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Class Anxieties at the Britain Can Make It Exhibition: The Uses of (Design) Literacy* (* with apologies to Richard Hoggart)

The Council of Industrial Design (COID) and British design establishment, through its literature and exhibitions, consistently reinforced the view that good taste in design was a disposition segregated by class. Archive documents show that the Britain Can Make It (BCMI) exhibition and accompanying COID publications, were to be instrumental in “raising the public to a state of alert sensibility and giving it a lead” and relied on the hope that the visiting public would “get the idea for itself”¹ and subsequently make better taste decisions. Unfortunately, when left to ‘get the idea for itself’ the public would so often get entirely the wrong idea that the necessity for intervention became clear. This paper examines the uses of ‘design literacy’ in the BCMI exhibition and the continued failure of the project seventy years on.

While the “alert sensibility” of the British public was something to be hoped for it was far from being a reality. The somnambulistic character of the British consumer, still recovering from the strictures of war is evident in the slightly exasperated tone of these remarks. In addition the notion of an alert British public was a contradiction in terms for many at the Council. The COID understood that reviving their interest in consumption might be difficult but the issue of their *sensibility* was more important. Would consumers identify with and actually recognize objects of good taste, well designed and consistent with the COID message. Without examples and texts to guide them they may not become design literate. More to the point without recreations of domestic scenes to guide them they could be hopelessly lost.

Exhibition culture was directed to exemplary displays that imprinted themselves on the working class psyche and encouraged their ideational capacities. As others have shown in their analysis of the exhibition, BCMI was

¹ Council of Industrial Design Annual Report, March 1946. Design Council Archive, Brighton University

a targeted and deeply paternalistic attempt at directing the working class toward good taste.²

The need for some form of design literacy was essential to achieve this goal. Indeed 'design literacy' was to be a government watchword for many years post BCMI and embodied frequent vain attempts to reform working class taste. That the working classes were in need of improvement was something of a given in postwar Britain and their resistance equally inevitable with their own design culture openly deemed tasteless by the British establishment.

BCMI was to be used as an opportunity to instill in working class consumers the advantages of the good taste society to Britain with the expectation that it would eventually inform purchases and subsequent lifestyle. These class expectations were clearly signaled through the exhibition's signage for the Furnished Rooms. The Furnished Rooms displays themselves clearly demarcated what type of furnishings, fabrics or decoration would be appropriate to your class. Each room was carefully labeled and the class of its potential occupant directly identified on the accompanying signage:

THE FAMILY Barrister at Law, collects books, plays bridge, his wife gives musical parties.

Imaginary occupant of kitchenette in a small flat designed by F Gibberd FRIBA, AMTPI, for the Furnished Rooms Section. The Occupant Single woman, a dietitian at a hospital and an excellent cook.

Dining-room in a small suburban villa. Designed by David Booth, ARIBA, NRD. A young curate, who is a keen naturalist and a great reader, has a wife who likes to collect modern pottery, three children, who do their homework in the dining room - and not much money. The dining-room designed for them has the whole wall adjoining the kitchen designed for service - the oak sideboard is in a recess between glass fronted shelves painted white, on which china

² Patrick Joseph Maguire, and Jonathan M. Woodham, *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain: the 'Britain Can Make It' Exhibition of 1946*, 1998 (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988); Penny Sparke, *Did Britain Make it?: British Design in Context, 1946-86*, 1986 (London: Design Council,)

can be placed from the kitchen and taken out in the dining-room. The chairs are upholstered in red.

Living room with kitchen recess in a small house designed by Mrs Darcy Braddell. THE FAMILY Storeroom clerk, middle-aged, collects stamps, reads thrillers, regular picturegoer. His wife, same age and interests. Their daughter turned twenty-one, loves excitement. Their son, schoolboy and aircraft spotter.

Kitchen with dining recess. Designed by Frederick MacManus for imaginary occupation by an Architect and his wife and small son. The furniture is manufactured by the Furniture Industries Ltd. The wallpaper is blue grey with a white star design, the curtains have a yellow rose design by Graham Sutherland. The pendant light fitting is of pierced copper.

