The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration

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The British boom in home improvement during the 1980s was associated, by many academics, with the broader conservatism and materialism of Thatcherite politics (Hall and Jacques 1983; Forrest and Murie 1984). Home ownership, considered as a petty capitalistic venture, was aligned directly with the demise of class consciousness, a view encapsulated in sociologist Alan Tomlinson’s disdainful tone: ‘Do it yourself, then. Build your own cultural environment. Thematize all your spare time activity. Express your familiarity with and ease in consumer culture by the choices you make in this sphere: and, also, with d-i-y [Do-It-Yourself home improvement], make some canny investment decisions’ (Tomlinson 1990: 69). Sociologists and geographers alike have identified the increasingly privatized and home-bound condition of the working class as a symptom of powerlessness and alienation in the public realm and workplace (Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler 1988; Saunders 1990). In particular, such theories have highlighted the aspirant privatism of the post-war British working class as indicative of a shift ‘away from a broadly based identification with work, and the issues and activities which stem from the workplace, towards greater home-centredness and self-identification with a domain of control which lies in the home and consumption’ (Franklin 1989: 93).

The proliferation, from the mid-1990s onwards, of a range of home-improvement media suggests a continued shift towards privatized leisure and consumption in both western Europe and the US. From the mysticism of monthly feng shui advice journals (offering wealth and happiness through the rearrangement and decoration of household interiors) to the stencilling techniques of US homemaking guru Martha Stewart, the transformation of the home as a site of aspiration abounds. The market for home-oriented lifestyle media has expanded several-fold over the last decade; in Britain, this phenomenon is epitomized by the pragmatism of television programmes, offering practical refurbishment tips to enhance the property value of owners’ homes, and spin-off publications (Walton and Walton 1997, 1998). The diminishing use of professional painters and decorators as a class-wide service industry has been coupled with the increased availability of an expanded range of wallpaper, paint, stencils, design sources, tools and advice (Gershuny 1985). The friction between investing in the house as inalienable
environment and realizable commodity value is an increasingly prominent feature of home ownership mediated largely through the mass consumption of visual and material culture: 'newspapers, magazines, catalogues, television and even the internet are part of the global marketplace where people now shop for the latest houses, furnishings, and ideas and values regarding home and family life' (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999: 27). Homes and gardens are presented as transient aesthetic entities, requiring regular 'makeovers' in keeping with the vagaries of fashion (Bhatti and Church 2000).

Historically, the construction of the household as an expressive form has been associated with the consolidation and formation of middle-class identity, as described by Victoria de Grazia in The Sex of Things: 'the pattern of expenditure for the bourgeoisie reflected considerable individuality, especially with regards to socially strategic commodities such as home furnishings, decoration, and charity, even when the family fortunes were in decline' (de Grazia 1996:153–4). By the nineteenth century, the furnishing and decoration of the bourgeois domestic interior in Europe and the USA had taken on a new significance as a form of expressive cultural practice: 'As never before, families invested time, money and a burning interest in designing their domestic tableau, creating impressive landscapes and special atmospheres in room after room' (Frykman and Löffgen 1987: 126). The masculine pursuits of collecting and the feminine activities of home-crafts, indicative of bourgeois leisure, were displayed within a carefully articulated schema promoting the home as both 'showcase and shelter' and 'civilizing' space. The domestic sphere became increasingly understood as a moral endeavour as expressed by the author of a typical contemporary publication titled Artistic Homes or How to Furnish Them with Taste (1881): 'There can be but little doubt that the surroundings of our daily life are largely instrumental, not only in affording pleasant sensations... but in actually moulding our natures and characters in many important respects' (cited in Pacey 1989). The ornamentation, decoration and conviviality associated with the middle-class parlour epitomized the notion of home decoration as an expressive (if highly prescriptive) practice perpetuating bourgeois values of social aspiration, material comfort and lineage (Ames 1992; Grier 1988; Davidoff and Hall 1987). In contrast, working- and lower-middle-class home making has been considered as a 'normative' and instrumental practice prompting, by the late nineteenth century, the scrutiny and intervention of State, government and social reformers (Lubbock 1995).

In Britain, by the first half of the twentieth century, government organizations such as the Design and Industries Association (DIA) used didactic displays to educate the mass consumer of the appropriate and 'modern' ways to furnish and decorate their homes using 'tasteful' and non-imitative styles in keeping with modernist ideologies. Social reformers, such as Elizabeth Denby, went as far as condemning specific material-culture forms, such as the three-piece suite and bedroom ensemble readily embraced by working-class couples of the 1930s, as indicative of their uneducated and restricted lifestyles (Morley 1990: 95). Similarly, Richard Hoggart in The Uses of Literacy (1957) identified the normativity of working-class home furnishing, in particular the arrangement and use of the three-piece suite, the occasional table and the bedroom set, as a consolidating element of class identity. While the stark normativity of lower-class consumption attracted the condemnation of design and social reformers, the overtly aspirational bent of celebratory events such as the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition (an immensely popular annual exhibit featuring fantasy homes and the latest in modern gadgetry and home-decorating styles) attracted condemnation from both sides of the political field. Sponsored by a newspaper renowned for its female-dominated lower-middle-class readership, the spectacle of the Ideal Home Exhibition challenged the positive aspects of class consolidation identified by figures such as Hoggart while simultaneously undermining the home as a place of enduring bourgeois values. Like suburbia, the Ideal Home Exhibition offered a vision of modernity, mass consumption and class aspiration that caused much disquiet in academic, high-cultural quarters (Oliver, Davis and Bentley 1981; Ryan 2000).

