

## Better Living: Toward a Cultural History of a Business Slogan

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ANDREW M. SHANKEN

This article traces the migration of the slogan “better living” from its inception in 1935 as an attempt to clean up the corporate image of Du Pont, through its dissemination into the building trades and architecture during and after World War II, and finally into urban planning in the postwar decades. These fields borrowed the phrase back and forth in their promotional literature in order to serve their own, often clashing agendas—one strand of the larger contest between the forces of free enterprise and those of centralized planning and reform. The essay aims to bring together aspects of business, architecture, and planning in order to explore the fertile cultural milieu these different fields shared in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

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In 1935 the advertising firm Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBD&O) proposed the now-famous Du Pont slogan, “Better Things for Better Living.” What might at first appear to be an appeal to mass consumption veiled an important public relations move. Du Pont was under siege. The company had figured prominently in the 1934 book *Merchants of Death*, which exposed American corporate profiteering during World War I.<sup>1</sup> “Better things for better living through

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1. H. C. Engelbrecht and F. C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death* (New York, 1934).

chemistry” was Du Pont’s retort. The simple phrase pivoted on the word ‘living,’ converting materiel to materialism and diverting attention away from the charges that Du Pont was among the “merchants of death,” becoming a life-affirming slogan for the company.<sup>2</sup> The slogan simultaneously aimed to win consumer acceptance of synthetic materials, alter Du Pont’s public image from munitions maker to a chemical corporation, and respond to American distrust of big business in the wake of the Great Depression.<sup>3</sup> Du Pont was not alone. As the New Deal stepped into the breach, big business responded with aggressive publicity campaigns defending free enterprise as the best means of righting the economy and leading the nation out of the crisis. Better living supplied the rhetoric.

Bruce Barton, the lead wordsmith at BBD&O, coined the phrase “better living,” pitching it explicitly against the New Deal as a way of establishing a new vocabulary for business leadership, part of what Roland Marchand has called the corporate “quest for social and moral legitimacy” that provided a major cultural counterpoint to the New Deal.<sup>4</sup> Barton’s phrase not only headlined Du Pont’s advertising, but it also decorated its exhibit at the New York Museum of Science and Industry in New York City in 1937 (shown later at the Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia), as well as its exhibit at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, where it was seen by some 9.7 million visitors.<sup>5</sup> While the historical context of Du Pont’s slogan is now well established, less known is its unexpected dissemination through

2. “Better living” first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in Oct. 1935 and was aired in the same month on the weekly broadcast *Cavalcade*. See William Lary Bird, Jr., “*Better Living*”: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1933–1955 (Evanston, Ill., 1999).

3. David J. Rhees, “Corporate Advertising, Public Relations and Popular Exhibits: The Case of Du Pont,” *History and Technology* 10, no. 1 (1993): 67–75. For the larger context of the rise of public relations, see Scott M. Cutlip, *Public Relations History: From the 17th to the 20th Century: The Antecedents* (Hillsdale, N.J., 1995).

4. See Charles F. McGovern, “Consumption and Citizenship in the United States, 1900–1940,” in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles F. McGovern, and Matthias Judt (Cambridge, U.K., 1998), 56–57. For the idea of business leadership see Bird, “*Better Living*”; and Roland Marchand, “Where Lie the Boundaries of the Corporation? Explorations in ‘Corporate Responsibility’ in the 1930s,” *Business and Economic History* 26 (Fall 1997): 81. For more on Barton see T. J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York, 1983), 30–38; and Warren Susman, *Culture as History* (New York, 1984), 122–49.

5. Rhees, “Corporate Advertising,” 69–70. For the earlier context see Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (Chicago, 1990).

American culture and its persistence through the war years and into the postwar decades.

By the time of the 1939 world's fair, several other companies had appropriated "better living" for their advertising, building their own campaigns around the energy of Du Pont's original slogan. World War II altered the context that gave birth to better living, yet the phrase proliferated on the home front into a widespread cultural phenomenon, taken up by still more companies and finding footholds outside of advertising and the commercial milieu. The phrase changed from an appeal for business legitimacy to a home-front anticipation of postwar plenty, when manufacturers of building materials vied for control of the postwar building boom. Yet it also appeared in less commercial architectural and building literature, in "how-to" and do-it-yourself literature, and in the publicity of the building trades. More surprisingly, the phrase continued to resonate after the war, as urban planning organizations conscripted the phrase for their own publicity in a moment when the planning profession was reaching out for public relations techniques to communicate to the lay public.<sup>6</sup> As an established term that recalled both corporate legitimacy and postwar bounty, it provided a useful tool for a profession whose very basis seemed to be a threat to free enterprise. Big business and the building trades are obvious partners, but the history of the slogan "better living" reveals the dynamic encounter of business and consumer culture with architecture and planning.<sup>7</sup>

Architectural historians have been slow to follow the lead of business and cultural historians in studying the rise of consumer culture and corporations, in spite of the fact that the building industry—historically one of the nation's largest industries—has dramatically shaped architecture and the culture surrounding it. Consumer culture, and in particular advertising, has provided a common denominator for building and architecture, and no less for urban planning, even as the last two fields have endeavored at times to insulate themselves from the commercial realm. As Mary Woods has argued, capitalism was the natural milieu of American architects by the turn of the century, but what this means demands closer study.<sup>8</sup> For instance, historians

6. See Andrew M. Shanken, "The Uncharted Kahn: The Visuality of Planning and Promotion in the 1930s and 1940s," *Art Bulletin*, forthcoming.

7. For "consumer culture," this essay leans on Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Power of Culture* (Chicago, 1993), x–xvii. "Planning," as used here, generally refers in a straightforward manner to urban planning organizations and the culture surrounding their efforts to plan and communicate with the public.

8. Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 167.

understand little about how rhetoric born of business provided a common ground for manufacturers of building materials and the fields of architecture and urban planning. Better living offers a valuable case study in how that rhetoric operated. It begins, moreover, to demonstrate the ways in which business slogans flow through the semipermeable membranes of culture. The project takes up Charles McGovern's call for historians to pay attention to the metaphors of consumer culture, finding in this metaphor a "fable of abundance," in Jackson Lears's phrase, and an important keyword in Daniel T. Rodgers's sense of a "furiously intense struggle over the control of words" for political purposes.<sup>9</sup> In this spirit, this essay traces the rhetorical journey of better living as a keyword from the New Deal through the Cold War.

Finally, because words are labile, the route that better living took from the New Deal to World War II and beyond lacks the causality of a normative history. In such an account, few actors rise up from the sources to carry the evidence from one moment to the next. Context becomes the colloid on which the historical image is fixed. Instead of a definable cast uttering the phrase scene to scene and driving a historical plot forward, consumer slogans float free in the public domain. Repetition is evidence itself, like the urban myths that owe their tenacity to wide dispersion. The meaning of better living grew through heavy trading in the rhetorical bourse of magazines and promotional literature. At first blush, a quantitative survey might promise a method for taming the unwieldy clump of "keywords," weeding the excess verbiage from the thick underbrush of common usage. But a quantitative approach, if possible at all, would only go so far because such an amassing of "data" would ignore the nuances of use that make this sort of work interpretive.

### The Sources of Better Living

As with many successful slogans, better living contained an ambiguity that allowed admen to manipulate it and the public to interpret it in any number of ways. Bruce Barton built that ambiguity into the phrase, cobbling it together from a number of different contexts. Better living (and singly better and living) was multivalent from its inception in the mid-1930s. Reaching back even before the Depression, 'better'

9. McGovern, "Consumption and Citizenship," 41–42; T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (New York, 1987), 212. For the keywords approach see also Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1983).

had been simultaneously a keyword for social causes in the 1920s, a salesman's word for progress, and a common word associated with the housing campaigns of the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> The word 'better' already lent its ameliorative power to organizations like the Better Business Bureau. The National Better Business Bureau of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World was officially founded and named in 1926, but it arose in the wake of the truth-in-advertising campaigns of the first decade of the twentieth century. Here, 'better' served as a kind of shorthand for social betterment and the crusades against corruption that characterized the period.<sup>11</sup> The "Better Homes in America" movement, founded in 1922, employed the vague word as a "cure for domestic neglect," as Janet Hutchison has argued.<sup>12</sup> Elaborating on home economics, this housing campaign promoted the making of the modern housewife, who would be trained as an expert and armed with the latest laborsaving technologies, creating a "discriminating consumer, and moral arbitrator within a defined architectural setting."<sup>13</sup> The movement soon found government backing as a national educational organization, which built a model home on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1922 and sponsored annual contests for model demonstration houses in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> Not coincidentally, the magazine *Better Homes and Gardens* went into print in 1924. By the end of the decade, better was firmly established in the context of housing, domesticity, and reform. Thus, by the time BBD&O attached better to living, better was already laden, associated with housing and home economics, efficiency and reform, and with so-called women's magazines and consumer culture. These associations would have been potent ways of domesticating the chemical industry and deflecting attention from Du Pont's wartime profiteering.

