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TALES OF TWO CITIES
The Administrative Facade
of Social Security

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This article presents history (stories) about a political landmark—Social Security—long topical in the discourse on societal versus individual responsibility to provide for retirement and disability. These stories are necessarily abbreviated and simplified because of their subjects: buildings—the locations of the Social Security Administration and its precursors in Washington, DC, and Baltimore. The perspectives of the built environment and of sociotechnical integration provide a distinct vantage on the program's growth into our nation's insurer; on the tensions between principle and compromise, original purpose and ultimate achievement, and neutral competence and political belief; and on the evolution of intent, preserved in unwritten artifacts, into mature program principles.

Keywords: *Social Security history; civic space; sociotechnical; Robert Ball; social insurance; hermeneutic; neutral competence*

> Since the case I want to make is essentially historical, it should be clear that arguing it conclusively is, for all intents and purposes, impossible. History is the most plastic of arts.
>
> —O. C. McSwite, p.56

Examining Social Security's history from an interpretive position does not secure our knowledge of what happened, but it can contribute to our appreciation of the past by attending to more than written records. Amos Rapoport (1990) ensconced the built environment in the study of history.

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In *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour (1988) looked past the great scientist's pronouncements to reinterpret the microbiological revolution in French medicine, demonstrating how unfamiliar technologies and requisite socialization of laboratory work among the medical community first limited, then drove the modernization of practice. I seek to enrich Social Security's history by investigating the agency's Washington and Baltimore locations and the technologies they housed as artifacts that persist, following Yanow (1995),

> to expand the consideration of the textual nature of policy enactments beyond agency language and acts to include spaces created or built in response to policy mandates. In this sense, agency buildings may be seen as telling policy "stories." (p. 408)

Not mere backdrops for human activity, physical environments and technologies may provide insights to illuminate two hitherto unrelated questions: With such a prominent beginning as a centerpiece of the New Deal, why is Social Security headquartered in Baltimore rather than Washington? And given its social welfare roots, how did Social Security ultimately become recognized as the "largest insurance institution in the world" (Altmeyer, cited in *Buildings for the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance*, 1948, p. 20)? Both questions involve distance covered over time: physical distance between two cities and semantic distance between interdependence and insurance. Exploring such disparate topics together requires a grasp of the key historical developments, both spatial and programmatic.

SOCIAL SECURITY IN HISTORY

Besides its ambivalence, the 2000 presidential election was remarkable for opening a substantial debate on Social Security. Into "a policy area where Republicans had been off balance since Roosevelt" (Schieber & Shoven, 1999, p. 185), candidate George W. Bush ventured by proposing "to allow younger workers to take some of their own money" for personal savings accounts (PBS, 2000a). Both candidates' characterizations of the

existing system—Bush's, as a policy "that says younger workers can't possibly have their own asset" (PBS, 2000a); and Al Gore's, as a "compact" that "links each American generation to the next with commitments of love and caring" (PBS, 2000b)—reflect the pay-as-you-go financial structure, which resulted from the 1939 amendments (Berkowitz, 1987a, p. 75). Since that time, payroll taxes have not built an actuarial reserve but have funded current benefits. If pay-as-you-go financing belies the "myth that people are only getting what they have paid for" (Schieber & Shoven, 1999, p. 8), it exemplifies the tendency to "ignore the temporal process in which a particular set of entitlements came into being" (Achenbaum, 1987, p. 130).

Popular inattention notwithstanding, Social Security's policy development has been amply covered by both scholars, such as Edward Berkowitz (1987a, 1987b, 1991), and participants, such as Arthur Altmeyer, known as "the founding personality—'Mr. Social Security' to a whole generation of reverent employees" (Derthick, 1979, p. 19). Martha Derthick's (1979) seminal analysis, *Policymaking for Social Security*, extended Altmeyer's (1966) history beyond the "formative years" and introduced the theme of agency activism and the term "program executives" (pp. 17-18), which husbanded Social Security's incremental growth through congressional committees and advisory councils—special bodies convened to consider eligibility, taxation, and benefit rules. Agency support for these councils, personified by Alvin David, who authored background material, alternatives, and potential recommendations, was integral to their deliberations (Ball, 1999, pp. 22, 23, 26). Jerry Cates (1983) and Carolyn Weaver (1982) revisited this activist theme but ascribed to it a political agenda beyond expansion, conservative and liberal, respectively.

In addition to Altmeyer, Wilbur Cohen and Robert Ball are most often mentioned as key policy actors. Although Cohen was last involved as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) in the Johnson administration, Ball's impact persisted through the 2000 presidential campaign, extending the prominent national role he began as staff director for the 1948 Advisory Council on Social Security in which capacity he collaborated with David on input to council deliberations (Ball, 1999, p. 22). He asserted in a political advertisement about Bush's proposal for personal accounts that "his plan simply doesn't add up and would undermine Social Security" (Democratic National Committee & Gore/Leiberman, 2000). Defending the program had not always meant attacking Republican positions. David (1997) recalled the watershed meeting with the new HEW leadership early in the Eisenhower administration in which Ball

> wowed them with things that were right up their alley . . . what should be a good Republican position, on this insurance program. This is the way that we have greater efficiency in the economy, to stabilize the workforce. We do the job at low cost. It's the right Republican position because it encourages work, as compared to public assistance. (p. 13)

Later, as former commissioner of Social Security, Ball brokered the Greenspan commission's recommendation, which resolved the deadlock between the Reagan administration and congressional Democrats and rescued the program from looming insolvency (Achenbaum, 1987, pp. 86-89; see also Light, 1985). Compromise eluded the last (1994-96) advisory council, as the traditional structure Ball advocated garnered only a plurality against a proposal for individual accounts (Ball, 1998, pp. 19-20) that presaged Bush's plan.

