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Introduction: “Living in a Modern Way”

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“What Makes the California Look”? asked the *Los Angeles Times*, a question so pressing it was posed on the cover of the newspaper’s “Home” magazine for October 21, 1951 (1.1). The answer was so obvious that it was immediately supplied with this image and its caption: “In this abstract arrangement are the glowing color, originality of treatment and simplicity of design that typify the California look.”¹

The cover depicted the most recognized characteristic of California culture—indoor/outdoor living—and many of the objects assembled have become icons of California

1.1. “What Makes the California Look,” *Los Angeles Times*, “Home” magazine, October 21, 1951, cover

design. Since the state's benign climate permitted the great outdoors to be incorporated as an extended living room, the photograph highlights objects intended to be used either on a patio or in the living room: a planter by Architectural Pottery and a cord-and-metal lounge chair by Van Keppel-Green. The blurring of boundaries is emphasized with the prominently featured grill and the garden lamp, both by Hawk House, placed among the interior furnishings. New industrial materials—a fiberglass chair by Charles and Ray Eames and a plastic screen by Spencer Smilie—are displayed with traditional handicrafts, evidence of other ways that boundaries were fluid. The bright yellows, burnt oranges, and vivid greens of sunny climes prevail, as does a stripped-down, casual aesthetic that was the essence of California modern style.

The essays in this book explore how “The California Look” was established, idealized, and disseminated at mid-century. It became synonymous with a modern way of life and, as the “Home” magazine article observed, a symbol of “the willingness to experiment and be different, to solve problems in California’s way.”² Such paeans to California exceptionalism were ubiquitous until the late 1960s— one of the most oft-repeated quotations about the Golden State is writer Wallace Stegner’s 1959 observation that California is “America, only more so.”³ If the United States symbolized the land of opportunity for immigrants, California was the repository of the most intense longings for reinvention. Odes to California’s endless capacity for growth, inventiveness, and individuality, coupled with its rejection of conventions, permeated the popular press of the era. As industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss, who moved from New York to Pasadena in 1944, wrote three years later: “On the Pacific Coast there are fewer shackles on tradition. There is an unslackening development of new thought. There is a decided willingness to take a chance on new ideas.”⁴ More recently, the California dream has been exhaustively and eloquently studied by historians such as Kevin Starr; many books and innumerable articles have been devoted to the image of California and the state’s history of incessant boosterism.⁵

These associations are persistent because so many of them ring true. This volume explores the California modern aesthetic, analyzing how the general qualities associated with the state (optimism and democracy, fearless experimentation, and a love of new technology) and those specific to design (an affinity for light and brilliant color, an openness to Asian and Latin influences, and an embrace of fluid spaces and cross-disciplines) made the state’s best products distinctive. None of these qualities, however, was unique to California, and all had important precedents before the 1930s, when this account begins.

The characteristics now associated with the mid-century home had first developed with the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the last century, particularly in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. In the Prairie houses, he created interior spaces that were not enclosed in the traditional sense. Barriers between the dining room, living room, and porch were abolished, establishing



interpenetrating spaces and freeing the walls to define distinct areas rather than enclose them. This startling innovation became widespread with its application to the inexpensive bungalow, which, though built throughout the country, has always been associated with California. The bungalow's open interior, one-story plan, prominent porch, and overhanging roof offered the ventilation and protection from the sun appropriate to the state's climate, and its rapid assembly, affordability, and informality made it particularly well suited to a mobile society.