The modern household, then, defined as a site of provisioning, social relations and economic management, holds a vital historical position in relation to the modern State and class politics (de Grazia 1996: 153). This chapter uses ethnographic examples to explore how the increasing emphasis on home decoration as a practice, its intersection with class, gender and ethnicity, is related to the construction of ideal and actual contemporary social worlds. It does not simplistically suggest that the external abstract forces such as 'class' and the 'State' are countered through the appropriation of domestic environments. Rather, it considers 'home' as a process, as opposed to an act of individual expressivity, in which past and future trajectories (inseparable from external abstractions such as 'class') are negotiated through fantasy and action, projection and interiorization. The householders in this study are representative of the broader section of informants in that their home making marks a particular stage in the life cycle of the family (and the individual women concerned). Whether physically or mentally transforming or transposing their homes, the process in which they are engaged is socially aspirant, not merely in terms of accumulating and articulating cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979), but in terms of their ambitions and projections of ideal social relations.

The study is based on ethnographic research concerning the provisioning of households in north London. The initial stages of the ethnography were shared with Daniel Miller (whose work concerned formal modes of shopping [Miller 1989]) and combined preliminary interviews and participant observation involving seventy-six households. This section of the research arises from a separate aspect of the ethnography that considered a range of informal, non-retail or alternative means of acquisition including home decoration, second-hand purchase,
home-made goods, gift giving and mail-order catalogue and Internet shopping (Clarke 1998, 2000). The ethnographic site in north London consisted of a street referred to as Jay Road, with a cross-section of housing: 1960s blocks of council (State owned) flats and maisonettes; semi-detached 1930s homes; Edwardian rented and small owner-occupied maisonettes as well as larger Victorian family houses occupied predominantly by middle-class families on adjoining streets. The ethnic groups found in the area and included in the study range from those of Greek Cypriot, West African, Jewish, Asian, South American, West Indian and Irish descent. The main street in the study was selected because it lacked any outstanding features although it does have an array of particularly mixed housing types. In short, the street is typical of north London in being cosmopolitan but manifestly ordinary.

**Day Dreaming Ideal Homes: The Process of Envisaging**

Home decorating in north London takes on numerous forms. Some homes on the street have remained decoratively unchanged for over fifteen years, while others are altered yearly to match, for example, pieces of new furniture purchased by a householder. The birth or death of a family member instigates many redecorating schemes. Similarly, ‘moving in’ to a home frequently warrants decorating as part of the process of cleansing the property of its previous owners’ presence. Occupants also embark on home decorating in preparation for passing on their home to a new owner or marking particular seasonal events, such as Christmas and spring. Many households take part in sporadic bouts of home decoration directly linked to material or perceived changes in household circumstance (for example, a financial windfall or, as with some elderly residents, in preparation for death). Home decoration, though tied to key life cycles and events, is the principal means by which members of households attempt to invert, reinvent or perpetuate their material worlds. The physical act of ‘decorating’ requires the household to draw on (or negate) both traditional and contemporary cultural, social, aesthetic and technical knowledge to varying degrees. But crucially, it also requires a process of envisaging or imagining even at its most basic level.

Walking along Jay Road, in the shadows of blocks of council flats, maisonettes and Victorian terraced houses, there are Devonshire fisherman’s cabins, baronial mansions and rose-covered country cottages that thrive in the imaginations of the street’s householders. These imaginings are not merely ‘dream homes’, plucked from the pages of lifestyle magazines and used as a blueprint for home decorating choices, rather they act as conceptual and value-laden configurations informing or undermining everyday household decisions. While the single occupant of a spacious three-bedroom 1930s semi-detached house on Jay Road conjures up a fantasy seaside residence to explain her taste in fabrics, the occupant of a cramped one-bedroom maisonette on the other side of the street talks of the garden she would have at ‘her’ rambling imaginary home in southern Ireland.

‘Ideal homes’ are not just escapist fantasy spaces conjured up to deal with the limitations of the materiality of ‘real’ homes, but rather are used as measures or as proactive forces that intermittently meld with or mock the reality of lived experience. One of the research techniques used in the ethnography was to ascertain the ‘biography’ and provenance of particular objects in the home (Appadurai 1986). In this way, informants provided narratives regarding the ways in which items were obtained and came to be in the place they presently occupied. As well as tracing how people came to own these goods this approach also highlighted subsequent issues over how these goods should be consumed or understood in the longer term. Jane’s description of one of her favourite objects, placed prominently in the living room of her one-bedroom owner-occupied Victorian flat, reveals how material culture simultaneously embodies the ideal and the actual:

> I never use that massive candelabra, hardly ever, it drips all over the floor but I love it. I thought it was brilliant because I always fancied that one day I would live in the sort of house that had a baronial hall and I would have this massive candlestick or I would be walking through this huge house waving this candlestick, but its never happened, its just sat there quite sadly. I did trot it out for a dinner party but, as I said, all the wax dripped on the floor.

Even informants with the economic and cultural means at their disposal to realize their ‘ideal’ home are confronted by the lag between the ‘ideal’ and ‘actual’. Joanna and Ben, two professional designers living on two full-time incomes, had originally envisaged a minimalist décor for their marital home and decorated in a stark modernist style. A decade after their marriage, however, collections of china, floral upholstery and a traditional Welsh dresser haunt them as markers of how, to quote Ben, their ‘taste fell apart’. Despite their earliest attempts at living out a decorative scheme deemed most representative of the couple and their peer group, the house and its objects have taken on an agency of their own:

> We made a wedding list which involved setting up a home, as we needed stuff. Cutlery you know, we were very specific then – but it just shows how our taste changed – or how our taste fell apart – because we had this very specific Danish Cutlery from Arne Jacobsen and we wanted eight sets but we managed to get five [laughing] we gave up because they were too expensive. We have a table cloth that Polly got especially, it’s white damask she got it from Liberty’s [designer department store] – we wanted something – well at that time we did a lot of entertaining for friends – you know suppers and things, and we just wanted something crisp and clean. But we don’t do much entertaining now.
These 'ideal homes' conjured up by middle-class home owners, are not just trivial fantasies about a perceived aesthetic style or associated social aspiration, rather they offer an idealized notion of 'quality of life' and an idealized form of sociality. Furthermore, these daydreams directly inform the construction, provisioning and aspirations of the lived home, allowing the occupants to begin to actualize beyond the limitations of their particular domesticity.

