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

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Biography

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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.

Introduction

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. Indeed, the seemingly garish patterns, man-made fibres and emphasis on kitsch, sits uncomfortably with the Modernist doctrine which informs much design history and discourse. This paper aims to redress this rather short-sighted view, by suggesting that the period was the height of design decadence and a symptom of a post-permissive generation which gave birth to post-modern sensibilities.

By investigating critical themes inherent in domestic interior design of the period such as time, space, authenticity and gender, the paper intends to demonstrate that the 1970s gave rise to innovative understandings of the domestic environment as well as the relationships and roles within. Central to this discourse is the exploration of the ways in which the notion of sensuality and sensual perception became a focus of interior design and how this became manifest in domestic spaces.

Themes in interior design

Interior design, as a profession and business in the 1970s was booming in the UK. Universities had started to offer courses in interior design and designers started to work with new clients, primarily public institutions including hospitals, universities and offices, as well as shops, hotels, bars and so on. These schemes tended to focus on open-plan, stylised architectural layouts, emphasising a design vogue for psychoanalytic approaches to the organisation of people and spaces. Design focus centred on the comfort, both physical comfort and a sense of at 'ease', of the user, which was addressed through adherence to colour theory, lighting, airiness and ergonomic or healthy furniture. One might conclude that this approach extended the safety one might associate with the private arena of the home, to impersonal public environs. It is also possible to suggest that this was an extension of the Modernist design doctrine which promoted a fitness for purpose in objects and spaces, whilst, with a new emphasis on the comfort and well-being of the individual, paved the way for today's user-centred design.

Likewise, in domestic interior design, which is the focus of this paper, comfort, in terms of luxury available to everyone, was at the core of the aesthetic sensibilities of the period. Home, it seemed, was as it had been since the onslaught of industrialisation 200 years earlier, a site of sanctuary, as well as a place in which ones financial 'comfort' could be displayed through a wealth of objects and demonstration of taste. Simultaneously, however, the domestic was evolving into a space for sensory exploration, emphasising what has been

called ‘the tactile home’. This emphasis on the tactile or sensual environment is the focus of this paper, in which the fusion of the old with the new, both stylistically and ideologically, highlights a tentative display of new understandings of the home, women, and their role within it. Indeed, during the 1970s, women were not seen as merely part of the furniture enhancing the aesthetic of the domestic landscape, but had, in certain circumstances, been replaced by it.

Aesthetically, interior design of the period can be seen as indicative of either a confusion or questioning (depending on your perspective) of design motifs, styles, ideas and boundaries, which interrogates the general design history viewpoint that the era was essentially one of non-design; a period overshadowed by the excitement of the obsolescence and avant-garde of the 1960s. Indeed, the years preceding the 1970s had witnessed a design decadence which had focussed on the new, innovative and by association, the throwaway; a here today gone tomorrow frivolity one might only associate with a youthfulness and a desire to obliterate the past, wipe the slate clean and start afresh. Such a standpoint highlights a move towards a society for whom design was not merely ephemeral, but encapsulated instant gratification; innovation and newness were conceptualised, consumed and thrown away, enabling it’s replacement with the next new best thing. Although exciting and vibrant, such wanton over-consumption of goods and images, much like eating junk food, leaves the consumer empty, hungry for more at an increasing rate.

There is no time for reflection, no time to discriminate, no time to experience or feel.

By the 1970s, design and its consumers, appeared over stimulated and exhausted, and perhaps it is this sense of cultural malaise which had led to an understanding of the 1970s as a period of non-innovative or lackadaisical and stagnant design. Partially this might be understood as a reaction to the unstable cultural climate. The 1970s encapsulated a period of social and cultural confusion, of war and rebellion, economic decline (inflation was 27% in 1975) and environmentalism, which fused the local with the global in unprecedented ways. The threat of potential social disarray exemplified by Watergate and the first resignation of a US president, the rise of trade unionism ('the winter of discontent' 1978-9) and impending strikes and accompanying shortages, the horrors of Cambodia and an increasing concern about world energy resources (the 1973 oil crisis) challenged the status quo as never before [1]. The future didn't look great, as the promise of post-war restoration failed to materialise to any great extent. Reaction or resistance to such social instability, or the potential for chaos, as marked by this era, can be demonstrated by a turn towards that which offers stability, and this was marked by increased worldwide conservatism and a fearful nostalgia for the past.

