

# On What Grounds? Subject and Method in the History of Modern Architecture and Design

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“Un cucchiaino è un cucchiaino; una sedia è una sedia; una casa è una casa; una città è una città.”<sup>(1)</sup> So begins Ernesto Rogers’s 1946 editorial in *Domus* 215, from which countless Anglo-American scholars have adopted the evocative phrase “from the spoon to the city” to describe the ambitious scope of architectural practice under modernism. For Rogers himself, the phrase referred to the broad range of activity necessitated by postwar reconstruction, which he believed provided architects and their collaborators an opportunity to transform the world through the materialization of their visions for a new society: “Acquistano dunque sempre più valore nella società moderna la figura dell’architetto e quella degli altri componenti della grande orchestra che è chiamata a trasformare in poetico canto ogni rappresentazione formale dell’esistenza: dal cucchiaino alla città.”<sup>(2)</sup> But just as that brief phrase has been taken in isolation by architects, critics, and scholars as a concise declaration of the sweeping powers of modernist architects, so when considered as part of the larger text it offers historians of both architecture and design a challenging point of departure for considering the divergences and convergences between the two fields of historical inquiry. While the isolated phrase – from the spoon to the city – seems to assert a continuous spectrum of design practices, the opening line – a spoon is a spoon, a chair is a chair, a house is a house, a city is a city – instead emphasizes the distinctiveness of objects that demand their own particular modes of attention from architects, designers, and historians alike.

My own introduction to Rogers’s compelling phrase as well as his architectural and design work and that of his collaborators and peers in Milan came during graduate school, when discoveries during coursework led me to a dissertation on the quartiere Cesate, which I found a productive if challenging lens through which to re-examine Italian architects’ efforts to re-orient modernism in response to the collapse of Fascism and the demands of reconstruction.<sup>(3)</sup> Trained as an architectural historian, I initially understood Rogers’s phrase as

<sup>(1)</sup> Ernesto N. Rogers, “Ricostruzione: dall’oggetto d’uso alla città”, *Domus*, (November 1946), 2.

<sup>(2)</sup> Rogers, “Ricostruzione”, 5.

<sup>(3)</sup> Jonathan Mekinda, “The Cesate Quarter and the Re-Invention of Modern Architecture in Milan, 1945-1955” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

This article examines the relationship between architectural history and design history through a discussion of two scholarly projects: the recently published *Art Deco Chicago: Making America Modern* and the forthcoming *Building the "House of Man": Design and the Modern Home in Milan, 1933-1957*. The former offers the first comprehensive examination of architecture and design in Chicago between 1914 and 1949 focusing on the range of popular practices and products that defined the "Machine Age" in the United States. The latter undertakes a critical re-examination of celebrated modernist Milanese architects, including Franco Albini, Gio Ponti, and Ernesto Rogers, that situates their work within broader discourses and debates over the character of modern mass culture and its role in shaping a distinctive national modernity. Drawing on the research conducted for these projects, it is argued that historians of architecture and design must attend as much to the forces exerted by residents, consumers, and users as they negotiate the demands and opportunities of everyday life as to the imperatives of economic, cultural, and political elites and their institutions.

a conventional modernist statement of architecture's wide-ranging capacities and the scalar diversity of his and his colleagues practices as manifesting simply the application of architectural ideals at various scales. My perspective began to shift, however, when I started working at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), where I was hired to teach design history just as I was finishing my dissertation. UIC is relatively rare among American universities in hosting a design historian, but the position there was established in the early 1980s with the hiring of Victor Margolin, who has played a central role in developing design history as a scholarly field distinct from art and architectural history. My primary teaching responsibility is an annual two-semester survey of the history of modern design that is required for all undergraduate students in graphic and industrial design, though it is also open to students from architecture, art history, and other departments across the university.

The syllabi for the modern design history survey courses that I inherited from Victor and my immediate predecessor, Robin Schuldenfrei, were at once familiar and strange. Their familiarity rested on structures built around key figures and movements in the historical development of modernism, from the British Arts & Crafts through Italian Futurism and Soviet Constructivism, the Bauhaus and the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm, to the advent of postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century and on to the wide range of practices pursued today. The points of estrangement were more notable, however, including the necessity of exploring the impact of the Industrial Revolution on modes of consumption as well as production in various industries such as ceramics and textiles; a sustained focus on printing, typography, and advertising; and close attention to the rise in America of a discrete discourse of industrial design beginning in the late 1920s, centered around figures such as Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Dreyfuss, and Norman Bel Geddes who appear rarely, if at all, in conventional histories of modern architecture.

The many late nights spent preparing lectures on material at once familiar and strange were challenging, but they also opened new scholarly perspectives for me that simultaneously revealed the wide gaps between the histories of modern architecture and design and illuminated the benefits of working within and between the two distinct but intertwined fields of design history and architectural history. The intellectual possibilities of such scholarly work were further reinforced by my welcoming colleagues in the School of Design at UIC – faculty and students alike – who introduced me to the practice and teaching of design to a degree that quickly equaled my long-standing engagement with architectural practice and pedagogy. In the wake of that rapid immersion in design and design history, I have found my scholarly research transformed. Two projects, one recently completed and the other ongoing, illustrate the impact on my work of engaging design alongside architecture. They also illuminate the challenging and provocative questions regarding scholarly subjects and methods that arise from taking such a diverse range of practices and objects as the focus of historical inquiry.

