

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

If California is a State of Mind, Design is Its Conscience

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, September 8th, 2011

This is a fairly ordinary encounter with Bill Stern. Lori and I had just moved into a California Spanish revival house built in 1930. Bill, who is a friend, stepped into the entryway, took one look at the fireplace and raised his right finger which means – if you know Bill – there is an anecdote of California design history he is about to impart.

“I’m quite certain,” he said, eyes glinting, head angled forward as if he were sharing a confidence, “that those tiles were commercially produced as part of the Mayan revival movement by Claycraft Potteries on San Fernando Road in the late 1920s. I’m sure I know who has a copy of the catalogue.” The next day, he brought over the catalogue that defined the provenance of our fireplace tiles.

Bill knows the provenance of many things, especially things designed in California over the past century, and his knowledgeable passion inspired him to create the Museum of California Design. MOCAD’s mission is to exhibit and document California’s extraordinary design history, which has influenced American and global design profoundly. As a museum without a building, MOCAD partners with other institutions to mount exhibits, which it does every year or two. It’s a rational, forward-thinking business model more arts organizations should follow: pool resources to get better, faster results. “I don’t want to spend 10 years and raise \$50 million for a building,” Bill says. “I want to do exhibitions!” Next up will be *California’s Designing Women 1896-1986*, in partnership with the Museum of the American West, in August, 2012.



I admire Bill for his ability to see that California design needed to be shared and understood... and that he did something about it. When I spend time with Bill, I’m always reminded that the objects of our environment are created, and each of us can choose to be surrounded with better design and better understanding. Which makes me recognize that even seemingly ordinary things – like the roadside barricade light, designed by Henry C. Keck in 1967 in Pasadena (pictured at left) – are not ordinary at all.

MOCAD merits your support. Their annual Award Benefit, honoring designer, artist, craftsman, Peter Shire, takes place September 18 at the Frank Israel-designed Dan House in Malibu. [Details here.](#)

Images: Bill Stern, right finger raised, with artist Tyrus Wong at the opening of the Museum of California Design’s exhibition Mid-Century Mandarin: The Clay Canvasses of Tyrus Wong, Los

Angeles, 2003; Roadside barricade photo by Keck-Craig, Inc.

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