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From Ration Cards to Refugee Camps: Bureaucracy, Domesticity, and the 'Bleak House' that Modern Architecture Built During and After World War I

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Histories of architecture and WWI have often placed wartime advances in mechanization and standardization at the center of analysis, emphasizing how they opened new fields of inquiry in the *aftermath* of global conflict. These accounts, many written by leading apologists for interwar modernism, have concluded that materials and technologies breathed life into a period that was itself deemed a new beginning. This notion of a distinct break with the past and a start to a promising new era veils, obscures, and erases the violence and atrocities of the war. In a context where, as we argue, the social and material repercussions of World War I continued well into the 1920s, Elizabeth Povinelli, Sharika Thiranagama, and Jim Sykes' writings on the concept of the 'bleak house' are illuminating. They posit that war characterized not only by obviously violent acts but also by the creation of 'exhausted social worlds'. The perceived fracture between the wartime and postwar worlds served a particular purpose in rationalizing massive suffering. Indeed, the interwoven bureaucratic, militaristic, ... War I formed the very basis of interwar architecture culture. Amidst the wreckage, designers, economists, planners, and military personnel forged not a new world but an extension of wartime physical and mental geographies disguised in utopian community building.

Keywords: modern architecture; war; refugees; domestic

In 1920 Austrian architect Josef Frank wrote an essay entitled 'Nach Kriegen' ['After Wars']. 'The great experience was to realize that nothing has to be as it is and that everything can be different,' Frank wrote. 'That there must be no bread, that money has no particular value, and that we could find ourselves in a never imaginable situation'. He added,

> We have been wrenched out of our usual plans for the future, of our habitual calm and our regular doings, and we have lived an idle life for four years. We have met people of whose existence we had previously only vague suspicions and thus we have discovered a larger world. The war has brought us into the long-awaited situation of being able to start anew, and we are looking for a way. (Frank 1931: 1–6)

Frank's comments, especially in the latter half of the cited section, can be read as affirmations of what has become a throughline in histories of architecture and design since the 1960s; that the experience of World War I on the battlefield caused a restructuring of society so great, that in the midst of wreckage and destruction, it resulted in a mood of newness and possibility. This powerful and alluring *idea*, symbolized politically by new nation states and modes of government, colored the writing of designers and was thus cited as the rationale for the 'new architecture'. Interwar histories of the foundation of the Bauhaus and the creation of municipally supported modern housing estate programs in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and France have further underscored this point. Akin to the notion of 1945 as 'Zero Hour', which itself has come under intense scrutiny over the last decades, the 'utopianism' of the 1920s was invested in marking a sharp line between wartime and the interwar period of resurgence and progress.

Building on the work of leading apologists for interwar modernism, histories of architecture and WWI have often placed wartime advances in mechanization and standardization at the center of analysis, emphasizing how they opened new fields of inquiry in the *aftermath* of global conflict (see Giedion 1941 and 1948; Hitchcock and Johnson 1932; Banham 1960). These historians have concluded that materials and technologies breathed life into a period that was itself deemed a new beginning. Yet, returning to the idea of 'Zero Hour', this notion of a distinct beginning to a promising new age is inaccurate and seeks to veil, obscure, and erase the violence and atrocities committed. It is perhaps more helpful to ask, what aspects of the war experience persisted after the armistice in November 1918? In a context where, as we argue, the social and material repercussions of World War I continued well into the interwar period, Elizabeth Povinelli, Sharika Thiranagama, and Jim Sykes' writings on war as a 'bleak house' are illuminating (**Figure 1**). They posit that war is characterized not only

by obviously violent 'dramatic moments of raiding, shooting, bombing and shelling' but also by the creation of long-lasting strategies of 'endurance ... of exhausted social worlds and the effort that people within them exert to create embankments against partial or utter dissolution' (Povinelli 2017: 131–136; Thiranagama 2011; Sykes 2018: 35–60).[1] For the individuals and organizations under consideration in this Special Collection, the First World War was not firmly in the past but rather very much part of their present.

Figure 1: Refugees in Gnilowody, today Hvardiyske, Ukraine, September 1915. Courtesy Austrian National Library, Vienna. Reference Number, WK1/ALB047/12899.

