1 Communist Comfort: Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev Era

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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 ‘homeliness’, 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.6

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.7 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 bourgeoisie 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’.8

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 comfortlessness 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.9 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?10 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’.11

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 chiliasm 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.

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
not only with shaping the material structure of apartments, but with defining how people should furnish and dwell in them.

But, the obsession with homemaking and the terms of domesticity was also shared by the millions of ordinary citizens who moved into new or modernised living quarters, or who could realistically expect to do so in the near future. Moving in, they had to furnish and decorate their homes and accommodate their standard structures to their own lives, while at the same time accommodating themselves to the new, unfamiliar spaces. As public discourse acknowledged – and some specialists regretted – the making of the domestic interior was a work with multiple authors. Architects and planners – accredited experts interpreting the priorities and briefs of the party-state – might set the parameters and determine the material structures of the house, but their power was not total. In making housing into home, it was the occupant who had the last word, however limited her room for manoeuvre.21

The negotiations between these agencies, differently positioned in relation to the authority of the state and to the material fabric of the individual home, was conventionally gendered as one between a masculine public sphere and its experts, on one hand, and female private interests and their amateur practices, on the other.22 Women were construed as the primary consumers and homemakers and as such, their dominion and expertise within the domestic domain was acknowledged as a force to be reckoned with; women had to be brought on board the socialist modernising project if the new flats

Figure 2: 1960s standard apartment block, St Petersburg (photo: Ekaterina Gerasimova, 2004 for project Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat).
were not to become nests of regressive, petit-bourgeois mentalities. A note of caution should be sounded, however: the gendering of the public/private, professional/amateur relationship did not necessarily correspond straightforwardly to an architect’s biology. In the USSR, architecture was not so exclusively a male preserve as in the West at this time, although a gender hierarchy of specialisms did operate within it: female architects appear to have been more likely to get ahead in regard to the traditionally feminine sphere of the domestic interior than in large urban planning projects and prestigious public buildings, and the authorities who wrote on home decorating often had female names. But however they may have behaved in their personal lives, in their professional practice these female architects generally espoused the same dominant norms as their male colleagues (however patriarchal) rather than adopting eccentric or dissenting positions based on their gendered experience. A systematic examination of the gender relations within the architectural and newly emerging industrial design professions lies beyond our scope. Here, we will explore attempts both in authoritative discourse (historically and conventionally masculine), and to a lesser extent in everyday practice and experience (conventionally and in practice the domain of women) to transcend the antithesis of home comfort and communism.

Already in the 1920s, Russian avant-garde artists aspired to bring the Revolution ‘home’ by purging from people’s everyday environments things which they regarded as the trappings of petit-bourgeois private life and materialisation of alien class values – ornate furniture, embroidered tablecloths and antimacassars, silk lampshades and useless ornaments – and to replace them with rational, functionalist, industrial, modern and ‘socialist’ material culture. However, beginning in the discourse of the 1930s and increasing in the postwar period of demobilisation and reconstruction, tablecloths, napkins and silk lampshades were reinstated as attributes of female virtue and markers of Soviet progress, signifying a modern, urban, cultured way of life (kul’turnost’). Vera Dunham has argued, on the basis of fictional representations, that the relegitimation of bourgeois cultural values and aspirations, as materialised in a retrospective aesthetics of homemaking and accumulation of possessions, constituted part of a ‘big deal’ with the new Stalinist ‘middle class’. There is little historio-ethnographic research on the popular material culture of the Stalin period by which to judge the relation between representations and reality here. But Western visitors to the Soviet Union in the 1950s also frequently commented on the overstuffed ‘Victorian’ interiors they encountered. This may be put down, in part, to a tendency to seek out confirmation of the Cold-War stereotypes they brought with them (notably the contradiction between official claims for progress, based on heavy industry, and backwardness of living conditions and consumer goods). However, the resilience or resurgence of this aesthetic through the 1930s and 1940s at least as an ideal (if not as a reality), is also suggested by the fact that, after Stalin’s death in 1953, a laundry list of bad taste almost identical to that which the Constructivists had sought to purge in the 1920s became once again the object of a widespread campaign of anathema.

The Khrushchev era is best known for de-Stalinisation – that is, for efforts to reform the most coercive aspects of Stalinism and dismantle its institutionalisation of privilege. But it also saw a revitalisation of utopian elements of Marx’s thought concerning such matters as the relation between people and things, and the self-actualisation of the individual; a restoration, in the fields of philosophy and the spatial
arts, of Constructivist ideas of the 1920s about the nature of a socialist material environment, and about the relation between art, industry and everyday life; and a rapprochement with international modernism in architecture and design. For cultural de-Stalinisers or modernisers, those pre-revolutionary teacups and ancient wooden dolls to which the émigrée Gray clung were the monsters brought forth by the Sleep of Reason; this home-life, a millstone around the neck of progress. What was needed was to fight for the liberation of man – and more particularly, given the conventional gendering of this discourse, woman – from the bondage of things, and to foster social forms of everyday life. Aesthetic reformers and utopian ideologues called to battle against what they disparaged as the ‘cult of acquisitions’ and ‘the striving at any cost to build a nest’. They cast the aesthetic they repudiated as ‘petit-bourgeois’ or ‘philistine’, a throwback to tastes and private property mentalities that were engendered by pre-revolutionary social and property relations. At the same time, this aesthetic was implicitly identified with Stalinism and, as such, an object of de-Stalinisation along with the other excesses and perversions of the Revolution. Taste war was a form of ‘class struggle’ for hegemony by a sector of the intelligentsia against the bureaucratic middle class privileged in the Stalin era, whom the aesthetic reformers cast as uncultured parvenus.

The great transmigration

The surge of attention to housing and homemaking in the late 1950s took place against the background of a chronic housing shortage, exacerbated by wartime destruction. The majority of Soviet people, in the post-war period, lived in barrack-type accommodation or in communal apartments, where an entire family or more would be cramped into a single room, sharing a kitchen and bathroom – if they existed – with many other families. One was lucky to have so much as a ‘cot-place’ in a hostel – one’s ‘private’ space limited to the bed one slept in. Overcrowded, insanitary conditions and homelessness were recognised as the cause of major social and health problems. Tuberculosis was rife. Recent research on post-war Soviet society presents a picture of peoples on the move, in flux, characterised by social dislocation. Nomadic mobility might be embraced by modernism as a defining aspect of modernity, and it was romanticised in Soviet literature and film in the Khrushchev era (especially in regard to the Virgin Lands campaign). But in life rather than fiction, after half a century of dislocation, rupture, flux and instability, to be homeless was associated with disorder, instability and marginality, and with elements of the population that eluded organisation. Lack of a legitimate, registered place of residence made one a misfit in Soviet society, a marginal type (limitichik) or person of no fixed abode; it disenfranchised and deprived one of civic personality. The dialectics of home and homelessness, dislocation and dwelling, disenfranchisement and becoming a fully self-realised Soviet person, were at the centre of public discourse and mass individual experience in the Khrushchev era.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Soviet society was on the move once again, on such a scale that the satirical magazine Krokodil likened this mass relocation to the ‘Great Transmigration of Peoples’. The modern-day ‘transmigration’ was distinguished from earlier waves in Soviet history, however (resulting from collectivisation, from the enforced deportation of whole ethnic groups under Stalin, and from war), in
that it was caused not by the loss of a home, but precisely the opposite; it was a mass homecoming. People were on the move because they had been allocated new homes thanks to the intensive mass housing campaign. The fundamental changes in people’s everyday environment and way of living were arguably more momentous for more people than better-known political events such as Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, in which he denounced Stalin’s excesses. A new revolution took place in Soviet daily life in the late 1950s, as Svetlana Boym notes, ‘consisting of resettlement out of communal apartments to outlying “micro-districts” where people were able to live in separate, albeit state-owned apartments – many for the first time in their lives’. As a result, the newly founded industrial design journal *Tekhnicheskaia estetika* (*Technical Aesthetics*) declared, ‘The creation of the interior of the contemporary urban apartment has become one of the most important state problems’ (Figure 3).

