Designing One Nation

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Introduction

\textit{Designing One Nation}

\textit{Ex oriente lux, ex occidente luxus.}” Light from the East, luxury from the West. Polish writer Stanislaw Jerzy Lec has been credited with coining this laconic aphorism to capture the magnetism of the two dominant Cold War ideologies. After the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), West German design critics reappropriated the phrase in discussions about East Germany’s material legacy.\(^1\) They used it triumphantly, because from their point of view luxury had eclipsed the light. Western economic liberalism, so it seemed, had won the war of ideologies.\(^2\) They used the phrase cautiously, because the lost socialist utopia, the extinguished light, carried the potential to ignite nostalgia among East Germans, a longing for a past civilization that, by 1992, had been taken over by the West. They used the phrase because the aphorism so fittingly encapsulated the Cold War struggle in divided Germany, the confrontation of two diametrically opposed socioeconomic systems: the principled, moralizing socialist economy in the East and the lavish, affluent capitalist economy in the West. Entrenched as these cultural critics and their contemporaries were in the political mindset of the Cold War, emphasizing difference had always been a way to ensure the international recognition of separate German identities. In fact, it is impossible to understand the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) during the decades of division without the GDR, and vice-versa. Their domestic and international politics, economic policy, social progress, and cultural development substantially derived from the tension created by the sheer presence of the other. Ironically, their attempts at expressing difference unintentionally created a shared code of ideological inscription in everyday German life.\(^3\)

After the Third Reich delegitimized nationalism as a valid form of identification, both German states faced a search for acceptable political values. Nationalist approaches that stressed German exceptionality had become unacceptable. The West German decision to remove the first stanza from the German national
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anthem is just one example; Germany could no longer aspire to stand “above everything in the world.” Moreover, heavy Allied involvement in state-building and policy development left the population with a sense of insecurity about the origins of their state(s), further hindering their identification with postwar Germany. In an effort to create a valid political culture, governments followed the people literally into their homes with highly politicized debates about German living standards. In election campaigns, the first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, capitalized on the general social uplift created by the “economic miracle” of swift West German industrial recovery, while East German leaders Walter Ulbricht and later Erich Honecker promised similar material everyday comforts with the New Economic Policy (1963) and Unity of Economic and Social Policy (1971) programs. In cooperation with cultural and economic elites, they relied on everyday aesthetics to create distinct national domestic cultures and emphasize ideological demarcation as integrative concepts. Economic progress would promote the new political order in both national and international contexts. It would also substitute for traditional nationalism by providing the population with values that yielded a sense of belonging. This importance of economic success for political legitimacy of the two Germanys in the East-West competition has long been acknowledged. On closer examination, however, this period of delineation should be understood as a prelude to the détente of the eighties. Seeing that the signing of the German Basic Treaty in 1972 “normalized” the antagonistic relationship between the two German states, a long-term analysis that extends to 1989 can provide insights into a more diverse political utilization of German material culture—and thus into the internal German relationship—than has been recognized so far.

One of the ways the FRG and the GDR developed and maintained the new national identity was by instilling material culture, specifically interior design and furniture production, with strong political messages. However, the emerging aesthetic did more than just modernize the respective parts of Germany. What started as a Cold War competition for ideological superiority in the field of economics quickly turned into a shared, politically legitimizing quest for an untainted postfascist modernity. In the process, they resurrected the “Made in Germany” brand to mark a rehabilitated, divided-yet-peaceful Germany that yearned for membership among modern industrial nations. Following furniture products from the drafting table into the homes of ordinary Germans offers insight into how converging visions of German industrial modernity created shared expectations about economic progress and living standards. These shared expectations shaped a system of values at the juncture of economic and sociocultural
politics, an economic culture that bound the two Germanys together. Implemented as policy, it projected internationally a pan-German interest.

That the striving for difference created similarity in how East and West Germans negotiated their country’s division is a paradox that warrants explanation. Examining this phenomenon highlights historical interconnections between the two Germanys in product design, economic structure, corporate ethos, trade, and consumer society. All of these are part of economic culture, which political scientist Paul Egon Rohrlich explained as the need to understand “the perceptual predisposition of national populations, based on cultural value systems” as the motivation behind policymaking. From this perspective, the legitimating norms for policymaking spring from contexts other than politics in society, yet they become visible through analysis of issue interpretation, policy formation, and implementation. It puts the focus on the people as historical actors, rather than on the state structure, to explain policymaking. In the case of postwar Germany, this concept offers an approach that transcends the starkly contrasting systems of state socialism and market capitalism. In doing so, it underscores similarities in the activities of a network of politicians, entrepreneurs, and cultural brokers, and how they envisioned and realized economic policy in the two German states in their efforts to regain economic stability and political influence in Cold War Europe’s order.

