From Service to Self-Service
Advice Literature as Design Discourse, 1920–1970

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This article examines examples of advice literature published in Britain for what they indicate about changes in the material culture of home entertaining from 1920 to 1970. Advice writing offers ideal models of design consumption attentive to social behaviour and reflective of reader concerns. A theoretical framework for the fusion of the social and material in a domestic setting is forged through reference to the work of Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. Elias’s 1939 work The Civilising Process illuminates pre-industrial etiquette, Goffman’s 1959 The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life bridges the movement away from such a model, and Bourdieu’s 1969 Distinction assists understanding of the reception of modernist design. A pre-industrial courtly model of ornament and luxury apparently jarred with the comparative austerity embodied in ‘high’ modernism and popular idioms such as moderne and contemporary. Modern design was recommended in advice literature, therefore, as contributing new ideals to the comfort of a social setting: flexibility, youth, practicality, thrift, hygiene, economies of space, fashionability and longevity. However, modernist design was also credited with the traditional etiquette ideals of dignity, luxury and comfort, pointing to a new appreciation of the beauty of utility grounded in the aestheticization of everyday life that modified the visual language of status and of hospitality.

Keywords: advice literature—domestic space—home entertaining—household management—interior design—taste

Introduction

Design history has concerned itself by turns with production and consumption and with the material and the social significance of designed goods. This study takes as its focus the fusion of the material and the social in the form of home entertaining—a moment in which status and hospitality become of paramount concern. It encompasses the social geography of the home (dining rooms, living rooms and, latterly, kitchens) as well as issues of labour related to a move from representations in advice manuals of staffed entertaining to eulogies on the benefits of self-service and the gadgets designed to assist in this act. Such phenomena—(1) the move of the dinner party from the dining room through the living room to the kitchen, (2) the shift from service to self-service in the period 1920–70 and (3) the reappraisal of modernist utility to embrace beauty, status and hospitality for the dinner party—form the sequential structure of this essay.

This period witnessed interrelated social changes attendant upon economic and cultural reorganization that affected the way home entertaining was conducted and modified the way parts of the home were conceptualized, in advice literature, as public (suitable for extra-familial entertaining) and private. The declining influence of aristocratic modes of taste accompanied a shift from service culture to self-service culture, exemplified in advice literature by a move from scenarios involving domestic staff to advice for the lone host or hostess. The serving hatch and the hostess trolley were developed as ‘bridges’ between front- and backstage regions of
the home. The gradual acceptance of modern domestic design led to a waning of earlier modes of status display through luxury to an appreciation of the beauty of utility grounded in the aestheticization of everyday life.

Status and hospitality have traditionally been demonstrated through displays of luxury and excess. The introduction of modernist restraint into the design canon in the early part of the twentieth century represented nothing less than a challenge, not only to conceptions of domesticity generally, but especially, I shall argue, to the act of home entertaining. While it may be assumed that advice on manners and modernism are unrelated, this essay will demonstrate how the latter formed a challenge to authors concerned with the former, and how the former was used as a way of reconciling readers to the latter. How to express status and hospitality using a sparse aesthetic was a key question for the authors of both etiquette literature and home-making guides alike. This paper uses, therefore, a blend of etiquette and home-making advice with the aim of charting the impact of modernism on ideal representations of design consumption in Britain in the twentieth century, by offering a study of the treatment of modernism in a neglected branch of the popular media. While design historians have had recourse to various forms of advice literature, including that of etiquette and of home-making, this has been for the purpose of seeing what such sources had to offer an understanding of designed goods. This article complements existing treatments of the impact of modernism in British design consumption by taking the representations put forward in etiquette and home-making literature as the focus of analysis. In doing so, it offers a reappraisal of the utility of advice literature for the understanding of design history in the period 1920–70. By consulting a populist genre such as advice literature, which depends on the needs of its readers, we witness repeated attempts to persuade British consumers of the benefits of modernism, in a manner that indicated that it was expected to meet with some resistance. While the rhetoric of modernity in design discourse is widely exercised from the 1920s onwards, examples of advice literature can be found continuing the same persuasive project as late as 1967. The Woman’s Own Book of Modern Homemaking (WOBMH) of 1967 features in this article because it demonstrates a clear attempt to persuade readers of the benefit of a modernist aesthetic for their homes. This book, stammering as it does from a mass-market women’s magazine, may be assumed to represent the concerns of a very broad readership with mainstream tastes.

The term ‘advice literature’ here indicates discrete texts produced for the dissemination of ideal forms of behaviour. Advice literature does not include women’s magazines (which have been subject to extensive academic attention) or other sources only partially dedicated to the giving of advice. Nevertheless, this study is informed by, and will complement, studies of magazines. The particular examples of advice literature addressed here are those that treat the fusion of the social and the material in relation to home entertaining, comprising etiquette literature and the literature of home-making. This essay aims to demonstrate that such texts may be seen as a form of design discourse representative of reader aspirations. Manufacturers and retailers do not necessarily reflect the ideal realm addressed in the essay. The texts referred to here provide information about the history of recommended taste and ideal forms of material culture.

Advice literature is sometimes difficult to locate because it is viewed as ephemeral: a new edition renders the previous one obsolete. Librarians, like the intended readership, routinely discard old advice (as it were) in the interests of eliminating misinformation. As a copyright collection, the British Library contains extensive holdings of historical advice literature, and as such it forms the basic archive of this study. Particular quotations have been selected for the light they throw on the efforts of advice writers to reconcile a British readership with modern design for the domestic interior, across the period 1920–70.

