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Everyday Aesthetics in the Khrushchev-Era Standard Apartment

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The domestic and everyday, constituting the ‘private sphere’, are commonly regarded as ‘the part of life you have most control over’ and the least susceptible to ideological impositions (Wierling 1995: 151; Kelly 2001: xviii.). The production of the domestic interior has been treated in a range of disciplines as an exercise in the production of individual or class (in particular, middle class) identity. Studies of the modern western home widely assume that a reflexive relation between the individual and the home is a defining attribute of modernity and consumer society (Chevalier 1999; Gregson 2007; Hurdley 2007; Jackson and Moores 1995; Miller 1988, 1995, 2001). Indeed, the possibility of exercising agency and of what Wolfgang Braunfels calls ‘the freedom to participate in the design of one’s own urban living environment,’ is seen as essential both to making living space into ‘home’ and to making oneself (Braunfels 1988: 38, cited by Ruble 1993: 244; see also Hill 1991). Material, aesthetic and consumption practices are crucial to the production of self in domestic space, as Leora Auslander argues: ‘In consumer society, everyday aesthetic practices come not only to reflect the new “identities” of modernity, but also help to form people’s sense of self, of likeness and difference’ (2002: 300).

These ideas about the meaning of home privilege western democratic, capitalist contexts. The modern home which Erving Goffman, for example, envisaged...
as a key setting for the production of identity or ‘presentation of self’ in his 1956 account, was a middle class house in 1950s Britain or North America (1956: 17-25). The everyday setting I shall discuss here, however, is the interior of prefabricated one-family apartments that were constructed on a mass scale in the Khrushchev-era Soviet Union, shortly after Goffman’s study. Did these standard flats on Soviet housing estates of the 1960s become a site for the production of self and personal meaning in socialist modernity?

This paper will address only one small, mundane aspect of this large question: display cupboards. What I present here is a ‘case’ study – literally, in that it focuses on the cases for people’s domestic displays. It draws on a research project on *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat* which concerns how people made home in the 1960s in the standard spaces of separate apartments built under Khrushchev. Some 108 million people – half the population of the USSR – moved out of overcrowded slums into new housing between 1956 and 1965, many of them into separate apartments with ‘mod cons’. The process was accelerated by a mass industrialized housing campaign launched in 1957 (Andrusz 1984: 178, table 7.5; Sosnovy 1959: 1-21; Taubman 2003: 382; Zhukov 1964: 1). The new apartments were not private property, yet they afforded the tenants greater ‘privacy’ in the sense that they no longer had to conduct the intimate parts of their lives under the gaze of strangers (Field 2007; Siegelbaum 2006). At the same time, however, standard construction increased state control over, and homogenization of, living space, as the party state intervened in housing conditions. While providing ‘private’ (segregated) spaces for individual families, the *khrushchevki*, like many twentieth-century housing projects, were also conceived as a means of social engineering (Khazanova 1991: 81). In addition to the physical structures and planning of urban space, which (on Marxist principles reinvigorated in the Thaw) were supposed to organize residents’ consciousness and relations, extensive efforts were made to shape discursively – through advice and visual representations – the way people took up occupancy, and how they furnished and dwelled in their industrially built, standard apartments (Reid 2005, 2006a, 2009a). The research project investigates the spaces for individual agency within these given, anonymous structures over which the ‘actors’ had limited influence, addressing the relations between centrally-planned, mass-produced spaces and things, on one hand, and decentralized, individual consumption choices, uses, domestic aesthetics, and hand-making, on the other. Exploring how people accommodated the physical and discursive structures of housing and homemaking, and paying special attention to everyday aesthetics and consumption, the research project identifies ways in which these individuals used them as the setting and material for the production of their social selves. Thereby it reflects on how the historical processes of urbanization, modernization and social transformation, which entered a new, intense phase after Stalin, were experienced by ordinary individuals.

The research project also seeks to adjudicate between two contradictory narratives concerning social processes in the Soviet Union after Stalin. There is no space here to do more than state these briefly, at risk of oversimplification. On one hand there is an extension and elaboration of the cold-war tendency to deny the Soviet people any freedom for manoeuvre and agency,
depicting them as a passive, faceless mass, duped by authority and cowed into submission to an all-pervasive state, and to see the regulatory power of the state as extended and perfected. On the other hand is the thesis of increasing separation of public and private life. Vladimir Shlapentokh has argued that the mass relocation to separate apartments in the new urban housing regions, in combination with other innovations that began in this period, such as ownership of television sets and private cars, was responsible for social shifts that came to fruition in the Brezhnev era which he designates the ‘privatization’ of life (Shlapentokh 1989: 153–64). The thesis of a retreat from public values into private life has now acquired the status of orthodoxy concerning the Brezhnev era and has become part of the standard explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Compelling as it is, this is premature, since much work remains to produce evidence for this privatization and to define its nature and parameters. The project attempts to mediate between the two models by treating homemaking as a mutual process of accommodation between residents and standard housing, whereby they made themselves at home (Miller 2002).

In the specialists’ efforts to shape the way citizens made home in their new apartments a central role was assigned to aesthetic criteria. The new homes were to be furnished and decorated beautifully and tastefully. The definition of beauty and good taste was not to be left to the lay homemaker’s subjective and untutored inclinations, however, but was highly normative. Through popular publications and lectures, exhibitions, and schools, intelligentsia aesthetic specialists tried to educate mass taste to ensure that the new interiors would not become ‘museums of bad taste’ but would conform to their own modernist principles of rationality, moderation and fitness for purpose in accordance with what they called the ‘contemporary style’ (for detail see Reid 1997, 2006b, 2009a). Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of habitus and cultural capital may, to some extent, help us understand the power relations at play here. As he insists, aesthetic sensibilities are not absolute and disinterested but produced in social and material relations; meanwhile the idea of the transcendence of the aesthetic masks the ways it serves these interests, helping to maintain and reproduce those relations (Bourdieu 1984). Thus taste is central to the production and reproduction of social stratification. An analysis of the problems of applying Bourdieu’s analysis to mid-century Soviet society lies beyond our scope here (for a critique of Bourdieu’s applicability to the Australian case, see Bennett 1999: 8–23). However, the relatively stable ‘legitimate culture’ he presupposes in regard to France, correlating to a clear and stable system of class and privilege, was not to be found in the Soviet Union. There, the decades since the Bolshevik Revolution had been marked by intensive redefinition of social and cultural hierarchies and processes of upward and downward social mobility along with fundamental shifts in the markers of taste and culturedness. While the definition and possession of ‘culture’ (kul’turnost’) and taste were central to processes of social stratification, what counted as taste was subject to redefinition and renegotiation in different periods. During the Stalin era kul’turnost’ had played an important role in social mobility and the formation of a new ‘middle class’ of managers and professionals. Many members of the new elite came from working class and peasant
origins and were not born with cultural assets; having to acquire cultural skills tastes and lifestyles as a marker of their elite position in society, they emulated the styles of pre-revolutionary upper classes (Fitzpatrick 1992, 1999: 82-83; Kelly 2001).

During the Khrushchev era, however, as part of the process of de-Stalinization, the privileges of the Stalinist ‘middle class’ and their claim on the definition of culture came under attack from the artistic intelligentsia who sought to assert their superior claim to define standards of taste. The interior furnishings of the Stalinist elite – and the corrupting effects their aesthetic of excess was supposed to have exercised on popular taste and aspirations – were pilloried as emblematic of their ‘petit bourgeois’ values, excesses and corruption. Thus the taste war in the late 1950s may be seen as a form of ‘class struggle’ for hegemony by a sector of the intelligentsia against the upwardly mobile bureaucratic middle class privileged in the Stalin era. The latter cast the former as uncultured parvenus; the aesthetic specialists’ arrogation of the prerogative to define taste may be seen as a claim for their own status and authority in post-Stalinist Soviet society.

