

# Architectural Competitions and Bureaucracy, 1934–1945

Andrew Shanken

*Author's address*  
Department of Art  
and Archaeology  
Princeton University  
Princeton  
New Jersey  
USA

The 1930s in the United States marked a turning point in the relationship of the architectural profession to both the government and corporations. The federal government and large corporations, began to hold design competitions to stimulate the building industry during the Depression. This caught the American Institute of Architects unprepared and led to the transformation of the profession from one grounded in the ideal of the architect-artist to one whose survival depends, in part, upon business acumen, technical competence, and public relations skill.

When the United States Congress passed the National Housing Act in 1934, it breathed new life into the moribund building industry. Grave mistrust of the market during the Depression had made people wary of spending, and as a result, the building industry was all but stagnant, with repercussions for everyone from the largest builders and corporations to smaller, independent labourers.

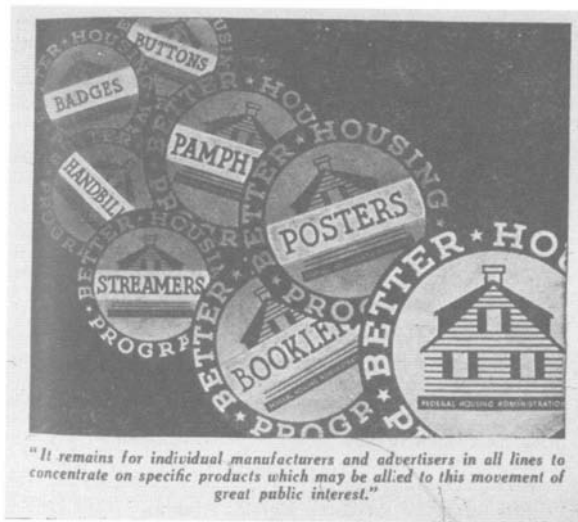
The new Act gave birth to a federal bureau called the Federal Housing Administration. The FHA in its early years was an unusual organization, one well adapted to the conditions of the Depression. It didn't finance housing, build public projects, or offer architectural plans. It didn't even set out to regulate the building industry. On the surface, the FHA merely guaranteed loans as a way of stimulating people to spend on new houses, or to modernize their old ones.

Depressions, however, are as much states of mind as they are economic states. Like other New Deal Programs, the FHA was built with this in mind. While it began with a clever manipulation of the economy (by guaranteeing loans), its main purpose in 1934 and 1935 was to stimulate a faith in the system that had mysteriously collapsed. Loans were but one method. Simultaneously, the FHA staged one of the largest publicity campaigns of its day [Fig. 1]. Its 'Better Housing Program' employed the most advanced public relations methods, applying the New Deal's emphasis on consumption to the building industry. Spur consumption, the thinking went, and production would follow, lifting the economy out of depression. Moreover, the daring

technical experiments in housing commonly offered in the 1930s, especially in prefabrication, would not be necessary. Complicated and politically contentious public works projects could be avoided. All America had to do was stimulate the people's desire for better housing.

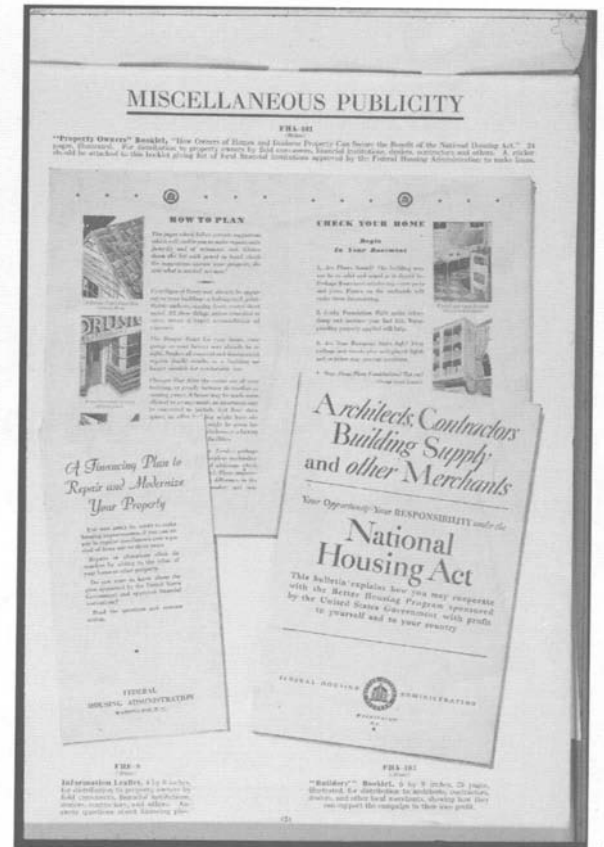
The Better Housing Program, in fact, did stimulate the building industry, but it also called a dazed corporate world to action. Big business, already deeply antagonistic to the Roosevelt Administration, feared that the FHA represented the first step in the nationalization of the building industry. In an attempt to win back the initiative, a number of corporations immediately launched advertising campaigns to publicize their own role in reinvigorating the economy.<sup>1</sup> One of the advertising strategies was the corporate sponsored architectural competition, a clever way for a company to advance the cause of housing, represent it as public service, and garner free positive press as newspapers covered their efforts.

This paper first examines the methods of the Better Housing Program, and the response of one corporation: the General Electric Company's 1935 Better Homes Competition, which borrowed the former's methods and adopted its rhetoric with the pretence of co-operation. The paper then turns to the futile attempts of the American Institute of Architects (or AIA), the official bureaucracy of the architectural profession in the United States, to compete with these two bureaucratic juggernauts. The AIA's failure to represent the changing realities of professional practice came to a head in the late



1 Samples of Federal Housing Administration publicity as published in the FHA's Bulletin for Manufacturers, Advertising Agencies and Publishers

2 The Better Housing Program logo applied to a food manufacturers' billboard



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1930s when there was near mutiny in the AIA over government sponsored competitions for public projects. Government and corporate bureaucracies were able to encroach on architectural practice because they quickly mastered the emerging tool of public relations, something the overmatched architects, extremely leery of advertising, were slow to grasp.

