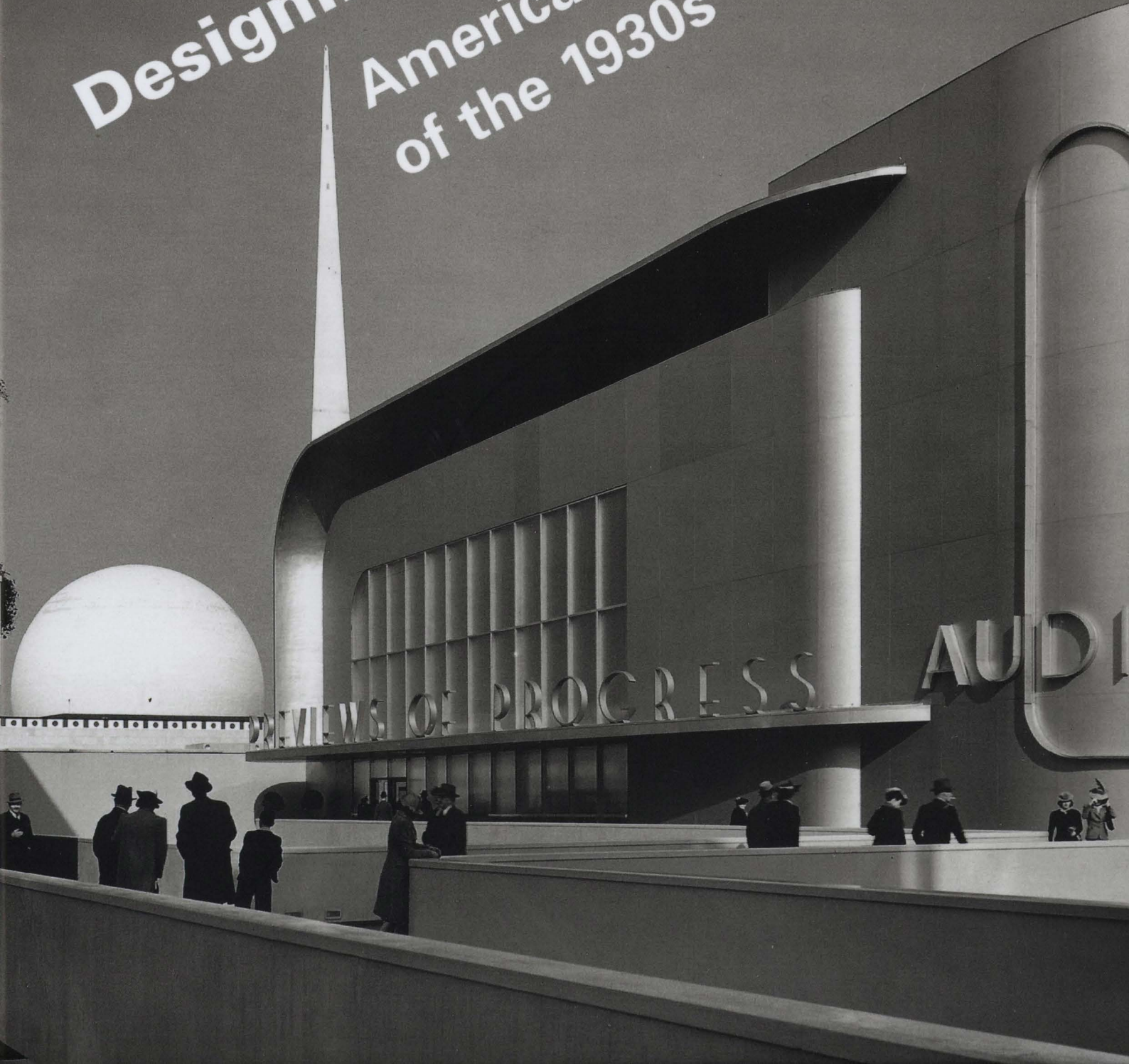


**Designing Tomorrow**  
**America's World's Fairs**  
**of the 1930s**





# THE WEST

**SAN FRANCISCO**  
IN 1999

VIEW ABOVE THE CITY  
LOOKING NORTH

THE GREAT PIER

STATES STEEL

WESTERN STATES STEEL

Beyond the Great West  
LAND OF FORMER AND FUTURE

# **Designing Tomorrow America's World's Fairs of the 1930s**

Edited by Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo

With contributions by Robert Bennett, Matthew Bokovoy,  
Robert A. González, Neil Harris, Lisa D. Schrenk,  
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# Designing the Modern Family at the Fairs

Kristina Wilson

As scholars in this volume and elsewhere have argued, the U.S. world's fairs of the 1930s were driven by two dominant forces: the public's fascination with science and the engines of corporate wealth.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps nowhere were these twin forces so compellingly aligned than in the model home exhibits included in each fair. In the collections of model homes—which began as a phenomenally popular cluster of eleven houses in Chicago, continued in smaller groups in San Diego, Dallas, and Cleveland, and concluded with a parade of fifteen houses in New York's Town of Tomorrow and a staggering twenty-five houses in San Francisco—the public could see, on an intimate, domestic scale, how science could improve daily living. Fair houses inevitably featured the most up-to-date appliances in the kitchen and demonstrated new household systems such as air conditioning (especially effective since the fairs were all open in the summer months). Some fair houses ventured further than mere demonstrations of present-day science by presenting technology that was blatantly futuristic, such as Chicago's House of Tomorrow, which featured doors that opened and closed with the wave of a hand and a garage to house the family car and hydroplane.<sup>2</sup>

In the model homes of the fairs, visitors encountered science, physically and immediately, through the gleaming products of countless corporations. Indeed, visitors' appreciation of scientific progress became inseparable from their ability to identify the corporations that had applied science to the domestic sphere.

While the model homes in the 1930s fairs can be seen as veritable jewel boxes in which fascination with scientific progress merged eloquently with an ethos of consumerism, in this essay I want to examine them from a different perspective. As highly public displays of that most private of spaces—the single-family home—the model homes of the world's fairs literally provided shelter to a standardized, model American family. An analysis of the trends that circulated through the various houses reveals how the American middle-class family was idealized during the decade of the Great Depression. While some aspects of domestic life seemed poised to change dramatically in these model homes, other elements remained firmly attached to domestic precedents established in the later nineteenth century. Ultimately, the model homes of the 1930s fairs were sites of contestation, where modernizing

forces repeatedly intersected with traditional idioms, and where the definition of the modern American family was thus continually negotiated and redrawn.<sup>3</sup>

The changes found in these houses did not progress uniformly over the course of the Depression years; that is, the houses did not become emphatically more radical by the end of the decade. Rather, patterns of living and standards of furnishings varied, with some more “modern” elements stronger in the early fairs and others more prominent in the later fairs. In the first part of this essay I examine the proliferation of styles in the model homes, both in their furnishings and in their exterior design. There were, oddly enough, many more modernist interiors and exteriors earlier in the decade; by 1939, furnishings and architectural style had become more reliant on period-derived models. In the second part of the essay I focus on the floor plans of the houses. I propose that the earlier houses, despite their aesthetic modernity, held fast to nineteenth-century practices in organizing domestic space, while the houses from the 1939 fairs, more conservative in style, offered several innovations in the allocation of domestic space—innovations that would become standard in the post-World War II modern ranch house. The historian Lawrence Levine has described the decade of the 1930s as “a complex world of conflicting urges: a world that looked to the past even as it began to assume the contours of the future.”<sup>4</sup> It is this world of conflicted ideals that is captured in the world’s fairs’ model homes when they are examined from the various perspectives of interior furnishings, exterior design, and floor plan: in some ways they became more modern as the decade progressed, and in other ways more attached to precedent. As we turn to a closer analysis of individual houses, this complexity will persist, revealing a society where the struggle to balance tradition and the new were constantly being recalibrated.

