

Exhibit Reviews

Comptes rendus d'expositions

National Building Museum, Washington, D.C., *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation*

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National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.,
*World War II and the American Dream: How
Wartime Building Changed a Nation*

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"I just want to say one word to you, just one word," said Mr McGuire to the 20-year-old Benjamin Braddock in the classic 1967 film, *The Graduate*, "plastics." For director Mike Nichols and indeed, for many of us born in the prosperous post-World War II era, this magical stuff summed up the hopes and aspirations of the newly materialistic middle class.

The exhibition *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation*, currently at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., showcases plastic, as well as plywood, water-based paint, aluminum siding and a host of other materials that still constitute our everyday domestic landscapes and were originally designed for wartime use.¹ Frozen foods, saran wrap, tupperware and melamine dinnerware are displayed amid Quonset huts, the Pentagon, and the ubiquitous post-war suburb, underlining the old aphorism, "necessity is the mother of invention."

The overall aim of the exhibition is to illuminate the constructive, rather than destructive, side of the global conflict that took place a half-century ago. It is installed in five or six relatively small galleries located off a corner of the museum's Great Hall. A P-39 Airacobra fighter

plane hangs from the ceiling, marking the entrance to the galleries. Loosely organized around the themes of mass production, Washington during the war, wartime research, housing and cities, and household products which emerged from the war, the show comprises about 350 objects and images. In material culture terms, it proceeds from the large-scale artifacts (Quonset huts, highways and blimp hangars) to smaller, domestic objects in a fairly linear fashion.

The real power of the exhibition is that it tells the story of World War II through things, rather than events, and focusses on that most materialistic of nations, the United States. In fact, parts of the show suggest that America's unsurpassed capability to produce all sorts of things — not just A-bombs — was at the base of the Allied victory in 1945.

One of the most interesting (and telling) aspects of the show is the design of the display structures themselves. Although rather shabbily built — they were self-destructing on opening day — the frameworks for the models, objects and images were directly inspired by the theme of the show and served to underline

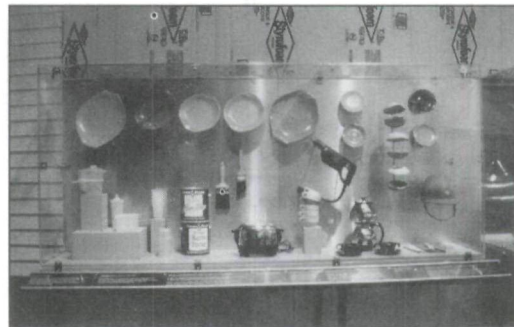
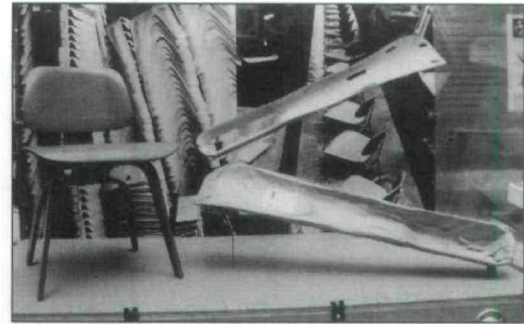


Fig. 1
*The mundane artifacts
of everyday life —
Melamine dinnerware,
plastic food storage
systems, Super
Kem-Tone paint, a
toaster, coffeepot and
household drill —
now art objects.*

Fig. 2 (right)
Plastics were used extensively during the war as lightweight Army helmet liners and shatterproof Navy dishes. As the war ended, plastics manufacturers sought new markets, which led to the development of popular domestic dinnerware. (Courtesy National Building Museum)



Fig. 3 (far right)
Fibreglass and plywood chairs displayed like highly prized pieces of sculpture, juxtaposed with the plywood leg splints from which their technology developed during the war.



liners and shatter-proof Navy dishes (Fig. 2). Marketed after the war for their bright colours, durability and high sanitary standards, cups and plates of melamine-formaldehyde were embraced by the typical post-war middle-class family, who placed a premium on both safety and cheeriness in the arrangement of their cozy, post-war nests.

Similarly, fibreglass and plywood chairs, like the ones still found scattered around libraries and cafeterias of most Canadian universities, are displayed like highly prized pieces of sculpture, juxtaposed with the plywood leg splints from which their technology developed during the war years (Fig. 3). It is ironic that such functional, well-designed and cheap objects are presented, 50 years later, in poorly built (although very hip) and undoubtedly expensive museum cases.

