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Architecture in the Experience Economy:
The Catalog Showroom and Best Products Company

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Architecture

by

Christina Bernadette Gray

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Architecture in the Experience Economy:
The Catalog Showroom and Best Products Company

by

Christina Bernadette Gray

Doctor of Philosophy in Architecture

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Sylvia Lavin, Chair

Although it is often assumed that production must logically precede consumption, the development of postmodern architecture complicates this narrative. The development of postmodern architecture undermined established structures by centralizing the role of consumption and the consumer. This dissertation examines ways in which various conservative trends pushed the consumer closer toward production. These changes ushered in the experience economy of which Best Products Company and the broader catalog showroom phenomena were particularly emblematic. Drawing on these changes within the history of retail architecture, this dissertation sets out to explore how architecture emerged into the postmodern period as a box, a malleable shell that was increasingly being invaded and overturned by a powerful consumer.

This dissertation of Christina Bernadette Gray is approved.

Dana Cuff

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Sylvia Lavin, Committee Chair

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2019

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family upon whom I have leaned so heavily. Firstly, this dissertation is dedicated to my parents who have supported me in immeasurable ways. My parents Jim and Jane have modeled a level of dedication and love that continues to astound me. I am also beholden to my dear siblings, Andrew and Patricia, who have always offered inspiring warmth and understanding. To Jon who has patiently accompanied me every step of the way, thank you for making this journey a joyful one. And lastly, above all, I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my daughter Inez of whom I am so proud.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Prior to enrolling at the University of California, Los Angeles in the fall of 2011, Christina Gray earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of British Columbia in 2006 followed by a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Toronto in 2010. While completing these architectural studies, Christina worked in Rome for Studio Fuksas and in Vancouver for Patkau Architects, Joel Berman Glass Studio and Stantec. While a doctoral student at the University of California, Los Angeles, Christina had the opportunity to work as a Teaching Fellow. Additionally, while completing her doctoral studies Christina worked as an archivist for Gehry Partners and taught architectural history at the University of Southern California and the Southern California Institute of Architecture.

INTRODUCTION

Shoppers were knocking on the side doors, asking to be let into the warehouse. With their catalogs in hand, they demanded that the boxes of wholesale merchandise be opened up so that they could see and touch the products within before they placed their orders. A change was afoot. Shopping during the 1960s and 1970s was suddenly being reorganized around this insistent act of selection. This represented a significant shift. No longer was the shopper immersed in a department store phantasmagoria of sights and sounds. Such a shopper would have meandered around sumptuous interiors, lost in an overwhelming daze, confusing products for sale with the rich environment that enveloped them. The grand department store of the nineteenth century had transformed everything and everyone within into a shopper's spectacle. This however, was a world away from the warehouse that the new shopper was entering. For this shopper there was little confusion between the product they were selecting and the retail environment that surrounded them. This dissertation examines the emergence of the catalog showroom as a new form of retail that, in turn, helped usher in the early stages of the experience economy.

The underlying drive behind this history was the initial development, during the 1960s and 1970s, of the experience economy. The basic premise of the experience economy was a growing conflation between production and consumption, and by extension between producers and consumers. The second impetus behind the emerging experience economy was growing conservative currents. More specifically, economic deregulation and the vertical disintegration of organizations created the conditions whereby producers and consumers could be brought closer together. From this closeness emerged the figure of the prosumer, an ambiguous blend of a producing consumer. The prosumer's focused act of product selection became particularly emblematic of this empowered figure and their ability to merge production with consumption. Within the history of retail architecture, this dissertation traces how the birth of the catalog showroom, a new form of retail that

emerged in this period, represented the nascent development of an experience economy. In these circumstances, architecture was increasingly understood as a permeable form, a box that could be invaded and overturned by the powerful prosumer.

Vertical Disintegration

In 1991 economist Ronald Coase won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in part for the article he published in 1937 entitled, “The Nature of the Firm.” Seemingly irrelevant at the time of its publication, this prophetic paper had predicted a limit to corporate vertical integration that would become apparent during the late twentieth century. Coase described a balance between functions that a business could internalize and functions that a business might prefer to outsource to the open market. By contrast, in 1977 Alfred Chandler published his breakthrough work *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* that described an opposing approach.¹ Using historical examples from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chandler traced how businesses increasingly internalized production and distribution systems, creating more vertically integrated structures dependent upon a new managerial class. However, by the time Coase was awarded his Nobel Prize, the vertically integrated managerial systems described by Chandler were struggling against systemic limitations that had been bolstered by economic deregulation. In 2003, economist Richard Langlois proffered his work *The Vanishing Hand* as a re-evaluation of Chandler’s work within the context of late twentieth century economic history.² Langlois described a re-balancing of internalized corporate organization with external market forces. He characterized the late twentieth century as a period when “markets are thick and market-supporting institutions plentiful,” resulting in production and distribution systems that were increasingly coordinated

¹ Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1977).

² Richard Langlois, “The Vanishing Hand: the Changing Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism,” *Industrial and Corporate Change* Vol. 12, No 2 (April 2003).

through market mechanisms rather than Chandler's managerial class.³ This dissertation is situated during the 1960s and 1970s and premised on Langlois' argument that vertical disintegration was beginning to take hold.

Economic Deregulation

A broad range of politicians and economists supported the need for greater deregulation throughout the 1970s. The publication of prominent legal scholar Robert Bork's *The Antitrust Paradox* in 1978 represented a watershed moment, demonstrating that discussions had reached a consequential pitch. The book placed economic thinking, and more specifically the economic wellbeing of the consumer, at the center of antitrust debates. Bork began by criticizing the Sherman Antitrust Act enacted by Congress in 1890 as having had the undesirable effect of shielding inefficient small businesses from competition. The titular paradox Bork highlighted was that such governmental intervention often had the unintended effect of hurting "consumer welfare" by reducing the variety of consumer selection while simultaneously increasing consumer costs.⁴ According to Bork's argument, the consumer's well-being represented the central justification for economic deregulation. The consumer's rising profile at the center of antitrust debates forms an important backdrop for this dissertation.

Experience Environment

The consumer was positioned in the economy as an ascendant and consequential figure during the late 1960s and 1970s. The shopping experience was becoming a focal point among increasingly competitive retailers that were no longer shielded by protectionist policies. At the time,

³ Richard Langlois, *The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism – Shumpeter, Chandler and the New Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 17.

⁴ Robert Bork, *The Antitrust Paradox* (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

consumerism was broadly characterized by a crisis of choice. Consumers and regulators alike decried the lack of choice within a morass of interchangeable products. In this circumstance, the individual consumer's experience selecting a product became a focal point. In 1979, Joan Didion described, in her book of essays *The White Album*, visiting several California retail spaces that were nearly indistinguishable. Didion suggested that the products available were equally indistinct. Within such a sea of sameness, Didion turned her attention to the ways in which these generic retail spaces became affective environments. She noted how the sense of her own experience overpowered not only the minor differences between the mundane retail spaces but also between the sense of herself as being distinct from other shoppers. The lack of consumer selection trained her focus instead upon a sensational retail experience. She wrote, "These marginal distinctions to one side, Ala Moana, The Esplanade, and Edgewater Plaza are the same place, which is precisely their role not only as equalizers but in the sedation of anxiety. In each of them one moves for a while in an aqueous suspension not only of light but of judgment, not only of judgment but of 'personality.'"⁵

Similarly, in his 1970 book *Future Shock*, futurist Alvin Toffler characterized consumer spaces as simultaneously both repetitively mundane and highly affective. Toffler highlighted, "the psychological charge that accompanies even the most routine transaction."⁶ He connected this characterization of affective consumer environments with what he categorized as the emerging phenomenon known as "the experience industry." Coining the phrase, Toffler described, "the next forward movement of the economy, the growth of a strange new sector based on what can only be called the 'experience industries.'"⁷ According to Toffler, the psychological charge at the core of this newly emerging experience industry was based on the "psychologization of all production, beginning

⁵ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 186.

⁶ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 226.

⁷ Toffler, *Future Shock*, p. 221.

with manufacture.”⁸ The idea that the consumer could now connect production within their consumer experience was one elaborated on by Toffler in his subsequent book *The Third Wave*. Here Toffler introduced the idea of a “prosumer” and described someone who was bringing the roles of producer and consumer closer together. According to Toffler, this prosumer merged production and consumption both out of reasons of economic necessity as well as for pleasure and edification. Prosumers pushed their presence further back into the chain of production, eager to expand the scope of their consumer experience.⁹

Literature Review

There is a body of research on the relationship between the experience economy and architecture, much of which focuses on the effects of an already established experience economy, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. The writings of Brian Lonsway¹⁰ and Anna Klingmann¹¹ describe the effect of an established experience economy upon architecture as prompting a discourse about place-making. This line of research lays out how the experience economy began to amplify the arrival of postmodern architecture on a discursive level. By contrast, this dissertation focuses more narrowly on the nascent experience economy of the 1970s. The experience economy as it initially developed in the 1970s was premised upon shifting the consumer into both the spaces and processes located deeper within the supply chain. Moved in this way, the repositioned consumer began to develop new types of interactions with products. Subsequently during the 1980s, the experience economy developed further into a later phase that came to prioritize the consumer’s engagement with

⁸ Ibid., p. 221.

⁹ Philip Kotler, “The Prosumer Movement: A New Challenge for Marketers,” *Advances in Consumer Research*, ed. Richard J. Lutz (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1986).

¹⁰ Brian Lonsway, *Making Leisure Work: Architecture and the Experience Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹ Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

an entire retail environment over the specificity of a particular product. Instead, this research focuses on the earlier phase when the consumer's engagement with a product, burrowed deep within the supply chain, recast the operations and architecture around them.

Architectural history is presented here in close relation to consumer history. As such, this dissertation is positioned within a lineage of retail architectural history rather than the related parallel history of architectural phenomenology from the period.¹² By fixing on retail architectural history, the role of the consumer is centralized. By extension, this allows for an examination of the broader influence of architectural consumers understood to also include architectural patrons. Specific mechanics of architectural patronage are examined in order to better understand the central influence of architectural patronage upon postmodern architecture. Focusing upon the particular ways in which producers and consumers began to overlap in the creation of postmodern architecture is the primary underlying focus that drives the dissertation.

Historian Richard Longstreth's research on mid century shopping malls is a model for this approach.¹³ By keeping the consuming public at the center of his discussion, Longstreth's description complicates the common understanding within modern capitalism that production must logically precede consumption. Similarly, the work of historian Anne Friedberg provides a method to describe how a mobilized consumer was a key determinant of postmodern culture.¹⁴ However, where Friedberg describes the response of a postmodern consumer to the pre-existing architectural format of the shopping mall, this dissertation instead examines the interplay between a mobilized consumer and the creation of a contemporaneous form of retail space, the catalog showroom.

¹² Jorge Otero Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹³ Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

There is a growing body of research on the numerous ways in which managerial strategies impacted architecture during the twentieth century. John Harwood's book *The Interface: IBM and the Transformation of Corporate Design, 1945-1976* focuses on the design processes at IBM, including the creation of corporate design guidelines that extended beyond a singular understanding of authorship.¹⁵ Jesse LeCavalier's book *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment* outlines the development of big box retail. LeCavalier argues that logistics have annexed the previously dominant force of mass production, creating a new organizational model for the twenty-first century.¹⁶ He presents an analysis of the interaction between the emerging field of logistics and the physical form of big box retail. His description of the disintegration of interior distinctions between back and front within these infrastructural buildings proved to be particularly useful in developing this dissertation's analysis of the closely related, albeit still distinct, catalog showroom typology. Michael Osman's book *Modernism's Visible Hand* offers analysis of the influence between regulation and architecture.¹⁷ Stemming from this research, I wanted to understand what happened when the regulatory build-up that Osman detailed in the first part of the twentieth century began to be impacted by the rampant economic deregulation of the 1970s and 1980s.

Reinhold Martin provides a method to analyze the role of the client in late twentieth century architecture. In *The Organizational Complex* Martin describes the client's role by precisely examining how the practices of clients and architects began to coincide.¹⁸ Governed by shared organizational strategies, Martin examines the particular qualities of the sometimes ephemeral boundary between clients and architects. Building upon this, he describes the role of the client within

¹⁵ John Harwood, *The Interface: IBM and the Transformation of Corporate Design, 1945-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Jesse LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Michael Osman, *Modernism's Visible Hand: Architecture and Regulation in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

postmodernism, as developed in *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*, as a feedback loop, distinct from the dialectical structure of modernity.¹⁹ Continually flowing back and forth between representations and structures of power, Martin examines the deep entanglements and contiguities between the elements that together constituted postmodernism. In this way, architectural representation and architectural production are described as completely inseparable. More specifically, Martin uses the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in order to stake the claim that the aesthetic experience central to postmodernism was “coterminal” with the production of buildings. It is this understanding of experience that I take as central in this dissertation. In other words, by examining the irreducibility of the combined forces of architectural production and consumption, I hope to better understand architecture’s role in the formation of the experience economy.

Within Martin’s particular treatment of the role of the client in postmodernism, he provides a specific analysis of Charles Jencks. Martin foregrounds Jencks’ reliance upon a particular description of the architectural client, an issue that he acknowledges is on “deep background,” buried within the assumptions undergirding Jencks’ work.²⁰ Jencks characterized an integration of what he called the “three systems of architectural production” meant to represent three types of clients – private individuals, public institutions and developers.²¹ According to Jencks, this divergent array of consumerism laid the groundwork out of which postmodernism could emerge. It is this variety that Martin characterizes as a diversity that expanded beyond the bounds of regulation to create what he calls a “natural economy,” organized around its own internalized homeostatic balancing.²² As such, throughout this dissertation I seek to highlight specific instances in which the client’s involvement in

¹⁹ Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

²⁰ Reinhold Martin, “Architecture’s Image Problem: Have We Ever Been Postmodern?” *Grey Room*, No. 22 (Winter 2006), p. 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

architectural production moves beyond the bounds of external regulation in order to bring production and consumption closer together.

My final scholarly due is to Sylvia Lavin. This dissertation was prepared within the ongoing context of Lavin's examination of the mythologies surrounding postmodernism.²³ In this research Lavin outlines the growing complexities of the architectural supply chain during the postmodern period. She describes the ways in which architects of the period exerted diminishing power over architectural production as they increasingly found themselves negotiating with other players and forces in the supply chain. Lavin focuses on the bureaucratic procedures of architectural work that illustrate the myriad entanglements of the architects. Within this context of bureaucratic entanglements, I examine the issue of economic deregulation and its effects, with my particular question being, what further pressure was exerted upon architects and architecture, already mired in postmodern procedural tangles, by the forces of economic deregulation?

Structure of the Dissertation

The structure of this dissertation has been conceived as a weave between the warp of economic changes and the weft of organizational strategies. In turn, the impact of these combined influences has been traced along the changing understanding of architecture's role within retail. More specifically, this dissertation focuses on the twin economic tendencies toward deregulation and vertical disintegration that undergirded the era's rising tide of conservatism. These economic tendencies have been woven through the four chapters that are each based around an organizational strategy that was central to the development of the catalog showroom, namely: policy, inventory, service and collecting. In understanding the confluence of these various factors that together gave

²³ Sylvia Lavin, "Showing Work," *Log*, No 20 (Fall 2010); *Everything Loose Will Land: 1970s Art and Architecture in Los Angeles* exhibition catalog, ed. Sylvia Lavin (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2013); Sylvia Lavin, "Oh My Aching Antenna: The Fall and Rise of Postmodern Creativity," *Log*, No 37 (Spring/Summer 2016); "Architecture Itself and Other Postmodernist Myths," exhibition, Canadian Centre for Architecture, November 2018 – April 2019.

rise to the experience economy, specifically represented here by the birth of the catalog showroom, the dissertation seeks to better understand how architecture emerged into the postmodern moment as a box.

Deregulatory policies that reoriented the American economy around consumer experience provide the ground upon which this dissertation is built. The confluence of expanding strands of conservatism across the 1970s focused on the consumer as a singular, empowered figure. This is the broader trend that animates the dissertation. The first chapter, “Policy,” describes policy changes that took place during the 1970s. These encouraged vertical disintegration of corporate organization and allowed previously suppressed areas of the supply chain to dominate. The growing role of the wholesaler in particular was exemplary of these changes. This in turn facilitated the development of the new retail format, the catalog showroom. Best Products Company, based in Richmond, Virginia, was the preeminent pioneering leader of the catalog showroom industry and serves as the primary case study for this dissertation. The newly ambiguous terrain between wholesale and retail became fertile ground for an ascendant prosumer figure. This highly competitive consumer economy led to an increased sense of uncertainty over what criteria would drive consumer selection. It was not necessarily products that were going to be distinct to the prosumer, but rather, in the words of some retail architects of the period, the “unquantifiable elements” that would distinguish one consumer experience from another.²⁴ The chapter outlines how policy rendered the consumer’s presence and their power of selection into an important but unquantifiable element within the economy.

The second chapter, “Service,” describes how changing expectations around service were endemic to the emerging experience economy. The centralization of self-service was solidified by both the organization of the architectural economy as well as the design of retail space. The underlying commonality was a tendency toward vertical disintegration within the chain of production

²⁴ Margaret Roberts and John Roberts, “Good Distribution: A New Approach,” *Official Architecture and Planning*, Vol. 33, No 1, (January 1970), p. 39.

and consumption. Increasingly, functions that had previously been linked together in continuously managed chains of production were atomized into more discrete tasks, due largely to the effects of deregulation. In the case of architectural production, for example, large corporate clients such as Best Products more easily sub-divided the process of generating architecture into tasks that were then distributed to a variety of actors, some of who were architects and some of who were not. This same vertical disintegration was similarly evident in the way self-service was designed into the retail experience, where the consumer became increasingly responsible for functions that had previously been tasked to employees. Best Products' catalog showrooms were organized to encourage the consumer to understand the shopping experience as a series of tasks. In turn, the consumer was encouraged to appreciate how they were enjoying the benefits of burrowing deeper into the supply chain.

The third chapter, "Inventory," examines how challenges associated with inventory control were central to both the efficacy of a deregulated and vertically disintegrated economy as well as to the consumer's experience of this economic order. The issue of consumer selection was pressing. Writing slightly in advance of this period in 1961, Reyner Banham described how the work of contemporary architects had gradually become the work of product selection rather than design.²⁵ In Banham's reckoning the only thing that separated these architects from middle class consumers was the architects' professionally trained discipline in selecting the most appropriate products. Knowing how to use obscure product inventories was a skill not possessed by helpless middle class consumers, claimed Banham. By the 1970s, powerful political figures such as Robert Bork were arguing effectively for antitrust deregulation on the basis that consumers were being unsatisfactorily served by poor consumer selection. In parallel, cultural commentators such as Umberto Eco claimed that the entire cultural period was characterized by familiarity and lack of novelty brought on by low levels

²⁵ Reyner Banham, "Design By Choice," [1961] *Design by Choice*, ed. Penny Sparke (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), p. 100.

of consumer choice.²⁶ One of the underlying challenges of the period was developing the technological apparatus that could render the logistics of inventory more responsive and transparent to the consumer in order to address this issue of consumer choice.

The fourth and final chapter, “Collecting,” examines a broad swell in collecting culture as an effect of the emerging experience economy. Various deregulatory policies of the period altered the economics of collecting. A wider range of collectors surfaced. With them arose a looser sense of what qualified as a collectible object. This chapter examines collecting as a form of architectural patronage within the experience economy. Best Products founders Sydney and Frances Lewis described their role as patrons of architecture as if they were collectors of buildings. Starting in the 1960s, both Lewises became voracious art collectors. The ways in which the management of their vast art collection overlapped with their building collection were significant. Category distinctions among art, décor and architecture all blurred under the shared rubric of collecting. Objects were continually being recast by collectors in different guises, shifting among these categories. This more omnivorous approach toward collecting illustrated a convergence between production and consumption. The chapter examines how this collecting culture, amplified within a growing experience economy, began to alter how the architecture of Best Products was understood.

²⁶ Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Postmodern Aesthetics,” *Daedalus* (Fall 1985).

BEST PRODUCTS COMPANY: A PRIMER

In 1956, husband and wife, Sydney and Frances Lewis established Best Products Company. The company was born from a previous business that sold mail order encyclopedias and other educational materials to schoolteachers, originally founded by Sydney Lewis' parents years earlier.¹ Sydney and Frances Lewis started the catalog mail order business in a brick warehouse on West Marshall Street in Richmond, Virginia. After distributing 5,000 copies of their inaugural sales catalog, known initially as a wholesale Buyer's Book, some local recipients began arriving at the warehouse asking to see the merchandise.² Sydney and Frances responded by creating a dedicated space for customers within their warehouse to appraise potential purchases.³ From this first warehouse location, the business expanded, and the concept of the catalog showroom developed. In subsequent locations, the Lewises continued to designate a certain amount of space at the front of the warehouse for the product showroom while the remainder of the warehouse was reserved for the organization and storage of their stock. Expansion of the company continued gradually through the 1960s, growing to five showroom locations in Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland by 1970.

From this beginning, the Lewises continually refined their influential concept of catalog showroom retailing.⁴ They described how they felt they were working within the well-established

¹ Julian and Dora Lewis, parents of Sydney Lewis, founded the New Standard Publishing Company in 1935. Julian Lewis was a Russian émigré who settled in Virginia. He died in 1958. Dora Lewis continued to work for Best Products until the 1980s. She died in 1984. SEC Registration Statement, Form S-7, Best Products Registration Statement (1979), p. 7, Best Products Archive, Folder 315, Series 1.3. This documentation was found in the Best Products Co., Inc. Records, ca. 1958-1999 (Mss3 B4648a FA2), Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter, this archive will be referred to as the Best Products Archive.

² In 1957 Best Products distributed 5,000 copies of their first catalog which consisted of a hand-collated collection of manufacturer's product sheets. "Since 1960: A History of Respect and Collaboration," *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 11 (October 1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

³ Frances Lewis said, "After the first catalog, customers started knocking on the door, which we did not expect them to do, and Mrs. Guthrie would take them to the back. First we had a couple of things, and then we had a few samples we hung in what was a warehouseman's office or something. She would take them back and open the doors and look at the few wallets, and whatever. It became apparent immediately that customers were going to want to come and see the merchandise." Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Frances Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1194, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁴ "Our customer is typically 25-65 years of age and is part of a middle to upper-middle income household earning \$15-25,000 annually." Best Products Corporate Profile, (March 24, 1980), p. 3, Best Products Archive, Folder 1370, Series 9.1.

framework of mail order retail but were transforming it by finding ways to involve the customer more directly in the process. Their pioneering innovations introduced customers to a retailing format that had previously been a largely invisible distribution system. Their approach was noticed by would-be competitors and Best Products soon became a leader in the rapidly thriving catalog showroom field. Best Products quickly expanded its scope and soon carried hard goods that ranged, in its own words, from can openers to diamond rings.⁵ Showrooms were divided into five major departments namely, toys, sporting goods, cameras and electrical merchandise, jewelry and general merchandise.⁶ The company summarized its high volume, low margin business plan as follows: “Offer a wide variety of name-brand merchandise at incredibly low prices through a huge four-color catalog; invite customers to Spartan, yet clean and attractive showrooms where each item (as many as 18,000) is displayed; encourage customer participation through sales ticket preparation; flash orders to an on-premises warehouse from which the items trundle by way of conveyor to a pick-up point; and install a system for speedy payment.”⁷ Honed through the trials of their first few locations, the Best Products showroom experience was quickly presented as an efficient and well-considered system. One employee described how, “For an average customer on an average day, purchase to exit time takes five to eight minutes. Bang, biff, whammo; sales, volume, turnover. Results: happy customers, pleased management, satisfied stockholders. Quick, neat and profitable.”⁸

After suffering health setbacks, Sydney Lewis was advised by his doctor to find some leisurely pursuits to counteract his business-related stress.⁹ Lewis landed on art collecting. With this

Additionally, Andrew described how, “My father always said, ‘Give us the masses, not the classes.’” Nancy Winter, “Best’s Better Idea,” *Richmond magazine* (May 1976), p. 32.

⁵ Best customer explanation sheet (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1277, Series 7.

⁶ “Best Products Opens Third Houston-area Showroom Today,” (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1250, Series 7.

⁷ Milton Elliott, “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business,” *Special Magazine Issue: Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business. Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 0.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 0.

newfound interest in art, the Lewises started purchasing from young un-established artists in the early 1960s. They were described as “going after the Young Turks and the cutting edge.”¹⁰ Often taking an interest in developing personal rapport directly with the artists, Sydney and Frances modeled themselves as supportive patrons who developed long-standing commitments to un-tested artists. They even nicknamed their summer house, located in Virginia Beach, Villa Medici West. Throughout the summers they would invite artists to Villa Medici West where they would rub shoulders with various architects and art world luminaries. Initially, the Lewises focused on collecting the work of emerging Pop artists, recognizing the accord between this art and their mass-market retail business. They brought these two realms together by selecting works from their private art collection to be displayed in their warehouse showrooms. They soon expanded their collecting beyond Pop Art and by the 1970s were among the most noted collectors of Art Nouveau and Art Deco objects in America.¹¹ Frances and Sydney Lewis’ art collecting climaxed with their 1985 donation of 1,500 art works to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts along with funds to help construct a new museum wing to house these Pop Art, Art Nouveau and Art Deco objects. The Lewises selected Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates to design this additional wing of the museum.

The Lewises first became connected to sculptor James Wines in the early 1960s while they were establishing their art collection.¹² Several of Wines’ sculptures and drawings were early additions to their collection.¹³ The Lewises showcased a sculpture by Wines in their home.¹⁴

⁹ Roberta Smith, “Sydney Lewis, 79, Art Collector and Patron,” *New York Times* (March 16, 1999). Frances Lewis described how Sydney suffered a heart attack and was subsequently advised by his doctor to take up a hobby. Every year the Lewises would travel to Chicago for an annual meeting with other catalog showroom businesses. While in Chicago they began visiting art galleries where they purchased their first piece of art. See: Fred Brandt filmed interview with Frances Lewis. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Collection. 2001. Accessed October 23, 2018. <https://www.vmfa.museum/piction/11617470-110658703/>

¹⁰ Fred Brandt filmed interview with Frances Lewis, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Collection, 2001, accessed October 23, 2018. <https://www.vmfa.museum/piction/11617470-110658703/>

¹¹ Smith, “Sydney Lewis, 79, Art Collector and Patron.”

¹² James Wines was born in 1932 in Oak Park, Illinois. He graduated from Towson High School in Maryland in 1951. He studied sculpture at Syracuse University with Ivan Mestrovic and was a practicing sculptor from 1955 until 1968. “‘Architecture-Environment’ by Wines at ISU and Swope,” *Terre-Haute Tribune Star* (February 11, 1979).

Interested in shifting away from his sculptural practice and expanding his activities into the scale and scope of architecture, Wines founded his collective Sculpture in the Environment, known more generally as SITE, in 1970. Wines led SITE alongside architect Emilio Sousa, writer Alison Sky and photographer Michelle Stone.¹⁵ Upon its founding Sydney Lewis accepted Wines' invitation to serve as a member of SITE's inaugural Board of Directors.¹⁶ For three years Wines engaged in discussion with and made proposals to Sydney and Frances Lewis, requesting an opportunity to intervene upon Best Products buildings with his public art concepts.¹⁷ In 1972, with the assurance that his proposal would cost no more than \$25,000, Sydney and Frances Lewis, along with their son Andrew Lewis, the company's Vice President, commissioned SITE to renovate one of their Richmond showrooms¹⁸ that was described as an "unassuming brick building."¹⁹ The Lewises decided that it would be acceptable for SITE to use the equivalent of one per cent of a typical showroom construction budget. In this way, the Lewises told SITE that they had decided to equate their intervention with the National Endowment for the Arts' "one percent for art" program.²⁰ After the first proposal for a "floating" brick roof built on transparent mullions was vetoed because it would require the temporary and costly closing of the showroom during construction, an alternate plan that only intervened upon

¹³ A receipt from the Leo Castelli Gallery indicated that the Lewises purchased a James Wines drawing. (1964-1969), Lewis Archive, Folder 388, Series 3.2. Additionally, insurance receipts from 1968-1970 indicate that the Lewises owned several James Wines drawings and one sculpture entitled "Yahoo" bought between 1968 and 1970. Lewis Archive, Folder 400, Series 3.3. This documentation was found in the Sydney and Frances Lewis papers, ca. 1950-2003 (Mss1 L5888 b FA2), Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter, this archive will be referred to as the Lewis Archive.

¹⁴ Connie Lauerman, "Peeling Away Façade Reveals Humorous Side of Architecture," *Chicago Tribune* (February 2, 1977).

¹⁵ Emilio Sousa was born in Spain in 1944 where he trained to be an architect. He subsequently worked with Buckminster Fuller. Before joining SITE, he had designed several ski resorts. Alison Sky was born in New York City and was trained in art and literature. Michelle Stone was born in 1944 and studied sociology and photography at New York University.

¹⁶ Letter from Sydney Lewis to James Wines to accept an invitation to join the first Board of Directors of S.I.T.E. (July 3, 1970), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹⁷ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines & Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 571, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

¹⁸ Peeling Façade cost BEST \$25,000. "Onto the Right Side of the Tracks," *Financial World*. (June 1, 1980), p. 44.

¹⁹ Robert Merritt, "Marriage From Fairyland But is SITE Show Art?," *Richmond Times Dispatch* (June 15, 1980).

²⁰ Michael McDonough, "The Greene Street Mafia: Remembering SITE and Soho in the mid-1970s," *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group PTY LTD, 2005), p. 18.

the façade was approved.²¹ SITE designed the addition of two curving brick segments to either side of the front façade. The two new arching segments gave the impression that the entire brick façade was beginning to peel away. Customer response to the Peeling Façade was immediate. Best Products' sales volume quickly escalated.²² SITE's second project for Best Products was the Indeterminate Façade completed in 1975. Unlike the previous renovation project, this was a ground-up, purpose-built showroom in Houston, Texas. It was opened with great promotional fanfare. The ribbon cutting grand opening ceremony became a theatrical event when a helicopter flew in to unveil the building that had been kept hidden from view behind giant swaths of canvas.²³ The design featured the spectacular illusion of a ton of bricks breaking through the façade, tumbling down and piling up near the front entrance.²⁴ Again Sydney Lewis reassured the wary Best Products Board of Directors that the publicity generated by "the initial reaction to the special design" would more than justify the additional three per cent construction cost for SITE's intervention.²⁵ Much of the publicity generated in local newspapers featured variations of anecdotes about Houston citizens either incredulous or distraught, calling the local Houston Building Commission to report serious damage to the building.²⁶ At least some of these concerned citizens must have returned to shop. One Best Products spokesman declared of the special showroom designs that, "People come to photograph them and wind up buying."²⁷ As further reassurance, Best Products calculated that the showrooms designed by SITE generated five to thirty per cent more sales than their more conventional

²¹ See Figure 0.7 for an illustration of SITE's unbuilt proposal of the "Floating Roof" design.

²² "Onto the Right Side of the Tracks," *Financial World* (June 1, 1980), p. 44.

²³ Lauerman, "Peeling Away Façade Reveals Humorous Side of Architecture."

²⁴ *Best Times* newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

²⁵ Best Products Board of Directors meeting minutes (April 24, 1975), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 167, Series 1.1.

²⁶ Lauerman, "Peeling Away Façade Reveals Humorous Side of Architecture."

²⁷ "Unusual Stores Sell Best," *Chicago Tribune* (September 21, 1981).

counterparts.²⁸ Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, SITE continued to work on buildings for Best Products. In total nine of SITE's numerous proposals for Best Products were built in locations across the United States.²⁹

The 1970s heralded a period of exponential growth for Best Products. One business journal referred to Best Products as “the leading catalog showroom chain – and one of the brightest stars in the retailing galaxy.”³⁰ In 1970, the company became the first publicly held catalog showroom business.³¹ Four years later they were listed on the New York Stock Exchange.³² The intoxicating mixture of a low margin mail order business model, the accuracy of an innovative inventory control system, the low advertising budget that relied upon the catalog and the architecture to promote the business, as well as the minimal overhead of a showroom designed to operate with relatively few salesclerks saw their profits skyrocket. During the 1970s the catalog-showroom industry, of which Best Products was the national leader, grew at an average annual rate of twenty per cent.³³ Wall Street began to take notice.³⁴ In 1970 *Barron's* financial review outlined how, “the cut-rate catalog business promises to become the hottest thing in retailing ...”³⁵ Best Products further intensified this momentum by rapidly investing their profits in the construction of new showrooms, significantly

²⁸ Martin Baron, “Best Products Enters Florida Market,” *Miami Herald* (October 13, 1979).

²⁹ There were nine built SITE designs for Best Products showrooms: “Peeling Façade” (Richmond, Virginia, 1972), “Indeterminate Façade” (Houston, Texas, 1975); “Notch Building” (Sacramento, California 1977); “Tilt Wall” (Towson, Maryland, 1978); “Rainforest Building” (Hialeah, Florida, 1979); “Anti-Sign” (Ashland, Virginia, 1979); “Fractional Façade” which was sometimes also referred to as the “Cutler Ridge Building,” (Miami, Florida, 1979); “Forest Building (Richmond, Virginia, 1980); “Inside/Outside Building” (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1984). Additionally, there was SITE's design for “The Twist” (Quakerbridge, New Jersey, 1981). The Quakerbridge showroom was begun but not fully completed to SITE's original design. SITE does not claim the building in their list of work.

³⁰ “Onto the Right Side of the Tracks,” *Financial World* (June 1, 1980), p. 44.

³¹ Andrew Lewis, “Re-Examining the Business,” memo distributed to corporate officers (May 14, 1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 315, Series 1.3.

³² *Best Times* newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition, (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

³³ “Onto the Right Side of the Tracks,” *Financial World*, (June 1, 1980), p. 44.

³⁴ Dan Fesperman, “How Florida's Catalog Showrooms Stack Up,” *Miami Herald* (April 12, 1982), p. 1.

³⁵ “Tracing the Evolution of the Retail Catalog,” *Best Times* newsletter (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

increasing the volume of their enterprise. By 1978 Best Products had annual sales of over half a billion dollars with sixty-two different locations spread across California, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia.³⁶ Remarkably only three years later, Best Products had doubled their annual sales to reach the billion-dollar mark. Eventually Best Products would have more than two hundred showrooms in twenty-seven states with annual sales of two billion dollars.³⁷

While Best Products had initially developed their locations by inserting their showrooms within existing warehouses and related facilities, during the 1970s they increasingly began to turn to new construction. They developed their own corporate construction division, the Real Estate and Facilities Development Department, responsible for a showroom prototype design that was then adjusted and implemented according to local conditions. This department also worked with architects who were occasionally given special commissions to re-design the façade of their prototypical box. In 1979 Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown designed a gigantic floral graphic rendered as porcelain enamel on steel panels at the Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania location. The oversized floral motif, described by Robert Venturi as “pretty,” had been inspired by the wallpaper pattern “Matin” that had been designed by Paule Marrot – a wallpaper which decorated Venturi and Scott Brown’s own bedroom.³⁸ However, by far the majority of Best Products locations followed the more conventional prototypical design that was described by the company as “square, windowless boxes.”³⁹ These were completed largely within the internal purview of their Real Estate and Facilities Development Department. By 1980 only nine of Best Products’ eighty-eight showrooms had been built with

³⁶ “Best Turns 21,” report to employees (1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 761, Series 4.1.

³⁷ Smith, “Sydney Lewis, 79, Art Collector and Patron.”

³⁸ Best Products promotional pamphlet (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1. A description of the original wallpaper design can also be found here: David B. Brownlee, “Form and Content,” *Out of the Ordinary: The Architecture and Design of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Associates* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), p. 213.

³⁹ Ibid.

“bizarre facades.”⁴⁰ That same year company President Andrew Lewis stated that, “The specially designed outlets are about five per cent more expensive than the normal buildings to build, and they have to justify the extra cost – part of the architect’s challenge is to come up with something that I’ll think worthwhile. But so far, all of the buildings with these designs have turned out to be among our most successful.”⁴¹ The special façades generated significant publicity for the company. Best Products described how its bold use of architecture expanded their audience and their business simultaneously. In one press release, the company stated, “And what about the customer? It seems that for many people, the Best Products showrooms are the first time they ever thought about architecture at all and confronted such questions as why walls are straight or flat or not straight or not flat. It is no small accomplishment to capture the attention of today’s busy consumers and introduce them to new ideas. And if the sight of trees growing inside the outer walls of the building puts them in a spending mood, so much the better.”⁴² This expanded audience, enticed by the architecture, extended beyond Best Products customers. In 1979 the Museum of Modern Art held the exhibition “Buildings for Best Products” wherein museum curator Arthur Drexler selected six leading architects of the day to design hypothetical façades for the corporation.⁴³ These architects, described by Philip Johnson as “the bravest,” were Anthony Lumsden, Michael Graves, Allan Greenberg, Stanley Tigerman, Charles Moore and Robert Stern.⁴⁴

Given the company’s rapid expansion throughout the 1970s, Best Products hired Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Architects (HHPA) to design a new corporate headquarters building in Richmond,

⁴⁰ Sarah Booth Conroy, “Blueprints for Building Fantasies,” *Washington Post* (November 9, 1980).

⁴¹ “Onto the Right Side of the Tracks,” *Financial World* (June 1, 1980), p. 45.

⁴² “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business,” *Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 11.

⁴³ James Wines’ reaction to the Museum of Modern Art exhibition was as follows: “At first we were upset with the show. It seemed we were merely being used as a kind of backdrop for five or six big names, some of them our biggest detractors. But the fact that all the architects seemed to miss our point – of taking the obvious and inverting it – showed that what we do is special.” Phil Patton, “The Madcap Buildings of Best Products,” *United Mainliner Magazine* (February 1981), p. 82.

⁴⁴ “Architecture Can be Humorous,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 28, 1980).

Virginia to accommodate their growing staff. By the time the first phase of this building was completed in 1980, the company was already beginning to feel the headwind effects of the general economic recession of the early 1980s. The company would struggle to overcome this economic setback for the remainder of the decade. After having just completed a series of high-risk acquisitions, the overextended Best Products entered this economic downturn at a particularly perilous time. Additionally, continued regulatory challenges related to price protection policies, growing territorial competition among the expanding sector of catalog showroom retail and more general shifts toward greater specialization in retail all contributed to the slowing of Best Products' previously astonishing, momentous growth.

By the mid-1980s, the Lewis family was increasingly stepping away from the management of the company, particularly after Andrew Lewis resigned as president in 1984.⁴⁵ Sydney Lewis had stepped down as president in 1976 in favor of his son but had remained closely involved alongside Frances Lewis. They both served on the Board of Directors during this time. A long sequence of drawn out and complex bankruptcy proceedings gradually drained the company until it completely closed in 1997. The decline of Best Products mirrored the larger waning of the catalog showroom format more generally, with business reporter Debra Hazel noting in 1997 that, "Conventional wisdom says that the catalog showroom format is dead."⁴⁶ The catalog showroom phenomenon had a short but spectacular history. At its peak, the industry only accounted for around six per cent of national retail sales, but despite this, the curious new retail type generated outsized attention.⁴⁷ One

⁴⁵ Andrew Lewis resigned as president in 1984 and then resigned as chairman and chief executive officer in 1987. Robert Huntley became the first company president who was not a member of the Lewis family in 1984. Huntley had been a Best Products board member for 12 years and was former president of Washington and Lee University. Best HQ Fact Sheet (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1277, Series 7.

⁴⁶ Debra Hazel, "Resurrecting the Catalog Showroom," *Chain Store Age*, Vol. 73, Issue 11 (November 1997).

⁴⁷ Best Products Flyer Advertising for Management Personnel (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

business analyst noted that, “probably no other retail concept has generated as much initial excitement among retailers and merchandise suppliers or has fallen into disfavor quite as quickly.”⁴⁸

This dissertation lays out the remarkable history of the rapid rise and fall of Best Products Company, its intrepid founders Sydney and Frances Lewis, and the catalog showroom retail format that they pioneered. The Best Products story forms the context within which the relationship between architecture and the genesis of the experience economy is analyzed.

⁴⁸ Albert Bates, “Warehouse Retailing: A Revolutionary Force in Distribution?,” *California Management Review*, Vol. 20, Issue 2 (December 1, 1977), p. 74.

