

Architects' Professional Alliance with the Furniture Design Industry in Interwar America - As Reflected in Public Exhibitions -

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ABSTRACT

The professional alliance between disciplines of architecture and furniture design in the interwar years as displayed in the prominent architectural exhibitions of the era is interesting in the context of professionalization of American architecture. The way furniture design gradually became part of the architectural shows not only reflected but provided the practical field in which the architectural institution sought, under the new social order since the mid 1910s, a new professional cast—departing from the former milieu in the realm of high-art by the Beaux-Arts Movement. Exhibitions held by the Architectural League of New York in the 1920s revealed that the early impetus for reformation toward efficiency had been subsumed by the system of Beaux-Arts. By contrast, “The Architect and the Industrial Arts” show of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in which the most prominent architects of the era exercised their professional expertise in the design of “Moderne Style” interior furnishings, clearly shows how architects, in the milieu of expanding commercial market, sought to align their profession as industrial designers.

Keywords: Architecture, Furniture Design, Profession, Exhibitions, Architectural League of New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1. INTRODUCTION

Because architecture deals with the built environment, of which the basic unit is the room, there are numerous instances in the history of architecture where the architect is directly involved in the production of furniture. For those who upheld the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideals of the modern period—from Frank Lloyd Wright to Henry van de Velde to De Stijl designers—designing pieces of furniture were a natural part of an architect’s work. However, the period between the two World Wars is a curious one in the history of modern American architecture regarding its disciplinary relation to interior design and furniture, considering the fact that before then such fields were, in the process of architecture’s professionalization, deliberately distanced from the discipline.

The purpose of this research is to look into the process of how the closed professionalism of architecture gradually opened up to the fields of related disciplines in this era, the primary role the furniture industry played in this transformation, and on what backgrounds such changes were instigated. Because professionalism concerns not only the establishment of an internal discipline but also its projection onto the public sphere, the research will focus on two major architectural exhibitions of the era - the annual exhibitions held by the Architectural League of New York, and the industrial art shows of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, especially “The Architect and the

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Industrial Arts” exhibition of 1929. As these events hitherto had not been illuminated from the perspective of professionalism, this research will rely on primary sources of the era, documents from the archives of the Architectural League and the Metropolitan Museum, as well as their contemporary coverage in professional journals of architecture and industrial design.

To provide background information to the discussion of the interwar years, chapter two will introduce the professionalization process undertaken by the American architectural community in the preceding years, and how the social milieu supporting the initial institutional cast had begun to change in the 1910s. How the Architectural League exhibitions reacted to such changing conditions is discussed in chapter three, followed by chapter four, which deals with the Metropolitan show to reveal how professionalism of its participating architects differed from that represented in the preceding League exhibitions.

2. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION IN MODERN AMERICA

Since the late nineteenth century, architects of the so-called Beaux-Arts Movement—those who either studied in or were influenced by the French *École des Beaux-Arts*—institutionalized architectural practice as a modern profession. Alarmed by the lack of regulation or licensure in the building industry, these architects strove to construct a prestigious institutional setting for architectural practice by importing the Parisian school’s established system of design methodology and artistic discipline. At the core of the Beaux-Arts system was the clear formal discipline of neoclassicism, in which vocabulary and grammar of architecture had already been historically perfected, and the task of contemporary architects was to compose them in a correct and systematic way to meet modern programmatic and functional needs. Such composition required an artistic inspiration and a thorough knowledge of historical ornaments and details as well as modern requirements, which could only be gained through strict and professional education. It was on this basis that the Beaux-Arts movement established itself as an academic institution in the realm of high art. As Joan Draper remarked, the ultimate goal of the Beaux-Arts movement was not in its establishment of a coherent formal style but to enhance the social status of the architect (Draper 1977), and as the movement won the patronage of the government and the cultural elite of the east coast, an era of “American Renaissance” had emerged.

However, the social milieu that supported the artistic ideals of the Beaux-Arts system was fundamentally shaken in the early decades of the twentieth century, which saw a great change in the aims and structure of American society. Since the 1910s, industrialization, mechanization and restraints under the condition of World War I—which imposed a moratorium on all building constructions except the war-related ones—led to the rise of a more technical, pragmatic approach to all areas of social activity. In the milieu of the following postwar era, this pragmatic approach gained increasing weight in the cult of engineering, which reached beyond the realm of science and technology.

