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Chapter 11

Everyday Utopias, Technological Dystopias, and the Failed Occupation of the Global Modern:

Dwell Magazine Meets Unhappy Hipsters

Joan Faber McAlister and Giorgia Aiello

At the turn of the 21st century, a new publication appealed to affluent consumers in the U.S. by combining aesthetics drawn from journals featuring artistic and architectural designs with themes common to popular “shelter” magazines guiding home decor. *Dwell: At Home in the Modern World* favored modernist urban housing over the traditional suburban homes found in decorating magazines, yet differed from its higher-end architectural counterparts by depicting and describing the residences it featured as overtly occupied spaces. The inaugural issue of *Dwell* characterized this combination of unique modernist architecture and domestic do-it-yourself (DIY) decorating as “a minor revolution,” insisting that it was “possible to live in a house or apartment by a bold modern architect, to own furniture and products that are exceptionally well designed, and still be a regular human being.”¹

Called the “Fruit Bowl Manifesto,” *Dwell*’s mission statement asserted its intentions to take up a position between elaborately staged domestic sets usually featured in magazine photographs and ubiquitous scenes of domestic life often imaged in marketing. *Dwell*’s manifesto thus not only focused on images of modernist dwellings, but also of modernist dwellers, blending machine aesthetics with messy organicism to create compelling portraits of both desirable environments and distinctive consumers to admire and emulate. Promising to offer a new, less purist and more livable version of modernism, *Dwell* distinguished its project from the empty elite environments of *Architectural Digest* and the vacant, pleasant scenes of *Better*

Homes and Gardens. By combining an appreciation for both high culture's forms and the base demands of human nature, *Dwell's* visual portraits provided a bold alternative to the bland conventionality associated with the Martha Stewart set while mounting a defense against established critiques of the "modernist utopia" as dependent upon "the absence of human qualities such as desire, intuition, and feeling."² Moreover, the manifesto launching *Dwell's* distinctive aesthetic cast this new version of modernism as adaptable and realistic, stating that "[h]ere at *Dwell*, we think of ourselves as Modernists, but we are the nice Modernists" insofar as "[t]o us the M word connotes an honesty and curiosity about methods and materials," together with "a certain optimism not just about the future, but about the present"; and that, in the end "no fantasy we could create about how people could live, given unlimited funds and impeccable taste, is as interesting as how people really do live (within a budget and with the occasional aesthetic lapse)."³

Differentiating the nicer modernist dwellings and dwellers as distinguished by their "honesty," "curiosity," and "optimism," and displaying an appreciation for the charms of products personally selected by real residents with budgets and tastes not dictated by professional stylists opened up new vectors for audience identification in *Dwell's* heavy and tastefully muted pages. Indeed, the manifesto's declared departure from conventional shelter magazines in portraying both modernist dwellings and modernist dwellers in their intimate imagery branded the magazine's visual signature in distinctive ways for viewers.

Dwell's styling of this embrace of real modernist design (and real modernist dwellers) in the form of a "manifesto," as well as the links it drew between the beautiful and the mundane in the daily milieu of a society characterized by mass production and mass consumption, all link its visions of the architecture of the everyday modern to the utopianism of the radical French critics

of modernity, such as Henri Lefebvre and the Situationist International. Michael Gardiner argues that contemporary scholars interested in utopian thought need to recover this strand in French theory, as Lefebvre's central project was "conjoining a critical utopianism with the analysis of everyday life,"⁴ while the Situationists offered an "uncompromising critique of modern society and everyday life" from a perspective "firmly rooted in the utopian tradition."⁵ Lefebvre (who was briefly associated with the Situationists) is a particularly key figure for scholars of utopia, as he is poised between a realist critique of a modernist machinic utopianism and an embrace of the potential for utopias to stimulate social transformation. A critic of the "abyss of negative utopias" offered by abstract critical thought divorced from daily practices,⁶ Lefebvre nonetheless celebrated utopianism as crucial to the abstract visions guiding both social critique and the production of new spaces of everyday life. Declaring that there could be "no theory without utopia," he argued that "the architects, like the urban planners, know this perfectly well," as both the critique and creativity required for social transformations depend on the ability to imagine idealizations beyond the given social order and push toward these guiding visions.⁷

Moreover, Lefebvre's philosophy articulated a desire to bring together design/planning, everyday experience, and new (artistic yet inhabitable) possibilities—an aim that Dwell's "minor revolution" seems to echo, bridging the gap between the "conceived" spaces represented by architects and the "perceived" spaces of readers' daily lives with "lived" spaces imaged/imagined through creative portraits of objects of beauty and the subjects who own them.⁸ Illustrating the vision of "nice modernism" explicated in its mission statement, Dwell's photographic portraits offered an idyllic fusion of enviable architecture and actual homeowners, replacing both sculptural design and ordinary environs with stylized spaces occupied by confidently casual modernist dwellers not only present on the scene but intimately so:

distinctively portrayed “in their pajamas, in their sweatpants, in their best stay-at-home-and-do-nothing attire” in images that “conveyed the seemingly obvious but oft-obscured message: Real people live here.”⁹