### **A Cacophony of Styles**

One of the most surprising elements in the model homes is their stylistic plurality, both in architectural form and interior furnishings. In Chicago, more than at any other fair, the architectural style of the houses was almost uniformly modern (loosely defined as blocky masses, planar facades, little ornament, and broad expanses of windows); in every other fair for which photographs survive, the houses

were a mix of modern and various period revival styles, ranging from Spanish Colonial in the California fairs to traditional center-entrance Colonial designs in New York. Moreover, the percentage of modern houses in each fair decreased as the decade wore on, with the consequence that the earlier fairs seem to be, in general, more aesthetically radical than the later ones. In San Diego in 1935, fully half of the homes were modern; in Dallas in 1936, one of four homes was explicitly modern; the few images that survive from Cleveland in 1937 suggest there were no modern homes. In New York in 1939, four out of fifteen homes were emphatically modern, while in San Francisco, one critic claimed that only three of the twenty-five were modern (but my somewhat more generous assessment puts it at seven).<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, the furnishings with which these houses were outfitted varied dramatically, and there were greater numbers of modernist interiors earlier in the decade than later. Some houses displayed an austere, German-inspired modernism, predicated on tubular steel and an overall effect of efficient minimalism, while others featured a blockier, somewhat heavier modernism that used more wood and upholstery. (I have called this mode of modernism in the United States, which catered to consumer desires for bodily comfort and familiarity, livable modernism.)<sup>6</sup> Yet other houses contained sets of turned-wood chairs and trestle tables, commonly marketed as Early American, and some had suites of floral upholstery and carved wood chairs that might have been labeled Queen Anne or Chippendale by manufacturers and retailers. In short, the furnishings ran the gamut of styles available to the consumer of the 1930s.

Such stylistic variety may seem to be at odds with the fairs’ focus on technology and the future. However, when viewed through the lens of the corporate interests that shaped the fairs, the proliferation of styles evident in these model homes was to be expected. Throughout the 1930s, furniture manufacturers delved into the modernist market with varying degrees of commitment and enthusiasm, and usually offered a line of modernist designs alongside a wide range of period lines. While modernist designers may have been committed to the utopian ideals that underlay modernism in Europe—including a belief that smaller modern homes would benefit from multifunc-



tional, smaller furniture and that a lack of ornament liberated the mind from the confines of history—their beliefs must be distinguished from those guiding furniture manufacturers and retailers. The latter group was remarkably open in its tastes: manufacturers and retailers alike were willing to offer anything that might sell in these years. Thus the cacophony of furnishing styles on view at the various world's fairs of the 1930s must be seen as a consequence of the catholic approach to styles found in the commercial sector.

Nonetheless, within the marketplace of the 1930s, modernism possessed a level of distinction that set it apart from period styles en masse. First, it was often the most unusual-looking style on the furniture floor to a casual browser: few curves, little ornament, often a sense of bluntness. Second, modern designs were promoted by elite institutions such as museums, which elevated any object classified as modern to a status somewhere near art. And third, advertisements routinely associated modern styles with ideas about change, improvement, and youthful optimism. Because modernism had this distinction, where it appears in the model homes of the world's fairs may be significant: its appearance might signal a willingness to try different patterns of living, or at least a willingness to promote different domestic standards. I use *may* and *might* because it is also possible that the appearance of modernism signaled nothing more than a marketer's desire to vary the merchandise. In short, I do not want to attribute too much significance to the appearance of modern design in these model homes, but I do want to interrogate the lifestyles that they prescribe.

The most avant-garde interiors of the 1930s world's fairs were to be found in Chicago.<sup>7</sup> It is this fair, therefore, that gives us the best purchase on the significance of modernism as a domestic style. The collection of eleven model homes was among the biggest successes of the Chicago fair. In the summer of 1933, more than 1.5 million visitors traipsed through the homes, and because of the wear exacted on their interiors, each house was refurnished for the 1934 season. Many of the homes embraced a fully modernist aesthetic, none more famously than George Fred Keck's House of Tomorrow. As several scholars have discussed, Keck's twelve-sided, glass-walled house offered an optimistically futuristic vision of the American home.<sup>8</sup>

None of the glass walls opened to the outdoors (although there were a few glass doors onto the various terraces), and the air inside was instead ventilated through heating or cooling systems; the kitchen was entirely electric. The various rooms of the house were arranged on the main floor like pie pieces around the central stairway core, with the two bedrooms and a bathroom to one side and the open living room–dining room and the kitchen on the other. In both the 1933 and 1934 decoration schemes, the living room was anchored by a collection of wide, deep, upholstered armchairs with blunt lines (the 1934 furniture was designed by Gilbert Rohde for the Herman Miller Furniture Company) (figs. 1, 2). The room felt open because it contained relatively few pieces of furniture, which were placed to maximize the sense of spaciousness. The 1934 version had a geometrically patterned deep pile rug, which added texture and irregularity to the room. Its tufted, rounded armchairs, with their extraordinarily deep seats, offered to envelop the sitter's body, and such unusual elements as the asymmetrical cabinet or three-legged side table offered passages of surprise and visual delight to the inhabitant. It was an interior that catered to the comfort of the physical body and the joy of the psyche. In contrast, the 1933 living room was dominated by a large, angular macassar ebony pier table with two broad, conical lamps; these objects introduced a sense of spareness and geometric clarity to the room. Thus, while the two versions of the living room shared several features, the 1934 iteration moved toward a greater blurring of contours and a general sense of blended textures and warmth.

The Chicago homes also displayed period revival styles. The living room of the Stran-Steel House in 1934 was furnished largely with a selection of objects indebted to the slender, neoclassical impulses of early-nineteenth-century Federal furniture (fig. 3). A curved, fringe-skirted sofa (certainly not Federal) was grouped with a pedestal table, a scrolled armchair, and an upholstered chair on cabriole legs. Around the mirrored fireplace, a pair of upholstered easy chairs and tapered-legged side tables created an inviting place to sit. Fireplaces had been a symbolic heart of American family living spaces since the nineteenth century, when a fascination with the colonial-era open hearth and the sentimental idea of a family gathered around it came into vogue. Despite its status as an unnecessary accessory



**fig. 1** Living room, House of Tomorrow, 1933. George Fred Keck, architect. Century of Progress Exposition, Chicago, 1933–1934. Chicago History Museum.