BRICKS AND MORTAR: A PREAMBLE

“I can’t figure it out. They’ve been building it up and tearing it down for six months ... now you tell me it’s finished!” exclaimed one distraught Houston citizen.¹ The grand opening in 1975 of SITE’s Indeterminate Façade Best Products showroom was devised for this type of reaction. “The building that King Kong seems to have stepped on ...” featured a cascade of bricks tumbling down the fractured façade, piling up on the entrance canopy.² Wide-ranging press coverage delightedly relayed stories about distressed citizens calling the Houston Building Department to report the building’s collapse.³ But perhaps the more telling anecdote that emerged from the coverage was James Wines’ commentary on the production process behind the creation of this brick cascade. Wines incredulously described to one journalist how, “When we sent the plans to the contractor, he wanted to know how many bricks were in the ‘avalanche.’ That was like asking how many beans are in the jar? I had no idea: so I made a wild guess. That wasn’t nearly enough. So we added some more.”⁴ It turns out that SITE needed to do much more than guess at the number of bricks. SITE was ultimately required, in the words of Wines, “to give them a rendering in half scale that showed the placement of the bricks in the brick mound, brick by brick! So we had this huge drawing before we could even start!”⁵

While Wines was blithely launching visual jabs at the extraneous state of brick veneer construction, tensions around its production reveal just how unstable underlying processes had become in the face of a fluctuating economy. This preamble about bricks offers the opportunity to

¹ James Wines, *De-Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987).

² C. Ray Smith, “Surrealism Comes to Shop Center,” *The Village Voice* (March 15, 1976).

³ “The Ambiguity and Craftsmanship of ‘De-Architecture’,” *International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen*. (May 1978), p. 16.

⁴ Barbara Green, “Flights of Fancy,” *Richmond News Leader* (June 24, 1980).

⁵ David Robbins, “SITE,” *Interview, New York* (September 1980).

outline the broader argument developed in more detail in this dissertation. More specifically, as economic conditions became increasingly deregulated, systems of architectural production were subject to greater vertical disintegration. One resultant effect was the widening range of professionals and stakeholders thrust into more demanding roles of responsibility alongside architects, causing architects to work within an expanding system of production. This preamble lays out ways in which the brick industry exerted their influence upon the production of the Indeterminate Façade. Similarly, this preamble describes the high level of involvement of the client, as they accepted exposure to increased liability to facilitate this unusual use of brick.

SITE

To begin with, SITE's approach toward building authorities reveals the firm's implicit understanding of the broader changes that were reshaping architecture. SITE developed a tactic in response to municipal building authorities that often emphasized the limited range of their own expertise in relation to a broader field of related professionals. SITE highlighted the compartmentalized quality of their contributions to the Indeterminate Façade project in a way that reflected the broader trend towards vertical disintegration that animated the experience economy. James Wines dramatized SITE's relationship with municipal building authorities by describing them as "the enemy."⁶ Wines characterized municipal regulations as damning, stating, "architecture, as I would say, is the least charismatic and interesting of the arts because of all the restrictions."⁷ He described becoming frustrated, "because you're batting your head against bureaucracies and things

⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines and Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 579, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁷ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines and Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 573, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

like that.”⁸ In another instance, Wines decried, “You have to crawl in under the door, almost unnoticed, to get anything done, because you might alert someone in the Building Department that you’re trying to do something unusual, and then everything stops.”⁹ As a coping mechanism, some of the bureaucratic characteristics that frustrated the group were eventually incorporated into SITE’s own operations. SITE chose to emphasize the divisions and delegations within the building process as a way to spread authority and responsibility among numerous parties. To this end, Wines described how, “we have developed all sorts of circuitous systems to show only parts of ideas at each presentation.”¹⁰ Similarly, Wines asserted how, “There’s plenty of book knowledge we don’t have. Structurally, the real responsibility is whether buildings are going to stand up or fall down. We leave that to engineers.”¹¹ In another instance, Wines stressed that his ideas were “unbelievably difficult to execute,” and therefore required significant contributions from other experts.¹² Emilio Sousa took the same approach when he emphasized the indispensable role the bricklayers played in completing SITE’s designs. To this end, Sousa described his desire to imbue them with greater agency when working on challenging brick projects such as the Indeterminate Façade. “The only way to get these buildings up is to get the workers committed and involved, to get them to put their pride on the line.”¹³

⁸ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines and Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 574, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁹ David Robbins, “SITE,” *Interview, New York* (September 1980).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Patricia Roberts, “SITE: For Sore Eyes,” *ALOFT Magazine* (March 1980), p. 19.

¹² Connie Lauerman, “Peeling Away Façade Reveals Humorous Side of Architecture,” *Chicago Tribune* (February 2, 1977).

¹³ Roberts, “SITE: For Sore Eyes,” p. 20.

Mortar

By design, the Indeterminate Façade was meant to appear as if the brickwork had failed, the mortar being inadequate for the task. However, in order to sustain this illusion, the mortar in this case was unusually strong. The Houston Building Department expressed alarm when they first received the permit application. They were particularly concerned about how this unorthodox assembly might fare in the event of a not uncommon hurricane. After consultation, it was agreed that the design would be approved on two conditions, that the mortar needed to be stronger than the brick itself and the whole assembly needed to be satisfactorily tested in a wind tunnel.¹⁴ Pearland Masonry Contractors, with their ten-man bricklaying team ready to take on the challenge, assured that they would utilize an epoxy mortar.¹⁵ They then produced a brick assembly sample that was sent for testing. From this testing, it was ascertained that the brick cascade could withstand winds up to 165 miles per hour.¹⁶ All parties were satisfied that if a hurricane swept through, the Best Products showroom might well be obliterated, but the epoxied brick cascade would remain.¹⁷ The Houston Building Department duly issued the building permit.

The evolution of masonry mortars is a story framed within a largely self-regulated and closely guarded industry. Proprietary protection of the precise formulations of masonry mortars had long been guarded as a trade secret. Historian Thomas Leslie characterized the masonry industry as having been guided by deeply internalized knowledge. Leslie described how the complexity of the required engineering calculations for masonry construction, especially during the nineteenth century, meant “masonry design and calculation remained firmly entrenched in conservative, experience-based rule-

¹⁴ Vernon Mays, “The Many Faces of Brick,” *Progressive Architecture*, Vol. 69, No 7 (July 1988), p. 107.

¹⁵ The masonry contractors were Pearland Masonry Contractors. Ernest Clay, President of the company took charge of the Indeterminate Façade project with his ten men crew of bricklayers that included Max Cochran, Nick Koing and Bob Brown. They spent thirty days working on the Indeterminate Façade brick cascade. Best Products press release on opening of Houston showroom (September 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 1250, Series 7.

¹⁶ Walter Herman, “Best Products ‘Tilts’ New Showroom,” *The News American – Baltimore* (May 28, 1978).

¹⁷ Best Products press release on opening of Houston showroom (September 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 1250, Series 7.

of-thumb methods.”¹⁸ The brick industry was profoundly changed when Joseph Aspdin patented Portland Cement in Great Britain in 1824, which by the 1890s was in widespread use in masonry mortars.¹⁹ Before this particular formulation was patented, masons had been particularly notorious for unscrupulous behavior, covertly altering the quantities and qualities of lime and water in their mortar to allow for cost savings that inevitably lead to rapid deterioration.²⁰ Even after the introduction of the precisely patented and fast-curing hydraulic Portland Cement, masons still typically mixed Portland Cement with their own preferred ratio of additional lime putty.²¹ Gradually through the early twentieth century, increasing standardization of the masonry industry began to emerge, particularly as the industry continued to grapple with the significant new challenge of marrying masonry cladding with steel-frame construction. Industry-developed details were publicized in reference books such as *Architectural Graphic Standards* that had been written in consultation with their construction-industry partners such as the National Terra Cotta Manufacturers Association, the Indiana Limestone Company, and the Structural Clay Products Institute.²² However, in the face of this shift away from load-bearing masonry construction and toward masonry cladding, the industry still maintained significant autonomy from architectural oversight. In fact, some argued that once masons were freed from the responsibility of creating a building’s primary structure, and were now focused upon cladding, the industry became even more invested in developing internalized standards of workmanship. Structural engineer Kendall Freitag observed in his 1909 book, *Architectural Engineering*, “Less is now required of the brick or masonry wall as a supporting

¹⁸ Thomas Leslie, “‘Built Mostly of Itself’: The Chicago Brick Industry and the Masonry Skyscraper in the Late 19th Century,” *Construction History*, Vol. 25 (2010), p. 71.

¹⁹ Richard Ortega, “Masonry Cladding of Iron and Steel Frame Buildings, 1880-1940: A Destructive Relationship,” *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology*, Vol. 43, No 4 (2012), p. 27.

²⁰ Thomas Leslie, “‘Built Mostly of Itself’: The Chicago Brick Industry,” p. 70.

²¹ Filip Van Rickstal, “Grout Injection of Masonry,” dissertation, KU Leuven (2000), p. 9.

²² Ortega, “Masonry Cladding of Iron and Steel Frame Buildings, 1880-1940: A Destructive Relationship,” p. 25.

member... much more is now demanded of it as to quality and perfection of workmanship ...”²³ In a similar vein, an instructional manual published in 1929 by Edmund George Warland, *Modern Practical Masonry*, emphasized to masons that the responsibility of interpreting unspecific architectural drawings and determining stone layouts fell to them.²⁴

Epoxy Mortars

One significant development within the masonry industry during the twentieth century was the introduction of synthetic epoxy resin mortars. The expansive capabilities of these epoxy mortars allowed the masonry industry to further their own autonomy as a construction discipline. The condensation of epoxides had been first reported and patented by chemist Paul Schlack of Germany in 1934 who was then employed at IG Farben.²⁵ Over the following decades, epoxy adhesives were increasingly applied to masonry construction, primarily in restoration work. Injected into weakened masonry, epoxy adhesives could effectively penetrate and strengthen crumbling historical buildings. By the early 1970s, on the eve of the postmodern period, brick veneer assemblies were increasingly being pushed to an apex of thinness while simultaneously being subjected to higher performance expectations around moisture penetration. At this point, the use of epoxy within masonry construction began to spread beyond restoration work and into new construction.²⁶ Manufacturers increasingly began creating a wide variety of complex proprietary formulations of masonry cements that included different epoxy resins. One instructional article from 1975 noted this growing range of proprietary formulas available for new construction. “A third type of mortar is ‘patent’ or masonry cement, which consists of Portland cement, limestone, gypsum and other materials premixed and

²³ Ortega, “Masonry Cladding of Iron and Steel Frame Buildings, 1880-1940: A Destructive Relationship,” p. 27.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁵ P. Schlack, I.G. Farbenindustrie, German Patent 676 117 (1938), US Patent 2 136 928 (1938).

²⁶ Michael Sheffler, “Thin-Stone Veneer Building Facades: Evolution and Preservation,” *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology*, Vol. 32, No 1, (2001): pp. 27-34.

bagged for convenience. Many manufacturers offer this masonry cement in a wide range of colors with color charts and bars to aid the customer.”²⁷ One effect of this vast new range of proprietary epoxy mortars meant that projected performance could not always clearly be ascertained by regulated standards, leading building authorities to often request sample testing as a means to prove adequate performance.

The Houston Building Department expressed relief when it became clear that an epoxy mortar would be used to adhere the Indeterminate Façade’s cascading bricks together. The general contractor, Conceptual Building Systems of Dallas assured the Building Department that their masons had confirmed that they would mix the epoxy additive at a ratio at least three times higher than a comparable mortar formulation.²⁸ One of the managers from Conceptual Building Systems similarly reassured Best Products officials that the mason’s formulation of the epoxy mortar would ensure that, “The mortar is stronger than the brick itself.”²⁹ It was estimated that this particular mixture of the epoxy would yield “a two hundred per cent safety factor.”³⁰ However, this assurance alone was still not entirely adequate for the Houston Building Department. Unsure of how exactly this altered mortar mix would perform, they insisted on sending a test sample down to the NASA wind tunnel testing facility on Cape Kennedy.³¹ Only once the mason’s particular mixture of preferred proprietary epoxy mortar had been run through simulations of a hurricane experience was the Houston Building Department willing to give their approval.

²⁷ James Cheston Thomas, “Restoring Brick and Stone: Some Dos and Don’ts” *History News*, Vol. 30 No 1 (January 1975).

²⁸ Best Products press release on opening of Houston showroom (September 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 1250, Series 7.

²⁹ Best Products press release on opening of Houston showroom (September 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 1250, Series 7.

³⁰ Bruno Zevi and Pierre Restany, *SITE – Architecture as Art* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), p. 26.

³¹ Connie Lauerman, “Peeling Away Façade Reveals Humorous Side of Architecture,” *Chicago Tribune* (February 2, 1977).

The Client and Financing

The second major production challenge associated with creating the Indeterminate Façade's brick cascade related to the role of the client. Emilio Sousa noted that, "Prospective clients tend to get scared when they see our drawings."³² In the case of the Indeterminate Façade it seems that the Lewises were less scared than the banks that were indeed quite alarmed. Typically, Best Products would seek and obtain financing before proceeding with a significant construction project. It often fell to company president Andrew Lewis to discuss the specifics of their construction plans with potential lenders. Lewis described how the banks often balked at the prospect of unusual architecture, saying "The financiers want to know what they will do with contemporary architecture buildings if we go broke."³³ After examining the Indeterminate Façade drawings and hearing Lewis' pitch, the Houston bank "refused to finance the crumbling wall showroom."³⁴ Instead, the Lewises were forced to devise an alternative way to finance the construction themselves.³⁵ In this case, the client stepped into the regulatory impasse in order to move the architectural production forward.

In summary, as regulatory standards were being tested, a wide array of participants each with divergent expertise introduced a range of production processes to architecture that pushed beyond the limits of regulation. This preamble is intended as a brief introductory anecdote meant to highlight the underlying argument of this dissertation. The experience economy, premised upon deregulation, was rendering production processes less cohesive. As a result, producers and consumers were brought closer together. For architecture, this often meant that the production of a building became an integral part of its consumption. This phenomenon is further illustrated by the Indeterminate Façade's

³² Patricia Roberts, "SITE: For Sore Eyes," *ALOFT Magazine* (March 1980), p. 20.

³³ Kay Dunlap Veazey, "An Industry Whose Time Has Come," *The South Magazine* (August 1979), p. 30.

³⁴ Geoffrey McNaly, "Tilted Façade Design to Highlight Best's Baltimore Mall Location," *Catalog Showroom Business* (July 1978).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

intended effect of leaving an incredulous Houston citizen exclaiming, “I can’t figure it out. They’ve been building it up and tearing it down for six months ... now you tell me it’s finished!”³⁶

³⁶ James Wines, *De-Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987).

CHAPTER 1

Policy

No one expected the pegboards in the boiler room to be the genesis of a new retail format. It was 1957 and Sydney and Frances Lewis had just begun using a small three thousand square foot brick warehouse in Richmond, Virginia to store the boxes of merchandise they were receiving from school and office supply manufacturers. They had scarcely begun distributing their mail order catalogs to nearby businesses and institutions and were readying themselves to collect orders when customers started turning up at their warehouse door.¹ Knocking with the catalog in hand, these visitors wanted to see the merchandise. Frances Lewis described how, “We expected mail orders and instead we got people.”² Sydney Lewis described an early visitor who, “wanted to see a few things, so we literally broke the box and took the items out of the box for them to see.”³ Soon they, “had people lined up outside the building, because we just didn’t have any place for them inside.”⁴ A few weeks later, after deciding, “it was getting impossible to take people into the warehouse and open cartons all the time,” they created a dedicated display space within the warehouse.⁵ They moved their warehouse manager out of his tiny eighty square foot makeshift office located in the boiler room and used pegboard on the walls to hang unwrapped sample products.⁶ Frances Lewis recalled visitors coming through the inadvertent customer entrance, by saying, “I clearly remember when customers

¹ Anonymous, Oral History transcript, interview with Sydney and Frances Lewis (March 9, 1993), p. 12, Best Products Archive, Folder 1623, Series 5.5.

² Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Frances Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1198, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

³ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Sydney Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1171, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1171.

⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with anonymous customer (September 11, 1981), p. 546, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

came through that door, a gust of wind would come in and everything would fly.”⁷ One early employee compared these initial customers to patrons shiftily entering an illicit speakeasy, caught in a transgressive act.⁸

As the Lewises barreled toward the peak of their first Christmas shopping rush, they decided to expand the improvised display space beyond the boiler room into the warehouse’s cavernous storage space. Their new catalog showroom retail format began.⁹ Mail order had already been established as a retail format in America for close to a century, but this was a new variation. Now the customer could study the catalog at home, come to the showroom to inspect the object and then walk away with the product in hand. Customers were demanding an environment where they would be allowed to touch the objects that they had previously only seen in the pages of the catalog. A customer interviewed in a Best Products showroom summarized this desire by saying, “I’m one who believes in feeling the merchandise, to put it bluntly. I kind of like the whole atmosphere. You can see at a glance what you want and you can tell pretty much what the quality is. You don’t have to look at it on a piece of paper, in a catalog, through a glass case or something like that. You can actually hold it.”¹⁰

The fact that customers were asking to be let into the warehouse in order to examine wholesale merchandise was extraordinary. It represented a profound shift in American consumer culture. The underlying economics of this moment were characterized by broad deregulation. Policies that had previously protected producers were eroding in favor of consumers. Protectionist price controls, increasingly understood as unwanted impediments that harmed consumers, were

⁷ “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business,” *Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 2.

⁸ “Growing From One Showroom to One Hundred,” *Best Times newsletter, 25th Anniversary Issue* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁹ “Best Products Company – The Industry’s First Billion Dollar Baby,” *Industry’s Merchandising Publication* (November 1981), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

¹⁰ Elliott, Oral History project, interview with anonymous customer (September 11, 1982), p. 515, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

widely challenged. This chapter examines how deregulation created the conditions under which the catalog showroom format could emerge and thrive.

Experience Economy

Alvin Toffler first coined the term “experience industry” in his 1970 book *Future Shock*, in which he observed how a new industry was being created by interrelated systemic changes taking place in the American economy. Toffler identified two main areas of change, the diminishing status of manufacturing and the expanding role of the consumer. In his prescription, the shriveling manufacturing sector would need to shift ever closer to the consumer end of the supply chain in order to maintain any semblance of relevance. Toffler forecast that this rapprochement would create a fusion that would become the experience industry. After Toffler first introduced the term experience industry in 1970 it would take a further twelve years for it to begin to emerge in consumer marketing literature. In 1982 marketing researchers Morris Holbrook and Elizabeth Hirschman published an influential article in which they first characterized the related concept of the “shopping experience.”¹¹ Subsequently, throughout the 1980s and 1990s marketing researchers voraciously developed the concept of the retail experience, culminating in the writing of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, whose book *The Experience Economy* would give the concept broad recognition.¹² Within the research that developed on the subject, there was a varied understanding of what constituted the shopping experience. However, much of the marketing literature supported an understanding of the experience economy as based upon a ludic and hedonistic retail environment that merged leisure with the work

¹¹ Blandine Anteblian, Marc Filser and Claire Roederer. “Consumption Experience in retail Environments: A Literature Review,” *Research and Applications in Marketing*, Vol. 28, No 3 (October 2013).

¹² James Gilmore and Joseph Pine II first gained broad recognition for their rendition of the experience economy in their article, “Welcome to the Experience Economy,” *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 76, No 4 (July-August 1998), pp. 97-105. They subsequently expanded upon the idea with their widely read book, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

of shopping.¹³ There was a tendency toward analyzing how immersive sensorial retail environments dramatized the labor of shopping as a recreational activity.¹⁴ In such a reading of the experience economy, the product could be sidelined by the far more overwhelming and significant experience environment. Broadly speaking, the environment itself became the consumable item. In Pine and Gilmore's most repeated example the primary object of consumption was not the cup of coffee, but rather the rich ambience within the coffee shop.¹⁵ This ambient environmental approach toward the experience economy was absorbed into the architectural vocabulary of architects such as Jon Jerde during the 1990s who described his work as "experiential design."¹⁶ However, this dissertation is instead focused upon the earlier period in the development of the experience economy, before it became a widely discussed area of marketing research. In this nascent moment, the focus had not yet switched from the product to the environment around it. Instead, in its infancy, the experience economy focused more narrowly upon the act of selection during a consumer's encounter with a product. In this scenario, architecture was not yet conceived of as an immersive environment but rather as a proxy for a product's packaging – a box.

The roots of Toffler's early description of the experience industry consumer can be traced back to the emergence of the citizen-consumer during the New Deal of the 1930s. This was a movement in which consumers were encouraged to express their ideology and contribute to the betterment of society through their purchasing power.¹⁷ Consumerism was less about acquisition and more about the power of selecting a certain product as a way to impact production. This formulation of the citizen-consumer reached its greatest application with the post-war Marshall Plan. Historians

¹³ Anteblian, Filser and Roederer, "Consumption Experience in Retail Environments: A Literature Review."

¹⁴ Ganesh Iyer and Dmitri Kuksov, "Competition in Consumer Shopping Experience," *Marketing Science*, Vol. 31, No 6 (November-December 2012), p. 917.

¹⁵ James Gilmore and Joseph Pine II, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁶ Ann Bergren, "Jon Jerde and the Architecture of Pleasure," *Assemblage*, No 37 (December 1998), pp. 8-35.

¹⁷ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

of the Marshall Plan have described this post-war period as fundamentally transformative to consumer culture.¹⁸ In America this marked the ascendance of the consumer ideology *consumo ergo sum*, in which the citizen had been completely reconfigured as a consumer.¹⁹ In the post-war period, American consumerism was increasingly defined by the ability of a virtuous individual consumer to use their purchasing power as a check on public vices. This marked a complete inversion of the eighteenth century “consumer revolution” in which consumption patterns had been understood to have an ameliorative effect upon private vice.²⁰ Within the postwar consumer ideology, the act of product selection was deemed particularly charged in that the links between consumption and production had been made so politically explicit and consequential.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the issue of consumer selection and choice remained dominant. Empowered consumers were encouraged to gain access to comparative product information in order to make more informed selections. Various consumer testing groups emerged as the vanguard of this new consumer empowerment movement. By 1969 there were multiple thriving consumer organizations dedicated to comparative product testing in the United States.²¹ In conjunction, comparative testing magazines rapidly arose to address this demand. *Consumer Reports* became the most prominent such magazine by the end of the 1960s.²² Similarly, *Readers Digest* regularly featured a section devoted to consumer education.²³ These, and other related publications, presented comparative consumer testing as a form of scientific analysis. The statistics of scientists and engineers were translated into layperson’s terms to help the consumer reconnect with products as

¹⁸ Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judd, “Introduction,” *Getting and Spending*, ed. Susan Strasser and Charles McGovern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5.

¹⁹ Sheryl Kroen, “Political History of the Consumer,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 47, No 3 (September 2004).

²⁰ Matthew Hilton, “The Fable of the Sheep, or, Private Virtues, Public Vices: The Consumer Revolution of the Twentieth Century,” *Past & Present*, No 176 (August 2002).

²¹ Matthew Hilton, “The Death of a Consumer Society,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 18 (2008), p. 218.

²² Hilton, “The Death of a Consumer Society,” p. 218.

²³ Helen Potter, “Consumers’ Freedom of Choice,” *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 28, No 1 (March 1970).

evaluators. One such consumer magazine stated that their goal was to create “more discriminating consumers.”²⁴ Similarly, *Which?* magazine showcased images of unwrapped products to minimize the distractions of packaging. These product photographs were accompanied by descriptions that deployed the “precise, technical language of scientific scrutiny.”²⁵ Guided by comparative analysis, consumers were mobilized to overcome deceptive advertising and instead think of the quality of goods in relation to their means of manufacture. In the words of one historian, “Testing stood in defiance of the promotional devices of advertising and literally stripped a product down to its constituent parts to render it knowable, understandable and meaningful. It was an attempt to establish consumer sovereignty ...”²⁶

However, as the 1960s wore on, the issue of consumer choice became increasingly fraught as discussions around economic deregulation began to intensify. Consumers had come to expect to make informed evaluations and selections of products. At the same time, regulators were using what was characterized as an appalling lack of consumer choice as justification for economic deregulation. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Federal Trade Commission was undergoing a period of rejuvenation and expansion, bolstered by a focus upon the new ideal “informed consumer.”²⁷ By promoting initiatives that the Federal Trade Commission called “counter-advertising,” which encouraged techniques such as comparative advertising, the Commission felt that they could address what was seen as significant market failure that did not adequately facilitate consumer choice.²⁸ The resultant “informed consumer” was seen to exist at the ideal nexus between the otherwise conflicting goals of fostering antitrust competition and achieving consumer protection.²⁹ But with many interests at play

²⁴ Hilton, “The Fable of the Sheep, or, Private Virtues, Public Vices,” p. 236.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²⁶ Hilton, “The Death of a Consumer Society,” p. 218.

²⁷ Hobbs, “Antitrust and Consumer Protection: Exploring the Common Ground,” p. 1156.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1156.

amidst rising stakes, the issue of consumer choice became increasingly muddled. One economist wrote in 1970, “Recent dialogue among economists, business, government and the consumer has included a confusing array of claims and counter-claims regarding consumers’ freedom of choice.”³⁰ More and more, the conflicted issue of consumer choice was mired in distrust between the interests of bureaucrats and those of consumers who were increasingly banding together into various associations, united under the assumption that the marketplace was intent upon manipulating them.³¹ In order to better protect their own interests, there was a growing sense that the consumer should inform their decision as directly as possible. Evaluating consumer products through comparative statistical analysis provided by magazines such as *Consumer Reports* no longer seemed like the most direct form of product evaluation. Instead, direct consumer choice was increasingly understood viscerally as a hands-on evaluation. Writing in 1970, economist Helen Potter described how, “the choices of an entrenched bureaucracy may be far different from the choices consumers would make directly, as changes desired by consumers come very slowly when these interfere with bureaucratic vested interests.”³² Best Products responded to this consumer anxiety by emphasizing that the shopping experience it offered was entirely premised around customers handling the products directly. In a promotional brochure from 1979, Best Products proclaimed that it encouraged customers to visit “the showroom where merchandise can be examined and purchased.”³³ Assuaging customers by promoting an environment in which they were expected to test products themselves was absolutely central. In an interview from 1978 one senior Best Products official explained, “A

²⁹ Ibid., p. 1156.

³⁰ Potter, “Consumers’ Freedom of Choice.”

³¹ The UK’s Consumer Association, the counterpart to US Consumers’ Union, was set up in 1956. The foundation of this Consumer Association was in response to, “widespread public demand for more information about an increasingly complex and, what was perceived to be, manipulative marketplace.” Hilton, “The Fable of the Sheep, or, Private Virtues, Public Vices: The Consumer Revolution of the Twentieth Century,” p. 230.

³² Potter, “Consumers’ Freedom of Choice.”

³³ Best Products promotional brochure (c. 1979), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

showroom is different to the extent that customers have the opportunity to evaluate merchandise at their leisure.”³⁴

Economic Deregulation

A broad wave of economic deregulation began under the direction of both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.³⁵ This reflected a significant shift among politicians and economists regarding the relationship between consumption and governance. Until the late 1960s, economists’ prevailing position had been to focus on the problems of market failure, generally believing that government intervention could amend the inevitable resultant social shortcomings.³⁶ However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, more economists began focusing on the opposite approach, spotlighting the problems associated with government failure in attempting to intervene in markets.³⁷ At a general level, theoretical analysis and policy levers were switching toward identifying the market as having the primary role in optimizing the economy.³⁸ Scholars concentrated in Virginia and Chicago especially championed such positions.³⁹ The influence of the University of Virginia upon broader economic deregulation, in particular, was solidified in 1980 when Ronald Reagan appointed the University of Virginia alumnus economist James C. Miller III as chairman of the Federal Trade

³⁴ M. Bruce Reiss, Best Product’s Senior Vice President for Merchandising was quoted in the following story. “Best Products Links Growth to Service and Soft Sell,” *The News America* (October 8, 1978).

³⁵ Jimmy Carter said during his 1976 presidential campaign: “The reform of our regulatory agencies would be one of the highest priorities of a Carter Administration.” Governor James Carter, Response to Question from the Association for Cooperation in Engineering (August 6, 1976) reprinted in Jimmy Carter, *The Presidential Campaign of 1976: Jimmy Carter* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 855.

³⁶ Paul Joskow and Roger Noll, “Regulation in Theory and Practice: An Overview,” in *Studies in Public Regulation*, ed. Gary Fromm (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 1-65.

³⁷ David Moss, “Reversing the Null: Regulation, Deregulation and the Power of Ideas,” *Harvard Business School Working Papers* (October 2010), p. 5.

³⁸ Stefan Riesenfeld, “Consumer Protection and Antitrust Laws,” *Journal of Comparative and International Private Law*, Vol. 40. No. ¾ (1976), p. 579.

³⁹ Moss, “Reversing the Null: Regulation, Deregulation and the Power of Ideas,” p. 8.

Commission and Miller's classmate Bob Tollison as head of the FTC's Bureau of Economics.⁴⁰ Similarly, economists such as Ronald Coase activated a lively interchange on the topic of deregulation between the University of Chicago and the University of Virginia.⁴¹ Unlike later theories of deregulation that developed elsewhere, Coase viewed the problem of regulation as primarily an issue of cost efficiency.⁴² Coase argued, in part, that a deregulated market could be more economically efficient if there was greater transparency and cooperation between all parties involved, including the consumers. An important element of Coase's argument for deregulation was to contextualize methods of production as being merely a small component of a larger "total effect" which included the broader sphere of consumer experience.⁴³

In 1976 economist Sam Peltzman published a paper titled, "Toward a More General Theory of Regulation." Peltzman's paper was a direct response to another paper titled, "The Theory of Economic Regulation" that had been recently published by his colleague, leading economist George Stigler. The disagreement between the two illustrated the vigorous quality of the many contemporaneous debates concerning the status and power of the consumer. Stigler's regulation model proposed that invariably consumers could not rely on regulations to protect them against producers because consumers were never unified enough in their special interests in the way that producers were.⁴⁴ Regulators would always find producers more convincing simply because they were better organized. By contrast, Peltzman argued that consumers were more powerful in shaping regulations to protect them against producers than Stigler had allowed. Peltzman's main point of

⁴⁰ One assessment of the University of Virginia economics department of the period described how, "Both men had earned their doctorates in an intellectual environment that combined hardnosed Chicago-style price theory with the then-emerging public choice research program ..." William Shughart and Fred McChesney, "Public Choice Theory and Antitrust Policy," *Public Choice*, Vol. 142, No ¾ (March 2010), p. 387.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² Jodi Short, "The Paranoid Style in Regulatory Reform," *Georgetown Public Law and Legal Theory Research Papers*, No 11-10 (2012), p. 23.

⁴³ Ronald Coase, "The Problem of Social Cost," *Journal of Law and Economics*, Vol. 3 (October 1960), p. 44.

⁴⁴ George Stigler, "The Theory of Economic Regulation," *Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science* (Spring 1971).

criticism was that Stigler had not adequately identified the specifics of his vague figure of “the regulator.” According to Peltzman, the regulator was concretely a legislator who needed to be elected in order to stay in power. More specifically, Peltzman characterized Stigler’s vague outline of the regulator as one actually subdivided and atomized into various levels and branches of government, all of whom needed to maintain disparate agendas in order to stay in power. Peltzman’s idea that internal subdivision and organizational disintegration facilitated the rise of the consumer is central to this dissertation’s understanding of the emerging experience economy.

Mid twentieth century deregulation of protectionist trade laws was first initiated broadly at a national level. However, as an illustration of Peltzman’s point, beginning in the late 1960s, state involvement intensified. This fractured and diversified antitrust regulations across the country. Individual states began to declare the federal Fair Trade Act unconstitutional and some started to break away in order to produce their own distinct antitrust laws.⁴⁵ The State of Virginia had been one of the initiators adopting a statute against the federal Fair Trade Act.⁴⁶ State-level antitrust litigation and enforcement gained an increasingly dominant role during the 1970s, shifting the regulatory responsibility away from the federal government. As an example, the Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976 allowed state attorney generals to sue companies in federal court on antitrust grounds, thereby encouraging state-level enforcement. In 1977 the federal government further encouraged the decentralization of antitrust regulation and enforcement by initiating a three-year grant program, supplying ten million dollars to individual states in order to augment their own distinct antitrust enforcement efforts.⁴⁷ One retailing analyst, Jack Kawa, wrote in 1979 that he believed that Southern states were far more amenable to experimental retailers because of greater deregulation. He wrote, “The Northeast is stagnant. And the South is growing rapidly because of less

⁴⁵ Glen Weston, “Fair Trade, Alias ‘Quality Stabilization’: Status, Problems and Prospects,” *American Bar Association*, Vol. 5 (1963), p. 78.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁷ Ky Ewing, “Overview of State Antitrust Law,” *Antitrust Law Journal*, Vol. 56, No 1 (April 1987), p. 103.

unionization and lower taxes among other things. It just makes it easier for a company to get going in the South.”⁴⁸ Similarly, retailing analyst Thomas Taylor asserted in 1979 that, “Most new retailing ideas in recent years have originated in the South and Midwest.”⁴⁹ To this end, Best Products officers watched the dissolution of protectionist trade laws at the state level closely.⁵⁰ Examining a national map marking the expansion of Best Products showrooms, one can observe both how disparately various states responded to the federal guidelines on trade deregulation as well as how dependent Best Products was upon state level deregulation.⁵¹

As antitrust regulation fractured across state lines, one awkward issue gained prominence, the problem of mail order retail.⁵² The issue first emerged when courts began to examine whether Pennsylvania’s Fair Trade Act should apply to interstate mail order transactions that sent products to out-of-state consumers. The court determined that applying such state-level trade laws on other jurisdictions would prove an unconstitutional burden on those consumers.⁵³ A new infusion of business interest emerged during the 1960s seeking to capitalize on this regulatory ambiguity. A range of retailing players began to join the mail order fray, creating new hybrid scenarios. For example, the established J.C. Penney Company department store acquired a mail order business during the 1960s, merging the two retailing formats into one operation. In this way, the unresolved

⁴⁸ “An Industry Whose Time Has Come,” *The South Magazine* (August 1979), p. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The 1979 Best Products SEC Registration Statement stated: “Certain states, in which the Company has no showrooms, have developed comparative price advertising requirements which are more restrictive than federal guidelines. The Company has no plans to build showrooms in those states, but if similar standards are adopted in states in which the Company’s showrooms are located, the Company’s comparative pricing policy may be adversely affected.” *SEC Registration Statement: Form S-7, Best Products Registration Statement* (1979), p. 19, Best Products Archive, Folder 315, Series 1.3.

⁵¹ See Figure 1.6.

⁵² One economist declared in 1963 that, “One of the most irritating enforcement problems is the interstate mail-order sale.” Weston, “Fair Trade, Alias ‘Quality Stabilization’: Status, Problems and Prospects,” p. 80.

⁵³ 1950 decision of the Third Circuit in *Sunbeam Corp v. Wentling Weston*, “Fair Trade, Alias ‘Quality Stabilization’: Status, Problems and Prospects,” p. 80.

issue of mail order retail was symptomatic of the era's decentralized and geographically uneven shift toward deregulation, opening up possibilities for hybrid retailers.

Resale Price Maintenance Policy

Within the realm of changing antitrust regulation, resale price maintenance policy emerged as a central issue. The controversy focused on whether it was a manufacturer or a retailer who should control the final determination over a product's price. During the early twentieth century, resale price maintenance policies had been robust, representing the power that manufacturers had in systematizing the distribution and consumption of their products.⁵⁴ However, by the early 1970s resale price maintenance policies were being aggressively challenged in courts across the country.⁵⁵ Gradually more retailers were given control over final sales prices, unless there was a bona-fide consignment arrangement in which the supplier retained ownership of the product until the final sale.⁵⁶ However, as distribution chains became more complex, significant uncertainty arose over the precise legal trade status of the different retailing stakeholders.⁵⁷ With no federal statute permitting a national system of resale price maintenance that could be enforced in federal courts, debate around resale price maintenance was further complicated by the diversity of regulatory responses across state lines.⁵⁸ By 1972 courts in roughly one third of the states had responded to challenges by instating clauses that prohibited manufacturers from enforcing price controls or entering into explicit or

⁵⁴ David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 233.

⁵⁵ However, in 1963 a law professor declared that, "Resale price maintenance under state 'Fair Trade' laws has been rapidly disintegrating in recent years." Weston, "Fair Trade, Alias 'Quality Stabilization': Status, Problems and Prospects," p. 76.

⁵⁶ Stanley Hollander, "United States of America," *Public Policy Toward Retailing*, eds. J.J. Boddewyn and Stanley Hollander (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1972), p. 378.

⁵⁷ *Comprehensive Merchandising Catalogs, Inc. v. Giant Food, Inc.*, No. 74, Civ. 4794, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York (1975).

⁵⁸ Weston, "Fair Trade, Alias 'Quality Stabilization': Status, Problems and Prospects," p. 76.

implicit agreements with intermediary retailers and wholesalers.⁵⁹ Within this arena of uncertainty, trans-American discount retailers flourished, as they were able to calibrate their razor thin profit margins by cutting back manufacturer's preferred retail prices as they moved products across state lines.

The Federal Trade Commission struggled to clarify the roles of a rapidly diversifying field of manufacturers, importers, wholesalers, retailers, or some hybrid combination thereof.⁶⁰ Wholesalers in particular became increasingly problematic to regulators as they became more prominent. The role of wholesalers, mediating between manufacturers and retailers, had long been a source of contention for many in the retail industry who often resented this middling influence. An article published in a marketing journal from 1949 expressed incredulity at the tenacity of wholesalers, thriving despite the best efforts of manufacturers and retailers. Author Wroe Alderson wrote, "The survival and continued vigor of the wholesaler is remarkable considering the persistent attempts to supplant him which have been made by many of the producers and retailers whom he serves."⁶¹ In the post-war period wholesalers became more aggressive in broadening their scope of influence. In particular, wholesalers increasingly muddied the waters by engaging directly with consumers. Deceptive practices were rampant, especially in the catalog showroom field. An executive of a large catalog showroom retailer claimed in 1982 that, "Most of the catalogers had to claim they were wholesaling, and not retailing, so they could get products. Then they'd turn around and sell the stuff retail."⁶² One prominent Fair Trade case from the period asked, "Is the mere classification of the parties as either both 'wholesalers' or both 'retailers' enough to bar Fair Trade even though there is no

⁵⁹ Hollander, "United States of America," p. 394.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 387.

⁶¹ Wroe Alderson, "Scope and Place of Wholesaling in the United States," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 14, No 2 (Sept 1949), p. 145.

⁶² Dan Fesperman, "How Florida's Catalog Showrooms Stack Up," *Miami Herald*, (April 12, 1982), p. 8.

competition?”⁶³ In response, the State of Virginia began to issue fair trade policy statutes that attempted to differentiate between retailers and “wholesale houses,” noting that although they both needed to follow current fair trade laws, they were understood to employ distinct price markup formulations.⁶⁴

The challenge in redefining the role of wholesalers reflected broader antitrust debates around vertical integration. Regulatory change was set in motion when the Department of Justice won a Supreme Court decision in 1966 that required the Vons grocery chain to divest itself of another similarly large grocery chain it had recently acquired.⁶⁵ This demonstrated federal concern over excessive horizontal integration within singular retailing categories. However, it left open alternative possibilities. Retailers responded either with the amalgamation of a broader variety of retail entities across different product categories or by drawing closer vertical connections with manufacturers within narrower area of specialization. Expansive discount chains that spread themselves horizontally, encompassing multiple retail categories became especially prevalent.⁶⁶ Within the arena of discount retail, it was the catalog showroom businesses in particular that benefitted because they could take advantage of a broad horizontal spread of products while also taking advantage of the ambiguity over their wholesaler status.

Best Products and Policy

Sydney Lewis was an outspoken opponent of resale price maintenance. He pushed his business to operate at the limits of legality and credited this position for the rise of discount retailing,

⁶³ United States v. McKesson & Robbins, Inc. 351 US 305 (1956). Weston, “Fair Trade, Alias ‘Quality Stabilization’: Status, Problems and Prospects,” p. 84.

⁶⁴ ‘R.M.G.’, “Unfair Trade Practices in Virginia,” *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 45, No 1 (January 1959), p. 174. Stigler’s paper bolstered the Economic Theory of Regulation. Furthering this approach, Milton Friedman published *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962. Also Charles Wolf’s “A Theory of Nonmarket Failure” published in the *Journal of Law and Economics* in 1979 furthered this theory.

⁶⁵ Hollander, “United States of America,” p. 375.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

including the rapid ascent of Best Products. In speaking with shareholders, Sydney was explicit in stating, “the company’s growth from a \$75,000-a-year family business to a \$525 million public corporation was a 21-year struggle to compete. The biggest barrier to competition was fair trade laws, which, until not very long ago, made discounting illegal.”⁶⁷ In interviews, speeches and editorials published in local newspapers, Sydney used every opportunity to underscore his position on trade laws within these volatile debates taking place across the country. Beginning with a 1966 letter to the newspaper editor of his local *Richmond News-Leader*, Sydney railed against the ability of General Motors to fix their prices, writing, “How can you suggest that Big Brother General Motors be allowed to dictate consumer prices in restraint of trade and at the same time insist that Big Brother U.S. Government remain silent on safety standards? You can favor one Dictator over another, but as far as we’re concerned, let there be a pox on both their houses.”⁶⁸ Over a decade later, in a 1978 interview with the *Norfolk Ledger Star*, Sydney continued his attack, stating, “Fair Trade laws were fostered by big business under the subterfuge of protecting the little man – but they actually protected the big boys from price competition.”⁶⁹ Sydney repeatedly sought to underscore the foundational quality of antitrust positions to American policy, stating that, “The Supreme Court has called our antitrust laws the Magna Carta of the American economy.”⁷⁰

Operating on the edge of changing legislation around price fixing, Best Products often found itself in court. Sydney Lewis told a local Richmond newspaper in 1975 that he didn’t think Best Products “would be where it is today” if it had not violated the state’s fair trade law “every day in every way it could” while it was establishing itself.⁷¹ In 1972 the company was found in violation of

⁶⁷ Jerry Knight, “A Surprising Enemy of Free Enterprise,” *Washington Post* (November 29, 1978).