[1] Christopher Booker, *The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade*, London, Allen Lane, 1980, p.4

Likewise, interior design appeared somewhat out-of-place and confused as demonstrated through the eccelecticism of the period. Post-modern philosophy and styling was emerging, fusing high cultural styles with popular cultural forms and history was opening a dressing up box full of styles, motifs, forms and references for designers and home makers to find inspiration from. Indeed, the period witnessed a whole host of style revivals; Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, to such an extent it appeared as if the whole 20th century was being revisited. The period was though not merely characterised by a retro-gazing; history was indeed revisited, but was juxtaposed with a futuristic look to technology through new materials, specifically synthetics such as laminates.

Synthetics and their development really characterised the period; new, user friendly surfaces, such as wipe clean laminates, wallpapers and easy to wash soft furnishings became central to the styles of the period. Like technological innovation throughout the 20th century, new materials were introduced to the public in traditional formats, emphasising their similarity with existing natural forms, not just in terms of 'look', but also in terms of 'feel'. Therefore new finishes and so on were advertised as if they were 'the real thing', i.e. like leather, marble, wood and so on, but cheaper in cost *not* appearance, and frequently these materials were presented in traditionally 'tasteful' and familiar forms or styles, democratising design, style and taste on a mass

scale. Everyone now could afford the latest taste, even if the styles were derivative and nostalgic.

The manufacture of authenticity – designed naturally?

Popular interior design elements repeated this fusion of high cultural form with affordability, by reproducing aspects of historic aristocratic and luxurious taste and fusing it with modern technology, such as man-made fibres, plastics, wipe clean surfaces and so on, which emulated wealth and status. So, synthetic floor tiling was produced to emulate grand mosaics or lavish marbles, whilst wallpapers, became textured, heavily decorated and coloured, referencing the décor of stately homes. Style and design, it appeared, became an exercise in imitation, and this imitation of accepted 'good' or high class taste, became a vehicle for the expression of contemporary technology. This might be construed as an early form of post-modernism, or indeed kitsch, in which the copy becomes subject to copying, and luxury is diffused on a wide scale through re-appropriation and reproduction.

> Since the characteristic that gives the authentic value is its inability to be reproduced, the concept of producing a 'reproduction' of an authentic piece is an impossible and contradictory project. By definition a 'reproduction' is a degraded version of that which it is reproducing. It represents the ultimate modern phenomenon, born out of the transformative conditions made possible by the processes of industrialisation that enabled the multiplication of the 'original' that has variously been thought to democratise access while at the same time increasing the auratic and exclusive authenticity of the original[2]

The notion of the reproduction is essential to an understanding of the way in which traditional patterns and styles continue to remain within the language of

[2] Judy Attfield, *Wild Things*, Berg, 2000, pp.99-100

contemporary design. In essence, the ability to reproduce something which is ostensibly authentic, an original, highlights the objects' desirability to contemporary designers and consumers, i.e. why bother to copy something which is ugly, outdated, poorly designed, and so on? With this in mind, it can be assumed that styles and motifs deemed suitable for reproduction have some kind of cultural value that relates to the contemporary world, either through the communication of ideas and ideals, or, in relation to connosieurship and an institutional understanding of taste.

It is possible to suggest that the past can never be understood as it was originally, and this is the main problem with notion of revival. The past indeed, as David Lowenthal suggests is a 'foreign country[3]', and in order for it to maintain any form of relevance to contemporary society, must 'speak' to the here and now; messages sent have to be received, lessons that could be learned re-learned, and alternatives to present problems, whether social, cultural, political, economic, stylistic and so on, should be presented in a manner which look simultaneously backwards and inwards. In this respect, the maxim that 'history repeats itself' is a clear representation of the value of the past in the present.