While some of the advice literature employed here is derived from the United States, such as the Esquire Party Book, the fact of its publication in Britain can be taken as evidence either of an interest in the customs of other countries or more probably as an indication that the material was considered relevant to a British audience. The audience for the advice books quoted in this essay is rather diverse. Some of the advice literature used is obviously aimed at men, for example The Esquire Party Book (1965), whereas other examples are aimed at women, such as The Woman’s Own Guide to Homemaking (1967). The history of advice literature is peppered with examples aimed at specific groups such as men, boys, women, girls,
business people, sports people, etc. Simultaneously, however, other examples of advice literature market their universality.6 Advice literature is prepared by those in possession of a particular form of knowledge for those who consider themselves to be in need of it; we may assume that the readership for advice literature is aspirational. Therefore, an etiquette text that describes behaviour referred to as ‘upper’ or ‘middle’ class can logically be said to be designed to appeal to those in the class ‘below’—i.e. the middle class or the working class respectively. However, such assumptions should be framed by recognition of the fact that one function of advice literature is to facilitate social fluidity.

The method employed fuses the concerns of design history for the understanding of material culture with techniques of discourse analysis and the ideas of three sociological theorists selected for their common concern for, and contribution to, the understanding of social interaction, manners and taste. It is proposed that Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu each offers to the design historian a historically specific understanding of the role of material culture in social interaction. The article proposes a shift in advice writing over the period 1920–70 for which explication can be sought initially with recourse to Elias’s 1939 study of a pre-industrial courtly model in The Civilising Process and The Court Society of 1959, next by Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor of front and backstage in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life of 1959, which bridges the movement away from such a model, and finally by Pierre Bourdieu’s researches from 1963 onwards into the aestheticization of everyday life, published in Distinction of 1969. Even while Elias suggests a pattern of increasing formalization, these three writers can be used to track the increasing informalization of social interaction of the period and are useful for understanding the social conditions of the entry of modernist design into the home.

Advice literature as design discourse

Of the existing histories concerned with modernism in British design that have moved away from an emphasis on production, most have nevertheless referred to sources aimed at professionals working in architecture, design and the applied arts such as The Architect, The Builder and The Studio or to top-down governmental policy documents and institutional didactic materials with a focus on the aesthetics and politics of material goods and design education, rather than upon the group of consumption behaviours indicated in advice literature.8 However, a concern for the minutiae of material culture, such as dress codes, visiting cards, table settings and social settings, renders the literature of etiquette and home-making a key tool for understanding recommended forms of design consumption. Advice writers were the unsung heroes of the attempt to reconcile British consumers with modernist designs, providing as they did a bridge between the rhetoric of government-generated design reform and the popular media. While magazines have been subject to intense academic scrutiny, discrete advice literature remains a relatively untapped resource for design historical understanding of how material and social worlds collide in the home. Furthermore, the vast majority of attention paid to etiquette writing has focused upon pre-twentieth-century examples.8 By consulting ephemeral sources aimed at a populist audience, this article offers a reassessment of the periodization of the rhetoric of modernism in British history and, in doing so, complements existing studies of design reform and design education in the mid-twentieth century. The study demonstrates that by consulting material prepared for a mass audience (not associated with avant-garde consumption or the ‘early adopter’, so-called because he or she accepts innovation in advance of the majority of consumers) we can track a similarity in the rhetoric of persuasion of the benefits of modernism between professional sources from the 1920s and populist sources from the late 1960s.

Writing on design promotion, Jonathan Woodham discusses the way in which members of the inter- and post-war design reform organizations embodied a ‘relatively narrow social outlook’. He cites LeMahieu’s description of a ‘cultural elite, believers in notions of cultural hierarchy’ convinced that ‘aesthetic judgement demanded talent, training, discrimination and taste’.7 Attempts to enfranchise a wider audience for design reform, were, Woodham suggests, both defensively framed and perhaps misguided in view of popular antipathy towards ‘the steel stuff’ presented as well-designed furniture in the Britain Can Make It display of 1946.8 Paul Reilly’s 1953 assertion that ‘people of all classes’ were purchasing modern furniture is heavily compromised by the title of his article
‘Don’t be Afraid of Contemporary Design’. Much of the government-generated design advice was written by one social group for another, thereby creating a gulf between that which was presented as ideal and that which the majority recognized as being available to them.

Other existing consumption-oriented treatments of design reform in the mid-century period focus on fashion leaders and early adopters, presenting middle-class consumption as being in advance of that associated with the working class. For example, Kevin Davies’s study of the market for Finnish furniture has demonstrated an enthusiasm for modernism in 1930s Britain, but he acknowledges that this reception was centred upon contract clients and a small minority of economically comfortable, metropolitan middle-class consumers. Elsewhere it has been noted that the middle classes were ahead of the working classes in the take-up of electrical appliances. Middle-class consumers would perhaps have been both economically equipped and sufficiently confident in their taste to be early adopters of modernism and concomitant technological aids.

Elias, Goffman and Bourdieu each demonstrate the significance of the ‘manner of acquisition’ of manners and taste, distinguishing between formal learning and social education as part of upbringing. Here Bourdieu develops Elias’s concept of ‘habitus’:

Total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life and extended by a scholastic learning which presupposes and completes it, differs from belated, methodical learning not so much in the depth and durability of its effects—as the ideology of cultural ‘veneer’ would have it—as in the modality of the relationship to language and culture which it simultaneously tends to inculcate. It confers the self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy, and the ease which is the touchstone of excellence; it produces the paradoxical relationship to culture made up of self-confidence amid (relative) ignorance and of casualness amid familiarity, which bourgeois families hand down to their offspring as if it were an heirloom.

Bourdieu’s study examines the French bourgeoisie, but he acknowledges the wider application of the ideas he sets forth. Accounts of social behaviour published in advice books are aimed, therefore, not at the members of the social group described, but at a readership aspiring to join the group. Established members of the middle class would not typically have used advice literature, gathering a social education through familial channels instead. Whereas in the early part of the twentieth century advice authors took their cue from aristocratic modes of behaviour, the scale and complexity of recommended entertainment and related economic expenditure lessened from the 1920s onwards to become increasingly suited to a middle-class ideal. This ideal may be said to address two audiences: both those aspiring to join the middle class and those who considered themselves to have recently joined it.

