The Early Years of Nathaniel A. Owings

A Portrait of the Architect as a Storyteller

NICHOLAS ADAMS

ABSTRACT: For three decades, Nathaniel Alexander Owings was one of the most influential architects in the United States. With his brother-in-law Louis Skidmore, Owings was a founding partner of the architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. SOM quickly developed into a company that was awarded some of the largest and most prestigious architectural commissions in the nation, and in the world, from the 1930s onward. Nicholas Adams examines Owings's childhood and young adulthood, as well as his early career, in light of the architect's autobiography, *The Spaces In Between*. Adams discovers the stories, and sometimes myths, Owings told about his life, and, more broadly, considers "the narratives corporate architects used to thrive in mid-century America."

KEYWORDS: History of architecture; U.S. architecture; architectural firms; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Nathaniel A. Owings; Louis Skidmore; John O. Merrill; Gordon Bunshaft; Robert Moses; Harry V. Wade; Emily Otis Owings; Georgia

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"Indianapolis shaped my point of view for life."
Nathaniel A. Owings, *The Spaces In Between: An Architect's Journey*

For three decades, between 1945 and 1975, Nathaniel Alexander Owings was one of the most powerful architects in the United States. He was born in Indianapolis in 1903. In 1936, with his brother-in-law, fellow Hoosier Louis Skidmore, he founded Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, one of the largest privately owned architectural firms in the world. Adding a third partner, John O. Merrill, in 1939, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) obtained some of the biggest and most prestigious postwar architectural commissions, regularly receiving prizes and critical ovations. Working from five offices that opened successively across the United States (Chicago, 1936; New York, 1937; San Francisco, 1946; Portland, 1952; Washington, D. C., 1971), SOM designed an incalculable number of buildings, well into the tens of thousands, which are found across the world and all over the United States.[1] Skidmore retired in 1955; Merrill stayed largely in the background; Owings was there to direct the firm and receive accolades at the end of his life as winner of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Gold Medal in 1983. His curriculum vitae was long. With Skidmore he oversaw the Century of Progress Exposition (1933–34) and was subsequently chair of the Chicago Plan Commission (1948–51); member of the board of trustees of the American Academy in Rome (1960–71); head and member of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation in Washington (1962–82); and overseer of the renovation of the National Mall (from 1964). The projects with which he became closely associated include Oak Ridge, Tennessee (1942–45); the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs (1954–62); Chase Manhattan Headquarters, New York (1955–61); the Crown Zellerbach Headquarters, San Francisco (1957–59); and many others. He wrote two books: *The American Aesthetic*, on the environment, and an autobiography, *The Spaces in Between: An*

[1] The inability to calculate the number rests on the definition of "a building." Should we ignore renovations? Or joint undertakings? Are planning projects or interior designs excluded?

Nathaniel A. Owings, portrait ca. 1940
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Architect's Journey.[2] A friend to corporate leaders and presidents, pictured on the cover of *Time* in 1968—no American architect of his day, with the exception of Frank Lloyd Wright, matched his public status.

Owings was a polarizing figure. The *Los Angeles Times* described him, on his receipt of the AIA Gold Medal, as: "lovable, hateable, sophisticated, childlike, bullying, [a] caring supporter of architecture, architects and clients."[3] The paradoxes of the man had their origins in his childhood, as anyone who has read his autobiography will know: orphaned by the "death" of his father; cared for by cousins in the country who gave him his true sense of home; ambitious, a show-off, enamored of the theater and a lover of groups of every sort; a Boy Scout in youth and a fraternity man in college. He was most comfortable as the center of attention. But though he trained as an architect he was never a designer, and though he had successes that would have filled most people with pride, his insecurity, and his bitter resentment when he did not get his way, undermined his achievements. He contemplated giving his autobiography the subtitle "Confessions of a Bad Architect" and experimented with other equally derogatory subtitles.[4] Until 1965 he had a problem with alcohol. He could even discount his own competitive drive. And yet he was seductive. His compliments were extravagant, intense, and memorable. As he wrote to the architect Philip C. Johnson: "If I were to send you a fan letter every time I saw one of your good buildings, I would have to set up a Post Office address and apply for a lower mailing rate."[5] He was, people would say, a force of nature, an excellent metaphor for his desire to succeed, which was, he confessed, comparable to the explosive force of Paracutín, the Mexican volcano: "Violent, compulsive, driving to put on our own show, to get at the business of building. Jobs, jobs, jobs!"[6]

This essay examines the early, formative years of Nathaniel Owings, from his birth through the formation of his partnership in Chicago with

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[2] Nathaniel Alexander Owings, *The American Aesthetic* (New York, 1969); Owings, *The Spaces In Between: An Architect's Journey* (Boston, Mass., 1973).

[3] John Dreyfuss, "A Gold Medal for a Maestro of Architecture," *Los Angeles Times,* December 10, 1982, p. 18.

[4] Early Note, #1, Box 49, *Spaces In Between*, Correspondence and Contracts, 1969–71, Nathaniel Alexander Owings Papers, MSS75863, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (hereafter Owings Papers, LOC).

[5] Nathaniel A. Owings to Philip Johnson, January 17, 1964, Box 1, Correspondence, Miscellaneous, 1963–65, H-O, Owings Papers, LOC.

[6] Typescript, May 15, 1971, p. 167, Box 50, *Spaces In Between*, Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC. In the printed book this statement is softened. Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 100.

Louis Skidmore in 1936, the division of the firm with the opening of a second office in New York in 1937, and the beginnings of World War II. It retells the story of his youth in Indianapolis as revealed in documents and drafts of his autobiography. Exposing and analyzing the myths he tells about himself and SOM brings to life the foundation of his career and focuses us on the narratives corporate architects used to thrive in mid-century America. In the process, Owings emerges as three-dimensional, a living person rather than a cardboard hero.

Nathaniel Alexander Owings was born on February 5, 1903, to Nathaniel Fleming Owings, known as "Jack," and Cora Mima Alexander, in Indianapolis, Indiana. The pair had married four years earlier and Nathaniel Alexander was their first child. A sister, Eloise, was born in 1906. Jack Owings was a timber merchant, dealing in imported wood and veneers. The Indianapolis city directories describe him as secretary and treasurer of the Capital Veneer Company (later Capital Machine Co.), a firm specializing in laths and veneer slicing machinery, and then at the National Veneer and Lumber Company, based in Seymour, Indiana.[7] Of Cora's background we know only tragedies. Her parents, Alfred Marshall Alexander and Mina Murray, died within months of one another. The marriage had not been successful. They had divorced in 1887—Alfred died of what was called an "abscess of the liver," and the newspaper notes his "social qualities," which suggests that he might have had a problem with alcohol. He was involved in a complex affair with a married woman, who was shot by her husband, who then shot himself. It was a turbulent youth for the woman who would raise Owings, a man prone to his own problems with alcohol.

The family moved around. Indianapolis directories list Cora and her son at 3705 E. 16th Street (1916) and 648 E. 16th Street (1926) near Brookside Park, both now destroyed. The itinerant nature of the family is not reflected in *Spaces In Between*. For Owings, Indianapolis meant a neighborhood of open lots, apple trees, baseball diamonds, and good friends. He was specific about the character of his home: the attic as the site of childhood games, the sound of his mother's sewing machine as a constant in the background.[8]

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[7] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 8. According to his son, Jack traveled extensively to Central and South America, bringing back tales of excitement and adventure. Owings also wrote that the smell of a lumber mill was his equivalent of a *madeleine*, the sweet inspiration for Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Owings and his second wife, Margaret Wentworth, read the series out loud to one another.

[8] In an interview with Owings on the occasion of the publication of the Indianapolis Architectural Foundation's *Indianapolis Architecture*, he identified his neighborhood as 23rd and Park Avenue

He frequently called himself a child of Indianapolis and used the metaphor of the thick black Indiana topsoil to describe the growth of his family in the state. Perhaps his mother or his father invented a genealogy to stir pride—for according to Owings's account, his grandfather was Nathaniel Bond Owings, an early resident of the growing city. In fact, Nathaniel Bond Owings had no son named Nathaniel Fleming, and more dependable records show that Jack Owings had been born in Kokomo, Indiana, the son of a Matthew Owings, Nathaniel A. Owings's true grandfather.[9] Someone, Jack or Cora or possibly Owings himself, identified with the line of Nathaniel Bond Owings, a model middlewestern aristocrat, like the family at the center of Booth Tarkington's novel *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Owings may also have linked his roots to the European origins of Indianapolis with Monument Circle at the heart of its geometric plan. "The focal point of Indianapolis…is baroque and self-conscious," he wrote, "located east of the true prairie and west of the true East. This monument to war [the Soldiers and Sailors Monument] is…the Eiffel Tower, the Boston Common, the Statue of Liberty" of Indianapolis. He reminisced that the "tree-lined vistas, broad boulevards and solid buildings with granite, marble and stone, bronze and copper, confirmed from birth my instinct for permanence and a predilection for style."[10] A connection between his branch of the Owings family and the early history of Indianapolis, however, was a fable.[11]

Owings also constructed his own life in the terms of a fabulist. In *Spaces In Between,* he connected the death of his father with the floods along the White River in 1913 that destroyed his father's timber mill.[12]

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and expressed concern at the changes he had observed on a recent visit, which, in his view, did not auger well for the future. I have found no record to confirm that residence. The interview offers little fresh information and seems to have been patched together from oral and written sources. *Indianapolis Architecture* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1975), 3.

[9] Were Owings's account true, Nathaniel Bond Owings's wife, Margaret Owings, would have been over 70 years of age at the time of this child's birth. See her obituary, *Indianapolis Journal,* May 22, 1887, p. 9. Nathaniel Fleming Owings (1883–1941) was born in Kokomo; his father is recorded as Matthew Owings; his mother was from Maysville, Kentucky. Michigan Death Records, Kent County, Grand Rapids, 1867–1952, Certificates, 1921–1943, p. 264. For the children of Nathaniel Bond Owings, see *Indianapolis News,* July 21, 1902, p. 8. In a letter in answer to an enquiry, Owings said that his grandfather's name was "Nathaniel Jackson Owings." See Nathaniel A. Owings to Viola Owings Whitley, February 8, 1962, Box 5, Correspondence, Personal, 1961–1975, Owings Papers, LOC.

[10] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 6.

[11] Interview, *Indianapolis Architecture*, 2.

[12] There is no evidence that Jack Owings owned a timber mill, as implied by his son. It is nonetheless possible that he incurred significant losses in the floods.

> I remember standing close to my father, braced against the wind on the flat roof of his mill, watching the roiling waters of the flood beneath us tear away the precious logs. One by one they pitched down that torrent and disappeared. I understood the value he placed on those logs. His whole scheme of things was tearing apart…. I watched him suffer, his capital, spiritual and financial, vanishing in the foaming maelstrom…. Whipped by the wind above the roaring water, I heard him cry out, making one last show of defiance—but the river won.[13]

Thereafter, his father disappeared and died—so Owings tells us.[14] The reality is that Jack abandoned or divorced his wife Cora, leaving behind Nathaniel and Eloise.[15] If this took place around the time of the flood, Owings would have been 9 or 10 years old, Eloise 6 or 7. Indianapolis directories record Jack at 318 E. 17th Street in 1913. Shortly thereafter he must have moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for he remarried there in 1917 and died in 1941, as his son well knew.[16] The tragic hole at the center of Owings's life caused

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[13] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 15–16.