Joining better to living gave it new meaning and provided a vivid way for admen to conjure up the forestalled dreams of the Depression,

10. Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, Md., 1998); James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (Westport, Conn., 1990). Indeed, the phrase was used sparingly in the 1920s, but Du Pont's campaign gave the phrase a national profile and anchored it in the cultural milieu that would characterize the term for decades.

11. For the truth-in-advertising campaign see Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 161, 205. For an early example of the work of the Better Business Bureau, see Better Business Bureau of Metropolitan Boston, *The Boston Better Business Commission, Inc.: An Outline of Its Work* (Boston, 1922[?]), copy in the Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Harvard University.

12. Janet Hutchison, "The Cure for Domestic Neglect," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 168–79.

13. *Ibid.*, 168.

14. *Ibid.*

employing the rhetoric of what William L. Bird, Jr. has called “more, new, and better.”<sup>15</sup> The word living also had its own peculiar associations. For instance, Barton may have been playing off the rising interest in the standard of living, a phrase popularized in response to the dire conditions of the Depression. On this level, better living was the adman’s clichéd echo of the standard of living.<sup>16</sup> War provided still another context for the word living. Wartime restrictions and rationing again deferred consumer desires, but the booming economy promised fulfillment at the end of the war. Living also came to represent the “other” of war and its obvious associations with death. For instance, at the same time that the term better living proliferated, a movement for “living” (or useful) memorials was growing, which, like better living, also played the word living off the idea of an obsolete or undesirable past.<sup>17</sup> The building industry called on better living to express a safe form of futurism, a modified modernity that spread beyond the commercial realm, especially to health care and education, and even urban planning.

A more precise source of the phrase, however, may have come directly from government attempts to stimulate housing—government intervention being the precise context that troubled business leaders. The Federal Housing Administration’s (FHA) Better Housing Program, which began in 1934, a year before Du Pont launched its campaign, used very similar rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> The Better Housing Program applied Keynesian strategies to the building industry. In a moment of waning faith in the economy and declining investments in new building, the Better Housing Program attempted to stimulate people’s desire for new or modernized housing. Spur consumption, the thinking went, and production would stir. The FHA conducted a nationwide publicity campaign, turning dealers, manufacturers, and laborers into salespeople for the campaign and staging what Daniel Boorstin would later call in a different context “pseudo-events.”<sup>19</sup> Like the 1920s Better Homes in America campaign, the FHA built model homes, which it opened to the public with great ceremony. Eleanor Roosevelt presided over the opening of one model home.

15. Bird, “*Better Living*,” 10–23.

16. Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

17. See Andrew M. Shanken, “Planning Memory: The Rise of Living Memorials in the United States during World War II,” *Art Bulletin* 84 (March 2002): 130–47.

18. For the FHA’s Better Housing Program, see Andrew M. Shanken, “Architectural Competitions and Bureaucracy, 1934–1945,” *Architectural Research Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1999): 43–54.

19. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York, 1962).

The program had an instant effect, increasing work in the building industry for the first time since 1929. The FHA thus borrowed the idea of a public relations campaign from admen like Barton and showed how it could have a profound impact on the economy.

The publicity for the Better Housing Program, however, also publicized the New Deal, which irked corporate leaders who feared that the program was a step toward nationalizing the building industry.<sup>20</sup> While many companies collaborated with the FHA, using its free advertising for their own promotions, other companies launched their own ad campaigns to steal the initiative back. Building on the rhetoric of better housing, General Electric (GE) immediately staged its own Better Homes in America architectural competition, the results of which were published by *Architectural Forum* as “The House for Modern Living” in 1935.<sup>21</sup> Barton, who also represented GE as it launched its Better Homes in America competition, would have looked closely at the Better Housing Program, since GE’s competition responded directly to it.

As a public relations campaign, the FHA’s program rivaled the best work of the admen. Instead of meeting the New Deal program head on with heavy-handed attacks, Barton opted to use the Better Housing Program’s rhetoric and energy against itself, to steal its success for the corporate world. In 1934 literature for the Better Housing Program had used the slogan, “Your building is an investment in living,” and asserted that better housing led to “better living.”<sup>22</sup> Here was the same turn of phrase that Barton would adopt in the coming months in turning Better Housing first to Better Homes for GE, and then to Better Living for Du Pont. While it may be impossible to know whether Barton read the FHA literature, he was a deeply political man. A staunch ally of big business and an opponent of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, he would soon serve the 17th District of New York as a Republican in the House of Representatives between 1937 and 1941. In this role, he engaged in battles against public housing.<sup>23</sup>

Du Pont’s better living campaign began in October 1935 with a series of ads that ran in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The ads exhumed what had been buried in FHA literature and elevated it to a place in the most widely circulated magazine in the nation. The ads related

20. Shanken, “Architectural Competitions,” 43–54.

21. See the entire issue of *Architectural Forum* 62 (April 1935): 275–398.

22. Federal Housing Administration, *How Owners of Homes and Business Property Can Secure Benefit of the National Housing Act* (Washington, D.C., 1934), back cover, 4.

23. “Housing Control Scored by Barton,” *New York Times*, 4 April 1940, p. 11.

allegories of common folk at work and at play: Amos, the boy next door going on a date, or Rinaldo, the Italian immigrant plumber, tending his garden. In each case, Du Pont products were insinuated into the narrative, making the most basic of necessities possible, from the rayon of Amos's date's dress to the insecticide Rinaldo used to drive bugs out of his garden. Each of the ads summed up the allegory with the new phrase: "Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry."<sup>24</sup> By telling tales about the common experience and the simple pleasures of everyday life, the ads refashioned Du Pont, the corporation, into a nurturing figure, making its chemicals seem almost wholesome and diverting attention away from the company's role in World War I. Barton softened Du Pont's image as he had done a decade earlier for General Motors, when he reinvented what Marchand argues was an anonymous corporate holding tank for automobile manufacturers as a "family" and redefined the corporation as an American institution.<sup>25</sup>

Along with the ads came a new radio show called *Cavalcade of America*, which spread Du Pont's message of better living across the airwaves.<sup>26</sup> *Cavalcade* was an historical drama planned from the beginning to define and assess American civilization, highlighting American triumphs as a means of providing uplift in depressed times.<sup>27</sup> The show told the story of America through a series of fictional and real biographies that focused less on events than on the nature of the American spirit and the search for the good life. The overarching strategy folded Du Pont into the continuous fabric of American history, not a difficult task since the family's (and company's) own history stretched back almost to the colonial era.<sup>28</sup> *Cavalcade* measured the present favorably against the history of America, enlisting the past as a didactic tool to demonstrate a kind of corporate manifest destiny. Each new invention or product in the history of America was part of an incremental advance in civilization, a rise in the standard of living that slowly built up an inevitable view of American progress—part of the manifest destiny of the

24. Bird, "Better Living," 23.

25. Roland Marchand, "The Corporation Nobody Knew: Bruce Barton, Alfred Sloan, and the Founding of the General Motors 'Family,'" *Business History Review* 65 (Winter 1991): 833, 841.

26. Information about *Cavalcade* is taken from Bird, "Better Living," 53–85.

27. BBD&O assembled a team of historians to act as advisers, including Arthur M. Schlesinger and James Truslow Adams. *Ibid.*, 76.