The late 1990s proliferation of publications and television programmes dealing with aspects of interior and garden design have drawn heavily on the fantasy element of home-making as a crucial aspect of its newly valorized status. The period of ethnographic study (1994-7) on which this paper is based coincided with a visible increase in the media, particularly in the form of prime-time television programmes, directly addressing issues of home decoration as a leisure pursuit. In a particularly popular series, named Changing Rooms, couples (friends or neighbours) swap houses and, with the aid of a professional interior designer and 'handy man', set to work redesigning and redecorating a room nominated by the householders and envisaged by the friends. The weekly programme places design and decoration firmly within the context of social and friendship (as opposed to kinship) relations. Each couple is limited to a tight schedule of forty-eight hours in which to transform the other's rooms. At the end of this hectic period they offer back the redecorated rooms as gifts to each other; for the refurbished interiors meld imagination, caring, labour and, ideally, a taste consensus generated through the friendship. As well as providing DIY tips and practical information the excitement of the programme revolves around the risk of allowing good friends or neighbours to potentially destabilize their relationships by completely misinterpreting each other's tastes and fantasies, or worse still, blatantly implementing their own. Couples are led blindfolded back to their own residences and filmed taking in with pleasure, shock or dismay the other couple's decorative scheme. More often than not, couples are seen accepting each other's designs with pleasure, suppressed shock or good grace. For they are making a direct exchange of each other's homes, taste knowledges and aesthetic fantasies mediated by design experts.

In contemporary Britain, then, the representation of home decorating as a widely accessible, playful and celebratory leisure pursuit has become commonplace but it remains implicitly tied to property ownership. In May 1998, a television viewer made an official complaint of discrimination (enthusiastically followed up by the tabloid press) against the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) charging that Changing Rooms had never featured a council or State-rented home in the full four years of its transmission. The production team defended themselves by arguing that, to date, no volunteers from State housing had offered their homes for interior redecoration.

Whether or not there is any truth in the producer's claim of mass antipathy towards home decoration in British council estates, there clearly remains a strong cultural assumption regarding the relationship between middle-class home ownership and home decoration as an expressive practice. While the middle-class home is seen as a place of fantasy making and fashionability, the notion of normative working-class home furnishing prevails (Gurney 1999). By contrast the following section focuses on the decoration of State-designated homes, namely a council housing estate in north London, named Sparrow Court, in order to place the home-making activities of its occupants in the context of a local and class-specific housing culture. Do the inhabitants of State housing use home decorating any less than their middle-class counterparts as an activity of creativity, daydreaming and expressivity? In a strictly delineated, State-designed environment, where the interior and exterior world of the households is standardized and regulated by an external entity (the council/State) the ethnography goes on to reveal the ways in which the occupants appropriate, interpret and generate agency through their standardized spaces. In so doing, it challenges the understanding of home decoration and consumption as a merely expressive or normative activity. Rather, the interior worlds of these households, although they may remain to all intents and purposes physically private, are used as projections of very real relations with the larger external world.

Sparrow Court: Behind Lace Curtained Windows

Sparrow Court council estate was built in the mid-1960s and is situated along one side of Jay Road opposite a row of late Victorian terraced maisonettes and 1930s semi-detached houses. Although the estate is an integral part of the street there is a vivid conceptual divide between the mainly owner-occupied properties on the other side of the road and Sparrow Court. Organized in three-storey blocks of approximately thirty units as it is, access to the upper stories of the estate is made by ascending a central stairwell leading to an open balcony, running to the right and left, overlooked by the kitchen windows of each unit. This relatively narrow balcony with open railings is the only thoroughfare, and it allows little room for external storage, decoration or individual exterior customization of flats.

The block of housing is easily identifiable as State housing. It has uniform green/blue PVC doors and standardized external fittings, but it is a relatively low-density, well-maintained and neighbourly housing arrangement with an ethnically diverse range of households ranging from five-children families to single elderly-person households. It is common for neighbours in Sparrow Court to recognize and greet each other, but this is usually the limit of their intimacy. Despite this semblance of community and the comparatively small scale and green setting of the housing block, inhabitants view the estate as an ostensibly urban dwelling with the associated problems of theft and the protection of privacy.
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Only in exceptional circumstances do neighbours actually see the contents of each other's homes. The ability to contain 'domestic dramas' within the walls of individual households is considered paramount for the smooth running of everyday life on the estate. Incidents that involve the spectacle of police intervention generate notable exceptions and warrant widespread inter-household communication. Rumours and gossip endure for several years. Consequently, unless a household is fearless of ostracism, maintenance of privacy becomes paramount. In this sense a form of conservatism, which undermines liberal individual self-expression associated with middle-class home decoration, prevails. The notion of 'the neighbours' acts as a form of 'super-ego' through which the estate is controlled (Miller 1988).

