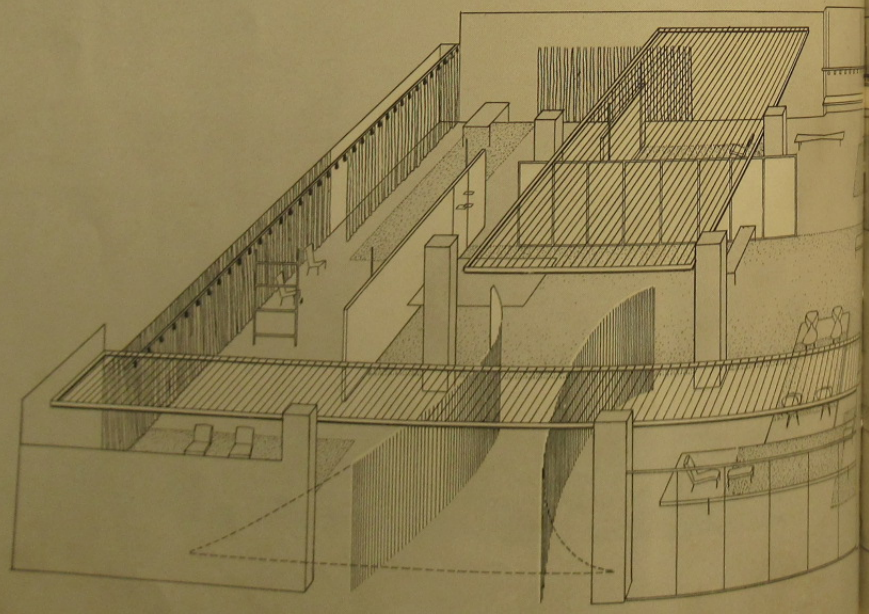
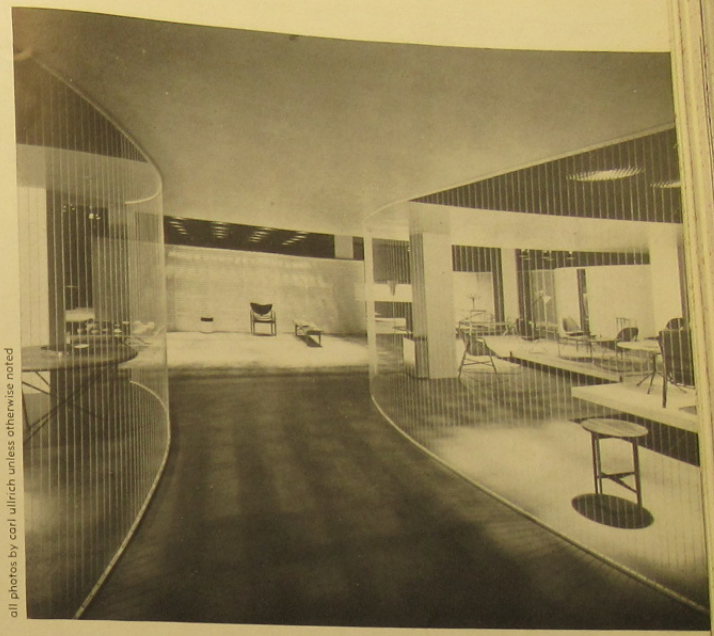
"Good Design" in chiaroscuro

That a museum should choose and exhibit manufactured products is unusual, but that it should set up such an exhibition in the stronghold and with the cooperation of a manufacturer-supported trade mart was unheard of when New York's Museum of Modern Art and Chicago's Merchandise Mart announced their joint Good Design program three years ago. This union of esthetes and practical businessmen, of purists and Philistines, seemed so audacious that even its sympathizers hardly dared hope for its survival under the critical cross-fire of enemy factions it would inevitably antagonize.

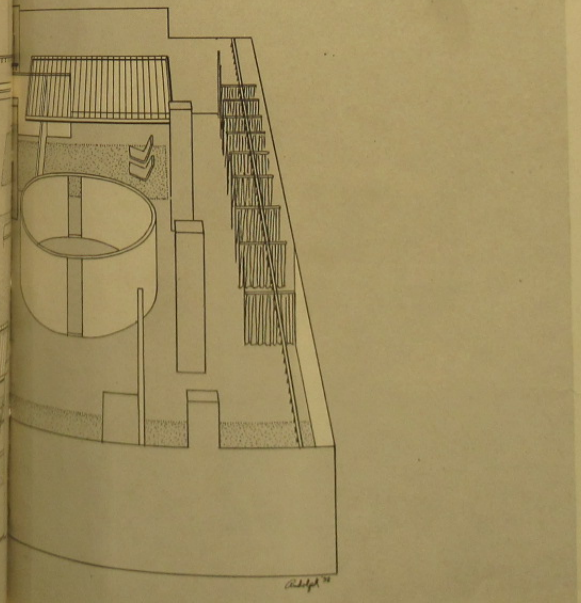
The expected sniping has peppered the undertaking without respite, but the routine of the program has swung along bravely despite it. Each Fall Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., director of the program, and two other judges appointed for that season, make their selections from new products on the home furnishings and appliance markets; a designer chosen for the occasion installs these in an exhibition at the Merchandise Mart; in June selections from the Summer market made by a new committee of judges are added to the



