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The Stories Houses Tell:
Model Homes and the Consumer Imagination

Americans today expect a lot from a house. Encompassing complex and contradictory ideas regarding family, self, and lifestyle, the house is considered a physical manifestation of personal identity, an expression of values through which a family image is made known. Fantasies of life in the home, based on images supplied by the plethora of popular literature devoted to housing and lifestyle, vaguely resemble reality, yet play a central role in the creation of desires and expectations. This paper explores methods and meanings of house merchandising at the turn of the twenty-first century, looking briefly at the primary elements of the marketing process; professional literature designed for the builder, literature aimed at the public, and focusing on the walk-through model home, in order to illustrate how family mythologies are created and stories communicated in presentations of domestic space. My work focuses on house types that make up the largest percentage of new home starts in the late twentieth century (figure 1), the mass-produced, detached, single-family dwellings built in suburban subdivisions and intended for those in the "moving up" category of the housing market. What initially struck me as remarkable about these structures was the consistency in layout and lifestyles presented within a broad price range and across a broad geographic area.

Central to an understanding of the model home and its purpose is the realization that meaning is determined in the house as commodity, not the house as lived in. The model, its surroundings, and its furnishings are constellations of culturally specific narratives that situate identity; community, familial, and individual. As a 1999 trade

publication advised builders, "A model home should enable prospective purchasers to . . . visualize how their happiness will be increased by living in the home."[1] Selling new houses in late twentieth-century America had less to do with the house than with creating idealized visions of what an American home and American family should be. Instructional and motivational material utilized by builders, with titles such as "Subliminal Selling," and "Create Male Spaces in All the Right Places," instruct home builders in the latest methods of house marketing. My personal favorite is entitled "Ward, Have You Seen the Beave?"[2] This brief article points out the need for the housing industry to acknowledge the changing makeup of the American family. To paraphrase; it is time to acknowledge that The Beave is on his third marriage, he and his wife have seven kids between them, and Wally grew up to marry the boy next door. The article illuminates many significant elements of house merchandising, which has failed to accept the reality of contemporary life.

House merchandising creates a story of middle class America that maintains an unrealistic view of the American family: in these spaces reside a married woman and man with, on average, two children, one girl and one boy. The husband has a job outside the home. What the wife does is left a bit unclear. Merchandising relies heavily on a mythic sense of an idealized, unproblematic past that feeds on a desire for an unproblematic future. (figure 2) Ward, June, and the boys are the most often cited icons of home life in merchandising literature that attempts to evoke images of what is often referred to as "happier times." The Cleavers' image not only permeates the literature, but

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[1]Parker, David F. and Charles R. Clark, *Marketing New Homes*. Washington DC: The Home Builders Press, 1999: 132.
[2] Michael Subert, "Ward, Have You Seen The Beave? The Changing Lifestyles of Our American Heroes," *The Best of Sales & Marketing Ideas*: 6.

the model homes as well (figure 3). Those of you of a particular age group will realize immediately that this is, in essence, Ward's study. It is also the home office of a model home near Philadelphia built in 1998. The continual invocation of a fictional family speaks to the late twentieth-century housing market's proclivity for idealizing home life of the 1950s and early 60s and to the strength of popular media to shape ideas of normalcy. The conflation of fiction and reality is a cornerstone of house marketing and nostalgia remains an effective tool.

In the furnished model home, the home office or study is considered the man's domain. Story-telling accessories placed in model home office reflect this masculine tradition and make specific statements of personality. (figure 4) Photographs, trophies, leisure paraphernalia usually related to sports, and other symbols of accomplishment are placed in the home office, which offers segregated male space, "A father expresses delight in discovering a special room identified as his personal retreat because of the well-appointed executive desk – you've done the job. You've sold them."[3]   Home offices in model homes typically contain a large selection of books. Books are signs of achievement and intellectual pursuit. Perusing the titles in model home offices, one soon realizes that there is no theme, reason, or consistency in book selection except that of aesthetics of the book jackets. These books are stage props and meant to be seen, not read.

These spaces are presented as havens where intellectual curiosities can be pursued. In the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century middle-class home, it was the

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[3] Kaye Graham, "Where Are Your Customers Headed: Merchandising to Trends," *The Best of Sales & Marketing Ideas*, 1999: 50.

man who had time for such leisurely intellectual pursuits. In today's model home, that masculine narrative is continued (figure 5).

