

## Ideas connect in AIC's 'Past Forward'

New Modern Wing permanent exhibit tells story of design



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*Cityscapes*

There are old favorites, like Daniel Burnham's sweeping vision for Chicago. And there are unexpected gems, like the glossy prefab kitchen and bathroom units of a French architect intent on making once-elite ski resorts affordable to the masses.

These are among the eye-catching objects in the Art Institute of Chicago's new installation of its permanent architecture and design collection. It is the most extensive display the museum has ever mounted of its vast holdings in these areas. But the objects alone aren't what makes the show worth seeing.

Rather, it's the skill with which the pieces are framed within a larger narrative of how architecture and design have shaped — and continue to shape — how we live. While there are some lapses in that story, the exhibition, titled "Past Forward: Architecture and Design at the Art Institute," is, for the most part, freshly and intelligently told.

Throughout, a major theme is that architecture and design are idea-driven fields engaged in the making of experimental visions, not just the tangible reality of a brick bungalow or a tubular steel chair. That

cerebral view will likely provoke a world-weary dismissal from those who have witnessed the costs, both human and financial, of designers' failed visions. Think demolished public housing projects. But there is no denying the revolutionary, often uplifting impact that architecture and design have made during the past nearly 120 years.

The show, to its credit, explores both sides of this coin.

Organized by Zoe Ryan, the museum's chief architecture and design curator, "Past Forward" occupies most of the architecture and design galleries in the museum's Renzo Piano-designed Modern Wing. (The rest of those galleries will be devoted to temporary shows).

As in the rest of the Modern Wing, the displayed material — drawings, models, pieces of furniture, posters, videos and more — covers the period from 1900 to the present. It is the first time, Ryan said, that the museum has jointly exhibited its holdings of modern and contemporary architecture and design. They number an estimated 250,000 objects.

But this is a different sort of permanent installation. Some of the show's contents, especially light-sensitive architectural drawings and textiles, must only be displayed for a few months at a time to prevent fading. So go now if you want see a drawing like Ludwig Hilberseimer's chillingly seductive 1924 vision of a

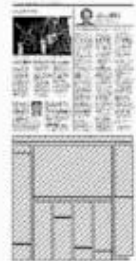
city whose residents live in high-rises and work in factories directly below.

The installation — designed by Julia Di Castri, who teaches at the University of Illinois at Chicago's architecture school — neatly accommodates the need for the exhibition's ever-changing contents. In the bargain, it underscores architecture's unique capacity to frame space and gives visitors multiple paths through the show.

Diagonally arranged, 12-foot-high walls create a compelling tension with the Modern Wing's right-angled geometry and shape a series of roomlike spaces that contain the show's thematic sections. Openings in the walls create alluring, down-the-alley views that showcase prime exhibit material, like a multicolored, stenciled wall covering by Chicago architect Louis Sullivan.

The best of the sections make intriguing connections among their fields and the world at large. The one on workplaces, for example, demonstrates how the expansive, column-free interiors of innovative structures like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's 1955 Inland Steel Building in Chicago pushed designers to create lighter, more flexible office environments. Unfortunately, one such effort flopped, leading the lucid wall text notes, to "what we now know as the ubiquitous and dull cubicle."

A more satisfying outcome can be seen in the



aforementioned prefab kitchen and bath units, which French architect Charlotte Perriand designed in the 1970s for the Les Arcs ski resort in the French Alps. The fiberglass units were plugged into small apartments, holding down costs and helping to democratize a previously exclusive leisure activity.

"Past Forward" also succeeds at pulling back the curtain on how architects transform their concepts into material reality, a process nicely illustrated by architect David Adjaye's drawings and mock-up models for his National Museum of African American History and Culture. And we see design's importance in shaping a city's image, evident in the artfully simple posters that the modernist graphic designer John Massey did in 1966 to promote Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan.

Still, there are weaknesses, and they are partly rooted in the reality that curators are like card players — they have to play the hand they're dealt.

The Art Institute's architecture and design holdings, as extensive as they are, are not all-encompassing, and that leads to some frustrating gaps. The section on contemporary museum design, for example, has nothing to say about the powerfully sculpted, digitally enabled museums of Frank Gehry, whose Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, dazzled the world and changed the course of museum design when it opened 20 years ago.

Even when the collection is strong, it is not always well-handled. The show's treatment of postmodernism is fragmented and unfocused. Stanley Tigerman's iconic "Titanic" collage, which portrays Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall sinking into Lake Michigan, appears in one section while some of the postmodern "Late Entries" to the Chicago Tribune Tower competition of 1922 are in another. Given the current resurgence of interest in postmodernism, the show's

inability to draw together these important pieces is a disappointment.

Some of the design objects on display seem a little kooky, despite their provocative contemporary relevance. A huggable, toylike version of a mushroom cloud? A bench, shaped like a cow's torso, which reminds us of the animal origins of leather furniture? Such designs bring to mind Mies' famous line: "I don't want to be interesting; I want to be good."

It is far more moving to see one of the molded leg splints that California designers Charles and Ray Eames developed for wounded soldiers during World War II. The splint was a significant step toward the sculptural molded plywood furniture that the Eameses designed after the war. Architecture and design are at their best, this example suggests, when ideas aren't conceived for their own sake but to enrich and elevate human experience.

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A model of the Inland Steel Building, right, is on display in "Past Forward: Architecture and Design at the [Art Institute](#)."