Introduction

Architecture by Television

Ever look through a blank wall?
—Advertisement for Farnsworth Television, 1942

Out where man has never seen before . . .
—Advertisement for Farnsworth Television , 1943

Your private window on the world . . .
—Advertisement for Farnsworth Television , 1944

And the air will be full of pictures!
—Advertisement for Farnsworth Television, 1944

AMERICANS FIRST LEARNED ABOUT TELEVISION AS A FORM OF MAGIC sight that would allow them to see through physical barriers, across the world, and into outer space. The epigraph above features taglines from a series of advertisements for the Farnsworth Television and Radio Corporation, published in *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and other popular magazines during the early 1940s. Farnsworth had hired one of the nation's oldest advertising agencies, N. W. Ayer & Sons, to design a wartime campaign "preparing the nation for television."[1] One of its ads from 1942 claimed that Farnsworth's electronics were being "used by scientists to help push time and space aside, and bring new worlds in sharper, clearer focus." Astronomers were, in fact, using the company's tubes to enhance the detection of faint celestial objects in photoelectric imaging. Underscoring this ambition, a partial map of Mars appeared beneath the ad's tagline, "How cold is it on Mars tonight?"[2] In another ad,

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published the following year, the tagline "Out where man has never seen before" could be read above a depiction of Earth, the Moon, and Mars shown as three orbs suspended in a cloudy blue sky. Oversized human figures standing across Earth's continents gazed upward at a rainbow band stretching into outer space. "The naked eye sees very little," the ad's copy explained, "It can't see in the dark, through mountains or buildings, or around corners. And yet today man is seeing the wonders of a great, invisible world never before open to him—through the magic of the science of electronics."[3]

Another 1943 advertisement touted corporate oversight as one of the "many unique possibilities of the magic of television" (figure I.1). The profile of a silver-haired man fills the right side of its composition. His managerial gaze—indicated by a dashed line—extends from his eye to an inset image of workers on an assembly line before turning sharply toward a bird's-eye view of the factory.[4] "It may be miles from the plant manager's office to his most distant buildings, but it won't take a second for television to *show* him the production line," the copy makes clear.[5] *Life* published Farnsworth's full-page advertisement opposite one for the Bendix Aviation Corporation's suite of radio and radar instruments (figure I.2). That ad shows two pilots (one seen in profile like Farnsworth's plant manager) sitting in a cockpit and flying through a dark blue fog. Bendix's technologies apparently equipped the pilots with "third-dimensional senses" allowing them to navigate "Into the Fog . . . Into the Future."[6] Their "Super Human Vision" is pictured as a series of flight helmets radiating from each pilot's head and converging at a luminous vanishing point beyond the windshield. Read together, *Life's* tandem advertisements convey a message of dominance achieved through extended, electronic vision.

Electronics companies used advertising like this to rally public support for wartime production while promising future civilian benefits. They typically pledged to redirect military technologies into domestic applications once peace was achieved. Architectural historian Andrew Shanken has described such campaigns as "anticipatory," noting that "the pages of magazines became theaters in which citizen-consumers watched the drama of war unfold . . . and imagined the world of 194X in terms of architecture."[7] Farnsworth participated by staging a future in which television surpassed architecture's familiar dimensions to establish a new spatial order. In its ads, readers were told that they could not "have this marvelous new television until peace once more is ours."[8] The company urged them to "help bring peace and victory closer" by purchasing "the War Bonds that buy America's winning weapons."[9] In this