28. David A. Hounshell and John Kenly Smith, Jr., *Science and Corporate Strategy: Du Pont R&D, 1902–1980* (Cambridge, U.K., 1988). The Du Pont Company, founded in France in 1801, established a black powder factory in the Brandywine Valley in Delaware in 1802.

nation. The beauty of BBD&O's phrase was how smoothly it inserted Du Pont into this march of progress, parlaying a history of technology into a history of goods that represented both a timeless sense of the good life and of continuous progress. Du Pont's "better things" went from being agents of war to agents of civilization; "better living" posed as the never-ending endpoint of this seductive teleology. Moreover, the teleology represented technology (as opposed to industrial production) as the frontier, deflecting the focus away from the faltering economic system toward a seemingly inevitable process of technological progress.

### Better Living and the Citizen-Consumer in the 1930s

A slew of similar advertising campaigns in the building industry applied better living to a vision of architecture, especially the house. In 1936 the Kelvinator Corporation, for instance, researched and developed a house designed around the relatively new technology of electric air conditioning. The company introduced the house to the public in a pamphlet titled, *Towards Better Living for America: The Inauguration of the Kelvin Home*, and adopted the slogan, "Kelvinator cuts the cost of better living."<sup>29</sup> Much in keeping with earlier uses of better living, Kelvinator dedicated the pamphlet to "all who welcome the rapid progress of scientific housing for the people of America."<sup>30</sup> Kelvinator literature represented air conditioning not merely as a matter of comfort, but as a scientific breakthrough with immense social consequences, especially when the house was "engineered" around it. Shaping a house around a product stretched the symbolic importance of a given product to encompass a larger realm, like the house, or a more abstract idea, like personal planning.<sup>31</sup> From the association of the product with something larger or with a tangible abstraction—in this case, the home—a corporation could insinuate itself and its products into a narrative of the good life.

By taking on the research and engineering, the Kelvinator Corporation believed it could standardize the mechanical plant of the house,

29. Kelvinator Corporation, *Towards Better Living for America: The Inauguration of the Kelvin Home* (Detroit, Mich., 1936), copy in the Columbia University Library.

30. *Ibid.*, inside cover.

31. For an analysis of goods as symbolic see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (1979; New York, 1996).

thereby substantially reducing the cost. The company would thus be able to put the scientifically advanced house within reach of the common person. Like Du Pont, Kelvinator positioned the corporation as the driving force behind the coming better world. In fact, the in-house research and engineering became central to its promotional pitch. Great advances in technology would lead to social transformations, which would relieve people of drudgery and create leisure time. Much in the way that Du Pont's *Cavalcade* exchanged the geographical frontier for a technological frontier, Kelvinator used better living to make the product symbolic of the promise of technology as a civilizing force: "These homes, embodying every comfort known to electrical housing science" would "usher in a new era of health, comfort, convenience and leisure."<sup>32</sup>

New York architect Francis Keally was among a number of experts to offer testimonials to the Kelvin Home at its inauguration in Detroit in October 1936. Keally sketched out a grand history of shelter as evidence of Kelvinator's achievement. Throughout the ages, he argued, the great housing problem of every civilization has been combating the elements. In one fell stroke, according to Keally, Kelvinator put this history to an end, conquering weather with air conditioning. In his estimation, the consequences were so far-reaching that "a new system of architecture's [*sic*] being created."<sup>33</sup> Climate and exposure were now irrelevant, freeing the architect to experiment in new ways with shelter. Of course, air conditioning never has freed the architect from considerations of climate, but the hyperbole was an important strategy. Keally used history as a foil for modernity. By placing the new technology in relation to the stream of history, he naturalized the new, making it more comfortable and accessible. Yet simultaneously Keally drew a sharp, epochal line, cutting off the present from the past and claiming a social transformation based on the new technology. He thus performed the requisite ritual of constructing a historical narrative only to show its irrelevance to the modern miracle of technology. The usable past could be used to divide (as well as to assimilate) modernity.

The Kelvin Home itself reinforced Keally's move, resolving the tension between past and future. For all of its modern posturing, Kelvinator had no interest in matching its claims to engineering excellence with an engineered aesthetic. The facade was a safe variation on colonial architecture, the plan typical of the suburban middle and upper-middle classes. In fact, in contrast to the winning designs

32. Kelvinator, *Towards Better Living for America*, 3.

33. *Ibid.*, 14.

in GE's competition, the Kelvin Home eschewed modern flourishes. In an assuming tone, the pamphlet assured the reader that "no attempt has been made to incorporate ultra-modern ideas" but that the "utmost in modern adaptation of the tried and proved normal American layout has been achieved."<sup>34</sup> If one sought sales, "ultra-modern" architecture was something to avoid in the 1930s, but a forward-thinking message and advanced equipment were desirable. In the corporate setting conventional architecture could be made harmonious with progressive ideals. One could speak of air conditioning as leading to a social revolution, but a free or open plan was still out of the question. The difference was that air conditioning, as Kelvinator implied, led to a transformation in comfort and health, while the open plan led to unknown changes in family or even community structure. The issue was also one of representation. Kelvinator virtually divorced the skin of the house from its inner workings. Modernist architecture failed to displace the colonial as the paradigm for the American home, but modern devices and convenience were easy sells. Kelvinator wedded modern ideas to the warmth and the psychological comfort of the traditional house.

In an era before trademark law froze phrases out of free circulation and associated them indelibly with certain corporations, slogans moved more fluidly through advertising, popular culture, and the literature of government agencies. An especially free exchange occurred in corporate culture. Companies in the same sector sometimes adopted similar advertising strategies. The General Insulating and Manufacturing Company, like Kelvinator, used the phrase in its 1937 pamphlet, *Better Living: In a Home That's Cooler in Summer and More Comfortable in Winter*.<sup>35</sup> The Carrier Corporation, another air conditioning company, used the term on promotional literature for its exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair.<sup>36</sup> The first page of its pamphlet *From the "World of To-Morrow" for the World of To-Day!* carried the headline, "Carrier Air Conditioning Brings *Better Living* to Every Clime." The italics were typical, drawing attention to this new incarnation of the good life. General Electric, not far removed from its experience in 1935 with the Better Homes in America competition, prominently adopted better living in its 1939 New York

34. *Ibid.*, 34.

35. General Insulating and Manufacturing Co., *Better Living: In a Home That's Cooler in Summer and More Comfortable in Winter* (Alexandria, Ind., 193-[?]), copy in Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

36. Carrier Corporation, *From the "World of To-Morrow" for the World of To-Day!* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1939), 1. See the Orth Collection at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

World's Fair exhibit as well. The company erected a storefront inside its exhibition with BETTER LIVING written in brightly lit capital letters across the facade.<sup>37</sup> The slogan fit the New York fair's theme, the "World of Tomorrow." Visitors to the world's fair would have seen the phrase better living at no fewer than three separate corporate exhibitions: GE, Du Pont, and Carrier.<sup>38</sup>

The repetitive use of better living made these ideas socially available and provided a rhetorical context that took on some of the character of a more traditional agent of historical change. In a highly mediated society, words shape history as readily as people and institutions do. They do so by accretion, by carrying forward some of the associations of earlier uses. Kelvinator's use of better living built on Du Pont's; General Electric's built on both, and any company thereafter could redirect the energy stirred by the earlier uses. Each company was a manufacturer of products for the home, especially those same laborsaving devices that the Better Homes in America movement had put at the center of its campaign. "Better living" offered these companies a free rhetorical currency that signified progress, modernization, and domesticity. Moreover, it did so within the context of the fair's theme, "the world of tomorrow," and its forthright sponsorship of big business. Soon dozens of companies adapted the slogan to their promotional campaigns.

The Buffalo Niagara Electric Corporation, much like GE had done in the mid-1930s, designed its own house in the late 1930s. It also used the same rhetoric, publishing *A Guide to Better Living: The Five-Star Home* in 1939.<sup>39</sup> The guide established "standards" (really a checklist of appliances and electrical capability) for people to judge whether a home was up to their standards. The whole campaign, which must be seen in light of the Better Homes in America movement and the FHA's Better Housing Program, mirrored an earlier housing drive sponsored by GE that spun off from its 1935 Better Homes in America competition. With much media self-promotion, GE built one house for every 100,000 Americans.<sup>40</sup> Buffalo Niagara also built demonstration homes of widely disparate costs for the public to view. The first one opened in August 1937, and by April 1939, the

37. General Electric, exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair, 1939, Folder: Production and Distribution, GE Co. (1), Orth Collection. Also see GE's house organ, *Magazine of Light* 5 (1939): 18.