Estates such as Sparrow Court are suspended between a constant tension of privacy and sociality that impacts on the broader moral economy of households (for contrast see Gullestad (1986) for the actual sociability of Norwegian housewives where the home is constantly 'primed' for potential neighbourly visits).

Suzy, a mother in her late thirties, consciously maintains an aloofness from her neighbours. Her husband Jim, who is out working most of the day, views the boundaries of his home more protectively than Suzy who spends a considerable amount of her time alone in Sparrow Court;

Jim is one of those people who likes to keep himself to himself and he doesn’t like to interfere in anybody’s life or them interfere in his but I’m more like, I’m not saying gossipy but I have a chat and I like talking to people. I invite people round for a coffee sometimes and he’ll say, ‘what did you invite her in for? You have her in every week.’ But I say, I’m here half the time on my own!

The negotiation of living inside and outside, for retaining autonomy and maintaining sociality, is a tentative and on-going process particularly for women raising children on the estate. While it is unusual for adult neighbours to speak to one another, let alone be welcomed into each other’s flats, it is deemed acceptable for children to congregate on the estate and occasionally enter each other’s homes in the summer months. But even this can cause tension. Lola, a new tenant of South American origin on the lower floor of the block, has two daughters aged seven and eleven who play with the daughters of a next-door-but-one neighbour. Lola was initially happy to see the girls making friends with their neighbours and ‘fitting in’ even though she admitted to having little in common with the girls’ Irish mother. However, after an incident in which the neighbour’s children ‘stole’ toys and helped themselves to large amounts of drinks and provisions from the refrigerator, Lola is reluctant to be ‘taken advantage of’. Now the daughters are dissuaded from playing in the public area at the front of the flat and their parents have purchased a swing for private use in their own small back garden.

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There is a clear paradox in terms of the sociality aspired to by most of the residents and the actual sociality of their private domains. In exceptional circumstances there is a limited amount of public sociality though this may be heavily discouraged by spouses wary of protecting their own reputations and privacy. Jenny, despite her normal reserve feels justified in getting involved in neighbourly incidents on the estate much to the consternation of her husband:

If something happened everyone would be out and I would go out and he would say, ‘don’t go out Jenny keep your nose out of it, stay in!’ And I’d be peeping through the keyhole then somebody would come and tell me ‘oh did you hear that last night?’ and I’d say ‘well I heard it but I didn’t see’. Then they’ll start telling me and I’ll say ‘oh terrible’. And these could be people that I’ve never spoken to before but they’ll come and kind of tell me, so yeah, you get to know people through the gossip.

Although households are separated by thin walls, and literally built one on top of the other, the layout of the flats and the positioning of the windows make it impossible for passers-by to casually glance inside a tenant’s flat. Despite this and the studied distancing from each other’s affairs (with the exception of overtly public incidents) informants frequently try to envisage the interiors of one another’s homes. The flats in Sparrow Court do not vary from a standardized layout of rooms, but this seems to add to, rather than detract from, neighbourly interest in specific individual’s interpretation of household space, as revealed in the informants’ following conversational extracts:

Yeah the girl next door, have you seen it? She’s done her loft and she sews up there and everything. She’s boarded it all out. Her boyfriend did it before he went to Africa... but mine is twice as big as hers, it covers the whole flat

Well, she’s got two kids cos’ I think the little one’s room is there [pointing to neighbour’s flat above] and they moved their living room to the big bedroom as far as I can tell.

Well she had a big sofa and chairs moved in from the catalogue [mail-order purchase], and her washing machine was out on the landing so I think they’re having a clear out.

Despite this interest in neighbours’ private domains there is very little in the way of formal or informal sociality conducted in each others’ homes. Mail-order catalogues might be passed from door to door for shared perusal but it is rarely anticipated that neighbours will step beyond each other’s thresholds.

Getting your House in Order: Strategies for Sociality and Aspiration

The isolation and oppression of the domestic sphere is a familiar aspect of feminist discourse regarding the home (Oakley, 1976). Similarly, women’s historical relation
to 'home' as the focus of social reproduction and the role of their labour and emotional investment within it is well documented (DeVault 1991; Madigan and Munro 1983; Franklin 1990). How, if at all, do women appropriate this potentially oppressive space called 'home', as subjects in their own right? How do women with comparatively limited resources identify and mobilize their aspirations as individuals and mothers through the aesthetic construction of home? The following case studies focus on the distinctiveness of the home decorating activities of three women bringing up families on low incomes in Sparrow Court. They highlight the ways in which home decorating and interior decor are used to establish relations with an outside and ideal social world. Rather than construct their homes as 'havens' these households use 'home', and its provisioning, to project themselves beyond their immediate surroundings. The informants share identical spatial layout. Their flats comprise an entrance hall leading to a central living room, kitchen, bathroom and two or three bedrooms.

All three households have a steady but minimal income supplemented by sporadic cash injections from entrepreneurial activity or members of family outside the immediate household. But, as Sandra Wallman's pioneering study of urban households in south London reveals, economic measures of capital, land and labour do not alone explain the diversity of households in industrial societies and the range of resources they deploy:

The livelihood of a London household involves all kinds of work. It depends on the achievement of a sense of identity and belonging; on its ability to differentiate between us and them in apparently transient and impersonal urban settings; and on its capacity to manage social relationships and information, as much as it depends on informal economic organisation and on some member of the household having a job in the formal economy. (Wallman 1984: 23)

While Wallman treats consumption as a by-product of employment and services rather than as an integral or productive aspect of household resourcing, in the following case studies, consumption, in the form of home decorating is seen as a focal point, rather than a 'reflection', of the construction and negotiation of 'household philosophies'. Historical narratives and future trajectories, revealed through the ethnographic detail of home-decorating practice, highlight the home as process.