However, if a lack of “signs of life” and human subjects in visions of modernist architecture was a void Dwell’s imagery offered to fill, it did so through portraits that not only invited admiration of modernist dwellings, but also incited ridicule of modernist dwellers. The intimacy implied in Dwell’s promise to bring viewers closer to modernism by peering behind closed doors at optimistic fashion statements and real aesthetic imperfections also rendered its dwellings and dwellers vulnerable to critique. Spaces of everyday life are distributed, occupied, and perceived differently, which is one reason why Lefebvre placed such a premium on the creativity required to adequately capture lived spaces. In its attempt to bring modernist homes and homeowners closer to readers, Dwell also brought the objects and subjects visualized into intimate relation with one another, creating the possibility of surprising topological inversions of object/subject relations via personification and objectification in its images. For, if enlivening utopian modern spaces was *Dwell’s* aim, its portraits also provoked dystopian critiques via DIY re-captioning that rendered modernism’s unique exteriors incongruous and its distinctive interiors dreary and uninviting. Such reversals underscore how perceptions and lives are shaped by perspectives, as viewers are positioned very differently in visual culture. As Kenneth Burke’s account of consubstantiality makes clear, identification is created through a rhetorical process.¹⁰ And rhetorical operations are notoriously contingent, uncertain, and capricious.

A website entitled *Unhappy Hipsters: It’s Lonely in the Modern World* began a running joke of Dwell’s idyllic imagery of modernist environs and their occupants (both human and inanimate) with new text placing them in antagonistic relationship to one another. “The flowers

began to wither under the rigorous interrogation,” “Drink in hand, he settled into the numb nothingness of his self-imposed isolation,” and “Never mind the fruit bowl, here’s the empty pleasure of conspicuous consumption,” serve as notable examples of the clever captioning found throughout the site. Such captions alter artistic portraits of modernist domestic life to suggest that the lives lived in Dwell’s world are both shallow and miserable. The website invites and celebrates (for example, by holding contests for winning captions) a seemingly populist attack on elite architecture and public ridicule of its residents. If Dwell found the bowls of fruit that provide the organic matter for the domestic settings in other magazines to be staged and artificial, Unhappy Hipsters found Dwell’s images of domestic spaces to be austere and even anti-humanist, and saw the human subjects in the magazine’s portraits as posers adopting a depressed affect as a fashion statement. The humorous revisions deploy Dwell imagery to illustrate the implausibility of combining machine aesthetics with organic embodiments into any place that might be called “home.” Labeling Dwell’s residents “hipsters” also charged them with dwelling in melancholic spaces for the sake of appearances in a display of consumption that is conformist in its non-conformity and therefore worthy of derision.

We find the cultural commentary that emerges in the visual-textual interplay between Dwell’s photography of modernist interiors and Unhappy Hipsters’ recaptioned revisions to be deeply entangled in the aesthetics of utopian and dystopian spatial imaginaries and the politics of DIY unmediated and mediated environments. This interplay takes place at the boundaries of envisioned architectures that are inherently both “unredeemably utopian” as they rely on and offer “powerful visions of making and unmaking the world,”¹¹ generating imagined spaces providing both new possibilities and new critiques of social realms. The visual and virtual productions of space at work in Dwell and Unhappy Hipsters are not only linked to utopianism,

but also to DIY crafting that circulates via websites and blogs like those described above, connecting them to “a broader DIY culture and an activist community in a way that spatially and analogically links experiments in making futures differently.”¹² For this reason, the making and unmaking of home happening in Dwell’s images and in Unhappy Hipsters’ captions also illustrates the interdependence of the technological productions of global utopias and local dystopia required to open up new spaces for moving social space “beyond empire,” as argued by Henri Lefebvre.¹³ While Lefebvre was eager to explore the potential for spaces to escape the reach of global capitalism, we find his analysis helpful for considering how utopian and dystopian projects may also seek to displace the territorializing cartography of cultural imperialism.

Furthermore, we see the complex relations between Dwell’s and *Unhappy Hipsters*’ re/productions to reveal some important ways that the aesthetics of homes and bodies are rendered and reworked through tensions between modern/postmodern, everyday/elite, and hip/hipster in contemporary visual culture. To account for the utopic and dystopic pleasures, politics, and possibilities of these DIY discursive re/figurations of images and texts, we examine the memetic tendencies, visual elements, and rhetorical functions of Dwell images and Unhappy Hipsters’ captions that are re/circulated in digital form. Our focus is on how Unhappy Hipsters illustrates the failure of Dwell to image an everyday modernist utopia as an accessible and DIY lived domestic space for viewers refusing invitations to enter into its utopian imaginary. We explore how Unhappy Hipsters exploits the relationship between Dwell’s visual aesthetics, modernism’s international aspirations, and globalizing communication genres (such as stock photography, design, and branding) and analyze how these aesthetics attain coherence by re/stylizing human and inanimate objects alike through highly generic semiotic resources.

