



Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Annmarie Adams

Reviewed work(s):

Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History by Alice T. Friedman

Source: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1998), pp. 474-476

Published by: Society of Architectural Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/991469>

Accessed: 06/04/2010 14:19

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=sah>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

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.



Society of Architectural Historians is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

child's five sons to establish themselves in the principal cities of Europe via the grandest undertakings in both cities and fashionable watering spots, to the mid-twentieth century, when their descendants increasingly preferred to remodel eighteenth-century houses rather than commission new family seats.

In addition to providing building histories and descriptions of the furnishings and important art collections of both fabled and lesser-known houses, *Les Rothschilds* is on the lookout for patterns of taste, strategies, and motivations. The relative consistency of Rothschild taste throughout Europe is perhaps most fascinating in this period, during which questions of nationalism at first and of regionalism by the end of the century colored animated debates on architectural style, its meaning and appropriateness. In terms of both cooperation and interfamily rivalry and posturing, the Rothschilds operated largely as a closed universe, following one another not only in matters of taste and stylistic reference but also in choosing architects, decorators, and even manufacturers of household luxuries. From the beginning they rejected neomedieval imagery, which so many moneyed families used to construct credentials and heritage in nineteenth-century Europe. In the heavy-handed neo-English Renaissance styling that Joseph Paxton provided for them at Mentmore and then at Ferrières—only the glass-covered central living halls, a Rothschild trademark, echoed his more famous work for the Crystal Palace—the family demonstrated both a fidelity to classicism and a cosmopolitan approach to style in which national traditions were easily evoked across borders.

Beginning in the 1860s, the Rothschilds' preference for models from the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV anticipated by decades the generalized promotion of refined French classicism as the *sine qua non* of affluence and privilege, as well as a quest for "Frenchness" in the intense nationalism of the late nineteenth century. The Rothschilds thus not only paved the way for a dominant strain in aristocratic taste of the 1890s and early 1900s but also defined a new approach to planning, in which the private residence served as a theatrical backdrop for the social spectacles staged there. James de Rothschild's moment of glory came with

Napoleon III's visit to the great glass-covered hall at Ferrières, a brilliantly staged occasion. Prevost-Marcilhacy details the parallels between recurrent features of planning and decor in the great Rothschild power houses and Charles Garnier's Paris Opéra, where the world of finance and the administrative classes also displayed themselves in the late nineteenth century.

Not surprisingly the Rothschilds often preferred designers with a background in stage design. Once they found an architect sensitive to their demands, they plied him with commissions and passed him from one branch of the family to another, thereby enhancing the cosmopolitanism of their enterprise and their imagery. The English Rothschilds called upon the Frenchman Hippolyte Destailleur, the French branch brought Paxton across the Channel, and French models were preferred even for building in the great Hapsburg setting of central Vienna. Their preferred architects often had royal commissions as a pedigree, and in many cases they had enough employment from the Rothschilds to make it unnecessary for them to seek work outside this circle—court architects of a new sort, as the author notes in several instances. Although the book remains largely descriptive in tone, it provides a fascinating angle on the sociology of taste, even while it leaves one eager for comparative studies of some of the other great financial dynasties of the early heyday of European capitalism.

The only criticism of this rich portrait of both a society and a family viewed in its most influential generations is the conscious decision to downplay the Rothschilds' extensive and sustained philanthropic endeavors. In each of the countries where they established themselves, the Rothschilds were prominent patrons of everything from social housing and schools to hospitals, sometimes specifically for local Jewish communities, for whom they also built a number of important synagogues. This study originated as a thesis for the University of Paris, so it is understandable that the author glossed over aspects of Rothschild patronage well studied by other historians in recent years. Yet this, as well as a complete lack of discussion of the architecture of the places where the Rothschilds conducted business and amassed wealth—from their banking offices to such great

stations as Paris's Gare du Nord representing their railroad investments—diminishes the depth and reach of the conclusions drawn in this first study of the patronage of this family at the crossroads between Renaissance princes and the modern multinational financial corporation. Interesting hypotheses about the Rothschilds' changing attitudes toward their fellow Jews and their cousins, as well as their political aspirations (the English Rothschilds first entered Parliament in 1865 and were ennobled in 1885), are all offered, but one is left wondering if these assumptions would need to be altered if the study had been even more ambitious, encompassing the full panorama of each family member's patronage beyond the walls of the châteaux, mansions, and villas so thoroughly documented here.

