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America Through the Kitchen Window: Mid-Twentieth Century American Culture Through Kitchen Advertisements, Products and Design

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AMERICA THROUGH THE KITCHEN WINDOW:
MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH KITCHEN
ADVERTISEMENTs, PRODUCTS AND DESIGN

by

Kristen Eileen Schulrud

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in Art History

at
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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ABSTRACT

AMERICA THROUGH THE KITCHEN WINDOW: MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY
AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH KITCHEN ADVERTISEMENTS, PRODUCTS AND
DESIGN

by

Kristen Eileen Schulrud

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Professor Kenneth P. Bendiner

During the nineteen-fifties in America the kitchen space and its related
objects came to be emblematic of the concerns and ideals of American culture at the
time. A study of the advertisements and articles in the periodicals of the era reveals
a culture focused on leisure, technology, family life and personal plenty. Through a
combined analysis of the images and texts found in surviving vintage magazines of
the decade and more recent scholarship on the popular culture of the era it can be
seen that the American dream of a happier, easier, more free and more luxurious life
was made manifest within the kitchen space. Beyond gaining greater knowledge of
the period, a larger goal of this thesis is to encourage greater support and respect
for material culture as both a topic and a tool of study.
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Introduction

The following thesis is concerned with the ability of everyday objects and spaces to record moments in time. Both are informed by, and impact, the period that they come from. To illustrate this concept focus has been placed on mid-twentieth century America. During the nineteen-fifties, consumer goods came to the forefront of people’s lives and took on greater cultural significance than they had in previous decades. The years following the war were a boom period for most middle-class Americans. While they made up 35% of the population they earned 42% of the national income\(^1\). Their spending habits dominated the decade, with the amount that they spent increasing 60% from what it had been pre-war\(^2\). Spending was the way of the era and a large part of earned income was able to go to the purchasing of non-essential consumer goods\(^3\).

And there was a sudden wealth of consumer goods to be purchased. Materials and production facilities had been freed from their wartime occupations\(^4\). Technological advancements developed during the war in automation and assembly meant goods could finally be produced in greater number, do more advanced things and were more affordable than before. The goods bought became symbols of the American good life\(^5\). The items consumers purchased were emblematic of their owner’s participation in a life of affluence, freedom and ease.

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\(^3\) Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 147


While the production and consumption of goods increased across virtually all realms of consumables, the focus of the vast majority of the spending during the nineteen-fifties was on the home and items related to it. In the years following the war, the amount of income spent on items for the home rose 240%\(^6\). The home became an almost patriotic site of spending. The purchasing of items for it was seen as a commitment by the homeowner to the family unit and American values\(^7\). Buying items for the home enhanced the family’s quality of life, was seen as the exercising of personal choice and was an important way to help one fit into one’s community.

Within this general focus on the home, the kitchen became a special area of concern. The kitchen was a touchstone of America during the nineteen-fifties. A formerly closed off and utilitarian space, it was opened to the rest of the house at the beginning of the decade and its design and inhabitants (both human and mechanical) became imbued with meaning for the popular culture of the era\(^8\). Both the kitchen space itself and the objects within it can now be read as symbols of the decade.

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\(^6\) Comparatively, spending on food increased only 33% \((\text{Tyler May, 148.})\)
\(^7\) Ibid.
Method

Studying an actual space and items that have now been mostly lost or replaced presents some challenges. To overcome them, I have chosen to analyze the articles and advertisements related to kitchens that can be found in the popular magazines of the decade. I have acquired thirty vintage magazines from across the nineteen-fifties. As the kitchen area is my main concern I have focused my attention on magazines concerned with the home. Making up the bulk of my primary source material are issues of Better Homes and Gardens, American Home, House Beautiful, Look, Living and McCall’s. Issues of Life magazine were consulted as well, for although Life did not focus on the home, it did concern itself with the everyday life and experiences of America.

While magazines present a wide range of images and texts to use as primary sources they do have limitations for researchers. When looking at a magazine one has to continually take into account issues such as editorial bias, advertiser manipulation and intended audience. In trying to view the life and concerns of the average, everyday American through the pages of a magazine, it is important to not base any conclusions on single instances of an image or statement. What I have been very careful to do in my analysis is to hone in on the prevalent trends in items, information, opinions and advertising that appear across the different publications and throughout the decade.

While the thirty issues of mid-century American magazines that have been considered could not possibly capture the exact life experiences and opinions of every single American during the nineteen-fifties they do, just as magazines do
today, capture the zeitgeist of the time. They can act as a revelation of the concerns and ideals of the majority.

The magazines consulted were all widely circulated among the general public and represent a good picture of the kitchen ideals of the era. They have an advantage over other sources of kitchen imagery from the decade. While personal photographs still exist of nineteen-fifties homes their accurate dating can rarely be assured. Though homes that were built in the nineteen-fifties still stand, the kitchen spaces have often been updated with new appliances and other changes to the space. The advertisements and articles found in the magazines are all securely dated and allow the chronological changes that occurred in the kitchen space to be revealed. As fortune would have it an event occurred at the end of the decade that serves as historical support of the American cultural concerns and ideals I have found presented in the period’s home magazines. The American National Exhibition in Moscow that occurred during the summer of 1959 utilized presentations of the American home and particularly the American kitchen as a tool to acquaint Soviet visitors with the American way of life and extoll its virtues of personal freedom and material affluence.

Structurally, this thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter recounts how the kitchen space came to be opened up to the rest of the home as a result of the housing shortage following the end of WWII. Chapter two considers how the design of the kitchen and the appliances created for it met the desire of nineteen-fifties Americans to actively and conspicuously live the good life. Chapter three explores the relationship between modern art and the kitchen and how the
design of appliances and the decoration of the kitchen related to expressing a sense of freedom in living. Chapter four looks at the role of the American housewife and how the image of her changed in advertisements of the decade from a hardworking member of the household to an ornamental accessory of the home. Finally, chapter five concerns itself with the use of kitchens in the American National Exhibition in Moscow and how Vice-President Nixon utilized the kitchen as an example of the ideals of American society.
Chapter 1: The Kitchen Opens Up

“Our nation’s housing shortage poses an acute and bitter problem for returning servicemen, unable to find shelter for their families. There is no speedy solution. Authorities place the nation’s need at 10,000,000 new homes; yet few anticipate more than 750,000 will be built annually within the next several years. That means temporary shelter for many, in garages, converted office buildings, trailer houses, even barns.”

“What if you must live in a garage?” Better Homes and Gardens, March, 1946

Post WWII Housing Shortages:
During the nineteen-fifties the physical location of the kitchen within the home changed. What had traditionally been a shut off and predominantly utilitarian space was opened up to the rest of the home. As a result it became a showplace of the homeowner’s engagement with the modern good life. This change occurred due to new building practices and home design that sought to expedite the creation of homes to fill the extreme housing shortage that developed following WWII.

Returning servicemen and their new families were often unable to find housing. Many had to share quarters with friends and relations or seek homes in non-traditional structures, such as converted garages, grain bins and even trolley cars.

In April of 1947 Life magazine ran a feature on “Veterans at College”. The article focused on the veterans attending school at the University of Iowa, whose experiences mirrored that of those attending universities across the country.

Housing for veterans and their families was at such low availability that the

10 Carlisle and Talbot Nasardinov. 156.
university had taken to creating housing in both trailer camps and Quonset huts (see images 1 and 2). The conditions in the trailer camps were cramped, but for “about $25 a month they get a furnished trailer, electric light and the right to use the communal baths and washrooms. Most of them are on the waiting list for a barracks or a Quonset hut, where they will have the luxury of running water”\textsuperscript{14}.

To end the housing crisis the federal government responded by underwriting mortgages for veterans. This provided a measure of financial security that encouraged the large-scale building of new homes by a variety of private builders\textsuperscript{15}. Builders focused on creating swaths of new homes in planned communities on undeveloped land they were able to acquire fairly economically. Perhaps the most famous of these new suburban communities were the eponymous ones created by Levitt and Sons, Levittown\textsuperscript{16}. Levitt and Sons actually built three communities called Levittown from the late nineteen-forties to the early nineteen-sixties, the first on Long Island in New York, the second in Pennsylvania and the third in New Jersey\textsuperscript{17}.

While the company had began by making more luxurious homes in the pre-war years, the goal that it had for their post-war homes was to create the best single-family homes available on the market for the lowest cost\textsuperscript{18}. This matched what most prospective homebuyers were looking for. With homes in short supply new homebuyers were not overly picky, but they did want the best home, for the least

\textsuperscript*{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 233.
\textsuperscript{18} Jackson, 235.
money and available as soon as possible\textsuperscript{19}. To meet this demand Levitt and Son’s used the latest tools available and streamlined the building process of their homes to lower costs and build the maximum number of units in the least amount of time. Almost Ford-like in their efficiency, the construction of a Levittown home was divided into twenty-seven steps by work teams. Each team performed a specific activity at each building site, using preassembled parts and recently developed power tools, such as electric saws and nail guns\textsuperscript{20}. With this method thirty houses could be built in a day. Using this process Levittown homes were very affordable, with models running from $9,000 to $17,900 and requiring no down payment for veterans, with others only having to place $100 down\textsuperscript{21}. The refusal of the company to commit to using union labor also aided in keeping costs low for the homebuyers and speeding up building schedules\textsuperscript{22}.

Levitt and Sons are often credited with pioneering the systematic division-of-labor process. But, in reality, they were only very skilled at the assembly line technique that other builders had previously developed and were also using\textsuperscript{23}. Levittown homes were similar in size and cost to the homes that other builders were creating to fill the housing shortage. Levitt and Sons focused their marketing efforts not just on selling their homes affordability, but on the key points of difference that they had decided all their homes would contain.

\textsuperscript{19} Gans, \textit{The Levittowners} 32.
\textsuperscript{20} Jackson, 235.
\textsuperscript{22} Jackson, 237.
The features Levitt and Sons offered would not have been found in older housing in the cities or in the temporary housing that people lived in following the war. The large picture window included in each home, that looked out over a family lawn, were both luxurious aspects unfamiliar to most. New homebuyers were so unfamiliar with lawns that they had to be taught how to properly tend them in the information packets they were provided with when they moved in\(^\text{24}\). The open floor plan that fit best with the speedy and low cost building, as it required minimal building of walls, was promoted as a feature. Spaces and rooms all flowed into one another with a limited number of walls. The open plan concept of the nineteen-fifties was different from the open plan concept of today. Currently, we consider the open plan to have virtually no walls at all. For the nineteen-fifties, open plan meant that the public rooms of the home (kitchen, dinning room and living room) were all fairly interconnected with half walls or walls with cut outs (such as over kitchen counters or through centrally located hearths) that would create a sense of separate areas in a open space. This helped to define the different areas of the home and yet also provided an openness that was billed as encouraging family togetherness and unity. While this was a clever marketing ploy to cover up the quick building process, rather than a response to an actual need, it did provide a positive change for homebuyers. For those who had been used to cramped one-room living it offered a sense of privacy and for those who had lived in homes with separate rooms, it gave a sense of modern living.

A result of the open plan was that the kitchen was now exposed and integrated with the rest of the house. Levitt and Sons utilized this necessary development as yet a further sales opportunity. The kitchen was designed to be a step-saving wonder, had ample storage and counter space and included kitchen appliances. The fully loaded kitchen became the main point of difference to encourage home sales and a home’s kitchen features were always the first to be listed on the flyers for the different models of homes (see images 3 and 4). Levittown kitchens were sold as promises of a better and more modern life in one’s new home in postwar America.

The Room that Sells the House: The Mid-Century Re-Birth of the Kitchen

The kitchen, as most of us know it today, is a direct legacy of the nineteen-fifties kitchen. Situating it so it is open to the rest of the home, carefully styling and decorating it, adding in dining space, using it as a site of entertaining, including built-in features and up-to-date appliances are all common aspects of contemporary kitchens that became established in the nineteen-fifties. Kitchens had typically been considered utilitarian spaces for most of American history. The site of heat, noise and food smells, they were purposefully set off from the rest of the home by all those that were able to do so. Kitchen spaces in the years leading up to the war were still very primitive by today’s standards. In 1940 only a little over half of families in America had refrigerators and washing machines and a third of homes still used

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wood or coal for cooking. Once the war began (and in the years immediately following its end), even those families who could access or afford appliances were not able to acquire them due to the rationing of materials and the industry’s concentration on wartime production.