Yet even as they asserted their cultural power, the aesthetic specialists had only limited jurisdiction in peoples’ homes. While architects and planners set the parameters of the new housing, and other specialists sought to shape the ways in which women (still assumed to be the chief homemakers) made home in the new flats, they were dependent on individual householders to materialize the norms of the ‘contemporary’ aesthetic. Would – or indeed could – ‘ordinary’ homemakers fashion their everyday lives in accordance with their reformist aesthetic norms?

Sources for this research project include archival documents from the 1950s and 1960s, as well as published images and texts about consumption and home decorating. However, as is often the case for research on the everyday, conventionally historical (written, printed and archived) sources are of limited use here. With some exceptions such as citizens’ letters or comments in visitors’ books, they tend to return us to policies and specialist discourses, centralized standards, regulations, designs and production plans, rather than illuminating the ways in which those impersonal structures were accommodated in individual practice in ‘private’ space. Thus they reinforce the emphasis, in cold-war Western views of the Soviet Union, on high-level blueprints rather than individual agency, and on determining structures rather than the ‘freedom to participate in the design of one’s own urban living environment’ (Braunfels 1988: 38, cited by Ruble 1993: 244). To find de-centred, popular consumption, informal exchanges, and do-it-yourself practices, which may or may not challenge this model, we have to turn to other sources such as oral history interviews and material culture.

Semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted between 2004 and 2006 with residents of Khrushchev-era flats in a number of cities of the former Soviet Union: St Petersburg; Kaluga; two cities on the Volga, Samara and Kazan; Kovdor and Apatity in the Far North, which were new cities in the postwar period; and the Estonian university city, Tartu. The ideal informants had moved into khrushchevki as young adults in the early 1960s when the apartments were newly built, and, now elderly, still lived there at the time of the interview. Almost all were women, with the
exception of a few couples and some male collectors, both because the aim was to speak to the person who took responsibility for arranging and maintaining the domestic interior, a role that was conventionally female, and because of the demographic fact that more women than men have survived into their seventies and eighties. The interviews took place in their apartments and focused on domestic things, around which autobiographical stories were drawn out.

The informants were socio-demographically diverse, including former peasants with only elementary schooling, low-paid factory or construction workers, and urban intelligentsia with PhDs, the latter belonging to the same social stratum as the architects and other specialists who sought to set the taste norms and define the parameters of people's everyday lives in the new flats. We can hypothesize that such subjects were more likely to be at ease with the valorized aesthetic and to have the cultural know-how to realize it in their own homes, demonstrating confident mastery of the cultural competencies and practicing the finer points of the 'contemporary' aesthetic as exemplified in model interiors shown at exhibitions and illustrated in the print media.

The data production also included photographing individual things and arrangements in the interior today as material for visual analysis. Clearly such evidence has to be used with care. It prioritizes that which is visible at the time of the interview, yet aside from the problem that homes are not museums, some of the most cherished items are not displayed but hidden away (a locket worn close to the heart, a special box kept in a clothes drawer) or exist only in memory. They do not constitute part of the self that the informant chooses to present to others.

Access to the everyday and ordinary invariably has to be opened up via the occasional and extra-ordinary, given that historians are largely reliant on data produced at the time, for it is the special moments that people record, store away, and recall in their own lives.4 We tried initially to open conversations by asking to see old photographs of the interior taken when the informants first moved in, but few had photos where the interior was the main object, although it may sometimes be glimpsed as the backdrop to a family occasion. Among the exceptions I have two snapshots (undated, probably 1970s) featuring cabinets in Khrushchev-era flats. In one, a woman opens the glass door of the cabinet as if to take china from it to lay the table. In the other, the cabinet forms the backdrop for a family scene. The photos are out of focus, black and white, and uninformative. But even such unremarkable contemporary photographic 'documents' of the interior are a rarity in the albums of former Soviet citizens. Although photography was a popular hobby and was taught in neighbourhood clubs and Pioneer Houses, camera ownership was far from universal in the sixties. In addition, the apartments were small and dimly lit, making it difficult to take successful photographs of anything other than details. Above all, the absence of the interior from the photographic record was a matter of priorities when film had to be bought and developed. Even if there was a keen amateur photographer in the household he (usually) was more likely to take photographs of people or nature than of the domestic interior.5 (Perhaps this is a matter of the conventional gendering of photography; we can only speculate whether, had women wielded the camera, they would have taken more photos of the interiors they produced and main-
People did not take photos of their everyday, routine activities, nor of the taken-for-granted settings that represented the constant environment of domestic life (or if they did they rarely pasted them into their albums for posterity), but of special occasions that punctuated the flow, and the presence of guests (Narskii 2008).

It is not that the new domestic interior was lacking in visibility at the time. Both positive images of the ‘contemporary’ interior of the small separate apartments under construction in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and negative representations of the regressive ‘petit-bourgeois’ domesticity it was supposed to supplant were ubiquitous in visual culture and authoritative discourse. 

Khrushchevki interiors were widely depicted in film and print media as well as on television. These were ideal homes, however: normative interiors designed by professionals with the aim of reforming and modernizing people’s received aspirations and practice. A handful of such interior settings in the ‘contemporary style’, produced for specific competitions and exhibitions, were photographed and appeared repeatedly in albums, popular magazines and specialist journals. Miniature modernist utopias of sophisticated contemporary taste, cleanliness and order, representing the unpopulated vision of specialists, they are aloof from the mess and compromises of everyday living. The interiors that ordinary people produced over time – as they gradually accommodated the new flats to their needs, taste, and sense of themselves, as they grew better off, and as the availability of consumer goods increased – remained largely unrecorded.

The photographs, out of focus as they are, dramatize the cabinet; and it is glazed cabinets or sideboards, along with their place in Soviet people’s practices of making themselves at home, that I will bring into focus in the remainder of this paper. Even these photographs are not quite ‘everyday’: the fact that the cabinet was photographed at all indicates that it was at least momentarily the object of special attention, perhaps a new acquisition. Moreover, domestic display cases occupy a liminal position in relation to everyday functions. Special things and events, slightly removed from routine and necessity, are points where material practices in the home become more conscious, aestheticized, and invested with meaning (Csikszentmihalyi and Rocheberg-Halton 1981; Woodward 2001; Hurdley 2007; Makovicky 2007). In my project, interviewers asked (inter alia) about things that were especially valued or meaningful to the informant, what they used to decorate the home or to create ‘uiut’ (homeliness), and about what they thought were generally considered ‘prestigious’ or ‘fashionable’. The cherished items are very often collected and displayed in the cabinet or equivalent and serve as starting points and props for their narratives.

A cabinet of contradictions

The cabinet’s presence in the khrushchevka materializes a number of contradictions between prescribed norms and practice in the 1960s. This single item of the interior allows us to explore both the axes of the public/private dichotomy which Jeff Weintraub distinguished: first, what is particular or pertains only to an individual, versus what is common, collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals; and second what is
hidden or withdrawn versus what is open, revealed, or accessible (Weintraub 1997: 4-5; see also Kharkhordin 1997: 333-363). We are concerned with how the apartment could become particular, such that it both 'reflected' and constituted the identity of the occupants; and with how aspects of those lives were concealed or revealed: the management of appearances or selective 'private publicity' (Gerasimova 2002). This private publicity does not necessarily entail rejection of what is common or mass-produced, but the appropriation or assimilation of such material into personally meaningful collections and its aesthetic arrangement, whereby mass-produced material becomes part of the narrative of self (Boym 1994; Miller 1988). The things to be found in cabinets largely conform to a limited, conventional repertoire of objects. (Similarly, in mid-century Great Britain the Mass Observation Project found that there were certain types of things one could expect to find on a mantelpiece, see Attfield 2000, 2007; Hurdley 2006; Leal 1990). On Weintraub's second axis, privacy is constituted not by concealment alone but by discretion over what is concealed and what is revealed in what circumstances and to whom. Domestic display – as the management of appearances, the other half of which is concealment – plays a part in the construction of privacy and the presentation of individual or household identity for the limited ‘public’ allowed over the threshold.