**fig. 2** Living room, House of Tomorrow, 1934. George Fred Keck, architect. Gilbert Rohde, furniture design for Herman Miller Furniture Company. Dorothy Riley, *Homes and Furnishings at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition* (Chicago: M. A. Ring, 1934).

*opposite*

**fig. 3** Living room, Good House-keeping Stran-Steel House, 1934. O'Dell and Rowland, architects. Dorothy Riley, *Homes and Furnishings at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition* (Chicago: M. A. Ring, 1934).

in an age of central heat, throughout the first decades of the twentieth century the fireplace continued to have a strong psychological appeal, and architects and designers of all stylistic orientations willingly incorporated it into their plans.<sup>9</sup>

While the Stran-Steel House living room unquestionably embraced a historicized aesthetic, it ultimately provided a setting for domestic life that was remarkably similar to the modernism of the 1934 House of Tomorrow. Throughout these homes one finds an emphasis on enveloping, bodily comfort in the proliferation of deep-seated, thick-cushioned upholstered pieces. These interiors also catered to the mental ease of the inhabitant, providing cozy furniture for conversation or interesting objects to gaze upon. The major difference lies in the question of quantity: the modernist interiors simply had fewer objects in them, giving primacy to a sense of openness and spaciousness, while the period-styled interiors had more pieces of furniture and a greater sense of congestion. The modernism of the Chicago houses indicates that designers did not wish to challenge the capitalist ideal of the individual private home as a place of retreat and rejuvenation, but they did want to address the experience of confined spaces that charac-



terized so many homes in the years of the Great Depression. These designers wanted the public to reevaluate its penchant for accumulation and to sacrifice the practice of conspicuous display for a greater sense of openness and the ease that comes with having fewer pieces to navigate (and clean) in a given room.<sup>10</sup>

Of the four model homes in the Dallas fair of 1936, one was emphatically modern. The living room of this house was furnished almost entirely with pieces designed by Rohde for Herman Miller, and their arrangement indicates the persistence of several ideals embodied in the Chicago houses (fig. 4).<sup>11</sup> The pair of armchairs by the fireplace provide a place for individuals to literally take warmth from the family hearth; both the pair of armchairs in the photograph's foreground and the L-shaped sectional sofa against the window provide amenable settings for conversation, tea, or cocktails; and the card table group next to the radio is an arena in which the family, or its guests, can gather to play games. In short, the entire room was designed to foster welcoming retreat and social engagement. And despite the large number of objects in the room (more than in any modernist room in the Chicago homes), the emphatic open space in the center of the photograph and the predominance of blunt, angled contours give it an air of clarity and spaciousness.

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In the model homes of the 1939–1940 New York fair (making up the group The Town of Tomorrow), there were far fewer examples of modernist interiors, and the remaining houses pursued a stricter adherence to period styles than the period-“inspired” interiors in Chicago. Critics were, in general, less enthusiastic about the furnishings in New York than in Chicago, as is evidenced by tepid reviews and the lack of coverage in major shelter magazines (*House Beautiful*, for example, devoted only two pages to the New York homes in 1939, while in 1933 it ran a three-page article on a single house at the Chicago fair).<sup>12</sup> In the architectural journal *Pencil Points*, the critic Talbot F. Hamlin complained,

One thing, alas, is to be found in both sets of houses [in New York and San Francisco]—terrible furnishing and decoration. Not one of those which I saw in either Fair showed any but the vaguest sense of that quality of repose and quiet comfort which comes from the fitness of the means to the end. Everything seems to have been



**fig. 4** Living room, Contemporary Home. DeWitt and Washburn, architects. Gilbert Rohde, furniture design for Herman Miller Furniture Company. Texas Centennial Exposition, Dallas, 1936. Courtesy Dallas Historical Society. Used by permission.

done in the most complicated, most stunty, most vulgarly ostentatious manner, and this goes for the houses which were theoretically modern as much as for those in the "styles." . . . All the interiors seemed more like the over-full show windows of a not too high-toned shop rather than the environment for human living.<sup>13</sup>

Hamlin's final turn of phrase may have been an allusion to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier's famous description of the house as a "machine for living," and as such reveals his bias.<sup>14</sup> Hamlin, in accord with European modernist architects, believed that homes should facilitate ease and comfort of living through simplified design. He criticized the furnishings in the fairs' model homes for their excessiveness: there were too many objects that were too ornate, and the homes became, in effect, models of excessive display rather than models of modern living. However, Emily Genauer, an arts editor for the *New York World-Telegram*, found qualities to celebrate in the modernism of the New York fair. Describing the mode of modernism put forth in Chicago as "straight simple lines and chunky forms," she argued that the influence of the 1937 Paris World's Fair had contributed to a broader sense of modernism in 1939. She described the new trend as one of "graciousness"

and "elegance," "whether it is straight, softly tapering, or flowing in wide but disciplined curves," designed to appeal to "our emotions rather than our intellect."<sup>15</sup> Whereas Hamlin believed that the fairs offered inadequate (or non-existent) modernism, Genauer interpreted the modernism at the New York fair as a style that more willingly engaged with popular ideas about the home.

The most emphatically modern house in the New York fair was the House of Glass, designed by Landefeld and Hatch and decorated by Modernage Furniture Company. (Modernage furnished two of the fair's four modernist interiors.) Modernage was a manufacturer and retailer of modern furnishings based in New York City; it was founded in 1926 and advertised itself throughout the 1930s as an affordable source for modernist furnishings.<sup>16</sup> Over the years the retail arm sold objects by many modernist designers (and the architect Frederick Kiesler designed its showroom in 1933), but its manufacturing arm, the source of the most affordable objects, was never associated with any specific artist. Instead, it offered pieces that were often clearly derived from designs created by known figures such as Rohde or Donald Deskey.<sup>17</sup> That Modernage, a manufacturer known more for its knock-offs than for its original



**fig. 5** House of Glass. Landefeld and Hatch, architects. New York World's Fair, 1939–1940. "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," *Architectural Forum*, July 1939.

designs, was the primary supplier of modernist furnishings for the fair is revealing. Its popularizing mission made it an appropriate choice for the fair, where some visitors would be seeing modernist furnishings in person for the first time. Yet its designs, often derivative or poorly conceived, were lower in quality than the modernist objects from the earlier fairs. The choice of Modernage thus meant that visitors to the fair did not see the best modern design available, and suggests that organizers for the Town of Tomorrow were either less knowledgeable about modern design than earlier fair organizers, or less invested in it overall.

The House of Glass was one of the largest and most expensive homes in the fair, and was architecturally indebted to the international style: it had a flat roof, ample terraces to front, back, and side, and continuous ribbons of window (sometimes alternating with glass brick) around its surface (fig. 5). Modernage furnished the living room with a built-in sofa before the fireplace (attached to a series of built-in bookshelves); it also featured a pair of barrel-form armchairs with sloping arms (somewhat less radical, perhaps, than the purely cylindrical forms of Rohde's chairs in the Dallas house).