With due acknowledgment of the program executives' historic roles, prominent actors support and elaborate the buildings' stories to reconcile Goodsell's (1988) paradox: "Even though architectural phenomena are 'hard' and objective, their meanings are by necessity 'soft' and ambiguous" (pp. 8-9). Allusions to Altmeyer, Cohen, and Ball, along with colleagues David, John Corson, William Mitchell, and others less recognized, buttress the perspectives of technology and the built environment, which illuminate the evolution of intent, preserved in unwritten artifacts, into mature program principles. Further interpretation builds on the prosaic questions of where and how Social Security was headquartered to broach more abstract ones. Principle and compromise. Original purpose and ultimate achievement. Neutral competence and political belief.

Tackling these questions requires a historical framework. Table 1 combines the topics of policy and space. It traces the program's formative history beginning with the Social Security Act of 1935, which encompassed not only social insurance but also public assistance for the blind, needy, aged, and children. From the New Deal experiment in social interdependence, the program's reputation evolved into "the cornerstone of the Government's programs to promote the economic security of the individual," to borrow from President Eisenhower's message to Congress on Social Security (Eisenhower quoted in Altmeyer, 1966, p. 238). Dual focus on national developments and their organizational implications for the agency and related entities (e.g., advisory councils) marks the progress of these policy developments. The organizing time frame is borrowed from Cates's (1983) critical history of Social Security, which segments its periods by the prevailing philosophy of the time—liberal or conservative. An

TABLE 1
Social Security's Development From National, Organizational, and Spatial Perspectives

Time Frame	National Developments	Organizational Implications	Spatial Manifestations
Beginning era			
1934	Townsend Plan movement launched advocating stipends be paid to all starting at age 60.	Committee on Economic Security (CES) established and makes recommendations on which the Social Security Act will be based.	CES activities housed in Labor Department building.
1935	Social Security Act passed.	Three-member Social Security Board (SSB) created to administer the Act, reporting directly to the president. Arthur Altmeyer, who led the CES Technical Board, appointed to SSB.	SSB replaces CES in Labor Department building but has outgrown the space by year's end. Temporary space sought.
1936	Presidential candidate Alf Landon raises Social Security as a campaign issue.	SSB Chairman John Winant, a Republican, resigns to participate in campaign refuting his party's attacks. Will be replaced by Altmeyer (1937).	Space leased in Baltimore for central record-keeping operation in Candler Building.
1937-1938	Senator Arthur Vandenberg attacks Social Security reserve projected to reach $47 billion.	Social Security Advisory Council formed to consider changes, and recommends adding survivors' benefits, thereby reducing reserve.	Planning under way for the Social Security Board Building on Independence Avenue in Washington.
1939	Social Security Act amendments add survivors' benefits and abandon reserves, adopt "pay-as-you-go" financing.	Federal Security Agency (FSA) created. SSB and Chairman Altmeyer now report to FSA Administrator Paul McNutt, not the president.	Cornerstone laid for SSB Building.

| 1940-1941 | Sustained pressure for uniform old-age pension ("baby Townsend Plan") to replace contributory Social Security. | Administrator McNutt scheduled to deliver a speech advocating uniform old-age pensions. SSB-drafted substitute is approved by White House, given to McNutt just before he speaks. | SSB Building constructed. Mural competition held based on Altmeyer's statement "The Meaning of Social Security." |

Middle era

| 1942-1945 | Second World War displaces focus on social programs, including consideration of changes to Social Security. | John Corson, director of Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (BOASI), leaves for wartime assignment in Bureau of Employment Security. Later, declines McNutt's offer to head the U.S. Employment Service. Finds more autonomy upon return to BOASI (1943). | BOASI headquarters moves to Baltimore (1942) where central operations remain after New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia sites considered. |

Late era

| 1946-1948 | Republican-led 80th Congress restricts eligibility for Social Security coverage. | Reorganization Plan No. 2 replaces SSB with the Social Security Administration (SSA) led by Altmeyer and his deputy, William Mitchell. | SSB Building renamed Federal Security Building. |
| 1949-1951 | 1950 amendments extend coverage to self-employed, domestic, and farm workers. For the first time, Old-Age Insurance recipients outnumber Old-Age Assistance recipients. | Advisory Council on Social Security, with Robert Ball as staff director (during a break in his SSA service), produces its recommendation, the basis for the 1950 amendments, reversing recent restrictive trend. | Postwar attempts to construct new BOASI building continue. Return of headquarters staff to Washington only considered. |

(continued)

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TABLE 1 (continued)

Time Frame	National Developments	Organizational Implications	Spatial Manifestations
1952-1953	Eisenhower elected. Rep. Carl Curtis holds hearings to expose nature of Social Security (i.e., lack of an insurance reserve). Altmeyer testifies under subpoena.	Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) created with responsibility for Social Security replacing FSA. Proposal to "blanket in" noncovered elderly (without contribution) pushed by several advisors to HEW Secretary Hobby. Altmeyer's position eliminated.	Permanent SSA headquarters sites explored. Washington versus Baltimore location becomes public controversy.
1954	Eisenhower issues message to Congress on Social Security calling it the "cornerstone of the Government's programs to promote the economic security of the individual."	Ball receives HEW Distinguished Service Award in recognition of his efforts as Acting Director of BOASI early in Eisenhower administration. "He and the rest of us were on the inside after that," according to SSA's David.	Woodlawn chosen. Maryland Congressman, Rep. Samuel Friedel, blocks HEW attempt to move BOASI headquarters staff to Washington with budget rider.
Consensus era			
1955-1960	Social Security Act amended to add disability coverage.	Increasing autonomy of SSA commissioners as HEW secretaries increasingly defer on operational and policy issues.	SSA Woodlawn complex built; operations begin.

