Not long after Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s experimental Farnsworth House (completed in 1951) inspired public debate over the appropriateness of the International Style for residential architecture, United Artists and director Otto Preminger took a gamble on the inappropriateness of The Moon is Blue (1953). Centering upon the 24-hour romance between an architect and the young woman he meets at the Empire State Building, the film largely takes place within the bachelor architect’s apartment. The space reflects essential elements of mid-century modern design: it is bright, spare, and functional, but it is also casual and comfortable (as evidenced by Maggie McNamara curling up in an Eero Saarinen-designed Womb Chair to sew a loose button, or how easily the Eames “bikini” wire chairs are reconfigured for dining with a convertible coffee table!). The film’s light treatment of sexuality would become a hallmark of similarly styled films—particularly the Doris Day/Rock Hudson vehicles of the late 1950s and early ’60s. Precisely because of its candid discussions of adult themes (and the specific use of forbidden words like “mistress” and “virgin”), it was denied a seal of approval from the Production Code Administration—the equivalent of today’s MPAA rating. One of the first to defy the production code, Preminger released the film independently and it became a runaway success, garnering three Academy Award nominations.

The National Building Museum’s recent film series, Bachelor, Secretaries & Spies: Mid-Century Style in American Film, was inspired by the exhibitions Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture (which closed in February) and Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future (opening May 3). Given that film can offer unique insights into design history and trends in popular taste, how do American movies of the 1950s and ’60s reflect or diverge from developments in mid-century modern architecture and design?

During this period in film history, bachelors, working women, and spies or super-villains exist on film as independent figures, detached from—if not in direct opposition to—safe havens of community and family. In contrast to these metropolitan singles, families are shown to live in homes that are traditional in style (Colonial or Victorian), suggesting security and comfort. Nonetheless, the domestic trappings of middle class success are often undermined by themes of anxiety, instability, and financial burden, further fueling the desire for a bachelor existence free of responsibility. The great irony of the mid-century bachelor film is that practically all of the free agents featured find themselves well on their way to marriage and family by the end of the picture. The high number of films in this broad genre seems to indicate that the public found great pleasure in seeing independent men and women pulled back into “normal” society. What follows is an exploration of how the mid-century modern homes of single men and women in American film reflected changing lifestyles and shifts in architecture and design during the same era.

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WHAT DOES “MODERN” MEAN?

In April 1953, Elizabeth Gordon, editor of House Beautiful, launched a now infamous attack on modern architecture, embodied by Mies’s Farnsworth House and deemed “The Threat to the Next America.” Gordon wrote that “[t]he much touted all-glass cube of International Style architecture is perhaps the most unlivable type of home for man since he descended from the tree and entered a cave.” The editors of Architectural Forum returned fire with a full-page editorial that mused, “Who can really declare that his or her preferences represent ‘free taste’ but yours are part of a conspiracy to subvert the nation?... Major ideas do not gestate favorably in a mob” (May 1953).

As a result of this editorial scuffle, Architectural Forum initiated a series of articles “[t]o help sort out the main Design trends so the public as well as architects may understand them” (May 1953). The series began with Eero Saarinen’s look at “The Six Broad Currents in Modern Architecture,” identified as: “Wright and organic unity”; “Wurster, Belluschi and handicraft architecture”; “Aalto and the European individualists”; “LeCorbusier—function and plastic form”; “Gropius—an architecture for the machine age”; “Mies van der Rohe, the form-giver”; and then Nervi and Fuller, as “the engineer-scientists” (July 1953). Saarinen acknowledged that “each seeks in its own way,” but he was nonetheless hopeful about the shared future of modern architecture:

“It is, therefore, logical to assume that with the matur-
ing of our civilization and the resulting respect for cultural, nonmaterialistic aims, spiritual qualities will flourish. They will catch up to the physical advances. Our archi-
tecture will then have the balance necessary for its flowering and some day will take an important place in history with the Greek, the Gothic and the Renaissance.