38. BBD&O still represented both GE and Du Pont in 1939.

39. Buffalo Niagara Electric Corporation, *A Guide to Better Living: The Five-Star Home* (Niagara, N.Y., 1939), copy in Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University. See also *Better Living and Happier Homes* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1940).

40. Shanken, "Architectural Competitions," 49–51.

company claimed that over 100,000 people had visited the homes, a prodigious number for a city like Buffalo. One of every seven new homes in the Buffalo area was built according to Five-Star standards. Buffalo Niagara echoed Kelvinator, claiming that the homes were “scientifically planned for BETTER LIVING.” The standards were little more than a prescription for the latest wiring, including modern lighting, air conditioning, and automatic hot water, but in a nation told it was one-third ill housed, this sort of modernization was significant. The company also had insight into the housing market. The Five-Star Home filled the empty niche between architects, products, and the public. Buffalo Niagara understood the uncertainty the public felt about architectural services and, conversely, the struggle that architects experienced trying to convince the public of their necessity. The pamphlet reads like an argument against architectural services: “Your architect or builder,” the company claimed, “—no matter how experienced—does not know *your* family and *your habit of living*.”<sup>41</sup> The Five-Star Home thus served as a conduit between the family and professional building services. It offered itself as a trusted guide for home planners, helping them to find their way through the potentially hazardous experience of building a home. In other words, it assumed the role many architects coveted. Buffalo Niagara started a “5-Star Planning Bureau” with “home-planning advisers” who gave free advice to consumers. The company surveyed public housing tastes and submitted the results to publisher Howard Myers of *Architectural Forum*, Jean Austin of *American Home*, and other housing experts for analysis. The result of the grand survey, which queried over 13,000 people, revealed that most people wanted traditional houses, although Buffalo Niagara was amenable to the few who desired modern architecture, recognizing it as one of ten styles from which one might choose.

Taken together, these efforts by air conditioning, heating, appliance, and electric companies show an entire sector using various forms of publicity—advertisements, pamphlets, merchandising campaigns, exhibitions—to align itself with the spirit of Du Pont’s better living campaign. Unlike Du Pont, these companies aimed their pitch at the housing market. Through the phrase “better living,” their products would be associated with the better housing campaigns then taking place around the country, as well as with Du Pont’s more explicit defense of big business. Other issues were also at stake. By the 1930s, the public understood the desirability of modern electrical wiring and appliances, but it was slower to accept the machine as a model or aesthetic for the entire

41. Buffalo Niagara Electric Corporation, *Guide to Better Living*, n.p.

house. Most corporations had no stake in any particular style, and modern architecture was not yet unequivocally good publicity, an understudied topic in consumer culture. Modern ideas and progressive housing, including modern appliances and wiring, had to be dressed up in colonial garb to be presentable. Better living became an easy cliché for this hybrid of modern colonial or progressive Cape Cod. As a commercial phrase in the 1930s, better living helped peddle products propounding to ease the trials of domesticity. The term resonated in a moment of want, when people hungered for better days.

This form of advertising, in which a product became associated with a state of being, a sensual pleasure, or an anticipated standard of living, featured prominently in campaigns of the period. Roland Marchand has analyzed the strategy in detail, showing how ads used allegories of uplift, social tableaux, and parables to preach a kind of salvation through consumption.<sup>42</sup> And admen, he argued, did so ingenuously. Allegories of light, heat, or chemistry altering the fabric of human society and consciousness were not merely the work of out-of-touch elites in advertising who mistook their market but the zealous work of the advertising missionary intent on instructing an unrefined public about a better way to live. These “apostles of modernity,” as Marchand called them, identified and to some extent helped to construct the idea of “consumer citizenship.”<sup>43</sup> The political underpinning of the consumer citizen was explicit: “Drawing by analogy upon the political concept of citizenship, [advertisers and admen] constructed an image of a market democracy, in which advertisers appealed to constituencies of consumer citizens and won election of their brands as popular products.”<sup>44</sup> In this context, better living carried a political metaphor of choosing between different forms of living. The choice pitted consumer capitalism, in which free enterprise (and its corollary, free consumption) was roughly equated to freedom, against regulation and planning, which by implication impeded the democracy of consumption.

### Better Living and the Postwar Building Boom

During World War II, corporations and admen picked up on better living with even greater vigor, offering the phrase as a sort of conceptual

42. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 138, 164–67, 217–22.

43. *Ibid.*, 167. More recently, Lizabeth Cohen has provided a more detailed history of similar ideas. See Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003), 29.

44. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 63–64.

waiting room in which the public could view the better things that would stock their postwar houses. The building industry, especially those companies whose products had been taken off the market, led the way. Advertising and public relations kept them in the public eye.<sup>45</sup> A Westinghouse pamphlet titled *Electrical Living*, produced by the company's newly formed Better Homes Department, worked over the metaphor of lighting as postwar enlightenment.<sup>46</sup> The company's pamphlets and ads exhorted the reader to plan for "electrical living in 194X" and used the headline, "Better Wiring for Better Living," a blatant recycling of Du Pont's slogan.<sup>47</sup> Corporations used the anticipatory term '194X' during the war to make forecasts about life after the unknown date of the end of the war. It gave better living a terminal date. Here was GE's main competition in lighting fixtures using the same exact phrase for its advertising, even though a different advertising firm ran the campaign.<sup>48</sup>

The wartime Westinghouse pamphlet drew stills of cartoon interiors from a film called *The Dawn of Better Living*, which the company had commissioned Walt Disney Productions to make. The pamphlet and film used many of the same strategies that other companies had pioneered in the 1930s. In the same way that Francis Keally had written the history of the house around air conditioning for Kelvinator, Disney's film for Westinghouse told the history of indoor lighting in America, in a pun on the title, beginning with the sunrise. It traced the history of lighting from the pioneers and settlers, who felled trees for firewood and used a simple hearth, candles, and torches for light. From there, the story moved to kerosene lamps to gaslights and finally to modern electrical lighting, which represented man's dominance over the machine. With electricity trained, modern interiors could be stocked with sparkling white appliances that stood in stark contrast to the dim earthy browns of the settlers' world. The pamphlet evoked the romantic pioneer myth mostly as a foil; no one wanted to return to the past, only to the potential of the frontier.<sup>49</sup>

45. Frank W. Fox, *Madison Avenue Goes to War: The Strange Military Career of American Advertising, 1941–45* (Provo, Utah, 1975).

46. Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Co., *Electrical Living* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1945), copy in the Smithsonian Institution Library.

47. See *Pencil Points* 25 (April 1944): 208; *Pencil Points* 25 (July 1944): 13; and *Pencil Points* 25 (March 1944): 93. These ads, and others that appeared in the popular press, were reviews of Westinghouse's pamphlets.

48. Westinghouse retained Fuller and Smith and Ross of New York City.

49. Walt Disney Productions and Westinghouse Electric Corporation, *The Dawn of Better Living* (1945), Library of Congress. The pamphlet is *Electrical Living*.

Electricity was a cleanser, wiping out all that had come before. Better wiring ushered in a new organizational principle not only for one's fleet of new appliances but also for the house itself. The text spelled out the great transformation that "electrical living" would bring: "The time has come for us to dream of our tomorrow . . . of the job of better living . . . *Electrical Living* in tomorrow's home. Of course, this isn't the home. It's just the things that go in it. We used to get a house first, then arrange our lives, furniture and equipment to fit it. Tomorrow will be different. Our design for living will be planned first."<sup>50</sup> Appliances, which Westinghouse animated as "living equipment," would be arranged as desired, and the architect's job would be to "wrap walls and a roof around it."<sup>51</sup> The house would truly become a machine for living in, really a complex of machines wrapped in a skin. Westinghouse and other corporations helped the consumer plan; their machines provided a new golden section, determining the dimensions of architecture. Architects were left with that part of the design process that corporations deemed least important: the exterior, a wrapping to keep the machine-house dry. The pamphlet illustrated the transformation of the house with a corroborating narrative on the increasing wattage that electrical living demanded. Every room buzzed with new electrical equipment of some kind, necessitating the total planning of electrical wiring.

