

# Reframing Chicago's Residential Architecture

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Book Review / CRITICISM

***Modern in the Middle:  
Chicago Houses 1929-1975***

By Susan S. Benjamin and  
Michelangelo Sabatino  
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Within histories of the advent of architectural modernism, Chicago's role has been presented as so seminal, and so focused on a handful of key events and individuals, as to obscure deeper understandings of the place and period. A fuller accounting inevitably builds more complicated and interwoven narratives textured by often conflicting details.

For many early historians of modern architecture, the explosive growth of the city itself prior to the 1871 fire and its even quicker post-fire rebirth provide the backdrop for an emphasis on the astounding accomplishments of commercial building in the 1880s and 90s. The comprehensive metal

frame in William Le Barron Jenney's 1885 Home Insurance Building marks the technical innovation underpinning these narratives, even if it was left to figures like John Root or Jenney's former employee Louis Sullivan to uncover the aesthetic potential of the new structural techniques. Writers such as Nikolaus Pevsner cast these designers in heroic roles. In his 1936 book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, Pevsner recognized both the technical innovation and the aesthetic conservatism of Jenney's work, noting that "it was left to Sullivan to pay attention to the voice of steel."<sup>1</sup>

This emphasis on the heroic drew attention away from the city's more everyday buildings and practices. By placing Chicago at the center of the global stage, early modernist historians helped to divert attention from local phenomena that might be more nuanced, complicated, and enriching. Since the middle of the twentieth century historians have worked to more accurately portray both the relevance and the diversity of Chicago's architecture and urban development. Northwestern University professor Carl Condit brought greater detail and depth to our understanding of early skyscrapers and other commercial buildings.<sup>2</sup> Later, exhibitions and related publications sought to bring attention to more marginal actors and aspects of Chicago's built history. By the late twentieth century, under founding curator of architecture John Zukowsky, the Art Institute of Chicago had produced a series of exhibitions and publications that reinforced the international reputation and appeal of Chicago architecture while also increasing the rigor and specificity of its historical interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

*Modern in the Middle* makes a formidable contribution to this growing body of work, both through its specific focus on housing and the power of its hybrid format to address the topic at varied scales and through diverse lenses. The book's formal organization centers on its primary identity as a curated "portfolio" of fifty-three Chicago-area houses built between 1929 and 1975, with locations ranging from Waukegan in the north to Olympia Fields in the south, and to far-western Hampshire and Plano. The brief articles accompanying each published house are written by the book's primary authors, Susan S. Benjamin and Michelangelo Sabatino. Even just as a catalog of significant houses from the period this volume is substantial, but woven around its core content are essays that offer broad contextual frameworks as well as more specific insights into themes including the pivotal leadership and influence of Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the legacy of mid-century Chicago as viewed from the debates of the 1970s and 80s, and the challenges of restoring modernist residences.

While many readers will be drawn directly to the portfolio of selected houses, the book's two-essay introduction and brief "coda" essays provide essential context. Michelangelo Sabatino's opening piece maps out the main cultural forces in the recognition and promotion of modern housing just before and during the four and a half decades covered in the book. Key

publications are surveyed for their role in shifting public taste, as are the roles of interior design, furniture showrooms, and print advertising. Sabatino also pays attention to the geographical settings of the selected houses, as well as briefly recognizing the better known examples of multifamily housing design.

Sabatino's contribution to the introduction concludes by setting the primary thematic scene for the book: the tension between so-called "international style" and "organic modernism" tendencies that can be found in so much American architecture during the period, and in residential buildings in particular. This theme is supported with more elaboration in Susan Benjamin's introductory essay, which considers the looming presence, mutual appreciation, and generally opposed formal and material approaches of Wright and Mies. Although neither was from Chicago both developed highly influential design models that seemed to take root—in very different ways—in the landscape or the commercial and institutional conditions of the region.

With its emphasis on these two foci, Benjamin's essay can afford to be more targeted and give more detail than the survey-like contribution of Sabatino. Taken as a whole, the introductory material provides readers with not only a valuable and broad historical framework but also an appreciation of just how closely many younger architects clung to the models of Wright and Mies. By establishing these debts so clearly, the book also allows readers to perceive the remarkable range of residential work undertaken during the middle decades of the twentieth century. As clear as the adherences to Mies and especially Wright were, the more remarkable examples here are indicative of a search for more independent approaches and more diverse influences. The illustrations and analyses of works by George Fred Keck, Bertrand Goldberg, and Harry Weese all attest to the relative independence of these voices. Further reading suggests their leadership in helping younger architects to break free from the heroic figures that so dominated Chicago design.