Advice literature may be seen to be more accurately reflective of wider public taste than the campaigning rhetoric of organizations intending to educate from a position of superiority (top-down) and their mediators, because it caters specifically to its aspirational readership—a readership desirous of upward mobility, seeking advice and implicitly lacking in self-confidence. Top-down sources offered advice at the point when the organizations involved were concerned to change taste. While readers may have been familiar with pro-modernist rhetoric from a range of organizations aiming to improve British taste in the first half of the twentieth century, advice literature provided them with on-demand practical guidance on the application of modernist design to the social home (the home as a site for entertaining) when they needed it, which was much later than much top-down design reform activity.

Reading and writing: the real and the ideal?

Clearly, instructional literature does not supply historical information about actual consumption; rather, it exists as a group of ideals that we cannot assume are followed. Elias states in his History of Manners that, when read historically, etiquette texts allow historians to ascertain the moment at which a particular point of etiquette was adopted by the readership because it is omitted from subsequent texts. This suggests a rather straightforward relationship between reader and advice and between representation and reality. It is the role of the advice writer, however, to proffer advice related to need. Etiquette texts offer the oxymoron of ‘real ideals’ and are, as Elias noted, ‘a little the work of everyone’.

A useful case study of the mutually informative
relationship between consumer literature and its readers is shown to function at a linguistic level in Laird O’Shea Borrelli’s work on the editorial voice in American Vogue, beginning in 1968. O’Shea Borrelli’s example is American but the relationship between the language used by authors and readers may be said to be sufficiently universal to apply to both UK and US consumer literature. Fashion writing is didactic and personal to individual editors, but also has its roots in a popular parlance used by readers and consciously invoked by editors to broaden the appeal of their messages. Simultaneously, readers imitate the language of fashion as a source of pleasure in its own right. Like magazines, then, advice literature has not only offered advice on modes of design consumption; it has also been consumed as a commodity itself, whether for entertainment or serious purpose.

 Etiquette is furthermore a fashion system in itself, dependent upon a currency of taste. An etiquette text is rendered obsolete by its successor. Successive re-editions exemplify a desire to keep pace with changing modes of behaviour. Evidently, this is a response in part to the assumption by contemporaries that the period they occupy is one of unprecedented social change, as these quotations from 1922, 1956 and 1968 respectively demonstrate:

The War has changed many of our long-cherished conventions. In certain respects very much more freedom is allowed now than was considered permissible up to the opening of the present reign.

In this book you will find that old-fashioned and outdated manners are treated only historically. Teenagers to-day are fortunate that the old formalities of 'society' have been replaced by simple informalities.

For although manners change with the years, some observance of the conventions and the unwritten rules of conduct are still required of those who wish to be accepted and to move with confidence even in today’s more free-and-easy society.

Each of these statements displays a sense of the present as a time of freedom to a greater or lesser extent. This sense is not confined to etiquette writers, nor to the twentieth-century period, as Andrew St George demonstrates in his study The Descent of Manners:

Etiquette books continued to amass sales in the 1880s and 1890s, but by then the writer who opted for the etiquette genre was buying into a tired, if not failing, market... These books provided self-help and self-therapy for a society that had changed itself beyond recognition in the middle years of the century.

In fact, etiquette publishing survived this drop in popularity, and in the twentieth century etiquette publishing has been most prevalent at particular points of social instability and social mobility, when readers sensing change are most likely to seek advice on how to manage it. Judgements about whether this phenomenon is recurrent or whether it is specific to the twentieth century require further study outside the remit of this article.

Unlike other popular media forms with a didactic function such as magazines, however, advice literature is constrained in part by the pre-eminent importance it places on behavioural and literary precedents. Etiquette describes what is 'done' and 'not done', a mode of discourse based on transcending fashion and supplying the definitive. In addition, etiquette writing may be viewed as especially self-referential. Successive re-editions of key texts and a high level of (mostly unacknowledged) intertextuality provide another form of precedent at genre level. We can compare this with the way magazines work, with reference to another useful US case study. In her discussion of The Ladies’ Home Journal from 1910 to 1930, Jennifer Scanlon notes that magazines offer a ‘balance between the fostering of anxiety that draws readers to seek out advice and the offering of positive messages that encourage them to return the following month.’ While such a description may be applied to advice literature, it is worth making the distinction that this dual motive—a motive that results in incomplete and unfulfilling advice—is characteristic of the serial form, rather than of the definitive nature of the book-length volume.

Home-making and etiquette guides share a largely female readership with magazines, are mutually the product of reader and writer and thrive on change. Unlike magazine advice, however, etiquette relies in a particular way on an authority based on tradition. The different levels of ephemerality associated with the magazine and book formats further exemplify this distinction. This system is equally dependent on maintaining the status quo and managing social change. While advice writers prefer to recommend actions that have an authority bestowed by precedent, advice literature has functioned as a means of
managing change decorously. The remainder of this article discusses the role of advice literature in modifying the material culture of home entertaining in mid-century Britain. In order to achieve this modification, the advice writers to whom I will refer demonstrate an acute concern for balancing tradition and modernity that makes advice literature such a sensitive barometer of the mediation of modernist design.

Front- and backstage contested

In Mary and John Bolton’s *The Complete Book of Etiquette* (1968), an illustration in Chapter 5, ‘Places and Situations’, reminds the reader that ‘Manners, like charity, begin at home’ [1].25 Advocates of etiquette consider it to be a fundamental tool of harmonious co-existence, through the emphasis it places on consideration for others, as described by Edith Barber in her *Short Cut to Etiquette* of 1956: ‘if you are familiar with the accepted standards of friendly living, based on good taste and good manners, and if you put these into practice, you will be happier both at home and in social life.’24 The fusion of good taste and good manners echoes the point made by Elias, in relation to court society, that for status to function, it must be refied materially:

The intense scrutiny of each manifestation of a person, including his house, to determine whether or not he is respecting the traditional boundaries proper to his place within the social hierarchy, and to assess everything relating to him in terms of its social valency, its prestige value, springs directly from the mechanism of absolute rule in the court society and the hierarchical structure of the society centred around the king and the court.25

Elias goes on to summarize the attitude of Louis XIV’s court: ‘in power that may exist but is not visible in the appearance of the ruler the people do not believe. They must see in order to believe.’26 Writing in 1939, Elias outlined how the courtly model has been modified:

The lessening in the compulsion towards display even among the most affluent elite groups of industrial societies has become of decisive importance in the development of domestic architecture, dress and artistic taste in general. Moreover, the mighty and rich in these societies not only save like the less wealthy and powerful, but they even work like them as well. One could say that in some respects the rich live today as the poor did earlier, and the poor like the rich.27

Elias describes how in a court society personal and professional or state functions are fused. As court society disintegrated in the face of industrialization, the personal and professional spheres separated. On the eve of the Second World War, Elias suggested

Fig 1. ‘If you would not put the milk bottle on the table when you have company, do not insult the family by doing so when they are alone’. Bolton, 1968
that conspicuous consumption was less important for the maintenance of power than it had been in the pre-industrial era. The material culture of twentieth-century etiquette, while derived from a courtly model, was subject to a greater variety of influences: less was sometimes more. The resultant 'vitality' of meaning has been cited as a reason for the inadequacy of studies of home-making. However, the emphasis on display and the manifestation of status described by Elias as typical of court society is by no means irrelevant to the surge of consumer activity from the 1950s onwards, which Elias could not foresee when he wrote *The Civilising Process* in 1939.

Writing in 1959, Goffman considered the period of industrialization when building his extended dramatical metaphor *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. We interact, or perform, in a range of 'regions' using the various 'props' at our disposal such as clothing and furniture. The social 'front' comprises the personal front composed of appearance, gesture, clothing and insignia. The back stage is where illusions are devised, and costumes are maintained. The outside region could be the exterior wall of an institution, or the garden wall of a house. I would add that this might be interpreted also as a 'liminal' space such as a hall, foyer or antechamber, and even a bridging device such as a serving hatch, a hostess trolley or a serving tray.

For Goffman 'decorous behaviour' means showing respect for the occupied region and the audience. Clothing and personal effects are classed as 'sign-equipment', instances of material culture deliberately employed for a certain effect:

In our middle classes a similar situation arises when a hostess has to decide whether or not to use the good silver, or which would be the more appropriate to wear, her best afternoon dress or her plainest evening gown.

Maintaining a front correspondent with a higher social stratum than the one a person usually occupies sometimes entails sacrifices and 'secret consumption' of pleasures and economies. In this case backstage labour, or the lack of it, is concealed and only the desired end product is revealed. Home entertaining occurs within a setting that is controlled by at least one of the social players. Therefore, the architecture, decor and material culture of the setting have been chosen to communicate silently about the inhabitants and to influence or control the responses of guests.

Ironically, when compared with the advice literature of home entertaining, Goffman's 1959 model of front and back stage best describes the period prior to the one in which he wrote: a pre-war and inter-war model of clearly demarcated upstairs—downstairs. Perhaps Goffman's motivation in charting the 'regions' may have stemmed from an elegiac sense of the imminent dissolution of such distinctions? Pre-war and inter-war etiquette writing rigorously separates front- and backstage. Fiona Leslie describes the end of the nineteenth century as a period in which 'a large home (with servants) may have had over fifty rooms for at least thirty different social needs.' However, advice literature demonstrates that the ideal of maintaining distinctive social regions within the home was upheld for upper-middle and upper-class homes at least until the Second World War. Dinner parties would have begun in the drawing room, with drinks being served, after which the dinner party would have proceeded to the dining room, finally separating into single-sex groupings in discrete rooms.

Goffman's 1959 model illuminates etiquette texts of the first half of the twentieth century that show how labour is hidden from guests. Typical advice from a 1923 text cautions 'when receiving callers . . . politeness requires that any occupation which completely engrosses the attention, be abandoned.' The same text furthers this impression of the hostess as socially uninvolved with 'few active duties . . . No accident should ruffle her temper. No disappointment ought to embarrass her. She ought to see her old china broken without a sigh, and her best glass shattered with a smile.' The best hostess of the inter-war period is the most passive: virtually her sole active role is in the procession to the dining room. So the mascot for disguised labour, the smiling hostess, joins her husband in performing at least one act of visible labour along with the group of hidden labour tasks more traditionally assigned to her.

Goffman's division of the social space into front- and backstage resonates differently in a period in which these spheres increasingly fused. The economic changes of the pre-war and post-war period involved greater employment opportunities for women. Domestic service workers dissatisfied with the hardships of service moved to other occupations. Therefore, even women in a position to
afford full-time live-in domestic assistance sometimes experienced difficulty in finding staff. Such women had been used to having staff to mediate the outside world by opening their front doors and answering their telephones, as well as preparing and serving their canapés and dinner parties, and experienced discomfort at performing such tasks themselves. Simultaneously, etiquette texts began to address more economical and egalitarian types of home entertaining, and the aristocratic model lessened in influence. The type of social interaction described in etiquette texts prior to the outbreak of the Second World War was threatened by the conditions of increasingly dense urban populations, and the compact responses proffered by the modernists. In addition, such a threat existed in the challenge that modernist austerity presented to existing pattern of home entertaining, which had been couched in a visual language of conspicuous consumption and status display.

As parts of the home were re-conceptualized for new uses, so design reformers promulgated a new philosophy of design. An example is found in the home decorating advice guide, *Modern Furnishing and Decoration* of 1934, helping readers come to terms with the placement of modernist art and design in their homes. ‘Modernity in a period panelled room’ shows a decorative panel by Edward McKnight Kauffer used as inspiration for the positioning of a modern rug. As with the text from 1934, so in 1967 combining modern furniture with earlier examples is suggested:

Having an Edwardian suite in a Victorian house doesn’t prevent you putting Scandinavian modern in the same room—and having comfort with perfect harmony. As every decorator has proved, the beauty of modern furniture is the way it mixes so happily with antiques, Victorian, even reproduction.