⁶⁸ Sydney Lewis, draft letter to the editor of *Richmond News-Leader*, (May 11, 1966), Best Products Archive, Folder 1622, Series 5.5.

⁶⁹ Sydney Lewis, “Competition Fine for Somebody Else,” *Norfolk Ledger Star* (December 4, 1978).

⁷⁰ Sydney Lewis, “Remarks, Annual Shareholders Meeting” (June 2, 1983), Best Products Archive, Folder 1625, Series 5.5.

Maryland Fair Trade Law for undercutting product prices established by Sony Corporation.⁷² However, just a few years later in 1975, Maryland's Fair Trade Laws, alongside the few other remaining similar state fair trade laws, were repealed by an act of Congress. Lewis, whom journalists had labeled, "the kingpin of discount catalogue merchandising,"⁷³ expressed his sense of accomplishment that Best Products played a significant role in pressuring Congress to enact this change.⁷⁴ However, significant uncertainty remained around this fraught issue of price fixing within a retail supply chain that was continually morphing and adapting. In 1978 Lewis told the *Washington Post* that, "there are manufacturers still today, who refuse to sell to us for fear we will discount their suggested selling prices, which have been set and maintained by collusion with retailers and distributors."⁷⁵ Well into the 1980s, Lewis continued to be outspoken about the lack of enforcement around illegal price fixing and was particularly prone to criticizing the Federal Trade Commission for not doing enough to root out more insidious practices and problematic collusion within the supply chain.⁷⁶

Rise of the Catalog Showroom

Broad economic deregulation in retailing, including the aforementioned challenges to price fixing, created optimal conditions for the catalog showroom to emerge as a viable retailing format. The regulations that had previously favored manufacturers and retailers were eroding, allowing

⁷¹ A *Richmond-Times Dispatch* article regarding Best Products and Fair Trade Law violations (February 7, 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 1479, Series 5.2.

⁷² *Sony Corp. of America, Plaintiff v. Best Products Co., Inc., Defendant* Civil No. 72-696-Y, United States District Court for the District of Maryland (1972).

⁷³ Sandra Boodman, "Best Man is a Winner in Virginia; The Best Man Wins Over Virginia Elite," *Washington Post* (February 27, 1982).

⁷⁴ Steve Row, "Best's Sydney Lewis Scores Fair Trade Policy," *News Leader* (June 2, 1983).

⁷⁵ Knight, "A Surprising Enemy of Free Enterprise."

⁷⁶ Row, "Best's Sydney Lewis Scores Fair Trade Policy."

wholesalers to ascend. The removal of price protection policies made traditional retailers, which could not necessarily depend upon high volume purchasing, more vulnerable to competition from wholesalers.⁷⁷ By turn, wholesalers like Best Products, provided a more direct consumer experience by eliminating retail middlemen and simplifying distribution.⁷⁸ In the popular press, catalog showroom companies were careful to clearly maintain this distinction and differentiate themselves from retailers. One journalist of the period described, “Far from being a discount store, a catalog-showroom is essentially a warehouse.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Frances Lewis described how, “We considered ourselves a warehouse with some merchandise in it.”⁸⁰ Andrew Lewis echoed his mother’s message when he described how, “People have said to us that you aren’t retailers, you just distribute merchandise, and there’s some truth to that.”⁸¹

The catalog showroom industry evolved as a variation of the catalog mail order business. Beginning in 1872, the mail order system had first developed in the United States when traveling salesman Aaron Montgomery Ward founded his catalog mail order business. Montgomery Ward quickly identified a large eager consumer base in farming and other rural communities across the United States.⁸² At this time, three-quarters of the American population lived in rural areas, far from urban retailing centers.⁸³ Montgomery Ward’s initial customers were the Patrons of Husbandry, a protest group of farmers that had formed to fight against what they felt were the unfairly fixed high

⁷⁷ Kay Dunlap Veazey, “An Industry Whose Time Has Come,” *South Magazine* (August 1979), p. 32.

⁷⁸ Joseph Winski, “Catalog Showroom Hot Retailer,” *Chicago Tribune* (December 6, 1978).

⁷⁹ “Onto the Right Side of the Tracks,” *Financial World* (June 1, 1980), p. 44.

⁸⁰ “Best Products Company – The Industry’s First Billion Dollar Baby,” *Industry’s Merchandising Publication* (November 1981), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

⁸¹ Isadore Barmash, “Bold Page in Best Products’ Book,” *New York Times* (June 13, 1982).

⁸² Robin Cherry, *Catalog – An Illustrated History of Mail-Order Shopping* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), p. 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

retail prices of farming equipment.⁸⁴ The underlying gambit of the catalog mail order business was the premise that a consumer could eliminate the retailer and deal directly with a wholesaler if the costly burden of distribution was principally eliminated. In the case of mail order, the government would largely subsidize a significant portion of distribution costs. In this way, the rise of catalog mail order business reflected the development and expansion of railway networks and the postal system. This close dependency between mail order business and the government's sponsorship of distribution networks was highlighted when Minnesota railway agent Richard Sears, observing how effectively Montgomery Ward was making use of the postal delivery system, left his job to found his own rival mail order company in 1886.⁸⁵ This close connection between alternative distribution mechanisms and the ability of wholesalers to circumvent retailers' price fixing protectionism was foundational.

Wholesaler Status

When the Lewises first welcomed customers into their warehouse in Richmond they helped initiate the catalog showroom format and gradually differentiated themselves from other mail order operations. Frances Lewis recalled, "The idea of having what the customer saw in the catalog on hand when the customer came in was what we finally found out was the brand new idea. Catalogs have been around, mail order has been around, but what hadn't been around – and it finally became clear to us – was a place in which you could read the catalog at home, check the price, come in and pick it up."⁸⁶ However, this original link to mail order retail remained central to their legal status as wholesalers. Although approximately ninety-nine per cent of Best Products customers chose to visit the warehouse to make their purchase it always remained possible for a customer to order directly

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Frances Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1202, Best Products Archive, Folder 1376, Series 9.2.

from the catalog over the phone and receive their order through the mail.⁸⁷ Initially, the differences between the catalog showroom format and mail order retail were not always apparent, even to the Lewises. Frances described the early establishment of their business by saying, “It evolved in our way because we thought we were in the catalog mail order business ...”⁸⁸

But in a period of deregulatory upheaval when the elimination of price protection policies was being broadly contested by a variety of manufacturers and retailers, Best Products needed to tread carefully when defining the scope of the emerging catalog showroom industry as wholesale. Initially, Best Products managed to maintain its status as wholesalers by issuing “admission cards” to members during the early 1960s. Frances described how they “had a hard time getting manufacturers to sell us stuff that we would sell at low prices direct to the customer. We could get some of the manufacturers to do that because we were not exactly selling to the customer, we were selling through the customer’s firm. It was real important not to look as if we had a completely open door, because at the beginning it was real hard to get manufacturers to sell us, to give a damn about us. They were more interested in keeping their retail prices up. It was real important not to look like our door was wide open ... We used to throw someone out every once in a while who didn’t have a card – if there were enough people listening.”⁸⁹ Sydney described how in their first few years of operation they issued thousands of admission cards to their customers in a thinly veiled guise that only particularly litigious manufacturers would bother disputing. While price protection policies were actively being contested, large-scale manufacturers such as Timex would frequently take legal action against Best Products. Timex would send undercover shoppers to Best Products to see if it was underselling the manufacturer’s recommended price for their watches. Lewis described how he would regularly “get a wire from Timex saying we were in violation of fair trade laws of Virginia,

⁸⁷ Winter, “Best’s Better Idea,” p. 19.

⁸⁸ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Frances Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1203, Best Products Archive, Folder 1376, Series 9.2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1216.

and we demand you cease selling Timex at this discount price, or we will take you to court. We would take Timex merchandise off the floor completely and keep it off for about two weeks. At the end of that period we would put it back on the floor and sell it.”⁹⁰ As litigation around price protection policies subsided, Best Products ceased to issue admission cards to customers.⁹¹

Diamonds

As mail order companies such as Montgomery Ward and Sears established a business model to consider, the jewelry sector would present a more specific path for the catalog showroom to follow. Best Products was widely heralded as the first catalog showroom business to operate at a broad scale, however, the wholesale jewelry business had already established a more specialized example to emulate. The jewelry business had a long history of operating in a niche area that combined wholesale with the need for a consumer’s presence. One *Chicago Tribune* journalist observed in 1978 that, “Catalog showrooms are an outgrowth of downtown warehousing districts that were common years ago, particularly the jewelry wholesalers ...”⁹² Tellingly, it had been through jewelry that Richard Sears had been initiated into his mail order retailing career. In 1886, Richard Sears made his first sales when he purchased a shipment of watches that had been deemed sub-par by a jewelry retailer. Sears then re-sold them to his fellow railway agents along his route, thus founding the R.W. Sears Watch Company.⁹³ Because jewelry was a product that had a particularly sensitive link to final demand, jewelry wholesalers had cemented the indispensable importance of their mediating role within the supply chain by the 1890s.⁹⁴ The dominant market power of jewelry

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 1191.

⁹¹ Winter, “Best’s Better Idea,” p. 20.

⁹² Winski, “Catalog Showroom Hot Retailer.”

⁹³ Cherry, *Catalog*, p. 19.

⁹⁴ Philip Scranton, “Diversity in Diversity: Flexible Production and American Industrialization, 1880-1930,” *Business History Review*, Vol. 65, No 1 (Spring 1991).

wholesalers subsequently endured for a generation, with manufacturers rarely able to rebalance the equation in their favor. The onerous necessity for highly specialized technical production skills combined with the unpredictable vagaries of fashion that dictated jewelry production meant that manufacturers could rarely get the upper hand. Jewelry manufacturers were constantly in a reactive position, scrambling to catch up to rapidly shifting demand while unable to capture the cumulative technical expertise that other more monopolistic manufacturing sectors were able to achieve.⁹⁵ As they could not readily rely on a high level of consumer trust or the reliability of mass-produced objects, jewelry wholesalers were among the first industry specialists to find ways to engage directly with consumers because high-value jewelry exceeded the limits of mail order retail.⁹⁶ Growing distrust of the postal system was cited by some as a significant issue, enough to make many wary of purchasing jewelry via mail order retail.⁹⁷ Jewelry purchases often required consumers to be present both because the values involved were high and because the idiosyncratic qualities of precious stones defied mass production and required close inspection. It was jewelry wholesalers who first devised the practice of double coding their listed prices so that they could easily interface directly with consumers while still being able to simultaneously reference their own costs.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the diamond industry had a long history of testing the regulatory limits around trade law.⁹⁹ A complex network of diamond traders had managed to develop elaborate internal rules and self-regulating governance that defied state-created law.

⁹⁵ Scranton, "Diversity in Diversity: Flexible Production and American Industrialization, 1880-1930," p. 87.

⁹⁶ Generally, some jewelry was often available through typical mail order catalogs, however, this tended to be limited to either imitation or semi-precious jewelry. Francesca Carnevali, "Fashioning Luxury for Factory Girls: American Jewelry, 1860-1914," *The Business History Review*, Vol. 85, No 2 (Summer 2011).

⁹⁷ Journalist Dan Fesperman described the benefit of catalog showrooms as the opportunity to not have to rely on the postal service: "Catalog showrooms are retailing hybrids – combinations of mail-order houses and department stores. They produce merchandise catalogs, many through the same publishers, to allow at-home shopping. But the goods found on the colorful pages of the catalog also can be found on showroom shelves, so shoppers aren't at the mercy of the postal service." Fesperman, "How Florida's Catalog Showrooms Stack Up," p. 8.

⁹⁸ Winski, "Catalog Showroom Hot Retailer."

⁹⁹ Lisa Bernstein, "Opting Out of the Legal System: Extralegal Contractual Relations in the Diamond Industry," *The Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 21, No 1 (January 1992), pp. 115 – 157.

Just as Richard Sears had entered into the mail order business through jewelry, the Lewises similarly recognized the connection between the infant catalog showroom format and jewelry wholesale. In describing the establishment of their enterprise, Sydney recognized that they would need two things in order for their fledgling catalog showroom business to flourish: precise inventory control and diamonds.¹⁰⁰ Frances subsequently designated herself the family diamond expert, took gemology courses at the Gem Institute in New York, and ensured that all Best Products showrooms prominently featured a jewelry department at the forefront.¹⁰¹

Frances envisioned focused customers bent over, carefully examining displays of diamond rings before making their considered selection. She knew that jewelry was the key to bringing direct customer engagement together with wholesale operations. To this end, Frances stated, “diamonds are the one thing you cannot buy the way we bought everything else – by going down a catalog page.”¹⁰² It was assumed that a customer buying jewelry was going to be more discerning and intent upon their selection than any other type of purchase. One Best Products employee described how, “A jewelry customer decides quickly if a salesperson knows what he or she is talking about and can be trusted.”¹⁰³ Best Products interiors were organized around jewelry, using diamonds to draw people to their warehouse spaces. A Best Products newsletter described how, “The jewelry department has been brought out front and center to greet customers when they enter the showroom, and to generate maximum traffic flow.”¹⁰⁴ Jewelry sales were a crucial component of the company’s business

¹⁰⁰ Oral history with Sydney Lewis & Frances Lewis (March 9, 1993), p. 13, Best Products Archive, Folder 1623, Series 5.5.

¹⁰¹ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Frances Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1199, Best Products Archive, Folder 1376, Series 9.2.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 1376.

¹⁰³ “Jewelry V.P. Heads Coordinated Efforts to Increase Sales,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 8, No 3 (March 1983), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 884, Series 5.2.

¹⁰⁴ “Growing from One Showroom to One Hundred,” *Best Times* newsletter, Special Edition (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2. A similar commentary about the centrality of the jewelry department’s placement within the showrooms was made by Best Products officer Stewart Kasen. “You can’t get to any other place in the showroom without passing a jewelry counter.” Stewart Kasen, “State of the Company” speech transcript (March 1994), Best Products Archive, Folder 1368, Series 8.3.

success, often propping up less lucrative areas of the enterprise. One Best Products employee described how, “Jewelry carries a higher markup and generates greater profits than any other department in this showroom.”¹⁰⁵ In 1983, Best Products was listed as one of the top five diamond sellers in the US, ranked behind such behemoths as De Beers.¹⁰⁶

Best Products exemplified the broader tendency of wholesalers maintaining control over jewelry manufacturers. The Best Products Diamond Buying Department often dictated specifications to its manufacturers. The department employees regularly traveled to “jewelry styling shows in Basel, Switzerland and Milan, Italy to pick up design ideas.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the Best Products Diamond Buying Department often bought and imported loose diamonds itself directly from dealers in Antwerp and Tel Aviv before having their carefully selected manufacturers work these diamonds into jewelry.¹⁰⁸ One employee described how they preferred not to work with certain overly rigid manufacturers who refused to alter their designs.¹⁰⁹ Instead, Best Products would work with manufacturers, such as Gold-Fine Jewelry in New York, that were willing to change their metal casts to suit Best Products’ specifications.¹¹⁰ Best Products would often make alteration requests to manufacturers, such as thinning the metal shanks, or minimizing the size of precious stones, in order to further reduce costs.¹¹¹ Best Products explained to its employees in a newsletter, “Best jewelry

¹⁰⁵ “Jewelry V.P. Heads Coordinated Efforts to Increase Sales,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 8, No 3 (March 1983), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 884, Series 5.2. Another Best Products employee similarly exclaimed, “First is jewelry. Jewelry is the three-point bomber on the team because when it scores, it scores big.” Stewart Kasen, “State of the Company” Speech Transcript (March 1994), Best Products Archive, Folder 1368, Series 8.3.

¹⁰⁶ “Buyers Have to Know What Customers Want,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 8, No 3 (March 1983), p. 4, Best Products Archive, Folder 884, Series 5.2.

¹⁰⁷ “Diamond Story,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 2, No 9 (February 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 874, Series 5.2.

¹⁰⁸ Best Product Annual Report to Employees (1980), p. 23, Best Products Archive, Folder 763, Series 4.1.

¹⁰⁹ One Best Products employee described not choosing to work with the manufacturers who would declare, “You get them as they come ...” “Diamond Story,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 2, No 9 (February 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 874, Series 5.2.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ “Buyers Have to Know What Customers Want,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 8, No 3 (March 1983), p. 4, Best Products Archive, Folder 884, Series 5.2.

buyers don't hesitate to ask a vendor to alter items to suit the catalog showroom customer's tastes – and pocketbooks.”¹¹²

In Summary

A host of deregulatory policy changes during the late 1960s and 1970s recast the balance of economic power away from manufacturers and toward consumers. The prevailing tendency toward vertical disintegration re-shaped the supply chain. Within these changing conditions consumers were able to insert themselves into the supply chain and better assert their demands for greater consumer choice. This repositioning marked the beginning of the experience economy. The emergence of the catalog showroom as a new retail format exemplified these changes.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 4. Best Products did not generally intervene in the manufacturing of any other type of product that they sold. However jewelry, being so foundational and central to their success, was held as a product apart, a category unto itself. Even in the ways in which the Diamond Buying Department employees discussed their work, it was apparent that this department's work was understood as distinct from the rest of the catalog showroom context. To this end, one employee described how, “Incense doesn't sweeten the air and no veiled, mysterious women offer exotic drinks, but the jewelry selection process for the Best Products catalog has the definite flavor of a mid-Eastern bazaar.” Ibid., p. 4.

CHAPTER 2

Service

Self-service was at the center of the experience economy. When a customer entered a Best Products showroom they were greeted by an instructional sheet that announced, “You do it yourself. No standing around until a salesperson is free to wait on you. When you’re ready, just pick up a handy order form, write down what you want, plus the coded price and catalog number (see code explanation below) and hand in the form at the Customer Service.”¹ Filing out administrative forms and decoding prices had become an acceptable part of the customer’s retail experience. This level of self-service was the key quality that set catalog showrooms apart from other contemporaneous retail types.² The entire showroom layout was premised around self-service, an invention within the catalog showroom industry innovated by Best Products before becoming the industry standard.³ To be sure, it provided significant economic savings to both Best Products and its customers, but in promotional materials Best Products chose to emphasize the more immaterial pleasures of self-service. Invariably, Best Products described its customer reveling in a stroll, appraising compelling objects that caught their attention before jotting down their order. In such a scenario, customer service would only be an unwanted and unwarranted intrusion.⁴ Ideally, the Best Products customer’s self-service shopping experience was intended to emulate a visit to a museum, examining interesting objects at their leisure before making their astute selection, rather than merely performing the chore

¹ Best Products customer poster (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1277, Series 7.

² “Best Products Links Growth to Service and Soft Sell,” *The News America* (October 8, 1978).

³ Frances Lewis, “The whole idea of a customer writing up his own order, sending it back to the warehouse in a tube, having it pulled from warehouse inventory and then sent down a conveyor, started with Best Products. This flow concept, as well as the layout of the physical plant, was really invented by Best Products.” “Best Products Company – The Industry’s First Billion Dollar Baby,” *Industry’s Merchandising Publication* (November 1981), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

⁴ Another promotional brochure similarly framed the tactile encounter that a Best Products customer could have when assessing a product as blissfully unencumbered by the interference of sales personnel. Best Products Co., Inc. promotional brochure. (c. 1979), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

of value shopping.⁵ To this end, a Best Products newsletter chronicled the seemingly incompatible yet unexpectedly enjoyable tale of a customer visiting a warehouse. “You take a leisurely walk down a spacious aisle, eyeing the rows of merchandise and stopping here and there.”⁶

This chapter examines how self-service repositioned the consumer within the experience economy and in turn how this influenced retail architecture. Consumers were becoming more involved in operations that previously would have remained behind the scenes. In parallel, the experience economy was reshaping the architectural economy with a self-service ethos. As deregulation removed protectionist barriers, the architectural profession was increasingly dividing into a series of diversified services. With this dispersal, it became easier for the client to assemble and recombine disparate components of such professional services. Clients, especially large corporate clients such as Best Products, were well positioned to serve themselves by integrating many design services in-house, vertically re-aligning architectural production according to their needs. In concert with architectural clients, the average catalog showroom customer was expected to embrace self-service. This chapter describes the ways in which the designs of Best Products showrooms encouraged customers to adopt self-service as an experience, an opportunity to position themselves within an absorbing flow of goods and sequence of procedures. The various forms of self-service that surfaced within the experience economy developed through the division of previously impenetrable operations into more discrete procedures. This subdivision rendered procedures more interchangeable among a variety of parties, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, and thereby allowing an increased number of tasks to become part of the consumer experience.

⁵ Andy Warhol aphoristically said in the same period, “Bloomingdale’s is my favorite museum.” “Death is like going to Bloomingdale’s.” These comments were reprinted in several iterations including by Tracy Brobston, “A Shopping Spree in Bloomingdale’s with Andy Warhol,” *I’ll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), pp. 301-311. The comments were similarly referenced by Jesse Kornbluth, “The World of Warhol,” *New York Magazine* (March 9, 1987).

⁶ “The Clearance Warehouse – A Success Story,” *Best Times newsletter*, Vol. 5, No 7 (July 1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 879, Series 5.2.

Rise of the Prosumer

Economic deregulation was at the core of the burgeoning experience economy. Deregulation repositioned the consumer, providing them greater access to previously unseen and unknown information. This came, most explicitly, through more robust legal protections that enshrined the consumer's right to information. In 1972, the Federal Trade Commission proposed a model consumer protection act that was subsequently enacted in numerous states.⁷ The following year the Bureau of Competition and Consumer Protection had their mandate realigned in order to clarify and expand their role in responding to consumer complaints.⁸ As a result, retailers across the country were pushed to provide consumers with a greater degree of transparency regarding a broad spectrum of information including: product acquisition dates, price per standardized units for foodstuffs, lottery-based promotional practices and the provision of extended warranties and other services. The consumer movement also propelled expansions of class action rules which allowed a few consumers to be treated as a legal class that could represent all consumers in a given retail category.⁹ Exemplary of this growing consumer agency was Ralph Nader's well publicized championing of the consumer protection movement throughout the 1970s.¹⁰ In response to Nader, the Antitrust Division of the Federal Trade Commission issued a document entitled "Antitrust Enforcement and the Consumer" which intended to provide consumers with clearer information on their rights and privileges.¹¹ Reyner Banham presciently noted this growing consumer empowerment when he observed in 1961

⁷ Stanley Hollander, "United States of America," p. 388.

⁸ Riesenfeld, "Consumer Protection and Antitrust Laws," p. 580.

⁹ Hollander, "United States of America," p. 368.

¹⁰ Ralph Nader championed consumer protections beginning with his exposé book *Unsafe at Any Speed* published in 1965. This book targeted the lack of automobile consumer safety standards. Beginning in 1968 Nader organized a group of law students known as "Nader's Raiders" who pressured the FTC over various consumer protection issues. In 1971 Nader founded the watchdog group Public Citizen that lobbied for consumer rights in a variety of industries.

¹¹ Riesenfeld, "Consumer Protection and Antitrust Laws," p. 580.

that, “In most Western Countries, the appearance of consumer-defence organizations has added yet another voice, another viewpoint.”¹²

The empowered consumer was also increasingly professionalized. They now knew more about the consumer system that surrounded them and were expected to exhibit more informed judgment and behavior when operating within that system. A member of a consumer advocacy group of the period described herself as “a professional consumer” who watched the market “like a hawk.”¹³ By contrast, in a 1937 issue of *Architectural Forum* a design professional who was visiting a showroom had been described as a “purchasing agent.”¹⁴ By the 1970s someone who might be found perusing a showroom would more likely be a member of the general public, but just as likely to be understood as professional – not necessarily a design professional, but a professional shopper. In this same way, Sydney Lewis had credited his initial interest in discount showrooms to the moment when he first recognized the two-price system printed in a catalog. He realized that the consumer retail price listed below a product’s image was matched to a coded dealer price buried at the back of the catalog. Lewis described his desire to render this double-coded system transparent and thereby place the consumer in the role of the professional buyer.¹⁵

The professionalized role of the consumer continued to become more evident to retailers and design professionals as they observed changing consumer patterns. For example, consumers were increasingly embracing the high volume and bulk consumption previously associated with professional wholesalers. In 1957 retail architect Morris Ketchum predicted a more widespread change when he noted with surprise that increasingly stores were “uniting volume sales with

¹² Banham, “Design by Choice,” p. 97.

¹³ Hilton, “The Fable of the Sheep, or, Private Virtues, Public Vices: The Consumer Revolution of the Twentieth Century,” p. 242.

¹⁴ “Furniture, Wholesale Showrooms,” *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 66 (June 1937).

¹⁵ “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business,” *Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 3.

attractive shopping conditions.”¹⁶ By 1970, an estimated fifty per cent of households owned a car and sixty per cent had at least a refrigerator, if not a freezer furthering this tendency toward bulk shopping.¹⁷ Additionally, the general decline in the role of the full-time homemaker meant that shopping was more often a less frequent and therefore higher volume activity.

The idea of a professionalized consumer was similarly reflected in Alvin Toffler’s writing from the period.¹⁸ Toffler described the “prosumer” as a consumer who desired to participate more deeply in the production of his or her own goods and services.¹⁹ According to Toffler this was “the willing seduction of the consumer into production.” He described how “the consumer is drawn back into the production process.”²⁰ For Toffler, this shift in the late twentieth century had been brought about by the convergence of a number of factors including lowered barriers of entry into the realm of production.²¹ In Toffler’s telling, the tactile ways in which a consumer could engage with production were the foundation for self-actualization or a self-help revolution. Sensational engagement was at the core. The prosumer was “eager to use their own hands.”²²

The idea of the prosumer as a figure who combined production and consumption can be traced back through Karl Marx. In Marx’s unfinished text *Grundrisse* he described the paradox of the “leisure-worker” who entered into a cycle in which their leisure activities transformed their work

¹⁶ Morris Ketchum, Jr., *Shops & Stores* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1957), p. 187.

¹⁷ Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping – An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 278.

¹⁸ This description of a prosumer had also been suggested, albeit less explicitly, by Marshall McLuhan a few years earlier in his book *Take Today*. Marshall McLuhan, *Take Today* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

¹⁹ Toffler, *The Third Wave*, p. 275. The idea of the prosumer as described by Toffler is also discussed by Philip Kotler. “The Prosumer Movement: A New Challenge for Marketers,” *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 13 (1986), pp. 510-513.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

²² Toffler, *The Third Wave*, p. 278. Toffler’s descriptions of a prosumer, were also reflected in a contemporaneous renewal of interest in Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backwards* from 1888, which had been rewritten in 1974 by American science fiction writer Mack Reynolds. In this utopic reimagining, the balance between production and consumption was recalibrated around the primacy of consumer experience. Mack Reynolds, *Looking Backward from the Year 2000* (New York: Ace Books, 1973).

habits and in turn their production potential.²³ The increased commodification of leisure experience altered the expectations of workers who thereby created new markets for leisure and in turn new processes of production. The paradox of this formulation was the vision of a “leisure-worker” who unknowingly combined productivity with leisure. When Marx described the “commodity experience” at the heart of leisure, he described a situation where a spatial and sensational experience was so overwhelming that it “annihilated” any associations between time and productivity.²⁴ Marx described an unwitting leisure-worker who was completely subsumed within their own affective experience. The example given was of a worker experiencing music from a phonograph record which, when enjoyed, was so sensorially overwhelming that it suspended any productive sense of time.

By contrast, the prosumer of the 1970s had gained a greater degree of mastery in combining production with consumption. The overlapping cycles of production and consumption were more transparent to this consumer who understood their position within both an experience economy and a sensationalized experience environment. The prosumer was a competent consumer with sound judgment and the ability to evaluate products independently. Consumer historian Rachel Bowlby described this shift occurring in the late 1960s, when the prevailing model had been of the “dim and dazed, a childlike housewife passively picking up brightly coloured things she had no thought to resist. Nowadays the shopper is viewed positively as the rational planner who knows what she wants and competently makes her selection.”²⁵ In Marx’s depiction, the leisure-worker had ultimately been exploited because they did not have ownership over the means of production. By contrast, the prosumer of the 1970s was presented as having some mastery and agency because it was their own heightened sense of judgment that was adding value to the consumer experience. Due to the proliferation of largely undifferentiated mass-produced consumer goods during the late twentieth

²³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973). See the discussion of *Grundrisse* here: Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 57.

²⁴ Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, p. 57.

²⁵ Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away – The Invention of Modern Shopping* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 5.

century, the tactile ability of a prosumer to appraise similar products became a valuable component of the consumer experience.

This shift toward a more assertive and perceptive position within an emergent experience economy was also reflected in the development of Jean Baudrillard's early thinking around the role of consumers. In 1968 Baudrillard published *System of Objects* in which he described the primacy of the symbolic and sign value of a consumable object over its functional or exchange value.

Baudrillard described how a consumer would be so overwhelmed by the symbolic and sign values of an object that they would be effectively blinded, unable to understand anything about the means of production or the supply chain that had brought this object to them. As a way to describe this blindness toward production, Baudrillard characterized consumer culture, as having the "tendency to regress to a point anterior to real social processes, such as work, production, the market, or value."²⁶

Five years later however, when Baudrillard published *Mirror of Production*, he had shifted his focus to describing ways in which such an imbalance between production and consumption needed to be redressed. Baudrillard criticized Marx for being overly fixated upon production while overlooking consumption, and as a result "interiorizing" his understanding. By contrast, Baudrillard sought to open up a more dialectical understanding of consumption in relation to production. Tellingly, Baudrillard relied upon the metaphorical language of transparency and vision. He described how he sought to break through the interiorized mirrors of production to allow a clearer view beyond, to be able to link what he conceptualized as the front and back of the chain of production and consumption.

While the savvy consumer was presented as a knowing participant aware of their position within this economic system, they appeared increasingly opaque and inscrutable to others. During the late 1960s numerous supermarkets began to sponsor research that would help them to better understand how consumers moved through stores. One such report stated that compared to the far

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Systems of Objects* [1968] (New York: Verso, 2006), p. 175.

more predictable circulation patterns of shoppers twenty years prior, today's shoppers' movements were enigmatic.²⁷ The report ascribed the consumer's individualized behavior to the fact that now consumers were more likely to want to touch and see products themselves in order to make a choice rather than relying upon the judgment of store clerks as they had been more likely to do in the past.²⁸ The report further stated that, "Two decades ago, the path of a customer shopping the grocery store usually consisted of a straight line from the store entrance to the nearest clerk who filled the customer's grocery order ... But the advent of the super market and of self-service brought fringe challenges ... The simple one-line concept of the shopping pattern began to evolve into a complex zig-zag, in-and-out design rivaling an abstract work of art."²⁹

The idea that a consumer might appear more enigmatic and unpredictable to a retailer was also reflected in a growing sense of distrust on the part of consumers who increasingly wished to exert their judgment in appraising products. Consumer trust and perceived risk were particularly pertinent to the catalog showroom format which was premised upon the assumption that a product's image in a catalog was inadequate when given the alternate option of a tactile showroom appraisal. To this end, in 1970, a group of marketing researchers published a study that claimed that the majority of consumers felt that mail order retail was too risky because of their "inability to examine the item."³⁰

²⁷ Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 241.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³⁰ Spence Homer, James Engel and Roger Blackwell, "Risk in Mail Order and Retail Store Buying," *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 7, No 3 (August 1970), p. 364.

Deregulation of the Architecture Profession

A key attribute of the emergent experience economy was the assertion that a post-industrial society would inevitably shift focus from producing goods to producing services.³¹ This followed the prevailing trend toward vertical restructuring where manufacturing would become more closely connected to a blossoming expansion of associated services. This vertical restructuring often drew architects into closer arrangements with their clients. In addition, continued deregulation applied pressure from multiple directions on architecture as a cohesive profession. Defenders of free-market principles denounced the historic monopoly of the profession while many critics from the left similarly advocated for less professional control in order to attain greater user input in the design process.³² Regulatory bodies attempted to ease this swelling tension by framing the profession as service oriented. As a profession less focused on the end product and more focused on providing a service, architecture would be positioned as a process that could fit fluidly within a variety of scenarios, including large corporate systems. This focus on services fundamentally altered the way in which consumers and producers related to one another, drawing them together into a closeness that became a key component of the experience economy. This section seeks to examine the implications of this phenomenon within the architectural profession generally and then in regard to Best Products more specifically.

As markets were increasingly deregulated during the 1970s, antitrust legislation was strengthened in ways that began to impact various professions. After a series of court cases in 1975 and 1977 that tested the power of professional regulatory bodies, the Supreme Court of the United States clarified that the American Bar Association was not exempt from antitrust laws as a

³¹ Toffler, *Future Shock*, p. 221.

³² Magali Sarfatti Larson, George Leon and Jay Bollick, "The Professional Supply of Design: A Descriptive Study of Architectural Firms," *Professionals and Urban Form*, eds. Judith Blau, Mark Gory and John Pipkin (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), p. 252.

professional entity.³³ This antitrust focus upon professions had begun with the American Bar Association's prohibitions against members advertising their legal services. Soon after, the Justice Department made it clear to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) that it was the last remaining major professional regulatory body to undergo reform, that its current protections were precarious and that it was being closely monitored.³⁴ This threat swiftly led the AIA to abandon a series of internal membership regulations that were deemed barriers to free competition. The AIA adopted its first major change by ending its long-standing ban on advertising, provided their member's advertisements for architectural services were "dignified," did not appear on television and did not include photographs.³⁵ The AIA's second major change was to remove their ban on construction contracting. This change increased the potential scope of architectural services by allowing much greater financial involvement in a project. Architects could now officially act as designer-builders, which in the words of one AIA executive, was merely, "catching up to the reality of what architects are increasingly doing."³⁶ Many considered John Portman to have pioneered this professional duality, mixing the role of architect and real estate developer dating back to the early 1960s.³⁷ Changes to the AIA code of practice moved his previously controversial activities into the leading edge of this professional change.³⁸ The AIA's deregulatory trajectory was further solidified by a 1979 case in which the court decreed that the organization could not maintain rules that prohibited a member architect from supplanting another architect's job once hired.³⁹ This was a key decision that resulted

³³ The new rules about professional institutions were an attempt to conform to guidelines set forth by the United States Supreme Court in June 1977, in the case of *Bates and O'Steen v. the State Bar of Arizona*, in which the high court held that bar associations could not legally restrain lawyers from advertising.

³⁴ Paul Goldberger, "Architects Will End Ban on Advertising," *New York Times* (May 25, 1978).

³⁵ Goldberger, "Architects Will End Ban on Advertising."

³⁶ William Blair, "Should Architects Become Builders and Developers?," *New York Times* (August 10, 1980).

³⁷ Charles Rice, *Interior Urbanism – Architecture, John Portman and Downtown America* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

³⁸ Paul Goldberger, "Architects Widen Traditional Role to Give Clients Business Service," *New York Times* (January 4, 1977).

in separating the previously monolithic understanding of an architect's work into a sequence of distinct, divisible tasks.⁴⁰ After updating their code of practice to reflect these changes, the AIA then published the guide *Development Building: A Team Approach* that grasped at this sea change by encouraging members to envision themselves as entrepreneurial "coordinators" who maintained the central managerial position within a broadened scope of services.⁴¹ This expansive view of the architect's role set within a broader field of dissolving boundaries was noted at the time by architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable when she observed that the architect was now "going to join these clients, in a much changed relationship. He will not only serve them, he will be one of them."⁴²

While addressing external legal challenges to professional regulation during the 1970s, the AIA also faced significant internal discord as it attempted to negotiate these changes among dissenting factions within their membership ranks.⁴³ The AIA had largely been founded on the premise that a builder and a client were adversaries and that it was therefore the purview of the architect to act as referee between these two parties. However, during the 1970s, the boundaries among all these parties were increasingly overlapping. It became more challenging to assume that an architect was adequately disinterested to act as a referee. The authoritative characterization of

³⁹ Andrew Saint, *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 159.

⁴⁰ The legal actions against professional regulation in the United States were similarly mirrored in the United Kingdom, suggesting the scope of this broader trend within the profession. A drawn-out investigation by the Monopolies Commission against the mandatory fee scale of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) was probed as overly protectionist and against the public interest throughout the 1970s. The Monopolies Commission eventually mandated that the fee scale be reduced from mandatory to recommended thereby weakening the market cohesion of the profession. As in the United States, the RIBA faced similar discord among its own ranks. Disagreement grew between its more traditional salaried architects who formed their own lobbying Salaried Architects' Group and the competing faction of members representing themselves as the Architects in Industry Group as well as the Association of Consultant Architects. As the 1970s unfolded, gradually the faction of entrepreneurial consultant architects edged out the salaried architects within the RIBA. One commentator noted how, "more out of desperation than zeal, goaded by the government to abandon monopoly and less fettered than before by the reservations of its salaried membership," the RIBA resignedly loosened their regulations in a bid to allow their members to obtain more work. This deregulatory trajectory was furthered by the efforts of the New Architecture Movement founded in 1975 in London. Among other activities, this lobbying group provided evidence to the Monopolies Commission, encouraging them to rule against the RIBA's protectionism. Such discord generated from within the profession's institutional center as it tried to grapple with deregulation, further undermined a cohesive sense of professional authority, as it splintered into a more diffuse and diversified service-based profession. See, Saint, *The Image of the Architect*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴² Ada Louise Huxtable, "Nothing is the Way it Was," *New York Times* (February 11, 1973).

⁴³ Paul Goldberger, "What's at Stake is Control Over the Building Process," *New York Times* (May 15, 1988).

architect-as-referee softened toward the slightly more adaptable architect-as-mediator.⁴⁴ In line with this shift, Spiro Kostof's edited volume, *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, was published in 1977. Kostof made the case for understanding the role of an architect as a shape-shifting figure of mediation.⁴⁵ But establishing the more amenable purview of the architect-as-mediator among such an expanding and increasingly competitive field became a contentious task.

The AIA attempted to take a conciliatory position that would appease both its more entrepreneurial as well as its protectionist members worried about incursions from “unregistered persons who offer architectural services.”⁴⁶ In 1972 architect Wendell Rossmann published his professional handbook *The Effective Architect* in which he lamented, “Our society, being quite cognizant of the surrender of some of his authority to others, will now almost instinctively seek out the contractor for advice first.” Bemoaning the shrinking professional purview of the architect, Rossmann concluded, “The very sober subjects of engineering and construction are now in the hands of someone else. The architect is left with the difficult defense of the artistic value.”⁴⁷ The pressure from adjacent fields which had splintered away and grown into significant areas of specialization, such as interior decorating and urban planning, continued to aggrieve many members who felt that reframing their profession in terms of services had made architecture more vulnerable to unlicensed incursions. Such deregulation was characterized by Robert Geddes, Dean of Princeton's School of Architecture throughout the 1970s, as “deprofessionalization.”⁴⁸ Facing an onslaught of requests from affiliated design consultants to join the AIA's licensing umbrella, the AIA established a task

⁴⁴ “Architectural Malpractice Suits Reported Increasing 20% a Year,” *New York Times* (February 12, 1978).

⁴⁵ Spiro Kostof, “Preface,” [1976] *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, ed. Spiro Kostof (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Saint, *The Image of the Architect*, p. 156.

⁴⁸ William Blair, “Should Architects Become Builders and Developers?,” *New York Times* (August 10, 1980).

force to study the issue in 1984.⁴⁹ In the resultant report, the AIA attempted to appease their disgruntled members by rebuffing the licensing of affiliated design consultants as an unwise professional dilution.⁵⁰ As a taste of the discontent, architect George Lewis, who was a director of the AIA's New York chapter, quipped about what distinguished him from an interior decorator. He remarked, "We, as architects, are here to give professional services, not to sell furniture."⁵¹ During this tumultuous period of professional upheaval, a broad range of architects contributed to the melee that was, in the words of Reyner Banham, "a real orgy of professional self-abasement."⁵²

The Service Profession

In response to the professional tumult brought about through deregulation, many architects began to reorganize their practices. The historical vision of an architect as a singular force who unified the conceptualization of form with the organization of construction continued to fracture. Architecture critic Paul Goldberger declared the year 1974 as a turning point, marking Louis Kahn's death as the moment when the professional focus on singular heroes needed to finally come to terms with increasing diffusion.⁵³ Goldberger pointed to the success of Kohn Pederson Fox Associates as typical of this emergent change in practice.⁵⁴ Kohn Pederson Fox Associates not only designed buildings, but also provided a range of other related but distinct services such as assisting clients with feasibility studies, site selection, building diagnostics, and post-occupancy studies. The expanded

⁴⁹ "A national campaign to license interior designers has been undertaken by the American Society of Interior Designers. Officials of the society, a professional organization with 20,000 members, say that although licensing has been discussed for almost 20 years, the increasing complexity of the field makes it more urgent now ... Anyone could still be called a decorator ... The society wants to establish the legal definition ... so that consumers can distinguish among architects, decorators and interior designers." "Move to License Interior Designers," *New York Times* (January 23, 1986).