Rather than a back room affair with no appliances, piecemeal kitchen storage and mixed height work surfaces Levittown kitchens were orientated to the front of the home, included the latest models of refrigerator, stove and dishwasher and seventy-five feet of built-in storage and single height counter space. The American Kitchens ad from American Home’s March 1951 issue offers a glimpse of pre-war kitchens (see image 5). In an attempt to sell readers on remodeling their kitchens the ad shows a housewife distressed at the idea of visitors seeing her outdated kitchen. Storage is limited to the hutch (on which the cabinet drawer and doors refuse to close), the sink’s legs and pipes are exposed to the room and a table designed for sitting has to double as a backbreaking work surface. The ‘after’ kitchen in the ad is in line with what Levitt and Sons created for the kitchen in their pre-fab homes (see image 6). Acres of built-in storage space, dedicated work surfaces at uniform height, unsightly pipes hidden away within cabinetry plus the latest appliances (which were ultimately available in a range of colors) all roll out to meet the dining table.

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27 Miner, “Pink Kitchens for Little Boxes”, 252.
28 Folding screens that ran on tracks in the floor and ceiling were placed in the kitchen area in the early years of Levittown homes, so homeowners close off the space if needed. As the decade progressed, this feature was eliminated. (Wagner and Duckett Wagner, 43)
Stylistically, both the kitchen in the advertisement and the Levittown kitchen are reminiscent of appliance design of the nineteen-thirties. Rounded corners on both sinks and appliances create soft, sculptural masses. Keeping their proportions short, squat and heavy emphasizes the weight and bulk of refrigerators. When first popularized in the nineteen-thirties these heavy and bulbous forms acted as manifestations of the need to have some sort of stability during an unstable decade. With the stock market crash of 1929 and the following Great Depression compounded with the difficulties of the Dust Bowl, the nineteen-thirties were a difficult period for most Americans in one way or another. For those who were able to create new kitchen spaces and buy new appliances, manufacturers and designers offered them soothing, smoothly rounded corners and large masses that acted as reassuring anchors of constancy. Why the design forms of the nineteen-thirties carried over into the nineteen-fifties has less to do with these connotations of strength and more to do with the gap in manufacturing and design that occurred because of WWII. With war manufacturing taking over materials and assembly plants, new kitchen and appliance designs did not really develop during the war years, so, following the end of the war manufacturers and designers picked up where they left had off, with the designs of the nineteen-thirties. As the nineteen-fifties progressed a more dynamic and bold style of sharper corners and less bulky shapes developed, as will be seen later.

29 During the nineteen-thirties there was a push to add beautification to the kitchen, through paint colors and curtain patterns. But, by and large, the kitchen space was still separated from the rest of the home and was only appropriate for informal meals, like breakfast. To entertain, or dine, in the kitchen was considered a lower class activity. (Carlisle and Talbot Nasardinov. 123)
30 The tastes that define a decade take time to develop and manifest. While the United States did not enter WWII until the end of 1941, no real new design trends had yet developed for the American kitchen at that point.
Much like their systematized home building process, Levitt and Sons are often given credit for creating the efficient unified kitchen. In actuality, the design of their kitchens was an extension of previous events and innovations in the kitchen space during the early twentieth-century. America saw a drop in the number of domestic servants looking for work in early 1900s, as more women were drawn to factory, retail and clerical work that did not create as much of a burden on their time. With housewives now having to do work on their own, there developed an increased concern with creating efficient kitchen workspaces, with the contents placed in such a manner to eliminate unnecessary steps. As *House Beautiful* put it in 1915, a woman required “a small spotless space, conveniently planned, with the tools of her occupation all in easy reach...a place planned merely for one kind of work, which she leaves when that kind of work is done.”\(^{31}\)

This desire for an efficient kitchen space for a housewife to work in on her own made its first major appearance in Germany. In 1923 the Bauhaus, during its early years in Weimar, executed an exhibition of its work. Part of this exhibition was the creation of a home that was fully designed and furnished by the staff and students at the school. The kitchen space in the Bauhaus home was small in scale and placed directly next to the dining room (see image 7)\(^ {32}\). It was “intended solely for cooking purposes” and “featured a continuous worktop under the window, chairs which could be fitted under the table to save space and surfaces which were smooth and easy to clean.”. The ideal Bauhaus kitchen presented an almost clinical aesthetic. Efficiency and hygiene were the paramount concerns in the choices of the

\(^{31}\) Carlisle and Talbot Nasardinov, 124.

L-shaped layout of the kitchen and the materials used. Though the use of ecru and slate gray in the cabinets and counters provide a slight counter to the laboratory-like feel, the overall scheme of the kitchen is one of sharp corners and linearity. The round, brushed steel cabinet and drawer pulls provide a slight sense of softness, but this softness is largely over-shadowed by contrasting edging on the cabinets and drawers, which serve to emphasize the repetition of strong right angles. The Bauhaus kitchen contained no extra spaces for entertaining or additional aspects of style or flair to make it a welcoming environment. It was a space designed to facilitate the production of food in the most efficient ways possible.

The small and efficient kitchen that the Bauhaus created entered into the public realm in 1926 with architect Margarete Schütte-Lihoyzky kitchen design for social housing apartments in Frankfurt, Germany (see image 8)33. Following WWI Germany experienced a severe housing shortage similar to the one America would go through post-WWII. Rather than focus on the creation of single-family homes the German government embarked on a socialist program to create large-scale apartment complexes for families. Schütte-Lihoyzky designed a kitchen space that would take up a minimal amount of the already limited apartment space. The kitchen she designed has a rather galley-like quality to it, with all storage and appliances placed in a U formation and stacked on top of each other, minimizing the kitchen’s footprint and the number of steps the housewife had to take to complete tasks. The Frankfurt kitchen was based on a series of work-stations placed close

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together so that the processes of making food and clean up could all be efficiently carried out in the small space. Health and hygiene were addressed with the kitchen stool being of an adjustable height, the floors and walls tiled for easy cleaning, the labeled storage drawers being crafted out of scratch-proof aluminum and even the blue coloring of the cabinets and counters being chosen as a result of contemporary studies’ finding that the color blue repelled flies\textsuperscript{34}. The Frankfurt kitchen was an even greater presentation of the desire for efficiency and hygiene than the Bauhaus kitchen\textsuperscript{35}. The Bauhaus kitchen did, ultimately, become physically present in America. Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius built a galley-shaped, sharp cornered, efficient kitchen of stainless steel and white enamel in his family’s Massachusetts home in 1937, when he joined the faculty at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design\textsuperscript{36}. The efficiency of Levittown kitchens was not an original development of Levitt and Sons, it was an extension of trends already present in international design development from earlier decades. However, the opening of the space to the rest of the home to reveal the kitchen’s built-in components, matching colors and push-button conveniences as marks of living a modern and upwardly mobile life, was an original idea created to appeal to American consumers\textsuperscript{37}.

\textsuperscript{35} While the Bauhaus had embraced cleanliness and hygiene and turned it into a crisp and clinical aesthetic, Schütte-Lihotzky rejected concerns with aesthetics outright and created the space around wholly practical concerns. (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{36} Carlisle and Talbot Nasardinov, 42.
Levitt and Sons focused much of their research and development on the kitchen because they realized, as most builders of the era did, that the kitchen was the “room that sells the house”, not just because of its open plan layout, top of the line appliances, built-in storage/workspace but because the combination of all three  

38. This trifecta promised the homeowners a slice of the American good life that few young men and women had had a chance to experience in their pre-marriage years39.

The augmenting and styling of the kitchen, with the latest up-to-date tools and in the manner one wished, became of paramount importance, as it had never been 40. A 1956 American Standard ad that appeared in the April edition of American Home illustrates the change of the kitchen with the bold tag line “Your kitchen can be as lovely as a living room” (see image 9)41. No longer in its hidden pre-war position, the kitchen was now front and center in the home and privy to as much decoration and scrutiny as the living room was42.

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38 Miner, 245.
39 Ibid. 244.
40 Hine, 60.
42 Even in 1956 the vestiges of the kitchen design elements of the nineteen-thirties were still present. The rounded corners of the counter tops persist in the American Standard kitchen ad. However, the corners of the cabinets now come to sharp angles. The oven is now built-in to the wall and occurs in stainless steel, rather than the white enamel of the nineteen-thirties and early nineteen-fifties. By incorporating a large area of shiny steel into their 1956 advertisement American Standard was attempting to infuse the kitchen with a sense of space age modernity.

Image 3: Levittown home in the process of being built, with appliances and fixtures to be included in the kitchen. Source: 1940s.org, : http://1940s.org/history/post-wwii-optimism-and-the-rise-of-the-late-1940s-american-suburb/attachment/building_materials_levittown/
The Rancher

PRICE - $8,990 - $57 A MONTH!

A new house has just been built in Levittown, Pa., the most perfectly planned community in America. It may be seen 7 days a week from 10 A.M. to 7 P.M. at the Exhibit Center right on the Bristol Pike at the entrance to Levittown.

There is nothing to compare it anywhere. Costs are $500 additional and are on plots at least 80 x 100, inside plots are at least 90 x 100.

Each house has an entrance foyer, a very large living room, two beautiful bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a porch or carport on the main floor. There is a stairway to a large open attic which can be finished into two more bedrooms and another bath.

This price is subject to increase at any time. Those who make application now will be protected against any rise in price.

The Following is Included in Every House:

- Bondar Diplomatic Washer
- General Electric Push-Button Range
- Tracy All-Stainless Steel Cabinets
- Tracy Stainless Steel Sink
- General Bronze Sliding Aluminum Windows
- Thermopane Insulated Glass
- Briggs Colored Bath Fixtures
- Voss Porcelain-on-Steel Wall Tile
- Hot Water Radiant Heating
- Municipal Sewers and Water
- Aero Electric Ventilating Fan
- Federal Crest Breakers - No Fuses
- York-Shilex Automatic Oil Burner
- 100% Complete Insulation
- Mastic Tile Floors
- Complete Landscaping
- Outside Garden Storage Closet
- Levittown Community Swimming Pool
- Levittown Community Playgrounds

Total Settlement Charges $10

APPLICATIONS:

Applications must be made in person at the Exhibit Center in Levittown, and must be accompanied by a good faith deposit of $100.

FOR VETERANS:

NO DOWN PAYMENT IS REQUIRED

Carrying charges are $57 a month and that includes taxes, fire insurance, interest and complete repayment of the mortgage.

FOR NON-VETERANS:

Total cash required (including the $100 mentioned above) is $450. Carrying charges are $57 a month and that includes taxes, fire insurance, interest, and complete repayment of the mortgage.

SETTLEMENT CHARGES:

All settlement charges are included in the one fee of $10. This includes all legal fees, all transfer taxes, all recording charges—everything!

LEVITTOWN MAY BE REACHED AS FOLLOWS:

By car from Philadelphia: Drive out Roosevelt Boulevard concluding on Route 1 for about 5 miles. Turn right at Levittown sign to Route 13. Turn left on Route 13 about 3 miles to the Exhibit Center.

By bus from Philadelphia: Take Levittown Express Bus at Broad Street station of Elevated direct to Exhibit Center.

By car from Trenton: Cross the bridge into Pennsylvania, turn left to Route 13. Continue on Route 13 four miles past Morrisville.

By car from Camden: Drive out Route 30 (Burlington Pike) to Burlington. Turn left and cross bridge to Bristol. Turn right on Route 13 four miles to Exhibit Center.

Levitt & Sons
BRISTOL PIKE - LEVITTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA
Telephone WINDSOR 6-1100

Your kitchen can be as lovely as a living room

American-Standard kitchens are living room-pretty, with their clean, contemporary lines. And you can harmonize or contrast the colors of counter tops ... roomy sinks ... handle color guards. For work-saving convenience, all cabinets open at a finger touch. Their sliding drawers and shelves are interchangeables, so you can arrange storage space to fit your needs. For long service and lasting beauty, cabinets are made of sturdy steel with a mar-resistant baked-enamel finish.

