Cleveland Goes Modern: Design for the Home, 1930–70 by Nina Freedlander Gibans and James Gibans (review)

Anna Vemer Andrzejewski

Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 160-162 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0024*

a microcosm for the development of the state and, more broadly, the United States. The big themes of Minnesota and American history are there: relations between Native Americans and white settlers, industrial development, class divisions, even the cereal and grain business of the region. The tales can seem loosely knit at times, but taken as a whole, Dregni does what he set out to do. At the beginning of the book he says he was drawn to the stories about the lake, "the history I missed in school." Dregni likes the place and its lore, and from the tone of his book, he likes sharing those good yarns.

Tom Crann
MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO
St. Paul, Minnesota

Nina Freedlander Gibans and James Gibans, *Cleveland Goes Modern: Design for the Home, 1930–70*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014. 232 pp. $50.00.

Cleveland Goes Modern is a regional study of Cleveland's notable contributions to midcentury architecture and design. The book grew out of a 2007 exhibition of the same name. Organized by the Cleveland Artists Foundation under the leadership of curator Nina Gibans, the exhibition commemorated the sesquicentennial of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Amply illustrated with beautiful interior and exterior color photographs and scaled floor plans of midcentury houses, the authors of this volume attempt to relate Cleveland's contributions to broader avant garde trends in modern American domestic architecture. Although Clevelanders will certainly find much in this book to appreciate, it will also be of interest for midcentury aficionados more broadly, particularly midwestern architectural scholars and enthusiasts who will certainly recognize some of the designers' names and stylistic features of the houses.

It would be surprising if Cleveland's midcentury housing were not subject to this kind of study given the growing interest in modern design during the last decade. DOCOMOMO-U.S.—the American branch of the international DOCOMOMO, which stands for "The Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites, and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement"—has sixteen chapters, including several in the Midwest. Regional groups have formed to study midcentury design, including in Texas

(mid-Tex-mod) and Michigan Modern. California still garners much attention for its midcentury masterpieces. (Witness the success of the 2011–12 Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition, "California Design, 1930–65: Living in a Modern Way.") But there is clearly a burgeoning appreciation of midcentury architecture more broadly. Scholarly studies of midcentury architecture abound. Recent efforts include Dianne Harris's book, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); *Sanctioning Modernism: Architecture and the Making of Postwar Identities* (ed. Vladimir Kulic, Timothy Parker, and Monica Penick; Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); and the forthcoming book by James A. Jacobs, *Detached America: Building Houses in Postwar Suburbia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015). Recent historic preservation conferences—motivated by the fact that nearly two decades of buildings built after World War II are now potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places—have prompted numerous publications to help preservationists prioritize modern buildings to try to save. And popular interest in midcentury design has grown to support serials—such as the enormously popular *Atomic Ranch*—midcentury lines of furniture, interior products at national retailers such as Target, and shows on HGTV that feature midcentury architecture and design.

Positioning the book within this growing interest in midcentury architecture helps explain the book's central claim: "It is time for Cleveland's pioneering leadership in the modernist movement and its impact on several crafts to be recognized and integrated into the fabric of American culture" (1). This agenda toward making a case for the significance of Cleveland's midcentury modern housing stock persists throughout the volume. A fascinating section on "Voices" tells the story of modernist design from the recollections of midcentury architects and clients reminiscing about particular buildings and commissions. The core chapter, titled "Six Modernist Architects," addresses the work of Ernst Payer (1904–81), Robert A. Little (1915–2005), John Terence Kelly (1922–2007), William B. Morris (1927–), Fred S. Toguchi (1922–82), and Don Hisaka (1927–2013). The curator and her committee chose these six figures to represent Cleveland's most significant contributions to modern architecture. Other sections of the book look at dwellings designed by nationally known modernists—including Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, and Marcel Breuer—and twenty first century efforts. Useful appendices include an exceptional annotated list of

Cleveland's midcentury designers—an indispensable resource for anyone interested in Cleveland architecture or the midcentury movement.

The regional focus of the volume is its greatest strength as well as its greatest weakness. There is an unresolved tension in the fact the authors seem to want, on the one hand, to position Cleveland's midcentury contributions *within* a broader nationalist trend and, on the other hand, to argue that Cleveland's buildings were cutting edge and somehow regionally specific. This tension is apparent in one of the most interesting chapters in the book, "The Modernist Era," which examines the residential construction of sixteen Cleveland architects, who mainly worked in industrial and commercial architecture but occasionally experimented with residential buildings. As opposed to the previous chapters, which try to situate architects' contributions nationally, this chapter is firmly anchored locally—but the narratives about individual buildings are fascinating, and show how these architects were engaged with both local and national design trends. A great example is the work of George B. Mayer featured in this chapter. One of Mayer's houses is firmly positioned within its local context but also described as being publicized in *Architectural Forum*. This example and others suggest that Cleveland's midcentury architecture—as with such architecture anywhere during this time period—must be understood as simultaneously engaged with national trends as well as having regionally specific meanings.

Negotiating the precise balance between the national and the local is pressing for those of us engaged in studying midwestern architecture, particularly in the twentieth century when architects and ideas moved between midwestern cities, the coasts, and abroad with increasing frequency. As we seek to better understand the built environment of the Midwest, such circulation and exchange is something to be acknowledged, theorized, and interpreted more rigorously. While books such as *Cleveland Goes Modern* go a long way toward highlighting regional contributions to the midcentury modern movement, there remains great potential for further studies that focus on regional modernism evident in cities such as Cleveland during the mid-twentieth century, resulting from a dynamic interplay between local, national, and even international forces.

Anna Vemer Andrzejewski
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON
Madison, Wisconsin