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FORMICA FOREVER

by Mark Adamson, et al.

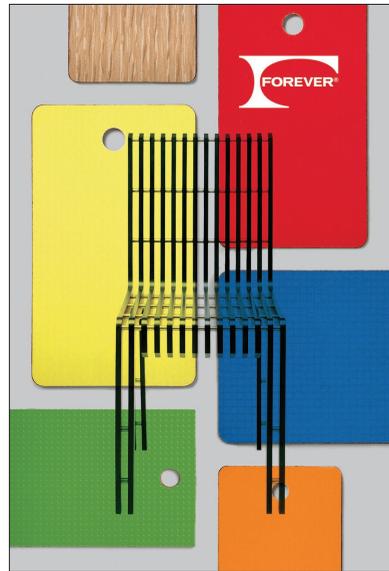
Formica Corporation & Metropolis Books, 2013
407 pages; primarily photo/illustration. Includes translations.
\$39.95 softcover

Creating the successful brand is a will o' the wisp chased by generations of talented and sometimes dodgy advertising geniuses. Suddenly out of left field comes *Formica Forever*, possibly the most delightful and instructive book ever written on the topic of building a brand.

Formica Forever marks the 100th anniversary of the founding partnership—the Formica Products Company of Cincinnati, OH. It is a *fun* read. Modeled on trade swatches, the section titled “100 Years of Color and Pattern,” is printed in full color on heavy coated paper with perforated lines dividing each page into Formica chip-sized swatches. The section reprints advertisements and other sales material from company archives, plus correct-to-scale reproductions of popular colors and patterns by decade. Best of all, it incorporates a series of literary quotations referencing the brand. My personal favorite: a nuclear submarine mess hall scene from Ian Fleming’s *Thunderball*.

The brand, however, speaks for itself. It persuades without even trying. *Formica Forever* is corporate self-promotion, but understated self-promotion of rare quality and even rarer modesty. Editorial design is by Pentagram, which will alert the design-savvy to a serious intention to get this book exactly right.

The only actual corporate voice is heard in the brief one-page foreword by Mark Adamson—no affiliation or title identified. We find out he is CEO when we start into the first of three essays: Phil Patton on the history of the Formica Corporation; Alexandra Lange on Formica materials and their impact on the design world; and Peter York on the social influence of the “wipe-clean world” created by high-pressure plastic laminates. The essays include endnotes, but



are written for a general audience.

There is much interesting information here, beginning with the invention of Bakelite in 1907 and subsequent

rapid development of textile and paper laminates for use as electrical insulating material. Formica sheets and tubes were key to the first market boom in consumer electronics—the solid-state radio receiver of the 1920s. War made ready markets for many early products, including pulleys used in WW I aircraft controls; guide tubes used in WW II bombers, and 88 separate components for the P51 Mustang fighter.

Since WW II, Formica has focused increasingly on decorative laminate paneling, a market that has grown steadily. An early favorite of transportation designers, colored and patterned Formica laminates figured heavily in ocean liner and passenger train interiors and were soon replacing natural finish materials in commercial cafeterias, drugstore soda fountains and roadside diners from coast to coast. The postwar suburban construction boom completed the market conquest and made Formica into a generic name as familiar as Kleenex or Xerox.

One caution: as befits a worldwide corporation, this book includes translations in seven languages, so the final third is for the non-English reader. *Formica Forever* will enrich and entertain architects and interior designers as well as students of industrial design, marketing and social history.

—RICH RAY

THE HOUSES OF LOUIS KAHN

By George H. Marcus and William Whitaker

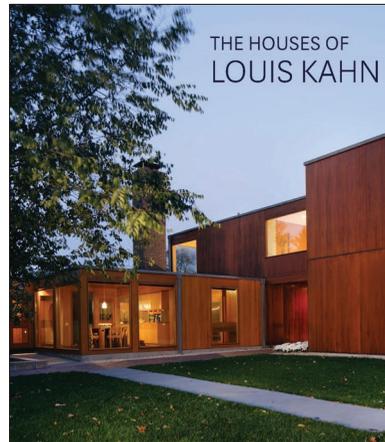
Yale University Press, 2013
280 pages; 100 color + 150 b/w illustrations
\$65.00 hardcover

With 610 titles on Louis Kahn in WorldCat, the union catalog of 72,000 libraries across the planet, does the world need another book on the master of light and shadow, the reviver of structural mass, the translator of modernism, the coiner of “served” and “servant” spaces, the poet-architect? If the book is *The Houses of Louis Kahn*, the answer is yes.

With support from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, this analysis of Kahn’s nine realized domestic designs stems from an ideal partnership between George Marcus (*Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine for Living*, 2000; *Masters of Modern Design: A Critical Assessment*, 2005), a writer of exceptionally adroit and precise architectural description, and William Whitaker, curator of one of the most venerable architectural archives in the country.