See the newest, loveliest kitchens at your American Standard retailer's. He's listed in your phone book's Yellow Pages under "kitchens." American-Standard Plumbing and Heating Division, Pittsburgh 30, Pa.

The most beautiful kitchens are American-Standard Kitchens

Glendura Oil-Proof Wallcoverings are actually scrubbable ... dirt and grime are almost instantly removed with soap and water. Even the more stubborn stains like grease, fruit or ketchup can be quickly removed with ordinary household cleansing agents as well as bleach. Yes, you can count on Glendura keeping its clean, original look-in beauty.!! See the more than 160 smart, new patterns now on display at your Imperial dealer. Let Glendura help you make your kitchen a charming, work-saving second living room. Pattern illustrated is California Kitchen #2092.

Chapter 2: To Live and Buy the Good Life

“We had as a nation emerged from a great war, itself following a long and protracted Depression. We thought, all of us, men and women alike, to replenish ourselves in goods and spirit...”

Viewing the home, the kitchen and appliances as tangible manifestations of the American good life did not remain exclusive to the suburbs. As people moved in droves into the new subdivisions, the homes there came to be seen as the fashionable way to live. What suburban homes had were considered to be the newest and the best. Manufacturers and advertisers for kitchen items agreed with, and helped spread, this way of thinking across the nation. They began to sell their kitchen items and designs as the path to a more modern, and therefore better, way of living. This love of the new coupled with effective and pervasive advertisements spread the suburban notion of the kitchen as the mark of the homeowner’s participation in the American good life into the popular consciousness of the rest of the nation.

As the Youngstown Kitchens ad in *American Home’s* April 1956 edition stated, adding a Youngstown Kitchen was perfect “for that NEW home look” (see image 10). If the consumers took the advice of the ad and decided to “visit the model homes in your community” they would find Youngstown Kitchens in “more fine homes that ever before!”. The ample storage space, work centers and yards of counter spaces that offer “so much convenience, such beautiful colors” bear a direct

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43 Tyler May, 49.
44 Hine, 23.
46 Hine, 64.
similarity to the homes found in Levittown. In Better Homes and Gardens November 1953 feature on “New Kitchens from Old” the floor plans for all three homes clearly show incorporations of aspects found in Levittown kitchens (see images 11-13).\textsuperscript{48} Cabinets are placed by formerly freestanding ranges and refrigerators to provide storage and work space. Dining areas are added into the kitchen space itself by converting pantries and removing walls that separated former dining rooms from the kitchen.\textsuperscript{49} Large windows are also added in two of the three kitchens, just as would have been found in Levittown. Built-in cabinets and counters became the new norm and anyone who was American, and valued the family, tried to open the kitchen up to the dining area or, at least, include a table and chairs in their new kitchen plans to try and mimic the open plan living of the suburbs.\textsuperscript{50}

The new open plan did have its downfalls. American Home’s April 1956 issue featured an article asking “What’s Wrong with Walls?”\textsuperscript{51} It highlighted the difficulties associated with open plan living such as loss of privacy, difficulty in keeping spaces tidy when they served multiple purposes and increased noise. All these reasonable points no doubt troubled a fair number of Americans in their new homes, but the style nonetheless persisted throughout the decade. In true American spirit it even became a forum for innovation and the creation of yet more things to buy. Armstrong ads for noise reducing false ceiling panels are peppered throughout the magazines of the era.

\textsuperscript{49} When possible, kitchens were created to conform to either a U or L shaped plan, to minimize the number of steps the housewife had to take throughout her day. (Carlisle and Talbot Nasardinov. America’s Kitchens, 158.)
\textsuperscript{50} Tyler May, 152.
\textsuperscript{51} Evelyn Bowen, “What is Wrong with Walls?” American Home, April 1956, 68.
Out of all of the appliances produced in the industrial world in the nineteen-fifties Americans were responsible for buying three quarters of them. Appliances did more than cook food and keep it cold. They represented “something fundamental to the postwar understanding of national identity: a sense of freedom, of effortless ease, of technological mastery, modernity, and access to conveniences formally reserved for the very rich”52. The layered meanings that the kitchen space, and its mechanical inhabitants, took on for Americans can be seen in the decade’s advertisements.

The association of technology with the creation of ease is apparent in Coolerator’s ad for its Leadership Line that appeared in the March 1953 issues of Better Homes and Gardens53. Billed as “Big News for ’53 Kitchens!” housewives on the fence about if they wanted to invest in the line could send away for a booklet that would tell them all about the work saving options the items offered:

““How to be a Part Time Housewife” Send for a free booklet with dozens of ideas to save you time, work and money- pictures and facts about Collerator’s look-to-the-future appliances. It’s a gold mine of suggestions for making kitchens brighter-housework lighter.”

The ultimate goal of using technology to ease work was the creation of leisure time. Youngstown Kitchens ran an ad in the March 1953 issue of Better Homes and Gardens that advertised electric additions to their already amazingly functional kitchen cabinets and layouts (see image 14)54. The new dishwasher and “food waste disposal” were “Kitchen Luxury you can afford!”. But the value went beyond luxury:

“here are time-saving, work-saving conveniences that speed you through kitchen

52 Marling, As Seen on TV, 258.
54 Youngstown Kitchens Advertisement, March 1953, Better Homes and Gardens, 151.
hours, that give you new leisure time.” Part and parcel with all these new work easing and leisure creating items was the ability of the buyer to participate in one of the most valuable tenets of capitalism of the decade: the exercising of free choice. That there were choices that the buyer could make to customize items to fit their needs and fancies was paramount. To meet this desire to personalize and express individual choice, appliances started coming out in a range of colors, whereas before they had all, essentially, only come in basic white. General Electric’s 1958 ad in the April 1958 issue of Better Homes and Gardens featured a kitchen further modernized by replacing the range with a separate oven built in the wall and a cooktop set into the counter (see image 15)\(^{55}\). Each was available in “in Canary Yellow, Petal Pink, Woodtone Brown, Turquoise Green, White or Satin Chrome.”.

Cheerful pastel colors dominated the nineteen-fifties. The pinks, yellows and blues that appliances newly came in were echoed in most of the consumer goods of the decade. Clothing, paint colors and automobiles were now all produced in a range of brightly hued pastels. The new popular colors captured the exuberance of nineteen-fifties Americans better than darker or neutral tones and were able to appear more frequently and appealingly as color film and printing further developed. Consumers also actively asked for the greater use of color in their goods, especially for goods that had only come in standard white or subdued darks (such as kitchen appliances and automobiles). Within the kitchen space, pastel colors also served to cast a veneer of American-ness on a space that was largely a reiteration of European design. By using baby pinks, robin’s egg blues and sunshine yellows for

\(^{55}\) General Electric Advertisement, April 1958, Better Homes and Gardens, 78.
appliances, cabinets and counters manufacturers were able to counter the stark Bauhaus-inspired efficiency that kitchens were based on and add a sense of joy and free-spiritedness to the kitchen space. Pastel colors emphasized that an item, the consumer's lifestyle and America were modern and better.56

The element of pride was also present in the acquisition of kitchen appliances. The pride aspect in the advertisements reveals a bit of an unseemly, yet unsurprising, undercurrent in the outfitting of the home. One-up-manship of the neighbors often guided purchasing of goods in the nineteen-fifties. It was not enough to keep up with the Joneses, one had to top them as well. Pride was the main feature of the tagline the St. Charles Kitchen’s ad in the April 1951 issue of *American Home*: “Who wouldn’t be proud? When you know in your heart, it’s the best!”57. Much of this pride was garnered by the fact that the homeowners (exercising their right to free choice) had had a direct hand in the planning of the kitchen, “you, yourself, guide every step of it’s planning, before your St Charles kitchen is ever built. You choose its colors, from ten that St Charles offers you. You select the material...”. But the real selling point was that a “St Charles kitchen will assure your enduring satisfaction and earn all the envious adjectives your friends can think of!”. The satisfaction of having the best appeared in the ad copy for Frigidaire’s electric ranges in the November 1953 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* as well (see image 16)58. Finding an elegance in their new range with side-by-side ovens, created with “exclusive Quick-Clean construction” consumers were asked to

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56 Marling, 40.
imagine the range in their own home: “Just picture this glamorous Frigidaire Deluxe Electric Range in your own kitchen. You honestly get a glow of pride just thinking about owning it.”

An unsurprising result of this extreme focus on the ability, right and virtual responsibility that consumers had to buy happiness was the pervasiveness of planned obsolescence for goods in the nineteen-fifties. Superficial aspects like color and pattern were constantly changing to match seasonal color trends and encourage the matching of appliances to a room that now regularly went through re-decoration. Technical innovation offered appliances that heated more quickly, timed things more accurately and had more general features with each yearly model. Items and floor plans were never considered permanent. A newer version was always coming out and newer was always better. Things were not kept until they did not work anymore; they were kept until something better came along – which was often.

With all this innovation and redesigning, the decade saw the development of many new items that offered solutions to problems that never existed. General Electric was particularly at the forefront of the creation of unique items “for which nobody had been clamoring but for which a market niche might be carved out.” The General Electric table-top rotisserie oven advertised in the April 1958 issue of Better Homes and Gardens could roast meat with or without the rotisserie mechanism as well as bake items and was ideal in that it was “wonderfully portable

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59 Hine, 21.
60 Marling, 265.
61 Hine, 59.
so you're not tied down to the kitchen...”, making it “...Grand for entertaining indoors or out.” Two years prior to their advertising the solution for those who wished to be able to bake a soufflé outside, General Electric also offered an answer to those who were tired of having to open the refrigerator door and lean over to see what foods they had on hand (see image 17). Having “All foods at your eyelevel in the new General Electric Wall Refrigerator-Freezer” and freed-up counter space were the touted benefits of this wall strainer and refrigerator repairman’s nightmare. General Electric was not the only transgressor in the innovation gone mad trend of the nineteen-fifties. The portable electric skillet was an item that several companies produced in answer to the call, that no one had made, to be able to fry eggs and bacon right at the breakfast table.

In Defense of Consumerism:

The massive consumerism, encouragement of competition and impractical gadgetry has lent the decade a dubious legacy that often leads to a pejorative attitude towards nineteen-fifties American culture. However, there are several points to consider that may amend this harsh view. Firstly, the rationing of material and industry for the war effort had created a real vacuum of goods. Any item that had required metal and assembly plant space to make it, had been deferred for the creation of items for the war effort. Following the end of the war and the return of

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62 General Electric Advertisement, April 1958, Better Homes and Gardens, 56.
63 General Electric Advertisement, November 1956, Better Homes and Gardens, 36.
64 The advertisement indicates the close relationship that manufacturers had with magazine publishers and editors. Better Homes and Gardens produced a widely used cookbook with a very distinct red-and-white checked cover. On the counter in the ad is a very similar book. Just as today, magazines and manufacturers worked in synchronicity to cross-promote themselves.
65 Marling, 267.
such items it is not surprising that Americans would focus their new monetary wealth on replacing and procuring items that had been unavailable for so long. In *Better Homes and Gardens* April 1946 issue Crane manufacturing promised consumers that they would soon be able to enjoy Crane items for kitchens, bathrooms and home heating: “Crane is now in production on new equipment for your home. Obviously, everyone cannot be supplied at once; it is going to be some time before production can keep pace with demand...” Secondly, the vast majority of spending was focused on the home with the idea that the purchasing of items would support and enrich the family unit. Admittedly, almost anything that family members touched or that somehow elaborated the home could be justified as being for the family. However the important aspect was that whether it was a new stove, refrigerator, car, boat, hi-fi, painting or swimming pool these items were used by the family either in the home or when the family was together. By encouraging togetherness items were seen as strengthening the family unit.