The feminist historian, Leonore Davidoff, recognises this quest for the past in the present as a symptom of the alienation of the workforce and the rise in

[3] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, 1985 (1986, 1988, 1990)

multi-national corporations, which turns the seemingly ‘static’ arena of the home into an idealised state. The idealised version of ‘home’ ignited within its occupants, a need for ‘creative home-making’ - which Davidoff sees as ‘farmhouse cookery’ (interestingly, a metaphor developed in the 1972 publication of the *Joy of Sex*) ‘organic gardening’, ‘wine making’ and so on – as a suburban substitute for authenticity[4].

The combined emphasis on nostalgia and an idealised home as a means of establishing security in an unstable climate, can be also addressed as a need to create some sense of authenticity in an increasingly inauthentic world. The sterility, snobbishness and standardisation of suburbia, had been upturned through sex comedies of the period, media stories of wife-swapping, Cynthia Payne’s infamous luncheon voucher suburban sex parties (1978), and general derision through television programmes, had created a disturbed and overtly sexual vision of ‘home’, which not only suggested that taboo behaviour was taking place behind the net curtains, but also that something authentic was missing. Indeed, nostalgia means ‘homesickness’ and this placelessness and longing for an ideal merged inexorably with new socio-cultural attitudes and issues representing a pull between the progressive and the retrogressive.

Alongside this nostalgic yearning was juxtaposed a remnant of the 1960s; a product of a post-permissive generation with a desire for a more mature

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[4] Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*, Polity Press, 1995. p.65

attitude to sexual experimentation, which exerted itself voraciously within interior design. Advertisements for seemingly mundane products such as floor coverings, furniture, crockery, and wallpaper, all exploited the concept of tactility; the feel of the product on the skin inviting ones toes, fingers and bodies to luxuriate in the warmth, depth, quality of new surfaces. The sub-text of image and strap-line are undoubtedly sexual; they encourage sensual and sensuous engagement with products, but also with the home, offering the potential for a higher level of experiential interaction with ones surroundings through touch, and by association a clearer and fulfilling relationship with the private and sensuous self. Frequently, advertisements were aimed at men, even though historically women had been targeted as consumers, presumably as they held the purse strings for larger, more expensive household items, emphasising the feminine attributes and sexiness of furnishings and fittings. The implication was 'a sensual home means a sensual wife', moving the role of the woman to one of sex rather than domestic, goddess.

This was particularly significant in relation to concepts of femininity and the female body. Feminism, which was beginning to have a social impact in relation to social equality, was combined with new personal empowerment surrounding concepts of pleasure and the sexual body. The publication of popularised texts such as *the Female Eunuch*, *The Fear of Flying*, *The Sensuous Woman* and *the Hite Report*, emphasised the significance of sexual pleasure and the female orgasm amidst the middle classes, whilst tabloid

newspapers such as *the Sun* and sex comedies such as the '*Confessions...*', series, focussed on sex as a bastion of working class fun which could be enjoyed by men and women alike (as long as women weren't 'frigid', lesbians, humourless feminists or ugly, like Olive from *On the Busses*), which must be fought for against moral do-gooders and those wishing to deprive others of any sense of pleasure[5]. Sex was certainly on the agenda and filtered more obviously into interior design than ever before.

'Home' derives from Anglo-Saxon and Nordic languages, and is a term which refers not merely to a place, but to a state of mind, and it is from these origins that 'home' as a place of intimacy and privacy emerges. Similarly, the cultural appropriation of the home as a feminine and feminised space, a consequence of Victorian biological determinism, which gendered people, places, behaviours, and so on, as a means of constructing social hierarchy, contributed to a symbolic correlation between woman and home. The feminisation of the domestic interior, for example, manifested itself in shapes, styles, forms, fabrics and motifs, as well as symbolic imagery; floral design, for example, was seen to be an expression of feminine taste as the motifs were drawn from nature, as opposed to masculine culture, whilst swathes of drapery was seen as representative of the drapes concealing the Classical Venus, or, from a Freudian perspective, the folds of female genitalia. Home is also representative of a haven, a place of safety, and is often described as a womb. So essentially, and to refer to a rather crude series of binary opposites, the soft, rounded,

[5] Leon Hunt, British Low Culture, p.26

draped, warm, natural, organic, and so on, was essentially female, and featured highly in domestic interior design. One might see this then as an extension of the female self, the tactile, soft, frivolousness, creating almost another body, to be explored, experienced and touched by the inhabitants.

