

Chapter 18

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Mirror images

Technology, consumption, and the representation of gender in American architecture since World War II

Two well-known images might be said to define American architecture in the first decades after World War II. One is Lever House, an early icon of International Style modernism, public face of American corporate capitalism (Figure 18.1). The other is Levittown, embodiment of suburban single-family domesticity, a vision of private life socially traditional and aesthetically conservative (Figure 18.2). How is this apparent schism in the built representation of postwar America to be explained? Why was a modernist aesthetic acceptable in the public realm but not in the private one? What is the relationship between this—literally and figuratively—high and low architecture? In what follows I shall attempt to answer these questions by postulating the existence of a kind of unstated “bargain” or social arrangement facilitated by basic assumptions about gender roles. From this analysis I shall then consider some significant shifts that have taken place more recently in the context of postmodernism.

It is necessary to begin by redescribing these two emblematic images in terms of the dominant ideologies they represented. The International Style as developed in the corporate and administrative framework of postwar America explicitly embodied the values of *technocracy*—the ethos of rationalism, bureaucracy, and technoscientific progress on which both big business and government were predicated. The exposed high-rise structural frame infilled with the repetitive modulations of an abstract curtain wall reflected the expansionist ambitions and laconic demeanor of American capitalism in an age of cold-war geopolitics.

Ironically, this “strong silent type” came to represent the “new monumentality” that Sigfried Giedion had called for during the war years, although not, to be sure, in the civic sense he had envisioned. Its cold, hard, unornamental, technical image supplied the American government with what it wanted out of its professional elites during the cold-war period. This was, as historian Godfrey Hodgson has put it, “a maximum of technical ingenuity with a minimum of dissent.”¹

Having its major origin in the interwar modern movement in Europe, the postwar International Style was an outcome of the doctrine codified by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their 1932 show at the Museum of Modern Art and of the teachings disseminated by the European emigrés who began at this time to head America’s most prestigious schools of architecture. But American postwar modernism also had an indigenous source in the formidable imagery of native American technology: in engineering achievements like the Ford plant at River Rouge, the TVA dam, and, most recently, the arsenal of

18.1 Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Lever House, New York, New York, 1952



military production that had brought the United States and its allies to triumph in the war. As a recent exhibition at the National Building Museum in Washington illustrated,² the ascendancy of the postwar International Style coincided with the emergence of the American military-industrial complex. American architectural firms, led by offices like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, designers of Lever House, reproduced these values in their own technically sophisticated and increasingly bureaucratic professional structures. SOM, still a moderate-sized firm at the beginning of the 1940s, got its major breakthrough during the war when it received a \$60 million commission from the U.S. government to design a new town for fifty thousand people at Site X of the Manhattan Project, a location near Knoxville, Tennessee, where the atomic bomb was secretly being developed.

It is apparent that the imagery of technological power, highly rationalized and disciplined production, and wealth projected by this postwar architecture was a product of the male-dominated hierarchy whose expression it was and whose values were at stake in it. Geared to optimizing the labor of a new class of capitalist worker whom sociologists



18.2 *Bernard
Levey and Family,
Levittown, New
York, 1950*

would dub “organization man,” it reflected a major shift in social orientation. In the earlier phase of modern architecture, the urbanized factory worker had been the protagonist of culture, at least symbolically, and factories and social housing were the inspirational programs. In postwar America, corporate headquarters, embassy buildings, and detached single-family houses became architecture’s defining instances, and the man in the gray flannel suit commuting to a wife and children in the suburbs its prototypical occupant. Nor is this characterization belied by the fact that behind the office tower’s glass facade, the corporation’s CEO furnished his penthouse suite in the style of Louis XIV or the executive dining room like an Edwardian gentleman’s club; below, the middle managers, secretaries, and staff worked and lunched in “office landscapes” programmed for maximum functional efficiency. Indeed, the implementation of modernism as the prestige style of corporate capitalism was not a matter of a significant change in taste, as Russell Lynes pointed out in 1949 in his book *The Tastemakers*.³ Rather, it was a symbolic display of power. The American philosopher George Santayana had observed four decades earlier: “The American Will inhabits the skyscraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.”⁴

In the postwar period this split between the work world and domestic life characterized not only the upper class. For the burgeoning middle class, too, the domestic abode became, if not the place for the ritual enactment of gentility, at least the antithesis to the workaday routine and the repository of bourgeois comfort. The “male” culture of production found its complement in the “female” culture of consumption.