This 1934 text eulogizes the efficacy of “elimination” in decoration and traces an ‘Oriental’ pedigree for such an approach. Elsewhere, the heart of the home, the hearth, is literally sidelined as readers are invited to ‘note the ingenious manner in which the copper Sun-ray electric fire has been built into one side of the settee’ [2]. Flexibility was a key selling tool for a new style perhaps considered less permanent and less worth investing in by prospective home-makers than familiar reproductions.

Other key devices in the propaganda for making modernism acceptable were the connotations of luxury, style and subtle glamour. The 1934 ‘Room from the House of Tomorrow’ has a lacquered ceiling and a pink leather three-piece suite (as well

![Fig 2. Fitted furniture and the sidledine hearth, Patmore, 1934](image)
as a glass wall), so spare forms are rendered acceptable through their luxurious materials. In 'The Contemporary Style in Silver' [3] we see moderne tableware from Mappin & Webb noted for its 'graceful simplicity'. An all-white room designed by Arundell Clarke of London is relieved of its 'severity' through the placement of 'coloured rugs and flowers'. A metal balustrade in a virtually empty stone-flagged hall entitled 'Dignity in the Entrance Hall' exemplifies the way in which design has been associated with good manners to appeal to readers keen to attract such characteristics for themselves [4]. This example of a bridging space is designed to aggrandize its owners through the communication of a spare 'dignity'. In turn, retailers and mediators have used such desirable qualities in their promotion and publicity. A similar pattern of reconciliation of readers to modernist domestic design can been seen in another challenge to extant home entertaining: self-service.

Fig 3. Luxury and status denoted by Mappin & Webb silver, Patmore, 1934

Fig 4. 'Dignity in the entrance hall', Patmore 1934

From service to self-service

From the 1920s to the 1970s, advice literature was increasingly concerned with the shift from a service culture to a self-service culture. While, on the one hand, advice writers catered to a new group of socially mobile readers keen to entertain in a manner different to the one they had known at home, simultaneously an absence of staff for the upper middle-class householder introduced new problems for etiquette writers to address. The hostess performed the conflicting roles of both entertaining guests and cooking, which involved her in both front- and backstage regions of the home, as shown in this 1967 text:

Dinner parties should be planned so that the hostess is detained in the kitchen as little as possible. Nothing is
more embarrassing to guests than a flurried hostess darting into the dining room between long absences at the cooking stove.46

Advice authors united in this period in the fight against the 'party flurry' experienced by a new generation of hostess-cooks. The humorously ebullient Esquire Party Book of 1965 proclaimed the virtues of self-service with a more upbeat approach:

Once upon a time when you wanted to give a party, you called Ye Olde Family Retainer and said 'Dinner for 12, please, James.' BUT THAT WAS LIGHT-YEARS AGO. NOW when you want to give a party, it's on you. You plan it; you shop for it; you cook it; and nine times out of ten, you serve it... For the joy of today's entertaining at home is the chance it gives YOU to make each party your own—your style, which is after all the best style for you... Your welcome is the Prime Meridian—the starting point from which to reckon the success of each party—so try to open the door yourself for each guest.46

The repetition here may be seen as an attempt to cheer the reluctant reader. The existence of this passage indicates that there was a zone of transition from domestic service to self-service. The confident humour of this text may result from the fact that it was unusually aimed at bachelors rather than housewives. The advice is presented in a casual manner that belies the concern to which it catered.

In addition to a scaling-down of culinary complexity, readers are encouraged to enlist assistance from mechanical means:

If the host must be the bottle-washer and the butler as well as the chef, mean no! Small loss of dignity—for he somehow contrives that the service be gracious, if informal. He substitutes gadgets and appliances and new equipment for extra hands. He organizes menus that demand less service, if more advance preparation. He manipulates courses and guests and eating places so that everyone is spared the awkwardness of inept service or place-clearing.47
The 'gadgets and appliances' referred to here testify to the proliferation of new devices nominally aimed at easing the burden of the newly unassisted host and hostess. In *How to Make Your Home Smart*, an illustration demonstrates a simple pair of trolleys, differentiated by size, making one suitable for tea and one for a 'light meal'. These are shown together with nesting tables and a coffee table in a complete picture of the furniture needed for eating outside the kitchen and dining room. This book was published in London in 1962 for 'the modern African woman' and notes the 'the Modern furniture being produced in Britain, Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe is ideally suited to tropical countries'. However, the treatment of electrical appliances is one strictly of necessity. A trolley, illustrated in the Design Centre publication *Tableware* of 1969, is described as 'invaluable for carrying things to the table and back for washing-up. This one, laid for a buffet supper... is made by Christopher Bateman workshops'. While the trolley is presented as labour-saving in that it saves trips to carry dishes between the eating area and the sink, the cutlery and crockery are nevertheless set out as meticulously as they would be for a formal dinner, underlining the fact that this trolley is a mobile dining table. The question is raised of the extent to which such devices actually saved labour. Adrian Forty reminds us that the assumption that gadgets replaced domestic staff does not hold true for the period prior to 1939, when domestic staff were not in short supply, appliances were bought for use by servants, and only those wealthy enough to have servants could afford the appliances. In her study of women's magazines, however, Joy Leman notes that during the war 'the selling point of household commodities becomes time saved to be used for war work'. Lynn Spigel makes the point that 'living without an array of machines meant that you were anachronistic, unable to keep up with the more progressive Joneses. In *More Work for Mother*, Ruth Schwartz Cowan describes how the so-called 'labour saving' devices aimed at the US post-war housewife increased labour because they invited higher standards of cleanliness. Putnam points to the way in which such devices are no longer marketed as labour saving but rather as associated with 'leisure, pleasure and higher standards of consumption'. In contradiction of reality, then, these
representations endowed appliances with the ideology of labour saving, time saving and modernity. The plate-warmer was less dynamic an electric mod con than the cooking devices described above, but it too represented a microcosmic kitchen in the dining room [7]. While it might have been suited to entertaining, the reader of the home-making guide in which it appeared was advised that it must be used regularly, not just when guests were present, in order to repay its purchase price. While the plate-warmer merely preserved what had been achieved in the kitchen, the use of cooking equipment at the table turned the dining room into a temporary kitchen:

Cooking at the table—by electric skillet, rotisserie or a thermostatically controlled cook-and-serve unit—is certainly one way of keeping the hostess in the conversation when tricky things like pancakes or soufflés are on the menu. But when the cooking involves fat or strong flavours such as onion and the dining room has no extractor fan, it can create its own problems with the decorations. 