The essays in this collection, presented under the title 'Ration Cards and Refugee Camps', shine a light on the 'bleak house' of war. They also illustrate what the beginning of the excerpt by Frank shows: that in addition to advancements in mechanization and material technologies, the war produced worldwide bottlenecks, scarcities, and a failing imperial infrastructure and bureaucracy – money, housing, food distribution, medical aid – that violently extracted resources globally. Between 1914 and 1918, these systems were brought to the brink of collapse. Rapidly dwindling resources extended the notion of the 'front' into the realm of everyday life, both public and private. By tracing aspects

of material and architectural production that resulted from emergency decrees, new wartime household organizations, and military institutions, which championed housing infrastructure ranging from military camps to civilian settlements, this Special Collection illustrates that architecture became complicit in producing violence on the battlefield and in the domestic realm. To paint a more complex picture of the period and expand our understanding of certain architectural figures, we make visible that the development of interwar modern architecture was reliant on histories of scarcity, resource extraction, and brutality.

Due to its emphasis on an architecture of bureaucracy and want, this Special collection moves beyond any form of romanticization of architects as military personnel in combat. Instead, it considers the lasting visual and spatial regime of World War I. Elsewhere, we have argued that 'architectural-historical understandings of World War I have long been colored' in problematic ways 'by military histories and the romance or tragedy of specific individuals fighting on the Western Front – from soldier-architects like Erich Mendelssohn, Walter Gropius, and Richard Neutra to literary figures like Siegfried Sassoon, Erich Maria Remarque, and Ernst Jünger' (Sassin and Hochhäusl 2022: 10). Although this collection of essays returns to some familiar actors, including architects, home economists, and military personnel, it does so by establishing links between the ferocious extraction of resources and the production of architecture. Indeed, architectural design relied on rampant militarism and became entangled with the bureaucratization of scarcity in institution building that extended well beyond World War I. Those design efforts reproduced imperial and colonial paradigms in a first wave of self-determination and decolonization efforts. Ultimately, our return to figures of architectural culture seeks to entangle them with complex questions of power, bureaucracy, and warfare ranging from European capital cities to New York, the larger United States, and Russia.

Finally, the title for this Special Collection, 'From Ration Cards to Refugee Camps' marks a dedication to histories of World War I and the domestic, including cookware, kitchens, housing settlements, temporary shelter, and hotels. Moving away from histories of the front proper, in fact, all essays of the collection seek to link militant spaces — temporally and spatially broadly defined — to questions of housing and the domestic. Following important publications, such as *Domesticity at War* and *Architecture in Uniform: Designing and Building for the Second World War*, which focused on World War II, we highlight the domestication of war and the militarization of the home front, the latter itself a concept borne of the period 1914 to 1918 (Colomina 2006; Cohen 2011). We do not see the front line and the home front as distinct spaces but rather as closely intertwined phenomena marked by permeability and porosity. The production

of housing and the provision of cookware were by no means innocent affairs. With the exponential rise in the price of bread — to name one basic staple that became costly during World War I — households and home economics were a primary domain for rampant nationalism and drove enlistment efforts. The essays collected here thus embed the creation of wartime and resultant interwar institutions into broader frameworks of imperial and colonial warfare, while also mapping the development of survival, coping, and resistance mechanisms by those forced to contend with everyday scarcity on the ground.

Articles in this Special Collection

The first essay in the Special Collection, by Anna Maria Meister, '"Housewives and Architects": Marie-Elisabeth Lüders' Management of the New Architecture from Pot-Lid to Siedlung', connects the domains of the household, war economics, and rampant nationalism. In excavating the life of politician and 'managerial expert' Marie Elisabeth Lüders (1878–1966), Meister sharply disproves the early fallacy — held by many members of the German General Staff — that conducting the First World War was separate from the concerns of the domestic realm (Tuchman 1962: 374).[2] Meister writes that this self-identified 'professional housewife' claimed that the development of carefully managed household regimes were not only 'essential to conquer pressing housing shortages' during the war but also a means to mitigate impending economic catastrophe. In this effort, Lüders, like Walter Gropius, with whom she collaborated, 'saw the mission at hand to be one of an "urgent collaboration" between "producers, traders, housewives and architects"'. Meister's research situates Lüders not only as a fundamentally bureaucratic and managerial thinker of pot-lids and *Siedlungen*, all of which she helped to design, but also as a long overlooked female figure who readily adapted the logic of war economics to domestic production. Ultimately, Meister's article helps to expand our understanding of the broad economic concerns of bureaucratic entities working *within* the German war machine, the interplay between unwanted 'chaos' and wanted 'organization', and the long shadow of governmentally supported war efforts.