By the 1970s, the discussion of female sexual pleasure, combined with a desire for a stable haven, idealised and manifested in the locale of the home, was representative of a zeitgeist that embraced domesticity (including the female form) as tactile, sensual and sexual to be enjoyed by men and women alike. Perhaps this was a response to the aging of a permissive generation, but the 1970s saw interior design and the beautifying of the home as increasingly tactile and potentially erotic. Products became an extension of the body, sometimes even acting as substitutes for the female body, and consequently the domestic took on almost fetishistic qualities. Ultimately such advertising stimulated desire in a new way; this was less about 'keeping up with the Jones's' and more about lust induced longing. Consumer goods became associated firmly with desire, and their promotion as 'lifestyle' objects fuelled a desire which gave the consumer access to a world of fantasy, a means of escaping the harsh realities of daily life. As Elizabeth Cowie acknowledged:

> Fantasy itself is characterised not by the achievement of wished-for objects but by the arranging of, a setting out of, the desire for certain objects [6]

[6] Elizabeth Cowie, 'Pornography and Fantasy Psychoanalytic Perspectives', in L Segal & M McIntosh (ed.s) *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, London: Virago, 1992, p.136, quoted in Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion Desire and Anxiety*, London: I B Tauris, 2001, p. 71.

So, consumer goods became, by association, fantasy ‘lifestyle’ choices, stimulating desire, not just for the goods themselves, but for access to a world of fantasy and desirous experience. Essentially, the consumer was seduced by the promise offered by goods. Fantasy in the 1970s was linked inexorably with sex and sensuality, and although this wasn’t a new idea, it manifested itself far more explicitly. Home furnishings and wallcoverings embraced this new and brazen fusion of sex and sensuality by focusing on two areas; firstly fusing the exotic with the erotic, and secondly, by emphasising the potential for the home to be a site of sensual pleasure, an extension of the woman’s body. We might see this as the encapsulation of two opposing ideas which emphasise a nostalgic golden age and a fall[7], a need for security to be found in the past, but one which has no salvation.

Sensual engagement, particularly touch, had previously been (and remains to a certain extent) taboo. We live in a world where we are encouraged not to touch; don’t touch people of a higher or lower class as a mark of respect or in case poverty rubs off on us, don’t touch the sick or the elderly, as disease and age might be contagious, don’t touch people of the opposite or same sex, or the young for fear of sexual impropriety, and so on. Although these restrictions bear the hallmarks of social niceties, they also bear witness to a general fear of our primary sense, touch, a sense which has to be controlled as an expression of personal development and socialisation. In psychoanalytic terms, one might

[7] Leon Hunt, *British Low Culture*, p.5

assess this as the mastery of the ego over the id, the suppression of primary urges in favour of more mature and acceptable actions and behaviours.

Conclusion

It is possible to suggest that the 1970s, as a period of turbulent social and global issues created a climate of instability and fear. Interior design responded to these conditions by wallowing in a decadent and faded glamour associated with the past, or by attempting the recreate more stable times through a nostalgic longing, with interior design merely an aspect of revivalism.

Women, whose seemingly natural place within the home, as both producers and consumers, were superseded by consumer goods, which increasingly were discussed as if they were women or embodied the sensual characteristics of the feminine. Homes became bodies to be explored through the medium of touch.

The pleasure inherent from a tactile home, of surfaces that stimulated the mind, body and eye, whilst recreating experiences reminiscent of the exotic and erotic, equally paid testament for a post-permissive generation's quest for a sense of the 'real' in an increasingly inauthentic world, and of a desire for a place and state of mind which transcended the mundane.