Taste, Gender and the Home: Before and After Bourdieu

This chapter, which focuses on the concepts of taste, gender and the home, and the way they are considered in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, has been written from the perspective of the discipline of design history. That discipline emerged in Britain in the 1970s in response to the needs of design students in art schools who required a contextual education that was relevant to the professional practice for which they were being prepared. While early design historical enquiry focused on the birth of the design profession, and on ways of unpacking designed images and artifacts that went beyond the methodological limits of art historical scholarship, it quickly turned to the issue of consumption and thence to that of taste. By the 1980s, those design historians who were less committed to the idea of a taste hierarchy, which still preoccupied art historians, looked to Bourdieu and his account of taste rooted in the social sciences, to discover an appropriate way of discussing the subject.

Taste is not a static concept, however, but, rather, one that has been constantly re-defined over time. In order to understand how Bourdieu's work represented, and arguably, still continues to represent, a paradigm shift in the study of taste - one that is especially relevant to the history of the home and its decoration, and, by implication, to contemporary interior design practice - it is important to have an understanding of the key shifts in the meaning of the concept of taste, from the eighteenth century up to Bourdieu's account of the late 1970s.

The word 'taste' has sometimes been used on its own, as an absolute concept, as for example in the eighteenth-century idea of a 'gentleman of taste'. At other times the word has been attached to the epithets 'good' and 'bad', thereby containing a binary opposition within it. Those polar opposites were formed in the nineteenth century but have remained in place for some time, as evidenced, for example, in the title of Odd Brochman's 1955 text, 'Good and Bad Taste'. (Brochman 1955) The reasons for these varied uses of the word 'taste' are, I

would like to suggest, historically rooted. In the pre-industrial context, when only the aristocracy had the possibility of possessing and displaying artworks and luxury items in their interior settings, there was no need to add a qualifier to the term. In that context taste was a universally recognised, absolute value. In his 1995 book, *Bricobracomania: the bourgeois and the biblelot* Remy G. Saisselin explained that the nobility was expected to possess art as it both defined, and was inseparable from, their rank and social function, as well as with the ideas of landed wealth and lineage. (Saisselin 1985)

He also suggested that the fact that artworks were owned by the nobility conferred status upon them, not the other way round. Inevitably, though, once imbued with status symbolism, artworks went on to transfer it to their next owners. It was not inherent in the work, itself, however, Saisselin argued, but rather defined socially. With the arrival of industrialisation, and the extension to the middle classes of the ownership of art - to, that is, the possibility of large swathes of society engaging with taste - the artwork acquired the capacity to confer status on its owners. Redolent with associations from the earlier, more socially stable era, it brought those meanings into a new age characterised by social mobility and display.

As a result, as de Saisselin elaborated, the work of art, in that new context, was defined first and foremost by its marketability. It was transformed, as a consequence, into what he called a *bibelot*, that is, a decorative object destined for the nineteenth-century middle-class domestic interior. Indeed, it was in that interior that the bibelot acquired its full meaning. In that location the social status and the identities of its owners were formed, expressed and put on display. In short, taste could be bought in the marketplace and brought home.

Alongside that important shift of meaning for the artwork, according to de Saisselin, and importantly for the continually shifting definition of the concept of taste, the possibility of its mass production through the advancement of technology introduced the existence of both

unique, or authentic, art objects, and of factory-made *bibelots* that acted as substitutes for them. In turn that created a climate in which a body of reformers, led by A.W. N. Pugin, John Ruskin and William Morris, emerged to defend the idea of authenticity in the decorative arts and to condemn its polar opposite. In the process the concepts of 'good' and 'bad' taste came into being, the latter needed to distinguish itself from, and thereby validate, the former. Good taste became defined by what it was not, bad taste. That polarisation was discussed in numerous texts, including Pugin's *Contrasts* (Pugin 1898), and addressed by exhibitions, such as Henry Cole's *Chamber of Horrors*.[i] The assumption was that socially mobile, middle-class consumers needed to be educated about taste as they had not acquired that knowledge in their early lives. In the context of Bourdieu's later writings, they lacked the 'cultural capital', that was dependent upon education.

