Designing One Nation

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CHAPTER 5

Conservative Modernity

_The Reception of Functionalism in German Living Rooms_

_Habitation (wohnen) is a part of culture,_” Hans Paul Barhdt expounded in his sociological analysis of the processes at work in the German postwar home. His 1961 book became a seminal sociological text on German urbanization and the tensions between public and private spaces.¹ “A space, an apartment, is comfortable if it provides a cozy-familiar frame to everyday functions, including work—yet not all kinds of work—in a way that these functions not only don’t interfere with each other, but rather harmonize with each other. This harmony is a part of culture.”² With his work Barhdt expanded the West German functionalist debate about domestic culture, aesthetics, and taste. Industrial designers and architects had previously limited functionalism to a specific aesthetic of “good design,” which, religiously implemented, expressed support for politically legitimizing national brand narratives. Barhdt reinterpreted functionalism as practicality, the way in which the home and the things in it aligned with the needs of its inhabitants and their everyday routines. His definition included the actual practices involved in the consumption of space, both in terms of the acquisition of objects and their usage. This perspective subordinates material culture to human needs, a position similar to Adorno’s call for an extended functionalism.³

The sociological approach to material possessions diverges from postwar German design discourse that had put form and political meaning above the necessities of everyday life. As such this point of view offers a different perspective on the complex history of functionalism in Germany and provides an opportunity to look at its implementation in German homes. It adds the social element that was lacking in West German design debates, an aspect that differed between the Federal Republic and the GDR, where it had remained part of the East German industrial design discourse from the states’ foundation.
What remained unclear, however, was how, or whether at all, socialist and capitalist modes of habitation differed practically. This chapter seeks to understand how pervasive the German postwar discourse on functionalism was in German everyday life and what elements of the good design education successfully entered consumer practices.

By the 1970s both German states had arrived at functionalist aesthetics as a marker of modern living standards. This raises the question of whether the two German states also shared one vision of modernity. Heretofore, historians of the GDR and other Eastern Bloc countries have put forward the notion of “socialist modernity,” arguing that the Eastern Bloc shared with capitalist modernity progressive forces such as secularization and industrialization, yet that socialism had “a special dynamism” in its scientific approach used to legitimize political action and a “cult of technology and a mania for remaking the world” in its vision for a socialist way of life. This emphasis implies that GDR designers and politicians, producers, and consumers had inherently different ideas about industrial modernity than their western cousins.

While the notion of a socialist path to modernity is certainly useful, it has its limitations when discussing the two postwar German states. In fact, strong similarities existed between the economic cultures in East and West in the later decades of the Cold War, which leads to the conclusion that the earlier diverging concepts of modernity were fueled by the ideological fervor of the GDR’s early days under Stalinist influence, traces of which persisted into the 1960s. In the long run, however, the German-German bond that endured despite and because of the eastern demarcation efforts, the reflexes that the ever-present alternative on the other side of the border triggered, led to reflective policymaking and institution building. Approaching this topic from the vantage point of the welfare state, specifically housing policy, offers an exciting opportunity to move beyond discourse on postwar German design that had put form and political meaning above the necessities of everyday life. The existence of a German socialist state helped raise the profile of social policy during the Adenauer years and made progress in housing provision and economic security a foundational issue in debates about human dignity and citizenship in the early Federal Republic. Similarly, West Germany’s social market economy and its conservative welfare state, centered on middle-class dreams of homeownership and the male bread-winner model, challenged the GDR leadership to move away from radical socialist ideas and to inch toward a model that Konrad Jarausch has labelled a “welfare dictatorship.”

As we have seen, East and West German economic cultures were not dramatically different in terms of expectations for living standards, both expressed in
political debate and production culture. However, at the level of execution, the availability and the material quality of furniture and housing remained a challenge for the GDR’s economic system throughout the Cold War, as thousands of complaint letters and comments in exhibition guestbooks show. The East German population expected more, especially after the Fifth Party Congress in 1958, when the GDR leadership pitted East German economic performance against the West German benchmark. At the same time, social stratification in West German capitalist society limited the opportunities for participation in progressive lifestyles for those in the low-income brackets.