If, in the comfort of one’s new home, one opened a newspaper or turned on the television (a rapidly expanding leisure pursuit and medium in terms of airtime and number of sets in the early 1960s), one would get the impression that the entire Soviet population was on the move, running around worrying about colour schemes and the choice of wallpaper, furniture and lampshades.

The new housing regions of the Khrushchev era were notorious for having sacrificed aesthetics to engineering, function and economy. One of Khrushchev’s first decisive interventions, less than two years after Stalin’s death in 1953, had been to denounce the extravagant, monumental style of Stalinist architecture and, seemingly prompted by modernisers in the architectural profession, to declare ornament a crime (or at least, a Stalinist excess). This implied a rapprochement with modernist principles of design dictated by function, materials and mode of production. Architects and engineers looked back to indigenous Constructivism and across the Iron Curtain to recent international developments, in particular efforts to solve the housing shortage throughout post-war Europe through system building and factory prefabrication.

The imperatives of thoroughgoing industrialisation, speed and economy of construction, combined with still primitive technologies of prefabrication, required rethinking the requirements of dwelling: eliminating architectural ornament, reducing the dimensions to a functional minimum, and minimising or eliminating auxiliary spaces such as corridors. Standardisation was paramount: the use of a limited number of type plans, standard modules and unembellished elevations. As Russian design historian Iurii Gerchuk describes the new flats:

‘Comfort’ was also conceived in very frugal terms . . . In the standardized housing designs accepted and applied at the turn of the 1950s–60s, ceiling heights were reduced to 2.5 m. In the tiny, cramped flats the space for auxiliary rooms was cut to the bare minimum. The size of the kitchen was reduced from 7 to 4.5 sq m and it opened directly off the living room. The toilet was combined with the bathroom. Convenience was sacrificed not only to save space but to simplify the construction process.

Functional and featureless, the new housing estates may not count today among the monuments of world architecture, worthy of preservation orders or heritage status. On the contrary, the new flats – known as *khrushchevki* (or worse, *khrushcheby*, a contraction of ‘Khrushchev’ and ‘slum’) – are widely regarded as a shameful aspect of the Soviet legacy, to be purged as quickly as growing prosperity allows. Yet, notwithstanding the monotonous standardisation and minimum specifications of the new flats,
as well as numerous shortcomings in their design, materials, construction and finish, the improvement in millions of people’s quality of life cannot be overestimated. As one elderly woman told me, they are ‘monuments in our hearts’. Most significantly, the flats were planned and designed for occupancy by single nuclear families, and were equipped with mains plumbing, inside toilets and kitchens. Many people in interviews conducted in 2004–07 still recall the joy of having their own bathroom or kitchen, however diminutive, for the first time, rather than sharing with up to fifty others. After a lifetime under the gaze of nosy neighbours, it was bliss to have one’s own four walls to shelter one from their view, even if poor soundproofing meant you could still hear everything going on next door. Along with the spread of television and car ownership, the single-family apartments have been seen, with reason, as setting in train
a process of ‘privatisation’ of Soviet life. It was the state that provided the premises for this process, which was one of a number of paradoxical unintended side effects of its policies. While tenants had no legal rights of ownership or disposal, and one person’s apartment shared the same standard plan as another’s, it was nevertheless a place to settle at last and call one’s own.

Mediating the move: giving public meaning to the separate apartments

Housing construction gave visual dramatisation to the party-state’s commitment to raising living standards of the many, not just the few. The intensive housing campaign was kept in the public eye and mind through two linked themes that corresponded to the dichotomy of mobilisation and settling/dwelling: first, Happy Housewarming; and second, the process of making and maintaining a home in these government-issue spaces. Thereby the new housing was invested with public meaning as a gift that demonstrated the party-state’s solicitousness for its people, and as a symptom of progress towards communism and of its superiority over capitalism.

The theme of Happy Housewarming, novosel’e (lit. new settling), celebrated the dynamic, ritualised, transformative moment of moving in: turning the key in the new door for the first time, crossing the threshold, inviting friends and family inside to share one’s happiness. ‘Housewarming is becoming the most common festival genre’, declared the state newspaper Izvestiia. “New home – new happiness”, as the folk saying goes’, began an article in the labour newspaper Trud in late 1959, entitled ‘Happy Housewarming’. It focused on a newly built five-storey apartment block into which fifty-six families of workers and employees of a Moscow machine-building factory had just moved. ‘Bright, cosy [uiutnye] rooms. A joyful, festive bustle. Human happiness takes up stable and permanent residence here’. Housewarming was represented as a joyful rite of passage, associated with brightness, cosiness, stability and happiness, through which the new Soviet person would emerge, remade, in readiness for the new life under communism. It was a mass, common celebration, but unlike the major public festivals and parades in city streets and squares, this one was celebrated by individual families with their friends and kin in their own homes.

The longer durée and mundane, everyday process of settling in, making home and dwelling in the new flats, was harder to dramatise and keep in the public eye than the ritual moment of changing places. How to maintain public consciousness about the relation between this blessing in the present day and the future perfection to come? How to keep people mobilised for the construction of communism once they had settled in?

The duration and daily round or byt, commonly designated ‘private life’, was articulated and reproduced again and again as the subject of public discourse through pervasive advice. Allegedly in response to readers’ demand, the popular press, advice manuals and television offered instruction on how to arrange one’s furniture in the unfamiliar spaces, how to select elements of décor and find an appropriate colour scheme, or how to maintain the new types of surface such as linoleum floor covering. Housewarming and settling into one’s new flat became the theme of much early television programming. Broadcasts with titles such as ‘For Family and Home’ or ‘Help for the Housewarmer’ represented this as the ‘typical’ experience of the present day, presuming their viewers were either already watching in a new flat or dreaming
of receiving one soon. New norms of ‘contemporary’ (that is, modernist) ‘good taste’ and ‘rational’, function-based use of space were propagated through representations of model interiors in the form of ideal home exhibits and show homes, photographs and artists’ impressions. Advice also sought to introduce industrial, Taylorist standards of time-and-motion efficiency and mechanisation into the domestic workspace of the kitchen, thereby integrating the home (via the space most implicated, in the past, in its regressive role of enslaving and stultifying women) into the public modernising project. Izvestiia’s ‘home and family’ page, a significant innovation introduced in July 1959, printed articles such as that cited above, entitled ‘New Home – New Way of Life’. It argued that, as millions of Soviet citizens moved to new, well-appointed apartments, it was necessary to develop the new discipline of domovodstvo, domestic science, ‘to teach how best to furnish [the new apartment] to make it more uiutno [cosy] to live in’: ‘Rational nutrition, knowledge of how to dress comfortably and beautifully, and how to furnish one’s apartment: all this has to be taught’.