The on-site, furnished, walk-through model home has been a primary selling tool of developer housing since the late 1940s. Model merchandising became a subcategory of the interior design profession in the 1980s and by the end of the twentieth-century builders were spending on average $24.00 per square foot, or roughly twenty-five to thirty percent of the house's selling price, merchandising the model.[4] This resulted in an average cost of $70,000 per model home.

Home furnishings and decorations are associated through advertising, television, and motion pictures with cultural categories immediately understood by an identified target market. The furnishings placed inside model homes are pieces of a constructed cultural identity. Carefully selected artifacts articulate carefully chosen values. Through them an identity and a lifestyle is created; a story is told that resonates within the target market as representative of the achieved or desired self, creating a sense of longing and planting the seeds of dissatisfaction with one's current living conditions. Status merchants (as decorators of model homes are known) construct elaborate narratives to which the viewers feel they belong, or deserve to belong. These fantasies of life in the home are based on images supplied by popular media forms that shape ideas of "correct" living. Viewing the model is an interactive performance of house and visitor, as the prospective buyer tries on the particular identity of the house.

One of the most effective elements in the creation of these experiential spaces are what I referred to earlier as story-telling accessories; symbolically charged objects placed

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[4] Trupp, Beverly. *Color it Home: A Builder's Guide to Interior Design and Merchandising.* Boston: CBI Publishing Company, 1981: 194. Parker and Clark, 133-34.

strategically throughout the house. Their purpose is to help viewers project themselves into the narrative and establish associations with particular lifestyles. They include objects of daily living that offer a narrative description of the potential owner of the home.

Often eighteen percent of the merchandising budget is spent on storytelling accessories.[5] In homes being decorated for a client that lives in the home, accessories averaged two percent of the budget in 1981.[6] As one professional merchandiser stated, "accessories are like adjectives to describe the ideal lifestyle that can be enjoyed in a room or house…though we tend to think of accessories as 'things', I believe it is also important to think of them in terms of 'feelings', special feelings they suggest to, and elicit from, your target market."[7] Based on psychographic studies, merchandisers create a story of a family. According to one, "We even select pictures of them to distribute throughout the house. They have their own activities, we know what they may cook, what kinds of flowers they may like, and what sports they play."[8]

Walking through a model home allows one to discover the story they tell:

<u>FORMAL LIVING ROOMS</u>

Formal living rooms (figure 6) have been referred to as the location of "taste exchanging," where residents and guests determine if they are socially and intellectually

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[5] Trupp breaks down the merchandising budget as follows; Furnishings = 45%, Carpet = 6%, Built-Ins = 10%, Accessories = 18%, draperies = 12%, and wallcoverings = 9%. It is insightful to compare these figures to those she gives for decorating lived-in homes for clients where furnishings = 70%, carpet = 6%, built-ins = 2%, accessories = 2%, draperies = 18%, wallcoverings = 2%. Trupp, 193-195.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Trupp, 94.
[8] Amoruso, Dena. "Model Home Artistry: More than Just a Pretty Place," *Realty Times*. Realtytimes.com. October 15, 1999.

compatible.[9] Such purpose requires that the constellation of objects placed within this space communicate clear, precise narratives. In model homes, these spaces are given priority in furnishing and decoration. More money and effort is spent on merchandising these spaces than other areas of the house. The décor of the model home living room is based on nostalgic concepts of gentility, derived from the nineteenth century's interest in eighteenth-century European cultural ideals. Furnishings that emulate these ideals and loosely emulate historic styles are now mass produced for middle-class commercialized gentility and combined with more inviting, more comfortable pieces.[10] Their possession reflects an idealized sense of self; objects have the power to change the way one thinks of oneself and change the way one acts. Their possession reflects an idealized sense of self; objects have the power to change the way one thinks of oneself and change the way one acts and the standardization, of furnishings, decorations, and finishes, assures that individualism will conform to cultural standards. The fact that one possesses fine objects and fine materials to fill such a room is a statement of status, one that encompasses concepts of respect and envy. Accessories that are located in these spaces are costly, fragile items; often antiques. Fragility and age of objects add to perceived value. Such objects require attention, protection. Their existence represents an accomplishment of the possessor.

In the typical model home for the move-up buyer, there are two templates from which the merchandiser chooses. In one, white, which does not lend itself to casual

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[9] Kron, Joan, *Home-Psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration.* New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1983: 93.

[10] Between 1845 and 1865 furniture production doubled in the United States. Brucken, Carolyn E. *Victorian Privacy: An Analysis of Bedrooms in American Middle-Class Homes From 1850-1880.* M.A. Thesis, University of Delaware, June 1991: 21.