The postwar house thus reflected the other dominant ideology of the postwar period, that of *consumerism*. By the second quarter of this century, mass consumption had

become central to the development of American capitalism. Even during the years of World War II, when consumer goods were greatly restricted because of war production needs, the public's appetite for postwar plenitude was whetted by the media and by government-sanctioned advertising (Figure 18.3). Above all, it was feared that the economy, having reached peak productivity during the years of emerging mobilization, would slide back into a depression if conversion from a military to a domestic economy did not occur rapidly. Postwar planners now spoke of "mobilizing for abundance." Crucial to the viability of the economy's domestic sector was the low- and middle-cost housing market. During the war years, job-hungry architects and an eager building industry indulged in wildly optimistic predictions about the postwar housing market. Nor did their optimism prove unfounded. In the unprecedented boom that followed the war, the suburban dream house became a form of compensation for the privations and sacrifices endured during the years of war and economic stagnation, a realization of the material prosperity to which Americans considered themselves at long last entitled. As the postwar office building became a machine for streamlined white-collar production, so the private house became a machine especially for white middle-class consumption.



18.3 Advertisement for United States Steel
(from *Architectural Forum*, July 1943)

It was a machine, however, that dissembled its mechanistic nature. If the American public momentarily became intrigued during the war years with Bucky Fuller's Dymaxion Dwelling Machine—whose advantages Fuller had been proselytizing for more than a decade with the question, "Madam, do you know how much your house weighs?"—the sheen of a lightweight metal domicile quickly wore off in comparison with the more rooted-looking Cape Coddage offered by a canny developer like William J. Levitt.

Home, in the American dream, is a quaint little white cottage, shyly nestled in a grove of old elms or maples, bathed in the perfume of lilacs, and equipped with at least one vine-covered wall. Its steep gabled roof, covered with rough, charmingly weathered shingles, shows a slight sag in the ridge. The eaves come down so low that one can almost touch them. Tiny dormers on one side poke themselves through the old roof and let in light through tiny-paned windows to the upstairs bedrooms. In front of the house there is invariably a picket fence, with day lilies poking their heads between the white palings. Let into the fence, at the end of a flagstone walk bordered with alyssum and verbena, is a swinging gate, where husband and wife embrace tenderly as he dashes for the 8:11 and the workaday world.⁵

This was the nostalgic idyll that George Nelson and Henry Wright set out to dispel in their book of 1945, *Tomorrow's House*, but nothing that they or other modernist proselytizers had to offer seemed able to replace it. Levittown was a margarine substitute, but an appealing one for the thousands of returning GIs and their wives. The fact that like the Dymaxion its Taylorized construction process contradicted its traditionalist image was not a fatal defect for buyers who were, in no small measure, purchasing a life-style, a dream. Moreover, the Levitt was hardly lacking in up-to-dateness; it came equipped with one or more of the latest conveniences, from Bendix washing machines to "built-in" television sets. The idea of the built-in derived from modernist spatial concepts, but Levitt was quick to realize its economic benefit: it qualified equipment to be paid on the mortgage. The buyer was also given, in the later Levitt developments, some limited choice as to plan type, elevation details, and finishes. The marketing strategy of "standardized diversity" catered at least minimally to the deep American desire for individualism.⁶ William Levitt appears to have understood the compromise that a large segment of the American public wanted as Fuller and other architects promoting a more radical image of the low-cost house did not. This is not to suggest that Levitt was a populist. He was a businessman. Acknowledging himself that the renderings in his sales brochures could appear deceptive—they portrayed Levittown houses set on spacious, private lawns surrounded by lush foliage—he quipped, "The masses are asses."⁷

