WOMEN AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

The Monstrous Regiment Then and Now

Edited by
Dana Arnold

ISBN: 9781032124568 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032124582 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003224662 (ebk)

First published 2025

9

EXPANDING AGENCY

Ethel Power, *House Beautiful,* and the Writing of the History of American Architecture

Kathleen James-Chakraborty

DOI: 10.4324/9781003224662-13

Chapter 9 is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 101019419).

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

9

EXPANDING AGENCY

Ethel Power, *House Beautiful,* and the Writing of the History of American Architecture

Kathleen James-Chakraborty

When I was a college senior, my thesis advisor required me to skim two decades of *Harper's Magazine*, which he upheld as a key source for understanding the upper middle class American culture in which the building I was studying was embedded. It took me forty years, however, to move beyond using newspapers to supplement the stories I and my colleagues easily found in professional architectural journals and turn my attention to the shelter press, that is to journals that target consumers of architecture and design, most of whom its editors presume to be female. Why so long? Did I presume that middle-class women were not as worthy subjects as the male makers upon whom I focused for much of my career as an architectural historian? Certainly, I was less interested in studying the taste of my grandmothers, their sisters, and their sisters-in-law than in modernist alternatives to their familiar approaches to the decoration of their homes. Yet once I scanned the pages of *House Beautiful* in the years it was edited by Ethel Power, and the contributions she made to its pages immediately afterwards, it became clear that I had greatly underestimated the impact women had in shaping taste in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s. This included – but was by no means limited to – their reception of modern European architecture and their creation of networks, often fostered by same-sex relationships, that supported women's professional careers as architects, interior decorators, and landscape architects. Furthermore, Power sought to educate women to be able to commission, renovate, and decorate houses as well as maintain their gardens. She also presumed that women would be interested in gentrifying neighborhoods, preserving historic architecture, and staying abreast of new approaches to housing. The purpose of these activities, at least as defined by the editorial content rather than ads, was not an extension of caring for husbands or children. Readers were to find intellectual fulfillment through creating and inhabiting well-designed alternatives to what were understood to be outmoded late Victorian paradigms. While the assistance of professional architects, landscape architects, and decorators was presumed to be key, *House Beautiful's* female readers were expected to want to be able to read plans, to learn to understand modern appliances and mechanical systems, and to be familiar with the history of architecture and decorative arts in Europe, the United States, and beyond.

Ethel Power was one of the first students to enroll at the Cambridge School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, the only all-female degree program in architecture ever offered

DOI: 10.4324/9781003224662-13

FIGURE 9.1 *House Beautiful* illustration by E.J. Munro, July 1925, 12.5 × 9.75″. Vintage Magazine Covers collection, Rhode Island School of Design, Fleet Library, Picture Collection.

in the United States; she would later serve on its Board of Trustees.[1] In 1922, she became the editor of *House Beautiful*, a position she resigned at the end of 1933, although she continued to contribute articles in 1934 and 1935 (Figure 9.1). Established in Chicago in 1896, *House Beautiful* was the earliest consumer-oriented publication in the United States to focus exclusively on architecture, interior decoration, and design. It also covered gardening. Left out, however, were fashion, fiction, and the housekeeping advice included in the magazines targeted at women, such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*, that were already well established by this point and, with circulations that could surpass one million, ten times what *House Beautiful* achieved under Power's stewardship, were the country's most widely read periodicals.

Journalism, far more than architecture, had for nearly a century at the time of Power's appointment been a well-worn path for well-educated unmarried or widowed New England women to achieve economic independence. Female readership supported women writers. Sarah Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* from 1837 to 1877, was the first of a series of influential

female editors. By the 1920s, a quarter of the country's journalists were women.[2] Women were presumed to be especially suited to judging buildings, and not just houses. Women writing about architecture and interior design in the nineteenth century in the United States included Louise Tuthill, the author of the first survey of architectural history published in the country; Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, the country's first architecture critic, and the novelists Harriet Beecher Stowe and Edith Wharton.[3]

House Beautiful already had a remarkable history before Power took the helm. In 1897, a year after it was founded, it became the first journal of any kind to publish the work of Frank Lloyd Wright; it continued to offer key support to the Prairie Style until moving east to Boston in 1910.[4] Power was well positioned to reconfigure the magazine's progressive outlook in relation to New England's architectural heritage. Although not a native of Boston, she came from a family that had roots in nearby Salem and Marblehead. Her father died when she was still in her early teens; her mother followed just over a decade later.[5] The family was well-established in the region but probably not wealthy enough so that Power did not need to have to support herself. Through the Cambridge School, Power belonged to a network of women who had similar backgrounds and were also engaged in building careers as architects, landscape architects, and journalists. These included the architects Lois Howe and Eleanor Raymond. Howe, one of the first women to receive a degree in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, injected her comprehensive knowledge of the region's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture into her designs for houses.[6] Power met Raymond, her life partner and a fellow graduate of the Cambridge School, through their shared commitment to women's suffrage. Relationships like theirs were not unusual in these circles, or among educated Bostonian women more generally, and were accepted as long as they did not openly flout convention.[7] Instead, these women shaped it, above all by redefining the Colonial Revival in terms of modern comfort and simplicity in a way that eventually morphed into an early acceptance of new architectural styles from Europe.

I began to scroll through digitized issues of *House Beautiful* from the 1920s while sitting in the living room of my mother's house in New Hampshire's White Mountains. A modest farmhouse erected just before the start of the Civil War; it was later extended to serve as a summer house. The furnishings that surrounded me, most of which dated to the second quarter of the nineteenth century, were amassed by my stepfather's grandmother, who was Power's exact contemporary; both were born in 1881. Although I first visited the house only in 2015, it felt uncannily familiar, as the style of decoration was that of my mother's and grandmother's generations of my own family. While my mother assured me that her mother's apparently innate good taste had not been dependent on perusing a home decorating magazine, it is inconceivable to me that these women had been unaware of the issues Power edited in the 1920s.

My grandmothers and great aunts who could have read these issues had much in common with Power and the decorating strategies she favored. Younger than Power, they were born between 1892 and 1916. Although several spent their adult lives in New England, most grew up in Baltimore, where many were educated at the Bryn Mawr School; only one, a great-aunt by marriage, graduated from college.[8] Book-lined walls were not surprisingly a favorite decorating motif, and few of the classic and contemporary novels, volumes of poetry, museum exhibition catalogues, and popular works of history on their shelves were there simply for show.