The glaring omission of social issues is truer of the exhibition itself than of the 280-page catalogue of the same name, which unfortunately was not available for the exhibit's opening on Veterans' Day, 1994. Essays by Margaret Crawford and Greg Hise, in particular, provide the much needed historical grounding missing in most parts of the exhibition. There is little suggestion in the museum setting, for example, of how the advent of frozen food affected the lives of countless middle-class women suddenly forced back into the home to reproduce. As many historians of technology have shown, the "perfect results" promised by TV dinners, Spock-style parenting, and the crisp, undecorated walls of Modernist architecture led directly to the "problem that has no name": the Feminine Mystique. What happened when millions of men traded their khakis for grey flannel? According to this exhibition, everybody lived happily ever after.

To be fair, *World War II and the American Dream* does reveal how many of the things usually assumed to be developed in post-war America, especially the middle-class suburb, actually began in the desperate years during

its major points. For example, the space accommodating the final section on home life during and after the war is defined by a gable-shaped wall veneered in fibreglass insulation and aluminum siding; some walls are slightly canted to suggest the ways prefabricated ones were raised up to construct cheap wartime housing; the tables supporting the models look like the landing gear of airplanes; and everything is grey, evoking the functionalism of bare metal and the composite dullness of khaki uniforms.

Less successful is the suggestion of any kind of social or cultural context for most of the artifacts. The exception to this general criticism is the section on urban issues, which is full of photographs and maps and illuminates the double standards experienced by black workers during the war. The parts of *World War II and the American Dream*, however, that focus on the smaller stuff of everyday life present rather mundane artifacts like so many art objects, devoid of any social meaning. Melamine dinnerware, plastic food storage systems, Super Kem-Tone paint, a toaster, coffeepot and household drill are all carefully arranged behind glass (or is it Plexiglas?), emphasizing their now precious value (Fig. 1). This display case is situated between an open fridge of frozen food and Buckminster Fuller's model of the aluminum and plastic Dymaxion House. A single helmet included in the all-domestic ensemble reminds viewers of the development of plastic during the war for lightweight Army helmet

World War II. In this sense, the show succeeds in underscoring both the impetus to create new technologies fostered by the war effort and the rapid conversion of wartime production to the needs of post-war consumer society. For those of us who grew up in post-war suburbs playing with perfectly shaped (plastic) Barbie dolls, cooking tiny cakes in Easy-Bake ovens and consuming processed cheese sandwiches lovingly sheathed in Saran Wrap, these points strike a real chord. It is fascinating to learn, for example,

that this multi-purpose plastic film still found in most of our refrigerators was first developed to protect machine guns from moisture during shipment to the front lines.

Unfortunately, the exhibition's celebration of American technology — sponsored, not incidentally, by the U.S. Department of Defense — provides no hint of the negative impact of mass-produced consumer technologies. Plastics, after all, were never the problem-free miracle product promoted by the Mr McGuires of the world.

NOTE

1. For a commentary on the exhibition from the perspective of architectural and urban history, see my review in the current issue of *Urban History Review*.

Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, *Remembering Our Warriors: A Tribute to Manitoba's First Nations Veterans*

SHARON MCLEOD-MARTIN

It's the beginning of something I hope doesn't die.

They really are the forgotten soldiers.

Lambert Hart
Manitoba Indian Education Association

May 1995 marks the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and the beginning of an era that sees First Nations communities coming forward to recognize members of their communities who have made contributions to Canada's war efforts. Approximately 3 500 individuals out of 106 500 First Nations members served in WW I alone.¹ The public is constantly being reminded that First Nations veterans are "forgotten soldiers," but why are they referred to as "forgotten." First Nations soldiers will tell you, "we came to the call of duty when our country needed us, and were proud to do so, only to return to a country that forgets our contributions." Other veterans have said, "while we were in the service we thought of ourselves as Canadians first, before we were Indians, and if your life depended on saving yourself and your comrade's life, whatever his ethnic background, you did just that." Thoughts like these of patriotism, heroism and courage will always remain in the minds of First Nations veterans who themselves made near ultimate sacrifices

in the name of freedom. For the remaining days of their lives they, along with their families, will continue to suffer psychological effects due to the horrors of war.

In November 1993 (75 years after the end of WW I), the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature hosted the exhibition *Remembering Our Warriors: A Tribute to Manitoba's First Nations Veterans* (Fig. 1). The exhibit included wartime memorabilia, photographs and historical information detailing the involvement of Manitoba's First Nations communities in Canada's war efforts. The focus was to provide both the aboriginal and non-aboriginal public with an awareness and appreciation of the contribution First Nations communities made to both world wars and Korea. The exhibition was about First Nations veterans. It brought to the forefront examples of the sacrifices these veterans made for their country. It was the perfect opportunity for First Nations veterans to come forward with their stories and experiences and it provided a forum for the public to respond.

The exhibit was a collaborative effort between the curator and the Manitoba Aboriginal Veterans Association of Manitoba Inc. under its president, George Mann. Originally from Fort Alexander First Nation in Manitoba, George Mann is a veteran of 25 years of service,