NOTE: The national and organizational summaries include many events associated with policy milestones and reported in multiple sources: Derthick (1979), Berkowitz (1991), and Altmeyer (1966). Except for the creation of the Social Security Board (McKinley & Frase, 1970, pp. 12, 18), events from 1934 to 1935 appear in Berkowitz (1991): Townsend Plan movement (p. 19), the Committee on Economic Security establishment (pp. 15-16), and Social Security passage (p. 13). Berkowitz's (1987a) account of the first advisory council on Social Security described the 1936 to 1939 developments leading to (pp. 58-61) and resulting from (pp. 72-73) the council. Altmeyer provided details on the Federal Security Agency's (FSA) establishment (p. 117), FSA

Administrator McNutt's speech rewrite (pp. 122-123), FSA reorganization (p. 159), and replacement by Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) including abolishment of Altmeyer's position (pp. 215-221). This source also provided details of the Curtis hearings (Altmeyer, 1966, pp. 224-235) and Eisenhower's declaration on Social Security (Altmeyer, 1966, p. 238). The enduring appeal of universal old-age pensions on the threshold of World War II is reported in the following major sources: Derthick, 1979, pp. 167-168; Berkowitz, 1991, pp. 45-46; and Altmeyer, 1966, pp. 122-124. Its subsidence during the war is best described by Berkowitz (1991, pp. 50-52), as is the preeminence of old-age insurance after 1950 (1991, pp. 56-64). Corson's war-time activities are taken from his oral history (1967, pp. 45-46, 51-52). Derthick provided coverage of most of the remaining developments: the 1948 Advisory Council as well as its impact and Ball's role (pp. 97, 297-300), the amendments of 1948 and 1950 (p. 430), disability-related amendments (pp. 300-315), and the autonomy of Social Security Administration Commissioners (pp. 70-72). The significance of Ball's receipt of the HEW Distinguished Service Award was interpreted by David (1997), although the date is established from a recap of Ball's career originally published in the February 1973 issue of *OASIS*, retrieved January 27, 2002, from the World Wide Web: http://www.ssa.gov/ history/balloasis.html. Many of the events under the heading Spatial Manifestations appear within the text or notes. Those not referenced within include location in Labor Department of the Committee on Economic Security and initially of Social Security Board (SSB; McKinley & Frase, 1970, p. 25), space demands at the end of 1935 (Clearman, 1935), lease of Candler Building space (McKinley & Frase, 1970, p. 33), SSB Building planning references—many in the National Archives (e.g., Mitchell's [1938] memorandum to Frank Bane on space allocation, renaming of the SSB Building [Reynolds, 1947], site exploration and Woodlawn selection in Ball's "Location of New Bureau Building," (1953), and in "Building site announced; headquarters staff moves to Washington in Aug" (*OASIS*, 1954). The author observed the date on the Cohen Building/SSB Building's cornerstone during a July 1999 visit.

additional period has been added to Cates's time frame to capture the period from 1955 to 1960 when the image that Social Security projected was as "American as apple pie, as sophisticated as a dry martini, as solid as the best-run insurance company" (Berkowitz, 1991, p. 65). By the end of the study period, Social Security's permanent headquarters was occupied and operational, its political position was solidified by the incoming Democratic administration, and the start of Ball's decade-long tenure as commissioner lay just over the horizon. Beyond loomed the fundamental changes due to added responsibilities, first for Medicare and then for Supplemental Security Income. Treatment of these challenges and controversies (Derthick, 1987, 1990) enriches the history of Social Security; however, I conclude in what Derthick (1987) termed the "agency's golden era" (p. 102).

WASHINGTON

As a visitor to the nation's capital navigates its broad arteries and experiences the great houses of government that line Pennsylvania, Constitution, and Independence Avenues, the cabinet departments and larger agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Customs Service, and Internal Revenue Service, are obvious by their monumental structures. There is an anomaly; the Social Security Administration is nowhere evident. Its headquarters is located some 50 miles away on the outskirts of Baltimore where the stories begin.

BALTIMORE

They call it Altmeyer Building, tallest of the Woodlawn buildings. A large, low building is attached at the rear. These were first; others followed. Thousands worked in the low building, operating special machinery, as well as computers, even then, in the sixties. The inscription carved in the lobby of the tall building dedicates it to Arthur Altmeyer. It was called the Administration Building when it was new, and the lobby was used for exhibits. The lobby also offered a good view of the circular drive in front, with the flagpole and a garden space in the center. Flowers were kept constantly blooming in the garden space. The walkways and courtyards made it pleasant to work there, a great improvement over the places they had been before.[1]

This article follows the hermeneutic stance of Yanow (1995) and Goodsell (1988), self-consciously falling short of the scientific standard

endorsed by Rapoport (1990) for interpretation of the designers' and builders' intent through environment-behavior studies. Yanow adds to the physical attributes—"siting, materials, and décor"—that contribute to interpretive analysis of physical space, consideration of the "values, beliefs, and feelings of those who created them" (pp. 408-410). The Woodlawn headquarters is sufficiently contemporary to allow the impressions of the subsequent interpreter to be augmented through the reflections of Ball, who substantially influenced the buildings' design and construction. Even though administered by the General Services Administration (GSA), space was financed out of the old-age and survivors insurance trust fund (Reynolds cited in *Buildings for the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance*, 1948, p. 6). Ball was the deputy director of the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (BOASI), which was the precursor to the Social Security Administration (SSA)—the insurance program became the only responsibility of SSA in 1963 (Derthick, 1979, p. 18n). He was involved

> from the big concept to every detail . . . [and] made all the final decisions that were effected and that were later approved, more or less *pro forma*, at the actual design approval stage by GSA. . . . The material and color of the seats in the auditorium, of the curtain in the auditorium, of the bricks that would show on the outside of the building. (Ball, 1999, p. 3)

Although the color of the seats signifies little, not so the conspicuous concern for the auditorium so indicative of the organization's character. Ball recalled "rather frequent meetings. The people actually present within the auditorium would be selected to represent all parts of the organization, but then the program would be piped everywhere," emphasizing the involvement and coordination of the entire organization of about 10,000 people (Ball, 1999, p. 6).

Coming together, remembered Jack Futterman (1997b), who later took responsibility for Woodlawn as part of his overall administrative duties,

> was a happy event. . . . The vast majority of people were delighted with their new working situation, their cafeteria, the whole ambiance of the campus and also the fact that the building was for us. It increased the stature . . . [moving] from a number of different offices, which were helter skelter, various kinds of leftovers from commercial use that we occupied, to a building built especially for us. (p. 19)

Woodlawn brought not just sense of community but also efficiency of administration, advanced, for example, by "what amounted to a

dumbwaiter" connecting the top suite with the division directors' offices "stacked in a line going up this tall building" to expedite paperwork (Ball, 1999, p. 3). Another example was the prototypical facsimile capability that transmitted document images between the commissioner's Baltimore and Washington offices decades prior to its general availability (Ball, 1999, p. 9).