Although the refashioning of modern spaces and modern subjects in *Unhappy Hipsters* clearly contains strains of postmodern critique, we contend that Dwell's failure to convincingly image modernist houses transformed into lived space is more attributable to perspectives offered by postcolonial theory than those provided by postmodernist style. What the humorous appropriations of Dwell's portraits indicate is that the subjects dwelling in elite architecture are not fragmented and decentered, but made visible as Western and affluent in ways that link the aspirations of modernism's "international style" of architecture to the hubris of its cultural architects. A key context for this critique emerges from the way that modernist architecture's elevation as high art was undermined in the face of a "post-Orientalist/postcolonial critique of the 'Western canon' in art and culture" in an era when this idealized aesthetic is the target of "postmodern attacks" found to have "an especially strong appeal outside the Western world, parallel to a mounting obsession with identity."¹⁴ Such appeals are rendered more resonant after modernist architecture came to be associated with nationalistic and colonialist interests¹⁵ and the "tragic" failure of modernist urbanism became the exemplar of the fall of "utopian thinking."¹⁶

Reading *Unhappy Hipsters* as pointing to a failed relation between Dwell's subjects and globalization, we find that the magazine's attempt to make itself at home in the modern world takes place just as postcolonialism has rendered the "universal" spaces of Western affluence as uninhabitable dystopias and recast its privileged occupants as ridiculous posers. In sum, Dwell's efforts to remake the world as a modernist utopia are out of place in an era witnessing critiques of the imperialist interests of globalization, which have made the dream of a globalized aesthetic via a modernist international style absurd. Ultimately, Dwell's modernism is unable to comfortably reside in a global visual culture that is not only postmodern, but also postwestern. However, we also find intimate entanglements between the utopian and dystopian subjects and

objects imaged and imagined in *Dwell* and *Unhappy Hipsters* that prompt important questions about the politics of the pleasures these visual and textual portraits offer their admirers and critics, while demonstrating how globalizing visions featuring everyday utopias prompt local responses in the form of technological dystopias—creating a critical exchange that may be crucial for social imaginaries to spark social change.

On January 25, 2010, *Unhappy Hipsters* made its debut on Tumblr with a scanned photograph from an issue of *Dwell* dating back to February 2008. The photograph shows a perspectival view of a hallway with a dark concrete floor. With floor-to-top, wall-size windows on the right side and primary blue, green, and red color-block walls on the left side and at the back, the hallway wraps around the internal courtyard of a squat and blocky modernist building. Leaning against one of the dark steel lighting poles that line the windowed side of the hallway, a bespectacled man in the background gazes at the walls with his arms crossed. Underneath the scanned image, the following caption humorously explains the remit of this image: “He is sad because his house looks like an elementary school. And all the children have died.” Nearly 150 Tumblr users liked or reblogged *Unhappy Hipsters*’ first post, with some of them adding comments like: “this is a shiny new thing,” “NEW SOURCE OF ENTERTAINMENT!” “I was recently re-reminded of how much fun it is to laugh at people trapped and lonely in their minimalist architecture...” and “Haha, I died. (and so did those children).” In the following days, *Unhappy Hipsters*’ activity picked up quickly, with ten captioned images posted on January 26 and six on January 27 alone. After only a week online, the blog had received 122,000 hits.¹⁷

Over the next several months the anonymous authors continued to deliver their deadpan humor on modernist living regularly with captions like: “The stools huddled together, braced for another one of his incoherent solo poetry slams,”¹⁸ “In their haste to score an original Damien

Hirst, her parents had sped off to Art Basel without her,”¹⁹ “The utopia of urban flight came with a price,”²⁰ and “He’d finally decided to eliminate the one thing that blemished the uninterrupted expanse of concrete and plywood—himself.”²¹ What emerged from the juxtaposition of these captions to images from Dwell and a handful of similar shelter magazines was a world made of disgruntled furniture, overpowering flooring and wall materials, utterly lonely if not desperate humans, and children neglected in the name of trendy art and design. In addition to its own carefully orchestrated parodies, over the first year Unhappy Hipsters started soliciting content from its readers, at first with caption contests and later also by encouraging them to produce their own Dwell-like imagery that would then be captioned by its authors. A year into its existence, Unhappy Hipsters opened up to full image and caption submissions by its “passionate, intelligent, and wildly good-looking readers,”²² offering detailed guidelines on how to properly caption and credit images.

Unhappy Hipsters is a great example of social media DIY, both because of its bricolage, guerrilla approach to communication and its potential as an Internet meme. As a short-form blogging platform, Tumblr enables users to post multimedia content that can be followed, liked, and reblogged by other bloggers. The platform also allows users to choose a unique domain name and access basic HTML code to customize the appearance of their blog. Each customized blog can then be connected to other social networking accounts, so that each time that a new post is added this update is also sent to Twitter or Facebook.