Under these new social circumstances, Beaux-Arts-inspired architects, with their aspirations of high art and dependence on the patronage of wealthy but small class of elites, had trouble obtaining works while mass builders, empowered by the social agenda of maximizing efficiency as well as developments in construction technology and engineering, claimed an increasing volume of the building market. According to *The Architectural Record*, a crucial problem laid upon architecture was “to adjust the general practice of architecture to the conditions created by modern techniques in the useful arts, including commerce and industry.” (Mikkelson, 1929)

This meant that manufacture and craftsmanship now had to be incorporated into the Beaux-Arts system, which hitherto set the high-art-inspiring professional discipline of architecture in the modern era. Because it was a problem of the profession—which is activated on social consensus—and not just an issue of internal discipline, such change had to be publically announced in the field of public discourse. This resulted in an apparent change in the annual exhibitions of the Architectural League of New York.

3. THE INCLUSION OF FURNITURE DISPLAYS IN THE ARCHITECTURAL LEAGUE SHOWS (1918-1932)

3-1 Incorporating Interior Design into Architecture

The editorial of *The Architectural Review* in April 1921, titled “Architecture and the Allied Arts,” aptly summarized the background in which the changes of the Architectural League shows were made: “...the dependence of architecture on the existence of skilled craftsmen of artistic ability for the many minor objects that enter into a building...has not been so well understood. Now, however, the workers in the industrial arts are making a serious and well directed effort to produce works above the purely commercial level... This same spirit is becoming evident in the less important work, in the residences and in the smaller buildings of a semi-public character, where more attention is being given to consistency and excellence in the matters of iron work, door fittings and interior treatment.” (*The Architectural Review*, 1921)



**Fig.1. Court of Honor, “The International
Exposition of Architecture and Allied
Arts,”
Grand Central Palace, New York, 1925.**



**Fig.2. Gothic Carving arranged by P. W.
French & Company, decorators,
“The International Exposition of
Architecture and Allied Arts,”
Grand Central Palace, New York, 1925.**

This betrayed a major change in the League's approach to public exhibitions, and more fundamentally, its professionalism. Here, two major aspects of the reformation are articulated: that craft and manufactures, in addition to fine arts, are making an increasingly important contribution to architecture and is now a significant part of the League exhibitions; and that the scope of the show is enlarged to include fields previously deemed marginal to architecture's institutional foundation, such as interior design and furniture.

Until them, the Architectural League, an institution of New York architects established in 1879 under heavy influence of the Beaux-Arts movement, held annual exhibitions for both architects and the public under the constitutional aim of promoting architecture and the allied fine arts. In order to promote the artistic aspirations of the architectural profession, technical or commercial aspects were deliberately downplayed, and the central spaces of the galleries were filled with architectural drawings and models of representative projects as well as paintings and sculptures. However, under the new social background, the League made various changes in its institutional form to meet the new demands on the profession: the category of the League's competition prizes was expanded to include design and craftsmanship in native industrial art, and the League's membership was now open beyond architects and artists to embrace manufacturers of artistic materials and products. Moreover, its constitution went beyond its traditional alliance with fine arts, and aimed to "unite in fellowship the practitioners of these arts and crafts." Under these circumstances, the League adopted a new exhibiting policy—to display actual products of crafts, especially furniture pieces, as part of their public exhibitions.

Initially, furnitures were often represented by photographs and illustrations, the usual method employed to represent architectural works. However, in 1925's "Exposition of Architecture and Allied Arts," prepared under the auspices of the American Institute of Architects and the Architectural League of New York and on view at New York's Grand Central Palace, they were assembled into actual rooms in the manufacturer's booths. Beside the Court of Honor—the central well of the Palace where major pieces of architectural drawings, sculptures, and paintings were on display—were separate booths and show rooms rented by manufacturers. The result was similar to a period room, a form of display one could find in the galleries of museums, where arts and crafts pieces were displayed in the intimate surroundings for which they had been designed. This meant that works of architecture were no longer represented exclusively through sketches, drawings, and models—which stood for the artistic inspirations related to the process of their creation—but were now also presented in its final form as a product in a practical, commercial context. These room settings in the League exhibitions helped to establish an intimate link between architecture and products of the furnishing industry, and showed how the achievements of the former relied on the latter's service.