1. Kelly: 'A Man about the House'

The first case study considers the role of home decoration in the life of a woman running a household as a single mother. Aged around forty years old, Kelly relies on social welfare and sporadic cash supplements from her ex-partner, casual work and occasional entrepreneurial activity. She has rented her three-bedroom flat on the Sparrow Court council estate for over ten years and lives there with her two children aged seven and fifteen years. Kelly has no savings and would only ever be able to move house by taking part in the council-housing exchange scheme, which would be unlikely to benefit her because her flat is extremely large and well situated in comparison to other council properties in the borough. Her ex-partner, the father of her children, makes very occasional visits to the family's home (he now lives abroad) but he generally acts as an absent but much-loved father figure. Towards the end of the three-year span of the ethnography his visits had decreased dramatically and after several years' work as the sole childcareer Kelly has begun to reconsider the direction and future of her own life, as well as her children's. As both children are settled at local schools Kelly has become determined to pursue a new social life. As a first-generation black British woman she has relatives in the West Midlands and Jamaica. Her older sister, whom she stays in contact with by telephone, is a solicitor. She does not regularly meet any members of her extended family, and she moved to London more than fifteen years ago when she met her ex-partner. Kelly openly seeks to detach herself from what she describes as her 'traditional Jamaican working-class roots' and considers herself middle class even though, unlike her sister, she has no formal college education or qualifications. In this context, several years ago Kelly changed her Christian name from what she considered to be an 'old-fashioned' form to a more suitable and trendy version more indicative of her own self-image.

For Kelly, then, a woman all too aware of the constraints of externally imposed definitions, aspiration is an empowering concept. Despite her comparatively friendly relations with neighbours, her reliance on State housing, and the stigma associated with council estates is a constant source of unease for Kelly, which she counters through her interior-design schemes. Kelly last fully decorated her flat in 1989 and describes it as an 'oasis of tranquility'. Situated on the upper storey of Sparrow Court at the point furthest from Jay Road it is protected from the noise of passing traffic. Although Kelly is conscious of her flat as a council property she consistently counterbalances her antipathy towards Sparrow Court with the 'specialness' of her specific flat and its interior design. In order to feel confident about the prospect and ambition of leaving behind her home of over ten years by meeting a new partner, she goes through a process of re-amelioration regarding her flat and prepares to spring clean and refurbish the living room:

Honestly I mean even when it's not hot outside it's cool in here. It's just so nice in the winter I mean it's not that cold I can economize on bills heating and that, but if I can find myself someone... I'm going out now because I'm going to find myself a partner. Yeah this is what it's all about!
Kelly stands apart from other informants in the street due to the overwhelming enthusiasm she expresses for formal principles of interior decoration. Her living room has a white fitted carpet, white walls, a white leather three-piece suite and a mirrored rear wall which, she says, is used to accentuate a 'monochrome feeling'. She made the Rouched curtains herself, 'before everyone else had them', in shiny pale pink using exclusive cut-price designer fabric from a friend working in a prestigious fabric shop in the West End. Previously, the room had been decorated in an even more extreme monochromatic style with a black ceiling:

"Yes it looks incredible [with a black ceiling] it's amazing it looks so different you wouldn't believe it's the same room and the carpet was a grey with it. It had black in it, it wasn't plain but it wasn't a pattern, anyway everything else was white. I had a white suite but the same kind of colours because most designers work with black and white [the effect] is really funny, strange.

Although the living room is the largest single space in the flat, which she shares with her two children, it is very much designated and decorated as an adult space. A large coffee table, a gift from Kelly’s ex-partner, with a bevelled glass top, chinoiserie engraving and Egyptianesque legs stands in the centre of the room. In the corner an ornate flower stand features a climbing plant. A bookcase hidden around the corner from the doorway in a recess holds a pile of Hello! photo-gossip magazines, the stereo system, paperbacks and a selection of school and family photographs. The room has a palatial feel of relaxed and modern luxury. There are no toys or children's items present.

Kelly sees the room as an expression of her talents as a designer, the one room she has managed to completely redecorate in her 'own taste' according to sound decorative principles since she moved to Sparrow Court. While expressing dismay at the state of her unfinished kitchen (she paid the next-door neighbour to install shelves last winter but still has not finished decorating) Kelly views her living room as a testament to her 'know-how' and individual artistic flair. She also couches the significance of the room in spiritual terms:

"Most people wouldn't think of doing a room like this because it could be clinical. When it was just done it just looked so therapeutic. Colours are really important we take it for granted but it really is important about how we feel about things, you know, and so most of these colours together could look clinical but it's funny it just opens it up and makes it look airy.

Unfortunately, the 'purity' of the room has more recently been marred by 'wear and tear' and the decorative scheme has been turning from white to off-white. Due to her extremely restricted income Kelly intends to refurbish the room 'on a shoe string', making white Velcro-attached throw covers for the suite and hiring an industrial vacuum cleaner to clean the carpet.

The white, spatial living room of Kelly's flat stands in stark contrast to the clutter of the rest of the house. The other rooms have been left unaltered since moving to the flat over ten years earlier. The children have attached posters to their bedroom walls but Kelly points out that they are still waiting to decorate these rooms. The bathroom also remains unchanged since the beginning of the tenancy and Kelly is concerned about a rising-damp patch in the corner. Rather than rely on the council to deal with such problems Kelly waits until her ex-partner makes one of his sporadic visits and hopes that he will take on some home-improvement tasks. She has occasionally 'borrowed' her next-door neighbour's husband, to move heavy household items, but is weary of over-stretching this relationship. Without 'having a man about the house' Kelly has confined her efforts to the living room, and her effort to spring clean and refurbish the living room coincides with a determined decision on Kelly's part to find a new partner:

'I've just got myself together I've started going out again and if I go out I'd like to entertain, right? So if I start [decorating] then I feel comfortable when I go out. It's no good projecting this image and then you invite people back and 'oh!' [signs shocked disappointment] because I hate pretending. When I decorated three years ago I didn't even finish the kitchen so I've got that to do, the bathroom and everything and then I'll feel comfortable about myself. I've got to take them down [looking at the curtain pelmets] and clean everything.