The political potential of the creative component inherent in such forums has prompted links between social media sites, “culture jamming” discourse, and a “do-it-yourself countercultural ethic” that can be traced to the Situationists’ “psycho geography” as critique of the landscape of capitalism.²³ In an era when social media platforms like Tumblr have created

virtual spaces for DIY everyday material productions as well as “psychogeographic aesthetic experiments” for publics whose “units of affinity can be small and local (harkening back to guilds and to contemporary affinity groups) and/or global (especially with virtual communities).²⁴ Like other DIY fabrications and cultural crafts, Unhappy Hipsters is a stage for generating textual creations that share some of the aesthetics and ethics noted of the productions of the “citizen bricoleurs” Frank Farmer finds appealing. In line with Farmer’s definition, Unhappy Hipsters interpellates counterpublics via a “collage aesthetic” and a “passionate allegiance to an ethics of ‘do it yourself,’ or DIY” while also promoting “a militant anti-copyright ethos and an oppositional stance toward all the established protocols of life under consumer capitalism.”²⁵ While Farmer deems these textual creations to be “undeniably utopian” in the worlds they envision,²⁶ the culture jamming aesthetics and critical ethics characterizing Unhappy Hipsters’ recaptioning also undercut Dwell’s images of DIY everyday domestic utopias (based on modernist designs articulated to international imperialism and global capital) with technological dystopias (relocating these modernist subjects and objects to specific cultural and classed localities).

In addition to being received warmly by social media users, who were compelled and then invited to submit their own content, Unhappy Hipsters was covered extensively in the press. Less than ten days after its debut, the New York Times reported that it “ricocheted in the blogosphere like a shuttlecock.”²⁷ Just a few days later, the LA Times stated that Unhappy Hipsters “is the most welcome addition to the often self-serious world of architecture and design in recent memory, not to mention a pocket of satirical warmth in the middle of a soggy, recessionary, earthquake-wracked, Martha Coakley winter.”²⁸ A host of other media outlets quickly took an interest in Unhappy Hipsters, including online trade magazines like Ad Week and

Creative Review in addition to a myriad of design-related blogs. Psychology Today dedicated an online feature to Unhappy Hipsters asking the following question: “Are there elements of modern design that inherently make us feel gloomy?” Taking Unhappy Hipsters’ satirical critique seriously, the article expounded on the impact that color, light, texture, and form have on our mood and concluded that “modernism’s restrained quality is fundamentally in tension with the idea of delight” and, in the end, “there must be something primal within us that understands such stripped down spaces as inhospitable – the emotional equivalent of dry desert, or fallow fields.”²⁹

At the most basic level, Unhappy Hipsters followed a fairly typical script in matters of viral communication. The authors were chased by literary agents and eventually got a book deal for a volume mimicking a proper architectural and interior design handbook. Following the hype, co-founder Molly Jane Quinn stated that the book deal and all of the media coverage the project received led people to believe that they had made a fortune off their project and that they were “rolling in Unhappy Hipsters cash.” Instead, Quinn and her partner in crime Jenna Talbott “never made any money off of the site” and the book deal only “really funded one crazy summer of intense work.” By the time the book was published, both Quinn and Talbott were onto other things.³⁰ In addition to its sudden if not short-lived success, Unhappy Hipsters’ formula lent itself to being taken up by others through acts of recaptioning and remixing. As Limor Shifman³¹ explains, an Internet meme is not simply an individual item that propagates well through digital means; rather, memes are groups of items that are aware of each other and share similarities most often due to imitation and transformation through the means of irony, parody or satire. While Unhappy Hipsters was not imitated or transformed by other digital authors, the Tumblr’s creators actively integrated a memetic logic into their own highly regulated digital craft, not only by

‘remixing’ Dwell’s imagery but also by inviting their readers to recaption the same imagery or submit their own modernist architectural photos to be captioned and published on the blog. It is in this sense that Unhappy Hipsters can be seen both as DIY utopia and dystopia, insofar as its quick rise to celebrity among social media users offered visibility to its authors but was not matched by a real opportunity for them to make a living out of this success. In parallel, Unhappy Hipsters offers a (humorous and potentially remixable) dystopic critique of yet another kind of DIY utopia: that of modernist architecture and interior design. With the subtitle “It’s Lonely in the Modern World,” Unhappy Hipsters parodies Dwell’s byline “At Home in the Modern World,” hence establishing a clear linkage between prized, aspirational forms of contemporary dwelling and existential anomie.

A social semiotic approach to visual analysis³² helps us to outline the representational, interactive and compositional meaning potentials of these images in order to examine the ‘stories’ they tell, the kinds of relationships that they establish with the viewer, and the ways in which they arrange their different components in relation to one another. In doing so, we are particularly interested in how the satirical captioning of these images draws out, reverses, and both radically and hilariously critiques some of the very rock-solid ideological assumptions underlying contemporary aspirational home design.

From a representational point of view, the architectural images featured in Unhappy Hipsters offer a combination of spaces with or without human presence. When humans are present, there is a prevalence of white adults in their 30s or early 40s. The sparse inhabitants of these carefully designed interiors are most often lone individuals engaged in activities such as standing in gardens and looking out of balconies, gazing outside wall-size windows with a mug or book in hand, tending to produce from behind open-plan kitchen counters, working on Apple

laptops, and watering lawns against the backdrop of façades covered in concrete, glass, and wood paneling. Children feature regularly in these images too, but rarely in groups or in the company of adults. Pets, and in particular dogs, are sometimes present, mainly as décor rather than companions. When more than one individual is pictured, we typically see heterosexual couples or nuclear families with very few of these images representing larger groups of people, or any significant form of interaction between portrayed subjects. Most often couples are portrayed as they look away from each other or as they inhabit different spaces in the house.