Kahn’s institutional projects—from the small-scale bath houses for the Trenton Jewish Community Center to the majestic Bangladesh National Capital—in which he sought to represent the collective spirit of the social enterprise, are well documented. In sharp contrast with the monumentality of most of those projects, Kahn’s residential commissions gave him the opportunity to explore domesticity and interior settings, to consider the intimate scale of family life—after all, he did create three families of his own—and to allow clients to indulge in bespoke details, such as inglenooks, window seats, and framed views. In comparison with his institutional and governmental designs, the houses are reticent, biographical, and deeply related to a tradition of craft.

The opening essay, “Home,” chronicles the architect’s interactions with his clients and their collaborative design process. Next is “Houses,” an exceptionally lucid outline of Kahn’s debt to the International Style. With polished prose and



carefully selected illustrations, the authors explain Kahn’s relation to Le Corbusier, Neutra, Gropius, Breuer, and George Howe’s later work. They trace with originality and insight the evolution of his style from a more orthodox modernism to a signature of warm-toned wood and masonry, unsentimental domesticity expressed as scaled-down monumentality, and site-specific solutions.

Shaped with a verbal precision not unlike the clarity of Kahn’s Beaux-Arts-inspired floor plans, the core of the book analyzes each house by addressing client relations, budget, parti, revisions, materials, structure, spatial variety, and details. Pictorial material, drawn primarily from the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, is especially strong and provides opportunity for the reader to explore each house in depth. In the chapter on the Jesse and Ruth Oser House (1940–1942) in Elkins Park, PA, for example, period photographs, floor plans, a cutaway perspective from the August 1945 *Architectural Forum*, a perspective sketch by the architect, and new photographs by Matt Wargo, whose remarkable images seem to reveal an additional layer of architectural truth, accompany the text.

A Kahn house is best experienced first hand. When the Margaret Esherick House—described by Vincent Scully as “a brimming chalice of light”—was on the market last year many appreciative visitors made the pilgrimage to Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia. For all other times, *The Houses of Louis Kahn* is unparalleled.

—PAUL GLASSMAN

FIRE ISLAND MODERNIST, HORACE GIFFORD AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF SEDUCTION

By *Christopher Bascom Rawlins*
Foreword by *Alastair Gordon*

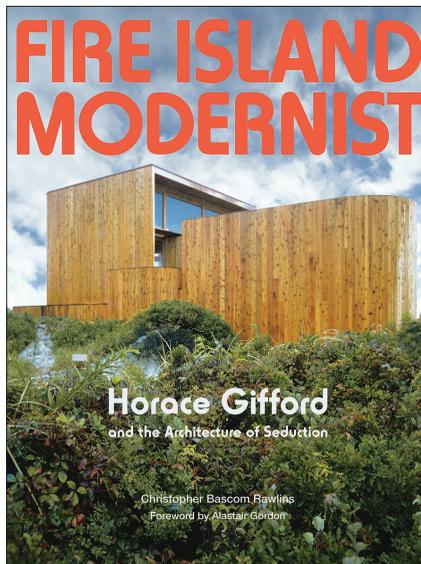
Metropolis Press/Gordon de Vries Studio, 2013
204 pages; 140 color + 100 b/w illustrations
\$60.00 hardcover

In 1948 the real estate developer William Zeckendorf asked his right hand man to find “the greatest architect that no one has ever heard of” to come work for him. After months of searching the man recommended that Zeckendorf hire I.M. Pei. Pei worked for Zeckendorf for seven years before establishing his own firm in 1955. The rest of I.M. Pei’s storied career is a history that is still being written.

Horace Gifford is the greatest architect you never heard of, until now.

Christopher Rawlins shines a bright light, and sympathetic eye, on the life of the architect and the culture that gave rise to his work. Horace Gifford (1932–1992) was prolific during his all-too-short career and enjoyed the support of the wealthy, gay community he helped create. He designed and built over 60 houses on Fire Island, most of those in Fire Island Pines. In the 1960s and 1970s, Fire Island Pines was a safe haven for gay men to relax and recharge away from Manhattan. That the Pines has remained a freewheeling enclave of gay culture with a reputation for sophisticated architecture is a testament, in part, to Gifford’s enduring presence in the community.

Rawlins book, full of gorgeous photographs and drawings, illustrates Kahn’s influence on Gifford. His understanding of servant and served spaces, and monumental form is beautifully documented. Rawlins also demonstrates the influence of Paul Rudolph and Frank Lloyd Wright regarding concepts of structural clarity, dynamism and openness. What Gifford brings to the dialogue is intimate and cultural in its understanding of



his clients and the implications for his work. His buildings have a formal presence that belies their modest scale, yet they sit delicately and openly on the sands of Fire Island.

Gifford’s work captures the value, and the values, of the Pines. Structurally dynamic, spatially complex, clearly organized and fluid, his influences are clear, but the voice is all his own. Gifford’s deft understanding of the place manifests specifically in the organization of the houses, the use of modest materials, his use of light and the framing of the landscape. As a result his work also serves as a reminder that architecture makes complementary relationships of materials, spaces and places. And that it can be serious, sustainable and fun at the same time.

Salinger asked if we could grow-up, retain our optimism and not be considered naïve. Given that Rawlins book is as much social commentary as it is biography and architectural history, it asks questions regarding culture while explaining the cultural influences on the architect: can you understand and accept gay culture? Can you see the unique beauty in this culture? Can you see aspirations in the architecture? Can you do it while it evolves, on its own terms? Given this beautiful and thoughtful book, I remain optimistic.

—JAMES CRISPINO

AFTER YOU LEFT/THEY TOOK IT APART: DEMOLISHED PAUL RUDOLPH HOUSES

By *Chris Mottalini*

Columbia College/Chicago Press, 2013

75 pages; 44 color images

\$50.00 hardcover

“Job of a lifetime” is a perfectly reasonable way to put it. In 2007, an assignment from the Paul Rudolph Foundation forever changed photographer Chris Mottalini. The foundation asked Mottalini to photograph the Micheels House in Westport, CT, after all efforts to save the 35-year-old building had been exhausted. Affected by Rudolph’s creation palpably, the gig concretized Mottalini’s focus on architecture as his subject matter, as well as his formal perspective as an artist.

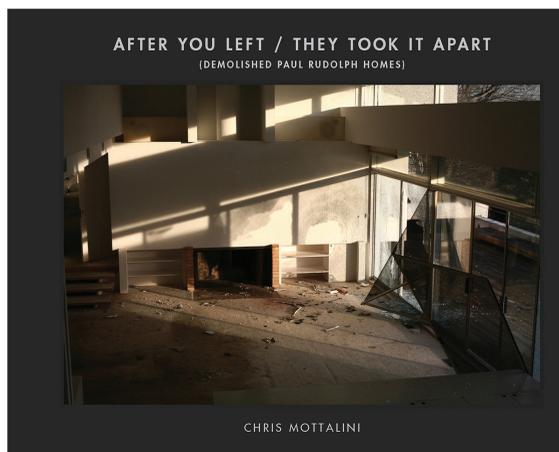
After You Left/They Took It Apart culminates Mottalini’s work since the Micheels shoot. Although the photographer has shot dozens of Rudolph-designed buildings, the new book assembles photo series of only the three he captured immediately prior to destruction. In addition to the Westport residence, they include the 1956 Cerrito House in Watch Hill, RI, and Ralph Twitchell’s home in Siesta Key, FL, on which a young Rudolph worked before attending Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1941. Mottalini calls the publication “a sort of photographic elegy, a type of obituary.”

Multiple obituaries, really: These photographs offer remembrance from multiple points of view. Awaiting demolition, the homes are furnished just enough to evoke the lives that were lived within. They are stripped just enough, too, to reveal intents that might have been long covered by decorating. Rudolph’s evolving command of form and light are on display, as is his conditional blurring of outdoors and within.

Neither perspective is particularly romanticized. Although Mottalini calls himself a nostalgic person, he shot these houses without a tripod, under inconsistent conditions. Unflattering portrayals—not just of bastard wallpaper or a bowed beam, but products of Rudolph’s hand, like a wan awning—made

the final cut for the book. And they are certainly not retrofitted in sepia. “The feeling of impending destruction and loss was everywhere and I just tried to capture it,” Mottalini observes. “That said, this project is far from lacking sentimentality.”

The visual ambivalence of Mottalini’s documentary finds its match in an introduction by former *Dwell* editor Allison Arieff. The essay cogently describes the difficulty of preserving modernist buildings with-



out advocating their unanimous saving. Arieff even pokes at the materiality that unfolds in the following pages. On the other hand, the book concludes with a conversation between Charlie and Marlene Cerrito, whose praise of their eponymous childhood home counters someone else’s less gracious assessment of Rudolph’s skill. Yet the transcript asks as many questions as it tries to lay to rest; the siblings equate the subversive house with their out-of-place ethnicity, for example.

“I set out to preserve those homes the only way I could, by taking pictures of them,” Mottalini says. By inviting readers to interpret these works formally and culturally, and as both achievements and dilemmas, *After You Left* preserves history with surprising nuance.

—DAVID SOKOL