Kelly is detached from her extended family but has a large network of friends across London. Several years ago she began a dress-designing company with a best friend. They turned their own experience making clothes in the home into a made-to-measure 'couture clothes' business. Specializing in glamorous party dresses the two women rented a small shop and used contacts at fabric shops to support their enterprise. Despite a certain amount of success the enterprise folded when her business partner 'found herself a nice rich man friend' and left the shop. Since then Kelly has intermittently used her home dressmaking skills to make one-off party dresses for paying friends and contacts.

As well as refurbishing her white, spacious living room, for the possibility of increased home entertainment, Kelly has begun to make a range of short and clingy 'club' dresses for dancing. Browsing through Hello! magazine (a popular photographic gossip publication) she picks out designs that she finds potentially flattering and adapts them to her own taste. She has also installed a miniature trampoline for home-based exercise in order to improve her muscle tone. The design of her new made-to-measure dresses (the refurbishment of her body) and the cleaning of her white living room mark the beginning of her self-conscious pursuit of a life outside Sparrow Court.

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Kelly is openly instrumental in pursuing her new life. She is quite happy, for example, to date men she considers inappropriate as long-term partners in order to gain access to a new group of friends and escape the limitations of life as a single mother in Sparrow Court. While Kelly’s flat acts as a testament to her artistic home-making skills, getting ‘her house in order’ would offer a springboard to a new life – ideally a home with a garden for the children, and a ‘man around the house’. Kelly’s aspirations are underpinned by imaginings, that manifest themselves in the decoration and refurbishment of the household and ultimately have real implications.

2. Lola: Assimilation and Aspiration in ‘Bring a Bottle’ Culture

Lola, her husband and three children share exactly the same layout of rooms as their neighbour Kelly in their three-bedroom flat in Sparrow Court. They are comparatively new residents and after living in the property as council tenants for a year took the option of purchasing the flat by taking on a large mortgage. This home marks, for Lola and her husband, a major life transition. Prior to living in Sparrow Court they shared a multiple-occupancy house with several other immigrant families in Camden, London. When the couple first arrived in the UK they had few possessions with which to construct a home; ‘When I came from Chile I didn’t bring any special things just my clothes and bed linen as I didn’t know where I was going to sleep and I decide [sic] to bring those.’

Over a ten-year span Lola and her husband have moved from sleeping on friends’ floors, to bringing up their new babies in communal homes, to sharing a co-op house, to renting a council flat that has finally become ‘their own home’. This process has involved decisions, conscious and otherwise, over the extent of their Anglicization. By moving to Sparrow Court they have severed many of their ties with their ethnic community which initially facilitated their lives in a new host country. Although they regularly attend Chilean party events their decision to make Sparrow Court their permanent home has had direct consequences for their everyday social lives, as Lola points out: ‘None of my friends live around here – none of them. I don’t know any Chileans living around here. I say hello to the neighbours and that but we are not really friends – my friends live south of London or at Camden.’

Lola is a full-time house parent and, except for occasional visits to friends’ homes at weekends, spends each day at Sparrow Court alone while her children attend local Catholic schools. Since moving to the area her husband, Philippe, who works in south London, has had to work longer hours to increase his training as an electrician and earn more money to cover new living costs. Initially he spent most weekends studying but more recently spends an increasing amount of time involved in home-improvement projects. It is principally Lola, then, who has become the member of the family responsible for acquiring information about local amenities and for making friends on the estate. Lola is not at all confident in this position. She is reluctant to leave the house alone and limits her provisioning to one weekly shopping trip to the supermarket. Although Lola’s children are becoming increasingly involved in school and social activities (such as attending friends’ birthday parties) Lola herself remains relatively isolated.

While the children gain confidence in their new social groups, their parents work on transforming their home, and through the negotiation of objects and styles struggle to make an appropriate home for their first generation Chilean/ British children. The children instruct their parents in the mores and nuances of British taste and culture, which they bring home daily from their peers and apply when flicking through the pages of furnishing catalogues together. Lola and her husband mediate their children’s new values and tastes and try to combine, through the provisioning and decoration of the home, some version of Anglo-Chilean identity.

In this sense, the children become the driving force behind Lola’s and her husband’s most recent spate of home decoration. Unlike their neighbour Kelly, the couple cares little for their living room or its potential for home entertainment. While their Chilean friends frequently host extravagant house parties, the Santoses, aware of the importance of ‘not upsetting the neighbours’ or drawing undue attention to themselves in Sparrow Court, feel that such festivities are an aspect of culture they left behind in their ethnic community in Camden along with the associated social relations. Now ‘out of the circuit’ Lola explains that in her own culture the home would be decorated and furnished almost exclusively through gifts from friends and family rather than through private consumption. Similarly, the English ‘bring a bottle’ culture (whereby a guest is expected to make a contribution to their host’s hospitality) is anathema to Chilean sociality and hospitality:

If I had house parties I would receive lots of gifts but I can’t. The Chileans are always having house parties to early in the morning – but now they are learning they must hire a hall or a place because of the noise. They play the music very loud and until 5 o’clock in the morning and they have trouble with the neighbours so now they hire a place. Chileans like parties and they spend a lot of money and they invite you and give you food and you don’t have to buy anything like an English party where you bring a bottle – not Chileans they spend hundreds.

