The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design

ed. by Clive Edwards. Bloomsbury, December 2015. 3 vol. ill. ISBN 9781472521576 (cl.), $725.

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This new reference is eagerly anticipated across affiliated disciplines, an opportunity to reexamine the indispensable, fundamental topics that inform our understanding of design. What approach to this mammoth task best suits modern researchers and enthusiasts in the information age? Naturally decisions will always be second-guessed; scrutiny is inevitable when vital innovations or noteworthy progenitors are inevitably left on the outside looking in.

In reading over the subject entries — there are almost 1800 — the emphasis on contemporary movements and theory is palpable, and stands out as a worthy facet setting the three-volume set apart from more object-based predecessors such as mainstays like The Design Encyclopedia by Mel Byars from 2004 or Alan Fletcher's Phaidon Design Classics, published in 2006. Here the approach is decidedly different, focusing on a scholarly examination of critical intellectual interest across design fields. This results in an engaging cohesion with contemporary topics like Speculative Design, Cultural Relativism/Cultural Difference, Nonintentional Design, Design for Sustainability, Source Reduction, and User Experience Design.

Of course the set also includes sections on individual designers, objects, and geographical analyses. Over 200 international experts wrote the subject entries, which are generally quite well researched and written with brevity and authority in mind. Write-ups such as Jeanne Van Eeden's wonderful elucidation on Southern African Design combine lively prose with the unifying aim of covering practice while delving into the larger global, political, and ethical

context. Still some readers will be left wondering why certain designers or artifacts didn't make the cut, even with an explanation of the obvious difficulty of the project and certain boundary decisions outlined in the introduction. For instance, architects and engineers were only included if they exerted influence beyond their own sphere. This partially explains why Steve Badanes, Nanda Vigo and Belle Kogan aren't mentioned. But why include Samuel Colt and his firearms and not Leo Fender and his enduring electrical instruments which have left a similarly striking imprint on society? Other questions remain as well: why is the entry on Tom Ford longer than the Ford Motor Company passage? For that matter, why is there no mention of Henry Ford's political views or anti-Semitism? Is this a form of whitewashing? Again, it's natural that decisions on what to (or not to) cover will be scrutinized.

Perhaps as a result of combining so many contributors, occasionally subject entries feel incomplete or perfunctory. The description of Franco Albini, for instance, neglects to mention his influential shelving designs or urban advancements, and cites only an Italian text for further reading while helpful titles in English are available from Ashgate and Princeton Architectural Press. Actually the references and further reading and additional bibliography selections are usually thoughtfully selected, and could prove quite useful. Some features make this scenario unlikely, however, including the small, sanserif typeface and the slightly austere layout, which opts for fewer illustrations and photographs than one would expect, and none in color. This combines for a slightly laborious reading experience, at least in a traditional print format version, unlikely to appeal to the casual reader.

Perhaps some of the choice of black-and-white images reflects the publishing industry's need to protect the bottom line. Clive Edwards even mentions the "realities of permission budgets" in his introduction. There is, however, no explanation for the index, or rather, indices: one mutually exclusive index for each volume, rather than the "comprehensive index" mentioned in Edwards' introduction. This decision, along with the choice not to include the letter range (AE, FN, etc.) on the covers, makes the set quite difficult to navigate. Ford Motor Company, for instance, can be found in all three indices, with no indication (such as bold text) as to whether any of the nine entries are a main entry. This is a truly unfortunate system.

Despite these compositional choices, the work will still be an appropriate acquisition for most libraries that support design fields, especially on the strength of its recontextualized scholarly content.