Technology was also prominent in the adjacent operational building where a major computer installation supplanted much of the mechanical processing that Social Security had pioneered a generation earlier, distinguished from the ten-story headquarters building by height (Ball, 1999, pp. 3-4), traditionally signaling importance (Rapoport, 1982, p. 107). Overall, the features described create the impression of an environment "designed primarily for use" and are distinguished by the absence of symbolism, except for a "tribute to the person who was most influential in the very early stages of Social Security, Arthur Altmeyer," added after his death (Ball, 1999, pp. 4, 6). As an artifact of the institutional identity of Social Security, the photograph of Altmeyer in the foreground of the building that bears his name (see Figure 1) achieves nearly everything of which the medium is capable. The straightforward, expressionless gaze recalls the demeanor of the man who idealized an absence of public image: "a successful administrator ought to be about as interesting as spinach—cold spinach at that. That ought to be the idea. . . . I don't think you'll find anything colorful in my whole career" (Altmeyer, 1967, p. 192). The structure stands in the background like a shadow cast by the man, silently confirming the ideal of anonymous, competent performance. This relationship may be illusory; Altmeyer left Social Security before the permanent headquarters was built. Perhaps the spare, unadorned look of the Altmeyer Building merely reflects its era. Loeffler's (1998) study of diplomatic architecture characterized the modernist style with its rejection of aristocratic flourishes as emblematic of American democracy at the time. Whatever explanation is accepted for the look of the building, its location outside of Washington remains a puzzle.

Even if coincidental, it is ironic that the physical separation of Social Security should be reinforced by its administrative autonomy as an independent agency. Originally the Social Security Board (the Board) reported to President Roosevelt, and, in 1995, the Social Security Administration was separated from HEW—as well as the fiscal partition connoted by candidate Gore's proposal for a budgetary "lock box" for Social Security trust funds (PBS, 2000a). Studies have recognized proximity as a factor in

Figure 1:   Arthur Altmeyer in Front of the Administration Building (So-Called at That Time) in Woodlawn, Maryland
SOURCE: In the Social Security Archives, Woodlawn, Maryland: Social Security Administration.
NOTE: After Altmeyer's death, the building was renamed in his honor.

organizational relationships, for example, linking the initial location of the first four departments near the White House with their intentional identification as *executive* agencies (Sharbel, Moffit, Leimer, Shane, & Goodsell, 1998, p. 198). Derthick (1979) concluded, based on Mitchell's oral history, that independence sought from political influence, coupled with the initially inadvertent (because of New Deal Washington's space shortage) location of the huge record-keeping operation in Baltimore, drove the agency's abandonment of the nation's capital (pp. 35-36).[2] According to Mitchell (1967), a long-time Altmeyer deputy and the Social Security Commissioner prior to Ball, this independence exacted a cost— separation of the need-based and earnings-based entitlement programs:

> Being away from Washington, that activity [BOASI] tended to assume a greater degree of independence and to detach itself from the other programs and aspects of social security. . . . To separate them means that a spirit of competition develops between them, and a feeling of prejudice develops . . .

> people in the insurance programs tend to look down on the people in the assistance programs because the assistance programs are based on need. . . . So space was a very important matter . . . from the standpoint of its implications for the program. (pp. 42-44)

Corson (1967), director of BOASI, echoed the criticality of the relocation: "The separation, the movement to Baltimore, tended to make us more autonomous" (p. 46). This autonomy insulated his organization from the Federal Security Agency, interposed between the Board and the president in 1939, and its first administrator, Paul McNutt—sources of unwelcome influence:

> In those early days when the Federal Security Agency was first set up, we found it a handicapping problem. We mistrusted, or we distrusted, Paul McNutt. When he first came in, we were satisfied that he was a politician and he was going to use our office for political ends, and we lacked confidence in him. (Corson, 1967, p. 48)

These "political ends" surfaced in McNutt's advocacy of universal old-age pensions, thwarted by a Board maneuver because of the threat posed to Social Security's contributory essence.[3]

The usual tensions between agency autonomy and departmental prerogative fail to account for Corson's pledge to "make this Bureau like the Swiss nation" (p. 18), so memorable to David (1997), "make it so strong that nobody will want to attack it" (p. 18). Corson had recourse to this strength when he resisted politically motivated hiring supported by McNutt, who ordered his dismissal; Altmeyer refused (Corson, 1967, pp. 49-51). The principle of neutral competence predated the Federal Security Agency. Maurine Mulliner (1967), who started "in the Labor Department building sitting on a packing box" (p. 145), remembered how a stand by Board Executive Director Frank Bane, his salary cut in retaliation for a thwarted patronage appointment through an appropriation amendment at the behest of Senator Carter Glass,

> had a wonderful effect on the whole organization. It does something fine for a staff when they see the key people in an organization live up to the fine words they say about high standards. . . . Standards for the Social Security program that have been unknowingly influencing the organization all through the years. (pp. 23-25)

Ball credited his predecessors, particularly Altmeyer and Corson, for establishing the values he "inherited":

a career service based on merit, with an emphasis on research, emphasis upon service to the public, the importance of a total spirit of being a public service. (Ball, 1999, p. 9)

However motivated, the BOASI's exodus from Washington and the dozen-year search that culminated in the Woodlawn site selection attended circumstances—the Second World War's outbreak foremost. Emergency military preparations displaced prewar priorities, prompting the president's decision that certain civilian agencies, including the BOASI, could not occupy Washington locations (Smith, 1941). The just-completed headquarters, custom built for Social Security's accounting operations— its floors reinforced and inlaid with cables and electrical grid for the machinery (Mitchell, 1967, p. 42; Mulliner, 1967, p. 151)—was assigned instead to the War Production Board (Reynolds, cited in *Buildings for the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance*, 1948, p. 6). The agency fended off relocation to Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago.[4] Then, its own *decentralization* initiative cleared BOASI staff from the nation's capital—claims processors dispersed to other major cities and its headquarters of fewer than 500 staff (presumably a manageable number to situate, even in war-swollen Washington) transferred to Baltimore (Pogge, 1942a, 1942b)—uniting national operations, albeit in separate buildings, within that city where records had been kept since 1936 while awaiting construction of the Washington facility. This was despite the agency's earlier insistence that leaving Washington (for Chicago) "would disrupt essential contacts between the top personnel of the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance with top personnel within the Federal Security Agency and in other Governmental agencies" (Altmeyer, 1942, p. 2).