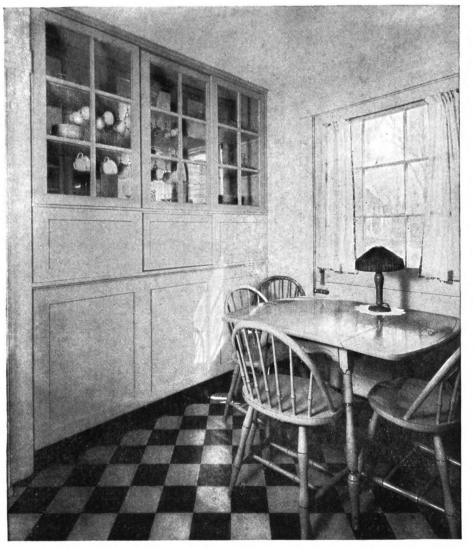
Books aside, the decorating choices these women made were indisputably statements of whiteness, but also of very particular class and ethnic identities. Like Power, these women, except for one émigré from Germany, could trace their family's presence on the Eastern Seaboard

to the eighteenth century. Well enough off to express themselves through the objects with which they surrounded themselves, they shared Power's use of interior decoration to establish visual continuity between the present and the history of that part of the world from the middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth centuries. This distinguished them not only from the Catholic and Jewish immigrants who poured into the United States after the Civil War, but also from what they saw as the old-fashioned, stilted formality of their parents, as well as the ostentation of those whose greater wealth most could not afford to match.

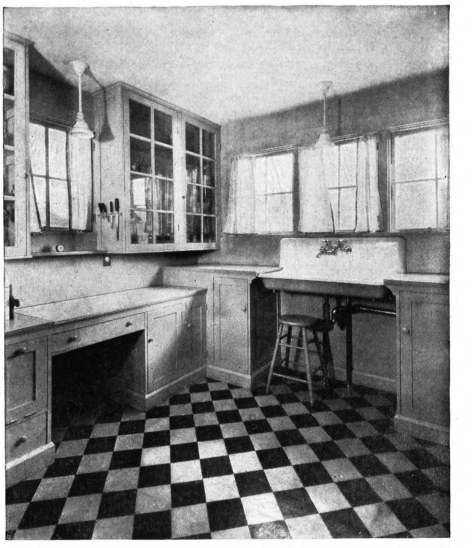
Already in 1922, Rose Greely, a fellow graduate of the Cambridge School who would be one of Power's most regular contributors, defended a colonial revival house in *House Beautiful's* pages by noting, "In the Victorian age, convenience would have been considered an enemy of beauty. But now, fortunately, we see beauty in simplicity, rather than elaboration" (Figure 9.2).[9] Ideally, the understated American-made furniture these women displayed in their living and dining rooms, along with the porcelain, prints, and silver, were family heirlooms whose manufacture showed few traces of industrial production or of the rich ornament it made more easily possible; just as often they were chosen to imply that this was the case. Persian rugs and chintz curtains were of more recent manufacture, but their Asian patterns were presumed to be timeless. The comfortable seating that supplemented these references to the past and other cultures had little discernable style. The intention was that these rooms look as if they had always been there. And indeed, by the time I first visited them in the 1960s, many had probably changed little for several decades; one remained reassuringly familiar into the twenty-first century.

As a historian of architecture, however, I am well aware that this intended sense of permanence was very much products of a particular time and class. Growing up in the early years of the twentieth century, these women were surrounded by what they regarded as stodgier furniture from the second half of the nineteenth century, much of which survived in less privileged positions in the dwellings they inhabited as adults. Power did not define the aesthetic that pushed these pieces out of public view on her own, but it did emerge in the first three – and especially the third – decades of the twentieth century out of the milieu of which she became a prominent representative and for which she served as an influential tastemaker. What impressed me reading these volumes of *House Beautiful* was the degree to which, building on nearly a century of advice literature published in the United States and targeted at precisely such readers as my grandmothers and great aunts, Power focused on education and empowerment. Betty Friedan would later chastise postwar women's magazines as a source for what she termed the "feminine mystique," but domesticity was not presented in *House Beautiful* as necessarily paired with caring for a husband and children, but instead as a possible means of self-expression, including on the part of career women (Figure 9.3).[10] And although Richard Ohmann has described how the emergence of mass-marketed periodicals in the country at the end of the nineteenth century occurred as editors sold their reader's attention to advertisers, the many pages of full-page ads for building materials, bathroom fixtures, and heating systems appeared only loosely tied to the articles.[11] Overt product placement simply did not happen.

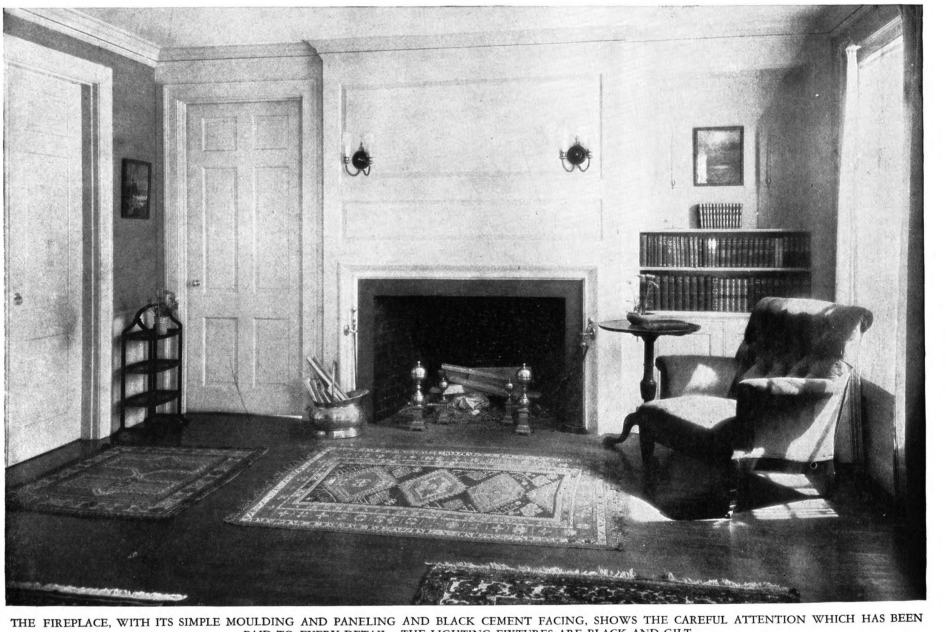
Instead, Power's purpose was to train her presumably female readers to become informed consumers. A regular reader of *House Beautiful* was presented with the plans as well as the information about the latest building materials and mechanical systems, plus styles and their sources, available to her to build and furnish new houses, update Victorian ones, or renovate historic ones. Thus empowered, she could make decisions governed by a commitment to simplicity and relative informality understood to be appropriate to the descendants of early white settlers of New England and California while also taking advantage of the technology that increasingly