These limitations, in turn, raise questions about the extent to which the officially promoted political, social, and cultural norms and values embodied in material culture and interior design were able to transcend the divide between public and private in the two German states. This chapter examines these questions through consumer education and consumption practices. The narrativity of material culture can explain consumer choices based on fashions, personal tastes, and projections of self-image. No matter if it is furnished sparsely modern, retro nostalgic, cozy romantic, or expensive luxurious, a home becomes part of a life story. Accordingly, consumers purchase the material representation of values with which they identify.8 The act of consumption, then, symbolizes the population’s acceptance or rejection of foundational values inscribed in the national brand and the economic culture. In this way, consumers became an integral part to the success or failure of official aesthetics in interior design in East and West Germany. But it is important to go beyond consumption statistics to evaluate the relative success of functionalist rhetoric. What did prescriptive visions of domestic modernity mean for the populations’ everyday life? How successful were these interjections of public policy into private homes, and how did the individual mitigate them?

Despite the emphasis on modernization and progress on both sides of the border, what emerged in the practices of domestication and privatization, curiously, is a pan-German conservative modernity, a muted rationalism that intertwined progressive cultural policy with conservative social policy. The term conservative modernity warrants further explanation. It links to political conservatism, which revolves around ideas of nationhood that put family at the center of political life. These concerns form the basis for a commitment to safeguarding the limits of acceptable expression of national belonging.9 Conservatives themselves have explained that their philosophy is not opposed to change, but is a cautious “break” to slow down change, to reform gradually and not to revolutionize.10 Conservative modernism shares certain concerns and values with political conservatism
and has been discussed as a phenomenon that emerged first in the early 20th century as a political reaction to cultural liberalization. The term was also used in architecture discourse in the interwar years and resurfaced during the postwar reconstruction period. Recovering polemics from the 1930s, church architect and moderate modernist Rudolf Schwarz employed the term during the 1953 Bauhaus Debate in West Germany to express “his rejection of any kind of avant-garde.” After losing the argument to functionalists Hans Schwippert and Egon Eiermann, he repeatedly took a stance against “monocultures” of glass facades and cubic architecture. A similar conservative resistance to design monocultures was reflected in the consumer behavior of most East and West Germans. Partial integration and “incorrect” appropriation of those modern idioms that the two German states promoted at different points over forty years—be it functionalist modernism, socialist synthetic modernism based on functional product designs, or Adorno’s extended functionalism—resulted in a conservative modernism.

The intertwining of cultural and economic modernization with, in essence, conservative social policy was another aspect that contributed to an economic culture shared by populations on both sides of the border.

Leading by Example: The Visual Experience of Wohnkultur

Implementation of modernization in everyday life happened only gradually for a host of reasons. Social patterns of tradition, the inability of the state—despite growing welfare states—to enable everybody to participate in a modernity that sought a complete break with the past, the authoritative notion that there was only one right way to get to this modernity, and the connection of its fulfillment to competing ideas about national identity or brand narratives all presented hurdles. These parallel challenges came clearly to the fore in state-guided consumer education, political attempts at integrating the population into the nation’s cultural-economic aspirations via moderate, rational, and “correct” consumption.

Home ownership quickly became an important issue in bombed-out and refugee-crowded urban areas in the West and was encouraged by local administrations. Under the Adenauer governments, a conservative consensus viewed private property and state welfare as the basis of social security. The exhibition catalog for one of the first postwar interior design exhibitions How to Dwell? in Stuttgart in 1949 acknowledged popular ambitions of home ownership: “A house for the family is the dream of many. Rightfully so! A people that cultivates domestic culture does not give up on itself.” However, for the time being,
the catalog posited that Germans had to content themselves with smaller apartments and simpler, fitting furniture. “The occurring changes require completely different things. . . . The small apartment is not transitional, it is constant.” Indeed, the First Housing Law of 1950, describes West German humble beginnings with the so-called small apartment model of 32 to 65 square meters. Between 1950 and 1952, 70 percent of all new-built housing was public housing funded by the state with subsidies or interest-free loans to alleviate the shortage of capital. Private investors received tax cuts and credits in exchange for accepting rent restrictions and an income-defined tenant community. This housing policy aimed at the social integration of a starkly stratified postwar West German society by providing affordable apartments for all, including millions of refugees and expellees. While rental property development had clear priority during the early years with an estimated housing deficit of 4.5 million apartments, private home ownership received equal state support. Meanwhile, the right to housing was not inscribed in the West German constitution, and home ownership remained a distant dream for many.