The standardization of furnishings and their appropriateness for particular rooms of the house began in the later nineteenth century with the mass production of matching sets of furniture for particular areas of the house.

living, is the upholstery color of choice for the formal living area (figure 7). Only certain

activities are appropriate in a white room and its use signifies that these spaces are

intended more to be seen than to be lived in. The other approach encompasses the idea of

"old world charm," a very popular phrase in trade literature, though one that remains

somewhat vague in definition. It consists of dark colors, a "deep rich tone Oriental look,"

and tapestries or antique prints (figure 8). [11]

FORMAL DINING ROOMS

Furnishings and accessories placed in the formal dining rooms of the model

consistently speak to concepts of nostalgia and traditional family values (figure 9). The

dining table serves as display for fine china and crystal and identifies the possessor of the

home as formal host with the necessary knowledge and skills symbolized in the formal

table setting. Eating rituals are a means to establish and maintain social relationships.

Using fragile objects for this social activity, risking the costly for display and use, is a

strong statement of status. A set table also fills the room with presence.

Trade literature presents an image of the American family in the move-up

category as one that entertains at home a great deal. The idea is prevalent, though there

does not appear to be a correlation to the realities of American life. In fact, evidence

indicates that entertaining in the home has declined since the mid-twentieth century. Yet

narratives of such events and spatial allocation for them remain within the formal dining

room.

KITCHENS

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[11] "Colors Pop In Theme-Decorated Rooms; Stylish Décor In Bedrooms, Family Spaces," *Richmond Times – Dispatch*, October 5, 2003, BuilderOnline.com.

Associations in the kitchen combine with a sense of effortlessness of life, offering an idealized narrative of the potential household. Muffins are baked, lunches readied, and wonderful breakfasts are served (figure 10). These dream kitchens remain clean, neat, cutting edge, and highly visible displays of the home owner's culinary abilities. Longing is created: if only this were your kitchen. Here cooking would be fun; a happy and healthy family endeavor, rather than the drudgery it often is now. Storytelling accessories placed in kitchens, such as baskets of bread or homemade cakes, signify family values and support the images of family cohesiveness presented in the advertising literature (figure 11). Narratives of status are also created in the presentation of particular brands and types of food. All food items in model home kitchens are of high quality, many are imported. There are no cases of boxed or canned goods from the local supermarket outlet in the model home kitchen. Such items would create the undesirable association to a less-than-elite status as well as the reality of kitchen labor.

The public nature of this area of the house has transformed cooking into a performative act (figure 12). No longer are meals prepared in an isolated work area designed solely for food production and then presented in the dining room. Meal preparation is now on display and the correct appliances, countertops, floor covering, lighting, and food brands all speak to the status of the homeowner and their culinary sophistication. The model home kitchen of today is as much a status symbol as it is a workspace. They are elaborately equipped with the latest in fashionable appliances and labor saving devices.

In reality, most of today's homes are vacant during the day and kitchens are used very little at any time by today's busy families. But they offer a nostalgic narrative of

family togetherness and a promise of future shared conviviality. This image of today's kitchen is generated and reinforced by shelter magazines, furniture catalogues, television, and film, which often present images of family members or small intimate groups of friends sharing moments of laughter around the kitchen island or breakfast table. While the kitchen in one's current home may be a workspace, the model home kitchen offers the possibility of a kitchen as a place of leisure and intimate moments with friends and family.

PUBLIC SPACES

Speculative houses provide spaces for informal entertaining, a trend that trade literature claims is on the rise; in the model home, kitchen/family rooms certainly speak to the popularity of such events. In them, the kitchen table is almost always set (figure 12). It offers a more casual fare than that presented in the formal dining room and often references a social event such as an invitational tea. Such presentations are allusions to a particular kind of leisure; the owner has time to host teas and time to acquire the skills to do so.

In public areas of the house, the most often created visions are also of intimate gatherings of friends and family. By far, the most common story-telling accessory is alcohol (figure 13), in a variety of presentations, followed closely by an abundance of bed trays, often as bearers of alcohol.