### Art Deco Chicago

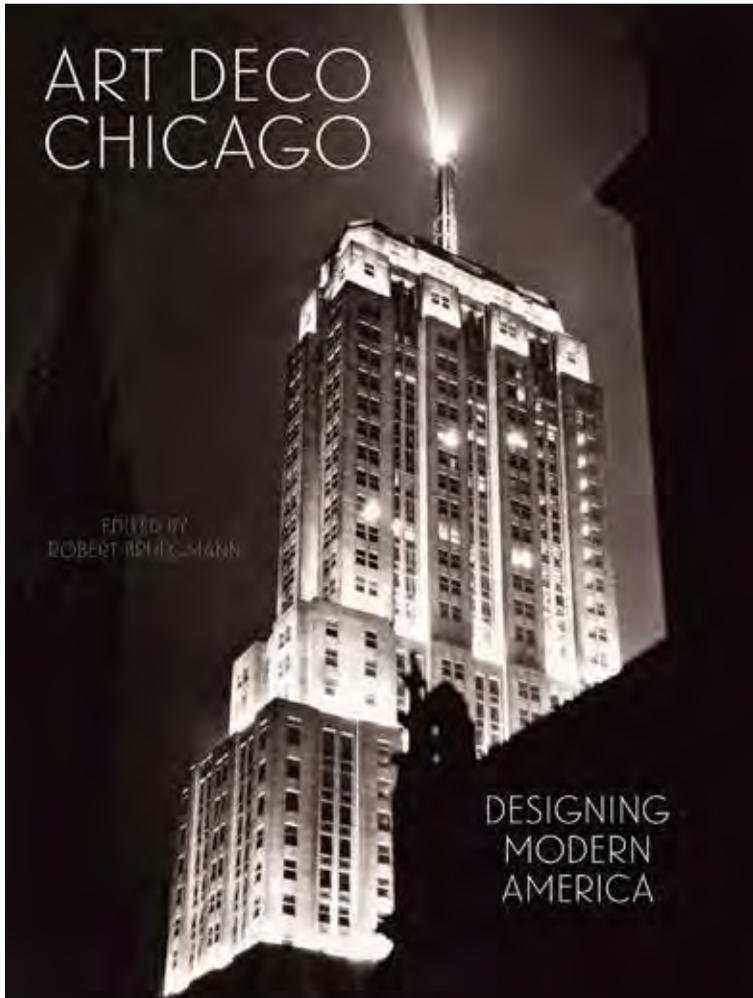
An invitation several years ago from architectural historian Robert Bruegmann to join an initiative organized by the Chicago Art Deco Society combined with my pedagogical engagement with design and design history to spark a profound change in my approach to both the history of architecture in Chicago and architectural history more broadly. Conceived initially as a survey of Art Deco architecture in the city, the project expanded under Bruegmann's direction and through input from a diverse array of scholars, collectors, and connoisseurs, to include landscape, infrastructure, and design broadly defined. It also culminated in the recent publication of *Art Deco Chicago: Making America Modern*.<sup>(4)</sup> As the title of the volume makes clear, the organizing imperative for the project was the term Art Deco, a widely used stylistic designation but one not especially popular among architectural and design historians.<sup>(5)</sup> The term itself gained traction in the Anglo-American world during the 1960s and 1970s through the work of Bevis Hillier following a 1966 exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris entitled "Les années '25': Art Deco, Bauhaus, Stijl, Esprit Nouveau" that introduced the term.<sup>(6)</sup> While the initial impact of the "discovery" of Art Deco was evidenced chiefly in a wave of popular and effective preservation movements – including the Chicago Art Deco Society, which continues to be an important advocate for preservation – its emergence also coincided with a notable turn toward the study of popular culture within the American academy.<sup>(7)</sup> The significance of that

<sup>(4)</sup> Robert Bruegmann (ed.), *Art Deco Chicago: Making America Modern* (Chicago, Chicago Art Deco Society, Distributed by Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>(5)</sup> A taste of academics' skepticism toward both the concept of Art Deco and the material it described is offered by Edgar Kaufmann Jr.'s review of two early publications exploring the phenomenon: Edgar Kaufmann Jr., "Reviewed work(s): *The Decorative Twenties* by Martin Battersby; *Style and Design 1909-1929* by Giulia Veronesi; and *Stile 1925. Ascesa e caduta delle 'Arts Deco'* by Giulia Veronesi", *Art Bulletin* 52, 3 (September 1970), 340-341.