The GDR faced similarly challenging circumstances. Initial experiments in communal housing and shared spaces faltered in the face of what East German authors also depicted as a “natural” longing for a private apartment and family life without subletters and an army of children. In 1952, the prestige construction project Stalinallee in Berlin promised East Germans family flats with lush amenities, including elevators, modern built-in cupboards, and separate bathrooms. Although about 70 percent of the materials for the first stage of the project had been salvaged from the debris of bombed houses, the lavish architectural style proved too expensive to become the standard blueprint for GDR public housing.

The hardships of the postwar housing situation engendered popular nostalgia for a comfortable past. In an effort to make their new apartments feel like home, many West Germans acquired furnishings that reminded them of better times, much to the disdain of the network of industrial designers, producers, and politicians who had invested in the national aesthetic. Consumer choices, guided by sentimentality rather than the actual limitations of the postwar situation, only confirmed the Werkbund’s conviction that public consumption ought to be guided. The liberalization of choice in the climate of incipient economic recovery only exacerbated the problem, which the Federal Republic shared with its European neighbors. The RfF design council promptly nominated itself to supervise this liberalization of choice. During the parliamentary hearings about the council’s rationale in 1952, the Werkbund laid out the elitist philosophy for
the RfF: “The audience has neither good nor bad taste. Its taste always refers to that of the powerful, who shape the Zeitgeist, the meaning of life, and mankind’s ambitions and illusions.”22 Such a top-down approach not only ran contrary to West Germany’s sociopolitical goals of democratization and liberalization in all areas of cultural, economic, and public life, but it also intentionally capitalized on the principle of pecuniary emulation, canons of taste in modern stratified society, and status consumption.23

Similarly, but with a different ideological impetus, Horst Michel and the Weimar Institute organized several kitsch exhibitions to educate the broader public through comparison with well and badly designed products.24 Michel’s understanding of good design was expressed in the same design maxims as the Werkbund: durable and honest materials, the avoidance of modishness, and pretension of value appreciation via “unauthentic” or embellished surfaces. When the regime eventually made a step toward a comprehensive housing policy in the 1960s, people brought their old furniture into new modern housing, which frustrated reformers.

In the 1960s, the Soviet Union had solved a comparable situation with the so-called everyday (byt) campaigns. The eradication of petit-bourgeois furniture as “vestiges of the capitalist past hindering the development of late socialism” became one of the central aims of Khrushchev’s rationalizing reforms. Byt reformers distributed household advice manuals which encouraged behaviors that would conform with socialist ontology through taste education. Stalinist excess could be adequately contained through this disciplining regime of taste. Manuals provided do-it-yourself advice about how to alter the vestiges of petit-bourgeois living to conform to the reformist principles of the leveled domestic landscape. Chopping off the backs of divans and lowering bed frames or disposing completely of such bourgeois furniture were among the recommended measures to guarantee the “horizontality” of the home.25

There is no evidence of such campaign measures in the interior design advice literature of the GDR. A possible reason might have been the extreme pressure on the SED to uphold the image of a flourishing economy that could provide for its population, so it instead addressed the problem of outdated interior design choices with the 1964 reform of the furniture industry. But producing modern furniture did not mean that consumers would buy it. Actively shaping consumer taste and influencing decision-making remained the only means to improve future consumption.

It is noteworthy that both Germanys denied that the general public had good taste and therefore elevated design professionals to arbiters of beauty. This elitist
worldview and the activities that derived from it expressed what can be called “taste paternalism,” a term that encapsulates the missionary zeal with which reformers took up their self-assigned task of enlightening the population about aesthetic principles. “Show and tell” became a popular method to generate public understanding of their respective modern domestic cultures in the two German states. The Werkbund and the ZfF, each in cooperation with regional administration and industry, put together a range of activities that brought their message to the people. They targeted all age groups to ensure the education of present and future consumers to buy the “right” products that supported the construction of socialist and capitalist society. Hands-on taste education, a form of consumer education that relies on clear distinctions between good and bad design, became the logical next step in both Germanys.

In 1954, the Werkbund initiated a program of material culture education in West Berlin’s secondary schools that eventually spread to other federal states. To provide teachers with materials for demonstration, the Berliners invented so-called Werkbund boxes (Werkbundkisten), which they filled with exemplary objects for the students to see, touch, and utilize. The objects were arranged in the boxes according to their material, function, utility, technology, shape, and color. Each box had a different thematic focus—“the work space,” “kitchen appliances,” and “the set table.” Often, they contained designs of Werkbund members Heinrich Löffelhardt and Wilhelm Wagenfeld, and those of firms close to the association, such as Zwiesel glass, Arzberg china, and Carl Pott cutlery. Some of the boxes, like the ones that focused on table settings, encouraged students to utilize them in simulations of family meals, reproducing conservative social norms of family and domesticity. Growing incomes and more leisure time, the result of the economic miracle, made youth vulnerable to the seduction of the developing consumer society, the Werkbund feared. The objective of this program was to sensitize teenagers to the design of everyday objects and to enhance their critical abilities vis-à-vis the world of consumer products.

After the social critique of functionalism by the 1968 movements, the Werkbundkisten initiative began to lose momentum in the early 1970s. One federal state after another ended the program amid the general climate of antiauthoritarianism and youth protest. A final report of the Werkbund in Lower Saxony stated in 1970 that the program had become counterproductive: “The youth’s skepticism toward things that they perceive as representations of the establishment lead to a loss of their binding character or even to an urge to fight them.”

In the GDR students’ education about the material environment had a completely different point of departure. After the secondary school reforms of 1958,
the curriculum required polytechnical education and industrial apprenticeships. The underlying objectives of this program were similar to the Bitterfelder Weg in acquainting school students with the means of production in connection with the cultural value of objects. A byproduct of polytechnical training in schools was a preparation for adult life in the GDR economy of scarcity, where do-it-yourself became an important and clandestinely state-supported strategy to fill the gaps of supply shortages. It also aimed at introducing university-bound students to the everyday experiences of workers, familiarizing them with the social foundations of the German socialist state. In the West, professional internships became increasingly common in later decades, but here the goal lay in helping young people choose their future vocations.

To educate the adult population that possessed actual buying power, both Germanys developed an interior design counseling system. In West Germany, the elevation of living standards developed alongside public housing policy. So-called Wohnberatungen sprang up around the Federal Republic. The first Wohnberatung set to work Mannheim in 1953. The “Second Housing and Family Home Law,” which abolished some of the conditions for generous state-supported mortgage systems and tax cuts in 1956, shifted focus from renting to private home ownership. The effect of this housing policy liberalization was further social stratification that disadvantaged lower income groups; in fact, by 1960 working-class families were disproportionately represented in emergency accommodations. The newly introduced term “family home” encapsulates the conservative foundation on which West German society and its growing welfare state would continue to evolve, an anti-collectivism centered on private property. Home ownership never reached the same level as in other European countries: by the 1990s West Germany’s 43.1 percent looked unimpressive when compared to 81 percent in Ireland, 78 percent in Spain, and 68 percent in Great Britain. Nevertheless, with 2.3 millions new-built homes and 600,000 rental properties converted to private ownership by 1994, the Federal Republic’s policy has been noted as a success because it expanded the circle of home owners to lower income groups.

By 1972, sixteen Wohnberatungsstellen, a number of them Werkbund-affiliated, received subsidies from the Ministry for Housing and municipalities across the republic. The federal government expected interior design counseling that connected furnishing to the conservative consensus around private homeownership and technocratic ideas about social progress. The West German Wohnberatungen tied this message to restrictive taste regimes in domestic culture by impressing the functional aesthetic of “good design” on the population.
Clients received advice from interior decorators who used samples ranging from wallpaper over furniture to tea sets to help them find space-saving solutions for their home. Some of the Wohnberatungen even presented life-sized idealized apartment settings. This involvement in all areas of the material environment epitomizes the Werkbund’s paternalistic claim that through taste and consumer education they could regulate the way in which the population furnished its homes.\textsuperscript{41} In the end, the interior design counseling did not remain untouched by the changes brought about by the protest movements of the late 1960s. It gradually had to move away from “the taste of an elite of sensitive esthetes” but nonetheless remained linked to their political and economic interests.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{Wohnberatung} was also a byproduct of socialist economic reforms, standardization, and concentration in the GDR. It was a way to achieve greater transparency in the retail sector and thus facilitate better planning. With a change of economic orientation from heavy industry toward consumer good production under Ulbricht’s NES, furniture retail morphed from barely meeting the most basic needs of the population to a more service-oriented industry. For example, the Wohnberatung in Karl-Marx-Stadt, Ulbricht’s model socialist industrial city, joined the regional retail organization in 1964.\textsuperscript{43} Just like their western counterparts, interior decorators advised customers with the help of samples, product catalogs, and mini-exhibitions that promoted ideologically correct furniture and advertised new synthetic ersatz materials, such as Melafol. Within the constraints of the planned economy, the mission of the Wohnberatung was to create domestic environments that enabled and supported new experiences as well as ignited the population’s joie de vivre.\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless, the personal comfort of the home came second to overall economic goals. Wohnberatung belonged to an entire institutionalized system that “‘trained’ consumers to ‘want’ what the government decided that they ‘needed.’”\textsuperscript{45}

Despite, or even because of, the failure of design councils and intellectuals to develop a terminology that could give East and West German domestic culture a profound sociocultural meaning, the market for interior design publications boomed by the mid-1960s. This medium communicated trends, new ideas, and tastes through images, allowing citizens to see how one should live in modern postwar Germany. In a survey conducted in 1962 and 1963 in Cologne and its suburbs, sociologist Alphons Silbermann found that among the design interested Cologne inhabitants with basic schooling, 39 percent read articles on furnishings and living spaces. Among those with a secondary education (Gymnasium), this number increased to 69 percent.\textsuperscript{46} Readers usually referred to special interior design magazines, the daily press, or lifestyle magazines for information on
interior design. Consequently, the media catered to a broad audience ranging from experts to the general interest readers. The West German design magazine Form moved gradually toward a specialized and professional audience. Along with this specialized audience came increasingly specialized debates, such as the critique of functionalism in the late 1960s. Earlier, such debates had taken place exclusively in the Werkbund newspaper Werk und Zeit (Work and Time), mostly read by its own membership. Form, however, was available at newsstands across the country and even in the GDR, where design professionals used it to stay informed about the developments in the West. In contrast, the East German design council’s specialized industrial design journal Form und Zweck became a forum for institute employees and design professionals to show the connection between politics, ideology, and industrial design but did not provide advice on how Germans should furnish their homes. The debates remained largely scientific and ideological, without any real application to everyday living conditions and practices.

Interior design magazines, alternately, developed a broad popular appeal. Since 1957, the East German magazine Kultur im Heim reported on the domestication of socialism and its effect on the New Man. It has been described as part of the effort to implement “a rational ‘sensible’ modernity in domestic culture.” The editors put great emphasis on images for presenting new designs, and the photographs usually showed arranged room settings, though most of them taken from company or fair displays. The logic behind orchestrated displays, rather than depicting single pieces of furniture, was to elicit emotional reactions from readers. Such settings demonstrated a cohesive socialist domestic culture in contexts that the population could easily transfer to their homes.