Like other capitalist and socialist societies throughout Europe, both the Federal Republic and the GDR embarked on finding solutions to postwar reconstruction problems, most notably scarce housing and furnishing, and shared their findings in the myriad European design exhibitions, among them the Milan Triennial and the Jablonec International. Many of those solutions involved the mechanization of craft industries and ensuing standardization, which were economically efficient but were criticized by contemporaries for their monotony, thus hindering cultural diversity as well as societal refinement. Both German states created institutions that not only defined the new industrial design profession but also invested in consumer taste education that promoted certain national aesthetics. Meanwhile, in the later postwar decades, growing notions of individualism and social distinction across all social strata pushed designers, industrialists, and politicians to find more bespoke solutions. Especially in state socialism, the apparent contradiction between collectivist maxims and individualistic desires preoccupied high-ranking politicians of the power-monopolizing Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED). Efforts at creating ideologically conforming consumer habits reveal personal responses and show how the ideas that consumer education initiatives promoted became
pervasive among the population. Naturally, the availability and affordability of desired products were key to the success of these ideas.

Despite the centrality of trade in shaping the German-German relationship, especially after the 1972 Basic Treaty, it has received relatively little scholarly attention. Economic treatments of GDR history have focused on the shortcomings of the command economy in order to explain the country’s comparatively sudden collapse in 1989. Over the past three decades, the question of its forty years of relative political stability, peaking in the 1970s, has remained a scholarly focus. Controversies emerged over the stabilizing factors of communist rule. Yet the extent to which the GDR leadership secured this “golden decade” through its special relationship with the Federal Republic goes unnoticed or, when looking at trade credits, is oversimplified to portray the GDR as a passive receiver, instead of as an active agent in the marketplace. Alternatively, the Federal Republic’s economic success has diverted attention to Western integration and the development of the European common market. The FRG’s economic relationship to the GDR has been deemed insignificant, which is true in terms of its trade balance but not in terms of pan-German cultural influence and national politics. The following pages describe an asymmetric relationship in which economic and political priorities developed at times into conflicting and contradictory dynamics. For the West, the political aspect of intra-German trade outweighed its economic benefits, and for the East, economic necessity trumped the official policy of ideological differentiation.

Details are sparse about East Germany’s efforts to deepen trade with the West. Indeed, the GDR capitalized on the territorial incertitude and the lack of a postwar peace settlement that would have defined borders. With the help of the Federal Republic, it gained special status for trade with the European Economic Community (EEC). Through the Protocol on Intra-German Trade, East German goods and services were exempt from tariffs that other non-EEC countries had to pay. Western customers bought, often unknowingly, East German products in department stores and through mail order catalogs, enjoying low prices courtesy of an eastern economic infrastructure that focused on mass production. By the 1970s, the Federal Republic had become an indispensable trade partner for the GDR, second only to the Soviet Union. From the West German perspective, the structurally lagging GDR economy offered opportunities for a gradual normalization of German-German relations. Hence these links ran deeper than simple economic transactions; they were inherently political, illustrating not only the place of East-West trade in the permeability of the Iron Curtain but also pointing to its significance in stabilizing the GDR. Moreover,
in catering to foreign markets, GDR industries and their designers eventually aligned themselves with western tastes and aesthetics, which risked undermining cultural distinction efforts on the national level.

Beyond uncovering hitherto understudied dimensions of German-German relations, the economic culture perspective contributes to the literature of postwar German history in a number of methodological and thematic ways. First, many cultural studies of Cold War Germany evaluate economic performance exclusively based on consumer satisfaction.\textsuperscript{10} It is, however, crucial to consider the aspirations for and perceptions of cultural modernization alongside its actual materiality. Including specific values in the discussion of economic performance reveals the significance of a shared history, cultural norms, and economic practices in the German postwar context. Hence this work is not just about competition for preeminence between East and West Germany, but it is also about the rediscovery of forgotten similarities. Vying for economic and ideological superiority and earnest efforts for a German-German cultural rapprochement were not mutually exclusive.

