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## **The Aroma of Bad Taste: the atmosphere of the Working Class home and its representation in the Literature of Design Reform.**

“I always feel discouraged after I have visited the North, as I have been doing lately, because that brings home to me the brutal ignorance of industrialists, workers and all who live in those sooty hells of the North Midlands. I am beginning to think of the Council of Industrial Design as a form of missionary enterprise, but, my God, there are a lot of cannibals.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines the representation of the everyday working class home in a set of literatures that strive to capture an atmosphere made foul by the occupant's execrable taste. I wish to examine the domestic advice given in the literature of design reform with a discussion of the *dirty aesthetics* of the British working class, and their perceived lack of both moral substance and physical hygiene. The paper takes as its starting point a group of design reform lectures and texts presented and published between 1935 and 1949. Some were emphatic about the troubled dirty persona of the working class and their homes while others defended what they perceived as working class culture. I also refer to the term *dirty aesthetics* and I use this term to indicate the *particular type of taste* the working class were seen as possessing.

The authors of many design reform texts used them to illuminate a world of dirt amongst those who inhabited the slums of the 1930s and who subsequently escaped into new social housing in the 1940s and 50s. This very clear address to the working class is at its most explicit in references to the disorderly home or slum. Maintaining class boundaries and the correct social status of the individual through aspects of taste and order was the express purpose of the design reformers. During the 1930s and 1940s confidence in their own social status and therefore their position in the social hierarchy belied their lack of awareness of how small a group they, the design reformers, themselves represented.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from John Gloag in *Managing British Design Reform: Fresh Perspectives on the Early Years of the Council of Industrial*, Jonathan Woodham, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1996), pp. 55-65

It is this lack of awareness and their many anxieties about the state of the very large portion of the population they were different from, and indifferent to, at this time that constructs this discourse. In addition, that the working class might desire to assume the mode of life of the middle and upper classes and aspire to their tastes was an assumption made without any real investigation of evidence to the contrary.

The displays of indifference to the plight of the slum dweller shown by these writers and their insistence on Modernist solutions to the housing crisis were founded in their continual anxieties about dirt and contamination. There was an overtly mysophobic view of the taste of the British working classes and this fear of dirt or contamination applied not only to the working class home and the tasteless object that took pride of place on many a mantle piece, but to the working class character itself variously described as feckless, dirty and shiftless, and in more recent times scrounging.

The stench of everyday working class life is evidenced again and again in many types of British literature. George Orwell would observe and capture the fetid atmosphere of working class domestic circumstances in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937, but he would also at least try to acknowledge their plight. At the other end of the scale, and at the same time, design reformers such as Elizabeth Denby, Darcy Braddell and Anthony Bertram were suggesting methods not only to sanitise the working class home, both literally and visually, but in doing so were hoping to cleanse the bad taste of its occupants. When the project of Modernism finally took hold in Britain in the interwar years clean lines quickly became synonymous with clean lives. It was not just matters of personal hygiene that would so exercise the design reformers but essentially *the aroma of bad taste*.

Anthony Bertram's slightly obsessive desire to remake the working class fits a little too closely within a eugenics framework. This allegiance to social cleansing was not unusual, even among socialist thinkers during the 1930s. Indeed, Bertram's central problem, before we reach his works on design, is with the social structures and less-than-healthy lifestyles of the lower classes.

He expressed these views very clearly in his works on design that first appeared in 1935. The eugenics debate had been attached to the working class long before this, but both fascist and socialist political ideologies crept uncomfortably close to suggesting 'cleansing' the working class in the UK, as publications and political debate would show during this period.