Westinghouse aimed a second pamphlet, *Electrical Living in 194X*, which was based on the same material, at builders, contractors, and architects (as opposed to the consumer). Here the company traced the same narrative, culminating in a two-page illustration of the "electrical home in 194X."<sup>52</sup> The house of 194X, really one big circuit, became a favorite of the architectural press in its reviews of the pamphlet.<sup>53</sup> In the illustration, walls and roof are stripped away to reveal the electrical wiring of the house, aestheticized with bright colors in such a way that the facade seems superfluous. In contrast to Kelvinator's tentative use of the machine, here the machine itself had become beautiful.

More important than the proliferation of the phrase's usage, ads played on the slogan with increasing self-consciousness, as if it were a definable commodity, something as tangible as comfort itself. It became commonplace for companies in the building industry to

50. Westinghouse, *Electrical Living*, 5.

51. *Ibid.*, 6.

52. The Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Co., *Electrical Living in 194X, Professional Edition* (Pittsburgh, 194-[?]), copy in the Smithsonian Institution Library.

53. See the review of "Better Wiring" in *Architectural Forum* 80 (May 1944): 13.

adopt better living, essentially a nonarchitectural term, to describe the effect that a given product would have on the consumer's life.<sup>54</sup> One of the key differences between the uses of better living in the 1930s and 1940s grew out of the very different relationship between consumption and citizenship during the Depression and war. War gave a particular cast to the idea of the citizen-consumer.<sup>55</sup> The strict conservation of national resources began in the home with victory gardens and the salvaging of scrap. The ordinary citizen came to understand personal consumption in national and patriotic terms. Moreover, the planned consumption of postwar products guarded against a return to depression, something that ads relentlessly reminded people on the home front.<sup>56</sup> By engaging the obligation of the citizen-consumer to stave off postwar depression, wartime advertisements merely elaborated a message that was already deeply inculcated in advertising culture and brought out by war production, namely, that business and politics in American capitalism were inseparable. The war only made the relationship explicit by calling on the citizen to carry out a patriotic duty as a consumer. That this would be done in the name of the postwar house is not surprising, given the importance of the building industry to the economy and the symbolic importance of the house to American ideals of citizenship, independence, and individuality.

The house bridged the gap between personal responsibilities to the family and national duty during war.<sup>57</sup> The appeal to citizenship would be made explicit. A 1942 advertisement for the *Ladies' Home Journal* claimed that its broad readership represented both "Democracy" and the united effort "to secure better living for themselves and their families."<sup>58</sup> As with most wartime advertising, admen enlisted better living as a morale booster, creating much needed esprit de corps. As Robert Westbrook has argued, wartime advertising played off of personal obligations, usually to the family, to sell people on the duties of war.<sup>59</sup> As an anticipatory term, better living promised

54. See also the advertising of the following companies: Hussmann-Ligonier Co., *Architectural Forum* 77 (Sept. 1942): 168; Robbie Robinson Company, *Michigan Society of Architects Bulletin* 18 (19 April 1944): 12; and Minneapolis-Honeywell Controls, *American Home* 28 (Aug. 1942): 22.

55. Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 62–109.

56. Fox, *Madison Avenue Goes to War*.

57. Robert Westbrook, "Fighting for the American Family: Private Interests and Political Obligations in World War II," in *Power of Culture*, ed. Fox and Lears, 195–222.

58. Advertisement for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, undated, N. W. Ayer Ad Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

59. Westbrook, "Fighting for the American Family."

that the mobilizations and coherence of the home front would be converted into a way of life after the war. Ads prepared people on the home front for postwar consumption (and consequently, citizenship).

Yet this reading of better living as preparation for the citizen-consumer falls far short of the rich usage of the phrase during the war. For instance, Revere Copper and Brass's wartime campaign, "Revere's Part in Better Living," though part of a consumer context, associated the slogan for the first time unequivocally with the architectural avant-garde. The monthly ads, which ran in *Architectural Forum* and the *Saturday Evening Post* (the most widely disseminated magazine of the day), featured designs by the leading progressive architects, including Louis I. Kahn, William Wurster, Antonin Raymond, William Lescaze, Buckminster Fuller, and others. Offering unbridled visions for postwar America, the ads and a series of associated pamphlets that the company distributed to tens of thousands of people were "Revere's Part" not in prosecuting the war, as many ad campaigns claimed to be doing, but in inventing the postwar world. The manufacturer of copper flashing and other building materials contributed to the effort by buying advertising as a clearing-house for advanced architectural ideas, which is to say, envisioning better living.

The most extravagant Revere pamphlet, by housing researcher Carl F. Boester, envisioned a postwar world in which people flew personal planes to work and lived in modernist homesteads where they condensed water directly from the air and created energy by burning trash.<sup>60</sup> The point of all this technology was better living. Boester personalized public duty by writing, "We are told that the home is the 'shrine of civilization' and that we are fighting this war to protect it. That is a needed and basic reason; but it isn't the whole truth. The fact is that for millions of Americans, the present effort is an all-out fight to get a home."<sup>61</sup> The cover of the pamphlet shows how a new age would do little to alter the social structure: wife and daughter greet the man of the house excitedly at their vestigial driveway, now a symbolic site for waiting for him to return home. Importantly, the Revere pamphlets were not overtly commercial, and they applied the phrase to a wider conception of the built environment. Several pamphlets elaborated complex urban planning schemes

60. See the advertisement in *Architectural Forum* (Feb. 1943): 13; and the pamphlet by Carl Boester, *Home . . . for a Nation on Wings* (New York, 1943), copy in Columbia University Library.

61. Boester, *Home . . . for a Nation on Wings*, 4.

rather than individual houses, suggesting a sincere contribution to the wartime dialogue on postwar planning. These ads anticipated a role for better living as a slogan for urban planning.

As the war progressed, better living underwent further transformation as it filtered into different contexts, making its way into mainstream architectural books. In 1945 Clarence Dunham, a Yale University engineer, and Milton Thalberg, an advertising manager for the Cosa Corporation, wrote a book called *Planning Your Home for Better Living*.<sup>62</sup> It operated like a how-to guide, intended to teach people on the home front how to plan postwar homes, but it also sold the public on the idea of home planning. By dint of their backgrounds, the authors conspicuously brought architecture and advertising together. The title alone suggested the merger, with “planning” being imported from architecture and “better living” from advertising. As one might expect, the book began with ballyhoo. Building on the Depression-era rhetoric of “more, new and better,” it proclaimed, “Since the beginning of time, man has been ever trying to do things better and better. . . . Underlying all the emotions of man are the creative spirit and the desire to pioneer . . . [the] impulse which gives a man no peace until he has set his foot where no mortal has trod before.”<sup>63</sup> The creative will and pioneering spirit of man were channeled into a single dream: the “desire to be able to create a home, about which all his activities will revolve.”<sup>64</sup> Through this telling, the authors were able to bend a number of fundamental themes of American history to support the pursuit of the home. They assumed material progress as part of the natural order of Western civilization. And they grafted the figure of the pioneer to that background of progress, pulling in a number of possible associations, including rugged individualism, a do-it-yourself mentality, and a romantic notion of the frontier. The figure of the home tied this national narrative to the individual. In place of staid, conservative, suburban comfort, the home was taken to be a creative, pioneering culmination of one’s energies, or of a “progressive” life.

These terms could be reversed, as well: the individual home could be a figure for civilization. The authors wrote, “the home and family life constitute the center around which our civilization revolves,” a phrase that recalls Carl F. Boester’s rhetoric.<sup>65</sup> World War II, they argued, made us more aware of this than ever. By planning a home,

62. Clarence W. Dunham and Milton D. Thalberg, *Planning Your Home for Better Living* (New York, 1945).

63. *Ibid.*, 1.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

one contributed to civilization by assuring that its central institution was healthy, modern, and well planned, or rational. The authors used the home as a personal culmination and a national symbol, paralleling the historical inevitability and quasi-religious ideals invested in myths about America's role in World War II. Rationality, here in the guise of planning for better living, drove the narrative forward. In the context of wartime mobilization, better living, usually an appeal to individual gain, connected the individual to the larger society. Personal planning could be seen as part of the larger wartime planning effort. As a phrase anticipating the postwar world, it acquired even greater metaphorical force. The home was the great object of all this planning. Informed individual planners—versus centralized planners—were the agents of the American way of life, and they needed solid guidance, something Dunham and Thalberg offered.

A range of chapters explained how to read architectural symbols, buy land, create a physical layout, and plan the “traffic system and its facilities.” Other chapters explained the purposes of different rooms and how to plan them, including how to orient them to the sun and wind, how to arrange furniture, and how to prepare for the most modern of appliances and electrical wiring. The text got technical enough for a true do-it-yourself type to carry out or at least oversee much of the work; it included a detailed discussion on how to construct a stairway and suggestions on how best to build a leaching cesspool. In other words, the initial pitch turned quickly into a practical discussion of how to build a house from scratch. While the authors disclaimed any interest in particular products, they drew the copious illustrations demonstrating many of the different points from literature credited to corporations such as the Douglas Fir Plywood Association and Pittsburgh Plate Glass.<sup>66</sup> The latter had used better living in its publicity in the same period. With this succession of commercial images, the house—that central institution of civilization—came to resemble an accumulation of products. But there was truth in this. In trying to give a sense of the types of materials that would be available in postwar America, Dunham and Thalberg showed how a house was assembled. Instead of the prefabricated house, which the public never bought into, Dunham and Thalberg showed how to order à la carte, toilet by sink. The commercialism of better living in the 1930s gave way here to a practical manipulation of the emerging advertising-industrial complex. Already by the 1930s, the house had become fully commodified as an aggregation of

66. *Ibid.*, 93.

products. Dunham and Thalberg, then, responded to the realities of the *marketing* of building materials and fittings.

The impending housing boom led to a number of similar planning books, many of which leaned on better living to convey a complex set of established meanings to the public. Architect Julian Roth of Emery Roth and Sons, Architects, edited a volume just after the war called *A Home of Your Own*, a practical home building and modernizing book, with chapters by New York City modern architect Percival Goodman and industrial designer J. Gordon Lippincott (who was part of the Revere series), among others. The final section, “Homes for Better Living,” contained an array of designs in the form of a plan book, featuring the work of such notable modern architects as Gardiner Dailey, George Fred Keck, Richard Neutra, and Walter Gropius (Dailey and Keck had also done ads for Revere Copper and Brass).<sup>67</sup> With this group of architects, Roth could have borrowed better living from any number of sources, since many of them had been involved in advertising for Revere Copper and Brass, Celotex, USG, and other companies that had used the phrase. Whatever the source, by 1947 architecture had co-opted better living. Books like these, which proliferated in the wake of the war, were the pattern books of the modern architect. Where nineteenth-century architects had their Sam Sloan and A. J. Downing books with variations on architectural plans and ornament, the modern architect (or home planner) had photos and illustrations, garnered from the building industry and compiled into books. Architecture was now patterned not by pencil so much as by product.<sup>68</sup>

By the time America emerged from the war, better living had become a palpable reality just around the corner. Ads and pamphlets, films and books gave it physical form. The 1944 book *Miracles Ahead! Better Living in the Postwar World* demonstrates the remarkable resonance of the phrase.<sup>69</sup> Citing “authorities” from top American corporations, the authors outlined a future stocked with radio-frequency heating, electronic gadgets to test the ripeness of

67. Julian Roth, ed., *A Home of Your Own: How to Buy or Build It* (New York, 1947).

68. See also Quincy Jones and Frederick E. Emmons, *Builders' Homes for Better Living* (New York, 1957). Plan books also used better living extensively. The American Plan Service published the first of several better living volumes in 1945, called *Your Future Home for Better Living: Practical Designs for the Homebuilder* (Miami, 1945); the National Plan Service published *Southwestern Better Living Homes* (Miami, 1945); and the National Plan Service published *Home Style Trends: Your Key to Better Living* (Chicago, 1954). See also Samuel Paul, *How to Improve Your Home for Better Living: The Complete Book of Home Modernizing* (New York, 1955).

69. Norman V. Carlisle and Frank B. Latham, *Miracles Ahead! Better Living in the Postwar World* (New York, 1944).

melons, mining directly from sea water, and fabric spun from the by-products of skim milk, the sort of futurism seen in Carl F. Boester's Revere Copper and Brass pamphlet.<sup>70</sup>

The frontispiece, the only image in the book, was a graphic collage of new transportation and housing options taken directly from the advertisements of industry. Two, in fact, were reproduced from the Revere Copper and Brass series, showing the interaction between the various apostles of better living. A Revere house designed by Pomerance and Breines that had been republished in Roth's *A Home of Your Own* also appeared in *Miracles Ahead!* The house, by New York architect Simon Breines, used a flat roof to retain a layer of water: in winter the frozen sheath would insulate, and in summer it would reflect the sun. The second Revere image, an apartment building by Walter B. Sanders, was a "file cabinet" apartment building.<sup>71</sup> The inhabitants would buy space in the frame and fill it with modules according to their needs, trading in old rooms, or adding them as their families grew. With other images taken from ads, *Miracles Ahead!* depended heavily on the image of better living proffered by the building industry and advertising, but the book extended the idea to a wider public and expanded it broadly to an elevation in the standard of living. Books like *Miracles Ahead!* had strong ties to the building industry, which carried on the idea of better living as a salable commodity. Other publications, however, clearly recontextualized the term in nonconsumerist efforts to set standards for the postwar built environment. Born in the Depression as a defense of big business, better living now narrated the building boom.

Other sources carried on the dialogue about better living between business and architecture as well. In 1946 the Walker Art Center pulled better living into the realm of high culture with the exhibition "Ideas for Better Living."<sup>72</sup> The exhibition included George Fred Keck's model for the "Solar House" and new products from numerous manufacturers. Variations on Keck's house had appeared in ads for United States Gypsum and Revere Copper and Brass, suggesting a route of transmission. Irons and toasters, radios and lamps gleamed with newly acquired auras. Such an endorsement of a cultural

70. A review in *Survey Graphic* by Robert Davison, then director of housing research in New York, dismissed the book. He wrote, "No one but an advertising man would make [such a] statement." In fact, neither author was an adman: Carlisle was a reporter on business and industry and an expert on aviation. Latham was a freelance writer and associate editor of *Scholastic* magazine. Robert L. Davison, "Review of *Miracles Ahead!*," *Survey Graphic* 33 (Nov. 1944): 470.

71. Walter B. Sanders, *Apartment Homes for Tomorrow's Better Living* (New York, 1942), copy in Loeb Library, Harvard University.

72. "Ideas for Better Living," *Everyday Art Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1946): 5.

**THE ART OF BETTER LIVING**

*Yesterday . . . Today . . . Tomorrow . . .  
it's Electrical Living by Westinghouse*

Let's hope it's not too far away . . . that bright new day when you'll again know the lift of living electrically. And when it does come, Westinghouse will be a name to remember. It stands for the know-how and experience acquired in making 30 million pre-war electrical home appliances.

More than that . . . it stands for years of tried and tested background in making not just one or two appliances, but *twenty-two* different types of electrical servants for your home.

At the moment, we're head over heels building essential war material. And we'll stick to that job until it is done. But when the go ahead signal flashes, you can count on Westinghouse to turn out all the *fine* new appliances you need to banish that "never done" feeling about housework. In war or peace, we take your homemaking problems to heart. The pre-war masterpieces shown above are just a promise of what's to come.

WESTINGHOUSE ELECTRIC & MANUFACTURING CO., MANSFIELD, O.  
PLANTS IN 10 CITIES . . . OFFICES EVERYWHERE

**30 MILLION PRE-WAR  
Westinghouse  
ELECTRIC HOME APPLIANCES  
YOUR PROMISE OF STILL FINER ONES TO COME**

TUNE IN JOHN CHARLES THOMAS • SUNDAY 2:30 EWT, N.B.C. • HEAR TED MALONE • MON. WED. FRI. 10:15 EWT, BLUE NETWORK

Figure 1 Advertisement for Westinghouse Electric Home Appliances, October 1944.

phenomenon reinforced the credibility of what, we must remember, first spread as an advertising campaign to clean up the tarnished image of an armaments manufacturer. Ironically, the idea for a better living exhibition could have come from advertising in the first place (see figure 1). A Westinghouse ad in the *Ladies' Home Journal* of October 1944 showed a couple in a museum examining the various products promised for the postwar world. Framed paintings of Westinghouse products—modern toasters, ovens, irons, and can openers—represented what Westinghouse punned (and the Walker Art Center proclaimed) was “The Art of Better Living.”<sup>73</sup> By war’s end, architecture embraced

73. Ad for Westinghouse in *Ladies' Home Journal* 61 (Oct. 1944): 183.

better living, or more appropriately, better living had become a way to frame architecture (especially the house) as the container and context of the collective promises of big business and government from the New Deal through the war.

### Planning for Better Living

The appropriation of better living reveals more than the antagonism between corporate and government visions of leadership and abundance. Even in the 1930s, the tradition of corporate responsibility occasionally met the New Deal on its own terms, forging links that suggested that better living could be a rhetorical delta rather than a battle of words.<sup>74</sup> The ruling business elite in Pittsburgh, for instance, understood the importance of urban planning for the health of their companies. In the early 1940s business leaders there formed the Allegheny Conference on Community Development (ACCD), which described itself as an “over-all planning agency” meant to bring citizens and local planning organizations together to determine the future of the city. The nonprofit planning organization conducted a major study of the city that culminated in Renaissance One, which is now seen as a landmark of urban planning. One of the ACCD’s first publications about this plan was called *A Civic Clinic for Better Living*.<sup>75</sup> The pamphlet borrowed strategies from advertising and consumer culture, including a historical account of urban rehabilitation using Benjamin Franklin as the allegorical figure for Pittsburgh. Recalling Du Pont’s *Cavalcade*, the pamphlet blended historical narrative with modern aims and ambitions. Instead of linking consumption with the good life, the *Civic Clinic* substituted planning and participatory democracy.

Behind Franklin, however, lay the elite businessmen of the city, who initiated and ran the new planning organization in anticipation of the building boom. The group included department store tycoon Edgar J. Kaufmann, one of the leading architectural patrons of the period. Through Franklin they proposed a community partnership between local citizens’ groups, business

74. Morrell Heald, *The Social Responsibility of Business: Company and Community, 1900–1960* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1970), esp. 148–97.

75. Allegheny Conference on Community Development, *A Civic Clinic for Better Living* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1944[?]), copy in Loeb Library, Harvard University; Sherrie Mershon, *Corporate Responsibility and Urban Revitalization: The Allegheny Conference on Community Development, 1943–1968* (Ph.D. diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2000).

leaders, and public planning agencies that would extend better living to the entire region. The business leaders in the ACCD could have imported the language from the milieu they knew best. The Depression-era language of business leadership went well with ideals of corporate social responsibility bolstered by the war. Through these and other channels, better living gained a purchase in planning circles after the war. From there, planning organizations with quite different compositions would take up the phrase as well.<sup>76</sup>

In 1946 Wyatt W. Wilson, the housing expediter of the National Housing Agency and the wartime mayor of Louisville, addressed the National Conference of Catholic Charities with a paper called "Planning for Better Living."<sup>77</sup> Wilson compared the housing emergency to the war effort, proclaiming that they both demanded the same kind of mobilization and planning. Planning was something for the people: "Lots of people think that city planning, any housing planning, is a luxury to be indulged in only by impractical, long-haired theorists."<sup>78</sup> Wilson disagreed. Like the ACCD, he urged citizen participation and immediate action, especially to secure low-income housing. Better living became inextricably bound to planning; the two were often used in the same phrase, the first softening the pejorative associations of the second.<sup>79</sup> Using the cultural momentum that business had invested in better living, planners reworked Barton's original message, now linking an idea of the good life and a better standard of living to planning rather than consumption. The citizen-consumer was now being asked to be the citizen-planner, but the rhetoric and goals remained the same.

In the years after the war, the phrase was borrowed back and forth between commercial interests and planning organizations. While public planning and private development might seem like antithetical social and economic forces, after the war they became intricately interlocking concerns, as representatives of private enterprise, real

76. For instance, see City Planning Board of St. Paul, *Planning St. Paul for Better Living: Report of the City Planning Board of St. Paul, Minnesota* (St. Paul, Minn., 1946), copy in Loeb Library, Harvard University.

77. Wilson W. Wyatt, *Planning for Better Living* (Washington, D.C., 1946), copy in Loeb Library, Harvard University. Wilson went on to run President Harry Truman's Federal Housing Program.

78. *Ibid.*, 4.

79. In 1945 Ric-Wil Insulated Pipe Conduit paid for a series of studies for planned communities and in the spirit of Revere Copper and Brass published them as pamphlets. See the ad with the headline, "To Help You Plan for Tomorrow's Better Living," *Architectural Forum* 83 (Nov. 1945): 34.

estate, and public housing increasingly worked together.<sup>80</sup> In 1949 Hancock Village, a suburban Boston housing development financed by John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, advertised itself as a “A Community for Better Living.”<sup>81</sup> Park Forest, a sprawling Chicago development financed by American Community Builders, Inc. similarly used better living throughout its literature. In 1948 it published *Park Forest, a New Design for Better Living* and *Design for Better Living: The Park Forest Story*, and it continued to use the slogan through the 1950s.<sup>82</sup> Such commercial references did not deter public planning efforts from also using better living. In fact, such commercial use may have encouraged planners by keeping the term familiar and accessible, rather than becoming associated with Wilson Wyatt’s “impractical, long-haired theorists.” The slogan now became the point of departure for businesses and government or official planners to develop a shared language in the postwar era, when they came together (and often clashed) over increasingly large urban rehabilitation projects. In 1949 planner Gale Dudley presented the Nashville Chamber of Commerce with an urban plan for the city, which he called “A Master Plan for Better Living in the Nashville Area,” a plan, like most in this period, that blended public initiative with private enterprise for urban planning.<sup>83</sup> Dudley thus used a business term to present an urban plan to businessmen.

For urban planners like Dudley, better living supplied a coded way of discussing planning in the postwar decades, when *laissez-faire* advocates associated planning with communism and totalitarianism. Better living softened planning. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey used the phrase as a foil for communism. In his 1966 speech “Better Living in Great Cities,” delivered to the Department of

80. See the relevant chapters in Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City* (Baltimore, Md., 1996); John F. Bauman, “Visions of a Post-War City: A Perspective on Urban Planning in Philadelphia and the Nation, 1942–1945,” in *Introduction to Planning History in the United States*, ed. Donald A. Krueckeberg (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983), 170–89; and Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969), 397–540.

81. Ad for Hancock Village, in Loeb Library, Harvard University; *Boston Herald*, 6 Oct. 1949.

82. American Community Builders, Inc., *Park Forest, a New Design for Better Living: Homes for Rent in Chicagoland’s Most Modern Community* (Chicago, 1948); American Community Builders, Inc., *Design for Better Living: The Park Forest Story* (Park Forest, Ill., 1948). Both of these promotional pamphlets are available at Loeb Library, Harvard University.

83. Gale Dudley, *A Master Plan for Better Living in the Nashville Area* (Nashville, Tenn., 1949), copy in Loeb Library, Harvard University. See also James Dahir, *Communities for Better Living: Citizen Achievement in Organization, Design, and Development* (New York, 1950).

Housing and Urban Development, Humphrey discussed the battle against “slumism.”<sup>84</sup> He called slumism a communism of a domestic order, or “the enemy within”: “Slumism is like an insidious virus consuming city after city where people live.”<sup>85</sup> He thus married Great Society programs of the 1960s (to which the “Great Cities” of his title refers), such as the Model Cities program for urban redevelopment, to the language of a consumer culture born explicitly to fight similar attempts at government planning during the Depression. Into this, in turn, he folded the Cold War resonance of anticommunist sentiment. Better living blithely made sense of an era caught between the “Kitchen Debates” and the Great Society—the poles of better living translated into grand political terms.

In the 1950s better living turned up in planning literature that came out of Dallas, Detroit, Chicago, and New Haven, to name just a few cities, proving that as a planning slogan it transcended region, as it had as a commercial slogan.<sup>86</sup> Their shared context and the repetition of themes drawn from earlier uses of better living tied them together. These publications belong to a special class of literature that deserves more scholarly attention: the promotional literature that urban planning organizations published to translate the technical language of the profession to the public. Actual master plans were not couched in terms of better living, only the attempts at publicizing those master plans. In other words, when cities needed to promote expensive and contentious planning schemes that required public support, they turned to the promotional language of consumer culture, which was still very much alive in the period. This brought the term full circle. Corporate capitalism had lifted better living from government housing initiatives and stocked it with modernist ideas and images, and now planning authorities borrowed the slogan back as a public relations maneuver to soften the idea of planning in Cold War America.

Such cross-fertilization came out palpably at the third annual Conference on City and Regional Planning at Berkeley in 1955,

84. Hubert Humphrey, *Better Living in Great Cities: Excerpts from an Address* (Washington, D.C., 1966), copy in the University of California, Los Angeles, Library.

85. *Ibid.*, 6.

86. See Dallas Housing Authority, *Better Homes, Better Living, Lower Rents* (Dallas, Tex., 1955[?]); Detroit Committee for Neighborhood Conservation and Improved Housing, *Neighborhood Conservation: A Challenge to Better Living* (Detroit, Mich., 1955); Metropolitan Housing and Planning Council, *Needed! A Housing Code for Chicago: A Yardstick for Better Living* (Chicago, 1955); Wooster Square Neighborhood Renewal Committee, *Toward Better Living in the Wooster Square Neighborhood: A Program of Action* (New Haven, Conn., 1955), all in Loeb Library, Harvard University.

which chose the theme, “Planning and Building for Better Living in Cities and Counties.”<sup>87</sup> A committee of representatives from the League of California Cities, the County Supervisors Association of California Cities, and the Northern Section of the California Chapter of the American Institute of Planners chose the theme as a way of bringing citizens, organizations, and public officials together. The keynote speaker, Bruce Bliven (1889–1977), one of the most important journalists of his generation, had just ended thirty years as a writer and editor of the *New Republic*. He also had been a key contributor to the Twentieth Century Fund. Moreover, he had been an editor at the *San Francisco Bulletin* just after the 1906 earthquake and had witnessed the rebuilding of the Bay Area. Clearly, he was an eminent and appropriate figure to address this group of planners. But Bliven was also a former adman of roughly the same vintage as Bruce Barton. He even served as the editor of one of advertising’s key professional magazines, *Printer’s Ink*, during World War I, as Barton first emerged as an adman. In many ways Bliven was Barton’s alter ego. He went from advertising to become what the *New York Times* called a “champion of liberalism,” while Barton went from adman to conservative politician and back to adman. Both came from Protestant backgrounds in the Midwest to become admen in the East. While Barton turned Du Pont’s scientific breakthroughs into public clichés, Bliven was becoming one of the most important journalists of science and helped formulate the planned town of Radburn, New Jersey. The two came to better living from opposite angles. Surely the irony in the theme of the Berkeley conference—that the conference co-opted Barton’s anti–New Deal better living to represent liberal planning efforts—would not have been lost on Bliven.

In his address, Bliven delivered a scathing critique of the modern metropolis and the hapless commuter. Speaking in the disingenuous first person, he wrote:

My wishes are simple and reasonable, I feel. I want to live in a handsome garden suburb, with congenial neighbors readily available, who shall however be as silent as death from 10 P.M. every night until 8 A.M. the next morning—and also in the daytime if I elect to work at home. I want a completely rural atmosphere but I also want it to be only ten minutes from the heart of the city. I want to drive my own car into town every day, taking up enough room on the road to carry forty people in a bus. I want ample parking

87. University of California Conference on City and Regional Planning, *Planning and Building for Better Living in Cities and Counties: Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference* (Berkeley, Calif., 1956).

available free of charge within 400 feet of wherever I want to go. I want to travel back and forth over multimillion-dollar highways, for which I certainly don't intend to pay, and I want them to be very little used, even at rush hours, so that I can traverse them practically in solitary grandeur. I want wonderful municipal services, at tax rates about half the present ones.<sup>88</sup>

Bliven foresaw many of the problems of postwar planning, including the eroding tax base and suburban flight, the overcrowding of highways, and the class implications of planning to accommodate suburbanites, much of which arose in part from the blithe vision of better living evoked by many wartime ads. He went on to articulate a liberal critique of the city that would not become standard for more than a decade, after planners had dramatically altered cities with schemes that catered to the suburban upper classes. While some of his expectations reflect an unrealistic optimism—for example, he sustained the wartime fantasy that personal airplanes would turn the planning profession upside down—he was sensitive to the trials of many groups who were not served well by large planning schemes. One of his key points directly opposed Barton's laissez-faire message that big business, if left alone, would best serve the nation's needs. Bliven believed that private investment was insufficient and favored comprehensive public planning.<sup>89</sup> For decades Barton's malleable slogan served planning organizations with widely different aims.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

The rhetorical life of better living shows an important and little explored relationship between consumer culture and building, architecture and planning culture. Du Pont and other companies branded the term as an argument against New Deal intrusions into business. It naturally moved from this context into a similar role on the home front as a way of angling for control of the postwar building boom. Wartime usage also built on the idea of deferred dreams to prepare postwar consumers for a rapid conversion to a peacetime

88. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

89. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

90. See American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods, *East Hills: A Demonstration of Better Living* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), a project that included Walter Gropius, J. L. Sert, and others; and Ruberoid Company (Mastic Tile Division), *Awards, First Annual Design Competition, to Stimulate a Major Contribution to Better Living for the Middle Income Family* (New York, 1959); both in Loeb Library, Harvard University.

economy, when the sacrifices of war would lead to a brave new (or, given the commercial source of the phrase, a “brand” new) world. And the postwar decades pressed it into duty in support of urban planning and commercial development, as well as Cold War ideology.

After fading in the late 1960s, it disappeared almost completely in the 1970s, only to return vigorously in the 1980s. As the last of the wartime generation played out its time in power, it became fashionable to refer back to the happy days of the postwar period, when better living was a known quantity, something around which consensus could be built. As part of this cultural boomerang, Du Pont revived the slogan in the 1980s (it had dropped *Better Living* as its in-house magazine in 1972). A popular magazine called *Better Living* sprang up in 1981, and the Universal Foundation for Better Living, a Christian-based organization, began in the early 1980s, reviving the earlier uses of the phrase by the temperance movement. The building industry brought the term back as well. In 1986 a company called Home Planners, Inc., which had formed in 1946 on the energy of a wartime ad campaign featuring house designs, published a special fortieth anniversary book called *244 House Plans for Better Living*.<sup>91</sup> The nostalgic look back at postwar suburbia could not have been more self-conscious. This strand continues today at Value City, a department store stocked with irregular clothes and overstocked items, where the receipts read “BETTER LIVING FOR LESS.” A do-it-yourself store in the mold of Home Depot took the name Better Living as well, returning the cliché to its roots in domesticity and the house (see figure 2).

The persistence of the phrase in the postwar decades can be attributed, at least in part, to its ambiguity as a term. Better living was never-ending, something one approached but never reached or completed. A few more conveniences and appliances, perhaps the latest toaster, or a new form of lighting, heating, learning, eating, or praying, would surely lead to better living. Its politics were equally ambiguous, representing first federal housing programs, then corporate sponsorship of free enterprise, followed again by government attempts to bolster the authority of planning. This played out like a public conversation over time, and not always in the form of opposition: many planning initiatives in the postwar decades came in the form of public-private cooperation. In short, the phrase narrated the conversion of the war machine and the military-industrial complex into the housing projects and highways of the 1960s and the malls and “megastores” so common in the American built environment today.

91. *244 House Plans for Better Living* (Farmington Hills, Mich., 1986), copy in Columbia University Library.



Figure 2 Better Living Store, Charlottesville, Virginia.

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