Tableware of 1969 makes a clear connection between the use of spaces within homes and the devices made to bridge them:

With smaller houses, better planning of kitchens in relation to eating-serving, and the growing tendency to eat at least some meals in the kitchen, keeping food hot is no longer the problem it was when protocol and several flights of stairs separated kitchen from dining room. Nevertheless there are occasions when equipment for keeping dishes hot can be useful: for invalids where food may be prepared in advance and left by a bedside; for parties to save constant trips to and from the table; for eating out of doors; for keeping coffee and other drinks hot.

It is significant that in 1969 the Design Centre described the use of the plate-warmer to ease the passage between kitchen and dining areas as a historical problem, whereas for the author of The Women's Own Guide to Modern Homemaking, writing only two years earlier in 1967, the problem is very much a current concern. It is clear that for readers of the latter, these gadgets literally bridged the gap between front- and backstage, for the purposes of self-service, by providing a microcosmic kitchen in the dining room.

Another method of bridging the regions was found in the serving hatch, horizontal relative of the 'dumb waiter'. An article in The Studio of 1947 depicts two sides of a hatch that is also a storage device cum room divider. Note the way in which the display function of the cabinet is directed at the dining room where the cabinet has glass sides [8-9]. Like electrical appliances such as the vacuum cleaner, the hatch was originally developed for use by servants in the 1920s, in tandem with the interest in Taylorist efficiency exemplified by Christine Frederick's Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home, published in London in 1920. By the 1950s, the hatch was a feature of new homes and a commonplace improvement in old ones. In addition to their capacity for 'saving steps', Christina Hardyment suggests two benefits of the hatch. First, a hatch does not allow guests to witness labour, or its material evidence in the kitchen and, second, it 'catered to the

Fig 7. 'English Electric' plate-warmer by English Electric, WORMH, 1967
growing feeling that it was somehow not quite right for mum to be shut away in the kitchen.\textsuperscript{51} Perhaps for reasons of dignity, serving hatches are barely mentioned by etiquette writers, and were really a transitional solution to the problems of self-service.

The move from staffed entertaining to more hands-on hosting considerably lessened the formality of domestic entertaining to the extent that the concept of self-service encompassed guests. Middle-

class guests modified their expectations to accommodate reduced incomes and a lessening of domestic assistance to the point of performing roles recently vacated by staff: ‘often appetizers served in the living-room will take the place of the first course at the table. The guests may help to pass the appetizers.’\textsuperscript{62} Assistance from the guests underwent a change from being initially controlled, here in 1956, until it too was presented as socially beneficial, in placing all

\textsuperscript{51} Robertson, 1947

\textsuperscript{62} Robertson, 1947
members of the social scene on an equal and cooperative footing, as we see in 1963:

If one of your guests is shy or a stranger, or both, draft her as your assistant. If she has something to pass or to do, the shy one will be forced out of her corner and become part of the group in spite of herself. The same technique sometimes works wonders in breaking up cliques. You can call one or two people out of an overture conversation to select records and to pass the hot tidbits (either food or gossip) then introduce new people to the old group. This should start it ticking again.63

Constance Spry noted that the social benefits also applied to the hostess: ‘The contemporary cook-hostess has the best of it, for she sees her efforts appreciated and hears the dishes discussed, which is a pleasant innovation.”64

Another consequence of self-service was that the food served at dinner parties became less elaborate, with fewer courses, and by the mid-1960s the dinner party was threatened by alternative hospitality:

Wine and cheese parties . . . require a minimum of preparation, provide plenty of variety and result in surprisingly little washing-up . . . Tea parties are an easy means of entertaining your friends. The cost is relatively low, the food can be prepared in advance, and can be served either at table or, more informally, handed round by the hostess, from a large side-table.65

The increasing informalization of home entertaining, and different uses of home regions are clearly exemplified in this shift from a dinner party group that processes from room to room, to a buffet group who help themselves to food and drink without leaving the sofa. The WOBMIB of 1967 advises:

[Buffet parties] are great space-savers, so you can accommodate more guests at weddings, birthday parties, luncheon or evening parties . . . If the weather is fine, and you either have a patio, or can deck up a concreted area in the garden to look reasonably festive, lure people outside. This will save wear and tear on your carpets.66

The recommendation of alfresco dining relates to an emerging continental influence in British eating. The house that had previously been stringently demarcated into social spaces, Goffman’s ‘front regions’, and family spaces, or ‘backstage’ offered a material manifestation of the informalization of domestic entertaining through the blurring of public (that is, social) and private parts of the home:

Whether ‘dinner’ means pot-luck with pot roast at the picnic table—or filet en broche on the Spode—the fact that it is dinner guarantees certain niceties. Different niceties, we’ll grant you, than they were a generation ago, but niceties withal! It may no longer be served in a dining-room, but the sun-room or loggia or garden that substitutes will be alive with flowers and paintings and music to dramatize the meal. It seldom steps out onto white damask anymore, but the heavy place-mats or colored cloths that appear instead are no less handsome for all their modern practicality.67

Etiquette texts throughout the period suggest that the scale of entertaining be determined by available space, but to differing degrees. In 1920, hosts were advised to calculate the number of guests for a dinner party on the basis of the size of their dining table, allowing one foot of table per guest.68 By 1923 this space had doubled to two feet, and mysteriously ‘the number of guests at a dance should be regulated by the size of the room.”69 By 1963 hosts receive the less prescriptive advice to have practice runs at setting the table in order to determine the number of guests and to hire extra card tables, chairs and glassware if necessary.70 This latter advice reflects a more flexible conception of the capacity of the home that had been positively promoted by Anthony Bertram in 1938:

We have all seen those dreary dead rooms reserved for company. Surely it is better to have a large friendly family room in daily use, with a dining table at one end and easy chairs and so on at the other. The space can be even further freed by having a dining table that folds away, of which there are now several designs available.71

Bertram offers an example of this ideal [10], whereby such flexibility is accorded to the ‘parlour’, a room used sparingly for the most formal occasions, which becomes a living room or family room used both for everyday family life, not least the new shared experience of watching television, and for entertaining. Bertram argues that it is far preferable to ‘telescope the living- and dining-rooms’ than to combine the kitchen and dining room, because of the unpleasant ‘smell of cooking and the “atmosphere” of housework’.

