Chapter Eighteen

The Construction of Taste: Television and American Home Décor

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Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, television arose as the technological successor to print and radio, becoming the central platform for the distribution of information designed for mass public consumption. The manipulation and gatekeeping of that information has been a controversial issue for many scholars who proclaim that media (especially since the advent of television) has been the testing grounds for an elitist class of capitalists who seek to dominate the social order through the tacit dispensation of ideology preferential to their economic and political agendas.[1] While much attention has been given to the sociopolitical role that news has played in the fate of public opinion,[2] a substantial amount of the television content in question may be primarily regarded as entertainment, which has been noted for its influence on sociocultural standards.[3] This chapter will analyze the use of television as an influential medium in the evolution of home décor by investigating television's role in population shifts; its influence on the representation of race and class; and TV's culpability in the global economic crisis of 2008. The authors argue that television has been an integral component in the society-wide codification of commercial standards of visual aesthetics. Moreover, it is asserted here that the richness of television as a media format has been instrumental in the emergence of American consumer culture as the dominant social form dictating the stylistic values of ordinary citizens in ways unimaginable with print and radio.[4]

Studies have long demonstrated the ability of television to facilitate the construction of audiences' understandings of real-world phenomena. Perceptions of crime rates, court proceedings, and physical trauma have all been shown to be highly dependent upon information received from television (whether accurate or fabricated) in the minds of viewers unfamiliar with these actual processes.[5] Given what is known about how consumers of television interpret

these presentations, it follows logically that viewers would also use television to construct their own generalizations about the appearance and layout of emergency rooms (as Katherine A. Foss discusses in this collection), courtrooms, and police precincts (as Susan H. Sarapin and Glenn G. Sparks discuss in this collection). The point is to suggest that if the appearance popularly applied to these fundamental parts of life is so easily incorporated into the conscious thinking of television audiences regardless of accuracy, then the meaning and value of design styles implemented in home décor should be just as readily absorbed into the waking psyche of viewers. Thus, audiences develop a significant degree of their ability to discriminate between the status and value attributed to different brands, design schemes, and color palettes from television. Television programs continually use visual signifiers as tools to create symbolic value in the domestic space, which shapes the populist comprehension of home décor aesthetics.[6] Home décor has been selected as the focus of this study because the domestic arena has served as the linchpin for the unrestricted exercise of individual taste, self-expression, and the articulation of personal aspirations in the lives of everyday people in the United States.[7] The first section of this chapter discusses programming ideology (e.g., what did TV viewers see and what did that mean for the development of style and taste within the home). The authors lay the foundation for their argument by examining television's relevance in postwar American culture. Subsequently, they explore how television served as a catalyst for the emergence of middle-class idealism, which became one of the ideological benchmarks for achieving the "American Dream." In the second section of this chapter, the authors investigate how the programming ideologies found on television have shaped the evolutions of style and design philosophies on television. Furthermore, this chapter examines how these shifts in ideological and philosophical paradigms informed how urban and suburban residences constructed the spatial environment within the home in response to the stimuli they received via television shows.

TELEVISION'S EMERGING RELEVANCE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

As television surpassed print and radio as the most popular means of social instruction there emerged a more modernized, integrated media industrial complex that brought about an abundance of contextual factors that must be taken into consideration.[8] The transition from the "Silent Generation" to the "Baby Boomers" played a significant role in the evolution of home décor. The recovery period post–World War II sparked an ideological evolution that

was reflected in all aspects of the American social conscience. This created a quixotic atmosphere of hope, a desire for the "finer things in life," and the inception of a revisionist tone toward the "American Dream."[9] The symbolism emoted by the "house with the white picket fence" became real with the emergence of suburban enclaves outside of metropolitan cities across the United States.[10] The desire for affluence and "a piece of the pie" became the rallying call of the late 1950s and early 1960s.[11] These aspirations became part of the DNA of a populist dialogue present in television programming and advertising.[12]

Television programs such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957*)* and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963) played a significant role in defining domestic aesthetics during the 1950s.[13] Programs such as these were hallmarks of the modern culture of their time, illustrating the inner anatomy of family values and domestic spaces to American audiences. This family-oriented perspective perpetuated the "homemaker" archetype as the defining role of the American woman. This was one of the many variables that helped shape the American middle-class ideal. The establishment of social order within the television household in the mid-twentieth century initiated a status-conscious perspective for the incipient generation of "Baby Boomers."[14] Television began indoctrinating the next generation of Americans into a mode of consumption dictated by the psycho-social hegemony of media producers.[15] Advertisers aggressively sought to take advantage of this new rich media format.[16] Therein, preferences assumed to be the product of individual agency were guided by visual paradigms paraded in the weekly broadcasts of programs aimed at conditioning audiences to embrace the lifestyles of their mediated counterparts.[17] One of the best illustrations of this tactic in television advertising would be the "Maytag Repairman." The figure first appeared in the late 1960s serving as the de facto "pitch man" for the brand. Maytag leveraged design elements, innovation, and aesthetic placement of their product within the home with the "homemakers" as the target. In *Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker*, Mary Beth Haralovich states, "Like housing design and suburban development, the consumer product industry built its economy on defining the social class and self-identity of women as homemakers."[18]

