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Using innovative methodological and theoretical approaches, Homes and Homecomings provides case studies across the globe. The book contains original illustrations, and provides an important reference for historians and scholars across a broad range of disciplines.

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Homes and Homecomings
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Homes and Homecomings

Gendered Histories of Domesticity and Return

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AND
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CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors  vii

Introduction

Gendering Histories of Homes and Homecomings
K. H. ADLER 1

Comfort

1 Communist Comfort: Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev Era
SUSAN E. REID 11

2 Corporate Domesticity and Idealised Masculinity: Royal Naval Officers and their Shipboard Homes, 1918–39
QUINTIN COLVILLE 45

3 Men Making Home: Masculinity and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century Britain
KAREN HARVEY 66

Utility

4 ‘Who Should Be the Author of a Dwelling?’ Architects versus Housewives in 1950s France
NICOLE RUDOLPH 87

5 Ideal Homes and the Gender Politics of Consumerism in Postcolonial Ghana, 1960–70
BIANCA MURILLO 106

6 ‘The Dining Room Should Be the Man’s Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman’s’: Gender and Middle-Class Domestic Space in England, 1850–1910
JANE HAMLETT 122

Inhabitants

7 ‘There Is Graite Odds between A Mans being At Home And A Broad’: Deborah Read Franklin and the Eighteenth-Century Home
VIVIAN BRUCE CONGER 138

8 Sexual Politics and Socialist Housing: Building Homes in Revolutionary Cuba
CARRIE HAMILTON 154
Contents

Boundaries

9 ‘The White Wife Problem’: Sex, Race and the Contested Politics of Repatriation to Interwar British West Africa
CARINA E. RAY 174

10 From Husbands and Housewives to Suckers and Whores: Marital-Political Anxieties in the ‘House of Egypt’, 1919–48
LISA POLLARD 193

11 Double Displacement: Western Women’s Return Home from Japanese Internment in the Second World War
CHRISTINA TWOMEY 216

Index 231
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In the summer of 2009, a British government social attitudes survey which was designed to discover the happiest location in England, used an index of whether people felt that they belonged to the place where they lived. The sense of belonging, the survey suggested, differed across the country by a margin of almost a third, with just 42 per cent of residents of the east London district of Tower Hamlets feeling as though they belonged there, against 71 per cent of the inhabitants of the rural county of Shropshire. Feeling as though one belonged, it would appear, was considered a real determinant of happiness in early twenty-first-century England, and something that could be geographically located. Indeed, the study was called the Place Survey and it seems to have been motivated by a concern to trace the feelings generated by certain locations though not, interestingly, to distinguish between inhabitants by other aspects such as their age, occupation, wealth or gender: ‘belonging’, we are meant to understand, is not only a generic sentiment uncoloured by social factors but one that is very much affected by geography and an individual’s position in space.

The authors in this volume would no doubt refine and challenge these not uninteresting but somewhat crude findings. In their explorations of historical meanings of homes and homecomings, the chapters presented here investigate how the gendered interplay of a sense of belonging – or exclusion – have been made to work across time and space. Whether ‘home’ was a district – as the Place Survey claims – or a nation or community, or indeed just a dwelling, by looking at historical and gendered aspects of homes and homecomings we aim to upset historical assumptions about who belonged where in a dwelling, or what sort of impact the state and its agents might have on inhabitants. The kind of questions that this work asks are, why did the material objects that every home contains, and their arrangement, arouse such gendered fears? What type of surveillance was deemed necessary of the intimate relationships that the inhabitants of a home had with each other or those outside? If the nation represents itself as a home, what meanings might be attached to both? And what conditions are laid on those who move away or return? Assumptions made about the nature of the home, by those who designed it or sought to control it, are pared down to their ideological framework, much as the walls of Finnish artist Tea Mäkipää’s full-scale rendition of the wonky but working skeleton of a typical northern European, suburban house are stripped away to reveal its inner workings. Here, burning electric lamps are
in perilous mid-air suspension and taps run water into sinks divested of all furniture and apparent human intervention. Mäkipää’s refusal of the usual limits between public and private, by the simple expedient of removing all walls, ceilings and doors, exposes the extent to which those limits remain; the viewer ‘sees’ their presence and, by their very absence, knows all the more the work that they normally do. The very banality of the house’s inner workings, in their western European context – the white ceramic lavatory, a stainless steel sink, a dull and unremarkable lamphade, as well as the wires and pipes via which these objects’ functionality must derive – force reflection on the habits of those who live surrounded by such features, as well as on those who do not. But this particular incitement to reflection, while provocative, is still located in the present. It is the relation between the knowledge of the sense of home and its historical coming into being and developmental shifts at other times that the authors collected in this volume begin to explore.