[14] The story is slightly different in the draft versions. After the floods and the loss of his timber, Jack Owings "became itinerate, drifting from New Albany to Crawfordsville, back to Indianapolis. We followed along until he died, leaving debts unsettled from the loss of his mill and inventory. At that point my mother took over firmly, assuming every debt and the support of we children." Draft, April 20, 1970, Chapter 1 and foreword, p. 38, Box 50, *Spaces In Between,* Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC.

[15] Cora's parents, Alfred Marshall Alexander and Mina Murray, had both died suddenly in 1892. For Alfred, see *Rushville Republican,* June 21, 1892, p. 4; for Mina, *Indianapolis News,* October 3, 1892, p. 2. On their 1887 divorce, see *Indianapolis Journal,* September 25, 1887, p. 8.

[16] Jack Owings's second marriage, to Statia E. Bachinski (fourteen years his junior), took place in Jamestown, New York, on August 4, 1917. On the marriage certificate (number 4993) he notes the name of his father, Nathaniel J. Owings, and his mother, Mary Shackelford. Jack declares on the Affidavit for License to Marry that he divorced in June 1910 in Indianapolis. See New York State, County Marriage Records, 1847–1849, 1907–1936, pp. 2292 and 4993. Nathaniel A. Owings knew of his father's whereabouts in June 1920, as his passport application reveals. Certificates: 57376-57749, 23 Jun 1920–23 Jun 1920, Roll 1269, M 1490: Passport Applications, 1906-March 31, 1925, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C. Owings probably also knew of his father's death, because his college classmate, Harry V. Wade, corrected a misidentification in the *Indianapolis Star.* An article presented "the Shortridge High School football team of 50 years ago," and identified one of the team members in a photograph as the "widely known architect" Nathaniel Owings. Wade, in a letter to the editor, noted that the Owings in the picture was "the Nathaniel Owings…engaged in the veneers and furniture business" who "died approximately two years ago in Michigan. His son by the same name is the one who is a widely known architect of Chicago." *Indianapolis Star*, October 9, 1943, p. 6. Owings continued to maintain publicly that his father had died "when I was quite young," as he wrote to enquirers. Owings to Viola Owings Whitley, February 8, 1962, and Owings to Nathaniel B. Owings, March 7, 1962, Box 5, Correspondence, Personal, 1961–1975, Owings Papers, LOC.

by the absent father and the itinerant years in Indianapolis was papered over, for readers of the autobiography, by a theatrical tableau worthy of *King Lear*. Jack Owings had not died heroically. Cora, a single mother with young children, struggled to make ends meet. She worked for her brother-in-law John F. Madden as an accountant in his furniture plant.[17] She studied to become a chartered public accountant and moved to become a bookkeeper and credit manager at W. K. Stewart's, then the most important bookstore in town. According to Owings, Cora was on friendly terms with the humorist, journalist, and playwright George Ade, and novelists Meredith Nicholson and Booth Tarkington. On one occasion, James Whitcomb Riley, Indiana's unofficial poet laureate, arrived in the store through the shipping entrance in a drunken stupor declaiming his "Ode to the Outhouse."[18]

Owings longed for a life that was not his. In one draft of *Spaces In Between,* he claimed to have been born in Rushville, Indiana, the site of his mother's family's farm, where the Owingses spent holidays and weekends. On seeing the draft, Eloise pointed out to Owings that he was not, in fact, born in Rushville. Owings's reported answer was: "I always wanted to be from Rushville."[19] Owings admired his cousin Will and Will's three boys, who lived on the farm and provided the model of masculinity missing at home. William A. Alexander was well-known in farming circles for his development of Alexander's Gold Standard, what the *Rushville Republican* proudly called "the best corn grown in Indiana."[20] After a wonderful meal of farm food in the kitchen under the direction of his aunt, India Alexander, Owings related, the men went outside and "regained their manhood. Armed with shovel or pitchfork, harness or saddle, they took over and it became a man's world."[21] Owings affectionately recalled the interurban electric rail service from Indianapolis to Rushville.[22]

The Alexanders offered other models, too. Owings's cousins Georgia and Grace Alexander were exemplars of intellectual and economic prowess. Georgia

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[17] Interview, *Indianapolis Architecture*, 4.

[18] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 16–17. Owings conflates the title of the poem with the 1892 song "Daisy Bell (A Bicycle Built for Two)" and calls it "An Outhouse Built for Two."

[19] Louis Skidmore Jr., telephone interview with the author, January 12, 2005.

[20] "Has Interest in Grand Prize Ear," *Rushville Republican,* February 8, 1912, p. 1.

[21] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 12.

[22] Ibid., 13. Owings related that his wife Margaret doubted the existence of something called an "interurban" system in rural Indiana. In fact, the term "interurban" was coined by a Hoosier to describe his "traction railway." Charles M. Walker, "Concerning the Hoosier," *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History,* 9 (March 1913), 43–44.

The Alexander Sisters, 5173 Pleasant Run Parkway, Indianapolis
Courtesy of Howard Schrott

was a nationally known educator, a district superintendent in the school system, a supporter of women's suffrage; she had been educated at Harvard and received an M.A. at Columbia University, where she befriended John Dewey, with whom she collaborated on a mathematics textbook.[23] Her belief in the importance of education and self-expression through English composition as a way "to train for power" instilled in Owings a belief in books and an ambition, despite personal limitations, to communicate ideas through words.[24] Georgia personified decisiveness to the young Owings: she didn't come into a room, he reported, "she charged." (The same could be said of him.) She offered intellectual stimulation, too, so that when Owings was ill in bed during his time in college, she brought him six volumes of Edward Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—books, he said, that thoroughly engrossed him.[25] Georgia or Grace might also have brought him Meredith Nicholson's *The House of a Thousand Candles*, with its description of the great library of architectural books and drawings at "Glenarm House" in "Annandale, Indiana."[26]

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[23] *Indianapolis Star*, November 24, 1928, p. 4; Georgia Alexander and John Dewey, *The Alexander–Dewey Arithmetic* (New York, 1921).

[24] Linda Adler-Kassner, "Ownership Revisited: An Exploration in Progressive Era and Expressivist Composition Scholarship," *College Composition and Communication* 49, 2 (May 1998), 215; Georgia Alexander, "Study of English Composition as a Means of Acquiring Power," *Proceedings and Addresses of the Forty-Third Annual Meeting* (Winona, Minn., 1905), 407–11.

[25] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 14, 24.

[26] Meredith Nicholson, *The House of a Thousand Candles* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1905), 42.

Grace was equally imposing. She was an editor for Bobbs-Merrill in Indianapolis and the author of novels and stories for children, both by herself and with her sister.[27] These fables and historical narratives provided a setting for Owings's imaginative life. The sisters were also well-known among Indianapolis intellectuals, their living room a site for lectures and meetings—notably gatherings to promote women's suffrage; in 1920, for example, they held a reception for poet Vachel Lindsay, then visiting his aunt nearby.[28] Perhaps they helped Cora find work at W. K. Stewart's.

The Alexanders were also real estate entrepreneurs. They developed three properties: a home at 520 North Audubon Road in the Irvington district; a private hotel nearer to the center of the city (possibly a professional women's boarding house) at 1576 North Pennsylvania Street; and, in 1926, a speculative house at 4414 North Meridian Street. They advertised in the *Indianapolis Star* as "Alexander & Alexander Builders of 'Homes of Comfort and Beauty.'" They built into the house, it was reported, "those many little feminine touches which make a house truly livable and yet which so often escape the notice of the average man."[29] In 1928, the year after Owings's graduation from Cornell, they completed an elegant house for themselves on 5173 Pleasant Run Parkway, a virtual duplicate of their house on Audubon Road.[30] The architect was Harry Philip Bartlett. Though Owings was attentive to the intellectual achievements of his cousins in *Spaces In Between,* he does not refer to their real estate ventures, a curious omission. Owings had deep respect for the women in his life: for successful cousins, for his hardworking mother, and for India Alexander. His second marriage, in 1953, to Margaret Wentworth brought him another strong-minded independent woman to follow.[31] There were limits. When

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[27] Grace lectured on George Eliot before a woman's group. *Indianapolis Star,* December 22, 1925, p. 4. The sisters collaborated on *Child Classics* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1928).

[28] For the Irvington Franchise Club, see *Indianapolis Star,* May 21, 1916, p. 28; for Lindsay, see *Indianapolis Star,* August 7, 1920, p. 7. The sisters also advertised for a cleaning person (no washing) but specified an "experienced white woman." *Indianapolis Star,* July 8, 1916, p. 14.

[29] "Model Home Justification of Entry of Women Into Real Estate Field," *Indianapolis Star,* March 21, 1926, p. 46.

[30] "Home of the Misses Alexander," *Indianapolis Star,* February 19, 1928, p. 28. One of the house's features was a special alcove or "writing nook." In the following year, Virginia Woolf wrote her noted essay, "A Room of One's Own."

[31] As Margaret confirmed: "I mean, he outdid himself all the years he was married to me. I came first. Anything I ever asked for or thought about or even mentioned, he would just stop everything to do it for me." Margaret Wentworth Owings, "Artist, and Wildlife and Environmental Defender," Oral History conducted by Suzanne Riess and Ann Lage, 1991, p. 62, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, Los Angeles, California.

the question of inviting women onto the board of trustees at the American Academy in Rome came up, Owings was a firm opponent.[32] Perhaps he thought the idea of women as building entrepreneurs not entirely suitable. His cousins' selection of the academically untrained Bartlett may also have been the focus of his disdain. He might even have imagined that they should have picked him for the job.[33]

Owings embraced the opportunities offered youth in the city. Like young Frank Cowperwood in Theodore Dreiser's novel, *The Financier*, he looked eagerly for ways to make money. Being busy and making money meant getting ahead. At the age of 11, he received a headline in the *Indianapolis News,* as the first child to become a district manager for the Children's Aid Association auxiliary, recruiting new child members among his friends and setting them to work earning their membership fees. Owings delivered packages for a dressmaker as well as shoveling snow, washing dishes, and running errands.[34] He joined the Boy Scouts, too, ultimately winning a competition to go to London for the Scout Jamboree after graduating from the Arsenal Technical High School in 1920.[35] The prize included a week in New York City prior to the trip and a tour of the World War I battlefields in France after the Jamboree. For Owings, at least in retrospect, the high points of the trip were the cathedrals in Paris and Chartres and the complex of Mont-Saint-Michel, sites that convinced him of the importance of architecture. Though these were life-changing experiences, Owings was diplomatic on his return, telling the Rotary Club at a September luncheon that "the trip had served to impress upon him what a fine city Indianapolis is."[36]

Early experiences in the theater were also important. For three summers from 1917 to 1919, he worked shifting scenery at the Murat Theater in Indianapolis. He was especially fond of the Stuart Walker troupe, one of the New York-based traveling stock companies that came to town. His favorite actor was George Gaul, for whom he "risked truancy and family discipline rather than miss one of his performances."[37] His own acting

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[32] Owings to Henry A. Moe, August 28, 1963, Box 6, Correspondence, Personal, 1961–1975, Owings Papers, LOC.