THE BREAKFAST-ROOM SHOWING THE WIDE DUTCH DOOR OPENING ON THE TERRACE, AND THE CHINA CABINET AND SLIDING DOORS BENEATH OPENING BOTH INTO THIS ROOM AND THE KITCHEN

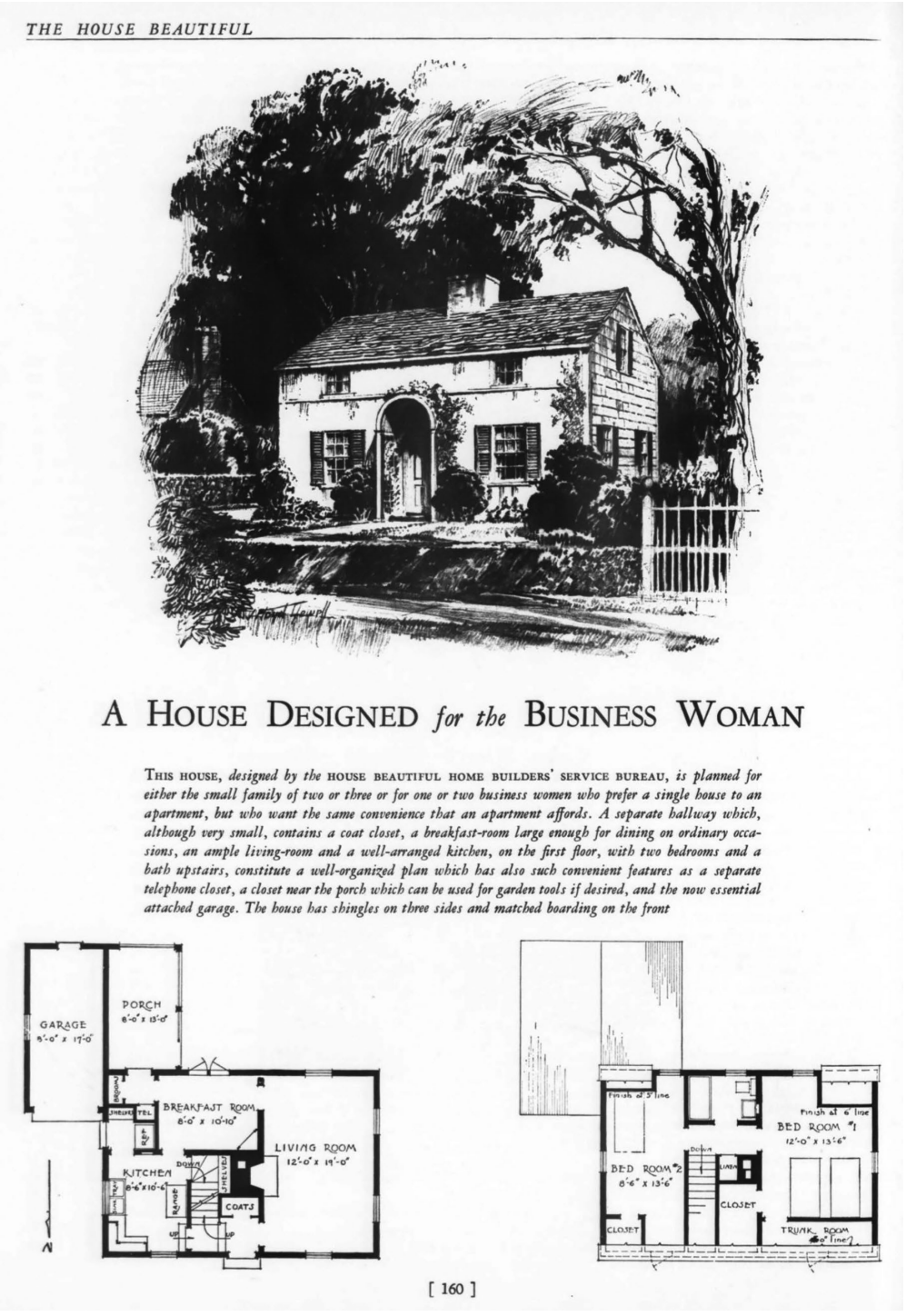


THE KITCHEN IS BY NO MEANS THE LEAST ATTRACTIVE ROOM, WITH ITS DOVE-GRAY WOODWORK, BLACK AND WHITE LINOLEUM AND UNBLEACHED COTTON CURTAINS EDGED WITH BLUE AND WHITE CHINTZ



THE FIREPLACE, WITH ITS SIMPLE MOULDING AND PANELING AND BLACK CEMENT FACING, SHOWS THE CAREFUL ATTENTION WHICH HAS BEEN PAID TO EVERY DETAIL. THE LIGHTING FIXTURES ARE BLACK AND GILT

FIGURE 9.2 Excerpt from an article "A Small House of Distinction" by Rose Greely exemplify an interior design of an American home, *House Beautiful* 52 (1922): 422. Public domain, courtesy of HathiTrust.



THE HOUSE BEAUTIFUL

A House Designed *for the* Business Woman

This house, *designed by the* **house beautiful home builders' service bureau,** *is planned for either the small family of two or three or for one or two business women who prefer a single house to an apartment, but who want the same convenience that an apartment affords. A separate hallway which, although very small, contains a coat closet, a breakfast-room large enough for dining on ordinary occasions, an ample living-room and a well-arranged kitchen, on the first floor, with two bedrooms and a bath upstairs, constitute a well-organized plan which has also such convenient features as a separate telephone closet, a closet near the porch which can be used for garden tools if desired, and the now essential attached garage. The house has shingles on three sides and matched boarding on the front*

[160]

FIGURE 9.3 "A House Designed for the Business Woman" excerpt from *House Beautiful* 69 (1931): 160. Public domain, Internet Archive.

replaced domestic servants. Power also enabled her to participate as a well-informed citizen in discussions about community planning with the same critical skills readers gained in recognizing the motifs in an antique palampore from India or a carpet from Iran.[12] Simply being fashionable ("Good taste is quite another thing from fashion," an unidentified author, who may have been Power herself, quipped in 1923) was actively discouraged as was, excepting in the many advertisements for silver cutlery and for automobiles, overt luxury.[13] Although the magazine regularly featured mansions alongside ample urban apartments, Power was committed to publishing relatively economical houses of two to four bedrooms. For many years the magazine ran an annual Small House Competition, won in 1931 by William Wurster's self-consciously unshowy house for Sadie Gregory.[14] Power's book *The Smaller American Home*, of 1927, further buttressed her reputation as an expert in this area.[15]