Prime consideration for its programmatic and operational cohesion thus set the insurance program apart. After the war, Altmeyer reaffirmed accounting operations' centrality by rebutting the "misconception" of these activities as factory-like (Altmeyer, 1946), on which basis President Truman's order on resituating postwar Washington was interpreted to exclude them. Denied its designated prewar site, ensuing efforts to build the BOASI headquarters contemplated administrative and operational functions under one roof ("Advantages in Operating Efficiency of Location in Newly Constructed Building," enclosed in Collins, 1947). By the time transferring only the headquarters staff from Baltimore was considered (Mitchell, 1950), the attempt to reclaim SSA's place in the nation's capital attracted media attention (e.g., Swanson, 1953), generated "a lot of pulling and hauling" politically (Wynkoop, 1973, p. 28), and ultimately succumbed to a 1954 appropriation "rider" attached by Maryland

Congressman Samuel Friedel preventing expenditures for the move to Washington (Christgau, 1954).

The choice of internal cohesion over programmatic synergy (i.e., with other programs issuing from the Social Security Act) may exemplify the influence of what Wamsley and Zald (1972) termed the *internal economy*,

> in which the technological aspects (in a broad sense) of the organization are concentrated, where instrumental and efficiency norms take precedence over legitimacy . . . [and] pursuit of efficiency may require alteration of major characteristics or behavior of an organization, a possibility that links this concern of internal economy very closely to internal and external political processes and structures. (p. 72)

The political processes that accompanied Social Security's metamorphosis from New Deal creation that "may have had a radical ring to it" to centrist program that "barely stirs a ripple" (Wamsley & Zald, 1972, p. 38n) featured more redistributive alternatives all along until the proposal to *blanket in* all seniors was rejected in the initial years of the Eisenhower administration. This later, conservative cousin of the Townsend Plan was designed to undermine Social Security by upsetting its financial balance with millions of additional beneficiaries, thus demonstrating its "true" cost (Derthick, 1979, p. 148). Mark Leff's (1987) meta-analysis of the program's histories supplied a theme for these political currents:

> American old-age insurance thus spent its youth not in the cozy womb of supportive conservative free-market values but in an environment that challenged its inadequacies. Sometimes those pressures, ironically, pushed the program toward a self-protective conservatism; the sanctification of fiscal soundness and insurance principles was partly designed to block proposals for excessive pensions from being grafted onto the program. (pp. 42-43)

Derthick (1979) linked control over its destiny to the "obstacles to executive supervision" presented by Social Security, including "the reputation of its leaders for exceptional administrative competence" (p. 36). The twin defenses of technical competence in its internal economy and the insurance imagery in its external economy appear to have insulated Social Security from an often hostile political environment.

Can it be that the organizational membrane separating internal and external economies is porous, permitting the commingling of these elements? As an epoxy hardens by exposure to an activating agent, the apolitically competent culture may have solidified through continual comparison with insurance companies—whose representatives formed a

"constant stream" of visitors invited to witness the operational efficiency (Altmeyer, cited in *Buildings for Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance*, 1948, p. 21). Analyzing the program's later stumbles (beyond the period of this study), Derthick uncovered a possible consequence of such organizational rigidity. With the new responsibility for Supplemental Security Income, a need-based program, Social Security was "forced to compromise its own commitment to nationwide uniformity of administration and thus to sacrifice something of its essential character" (Derthick, 1990, p. 31), attesting to the interdependence of these internal and external pillars and the fallacy of "an exaggerated perception of the extent to which the culture and ideology of the organization shape the task, rather than vice versa" (Derthick, 1990, p. 186). The values that Ball saw as his predecessors' legacy and credited for much of his success clearly endured, yet also may have evolved over time. To examine the values of Social Security from an alternate, prospective view involves visiting other buildings.

WASHINGTON

> They call it Cohen Building. Facing its front entrance, the Capitol is visible to the left. The Washington Monument rises to the right. Inside, plaques on opposite walls commemorate its naming. One honors Wilbur Cohen, whose biography is entitled *Mr. Social Security;* the other recalls the first name, Social Security Board Building. The locked doors permit a glimpse of these inscriptions, also the murals in the lobby, with their scenes of enterprise, cooperation, and prosperity. Recently restored using a seaweed compound, they are surprisingly vivid seen from the inside. But few have the opportunity. They enter at the rear where the metal detectors are operated and work for Voice of America, not Social Security.[5]

The building created to house Social Security provides a grand vista with over 500 frontage feet on Independence Avenue overlooking the Mall. To meet restrictions on height and in keeping with the look of the Federal buildings constructed during this time (e.g., Department of Justice; see Scott & Lee, 1993, p. 174), classical elements of an assertive facade combine with modernist elements of simplicity. The impression created by the building is of massive scale and also of serious purpose, owing to its graven symbolism: relief sculptures above the doorways reflecting themes of care, interdependence, and security. The structure's character was appreciated by the Board who chose for Social Security to be headquartered there rather than at the less "monumental" Railroad Retirement Building located across C Street (Mitchell, 1938).
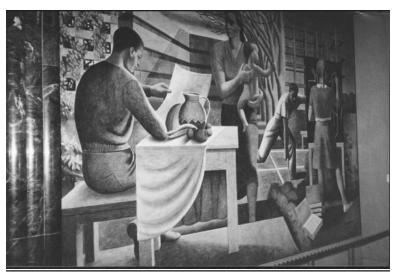
Figure 2: *The Security of the People.*
NOTE: This mural was painted by Seymour Fogel (1942) in the lobby of the Cohen Building (then known as the Social Security Board Building) located on Independence Avenue.