<sup>(6)</sup> For the early works on Art Deco, see: *Les Années '25'. Art Déco / Bauhaus / Stijl / Esprit Nouveau. Musée Des Arts Décoratifs 3 Mars / 16 Mai 1966* (Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1966); Bevis Hillier, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s* (London, Studio Vista, 1968); Bevis Hillier, *The World of Art Deco* (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1971); Giulia Veronesi, *Stile 1925* (Florence, Vallecchi Editore, 1966); and Giulia Veronesi, *Style and Design 1909-1929* (New York, George Braziller, 1968).

<sup>(7)</sup> The history of the term Art Deco is thoroughly explored by historian Neil Harris in his contribution to *Art Deco Chicago*: Neil Harris, "Decomania, the Paths to an Enthusiasm", in Bruegmann (ed.), *Art Deco Chicago*, 63-78.



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*Art Deco Chicago: Making America Modern*, edited by Robert Brueggemann, published by the Chicago Art Deco Society and distributed by Yale University Press, 2018. Courtesy of the Chicago Art Deco Society

development for the study of architecture and design is exemplified by the work of American Studies scholar Jeffrey Meikle, whose ground-breaking book *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* provided for the first time an examination of the rise of industrial design in the US from an historical perspective that eschewed both the aggrandizing personal narratives of key protagonists such as Bel Geddes and Raymond Loewy and the ideological tenets of avant-garde modernism.<sup>(8)</sup>

Despite the rapid embrace of the term by the general public, Art Deco has figured little in the scholarship on the history of Chicago architecture. Since at least the early 1930s, when the recently established Museum of Modern Art in New York organized the exhibition “Early Modern Architecture: Chicago, 1870-1910”, the architecture of Chicago has been celebrated around the world as fostering some of the most advanced experiments of the modernist avant-garde.<sup>(9)</sup> In that view, the work of certain Chicago architects in the late nineteenth century, chief among them William LeBaron Jenney, Louis Sullivan, and Frank

<sup>(8)</sup> Meikle himself recounted some of the drivers of the scholarly turn toward popular culture in his review of two surveys of industrial design produced during the early 1980s: Jeffrey Meikle, “Review: *Design since 1945*”, edited by Kathryn B. Hiesinger and George H. Marcus; and *A History of Industrial Design* by Edward Lucie-Smith, *Design Issues* 1, 2 (Autumn 1984), 87-89.

<sup>(9)</sup> For more on this exhibition, see Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, “American Modern: The Chicago School and the International Style at New York’s Museum of Modern Art”, in Alexander Eissenschmidt and Jonathan Mekinda (eds.), *Chicagoisms: The City as Catalyst for Architectural Speculation* (Zürich, Park Books, 2013), 116-129.

Holabird & Root, Chicago Board of Trade building,  
Chicago, IL 1930. Photo by James Caulfield, 2016.  
Courtesy of the Chicago Art Deco Society

<sup>(10)</sup> For more on the concept of the Chicago School, see H. Allen Brooks, "Chicago School: Metamorphosis of a Term", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25, 2 (1966), 115-118; and Robert Bruegmann, "Myth of the Chicago School", in *Chicago Architecture: Histories, Revisions, Alternatives*, ed. Charles Waldheim and Katerina Rüedi Ray (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2-29. The concept of the Chicago School received its most refined exposition in the work of Carl Condit; see Carl Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture: A History of Commercial and Public Building in the Chicago Area, 1875-1925* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>(11)</sup> Daniel Bluestone, *Constructing Chicago* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991); Robert Bruegmann, *The Architects and the City: Holabird and Roche of Chicago, 1880-1918* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997); Thomas Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers, 1871-1934* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2013); and Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, *Chicago 1890: The Skyscraper and the City* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009). A first step in the re-examination of the conventional history of Chicago architecture was the exhibition and related catalogue organized by the Chicago Seven, a group of architects centered on Stuart Cohen and Stanley Tigerman, in the late 1970s, both entitled "Chicago Architects". See: Stuart Cohen and Stanley Tigerman, *Chicago Architects* (Chicago, The Swallow Press, 1976).

<sup>(12)</sup> The work of Joseph Siry exemplifies this strand of scholarship; two examples are: Joseph M. Siry, *Carson, Pirie, Scott: Louis Sullivan and the Chicago Department Store* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988), and Joseph M. Siry, *The Chicago Auditorium Building: Adler and Sullivan's Architecture and the City* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>(13)</sup> Jonathan Mekinda, "Chicago Designs for America", in *Art Deco Chicago*, 15-31. Robert Bruegmann proposes the term "mainstream modernism" to describe these practices in his contribution to the volume: Robert Bruegmann, "Capital of Mainstream Modernism", in *Art Deco Chicago*, 1-14.