—Barry Bergdoll
Columbia University

Alice T. Friedman

WOMEN AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN HOUSE: A SOCIAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998, 240 pp., 110 b. & w. illus., 30 in color. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8109-3989-4.

Queen Hatshepsut. Costanza. Empress Theodora. Hildegard von Bingen. Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Josephine Baker. Peggy Guggenheim. Phyllis Lambert. The history of architecture is dotted with women who inspired, commissioned, and in a few cases designed some of the world's best-known monuments. The specific contributions to architecture of these remarkable women, however, have always been overshadowed by the high profiles of their powerful husbands, fathers, sons, colleagues, or lovers. Many architectural histories, for example, only hint at Theodora's influence on Justinian at Hagia Sophia. Historians have minimized the pivotal role played by William Randolph Hearst's mother, Phoebe, in recommending Julia Morgan as the architect for Hearst Castle. The story of Phyllis Lambert convincing her father, Samuel Bronfman, to hire Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the Seagram Building is somewhat better known, thanks to her own prominence on the architectural scene.

Alice T. Friedman's *Women and the Mak-*

ing of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History is the first book-length study of the much-neglected subject of women as patrons of architecture. At the same time, it offers a refreshing look at the history of the modern house, illuminates how twentieth-century architects have marketed their goods and services, and reminds us that architecture is, above all, an act of both persuasion and negotiation.

Thankfully, Friedman's project is nicely focused. The six beautifully written chapters explore six of the best-known houses of this century in chronological order: the Hollyhock house (1920–1922), the Schröder house (1923–1924), the Villa Stein-de Monzie (1926–1928), the Farnsworth house (1945–1951), the Perkins house (1953–1955), and the Venturi house (1961–1964). The architects of these buildings constitute a virtual Who's Who of twentieth-century practice: Frank Lloyd Wright, Gerrit Rietveld, Le Corbusier, Mies, Richard Neutra, and Robert Venturi. Friedman's focus, however, is on the not-so-famous women for whom the buildings were designed and constructed: Aline Barnsdall, Truus Schröder, Sarah Stein and Gabrielle de Monzie, Edith Farnsworth, Constance Perkins, and Vanna Venturi.

Friedman's premise is extraordinary. Through her carefully researched case studies, she convincingly argues that these independent women acted as major catalysts in the general development of twentieth-century domestic architecture. They had little in common, save for the fact that they all came of age between 1890 and 1930, were more or less interested in feminism, and lived in unconventional family situations. Barnsdall was a single parent. Sarah and Michael Stein lived with Gabrielle de Monzie and her daughter. Perkins and Farnsworth were unmarried, professional women. Venturi, by the time her house was constructed, was a widow. Their financial situations also varied widely. The atypical circumstances of these women as patrons, according to Friedman, challenged architects to reconsider traditional spatial divisions between public and private, individual and community, male and female. The six houses met one additional criterion set by Friedman: each of them constituted a "creative breakthrough" for its architect (96).

Certainly, these patrons had unusual

relationships with their architects. Wright and Mies eventually saw their clients in court. Schröder, according to Friedman, co-designed her house with Rietveld. As distinguished collectors of modern art, the Steins presumably saw their house by Le Corbusier as the architectural equivalent of a painting by Matisse. Neutra worked from detailed lists made by Perkins, in a fascinating process of give-and-take, and she remained his devotee throughout her life. Venturi hired her son, a young architect with limited experience. In all cases, Friedman argues, the gender of the clients mattered.