The desire to particularize standard space does not necessarily imply the rejection of public values or a retreat from participation. The self one makes at home is not hermetic or pre-social, but a social identity, and domestic display is a social practice, a form of intersubjective communication and culture that makes use of common codes. The contents of domestic displays – and narratives about them – are very often about relationships, both within and beyond the household; they are social performances in a space somewhere between the public and the private, personal and collective, individual and common (Bal 1994; Hurdley 2006, 2007; Miller 1988).

What, for convenience, I am calling a ‘cabinet’ embraces a number of types of cupboards that combine hidden storage for linen and clothes with open glazed shelves. The top of the cabinet, which in this period was around five feet high, was also used for display. Galina (St Petersburg) talks about the qualities she values in her sideboard [servant]:

Interviewer: What was beautiful about it?
Galina: Firstly it was fine wood, not chipboard, of course. Secondly, it was terribly convenient, with an incredible number of these little drawers, little shelves and also some kind of little doors. You could get a load of stuff into it.

Galina slips fluidly from the appearance of the cabinet itself – its fine wood – to its function in managing the visual appearance of the interior. Its aesthetic value consists in the order and hierarchy it imposes on domestic things by combining the functions of display and concealment.

An item of furniture of this sort is almost ubiquitous in the Khrushchev-era separate flats in my sample, located against one wall of the zal or oshchaia komnata (‘common’ or living room). Many of these cabinets date stylistically from the 1960s, although in some cases they have been replaced by the larger floor-to-ceiling
stenka (literally ‘little wall’) that became desirable and available in the 1970s. Much of the discussion in the interviews circulates around ‘special’ things located in or on the cabinet or sideboard, which elevates, frames and stages them and affords them VIP protection (see also Hurdley 2007: 124). The cabinets today contain books and more recent acquisitions for home entertainment such as videotapes; photographs, postcard-size art reproductions and greetings cards, certificates or official letters of congratulation (for work or social service); a small toy or craft object made by a child; souvenirs, porcelain figurines; and, most commonly, tableware, both ceramic services and gilded or cut glassware. The top of the cabinet presents framed photos, crystal vases, artificial flowers, radios or clocks, and the cabinet’s entourage on the walls around it including works of art and craft and photographs. These items and the relations between them (spatial, chronological, and associative) play an important role in narrating the self and merit separate analysis, but here space only permits us to focus on the furniture that frames them.

The presence, in the khrushchevka interior, of such equipment for controlling the proliferation of things and for managing appearances is noteworthy, for it contravenes the prescriptions of the specialists; it exemplifies the contradictions between, on the one hand, the ideal material environment they envisaged, and, on the other, the realities of Soviet production, received popular consumption practices, taste and notions of what made a proper home. Thus it demonstrates the limits of their jurisdiction, suggesting that people were not listening when they propounded their new norms of taste and rational, hygienic living. It also reveals a more complex negotiation between sometimes contradictory structures, dispositions, norms and prohibitions, for example, between the modernist principles promulgated by reformist specialists after Stalin’s death and the ‘structuring structure’ of *habitus* and unconscious hold of tradition which for many, especially first-generation urban dwellers, still held sway.

The origins of the cabinet or commode were associated historically with the birth of the private bourgeois individual and the separation of the public and private spheres. The display and status functions of the bourgeois home were concentrated in this item of furniture, which was the ‘primary display of bourgeois self-fashioning’ (Boym 1994: 151, 325-326; Buchli 1999: 4-5). Judy Attfield has argued that the glazed china cabinet ubiquitous in mid-twentieth century British interiors served as a vestigial ‘front parlour’; as architects began to design mass housing with modernist open plan interiors, it compensated for the loss of the spatial separation necessary for maintaining appearances and defining relations with visitors to the home (Attfield 2007: 158).

In the standard plan of Khrushchev-era apartments, the collapse of the separation between front and back went even further. The new breed of Soviet architects that came to the fore with Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s ascent aspired to approximate the open plan – a key feature of international modernist architecture – to the limitations of still experimental prefabrication technology and to the requirements of maximum economy and small scale. The single undivided space of the ‘general room’ or *zal* (around 18 m²) had to serve a range of domestic functions, from sleeping to receiving guests. In one-room apartments all household members shared a single space for these functions. In a two or
three-room apartment the zal additionally served as a passage between back rooms and entrance-service area, because corridors were eliminated in favour of an enfilade arrangement of rooms both to save space and costs and to achieve something like the modernist ideal of the open plan (Attfield 1999: 73-82). We do not have contemporaneous ethnographic data on how the plan was experienced by those moving in, but certain aspects such as the ceiling height, enfilade and bathroom arrangement were commented on, often critically, in public consultations and visitors’ books when model apartment plans were shown to the public at the Construction Pavilion of the All-Union Exhibition of Economic Achievements (VDNKh) in 1959-61. Recipients of these new flats were unlikely to have missed a parlour they had never even dreamed of; for most, the new flats meant more not less privacy and greater possibility to differentiate spaces, as compared with barracks or communal apartment from which they came. Most of my informants vividly recall their euphoria on receiving a new apartment, which seemed to them like a palace. Only in relation to the living conditions of a privileged elite and an aspirational ideal could it be perceived as a loss of functional segregation.

Nevertheless, to impose order and hierarchy on things and manage the relations between visibility and concealment was essential not only in case of visitors but to maintain propriety among household members using the same space. The legitimacy of display and of items of décor and furnishing whose primary function was dedicated to appearance rather than function and to concealment rather than transparency was, however, in question. Already in the 1920s the cabinet’s predecessor, the buffet or gorka (sideboard) had been condemned by zealous campaigners for the new Soviet way of life (novyi byt), because it stood for values antithetical to socialism: petit-bourgeois consciousness, individualism, the cultivation of the private sphere, competitive social display and class aspirations (Buchli 1999: 89).

Yet despite its alien class background and tainted associations with the bourgeois commodity and private life, as Sveta Boym notes, the cabinet in some form survived successive waves of modernist efforts to expunge it from the home (Boym 1994: 152). Ideal representations of the ‘cultured’ interior in the early 1950s show it dominated by a tall piece of furniture, elaborately carved, with drawers or cupboards below, a ledge at waist height covered with an embroidered cloth when not in use for serving food, and above, shelves protected by glass. The cabinet or sideboard remained an essential item of domestic equipment for representing the kul’turnost’ of the household, used to display treasured family possessions associated with eating, drinking and hospitality. Along with the etagère or whatnot, these two items of furniture were, according to Buchli, the primary vehicles for displaying ‘the private day-to-day prosperity of the immediate household, further expressing the interiority of the domestic realm’ (1999: 91). In practice, according to Boym, even in communal apartments the cabinet or commode remained a site of personal pride and ‘a display of one’s externalized interior and of the desire for individuation’ (1994: 151).10

In the Khrushchev era, as millions moved into new apartments, everything the cabinet stood for came
under concerted attack, once again, from modernizing aesthetic specialists acting for the party-state. Decoration and display fell into disrepute along with the Stalinist style of architecture and interior decoration, which Khrushchev denounced in 1954 in favour of industrialized construction. The rejection conflated morality with aesthetics: ornament was cast as crime, just as Austrian modernist Adolf Loos had pronounced half a century earlier. The reform of byt (everyday life) was both about introducing new, modernist principles and about rejecting the past, Stalinist as well as pre-revolutionary. For reformers, display and non-functional decoration represented aspects of Stalinism from which the Khrushchev regime had to distance itself: wasteful extravagance and excess, privilege (associated with the concentration of resources on a few high-profile extravagant projects at the expense of mass housing), sham and cover-up. In their place reformers promoted modernist values: a transparent, ‘honest’ relation between function and form, structure and surface appearance.