The practice of arranging settings also profoundly shaped an entire generation of interior designers in the Federal Republic who knew how to find the best light, fashionable color combinations, and cutting-edge designs. One of them, Rolf Heide, oversaw an advice section that responded to reader questions in Brigitte, Germany’s most successful women’s magazine. His designs offered solutions to real world problems, such as how to combine antique with new furniture or cheap furniture with collector’s items. This column’s success inspired the Hamburg publishing house Gruner and Jahr to publish Schöner Wohnen (Better Dwelling) in 1960, the first and most successful magazine to exclusively focus on the domestic environment. Like Kultur im Heim, Schöner Wohnen used idealized settings to influence German tastes. After its successful first issue in 1960, its readership quickly grew to two million. With pictures of the newest trends in furniture design, color palettes, and room arrangements, Schöner Wohnen
brought interior design to the masses in an effort to promote aesthetically cohesive living environments. Studio photographs filled the pages of the magazine, an art form in and of itself, as the founding editor-in-chief Josef Kremerkothen noted: “Small rooms needn’t look cramped, improvisation needn’t seem primitive—they had to appear lively . . . , light had to create atmosphere . . . , colors had to be finely matched with materials.” Heide eventually joined Schöner Wohnen where he created idealized room arrangements and continued to exert tremendous influence over shaping the population’s interior design taste.

FIGURE 5.1. Cover of the East German interior design journal Kultur im Heim 3/1966 showing the furniture suite “Leipzig” produced by VEB Möbelindustrie Gera. Image courtesy of Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Photographer unknown.
By the late 1970s, *Kultur im Heim* had abandoned studio pictures of ideal room arrangements in favor of actual apartments. This development has been associated with the loosening of the party’s hold on every facet of public and private life. Closer examination of the magazine reveals, however, that this change in imagery also occurred alongside the stagnation of GDR furniture innovation during this decade. Showing the same furniture in the domestic context of different subcultures and lifestyles glossed over the unavailability of new designs and created an illusion of consumer choices. By shifting focus to the makeshift solutions of their readers’ neighbors, editors avoided showy, yet unavailable, prototypes under Honecker’s failing consumer socialism. In this way, *Kultur im Heim* circumvented the kind of public disgruntlement that earlier interior design showcases had caused.
Designers, politicians, and retailers hoped that consumers would internalize these images and make consumer choices in support of the aspired national modern brand. By visualizing the spatial context of furniture in arranged displays and on blueprints of family homes at Wohnberatungen, the Werkbund and the ZfF brought their vision to the people. This paternalistic attitude toward consumer taste continued interwar-era concerns about German material and economic culture: aesthetic education and the struggle against kitsch in everyday life.

The Multifunctional Living Room

Despite the emphasis on rational technological progress that accompanied economic and social modernization, privacy and emotions had replaced the public “aesthetics of power” of the Nazi period in postwar Germany. Yet the curious combination of the success of modern Bauhaus rationalism with the conservative social climate of the reconstruction decade in the West and the artistic dictat of socialist realism in the East had sidelined emotional needs. Change eventually occurred when the 1970s saw a general shift toward individualization based on postmaterial values in the West and an official acknowledgment of the right to privacy in the East. These developments inserted powerful notions for more freedom of individual expression and emotionality into the discussion. To understand the forces at play requires exploring how Germans navigated the struggle between rigid public taste regimes and desired private coziness, a tension that was nowhere more at play than in the living room.

The extent of urban destruction that wartime bombings had caused made the representational function of the living room in bourgeois homes—a Gesamtkunstwerk of strategically placed representative furniture and decorations—seem like a relic of a bygone era. Nevertheless, as a symbolic system of interior design the living room continued to figure largely in debates on lifestyles as codifications of class distinctions, habitus, and socioeconomic aspirations. However, the sociological model of distinctive consumption driven by social aspiration, observable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lost its explanatory power as the three-class system was replaced by a growing number of postmodern lifestyle milieus. Moreover, during the housing scarcity of the immediate postwar years, Germans in East and West and from all social backgrounds lived in crowded conditions. As a result, the little space available had to serve multiple functions: as space for receiving guests, eating, sleeping, storing belongings, and working. The postwar German living room therefore became a
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less formal space. Furniture designers responded, and the two decades immediately following the Second World War saw the most interesting developments in modular system furniture not only in Central Europe but also in the United States and among neutral European powers such as Switzerland and Sweden.  

