Despite the increasing presence of large, team-based offices within US architectural practice over the last century, a history of how architects and critics have understood these offices has yet to be written. The nature of group practice has changed from the big businesses and large organizations that accompanied the merger movement at the turn of the twentieth century to the factory producers of the industrial expansion in the 1910s and 1920s, the bureaucratic firms of the postwar boom, and the multinational conglomerates of the neoliberal present. Only after World War II did the term “corporate” come to constitute a topos of architectural discourse, one that refers at once to a specific mode of production, the mentality of its producers, and the perceived qualities of the work produced. Throughout these changes in the scope of architectural organization, architects and historians have speculated on the implications of the large-scale office for the status of architecture as a business, a profession, and a field of cultural production.

A convenient place to enter this history of critical reception is in midstream, in the years immediately after the World War II, when numerous authors looked to the largest firms of the early twentieth century to comprehend the implications of team-based practices for postwar architectural production. Among the earliest attempts was Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s 1947 article, “The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius,” in which he predicted that the major categories of postwar architecture would be distinguished not by style, but by economy of production. Hitchcock noted that the prewar terms of debate, centered on avant-garde themes of advance or regression, had given way to a “clarification of the architectural picture” in which “it came about that there was at last only one contemporary way of building,” namely modernism. Based upon this stylistic consensus, Hitchcock predicted the evolution of a new professional entity to meet the increasing scale and scope of design tasks in a postwar society: the bureaucratic office. “Bureaucratic architecture,” he wrote, would include “all building that is the product of large-scale architectural organizations, from which personal expression is absent.” In contrast to the speed and competence required for large-scale projects, to which bureaucratic architecture would ideally be suited, Hitchcock counterposed “an entirely different world” of design practice for those monumental or special cultural commissions requiring artistic or creative synthesis, “the world of the architecture of genius.” The genius
would be the anti-bureaucrat, “the sort of architect who functions as a creative individual rather than as an anonymous member of a team”; his method would be “a particular psychological approach and way of working at architecture which may or may not produce masterpieces.”

These two types of practice and their resulting expression — the competent prose of the bureaucrat and the imaginative poetry of the genius — would each have their exclusive domain of professional application. Significantly, Hitchcock already warned that this dichotomy, at once productive and discursive, would require the architectural critic to develop different tools to evaluate the built results of such practices. Henceforth, it would no longer be possible to judge bureaucratic production on the same artistic criteria that had applied to the prewar avant-garde, whether the interpretive framework of signature and authorial intention or the expressive attributes of imagination, creativity, or synthesis.

Frank Lloyd Wright provided the inevitable model of Hitchcock’s architectural genius, reinforcing an image maintained through the atelier-like atmosphere Wright cultivated at his Taliesin studios in Arizona and Wisconsin. The office of Albert Kahn represented the bureaucrat, known primarily for factories and offices for Ford Motor Company and other Detroit manufacturers. For Hitchcock, Kahn’s office represented “the type of bureaucratic architecture par excellence.” He praised: “The strength of a firm such as Kahn...[that] depends not on the architectural genius of one man...but in the organizational genius which can establish a foolproof system of rapid and complete plan production.” Such a system, organized in technical divisions from design to engineering to construction, enabled different sets of design information to “meet on the site with as perfect mutual co-ordination as machine parts come from the various sections of a factory to be joined first into sub-assemblies and then into the finished product on the final assembly line.”

By 1947, however, Fordist factory production was already an anachronistic model for large-scale, postwar organizations. A year before Hitchcock’s text, the sociologist Peter Drucker identified the corporation as the representative American social institution, predicting its emergence as the dominant form for business and other postwar institutions.2 In contrast to the assembly-line production embodied by Ford Motor Company, Drucker argued that the managerial principles that would typify the coming economic boom would emulate the flexible, distributed model of General Motors, the largest corporation in the world by the 1950s. General Motors’ structure consisted of independent automobile divisions combined with coordinated decision making and control between divisions to ensure consistency across the company’s product lines. A mix of specialists at different levels within the hierarchy allowed information to travel both upwards and downwards through the production chain, increasing efficiency from the factory floor to the management office. Decentralization, teamwork, and flexibility were, for Drucker, the characteristics that would mark the progressive application of corporate models across both business and institutional domains in the postwar context.
Such managerial methods found their closest parallel in architectural practice in the offices of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), the firm which became uniquely synonymous with the term “corporate” during this period. SOM’s success was based on the development of the “package deal,” in which large teams of architects and engineers delivered complex projects from site planning and structural engineering to detailed design, facade systems, interiors, budgeting, and administration.\(^3\) Diagrams of the firm’s organization published in architectural journals precisely represented Drucker’s efficient yet flexible corporation. In practice, the image of SOM as a firm characterized by consistent products rather than by signature architects — one supposedly so anonymous that a partner claimed “it could even be called the ABC Company”\(^4\) — conflicted with the acknowledgment of Gordon Bunshaft as the firm’s lead designer, and with his description of his role as office “dictator.”\(^5\) Yet the overall impression of a smoothly functioning team was successful enough that *Fortune* magazine extolled SOM’s “group design,” while *Business Week* marveled at the firm’s $2 billion dollars of “design by conference.”\(^6\) *Newsweek* made explicit the firm’s affinity with Drucker’s managerial paradigm, praising SOM for its “enormous and assiduous activity and production — something like a General Motors of the architectural world.”\(^7\)

As Hitchcock had situated the emerging architecture of bureaucracy in terms of the prewar model of Albert Kahn’s office, so contemporary critics looked to earlier examples of large-scale practice in order to understand this new scale of production. In a special issue of *Bauen + Wohnen* dedicated to SOM in 1957, Sigfried Giedion situated their work within the lineage of Chicago firms like Burnham and Root that had been among

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“Designers For a Busy World: Mood For Working,” 97.
the pioneers of the large-scale architectural business model at the turn of the twentieth century.\(^8\) Responding to Hitchcock and Giedion with a view from outside the United States, Peter Smithson placed SOM’s genealogy not with the commercial architects of the Chicago School but rather with the New York office of McKim, Mead & White, among the largest architectural firms at the end of the nineteenth century.\(^9\) For Smithson, both firms embodied a lineage of luxurious materials and careful execution inaccessible to foreigners, “that special tradition of concentration on detail which Americans enjoy.” Describing the other-worldly impression of “machine-absolute” buildings like SOM’s Chase Manhattan Bank, Smithson wrote that they “arouse the strongest cargo-cult feelings in foreigners, and are truly hints of une architecture autre.” Hitchcock would also link the fetish character of such products with the professionalization of the firms that produced them, suggesting “the acceptance of the skyscraper outside of North America has certainly already led in some cases to the development of architectural offices comparable in scale and organization to the American ones. Thus it is not only the American skyscraper that has come to be adopted abroad but, up to a point at least, the methods of its design and production.”\(^10\)

Evident in these descriptions was the need to reconcile the prewar notion of modernism as a cultural avant-garde with the mainstream, corporate organization by which such products were achieved. Giedion’s essay had characterized SOM as an “experiment” in merging management and progressive design, by using this scale of organization to convince clients of the value of modernist aesthetics. Nathaniel Owings himself alluded to such ambitions in his account of SOM’s early years, claiming

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that “we were not after jobs as such. We were after leverage to influence social and environmental conditions. To work, we must have volume... Volume meant power. We would try to change men’s minds.”

A 1950 exhibition of SOM’s work at the Museum of Modern Art had already affirmed the perceived compatibility between the repetitive, reproducible character of modernism and the efficiencies of bureaucratic production, characterizing the firm as one in which designers “work together, animated by two disciplines which they all share—the discipline of modern architecture and the discipline of American organizational methods.”

Yet the interest of other young architects in team-based practices after World War II lay less in leveraging big business toward aesthetic ends than in how large-scale involvement could be channeled toward broader cultural goals. Collaboration became the watchword for a generation of architects schooled in the belief that anonymity, teamwork, and the broadest scale of action were the keys to progressive architectural production. Inspired by the massive building projects of the Tennessee Valley Authority under the New Deal, and by the collaborative pedagogy of the prewar Bauhaus, young architects called for new models of collective production that would embrace the emerging fields of planning, engineering, and landscape. For adherents to this ethos, a perceived consensus around the principles of the modern movement after the World War II combined with a commitment to challenge the trope of the genius inherited from the first generation of modernist masters, which was seen as inadequate to address the urgent building problems of their time.

Emblematic of the belief in team-based practice as a social ethos was The Architects Collaborative (TAC). The firm was established in 1945 by seven young architects along with Walter Gropius, the German émigré who led the Bauhaus and later, the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Founded as an experiment in collective production, TAC eventually became the largest dedicated architectural practice in the United States. In the postwar decades the firm’s headquarters formed the nucleus of a vibrant professional culture of designers gathered around Harvard Square, numbering into the hundreds — many of them working in offices indebted to the collective atmosphere first established by TAC. Sometimes referred to by its legatees as the “Cambridge School,” for members of this scene it was within the structure of practice itself, beyond its visible products, that the postwar evolution of modernism would take place.

The seven young architects who came together to form TAC with Gropius were linked by a network of overlapping personal and professional connections, formed in this shared climate of social and architectural optimism at the start of the postwar building boom. Norman (“Fletch”) Fletcher, Louis McMillen, Robert McMillan, and Benjamin Thompson had been classmates at Yale, where they talked about forming what Fletcher called the World Collaborative, an “ideal office” that would combine painting, sculpture, and architecture. John (“Chip”) Harkness had worked with Fletcher during the war (both were conscientious objectors) at SOM in New York, and later, with Jean Bodman, for the firm of Saarinen and Swanson in Michigan. Sarah Pillsbury and Bodman...
had both studied at the Cambridge School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, the first degree-granting graduate school in the United States designed specifically for women in these fields. Harkness and Pillsbury had married in 1941, Bodman and Fletcher in 1945. Committed to forming a practice together after the war, these friends decided that adding an experienced senior practitioner would help them find their way in the field and lend stature to the young firm. Coincidence and good timing intervened to bring Gropius, the very figure of Bauhaus pedagogy, on board. In him, they found an eminent practitioner as well as a highly sympathetic collaborator, one whose attitude toward the value of teamwork closely matched their own. Christened The Architects Collaborative, the goal of its founders was, in Sally Harkness’s words, nothing less than “to remake the world.”

TAC represented a model of practice distinct from other prominent team-based architecture firms of the postwar period like SOM or Caudill Rowlett Scott (CRS), though all would eventually come to be grouped together by critics under the rubric of the corporate office. The collaborative ideal at TAC meant something very different from the hierarchy represented by the work of SOM. Key to the TAC approach was the idea that teams should consist of generalists able to criticize each other as equals, rather than parceling tasks among specialized practitioners according to the managerial principles of efficiency and division of labor. This structure was formalized through a weekly meeting in which all the partners gave shared criticism of each others’ projects, Gropius among them. Working at other team-based firms meant suits and ties, a time clock, and a rigid chain of command; TAC meant corduroy and jeans, wild (occasionally scandalous) office parties, and a messy environment of shared investigation closer to an atelier than a corporate office. Embedded in this environment was Gropius himself, at once simply one among the partners and the singular figure identified with the outsize legacy of the Bauhaus. By 1966, when the first major monograph on TAC was published, the firm was the subject of intense celebrity and the object of both admiration and进行了大量的研究。
culminated the first twenty years of the firm’s work, the founding partners reiterated their sustained faith in the collectivist model, contributing essays with titles like “TAC’s Teamwork,” “Collaboration,” and “The Idea of Anonymity.”

Given Gropius’s identification with the Bauhaus pedagogy of team-based work among holistically-trained designers and its postwar translation into schools of architecture in the United States, critics chose to see TAC’s organizational model as the application of these same principles in the context of Americanized professional practice. As the chosen voice of TAC’s work in the architectural press (though significantly not the primary author of the firm’s output), Gropius wrote extensively about the positive impact that collaborative models of management could have on architectural practice. In 1952, on the verge of his retirement from Harvard to focus on the practice, Gropius reiterated the urgent need for “a closely co-operating team together with the engineer, the scientist and the builder,” in which “design, construction and economy may again become an entity — a fusion of art, science and business.”

Gropius’s argument was both ideological and pragmatic. He insisted that collaboration across disciplines would allow the architect to recover the ideal of integration represented by the pre-industrial figure of the master builder in the context of postwar industrial society. These issues of production also directly concerned questions of authorship and the self-image of the producer, issues with which Gropius was intimately familiar through his long engagement with design pedagogy. Students of architecture would have “to learn to collaborate without losing their identity,” an approach he had worked to promote through collaborative workshops at the Bauhaus and later at Harvard. The historical task of the next generation of architects, inheritors of the legacy of modernism, would be to overcome “the ideology of the past century” that “has taught us to see in the individual genius the only embodiment of true and pure art.”

Significantly, Gropius understood that this change in pedagogy would enable new attitudes towards individual self-consciousness for architects in practice, no longer taught to think in terms of singular authorship. He warned that these new team-based production would entail an inevitable confrontation with inherited expectations about the autonomy and importance of the architect, predicting that “Architects in the future will refuse to be restrained from a natural urge to take actual part in a team effort with the industry to produce buildings and their parts. The emphasis, I believe, will be more and more on the team.”