Lloyd Wright, is seen to embody the concentrated engagement with modern materials, structures, functions, and forms that would culminate in the modernism of architects such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The widespread influence of that view is well demonstrated by the spread of the term the "Chicago School" to describe the architecture of the city during both the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, following the arrival of Mies van der Rohe to direct the school of architecture at what is now the Illinois Institute of Technology.<sup>(10)</sup> While architectural historians such as Daniel Bluestone, Robert Bruegmann, Thomas Leslie, and Joanna Merwood-Salisbury have produced a substantial body of scholarship in the past 25 years that productively interrogates the "myth" of the Chicago School, the city's role in the development of modernist architecture largely continues to define how architectural historians approach the history of architecture in Chicago.<sup>(11)</sup>

And yet, it takes only a few days in the city to realize how much of the architecture here exceeds that canonical history. While the works of LeBaron Jenney, Sullivan, and Wright are still rightly celebrated, remarkable buildings by other Chicago architects rarely figure in most discussions within a field still preoccupied with modernism. Two examples by the prolific firm Holabird and Root exemplify this point: the Palmolive building, which stands at the north end of Michigan Avenue, and the Chicago Board of Trade, at the southern end of LaSalle Street. As architectural history in the US has developed since the "cultural turn" within the American academy that began in the 1960s, excellent scholarship has been produced on these and other significant buildings in Chicago that locates both the structures and their architects within streams of historical development exterior to the modern discipline of architecture itself. Rather than emphasizing disciplinary concerns such as material, structure, space, and function, these studies focus on the actual use of a given edifice and the ways that the occupants, owners, and visitors engage and experience the building in order to construct a properly social history of architecture.<sup>(12)</sup>

In preparing my own essay for the volume on Art Deco in Chicago, conversations with the other contributors as well as the challenge of grappling with the term Art Deco itself quickly forced me to shift my focus away from the established icons of Chicago architecture and toward the practices embraced by the vast majority of architects, designers, clients, and consumers, who had only varying degrees of interest in either the formal or ideological ambitions of avant-garde modernism.<sup>(13)</sup> With respect to the two buildings by Holabird



<sup>(14)</sup> Mekinda, "Chicago Designs for America", in *Art Deco Chicago*, 16. Other important discussions of the interwar effort to modernize the classical tradition are: Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton, "The Style and the Age", in *Art Deco, 1910-1939*, ed. Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, and Ghislaine Woods (London, V&A Publications, 2008), 13-27; David Gebhard, "The Moderne in the U.S., 1920-1941", *Architectural Association Quarterly* 2, 3 (1970), 4-20; Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "The Art Deco Style", in *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975), 35-73; Richard Striner, "Art Deco: Polemics and Synthesis", *Winterthur Portfolio* 25, 1 (Spring 1990), 21-34; and Richard Guy Wilson, Diane H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian, (eds.), *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941* (New York, Brooklyn Museum in association with Abrams, 1986).

<sup>(15)</sup> For accounts of Moholy-Nagy's work in Chicago, see: Lloyd Engelbrecht, "The Association of Arts and Industries: Background and Origins of the Bauhaus Movement in Chicago" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1973); Alain Findeli, "Moholy-Nagy's Design Pedagogy in Chicago (1937-46)", *Design Issues* 7, 1 (1990), 4-19; and Alain Findeli, "Design Education and Industry: The Laborious Beginnings of the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1944", *Journal of Design History* 4, 2 (1991), 97-113. For useful, if narrow, discussions of the relationship between Moholy-Nagy's schools and the broader Chicago's design community, see: Lloyd Engelbrecht, "Modernism and Design in Chicago", in *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940*, ed. Sue Ann Prince (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), 119-138; and Peter Selz, "Modernism Comes to Chicago: The Institute of Design", in *Art in Chicago, 1945-1995*, ed. Lynne Warren (Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 35-52.

<sup>(16)</sup> Useful starting points for the history of Chicago design are: Victor Margolin, "Graphic Design in Chicago", in *Chicago Architecture and Design, 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis*, ed. John Zukowsky (Munich, Prestel, 1993), 282-301; and Pauline Saliga, "To Build a Better Mousetrap: Design in Chicago, 1920-1970", in *Chicago Architecture and Design, 1923-1993*, 264-281. Also valuable, if more narrowly focused, is Sharon Darling, *Chicago Furniture: Art, Craft, & Industry, 1833-1983* (Chicago, The Chicago Historical Society, 1984). The work of Barbara Jaffee is essential for understanding the early formation of the design culture that flourished in Chicago during the middle decades of the twentieth century: Barbara Jaffee, "Before the New Bauhaus: From Industrial Drawing to Art and Design Education in Chicago", *Design Issues* 21, 1 (2005), 41-62.

and Root mentioned above as well as contemporaneous works in the city by other architects such as the Burnham brothers, Phillip Maher, and Graham, Anderson, Probst, and White, that meant acknowledging and grappling with the renewed appeal of the classical tradition in the interwar years, when architects explicitly embraced it as an approach to design that could address the advances of modernity without breaking radically from convention. As I argue in my essay:

More than a single historical style, the classical tradition was understood [during the 1920s and 1930s] as a coherent body of aesthetic thought that connected antiquity to the present via an unbroken chain of masterpieces. It offered a universal approach to design that celebrated balance, order, and harmony as the basis of beauty, and beauty as the measure of any successful design. Even in the face of industrialization, the many advocates of the classical tradition proclaimed its continued vitality. Confronted with the machine, they called for updating the tradition through the adoption of new materials, technologies, and aesthetic techniques while still adhering to the longstanding principles of beauty they believed central to Western civilization. In the broadest sense, that ambition to synthesize the classical tradition and the modern defines Art Deco.<sup>(14)</sup>