The second essay in the collection, 'Modernism and Mobilization: From Viktor Sokolsky's Economic Principle to Interwar Architectural Planning', centers on questions of efficiency construction during World War I in Imperial Russia. In her article, Alla Vronskaya links the design of interwar modern buildings, such as the Narkomfin House, not only to Soviet housing politics but also to the design of pre-war and wartime military barracks. Centering her analysis on the military architect Viktor Sokolsky (1869–1913), Vronskaya writes that this history 'reveals how modern

architecture converged with military history, blurring the established historiographic boundaries between the radical and the regressive'. Moreover, Vronskaya convincingly demonstrates how interwar Soviet architecture introduced the categories of hygiene, efficiency, and economy through the emergent discipline of urbanism, as well as housing deeply reliant on and entangled with imperial precedents — the procedures, manuals, and internal histories of the Russian military and the final years of Romanov rule.

Finally, Justin Fowler's essay, 'Masterly Confusion: Ported Protection in the American Interwar', returns to a subject of existing scholarly research, but with entirely new framing. Tracing the experiences of Robert Moses, Ralph Walker, and Aymar Embury II in the European theater of war, Fowler looks at how trauma, loss, and play with concealment found its way into the work of these planners in interwar America. All three individuals under consideration worked as camoufleurs, and the narrative arc that Fowler charts is one from a theater of reciprocal violence, where 'makeshift flat tops of fabric and foliage provided portable spaces of relief', to interwar architectural work that considered therapeutic desires, safety, and comfort. Fowler writes that modern American architecture, often deemed 'middlebrow', actively 'sought to mask or avoid the aesthetic and physiological shocks of modernity' while furthering 'the entrenchment of modern forms of mobilization, organization, and risk management'. These three men applied the mindset they developed as camoufleurs on the western front to the spills on hotel carpets of Manhattans, Old Fashioneds, or Gin Fizzes, transforming profoundly discomforting wartime experiences into the creation of quasi-domestic environments of comfort for an emergent white American middle class. As Moses, Walker, and Embury were both the designers of as well as the ideal clients for their interwar work, it is not hard to see their efforts as a subconscious form of memory work that converted trauma into design.

In returning to the actors, buildings, and indeed the history of modern architecture proper, we are not interested in merely situating the domestic or histories of women in it. In turning to architectural figures, we seek to treat them with complexity; an illuminating example is the study of women who advocated both for bureaucracies of war and the mobilization of national sentiments to produce new domestic environments. We seek to understand the domestic as complicit in violent interventions on the front and in an interwar domesticity deeply informed by war. Moreover, we subvert histories of the avantgarde by connecting them with the discourses of violent oppression from which they stem; not only were debates on hygienic environments the result of peacetime considerations for bright and airy cities (which in themselves were not without gendered and racialized overtones), but they also stemmed directly from military planning whose ends, and means, were brutal. Even interwar corporate architecture

in the United States was influenced by histories of concealment and camouflage. The designers of such work are portrayed here not as heroic but as vulnerable men who worked through their trauma and loss architecturally, delivering the stains of violence home to the United States.

Our focus therefore remains on the numerous means of coping with scarcity and loss, on the permeability and porosity of war spaces, including within the domestic realm, and on the afterlives of war in unexpected places, both between 1914 and 1918 and after. We posit that the perceived fracture between the wartime and postwar worlds served a particular purpose in making sense of massive suffering, particularly on an individual level, while the interwoven bureaucratic, militaristic, and technocratic systems of World War I continued in obscure ways, forming the very basis of interwar architecture culture and forging, not a new world, but the continuation of a wartime one. While its contemporaries deemed the 'new architecture' one of 'utopian community building', that 'new' architecture was an inflection and a continued construction, to invoke Povinelli again, of 'exhausted social worlds' (2017: 131, cited in Sykes 2018: 35).

Notes

[1] The concept of war as a "bleak house" asks us to focus on enduring conditions of absence, displacement, and disruption for both civilians and combatants. As Sykes writes, the "bleak house" encompasses "political and daily strategies of survival, as well as the fearful tedium that emerges from the erasure of one's past existence" (2018: 35).

[2] This attitude was exemplified by General von Molte's announcement of 1914, 'Don't bother me with [home] economics, I am busy conducting a war' (Tuchman 1962: 374).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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