The visitor's impression of the Cohen Building, with its sculptures and murals by Depression-era artists, may be influenced by the period, as Ball believed, reflecting on any comparison made with the current headquarters:

> As far as interpretation goes, it says more about the dates those two build-ings were conceived than it does about a difference of policy or intention related to the program. I don't think that you can really derive conclusions about differences in attitudes or values or anything else from the design of those two buildings. (Ball, 1999, pp. 1-2)

Although strong evidence, Ball's dismissal of themes represented on the walls of a building the organization never inhabited may also be attrib-uted to his intuitive feel for Social Security's values, which he helped shape through a life's work. Values that the Cohen Building conveys may well seem irrelevant, even contradictory to personal experience. Con-sidering the mnemonic function of the environment, however, such visual cues have the capacity to evoke reaction and to "remind people of the behavior expected of them" (Rapoport, 1982, p. 80). Taking this position provokes the question: Would single-minded administrative efficiency have been performed within this imposing structure, with vivid images of

interdependence and mutual assistance sculpted above its doors and painted in its lobbies? Or would these symbols have accompanied a program that was more compassionate, less actuarial? Any suggestion that abandoning its first headquarters, laden with symbolism, caused a difference in how the organization viewed itself or its purpose is just speculation. Nevertheless, these symbols represent Altmeyer's legacy as truly as the Woodlawn building that commemorates his service, apparently so different in character. An excerpt from his statement on the "Meaning of Social Security," featured in the competition announcement for the murals, established their provenance:

> There is nothing new in this reliance upon both individual effort and joint action. No one man alone could have explored the frontier; but many men, working together through the years, opened up a continent. No one community alone could have founded the nation; but many communities, working together through the years, built a nation not only politically united but socially and economically integrated as well. No one man, no one family, and no one community alone can set up defences against nationwide risks; but national action can–and is–rebuilding and strengthening the foundations of security. (Altmeyer, 1940, p. 7)

BALTIMORE

> They call it Candler Building. Warehousing and manufacturing concerns occupied it. And Social Security, for twenty-five years. They brought new machines—collators and bursters to handle the paper—unlike the vats, dies, and presses that were there already. File cabinets went up to the ceilings. Ladders were needed for the top drawers. People read about Candler in the newspapers. No one read about rickety elevators, long lines to the bathrooms, or the stink of "Witches' Brew" from the pharmacy downstairs. But they made do: a man sold sandwiches, bologna or cheese. They chased the vermin that gnawed the punched cards and crushed the bugs, which snapped. They remembered these things and the hard work, too, in their stories, told with pride.[6]

The passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 marked a social policy milestone, enacting the collective community signified by the artists who would decorate the Cohen Building while at the same time presenting the operational problem of maintaining 30 million accounts and 120 million annual payroll postings that Elwood Way, the Records Division chief, projected would be required (Way, 1936). The immediacy of the looming milestone—the assignment of Social Security numbers and creation of

Figure 3: *The Wealth of a Nation*.
NOTE: Another Seymour Fogel mural (1942) in the Cohen Building's lobby. Fogel's murals were painted to express the meaning of Social Security.

accounts nationwide by the end of 1936—concentrated attention on the resources needed to accomplish this initial task. A huge, makeshift repository of employee earnings information was established within the Candler Building, a warehouse facility on the Baltimore waterfront (McKinley & Frase, 1970, pp. 29, 33). The record-keeping function, in spite of its laborious nature and unglamorous surroundings, received positive initial newspaper reporting of which Social Security Board leaders took notice (McKinley & Frase, 1970, p. 376n). When the first advisory council was considering changes to the Social Security Act, a skeptical member inspected the Baltimore operation where his personal records were located and presented within minutes (Berkowitz, 1987a, pp. 64-65). The regular visits by private insurance companies to inspect the paper handling methods are noted above.

Figure 4:   The Candler Building
SOURCE: In the Social Security Archives, Woodlawn, Maryland: Social Security Administration.
NOTE: Social Security leased space on the Baltimore waterfront to house the Accounting Operations Division from 1936 to 1960. This organization performed the record-keeping for more than 100 million individuals and maintained their files in this building.

In a sense, the processes, mechanical devices, and storage and retrieval methodologies of the record-keeping activity became constituencies that demanded the organization's attention. Way recalled visiting "big apartment buildings, vacant factory buildings . . . several other places we thought might be remodeled or changed" (Way, 1973, p. 61) before the Board decided on the Candler Building, which had adequate space and sufficiently strong floors to support the staff, machinery, and records. As the record-keeping proficiency grew, so did the investment in how the job was performed. Law and Bijker (1992) viewed the persisting codependence between human and technological components of organizations as sociotechnical phenomena defined as "how it is that people and machines work together, how they shape one another, how they hold each other in place" (p. 306). Way (1973) described his concept thus:

> I came on the job at Social Security with the following basic features quite firmly in mind. Employee and employer account numbers, an index to each. . . . A register of accounts established [and] . . . a number and a place for cross references in case we had to make notations. (pp. 37-38)

He recalled that the core operational elements changed little "up to the time that electronic data processing came in" (Way, 1973, p. 95). Looking back, Ball assigned technology a key role in establishing the program by making possible the scale of record handling:

> Social Security had to adapt to what was available for a massive recordkeeping operation in order to make benefits dependent upon lifetime earnings. The punch card and accompanying machinery, and later computers, were necessary to the highly individual wage records that are fundamental to the Social Security statute. (Personal communication, August 15, 2001)

These operational tenets became more than ideas; mechanical and procedural setup followed. Futterman (1997a), eventually Ball's deputy, recalled details of his first Social Security job as a record coder at Candler: how the "Soundex" system translated names into a file locator key (p. 3); how "Flexoline" files physically sequenced the ever-expanding index in which staff "could find most people's records in seconds" (pp. 4-5); and how some work was organized not only for division of labor but for segregation of work teams.