Even more potent in re-shaping my approach to the history of Chicago architecture was the imperative to examine simultaneously the history of design in the city. That subject has generally suffered from the same biases as the history of architecture in the city, namely the view that Chicago's primary contribution to the development of modern design during the twentieth century was its role in stimulating modernism by fostering European émigrés, in particular László Moholy-Nagy, who was brought to Chicago at about the same time as Mies van der Rohe in order to establish a new school of design, first called the New Bauhaus, then the School of Design, and finally, as it is still known today, the Institute of Design.<sup>(15)</sup> While Moholy-Nagy and his school had a fundamental and long-lasting impact on the practice of design in the city – as attested to by the fact that many designers in Chicago today still trace their education and practices to Moholy-Nagy – the depth of that impact in many ways rested on the existence of an already large and vibrant community of professional designers in the city, most of whom worked in modes far better described by the concept of Art Deco than modernism.<sup>(16)</sup>



1.3  
Chicago Flexible Shaft Company, Sunbeam Mixmaster Model 5, designed by George T. Scharfenberg, 1939. Collection of William E. Meehan, Jr. Photo by Richard Quindry, 2016. Courtesy of the Chicago Art Deco Society

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Indeed, as the host to Sears, Roebuck Co. and Montgomery Ward, two of the largest mail-order companies in the world during the first decades of the twentieth century, as well as numerous manufacturers and industrial concerns such as Western Electric Co., Crane Valve Co., and the Chicago Flexible Shaft Co., Chicago produced during the middle decades of the twentieth century many of the objects and goods that came to define modern living for millions of Americans. Products such as the Aerocycle from Schwinn, the Mixmaster from Sunbeam, and radios from Motorola and Zenith were widely distributed and acquired during those decades and became the material means by which many Americans entered what soon became known as the “Machine Age.” Despite the widespread popularity and commercial success of these products, however, they have until now played no role in the history of Chicago design. Similarly, the numerous graphic designers who flourished in Chicago as a result of the city’s status as a major center of printing and publishing have been largely overlooked by art and design historians who have focused on the advertising program of the Container Corporation of America (CCA). Under the direction of president Walter Paepcke, art director Egbert Jackson famously commissioned work for CAA from celebrated modernists such as Herbert Bayer and Paul Rand to pioneer new forms of corporate promotion.<sup>(17)</sup>

Thanks to the efforts of the many researchers and scholars who contributed to *Art Deco Chicago* we now know more than ever before about the vast “ecosystem” of design that operated in Chicago between 1920 and 1950, from

<sup>(17)</sup> Walter Paepcke’s work and ambitions are considered in detail in James Sloan Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform*, rev. ed. (Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2002). For a broader perspective on the design program of CCA, see Neil Harris, “Designs on Demand: Art and the Modern Corporation”, in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*, ed. Neil Harris (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), 349-378. That essay was produced as part of a larger exhibition project: Neil Harris and Martina Roudabush Norelli, *Art, Design, and the Modern Corporation* (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985). A more critical discussion of the CCA design program is T.J. Jackson Lears, “Uneasy Courtship: Modern Art and Modern Advertising”, *American Quarterly* 39, 1 (1987), 133-154. Important for understanding the program at CCA within the broader context of American advertising is Michele H. Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995). Paul Gehl’s ongoing research offers an essential counter to the conventional emphasis on modernism in the history of graphic design in Chicago; see: Paul Gehl, “The Calligraphic Tradition in Chicago Graphic Design, 1900-1950”, *Bibliologia* 5 (2010), 127-163.

