

World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation, National Building Museum, Washington DC, 11 Nov. 1994-31 Dec. 1995; accompanied by a catalog of the same title, ed. Donald Albrecht, published by the National Building Museum and MIT Press, 1995

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Exhibition Review

Annamarie Adams

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There are few interior spaces in North America as monumental as the Great Hall of the former Pension Building located in Washington's Judiciary Square. Its open, four-storey volume is magnificently ringed by arcaded galleries; light emanates from a double row of arched windows above the office floors. Just below the building's huge gabled roofs (which rise to a maximum height of 159'), accentuated by their exposed iron trusses, is a "cornice" comprised of 244 seemingly tiny busts, mostly of Native Americans.

The grand 316' by 116' room is traversed by two screens of colossal Corinthian marbleized columns, supposedly the largest in the world. As an example of architectural irony at its best, the columns seem to march through the Great Hall. So do the hundreds of soldiers depicted in the terra-cotta frieze which rings the exterior of the 108-year-old brick government office building, constructed by U.S. Army general and civil engineer Montgomery C. Meigs to accommodate the bureau which disbursed pensions to disabled war veterans and their families. It is no surprise, given the building's unique sense of grandeur, that the Great Hall has been the site of the presidential inaugural balls since that of Grover Cleveland in 1885. Since 1980 the Pension Building has served, quite appropriately, as the National Building Museum.

The structure's wartime roots have been subtly underscored in the recent exhibition "World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed

a Nation," which explores the relationship of World War II and the design of cities, a variety of building types, and domestic products. The exhibition itself is installed in five or six relatively small galleries located off a corner of the museum's Great Hall; a P-39 Airacobra fighter plane suspended from Meigs' grand ceiling only hints at the standardized world of metal and plastic revealed in the display of approximately 350 items obscured by the ground-floor arches. The exhibition proceeds in a linear manner. Visitors enter from the Great Hall through the long side of a reconstructed Quonset hut and then proceed through rooms organized thematically around topics such as mass production, Washington during the war, wartime research, housing and cities, and household products. In its stunning models, compelling photographs, vintage film footage, tantalising posters, oral histories, furniture, domestic appliances, and household products, the notion runs throughout the exhibit that the staples of postwar, middle-class life—highways suburbs, convenience foods, reliable medicine—were developed *during*, rather than *after* World War II. Many of the objects included in the show are commonplace: modern-looking factories, fluorescent lighting, fibreglass and plywood chairs, styrofoam, Saran wrap, and frozen foods.

More startling is the sheer scale of wartime production as presented in the first few galleries. Visitors are told that 170,000 Quonset huts were shipped around the world, to serve 100 different purposes, and are perhaps reminded that multi-functionalism is a hallmark of Modernism; the largest wood structures in the world—blimp hangars measuring over 1,000 feet in length—were constructed due to shortages in metal. This might trigger associations of power and heroic engineering.

The section on the Pentagon emphasizes this notion of scale. A huge plan and an incredible sectional model allow glimpses into the world's largest office building, a 4-million-square-foot structure built for 40,000 defense workers in 1942. The building comprised 17 miles of corridors in its innovative, pinwheel arrangement. The enormous impact on the morphology of Washington as the administrative centre for the U.S. war effort is evident in photographs showing the "temporary" architecture constructed along the Mall (Figure 1).

The arrangement of these first few galleries which focuses on the scale of the American wartime effort strikes a delicate balance between the enormity of the "big picture" of the war and the value of personal perspectives. This is mostly achieved through the innovative use of oral histories. ABC News commentator David Brinkley describes life in the capital during the war near this section dedicated to the Pentagon; the first gallery which looks at the mass production of barracks is enlivened by the reminiscences of an African-American carpenter who participated in the construction of one of the largest Army camps. Further on, the 1947 film "Looking Ahead Through Rohm & Haas Plexiglas" takes visitors on a tour through the "Plexiglas Dream Suite," which featured postwar domestic uses for their innovative product.