Crucially, *House Beautiful* also showed women how they could support themselves through such efforts. The work of architects Howe, Raymond, and Verna Cook Salomonsky featured regularly in its pages.[16] So did that of Ellen Shipman and other female landscape architects, not to mention women who supported themselves as decorators, such as Raymond's sister Rachel, or who designed textiles and furnishings, including the Hungarian-born sisters Ilonka and Marisha Karasz.[17] The majority of the magazine's writers were female; some such as Sophie Kerr and Catherine Drinker Bowen were or became well-known writers; others, including Greely, the first female architect licensed to practice in Washington, or Isabel Goodwin, who contributed a series on gardens in the city's gentrifying Georgetown neighborhood, undoubtedly welcomed the income and publicity such contributions generated.[18] Probably the majority of the books reviewed in the magazine were by women authors, some of them familiar to readers as regular contributors.[19] Many of those who wrote or whose work was illustrated in the magazine's pages had studied at the Cambridge School, but Power was also alert to new talent, and especially on the lookout for women who could address their readers in the slightly chatty style she clearly favored. She herself wrote of one contributor,

> Mrs. Elizabeth Macdonald has a husband and three children. She also has a ten-room house and a garden in which she raised twenty-seven pumpkins. Moreover, she not only runs her home according to the very excellent advice that she gives, but in addition she is professor of Economics at Boston University, and a writer (her book *Home-Making, A Profession for Men and Women*, written in collaboration with her husband, will soon be published).[20]

Power herself was an astute professional. The circulation of *House Beautiful* soared during her editorship from 63,662 in 1924 to 105,972 in 1933.[21] These numbers do not include the many readers to whom copies were passed by friends, or who perused it in public libraries. A subscription cost $3 a year; individual monthly issues thirty-five cents, making the magazine widely affordable to those who could afford to inhabit even relatively modest versions of the homes Power published. Although the examples Power focused were drawn largely from New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and California, the magazine had a national circulation. Except in 1932, numbers climbed steadily despite the Depression when advertising pages plummeted; during these years, it probably provided an aspirational distraction, much as high fashion monthlies do for those who will never buy a couture dress but might easily splurge on a designer lipstick. This fall in revenue sparked the sale of what had been an independent business to Hearst; Power resigned rather than move to New York. She continued to be a contributor but was unwilling to leave Raymond and the apartment they shared on Boston's Beacon Hill or their summer house

in Gloucester behind. The journal's circulation numbers immediately slipped, but not by much. It remains a Hearst publication to this day.

One of the inherent tensions during Power's years at the helm was between her belief, shared by many of those who wrote for her and many whose designs for houses, gardens, interiors, and objects she published, in transcending fashion, and the fact that such publications earn their keep by marketing the new. Today we recognize that the version of the colonial revival presented in her pages was, like that presented in museum period rooms of the day, far from historically accurate.[22] Its appeal at the time, like that of the Native American (declared in 1932 to be "modernists in the true sense") and Mexican designs Power also included, was undoubtedly tied to the way in which such articles combined a respect for a past that implied stability at a time when most of the new houses illustrated in the magazine were actually located either in new high-rise apartment towers or, more commonly, in rapidly growing suburbs.[23] The magazine's focus also encompassed the gentrification of older urban neighborhoods as well as the renovation of historic homes in rural and small town New England, including their transformation into vacation homes.[24] These, including the one in which my mother now lives, provided appropriately modest alternatives to the typically much larger "cottages" erected across the region during the last two decades of the previous century. There was, however, little nostalgia in *House Beautiful* for plantation slavery.[25] Instead, the editorial tone established that, unlike the mid and late Victorian designs that they superseded, New England houses built before the Industrial Revolution in particular offered a uniquely American – if well informed regarding European, especially English precedents – and thus practical way of life, one moreover that usually had clearly identifiable roots in the farmstead, even if it was now being transplanted to the suburb.

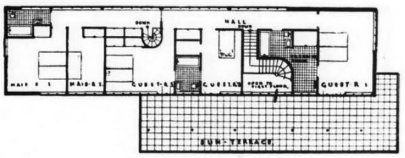
This emphasis on informality and pragmatism encompassed, of course, the innovations that made the houses published in *House Beautiful* in these years up to date. These included improvements in heating and cooking provided by the switch away from coal and gas, presented as dirty and outmoded, as well as the provision of hot running water and electricity that transformed the cleaning of clothes, dishes, and houses, not to mention food storage and preparation. Contributors and advertisers alike presumed that knowledge of these was the responsibility of the woman of the household as much or more so than of her husband. Although probably only a minority of the magazine's readers relied on servants, these forms of modernity were presented as providing efficient alternatives to the country's declining supply of women willing to work as maids and cooks as well as of households, even in the booming economy of the 1920s, that could afford to pay them.[26] The so-called "servant problem" was also identified as the excuse for dwellings that do not necessarily appear modest today, especially in comparison to those erected in the 1930s through the 1950s, but which were often smaller than the ones in which their more prosperous inhabitants had been raised. The new homes could be apartments as well as houses. Edward Stratton Holloway argued for the latter, writing that "the cares of even the small house involve a slavery to which many refined and intelligent women are now forced to devote their lives to the exclusion of intellectual interests and needful recreation of body, mind, and spirit."[27]

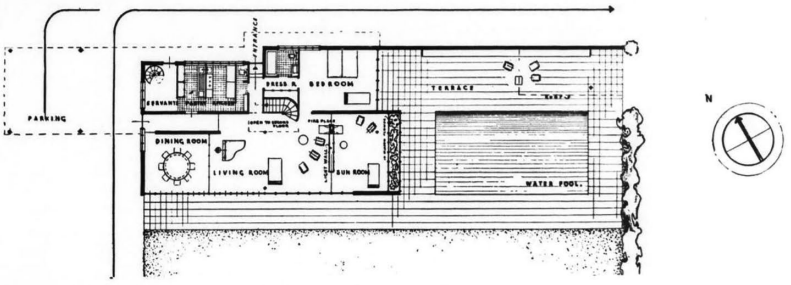
In the 1930s, two of my great-aunts would, with their husbands, commission International Style homes, although by the time I knew them, both households had retreated to more conventional quarters (one of the pair was even published in *House Beautiful*).[28] This left me free in the 1970s and 1980s to discover modern architecture as a liberating alternative to the environments in which I grew up, furnished in a style of which Power would have approved. The longevity of her version of the colonial revival belies the role she and they played in pioneering alternatives to it. Masculinist histories of modern architecture tell us that in 1932 the International Style

architecture. The plan is thought out to suit the person who will live in the house rather than to meet a preconceived idea of what the outside should look like. With the plan settled upon first, the architect then builds around it a simple and graceful exterior. Hence the practical advantages are many.