> If you stayed behind at night, on that particular floor where the Flexoline Files were, you'd see these lights coming down from the ceiling, and a black person working on them with a lot of these strips, interfiling. . . . Some of whom were graduates of black colleges. And some of the supervisors were people of that kind of education, well-qualified to do the same kind of work that we did. (Futterman, 1997a, pp. 17-18)

Synchronizing the needs of hundreds of gadgets, thousands of people, and millions of records on a few floors of an improvised facility defined Social Security's operational essence and pushed Candler's physical limits. Queues of workers standing in line for restroom breaks—exacerbated by the need to subdivide existing toilets to separate gender and race (Futterman, 1997a, p. 18)—were a glaring shortcoming, finally prompting Congress to authorize acquisition of a headquarters for the BOASI after the agency "had tried every year for six or seven years" without success (Wynkoop, 1973, p. 27). Candler was a prime consideration in these abortive relocation attempts, as Way planned revising its operations to take advantage of a more accommodating site—for example, allowing extra distance between floors for the Flexoline files to be installed underneath. Even the files themselves merited consideration, as Way determined that the movement of "18,000 filing cabinets" would require too

much time given Candler's elevators (Way, 1973, pp. 112-113). Altmeyer had argued similarly at the start of the war that moving the BOASI to Chicago was impractical and cost-prohibitive given the size of Candler's files and equipment (Altmeyer, 1942), although he could not have foreseen how long this immobility would persist.

The relationship between organizations and the technologies that underlie their core processes has served as the traditional focus for technological analysis, classically based on Thompson's (1967) typology (for an application to public agencies, see Wamsley & Zald, 1972). In contrast, the sociotechnical framework describes technologies not as static attributes but as active participants along with their human counterparts, maintaining that to "balance our accounts of society, we simply have to turn our exclusive attention away from humans and look also at non-humans. Here they are, the hidden and despised social masses who make up our morality" (Latour, 1992, pp. 225-226). An example of these "hidden" actors and their "morality" is the seat belt–ignition interlock, which enforces driver safety.

The power of nonhuman technologies as actors engaged in organizations' work casts the significance for Social Security of the Candler operations in a different light. To the extent that the collators and bursters—devices invented for Candler that sorted punched cards and separated continuous forms, respectively (Futterman, 1997a, pp. 8-11)—performed the record-keeping process side by side with International Business Machines' engineers (McKinley & Frase, 1970, p. 375) and agency employees, this machinery shaped Social Security. The scale required for Woodlawn to accommodate thousands of employees perpetuated this impact as did the attention there to integrated communications. In each instance, in Cohen Building's large workspaces and special floors, in postwar attempts to replicate that building elsewhere, and, ultimately, at Woodlawn, the Candler-based component of its activities constrained the scale and design of Social Security's headquarters. Less conspicuous than the murals, artifacts of the mass record-keeping technologies—latent and forgotten under Cohen Building's floors and gone from Candler Building—mark organizational traits arguably as persistent as the values described by Ball.

Social technologies, through devices that are semantic and procedural rather than mechanical, also perform organizations' work and persist in their impact. Analyzing a budgeting system introduced to control English health care costs, Pinch, Ashmore, and Mulkay (1992) find sociotechnical effects from the new concepts and terminology, which must be mastered

and interpreted in a compatible way to achieve the desired utility. Social Security's definitions and computations, more complex with each successive change to program rules, required similar mastery. Berkowitz (1987b) quoted Ball's compliment to Robert Myers, long-time chief actuary, distinguishing him among the leadership cadre present at the Social Security 50th anniversary celebration as "the only one of the three [Myers, Ball, and Cohen] who still knew how to calculate a benefit" (p. 8). This praise illustrates how facility with specific program details marked this generation of the agency's management resulting from both their extraordinary tenure, often beginning in entry-level positions (Futterman being just one example), and the incremental evolution of policy change (Derthick, 1979, pp. 19, 25). Ball's command of programmatic details, more than 20 years after being commissioner, earned the respect of his adversaries on the 1994-1996 Council,[7] who witnessed his deft advocacy: "No one has ever accused Bob Ball of being a poor tactician" (Schieber & Shoven, 1999, p. 280). As Ball demonstrated from 1948 on (debatably from 1994 to 1996), the semantic framework of eligibility requirements, earnings calculations, and benefit levels endured, underpinning the "gradualism" that served as a de facto program philosophy (Derthick, 1979, p. 25).

Thus, the technological perspective offers a thread of consistency that traces the institutional maturity gained from Candler to Woodlawn as plainly as value-based interpretation. Candler's legacy grounds the organization in the practical language of hands-on achievement, but it also defines and constrains its thinking based on familiar methods and tools. This continuity may explain why Way's operational grammar described Social Security's record-keeping for a generation and why Ball echoed the "tradition of the current Social Security program" in developing solutions (e.g., expanded eligibility) to address recent issues (Ball, 1998, pp. 8-9). The inference of practiced responses serves not to exclude principle, calculation, or belief but merely to suggest solely that rote behavior explains a portion of the program's great achievement in its prime. The rationale of an organization trained nicely, but taught simply, may explain subsequent stumbles as its mission changed.

REFLECTION

To trace historical developments through the built environment and the technologies that it houses is to show that these perspectives create self-consciously interpretative history. The advantages derived from such an

approach are the humility and the possibilities engendered. Humility promises further dialogue, because nothing is proved, being so obviously dependent on personal perspective. One interpretation relates its location outside the nation's capital to Social Security's programmatic independence from the other titles of the founding Act, thereby reflecting a consistent distinction between need-based and contributory entitlement. Application of the twin themes of apolitical, technical competence and the "program concept of benefits earned by work" (Ball, 1999, p. 9), perpetuated under the rubric of insurance, lent Social Security its singular identity: "the Marine Corps of the domestic civil service—elite and invincible" (Derthick, 1990, p. 47). The notion that Social Security stood apart from the rest of the government physically for the same reasons that it stood apart culturally and programmatically is a personal one. Alternate interpretations abound: that the agency's location in Baltimore resulted from a combination of wartime exigency and local (Maryland) political considerations; that the paintings and sculptures in a never-occupied building simply mark the times; that buildings, being mute, explain nothing. Do these contending realities not enrich rather than diminish our history? This premise distinguishes the hermeneutic stance, expanding the frontier of understanding with each interpretive cycle, from reductionist tendencies toward finite explanations. A further source of humility is the current dearth of rigorous methodology—Rapoport's (1990) expressed hopes for more scientific environment-behavior studies and Yanow's (2000) desires for more systematic interpretive analysis notwithstanding—opening the way for new techniques to be tried without fear of heterodoxy.