The new aesthetic morality was not limited to the work of professional architects in designing the plan and elevation of buildings. Reformist specialists also sought to extend it into the ‘private’ interior produced by amateurs. The modernist ‘contemporary style’ of interior decorating which they promoted called for maximizing open space, transparency and simplicity. Residents should only have the minimum of utilitarian, preferably multifunctional things in their apartments; only built-in storage was deemed necessary or appropriate in the new flats because the new Soviet person was supposed not to encumber himself with fetishized, superfluous material possessions. Both to ‘reflect’ this situation and to engineer it, free-standing cupboards of any sort were omitted from ideal interiors such as those shown at the 1961 exhibition of model room settings ‘Art into Life’ (Iskusstvo – v byt). Soviet viewers of the exhibition complained, however, about the lack of cupboards and asked where they were supposed to store things. Some architects and taste specialists also acknowledged that their jurisdiction was limited because, in the end, the domestic interior was produced by amateur homemakers. Moreover, new residents would and even should - want to attend to the aesthetics of their interior and would legitimately wish to particularize it, whereby the aesthetic element was identified with decorative, non-functional touches that transcended necessity and routine. It was also acknowledged that, along with provision of new homes, Soviet citizens needed consumer goods to furnish and equip them.

Official statistics indicate a steep increase in possession of most categories of furniture in the late 1950s-mid 1960s, which is symptomatic of a general rise in consumption and living standards, of which the mass move to new housing was an important part. Notwithstanding taste reformers’ equally categorical repudiation of domestic display and their mission to inculcate ascetic, modernist ‘good taste’ in the masses, an item of furniture whose primary function was the management of appearances was part of the standard inventory produced or imported in the 1960s. Indeed, according to figures for the RSFSR cited by Steven Harris, production of bufety and servantsy rose by 425% between 1957 and 1961, and around half of urban households might have possessed one (Harris 2003 Appendix 1, Table 26, 566; Table 14, 492). While statistics do not
distinguish according to style or model, it is likely that
the increase was accounted for partly by low, light-
weight furniture types in the contemporary style, whose
introduction was part of a radical overhaul of furniture
design and technology aimed at facilitating mass
production. The rise in production indicated by official
statistics is supported by my informants’ recollections
of acquiring new cabinets within a decade of moving
into khrushchevki, that is, in the 1960s. Their remem-
bered periodization is corroborated by the stylistic
evidence of cabinets in the simple, stripped-down
contemporary style which still stand in many homes
today (Boym 1994: 153). Soviet consumers started
buying low sideboards with a glass-fronted shelving
unit mounted on top, or a cupboard that combined
storage concealed behind doors with open, glazed
shelves. Later, beginning in the 1970s, as it was offi-
cially acknowledged by sociologists that Soviet house-
holds had more and more possessions and needed
somewhere to store them, the cabinet was sometimes
superseded by the newer furniture type, the floor-to-
ceiling stenka (Baranov 1969: 15).

Continuity or change?

Thus, even as specialists conducted their modernist
campaign against show, sham, accumulated clutter, and
commodity fetishism in the name of the communist
way of life, the material equipment for display was
designed, produced, and consumed. The glazed
contemporary style cabinet or sideboard became an
almost ubiquitous item of furniture in the zal of the
separate apartment, an essential piece of equipment for
making home and maintaining order there, and a
‘normal’ expectation and attribute of decent living.
Domestic production was swelled by imports, intro-
ducing to the Soviet Union furnishing types established
for bourgeois consumption in interwar Germany and
Czechoslovakia. Imports accounted for a number of
those in the interiors examined in this study, especially
those in St Petersburg. Furniture from the Baltic
Republics was also desirable.

Soviet reformers, first in the 1920s and again in the
Khrushchev era, accused the bufet of representing
continuity with the past. This had more to do with the
practices and aspirations it represented than with the
survival of a particular representative of the category. It
is true that in regard to the contents they harboured
they may also have represented constancy, permanence,
and settledness to their owners (as positive values rather
than as regrettable vestiges of a bourgeois past that
should have been rooted out) since they protected
precious and fragile things such as fine glassware or
china from damage. A number of my informants’
cabinets contained pre-revolutionary Lomonosov or
Kuznetsov services or the last remaining pieces of
former sets, sometimes heirlooms and markers of their
families’ former propertied, upper middle-class status
before the Revolution. Thus they represent an alterna-
tive identity from the Soviet ones they had lived (a fairy
tale of hidden nobility, princesses disguised as paupers).
Galina tells of her grandmother’s porcelain and art
nouveau objets d’art. Some indicate the significance of
complete sets, suites or services that had survived, which
they say counted as luxury or as prestigious.

However, in regard to the 1960s cabinet installed in
khrushchevki, we should question whether this item of
furniture represented continuity and memory or, on the contrary, change: a new way of life, and a new role for the ‘private’ interior in the construction of identity associated with the development of a Soviet form of modern consumer society. As far as the production and availability of cabinets is concerned, this was a new departure rather than a continuation of established practice. The fact that a new type of cupboard to fit the dimensions and aesthetics of the new apartments was designed and manufactured is significant, for in the planned economy the odds were stacked against innovation. Production of the contemporary style cabinet, as of other new products, required new state standards to be approved, new machinery to be installed, resources and quotas to be written into the economic plan. Similarly, import of foreign furniture, even from Comecon countries, required special agreements and reciprocal arrangements.

Nor can consumption of this item of furniture and its presence in the new apartments be ascribed to passive reproduction of past practices. The resilience or, rather, perpetual recurrence of the display cupboard in Soviet homes cannot simply be explained by inertia, habitus, or continuity. First, as noted, the presence of a sideboard in Stalin-era representations was an ideal of cultured living rather than a mass reality (although it is quite possible that many aspired to it), and the likelihood of possessing a cabinet of some sort also varied with socio-demographic category. Many families living in communal apartments and barracks lacked not only this item of furniture but any space to put it. In the 1950s, if Soviet citizens had a sideboard it was more likely to be a pre-revolutionary piece than a Soviet-era product given the low level of furniture production before the introduction of the contemporary style at the end of the decade. However, it did not necessarily have deep personal associations or represent continuity with a family past. Given the repeated dislocations in the lives of my informants, it was at least as likely to have been salvaged off a dump as to have been passed down carefully from generation to generation (there are many accounts, both in my interviews and elsewhere, of how even fine antique furniture was abandoned in this period and how people acquired their furniture off the street). Second, the cabinets in new flats are not the same pieces of furniture as in Stalin-era representations but, as indicated above, new items manufactured in the 1960s in the contemporary style, often using newly developed industrial serial production processes and man-made materials. Third, when moving into the new apartments my informants rarely brought old furniture with them or aspired to continue their old furnishing practices, feeling they were inadequate – born of necessity and poverty – or that they betrayed their rural origins. If they brought an old metal bedstead to the new apartment, for example, many soon replaced it by the new furniture type promoted as part of the contemporary style interior: the divan on a wooden frame, which doubled as bed and settee.

