While this is a wonderful text that tells the story of a few well-known business women, Enterprising Women appears to have left out women that were not of a certain status or culture. While the book concentrates on Caucasian and African-American women, very few other minority women are mentioned, and no physically disabled women, no women with risqué backgrounds, and no lesbian, bisexual, or transgender business women are mentioned as part of the American entrepreneurial story. Some examples of unconventional women who could have been profiled but were not include sisters Ada and Minna Everleigh, who were high-class brothel owners who retired with an estimated one-million dollars, or lesbian Rosie O'Donnell, an entrepreneur with her own TV show and magazine.

Regardless of who was left out, the book does a wonderful job of exposing readers to the unique history of entrepreneurial women in American business past and present. Enterprising Women is highly recommendable for undergraduates and those studying American business, business culture and women’s history.

FORM FOLLOWS LIBIDO
Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture.

by Sylvia Lavin

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004
x+182pp. Illustrations, Photographs, Notes, and Index
$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-262-12268-5.

Reviewed for PAS/APAL by Peder Anker, University of Oslo

“[Richard] Neutra houses were pleasure palaces, and some of them had a G spot,” Sylvia Lavin argues in a fascinating book about the famous architect, Form Follows Libido (95). Instead of analyzing Neutra’s buildings in view of competing modernists, she understands them in the context of the psychoanalytic culture of the pleasure in which Neutra and his clients participated.

Lavin’s point of departure is the importance of Sigmund Freud’s psychology in understanding Neutra’s architecture. In this, she follows a recent trend among architectural historians by discussing the relevance of the history of science to design. Anthologies such as Architecture of Science, edited by Peter Galison and Emily Thompson (1999), as well as Architecture and the Sciences, edited by Antoine Picon and Alessandra Ponte (2003), have documented a rich field of mutual inspirations between the scientists and practicing architects. Lavin’s book illustrates how this broadening of focus among historians of architecture can provide novel perspectives on designers and their work.
The problem with existing interpretations of Neutra, Lavin argues, is that he is understood in the context of other modernist architects and not in view of his writings or the culture in which he practiced. As a consequence Neutra has become “both a canonic figure in the history of modernism and an unknown architect obscured by his own historiography” (11). This is a fair criticism: there are hardly any in-depth studies based on archival sources of his buildings, with the possible exception, perhaps, of Thomas S. Hines’s (1982) celebratory biography.

“Richard Neutra was a founder of environmental design,” Lavin claims in her opening line (3). It is an ironic proclamation, as there is little about his architecture that resembles the past or current work of ecological designers. What Lavin suggests is that one needs to broaden the notion of what constitutes the “environment” to include spaces construed for the betterment of human psychology as well as landscape ecology. Neutra’s agenda was to create a psychologically healthy environment inside buildings and connect them with the surroundings. He fashioned himself in the image of a therapist serving the unconscious environmental needs of his clients by creating architectural spaces of delight and pleasure.

Neutra’s preoccupation with psychoanalysis has hardly been noted by historians, even though he knew Freud himself through his friendship with his son Ernst (who also became an architect). Born in 1892, Neutra was a native Viennese who spent his formative years in the fin-de-siècle city of intellectuals spellbound by the famous psychologist. In the 1930s Neutra’s interest in psychoanalysis turned towards environmental psychology, when he came to believe that buildings were an attempt to return to the mother’s womb.

A house could be of therapy to a client in therapeutic need, Neutra thought. A good portion of the book focuses on a series of buildings which Lavin understands in view of the client’s psychological needs and the architect’s response to them. Neutra deliberately modeled his role as an architect for domestic clients on the analyst working with neurotic patients. He wanted, Lavin shows, his clients to think of him as a doctor with whom they could have emotional intimacy, something he deemed important in order to construe an architectural space of therapeutic quality.

Understanding a building in terms of a return to the mother’s womb implied a dismantling of conventional barriers of being in outside and inside environments. By breaking down this demarcation, Neutra sought to help the client in overcoming his or her birth-trauma. His solution was to let some of the building’s structure stick out as “spider legs,” a technique which in effect became his architectural trademark. Lavin argues that “the spider legs create what might be called an intermediary zone, a kind of birth canal that mediates the passage from inside to outside.” At the same time they deal with the
inherent fear of spiders since the legs “minimize this anxiety by functioning as architectural umbilical cords” (63). His ultimate goal with the spider legs was to connect the outer landscape with our inner landscape of intimate organic events. This is surely an original and refreshing reading of Neutra, and Lavin supports her interpretation with a rich body of textual, archival, and circumstantial evidence.

Neutra practiced in the social and cultural context of bohemianism that was sweeping California in the 1950s, and many of his clients were experimenting with various sorts of therapeutic activities that had little or nothing to do with Freudian psychology. One such therapy was the “orgone box” cure recommended by the psychologist William Reich. He established a laboratory in which one could liberate one’s “orgone” (from “orgasm” and “organism”) by sitting in a box designed especially for this purpose. The personal effect was improvement of health, better sex, and happiness, while the landscape and the ecosystem allegedly could benefit from the orgone energy in the form of a more temperate climate. Neutra’s famous Chuey house was designed as a salon for orgone box users, and his Survival through Design, published in 1954, was inspired by Reich. Lavin’s point is not to document an architect’s eccentricities, but instead to place Neutra in a culture in which the pursuit of emotional and physical happiness became an architectural commodity. Unlike his predecessors, Neutra pursued a moody architecture that differs from the rationalist agenda of many of his modernist colleagues.

This book is an original and well-argued piece of scholarship. As with all good books, the reader is left with a desire to know more: more about Neutra’s Vienna, more about the environmentalists, therapists, and lifestyle experts he engaged with, more about his clients, and more about the architectural and scientific debates of the period. A total of 144 pages of text and images is just too little when one is working with such remarkable material. This is not to say that the book is not a valuable contribution to architectural history worth both time and attention.

References Cited

