

The Great Indoors

At Home in the Modern British House

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WELCOME HOME

The delights of a well-appointed home are infinite, providing a launching-pad for nearly all the rich range of human activity that makes up life today.¹

This book is about the ordinary spaces of household life. It describes the major rooms – the kitchen, the front room and bedroom – as well as those more obscure spaces such as the upstairs landing and the hallway. Its historical focus is the twentieth century – particularly the second half, the post-war period. But the book also creeps into the present, and now and again it takes a much longer historical view. I pay attention to domestic rooms because they have been the stage sets for seismic shifts in social and cultural life over the last hundred years or so. Some of these changes are now glaringly obvious: today, for instance, we can seem wholly dependent on technology for most of our indoor entertainment. Other changes are less pronounced but no less significant: we sit differently, eat differently and use our rooms with a different sense of purpose. Domestic change has sometimes been swift, but often it has been incremental and sometimes glacial in its movement. We can see the results of change, but often it is hard to say where and when a change

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took place: when did people first ‘flop’ down into settees rather than ‘take their seat’? Did anyone ever simply decide overnight that from now on they would often eat meals while watching TV? Sometimes change appears dramatic – as if it happened overnight. The technological inventions that have left their indelible mark on the ordinary house are often presented like this. But anyone who has watched *Tomorrow’s World* will know that just because something has been invented doesn’t mean it will affect the lives of ordinary folk as they go about their daily routines. Even those inventions that do take off can be slow to gain a foothold in ordinary life, let alone become a ubiquitous part of it.

As well as drawing attention to change I am keen to notice the continuities of domestic life. In the Mass-Observation archive – a source that I will continually mine in this book – there are hundreds and hundreds of descriptions by ordinary men and women listing the items on their mantelpieces.² They are split into two sets. One is from the late 1930s, the other from the early 1980s. There are, as you might expect, differences between the two groups of description: in the 1930s there are more ashtrays and pipe-cleaners; in the 1980s there are more foreign coins waiting patiently for the next holiday abroad. Across the two moments there is continuity too: clocks seem as popular in the ’30s as in the ’80s – the same could be said for lone buttons, drawing pins, elastic bands and appointment cards. Other changes are more subtle: in the 1930s the lists are short, unfussy; by the 1980s they have become more elaborate, as if ordinary people have got more comfortable narrating their possessions and their lives. Other differences point to more fundamental changes: in the 1980s the mantelpiece doesn’t necessarily sit above a fireplace. By the 1980s some of the shelves that maintain the role of the mantelpiece are now radiator shelves or the telephone shelf. For some the mantelpiece has transformed

into a fridge door and its surrounding surfaces. But the fact that people have maintained a specific space for odds-and-ends and precious objects as well as for general communication and household reminders suggests that continuity sits alongside change in our domestic lives.

For a Martian anthropologist eager to study human life on the islands that make up Britain, the house would offer a natural site for fieldwork. Houses are where these particular humans, living as they do in a cold and wet climate, scurry back to in the evening. It is where they invest their money, where they keep their stuff. He or she (presuming that Martians follow such coarse distinctions) might chance upon these mantelpieces and might be forgiven for seeing them as sacred sites for collecting things that have little use but large symbolic value (why else give them such a prominent position?). Knick-knacks of all sorts would be found there: personal mementoes, household reminders, assorted oddities. Here humans bring together the precious, the peculiar and the haphazard. Returning home to Mars, and asked to report on what was most important to these humans, the Martian anthropologist will perhaps mention a list of things that, according to the Mass-Observation archive, are present on most mantelpieces across the century and across the varieties of people who respond to the directives: coins, pins and postcards. Perhaps this is our common culture at its most basic. And perhaps it has survived for years and will continue to, just as long as we need buttons.

This book will sometimes require the services of a Martian anthropologist to make visible a world that is often hidden from view simply by over-familiarity. Perhaps we don't see electric sockets any more because we take them so completely for granted. The only surprise we might get from a sink today would be if there wasn't gushing hot water 'freely' available – on tap, so to say. Talking of his time working with Mass-Observation

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in 1937, the photographer Humphrey Spender remembers visiting one particular house in the industrial town of Bolton: ‘we found, on the mantelshelf of the front parlour the component parts, heavily chromium-plated and gleaming, of a Hoover [vacuum cleaner]. There was no electricity connected to that house, so clearly this new invention, this new-fangled thing had another kind of meaning – as a kind of status symbol.’²³ Sociologists and others are quick to explain such oddities in terms of status-seeking, but would a working-class family in Bolton really spend what would have been a king’s ransom just to seem upwardly mobile? Perhaps the machine had been won in some sort of lottery and was now lying dormant in its dysfunctional splendour. Perhaps someone in the family was moonlighting as a repairer of domestic appliances, and here was the machine cleaned and ready to be put back together. Perhaps the family knew that an electricity supply was just around the corner, and here was their leap into the future – their down payment on an energy-guzzling tomorrow.

