

**DOCILE BY DESIGN:
COMMERCIAL FURNITURE AND THE EDUCATION
OF AMERICAN BODIES 1840–1920
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ABSTRACT

Whether we inhabit a desk in a classroom or office or occupy a seat on a train or in a theater our bodies are enveloped, supported, manipulated, and controlled through the form and operation of furniture that is seldom noticed. Ubiquitous, intimate, and often compulsory, commercial furniture (institutional furniture used outside the home) is a powerful resource for elucidating politics in the public sphere. This dissertation demonstrates that between 1840 and 1920 manufacturers produced commercial furniture intended to teach postures, behaviors, and interactions suited to competencies expected of occupants as compliant citizens and industrious workers. In response to the overwhelming social, economic, and demographic changes that accompanied industrialization and urbanization furniture constructed new psycho-social and physical borders between individuals and groups in public space that defined identity. The furniture and interior design of schools, offices, theaters, and trains are analyzed using an interdisciplinary material culture methodology to elucidate the constraints of manufacturing and recover the sensory experience. Material evidence is evaluated alongside visual culture and textual sources to show that manufacturers mediated among

the expectations of educational and occupational theorists, executives, administrators, experts, civic leaders, and furniture users to determine furniture form and function. Standard furniture forms emerged out of a web of influences and were sent across the nation to realize a corporatist vision of America that elevated white men and the wealthy, accommodated white immigrant and native-born members of the middle class, and distanced members of the working class, the poor, and African Americans.