The second advantage, of possibilities, derives from the absence of hard facts in a methodology that precludes finality. Given the inability and unwillingness to stipulate what actually happened and what represents historical fact, there is freedom to pose alternate story lines. Experiencing buildings as testaments to the past prompts reflection about accomplishments achieved and, perhaps, opportunities lost. Candler Building conjures images of accomplishment due, paradoxically, to the palpable prospect of failure in a structure so inconvenient, ungainly, and ill-suited to its purpose. The fortunes of an orphaned program (its New Deal legacy lost to war) maturing in a hardscrabble environment and succeeding through patient, unglamorous effort have obvious parallels to much of what government is asked to do, presenting a parable with application to the current climate of diminishing means and low respect.

Conversely, to experience the Cohen Building as symbolic of the grand original promise of the Social Security Act—imperfectly achieved by its

split into social insurance that is earned and welfare that is not—is to revisit the moment when this new program, prized progeny of the New Deal and lavished with a headquarters comporting with its station and high purpose, stood on the threshold of great achievement. This Independence Avenue memorial to the founding idealism, with its obscure relics of Social Security, ratifies a purpose of public buildings often overlooked: to safeguard the envisioned aims of our predecessors who convey their ideals and hopes—set in stone, steel, and glass—reminding us of what was thought possible. So, simple narratives about buildings and how they came to stand for Social Security may yield fresh insights into what the program represents, and what it was meant to represent.

NOTES

1. Impressions of the Altmeyer Building were obtained by personal inspection (June 1999) and augmented from the interview with Ball (1999) as well as from the oral history of Futterman (1997b).

2. Derthick reported Altmeyer's rationale, related to Mitchell "confidentially," that away from the influence of the Washington political environment and the Federal Security Agency "the bureau would have a much better opportunity to develop soundly and objectively" (Mitchell, quoted in Derthick, 1979, p. 36). Derthick also reported that Altmeyer came to regret his decision. Altmeyer's congressional testimony did not address the relocation other than in the context of wartime exigency. Both his program history (1966) and oral history interview (1967) are silent on the topic. This silence is plausibly attributable to a concern for administrative discretion, noted by the agency's first historian whose efforts to capture events as they occurred were frustrated by the edited minutes of Board proceedings, and Altmeyer's particular reticence, which finally discouraged him from "trying to pump from a blocked well" (McKinley & Frase, 1970, pp. xvi-xvii). The only evidence in the contemporaneous record is an informal note from L. H. Lawson (1941) to Mitchell relating Corson's report of his meeting with Altmeyer, who (according to Corson) "was not opposing a moving to Baltimore."

3. Derthick cited the support by Federal Security Administrator McNutt for uniform old-age pensions to illustrate the enduring political strength of Townsend-like approaches on the verge of the Second World War (Derthick, 1979, p. 168). McNutt, nominal superior to the SSB, was to give a speech advancing his own presidential ambitions (prior to Roosevelt's announcement seeking a third term) that undercut the program's contributory principles. Advance notice of the speech obtained by SSB staff enabled Altmeyer to contact the White House, which authorized an alternate speech handed to McNutt minutes before he was to speak (Altmeyer, 1966, pp. 122-123).

4. Altmeyer (1942) weighed in personally against the BOASI's permanent move to Chicago, basing his opposition, in part, on the logistical problems of transferring files and machinery. There is also record of prior abortive relocations of all or part of the bureau to New York (Michael J. Shortley to Arthur J. Altmeyer, February 26, 1942) and Philadelphia

(W. L. Mitchell to Arthur J. Altmeyer, December 22, 1941). The uncertainty of this period may best be captured by an anonymous wit's "Bulletin," announcing the BOASI's location had been narrowed "down to three places . . . 1. The East Coast 2. The West Coast 3. The Interior" (O. C. Pogge to Mr. Altmeyer, April 8, 1942, "Bulletin" [Attachment]). All references for this note are in File 347.2, Correspondence of the Executive Director and Chairman, Social Security Board, and Commissioner, Social Security Administration (1941-1948).

5. Impressions of the Cohen Building were obtained by personal inspection (July 1999 and December 1999), augmented by a walking tour with the General Services Administration Facility Manager, E. A. Poe, who furnished details on the refurbishment of the murals. Berkowitz's biography (1995) of Cohen does not convey the mantle of "Mr. Social Security" unanimously, having previously been applied to Altmeyer (Derthick, 1979, p. 19).

6. Impressions of the Candler Building were obtained from testimony of Altmeyer and W. E. Reynolds, Administrator of the Public Buildings Administration, in *Buildings for the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance* (1948) and from oral histories of Futterman (1997a, pp. 1-2), Lillie Steinhorn (1996, pp. 1-4), and Roy Wynkoop (1973, p. 27).

7. Characterization of some members of the 1994-1996 Advisory Council on Social Security (the Council) as Ball's *adversaries* is because of their support of the Personal Savings Account proposal—the principal alternative to the Maintain Benefits plan, an incremental modification of the existing system that Ball advocated. One of these members, Sylvester Schieber, coauthored *The Real Deal* (Schieber & Shoven, 1999) from which the comment on Ball's tactical prowess is taken. Schieber's advocacy of the Personal Savings Account proposal—advancing the proposal originally as a council member—was opposed by Ball (Schieber & Shoven, 1999, pp. 282-285) and still is (Ball, 1999, p. 27).

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