

**Sandra Alfoldy and Janice Helland, eds., *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855–2005*. Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2008, 244 pp., 48 black-and-white illus., \$99.98, ISBN 978-0-7546-5706-4**

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## Book Reviews

### Comptes-rendus de livres

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Sandra Alföldy and Janice Helland, eds., *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855–2005*. Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2008, 244 pp., 48 black-and-white illus., \$99.98, ISBN 978-0-7546-5706-4.

The concern of *Craft, Space and Interior Design* is to explore the direct interactions between craft and space in Europe, Canada, and the United States during the period 1855 to 2005. The essays examine how craft “controls, manipulates, organizes, and defines space” specifically in relation to interior design and decoration, and to architectural space (p. 4). One of the central arguments of the book is that, despite the widely accepted misconception, high modernism did not erase the relationship between craft and space. To this purpose the editors have included a relatively large number of essays that argue for the continued intersection of modernism and craft from the era of the Arts and Crafts movement to the present.

Publications on craft and its links to other art forms are few and are to be welcomed. This volume adds to and complements recent publications, specifically *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto, 2001), which explores craft’s engagement with industrialization and modernism. Several essays in the present volume offer new material relating to women artists’ contributions in the area of craft and design that adds to recent work in this field such as *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure* (Aldershot, 2000) and *The Studios of Frances and Margaret Macdonald* (Manchester, 1996), and Anthea Callen’s earlier yet valuable *Angel in the Studio: Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870–1914* (London, 1979). *Craft, Space and Interior Design* is a significant contribution to the field in that its approach differs from other publications. It is unique for its sustained focus on craft’s relationship to design and architecture over time and its inclusion of work by both male and female artists.

The thirteen essays are diverse in focus, including a consideration of interior furnishings, material finishes, and craft and symbolism, and range geographically from case studies relating to the United States and Canada, England, Ireland, and Scotland’s Orkney Islands. One of the highlights is Janice Helland’s essay on the interior decoration of two Glasgow tearooms by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald. In it Macdonald’s work as both designer and crafts artist is examined and her importance to the artistic collaboration with the much-better-known Mackintosh is emphasized. The theme of women as both designers and craft artists is continued in the following essay by Annette Caruthers, and in Joseph McBrinn’s essay on the interior design of Belfast Cathedral, which discusses the work of Irish sculptor Sophia Rosamond Praeger (1867–1954)

and mosaics by the sisters Gertrude (d. 1952) and Margaret Martin (active ca. 1925–35).

The collection as a whole offers remarkably diverse perspectives on the junctures of architecture and craft. One of the most engaging and highly accomplished is Annette Caruthers’ “Symbolism in a Scottish Arts and Crafts House,” which focuses on little-known Melsetter House in Scotland’s Orkney Islands. The house was designed in 1898 by the architect William Lethaby for his clients Thomas and Theodosia Middlemore. Caruthers explores how and why symbolism, in this case relating to the sea, boats, and the character of the Orkney Islands, was employed in the exterior and interior design, interior embellishments and furnishings of the house. A particularly strong feature of the essay is the way in which the author draws on unpublished family papers and correspondence to develop her exploration of the range and significance of the highly crafted components of the architecture and interiors of Melsetter. References to letters by May Morris, the daughter of William Morris and herself an artist and designer, are a fascinating addition. May Morris was a family friend who visited the house in 1902, and her designs for embroidery are shown in a photograph being worked by Theodosia Middlemore. Other textiles designed by William Morris, and worked by his wife Jane Morris, were part of the interior design of the house.

It is difficult to find any major fault with this book. Broadly speaking, the decision for the chosen time-span, 1855 to 2005, announced in the book’s title is addressed by the essays. The articles appear in roughly chronological order, beginning with John Potvin’s exploration of the design of a Turkish bath in London in the 1860s. The two final articles, devoted to more contemporary times, cover subjects located in Toronto. Sandra Alföldy’s essay looks at a University of Toronto School of Architecture exhibition held in 1967, and Amy Gogarty’s essay examines artist-designed rooms commissioned in 2004 for the renovation of the Gladstone Hotel. However, with seven of the thirteen essays concerned largely with the years between 1900 and the 1930s, here lies the weight of the book. The reason for this weighting may be the aim of the editors to demonstrate how craft endured as an influence under modernism. This goal is important because it has previously been assumed that craft was extinguished and superseded by the advent and influence of modernism, that modernism in effect “erased the relationship between craft and space” (pp. 3–4). Alföldy and Helland’s choice of essays convincingly show that this is a misconception and that during the time period 1855 to 2005, while there was a changing rapport between craft, architecture, and interior design, there is much that argues for a development of links and continuance between the nineteenth-century crafting of space and post-World War I high modernism. This volume challenges

the reader to consider this argument; it questions the view that sees only the fissures between earlier craft aesthetic and modernism, or the wide-ranging disruption brought about by the modernist movement. Alföldy and Helland's weighting of articles towards the first third of the twentieth century may be explained by a desire to focus on this period of rapid transition from the late nineteenth-century promotion of craft, as seen in the Arts and Crafts movement, into full-blown modernism.