In the Lindbergh house, for example, the orientation is a prime consideration. The house is very long, nearly two hundred feet. All the rooms are on the south side. Corridors, servants' quarters, service entrance, and garage face the north. The house is generous in window area, making dark winter days brighter. In summer the house is cool and delightfully open, especially in the late afternoon and evening. To regulate the light, or for privacy, curtains covering the whole window surface can be drawn. Awnings keep the glare of sunlight off the glass. The windows on the ground floor are really glass doors, which, when thrown open, make the living-room a veritable porch.

So great an expanse of windows was not possible in the last century. Modern steel or reënforced concrete construction makes potentially possible a house without any solid walls, one which can therefore be as free and open as modern life requires. One concomitant of this type of construction is the flat roof. It can be better built and better insulated against sun, snow, or rain, with the same expenditure of money and effort, than any other type of roof. In addition, the roof of the lower story can be used as a terrace. The Lindbergh house has both an open and a covered terrace on each floor. The (*Continued on page* 356)





This house, designed for Mrs. Homer H. Johnson by the same architects, is being built in Pinehurst, North Carolina. It is planned to be placed on the extreme northeast corner of the lot close to the house behind, from which it is screened by a wall, which also serves as a windbreak. The plentiful use of glass is desirable for the Southern climate

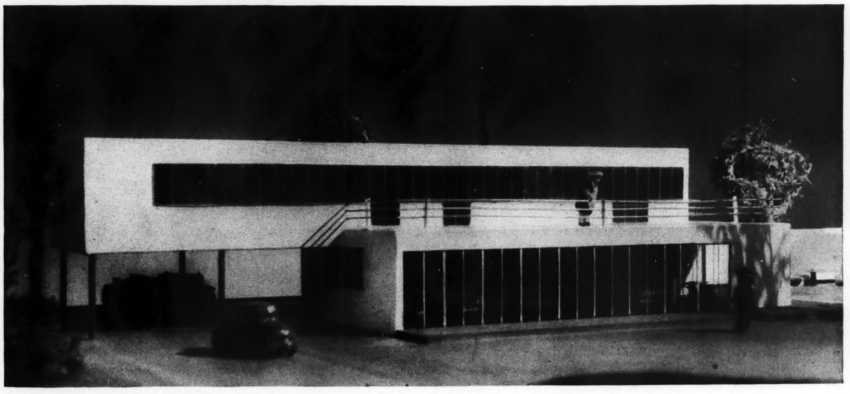


FIGURE 9.4 Philip Johnson, "Two Houses in the International Style" excerpt from *House Beautiful* 70 (1931): 309. Public domain, Internet Archive.

was introduced to audiences in the United States through a traveling exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson.[29] Putting aside the involvement of Catherine Bauer and Lewis Mumford in organizing "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition," a display that featured a great deal of new European housing not included in Hitchcock and Johnson's book *The International Style*, this story is demonstrably false.[30] No one knew better than Hitchcock and Johnson themselves that much of the credit they took was unwarranted, and that one of the people with whom it should have been shared was Power. She had, after all, allowed the two then entirely unknown young gay men, neither of whom had yet turned thirty, to trial their arguments in the pages of *House Beautiful*, whose readership far exceeded the number who saw the show in New York or indeed, the size of the architectural profession in the United States at the time (Figure 9.4). That their exhibition, which almost certainly had almost no impact on the way in which architecture was practiced in the United States across the next decade and a half, continues to be credited with introducing into the country architecture that was already well known there is a testament to the willingness of generations of architectural historians to take male hubris at face value as well as to the power both men held over the discipline in the second half of the twentieth century.[31]

Hitchcock published the work of Le Corbusier and other modernists in *House Beautiful* in 1928, the year before his book *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* appeared. He was careful to ally the European work he showed with the ethos of the magazine and the tastes of its readers:

> The . . . houses here illustrated have indeed in their general lines much in common with the simplest of our own. They depend for their effect on the excellence of their brickwork and the skilled arrangement of their essential parts. If they differ from American work it is in the very pointed avoidance of all inherited ornament and in a certain rather successful attempt to make the essential parts form a scheme of design which is new and perhaps even a little unnecessarily novel. In other words, where our simplicity is largely negative theirs is for good or ill distinctly positive.[32]

Johnson introduced the term International Style, which he borrowed without attribution from Frederick Kiesler, to the magazine's readers in 1931.[33] As exemplars he illustrated two projects by now largely forgotten firm of Clauss and Daub, one a design that pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh had already rejected, and another that Johnson's mother failed to build. Both had been featured in a recent exhibition in New York of work that the Architectural League had refused to show. This was one of the many exhibitions to which Power, who would completely ignore the 1932 MoMA display, alerted her readers. But the work of women writers and women architects played a more substantial role in Power's efforts to publicize developments of which she believed her readers should be aware, even if she never focused exclusively upon them. Dorothy Todd, the former editor of the British edition of *Vogue*, tutored readers on the difference between the International Style and Art Deco, advocating the work of Le Corbusier, Marcel Breuer, and Walter Gropius over that of figures like Jean Frank.[34] Ise Gropius, whom Power met in Berlin when she traveled there with Raymond in 1930, defended standardization.[35] Katherine Morrison, who mostly authored articles on medieval or revivalist British houses, introduced readers to the London apartment of Serge Chermayeff.[36] Later in 1932, Power published the Raymond House which her partner Eleanor had built in Belmont, Massachusetts, for Eleanor's sister Rachel, almost certainly the first International Style house erected on the East Coast of the United States.[37]

What did modernism offer Power, her readers, and my foremothers? First and foremost, modern technology was convenient. Heating systems, kitchens, and bathrooms are not the modernism on which the Museum of Modern Art focused, but they transformed the daily lives of those who could afford them.[38] Fashion also mattered more than these women cared to admit. Male and female *House Beautiful* authors who advocated the International Style frequently equated it with the change in women's dress that occurred in the 1920s.[39] The introduction of bobbed hair, uncorseted waists, and knee-length skirts was one of the most abrupt and transformational revolutions in the entire history of women's dress. Women who had been physically emancipated in this way were more likely to appreciate other dramatic changes, even if they were also being constantly encouraged to dismiss mere fads. And for Power, modernism increasingly fulfilled a desire for comfort that previous styles were less able to fulfill. In an article published in June 1934, after she had resigned as editor but at a time when continued to contribute two articles on average to each issue, she summarized her position:

> Our way of living has radically changed. Today the automobile, the several bathrooms, the telephone, the electric refrigerator, the oil heater, the gas-fired incinerator, the radio and other mechanical equipment all have to be taken care of. Our early houses – the houses we are still copying – had little to do but provide shelter, and if we would build as sincerely as our forefathers, we will face facts as squarely as they did . . . The modern house is an effort to meet modern requirements with a sincerity equal to theirs. Indeed, the very essence of the modern house is its straightforwardness in meeting our complicated modern problems . . . The modern house is, therefore . . . restful, for it promotes the comfort that comes from ease of operating and lack of fussy, meaningless detail . . . This characteristic appearance of the modern house, which is so largely influenced by the plan, is also due to some extent to the increased use of new materials or to a new use of old ones.[40]

