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Penny Sparke, Anne Massey, Trevor Keeble, and Brenda Martin (eds.), *Designing the Modern Interior: From the Victorians to Today*  
Designing the Modern Interior: From the Victorians to Today by Penny Sparke; Anne Massey; Trevor Keeble; Brenda Martin  
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within a year of this auspicious event it was making export arrangements with Western companies. By the 1970s Iskra was supplying electronic components for Bosch, Renault, and Volkswagen, as well as taking out patents and winning international awards for its own designs. This duality is understood by the authors of this book as a reflection of Yugoslavia’s non-aligned status. The country was home to the first conference of Non-Aligned Countries in 1961, a union of progressive states which refused to fall into either camp in the Cold War. No doubt Josip Broz Tito addressed the assembled leaders through a well-crafted Iskra microphone.

Iskra represented—as Predan shows—an attempt to bring capitalist know-how to a socialist production. “Numerous factors—the planned economy, self-management, the consensus economy, the requirements of a living environment that is, in an artistic sense, more richly motivated and realized” (p. 51). Moreover, his words were in harmony with the lofty aspiration of humanist designers elsewhere in the world too. They could have been delivered at the Aspen conferences in the 1960s or issued from the mouths of Braun’s designers. Much the same can be said of the company’s products. They spoke the same kind of international design Esperanto as Olivetti, IBM, and Braun’s goods.

In the third major essay in the book, British design historian Jonathan Woodham surveys the international context of Iskra’s operations, discussing visits and meetings with representatives of international NGOs and professional associations. In the approving reports from British representatives of the Design Council and design bureaucrats that he cites, one can almost detect envy. These commentators understood efficient products stripped of unnecessary styling, teamwork between designers and engineers, and the steer that comes from a “rationally” organized economy as the prerequisites of “Good Design.”

Looking carefully at the products which feature in this publication, one begins to wonder about their ideological functions as well as their practical operations. The monumental 35mm movie projectors that came off the company’s production lines from the late 1940s were joined in turn by trim 8mm home projectors in 1963. Was this a shift from the projection of Stalinist propaganda to the promise of socialist consumerism? In this, can we detect a move from public culture (the cinema) to a private one (home)? Who determined the need for such things? In similar fashion one might ask, what was the impetus behind the investment in experimental engineering products? Cybernetic systems, for instance, had been the holy grail of the planned economy throughout Eastern Europe in the 1960s. The aim of managing the uneven relations of production and demand with computers, or of regulated mechanical operations on an assembly line, had been claimed as the means to stir command economies out of stagnancy. By the 1980s most of the countries in the Eastern Bloc had virtually given up this hope. Did the Roki 200, Iskra’s cybernetic robot unveiled at the Hanover trade fair in 1988, represent the last outing of this socialist high-tech fantasy?

Since the end of the Yugoslav wars of the mid-1990s, the material culture of the Tito era has been wrapped in its own particular brand of Yugo-nostalgia. Food, packaging, music, and even holiday resorts have been the subject of considerable sentiment. The stability of this “golden age” has high appeal in societies that have seen war and economic collapse. Iskra’s products don’t seem to have been adopted in this fashion. In fact, in his introduction to this book, Špela Subic complains that Iskra risks being forgotten, not least by the inheritor companies that were formed from Iskra’s remains at the end of communist rule. Why should they be exempt from the taste for socialist kitsch is an intriguing question: could it be that the designers’ emphasis on the functional and rational forms affords little purchase to such desires? Perhaps in this regard, at least, they behave like “good” socialist things, stifling this particular form of commodity fetishism.

David Crowley

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then organized chronologically into four sections (The Late Nineteenth Century Interior; The Early Twentieth Century Interior; and the Late Twentieth Century Interior), each with its own introductory essay.

Throughout the anthology a number of key issues that have arisen out of the study of the interior are addressed, including the relationship between public and private space, the tension between professional and amateur interventions, gender, the role of taste, and the relationship between modernity, the mass media, and mass consumption. Related to this, the intertwining of self-identity and interior design is revisited in a number of the essays, as is the issue of national identity. The book’s aim to expand the notion of the “modern” interior as it has generally been conceived within architectural and design history ties these issues together. Thus, rather than address the subject but also serves to negate any sense of the notion of the “modern” interior as it has generally been conceived. Alice Friedman (p. 81) that the canonic modernist interior was only one of a number of competing “ideologies of what it meant to be modern” (p. 90). Alice Friedman likewise adds to this in her analysis of the convinicing exploration of Miami Beach in the 1950s, which she argues materially embodied the consumer dreams American modernity had promised (p. 205). Returning to Reed’s essay, however, what is particularly powerful about his analysis is his claim that the “Amusing Style,” with its “theatricality, humour, and an emphasis on artifice and playfulness” (p. 81), was consigned to historical obscurity by the design establishment, in favor of interiors that emphasised functional rationalism, because of anxieties about gender and sexuality. In so doing he places discourses about gender and sexuality at the heart of debates about design in the 1920s, demonstrating the extent to which they structured the course of design history and that of the domestic interior in particular.

