Cold War Modernism and Post-War German Homes. An East-West Comparison

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Divided Dreamworlds?

The Cultural Cold War
in East and West

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8 Cold War Modernism and Post-War German Homes

An East-West Comparison

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Introduction: Cold War Modernism in the West and the East

The stylistic dichotomy between modernism on the one hand and socialist realism on the other is a standard theme in narratives of the cultural Cold War. This narrative, encompassing the whole range of cultural productions from literature, dance and music to art, design and architecture, is itself not free from Cold War rhetorical elements. To interpret modernist culture as a free and individualist form of artistic expression in opposition to socialist realism as an essentially traditional and even national approach to culture, suggests the clear-cut logic of two opposing political systems being reflected in the propaganda uses of culture in both camps.[1]

In 1983, Serge Guilbaut published his influential study about how Abstract Expressionism came to represent American culture and in turn was used by the state and the CIA to demonstrate two things: firstly, that the United States contributed substantially to Western (formerly European) high culture; secondly, that American Art, in contrast to the Soviet Union, represented above all the freedom of the individual.[2] More recently, this interpretation has been taken up in different historical studies on the cultural Cold War, producing new perspectives on a debate previously focused on art-historical issues. Thus, it has become clear that the political appropriation of modernism reached far beyond the practice of exhibiting paintings. Especially in the field of architecture and industrial design modernist aesthetics acquired strong symbolic and representational significance

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1   David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Introduction.

2   Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

in the context of Cold War cultural diplomacy.[3] During the 1950s, new American embassies around the world were built by modernist architects, thereby reflecting, as Jane Loeffler puts it, 'the extent to which architectural modernism became identified with democracy,' a democracy linked by American architects to characteristics such as 'newness, openness, abstraction, ambiguity, and technological innovation.'[4] At the same time, modern design and architecture were also associated with a new spirit of Western international cooperation, since the international origin and pervasiveness of this style lent itself to underline the *common* Western project of economic and cultural progress, above all in American or international exhibitions.[5]

However obvious the political uses of modernist art, architecture and design may have been, there are also doubts about the nature of the relationship between the political and the aesthetic and the question if there was any necessary or inherent ideological rationality of a modernist style. In this context David Caute has raised the question if the choice of the United States to engage in promoting modernism as the artistic expression of democracy might have been provoked primarily by the simple fact that the Soviet Union censored modernist art forms. Others have pointed to the many conservative voices in the US who regarded modernism – abstract art as well as modern architecture and design – as invested with anti-liberal or even socialist ideas.[6]

These comments indicate a larger general problem within the flourishing and exciting field of Cold War cultural history: while by now it is common knowledge that during the Cold War era the cultural sphere was deeply politicised (so much so, that agents of foreign policy systematically used it for propaganda and cultural diplomacy objectives), the cultural and political processes through which categories of artefacts were invested with specific political meanings are yet to be fully understood. Any reflection on the political meanings of art and culture in the Cold War has to be aware of the political effects of different target audiences. That is to say, the 'message' of the artefacts is directed *both* to the competitor abroad *and*

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3   Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Jane C. Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998); Annabel Jane Wharton, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis, MI/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

4   Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, p. 7-8.

5   See Greg Castillo, 'Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005), p. 261-288. Another good illustration of the close link between architectural modernism and the Western ideal of international co-operation is the architecture and interior decoration of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, built in 1958.

6   Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 268-271.

to the national (or international) audience at home. Concerning the latter, the political meaning will inescapably be intertwined with other meanings and other cultural contexts than the East-West competition of political systems.

Patrick Major and Rana Mitter's useful distinction between 'cultural cold war' as a form of cultural diplomacy and 'cold war culture' as a 'system of meaning and behaviour shaped by the dynamics of the conflict' should therefore be used to consider more thoroughly the mutual influence and interdependence of these two sides of the coin.[7] To put it differently, the ways in which specific elements of Cold War culture were locally appropriated can only be understood in relation to a society's internal goals, needs and debates.

The relative popularity of modernist forms in Cold War Europe, used by the US as a weapon in order to win European populations over to the western ideological cause, is neither an indication of America's success, nor an affirmation of modernism's 'liberal', 'progressive' or 'free' nature. Its appeal in Cold War Europe can only be understood against the background of European struggles to reinvent the guiding political principles and imaginaries of their societies in the shadow of the interwar crisis and the catastrophe of World War II.

In the light of this argument, the theme of interior design in both Germanies is an especially interesting and complex case in point. Recent scholarship has revealed that the home was a crucial topic in post-war Europe (and in America), both as a site of technical, social and cultural renewal and as an imaginative space serving to deal with the future *and* the past.[8] The way houses and homes were conceived, constructed and furnished was generally regarded as a central political issue, through which the government had to prove its ability to solve social problems. At the same time, the living space also was to reflect the formation of post-war societies as a whole. The question of where, how and in what style of furnishing people lived was therefore closely connected to the question of what kind of society was to be (re)constructed. In the two Germanies this relationship between design and the reordering of post-war society was furthermore closely

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7   Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, 'Culture', in Saki R. Dockrill and Geraint Hughes (eds.), *Cold War History* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 240-262, quotation p. 241. See on this debate also Peter J. Kuznick en James Gilbert, 'U.S. Culture and the Cold War', in Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (eds.), *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington/ New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), p. 1-13; Peter Filene, '"Cold War Culture" Doesn't Say it All', in Kuznick and Gilbert (eds.), *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, p. 156-174.

8   See 'Notions of Home in Post-1945 Europe' in Paul Betts and David Crowley (eds.), *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005); Liesbeth Bervoets and Mikael Hård (eds.), *Home Cultures* 10 (2010); Johannes von Moltke, *No Place Like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Becky E. Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester/New York: Manchester UP, 2003); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 1995); Claire Duchen, 'Occupation housewife: The domestic ideal in 1950s France', *French Cultural Studies* 2 (1991), p. 1-12; David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford/New York: Berg 2002).

related to both countries' efforts to create a new 'national' self-understanding after the political break of 1945. While for West and East Germans this effort was necessarily linked to the question of how to deal with the national socialist past, the United States, and later on the Soviet Union developed their own political agendas with design.

The United States was the first to bring the interior design of private dwellings onto the agenda of cultural diplomacy. During the 1950s, it sought to further propagate the American model of mass consumption in Europe by organising a series of exhibitions in West Germany and other Marshall Plan countries to demonstrate the technical achievements and 'international modernism' of the Western home.[9] As is well known by now, the typical modernism of the showrooms was not only quite dissimilar to the average American home, but also heavily contested as a political symbol by many conservatives.[10] The 'American modern home' was primarily created for the West and also East European publics rather than for American audiences.[11]

Obviously, the domestic environment did not get the same kind of attention in Stalin's USSR, given both the central role of production and work in socialist ideology, and the socialist emphasis on the collectivist, rather than intimate and individual aspects of leisure. Consequently the domestic sphere initially played an inferior role in the Soviet Union's Cold War propaganda.[12] On the stage of international exhibitions this tradition became once more visible at the Brussels' world fair in 1958, where the US exhibition centred on the material world of private everyday life, whereas the Soviet Union quintessentially displayed machines, airplanes and a *Sputnik* satellite.[13]

This did not prevent Khrushchev from engaging in the famous kitchen debate with vice president Nixon in Moscow just a year later, discussing which system could provide its people with better equipped homes.[14] In fact, Soviet culture of the Khrushchev era 'became obsessed with homemaking and domesticity' as Susan

9   Greg Castillo, 'Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005), p. 261-288.

10 Marlin, *As Seen on TV*; Shelley Nickles, 'More is Better. Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America', *American Quarterly* 54 (December 2002), p. 581-622.