Advice, addressed primarily to the female homemaker, was often a matter of informing her about consumer goods that were supposed to be available, if not now then in the near future, and how to choose, teaching her to make wise and tasteful purchases: that is, to be a skilled consumer. New consumer goods, including furniture and appliances for the home, which were promised in the 1959 economic plan, created new civic tasks and responsibilities for the housewife; they imposed the duty of rational consumption and correct choice. Advice also functioned as socialist realism, often implying a greater degree of choice than was available. According to a television programme on home furnishing: ‘Many of us, when we receive a new apartment, want to change the colour of the walls or put up wallpaper, all the more since now in Moscow you can get any kind of wallpaper you want. But, comrades! – in buying wallpaper it is necessary to make the correct choice of colour, pattern and texture’.

Many community activities in new neighbourhoods were also directed towards homemaking and making things for the home, in addition to communal campaigns to improve and maintain the external appearance of blocks of flats, monitor use of balconies, plant the yards and create children’s playgrounds. The local housing administration might organise carpentry clubs for adults, exhibitions of houseplants and flower arranging, and cookery competitions, in addition to amateur art and photographic circles, musical ensembles and radio clubs. Community activities included not only homecraft classes for women and girls, but also home-oriented activities for men such as woodwork. In one neighbourhood carpentry club, each member began with repairing furniture, making small things such as shelves, bedside cabinets and kitchen tables, and then moved on to making more complex items such as bookshelves, TV tables or sideboards. The members got so keen that they began to spend all their free time there. Such clubs aimed to attract men, to keep them off the street, away from the bottle, and from antisocial behaviour or ‘hooliganism’, while engaging them in activities associated with the home and fostering a pride in making or mending things for their domestic space. Thus, if homelessness deprived one of civic personality, becoming a homemaker (novosel) conversely made one a Soviet person and respectable member of the community, participating in the ‘typical’ experience of the present day.

Although activities associated with the home were a recognised way to integrate potentially antisocial men, advice on creating the domestic interior and keeping a
rational, modern, tasteful home was still addressed predominantly, if not exclusively, to women, constructing them as the primary homemakers. Men might participate, but theirs was an auxiliary role. In 1955, a Novyi mir reader lamented that while she and her husband might discuss how to furnish their new marital home, in practice it fell to her alone. There was also a conventional gender division of skills and materials. As the community activities confirmed, work that involved structures and hard materials such as wood or metal was appropriate to men, while the aesthetic decisions, attention to surfaces, decorative touches and soft furnishings belonged to women. Making uют was women’s responsibility, both in authoritative discourse and, recent interviews suggest, in everyday understandings. Men are absent altogether in many of the retrospective narratives of homemaking told by women. As possibilities for private car ownership grew in the course of the 1960s, cars and the spaces associated with them and their time-consuming maintenance – yard, street and garage – increasingly became an alternative male homosocial space to which men retreated to escape the home and its obligations. There were some exceptions, however, where homemaking became a shared family bonding experience. One woman who had moved into a newly completed house in 1960 with her parents when she was twelve years old recalled how the whole family was involved in the process of turning the new apartment into ‘home’. ‘We tried to make it nice and cosy in the apartment’. Although still young, she, too, had wanted their new home to be beautiful and actively participated in making the interior. So did her father. Forty years on, this woman still took great pride in the furniture her father had made for the family home. ‘Dad did everything himself!’ He had made a sideboard, beds and kitchen cabinets with his own hands. He also laid linoleum. She, meanwhile, brought home fabrics for curtains and soft furnishings to decorate the interior as soon as she was old enough to work in a shop.

At the same time as publicists ascribed the key role in making and maintaining the home to women, they also regularly emphasised that this was only part of their identity. If, in the past, a good housekeeper was one who devoted all her time and energy to domestic affairs, the Soviet woman was not confined to her domestic role, but was also active in production and social life, which were vital to her self-realisation. The conclusion the experts drew from this was not, or rarely, that the gendered division of labour in the home should be restructured but, rather, that the housewife’s domestic responsibilities now included the introduction of an industrial model of efficiency or scientific management into domestic space and domestic routines. She must learn to rationalise housework – to see to it, for example, that the kitchen was arranged rationally – so that it did not absorb all her energy and time. The sheer volume of press articles on taste, advice manuals offering ‘help for the housewarmer’, and television programmes about how to make home in the new standard apartment, as well as exhibitions of new furniture designs, together focused attention on interior decorating and home improvements and rendered these a normal and even normative concern and leisure pursuit for the modern Soviet person. Even zealous Marxists who were committed to reviving the spirit of the Revolution began to endorse cosiness as a legitimate aspiration along with the principle of one-family flats. For example, philosopher of material culture Karl Kantor – one of those active in reviving the suppressed legacy of the Constructivists, including the industrial modernist aesthetic they proposed as part of a reconfiguration of the relationship between people
and things under socialism – distanced himself from the extreme asceticism of the 1920s. At that time, wrote Kantor:

\[ \ldots \] the struggle for the new way of life against the old bourgeois-philistine domesticity sometimes took on the form of a struggle against material comforts in everyday life, against the striving to have a separate apartment and make it comfortable. Attention to the external side of life was disparaged as little short of a betrayal of the Revolution.

However, Kantor corrected, ‘the liberation from enslavement to things which the Revolution brought with it, could not mean liberation from things themselves; the striving to collective forms of life does not presuppose a rejection of individual forms of dwelling’.66 ‘The individual should not be lost sight of behind society, nor the family for the collective’. One-family flats were not, per se, counter-revolutionary, and concern with furnishing them was not to be confused with bourgeois fetishism or the consumerism identified with the capitalist West, he concluded. ‘No-one today would dream of accusing a person of betraying revolutionary ideals by taking an interest in how to furnish an apartment in a new building comfortably and beautifully’.67

**Accommodating industrial, standardised construction**

The main task facing Soviet citizens moving into the new flats, public discourse acknowledged, was to overcome standardisation: how to create *uiut* in a mass-produced, concrete, prefabricated box. It was assumed that the new occupants would need and want to customise and interiorise their look-alike, industrially mass-produced living space to fit it to themselves. The official media encouraged the idea that the raw interiors of the prefabricated concrete blocks had somehow to be processed and worked over, to make them into cosy homes. While standardisation was acknowledged as a necessary condition of industrial production, it was represented more as a problem that needed to be mitigated, rather than as a virtue on account of its homogenising potential (with the exception that the elision of differences in living conditions between city and country was represented as a major benefit of extending such housing construction to rural areas). Responses to a 1968 survey of residents who had moved into new Moscow apartments in 1966 indicated that they saw standardisation as antithetical to *uiut*. Twenty-one out of eighty-five respondents named this as a defining characteristic of the interior, and 20 per cent said they did not want their apartment to look like their neighbours’.68 Many thought lack of choice of consumer goods exacerbated the problem of standardisation of interiors. One wrote: ‘Standard, lack of *uiut*: if one were to judge from the contemporary home it might seem that everyone has identical characters’. Conversely, *uiut* must presumably require a degree of individualisation.69 It was *uiut* that made the difference between mere living space and a lived-in place, home.70

The problems and paradoxes of making ‘private life’ in both public and commodified housing – as a common problem of industrial modernity identified by Heidegger, for example, in his 1954 essay – have received much attention from anthropologists, design historians and others in different national contexts since at least the 1980s. They emphasise that residents do not passively submit to the given structures and the norms they materialise. As Marianne Gullestad, Daniel Miller and Nicky Gregson demonstrate, even if most people no longer reside in homesteads built with their own hands
but in commodified or state-allocated housing, ‘most do engage in sets of activities that are about seeking to constitute these dwelling structures as appropriate sites of habitation for them’; that is, they accommodate those spaces to their own lives, a process that includes both appropriation and compromise. Studies of social housing in Britain, including Daniel Miller’s important analysis of how residents of council housing overcame alienation, and Judy Attfield’s work on how residents of rented public housing in Harlow New Town made themselves ‘at home’ in its modernist, open-plan structures, focus on the material practices of appropriation of space. McCracken, in his 1989 study of North American owner-occupied homes, similarly found that individuals sought to mediate their relationship with the larger world, ‘refusing some of its influences, and transforming still others’ by creating ‘homeyness’. At issue is the possibility of exercising agency, control over boundaries and what Wolfgang Braunfels calls ‘the freedom to participate in the design of one’s own urban living environment’.

The possibility of such agency and mutuality has often been denied by Western commentators in regard to the Soviet context. Writing of Soviet mass housing, historian Blair Ruble cites Braunfels with the gloss: ‘The Western alienation from residence . . . was magnified in the Soviet Union, where all planning is done for strangers’. Yet Soviet residents were expected to make a large input into transforming the concrete shell of their apartment into a liveable space. Experts writing in the popular and specialist design press in the Khrushchev era emphasised the labour of making the standard apartment into home, that is, the agency and responsibilities of the homemaker. People did not passively move in, or ‘consume’ the apartment as a ready-made, fully finished commodity, either in representations or in practice. If only because of shortcomings in the construction and finishing (rather than as a matter of state policy and design), this required personal investment of effort, and resourcefulness and skill on the part of the homemaker: people actively made the standard space into home through their purchases, taste decisions, and by making or adapting things. Many manufactured goods also presupposed the need for work on them by the user. Advice literature assumed the necessary input of the tenant and included very practical directions on how to adapt or fit cupboards, equipment and labour-saving devices. Some authors even acknowledged that choosing and arranging things for the new home was a semiotic process: an exercise in self-expression and differentiation. That one could and even should inscribe one’s individuality upon the plan and walls of the new apartment and make the givens of the standard architecture personally meaningful and communicative of self-image and social position was an unexamined premise of much advice literature.

Nevertheless, the degree of individualism envisaged was not only narrowly circumscribed by the physical structure of the building and by shortcomings of centrally planned production and distribution (shortages and lack of choice of consumer goods); it was also subject to widely promulgated norms and regimes of taste. Residents were not supposed to exercise their agency just anyhow, but in ways that accorded with the ideal identity of the Soviet Person and with modernist norms of good taste, rationality and hygiene – as these were defined by intelligentsia experts. Communism presupposed voluntary self-regulation, the internalisation of and submission to social norms, and accommodation of personal desires to the best interests of the collective. And this consciousness extended beyond ‘communist morality’ to matters of aesthetics.
Rationalisation and modernisation of *uiut*

*Uiut* remained the central term in discussions of domesticity in the context of Khrushchev-era remodernisation. There was much ambivalence, however, about the will to cosiness, and this was often expressed in misogynistic terms. Anxieties included, as Christine Varga-Harris summarises, ‘trepidation over the rise of bourgeois desires, tastes and mores (gendered female); the emasculation of men within the household (metonymic of the emasculation of the working class as a whole, gendered male); and the disruption of social relations’. Even as the search for *uiut* was legitimated and encouraged, the dream of a private realm such as Gray presented, seemingly insulated from the public sphere and from the forces of modernisation and sovietisation, was denigrated as ‘philistine’ and regressive by authorities on the interior. Thus Boris Brodskii, writing in the new design journal *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR* (*Decorative Art of the USSR*), condemned the idea of home ‘as an island where one could build one’s personal [lichnuiu] life “as I like”’. Repudiating this conception of privacy as a throwback to ‘petit-bourgeois’ values of the past, he, like other taste reformers, firmly identified it with a particular treatment of domestic space and residue of clutter: ornate furniture, embroidered tablecloths and antimacassars, and silk lampshades. These trappings of ‘private life’ not only failed to cement relations between people, Brodskii argued, but were fetishes that alienated them. ‘The struggle with philistinism is the struggle for man’s liberation from the bondage to things, which . . . appear to him more significant (and thence more beautiful) than they in fact are.’ A direct, seemingly causal link was assumed between things of a particular quantity, kind and style and a home-centred mentality, segregated from the public sphere. Such possessions chained people – especially women – to the home, and inhibited their engagement with public life. The assumption that padded and cluttered interiors stultified the individual was rationalised by reference to hygiene and women’s enslavement to the unproductive labour of dusting, which (along with the ‘kitchen slavery’ Lenin had denounced as the source of women’s stereotypical lack of political consciousness) prevented them from realising themselves as unalienated, all-round individuals.

Brodskii and other publicists sought to distinguish the proper, socialist attitude towards the new apartments from the bourgeois ‘home-is-my-castle’ mentality in aesthetic terms. To prevent the new one-family apartments from becoming nests of particularist and regressive mentalities, their solution was to promote a modernist style known as the ‘contemporary style’. The contemporary interior must be fitted to assist the process of opening up everyday life into the public sphere, to make the boundary between public and private transparent and shift the centre of gravity of everyday life out of the room or flat and into the public sphere. Thus, while *uiut* remained vital to homemaking in the ‘new type of small-scale apartment for one family’, and continued to be identified with ‘the idea of an attentive female hand’, the challenge was to produce it in ways that did not reproduce petit-bourgeois relations. *Uiut* must be redefined in austere, modern, hygienic terms explicitly opposed to those of the bourgeois and Stalinist past and appropriate to the present period of scientific technological revolution and imminent transition to communism.

What this modernised socialist *uiut* repudiated was clear already to the reader of the highbrow literary journal *Novyi mir*, cited above: it was not ‘rubber plants with dusty leaves, nor a herd of marble elephants put out to pasture on one’s dressing
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If in the past, uuit was identified with confinement and encumbrment, entailing the use of all means ‘to reduce living space, associated with cushions and drapes, dust and warmth’, the (ideal) contemporary Soviet person, by contrast, strove for her home to be hygienic and spacious, to have more light and fresh air, to be furnished simply and conveniently with simple and beautiful objects of everyday life.83 Modern beauty and comfort under socialism were the product of reason, dictated by function, convenience, hygiene, openness, stylistic homogeneity and good taste. Prime targets for the modernist broom were the accumulation of dust, clutter, useless ornaments and mementoes, that is, precisely those things which in Gray’s and other accounts of the (traditional) Russian home were most closely identified with its female occupant and the status of the interior as an expression of femininity, identity and memory.

Among the most unforgivable taste gaffes were ersatz rugs hung on walls, on which swans, kittens, tigers, women’s heads or portraits of important people were painted in oils.84 These painted rugs, sold at stations and provincial markets, were a form of popular culture that had emerged in spite of the state, filling a vacuum left by the command economy. Producing them was a way in which collective farm peasants supplemented their income (Alexander Solzhenitsyn referred to them in his One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, 1962).85 Not only did such artisanal production occupy a shady area outside the state’s economic planning and regulation, but it also undermined the intelligentsia’s cultural hegemony. That it eluded quality control and aesthetic regulation by the professional artistic organisations was a matter of concern to taste experts in the late 1950s, as well as to the Komsomol (Party Youth League).86 Moreover, to use rugs as wall hangings was a traditional practice of Russia’s hinterland (while all negative practices tended to be branded indiscriminately as ‘petit-bourgeois’ their origins were often also rural and regional or ethnic), and attacks on this practice were part of a condescending mission civilisatrice by modernising urban professionals to reform and indeed Westernise popular practice. An architect instructed Rabotnitsa’s women readers in 1959: ‘rugs hung on walls – that’s bad! They are spread on the floor to muffle footsteps and keep feet warmer, or are hung behind a divan without a back so that one does not lean against the cold wall and also above the bed so as not to scratch the wall. Don’t get carried away with rugs because they collect dust’.87

Other traditional uses of textiles were also inappropriate. A manual for teenage girls, Podruga (Girlfriend) showed ‘before’ and ‘after’ images of the same interior done in retrograde and good contemporary taste, where the key difference was the disappearance, along with little ornamental marble elephants, of the scalloped and embroidered cloths that covered every surface in the ‘before’ image (Figure 4). ‘Many imagine that the more napkins, lampstands and sideboards, the cosier [the interior]’, lamented a Novosibirsk taste manual, also for young people—but they were wrong! Along with beds covered in satin bedspreads and mountains of white, lace-covered cushions, intended proudly to proclaim the family’s prosperity, they merely betrayed the householders’ lack of discernment and failure to understand what beautifies and what spoils the appearance of the home (Figure 5).88 Since all spaces and furniture in the modern Soviet flat had to serve multiple functions and the bedroom became the living room during the day, the bed had to double as a settee, not be set apart as a site of display of wealth.89 Dust-catching and unhygienic, embroidered cloths were a
throwback to petit-bourgeois models of domesticity and home-bound femininity. They were associated with the trousseau and the private property functions of the bourgeois and feudal family, with ostentatious display, with irrational, time-wasting practices of housekeeping and with an anachronistic conception of women’s role, tied exclusively to the home. Embroidery testified to the confinement and oppression of women in the past, who were treated as chattels to be exchanged accompanied by a trousseau, rather
than as free, equal and entitled to develop their individuality, as they were supposed to be under socialism.\textsuperscript{90}

Textiles had been used traditionally in Russian culture, including in the communal apartment from which many occupants of new flats had moved, to screen and conceal: nets hid intimate life from neighbours, valances around bedsteads concealed the things stored beneath them and curtains were widely used to hide messy shelves.\textsuperscript{91} Victor Buchli insightfully analyses the ways in which, in the Stalin period, embroidered cloths were deployed to ‘individualise’ space and for the purpose of ‘interiorisation’ or ‘privatisation’ and ‘withdrawal’.\textsuperscript{92} The approved modernist aesthetics of transparency was conceived, by contrast, as opening up the ‘private’ interior onto the public space beyond, and maximising space and light. ‘Don’t clutter up the apartment with things. Let there be more space and light. Every item of furnishing you acquire must be
essential for you . . . Choosing furniture don’t buy cumbersome things [ . . . they] make it crowded and look very old-fashioned. The most important thing is stylistic unity. If you have only just started to equip your apartment then get contemporary, light, elegant and, at the same time, very simple furniture’ (Figure 6).

Writing in Rabotnitsa, the magazine for women workers, architect Irina Voeikova, a frequent commentator in the popular press on how to furnish homes, instructed new homemakers to purchase
furniture that left as much free space as possible. Thus, ‘huge bedsteads on high legs disappear from our lives along with patterned valances,’ for ‘everyone knows that one doesn’t hang valances nowadays’. They were to be replaced by ‘convenient divans and chairs that easily transform into beds without taking up a lot of space’ ⁹⁴ Others exhorted: ‘Contemporary furniture must be convenient to use, compact, light and without carving or mouldings (scrolls, cornices), which are hard to wash and clean’ (Figure 7). ‘Contemporary lamps must be simple, light, hygienic, modest and elegant’. ⁹⁵ Functional zoning was recommended, applying the modernist principle of spatial separation of functions in conditions where a single room had to serve multiple purposes. But this could be achieved without blocking off areas and daylight with solid partitions, by using differentiated colour schemes or light, open shelving units. Voeikova recommended a light frame with vertical cords above a narrow trough for
plants. Trained to climb up the cords, the vegetation would form a light trellis, which corresponded with the fashionable aesthetics of transparency, lightness and irregular vertical lines.

**Home as a site for display of cultural level and aesthetic discernment**

One of the sins associated with embroidered cloths and lace pillows was that they served purely for display and were non-functional or even inhibited the proper use of an object or space. Was there any place at all for displays, mementoes, ornaments and other decorative elements in the socialist modern interior? In his 1954 call for industrialised construction, Khrushchev had condemned non-functional decoration in architecture as an expensive waste of resources, a luxury associated with Stalinist ‘excess’, which was unwarranted in modern socialist society. Signalling Soviet architecture’s reorientation towards international modernism, with its minimalist aphorisms such as ‘less is more’ (widely attributed to modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe) and its identification of ornament with criminality, degeneracy and regression to a primitive evolutionary stage (Adolf Loos), the First Secretary’s intervention (reinforced by subsequent decrees against ‘excess’), rendered all forms of decorative art aesthetically and morally suspect. Specialists extended the prohibition on ‘superfluous’ decorative elements to the domestic interior; these must be reduced to the minimum or eliminated, along with anything else that served purely the purpose of display or concealment. ‘Some think that decorations create *uiut*. That’s not quite right... To create genuine *uiut* in the apartment the main thing is convenience for people’.