A dichotomy also emerged in the middle years of the nineteenth century between a realistic, pragmatic idea of the home that was linked to everyday middle-class values, and a more idealistic, aspirational version, seen, primarily, as a location for the reform of aesthetic and moral values that was being encouraged by the writers discussed above. The latter brought with it a new focus on the aesthetic content of the domestic interior and the artefacts within it.

While the Victorian writers concentrated on domestic objects – furniture and the decorative arts in particular – as the foci for their ideas about aesthetic and moral reform, the modernist architects and designers of the early-twentieth century, whose ideas were rooted in the functionalist ideas of the Bauhaus and of Le Corbusier and others, presented their discussions and proposals in the exclusive context of architecture. In both instances, however, the domestic interior – defined either by its material contents or, spatially, through its links with its architectural shell – became the site on which the fiercest battles about taste were fought.

That same battle was to come to a head in the growing tension in the later twentieth century between the interior decorator and the interior designer.

The interior designer was a post-Second World War product of inter-war architectural modernism, a movement that had, at first, set out to deny the very existence of the interior, tainted as it was for its protagonists by its associations with domesticity and taste. The European and American progressive architects and designers of the early decades of the twentieth century approached the interior rather differently from their nineteenth-century predecessors. They associated the concept of taste with femininity, bourgeois domesticity, fashion, decoration and conspicuous consumption. (Sparke 1995) In search of a means of side-stepping those phenomena, which they unanimously abhorred, they developed a modern architectural formula that looked to contemporary developments in science and technology, as well as to the public, rather than the private, sphere. The modernists saw the insides of their buildings as seamless extensions of their exteriors and went to great lengths to deny the existence of free-standing interiors that could confer status on their inhabitants.

In creating the inside spaces of their residential buildings (which they referred to as dwellings rather than homes to avoid associations with domesticity) they looked to the rational, production-oriented, process-focused new spaces of the factory and office that had been created with the help of scientific management engineers and space planners. From the work of Christine Frederick in the USA through to that of Ernst May, working with Grete Schütte-Lihotsky, in Frankfurt in the 1920s, the systematic approach of step-saving, of, that is, finding the quickest and most efficient means of undertaking work (a methodology that was first undertaken on factory floors) was applied to domestic kitchens. (Frederick 1913) The result was a new kind of domestic space planning that had function, rather than social status,

at its core. In many ways this was Bourdieu's concept of the 'taste of necessity' transformed into an aesthetic language that nonetheless denied its own aestheticism. (Bourdieu 1984; 173) This was interior design that, theoretically at least, operated outside the requirements of taste. What was at stake was the creation of an effective machine for living in and the encouragement of a life that valued simplicity, classlessness and social engagement over social status and aesthetics.

In spite of the attempts made by its perpetrator to minimise its existence, the modernist domestic interior did exist and it developed through the 1920s continuing to borrow from the public sphere in order to downplay its relationship with trade, consumption, femininity, bourgeois domesticity, and, most importantly, the concept of taste. Le Corbusier developed ideas about transparency, indoor/outdoor ambiguity and the use of industrial materials and fitted furniture in the home – all of which became aesthetic pre-requisites of the modern dwelling – as a means of emphasising his rejection of bourgeois domesticity. (**Fig. 1**) He also borrowed free-standing furniture pieces from outside the home, among them the chaise longue and the leather club armchair. (**Fig. 2**) He found the first in the tuberculosis sanatorium and the latter in the gentleman's club, both of which spaces ostensibly stood outside the remit of taste and served to reinforce the emphasis on functionality and public masculinity in the modernist home. (Sparke 2008)

This rather simplistic overview of the history of taste and its changing relationship with the domestic interior from the eighteenth century up to the inter-war years of the twentieth century, provides a broad historical backcloth for Pierre Bourdieu's basic proposition, outlined in his 1979 text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* that, 'tastes function as markers of "class"'. ((Bourdieu 1984: 3) His relational view of taste was

articulated within a post-modern paradigm that threw existing aesthetic value hierarchies into the air and sought, instead, a relative, socio-cultural explanation for what had hitherto been considered as either as an absolute truth or as a simple binary opposition. (Although, arguably he replaced that binary system with a tripartite one focused on three levels of taste – low-brow, middle-brow and high-brow).

The details of Bourdieu's analysis can be debated at length, and we can discuss endlessly whether or not the class boundaries that operated when he undertook his research in France in the 1960s still exist, or whether they have been superseded by something rather more complex that we might loosely call 'taste cultures', which operate both locally and globally; and whether the category of class needs to be joined by a range of other culturally-defined groupings. It is, however, worth revisiting Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* I would suggest, to see how he pushed the discussion about the modernist notion of 'no-taste' - which, as it was socially assimilated and inevitably became a style to be emulated in the marketplace, was quickly transformed into the idea of 'good taste'.

Whether or not Bourdieu's basic proposition holds up in the early twenty-first century remains up for grabs, but, although they have enriched it with discussions about taste cultures and the impact of globalisation, more recent studies have tended to continue to root themselves in his main premise. What I would suggest does remain entirely relevant today is Bourdieu's discussion about the domains of human existence and activity within which he believed tastes are exercised and manifested. For Bourdieu taste was embedded, above all, in the choices we make in the course of our daily lives. In his words, 'nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even "common"…or the ability to apply the principles of a "pure" aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration'. (Bourdieu

1984: 6) Indeed, his preoccupation with the aesthetic choices of everyday life was fundamental to his proposition.

Leaving to one side Bourdieu's strong interest in the areas of food and clothing/fashion this chapter focuses on what can be seen as a near-obsession with the idea of the home and its decorative contents. The potency of home for Bourdieu clearly lay in its visceral qualities and in his memories of childhood experiences (as indeed did his interest in food). He writes evocatively about the idea of 'naked' taste being present in the context of the home, explaining that, 'the social relations objectified in familiar objects impress themselves through bodily experiences which may be as profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpets [or] the thin clamminess of tattered, garish linoleum'. (Bourdieu 1984: 70) Those experiences relate most strongly to the sensations of touch (caress, clamminess) and to sight (beige, garish).

Bourdieu understood home decoration as a manifestation of another concept that remains highly relevant in the early twenty-first century, that is, 'life-style'. In turn, life-style, for Bourdieu, is the systematic product of what he calls 'habitus'. The way in which choices about the decoration of the home are made is indicative, for Bourdieu, of the level of aesthetic education of the choosers and of their need, or otherwise, to display that knowledge both to establish their own identities and to confirm their social status to others.

In the early twenty-first century the idea that an aestheticised home is only available to one class is clearly problematic. Given the plethora of widely available and easily absorbed information about the choices of aestheticised interiors – disseminated in (what the Americans call) 'shelter magazines', coffee table books, television programmes, store displays, home exhibitions and on internet sites – almost anyone can apply aesthetic discrimination to the decoration of their homes. This is combined with the wide availability

of cheap goods and decorative items, as well as with the fact that, in our post-post-modern context, many different, and equally acceptable, stylistic options are available in the marketplace, from modern, to retro to historicist to hybrid, among many others. (Guffey 2006) While a subtle level of differentiation and hierarchy undoubtedly underpins this huge diversity, it is harder to unravel than hitherto and, arguably, less exclusively linked to class differences.

Back in 1979, however, Bourdieu was able to make what he felt was a clear distinction between the domestic choices of a working-class woman and those of her middle-class equivalent. For him there was an important distinction to be made between what he called the 'taste of necessity' and the 'taste of liberty or luxury'. (Bourdieu 1984: 173) The latter was expressed, for instance in 'the decoration of a holiday home in the country'. (Bourdieu 1984: 56) This example was chosen because a second home indicates a level of luxury that goes well beyond necessity. Interestingly though, it is not the mere ownership of the second home that, for Bourdieu, expresses class values, but rather its choice of decoration.

To explain the distinction between the two kinds of taste, the first embraced by the working class and the latter by the middle class, Bourdieu noted that,

> Nothing is more alien to a working-class woman than the typically bourgeois idea of making each object in the home the occasion for an aesthetic choice, of extending the intention of harmony or beauty into even the bathroom or kitchen, places strictly defined by function, nor of involving specifically aesthetic criteria in the choice of a saucepan or a cupboard……..the rooms socially designated for "decoration"… are opposed to everyday places… and they are decorated in accordance with established conventions, with knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, a forest scene over the sideboard, flowers on the table, without any of these obligatory choices implying decisions of a search for effect. (Bourdieu 1984: 379)

From the perspective of the work on taste and gender that I have undertaken over the last couple of decades this passage throws up a number of issues that cause me to question Bourdieu's assumptions about class difference as it is played out in the expression of taste in home decoration. Firstly, he intuitively associated home decoration with women without overtly acknowledging the fact. For him it was an unproblematic given. Secondly, (and why should he given he was a social scientist) he showed no interest in the historical link, formed in the middle years of the nineteenth century, between gender difference and taste that can be seen to cut across, or at least operate in tandem with, the latter's relationship with class. In *As Long as it's Pink,* published back in 1995, I set out to track the links between gender and taste in the context of domesticity. What emerged from that study offers a way of accounting for what underpinned the domestic choices of working –class and middle-class women in the second half of the nineteenth century, and by implication, a slightly different reading of the relationship between the working-class and middle-class interiors that Bourdieu presents to us.

History tells us, or so I claimed in my book, that the choice of a middle-class domestic aesthetic emerged as a result of what historians have dubbed 'the separation of the spheres' that occurred in the middle years of the nineteenth century in a number of industrialising nations, including Britain. (Davidoff and Hall 2002) Specifically, it was the result of the need at that time on the part of the women, left in the home to create a comfortable sanctuary, both for the eye and for the body, and a safe place for nurturing children. For the most part, their male partners entered the public world of the paid workplace. The acquisition of 'knick-knacks' was the result, I argued, of the growth in manufacture of cheap goods and the desire on the part of the new middle-classes both to express their *arrivisme* and to inject beauty into their homes. That notion of 'beauty' was expressed through the decorative objects that covered every available surface in middle-class Victorian parlours. They were also seen as

educational tools, as were the multiple plants and flowers that filled the same spaces. (**Fig. 3**) The latter also served to retain a link with nature in newly-urbanised and suburbanised environments, and, along with the use of multiple textiles, a sense of softness in spaces largely populated by hard materials, such as wood and metal. Plants were also described in advice books of the time as companions to the sick and widowed, an aid to health and as representatives of God on earth. (**Fig. 4**) Above all the mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class parlour was an inward-looking space shut off from the outside world.

For a number of reasons, therefore, the now familiar language of Victorian domesticity quickly became the established convention that Bourdieu accurately observed as influencing the appearance of the working-class home he chose to describe. What he failed to remark on, however, was the important role played by women in its construction and, as a consequence, its intrinsically gendered, as well as class-related, nature. Arguably, also, give that, according to the means at their disposal, working-class women sought to emulate middle-class housewives, taste crossed classes rather than distinguishing them from one another.

This is not to say that Bourdieu was unaware of the different relationships that men and women have with their domestic environments. On the contrary, he seems to have been acutely aware of them. He stopped short, however, of offering an analytical frame for demonstrating that, in the formation of tastes, gender was an important agent working in tandem with class and that, to extend the statement at the beginning of this talk, tastes function not only as markers of class but also of gender. While I am focusing on the latter's relationship with taste in this chapter it should also be pointed out that adding gender to class as a driver of taste formation represents just one step forward in the more important process of seeing other classifying categories of groups of people – including those of age, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, location (both local and global), hobby-groups and many others - as

determinants of taste values and, in reverse, of expressions of taste functioning as markers of the distinctive and defining characteristics of those different social groupings.

Demonstrating that he was clearly *aware* of the gendered nature of tastes, even if he stopped short of using it as an analytical tool, in the section of the book where he provided examples of his fieldwork, Bourdieu referenced a quotation from *Madame Figaro*, describing an exotic 'cosy samovar-style bedroom' which contained 'a bed which suggests a gondola', and was inhabited by a certain Isabell d'Ornano, described as a sister-in-law of the Minister. She is quoted as saying, 'I know how I want to live. Decoration is a way of expressing it'. (Bourdieu 1984: 265) In sharp contrast, Jean L, a University teacher, is quoted as saying that he 'prefers 'sobriety' and 'discretion' and that he disliked 'fat cushions and heavy cushions'. (Bourdieu 1984: 268) However obvious, the highly gendered nature of those responses was clearly less significant, for Bourdieu, than the class differences between the two people in question.

The mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class interior was indisputably a feminised environment created by women, emulated by other women and, above all, representative of feminine interiority. Working class women undoubtedly aspired towards the same interior decorative schemes that were embraced by their middle-class equivalents (hence the knick-knacks and flowers in Bourdieu's domestic interior) but could not necessarily do more than include some key, albeit defining, features. Arguably the domestic interior can exist in a 'degree zero' state, with only a few of its key characteristics – a sofa and a plant, for example, being present. (**Fig. 5**) The idea that one class makes aesthetic choices and the other doesn't, seems to me to be doubtful. There is more likely simply a difference of degree and the capacity with which to express it. In the nineteenth century most working-class women worked outside the home and had less time available to them than middle-class housewives to engage in house crafts or to read the magazines and advice books (if indeed they could read), nor did they have the means by which to purchase as many knick-knacks.

Where domestic plants were concerned (my current research topic) a fern acquired in a local wood was seen as the equivalent of the middle-class, more expensive, exotic parlour palm, while the Wardian case was considered a 'poor woman's' conservatory. (**Fig. 6**) There was clearly a desire on the part of all sectors of society to include plants in their domestic decorative schemes, simply a difference of means with which to do it. In both cases, however, it was women who carefully positioned these plants in their home settings and nurtured them.

In the same section of the book in which he describes the approach of the working-class women who simply followed established convention, Bourdieu went on to define what he called 'bourgeois' formalism, the opposite, that is, of conventionalism. It implied that every choice in the construction of domesticity was aestheticised. He speaks, for example, about 'the art of the table' and 'the art of motherhood', heavily gendered concepts that had emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, dependent upon women as both objects and creators of beauty in the home. (Bourdieu 1984: 77) With the commodification of the home and its contents came a shift in emphasis from the ownership of a house as a status symbol to the ownership of beauty as a status symbol, as Bourdieu noted in his holiday home example.

Interestingly, while that pattern occurred first in craft-based goods destined for the domestic arena it was repeated in the early twentieth century in technological products, from cars to typewriters, destined for the public sphere. While in the early years of the century, for example, Henry Ford could sell a completely standardised, single –priced car to countless first time car owners, and ownership itself was sufficient to denote social status, a decade later General Motors had to offer a range of models at different prices to remain in business and it was the appearance of the cars that mattered.

Class aspiration may have underpinned the social mobility of the Victorian era but the ideal of feminine beauty clearly determined that of domestic taste. In turn, as it was predominantly women who exercised their taste in the domestic context, that taste functioned as a marker of gender. Bourdieu also failed to understand that home decoration is, for all classes, simultaneously, the expression of an ideal, an emulation of an existing 'model', and a lived-in reality. Jean Baudrillard understood the concept of the 'model interior' rather better when he explained in 1968, 'Leafing through such glossy magazines as *Maison Francaise* or *Mobilier et Decoration* one cannot fail to notice two alternating themes. The first reaches for the sublime, presenting houses beyond compare: old eighteenth-century mansions, miraculously well-equipped villas, Italian gardens heated by infra-red rays and Etruscan statues – in short the world of the unique, leaving the reader no alternative but contemplation without hope. Aristocratic models such as these, by virtue of their absolute value, are what underpin the second theme, that of modern interior decoration and furnishing'. (Baudrillard 2005) Baudrillard understood that the first both escapes the latter but is also somehow also contained in it, albeit, however, always inevitably falling short of it. Thus, while the working-class home with its knick-knacks and flowers only contained part of what it aspired to be, it nonetheless succeeded in fully representing it.