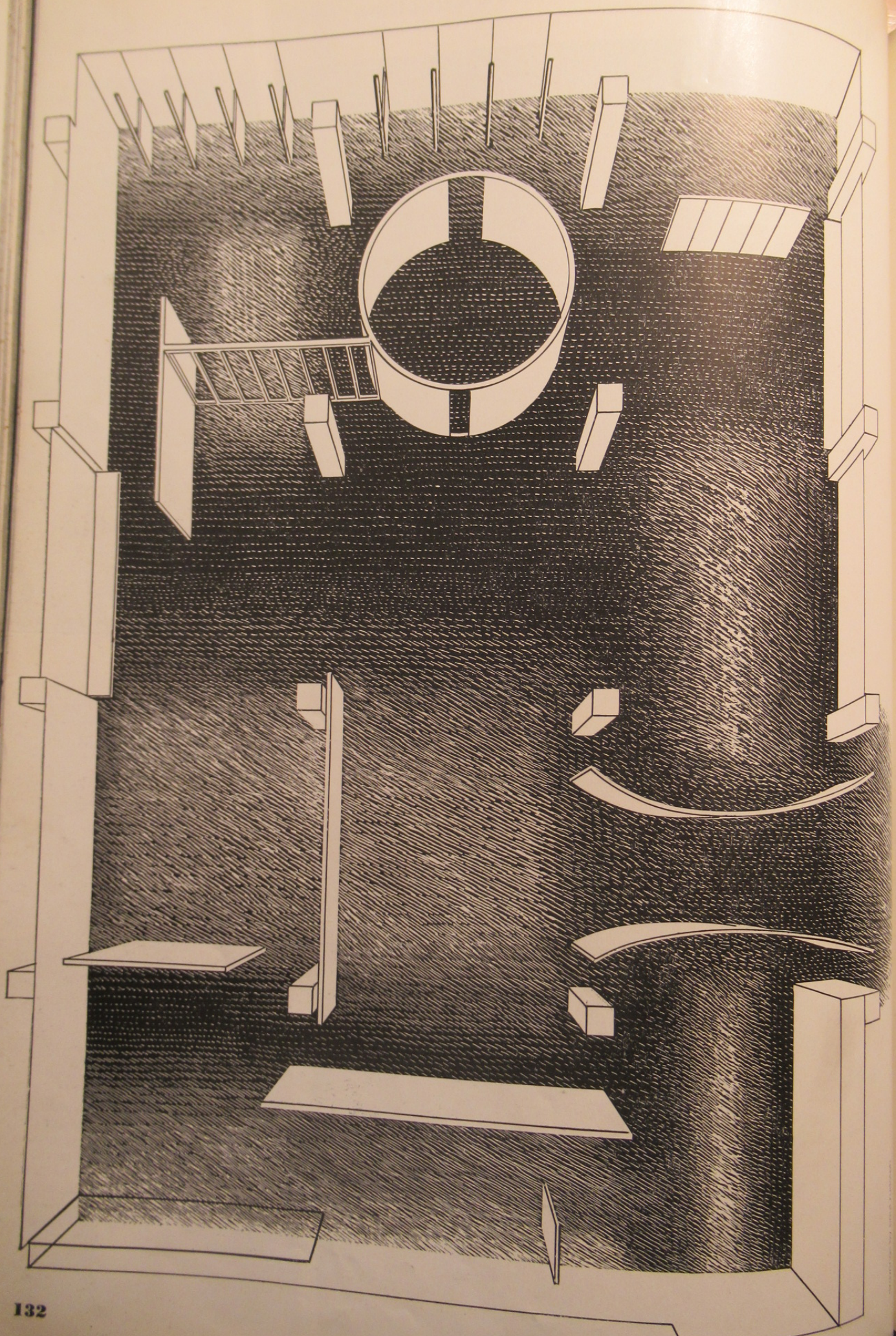
Paul Rudolph designs the Mart's third exhibition