As in earlier modernist discourse in the West (and in the rants of nineteenth-century male taste reformers, for example in Great Britain), the decorative was identified, negatively, with the feminine, along with anything that was a matter of surface rather than substance. Women were represented as the chief perpetrators of clutter, hoarders of superfluous things and accumulators of knick-knacks. But they were also their chief victims, taste experts cautioned, for useless decorative paraphernalia were among the chains that bound women into domestic slavery, since it fell to them to dust and polish them. As women saw the light of communist consciousness they were expected to recognise the tyranny of trash as an aspect of their oppression in the past, clinging to which was false consciousness. Ridding their lives of this dust-collecting ballast was in their own best interest. Combined with simplifications of the forms of furniture – stripping off the ornate mouldings from older items of furniture, for example – it would not only make their apartment look more contemporary, but would reduce the time they spent on cleaning, freeing them up for social and cultural activities. As the 1955 *Novyi mir* reader had already grasped, ornaments popular in the recent past, such as miniature elephants, were out, as was the dysfunctional display of family status and wealth that characterised the bourgeois home.

Memory objects were particularly problematic, along with women’s traditional role as custodians of memory. Public discourse represented moving into the new flat as a clean break with the past, its material and ideological residue, while taste experts’ insistence on the unified contemporary style for all elements of the interior delegitimised alternative principles of unity based on biography, affect and personal ties. After repeated relocations and losses, in addition to the fear-induced excision of evidence associated with purged friends or family members, the material repositories
of memory had often been reduced to the portable and concealable form of a small treasure box. But if any remaining material links with family history and repositories of personal memories had survived after decades of upheavals, destruction and loss, they were now to be cast away on the tide of progress, left behind in the move to the radiant future. This was often a physical necessity in practice: old pieces of furniture were too big to bring into the small flats. Their abandonment was also an imperative of modernity, however, according to advice that exhorted those moving to new apartments to do so unencumbered by the material trace of the past.100

There were mixed messages, however, concerning decorative touches in the apartment. These related to the centrality of aesthetics in the vision of the communist future. How to make the industrially prefabricated interior into a work of beauty and self-actualisation? The importance of aesthetic education in the formation of the fully rounded future citizen of communism was emphasised by philosophers and ideologues in the Khrushchev era, informed by a return to Marx (especially his earlier writings), and was written into the new Party Programme (‘the Communist Manifesto of the present era’) ratified in 1961. All Soviet people should have the opportunity to develop their aesthetic sensibilities and taste through access to art and aesthetic education. Moreover, they should themselves become producers of aesthetic value.101

The domestic interior was potentially a key site for daily encounter with art and for cultural activity. The household’s cultural level (rather than its wealth, as in the past) was manifest, for example, through the presence of a piano or books.102 Unique paintings might not be accessible for all, or even desirable in the modernist interior, according to some aesthetic specialists, because of their dust-collecting frames and spatial illusionism, which disrupted the flat plane of the wall. Judiciously chosen art prints were advocated, however, especially those in which decorative, formal qualities took precedence over naturalistic representation.103 Voeikova recommended calm tints for walls on the grounds that these were easy on the eye, allowed one to use decorative fabrics for curtains and soft furnishing, and made a good background for prints, paintings, photographs and decorative elements. ‘In such a room a brightly patterned rug or colourful decorative cushions on a divan will not look excessive, nor a vase in a saturated colour or picture on the wall’.104 The choice, restrained deployment of such objects in the interior created contemporary beauty and revealed aesthetic discernment, and was quite distinct from mindless, eclectic, tasteless accumulation or vulgar display of luxury.

Moreover, creating the beautiful, tasteful interior was in itself a form of aesthetic production and not only of consumption.105 For, as two television viewers (a married couple, both engineers) put it, writing in to the programme on homemaking mentioned above: ‘everyone must become an artist in their home!’106 A specialist in the new discipline of Technical Aesthetics indicated that, notwithstanding the value of rationalisation and standardisation, there was a place for purely expressive, aesthetic gestures. While advocating thoroughgoing standardisation of utilitarian routines and domestic fittings, because this would combat the regressive influence of the nuclear household and of any fetishistic tendencies that the increased availability of consumer goods might foster, she forestalled possible objections that fitted furniture would prevent the manifestation of individuality. For, the specialist asserted, the occupant’s individuality would find full expression in the aesthetics of interior decoration.107
Handicraft

It will be clear by now that this did not mean open season: only certain kinds of decorative objects, discerningly deployed in moderation, were acceptable. In regard to curtains or wallpaper, for example, bold, abstracted patterns were deemed ‘contemporary’, but naturalistic designs that dissembled the flatness of the fabric or wall by creating a spatial illusion were in bad taste. Not only was discrimination to be exercised according to the specific formal treatment; there were also hierarchies of virtue pertaining to the materials and mode of production, where artefacts were made, and by whom. The painted rugs discussed above were anathema not only for the romantic and nostalgic images depicted on them and because they were ‘dishonest’ – a cheap ersatz for woven rugs – but also because they were a form of unregulated artisanal production for provincial bazaars, neither ‘authentic’ folk craft nor industrial manufactures.

Certain kinds of handmade objects, in limited numbers, were, however, acceptable within the modern, industrially produced interior, notably traditional ‘genuine’ folk craft and unique works of decorative art. Even in journals such as Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR, which staunchly promoted the stripped-down modernist ‘contemporary style’, authors widely acknowledged that an increasingly standardised, industrially mass-produced environment engendered an aesthetic need for the faktura (texture, surface qualities that bear the trace of the process of making) of hand-made things. They also discussed approvingly the discerning use of folk ornaments, craft and hand-made objets d’art in the mass-produced modern interior. Illustrations of ideal modern interiors regularly included carefully selected items of handcraft – a well-placed, hand-thrown vase or a rough, hand-woven tapestry – amidst the stripped-down lines of the new furniture.108 The Estonian home decorating magazine Kunst ja kodu (Art and the Home, also published in Russian as Iskusstvo i domashnii byt) celebrated handcraft as part of the ideal modern interior (as it was in contemporary Scandinavian modernism, an important model for Estonian design in this period).109 Taste experts advocated the restrained, discerning use in the contemporary apartment of traditional folk craft identified with the specific traditions of various ethnic groups, regions and national republics of the Soviet Union. ‘The inexhaustible imagination and varied forms and colours of folk craft provide unlimited choice of works of decorative-applied art to beautify any room’. Voeikova recommended ceramics such as statuettes or dishes hung on the wall, vases, painted figures from Viatka, Georgian black-fired pottery, carved wooden figurines from Transcarpathia or Karelia, along with folk rugs, weavings, Vologda lace, and other traditional textile arts from various national republics.110 A limited number of well-chosen and subtly deployed items of folk craft were desirable in the industrial, standard urban apartment, then, for the splash of colour or contrasting texture they added.