[33] Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana from its Exploration to 1922* (Dayton, Ohio, 1924), 4: 394–95.

[34] "Boys and Girls Busy with Chores' Earning Their Fees," *Indianapolis News,* March 25, 1914, p. 13.

[35] *Indianapolis News,* June 12, 1920, p. 5.

[36] *Indianapolis News,* September 15, 1920, p. 18. Owings reprinted a section of his battlefield tour in *Scouting,* 63, no. 5 (1975), 16.

[37] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 20, 19.

career, so far as we know, was limited to a high school production of J. M. Barrie's satire on social class, *The Admirable Crichton,* in which he played the foppish Ernest Woolley. The *Indianapolis News,* in its review, described his performance as "one of the hits of the play."[38] Owings saw his theatrical experiences as foundational. Of the experience of high school theater, he wrote: "My spine tingling, I savored that moment and have never ceased to try to arrange things so that it would happen again and again." He credited his experiences at the Murat as influencing his business skills: "After a successful presentation to a client where I had staged the basic architectural idea in a particularly dramatic setting, I would have reason to remember Stuart Walker and my introduction through him to great theater."[39]

Owings attended the University of Illinois in Urbana from 1920 to 1921, joined the debating team, and supported himself by waiting on tables at Sigma Chi, his fraternity.[40] But after a year, he recalled, he was "disenchanted." He applied to go to the United States Military Academy at West Point but was diagnosed with Bright's Disease and spent the next six months in bed at home. Only the intervention of a new doctor, identified by cousin Georgia, brought any improvement. Owings was shipped to Oklahoma, and after six months in a warmer climate, mixing brutal outdoor labor with a desk job, his health improved. There he met Elizabeth Churchyard Allen, a Cornell alumna who described the virtues of an eastern education and arranged for Owings to get work at Cornell University as a waiter.[41] Then, over the summer, while working at a Boy Scout camp on Lake Cheneaux Island in Lake Huron, he met Cornell University trustee Nicholas H. Noyes. Noyes was director of Eli Lilly & Company in Indianapolis and a generous Cornell alumnus. With his help, and possibly with his connivance, Owings enrolled in fall 1922 in the College of Agriculture, which did not require foreign languages. Transfer from one college to the other was not particularly difficult, and Owings thus graduated from the College of Architecture in 1927.[42]

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[38] "Class Play Given at Murat," *Indianapolis News,* January 20, 1920, p. 4.

[39] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 20.

[40] "Debate Against Chicago," *Daily Illini,* April 9, 1921, p. 1.

[41] Mrs. Elizabeth Allen—whom Owings called "Mrs. Churchyard," although Churchyard was her maiden name—graduated from Cornell in 1919. *Cornell Alumni Directory* (Ithaca, New York, 1922), 57.

[42] Author Kurt Vonnegut Jr., son of Indiana architect Kurt Vonnegut Sr., briefly attended Cornell. Though intending to follow his father into architecture, the family pushed him into chemistry. Vonnegut left Cornell in 1943 without a degree. Charles J. Shields, *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut, A Life* (New York, 2011), 48.

Owings had relatively little to say about his Cornell education in his autobiography—an odd omission.[43] He followed the "construction" track within the College of Architecture. The difference with the design program was one of emphasis: more mathematics and analytic geometry, surveying, slightly less design and architectural history.[44] His B. Arch. thesis was the design for a public library in Rochester, New York. The site stood between South, Broad, and Court Streets and had been selected by the Common Council in April 1924, although no designs had yet been submitted.[45] Four sheets survive, and they reveal Owings's architectural taste: "At that time architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue was my hero."[46] Goodhue, who had just died, had largely completed the Los Angeles Public Library (1926) when Owings began his design. Owings may also have looked at Goodhue's designs for the Nebraska State Capitol (1932), which had been well-published in American magazines. Owings, however, could not resist a few humorous touches. Inscriptions in the cornice appear at first to be conventional: great writers and poets. But the inscriptions terminate on the right with an Owings invention: BLUTZ. On the interior the blind aedicules are named: HORSE CENCE, APPLE SAUCE, and ONION AND OLIVES.[47] He received a grade of 95 percent and a second prize medal (one of seven)—seventeen students received passes lower than his. The faculty also gave him a University Fellowship for the following year, an award that he later claimed to have turned down on the basis of assumed family expectations.[48]

Disappointingly for the architectural historian, Owings devoted more attention in his autobiography to his job as a waiter for the crew team in

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[43] He was elected to Gargoyle, the national architectural society, in November 1926 along with Harry Wade. *Cornell Daily Sun,* November 26, 1926, p. 3.

[44] Series I, Box 82, Faculty Meetings Minutes and Memoranda, September 1922 to June 1928, pp. 89–90, Cornell University College of Architecture, Art, and Planning Records, 1905–2004, Collection 15-1-512, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.

[45] "Proposed River Library Site Set Aside for Municipal Use By Common Council Ordinance," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester), April 2, 1924, p. 22.

[46] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 37.

[47] The survival of these drawings was brought to my attention by the speech of John Reps at an alumni gathering in 1977. Reps describes Owings's library as "Bunshaftian" (which it is not), but he draws attention to the inscriptions. See Reps, "Lecture, Saturday morning," p. 7, Box 68, Alumni Assembly Transcripts, Cornell University College of Architecture, Art, and Planning Records.

[48] Faculty Meeting, June 10, 1927, pp. 254–55, Series I, Box 82, Faculty Meetings Minutes and Memoranda, September 1922 to June 1928, Cornell University College of Architecture, Art, and Planning Records.

Nathaniel Owings, Public Library, Rochester, New York, 1928, thesis project, Cornell University

Courtesy, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

Baker Cafeteria than to his classes or his professors. He never noted, for instance, that the thrust of a Cornell education at that time was in the tradition of the École des Beaux-Arts, a noteworthy point given that he later insisted that SOM would be a modernist firm, although modernist training was not his experience.[49] Owings was also silent about his experiences with spectacle. The local press was not so reticent. In May 1926, Owings was chosen chairman of the annual Spring Day Committee and oversaw the decorations for the Navy Ball to be held in the Drill Hall. The *Ithaca Journal* described lowered lighting levels leaving the ceiling in gloom with "towering columns disappearing into nothingness." The central feature was "a huge central dais behind the patronesses' box, set off by two high columns with pylons in front.... Above the dais, a huge bowl, lighted from within, will emit curling steam which will be illumined by vari-colored spotlights playing on it from all parts of the hall. High in the air a golden disc suspended in the air as the focal point of the lighting." The effect, the newspaper reported, was "spectacular."[50] The *Cornell Daily Sun*, the student newspaper, elaborated on the design under the headline "Hop to Reveal Novel Effects," noting that "N. A. Owings '27 was the designer of the effect."[51] Perhaps he did not mention this project as he felt it too frivolous, confirming later accusations that he was nothing but a showman. Nonetheless, the man who was to plan the festive entertainments for the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago six years later had practice with low-budget, temporary decoration at Cornell.

Following graduation, Owings did not return home to Indianapolis as might have been expected. He received one commission there that we know of, a house for Rudolf K. Haerle at 4470 N. Delaware Street, "the first house I ever did."[52] Haerle and Owings may have known one another from the Boy Scouts but how they made the connection at this time is unknown. The

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[49] The architect Lawrence Bradford Perkins (Cornell '30) notes the school's isolation: no mention of Louis Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright in the courses, and the only inklings of modernism from family or friends. Owings experienced the final moments of Beaux-Arts education. The noted city planner, Edmund Bacon ('32), who overlapped one year with Owings, registered changes in instruction and openness to modernism. Edmund Bacon, untitled recollections, transcriptions of tapes #2, 9, 12–13, Box 68, Folder "Planning Alumni Association Transcripts," Cornell University College of Architecture, Art, and Planning Records.

[50] "Navy Ball on Friday to Be Spectacular," *Ithaca Journal,* May 19, 1926, p. 9.

[51] *Cornell Daily Sun,* May 19, 1926, p. 1.

[52] Owings to R. K. Haerle, June 1, 1961, Box 1, Correspondence, Miscellaneous, 1961–1962, A-G, Owings Papers, LOC.

design is in the tradition of suburban Arts & Crafts practiced by architects like Harrie Lindeberg or the Philadelphia-based firm of Mellor, Meigs & Howe.[53] Owings does not mention the house in his autobiography, perhaps self-conscious about its traditional character.[54] Whatever opportunities might have been in Indianapolis did not detain him; he soon went to work for the firm of York & Sawyer in New York City, a favored spot for Cornellians, as Edward P. York was a graduate. He explained his failure to take up the fellowship as deriving from his sense of filial responsibility: the young man who had been a son for his mother and brother to his sister, now sought to play husband and father. On his request his mother gave up her job to be supported by him, and his sister took the courses at the Parsons School of Design that Owings selected for her. Later, in *Spaces In Between,* he reflected poignantly on what he had done: "In the illusory role of a noble son and brother, did I wrongly change the course of all of our lives?"[55] He paid for mother and sister to go abroad in May 1928 as part of Eloise's degree program. The compulsion to care for others, born in youth, could not be restrained—whether or not his help was requested.

The news that his sister had been seen in Paris with architect Louis Skidmore, "a gay blade, if not an outright rake," horrified Owings.[56] On his mother and sister's return from Europe in May 1929, he gave up his job at York & Sawyer.[57] From his drafting table he had watched the erection of the Empire State Building, and the contrast between his dull desk work and the excitement of construction outside his window was unbearable. The three Owingses set up house, at his expense, first in Manhattan (135 West 16th Street) and then in the Ramapos, in New Jersey. Owings played *pater familias*. He and his Cornell classmate Arthur Winkler worked for architect Henry Barrett Crosby, who had obtained the commission for a massive jail-courthouse to be located in Paterson, New Jersey. Seven-to-eight-stories tall, the project was expected to cost between $1 and $2 million.[58] Skidmore, who returned from Europe a little later in July 1929, joined the group, too,

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[53] I am grateful to Richard Longstreth for these suggestions.

[54] The presentation style is very similar to the drawings Skidmore had done for Samuel Chamberlain's *Tudor Homes of England, With Some Examples from Later Periods* (New York, 1929).

[55] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 34.

[56] Ibid., 38.

[57] For their return, see New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820–1957, online at Ancestry.com. The pair returned May 6, 1928.

[58] *Paterson Evening News,* January 24, 1929, p. 22.

Rudolf and Elizabeth Haerle House, 4470 N. Delaware Avenue, Indianapolis, 1928
Courtesy of Kenneth Kleinknecht

but with Black Friday in 1929, Crosby lost the commission and released his young office.[59] Eloise and Louis Skidmore married in June 1930 in New York City and, in a reversal of fortune, Skidmore became Owings's sponsor.