### Better Housing

With the resources of the federal government behind it, the Better Housing Program could canvass the world. Pamphlets were published, billboards erected [Fig. 2]. Corporations, often from disparate industries, put the Better Housing logo on their own advertising. Promotional literature was sent out to special interest groups, including architects, contractors, and merchants. Communities were

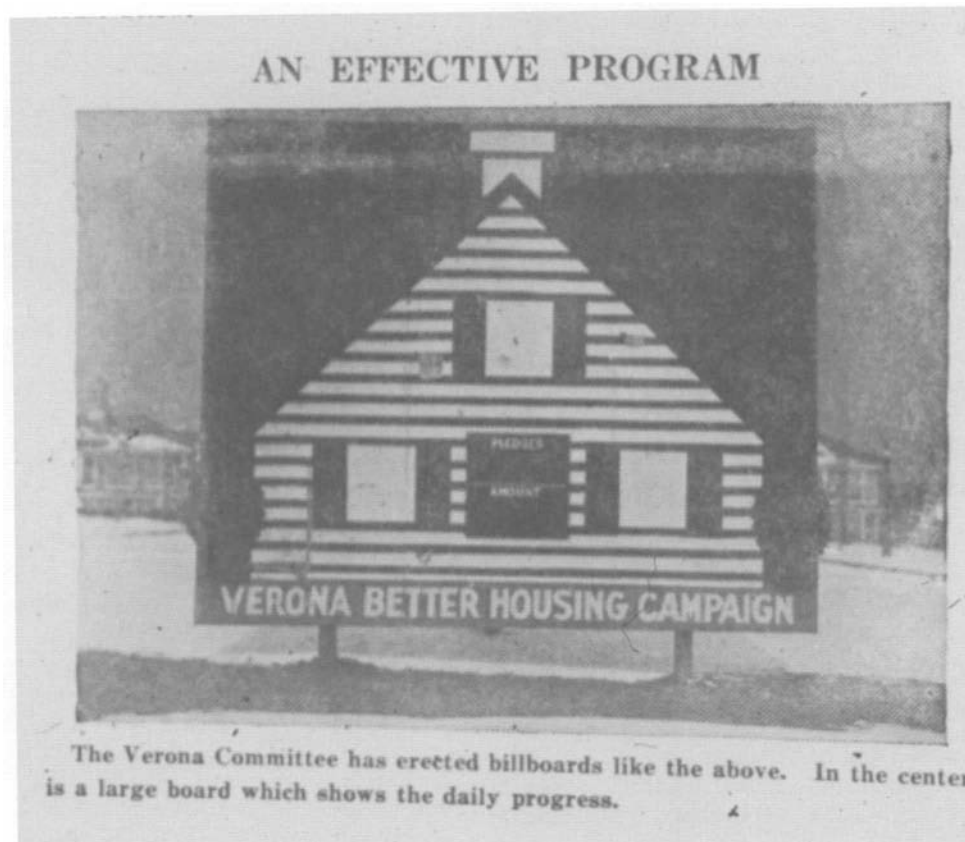
instructed how to set up their own local Better Housing campaigns, and by February 1935, over 6000 communities had done so, adding local advertising to the national deluge [Figs. 3a and b].

The Better Housing emblem was ubiquitous. Children made Better Housing posters in schools, and high school students competed in a Better Housing essay contest for two top prizes of \$1000, an enormous sum in 1935 [Fig. 4]. Both winners, moreover, were given jobs by the FHA's Director of Public Relations, Paul Fitzpatrick. The logo even graced the morning milk. The FHA plied the public with a steady diet of news coverage, capped off in June 1935 by a skilfully constructed media event, when National Better Housing Day was celebrated at thousands of sites across the nation [Fig. 5]. The FHA set up exhibits at these sites and erected model houses across the nation, in what Daniel Boorstin would have called a pseudo-event [Figs. 6a and b] (Boorstin, 1961). New Jersey alone had 125 'celebrations' across the state, including the dedication of a model home on Atlantic City's Steel Pier by Eleanor Roosevelt. New York celebrated National Better Housing Day at 250 sites. All of this was covered, of course, in local papers, giving free publicity to the campaign.

As a publicity campaign, Better Housing operated on multiple levels. Not only was the public inundated with information, but manufacturers, dealers, artisans, builders, and architects had to be sold on the programme, as well. Beginning in February 1935, the FHA set up sales schools and asked manufacturers to 'send their best men from sales

3 Part of the national advertising deluge for the Better Housing Program  
 a A community billboard  
 b A community banner

## AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

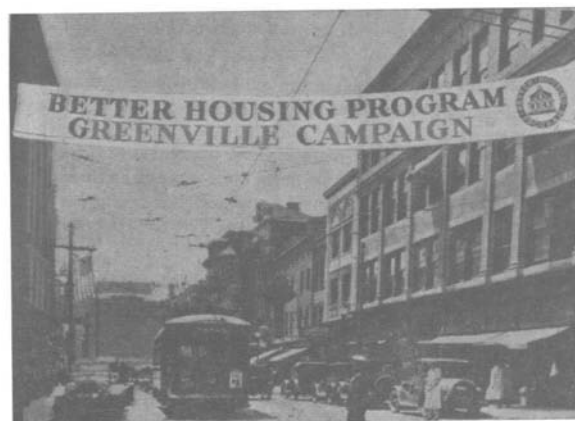


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and promotional departments to act as instructors' (*New York Times*, b). Importantly, these were not set up to educate people on housing; they were part of the structure of the publicity campaign, training people in the building industry how to sell the public on Better Housing. In New York State alone schools were set up in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Albany, Binghamton, Elmira, Rochester, Schenectady, Syracuse and Troy (*New York Times*, b).

The promotional literature followed suit. *Better Selling of Better Housing* gave step-by-step instructions to artisans and manufacturers on how to sell the programme to prospective clients. This included how to conduct house calls, and house-to-house surveys, how to take persistent refusal, how to 'gender' one's appeal, and how to close the sale. It enlisted the help of thousands of labourers and dealers, making them into an army of door-to-door salesmen for the programme. Armed with charts, graphs, and official forms, they were instructed by FHA literature on how to use them in the field to gain greater authority with the customer (Federal Housing Administration, 1934 and 1935). In short, Better Housing centralized a massive effort to sell America on building. This was largely achieved by stimulating the people's faith in the programme itself, a case of pure marketing.

In fact, in the first few months of the programme, publicity was the main means through which this new bureau would alter the building industry. One might take issue with this view by arguing that the FHA revised the marketing of construction more than the administration of work.<sup>2</sup> At least since the



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New Deal era, however, the line between marketing and administration has not been so clear.

