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Tastemaker: Elizabeth Gordon, House Beautiful, and the Postwar American Home, Monica Penick, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. 260 pages, 96 colour and 90 black and white illustrations, \$65 Hardcover, ISBN: 9780300221763.

This book is the result of 16 years of work which began when Monica Penick enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of Texas to research what became her PhD dissertation 'The Pace Setter Houses: Livable Modernism in Postwar America' (2007). The term 'livable modernism' will be familiar to readers of this journal from Kristina Wilson's book *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (2004) which is not mentioned by Penick although Wilson herself is thanked in Penick's acknowledgements. In developing her thesis for publication Penick has shifted the focus from 'livable modernism' to place this term within a group of keywords used by Gordon in her work at *House Beautiful*, including 'taste', 'good design', 'bad design', "modern" and all its derivatives' and 'organic' (p. x). Penick's writing is easy and vivid. In closing her first chapter, she notes that Elizabeth Gordon's first book was 'far more than an advice book: *More House for your Money* was a roadmap to a self-determined domestic future' and that while '[m]any of her counterparts believed – or hoped - that her tenure [at *House Beautiful*] would last only through the Second World War' '[s]he surprised them all: she led *House Beautiful* for the next twenty-three years' (p. 8).

The book is based on close reading of 25 years of *House Beautiful* back issues alongside several other magazines and newspapers. Penick has also consulted, she tells us, material from fifteen archives in the US (p. xi) although only twelve are accorded entries in the list of abbreviations. These include the papers of Elizabeth Gordon, of course, plus the papers and collections of Alfred Browning Parker, Curtis Besinger, Thomas D. Church, Ralph C. Henning, Harwell Hamilton Harris, John deKoven Hill, Cliff May and Maynard L. Parker and materials in the archives of the American Institute of Architects, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and the Guggenheim Museum.

Penick clearly delineates the contribution to knowledge of her book as being based on: her decision to study a mediator rather than an architect or designer; the need therefore to consider the groups between which she served as mediator; the presentation of designs which have been eclipsed by other better-known examples such as the Case Study Houses; and the fact that it is a study of a popular magazine. Of these four claims to significance, the third is the strongest because the others are

incremental. Mediation has been a focus in design history throughout this admittedly young century, and is compelling because it requires attention to producers, consumers, and others, has been shown in studies ranging from domestic advice to design criticism, to name but two. Indeed, magazines have received a disproportionate amount of attention from academics working in the arts and humanities perhaps because they offer a convenient, and even enjoyable, unit of analysis. So, when Penick identifies these claims to significance I wonder is she is writing for design historians reading this journal, or whether she is writing for other fields and disciplines, American Studies being the most obvious contender.

Nevertheless, design historians will enjoy this book. It offers another closely developed case study of the role of mediators in making meaning for design and, in this case, the home. Penick tracks the personnel changes at the magazine, and the market segment that it served (educated and not flashily wealthy). The US entry into World War Two in 1941 meant that newly installed editor Gordon could depart from the influence of her forerunner, Kenneth K. Stowell, and respond to the materials shortages and suggestions from the Office of War Information and the Magazine War Guide which promoted patriotic content based on defence and thrift. Penick shows how Gordon negotiated the potential risks of war to her magazine – chiefly lost advertising revenue – by promoting a practical present and the hope of an affluent future of ‘good living’. She ran designer profiles and investigated readers’ views and understanding through contests and surveys. She emulated *Good Housekeeping’s* seal of approval with a ‘Better Your Home’ seal.

Gordon tackled the poverty of post-war housing initiatives and performed an educational role with her Home Planner’s Study Course. She advertised Fritz B. Burns’ ‘The First Postwar House’, designed by Walter Wurdeman and Welton Becket in 1946. The success of this forerunner led Gordon to the Pace Setter Houses which promoted a middle way between the commercialism of Burns’ houses and John Entenza’s directional architect-led Case Study Houses for *Arts and Architecture*. Cliff May’s Ranch House Classic implied a comfortable life without domestic staff for families in the upper middle wealth bracket. Bankrolled by his partner at the First National Finance Corporation, the Pace Setter programme nevertheless progressed under Gordon’s control to cultivate half a million readers’ ‘understanding of and appreciation for good contemporary design’ while also encouraging them to ‘hire a designer’ (p. 57).

