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Interior Iron Curtains: United States Textile Design of the Cold War Era

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In the last few years mid-century design has made a strong comeback. Though the possible reasons for this renewed interest can be argued, from simple cycles of retro and revival aesthetics to a politically uncertain climate and the war on terror, it cannot be disputed that the years following WWII, those of the early Cold War, were ripe with architectural and designed innovations which created a distinct visual language and American style. The architecture and design produced in the late 1940s, the 1950s and early 1960s was meant as a means of promoting capitalism and economic growth, transitioning the country's wartime economy into a bustling capitalist society but also served as tools for improving the quality of life for citizens of the United States. Though the architecture, design and the era's aesthetics were aimed to strengthen the nation's economy and make life easier and better for its people, they also played a role in the political agenda against communism.

Well into the Cold War, it is the Kitchen Debate of 1959 that is one of the clearest and most recognized examples of design used as a political strategy. Taking place at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, and in front of a model American kitchen, U.S. president Richard Nixon assured Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev that technological advances in the domestic realm, rather than the military, would ensure the victory of the Cold War. Using the dishwasher and washing machines installed in contemporary homes as examples, Nixon argued that such advances meant homemakers could spend less time scrubbing and cleaning, and more time doing things they enjoyed.

Although some historians have argued the conception of the Cold War took place at the end of WWI, others point to the end of WWII as its start. Though the U.S. and Russia fought together as Allied Forces during WWII, the countries ideological differences drove them apart after victory over Nazi Germany in 1944. Though he and President Truman had used the words earlier in letters, it was Winston Churchill's speech from March 1946 that propelled the term "Iron Curtain," signaling the divide between the U.S.S.R. and the West, into mainstream useage. The Iron Curtain was key to containment, the U.S. political strategy meant as both an ideological barrier as well as a physical one, and allowed each side to exist, more or less, without the direct intervention of the other. Textiles, as interior iron curtains, played a similar role between those inside a home and everything outside of it, serving the political agenda of the mid-century. Additionally, through the use of then-current motifs of nature, Americans were able to re-create within their homes the exterior scenery their interior iron curtains shut out.

Both the assertion of a distinct American style as well as the illusion of safety and assurance this style provided are evident in the ways interior design magazines promoted certain aesthetics and commented on their popularity. *Interior Design* and *House Beautiful* are two monthly publications that serve as historical records of interior design and textile usage; the first geared toward professional designers, that latter, read more widely by upper-middle class homemakers.

In exploring their representation in magazines and the role textiles played for American consumers and homeowners during the Cold War, it is helpful to understand the political climate of the nation; on television, radio and in print Cold War rhetoric permeated nearly every aspect of American life. For

example, someone browsing the August 1950 issue of the popular newsweekly *Colliers Magazine* would have been confronted by images of a devastated cityscape accompanied by text reading “(NR) New York—(AP)—An A-bomb fell on the lower East Side of Manhattan Island at 5:13 P.M. (EDT) today.”¹ The vivid and realistic presentation of this “news story” impressed upon viewers that nuclear destruction could happen anywhere, and at any time. As context, the editor added “for five years now the world has lived with the dreadful knowledge that atomic warfare is possible,” and he goes on to further explain the state of the nation and the events that have led up to such cataclysmic circumstances.²

Two years after *Collier's* “Hisroshima USA” spread, the April 1952 issue of *Interior Design* covered the twenty-first annual conference of the American Institute of Decorators (A.I.D.) at which architect Henry Wright reported that “physiological research had established that uncovered large glass areas not only look cold and black at night but actually register cold through never centers in the skin. His advice was to cover windows completely at night for more comfort.”³ Wright’s assertion was that the body’s physiological response to floor-to-ceiling glass walls in modern homes could be negated with curtains. Using this logic, it would also seem that similar curtains could also negate anxiety, both physical and emotional brought on by Cold War fears. Notably, in the Civil Defense film *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, citizens are told to “pull the curtains” as a measure in keeping themselves safe.

House Beautiful's “The High Cost of Hanging,” from March 1948, is a testament to the importance of windows within the post-war home, the same windows that Henry Wright would address a few years later. Though theirs are not of the floor-to-ceiling variety, author Helen Markel Herrmann and her husband David love their windows. However, to have windows is only half of the battle, so to speak; creating the perfect covering for them was equally as important. According to the article, so intense was the window treatment project that Helen and David argued and accused one another of incompetence, with David finally noting that prohibiting married people from moving more than once, and having to decorate again, would cut the divorce rate in half. The high stakes placed on interior design within a family’s home cannot be denied and the acute awareness of the political climate and Cold War fears are revealed through David’s statement; “Russians, they may be having trouble with their iron curtain but at least it’s hung.”⁴

Yet for all the talk of the curtains themselves, “The High Cost of Hanging” features only one drawn illustration, and no photographic images. The fabric is simply described as an intelligent and distinctive Steinberg with a challenging repeat. However, the exclusion of images should not be viewed as a slight to the significance of domestic textiles, rather, the focus on the narrative, and not images, highlights the intangible benefits provided by textiles; the creation of a space, even if illusionary, that is private and secure, where the pulling of curtains establishes a barrier to the outside. Despite the tongue-in-cheek attitude of “The High Cost of Hanging”, it demonstrates the great value of interior design for the family and the role it played in keeping the peace.