The connections and interconnections between houses alter during the period I’m looking at. This 1937 Bolton house has no electricity, even though the National Grid has been fully operational for two years and Bolton is a bustling urban area. It probably doesn’t have its own water supply and most likely shares a toilet with a number of other houses. Fuel for warmth and for cooking was presumably supplied through a weekly delivery of coal. If there was a radio set (and there might well have been), then this was because there was a wireless enthusiast in the house. Today we see it as essential that we are connected to an array of services: gas, electricity, water, sewage, telephone, television, radio, the internet. Today when we ask if a house is networked, we are simply asking if it has broadband – all the other services are just assumed.

This book, then, is partly an account of how British houses

and their households were changed by electricity, by the uneven spread of household gadgets and labour-saving devices: by telephones, radios, TVs, computers and by central heating. It is not a straightforward story of expensive appliances gradually becoming more affordable, of distribution trickling down from the well heeled to the masses, so to say. Our Bolton house is probably owned by a private landlord. It was in mid-century council houses that you were most likely to find automated waste-disposal units, under-floor heating and endless electricity sockets. The trickle-down effect also doesn't account for why some devices took much longer to get taken up than others. The vacuum cleaner took roughly forty years (from 1915 to 1955) to move from having a 1 per cent presence in English and Welsh households to achieving the 50 per cent threshold: the radio took only ten years (from 1923 to 1933) to reach the same level of diffusion.⁴ If women were in charge of buying consumer durables and not just perishables, would it have been a different story? Probably.

For most people, buying a vacuum cleaner or a wireless set was a large financial commitment. But it was nothing compared to forking out for a fitted kitchen or for getting central heating installed. For most of the twentieth century the majority of householders rented the properties they lived in. At the beginning of the First World War only 10 per cent of houses were occupied by their owners. It is only by the early 1970s that half the housing stock becomes owner-occupied, and by the end of the twentieth century it reached a plateau of around six houses out of ten.⁵ It is, of course, no coincidence that it isn't until the 1970s that central heating becomes a feature of over half of British households – how many private landlords would make that sort of investment if they didn't have to? This shift from 90 per cent of householders renting to a majority of households owning their properties is a social revolution on a massive scale.

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In many ways it explains a good deal of what happens to the home in the twentieth century and the practices that characterise it: for instance, the rise of DIY is clearly dependent on ownership. (Who would invest so much time and money into a building that was owned by someone else?) To bring such a revolution about required a change in the way that a society thought and acted. Mortgages, rather than being seen as morally dubious forms of debt, or as millstones inhibiting the enjoyment of life, had to become seen as a form of investment and as a way of getting on in life. Building societies, estate agents and banks eventually convinced us that owning, and the debt that went with it, were the way forward, the way to 'get on'. Clearly for the vast majority of people in the early decades of the twentieth century not being on 'the property ladder' was not the problem that it is now perceived to be.

In the chapters that follow I want to give a sense of lived-in-ness to the rooms that I explore. Perhaps one of the most significant changes in our day-to-day domestic living has to do with the manner in which we occupy space. Whether you call it a lounge or a sitting room, or opt for the anachronistic name 'parlour', something has changed in the living rooms of British houses: a sense of informality has invaded the home. Stuart Hall (the Stuart Hall who was responsible for establishing the discipline of cultural studies in Britain rather than the one who compèred *It's a Knockout*) came to Britain in the 1950s from Jamaica. He remembers how families created formal rooms under restricted conditions:

as you can imagine, the houses that West Indian families could afford at this stage were very small and the front room was a more confined space: but people still found a way to designate a space which is not packed out with people, where the family don't slouch about and relax and where there are

distinct rules as to when the whole family went in there and when they did not.⁶

Such rooms were for very formal socialising, but they were also a place where sacred objects were kept: souvenirs from travels, certificates of achievements, pictures of loved ones living far away. These parlours – especially for those who had newly migrated – spoke of values tenaciously held on to, of complex and contradictory desires, and, importantly, of memory.

In the period I'm looking at, domestic interiors became places for self-expression – for everyone. But before this, throughout the first half of the century and into the post-war period they are places requiring instruction, advice and concern. Concerns about hygiene, about how best to bring up an infant, about what kind of manners to display in the home, about how to use the rooms of the house (how to clean them, heat them, use them) are offered by magazines, books and government policies – endlessly. The move towards the expressive interior also seemed to require lots of advice, but this time it was aimed at getting the interior to reflect your personality.

The home is a place where you are meant to express your taste, your cultural loyalties and your aspirations. These might be expressions of a common culture – of religious commitments and national pride – or they might be about the idiosyncrasies and modishness of taste (which is a different sort of commonality). If you could afford it – and more and more people could – your house could reflect your sense of being modern or your love of the past. Your house, in other words, could be your lifestyle. But the home is always and primarily a practical environment determined by money and by the day-to-day business of living. How we negotiate between the practical and the expressive is a consistent theme in this book.