In the 1920s, revolutionary experiments in modern living were taking place throughout Europe and elsewhere in the United States, most famously in Germany at the Bauhaus and in Holland with the De Stijl group of architects. Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House in Utrecht (1924-25)—with its open plan, sliding walls for flexible room configurations, built-in furniture, and large, uncurtained windows—is widely considered to be the first truly modern house (1.2). Truus Schröder's convictions about what a house should provide were prescient: "She wanted to experience consciously the changes of nature from within her own house. . . . She felt that life should be transparent and elementary," a view commonly shared by California architects and their clients twenty years later and half a world away.⁶ That the defining characteristics of California design had originated decades earlier and very similar innovations

1.2. Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964). Interior, Schröder House, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1924-25. Photo by Kim Zwarts, 2005



1.3. R. M. Schindler. Pauline Schindler's studio, Kings Road House, West Hollywood, 1921–22. Photo by Grant Mudford, c. 1981

1.4. A. Quincy Jones and Frederick E. Emmons, Quincy Jones House, Brentwood, 1955. Photo by Julius Shulman, 1955

The sliding glass doors, made possible by steel-frame construction, connected the kitchen and the patio. The size of the glass panels was made possible by new technology developed during World War II.

had occurred elsewhere does not negate the state's remarkable achievement. In fact, the house that architect R. M. Schindler designed for his family and another couple in West Hollywood (1.3)—with sliding canvas doors, glass panels, and gardens that functioned as unroofed living rooms—was earlier (1921–22) and arguably even more adventurous (although at the time much less known) than the indefatigably promoted Schröder House.

The utopian dreams of European modernists (at least those that pertained to the health and freedom of indoor/outdoor living) could be realized most fully in California for one simple reason—the benevolent climate—and many complex ones. Californians could actually come close to living in the open air, which was not possible for even the sturdiest Northern Europeans. (Schindler did have to enclose his rooftop “sleeping baskets,” since California weather is not *always* salubrious.) With their sleeping porches, pergolas, and patios, the bungalows of the previous generation had already demonstrated the pleasure of living close to nature. What became the distinctive vocabulary of the California house and its furnishings at mid-century resulted from a natural evolution, accelerated by new construction techniques and new domestic applications for materials such as steel, which, by completely freeing the wall, allowed the floor-to-ceiling windows that made space more permeable (1.4).





1.5. Carlos Diniz for Ladd & Kelsey, Architects. Monarch Bay Homes, Laguna Niguel (outdoor dining terrace), 1961. Cat. 69

Expert delineator Carlos Diniz evoked the casual ease of outdoor dining in a rendering used to promote Monarch Bay, an upscale housing development.

The climate and the culture of California provided the ideal environment for modernism to take root and flourish, but in its own particular way. Like European modernism, it was functionalist, anti-ornament, and utopian in the conviction that design and technology could transform society. California practitioners, however, were committed to solutions appropriate to California. They adhered to a looser, warmer, more ad hoc modernism, one almost exclusively domestic in scale (1.5). Schindler's rejection from the Museum of Modern Art's defining *Modern Architecture* exhibition of 1932 and its accompanying catalogue, *The International Style* (so influential that its title named the style), highlights the qualities that made California different. Stung by his exclusion, Schindler wrote to the exhibition organizers, "I am not a stylist, not a functionalist, nor any other sloganist," and he protested "rational mechanization" at the expense of responding to particular circumstances.⁷

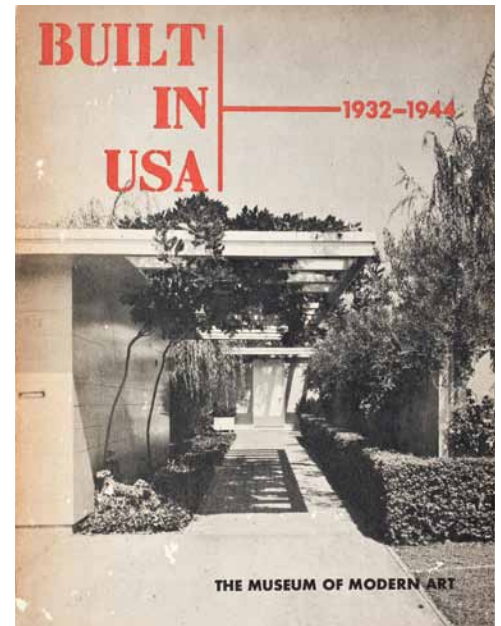
While embracing new technology, innovative materials, and a language of reductive geometry, California modernists still retained the individuality of the Arts and Crafts movement, of being particular to a place, of being joined to nature. In contrast, the International Style by its very name was opposed to localism, to being rooted to its surroundings, and instead championed a prescription for architecture and design that would follow a universal language of

form.⁸ California modernism became a different, and hugely influential, model for the rest of the country and was widely admired abroad because it reflected the way people really wanted to live (1.6).