But the postwar campaign to redomesticate women after their brief taste of equal employment opportunity in the wartime work force was abetted not only by the tangible amenities of the new suburban dream house but also by its essentialism. Women, voluntarily making room in the job market for the returning veterans, were induced or seduced to return to home and child-rearing through intensive propaganda by government, businessmen, psychologists, religious leaders, and others on behalf of "family values." As one feminist historian has commented, "'Rosie the Riveter' was . . . transformed with dizzying speed from a wartime heroine to a neurotic, castrating victim of penis envy."⁸ The mytho-

logical imagery of the house as a nest and haven presided over by a nurturing mother figure was fundamental in reestablishing the traditional division of labor in the American family. The new tract divisions served in a literal way to enforce the gulf of space and time between private life and work world. Women's separation increased along the lengthening network of highways; homemaking became increasingly distanced from the making of history.⁹

Nor, to most women at the time, did it seem a bad bargain. After the traumatic dislocations of the war, stability and nest building came as a welcome relief for many. So did economic prosperity, which meant that the domestic abode, for all its cozy image, did not need to have humble aspirations. It could be added to, or if rendered obsolete by the family's changing needs and status, shed for a new and larger home. Planned obsolescence became an important economic strategy after the war; an approach similar to that used for selling automobiles had its application to mass-market housing. Meanwhile, the cornucopia of new domestic goods churned out by a retooled economy was aggressively marketed to the new generation of housewives, the appointed "managers of consumption," as Margaret Mead described them in 1948.¹⁰ While their husbands strove to move upward in the corporate hierarchy, the "wives of management"¹¹ attended to the parallel task of keeping up with the neighboring Joneses. Wartime savings fueled a postwar spending spree, heavily abetted by advertising. Having from its inception targeted "Mrs. Consumer" as the prime object of its sales pitch, American advertising increased sixfold between 1920 and 1950 and then doubled again between 1951 and 1960.¹² Women who had remained on the home front during the war, encouraged in a time of rationing to be "generals in their own kitchens," now were assured that the newest gadgetry would free them from domestic "drudgery"—an oft-repeated Dickensian word. The myth of the happy housewife—the flawed logic that a streamlined kitchen was sufficient to liberate a woman from a patriarchal society's oppression—was parodied by British Pop artist Eduardo Paolozzi in a 1948 collage entitled *It's a Psychological Fact Pleasure Helps Your Disposition*.

Moreover, now that technology had presumably released women from the burdens of old-fashioned housework, questions remained of how they should spend their new leisure time. In an ironic turn, the fundamental capitalist axiom "time is money" was reformulated for a consumer society. Certainly as far as the advertising industry was concerned, leisure time was time available for consumption, for shopping. In his widely read book *The House and the Art of Its Design*, the architect Robert Woods Kennedy acknowledged, "Our general desire is for women to consume beautifully."¹³ During the 1950s the beautiful consumers would play their part. At the beginning of the decade *Fortune* magazine forecast that they would incite \$10 billion in spending on home construction and \$12 billion on home furnishings.¹⁴ It was Betty Friedan who explosively deconstructed this system ten years later, in 1963, in *The Feminine Mystique*. Stopping short of alleging a conscious conspiracy aimed at women, she wrote, "The perpetuity of housewifery, the growth of the feminine mystique, makes sense (and dollars) when one realizes that women are the chief customers of American business. Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives."¹⁵

It would seem, in short, that the prevailing dichotomy between Lever House and Levittown amounted to a highly efficient, eminently practical, and symbiotic social arrangement. In a society that sought simultaneously to promote maximum productivity and maximum consumption, the public and private spheres had separate but complementary roles to play. Architecture served to reproduce and reinforce this gendered social division, providing an efficacious image for each.

In actuality, of course, the two forms of representation were mirror images of a single system, two sides of the capitalist coin. Both Lever House and Levittown were predicated on highly rationalized and optimized production processes; both were geared to a postwar mass society. Where they differed was in the image they projected, in the one case of elite modernist aesthetics, in the other of midcult taste. Despite his antipathy for the latter, Theodor Adorno acknowledged the fundamental identity of these two antagonistic forms of the contemporary world: "Both [modernism and mass culture] bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . They are torn halves of an integral to freedom to which, however, they do not add up."¹⁶