While the case studies themselves are tightly argued and meticulously researched, the introductory essays are invaluable to the student of the interior, providing an excellent overview of the historiography of the subject and the disciplinary approaches employed. Perhaps inevitably, though, for an anthology this ambitious, more issues are raised than can be addressed. For example, in the introduction to the mid-twentieth century section (1940–70) Penny Sparke observes the growth of the DIY movement and the growing number of middle class and upper working class homeowners who wanted to express their modernity through their domestic spaces. Yet there is no essay specifically dedicated to DIY in this or the last section of the book, which seems surprising given the significance of the subject and the quality of research in this area. That said, Elizabeth Darling’s essay on two interior design schemes by the modernist architect Wells Coates echoes Sparke’s discussion around the growing significance of consumption, as she includes within her analysis a careful consideration of the specific psychological and social needs of the individuals who commissioned work from the Canadian architect-designer. This leads her to read the new interiors as a backdrop or stage set against which the inhabitants could act out and project their modernity. While these were far from “ordinary” middle class homes, Darling nonetheless demonstrates the ways in which interior design, identity formation, and expressions of modernity came together. Interestingly, she also traces how photographs of the interiors continued to be reproduced in the contemporary press, providing some sense of the double life of the interior as a lived experience, a physical space, and a disembodied image—a subject that Charles Rice also addresses in his essay on architectural drawings of modernist homes in Australia.

What is impressive about this anthology—and what distinguishes it from another recent publication by Penny Sparke entitled The Modern Interior, which takes a similarly broad view of the “modern”—is the range of methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives in anything other than a cursory way is, however, difficult. Sparke, for example, in her essay, an overview of Italian design between 1945 and 1972, draws attention to the conceptual approach taken by Gae Aulenti, Ettrle Sottsass Jr., and Joe Colombo in their “house-environments,” suggesting that “it was behaviours rather than images, objects or even spaces that mattered” to their visions of the home (p. 192). Unfortunately, the limits imposed by the anthology prevent further discussion of this approach or other theories of space that are addressed within essays elsewhere in the book. Similarly, Trevor Keeble suggests in the introduction to the final section (covering the period 1970 to the present) that the interior remained neglected as an area of academic enquiry in part because of “its often complex and collective ‘authorship,’ its domestic or commercial contexts and its transient and evolutionary nature” (p. 220). Yet there is relatively limited space to discuss the continuing methodological challenges attached to studying such a “transient” subject.

Once again, it could be argued that these challenges are addressed through the example of the
Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design
Greg Castillo

Scholars have long recognized the centrality of the home in Cold War discourse. They have also broadened research into the Cold War by looking at design and daily life behind the iron curtain. David Crowley, Susan E. Reid, and others have brought the design and material culture of the Eastern Bloc to the fore, and the Victoria and Albert Museum’s exhibition Cold War Modern: Design, 1945–1970, curated by Crowley and Jane Pavitt with contributions by Reid and Greg Castillo, dedicated a significant portion of the exhibition and its catalogue to designs from Eastern Europe.1 In Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design, architectural historian Greg Castillo continues this trend, offering an informed reading of the interiors and material artifacts exhibited at trade fairs and exhibitions held in divided Germany and elsewhere. He situates the Cold War home and its material culture at the center of the ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union, and reinforces Beatriz Colomina’s argument that “everything in the postwar age was domestic.”2 Castillo elaborates on the work of historian Robert H. Haddow and expands our understanding of trade fairs and exhibitions by breaking down the polemic of consumerism versus communism as a Cold War construct.3 In its place, he reveals the complex relationship of consumption, domesticity, and midcentury modernism with the self-representation of both the West and the East.

As Marshall Plan organizers sought to sway foreign citizens with the pleasures of privatized capitalist consumption, Eastern Bloc governments hoped to counter the allure through domestic displays of their own. Castillo relies on archival materials, as well as on German and American period journals, magazines, and fiction, and convincingly applies political scientist Joseph Nye’s dichotomy of “hard” and “soft” power as his organizing methodology. According to Nye, hard power controls and coerces through overt displays and tactics, such as occupation and trade embargoes, while soft power beckons and beguiles through intangibles, such as culture and belief systems. The allure of soft power rests in its capacity for appropriation and adaptation by foreign recipients, who, while promoting their own interests, also promote the interests of the generating nation.

