

Clive Edwards, Turning Houses into Homes: a History of the Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishings. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. ix + 294 pp. 20 b&w illustrations. 2 tables. Bibliography. £52.50 hbk.

Clive Edwards has published widely on the history of furniture design and furnishing, as well as aspects of consumption, business and retailing. *Turning Houses into Homes* is part of Ashgate's History of Retailing and Consumption series. In seeking to illuminate distribution and reception it promises a reasonably comprehensive understanding of the significance of domestic furnishings across a long period of study from the eighteenth century to the present. The result is certainly ambitious and is characteristic of a researcher who has made a habit of encyclopaedic publications such as an *Encyclopaedia of Furniture Materials Trades and Techniques*, a *Complete Dictionary of Furniture* and a forthcoming *Encyclopaedia of Furnishing Fabric and Soft Furnishings*. *Turning Houses into Homes* is organised chronologically, with the double focus on retailing and consumption supported throughout the structure. Edwards states first that his work is a contribution to the history of retailing and that 'retailing cannot be understood fully without some analysis of the consumption practices that feed it'. (p. 8) After the introduction, which ranges from the medieval period to the seventeenth century, chapter two, 'The Development of a Consuming Culture' is one of a pair on the eighteenth century treating retail and comfort, and convenience respectively. Two chapters on the nineteenth-century follow, addressing retailing responses to consumer demands and the social significance of domestic consumption. Next are two chapters on the twentieth century - the first on a shift from mass to niche marketing and the second on the consumption of home furnishings. The book therefore deals in sequence, if not in tandem, with the dual concerns of its title and the series to which it belongs. Rather than filling a gap in the literature by supplying an analysis of 'the interaction between retailer and consumer' as the blurb suggests, the framework of the book implies that retailing and consumption are discrete, albeit contingent, entities to be considered sequentially rather than simultaneously.

Edwards emphasises the importance of urbanization in the development of retail culture, pointing out for example that London was host to fixed shops for retailing furniture and furnishings during the Middle Ages. Then, using Pepys, Edwards establishes that the later selling of furniture involved the retailer in home visits to clients to assess their needs. By the eighteenth century, notwithstanding 'the amazing diversity of the retail infrastructure', (p. 74) 'the prime location for a furnishing business in England had to be London' (p. 41) However, London itself was of course a moveable feast with furniture workshops and showrooms gradually moving west, in pursuit of London society, eventually ending up in 'furniture street', Tottenham Court Road, and Oxford Street. 'Status-

conscious furnishing business' also existed in York, Norwich, Bristol, Liverpool and Edinburgh, and in the eighteenth century fairs remained important sources of goods for the rural population of consumers and itinerant tradesmen alike. Edwards introduces the significance of overseas trade, considering the role of France as a supplier, and the channels of communication open to North American consumers wishing to keep up with London fashions (p. 70). In addition, Edwards returns to the role of second-hand trade in local networks. The eighteenth century separation of manufacture and retail activities, and its impact on urban development as premises became increasingly specialised, continued into the nineteenth century even as general department stores and complete home furnishers arose. Edwards elaborates upon further retail developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries including antique dealing, mail order, hire purchase, direct selling by manufacturers, global outsourcing and the production of cheap copies. He also reviews the selling of interior design schemes by house builders such as Wimpey, which in allowing customers to pre-select bedspreads to match their new home interiors entirely 'removed the retailer's function'. (p. 180) While Edwards places changes in retailing practice within the context of broader urban themes, visual information on the distribution of the furniture industry in the form of maps would have been a useful addition. The figures supplied are of trade cards, catalogues and images of showrooms and retail environments.

Repeatedly, Edwards poses himself the question 'How did people acquire furniture?' (p. 32, p. 66, p. 135) In one section, which makes greater use of primary sources than the overviews elsewhere, the author discusses the range of different types of furniture businesses, from workshop to showroom (pp. 55-60). The parts in which Edwards turns his attention to the consumption, rather than purchase, of furniture and furnishings are based on diaries, letters, pattern books and advice books as well as on the secondary literature. Edwards uses advice literature without reference to recent methodological contributions on the complex place of mediating discourses between production and consumption, and its strengths and weaknesses for the writing of history, which means that it requires careful handling in order that it not be seen simply as evidence of consumption. Edwards does consider the role of the furniture retailer as advisor (e.g. p. 173) and didactic shop displays (p. 184); this reader at least wished for more here, given that the neutrality assumed for the 'impartial advisor' is compromised by the commercial imperative of the salesperson.

*Turning Houses into Homes* is essentially a history of the retailing, and to a lesser extent, the consumption of furniture and furnishings. It will interest readers in a broad range of fields. Students, particularly, will benefit from the overviews offered here of: theories of consumption, the furnishing of a medieval home, eighteenth-century retailing practices, hire purchase and so on.

While the book's scope is impressive, it does occasionally canter rather too quickly through its constituent parts, for example twentieth-century 'branding' is dealt with in only two pages. Also, because one of the strengths of this book is its synthesis of secondary literature across the range of its subjects, it is unfortunate that the majority of sources date from the twentieth century; reference to more recent work would have extended the shelf life of this book. Nevertheless, this is a richly useful book, which brings together otherwise largely disparate topics and students or researchers in a number of fields would be wise to consult it.

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