Skidmore's European travels had been sponsored by a Rotch Fellowship from MIT. During his final months in Europe, architect Raymond Hood sought him out.[60] Hood had been invited to plan a massive industrial exposition to be held in Chicago in 1933. The aim of "A Century of Progress" was to celebrate the twentieth century's achievements in industry and science. But Hood subsequently stepped down from the board overseeing the exposition, and the comparatively inexperienced Skidmore was

[59] For Skidmore's return on July 30, 1929, see New York, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820–1957. Winkler died in a swimming accident in June 1929. Evidently, he leapt from a rope into a pool and failed to see a boy swimming nearby. Knocked unconscious, he drowned immediately. See *Passaic Daily Herald*, June 17, 1929, p. 1. Owings gives a slightly different account in *Spaces In Between,* 42, in which Winkler executed a perfect acrobatic dive and hit his head on a rock.

[60] To extend his time in Europe, Skidmore did drawings for Samuel Chamberlain, then writing *Tudor Homes of England.*

designated head of design. He invited Owings, his new brother-in-law, to join him; the quartet of Eloise and Skidmore, Owings and his mother, moved to Chicago.[61]

Sited along the shores of Lake Michigan, the Century of Progress Exposition (1933–34) provided Skidmore and Owings's formative architectural experience. While Skidmore handled the pavilions and the corporate sponsors, Owings oversaw the rides and entertainments—everything from the Towering Sky-Ride, a suspension bridge with specially designed "rocket cars" that "flew" across the lagoon, to the Enchanted Island, the children's "fairyland." Parades and brass bands hustled back and forth to provide a reason to come back for a second visit, and Owings engaged a nude "tableau" show—although it was shut down for "the protection of family morals," it bought column inches in the newspapers. The Streets of Paris, one of the most successful of the exposition's zones, featured burlesque dancer Sally Rand, noted for her ostrich feather fan dance.[62] At the exposition, Owings learned the lesson of publicity inches that he was to deploy at SOM. Work was underfunded and frenetic. Owings gave himself to it completely: "There was a rhythm to it, a pulsing regularity of inevitable change. I became an instant expert in a variety of fields, organized a drafting force for working drawings (having hardly ever drawn one myself), supervised construction, planned concessions, made up in enthusiasm for what I lacked in skill, and developed a swinging crew. If there were deviations from the original designs we were regretful but not surprised, sympathetic but intractable. It was always too late to go back."[63] He cadged building materials and persuaded contractors to work without pay until the turnstiles clicked. Then, if he thought the rides were not generating enough enthusiasm, he embellished them with gimmicks and tricks to draw in repeat customers and entice new ones.

Owings must also have learned something from the Indiana State Fairs he had seen in his youth. Pageants, developed in midwestern fairs in the 1920s, were family-friendly entertainment, mixing spectacle with education, and they were an essential part of the Century of Progress, too.[64] The 1920 Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis featured an automobile caravan tour of

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[61] Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago, 1993).

[62] Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 135–37.

[63] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 50.

[64] In the 1920s, the pageant had been advanced as a substitute for the (often lethal) Independence Day celebrations. See the editorial "Hoosier Pageants," *Indianapolis News,* June 12, 1927, p. 56.

"Riding in rocket cars suspended high in the air has never been done before." Leaflet advertising the Sky-Ride, Century of Progress, Chicago, 1933.
Author's collection

Indianapolis; at the Century of Progress, Owings organized a historical transportation pageant from covered wagon to airplane.[65] In 1928, the State Fair featured a life-sized celebration of John T. McCutcheon's popular cartoon "Injun Summer" at the Agriculture and Horticulture Building.[66] At the Century of Progress, six years later, Owings transformed the cartoon (it ran annually in the *Chicago Tribune* from 1904) into a fireworks display; it drew the second highest attendance at the exposition.[67] Owings ended every night with fireworks—he loved fireworks—and they became the motif by

[65] "Records Fall as State Fair Opens," *Indianapolis News,* September 6, 1920, pp. 1, 9.

[66] "'Injun Summer' will be Feature," *Brookville Democrat,* August 16, 1928, p. 1. McCutcheon was a classmate of George Ade at Purdue.

[67] "'Injun Summer' in Fireworks Thrills 100,000," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1934, p. 1. Ade also appeared at the Century of Progress for the celebration of Indiana Day. See "Press Veterans of '93 Bridge a Gap of 40 Years," *Chicago Tribune,* August 13, 1933, p. 5; "Indiana Day is Celebrated at a Century of Progress," *Chicago Tribune,* July 14, 1933, pp. 4, 38. The following year he was unable to appear due to a heart attack. "George Ade, Suddenly Ill, Halts Fair Trip," *Chicago Tribune,* July 20, 1934, p. 8.

which he introduced his autobiography, where, in a dream that quickly became a nightmare, SOM buildings exploded from a Catherine wheel.[68]

The dissolution of the Owings ménage by Eloise's marriage had predictable results: on September 5, 1931, Owings too married.[69] He met his bride, Emily Huntington Otis, at a country house weekend. She was, he said, "nearing the dangerous area between fresh, marriageable girlhood and the clear-eyed candor of a youngish spinster"—a judgment that seems harsh, even for the day, as she must have been only 22 or 23 years old.[70] Emily was the daughter of Joseph E. Otis and Emily Porter Webster.[71] Otis was a banker, successively president (or chairman) of the Western Trust and Savings Bank, the Industrial National Bank of Chicago, and the Chicago National Bank. The family was of considerably higher status (and greater wealth) than the Owingses. Owings considered the family "of rare stock" containing "true aristocrats." Emily had been given a society woman's education. She attended Chicago Latin and graduated from Miss Porter's School in Farmington, Connecticut. Thereafter she spent a year at Miss Wickham's School on Lexington Avenue in New York, a college preparatory/finishing school; her coming out party was at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago in 1925.[72] If it was Owings's ambition to obtain a place in Chicago society, marriage to Emily Otis opened a door.

Indeed, the name of Mrs. Nathaniel Owings was found more frequently in the pages of the Chicago newspapers than her husband's. In January 1932, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that she poured tea after a charity lecture on Mexican art by the curator of the Museum of Modern Art, René d'Harnoncourt.[73] She was on hand to help with the preparations for the Century of Progress, too, as a society columnist noted: "That charming young matron and hostess, Mrs. Nathaniel Owings [Emily Otis that was], had such a nice luncheon the other day…. And there were men at the

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[68] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 3.

[69] For the first record of Skidmore in Chicago, see *Chicago Tribune,* August 23, 1930, p. 6. What happened to Cora Owings is not clear. According to reports on Owings's wedding, she was living in Evanston, Illinois. She does not appear in census records in 1940. She attended the Century of Progress but, according to a classified advertisement (*Chicago Tribune,* June 21, 1934, p. 28) lost her purse en route.

[70] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 55.

[71] In *Spaces In Between,* 55, Owings incorrectly gives her name as "Emily Hunting Otis."

[72] Ibid.; *Chicago Tribune,* December 23, 1925, p. 19.

[73] *Chicago Tribune,* January 14, 1932, p. 17.

luncheon—Mr. Owings snatched a few moments from the concessions, and Mr. Skidmore from his architectural duties."[74] She and Owings were appointed "chairmen of special events" and she helped greet visiting dignitaries.[75] But there was another side to Emily, of which Owings does not speak, that nourished other strands in his character. As a child, she had "turned inward and became rather solitary."[76] Her father had been a director of the Santa Fe railroad and a collector of American Indian artifacts, and he took the family south from time to time. Her wedding announcement in the *Indianapolis Star* noted: "She has devoted much time to the study of American Indians."[77] She had, in fact, fallen in love with New Mexico in 1927 when visiting her novelist brother, Raymond Otis, a member of Santa Fe's art colony whose work reflected the rich ethnic mixture of the area. She and Owings spent their honeymoon in the house of art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan in Taos.[78] In 1944 Owings acceded to her request and bought property in Pojoaque, near Santa Fe, where they spent summers. With Margaret, his second wife, he explored the faith of the Hopi, admiring their respect for earth and sky. He attended the ecstatic Hopi dance ceremonies, observing them in silence and respect. Reflecting his understanding of their cosmology, Owings later recognized a "god living in every brook, every tree, flower, animal and bird."[79] The Hopi, he came to believe, offered a model for American environmentalism.

When the Century of Progress Exhibition closed after summer 1934, Owings and Emily set out to travel westwards around the world, a distinctive choice when most received wisdom about architecture came from Europe.[80] Of course, they expected to get to Europe, but Owings, at least, wanted exotic experiences. They had a $2,100 ticket valid for two years

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[74] Cousin Eve, "Parties, Large and Small, to Honor Notables at Convention," *Chicago Tribune,* June 12, 1932, Part 8, p. 2.

[75] Emily Otis Barnes, "A Walk with Emily," typescript memoir (Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1990), 22–23.

[76] Ibid., 11.

[77] "N. A. Owings, Former City Man Weds Emily H. Otis of Chicago," *Indianapolis Star,* September 10, 1931, p. 6.

[78] Raymond Otis may well have introduced Owings to the landscape and people of New Mexico. Otis had moved to Santa Fe in 1928 and his novels—*Fire in the Night* (1934), *Miguel of the Bright Mountain* (1936), and *Little Valley* (1937)—demonstrate deep familiarity with Spanish and Indigenous cultures.

[79] Owings, *Spaces In Between*, 217.

[80] Owings says that he considered a position with a meat-packer after the Century of Progress. Ibid., 61.

Nathaniel and Emily Owings and twin daughters Emily and Natalie, April 1941.
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

that allowed them travel on freighters that might (or might not) have an interior cabin.[81] We have two accounts of this trip: Owings's brief account in *Spaces In Between* and Emily's longer account in her own autobiographical memoir, "A Walk with Emily." They traveled to Tokyo, Kyoto, Kobe, and then by steamer to China. Thereafter they visited Angkor Wat where Emily developed amoebic dysentery, and the pair had to be evacuated by car and train to a hospital in Bangkok. On the train, Emily recalled, Owings sat "in another car, came and went, concerned for me but not showing it, and being merry with the passengers. He enjoyed the scene for what it was," then noted, relenting slightly in her criticism, "this gave me courage and strength."[82] Finally, passing from India to Egypt and then through Italy, they arrived in England where they met the Skidmores; there they made the decision to form their architectural partnership.

The formation of the partnership is one of those hallowed moments in the history of SOM, the story told with different emphases on different occasions. Owings and Skidmore seem to have concluded their partnership pledge while waiting in Paddington Station for the boat train; their vision of the future is harder to catch. In a draft of *Spaces In Between*, Owings reveals emotions not recorded in the printed account: "There was Emily and I: threadbare, broke, quite ready for home after nearly a year away, overlapping a month with Eloise and Skid…. They sat there, their American prosperity still glistening, their wallets fat, their tipping gross. Whenever I could I subtracted a substantial portion of those tips from under the plate, partly to maintain our prestige in the eyes of the waiters and partly to bolster my waning funds."[83] Whether details of the partnership were actually worked out here is unknown, but it seems unlikely. Who formulated one of the most striking metaphors used by Owings in his description of the partnership is also unknown: their firm was to be a modernized "Gothic Builders Guild," a phrase that seems as if it ought to have been invented by John Ruskin, William Morris, Henry Adams, or even Joseph Hudnut, a modernist who had brought Ruskin's language to

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[81] Barnes, "A Walk with Emily," 24.

[82] Ibid., 35.