Bertram's enraged attack on the poor design of electric fires and their honest or dishonest identity is indicative of much of his critique of the nature of daily objects:

I have seen bad imitations of wrought iron basket fires, filled with bad imitations of coal or logs, and fitted with an electric *light*. (Bertram's italics) These queer and elaborate falsehoods are proudly labeled 'no heat'. Here surely are the very depths. It is bad enough when an electric fire tries to look like a coal or log fire, but what of an electric light that tries to look like a fire?<sup>2</sup>

In his works on design in daily life he is emphatic about the role design plays in civilizing and cultivating good taste. His advice on interior decoration in the working class home on the one hand seems to acknowledge the day to day experience of a dirty job:

Most people do not perhaps realize the importance of the old problem of picture rails which not only collect dust but also harbour vermin.<sup>3</sup>

and,

There is case for a dado where the husband had a dirty job or there are children. The lower part of the wall may have to be dark, but we can still keep the upper part white.<sup>4</sup>

This is soon overtaken in subsequent advice about the very special qualities of a white rug, something it is hard to imagine finding a place in Orwell's Peel Street dwelling:

When we step out with bare feet onto the white rug, we feel beautifully safe; which we never do with black hair or all over patterns in dark shades. It is not that we suspect houses of being dirty but we like to see that they are clean.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bertram, Anthony (1937) *Design in Daily Life*, London, Methuen, 69

<sup>3</sup> Bertram, Anthony (1938) *Design*, Pelican, London, 38

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 70

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 32

By strange contrast Anthony Bertram wrote a number of novels where politics and design were very freely mixed. His novels tackled the politics of the day, the inequalities inherent in society while often describing in detail domestic settings or period interiors. They incorporated the best of his design reformers intentions with character sketches and fictionalized settings that frequently employed specific historical motifs. In these he depicts the working class character offering sentimental accounts of the struggles in working class life and their less than desirable living conditions. Bertram's *Men Adrift* published by Chapman and Hall in 1935 was described as an experimental novel and had as one of its many plot lines the murder of a Communist Party member. His character Georgie's predicament is described thus:

Georgie Perch sat in a corner with a book listening to the argument, listening fatalistically. His book, for better or worse, was a Latin grammar. The room was so small that the table had to be pushed close against the wall to make room for the clothes-horse in front of the range. The rest of the washing hung on a diagonal line across the ceiling. The wallpaper had been gaily patterned with a lattice of red roses and trailing leaves but it was so faded now, so darkened with smoke, so mildewed with with damp that the pattern only showed in patches here and there. ....It was very hot, and Georgie, whenever he looked up from his Latin grammar, could see the bugs moving over the steamy wall. <sup>6</sup>

A review in *Labour Monthly* was less than flattering and somewhat dismissive of Anthony Bertram's aspiration to represent the working classes:

WANTED A SIGN POST.

Man (sic) Adrift. Anthony Bertram. Chapman & Hall. pp. 323. 7s. 6d.

HERE is an intellectual who, unable to live in the clouds and write of airy nothings any longer, has become so conscious of the misery, injustice, and exploitation going on around him, that he not only believes that he must write what he sees, but that the subject matter must affect the form of the novel. It is an interesting experiment, but it is at present only an experiment. We are presented with a cross section of life to-day, but there is too large an assortment of characters, the whole thing is too disconnected and the characters are not at all representative, being almost entirely the cranks, and odd men out. One cannot grumble that a book entitled *Men Adrift* gives only a picture of a society that is lost, aimless and hopeless.

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Bertram, *Men Adrift*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1935) 96

There is not one episode in the book that gives any suggestion that the author has any faith in the power and strength of the working class or that he has any knowledge of the new life of purpose that can be built up when capitalist exploitation and injustice are abolished. While the writer cannot see this, he will certainly remain adrift, as much as any of his characters, and his writing will certainly not be a true reflection of the world as it is to-day. DG<sup>7</sup>

If this work was a reappraisal of society and an expression of solidarity with the working classes it had fallen well short of the mark, but it was nevertheless still a useful demonstration of this new form of writing. In many of his books Bertram makes attempts at copying working class patterns of speech. The representation of the working life of the protagonists is overplayed and sentimental. Here he gives this somewhat lurid description of the wife of poor Bert Greenway:

Bert looked at his wife's open mouth and saw that there were little foam-flecks in the corners and wondered whether if he tried to wipe them off it would wake her. She'd been took bad that sudden, working in the morning as cheerful as you'd wish when he looked in for his dinner and then at dusk when he was stabling the horses, little Eileen had come down to say mother was took bad, mother was lying on the kitchen floor and couldn't speak.<sup>8</sup>

*Men Adrift* by way of contrast also contains helpful references to upper middle class life, contemporary social etiquettes and examples of tasteful design, while also mentioning by name the key contemporary designers and decorators of the period:

His valet drew back the curtains which had been designed by Allen Walton.....Ignatius opened his eyes and saw the vast Arundel Clarke armchair and the Kauffer rug by the window. That was all right. Those were the proper things to have. His flat was illustrated in the best papers. ....He continued dictating while he bathed in the alcove designed by Mrs. Darcy Braddell, shaving himself as he lay in the softened scented water. In his Chermayeff study he spent an hour and a half with Miss Barlow, his female business secretary, endorsing cheques.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Labour Monthly*, Vol. 18, No. 4, April 1936, 254

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Bertram, *Men Adrift*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1935) 142

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 290-291

Speaking of Mrs Darcy Braddell, her notion of the ideal working class home is of great interest to us too. As she put it in her lecture *Common Sense in Furniture Design* given to the Royal Society of Arts in 1942:

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. Some people may argue that so much built-in furniture will make for monotony and lack of individuality in the home, but I do not think this need be the case. Colour schemes and fabrics alone afford much scope for personal taste, and, with the need for most of the big, and many of the expensive pieces of furniture satisfied, the householder will have even greater freedom in the choice of the smaller ones. ....One reason why I am in favour of built-in furniture is that we can exercise more control in that sphere than we can with loose furniture.<sup>10</sup>

Now without *snobbish* large pieces of furniture upon which the working classes lavished far too much money all that would be left to manipulate in these newly cleansed living spaces would be coloured fabrics thus ensuring *more control*. Braddell had many supporters in the audience and was joined in her criticism of the working class home and tastes by a government employee:

I agree that the furniture trade has at times produced loathsome designs which were the essence of vulgarity, but if there was no demand for them on the part of the public they would soon die, and I think that one has to envisage or at least hope for some education of popular taste after the war. Again, there were, before the war (and there may be still, for all I know) manufacturers who ran two companies, one of which produced exaggerated, over-decorated "muck", and out of that company they made a very good living. The second company produced really well-designed and well-executed furniture, suited for its purpose and pleasing to the eye of those with a sense of judgment, but that company usually had to be subsidised from the one that produced the "muck". That process also went on in the retail trade. I knew one well-known retail furniture dealer who ran a section for simple, neat, modern furniture, which did not pay him at all, and his store was kept going on the "muck".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mrs Darcy Braddell, RSA Lecture 5, *Common Sense in Furniture Design*, February 11, 1942, RSA Papers, RSA Library and Archive

<sup>11</sup> Mr. E. H. Pinto, Assistant Director of Design (Timber Economy), Ministry of Works and Buildings speaking in response to Darcy Braddell, in RSA Lecture 5, *Common Sense in Furniture Design*, February 11, 1942

In addition campaigners such as Elizabeth Denby, the author of *Europe Re-housed*, supported rehousing and participated in designing major schemes for modern new homes but on very Victorian conditions reminiscent of the slum missionaries:

I think it is wrong to give *new* homes to families who are dirty and shiftless; slum people - for slum people are not the same as slum areas - should be put into old re-conditioned houses. If they really want a new home they will soon bustle round and get themselves fit for one, particularly if it is so pleasant, so easy and inexpensive to run that it is worth making the effort. If people like to be dirty, let them be dirty-it is their look-out.<sup>12</sup>

Yet again a local government official supported her in her views:

Are we satisfied that the people for whom we have to cater are really up to such a domestic standard as to be able fully to enjoy and understand those ideals which Miss Denby has put forward today, and which, I think, are the ideals of most of us? My work is in one of the largest industrial centres of the Midlands, where a large percentage of the houses are verminous and where it is the practice of many tenants to find the week's rent by pawning some article on the morning of rent day.<sup>13</sup>

Exercising control over the working class through the regulation of their home environment was just one response to the opportunities being presented by the war and its after-effects. As the war progressed, the after-effects were more and more far-reaching, as was the exposure of the working class and their domestic arrangements. The volatile political landscape, coupled with the transformation in circumstances of the bulk of the British population, meant that serious changes were looming for their day-to-day lives. The combined effects of castigation and celebration confused once more the perception of the working class and their domestic spaces.

In the series *The Things We See*, published by Penguin from 1946 to 1948, we find examples of the literature that the Council of Industrial Design used as its major instrument of education. The series covered housing, furniture and objects of all kinds, and was a publishing collaboration between Penguin and the Council.

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<sup>12</sup> In "Using Space to Advantage", Elizabeth Denby, Journal Of The Royal Society Of Arts, January 9, 1942

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Bywater, Housing Manager for Walsall Borough Council, 1942

*The Things We See* series were conceived as picture books for adults, to all intents and purposes and were sold at the Britain Can Make It exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 1946. The seemingly child-oriented appearance of the book seems to infantilise the reader and their ability to make taste distinctions. In the section entitled 'Words and Pictures' the emphasis in the text is on the use of images as metaphors for the forms in furniture. The text points to a number of examples of furnishings illustrated by photographs that are then juxtaposed with comparisons from the natural world to deliver the message more clearly. A hippopotamus, a greyhound, a toad, a pelican, a bear and a clipped poodle are set alongside their furnishing counterparts in order to demonstrate ornament, clumsiness, heaviness or grace. Taste is also called into question where patterning was concerned with close comparisons being made between tattooing and patterned teapots. Perhaps even more evidence of infantilisation and patronising attitudes of these publications is the direct comparison made between the taste of things and taste in things. The text castigates consumers of poor quality goods in this comparison with unhealthy foods:

We know the childish impulse to gorge on sweets and we recognize at once a visual example of the same things. A mature taste in either food or furnishings would be made sick by too much sweetness.<sup>14</sup>

At a time when rationing was still firmly in place and when the notion of anyone gorging on food was a distant memory this must have been the most damning example of all.

The ever more patronising "How to Buy Furniture" and ludicrous "Design Quiz" produced for the Britain Can Make It exhibition stressed the right way of doing things and the contempt for those who did not. Poor social housing, coupled with urban decay and the effects of the war, seemed a long way from the thoughts of Penguin's authors, and since the extent of the true nature of the problems with working class housing had been exposed in 1943 these texts looked even more out of touch, ill judged and ill informed than Dennis Chapman's assessment and comments about them in 1949 was to indicate:

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<sup>14</sup> Jarvis, *The Things We See Indoors and Out*, 30

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.<sup>15</sup>

In Dennis Chapman's research there was a unique appreciation 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 a 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 be exerting a plea to see the working class as *real people with real emotional needs*, rather than as a problem to be solved:

.....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 fulfill 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 texts was directed to cleansing homes of less than satisfactory clutter they accrued. In answer to this the nascent discipline of ethnography and Mass Observation would attempt to document and record the social mores of the working class and their particular domestic culture. Dennis Chapman was eager to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies and importance of the arrangement of objects in the working class home and predicted the material culture studies that we are involved in today:

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<sup>15</sup> 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

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

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. ....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.<sup>17</sup>

Far from trying to purge it of all traces of character, this home was to be celebrated and left uninterrupted or disturbed. Within the space of thirty years the working class went from being first reviled as dirty and disordered, without taste and lacking moral fiber, then courted as the new model citizens with bright and productive future lives centrally involved in rebuilding a green and pleasant land, until they were finally celebrated as a distinct and unique culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid