

Icon & Anonymity (Santa Barbara, 19 May 12)

University of California, Santa Barbara, May 19, 2012

Deadline: Oct 30, 2011

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ICON AND ANONYMITY: WHAT IS CALIFORNIAN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY?

Call for Participants

During Winter and Spring quarter 2012, the Art, Design, and Architecture Museum (ADAM) at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) will exhibit "Carefree California: Cliff May and the Romance of the Ranch House". This first ever exhibition dedicated to the oeuvre of Californian architect Cliff May draws from the archive housed at UCSB and offers a perfect opportunity to think more generally about the teaching of Californian architectural history. Through open, collegial round-table discussions, the conference "Icon and Anonymity" will ask: Is there a specifically Californian history of architecture, and what do we teach when we offer instruction in it?

What, for example, do Cliff May's ubiquitous ranch houses represent? Fine architecture, material culture, or mere images of a mythic frontier? How do we present the contradiction that they allowed for a life closer to nature by contributing to processes of suburbanization? Are they examples of modern architecture gone regional, or of modernized vernacular buildings, or of yet another Californian revival style?

Comparable questions and issues obviously arise in the context of Californian architectural history at large. In histories of California, descriptions of buildings often accompany accounts of the colonization efforts of the Spanish Crown and the creation of modern California after the state became part of the U.S. in 1850, as though architecture's key purpose was strategic. On the one hand, California has contributed iconic modernist buildings to canonical histories of architecture, but many current discourses on Californian architecture are shifting the focus to a built environment made up of mass housing, "anonymous" edifices, and subsidiary buildings. In recent decades, indeed, the history of Californian architecture has undergone a remarkable widening of its subject matter. Shifting academic foci of inquiries have resulted in lively discussions of architectural history as an aperture onto issues of politics, economics, social policies, ethnicity, cultural history, social justice, technology, preservation, regionalism, and sustainability. Such methodological shifts have enhanced the scope of the academic discipline of architectural history, but they also create complications.

This conference will navigate the competing demands on the history of architecture in the Californian context. Can architectural historians simultaneously serve the needs of preservationists, practicing architects and designers, students of art history, and general education curricula? Should the history of architecture become a sub-discipline of cultural studies, material studies, cul-

tural geography, or studio design? What are the subject-specific questions, methodologies, and terminology that define architectural history as a discipline in its own right? Do architectural historians still care about architectural quality, style, taste and affect—for a long time the criteria to determine whether a design merited our discipline’s attention? Can discussions about the “built environment” elicit enthusiasm, critical evaluation, and qualitative judgment among students comparable to that purportedly inspired by “great buildings” and their “starchitects” (Michael Lewis)?

The Department of the History of Art & Architecture and the Art, Design, and Architecture Museum, both at UCSB, will host “Icon and Anonymity” as a day-long conference dedicated to debating disciplinary questions. The conference includes a tour of the Cliff May exhibition, lunch-time discussion groups, and a public roundtable talk and open discussion. The event will be opened and closed by Frances Anderton, host of “DnA: Design and Architecture”, a monthly radio show on KCRW and KCRW.com, and L.A. Editor for Dwell Magazine, and Wim de Wit, Head of the Department of Architecture & Contemporary Art at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

Applications to participate in the exhibition tour and lunch-time discussion groups are cordially invited from scholars, professionals, and graduate students teaching, researching, and engaging with architectural history in universities, city colleges, preservation foundations, public history and environmental groups, real estate, museums, architecture firms, and other organizations and initiatives concerned with Californian architecture.

Please send a brief statement (no more than one page) of your interest in Californian architectural history and a short CV (maximum one page) to Prof. Volker M. Welter, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, University of California at Santa Barbara (welter@arthistory.ucsb.edu) and Prof. Simon Sadler, Design Program, University of California at Davis (sjsadler@ucdavis.edu) with the subject heading “Icon and Anonymity: Call for Participants.”

Reference:

CFP: Icon & Anonymity (Santa Barbara, 19 May 12). In: ArtHist.net, Aug 31, 2011 (accessed Apr 17, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/1724>>.