

***Designing the Modern Interior: From the Victorians to Today* edited by Penny Sparke, Anne Massey, Trevor Keeble and Brenda Martin**

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This anthology is another product of the increasingly prolific Modern Interiors Research Centre at the University of Kingston. Specifically, it is a selection of seventeen chapters developed from papers presented over several years at the annual conference held at Dorich House. In her introduction to the book, one of its four editors, Professor Penny Sparke, describes the chapters as ‘case studies’, that:

‘demonstrate that the study of the modern interior depends as much on the understanding of the particularities of a specific interior, or set of interiors, as it does upon the establishment of an appropriate theoretical and historical framework.’

The detail provided by the case study chapters is welcome and the arrangement of the chapters into four chronological sections is supported with a clear and thought-provoking general introduction and four section introductions, which each provide a general thematic overview, historiographic and bibliographic discussion and brief introductions to each of the chapters. In selecting, arranging and introducing the core material in this way, the editors aim to create from the proceedings of the various conferences, a ‘new history of the interior’, which implies a coherence, authority and definitive nature not easily achieved in the anthology format. That’s not to criticise the excellent scholarship presented in the chapters and the editorial matter.

Emma Ferry’s introduction to part one, on the late 19th century interior, provides an extremely useful historiographic account of a period in which modernism was a dirty word. However, more could have been said about the section’s chapters and the links between them than that their ‘diversity in subject matter, source materials, methodology and interpretation emphasises the rich and exciting possibilities of this developing field of research.’ Trevor Keeble’s opening chapter is a well-written and detailed account of taste and common sense: ‘By suggesting that common sense was the basis on which judgment was made, [design and author Lewis Foreman Day’s] writing placed the domestic design reform agenda firmly within the grasp, possibility and responsibility of the masses.’ Fiona Fisher examines design as an agent of social reform, when authorities intervened in ‘the design of licensed premises with the aim of improving order and regulating consumption.’ Fisher shows the particularly fine balance between public and private in the interior of the ‘public house’, a space which was not only simultaneously within and without the home of the publican and his family, but was also manipulated using screens and curtains into an extremely flexible environment capable of providing variable levels of both privacy, and surveillance. Sabine Wieber’s account of the German interior at the end of the 19th century examines the historicism of exhibited interiors of the period as responses to a perceived modernity.

Part two, on the early 20th century interior (1900-1940) is introduced by Penny Sparke. She notes that ‘within modernist accounts of modernist architecture’ the interior ‘was largely unacknowledged’. Sparke goes on to note that a type of literature which we might (but Sparke does not) term ‘home decoration books’, ‘granted much more independence to the modern interior as a phenomenon in its own right.’ Christopher Reed’s chapter finds room within modernism for what he calls the ‘Amusing’ style. Distinct from the historiographic emphasis on mass housing, ‘Amusing’ interiors complicated and enriched the gendering of the modern interior. Elizabeth Darling continues the emphasis on the rarefied interiors produced by named designers, examining

two early commissions undertaken by Wells Coates, one for George Russell Strauss's mansion on millionaires row (Kensington Palace Gardens) and another for the Bloomsbury flat of actors Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton. Irene Nierhaus offers a dense analysis of Mies van der Rohe's and Lilly Reich's Villa Tugendhat (1928-1931) as a site of perceptual and performative complexity, enhanced by screens, planes and reflections, and the influence of lens-based media. Hilde Heynen considers the extent to which high modernist homes accommodated 'the messiness of everyday reality'. In the final chapter of part two, Charles Rice reiterates a point elaborated in his book *The Emergence of the Interior* (2007) that at the beginning of the 19th century, 'the word "interior" attained a domestic meaning [...] as the inside of a room and its artistic effect, the idea that an interior was a deliberate addition to a given architectural "inside". It also began to refer explicitly to representations...' Rice's interest here is the Rose Seidler house in Australia and its relationship with architectural diagrams.