My two great aunts who traveled to Los Angeles in the early 1930s in search of an alternative to the taste of the formidable mother-in-law of the elder of the pair undoubtedly agreed. So did the one who a decade later supervised the encasing of a Queen Anne staircase in a sleeker, streamlined version. Like Ise Gropius, who was nine years her senior and grew up less than forty miles away from her, she believed in standardization. By the time I knew her, her wardrobe consisted almost exclusively of the same dress design. She wore new ones on special occasions, such as when she was honored for her pioneering epilepsy research; less new ones when busy at work; and old ones for tending her garden. But, like Power, these women agreed that the International Style was just one of a number of legitimate choices and that the new could often be convincingly combined with whatever one already had to hand. To deftly transfer an omelet from a Teflon frying pan onto an earthenware plate decorated with jaunty flowers, a memento of a trip to Italy, represented the perfect pairing of progress and prettiness.

Although Power, who died in 1969, gradually faded out of view after working in the 1930s as a kitchen consultant, *House Beautiful* continued to flourish.[41] So did the importance of female editors, designers, and consumers in defining the material culture of domesticity in the United States. Historians of architecture have been most willing to acknowledge female agency when it allows them to blame women for the rejection of self-proclaimed male genius. For instance, H. Alan Brooks denounced the readers of *House Beautiful* for the shift in taste in the early 1910s away from the Prairie Style.[42] Elizabeth Gordon, editor of *House Beautiful* from 1941 to 1964, hardly endeared herself to the upper echelons of the architectural establishment when she

notoriously labeled the International Style "The Threat to the Next America." At stake was not just Cold War politics, but whether a male architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, or his female client, Edith Farnsworth, would call the shots. Selling advertising for more affordable middle brow furnishings may have also played a role, but it could hardly have been the determining factor.[43] Meanwhile, Power's partner Raymond was a pioneer designer of solar houses.[44]

My grandmothers and my great-aunts probably ignored the debate over "The Threat to the Next America." By that time, they had made most of their home decorating decisions, although in the 1960s one would with her husband erect an informal hillside retreat in which floor to ceiling glazing was placed perpendicular to the usual wall of books, while electric blankets added a space age note. Many of their daughters moved into conventional suburban ranch and split-level houses, but the chintz curtains, Chinese export porcelain, and antique or reproduction furnishings remained a constant. I grew up amidst the slightly shabby disarray of an actual eighteenth-century house. My mother, the "handy man" in the family, oversaw its ongoing repair, about which she spoke in much the same tone of humor mixed with exasperation adopted by the authors of the *House Beautiful* articles her own mother apparently never read. The major concession to the twentieth century, besides the not always robust heating and hot water systems, was a mid-century modern Danish chair, a wedding present from an eccentric great-uncle who had settled south of San Francisco.

Neither the International Style nor avant-garde alternatives to it ever captured the hearts of most American consumers. The architects whom Hitchcock and Johnson lauded defended their designs as capturing the spirit of a time defined by airplanes and automobiles, but Power was in many ways more astute in judging that mass production coupled to an increasingly equitable distribution of wealth could generate greater simplicity in ways that leapfrogged over the Victorians to respect a more distant past. She also understood the appeal of emotional as well as physical comfort. The niches among which modern architecture and home décor had the largest degree of acceptance in the United States included Jewish professionals and migrants to the sun belt, but even among these groups, enthusiasm for it was far from universal.[45] The degree to which historians of architecture have focused on architects such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, and on the writings of the men such as Hitchcock and Johnson who championed them, ignores the degree to which mainstream taste was largely shaped outside circles controlled by professional architects and yet was very much the product of its times. While there has been much scholarship on the postwar American suburb, less attention has been paid to the popularity of Ethan Allen-style reproductions sold through Sears Roebuck catalogues that filled the living and dining rooms of many of the kids, Black as well as white, with whom I went to school.[46] More needs to be done not just to identify the overlooked role women played in championing the International Style, but to understand why alternatives to it remained so popular across the twentieth century among so many different social groups, including those with the knowledge and economic means to know about and be able to afford the alternatives. Nor can it be an accident that Jane Jacobs and Denise Scott Brown, two champions in their different ways of the everyday, numbered among the most astute and influential critics of International Style architecture and urbanism, despite in Scott Brown's case having grown up in a modernist showpiece.[47]

The women who resisted the International Style were not necessarily beholden to nostalgia for a vanished past. In the 1920s, Power, my grandmothers, and my great-aunts appreciated the association of the colonial revival with what they viewed as enduring democratic values, very much including their own recently won right to vote.[48] While not all of these women were politically progressive, many shared a real commitment to social change. My step-great grandmother

regularly rented her New Hampshire cottage to her good friend, Frances Perkins, the first woman to serve as a member of the cabinet and a key figure in the implementation of the New Deal. Even women who did not have their (or my) degree of privilege, however, often preferred alternatives, as my research into the career of Edith Bailey Madison Furman demonstrates.[49] Furman, whose lifespan overlapped almost exactly with that of my eldest great aunt, spent her career designing houses and churches for fellow African Americans in and around Richmond. In the postwar years these houses typically conveyed their owner's aspirations for the same sort of dwellings that were so much more easily attainable by white contemporaries moving to postwar suburbs from urban working-class neighborhoods. Nor, as numerous exposes of conditions in architecture schools and practices across the United States and Europe have demonstrated, does ownership of Wassily or Barcelona chairs equate with a sense of responsibility for mitigating inequalities rooted in class, gender, or race.