A third point to consider is what an uneasy realm the suburbs presented for their new inhabitants. For the majority of homebuyers in new subdivisions, like Levittown, the residents had only a few things in common to connect themselves to one another. While many were new families with young children, and of similar economic levels, they came from disparate backgrounds and locations. Families that moved from the cities and the country both left behind the extended families and ethnic groups that had guided their social norms and established their standards of

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66 Jackson, 23.
68 Tyler May, 148.
living. Many new suburbanites had truly limited contact with their pre-suburban family and friends. Frequent drives back and forth were impractical for most with their small children and new homes that needed caring for. Even in the nineteen-sixties it was considered a long distance call for homeowners in New Jersey’s Levittown to call into the city. If suburbanites wanted to speak to their city friends or relations several times a week it could create a monthly phone bill of about twenty dollars, which would be the equivalent of one hundred and fifty dollars today. Once they were in their new suburban communities, a way to unify and find commonality with one another was through consumerism. The process of picking out and buying similar items created a shared experience that helped people relate to each other.

Additionally, with so many items for the home offering the ability to exercise personal choice through customizable style and color, what a family chose to buy could help to give them some sort of individuality in the often characterless world of suburbia. The assembly line system of rapid home building at the lowest cost possible, that builders like Levitt and Sons used, left little in the way of style or character for the homes. Homes on the streets of the new suburban landscape took on a repetitive cookie cutter quality of boxy shapes all in a row. In a world of sameness one of the few ways people could distinguish themselves was through the objects they chose to buy, even if they were buying the same item as almost all their

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69 Hine, 24.
70 Gans, 242.
72 Harris, “The House I Live In”, 202.
73 Marling, 262
neighbors but were just choosing a different color from the set palette of pastels offered.

The rampant consumerism and the homogenized quality of life that was occurring as a result of the spread of suburban ideals were not lost on contemporary observers. Critic Lewis Mumford found Levittown and other post-war subdivisions of its ilk to be “socially backward” in design and “too congested for variety and too spread out for social interaction.”⁷⁴ In his 1958 book *The Affluent Society* economist Kenneth Galbraith stated his belief that the basic concerns of human existence (food, clothing and shelter) had already been met for most of America. What was driving consumer spending now was not the meeting of necessary needs but the meeting of false needs created by manufacturers⁷⁵. The methods of these manufacturers had been exposed to the public in 1957 in Vance Packard’s book *The Hidden Persuaders*. Packard revealed that advertisers played on consumers deep seated psychological wants and bombarded them with subliminal messages to get them to buy things, that (according to Galbraith) they did not really need⁷⁶.

Despite these condemnations and revelations, there was a distinctly common thought that consumerism was a positive aspect of American life; and it did not need to be tempered. In fact, after the end of the war, the pervading social opinion was that by buying new items Americans were working to jump-start the economy.

⁷⁴ Harris, 206.
Refurnishing a home following the years of the Great Depression and WWII would stimulate mass-production and create new jobs. The ability to mass produce a wealth of items at a low enough cost for virtually all to afford them was cause for celebration. To close out the end of the decade Life dedicated their final issue of 1959 to “The Good Life”. To the editors of this widely read and highly influential publication, America had reached an apex of success not enjoyed by any other nation. The cover of the issue was a fold-out of a myriad number of shots of people swimming, ice skating, dancing and reading to highlight how “zestful American’s enjoy their new leisure”. The reason for this was stated in one of the main articles in the issue, “Cause of Breakthrough Towards Life of Plenty”. The cause was due to the development of automation, which “For US consumers…has loosened a fresh windfall of inexpensive goods, many entirely new, to bring more comfort and enjoyment to daily life.”. The result of all this new leisure, brought about by the now affordable home goods such as push-button stoves and dishwashers, was expanded on in a further article, titled “Leisure Could Mean a Better Civilization”.

While leisure had been wrought through the use of items that had culminated in the development of a consumer-based society, Life magazine saw no shame or downside to a devotion to things and living the good life. Rather, to them leisure provided the necessary time to devote one self to the creation of a more evolved civilization:

“Is it true, as Professor Galbraith argues in his Affluent Society, that our legitimate wants are long since sated and that we are now being corrupted by inducements to buy things we don’t need… Affluence may indeed multiply

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77 Cohen, A Consumers' Republic, 113
temptations and trivialities, but it also extends our command of the arts and products that enhance life and adorn virtues as well as vice...Let’s not blame affluence as such; we need more of it not less. Our problem is rather to transcend it and use it for the purpose of our civilization."\(^81\)

In the mid twentieth-century American mindset, consumption and leisure were not equated with ideas of greed or sloth. Rather, consumption was tied to participating in the modern good life, where one could, and should, exercise one’s democratic right to pick and choose which bright candy colored technological innovation one wanted so as to allow more free time in which to develop American culture and civilization. Buying an open plan home for your new family and discussing the choice of a pink General Electric oven or a yellow Hotpoint with a neighbor was not an act of conforming to an advertiser’s manipulation of popular tastes; it was celebrating and helping America.

\(^81\) Ibid.
Why you see quality-built Youngstown Kitchens in thousands of the finest new homes

Only Youngstown Kitchens give you so much convenience, such beautiful colors...so many features that add to the value of your home!

This week end, why not visit the molded homes in your community? You'll find a world of exciting new ideas—like the beautifully styled Youngstown Kitchens, for example—until you've seen them in more fine homes than ever before!

Why? They're built for lasting pleasure—of lifetime steel that will never warp, rot, swell, or shrink colors. They're so flexible that every plan is a custom plan—every kitchen a personal Kitchen. And all of the builders know the hope with a Youngstown Kitchen keeps its value longer!

Take a hint from leading builders. Whether you buy or mortgage, don't settle for less than a Youngstown steel Kitchen!
Yes, it's the same kitchen
...but the range has been changed!

Your kitchen... far less money and trouble than you dream. Oven and cooktop can be installed easily as shown.

New 1958 General Electric Built-in Ranges
Give any kitchen new custom-beauty—give every cook that gourmet-touch.

There's brand new beauty in the kitchen—brand new pleasure in cooking wherever a G-E Built-in Range is installed! Wonderfully automatic features give your cooking that gourmet-touch!

Your G-E dealer will help select the model best suited to your needs! Choice of ovens and cooktops: Canary Yellow, Petal Pink, Woodtone Brown, Turquoise Green, White or Satin Chrome.

Easy credit terms for range alone... or complete kitchen modernization. Range Department, General Electric Co., Louisville 1, Kentucky.

GENERAL ELECTRIC

New Frigidaire Electric Range has everything
to make your cooking easy, accurate—fun.

Beautiful new 2-oven Deluxe Range— with the easiest-to-clean ovens ever made!

Here are two ovens... big, roomy ovens... that are really fun to use!
These ovens not only roast or bake or boil to perfection—but, thanks to their exclusive Quick-Clean construction, they clean far more easily, with less work, than any other oven made.

Here's why: Shelves, grids, the full-width oven drip tray... all glide out for easy cleaning. And the ovens themselves haven't a bump, bulge, or square corner to trap grease or spillage. They're the easiest cleaning ovens ever made.

In addition, you get the famous Cook-Master Oven Clock Control that gets you

There are so many, many other wonderful features that have been built into America's most beautiful, most serviceable electric range. Just picture this glamorous Frigidaire Deluxe Electric Range in your own kitchen. You honestly get a glow of pride just thinking about owning it.

Ask your Frigidaire Dealer to show you all the Frigidaire Electric Ranges. Look for his name in the Yellow Pages of the phone book. Or, for a free descriptive folder, write Frigidaire, Dept. 2777, Dayton 1, Ohio. In Canada, Toronto 13, Ontario.

Enjoy Arthur Godfrey's daily show on TV or radio. Or on Saturday afternoons, see General Motors' "TV Football Game of the Week." Consul local papers for time and station.

Frigidaire Electric Ranges
Built and backed by General Motors
Chapter 3:
Art and the Nineteen-Fifties Kitchen: Celebrating Freedom with the Kitchen Wallpaper

“America is entering a new and exciting era of Free Taste.”
House Beautiful, October 1952

The art of the nineteen-fifties (that supposedly developed out of the affluence of the decade, according to *Life*) is one of the areas of mid-century culture that is lauded today. The work of artists like Jackson Pollock and the modern designs of figures such as Charles and Ray Eames feature prominently in histories of American art and design. Respectively celebrated as seminal movements in the history of art and reproduced as retro chic additions to contemporary homes, the art and designs of the nineteen-fifties stand apart from the push-button stoves and pink refrigerators of the era. They have connotations of being the ‘better’ half of the history of American material culture for the decade. Rather than being indicative of mass consumption and the conformity of suburbia they stand for intellectual and artistic innovation in the wider world history of modern art and design.

It may surprise some that the worlds of the suburban kitchen, esoteric art movements and groundbreaking designers did overlap in the nineteen-fifties. Aspects and versions of each made their way into the homes and mindsets of the masses. In October of 1952 *House Beautiful* devoted it’s entire issue to “What is Happening To American Tastes?”. One of the features was the “Editor’s Forecast of the new Taste Cycle”\(^8^3\). Based upon four years of “taking yearly ‘soundings’ in both the direction of change and the rate of change of public preferences.”, the editor

\(^8^2\) Elizabeth Gordon, “What is Happening to American Tastes?” *House Beautiful* October 1952, 173.

offered a prediction of what future taste in home decorating would be. The design
tenets for the coming era would involve: “The great preference for texture, real or
simulated. The growing love of soft sculpted forms. The strong preference for the
colors of the landscape.” (see image 18). The visible texture, lively colors
(dominated by pastels) and curving forms that the editors saw as defining the era
are the same aspects that can be found in the modern art and design of the nineteen-
fifties. The paintings of Jackson Pollock have a highly textural quality to them while
Willem de Kooning’s works contain the bright colors and biomorphic forms that
both Finn Juhl and Isamu Noguchi also brought to their furniture design (see images
19-21).

The biomorphic shapes and sense of texture were ultimately derived from
Surrealist art. Surrealism had entered on the American scene in the nineteen-
thirties and nineteen-forties when artists such as Dali, Ernst and Roberto Matta
began to emigrant from Europe to avoid fascism. The open-ended biomorphic forms
of Surrealism ostensibly came from these artists’ psychologically revelatory dreams.
Surrealists used seemingly random rubbings and amorphous smears, created
through such techniques as frottage and decalcomania, to stimulate their
subconscious. While influential on the development of Abstract Expressionism,
Surrealism was also still popular on its own right well into the nineteen-fifties.

Armstrong’s flooring and kitchen designs of the nineteen-fifties show a
strong awareness of modern trends that House Beautiful ascribed. In a kitchen
combining both modern and traditional aspects, the brick of the wall and the

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smoothness of the wooden cabinets create textural contrast (see image 22). The colors and splotches in the linoleum harken to the colors and forms of Clyfford Still (see image 24). The “soft, sculpted forms” can be seen in the rounded triangle shaped chairs at the counter and the George Nelson ball clock above the far wall (see image 23). Similarly, Armstrong’s Spatter pattern for linoleum (available in seven different color bases and offering the “newest style effect”) has a distinct sympathy to Jackson Pollock’s famous drip effect abstract works (see image 25).

Outside of the advertisement realm, the kitchens featured in home magazines also contained influences of the more prestigious realms of art and design. A homeowner’s kitchen in the November 1956 issue of Better Homes and Gardens features a breakfast bar that undulates out in a biomorphic form similar to Isamu Noguchi’s famous 1948 coffee table that Herman Miller produced for the mass market (see images 26 and 28). Placed at the breakfast bar are rounded edge chairs with clearly visible metal rod frames with exposed screws set in a T shape on the back that have a distinct similarity to the work of Charles and Ray Eames (see image 27). Texture and “colors of the landscape” are brought in to the kitchen with the cabinets having a sketchy green style of painting on them that is reminiscent of the color field works of abstract artist Barnett Newman (see image 29). The textural quality of another reader’s kitchen from the March 1956 issue of Better Homes and Gardens had a similarly simulated textural quality to the floor (see image 30). The table and chairs seem to be a hybridization of the Eames’ work with molded plastics and metal strutting, here pared down to a more simplified placement of metal supports (see image 32). The wallpaper of the kitchen seems to be a series of
brightly colored biomorphic shapes, evocative of Surrealism and the later work of Ellsworth Kelly (see image 31).

The images used in earlier sections of this thesis also show these stylistic concerns. The American Kitchens ad from March of 1951 features a ‘before’ kitchen with plain floor and pink curtains matched with a pull down shade (see image 5). In the ‘after’ kitchen, that would allow the homemaker to “never again face the embarrassment of trying to hide your ugly old-fashioned kitchen”, the plain floor has been replaced with a linoleum pattern with a sense of texture implied in it and the curtains now have a bold series of horizontal lines and are combined with the more modern venetian blinds.

The promotional image of a Levittown kitchen from the early nineteen-fifties shows a similar love of texture (see image 6). The patterning of the linoleum is virtually the same as the one in the American Kitchens ad, with its sketchy elongated splotches of lighter colors on a dark background – much like a re-tooled Clyfford Still work. The smoothness of the enamel kitchen appliances and cabinets are contrasted with actual rough texture of the brick wall above the fireplace as well as the floors simulated texture. Surrealist biomorphic forms are brought in with the seemingly abstract polished piece of wood that hangs above the fireplace.

Images such as these could seem to indicate a close awareness and interest on the part of nineteen-fifties consumers with the most up-to-date works in the fine art and design movements. Ostensibly, further support of this tempting conceit is found among the articles and images in magazines. Life would regularly run features that exposed readers to the work of designers, such as their September 1950 look at
Charles Eames in "A Designer's Home of His Own"\textsuperscript{85}. \textit{Better Homes and Gardens} extolled the value of bringing art into the home in an April 1958 article on how “Art Appreciation Begins at Home”, written to relate the benefit of exposing children to art\textsuperscript{86}.

But as appealing as it would be to use these as indications of a heretofore unrealized mass interest by nineteen-fifties popular culture in the value of contemporary art and design it is not actually possible to do so. Jackson Pollock-like linoleum and Isamu Noguchi inspired forms were indeed present in the kitchens of the average American, but they were not the only style present. They were joined throughout the decade with the next-door neighbor’s early American kitchen (see images 33 and 34). While modern forms would abound in one person’s home, copper kettles, strap hinges and brick facades would be present in another’s. Kitchens were just as likely to invoke the ponderosa, as they were the color fields and drips of modern art. Even when occurring with the trappings of early American life the basic layout of the kitchen still maintained the use of built-in features, ample workspace and efficient design that the Bauhaus and the Frankfurth Kitchen had established. As both were regularly included in the pages of home magazines through both advertisements and featured reader’s homes it would seem that each were equally stylistically popular and acceptable\textsuperscript{87}.

Closer reading of the articles that featured and celebrated art and design in magazines reveal that less text was devoted to the intellectual qualities of color and

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Life}, “A Designer’s Home of His Own”, September 11, 1950, 148.
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}, “Art Appreciation Begins at Home”, April, 1958, 6.
\textsuperscript{87} Hine, 8.
form or the nature of representation than was given to issues of commerce and home decoration. Life was less concerned about Eames’s process or the newness of his forms, but focused on his creation of items that could be had by all: “… Eames is so interested in making the products of his drawing board available at the lowest cost that the modest retail price of his newest chair ($32.50) bothers him…Eames likes to say his job is ‘the simple one of getting the most of the best to the greatest number of people for the least.’”88 For Better Homes and Gardens, art appreciation at home was not about exposing children to the creation of art, the concepts of color and space or even the history of art. It was about renting original works of art on a monthly basis from libraries, museums and galleries. Creating a complementary tableau of items around the ever-changing artwork would continually liven up the home, individualize it and act as a conversation starter: “Through a local art center, this homemaker selected a painting which she especially liked. The contemporary painting becomes a conversation piece, noticed immediately.”89.

In fact, modern art movements were met with distrust by much of the public during the nineteen-fifties. The open-ended forms and unclear meanings of abstract art created by artists living the bohemian life is New York were seen as possible tools of subversion. 90. The fear was that the unclear images, dynamic slashes of paint and vibrant colors were agents that “threatened to destroy by ‘designed disorder’, ‘depravity’ and ‘decadence’”91. Despite being antithetical to the Social

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88 Life, “A Designer’s Home of his Own”, 152.  
90 Doss, Twentieth-Century American Art, 133.  
Realism movement that the USSR mandated as the ‘correct’ form of art\textsuperscript{92}, the real fear of modern art was that it was somehow going to convert Americans to communism\textsuperscript{93}. As the decade progressed this extreme rhetoric began to diminish only to resurge again at the end of the decade when the USSR’s power seemed to grow with their launch of Sputnik in 1957\textsuperscript{94}.

The visual effect of the decoration of the kitchen was more important than being true to artistic movements and the latest designs. In November 1953 \textit{Better Homes and Gardens} ran a feature on a unique lower level living space in “You’d never Guess It’s A Basement”, of which the kitchen area featured a hand painted abstract mural (see image 35)\textsuperscript{95}. While the magazine did make note of this, and feature it as a plus for the remodeled space, it did not use it as an example to encourage readers to commission original works of art on their own. Rather, it felt using “a panel of interesting wallpaper.” could create the same visual impact. While consumers would have had a working familiarity with current art and design trends, thanks to coverage of them in periodicals, such objects of striking similarity in their homes should not be taken as indicating a widespread allegiance to any art movement or designers precepts. The most likely path that such inspired items took to get into the home was that of a trickle down effect of moving from their original artists and designers, through the design departments of mass production manufacturers and into the home of consumers.

\textsuperscript{92} Michael L. Kreen, \textit{Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005),156.
\textsuperscript{94} Phillips, \textit{The American Century}, 38.
\textsuperscript{95} Dorothy Miller, “You’d never guess it’s a basement”, \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}, November 1953, 218.
However, the presence of such items in people’s homes indicates more than just a passive consumption of things regardless of their beginnings. The mix of forms and styles that could be present in the kitchen is indicative of the ideal of exercising personal freedom that was celebrated in the nineteen-fifties. *House Beautiful’s* October 1952 issue states that America was set to begin an era of an ‘anything goes’ taste mentality that would allow people the freedom to express their individuality:

“America is entering a new and exciting era of Free Taste. Americans are declaring their independence from the dictates of convention and achieving open-mindedness and freedom from rules and clichés...so we are mixing the best of the past with the best of the present, creating a *free*, new look. You will find in this issue a record and forecast of American taste – your taste... All through the magazine you will recognize your own preferences, because you, and only you are dictating American style.”

The previously introduced Youngstown Kitchens ad from April of 1956 exemplifies this “free taste” (see image 10). It participates in all the predicted style concerns of four years prior. The faux brick flooring provides a textural contrast to the smooth all-steel cabinets. Bright natural colors abound with the mix of blue, green and brick red. Softly curving forms meet modernity with the cabinet and drawer pulls shaped into dynamic boomerangs of shining steel. However, there is not a single style that dominates the kitchen. The windows have diagonal muntins creating a large-scale diamond pattern that are most likely meant to evoke ideas of colonial era homes, as does the ‘brick’ floor. The lighting fixtures that flank the sink would be more appropriately seen on the outside of a nineteenth-century carriage house while those above the dining table drip and curve downward with floral

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aspects more common to Art Nouveau. The strip of steel that rims the counter top stems from the nineteen-thirties but now comes to sharp angles at the corners in the more dynamic style of the nineteen-fifties.

The following year *House Beautiful* argued that its readers must hold fast to their right to mix and match colors, forms and styles in their homes and kitchens. The minimal and functional homes of the International Modern movement that were popular in the European design world were seen as a subversive threat to the American way. Seemingly unaware that they stemmed from the very same Frankfurt kitchen that inspired America’s kitchens, the stark colors and clean lines of the practical and uncluttered Bauhaus kitchens were seen as an outside influence trying to place rules and constrictions on the American “free taste” of mixing styles.

It was crucial that Americans must maintain their freedom to clash styles and time periods together and not succumb to the dictates of outsiders: “Freedom, your won freedom of choice – and its consequences – is the only road to personal growth. Your reason, your common sense, is the finest instrument you possess for living. Don’t let them take it away.” 97 By buying items and making the spaces of the home fit their personal style and taste, consumers were exercising their freedom of choice, which was seen as an American right and duty.

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Image 19: Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles II*, 1952, enameled and aluminum paint with glass on canvas, 212.1 (h) x 488.9 (w) cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Source: http://nga.gov.au/international/catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=35334&MnID=2&GalID=1


Image 27: Charles and Ray Eames, Molded Plywood Dining Chair, 1946. Source: http://store.hermanmiller.com/store/servlet/DynamicKitDisplayView?langId=-1&storeId=10151&catalogId=10051&categoryId=&dynamicKitId=330


Chapter 4:
Being a Housewife In the Nineteen-Fifties

“What are Women Coming to?
They’ll never lift a finger – except to push ultrasonic, electronic and push-button devices...they’ll put on the roast and let out the dog from a telephone booth downtown...look at the meat counters, the grocery selves; without ever leaving their kitchen...they’ll wave their little white hands over a counter top to answer the phone across the room without ever picking up the receiver...they’ll flash recipes on a color screen, push buttons to measure the ingredients, cook on cold marble and high frequency sound waves will wash the dishes... That’s what women are coming to!”

American Home, April 1956

When considering the American kitchen of the nineteen-fifties an inescapable figure that comes to mind is the nineteen-fifties homemaker. She is easily pictured in the mind’s eye: perfectly coiffed and made up, she clicks through the kitchen in her high heels, turning out elaborate hors d’oeuvres and hearty main courses with her cutting-edge kitchen appliances all the while caring for the children and keeping the house in order, with never a drop of sweat nor a hair out of place. There are two ways to interpret the image of the nineteen-fifties homemaker and they depend on what era she is viewed from. Considered from today’s perspective, she is seen as a symbol of oppression: a woman trapped in the domestic realm of cooking, cleaning and child-care and judged on her ability to maintain her looks. This is a perfectly understandable and, in many ways, correct view to take. Situated as we are in the twenty-first century and having knowledge of the coming women’s movement, we know that the homemaker will start her long escape from the kitchen in the nineteen-sixties. But, if we try and consider the image of the homemaker from the perspective of a mid-century viewer our interpretation is different. She is not a

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98 American Home, “That’s What Women are Coming to!”, April, 1956, 32.
prisoner but a guard of the home. She keeps the home in order, nourishes the family with food, and instills values in the children, all while maintaining her feminine beauty. Though many different factors led to the exodus of women from the kitchen and the home, the advertisements of the decade can reveal the changing view of women during the nineteen-fifties. Manufacturers and advertisers changed the image and popular perception of the housewife as the decade progressed and, ultimately, had a role in her departure from the home.

At the beginning of the decade her role was lauded in popular culture as a vital force for a happy home and national well being. She was given the most sway in the matters of the home and manufacturers began to court her as the decider of what goods to buy. Items were built to meet her needs, ease her workload and provide her with essential leisure time. In these early advertisements she appeared as a well-put together woman; whose fashionable yet practical clothes were covered by an apron and who wore high heels of an appropriate height for working in the home. She was engaged with housework but was enjoying the new appliances that would ease her burdens. As the decade went on manufacturers and advertisers seem to have become caught up in the hype of their products. They made claims that their items were now eliminating work for the housewife all-together, rather than just easing it. Housewives in the advertisements of the later half of the decade began to take off their aprons and sensible shoes in favor of dressing like they were always just stepping away from a cocktail party. Housewives were no longer working in their kitchens; they were now beauty queen accessories to their pink stoves and refrigerators, which did all the work for them. These images began to pervade mid-
century culture and change how housewives perceived themselves and were seen by others. The respect and satisfaction that women had received for their proscribed role as homemaker lessened and removing oneself from the home became the goal of many homemakers.

Housewife as a Bastion of Family Values:
To be a housewife in the nineteen-fifties was to take on a position of national importance. Following the end of WWII, social and government experts encouraged women to dedicate themselves to domesticity and child rearing to ensure the physical, mental and patriotic health of the family\(^99\). By being present in the home American women could focus on aiding children in their developmental abilities, provide the whole family with proper nutrition and a clean and ordered environment as well as uphold the gender roles that were seen as endemic and essential to the American way of life. In the war against the communists, staying at home was a way women could be sure to teach their children the democratic and patriotic correct way of living and thereby “defeat totalitarian, authoritarian ideas”\(^100\). The Red Menace that McCarthyism fought against also served to quell leanings women may have had about trying to change their set gender role, lest they were considered un-American\(^101\). Homemakers were even informed of their precise role to be played in the event of the ever-looming nuclear disaster. Women were told

\(^{99}\) Tyler May, 89.
\(^{101}\) Ibid, 85.
that they were particularly crucial for their natural ability to focus on preparing the home by stock pilling essential goods and learning to provide medical aid\textsuperscript{102}.