### Convincing the public

Most historical and sociological studies of bureaucracy focus on production, on how work is processed or organized, and how products are made and distributed.<sup>3</sup> But bureaucracies also sell. This is often forgotten. In most cases, bureaucracies also spend immense energy selling their very structures; publicity is one of a bureaucracy's primary means of establishing and maintaining authority. Every factual report, no matter how dressed up in rational language, or inundated with figures and charts, is also part of the performance of publicity. In *Bureaucratic Propaganda*, David Altheide and John M. Johnson argue for such an understanding of

bureaucracy (Altheide and Johnson, 1980). They argue that official reports have a symbolic life. Their rationality gives the appearance of rational organization. The ostentatious display of facts and figures dramatizes the efficiency and efficacy of the organization, and ultimately undergirds its authority. As a physical trace of the organization, an official report operates like synecdoche, substituting the part for the whole. In a world where rationality and reality are often confused, this sort of theatre of the fact becomes potent publicity for the success of the organization. Success in these terms, however, has less to do with a job well done than with a public convinced of the organization's authority or legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

The Better Housing Program indulged significant resources in counting its figures, and in so doing, recounted its efficiency, and established its authority. Official reports consummately brandished cold statistics. Newspapers willingly abetted the process, enumerating the calls made, contracts signed, homes modernized; facts and figures were easily fetishized. The Roosevelt Administration and the press were entranced by the figures, repeating them again and again. Roosevelt himself made a cameo in the drama. He wrote to FHA head James A. Moffett in March 1935 saying that he was 'particularly impressed with your statement that 6174 communities have selected chairmen of their Better Housing Committees, and that between 250,000 and 300,000 volunteer workers are participating ... in the work of acquainting property owners with the uses they can make of the Housing Act' (*New York Times*, c). Those volunteers, and other salesmen, had already made '6,000,000 house calls, securing 1,100,000 contracts for jobs for a total value of \$275,000,000 ... In other words, the American people will clearly see that the Housing Act provides for the nation a way back to recovery and prosperity' (*New York Times*, c).

The proof was in the numbers. As a New Deal bureaucracy, presiding over a building industry with little capacity to produce new housing, the FHA's main responsibility in the beginning was never to reorganize production – the conventional expectation scholars have of bureaucracy – but to organize and stimulate consumption. To do that, the FHA had to sell the public on itself in order to create faith in its 'product'. Ergo, all the number counting. The FHA centralized a massive effort to sell America on building, to promote consumption, but the change in marketing also changed the organization of the building industry.

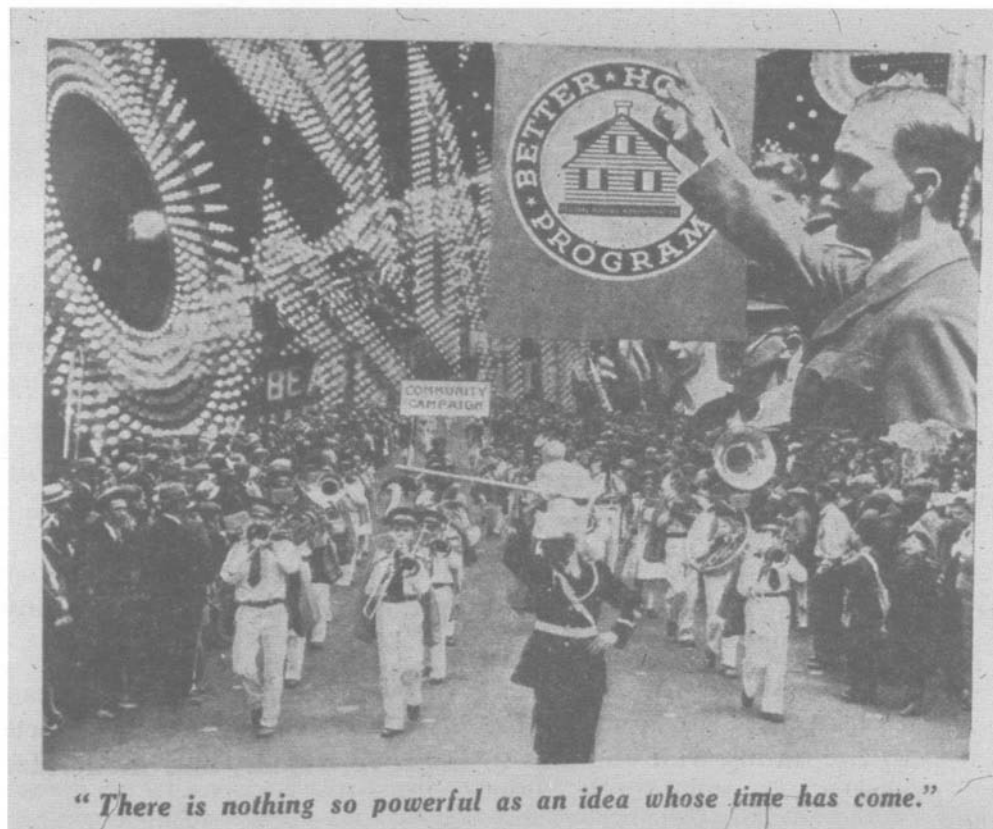
#### Architects pulled into the system

This claim also runs counter to standard understandings of bureaucracy. In a study of the administration of the building industry, for instance, Arthur Stinchcombe cleanly separated the marketing of construction from the administration of work, as if the two were unrelated (Stinchcombe, 1959–60). In a mass society, however, bureaucratic administration cannot be cleanly separated from publicity. In fact, the Better Housing Program



4 High School students' winning entries in a Better Housing poster competition

5 A skilfully constructed media event – a National Better Housing Day parade, 1935



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subverts the relationship. Everything it did was also an act of publicity, selling the building industry on the programme, and selling the public on the building industry. Publicity and the administration of work were indistinguishable. Not only were carpenters, painters, electricians, contractors, and dealers plugged into a vast network of publicity, thereby working within the strictures of Better Housing, but also architects were pulled into the system.

The FHA appointed architectural supervisors for all of the local programmes, and then congratulated itself for its efforts. One FHA official claimed in the pages of the AIA's journal that this was 'the greatest single promotion ever given to [architects]'. Appealing to their vanity, he wrote that the FHA included architects 'in that elite group of financial analysts who file silently into the banking room marked 'Board of Directors'' while it left the mortgagor out (Dusenberry, 1935). In other words, the FHA's vision of the architect was as a glorified property inspector, determining 'risks arising from the design and construction, the estimation of building costs, the consideration of the layout of plots' (*New York Times*, a).

Part of the PR of Better Housing was aimed at gaining the confidence and support of the architectural profession, promising them greater opportunities in the small house and modernization market, a sector traditionally resistant to architects. A debate about the role architects should play in the Better Housing Program erupted in the pages of *The Octagon*. Some architects saw it as a golden opportunity to make

inroads into the small housing market.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, some architects wanted to assume a managerial role with the Better Housing Program, in order to assert control over the various trades.<sup>6</sup> Many architects feared the programme was too restrictive, and condemned participation on the grounds that it forced on architects too narrow a field of practice.

The more managerial model of the architect struck at the very heart of larger debates about the future of the profession that were straining the boundaries of traditional practice. Modern architecture in the 1930s had begun to challenge the hegemony of the Beaux Arts System in the United States. With the International Style, for instance, came new ways of understanding both the process of making architecture and the role of the architect. Functionalism, understood in its various forms as a commitment to industrial methods, materials, and aesthetics, presented the architect with a conception of architectural production quite at odds with traditional training. Functionalism also undermined the traditional role of the architect as a form-giver, whose work was based on the inventive use of historicized facades.

