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ISSN 2167-8812

http://openinquiryarchive.net

June 2014

REVIEWS

Patrick Lee Lucas. *Modernism At Home: Edward Loewenstein's Mid-Century Architectural Innovation In The Civil Rights Era*. Greensboro, NC: Weatherspoon Art Museum of the University of North Carolina Greensboro, 2013.

Reviewed by K. Porter Aichele (Professor Emerita of Art, University of North Carolina at Greensboro)

Modernism Domesticated

As is evident from the full title, this catalogue was not produced as a coffee-table adornment, although it is elegantly designed and amply illustrated. Insightful essays by Patrick Lee Lucas, now director of the School of Interiors at the University of Kentucky, and sidebars written by his former students at the University of North Carolina Greensboro's Department of Interior Architecture explore the dynamic relationship between regional modern architecture, individual identity, and the changing social and political landscape of central North Carolina in the decades leading up to the civil rights legislation of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. Lucas traces the sixteen-year trajectory of Edward Loewenstein's residential designs in and around

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Greensboro in straightforward prose accessible to general readers as well as specialists in architecture and interior design. Of particular interest to non-specialists is his essay on "Modernism in Context," which introduces the theme that is threaded throughout five sections of text, namely how innovations in visual and material culture can reflect and even anticipate social change.

Many of Loewenstein's designs were featured in newspapers and glossy magazines when they were completed, but until the publication of *Modernism at Home* there has been no substantial study of the architect's place in the history of mid-century modernism. This publication accompanied a series of lectures and a house tour, so it is fitting that Lucas and his student assistants used as their model the scholarly exhibition catalogue with introductory essays and commentaries on individual entries – in this case all architectural structures. *Modernism at Home* should in turn serve as a model for subsequent publications on regional modernist architecture. Lucas's essays are meticulously researched and scrupulously documented. In this respect they join the good company of Catherine W. Bishir's *North Carolina Architecture* (2005) and Sandy Isenstadt's *The Modern American House: Spaciousness and Middle-Class Identity* (2006). What makes Lucas's biographical profile unique is its specificity of local contextual references, which encompass contributions of the Jewish community to Greensboro's cultural life and the racial tensions that brought about shifts in community values, as well as archival material from Loewenstein's project files.

The quietly charismatic personality who emerges from the pages of *Modernism at Home* was a native of Chicago, transplanted to Greensboro when he married a member of the extended Cone family, whose textile plants fueled the city's economy for much of the 20th century. Growing up in Chicago, then completing his degree in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Loewenstein was exposed to Frank Lloyd Wright's low-lying Prairie Style residences and Mies van der Rohe's sleek International Style skyscrapers. As a second-generation modernist, he adopted Wright's aesthetic and adapted it to the southern community to which he moved. Loewenstein was a geographical outsider who had an insider's access to the Cones' network of business and social contacts. When he opened a private architectural practice in 1946, he tapped into this network to establish a client base. As Lucas observes, Loewenstein's success in building a solo practice into a sizable and successful firm was due in good part to the fact that he was not an uncompromising purist, but a congenial pragmatist who worked with ease across a spectrum of architectural styles and responded to clients' requirements without compromising his fundamental design principles. Other principles determined his hiring practices. Despite protests from some employees, he integrated his drafting studio a decade before the Greensboro Four made history by sitting at the Elm Street Woolworth's lunch counter. He was likewise ahead of his time in employing women to draft exterior as well as interior designs long before the second generation of American feminists called for gender equality in the workplace.