Meanwhile, the image of architectural modernism, too, was becoming precisely that—an image. In the context of postwar America, of the cold war and McCarthyism, the social idealism that had animated the vanguard architecture of the 1920s began to appear naive or hollow. The postwar glass-grid skyscraper seemed duplicitous in its reference, its elegant, abstract transparency alluding to the utopian vision of a radiant, egalitarian, dynamically open society, while embodying the reality of panoptic, hierarchical bureaucracy. In an influential article published in 1951 entitled "Origins and Trends in Modern Architecture," the architect Matthew Nowicki characterized American architecture at this date as preoccupied more with structure and form than with function. Instead of following function, suggested Nowicki, form now followed form; moreover, he noted, the new architectural formalism was tending toward the "decoration of structure" (this almost twenty years before Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi would coin the concept of the decorated shed). Certainly the buildings produced in these years by young architects like Philip Johnson, Edward Durrell Stone, Minoru Yamasaki, and Paul Rudolph, and even older masters like Gropius and Le Corbusier, not to mention Frank Lloyd Wright, were undermining modernist orthodoxy with eclectic and personal inputs. Nowicki probably had in mind Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous details at Illinois Institute of Technology and the Lake Shore Drive apartments, where Mies used steel mullions more for expressive purposes than strictly structural ones, in writing, "The symbolic meaning of a support has also been rediscovered, and a steel column is used frankly as a symbol of structure even when it is not part of the structure itself."¹⁷

And precisely in this revelation of architecture as a system of arbitrary signs, in the dissociation between image and reality, in the use of design for purposes of "corporate identity" and "marketing strategy," in the recognition that modern architecture was simply another historical style—in all this, the transition from modernity to postmodernity took place. With this, I'd like to extend my argument about the relation between technology, consumption, and gender conceptions to the present period, although my comments here can only be very preliminary.

We have said that the postwar International Style was a symbolic representation of the virility of American technology. Starting in World War II, however, a subtle change began to occur, even if culture was to take a number of years to register it. With the emergence of a so-called postindustrial economy, technological power began to be associated with something besides industrial hardware and large-scale, discrete mechanical objects—besides the rockets, bridges, munitions factories, not to mention grain elevators, airplanes, ocean liners, and plumbing fixtures that had defined modernity earlier. Advanced technology now also came to mean cybernetic processes, software systems, miniaturized electronics, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and other sophisticated instrumentalities eluding physical form. *The imagination of power* inevitably began to take inspiration from the new logic of global networks, integrated circuits, microchips, smart weapons, virtual fields.¹⁸ The penetration of these often invisible technologies into the unconscious—especially through the impact of advertising and the media on everyday life—served to unleash potent new images and desires. Alison and Peter Smithson wrote in 1956:

Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,
Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes,
And Charlotte Perriand brought a new object to the office
every morning;
But today we collect ads.¹⁹

Architecture would remain no less bound than before to rehearse the technocratic background from which it sprang, but the repository from which it would draw its symbolic content would necessarily change with the new modes of production and reception.

At the same time, consumerism would also undergo a change. If gender stereotypes had previously served to reproduce the binary relations of production and consumption—consumption being marked as female and therefore socially less valuable—then increasingly, after World War II, these relations ceased to be so clear-cut. As Robert Bocock has written,

The modern period was marked by [a] gender division between mothering and consumption, on the one hand, and production and making war on the other. The post-modern has been, by comparison, a period of peace in Western Europe, North America and Japan. This has allowed a change in gender roles for men. No longer required in large numbers as fighters, men, especially younger men, have become consumers too since the 1950s.²⁰

Men, too, now construct their identities in terms of what they consume, from sports and cars to movies, food, and clothing. The sociopolitical emergence of gays within capitalist culture, with their frank patterns of consumption, has further challenged the traditional dichotomy that marks consumption as feminine and production as masculine, just as the new politics of childbearing, child rearing, and healthcare have expanded the concept of production to include women's biological reproduction and the whole hitherto excluded economy of the home. At the same time, the increasing participation of women in every echelon of the conventional work force, the shift of the workplace not

only from city to suburbs but into the home itself, and the accelerating computerization of both work and everyday life have effectively blurred the lines between production and consumption, public and private realms, undoing the simple bargain between technocracy and consumerism that obtained in the postwar decades. The old dichotomy between home and history has been superseded by public/private relationships deeply inflected by the new commercially and technologically mediated conditions of contemporary life. As German film theorists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have suggested in their book *The Public Sphere and Experience*, our concept of the public realm has to be rethought today across a broadly inclusive and interconnected horizon of social relations.²¹ Going beyond traditional liberal civic models, such a reconceptualization of public space would extend to privately owned spaces of commerce and consumption (including, for example, shopping malls), as well as to those less physical and more ephemeral sites where public opinion and consciousness are formed—television and the movies, the print media, the computer internet.

