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“Displaying the Modern Home: graphic design and the domestic interior in Europe, 1900 – 1930”

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Introduction

“There are designers who make interiors not so that people can live well in them, but so that they look good in photographs. These are the so-called graphic interiors, whose mechanical assemblies of lines of shadows and light best suit another mechanical contrivance: the camera obscura.”

Adolf Loos, Regarding Economy, Raumplan versus Plan Libre  (1)

In his 1910 essay, Adolf Loos, the renowned Viennese architect made a number of assumptions about the relationship between interiors and their representation in publication. His comments reveal that Loos was particularly ill-at-ease with the emphasis given to new forms of graphic and photographic rendition. Most provocatively, he contrasted the ideas of ‘living well’ with ‘looking good’ – and suggested that they were in tension, if not actually contradictory. The architect’s caution forms a suitable introduction to a paper that seeks to examine in some detail the processes and visual language of publishing the modern home.

My focus here is on representations of the domestic interior in Europe of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in periodical and book form. For the purposes of simplicity, I have chosen to concentrate on examples drawn from around two years – 1902 and 1929. Between these years, tremendous experiment in art and design throughout Europe informed designers’ approaches to both page and room in the periods of Jugendstil and early Modernism. Positioned at the intersection of advertising, journalism and design documentation, the design magazine becomes an interesting object of analysis. In part prompted by improvements in the actual techniques of available graphic reproduction, visual and verbal strategies for the interpretation of the domestic became multiple and complex.

The Interior around 1900

Figure 1: Das Interieur, 1900 designed by Marcel Kammerer

In 1900, on the title-page of the first issue of Das Interieur, the Viennese journal devoted to interior design, a line-drawing depicted a woman in an aesthetic environment, her dress co-
ordinated with the interior, with a strong emphasis on stylised floral decoration. Her pose, reminiscent of much Symbolist portraiture of earlier years, was characteristically reflective and introspective. The titling of the magazine was in an elegant script, typical of Secessionist lettering in its restrained decorativeness, and the entire design seemed informed by a belief in the aesthetic philosophy of the total work of art, the Gesamtkunstwerk, held by many such designers at the time. In this case the designer of page and interior scheme was Marcel Kammerer. (2) Significantly, Das Interieur took the French word for its title, reflecting Viennese design’s close relationship with Paris. At this stage, terms for interior design were by no means fixed or clearly defined. The subject of publisher Anton Schroll’s magazine ranged across interiors of diverse kinds—shops, offices, cafés and restaurants, not just for the home, as its treatment of the the Viennese coffee-house, for example, illustrates. Such coverage distinguished the magazine from some of its contemporaries. Striking parallels between design for the page and the room become apparent in Das Interieur. The magazine featured photographic profiles of actual interiors and designs by leading, fashionable modern architects and designers, among them the Secessionists. Like many titles, it was available monthly, by single issue, or could otherwise be acquired as an annual compilation. In the latter case, a set of coloured drawings would be presented as a separate supplement, forming an impressive array of visual references.

As Stephan Muthesius has shown, periodicals dedicated to interior design developed in the 1890s and in many respects the lead seemed to come from German-speaking countries. (3) Among the most prominent were Innendekoration (1890-1944), Dekorative Kunst (1897-1929), Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration (1897-1932) in Germany; Das Interieur (1890) in Vienna, and Art et Décoration (1897-1939) in Paris. As a new genre, these magazines brought together at least three kinds of writing to varying degrees. Firstly, there was that which had developed in the specialist trade literature, which covered separate branches of craft and manufacture for the home, like furniture or wallpaper under individual titles such as The Furniture Gazette and The Cabinet-maker. Secondly, furniture came to be treated as an extension of an art form in the context of the decorative arts and here a level of art criticism entered their pages. (4) The Studio for instance, which started publication in London in 1893, combined articles on the fine and
applied arts, in which furniture and designed interiors featured. The third kind of literature that informed writing about interior design was from the area of taste and the home which had proliferated since the 1870s. The new interior design magazines adopted styles of writing and techniques of addressing the reader learnt from advice manuals, ‘how to do it’ books, and consumer magazines. (5)

