

*Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business.* Roland Marchand. University of California Press, 1998. 461 pp. 38 color and 146 b&w illus. ISBN 0-520-08719-4.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

The late Roland Marchand was not a design historian but his book *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, published in 1985, gained wide currency in design history circles. Marchand is one of the few historians to have acknowledged the visual as a significant form of historical documentation. Unlike many cultural studies theorists who analyze the rhetorical and semiotic forms of advertisements without embedding them in a larger historical narrative, Marchand read back from his sweeping analysis of American advertisements in a twenty year period a sense of national sentiment and belief that complements the conclusions of other historians whose focus has been on verbal texts rather than visual ones. I believe that *Advertising the American Dream* was well received by many design historians because it unequivocally demonstrated the importance of a social framework for the full understanding of designed objects. Polemically, though without his explicit intention, Marchand's book made a strong argument for social or cultural history as a model for design historians.

I first met the author around 1990 at one of Steven Heller's "Modernism and Eclecticism" conferences in New York, where I learned of his project to write a history of corporate imagery. *Design Issues*, which I co-edit, subsequently published two articles from this project on the respective roles of Walter Dorwin Teague and Norman Bel Geddes as corporate designers at the Century of Progress of 1933-34 and the New York World's Fair of 1939-40. As contributions to the design history literature, the articles are exemplary but, independent of the larger story of corporate public relations that Marchand tells in his new book, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*, they remain pieces of a puzzle.

In Marchand's book, whose narrative extends from the late nineteenth century to just after World War II, design does come into the until rather late. Before the 1930s, public relations consultants had control over the corporate image which was given form by art directors, illustrators, and layout men. With the advent of the Century of Progress Exhibition in 1933-34, the corporations began to rely more on public spectacle as a means to tell their story and here the consultant designers came into their own as orchestrators of multiple visual resources for this purpose.

The impetus for corporate image-making according to Marchand was the corporation's desire for social legitimacy. He calls this the quest for a "corporate soul." Between 1885 and 1904, the large number of corporate mergers transformed the business landscape from one of many freely-competing individual enterprises to one where a few large corporations dominated. This

emerging institutional hegemony created a public suspicion of big business that corporations have striven to overcome since the late 1890s. The "corporate soul," a term used in public relations literature, was the organizational spirit intended to convey a commitment to employee well-being and the social good. The author notes that not all corporations realized the need for a public relations policy simultaneously and he sees their responses to this prospect arising in an irregular pattern over the first half of the twentieth century.

Marchand has managed to give his complex subject a powerful narrative thrust which at times makes this extremely scholarly book read like a novel. The protagonists are the giant American corporations—General Electric, General Motors, American Telephone and Telegraph, Du Pont, Westinghouse, and Ford, along with the major railroads and insurance companies—who seek acceptance from their employees and customers while they vigorously defend the virtues of the American free enterprise system against all perceived attempts by the federal government to regulate their activities. The brains behind their efforts are the public relations geniuses such as Ivy Lee and Bruce Barton who play a powerful role in convincing corporations of the need for public relations campaigns. Once these consultants are successful, they then devise far-reaching and costly strategies for communicating with the public. Ivy Lee, who, according to Marchand, emerges as the first American public relations counselor, formed a partnership with the journalist George Parker in 1904. Following the panic of 1907, corporate public relations burgeoned as a result of the extensive criticism companies encountered from muckraking journalists. It arose as a defensive strategy to overcome public dissatisfaction and at times to cover up socially questionable practices.

Nonetheless, corporate leaders were slow to take up the services of the Ivy Lees and other public relations experts. Marchand, making good use of feminist theory, notes that public relations activities were gendered female because they were not essential to the processes of production. The need for these strategies arose from the potential power of a public that was seen as being emotional and irrational. And yet, as the twentieth century progressed and the scale of corporate activity grew, management's need to explain its policies and practices to the public as well as to its own employees increased as well.

Among the experts to whom we are introduced, Bruce Barton, of the advertising agency, Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, is clearly the towering figure who most contributes to the development of corporate public relations strategy and whose successful campaigns lead to the establishment of in-house public relations departments in many large companies. Barton is a messianic figure who has an extraordinary ability to personalize corporate identity. As Marchand notes, Barton helped his clients obtain "a larger vision of themselves to which internal struggles could be subordinated" (136). Relying heavily on metaphors such as the family, Barton and other

public relations experts were able to devise advertising campaigns that sought to define close emotional relationships between the companies and those they served.

Marchand writes at great length about the visual strategies used by corporations to tell their stories. One of the first public relations tropes, after conflating the image of the company's president with that of the organization itself, was the presentation of the factory as an emblem of the corporation's industriousness and productivity. The author includes pictures of trade cards and advertisements that show exactly how this worked. We then move from factory images to a discussion of how corporations used the design of new headquarters buildings in urban centers to convey images of modernity. The author draws extensively on architectural theory for this discussion but, as incorporated in his narrative, there is a softening of its critical edge. Marchand relies heavily on the texts of the period as framing mechanisms for his interpretations rather than on more independent iconic readings of buildings. His reluctance to confront the many images he incorporates in a more critical manner is part of the historian's distance he strives to maintain but, at the same time, it contributes to a limiting frame on his overall interpretation of corporate public relations in America. What remains unspoken is the articulation of how public relations is itself the equivalent within capitalism of the propaganda that has been so often decried in socialist and communist countries. There are many parallels between the way that corporate advertising images were constructed in the 1920s and 1930s and the political propaganda in Germany, Italy, or the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Consider, for example General Motors' employee magazine *Folks* which features a trio of smiling workers on a 1938 cover that Marchand illustrates. They appear not unlike comparable groupings of Soviet workers on the covers of *USSR in Construction* during the same period.