For those dwelling in the city, the lack of a yard or even a patio or balcony made views from the window tremendously important and highly desirable. Sandy Isenstadt, architectural historian, highlights the enthusiasm for glass, and the growing expanses of the material used in new buildings in the first half of

¹ John Lear, “Hiroshima, U.S.A.,” *Collier's Weekly*, August 5, 1950, 11-17.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ AID 21 Conference,” *Interior Design*, April 1952, 84.

⁴ Helen Markel Herman, “The High Cost of Hanging,” *House Beautiful*, March 1948, 120.

the twentieth century, culminating just around the outbreak of WWII at the 1939 New York World's Fair. He states that bigger windows in the home were linked to industrial production, national economy, and patterns of settlement that afforded the leisure of looking at landscape.⁵ However, after the war the nation's fascination in glass shifted and was displaced by nuclear technology. Isenstadt has argued, "views had been known to motivate home-buying decision and induce psychic satisfaction... views were literally priceless."⁶ Yet even though the windows, and the amazing sightlines they offered were major selling points of the apartments within modern highrises, there is a great disconnect between the way in which the interiors are photographed and the way in which they are described within interior design magazines. Photographs often show interiors with curtains drawn, obstructing the view deemed oh-so-important to homeowners. Here the challenge of photographing an interior space with exterior light seems too simple an answer to account for the lack of outward looking views. Other photographers of the era seemed to easily circumvent this problem; Julius Shulman, famous for his photography of case study houses, is one example.

The January 1954 article, "Five Rooms" from *Interior Design* is an example of this curious photography. "Five Rooms" examines the interior design of a floor-to-ceiling glass windowed modern apartment in the city of Chicago. Completed in 1948 by modern master Mies van der Rohe the apartment is located on North Lake Shore Drive. From the start "the reason for existence, of the living room's specially designed décor is the superb view of the Lake and Outer Drive from the window-wall... the furniture has been arranged accordingly so that the view from any angle in the room is not obstructed."⁷ Two of the five photographs show the highly-prized windows of the apartment. Though both images reveal the view afforded by the windows, each gives viewers just a small glimpse of the stunning views they are meant to highlight. Additionally, both of the photographs of windows with open curtains were taken in the public places of the home, spaces in which a homeowner could show off, and spaces in which guests would expect to enjoy the view. The text describes in detail the furniture and materials of the room, the colors of the walls, carpet and interior fabrics. Perhaps due to the grayscale of the image, the text details the colors; pink, red and orange flowers dot the bright and lime green shades on the sofa and upholstered chairs, echoing the potted plants in the corner.⁸

The bedroom of the apartment on North Lake Shore Drive shares the same exterior wall as the living room, it too has floor-length windows. Though the bedroom contains a dressing alcove, lined on two sides with closets, a dressing table is situated on the opposite side of the room. Unlike the specially designed furniture of the living room, which was created with the windows in mind, the rectangular mirror of the dressing table is situated directly in front of the window. Rather than set against a wall, the furniture's placement in front of the window, and the long curtains covering it, give credence to the idea that the curtains are never truly meant to open. In placing the dressing table against a window wall, the temporary and moveable fabric of the drapery becomes solid – permanently blocking out the exterior. The bedroom is also furnished with a sofa, armchair and coffee table, yet unlike the front and formal entertaining space, this living room in miniature is not meant for engaging guests but intended only for its inhabitants.

⁵ Sandy Isenstadt, *The Modern American House*, 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷ "Five Rooms," *Interior Design*, January 1954, 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

The bedroom, often thought of as a retreat, the most private area of the house, is also the place where inhabitants are most vulnerable, while sleeping. The creation of solid walls and a limited space, especially in the environment of a glass-walled high-rise unit suggests – to be extreme – a bomb shelter. Their popularity on the rise in the 1950s, bomb shelters were concrete objects that soothed the frazzled nerves of American citizens, standing by to provide protection in the event of an emergency.