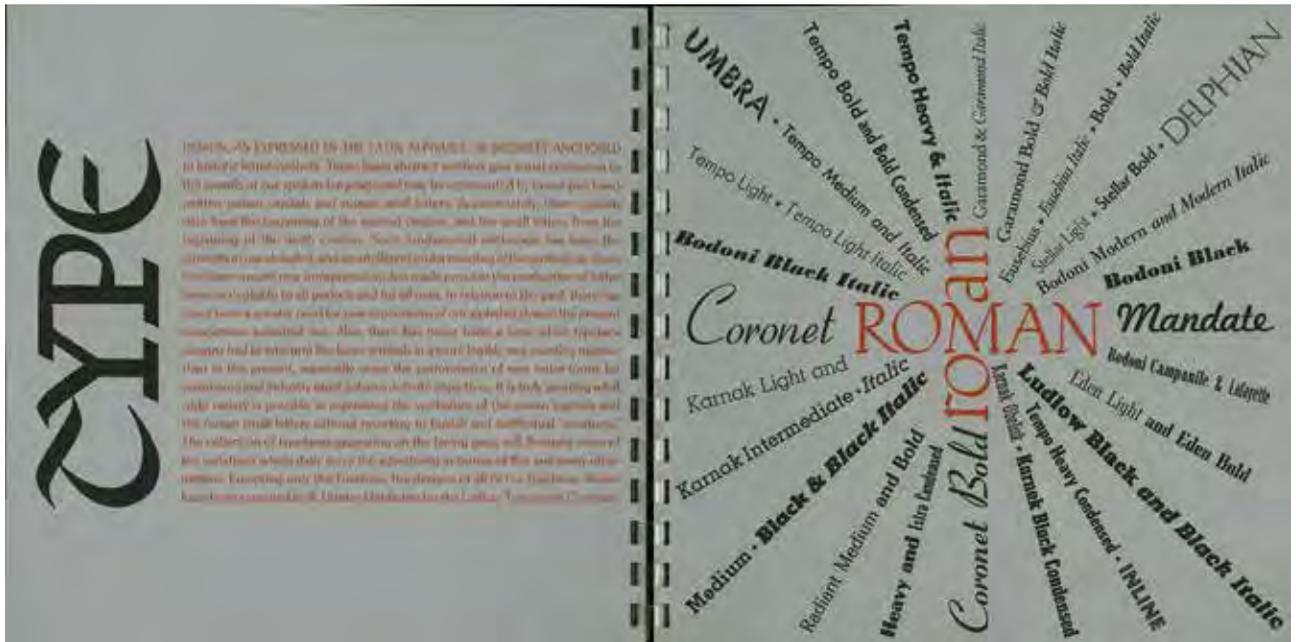


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Barnes & Reinecke, Product array for advertising, ca. 1946. Collection of Vicki Matranga

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Robert Hunter Middleton, Typeface wheel, published in *Chicago Designers*, 1940. At that time, Middleton was Director of Typeface Design for the Ludlow Typograph Co., a Chicago-based manufacturer of compact typesetting machines that were a popular alternative to Linotype machines and were in use worldwide by the end of the 1920s. Collection of the Newberry Library, Chicago



the workings of the design shops at Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, under the direction of John Morgan and Anne Swainson respectively, to the large number of designers who maintained independent consultancies such as Barnes & Reinecke, Bertsch & Cooper, Alfonso Iannelli, and Everett Worthington. For the purposes of preparing my own contribution to the volume, however, understanding the role that Chicago designers played in shaping the modern mass culture that emerged in the USA during the middle decades of the twentieth century required not only examining works of architecture and design that fall outside the traditional aesthetic standards of art, architectural, and design history, but also engaging the tremendous body of scholarship from other academic disciplines such as history and cultural studies devoted to the study of Chicago and its diverse communities.<sup>(18)</sup> The work of scholars such as Davarian Baldwin, Lizabeth Cohen, William Cronon, Neil Harris, David Hounshell, and Philip Scranton, to name only a few among those whose work I studied, was transformative for grappling with the vast assortment of advertisements,

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<sup>(18)</sup> The definition and scope of American mass culture is the subject of ongoing debate. While the term is conventionally assumed to describe the mainstream culture of the broad economic middle of Americans, scholars are increasingly as sensitive to the points of variation within mass culture as to the points of uniformity. For a useful consideration of the issues at stake in the concept of mass culture, see Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London & New York, Verso, 2004), especially the essays in "Part Two: Working on Culture".

<sup>(19)</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC, The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, Norton, 1991); Neil Harris, "The Drama of Consumer Desire", in *Yankee Enterprise, The Rise of the American System of Manufactures*, eds. Otto Mayr and Robert C. Post (Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981); David Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); and Philip Scranton, *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997). Other valuable works include: Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009); Robert Lewis, *Chicago Made: Factory Networks in the Industrial Metropolis* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997); and Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, Pantheon, 1983).

<sup>(20)</sup> Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994). The plenary address that Kathleen James-Chakraborty gave to the 2017 annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians explored some of these themes: Kathleen James-Chakraborty, "Field Note: Architecture, Its Histories, and Their Audiences", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, 4 (December 2018), 397-405. In my own experience, the work of historian Lizabeth Cohen has been especially influential in this regard; see: Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s", *American Quarterly* 41, 1 (Mar. 1989), 6-33.

publications, and consumer products that poured forth from the design offices, factories, and retailers of Chicago between 1920 and 1950.<sup>(19)</sup>

On the one hand, my reading in other fields reinforced my sense of the capacity of design as a subject of historical inquiry to materialize forces and conditions that frequently remain abstract in those fields, which typically lack close attention to the material qualities and visual forms that make designed objects so powerful as tools for daily life as well as agents of advancement and change for the individuals who design, manufacture, distribute, purchase, and use them. On the other hand, that body of scholarship dramatically broadened the scope of my approach to the history of Chicago architecture and design, introducing me to subjects and methods foreign to my training as an architectural historian but important for understanding the broad popularity of the formal language described by Art Deco among clients and consumers across many communities. As a result, bringing together the new body of knowledge unearthed by the contributors to the volume with the broader view of Chicago's architecture demanded by the concept of Art Deco spurred me to re-configure not only my understanding of the history of Chicago architecture and design, but also the subjects and methods of my scholarship at large. Put succinctly, my engagement with the diverse subjects – individuals and institutions, goods and services, communities and systems – contained by the intellectual frame "Art Deco Chicago" challenged me to re-examine the grounds on which I assert the significance of my chosen historical subjects and to think more deeply about the kinds of histories I think important to tell in the present.