⁵⁰ "Move to License Interior Designers," *New York Times* (January 23, 1986).

⁵¹ Rosemary Kent, "Is Decorator a Dirty Word?," *New York Times* (September 29, 1974).

⁵² Dell Upton, "Architecture in Everyday Life," *New Literary History*, Vol. 33, No 4 (Autumn 2002), p. 709.

⁵³ Paul Goldberger, "Architectural Soup," *New York Times* (December 30, 1979).

⁵⁴ Paul Goldberger, "Architects Widen Traditional Role to Give Clients Business Service," *New York Times* (January 4, 1977).

scope created by these ancillary services was described by Eugene Kohn as, “all of the things that are part of a building, from economics, and marketing to image and esthetics.”⁵⁵ Goldberger described this as a form of “packaging” architecture within a broader scope of services that had been subdivided into discrete tasks.⁵⁶ Sociologist Robert Gutman observed how this wide range of ancillary architectural services had long been a part of a typical architect’s work, however, it was not until the late 1960s that architects themselves began to think of them as distinct and divisible.⁵⁷ This emphasis upon a service-oriented approach was rendered imperative by the recession that was punishing an underemployed architecture community by the mid 1970s.⁵⁸ This growing tendency toward diversified services was not without its grumbling detractors. Mounting tension over the economic pressure to understand architecture as a series of divisible services was expressed within innumerable debates that erupted in professional outlets. At issue was whether architects should describe themselves as providing services or creating products. Architect John Reynolds reacted with a staunch, “We sell services, yes, but let’s not fool ourselves, we are also selling a product.”⁵⁹ Whereas Donald Canty, editor of the *American Institute of Architects Journal*, noted that architects closely aligned with their clients’ interests could no longer think of the building as the product of just their own labors.⁶⁰ A decade earlier Reyner Banham had presciently described this oncoming tumult. In Banham’s telling, a service profession was less glamorous and less visible to the public but perhaps more powerful behind the scenes. He described how, “Conceivably there may be less glory

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Similarly, architect Virgil Carter described in 1977 how architecture had become a series of “diversified services.” Ibid.

⁵⁷ Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice – A Critical View* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), p. 3.

⁵⁸ Paul Goldberger, “Architects Widen Traditional Role to Give Clients Business Service,” *New York Times* (January 4, 1977).

⁵⁹ Goldberger, “Architects Widen Traditional Role to Give Clients Business Service.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

involved than in being able to sign one's name to everything as 'designer' but there may be more useful work done and better service rendered to the public."⁶¹

In close connection with the growing focus on the architectural profession as a purveyor of services, an increasing tendency toward renovation projects developed during the 1970s. The *New York Times* characterized the "rehabilitation movement" that expanded across the decade as one that required architects committed to servicing existing buildings rather than designing new ones.⁶² Just as in other building sectors, new homebuilding decreased during the late 1970s in the face of an economic downturn, pushing more homeowners toward renovation.⁶³ In 1977, architect Raymond Kappe summarized this shift by saying, "Every indication these days points to prevailing public sympathy for slowdown, no-growth, small-is-beautiful policies. It seems that we are looking at the next ten to twenty-five years as a period to recycle, reclaim and rehabilitate rather than one which compounds the growth philosophy of the 60s and early 70s."⁶⁴ Firms such as Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates (HHPA) began to specialize in this type of architectural work. Engrossed in a practice known largely for their renovations, Hugh Hardy wrote in 1977 that, "architecture is retreating from the concept of the buildings as objects."⁶⁵ HHPA's renovation work was often acclaimed for its subdued mastery of the retiring act of acquiescence. In describing a renovation project that HHPA undertook in St. Louis in 1977, a local newspaper detailed how the deferential firm, "saw no need to take the original architect on in battle – it is as if they knew he would win anyway, so they chose instead to give in gracefully at the start, and work as hard as they could to

⁶¹ Reyner Banham, "Design by Choice," *Design by Choice*, ed. Penny Sparke (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), p. 101.

⁶² Carter Horsley, "Architecture Firm's Fortune Rises on Conversion Tide," *New York Times* (December 2, 1979).

⁶³ Ruth Rejnis, "Wanted: Home Restorers," *New York Times* (July 23, 1978).

⁶⁴ Paul Goldberger, "Institute of Architects Keeps Ban on Advertising and Contracting," *New York Times* (June 9, 1977).

⁶⁵ Hugh Hardy, Malcolm Holzman and Norman Pfeiffer, "It is Wrong to Preserve Old Buildings Academically and Scientifically as Yesterday's Stage Sets for Today's Players; We Must Change Them Purposefully, yet Respectfully, To Meet Modern Needs," *Architectural Record* (August 1977), p. 90.

give the impression that they had done nothing at all.”⁶⁶ For his part, Hardy was quick to point to recent underlying economic and regulatory shifts that were driving the field toward this service-oriented approach of adaptation and renovation. Hardy noted, “Until recently the economics of real-estate development always favored new construction over re-use. Tax laws, lending policy, construction methods, and design philosophy all once conspired to make the re-use of existing buildings appear to be more costly than demolition and replacement.”⁶⁷

Among several regulatory changes that began to encourage building renovation was the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 that incentivized rehabilitation over demolition through federal grants. The Act also created the National Institute of Building Sciences that was mandated to apply building science principles in order to encourage the reduction of construction waste. This included promoting certain building methods that improved performance through renovation. Similarly, throughout the 1970s the National Trust for Historic Preservation was actively updating building codes toward greater flexibility in order to better facilitate renovation work.⁶⁸ This type of pressure and attention resulted in the Department of Housing and Urban Development issuing a rehabilitation guidelines document in 1980, which further accelerated this increase in renovation work. As emphasized in the guidelines, modifications to the Change of Occupancy Rule that had been in effect in many building code jurisdictions during the late 1970s significantly eased the burden of renovation work. Previously, altering the use of an existing building would trigger the onerous requirement to update an entire building to the current code standards of new construction. However, beginning in the late 1970s amendments to this rule were allowed. Such policy changes represented yet another aspect of the profound deregulatory shift underway in America.

⁶⁶ “Art Museum in St. Louis Spends \$6.6 Million for Subtle Face Lift,” *New York Times* (December 26, 1977), p. 35.

⁶⁷ Hardy, Holzman and Pfeiffer, “It is Wrong to Preserve Old Buildings,” p. 90.

⁶⁸ The National Trust for Historic Preservation held their first national conference on building code reform in 1974.

Conservative economists had been an important part of the push for these changes. Many spoke out against what they felt were the overly burdensome building code regulations that had stifled the adaptive re-use of existing buildings. Economists Charles Field and Steven Rivkin published *The Building Code Burden* in 1975 that argued in favor of a policy shift toward loosening building code regulations in order to encourage more efficient use of existing buildings.⁶⁹ Similarly, economists Sharon Oster and John Quigley published an article in 1977 that argued in favor of deregulating building codes in order to encourage more innovative use of existing buildings.⁷⁰ Additionally, such changes to the building code were mirrored by the loosening of the tax code in accommodating renovation work, particularly within the context of historic preservation. In 1975 the Internal Revenue Service ruled that nonprofit organizations that were formed in order to promote an appreciation of history through the acquisition, restoration and preservation of historical or otherwise significant buildings could qualify for tax-exempt status.⁷¹

Best Products and Client Empowerment

Best Products occasionally constructed new buildings but more often adapted a wide range of existing structures to create its showrooms. They were sensitive to the fact that the, “acquisition of existing showrooms was less expensive than constructing new showrooms” and made calculated financial decisions with this in mind.⁷² When discussing their work for Best Products, SITE often framed this adaptive re-use as a theoretical position. SITE described such projects as if they were an

⁶⁹ Charles Field and Steven Rivkin, *The Building Code Burden* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1975).

⁷⁰ Sharon Oster and John Quigley, “Regulatory Barriers to the Diffusion of Innovation: Some Evidence from Building Codes,” *Journal of Economics*, Vol. 8, No 2 (Autumn 1977).

⁷¹ Mortimer Caplin, “Federal Tax Policy as Incentive for Preservation,” *Saving Large Estates: Conservation, Historic Preservation, Adaptive Re-Use*, eds. William Shopsin and Grania Bolton Marcus (New York: Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, 1977), p. 18.

⁷² Best Products Board of Directors meeting minutes, (June 11, 1982), p. 3, Best Products Archive, Folder 171, Series 1.1. This was also reiterated as follows, “The strategy behind sales centers is to minimize construction costs by moving into existing buildings and renovating them to meet our needs ...” *Best Times newsletter*, Vol. 6, No 1 (January 1981), p. 4, Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

assembly of disparate component parts. To this end, James Wines would characterize SITE's role as an assembler of parts rather than as a designer. In describing this approach, Wines compared SITE's work with Robert Rauschenberg's "Combine" series of collaged art works. Wines described this parallel by saying, "He didn't 'design' the bed – and he certainly didn't ask the manufacturer to make a certain kind of bed to fit his vision of painting – but, instead, with very little physical exertion, he radically changed the meaning of the bed and the meaning of the painting. Our conditions of transformation in architecture are parallel to this process. To NOT design a building is, for us, a strong act of assertion."⁷³ In SITE's assessment, adaptive re-use was a deliberate act of acquiescence on the part of the creator, allowing the user to then step forward. In various descriptions, SITE emphasized that within an assembly of disparate components, it was the much-vaunted user whose experience would envelope the assembly and create a coherent sense of continuity.⁷⁴

Best Products took full advantage of the deregulatory changes reshaping architecture toward a more deeply service-oriented profession. Perhaps the most significant change was to subdivide their architectural needs into specific tasks, allowing them to advantageously move certain design services in-house, while giving them greater flexibility in engaging outside professionals on particular aspects of their building projects. Beginning in 1972, Best Products' Board of Directors decided that they needed closer control over the growing expenses associated with acquiring land and creating showrooms and changed the way that they employed architects. The ability to better manage such expenses was especially pressing given the corporation's accounting policy of treating start-up costs as expenses.⁷⁵ Previously, when the volume of construction was still relatively low, the

⁷³ Transcribed interview with SITE (no date), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 1338, Series 8.1.

⁷⁴ Alison Sky of SITE stated that, "The reuse of buildings is something we are very interested in. Buildings that take on new life through periods like these have transcended through a period of time, and people have found reasons to reuse them." Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines & Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 601, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁷⁵ The Best Products Board of Directors wrote, "The Chairman then presented a summary of operating results for the six month period ended December 31, 1972 and for the same period of the previous fiscal year. He pointed out that sales had increased at a rate greater than that of net income due to the number of new showrooms opened during the period and the corporation's policy

management of construction expenditures had been handled in a somewhat ad hoc manner with a handful of architects employed as needed. James Wines described this early period when working on SITE's first design for Best Products by saying, "In the beginning we were, in a sense, the construction division and the Lewises were willing to go along with the experimentation that it took to do it."⁷⁶ However, soon after, desiring to make their building projects more economically efficient, Best Products began internalizing the design and construction management.⁷⁷

The Best Products Real Estate and Facilities Development Department was established at the head office to oversee the acquisition of new land, design showroom prototypes, coordinate permitting processes, and manage construction. It was an employee of the Best Products Real Estate Department that would coordinate the showroom development among, "construction managers and architects, lawyers, realtors and developers."⁷⁸ One such employee, Gary Hall, described how he would, "do whatever it takes to see that the showroom is built to Company specifications and that it opens on time, within budget."⁷⁹ Hall described how he was in charge of scheduling each project, setting deadlines, managing the site investigation, coordinating with engineers and working with local jurisdictions to obtain permits, all tasks that could otherwise be completed by an architect. Hall would only briefly consult with architects as needed. He described for example, the time they required the services of an outside architect in the uncommon case where, "plans for the new Montgomeryville showroom were changed to allow for a sales center operation, and were revised

of treating start-up costs as an expense." "Regular Meeting of the Board of Directors minutes" (February 1, 1973), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 165, Series 1.1.

⁷⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines & Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 577, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁷⁷ The Best Products Board asked that, "management should explore the possibility of establishing and operating a real estate subsidiary charged with the duty of recommending sites to the Corporation, and once selected, taking such action on behalf of the Corporation as may be necessary to erect at such site an appropriate showroom." "Special Meeting of the Board of Directors" meeting minutes, (February 24, 1972), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 164, Series 1.1.

⁷⁸ "Real Estate and Construction: Making the Right Moves at the Right Time," *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. VI, No 1 (January 1981), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

once again to create an experimental showroom design for a full-size operation that has four departments, rather than six.”⁸⁰ Similarly, John Penn, another employee of the Real Estate and Facilities Development Department, described how, “It’s up to us to make sure the showrooms are built on time and at the least possible cost.”⁸¹ He further elaborated how his employees within the department were constantly called upon to showcase “technical and management expertise in the field of construction.”⁸² In addition to employing five construction managers, the department also employed an in-house electrical engineer, a construction facilitator, a fixtures coordinator, an equipment engineer, a plans coordinator, and several draftsmen.⁸³ The degree to which the in-house department decreased the need for an architect’s involvement did not go unnoticed by the professional architectural community. After Best Products opened a showroom in Houston in 1975, according to one journalist, the local AIA, “met to try to prevent projects like that, that took jobs away from real architects from ever happening.”⁸⁴ Similarly, architectural critic C. Ray Smith reported on the opening of the same Houston showroom by noting the displeasure of local architects at being left out, saying “they take it as attacks on their profession for anyone to make sculpture, art,

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸¹ “Real Estate and Construction: Making the Right Moves at the Right Time,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. VI, No 1 (January 1981), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁸² “Real Estate and Construction: Making the Right Moves at the Right Time,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. VI, No 1 (January 1981), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2. Similarly, another Best Products employee, Ann Nigro, described her role as an in-house project coordinator as wide ranging and typically needing little, if any, outside assistance. “My job includes design layout, ordering, scheduling, and planning in advance for problems that may arise. I line up carpenters, electricians, and fixtures companies who buy and remove our old fixtures. And of course, we all pitch in to help clean, price and restock.” “Some Unique Jobs,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 2 (February 1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 882, Series 5.2.

⁸³ The Best Products Real Estate and Facilities Development Department included: Dan Barzel, construction facilitator; Sandy Fischer, fixtures coordinator; John McKee, equipment engineer; Doug Bailey draftsman; Mike White, plans coordinator; Jeff Blackwell, Ralph Patch, Eric Johnson, Swain Lucas and Dave Casale, construction managers; and Vonnie Loving, in-house electrical engineer. “Real Estate and Construction: Making the Right Moves at the Right Time,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 6 No 1 (January 1981), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁸⁴ David Robbins, “SITE,” *Interview*, *New York* (September 1980). James Wines emphasized this division when he told a journalist in 1979 that, “Conventional architects resent us.” Scott Edwards, “Some of the Best Buildings Look a Bit Odd,” *Sun-Tattler* (August 22, 1979).

or display out of the idea that, for instance, a roof leaks – as if that had only to do with the craft of building ...”⁸⁵

With the establishment of in-house design expertise, the more limited ways in which Best Products engaged with architects focused on generating a mutually collaborative experience. It was assumed that the client had a significant amount of expertise and would therefore participate closely with the architects in the design process. Hugh Hardy often spoke of his clients having significant know-how to contribute. In Hardy’s descriptions, the client’s competence was based not upon training but upon experience. More specifically, Hardy described how clients could draw from deep personal wells of visual literacy, saying, “Some architects believe that their role is to educate clients who are unwashed and illiterate visually and need the education... We don’t do that.”⁸⁶ Hardy’s business partner, Malcolm Holzman similarly recognized the client’s expertise by saying, “The Lewises are what I call ‘creative directors.’”⁸⁷ Holzman expanded on this relationship, describing the Lewises’ Socratic management style. “They would not tell you what to do, nor push you in a direction; but through asking certain questions, indicate certain things to you. And you could resolve them. Its direction through thinking, not direction by saying do this or do that.”⁸⁸ Holzman continued by saying, “During the design process for the Best headquarters, I became accustomed to Sydney Lewis’s questions. He often used direction by inquiry to move a discussion forward.”⁸⁹ Holzman marveled at the Lewises’ personal willingness to be available to work closely with their architects

⁸⁵ Michael Bzdak, “Indeterminate Façade.” *The Critical Edge*. edited by Tod Marder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 144.

⁸⁶ Mark Matousek, “The Thespian Touch,” *Metropolis* (March 1985), p. 26.

⁸⁷ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Malcolm Holzman, Volume 3 (December 9, 1981), p. 1767, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1767.

⁸⁹ Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: Images Publishing, 2008), p. 181. A further description of Sydney Lewis’ interest in being closely involved with the architectural design process came from his friend Agnes Gund who described in a eulogy at his memorial service how, “Sydney commissioned a number of important projects during his life and with every one of them he was not just a distant underwriter but an active partner in the project, one who was as willing to be involved as the architects wanted him to be.” Sydney Lewis Memorial Service at MoMA, VHS tape (March 22, 2000), Lewis Archive, Folder 1631, Series 5.6.

when he might have otherwise expected to be confronted with slow-moving committees.⁹⁰ James Wines described a similar working relationship wherein he felt free to call the Lewises in the midst of design development to ask them to “do something” and they would promptly, “Send word down somewhere. If it was the building department, for example, that was not cooperating, they would make it clear that they were bringing jobs to the community. They would appreciate cooperation and they put pressure on when the pressure was needed.”⁹¹ Alison Sky described SITE’s working relationship with Best Products in which the Lewises were similarly indispensable to the design process to the point where she no longer referred to them as clients, but rather as patrons. “It seems that we celebrate the achievements that patronage, great patronage has made possible, historically. If not for great patronage Venice wouldn’t have been built, and the Lewises – we call them our patrons as opposed to clients [*sic*]. I think the difference is that kind of chemistry that exists between the artist and patron and it takes both – it takes both the artist and the patron beyond in a certain way, because it’s that kind of combination of energy and support. In a sense you transcend your limitations, making great works possible, and no great works of art were ever created by a committee, by a bureaucracy.”⁹² In this situation it was understood that the architects were close collaborators working under the experienced direction of their clients. Hardy summarized this relationship in a 1984 interview, saying, “In our practice, we don’t present ourselves as experts – we don’t believe in the artist-hero in that sense. The client is not a vehicle for our vision, because we believe they know as much as we do about what and why they are building. There are two things I

⁹⁰ Holzman, “When I discovered that the last remaining section of New York City’s West Side Highway was on the verge of demolition and that some light stanchions were available, I immediately phoned Sydney Lewis. Our conversation was similar to the one about the elevator cabs; I was again the one asking questions. His answer now graces the west side of the Virginia Museum. Two retrofitted light stanchions symmetrically frame Paley’s other gates on the West Wing’s park side, its only access point along this façade. In hindsight, I now recognize the ease of these transactions. Today I am more likely to be consulting with an art-selection committee than collaborating with a single, fast-acting, decisive donor.” Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: Images Publishing, 2008), p. 186.

⁹¹ Dana Cuff, “Seven New York Architects and Their People,” *Architect’s People*, eds. Russell Ellis and Dana Cuff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 71.

⁹² Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines & Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 573, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

detest in our profession: self-glorification and running down clients. I realize it's old-fashioned, but I really do think architecture is a service profession."⁹³ Hardy furthered this observation by describing how this mixing of interests invariably led to a desirable stylistic eclecticism and often generated a greater appreciation for architecture understood as an assembly of disparate parts. "The notion of the collage, of the architectural work as a collection of disparate parts rather than as a perfect whole, is crucial to Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer's work."⁹⁴

Hugh Hardy's understanding of architecture as a service profession extended to his focus on developing social rapport with clients. In Hardy's accounting, interpersonal experience between architect and client was a crucial foundation for architecture. According to Hardy, "The key to understanding such things is experience; I mean being curious about people, not the experience of building buildings."⁹⁵ The architects involved with Best Products invariably emphasized their ability to work for clients as a social art. James Wines similarly noted how he had, "been a personal friend of the Lewises for more than twenty years" before he began working on Best Products showroom designs. After they began to collaborate, Wines described that they "became, personally, quite close."⁹⁶ Wines continued his description of their close relationship in a letter to Frances, saying "yours and Sydney's friendship, encouragement, patronage and ever-present sense of humor have been a foundation stone in my life."⁹⁷ Upon learning of Sydney's death in 1999, James Wines, who eulogized Lewis at his memorial service, wrote a condolence letter describing how, "Sydney was more than a friend; he was a symbol of intelligence and generosity that helped sustain my belief in

⁹³ Cuff, "Seven New York Architects and Their People," p. 71.

⁹⁴ Paul Goldberger, "Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates," *New York Times* (February 20, 1977).

⁹⁵ Cuff, "Seven New York Architects and Their People," p. 71.

⁹⁶ James Wines, "I had been a personal friend of the Lewises for more than 20 years, and it started primarily because of their interest in the visual arts. I was a sculptor when I first met them. They had purchased some of my sculpture, we got to be very friendly and there were certain artists that they were just drawn to simply because of personality, as well as work. We became, personally, quite close ..." Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines & Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 570, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁹⁷ Condolence letter from James Wines to Frances Lewis (March 13, 1999), Lewis Archive, Folder 1519, Series 5.3.

humanity.” Similarly, Denise Scott Brown described the Lewises as the epitome of “tea and sympathy clients” with whom they could develop a personal rapport.⁹⁸ In relating the story of how the Lewises first came to hire them to design a showroom in 1973, Scott Brown described how she and Venturi had gone out for dinner with the Lewises in New York as they were already known to each other through their mutual interest in Art Deco collecting. Scott Brown and Venturi subsequently unburdened themselves about the worrying lack of architectural work in the office and described how, “the next day they called us and said we have a building for you. And it was just kindness - just pure kindness.”⁹⁹ Venturi called Best Products their “first commercial client.”¹⁰⁰

James Wines, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown among many others regularly joined the Lewises at their Virginia Beach summer house, nicknamed Villa Medici West, to socialize together over long summer weekends.¹⁰¹ Art curator Patterson Sims described these social gatherings, saying, “Modernism and post-modernism were refreshingly mixed. One looked across the

⁹⁸ Denise Scott Brown, “Over most of our careers, who was our clientele were those tea and sympathy clients I described. And the very high culture clients who were involved in the making of art with the artist and those sustained us in amazing ways. I can remember once, Sydney and Frances Lewis who are the epitome of that high culture client.” Scott Brown’s description of “tea and sympathy clients” references the 1953 play *Tea and Sympathy* by Robert Anderson that revolves around the sympathetic kindness shown by a teacher at an elite prep school toward her student. Filmed interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, “Our Clientele,” Web of Stories, accessed June 8, 2018: <http://www.webofstories.com/play/robert.venturi.and.denise.scott.brown/83;jsessionid=F08F33678EBAF8C176C0CBDA818F007E>

⁹⁹ Denise Scott Brown, “They took us for dinner one night in New York and to a show, which is a nice thing they used to do, and we had much of our office, it was 1973 and like many architects, much of our office was on unemployment, they were still coming into the office because they were allowed to, doing their own work there, and also, once a week, doing some work for us, which in the terms of unemployment they could do. And I told Frances and Sydney this story and it was not totally without, um I was not totally innocent in telling them, I hustle almost all my life, I’ve had to, to help support this place, so I was telling them knowing that they hired architects, but the next day they called us and said we have a building for you. And it was just kindness. Just pure kindness. We love them eternally. And think of them with great gratefulness.”, Filmed interview with Scott Brown and Venturi, “Our Clientele.”

¹⁰⁰ *Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown*, Film, United States: Michael Blackwood, 1998.

¹⁰¹ A letter from Venturi to Sydney and Frances Lewis, dated July 25, 1977 described a weekend spent together at the Lewis’ summer house, Villa Medici West, “Dear Sydney and Frances, A note to thank you again for our happy weekend with you and your friends and your staff and your art not to mention your weather. And Frances, thank you especially for your gracious and unforgettable celebration of our anniversary and your thoughtfulness in having Sandra for Jimmy.... Bob, Denise, Jim” Lewis Archive, Folder 1518, Series 5.3.

room or porch and saw Robert Venturi chatting with Twyla Tharp, Denise Scott making Lucas Samaras smile, and Frank Rich and Lillian Nassau debating theater and Art Nouveau.”¹⁰²

Lewises and the Exchange of Goods and Services

The Lewises treated their patronage as a loose exchange in which the value of what they were seeking was not fixed but rather always negotiable. They developed an idiosyncratic habit of bartering cultural goods and services in exchange for their own merchandise. In this way, they were able to forge more direct connections between themselves as the consumers and the artists and architects as the producers. Retail historians have described barter and trade as a form of exchange in which, typically, the difference between a producer and a retailer begins to blur and diminish.¹⁰³ The Lewises’ tendency toward bartering went back to their relationship with Andy Warhol. A 1969 description had Andy Warhol hanging out with artist Les Levine when Warhol suddenly asked Levine whether or not he had a TV aerial on the roof. If not, Warhol informed him, he knew a man in Virginia who liked to trade appliances and furniture for art. Levine reportedly said, “I could certainly use a couch,” to which Warhol replied, “You could probably use a lot of things. When he comes to New York, I’ll give him your number and tell him to call you. His name is Sydney.”¹⁰⁴

Beginning with Warhol, Sydney Lewis developed the practice of negotiating payment with Best Products merchandise in exchange for art.¹⁰⁵ While riding in a cab, Lewis had come across an ad that Warhol had placed in the *Village Voice* newspaper in 1963. A voracious reader, Frances

¹⁰² Patterson Sims, transcript of eulogy for Sydney Lewis (March 18, 1999), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 1608, Series 5.5.

¹⁰³ Clare Wright Barker and Ira Dennis Anderson, *Principles of Retailing* [1935] (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1941), p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ David Bourdon, “Plastic Man meets Plastic Man,” *New York Magazine* (February 10, 1969), pp. 44-49.

¹⁰⁵ “Thus, the timing of renewed interest in the arts coincided exactly with the rise of the Pop Art Movement. In fact, a classified advertisement in the *Village Voice* led the Lewises to Andy Warhol who advertised that he would trade his paintings for anything. The Lewises were among those who responded to the ad, and made an appointment to see him., this beginning a friendship that has lasted for more than two decades.” Frederick R. Brandt, “Building a Collection for the Twentieth Century: The Sydney and Francis Lewis Collection of Late Twentieth-Century American Art,” *Apollo* (December 1985), p. 484.

described how Sydney made a regular habit of systematically reading through all of the news and then continuing on until he had finished all the classified ads at the back of every newspaper he read.¹⁰⁶ The ad he came across read, “I will trade my paintings for anything.”¹⁰⁷ Frances later recalled her response to the ad. “Well, as retailers, Sydney and I had access to quite a bit of ‘anything.’”¹⁰⁸ Intrigued, Lewis contacted Warhol who initially hoped he could trade a painting with Lewis in exchange for some Kodak film. However, Best Products did not carry that particular film. They eventually settled on exchanging one RCA television set and a vacuum cleaner for a silkscreen portrait of Frances.¹⁰⁹ In a 1966 letter between the two, Lewis described the new projectors that he had recently sent to Warhol, stating, “Of course, as previously agreed, I will accept payment in paintings.”¹¹⁰ This continued over several years. The relative value of artwork to merchandise was negotiated on a continual basis. Warhol’s assistant, Paul Morrissey wrote to Lewis in 1966. “If you could send us a bill for the projectors, Andy could figure out how many pictures to do as each picture costs \$500.00. We have the bill for the slide projectors. Andy doesn’t know how many pictures you might like.”¹¹¹ By all accounts it was a casual form of exchange in which a running tab was continually amended. In 1968 Lewis wrote to Warhol, “it would appear that as of this date there is an outstanding balance of \$3,840.07. Don’t worry about it because I am sure we can make this up in pictures of one kind or another in the future. If not, then please reserve an extra portfolio of the soup cans, which we will give instead. Also, please save us two low numbered sets if possible.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Fred Brandt filmed interview with Frances Lewis, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Collection, 2001, accessed October 23, 2018. <https://www.vmfa.museum/piction/11617470-110658703/>

¹⁰⁷ Ellen Posner, “Sydney Lewis Knows Best,” *Art & Auction magazine* (October 1985), p. 165.

¹⁰⁸ Gertrude Vanderbilt Award speech script (April 17, 1990), Lewis Archive, Folder 1626, Series 5.5.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Booth Conroy, “Modern Art and the Sultans of Swap,” *Washington Post* (January 3, 1988).

¹¹⁰ Letter from Sydney Lewis to Andy Warhol regarding the projectors and the acceptance of payment in paintings (July 11, 1966), Lewis Archive, Folder 108, Series 1.

¹¹¹ Letter from Paul Morrissey, Andy Warhol Films Inc. employee to Sydney Lewis regarding appliances (August 4, 1966), Lewis Archive, Folder 108, Series 1.

From initial encounters with Warhol, Sydney's bartering practices expanded to include, at first, the brokering agents of the art world. Patterson Sims, who was then working in the New York gallery of Ivan Karp, began dealing with Lewis trading art in exchange for merchandise. Sims described "sometimes-daily calls with Sydney about the tiniest of details, the minutiae of artistic aspirations for coffee makers, dishwashers and TV sets."¹¹³ Sims noted his astonishment that Lewis, the busy leader of a large company, would not assign an employee to deal with such minutiae. After continuing to work with Lewis on these arrangements, Sims concluded that Lewis did this largely for pleasure, enjoying the absurd act of negotiating coffee pots for paintings with outsized art world personalities. Obliging the artists, Lewis would increasingly use the informality of these arrangements to circumvent the gallerist's customary cut. Painter Theodoros Stamos pleaded with Lewis in a letter, "I would like to avoid giving my dealer his thirty-five per cent and would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to say nothing about the price etc., and if he asks me about it, (I will not tell him of the sale figure) but you know how these things get around. I'll say that we have made a deal, since you are in the mail order business and I'm bartering with you!"¹¹⁴ Whether the trade was above or below board, the Lewises' bartering soon became ubiquitous within the New York art world at the time, leading artist Chuck Close to declare, "No one bought a washing machine or a dryer, or a refrigerator or a TV set in the art world for a very long period of time."¹¹⁵

In addition to using this unconventional exchange as a means to circumvent gallery commissions whenever possible, this informality also had added tax advantages. Lewis was described admiringly in a *Forbes Magazine* profile as having artfully bartered his way to a significant

¹¹² Letter from Sydney Lewis to Andy Warhol regarding an outstanding balance owed to the Lewises in exchange for pictures and a set of Marilyn Monroe prints that Frances would like to present to the University of Michigan, (October 13, 1968), Lewis Archive, Folder 108, Series 1.

¹¹³ Patterson Sims, transcript of eulogy for Sydney Lewis (March 18, 1999): 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 1608, Series 5.5.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Stamos to Lewises regarding the sale of artwork bartered for merchandise (no date), Lewis Archive, Folder 96, Series 1.

¹¹⁵ Sydney Lewis Memorial Service at MoMA, VHS tape (March 22, 2000), Lewis Archive, Folder 1631, Series 5.6.

corporate art collection which he was then able to depreciate for tax purposes.¹¹⁶ The financial incentives associated with establishing corporate art collections were rooted in the 1970s and subsequently expanded during Ronald Reagan’s administration.¹¹⁷ Among the most common art investment tax incentives utilized by companies was accelerated depreciation. This proved to be even more effective when the art value was matched to the already low wholesale costs of the bartered goods traded at retail value.¹¹⁸ Art was considered particularly amenable to tax-relevant depreciation because in the words of Internal Revenue Service officer Michael Finley, “A work of art (as contrasted with a mere wall decoration) would not generally have a limited or determinable useful life.”¹¹⁹ Issues around the taxation of art collecting are explored in more detail in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. The point here is that a relaxed treatment of regulations around exchange aided and abetted the possibility of treating creative producers and their products in more malleable ways, blurring the determination between whether someone was providing a good or a service.

Having initially met the Lewises as a sculptor, James Wines also began bartering his art for Best Products merchandise. In 1966, James Wines wrote to Sydney Lewis to say that he could show him his available sculptures and in exchange he was considering different TV sets.¹²⁰ A few months later Wines wrote back to say, “Many thanks for all the goodies that have been arriving at such a rapid rate. We have plugged in about everything by now and live in a totally automated state... At

¹¹⁶ Ghruitie Brown, “Artful Barter,” *Forbes Magazine* (July 9, 1990).

¹¹⁷ Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture – Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 159.

¹¹⁸ Wu, *Privatising Culture*, p. 215.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹²⁰ James Wines, “Many thanks for the brochures on T.V. sets. The idea is getting to me and I will discuss the matter in more detail next time I see you. You should sort of decide which work of mine interests you and we can start figuring things out. I shall show you pictures of available sculptures.” Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding the exchange of art for goods, (April 8, 1966), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1. A similar exchange between Sydney Lewis and James Wines was found in a letter from 1965. Sydney Lewis wrote, “However, in the event you might be interested in trading with us, we will be glad to set up an account for you and you could order as you desired. This idea might come in handy, particularly around Christmas time to help you fill your gift needs. In any event, give it some thought – and I will be glad to work with you as you desire.” Letter from Sydney Lewis to James Wines, (October 15, 1965), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

the end of this letter I include a list of new items we would like to consider. Please give me an exact amount of where we now stand.”¹²¹ The flow of appliances and artwork back and forth continued unabated for some time: requests for air conditioners, stereo equipment, and tricycles were continually reconciled against lists of sculptures and drawings.¹²² The personal quality of this arrangement again allowed for the circumvention of the typical commission imposed by gallerists. In 1968 Wines wrote to Lewis, “I believe I can get around their commission on this piece. Even if they did demand a commission I think it could be settled by some item of merchandise as before. However, I think the swap between us could remain personal considering our relationship as friends.”¹²³ Another letter similarly expressed the desire to maintain the vague and informal character of the exchange with Wines writing, “Concerning the gallery projector and screen. The less said the better. I don’t want to show the brochure to make them too aware of prices as I am always afraid when they realize I have released a \$2500 net-to-me piece they will make some re-trench fuss about the amount their commission should have been.”¹²⁴ This informal system of bartering seems to have encouraged Wines’ expansion into architecture as he sought to switch from trading his art objects into design services. In 1967 Wines wrote to Lewis, “Please give me an accounting to relieve me of the cold sweat I am in that, in reality, you own me outright. Heaven knows what the bill with you must be by now. Please start thinking of some work I can do for you. I really enjoy working with a particular context in mind - maybe some permanent installations in either your home or store. I am creating almost exclusively for architecture now which is my bag and would be interested in

¹²¹ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding Best Products Merchandise and gallery commissions (August 17, 1966), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹²² Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding thanks for air conditioners and requesting a balance on his account (June 21, 1967) with a list of account from Sydney Lewis to James Wines (July 11, 1967), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹²³ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding purchase of artwork, commissions to gallery and request for account balance with Best products (February 11, 1968), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹²⁴ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding Best Products merchandise and gallery commissions (August 17, 1966), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

extending this idea to my commitments to you.”¹²⁵ In another instance, Wines described how his transition from sculpture to architecture was driven by the Lewises’ expectation for Wines to continue working and creating, regardless of the medium, saying, “through all of this transition, even though my agents and everybody else began to fall away like flies, the Lewises perceived that I might come up with something yet.”¹²⁶ Wines kept the Lewises closely updated as he shaped SITE from informal gatherings of artists in his studio into a formalized collective, inviting Sydney Lewis to sit on their inaugural Board of Directors.¹²⁷ In the midst of formalizing SITE, Wines wrote to assure Lewis, “I am working very hard these days. The S.I.T.E. group that I spoke to you about seems to be evolving into a reality. We meet every week, ideas are flowing, there has already been considerable interest generated from the outside, and work is being done. Please give me a little notice of your next visit to the city and I will plan a meeting of the group for you to attend. I think you will be interested.”¹²⁸ A few months later, Wines wrote to Sydney with an update. “I want to show you all the information concerning S.I.T.E. and get your advice on our plans.”¹²⁹ The continued exchange between Wines and Lewis rolled easily into a loan to help bankroll the early development of SITE in 1969. Asking for a loan “to help with pressing and immediate needs of the organization,” Wines assures Lewis that, “even if S.I.T.E. doesn’t work out successfully, I can always rely on you to consider repayment of the loan in sculpture whereas the bank is generally less sympathetic to such exchanges.”¹³⁰ As SITE grew, this mode of exchange continued apace with Wines and Lewis

¹²⁵ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding jewelry, architecture and requesting an account balance, (November 24, 1967), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹²⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with James Wines & Alison Sky (September 16, 1981), p. 570, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

¹²⁷ Letter from Sydney Lewis to James Wines to accept an invitation to join the first Board of Directors of SITE (July 3, 1970), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹²⁸ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding the formation of SITE (May 7, 1969), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹²⁹ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis (November 30, 1969), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

bartering architectural design services for appliances. Wines assured that, “The wheels are really rolling on the new Best building concept,” while in the same letter then making a request for a “list of appliances we need for SITE.”¹³¹

Once established, this pattern continued to expand into the ways Best Products engaged architectural services. Best Products officers proposed keeping SITE on an open retainer fee to facilitate their ongoing services.¹³² They were particularly interested in using this retainer fee arrangement to guarantee that the public relations services that SITE was providing through the many interviews they were giving would remain aligned with their interests, saying, “A retainer fee would keep them focused on what Best Products wants and needs in terms of on-going publicity regarding the buildings. We would exercise more control and therefore be better able to plan and coordinate activities.”¹³³ Wines in turn, clearly understood the value of such services to Best Products and searched to translate such value into compensation in architectural terms. In a letter written just before Sydney agreed to hire Wines to re-design the façade of his Richmond showroom, Wines outlined to Lewis how the value of such an act should be understood. Wines argued that the publicity alone should be considered adequate exchange for the extra cost of construction and delay in re-opening. “Please think seriously about our conversation. I really, in retrospect, feel that publicity surrounding a cultural event centered on the opening of new BEST stores would probably be enough compensation, (even on business terms), to warrant any small delays that making the stores unique would entail. Inevitably the addition of environmental art to a project would create certain difficulties; but, I would hope the favorable results would outweigh the investment and make it

¹³⁰ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis on SITE letterhead regarding the formation of SITE and requesting business advice along with a list of toys for Christmas for his daughter, (November 30, 1969), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹³¹ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding the Best building concept with a list of appliances needed for SITE (March 29, 1971), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹³² Memo regarding SITE being hired to do marketing materials, put on a retainer, “Suggested Projects Relating to BEST Special Showrooms.” (June 12, 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 1331, Series 8.1.

¹³³ Memo regarding SITE being hired to do marketing materials, put on a retainer, “Suggested Projects Relating to BEST Special Showrooms.” (June 12, 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 1331, Series 8.1

worthwhile.”¹³⁴ SITE’s understanding of their relationship to Best Products continued to develop through the 1970s. Increasingly, SITE spliced and parsed their activities into ever more discrete categories. In a letter to a Best Products officer written in 1978 on behalf of SITE, Michelle Stone described how they were distinguishing between pure labor and creative work. “Enclosed please find a breakdown of our hourly rates, inclusive of minimal overhead. This fee schedule is based specifically on the special projects related to the combined efforts of SITE and Best. The amount includes just pure labor, and we have actually not charged any fee for the creative development of projects. This I guess you could consider our contribution. The only reason I bring this up, is because if we were to work on a commercial project for Best such as the catalog, or corporate identity program, the charges would be calculated much differently. Neither one actually has anything to do with the other, so I just did not want you to be comparing budgets and trying to find some correlations.”¹³⁵ In understanding their work for Best Products as a service, SITE increasingly divided their activities. In this way, they were better able to consider alternative and loosened forms of exchange.

Self-Service in the Best Products Showrooms

The emergence of the experience economy embedded self-service as a required component of retail design. The particularly strong association of self-service with catalog showrooms was promptly absorbed into the public’s shopping expectations. One *Chicago Tribune* journalist declared in 1978 that to shop at a catalog showroom meant categorically that there would be “no eager salespeople volunteering to help you when you enter.”¹³⁶ Similarly, a Best Products promotional brochure from 1979 advertised emphatically that self-service was integral to its showroom design.