In a poll conducted by *Architectural Forum* of visitors to the Town of Tomorrow, the favorite house was the modest building known as the Bride's House, also designed by Landefeld and Hatch and furnished by Gimbel Brothers department store.<sup>18</sup> The Bride's House was superficially more conservative than the House of Glass, with its pitched roof and red brick chimney; however, critics described it as modern because of the use of glass brick to partition the dining alcove, and the recreation room which opened directly onto a side terrace. In the living room, the furnishings were less explicitly modern than the Chicago or Dallas interiors, and even less so than in the House of Glass (fig. 6). A pair of upholstered settees in a broad floral pattern, with diminutive, tapered legs, were arranged around the fireplace. Together with the slender, tapered legs of a side table and coffee table, these objects created an effect of sinuous, curvy elegance that echoed Emily Genauer's description of modernism at the fair. Yet the living room also included at least two more upholstered armchairs, a built-in bookshelf, and a heavy wooden desk, creating an interior space far too crowded to be graceful. If the House of Glass maintained some of the spare openness of the Chicago modernist interiors, the Bride's House

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**fig. 6** Living room, Bride's House. Landefeld and Hatch, architects. New York World's Fair, 1939–1940. "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," *Architectural Forum*, July 1939.

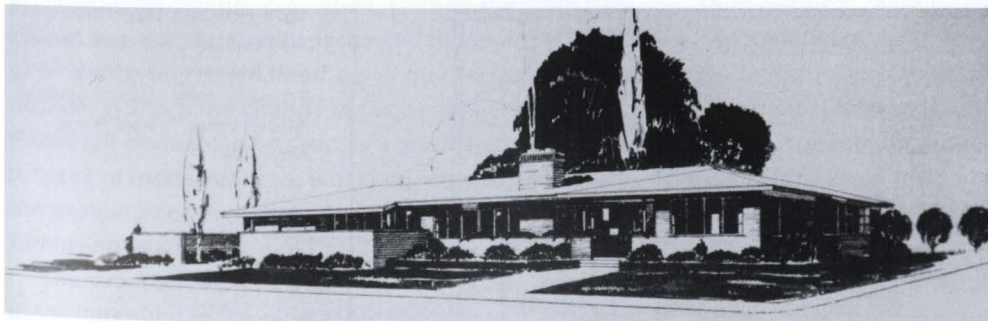
seemed to fit Hamlin's complaint: its many pieces of furniture made the room seem cramped, more invested in showing off the wealth of its owners than in catering to their ease of living.

The modernist interiors in New York were far outnumbered by historically based interiors. Many houses had living rooms in which the central focus of the fireplace was framed with a pair of upholstered, skirted armchairs with rolled arms (taken from the eighteenth-century wing chair form) and floral patterns.<sup>19</sup> The New England House, designed by the architect Cameron Clark, was a representative example. Its early American-flavored living room (also furnished by Gimbel Brothers) included the requisite pair of skirted wing chairs and turned-leg side tables (fig. 7). Its mantelpiece featured classicizing ornament, akin to that found in early-nineteenth-century New England homes; above this, a square mirror had a carved, rococo frame.

As in Chicago, the modernist interiors in New York ultimately seemed designed to enable a similar manner of domestic living as the period-revival-influenced interiors. All recognized the symbolic importance of the fireplace and placed it at the center of living room organization; all fostered social interactions and provided bodily comfort.

Moreover, the modernist interiors in New York inclined toward overpopulation—every chair had a side table, and perhaps also a coffee table before it, and the sheer number of objects made clear passage through spaces difficult. The modernist interior no longer challenged middle-class acquisitiveness; it, like the period interiors, promoted accumulation and enabled the display of material wealth.

Although no interior images of the San Francisco houses have yet been discovered, Hamlin's disparaging comment indicates that he felt the West Coast interiors, like those in New York, suffered from too many objects and too heavy a reliance on period styles. The exterior architectural design of the homes, too, indicates a level of stylistic variegation similar to the New York fair's homes. Among the more avant-garde designs was Gardner Dailey's Woodside Hills and William Wilson Wuster's Kent Woodlands.<sup>20</sup> Both featured living rooms that projected from the back of the house and had windows on three sides. Dailey's design was particularly avant-garde, with its flat roof and expanses of floor-to-ceiling windows. More affordable was Birge M. Clark and David B. Clark's Leland Manor, designed in a so-called "modernized craftsman" style (fig. 8).<sup>21</sup> The slightly sloping roof, with a two-and-a-half-foot overhang, gave the



*opposite right*

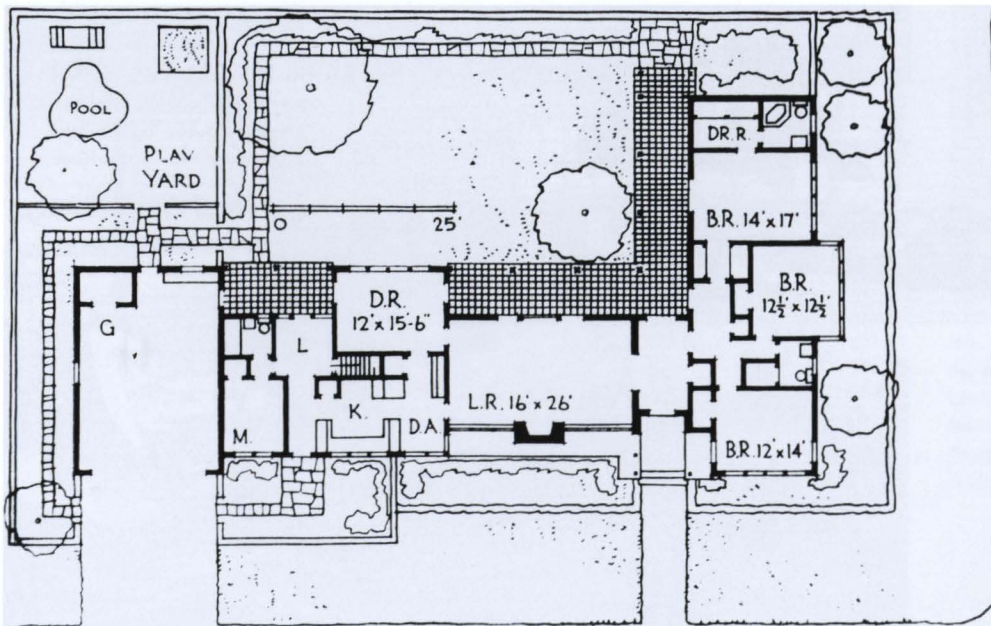
**fig. 7** Living room, New England House. Cameron Clark, architect. New York World's Fair, 1939–1940. "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," *Architectural Forum*, July 1939.