At one level, therefore, interior design magazines can be understood as an important part of the process of professionalisation of the interior decorator or designer. It is fair to assume that they aimed to address designers and architects as the main readers. However, research into the subscription of such magazines shows that readership not only came from a wide-range of professional groups, but that they were also read by private, individual consumers. (6) The magazines’ contents could combine the didactic, the promotional, the prescriptive and the aspirational. Although these may appear to be somewhat contradictory impulses to contain within one title, commentaries on magazines in general suggest that it is intrinsic to their identity to be composite, which in turn reflects how they are read or browsed. As texts, magazines are polyvalent and multi-vocal, allowing for simultaneously different readings to be experienced. (7)

Figure 2: Drawings from the supplement of Das Interieur, Max Benirschke, first prize award for a bathroom design.

The editorial pages of these first mass-distributed design magazines reveal that a wide range of illustrative approaches was employed. These included black and white photographs of single designs, as well as entire rooms. Design drawings were also reproduced on their pages. Another popular kind of depiction was that of pictures of interiors showing a subsequent re-interpretation, not necessarily by the original designer, but often by a commercial artist. These could appear in black and white or colour. Finally, line drawings of individual pieces of furniture or household items, as well as entire rooms, formed another mode. When it came to the depiction of architecture, plans, elevations and cross-sections, all established professional conventions, were included in articles, offering the general reader a sense of layout and design of individual
houses under consideration. Advertisements in these magazines tended to repeat a similar range of illustrative styles and techniques.

An initial striking characteristic of Das Interieur was how graphic form and design content were integrated. Its pages were filled with stylised natural motifs on the page, echoes of the surface pattern on walls, textiles and ceramics found in the works illustrated. A heightened awareness of the place of ornament ran throughout all Viennese design at the time. The Vienna-based art historian, Alois Riegl, first as Curator of Textiles at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst then later at the University of Vienna, made the influential study, Problems of Style, Foundations for a History of Ornament in 1893 and his second major work, The Late-Roman Art industry of 1901 continued this enquiry. Among characteristic graphic ornamental devices in Das Interieur, was the inclusion of monograms identifying designers. Reproduced along with the designs, they could be considered to take the form of a ‘branding’ of design, elevating personal style to signifier. This identification of ornament became an important integral element in the overall presentation of the interior, acting like a hallmark. Indeed, it was Walter Benjamin, writing about a house designed by another Jugendstil architect, Henri van de Velde, who commented, “Ornament is to this house what the signature is to a painting.” (8)

On leafing through such volumes, the reader would encounter a strong contrast between reproduced drawings with their imaginary colours and the apparently more factual record in black and white photograph. It is tempting to read into this a lack of advancement or sophistication in black and white photography. This would be misleading, however, as half-tone photographic illustration was then still a relatively new technique – colour would only become available widespread in the 1930s. Quite how the contemporary viewer oscillated between the two forms of representation remains a fascinating question and one worth further exploration elsewhere.

Figure 3: Ornamental metalwork and a design for an office by Peter Behrens reproduced in Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration, 1902
In investigating the potential properties and place of photography in the magazine, it is interesting to refer to the writing of Roland Barthes. In *Camera Lucida*, he commented:

“Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.” (9)

For Barthes, the late nineteenth century, his ‘age of Photography’, began the proliferation of reproducible images in magazines such as *Das Interieur* and other such titles. The idea that it was the ability of the photograph to bring the private into the public realm, and in so doing, render it a consumable experience, is helpful in thinking about the process of publishing interiors. It should, however, be added that other visual media such as prints of all kind, had been equally equipped to depict the interior prior to the application of photography. Barthes stressed the idea that it is the referent – what he calls elsewhere in this essay the ‘studium’ – that is the element of the photograph that documents and records – ‘the having been there’ which is crucial. This he sees as a unique property of the photograph among other media of the time. We might also qualify Barthes’ comment by stressing that most of the interiors that appeared in magazines were knowingly prepared for public consumption and therefore the 'private' was carefully selected and coded. Many aspects of private life were in fact still excluded from such views.