Modern architecture was not alone in prompting these changes. Architecture, understood as the art and science of building, has often taken refuge in the arts, especially in response to the encroachments of other professions, such as speculative builders and engineers. Under the duress of the Depression, with scant work for architects, the model of the architect as an artist was challenged by a model of the architect as an organizer of the building trades, what

Philadelphia architect C. Clark Zantzinger, Jr later called the 'chairman of a board of experts' (Zantzinger, 1940).<sup>7</sup> In some ways, modern architecture reinforced the new model, which might be seen as a new formulation of the Master Builder. But the Better Housing Program promised much less, making the architect one among many experts or

technicians, and dropping design entirely from professional practice.<sup>8</sup> Understandably, much of the profession balked.

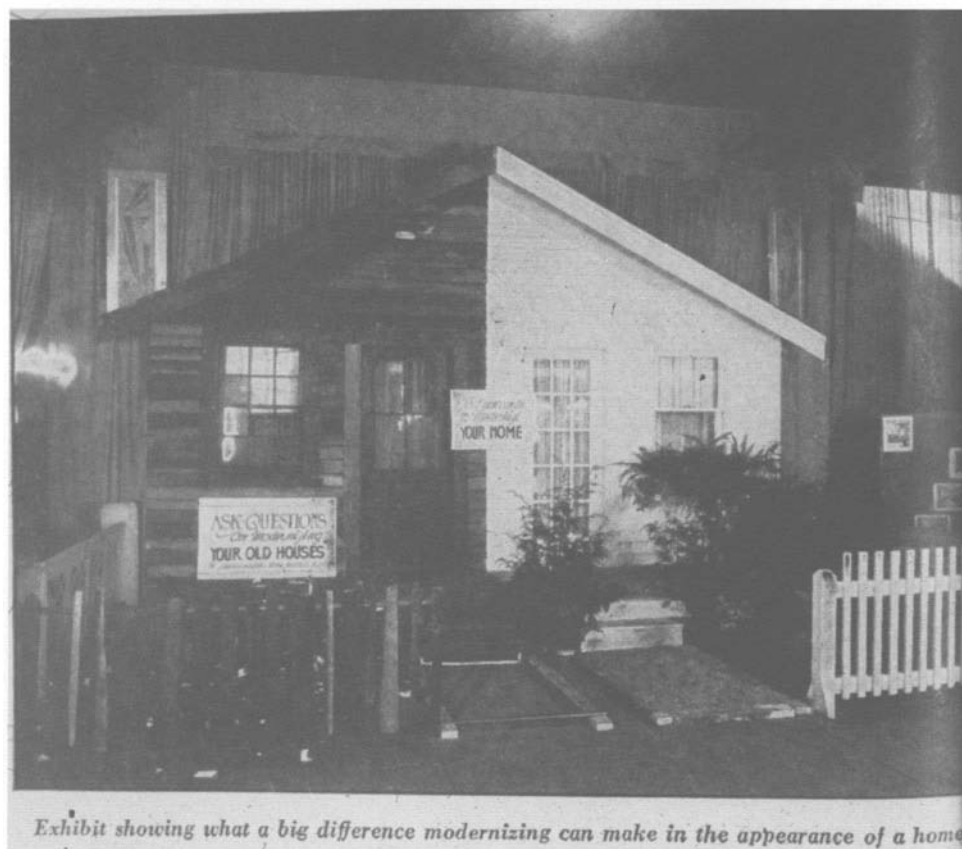
#### Architects' organizational weakness

As if in response to the concerns of architects, the FHA encouraged architects to band together to form architectural planning services, which they did, most notably in Buffalo and Baltimore.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the commercial plan services, the architectural ones were not set up to sell plans, but to match prospective clients with architects by collecting hundreds of plans from local architects. Clients would leaf through books of anonymous numbered plans, and when they found one they liked, they would be given the name of the architect. These ventures failed, mostly because architects did not have the centralized support and bureaucratic experience to run an effective plan service. Nonetheless, they show to what extent the FHA altered architectural practice, at least revealing to the profession its organizational weaknesses.

Better Housing also encouraged the local programmes to stage architectural competitions for house design. The promotion of competitions caused some controversy. The older, seasoned architects remembered the corruption of earlier competitions, and had worked for decades to establish a policy to discourage them. The old guard argued that competitions of this sort were detrimental to professional practice because they gave free plans to manufacturers or builders, who then had no responsibility, even to the winners of the



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6 'Pseudo events'?  
a People lining up to  
visit an exhibition  
home  
b 'Before' and 'after'  
exhibit



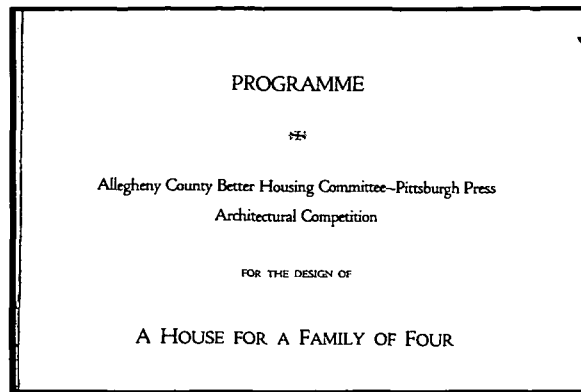
competition. Prizes rarely covered costs, and publicity was not even guaranteed, since designs could be published anonymously.

Earlier competitions of this sort had given the corporations greater power than the architect over the architectural product. For instance, United States Gypsum (USG) conducted a house competition in 1926 and made one of the conditions of entry that the company would retain the copyrights for the submissions. By this method, USG could amass dozens of designs for the nominal cost of the prizes, but since the competition was really a form of advertising, the company would have incurred these costs anyway. They also turned the competition into a plan service by selling working drawings upon request, thereby turning their advertising into a money-making venture. Architects rightly feared that books of stock plans like this would become the basis for builders' homes, thus exiling the architect from the housing market. Not only was Better Housing's interest in competitions a blow in the lean days of the Depression, but it seemed likely it would set the profession back decades.

Better Housing competitions were mostly local affairs [Fig 7].<sup>10</sup> However, the idea caught on, ironically, in the corporate world. In an attempt to thwart the government's increasing involvement with the building industry, big business struck quickly. Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company, for instance, held a competition in 1935–1936 to encourage the modernization of 'Main Street', which they explicitly linked with the FHA and its interest in store modernization (Libby-Owens-Ford, 1935). At the same time, the Portland Cement Association, a business consortium advocating for the cement and plaster industries, staged a small home competition called 'Designed in Concrete', and published the results 'in the interest of better homes for American Families' (Portland Cement Association, 1936). While these were successful competitions, they were not publicized well enough to divert attention away from the FHA General Electric's competition. In January 1935, just a couple months after the FHA launched the Better Housing Program, General Electric (GE) staged a massive small house competition. Playing with the rhetoric of Better Housing, the 'Better Homes in America' competition was one of the most successful in a long line of corporate publicity campaigns waged to undermine the New Deal.

#### General Electric

While the corporate competition was not a new idea, GE's signalled a significant change. Instead of dozens or hundreds of proposals, GE received over 2000, and this at a time when there were scarcely more than 10,000 registered architects in the United States. The architects signed over their designs to GE, and the winners were beholden to prepare a full set of working drawings.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the Depression, many of the high-minded ideals of professional practice were suspended. To its credit, GE avoided publishing a commercial plan book, instead relying on the media for publicity.



7 Cover from a brief for one of the many local competitions held in 1935–36

*Architectural Forum*, which co-sponsored the competition, devoted an entire issue in April 1935 to reporting the results, effectively creating a plan book for GE. In fact, GE distributed copies of this issue for its own publicity. Of even greater interest was how GE used the designs to garner publicity outside the architectural profession.

Also in April, the *New York Times* reported that GE intended to use the 52 prize-winning entries as models for a housing drive, proposing to build one home for every 100,000 Americans by September 1935, in what GE presented as an altruistic effort to 'stimulate building' (*New York Times*, d). In the midst of the Depression this must have seemed like an overwhelming gesture, just the sort of thing big business needed to win back the public faith lost since Black Friday. In a nation starved of good news, a corporate public service campaign like GE's made for great free publicity. The idea of the public service campaign was a relatively new advertising tactic; the press uncritically accepted it at face value.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the Better Homes Campaign made the Better Housing Program irrelevant, which is exactly what GE wanted.

Emulating the structure of Better Housing, GE set up over 100 regional committees, which, according to another *Times* article in June 1935, were made up of GE dealers, public utility representatives, and builders (*New York Times*, e). Architects were conspicuously missing. The committees offered select builders the prize-winning designs at substantial discounts and terms on General Electric equipment. Following the FHA's lead, GE also provided them with free advertising, ensuring the houses would be bought (*The Washington Post*, 28 April 1935).

#### Breaking down architects' morale

Architects were clearly threatened. Washington, D.C. architect, Irwin S. Porter, appealed to *The Octagon*: 'It seems to me that this will undoubtedly work a hardship on the architects of this country, if they use some 50 odd plans to be distributed to various builders throughout the country, repeating many times the design and again breaking down the

morale and slim chances of the architectural profession [for] recovery' (AIA Archives, a). The AIA apathetically informed Porter that it did not approve the competition and that 'it is difficult to meet and overcome the free plan service which it involves' (AIA Archives, b). Even though GE carefully avoided turning the competition into a plan service, many in the besieged architectural profession could see it in no other way. So much the worse that architects were stumbling in their efforts to organize their own plan services.

GE's media-blitz continued with monthly press releases. Also in June 1935 the company reported that its housing drive was to be speeded up, garnering another round of articles (*New York Times*, e). In July 1935 it formed Houses, Inc, a separate company, meant to co-operate 'with others in encouraging home building, [conduct] research work in the housing field and [assist] in the management and financing of such enterprises'. In other words, Houses, Inc was a corporate rival to the FHA's Better Housing Program, but with a more experimental thrust that encroached even more directly on the domain of the architect. Charles E. Wilson, vice president of GE, was quoted in *The Times* explaining how Houses, Inc would 'help others in worthy projects and to carry on the fundamental work and experiments for the particular benefit of those interested in perfecting modern houses' (*New York Times*, f). Houses, Inc also went significantly beyond the FHA by financing houses directly.

In October 1935, GE announced that 300 demonstration homes would throw open their doors to the public, a retort to National Better Housing Day, held four months before. The company departed from the winning competition designs and played to a wider public with its so-called 'Future House', which was planned around the latest GE equipment. GE president, Gerard Swope, claimed the Future House 'represented the American way of living', a phrase already well on its way to becoming a cliché. It was 'not the old-fashioned American way either', he continued, 'but the "New American" way – and thus a new style of house design was born – the "New American"' (*New York Times*, g). While the plans from the competition were offered to builders, often the developers chose their own designs, and used their own architects. The grand opening came in stages, beginning in early October with a series of private previews, reported, of course, by the press. Horticultural Hall, on the 11th floor of the RCA Building in New York City, exhibited the so-called 'Future House'.

#### Architects up in arms

GE's Houses, Inc began by excluding architects. The 'New American' house had done one better. By claiming the birth of a new style, it intruded on the traditional turf of architects. Style had been the bastion of the artist-architect. Modern architecture laid siege to style in an attempt to vanquish it and now the corporate world staged a hostile takeover. GE also made a bid to have it both ways, inventing a cultural space between conventional and modern

architecture. GE's Future House borrowed the anticipatory rhetoric of modern architecture, celebrating the machine and the transformation it would bring to domesticity. But GE attached this rhetoric to a more pedestrian facade and then dubbed it 'American', making it more palatable to an American public still dubious of modern architecture and its foreign roots. In the effort to fend off the real or imagined encroachment of engineers, builders, and planners, architects had been clinging to an artistic base for professional survival. In GE's publicity, the appliance-generated style, muscling the architect into an even narrower niche. If this is where corporate competitions led, it is no wonder architects were up in arms.

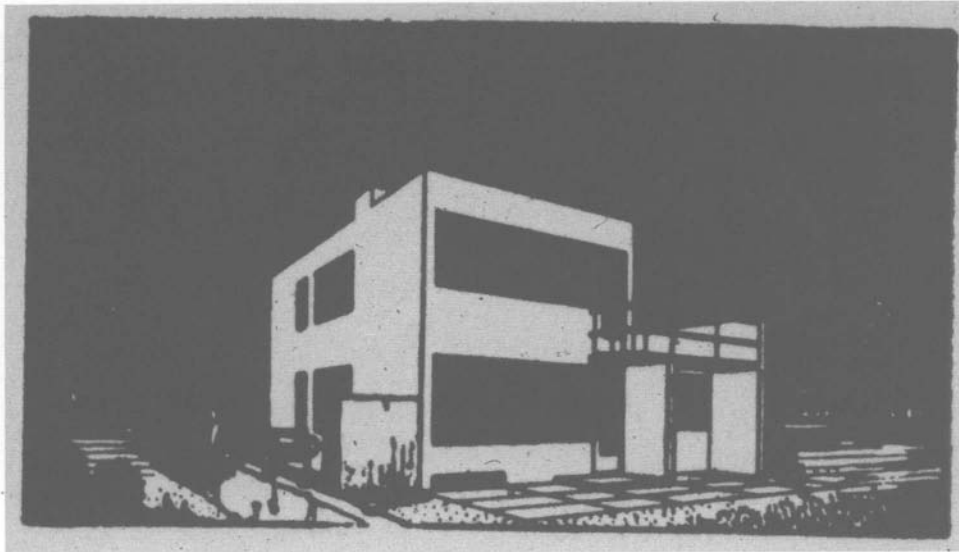
GE's competition proved a number of things to the corporate world. First, it showed just how good a competition was as publicity, and moreover, that the commercial plan book could be jettisoned for the new tactic of the public service campaign. Second, with some manipulation, modern architecture, as it turned out, could also be good publicity. The competition yielded overwhelmingly progressive architectural ideas and GE rewarded them with the top premiums. For instance, Philadelphia architect, Louis McCallister's GE design [Fig. 8] bore a striking resemblance to H. L. de Koninck's Lenglet House near Brussels from 1926, which appeared in the 1932 International Style exhibition, and may therefore have been on many architects' minds in 1935. This sort of formal comparison could be done *ad nauseum*, which is to say that a mere three years after Hitchcock and Johnson introduced the International Style through the rarefied world of MOMA, a corporation was sanctioning and spreading its gospel.

Taken together, the Better Housing Program and GE's competition forced a new set of issues onto the architectural profession. With little more than a public relations campaign, the government bureau had reinvigorated the building industry, but simultaneously it undermined the very definition of professional practice. Using similar techniques, GE's competition threatened the profession with corporate designed and sponsored houses. Its claims of founding a new style, while inflated, posed serious problems for a profession that had failed to confront the implications of modern architecture and the dire conditions of the Depression.

#### The American Institute of Architects

The AIA was caught off guard by GE's competition, along with others that followed. The Depression had broken the long-standing AIA ban on unofficial competitions, as hard times drove architects to enter corporate competitions not authorized by the AIA. More progressive architects saw competitions as a way of giving a chance to the younger generation and of giving an outlet for modern architecture. Until the mid-1930s, the AIA, which represented the more conservative members of the profession, resisted these opportunities. The sea-change is evident from the minutes of a 1936 meeting of the Philadelphia Chapter of the AIA. The Philadelphia group wrote a





8 Louis McCallister's 1935 entry for General Electric's competition – this bore a striking resemblance to a house which had been displayed in MOMA's 1932 International Style exhibition

statement to *The Octagon* asking it 'to cease the campaign which in recent years very nearly whispered the architectural competition out of existence' (AIA Minute Book, 1935–43).

The national organization had been evading similar uprisings in the profession for some time. By 1935 the policy was in flux, the thinking on competitions muddy. Each Chapter of the AIA had the power to approve a competition, so long as it adhered to the basic AIA policy, which required, first, a professional adviser, and, second, that a definite programme be sent to the local sub-committees on competitions. But competition committees changed year by year, and poorly informed architects frequently broke with policy, causing great confusion.

The chaotic state of affairs drew the attention of Egerton Swartwout, then head of the Committee on Competitions [Fig. 9]. A veteran of many competitions himself, Swartwout recognized the value of corporate competitions, especially to struggling, younger architects. He carefully worded a more permissive policy about corporate competitions, which became the standard refrain of the Institute: It was 'not the policy of The Institute to grant its official approval to competitions of this type', he wrote, 'but ... participancy of [its] members was not denied ...' (AIA Archives, c). In intra-office memos Swartwout worked through different wordings of the AIA's position on competitions. In a letter of May 1935, Swartwout wrote to Executive Secretary, E. C. Kemper: 'The Institute, very properly, does not commit itself as to the advisability of competitions, nor does it put itself on record as opposing them, as it did at one time' (AIA Archives, d). While drawing away from the unpopular policy of forbidding participation in unauthorized competitions, the AIA also withdrew from playing a role in influencing the way competitions were held. Such a soft change in policy was too little too late. In the 1930s and '40s, as corporate competitions proliferated, the AIA tried to cope with them by

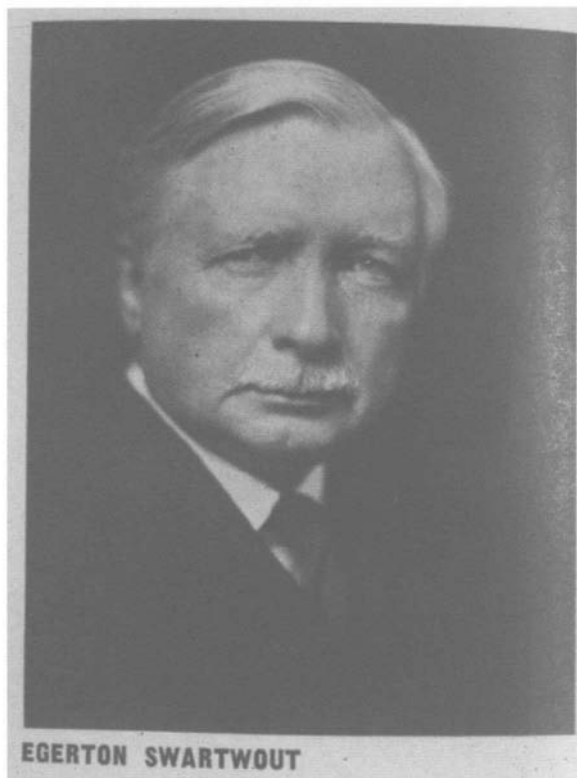
inflecting policy, but it moved too slowly, and never fully grasped their import as publicity for the profession.

#### A masterstroke for architects' business

Fortunately, some AIA members did. In September 1935, as GE's model homes were opening to the public, Philadelphia architect, Paul Davis, wrote to the AIA to complain about 'unauthorized competitions', by which he meant corporate competitions: 'The great surprise of the day', he wrote, 'is to still find architects so damned dumb that they do not realize a fine standard of professional practice is [also] a master stroke of business' (AIA Archives, e). Davis and other architects looked to the Committee on Competitions for a set of standards, a national board to appeal to, not for the unusual cases of fraud, but for the frequent competitions that undermined the architect's role by soliciting hundreds of designs with meagre or no compensation, and using those designs as publicity, or worse, in commercial plan books.

Yet the Committee on Competitions repeatedly refused to budge from its distant neutrality on competitions, even when the competition was for plum federal projects. In 1936, for example, there was much excitement in the profession when a number of public works were to be contested through competitions. A group of younger architects from across the nation wrote a long appeal to *The Octagon* urging that the AIA take a strong stance in favour of these competitions.

In the process, this group addressed the larger failure of the AIA to deal with competitions of all sorts. They wrote: 'For years the Institute has evaded this issue', and perhaps referring to Swartwout, the statement continued, 'We are in danger of becoming elderly, broad-waisted, slow-moving and conservative in the midst of a vital and progressive age. We need young, vigorous and ambitious creative architects' (AIA Archives, f). Expressing a mixture of youthful bravado and hunger, with a real concern about



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professional practice, the report went on to demand: 'We need publicity ... We believe a more general use of the competition method will do much to educate the public to the value of architectural service' (AIA Archives, f). And they continued: 'The growth of many Government bureaus and the increasing tendency to regiment our profession out of an independent existence is, we believe, to a large extent due to the inability of the Institute to formulate and advance a proper answer to this question' (AIA Archives, f).

In response, Swartwout wrote an intra-office memo to AIA Secretary Charles Ingham simply stating: '... inasmuch as this resolution concerns a broad question of Institute policy and not the conduct of competitions in general, it was beyond the power of the Committee officially to make any report or recommendation upon it' (AIA Archives, g).<sup>13</sup> In other words, the *idea* of the competition was beyond the purview of the Committee on Competitions; only narrow questions of conduct were relevant. The problem was, the AIA had no other committee that could wrestle with the idea of the competition in relation to the profession.

In a second letter to Ingham, Swartwout advised against the publication of the group's letter in *The Octagon* on the grounds that it would be confused as an official statement of the AIA, and that it might persuade the 'Government people to continue the present system', namely of holding competitions. Almost as an aside, Swartwout quietly added his own age bias, commenting that the architects in question were not competition savvy, having not generally entered them (AIA Archives, h).<sup>14</sup> The generational anxieties expressed by both sides might be taken as evidence of one element of bureaucratic structure

9 'Elderly, broad-waisted, slow moving and conservative'? – the AIA's Competitions Committee head, Egerton Swartwout

and control: a hierarchy of status based on age, which itself is used as a veil for nepotistic exclusion. How else would the young architects become experienced in competitions unless they were given the opportunity to enter them. Swartwout also tendered his resignation that year; at 66, the controversy may have been too much for him.

### Withdrawal and uproar

Eric Gugler replaced Swartwout as the head of the Committee on Competitions, but with similar results. The Board of Directors that year approached the AIA Convention with the resolution (really a non-resolution) that the Institute 'does not express itself concerning methods of selecting architects for public works' (AIA Archives, i). The Institute was withdrawing even further from the issue, which led to an uproar at the convention. William Lescaze and a host of younger architects agitated, pressing the old guard and forcing them out of their trenches. In the end, the Board of Directors found more flexible language, allowing that competitions 'should receive thoughtful consideration ... as being a possible solution to some of the difficulties facing Government, the private architect and the Institute' (AIA Archives, j).

More importantly, the encounter led to the formation of a new group, the National Committee on Competitions. Composed of New York architects disgruntled with the work of Gugler's Committee, the new group, led by Henry Churchill and William Lescaze, took on what its Washington representatives would not – the relationship between competitions and professional viability (and visibility) in the swiftly changing world of architecture.<sup>15</sup>

The New York group immediately displayed its bureaucratic savvy. It hired a publicist who issued a statement in late 1937, decrying the lack of federal competitions. The profession, it claimed, 'has been menaced by State and Governmental agencies, which have set up bureaus to take over the work which more properly belongs to the architect in the field of private practice. The Federal Government has usurped the functions of the architect' (AIA Archives, k). The publicist went on to claim: 'Under the pressure of emergency, the Office of the Supervising Architect in Washington developed from a small supervising unit to the largest architectural planning factory in the world ... Now architectural design has become the function of the Procurement Division of the Government' (AIA Archives, k). The implied result was an authoritarian state, the bureaucratic machine having usurped the role of the architect.

To those with a more conspiratorial bent, these public projects demonstrated that the federal

government was quickly taking over the building industry. According to the statement, this threatened not just the profession but also the American way of life: 'The public is unmindful', the publicist wrote, 'of the implications of this transition, and does not realize that it is subscribing to a principle of bureaucratic control which is entirely un-American and subversive of excellence in civic architecture' (AIA Archives, k).

### Architects adopt PR

The irony is that the New York Chapter had to hire a publicist on behalf of the profession to rabble rouse about the evils of bureaucracy primarily because the AIA was not a strong enough bureaucracy in its own right to counter the slick public relations associated with New Deal public projects. Using rhetoric borrowed from the corporate world, the New York group took on the New Deal, charging dictatorship, and calling it un-American. Architects were caught between two very effective bureaucratic juggernauts: big business and government. Realizing its own administration in Washington was too weak to enter the fray, the New York group aligned itself with big business and adopted modern bureaucracy's most deadly weapon: PR.<sup>16</sup>

Not everyone, however, was so sanguine about competitions. The last years of the 1930s saw various chapters engage in the debate from every imaginable point of view. In late 1938, the Committee on Competitions began to assert itself a bit more, formulating a new policy to deal with the changing realities of competitions. Wary of 'competitions that do not lead directly to the erection of any actual structure' but acknowledging that the prizes for such competitions were 'an incentive to the younger members of the profession', the AIA began to think of corporate competitions as a subordinate or secondary class to be tolerated when kept under strict control (AIA Archives, l). A bipartite policy for competitions began to take shape.

Still, the AIA remained firmly against corporate competitions. In a formal statement to the profession in December 1938, the Committee on Competitions expressed that '... it can be stated definitely that the Institute does not look with favor on competitions held mainly for publicity in the hope of raising funds for vague operations that may never materialize' (AIA Archive, l). Taking a shot at the supporters of the corporate competitions, the Committee on Competitions stated: '... nor do they approve the action of architectural magazines in sponsoring or conducting architectural competitions, considering this an intrusion on the rights of the profession to conduct and be responsible for their own operations' (AIA Archive, l). Two years earlier, the AIA had not considered the administration of competitions a formal duty; now it was scolding the magazines for stepping in where it was absent.

### The Competitions Committee waffles on

The Committee on Competitions continued to waffle over policy, however. When the war economy kicked

in, as materials were rationed, and restrictions were placed on non-military building, the profession was seized by another crisis. Wartime was bleak for young and inexperienced architects. Competitions for federal and private projects dried up. There was neither time, nor money for the indulgence of a competition.

Some architects were lucky enough to secure military or workers' housing. Others signed on with corporations as industrial designers, or consultants, but the bulk of architects were simply jobless. After a decade of depression, it was a state they were used to, but now the energies of the rest of the nation were surging, while they sat idly by.

The homefront was also an awkward time for many corporations. Even big war contracts came at a price. While such contracts ensured profits during the war, these corporations were concerned about recapturing a peacetime market that had grown accustomed to life without their products. To combat this trend many corporations launched massive advertising campaigns, especially beginning in the months after Pearl Harbor. Advertisements about unavailable products filled the popular and trade press. Corporate competitions again flourished as a way for corporations to maintain a public image when products were rationed and taken off the market. The AIA, seriously understaffed and still equivocating on corporate competitions, formed a special committee to study the matter, but it was ineffectual. Hundreds of architects entered corporate competitions during the war, and plan books proliferated, some with the stamp of approval of top architects.

In 1944, for instance, the National Association of Home Builders, an organization often at odds with the architectural profession, launched a home design competition that was not merely judged by an architect, but by the AIA's president, Raymond Ashton. Naturally this caused a furor. John Thornton, President of the Michigan Society of Architects, wrote a letter to the AIA Board of Directors arguing that the NAHB competition 'could easily injure the profession' (AIA Archives, m). Ashton was clearly deceitful either to the NAHB or to Thornton. He responded to Thornton: 'Confidentially, I have seen in my lifetime the exploitation of the profession by the so-called home builders, who to my mind, are frequently building brokers with little or no appreciation of the value of professional service' (AIA Archives, n). He went on to argue for his role as judge as 'an opening wedge' in 'what has been an unhappy relationship, partly because of the not too clean hands of the realtors' (AIA Archives, n). Ashton warned Thornton to be discrete, marking his letter 'CONFIDENTIAL' and telling him of the harm that indiscretion would cause (AIA Archive, n). It is possible that Ashton sincerely believed the competition held out some promise for a rapprochement between architects and builders, but considering his negative assessment of builders (realtors), and the subsidiary role architects played in the competition, his motives are none too clear. It must have seemed like a step backward for the

profession to have its president ruling on a competition that architects could not enter.

By 1950 AIA architects served as judges for a competition on building product literature, rating the best promotional material generated by corporate bureaucracies. By then the battle against competitions, and by extension, against corporate inroads into the profession, had been lost. The loss marks the passing of an old order of architects, along with their methods and theories of architecture.

### The profession changed for ever

Often this story has been schematically written as a battle modernists won against an old guard of Beaux Arts practitioners clutching their T-squares as I-beams were riveted onto the facades of Miesian towers. But the story goes beyond questions of style. In the 1930s and '40s, the AIA was basically a gentleman's organization. Poorly funded, even poorly subscribed, it did not represent the profession, and it certainly did not have the power or ability to defend it. New forms of organization, not the least of which was the growth of public relations, demanded an agile professional organization, one that understood the emerging rules of practice, and could set the agenda for the profession.

The conditions of the Depression and later of the war only brought out the odd status architecture has always endured as a profession. As Ruskin defined it about a hundred years earlier, architecture is 'that art which, taking up and admitting, as conditions of its working, the necessities and common uses of the building, impresses on its form certain

characteristics venerable or beautiful, but otherwise unnecessary' (Ruskin, 1913). The logic is one of subtle distinctions of class and status: architecture's claim to professional status was its very lack of necessity. Being above necessity, architecture was more than a mundane trade, like masonry or carpentry, and demanded professionals with taste and distinction.

In times when necessity dominates, however, like depression or war, the architectural profession is thrown into turmoil and has to find new professional ground on which to stand (Ruskin, 1981). The architects in charge of the AIA in the 1930s still operated under Ruskin's assumption about architecture, even though the profession had been shaken by engineers, builders, and more progressive architects who had challenged that definition for nearly a hundred years. With Ruskin came certain high-minded ideals about professional practice also developed in the nineteenth century, namely that professional men did not deign to advertise their services. By the 1930s, this ideal was not merely antiquated by changes in architectural practice and by rival bureaucracies, it posed a threat to the survival of the profession as it was then constituted. The AIA slowly changed, launching a publicity campaign for the profession after the Second World War, but that was at least a decade late. In the meantime, architectural firms had restructured themselves to deal with the realities of the building industry, for ever altering the practice of architecture, which settled into the uneasy position somewhere between building, bureaucracy, and Barnum that persists today.

### Notes

1. William Larry Bird has written about the corporate response to the New Deal in his recent book, *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935–1955* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1998). Bird is especially good on the rhetorical play of Bruce Barton, who created DuPont's 'Better Living' advertisements in 1935. Barton represented General Electric, as well (see below).
2. Cf Arthur L. Stinchcombe, 'Bureaucratic and Craft Administration of Production: A Comparative Study', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 4 (1959–1960): pp.168–187.
3. The classic work that sets up this standard view is Max Weber's *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947). Incredibly, almost every source since Weber's has had to reckon with his production-based understanding of bureaucracy.
4. The display of facts as a measure of success might be profitably held up to Max Weber's theories about the Protestant ethic and the display of success, in this case transmuting material gain through a credo of rationality into a display of rationality as the index of success. In this way, someone in the building industry could become one of the 'chosen' by joining the better housing programme, and become charged with the power to extend the status to the public by waving Better Housing's charts in the faces of potential customers. Public service might thus be seen to be confused with personal salvation through increased sales and the salvation of the nation in a time of economic strife.
5. See R. H. Shreve, 'A Challenge', *The Octagon* 7 (July 1935) p.5.
6. See Charles W. Killam, 'Design in its Relation to Construction', *The Octagon* 7 (February 1935) pp.8–14.
7. A more nuanced history of the profession in America is sorely needed, especially in light of the constant effort of architects to define new professional domains as the realities of building change.
8. Amid the flowering of federal arts and writing projects, hard times it seems would not sustain the indulgence of high design in architecture.
9. See John J. Wade, 'Cooperate with FHA – The Buffalo Plan', *The Octagon* 7 (April 1935) p.14. Wade was Chief Architectural Supervisor of the Buffalo FHA.
10. The Allegheny County Better Housing Committee sponsored a competition in 1935 called 'A House for a Family of Four'. For the programme, see AIA Archives, RG 802, Series 2, Box 17, Folder 27.
11. For the programme of the GE competition, see *Architectural Forum* (April 1935).
12. For more on the origins and tactics of public service campaigns as promotion, see Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Inventing*

*the Consumer, 1880–1940* (Diss Harvard University, 1993).

13. This correspondence must have been tinged with more than a little bit of tension. Ingham served on the jury of GE's Better Homes Competition in 1935.
14. For his own part Swartwout had been a major participant in competitions, entering competitions for the Roger Williams Memorial Baptist Church (1924), the George Washington Memorial (1914), and the Missouri State Capitol (1912), among others.
15. The New York architects came to the competition with a great deal of enthusiasm. In 1936 they had just competed in the competition for the 1939 New York World's Fair, which was intended to find the hidden talent among the younger architects. The success of this competition, coupled with the obvious advantages the New York area gained from the GE competition, may have influenced their positive assessment of the competition.
16. Also in 1937, the failure of the AIA to advocate for the profession was so severe that the Pennsylvania Chapter made a move to pull out of the organization and reorganize the entire profession with the AIA retained as an honorary and professional body, but stripped of its ability to head the State Associations. A new National Association of Architects was proposed with automatic membership granted through official registration in any state. One of the main goals of the proposed NAA was to conduct publicity for the profession and to fight what it considered unfair competition from government bureaus. See Minutes of the Pennsylvania Chapter of the AIA, AIA Minutes Book, 1935–1943 (10 May 1937), at the Philadelphia Athenaeum.

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- Federal Housing Administration 1 – 6b.
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## Biography

Andrew Shanken is currently Chester Dale Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study of the Visual Arts. His dissertation, 'From Total War to Total Living: American Architecture and the Culture of Planning, 1939–194X' is a study of how American architects during the Second World War imagined the world after the war.

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