¹³⁴ Letter from James Wines to Sydney Lewis regarding publicity generated by a cultural event surrounding the opening of new BEST stores, (March 27, 1972), Lewis Archive, Folder 118, Series 1.

¹³⁵ Letter from Michelle Stone to Ed Slipek of Best Products (May 15, 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 1331, Series 8.1.

¹³⁶ Winski, “Catalog Showroom Hot Retailer.”

The brochure stated, “The showroom is designed for a minimum of sales help on the floor.”¹³⁷ Earlier in the twentieth century, self-service had been incorporated into retail design in ways that emphasized the underlying economic efficiency. However, by the 1960s and 1970s, retail design increasingly framed self-service as a more immaterial consumer experience, an opportunity to position oneself within a broader flow of goods. Shopping was presented as a series of tasks, some of which remained invisible to the consumer and some of which the consumer needed to participate in directly, but all of which allowed the consumers to position themselves within an undifferentiated flow of goods and services.

A gradual shift away from full service retail had been initiated in America during the early twentieth century but began in earnest during the rapid consumer market expansion after World War II. The first Piggly Wiggly supermarket opened in Memphis, Tennessee in 1916. This proved to be a breakthrough moment for self-service retail design.¹³⁸ So much so that the following year the US Patent Office awarded Piggly Wiggly founder Clarence Saunders with a patent for his layout of a “self-serving store.” The patent was based upon Saunders’ design for a one-way circuit through the space: channeling customers through a turnstile, continuously guiding them through a closed maze of aisles which they could not short-circuit, and then funneling their exit through a narrow checkout. Such self-service supermarket retail formats continued to expand gradually across the United States with the noted Big Bear supermarket chain opening in New Jersey in 1932.¹³⁹ Local coverage of the opening of Big Bear’s first store fixated upon the novel way in which customers were expected to serve themselves, describing how awestruck customers were milling around “with baskets on their arms, content to wait on themselves.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Best Products promotional brochure (c. 1979), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

¹³⁸ Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping: An Architectural History*, p. 275.

¹³⁹ In 1932 one of the first supermarkets opened in the US named Big Bear located in Elizabeth, New Jersey. News coverage fixated on the novelty of the self-service. Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 135.

Pioneering retailers of the early twentieth century, such as Carl Dipman, tended to frame self-service as an applied science.¹⁴¹ Inspired by Frederick Winslow Taylor's management theories being applied to factory organization, Dipman was intent upon implementing self-service as a means of maximizing the efficient flow of goods. This economic efficiency was then communicated to the price-conscious value consumer. Early supermarkets promoted themselves by congratulating customers for saving money by doing the work themselves.¹⁴² However, despite these initial forays into self-service retail, it was not until the 1950s, when retailers were faced with significant post-war labor instability and shortages that the concept of self-service took off at a much larger scale.¹⁴³ A broad range of retailers turned to self-service out of necessity. Influential American marketing executive Bernardo Trujillo, known alternately as the "Pope of Supermarketing"¹⁴⁴ and the "Prophet of Distribution," declared to receptive colleagues in 1962, "Let the consumer do the work."¹⁴⁵

However, in order for self-service to be convincing at a larger scale, it needed to be framed not merely as a form of economic efficiency but also as a social opportunity for consumers. In this way, some retailers tended to emphasize the concept of courtesy as a replacement for service.¹⁴⁶ One aspect of this shift from service to courtesy was the growing democratization of customer-employee relations. When compared to the far more deferential and hierarchical model of customer service that had been built into the nineteenth century department store, this marked a significant social shift.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 135.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴³ Joy Cushman, "'The Customer is Always Right': Change and Continuity in British and American Department Store Salesmanship, 1945-1960," *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society Since 1700*, eds. John Benson and Laura Ugolini (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 186.

¹⁴⁴ Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 399.

¹⁴⁵ Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 160.

¹⁴⁶ Cushman, "'The Customer is Always Right'," p. 186.

The “character and prestige” of department stores, that had built themselves into venerable institutions based upon full customer service, was increasingly under threat.¹⁴⁸ The reframing of self-service in social terms was observed by French retailer Rene Uhrich. He noted in 1962 that, “New formulations are appearing, unfamiliar words are entering into everyday language. Self-service is spreading, and the supermarket is becoming the housewives’ meeting place.”¹⁴⁹

The pressure of imposing additional labor upon consumers also created some backlash. There was a growing recognition that the retailer was simply transferring a burden upon the consumer.¹⁵⁰ An executive of the Sainsbury supermarket chain in Great Britain was described in one anecdote as being “accosted by a judge’s wife,” because he “had no right to expect the customer to do the work the assistants had done in the past.”¹⁵¹ In the face of consumer backlash, some retailers began to frame the benefits of self-service as not only being cost-effective and socially desirable but additionally began to present the act of self-service as being a valuable and enjoyable experience.

Best Products Showroom Design

The desire to create an interior in which a customer would be effortlessly absorbed into Best Products self-service procedures was manifested most prominently in the strategies Best Products deployed to display products. The balance between retail display fixtures and the products they contained shifted significantly during the 1960s and 1970s. Increasingly, retailers sought to restrain or eliminate almost entirely the cabinetry and cases that might become a barrier between the consumer and the product. There was an ambition for the display fixtures to seemingly disappear in

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 196.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Longstreth, *American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 35

¹⁴⁹ Rene Uhrich, *Super-marchés et usines de distribution: Hier aux Etats-Unis, aujourd’hui en France?* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 7.

¹⁵⁰ A description from 1957 stated, “The consumer has taken over the problem the retailer used to have.” Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 150.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 234.

order that the products would emerge foregrounded in the consumer's visual field. With little barrier between them, the consumer was encouraged to engage objects independently. One retail researcher of the period described this approach as a new form of "tactical merchandising" in which the customer's direct response to products guided display design decisions.¹⁵² The idea was that the product itself, particularly an unwrapped product, could become the most effective form of display. There were underlying professional and financial reasons behind this shift. While most retail interiors of the 1920s would typically have been designed, at least in part, by the building's architect, by the 1930s there was already a shift away from the reliance upon architects for this type of work.¹⁵³ A new area of specialized retail design expertise was beginning to develop that hived this work off from the architect's arena. Displaymen, who combined interior design work with the increasingly important concept of merchandising, began to grow as a cohort. As a result, focus gradually shifted from fixturing to merchandising to the point where the merchandise became its own form of display.

Financial patterns in the retail industry during the 1960s and 1970s furthered the move away from fixturing in favor of merchandising. As chain retailing expanded, more retailers began relying on sale and leaseback arrangements in order to extend their financing.¹⁵⁴ A retailer might purchase a promising property and then sell it with the provision that they could lease back the premises for their own business. In these types of arrangements, it often became less desirable for the retailer to invest in significant alterations to interior fixtures. The building was understood as a shell in which only temporary and superficial changes would be made to the interior. As a result, merchandising design became far more influential as an interior display strategy. One historian described this shift by

¹⁵² John Dawon, "Futures for the High Street," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 154, No 1 (March 1988).

¹⁵³ Richard Longstreth, *American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping: An Architectural History*, p. 198.

saying, “This was a new way of doing things. Architecture now played a lesser role in the branding exercise, while design became all-important.”¹⁵⁵

Best Products exemplified these changes, often employing sale and leaseback arrangements to finance its expansions. Similarly, Best Products established its own Merchandising Display Department.¹⁵⁶ This department was stationed within an open 23,000 square foot warehouse where they would experiment with different merchandising arrangements. Generally, the only fixtures that they used were simple movable shelves, allowing them to quickly test various product layouts. Best Products employees would experiment with different combinations and once satisfied would create a “plan-o-gram.” This was a document combining photographs and diagrams that could communicate the recommended merchandising display arrangement to each Best Products showroom across the country.¹⁵⁷ Particularly because the shelving layouts differed slightly between showroom locations, the focus of the plan-o-grams was less about how the products engaged with the specific shelving units and more about how the products related to each other in their arrangements. Over-reliance upon cabinetry and elaborate casework in creating enticing displays was thought to be overly distracting. In order to bring consumers into closer contact with products, merchandise was foregrounded over fixtures as a display strategy.

Best Products described its desire to create interior layouts where a customer would intuitively understand the expected sequence of self-service. Each stage of the process would be effortlessly apparent to a customer upon entering the showroom. Additionally, such a layout would allow the customer to understand how the flow of goods from the warehouse behind the showroom interacted with the process of self-service within the showroom. Frances called this approach in which the self-service procedure was made evident by the interior design, “the flow concept” which

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁵⁶ “23,000 Square Feet: Room to Experiment,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 9, No 5 (unknown date), p. 4, Best Products Archive, Folder 886, Series 5.2.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

she described as having been conceived by Best Products.¹⁵⁸ Showrooms were a standardized 60-80,000 square feet, separated into two distinct areas with approximately one third of the space devoted to the display of merchandise with the remaining two thirds devoted to back-of-house storage.¹⁵⁹ While the exterior of the stores varied, the interior was strictly standardized and familiar to employees and customers alike.¹⁶⁰ According to Best Products, the logic of the flow system had to be immediately legible upon entering the showroom. The partition free showroom interior, which mirrored the partition free warehouse space, was described as a merchandising asset by one Best Products officer. “The open design of the showroom allows customers to really see a lot more of what we carry when they walk in the door. We think it gets them into more of a buying frame of mind.”¹⁶¹ The panoptic layout was established, “to allow maximum visibility of each department from the showroom entrance.”¹⁶² A sense of an immediate and masterful overview of the interior was further emphasized by the addition of a central information desk at the entrance from which circulation paths radiated. This slightly raised information desk was described by Best Products as the area, “from which the customer can see every merchandising department.”¹⁶³ From this position, the remainder of the interior circulation was coded for maximum legibility and efficiency with wide tiled walkways leading customers to each of the five major departments.¹⁶⁴ In 1979 Andrew Lewis described how, “This layout is based on a computerized analysis of the movement, profitability and

¹⁵⁸ “Best Products Company – The Industry’s First Billion Dollar Baby” *Industry’s Merchandising Publication* (November 1981), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

¹⁵⁹ “Regional Retail Report – Best Products Company, Inc.,” *Wheat First Securities* (November 1971), p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ Best Products Corporate Profile (March 24, 1980), p. 6, Best Products Archive, Folder 1370, Series 9.1.

¹⁶¹ “Best Products Company – The Industry’s First Billion Dollar Baby,” *Industry’s Merchandising Publication* (November 1981), p. 54, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

¹⁶² Best Products promotional brochure (c. 1979), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

¹⁶³ Best Products showroom remodeling photographs, black and white photo prints, unidentified locations, (no dates), Best Products Archive, Folder 1310, Series 7.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

cubage storage requirements of the merchandise in the warehouse.”¹⁶⁵ Similarly, a 1979 Best Products report described, “As we plan for new showrooms, we are always looking for ways to improve the flow of traffic, both for customer convenience and increased sales.”¹⁶⁶

In addition to the flow concept, the smaller details of the merchandising design similarly prompted the customer to understand self-service as a sequence of procedures. The trappings of a meticulously managed organization were found throughout the customer experience and were considered central in establishing the self-service atmosphere. The customer was ushered into a bureaucratic system of clipboards, order forms and reference tags. A telling hallmark of catalog showrooms was the ubiquitous clipboard.¹⁶⁷ Immediately upon entering, the customer was faced with a neat stack of clipboards. The customer was meant to peruse the showroom, clipboard in hand, marking down their selection, before handing the order form to an employee who sent their request, via pneumatic tube, to the warehouse. The item was then pulled from the inventory and sent via conveyor belt to the customer waiting by the cash register. The company described this process as “customer participation.”¹⁶⁸ With this clipboard arrangement, Best Products pioneered the self-service system that became the industry standard.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Summary Report, Presentation by the Best Products Management, (June 1979), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

¹⁶⁶ Report to Best Products Employees, (1979), p. 6, Best Products Archive, Folder 762, Series 4.1. This was similarly reflected here, “The inside of the showroom is a very efficient box designed to move people and merchandise quickly,’ explained Frances Lewis, executive vice president. ‘The outside of the showroom is a different matter: it’s designed to make an impression.’” “Best’s ‘Tilt Building’ Puts Maryland Shopping Mall on the Map,” *Catalog Showroom Business* (December 1978).

¹⁶⁷ A telling hallmark of catalog showrooms, according to the trade journal *Chain Store Age* was the ubiquitous clipboard, describing, “nothing typecast the catalog showroom more than the clipboard.” “End of an Era,” *Chain Store Age*, Vol. 74, Issue 10 (October 1998), p. 54. This was similarly reflected here, “The whole idea of a customer writing up his own order, sending it back to the warehouse in a tube, having it pulled from warehouse inventory and then sent down a conveyor, started with Best Products,’ Mrs. Lewis added.” “Best Products Company – The Industry’s First Billion Dollar Baby,” *Industry’s Merchandising Publication* (November 1981), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

¹⁶⁸ “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business,” *Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 0.

¹⁶⁹ Flyer Advertising for Best Products Management Personnel (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

Furthermore, Best Products augmented the bureaucratic bent of their merchandising design with what they called, “an enhanced fact tag concept.”¹⁷⁰ Each of the approximately 13,000 display products on the showroom floor was accompanied by a large information tag encased in a durable plastic sleeve.¹⁷¹ The labels summarized each product with succinct quantitative description above the product code to be recorded by the consumer. Retail historian Rachel Bowlby described the absorbing effects of such overt labeling strategies as, “Less talk, more print; a customer who, instead of engaging in conversation with store assistants or her peers, becomes a solitary, silent reader of innumerable printed texts on packages offered for her perusal.”¹⁷² Other display design details similarly prompted the customer to the focused task of carefully analyzing the products at hand before recording the information on their own order form. In certain departments, the shelving was carpeted in order to encourage customers to pick up products without fear of scratching them on unforgiving metal shelves.¹⁷³ Similarly, most packaging was considered an unwanted barrier between the customer and the product they should want to handle. As much as possible, products were unwrapped to allow for close inspection. One instruction circulated to Best Products staff reminded them that during the busy Christmas season they should, “be sure to remove the cardboard sleeves from gift packages of nuts and cheese. Otherwise, customers have a difficult time determining what’s inside the boxes.”¹⁷⁴ Merchandising display strategy that prompted the consumer through the intended sequence, aided in the establishment of the absorbing self-service process described in Frances Lewis’ flow concept.

¹⁷⁰ Mike Shealy, Hopewell Planning Report (March 30, 1979), Best Products Archive, Folder 314, Series 1.3.

¹⁷¹ Newspaper clipping, “Best Products opens third Houston-area showroom today,” unknown date. unknown newspaper, Best Products Archive.

¹⁷² Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 194.

¹⁷³ “23,000 Square Feet: Room to Experiment,” *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 9, No 5 (unknown date), p. 4, Best Products Archive, Folder 886, Series 5.2.

¹⁷⁴ “Selling Tips for Impulse Items,” *Best Times* newsletter. Vol. 7, No 12 (November 1982), p. 5, Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

In Summary

The experience economy was based upon the rising profile of the consumer, protected from potentially domineering producers through greater access to information about the supply chain that surrounded them. Previously opaque operations that facilitated this supply chain were rendered increasingly transparent. In exchange, the consumer was expected to participate more deeply with their own labor, providing more of their own services. Deregulation increasingly fractured and subdivided entities and procedures into more discrete parts, allowing them to be re-assembled in ever more malleable and flexible ways, particularly by a more empowered, service oriented consumer. Within this context, architecture was presented as both transparent and divisible, consisting of multiple components available for the consumer's assembly. In the case of Best Products, the divisibility that facilitated self-service applied both to the consumption of the architecture as much as to the production of the architecture.

CHAPTER 3 Inventory

In 1977 Malcolm Holzman of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates received a product catalog in the mail that proved to be, in his words, “revelatory.”¹ It was a Gladding McBean catalog of terra cotta, clay pipe, and tile building products. Holzman was particularly intrigued that the company, which had been founded in 1875 in order to produce clay sewer pipes before expanding into building ornaments, was in the process of re-inventing itself, using its catalog to promote new applications for mechanical reproductions of its vast collection of handcrafted designs. Holzman described delightedly pouring over the collection of outmoded architectural products, “like a child getting a hand-me-down Tinkertoy set.”² He challenged himself to find the perfect application for the array of outdated clay units. When the catalog arrived, Holzman had been working on a design for the Best Products headquarters on the agricultural outskirts of Richmond, Virginia. Since contractors in this area had not installed terra cotta elements for several decades, a full façade mock-up needed to be erected on site to prove that Holzman’s anachronistic assembly of parts could indeed come together for the headquarters. Upon its completion in 1980, turquoise glazed terra cotta would prominently edge the cornice and base of the building’s sleek curving façade. This episode suggests the potency of certain inventory strategies in raising the visibility of an otherwise unseen product and thereby affecting a whole supply chain.

The 1970s marked a pivotal moment in inventory management. With the birth of inventory logistics, retailers began reconceiving how best to handle their stock. More inventory managers began to treat consumer demand as the primary concern rather than the previously narrower focus upon supply management. Inventory logistics became an increasingly complex field that drew a greater number of factors into consideration, including greater attention paid to the consumer’s

¹ Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: Images Publishing Group, 2008), p. 30.

² Holzman, *A Material Life*, p. 30.

presence. In turn, the consumer was encouraged to visualize their own position within a broader flow of goods continually moving between states of storage and display. Precise inventory management allowed for a rapprochement between states of storage and display that became central to the showroom experience. This chapter examines how inventory logistics became central to Best Products' success.

Inventory Management

The field of inventory management developed significantly during the 1970s. A professional field of distribution managers had begun to materialize during the late 1950s.³ At this time Peter Drucker, known as “the founder of modern management,” declared that the field of distribution logistics was the last remaining frontier of American business.⁴ This field began to solidify with the formation in 1963 of a national organization, The National Council of Physical Distribution Management.⁵ During the 1960s a major focus had been on optimizing the physical distribution of goods.⁶ It had been broadly accepted that facilitating efficient transportation was the most effective way to manage physical distribution and in so doing, keep retail operations functioning smoothly. Concentrating upon outbound logistics, the physical distribution field considered itself distinct from the complementary management field of physical supply, focused upon inbound logistics. In turn, physical supply managers formed their own distinct national organization, the National Association of Purchasing Management.⁷ This separation, in which physical distribution dictated supply, was reinforced in one of the early textbooks published in 1964, *Business Logistics: Management of*

³ Peter Lynagh, “Measuring Distribution Center Effectiveness,” *Transportation Journal*, Vol. 11, No 2 (Winter 1971).

⁴ Roy Dale Voorhees and Merrill Kim Sharp, “The Principles of Logistics Revisited,” *Transportation Journal*, Vol. 18, No 1 (Fall 1978), p. 70.

⁵ Neil Southern, “Historical Perspective of the Logistics and Supply Chain Management Discipline.” *Transportation Journal*, Vol. 50, No 1 (Winter 2011).

⁶ Southern, “Historical Perspective of the Logistics and Supply Chain Management Discipline.”

⁷ Ibid.

Physical Supply and Distribution in which the authors described how “this book deals with the two branches of business logistics, physical supply and physical distribution.”⁸ By the late 1960s however, critics were beginning to emerge within the field, arguing that too much emphasis was being placed upon physical distribution as a spatial problem to the detriment of understanding inventory management as a more multifaceted and integrated system.⁹ Logistics researcher J.L. Heskett, for example, implored his colleagues to take factors such as storage requirements into greater consideration rather than focusing exclusively on the geographic parameters of transportation.¹⁰

Compared to the 1960s, the field of inventory management underwent pivotal advancement during the 1970s, absorbing a much broader range of information. Many in the field deemed the 1970s, “the age of logistics.”¹¹ So much so, that through the 1970s and early 1980s, the term physical distribution was gradually phased out while the term logistics took its place.¹² A host of new university curricula, academic journals, textbooks, and professional organizations furthered the rapid expansion of logistics as a discipline.¹³ In the place of physical distribution, more emphasis was focused upon managing the inbound side of logistics, often referred to as materials management. One factor behind this de-emphasis of physical distribution was the aggressive deregulation of the transportation industry that occurred during the decade. In fact, the broad sweep of deregulation that transformed the American economy during the 1970s had first been initiated within the transportation

⁸ One of the most prolific writers of the time on this topic was James L. Heskett from Ohio State University. Heskett, along with Robert Ivie and Nicholas Glaskowsky, published the first edition of their textbook, *Business Logistics: Management of Physical Supply and Distribution* in 1964. Southern, “Historical Perspective of the Logistics and Supply Chain Management Discipline.”

⁹ J.L. Heskett, “A Missing Link in Physical Distribution System Design,” *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 30, No 4 (October 1966).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Roy Dale Voorhees and Merrill Kim Sharp, “The Principles of Logistics Revisited,” *Transportation Journal*, Vol. 18, No 1 (Fall 1978), p. 70.

¹² Southern, “Historical Perspective of the Logistics and Supply Chain Management Discipline.”

¹³ Ibid.

sector. Efforts to deregulate the commercial trucking and rail industries led Congress to pass the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act in 1976. This was followed shortly thereafter by the Airline Deregulation Act. The resulting increased competition and volatility within the commercial transportation sector led the field of inventory management to bolster themselves by diversifying and broadening the scope of their analysis.

With the birth of inventory logistics, more focus was placed upon understanding storage as a key state within the continuum between production and consumption. Later, during the 1980s and 1990s as the field progressed, there would be greater focus upon lean inventory management in which the goal was to reduce dependence upon storage as much as possible by creating more integrated inventory systems.¹⁴ Lean inventory systems would be geared toward continuous replenishment in which a continual flow of information between parties allowed retailers to significantly reduce their dependence upon storage within highly responsive systems.¹⁵ In such a scenario, a need for storage was considered a failure of the system. However, during the 1970s, storage was considered a crucial logistics component, as eliminating it in order to achieve a lean system was not yet a priority. Instead, storage was often understood in its proximity to the consumer, often recognized as an elastic buffer that could accommodate the vagaries of consumer demand.¹⁶ The characteristics of storage became a focal point within inventory research. Donald Bowersox, a pioneer in supply chain management, attempted to correct how storage had been overlooked in the field, by placing storage at the center of the distribution system. He declared in 1969 that, “A realistic view of a physical distribution system is that the network consists of one or more storage points

¹⁴ Robert Benjamin and Michael Scott Morton, “Information Technology, Integration and Organizational Change,” *Interfaces*, Vol. 18, No 3 (May/June 1988), pp. 86-98.

¹⁵ Jean Kinsey, “A Faster, Leaner Supply Chain,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 82, No 5 (December 2000), pp. 1123-1129.

¹⁶ Leonard Nakamura, “The Measurement of Retail Output and the Retail Revolution,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 32, No 2 (April 1999), pp. 408-425.

interconnected by a series of transportation linkages.”¹⁷ Similarly, management researcher Creed Jenkins declared in 1968 that warehouse storage remained overlooked as “one of the few areas of business where major savings are yet to be attained.”¹⁸

As an important tool to address fluctuations in consumer demand, storage became connected more closely with the consumer. Writing in 1975, two inventory management researchers declared that “the consumer is king” before describing how sales lead inventories.¹⁹ Inventory management researchers began to conceptualize inventory as a complex system that converged with the consumer’s experience, noting that, “Logistics is, in turn, composed of a number of subcomponents or ‘key activity’ centers. These activity centers vary with the nature of the overall enterprise, but all are ultimately concerned with the classical time and space utilities relevant to the provision of goods and services to some end-user or consumer.”²⁰ This reorientation of the consumer’s experience to a position at the apex of a broad logistical network was similarly echoed in the writing of Donald Bowersox from 1969. Bowersox described in the *Journal of Marketing* how inventory managers needed to better appreciate that inventoried products only obtained value at the moment they were brought into the consumer’s orbit. He observed that, “Individual products are properly viewed as a combination of form, time, place and possession utilities. The product has little value until form is placed in a temporal and spatial context which will provide the opportunity to enjoy the physical and psychological attributes related to possession.”²¹

¹⁷ Donald Bowersox, “Physical Distribution Development, Current Status, and Potential,” *Journal of Marketing* (January 1969), p. 69.

¹⁸ Creed Jenkins, *Modern Warehouse Management* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1968), p. 69.

¹⁹ Hiram Barksdale and Jimmy Hilliard, “A Cross-Spectral Analysis of Retail Inventories and Sales,” *The Journal of Business*, Vol. 48, No 3 (July 1975), pp. 365-382.

²⁰ Roy Dale Voorhees and Merrill Kim Sharp, “The Principles of Logistics Revisited,” *Transportation Journal*, Vol. 18, No 1 (Fall 1978), p. 69.

²¹ Bowersox, “Physical Distribution Development, Current Status, and Potential,” p. 66.

The general perception of the warehouse as a storage facility was shifting alongside the emergence of inventory logistics. As a site for inventory logistics, the warehouse interior was becoming a space where dead storage could become activated by the consumer's presence. In 1958, *Architectural Record* magazine declared, "Pure warehouses are becoming scarce. The former concept of a warehouse as a dead storage area for out-of-season merchandise is fast disappearing."²² The magazine speculated about an imminent new era of warehouse design featuring the "expanded roles of warehouses."²³ *Architectural Record* declared that warehouse storage buildings now needed to be conceived of as "an active sales tool."²⁴ The hybrid retail-storage warehouse was declared by trade press in 1964 to be "a new building type."²⁵ This expanded approach toward warehouses significantly altered the orientation of these buildings. Warehouses that combined some retail functions had been deployed before during the early twentieth century, as a means to develop better public relations for storage companies.²⁶ However, in such cases, retailing and its associated public goodwill had been used largely as a surface treatment, with storefronts tacked onto the perimeters of urban storage facilities as a gesture of civic benevolence. By contrast, the reimagining of warehouses as a means of consumer outreach occurring by the early 1960s was a far more existential change in which the relevancy of "dead storage" was being questioned. In testing the capacity of warehouses to absorb other functions, warehouse buildings were being completely reoriented, their interiors breached and subdivided.

²² Erik P. Johnson, "Service Buildings, Warehouses with Additional Functions," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 124 (December 1958), p. 133.

²³ "Warehouses Assume Expanded Roles," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 124 (December 1958), p. 129.

²⁴ Johnson, "Service Buildings, Warehouses with Additional Functions," p. 133.

²⁵ Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping – An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 278.

²⁶ A closer reading of warehouse design history and its relation to retail design should include the cold storage warehouses of the early twentieth century which sometimes featured retail space in the form of public storefronts as a means to give the storage companies a positive public image. See Michael Osman, "Regulation and Modernism in the United States, 1890-1920," MIT (September 2008).

Frank Gehry's work from the period epitomized this changing attitude. Completed in 1978, Frank Gehry's design of the Mid-Atlantic Toyota Building near Baltimore was described as appearing from the exterior as a "mundane auto warehouse."²⁷ However, on closer examination the "dual nature" of the warehouse was revealed.²⁸ Gehry described how the unexpected qualities of the warehouse were only exposed within. "On the surface I design dumb, stupid industrial buildings. But all you have to do is find that phone booth and get inside and the object becomes much stronger than it appeared at first."²⁹ Along similar lines, Buckminster Fuller described warehouses as "mines," suggesting that the vast interior potential of these obtuse boxes was just waiting to be uncovered and rendered productive.³⁰ Translated into more pragmatic and explicit terms, architects of the period such as Shean McConnell wrote urgent instructional articles in professional journals, describing the architect's need to address the changing status of the warehouse and to find new ways to incorporate space for both storage and display.³¹

Best Products' Inventory Control

Best Products was the first company to pioneer the use of computer database inventory control within the catalog showroom industry.³² It continually sought ever more precise ways to inventory its stock of approximately 13,000 different products available at each showroom location and connect this inventory to its massive nation-wide inventory.³³ Over the course of two decades the

²⁷ Edward Gunts, "Parts, Arts and Architecture," *The News American, Baltimore* (July 22, 1979).

²⁸ "Mid-Atlantic Toyota Leads the Way," *Corporate Design* (July 1982).

²⁹ Gunts, "Parts, Arts and Architecture."

³⁰ Nicholas Grimshaw, "The Future of Industrial Building," *Journal of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce* (December 1984), p. 49.

³¹ Shean McConnell, "Elements of Town Planning, No 18: Warehousing and Distribution," *Official Architecture and Planning*, Vol. 32, No 2 (February 1969).

³² Best Products Annual Report to Employees (1981), p. 7, Best Products Archive, Folder 764, Series 4.1.

³³ "Best Products Links Growth to Service and Soft Sell," *The News America* (October 8, 1978).

company continued to update its inventory management systems with improved technological apparatus. The use of innovative inventory systems allowed the company to calibrate a highly responsive relationship between storage and display, permitting Best Products to boldly proclaim, “matching merchandise with demand – is the basis for Best Products’ success.”³⁴ Much like deregulatory economic policies of the period that were rebalancing the economy toward the market-driven end of the spectrum, Best Products’ application of database inventory control was conceived as a system oriented around the consumer. Best Products described its application of these emerging management systems as an effort to create situations in which inventory management was increasingly exposed to the consumer whereby it would eventually become a component of the consumer’s retail experience. As a low-margin business, this close attention to inventory management was particularly crucial to Best Products’ survival.

Repeatedly the Lewises emphasized that the most crucial element of the catalog showroom business was reliable inventory control. Once a customer was primed by the enticing images in a catalog, they needed to trust that when they arrived at a showroom their expectations would be fulfilled and they could walk away with the anticipated product. The link between the catalog’s promise and the showroom’s delivery was sacrosanct. If not, the consumer’s willingness to participate in the distribution of their own goods would be lost and the system would disintegrate. According to the Lewises, all other retail models were fortunate to have more leeway in stocking merchandise. For them however, the promise of the catalog rendered its tight inventory control imperative. In this respect Sydney compared catalog showrooms to department stores, pointing out that department stores did not depend upon the reliability of their stock as their main attraction and therefore could have a looser relationship between inventory and storage. Lewis said, “I think it is very important for us to understand that we’re not a department or a specialty store. People do not get

³⁴ Best Products flyer advertising for management personnel (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

mad at these stores because the store does not have what they thought could be purchased there.”³⁵

Lewis suggested that while department stores could lure customers with their displays alone, catalog showrooms relied instead upon a closer connection between storage and display.

In their first year of business in 1956 the Lewises devised a manual form of inventory control to determine how much product needed to be re-ordered from suppliers. Every night after closing the Lewises and a handful of employees would begin the laborious task of counting the remaining merchandise and checking it against the sales receipts in their inventory ledger. As a result, the merchandise on the warehouse racks was constantly being handled. Sydney described how, “every package was unwrapped by us and put on the shelf and put in the inventory book, marked with handwritten tickets... all items sold by us were then taken off of the inventory book by us and had to be reordered that evening.”³⁶ This initial approach was thorough and comprehensive, with Sydney describing, “We really could sense what we had, what we sold, and what we would need. There was not the right hand not knowing what the left hand did, because both hands were doing everything.”³⁷ Frances emphasized the manual quality of their initial inventory approach when she described quickly reaching its limits by saying, “No longer could we count on our fingers.”³⁸

After one season of using this intensively manual system, the Lewises devised an inventory scheme based around manila folders. Initially all sales receipts, whether they were customer sales receipts, customer mail order forms or supply order forms were kept in one manila folder, clipped together by product. These receipts and sales orders were indexed against one another to determine how many products were still on the warehouse shelves and how many had been purchased by customers. Frances’ breakthrough moment came when she thought to subdivide their inventory

³⁵ Sydney Lewis, speech draft, “Merchandise Meeting,” (c. 1977-1983), Best Products Archive, Folder 1625, Series 5.5.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Frances Lewis, speech transcript (c. 1984-1993), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 1626, Series 5.5.

system into incoming and outgoing, each with its own manila folder as the genesis of an entire department devoted to the bureaucracy of inventory management.³⁹ Frances was remembered to have exclaimed, “Why not have two folders, one for stock merchandise and the other for customer merchandise.”⁴⁰

In 1963, Best Products proudly announced, “Best acquires its first ‘computer.’”⁴¹ This was a Remington-Rand Kardex accounting system that featured overlapping index cards affixed in visible files set within a filing cabinet. Each item of merchandise was represented by an index card and every time a purchase was made it was noted on the appropriate card by hand.⁴² Every product index card could be slotted into its designated drawer in a way that kept the product name exposed at the edge. The key innovation of the Kardex system was that information was arranged and displayed in a way that made it continuously visually accessible.⁴³ In fact, this Kardex system had been developed from an earlier accounting system that the Remington-Rand company called the Visible Ledger.⁴⁴ Best Products would later describe their Kardex system by saying, “Although primitive by today’s standards, the ‘computer’ is a type of accounting machine requiring cardboard cards, and represents the company’s first step toward automation and data processing.”⁴⁵ Adjacent to the warehouse office

³⁹ “Best Began in the Book Business,” *Best Progress* newsletter (November 1, 1974), Best Products Archive, Folder 1602, Series 5.5.

⁴⁰ Best Products, anonymous speech (c. 1984-1993), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 1626, Series 5.5.

⁴¹ “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business,” *Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 3.

⁴² Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Sydney Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1183, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁴³ A retailing consultant described the primary benefit of this index system, saying, “These... are so arranged that a portion of the card or sheet is always visible.” Clare Wright Barker and Ira Dennis Anderson, *Principles of Retailing* [1935] (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1941), p. 251.

⁴⁴ AEC Info, Kardex Systems Inc., accessed October 21, 2018. https://www.aecinfo.com/1/company/05/47/32/company_1.html

⁴⁵ *Best Times* newsletter, *Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

occupied by the Lewises, a dedicated room was created to house this Kardex accounting system, which they referred to as their “data processing center.”⁴⁶

In 1967 the Lewises invited an IBM consultant to visit their offices. Subsequently, the Remington-Rand Kardex system was replaced with an IBM accounting machine.⁴⁷ The Lewises and their accountant worked with the IBM consultant to customize the installation to their needs.⁴⁸ Not unlike the Kardex system, the IBM system also relied upon a card to represent each item of merchandise. These cards were stored on a large tray. After a sale was made, an accountant would run the relevant card through a punch machine. At the end of the day, the punched cards would be collected and processed through the IBM accounting machine that would tally and print a daily summary report.⁴⁹ Although this would later become commonplace, Best Products’ use of accounting machinery was initially considered unusual among their peers in the catalog showroom industry. Frances remarked how their competitors “used to laugh at us,” for focusing so intensively on applying accounting machinery to their inventory.⁵⁰ Sydney similarly described how, “We used to go to meetings carrying these big printouts, because we wanted to know when we sat down what we had done with various inventory items... we could tell what we had sold... the only thing anybody else could tell is that they had hunches about what they had and hadn’t sold.”⁵¹ With the integration of the IBM accounting system, Best Products had completed the switch from its initial physical inventory system to a perpetual inventory system. This way, instead of relying upon deriving sales figures from continually counting physical stock, the perpetual inventory system worked in reverse, deriving

⁴⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Herbert Crumley, Vol. 2 (October 27, 1981), p. 1144, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁴⁷ *Best Times newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁴⁸ Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Frances Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1199, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁴⁹ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Sydney Lewis (November 4, 1981), p. 1183, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁵⁰ Best Products Annual Report to Employees (1981), p. 7, Best Products Archive, Folder 764, Series 4.1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

physical stock counts from daily sales figures.⁵² Such a perpetual inventory system allowed for a more immediate indication of how inventory was responding to consumer demand.

By the early 1970s, after a few iterations of computerized inventory database management techniques had been introduced at Best Products, the scale of operations began to increase dramatically. The scale and speed of inventory management had transformed their warehouse storage facilities into decentralized distribution centers. As storage became more closely calibrated to market demands, the relationship between storage and distribution increasingly overlapped. In 1973 Best Products shifted from an IBM inventory system to a Honeywell 6000 mainframe computer.⁵³ Honeywell, often referred to as one of the seven dwarves laboring under IBM's Snow White, had emerged among its competitors with two database inventory innovations. Firstly, Honeywell had become a worldwide leader in innovating the application of new digital storage materials. Specifically, the Honeywell digital storage system used by Best Products relied upon magnetic tape. Some early users of magnetic tape inventories reported discomfort at having to give up the punch cards that had displayed specific inventory information so immediately and tangibly.⁵⁴ One of the main challenges associated with Best Products switching from a card inventory system to a magnetic tape inventory system was that magnetic tape was a sequential access storage medium. Because of this, Best Products employees were now prompted to conceive of the inventory as broad sweeping sequence of consumer demand rather than a more targeted item-specific conceptualization of the inventory.

⁵² Barker and Anderson, *Principles of Retailing*, p. 243.

⁵³ *Best Times newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2. The connection between Best Products and Honeywell was further strengthened when they hired Howard Brooks in 1974 to be their Data Processing Manager. He had previously been a manager at Honeywell. See "Welcome," *Best Progress newsletter* (November 1, 1974), Best Products Archive, Folder 1602, Series 5.5.

⁵⁴ Computer History Museum, Visible Storage, Magnetic Tapes, accessed October 21, 2018. <http://www.computerhistory.org/visiblestorage/1940s-1960s/secondary-storage/magnetic-tapes/>

The second area in which Honeywell excelled during the 1970s was in establishing, “a centralized view of de-centralized control” with their database management. This particular balance between centralization and de-centralization dovetailed with Best Product’s growing need to allow individual showrooms to be more responsive to their regional markets while maintaining some degree of centralized oversight. When Best Products installed the Honeywell 6000 it declared this development as groundbreaking, stating, “Company revolutionizes its information processing with installation of main-frame computer in Ashland, Virginia offices.”⁵⁵ Immediately, this inventory management allowed them to expand their showrooms into the massive California market.⁵⁶ The Honeywell 6000 system gathered point-of-sale information from each showroom automatically, creating a perpetual inventory. This eradicated the need for employees to meticulously punch in the figures from sales receipts that had previously been mailed from each showroom to the corporate headquarters.⁵⁷ Instead, magnetic reel from the showroom registers was sent daily to the corporate headquarters in Richmond where within twenty-four hours they could create a national summary report.⁵⁸ Best Products described how this change allowed for greater regional decision making coupled with centralized oversight, saying, “Regionalization of the company’s showrooms provides the opportunity for more decision making by regional operations managers (now regional sales directors), which makes the company’s operating structure more flexible and responsive to the needs of showrooms in each region.”⁵⁹ The Honeywell 6000 allowed for more nimble responsiveness to consumer demand. By 1980, Best Products had become completely dependent upon its inventory

⁵⁵ Best HQ Fact Sheet (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1277, Series 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Best Times newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁵⁸ “Dishing Up the Data,” *Best Times newsletter*, Vol. 3, No 4 (April 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 874, Series 5.2.

⁵⁹ *Best Times newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

technology, stating, “Only computerized systems and communications can control the volume and detail of our systems.”⁶⁰

As Best Products persistently updated its inventory control technology, they also adapted their customer inventory interface. The company continually sought ways to improve this interface, pursuing efforts to render it more responsive and transparent. In 1980, anxious about the upcoming high-volume Christmas shopping rush, there was concern about a lag between a showroom’s warehouse inventory and the updated customer inventory interface.⁶¹ In company correspondence, there is a description of the goal of “capturing” the customer by better integrating inventory and showroom experience.⁶² The plan was to integrate “in-showroom mini-computers” scattered throughout the showroom display area. Placed on small tables interspersed among the shelving display units, a customer would be able to type the name of a product into the computer terminal. These Order Reservation Stations would allow the customer to access a continually updated inventory and immediately receive assurance that the product they sought was indeed in stock at the back of that particular showroom. The customer was then able to put a temporary hold on that item while their order was being processed and handled. Before the addition of this self-service innovation, customers had to inquire about the availability of specific products at one centrally located Customer Service desk. With the addition of many Order Reservation Stations dispersed among the shelving units, the process of checking inventory became more fully integrated within the display of merchandise. These self-service computer stations became a prominent element within the display landscape, further solidifying the link between the showroom and warehouse.

⁶⁰ Best Products Memo, Human and Administrative Resources (1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 315, Series 1.3.

⁶¹ Best Products Memo, Point of Order Proposal, from Ed Wotring to Andrew Lewis (February 6, 1979), Best Products Archive, Folder 314, Series 1.3.

⁶² Best Products Memo, Point of Order Proposal, from Ed Wotring to Andrew Lewis (February 6, 1979), Best Products Archive, Folder 314, Series 1.3.