FAMILY ROOMS

The family room remains the locale for socially interactive activities signified by pitchers of lemonade and game boards, which further suggest gatherings of friends and family (figure 14). While objects in the formal areas of the house signify the ideal self,

objects in the family room tend to be more personal, speaking more to the perception of the actual self, but still an idealized image of homeowner and family (figure 15). Many items not deemed appropriate for the formal areas are found here. This is the locus of collections (suggesting tradition and heritage), baskets of potpourri (creating a sense of hominess), and needlepoint pillows and crocheted throw blankets (evidence of feminine handiwork even though they are mass produced by machine). In a furnished model home, however, idiosyncratic objects that are symbols of association to particular groups holding shared beliefs are conspicuously absent. Crucifixes, menorahs, or any culturally specific reference is purposefully omitted in an attempt to be inclusive in marketing. Objects can be symbols of exclusion as clearly as they can define inclusion.

The emphasis on privacy and personalization of space expresses the value of self-definition and makes it manifest in the physical form of the later twentieth-century house. Emphasis on privacy is indicative of the cultural focus on cultivation of the self, a value strongly articulated in the model home through the selective use of story telling accessories as signifiers of self-identity and through the growing opulence and spatial allowance for the most private spaces of the home.

CHILDREN'S BEDROOMS

Children's rooms are bright, clean, and orderly. But foremost, they are whimsical (figure 16). Themes are often centered on contemporary children's literature or popular children activities as these spaces create desire – childrens' desire for fun and parents' desire for happy, carefree, overachieving children. There is no family strife here. These children are not troublesome. They participate successfully in extracurricular sports, and are actively involved in intellectual pursuits. In model homes, children's rooms are

stereotypically gender specific. Girls dance, have tea parties or ride horses (figure 17).

Boys play competitive sports (figure 18). As confirmed by displays of ribbons and

trophies, "model home children" are good at what they do.

Since these rooms must also appeal to the parent, children's rooms always contain

desks with computers and school supplies prominent (figure 19). Televisions, stereos and

telephones are conspicuously absent. These rooms articulate the value of connectedness

to the family and to sanctioned extracurricular activities rather than an unsupervised

relationship to the outside world.

MASTER SUITES

Master suites in model homes are glamorous spaces (figure 20). They are always

formal and the constellation of objects found in them signifies an emphasis on privacy,

relaxation, and romance. Bedding is sumptuous, often regal, creating a veritable homage

to marriage. References to leisure, relaxation, and self-fulfillment are prominent

throughout the private areas of the home. The middle class consumer desires time to

relax, away from the children, and model home master suites promises the possibility.

The image of the master suite as a refuge for husband and wife is furthered by the

presence of open books or magazines, plates of fruit, and drinks on trays.

Story-telling accessories placed in Master Suites symbolize fulfillment of the

most personal needs and desires. "Who lives in the Master Suite? A couple who loves

each other, that's who."[12] Romantic allusions abound (figures 21 & 22)). They

symbolize a happy marriage and by extension a happy home. The consumer transfers

meaning to the house itself. Life here is good. Sexually suggestive narratives are not

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[12] Trupp: 101.

uncommon, and though not always blatant, allusions to connubial gratification are strongly made.

CONCLUSION

As Alexander Jackson Downing stated in 1850, without furniture a house "wants all that variety, intricacy and significance of meaning which the same room has, when filled with furniture in keeping with its uses, and the social life of those who inhabit it."[13] This concept is the underlying reason for model home merchandising, "Model merchandising enhances the appearance of a home to elicit a positive emotional response from prospective purchasers. It supports the oral sales presentation through sensory communication of comfort and style and thereby induces perceived value beyond that possible with an empty house…The underlying objective of interior merchandising is to create the illusion of living in this home."[14] The constellation of objects in the house combined with the structure and spatial arrangement provides a narrative of the residents, offering insight into the lifestyle and values of future residents and supplying meaning to the house.

But while these furnished models create desire and a sense of belonging, they are also places of denial. The model home eliminates the inherent complexities that exists between a house and its varied inhabitants, or dissonance that exists between the inhabitants themselves. These are places of hope and promise, places of wish fulfillment. They are carefully constructed stories of idealized worlds, which the potential homebuyer can experience. Staged presentations of house merchandising play a central role in the

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[13] Downing, A.J., *The Architecture of Country Houses; including designs for cottages, and farmhouses, and villas, with remarks on interiors, furniture, and the best modes of warming and ventilating* (New York: De. Appleton & Co., 1850): 406.
[14] Parker and Clark:133.

creation of desires and expectations. They are simulacra that define and establish a

mythic vision rather than reflect the realities of domestic life in late twentieth-century

America.   Here dreams are created, marketed, and sold to the public as attainable

realities.

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