11 This does not preclude though that it had an influence on internal visions of the 'American way' simultaneously circulating in US publications and advertisements.

12 See for example Anthony Swift, 'The Soviet World of Tomorrow at the New York's World's Fair, 1939', *Russian Review* 57 (1998), p. 364-379.

13 Karl Pawek, 'Versöhnung mit der Zivilisation', *Magnum: Die Zeitschrift für das moderne Leben* 18 (June 1958), p. 39. 'Brussels's Light-Up Time: Shapes, sights of the World's Fair show age of marvels and contest of ideas', *LIFE* 19 (12 May 1958), p. 47-50.

14 See the various contributions in Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (eds.), *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

Reid put it.[15] This is partly due to the fact that after Stalin's death in 1953 the politics of de-Stalinisation broke with the preceding practice of rehabilitating bourgeois living cultures and started to embrace the modernist style of interior design, reconnecting to the early post-revolutionary period.[16] Curiously, the fact that America had symbolically loaded modernism as *the* style of the West did not restrain Russia from using the same aesthetics for the purpose of giving a new shape to post-Stalin socialist society. This is a remarkable indication that the Cold War culture of one country could produce phenomena not only partially at odds with its own culture, but also in paradoxical conformity with the enemy's Cold War culture.

Where do these observations leave us with Cold War modernism in general and the German cases in particular? West Germany welcomed modern design nearly from the beginning. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) started to rehabilitate modernism during the second half of the 1950s, after having embraced socialist realism before, following the Soviet line. In both countries the state sponsorship of this style went hand in hand with a public discourse on the morality of domestic objects and on the way the right objects with the right design would help to rebuild the 'new' post-war German societies and reshape their respective citizens. Although the underlying political ideologies were obviously very different, the significance both countries tried to inscribe into the aesthetics of everyday objects was in many ways very similar. But astonishment about the fact that 'products specifically formulated for their appeal in the capitalist West had suddenly become the standard bearers of socialist domestic culture'[17] will not suffice as historical interpretation. Instead, we propose to step back from an approach which takes the Western story of modern design as the model against which the East has to be evaluated. Rather, the remarkable load of political meaning injected into modern design in both countries can only be understood as part of a general attempt to reshape society in the specific historical constellation of the post-war era, when countries were confronted with a triple challenge: reinventing modernity, doing so in the shadow of a troubling past, and constantly facing the competition with a hostile political system on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

The following comparison between the political meanings of modern design in post-war East and West Germany is based on the conviction that modern design had (and has) no intrinsic relationship with any twentieth century political ideology. On the contrary, modernism has proven to be quite adaptable and capable to express national socialism/fascism, communism and liberal democracy. Its quite remarkable success in both West Germany and the GDR further supports this

15   Susan E. Reid, 'Communist Comfort. Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev Era', *Gender & History* 21 (2009), p. 465-498, quotation p. 469.
16   Ibid., pp. 471-72.
17   Castillo, *Cold War at the Home Front*, p. 176.

conviction, but the German case also sheds light on another issue. The fact that both the aesthetic of interior design and the political interpretations with which it was presented reveal conspicuous similarities in both Germanies, makes clear that the two central ideas associated with modern design – the belief that it would be possible to improve social life in a rational way, and the rejection of fundamental class differences – were indeed of crucial importance for the post-war cultural reconstruction in West and East. In the specific context of the two post-Nazi-era German states another aspect was added. The design communities in both countries recognised modern design as an aesthetics opposing, and thereby enabling a clean break with the dark sides of the German past. Modern design, in other words, was considered to be able to wipe out the national socialist legacy which was regarded as either the apex of capitalism (East) or the culmination of all reprehensible characteristics of Wilhelmine culture (West).

Post-war ideals of societal renewal were thus materialised in rather comparable ways in both states; inhabitants of both countries were to furnish their homes in a modern way. As we will show, there were striking differences as well, between the ways in which modernism was appropriated by both German states. Furthermore, the American use of modern design as a symbol of the West also left its mark on the ways in which West and East Germany were able to assign political meaning to modern design. In West Germany designers and journalists were prompted to take a stance on the American influence, whereas in the GDR designers were provoked to invent new labels and adapt different interpretations to a German design tradition that had been appropriated by its western neighbour. However, it is telling that in both German states designers simply suppressed modern design's interpretations as far as these did not fit in with their ideological and political views – be it on the other side of the Iron Curtain, or on the other side of the political turning point of 1945.

A Post-War Aesthetics of Renewal

In the course of the 1950s, politicians and professionals in East and West Germany discovered the aesthetics of everyday objects as strong political symbols as well as powerful educative tools for the overall renewal of their societies. The backdrop, though, against which these ideas developed, was the reality of what German historians have once called the 'breakdown society' (*Zusammenbruchgesellschaft*).[18] National socialist measurements of self-destruction, combat and the allied bombings of German cities had produced a landscape of urban ruins and destroyed

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18   Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung: Deutsche Geschichte 1945-1955* (Bonn: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), p. 39.

infrastructure which, after the war, resulted in poverty, hunger and a severe housing shortage aggravated by the arrival of millions of displaced persons and refugees from the former Eastern German provinces.[19] Although industrial production soon increased again in the western sectors, everyday life continued for years to be shaped by the scarcity of basic commodities, the production of 'privation commodities' (*Notprodukte*) made of war materials and the dominance of the black market forcing many people to exchange material goods for food.[20]

Despite the fact that both the Marshall Plan and the Korean War boom helped the economy grow ever more quickly after the founding of West Germany in 1949, the great majority of West Germans could not afford to buy anything beyond absolute necessities for survival until well into the 1950s.[21] Judging from popular lifestyle magazines the average West German citizen was indeed not concerned with the style of furnishings but rather with having an apartment at all. Consequently, existential practical problems like heating dominated as well as the omnipresent question of how to organise the furniture in a very small apartment or how to give a personal touch to a room furnished by the owner.[22]

This did not prevent the professional industrial designers from putting the aesthetics of things quickly back on the public agenda. It may have been by coincidence but it was nevertheless telling that the German *Werkbund*, which had been re-established in 1947, inaugurated its first major exhibition under the title *Neues Wohnen* (New Dwelling) only nine days before the new West German Basic Law was promulgated on 23 May 1949. The contributors to the catalogue expressed above all their concern about the new Germany losing its capacity to 'design its own world' and urgently pleaded for a reanimation of the German design expertise of the 1920s.[23]

Mere survival also dominated life in the future GDR amidst the ruins of the war. About 45% of the country's productive capacities had been destroyed, and contrary to the western part of the country, the Soviet-occupied part did not receive help from the Marshall Plan. Instead of receiving aid, it was forced to pay about

19 Approximately 12 million people according to Kleßmann, ibid.

20 Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegrist, *Deutsche Kulturgeschichte: Die Bundesrepublik von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Hanser, 2009), p. 23-25; Malte Zierenberg, *Stadt der Schieber: Der Berliner Schwarzmarkt 1939-1950* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008). See on the *Notprodukte* also *Blasse Dinge: Werkbund und Waren 1945-1949*, exhibition of the German Werkbund (Berlin: Anabas, 1989).

21 Michael Wildt, 'Privater Konsum in Westdeutschland in den 50er Jahren', in Axel Schildt and Arnold Sywottek (eds.), *Modernisierung im Wiederaufbau: Die westdeutsche Gesellschaft der 50er Jahre* (Bonn: Dietz, 1998), p. 275-289. For a recent discussion of the effects of the Marshall Plan on the German economy see Werner Abelshauser, *Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte seit 1945* (München: C.H. Beck, 2004), p. 130-154.