From an interactive standpoint, these images tend to position the viewer as a distant participant. Eye-level, medium-long shots of exteriors and interiors alike suggest that the viewer's ability to dwell in these spaces is possible, though apparently still out of reach. The compositional outlook of these images privileges layouts that emphasize the separation, rather than continuity, of living spaces. The different quarters, levels, and corners of a house are often skillfully captured at once, with lone individuals inhabiting their own 'boxes,' which are marked by the lines drawn by window frames, stairwells, and doorless entryways. Through these framing devices, these images highlight a seemingly egalitarian potential for personal retreat and individual fulfillment within the safe boundaries of idyllic nuclear-family living.

The images that *Unhappy Hipsters* draws from *Dwell* magazine are stylized portraits, artfully displaying the modernist aesthetic appeals—such as clean lines, industrial materials, geometric shapes, and unusual textures—of its sculptural and brightly-lit scenes and subjects. The tendency to treat architectural forms, artful objects, and their affluent owners as similar aesthetic features in these modernist environments, when paired with traditional critiques of modernist design as machine-like and anti-humanist, provides rich material for *Unhappy Hipsters'* captions that invert conventional subject/object relations to create rifts in *Dwell's*

utopic visions of modern life. These tropic inversions, clear in the earliest months of Unhappy Hipsters' appearance, tend to personify residential objects and environs, objectify residents, and invent or exploit tensions between and within non-human and human dwellers on the scene.

Personification of modernist décor, furniture, rooms, and even whole houses is a common trope in Unhappy Hipsters productions, a clever play on the shapes and styles common to abstract art (wherein a simple curve can suggest a human form). This trend was established from the start of Unhappy Hipsters' entry onto the virtual world of memes, as in the second image/caption it offered (a photograph of a bright bedroom with a stuffed animal on the bed over the words "The octopus was full of judgment"). Further posts frequently built on this theme, finding the modernist home littered with lurking lamps, hostile houseplants, and pretentious possessions. Examples of captions undermining attractive images with these dark personifications of the objects depicted include "For weeks the lamp had been creeping closer to the sofa, ready to engulf the man with its black lampshade of doom," "Flipping the pages hurriedly, he sensed that the potted plants were advancing," and "He couldn't stand another night with that smug hookah."

In other appropriations, Unhappy Hipsters' captions personify the architecture as a whole, attributing misery or malicious intent to the houses themselves. Modernist dwellings are described as despondent ("There. He felt it again. The whole house had unmistakably slid toward the retaining wall, as if inching toward edificial suicide") or filled with unkind spirits ("At first, she had attributed the strange scribble on the blackboard to her forgetful memory. Now she descended the stairs each morning with dread, petrified of what the poltergeist wanted to communicate today"), and modernist façades are described as unfriendly faces ("The porthole windows seemed like a good idea. But now the house appeared to be leering at them, distinctly

ominous”). In the midst of such frequent personification of modernist objects and structures, captions such as “She had this uncanny way of making him feel so, so small” (under an image of a couple dwarfed by the receding horizon of their extensive open floor plan) invite viewers to wonder whether the pronoun refers to an emotionally abusive human or house in the miserable cohabitation *Unhappy Hipsters* captures.

Not only do modernist objects become personified subjects in these visual-textual tropes, they also exert agency over their human owners, who become merely part of the décor in these dystopic settings. *Unhappy Hipsters*’ captions describe residents reduced to minor contributions to the modernist color scheme (“He deeply resented her insistence that their wardrobes coordinate”), made slaves to the domestic aesthetic (“The frequent window washing and dry mopping required to keep the room sufficiently spartan became more than she could bear”), or converted into realist modern art, as below an image of a couple standing next to an enormous portrait featuring one of them: “Sober (and in the light of day), she realized that buying the companion sculpture to the photograph had been unwise.”

Children in *Dwell*’s domestic scenes, always a sacred aspect of familial portraits in shelter magazine culture, are similarly reduced in status or even treated as pets. For example, a photograph of a small child and a large dog peering together over the metal railing of a rooftop balcony is given the sinister explanation: “Adding the roof deck to their cinder-block abode had been an afterthought. Now she thought of it more as an arena for natural selection.” Other captions equate offspring with furnishings on the domestic scene, or even rank the needs of children below the modernist aesthetic imperative (“It occurred to her that in choosing the repurposed airplane ramp as a staircase, she hadn’t considered the child”). Photographs of children at play in modernist environments are revised to evince a desire to flee their bizarre and

bleak homes, as bunk-bed ladders, sidewalks, and slides are characterized as potential escape routes for trapped toddlers. These dark interpretations of modernist settings, as even less appropriate for families than they are for affluent couples or artistic singles, seem to exhibit a pre-modern (rather than postmodern) sensibility—one that ignores how the geometric shapes, bright colors, and durable materials of the modernist home might be more kid-friendly than the traditional models found in *House Beautiful* and *Good Housekeeping*. Running jokes about children forced by their aesthete parents to watch documentaries on design, sort swatches, or exhibit architectural knowledge drive home the idea that modernism is too severe for familial life.