[83] Typescript draft, March 18, 1971, p. 1, Box 50, *Spaces In Between*, Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC. Skidmore may have been aware of Owings's practices. See William S. Brown, "SOM: The Formative Years," typescript, p. 624, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York.

life in the early 1950s.[84] In fact, the phrase appears nowhere else and seems to be Owings and Skidmore's invention; it has captured the imagination of many readers as appropriate for SOM. But could they have imagined in 1935 that the firm would "offer a multidisciplined service competent to design and build the multiplicity of shelters needed for man's habitat" and employ a "synergism of power" based on "group practice and good design, social change, showmanship"?[85] In short, the description mixes their ambitions, what SOM actually became, and Owings's hopes in the 1970s for a renewed architectural mission to address his then-current concerns: pollution, rampant highway construction, and racial discrimination within the architectural profession.

Skidmore and Owings's ambitions probably centered around the good fortune of Burnham & Root. Burnham & Root had been directors of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, predecessor to the Century of Progress. Skidmore and Owings must have heard stories of those times and of the subsequent expansion of Burnham & Root ("not fewer than 180 men on the payroll"). Perhaps they had read Louis Sullivan's *The Autobiography of an Idea* and been struck by Burnham & Root's own small beginnings. Sullivan reported Burnham as saying, "my idea is to work up a big business, to handle big things. Deal with big business men, and to build up a big organization."[86] Just as Burnham & Root had imported the practices of big business developed by nineteenth-century industry to the field of architecture, Skidmore and Owings might have thought to take up the twentieth century's efficiencies of scale as demonstrated at the Century of Progress. It was a very broad brief; in reality, the future shape of the firm would have been unknown, but for now, they needed jobs.

They opened for business in January 1936; the economy was still poor and "even the larger offices in Chicago were living hand to mouth."[87] They hired a brilliant lawyer, Marshall Grosscup Sampsell, who wrote an elastic partnership document that has survived (in modified form) to this day. Their office was at 104 South Michigan, where they offered "design services" to their landlord in lieu of rent.[88] Rufus Dawes, formerly pres-

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[84] Joseph Hudnut, *The Three Lamps of Modern Architecture* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1952).

[85] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 66.

[86] Louis H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York, 1956), 285–86.

[87] Ambrose Richardson. "Skidmore and Owings: The Early Days," *Threshold: Journal of the School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Chicago* 2 (Autumn 1983), 66.

[88] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 67.

ident of the Century of Progress Exposition, gave them a job to create a model coal mine and dynamic exhibition in the new Museum of Science and Industry.[89] Most of all, they built houses—supposedly a dozen, leading to the quip "at the beginning of the year, twelve friends and no houses; at the end of the year, twelve houses and no friends." They contributed a low-cost prefabricated home design to *Better Homes & Gardens* in October 1936, advertising their experiences at the Century of Progress. Making it look "like a home—not a cantonment camp—or a box" was a high priority. They reduced the size of the hall for internal efficiency and offered to add an extra bedroom at the second floor.[90] Their design was then selected for construction in a new development in Charlotte, North Carolina, as a "Home of the Year" sponsored by the *Charlotte Observer*. The *Observer*'s "Miss Charlotte" wrote that although the lines of the house were "straight and severely simple please do not confuse it with a 'modernistic' type…. It is modern in every detail, yet it is truly practical and very livable."[91] Regular updates on construction and the selection of the interior decorations provided plenty of publicity. They also designed five-to-eight-room model houses, selling for $5,000 to $12,000, for a seventy-acre site in Highland Park, Illinois. Nine houses were ready by mid-July 1936.[92] They were still planning for more housing designs the following year, as an April 1937 job advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune* indicated: "Architectural Draftsmen. Must absolutely have had experience on large houses."[93] It is no wonder that in 1939 they added John O. Merrill to the masthead (though not to the partnership agreement). Merrill was an engineer, which was convenient, but perhaps the more relevant factor was that he had worked for the Federal Housing Authority.[94] Skidmore and Owings might well have become home builders.

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[89] "Streamlined Wooden Indian," *Fortune* 37 (May 1948), 126; Rufus Dawes to Louis Skidmore, August 13, 1935, Box 2, General Correspondence, 1916–1976, Folder 1926–1939, Louis Skidmore Papers, 1908–1976, MSS75892, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

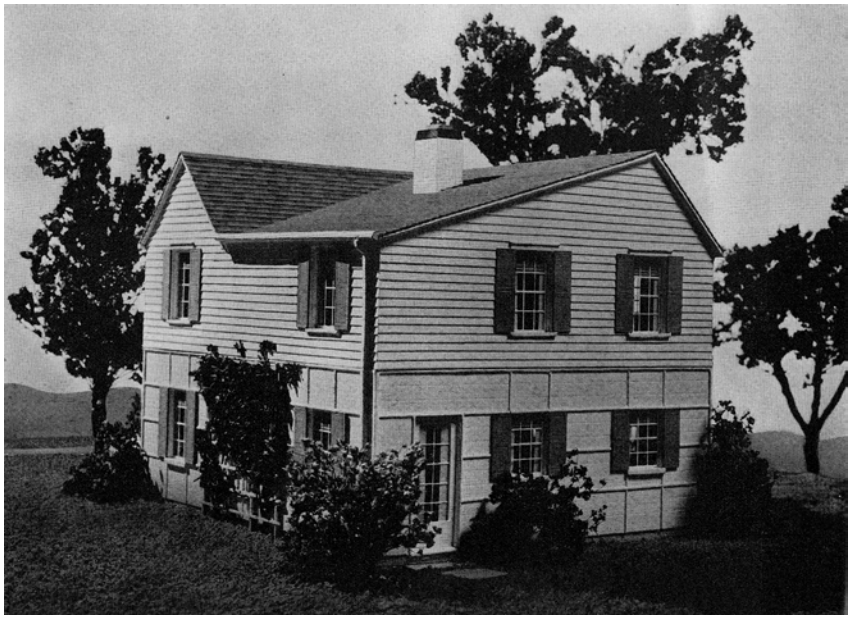
[90] Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings, "A Sensational Bildcost Gardened Home for $3500," *Better Homes & Gardens* 15 no. 2 (October 1936), 13–15, 123–25.

[91] *Charlotte Observer,* May 23, 1937, p. 28.

[92] "Selects Two Architects," *Chicago Tribune,* January 19, 1936, p. 24.

[93] *Chicago Tribune,* April 11, 1937, p. 78.

[94] "Housing Theme of Architects," *The Times* (Munster, Indiana), March 8, 1938, p. 6. Merrill had been a partner at the Chicago firm of Granger & Bollenbacher, dissolved after Bollenbacher's death in 1939. SOM "claimed" the Marcy Village Apartments, Indianapolis, as their project although



"A Sensational Bildcost Gardened Home," *Better Homes and Gardens*, October 1936
Courtesy, Meredith Corporation

Their change in direction was fortuitous. One signal moment brought together Owings's ambitions and his deep insecurity. In July 1936 Owings went to New York to interview at the American Radiator & Standard Sanitary Corporation for a "home comfort exhibit" for their New York headquarters at 40 West 40th Street.[95] At the Century of Progress, American Radiator had been represented with a "Garden of Comfort" that demonstrated the new science of air conditioning and offered displays of kitchen and bathroom design. American Standard had judged their participation in the Exposition a success: it would have "a direct bearing on sales results for the next ten years."[96] Clarence M. Woolley, president and subsequently chairman of the board of the American Radiator Company, was already committed to

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Granger & Bollenbacher were the firm of record. Merrill had presumably moved to SOM before the completion of Marcy Village. See *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill 1936–1980* (Chicago, 1980), 68.

[95] The American Radiator Company presented an exhibition in the French Building at Rockefeller Center in March 1936 to demonstrate how to convert basements into usable spaces.

[96] Earl Mullin, "Business Gains Reported by Big Fair Exhibitors," *Chicago Tribune,* September 15, 1934, p. 9.

Skidmore's belief that design could be turned to economic advantage.[97] Woolley stipulated that Owings and Skidmore had to have a New York office and a resident partner.[98] Owings later wrote: "Of course we didn't have an office in New York yet, nor did we have a resident partner. I didn't dare risk losing this chance for a critical commission by an explanation. So I replied: 'Okay, I will mail that letter to you this afternoon. You will have it not later than tomorrow morning.'"

Owings ran from the Radiator Building on 40th Street to the nearest Woolworth department store on Sixth Avenue where, in the phone book (a staple at every public telephone in those years), he looked up the address of two friends from the Century of Progress, Joseph Urban and Otto Teegen.[99] He printed letterhead with their address and the name of Skidmore & Owings at the head. They now had their second office on the 9th floor of 5 East 57th Street in New York City. It might have made more sense for Owings to have designated himself as resident partner there, but, as Owings admits in a draft of *Spaces In Between,* his "surface confidence thinly covered a no-confidence feeling about carrying out the design decision. Skid—older, married and established in Chicago—agreed. He simply packed up and moved to New York. There was no debate even though the reverse would have made better sense." Louis Skidmore was now the resident partner in New York.[100]

What compelled these instantaneous decisions? First and foremost, it was opportunity for work. While their housing ventures were developing, if Skidmore and Owings were to take advantage of their reputation from the Century of Progress, being available for the upcoming New York World's Fair, to open in 1939, was a good idea. They could wait and see what developed. Skidmore had notes from his Century of Progress work

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[97] "Clarence M. Woolley, Long-Time Village Resident and Noted Industrialist, Dies at Age 93," *Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, Calif.), July 23, 1956, p. 1.

[98] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 71–72. Woolley's residence in Santa Fe is confirmed in "Woolley Sees Brighter Picture for Building Industry in America," *Santa Fe New Mexican,* April 7, 1936, p. 6.

[99] Teegan wrote humorously to Owings many years later complimenting himself on the good advice he had given Owings: "namely, to keep up with architecture instead of going into show business, for which, I will admit, you had particularly aptitude." Otto Teegan to Owings, April 16 [1974 or 1975], Box 6, Correspondence, Personal, undated folder, Owings Papers, LOC.

[100] Typescript draft, March 18, 1971, p. 8, Box 50, *Spaces In Between*, Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC. As a result of his position, Skidmore's name carried considerably more resonance than did that of Owings. Skidmore, for example, gave advice to the organizers of the Dallas, Texas fair. Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 127.

and was prepared.[101] There was also an advantage in the separation of the brothers-in-law. The experience of running the office in Chicago had not proved wholly satisfactory.[102] Owings claimed the pair had "a kind of extra sensory perception," stating in a draft for *Spaces In Between*: "We could pin the tail on each other's donkey blindfolded."[103] The reality was different. Elsewhere, in another draft, he wrote about his feelings at the moment of the partnership agreement: "Skidmore was the decanted essence, bold in contents, all architecture. My mind was on something else—not the longevity of our [partnership] arrangement. I was concerned about what I was: salesman, huckster, manure spreader?" His and Skidmore's different strengths might have been seen as an advantage; instead, Owings focused on his insufficiency: "I had ideas, yes, boiling over with them. My mind turned ideas into three, often four, sometimes five dimensions…. The problem with me was the detail. Excited, impatient, there never was enough time. Architects that I knew, especially the great designers, took an idea, sat down, drew it up and worked it out. I had to place my ideas into another's hands for execution—not just of the idea, but the mind behind the hands."[104] Moreover, working alongside Owings was not easy. William S. Brown, who worked out of the New York office almost from its opening and had occasion to observe Skidmore and Owings, separately and together, wrote: "Simply working with Nat in everyday circumstance could be exciting—or confusing—depending upon how you looked at it…. As a matter of fact, even Skid lost his poise when there was an impending visit by Nat. In anticipation, Skid would feverishly line up closely-coupled promotional-type engagements in order, I suppose, to impress Nat, who always came to town in a flurry of such activities."[105]

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[101] According to J. Walter Severinghaus, a partner in the New York office, Skidmore had detailed notes concerning every building and exhibit from the Century of Progress. He was, Severinghaus states, "probably better prepared with factual information than any other architect in New York." J. Walter Severinghaus, Oral Memoir, c. 1980, p. 7, Archives, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, New York.