Loewenstein, his partner Robert A. Atkinson, Jr., and their associates completed 1600 commissions, a majority for businesses, educational institutions, and recreational facilities. *Modernism at Home* focuses on representative examples of the fifty residential commissions built in Loewenstein's unique interpretation of the mid-century modern idiom. The characteristic features of Loewenstein's style emerge in what Lucas calls "the prototype" – a house designed for Martha and Wilbur L. Carter precisely at mid-century. The facade of the house is dominated not by the front door, which is off-center and recessed, but by a glass-roofed, screened porch, now enclosed as a sun room. This expansive, open-air living area is an extension of the interior core of the house, which consists of spacious, interlocking rooms for daily activities and entertaining. Bedrooms, baths, and built-in storage are aligned along a hall, which separates private spaces into a wing that defines an ell-shaped floor plan. In "the archetype" that Loewenstein built for his own family, he could make more daring design choices, separating the dining and living areas by a curved, Carolina fieldstone wall that counterbalances the linear geometry of canted glass window walls. Here, as in other residences from the fifties, a combination of natural materials and glass creates the illusion that there is no separation between interior and exterior living spaces. Lucas readily acknowledges that not all of Loewenstein's potential clients were sold on mid-century modern architecture. For those more conservative clients who had reservations about modernism, Loewenstein designed "hybrids," which incorporated traditional architectural elements such as a central gable punctuating the façade to mirror the rooflines of neighboring Classical-revival houses. As another concession to local tradition, Loewenstein chose the same warm rose and orange brick used not only in the grand homes in Greensboro's affluent neighborhoods, but also in the Cone Mills factories, setting his structures apart by combining brick with corrugated fiberglass and other modern materials. Whether catering to clients who embraced modernism or those who were more comfortable in a hybridized version of his style, Loewenstein gave full visibility to what Lucas singles out as the two principal icons of mid-century material culture: the car, parked in a prominent, attached carport, and the television set, centrally placed in a recreation room that exemplified family values before that term was politicized.

As Lucas notes, Loewenstein's Greensboro practice flourished concurrently with pockets of modernist design across North Carolina, from North Carolina State University's College of Design in Raleigh to Black Mountain College near Asheville. Located between the two, Greensboro was a mid-size city with an established economic base in textile manufacturing and a population that was generally conservative in its political views and social values. The catalogue text situates this quintessentially southern city in the broad socio-economic context of the post-World War II years. Like other cities across America, Greensboro's middle class prospered during this time, and like other cities in the South, it witnessed a decade of social upheaval. As race relations festered and deteriorated in inner cities, there was a housing boom in the suburbs, where the GI Bill and FHA loans made the dream of a single-family house accessible to millions of people. For the burgeoning middle class a house in the suburbs represented upward mobility and financial stability. For those who aspired to the lifestyle of television's Nelson and Cleaver families, the houses of choice were the affordable ranch and modest versions of Georgian-inspired two-story houses. In Greensboro, as elsewhere, relatively few non-conformists gravitated to the kind of vernacular modern architecture that Loewenstein associated with an open-minded attitude toward new ideas. Lucas refers to them as Loewenstein's exceptional clients. Who were they?

In addressing this question, Lucas skirts conventional profiles in favor of a more nuanced response. He categorically dismisses the notion that Loewenstein's modernist houses projected a Southern Jewish identity, even though Loewenstein was the only Jewish architect working in Greensboro, and many of his most innovative designs resulted from collaboration with Jewish clients. Lucas argues instead that Loewenstein's low-key modernism was a visible sign of difference that appealed to a small number of people who thought of themselves as being outside the norm with respect to their political views and their commitment to changing the dichotomy of the existing social order. Loewenstein himself was politically liberal, socially engaged, and committed to expressing his own sense of being different in the vocabulary of modern design. In the mid-century modern houses he designed, his personal style resonates compatibly with the personal identities of his like-minded clients.