The living room, the most public room, has changed little since the Santoses arrival at the flat three years earlier, even though they are buying the property through the ‘right to buy’ scheme. There are dust patches on the walls where the previous occupants hung their pictures. It contains only an ageing television, a makeshift table and two pieces of flimsy garden furniture. There are no comfortable
seats and few ornaments. Lola disassociates herself from many of the objects in this room, as they are ‘hand-me-downs’ from a series of other Chilean families setting up home in Britain. In a complete inversion of Kelly’s home it is the private rooms, in particular the children’s bedrooms, which have received maximum decorative attention.

While the living room has an air of neglect and aesthetic indifference, on entering the children’s bedrooms one is struck by the immaculate, ‘show-home’ finish of newly decorated and refurbished rooms. The wall-to-wall fitted carpets have been replaced by shining wood-effect laminate. The bedroom doors have been removed and re-hinged to allow room for hand-made customized louvered cupboards. The bed linen matches a set of stencilled toy boxes and the walls are covered with bright wallpaper co-ordinated with pretty swagged curtains in modern plaid fabric.

In the bathroom the entire bath suite has been replaced by a large walk-in shower. Like the bedrooms, the bathroom features hand-made cabinets crafted by Philipe. The windows have been fitted with double-glazing and ceramic tiles have replaced the linoleum flooring. Gradually, then, beginning with the children’s rooms and bathroom, the flat is being overhauled and modernized in a style most appropriately described as modern European.

The Santoses want their children to have opportunities equivalent to or better than their English peers and are very aware of their own children’s perception of deprivation (the older child, for example, complains that English families all own cars). This move towards a more materially comfortable lifestyle has to be weighed tentatively against a loss of core ‘Chilean values’ as perceived by the parents. Since they embarked on the refurbishment of their home the girls have become, Lola believes, unappreciative of the ‘value of things’. ‘We just bought a new bedroom suite and Susannah [the eldest child] started saying she wanted this she wanted that. I told her, I said “this is the first piece of new furniture I’ve had in fifteen years of marriage, things just don’t come to you like that”.

Their newly decorated house is defiantly non-traditional British, with its non-carpeted floors, walk-in shower room and café-style kitchen. But it also defies the lavishness or ‘Dynasty style’ Lola associates with her Chilean friends in Camden. Rather they have created a metropolitan style that brings together home crafts (cabinetry, home sewing, hand painting) and modern design styles. Although much of the furniture is brand new, Philipe customizes the items, including especially designed cupboards and lamps for the children’s rooms, and Lola makes the bed linen and curtains herself from Ikea fabric. While Philipe is solely responsible for home improvement, Lola spends much of her time at home adapting patterns from women’s magazines to make linen items for the home and the children. This home is indeed a labour of love.

The Santoses, while steadfastly focused on the significance of their own home, are largely unaware of its meaning within the broader context of property value in the area. Home decorating between the normativity of two disparate cultures may have undermined their expenditure as a viable financial investment, particularly as the property is problematized by its ex-local authority status. Within the British housing market, to remove a traditional bathroom suite is, for example, likely (according to popular wisdom) to alienate potential buyers and diminish the value of a property by several thousand pounds. Similarly, the home’s bright modern style, incorporating non-traditional surfaces and non-neutral colours, contradicts the perceived wisdom of maintaining neutral tones (such as ‘magnolia’ and ‘beige’) to enhance resaleability. Despite the major aesthetic and structural changes made to the home, which firmly delineate it as a non-State property, the Santoses have not necessarily maximized their very limited economic resources (in terms of resaleability). Neither is this their imperative. Rather their home and its improvement becomes the material context for an envisaged aim of family and a new sociality. Despite the diminishing ties to their ethnic community the Santoses are not merely undergoing a process of assimilation into British culture, with its crudely reciprocal ‘bring-a-bottle’ sociality. Rather, Lola orchestrates a carefully managed syncretism where ‘home-making’ operates as the key form of identity construction easing the way of her first generation British-Chilean children into their new social worlds.


Sharon and her partner David have two younger children and a teenager who has left home to live with his grandmother (following a family argument). They are both in their early forties. They have an identical space to that of Kelly and Lola with a large living room, medium-size kitchen and three bedrooms. They are situated on the upper storey of the block. The family are very settled in their home, and Sparrow Court in general, having lived in the flat for over fifteen years. Unlike many of the families on the estate they use their garden plot: (situated some distance for the dwelling) regularly as a place to keep the pet rabbit and hang a hammock in the summer. Their children are well known on the estate as they frequently play outside. The couple rent their flat and live largely on Dave’s casual income as a part-time painter and decorator.

As in their neighbour Kelly’s flat, the kitchen is the least decorated room, serving as a place of functional tasks rather than aesthetic interest or coherence. The living room is the centre of the home. It contains a deep, green velvetem three-piece suite, a worn shag-pile carpet, a large television/home entertainment centre, wall display units and cupboards, a dining table and four chairs, and an enormous American juke box. On the living-room wall, as well as pictures acquired from car-boot sales, are old sepia photographs of Dave’s great-grandparents and elderly West Indian relatives displayed in a prominent, symmetrical composition. As
Sharon has become estranged from her own mother, Dave's family have become the closest extended kin. She frequently expresses love and admiration for her mother-in-law who has been teaching her traditional feminine skills that she did not acquire herself as a child, such as home dressing.

