

REVIEWS

Designing Detroit: Wirt Rowland and the Rise of Modern American Architecture

By Michael G. Smith

(Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2017. Pp. xii, 498. Illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.99.)

Because Detroit's role in the history of twentieth-century architecture has largely been overshadowed by Chicago and its abundance of architect heroes, individuals like Wirt Rowland—a creative local designer who transformed the city's skyline in the pre-Depression era—remain generally unknown and unappreciated. The details of Rowland's life and career are limited; the best source of information to this point has been a slim exhibition catalog published by a local historical society. Michael G. Smith's *Designing Detroit: Wirt Rowland and the Rise of Modern American Architecture* aims to correct this glaring omission, adding new information to Rowland's story and filling in the many poorly understood periods of the architect's practice.

Smith reviews Rowland's prodigious output of the 1910s-20s, a

period in which he worked for the city's most prominent architectural firms. Beginning with a decade of training under George D. Mason, followed by three years specializing in school design for Malcomson & Higginbotham, Rowland joined Albert Kahn's firm as a designer. Over the next seven years he contributed an impressive stock of quality buildings to Detroit's landscape, including the Detroit Trust Co. Building (1915), the Detroit News Building (1917), and the massive General Motors Building (1922). Kahn's preference for classical forms, however, ran counter to Rowland's more experimental nature, and he left the firm for a lucrative position as head designer at Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. Before the Great Depression halted construction in the early thirties, Rowland had designed

the Penobscot Building (1928) and the extraordinary Union Trust Building (1929), better known by its subsequent name, the Guardian Building, establishing Detroit as a leading center for the Art Deco style. But Rowland, like many other architects, was hit hard by the economic downturn, and after losing his position at Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, he scraped together a living with a small office on his own until his death in 1946.

Rowland's story provides insight into Detroit's "boom" years, and Smith's book alludes to the growth of the city's banking and automobile industries. However, *Designing Detroit* adopts a heroic approach to its subject, overstating Rowland's importance, emphasizing architecture as a purely visual art, and evaluating designs on their ability to achieve beauty. Wirt Rowland was a talented architect and highly regarded in Detroit, to be sure, but he is little-known outside the Midwest. To say he was "a pioneer and one of the most consistently innovating building designers of the twentieth century," whose "innovations influenced iconic buildings throughout the country" and whose designs "placed him among the most experienced and accomplished architects in the world," overstates the case (pp. 2, 117). While one applauds the author's attempt to expose Rowland's work to a wider audience, a more nuanced evaluation would be welcomed.

Smith's focus on the geometric details of Rowland's ornament and

building forms, including extended analyses of his compositional strategies, is fascinating but fails to locate the architect within a changing profession. Rowland practiced in a period when significant advances in building materials and technology, together with new ideas about function, form, and space, led architects to challenge traditional attitudes toward style, design, and decoration; the book minimizes his engagement with these developments. Nevertheless, *Designing Detroit* is thoroughly researched, well-illustrated, and a worthwhile read for anyone interested in Detroit, skyscrapers, or early twentieth-century architecture. Smith sheds light on Rowland's career, and his valuable lists of the architect's selected designs for Malcomson & Higginbotham, Albert Kahn, and Smith, Hinchman & Grylls demonstrate his impact on the city's architecture in the 1920s. It is also visually stunning, offering many color photographs and informative diagrams, which only enriches the text.

Wirt Rowland was among Detroit's most prominent architects for almost two decades. One hopes that *Designing Detroit* will promote further interest in his creative genius and inspire a wider discussion of the intersections of traditional and modern architectural ideas and practices in the interwar period.

DALE ALLEN GYURE is a Professor in the Department of Architecture at Lawrence Technological University.

doi: 10.2979/indimagahist.116.3.05