[102] Ambrose Richardson reports: "I think they would have had a lot of difficulty … working in the same office…. I think they both ran their own shops, period. There's no question about it." "Oral History of Ambrose M. Richardson: Interviewed by Betty J. Blum," p. 63, transcription of 1990 interview (revised ed. with introduction, 2009), Chicago Architects Oral History Project, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archive, Art Institute of Chicago.

[103] Draft, chapter 3, March 18, 1971, p. 10, Box 50, *Spaces In Between*, Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC.

[104] Ibid., p. 4

[105] Brown, "SOM: The Formative Years," 320; see also Nicholas Adams, "William S. Brown's 'SOM The Formative Years' (1983): A New History of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 78 (September 2019), 254–58.

Even David Childs, a managing partner at SOM in the 1990s and early 2000s, and someone with whom Owings had a paternal relationship, has described him as having "a very difficult relationship with people." Working with Owings "was almost always a time filled with tensions."[106] Owings reported a comment by Skidmore about the need for two offices: "'Two guys like us need that much territory to operate in.'"[107] Skidmore probably was being polite.

Skidmore's presence in New York was a triumph. He soon befriended Robert Moses, the key figure for public construction in the New York region. Moses had big projects in mind and needed people who could get things done. Skidmore's ability to cope with Moses and Moses's affection for Skidmore, as Owings recognized, were "the beginning of a thirty-year friendship … [that] gave SOM a niche in the tight hierarchy which controlled architectural, planning, engineering and construction jobs in New York City."[108] Though he declined the kind of massive responsibility for the New York Fair that he had shouldered in Chicago in 1933, in April 1937, after only a few months in the city, Skidmore was appointed to the Board of Design and as consultant to the general manager and chief engineer. Business leaders who had worked with Skidmore in Chicago came to talk again, and those who had only heard about his work came for their own consultations.[109] The firm designed eight temporary pavilions, and Skidmore carefully matched up his designers and his production crews—notably the newly hired Gordon Bunshaft and William S. Brown at the Venezuela Pavilion, SOM's first "modernist" building with a sharply angled roof and glass walls.[110] Moses found work for Skidmore after the Fair too: landscaping the access roads to the beaches and bridges; developing restaurants (Jones Beach) and museum spaces (The Botanical Gardens); and, ultimately, constructing large-scale housing developments and hospitals.

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[106] Dreyfuss, "A Gold Medal for a Maestro of Architecture," 18.

[107] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 72.

[108] Ibid., 77.

[109] Ibid., 76.

[110] With the exception of the Venezuela Pavilion, the rest were Art Deco in character: Swift Premium Meats, Continental Baking, the Radio Corporation of America, the Gas Industries Pavilion, the Westinghouse Pavilion, the Standard Brands Building, the Glass Building, and a Medicine and Public Health display.

In short, it was Moses who enabled SOM to move to another scale—a fact unacknowledged in the printed version of *Spaces In Between*.[111]

Without a figure like Robert Moses in Chicago to dispense commissions, Owings diversified, running from job to job, just as he had hustled in his youth. Even before Skidmore moved to New York he was out and about, generating publicity. In 1937, his Cornell classmate and fraternity brother Harry V. Wade arranged for him to lecture to a meeting of the Life Advertisers Association in Indianapolis. Owings spoke about "Three Dimensional Advertising," probably related to the Century of Progress.[112] He served on the Boy Scout Council and created the settings for society dances and fundraisers, just as he had done at Cornell.[113] In 1938 the firm renovated the barber shop in their building and designed a heraldic crest for the store—a little more publicity.[114] For a January 1940 fundraiser ball for the Chicago School of Architecture on the theme of Olympus, Owings was the chair of the committee and called himself General Chairman of the Gods. He wore black tights, a red cloak and skull cap, and a white dress shirt. Emily, "tall and slim," as the *Chicago Tribune* described her, "was a lovely Goddess of the Nile, both Upper and Lower, as she explained. She wore a gown of yellow and white pliofilm and a headdress of yellow yarn."[115]

Owings worked his Indiana connections to advantage. For example, for the Alpha Phi sorority house at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, the Chicago office produced a modernized colonial-style building (1939). They worked for L. S. Ayres & Company department store in Indianapolis (1941–42; 1946–47). Harry Wade pushed through a commission for a headquarters for the Standard Life Insurance Company of Indiana (1945–47), where he was president, and later supported SOM from his position of chair of the Indianapolis Housing Authority, for the

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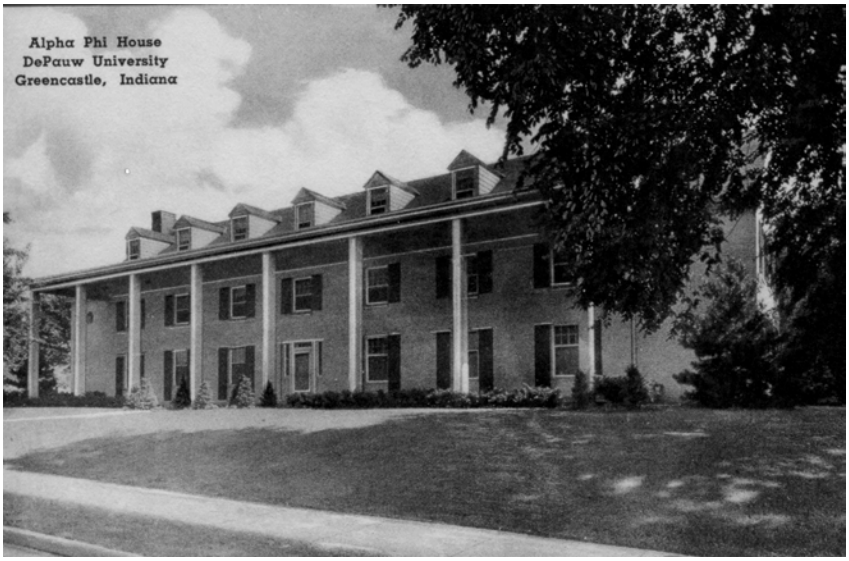
[111] Owings was not a friend of Moses. Moses spoke at Skidmore's funeral. Skidmore, he noted, was "a Hoosier," and no Hoosier, he underlined, "was born to be existentialist, sophisticate, precious, or stuffy." "Remarks of Robert Moses," Memorial Service for Louis Skidmore, October 24, 1962, photocopy of program leaflet, author's collection.

[112] "Life Advertisers' Association to Hold Regional Meeting at Woodstock Today," *Indianapolis Star,* July 23, 1937, p. 5. Wade had his own house designed by another architect. See "New Home Under Construction," *Indianapolis Star,* March 4, 1934, p. 13.

[113] For the Scout Council, see *Chicago Tribune,* October 18, 1937, p. 6. India Moffett, "Architects Put Gayety in High at Movie Ball," *Chicago Tribune,* December 3, 1938, p. 17.

[114] "Maybe You'd Better Just Skip It," *Chicago Tribune,* April 25, 1938, p. 10.

[115] "Yes, It's Really a God's Life Up on Mount Olympus," *Chicago Tribune,* January 13, 1940, p. 13. The decorations were by the students of the architect Paul Schweikher. The students of László Moholy-Nagy provided a constructivist "Venus on the Half-Shell."



Alpha Phi House, DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, 1939
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Standard Life Insurance, 350 East Fall Creek Parkway, Indianapolis, 1945–47,
by Hedrich Blessing
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

construction of an Indianapolis low-rental housing project between 10th and 16th Street and West Street and Fall Creek.[116] In Chicago the firm redesigned the interiors for the Charles A. Stevens Department Store and Stevens Circle Restaurant (1940–1941) and Marshall Field & Company (submitted August 1941). There was a project for Goldwater's department store in Phoenix, Arizona (project, 1943–47), and Owings went on a camping trip with Barry Goldwater, later senator from Arizona, to seal the commission.[117]

From his earliest days Owings understood selling, and the barker's megaphone was a natural extension of his voice. One of his favorite words was "glamorization," to "glamorize" buildings as if they were a Christmas tree draped with novelties and surprises. Glamorization bought column inches in newspapers and magazines and produced advertising for the firm. At Goldwater's the canyons of Arizona inspired cantilever overhangs; desert rock gardens lined with stone from a local Navajo reservation and with floor pavers from Flagstaff. "Set here and there among the flagstones will be smaller pieces of stone, unearthed by chance in the surrounding territory, bearing fragmentary imprints of prehistoric creatures including dinosaurs and pterodactyls."[118] In 1944, to draw more attention to SOM, he wrote an article about the importance of lighting for *Illuminating Engineering*. Selling was theater, the former high-school actor, argued: "From the design point of view, the store is the *theatre*—the aisle being roughly analogous to the seats, and the selling areas representing the area where the drama takes place—the *stage."* Lighting should enable the merchandise to stand out, "not the walls and the ceilings. We are showing goods—not plaster and paint. As in the theatre, one should build up slowly to climaxes."[119] Retail design, he observed in another article on department store planning in 1947, needed to shift from what he called "unproductive doodling, to an architectural treatment progressively subordinate to…merchandising

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[116] See "Housing Authority Architects Named," *Indianapolis News,* July 19, 1950, p. 27; subsequently, "Housing Fund Escapes State," *Indianapolis Star,* February 22, 1952, pp. 1, 21 and the editorial, p. 10.

[117] "Remodeled Sales Floor for L. S. Ayres, Indianapolis," *Architectural Forum* 76 (April 1942), 204–206.

[118] Goldwater's Department Store, unsigned and undated program statement, pre-1946, Archives, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Chicago; Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 123–24.

[119] Owings, "Comments on Lighting Layout and Design," *Illuminating Engineering* 39 (December 1944), 865–67.

and customer service."[120] What he had learned from the stage came back to shape his practice; the firm's Chicago branch was headed toward commercial and residential design.