Utility as beauty: redefining status

A final solution to the physical difficulties of self-service for the hostess was that the guests should go to
her. The kitchen in the 1920s was very much a 'backstage' environment, only in the process of being vacated by full-time service workers. Inhabitants generally welcomed the space-saving fitted kitchens of the prefabricated home as an improvement on their previous circumstances [11]. While their size and arrangement made these fitted kitchens exemplary of Taylorist ideas, however, they were not suitable sites for home entertaining. The kitchen, by 1967, became much more regularly seen as a social space used for interaction with guests.

The most interesting thing about kitchens is how they have come up in the world. Two generations ago they were dark, dreary and very much 'below stairs', or pushed to the back of the house in any odd corner the builder could spare between the front hall and the back...
door... Today, in any modern house, the kitchen is usually the nicest room in the place, the centre of family life, and the area in which they have spent most money and thought... Marriages, although made in Heaven, have been known to perish in a bad kitchen and revive in a good one. Architects and builders, with housewives jogging their elbows, are now providing more space for kitchens, usually double the area they thought adequate in the 1930s. They are bringing them out of the back regions into the main part of the house, giving them a chance of sunshine and a good view from the sink. Walls between kitchen and dining room are coming down and being replaced by counters and cupboard units. Sometimes the kitchen is moved into the area once occupied by the traditional 'front room', or it is linked with the open plan living-room so that whatever she is doing about the dinner, the hostess is never shut out from the conversation or the television news.73

That home entertaining had reached as far as the kitchen required that the previously backstage setting be rendered presentable in a front stage manner. From the 1920s, the domestic kitchen underwent a form of scientific management to become more efficient and more like a place of work.74 The dining-kitchen area demonstrated a practical compromise, from 1955, between opening up the previously backstage kitchen space to the more public act of home entertaining and the maintenance of a space reserved for dining [12].75 WOBMH depicted an almost identical solution in 1967 [13]. The caption reads: 'to eat in comfort in the kitchen you need a separate space of not less than 5ft. 6in. by 4ft. 6in. quite clear of the traffic between cooker and food storage. This breakfast half of a modern kitchen is furnished as a dining-room and looks over the garden.176 The strange and slightly contradictory nature of the phrasing here implies hesitation about describing the area as straightforwardly for dining. It was a transitional example, which used a storage unit as a partial screen between the preparation and eating areas.

At the same time that the front stage, or social, public spaces were creeping forward to encompass more of the home, so utilitarian objects were increasingly praised and utility was presented as a form of status display in its own right, as here in 1967:

Traditional shapes and canteens are still available and you can, if you like, buy table 'silver' that is an exact copy of your grandmother's, even to rat-tail spoons and real ivory-handled knives. But more likely you will look at stainless steel in six- and seven-piece place settings, not just because this is newer, but because it is sensible... and specifically designed for eating a meal! Few things we use about the house have changed more than table ware... go to buy some new ones and you find yourself in the middle of a small domestic revolution. The cutlery and china which young people buy today doesn't even pretend to look like the stuff their parents use. The linen
has almost vanished. From the material and design to the method of selling, everything is different. And in most cases very much better.77

In his 1979 study Distinction, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu used data gathered in 1963 and 1967–8 to discuss the way in which certain sectors of society, particularly those endowed with what is termed 'cultural capital', viewed almost every action of daily life as relevant to the judgement of a person's position within the social framework.78 The rhetoric above points to Bourdieu's assertion that trends in, for example, modernist utility, are not merely the product of necessity (economic or otherwise), or of enthusiasm for utility, but are also a choice of distinction. The various types of capital Bourdieu discusses have been taken as more or less related to social class. It is precisely this appreciation of the beauty of utility that has enabled home entertaining to take place in regions previously designated as backstage, such as the kitchen.

Advice literature shows us that in the 1920s the use of utilitarian household goods for entertaining would have been unthinkable for all but the most avant-garde hosts. In her discussion of the way in which magazine sources encouraged US consumers of the 1950s to find a place in their homes for a television, Lynn Spigel notes that 'media discourses did not so much reflect social reality; instead, they preceded it.'79 Similarly, etiquette and home-making advice writers helped readers to come to terms with the use of modern design for an activity—home entertaining—considered as the mainstay of luxury in which hosts had been expected to bring out their finest wares in an expression of their status and a recognition of that of their guests. WOBMH counselled that 'modern' design:

is NOT a passing fashion, nor a designer's gimmick, and like television and electric appliances, it is here to stay . . .

Go first to the Design Centre or to one of the specialist cutlery shops now in most large towns, where they show the best ranges, both British and foreign. Some of the finest are Scandinavian in origin.80

This author points out that stainless steel had been used extensively since the 1950s, perhaps in the hope that this longevity would counter rejection by thrifty readers of anything too fashionable. The text suggests that a long-held resistance to relinquishing traditional manifestations of luxury was slow to dissolve. Stainless steel was recommended in this text as a modern material that was economical because, unlike ceramic, it did not break, labour saving because it did not need polishing, stylish because it appeared in beautiful shapes designed by silversmiths and contemporary because it carried 'no fancy work, no needless decoration'. The same publication shows a 'Stainless steel tea or coffee service designed by David Mellor for the uncluttered modern table' [14].
So cheek by jowl with the traditional fine tableware made for export, we have a vast new range of pottery designed for young moderns who drink coffee instead of tea, who breakfast and sometimes have dinner parties in the kitchen, and don’t want flowers on anything. Most of it is made in the same potteries as famous china, but it has been specially created for present-day living and it is doing its job well.81