What becomes clear in Marchand's narrative is the degree to which corporate public relations is a manipulative practice. It arises in response to the corporation's need to maintain its own objective, that of increasing its wealth, while placating and complimenting those on whom it depends, its workers and its customers. Marchand is explicit about the corporate agenda: resist unions, maintain a high level of innovation, and defend free enterprise against government regulation. But these goals were often indirectly conveyed in the articulation of corporate images.

As corporations achieved financial success in the 1920s, they sought to establish themselves as institutions whose mission transcended that of simply making money by portraying themselves as exemplars of public service and civic beneficence. One way they did this was to sponsor high culture such as symphony performances and radio dramas. Another was to extol the virtues of scientific research in creating valuable new products. You can still hear this today in General Electric's homily, "we bring good things to life." Du Pont, for example, a company that depended heavily on research, presented its scientists in a series of ads where each was identified

as "today's Prometheus" who, in just over a century, had advanced civilization by more than ten centuries.

In the 1930s, when the United States was in the throes of the Great Depression, corporations began to wage their version of a holy war against the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal. A testing ground for this battle was the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago, held in 1933-34. In the corporate preparations for this exhibition, one begins to see the influence of the consultant designer, notably Walter Dorwin Teague, whose office created the Ford Pavilion. Relying on techniques of theatrical display, Teague demonstrated how exhibition design could capture the emotional attention and allegiance of the public. Marchand's account of Teague's role in the Ford display goes well beyond description of exhibition techniques. Coming rather late in the book, it benefits from his previous discussions of public relations strategies and gives a new dimension to the discussion of how consultant design in the 1930s functioned as part of a larger political process of corporate communication. Marchand's descriptions of both Teague's and Bel Geddes' role at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair are equally illuminating and one understands more clearly than ever the political role of the consultant designers in the corporate war against the New Deal.

The emphasis on exhibitions with dazzling displays of technology and other visual wonders was part of a move to create a less cerebral relation between the corporation and the public. Many companies in the 1930s adopted the techniques of P.T. Barnum to produce shows and displays that were high on visual impact and short on rhetoric. Consultants urged corporations to eschew long literary texts in their ads and adopt the simple folksy prose of the common man. Companies also made greater use of films such as General Motors' *From Dawn to Sunset* and Westinghouse's *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*. After Marchand recounts the designers' role in the two major world's fairs of the 1930s, design remains central in his description of the use many corporations made of futuristic product images as lures to bolster their defense of free enterprise during World War II.

One sees in Marchand's narrative that the adoption of public relations techniques from the 1890s to the 1940s served successive functions. First it helped to define the corporation as a social entity that had its own personality and possibly even a "soul." Then it legitimated its role as a civic benefactor, and finally public relations became part of the corporate struggle to sustain the hegemony of free enterprise in the face of potential restrictions from the federal government.

As informative as Marchand's account is, however, I do have one complaint which points to a serious flaw in his narrative. The author makes no mention of the African-American community, particularly its absence from representations in corporate advertising. He accepts the prevailing definition of diversity in his description of a breakthrough that occurred in 1936 and 1937 when

corporations began to depict workers with Eastern European ethnic backgrounds for the first time in their ads.

In its new company magazine United States Steel gave recognition to Stephen Yablanski for his skills both in music and in the hardening and tempering of tools. Westinghouse turned to the family of Mike Slzechinski to see the system by demonstrating the capacity of an "average American workman" to purchase a new car (Fig 6.9). Studebaker, which had turned recently—"in the midst of reorganization and labor turmoil"—to ads that linked a merchandising strategy to cultivation of employee loyalty, now publicly celebrated Joseph Szuba, metal finisher, Scoutmaster, American Legionnaire, and member of South Boston's Kosciuszko Civic Club, as an exemplary Studebaker employee. (217)

But these workers, as distinct as their ethnic backgrounds may have been, were still part of a single mainstream white culture. It would therefore appear from Marchand's description that a turn in the corporations' recognition of American diversity had been made in 1936 but the corporate resistance to admitting African-Americans to its circle of employees does not come into play here. Ignoring this fact skews Marchand's account because it does not take into account the way that corporations constructed a vision of America that excluded a portion of its citizens. Thus, the story that they told through public relations was a story addressed to some as if it were being addressed to all. As more scholars publish research on way that African-Americans have fought to negotiate a place for themselves in American society, additional material will come to light about their relation to corporate America. Marchand's book is a good beginning but the full story of corporate public relations has yet to be told.

Despite his omissions, however, Marchand has created an exemplary work of interdisciplinary scholarship. His ample notes are replete with citations from literature in other fields and his wide reading explains the hiatus of thirteen years between his previous book, *Advertising the American Dream* and this one. There is much to admire in *Creating the Corporate Soul* and the broad sociopolitical context it establishes for design practice in the 1930s and 1940s should give design historians a lot to think about.

Copyright © 1999 Victor Margolin. All rights reserved.  
First published in *Journal of Design History*, vol. 12, no. 3.