**fig. 8** Exterior, Leland Manor. Birge M. Clark and David B. Clark, architects. Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939–1940. "Exposition Model Homes," *Pencil Points*, May 1939.

effect of the single-story house gently hugging the horizon, similar to the effect Frank Lloyd Wright had achieved in his Prairie Houses but with an even greater simplicity (owing in part to the smaller size of the house). Leland Manor also featured an open living room that extended the full depth of the house's central section, with windows to the front and two doors opening directly to the back terrace (fig. 9). The more traditional houses in San Francisco featured steeply pitched roofs, such as Oak Grove Manor (designed by Leo J. Sharps) and Oak Knoll Manor (by Charles F. Maury).<sup>22</sup> In both of these houses, the living room was positioned to the right of a center entrance, more akin to the center-entrance floor plan of a typical eighteenth-century Colonial house.

Despite the proliferation of styles in the homes of the world's fairs of the 1930s, it is clear that some kind of modernism was more prominent in the earlier fairs, while the later fairs returned to more conservative period styles. Any explanations for this must be speculative at best. The Chicago fair was held at the grimmest point of the Great Depression; during the New York and San Francisco fairs, although the country was undoubtedly still feeling the effects of the economic crisis, the most bitter years had

passed and a level of stability had been recovered for many families. The darkest moment in the national crisis may have bred the most emphatic attempt to deal with it. In the years when consumers felt least empowered, Chicago's modernism tried to address the loss of ability to accumulate: it advocated fewer objects and a greater sense of openness, qualities which were intended not to alienate inhabitants but rather to make them feel less confined and more the lords and ladies of a spacious interior. Moreover, the simple forms were supposed to be easier to clean, alleviating housework for the wife, who might be working outside the home to help support the family. By 1939, when the brutal reality of the early 1930s had begun to fade, designers offered interiors that once more flattered the American family's ability to acquire, with their busy arrangements of numerous objects. In a promotional movie produced by Westinghouse for the New York fair, a passing comment about modernist furnishings reveals some intangible attitudes toward the style. A grandmother and her granddaughter pause before a display of modernist furniture, and the elder woman urges the younger to bring her socialist boyfriend to see it; after all, she concludes, even he must be interested in domesticity. By the end of



**fig. 9** Floor plan, Leland Manor. Clark and Clark, architects. Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939–1940. "Exposition Model Homes," *Pencil Points*, May 1939.



the movie, however, the socialist has been exposed as an intolerant cad, and the modernist furniture, in retrospect, is tinged with his association (the granddaughter chooses the midwestern capitalist boy instead). Modernism, in this logic, promoted minimal materialism, which threatened the American ideals of capitalism and free competition. In such a context, it is little wonder that New York's modernism was both smaller in quantity and changed in quality to more closely reflect the principles of period-styled American families.

### Modern Floor Plans

If the aesthetics of architectural styles and furnishings of world's fair homes appeared to become increasingly conservative over the course of the 1930s, the floor plans reveal a different, though equally complicated, story. These changes indicate a significant, if gradual, shift in family living patterns toward a postwar lifestyle of increased efficiency and informality. The changes in orientation of the living room and kitchen, described below, were to become standard elements in the 1950s suburban ranch (exemplified by developers such as William J. Levitt on the East Coast and Joseph L. Eichler on the West), making the 1939 model homes true early-stage examples of this influential type. At the same time, certain forms based on nineteenth-century precedent, such as the strict division of social and private spaces and the maintenance of a dining room, remained tenacious throughout the decade. In short, the change in floor plans among the model fair homes can be seen as a gradual, if incomplete, process of modernization, which appears to contradict the growing conservativeness of architectural and furnishing aesthetics.

The suburban Victorian single-family home, developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was characterized by its many rooms: as historians have argued, the increasing professionalization of middle-class life seems to have insinuated itself into the domestic sphere, and each separate task in the family realm was assigned its own unique space.<sup>23</sup> Thus a house often contained a formal front parlor and a more casual back parlor; a separate dining room devoted to meals; a study in which the man of the house could retreat from domestic chaos; the kitchen and maid's quarters, which usually demanded their own

distinct architectural space; and bedrooms for children and adults, often accommodating no more than two people. Emerging from this maze of rooms were three fairly distinct zones: a public or socializing zone on the main floor (with degrees of intimacy, as the front and back parlor indicated); a service zone comprising the kitchen, laundry, and servant rooms; and the family's private zone of bedrooms, almost always on the second floor. Although house design was drastically simplified in the early decades of the twentieth century—in the bungalows of the 1900s and even the suburban period-styled houses of the 1920s, multiple social and study spaces were condensed into a single living room, servant's rooms were eliminated, and kitchens were streamlined—one element of the Victorian ideal remained intact: the separation of social and private zones.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, in the model homes of the 1930s fairs, bedrooms and bathrooms were, without fail, segregated to one side, wing, or floor of a house. Bathrooms intended for use by guests were incorporated somewhere near the vicinity of the kitchen and were readily accessible from the living room; if no such separate guest bathroom existed, almost every house provided a short hallway or foyer space around the bathroom, making it possible for guests to reach it without treading on the sacred privacy of bedrooms. And what happened in these bedrooms? They were not merely places for sleeping or dressing, as is evidenced by the fairly generous size of the rooms and the tendency to furnish them with desks or comfortable armchairs. Children played with friends or studied in their rooms, and mothers talked to their children, or perhaps a particularly close friend, in their rooms. Bedrooms were not simply a separate space designed to meet the function of sleeping, but rather were a zone where a different order of intimacy and informality dominated.

If the fairs' homes revealed a stubborn Victorian-ness in their rigorous zoning between public and private, the status of dining rooms in these homes reveals a more confused relationship to precedent. The Victorian-era separate dining room had been under attack by designers, architects, and home economists throughout the first decades of the twentieth century; most believed that a dining room was a flagrant waste of space in an era of smaller homes and increased informality. The alternative to a dining room was either an alcove adjacent to the main space of the

living room, or simply a corner of the living room itself, perhaps furnished with a table that could be converted, by inserting leaves, into a dining table when needed. With the onset of the Great Depression, when fewer people had the resources for entertaining and perhaps lived in even smaller spaces than before, the argument against the separate dining room seemed to speak to the logic of the times.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, in the model homes in the Chicago and San Diego fairs, about one-third had a separate dining room altogether, while most had either a modest alcove or a small corner of a living room designated for dining; in a few, no space appeared to have been planned for dining at all. Yet in 1939, the majority of houses shown in both New York and San Diego had designated dining spaces, usually an entirely separate room or else a well-defined alcove off of the living room. The rooms indicate an apparent move back to the Victorian standard, and perhaps a lingering attachment to the ideal of having a distinguished dining space where guests could be impressed and the family gathered together for special occasions. Indeed, a survey conducted by *Architectural Record* in that year found that a majority of respondents preferred a separate dining room in their houses (and most of them desired the formal ideal of a coordinated dining room suite to furnish the room).<sup>26</sup> This change—away from a more informal and less traditional style of domestic living—suggests some of the complicated forces at play during the decade of the 1930s. While the brutality of the early years of the Depression may have made designers and architects more willing to assert ideas of modernized living in the fairs in Chicago and San Diego, by the end of the decade those same players seemed to understand that the public had held fast to an ideal of grand hospitality from an entirely different era. The appeal of this vision of dining and entertaining may have been made stronger, in fact, by the adversity of the decade; as Lawrence Levine has suggested, the economic crisis inspired surprisingly little revolutionary thought and action, and many citizens seemed instead to cling to stable images of a more prosperous status quo.<sup>27</sup>