A project to explore the historical sense of home recognises that ‘home’ is made up of more than actual or metaphorical sinks and pipes; as Mäkipää’s skeletal house indicates, it is something full of constructed meanings. But the nature of ‘a’ home as a single dwelling or community is in many instances defied. In her 1982–83 performance work, Under Siege, the artist Mona Hatoum elaborated the following interview dialogue:

M: I like to walk through London with friends.
What do you talk about when you’re walking?
M: We don’t talk, we shout.
I’m sorry, I don’t understand.

M: I spend day after day on the phone, dialling and redialling.
Who are you calling?
M: I’m trying to locate my parents.
Why is it such a problem phoning home?
M: I’m not phoning home.
I’m sorry, I don’t understand.⁴

M is holding this conversation with her dim-witted interlocutor in the early 1980s, right around the time of the war in the Lebanon, where Hatoum spent much of her childhood with her family in exile from Israel. (More prosaically, this piece coincided with the release of the hit science fiction movie E.T. whose nostalgic command, ‘phone home’, rapidly entered Euro-American popular memory.) The early 1980s was a period in which discussion of the refugee, the exile and the cultural dislocations that migration often entails was much less ubiquitous than it subsequently became. Nonetheless, a quarter of a century later, Under Siege retains an acuity to pinpoint the idea that ‘family’ and ‘home’ may each be located in entirely different places, that home might not be a place to which it is possible to return, and that these facts might condition ordinary behaviour so that it becomes extraordinary, even in a mundane activity – not possible in conditions of war – such as walking down the road with friends. The performance of Under Siege, described variously as lasting three or seven hours, was, in Gannit Ankori’s words, ‘gruelling’, and it must have been for both artist and audience: the artist was contained in a transparent plastic box, struggling against a mixture of mud and clay, repeatedly trying to stand up and falling down, while speakers in the room where the box stood blasted out several three-hour tapes in Arabic, English and French,
the languages of Hatoum’s childhood and education. Nevertheless, the interviewee’s reply, ‘we don’t talk, we shout’ amuses, not just in the bafflement of the questioner but in how the response sidesteps the original query and spotlights one of the most common aspects of misbehaviour unwittingly or consciously enacted by the migrant. The inappropriate loudness of migrants to western Europe, and what was perceived as their monstrous distortions of language, were often cause for concern from at least the late nineteenth century; later on, for example, such was the fear of the potential disruption that outsiders might cause, that Jewish refugees arriving in Britain from Nazi-occupied Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia before the Second World War were routinely handed a bilingual booklet of assimilatory guidance, admonishing them to avoid involvement with politics, and issuing the instruction, ‘do not make yourself conspicuous by speaking loudly, nor by your manner or dress’.

Loudness is thus emblematic of the fact that home is both somewhere else and here; it is a series of multiplied homes; or a conglomeration; or a home nowhere. Home for many, for reasons of gender and sexual, as well as political, exile might be unreachable, unsafe or hostile. Home may well also be multiple, fragmented and transnational; not all of these conditions should be unconditionally interpreted as problematic.

If migrants’ language has aroused disquiet, what are we to make of the language of home itself? What did home mean in the different contexts and periods that the authors in the volume address and in other contexts more broadly? How people understood their own ‘being at home’ is by no means self-evident, as a brief, and rather unscientific, linguistic excursion will make clear. English is unusual in its ability to combine in one word the place where one lives and the sense of being in it: home. In English we are ‘at home’ when we are in our place of residence and when we are comfortable with our condition. That single word can express a multiplicity of relations and sensations. Not so other languages. ‘So you’re working on Heimat!’ was the greeting my Germanist colleagues tended to repeat during the months leading up to publication of this volume whenever I mentioned Homes and Homecomings to them. The word ‘Heim’, as a literal translation of ‘home’, appears rarely in colloquial German, and its use (aside from complex sorts of residences, such as retirement homes) is confined to southern Germany and Austria. As a stem word it is far more common in the term Heimat, a concept that implies a certain Romantic, provincialised and gendered way of thinking about the home as an amalgam of the nation and its people, and their ideologically unequivocal attachment to the land. My colleagues’ assumption indicates just how axiomatic it has become, when thinking about ‘home’ in the modern period in Germany, to refer to and problematise not the individual condition of homeliness but the nation. Of course, how a nation becomes a home, or stops being one, is one of the aspects of home that this volume seeks to tease out. But the German concept of Heimat, and its ‘vacuously ideal’ earth-bound, peasant inhabitants of a mythic nation, inaugurated in the Third Reich something very far from domesticity and homeliness, and the set of conceptual maps that Heimat implies have been revivified again and again in popular culture.