Since buying her first sewing machine three years ago Sharon has dreamed of having her own space, a sewing room up in the loft, where she could embark on a home-craft pursuit that she could return to without clearing from the dinner table when the kids get home from school. In the drawers of the living-room cabinets Sharon keeps all of her home-making magazines and books that she buys at the local newsagent or as offers from the cable daytime television ‘homecraft’ shows she loves to watch. She also has an extensive collection of unused home-craft materials such as ribbons, threads and hooks that she picks up at car-boot sales and ‘50p shops’.

Over the last decade Sharon has consistently tried to implement a series of home-improvement schemes. She has, for example, been stripping the paint from the doors and banister. This process has taken so long she worries that by the time she finishes bare wood ‘will be out of fashion again!’ This home-improvement scheme is at the focus of a running joke and playful antagonism between Sharon and her husband, Dave. Sharon does not work outside the home and the family relies on Dave’s part-time employment in the building trade for most of their income. Sharon’s paint-removal task falls within the realms of Dave’s paid expertise but he never gets around to doing their own home improvement. Sharon complains that she is full of ideas and schemes for home decoration but because of the kids she never has time to carry any of them through: ‘you’ve got to stop to go shopping and stop to get the kids dinner ready. And I couldn’t just stop and leave it I had to stop and clean up all the dust and everything, so it was taking me forever.’

As well as using a converted loft as a creative space for making clothes and homemaking for the children and their bedrooms, Sharon envisages it as a useful storage area. If she could move extraneous furniture into the loft she could complete her bedroom design (another project in progress for over ten years). If her husband had not mismeasured the cabinet units he finally got around to making for the bedroom, it would not be necessary for the radiator to be moved and extra furniture to be stored in the loft that he has been promising to convert for ten years. Similarly Sharon would like a dishwasher in the kitchen, but her husband argues that until he moves the kitchen doorway to another position there will not be enough room for the plumbing. Until he moves the doorway Sharon cannot redecorate the kitchen and introduce her ambitious wall-of-glass-bricks idea inspired by the television home-decorating programme Changing Rooms.

Within the household a ‘circular logic’ operates preventing the successful completion of the home as a coherent project of redecoration. Encompassing all rooms in the house, Sharon’s role as would-be home maker and Dave’s role as provider and facilitator, this ‘circular logic’ revolves around a pivotal character—a rogue squirrel. Dave will not rearrange the kitchen until he has completed the loft idea they have been discussing for years. But he refuses to do this as a rogue squirrel has made a nest in the roof and ‘it gives him the creeps’. While Sharon uses this in defence of her husband’s inactivity (along with the fact that he does home improvement as a job outside the home), she is quick to guard against any sense of emasculation she may be conferring on him: ‘He’s not really sacred of it [the squirrel]. It’s just that it might jump out at him and you know [mock screams]! I rang the council but they want twenty-five quid to come out and I thought “bugger that”’.

Over the three-year period of the ethnography Sharon repeatedly mentions the ‘bloomin’ squirrel’ in relation to her thwarted ambitions for the home: ‘cos when I get around to converting my loft I’ll have some where—the only thing that’s stopping me is the squirrel up there’. Sharon and David’s home could not be described as a haven of coherent home decoration or aesthetic normativity. Despite Sharon’s consistent desire and efforts to transform the home through her own labour, time and creativity, the home seems to have reached a happy but static situation (see Figure 2.1). The ‘would-be’ loft has become the most important, if conceptual, space in the home. It is the focus of much hope for change in terms of Sharon’s own personal fulfilment, her commitment to the kids as a ‘better’ mother and the family’s overall improvement. Here we see vividly the home as process: how its decorative schemes (implemented and failed through a light-hearted play-off of gender relations) are the interiorizations of external concepts such as ‘proper’ mothering.

Conclusion

The home-improvement aspirations of the above informants clearly challenge the homogeneous and normative models of working-class home-making. While it would be easy to assume that the rise of the ‘home’ as a privatized arena of consumption exists in inverse relation to a State of declining solidarity experienced by the occupants of the housing estate, such an assumption fails to explain the extent or nature of the investment made by the households in their interior worlds. In these particular examples, there is an extraordinary disparity between the amount of attention paid to how a place should look, as if it is firmly within the public domain, as against all evidence which indicates to the contrary that they are very rarely exposed to the view of an outsider. Kelly, Lola and Sharon conjure up their ‘ideals’ (as manifest in a man, class, aspiration, the kids, immigration or home creativity), and it is as though instead of being inspected by actual visitors they are being viewed and judged by these same ideals.
This is not to suggest that people have become more materialistic and have abandoned sociality, merely turn to an 'interiorized' social world. Traditions of working-class sociality have historically revolved around public rather than private domains. Earlier studies of working-class housing, for example, reveal the importance and sanctity of the 'parlour' - a fully furnished formal room preserved for potential, but largely unrealized, visitors. So even in the poverty of the slums most of the home decoration was devoted to a room which was judged as an ideal but was not usually visited or even used. Later sociological studies show that social visits were largely confined to female relatives (Young and Willmott 1957).

Rather, this ethnographic example shows how the ideal home, as used to influence the construction of the actual home, becomes an internalized vision of what other people might think of one. Far from being a site of crude emulation, the house itself actually becomes the 'others'. The house objectifies the vision the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of others and as such it becomes an entity and process to live up to, give time to, show off to. As against actual observers it is an interiorized image of the other that can actually be worked on and fed into the aspirations and labour of the occupants. So the proliferation of home decoration and the popularization of design has become a key, contemporary component of a relationship that was never simply between an internal private sphere and an external public sphere, but a more complex process of projection and interiorization that continues to evolve.

References


