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Sex in the Sitting Room: Renegotiating the Fashionable British Domestic Interior for the Post-Permissive Generation

Abstract

Design history frequently and rather narrowly understands the 1960s as an era in which design was at its most innovative and youthful, challenging convention and removing hierarchical boundaries relating to sex, sexuality, fashion and its objects. Such an explosive description has, within the literature of design and fashion history, left the 1970s as a post-coital decade that style forgot. This paper aims to redress this by critiquing the ways in which fashionable interior design during the early 1970s was promoted as an extension of sexual decadence and sensory experimentation suitable for a post-permissive generation. One might suggest that this is a visual and material move towards a more lasting intimacy between people, spaces and things, indicative of the maturation of permissiveness.

Referring to advertising campaigns, fashion shoots and interiors magazines of the period, the paper aims to establish a correlation between the physical domestic spaces and constructs of the liberated female body. This argument consists of two thematic approaches and discourses emanating from the visual imagery outlined; firstly, the private sphere as an arena for the expression of the exotic and the erotic through the sensual language of touch (the tactile home), and secondly, the woman as both consumer and consumed, subject and object, with the domestic space representative not merely of female taste, but as a body open to inhabitation (or penetration) touch and exploration.

In Britain, where sex is often a subject swept under the carpet, this paper intends to discuss how 1970s interior design exposed and celebrated what lurked beneath the shag-pile.