In this regard, if not in others, homemakers’ practice matched the specialists’ blueprints, although less from obedience than for their own reasons. When the new, small, plain apartments began to be built, the accompanying advice called to leave everything behind and move in unencumbered by the material culture and values of the past. Even without paying attention to this ubiquitous message – and my informants generally
deny any awareness of advice on interior decorating—they almost all state that they moved in with nothing. The reasons they gave varied. A few cases conformed involuntarily to authoritative discourse: the old furniture was too heavy, too cumbersome, too tall. Style and a sense of fashion—that one should move with the times—also figure. Some shared the specialists’ view that a tall and ornately hand-carved sideboard was aesthetically inappropriate in the low-ceilinged, minimalist interior. Similarly, they recall how the etazherka went out of favour by the 1960s, although many remember this as an essential aspect of homemaking in the 1950s. The rejection of practices perceived as rural, backward, and old fashioned is especially marked in relation to material practices of displaying photographs in the interior.24

The contemporary style, as promoted in publications and exhibitions, called for smooth contours without dust-catching mouldings, for openness, transparency and free space, and only the minimum necessary things. Some informants (mostly with higher education) reproduce aspects of the modernist criteria when explaining their choices: they wanted spaciousness and disliked clutter or things that caught dust.25 A number speak of a desire to divest themselves of things (although this may have more to do with the process of renunciation as they near the end of their lives rather than reflecting their attitude back in the 1960s). Nataliia (St Petersburg) is made anxious by her accumulated stuff.26 Others fear their collections of clutter cast them in a bad light in the interviewer’s eyes, and refer repeatedly to the need to get rid of them. Conversely, Diliara, a top scientist and Party secretary in Kazan, conveyed a strong sense of satisfaction, self-determination and control over the conditions of her own life in her interview, which corresponded to the uncluttered space of her interior where everything had its place and its function in her life.27

Popular practices often contradicted the normative injunctions of reformist professionals, however. Even those who claim they brought nothing sometimes perpetuated traditional, preindustrial practices that were widely attacked in authoritative discourse. For example, while advice consistently condemned rugs as atavistic dust catchers and sanctioned them only if placed on the floor, many informants continued to regard rugs as a marker of wellbeing and essential equipment for making the apartment cosy (uiutno) and hung them on the wall behind the bed or divan. Many also continued the traditional practice of arranging shishki: piling cushions on the bed or even divan and covering them with white lace.

Inna (St Petersburg) reproduces the modernists’ hostility toward dysfunctional display and clutter and conforms to the ‘correct’ morality of things. She seeks to divest herself of unnecessary stuff, disclaims domestic exhibitionism, and presents herself as ambivalent towards consumption. She also dislikes rugs and gives the same reason as reformers: because they harboured dust. Yet she, too, had a cabinet (although, compared to some, it is quite sparsely populated) and now longs for an antique gorka.

I’m no lover of all these kinds of displays, there’s simply nowhere to put things… My dream is to buy one of those cabinets [gorki]. But when I look at the prices … I realize that this dream’s never going to come true for me. And also they don’t make an awful
lot of them nowadays. I like antique ‘gorki’ very much. Can you picture what they are like? ... They can be like a *servant* in height but they are often curved and glazed.\textsuperscript{28}

Inna’s case may indicate that the contemporary style cabinet was associated more with the modern than with practices of display from which she distanced herself as anachronistic. Its modernity lay partly in the fact that it could assist in producing an uncluttered interior, facilitating control over things and appearances. Yet far from all the reasons for a fresh start in the new apartments corresponded to the modernist ideal of rupture with the past and unconditional embrace of the new. Some chose to divest themselves of the old for personal reasons. Galina, one of my youngest informants (born c. 1950, higher education) speaks with regret of how her mother chose to leave a fine separate apartment in the centre of Leningrad for a newly-built one on the outskirts in 1964 because her husband (Galina’s father) had died there and she wanted to escape the memories. Here, affect and the investment of human relations in things and spaces are materialized in practices of divestment rather than retention.\textsuperscript{29} Galina, meanwhile, regretted that her mother had given up the old apartment and disposed of their furniture, but her reasons are to do with objective quality and functionality rather than affect. (Like Inna she also reflects a more recent change in attitudes towards the very old or antique).

*Interviewer:* What did you bring with you in the way of furniture from your old apartment?  
*Galina:* Well the furniture there wasn’t antique but it was quite old. My mum threw out some things, which I still regret today. Because there was a mahogany commode ... but then in the sixties everyone was madly moving house into these little apartments, well many people were anyway. And they threw stuff out. Of course they threw out some beautiful furniture.  
*Interviewer:* Wasn’t it valued? Why did your mum throw it out?  
*Galina:* Well it seemed old. Of course it may have needed restoration. But at that time there was no talk of that. About restoring old furniture. The furniture we had was perfectly fine for the time – it was some kind of Yugoslav suite, there was some kind of *servant*, quite beautiful, a large beautiful table, chairs, a Finnish divan which is still going strong today and lives on at the dacha. If it wasn’t so big I think I might even have left it [here] because it is comfortable...  

Most travelled light, not out of a moral commitment to asceticism and change, nor an aesthetic embrace of modernism, but because, they say, they had nothing. Asked what they brought with them when they moved out of a communal apartment, hostel or barracks into the separate apartment, they are dismissive of the question: what *would* they have brought? Many emphasize their utter poverty and lack of material possessions.\textsuperscript{30} One Kaluga informant (born 1941), who moved into a new flat with her parents, portrays the emptiness of the new apartment. Having no furniture, they made stools out of old lemon crates. In relation to this austerity she recalls a pleasurable memory of washing the floor and spreading it immediately with newspaper onto which...
her mother would throw hot baked potatoes, which they ate off the (clean) floor. Sometimes these claims to a ballast-free existence are hyperbole elicited by the circumstances of the interview. Informants are keen to impress on the interviewer the austerity of their lives and its difference from (moral superiority to) the post-Soviet consumerist, affluent society, personified in their narratives by a daughter-in-law. They emphasize anti-materialist, Soviet values, community, and resourcefulness. In the course of the interview, they often begin to enumerate items of furniture they did bring with them, but these are mostly not very significant items, for many informants had long been rolling stones that gathered no moss until they finally came to rest in their khrushchevka. Their autobiographical narratives are marked by poverty, dislocation and dispossession, providing individual cases of the historical experiences of the Soviet Union – collectivization and dekulakization, purges, war, and the construction of new industrial cities. Salme (Tartu) recalls how her only possessions were reduced to a suitcase that was then stolen on a train journey during one of her repeated relocations during the war. Other informants included army officers demobilized in 1960 who had only the two suitcases of possessions allowed to military personnel. A Kaluga woman’s grandfather had been a propertied doctor before the Revolution, but her family had been dispossessed of their house, which was later (in the post-Soviet consumer boom) demolished. The only material connection to her past she had been able to preserve was her grandmother’s icon – and even this she had to steal.

Others explain that what little they had before the move was so broken and rotten as not to be worth bringing. Marina M. (Kaluga) explains why they left old furniture behind. They received a new apartment in 1963 because the house they lived in was condemned as unfit for habitation. She recalls that her grandfather brought his iron bedstead but otherwise they left everything because the derelict conditions of their former accommodation meant that any wooden furniture was rotten and riddled with woodworm: had they brought it the worm would have spread to new furniture. Inadvertently she reproduces the kind of rhetoric used by modernist publicists. How they would have relished the way that life wrote the book here, providing a vivid metaphor for the dangers of dragging the ballast of the past and how it would contaminate, the new, corrupting it from within!