This volume examines California modern at mid-century, particularly the furniture, ceramics, metalwork, fashion and textiles, graphic design, and industrial design that defined the California home, with architectural drawings and photographs selected to illuminate how these spaces were used. Four themes provide the leitmotifs of the book and the exhibition it accompanies: Shaping California Modern; Making California Modern; Living California Modern, and Selling California Modern. The term “California Modern” was commonly used by the 1930s. However, when a critic in the *Decorative Furnisher* described a room installed at the 1939 World’s Fair in San Francisco (the Golden Gate International Exposition) as “in the new ‘California Modern’ style” or when the influential designer Alvin Lustig wrote an article entitled “California Modern,” they were referring not to a single aesthetic but to a loose, albeit clearly recognizable, group of ideas.⁹ Therefore, our overarching goal is to elucidate the 1951 quote from émigré Greta Magnusson Grossman incorporated into the title: California design “is not a superimposed style, but an answer to present conditions. . . . It has developed out of our own preference for living in a modern way.”¹⁰

Shaping California Modern

In the 1920s boom economy, California experienced an extraordinary population growth, and these new denizens flocked to the state’s urban areas, changing the image of the state as a bucolic Eden of relatively uninhabited mountains, desert, and shoreline. Los Angeles exemplified this development: the population of Los Angeles County more than doubled in the 1920s, from little more than 900,000 to over two million by the end of the decade. The county also expanded its boundaries and, with the demand for subdivided land, assumed its characteristic sprawl. By the late 1920s undeveloped space began to fill in with single-family houses and low-scale commercial buildings (1.7 and 1.8). By 1930 most Los Angeles residents lived in single-family homes (94 percent—higher than anywhere else in the country).¹¹ All these people needed houses and furnishings: the “Shaping” theme focuses on the 1930s because that is when buildings and products started to be made in modern ways and in modern styles. By the end of the decade, postwar paradigms about California would already be in place. As San Francisco architect Ernest Born stated in a 1941 issue of *Pencil Points* dedicated to California architecture: “One trait is evident in all our work: an unselfconscious adaptation of new architectural forms and concepts for use in informal and rational houses . . . scaled to everyday use for everyday people.”¹² (See, for example, houses by Gregory Ain and George Agron [2.31] and Harwell Hamilton Harris [2.32].)



1.6. *Built in USA, 1932-1944*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1944. Cat. 344
This survey of contemporary American architecture featured Bay Area architect John Funk’s Heckendorf House on the cover. MoMA curator Elizabeth Mock praised the state’s regional style as “amazingly fresh to a modern eye.”



Bringing with them a passion for experimentation and the most progressive design training, the early émigrés who came from Central Europe in the teens and 1920s (for example, Kem Weber, R. M. Schindler, Richard Neutra, and J. R. Davidson) were critically important to the formation of California modern. These seekers of new professional opportunities were joined in the 1930s by other, equally influential émigrés who had fled Nazi persecution. Particularly in Southern California, they often found patrons for their work in other émigrés—for example, Neutra with director Josef von Sternberg (see 4.2) and Davidson with writer Thomas Mann—a creative synergy made possible because, as critic Mike Davis has observed, “Since the 1920s [Los Angeles] has imported myriads of the most talented writers, filmmakers, artists and visionaries.”¹³ The luxurious lifestyles of successful actors also provided a steady stream of work for émigrés: Hungarian-born Paul László’s obituary called him “architect to celebrities” (Cary Grant and Barbara Stanwyck were among his clients); Danish silversmith Philip Paval’s self-aggrandizing account of his life was entitled *Autobiography of a Hollywood Artist*.¹⁴

