A Handbook of California Design, 1930–1965: Craftspeople, Designers, Manufacturers by Bobbye Tigerman (review)

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motive industry, and artistic creativity and scientific management, providing readers with a more nuanced picture of how aesthetics, commerce, and culture intersect than that generally provided in studies relying on “cultural representations” alone. However, this same historical richness occasionally detracts from the book’s central arguments. The multiplication of examples and anecdotes, some of them only tangentially connected to a chapter’s argument, often obscures more than it illuminates. More attention could surely have been devoted to the book’s images, which are not closely analyzed by the author. Why is it, for example, that, despite experts’ emphasis on simplification, the images that appear in advertisements so often prioritize variety and choice? Finally, for historians of technology interested in how stylists have come to acquire such influence in high-tech industries, The Color Revolution suggests several new avenues of research. Fashion and style may not be out of the historian of technology’s purview after all.

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A Handbook of California Design is the companion to an exhibition held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from fall 2011 to spring 2012. It shares the comprehensive approach of the exhibition, generally eschewing a singular focus on well-known designers for a more egalitarian and wide-ranging assemblage of relevant practitioners, manufacturers, and promoters involved in the Los Angeles design world at mid-century. The format reflects this ambition: after a modest introduction, the book consists of a series of one- to two-page introductions to these figures and their practices.

Of course these individuals are held together not only by shared temporal and geographical space, but also by their participation in the emergence of a certain style. Though claiming a geographic egalitarianism (i.e., a willingness to include the Bay Area), the book is mostly interested in Los Angeles and its aesthetic hinterland. The premise that there is a specifically Californian design has been commented on extensively, for example in Esther McCoy’s engaging and supportive 1960s writings on Arts & Architecture’s Case Study House program. Thomas Hines’s more recent Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900–1970 (2010) has reiterated these issues in architectural terms. This California imagination came to de-
fine a certain kind of “good life” in the postwar period, one that would soon take on global connotations.

Recent literature on the period has attempted to hold this design milieu accountable for the kind of present and future it imagined, and to see what lessons can be learned from the mid-century excitement about new forms, new objects, and new modes of production. A Handbook of California Design does not belabor the complex interconnections of style, policy, and economic growth, but rather is focused on isolating and documenting the trajectories of design practices. The catalog-style organization of the book is both its strength and its weakness: in allowing for a wide range of coverage, the entries introduce the reader to a much greater number of designers, materials, technologies, and methods than a more in-depth reading would allow. The range of entries is impressive, encompassing individual designers, firms, manufacturers, promoters, and others. On the other hand, because these brief introductions are framed as biographies, the narratives neglect the rhizomatic characteristics the project at first seems to project. Origin stories are frequently repeated, involving emigration in some cases, shared courses at the Art Center in others. It is more of a guidebook than a handbook, offering a synoptic tour. After a while, the biographic premise comes to seem like a barrier to understanding the stakes of “California design” rather than a window into it.

Another attempt to indicate the networked dynamism of this socio-technical milieu is similarly disappointing: bright orange text is used when a name in a bio is that of someone else who appears in another place in the catalog. Instead of collecting and emphasizing these connections, this strategy ends up reinforcing the relative isolation of many of the individuals’ and groups’ practices—the extent to which they were chasing after the same distributors or licensing materials through the same firms. Many of these people and the materials, designs, and processes they championed rose to prominence, and it would be worthwhile to see these better-known practitioners placed among those who, we assume, were of equal skill and renown in the period. The book’s benefits will perhaps only be tested decades down the road, when enough of these players have been subject to intensive scholarly analysis, and rendered as a crucial part of their economic and cultural milieu. (A seminal text implicitly invoked is Christopher Alexander’s A Pattern Language, which, though not published until 1977, was being written at the University of California, Berkeley, at the end of the Handbook’s timeline, in the mid-1960s. The open-source system of interrelationships that Alexander pioneers seems more alive as a system of knowledge than the alphabetical discussion of designers’ biographies presented here.)

One of the interesting points Tigerman makes is that the design strategies that emerged did so in concert with willing collaborators on the industrial, production, marketing, and distribution side. In this sense the Handbook, almost despite itself, presents a map of an economic, cultural, and
social campaign to argue for a certain design disposition, with hopes that such a disposition could cycle back and have some sort of impact on the daily lives of those engaged in these new forms of living.

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Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage.


This edited collection, produced by members of the Soundscapes of the Urban Past research project at Maastricht University, investigates the urban soundscapes of Amsterdam, London, and Berlin as a window into the cities’ evolving identities over the course of the twentieth century. Given the lacuna of historical recordings of everyday urban experiences, scholars’ access to soundscapes of the past—defined here as both the sonic environments of cities and urban residents’ perceptions of those sounds—is necessarily mediated through written texts, radio plays, and films. Yet because historical actors frequently took note of sounds only when they elicited particularly strong reactions, the authors argue, textual sources referencing the “putative historical realities” of past soundscapes can be analyzed alongside radio plays and films “dramatizing” urban environments (p. 15). This methodological premise undergirds the three principal chapters, which examine patterns in the representation (or “staging”) of urban soundscapes over time and across different media.

In “Shifting Sounds,” the first core essay, four coauthors (Karin Bijsterveld, Annelies Jacobs, Jasper Albers, and Andreas Fickers) analyze novels, films, diaries, and travel writing from the 1920s through the 2000s to uncover the “narrative repertoires . . . used to articulate particular impressions of urban soundscapes” (p. 35). They find that sound has most commonly been deployed to frame scenes of urban arrivals, juxtapose soundscapes of the present with those of the past, compare and contrast urban neighborhoods, and highlight the varied rhythms of urban life. Their second lengthy essay, “Sounds Familiar,” examines the symbolism and narrative function of sound in four different versions of Alfred Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz: the original 1929 novel, a 1930 radio play, the 1931 film, and Rainer Fassbinder’s 1980 television serial. While considering the historical factors shaping the production and reception of each version, the authors’ goal is to demonstrate the value of a comparative “intermedial” approach for studying sound. Radio, sound film, and television may have made possible the creation and mass diffusion of soundtracks for Döblin’s narrative, but