

Castillo, Greg: *Cold War on the Home Front. The Soft Power of Midcentury Design*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8166-4691-3; 312 S.

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Greg Castillo is a sound and thorough war correspondent on the battle of styles of East and West when the leaders of both the Capitalist and Communist worlds claimed to be able to provide their citizens with a superior way of life. In his reference book Castillo does not construct a victorious history of the American Way of Life, but analyzes the ideologies of consumer culture in the 1950s and reveals the dreadfully bloated situation of today: While the typical suburban home displayed in 1950 at West Berlin's „How America Lives“ exhibition held 91.3 square meters, the equivalent in 2006 featured 228.4 square meters – an increase of 150 percent. Since the size of the average U.S. household decreased by 23 percent, the living area of each resident actually increased by a factor of three, thereby providing U.S. citizens with 80 percent larger homes than European ones. That is certainly no reason for triumph, as Castillo notes premonitorily: „...more natural resources have been used by U.S. citizens since 1950 than by everyone else, everywhere else in the world...the American formula for citizen enfranchisement through ever-increasing low-cost mass consumption...is costing us the world“ (p. xxiv). The cautionary context of these findings elevates Castillo's monograph to a stimulating book even for less specialized readers.

The famous Kitchen Debate of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon in a model home at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow was not the starting of a design war, but already a key battle of the U.S. home propaganda offensive, as Castillo points out by placing „domestic conveniences“ next to „ideological conveyances“: „Rather than coercing, soft power entices“ (p. xi). The major battleground for this war was Germany – divided into East and West. However,

Castillo does not focus on the actual everyday design that aesthetically separates the severed states, but on model home exhibitions in the two postwar mentalities which he names „the East's aesthetically cultivated proletarian, and the West's cosmopolitan consumer-citizen“ (p. xx).

The domestic simulacra displayed on the shows have only survived in texts and photographs. Unfortunately, the book is only equipped with black and white photographs – sometimes even rather small ones. It is not only the living room „furnished by Macy's Department Store in tones of blue and green“ (p. 159) that one would like to see in its oceanic splendor, but also the mentioned „matched veneers, applied rosettes, high-gloss finishes“ (p. 100), pink telephones, avocado-green kitchens and sunshine-yellow mixers. Although Castillo focuses on the propaganda war instead of the aesthetic battle and skillfully manages to keep his reader interested with excellent research and a lively tone, a colorful picture section would have sensually evoked the accompanying history of design. But there are other publications on the market which satisfy this desire.

While the West tried to continue and expand the Bauhaus tradition of designers, the East promoted with Stalinist aesthetic theory a strictly political aspect and defined design as the domain of Party functionaries as is convincingly shown in the second chapter. The East tried to cure modernism, which it understood as degenerate capitalism, with the antidote of socialist realism. The harsh associations about the Third Reich discourse on modern art's degeneracy are carefully examined by Castillo and he discloses appalling similarities of the 1933 shows of the Nazified Werkbund and the 1937 „Entartete Kunst“ exhibition in Munich with the duct of the design presentations of the early 1950s. While in the 1930s avant-garde objects were classified as Bolshevik and Jewish, 20 years later the terms of disgust and horror were American and capitalist. For example, a 1953 issue of the journal *Studienmaterial*, featuring translations of Russian texts, contains an article by Stalin Prize-winning sculptor Vera Mukhina in which she describes the American art scene as „gangster world, in which anything is al-

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lowed.“ Even more – the German translation displays the heading „Entartete amerikanische Kunst“ [sic!] (p. 99). It is especially in these moments of meticulous research and close reading that Castillo’s work is at its best, since it becomes palpable how drastic not to say boiling the so-called Cold War actually was. Everyday items, such as the chairs he discusses, cannot only be read as aesthetically charged, but they are also disclosed as loud signs within an ideological discourse. Personally, I would have liked to be given more examples of this fascinating close reading, but Castillo explicitly uses them as exemplary items to keep in line with his announced and fulfilled focus.

Thus the author does not tell the story of postwar consumption, but the story as proposed by propagandists on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He clearly points out that his interest is not in the aesthetics of household goods, but in the reconstruction of the socio-cultural discourse around them. His task is to tell a joint historiography of design of regions separated by geopolitics. Castillo manages to integrate this narrative in the chronicle of global culture and elucidates its processes of transfer and transformation. Therefore, the theories and items of Western minimalist modernism are presented as the antipodes to ideas and goods of Eastern socialist realism. Stylized domestic environments were exploited to promote either capitalist or socialist ideology. This book is highly recommendable for readers interested in politics and aesthetics of art, history, constructions of culture, and ideologies of design.

The ample notes (pp. 211-259) show Castillo’s careful working with a multitude of sources ranging from homemaking journals to only recently declassified government documents. Castillo’s in-depth history of soft power reveals the propagandistic tactics of the U.S. government to lure citizens of the Soviet bloc and also presents the reactions of the Communist Party. The author shows how hearts and minds of consumers were as much at the aim of the ideological sighting telescopes as rockets simultaneously placed by nuclear physicists. The slogans of the exhibitions, the Western „Wir bauen ein besseres Leben“ in 1952 or the Eastern „Besser leben

– schöner wohnen!“ in 1953 demonstrate the analogies in the marketing of the ideologies and items. However, from 1960 on, „[t]he abundance of an American Way of Life, promoted at home and abroad as the free world’s future, appeared to be its Achille’s heel as well“ (p. 207).

Hence Castillo’s merit lies not only in the thorough academic work, but especially in the presentation of his findings within a narrative that does not allow us to merely look at the history of model homes over half a century ago, but demands of us to place ourselves within the consequences of the post-war era.

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