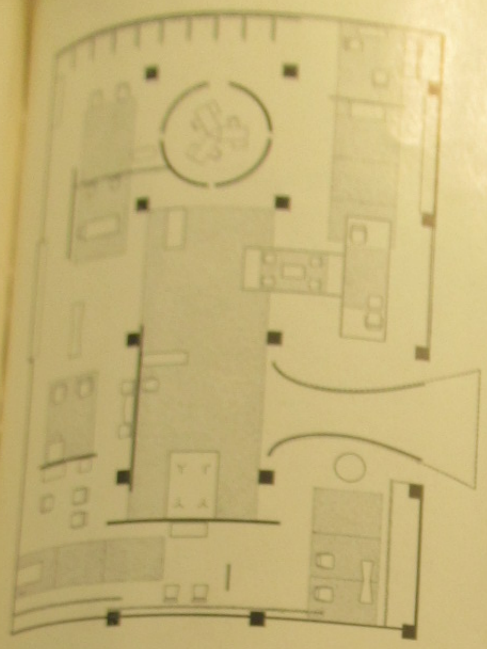


all photos by carl ullrich unless otherwise noted



A ghostly frame — colorless and transparent as water — fits over the exhibition and directs the spectator's progress. Its insubstantial appearance gives the displays greater solidity, and its unobtrusive color makes their hues more brilliant. Plastic-string walls of the formal, curved entrance reveal a mysterious shaded maze punctuated by bright pools of light and shimmering, veil-like partitions.





existing installation; in November the whole exhibition, installation and all, is duplicated at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and the following winter the cycle starts anew.

The very fact that we have come to take the program for granted, that it has survived into its third year without petering out or being bludgeoned to death is in itself a triumph. Retail and press support have gained steady momentum.

But whatever political success the program attains, it is always in danger of becoming more of a liability than an asset to its cause unless it maintains the elusive element of esthetic vitality. The undercurrent of excitement which ran through the opening of the third annual Good Design exhibition at the Mart last January 10th was a response to that element. Its presence was shown by the quality of the selections, and fortunately it was also given immediate and dramatic expression in the installation itself, which was designed by Paul Rudolph.

The selection committee enjoyed an inestimable advantage over its predecessors: it had a better market to choose from, as far as the general level of design was concerned. Who knows — perhaps the Good Design program is exerting the healthy influence which is its reason for existing?

In his position as the permanent member of the selection committee, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., is completely vulnerable. Anyone who wants to can call him an *arbiter elegantum* representing the preferences of a narrow coterie, but he has wisely tried to assure

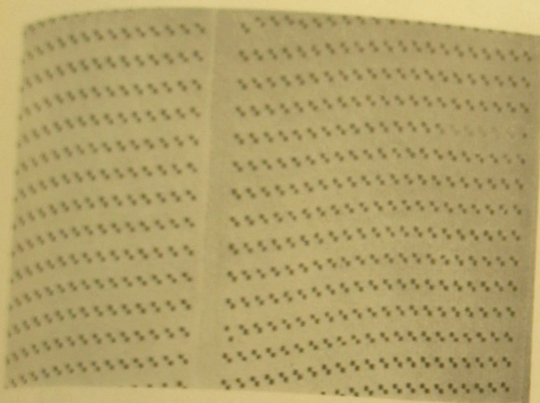
Rudolph made a plan of light and shade as most designers might make a pattern with partitions or flooring. The sensation of stepping from the shadow into an unexpected pool of light can be appreciated only by walking through the exhibition — or a forest glade. The round stockade is pierced by three narrow peek-a-boo windows and a door. Inside, ex-Naval officer Rudolph has installed a periscope, with which the visitor can scrutinize practically anything, remaining unobserved himself.