This inclusion of furnitures marks an important change in the professionalism of architecture, regarding its market. These arrangements for different types of rooms were suitable to consumers of moderate means, and hence it was argued that "the majority of our people can profit by the taste and learning of our best known decorators, architects, painters and draftsmen." (The American Architect, 1924) With this emphasis on the importance of the public market, the institution of architecture, previously established as a branch of high art separate from matters of the commercial market, was now in a transitional phase. The public's response was enthusiastic—attendants at the Grand Central Palace increased to a soaring 150,000, more than seven times the average of 20,000 visitors at previous annual shows.

3-2 Professional Relationship between Architects and Furniture Manufacturers

However, the inclusion of craft and manufactures into the Architectural League shows was not seamless. In the 1925 show, many noted the low quality of craftworks which were, unlike

architectural presentation, presented *hors concours*, and lamented that “if architecture is a pill that needs sugarcoating, they have made the coating so thick that the architecture could hardly be found.” (The Architectural Forum, 1926) And there was also a limit to the concept of craft as understood by the League: it was a realm of technical skill that was necessary in fulfilling ideals the classical notion of architecture projects. As *American Architect* noted, “interior decoration is rightfully the architecture of the interior, and, as such, should be directly under the control of the architect.” (The American Architect, 1925)

In fact, this new idea of the professional relationship between the architect and the interior designer was much debated in contemporary furniture journals. In order to create a better designed interior environment, designers hoped to build in the production of furnishings a network of cooperation with the architects, who were the single most influential agency on consumers of furniture and other interior furnishings, as consumers most naturally went to architects for advice in the selection of interior fitments (Good Furniture, 1916). The appraisal of the furnishing industry that an architect is a “professional advisor who has no commercial interest” in the products he recommends, and a “dealer in building, decorating and furnishing commodities” just as “a physician is a dealer in drugs,” was similar to the role of an engineer in that era. However, manufacturers lamented that, because of their misunderstanding of the function of the architect, they could not build as cooperative a relationship with the architects as the latter’s fruitful relationship with the building trade.

But as the emerging interior designers aspired to the same artistic and professional prestige as the architects, and claimed a growing portion of the market for the design of the interior—financially the most lucrative part of the building construction process—conflicting interests between architect and the manufacturer of interior furnishings was so apparent that an entire issue of Good Furniture, the representative journal from the furnishing industry, was devoted to discussions on the relationship between the two fields in September 1917, and once again in March 1918.

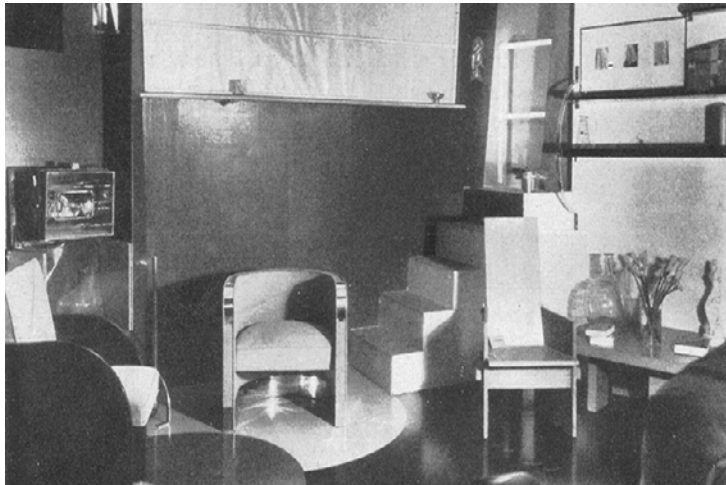
In sum, the link between architecture and the furnishing industry emerged with the opening of the Beaux-Arts discipline to the commercial fields in the 1910s. This was apparently a shift of policy for the institution of architecture that insisted on the Beaux-Arts-inspired connection with the realm of fine arts. However, the basic ideals of Beaux-Arts discipline persisted, and modern notions of professional “service” or functionalism were still absent in the discourse of the League members. Though strategically essential, it is still only a means to achieve the aims of classical architecture whose foundation had not yet been shaken by the emerging ideas. Under these conditions, a proper, integrated link between architecture and craft could neither be displayed nor established—craft remained at a level that supplied technical proficiency required in fulfilling the ideals of Beaux-Arts classicism. The idea of industrial design, its programmatic demands and social aims, had not permeated the League exhibitions, and it is precisely in this facet that we can locate the fundamental difference between the League exhibition and those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the subject of our next chapter.