22 See for example the following articles in *Das Blatt der Hausfrau:* 'Unser winterlicher Freund', 2 (1952), p. 8; Mein Dachkämmerchen', 11 (1952); 'Aus eins mach zwei', 25 (1952).

23 Jupp Ernst, 'Die Form aus der Maschine', in *Neues Wohnen: Werkbund-Ausstellung Deutsche Architektur seit 1945* (Cologne 1949), unpaginated.

14 billion dollars reparations to the Soviet Union in the first eight years of its existence.[24] The reparations were mainly taken in kind; the Soviet occupying forces dismantled everything they could lay their hands on and transported it to the Soviet Union.[25] Large parts of East Germany's railway network were broken up and transported to the Soviet Union, further frustrating the country's miserable production capacities by a lack of transport capabilities. Hunger reigned and during the first years after the war one and a half times more people died than during the last years of the war.[26] Life was reduced to the barest form of survival, and it goes without saying that in this context the specific form and design of material necessities was completely irrelevant.

Interestingly, this began to change as soon as the material situation allowed. From the beginning of the 1950s onwards, when the first ruins were cleared and hunger no longer dominated all of public life, the GDR began to search for an adequate material expression of its status as 'first socialist state on German soil.' In line with the classical Marxist axiom that the material basis of society determines the social relations and mentality of a people, a lot of attention was paid to finding the right forms for East German daily life. It was considered important for their further development that they would be surrounded by the right, socialist-proof material world. This not only pertained to the public sphere (urban development and architecture), but people's private surroundings were an equally relevant issue for public concern.

In order to legitimise its existence, which was primarily politically motivated, the socialist state-that-was-no-nation needed an appealing form to materially express its identity. Since the GDR's existence was primarily justified by the state's presumably distinct anti-fascist character, the country was in need of a form that would best be able to express socialism as anti-fascism. Opinions differed as to how that form should look, favouring different elements of German design history. Although the East German design world eventually agreed on modern forms of design as the most appropriate way to both express the socialist state's anti-fascist identity and educate East German consumer-citizens to recognise socialism as an improvement compared to 'the former social order,' this accord was certainly no foregone conclusion.

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24 Historians do not agree on the precise amount of reparations paid by the GDR to the Soviet Union. Between 1945 and 1953, the GDR paid 'the highest known level of reparations in the twentieth century', Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship* (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 84. See also Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

25 See Jochen Laufer, 'From Dismantling to Currency Reform: External Origins of the East German Dictatorship, 1943-1948', in Konrad Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 73-91, especially p. 76.

26 See Rainer Gries, *Die Rationen-Gesellschaft: Versorgungskampf und Vergleichsmentalität: Leipzig, München und Köln nach dem Kriege* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1991), p. 120.

Designer Mart Stam, Dutch by birth but having lived and worked an important part of his life in Germany and the Soviet Union before returning to the Netherlands in 1934, chose to settle in the eastern part of Germany in 1948 in order to help rebuild the socialist country. As a close colleague of Le Corbusier and Gerrit Rietveld, Stam deemed a Bauhaus inspired, modernist line of design the most appropriate way to underline and express the GDR's socialist character. He not only regarded modernism's straight lines and lack of ornamentation as the most appropriate symbols for socialism's classless society, but he also recognised modernist architecture as the most practical solution for the GDR's massive housing problems. These views were widely shared amongst professional designers and other East German intellectuals, but there were powerful antagonists as well, the most important of whom was undoubtedly Walter Ulbricht – until 1950 Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the GDR, from 1950 General Secretary of the Central Committee of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED).

Ulbricht, who had been a woodworker before becoming a professional politician, was inspired by the neoclassicist style and tradition he had encountered during his years in exile in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Just like in the Soviet Union, he favoured forms in which national traditions were 'respected, integrated, and enhanced,'[27] and he considered what he called 'proletarian classicism' to be the most appropriate socialist form. He denounced modernism for uprooting national heritage and denying the real meaning of art, reducing everything to its form.[28] At the SED's third conference in July 1950 a declaration of war was waged against what was called 'formalism' in art and architecture. Formalism, the pejorative and official designation for Bauhaus' modernist principles, was regarded as 'the outcome of "cosmopolitanism", of capitalism, and of the "cannibalistic" teachings of the imperialist [American] war-mongers.'[29]

Although Ulbricht, representing the GDR's central leadership, did not favour modernist design, it continued to be a very popular style amongst East German designers, and Mart Stam's career continued to show an upward line.[30] In 1952, he organised an exposition on '*Industriewaren von Heute*', choosing the displayed objects from amongst 'a sea of kitsch'[31] – an indication that the struggle between

27   Anna Minta, 'The Authority of the Ordinary: Building Socialism and the Ideology of Domestic Space in East Germany's Furniture Industry', in Mart Kalm and Ingrid Ruudi (eds.), *Constructed Happiness: Domestic Environment in the Cold War Era*, Estonian Academy of Arts Proceedings, 16 (2005), p. 102-117.

28   Ibid.

29   Ibid., p. 106.

30   Stam was respectively rector of the Academy of Arts and *Werkkunst* in Dresden (1948), Rector of (East) Berlin's Academy for Applied Art (1950), and founder of the Institute for Industrial Design in Berlin (1950).

31   Horst Oehlke, 'Design in der DDR', in Regine Halter (ed.), *Vom Bauhaus bis Bitterfeld: 41 Jahre DDR-Design* (Gießen: Anabas Verlag, 1991), p. 75.

modernism's protagonists and opponents was not decided yet, and was still being fought feverishly.

At about the same time, West German designers and journalists, educators and state officials started to intensively promote modern design. New or re-established institutions like the new German *Werkbund*, the government agency *Rat für Formgebung* (German Design Council 1951) and the *Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm* (Ulm Institute of Design 1955), an official successor of the Bauhaus school, reinterpreted the modern design tradition as an expression of a specifically German and at the same time anti- or post-fascist humanist cultural idealism. The public discussion about questions of interior design expressed the difficult search for a new identity adapted to the political and social conditions of life in post-war West Germany. For architects and designers the aesthetic appearance of everyday objects was the main post-war challenge. At stake was the need to finally find the right way of modernising the country. For these professionals, the 'good form' of domestic things was an explicitly moral issue, for neither the pathos-driven irrationalism of the Nazis nor capitalist materialism should shape the modern West German society in the making.[32]

Already in September 1951, the West German political magazine *Der Spiegel* paid attention to what it perceived as a disparity between the new forms created by interior designers and the taste of the average customer. Contrary to the functional, Bauhaus-inspired pieces of the former, many consumers seemed to favour curved lines and types of furniture that professional designers ridiculed as 'Gelsenkirchener Barock'.[33] Different professional institutions, such as the building society *Neue Heimat* and the programme for social housing, began to experiment with ways to actively shape West German consumer taste, which they deemed misguided, in order to convince them of the advantages of modern furnishings instead of the traditional opulent designs.

Although the early issues of the West German magazines under scrutiny did not really favour a specific form or design tradition, this began to change as early as 1953 and 1954, when *Brigitte* and *Constanze* published programmatic articles in which they half described, half argued for a general change in decoration styles in favour of a decisively 'modern' orientation. One recurrent line of the argument for modern design during the first half of the 1950s was directly related to the living conditions in post-war Germany. The urgent lack of housing and the decisively smaller floor space of the newly-built apartments compared to bourgeois

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32 See especially Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Greg Castillo, 'The Bauhaus in Cold War Germany', in Kathleen James-Chakraborty (ed.), *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 171-193.

