

## BOOK REVIEW

# A visual revolution between two covers

Seminal magazine Arts & Architecture changed how Americans view the buildings around them.

GREG GOLDIN

Arts & Architecture, which folded 41 years ago, is the most influential architecture magazine ever published. During the height of its run, from 1945 to 1967, it convinced the world that Los Angeles was at the vanguard of reinventing the single family home. John Entenza, the editor, quietly featured the work of Isamu Noguchi, Henry Moore, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, Richard Neutra, George Nelson, Charles Eames, George Nakashima and Bernard Rudofsky.

Hans Hoffmann, Saul Bass, Eugene Weston III and Peter Krasnow, along with the indefatigable Herbert Matter and John Follis, did the covers.

Peter Yates and Esther McCoy knocked out countless articles. Marvin Rand and Julius Shulman contributed photographs, for free. The effect, British critic Rayner Banham said, was that Los Angeles replaced Florence on the travel itinerary of European architects and students.

The magazine has now been reissued in a facsimile edition that covers 1945 to 1954 — 10 years in 10 boxes, 118 issues in more than 6,000 pages. (A second installment, reprinting 1955 to 1967, is due in 2010.) Rarely more than 50 pages a month, and often fewer than 40, Arts & Architecture was alive with the possibility of cultural and spiritual renewal after the ravages of the Second World War.

The sense that something new was

forming on the horizon was encapsulated — and given shape — by Entenza's now-famous Case Study House program. In January 1945, months before the German surrender, he announced that it was time "to get down [See Arts & Architecture, Page F8] to cases . . . in terms of post war housing." That's the etymology of "case" in Case Study.

The plan was straightforward: When wartime restrictions on home-building were lifted, the magazine would solicit and underwrite designs "of practical assistance to the average American in search of a home in which he can afford to live." The very notion of "house" was up for grabs, and Entenza insisted that contemporary ideas would change the home, which he described as the "environment that is responsible for shaping the largest part of our living and thinking."

## Liberating architecture

This, surely, was a key modernist faith, one that has long since been decimated by the failure of modern architecture (and art) to transform mankind. Yet in its hopefulness and enterprise, there is much to admire and adopt. As anyone who has recently been to New Orleans — or Pacoima — can attest, the problems Arts & Architecture confronted are still very much in our midst, which gives rereading the magazine a modern urgency.

The Case Study Houses, of which 26 were built, emerged from an abiding concern with small homes for small urban lots. Nearly every issue of Arts & Architecture contains titles like "Winners Second Annual Small House Competition," "Small Contemporary House," "A Tract of Small Modern Houses," and "The Small House and the City Plot."

Entenza and his architect pals — William Wurster, Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, Raphael Soriano, A. Quincy Jones — shared an obsession with finding a way to build inexpensive yet liberating homes. In his April 1949 essay, "Consider the Family," Josef Van Der Kar summarized the problem. "The small house with its many amenities both aesthetic and practical," he wrote, "is too often, in actuality, a juxtapo-

sition of toys and stumbling people. . . . For the average person the hiring of a modern architect and the building of a modern home is too often a snare and a delusion of the slick magazines. For them, the architect becomes a swami of space well beyond their practical reach."

Echoing through these words were the stomping feet of 16 million returning veterans marching out of the cities straight to Levittown. Suborned by Veterans Administration loans and the newly conceived mortgage interest deduction — the neutron bombs that killed American cities — the migration to suburbia had a price, which some call the Geography of Nowhere. Arts & Architecture was a prescient force aligned against this mass-produced culture of dingbats, flattop malls and thruways. As the country drifted into the deadening alikeness of the Truman-Eisenhower years, Entenza and his obscure magazine, with a circulation of no more than 10,000, fought to express the conviction that, for less than \$10 per square foot, art and architecture could stir the soul.

The magazine attacked on two indivisible fronts, intellectual and aesthetic. Entenza's monthly "Notes in Passing" were not-so-quiet sermons against war and greed and blind obeisance to the powers that be. In February 1950, he confessed: "One has considerable difficulty in deciding between the destructive horrors of the hydrogen bomb and the implications inherent in the development of the new computing machines which in their electronic fury are reputed to be well on their way to taking over most of the basic functions of civilized living. It is ironic that we are at last faced with the necessity of considering Man himself as being obsolete in the face of triumphs of his own technology. It is possible that the whole dilemma boils down to our own seeming inability to effectively develop a sense of proportion and a proper assessment of the values of life itself."