For Castillo, then, the home, as exhibited throughout the postwar period, was a “Trojan House”4 (p. 138) of sorts, leading to the fateful exchange in the American kitchen between Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow. That exchange, held amid washing machines, hi-fi units, and other products of capitalist labor, Castillo argues, represented not the inception but rather the culmination of an ongoing ideological battle about the relative merits of consumption. Its legacy is nothing less than the single globalized economy we live in today.

After the Second World War, citizens of both East and West Germany perceived the heritage of the avant-garde as increasingly irrelevant, and even retrograde. By the 1950s the Existentenzminimum home was replaced in the socialist East by a distrust of modernism and an embrace of neoclassicism. In the West, the introduction of the deutschmark and its material culture at the center of the ideological battle with the United States and the Soviet Union, and reinforces Beatriz Colomina’s argument that “everything in the postwar age was domestic.”2 Castillo elaborates on the work of historian Robert H. Haddow and expands our understanding of trade fairs and exhibitions by breaking down the polemic of consumerism versus communism as a Cold War construct.3 In its place, he reveals the complex relationship of consumption, domesticity, and midcentury modernism with the self-representation of both the East and the West.

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case studies. Anne Massey’s essay, for instance, on the design of ocean liners, provides a detailed expose of the complex and collective design process involved, while Judy Attfield’s essay, examining the home furnishing choices of a retired couple, highlights the transitory nature of a domestic interior and the way in which stylistic aspirations and biographic memories structure its evolution. Like Clarke, Pat Kirkham’s essay on the Eames House in Pacific Palisades, California, also emphasizes the active and ongoing construction of interior spaces by their inhabitants as she analyzes the way in which the couple used their home to entertain. In this, both Clarke’s and Kirkham’s essays exemplify the influence of material culture studies, noted by Keeble in his introductory essay, as the interior is viewed as a performative setting, which is an ongoing process requiring constant work.

What is less evident in the anthology is the way in which material culture studies has sought to uncover the normative practices that structure the domestic interior.5 While Keeble suggests, correctly, that much of this work ignores the importance of style and aesthetics, and can tend toward a synchronic analysis of the interior, there are some notable examples where the demands of both are interwoven with excellent results. Judy Attfield’s seminal essay “Inside Pram Town: A Case Study of a Housing Project”6 explores the ways in which women responded to “modern” open plan living and the strategies of resistance they developed as a means to appropriate “modernity to their own designs [my italics].”7 A little more analysis of such “ordinary” interiors would have been a welcome addition.

Of course an anthology must draw its boundaries somewhere, and Designing the Modern Interior pulls together essays that both extend and refine existing (albeit dispersed) works of historiographic significance as well as essays that present new research, providing a stimulating and authoritative introduction to the history of the modern interior. Indeed, the quality of research—in particular the detailed archival research—is excellent throughout, and where the anthology is particularly successful is in its “spatialization” of history, which, as Sparkes claims, leads to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the subject. This is backed up by extensive endnotes and a select bibliography that provide a rich source of information to any student wishing to learn more. With one hundred illustrations and an engagingly lucid text, Designing the Modern Interior should be essential reading for such students. While some of the essays and issues raised might leave those more familiar with the subject desirous of longer and more extended analyses, this should not be read as a criticism; rather it is an acknowledgment that the subject of this quality work warrants further investigation and publication.

3 For example, see David Bell and Joanna Hardwell, eds., Ordinary Lifeways: Popular Media, Consumption and Taste ( Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2005).
5 See, for example, Suzie Attfield’s criticism that design history provides inadequate analysis of the temporal and spatial nature of interior design because it foregrounds the visual aspects of the interior while neglecting issues of enclosure and containment rather than recognizing the more contingent and conceptual nature of what an interior might be. Suzie Attfield, “Towards an Interior History,” IDEA Journal (2004): 1–8.
6 For example, see Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey, eds., Inside Homes?: Social Change and Domestic Life (London: Routledge, 1999); Sarah Pink, Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects, and Everyday Life (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand, and Jack Ingram, eds., The Design of Everyday Life (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
8 Judy Attfield, “Bringing Modernity Home: Open Plan Living in the British Domestic Interior,” in At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space, ed. Irene Cieraad (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 73–81. A more recent work that takes up some of Attfield’s findings is Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd’s Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife (Oxford: Berg, 2004), which—although written from the perspective of the social sciences—examines the new “visuality of home-making” in the postwar era through an analysis of advice literature, magazines, and advertisements, making it highly relevant to the study of the modern interior.

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