The third part, also introduced by Penny Sparke, covers a period (1940-1970) in which, Sparke argues, the modern movement's 'prewar ideological baseline' was undermined by 'the growth of mass culture' and 'the development of the modern interior which embraced pluralism'. Nevertheless, 'the tension that existed between decorating and designing the interior also characterised the relationship of amateur work with professional activities in that era.' Peter Blundell Jones explicates the importance of the interior, and a 'sense of centre' in the work of architect Hans Scharoun. There follows an enjoyable chapter on the Eameses by Pat Kirkham, which explores the importance of 'functioning decoration' (here, domestic displays of eclectic groups of objects) to the activity of home entertaining, at which Ray Eames (assisted by her employees) is shown to have been expert. Penny Sparke contributes a chapter on the importance of domesticity in the development of Italian design of the post-WW2 period. Sparke observes a shift away from the decontextualised, sculptural object towards the reinstatement of the 'architectural and environmental approach to design' displayed at the 1972 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* in New York. Part three ends, with Alice T. Friedman's account of the ways in which references to the ocean liner were used to bring 'at one and the same time both urban sophistication and an escape from the familiar [...] that Miami Beach's postwar developers wanted consumers to focus on' and editor Anne Massey's concise discussion of actual ocean liners, and particularly the *QE2*, as representative of national identity and design trends.

Part four ranges from 1970 to the present and is the most varied of the book's quarters. Trevor Keeble's introduction explains that postmodern interest in 'the communicative possibilities rather than the functional determinants of architectural space' led to reconsideration 'of interior spaces in relation to both their architecture and one another'. Keeble also traces the historiographic path to increased interest in the interior and explores the opportunities offered to interior designers by a series of landmark cultural redevelopment projects, including the Musée d'Orsay and the British Museum. David Crowley's chapter considers the work Russian artist Ilya Kabakov and German artist Gregor Schneider, each of whom has 'created home from and with the debris of modern life'. Their installations recall Soviet communal living and the hiding places adopted by Jews in Nazi Germany respectively. They not only make clear the role of the home as 'a mirror of the individual and a container of private memory' but also 'draw attention to a wider and perhaps more disturbing set of modern ambitions of domestic perfection'. The following chapter by Sarah Chaplin shifts attention to Japan's love hotels, spaces 'set aside for sexual relations'. Competing love hotels have attracted custom through 'innovative spatial, visual and material configurations' where 'traditional social mores and identities can be challenged and alternatives may be developed and practised.' Chaplin explains that modernity is represented by Western-style beds, elaborate lighting effects and murals and that 'The love hotel may therefore be characterised as both a product of modernity in terms of its rationality of ends, but simultaneously a product of postmodernity in terms of its means of achieving these.' The penultimate chapter, by Alison Clarke, reports on her 2006/7 work with the Mass Observation Archive, in which respondents provided written accounts of their dream

homes and thereby offered ‘the researcher an opportunity to understand the contemporary interior not just as part of a broader sociological phenomenon but also as a trope of narrative construction.’ In the closing chapter, Anne Chick explores the Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED) as an exemplar of sustainable living. Chick shows that while ‘BedZED demonstrates that the provision of sustainable building infrastructure can lead to sustainable behaviour’, the building industry believes that the ‘business case for sustainable homes’ needs further evidence.

The authors, editors and publisher are to be congratulated on having produced a beautiful volume; its size and weight feel good in the hand, and its design appeals to the eye as to the mind. The apparatus (author biographies, select bibliography, list of illustrations, index) are, like the rest of the book, clearly set out and useful. The black and white images are in many cases unfamiliar, and are mainly produced at a decent size and resolution. An exception is the cover image, which has been deliberately darkened, and thereby misrepresents the approach to light and space intended for the particular interior shown. Happily, that same interior appears, with sunshine restored, in the figure on page 139.

The book’s blurb notes that ‘a shared modernising impulse, expressed in interior design, extends at least as far back as the Victorians’. And further, we might argue: those involved in shaping the homes and other buildings of the 18th, 17th and even 16th centuries (the modern period) sought to realise something current, the latest thing in interiors of the day. Sparke claims that ‘the conventional, modernist story of dramatic stylistic change [...] has not completely vanished. It has, however, been rendered more complex, contextualized and broadened.’ This is a suitable summation of this book’s not inconsiderable achievements.

References

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Biography

Grace Lees-Maffei PhD, MA RCA, FHEA is Reader in Design History at the University of Hertfordshire, where she coordinates the tVAD (theorising Visual Art and Design) research group in its work on relationships between text, narrative and image. Recent work includes co-editing *The Design History Reader* (Berg, March 2010) and co-convening the 2009 Design History Society annual conference *Writing Design*. Grace was an editor of the *Journal of Design History* (2002-2008) and a DHS executive committee member (1998-2002). Her publications centre upon the mediation of ideas about design, through channels such as domestic advice literature, corporate literature, advertising and magazines.