Thus far, my analysis of the floor plans of the model houses suggests a move away from modernization over the course of the 1930s. This trend is contradicted, or at least complicated, by changes to the position of both living

rooms and kitchens. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the space where guests were entertained, the living room typically faced the front or more public side of the house. The industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes had argued as early as 1931, however, that living rooms should be positioned at the back of the house to allow for “seclusion” and access to the outdoors of the backyard.<sup>28</sup> His rationale—that the back of the house has greater privacy—indicated a shift in ideas about what the living room was used for, and more broadly what the home was to be used for. By privileging the family’s privacy over its public face, he implied that houses should be for the comfort of its inhabitants foremost and that guests were not only less important but also perhaps less present. In short, he presumed that the American home was less a place for entertaining than it may have been previously, and his vision implied a suburban sea of isolated families, a society atomized within its architectural skin.

Bel Geddes, as was often his lot, proved to be far ahead of society’s desires when he urged the backyard-facing living room. In the model homes in Chicago, despite the modernity of the exteriors, only one-third of the houses had a living room that faced the back of the house. In San

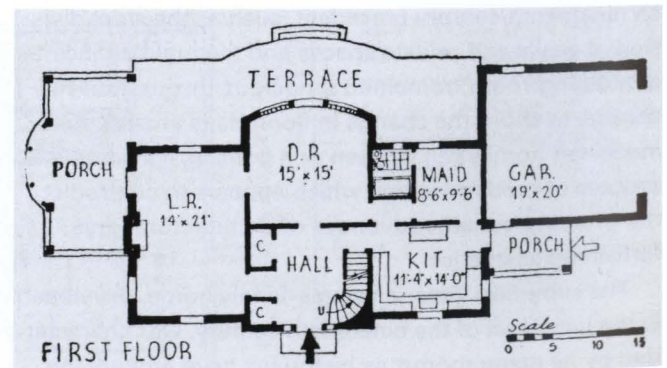


fig. 10 Floor plan, Electric Home. James W. O'Connor, architect. New York World's Fair, 1939–1940. “Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair,” *Architectural Forum*, July 1939.

Diego most of the houses had living rooms that spanned one full side or else opened exclusively to the back. In New York, many of the houses adhered to a center-entrance floor plan and placed the living room to one side of the central hallway; these living rooms spanned the entire depth of the house, and often had doorways opening to terraces on the back or side. Thus, despite the conservative template, alterations were made that oriented the life of the family toward the more private sides of the house and away from its public face.<sup>29</sup> Finally, in San Francisco, a new style of floor plan began to emerge that changed the concept of the living room altogether. In the majority of these houses, one entered through a small alcove or foyer directly into a living room that spanned the full depth of the house. This living room was positioned in the central block of the house (with service and private zones often relegated to wings). While the living room, as in the New York houses, had a front face, its orientation was clearly to the back, where, via glass walls or doors, it engaged a backyard patio (fig. 10).<sup>30</sup> This living room was literally the core of the house; in most designs, one had to traverse its length in order to walk from bedroom to kitchen, and guests entering the front door were thrust almost immediately into its space. These living rooms were inescapable, and because of that, had a more dynamic, less formal quality than even the living rooms in New York: they were spaces for sitting still and for walking through, for welcoming guests and (in the absence of a library or study) for repose and relaxation. While these houses enabled a greater level of privacy for the family with their backyard orientation, they also proposed a new calibration of public and private, one where the household itself was less fastidious about hiding outsiders from its daily goings-on. This new style of living, both more nuclear-family-focused and more casual, represents a significant level of modernization within the model homes of the fairs.

The changing status of the kitchen in the world's fairs' model homes indicates one more trend toward modernization over the course of the 1930s. In Chicago, only three out of eleven homes placed the kitchen at the front of the house, while the rest located the kitchen to the side or back; in San Diego, likewise, only one house had a kitchen in the front of the house. By 1939 many more homes featured kitchens in the front, even several of the conservative

period-influenced styles in New York. "The kitchen is progressing from its traditional location on the view-commanding rear of the house to the side or front," *Architectural Forum* noted approvingly, and then singled out houses in which "The kitchen has been moved to the house's least desirable exposure—the front."<sup>31</sup> This shift anticipates the kitchen location of the typical postwar suburban ranch. Like the changing location and status of the living room, the moving of the kitchen suggests shifting concepts of privacy. In the nineteenth century, the kitchen was banished to the farthest corners of the house because of its smells and messes; it needed to be hidden, although it was not a place of psychological privacy like the bedroom. By the 1930s modern technology—in the form of running water, gas or electric ranges, and electric refrigerators—had made the kitchen a more palatable place, and the de facto privacy of the service zone became irrelevant. Not only did kitchens become discreet and efficient, but their modernity was now something to brag about. The International Nickel Company, maker of the countertop alloy Monel Metal, furnished work surfaces for all of the kitchens in New York's Town of Tomorrow (including the Smartline Table, used in the kitchen of the Motor Home). Their publicity materials from the fair illustrate the emerging attitude that kitchens were to be seen by more people than just the housewife, and their beauty something to take delight in: "Monel is lovely to look at—and it stays that way—actually becoming more beautiful with use. It's a solid metal, like sterling silver. It's chip-proof, smooth and easily kept spick-and-span. . . . Every Monel-topped piece of equipment is painstakingly designed to give lasting service, to save steps and effort, to fit into a bright, happy ensemble, as carefully matched as a string of pearls."<sup>32</sup> The reader—and consumer—is meant to surmise that any kitchen that evokes associations to sterling silver or pearls is a kitchen that should not be hidden. The modern kitchens of 1939 were no longer considered private, and their emerging location at the front of the house reflects that changing attitude.

