Exhibition

AN EVERYDAY MODERNISM: THE HOUSES OF WILLIAM WURSTER
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
16 November 1995–11 February 1996

During his lifetime the California architect William Wilson Wurster had a major impact on architectural practice and education. From the late twenties until well into the fifties, his understated residential architecture, the basis of what came to be called the Bay Region style, defined a uniquely Californian way of life. Wurster also influenced architectural education, first as dean of the School of Architecture at MIT then as the founder and dean of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley. However, soon after his death in 1973, his reputation began to fade. Today, he is a footnote, a minor figure whose name rarely appears in architectural histories. This comprehensive exhibition, mounted in 1995, the centenary of Wurster's birth, does an excellent job of reestablishing his historical importance, both by illuminating his own achievements and by situating them within the broader contexts of Modernist debates, California regionalism, and the evolution of the American house. Initiated by Paolo Polledri, former curator of architecture and design, the exhibition was organized and designed by guest curator Marc Treib with Dorothée Imbert. Treib also edited the accompanying collection of essays.

Exhibiting Wurster's work poses multiple curatorial challenges. In many ways, he is an unlikely subject for a monographic exhibition. Almost none of the buildings he designed over the course of his long career possess the easily recognizable "signature style" or "curb appeal" that currently define architectural identity, either in the elite world of the art museum or the popular forum of the shelter magazine. Modest and restrained, they exist somewhere in the ambiguous territory between high art and ordinary life. Wurster was notable for his ability to design houses that fit into their environment so perfectly that they hardly seem authored. Free of stylistic insistence, they appear to be generated solely by the circumstances of site, climate, and the client's needs and budget. At first glance, they are difficult to distinguish from their surroundings, whether vernacular farmhouses, beach shacks, townhouses, or suburban ranchettes. This reflects Wurster's rejection of formal ideologies. Considering style a distraction, he adopted simplified interpretations of traditional, vernacular, and Modernist modes as circumstances demanded. His formal restraint prompted a visitor to one of his houses to inquire, "So where is the architecture?"

Wurster would have answered: "Architecture is not a goal. Architecture is for life and pleasure and work and for people. The picture frame and not the picture." However, despite his own disavowals, Wurster's appropriate and livable dwellings are far more intentional and artful than they initially appear. His houses are best understood through occupation rather than representation, their livability a quality that unfolds over time. Based on experiential rather than visual considerations, their best features often elude the camera. Wurster does not fit the mold of the heroic individual creator particularly well, either. Collaboration constituted a fundamental element of his career. His close associations with landscape architect Thomas Church; his wife, the planner and housing expert Catherine Bauer; his partners Theodore Bernardi and Donn Emmons; and even his long-time clients make it difficult to define the boundaries of his work.

Acknowledging these inherent difficulties, the curators assembled a multiplicity of material that succeeded surprisingly well in conveying the content and context of Wurster's work. The show documented fifty-two houses and housing projects, organized around themes such as patterns of life, building techniques, the California environment, and regionalism and Modernism. Original black and white photographs by Roger Sturtevant, another of Wurster's close associates, provided the primary documentation, supplemented by new color photographs and a broad range of drawings, plans, and models. These were juxtaposed with less conventional representations: family snapshots, Christmas cards, letters to and from clients, and, most innovative, a series of interpretive photographs commissioned by the museum. Five local photographers used Wurster's buildings to explore issues of space and time, occupation, and personalization, contributing new layers of meaning to them. To establish the larger professional and historical context, the curators interwove photographs of other contemporary houses throughout the exhibit. Finding Royal Barry Wills's New England saltbox, Schindler's Lovell beach house, or Gropius's Lincoln house next to Wurster's work prompted almost effortless comparisons. Captions with descriptions from journals of the period added other layers of interpretation.

During his lifetime, Wurster was regarded as a sensitive but straightforward regionalist. In 1947, Lewis Mumford defended his work against hard-line modernists as a "native and humane form of Modernism." While stopping short of a fully postmodern rereading, the exhibition and catalogue essays suggest that Wurster's architecture is far more "complex and contradictory" than Mumford imagined. Their descriptions of Wurster's work emphasize paired oppositions: "large small, expensive but cheap, untypically typical, deceptively simple, open closed, formal yet informal, elegant yet casual." Dan Gregory points out the "contradictory nature that many of his best houses express." Even his Modernism is ambiguous: David Gebhard claims that Wurster was both a "soft Modernist" and a "soft traditionalist." Marc Treib emphasizes Wurster's personal and professional connections with Alvar Aalto. More visibly

deux périodes, la doctrine de la restauration paraît avoir changé. Dans les années 1950, prévalait la doctrine de l'unité de style qui privilégiait telle ou telle période de l'histoire du monument. Aujourd'hui s'impose la doctrine de la lisibilité des vies successives du monument. A une vision unique et parfois réductrice a succédé une conception pluraliste et parfois confuse de l'histoire des monuments."

[98] Foucart, "Restauration" (see n. 16), 7–9: "Au rêve dix-neuvièmiste de l'unité de style avait succédé celui, vingtièmiste, du monument premier. Que de crimes d'amour l'on commit et pour l'un et pour l'autre."

[99] In this proposal I partially support James Beck, "Toward a Bill of Rights for a Work of Art," *Source* 10 (1991): 5–6.

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Figure 36. C. Enlart

Installation view of the exhibition *An Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 16 November–11 February 1996. Photograph: © Ben Blackwell.

contradictory than Wurster, Aalto was also pigeonholed as a regionalist and humanist until Robert Venturi and Dimitri Porphyrios claimed him as an exponent of the postmodern values of both/and. Contradiction may also be Wurster's most salient characteristic. The same qualities that Modernists abhorred—Wurster's impurity and ambiguity—now look like the postmodern virtues of multivalence and hybridity.

One intriguing duality brought out by the exhibition is Wurster's ability to be simultaneously conservative and innovative. His approach to housing was shaped by experience rather than experimentation, repetition rather than originality. Believing that no job was too small, he designed several hundred houses. Clients often returned for second, third, or fourth houses, as well as for garages, remodeling, and additions. The exhibition documents a wide range of houses, including weekend retreats, suburban villas, elegant townhouses, and tract house prototypes as well as multiunit types such as public housing projects and mass-produced defense units. Collectively, they reveal a consistent set of design considerations: spaces for indoor-outdoor living; siting attuned to topography, climate, and view; functional planning based on the client's living patterns, and pared-down detailing. In house after house, Wurster returned to these themes, transforming them in multiple ways. Rather than inventing new ways of life, he adjusted, improved, and expanded the possibilities of existing concepts of dwelling and domesticity. Using his detailed knowledge of ordinary living patterns and building techniques, he reconfigured everyday experience from the inside out.

Modernist open plans never interested Wurster, who pursued other forms of openness. He constantly and often brilliantly reworked the optimum arrangement of rooms on a site. Early in his career, encouraged by a circle of wealthy families seeking "inconspicuous consumption," he designed a series of weekend houses that became landmarks of informal California living. The clients' preference for relaxed outdoor living gave him the freedom to redefine conventional plans. In the Gregory Farmhouse, inspired by nineteenth-century ranchos, he lined up the rooms to open onto an outdoor gallery around a walled courtyard. At Pasatiempo, he broke the Butler house into four separate pavilions, then connected them with outdoor corridors and a living porch. In another courtyard house, the rooms open onto a broad glazed corridor lined with bookshelves. The demands of low-budget houses spurred other inventions. To make the tiny Timby house seem larger, Wurster linked the bedroom and living wings with a wide, glassed-in gallery, opening it up to outdoor access and expansive views. This was a variant of his well-known "room without a name," a centrally located but ambiguous space that could assume different identities depending on the season, the time of day, or the family's changing needs.

Wurster's approach to materials was equally paradoxical, using ordinary material in ways that were often extraordinary. On the one hand, he relied on proven methods and inexpensive and readily available materials, condemning the use of new systems of construction for their own sake. Frank Lloyd Wright called him "Redwood Bill" and "a shack architect," but his careful and exacting use of wood framing, locally milled redwood, and plywood sheathing often transcended their mundane origins. This generated a correspondingly paradoxical aesthetic of poverty, celebrated in apocryphal stories that quote Catherine Bauer, for example, as saying, "It doesn't matter how much Bill can spend on a house, it will always look cheap." On the other hand, when the situation demanded it, he was adventurous. To combat the intense heat of California's Central Valley, he revived vernacular techniques, building adobe walls two feet thick. When Saxton Pope requested a maintenance-free house, he produced a startlingly radical design of concrete blocks, corrugated metal siding, and industrial chimneys.

His marriage (in 1940) to Catherine Bauer expanded Wurster's involvement with political and social issues. He took on large-scale projects, constructing huge tracts of defense housing in Vallejo and Sacramento, and enrolled in MIT's planning program. The institute's invitation to become dean of its architecture school derailed his plans, but Wurster continued to work at both community and individual scales. Judging from the material presented in the exhibition, the richness and diversity of Wurster's single-family houses does not translate into multifamily housing. While thoughtfully planned, projects such as Valencia Gardens, a public housing project in San Francisco, suggest that, expanded in scale, Wurster's virtues become defects; his simplicity appears reductive and his restraint, austere. Photographer John Harding's wide-angle views of the courtyards exaggerate their emptiness, a striking contrast to the smiling families the architects had envisioned occupying them fifty years earlier.