Reading *House Beautiful* explained to me a great deal about myself. I began this research in my mother's living room, but I am writing this article in my own flat in Dublin, where I am surrounded not by the aesthetic that I study, but by furniture I inherited. My step-grandmother proudly purchased most of my best antiques in the 1940s with her earnings as a nurse; much of the rest belonged to my great-grandparents. As a historian of modernism, why did I not exchange any of it, especially before its value plummeted as the taste for brown furniture finally declined, for the objects I teach? In questioning myself about this, I thought long and hard about what these objects embodied to me as well as the importance to me of the women in my family who had cherished them. They had little if any time for the feminine mystique. Particularly proud of me when I took advantage of opportunities that had not been available to them, they passed on as well the pleasure they derived from their skill in visual discernment. All could see distinctions not everyone else noticed and in ways that stretched far beyond the expression of their social status. In addition to the epilepsy expert, one birthed calves and churned butter, another was a military historian, a third was instrumental in raising the salaries of American orchestra musicians, while a fourth was a spy. Yet their taste for the new, when it existed at all, was tempered to no small degree by an appreciation for precisely the past that Power had often championed, and which, like her, my grandmother and great-aunts were often adept at folding into a forward-looking present. It is impossible to relinquish the privilege they bestowed upon me. If I also renounced the objects that had meant so much to them, I would also be sacrificing the material evidence of the sustenance their example had provided across the course of the career they had so strongly encouraged me to undertake. Furthermore, it was precisely this support that enabled me to mentor others, few of whom had such imposing precedents to draw upon. Even, however, when I leave their taste behind, Power was there first. My most treasured example of twentieth-century design, a set of half a dozen Georg Jensen silver demitasse spoons presented to my mother by a Jewish friend of the family upon the occasion of her christening, was advertised in *House Beautiful* in 1928 for $13.50.[50]

In the context of the Cold War, Hitchcock and Johnson's formalist interpretation of modern architecture did eventually triumph, along with the myth that they had been responsible for introducing the architecture that embodied it to American shores.[51] Since the 1990s, I have belonged to the generation of scholars who have challenged the primacy of their perspective. Formalism could account up to a point for the best of the buildings in which I was educated once I left home but not for the environments in which I grew up. Although I have only come recently to wrestle with the discrepancy between the two, I have always explored architecture as the intersection of form and identity and been interested in spaces crafted to shape experiences in ways that can be

profoundly political and also spiritual.[52] Unlike Hitchcock and Johnson, I have never been afraid to admit that consumer choice, including that of the clients for the buildings I study and also for the audiences they intended to reach, matters enormously. This is something of which both Power and Erich Mendelsohn, the German Jewish architect who was the subject of much of my early scholarship, were acutely aware.[53] Moreover, whereas Philip Johnson attempted to start a fascist movement in the United States and Hitchcock was a Cold War warrior, the same women in my family who decorated in a style of which Power would have approved also encouraged me to understand that ours was not the only heritage that mattered.[54] Many supported the integration that ensured that I had African-American classmates and, in school teachers and principals, real figures of authority. This and their openness to other religions and cultures paved the way for my engagement with India and my commitment to global histories of architecture that countered the emphasis on the movement of ideas from what Hitchcock and Johnson believed to be the center to the periphery and that address issues like slavery and colonialism, whose impact they studiously ignored.[55] Finally, without the example of my female relatives, I would not have been fortunate enough to grow up knowing that women had long made a difference, the idea at the core of my current project exploring the role of female and non-white taste in the global dissemination of modern architecture and design between 1920 and 1970.[56] They primed me to be able to take Power seriously, and thus to be able to contribute to the liberation of the International Style, if not its most self-serving defenders, from being understood as inherently masculinist.[57]

Acknowledgements

This research was undertaken while I was an Ailsa Mellon Bruce Senior Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 1010119419). I would also like to thank Weronika Kocurkiewicz for sourcing the illustrations.

Notes

1 Dorothy May Anderson, *Women, Design, and the Cambridge School* (West Lafayette: PDA Publishers, 1980).
2 Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792–1995* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998).
3 Louisa Tuthill, *History of Architecture, from the Earliest Times; Its Present Condition in Europe and the United States; With a Biography of Eminent Architects, and a Glossary of Architectural Terms* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1848); Judith Major, *Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer: A Landscape Critic in the Gilded Age* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869); Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897).
4 H. Alan Brooks, *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 23–24, 294.
5 https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/117941223/ethel-b-power, accessed 15 August 2022, for the family monument in Waterside Cemetery, Marblehead, Massachusetts that lists Power, her parents, and five of her siblings.
6 Maureen Meister, *Arts and Crafts Architecture: History and Heritage in New England* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2014), 20–22; 159–60; 172–202.
7 Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) for the milieu in which Power lived and worked.

8 Kathleen Waters Sander, *Mary Elizabeth Garrett: Society and Philanthropy in the Gilded Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
9 Rose Greely, "A Small House of Distinction," *House Beautiful* 52 (1922): 420. This is an up-market version of the advice that was being dispensed to school girls at the time through home economics. See Carma Gorman, "Educating the Eye: Body Mechanics and Streamlining in the U.S., 1925–1950," *American Quarterly* 58 (2006): 839–68.
10 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). See also Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not Just June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); and "A House Designed for a Business Woman," *House Beautiful* 69 (1931): 160.
11 Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London: Verso, 1996).
12 Agnes Warbase, "Real Coöperative Housing," *House Beautiful* 59 (1926): 29, 78; Lucy D. Taylor, "Oriental Rugs," *House Beautiful* 59 (1926): 142–43, 197; Nancy Cooper, "Indian Palampores," *House Beautiful* 62 (1927): 650–51; 693–96.
13 "Our Fifth Avenue Looking Glass," *House Beautiful* 53 (1923): 338.
14 "Our First Prize House," *House Beautiful* 69 (1931): 238–40.
15 Ethel B. Power, *The Smaller American Home* (1927, Altigen: Shiffer, 2007).
16 For instance, Mary Kellogg, "Expanding a Cape Cod Cottage," *House Beautiful* 53 (1923): 624–25, 660–62, emphasizes that the architects, Howe & Manning, were both women. See Catherine R. Ettinger, "Designing Houses Is Like Having Babies: Verna Cook and the Practice of Architecture in the 1920s and 1930s," in Anna Sokolina, ed., *Routledge Guide to Women in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2021), 57–69, for an analysis of *House Beautiful's* coverage of Cook Salomonsky.
17 For example, "Sunshine and Shadow," *House Beautiful* 57 (1925): 543; showcased a garden designed by Marian Coffin, while "The Garden of Mrs. Robert A. Franks," *House Beautiful* 60 (1926): 166–67 focused on a design by Shipman. See also Thaïsa Way, *Unbounded Practice: Women and Landscape Architecture in the Early Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); "The House in Good Taste," *House Beautiful* 64 (1928): 149–52, for the work of the Karasz sisters.
18 Mrs. Ezra Bowen, "The Amenities of Home Building," *House Beautiful* 53 (1923): 497, 534, for the first in a series by the author; Sophie Kerr, "Other People's Houses," *House Beautiful* 54 (1923): 472, 516; Rose Greely, "Tudor Place," *House Beautiful* 57 (1925): 141; and Isabel M. G. Goodwin, "Gardens of Old Georgetown," *House Beautiful* 62 (1927): 368–71.
19 For instance, Rose Standish Nichols's *Italian Pleasure Gardens*, was reviewed in "Book & Lamp," *House Beautiful* 65 (1929): 774.
20 [Ethel B. Power], "Overheard in the Editor's Office," *House Beautiful* 61 (1927): 20.
21 The figures are from the Audit Bureau of Circulation and were supplied to me by Kathy Woodrell of the Researcher and Reference Services Division of the Library of Congress.
22 Kathleen Curran, *The Invention of the American Art Museum: From Craft to Kulturgeschichte, 1870–1930* (Santa Monica: Getty Research Institute, 2016).
23 "Table of Contents," *House Beautiful* 71 (1932) 251; See "Style Notes," *House Beautiful* 71 (1932): 14, however, for the racist tone that could mar such appreciations. The unidentified author, perhaps Power herself, notes

> This is not to assume that primitive objects and motives [from Mexico and Central America] are being copied outright. Being sophisticated people living in a sophisticated age, we adapt and modify what we take from other sources to suit our own needs and tastes, but the clear, intense hues associated with tropical suns, and the naïve designs of childlike people, can be found in increasing numbers in our textiles and other furnishings.