Like its two-part introduction, the book's coda section frames the legacy of Chicago's mid-century housing in multiple ways. A second Sabatino essay maps out the trajectory of post-1970s historiographical and theoretical debates and the residential design they represented. The primary authors are then joined by architect Serge Ambrose in a consideration of the shifting attitudes toward the preservation of mid-century residential heritage. Finally, the authors share their personal experiences as owners and caretakers of two mid-century Chicago-area houses, reminding us that homes are uniquely intimate works of architecture.

The varying components comprising the book will allow it to connect with a wide range of reading audiences, including architects, specialists in architectural or urban history, those interested in residential architecture

or mid-century design in general, and Chicago-area residents curious about the local history of their region. The book's arrangement encourages readers to either explore the portfolio in sequence or not, and to give more or less attention to specific examples or to the longer essays as they see fit.

The hybrid format allows a complex and nuanced interplay between the general and the particular. For example, in his discussion of the synthesis of "organic" and "international" impulses evident in many of these houses, Sabatino points to the example of Paul Schweikher's own house in suburban Schaumburg, originally built in 1938 and extended in 1949. Readers who then turn to Susan Benjamin's portfolio entry on the Schweikher House will find a longer-than-typical analysis which complements and elaborates Sabatino's arguments, while also revealing and honoring the individual identity of the house, independently of its illustrative role within broader historical themes.

The 208-page portfolio is not only the centerpiece of the volume, and a true feat of curation, but its generous deployment of period and contemporary photography and sharp commentary give the book a clear sense of identity. The portfolio texts are the key to the book's success; the authors use these to provide a degree of depth and detail while they wisely avoid either gratuitous discussions of style or academic formal analyses. Instead, one gains through these entries not only clear descriptive and historical information but a sense of how each house illustrates diverse specific themes of relevance to the book's general topic.

An example of this can be found in Sabatino's entry on the lesser known of Mies van der Rohe's Chicago area houses, the residence built in west-suburban Elmhurst in 1951 for Robert Hall McCormick III and Isabella Gardner. Citing McCormick's intention to launch a business mass-producing homes in collaboration with developer Herbert Greenwald, Sabatino uses the opportunity to sketch a history of residential mass-production strategies in the United States, ranging from the popular mail-order efforts of Sears, Roebuck, and Co. and Montgomery Ward—both Chicago-based retailers—to the more technically oriented efforts of Chicago architect Howard T. Fisher. This thematic thread not only provides useful insight about the McCormick house itself but also connects it to broader movements of significance.

Elsewhere, Susan Benjamin's presentation of the 1960 Ruth Koier and Laurence Sjoblom house in southwest-suburban Lemont focuses on the professional experience of architect Jean Wiersema Wehrheim and other women in the field during the 1960s and in subsequent decades. The example elaborates on Michelangelo Sabatino's discussion, in his introductory essay, of the need for more scholarship on the experiences of and limited opportunities for women and minorities within professional design cultures during the period.

While the sub-title of the book—*Chicago Houses 1929–1975*—is of course appropriate, given the cultural and economic dominance of the city over its hinterlands, only six of the fifty-three houses included therein were actually located in Chicago proper. Sabatino's introductory essay refers to the backdrop of suburbanization and centrifugal growth that emerged during the period, but those interested in the social geography of "Chicagoland" would likely appreciate more elaboration on the particular dynamics of suburban development in the region.

While, as Sabatino points out, many of these houses chart the ascendancy of an upper-middle class rather than a shift in the tastes of the old-money north-shore elite, it would be safe to stress the "upper" over the "middle" in describing most of these patrons. Well over half of the featured homes were located along the traditional lines of power radiating north from the city. Far fewer were to the west or south—the locales of the new middle-class subdivisions that began consuming farmland during the 50s and 60s. More space for this discussion would of course open up other issues that are outside the scope of the book, including the complex and perhaps unintended alliances between mid-century modernism and histories of white flight, redlining, and corporate disinvestment in the city and its neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, readers who long for greater attention to one issue or another will often be responsive to the remarkable way in which the stories of these houses touch on so much that is fascinating and relevant about the place and period. The diversity of the book's content encourages a new understanding of the varied modernisms that emerged and intertwined in and around Chicago during the mid-twentieth century. Rather than the unified modernist project heralded just decades earlier, this account reminds us of the wide-ranging nature of formal approaches, material attitudes, and visions of modern domestic life pursued by architects and their clients. By balancing discussions of architectural qualities with accounts of the meaningful connections between houses, clients, and designers, the book is able to convey the rich cultures of patronage that drove the turn toward modernism and its wider distribution into American life.

## Notes

1. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, 4th ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 116.
2. Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture: A History of Commercial and Public Building in the Chicago Area, 1875–1925* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
3. John Zukowsky and Mark Jansen Bouman, *Chicago Architecture and Design, 1923–1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis* (Munich: Prestel, 2000). John Zukowsky and Robert Brueggemann, *Chicago Architecture, 1872–1922: Birth of a Metropolis* (Munich: Prestel, 2000).

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