The factual and object nature of photography was a source of great interest, as the application of the word ‘sachlich’ or objective as a term of praise would suggest. In Germany, a strong tendency towards recording industrially produced objects in an almost encyclopaedic way was assisted by the availability of the photograph, as the publication of the *Deutsches Warenbuch*, a compilation of around two thousand objects of German manufacture in apparently straightforward, documentary style indicated. As Alan Sekula, photographic historian, has written in relation to the archive,
‘In general, then, the hidden imperatives of photographic culture drag us in two contradictory directions: towards ‘science’ and a myth of ‘objective truths’ on the one hand, and a cult of ‘subjective experience’ on the other.’ (10)

Not all properties of photography were necessarily equally attuned to the effective representation of interiors. The controlled lighting conditions and the staging required, as well as the blacking out of natural light from windows and other light sources, together with the necessarily long exposure times, meant that around 1900, the majority of photographic interiors were presented without people. As such, the rooms take on peculiar qualities, as commentators have suggested, they can be reminiscent of the scene of the crime, ready for the forensic eye of the reader or observer to analyse them. (11)

If one tendency in photography was to document, recent commentary has also suggested that in the area of photographing design, a second tendency was to take the object into the opposite direction, towards the magical. Photographs were recognised to give goods commodity value through their re-presentation. The sensitivity to form and surface informed an increasing recognition of the importance of style for industrial goods. It is no coincidence that many of the first industrial designers developed this awareness in their transition from design for two to three dimensions. Frederic Schwartz in his study of the Werkbund has stressed this in relation to AEG and Peter Behrens’s development of what he calls ‘commodity signs’. (12) Certainly, even when working in lithography and other techniques, illustrators and poster designers adopted the harsh lighting techniques of the studio to enhance mass-produced, industrial designs for display and sale, giving them a near-transcendent quality.

In a recent essay, architectural historian Tim Benton suggests it was watercolours rather than the photograph that offered imaginative possibilities for non-visual qualities of the interior to be depicted, such as homeliness and familial warmth. (13) A book such as Carl Larsson’s extremely popular Ett Hem (A Home, 1901) for instance, or Kate Greenaway’s illustrations, indicate how the domestic Arts and Crafts idyll could be more effectively portrayed, complete
with children and their activities. Another area in which colour was important was in advertising and trade catalogues produced by specialist furniture manufacturers. For the upper- and middle-classes of the early twentieth century, the practice of viewing the interior could offer a continuum between the magazine, the department store, the trade and retail catalogue and the exhibitions. As the pages from specialist furniture shops reveal, the principle of a perspectival view onto an un-populated room operated across their pages. Indeed, in the English language, the etymology of the word “Magasin” from the French, reveals that both shop and publication lie in the same root. Both department store and magazine were dependent on accumulation, diversity and distraction and each was dedicated to persuading the consumer or reader to engage with the display of material goods through controlled and arranged points of view. (14)

Colour was again achieved through reproductions of watercolour sketches that rendered interiors in detail with a softness and atmosphere, presumably aimed at selling, that was otherwise hard to achieve. It is therefore understandable that catalogues switched modes from watercolours of imaginary scenes of interiors, to photographically-derived illustrations of pieces of furniture on sale, and more extended elaborate conceits, such as engravings of historical interiors suggesting illustrations from romantic novels.