The kitchen was not just more beautiful in 1939, however—it was also the site of more activities than its nineteenth-century ancestor. Crane Company asked visitors to the New York fair, "What do you expect in a kitchen? An efficient place to work? Step-saving, energy-conserving

convenience?" They then reminded consumers that the modern kitchen was also a social center: "Many families eat one or more meals every day in the kitchen. . . . Growing children sometimes like a place to study near where mother is working. Nothing appeals more surely to the guests who come in for the evening than refreshments served in a kitchen designed for that purpose. . . . With the kitchen the 'showroom' of the house, it is amazing how guests will gravitate to it. Many of today's most successful parties have been held in the kitchen."<sup>33</sup>

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The model kitchen of the 1930s had, in fact, become a part of the public zone of the house: like the Victorian parlor, the modern kitchen was located at the front of the house, was the place to impress visitors, and was an alternative socializing venue. What does this trend tell us about the American family who occupied the modern kitchen? Were they as modern as their kitchen? First, the 1930s kitchen suggested radically less formal standards for the house. That the kitchen, a place of household work, became acceptable as a site for entertaining, introduced an unprecedented mixing of public and private life; it evoked the same fluidity and dynamism as the new living room spaces of the San Francisco homes.<sup>34</sup> Second, the 1930s kitchen implied that the status of the housewife had been significantly altered from earlier generations. She (or her servants) no longer toiled in obscurity. Rather, her kitchen now housed an arsenal of appliances, ready to keep up with the Joneses and do the work of the house with unprecedented efficiency. Magic Chef ranges called out to the American housewife at the New York fair with this tantalizing image: "There's absolutely no reason why you should spend hours in the kitchen every afternoon in order to serve wholesome, tangy meals in the evening. Thousands of women . . . thanks to Magic Chef . . . are serving tempting, savory meals to their families after having been at the beach, playing cards, romping with the children, or just plain reading in their easy chair."<sup>35</sup>

Although this advertisement suggests that the housewife had, by the 1930s, an easier workload and greater respect within the house, historians have argued that such changes in the armature of housework did little to actually reduce the number of hours a woman spent cleaning and cooking. If she now had better appliances, she also had increased standards of cleanliness to maintain and

more tasks for which she alone (without the help of servants or children) was responsible.<sup>36</sup> In keeping with this analysis, I propose that housework was still fundamentally private in the 1930s. While the housewife, perched in her status kitchen, was certainly more visible in 1939, her work was still invisible: she had to continually clean up any messes that would be evidence of her cooking—her *work*—in order to maintain the pearly glow of the Monel countertop. Her work literally hid behind such gleaming modern conveniences. Thus while the 1939 kitchen seemed to be more honest about housework, letting anyone from the public see its command center, in the end it maintained older levels of discretion and, indeed, privacy about the actual mess of domestic life.

Because of the persistence of historical styles in New York's model homes (such as the center-entrance Colonial Revival-type house), San Francisco's houses emerge as probably the most modern shown in a 1930s fair. The San Francisco homes did often have dining rooms, a concession to tradition, but they also had living rooms and kitchens that bucked older trends in privacy and formality and led to dynamic, fluid domestic stages. Because of these qualities, the architectural critic for *Pencil Points*, Talbot F. Hamlin, argued that the San Francisco houses should be taken as models for "the future of suburban house development."<sup>37</sup> Describing the dominant type of home in the San Francisco fair as indebted to "the old California ranch tradition of free rambling planes," he praised the houses for their "direct simplicity, [and] straightforward planning." Furthermore, he believed that these houses would be of great appeal to American families, arguing that "after all, the foundation of any house architecture must be, first and foremost, the livability of the buildings which it creates. The American family will demand in its house free and open space, but it will also demand the possibility of complete privacy for its members. It will demand a minimum of wasteful, merely connective area. It will, I am confident, also, more and more develop a taste for houses without applied stylisms and with a charm that is at least half modesty."<sup>38</sup> In his assessment of the qualities of the San Francisco homes, and in his claim that they should and would become prototypes for future suburban development, Hamlin predicted the nature of the housing boom that would not begin for another decade. That the efficient yet dynamic

forms of the postwar suburban ranch were presaged in the 1939 fairs (both San Francisco and New York, in varying degrees) testifies to the emergent modernism of their designs.

### **Conclusion: Questioning Privacy**

This essay has been predicated on a large-scale thesis about public and private spaces. The thesis goes something like this: the model homes of the 1930s fairs offered examples and prescriptions for how American families should design and outfit their homes, and on a deeper level, how they should conduct their private lives; the millions of visitors who walked through these houses imbibed the prescriptions, took them home, and gradually changed their houses to conform to these models. Of course we do not know how visitors to the fairs actually responded to the homes—the most we can do is speculate. The fairs were huge public spectacles, and the corporate- and government-sponsored buildings were large public statements about technology, science, and the future progress of society at large. The model homes, in contrast, were small experiences, rooted in the present, in the confines and challenges that characterize daily domestic living. What was it like, as a visitor, to leave behind grand public sentiment and stumble into a modest, private house? What was it like to encounter the private in such a public place? The possible collision of public and private experiences imbues the model homes with a particularly acute volatility as prescriptive vehicles.

On the one hand, the model homes might have been highly seductive experiences. Their true-to-life scale and intimate details created a completely immersive environment: visitors might quickly lose all references to the world beyond the present model house and instead submit themselves to its fantasy of warmth, sociability, and up-to-date appliances. Robert Rydell has discussed world's fairs as hegemonic forces, and the model homes might be an instance of hegemony at its most pernicious. By proposing a standard of domestic life, the model homes invaded the most private area of our mental life: how we envision our families, how we want to conduct our daily lives. If the fairs prescribed trends for society at large, the model homes provided settings and tools to live out our private dramas, and thus affected how we think of ourselves even when no one else is supposed to be watching.

On the other hand, perhaps the experience of entering a private home with the chaos of the fair outside was a bit jarring. Not only might it have been difficult to shift from being a public spectator to being a private dweller, but the homes themselves may have been compromised in their ability to conjure up true domestic privacy. In New York visitors had to pay an extra ten-cent admission to the Town of Tomorrow (and Keck's House of Tomorrow in Chicago charged its own separate concession), but crowds around and within the houses were still on the order of hundreds per day, quite different from the typical suburban lawn and street. Photographs make clear that furniture was sometimes arranged to accommodate crowds rather than demonstrate ideal configurations, and the tchotchkes and accessories that would typically enliven a home were often absent (presumably because of the difficulty of securing such small items). Thus the model homes may have been, at best, poor approximations of private life, and their persuasive capacities far less than I have assumed.

Yet if the model homes were flawed in their ability to conjure up private living experiences, they still may have been influential to the millions of visitors who crossed their thresholds. The historian Warren Susman described world's fairs as liminal spaces—spaces that are not anchored firmly in the past, present, or future, but rather hover just outside of, or parallel to, the patterns of one's quotidian existence.<sup>39</sup> In a liminal space, he argued, the visitor is more open to suggestion and change precisely because she is close to her life but not confined by it. Within the larger liminal space of the fair, it may not have mattered how immersive and convincing the model homes were; instead, they simply provided a space that reminded visitors of home, without actually being home, and suggested particular patterns of daily existence. The appeal of those patterns was less dependent on how well they were illustrated in the homes, and was more a product of the general mindset cultivated by the fair.

Ultimately, the model homes of the 1930s world's fairs were ambiguously private structures: they occupied a physically public space and alluded to private life even as they accommodated thousands of visitors. The lives they depicted were likewise complex. Over the course of the decade, the homes prescribed differing attitudes toward consumption, formality, and familial privacy. Each house

demonstrated some mix of nineteenth-century standards and twentieth-century innovations, but in each house the mix differed. Indeed, these homes provide models where such classic binaries as period style and modern, formal and informal, and public and private are destabilized. They illustrate the complexity of transition, and demonstrate that the march toward a modernized American home was circuitous and gradual at best.

## Notes

I would like to thank Laura Burd Schiavo for her support and insights about this topic. I would also like to thank Robert W. Rydell and Richard Guy Wilson for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. The key text on the fairs of the 1930s is Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Exhibitions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), chapter 3.
2. The doorway mechanism was described in "The Modern Houses of the Century of Progress Exposition," *Architectural Forum* 59 (1933), 61: "The kitchen door is opened and closed by an invisible ray that operates by interruption of the beam."
3. In their drive to present an ideal domestic setting, the model homes of the fairs can be linked to broader efforts at social standardization present at the 1930s fairs. One notable instance of this mentality was the "typical family" competition held for the 1940 New York fair, in which states nominated "typical families" to win a free week at the fair. Unsurprisingly, these families were all Caucasian and American-born, and most had two children. Robert Rydell has argued that the uniformity of these "typical families" reveals the challenges that the form of the American family was actually facing at this point in time. While all of the model homes discussed in this essay presume some combination of cohabitating adults and children, the value of various family members changed over the course of the decade, as we shall see. See Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 56–58, and Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 123.
4. Lawrence Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression," *Yale Review* 74 (1985): 223.
5. Talbot F. Hamlin, "California Fair Houses," *Pencil Points* 20 (1939): 293.
6. Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery and Yale University Press, 2004).
7. For a discussion of the stylistic variation on view at the Chicago Fair, see Monica Obniski, "Exhibiting Modernity Through the Lens of Tradition in Gilbert Rohde's Design for Living Interior," *Journal of Design History* 20 (2007): 227–242.
8. Lisa D. Schrenk, *Building a Century of Progress: The Architecture of Chicago's 1933–34 World's Fair* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), chapter 5; Brian Horrigan, "The Home of Tomorrow, 1927–1945," in *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology, and the American Future*, ed. Joseph Corn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 137–163.
9. Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, 55.
10. For a critical history of the importance of spaciousness in American middle-class homes, see Sandy Isenstadt, *The Modern American House: Spaciousness and Middle-Class Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapter 3.
11. While I have not found records to confirm the attribution of the designs, several pieces in the room clearly match items offered in the Herman Miller catalogues of the later 1930s, including the round glass-top coffee table before the fireplace, the square glass-top coffee table

- before the sectional couch, the couch itself, the chairs at the card table, the radio, the upholstered armchairs before the fireplace and in the lower right of the photograph, and the side table also in the lower right. See *Herman Miller 1939 Catalogue: Gilbert Rohde Modern Design* (Atglen, Pa.: Schiffer, 1998).
12. "A Notebook at the Fair," *House Beautiful*, July–August 1939, pp. 34–35; "Design for Living," *House Beautiful*, May 1933, pp. 210–211, 229–230. A characteristically tepid review of the New York homes can be found in *Arts and Decoration*: "No one ought to go to the Fair feeling that because the interiors are not as sensational as Dali . . . the houses are not Modern from the standpoint of liveability. Esthetically the picture may not be finally solved, nor will it ever be, but progress has been made. It is slow, but it is true to the tempo of acceptable living"; Otto Teegan, "Houses in Our Towns of Tomorrow," *Arts and Decoration* 50 (1939): 8.
  13. Talbot F. Hamlin, "Some Fair Comparisons," *Pencil Points* 20 (1939): 644.
  14. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. James I. Dunnett (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 279.
  15. Emily Genauer, *Modern Interiors: Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Illustrated Editions, 1939), 12, 19, 24.
  16. *ABC of Modernage Furniture* (New York: Modernage Furniture, 1933), located in the Corporate Archives, Herman Miller, Inc., Zeeland, Michigan. See also advertisements in magazines throughout the 1930s, such as that from the *New Yorker* that claimed, "We'll show you how smartly you can 'go modern' within ANY budget!" *New Yorker*, April 18, 1936, p. 56.
  17. For Kiesler's showroom, see "'Space House' Exhibited," *New York Times*, October 17, 1933; "Architect Designs a Space House," *House and Garden*, December 1933, p. 8f; "One Living Space Convertible into Many Rooms," *House Beautiful*, January 1934, p. 32. The Modernage pamphlet from 1933 refers, unhelpfully, to "designers of its own staff" but does not name any. *ABC of Modernage Furniture*, n.p. My thanks to Phyllis Ross and Christopher Long for sharing their thoughts on Modernage with me.
  18. "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," *Architectural Forum* 71 (1939): 63, 66.
  19. For several examples of houses furnished thus, see the Garden House, Celotex House, and Fire-Safe House, *ibid.*, 68, 71.
  20. For plans and renderings of these houses, see "Exposition Model Homes," *Pencil Points* 20 (1939): 279, 290.
  21. *Ibid.*, 285.
  22. For plans and renderings of these houses, see *ibid.*, 272, 274.
  23. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), chapters 6 and 9; also Clifford E. Clark, *The American Family Home, 1800–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), chapter 5.
  24. Wright, *Building the Dream*, chapters 9 and 11.
  25. The compressed space of the modern dining room is discussed in Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, 60–61. See also Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), chapter 8; Clark, *The American Family Home*.
  26. "Building Types: Dining Rooms," *Architectural Record* 85 (1939): 101.
  27. Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression," 198.
  28. Norman Bel Geddes, "The House of Tomorrow," *Ladies' Home Journal*, April 1931, pp. 12–13.
  29. Examples of this type of floor plan organization were the Johns-Manville Triple Insulated House, Garden Home, Celotex House, Kelvin Home, and Electric Home. See "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," 67–70.
  30. A partial list of other model houses with this type of floor plan: Happy Valley Estates Model Home, Santa Cruz Host Home, Sleepy Hollow, and Sunnybrae Model Home. See "Exposition Model Homes," 267, 275, 277, 278.
  31. "Modern Houses Top N.Y. Fair," 63, 67.
  32. *Monel at the New York World's Fair* (New York: International Nickel, 1939), World's Fair Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.
  33. *Family Planned Kitchen* (New York: Crane, 1939), 2, 5. World's Fair Collection, Yale University Library.
  34. Gwendolyn Wright has proposed that the newly social space of the modern kitchen is related to a nostalgia for the idea of the homestead kitchen; Wright, *Building the Dream*, 253–254.
  35. *The Range of Tomorrow Brings You Shorter Cooking Hours* (New York: American Stove, 1939), World's Fair Collection, Yale University Library.
  36. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic, 1983). Sarah Fayen, as an undergraduate at Yale College, wrote an excellent senior thesis on the symbolism and design of the modern kitchen at the New York World's Fair, arguing that the housewife was actually more confined than ever before by these supposedly liberating kitchens; Sarah Neale Fayen, "The 1939–40 New York World's Fair: Reviving the Kitchen as the Heart of the Home," senior thesis, Yale College, 1998.
  37. Hamlin, "California Fair Houses," 295.
  38. *Ibid.*, 293, 296.
  39. Warren Susman, "Ritual Fairs," *Chicago History* 12 (1983): 6.