4. ARCHITECT-DESIGNED FURNITURE IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM’S INDUSTRIAL ARTS SHOWS

4-1 Architecture Represented by Room Furnishing

From its inception to the tenth show of 1927, the industrial art exhibitions of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, were of general content, open to manufacturers from a wide range of fields. As the need for a more focused exhibition arose, the Museum decided to limit subsequent

shows to one area, and the first show to materialize from this aim was “The Architect and the Industrial Arts” of 1929, organized in close collaboration with architects. Architects had already participated in the design exhibitions of department stores, including Macy’s “Exposition of Art and Trade” in 1927 and 1928, prepared in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum, but this was the first time they occupied the center stage of an industrial design show held in an artistic context, under a title underlining the importance of their profession.



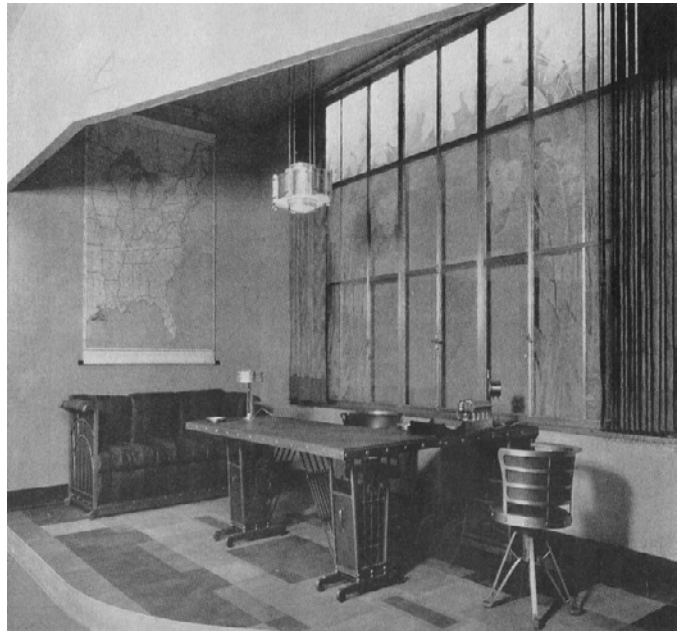
**Fig.3. Penthouse studio apartment by William E. Lescaze,
“International Exhibition of Art in Industry,” Macy’s, New York, 1927.**

For this exhibition, Richard Bach, the Museum’s Associate to Industrial Arts, and ceramic designer Leon V. Solon enlisted nine designers to take up the task and act as the Cooperating Committee on the exhibition. With the exception of Solon and landscape designer Armistead Fitzhugh, the Committee consisted of architects or architect-designers: from New York, Raymond M. Hood, Ely Jacques Kahn, Ralph T. Walker, Joseph Urban and Eugene Schoen; Eliel Saarinen from Detroit; and John Wellborn Root, Jr. from Chicago. Accordingly titled “The Architect and the Industrial Arts,” the exhibition featured a participant list which was a roll-call for the most renowned practitioners of its time, especially the creators of the New York skyscrapers. 158 manufacturers participated in installing the objects and settings designed by the architects.

The role charged to the architects was to assemble group displays of designed objects in simulated room arrangements, similar to the setting we have seen in the Architectural League shows of the 1910s and ’20s. These furniture and interior pieces were not stock articles but, for the first time in the Metropolitan’s industrial design show, designed specifically for the exhibition. Under a basic display scheme by Saarinen and Kahn, the designers then planned almost every detail of the presentation, which were arranged in thirteen rooms that represented the modern way of living, including business executive’s office, man’s study in a country house, conservatory, woman’s bedroom, dining room, apartment house loggia, and salesroom. Fulfilling its role as an exhibition to promote industrial art, statements from all participating designers were published in the exhibition booklet, which also included a list of manufacturers who supplied the materials for its furniture, lighting fixtures, windows, and desk equipments. The show immediately attracted a large crowd—within its eight months of extended duration, it attracted over 186,000 visitors in total.