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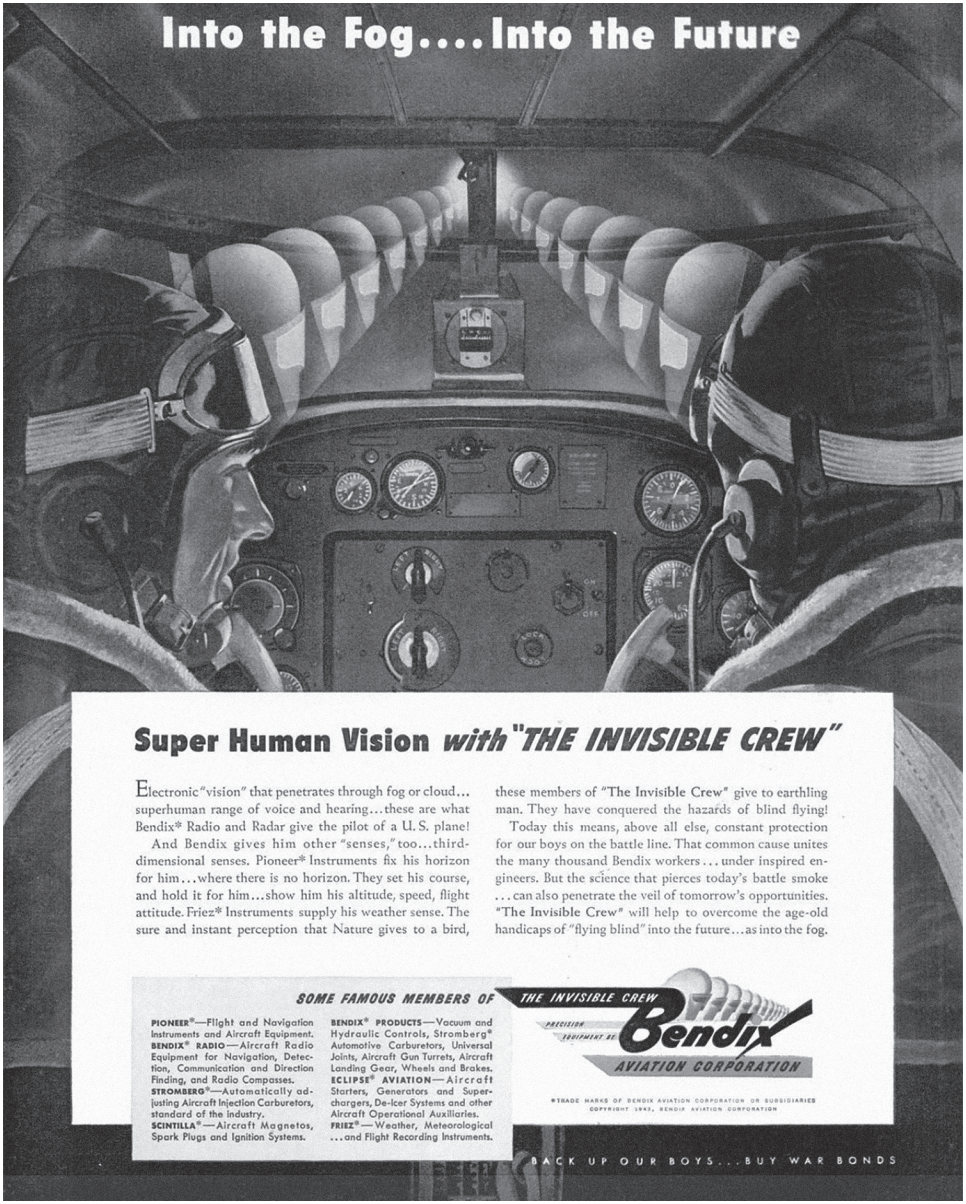


Figure I.2. Advertisement, Bendix Aviation Corporation. *Life* (September 20, 1943): 10.

way, years before nationwide television broadcasting was feasible (and decades before it would deliver live footage from the Moon), anticipatory advertising asked consumers to invest in the development of superhuman vision,

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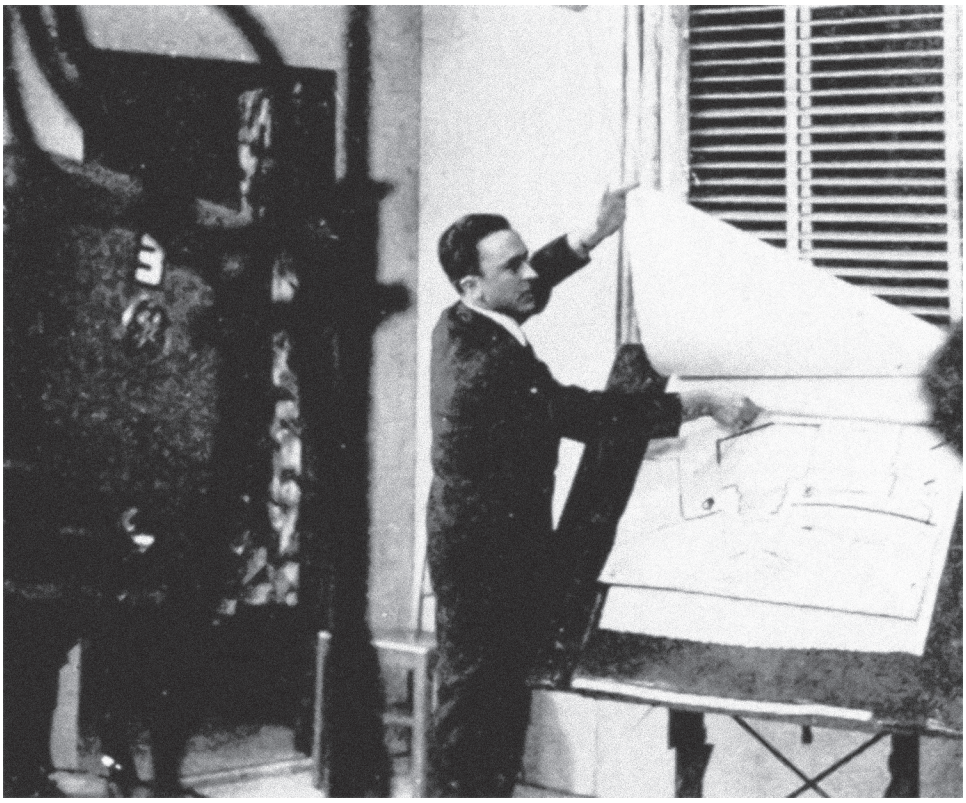


Figure I.3. Ildefonso Aroztegui, a postgraduate architecture student at the University of Illinois, presents his plans on WRGB, Schenectady, New York, 1944. *Illinois Technograph* (February 1944): 16. Courtesy of the Illini Media Company.

extraterrestrial access, and other space-time transfigurations made possible through television and its related technologies of radio and radar.

The broadcasting industry also enlisted architects to anticipate and plan for television's postwar spatial needs. In February 1944, the General Electric (GE)–sponsored station in Schenectady, New York, known as WRGB, telecast three architects presenting their designs for a "television broadcasting studio of the future" (figure I.3).[10] The three had received top honors in that year's annual Beaux Arts Institute of Design (BAID) competition, which focused on planning for what was then a fledgling industry.[11] In its brief, BAID described

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television as a "means of communication whereby both the sight and sound of any event may be transmitted electronically through space with the speed of light." It told designers that "the entire living world must be considered as material for television transmission."[12] In response, the institute invited architects to design production facilities "provid[ing] for the development of programs as yet unimagined."[13] After selecting its winners, BAID arranged for them to present their proposals live on WRGB. The telecast was likely the first to feature architects and their work in the United States.[14]

As the nation's oldest television station, and one of only two commercially licensed broadcasters operating outside New York City, WRGB offered a fitting platform for the historic broadcast. Five years earlier, in 1939, the FCC had granted General Electric permission to operate four experimental television stations throughout the region, including one in Schenectady known then by the call sign W2XB.[15] To maximize the coverage of its Very High Frequency (VHF) allotment, GE built a relay station twelve miles outside town in the Helderberg Mountains. Billed as the "first link in a television network," that station boasted the most powerful transmission tower in the country.[16] Reports emphasized how its height surpassed the RCA-NBC tower atop the Empire State Building by 250 feet.[17]

GE rapidly expanded its broadcasting infrastructure. In 1941, the company remodeled a turn-of-the-century employee clubhouse near its headquarters into an air-conditioned facility designed specifically for television production (figure I.4). The studio featured a soundproof main stage measuring seventy feet long, forty-six feet wide, and eighteen feet high. On opposite sides of the room were a control booth and a public gallery, each with interior windows overlooking the studio floor.[18] GE equipped its station with six cameras: three for capturing live studio footage and three in an auxiliary space for telecasting from film. By 1942, when the FCC granted GE commercial programming rights and a new call sign, the Schenectady site had become a national leader in television production. GE promoted WRGB as its "proving ground station."[19]

The 1944 broadcast of the BAID winners marked a brief but significant moment in the historical convergence of American architecture and American television. By asking young designers to envision a studio "of the future," the competition anticipated the central role architectural form would assume in television's postwar rise as a mass medium. Then, by televising their speculative plans from within one of the country's most advanced broadcasting facilities, the program directors enacted what media historian Brian R. Jacobson describes as the "modernity-defining blurring of reality and its image"

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Figure I.4. General Electric's WRGB television studio building in Schenectady, New York, 1946. Courtesy of miSci/Museum of Innovation and Science, Schenectady, New York.

that happens inside studios. According to Jacobson, "studios are spaces for the creation of spaces, worlds for worldmaking, and environments designed to generate other environments."[20] WRGB's broadcast, then, underscored the various tensions between real and imagined, present and future, and material and immaterial that made television such a potent site for architectural invention.[21] The episode even drew attention from *Architectural Record*, which hailed the broadcast as an example of "architecture by television" and invited readers to "imagine architects explaining their designs before the eyes and ears of the world (within a 50-mile radius)!"[22]

In this book, my aim is to examine television as a form of modern architecture, the material conditions of which have shaped contemporary ideas of space, place, and distance. I open with the Farnsworth advertisements and the WRGB broadcast because they provide a shared point of reference for studying the social and spatial relations between architecture and television—two material

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