While nineteenth-century nouveau-riche women often found their models in the pages of women's magazines, or at the World's Fairs, the model of middle-class domesticity that they subsequently established was, in turn, experienced by servants and tradeswomen who set out to emulate it as best they could with the means at their disposal in their own homes. Thus the idea that the taste of working-class women is exclusively defined by necessity and convention, and that that of middle-class women embraces luxury and progressiveness, is flawed in my view. In the carefully regulated, albeit hugely mobile, class system of the second half of the nineteenth century, one class simply emulated the other in a Veblenesque

manner. (Veblen 2013 [1899]) Since the last decades of the twentieth century, of course, as taste groups are defined by more complex means, emulation can be upward, downward or, indeed, sideways.

Although the cluttered Victorian interior was originally linked with the idea of feminine interiority, like any visual language it could be, and was, frequently re-appropriated and it could acquire new meanings as required. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, it left the privacy of the home and entered the inside spaces of tea-rooms and restaurants, hotel lobbies, and railway waiting rooms and carriages. The simplest explanation for that phenomenon was that it accompanied middle-class women as they left their homes, went shopping and engaged in travel and entertainment in the public sphere. Ironically, at the same time as they acquired sufficient time in which to undertake home crafts, domestic manufacture was replaced by industrial production and women had to go outside to buy the commodities needed to create their domestic idylls. In order to make them feel safe and comfortable, and to encourage them to consume, their home interiors went outside with them. Even lunatic asylums were transformed into domestic parlours as a form a therapy for middle-class female patients.

Given his focus on taste in the context of daily life, Bourdieu's account of home decoration focused on consumption rather than on production. Arguably, though, if one accepts that the execution of home decoration is largely a process of emulating models, wherever they are to be found, then the boundary between production and consumption, and between the work of the amateur and professional, is profoundly blurred.

I would like to devote the last section of this essay to a brief account of the way in which the links between taste and the home led to the emergence of a particular kind of gendered creative practitioner – the interior decorator – who, as I hinted earlier, largely because of

issues relating to gender and choice of style, and the problems associated with the concept of taste, has been marginalised from the mainstream world of creative practice and its history. In the preface to a recent book of essays entitled, *After Taste,* that marginalisation was forcibly expressed, 'the field of interior design is inadequately served by its historical reliance on taste-making and taste-makers'. (Kleinman, Merwood and Weinthal 2012) This neo-modernist approach seeks, once again, to eradicate the notion of taste from the discussion of home decoration and re-enter a world in which there are no absolute concepts of taste, no binary oppositions and no relational ideas about it - indeed no taste at all. It is, I would suggest a delusional approach proposed by educators and practitioners who are in denial about their own levels of cultural capital and their own taste values.

As has been discussed, the aestheticisation of the middle-class interior, its links with feminine culture, and its role as an expression of newly-acquired social status and identity, were fully in place by the end of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century the interior decorator had emerged as the main agent tasked with maintaining the existence and continuation of those complex socio-cultural relationships. That new profession's role was to inject 'good taste' (the decorator emergd at a time when the binary divide was all-powerful and was indeed a product of it) – defined as period style (usually French) and aesthetic self-awareness into interiors whose inhabitants lacked the capacity or confidence to do-it-themselves. The emergence of a new professional role for middle-class women in this arena was an important component of this development. In the UK, for example, the cousins, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett, were among the first women to make a living for themselves by decorating other peoples' homes, while in the US women such as Candace Wheeler and a handful of others moved into the same space. (Ferry 2003)