By the end of the twentieth century, consumers had begun purchasing replacements for goods—which were neither worn-out nor functionally outmoded—at an accelerated pace. Rather, they were buying new products because the old ones had fallen "out of fashion."[19] This presented a marked contrast to the historical notion that many durable items were essentially a once-in-a-lifetime purchase. This tendency toward unnecessary replacement facilitated the intentional incorporation of design obsolescence in the durable goods industry. The rapid-paced evolution of aesthetic sensibilities, dictated

to audiences by television, replaced the emphasis on function with an ostentatious preoccupation with form.[20]

Television's American Infusion

The post-World War II climate in American society during the 1950s was one of transition, where the country sought to assert itself as a superpower and heal from the trauma of war. In an effort to acculturate a nation, media and entertainment served as the go-to tactic for socialization in the United States. Television significantly impacted not only the American psyche, but it also served as an aesthetic compass shaping the taste of American society. Television's programming not only influenced how Americans viewed the world, but these shows also cultivated the lens that Americans saw themselves through within the larger global context. Serving as a key variable in the spread of middle-class suburban ideals, television projected a stylized perspective of American living.[21] Furthermore, television's ability to seed aspirational tropes via mediated experiences enabled the medium to permeate every aspect of popular culture into the twenty-first century. By manufacturing an insatiable infatuation with cultural materialism, particularly amongst the middle and working classes, a socio-economic divide emerged that positioned these social groups to strive to maintain pace with the "haves." Paul Adams asserts in his book *Television a Gathering Place*:

> Television can be seen and heard by virtually any member of modern society; it allows people to rise above the chaos of daily life and survey the world from a position of omniscience; it separates one class of people—politicians, entertainers, and public figures—from the rest of people, and puts them in a privileged position where they can be seen and emulated and yet remain separate from society.[22]

The evolution of a bifurcated social hierarchy (e.g., upper and working class) served as the catalyst for the emergence of the middle-class citizen seeking to reside in the suburbs and achieve "upward mobility." Television programs like *The Honeymooners* (1955–1956), which featured the Kramdens, a working-class couple, illustrated a familial desire to migrate from the harsh realities of residing in cramped urban dwellings into the wide-open spaces of the suburbs. The post-World War II return of military veterans and the expansion of the American highway system were significant catalysts in the mass migration from the cities to the suburbs, as were governmental social welfare programs enacted by the New Deal and subsequently the Great Society. For many Americans, having the ability to physically remove themselves and enjoy the trappings of middle-class living fundamentally shifted

the perspective of who were the "haves and have-nots." In her book *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel asserts, "The illustrations of domestic bliss and consumer prosperity presented a soothing alternative to the tensions of postwar life."[23] With this domestic bliss came the benefits of privacy, space, and property ownership: three things that were difficult to achieve in the urban centers of America.[24]

The emergence of family television programs like *My Three Sons* (1960–1972) and *The Brady Brunch* (1969–1974) laid the foundation for a cultural shift in values and consumption habits. Presenting tangible examples of what a family home should look like, family television programs now began to function as the new meeting place within the home, usurping the role of gathering around the dinner table or congregating in front of the radio.[25] Brands and networks relished the opportunity to leverage the new role that television played in our daily lives via advertisements and TV programming, which seeped into the consciousness of American families. Spigel notes, "The family circle ads, like suburbia itself, were only a temporary consumer solution to a set of complicated political, economic, and social problems."[26] In her recent work, *The Citizen Machine*, Anna McCarthy states that television broadcasting functioned as a tool for enlightenment and evoking stability into the minds of the American people.[27] Television also stimulated a shift of psychographic consumer behavior and social etiquette. The cultivation of this new social normative that celebrated individualism and its association with the ideals of consumerism and democracy enabled television to have comprehensive influence on the aesthetic taste of individuals and the family unit. The impact of television on the aesthetic taste of consumers, specifically with females who were the key decision makers and curators of the spatial dynamics within the home, was palpable from the perspective of television networks and advertisers who utilized visually seductive tactics in order to exploit the middle-class suburban aspiration to be amongst the bourgeois class.[28]

Middle-Class Idealism

Emerging as one of the leading voices in television research and its influence on how consumers see the world, Spigel identifies several key insights that have proved important to note in this research, including: the emergence of the white middle class, the cultivation of the suburban ideal, home as theater, and upward social mobility.[29] Each of these variables, reflecting the cultural mood of America during the 1950s and 1960s, encapsulates how television became such a powerful medium that influenced consumer preference, judgment, decision making, and what they aspired to acquire for their homes via the promotion of futurism through the desire for the "new."