But what of amateur handicraft produced by women in the home? ‘What is the amateur of handicraft to do?’ Voeikova put this question: ‘Do embroidery and lace, executed by the mistress of the house (khoziaika) herself have a place in the new décor?’ Could the definition of everyday aesthetic production embrace even embroidery, needlepoint and crochet? As we have seen, the legitimacy of deploying in the interior cloths and embroidered napkins, which had played a significant role among the repudiated forms of homemaking, had been under question in recent years. Needlework, along with other uses of textiles, was suspected of harbouring regressive relations,
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as well as dust. Yet Voeikova answered her own rhetorical question: ‘not only do
they go [in the interior], but these artefacts beautify the room’. Her affirmation of
amateur needlework’s legitimacy in the modern interior should not automatically be
explained by her gender. In part, this was a matter of finer distinctions to do with
authenticity, allowing original or traditional designs appropriate to the medium and
handmade (but not machine) lace. Needlepoint reproductions of popular, sentimental,
naturalistic paintings based on crude patterns, sold in bazaars and in the hobby shop
Rukodelie (handicraft), were still considered vulgar perversions. It may also have
been a compromise with the assumed tastes of Voeikova’s readership, this being an
article published in the magazine for women workers (a highbrow modernist aesthetic
that excluded embroidery and crochet was still consistently pursued in the more spe-
cialist design magazine Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR). Written in 1964, the article’s
willingness to admit amateur embroidery may also be an early indication of a growing
critique, even among design professionals, of socialist modernism’s asceticism
and deracination. By the end of the 1960s, the tide had turned decisively. Intelligentsia
discourse increasingly acknowledged the material and psychological losses entailed
by industrial progress, by purging material links with past, and by the insistence on
stylistic unity. It called instead for an ‘ecology of culture’ and sought to reconnect with
suppressed personal and collective memories, as well as to embrace the heterogeneity
of ‘national’ styles. In this changing climate of ideas, textiles, thread and tapestry
began to be used as positive metaphors to reimagine the relationship between present
identities and the past, revaluing the kind of connection between generations of women
which needlework artefacts, patterns and skills materialised (Figure 8).

Practice

Whatever misgivings the arbiters of taste held in the Khrushchev era, needlework and
handicraft of various sorts remained popular leisure practices in Soviet urban homes
throughout the 1950s to the 1980s. Not only were large quantities of needlework
produced and deployed in the interior, but they were also carefully preserved through
the years, even though storage space was at a premium in these small apartments. Textiles, in various forms, deeply enmeshed in traditional notions of comfort, homecraft
and female worth, remained essential material for creating home, a means to appropriate
and individualise space and personalise standard goods. Rugs provided sound and heat
insulation, while curtains were used to keep out draughts or to screen off areas of the
shared main room (a niche where a child slept, for example) and demarcate functions.
They also remained essential for creating privacy in the sense of concealment from
external, uninvited eyes; although the separate apartments gave much greater privacy
in this sense, a feature of their design was relatively large windows. In interviews and
even in published accounts of moving in, the first thing a housewife has in mind when
she says to her daughter ‘we should start making it cosy’ is to hang curtains or nets
in order to enclose the interior. The woman, cited above, who was proud of her
father’s cabinet-making recalled that making the apartment cosy had entailed the use
of napkins, for example, to cover the television, and spreading a tablecloth when guests
came.

In this respect, the voluminous advice literature appears to have had little direct
effect on many people’s material practices of uixut, which were still determined by their
habitus and remained closer to McCracken’s ‘homeyness’ as the expression of a search for continuity, stability and a sense of rootedness, than to the modernist contemporary style. When prototypes of furniture for mass production were presented to the population at an exhibition of model interiors in 1961, many who wrote in the visitors’ comments books found the new style ‘primitive’, ugly, poorly finished and anonymous, lacking in ‘national’ characteristics. Many also found it priced well beyond their means, and moreover, it was still unavailable in the shops. One respondent in the 1968 survey of new Moscow homes may have spoken for many when she denied that the minimal, ‘contemporary’, aesthetic that was so widely propagated could be either cosy or convenient to live in. On the contrary, for all that the modernisers condemned the way the old ‘petit-bourgeois’ (or Stalinist) interior subordinated function to non-functional display, the same criticism could, she pointed out, be levelled against the contemporary style they advocated. Its modernist minimalism and cool perfection rendered the interior like one in an exhibition or an illustration in a design magazine. _Uiut_, for this resident, depended on signs of being lived in. Others identified it with the warmth of human relations or the presence of a nice cat.

We can recognise this response to the socialist modernist ‘contemporary style’ as a version of the stock complaint about the unliveable-ness of the modernist interior familiar in the West. However, it would be wrong to represent this as a thoroughgoing

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**Figure 8:** ‘All of this is my mother’s [work]. She did the housekeeping and crocheted.’ Mother’s needlework with a tapestry received as a gift c.1965 (photo: Ekaterina Gerasimova, 2004 for project Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat).
or universal rejection of the new modernist style – and indeed of socialist modernity – regardless of social class, ethnicity or personal dispositions. Alongside the negative responses to the model interiors exhibited in 1961, there were many who welcomed the new light and simple furniture, and who would simply be glad to have an opportunity to buy any furniture whatever. The look of many of the apartments in the 1968 survey, according to its author Elena Torshilova, conformed to the official aesthetic of the contemporary style. And, asked ‘How is uiut achieved?’ 81 per cent of the informants rehearsed its widely promoted principles: ‘through cleanliness’ and ‘a small number of things’, ‘convenience’, ‘unity of style’ and ‘harmony of the whole ensemble of the interior’. That small survey made no claims to be representative, however. The informants, residents of an apartment block belonging to a Moscow research institute, included an unrepresentatively large number of people with higher education and doctorates. It is probable that take-up was highest among this, the same social stratum as the specialists who promoted the cosmopolitan modernist contemporary style, who were also more able to afford the new furniture. A much larger sample than Torshilova’s or than the interview and visual data I have been able to gather from some seventy households would be necessary to draw meaningful generalisations concerning class, ethnic and urban–rural (first or second generation urban dwellers, etc.) distinctions. The available evidence would suggest, however, that the effort to propagate the contemporary style met with neither universal acceptance nor with total rejection, but had a varied and mixed response. While take-up was limited by factors from taste and habitus to price and shortage, and adoption of the approved style in popular practices of homemaking and ideals of beauty and uiut was patchy and selective, many interiors were hybrids of new and old: not an outright rejection of the modern, but its accommodation and absorption/integration into an established conception of uiut.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored attempts in authoritative discourse to transcend the antithesis of home comfort and communism, cosiness and socialist modernity, and to redefine cosiness in ways that could be reconciled with the Enlightenment values of progress, science and reason through a modernist aesthetics. To a large extent this discourse was addressed to women, aiming to reform their notions of taste and delegitimate traditional practices of homemaking. The hegemony of the state, as materialised in the invasive effects of modern housing, is often seen as an assault on women’s domain and dominance within the domestic sphere. Yet, while architects and planners set the parameters of the new housing, and specialists sought to shape the ways in which women made home in the new flats, they were dependent on individual householders to materialise the norms of the contemporary aesthetic. Home and women’s practices in it tested the jurisdiction of the state. The continued production of decorated cloths and the use of textiles by women and girls in many homes are just two of the ways in which advice on good taste and rational living was ignored in everyday practice.