No doubt the attention paid to the exceptional and the distinctive in constructing the histories of modern architecture and design is in large part the result of the close proximity of architectural history and design history within the academy to the practices that are their subjects. Grappling with questions of dissemination, consumption, and use, shaped by class, gender, and race, as well as style and form, however, necessitates that scholars cultivate a host of methods that extend beyond research in professional and institutional archives and the analysis of iconic plans, structures, and objects. While attention to media has been a priority for Anglo-American architectural historians since at least Beatriz Colomina's seminal work *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, the breadth of design as a subject of historical inquiry points to the value of a range of sources, including business and census records, personal papers and photographs from community archives, and social surveys among others, to which scholars in other fields regularly turn in order to understand the conditions and attitudes of broader communities.<sup>(20)</sup> From that perspective, Rogers's

assertion that a spoon is a spoon, a chair is a chair, a house is a house, a city is a city, is a challenge to architectural and design historians to attend not only to the professional and disciplinary ambitions and desires of those who design, produce, and distribute works of architecture and design, but also to the ways in which such works address, accommodate, and transform the needs, obligations, and desires of the humans who occupy, encounter, and use them.

### Building the “House of Man”

At the same time that I have been working on the history of architecture and design in Chicago, I have continued my study of the work of Rogers and his colleagues in Milan, which I am currently preparing for publication under the title *Building the “House of Man”: Design and the Modern Home in Milan, 1933-1957*. The book builds on recent scholarship that approaches modernism as an inherently global phenomenon, developing contemporaneously yet differently in specific locales.<sup>(21)</sup> Until recently, Anglo-American architectural historians have largely conceived modernism as developing around a coherent center, defined variously by certain figures (e.g. Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe), certain places (e.g. France, Germany, and the USA), certain materials, technologies, and design strategies (e.g. glass, mass production, and the free flow of interior space) and/or certain historical conditions (e.g. industrialization). In that view, the principles and practices of modernism are articulated and refined by the center (however defined) and peripheral developments diverge from those to a greater or lesser degree depending on architects' access to the necessary materials, technologies, knowledge and institutions.<sup>(22)</sup> Within that framework, the historical development of modernist architecture in Italy has largely figured as a peripheral phenomenon showing only partial adoption of the central principles and practices of modernism, an assessment that has been reinforced by the seeming difficulty of untangling the political affiliations of Italian modernism.<sup>(23)</sup>

My book takes a different approach, one that emphasizes the local conditions and discourses of modernity with which modernists in Milan engaged as they articulated their conception of modernism.<sup>(24)</sup> Of course Rogers and his colleagues were deeply engaged with international efforts to advance modernism and frequently deployed comparative rhetoric to support their arguments, but their conceptions of modernism were constituted through the dynamic interplay of international discourses and local developments rather than the direct importation and adaptation of foreign ideas. Closer attention to the design work of modernists in Milan has reinforced the imperatives of this approach. Taking

<sup>(21)</sup> The ambitions and methods of this new approach are especially well developed in the work of Esra Akcan; see Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, & the Modern House* (Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2012). Exemplary of this approach in relation to Italy is Paolo Scrivano, *Building Transatlantic Italy: Architectural Dialogues with Postwar America* (Surrey England, Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>(22)</sup> The concept of the “International Style” is the best known example of this framework. While that term has been subjected to substantial scholarly scrutiny and is now largely understood as a strictly historical formation rather than an accurate description of modernism at large, it is emblematic of the ways in which Anglo-American architectural history has largely relied on a center-periphery model for understanding the historical development of modernism.

<sup>(23)</sup> The peripheral status of Italian modernism is often described in stylistic and material terms and explained by reference to the pace of industrialization in Italy in comparison to those countries at the “center” of modernism. The work of Michelangelo Sabatino offers an important corrective to that approach; see Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010); and Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino (eds.), *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities* (London and New York, Routledge, 2010). The political affiliations of Italian modernism have also limited how Anglo-American architects and scholars have engaged the subject, despite the important efforts of Diane Ghirardo to address the issue directly. See: Diane Ghirardo, “Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalists’ Role in Regime Building”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39, 2 (May 1980), 109-127; and Diane Ghirardo, “Politics of a Masterpiece: The Vicenda of the Decoration of the Casa del Fascio, Como, 1936-39”, *Art Bulletin* 62, 3 (September 1980), 466-478. A younger generation of scholars has continued the work initiated by Ghirardo: see Lucy Mulsby, *Fascism, Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922-1943* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2014); and David Rifkind, *The Battle for Modernism: Quadrante and the Politicization of Architectural Discourse in Italy* (Venice, Marsilio, 2012). Also important is the growing body of scholarship on the Italian colonies; for two useful examples see: Brian McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Colonial Libya: An Ambivalent Modernism* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2006); and Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism* (London and New York, Routledge, 2007).