And in her approach to gender and architecture, Friedman's book is unique. For the past two decades feminist scholars for the most part have focused on women architects and designers or women users of buildings, arguing for a revised and expanded canon that might acknowledge the contributions of women. They have pointed out that a history of architecture centered on famous architects and their monuments, by definition, fails to take into account the contributions and experiences of women, who have been excluded from the realm of high design throughout history. Friedman's critique is different. She embraces the very icons of modernism—her six houses are part of the canon—to argue that women occupied a place within architecture's inner circle. In other words, hers is not a call for expansion or dissolution of the field, but rather a new look at the same old buildings. Familiar as they are, these houses can never again be seen in the same way.

The Schröder house, for example, has appeared in countless architectural history lectures next to images of paintings by De Stijl painter Piet Mondrian. Friedman documents Schröder's belief that the house's open plan and thin sliding panels would allow her to participate more fully in the lives of her three children. The author also reinterprets the design as a spatial laboratory for Schröder's passionate love affair with Rietveld. Rather than reading the Dutch dwelling's interpenetrating planes as an aesthetic contribution to the history of heroic modernism, Friedman explains how its modern spaces were used and understood in modern (and intimate) ways.

The chapter on the Farnsworth house is equally compelling. Studied by genera-

tions of architecture students as the epitome of modernism, Mies's elegant white steel box is here the setting for a more tragic tale. Farnsworth hated her house. As Friedman explains, the building's relentless glass walls and rigid geometries "foregrounded Farnsworth's single life and her middle aged woman's body" (142). The absence of an enclosed bedroom implied that the Chicago doctor had no private life to conceal; Mies's inclusion of a second bathroom (supposedly so she could hide her nightgown from guests) is read by the author as evidence of the architect's discomfort with Farnsworth's femaleness. The book is full of magnificent photographs of modern architecture. None are as shocking, however, as those of the Miesian masterpiece in the 1950s decorated with Farnsworth's antique furniture.

Friedman's case study of the Farnsworth house shows that the building would have operated much differently had its chief occupant been male. To underline this point, she concludes the chapter with a bold interpretation of Philip Johnson's glass house and guest house of 1949 as typifying gay space. She contests the popular reading of the complex at New Canaan, Connecticut, as a metaphor for Johnson's controversial wartime past. Friedman views it instead as an offshoot of gay camp culture, which privileges irony, humor, and theatricality as mechanisms of survival. She suggests that Johnson's famous list of historic precedents for the house, published in 1950 in *Architectural Review*, was simply an example of a "wily fox leading a pack of hounds farther and farther off his scent" (149). By broadening an analysis of the glass house to include its windowless guest house, which she says accommodated the "messy 'private functions' of the domestic realm" (156), Friedman suggests that the complex offered its gay occupant a range of settings for enacting public and private personas. Mies offered no such choice to Farnsworth. Even though the two houses look alike, notions of gender and sexuality put them poles apart.

Taken together, Friedman's six essays are outstanding and ground-breaking. In addition to their potent lessons in gender analysis, the chapters underscore the idea that modern architecture was much more than clean, white, undecorated boxes designed by famous architects. This may be

self-evident to many architectural historians, but rarely has it been argued so eloquently: modern architecture encouraged modern life.

A weakness of *Women and the Making of the Modern House* is that the chapters function independently. Only in the book's introduction does Friedman pause to draw general conclusions from the group of houses she has assembled. Rather than revisiting the houses to emphasize the big ideas, the conclusion instead brings readers into the present by exploring two California houses designed in the 1980s for single mothers.

There are a few other quibbles. Versions of three of the six chapters have been previously published, which can be annoying in a rather expensive book. Also, the title and subtitle are misleading. Fried-

man's book does not address the general issue of women's contribution to the modern house, but instead considers only a small group of rather unusual women and their roles in six unique houses. In spots it seems as if the houses and their clients were forced to fit the research plan rather than the other way around. This is particularly true of the chapter on Le Corbusier's Villa Stein-de Monzie, for which the author provides a lengthy defense, since the client was a complex family group rather than an independent woman.