The design of the exhibition itself is an engaging framework for this multi-media presentation. In addition to the Quonset hut, designers Michael Sorkin and J. Abbott Miller constructed display walls, horizontal surfaces, and "stations" for the exhibition inspired by real wartime products. The model of the gigantic blimp hangar, for example, sits on an over-engineered wheeled, metal cart; photographs and posters about the promise of domestic bliss following the war are arranged like sheathing on a thin, tilted wall constructed of steel studs, inspired

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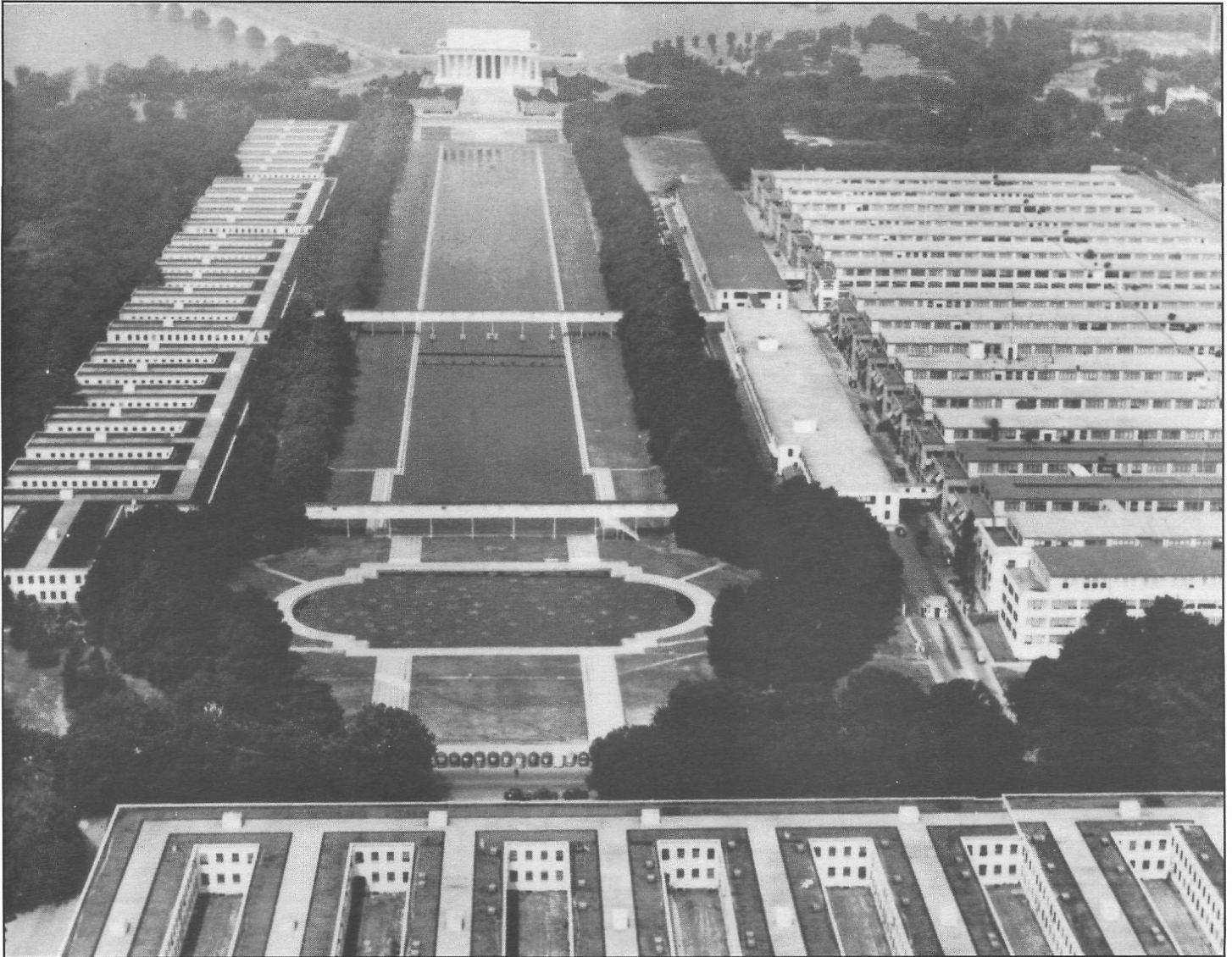


Figure 1: *Temporary Emergency Office Buildings along the Mall in Washington, DC*
Source: *National Building Museum, Washington, DC*

by prefabricated house construction. The background for the section on appliances, tableware, and food is ordinary insulation and aluminum siding. The text throughout the exhibition is on stainless steel sheets in authentic, wartime script. Like all good exhibition design, these details function as a relatively neutral frame-

work for the objects themselves, while underlining the show's major assertion: this stuff made a difference.