The visuals in the book are interesting and of an adequate number (forty-eight in total). The beautiful colour photograph of the living room of Saarinen House was an inspired choice for the book jacket. Most essays are enhanced by the illustrations, which support the reader's understanding of the discussions and analyses. While there are obvious restrictions of available historical/archival visual material, some of the illustrations, for example in Tag Gronberg's "Josef Frank's 'Aralia'" and Jim Cheshire's "Space and the Victorian Ecclesiastical Interior," would have been far more effective as colour reproductions.

To the book's credit is the fact that a number of the case studies examined in the articles are relatively little known. Two examples are Penny Sparke's essay on Elsie de Wolfe (1865–1950) and Joseph McBrinn's essay, "Craft as Union, Craft as Demarcation: The Decoration at Belfast Cathedral." Although the audience for this volume is likely to be an academic one with a prior knowledge of arts and crafts of the period, one wonders why newer readings of previously covered material were not included. With the exception of Helland's article on the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald, in a volume covering the period from 1855 to the present there is no one essay specifically focusing on such leading and influential players in the Arts and Crafts movement as William Morris, Charles Ashbee, or May Morris. Indeed, while references to May Morris and her work recur repeatedly in Carruthers' article, neither Morris is the essay's principle focus. Charles Robert Ashbee's (1863–1942) art production and design, and his Guild and School of Handicraft, trained and influenced many. While the book is to be admired for its covering of new and little-known territory, the inclusion of an article on Ashbee or the multi-talented Morris family would have created a base and context for the excellent and diverse analyses in the rest of the book and made it accessible to a broader audience.

There is a discouraging conclusion inferred by the choice of articles dealing with Canada. Sparke's article on American interior designer Elsie de Wolfe examines her career in the United States beginning in the 1890s. In contrast, the earliest discussion of Canada is 1967. The choice to begin the analysis in Canada's centennial year leaves the reader with the inaccurate implication that nothing very much was happening in Canadian craft and architecture prior to this date. There is much

that could have been explored in an earlier Canadian context, such as, for example, George Agnew Reid's (1860–1947) work in architectural and interior design, the interior mural commission executed in 1913 by Mary Hiester Reid (1854–1921) for the Weston Town Hall, and those done by Harriet M. Ford (1859–1938) and other Canadian artists for the interior decoration of the Charles Porteous house in Quebec in 1899. While the volume includes Tanya Harrod's essay on influences of the past and of modernism in twentieth-century studio pottery design and production, it excludes Canadian craft artists from the period 1900 to 1930. Toronto sculptor and ceramicist Winnifred Kingsford (1875–1947), who designed and executed art pottery and ceramic household objects such as lamp bases, and also potter and jewellery designer Mabel Cawthra (1871–1943) would have been especially relevant additions. Cawthra studied at Charles Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft in England and, in 1905, she opened a Toronto franchise of English interior design firm W & E Thornton-Smith and Company, which sold high-end furniture, fabrics, rugs, and curtains and won commissions to decorate city theatres and churches. In addition to her mural painting Harriet Ford's artistic production included interior furnishings such as screens designed and painted by her. Frances Loring (1887–1968) and Florence Wyle (1881–1968), largely known only for their sculptural production, also had a long-standing, craft-related production of small-scale furnishings, such as clock cases marketed through leading jewellers' shops in New York, and fountains that were incorporated into the garden designs of Canadian estates such as "Parkwood" in Oshawa, Ontario, the home of car manufacturer Robert Samuel McLaughlin. The little-known designer and entrepreneur Marion A. Living (active 1894–1901) designed her own line of carpets, which were manufactured in Toronto and sold under her company name, Marion Living Designs.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly a fuller acknowledgement and inclusion of earlier Canadian case studies such as these, which relate to the book's aim of exploring the relationship of craft to architectural spaces, would have improved *Craft, Space and Interior Design*. However, these points detract only a little from the larger, valuable achievements of this book, in particular its innovative theme and strong contributions.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See also, Susan Butlin, "A New Matrix of the Arts: A History of the Professionalization of Canadian Women Artists, 1880–1914," PhD Diss., Carleton University, 2008, 244–70.