**Fig.4. Dining room by Eliel Saarinen,
“The Architect and the Industrial Arts,”
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1929.**



**Fig.5. Business executive's office by
Raymond M. Hood,
“The Architect and the Industrial Arts,”
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1929.**

The show has been covered in the history of design for its novel stylistic trend—namely “Art Deco,” or “Moderne Style,” “Zigzag Moderne,” and “Arte Moderne” as it was known to its contemporaries—but it is notable in the current research for the fact that it marks another step in the reformation of architectural professionalism in modern America. Taking into consideration the era's social milieu of functional and efficient approach, it is quite ironic that style became such a conspicuous factor of the show's displayed furniture pieces. However, to the organizers of the exhibition, style was not aesthetically determined. Bach provided the following view on the issue of style: “No style...has ever prospered, or ever will, without recourse to reason.... We need not be troubled because [the new style's] voice is cracked, its color pitched too high, its apperception a bit vague. These are marks of adolescence...; modulation comes with maturity and this style of today is but a quarter-century old. The underlying reason in contemporary design is to be sought in the practical life it hopes to interpret. Only as interpreter can art function usefully....” (Bach, 1929) It should be noted that Bach's description of style is based on underlying reason and not formal principles, and for the latter he leaves the matter open for future developments. The stylistic coherence could also be read as a result of a functional approach, not its antithesis. Solon, who was in charge of the Metropolitan show with Bach, underlines this point in the exhibition catalogue: “The uniformity of interest that existed in this group, and the tacit acceptance of common aesthetic objectives were surprising, in view of the pronounced individuality of many therein. The probable reason for this delightful circumstance was that practicability took precedence of aesthetic factors in all preliminary discussion, permitting the varied inventive faculties to meet upon neutral ground....” (Solon, 1919)



**Fig.6. Man's study by Ralph T. Walker,
"The Architect and the Industrial
Arts," Metropolitan Museum of Art,
1929**



**Fig.7. Conservatory by Joseph Urban,
"The Architect and the Industrial Arts,"
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1929.**

Indeed, if we look at the architect's own accounts on their works published in the exhibition booklet—and partially reprinted in journals of art and architecture—one can witness an extensive amount of functionalist accounts. For example, let us examine Hood's description for his office design: "The executive sits with his back to the light as people enter. His desk is arranged to receive the proper working light, and at the same time to give him the restful distraction of an outdoor view. Facing him is his secretary's chair, while his visitors may group themselves about the conference table contiguous to his desk at right angles without disturbing his work. The walls and ceilings are covered with fabrikoid, a machine product which far excels in durability, cheapness, quality of surface, sureness of effect, and variety of expression the old methods of plaster and paint and wood paneling. The furniture is made of aluminum, a material as strong, light, and adaptable for the purpose as wood, but one that is not subject to shrinking, swelling, warping, and the necessity of repeated refinishing. The large window, made possible by modern heating, lights the room with a great area of subdued light, rather than by a small area of intense light. The curtain permits a complete regulation of light and air." (Hood, 1929) Every detail of the design is explained in strictly functional and pragmatic terms. Hood underlines the fact that the task of the contemporary designer is primarily to search for the practical solution to the problem, and then to develop it by means of every material, invention, and method available. On its aesthetic choice, Hood simply mentions that the "decorative treatment . . . has been dictated by the capabilities of the machine or process by which it is made." On the other hand, the traditional ornaments in Root's bedroom setting did not go unnoticed: "Instead of effects gained through simplicity of form, refinement of proportions, and

surface expression of structural material, the emphasis in this case seems to have been placed upon novelty of design and ornament.” (Richards, 1929)

In the following years, the Metropolitan held two more industrial art exhibitions which were focused on home furnishings. Following the model of 1929’s “The Architect and The Industrial Art,” both shows of 1934 and 1940 were arranged in close collaboration with architects, but this time they were teamed up with industrial designers, who were gaining increasingly important position within the industry. The ratio between architects and designers in each case testify to the growing influence of the latter in the home furnishing business. Architects’ interests on domestic interior design was fueled by the condition of the building market under the Great Depression, as architects short of work were naturally driven towards the design of smaller products which obviously claimed a larger market. Under these social circumstances and its effect on architectural professionalism, the design of furnitures was accepted as a legitimate field of architectural practice. Whereas furnitures made by manufacturers were introduced in the architectural shows of the Architectural League, the Metropolitan show distinguished itself by displaying furniture pieces designed by architects—none other than the era's most prominent practitioners.



Fig.8. Room for a lady by Eliel Saarinen, 13th “Contemporary American Industrial Art,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1934.



Fig.9. Office of an industrial designer, Raymond Loewy and Lee Simonson, 13th “Contemporary American Industrial Art,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1934.