In addition to these depressing accounts of modern parenting, the dystopic twists Unhappy Hipsters' captions add to Dwell imagery often find humor in imagined antagonisms and tensions between featured inhabitants (whether animate or inanimate) in modernist spaces. Implied flaws in personal or psychological dimensions of the lives of Dwell's homeowners are projected onto these initially appealing portraits celebrating their style and taste, hinting that surface aesthetics conceal deeper problems. Attractive couples photographed in ideal modernist scenes are undermined by descriptions of the ugly reality of their relationships, through accompanying captions revealing fear, dread, and hostility hidden in these domestic settings. The tendency for Dwell photographers to capture residents in "natural" or unconventional poses rather than having them stand together and gaze into the camera (instead, they are often seen separated as they use different parts of the home or are seen relaxing/reading/eating alone) is exploited in captions listing reasons why household members are estranged. Many of these captions are "tagged" with one of the site's more extensive "file under" categories: "romance on the rocks" or "lonely" (tags frequently attached to pages of image/caption combinations).

Unhappy Hipsters also envisions modernist rooms and structures as cages or blinds, enclosing or obscuring occupants who conceal disappointment or desperation as an open secret via design choices. In some cases, the captions poke fun at the unrealistic color scheme of the scenes, as this caption under an image of a man whose knitting project seems tailored to suit his décor: “Trapped by the tawny palette, he struggled through yet another brown knit scarf.” Others find modernist materials to be claustrophobic: “He tried to focus on the novel, and not how much his bedroom reminded him of a plywood coffin” and “The things that once so defined him — shag carpeting, Room & Board sofas, monogamy — now suffocated him.” Still others hint that the impressive home décor is compensation for even more private failures (“Eames, Aalto — her most significant relationships were with dead designers”).

Although the content and style of the images and text of Unhappy Hipsters were established during the first three months of online publication, opening up the site for submissions made room for very different kinds of DIY critiques of the utopian images in modernist magazines. Repeated warnings posted on the website make it clear that some contributions and comments were censored by the creators. The warning, “Hate speech of any type, directed at any race, gender, or orientation, will not be tolerated,”³³ indicates that some captions targeted more than the tastes of modernist dwellers. In addition to sexist, racist, and homophobic captions, profanity was removed from the website, generating some debate. Dismissing this controversy, while acknowledging the irony of Unhappy Hipsters editing captions, one visitor wrote (in response to complaints about censorship): “Maybe you are just shocked that something you thought was cool/funny/really hip is actually really square, and so now you are a REAL unhappy hipster.” Both the censorship and the comment calling website visitors “hipsters” themselves raises some important questions about the specific types of

critiques of modernism Unhappy Hipsters celebrates, and the viewers/readers who find them appealing. These questions are difficult to answer drawing on the Tumblr alone, but the book published by the creators offers more insights about the vulnerabilities and viewers the site targets.

The book version of the blog, *It's Lonely in the Modern World: The Essential Guide to Form, Function, and Ennui from the Creators of Unhappy Hipsters* is rhetorically significant, not only because its publication is a testament to the popularity of the website, but also because it fleshes out the lonely modernists skewered by the particular satirical tone that went viral via social media. In his introduction to the book, Andrew Wagner (editor of Readymade) charts the half-life of hipness as he writes about his own early days on the staff of Dwell when the magazine offered a bold alternative in 2000, as well as his own pleasures when Unhappy Hipsters challenged what had then become one of the established “purveyors of good taste” by 2010 by “deliver[ing] a swift kick to the groin of misappropriated modernism.”³⁴ Despite the characterization of the Tumblr as aiming below the belt, the statement marking “hate speech” and obscenities as off-limits sharpens our attention to the identities and insults considered fair game in Unhappy Hipsters’ attacks on modernist dwellers. Mimicking a DIY home design guidebook, the book has extensive textual portions and graphs (in addition to the familiar Dwell photographs and captions) that provide much more detail about its targets: unhappy hipsters are wealthy urbane Westerners who imagine themselves a “rare and superior breed of human” and who pursue the unattainable modernist ideal, seeking “a home that is a direct extension of [their] ego and ethos.”³⁵ Replete with references to exorbitant expenses in modernist home design, eccentric European and American modernist icons, and the urgency of appearances in trendy urban areas of the US, the book portrays unhappy hipsters as exceptionally privileged subjects

who are aware of, and place a lot of stock in, their social standing. Advice for avoiding any semblance of suburban or mainstream tastes, and ways to score “points” by appearing more educated, wealthy, culturally literate, environmentally aware, and (of course) possessed of distinctively hip tastes are offered throughout the book. Like the blog, the book relentlessly hammers at hipsterism as hopelessly idealistic, impractical, superficial, and fundamentally unfulfilling.