Gordon was not subject to the constraints that had been placed on domestic experts, such as Christine Frederick, when it came to corporate links. While *House Beautiful* joined a host of other publications in promoting climate control and 'solar design' as an aid to US homeowners comfort, cost savings and fuel scarcity (p. 64) Gordon actively joined a campaign by Libbey-Owens-Ford to promote its Thermopane glass. The second Pace Setter House (1949) demonstrated the gains to be made in terms of climate control. She anticipated the ecological interest of the 1960s and today's concern for sustainable design, while demonstrating her skills as principal investigator in a research project which incorporated government and commercial partners (p. 81).

Chapter six showcases Gordon's abilities in writing design history, as she articulated indigenous American roots for the modernist postwar 'New Look' in domestic architecture that followed Dior's postwar New Look in womenswear. Penick relates this into the 1948 symposium at the Museum of Modern Art which asked 'What is Happening to Modern Architecture?' with answers provided by Lewis Mumford, Henry Russell-Hitchcock, Walter Gropius, Philip Johnson, Marcel Breuer and others. Gordon identified with Mumford's Bay Region Styles, as opposed to Russell-Hitchcock's International Style, and her New Look morphed into the New American Look and finally the American Style. The American Style was accorded a stamp of approval by Gordon, too, this time featuring an eagle. Although Penick recognizes its similarity with the US great seal, she stops short of the implication that Gordon became, by extension, a self-appointed president of the US home. Political ideology suffuses the following chapter on 'The Threat to the Next America' which takes its name from a controversial editorial by Gordon, associated with the work of Lyman Bryson, in which a 'battle against communism and "totalitarian oppression,"' saw free market capitalism and household consumerism as 'powerful weapons' (p. 120). Gordon critique of a 'cold, barren' 'Cult of Austerity' promoted by Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier was publicized through full page advertisements in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*.

This approach attracted Frank Lloyd Wright. He wrote essays for *House Beautiful*, recommended the appointment of one of his staff at the magazine and Gordon served as his unofficial publicist, dedicating the November 1955 issue to his 'contribution to the beauty of American life' (p. 139) and conceiving Frank Lloyd Wright product lines with Schumacker textiles, Heritage-Henredon furniture, and Martin-Senour paints. A line of carpets for Karastan was never manufactured (p. 141-4). The products'

existence between tradition and modernity confounded retailers and the public alike, but Wright played well in the magazine. Gordon's 1954 Pace Setter House was designed by Wright devotee Alfred Browning Parker, and published by Gordon amid pull-quote endorsements from Wright. Penick presents this as part of a shift towards 'A New Regionalism', with chapter 11 focusing on the architecture of the 1955 Pace Setter House designed in Texas by Harwell Hamilton Harris. Wright's death in 1959 coincided with a period of reflection for Gordon and a bestselling commemorative Wright issue.

Penick's penultimate chapter sees Gordon touring Japan seeking to understand and define *shibui* and a naturalness that extended from Wright's organicism (p. 201). *Shibui* provided a more palatable form of austerity, Penick tells us, than the "Bauhaus austerity" Gordon decried. *Shibui* wall finishes were a commercial success and the *shibui* issues of *House Beautiful* sold out even though many thousands more than the standard circulation of 750,000 copies were printed. Penick closes, poignantly, with Gordon's acceptance into the American Institute of Architects as an honorary member, at the fourth attempt. While her editorial about the threat of modernism to the next America had delayed her admittance by twenty years, this text was acknowledged at her entry in 1987 as prefiguring broader critiques of international modernism; as early as 1958 she had stated that "The look of 1958 is the Post-Modern Look" (p. 179).

Tastemaker exemplifies the standard of visual presentation that many design historians aspire to for their own books. Typically for a Yale University Press book, Penick's is substantial and generously illustrated. Most of the images are from *House Beautiful* and are therefore familiar to readers of the magazine but the visual quality of this book does not simply enhance the story being told; rather, it *is* the story being told. The images do only support the textual narrative, they demonstrate it, exemplifying the mediation of ideal homes through low viewpoints, lush textures and attractive retro colours. Penick provides endnotes, and an index, but there is no bibliography or list of illustrations (illustration credits are supplied). The book is framed with a preface and a prologue, and an epilogue. I would have gladly exchanged some of the images for a bibliography, but I know that not every reader will agree.