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Selling Housing to Los Angeles: The FHA, Local Businesses, and the 1935 National Housing Exposition

On May 18, 1935 the National Housing Exposition officially opened its gates to the public. Located at the newly constructed Pan-Pacific Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles, the exposition was, in many ways, the city's answer to the economic hardships of the Great Depression. The event ran for three weeks and featured various exhibits and activities related to the home. In addition to numerous full-sized model homes, the exposition contained a theater where one could witness a theatrical pageant entitled "Housing Through the Ages," an outdoor pavilion for musical performances, a sports complex, and a miniature scale model of a "Village of Tomorrow."

My research into the National Housing Exposition began as a part of an effort to learn how a New Deal federal agency, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), worked to promote housing during the 1930s. In particular, I wanted to know how the FHA and local business interests worked together to sell a particular vision of housing to the people of Los Angeles. To answer this question I looked at documents related to the planning and operation of the National Housing Exposition which are held in the archival collections of the University of Southern California (USC). In addition, I examined published material on the exposition, including the extensive coverage in newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Examiner*.

Before going any further, though, I would like to provide a little bit of background information. The FHA was created as a part of the National Housing Act of 1934. The legislation aimed to revitalize the building industry, and thereby stimulate economic recovery from the Great Depression. Unlike previous government efforts, such as the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC), this legislation did not provide for direct government loans to homeowners or homebuyers. Rather, it created two categories of private bank loans which the government pledged to insure. Title I loans were meant for home repair and modernization, while Title II loans were meant for the construction or purchase of new homes. In order to promote these new insured loans, the FHA created the Better Housing Program (BHP).

Much of the existing historical scholarship on the FHA focuses on the financial and spatial consequences of FHA policies.¹ Few scholars have written, though, about the BHP and its efforts to stimulate housing and consumption as a sort of cure for the Great Depression. Those that have, such as architectural historian Gabrielle Esperdy and geographer Richard Harris, have tended to focus on Title I loans and the efforts to sell modernization to home and business owners. Furthermore, they have largely concentrated on the national scope of the Better Housing Program, glossing over the regional particularities of the campaign.²

¹ See, for instance, Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 203-218; David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Louis Hyman, *Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 45-97.

It is this historiographical gap that I set out to fill. I figured that the National Housing Exposition would be able to provide some insight into the way this large-scale federal housing campaign played out on the ground. However, after beginning my project this summer, my focus shifted slightly. While the FHA certainly had an important role to play in the impetus for the exposition, the organization of the event lay almost entirely with local business and civic leaders in Los Angeles. Furthermore, while housing exhibitions were commonplace during the 1930s, the National Housing Exposition was, in many ways, atypical. Gabrielle Esperdy has contended that exhibitions held as a part of the Better Housing Program were, “[a]t their best...a kind of multi-firm showroom, transforming the BHP headquarters or another rented space into a complete selling environment.”³

However, as my research demonstrates, the National Housing Exposition in Los Angeles was much more than a mere venue for selling products—though, sales and consumption were certainly major themes of the event. Rather, using spectacle and pageantry, the exposition put forward a cohesive vision of regional and national progress which linked homeownership not only to ideas about consumption, but also to notions of citizenship and economic prosperity. Today, I would like to focus on one particular area of my research which sheds some light on how this vision was manifested: the idea of the World’s Fair.

On May 19, the day after the exposition opened, the *Los Angeles Times* approvingly noted that many were touting it as “nothing short of a miniature world’s fair.”⁴ Indeed, promotional materials for the event heralded it as a “World’s Fair of the American Home.”⁵ Of course, the National Housing Exposition was not a true World’s Fair, but these comparisons are revealing. Originally a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, the World’s Fair experienced a resurgence in the United States during the 1930s. As various historians have demonstrated, this proliferation of World’s Fairs was largely a result of the economic hardships of the Great Depression; the hopeful and inspiring nature of these fairs was meant as an antidote to the nation’s maladies.⁶

The National Housing Exposition was intended to function in much the same way, albeit with a narrower focus. While many of the Depression-era World’s Fairs featured demonstration homes (in some cases sponsored by the FHA), housing was just one part of the larger vision of national progress that they displayed. In contrast, all visions of progress presented at the National Housing Exposition were filtered through the lens of the home. Furthermore, despite its name, the National Housing Exposition had a distinctly regional focus—it was much more a Southern

² Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Richard Harris, “A New Form of Credit: The State Promotes Home Improvement, 1934-1954,” *The Journal of Policy History* 21, no. 4 (2009).

³ Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*, 67.

⁴ “Thousands At Housing Exposition,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1935.

⁵ Pamphlet, Box 1, Folder 2, National Housing Exposition scrapbook, Collection no. 7034, Regional History Collection, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California (hereafter cited as NHE scrapbook).

⁶ See Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Warren I. Susman, “The People’s Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

California and Los Angeles housing exposition. Thus the exposition affords an opportunity to study how the ethos of the World's Fair filtered down to local community boosters and was applied in settings outside of official World's Fairs. Significantly, the National Housing Exposition presented a vision of the future and of progress which was much more conservative and traditional than that of contemporaneous World's Fairs. If the motto of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair ("Science Finds—Industry Applies—Man Conforms") presented a vision of bold national progress, the motto of the National Housing Exposition ("Happiness Begins With A Home") seemed to signal an appeal to traditionalism, a return to normalcy.⁷

Indeed, as the Managing Director of the exposition, Clifford W. Henderson, explained to visitors, the event had been created "not as a dazzling entertainment spectacle, but rather as a delightful, constructive and artistic portrayal of a more gracious mode of living."⁸ While such a statement might have been somewhat at odds with the actual reality of the event—the exposition certainly contained its share of pageantry and spectacle—Henderson's underlying message seems consistent with the spirit of the National Housing Exposition. The event was designed as an explicitly civic undertaking. The local business leaders who organized the non-profit corporation which operated the exposition envisioned themselves as "unselfish" heroes who would restore economic prosperity and security to the region of Southern California. They were, in the words of Henderson, men of "indomitable courage and civic fortitude."⁹ That many of these businessmen were directly involved in enterprises—such as selling building materials or household goods—which would directly profit from a boost in housing construction was an irony that was largely lost on them.

The historian Robert Rydell has argued that the World's Fairs of the 1930s "represented a powerful defense of corporate capitalism as a modernizing agency that would lead America out of the depression towards a bountiful future."¹⁰ The National Housing Exposition largely mirrored these World's Fairs in this regard, with two important distinctions. It was less large-scale corporate capitalism that would lead the country out of the Depression, but regional capitalism, as represented by the local business leaders who organized the event. Furthermore, their focus was more explicitly local—they expected to lead Southern California out of the Depression, which would then, they thought, drag the rest of the country along with it. Of course, the Great Depression did not end in 1935 following the National Housing Exposition. However, the event does provide an important window onto the ways in which local civic leaders, seizing on a federal housing program, worked to promote their own particular vision of economic recovery. By making the American home the locus of this vision, these men were both drawing on a long history

⁷ Lisa D. Schrenk, "'Industry Applies': Corporate Marketing at A Century of Progress," in *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s*, ed. Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 25; J. Howard Johnson, "Special Radio Announcement," May 24, 1935, Box 1, Folder 30, NHE scrapbook.

⁸ Clifford W. Henderson, "Far Reaching Results to Be Achieved by the 'World's Fair of the American Home,'" in "Official Program and Log," Box 1, Folder 43, NHE scrapbook.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 115.

of thinking which placed the home at the center of notions of citizenship, as well as foreshadowing postwar ideologies of suburbanization.¹¹ The history of the National Housing Exposition is thus pertinent not only to scholars of the FHA and housing exhibitions, but also to our broader understanding of how values—cultural, economic, or otherwise—are disseminated, or sold, to people.

¹¹ For more on ideologies of the home, homeownership, and suburbanization see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); LeeAnn Lands, “Be a Patriot, Buy a Home: Re-Imagining Home Owners and Home Ownership in Early 20th Century Atlanta,” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4 (2008); Janet Hutchinson, “Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal,” *Journal of Policy History* 9, no. 2 (1997); Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*.