Although *It's Lonely in the Modern World* also renders modernist dwellings and dwellers dystopian in their entrapment in utopian aesthetic ideals for homes and bodies, the book is (with a few notable exceptions) not as funny as the blog. We find the loss of the DIY character of the devastating and anonymous one-liner, now replaced by the unified propriety of an authored, edited, and published print volume, to be a key reason for this difference. The relative balance between text and images and the stable source and even production quality of all elements of the book is another factor. The beauty of a professional magazine photo scanned without permission and pasted above a satirical caption lies in the way that the strategies and resources expended in creating and imaging a utopian space are laid low by the tactical and temporary appropriations of anonymous authors. Finally, the memetic potential of blog postings to circulate among and be remixed by a broad public—all laughing at the private lives of hipster modernists—is also more provocative and wicked, giving the humor an appealingly cutting edge.

Our own relative pleasures in the humorous invitations the *Unhappy Hipsters* Tumblr and book make are important to consider, for in addition to finding these texts visually fascinating in their cultural commentary, we also find them funny. It is worth noting that rhetorical criticism analyzing the former without contending with the latter fails to address audience appeals at the most basic level. In other words, we cannot treat *Unhappy Hipsters* as solely a serious symptom

of cultural malaise. We need to understand why we are laughing and with (or at) whom we are laughing. Despite its mass-circulated and memetic form, we find Unhappy Hipsters' humor to be built on imbricated layers crossing categories for spaces of lived/perceived, imaged/imagined, and subject/object dwelling. Overall, these complex cultural constructions invite humor with a sharp flavor drawn from contrasts between modern and postmodern styles, elite and everyday experiences, and visual and textual modes of sense- and place-making.

The type of humor Unhappy Hipsters employs, and the pleasures it offers, are both overt and subtle, pointing to both simplistic and complex ways to consider who is laughing and why. Its humor seems to adhere to the directional valence of satire, in that it appears to allow those with less access to conventional modes of power (supplemented with anonymous populist posting online) to poke fun at those with more social privilege (model owners of model homes depicted in elite modernist magazines). Thus, the appeal of laughing at is most evident in these DIY captions converting utopian images into dystopian imaginaries. This said, the captions evince an intimate familiarity with the designers and scenes and sensibilities showcased in the photographs they parody. References to Eames, ennui, and ecru are unlikely to be appreciated by outsiders of this elite world of modernist living. In order to get the jokes, you need a complex understanding of the cultural capital on display—the kind of understanding that only comes with careful study and/or extended exposure.

The elite vocabulary and concepts represented through these connections between the original images and the added captions suggest humor appealing to “insiders” rather than outsiders. More importantly, the captions are not voiced as outside observations, but as insights drawn from internal dialogues attributed to the subjects portrayed. Grammatically, the captions are written in the third person, but they express intimate knowledge of the inner fears, hopes,

desires, and experiences of the modernist dwellers depicted in the photographs. Rather than observing that the hipsters appear to be unhappy in these images, the captions publicly confess their private unhappiness—usually drawing on intimate self-knowledge that it would be difficult for any other person (even a friend or family member) to know for certain. In other words, they perform observing the self as other. For example, a photograph of a woman seated in a wire chair bears the caption “Secretly, she enjoyed the grids imprinted on her skin. In the new DSM, the American Psychiatric Association gave her disorder a name: ‘Bertoia butt.’” Another caption, under a family scene, reads “Creative parenting meant allowing the wee one his own boundaries, but it didn’t mean they couldn’t secretly mock him.” Of course, these attributions of misery and pathology are only humorous because they are fictional emotional realities projected onto the model spaces and bodies by a knowledgeable figure excluded from the frame: a witty and resentful viewer with intimate knowledge of modernism and hip taste, but without the home or body that would make for a model of modernist style... or perhaps a viewer who would be too self-conscious to pose (without appearing to pose) for a magazine shoot. Yet despite the differences captions draw between Unhappy Hipsters’ fans and Dwell models, the affective appeals of the dystopian recaptioning seem to draw on a heightened self-awareness that links the negative feelings attributed to and about the subjects in the photographs. The DIY global modernist utopia provokes a DIY local modernist dystopia, as both contributors and viewers are not satisfied with the generally beautiful private spaces depicted until they have imagined specific ugly private thoughts dwelling within these model homes and bodies. The strong negative affect bespeaks a subjective entanglement. Unhappy Hipsters’ critique is not a random hit and run. It’s personal.

Moreover, the intimate relationship between the images and the captions has a formal structure. In a tropological sense, the image and caption operate in antithetical relation to one another, since the textual reversal relies on the visual fashion statement the image makes. In other words, it is both the DIY and utopian character of these visual statements on domestic style that fuel the satirical twist and provide its humorous appeals; it is not the appearance of the styled modern dwelling and dwellers that is funny, but it is instead the way in which they are exposed in public magazine spreads of their private spaces. The sheer hubris of holding out one's home and body as a model of taste and style galls and provokes resentment. The bold fashion statements render these subjects more vulnerable because they lack the backing of normative domestic conventions. These elements—resentment and vulnerability—combine to offer considerable Schadenfreude when the prestige of having your home and your body featured in a magazine is negated via ridicule. However, we suspect that these may also involve a substantial degree of self-ridicule.

