

“Selling” The Modern House

Through text and images, the professional and popular press communicated the lifestyle advantages offered by the modern house. They depicted an environment in which personal fulfillment and, in a larger sense, the rising postwar American standard of living was possible. These publications presented the house as a total package comprised of its architecture, furnishings – and most evocatively – views of its inhabitants enjoying their home. The advertisements were crucial in demonstrating the connection between building products and techniques and the proffered lifestyle.

In order to better understand the promotion of the modern house through the press, we reviewed a wide range of journals. The list included professional and popular journals; among those reviewed were *The Architectural Record*, *Progressive Architecture*, *House and Home*, *House Beautiful*, *Sunset* and *Popular Science*. We focused on advertisements that illustrated the modern house with particular attention to examples in California. The presentation of the houses and the manufactured product – which was the prime subject of the ads – varied depending on the journal audiences, and if these had a national or local distribution. Despite these variations, we were able to detect a number of trends.

The American public responded favorably to the modern house only gradually and selectively. During and immediately after World War II, the appeal of the modern house rested on two central goals: to brighten the interior by introducing more natural light, and to make rooms less cluttered and feel more spacious. By midcentury, a purer vision of the modern house was presented to the public; it incorporated new building systems employing steel and other industrial materials previously not used in residential construction. In response to southern California’s mild climate, sliding glass doors became a standard feature of the modern house; these allowed the living space to expand outdoors to patios that often included a pool and other attributes of leisure.

Through the optimistic filter of American advertising one can detect the social changes of the 1960s. The impact of the youth movement – visualized in graphics and text – changed the appearance of the advertisements. Contemporary interest in the social and environmental dimensions of architecture was repackaged for the American: conventional products were presented in a global context, and appliances and other devices for the home were produced and advertised in naturalistic colors – golds and greens were particularly popular.

By the opening years of the 1970s, the commitment to the environment assumed a greater degree of seriousness with products designed to make efficient use of natural resources appearing on the pages of the popular press. This is also the period when postmodernism was prominently featured in the press; its espousal of vernacular and historic architecture influenced the editorial choices made by the journals, and likewise the imagery used in the advertisements. By the mid-1970s, the public’s acceptance of the modern house as the normative standard of contemporary living, could, in large part, be credited to its effective promotion in the American press.