The career of the pioneer American interior decorator, Elsie de Wolfe, is particularly interesting in this context. She played a key role in developing the commercial potential of the role of the interior decorator as a taste-maker. Having risen through the ranks of society herself from a fairly humble middle-class background (her father was a doctor and she was brought up in a New York brownstone which she had found ugly), and therefore acutely aware of the importance of the relationship between social aspiration and its material manifestations, she was well prepared for that role. Also, through her first career as an actress on the Broadway stage, she had learnt about the workings of the relationship between the stage set and the characters played out on it. She was quick also to understand how to transfer that knowledge to the domestic interior. In addition, in that her first interior project was undertaken in her own home in New York, she crossed the divide between the world of amateur feminine domesticity and that of professional interior decoration, blurring, in the process, the boundaries between them. As a result, she rapidly acquired a deep understanding of the ways in which the decoration of the interior could, through the application of taste, play a role in status and identity formation and dissemination, and the important part played by women in that process.

De Wolfe's preferred decorating style was eighteenth-century French. In developing an interior aesthetic that suggested an elevated social status for her clients she looked back to an era in which the notions of aristocracy, material luxury and taste (still an absolute concept at that time) had been inextricably intertwined. In early twentieth-century America, in the context of her second generation nouveau-riche clientele, the meanings of those styles remained unambiguous. However, although the styles she used recalled an era in which the concept of taste had been defined in absolute terms, de Wolfe's famous advice book of 1913, was entitled *The House in Good Taste,* rather than, as would have been more likely in the

eighteenth century, *'The House of Taste'.* In spite of their overt historicism, through their lightness and their brightness de Wolfe's interiors offered a modern alternative to those that had preceded them. In one sense, therefore, she was a reformer like Pugin and Cole before her. Where de Wolfe's spaces differed, however, was in their overt references to taste, gender and social class; in her lack of interest in their architectural shells (they were theatre sets); and in their strong interaction with the identities of their (usually female) inhabitants. Where de Wolfe was perhaps even more modern than many of her proto-modern contemporaries was in her understanding and acknowledgement of the role of (good) taste, and the part it played in her clients' decisions to employ an interior decorator. Through the inclusion of art objects in her interiors and her links with what in a masculine context was called 'collecting' but which, in the context of feminine culture, was dismissed as 'shopping', she displayed an intimate understanding of the workings of the taste system and the way in which interiors played a key role within it.

However, it was the idea of the absence of taste, which had defined the modernist domestic interior, that informed the vision of the interior designers who, born in the early post-Second World War years, took their lead from architectural modernism. They worked predominantly in the public sphere thereby side-stepping the idea of taste which was linked to the home. The interior decorator/ interior designer battle began in earnest in the 1940s and it continues to this day. The strong condemnation, on the part of many professional interior designers and interior design educators of the taste-driven approach to the interior that is adopted by many contemporary television programmes bears witness to this. In the early post-war years, decorators were condemned for their closeness to their clients, their traditionalism, their links with trade (several had shops) and, above all, for their overt commitment to 'good taste' as a means of expressing social status and identity.

In conclusion, I have tried to demonstrate that the class-based divide that Bourdieu described between the 'taste of necessity' and the 'taste of luxury' is not as clear-cut as he suggested it was, and that he overlooked the importance that gender, as well as class, played in that context. However, his focus on the home, in particular on its decoration, as a site of taste expression, remains hugely significant in discussions about taste in the early twenty-first century. If we take his proposition that taste is a socio-cultural construct, and his emphasis on the home, to their logical conclusions, and we combine it with the fact that we live in a highly mediated, post-post-modern world defined by fragmented and multiple identities, I would suggest that we have to accept the idea of the co-existence of multiple tastes and the interior designer's responsibility to design for them and to deal with the issue of taste overtly. This may make people trained within the modernist ethos deeply uncomfortable but, whether we like it or not, the enormous popularity of those television programmes about the home means that they must be doing something right.

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[i] Along with Richard Redgrave Henry Cole put together a display of exemplary goods in order to encourage the general public to demand well-designed goods. In the first room of the exhibit, which was dubbed 'The Chamber of Horrors', they showed a range of what they considered poorly designed products, among them a gas burner that resembled a convolvulus.