<sup>(24)</sup> In addition to the scholarship mentioned above, the excellent work of Emily Braun is an important point of reference for my study; see: Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>(25)</sup> In addition to the work of Paolo Scrivano mentioned above, a valuable model for this approach is Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>(26)</sup> Among Anglo-American architectural and design historians, treatments of postwar developments in Italy are deeply divided. On the one hand, architectural historians have generally interpreted the interest in vernacular forms and techniques among Italian architects after the war as a nostalgic revival aimed at resisting a mass culture that celebrated the dissolution of established norms and conventions spurred by industrialization. On the other, the distinctive design culture that flourished in postwar Milan has largely been seen by design historians as marking the triumph of democratic values and the inauguration of the consumption-oriented mass culture that would flourish in Italy from the mid-1950s via the *miracolo economico*. Recent work has begun to complicate these views; see Grace Lees-Maffei and Kjetil Fallan (eds.), *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014); and Catherine Rossi, *Crafting Design in Italy: From Post-War to Postmodernism* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015). Scholarship in fields beyond architectural and design history that has been influential for my work includes, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001); Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public* (Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1990); David G. Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994); Emmanuela Scarpellini, *Material Nation: A Consumer's History of Modern Italy*, trans. Dafne Hughes and Andrew Newton (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011); and Noa Steimatsky, *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>(27)</sup> The phrase is from Ernesto Rogers, "Programma: Domus, la casa dell'uomo", *Domus* 205 (January 1946), 2-3.

the home as its subject, my book aims not only to integrate the diverse scalar practices of Rogers and his colleagues, but also to foreground the modes of modern living that their work envisioned and enabled. Attending to the subjects, audiences, and markets that these works constituted does not mean privileging use and consumption over design and production or abandoning close analysis of the formal and material properties of projects, objects, and built works. Rather, it necessitates interrogating the entanglement of such outputs in the broader environment within which architects and designers conceive their methods and ambitions beyond purely disciplinary concerns.<sup>(25)</sup> To that end, my book positions architecture and design as just one, albeit distinct, arena among many in which various positions, theories, and practices were articulated and materialized with the aim of defining the conditions of modernity for the still young nation-state.

As in my work on Art Deco in Chicago, considering design alongside architecture has meant grappling with both the different historiographic conventions of architectural history and design history, which are especially pronounced with respect to Italian modernism, and scholarship in other disciplines such as cultural studies, history, and cinema and media studies that examines the ways in which modernity was conceived and enacted by Italians of all types, from political, cultural, and industrial elites to bourgeois consumers, working-class women, and colonial subjects.<sup>(26)</sup> Building on that scholarship, my book focuses on how the formation of modern mass culture in Milan as well as the broader Italian discourse around that phenomenon during the middle decades of the twentieth century constituted the material and ideological ground on which modernism developed in the city. More than offering just an expanded view of the work of Rogers and his colleagues, I consider how they struggled to understand and direct the processes of modernization in the city in relation not only to the new forms of industrialized manufacturing such as pre-fabrication and mass production, but also to the new social formations emerging from modern modes of labor, leisure, and consumption. Through a close study of their domestic work across the middle decades of the twentieth century, from household objects to city plans, my book argues that the Milan group developed a distinctive conception of modernism that aimed to modulate the emergence of the industrialized masses as the primary social formation of modernity and to construct a mass culture that would reinforce a humanistic ideal of the modern subject – the inhabitant of what Rogers's declared the "house of man."<sup>(27)</sup>

In elaborating that argument, my book not only proposes a new assessment of the development of modernism in Milan, but also aims to contribute to the



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View of the *quartiere Cesate*, Milano, 2012.

The *quartiere* was designed by Franco Albini, Gianni Albricci, Enrico Castiglioni, Ignazio Gardella, and BBPR between 1950-1957.

Photo courtesy of the author.

1.7

View of the *Margherita* chair at the Triennale Design Museum at the Villa Reale, Monza, 2015.

The *Margherita* chair was designed by Franco Albini with Luigi Colombini in 1950.

Photo courtesy of the author

wider effort to reconfigure how scholars approach modernism as a global phenomenon by drawing closer attention to the dynamic relationship between modernism and the new regimes of daily life that emerge as processes of modernization take shape within disparate locales. In order to assess the full impact of modernism and the particular vision of modernity that it advanced, historians of architecture and design must attend as much to the forces exerted by residents, consumers, and users as they negotiated the demands and opportunities that confronted them daily as to the imperatives of economic, cultural, and political elites and their institutions. Indeed, our world today demands such an approach. Although extraordinary works of architecture and design continue to define the outermost horizon of our visions of the future, the ordinary “things” of daily life are where those visions meet the diverse systems, customs, and forces that constrain their realization. At a moment when the relentless press of technological advances in the digital realm has yielded the substitution of the narrow discourse of innovation for modernist ideas of progress, the realm of the ordinary affords the richest terrain in which to observe both the flourishing of alternative visions of the future and the means by which such visions are foreclosed.