Beyond the fears of nuclear holocaust and the instilling of American values, housewives could also be a more immediate asset to the success of the husband and the development of a cultured family \textsuperscript{103}. In March of 1952 \textit{House Beautiful} ran an article titled: “A Good Cook needs an Audience...or she won’t be a good cook anymore”\textsuperscript{104}. It relates the virtues of a husband taking an interest in, and actively supporting, his wife as she develops her “household arts”, particularly her skills as a cook: “A husband who does not support and pay attention to her is putting up a very effective roadblock in the path of his wife’s development of the household arts of good living, which could be a social, business and personal asset to him if only he were sensible enough to see it.”\textsuperscript{105}. Families with full time housewives were seen as indicators of strong family economics, status and high and healthful living standards for the family. Conversely, popular opinion held that working mothers and their families were to be pitied. It indicated that the husband was not fulfilling his assigned gender role and American ideal of the male as the supporter of the family. A housewife’s absence was considered to cause the family to suffer in physical and moral health and wellbeing\textsuperscript{106}.

However, there were acceptable ways a woman could work outside of the home in the nineteen-fifties and many of them did. The percentage of married

\textsuperscript{102} Tyler May, 90.
\textsuperscript{103} Sylvia Lovegren, \textit{Fashionable Foods: Seven Decades of Food Fads}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 181.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Schwartz Cowan, \textit{More Work for Mother}, 207.
women who worked outside the home went up 42% during the decade, with most of the women coming from the middle class\textsuperscript{107}. Paid employment could reasonably occur either before children were born, once they were in school full time or after they had left home. However, most did not do so to support the day-to-day running of the home and feeding and clothing the family. Rather, they worked to help pay for the new plethora of essential consumer items for the home\textsuperscript{108}. Since the money was going back into the home their working was seen as acceptable, because it was ultimately going to further support the family, be an exercise of free choice and, most likely, aid in the all important development of leisure in some manner. Leaving the home to involve oneself in civic matters was also acceptable. Becoming involved in local organizations or government was seen to be participating in the benefits of democracy\textsuperscript{109}.

The only advertisement that directly addressed working women found in the thirty magazines surveyed is the Pacific Contour Sheets ad in the November 1953 issue of \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}\textsuperscript{110}. In a series of photographs the ad related how fitted sheets aided Jean Davis, who “works for a New York fashion magazine” in her morning routine. The fitted top and bottom sheets made it impossible for her husband to kick them off in the night, making it easier for Jean to make the bed in the morning as she made breakfast for them both and got herself ready for work. Jean's working outside the home was acceptable because it was not interfering in

\textsuperscript{107} Hartman, “Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal”, 86.
\textsuperscript{108} Tyler May, 156.
\textsuperscript{110} Pacific Contour Sheets Advertisement, November 1953, \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}, 148.
the care of her husband and her home, the couple appeared to not yet have children and her job at a fashion magazine was a distinctly feminine one that encouraged commerce.

Housewife as a Career:

“Marriage is my career, I chose it and now it is up to me to see that I do the job successfully in spite of the stresses and strains of life.”

The majority of housewives considered their homemaking to be a career, and an important one at that. For women, being a housewife may not have been the choice they would have made, given another option, but they did consider it a job unto itself. Keeping the home and raising children was given career status by the large development of college level home economics courses in the nineteen-fifties and the ability to receive a degree in the field. The families that lived in the trailer camps shown in Life’s “Veterans at College” took turns caring for their children while each parent went to classes and, while women took other classes, it is more than likely that many were enrolled in home making classes to help them in their married lives.

In systematizing the homemaking process to teach it, and being able to rank a student’s ability through grading tests and projects, home economics classes made homemaking into a discipline to learn and a field to master. While many college educators were concerned that women were limiting themselves with such a singular focus, it gave the female students who did participate a sense of

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111 Tyler May, 26.
112 Ibid, 23.
accomplishment and pride when they married and became housewives. Even women who did not participate in home economics courses were able to undertake their new role of housewife with a sense of legitimacy. In marrying and starting a family they had acquired employment and were now able to implement what they had learned in their new position. They had a clear role defined for them and were confident in their ability to fulfill its needs. For women, marriage and homemaking could give them a “sense of responsibility...” or a “…feeling of usefulness...”.

Housewife as a Market Force

With their important role in assuring familial and national wellbeing, as well as becoming active participants in the securing of income to buy goods, women became a natural target for marketing in the nineteen-fifties. As keepers of the home they had a deciding vote in buying items for the home as well as the home itself. Levitt and Sons were in a constant state of tweaking and re-vamping their kitchen plans and appliances to meet the needs of housewives.

The housewife was now an active, economically viable figure who held a job in her half of the marriage. The consumer-driven economy turned her into another distinct figure that had a right to take part in the mid-century American culture of utilizing commodities and consumption to partake in the “good life”. She became a large target for advertisers to sell objects to that would better her life by easing the

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113 Ibid, 72.
114 Ibid 42.
116 Hine, 30.
117 Harris, “A Second Suburb”, 11.
burdens of her career through buying things. As the kitchen was her realm that
was where they focused their efforts.

Products were sold with the idea that the manufacturer was trying to meet
the special needs of women. The new 1950 International Harvester refrigerators
advertised in the April 1950 issue of Better Homes and Gardens were
“...feemineered! Women dreamed them...home economists planned them” (see
image 36) And, as such, featured: “Exclusive! Bottle Opener permanently built-in
on the door latch. IH femineered! Exclusive! “Egg-o-Mat” Stores 16 eggs; dispenses 1
or 2 at a time. IH femineered! Exclusive! “Diffuse-o-Lite” Lights entire interior
without glare. IH femineered". The pretty smock-wearing housewife in the ad smiles
delightedly at the prospect of a no glare fridge interior. In American Home’s April
1956 issue Curtis Kitchens continued this trend, extolling that they now offered
kitchen-remodeling options that were “woman-designed”. “And what is woman-
design? It means these cabinets are right for your reach, your way of working.
Shelves revolve... slide forward...swing in and out...are adjustable – to put
everything right into your hands. Woman [sic] home economists, designers, stylists
planned it that way.”

The easing of labor and the creation of leisure was always emphasized, with
kitchen manufacturers often claiming that their designs would save the housewife a
number of hours either per day or week. With this extra time she could devote more

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119 International Harvester Advertisement, April 1950, Better Homes and Gardens, 95.
120 Note the refrigerators still have that rounded and low down quality to them from the nineteen-thirties.
121 Curtis Woodwork Advertisement, April 1956, American Home, 50.
of herself to her family and maintain her youth and beauty. Hotpoint and American Kitchens ran dueling ads in the July 1951 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* (see images 37 and 38)\(^{122}\). Hotpoint claimed that homemakers (like the apron-wearing one reaching into the oven) would “Save 8 hours Every Week with a Hotpoint All-Electric Kitchen” allowing them to “feel fresher and have extra time for your family as well as the many added duties you’re called on to shoulder these days – because your Hotpoint Kitchen does naturally all of your most tiring, most time consuming tasks *automatically!*”\(^{123}\). Though Hotpoint scored extra points with their incorporation of the advanced technology that would do all the work “*automatically!*”, American Kitchens was the clear winner of the two advertisements\(^{124}\). While Hotpoint may have given housewives eight hours of freedom per week, American Kitchens promised “2 hours of Freedom Every Day!”, clocking their kitchen’s creation of leisure time at fourteen hours per week. They were also a little harder hitting in their language. To appeal to housewives on the grounds of family, a little boy shouts the fact that “‘Now my Mom has time to play with me!’ (the husband is more concerned with the low financing). In terms of saving one’s looks American Kitchens does not mince words and rhetorically asks “‘Why put up with youth-robning kitchen drudgery when you can have America’s most beautifully designed kitchen...!’”. American Kitchens embraced the family and youth keeping aspects as the main selling points for kitchen furnishing. The

\(^{122}\) Again, at this early point in the nineteen-fifties, both the Hotpoint and the American Kitchen’s maintain a similarity to the appliance styles of the nineteen-thirties. While the cabinets in the Hotpoint kitchen have a greater angularity to them, the counter top still curves around the corner with a shiny steel rim zipping around it. The same steel rim is present in the American Kitchen as well, around each tier of the rounded shelves that make up the end of the counter.


following year in *Better Homes and Gardens* June issue they encouraged housewives to send away for free information on their products. The housewife in the ad finally succumbed to mailing her request “the day Jeff said, ‘Aw Jimmy’s mother is more fun than you are!’...And I remember too how right Jeff was – Jimmy’s mother did have more time to have fun with Jimmy – time to keep herself looking young and fresh. While I, it seemed, was always stuck in that old work trap kitchen of mine....”\(^{125}\).

A positive aspect of the focus on homemaker as consumer was the realization and validation that housework was *work*. While the advertisements are amusingly lacking in subtlety they acknowledge the sheer physical effort that goes into caring for the home and family. Housework took time away from, and a toll on, the housewife. Her job entailed a real amount of physical labor that could be eased by innovation and automation along with the rest of American labor. And while a low glare refrigerator light may not have been the challenge that most needed to be solved, manufacturers created kitchen innovations that *did* ease some actual burdens and problems. A double page Norge advertisement from *Better Homes and Gardens* in April of 1950 shows their newly innovated refrigerators and ranges (see image 39)\(^ {126}\). “The New Norge Golden ‘50 Refrigerator with exclusive Self-D-Froster system defrosts while you sleep!” And saved the homemaker from the time and mess it used to take to empty the refrigerator, defrost the freezer and continually empty out an overflowing drip tray throughout the course of a day\(^ {127}\).


\(^{127}\) Again, both the 1950 Norge stove and refrigerator are created as heavy, rounded masses.
That the new Norge ovens featured more accurate and even heating would help eliminate overcooked food disasters; which can be, to a certain extent, “Heartbreak for Any Woman!”.

Housewife as Accessory:

Through a comparison of the image of women in the early advertisements of the decade to images of them in later advertisements a clear change can be seen in the view of the housewife’s role. In 1950 the women beside International Harvester’s “feminineered” refrigerator and by Norge’s new appliance offerings appear fashionable yet still capable of completing housework. A certain amount of care in appearance is understandable as housewives were, in fact, doing a job. They were not lounging at home doing nothing but they were working hard to keep the family together. International Harvester and Norge each designed their appliances and geared their advertising to aiding the housewife in her valuable work.

Frigidaire’s 1957 ad from Better Homes and Gardens’ January issue presents a one hundred and eighty degree change in the image of the nineteen-fifties housewife (see image 40)\textsuperscript{128}. Apron and sensible, yet stylish, clothes to work in have been cast aside. This housewife, next to the pink refrigerator, is dressed in a yellow party dress with matching yellow kitten heels and a crown of flowers on her head. Her labor has been eliminated to the point that she can dress in this manner. Frigidaire’s ad sells their new refrigerator to women who should be equally at ease at this point in the decade. The most notable labor saving selling point that the new

\textsuperscript{128} Frigidaire Advertisement, January 1957, Better Homes and Gardens, 60.
leisured homemakers need to make life even simpler for them is Frigidaire’s new “Ice-Ejector” which delivers 27 cubes in 4 seconds flat."

At this later point in the decade we can see that the rounded, bulging and heavy form that refrigerators took in the early nineteen-fifties has been replaced. The expanses of the refrigerator are now flat, the corners come to points and there is a greater use of steel, giving the mass a sense of lightness and modern innovation. Frigidaire was the company that first came out with this new style for appliances. Labeled “The Sheer Look”, Frigidaire used it on their washers, dryers, stoves and refrigerators (see image 41). “Every line is straight, every corner is square, the whole look is sheer – to bring the beauty of modern simplicity...”129. “The Sheer Look” moved the kitchen space into even closer alignment with the designs of the Bauhaus and the Frankfurt kitchens but the continued application of color kept the space distinctly American130. The visual effect of the sharply angled appliances in an array of colors was reflective of the abstract works of Josef Albers, namely the works from his series Homage to the Square (see images 42 and 43). A former student and faculty member of the Bauhaus, Albers came to America in 1933 and became head of the Department of Design at Yale in 1950. From 1950 to 1976 Albers created hundreds of images of squares stacked on top of each other in a range of colors to study how colors interacted with one another and to allow viewers to experience that interaction.

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130 It is worth noting that at this late date in the decade the colors used for appliances are beginning to move beyond the realm of bright pastels. Image 41 features the baby pinks and sunshine yellow of the earlier part of the decade along with a boldly black refrigerator.
Tappan advertisements followed this change in the presentation of the housewife as well. A 1953 ad in the March issue of Better Homes and Gardens places a small image of a woman in an apron standing next to the featured stoves and smiling (see image 44). The ad’s copy focuses on how Tappan produces a range of items that will meet every home’s budget and space. The company’s main image of the homemaker in its ad in the April 1958 issue of Better Homes and Gardens is a total change from the woman used five years earlier (see image 45)\(^\text{131}\). Dressed in a full skirted, sleeveless shimmering blue cocktail dress, she barely stands in her kitchen space. Which is the point of the ad’s text, that a Gold Ribbon Tappan is the key to kitchen freedom. Stylishly “decorated with fleur-de-lis” the oven is “electric and fully automatic – starts, cooks complete meals, turns off without your being anywhere near...”.

Stylistically the ad conforms to the tastes and trends that House Beautiful set out in 1952. The homemaker and the advertised oven and range are placed in a richly textured brick room. The dress of the homemaker matches the aqua blue of the walls. In the background an abstract work of art is hung on the wall. The bright steel of the oven and cook top connotes futuristic developments while the copper spoons hanging on the wall reference more antiquated kitchen spaces.

The later Tappan ad is illustrative of the fictive image that was created for the kitchen and the housewife in the later part of the decade. Believing that their innovations could do anything, manufactures and advertisers insisted that the kitchen was now work-free. Speed cook settings, timers, frozen food and boxed

\(^{131}\)Tappan Advertisement, April 1958, Better Homes and Gardens, 146.
mixes were all supposed to make for carefree kitchens, meals and housewives. But kitchens and meals can never be carefree; no matter how innovative the oven and the number of push-buttons it has, it cannot drive to the store, buy and prepare ingredients and serve and clean up after a meal.

Even with their Gold Ribbon Tappans and Frigidaire Ice-Ejectors and Norge Self – D- Froster systems women still had a great amount of work to do in the kitchen. More appliances did not actually equal more leisure time for housewives. The work that they were doing may have been less laborious and they were able to complete more tasks for each hour that they worked but their tasks were still numerous and took up all of their time\textsuperscript{132}. The burden of housework was added to, with the pressure that one should be able to be not just presentable, but glamorous at all times\textsuperscript{133}. The view of the housewife as a leisured beauty crept into popular conscious and opinion through these advertisements.

In utilizing advertisements such as these, manufacturers helped to negate the very career that they had originally celebrated and embraced as a way to market their items. They destabilized the role of the housewife in popular culture. From the housewives point of view they were expected to maintain their health and beauty as well as their family at all times. Now, since appliances were doing all the work for them, they had no reason to ever have the home not in top condition and take perfect care of the family while always looking cocktail party ready themselves\textsuperscript{134}. These images and ideals also impacted how husbands viewed their wives’ roles and

\textsuperscript{132} Schwartz Cowan, 201.
\textsuperscript{133} Hine, 30.
\textsuperscript{134} Sivulka, \textit{Soap, Sex and Cigarettes}, 253.
workloads. Early advertisements sold husbands on kitchen remodeling by claiming to be “wife savers” and articles focused on home construction projects that men could undertake to help keep their wife’s kitchen in working order. But with these new claims and images the view of how much work a wife actually did changed. Whereas before she had been considered an as hard-working half of the couple as himself she now came in line with the image that appeared in an 1957 issue of *Electrical Merchandising* of a woman relaxing on a chaise lounge in her kitchen, smoking and consuming bonbons while the kitchen does the work for her (see image 46)\textsuperscript{135}. Images like these, from the end of the decade, capture the changes that were beginning to foment in the minds of women\textsuperscript{136}. While they had once been willing to accept their role as keepers of the home, as necessary to family and national wellbeing, the continued acceptance of this stance was becoming insupportable. The unrealistic ideals and loss of respect they were now facing combined with their increasing stressors of lack of mental stimulation and power in their own lives and contributed to their eventual exodus from the kitchen and the home in later decades\textsuperscript{137}.

\textsuperscript{135} Miner, 253.
\textsuperscript{136} Tyler May, 37.
\textsuperscript{137} Marling, 255.
Save 8 Hours Every Week With A Hotpoint All-Electric Kitchen

Gain Extra Time For All Your Extra Duties!

Look To Hotpoint For The Finest...FIRST!

World's Most Convenient Refrigerator

Quality in Appliances

A Hotpoint All-Electric Kitchen is a real necessity these busy days. And you can easily own one—on convenient monthly terms if you wish. Good today for new illustrated planning book, "Your New Kitchen," Mail 15c (see stamp) to Hotpoint, Inc., Kitchen & Laundry Planning Dept., 365 W. Taylor St., Chicago 6, or see your Hotpoint dealer.

Everybody's Pointing To Hotpoint

My AMERICAN KITCHEN Gives Me 2 Hours of Freedom Every Day!

NOW MY MOM HAS TIME TO PLAY WITH ME!

AND IT ONLY COST A FEW DOLLARS A MONTH ON EASY NEW FHA TERMS

Why put up with youth-robbing kitchen drudgery when you can have America’s most beautifully designed kitchen —now—for only a few dollars a month. Ask your dealer about the easy FHA terms!

Only American Kitchens Have All These Work-Saving Features!

- Lifetime vinyl worksurfaces in 5 beautiful colors.
- Store-house storage space—at fingertip level.
- Easiest to clean kitchen in America—rounded drawer interiors wipe out like a bowl—no handles to collect dirt.

American KITCHENS
“SAVE 1000 STEPS A DAY”

American Central Division
AVCO
Cincinnati, Indiana

FRIGIDAIRE PRESENTS THE SHEER LOOK

The most exciting change that has come into your Kitchen!

It's an all-out stunning you can't believe your eyes.
But it's here—the sheer look! A whole new kitchen idea that makes a dream of your dream kitchen a reality.

On Frigidaire Refrigerators, Ranges, and Freezers, Appliances '57, every line is straight, every curve is square. The whole look is down-to-earth simplicity.

The most excruciating task to you, the homemaker, is no longer the daily chore of washing and cleaning. You'll see a wringer with a Frigidaire Electric Washer. It's there, and it washes the clothes faster than any other washer.

You'll see a refrigerator with a Frigidaire Electric Freezer. It's there, and it keeps your food at a constant temperature.

You'll see a stove with a Frigidaire Electric Range. It's there, and it's easier to use than any other range.

Both Frigidaire and General Motors will save you time and money.

'57 FRIGIDAIRE APPLIANCES

Frigidaire-Roth and Barden by General Motors.

there's a TAPPAN
to fit your budget...
to fit your kitchen

Whatever you're looking for... a range to fit your kitchen or your budget... there's a Tappan that's just right. For example, these two new Tappan business:

BIG RANGE FOR SMALL SPACE! This new Stovender by Tappan is the range for you. Only 4 ft. 3 in. wide—yet with a 24 in. front edge. Three easy-to-reach ovens. Even one bake and one broil—so you can cook a roast or a cake or a casserole at one time!

SMALL SPACE—LOW BUDGET? Then you want the new Tappan Standard. Almost as big as the biggies... four easy-to-reach ovens. Any size or type of oven you want. A dream—yet modern price.

AND YOU'LL TAKE TAPPAN

TAKE A MOMENT TO COMPARE...

Compare and you'll take Tappan... the range designed with you in mind. Features of all the famous Super Sixty Tappan that offers you all these exclusive features...

LIFT-OFF OVEN DOOR
PRESS-FOR BROILER
CHROME-LINED OVEN
GREAT CHEST
TELEPHONE
VISIBILITY OPEN

Take a moment and see your Tappan dealer today. Let him show you the Tappan that's "just for you." Tappan models are made for city gas, Propane and other LP (bottled) gas.

TAPPAN GAS RANGE

How proud you’ll be of your gold ribbon TAPPAN

Who wouldn’t be proud? Look at Tappan’s incredibly beautiful new styling. Eye-level controls are set in a panel of illuminated glass, decorated with fleur-de-lis. Wide-vision Viewlite window gives you an inside view of the gleaming chrome-lined oven which bakes better and cleans easier. It’s electric and fully automatic—starts, cooks complete meals, turns off without your being anywhere near. High broiler lets you bake and broil at the same time. Famous Tappan electric surface units are set in quick-cleaning stainless steel counter panel.

Chapter Five: The Kitchen and the Cold War

A manifestation of how the kitchen functioned as a practical fetish of American life occurred on the global stage at the end of the decade, in 1959, during the American National Exhibition in Moscow. While Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and American Vice President Richard Nixon toured the exhibition on the official opening day in July they engaged in an impromptu heated exchange on the ideologies of communism versus capitalism. This forty-five minute exchange occurred while standing in the kitchen of a model ranch home imported from America to Moscow for the exhibition, giving the exchange the moniker of The Kitchen Debate. Rather than debating the merits and downfalls of each other’s governmental systems in the terms of military or scientific developments, the two spoke in terms of the very items and individuals that filled the pages of the magazines that have been reviewed throughout this thesis: stoves, refrigerators and housewives. Within both the American National Exhibition, and Nixon and Khrushchev’s Kitchen Debate, the kitchen, its appliances and the housewife were all used as physical emblems of mid-century American cultural ideals of living a modern life devoted to free choice and leisure.

The American National Exhibition in Moscow was the American half of an exchange of cultural exhibitions between the US and the USSR. The agreement to the exchanges came about after Khrushchev surprisingly announced a desire for greater trade and cultural exchange between the two nations while being interviewed on

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138 Massy and Morgan, Cold War Confrontations, 198.
139 Tyler May, 10.
CBS’s *Face the Nation* in June of 1957. By late 1958 it had been agreed that each nation would stage an exhibition on the other’s soil that would focus on the “development of each of its science, technology and culture.” The Soviet exhibition took place in the New York Coliseum convention center while the Americans built their exhibition space from the ground up outside of Moscow, in Sokolniki Park.

American Goals for the Exhibition

“Nothing anybody will ever say about free enterprise will have the impact of what the average Russian will see when he walks through the average American’s home.”

Herbert Sadkin, All-State Properties

What Khrushchev’s goal was in sparking the movement to these reciprocal exhibitions is still not clear. One theory is that it was to shore up internal support for the production of consumer goods in the USSR by showing Soviet citizens a wealth of American goods. Another is that the whole idea of exchanges was done in order to get a close-hand look at American technological innovations. The American goals for their exhibition in Moscow are, however, quite clear. In an interview with the *New York Herald Tribune* in March of 1959 exhibition planner George Nelson was quoted as saying “primarily, we want to make a simple sincere statement about

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141 Ibid, 161.
143 Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 165.
144 Massy and Morgan, , 169.
American life.”\textsuperscript{145} While there was truth to that statement, it was only part of the actual goal. The larger goal of the American government was to use that “sincere statement” as a propaganda tool to undermine communism from within the USSR. A declassified document titled “Secret Basic Policy Guidance for the US Exhibition in Moscow in 1959” stated that while the public objective was to “increase understanding of the people of the Soviet Union of the American people and American life”, that goal should be achieved by “placing particular emphasis on American precepts, practices and concepts which might contribute to existing pressures tending in the long run toward a reorientation of the Soviet system in the direction of greater freedom”\textsuperscript{146}.

To meet the public and classified goals of the exhibition it was decided to gear the entire event towards presenting the everyday goods of American life. It was believed that this method would illustrate how “Freedom of choice and expression, and the unimpeded flow of diverse goods and ideas [are] the sources of American cultural and economic achievement” as well as be the most appealing and readily understandable to the average Soviet visitor to the exhibition\textsuperscript{147}. The American exhibit was designed to awe the Soviets with the variety of items and choices (and, therefore, freedom) that Americans enjoyed in everyday life and compel the communist citizens to embrace capitalism.

To create and oversee the exhibition space the American government tapped George Nelson and his firm. Nelson in turn invited Charles and Ray Eames to help

\textsuperscript{145} Massy and Morgan, 167.
\textsuperscript{146} Carbone, “Staging the Kitchen Debate”, 62.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
with the physical development of the grounds at Sokolniki Park\textsuperscript{148}. Their ultimate plan for the exhibition space was to divide it into two main buildings surrounded by smaller kiosks, stages and booths\textsuperscript{149}. The first building that Soviet visitors would enter was a geodesic dome created by Buckminster Fuller. Inside of the dome were seven movie theater sized screens. Simultaneously on each screen a film the Eames’ and their team had created of images of a week in the life of a typical American suburban family continuously played\textsuperscript{150}. On exiting the dome, visitors would enter into the Jungle Gym. A sprawling multi-level glass walled building divided into cube-like rooms, the Jungle Gym housed the plethora of consumer items (many displayed as they would have been found in America, in mock rooms, grocery stores and department stores) as well as demonstration areas\textsuperscript{151}. The building was filled to bursting with models, demonstrations and installations packed with the consumer goods that America had to offer: clothing, shoes, pots, pans, gardening tools etc. Anything that could be bought in America was put on display in multiple models and colors so that the Soviets could see just what they were missing. The wealth of goods were provided directly by the business community, who President Eisenhower had personally courted and convinced to offer samples of items to supply the exhibits and (in many cases) pay the freight cost of shipping the goods to Moscow as well\textsuperscript{152}. While the Eames’ focused their attention on the creation of their film, Nelson and his firm concentrated on the layout and set-up of the Jungle Gym

\textsuperscript{148} Colomina, Domesticity at War, 250.
\textsuperscript{149} The exhibition area took up the space of approximately two city blocks. (Kreen, Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit, 156.)
\textsuperscript{150} Castillo, Cold War on the Home Front 149.
\textsuperscript{151} Masey and Morgan, 179.
\textsuperscript{152} Hixson, Parting the Curtain, 169.
and its contents, which Nelson dismissively referred to as ”the stuff”\textsuperscript{153}. It was behind the Jungle Gym that the model home was located.

The focus of the American National Exhibition was in direct contrast to what the Soviets ultimately did in New York. While the Soviets did include displays and information of everyday life and culture in the USSR, most of their exhibition was devoted to emphasizing their technological advancements in space exploration, weaponry and heavy industrial production\textsuperscript{154}. To impress westerners with their technological prowess they prominently featured “...three Sputnik satellites, a model rocket and a working model of an iron and steel making complex among ten thousand exhibits”\textsuperscript{155}.

Kitchens at the Exhibition

Placed amongst the displays of goods, the fashion shows, the auto exhibits, the Helena Rubenstein makeover kiosk and the young Russian-speaking American guides acting as ambassadors of American life, were four different kitchens in different venues throughout the exhibition. Three of the kitchens were located in the Jungle Gym. General Foods and Bird’s Eye sponsored the demonstration kitchen (see image 47)\textsuperscript{156}. Russian-speaking American home economists staffed the kitchen and prepared sample food for visitors using the latest in canned goods, frozen foods and boxed mixes for the astounded audiences to taste\textsuperscript{157}. RCA-Whirlpool had a “Miracle

\textsuperscript{153} Masey and Morgan, 179.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid. 246.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 217.
\textsuperscript{157} Castillo, 142.
“Kitchen” that featured space age innovations such as a dishwasher that rolled on a track to the table, a free-ranging vacuum cleaner that happily whirled about the floor with a mind of its own and cabinets that raised and lowered themselves at the touch of a button (see image 48). Not every feature in the Miracle Kitchen was truly functional but the installed guides acted as if they were\(^\text{158}\).

The model urban apartment of an imaginary doctor’s family featured an efficient and up-to-date space in which Soviets could envision the urban life of an upper middle-class American (see image 49). The model apartment was one of the areas in the Jungle Gym that Nelson enthusiastically gave his personal attention to\(^\text{159}\). The apartment was furnished with the latest creations by Herman Miller, Frances Knoll, Paul McCobb and Edward Wormley. These top-of-the-line furnishings were seen as reasonable additions as it was assumed that the fictional family that lived there had, according to Nelson, “pretty sophisticated tastes and a pretty good income”. In fact, the fictional family had been allotted a yearly income of $12,000, twice the national average in 1959\(^\text{160}\). Seemingly a pet-project of Nelson, the model apartment received little press focus from either the Soviets or the Americans.

According to the results of voting booths placed throughout the grounds where visitors were asked to rank their favorite exhibits, the most popular kitchen at the exhibition was the one in the model home where Nixon and Khrushchev

\(^{158}\)Ibid, 166.
\(^{159}\)Ibid, 153.
\(^{160}\)Ibid, 154.
would butt heads on opening day\textsuperscript{161}. The kitchen was set in a six-room ranch style home with the decade's typical open floor plan, like the ones found in suburbs all over America. Nelson related that the home was meant to present a “less advanced taste”\textsuperscript{162}. Cleary not considering the model home to have the same cachet as the model apartment Nelson had little to do with the furnishing or design of the home. This particular model (the futuristic sounding X-61) had been donated by the Long Island builder All-State properties and was exactly like the ones that the company built in New York, Florida and Kentucky (see image 50). For the exhibition it was fashioned as belonging to a fictional family of four, the Browns\textsuperscript{163}. To accommodate the large crowds of Soviet visitors, designer Raymond Loewy and architect Andrew Geller were in charge of splitting the home down the center and inserting a ten-foot wide walkway down the middle\textsuperscript{164}. This earned the home the nickname of “Splitnik”\textsuperscript{165}.

Despite this necessary yet intrusive addition, the home was situated in such a way as to try and give visitors an accurate experience of American suburban life. As visitors approached the home they had to pass a mock curb and driveway where a Studebaker Lark and an AMC Rambler were parked\textsuperscript{166}. The interior of the home had been furnished by items all available for purchase through Macy's, though it was furnished at a budget of $5,000; almost half of the yearly income of a middle class

\textsuperscript{161} Massy and Morgan, 212.
\textsuperscript{162} Castillo, 154.
\textsuperscript{163} Massy and Morgan, 66.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} Carbone, 68.
family\textsuperscript{167}. The “Brown’s” kitchen was a bright yellow and white affair designed by General Electric (see image 51 and 52). It was stocked with appliances that would have been included back home in model X-61: “a built-in oven, countertop cooking unit, dishwasher, waste disposal, combination washer dryer, water heater and combination refrigerator freezer”\textsuperscript{168}. It was in this kitchen and through these items that the exhibition sought to expose Soviet visitors to a slice of daily American life. It was also in this kitchen that Vice President Richard Nixon would use the American kitchen, appliances and housewife to articulate to Premier Khrushchev the ideals of mid-century American culture\textsuperscript{169}.

Kitchen as Culture

Nixon: “I want to show you this kitchen...”
Khrushchev: “You Americans think the Russian people will be astonished to see such these things...”

Nixon and Khrushchev on entering the “Splitnik”\textsuperscript{170}

Khrushchev seemed to be in an especially combative mood when he and Nixon toured the exhibition on opening day. Never an easygoing man, his ire had, most likely, been raised only hours earlier by the actions of the US Congress. Nixon’s departure from Washington DC to Moscow had coincided with Congress passing the “Captive Nations Resolution”. Under the resolution the President was called on to issue a week of prayer for all those who lived “under communist tyranny.”\textsuperscript{171}. His

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{168} Carbone, 71.
\textsuperscript{169} Colomina, 244.
\textsuperscript{171} Marling, 272.
probable irritation at this led to almost anything and everything that Nixon pointed out to Khrushchev in the exhibition being met with disdain for the item and a condemnation for the system that allowed its creation and consumption.

When they entered the “Splitnik” his mood was no better (see image 53). The dishwasher was dismissed because the Soviets already had “such things”\textsuperscript{172}. The home may have been available to the average laborer but it would not last more than twenty years, whereas the Soviets “...build firmly. We build for our children and our grandchildren”. Appliances that were designed to ease the housewife’s work were meaningless to him, as “Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.”. Nixon fired back at Khrushchev’s dismissals, equally invested in winning the upper hand in this sudden debate\textsuperscript{173}.

Khrushchev was right when he said that the Americans wanted the Soviets to be “astonished” by what was in the model home, and by extension the entire exhibition. The items that were in each installation and model were picked because they were emblematic of the tenets of American life, the life towards which the Americans were trying to compel Soviet citizens. In his responses to Khrushchev’s barbs Nixon had to reveal how the items of daily American life stood for the American ideals. The home that Khrushchev dismissed as being poorly built would last longer than twenty years but that was no reason anyone would live there that

\textsuperscript{172} This was untrue. Soviet kitchens that appeared in exhibitions and world’s fairs were often inflated presentations of the kind of homes and appliances that everyday Soviets had access to. (Masey and Morgan, 149.)

\textsuperscript{173} History is divided on whether or not the Kitchen Debate was a chance occurrence or, if Nixon and his staff planned it. (Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann “Kitchens as Technology and Politics: An Introduction” in Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology and European Users, eds. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 8.)
long. Americans embraced the right to live the most modern life available: “after twenty years, many Americans want a new house or a new kitchen...the American system is designed to take advantage of new innovations and new techniques.”. Nixon deflected the statement that easing labor for women was somehow exclusive to capitalism. Americans were so committed to living the life of leisure for everyone that it was anyone who thought differently that was in the minority. He tried to make Khrushchev and communism seem out of touch in stating that the desire to ease women’s labor “is universal”. And, as to Khrushchev’s assertion that in Russia everyone was entitled to a house and was given one, the more important point for Americans was the ability to pick one’s own home, to exercise free choice from a wide range of options: “Diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different homes is the most important thing...we don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official. This is the difference.” For Khrushchev, everything about the model home and its kitchen was a trapping of “wretched excess and bourgeois trivia”\textsuperscript{174}. For Nixon, everything about the model home and its kitchen stood for the best parts of capitalism, democracy and America all rolled into one room: the ability of the American family to utilize the latest advances to live a leisurely life of their choice\textsuperscript{175}.

\textsuperscript{174} Marling, 243.
\textsuperscript{175} Following the Kitchen Debate the model home became a topic of popular conversation in the USSR and America. Russian newspapers lambasted the model home as a complete falsehood. From the American standpoint, the home was seen as an emblem of American triumph.. Following the opening of the exhibition and the Kitchen Debate, Macy’s sponsored the creation of replicas of Splitnik to be displayed in different cities in America; so that Americans could tour first-hand what had so shocked the Soviets. (Carbone, “Staging the Kitchen Debate”, 74.)
Conclusion:

It is fortunate that images and records exist of the American National Exhibition in Moscow and of the Kitchen Debate. Both help in creating an acid test in which to determine if the ideals of mid-twentieth century American culture that seem to be revealed in the articles and advertisements of the home magazines of the decade are correct. However, not all objects have such events or exchanges in which they play such a prominent role. But this should not exclude them from being the focus of academic study. My decision to study the kitchen space of the nineteen-fifties through antique magazines was ultimately due to my personal interest in both, not because there were two significant historical events tied to it that could act as verification. Though I do include them and feel they add support to my interpretations I would rather they had not occurred so I did not have to factor them in. They act as an unfortunate safety net that most studies of material culture cannot provide. This has the potential to lead to objects being rejected as topics of study; which should not be the case. With careful consideration most objects of everyday life can be read as records. They can record the time and place of their immediate creation and use as well as have an afterlife in which they can take on all new meanings. It is my hope that this thesis will provide support to the use of material culture as both a topic and tool of study.


Image 50: Exterior view of the Splitnik. Source: Greg Castillo, Cold War on the Home Front (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), viii.


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