A 2011 interview with Molly Jane Quinn, one of the creators of *Unhappy Hipsters* and the author of the written portions of *It's Lonely in the Modern World*, is quite revealing of the role of reflexive ridicule in the critiques of modernism her work offers. In response to the question “Having imagined the secret lives of unhappy hipsters, what closeted vice would you most like to attribute to them?” Quinn responds: “I would love if they had a secret guilty pleasure, like Velveeta. Something crappy they wouldn't want to admit they ate. I love the idea that you have this kitchen that's presented as if you're making these amazing gourmet meals, but really you're alone in a chair eating frozen TV dinners and reading *US Weekly*. Like my life.” This insight into the pleasures *Unhappy Hipsters* offers its creator is significant. If the impulse to shred the glamorous images of modernist dwellings stems from a failure (or refusal) to relate to

the utopian subjects and spaces depicted, the pleasure comes through a dystopian darkness that establishes a point of connection, rather than further distances viewers from the private homes imaged. There is a yearning to take modernist models down a peg or two, to bring them down to the viewer's level. The gap between the perceived spaces of viewers' daily lives and the lived spaces imaged in Dwell's portraits is bridged by projecting dystopian emotional realities onto a utopian aesthetic scene.

Despite its satirical tone, *Unhappy Hipsters* does not ultimately observe the directional grain of satire, dethroning privileged statures via populist perceptions. The sources for its humor are not located in working class ridicule of affluence or attacks on white privilege by people of color. Rather than operating as a critique from below, *Unhappy Hipsters* is a critique from within. The frequent name-dropping of famous modernist designers, the display of art terminology, the recognition of elite brands in its one-liners all suggest a target audience intimately immersed in the kind of cultural capital on display in Dwell's modernist utopias.

Likewise, *Unhappy Hipsters*' creations do not critique Dwell's wealthy Western subjects in ways calling global capitalism into question or pointing to the colonial histories shaping Euro-American art and fashions. Nevertheless, they quite vigorously resist the aspirations of an earlier modernism imagining its forms as universal and timeless, truly utopian (or placeless) modes for living. The writers and readers who create and celebrate dystopic visions of modernist dwellings exhibit a heightened awareness of the specific (geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural) place of these homes and homeowners, as captions with frequent references to U.S. cities, designer brands, and famous figures can attest. *Unhappy Hipsters*' followers recognize Euro-American affluence, education, and social practices in Dwell's photographs in ways that are only possible after postcolonial critiques and political movements have rendered such privileged subjects

hyper-visible as such. Followers recognize themselves in these portraits, even as they draw on their own elite cultural capital to peddle hipster humor in the form of the newest meme.

It is clear that Unhappy Hipsters' captions both poke fun at and perform an unhappy hipsterism that is gleefully masochistic in locating misery in its own pleasure, and pleasure in its own misery. The DIY dystopia of unhappy home that these appropriations create to undercut the intimacy and optimism of a "nice modernism" reflects an intimate self-knowledge that situates beautiful objects and tasteful subjects within a field of power relations that Western affluence both attacks and utilizes in its mediated (self)portraits of the cultural elite. These acts of visual self-destruction are performed as if they could assuage the guilt of markers of bodily and economic racial, ethnic, national, and class privileges only superficially displaced. In these ways, Unhappy Hipsters exhibits a postwestern sensibility, even as it stages a complex cultural performance that both embraces and distances itself from modes of cultural capital in visual culture.

Paradoxically, we find the dark DIY recreations of modernism in Unhappy Hipsters to be somewhat idealist in their yearning for an intimate and strange confrontation with a post-hipster social privilege enacted through staged encounters with the cultural capital wielded by the tech and style literate. The "nice modernism" this exchange between Dwell magazine and Unhappy Hipsters enables is the reflexive intimacy of a self-critique that makes economic, social, and cultural capital visible, even as it retains the privileges and pleasures of its (post)hipster denizens. In other words, Unhappy Hipsters is a DIY dystopia with utopian aspirations that are more selfish than satirical. The visual and textual signature of a new, postmodern, postwestern modernist sensibility may be the pleasure of laughing with others at the self as other. At the risk of presuming to claim that Henri Lefebvre anticipated the current state of a visual culture shaped

by both Tumblr and postcolonial critiques, we cannot ignore his observations about the interdependence of utopia/dystopia and global/local fashioning of place via technologies with the potential to open new social imaginaries and social spaces beyond the reach of both capitalism and imperialism:

Perhaps the most promising response to the newest iteration of a globalizing mode of production for a “technological utopia” is a radically localized technological dystopia, for between these might lie the very real possibility of transformed and transcendent social space beyond empire.³⁶

If Lefebvre’s hope is well-founded here, we may begin to see how the latest critiques of modernism are opening pathways to a kind of dwelling in the everyday that is reflexive and, rather than relying on the occupation of others, relocates the globalized other to the interior of a localized self.

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