In classic 1990s fashion, however, the exhibition itself is less well-crafted than the relatively cheap products which comprise its subject. Even on opening day,

text was literally falling off the walls of the National Building Museum. A deconstructing exhibition, however, was not the worst fate to befall the opening celebrations appropriately held on Veterans' Day (November 11); the accompanying 208-page catalog, co-published by the museum and MIT Press, was unavailable to

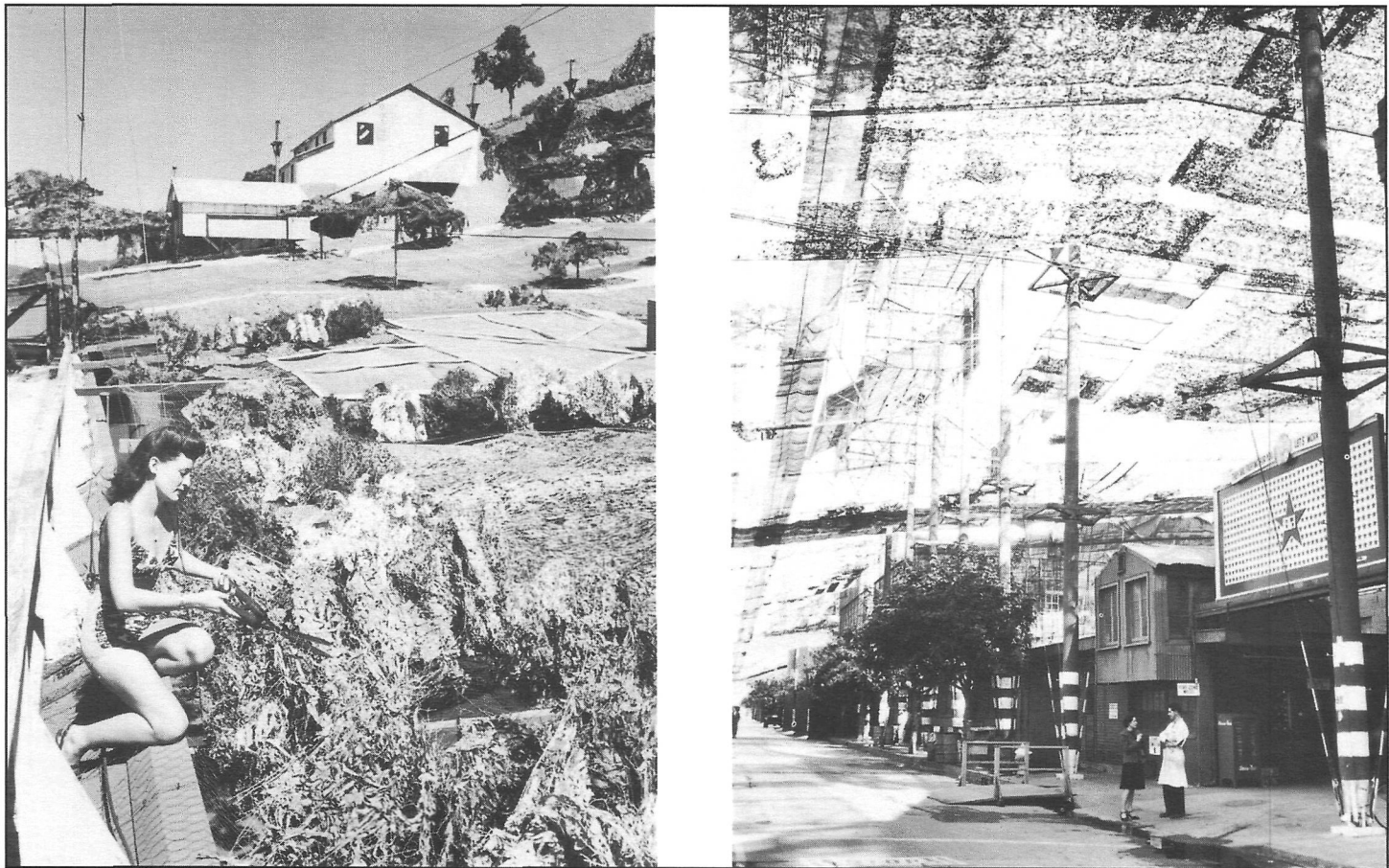


Figure 2: Left: *Camouflage Village on Top of Douglas Aircraft Plant, Santa Monica, California (n.d.)*
Right: *Douglas Aircraft Plant Under Camouflage, Santa Monica, California (n.d.)*

Source: *McDonnell Douglas Corporation*

an eager public, still hungry for information as part of the 1994 celebration of 50 years since D-Day. It is now estimated that the book will be out in May 1995.

Uncorrected galleys were on hand in the hope of ensuring orders for the book; these revealed its makeup of thematic essays by six scholars, a lengthy bibliography, and a year-by-year timeline of events during the war. Although loosely based on the exhibition, it will undoubtedly stand on its own as an independent contribution to the growing literature on war and architecture. Particularly innova-

tive are the essays by Margaret Crawford, "Daily Life on the Home Front: Women, Blacks, and the Struggle for Public Housing," and by Greg Hise, "The Airplane and the Garden City: Regional Transformations during World War II."

Indeed, the most original parts of the exhibition seem to have been drawn from the research of these two scholars—the relation of the war years to postwar housing and urban life. While the exhibition tends to highlight (and mostly celebrate) the architectural innovations resulting from the war, like the "ingenious solu-

tions" for factories designed by well-known architect Albert Kahn and others, Crawford's essay uncovers the horrid living conditions and double standards experienced by black workers in and around these supposedly well-designed factories.

Likewise, Hise's provocative essay suggesting that the dispersal of war industries promoted community planning and boosted the role of private builders is summed up in a tiny map of Los Angeles in the exhibition. Models of Frank Lloyd Wright's unbuilt Cloverleaf housing pro-