Second, the economic culture approach, based as it is on cultural value systems, illuminates the complex interaction of German state and nonstate actors across and beyond national borders in international organizations. Numerous avenues of communication made the inner-German border permeable and allowed for the transfer or exchange of ideas, goods, people, and, of course, interpretations of material culture. This book thus brings together scholarship on East German and West German design and consumption, which, like most of the historiography on postwar Germany, have heretofore developed largely separately.\textsuperscript{11} West Germany’s apparent untainted economic success has not only served as a benchmark against which to measure the East German past but has also allowed Germany’s eventual integration into the Western system of capitalism and liberal values to take on the semblance of a predetermined outcome.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, scholars’ tendency to focus on just one part of Germany has led to the assumption that the two countries developed in very different, indeed contrasting, ways, with a particular interpretation of industrial modernity in the East being labeled “socialist modern.”\textsuperscript{13} Yet studying the two Germanys alongside each other underscores how much—and at what points—they influenced each other. Against the backdrop of state policy, the dynamics among designers, entrepreneurs, retailers, and ordinary Germans can show when and why these actors competed or cooperated over the question of what modernization meant for the GDR, the Federal Republic, and the relationship between the two countries.
Designing One Nation thus seeks to offer a narrative that, as historian Konrad Jarausch describes, “break[s] out of the strait-jacket of parallel stories” and instead looks at mutual influence and internal relationships without losing sight of ideological differences. Addressing the Cold War from the German perspective, a focus on trade and design offers a detailed look at instances of exchange and even cooperation in Europe across the Cold War divide. Such moments of German-German agreement came to the fore especially during the so-called Second Cold War in the early 1980s, when the Soviet-American relationship deteriorated and set the stage for Germany’s gradual diplomatic emancipation. The two German states employed the constructive message of product design to communicate alternatives to nuclear deterrence for European security and peace. These initiatives show that German elites consciously used economic and intellectual resources to normalize East-West relations, which eventually undermined the Cold War status quo and helped to pave the way for unification. The tentative endpoint, the unification of 1990, meanwhile, must be examined without the teleological assumption that East and West Germany are easily identified as one nation. After all, almost nobody in Germany, East or West, believed that reunification would be possible up until the point when it actually happened.

And yet, in examining a process of rapprochement there are always the pitfalls of teleology that undermine the exploration of patterns of past developments. Convergence theory of the 1960s predicted the inevitable harmonization of capitalist and socialist countries. Facing the same challenges of the industrial age, the theory assumed, both systems would solve their respective problems with similar technological means that eventually would create the same social and political modernity. East and West Germany might seem like ideal candidates for testing this theory. Yet, convergence implies a kind of linear development that glosses over the complex internal relationship that bound the two German states together. In fact, East German social scientists rejected the theory, as it hollowed out the raison d’être of the socialist project. It was seen as a Western, anticommunist plot, and in particular during the years of détente the GDR felt as a result that it needed to double down the demarcation effort in the ideological struggle with the West. In going beyond parallel histories of convergence, changing and constantly renegotiated values and norms become visible in economic and foreign policy, in processes of production and consumption, in applied aesthetic concepts as well as in institutional and individual agency in the economic culture of partition. Approaching the German-German past through episodes of mutual provocation and cooperation in the field of economic policy therefore allows for a clearer picture of the tensions that fueled their trajectories.
At the center stands the question of how the two Germanys turned a competitive situation, the implementation of legitimizing socioeconomic orders, into a diplomatic tool for reconciliation.

The sources that shed light on this question come from diverse political, economic, and cultural institutional archives, published sources, oral histories, and visits to factories and retailers. Among other official sources, the book incorporates previously inaccessible documents on the activities of the West German Ministry for Economic Affairs (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, BMWi) and the Permanent Mission (Ständige Vertretung) in East Berlin that detail the mechanisms and behind-the-scenes bartering of the intra-German trade. Design archives in combination with the papers of the FRG and GDR foreign offices helped to establish how the two German states operationalized trade and material culture in international organizations for diplomatic goals. Meanwhile, design magazines, interior design advice literature, and exhibition catalogs offer insights into the changing meanings of material aesthetics. Interviews with former East and West German designers and politicians were instrumental in closing gaps in the archival documentation of technological and aesthetic development in product design, which the GDR referred to as industrial design much earlier than the West. Visual sources from a number of sociological studies and design journals provide a rare glimpse into the homes of East and West Germans, exposing their levels of taste appropriation and expressions of individuality. In addition, visits to furniture manufacturers and retailers helped to establish their technological, material, and infrastructural challenges. These wide-ranging sources connect the sphere of policymaking to policy implementation in the everyday lives of East and West Germans. The fact that the furniture industry developed similarly in terms of mechanization and labor intensity in the two Germanys, save for the difference in resource availability and investment stagnation in later decades, allows for a close examination of comparative developments in production and consumption. It is, for instance, unlike the automotive industry, which had disabling structural and competitive inequalities that would render any comparison futile from the outset.