33 'Weg von Tante Frieda', *Der Spiegel*, 26 September 1951, p. 32-33.

standards (50 square meters for a family in the social housing sector)[34] served as a practical and moral argument in favour of modern lines and forms. The overly adorned and oversized historicist furniture, so it was argued, just did not fit in any more. Even more so, the material and spatial constraints that strongly added to the fervour with which modern design was welcomed back were transformed into a virtue. It was argued that West Germans were morally obliged to give up the old dreams of bourgeois representation to achieve a simpler, more honest but also more comfortable and in the end more egalitarian way of life.[35]

With modernist design starting to become popular in West Germany, its East German proponents lost terrain. The political and economic Cold War between the two blocs was at its apex, and the GDR needed to clearly demarcate itself from its national twin and political opponent. When in 1953 the East German national exhibition *Besser Leben – schöner Wohnen* (Live better – Dwell beautifully) was organised, a strong plea was made for a design that was to derive its main source of inspiration from the workers' and farmers' traditions. The organisers consoled the public that there was no need to shy away from ornamentation and in a so-called *Schreckenskammer* (chamber of horrors) the dreadfulness of modernist design was presented. At that time Mart Stam decided to leave the country. In 1953, he moved to Amsterdam.

Interestingly, this incident is not mentioned in the all-embracing, detailed history of East German design, *Gestalten für die Serie: Design in der DDR 1945-1988*, written in 1988 by East German designer Heinz Hirdina.[36] An equally remarkable omission is Hirdina's complete negligence of the Soviet Union's influence on East German design-politics, which is well documented. When Stalin died in 1953, Ulbricht lost an important ally in his battle against modernism and his defence of ornamentation. Khrushchev took a completely different stance where it concerned the material reconstruction of the socialist countries. He reproached the building industry for not using standardised, prefabricated concrete constructions, and architects for continuing 'to adorn apartment block's with extravagant decorative details.'[37] His plea for standardisation (which was primarily motivated by economic considerations) had a deep and lasting influence on design throughout the socialist bloc, including the GDR.

In 1956, two design-related journals were established in the GDR: one explicitly aiming at people who were (professionally) interested in design, *Form und*

34 Adelheid von Saldern, 'Von der „guten Stube" zur „guten Wohnung": Zur Geschichte des Wohnens in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland', *Archif für Sozialgeschichte* 35 (1995), p. 227-257, 233.

35 'Warum denn so verschnörkelt?' *Constanze* 3 (February 1953), p. 48-49.

36 Heinz Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie: Design in der DDR 1949-1985* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1988).

37 Greg Castillo, 'East as True West: Redeeming Bourgeois Culture, from Socialist Realism to *Ostalgie*', *Kritika* 9 (2008) no. 4, p. 764.

Zweck, and a popular home-decorating journal, *Kultur im Heim*. *Form und Zweck*'s first issue clearly shows the direction in which East German form and design would develop. Its pleas for a 'simple, space-saving (…) parsimoniousness,' its battle against kitsch, and against 'capitalist mass production's' attempts to 'cheaply produce goods that look expensive' indicate the strong preference for modernism's basic assumptions, practices and principles the journal shared with its popular colleague.[38] Hardly two years after Stam left the GDR in disappointment, the officially state-supported perspective on design in the GDR was dominated by modernist forms and lines – both in architecture and in the production of consumer goods and household objects.

In the GDR the aim was to educate East Germans. They were to become so enlightened that they would internalise social and political needs and objectives to the extent that these would guide their taste preferences, instead of whimsy considerations on fashion. In West Germany the rationality of consumer choice was a theme promoted by journalists in many ways and on many terrains, targeting especially the post-war housewife.[39] But the rhetoric devices the magazines' advice pages used to convince West Germans of the advantages of modern design differed from the East German discourse. The presentation of rational and moral arguments was frequently combined with a method of playful seduction reflecting the need to negotiate between existing, still mostly conservative, style preferences and the new vision of the modern world of dwelling. The message's tone was different on both sides of the German-German border: in West Germany consumers were not only convinced of but also seduced towards modern forms, using advertising methods of persuasion, for instance by claiming 'To have no money – that is very modern' or by using headlines reminiscent of advertising slogans: 'That's how dwelling becomes fun!' In the GDR, on the other hand, 'the proper form' did not need to be sold by presenting it as 'actually very fashionable.'[40] East Germans simply had to become so enlightened that they, as good socialist citizen-consumers, would come to accept right forms as such.

Another difference concerns the labelling. Whereas 'modernism' and 'Bauhaus' were frequently used terms in the West, they were not referred to openly in the GDR. There, the preferred style was described in great detail, constantly referring to 'the basis of an object's beauty is its practical function,' thus clearly depicting modernist forms without ever mentioning this as such – Bauhaus remained

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38 *Form und Zweck* (hereafter *FuZ*) 1956-1957, p. 13.

39 See Erica Carter, *How German is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

40 'Wie modern sind wir eigentlich?' *Brigitte* 6 (March 1954), p. 4-6, and 'So macht das Wohnen Spaß!' *Constanze* 20 (September 1954), p. 102-103.

the style 'that did not dare to speak its name.'[41] Its East German heirs referred to their style as 'functionalist', while their opponents called it 'formalist'. The taboo on directly referring to the Bauhaus tradition as a source of inspiration was certainly a reaction to the style's ideological appropriation by the Western world. Once living and working in the US (from 1937), Walter Gropius started to ideologically reframe Bauhaus design, depicting it as an essentially democratic and anti-totalitarian form, belonging to the West. When the West German Academy of Design in Ulm, founded in 1955 with the support of Max Bill, a former Bauhaus student, was presented as the successor of Bauhaus,[42] this provoked East German designers to invent new labels and adapt different interpretations to a (common) German design tradition.

These differences notwithstanding, it is clear that both Germanies, contending with comparable problems and objectives, acknowledged comparable forms, using comparable arguments and rationales. On both sides of the German-German border thrift was recognised as the main ethical as well as aesthetic imperative, and journalists in East and West came to vehemently promote a frugal interior decoration in an educational tone. Below, we will describe both the forms of interior decoration and the didactics with which these were combined, and we will show that both in the GDR and in the West the stern enlightenment was combined with a mild understanding for those who 'had difficulties to get off the image of an ostentatious bedroom in the old style.'[43]

Educating the German Dweller

Comparable forms of design were embraced by designers in both German states, and in both states they were used to the same end: to demarcate the break with the fascist past, to instruct German citizen-consumers not to be seduced by the reactionary, false promises that had characterised national socialism, and to build up a better society.[44] Both in West and in East Germany, modernism was regarded as an appropriate way to re-educate the population towards a more egalitarian and enlightened stance on material culture. The conspicuously frequent use of the first person plural 'we' ('we are modern,' 'our lifestyle' etc.) signals how clearly

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41 Greg Castillo, 'East as True West: Redeeming Bourgeois Culture, from Socialist Realism to *Ostalgie*', *Kritika* 9, no. 4 (2008) p. 747-768.

42 Greg Castillo, 'The Bauhaus in Cold War Germany', in Kathleen James-Chakraborty (ed.), *Bauhaus Culture*. See also Paul Betts, 'The Bauhaus as Cold War Legend: West German Modernism Revisited', *German Politics and Society* 14 (1996), p. 2, 75-100.

43 'Möbliere sparsam – auch im Schlafzimmer! Die Schönheit in der Ecke', *Constanze* 14 (July 1954), p. 90.

44 On the relation between kitsch and reactionary politics (with a link to national socialism) see Lothar Kühne, *Gegenstand und Raum: Über die Historizität des Ästhetischen* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1980), p. 218-220.

the seemingly banal theme of interior decoration was linked to a search for a collective identity. The two non-national German societies searched for something ideally all their respective citizens would have in common. There are two reasons why especially modern lines and forms were deemed appropriate to realise both countries' new beginnings. The first has to do with the relation between modernism's unadorned and simple characteristics, which made it an appropriate style to stress the socially inclusive politics both countries strove for, albeit embedded in different overarching political programmes. The second reason why modernism was used to connote and express hopes for a better future is that the frugality and functionalism of its forms stood for a pragmatic rationalism with which to solve the problems of post-war life and embark on a journey to a better future.[45]

Until roughly 1957, the concept of *moderne Wohnkultur* in West Germany clearly combined these two motivations: First, the desire to start anew and distance oneself from a generally 'bad past' by aesthetically fashioning the longed-for better living conditions as counter models to pre-war bourgeois and authoritarian values; second, the conviction that this new culture of material well-being would also have to be one of social egalitarianism. The importance of cultural renewal in the home, even in times when most people still could not afford to buy new furniture at all, is reflected in repeated articles on how to remove the embellishments of the 'huge and ornate pieces of furniture' one had inherited or bought for a low price. The 'cold pomp' of turn-of-the-century furniture, the epitome of false ideals of social grand-standing, proved quite easy to get rid of, resulting in simple, modest and very convenient pieces that were in line with the *Zeitgeist* and could easily be combined with other pieces.[46]

Although West German ideas of the aesthetic modernisation of everyday life were explicitly presented as being part of a broader Western development, America appears to have been a very present but also largely ambivalent example. Albeit clearly the epitome of a modernised country, it was sometimes seen as a positive model whereas at other times it was deemed too different and remote from post-war West German realities. Not surprisingly, the Western countries that were referred to as model-states of modern design were above all the Scandinavian countries with their strong social-democratic and egalitarian political tradition, especially Denmark and Sweden. They showed that the ideal of a low-key, egalitarian modern interior design could successfully be combined with widespread

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45   This belief in rational and technical solutions was certainly a tendency common to many post-war societies. On Britain, see Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters, 'Introduction', in Becky Conekin et al. (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964* (Londen/New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1999), p. 1-21.

46   'Himmel, wir haben geerbt', *Brigitte* 4 (1953), p. 4-5; 'Schnörkelmöbel sind kein Unglück: Die Säge schafft's', *Constanze* 7 (March 1954), p. 88-89.

German ideas of homely comfort and modesty.[47] Interestingly, the Scandinavian countries were also referred to as positive models in East German design literature and journals, be it at a later date.

During the first two decades after the war the design literature in the GDR is characterised by a fierce and outspokenly idealistic and educational rhetoric in which, although fascism and national socialism are hardly referred to explicitly, the shadows of the country's dark past are clearly discernible. Incessant are the reminiscences and friendly paternalistic attempts to re-educate the population not to fall for the 'lamentable *Repräsentationssucht*' that characterised the '*Wolfsgesetzen des Kapitalismus,*' the horrible results of which were well known. Until the founding of the GDR, the (East) German population was said to have lived in the 'mental vacuum' that characterised life in capitalist societies, which they were accustomed to 'fill' with 'primitive, unconscious, emotional, and psychic calls' for kitsch,[48] or with

> artificially artistic design, the contents of which bear no relation whatsoever with reality, because it is filled, not with real emotional value, but with sentimentality, and because its missing expressive power is replaced by erotic, politic, religious or other fantasy-incentives.[49]

In the new socio-political circumstances, people's material surroundings were 'much more than just a shield, a skin, or our life's visual scenery,' with which they used to superficially saturate the emptiness that characterised their former existence. In socialist societies, material goods were the actual result of human effort and they should therefore be recognised as 'part of our essence, which develops with us and through which we find ourselves, realize ourselves.'[50]

East Germans thus had to learn to recognise the extent to which their taste preferences still testified to the 'habits from the capitalist world, rooted in obsolete concepts, that remain relatively stable for a long time.'[51] Misleading and recurrent mistakes were the desire for objects whose appearance was meant to impress, or objects whose form disregarded contemporary life and circumstances. They were often entwined in kitschy-looking objects. This label applied to all objects whose outer form promised an alternative to present-day life, especially newly made, old-

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47   For America see 'Blick nach innen', *Constanze* 13 (June 1953), p. 56-57; for Denmark and Sweden, 'Bitte gucken Sie rein! So sieht ein dänisches Haus aus', *Constanze* 3 (February 1954), p. 55; 'Das fiel mir in Schweden auf', *Constanze* 19 (May 1956), p. 142-143; Dieter Conrads, 'Die Nächsten kennt man am wenigsten/Schwedische Eindrücke', *Brigitte* 22 (October 1954), p. 8-9.

48   *Kultur im Heim* (further referred to as *KiH*) 6 (1968), p. 6.

49   *KiH* 6 (1968), p. 5.

50   Idem.

51   *KiH* 6 (1968), p. 4.

looking objects. Equally dishonest were objects whose function was hidden behind an irrelevant decoration; they not only renounced their primary aim to serve a specific goal but also their origin, because their appearance suggested another area of production than the one in which they were actually made. A comparable critique pertained to richly decorated objects, whose adornments did their utmost best to disguise their industrial origins. People who preferred to be surrounded by such things were actually trying to escape from the times in which they lived.

These points of departure formed the basis of East German designers' search for forms that expressed contemporary, industrial means of production, and that were in line with the innermost functions and aims of the products concerned. All this was to be done as economically as possible, because the available means were to be used in a sensible and responsible way. Thrift thus became a leading principle for design in the GDR; it was an important virtue – not just for purely economic reasons (the amount of money, raw materials, and manpower that were used during production), but also from a more qualitative perspective. Uneconomically designed objects tended to overwhelm and belittle their users,[52] and because an object's appearance should be subordinate to the people who were to use it, its ideal form was to resemble a wrapping or cover. Then the object could show what it was meant for: for closing, sealing and covering (technical) functions.[53] This perspective gave rise to an economically inspired, rigidly functionalist aesthetics, in which objects with straight lines and angles were preferred to rounded or curved forms. Rational, functional, enlightened, in accordance with present-day reality, no deceit, no insincere seduction, mutual alignment, and as economical as possible: those were East German design's main tenets. Taste was to be subordinate to reason. If a form was right, one could learn to appreciate it.

At least until the 1960s, an educational approach in many ways comparable to the East can be found in most of the West German design guidebooks. Just like in the GDR, the West German design literature does not openly refer to the national socialist past, which it is trying to disassociate itself from. There were two main discursive strategies with which the design literature connected the promotion of a modern style to the idea of a break with the past. The first one consisted in establishing an associative link between the German bourgeois culture of the turn-of-the-century and national socialism and the detested values it represented. For instance in May 1954, when *Brigitte* celebrated the asymmetrical and organic aspect of post-war modern interior design (later to be called *Nierentisch*), it declared 'we are not so fond of the square-cut any more, like we used to be years ago.' The broader political implications of this statement only become obvious in the German version, where both the word *eckig* (square-cut) and *zackig* are used,

52   See for instance *KiH* 1, no. 3 (1971), p. 1.
53   Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie*, p. 58.

a combination of words clearly associated with militarism. The growing tendency to emphasise the light, fresh and cheerful characteristics of the shapes of tables and lamps seemed to express the wish to distance oneself not only from ideas of weighty German *Kultur* and bourgeois representation but also from the shadows of the recent past more generally.[54]

The second discursive strategy relied on the already mentioned reinterpretation of Bauhaus modernism as being clearly anti-totalitarian and thus anti-fascist. The story of Bauhaus designers having to leave Germany under the Nazis was popularised, producing the common-sense idea that the development of modern design had more or less come to a halt.[55] This was in fact at best a half-truth since the matter-of-fact style which owed a lot to the Bauhaus tradition had in many ways been taken onboard and promoted by official institutions of the Third Reich.[56] But then, this part of the legacy of modern design was quite consistently concealed in West German public discourse, whereas in the East the problem was solved by rhetorically opposing the Bauhaus legacy, which had initially been interpreted as a capitalist aberrance.

Referring to the *Werkbund* tradition, West German designers frequently emphasised that the human being had to be the central purpose of all the objects in a home instead of regarding the things themselves as the purpose of everyday human activity – as was supposedly formerly the case. Sometimes ideas of the 'good form' of objects (forms that reflect their purpose in a timeless and universal manner) were explicitly combined with visions of a 'uniform "society",' for instance in the advice manual *Die schöne Wohnung*, which saw its sixth revised edition in 1952 having continuously been reprinted since 1931.[57] But mostly, authors highlighted the individual aspect of interior decoration: 'There are no recipes for apartments, because we are too different from one another.'[58] This emphasis on individuality did not mean however that there were no aesthetic standards according to which a 'better' or a 'worse' taste could be determined. The often cited ideal period (and style) of 'good dwelling' was not by coincidence the *Biedermeier*, a time before industrialisation and the advent of historicist furniture fashion. Good form took on the values already present in the *Biedermeier* era:

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54 'Versuchen Sie es doch mal schräg', *Brigitte* 11 (2 May 1954), p. 8-9.

55 See for instance 'Ein Mann ist erschüttert: Walter Gropius kam heim', *Der Spiegel* 16 August 1947.

56 Joachim Petsch, 'Möbeldesign im Dritten Reich und die Erneueurng des Tischler-Gewerbes seit dem ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert', in Sabine Weißler (ed.), *Design in Deutschland 1933-45: Ästhetik und Organisation des Deutschen Werkbundes im Dritten Reich* (Gießen: Anabas-Verlag, 1990), p. 42-55; Sabine Zentek, *Designer im Dritten Reich: Gute Formen sind eine Frage der richtigen Haltung* (Dortmund: Lelesken Verlag, 2009). See as an example of the Nazi rhetoric on simple furniture August Grosskinsky (in co-operation with the Deutsche Arbeitsfront), *Schönheit des Wohnens: Ein Bildwerk über deutsche Wohnmöbel* (Freiburg 1941).

57 *Die schöne Wohnung*, commented and arranged by Gudio Harbers (Müchnen: F. Bruckmann, 1952), p. 5.

58 Traute Tschirwitz, *Betrifft Wohnung* (Recklinghausen: Paulus Verlag, 1954), p. 8.

This is good, modern furniture: honest and simple, purposeful and beautiful, appropriate for the material and construction. They will be recognised as good even in a hundred years.[59]

The so-called *Stilmöbel*, the post-war equivalent of nineteenth-century stylistic historicism, were seen as the incarnation of bad taste, just as was said of their turn-of-the-century predecessors. They imitated historical styles in an artificial way, or so the argument went, and therefore pretended to be what they were not, namely old, handmade of expensive wood, thereby in turn helping their owners or potential buyers to pretend being something they were not: rich and bourgeois or even aristocratic. Time and again designers deplored that many people still stuck to their old habits, misunderstanding the purpose of things as being representational, instead of useful, filling their apartments with too many pieces of furniture and 'superfluous civilisation stuff.' Such people had not understood that 'our way of life has fundamentally changed and that a new spirit is searching for new forms,' they had not understood that furniture was there for people and not the other way around.[60]

Comparable arguments were brought to the fore in the GDR. Just like its West German counterparts, the East German design community warned consumers not to be 'owned' by their possessions. The main difference between the two was that in the GDR the reprehensible bourgeois aesthetics were regarded as an essential part of capitalism. Following Marx' idea on the fetish relationship between people and objects, East German readers had to understand that their preference for fashionable, so-called 'chic' things actually conveyed a form of alienation that characterised life in capitalist societies. In these societies, the urge to obtain ever more possessions went hand in hand with growing rivalry between men, and there was no room for sincere relationships between people. 'The constitutive moment of bourgeois enjoyment (...) is exclusiveness, the exclusion of others,' according to the East German philosopher Lothar Kühne in his book on aesthetics.[61] Aesthetics and taste were to be the result of a well-balanced rational analysis. Existing and past-time preferences were deemed irrelevant, except as a starting point for further clarification and enlightenment.

In order for East German consumers to recognise the right material entourage, they had to learn how to align their tastes and desires with what was considered to optimally serve society's further development. A match between personal taste and society's needs was only possible if people would learn to recognise communal

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59 Ibid., p. 32.
60 Walter Pause and Peter Eggendorfer, *Heim nach Maß: Heitere Lektionen über modernes Wohnbehagen* (München: Max Wittkop, 1958), p. 14 and 28.
61 Lothar Kühne, *Gegenstand und Raum: über die Historizität des Ästhetischen* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1980), p. 186.

interests as their own. This was to be accomplished by constantly training them to give up their acquired habits, primary impulses and individual desires, and to ask themselves how these related to the needs of the greater social context. The main instrument to achieve this was the power of reason.[62]

In order to help East German citizen-consumers to find 'forms of expression that are *lebensbejahend*, honest and true,'[63] social scientists, philosophers and designers studied the relationship between socialism, aesthetics and taste.[64] Their insights were popularised and disseminated by *Kultur im Heim*'s editors to reach and counsel the East German public. Functioning as mediators between the professional design community and East German consumers, the editors explained to East Germans which forms were acceptable and which were not, which living room interiors were to be preferred, and which were to be denounced.

According to the editors, it was 'tasteless, absurd, and kitschy to produce a salt-shaker in the form of an animal or mushroom.' What is more: it was even 'inappropriate, and thus superfluous,' to decorate salt-shakers at all.[65] Preferring a fake, old-looking object was wrong, because it was usually not the result of a true understanding of the object concerned. If people's preference for old-looking objects was based on real knowledge (about the object's development, and the era in which it was made and used) it was acceptable, because the proprietor then knew 'that old objects express the destiny of craftsmanship and older generations' taste, that they incorporate a part of the mentality and way of life at that time.'[66] If such knowledge and insight were not present, the attractiveness of old-looking objects was merely based on 'immature understandings.'[67] People had to learn that their uninformed eye betrayed them when it seduced them to favour objects that in reality were 'unnatural, meaningless, superfluous, unpractical, and overloaded,'[68] and 'sugary, false, unreal, plagiaristic, badly faked, functionless, counterfeit.'[69]

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62 'Empirical observation is not enough to understand reality in such a way that the essential truth, grasping the total direction of historical movement and development, will be the result. For this, a high level of thinking is needed which can never be accomplished without a scientifically based world view.' Jutta Schmidt, 'Über die Gestaltung des sozialistischen Menschenbildes', *Einheit* 21, no. 11 (1961), p. 1436.

63 *KiH* 4 (1977), p. 34

64 See for instance Martin Kelm, *Produktgestaltung im Sozialismus* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1971); Kühne, *Gegenstand und Raum*; Erhard John, *Kultur – Kunst – Lebensweise* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1980); Alfred Hückler et al., *Einführung in die industrielle Formgestaltung: Lehrbrief* (Berlin: Eichenverlag der KDT, 1983); Herbert Letsch, *Der Alltag und die Dinge um uns* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1983); Horst Redeker, *Die klassische Kulturkritik und das Dilemma der Dekadenz* (Berlin: Institut für Angewandte Kunst, 1958); Horst Redeker, *Chemie gibt Schönheit* (Berlin: Institut für Angewandte Kunst, 1959).

65 Ibid.

66 *KiH* 6 (1988), p. 27.

67 *KiH* 5 (1968), p. 1.

68 *KiH* 1 (1969), p. 49.

69 *KiH* 4 (1966), p. 22.

Comparable disadvantages and reproaches also applied to objects that were not in line with East German circumstances: objects whose production was extremely expensive, or objects that were adorned in order to be adorned, that attracted attention in order to attract attention, that were different in order to be different, new in order to be new, or objects that derived their assumed beauty merely from the fact that they were supposed to be 'fashionable'. The danger of such taste preferences, according to the editors of the journal, was that too much importance was ascribed to material objects. People were in danger of being dominated by the objects, instead of the other way around.

Although Marxist dialectics assumed that East Germans' tastes would almost automatically develop along the lines sketched above – because 'the enlightened human subject' would inevitably tend to favour 'objects which are in line with his essence' – this appears not to have been the case.[70] The frequency with which both *Kultur im Heim* and *Form und Zweck* (for over thirty years) kept on explaining and warning against oft-made form mistakes, makes clear that designers had a hard task re-educating East German consumers. As Varga-Harris makes clear, writing about the Soviet Union: 'the tendency of design professionals to offer advice and express key principles of interior decoration in negative terms might serve as a clue about actual decorating practices.'[71] In spite of everything, people continued to favour the same ineradicable-but-reprehensible style characteristics. Whether they liked it or not, designers simply had to adjust their designs to be more in line with popular taste preferences, which was one of the reasons why the East German material world came to look slightly different than the ideal picture sketched above – a topic we will return to.

The Messy Reality of Actually Existing Modernism

As was shown above, both the educational rhetoric and the specific forms that were preferred by West and East German designers were quite comparable, but due to the different (economic) dynamics in both countries, the prescribed norms were adapted in different ways in the two Germanies, resulting in a rather dissimilar material culture. Illustrated magazines in West Germany, for instance, played a different role than in the GDR. While both in the GDR and the West they served as mediator between design professionals and the public of consumers, the economic system of the free market produced its own logic of a sales attitude doomed to be positive. As a matter of fact, an important and particularly popular

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70   *KiH* 4 (1977), p. 34

71   Christine Varga-Harris, 'Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home During the Khrushchev Era', *Journal of Social History* (Spring 2008), p. 561-590, especially p. 574.

version of post-war modern design was a purely commercial phenomenon and not part of the agenda of professional designers organised in the *Werkbund* and the Ulm Institute of Design. This was the so-called 'Nierentisch'-design which departed from an all too rigid and geometric functionalism by adopting organic and round forms, flashy colours as well as asymmetric arrangements.[72] Although most *Werkbund* designers had strong objections to this playful commercialisation of modernism, the popular magazines actually did not distinguish between the different branches of modern design which they all presented as part of a wished for aesthetic 'revolution' in the West German living rooms.

Organic design was indeed very popular, especially among young people and in public spaces like cinemas and fashion boutiques, an aspect that probably fuelled its later status as an iconic style of the fifties. However, it was far from representing the common furnishing taste of the West German citizens. A survey from 1963 actually indicated that a huge majority of West Germans still preferred either *Gelsenkirchener Barock* or other historic styles.[73] From 1956 onwards, the magazines took up this subject matter and started to report more often on antiques, the way these could be combined with modern pieces, and on German film stars' penchant for historic furniture. Even if the 'good form' philosophy always acknowledged the aesthetic value of certain old styles, especially the *Biedermeier*, this rediscovery of old furniture and styles represented a significant change in a discourse that so vigorously had campaigned for the new. As a result of this shift, West German magazines became distinctly more open to individual preferences and style combinations.

As early as October 1956 *Brigitte* reflected on this subject by – again – offering Sweden as a model, this time for the particularly skilful and personal way in which the Swedish were believed to combine old and new furniture styles.[74] Even the formerly rejected *Stilmöbel* found their way into the lifestyle magazines. After an advertisement campaign for *Stilmöbel* was published in *Brigitte* in 1959, the magazine started a series of articles under the title *Möbelstile und Stilmöbel*' The articles not only gave background information on 'authentic' *Stilmöbel* (handmade in an authentically historical style) as opposed to inauthentic copies (mass-produced randomly mixing historical styles), but also presented and explained the main characteristics of the most important styles of earlier times.[75]

In the late 1950s, two developments occurred that gave West German popular discourse on modern interior design a special flavour compared to East Germany.

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72 Paul Betts, 'The Nierentisch Mimemis. Organic Design as West German Pop Culture', *German History* 19 (2001), p. 185-271.

73 Alphons Silbermann, *Vom Wohnen der Deutschen. Eine soziologische Studie über das Wohnerlebnis* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1963).

74 'Behaglich wohnen mit alten Möbeln. Stilgemisch mit persönlicher Note', *Brigitte* 23 (October 1956), p. 42-43.

75 'Möbelstile und Stilmöbel', *Brigitte* 1 (29 December 1959), p. 58-59.

First, there was the growing tendency to underline the *international* aspect of modern home decoration and turn it into an explicit programme. In 1957, five years after the US State Department had staged an exhibition in West Germany that was 'grooming modernism as the stylistic *lingua franca* of international consumer capitalism,' *Brigitte* began to introduce the terms 'international' and 'European style' on its advice pages.[76] With this phenomenon the main message of the former US initiative to promote modern design as above all a symbol for Western internationalism had found its way into mainstream public discourse. This happened, however, without an American origin of this trend ever being explicitly acknowledged. Secondly, there was an ever-stronger emphasis on individual differences of aesthetic preferences and on the merits of freely combining pieces from different styles. This development fitted in well with the first, since the ideal of a Western international community of consumers always implied a certain respect for specific regional and national features. But it can also be seen as reflecting above all the general trend of a steadily diversifying mass production.

This diversification of mass production as well as the dissemination of organic and playful forms not only in West Germany but also in international modern design made it increasingly difficult to hold onto the utopian vision of a society united by a common taste for simple 'good-form' interiors. The modernisation of taste, initially thought to be a reflection of rational clarity, turned out to be anything but clear in the messy reality of consumer capitalism. Even the most common denominator of this cultural movement, the rejection of kitsch, started to lose its original meaning and the self-proclaimed taste educators were forced to adapt their agenda to new realities. While lifestyle magazines had an economic interest in not growing too far away from their readers' actual taste preferences, this did not have to affect highbrow journalists. Nevertheless, in 1961, one of the leading intellectual promoters of post-war modern design, the monthly magazine *Magnum*, published an entire issue under the title *Geliebter Kitsch* (Beloved Kitsch). Though not completely renouncing a critical approach to the dangers of kitsch, the editors had to acknowledge that 'kitsch has reached modernity' and that 'the modern style is no longer what it once was meant to be, an anti-thesis to kitsch.'[77] In a logical move the following number was published under the title 'Future without style?'

In the GDR, the strict and rigid modernist design ideology was watered down as well, but both the way in which this was done, and the concrete objects that resulted from the adjustment, differed from the above-sketched West German modifications. The main differences were the result of the completely different economic mechanisms operating in the socialist country.

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76   Castillo, 'Domesticating the Cold War', p. 278.
77   'Geliebter Kitsch', *Magnum: Die Zeitschrift für das moderne Leben* 37 (August 1961), p. 46.

Because the socialist state bestowed such an important, educative role to material culture, designers obtained a central role in the production process.[78] It was their task to see to it that the population would be surrounded by the right forms and to develop a national style that was in accord with material culture's progressive function. In order to realise this, it was first of all important to clear the country's existing product landscape. East German designers were asked to sort out capitalism's inheritance, reduce the existing variety of forms and put a halt to objects' 'form-wilderness'.[79] Starting in the late 1950s, an all-encompassing 'assortment clearance' was ordered. Designers were instructed to critically study the country's existing material culture in order to select the most appropriately designed objects, which were then chosen for further production.

Their selection was to leave no room for 'bourgeois' taste preferences or for objects that expressed people's 'desire for prestige' or 'petty bourgeois ambitions.'[80] Prancing and making others green with envy were inappropriate for, and did not fit in with socialist society's egalitarian ideals.[81] Interestingly, soberness, modernism's main ideological form tenet, worked both ways: reducing ornamentations also reduced production costs. Modernist designers' educational mission thus seamlessly embraced the government's main economic goals, and the two parties naturally found each other in a thrifty, frugal, material culture. Although modernist designers generally had much more influence on the production process in the East than in the West, in everyday life the frugality pact between government and designers often broke on factors outside both groups' control. In factories, for instance, it frequently happened that a high-positioned party member decided to adjust a design in a way that fundamentally ran counter to the enlightened perspective sketched so far, usually because (s)he did not like the proposed object's style.[82] Explaining why his designs were often discarded or changed by East German policymakers, party members and people with a high position in industry, an East German designer made clear that these people usually had a totally different taste than professional designers. The former category was often from a poor, working class background,

> where there was only enough money for the bare necessities. For a long time those people had looked up to a somewhat flashy form of comfort, which for them was the ultimate ideal. The interiors they had seen at the mayor and the

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78   See Eli Rubin, 'The Form of Socialism without Ornament. Consumption, Ideology, and the Fall and Rise of Modernist Design in the German Democratic Republic', *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 2 (2006), p. 155-169, especially p. 164.

79   Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie*, p. 56.

80   *KiH* 3 (1971), p. 1.

81   Ibid.

82   Milena Veenis conducted fieldwork on this issue in a medium-sized town in Thuringia during 1993-1994.

notary's house – that was what they wanted: a shiny cabinet with glass windows (...) a beautifully adorned candlestick on top, and a copious couch next to it (...). That was their petty bourgeois image of an ideal home. That was their idea of how things were done by people in a certain position. That was the image of prosperity they would strive for if they obtained such a position themselves. That was what they wanted to spend their money on, so those were the kinds of objects that had to be made. When they were confronted with something that was too modern, too simple, too plain (...) they told us: 'That is not what our people want'. And maybe that was correct, but they themselves did not want it in the first place. The petty bourgeois ideal always remained intact in our country, and whenever some high-ranking party member had something to say, he could change the plans according to his own wishes.

The story shows that people who at the local level were responsible for the state's frugal policy, only subscribed to the *economic* aspects of the thrifty, national ideology. The match between the economic necessity of thrift and most designers' frugal ideas, which was pledged at the national level, was locally frustrated by party bosses and others in power who clung to their old taste preferences, even though these were not sensible or 'sound socialist.' If even a loyal party members' taste was not susceptible to rational consideration, it may be safe to conclude that East German material reality was less susceptible to rational considerations than the lucid socialist ideals would suggest.

The result was that objects were often characterised by odd combinations of strict lines and mismatched ornamentations, showing a striking compromise between functionalist-inspired and (economically) reasonable ideas of designers on the one hand, and 'lagging' petty bourgeois taste preferences of party bosses and most consumers' on the other – a compromise between modern lines and a 'cozy-looking' decor. This was also visible in the way chipboard (a frequently used material in the GDR) was used. Chipboard perfectly fitted in with socialist ideas: it exemplified the optimal use of raw materials, was visibly industrially produced and thus perfectly 'present-day'. Remarkably, almost all chipboard objects and furniture were placarded with a wood motif of plastic foil, suggesting that they were actually made from wood, and thus disguising the product's factory-made character with a 'natural' look.

Most designers knew that their ideas on functional forms expressing present-day modes of production were relatively unpopular. 'In our country, everything always looked the same: straightforward and unadorned. We didn't like that. We preferred objects with a little adornment here, and a little ridge there,' people explained when discussing their former material world. But ridges and adornments were not in line with socialist policy and designers stuck to a rational, more or less ageless ideal according to which form followed function.

At the academy, students even learned to design *contrary to* the somewhat softer, rounded, fashionable (and Western-looking) forms that so many East German consumers desired, Karin, a 35-year old designer, explained:

> These forms were regarded as a genuflection for naive consumers, but consumers were to be educated. That was what needed to be done. And that was what we were for. It was not our task to make what people wanted or liked. Because what they liked and wanted was no design. It had nothing to do with design at all – that was what we learned.

But she, too, frequently had to accept that the academy's ideals notwithstanding, her well-considered designs were embellished with flowery motives and colourful squares once they were taken into production.

Apart from the tension between enlightened ideas and traditional taste preferences, the most important factor influencing the East German material landscape was the GDR's relatively poor economic situation (as compared to the Western countries it was competing with). When discussing material culture's everyday form and socialist ideas on the subject with a highly-educated, prominent member of the SED, he snarled curtly:

> Ideology?? Socialist personality??? Come on! It was all a matter of money! Our objects were ugly, because we couldn't afford anything else. Besides, there was no need to please the eye; everything was sold anyway.

Almost from the beginning, East German production was plagued by deficiencies and shortages, which had a devastating effect on both the quality and availability of consumer goods. It is well known how much effort and time East Germans spent on obtaining everyday goods like clothes and furniture: waiting times were unpredictable, large-scale exchange networks were necessary, people spent a lot of time sewing and repairing things, and East German daily life was characterised by a constant wheeling and dealing in order to obtain the necessary objects.[83]

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83   Ina Merkel, 'Consumer Culture in the GDR, or How the Struggle for Antimodernity Was Lost on the Battleground of Consumer Culture', in Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judt (eds.), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 281-300. See also Milena Veenis, 'Consumption in East Germany: The Seduction and Betrayal of Things', *Journal of Material Culture* 4, no. 1 (1999), p. 79-112; Judd Stitziel, 'Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Culture and the Relationship between State and Society in the GDR', in Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (eds.), *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 253-287; Milena Veenis, *The Scent of Soap and Christmas Parcels: East German Fantasies about Western Consumer Society* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2011).

The insufficient availability and quality of East German goods played a significant role in the population's dissatisfaction and the vigour with which they took to the streets during the famous autumn of 1989. It did not take long before they were able to buy exactly those 'kitschy' objects enlightened designers had always opposed as 'bad taste': old-looking and richly adorned, with pastoral scenes and gold-coloured sham. Modern design's egalitarian creeds notwithstanding, objects carrying the label 'modern' have returned to their *real existierender* place and destiny 'of old': educated middle-class people's homes.