One of the revelations of the New York World's Fair had been the strength of SOM's young designer, Gordon Bunshaft. Possessed of a quick decisive mind, Bunshaft was evidently thought a sufficient asset by Owings and Skidmore that they moved him to Chicago after the Fair. His first job in that city was the modernization of the Presidential Suites in the Stevens (now Hilton) Hotel (1939–40), the largest in the city.[121] Owings had started work on the rooms and (mistakenly, in Bunshaft's opinion) cut a twenty-foot horizontal window into the wall facing Lake Michigan, creating what Bunshaft described critically as a "gray wall" on one side of the room.[122] Later, when Owings obtained approval to prepare a new plan for the first floor of the Marshall Field store (project only), he set Bunshaft to oversee the design. Bunshaft proposed to open the exterior wall to make a single glass showcase from sidewalk to the first floor, turning the façade into a modernist street exhibition.[123] In the submission for the client, one can hear Owings the salesman, spinning the client into the web of a story. The first floor of Marshall Field was "one of the wonders of the world," it read. "As an attraction for the throngs of visitors to Chicago, Lake Michigan is Field's only rival.... Its first floor is world-famous. Because of all this, the senior Burnham's admonition to 'make no small plans' must be forever kept in mind."[124] Work was piecemeal, so the need for hyperbole greater, unlike Skidmore with Moses "feeding us business, endless business." In

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[120] Owings, "Economics of Department Store Planning," *Architectural Forum* 101 (February 1947), 86–91. Among other renovation projects was the Illinois Children's Home and Society at Dearborn and Division Street, where SOM remodeled the offices making extensive use of glass. Owings, according to a newspaper article, was "a great believer in light, air, and the spiritual lift of growing things, so that Chicago of the future will, if he has his way, have all three." "Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society Meets in New Home," *Chicago Tribune,* June 5, 1949, p. 125.

[121] "Oral History of Ambrose M. Richardson," 68.

[122] "Hotels," *Architectural Record* 89 (January 1941), 64–65.

[123] Richardson provides the most comprehensive description: "We did a very exciting thing. Gordon, with his big ideas, suggested we knock out all the current show windows on Wabash and State and make one big glass showcase out of that whole lower floor. That's the first time that I recall in architecture where the whole big open front was used—glass from the sidewalk level all the way up.... He used the whole store as a show window." "Oral History of Ambrose M. Richardson," 156–57.

[124] "Philosophy of Approach to the Proposed Design of the First Floor Marshall Field & Company," Marshall Field Project Box, Archives, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Chicago.

Model of the Kimberly House, completed 1939
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Chicago, Owings had to land each job—"we bothered with trivia."[125] A man for whom details were problematic set projects in motion; he left their execution and the stylistic direction of the architecture to others. While Bunshaft was in Chicago, he led the design for Hostess House at the Great Lakes Naval Station—designed in 1940 or 1941, it echoed the Venezuela Pavilion that he had designed for the New York World's Fair in its abstraction and set a new direction for SOM in Chicago.

The most important commission the Chicago office received, indicative of SOM's future direction, was from Kimberly-Clark, the paper manufacturer, in Neenah, Wisconsin. Owings had probably known the Kimberlys from the Century of Progress in 1933, where Kimberly-Clark had an exhibition of Kotex, their best-known product, in the Hall of Science. Relations had a social side, too: the Owingses paid a weekend visit to the Kimberlys in December 1937, and SOM designed a rambling brick and timber house for the Kimberly estate overlooking Lake Winnebago starting in 1939. Owings described James "Jack" Kimberly as "one of my best friends."[126] In December 1940, Kimberly-Clark inaugurated a 17,000-square-foot new

[125] Draft, March 18, 1971, p. 8, Box 50, *Spaces In Between,* Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC. In *Spaces In Between,* Owings notes that there were "giant jobs" in New York, while "we in Chicago were content with small." Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 68, 69 (reference to "trivia.").

[126] *News-Record* (Neenah, Wisconsin), December 14, 1937, p. 3; Margaret Young, "A Sportsman's Peninsula Estate on Lake Winnebago: The Country Home of Mr. Jack R. Kimberly, Neenah, Wisconsin," *Country Life* 76 (June 1939), 67–69. The article does not provide the name of the architect, but SOM holds records of the design. Nathaniel Owings Jr. has suggested that his mother's favors were the source of the commission. Nathaniel Owings Jr., telephone conversation with the author, November 14, 2019. On Owings and Kimberly's friendship, see Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 127.

mill, Machine Building 3, part of the Badger-Globe complex.[127] The side wall of the 223-foot-long structure was largely glass and the lighting was advanced, combining diffusers and spotlights; the machinery was painted bright colors. Owings applied the values of commercial sales and theater to factory work. As a journalist in *Architectural Record* noted, probably following the architects' cue:

> Color costs no more than white or gray and may considerably increase output; in commercial interiors experienced architects have found that color has the most powerful effect on people's moods. Moreover, for every factory losing output through inadequate lighting there is another losing output through plentiful lighting wrongly directed, thrown against wrong surfaces, colors, or textures, and otherwise ignoring ocular psychology and thus positively creating fatigue."[128]

On only one occasion did Owings claim the role of designer, perhaps due to family pressure. Through his wife's family (her father was president of the hospital association), Owings obtained a commission for Little Traverse Hospital, to be built in the summer community of Petoskey, Michigan (1939).[129] In *Spaces In Between,* Owings expressed his embarrassment about the design. It was, he said, "almost pure Owings" and he described it as "American brewery."[130] In truth, if a little stiff, it was not as weak as he claimed. In the bright interior, the extensive mural decorations had the qualities of many institutional buildings of the day with simplified ornamentation and streamlined furniture. The abstract entry decoration and the extensive use of glass block recall Alvar Aalto's recently completed Viborg Library (1935) and other Scandinavian architecture of the period; perhaps Chicago office employees like Harry Weese and Bob Little, both of whom had spent periods in Sweden, may have been influential.[131] By the time Owings came to write *Spaces In Between,* however, a new three-story clinic

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[127] "New K-C Badger-Globe Mill Will be Dedicated Dec. 14," *Post-Crescent* (Appleton, Wisconsin), December 7, 1940, p. 7.

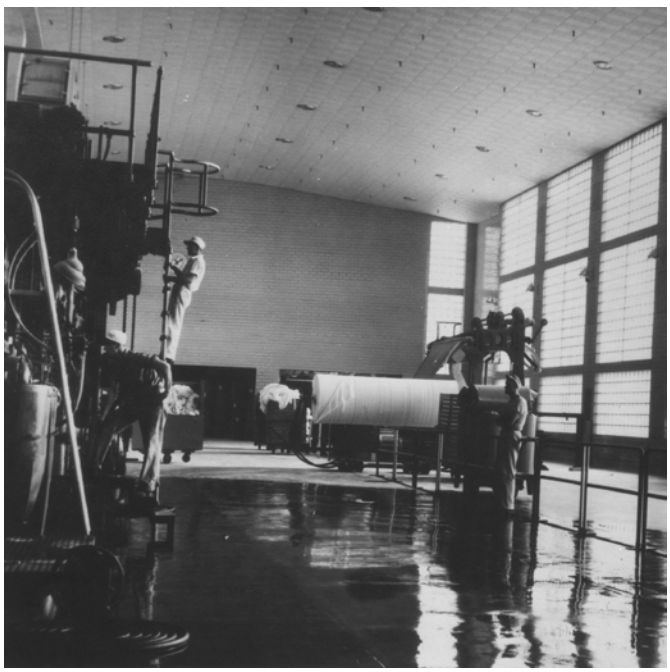
[128] "New Ideas that Produced Assets," *Architectural Record* 89 (March 1941), 57.

[129] On the history of the hospital, see "Indiana Happily Plays Good Neighbor Role to Michigan in Promotion of Fine Hospital on Little Traverse Bay," *Indianapolis News,* September 24, 1938, p. 9.

[130] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 68.

[131] "Oral History of Ambrose M. Richardson," 80.

Great Lakes, Illinois, Hostess House, 1940, by Hedrich Blessing
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill



Kimberly Clark, Machine Building 3, Badger-Globe complex, Neenah, Wisconsin, 1940.
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Little Traverse Hospital, Petoskey, Michigan, 1939. To the left is the addition designed by Gordon Bunshaft, 1955.
Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

on Le Corbusier-influenced piers and with slotted windows, "gracefully angling out from the main box structure" had been built (1955), putting his work to shame. This new building, he noted bitterly, was "pure Bunshaft."[132]

Owings's feelings of injustice and resentment could run deep. He had a particularly ugly dispute with Bunshaft around the design of Lever House, New York (1952), SOM's most successful early building. That the concept of the tower over the square doughnut had been developed by Owings earlier is beyond doubt; in 1947 clients in Chicago had been wooed with a spectacular design that he had directed.[133] When Lever Brothers Company took over the concept for their New York headquarters, Bunshaft became the senior design partner and claimed complete responsibility. Bunshaft planted his career firmly on Lever as his (and SOM's) true first work; when SOM published their collected works in 1963, Lever House was the first building in the book, everything before it was excluded.[134] Even thirty years after the completion of Lever House, at the time Owings received the Gold Medal from the AIA, Bunshaft publicly disparaged Owings's contribution.[135]

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[132] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 68; "Little Traverse Hospital: Petoskey Michigan," *Architectural Forum* 82 (February 1945), 91–96.

[133] Nicholas Adams, *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: SOM since 1936* (New York, 2007), 64–75.

[134] *SOM: Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1950–1962*, introduction by Henry Russell-Hitchcock (New York, 1963).

[135] Dreyfuss, "A Gold Medal for a Maestro of Architecture," 17.

Owings summarized his depth of feeling about the "loss" of his Lever House in a draft of *Spaces In Between*: "There was a movie taken day by day by Lever of the progress of the construction which was put together so that one could see the building rise in a fifteen minute film. I found it more interesting to run the film backwards. I liked the idea of taking the building down before one's eyes."[136] He was, effectively, destroying Bunshaft's Lever House, turning time back to the moment when the design was his own idea.

Meanwhile, World War II transformed SOM. The first connection to the war effort came through Skidmore's MIT classmate, Hugh Perrin. Perrin sought help with the construction of interceptor stations around the coasts of the United States from which volunteer observers would track "the approach of enemy bombers … before their silver windows flash above the threatened city."[137] The program was formalized in 1941 with American entry into the war as the Aircraft Warning Service. Robert W. Cutler, an early employee and later a partner in the New York office, outfitted locations on the East Coast, from Maine to Florida, and then westwards to New Orleans. Owings covered the rest of the United States, from San Antonio, Texas, extending to British Columbia. Altogether the Army and the Coast Guard identified some fifty observation posts around the country, in some cases employing previously existing buildings such as lighthouses or forest fire towers; in other cases, purpose-built structures had to be erected. At these observation posts, citizens could listen and watch for planes, and there were secret sites where Air Force personnel could receive reports.[138] This was the kind of high-speed, improvisational work Owings enjoyed.