The analysis of postwar Germany’s economic culture unfolds in five thematic chapters. Wartime destruction offered an empty canvas for material reinvention in Germany after the end of the Second World War. Chapter 1 follows the rise and fall of disciples from the famous Bauhaus school and members of the architecture and design association Werkbund in the institutionalization of national product aesthetics in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Their goal to create a forward-looking cultural and economic vision for Germany, which would
distance it from the politicized aesthetics of the Third Reich, relied initially on the modernist mantra “form follows function.” The GDR soon abandoned simplistic design in favor of highly ornamented styles to ideologically demarcate itself from the West. In the late 1960s, this GDR cultural policy was reversed, though not for purely economic reasons during a period of industrial standardization as previous scholarship has proposed. Instead, western debates about functionalism’s dogmatism enabled the GDR intelligentsia to reclaim modern aesthetics for the socialist planned economy.

Turning discourse on official aesthetics into practice set both German states on a track toward “nation branding.” The term describes the efforts of a network of designers and producers to create a narrative of political significance around their products. Chapter 2 offers a behind-the-scenes look at this translation process in the furniture industry. In particular, it underscores the business ethos of small- and medium-sized enterprises, the backbone of Germany’s industry, in both economic systems. Ultimately, this demonstrates that durable designs and quality materials were favored in both economic systems, although execution varied according to resources.

Domestic economic structures were not the only way in which national brand similarities were discovered and maintained. By the mid-1960s, the two German production cultures started to converge in a rationalized, streamlined aesthetic. It was not the case that, when faced with the same economic problems, capitalist and communist systems inevitably arrived at similar solutions. Rather, while the FRG successfully regained a reputation for excellence in interior design, the need for foreign currency in the GDR eventually led to a search for customers in the global market. This economic reorientation gave incentives to East German designers and producers to cater to western trends and tastes. Chapter 3 reveals how intra-German trade, strategically financed by the Federal Republic, played a significant role in undermining the Cold War division in Europe and paved the way for East-West cultural rapprochement.

With a focus on material culture as a means of diplomacy, chapter 4 demonstrates how industrial design became an important part of trade as a lingua franca in the German Question and offered space for exploration of alternatives to eastern and western alignment. The analysis builds on a growing literature on German cultural diplomacy and expands design histories by exploring industrial design’s—and related questions of export trade’s—operationalization for diplomatic purposes in the context of German division.20 It examines cultural activities in the International Council of Societies of Industrial Designers (ICSID) and the friendly competition that emerged from it in the context of talks about
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Despite attempts by the Federal Republic to isolate East Germany, the GDR succeeded in using membership in international organizations as stepping-stones toward international recognition. It is here that the potential for a “third way” between eastern and western integration emerged in German foreign policy.

Beyond the spheres of production and trade, consumers constituted an important factor in economic culture. Contemporary politicians and industrial designers were concerned about the taste levels among the population and implemented a multitude of strategies, such as publications and design exhibitions, to educate consumers from the 1950s onward. Not only were consumers the target of prescriptive elite taste education, but I argue in chapter 5 that they also presented a benchmark for success in establishing particular domestic cultures that expressed respective political and economic goals. Interestingly, despite the apparent differences between what economist János Kornai has named the socialist “economics of shortage” and the western market economy of abundance, similar narratives about functionalist aesthetics emerged in East and West German homes. They reveal a conservative modernism shaped by traditional elements in social and housing policy that translated into moderated production designs and consumer tastes.

The Cold War determined the context for the difficult relationship between the Federal Republic and the GDR, and the partition left Europe with the question of whether or not Germany should be able to unite and what role it should play in the region. While this “German Question” lost its political urgency after the peaceful unification of 1990, it is still part and parcel of its Cold War history. The lens of economic culture and related questions of design, trade, and consumption in combination with the political dimensions of the German Question offer an intriguing alternative to traditional Cold War histories of Germany that emphasize rivalry. In revealing similarities and instances of collaboration, it refocuses Germany’s Cold War history on the special relationship between the two German states. The findings help to explain the relative stability of the division over four decades and illuminate the comparatively smooth transition to unification in 1990. Moreover, they show how, in particular, West Germany—underneath thick layers of Western integration and international politics that strived to isolate the GDR—invested in sustainable economic and cultural policies that kept alive ties across the Iron Curtain, in the end designing one nation.