This exhortation presents modern design as desirable for its style as well as its practicality, and goes on to remark for those in doubt that ‘an entirely plain white plate is likely to be more perfect than one covered with decoration’. Clearly, this sort of design would appeal to ‘young moderns’ but for those who are not young, the advice offers a new paradigm of status. The emphasis placed here on generational difference suggests that the passage was aimed at experienced householders refurbishing rather than establishing their homes. It advocates emulation of the younger householder rather than the aristocratic one:

Thousands of families in this country buy furniture they don’t need because convention says they must have a three-piece suite, a matching bedroom suite, and a dining set complete with sideboard. In most cases they would be much more comfortable without them.82

Conclusion

Encouraging reader acceptance of modernist domestic decor was a gradual process for advice authors, who worked with their audience, administering advice at the reader’s level. The appearance of greater informalization in home entertaining between 1920 and 1970 relied on modified expectations for both guests and hosts. These were a result of economic changes, such as the inability of all but the wealthy to maintain a domestic staff and the engagement of a wider cross-section of society in domestic entertaining. They were also the result of cultural changes such as the creeping influence of modernist design paradigms. These various factors created a social home in which front- and backstage merged into a wider aestheticization of everyday life across the home. Etiquette texts and home-making guides were united in addressing the fusion of previously demarcated regions in several ways: extolling the benefits of self-service, advising assistance from ‘labour saving’ gadgets and from guests and promoting the casualization of domestic social geography, first through bridging devices such as hatches and trolleys and then through new uses of front- and backstage spaces. Modern design was recommended to etiquette readers as contributing new ideals to the comfort of a social setting: flexibility, youth, practicality, thrift, hygiene, economy of space, fashionability and stylistic longevity. Crucially, however, modern design was also credited with carrying the traditional etiquette ideals of dignity, luxury and comfort, pointing to a new aesthetic of status. The shift from the conspicuous consumption of luxury, noted by Elias, to a concern for aesthetic and financial restraint in the acceptance of modernism theorized by Bourdieu, considerably modified the language hosts used to express their status and to offer hospitality.
Notes


2 The Esquire Party Book, by the editors of Esquire with Scotty & Ronne Welch, Arthur Baker Ltd., 1965 offers a highly unusual example of 'additive' advice, as the 1965 text has been amended and augmented over a number of years.

3 The British Library holds, for example, more than four hundred volumes published in the United Kingdom between 1920 and 1970 that include etiquette in the title.


8 Woodham, op. cit., pp. 59–60.


12 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 (1979), p. 66. We may add to this Elias' theory of *The Civilizing Process* (Blackwell 1994 (1978), first published in German in 1939), including the 'habitus' interpreted as his 'socio-generic law', which informs both Bourdieu's notion of habitus and generative structuralism. In each case, the role of inherited or familial learning is key.


20 St George, op. cit., p. 286.

21 For example, a British Library catalogue search of books published in England with the title word 'etiquette' reveals an average output of 16.4 publications per decade. Between 1920 and 1929, 19 books with etiquette in the title were published. This figure rises to 21 in the decade 1930–9, to fall to only 8 in 1940–9, 13 in 1950–9, and a substantial rise to 21 again in the decade 1960–9, with a drop to just 2 in the period 1970–5.


23 Bolton, op. cit., p. 55. With many thanks to Dennis Kelly for kindly donating this book to my study.

24 Barber, op. cit., p. v.


26 Ibid., p. 118.

27 Ibid., p. 72.


30 Ibid., p. 39.

31 Ibid., p. 52.


36 The mid-nineteenth-century practice of the hostess following the processing guests in order to oversee their correct
manoeuvres was replaced by 1920, when the hostess was advised to lead the least familiar or highest-ranking female guest into the dining room, directly after the host who was to accompany the least familiar or highest-ranking male guest. Agogos ( pseudonym Charles William Day), *Hints on Etiquette and the Usages of Society with a Glance at Bad Habits*, Turnstile Press Ltd., 1946 (1836), p. 17.

40 D. Patmore, 'Modern furnishing and decoration', *The Studio*, 1934, plate XV.
42 Patmore, op. cit., plate XVI.
43 This attempt at achieving a sense of luxury through the use of an 'all-white' colour scheme has precedents in C. R. Mackintosh's designs of the 1902-3 and Sylvia Maugham's off-white interior of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Patmore, op. cit., plate III.
44 Patmore, ibid., plate XIX.
45 WOBMH, p. 332.
46 *The Esquire Party Book*, p. 2.
47 Ibid., p. 127.
49 Ibid., p. 76.
50 Ibid., pp. 27-8.
51 E. Good, *Takshware*, a Design Centre publication, MacDonald, 1969, p. 62.
57 WOBMH, p. 85.
58 Ibid., p. 85.
59 Good, op. cit., p. 53.
60 H. Robertson, 'Reconstruction and the home', *The Studio*, 1947, pp. 31-2.
62 Barber, op. cit., p. 32.
63 *The Esquire Party Book*, p. 3.
65 WOBMH, pp. 329, 337.
66 Ibid., p. 324.
67 *The Esquire Party Book*.
69 The A.B.C. of Etiquette by a Society Lady, pp. 29, 44.
71 A. Bertram, *Design*, Penguin, 1938, p. 73.
73 WOBMH, p. 59.
74 N. Bullock, 'First the kitchen—then the façade', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 1, nos. 3-4, 1988, pp. 177-92.
75 E. Bird & K. Holmes, 'Decorating for the amateur', *The Studio*, 1955, pp. 86-7. The original caption reads: 'The pictures and decorative curtain show that meals in the kitchen need not involve absence of comfort and elegance.' The design is by Frederick Gibbard.
76 WOBMH, p. 60.
77 Ibid., p. 78.
78 Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 13.
79 Spigel, op. cit., p. 76.
80 WOBMH, p. 79.
81 Ibid., p. 81.
82 Ibid., p. 12.