This kitchen of a cottage in a modern mining village, designed by Miss Edna Mosely ARIBA, THE FAMILY A middle aged coal miner, his wife and their three children.

A living room with a dining recess in a house near a small country town. THE FAMILY Bank manager, keen fisherman. His wife, a Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiast.

A bed-sttting room in a London apartment block designed by TAL Belton. BA, ARIBA, The Occupant. Single man, sportsman and sports commentator at Broadcasting House.

Different furnishings and furniture were presented in each tableau. The signage with captions written by John Betjeman and illustrated by Nicholas Bentley, added to the message with the written vignette amplified by an illustration of each scenario. Unmistakable and clearly partitioned each possible class division and taste was shown. And all this despite not once naming their class, it was simply implied and understood. All visitors needed to do was find their type or perhaps potentially identify the type they might like to be.

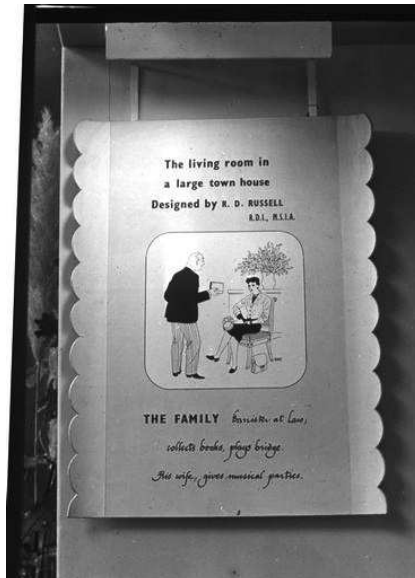


Fig.1 Exhibition signage accompanying the living room in a large town house designed by R.D Russell: one of the examples of Furnished Rooms at the 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition, 1946.

Inherent Good Taste

Try as they might to avoid saying it outright, the design establishment, through its literature and exhibitions, consistently reinforced the view that design was a disposition segregated by class. That taste was an attribute of good breeding and social status was understood and frequently made explicit in exhibitions and literature. The exhibition vehicle was used extensively to promote and project, through living space reconstructions, the extraordinary benefits of design in constructing working class lives, while at the same time pointing to the significant points of differentiation in how that might be achieved.

However, in the Britain Can Make It exhibition we can see evidence of a new domestic narrative for the working class. In the signage in the exhibition (see Fig.1 above and Fig. 2 below), we see clear and potent descriptions of the class character attached to the domestic scene. The sign for the room of an upper middle-class family reads:

The living room in a large town house designed by R.D Russell. THE FAMILY barrister at Law, collects books, plays bridge, his wife gives musical parties.

The other, a sign for the home of an upper working class family the legend reads:

The living room with kitchen recess in a small house designed by Mrs Darcy Braddell. THE FAMILY Storeroom clerk, middle-aged, collects stamps, reads thrillers, regular picturegoer. His wife, same age and interests. Their daughter turned twenty-one, loves excitement. Their son, schoolboy and aircraft spotter.