But if the intrusion of commerce and sophisticated technology into every crevice of daily life can hardly be considered cause for comfort, it is also the case that the built representations of postmodern society are no longer charged so heavily with dichotomous gender stereotypes. Both the “softening” of technology and the universalizing of the consumer have obliged architecture to seek new forms of representation. In this context, the initial phase of postmodernist architecture, characterized by the decorative facade treatments of corporate buildings like Johnson’s AT&T and civic ones like Michael Graves’s Portland, may be described as “cross-dressing”—scandalous with respect to the “strong silent” typology, but symptomatic of the mixing up of technocratic and consumerist values and gender stereotypes in today’s society. A current obsession on the part of many architects with using glass on the facade—no longer as a repetitive infill within a clearly articulated and primary structural frame, but as a screening element veiling the structure, or, as Diana Agrest has suggested in an article entitled “Architecture of Mirror/Mirror of Architecture,” a reflective element dissolving materiality into paradox and disarticulating the conventional relationships between architectural language and image, surface and depth²²—offers a further ambiguation of the postwar imagistic clarities.

The ideologies of technocracy and consumerism that we have inherited from the period after World War II are no less entrenched in contemporary architecture than they were at the moment when Lever House and Levittown were conceived. The design and practice of architecture continue to be bound up with the representation of power and the marketing of pleasure. I believe, however, that these twin imperatives are now less reinforced by, and reinforcing of, undesirable gender stereotypes. From a feminist perspective, this is something positive.

Notes

- 1 Godfrey Hodgson, “The Ideology of the Liberal Consensus,” in William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff, eds., *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 133.
- 2 *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation*, with catalogue edited by Donald Albrecht (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995). See also Elizabeth Mock, ed., *Built in U.S.A.—1932–1944* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944).

- 3 Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 305–9.
- 4 George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine: Studies in Contemporary Opinion* (London: J. M. Dent, 1913), 188.
- 5 George Nelson and Henry Wright, *Tomorrow’s House: How to Plan Your Post-War Home Now* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 4.
- 6 Stewart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 229. The unilevel ranch, almost equally popular at this date, especially in the West, represented a less nostalgic image of modern living; it appealed more for its easy life-style, however, than its aesthetic pretensions.
- 7 John Liell, “Levittown: A Study in Community Development” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1952), III; cited in Ewen, 227.
- 8 Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 176. See also Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
- 9 See Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
- 10 Margaret Mead, “The American Family as an Anthropologist Sees It,” *American Journal of Sociology* 53 (1948), 454; cited in Robert H. Bremner and Gary W. Reichard, eds., *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions 1945–1960* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 4. It may, of course, be questioned to what extent women actually controlled the purse strings, especially where large purchases were concerned.
- 11 “The Wives of Management” is the title of a well-known article by William H. Whyte Jr., first published in *Fortune* 44 (October 1951), 68–88, 204–6. Whyte satirically sets out the rules according to which corporate wives should behave.
- 12 Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 260; Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 117.
- 13 Robert Woods Kennedy, *The House and the Art of Its Design* (New York: Reinhold, 1953), 40.
- 14 Cited in Ryan, 301.
- 15 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 181.
- 16 Letter from Adorno to Walter Benjamin (1936), cited in Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 263.
- 17 Matthew Nowicki, “Origins and Trends in Modern Architecture,” *Magazine of Art*, November 1951; republished in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture 1943–1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 156.
- 18 On technology as symbolic form in architecture, a classic essay is Alan Colquhoun’s “Symbolic and Literal Aspects of Technology” (1962), republished in Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 26–30.
- 19 Alison and Peter Smithson, “But Today We Collect Ads,” *Ark* 18 (November 1956), republished in David Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 185.
- 20 Robert Bocoock, *Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1993), 96.
- 21 See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience* (1972), trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 22 Diana Agrest, “Architecture of Mirror/Mirror of Architecture,” in Agrest, *Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), 138–55.