California Modern: The Architecture of Craig Ellwood by Neil Jackson

He had no professional license, but was named one of the three best architects of 1957 along with Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. He drove a red Ferrari with the license plate VROOM. His succession of wives brought him clients and influenced his designs. He relied on a staff of talented assistants to realize his ideas. If ever there was a product of Hollywood, it was architect Craig Ellwood (1922-1992). A fiction of his own making—even his name was an invention—Ellwood fashioned a career through charm, ambition, and a connoisseurs eye. By the 1950s Ellwood had a thriving practice that infused the Germanic rationalism of Mies van der Rohe with an informal breeziness that was all Southern California. A series of dramatic, open, and elegant houses made him a media star, and interest in him and his work has only increased in recent years. California Modern: The Architecture of Craig Ellwood is the first comprehensive monograph on this prolific, influential, and complex character. Copiously illustrated with contemporary images—including many striking black and white photographs by Julius Shulman—plans, drawings, and specially commissioned new photography, California Modern traces Ellwoods fascinating personal history, provides a critical evaluation of his work, and establishes his importance as a pivotal shaper of the California style.

My Personal Review:
This is an excellent and comprehensive book about Craig Ellwood's life, both professional and personal. It is thoroughly researched, well laid out and fascinating in its detail. In sharp contrast to Rob Davis' review of this book, I have to say that from my point of view as Craig Ellwood's eldest son, Neil Jackson's book presents a very accurate and honest depiction of my father's work and life. There is no "prejudicial attitude" on Jackson's part. While it is true that the words of my father's former employees should be taken with a grain of salt (obviously!), I can attest that much of what they have to say is correct. Not all of it, but they are not totally off-base. Jackson leaves it up to reader to arrive at his or her own conclusions. I also take issue with Davis' assertion that Jackson was "rankled" at Craig Ellwood's lack of a license. To the contrary, Jackson allows the irony of Ellwood's being an "architect" (with quotation marks around the term) to speak for itself: license or no license, his work was significant and
important. Jackson's book is far more accurate than Meredith Clausen's "concise" hatchet job. Jackson actually took the time to get his facts straight. Clausen's "exposé" was riddled with gross errors and based on mis- (and dis-)information, with little discernible attempt to do the research to get it right. Her article was self-serving rubbish. It is clearly Clausen who wrote from a prejudiced attitude, not Jackson. Without an axe to grind or some personal agenda, Jackson provides an honest look at Craig Ellwood the person. The book is impressive for its extensive research, for the balanced presentation of Ellwood's life and body of work, for the depth of information provided and for the choice of illustrations included. My only disappointment was with the cover photograph, which is not the most representative of Ellwood's work. This was the US publisher's choice, however. The UK publication has a much better, more visually pleasing cover. For anyone who wants the most complete and balanced work on Craig Ellwood, this is the book. It is neither a whitewash nor a hatchet job. Rather, it is the best attempt so far to capture and record the spirit of an imperfect, perfectionist designer whose work influenced his associates and American architecture itself for decades.

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