24 For example, Elizabeth Bootes Clar, "What Philadelphia Is Doing with Her Alleys," *House Beautiful* 56 (1924): 478–79, 528; and Dale Warren, "The Minettas," *House Beautiful* 60 (1926): 568–69, 626–30.
25 Delos H. Schmit, "And Other," *House Beautiful* 64 (1928): 558 noted in an account of early colonial architecture in Maryland that "The negro slave was introduced at an early period, and we may not omit our word of admiration for his part in the erection of the early Tidewater house."
26 For example Elva D. Hoover, "Do You Hate Dishwashing?," *House Beautiful* 56 (1924): 59, 87; Gladys Beckett Jones and Jenoise Brown Short, "New Electrical Appliances," *House Beautiful* 56 (1924):

248, 284–86; and F. J. St. John, "Artificial Refrigeration," *House Beautiful* 57 (1925), 404, 435. See also Deutsch, *Women and the City*.

27 Edward Stratton Holloway, "Apartments and How to Furnish Them," *House Beautiful* 56 (1924): 130.

28 Dietrich Neumann, ed., *Richard Neutra's Windshield House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) for both Windshield and the Gibbs House in Brookline, Massachusetts. See also "New Angles on the Boston Scene," *House Beautiful* (April 1939): 60–61.

29 For instance, Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 231, writes "The defining moment for the introduction of the Modern Movement into America is usually seen to have been the exhibition . . ."

30 Greg Castillo, "German Lessons," *Places Journal*, August 2022. Accessed 26 Aug. 2022. https://placesjournal.org/article/philip-johnson-catherine-bauer-and-modernism-at-moma/ on Bauer's role.

31 For my earlier critique of this narrative see Kathleen James-Chakraborty, "From Isolationism to Internationalism: American Acceptance of the Bauhaus," in Kathleen James-Chakraborty, ed., *Bauhaus Culture from Weimar to the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 153–70; for recent insistence, as usual without supporting documentation, on the importance of the exhibition, Patricio del Real, *Constructing Latin America: Architecture, Politics, and Race at the Museum of Modern Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 1.

32 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Six Modern European Houses," *House Beautiful* 64 (1928): 253. A house by Le Corbusier had already appeared in Simon de Vaulchier, "The Style Moderne in France," *House Beautiful* 63 (1928): 606–07, 670–72.

33 Philip Johnson, "Two Houses in the International Style," *House Beautiful* 70 (1931): 307–09, 356; and Frederick J. Kiesler, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display* (New York: Brentano's, 1930).

34 Dorothy Todd, "Some Reflections on Modernism," *House Beautiful* 66 (1929): 416–17, 470–76.

35 Ise Gropius, "Modern Dwellings for Modern People," *House Beautiful* 69 (1941): 506, 532–34.

36 Katherine Morrison, "Where Furniture Is Based on Function," *House Beautiful* 69 (1931): 56–60, 83.

37 It graced the cover of the September issue and was the subject of the lead article the following month, Edith Kingsbury, "Spring Pasture – Our Experiment in the Country," *House Beautiful* 72 (1932): 200–07, 263. For more on the house see Kevin D. Murphy, "The Vernacular Moment: Eleanor Raymond, Walter Gropius, and New England Modernism Between the Wars," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70 (2011): 308–29.

38 Judy Giles, *The Parlor and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

39 Charles R. Richards, "Is There a Modern Style in Decorative Art?," *House Beautiful* 62 (1927): 374–76, 429–30; and Todd, "Some Reflections on Modernism," 416. Interestingly, before Power became editor, Chester H. Walcott, "Domestic Architecture in the Middle West," *House Beautiful* 22 (1922), 13, defended historicism as opposed to the prairie style which he described as "passing into limbo, with last season's style of clothes."

40 Ethel Power, "Talking Points on Modernism," *House Beautiful* 75 (1934), 61.

41 Dorothy G. Wayman, "Women Who Made Jobs for Themselves," *Boston Globe*, 16 May 1938, 1, 7.

42 Brooks, *The Prairie School*.

43 Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998) and Monica Pennick, *Tastemaker: Elizabeth Gordon, House Beautiful, and the Postwar American Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

44 Daniel A. Barber, *A House in the Sun: Modern Architecture and Solar Energy in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

45 Donald Albrecht, ed., *Designing Home: Jews and Mid-Century Modernism* (San Francisco: The Contemporary Jewish Museum, 2014).

46 Kristina Wilson, *Mid-Century Modernism and the American Body: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Power in Design* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021) is very astute regarding African American resistance to mid-century modernism, but almost certainly exaggerates the hold that firms like Herman Miller had on white upper middle-class families.

47 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

48 Highlighted in a General Electric advertisement, *House Beautiful* 54 (1923): 644.

49 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, "Ethel Madison Bailey Furman: Building Community in Richmond, Virginia," forthcoming in Felipe Hernández and Itohan Osayimwese, *Routledge Companion to Race and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2024).
50 Mary Jackson Lee, "Window Shopping," *House Beautiful* 64 (1928): 494.
51 Del Real, *Constructing Latin America*, does an excellent job of tracing the emergence of this formalist position in relation to race.
52 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London: Routledge, 2000).
53 Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
54 Franz Schultze, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Walter Nichols as quoted in Henry-Russell Hitchcock, letter to Louis I. Kahn, March 13, 1960, in "Voice of America -- Louis I. Kahn, Recorded November 16, 1960," Box LIK 55, Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Philadelphia, for the purpose of a series of Voice of America talks on architecture that Hitchcock organized.
55 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *Architecture since 1400* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
56 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, "Agenda expandida: Mujeres, raza y la diffusion de la Arquitectura moderna," *ZARCH: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Architecture and Urbanism* 18 (2022): 16–29. https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_zarch/zarch.2022186967
57 Power's example, and that of many of her writers, counters the argument for the modern architecture and design as masculinist made by Penny Sparke, *As Long as its Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995).