One of the central concerns for a high volume, low margin retail operation was effectively deploying inventory logistics in order to maintain an efficient relationship between centralized buying and decentralized distribution. The question of how much the transitional stage of storage, waiting between buying and distribution, should be decentralized remained important and contentious. Best Products was noteworthy among retailers of the period for combining a centralized buying operation based out of Richmond that was linked through its inventory system with highly decentralized storage. In this way, their distribution was skewed more closely toward the customers.⁶³ Best Products' goal was to keep as little in central storage as possible, and to keep whatever storage was necessary as close to the customers as possible in the individual showroom warehouses.⁶⁴ This tendency to keep storage decentralized and customer-oriented made Best Products an outlier within the catalog showroom industry in particular. One journalist described how, "Unlike other catalogers, Best locates its warehouse where merchandise is sold to save on transportation and handling."⁶⁵ Despite a vastly expanding network of showrooms across the United States, Best Products only maintained two Central Distribution Centers, one near Richmond, Virginia that opened in 1971 and one in Arlington, Texas that opened in 1973.⁶⁶ Reliance upon central distribution centers had been pioneered during the 1920s by large American retail chains and remained in widespread use during the 1970s.⁶⁷ However, even though central distribution centers tended to provide relatively low overhead storage costs, Best Products minimized its reliance on such centralized storage.⁶⁸ Best Products' Central Distribution Centers tended to be used only selectively

⁶³ Best Products Memos regarding various Sale-Leaseback agreements (multiple dates), p. 13, Best Products Archive, Folder 551, Series 2.7.

⁶⁴ D.W. Baker, *Not So Much a Warehouse...* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972), p. 14.

⁶⁵ Winter, "Best's Better Idea," p. 23.

⁶⁶ *Best Times newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁶⁷ Richard Longstreth, *American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 77.

⁶⁸ D.W. Baker, *Not So Much a Warehouse...* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972), p. 14.

for seasonal merchandise or certain bulky items that had become available with, “early buys and volume discounts” that would need to spend more time in storage.⁶⁹ Generally, Best Products preferred to rely upon showroom warehouse storage as much as possible.⁷⁰

In 1980, Best Products further decentralized its storage strategy when it introduced its Automated Sortation System use of storage trailers. They devised an internal distribution system that significantly eliminated the time products spent in centralized storage, instead keeping the flow of objects in near constant motion until they reached the showrooms. With this new system, trucks delivering goods from suppliers, arriving at the Central Distribution Centers would load their goods directly onto the appropriate trailers waiting in the parking lot, destined for specific showrooms, rather than first unloading into the building.⁷¹ Activity was thus largely transferred from the building to the parking lot. Once these truck trailers reached their target showroom destination they then plugged into the showroom warehouses to disgorge their contents, unsettling storage into a near constant state of flux. For the small percentage of goods that were not directly transferred into trailers and were instead transferred into the Central Distribution Center for longer-term storage, Best Products experimented with mobile shelving. After 1979 Best Products deployed a Roll-On/Roll-Off storage cart design whereby goods were stored on carts with wheels for ease of handling.⁷² But even these goods, stored on mobile carts, were the exception to the rule of near-constant movement. The company described how in largely bypassing the storage function of the Central Distribution Center building, this development was, “revolutionizing the methods by which merchandise is distributed to

⁶⁹ “Central Warehouse Gains But Not for All Operators,” *Nationwide DSN Report* (March 11, 1974), Best Products Archive, Folder 727, Series 3.8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “Best Turns 21,” *Annual Report to Employees* (1978), p. 12, Best Products Archive, Folder 761, Series 4.1.

⁷² Mike Shealy, Hopewell Planning Report (March 30, 1979), Best Products Archive, Folder 314, Series 1.3.

showrooms.”⁷³ In other cases, where possible, Best Products encouraged suppliers to deliver the goods directly to showrooms; a form of drop shipping that further eliminated the need for centralized storage.⁷⁴

In 1979, after much consideration, Best Products decided to update its inventory accounting strategy.⁷⁵ Initially the company had employed the First-In-First-Out accounting method, which was the standard international inventory accounting practice.⁷⁶ This accounting practice tracked the typical physical flow of inventory in which a company would sell their oldest stock first.⁷⁷ When Products switched to the inverted Last-In-First-Out (LIFO) accounting method, it was following a wave of nearly two-thirds of all American retail and distribution companies during the 1970s.⁷⁸ The LIFO method no longer directly correlated physical flows of goods with recorded accounts of those flows. The premise was that the value of an unsold inventoried item could be recorded at its lowest possible value, while still assuming that this object was accruing inflationary value and therefore would likely have a higher value when it eventually sold. By assuming that the stored goods had the lowest possible value while, by contrast, the sold goods had the most recent and presumably highest possible value, the LIFO method tended to reduce reported corporate profits.⁷⁹ When the LIFO method was first permitted in the United States in 1938, this deregulatory change allowed companies

Additionally, Best Products employee Ben Cheseldine described the decision-making that preceded the implementation of the sortation system. See, Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Ben Cheseldine, Vice President, Distribution and Traffic, Volume 3 (November 19, 1981), p. 1422, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁷³ *Best Times newsletter, Special 25th Anniversary Edition* (Winter 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁷⁴ Catalogue Finance, Inc. Report on First Closing, (March 14, 1974), p. 9, Best Products Archive, Folder 547, Series 2.7.

⁷⁵ Best Board of Directors, Meeting Minutes (February 13, 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 167, Series 1.1.

⁷⁶ Brian Carpenter, Douglas Boyle, Yi Ren, “The Impending Demise of LIFO: History, Threats, Implications and Potential Remedies,” *Journal of Applied Business Research*, Vol. 28, No 4 (July/Aug 2012), p. 645.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 645.

⁷⁸ Elliot Zwiebach, “Industry Concerned About LIFO Accounting Changes,” *Supermarket News*, Vol. 57, Issue 15 (April 13, 2009).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

to reduce their taxes by reducing the declared value of their stored assets.⁸⁰ However, it was not until the 1970s when inflation grew rampant that many inventory-intensive businesses began taking advantage of this accounting method that reduced their tax liability by decreasing the paper value of their stored inventory.⁸¹ One economist who examined the implications of LIFO accounting when Congress first made it legal, described how storage could now be considered as “unrealized inventory profits.”⁸² When Best Products switched to the LIFO method, it immediately reduced its listed annual profits by roughly eleven per cent, with Andrew Lewis claiming that as a result, “we’ve saved about \$9 million in taxes this past year.”⁸³ The implications of applying the LIFO inventory accounting strategy suggested that the storage of unsold goods would not be understood as a profitable undertaking in isolation. Instead, it was understood that storage existed in close interconnection with consumption and that only when retail and storage operated together, would the larger enterprise be considered profitable.

Inventory Apparatus in the Showroom

The Best Products clerk took the customer’s order slip and opened a little flap in the wall behind her. They both watched as the slip was sucked away, sent rushing back through a complex network of pneumatic tubes to the storage space where another clerk was waiting to receive the order. The pneumatic system helped keep the orders flowing. By the 1960s this use of a pneumatic communication system within a retail setting was curiously anachronistic since this technology had already risen and fallen within the golden era of the department store.⁸⁴ Frances described her

⁸⁰ Brian Carpenter, Douglas Boyle, Yi Ren, “The Impending Demise of LIFO: History, Threats, Implications and Potential Remedies,” *Journal of Applied Business Research*, Vol. 28, No 4 (July/Aug 2012), p. 645.

⁸¹ Zwiebach, “Industry Concerned About LIFO Accounting Changes.”

⁸² Henry Arthur, “Inventory Profits in the Business Cycle,” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 28, No 1 (March 1938), p. 28.

⁸³ “Onto the Right Side of the Tracks,” *Financial World* (June 1, 1980), p. 45.

⁸⁴ Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping – An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 188.

decision to employ pneumatics as a communication device at Best Products as having been nostalgically inspired by her recollection of their use in the department stores she visited as a child. Lewis described how she remembered, “that department stores used to send money and sales tickets to the back office to have change made through vacuum-tubes.”⁸⁵ Lewis arranged to buy discarded pneumatic tube systems from department stores and had them installed within Best Products showrooms as a key component that facilitated the flow of goods between display and storage areas.⁸⁶ In the case of Best Products, this curiously anachronistic use of pneumatics suggested a decision about arranging internal inventory distribution around the primacy of the customer’s experience. The moment an order slip was whisked away through the walls and into the hidden storage area at the back of the building was calculated as highly performative.

The catalog showroom experience was premised around the invocation of storage within the display space. By contrast, the nineteenth century department store had been designed as a retail environment centered on the bourgeoisie’s relationship to a culture of display in which issues of storage were largely suppressed, buried deep within the architecture and diminished in the customer’s retail experience.⁸⁷ Andrew Lewis characterized the catalog showroom experience as one in which storage and display were understood in continuity with one another. Lewis described the continual flow between storage and display by saying, “There is an enormous amount of activity in a showroom – moving the merchandise off the trucks, into the warehouse, back down into the customer’s hands and back out the door.”⁸⁸ Similarly, an instructional booklet provided to customers upon entering a Best Products showroom clearly emphasized this fact, urging the customer to

⁸⁵ Anonymous speech transcript (no date, c. 1984-1993), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 1626, Series 5.5.

⁸⁶ Anonymous speech transcript (no date, c. 1984-1993), p. 1, Best Products Archive, Folder 1626, Series 5.5.

⁸⁷ Michael Miller, *The Bon Marche – Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁸⁸ Kay Dunlap Veazey, “An Industry Whose Time Has Come,” *The South Magazine* (August 1979), p. 31.

conceptualize the storage that they could not see, saying, “Less than half of a Best showroom is showroom: the rest is warehouse, a warehouse at our fingertips. For every sample product displayed in the showroom, plenty more just like, in factory fresh cartons, wait upstairs in our warehouse for your order. The warehouse speedily fills your order – and immediately sends your purchases down to the Customer Pick-up Counter.”⁸⁹

A prominent aspect of the showroom experience was waiting. A customer was expected to wait until the inventory management system could produce their order. Designated spaces for waiting had been associated with retail design since the department store’s apotheosis in the late nineteenth century. The inclusion of waiting space within the department store coincided with the point when surplus products began to be stored on site in large quantities, out of sight from customers. Before this point, general and specialty stores had tended to keep the vast majority of their products in the same space in which the customers made their selections. Emile Zola, in his acclaimed novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* published in 1883, employed vast waiting spaces within the department store to anchor his narrative. Such spaces were characterized as being solely for leisurely waiting. Zola wrote, “A few men, lolling back in the armchairs, were reading the newspapers. But a great many people sat there doing nothing: husbands waiting for their wives ...”⁹⁰ By contrast, with retail spaces of the 1950s, the attitude toward accommodating waiting within store design had evolved toward one where a customer should be made reasonably comfortable while waiting, but not to the point of leisure. Morris Ketchum, architect and author of a prescriptive book on retail design, wrote in 1957 that, “sales furniture should not be too comfortable. The idea is to ease a customer’s waiting time, not to tempt her to stay all day. While she is waiting, however, it is a good idea to provide an ashtray.”⁹¹ By the late 1960s and 1970s, during the peak of the catalog showroom format, the idea of a customer

⁸⁹ Best Products customer explanation sheet (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1277, Series 7.

⁹⁰ Everardo Rocha, Marina de Castro Frid, William Corbo, “Business and Magic: Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* and Modern Consumption,” *Dossie*, Vol. 11, No 32, (September/December 2014), p. 62.

⁹¹ Morris Ketchum, *Shops & Stores* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1957), p. 53.

waiting in comfort had evolved further away from the lounging leisure of the department store. The Best Products waiting experience was designed to feel like an extension of the warehouse operations. With neither chairs nor ashtrays, the waiting customer was left to mill about, checking their time stamped receipt against the numerous large digital clocks mounted prominently throughout the space, waiting to hear their name called over a loud speaker.⁹² A feeling of urgency was central. Best Products promised that, “Eight minutes after the order is placed, merchandise is ready at pick-up counter.”⁹³ This waiting experience was sometimes only begrudgingly appreciated, as in one Chicago-based journalist’s description of Best Products from 1978. He wrote, “A visitor last week counted twenty-six shoppers milling around a pickup counter attended by two frazzled young women. Is this any way to run a retail business? Indications are that it is, indeed.”⁹⁴ This push to remove the leisure associated with waiting in retail settings was widespread. Business researchers created a new area of study in the 1960s that sought to discover ways, “to hasten a customer’s passage past the tills and therefore give her a more contented exit.”⁹⁵ By the 1970s the waiting experience in retail was less designed around leisure, instead giving the customer the sense that they were operating within a flow of objects.

Conveyor belts were made visible within Best Products catalog showroom interiors in a way that was unprecedented within retail design. In the supermarkets that were dominating the grocery sector, conveyor belts were beginning to ease shoppers’ burden as they moved through checkout counters. But at Best Products, conveyor belts took on a more dramatic role in linking the unseen depths of the storage area with the customer’s space. Although the precise configurations of checkout areas differed among Best Products locations, they invariably and conspicuously featured a conveyor

⁹² “Best Products Guarantees Eight-Minute Merchandise Delivery” Best Products press release (September 1986), Best Products Archive, Folder 1369, Series 9.1.

⁹³ Best Products Press Release “Fact Sheet: Best Express” (circa 1986), Best Products Archive, Folder 1369, Series 9.1.

⁹⁴ Joseph Winski, “Catalog Showroom Hot Retailer,” *Chicago Tribune* (December 6, 1978).

⁹⁵ Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away – The Invention of Modern Shopping* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 244.

belt emerging prominently from behind the cashiers. Customers were expected to linger in this area, waiting for the conveyor belt to discharge their merchandise. Best Products experimented with various conveyor belt materials, trying differently cut and grooved belts that would interact with the waxed cardboard surface of product boxes in just the right way. There was an effort to keep boxes from sliding too quickly down the conveyor belt and instead have them descend at just the right pace for customers waiting and watching for their merchandise to emerge.⁹⁶ In the words of one Best Products officer, they wanted the conveyor belt material to “slow it down” in order to keep the products flowing at an ideal speed, keeping the customer at an optimal level of suspense.⁹⁷ While more efficient metal roller conveyors belts were used within the warehouse area, the conveyor belts used in view of customers needed to provide just the right effect.⁹⁸

Conveyor belts have a long history of application within retail architecture, often associated with efficient management behind the scenes. Emile Zola described a slide used below a department store on the receiving floor. “There, on a level with the pavement was a kind of glazed cage, where the vans discharged the goods. They were weighed, and then slipped down a rapid slide, its oak and ironwork shining, brightened by the chafing of goods and cases. Everything entered a yawning trap; it was a continual swallowing up, a fall of goods, causing a roaring like that of a cataract.”⁹⁹

Subsequently, London’s D.H. Evans department store, completed in 1907, featured one of the earliest retail applications of conveyor belt infrastructure. Spiral chutes hidden behind walls brought parcels down to a basement conveyor belt where they were then carried to delivery sorting tables.¹⁰⁰ By the

⁹⁶ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Herbert Crumley, Vol. 2 (October 27, 1981), p. 1156, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁹⁷ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Herbert Crumley, Vol. 2 (October 27, 1981), p. 1156, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁹⁸ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Herbert Crumley, Vol. 2 (October 27, 1981), p. 1156, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁹⁹ Rocha, de Castro Frid, Corbo, “Business and Magic: Emile Zola, Au Bonheur des Dames and Modern Consumption,” *Dossie*, pp. 51-71.

1910s, it became commonplace for new department stores to feature below-grade spaces dedicated to sorting merchandise for delivery with conveyor belts.¹⁰¹ This attention to efficient and cost-effective internal movement of goods reflected the influence of the scientific management advocated by Frederick Taylor.¹⁰² Department stores of the 1930s that relied upon such mechanical infrastructure to aid in the internal movement of goods began to use this infrastructure to further separate the movement of goods from the movement of customers. One historian described how, “Goods were received in a dock which could be sealed by rolling shutters, they were checked and then sent via good lifts either to stockrooms or sales areas ...”¹⁰³ This separation of movement was a point of particular concern for reasons of both aesthetics and security. This concern was furthered during the 1950s, exemplified by Raymond Loewy Associates’ design for department store chain Foley’s in Houston. William Snaith, the chief architect working on the design, described how the building was completely “mechanized” behind the scenes, with walls riddled with all manner of chutes, lifts and conveyor belts, able to move stock throughout the building with ease.¹⁰⁴ Upon completion of the building, Fred Lazarus, the owner of the retail company, crowed over how they achieved the near impossible in maintaining internal mechanical efficiency without sacrificing any outward aesthetic appeal.¹⁰⁵ From their perspective, it was imperative that the customer had no sense of how goods were moved through the building and that any indication of this would intrude upon their shopping experience.

¹⁰⁰ Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping – An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 166.

¹⁰¹ Meredith Clausen, “The Department Store: Development of the Type,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 39, No 1 (Autumn 1985), p. 24.

¹⁰² Longstreth, *American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960*, p. 62.

¹⁰³ Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping – An Architectural History*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴ Longstreth, *American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

In addition to efforts to disguise and bury the mechanized movement of goods within the architecture, there was also the parallel history of retail operations that had detached storage entirely and dispatched it to a separate suburban facility in order to keep it entirely out of the consumer's view. With concern over the appearance of idling delivery trucks congesting traffic around department stores during the 1930s, some retailers went to great lengths to experiment with elaborate and extensive underground ramp and elevator infrastructure that would quickly whisk delivery trucks from the curb and out of sight.¹⁰⁶ When deemed impractical and costly, department stores began experimenting with alternate arrangements that placed their storage facilities adjacent to their retail operations. The breakthrough Famous-Barr scheme placed the storage facility across the street from its retail operation and connected the two through an underground tunnel.¹⁰⁷ Subsequently, in April 1949 Fred and Ralph Lazarus unveiled what was then heralded as an important "step in the evolution of the department store" when they opened their suburban warehouse building where goods for their downtown Houston department stores were stored.¹⁰⁸ Not only was this separated storage building considered efficient, but it was also considered important for visual camouflage, disassociating itself entirely from the customer experience. One historian described how, "Visiting the premises would not necessarily have led anyone to believe the facility was associated with a great emporium downtown ... In every respect the design suggested a modern manufacturing plant, not part of a retail enterprise."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ Longstreth, *American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Best Products' Art Inventory

Parallels can be drawn between the inventory management deployed by Best Products and the methods used by the Lewises to organize their large art collection. The Lewises treated their art collection as a fluid flow of objects that could be easily displaced and re-categorized. The majority of the Lewises' artworks were continually on display. Rather than being placed in conventional art storage, the pieces were more often rotated around different spaces. This inventory strategy created overlap among the Lewises' home, the corporate offices where items from their personal collection were regularly put on a display, the showrooms where art was displayed for Best Products' customers, and the museum spaces where items from their collection were regularly lent for exhibition. The well-resourced and maintained art inventory system enabled this constant movement of objects to diminish the difference between states of storage and display.

To manage their extensive inventory of art, the Lewises employed a personal assistant. In 1973 Frederick Brandt was hired to care for their rapidly growing collection.¹¹⁰ Brandt had been working as a curator at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts where he specialized in Art Nouveau objects.¹¹¹ Once Brandt was employed by the Lewises he took on a wide-ranging position that included accompanying the Lewises to auction houses and publishing articles about objects in the collection. Brandt's primary role was to continually manage the rapidly growing inventory. Brandt devised an inventory management technique based on illustrated index cards to represent each individual art piece. This card system worked in combination with a series of location lists that were continually being updated. The innumerable archived lists reveal a near-continual movement of

¹¹⁰ Frederick Brandt replaced Pete Wyrick who had held a similar position. Letter from Frederick Brandt to Ben Wallerstein (November 17, 1973), Best Products Archive, Folder 403, Series 3.3.

¹¹¹ Edwin Slipek, "The National Gallery's Art Nouveau Show Raises Awareness of the Virginia Museum's World Class Collection," *Richmond Style Weekly* (January 1, 1980).

objects. Pages of hand-written lists notate how art works moved among the house, board room, cafeteria, foyer, offices, storeroom, mailroom and beyond.¹¹²

The Lewises' prodigious collecting habits riotously overwhelmed their sober brick Revival style Richmond home.¹¹³ A curator who visited the house noted how, "densely installed the house was,"¹¹⁴ while an artist friend described it as "beautiful clutter."¹¹⁵ Such characterizations of the house were repeated with one friend describing how, "meanwhile back in Richmond there's a classic Federal Revival house containing more Tiffany lamps, furniture of unsurpassed elegance, fantasy and imagination and more art, art, art than has ever been shoe horned into a single space."¹¹⁶ Surprises met visitors at every turn as they attempted to navigate the dense interior. Many visitors described being startled by the disgruntled man in sweaty work clothes who stood on the stair landing, only to realize it was a life-size work of sculptor Duane Hanson.¹¹⁷ Others were surprised by the casualness with which the Lewises used precious and valuable objects in their daily lives. Sydney was particularly fond of lounging on Eileen Gray's coveted Pirogue Chaise Longue.¹¹⁸ Edward Colonna

¹¹² Inventory Notes (1970-1974), Lewis Archive, Folder 414, Series 3.4.

¹¹³ The Lewises' home was located at 2601 Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. It was designed by William Lawrence Bottomley and built between 1922-24. The Lewises moved to the house in 1969.

¹¹⁴ Patterson Sims, "Remembering Sydney: The 60s to the 90s," presentation at Virginia Museum of Art, VHS tape (April 8, 2000), Lewis Archive, Folder 1633, Series 5.6.

¹¹⁵ Jack Beal described the Lewises home as being filled with "beautiful clutter." Judd Tully, "Sydney and Frances Lewis - the quest for the best in art," *Smithsonian Magazine* (November 1987), p. 87.

¹¹⁶ MoMA Memorial, Sydney Lewis Memorial Service, VHS tape (March 22, 2000), Lewis Archive, Folder 1631, Series 5.6.

¹¹⁷ Tully, "Sydney and Frances Lewis – The Quest for the Best in Art," p. 87.

¹¹⁸ Sydney and Frances Lewis were particularly interested in engaging with Eileen Gray as they collected her furniture. The following description by a journalist gives a suggestion of their rapport, "One such friendship was with the architect and designer Eileen Gray. She was 96 when the Lewises met her in Paris. 'Did you come over on TWA?' asked Gray. It took a minute for Sydney to translate Twa to TWA. 'No, Miss Gray, we came over on the wonderful Concorde.' Gray immediately launched into a detailed conversation on the merits of the supersonic plane and revealed to the Lewises that she had been an aviator in her younger years and had once passed through Houston to participate in an air race in Mexico back in 1956. As Sydney says, 'She was a fabulous lady.' He is particularly proud of their Gray holdings. His favorite is a fanciful floor lamp with a parchment shade from 1923, created for a bedroom-boudoir in Monte Carlo. The lamp, though, is pure sculptural tension. It stands at the prow of Gray's Canoe sofa fashioned of lacquered wood and silver leaf." Tully, "Sydney and Frances Lewis – The Quest for the Best in Art," p. 90. In another instance Frances Lewis described when she and Sydney travelled to Paris and visited Gray, then in her late 90s, at her apartment. Frances described being thrilled when Gray showed them her sketchbooks filled with rug designs. See, Fred Brandt Filmed interview with Frances Lewis, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Collection, 2001, accessed October 23, 2018. <https://www.vmfamuseum/piction/11617470-110658703/>. Additionally, the Lewises corresponded with Prunella Clough,

chairs were sat upon, a rare Joseph Maria Olbrich tea service was poured from, a prized Guimard desk set was written upon and a celebrated Louis Majorelle bed was slept in.¹¹⁹ The publishing magnate and noted Fabergé collector, Christopher Forbes wrote to the Lewises after having been at their home, saying, “I felt like a modern Ali Baba visiting your house.”¹²⁰ He wrote, “I had visions of waking up in that magnificent Majorelle bed, turning to see my wife walk in wearing a Lalique choker, followed by Duane Hanson’s moving man suddenly come to life.”¹²¹ Similarly Robert Indiana wrote to the Lewises in 1974 after having visited their home with his gallerist saying, “We were both impressed with how you live with your collection. You seem to be enjoying it!”¹²² The classification of objects as precious collectibles, functional objects, décor or art was blurred in ways that continually kept visitors surprised and awed. Curator Patterson Sims responded to the interior by asking, “Does one stand, defend oneself or bring one’s own chair?”¹²³

The Lewises regularly welcomed a wide range of visitors into their home to view the collection. The tours ranged from personal encounters that Sydney and Frances would lead themselves during intimate social gatherings to private appointments with prominent art world guests. The President of the Whitney Museum, Flora Miller Irving, wrote to thank the Lewises after one such tour. Miller Irving remarked how she had particularly enjoyed the intimacy of touring their bedroom, writing, “seeing your home again was almost an entirely new experience; so much had

Eileen Gray’s niece and companion, after Gray’s death in 1976. The following excerpt is an example of Clough’s correspondence with the Lewises, “You have been much in my mind because of what I know to be your affection and admiration for Eileen; - so I must tell you that she died at the very end of October. But as you can imagine using every spark of energy to the end. Ten days before that we had been together to the exhibition at the Arts Decoratifs (you will have a catalogue I’m sure). It was a great effort but we made it, and she saw her things including your lamp (which I had never seen, of course). I think she was pleased.” Letter from Prunella Clough to Frances Lewis (November 13, 1976), Lewis Archive, Folder 1509, Series 5.3.

¹¹⁹ Conroy, “Modern Art and the Sultan of Swap.”

¹²⁰ Letter from Christopher Forbes to Sydney and Frances Lewis (February 18, 1983), Lewis Archive, Folder 1508, Series 5.3.

¹²¹ Letter from Christopher Forbes to Sydney and Frances Lewis (February 18, 1983), Lewis Archive, Folder 1508, Series 5.3.

¹²² Letter from Robert Indiana to Sydney and Frances Lewis (November 25, 1974), Lewis Archive, Folder 1511, Series 5.3.

¹²³ Patterson Sims, presentation at Virginia Museum of Art, “Remembering Sydney: The 60s to the 90s,” VHS tape (April 8, 2000), Lewis Archive, Folder 1633, Series 5.6.

changed. Your bedroom is just extraordinary and wonderful – I love your bed, its red cover, and that rich dark Rothko ...”¹²⁴ The Lewises also welcomed tour groups that were organized through various art institutions. The Smithsonian organized one such tour, promoting the event with the following description, “Members are invited to visit the wonderful and varied collection of Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Lewis, who have graciously agreed to allow their home and the corporate headquarters of the Best Products Company to be opened to us. Every room in the Lewis’ house presents a striking, colorful and personal blend of styles and artistic media.”¹²⁵ The Lewises also welcomed innumerable tours organized as local cultural events. When the Lewises were not home, such tours were often led by Frederick Brandt. The impact such tours had on the local cultural life of the city was not lost on the visitors. A letter from one such visitor stated, “I remember the first time I was ever invited into your famous home ... I was awestruck by your place, your art, your daring.”¹²⁶ He concluded with a note about the Claes Oldenburg giant clothespin sculpture notoriously placed in front of the house, saying, “... and putting a giant clothespin in your front yard. That is when I began to think, well, maybe Richmond isn’t so bad. To this day, I believe that Richmond’s greatest claim to fame is that it is the home of FL & SL.”¹²⁷

The Lewises art collection easily spilled from their domestic space to the corporate offices of Best Products. The practice of displaying the collection in the corporate office was initiated early in the company’s history. Sydney described how he began hanging artwork in their first offices, saying, “Probably the best thing that ever happened to me was when two employees at the West Marshall showroom asked me to take some art from my office and hang it in the halls. Very early, employees

¹²⁴ Letter from Flora Miller Irving, President of Whitney Museum to Frances and Sydney Lewis (November 9, 1978), Lewis Archive, Folder 1452, Series 5.1.

¹²⁵ Letter from Jenny Martin, of Smithsonian National Associate Program to Mary Ellis Wood, secretary to Frances Lewis (August 10, 1981), Lewis Archive, Folder 447, Series 3.7.

¹²⁶ Letter from Randy Strawderman to Frances Lewis (August 20, 1999), Lewis Archive, Folder 1517, Series 5.3.

¹²⁷ Letter from Randy Strawderman to Frances Lewis (August 20, 1999), Lewis Archive, Folder 1517, Series 5.3.

and other people responded to our art.”¹²⁸ The practice of displaying art in the company offices intensified after the tax-related re-organization of the collection was completed in 1979. This was followed shortly thereafter by the 1980 completion of a new headquarters building designed by HHPA. Many noted the museum-like qualities of this new headquarters building. One Best Products manager exclaimed, “In New York you’ve got to go to a museum to see something of this nature, here you’ve got it with you.”¹²⁹ Similarly, a journalist writing for the *Washington Post* stated that, “The place is as much a museum as an office.”¹³⁰ Andy Warhol’s silkscreened images of Marilyn Monroe gazed down on those entering the front lobby. Claes Oldenburg’s giant typewriter eraser sculpture occupied the lobby floor.¹³¹ As visitors ventured deeper into the building they would find a further three hundred paintings and sculptures distributed throughout the interior.¹³² The executive offices became repositories for an even greater array of collectible objects, with one observer calling these rooms, “the apotheosis of decoration.”¹³³ Frances sat in Art Nouveau splendor while attending to visitors seated on Thonet chairs.¹³⁴ Discussing the headquarters building, project architect Malcolm Holzman stated that the corporate offices were “specifically designed” to house the corporate art collection.¹³⁵ Holzman went on to describe how the design was intended to accept, “art evenly distributed around the building, which is what gives it the museum-like feeling.”¹³⁶ Specific

¹²⁸ “After 25 years: some Observations by the Lewises,” *Best Newsletter*, Vol. VI, No 3 (March 1981), p. 3. Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

¹²⁹ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with William O. Gibson, National Manager, Operational Services, Volume 1 (August 25, 1981), p. 202, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

¹³⁰ Wolf Von Eckardt, “Brazen Solutions to Commercial Schlock,” *Washington Post* (February 9, 1980).

¹³¹ Phil Patton, “The Madcap Buildings of Best Products,” *Mainliner magazine* (February 1981), p. 77.

¹³² von Eckardt, “Brazen Solutions to Commercial Schlock; Showroom Solutions; Recruiting the Brightest to Design for Best.”

¹³³ Michael Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1981), p. 20.

¹³⁴ “Executive Wing” art description, part of Inventory List (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1341, Series 8.2.

¹³⁵ Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Malcolm Holzman, Vol. 3 (December 9, 1981), p. 1764, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1764.

detailing of the building anticipated this use, including, “ways to hang things and to fasten them as part of the wall structures themselves.”¹³⁷ Internal corporate documents promoted this understanding of the office building-*cum*-museum. One Employee Handbook described, “Throughout our new building, as in the Ashland building, walls and corridors will be decorated with contemporary paintings and sculptures by some of America’s best known (and lesser known) creative talents.” Just as museum visitors might be admonished, employees were similarly warned through the handbook, “not to touch or move these pieces under any circumstances.”¹³⁸ Upon completion of the building, the company hosted a grand opening that featured instructions for a self-guided art tour through the winding office corridors and eventually leading everyone to the cafeteria, “where baked goods and punch were served.”¹³⁹ This connection between the Best Products headquarters building and a museum was furthered when a local art teacher wrote to the company to suggest that they might employ her as a full-time art education specialist, prepared to organize regular public tours through the building, given that in her estimation, “The art collection in Best’s corporate headquarters is one of the finest in Virginia.”¹⁴⁰ Malcolm Holzman summarized this hybridity when he described the building as “a museum that you work in.”¹⁴¹

Art objects were constantly shuttled among the Lewises’ home, corporate headquarters and loaned out to borrowers.¹⁴² One journalist described how, “they switch their paintings and sculptures around like passengers on airlines.”¹⁴³ The most frequent recipient of loaned artwork was the

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 1764.

¹³⁸ Best HQ Building. Employee Handbook (no date), Best Products Archive, Folder 1275, Series 7.

¹³⁹ “Open House a Success,” *Best Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No 7. (July 1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 879, Series 5.2.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Mary Arzt to Andrew Lewis (January 27, 1981), Lewis Archive, Folder 1455, Series 5.1.

¹⁴¹ Knight III, “Building Collections, Collecting Buildings,” p. 85.

¹⁴² The Lewises were open to having their art collection displayed at unconventional exhibition spaces, including places such as the Richmond Public Library. F.D. Cossitt, “Lewis Collection is Living One,” *Richmond Times Dispatch* (March 23, 1975).

¹⁴³ Ann Holmes, “Couple Travels About World Collecting Art,” *Houston Chronicle* (November 8, 1975).

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA).¹⁴⁴ This connection was strengthened when the Lewises donated 1,500 pieces of contemporary and decorative art to the VMFA in 1985 along with \$6 million dollars to help construct the HHPA designed West Wing to house their donation.¹⁴⁵ The new block long West Wing extended from the original 1936 Georgian Revival museum building. Sensitive to the lighting requirements of the art collection within, the design part of HHPA's addition was an essentially featureless, environmentally sealed box, a part not unlike the simple warehouse boxes of the generic Best Products showrooms. The interior of the new wing featured a thirty-foot high central atrium slathered in pink Verona marble with fossil-embedded Texas shell stone covering columns. Adjacent galleries adjoined this central space. Curator Patterson Sims described visiting Richmond soon after the collection had been moved from the Lewises home to the newly completed West Wing, saying he felt "quite dumbfounded that all these works had somehow burst the prison of 2601 Monument Avenue and found themselves taking over a much, much larger building and even making that building seem somewhat small by comparison."¹⁴⁶ After the artworks had been moved from the Lewises home to the VMFA, people noted how they seemed to domesticate the museum setting. A *Washington Post* journalist described the unusually intimate feeling of the collection. "The gifts in the West Wing were not coldly purchased. Warmth surrounds them all. The Lewises at one time wrote letters at that desk, they slept in that grand bed."¹⁴⁷ Frances emphasized the erasure of any

¹⁴⁴ Proctor stated that almost all of the pieces on display in the Best Products Company Headquarters had been on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art at some point. Roy Proctor, "Best at its Best," *Richmond News-Leader* (February 2, 1980).

¹⁴⁵ After exhaustive research into many museums, their selection of the VMFA as the recipient of their donation was based largely on the fact that the museum had a stated interest in treating decorative art objects as art objects, an attitude in close alignment with the Lewises. Knight III, "Building Collections, Collecting Buildings," p. 82.

¹⁴⁶ Patterson Sims, "Remembering Sydney: The 60s to the 90s," presentation at Virginia Museum of Art, VHS tape (April 8, 2000), Lewis Archive, Folder 1633, Series 5.6.

¹⁴⁷ Paul Richard, "Renovated Riches in Richmond; New Wing, Exhibits for Fine Arts Museum," *Washington Post* (December 1, 1985).

significant distinction between the museum and the Lewis' personal space, describing, "our art and our buildings are an extension of us."¹⁴⁸

The art collection moved just as fluidly through Best Products showrooms. After the Lewises had sub-divided their art collection, to take advantage of tax incentives, they established the Decorative Objects Department within the company in 1978. A small staff, under the direction of Steven Holcomb, was responsible for the management of 1,300 objects in the showroom inventory. These were regularly placed on display among the merchandise, at checkout counters and in pickup areas. A typical Best Products showroom had eight or nine decorative arts objects on display at any given time.¹⁴⁹ Internal documents emphasized how decorative arts objects were expected to help create an atmosphere for the customers. "Decorative items shall be rotated among the Company's catalogue showrooms and the executive corporate offices with such frequency as may be necessary to maintain in each location a fresh, striking and attractive atmosphere ..."¹⁵⁰ In a Best Products newsletter the company described the program, stating, "Most customers find that good prices and good service are reason enough to shop at Best Products showrooms. But there's another incentive to come into the showrooms in Best regions: to see the paintings that decorate the walls."¹⁵¹

In Summary

Through inventory logistics developed in the 1970s, the consumer became a force around which inventory systems were more carefully calibrated. In turn, inventory logistics became more exposed and transparent to this consumer who gained a greater sense of their own position within the

¹⁴⁸ Knight III, "Building Collection, Collecting Building," p. 87.

¹⁴⁹ "Paintings Make Best Showrooms Lively," *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. IX, No 2 (February 1984), p. 4, Best Products Archive, Folder 886, Series 5.2.

¹⁵⁰ Letter from John W. Patterson (McGuire, Woods & Battle) to Ben Cheseldine (Vice President of real Estate and Construction, Best Products Co., Inc.) regarding operating procedure for the acquisition and disposition of decorative items (September 5, 1978), Best Products Archive, Folder 424, Series 3.4.

¹⁵¹ "Paintings Make Best Showrooms Lively," *Best Newsletter*, Vol. IX, No 2, (February 1984), Best Products Archive, Series 5.2, Folder 886.

supply chain. The status of storage shifted within this changed landscape. Storage was increasingly understood in close proximity to the consumer, in many ways even incorporated into their shopping experience. At Best Products, the proximity and centrality of storage began to inflect and impact ideas about retail display, in some ways becoming a form of customer display itself. In such cases, spatial distinctions and boundaries between states of storage and display were beginning to blur and deteriorate. Through the parallel example of the Lewises' management of their vast inventory of art, the effect of such blurring distinctions between storage and display could be seen in the further disintegration of display categorizations. This included muddied distinctions among the status of objects as art, décor or furniture and the status of building types as home, showroom, corporate office, and museum. By connecting display more overtly with storage, through highly reflexive inventory management systems, the consumer's experience was centralized while the spaces and processes around them became more transparent.

CHAPTER 4

Collecting

In 1981 art magazine *Portfolio* lauded Sydney and Frances Lewis and their omnivorous collecting habits under the title “Building Collections/Collecting Buildings.”¹ In the profile the author declared that, “Best is also one of this country’s leading corporate patrons of architecture. It has made the commissioning of buildings a form of collecting.”² A bold point was made, conflating the way in which the Lewises had amassed their impressive art collection with the way they had overseen their retail business’ rapid development. In the author’s estimation, Best Products’ business success was inseparable from the Lewises’ treatment of architecture as a collectible.³ Frances concurred with the author when she noted that she believed Best Products’ success began to soar after, “It occurred to us that we had buildings that could be the raw material for sculpture in public places.”⁴ The Lewises were quoted as saying that at first they had not considered the SITE interventions upon their Best Products showrooms to be architecture at all but that later they had changed their minds.⁵ Throughout the article, distinctions between art and architecture were continually melded together under the joint category of collectibles.

This chapter examines ways in which an ethos of collecting underpinned the emerging experience economy. The prosumer was becoming increasingly adept at blurring the line between production and consumption. One manifestation of this was a massive swell in collecting culture. This resulted in a more expansive attitude toward the act of collecting as both a means of consuming and producing objects. More specifically, the act of collecting began to blur previously established

¹ Carleton Knight III, “Building Collections/Collecting Buildings,” *Portfolio* (September 1981), p. 82.

² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

categories of objects in order to produce more ambiguous category-defying collectibles. Distinctions between fine art and décor became hazy under the rubric of collectibles, just as distinctions between merchandise and architecture were similarly blurred. This chapter begins by outlining the deregulatory shifts that encouraged an expansion of collecting culture. Next, the chapter analyzes how the vocabulary of collecting became fused with architectural production, looking specifically at HHPA's approach toward their design of the Best Products headquarters building. This chapter then considers how customers within Best Products showrooms were presented with an interior design strategy intent on amplifying a collector's approach. Such an omnivorous wave of collecting had the effect of recasting architecture as a piece of merchandise.

Collecting Practices

During the 1970s a certain type of collector was empowered by economic deregulation. This was not an expert collector but rather an inexperienced collector who went about amassing objects without traditional expertise or connoisseurship. While some such collectors were interested in acquiring fine art, increasingly these growing ranks enlarged the definition of what was considered collectible, pushing the realm of popular collecting outward into the terrain of decorative arts, memorabilia, and other mass produced objects.⁶ In shops, galleries, flea markets and auction houses, the ranks of collectors were swelling.⁷ Often pathologized as a defiantly uncontrollable and unregulated virus, during the 1970s many Americans acquiesced to the collecting bug. One observer noted that, "Not too many years ago the general opinion of collecting art and antiques was that it was a hobby suited only for the very wealthy or the eccentric or both."⁸ However, the observer continued,

⁶ With this growing constituency of collectors, the definition of what kind of object was deemed collectible loosened, expanding beyond fine arts to, "anything from sea-shells and crested china to pottery and brass." Susanna Johnston, "Introduction" in *Collecting – The Passionate Pastime*, ed. Susanna Johnston and Tim Beddow (New York: Viking, 1986), p. 13.

⁷ Thomas E. Norton, "Art Collecting: Avocation or Aberration?" *American Bar Association Journal*, Vol. 66, No 11 (November 1980), p. 1394.

with the current climate, “No longer do those afflicted with the virus of collecting have to disguise their symptoms.”⁹ This was particularly evident within the art world as collecting was widely becoming a desirable investment in the face of economic turmoil. One auctioneer noted at the time that, “Art has had nothing but a bull market for the past decade. As a result financial counselors are sending more and more investors to the auction block to seek capital gains as well as aesthetic appreciation.”¹⁰ With insecure capital driven toward art collecting, the inclination to invest in art spread across America. The “pyramid of buyers” grew both taller and broader.¹¹

With this expanded scope, the inexperienced collector was both empowered and popularized. The year 1969 was declared “the age of the small buyer” with the assertion that, “The ‘average’ art collector these days is not Paul Getty; he is not even remotely like him.”¹² Many observed that the art market was creating “a bonanza for the smaller dealer.”¹³ Popular newspapers fueled the fantasy of “the big art find by a complete amateur” with stories of unexpected discoveries.¹⁴ The television quiz show *Going for a Song* debuted in 1965 and remained popular through the 1970s. It featured expert antique appraisers mixed with amateur celebrities all guessing and discussing the values of various antiques. The broad affluence amassed during the 1960s created enough discretionary income for the American middle class to go about, “spending with seeming extravagance and at the same time surrounding themselves with nostalgic objects.”¹⁵

⁸ Ibid., p. 1392.