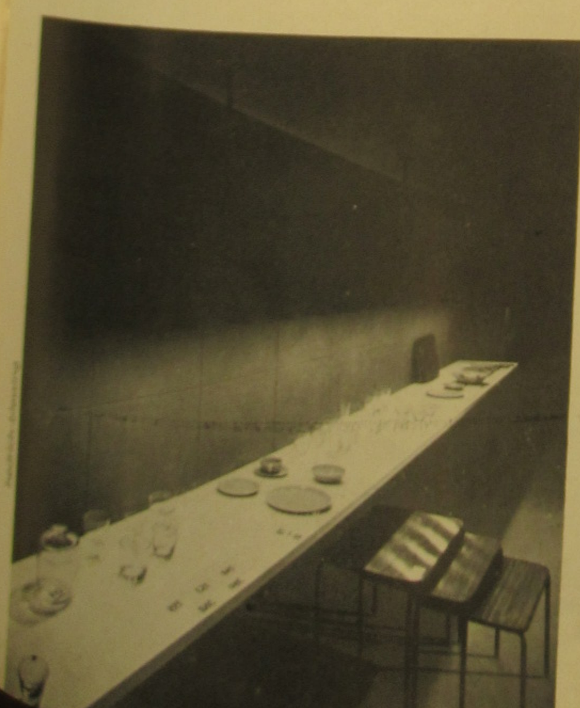
hedrich-blessing

Boesen's wicker chair and Gibbings' coffee table (both from the last market) sit by Eve Peri's appliqued linen (selected from Arundell Clarke's new line). In the distance are textured fabrics on low racks, printed fabrics in long lengths against the wall.

Over a Waite fibre rug, many meshes: Barber's wire chair, Pacific Iron's fishnet chair, a cane partition, an egg-crate ceiling unexpectedly painted charcoal. Martine's table retails at $59.

The play of light and shade behind semi-transparent partitions is one of the delights of the exhibition. Rudolph drew on his naval career for the one below: wire mesh sprayed with elastic, plastic cocoon, out of which squares were cut by hand. Casement fabrics stretched in frames (below, right) serve the same purpose.





Another kind of translucent partition, and another way of displaying the many fabrics in the exhibition; textured casements float free from a tall rack. A below-eye-level shelf for small objects is accompanied by its own line of light on a dark wall.

hedrich-blessing

diversity by lining up co-judges with a reputation for having minds — and tastes — of their own. His assistants for this market were Harry Weese, the young Chicago architect and city planner, and Charles Zadok, head of Gimbel's Milwaukee and a well-known patron of modern art. Zadok has a reputation for saying "No"—his phrase for it being, "Why that's just a compound novelty!"

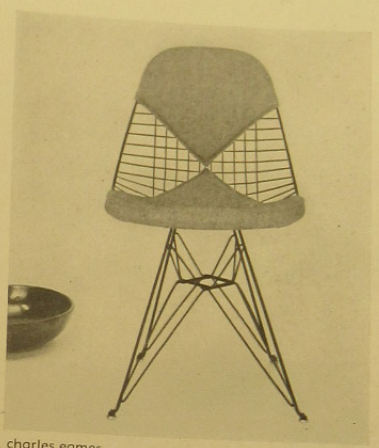
The design of the exhibition itself was a personal triumph for Paul Rudolph—who had appeared to be a far-fetched choice for the job in spite of his enviable reputation as an architect.

Charles and Ray Eames, who did the first installation, are famed for inspired fantasy, and Finn Juhl, who did the second, also has a name in the field of display. In comparison Rudolph seemed an austere purist and technician.

Rudolph's academic career was interrupted by wartime service in the Navy. He is 33, and came out of Harvard not very long ago wearing the aura that automatically attaches itself to Gropius' brightest students. Promptly joining Ralph Twitchell in Sarasota, Florida, he proceeded to build a series of small homes and stores noted for their airy plans and ingenious, economical construction. In Rudolph's beautifully executed renderings, however, Kaufmann had evidently discerned the architect's dramatic aplomb and creative, romantic imagination.

The exhibition turned out to be austere indeed, and pure, and almost totally lacking in color, except that contributed by the exhibits themselves. It was also shrewdly calculated to display each article to advantage from many angles and distances, and to arouse a sense of elation in the spectator.

Because of the absence of standard theatrical props such as advancing and receding panels and bright-hued backdrops, the emotional (*Continued on Page* 186)



charles eames

The 9′ x 21′ Marbalia panel shown on the opposite page doubles as a display prop for Wagenfeld's hand blown crystal, from Fraser's.

Random choice of chairs reveals wide range of esthetic idioms, many types of manufacture. The Don Knorr stool's simple components are comparable to those of the Eames chair, though the second is a triumph of product engineering as well as design (Kneedler-Fauchere and Herman Miller are respective sources). Eleanor Forbes' officer's chair (McGuire Company) has a removable seat and back too, but there the resemblance ends. Machine-made birch-rod chair (Swedish Modern) is by a man responsible for one of the most admired of handmade chairs, Hans Wegner.

BRITISH TEXTILES. *By F. Lewis, 90 pages, 11" x 8" [illegible] illustrated pages. Leigh-on-Sea, F. Lewis, Publishers, Ltd. London,* 1951. £5.50. $15.40.