The emergence of the middle class was a significant milestone in a country that believes everyone can achieve the "American Dream." Many white Americans who felt entitled to this dream sought to actively align their lives with this perceived "American Dream." Moreover, the postwar trend of bringing the family unit together in an effort to evoke domestic cohesion triggered an appetite for a change in the social environment propagated via television.[30] Television programs like *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) and *The Guiding Light* (1952–2009) were shows that provided a blueprint of sorts to American families. The momentary escapism these programs provided enabled viewers to have a snapshot into the fabricated world of suburban living. From floral curtains to elegant vases and flatware, television during this period served as an "instructional video" for the middle class on how to decorate their homes and comport themselves within these domestic spaces. This pictorial analog of domestic life was amplified by seducing the viewer with tantalizing advertisements of how the television could fit into their daily lives. [31]

Many advertisers sought to sell consumers a fantasy of home life that aligned with the other cultural signifiers that complemented the cultivation of the suburban ideal.[32] By becoming an essential component to the domestic space in suburbia, owning a TV became a status symbol for middle-class families seeking to enjoy the accouterments of the "good life." Possession of this status symbol was deemed as a progressive step toward aesthetic expression. Although this aesthetic expression and perceived affluence was filtered via the prism of a mediated experience, it contributed to the development of the self-concept for many Americans who fancied themselves sophisticated.[33] The ability to express their aesthetic tastes empowered many middle-class families with the feeling of "making it" and fully participating in the "American Dream."

In a country obsessed with image construction, what better stage to craft a utopian environment that represents hope and aspiration than the home? The home becomes conflated with theater: "architects, planbook writers, religious leaders, domestic engineers, women's magazines, and books on interior décor variously imagined the bourgeois home as a stage on which a set of highly conventionalized social roles were played by family members alike."[34] Consumer aesthetic tastes tend to revolve around the performative nature of daily life in relation to the visual pleasure garnered via beautiful design.[35] From a mundane task like house cleaning to "sexier" activities such as purchasing new furniture for the home, networks and advertisers tapped into the aspirational desires of consumers. The desired migration of certain social groups also redefined the concept of upward mobility. The ability to physically and metaphorically be mobile complemented the middle-class suburban ideal.

The Working-Class Voice

Many in the working and lower classes had a different perspective of mobility due to the fact that they lacked the ability to be mobile as a result of social and economic challenges. Television programs like *The Honeymooners* (1955–1956), *All in the Family* (1971–1979), *Sanford and Son* (1972–1977), *Chico and the Man* (1974–1978), and *Good Times* (1975–1979) chronicled the challenges for working and lower classes struggling for,[36] as *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985) put it, their "piece of the pie." This last program offers one of the best expressions of this image of upward mobility. The Jeffersons were spinoff characters from *All in the Family*. Characters George and Louise Jefferson migrated from their working-class enclave of Queens, New York, where they lived next door to the Bunkers of *All in the Family*, into a luxury apartment on Manhattan's swanky Upper East Side. The shift in presentation of the domestic space on *The Jeffersons* featured floral wallpaper, landscape paintings, China cabinets, and a sky blue dining area exhibiting a high color contrast verses the mundane color palette found on *All in the Family*. The use of high color contrast in the case of the Jeffersons functioned as a visual signifier of their upward mobility.

By reinforcing the plight of the working class on television (or their potential mobility as is the case with the Jefferson's; even though the Jeffersons moved to a wealthier neighborhood and had a maid, their behavior indicated that culturally they were working class and didn't "fit" in their wealthy environs), these programs further cultivated division between the "haves and have nots."[37] These programs showcased the perspective of working-class families living in cramped and potentially volatile living spaces with aspirations of enjoying life in "greener pastures." A prime example would be the program *Good Times*. The characters on this show lived in a dilapidated tenement building featuring tarnished walls, worn doors, and mismatched dining furniture. The constant portrayal of these characters struggling against "the man" propagated an unpleasant picture of what inner-city life in these domestic spaces was like, further romanticizing middle-class idealism.