The article “Renovation and Interior Design” from *Interior Design* notes that the increase in the availability of these modern, high rise apartment homes had conversely spurred a nostalgia for older houses. Homeowners became interested in purchasing old homes and working modern décor into the more traditional elements. Both the owner and the designer of the home featured in “Renovation and Interior Design” were confronted with the challenge of creating a modern interior in a large, thirty-year-old, English-style home in California. The alterations included the addition of large expanses of windows, some ran floor-to-ceiling while others covered only half the height of the wall. These new windows, inspired by 1940s and 1950s glass houses, lined the curve of the circular library room to allow uninterrupted views of the lawn but could also be disguised with specially designed shade-type black-out curtains if the need arose. In less public rooms of the house, such as the master bedroom, “the renovation is represented by vast window areas, and dominated by the window-wall...affording sweeping views of Beverly Hills and sea beyond,”⁹ and still include the option to block the view, with full length curtains.

The contributions of textile design to the home is noted; “the success of this delightful renovation can be attributed in large measure to the exclusive use of new materials in modern ways—including upholstery fabrics, floor coverings and grasscloth walls—throughout.”¹⁰ The triumph of the home is due not only to its pleasing aesthetic but also to the creation of an insular environment, one in which those on the inside can retreat and take cover from the outside without losing any of the natural view — a view that surely played a role in the decision to purchase the home.

Also on the West Coast, Ronald Regan’s Pacific Palisades home employed a similar design tactic. Though, or perhaps because, the home’s spectacular view encompassed Catalina and the Ocean shoreline over Santa Monica, Brentwood, Westwood, Culver City, Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles, the ability to completely block out the exterior world remained hugely important. Additionally, the interior of the Pacific Palisades house conveyed the contemporary desire to mimic the natural environment indoors; potted tropical plants added to this atmosphere.

Both *House Beautiful* and *Interior Design* showcase the American desire to incorporate nature into the home. Popular colors were those that could be found in nature, though sometimes with a bright twist, and patterns and textures from the exterior world were brought into the interior, including leaves, ferns, nuts, berries, pine branches and flowers. Part of the want for the replication of the exterior indoors can be seen as a reaction against the recent technological, scientific and military advances and against the Machine Age and the Modernist notion that houses could be built as machines for living. As *Collier’s* editor had noted, since 1945 Americans had been living with, and under the threat of nuclear devastation. Citizens worked against this anxiety by bringing nature into the home. Though homeowners might be worried about the future and the potential loss of natural landscape, they could decorate their homes with patterns drawn from the kind of naturalism that captured the essence of the real thing. A

⁹ “Renovation and Interior Design,” *Interior Design*, January 1957, 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

photograph of a bedroom shows ferns on the curtains, creating a wall of nature that once closed in front of the glass wall, still allowed for a view of the outdoors.

An advertisement from Lehman-Connor with the tagline “Glorifying the picture window” features “Twigs and Leaves” that followed the new decorating trend in American living which brought inside the beauty of the outdoors. Summing up the mid-century style, Joseph Wood Krutch, an American writer and critic, wrote: “If in our very wallpaper and fabrics we prefer leaves, flowers and green ferns... then we reveal it is by the suggestions of nature that we are most pleased and that to nature we still confess we still belong.”¹¹ He goes on to say, “we Americans like the colors of nature and the shapes of nature. We want the motifs of our designs to suggest—even literally to reproduce—natural forms.”¹²

Though interior design magazines promoted a sense of individuality in the decoration of one’s home, these spaces frequently utilized the same materials and inspirations, creating the mid-century “look.” As a result, the interior appearance of homes during the Cold War era was often less about one’s own individual taste but rather predicated on the idea of a unified nation through what would emerge as a distinctive American style. The insistence of an American style is in line with the promotion of an American, and better, lifestyle, as part of the fight against communism. By asserting a specific style Americans could stand united against the enemy. Decorating a home in the American style signaled progression, innovation, and above all patriotism.

The idea of the Iron Curtain both perpetuated and stabilized the stark ideological divide between the Soviet Union and the West; though not a physical object, it separated the adversaries emotionally. Similarly, interior iron curtains within the home allowed those on the inside to forget, if only temporarily, the danger, uncertainty, and differences on the other side. And unlike the cement-poured or solidly constructed fallout shelters textiles would not serve as enduring reminders of an uneasy era. Drawn curtains, keeping the family in and everything else out, mimicked the Iron Curtain drawn between Russia and the rest of the world. By maintaining a barrier between home and what lay outside of it, interior design was not just a means of decorating a dwelling, it was used for the political desire to keep the nation’s citizens feeling felt secure and safe, and in control of their homes.

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¹¹ Krutch, “The American Predilection,” 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, 114.