". . . perhaps some conservatism is shown . . ." F. Lewis half-apologizes in prefacing *British Textiles*, a volume of half-tone photographs presenting new British textile designs. The dominant tone is conservative, but not [illegible] gruntlingly so. Though few of the patterns are really exciting, there is a wide variety of pleasing surfaces among the 99 illustrations, and the book should not [illegible] interest for decorators or clothiers. Varied fabrics for many different purposes are represented, and the samples are contributed by leading British textile manufacturers.

Good design in Chiaroscuro

(*Continued from Page* 137)

impact, and the visual control which Rudolph achieves within it, are at first hard to explain, until one realizes that everything depends on one of the stage designer's basic tools, light. Rudolph went beyond the mere spotlighting of exhibits to convert the whole area into a pattern of dimly and brightly lighted ground, in direct contradiction to the even lighting more often considered ideal. His comparison of the exhilaration one feels while walking through, to the sensation of seeing the sun disappear behind a cloud only to shine brightly again, or to stepping into a pool of light as the sun's rays penetrate an opening in the branches of a shady grove, may be poetic, but it is also psychologically accurate. Richard Kelly was the lighting consultant.

There is a physical frame around the exhibition; in order to provide another kind of psychological contrast beside that furnished by varying the amount of light, Rudolph arranged constricted spaces in juxtaposition to freely

flowing spaces with distant vistas. There is a prescribed route to follow although there are many bypasses, while platforms and dropped ceilings give horizontal variety to the volumes through which the spectator proceeds. The material composition of the frame, and its color—or rather, lack of color—are eerily dramatic. The curving entrance aisle is formed by two semi-circles defined with vertical stretched string, a transparent device to begin with. In this case the transparency is enhanced by the fact that the string is itself of translucent plastic. The other frames, panels, and partitions are either openwork grilles of one kind or another, or square iron rods, all painted in the range from white to black. One of the most ornamental of the grilles was made of coarse, square wire mesh sprayed with cocoon, the tough elastic material which is used to mothball naval vessels. Rudolph learned the use of the material while in the Navy, has made a daring architectural application of it in the tentlike roof of a small house (January 1951 *Interiors*).

Broad is the word for the range of selections. No traditional furniture could be more exquisitely modeled than the new Finn Juhl tables for Baker, Gio Ponti's cellophane-seated side chair and Bertha Schaefer's nest of tables—both for Singer, or Ed Wormley's small-scaled, high-backed upholstered armchair for Dunbar. On the other hand the scientific spirit of Buckminster Fuller—"the maximum performance per pound of weight"—permeated Charles Eames' five Herman Miller chairs, all of which have a seat-back frame made of rigid wire mesh.

Having been criticized for the prevalence of black-iron pieces in previous exhibitions, the committee was careful to point out that "only a few pieces using black iron structurally were accepted for the show despite many sent in." Since the material is sturdy and easy to work into satisfactory designs, no apology was needed, but in any case, the pieces chosen were handsome, especially Allan Gould's two chairs with slung leather seats and backs, and the

round and rectangular Darrel Landrum tables [illegible] with seductively smooth, practical linoleum.

Among fabrics, Evsa Model's colorful "Vertical City" [illegible] a large panel of appliqued linen by Eve Peri were spectacular. The woven casements, which Rudolph designed both stretched flat and floating free, were especially striking, and there were also many interesting printed [illegible] ments, most of them small, linear, all-over designs, which the selection committee considers to be a basic [illegible] trend: "The best modern design is putting emphasis on line, geometrically derived yet personally expressive, [illegible] pending less than in the past on mass or color or texture. This sharply accented line is producing results that are crisp and dramatic, characteristic of American taste at mid-century." In its lineal quality, weightlessness, and delicacy, as well as in effectiveness, Rudolph's setting for the objects echoes these characteristics exactly.—*O.G.*

For your information

(Continued from Page 18)

Competitions and Awards

Michigan Crafts

Michigan's craftsmen in ceramics, metalwork, textiles, wood, plastics, and furniture are having a show in the Detroit Institute of Arts. Three hundred items were selected by jurors John Van Koert, head designer for Towle Silversmiths; Marion Lawrence Fosdick, professor at New York State College of Ceramics; and Charles Nagel, Jr., director of the Brooklyn Museum.

Top prize in the show, the Founders Society Purchase Prize, went to ceramist John A. Foster for his red stoneware dinnerware called "Festival." Ruben Eshkanian, a textile major at Cranbrook Academy of Art, won the $100 Arthur Fleischman Carpet Company prize for a hand-woven, deep