Beth Bailey and David Faber assert, "During the 1970s, Americans wrestled with fundamental questions of identity, particularly those related to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The social movements of the 1960s broke down many of the legal and political barriers that made people of color and women second-class citizens in the United States."[38] The emergence of a variety of social movements toward the end of the 1960s into the 1970s created a dramatic ripple effect in the public consciousness of the United States. Jeffery Cowie states,

> In 1970, the most popular television shows included the traditional escapism of *Marcus Welby, Flip Wilson, Here's Lucy, Ironside*, and, of course *Gunsmoke.*

> By the middle of the decade, in contrast, the list of the top shows was a multicultural working-class ghetto in all its complexities: *All in the Family*, (backlash worker versus the new politics); *The Waltons* (return of the Great Depression); *Good Times*, *Welcome Back, Kotter*, and *Sanford and Son* (life and poverty in the inner city); *The Jeffersons* (black upward mobility); *Laverne and Shirley* (working girls in the classless fifties); and *One Day at a Time* and *Alice* (working women face life after divorce).[39]

Television networks during this period aimed to create programs that reflected the mood in America via sitcoms. Led by savvy television producers like Norman Lear, who created iconic programs like *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Good Times*, these shows sought to put their fingers on the pulse of a variety of social issues grappling the nation. These shows provided a rare look into the worlds of working-class families seeking the "American Dream." By providing insights into these worlds, the programs marked a role reversal from the conservative modernist ethos of the 1950s and 1960s to a more liberal and at times eccentric point of view. The characters on Lear's shows cobbled together an aesthetic that reflected a lack of tonal differences that devoid the domestic space of "rhythm," relegating the interior décor to be more a matter of function verses form or design.[40] When you examine the blue-collar aesthetic of *All in the Family*, the composition of the domestic space lacked "presence"[41] and was organized out of necessity (function) verses design (form).[42] Set in Queens, the aesthetics on *All in the Family* were drab and featured such items as pea-green flatware, plastic water pitchers, an open-planned living/dining room that was wallpapered verses painted, and capped with decorated plates that functioned as "art work" on the walls. Contrast this with the program *Leave It to Beaver*, where the home reflected a conscious effort to illustrate the benefits of middle-class life: numerous small rooms, which evoked a sense of space. This stood in opposition to a home space where all family activities occurred in one open room as illustrated on programs like *The Honeymooners*, where the kitchen, dining room, and living room were all in the same space.

Television's New Money

By the 1980s and 1990s, a new consumer emerged, temporally and ideologically removed from the postwar Western consciousness prevalent between the 1950s and 1970s. This resulted in "an increasing orientation toward questions of lifestyle" that is cemented in the dialogue around culture.[43] Television programs like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (1984–1995) and MTV's *Cribs* (2000–present) perpetuated the fabrication of "pseudo-worlds" and "pseudo-places," igniting a yearning from the viewer to replicate these

experiences.[44] The opportunity to engage these "worlds and places" through viewership, or by emulating these experiences through interior design, exemplifies television as a byproduct of capitalism, functioning as a tool for the promotion of consumerist culture.[45] Watching television creates a platform for viewers to form parasocial relationships[46] with TV characters who traverse these pseudo-worlds. The admiration of the characters' movements through these spaces serves as a coping mechanism allowing individuals to escape the mundane rituals of daily life.

Sonia Livingstone notes, "The social trends of the twentieth century combined to transform the Victorian family, a model of domestic life that prioritized a culture of stability, hard work, security, duty, and respect into the democratic family that prizes role flexibility, gender, and generational equality, and a culture of self-fulfillment and individual rights."[47] Guided by the assumption that to be on TV one must possess a certain level of social status, consumers often correlated items "as seen on TV" as having a higher value proposition than those that are not. When this correlation is made it becomes the genesis of aspiring individuals seeking to acquire items that are deemed to possess high symbolic value.

The reintroduction of family programming in the 1980s as one of the key viewing options on television seemed like an attempt by Baby Boomers to reset family values as demonstrated in shows of the 1950s.[48] The one wrinkle in this situation is that these programs began to reflect the idiosyncrasies of American life. This was expressed in a variety of ways all with the aim of providing an authentic point of view to the world around us. Shows like *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) fundamentally reframed how television audiences understood the function of the family unit, especially an African American family who were actively participating in the middle-class ideal while living in New York City. *The Cosby Show* resonated with families from various cultural backgrounds seeking to achieve social status. The show provided a look into a brownstone in Brooklyn featuring the accouterments of upper-middle-class living. By reframing the visual discourse, family programming in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s expanded the dialogue around who was allowed to participate in the "American Dream."

THE EVOLUTION OF STYLE

Interior design and home decoration have continuously served as passive benchmarks for the chronological progress of human civilization. Home furnishings, like all consumer products, follow design motifs that embrace the aesthetic sensibilities of the cultural era in which they were produced.

However, the expensive, stationary, and semi-conspicuous nature of home décor plays a significant role in the inability of its design trends to spread as swiftly as trends in other product classes. Television has been integral as a catalyst for overcoming this inherent resistance to rapid mass diffusion and adoption[49] by facilitating the mimetic distribution of design motifs[50] in household flooring, window treatments, furniture, and appliances. However, these transitions are also informed by other forms of design, especially fashion. For instance, when the shag haircut fell out of style, its demise was soon followed by the shag carpet. Similarly, during the 1970s mid-hue earth tones such as chocolate brown, burnt orange, sunflower yellow, and split-pea green fell in and out of vogue in fashion apparel. Likewise, these dated color schemes also followed the same trends in minor durable goods, such as dining sets, vacuum cleaners, toasters, blenders, and lamps. These in turn led the way for the transition of more expensive and difficult to replace items such as sofas, floor rugs, curtains, wallpaper, and large stationary appliances.

Consequently, many elaborate, ornamental, and meandering line patterns of traditional décor also fell from prominence in lieu of more neutral, stable, and streamlined contemporary designs during the onset of the postmodern era, only to be later reinstated around the turn of the millennium with praise as vintage artifacts of superior quality. During the late twentieth century real estate bubble, vegetative motifs found in patterns such as floral, paisley, damask, and ogee became too idiosyncratic for the massive expansion of the US housing market. Check patterns such as plaid, argyle, gingham, and hounds tooth became too folksy for use in establishing universal appeal for the hopeful American home-buyer. By the 1990s neutral off-white and ivory walls were the standard format for open residential listings. This layout was a reference to the white cube aesthetic, popularized in fine art galleries and museums,[51] which became idealized with the affluent middle-class lifestyles portrayed on television shows such as *Frasier* (1993–2004) and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996). Meanwhile the vestiges of substantive, articulate design schemes became denigrated to their associations with the mass produced, low-culture, post-industrial kitsch on display in shows like *Roseanne* (1988–1997) and *Married with Children* (1987–1997), with interiors featuring dingy, low-contrast earth tones used in flooring, walls, counters, and cabinets. These household sets included mismatches of outdated designs such as gaudy floral and plaid patterns on sofas, pillows, throws, wallpaper, and carpet. Designs appear to be notably constructed from synthetic materials such as linoleum, polyester, ceramic, and acrylic in contrast to natural materials used in the ideal middle-class households today like granite, marble, steel, and wool.

The intention of the postmodern white cube's use in the home for sale or rent was to present a blank space for occupation as an empty canvas, pristine,

and bearing no traces of its previous inhabitants. In this way it needed no purification from the pollution of their dwelling, their habits, and their subjective tastes.[52] Likewise, in this way the home is fully prepared for complete possession by a new resident. The potential residents can imagine themselves in the home when its mood and appearance is dictated by their own personal tastes, making them "master of the domain" in question.[53] The clean neutral palette is to be ornamented by easily exchanged accents in window treatments, wall hangings, flooring, lighting, and well-placed decorations. These trends can be noted not only for their status-based occurrence across the social hierarchy, but also for their tendency to shift temporally across generations, as noted below.

One might make note of these temporal trends within media, as the aesthetic values of the middle-class American household have undergone constant transition on television from the time of TV's explosion until the present day. The televised household became a paradigm for the construction of self and social identity, serving as a source of expectation and inspiration for generations of middle-class (and aspiring middle-class) consumers in the interior decoration of their homes.[54] Studies have noted the disproportionate representation of social affluence on television.[55] However, not only has television played a vital role in the dissemination of visual directives for middle-class home decoration, it has also given the viewer strong indications of the idealized arrangement of poor, working-class, and upper-class homes. In doing so, television has provided cues for both avoidance and aspiration in the pursuit of increased social status.

Design Philosophies on Television

Many televised representations of the home stem from the authentic folk Americana reminiscent of that depicted in the commercial portraiture of Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* paintings, now often criticized as kitsch.[56] With the rich media format of television, and its hypnotic illusion of animated life, these images became more definitive and convincing as depicted in the televised stories of family-oriented dramas and situational comedies based in domestic settings,[57] and their accompanying advertisements.[58] In early shows first filmed in black and white like *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–1966), one might note visual attestations of traditional middle-class values in decorative features such as molded trimming along the living room walls, dark mahogany accent furniture heavily ornamented with curved legs and beaded woodwork, wall-to-wall carpeting, floral-patterned sofa sets with ruffled leg skirts, brass candleholders and wall lamps, and wooden framed canvas paintings of countryside landscapes.[59] Moreover, the narrow range of available programming and the immense popularity of television in general, made its influence over the public perception of

the ideal home even more potent during this early period. In this sense, in its incipient stages, network television had a dramatically homogenizing effect over the public consciousness when compared to the communicative limitations and specialized interest targeting of many radio and print publications offering similar sociocultural perspectives, because viewers had little choice but to watch the same limited selection of television programs at this time.

During the 1960s and early 1970s these middle-class aesthetics evolved, influenced by design philosophies rooted in the psychedelic, and other burgeoning reactions to the conservative ideologies of 1950s traditionalism.[60] These evolutions came to the public view under the new perspective of color television, which received widespread distribution in the US market in 1965. Shows such as *Bewitched* (1964–1972), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970), and *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) exhibited these changes with the introduction of vivid color palettes, including rich greens, oranges, yellows, and browns, in piled and shag carpets and floor rugs, curtains, and woolen sofa sets. Decorative accents introduced more eclectic tastes like Chinese character paintings, bonsai trees, and sofa pillows with re-stitched bricolage print patterns, countered by daisy, damask, and cornflower wallpaper patterns; soft pastel orange, green, or blue painted walls; or exposed brick and stone walls. During this era sofas began to appear with lower, narrower profiles, and sharper, streamlined edges, while tall-shaded ornamental table lamps became a popular trend. Floor plans began to approach less spatially congested nonconventional designs with more sparse furnishing layouts, open area room designs, and exposed staircases.

Later shows such as *Family Ties* (1982–1989), *Mr. Belvedere* (1985–1990), and *Who's the Boss?* (1984–1992), brought forth continued testimonies of ideal middle-class American life with signifiers of its proper domestic presentation. These included hardwood floors and doors with white walls suggesting early iterations of the white cube within the home, or walls plastered with sheets of gingham print, oak leaf patterns, stripes, or flower print wallpaper. Walls continued to include old-fashioned features like molded trimming and elaborate hangings such as regulator clocks and framed coats of arms. Spangled rivet patterns appear on microfiber sofas or accent pillows in beige and navy. Sofas and armchairs are also subject to carry gaudy floral prints, as are stair runners and Turkish rugs. These floral motifs were epitomized in the large green leaves of Dieffenbachia, and Chinese Evergreen houseplants. Meanwhile ornamentally curved and beaded woodwork continued its prominence in decorative furniture and railings. This era was typified by its modest shift toward the white cube in some aspects, while maintaining a heavy reliance on traditionalist design forms in others.

Similar but somewhat more modern home interiors were found in other shows overlapping the same time period like *Growing Pains* (1985–1992), *Charles in Charge* (1987–1990), *Full House* (1987–1995), and *Home Improvement* (1991–1999). In these shows features like recessed lighting, vaulted ceilings, spiral staircases, and white on white walls became legitimate middle-class aspirations. Rear kitchens included window walls and greenhouses. Ornamental woodwork was still common, but less prevalent than the cleaner lines of more modern cabinets, tables, chairs, and staircase railings. Lighter-colored spruce and beech wood began gaining popularity in lieu of darker mahogany stains. Green carpet and seating upholstery took on undertones of blue as a departure from the deep hunter greens of the 1960s and 1970s. Wall paintings now included maritime themes in addition to rustic countryside landscapes. Although they were in the process of being phased out of the middle-class paradigm of domestic aspiration, traditional designs such as lower-third wall paneling, floral vases and flatware decoratively set on open-faced cabinet shelves, check patterns, and gaudy golden chandeliers maintained their presence in the houses of American sitcoms. However, by this point these designs were becoming emerged within the symbolism of the white cube as older-styled woodwork was often painted over in light tones, or antique artifacts like mahogany caned settees became isolated points of focus within the clean lines of the postmodern household.

By the late 1990s the notion of aspiration had become more prominent as public policy began to strip the middle class of its access to legitimate social affluence at an accelerated pace—reducing its ranks to a fraction of its one-time glory as the cornerstone upon which the American economy rested. Increasingly, real wages were driven down against inflation and the rising income of a class of uber-wealthy plutocrats.[61] In an effort to maintain the "American Dream"[62] being sold to them on television, a host of Americans took on credit debt[63] in order to drive new cars, eat at the local Applebee's, keep their premium cable subscriptions, and furnish their marble-laden McMansions with imitation designer furniture.[64] Retailers like Ikea, Target, and Bed Bath & Beyond cashed in heavily on the opportunity[65] to exploit the pocketbooks of a waning middle class now on the edge of financial ruin. Thanks to television, these same individuals had developed an unhealthy affinity for a wasteful lifestyle of over-consumption.[66] Centuries of functional design rationale would fly out the window as American consumers flocked to big box home furnishing retailers to decorate the walls of their postmodern "cubes" with mass-produced hallmarks of artifice in the form of faux antique, Mediterranean, and country home-styled housewares.[67] Lifestyle-based programming found on shows like *The Martha Stewart Show* (2005–2012) and

programs on the Home & Garden Television network have been critical to the popularization of this growing obsession with material comfort.

Location, Location, Location

Eventually there arose a divide between town and country[68] with the coming of the postmodern abode of the city-slicking professional featured on shows like *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), *Frasier* (1993–2004), and *Friends* (1994–2004). These homes portrayed the new-age design philosophy that is ubiquitous to the public and private spaces frequented by progressive, coastal, metropolitan city dwellers who are often employed by glamour industries, and rank amongst the intelligentsia.[69] Apple Stores, trendy bars and eateries, corporate offices, and creative spaces all share the central motifs of this sleek, minimalist, postmodern aesthetic. Current programs including *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present) and *New Girl* (2011–present) remain true to this paradigm, which has rapidly changed the face of home décor since the 1970s.

In these households beech-stained wooden floors meet deep earth-toned, or soft neutral-colored living room sets. Walls are white and light neutral shades or painted in pastels such as teal, peach, pink, or periwinkle. Art deco dining sets and halogen lamps are contrasted with old-world artifacts such as antique telescopes and vases. The stage of these apartments has been set for the display of tasteful possessions. Glass-framed or open-faced kitchen cabinets expose stacks of flatware, dry food products, and kitchen utensils, complementing the glimmer of granite countertops. Square-compartmented bookshelves are filled with books and decorative works of contemporary art. The floor plans of these units are also highly expository with open or loft-style arrangements. Black and white framed photography hangs on the walls, while woodwork has been stripped of its ornamental traits and painted to contrast with the room in a way that is cold and technical rather than the natural way stained wood blends into a room.

Modernized remnants of vintage and traditional American folk culture endured on the set designs of suburban sitcom series such as *Hope & Faith* (2003–2006), *According to* Jim (2001–2009), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005), while *Modern Family* (2009–present) and *Last Man Standing* (2001–present) have updated the folk-inspired trends into the present. Within the confines of these middle-American McMansions, there are similar features in glass cabinetwork and granite countertops found in the city but with more olive, stained wood, and neutral ivory earth tones, or more saturated colors, or soft combinations of pastels serving as a quiet backdrop accented by vintage stripe, check, or floral patterns. In this way the classic—which one might argue to be indicative of the real—has become objectified as the

central attraction in an environment dominated by artifice and imitation,[70] in many cases being little more than an imitation itself.[71] Both town and country postmodern style and postmodern re-framings of traditionalism became effective tools for marketing cookie-cutter residences to the mass public, in open houses and on television. Because these programs promoted if not initiated many of the ideas constituting a particular aspirational standard of American living, in a sense the inspiration drawn from these contemporary television shows made it somewhat easier for an army of real estate agents to sell homes to middle-class Americans as they took the nation by storm with their infamous hypnotic mantra of "location, location, location."

As such, location became the imagined justification for the multiplying of the market prices of homes whose essential value could be easily deduced to the much lower cost of materials plus labor and development and marketing expenses. Yet, in many ways it was not the structures themselves that served as the point of interest in the sale of housing, or even the location per se. Rather, it was the idea of the American household, which was being sold to the public under the false assumption of indefinite growth.[72] That is to say, as Americans began to crave the affluence they were witnessing daily in their televised entertainment, the acquisition of that lifestyle at all costs became a central preoccupation. It became feasible to pay unreasonable sums for houses similar to the ones on TV as the market value appeared to be growing without end. Though no one was for certain exactly where this value was actually being produced, or how it was to be accounted for, housing prices continued to soar throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and this unsubstantiated production of value, underscored by inflation, was eating what would become an irreparable hole into the global economy.[73] What happened next bears elaboration.

THE TELEVISION ECONOMY

With urban sprawl in full swing,[74] and the Glass-Steagall Act[75] under repeal by 1999, a swarm of predatory mortgage lenders took to arms against working and middle-class US citizens with adjustable mortgages that often held the unwary consumer at an immense disadvantage.[76] This allowed bankers to devise subprime contracts with many under-qualified borrowers for, what amounted to, unsustainable access to the "American Dream" portrayed on television at unjustifiably high prices and interest rates.[77] Essentially this created debt that would never be reconciled. Ordinary consumers were widely misguided by the false assumption that houses were the ultimate asset of personal investment, and that their values would continue to rise as they had

for decades, without restraint. Desperate for their chance at a quality life, millions of ambitious Americans bought-in to some of the most extensive schemes of fraud and corruption the world has ever seen.[78] It soon became apparent that a large number of home buyers could not afford to maintain the fantasies sold to them on the sitcoms they had used as a guide to prosperity. It turned out that the price of prosperity was grossly inflated, as were the interest rates on the loans used to secure its benefits. In this way television served as an accomplice of sorts to the 2008 global economic meltdown, which initiated in the US housing market. The main point to be noted is that city apartments and suburban McMansions became the point of entry into this fantasy of middle-class socioeconomic affluence. The ideal image of those dwellings had been largely programmed into the public via staged representations of domestic spaces.

The housing market crisis was marked by the common symptoms of irrational exuberance,[79] mass hysteria,[80] and herd-like imitation[81] as it passed through the bubble-panic-crash cycle typical of economic fall-out.[82] Part of this imitative behavior of crowd-oriented contagion[83] involved the long-term consumption of images that provided a nation of viewers with a particular understanding of the world, including their own homes. To be certain, television had informed viewers of the normative standards of what their everyday lives should look like given their social status and the cultural climate.[84] In so doing, it planted within the population the idea that the overpriced postmodern styled apartments and McMansions—being hocked by developers and realtors across the country—were the quintessential high-notes of modern middle-class living.

Not only this, but it also raised the demands[85] of self-presentation placed on ordinary people in several aspects.[86] Suddenly, under the influence of shows like *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) there was a hyper-accelerated desire for Louis Vuitton bags and Manolo Blahnik stilettos within the fashion repertoires of ordinary middle- and even working-class Americans. Where they could not afford these, they "traded up"[87] with Coach and Dooney & Bourke or they wore luxury knock-offs or counterfeit goods. In a similar way, granite countertops, marble floors, and sub-zero refrigerators became designer standards for the interior of the middle-class American home. Likewise, where these could not be afforded they were also heavily imitated with synthetic vinyl countertops and ceramic tiles bearing marble prints, and large-framed, silver aluminum refrigerators similar in appearance to sub-zero units.

In the same sense, the McMansion itself is imitative of the actual provincial or country estate—its brick façade and drywall interior intended to mimic the mason work and plaster of the large elaborate homes of society's old-guard. In many contemporary homes artificial painted patinas and lightweight aluminum plumbing fixtures imitate the authenticity of oxidized bronze and tarnished heavy brass. Since the turn of the millennium, these aesthetic sensibilities have increasingly been exploited through the aspirational overtones

regularly conveyed in the segments and advertisements presented within lifestyle genre programs based in home improvement and domestic arts. From celebrity lifestyle gurus like Martha Stewart to reality programming such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003–2012), *House Hunters* (1999–present) and its series of spin-offs, *Celebrity House Hunting* (2012–present), MTV's *Cribs*, and even *This Old House* (1979–present), the home lifestyle marketers have relentlessly promoted a set of aesthetic standards of domestic organization and presentation that has catered to the broadening of faux antique Mediterranean and country house decoration motifs now prominent in modern middle-class homes.

By serving as aesthetic barometer via much of its programming, television fortifies the aspirations that reflect the essence of American culture. It has become one of the key benchmarks in how consumers measure their aesthetic taste. From the 1950s to present day, the television has shaped the way Americans see the world and themselves. By fostering a consumerist ideology steeped in the concepts of image construction, middle-class suburban ideals, and the pursuit of the "American Dream," television serves as a tool that continues to mold the public consciousness.

Trends in interior décor have depended heavily on television programming for the current rate of accelerated diffusion, which has enabled faster transitions in the prevailing paradigm of domestic presentation. Over a half-century of network and cable sitcoms have ingrained the general public with a specific understanding of social status and personal identity based upon design features found in the home environment. Moreover, the turn of the millennium witnessed the rise of reality-based genres of television, which produced an unmitigated pressure on audiences to engage materialistic fantasies pursuant to the agendas of the capitalist class and its directors of media. The establishment of this worldview and its preferential standards has profoundly impacted many aspects of our society including: a single-minded interpretation of superficial symbolism as an indicator of status and quality, the progressive displacement of the real in lieu of imitative artifice, and an inadvertent contribution to the meltdown of the global economy.

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