Such battles over the scope and authority of architects marked the first in a series of fundamental shifts in the legal and economic conditions of architectural practice in the United States that widened the gulf between increasingly large firms and smaller, boutique practices after the 1950s. These changes included the increased specialization of building types and the expansion of liability protection that architectural firms were required to carry, which encouraged the consolidation and centralization of practice into a small number of large firms. The 1972 agreement of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) with the Department of Justice...
to cease publishing a standard template for architects’ fees — a major stake in the AIA’s founding charter to promote the interests of US architects as a community of financially disinterested professionals — further exacerbated the need for firms to grow bigger in order to meet the demands of competition on the open market.22

By the 1970s, the economies of production represented by team-based offices had become the norm within architectural practice. A scale of operation that before the World War II had been reserved for a handful of firms — including those of Burnham and Root, McKim, Mead & White, and Albert Kahn — formed the typical structure of mainstream architectural production. This expansion of corporate practice was intimately related to the expanding oil economies of the Middle Eastern Gulf States after the World War II. Josep Lluís Sert’s US Embassy in Baghdad after 1955 and TAC’s commission to design the University of Baghdad in 1957 were among the earliest examples of what would become a growing involvement in the region by US architects. Yamasaki & Associates, CRS, Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum (HOK), Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall (DMJM), Brown Daltas and Associates, SOM, William L. Pereira & Associates, and many others would follow their lead in subsequent years. These exchanges reached their peak during the boom in crude oil prices from 1973 to 1983, a shift in clientele that formed a direct corollary to the corresponding decline in building practice in the United States.

Faced with such evident entanglements in the politics and economics of architectural practice, contemporary critics chose to abandon any real interpretation of such modes of production, disavowing the call by a previous generation of authors for an analytical framework through which such practices could be evaluated on their own terms. Surveying the legacy of the avant-garde “masters” and their postwar followers, Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co took up the dichotomy laid out by Hitchcock in 1947 only to lament a condition in which “a true and proper ‘architecture of bureaucracy’ settled in everywhere,” while the field “came to be dominated not by individual architects intent on communicating their opinions of the world but by large studios in which the tasks were parcelled out with virtual assembly-line standards.”23 Such modes of practice, for Tafuri and Dal Co, could only produce buildings “as anonymous as the architectural concerns that build them.” By the time of Transformations in Modern Architecture, a comprehensive survey of the previous two decades of production held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1979, curator Arthur Drexler could only point (following the historian Peter Collins) to the “archaeologically unclassifiable” variations of late and post-modern production on display — a selection dominated by the work of corporate firms — declaring the result to be “bewildering, profuse, overloaded, contradictory, inconsistent, largely mediocre.”24

Exhibitions like Transformations made evident the ellipsis that had come by this time to obscure such practices in architecture, exacerbated by a neo-avant-garde which framed itself as the rejection of a mainstream professional practice lacking in criticality toward its own
conditions of production. Retracing the steps that led to his PhD dissertation at the University of Cambridge, *The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture*, Peter Eisenman conspicuously located his decision to return to the academy in having been “disillusioned with practice” after working for TAC in the summer of 1959.25 So too, Robert Venturi reacted negatively to his experience in the office of Eero Saarinen & Associates in the 1950s, by then a firm of hundreds responsible for delivering an eclectic range of corporate images for a variety of clients.26 Latent in such reactions was a shared nostalgia for the ideal of the genius, with an emphasis on difficult, complex, and resistant forms of production as a deliberate counter to the smooth efficiencies represented by the distributed postwar office.

Yet, the critique of the corporate by neo-avant-garde architects and historians, far from producing resistance to the economic dominance of the profession by large-scale offices, only reinforced the widening disparity in the critical attention given to such firms versus smaller, boutique practices. Indeed this lack of attention had much the opposite effect, leaving few models by which to assess the even larger multinational offices that emerged from the 1990s onward. As these entities have increased in size and obscurity, they have become known less through any evaluation in the architectural press than by their market categorization in trade journals as “AEC” firms, providers of architecture as simply one among an immense array of building services.27 Emblematic of such scope and mega-scale is AECOM, with 45,000 employees, among which some 1,300 are architects. The firm’s acronym, rumored to refer only to the range of services it provides — Architecture, Engineering, Construction, Operation, and Maintenance — is quite literally anonymous, evacuated of any message other than the firm’s market categorization. Recognizing and reading the work of such distributed bodies today requires a renewal of the call made by Hitchcock for critical tools commensurate with the reality of this production, one which the history of corporate practices and their reception can only suggest.


AEC is the market categorization for firms that provide architecture, engineering, and construction services, as used in the yearly ranking of such offices by trade journals like *Engineering News-Record and World Architecture*. SOM would be an AE firm according to this categorization, for example, while TAC, a dedicated architecture practice with no engineers on staff, would be classified as an A firm.