For me, one big question remains: if these women patrons were really concerned about issues of gender and sexuality, why didn't they hire women architects, or at least architects who held more progressive ideas about women? Wright and Le Corbusier frequently expressed deroga-

tory views on women. Except for brief references to Eileen Gray and Denise Scott Brown, and images of buildings by Eleanor Raymond as examples of purpose-built homes for lesbian couples, Friedman avoids the question of women architects altogether.

The lessons of *Women and the Making of the Modern House*, however, resonate far beyond the subfield of gender and space. The book will engage readers interested in the history of housing, the history of the profession, the evolution of modernism, and the social analysis of all buildings. Most importantly, its powerful thesis speaks to the core of our discipline, confirming that buildings are more than meets the eye.

— Annmarie Adams
McGill University

BUILDING TYPES

Jerzy Ilkosz and Beate Stortkuhl, editors

HOCHHÄUSER FÜR BRESLAU

[WROCLAW] 1919–1932

Delmenhorst, Aschenbeck und

Holstein Verlag, n.d. (1997), 206 pp.,
221 illus. DM 38 (paper).

ISBN 3-932292057.

The German *Wolkenkratzer*, or “cloudscrapers,” of the 1920s have assumed a role in international architectural history that is grotesquely disproportionate to the actual numbers built, let alone to the Lilliputian height of most of them. And yet this subject is greatly enriched again by a book on the projects for Breslau, today Poland's Wrocław. Of great significance for Poland and Germany is a new spirit of cooperation between the institutions and architectural historians of both countries, which has resulted in a work that is more than adequately written, excellently produced, and good value overall.

For a long time Breslau appeared situated too far to the east to be taken seriously as a place of art and architecture by the dominant regions of Germany. After 1900, the city began to attract attention through its modernist fine arts and architecture, first under the guidance of Hans Poelzig and after 1920 through the Breslauer Kunst-

akademie, as well as through the frequent engagement of outside architects such as Erich Mendelsohn, Hans Scharoun, Adolf Rading, and Ernst May, to name just a few. Breslau became an artistic center second only to Berlin, not counting, of course, the Bauhaus towns Weimar and Dessau.

Even more important was the activity of Max Berg as *Stadtbaumeister* (city architect) from 1909 to 1925. He had made his mark before World War I with the miracle reinforced concrete spans of the Jahrhunderthalle. It seemed natural that he would join the *Hochhausfieber* (high building fever) of the early 1920s, which, as a whole, has been amply dealt with recently (see Joan Ockman, exhibition review, “Scenes of the World to Come,” *jsah* 55 [June 1996]). This sort of building now seemed right for the typical German *Grossstadt* of around 500,000 inhabitants. But a projected *Hochhaus* was not just a response to the commercial propositions of the day, nor did it arise, like the Breslau Great Hall, out of an enthusiasm for the new engineering methods. As was common with these early German projects, the construction methods were given only in the vaguest terms in the drawings.

For the Germans, the *Wolkenkratzer* was an intrinsic element in their intense new concern for all aspects of *Stadtplanung*, and

all the major Breslau projects were to be undertaken entirely by the city. Berg's proposals developed out of the expressionist/utopian phase of German architecture of the early 1920s. “The most important question for Berg was the function of the *Hochhaus* in the context of urban fabric, only in the second place came the *Hochhaus* and its form” (41). First of all, Berg had to confront the frequent criticism that the large amounts of money for such a building would be better spent on low-cost mass dwellings; he argued that concentrating office space efficiently would free much older urban property for residential use. With regard to placement, he stated that one should avoid the American way of bunching blocks of tall buildings, which resulted in narrow, lightless streets; *Wolkenkratzer* should be placed singly and strategically in major locations, with plenty of space around them to permit adequate light and views of the building. Berg never planned a single freestanding high block, and thus his proposals differ from many other projects of the time, such as the Friedrichstrasse competitions for Berlin of 1919 and 1921. Invariably he devised large agglomerations out of which a block of tall buildings would grow.

The major strategic point was the center of the city, the Ring (*Rynek* in Polish),