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ject and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion house, which had little impact on ordinary housing, are given much more prominence. Visitors who take the time to examine every image, however, will delight in the photographs showing whole fake suburbs constructed on the roofs of war factories, like the village above the Douglas Aircraft Plant in Santa Monica, California (Figure 2). These were intended to protect American war industries from air attack.

"World War II and the American Dream" offers a number of lessons for scholars interested in the Canadian wartime experience. Canada, of course, was equally affected by large-scale urban migrations of war workers and our cities were similarly rearranged to accommodate temporary buildings. Private developers, however, played less important roles in the large-scale development of wartime housing. Here the federal government established Wartime Housing Limited (WHL) in 1941 to contract out the con-

struction of temporary emergency housing across the country. These houses were wholly financed by the government and rented to the occupants. Following the war, many of these houses were sold to their wartime inhabitants at low prices. Largely modernized and upgraded, WHL houses are considered by many scholars today as extremely good examples of affordable housing. In WHL neighbourhoods like Ville St-Laurent, Quebec, the houses are fully occupied.

Despite their "temporary" character, WHL neighbourhoods were equally prophetic of the Canadian postwar landscape. Like wartime communities developed in the United States, WHL neighbourhoods showcased winding streets, conservatively-styled houses, and were located at some distance from city centres.

Canadian visitors to the exhibition may feel frustrated at the singular perspective offered by "World War II and the Ameri-

can Dream"; it erroneously depicts both the wartime and postwar experiences as uniquely American phenomena and presents World War II, in general, as an American rather than an Allied victory. This is compounded, of course, by the show's location in a site fashioned of multiple, complex layers of American nationalism. If anything, the production of housing during the war served to blur national boundaries and architectural traditions. Remember, the Germans did it too.

Back in the Great Hall, the marbleized columns seem as big as ever, even beside the fighter plane. The Civil War soldiers outside, too, are still in perfect step. In this place, after all, war is swell.¹

Note

- 1 "War is Swell" is the title of Michael Sorkin's contribution to the exhibition catalog.