4-2 New Professional Stance and Its Limits

Consequently, the Metropolitan show emphasized the new role of the architect—as a source of design in many fields other than the design of buildings: “The title ‘architect’ will be interpreted in its true sense as an inclusive one, covering the entire conception of the building and its contents and, further, as describing a type of generalship in design by virtue of which many talents are marshaled under the banner of a leader, who is not master but guide and counselor, shaping many capacities to one end.” (Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1928) As in the Beaux-Arts model the architect is once again given the role of integrating the design efforts of various fields, but, since he now works in a realm that is not determined by *Kunstwollen*, his position as a “master” is now

redefined as “counselor.” The new role naturally emphasized the importance of his relationship with manufacturers. As Bach noted: “The architect here is given the position of captain in a company of artistic collaborators and together they have produced an exhibition unique as a stylistic presentation, favoring on foreign national models, assuring correct use of known materials and logical interpretation of new ones, and serving no gods but those of cooperation between designer and producer, sincere individuality in expression, and reason in design.” (Bach, 1929)

In this professional cast, the architect’s relationship with manufacturers was also redefined. As a practice of designing buildings that entails various technical and economic issues, architecture has always been conditioned by manufacture, but now the architect and the manufacturer were placed in a new relationship under the industrial production system. The designer in the Metropolitan show was conceived as an expert acting entirely apart from any manufacturing establishment, and this autonomic position was analogous to the new managerial class of engineers, who, positioned between workers and capitalists and not owning the modes of production they managed, could free themselves from the profit motives of capitalists and serve public interest. Aligning with these technical experts, architects—procurer of culture for the upper class under the Beaux-Arts system—expressed a desire to participate directly in the process of industrial expansion for the mass market.

But there was still a fundamental difference between what architects did and how the industrial designers operated, which the former did not fully comprehend. Historian Jeffrey Meikle is correct in pointing out this difference in their relation to mass production: “Architecture in general remained the conceptualizing end of the construction industry, a bastion of craftsmanship and one-of-a-kind production. Industrial design, on the other hand, concerned itself with mass production.” Earlier in his account of the industrial art shows of the museum and department stores, Meikle notes the “split between a faith in the social benefit of design for mass production and the reality of custom-made luxury goods.” He observed that designers responsible for the organization of the post-Paris fair shows at the department stores and their articles adopted the new style but still employed hand craftsmanship and “cared little for and knew nothing about the processes and materials of mass production.” In fact, he partially ascribes this discrepancy in design to the fact that the related exhibitions often used the services of architects, who “followed architectural tradition by concerning themselves with individual clients rather than with manufacturers.” (Meikle, 1979) It was on this basis that Arthur Pulos claimed that the Museum’s choice of appointing architects to head the design shows were its fundamental flaw (Pulos, 1983).

These professional dilemmas derived from the institutional transition of architecture towards the industrial production and consumerist market. Beaux-Arts architects from the preceding era exercised the authority of historical precedent within the framework of socio-cultural agreement as to the stylistic character of the discipline. It was the knowledge of historic precedents and the ability to compose these elements into a coherent whole that held up the architect’s claim of professional status. But as architects designed beyond historical styles, they stepped outside the normative framework that had anchored architectural practice in a cultural sphere shared by architects, patrons, and the public—those inside and outside of the discipline. Under the influence of scientific management and other ideals of efficiency, the institution of architecture needed to establish new grounds that supported the professional status of the architect and significance of the discipline.

5. CONCLUSION

The integration of furniture and interior design as part of architecture’s inner field, and the

consequent changes in the object and display method of architectural exhibitions, testify to the institutional change the discipline of architecture was undergoing, and their willingness to promote such change to the society at large.

Found in the exhibition spaces of the era were potentials as well as limits of this professional reformation. If the Architectural League shows were ultimately a reflection for architectural discipline and professionalism set before they entered the exhibition space, the Metropolitan Museum exhibition motivated and supplied the very field in which the changes of the discipline would take place. Architectural League exhibitions in the 1920s, especially the biennial “Exposition of Architecture and Allied Arts” where furniture pieces made by manufacturers became part of the show, revealed that the early impetus for reformation toward efficiency had been subsumed by the system of Beaux-Arts. By contrast, the Metropolitan show, in which the most prominent architects of the era exercised their professional expertise in the design of “Moderne Style” interior furnishings, clearly shows how architects, in the milieu of commercial market, sought to align their profession as industrial designers. The Metropolitan exhibition shows a focal shift of the industry from engineering to industrial art, and how architects were inspired to participate in a parallel transition of their professional model.

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