⁹ Ibid., p. 1392.

¹⁰ James Brough, *Auction!* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), p. 218.

¹¹ “The base of the pyramid spreads farther and farther as literally millions of people, prompted by manifestations of the art boom that appear in newspapers, magazines, books and department stores, make their first purchases ...” Brough, *Auction!*, p. 214.

¹² John Russell Taylor and Brian Brooke, *The Art Dealers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), p. 85.

¹³ Taylor and Brooke, *Art Dealers*, p. 86. Similarly, *Vogue* magazine described this expanding cohort and their newfangled consumer habits by stating, “The new collectors are younger, know more, shop with security, and prefer auction rooms to department stores.” Judith Goldman, “Talking About Collecting,” *Vogue*, Vol. 169, Issue 2 (February 1979), p. 162.

¹⁴ Taylor and Brooke, *Art Dealers*, p. 66.

Sydney and Frances Lewis, once described as “excitable art lookers and acquirers,”¹⁶ enthusiastically surrendered to what Sydney referred to as the collecting disease.¹⁷ They described their shared affliction as “an irresistible impulse to collect.”¹⁸ During the 1960s the Lewises began making regular weekend trips to New York City to tour artists’ SoHo lofts, shepherded by their gallery agents. By the 1970s, they were equally known to hop on a Concorde jet to Europe upon hearing of an enticing auction.¹⁹ According to Frances, the frenzied collecting habits of the 1960s and 1970s “made us maniacs.”²⁰ The social dimension of their absorbing habit saw them, “feverishly collecting during the day and hanging out in the evenings at the Hotel Carlyle with the creators of the painting and sculpture.”²¹ The Lewises were in awe of the speculative power of this collecting mania, with Sydney noting that, “Some prices are incredible when you recall what they were not too long ago.”²²

Deregulation and Collecting Habits

As with the case of the Lewises, the pyramid of newly minted collectors not only widened but also expanded upward, reaching a new range of inexperienced wealthy collectors. In such circles, art collecting was increasingly depicted as a sound financial investment. While art dealers had long protected their trade with the promise of art’s investment potential, this assertion became

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁶ Ann Holmes, “Couple Travels About World Collecting Art,” *Houston Chronicle* (November 8, 1975).

¹⁷ Tully, “Sydney and Frances Lewis - The Quest for the Best in Art,” p. 86.

¹⁸ Holmes, “Couple Travels About World Collecting Art.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Richard Simon, “Collecting Art Has Made Them ‘Maniacs,’” *Sacramento Union* (April 23, 1977).

²¹ Speech script, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Award (April 17, 1990), p. 7, Best Products Archive, Folder 1626, Series 5.5.

²² Simon, “Collecting Art Has Made Them ‘Maniacs’.”

significantly more insistent during the 1970s.²³ These developments were spurred by regulatory changes both within and between Europe and America. In Europe, the 1967 Merger Treaty created the Commission of the European Economic Community. By the early 1970s its effects were being felt by European art dealers who could now trade art more freely within Europe.²⁴ Through these loosened channels, more diverse European art was reaching the American market. By turn, the voracious American market was particularly responsive to acquiring European art, echoing Henry James' observation on, "the eagerness of the Americans to rake across the green cloth of the Atlantic the highest prizes of the game of civilization."²⁵

Within the United States, deregulatory policies similarly began affecting collecting practices. In 1971, the untethering of the American dollar's direct relationship to the value of gold, known as Nixon's Shock, introduced widespread economic changes. With a now free-floating fiat currency, American trust toward their dollar was destabilized. Creeping uncertainty developed into a lingering fear of hyperinflation that remained throughout the decade. Looking for somewhere to securely deposit money, many turned to the art market, where between 1971 and 1984 investments were generally twice as profitable as investments in American corporate shares.²⁶ *Fortune* magazine described the "world's hardest coin" as being "areas of canvas or wood overlaid, by some master hand, with the oxides of metals."²⁷

Another related influence driving investment capital toward art within the United States was the November 1967 devaluation of sterling in Britain. In the same way that Nixon's Shock drove

²³ "Investments in Art," *New York Star* (June 2, 1889), p. 11.

²⁴ Souren Melikian, "The Impact of the EEC," *International Herald Tribune* (November 13, 1973).

²⁵ Lord Eccles, *On Collecting* (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 19.

²⁶ Jane Adams Allen, "Wheelers, Dealers and Supercollectors," *New Art Examiner* (June 1986), p. 23. Also see, Nicholas Faith, *Sold: The Rise and Fall of the House of Sotheby's* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985).

²⁷ Nicholas Faith, *Sold – The Rise and Fall of the House of Sotheby* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), p. 82. Similarly, one art dealer described how "we were literally deluged with Wall Street brokers up here to buy paintings from us." Faith, *Sold*, p. 83.

American investors to seek more stable investment vehicles, the sterling devaluation initiated the “internal emigration” of English wealth toward America in general and very often toward the American art market specifically.²⁸ This currency devaluation has been called the “crucial event in determining attitudes toward art-as-investment.”²⁹ Interest peaked with the listing of the first Art Funds on the stock market. Promoters widely disseminated the idea of the Art Funds’ “balanced portfolio,” composed of a safe variety of artists who were “represented in major museums.”³⁰ For those investors who might not be able to purchase a blue-chip European old master themselves, they could still participate in the relative safety of the art market through such funds. The effect of this broader appreciation of art collecting as a reliable and effective form of investing was widespread. By the mid-1970s artist Michael McDonough observed that the New York SoHo district was in the midst of transitioning from an “art world” or an “art scene” into an “art market.”³¹ Within this shifting economy, both inexperienced and experienced investors were increasingly responding to the uncertainty spawned through deregulation by becoming art collectors.

Tax Incentives

At the same time that investors were turning toward art collecting to mitigate the risks of a deregulated economy, tax incentives were furthering the drive toward widespread collecting. Throughout the early 1960s many collectors began to take advantage of provisions in the Revenue Code that permitted the donor of art given to a public collection, “to deduct its assessed value from his taxable income in the year of donation up to a total of thirty per cent of the income.”³² Many

²⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 145.

³¹ Michael McDonough, “The Greene Street Mafia: Remembering SITE and Soho in the Mid-1970s,” in *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group PTY LTD, 2005).

³² Faith, *Sold*, 18. See also, John Russell Taylor and Brian Brooke, *The Art Dealers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969).

collectors characterized these changes to the Revenue Code as providing an, “unbeatable combine of taxation and philanthropy.”³³ Similar art collecting tax incentives in other countries were not established until the 1980s and with greater limitations. As a result, tax incentivized art collecting was especially associated with America during the 1960s and 1970s.³⁴

After 1964 the IRS also allowed American corporations to deduct the value of their art donations from their taxes. With the combined effects of investment and tax incentives, American corporate art collecting expanded significantly, with a pronounced bump in growth by the late 1970s.³⁵ IBM had already established the modern precedent for corporate art collecting during the 1930s, launching what they referred to as the “enlightened self-interest” associated with the positive public relations and investment potential of art collecting.³⁶ But it was the tax incentives established in the 1960s that created the unprecedented scale of corporate collecting at a time when government funding for art museums was in a phase of retrenchment.³⁷ As an illustration of the new scope of corporate art collecting, in 1964 a Business Committee was established for the National Council on the Arts, which further encouraged corporations to support the arts particularly in areas where the government’s support was falling short. Corporate art collecting quickly took root amidst the broader collecting wave.

As corporate art collecting escalated, the specifics of enticing tax incentives were tested and clarified. In addition to incentives around institutional donations, there were also valuable incentives around accelerated tax depreciation that became increasingly associated with art collections, albeit with very particular results in how the collection was subsequently understood. Congress had created

³³ Taylor and Brooke, *Art Dealers*, p. 70.

³⁴ Marjory Jacobson, *Art and Business* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 16.

³⁵ Martorella, *Corporate Art*, p. 18.

³⁶ Jacobson, *Art and Business*, p. 12.

³⁷ Martorella, *Corporate Art*, p. 14.

accelerated tax depreciation in 1954 in order to stimulate investment in new building. By the late 1960s this building tax incentive was increasingly but unevenly being applied to corporate art collections to the degree that in 1968 the IRS felt impelled to issue specific clarification as to when this incentive could be appropriately applied.

Like many corporations Best Products began a corporate art collection that was able to take advantage of tax incentives. Before Sydney founded Best Products he trained as a lawyer, with one journalist referring to him as “lawyer-turned-merchandiser.”³⁸ Sydney practiced tax law, thus his particular familiarity with these issues.³⁹ The critical criteria in question during the late 1960s hinged on a clear distinction between what the IRS considered decoration as opposed to art. After 1968, the IRS defined “decorator art for the corporate walls” as something that was circumscribed by a “determinable life.” Decorator art, having a determinable life, could be depreciated for tax benefits. By contrast, a corporate art collection that had an indeterminable life and could be variably used “for investment, internal and public relations and image making purposes” could not be depreciated for tax benefits.⁴⁰ According to the IRS’ 1968 clarification, decorator art was to be understood as “furnishings.”⁴¹ In 1977 Best Products submitted their corporate art collection to the IRS to see if it could be considered decoration and thus be subject to the benefits of tax depreciation. Best Products corporate offices with their art adorned walls were visited by a tax assessor who reviewed the full inventory and then discussed the file with the Commissioner’s Art Advisory Panel. Subsequently, the IRS deemed the Best Products collection to be art, rather than decorator art, dashing any hopes of

³⁸ Nancy Winter, “Best’s Better Idea” *Richmond Magazine* (May 1976), p. 30.

³⁹ Sydney Lewis completed a law degree at George Washington University. Previously he had completed an undergraduate degree at Washington and Lee University. After this he undertook some graduate studies at Harvard University before switching to George Washington University. After completing his law degree at George Washington University, he worked as an assistant tax attorney in Washington, D.C. before returning to Richmond, Virginia around 1955. Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with Dora Lewis, Volume 3 (December 3, 1981), p. 1705, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁴⁰ The distinction between decorator art and art is made in Rev. Rul. 68, 232, 1968-1 C.B. 79. IRS National Office Engineering and Valuation Branch, Report on Best Products Co.’s claimed deductions for depreciation and investment credits. (May 8, 1978), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 424, Series 3.4.

⁴¹ Martorella, *Corporate Art*, p. 126.

reaping tax depreciation benefits. Qualities that the advisory panel were looking for that might differentiate whether an object was collector's art as opposed to decorator art included whether or not the artists represented had achieved enough prominence to be included in the most current edition of *Who's Who in American Art*, whether or not an artist's name was associated with the object at all, whether the object had been deemed worthy of recording in some form of inventory, how much oversight the top level executives had over specific decisions involving individual objects, how often objects had been damaged and the subsequent level of concern and attention given to repairing such damage, and whether or not the objects were bought with the assistance of interior decorators as opposed to fine art dealers.⁴² Others suggested that the location of the objects also impacted whether they qualified as art, with objects displayed in liminal spaces such as corporate office corridors, cafeterias, and lobbies more likely to be deemed décor.⁴³

Best Products and Decorative Art

Upon learning that their collection had been deemed collector's art and not décor, Best Products quickly responded by dividing the collection into three parts and changing its management strategy in order to rectify the situation and reap the tax benefits. According to their updated strategy, the Lewises would own some of the collector's art personally while the remainder of the valuable art would be donated to the newly created Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation.⁴⁴ This foundation was based on lending their art collection for exhibition at various public institutions around the United States. The new foundation would, according to their lawyer, not be subject to "the tax on failure to distribute income" and additionally would allow the Lewises better tax deductions when they

⁴² IRS National Office Engineering and Valuation Branch, Report on Best Products Co.'s claimed deductions for depreciation and investment credits. (May 8, 1978), p. 2, Best Products Archive, Folder 424, Series 3.4.

⁴³ When objects were located in such circulation and support spaces, "the function they serve within the workplace redefines them, and they are seen as 'décor.'" Martorella, *Corporate Art*, p. 180.

⁴⁴ The Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation was created in 1977. Lewis Foundations documents, Best Products Archive, Folder 462, Series 3.7.

donated further art work to their own foundation.⁴⁵ The Tax Reform Act of 1969 had recently made the creation of such “operating foundations” even more enticing as a vehicle for tax-exempting activities.⁴⁶ This reorganization of the Best Products collection also resulted in the less valuable art remaining in the corporate collection where it could be deemed decorator art, thus securing the tax benefits of depreciable assets with limited determinable life. However, this fine distinction would require careful management to ensure that future IRS reviews could not label such art as collectible. Within documents internal to Best Products, after this reorganization, the art that remained in the corporate collection was no longer referred to as art, but rather as decorative art or design objects. The 1979 Best Products Standard Operating Policy handbook affirmed that, “It is the policy of the Company to utilize in the interior decoration of its catalog showrooms and executive corporate offices relatively inexpensive paintings, sculpture, prints and other objects of a style and composition appropriate to convey an image of contemporary and innovative design consistent with the Company’s innovative marketing concept.”⁴⁷

After their reorganization, Best Products was careful to further differentiate its corporate decorative art collection from the Lewises’ personal art collection through personnel management. The company prudently delineated the duties of in-house curator Frederick Brandt who had been working as a manager of the Lewises’ personal art collection.⁴⁸ Brandt’s own position in relation to the collection had been ambiguous from the beginning, causing Brandt to write to Sydney after a full year of employment, inquiring, “In addressing possible borrowers, how should I refer to myself??

⁴⁵ W. Birch Douglass, III, Memo to Randolph Rollins (August 2, 1977), Best Products Archive, Folder 462, Series 3.7.

⁴⁶ Mortimer Caplin, “Federal Tax Policy as Incentive for Preservation,” *Saving Large Estates: Conservation, Historic Preservation, Adaptive Re-Use*, eds. William Shopsin and Grania Bolton Marcus (New York: Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, 1977), p. 18.

⁴⁷ “Best Products Co., Inc. Standard Operating Policy” document, Board of Directors Meeting (May 3, 1979), Best Products Archive, Folder 3, Series 1.1.

⁴⁸ Frederick Brandt was the Lewises’ personal curator from 1973 until 1985 when he returned to work for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts where he had started his career as a curator. Born in Paterson, New Jersey he held Bachelor and Master’s degrees in art history from Pennsylvania State University.

Curator?? Agent?? Registrar?? I think it would help if they could place me in relation to your collection.”⁴⁹ While Brandt’s position as a curator and personal art manager for the Lewises continued to remain multifaceted and ambiguous, after 1978 it became clear that his professional duties could not extend to the newly created Decorative Objects Department within Best Products. Instead, a distinct position was created to manage the Decorative Objects Department that was first filled by Best Products employee Steven Holcomb. Described by a specialist in corporate collecting as something between a facilities manager and “a decorator who shares similar occupational objectives with the design planning or architect’s office,”⁵⁰ this newly created position would act much like a registrar, managing the movement and installation of the 1,300 decorative objects among Best Products showrooms.⁵¹

A telling characteristic of the ambiguous status of the decorative art objects displayed in the Best Products showrooms was the informality with which these objects were handled. One Best Products employee described his amazement at the frantic last minute preparations taking place the night before the grand opening of the new South Richmond showroom. Deciding at the final moment to enhance the grand opening by moving a few paintings from their home to the showroom, this employee was incredulous when his unruffled bosses, the Lewises, showed up in the evening and, “asked different people to hold different pieces of the art up in different parts of the showroom.”⁵² Then the Lewises would “stand off from the art, look at it, and say, ‘move it in this direction’ or ‘turn this one this way.’”⁵³ The staff of the Decorative Objects Department demonstrated a degree of

⁴⁹ Letter from Frederick R. Brandt to Sydney Lewis regarding artwork by Patrick Caulfield Books (November 29, 1973), Lewis Archive, Folder 384, Series 3.1.

⁵⁰ Martorella, *Corporate Art*, p. 126.

⁵¹ “Paintings Make Best Showrooms Lively,” *Best Newsletter*, Vol. IX, No 2, (February 1984), Best Products Archive, Folder 886, Series 5.2.

⁵² Milton Elliott, Oral History project, interview with George Alexander, Traffic Services Coordinator, Volume 3 (January 7, 1982), p. 2096, Best Products Archive, Series 9.2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

informality as they combined the duties that might otherwise be distinctly ascribed to a professional museum registrar, curator, art dealer or facilities manager. There was a high degree of improvisation with manager Holcomb recalling how, “Sometimes we get surprised when we arrive and find out that a big wall where we had planned to hang something now has a thermostat or a light switch on it ...”⁵⁴

This sense of amateurism was furthered by a casual attitude toward display strategies, reflecting some of the IRS’ expectations of a decorative collection. One employee of the Decorative Objects Department noted, “Although we hang them much higher than a museum or gallery would, they still occasionally get dirty or damaged.”⁵⁵ This casualness was also reflected in the 1979 Best Products Standard Operating Policy document which stipulated that, “The Company Special Projects Coordinator shall strive to achieve through placement of decorative items an inviting, informal and attractive atmosphere for the customers and employees of the Company. In no event shall decorative items be roped off, set back an unreasonable distance, or displayed in a museum-like manner.”⁵⁶

Deliberate misunderstandings around the treatment of these decorative art objects abounded, often leading to damage. The Best Products corporate archive contains multiple folders dedicated to continual correspondence with insurance adjusters, illustrating a litany of ways in which the Best Products showroom spaces were not designed to exhibit art. Paintings were continually being brushed up against, leaned into and pressed upon by unsuspecting customers.⁵⁷ Some customers had more deliberate encounters, as was the case with a Joan Thorne painting when a customer, “poked a finger into the painting damaging the impasto while it was on display in the San Antonio

⁵⁴ “Paintings Make Best Showrooms Lively,” *Best Newsletter*, Vol. IX, No 2 (February 1984), Best Products Archive, Folder 886, Series 5.2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Best Products Co., Inc. Standard Operating Policy” document (May 3, 1979), Best Products Archive, Folder 3, Series 1.1.

⁵⁷ Letter from Frederick Brandt to Ben Wallerstein (February 24, 1975), Lewis Archive, Folder 405, Series 3.3. There is also a similar letter from Frederick Brandt to Robert Burrus regarding damage to art work due to showroom customers (November 25, 1980), Lewis Archive, Folder 424, Series 3.4.

showroom.”⁵⁸ Paintings hung in the children’s toy department were especially susceptible. A George Peck painting “located next to swing set” in the Dallas showroom suffered damage as a result of the “swing set hitting canvas.”⁵⁹ The Dallas showroom seemed particularly prone to art accidents. It was the site of an incident in which a Jack Brusca painting of a Dallas Cowboys football player suffered when, “a customer loaded and fired a BB gun in the sporting goods department striking one of the paintings.”⁶⁰

Much destruction was also ascribed to the staff who was similarly ill-equipped to be encountering art displays. One store manager was almost fined by the central office when a painting he had improperly hung fell to the floor.⁶¹ Employees from the central office were regularly sent to visit showrooms and reported having to discipline errant managers for their disinterest in the details of managing art displays. One report on an irreparably damaged painting stated, “While in the showroom, I discovered that this painting had suffered extreme abuse. It is scraped, scared and abraded, and everything else. I asked the manager what happened and he hadn’t even noticed.”⁶² Another showroom manager was disciplined over a damaged painting with the following letter, “it shows signs of neglect and abuse from merchandise leaning against it to out-right vandalism; therefore, we have a painting that is not fit for public viewing.”⁶³

The idiosyncrasies associated with mounting art displays within a store were exemplified by the challenges associated with wall labels. In 1979 the Best Products headquarters issued a staff

⁵⁸ Letter from Frederick Brandt to Robert Burrus (February 25, 1980), Lewis Archive, Folder 422, Series 3.4.

⁵⁹ Letter from Frederick Brandt to Sydney Lewis outlining damage to art in showrooms (September 14, 1981), Lewis Archive, Folder 422, Series 3.4.

⁶⁰ Letter from Frederick Brandt to Robert Murdock, curator at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (February 15, 1977), Lewis Archive, Folder 411, Series 3.3.

⁶¹ Letter from Frederick Brandt to Sydney Lewis (December 19, unknown year, 1973-1981), Lewis Archive, Folder 411, Series 3.3.

⁶² Letter from Frederick Brandt to Sydney Lewis outlining damage to painting in Montclair showroom (September 14, 1981), Lewis Archive, Folder 422, Series 3.4.

⁶³ Letter from Steve Holcomb to John Mashburn regarding damage to paintings in showroom (June 15, 1983), Lewis Archive, Folder 422, Series 3.4.

memo stating that descriptive labels affixed to the wall should approximate standard museum practices and accompany all decorative art on display. There was an incident at a New Jersey showroom, that subsequently also occurred at other showrooms, where, “Someone stuck the information labels for the paintings to the front surface of the four paintings while they were on display there. The result is that an epoxy residue has been left on the painted surface of each painting.”⁶⁴

The key quality of the decorative arts displayed within the Best Products showrooms was the deliberate ambiguity of their art status. The decorative art objects were displayed scattered throughout each showroom. Some paintings appeared behind cashiers, others within product display areas or near washrooms. Hanging among the merchandise, it was not immediately clear to customers whether they were looking at merchandise, art, or décor. Lewis described the Decorative Objects Department program as follows, “There is no special significance to art in the showroom environment. People can think of it as art, decorations, wall hangings, ornamentation – the least important thing is to try to decide ‘what it is.’ The idea is to look. Trying to decide ‘what it is’ restricts your perception.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Andrew Lewis described this purposeful confusion by stating, “And to the reluctant businessman, unsure of his artistic taste, who says defensively, ‘I don’t know art, but I know what I like.’ You don’t have to think of it as art even ...”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Letter from Frederick Brandt to Kathy Miller of the Wallerstein Insurance Agency (December 9, 1979), Lewis Archive, Folder 409, Series 3.3. A second similar example occurred when managers toured a showroom, and it was found “that in several showrooms someone has stuck these labels to the actual surface of the paintings causing considerable damage” Memo from Sydney Lewis to regional managers regarding damage to paintings in showrooms caused by labels (December 4, 1979), Lewis Archive, Folder 424, Series 3.4.

⁶⁵ “After 25 years: some Observations by the Lewises,” *Best Newsletter*, Vol. VI, No 3 (March 1981), p. 3, Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

⁶⁶ Barbara Green, “Art Works Put Creativity into Corporate Look,” *Richmond News Leader* (unknown date).

Expanding Realm of Collectibles: Art Nouveau and Art Deco

On the heels of Pop Art's declaration that consumer culture was worthy of art status, the range of objects that were considered collectible was expanding. A person no longer needed to collect art when "things" could potentially make interesting collectibles. In 1979 George Price drew a cartoon for the *New Yorker* depicting two men completely surrounded by an array of flea market trivia with one man stating, "I'm putting all of my money into 'things.'"⁶⁷ Similarly, an historian noted that, "Since the explosion of collecting in America, the collectors of 'things' are now found in every segment of American society. What they collect ranges from fine arts of all kinds to duck decoys, baseball cards, beer or wine labels, comic books, model airplanes ..."⁶⁸ According to Andy Warhol these everyday objects, now worthy of new attention, were, "all the great modern things that the abstract expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all."⁶⁹ By 1979 *Time* magazine declared that "collectionitis" had overtaken a wide swath of the American people who were "feeding on scarce objects of every conceivable description," rendering junk shops into antique shoppes.⁷⁰ Another observer of the period referred to this enlarging world of collectibles as consisting of "associated tangibles" that expanded beyond traditional works of art.⁷¹

Among this expanding sphere, decorative art took on a key role. Art Nouveau and Art Deco objects in particular became the subject of intense collecting during the 1970s. These objects provided an ideal vehicle for this mode of collecting in that they easily blurred the line between art and décor. It was this dissembling quality that had aroused Susan Sontag's interest when she

⁶⁷ Thomas E. Norton, "Art Collecting: Avocation or Aberration?," *American Bar Association Journal*, Vol. 66, No 11 (November 1980), p. 1395.

⁶⁸ Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman, "The Collecting Passion in America," *Zeitschrift fur Ethnologie*, Bd. 126, H. 2 (2001), p. 315.

⁶⁹ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), p. 3.

⁷⁰ "Going, Going, Gone," *Time magazine* (December 31, 1979).

⁷¹ Thomas E. Norton, "Art Collecting: Avocation or Aberration?," *American Bar Association Journal*, Vol. 66, No 11 (November 1980), p. 1393.

published “Notes on ‘Camp’” in 1964 in which the “things-being-what-they-are-not” quality of Art Nouveau objects in particular caught her attention.⁷² She described how “Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto.”⁷³ An art world journalist described in 1972 how “avant-garde collectors” who were “looking for unrecognized areas” were discovering Art Nouveau.⁷⁴ An art dealer of the period described how, “one could scarcely open a glossy magazine anywhere in Europe or America without being brusquely told that to be in the swim you had to go Art Nouveau.”⁷⁵ The Lewises relished their ability “to hunt down Art Deco in the early 1970s,”⁷⁶ rapidly amassing one of the most comprehensive private collections of Art Nouveau and Art Deco objects in America.⁷⁷ Frances noted that their interest sprang from this widespread collecting fever since “we were in the right places to see everything that was happening.”⁷⁸ They were at “the historic 1972 Paris sale” of the Art Nouveau couturier Jacques Doucet,⁷⁹ and the “high profile” 1975 Sotheby’s auction in London at which, “they paid the first big price for a Mackintosh object when they bought that 1904 chair.”⁸⁰ As the phenomenon spread, images of the homes of celebrity Art Deco collectors, including Yves Saint Laurent, Karl Lagerfeld, Barbra Streisand, and Elton John soon began appearing in a wide range of magazines.⁸¹ Collecting interest in Art Nouveau peaked in 1982 with the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s annual fundraising gala that gathered together the art collecting

⁷² Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” [1964] *Notes on Camp* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2018).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Marvin Schwartz, “Art Nouveau and Art Deco, the Avant-Garde Antiques,” *Art News* (December 1972), p. 63.

⁷⁵ John Russell Taylor and Brian Brooke, *The Art Dealers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), p. 91.

⁷⁶ Sydney and Frances Lewis, “Andy Warhol: Refrigerator Ware to Deco,” *Sotheby’s Preview* (March/April 1988), p. 17.

⁷⁷ Rita Reif, “Quality and Rarity Set the Tone,” *New York Times* (December 29, 1985).

⁷⁸ Rita Reif, “Beloved Armchair Far From Its Home,” *New York Times* (January 22, 1995).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Patricia Bayer, *Art Deco Interiors* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 195.

elite for an event thematically organized around *La Belle Époque*. The *New York Times* described this gala as having been inspired by Diana Vreeland's fascination with the "opulence and vulgarity, delicious hypocrisy and innocent naughtiness" of the period.⁸²

This particular interest in Art Nouveau and Art Deco objects epitomized the significance of the sea change in collecting practices. Not only did Art Nouveau and Art Deco blur distinction between art and decoration for collectors, but also Art Deco had been one of the first mass-produced styles to find a mass audience of consumers. Art Deco had been conceived and produced as a middle-class style that had then expanded down-market in its cheapest forms.⁸³ When Art Nouveau and Art Deco objects began appearing in auctions in the early 1970s this fact about their provenance was unusual enough to warrant an extra note in a Sotheby's catalog disclaiming that, "many of the pieces illustrated in the following pages would not have been considered worth selling ten years ago."⁸⁴ This inclusion of mass-produced objects broke significant barriers for the auction house.⁸⁵

Andy Warhol's abiding interest in collecting Art Deco objects further burnished the celebrity glow associated with obsessive collecting, and with collecting Art Nouveau and Art Deco specifically. In 1974, Warhol was asked if he could estimate how many tens of thousands of dollars he had spent on Art Deco, to which he dramatically whispered, "I can't put it in terms of money – it's my life."⁸⁶ Art Deco was one of several collecting genres that Warhol energetically pursued, an immobilizing collecting habit that left his five story New York townhouse crammed with filled

⁸² Debora Silverman, *Selling Culture – Bloomingdale's, Diana Vreeland and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan's America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 77. I am appreciative of Silverman's research on Art Nouveau for developing my interest in the topic. Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Debora Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I," *West 86th*, Vol. 18, No 2 (Fall-Winter 2011); Debora Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II," *West 86th*, Vol. 19, No 2 (Fall-Winter 2012); Debora Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part III," *West 86th*, Vol. 20, No 1 (Spring-Summer 2013).

⁸³ Penny Sparke, *An Introduction to Design & Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 114.

⁸⁴ Nicholas Faith, *Sold – The Rise and Fall of the House of Sotheby* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), p. 154.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸⁶ David Bourdon, "Stacking the Deco," *New York Magazine* (November 11, 1974).

shopping bags and stuffed boxes.⁸⁷ So jammed were the rooms with collectibles upon his death, that it took Sotheby's ten days of continuous auctioning to liquidated the vast holdings. *Newsweek* dubbed it "the biggest garage sale ever."⁸⁸ Warhol's boyfriend Jed Johnson recounted that Warhol, "shopped for two or three hours a day for as many years as I can remember."⁸⁹ Warhol's friend Henry Geldzahler called him an "indefatigable accumulator."⁹⁰ Another observer recalled Warhol's extraordinary rapacity in picking through rummage sale detritus, noting, "Never, before or since, have I seen anyone buy so much so quickly."⁹¹ This observer went on to credit Warhol's shopping prowess to his well-honed ability to visually appraise objects with his "uncanny eyesight locked in touch," dubbing him "Director General of the Delights of the Eye."⁹²

Descriptions of Warhol visiting the New York Art Deco dealers in the Antiques Center had his appearance sending the dealers into a tizzy of "well-bred chaos,"⁹³ relieved that "his mere presence was concrete evidence that Art Deco was still 'in.'"⁹⁴ At a party organized in 1975 by Philip Johnson on behalf of an Art Deco collector, Warhol reportedly spent the entire evening hovering around a throne-like Pierre Legrain chair, the only piece missing from the otherwise complete Legrain set that filled his New York townhouse.⁹⁵ Warhol began his foray into filmmaking around the time he began collecting Art Deco objects. As objects that evoked Golden Age Hollywood

⁸⁷ Sylvia Lavin, "Architecture In Extremis," *Log 22* (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 55.

⁸⁸ Claudia Kalb, *Andy Warhol was a Hoarder* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2016), p. 76.

⁸⁹ Jed Johnson, 'Inconspicuous Consumption' in *The Andy Warhol Collection*, Vol. V, ed. John Smith (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002).

⁹⁰ Henry Geldzahler, "Andy Warhol: Artist and Collector" in *The Andy Warhol Collection*, Vol. VI. ed. John Smith (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002).

⁹¹ Allen Kurzweil, "Booked for Possession" in *Possession Obsession – Andy Warhol and Collecting*, ed. John Smith (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002), p. 32.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹³ David Bourdon, "Stacking the Deco," *New York Magazine* (November 11, 1974), p. 64.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Rita Reif, "A Five Year Quest for Art Deco Pieces Yields a Leading Private Collection," *New York Times* (December 28, 1975).

glamor, many of these belongings appeared in his films.⁹⁶ Warhol strengthened this association by seeking out Art Deco objects with Hollywood provenance, as when he purchased Joan Crawford's Art Deco jewelry collection.⁹⁷

Some of the fruits of Warhol's Art Deco collecting were immediately put to use in his Factory while others he nonchalantly spread around, remarking, "we give them away as Christmas presents."⁹⁸ When the Lewises visited Warhol at his Factory in the early 1970s they were surprised to find themselves eating lunch off of a much-coveted Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann ebony table.⁹⁹ Similarly, the Factory's screening room was populated by a complete set of Edgar Brandt bronze side chairs upholstered in red leather.¹⁰⁰ Warhol artfully dismissed it all as "used furniture."¹⁰¹ One journalist described this haphazard display of coveted furniture as having the "anti-flair usually found in discount furniture showrooms."¹⁰² Upon discovering their mutual interest in Art Deco collecting, the Lewises pressed Warhol further.¹⁰³ In 1975 they invited him to visit their Richmond home to view their furniture collection. Warhol arrived in Richmond with an entourage of Deco enthusiasts, including Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.¹⁰⁴ Venturi and Scott Brown discovered that the

⁹⁶ *Possession Obsession – Andy Warhol and Collecting*, ed. John Smith. (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002), p. 17.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Bourdon, "Stacking the Deco," p. 66.

⁹⁹ Frances Lewis described Warhol's interest in Art Deco collecting: "But of more importance to us than the eclectic assortment of guests was the really magnificent Ruhlmann table around which we all dined. It and the fantastic bronze desk in the outer room, bowled us over. That visit was our first indication that Andy collected such fabulous Art Deco. We were surprised because we had never seen him at the wild and woolly Paris auctions we frequented in those days, when Deco pieces could be purchased for what by today's standards were reasonable prices." Sydney and Frances Lewis, "Andy Warhol: Refrigerator Ware to Deco," *Sotheby's Preview* (March/April 1988), p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ Bourdon, "Stacking the Deco," p. 64.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁰³ Letter from Andy Warhol to Sydney Lewis with a reply from Lewis, regarding movie projectors (March 23, 1966), Best Products Archive, Folder 108, Series 1. Warhol also added in the letter, "I would like to thank you again for the smoked ham as we ate it on our bus ride to Ann Arbor, Michigan for a college concert."

Lewis owned the much-desired other half of an Art Deco dining room set that they had collected.¹⁰⁵ For her part, Frances recalled this gathering with some disappointment. “With a group of such Deco aficionados we assumed the repartee would be lively and enlightening. Not a chance. The discussion for the entire trip centered on silver polish, and the proper care of exotic woods and galuchat.”¹⁰⁶ For his part, Warhol described visiting the Lewises in Richmond by saying, “went to dinner at Francis [*sic*] and Sidney Lewis’ fabulous house. They are leading collectors in Virginia of Pop Art, Art Deco, and Tiffany. After dinner, though, their collection got a little smaller because one of their pugs knocked over a Tiffany Glass. Then we went for a nightcap at Caesar’s Pizza Palace, in the basement of the Holiday Inn.”¹⁰⁷

Warhol’s approach toward collecting revealed his interest in bringing creative production and consumption closer together, highlighting the overlap. Author Allen Kurzweil recalled his experience witnessing Warhol swoop through a tag sale in 1974, amazed at his voracious skill in appraising and selecting objects amidst the second-hand detritus. He observed how this voyeur’s paradise of second-hand commerce was able to unite, “the liquidator and consolidator, seller and buyer, the collector who’s casting about, and the castoff collecting dust.”¹⁰⁸ The work and skill associated with being a shopper was not to be underestimated for Warhol. In an interview in 1967 Warhol stated, “I’m not the High Priest of Pop Art, I’m just one of the workers in it.”¹⁰⁹ An historian continued this thread,

¹⁰⁴ Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown had recently designed what Venturi referred to as a “very diminutive great country house” for the noted Deco collectors Mr. and Mrs. Brant. Rita Reif, “A Five Year Quest for Art Deco Pieces Yields a Leading Private Collection,” *New York Times* (December 28, 1975).

¹⁰⁵ Fred Brandt filmed interview with Frances Lewis. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Collection, 2001, accessed October 23, 2018. <https://www.vmfamuseum/piction/11617470-110658703/>

¹⁰⁶ Sydney and Frances Lewis, “Andy Warhol: Refrigerator Ware to Deco,” *Sotheby’s Preview* (March/April 1988), p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ “Venturi,” *Interview*, Vol. 5 (May 1975), Best Products Archive, Folder 1479, Series 5.2.

¹⁰⁸ Allen Kurzweil, “Booked for Possession” in *Possession Obsession – Andy Warhol and Collecting*, ed. John Smith (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002), p. 34.

¹⁰⁹ This refers to a Gretchen Berg interview with Andy Warhol from 1967. Pamela Allara, “Please Touch” in *Possession Obsession – Andy Warhol and Collecting*, ed. John Smith. (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002), p. 41.

stating, “As an artist-worker, Warhol considered shopping to be an important part of his job.”¹¹⁰

Warhol brought together acquisition work with creative work in his curation of the “Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol” exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in 1969. In this endeavor, Warhol curated a range of objects from the museum’s archives. According to the museum director Daniel Robbins, one of the more striking things Warhol insisted upon was to display a neglected cabinet of 193 pairs of shoes, asserting that they each be catalogued and displayed separately. After the headache of assembling this information on 193 separate display tags and catalog entries, Robbins was amazed that “a weird poetry results.”¹¹¹ The work of discrete selection became Warhol’s central creative contribution of the exhibition.

Best Products Headquarters, Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates

Several Best Products’ buildings were described with the terminology of collecting. This was particularly evident with the Best Products headquarters building completed in 1980. It seemed as if the headquarters building was itself a component of the Lewises’ art collection when described by journalist Carleton Knight. “The entire building is a superb background for art, a work of art itself, a unique acquisition.”¹¹² Similarly, when architecture critic Michael Sorkin described HHPA’s design of the Best Products headquarters, he noted that, “The spirit of collection is pervasive.”¹¹³ Furthermore, Sorkin characterized HHPA as having a sensibility that, “inevitably starts with observation, with picking and choosing.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Pamela Allara, “Please Touch” in *Possession Obsession – Andy Warhol and Collecting*, ed. John Smith. (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2002), p. 41.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹² Knight III, “Building Collections/Collecting Buildings,” p. 86.

¹¹³ Michael Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1981), p. 16.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The collector's impulse that drove HHPA's work was apparent early in the firm's history when in 1971 they were awarded a Ford Foundation study grant. With this grant, HHPA produced a proposal for a community center design premised upon selecting and arranging twelve off-the-shelf systems that ranged from building products, to furnishings and décor. There was an ambiguous quality to the blending of these elements in which furnishings, décor, and structural components were all treated interchangeably. The community center design was assembled by arranging the twelve products, demonstrating their interest in design as an exercise in "selection and arrangement."¹¹⁵ HHPA was particularly focused on the act of highlighting a discrete object by surrounding it with a disparate array of objects. In the words of Sorkin, HHPA demonstrated "a fascination with the bourgeois charms of the discrete," and in so doing, their architecture illustrated an interest in "the disposition of 'collected' objects."¹¹⁶ HHPA described their design method as a technique of "random focus."¹¹⁷ Rather than seek unity within a pluralistic array of objects, they instead sought to bring together a "preposterous assortments of things" and then emphasize "the individual identities of their components."¹¹⁸ Sorkin observed this collector's tendency in HHPA's work and labeled it as evidence of their engagement with postmodern design, describing how the firm, "grappled with the endemic condition of postmodernity: the loss of happy agreement about what goes with what."¹¹⁹ In a text written in 1974, the firm described their belief that creating designs from assembled disparate

¹¹⁵ Glenn Andres described HHPA's project for the Ford Foundation as follows: "Their Ford Foundation study of 1971, for example, produced a proposal for a low-cost community resource center for East New York that had more to do with choosing and arranging than with conventional design. It incorporated twelve independent off-the-shelf systems. Corrugated Butler components, a Wonder Trussless Vault, an inflatable swimming pool enclosure, and airplane hangar doors created an outer shell that was 'furnished' with the likes of fiberglass church domes, trailer classrooms, unitized toilets and movable prefabricated stairs." Glenn Andres, "On Their Own Terms," *Concepts and Buildings* exhibition catalog (Middlebury: Middlebury College Museum of Art, 1993), p. 16.

¹¹⁶ Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Glenn Andres, "On Their Own Terms," *Concepts and Buildings* exhibition catalog (Middlebury: Middlebury College Museum of Art, 1993), p. 15.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Michael Sorkin, "Preface," *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates – Buildings and Projects 1967 – 1992* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), p. 8.

components gave users the chance to generate their own rich experience. HHPA described how such a design could be “read as a metaphor of experience, of the ‘action rich’ interrelationships possible among people and between people and things.”¹²⁰

The Lewises confided to a journalist that, when they selected HHPA as the architects for their Best Products headquarters, they had been primarily concerned that the design should “harmoniously co-exist” with the approximately 300 works of art that they intended to house there.¹²¹ HHPA’s design linked the architecture to the art collection in several ways. References to Art Deco were echoed throughout the building and its contents. The striking façade of the Best Products headquarters curved in an arc, reflecting the nearby Interstate 75 cloverleaf while exuding a Streamline Moderne quality. The building façade further exhibited Streamline style through its prominent use of glass block. The patterning used was in turn reminiscent of the brick diaper patterning found on the fifteenth century façade of the Doges Palace in Venice. Continuing the Venetian references, the gleaming façade of the headquarters was lined with an adjacent moat, featuring water jets. The extensive use of translucent glass block and reflective water feature were primarily used, according to HHPA, to create diffuse lighting conditions throughout the interior that would be ideal for showcasing the extensive collection of art objects.¹²²

In plan, the Best Products headquarters featured a superimposition of two disparate organizational plans. These distinct geometries were allowed to collide in certain moments that revealed the underlying collector’s logic of collage and assembly, while simultaneously creating ideal environmental conditions for showcasing art. The broad curving arc of the façade and the parallel curving arc of the circulation spine interrupted the orthogonal structural grid and office layout, creating a sawtooth edge condition that allowed for a generous double-height space along the

¹²⁰ Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, “Architecture as Environment,” *New Learning Spaces & Places* exhibition catalog (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1974), p. 12.