We cannot, then, automatically explain the presence of cabinets in the new apartments by continuity – inertia, habitus, material continuity and inheritance – nor even by the investment of personal associations in an old familiar item of furniture. Unlike Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s informants in Chicago, in 1977, who named items of furniture as special because they stood for material links with roots and continuity (survival often in spite of migration, dislocation), for my subjects, furniture rarely represented bonds with their own family past.

The aestheticization of everyday life

This does not mean that furniture is any less ‘special’ than for the Chicago informants, but the reasons and the meanings invested in it may differ. Specialness can be a mark of newness, perceived modernity or fashion-
ability and prosperity, as well as of continuity with the past, veneration and memory.

Special efforts were required to get hold of a good-quality imported cabinet. The acquisition (along with that of the first appliances such as a television set or refrigerator, and also a rug) is often distinctly remembered and associated with other memorable events and small traumas. Marina (Kaluga) recalls how they had a cat that climbed everywhere and they were afraid it would break the china, so they took the cat to relatives in the countryside. When they eventually bought a cupboard (shkaf) they wanted to get the cat back, but it had run away and died. Even more humble items could be mnemonics of (narrowly averted) disasters. Inna recalls the purchase of her kitchen table with which the near death of a friend was associated: the friend had spotted it on sale and in her eagerness to alert her informant to this rare purchase opportunity she got knocked down by a motorcycle.37

The acquisition of the cabinet also marked the effects, in individual lives, of supra-individual (national and geo-political) shifts. The fact that the cabinet was often of foreign origins, for example, is a sign of the times. The new global position of the Soviet Union – no longer autarkic but leader of the socialist camp, with trading partners in the Bloc and expanding interests in the developing world – was reflected in people’s domestic interiors and everyday lives. Sometimes informants had been able to make significant purchases – a furniture suite or refrigerator – because a member of family had worked abroad, for example in developing countries where the Soviet Union was extending its interests and influence, and earned hard currency (Aleksandra, St Petersburg). Many of the homes of interviewees are ‘global assemblages’: collections, compiled over time, of things whose diverse geographical origins reflect changing political geographies, foreign policy and international relations.

Antonina, like many of my St Petersburg intelligentsia informants, acquired East German furniture from a store in Leningrad. She still remembers that it was called Khel’ga (Helga).38 Her ‘brand awareness’ was typical. My subjects can also usually recall the names of their first television set and refrigerator, as well as of the improved models with which they later replaced them. Imported furniture was ‘prestigious’ and regarded as better quality and more stylish than Soviet production. Consumer goods from the Baltic Republics shared in this prestige. While furnishing the apartment was at first a matter of getting whatever they could afford or get hold of, over the next decade some replaced their first stop-gaps by matching suites, which were also considered ‘prestigious’ or fashionable.

Galina S. (Kaluga) makes reference to fashion in relation to furniture and demonstrates awareness of style and of its changes through time.39 Inna (St Petersburg) also recalls, concerning her Helga cabinet, that it was very ‘fashionable’ when she acquired it (on stylistic evidence, in the 1960s): ‘Yes, it was the very height [literally chic] of fashion.’40 In the seventies she acquired a stenka floor-to-ceiling storage unit from Riga. The successive types of display furniture – the passing of the etazherka and bufet, the arrival of the contemporary style sideboard and later the stenka as attributes of a ‘normal’ (decent) lifestyle punctuated the passage of time, relating personal experience to particular eras in collective life and historical changes (compare Fehérváry 2002). Galina S. recalls the succession:
Galina S.: We had an etazherka back then, in the past bookshelves weren’t around, there was this kind of etazherka. And on every little shelf there was like an embroidered napkin [...] 

Interviewer: So these napkins would be put on bookshelves for example?

Galina S.: It wasn't on bookshelves but on the etazherka.

Interviewer: On the etazherka.

Galina S.: And then came the stenka.41

The mother of Galina L. (St Petersburg) updated her furniture with fashionable contemporary furniture from Yugoslavia and GDR, even though her existing furniture was good quality and relatively new. As Galina L. recalls, by the time they moved into a new flat in 1963 the etazherka's day had passed, and they, too, had acquired a Helga cabinet with combined storage and display. She places it in a historical succession of furniture types showing a precise awareness of the periodization and changing fashion. It was superseded in the seventies by the popular stenka of which it was a prototype, which offered even more cupboards, drawers etcetera to accommodate the growing number of possessions of urban households.42

Some would go to considerable lengths to find what they wanted, calling in favours, camping out in Moscow stations, or other tribulations.43 Travel, first within Russia, later to the Baltic Republics and fraternal countries, was one means to circumvent shortage and lack of choice. Seeking to differentiate her apartment from others, a Kaluga resident resorted to travelling to other cities get what she wanted because, she explained, all the furniture produced and distributed was yellow.44

What is noteworthy here is that aesthetic choice and the possibility to differentiate her interior mattered sufficiently for her to make this effort.

Boym cites a Soviet citizen in the late years of the USSR: 'who can afford here to have good taste?' (1994: 155). In conditions of poverty and shortage, fashion and aesthetic discernment – which presumes the possibility of choice – are a luxury or privilege.45 Many of my informants deny that questions of choice and taste played any part in their homemaking: they simply got whatever they could afford or came their way. 'Everyday aesthetics' seemed an oxymoron – beauty and byt were incompatible. Yet their narratives, along with the arrangements in their interiors, belie this. They indicate that a sense of style, fashion and aesthetics did become an important aspect of their effort to imprint their sense of themselves on their interior, if not immediately, then in the course of the 1960s. The acquisition of a cabinet marked a new stage in Soviet people's lives, representing their new settledness, comfort, relative prosperity, new opportunities to attend to domesticity, and a consciousness of how their own interior compared to others. It was a sign that they could now rise above everyday necessity and survival and attend to aesthetics and presentation of self.

Many had begun to see taste, fashion or even beauty as qualities they could, even should, aspire to in their apartments, and to regard the aesthetic aspect as a way both to individualize it and to realize themselves. Marina's parents in Samara decorated their one-room apartment in the mid-sixties in an ultramodern style, as she relates, with ‘avant-garde’ colour schemes and a stylish Czech vase. Others invested significant labour and other resources in the appearance of the apartment,
imprinting their own taste and sense of self on its standard plan and plain walls. Although structural alterations were rare until after the collapse of the Soviet Union, my informants made wide use of fabric, stencils, paint and wallpaper, in addition to decorative elements such as flowers, paintings or reproductions cut from magazines or calendars then varnished and framed.

Concern with decorating was partly a matter of compensation for the barren architecture. Residents sought ways to accommodate it to their idea of homeliness (uiut) by deflecting attention away from the standard features of the industrially mass-produced apartment. Rugs, traditionally essential symbols of prosperity and domesticity, continued to play an important role in this process; so, too, did the display cabinet and walls around them, serving as focal points that drew attention to those aspects the homemaker chooses to emphasize. Daniel Miller found, similarly, that London council housing tenants overcame the alienation of mass housing by putting up an aesthetic front of consumer goods (Miller 1988; see also Chevalier 1999: 83-94). The consciously curated visual spectacle of selected and carefully arranged possessions also distracted attention from the mundane intimate uses of the same space, whose associated paraphernalia such as bedding was hidden behind its solid doors.