SOM's ability to maintain the secrecy of this undertaking may have convinced the government that the firm, in addition to their expertise in prefabrication and housing largely done from the New York office, could be trusted with the design of the top-secret town of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the site of the government's project to build an atomic bomb. Between 1942 and 1945, SOM built the housing and civic center there. Few stories have been more often repeated than Owings's account of the selection of

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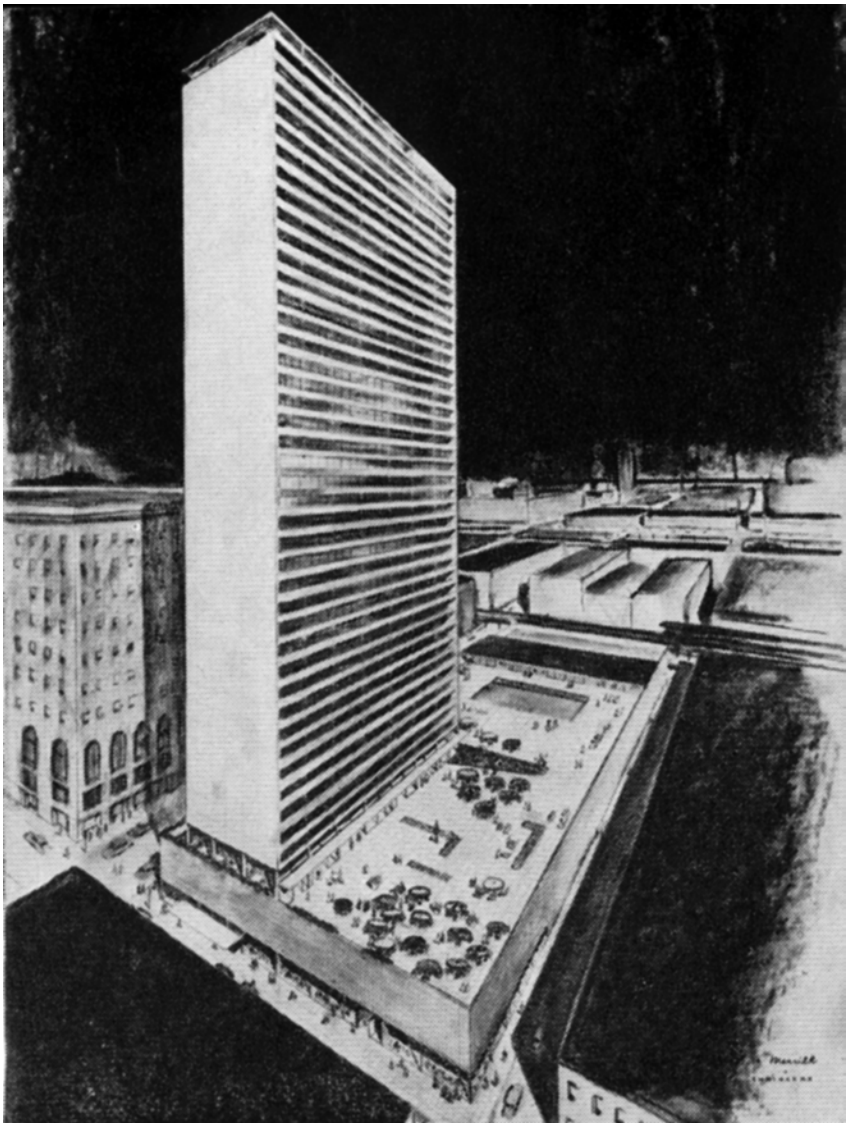
[136] Draft, Chapters 5 and 6, April 6, 1951, p. 14, Box 50, *Spaces In Between*, Drafts, Chapters, Owings Papers, LOC.

[137] John R. Reitemeyer, "Bomb Alarm Planned in Maneuvers," *Hartford Courant,* May 2, 1938, p. 1.

[138] Robert W. Cutler, Oral Memoir*,* April 4, 1977, p. 3, Archives, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, New York.



Ideal Office Tower, developed by Nathaniel Owings, the model for Lever House, New York, 1952.

Courtesy, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

the young firm to design and build Oak Ridge.[139] In *Spaces In Between,* Owings described the commission as a complete surprise: "It isn't every day that someone drops into the office and orders a town. One fine December afternoon in 1942 two men in civilian clothes walked into our New York office unannounced and requested an interview with Louis Skidmore."[140] William Brown in the New York office offered another perspective. He was intimately involved in the entire process of getting the commission and drew up the first town plans. Brown's friend, and later fellow-partner, J. Walter Severinghaus had been working on a fiberboard sandwich panel that employed a cement-based material called "Cemesto." Severinghaus's group was developing this new material for the John B. Pierce Foundation, a division of the American Standard and Sanitary Company, the firm that had first brought SOM to New York.[141] Cemesto, it was hoped, would reduce the use of plywood, rationed during wartime. In his account of the Oak Ridge commission, Brown recalled that both the New York and the Chicago offices had been working closely with the government on military sites along the East Coast since early 1940—the observation posts. Severinghaus, at the same time, was overseeing the construction of dormitories for women war workers using Cemesto at Arlington Farms in Washington, D. C.[142] It probably did not hurt that construction there was going on under the eyes of service leaders. Later, in 1942, SOM was also hired to construct housing using Cemesto for the United States Maritime Commission in a series of southern port towns. "Hundreds of units were constructed quickly and without fuss," Brown reported.[143] These units were probably designed in New York. Cutler, also present in the office at this time, recalled a further detail: evidently a friend of Skidmore's at the Pierce Foundation had been commissioned to design a central town plan (site unspecified) for an unknown client that turned out to be the United

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[139] Owings's account in *Spaces In Between* rests on his early account to the "Wayfarers," at the Chicago Club, October 15, 1946. See Box 53, Speeches, 1946, Owings Papers, LOC. It begins: "On a crisp winter afternoon in 1942, two quite ordinary looking men in even more ordinary civilian clothes walked into our New York office—unannounced—and requested an interview with our man, Skidmore."

[140] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 83.

[141] The requests of American Standard had been the source for the opening of a New York office in July 1936.

[142] "200 Move to Arlington Farms; Units for 8000 Under Way: U.S. Housing Gets First Occupants," *Washington Post,* March 14, 1943, p. R1.

[143] Brown, "SOM: The Formative Years," 159.

States government.[144] It was against this background, he recalled, that the Pierce Foundation also learned of the plans for Oak Ridge, and that an official at Pierce phoned the Manhattan District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to describe the virtues of Cemesto. Skidmore and Owings were then brought into the conversation. Without addressing Owings's dramatic account directly, Brown suggested that there was more to the story than Owings's cloak-and-dagger surprise.[145]

To meet government deadlines, Owings hired architects off the street and sent them to Oak Ridge the next day. John Merrill was placed in charge onsite.[146] Owings stayed in Chicago for the most part; he clashed more than once with Leroy Jackson, the onsite coordinator from the Army Corps of Engineers. Ambrose Richardson also describes Owings as being "abrasive" and having a poor relationship with Jackson. Owings, as the senior figure, was brought to the site, Richardson relates, when the architects faced a problem with the siting of a factory.

> There were three valleys and so the [SOM] planners brought in Owings … and they briefed him on it. He said, "Well, I think I understand." They said, "It's going to be a tough selling job because these generals…want to put it in this other valley." So … they briefed Nat, and he went in there to give all the reasons for putting it in this valley. He didn't come out and he didn't come out for about an hour. So, he finally came out just mopping his brow. He said, "Boy, it really took a lot out of me, but I sold it, fellows." They went in, and he had sold it down the wrong valley! This is a story told by a million fellows who were there, but, knowing Nat, I think it's probably true.[147]

[144] Robert W. Cutler, "Conversations with Bob Cutler," conducted by Morris Hoover, April 16, 1976, Archives, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Chicago.

[145] The entire episode is reported by Brown, "SOM: The Formative Years," 147–49. Owings's story of the commission has commanded the field and was even repeated by me. See Adams, *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: SOM since 1936,* 24. In my defense, there was no alternative explanation, and I met with the son of Louis Skidmore, who repeated the old account.

[146] "Oral History of Ambrose M. Richardson," 211, 222.

[147] Ibid., 132.

Indianapolis shaped Owings: his uproarious good humor, his sharp wit, and his attraction to a good story could have been born from the pages of George Ade, another Indiana fabulist (and Owings's fraternity brother). What kind of story would Ade have told about Owings?[148] Owings's Indiana life certainly belonged to Ade's world of the everyday: the busy little entrepreneur and Boy Scout; the intellectual female and the muscly male cousins; the neighborhood of apple trees and baseball diamonds. As in Owings's own telling, true tragedy, like the abandonment of the family, was kept at arm's distance with a fable of its own. Owings's partnership with Louis Skidmore, driven by love, had the makings of a fairy tale, and when two men walked in off the street and ordered a town, that was a miracle. Owings made sure that his telling of his life was speckled with miracles. Ade, however, could never resist a toothsome irony—men or women tripped up by their pretensions and high ambitions. Ade might have given more space to tell how Owings returned to Indianapolis for jobs—the most prominent of which was the doleful J. C. Penney store on Monument Circle (1950), the building that should have been Owings's crowning hometown achievement. Its design was under the control of Bunshaft from SOM's New York office, and Owings's later admission that the scale of the design may have been a mistake is a poignant recognition of the limits of his longings, and of the perils of not measuring your abilities accurately against your need to be conspicuous. The irony was made more bitter in that Penney's replaced English's Theater, one of Owings's favorite buildings from his youth.[149]

Still, there was enough good material for fables to convince clients and entertain employees. Clients needed to know they were getting something special from a remarkable firm; and if men and women were to work long hours, be willingly transferred far from home to Tennessee or Algeria, or Morocco or Taiwan (the site of SOM's jobs in the 1940s and 1950s), they had to believe in Owings and in SOM. They had to be convinced, like the

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[148] Ade was extremely popular during Owings's youth and early maturity. He was noted especially for his short stories, *Fables in Slang* (1900) and *More Fables* (1900), *Forty Modern Fables* (1901), *Ade's Fables* (1914), *Thirty Fables in Slang* (1926), and numerous plays. His children's stories in the *Strenuous Lad's Library* (1903) may also have appealed to Owings.

[149] Owings, *Spaces In Between,* 122. See also "Rector Decries Circle's 'Great Stone Curtain,'" *Indianapolis Star,* November 12, 1950, pp. 1, 3. Later SOM built the Fidelity Building (1959), also on Monument Circle, based around the design of the Chase Manhattan Tower, New York. It has been largely unnoticed by periodical and scholarly literature. The senior designer partner was William Dunlap. The writer Carl van Doren brilliantly characterized Ade's representation of Hoosiers: "They encourage aspiration, but they snicker at the mean arts by which means persons seek to make themselves conspicuous in the world without real excellence." See Carl Van Doren, "Old Wisdom in a New Tongue: George Ade," in *Many Minds* (New York, 1924), 24.

J. C. Penney Retail Store and Monument Circle, Indianapolis, 1951.
Courtesy, The Indiana Album: Joan Hostetler Collection

friends of Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* that even whitewashing the fence was a good opportunity: "Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence everyday?"[150] Spinning his life into a fable was both a psychological and a professional necessity for Owings. When receiving the Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects in 1983, he admitted his distress at speaking before "an audience filled with dear friends, family and colleagues—not to mention lifelong associates," for it eliminated his "options for hyperbole," challenging his "delight in never letting fact stand in the way of an idea."[151] Setting Owings's autobiographical writings, in print and in draft, next to one another and in parallel with more reliable forms of historical documentation, provides more than just one shaft of light into the complexities of Owings the person, the maker of myths more lasting than any single design. He wanted the SOM partnership to survive the deaths of its founders, and it has. People who never knew Owings now lead SOM in the shadow (or is it the light?) of the tales of his youth.

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[150] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Hartford, Conn., 1876), 30.

[151] "Owings Speaks of Instinct, Dedication, the Environment," *Architecture* (July 1983), 20