¹²¹ Knight III, “Building Collections/Collecting Buildings,” p. 85.

¹²² *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates – Buildings and Projects 1967 – 1992* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), p. 77.

perimeter, bringing diffuse light deep into the building. This in turn allowed art objects to be effectively displayed with appropriate lighting throughout the office space. A *Progressive Architecture* review of the building described how, “the translucent glass block admits a soft, even light that is most complimentary to the well-placed art works.”¹²³ The plan was not merely a juxtaposed grid-shift created for rhetorical purposes, but one that also served a performative function for the objects within, linking these two together. Sorkin characterized this approach toward the plan by saying, “The strength of HHPA’s work emerges in their willingness to confront the competing claims of the maelstrom of objects and in the suave and assured ways they made forms and materials companionable. Eschewing both the ironics of pop eclecticism and the forced juxtaposition of fashionable disorder, HHPA counterposes in the service of a feeling of new continuities.”¹²⁴

The circulation organization of the Best Products headquarters further animated the collector’s logic. The curving arc of the main circulation spine cut across the regular office grid layout, creating a scenographic sensibility that produced irregular residual moments that were often highlighted as display areas for the art collection. To further enhance the irregular quality of this curving circulation spine as it collided with the structural grid, freestanding pavilion-like furniture elements were added alongside the pathway to mark the perimeter of the office areas. Inspired by nineteenth-century wardrobes, these elements were over-sized turquoise storage cabinets that featured exaggerated colonial cornice detailing.¹²⁵ Marking the length of the circulation spine, these cabinets ambiguously blurred clear distinctions between architectural objects, furnishing and the art collection scattered throughout. To this end, Sorkin observed, “the architectural elements are continuous and often indistinguishable from the more purely decorative works of art.”¹²⁶

¹²³ David Morton, “Best Bets,” *Progressive Architecture* (February 1981), p. 69.

¹²⁴ Michael Sorkin, “Preface,” *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates – Buildings and Projects 1967 – 1992* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), p. 8.

¹²⁵ Andres, “On Their Own Terms,” p. 45.

The flooring that dominated the Best Products headquarters interior further blurred distinctions between building décor and art object. The circulation spine was brightly tiled. This tile walkway slashed through an equally dramatic floral carpet, the result of collaboration between project architect Malcolm Holzman and painter Jack Beal. Knowing that the Lewises collected Jack Beal's work, Holzman approached Beal to see if he could turn the water lily imagery from his silkscreen work, *Rowboat*, which had just been added to the Lewis collection, into a custom carpet pattern.¹²⁷ One journalist referred to this as an “ornamental carpet.”¹²⁸ Holzman called the resultant carpet “an art piece” and would go on to create numerous custom carpets in collaboration with artists in subsequent HHPA projects.¹²⁹

In describing the Best Products headquarters, Holzman relayed an anecdote about Sydney calling him during the design process to inquire as to whether they could make adjustments in order to incorporate some collectibles he had just acquired, a monumental stone sculpture carved by Rene Chambellan that adorned the top of New York's East Side Airlines Terminal building. Completed in 1939, the pair of twenty-foot tall Art Deco eagles was a massive piece of architectural ornamentation. Upon learning that the airline building was to be demolished, Lewis investigated whether he could purchase the sculptures. Not one to let a tax incentive slip by, Sydney negotiated for the owners to donate the eagles to his beloved alma mater, Washington and Lee University. He then arranged for Best Products to purchase the eagles from the university as a form of donation.¹³⁰ After a painstaking disassembly, the eagles were installed flanking the main entrance to the headquarters in a way that Holzman described as “an integral part of an architectural setting.”¹³¹ This wholesale inclusion of

¹²⁶ Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer*, p. 16.

¹²⁷ Holzman, *A Material Life*, p. 178.

¹²⁸ Mark Matousek, “The Thespian Touch,” *Metropolis* (March 1985), p. 26.

¹²⁹ Holzman, *A Material Life*, p. 178.

¹³⁰ Ellen Posner, “Sydney Lewis Knows Best,” *Art & Auction magazine* (October 1985), p. 165.

architectural *objets trouvés*, furthered the sense that, “the architectural elements are continuous and often indistinguishable from the more purely decorative works of art.”¹³² In his review, Paul Goldberger wondered if the inclusion of these “salvaged” Art Deco collectibles within the design was perhaps a bit “recherché” in 1980, but came around by concluding that the building still managed to resolve itself as “an amalgam of parts.”¹³³

HHPA was known to blur boundaries between décor and function by rendering mechanical building components into decorative features. *Progressive Architecture* editor David Morton claimed in his description of the Best Products headquarters that HHPA had by this point become “even somewhat notorious” for their treatment of mechanical systems as a form of décor.¹³⁴ At the headquarters, HHPA incorporated semicircular air diffusers above office doors in a manner that recalled Art Deco fanlights. Such detailing prompted Sorkin to observe that, “HHPA here uses industrial parts almost as if they were deco bits.”¹³⁵ Architectural historian Glenn Andres responded to such detailing by exclaiming, “The building and the collections resonate excitingly with each other.”¹³⁶ Demonstrating a close sympathy with High Tech impulses of the period, HHPA was well known for colorful exaggeration of exposed ducts and other mechanical equipment. What distinguished them slightly from many of their High Tech counterparts however, was a greater willingness to cloud the lines between décor and mechanical component. It was this sense of playful dissembling between décor and function, between collectible object and performative component that

¹³¹ Holzman, *A Material Life*, p. 186.

¹³² Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer*, p. 16.

¹³³ Paul Goldberger, “Architecture, Best Products’ Unusual Headquarters, An Appraisal,” *New York Times* (July 20, 1980).

¹³⁴ David Morton, “Best Bets,” *Progressive Architecture* (February 1981), p. 72.

¹³⁵ Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer*, p. 12.

¹³⁶ Andres, “On Their Own Terms,” p. 45.

lead Peter Eisenman to issue his oft repeated quip that labeled HHPA's work as, "functionalism in drag."¹³⁷

Retail Design, The Hunt

A collector's ethos was infused into Best Products showroom designs. More broadly, metaphors about a collector's hunt became prevalent within descriptions of retail design of the time. In 1965 J. Paul Getty waxed on about "the fantastic bargain or the fabulous find" in his book *The Joy of Collecting*.¹³⁸ Getty assured his reader that, "It does happen that the housewife who picks up a bargain marble bust at a rummage sale later discovers that she is the astounded owner of a rare piece worth thousands of dollars."¹³⁹ Similarly, in her book of the period, *Collecting – The Passionate Pastime*, author Susanna Johnston described the, "enjoyment to be had in the pursuit of elusive bargains."¹⁴⁰ Descriptions of consumption increasingly emphasized this impression of the wild unregulated hunting grounds of consumerism. In 1966 a British journalist wrote, "Americans found themselves in a jungle of goods, which seemed to have grown up around them overnight and was filled with strident macaw voices, screaming the claims of each of them."¹⁴¹ Another collector described the thrill of bargain hunting by admitting that, "Half the fun is in the chase and things can turn a bit dead when they come home."¹⁴²

Such ubiquitous metaphors repeatedly characterized retail spaces as predatory jungles where hunters might capture unwitting prey if they could cunningly avoid the traps set by exploitative big

¹³⁷ Paul Goldberger, "Brash, Young and Post-Modern," *New York Times Magazine* (20 February 1977), p. 18.

¹³⁸ J. Paul Getty, *The Joy of Collecting* [1965] (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2011), p. 71.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁰ Susanna Johnston, "Introduction" in *Collecting – The Passionate Pastime*, eds. Susanna Johnston & Tim Beddow (New York: Viking, 1986), p. 15.

¹⁴¹ Eirlys Roberts, *Consumers* (London: C.A. Watts & Co. Ltd, 1966), p. 34.

¹⁴² Susanna Johnston and Tim Beddow, *Collecting – The Passionate Pastime* (New York: Viking, 1986), p. 45.

business.¹⁴³ Increasingly, such traps came to be associated, in part, with coercive interior décor, which was seen to be a component of the jungle that the shrewd bargain hunter would need to overcome. Small collectors were empowered to seek a bargain by searching stores for themselves, not in trusting a retailer. One collector described how, “In a cosmopolitan rush they go searching for bargains, for ‘finds’ and discoveries, looking under tables, turning over packets of items deliberately thrown by an auctioneer into grouped lots, and plunging hands into boxes as if real treasure were within ...”¹⁴⁴ This bushwhacking approach was especially associated with discount retail as one journalist described in 1974, “Consumers have become accustomed to fending for themselves in discount houses and in most cases manage to do it successfully.”¹⁴⁵ The key to discovering the undervalued find was to see what was already hidden in plain sight – to look anew. This was especially evident in the realm of amateur collecting and the small-time bargain hunter. The trusted eye was pitted against other misleading sources. Over and over again, the message was that in order to rise above deception and find the hidden bargains, the amateurs must learn to trust their own eyes. One British collector gave advice to inexperienced collectors in 1968, saying, “Your eye, like your ear, is different from anybody else’s ... Too much striving to see as the expert sees spoils your own eye.”¹⁴⁶ He urged that too much knowledge could cloud vision for a consumer, saying, “What is the best way to cultivate a clear and discerning eye? And not only to do this in early life but to keep the eye in training despite the accumulating clouds of knowledge.”¹⁴⁷ This collector insisted that too much reliance upon the advice of others would only lead consumers away from a direct encounter with the object, the only way to appraise an object. Similarly, Peter Wilson, chairman of Sotheby’s

¹⁴³ Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 179.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, *Collector’s World*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁵ Tom Mahoney, *The Great Merchants* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), p. 361.

¹⁴⁶ Lord Eccles, *On Collecting* (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 31.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

during the 1970s, echoed this advice, saying, “to my mind you’ve got to buy with your eyes and your heart, you’ve got to buy what you love. If you buy with your ears and your intellect you’re just buying what everyone says is fashionable and you may come unstuck.”¹⁴⁸

Best Products Showrooms, A No Frills Aesthetic

The no frills showroom interior emerged in the 1970s as an efficient blend of retailing and warehousing, creating an impression of transparent and honest cheapness. This no frills interior was aimed at the shrewd bargain hunter, distrustful of retailers and their misleading décor. Catalog showroom impresario J.M. de Bernardi, who published an advice book for potential catalog showroom investors in 1974, declared that, “Warehouse selling is returning to the pile it high, sell it cheap philosophy.”¹⁴⁹ Repeatedly the no frills interior was associated with savings that were passed on to the consumer as suggested in this 1978 assessment from a journalist, “It’s the catalog showroom industry, which has shunned consumer frills in favor of offering consistently low prices on brand-name merchandise.”¹⁵⁰ The idea that any interior décor, amounted to an increased cost to the consumer was implicitly understood. J.M. de Bernardi explained that, “The customer still wants service and nicely appointed, exciting stores, but not if she has to pay for them.”¹⁵¹ This aesthetic efficiency was repeatedly presented as a form of honest transparency in customer relations, as in one author’s description of a discount store. “The store was hard, utilitarian, rather colorless and dead honest.”¹⁵² Much effort was invested in creating the no frills appearance, generating its own complex dissimulation with one observer noting that, “the store must appear to spend nothing on its

¹⁴⁸ Nicholas Faith, *Sold – The Rise and Fall of the House of Sotheby* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), p. 221.

¹⁴⁹ J.M. de Bernardi, *The Catalog Showroom Formula* (New York: Chain Store Age Books, 1974), p. 44.

¹⁵⁰ Winski, “Catalog Showroom Hot Retailer.”

¹⁵¹ de Bernardi, *The Catalog Showroom Formula*, p. 177.

¹⁵² Donald Katz, *The Big Store – Inside the Crisis and Revolution at Sears* (New York: Viking, 1987), p. 310.

appearance.”¹⁵³ This idea that an image of cheapness must dominate was reinforced in the following description of the opening of a discount Carrefour store in 1968, “What was particularly interesting in this store is that in fact this conditioning had to happen without giving the impression of investment in the décor. On the contrary, the store has to give external signs of non-wealth, as the customer has to be conscious of being in a discount store, and thus of benefitting from ‘slashed’ prices. For the customer to ‘believe’ in this, he must not be basking in luxury.”¹⁵⁴ The no frills showroom interior became a significant communications strategy conveying financial efficiency and marketing transparency in order to appeal to the bargain hunter in search of the find. Aligned with these broader retailing trends, Sydney Lewis stated that Best Products was built “for individuals who don’t care for those frills.”¹⁵⁵

“Merchandise the Box”

The no frills showroom aesthetic as deployed by Best Products focused on the idea of merchandise-as-display. The products became the décor. In 1981 architecture journalist Pilar Viladas described an effective showroom design as one where, “the no-nonsense feeling is well conveyed.”¹⁵⁶ Viladas continued by describing how this no-nonsense feeling was achieved when, “the design philosophy itself is the merchandising strategy.”¹⁵⁷ The merchandise-as-display approach was premised upon the idea that architecture needed to recede in deference to the products on display. Along these same lines, the book *Shops and Showrooms – An International Survey*, published in 1967, described how a no frills showroom environment foregrounded the isolated merchandise

¹⁵³ Bowlby, *Carried Away*, p. 165.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁵⁵ “Best’s Know-How Sparks Growth,” *Catalog Shopping Magazine* (January 1972), p. 16.

¹⁵⁶ Viladas, “Shops & Stores,” p. 7.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

object. The author explained how “the architectural framework recedes completely into the background to become an anonymous shell.”¹⁵⁸

It was assumed that architecture might otherwise provide unwanted interference for the merchandise. An architectural journalist praised Robert A.M. Stern’s showroom design for Erbus Fabrics by noting that it “offers no competition to the fabrics.” The journalist then asserted, “This is as it should be, of course.”¹⁵⁹ The praise continued by suggesting that unbridled architecture might limit the customer’s ability to see the merchandise properly, that it might unduly obstruct a clear communion with the objects for sale. “People must be able to look, see, find samples.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, in reference to an Andrew Geller shoe showroom, a journalist praised the architecture for being muted in deference to the merchandise. “Here and throughout the office and showroom areas, colors and materials are luxurious but hushed; nothing is allowed to upstage the shoes.”¹⁶¹ In the same vein, Viladas asserted that showroom design was effective when, “The merchandise is allowed to speak for itself ...”¹⁶² Viladas described the “showroom theory” as one in which, “the merchandise – furniture, fabrics, carpets or whatever – is the focus of attention, and therefore the architecture or interior design should play a secondary role. The design should certainly be able to stand on its own merits, but it should ultimately be unobtrusive, the better to be supportive of the goods on display.”¹⁶³ Viladas described how Philadelphia’s Eurotex showroom could be deemed a successful design because, “one could actually say that the merchandise becomes the showroom itself.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Karl Kaspar, *Shops and Showrooms – An International Survey* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Viladas, “Shops & Stores,” p. 119.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶³ Viladas, “Shops & Stores,” p. 105. Viladas went on to describe how showroom architecture created a desirable environment by not calling attention to itself. “The interiors, carefully modulated in spatial terms, are not allowed to interfere with one’s appreciation of the goods.” *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

The underlying premise was that architecture, seemingly the frill in the no frills aesthetic, needed to get out of the way of the merchandise. When analyzing Best Products showrooms, Viladas described how the company had created “essentially non-architectural solutions.”¹⁶⁵ More specifically, Viladas described how Best Products’ non-architectural solutions had been “to merchandise the ‘box’.”¹⁶⁶ Similarly, Michael Sorkin described how Venturi and Scott Brown’s design approach toward Best Products had been to “muralize” the box.¹⁶⁷ Stephen Izenour, who had worked on the Best Products showroom design at Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown explicitly equated architecture with merchandise, in this case a box of tissue. Izenour proclaimed, “It’s like being confronted with a Kleenex box – it’s got to be just so long and so high – so how do you make the exterior attractive? You distort it or decorate it.”¹⁶⁸ Philip Johnson likewise described the architectural contributions to Best Products showrooms as being “basically a decorating job.”¹⁶⁹ Best Products management was quoted in *Progressive Architecture* saying that in the company’s view, architecture was synonymous with art, which in turn was synonymous with décor. “Best’s view is that architecture, insofar as it is art, consists entirely of surface decoration.”¹⁷⁰

In Summary

The growing ranks of prosumers of the 1970s were exerting their expanding power to recast an object through the act of collecting. Mutations between architecture, art and décor abounded.

¹⁶⁵ Pilar Viladas, “Nothing But the Best,” *Interiors* (March 1980), p. 26.

¹⁶⁶ Pilar Viladas wrote: “What Best has done in the past with the SITE designs is to merchandise the ‘box’ using a three-dimensional approach in a two-dimensional context – the façade.” Viladas, “Nothing But the Best,” p. 26.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Sorkin, “The World of All Possible Bests,” *Exquisite Corpse – Writing on Buildings* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 30.

¹⁶⁸ Jane Fant Nelson, “Best Showroom Architecture: the Ultimate ‘Decorated Box’,” *Special Magazine Issue: “Best Products and the Evolution of the Catalog Showroom Business, Profits – A Bank of Virginia Business Publication* (Winter 1983/84), p. 11.

¹⁶⁹ Deyan Sudjic, “Latest Best, Latest Building Designs by SITE and Projects for BEST Show at Museum of Modern Art,” *Architectural Review* (April 1980), p. 222.

¹⁷⁰ “News Report,” *Progressive Architecture* (February 1980), p. 24.

Once rendered collectible, the status of an object could be changed in varying ways, namely, in the way it was treated, valued, or categorized by law. The implications for architecture were significant. Within the sphere of retail architecture, a space explicitly devoted to acquisition, architecture was particularly prone to being recast as a piece of merchandise. Architecture was understood to be the excess decorative frill in a sphere driven to eliminate frills. Such remarkable acts of transmutation encouraged an expanding audience to come puzzle through the differences in person – to come and produce their own categorical distinctions, to be a prosumer. To re-iterate the words of James Wines, approximating a perplexed Best Products customer, this re-casting of architecture was drawing a new expansive audience. Wines remarked, “Best builds it and the public says, ‘What is it? Is it a building? Is it a sculpture? Is it neither? They hate it at first, and then suddenly they realize that people are coming to see it. Whether they understand it or not becomes irrelevant.’”¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Knight III, “Building Collections/Collecting Buildings,” p. 85.

EPILOGUE

The experience economy at its simplest was a rapprochement between production and consumption, driven by deregulatory change. As production chains disintegrated, the consumer was displaced and reinstated as a unifying force within the web of production, distribution and consumption. Retail architecture aided in choreographing this repositioning by rendering itself increasingly transparent – exposing its operations and drawing the consumer deeper within. The emergence of the catalog showroom as both a new consumption model and architectural type is a particularly clear example of this change. As architecture helped to outline the experience economy, it too was being re-formed. Perhaps the most significant effect of the emerging experience economy upon architecture was the way in it began to work at dissolving architecture. In this sense, architecture was invaded from within by the empowered consumer.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown realized their much-theorized decorated shed with their Best Products showroom design. My contribution with this dissertation is to better understand how this moment came at the culmination of a sequence of political acts that deliberately and repeatedly dissolved formerly integrated chains of production. To describe this context, I showcase the changing dynamic of postmodern architectural patronage. Best Products, and more specifically, Sydney and Frances Lewis, exemplified this changing model of patronage by placing themselves in the center of this disrupted chain of production.

In organizing this historical material, I also hope to focus greater attention on the origins of the experience economy. The experience economy is much more familiar in its later stages of development during the 1980s and 1990s which focused overwhelmingly on ambient environmental effects. In this mature iteration of an experience environment, the individual along with all objects within the environment began to dissolve. But there was a moment before the experience economy became an experience environment in which the focus was decidedly different. In this dissertation, I

outline how before an omnivorous experience environment fully descended, there was instead a focus upon the intensive coupling of a consumer with a product. The act of a consumer intently evaluating and selecting a product was at the very center of the early experience economy. This encounter was the experience at the center of the experience economy, the moment that helped render the consumer into a producer. I argue that from this intensive and tactile coupling of a consumer with a product there emerged the ripple effects that gradually led to the dissolution of architecture into an environment. It was this initial coupling that first repositioned the consumer at the very heart of the postmodern paradigm.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 0.0

Sydney Lewis Jr., Susan Lewis, Sydney Lewis, Andrew Lewis and Frances Lewis. 1963. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 11 (October 1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

Figure 0.1

Frances Lewis. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 5, No 4 (April 1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 878, Series 5.2.

Figure 0.2

Dora Lewis, Sydney Lewis, Frances Lewis and Andrew Lewis. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 6, No 3 (March 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

Figure 0.3

Original Best Products Marshall Street Showroom. From: *Best Products 25th Anniversary Report* (1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 961, Series 5.3.

Figure 0.4

View of backside of original Best Products Marshall Street Showroom, Richmond, Virginia, in 2015. Photo by Christina Gray, 2015.

Figure 0.5

Best Products showroom, Durham, North Carolina. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1313, Series 7.

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Best Products showroom, unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1313, Series 7.

Figure 0.7

Unbuilt Best Products showroom design. SITE, Floating Roof showroom concept model. 1970. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 40.

Figure 0.8

Best Products showroom. Peeling Façade. SITE. Richmond, Virginia. 1972. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 12.

Figure 0.9

Best Products showroom under construction. Peeling Façade. SITE. Richmond, Virginia. 1972. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 42.

Figure 0.10

Best Products showroom under construction. Peeling Façade. SITE. Richmond, Virginia. 1972. From: Pierre Restany and Bruno Zevi. *SITE: Architecture as Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 38.

Figure 0.11

Sydney Lewis as the Peeling Façade. From: *Richmond Magazine* (May 1976), illustration by Charlie Brown.

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Best Products showroom in background. Indeterminate Façade. SITE. Houston, Texas. 1975. From: "SITE, Architecture as Environmental Art," *Space Design* (August 1981), p. 10.

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Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. SITE. Houston, Texas. 1975. SITE brochure. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1250, Series 7.

Figure 0.14

Best Products showroom. Notch Building. SITE. Sacramento, California. 1977. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 2.

Figure 0.15

Best Products showroom. Notch Building. SITE. Sacramento, California. 1977. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 48.

Figure 0.16

Best Products showroom. Notch Building. SITE. Sacramento, California. 1977. From: Best Products pamphlet (c. 1977), Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

Figure 0.17

Best Products showroom. Tilt Wall. SITE. Towson, Maryland. 1978. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 8.

Figure 0.18

Frances Lewis in front of Best Products showroom. Tilt Wall. SITE. Towson, Maryland. 1978. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1177, Series 7.

Figure 0.19

Best Products showroom. Tilt Wall. SITE. Towson, Maryland. 1978. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1177, Series 7.

Figure 0.20

Best Products showroom. Tilt Wall. SITE. Towson, Maryland. 1978. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 51.

Figure 0.21

Best Products showroom model. Rainforest Building. SITE. Hialeah, Florida. Completed in 1979. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 53.

Figure 0.22

Best Products showroom. Rainforest Building. SITE. Hialeah, Florida. 1979. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 6.

Figure 0.23

Best Products showroom. Rainforest Building. SITE. Hialeah, Florida. 1979. From: Whiting-Turner Contractors Catalogue (Unknown date), p. 38. Best Products Archive, Folder 1158, Series 7.

Figure 0.24

Best Products showroom under construction. Rainforest Building. SITE. Hialeah, Florida. Completed in 1979.
From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 55.

Figure 0.25

Best Products showroom. Anti-Sign. SITE. Ashland, Virginia. 1979. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. iii.

Figure 0.26

Best Products showroom construction. Anti-Sign. SITE. Ashland, Virginia. 1979. From: Pierre Restany and Bruno Zevi. *SITE: Architecture as Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 79.

Figure 0.27

Best Products showroom under construction. Anti-Sign. SITE. Ashland, Virginia. 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1262, Series 7.

Figure 0.28

Best Products showroom. Cutler Ridge Building. SITE. Miami, Florida. 1979. From: "SITE, Architecture as Environmental Art," *Space Design* (August 1981), p. 26.

Figure 0.29

James Wines in front of Best Products showroom. Cutler Ridge Building. SITE. Miami, Florida. 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1157, Series 7.

Figure 0.30

Best Products showroom model. Forest Building. SITE. Richmond, Virginia. Completed in 1980. From: Best Products booklet (1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 1333, Series 8.1.

Figure 0.31

Best Products showroom. Forest Building. SITE. Richmond, Virginia. Completed in 1980. From: Douglas Brenner, "Between Utopia and Apocalypse, Five Projects by SITE," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 172, No 3 (March 1984). Photo by Peter Aaron.

Figure 0.32

Best Products showroom. Forest Building. View from within the forecourt. SITE. Richmond, Virginia. Completed in 1980. In 2015 this was the only SITE designed showroom still intact. In 2015 this former showroom was occupied by the West End Presbyterian Church. Photo by Christina Gray, 2015.

Figure 0.33

Best Products showroom. Inside/Outside Building. SITE. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 1984. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 7.

Figure 0.34

Best Products showroom. Inside/Outside Building. SITE. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 1984. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 58.

Figure 0.35

Best Products showroom. Inside/Outside Building. SITE. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 1984. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 59.

Figure 0.36

Best Products showroom unbuilt design. The Twist. SITE. Quakerbridge, New Jersey. 1981. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 6, No 2 (February 1981), p. 3. Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

Figure 0.37

Best Products showroom unbuilt design. Parking Lot Building. SITE. 1976. Model in SITE's Greene Street Studio.
From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 47.

Figure 0.38

Best Products showroom. Venturi Rauch and Scott Brown. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 7.

Figure 0.39

Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott Brown in front of Best Products showroom with the caption “Their Enemies Call Them ‘Gurus of Chaos’ But These Architects Say They Just Prefer ‘Messy Vitality’ Over ‘Obvious Unity’”. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Jerry Bowles, “Building in the Vernacular,” *Today – The Inquirer Magazine* (September 23, 1979). Photo by Vicki Valerio, Best Products Archive, Folder 1235, Series 7.

Figure 0.40

Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott Brown in front of Best Products showroom. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Jerry Bowles, "Building in the Vernacular," *Today – The Inquirer Magazine* (September 23, 1979). Photo by Vicki Valerio, Best Products Archive, Folder 1235, Series 7.

Figure 0.41

Best Products showroom. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1235, Series 7.

Figure 0.42

Best Products showroom. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1235, Series 7.

Figure 0.43

Best Products showroom. Venturi Rauch and Scott Brown. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1235, Series 7.

Figure 0.44

Best Products showroom. Venturi Rauch and Scott Brown. Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania. 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1235, Series 7.

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Figure 0.45

Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. SITE. Houston, Texas. 1975. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 13.

Figure 0.46

Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. SITE. Houston, Texas. 1975. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 44.

Figure 0.47

Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. SITE. Houston, Texas. 1975. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 44.

Figure 0.48

Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. SITE. Houston, Texas. 1975. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 44.

Figure 0.49

SITE. Indeterminate Façade. View of the South West. From: Pierre Restany and Bruno Zevi. *SITE: Architecture as Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 47.

Figure 0.50

Aerial view. Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. From: Michael Bzdak, "Indeterminate Façade." *The Critical Edge*. edited by Tod Marder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 144.

Figure 0.51

Indeterminate Façade research reference image kept in SITE archive. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 31.

Figure 0.52

James Wines, sketch, Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. From: Michael Bzdak, "Indeterminate Façade." *The Critical Edge*. edited by Tod Marder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 143.

Figure 0.53

SITE, oblique projection drawing, Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. From: Michael Bzdak, "Indeterminate Façade." *The Critical Edge*. edited by Tod Marder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 145.

Figure 0.54

SITE. Indeterminate Façade. South Elevation Drawing. From: Pierre Restany and Bruno Zevi. *SITE: Architecture as Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 43.

Figure 0.55

Construction documentation. Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. C. 1975 From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 45.

Figure 0.56

Construction documentation. Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. C. 1975. From: "SITE – Efforts Toward a Truly Public Art," *Ceramics Monthly* (October 1980), p. 32.

Figure 0.57

Bricklayer working on Indeterminate Facade. From: *SITE: Architecture as Art: Essays by Pierre Restany and Bruno Zevi* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980)

Figure 0.58

James Wines, sketch, Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. From: *Gehry, Site, Tigerman: Trois Portraits de l'Artiste En Architecte* (Brussels: Cep Editions, 1981), p. 85.

Figure 0.59

Emilio Sousa, Michelle Stone, Alison Sky and James Wines photographed at Best Products showroom. Indeterminate Façade. C. 1975. Photo by Robert Perron. From: *SITE: Identity in Density* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2005), p. 23.

CHAPTER 1: POLICY

Figure 1.0

Copy of first Best Products Buyers Book. 1958. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1347, Series 8.3.

Figure 1.1

Sydney Lewis shaking hands with Ronald Reagan. Unknown date. From: Lewis Archive, Folder 1516, Series 5.3.

Figure 1.2

Andrew Lewis cutting ribbon at Best Products showroom opening. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 4.

Figure 1.3

Dora Lewis, Andrew Lewis, Virginia's Governor John Dalton, Sydney Lewis, customer Mrs. Peter Mazloom who made the half-billionth dollar sale of the year and Frances Lewis in a Best Products showroom. 1978. From: Laura Gilmour, *Best Products Archive Guidebook* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002), p. 2

Figure 1.4

Best Products showroom prototype plan. Circa 1981. From: "SITE, Architecture as Environmental Art," *Space Design* (August 1981), p. 8.

Figure 1.5

Best Products showroom prototype diagram. 1970s. From: Best Products booklet, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

Figure 1.6

Best Products showroom locations map. January 30, 1986. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1309, Series 7.

CHAPTER 2: SERVICE

Figure 2.0

SITE directors at Best Products showroom, Indeterminate Façade, Houston, Texas, Emilio Sousa, Alison Sky, Michelle Stone and James Wines. From: "SITE, Architecture as Environmental Art," *Space Design* (August 1981), p. 39.

Figure 2.1

SITE directors, Michelle Stone, James Wines, Emilio Sousa and Alison Sky. Unknown date. Photo by Frank Schramm III.

Figure 2.2

Frances Lewis, Denise Scott Brown, Sydney Lewis and Philip Pearlstein at an American Academy in Rome event. Unknown date. From: *Journal of American Academy in Rome*, (Unknown issue), p. 16.

Figure 2.3

Letter from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to Frances and Sydney Lewis. April 4, 1975. From: Lewis Archive, Folder 1511, Series 5.3.

Figure 2.4

Inventory from Andy Warhol Enterprises Inc. to Best Products, requesting merchandise to be traded for art. Circa 1967. From: Lewis Archive, Folder 108, Series 1.

Figure 2.5

Sporting goods department in the original Best Products showroom located on West Marshall Street in Richmond, Virginia. Circa 1965. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 11 (October 1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

Figure 2.6

Best Products showroom featuring catalog table. Circa 1977. From: Best Products pamphlet, Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

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Best Products showroom ordering desk. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1311, Series 7.

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Best Products showroom ordering desk. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

Figure 2.9

“A Best employee who specializes in impulse merchandise works with a Rubbermaid salesman to arrange an effective display.” Circa 1983. From: *Profits Magazine* (Winter 1983/1984), Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

Figure 2.10

Best Products showroom. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1306, Series 7.

Figure 2.11

Best Products showroom, catalog table. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

Figure 2.12

Best Products showroom. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1312, Series 7.

Figure 2.13

Best Products showroom shelving. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1312, Series 7.

Figure 2.14

Best Product showroom. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

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Best Products showroom. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.

Figure 2.16

Best Products showroom featuring product label. Unknown location. Circa 1979. From: Best Products booklet, Best Products Archive, Folder 963, Series 5.3.

Figure 2.17

Best Products showroom. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

Figure 2.18

Best Products showroom, catalog table. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

Figure 2.19

Best Products showroom, catalog table. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

Figure 2.20

Best Products, Sample Completed Sales Ticket. Unknown date. From: Best Products Fact Packet, Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

Figure 2.21

Best Products showroom, checkout. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

Figure 2.22

Best Products showroom, checkout. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1311, Series 7.

Figure 2.23

Best Products showroom exit doors. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

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Figure 3.0

Frances Lewis at her desk. Unknown date. From: *Best Times* newsletter, November 1, 1974, Best Products Archive, Folder 1602, Series 5.5.

Figure 3.1

Three Best Products employees (Eddie Cook Jr. and Warren Gilpin) sending products from the warehouse to the showroom at the original West Marshall showroom location. 1965. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 11 (October 1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

Figure 3.2

Best Products employee uses new microfilm accounting system. Unknown date. From: *Catalog Showroom Business* magazine (Unknown issue), p. 10, Best Products Archive, Folder 698, Series 3.7.

Figure 3.3

Best Products employee among magnetic inventory storage tapes. Circa 1983. From: *Profits* magazine (Winter 1983/1984), Best Products Archive, Folder 962, Series 5.3.

Figure 3.4

Best Products employee checking product tag. Circa 1978. From: *Best Products Report to Employees*, 1978, Best Products Archive, Folder 761, Series 4.1.

Figure 3.5

Best Products employee checking inventory machinery. Circa 1978. From: *Best Products Report to Employees*, 1978, Best Products Archive, Folder 761, Series 4.1.

Figure 3.6

Best Products employee with inventory machinery. Circa 1978. From: *Best Products Report to Employees*, 1978, Best Products Archive, Folder 761, Series 4.1.

Figure 3.7

Director of Transportation, Jack Salvant, showcases new inventory sortation system at Ashland Distribution Center to visiting managers. 1981. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 6, No 6 (June 1981), Best Products Archive, Folder 880, Series 5.2.

Figure 3.8

Return desk at Best Products showroom, Dayton South, Ohio location. 1982. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 11 (October 1982), p. 3, Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

Figure 3.9

SITE drawing of Best Products showroom prototype interior, showing how pneumatic tube system interacts with display units, Sheet PT1, First Floor Plan. July 1979. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 157, Series 1.1.

Figure 3.10

Best Products warehouse. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1306, Series 7.

Figure 3.11

Best Products warehouse. Unknown location. Circa 1985. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1354, Series 8.3.

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Best Products warehouse. Unknown location. Circa 1985. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1354, Series 8.3.

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Best Products warehouse conveyor belt. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 721, Series 3.7.

Figure 3.14

Best Products Ashland Catalog Sales Center. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1262, Series 7.

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Best Products conveyor belt. Unknown date. From: Best Products pamphlet, Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

Figure 3.16

Best Products warehouse. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

Figure 3.17

Best Products employee Sandra Kramer testing new Showroom Point of Order System. 1982. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 7, No 7 (July 1982), Best Products Archive, Folder 883, Series 5.2.

Figure 3.18

Frances and Sydney Lewis' home. 2601 Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. Photo by Christina Gray, 2015.

Figure 3.19

Living room in Sydney and Frances Lewis' home. Circa 1985. From: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archive.

Figure 3.20

Sydney and Frances Lewis' home office. From: Judd Tully, "Sydney and Frances Lewis, Quest for the Best in Art," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Vol. 18, No 8 (November 1987), p. 97.

Figure 3.21

Sydney and Frances Lewis' bedroom. From: Judd Tully, "Sydney and Frances Lewis, Quest for the Best in Art," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Vol. 18, No 8 (November 1987), p. 88.

Figure 3.22

Best Products showroom with decorative arts displayed on walls. Unknown location. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1312, Series 7.

Figure 3.23

Best Products showroom with decorative arts displayed on walls. Unknown location. Circa 1977. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1335, Series 8.1.

CHAPTER 4: COLLECTING

Figure 4.0

Sotheby's President John Marion auctioning a Frederic Edwin Church painting. circa 1979. From: "Going... Going... Gone!," *Time* magazine (December 3, 1979). Photo by Ted Thai.

Figure 4.1

Article featuring photograph of a Christie's auction filed in Lewis archive. This copy is notated with an arrow pointing out the Lewises sitting in the front row of the auction. 1979. From: "Going... Going... Gone!," *Time* magazine (December 3, 1979). Photo by Ted Thai.

Figure 4.2

Documentation of damaged painting in children's department of Dallas Best Products showroom. Documentation of damage was filed amongst insurance paperwork. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 424, Series 3.4.

Figure 4.3

Horst P. Horst. *Andy Warhol*. 1983.

Figure 4.4

Andy Warhol. *Sydney's Harem*. 1966.

Figure 4.5

Philip Pearlstein. *Frances and Sydney Lewis*. 1981.

Figure 4.6

Jack Beal. *Sydney and Frances Lewis*. 1975.

Figure 4.7

Frances and Sydney Lewis with objects in their collection. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1612, Series 5.5.

Figure 4.8

Frances and Sydney Lewis photographed in the newly opened West Wing of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts containing the Lewises' recently donated Sydney and Frances Lewis Art Nouveau Collection. From: Judd Tully, "Sydney and Frances Lewis, the Quest for the Best Art," *Smithsonian*, Vol. 18, No 8 (November 1987).

Figure 4.9

Frances and Sydney Lewis photographed in front of their portrait by Ben Schonzeit. 1985. From: Elliott Shaffner, "Eavesdropping on Jay and J," *Richmond Times Dispatch* (June 19, 2016).

Figure 4.10

Frances and Sydney Lewis photographed in front of the BEST sign in front of the headquarters, Richmond, Virginia.
Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 792, Series 4.2.

Figure 4.11

Sydney Lewis with Ivan Karp at the Lewises' Virginia Beach summer house "Villa Medici West." June 1972. Photo by Marilyn Karp. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1609, Series 5.5.

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Paul Mellon, Frances and Sydney Lewis at the groundbreaking ceremony for the West Wing at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. 1982. From: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archive.

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West Wing at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by Christina Gray, 2016.

Figure 4.14

West Wing, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, featuring the Lewis Collection. Unknown date. Photo by Cervin Robinson.

Figure 4.15

Hugh Hardy, Malcolm Holzman and Norman Pfeiffer. From: Michael Sorkin, *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1981).

Figure 4.16

Best Products headquarters opening ceremony seen from nearby Interstate. 1981. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1275, Series 7.

Figure 4.17

Frances and Sydney Lewis in front of the Best Products headquarters. Unknown date. From: Laura Gilmour, *A Guide to the Sydney and Frances Lewis Papers* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 2002).

Figure 4.18

Best Products headquarters. Richmond, Virginia. Photo by Christina Gray, 2015.

Figure 4.19

Best Products headquarters. 1981. From: "SITE, Architecture as Environmental Art," *Space Design* (August 1981), p. 46.

Figure 4.20

Best Products headquarters under construction. Unknown date. From: *Buildings for Best Products* exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1979), p. 16.

Figure 4.21

Best Products headquarters main level plan. HHPA. 1980. From: *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates – Buildings and Projects 1967-1992* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), p. 72.

Figure 4.22

Best Products headquarters interior display space. Unknown date. Photo by Norman McGrath. From: Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2008), p. 59.

Figure 4.23

Best Products headquarters interior featuring Jack Beal carpet design. Unknown date. Photo by Norman McGrath.
From: Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2008), p. 181.

Figure 4.24

Carpet samples for Jack Beal carpet design collaboration with Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer. From: Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2008), p. 179.

Figure 4.25

Best Products Headquarters with Art Deco vent above door. 1980. Photo by Norman McGrath. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1276, Series 7.

Figure 4.26

Airlines Building featuring Rene Chambellan eagles at top. New York. Photo by Cervin Robinson. From: Malcolm Holzman, *A Material Life* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2008), p. 184.

Figure 4.27

Best Products employees and their families at Art Open House at Best Products headquarters. May 18, 1980. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 5, No 7 (July 1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 879, Series 5.2.

Figure 4.28

Best Products headquarters, featuring art displays. From: *Best Times* newsletter, Vol. 5, No 1 (1980), Best Products Archive, Folder 878, Series 5.2.

Figure 4.29

Best Products showroom, Rockville, Maryland. Unknown date. From: Best Products Archive, Folder 1177, Series 7.

Figure 5.1

Christina Gray with her brother Andrew Gray, playing on the installation “Highway 86,” designed by SITE for Expo 86, Vancouver. 1986. Photo by Lin Cromie.

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