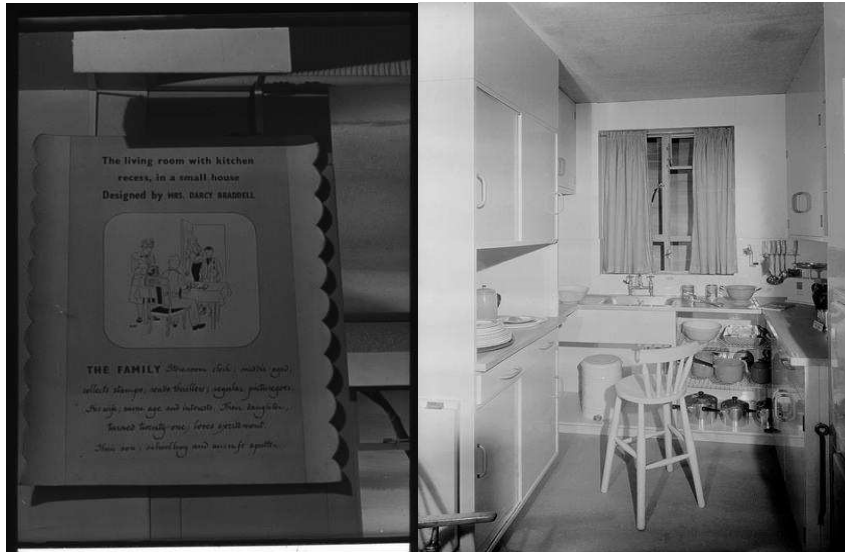


Fig. 2 Left Signage for the living room with kitchen recess in a small house designed by Mrs Darcy Braddell: one of the Furnished Rooms at the 'Britain Can Make It' Exhibition, 1946.

Fig.3 Right Photograph of furnished room showing the kitchen recess, designed by Mrs Darcy Bradell.

To deny that there was a class agenda attached to this exhibition would seem to be somewhat redundant. The exhibition was closely documented by members of the Mass Observation unit³ who mapped in detail the class of visitors who attended, providing ample data to give both government and design luminaries alike, pause for thought. Without doubt a most significant statistical analysis and extraordinary collection of data on taste and the working class, the Mass Observation teams' findings were something of a revelation:

³ See publications from 1937 – 1950, Mass Observation Unit; Hubble, *Mass Observation and Everyday Life*:

The most widely represented class was very definitely the artisan working class. Only 1 in 200 said that they thought the exhibition was bad. A dock worker's wife expressed approval of the plastic kitchen cabinets because she thought "They do keep the mice out."⁴

Mrs. Darcy Braddell, designer of the furnished room described as 'Living room with kitchen recess in a small house for a storeroom clerk', Fig 2 and Fig.3 above, expressed her views on the working class home and its design in many forums and in many modes. Well known in the design establishment she shared the perception of the homes of the working class in Britain before, during and after World War II as cluttered, disorganized and dirty even if she was reluctant to admit it. In the fifth of a series of twelve lectures given at the Royal Society of Arts in 1942, entitled 'Common Sense In Furniture Design', she refers to her work for the Council for Art and Industry that analyzed 'The working class home: its furnishing and equipment':

.....and our task was to furnish, at a minimum cost, a working class home (at the last lecture in this series I remember hearing Mr. Gloag take exception to this manner of cataloguing the standard of a house - I agree with him, it is distasteful - but at the moment I can find no better substitute for it).⁵

John Gloag, had been the Chair of the previous lecture, and had commented:

There is a touch of pauperisation about that phrase which is resented very much by the people who live in those houses and by many other people also. Let us describe the houses in terms of their accommodation, and then we shall get a true view of whether they are fit for anybody to live in.⁶

This apparent concern on the part of John Gloag for the lot of the working class (he was not always so generous) was mixed with an almost inevitable acceptance of the class divisions that would play a part in what had become

⁴ Extract from Mass Observation Report for the BCMI exhibition, 1946, Design Council Archives, Brighton University

⁵ Mrs Darcy Braddell, RSA Lecture 5, Common Sense in Furniture Design, February 11, The Post War Home: Its Interior and Equipment Lecture Series, 1942, RSA Papers, RSA Library and Archive

⁶ John Gloag, RSA Lecture 4, Adaptation of Design to Standardisation and Mass Production, The Post War Home: Its Interior and Equipment Lecture Series, January 28 1942, 1942, RSA Papers, RSA Library and Archive

the task on everyone's mind, that of rebuilding the homes of Britain and the taste of British working class society while saving us all from the horrors of the working class domestic interior furnished with faux antiques. Inherent good taste in the upper classes would be evident in their inherited material wealth and family traditions, whereas the hand-me-downs and bric-a-brac of the working classes represented an ongoing problem of tastelessness and sentimentality. Their choice in types of furnishing was perceived as dirty, unhygienic, ugly and disorganized, much like the working classes themselves.