While modern German draws on ideas of landscape and territory to define home and homeland, the classical languages suggest a vast array of different elements that can be expressed with a single word. In ancient Greek, oίκος (oikos) could apply equally to the house, its inhabitants and their economic relations (i.e., the household), or to what we understand as the family. In other words, oikos contained suggestions about
particular social relationships and their conduct. That root word now appears in our
economic, as well as our ecological, considerations, and its meaning is discussed more
fully by Karen Harvey in her chapter below. On the other hand, as far as forebears
in medieval England, Wales and Scotland were concerned, the Latin word *domus*
(home) delineated a structure, not what went on within its walls. It could be applied
to any number of dwellings that housed anything from royalty to rabbits. It was built
for activities far beyond living in the plain sense of eating, sleeping or receiving
guests: *domus* might be a toll-house, a brothel, a prison or an office. It could house
nuns, widows or scholars. In short, the house or home in medieval Britain had almost
limitless functions, involving practically anything that went on in a building, that itself
could be as enduring as a palace or as makeshift as a privy.11 While this one Latin
term could be applied to dozens of uses, in other modern languages, to say one is ‘at
home’ requires the use of several other words, often using the metonym, ‘house’. So
one is *à la maison* in French, *en casa* in Spanish, *doma* in Russian, *ba bayit* in Hebrew,
*a alla casa* in Italian, *zu Hause* in German and *watan* in Arabic. Thus literally ‘being
in the house’ – that is, being in a building – is a preferred way to express the idea of
‘being at home’ even in those languages such as German or Spanish where the word
‘home’ exists but is little used, or used in only a few regional settings (*das Heim* or
*daheim*, and *el hogar* respectively). But the meaning of these terms is not necessarily
similar, even if they appear to express the same thing. The Arabic ‘*watan*’ (lit. ‘where
you dwell’), has evolved since the nineteenth century to imply the dwelling within a
nation, rather than a house, while the other term for ‘being at home’, *bil beit*, literally
means ‘where you spend the night’. ‘*Bil beit*’ further carries the implication of being
with family members, not being alone. Furthermore, several other linguistic cultures
do not confine the expression of being at home to a building; the concept of being with
oneself, with another or with the family, can equally imply ‘being at home-ness’ in
French (*chez soi*), German (*bei mir*), Hebrew (*etz li*) or Italian (*alla famiglia*). It should
be clear, therefore, that of the few languages discussed here, English is extremely rare
in having the term ‘home’; it would be worth bearing this in mind when we come to
analyse and translate the homes and homecomings of people in other linguistic groups,
let alone in other historical periods.12 Moreover, this is before we have even begun to
embark on a discussion of the gendered and homely terminology of nation – *patria*,
*Vaterland*, *Rodina*, and so on – which so often refer to the mother, the father, or even,
as in the case of the French *la mère patrie*, both.13

It should be clear by now that ‘home’ is full of tangled meaning and that is
certainly the case in Mona Hatoum’s work, whose *Mobile Home II* features on the
cover of this volume. The immense power of *Mobile Home II* derives in part from its
transparency. The work consists of a space delimited by silvery metal barriers, ‘within’
which are several mundane objects on the floor. Above them trundle several pieces
of cloth pegged to a moving clothesline. The viewer is invited visually to replace the
metal bars with more solid walls, but the nature of the objects bounded by them –
a cheap battered suitcase, some tatty teacloths, a flimsy laminated table, a rolled-up
rug, some chairs arranged not to promote conviviality but in a way that indicates the
absent sitters’ separation from each other – only emphasise their, and the home’s,
 provisionality. Hatoum’s work has often featured planes made from metal bars; these
ones are like the crash barriers used by western European police as a means of crowd
control during demonstrations or visits by untouchable dignitaries. They are there to
exclude. So we are confronted by a simultaneity of public and private: the apparently private walls of a dwelling, the home, are in this instance things normally seen on the street in the most public of contexts. Equally multi-layered is the mobility of *Mobile Home II*: not only do the children’s drawings and teacloths pinned to the clothesline physically move, and the suitcases mark anticipated flight or recent arrival (or both), but again, the point of crash barriers is that they are moveable. Are we in fact looking at something discovered on a street? Or does the incessant circular movement of the washing line imply the sort of stasis combined with temporariness emphasised by one Palestinian interviewee in another art work, the video art project, *Roofs: ‘Public-Private’ Open Spaces in the Camp*? This project, by the feminist Palestinian architect, Sandi Hilal, explores via extended interviews the way that female residents of West Bank refugee camps experience their homes, in this instance, the spaces on the roofs. This particular interviewee explains in detail her love of running, and describes the geography of her neighbourhood, distinguished by a letterbox at the end of the road. Such are the gendered social constraints imposed by other residents of the refugee camp, however, in a place where there is little privacy, that she is forced to run round and round the flat roof of her building instead of down the road, with her husband measuring out the distance in recognisable terms. ‘Have I reached the post-box yet?’ she reports herself asking, imagining that she is in fact running along the road outside her house, an activity forbidden to her because she is a woman. Thus, extraordinary amounts of movement, in this case running for the sheer pleasure of the sport, only serve to emphasise confinement and stasis, not passage or travel. To return to *Mobile Home II*, then, whether we see a mobility of flight, arrival or confined nervousness, Hatoum’s whole installation evokes both sadness and confusion, far from any other of the culturally variable meanings its title may imply, be that pleasant family outing or impoverished marginality.

If contemporary art can remind one of the melancholy of home and of home’s unreachability, much of the analytical work on these topics over the last two or three decades has emerged from a variety of disciplinary bases from which historians are often absent. For example, references to ‘the growing, diverse and interdisciplinary study of home across the humanities and social sciences’ by two geographers of gender and home, Alison Blunt and Ann Varley, point to anthropology, literature, material and visual cultures, sociology and feminist cultural studies – but not to history. While much of the most exciting work on home has emerged from the discipline of geography, a great deal of it focused on the past as well as the present (and indeed the future), historians have tended to be absent from much of the recent theorising about home.

Feminist interest in the home, spurred in Britain and the USA by works such as Betty Friedan’s classic, *The Feminine Mystique* or Ann Oakley’s searing *Housewife*, explored what was effectively women’s captivity in the home, and the housewife’s sentence to a life of pointless cleaning. While Friedan, as is well documented, concentrated on white, middle-class American women, sideling the issues facing poor and black women after the Second World War – a critique that could not be levelled at Oakley – the association between the home and the normative place that women were required to occupy within it had been successfully made. Feminist historians took these ideas in several directions, most notably on the privacy of the dwelling against the public nature of the world beyond, and the gendered implications of such a divide. Their work aimed initially to establish that such a divide existed, though never to the extent
that successive critics claimed, and subsequently suggested interesting ways in which the separation of home and the world beyond helped in the development of a variety of social constructs. These explorations were largely associated with the development of modernity in western Europe from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, and made claims about how urban or urbanising women’s increasing confinement to the home and areas associated with it – typically shops or philanthropy – laid the basis for social and socio-economic patterns that stretched into the twentieth century, in what Hilde Heynen calls ‘a certain complicity between modernity and domesticity’.

On one trajectory, this radical thinking about public and private coalesced imaginatively with new critical theoretical debates on space and mapping, with contributions by practitioners in the field of architecture and visual culture, as well as, crucially, anthropologists and literary critics. Questions of space and women’s position in the home begin to cohere when the material cultures of home come under investigation. The scrutiny of domestic material objects is not simply a matter of bourgeois indulgence, but can contain the very bones of the heterosexual imperative that governed homemaking and people’s lives for so long. ‘Stuff’ was not merely a by-product of home, a class-bound and more or less irrelevant obsession with frippery and décor. As several of the authors in this volume indicate, and as Hatoum’s Mobile Home II stresses, objects can often make a home in fundamental ways. Moreover, the retrieval of a lost home can be symbolised by efforts made to reacquire things, even when the actual spaces and the people they were supposed to contain, remained unavailable. Many of these efforts at retrieval are gendered. Thus, for example, the articulations of ‘at-homeness’ made by Jewish claimants in their demands for the restitution of their stolen furniture in post-occupation Paris hide assertions of gender relations as well as relations to the state. These relations to the state, and to the powers that control it, continue to provoke thinking around the public and private, and the nation, for example, in the suggestion that particular methods of housework can become associated with national identity. Discussions of public and private, combined with those of space, also led to new feminist – and consequently gendered and raced – ways to account for the nation, and its larger spatial, colonial ambitions. With the idea of the home such a dynamic field, then, and with a reduction in the political desire for women to be released from the shackles of housework, it is not surprising that the gaze is now being turned towards homemaking as productive, and as a ‘necessarily incomplete project’. Clearly the home, in its domestic guise, generates pleasure as well as pain, but I am troubled that the work to restore the idea of pleasure to the analysis of the making of home and being in a home may wrest from it the politics that feminists worked so hard to extract.

The present volume to a large extent sidesteps the long-running deliberations on separate spheres. But the absence of historians in current debates about home is clear. As the editors of the journal Home Cultures, launched in 2004, clarify, part of their desire to publish such a journal was because,

\[\ldots\] the Editors have each felt somewhat cut off from other disciplines, as disciplinary boundaries and traditions have isolated scholars who take the domestic sphere as their primary unit of analysis. Consequently, it has often been rather difficult to find out what others in various fields have discovered. Discussions seem to be confined within anthropology, architectural history, design history, literary criticism and geography, to name just a few areas where the domestic as a unit of analysis has proven to be particularly pertinent.
That said, it is clear from their editorial, that the site of interest for Home Cultures is largely the problematisation of the dwelling and the domestic sphere it invokes. While questions about gender are put to the fore, and a historicisation of arguments is seen to be necessary, the home as something shifting or multiple does not appear to have been considered. On the other hand, gender might get short shrift even on some occasions when the complexity of home is taken into account. Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson’s critical collection, Migrants of Identity, on the anthropologies of being at home and away, as it were, considers questions of home and movement, the politics of home, home and the expatriate, the immigrant, the dissident, the nation, the child, the house, urbanity and community. Yet in all these important approaches to home, none privileges an understanding of gender (and ‘gender’ is not even a term in the index), even though the making of a home has conventionally been seen to require the presence of a domestic arbiter, generally a female one.30

This volume sets out to reinvigorate many of these areas and to address some of the lacunae alluded to above. The sorts of homes and the way their inhabitants belonged in them that the authors collected here explore were all conditioned by multiple factors, but united by the significance of gender to those belongings or exclusions. What none of the authors in Homes and Homecomings considers, at least overtly, is the question of space. While this has preoccupied theorists for the last twenty years, its applicability to such a divergent set of understandings, and its inherent emptiness, also come in for some critique.31 The apparently limitless readings available when one considers ‘space’ need to be set against the necessary materiality of historical study, even in its most theoretical guises, and it may be this that explains these chapters’ disregard for the concept of space: it is place, and its social and economic control, as well as the relations that it provokes or that are permitted or forbidden to operate in it that, in part, motivate our interest here.

Whether investigating how people made themselves at home in eighteenth-century England or twentieth-century France, or the ways that domestic concerns played upon national demands in Egypt or the Soviet Union, we find that the gender of inhabitants, things, spaces and the domestic context overall, was significant in telling and sometimes surprising ways that Homes and Homecomings sets out to explore. The volume is divided into four parts which, if considered in terms of a dwelling itself, broadly move from the home’s interior towards the outside, and survey several aspects of homeliness: Comfort, Utility, Inhabitants and Boundaries. In the first section, ‘Comfort’, the authors explore the elaborate, and elaborately gendered, means by which homes in the past were made homely. These efforts were significantly against the odds, in Susan Reid’s case, involving resistance to Soviet state injunctions against the squishy and the baroque when it came to interior décor. Karen Harvey considers how masculinity was able to figure in eighteenth-century British ideas of home, while Quintin Colville explores the unlikely homemaker in the person of the British naval officer at war. Against ‘comfort’, planners and designers often set ‘Utility’, the subject of the next section. Here the nation comes more to the fore, when the duty to control the layout and function of a home became a battleground in post-war France, as Nicole Rudolph clarifies. Just what should go into a home and where, is set out in the 1960s Ghanaian case by Bianca Murillo, and the nineteenth-century British one by Jane Hamlett. The third section, ‘Inhabitants’, investigates who gets to live in a home and, more pertinently, make decisions over it. The instance of elite eighteenth-century north America is examined by Vivian Bruce
Conger, who finds that the house designed by Deborah Franklin for her and her absent husband Benjamin raises questions not just about the ability of wealthy women to make major architectural decisions, but how the household is defined when not all assumed members are present. Similar questions are tackled in completely contrasting ways by Carrie Hamilton, whose investigation of access to housing by poor Cubans since the Revolution, particularly lesbian and gay Cubans, reveals much about changing ideas of sexuality and the constraints that ideologies of home impose. It is the imposition of ideologies of home that are more deeply studied in the final section of this volume, ‘Boundaries’. Here, the availability of homes, and the assumptions about who might belong in them, on both micro and macro levels, come under scrutiny. Carina Ray’s chapter investigates what happened when people married across ‘race’, and wanted to live together in British-controlled west Africa. Lisa Pollard explores representations of marital strife as national anxiety in twentieth-century Egypt, while Christina Twomey investigates western women’s return from Japanese internment after the Second World War. All three of these chapters suggest that anxieties about women being in the wrong place can provide ample evidence of how nations imagined themselves as home, as well as telling forgotten or long-buried stories about people whose homes the authorities frequently went to great lengths to make far from homely.

While most of the chapters collected here concentrate on single nations, they open up several new ways that historians can think about home. They take into account homes as sites to amass material objects, both hidden and displayed; they explore conflicts over the rights to construct and imagine a home; and they confront us with what happens when only some people are accorded rights to a home. In all of their explorations, gender is fundamental to elaborating our understanding of the historical meanings of homes and homecomings. But, given the amplitude of meanings of ‘home’ in the English language, this collection will necessarily range widely. Only one thing is definite: that, historically, there was something called ‘home’. Precisely what the home is, though, is a little less certain.

Notes

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1. The 2008 Place Survey. See http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/placesurvey 2008; http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2009/jun/24/communities-localgovernment (accessed 24 June 2009). Other indicators were whether respondents felt satisfied with their area as a place to live; thought that people of different backgrounds could get on well there; regarded anti-social behaviour as a problem; and thought their health was good. The survey did not analyse Wales or Scotland.


3. For a relatively early excursion into the notion that home was a concept, see Witold Rybczynski, Home: A Short History of an Idea (1986; repr. London: Heinemann, 1988). For refinement and development of this idea, see Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, Home (London: Routledge, 2006).


9. I make no claims to expertise in linguistics. The brief and highly provisional – not to say perfunctory – comments that follow are intended to be suggestive not conclusive. I am grateful to Ross Balzaretti, Julia Barrow, Lisa Pollard, Franziska Meyer, Sylvain Cypel, Carrie Hamilton, Hugh Goddard and Nick Baron for discussions about several languages.


13. Interestingly, Russia can be both *Rodina* (motherland) and *Otechestvo* (fatherland). A distinction is drawn between fighting for the nation’s survival, where an oath is sworn to the motherland, and glorifying in its victory, where it becomes the fatherland. Note that the synonym of the British English term ‘homely’ is ‘homey’ in north American English; ‘homely’ in Britain carries none of the disdain that it does in America; on the contrary, it expresses comfort and what in German might be called Gemütlichkeit.

14. Part of Sandi Hilal, *Al-Qasas Project* (2008), at the exhibition, ‘Palestine: La Création dans tous ses États’, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 2009. (My understanding is that this project was made in collaboration with Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman.)


17. See e.g., the now canonised Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).


For a recent investigation, see Amy Milne-Smith, ‘Club Talk: Gossip, Masculinity and Oral Communities in Late Nineteenth-Century London’, *Gender & History* 21 (2009), pp. 86–106.


The theme of this chapter – ‘communist comfort’ and the propagation, in Soviet mass housing of the 1950s–60s, of a socialist modernist aesthetics of domesticity – is rich with oxymoron.¹

First, modernism was assigned, in the Cold War’s binary model of the world, exclusively to the capitalist ‘camp’. ‘Socialist’ and ‘modernist’ were positioned as incompatible. Although the conjunction of political and artistic radicalism in Soviet Russia of the 1920s is well known, the renascence there in mid-century of socialist modernism was unthinkable in Cold War terms and has only recently begun to be taken seriously.²

The second contradiction is that between modernity – along with its cultural manifestation, modernism – and domesticity. Modernity and dwelling have been assumed to be at odds. Pathologised by Walter Benjamin and others as a nineteenth-century petit-bourgeois addiction, domesticity and the need for comfort were to be shrugged off in favour of the freedom to roam. Homelessness, and not ‘homeyness’, was the valorised figure of modernity.³ In revolutionary Russia of the 1920s, the modernist avant-garde designed portable, fold-away furniture more suited to the military camp; to supplant the soft, permanent bed of home was part of their effort to make the material culture of everyday life a launch pad to the radiant future.⁴ Adopting unchallenged the established cultural identification between women and the bourgeois home, modernism’s (and socialism’s) antipathy for domesticity was also gendered, indeed misogynistic. Its wandering, exploring hero was imagined as male, while the despised aesthetics of dwelling from which he walked away – entailing ornament, concealment, confinement and the use of soft, yielding materials – was construed not only as bourgeois but as feminine.⁵ That the condition of modernity was to be restless, transient, constantly on the move became, however, a source of regret and nostalgic yearning for some after the destruction and dislocations of the Second World War. The philosopher Martin Heidegger, writing in 1954, lamented that in modern industrial society people had lost the capacity to dwell. It was particularly hard, he found, to be at home and at peace in modern housing, which is produced as a
commodity or allocated by state bureaucracies, because we no longer reside in what we or our kin have built through generations but instead pass through the constructions of others.  

Third, the terms ‘communist comfort’ or ‘socialist domesticity’ are also, at first sight, as self-contradictory as ‘fried snowballs’. ‘Cosy’ is unlikely to be the word that leaps to mind in association with Soviet state socialism, and least of all with the standard, prefabricated housing blocks that were erected at speed and in huge numbers in the late 1950s, which form the material context for this study. Indeed, home-life has hardly been the dominant angle from which to study the Soviet Union.  

Socialism as a movement was traditionally associated with asceticism, sobriety and action; with production rather than consumption and rest; and with the collective, public sphere rather than the domestic and personal. Meanwhile, nineteenth-century socialist and feminist critiques, including those of Marx and Engels, identified the segregated bourgeois home as the origin of division of labour and alienation and a primary site of class and gender oppression. The bourgeois institutions of home and family, based on private property bonds, were supposed to be cleared away by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. John Maynard Keynes, speaking of left-leaning students in the 1930s, noted that, ‘Cambridge undergraduates were never disillusioned when they took their inevitable trip to “Bolshiedom” and found it “dreadfully uncomfortable”. That is what they are looking for’.  

If disdain for bourgeois domesticity was a stance sympathisers expected of the Soviet Union, neglect of human comfort was also one of the charges its detractors levelled against it. In the Cold War, Western accounts of the Soviet Union tended to focus on political repression and military hardware paraded in the public square. When Soviet Russian everyday life was addressed at all, it was in negative terms of lack and shortage, embodied in queues for basic necessities. Stereotypes of drab, austere comfortlessess reinforced the West’s indictment and ‘othering’ of state socialism as the polar opposite of the Western, capitalist model of ever-increasing comfort, convenience and individual, home-based consumption. The Soviet home, if it came within the sights of Western attention at all, stood – by contrast with Western prosperity – for the privation of Soviet people, their lack of privacy, convenience, choice, consumer goods and comforts. Alternatively, it figured as a flaw in the Soviet system’s ‘totalitarian’ grasp, its Achilles heel, a site of resistance to public values, of demobilisation in face of the mobilisation regime’s campaigns, and even a potential counter-revolutionary threat to the interventionist state’s modernising project of building communism. Thus one Western observer surmised in 1955: ‘if Russians got decent homes, TV sets and excellent food wouldn’t they, being human, begin to develop a petit-bourgeois philosophy? Wouldn’t they want to stay home before the fire instead of attending the political rally at the local palace of culture? ’ Others asked, ‘Can the Soviet system afford to allow a larger-scale retreat from the world of work and of collectivity to the world of cosy domesticity on the part of its women? . . . A type of socialism might appear that proved to be so pleasant that the distant vision of communism over the far horizon might cease to beckon’.  

You could have either communism or comfort, according to this model, not ‘comfortable communism’ or ‘communist comfort’. Home and utopia – no-place – were incompatible. If comfortable homes were deemed by Cold War observers to exist at all in the Soviet Union then it was as spaces where the official utopia of the
party-state was contradicted, as sites of potential resistance and as the germ of state socialism’s potential undoing.

Associated with women’s traditional roles as preservers of continuity with the past, with conventional female qualities and handed-down practices and know-how, the home’s status as the recalcitrant last frontier of state modernisation was gendered. Thus Francine du Plessix Gray, a Russian émigrée resident in the United States, represents the Soviet Russian home as an antidote to official Soviet values:

Moscow’s other havens, of course, were and remain the homes of friends: Those padded, intimate interiors whose snug warmth is all the more comforting after the raw bleakness of the nation’s public spaces; those tiny flats, steeped in the odor of dust and refried kasha in which every gram of precious space is filled, every scrap of matter – icons, crucifixes, ancient wooden dolls, unmatched teacups preserved since before the Revolution – is stored and gathered against the loss of memory.¹²

There, in Gray’s view, authentic Russian qualities were preserved in spite of over sixty years of Soviet rule. Paramount among these is an apparently timeless and indomitable ‘national tradition of uyutnost’ [sic]: that dearest of Russian words, approximated by our “coziness” and better by the German Gemütlichkeit, denotes the Slavic talent for creating a tender environment even in dire poverty and with the most modest means. Uyutnost is ‘associated with intimate scale, with small dark spaces, with women’s domestic generosity, and with a nurturing love’.¹³ It represents, in Gray’s elegiac account, continuity between generations of women. The womb-like embrace of the Russian home is defined by explicit antithesis to an inhospitable, inhuman public sphere and to the chiliiasm and collectivism of official ideology and culture. The opposition between the home and the Soviet state’s official modernising project, which entailed rupture with the past, is represented in a series of negative/positive dyads that map onto the dichotomy public/private: bleak/snug; raw/cooked (or even re-cooked!); loss/gathering and storing; amnesia/memory. The striving, future-oriented public project of Soviet modernity, based on Enlightenment values of rationality, science and progress, is opposed by home as a warm, hospitable, unchanging and essentially feminine domain of authentic human relations materialised in ‘scraps of matter’ and unmatched teacups. The home appears as a hermetic cell, apparently untouched by historical contingency and the ruptures of the twentieth century. Padded by the accumulation of memories and memorabilia, dust and clutter, it is insulated from ideological intrusion, scientific and industrial progress, in short, from modernity and its specific Soviet mode (Figure 1).

One can almost hear Benjamin scream in his sleep. For the private realm Gray celebrates here is the stuff of any Marxist modernist’s worst nightmares (dreams a Freudian might analyse in terms of fear of being absorbed back into the womb).¹⁴ In such a space, even Faust might succumb to the temptation to abide and give up the quest for enlightenment. For many Soviet commentators, too, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the period on which we focus here, the resilience of what they considered a regressive aesthetics of hyper-domesticity and bad taste among the Soviet people aroused fear of loss of political consciousness. But was the contradiction between domesticity and socialist modernity irreconcilable? Or could home be accommodated in the modernist, socialist utopia? If so, what should it look like? In what follows we will examine ways in which specialist agents in the Khrushchev era (1953–64) sought to overcome the contradiction between domesticity and socialist modernity and
to delineate a modern socialist aesthetics of the domestic interior. As Gray indicated, the key Russian term in the image of homeliness is *uiut*, a word that encompasses both comfort and cosiness or snugness.\textsuperscript{15} Intelligentsia experts redefined *uiut* in modernist terms. Did popular practice follow their prescription? Or did the material practices of *uiut* remain closer to a retrospective ideal of ‘homeyness’, as defined by anthropologist Grant McCracken, as the expression of a search for continuity, stability, and a sense of rootedness?\textsuperscript{16} In the concluding section we will turn briefly to whether the aesthetics of modern housing and modernist advice were embraced, resisted, subverted or accommodated by primarily female homemakers in their homes.

**An obsession with domesticity**

In Boris Pasternak’s 1957 novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, Lara (whose name references the Lares), watching a young girl construct a home for her doll in spite of the dislocations of the Revolution, comments on her instinct for domesticity and order: ‘nothing can destroy the longing for home and for order’.\textsuperscript{17} Unlike Pasternak’s heroine, we should not take for granted, as some ahistorical, biological given, that the longing for home and order, for comfort and cosiness, are mandatory for dwelling, that these are essentially feminine instincts, or that domestic spaces need necessarily be projections of the occupant’s self. Along with other apparently natural categories, such as childhood,
the identification of home with comfort has to be historicised as the cultural product of particular historical and material circumstances. The emergence of the concept of comfort, like that of the ‘private’ to which it is closely aligned, was associated with industrialisation, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the segregation of the home as a private sphere and women’s domain, to which the exhausted male could return from the world of work and public life. In the Soviet Union, the conditions for this historical phenomenon were supposed to be swept away: bourgeois capitalism, women’s confinement in the segregated home, and the idea of home as a fortress of private property values.

Yet Soviet culture of the Khrushchev era, it is no exaggeration to say, became obsessed with homemaking and domesticity. This was a matter both of authoritative, specialist practice and intelligentsia discourse on one hand, and of popular culture and experience on the other. Soviet public discourse, whether intentionally or as an unintended effect, naturalised cosiness and comfort as essential attributes of home life, and as a legitimate concern of the modern Soviet person, especially women. The domestic interior was presented not only as a place to carry out everyday reproductive functions, but also as a site for self-projection and aesthetic production, where the khoziaika (housekeeper or, more literally, mistress of the house) displayed her taste and creativity. It involved making things for the home and exercising judgement in selecting, purchasing, adapting and arranging the products of mass serial production. What were the historical conditions for the preoccupation with home decorating?

The material premises for the production of domesticity began, at last, to be provided on a mass scale in the Khrushchev era. The shift of priorities towards addressing problems of mass living standards, housing and consumption had already begun before Stalin’s death, at the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 1952, but the pace intensified from 1957 as the provision of housing and consumer goods became a pitch on which the post-Stalin regime staked its legitimacy at home and abroad. A party decree of 31 July 1957 launched a mass industrialised housing construction campaign: ‘Beginning in 1958, in apartment houses under construction both in towns and in rural places, economical, well-appointed apartments are planned for occupancy by a single family’. The results would transform the lives of millions over the next decade. Some 84.4 million people – over one third of the entire population of the USSR – moved into new accommodation between 1956 and 1965, while others improved their living conditions by moving into modernised or less cramped housing. The construction of new regions of low-rise, standard, prefabricated apartment blocks fundamentally altered the urban – and even rural – environment, extending the margins of cities and accelerating the already rapid process of urbanisation. Above all, the new flats were designed for occupancy by single families, in place of the prevailing norm of collective living in either barracks or communal apartments (Figure 2).

A range of bureaucracies and specialist agents of the party-state were necessarily involved in shaping the interior, given the mass scale and industrial methods of construction and the accompanying shift towards serial production of consumer goods to furnish them. At the same time, the increased provision of single-family apartments could, it was feared, foster regressive, particularist mentalities and loss of political consciousness. It was necessary therefore to work actively to forestall this. Thus architects and designers, trade specialists, and health, hygiene and taste experts were concerned