Furniture designers in the post-war period shared the same optimism and faith in “better living through better design” that Saarinen expressed. Saarinen himself, along with individuals like Charles and Ray Eames, Harry Bertoia, George Nelson, Edward J. Wormley, Paul McCobb, and even the classically-informed decorator T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, was inspired by new materials and advances in mass production, as well as by the collaborative spirit found in design laboratories like the Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Companies like Herman Miller, Knoll, and Dunbar Furniture Company supported these designers and brought their goods to market. A steady stream of innovative designs could be seen in department stores, magazines, books, and museum exhibitions. The missionary zeal on the part of mid-century “form-givers” and their advocates helped to generate public demand for products and designs that complemented changing lifestyles. By the late 1950s, what was once considered a style had simply become the style. Hollywood, however, had its own ideas about “better living,” and used mid-century designs to send a very different message to American consumers.
Looking at films from this time period, one can see that it is almost exclusively single men and women who are associated with mid-century modern design. Dozens of films from the 1950s and ‘60s feature independent men and women living in modern environments.

The most common feature of these adult-themed comedies and dramas is the bachelor pad; a space that offered men an escape, a lair of their own, and an opportunity to inhabit a distinctly male domestic environment. Regarding this last point, Frank Sinatra’s highly-decorated but very male nightclub of a “pad” in *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963)—including bar, TV den, lounge seating, and visible loft bedroom—makes *The Moon is Blue* set look like a modernist motel room. In *Boys’ Night Out* (1962) a group of friends work together to create, and share, one perfect “lair,” while almost all of the locations in *Ocean’s Eleven* (1960) could be considered bachelor pads, especially Mr. Acebos’ Japanese-modern home (with a Mondrian twist). Other examples would include Sinatra’s subdued Asian-inflected apartment in *The Tender Trap* (1955) and Bob Hope’s tract home (“It’s not pink, it’s California Coral!”) with freestanding red fireplace, in *Bachelor in Paradise* (1961). The most disturbing example would be John Frankenheimer’s film *Seconds* (1966), which takes the bachelor movie into *Twilight Zone* territory. Rock Hudson, in a role very much against type, abandons his family and undergoes radical cosmetic surgery so that he might be “reborn” as a bachelor artist in Malibu. Appearing repeatedly in films of the ‘50s, and especially the ‘60s, the bachelor pad or beachfront hideaway would seem the ultimate fantasy of personal freedom for a large population of veterans, “organization men,” and male breadwinners in American society.

For female characters the theme of freedom or the lack thereof, is also ever-present in 1950s and ‘60s film. Yet in the same films that show men living and working in modern style, most women are portrayed as wives living in ruffle-curtained suburbia (*The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 1956), in posh luxury (*Desk Set*, 1957), or sharing a shabby flat with other working girls (*The Best of Everything*, 1959). When women are shown living alongside the likes of Knoll or Herman Miller designs, their non-traditional surroundings are justified by their being performers or artists.

In *Torch Song* (1953), Joan Crawford’s apartment is the jaw-dropping domain of the ultimate Broadway queen, the design of which is echoed in the set for Judy Garland’s luxurious living room in George Cukor’s 1954 version of *A Star is Born*. Barbara Bel Geddes’ cheery artist’s studio in *Vertigo* (1958) is all Eames-ian artistic clutter and comfort. The same year brought audiences Kim Novak’s earth-toned Danish Modern den/office in *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958). Sometimes a woman was unhappy with her modern surroundings, as in *The Girl Next Door* (1953) where a stage star discovers that her new home is not the dreamed-for cottage but a glass-walled oddity, complete with giant chimney-less hearth and Calder mobile (“Frankenstein slept here!”). But it is the exuberant *Pillow Talk* (1959) that encapsulates the variety of mid-century modern styles available to both men and women at the end of the decade—from Tony Randall’s sleekly modular office, to Hudson’s wood-paneled but electronically-controlled bachelor pad, to Doris Day’s pastel paradise of an apartment.
MID-CENTURY MODERN MADNESS

By the end of the 1950s, architects mirrored Hollywood in their search for a way to reconcile the state of their art (the “material” and “spiritual” aims of Saarinen) to the popular taste and needs of the American public. In 1958, Architectural Forum presented another series of essays on the state of modern architecture. Douglas Haskell’s contribution, “Architecture and popular taste” (August 1958), noticed that a growing number of architects were “shifting away from the adaptation of design to machine production toward the highly psychological task of adapting design to an era of popular mass consumption.” He described three areas in which popular taste was having an impact on modern architecture, namely, the desire for more decoration or romantic expression; a need for drama or symbolic form; and an inclination towards the improvisational and abstract over the linear and clearly-defined.

By 1959, there was a definite increase of decorative elements in mid-century modern film designs—a trend that sadly coincided with a rapid decline in mature representations of male-female relationships. The transformation of style and subject matter is particularly telling when comparing two successful Day/Hudson films, Pillow Talk (1959) and Lover Come Back (1961).

Style-wise, the first film is more closely aligned with the trim aesthetic of The Moon is Blue (1953), albeit with a spiral staircase similar to the one found in the Eames’s Case Study house (1949). The main level of Hudson’s bachelor pad is small, with a wall-hung cabinet reminiscent of those designed by Bauhaus master Marcel Breuer, pickled wall paneling, and a tasteful display of framed and lit modern art (in addition to the discreet control panel that dims the lights and locks the doors). In Lover Come Back, Hudson lives in a sprawling penthouse filled with orange and black surfaces that gleam like a Chinese cabinet of curiosities. Filling the screen are a biomorphic couch, curvy wet bar, built-in hi-fi, court jester wall-hangings, Japanese prints and padded headboard—all of which are far more decorated and dramatic than sets in the earlier film.

While the general plot of both films is nearly identical, not only is Lover Come Back more outlandish visually, but the manner and the lengths to which Hudson’s character misleads Day make the film more unsettling. In Pillow Talk, Hudson finds it difficult to let go of his false identity as his affection for Day grows, but in Lover Come Back, the fact that Day is a rival advertising executive would seem to justify Hudson’s drawn out and malicious manipulation of her professional and private life. By the time the baroque designs of In Like Flint (1967) appear, along with similar 1960s bachelor and spy films, women have become just another modern convenience found in the bachelor pad.
FALL (AND RISE) OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A particular trend in film design towards the end of the 1950s was the widespread use of classical forms and motifs. In 1960, well-known decorator and designer T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings debuted his popular Klismos line of Grecian furniture, followed soon after by his book The Furniture of Classical Greece (1963). Greco-Roman designs appear in Ocean's Eleven (1960), Strangers When We Meet (1960), Lover Come Back (1961), and Come Blow Your Horn (1963). In That Touch of Mink (1962), Cary Grant's office presents a particularly odd combination of a sleek modern entryway next to a series of bas-relief urns and trompe l'oeil columns. Featured as stylized wall decoration and objets d'art, these classical elements had unambiguous associations of culture and sophistication.

Seeing how plotlines of the virginal 1950s evolved into the '60s sex farce, it is no wonder that the veneer of Grecian glamour applied by Hollywood became increasingly suggestive of Roman decadence.

In the architectural world, meanwhile, a more mature expression of classical ideals was taking form. By 1959, Eero Saarinen's Miller House (completed 1957) had become a superstar of modern residential design and decoration—though in a very different way than Mies's Farnsworth House had earlier in the decade. Architectural Forum deemed the home a "contemporary Palladian villa" in September 1958, followed shortly thereafter by the February 1959 Better Homes & Gardens issue, which featured the home on the cover as its third "Hallmark House." The home's "pinwheel arrangement" of rooms, around a central space with a luxurious conversation "pit" and playful round fireplace, is supported by elegant white columns and bathed with light from a perimeter of skylights. This vision of white marble is brightened throughout by the colorful interior design work of Alexander Girard. Here, the "spiritual" element of architecture that Saarinen looked forward to in 1953 had clearly caught up with his own "material" advances.

While Hollywood was busy taking modern design to "mod" extremes, playing fast and loose with an eclectic mix of neoclassical forms and extravagant textures and colors, architects like Saarinen were recognizing the need for architecture to express modernist ideals in an individualized fashion. Although 1950s and '60s films appropriated mid-century modern design and used it in ways that the designers and architects could never have envisioned, they nonetheless provide a unique lens through which to view how popular taste challenged and reinforced the norms of a culture struggling with Cold War anxiety and rapid social change. In the end, Hollywood's one-sided love affair with mid-century modernism helped create a long-lasting association between a particular moment in design history and an ongoing stereotype of the swinging single.