Wurster's insistence on local knowledge was both admired and disparaged. At a

symposium held in 1948 at the Museum of Modern Art, Marcel Breuer condemned Wurster's sensitivity to local materials and the California landscape as romantic and retrogressive. In many respects, Wurster's attentiveness to the dictates of local conditions was deeply conservative in a more positive sense. He selected materials, sited houses, and developed plans to accommodate environmental nuances in an almost vernacular manner. His houses responded to the climate, with its long dry season; to its local variations (too little sun in foggy San Francisco and too much in the Central Valley), and to more subtle constraints such as hilly terrain, the direction of the wind, or the location of a grove of trees. However, Wurster also felt that California's social climate encouraged experimentation. The same set of natural considerations led him to invent a series of indoor-outdoor rooms that, in retrospect, seem as daring as (and far more functional than) those of Schindler, Neutra, or Wright. The exhibition's succession of kitchen caves, living porches, screened verandahs, courtyards, solariums, and galleries defined a full range of conditions between building and landscape, enclosure and exposure. Several projects with Thomas Church blur the differences between indoors and outdoors even further, as Dorothée Imbert shows, producing seamless environments, uninterrupted confluences of building, interior open space, and natural surroundings.

Such dichotomies defy the designated polarities of regionalism and Modernism, leading Marc Treib to propose that Wurster, along with Harwell Hamilton Harris, O'Neil Ford, and Pietro Belluschi, was actually a "regional Modernist," influenced equally by Modernist aesthetics and local conditions. Wurster had difficulties fitting himself into ideological definitions of regionalism, with their often patriotic and moralistic overtones. Instead, he preferred to emphasize specificity: "I am a regionalist to the extent that I believe all buildings are on a specific site, subject to the customs and norms of that site."

Wurster's complex relationship to regionalism is only one of many issues demonstrating the difficulty of accommodating his work within existing architectural and historical categories. The exhibition managed to communicate something of these difficulties without itself being difficult. The curators presented a tremendous amount of information with clarity and intelligence. Although the texts were instructive, the visual material carried the weight of interpretation, making the exhibition painlessly didactic. The density and variety of documentation allowed different levels of engagement, so that both casual viewers and architectural experts could leave satisfied. The installation employed straightforward means to encourage these multiple readings, alluding to without reproducing Wurster's palette. Recycled plywood panels (somewhat rougher than Wurster would have liked), with occasional window cutouts, and translucent corrugated fiberglass established a human texture and domestic scale inside the museum's large white gallery space. While certain to renew interest in Wurster, the exhibition, through its incorporation of broader themes, may also encourage further reconsideration of the historical and architectural dimensions of American residential design and its regional variations.

Although the catalogue is attractive and informative, it is not as successful as the exhibition in opening up Wurster's work to reexamination. In part, this can be attributed to the advantages of the exhibition format. The collage method, based on adjacency rather than argument, is far more suggestive than the highly restricted form of the essay. The juxtaposition of multiple images sets up spatial relationships that encourage interaction and almost subliminal connections. Although most of the catalogue essays implicitly or explicitly point out the limits of existing modes of historical interpretation in elucidating Wurster's work, none of the authors redefined his or her own approaches enough to provide real alternatives. Marc Treib's comprehensive essay, "The Feeling of Function," goes furthest in questioning Modernist historiography. Greg Heis's essay, "Building Design as Social Art," looks at Wurster's attempts to solve large-scale housing problems through prototypes and experiments in mass production. Gwendolyn Wright explores Wurster's partnership with Catherine Bauer, demonstrating the professional significance of personal relationships. Dorothée Imbert's essay on Thomas Church emphasizes the formative role the landscape architect played in Wurster's career. Daniel Gregory's detailed account of the design and construction of the Gregory Farmhouse, commissioned by his grandmother Sadie, reveals the close connections between Wurster and his clients. David Gebhard surveys Wurster's California contemporaries, both traditionalist and Modernist. Richard Peters and Caitlin King Lempre contribute a biographical essay and Alan Michelson introduces Wurster's partners Bernardi and Emmons. Three short essays by Wurster, a bibliography, and a chronology complete the volume.

— Margaret Crawford
Southern California Institute of Architecture

Publication related to the exhibition:
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