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194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture on the American Homefront

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that the war would be over before the 1940s were through. This optimism, which suffused the home front in this period, is a keynote of Shanken's book. Reeling from the economic austerities of the Depression and the material restrictions of the war, architecture survived this professional double whammy by, in essence, ignoring it. Rather than dwelling on the lack of opportunities for building in the present, the profession looked toward the future, imagining a time when they might start to build again. Planning for this specific postwar moment, along with the rhetoric and discourse that surrounded it and the culture that produced it, is the subject of *194X*.

In four brisk and well-illustrated chapters Shanken examines how planning became a central professional occupation of the war years, with architects reconsidering their role in shaping the built environment as the New Deal gave way to the Arsenal of Democracy. Through planning, architects hoped to broaden the scope of their work and the field of their influence. Nowhere is this clearer than in the chapter "Old Cities, New Frontiers," which explores the ways architects planned and promoted the transformation of the country's "mature" urban areas as an economic necessity after the war. This chapter demonstrates to a remarkable degree how the planning agenda of *194X* anticipated and undoubtedly shaped the urban renewal policies and practices of the 1950s and 1960s.

What emerges from Shanken's lively narrative is a fascinating account of architecture on the home front in the 1940s. In this respect, *194X* makes a significant contribution to a body of scholarship known as "home front studies." Initially concerned with stateside issues like rationing and air raid drills, the field has expanded since the 1990s to explore cultural production, including the war's impact on film, art, and literature. In books and exhibitions such as *World War II and the American Dream* (National Building Museum, 1994–95), scholars have extended the inquiry to architecture, examining wartime building and building culture.¹ What is unique about *194X* is Shanken's consideration of how

Andrew M. Shanken

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The "X" in the title of Andrew Shanken's book refers to the unknown year that would mark the end of the Second World War. The stateside creators of what Shanken describes as "a kind of V-day for the built environment" (1) were convinced

wartime designers envisioned the postwar landscape. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of the book is the interplay between the wartime present and the postwar future.

Throughout the book, Shanken shifts seamlessly back and forth from the realities of the 1940s to the visions of 194X, as depicted in a cohesive body of design work produced between 1938 and 1946 by such architects as Louis Kahn, Eero Saarinen, William Lescaze, and Edward Durrell Stone, and industrial designers such as Walter Dorwin Teague, Egmont Arens, and Norman Bel Geddes. Ranging in scale from building components, like store-fronts and fixtures, to prefabricated and demountable structures, and from commercial, civic, and residential urban renewal schemes to suburban new towns, subdivisions, and shopping centers, the paper architecture of 194X is one of Shanken's central discoveries.

Canonical demarcations of prewar and postwar have tended to render the war years as something of an architectural void (notwithstanding studies of defense housing, etc.). Shanken's "forgotten oeuvre" (97) now convincingly fills this void, and what this work reveals requires us to reconsider, if not utterly retell, is the conventional narrative of twentieth-century architecture in the United States. The acceptance of modernism, for example, has too often been misunderstood as a postwar phenomenon tied to the arrival on these shores of European émigrés. But the "imagery of home front anticipation" (15) fully embraced modernist forms and planning ideals, demonstrating that U.S. practitioners had already begun to assimilate—and exploit—modernism well before the end of World War II. The designs of 194X also demonstrate how, contrary to the accepted view, this embrace of modernism in wartime America was not divorced from the social reformist ideals of its European originators but was, in fact, infused with a progressive agenda, one that was intentionally deployed as a way of distinguishing between capitalist democracy and totalitarianism.

194X also reveals a profound relationship between architecture and consumer

culture during the war years. Although in some way this relationship was simply an extension of exigencies that emerged with the decline in building activity during the Great Depression, as Shanken explains in "Advertising Nothing, Anticipating Nowhere," it became more urgent as home-front architects found themselves sidelined in military building and planning operations. Lacking other opportunities for practice, architects began preparing promotional designs for building industry manufacturers, including General Electric, Monsanto, and Pittsburgh Plate Glass, who were eagerly anticipating the brave new world of 194X as it took shape in a matrix of ephemeral advertising and marketing.

Until Shanken came along, the majority of this work was hiding in plain sight: drawings, models, and photo-collages reproduced in advertisements on the pages of popular and professional magazines such as *Time*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Architectural Record*, and *Architectural Forum*. Like the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts, long ignored by medievalists who thought they were inconsequential to the art of the Middle Ages, the architecture and urbanism of wartime advertising were easily ignored by architectural historians whose scholarly inclinations were monographic and hierarchic. Shanken's accomplishment is to refocus our gaze, making the supposedly peripheral absolutely central. This was no easy task; as Shanken notes in a valuable appendix (listing wartime advertising campaigns), when libraries bound magazines and journals into volumes at midcentury, they frequently removed advertisements or placed them in separate sections. This historiographic elision severed advertisements from their editorial and chronological context, rendered their relationship to architectural practice all but invisible, and fostered the convenient fiction of architecture's autonomy from commercial forces.

194X ends somewhat ruefully: as American industry retooled for peacetime after 1945, building superseded planning, which was increasingly perceived as the territory of fantasists and dreamers (think of Robert Moses's oft-cited condemnation of

"the long-haired planners" in 1944). Planning never regained its wartime prominence. If Shanken's book sheds light on an important moment in American architecture, it also offers a thoughtful frame for considering the state of contemporary culture. From the vantage point of the home front in the twenty-first century, with an end to the Great Recession and two wars still too dim to perceive, the optimism of 194X might be just the thing. The time may have come to start planning for 201X.

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Note

1. Donald Albrecht, ed., *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation* (Washington, D.C. and Cambridge: National Building Museum and MIT Press, 1994).