ehrman, and textiles such as Cuneiforms (1947–48) by Adler

Schnee are good examples of objects occupying the fluid boundaries between designed objects, sometimes almost art objects, and the mass market's orientation toward consumer goods. The eclectic assembly of numerous objects—pots, mugs, jugs, vases, book covers, record covers, wallpapers, and cigarette packages, to name just a few—in a large display case worthy of any well-stocked department store emphasized as well the degree to which the production of modern consumer goods relied on designers and, accordingly, the ample opportunities it provided the latter to shape the taste of the period.

The largest section of the exhibition was dedicated to six networks that illustrated the cultural context in which Jewish designers thrived. These networks crystallized around art and educational organizations such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Institute of Design/New Bauhaus, Chicago; Black Mountain College, Asheville, North Carolina; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Pond Farm, Guerneville, California; and the Case Study House program of John Entenza and his Los Angeles-based *Arts & Architecture* magazine. Those Jewish designers who had taught or worked in these institutions were represented in the exhibition by exemplary works and plenty of biographical information.

The German Bauhaus loomed large over many of these institutions and the lives of many of the portrayed individuals. In the case of the architect Harry Rosenthal the exhibition unfortunately perpetuated the myth that every modernist designer must have been a Bauhaus student. While Rosenthal never studied at that school, his cubic furniture for the Schiff family's Berlin home, some of which was shown in the exhibition, is witness to the reach of these informal networks across continents, even if in this case the connection was an accidental consequence of German politics.<sup>1</sup> Once the Schiff family had fled Nazi Germany, they asked Richard Neutra to design their new San Francisco home around Rosenthal's furniture. Rosenthal, in the meantime, had fled to Palestine, and from there he moved to Great Britain.

In summary, the exhibition succeeded well in arguing that Jewish designers had an important impact on American