Transplants from other parts of the United States as well as native Californians such as Millard Sheets also played a key role in defining California modern. In addition to being an architect and California’s leading regionalist



painter, Sheets was head of the Art Department at Scripps College between 1932 and 1955 (and thereafter director of the Otis Art Institute). He also directed the Art Department at the Los Angeles County Fair (1931–57), organizing annual exhibitions of California art, crafts, and design. Sheets's multifaceted career embodies many of the characteristics of California modern: the resonance of place; the development of design- and crafts-based art education to prepare students for commercial careers; and, through exhibitions such as the 1954 *Arts of Daily Living* at the county fair, the cultivation of a broad audience for design.¹⁵

Sheets was also director of the Federal Art Project (FAP) for Southern California, part of the New Deal government-spending program that was instrumental in pulling California out of the Great Depression. With more than 20 percent unemployment, California, like every other part of the country, was profoundly affected by the Depression, although its still prosperous oil, agriculture, and film industries ensured that it fared better than most regions. While many gained employment from the FAP, tens of thousands more found jobs with huge government infrastructure projects such as the building of the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge in 1936. Projects like this were immediately incorporated into images of modern living, as on the cover of *Sunset* magazine later that year (1.9). Berkeley designer Lanette Scheeline created a fabric

1.7. Spence Air Photos. View of Wilshire and Fairfax, Los Angeles, 1922. Cat. 270

1.8. Spence Air Photos. View of Wilshire and Fairfax, Los Angeles, 1929; printed 1930. Cat. 271



1.9. *Sunset*, November 1936, cover.
Cat. 349

1.10. Chester Cobb for Division of Information, War Production Board, Office for Emergency Management. *Production Lines Are Battle Lines!*, c. 1942. Cat. 46

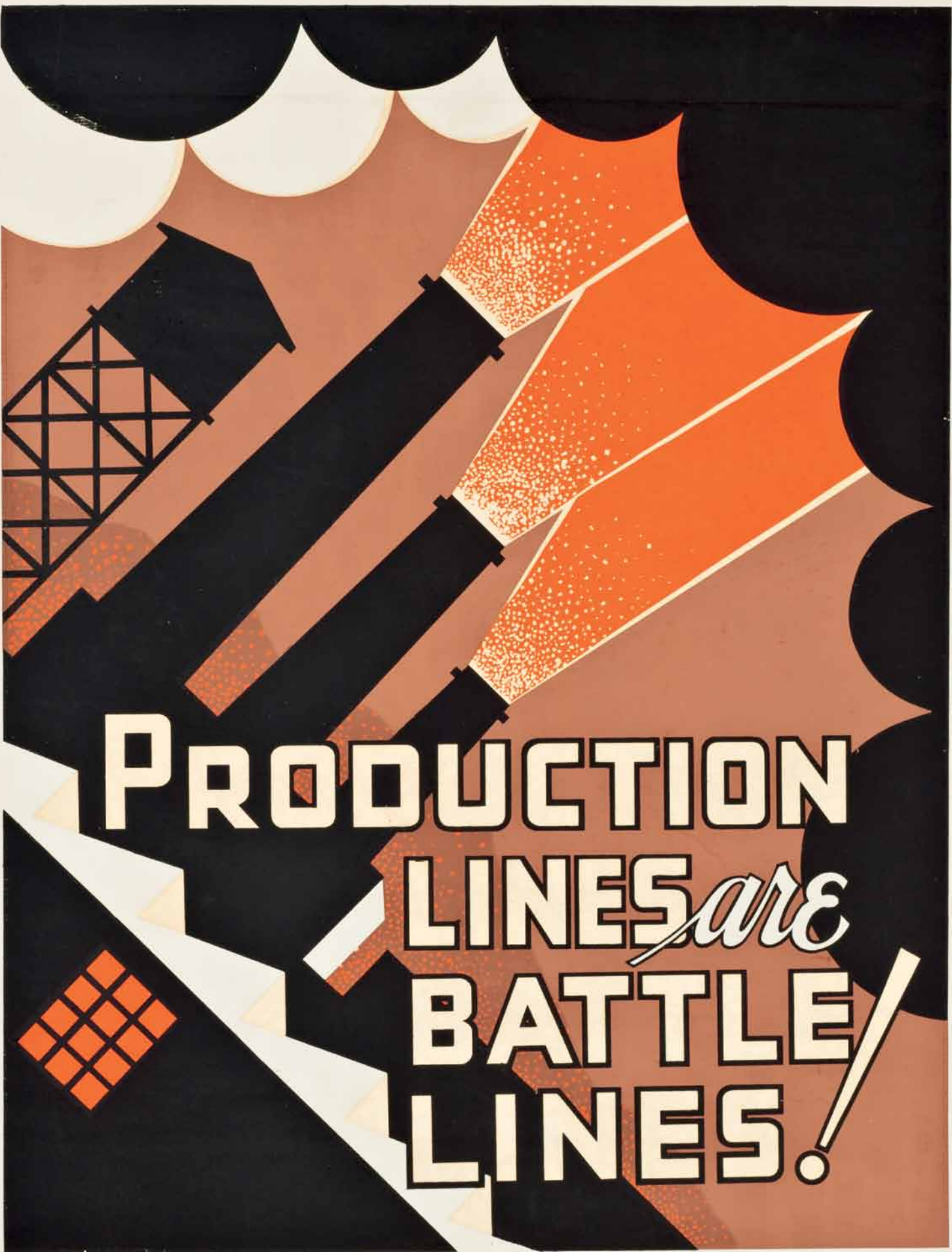
decorated with views of the bridge that, placed between streamlined furnishings and her painted view of the bridge, “makes this staged photograph look like a room on San Francisco’s Nob Hill.”¹⁶

Such federal intervention was imperative: what finally succeeded in ending the Depression in California was the huge government investment in shipbuilding in the North and the airplane industry in the South to prepare the nation for the impending global conflict. After war was declared in December 1941, the FAP was refocused to support increased industrial production.¹⁷ And very soon, millions of people came to California, where, as the Hollywood Writers Mobilization asserted, production lines were battle lines (1.10).

Making California Modern

After 1945 the United States became the world’s strongest industrial, military, and cultural power. California played a key role in this development, having dominated defense and aerospace production during World War II. After the war, this escalated production had a galvanizing effect on the design and manufacture of consumer goods in the state. Fiberglass, molded plywood, wire mesh, and synthetic resins were only some of the materials developed in the early 1940s that would be imaginatively adapted to peacetime use (1.11 and see p. 5). The Cold War, the escalating U.S.-Soviet arms race that followed, and the Korean War (1950–53) ensured that the military would continue to be a crucial part of the state’s economy as well as of its intellectual capital. (Again, Mike Davis provides interesting commentary: “Since the 1940s, the Southern California aerospace industry and its satellite think-tanks have assembled the earth’s largest concentration of PhD scientists and engineers.”¹⁸) However, California’s material culture was shaped by the imperative to apply innovative wartime materials and production methods to peacetime use.

Charles and Ray Eames’s work for the U.S. Navy in molded plywood and fiberglass, resulting in their now-legendary chairs made with these materials, is a well-known story, one recounted with new details later in this volume. But there are many other emblematic tales, and one that particularly captured the public’s imagination was the flying car developed by Convair (Consolidated Vultee Aircraft) (1.12). In 1944 the industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss was brought in to work with the company’s engineers on this project, a strategic effort to develop new products as the end of the war (and the contracts dependent on it) approached. Completed in 1947, the successful fiberglass design (with detachable wings for the plane) was, as Dreyfuss biographer Russell Flinchum noted, “far ahead of its time in terms of its aerodynamic envelope and efficiency.” Unfortunately, the prototype was destroyed in a freak accident in 1947 and the car never went into production, but “its carryover of the wartime ‘can-do’ attitude into the postwar period is indicative of the aspirations, achievements, and failures in the world of design in the 1940s.”¹⁹



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