With their long, horizontal lines, Loewenstein's houses blend seamlessly into their natural settings, rarely asserting themselves as ostentatiously modern on the exterior. They nevertheless stand apart from the generic houses surrounding them. As such, they manifest a temperate but firm refusal to conform to the status quo. Lucas convincingly compares this form of non-aggressive dissent to the passive resistance of the political activists who staged sit-ins in downtown Greensboro. Similarly, Lucas characterizes the interiors of Loewenstein's houses as domestic versions of the new social order that would evolve in the course of the civil rights era. In contrast to the segregated spaces of traditional domestic architecture, which reflect a hierarchical social order, the open, fluidly integrated spaces of mid-century modernism pointed to a pronounced change in social relations among family members, domestic help, and visitors. Loewenstein's interiors are as distinctively different and individual as his clients. On occasion they make dramatic claims to a modern sensibility in such focal points as the floating staircase in the Katherine and Sidney J. Stern Residence and the freestanding circular fireplace in the Evelyn and John Hyman Residence. Many residences reflect the owners' preference for an eclectic mix of styles. Among these was Loewenstein's own house, where, as Lucas wryly observes, the furniture he commissioned complements Frances Loewenstein's family antiques. The furnishings and accessories of other residences have the cosmopolitan sophistication of savvy art collectors or world travelers. More subtle is the lighting that permeates the interiors, where a carefully calculated balance of natural and artificial light is at once functional and symbolic of an enlightened approach to design.

Loewenstein's architectural legacy is secure in the public buildings and private houses that have been preserved and maintained by current owners, including this reviewer, who has restored the Joanne Spangler Residence in Danville, Virginia. Anchored to a busy corner in the center of the city, Loewenstein's Greensboro Public Library served as a centrally located, widely accessible educational recourse for three decades. With admirable concern for preservation, the administrators of Elon University repurposed the building to house a new law school, thereby perpetuating its symbolic role as an architectural monument to social justice, open minds, and progressive thinking. The residences featured in *Modernism at Home* are a testament to the longevity of mid-century modern architecture. Five of the houses that have been demolished are illustrated in the catalogue. Even those in a dilapidated condition seem more vibrantly modern than the derivative structures that have replaced them – all built by contractors whose knowledge of architecture is gleaned from pattern books of postmodern motifs, one example being the all too familiar Palladian window. Other aspects of Loewenstein's architectural innovations, including his forward-thinking experiments with passive solar heating and his insistence on incorporating existing mature trees into his plans, have come to fruition in the green architecture of today.

The last sections of Lucas's text highlight Loewenstein's legacy to Greensboro's diverse educational community. Even given his tireless efforts on behalf of equal opportunity, it is surprising to learn that Loewenstein drafted the master plan and designed no fewer that twelve buildings for Bennett College, a historically black college for women. On three occasions between 1957 and 1965 he directed a design studio for students in the departments of art and home economics at Woman's College, now the University of North Carolina Greensboro. In record time the students designed three spec houses financed by a local contractor. Working in committees, they created designs around "activity centers" and negotiated partnerships with Greensboro businesses to secure materials, appliances, and furniture. These experiments in what are now called experiential learning and student entrepreneurship opened opportunities for earning college credit outside of campus classrooms. Lucas subsequently took up Loewenstein's mantle in this regard, engaging his own students in service learning projects that developed "[mod]moments" in the form of information kiosks about modernist design that were placed in multiple sites throughout the community and were subsequently distributed digitally.

It is rare to come across a publication that is creatively designed to complement its content. *Modernism at Home* is one of those. As an allusion to the floor plans of Loewenstein's houses, the landscape format of the catalogue is emphatically horizontal. The high quality paper-back cover features the reproduction of an elevation drawing printed with a spot UV coating and stamped with die-cut openings that replicate Loewentein's signature fenestration patterns. Pages that open from the gutter and unfold in double spreads evoke the spatial experience of entering a sequence of integrated rooms in which private living quarters are discretely screened from public view. In a layout that mirrors the asymmetry of Loewenstein's designs, overlapping images of blueprints and photographs parallel the layering of living spaces in modern architecture. The palette of colors used so effectively in the catalogue was borrowed from Loewenstein's cork flooring, honey-colored paneling, and bluestone terraces. Even the feel of the paper is a reminder of the ubiquity of material texture in the interiors of his residential structures. In an age of e-books, this is a publication that reminds us why we still savor the visual and tactile pleasure of holding a book, feeling the smooth surface of paper, and turning pages in anticipation of discovering a provocative idea or a beautiful image.

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