## Abstract and concrete

This rhetoric must now sound quaint and anachronistic to a generation cross-linked at the atomic level to printed circuitry. Yet without this hiccup in the face of the inevitable, the midcentury modern architecture that is now overvalued real estate would never have existed. The making of spaciousness in small spaces, the transformation of light into substance, the use of steel to make structures disappear into landscape — and plenty else that continues to give Modernism an audience — springs as much from beliefs about human nature as from a pure abstract aesthetic. They informed each other, and neither stood alone.

None of this is to understate the visual beauty of Arts & Architecture. Month after month, year after year, the covers were tantalizing — outsized postcards from the cutting edge of design. Shaped largely by Follis, Matter and Alvin Lustig, the imagery had the energy of Russian Constructivist prints. Since the only text was the Arts & Architecture logo, with the month and year embedded into the drawing, the covers were like swatches of wallpaper: pure line and color, pattern and chaos. Invariably abstract and making no reference to the content within, the graphics are animated and urgent, as if too much matter had to be compressed into a single frame.

Yet that only suited the magazine's contents. Entenza never pretended to have any answers to the riddle of the single-family residence, and the experimental, often



Herbert Matter was among a stable of impressive artists of the era who contributed cover art.

whimsical artwork on the cover reflected the problem of working out what, expressly, Modernism stood for.

In a single issue, one might find Jan de Swart describing the use of a finely tuned band saw to slice blocks of wood into hollow and interlocking sculptures about “space and volume, line and shadow,” Marcel Breuer weighing in on the false dichotomy of man and machine (“Sullivan didn’t eat his functionalism as he cooked it,” he reminded readers, “Corbusier didn’t build his machine for living”) and Gregory Ain outlining plans for 100 inexpensive houses for returning World War II “average veterans” — his economical Mar Vista houses that no returning Iraq war vet could pos-

**VISIONARY:** A concept for a house by Alvin Lustig in the May 1950 edition.

Some imagery had the energy of Russian Constructivist prints.

sibly afford.



The only text on the cover (this one also by Matter) was the Arts & Architecture logo.

### A time capsule

This facsimile edition of Arts & Architecture has been done in an unusual fashion. Instead of bound annuals, or a stupendous anthology, every issue has been individually reprinted. Leafing through, you get something akin to the original experience of encountering the magazine when it arrived by second-class mail or on the newsstand. (On the back cover of a few issues, there is an address label for “Mr. Julius Shulman,” as if to prove the authenticity of the reprint.)

This kind of faithful reproduction — so disastrous in architecture itself — reanimates the provisional quality of Entenza’s work. Nowadays, Modernism is a commodity. In the pages of the reprinted Arts & Architecture, none of the ideas or images seems quite so fixed. Modernism has a bit of its incipient, and radical, energy restored.

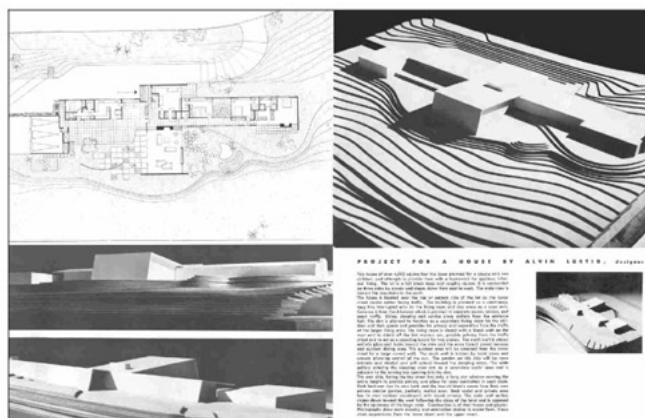
Goldin is the architecture critic at Los Angeles Magazine.

### Arts & Architecture 1945-54

The Complete Reprint

Introduction by David Travers

Tashen: 118 magazines in 10 boxes, 6,156 pp., \$700



DAVID TRAVERS Taschen Books

**EPIC IN SCOPE:** The collection features issues from 1945 to 1954 in 10 boxes, in more than 6,000 pages. This cover is by Charles Kratka.



Photographs by DAVID TRAVERS Taschen Books

**MISSION STATEMENT:** The magazine, which was published from 1945 to 1967, was a prescient force aligned against mass-produced culture.