

Domestic Nostalgia.

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Nostalgia in the home is far from being a modern phenomenon. In fact, it has been an integral part of consumer culture since the late 18th century. One only has to look at some of Wedgwood's original products, such as their reproduction Portland vase. This was sold as an exact replica of the real thing, and contemporary advertising claimed that Wedgwood had rediscovered the ancient techniques that went into making it. This was a fallacy however, as it was actually manufactured using a technique that Wedgwood had discovered himself. The early period of the industrial revolution coincided with the first stirrings of major interest in antiquities, which would go some way to explaining Wedgwood's choice of design.

This strand of emulating past styles of design continued to run throughout the 19th century, and even progressive movements by the turn of the 20th century such as the Arts & Crafts and Garden City movements made reference to an idealised past of simple, yet comfortable rural life.

The inter-war period of the 20th century was notable of course for the onset of modern design, which had led to truly striking pieces of architecture and furnishings. However, in Britain, the style proved to be a minority interest. This was an era of a boom in the private housing market, but most of the private homes built during this period were, on

the whole, built speculatively rather than architect-designed, and were cautiously traditional in appearance. Exposed timbering (for decorative purposes, as opposed to structural ones), projecting and bay windows, deep gables and the use of stained glass in door windows were all frequently in evidence, and many homes tended to be a mishmash of styles rather than a coherent pastiche of an era. Even recognisably modern elements were thrown into the pot sometimes, such as the ubiquitous 'sunburst' motif, or the use of sash-and-mullion steel-framed windows.

The 25 years following the Second World War were the era in which modern design was adopted by the masses. Architecturally, this period saw the hitherto unforeseen adoption of clean, adventurous and entirely contemporary design for new homes in both the public and private domains. Homes increasingly featured continental motifs and fittings, such as timber cladding, chalet-style roofs and large picture windows, and older buildings were ruthlessly modernised; fireplaces were removed and blocked over, panelled doors covered over, ceilings lowered and so on. A change occurred in the way people chose to decorate their homes too. Although historical styles were still bought, the fifties and sixties saw an unprecedented growth in the market for modern styled furnishings, frequently in new materials such as Formica, vinyl, foam rubber and polypropylene amongst others. By the end of the 1970s, however, modern design in the home rapidly fell back out of favour to all but a minority.

At this point, we must question why this is. At the end of the war, modern design had been seized upon with great optimism and idealism. New developments were intended to

free people from slums, prefabs, bomb damaged areas and one-or-two room living, whilst technological achievements such as nuclear power, the development of plastics and the construction of new roads solely intended for motor traffic were all seen as symbols of a new era. This widespread adoption of consciously modern design could also be seen as a symptom of unease with the concept of a vernacular style; after all, the idea of design pertaining to the mythologies, accurate or not, of a national identity was uncomfortably close to certain Nazi ideologies. So for a while, modern styles were ubiquitous. It was not long before disillusion started to set in. The 1957 fire at the Windscale nuclear reactor, where a plume of radioactive contamination was released into the atmosphere, shook people up, as did the collapse at the Ronan Point flats eleven years later. As early as 1971, the AA's member's magazine *Drive* wrote about the failure of the redevelopment of Birmingham town centre, which was noted as favouring the motorist over the pedestrian by far too great a margin. The new plastic derived textiles were also showing unfavourable characteristics; from skin sticking to vinyl upholstery to nylon bedding and carpeting generating static and causing people using them to receive mild electric shocks. By the seventies, there was also concern of the environmental impact of these developments, from the lack of biodegradability of plastics to the pollution caused by the burgeoning use of the motor car. All of this caused a considerable erosion of confidence in the 'new' to the eyes of the public.

Since the late sixties, there had also emerged a growing interest in the past, in particular Victoriana and Art Deco. The initial interest would have been for collectors, as items from both eras were still available for pin money during this period, but the commercial

concerns of Laura Ashley and Biba both marketed these two respective periods to notable success. While Laura Ashley are still successful today, dealing mainly in textile-based goods such as clothing and soft furnishings, Biba had a notably wide product range; although starting off as a ladies wear shop, by 1973, the company took over the old Derry and Toms department store in Kensington. Keeping the original deco fittings, the store sold a plethora of merchandise. Even Biba baked beans were available, packaged in a tin with a thirties waitress on the label, or Biba Washing powder, with the image of a black washerwoman smiling while working over a wooden washtub. All the goods were packaged in black or black-labelled containers with gold coloured writing in a thirties font, and put over an image that was both playful and nostalgic. By 1975, however, Biba had closed down, and although many writings cite the extremity of the store as the reason, the founder, Barbra Hulaniki in her book *From A to Biba* lays the blame at the feet of Dorothy Perkins, the company who owned the largest stake in the store at the time. She is adamant that Dorothy Perkins tried to sanitise the store, which affected its unique ambience, and then pulled the plug on it when many other businesses were suffering due to the various industrial disputes going on in the country at the time¹.

Despite the recent media portrayal of the 1980s as the ‘designer decade’, this was in fact the decade where tastes started to shift back to the ‘traditional’, or at least, a liberal and idealised interpretation of it. Despite the influence of Biba in the 70s, inspiration tends to be restricted to Victorian or Edwardian imagery, middle class at that and rarely urban. And products using this imagery are not merely updated reproductions; even the most contemporary item can derive an association with the past. A case in point is the range of

¹ Hulanicki, Barbara. *From A to Biba*. London; Comet, 1983. P 158.