But in some cases the informant’s aesthetic investment in the interior goes beyond compensation and decoy. In Aleksandra’s interior the purely aesthetic takes precedent over the functional. Aleksandra (St Petersburg), a member of the St Petersburg intelligentsia and formerly editor of a prestigious fine art publishing house, is a ceramics collector. Her main display area consists of two adjacent glazed cabinets on the wall near the window. The cabinets themselves are fine pieces worthy of aesthetic admiration. Although their design is in the simple contemporary style (on fine tapering legs with plain glass and no mouldings), they are distinguished by an exquisite decorative grain and high polish. As other informants indicate, the quality of natural wood was prized as a marker of prestige and authenticity.

The cabinets are the focal element in Aleksandra’s interior, which she treats as a work of art and as a means, in conjunction with her oral narrative, for presenting herself as a cultured, well-travelled, respected member of the St Petersburg cultural elite with aesthetic expertise. There are many display areas: her precious matching services are protected in the cabinet, while the individual decorative plates brought back from travels throughout the USSR are hung on walls. Aesthetic, formal principles predominate in their arrangement, which is determined by visual harmony (colour, pattern, etcetera) rather than by personal association, geographical origin, period, or other considerations. Plate ware straddles the boundary between the aesthetic and the utilitarian (Czikszentmihalyi and Rocheberg-Halton 2000; Vincentelli 2000). However, the use of the vertical plane – conventionally reserved for paintings or photographs as well as for the most expensive commodity in the home, rugs – effectively removes the plates from use and prioritizes their visual, aesthetic function as objects of contemplation and representations of the collector’s discerning eye.

Aleksandra’s exhibition of plates is an extreme case of aestheticization of the interior, but cabinets in general perform a similar function. Cabinets them-
selves stood out because they were often imported and because they were sometimes aesthetically 'extra-ordinary'. Even if some of the items they contain such as tableware are, on occasion, taken out and laid horizontal on a table for use in eating and drinking, as long as they are arranged in the vertical plane, framed by the cabinet and protected by its glass pane, they are abstracted from use, aestheticized, presented for visual and mental contemplation. Suspending their use value, this abstraction elevates, in its place, their sign value. It enhances their possibility to be invested with personal, subjective meaning but also to be used in intersubjective communication, as in the narrative interviews (Baudrillard 1994).

The move to the new apartments, whose architectural austerity was meant to inculcate in residents a new ascetic modernist taste, rational lifestyle and socialist consumption morality, was in practice far from consigning domestic display to the dustbin of bourgeois history. Mike Featherstone has argued, with regard to the West, that the 'aestheticization of everyday life' is a characteristic development of late or postmodernity (Featherstone 1991, chapter 5). My evidence from late Soviet homes also suggests that while the style of display might be updated in accordance with the modernist aesthetic, display became more not less important and the home became more exhibitionary. The aestheticization of the interior, which the cabinet epitomized, was perhaps partly an unintended effect of the professionalization of design and interior decorating and the revival of a modernist aesthetic. Here, too, the modernist discourse and practice of reformist professionals were internally contradictory. The ideology of the contemporary style, emphasizing the modernist premises that beauty lay in fitness for purpose, condemned dysfunctional display and decoration. Yet the ideal contemporary style interior was treated as an image rather than a lived-in space. Everything that was visible had to have its place in the visual composition. Style, visual unity, aesthetics rather than function, dictated. Its untrammelled perfection brooked no clutter, no mess. Lay viewers commenting on a Soviet ideal home exhibition 'Art into Life' in 1961 criticized the unlived-in and unliveable, over-designed quality of the contemporary style model interiors. Like modernist interiors elsewhere, they were popularly perceived as dysfunctional and lacking in cosiness: an image rather than a dwelling.

The aestheticization of the china cabinet was also related to changes in everyday practices, which were shaped by the provision of separate apartments – the shift to single-family living with one's own kitchen – as well as by changing social norms and work patterns. First, the cabinet was separated off from ordinary domestic functions and the kitchen. Second, the home became a place for receiving guests and for 'private' sociability.

The old sideboard, while providing the room with its visual focus, had also been embedded in one of the main functions and routines of the home; associated with serving food, eating and drinking, it shared with these functions the mixture of everyday and ritual, nutritional, and symbolic connotations that are constitutive of 'home'. The move to new flats with their own kitchens combined with changing patterns of family and work life to divide the functions of everyday eating from those of the zal and zone them into the kitchen. This was yet another unintended consequence that
contravened the intentions of the designers and the advice of specialists who conceived the kitchen as a working space only, for preparation of food. While tableware for everyday use was kept in the drainer above the kitchen sink, that in the cabinet was mostly for display and safekeeping. Significantly, unlike the old sideboard, the modern one from the 1960s usually has no serving ledge. The cabinet was thus a kind of visual backdrop to everyday life, visually present but liminal, not incorporated into its activities. Only on special occasions such as a feast to mark a life-course moment was a table set in the general room and the cabinet animated: its doors were opened, the special tableware it contained was put into use, and the origins and associations of other things kept there might be brought to mind and narrated. These were also the occasions when the camera might be taken out, as in the photographs with which we began.

Display presupposes a viewer; even private displays demand a public, however small. The rise of display is associated with beginning to see home as a place to invite guests into, a private social space: what might be called, using Shlapentokh’s term, the privatization of leisure and sociability (1989). The ideas of having a home of one’s own and of having somewhere to receive visitors were intimately linked in contemporary culture (Reid 2009b). Advice not only accepted that people would want to make the givens of the standard architecture personally meaningful and communicative of self-image and social position – to put their new separate apartments on show and present themselves to the best advantage when receiving guests – it also encouraged and normalized this aspiration.

Conclusion

The case of the cabinet exemplifies how common material and discursive structures are complicated by other factors, and while they condition or limit behaviours, they do not, in the end, determine them (Wierling 1995: 151). Moreover, authoritative discourses and practices were often internally contradictory and, at the same time, clashed with existing practices and norms. The people who moved into new apartments were not blank slates. The homogenizing forces of built space and specialist discourse had to contend with other structures and determinants on people’s behaviour, aspirations, and notions of how to dwell: tradition and unconsciously acquired dispositions or habitus. That, indeed, was why the modernizing reformists had to invest so much effort in promoting new tastes and practices and castigating the old. However, the move to new housing helped to loosen the hold of any traditions that had survived the disruptions of sovietization and war, while relatively improved selection and availability of consumer goods increased opportunities to choose the things one lived with. As Anthony Giddens notes (writing of western modernity), in a society where tradition has more thoroughly been swept away than ever before, where large areas of a person’s life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the ‘reflexive project of self’ assumes particular importance and the individual is continually obliged to negotiate lifestyle options. These lifestyle choices, at once constraining and emancipatory, are not merely external aspects of the individual’s attitudes, but are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self; that is, they define who the individual ‘is’ (Giddens 1992: 74-75).
Despite strictures against petit-bourgeois ‘my-home-is-my-castle’ mentalities, authoritative discourse presented concern with beautifying the private interior and consumption for the home as legitimate, and identified the aestheticization of the everyday environment with its particularization as a production of self. While specialists saw standardization as having positive roles to play in everyday life – routinizing everyday chores and making them more efficient, providing consciousness of belonging to a group and stability – it was an unexamined premise of much advice literature that one could and even should inscribe one’s individuality upon the plan and walls of the new apartment. Indeed the aesthetic organization of the domestic environment was a means to self-realization, both in theory and in practice. Compared to the reality (rather than the Potemkin-village) of the Stalin-era interior, the move to separate flats, the accompanying promise and growing availability of consumer durables, and the flood of representations of tasteful modern interiors evoking a calm but sophisticated urban lifestyle, together set the basis for the hypertrophy of domestic exhibitionism or private publicity. Transforming their domestic interiors into sites of conspicuous consumption and everyday aesthetics through material practices of decoration, display and concealment, occupants made these standard spaces their own. At the same time, they made themselves at home, creating meaningful selves and coherent narratives of their lives that they could present to others on their own terms.

