The frameworks of globalisation, national identity and locality have in recent years been extensively discussed in the field of design history, in which methodologies versed in transnational and global approaches have been assiduously applied and compared. But while this scholarship has highlighted how design at times circulates across, under, and above the nation state, Professor of Design History Kjetil Fallan’s body of work has regularly argued for the validity of national and regional frameworks, albeit through a critical lens, as exemplified in his latest volume, Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in an Age of Globalization (2016), co-edited with Grace Lees-Maffei. In Designing Modern Norway, Fallan continues to develop a non-essentialist approach of the nation, by offering a sweeping account of the complex and multifarious process through which a modern design culture developed in Norway from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, and of its proponents’ efforts to design a modern nation.

Whilst Fallan acknowledges that the nation can be regarded as designed from its wider infrastructures to everyday material culture, and that the home represents an area of central concern in Norwegian culture, Designing Modern Norway focuses “less on actual domestic consumption practices (or design practices) and more on the ideological, moral, normative and prescriptive underpinnings of, and reflections on, such practices” (p. 5). Fallan achieves this by dividing the book into nine loosely chronological chapters, each of which examines how particular design organisations, institutions and events contributed to the wider debates on the nature and contributions of design in Norway. In so doing, the book introduces a wide range of design actors to the reader, whilst successfully mapping competing agendas for nation building and longstanding debates around issues ranging from modernity to technology, aesthetics, and sustainability.
The first two chapters set the scene by shedding light on the establishment and early years of various cultural, educational and professional institutions and associations through which an official design culture crystallised from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s. These chapters reveal how whilst folk art and home craft were harnessed to construct a national image in the late nineteenth century, industry, technology, and business were seen as key factors to modernise the nation at the turn of the twentieth century, which resulted in a budding interest in industrial design and growing doubts towards traditional practices. Chapter 2 nevertheless reveals that most designers considered themselves craftsmen or artists, whilst a widely felt lack of interest in modern production technologies and standardisation prevailed within the applied arts community, an issue which constitutes one of the book’s main tropes. Designing Modern Norway indeed offers a rich portrayal of how industrial design practices arose from often overlapping fields such as craft and artistic industry, and of the applied arts and design community’s chronic debates on disciplinary distinctions, which echoed wider attempts at contributing to the modern project whilst preserving the nation’s cultural heritage.

The following chapters look at how modern design was envisioned and promoted in a context in which social unrest, World War II, and its aftermath prompted the design community to envision new ways of contributing to a country in political and economic turmoil. In Chapter 3, Fallan thus examines the rising interest in modernist design both within and beyond the design community in the interwar years, by contrasting the content of the Applied Art Association’s magazine, *Brukskunst*, and magazines aimed at elite audiences, with a selection of initiatives aimed at enhancing the living conditions of the working class, in so doing demonstrating the “ideological promiscuity of modernist design” (p. 67). Chapter 4 subsequently examines the design community’s discourse under the German occupation during World War II, by reviewing the content of *Bonytt*, a design magazine created in 1941, in which, whilst modernist design was presented as apolitical, the design community communicated its wider doubts towards avant-garde modernism, alongside its aspiration to develop a national modernist language which preserved the aesthetic, and thus emotional qualities of objects. A similar antagonism appears in Chapter 5, which demonstrates that whilst the applied arts community attempted to contribute to the country’s reconstruction efforts, and recognised the need to answer the rapid growth of its manufacturing industry, its members remained predominantly sceptical to mass-production and standardisation, an issue which, as Fallan notes, “remained unresolved for the applied art movement” (p. 109).

The two following chapters critically appraise the construction of an idealised image of Norwegian design in the 1950s, and the efforts that were deployed to preserve it in the following decade. Chapter 6 offers a captivating account of exhibitions held by Norway at the Milan Triennale in 1954 and 1957, which in an act of elitist cultural diplomacy has since then been instrumental in placing Norwegian design on the map of successful modernist design. However, as Fallan notes, the displays, which featured seamless collaboration between upscale craft and design, contrasted sharply with the growing division of the Norwegian design community, whilst private business interests and camaraderie further impacted upon the exhibits. Chapter 7 consequently appraises the downfall of Scandinavian “golden years” and the applied arts community’s attempts to preserve a total under-
standing of design in the late 1950s and 1960s, at a time when the movement became increasingly fragmented. Indeed, while members of the rising industrial design profession promulgated a problem-solving design approach to be applied to wider ranges of products, and attempted to position themselves as fully-fledged professionals in the realms of commerce and industry, the applied art community predominantly wished to preserve a mythical Scandinavian “Design” vision bound to studio craft and industrial art.

The two subsequent chapters lastly examine a series of ideological shifts in Norwegian design discourses in the 1960s and 1970s, which marked antagonist sets of concerns towards design and its contribution to society. As such, Chapter 8 examines a set of debates led by academics and design professionals in the 1960s, and a selection of design and educational initiatives, which reveal how this critical design discourse evolved from promoting the real needs of consumers and local economic development, to include wider environmental concerns in the late 1960s. The final chapter on the other hand focuses on the profound shift that took place within the magazine *Bonytt*, which from acting as a fierce promoter of ‘Good Design’, from 1968 onwards, set out to cater to the interests of amateur interior decorators due to technical and editorial changes, but also as a result of shifting critical practices within the design professions. The epilogue consequently maps how the collective attempt at designing a modern country dwindled from the 1970s onwards, and by appraising the disciplinary, ideological and educational shifts that have since taken place in Norway, offers a salutary space to reflect upon the country’s past and present design culture.

While *Designing Modern Norway*, as Fallan notes, “avoids any absolutist understandings of the nation and essentialist notions of ‘national style’” (p. 4), and at times introduces the reader to regional design organisations and initiatives, it would have been good to know more about the latter and how peripheral actors positioned themselves towards the design discourses that emanated from the capital. Nevertheless, the book regularly highlights the design community’s permeability to foreign influences, by mapping how models of design institutionalisation and design practices employed and promulgated by organisations such as the Deutsche Werkbund or the British Council of Industrial Design (CoID), were rejected, adopted, or translated locally. Its examination of the design community’s cooperation with organisations abroad and participation in international events, through which it fashioned a modern image for Norway, further reveals how cultural exchanges and the community’s interaction with international circles helped shape its design culture. Finally, the book successfully shows how diverging nation-building agendas, inter-institutional conflicts and shifting design visions affected the examined initiatives, in which personal relations were often factors “as relevant as professional or organisational ones” (p. 121). *Designing Modern Norway* as such draws a nuanced and vivid portrait of the Norwegian design community’s longstanding efforts to design a modern nation, in so doing offering a precious contribution to a design historical scholarship that moves beyond object-centred approaches, and proving a central addition to reconfigured investigations of national design histories.