'Country Diary Of An Edwardian Lady' merchandise which gained mass popularity in Britain in the early to mid 1980s. The book that the range had been inspired by had first been published in 1977. It consisted of a previously unpublished woman's journal from 1906, a certain Edith Holden, who had kept a record of the flora and fauna of the English countryside through the changing seasons, through paintings and words. It proved to be a great success, and spawned a plethora of related products. Products like wallpaper or bed linen in period designs made sense, but the range also incorporated goods like electric kettles and toasters. These latter items did not however emulate their Edwardian forbearers though. They were essentially entirely contemporary appliances, based on the standard Russell Hobbs range, but in muted colours with floral motifs.

Domestic design that harks back to another era rarely concerns itself with such matters as historical accuracy. It is also important to note that with reproduction or retro-styled goods, any attempts at placing the style within a period are only skin-deep. Under the surface, in terms of construction techniques and mechanisms, there is little to differentiate 'period' designs from utterly contemporary ones.

Another example of this, although the idea dates back to the 1920s, is the flame-effect electric fire. Long regarded as being in rather dubious taste, the basic design principle of a flickering orange bulb to simulate the visual effect of a proper coal fire nevertheless still survives today, although in this age of centrally heated homes, it has become a rarer

sight. In part, it seems to have been replaced by flame-effect gas fires, which are both cheaper to run and more realistic looking.

It is interesting to note that there are distinct parallels between the thirties and the eighties in terms of the private housing market. Both were boom periods for private home ownership, and in both periods, both traditionally styled furniture, fittings and design proved to be the dominant style. The general mood was that modern equalled brash, while 'olde worlde' meant respectable. In the latter period, this led to a peculiar phenomenon, especially on council estates where tenants had recently gained the right to buy their home usually at very low prices, a policy brought in by the then-current Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. People were keen to differentiate their homes from the homes of their tenant neighbours, and improvements were frequently carried out, such as the addition of extensions, new kitchens and bathrooms, double glazing and so on. But more interesting was the habit of installing 'period' features such as leaded windows, panelled and varnished front doors (grandparents) and most notoriously of all, fake stone cladding. These all proved popular, despite the application of 19th century vernacular looking distinctly out of place on a humble 20th century terraced home. And such features were also being found on the private housing estates of the eighties and nineties, which use the imagery of rural tradition to a far heavier effect than was even the case in the thirties. A case in point is the Woodlands estate, built in the Village of Sandford, Dorset in 1989. This is a large estate on the edge of a village, built within a small forest, the construction of which required annihilation of most of the foliage. All the roads are named after trees, and the style of houses all

conformed to an olde-worlde stereotype of leaded windows, canopies over front doors and fake half timbering.

But why do so many people favour the traditional over the modern? It would appear that to many, the past offers reassurance and security. In *Traditional Interiors*, which is a book from the USA published by the Architectural Review, the notion is suggested that

“In a marvellously comforting way, the past is forever there; the rules are established; the mistakes have been eliminated. A sort of purification has taken place, and the trends of the moment have been eliminated”².

The idea of the traditional being away from the realm of fashion is an important one when considering architecture, or home fittings and furnishings. Nothing dates as quickly as the ultra contemporary, and as the purchase of a home and/or its furnishings represent a considerable outlay, people tend to be wary about that which will date quickly.

Traditional designs are a safe option; while they will never be terribly fashionable, they probably will never be particularly unfashionable either.

Another interesting parallel to note is that both the inter war years and the period from the eighties on have both been periods of remarkable growth in domestic consumer technologies. While the earlier period saw the introduction of scheduled radio and limited television broadcasts and increasing ubiquity of the telephone, the later one has so far

² Rense, Paige [Ed]. *Traditional interiors*. Los Angeles : Knapp, 1979.

seen mobile phones, powerful computers, the emergence of the internet and a glut of television channels all become a part of everyday life. The unprecedented levels of mass communication achieved in both of these eras served to considerably alter perception of time and space-speeding life up as well as making information ever more accessible. In a world where the unfamiliar constantly becomes the normal, people can feel the need for something tangible and familiar to grasp on to. The future is not the certainty of an exciting new world that it was in the two decades following the cessation of WW2. Indeed, the problems associated with modern design and architecture of this period are well remembered, and add to a suspicion of the 'new.' Even the lack of regional variation in recently built estates can be perceived as offering reassurance. In an age where people's jobs can easily lead to them relocating to an unfamiliar part of the country, the similarity these developments have to each other almost eliminates the need to get used to the new area, which is something that seems to have been happening over the last couple of decades in terms of global standardisation as well.

The irony is, though, that people who are quite happy to live in a modern 'traditional' home, with 'traditional' furniture could also be the kind that would turn down living in a genuinely old (but modernised) house or owning antique furniture. This is illustrated in a brilliant quote from a book on the Channel Four series *Sign of the Times* (broadcast in 1992) which was a show about the nation's taste in home décor. One of the participants said that "I'm put off real antiques because to me they look old and sort of spooky³."

³ Barker, Nicholas and Martin Parr. *Signs of the Times: A portrait of the nation's Tastes*. Manchester; Cornerhouse Publications, 1992.

In summary, domestic nostalgia, despite its detractors, offers the consumer a retreat from the high speed world that we live in. The mistakes made post war in relation to 'the new' have remained in people's consciousness for a long time, and even today, the traditional is associated with quality, and a slower, more peaceful world. It is a completely idealised vision of the past, but because of this rose tinted depiction, a home built or decorated in this style provides a symbolically safe environment for its occupiers.