Indeed, in magazines, another form of visual representation of the domestic came in the domestic genre paintings accompanying the serialisation of novels. But to the historian of the domestic interior, it is not only the pages of the editorial commentary on homes and decoration that are of interest, but also the advertising pages. It was frequently through advertising that full-colour representations of new consumer goods were introduced and with them, a further range of idealised interiors portrayed. Through these pages, especially in the 1920s, advertising increasingly took on the role of advisor and expert, instructing the consumer in detailed copy. As Roland Marchand pointed out in Advertising the American Dream, when colour became an increasingly viable option for magazines of this kind, the editorial pages tended to look mundane and dull by comparison. (15)
Moving now to the 1920s, architectural historian Beatriz Colomina has identified a collapse of distinction between interior and exterior that she placed in direct relation to changing and new technologies of communication. In her analysis of architects’ engagement with the rhetoric of publicity, *Privacy and Publicity* modern architecture as mass media she wrote:

“With modernity the interior ceases to be simply bounded territory in opposition to the outside, whether physical or social. An analysis of the status of the house in Loos and Le Corbusier could be used to trace more precisely the transformations of the relationship between private and public space and the convolution of boundaries between inside and outside instigated by the emerging reality of the technologies of communication: newspaper, telephone, radio, film and television.” (16)

In 1929, the cover of the Frankfurt-based journal *Das Neue Frankfurt* (The New Frankfurt) portrayed ostensibly the same subject as *Das Interieur* of 1900 – a young woman in a designed environment – but the differences in visual strategies are what makes the image all the more significant. By 1929, the medium was photo-collage – a photograph of an equally fashionable woman was juxtaposed with an evocation of the city – dynamic lines lead to the words Italy, Russia and France – signalling an internationalism of outlook – the breaking of space that Colomina describes. The typeface is Paul Renner’s Futura, which was becoming an industry standard as a sans-serif that was praised for being clean, modern, while also advertised as being particularly compatible with photomontage. This number of the magazine was devoted to the theme of the chair, including a review of the important Werkbund exhibition of the same name, recently held in the Arts and Crafts Museum in the city. This new woman, identified by her hairstyle, stocking legs and shoes, turns towards the reader and engages directly with us. Pose and demeanour suggest a modern, liberated subject who is at home in the contemporary
world, whether private or public, interior or exterior. Here, the designers are the brother and sister team, Hans and Grete Leistikow.

*Das Neue Frankfurt*, from which this cover is taken, was a new kind of architectural journal that ran from 1926 to 1933. (17) It marks a stage of an increasingly overt role for the graphic designer in interpreting a magazine’s subject. As is well-known, *Das Neue Frankfurt* was not solely dedicated to interior design, the magazine promoted all aspects of the new design for the urban and domestic environment, as commissioned by this forward-looking Socialist municipal authority. Special issues of the magazine were dedicated to hygiene and the city, cheap dwellings, parallel building movements in other countries, notably the Soviet Union and Switzerland, as well as design themes and an occasional profile of individual designers, including, as it happens, Adolf Loos.

In terms of its design, the magazine belonged clearly to the New Typography, the application of modernist principles to publication design that had been formulated, by among others, Jan Tschichold, Moholy-Nagy and Kurt Schwitters in the preceding years. (18) The full page was used actively, organised according to the principles of abstraction, with no sense of a preoccupation with borders, framing and ornament of the preceding generation of designers. The initial designers were the brother and sister team, Hans Leistikow and Greta Leistikow and Willi Baumeister took over after they left for the USSR.

Within modernist circles, the photograph as document, so strongly felt in the pre-1914 years and the attendant impulse to archive had been displaced by a re-energised interest in the ruptured photographic image, produced by photomontage. This could signal a new approach to reality with human figures, artefacts and designed space cut up and re-organised to suggest simultaneity of experience. However, while the covers of *Das Neue Frankfurt* suggested this, its interior pages were more restrained and sober.
Among the graphic strategies employed were directional arrows to lead the reader to the ‘correct’ way of thinking, as on the cover from January 1929, or, juxtaposition of contrasting photographs – as for example, here, the comfortable/luxury interior and the preferred, standardised, modernist interior. Often informed by Marxist thinking, within the pictorial language of the magazine there was a distinct reaction against the developing commodity culture of more characteristic contemporary advertising, which stressed personal fulfilment and psychological gain. Instead, objects and interiors were portrayed as non-commodified – fulfilling needs rather than desires, serving as equipment rather than lifestyle accoutrements.