Sometimes disguised, but more often not, the depth of anxiety surrounding class politics and issues of class identity betrayed a deep distrust and fear of the social changes brought about through increased industrial activity and the postwar consumer culture that developed as a result. The important new role the working class would play in transforming postwar British industry and society demanded a changed persona - that of the *aesthetic working class citizen*.

Those characteristics that made the working class wholesome, good-hearted and honest were to be converted into sensitive, educated and moral qualities. The segregation of tastes in class terms was also the partitioning of design and desire. To segregate the working class was to put distance between them and the upper and middle classes and to maintain the necessity for this division in goods. The working class had a domestic culture of its own, made by themselves for their own understanding and consumption but widely scorned by the design establishment, who failed to see its value. It was not fabricated or manufactured for them, but constituted of very varied interests and by a certain degree of resistance to imposed values.

In many ways this made their social mores more or less impenetrable to the outside observer. Cultural and social attitudes formed from labour traditions and work occupations, agrarian backgrounds and industrial contexts, familial ties and associations, figured strongly in the composition of working class material cultures. Fundamentally, working class taste is not bad taste it is simply working class taste. It is just as varied and idiosyncratic as taste

among other social groups, subject to the same variations that come with locality: North or South, urban or rural.⁷

The Uses of (Design) Literacy and the Domestic Interior

Observations made by the design establishment about the over-ornamented and patterned, of fripperies and meretricious products that constituted the landscape of the working class home and its decoration, were insensitive to the meaningful narratives that these represented.

The works produced by Dennis Chapman⁸ and Richard Hoggart⁹ were in stark contrast to this message about working class taste. Instead they celebrated difference while documenting the shifting nature of authentic working class taste and domestic conditions, exposing the premise for their style and tastes, analyzing working class domestic interiors and objects taking into account the culture that produced them. At the same time as Willmott and Young were working with residents in Bethnal Green¹⁰, Richard Hoggart was critiquing the working class culture he had once occupied and escaped.

Hoggart was realistic about the problems that the working classes presented. If the working classes were to become new model citizens then they must have the taste to match. Persuading them to it was an uphill task. Hoggart describes the working class character in this respect. It may well have been much the same for the middle and upper classes too as ideas on taste evolved but Hoggart is clear about the non-participatory nature of the working classes:

The working classes have a strong natural ability to survive change by adapting or assimilating what they want in the new and ignoring the rest.¹¹

⁷ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957)

⁸ Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home, Dennis Chapman, 1949

⁹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957)

¹⁰ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, Penguin, 1957

¹¹ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 17

Questioning visitors about the impact of the BCMI exhibition on taste by MO revealed that the message had indeed found its mark amongst the target audience:

The most widely represented class was very definitely the artisan working class. Unskilled workers were far more definite in their answers and the majority of them volunteered the information that their ideas or tastes definitely had been altered.¹²

But whether they hoped for changes to the tastes of visitors were long lived was the real issue. A new type of citizen may well have been the ambition for the exhibitions of new design, but more often than not the same citizen emerged from them, warts and all, their poor taste still intact and the education process was once more set in motion to meet a public oblivious to the message of the modern. The newly-wed, setting up home for the first time, would all too often follow tradition and did this in spite of pressure from retailers and the offer of hire purchase, which so often became the route to ownership for many working-class families. As Hoggart observes:

But though the furniture calls itself modern and may use new materials, it must embody the same assumptions as to the furnishing of a “really homely” room as the older things bought by the customers’ grandparents.....It is a cluttered and congested setting, a burrow deeply away from the outside world.¹³

This perhaps accounts for the persistence of furniture types denounced and decried by the design establishment, and the role that complicity between the retailer and purchaser played in prolonging the enduring popularity certain goods. Perhaps it was this intransigence that necessitated the production of so much political propaganda around design and its tasteful consumption.

Hoggart’s assessment of the working class domestic interior gets to the truth, engaging as it does with the whole environment as a reflection of a way of life:

¹² Mass Observation Report, Extract from ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition interviews, 1946, Design Council Archive, Brighton University

¹³ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 17 - 20

Though it may seem muddled and sprawling, the design can be seen, ensured by an unsophisticated and unconscious but still strong sense of what a home is for.¹⁴

Mass Observation reported on another exhibition, the 'Register Your Choice' exhibition in 1952, and their findings support Hoggart's observations. Given the choice between a living/dining room decorated in 'the "contemporary" style' or that furnished and decorated with 'popular items in current production' the working class public chose the latter:

It seems evident that as yet many people- probably most - judge furniture in terms of its apparent comfort and solidity, and distrust the capacity of contemporary styles to provide these advantages too.There is much failure even to appreciate the aesthetic attractions of contemporary styles, much emotional resistance to this unfamiliar manner, much tendency to withdraw into the security of the familiar.....¹⁵



Fig. 4 Composite image showing the two living/dining room settings designed by Phoebe de Syllas, in the 'Register Your Choice' exhibition, 1952. Top: current production, bottom: contemporary style.

'Emotional resistance' is exactly what it was, and, as Hoggart would observe, was a product of fundamental class differences in the understanding of the home and domestic functions. His description of the domestic space of the working class was exactly that which raised anxiety and opprobrium amongst design reformers:

¹⁴ Ibid, 23

¹⁵ Extract from Mass Observation report in David Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951-1957: Tales of a New Jerusalem* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2009) 667

The living room is the warm heart of the family and therefore often slightly stuffy to a middle-class visitor. It is not a social centre but a family centre.¹⁶

The 'family centre' of the working class home would not correspond to the modernist model, neither would it demonstrate the lightness of touch and clean, new materials of the contemporary form. It would continue to assert its identity through 'popular items in current production', however heavy, overstuffed and over-embellished they may have been. Emotional resistance to the contemporary style was also resistance to forced changes to social organization and living arrangements brought about by relocation to new homes and housing estates.

The portrayal of the working class domestic interior and way of life in British working class society and culture of the 1950s in texts such as *The Uses of Literacy* was somewhat out of step with the desired changes to British taste that were expected to be brought about through design literacy. The exhibition tableaux of Furnished Rooms at the BCMI were in competition with the furniture showrooms where the working classes bought or hired their furniture and furnishings. Although the 'make do and mend' mentality was never far away in the working class home, the larger domestic spaces of the new housing estates were 'filled up' and shaped by what was available, not necessarily what was considered appropriate. In the following account of moving into a new home utility furniture and parents' cast-offs were still in evidence, but were now accompanied by fresh purchases from the 'hire purchase' shop and the so called 'never-never' payment schemes:

The hire purchase we took on was 2/6 per week. I remember telling the kids to go up the stairs in bare feet. This was of course because we did not have stair carpet. The same thing in the "lounge": NO carpet, or much else for that matter. This is where [hire purchase] came in as bit by bit we "got on". I know that because of the fact that we all had more space to fill we were able to expand our ideas. I also remember us having a Club Cheque for one shilling a week over 20 weeks, which the agent came to the house to collect on Fridays. This was for our clothing.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 19

¹⁷ Interview with Subject 1, conducted December 2010

Having to 'expand our ideas' was to be hoped for, but it had to be in the general direction of good taste and improved demeanour. A desire for new social structures of integrated slum dwellers and non-slum dwellers, alluded to by Silkin in the New Towns bill of 1945, was subsequently documented in Chapman's 1955 *The Home and Social Status*.¹⁸ Hoggart's detailed description of the hire purchase showrooms also strikes a chord:

At first glance these are surely the most hideously tasteless of all modern shops. Every known value in decoration has been discarded: there is no evident design or pattern; the colours fight with one another; anything new is thrown in simply because it is new. There is strip-lighting together with imitation chandelier lighting; plastics, wood and glass are all glued and stuck and blown together; notice after blazing notice winks, glows and blushes luminously. Hardly a homely setting.¹⁹

If *The Uses of Literacy* worked to reclaim the differences in aesthetics and taste amongst the working class, then *The Home and Social Status* worked equally hard to transcribe their meaning. As Dennis Chapman explained in a paper given to the Council of Industrial Design's Furniture Design conference held at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in July 1949:

..but if an objective appraisal of a number of homes is made, as was done in the case of our parlour study, it is found that in each room if the observer will stand in the appropriate position with the correct orientation he will know that no arrangement of furniture, plants, ornaments, bowls or curtains is accidental.²⁰

Purposeful decisions, then, were being made in the home, with careful arrangement of what was perceived by critics like Darcy Braddell to be the *wrong furniture*. Darcy Braddell concerned herself with low-rental houses, as she saw an inevitable postwar rise in their numbers and an opportunity not to be overlooked to make some serious inroads into exerting control over the domestic arrangements of the working class:

What an opportunity, then, has arisen for the solution of part of this general problem of the

¹⁸ Dennis Chapman, *The Home and Social Status* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955)

¹⁹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957) 76

²⁰ Dennis Chapman, *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home*, Council of Industrial Design Furniture Design Conference, Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), July 1949, 17

furnishing of the low-rental house!²¹

In addition, the new streamlined conditions would also achieve that long sought-after goal of regulating behaviour within the home, and with it the expulsion of the less desirable items bought by the working classes and the introduction of the purely functional. This was unlikely to happen and a frustrated Braddell chides the working classes for, of all things, their snobbery:

To name another instance of snobbery - this time on the part of the public, the “three-piece suite” is bought by many who can ill afford it, more for the mark of social prestige which its possession confers, than for whatever use they may hope to get out of it.²²

Chapman comments upon the ubiquity of the three-piece suite in the working class home. It is his observation of the need for this to be considered precisely as a status issue in the furnishing of both the bedroom and the parlour that is in marked difference to that of Braddell:

Although function enters into the decision to purchase many 3-piece suites, pianos and occasional tables, and carpets, social status is, without doubt, the main consideration.²³

In denying the working class any aesthetic sensibilities of their own, and regarding their need for objects that conveyed status as unnecessary, the thrust of these remarks was persistently about cleaning out all the less than satisfactory clutter they accrued. In direct contrast to this, Chapman was the first to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies and importance of the arrangement of the working class home:

The arrangement of furniture, ornaments, pictures, window draping and domestic equipment against a background of walls and wallpaper or structural details of the home, and the planned manipulation of lighting is a most important folk art of our culture.²⁴

If E.P. Thompson had identified the artisan character of the working classes in the nineteenth century²⁵, then Hoggart and Chapman allow us to recognize the new working class sensibility brought about by the political, health and

²¹ Mrs Darcy Braddell, RSA Lecture 5, Common Sense in Furniture Design, February 11, 1942, RSA Papers, RSA Library and Archive

²² Ibid.

²³ Chapman, *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home*, 29

²⁴ Chapman, *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home*, 30

²⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York: Vintage, 1963

education reforms of the mid-twentieth century. The manifestation of working class culture was no longer confined. It was to be celebrated and revealed in all its diverse forms as worthy of attention. The resonance of this new working class identity had begun to be felt in drama, writing and music of the 1950s and inspired a change in approach and a reappraisal of the stereotype of the coarse, rough nature of working class identity.

The Aesthetics of the Working Class

Finally, the recognition that there was indeed a definite working class culture and that its traits were distinct and discernible would be a turning point in the approach to understanding how working class taste was expressed. The early work of Mass Observation, the research conducted by Dennis Chapman and others identified the aesthetics of daily life in the working class home revealing a complicated and intricate system of taste.

This was pointed out in Chapman's paper *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home* and signaled a wholly different perception and understanding of the working classes and their homes. *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home* was, later published alongside other research in *The Home and Social Status* in 1955. In the paper we see some of the very first statements of support for a working class culture and for the need to understand the functions of the working class home as unique and particular. It is in reference to the issue of the development of working class family home, though, that his remarks have resonance for this discussion.

Chapman acknowledged the vital role that the aesthetic interests of the family play in making choices about furniture. Whereas the notion of the existence of any aesthetic capability at all in the working classes had been denied by much of the design establishment, here he states that these aesthetic capabilities are being used, and also just as frequently derailed by salesmen anxious to shift interest to goods they considered more suitable. He is specific about this in terms of the expression of these abilities:

.....thus decisions will frequently be “irrational” from the outside point of view and the decision which appears best from the housewife’s point of view will rarely fulfil the criterion of Gordon Russell, for example, who suggests that a housewife should say to herself when viewing something new, “would it be suitable in my house? Would it work?” It is generally based on factors infinitely more complex than this somewhat naïve appraisal.²⁶

In the section of the paper that deals with ‘The Development of New Emotional Needs within the Family’, Chapman’s analysis of 51 parlours in working class homes reveals with stunning clarity of observation the real life and real needs of the working classes in their homes. Of the decorative elements in the home he states that

.....many of its contents are possessions which have a symbolic or ritual value. There will be vases and ornaments which are commemorative purchases made on the honeymoon or other holidays. These ornaments are often difficult to appreciate aesthetically or from the point of view of utility, and there is an obvious field of anthropological investigation here awaiting study.²⁷

This prescient statement was of course entirely the case, and Chapman laid down the foundations for the research that would follow and indeed for contemporary Material Culture studies. In Chapman’s research there is also a unique assessment of the growing aesthetic capabilities of the working class housewife, and specifically the expression of emotional needs and ‘romantic interest’, as it is expressed in the bedroom. His clear assessment of the resistance to built-in cupboards and wardrobes rests on accepting that these are not rational but emotional decisions. Thus forcing an overstuffed three-piece bedroom suite into a room already equipped with built- in furniture produces overcrowding but satisfies an emotional need.

Chapman encourages the designer and architect to understand the complexity of the home and equally accept that ‘elements of fantasy’ are at work in the *emotional* choices made about furnishing. He might also perhaps

²⁶ Dennis Chapman, *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home*, Council of Industrial Design Furniture Design Conference, Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), July 1949, 24

²⁷ Dennis Chapman, *Families, Their Needs and Preferences in the Home*, Council of Industrial Design Furniture Design Conference, Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), July 1949, 24

be exerting a plea to see the working class as real people with emotional needs, rather than as a problem to be solved. As he observes, with somewhat dry wit:

He (the designer) should recognize that affection is something to be valued and encouraged and that the function of furniture in this situation is not to provide an occasion for the appreciation of the relations between rectangles of different sizes in different planes, or even the qualities of uninterrupted surfaces, but should be designed to contribute to the sense of occasion in the marriage.²⁸

A Matter of Taste

In attempting to draw this discussion to a conclusion it is difficult to know what to say about the consequences of the design literacy projects promoted through exhibitions like BCMI or accompanying texts. The urgency with which the projects were pursued, the language of the reformers, their disappointed tone, and the barely concealed contempt for their target audience all lead to the conclusion that this was a lost cause from the outset. In the event, to all intents and purposes, the British public refused to participate in the desired way although still keenly aware of how taste was changing around them and because of them. In paying no attention to the design reformer's propaganda around taste the working classes developed and sustained a singular set of characteristics that were by no means homogenous and that came to epitomize their class. Spurred on by more serious considerations in daily life than their taste they invented for themselves a state of class conditions that contained within it recognizable working class motifs and attitudes. The conservation of their culture was an unspoken task expressed in their everyday design choices, subject to change from one generation to another and influenced by social movement within and without their own group. Whereas the government and other design organizations put good taste in design at the centre of things, those experiencing it had little or no point of reference for what made it so crucial.

²⁸ Ibid, 27

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