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Acknowledgements


Notes

1 ‘Mod cons’ is the term used by estate agents to sell houses with ‘modern conveniences’.
2 Certain aspects of this process are common to the increasing power of the state and spread of standardization with industrialization under capitalism as well as socialism (Reid 2005). For the perfection of a grid of surveillance in the Khrushchev era see Oleg Kharkhordin (1999). Blair Ruble asserts that the Western alienation from residence, which Braunfels criticized, ‘was magnified in the Soviet Union, where all planning is done for strangers’ (Ruble 1993: 244).
3 For example Raleigh (2006: 9). Raleigh does, however, acknowledge important correctives offered by Yurchak (2006).
4 For crisis and the extraordinary as part of – rather than anti-theoretical to – the everyday see Fitzpatrick (1999) and Shevchenko (2009).
5 Interviews for Everyday Aesthetics (henceforth ‘ea’): Svetlana, Apatity; married couple, Tartu, (31.8.2006); Vasilii, Kaluga; Lev, Kaluga.

6 Model interiors produced for the 1958 furniture competition and for the exhibition *Iskusstvo – v byt* (Art into Life) in 1961 were illustrated and described in popular and specialist periodicals, for example: K. Blomerius ‘Pochemu malo udobnoi i deshevoi mebeli? (zametki arkhitekta)’, *Sovetskaiia torgovlia*, no. 9 (1959): 27-31; ‘V novuiu kvartiry novuiu mebel’, *Ogonek*, no. 11 (8 March 1959); numerous articles in *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSR* (henceforth *DI*); and in albums such as Biair and Blashkevich (1962).

7 Not-so-ideal homes were also represented in negative descriptions and satirical cartoons by taste reformers in the Soviet press, for example Boris Brodskii ‘Novyi byt i kamufliazh meshchanstva’ *DI*, no. 8 (1963): 23-8; and in rare accounts by western observers: David and Vera Mace (1963: 187-8); Rau (1959: 5); Bruce and Beatrice Gould ‘We Saw How Russians Live’, *Ladies Home Journal* February, 1957: 176.

8 Russian State Archive of the Economy (rgae) fonds, Russian State Archive of Scientific-Technical Documentation (rgantd), Samara, f. 127, op. 1, dd. 2175, 2176, 2177 (Comments books for vdnkh Pavilion ‘Zhilishchnoe stroitel’stvo’, 1960). Other examples of consultation are discussed in Harris (2003).

9 Interviews for ea.

10 The cabinet or commode appears in archive photos from the postwar period in the Shchusev Architectural Museum collection and Tsentral’nyi moskovskii arkhiv na spetsial’nikh nosite- liakh (tsmadsn) Moscow. An examples is reproduced by Buchli (1999: 88, fig. 13)


12 Visitors’ books for exhibition *Iskusstvo – v byt* (1961), Moscow Central Archive of Literature and Art (tsalim) f. 21, op. 1, dd. 121-125; Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (rgali) f. 2329, op. 4, d. 1002; d. 1391. Viewers also criticized the lack of storage space in the model apartments shown at vdnkh: rgae fonds, rgantd Samara, f. 127, op. 1, dd. 2176, 2177 (l. 2). Freestanding cupboards were deemed unnecessary at numerous professional discussions, e.g. rgali f. 2466, op. 2, d. 338, l. 5 (discussion of All-Union competition for furniture for one-family apartments, Novye Cheremushki (1958, 20.3.1959); rgali f. 2466, op. 2, d. 211, l. 3 (January 1957); rgali f. 2466, op. 2, d. 338, l. 5.


16 Thanks to Steven Harris for allowing me to refer here to material included only in the draft of his dissertation ‘Moving to the Separate Apartment’: Appendix 1: ‘Furniture production in the RSFSR 1957-1961’.

17 Interview for EA: Galina, St Petersburg.

18 For example Marina, Samara, born c. 1960.

19 rgali f. 2329, op. 4, ed. khr. 1391 , l. 14, l. 11.

20 The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, established in 1949 under Soviet leadership, organized economic relations among socialist states.

21 *Kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* peasants were much less likely to possess a servant or *bufet* than were urban social categories. Harris, ‘Moving to the Separate Apartment’, Ph.D. dissertation.
22 Interviews for ea: Galina, St Petersburg; Evgeniia, Ljubov, Tartu.
23 Interview for ea: Nina, Kazan.
24 For example ea: Nina, Kazan; Marina M, Kaluga.
25 ea: Inna, St Petersburg, Diliara, Kazan.
26 Natalia, St Petersburg (interviewer: Ekaterina Gerasimova, for project directed by Timo Vihavainen, Intelligentsia and Philis-
tinism, 2001, with thanks to Gerasimova and Vihavainen);
Interviews for ea: Inga and Aleksandr, St Petersburg.
27 Interview for ea: Dilara, Kazan.
28 Interview for ea: Inna, St Petersburg.
29 Interview for ea: Galina, St Petersburg.
30 Interview for ea: Nina, Kazan.
31 Natalia, St Petersburg (Gerasimova Intelligentsia and Philis-
tinism, 2002).
32 Interview for ea: Nina, Kazan.
33 Interview for ea: Salme, Tartu.
34 Interviews for ea: Vladimir, Kaluga; Ivan, Kaluga.
35 Interview for ea: Anna, Kaluga.
36 The Chicago residents had also been through many ruptures,
however. Things that had survived, maintaining links with
roots in spite of dislocation, counted as ‘special’ (Csikszentmi-
37 Interview for ea: Marina M., Kaluga (born in 1933); Inna, St
Petersburg.
38 Antonina, St Petersburg (Gerasimova, Intelligentsia and Philis-
tinism, 2002).
39 Interview for ea: Galina S, Kaluga.
40 Interview for ea: Inna, St Petersburg.
41 Interview for ea: Galina S., Kaluga. An archival photo of an
etazherka in a 1952 interior is reproduced in Buchli 1999: 91,
fig. 15 (rgakfd, no. 0242408).
42 Interview for ea: Galina, St Petersburg.
43 Interview for ea: Marina, Kaluga.
44 Interview for ea: Diana, Kaluga; Zinaida, Kovdor.
45 On changing conceptions of luxury see Crowley and Reid 2010.
46 Tat’iana, Apatity travelled to Ukraine to get the right paint for
her interior.
47 Interviews for ea: Marina, Kaluga; Galina, St Petersburg;
Aleksandra, compare, on the meaning of high polish as a signi-
fier of the housewife’s labour and pride (Attfield 2007: 155-
60).
48 Compare on mantelpieces, which similarly elevate their con-
tents above the everyday (Hurdley 2006).
49 rgali, f. 2329, op. 4, ed. kl. 1388; on exhibits at vdnkh, rgae
fonds, rgantd, Samara, f. 127, op. 1, dd. 2175, 2176, 2177.
50 In a 1966 survey informants considered the ideal tasteful con-
temporary interior unfit for everyday use (Torshilova 1971:
137–44).
51 rgali f. 2466, op. 2, d. 338, l. 5.
52 For example Kunst ja kodu (Iskusstvo i domashnii byt), no. 1
53 Iu. Sharov, G. Poliachek, Vkus nado vospityvat’‘Becedy dla molo-
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(1960: 66–79). See also M. Chereiskaia ‘Zametki o khoroshem
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