Figure 5: Double-page layouts from Das Neue Frankfurt

Photographic documentation of the Siedlung movement in the magazine was accompanied by a broad combination of visual ideas; plans of estates, layout of individual dwellings, as well as statistical tables and charts recording the provision of homes, room size or number of occupants. The various ways to represent the new home stressed their collective rather than individualised aspects in terms of interior design. And the emphasis was classless rather than class specific.

In many respects this version of politically-engaged Modernism presented a set of oppositions. As the mass-media became more adept at providing images that captured the colour and texture of modern life and more sophisticated in its strategies of persuasion, Modernism could be said to have codified an aesthetic of resistance and critique. In the case of Das Neue Frankfurt, this was to turn away from advertising towards information design. Even in the case of advertisements in the magazine, these were designed according to the same principles of layout and conformed to the magazine as a whole. Advertisements were reduced to what were considered to be the functional ingredients of a good advertisement – logo, product name and specifications, rather than the associative and psychological persuasion of many contemporary advertising strategies.
If the visual discourse of *Das Neue Frankfurt* was largely professional and masculine, it is significant that many of the design principles were also tested in the context of a new women’s magazine, *die neue linie* (The New Line), a Berlin-based monthly publication that is best known for its cover designs by Herbert Bayer and Moholy-Nagy. The magazine ran an article on Walter Gropius’s house in Dessau, for example, in which the usual professional conventions for representing the domestic interior were adapted to a popular context.

**Conclusion**

By the late 1920s, the tradition of design publishing associated with the 1890s and represented here by *Das Interieur*, continued alongside more modern developments. Modernism did not replace the former paradigm, they co-existed. While minor changes in paper, printing and layout design had occurred, the essential format of the turn of the century magazine was repeated over the years. From having been associated with the new, the formula had lapsed in/to what might be best characterised as a form of conservative modernity.

Modernist magazines such as *Das Neue Frankfurt* enter the history of design publishing as much for the significance of their ideas and the visual attitudes as for their immediate impact through distribution and readership. They also formed a model for much design journalism in the mid-twentieth century – particularly that associated with prescriptive views of ‘good design’, emanating from museums. For instance, in the early catalogues of the Museum of Modern Art New York, where a direct connection between designers from the Weimar period existed, a similar commitment to abstraction, object photography and scientism of layout was manifested. This was the case for the catalogue *Machine Art* in 1934, for example, with its cover designed by Joseph Albers, by then of Black Mountain College. The visual rhetoric of modern magazine design also became the accepted form for the publications of the first of group of design councils established in Europe in the early post-war years. Here again, a middle path was suggested through their concern to distance commentary from advertising and promotion in their texts and an experimental visual rhetoric was combined with factual object photography which avoided the allure of more overtly promotional images.
On a broader front, in many respects it could be said that Modernism pushed the magazine away from the culture of advertising, to define its layout as a form of information design. A further stage in the history of design magazines would be a reconciliation of these two apparently oppositional tendencies in another kind of design journalism and in tune with what has been described as a 'softening' of Modernism, as in the Italian design journal *Domus*. But that is another story.

**Endnotes**

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5. FERRY, E., “‘Decorators may be compared to doctors’: an analysis of Rhoda and Agnes Garrett’s *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork and Furniture* (1876)”, *Journal of Design History*, (Oxford), Vol. 16 no. 1, 2003, pp.15-34.


16. COLOMINA, B. op cit, p.229.
