
As author Paula Lupkin notes early on in Manhood Factories, the buildings of the Young Christian Men’s Association are so “typically typical,” such an ever-present and inconspicuous part of the American city, that they have received strikingly scant attention from architectural historians. Falling somewhere between vernacular utility and modernist formal exploration, the relatively unchanging YMCA design has proven an ill fit for standard architectural historical narratives. Nevertheless, ‘Y’ buildings left an indelible mark on American culture. By the end of the 1930s, more than a thousand community centers had been erected across the country, helping to define the image and meaning of the American downtown.

Manhood Factories is filled with eloquent formal analyses of YMCA architecture, but Lumpkin’s primary subject is the less obvious ideological role its spaces played. Precisely because it was so ubiquitous, the ‘Y’ offers critical insight into, the cultural ramifications of the nation’s change from a regional agrarian society to a corporatized industrial power, and the transformation of white Protestant male identity in the face of such changes. The YMCA offered both a palliative for the urban male increasingly separated from the outdoors and a means to reinforce emerging class, gender, and racial norms. Its built environment, the author claims, underscored the dynamic and shifting identity of manhood at the turn of the century, in turn offering a specific model for the modern middle-class man to follow.

To bolster this argument, Lupkin musters forth a stunning array of evidence: in addition to architectural drawings and plans, there are reproductions of contemporary postcards, archival photographs, World War II propaganda posters, advertisements, personal correspondence, and more. These primary materials are used to weave an historical account of compelling originality.

In the end, the sheer scale and bureaucratization of YMCA architecture came to coincide with the corporate culture it was meant to ameliorate. The architectural style of the ‘Y,’ moreover, was itself subject to a subtle sort of dynamism, embracing, however hesitantly, new types and functions to meet the demands of a growing commercial culture and the organization’s own desire to reach an international audience. Only a national calamity could seemingly stand in its way—and one did, the Great Depression, inalterably curtailing the growth of the organization and its Main Street buildings.

This well-designed, richly illustrated book is recommended for any library supporting an undergraduate or graduate architecture, cultural studies, or gender studies program. It makes an important and fascinating contribution not only to the study of American architecture, but to American social history as well.

Patrick Tomlin, Head, Art + Architecture Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, tomlin@vt.edu