How are we to interpret this? Is this a case of what anthropologists in other contexts have described as resistance by female occupants who persist in traditional practices and uses of space even when these have been designated ‘irrational’, or otherwise denigrated or countered by ‘creative and sometimes subversive alternatives’?
For Henri Lefebvre, home is inherently an oppositional, ‘private’ space that ‘asserts itself . . . always in a conflictual way, against the public one’. Moreover, as we saw, the ‘private’ space of home in the Soviet scheme of things was regarded by outside observers as communism’s ‘other’, a flaw in the Soviet system’s supposedly ‘totalitarian’ grasp or consummate grid of surveillance, where the state project of socialist modernity was contradicted. We should not resort to this model uncritically, however, it being one of the binaries that sustained and legitimated the Cold War and blinkered Western understanding of Soviet experience. The Soviet discourse we have analysed was aimed precisely at overcoming this antithesis and accommodating home comfort within socialist modernity. Did that spell the beginning of the end of communism as cold-war observers predicted? Was the preoccupation with nest-making a symptom of degeneration of the Soviet project, marking a retreat from building communism, into private values, personal consumption and home-is-my-castle mindsets? Or was it, rather, a way to sustain the Soviet regime and lend new legitimacy to the project of building communism?

So large a question cannot be resolved here. To construe the practices of homemaking as resistance to the hegemony of the state or the cultural elitism of intelligentsia specialists, however, invests them with too much conscious, programmatic intention. They are more accurately described by the model of ad hoc coping tactics and making do, as people’s everyday ways of negotiating and coming to terms with the material constraints and possibilities of their lives, as suggested by Michel de Certeau. As Attfield found in British social housing in the same period of the mid-twentieth century, residents made themselves ‘at home’ in a variety of ways that mitigated the homogeneous unity of modern design: ‘Yet it cannot be said that tenants rejected modernity as such, even when they clung to family heirlooms and traditional furnishing conventions. On the contrary, it was the adaptability with which tenants took over their domestic space, stubbornly arranging it in contravention to the designers’ intentions, that shows how they appropriated modernity to their own designs’. Soviet homemakers got what they could afford or get hold of and incorporated it as best they could into their conception of beauty and utopia. In the course of the 1960s, as prosperity and consumer goods production grew, many people gradually acquired the new modular furniture to replace the older bulky items that wouldn’t fit or looked out of place in the new flats – and learned to live with and even to love it. Incorporating the new into eclectic, hybrid combinations along with older pieces in more ornate styles, with hand-made things and with memory objects, they assimilated it into their domestic space and routines, accommodating modernity and socialism in ways that allowed them and their families to live comfortably within these givens. Thus home was where the contradiction between the forward thrust of modernity and chiliasm of communism, on one hand, and dwelling, on the other, was accommodated: a heterotopia rather than a counter-utopia.

Notes

1. This chapter is drawn from a larger project, Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat, generously supported by the Leverhulme Trust.


22. These negotiations are examined more fully in the wider project from which this chapter is drawn.


27. Paucity of consumer goods, overcrowding and the loss of homes and possessions in the course of serial dislocations which structure life stories of this period as narrated in interviews conducted under my project ‘Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat’. Over seventy interviews were conducted between 2004 and 2007 in St Petersburg, Kazan, Samara, Kaluga, Kovdor, Apatity and Tartu, with people who moved into new apartments in the early 1960s.


37. See also Steven Harris, “‘I Know all the Secrets of my Neighbors”: The Quest for Privacy in the Era of the Separate Apartment’, in Siegelbaum (ed.), Borders of Socialism, pp. 171–90, here p. 171.
38. Boym, Common Places, p. 125. The role of such public agencies in the ownership of housing increased in the 1950s, giving the ‘state’ a virtual monopoly over urban housing construction, although cooperatives represented an alternative. Sosnovy, ‘The Soviet Housing Situation Today’, p. 9.
41. Nikita S. Khrushchev, O shirokom vnedrenii industrial’nykh metodov, uluchshenii kachestva i snizhenii stoimosti stroitel’stva (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1955); Blair Ruble, ‘From Khrushcheby to Korobki’, in Brumfield and Ruble, Russian Housing, pp. 232–70.
42. A decree of 23 April 1959 extended the moratorium on superfluous embellishment to public interiors: ‘Ob ustranenii izlishestv v otdelke, oborudovanii i vo vnutrennem ubranstve obshchestvennykh zdanii’, Sobranie postanovlenii pravitel’stva SSSR (Moscow: Gosurizdat, 1959), pp. 166–71; see also Harris, ‘Moving to the Separate Apartment’, ch. 8, pp. 467–546.
45. Concierge, Union of Architects, St Petersburg, April 2005.


51. ‘Schastlivoe novosel’e’, Trud, 7 November 1959.


54. See e.g., the 1958 novel by Daniil Granin, Posle svad’by (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1959; Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964); Ol’ga Baiar and Rrima Blashkevich, Kvartira i ee ubranstvo (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 1962); regular features in magazines such as Ogonek (e.g. 11 (8 March 1959) back cover), Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR, Kunst ja kodu, Sem’ia i shkola. Among exhibitions of model interiors, the most significant was ‘Iskusstvo – v byt’ (Art into Life), Moscow, 1961.


57. Rybitskii, ‘Dlia doma, dlia sem’i. V pomoshch’ novoselam’.

58. Moscow Central Archive of Social and Political Movements (TsAOPIM), f. 4, op. 139, d. 35, ll. 12–16.

59. TsAOPIM, f. 4, op. 139, d. 35, ll. 8–12.

60. TsAOPIM, f. 4, op. 139, d. 35. On efforts to engage men with domesticity, see M. Edel’, ‘Divan’, Krokodil 12, 30 April 1958, p. 12.


62. Interviews for ‘Everyday Aesthetics’.


64. Interview with L. G., St Petersburg 2004, ‘Everyday Aesthetics’.


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82. ‘Tribuna chitatelia’, p. 247.


84. Sharov and Poliachev, *Vkus nado vospityvat’*, p. 73.


88. Sharov and Poliachev, *Vkus nado vospityvat’*, p. 73.


91. Interview with L. G., St Petersburg, female.


98. One speaker in discussion considered entresol storage ‘a superfluous seedbed of rubbish, which housewives always have and which must simply be liquidated’. TsGALI SPb, f. 341, op. 1, d. 386, l. 16.


102. Books were an essential attribute of the cultured home, for the absence of which no amount of luxury could compensate. GARF f. 6903, op. 26, d. 449, item no. 459, script of programme for Moscow Television: ‘Dlia doma, dlia sem’i: vasha lichnaia biblioteka’, 2 February 1963. However, a piano in a home where no-one played was a useless ornament. Sharov and Poliaovsk, *Vkus nado vospityvat’*, pp. 70–72.


111. See Buchli, *Archaeology*, p. 128.


115. Everyday Aesthetics interviews, 2004–07, St Petersburg, Tartu, Samara, Kaluga, Kazan.

116. Interview with I. A., St Petersburg, b.1927, engineer, female; Edel’, *Divan*, p. 12.


119. RGALI, f. 2329, op. 4, ed. khr. 1391; TsAGM f. 21, op 1, d. 125, d. 126, d. 127 (visitors’ book for exhibition ‘Iskusstvo- v byt!’; 1961); Torshilova, ‘Byt’.


121. Ekaterina Gerasimova, interview for project ‘Intelligentsia and Philistinism in Russian History and Culture’, funded by Finnish Academy of Sciences, 2000–02, accessed with kind permission of Timo Vihavainen. See also Timo Vihavainen, *Vnutrennii vrag: bor’ba s meshchanstvom kak moral’naia missiia russkoi intelligentsii* (St Petersburg: Kolo, 2004).