To want to be up to date isn't a desire limited to the twentieth

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and twenty-first centuries. But during the last hundred years it has become something of an insistent preoccupation – especially for the industries devoted to making and promoting new domestic furnishings, as well as for the myriad of voices telling us how we should live. From about the 1920s being ultra-modern and up to date has resulted in a general de-cluttering of the home – ridding it of endless shelves and display cabinets filled with crockery, ornaments, sentimental knick-knacks and so on. Of course, being ultra-modern has not been the preoccupation of all: during the twentieth century it has been taken up most enthusiastically by the young and aspirational. Implementing the modern could be seen as a form of self-expression: embracing the clean simplicity of geometric space left un-fussed by the ornamentalism of over-stuffed interiors. Or it could be seen as practical: a menagerie of knick-knacks requires a serious amount of dusting. The twentieth century witnesses a general shift in middle-class life, as domestic servants become something only the properly wealthy could afford. The moderate white-collar earners would have to manage their own household chores. The de-cluttering of the house is neither just an issue of taste nor an issue of pragmatism – it is both simultaneously, and it is this tangled relationship that we continuously find in our tour of the house. It has a credo much loved by advertisers – not only does it look great, it is super-efficient too.

Compared to today's ideal domestic interior, the Victorian and Edwardian home looks so much darker, so much heavier and so much fuller. But images tell us only part of the story. When it comes to what these rooms mean and how that meaning has changed, we also need to look at how they are used. A house, we say, is our private space. But within that space is a subtle range of more private and more public spaces. A downstairs toilet might have a sense of public-ness in a way that an *en suite* bathroom

could never have; a kitchen will always, I would think, seem less private than a spare room. And then there are rooms that seem to have a range of public and private functions. A teenager's bedroom often functions as a relatively public space for hanging out with friends but is also a deeply private space within the circulation of the house (entrance is by invitation only). Before central heating these were rooms that were rarely heated and wouldn't have been used at all during the daytime (unless the child was ill). Once upon a time, to be sent to your room really was some sort of punishment: now it is often the place where children and young adults would ideally want to be. And now, since the internet, these places are no longer the private cocoons for morose self-reflection (though they can be this too). Instead they are portals to all manner of opportunities, adventures and dangers. For many parents the bogeyman that haunts their nightmares isn't the stranger in the park offering sweets to young innocents but the internet groomer passing as a teenager in a chatroom in cyberspace seducing your young ones in the security of their own home.

In *The Great Indoors* I'm interested in two sorts of houses. One is the idealised house as it is imagined by exhibition designers such as those involved in the annual *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition. It is the house imagined in the pages of magazines and newspapers by lifestyle columnists and tailored to a variety of pockets and aspirations (from aristocratic to 'shabby chic'). It is there in aspirational DIY television programmes such as *Changing Rooms* (BBC, 1996–2004) and *Grand Designs* (Channel 4, 1999– ongoing). And it is pictured by retailers dealing in the accoutrements to domestic life.

The other house is the actual sort that people live in. According to the first type, it might seem that the average house is lived in by what is still sometimes called the nuclear family (in the sense of a nucleus of a pair of adults and their

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offspring rather than a family living off atomic energy). This imaginary house is people by effortlessly beautiful people at ease with their lovely interiors: here Aran-sweatered dads relax on white leather sofas watching football while tousling the hair of young sons; trendy mums in skinny jeans rustle up rustic food while curly-haired daughters cut cookies. The second, 'realist', type of house shows that this nuclear family household is now in the minority. According to the Office of National Statistics, about half the population lived in family homes in 1961; by 2009 this had fallen to about a third. The big growth areas are households of childless couples and single-person households. Families are also much more varied today than they were in the middle of the last century, with many more single-parent families, with blended families that mix biological and 'stepped' relations and with the new visibility of same-sex couples and their children.

It might seem that the idealised house is simply a fiction and that it is only the actual house that is real. But the idealised house not only shapes our imagination; it also shapes our real homes. In the chapters that follow I often refer to interior design advice provided by Terence Conran. In the 1950s Conran was a furniture and textile designer. In the 1960s he became a retailer, launching the Habitat chain of shops selling upmarket furnishings at relatively affordable prices. In the 1970s he launched a series of books advising people how to make the best of their homes. When I first started researching this book, I came across a reference to Habitat in the Mass-Observation archive. It is in a response to a directive asking Mass-Observers (in 1982) to describe their homes for the benefit of the historians of the future: 'I am interested in this project but do not see how any house is "typical" of the period. Well some are I suppose. Perhaps the '70s and '80s when reconstructed in museums will be pure Habitat? But isn't that a class thing?' This diarist is right, of course, Habitat