With the economic boom of the 1950s and early 1960s, the West German population experienced a collective increase in living standards, which enabled workers to afford household goods and technical equipment previously only affordable for the educated and upper-middle class. In the GDR, the population worked hard during reconstruction with a view to reaping the promised fruits of their labor in the planned economy, even though this consumer good abundance failed to materialize. Still, they benefitted from the increasing political attention to the pressing needs for more modern housing over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

One commonality that survived the forty years of partition on either side of the border was the multifunctionality of rooms, originating from necessity during the immediate postwar period and continuing into the years of greater prosperity. This was not an entirely new concept though. Urban working-class housing prior to this period had seldom offered the space for a room that was purely representational. Family life of urban workers had long taken place in the enlarged kitchen. It combined the sociability of a living room or parlor with workroom features, kitchen functions, and sleeping amenities. Typically, furniture was light and easily moveable, as industry workers were “nomads,” always on the move to the next place of employment, unlike bourgeois families. Over the course of a century, however, the reality of the working population had changed, especially under the welfare regimes in the GDR, with the inherent right to work and the constitutional right to housing. Social distinctions, naturally more finely nuanced than in the three-class system, were lived out in the private sphere of the home, even under the utopian auspices of a classless socialist society.

Nevertheless, GDR citizens’ exploration of the functionality of their living rooms was spatially confined by the highly standardized architecture in the Eastern Bloc. The country used specific crane models and prefabricated construction techniques that both originated in the Soviet Union. The Russian apartment model of the 1950s offered families with two children on average 35–40 square meters with an economical floor plan that predetermined the function of each room. In 1962, the GDR presented its own concept for modern socialist living in the “P2,” which became the most common apartment, built until 1990. It consisted of a small, open kitchen that connected to the living room and dining area,
thus including the housewife in family activities. This layout departed from traditional worker housing by making the living room the center of family life, reflecting “the idea of the home as primarily a respite of leisure and relaxation.”

The important point here is not only that with P2 workers’ housing had a room for leisure and sociability but that it emphasized family as the central unit in socialism. In this, the architectural design anticipated a profound change in GDR social policy. Three years later in 1965, the SED passed a new Family Law that pronounced the family the “basic cell of society,” an effort to combat one of the highest divorce rates worldwide.

By the mid-1960s, planners prioritized the construction of prefabricated buildings with standardized apartments, while inner-city areas with older building structures, for instance in Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin, fell into disrepair. As such, the historic worker apartments lost appeal due to their outdated sanitary facilities and utilities, such as communal toilets on the landing and coal ovens. When offered an apartment in one of the new, if less aesthetically pleasing, buildings, most families opted for the modern amenities of P2 and, later, the WBS 70 apartments. Housing remained a problematic policy area until Honecker introduced his Unity of Economic and Social Policy program at the Eighth Party Congress in 1971, followed by a promise to solve the housing question in the GDR once and for all. The following year he announced the Housing Construction Program, the largest capital investment program in the country’s history: building increased by 78 percent over the course of the decade. By the end of the 1970s, more than one million of these one- to three-bedroom apartments were built, and over all 2.1 million dwellings had been either newly constructed or renovated by 1990.

Such highly standardized architecture reignited concerns about the danger of potential moral degeneration through uniformity in the socialist material environment. Similar to the debates economic planners and industrial designers had in the 1950s and 1960s over the streamlining of furniture production, the concern was that uniformity in construction contributed to a loss in cultural value of GDR living standards. In 1969, attempts to create diversity within the confines of standardized construction techniques through long-term planning, such as the GDR Bauakademie building project “Mutable Living” (Variables Wohnen), ended in failure. It became a sobering litmus test for the degree of individuality and flexibility that socialist architecture and the interior design industries could tolerate. The architectural idea was simple: the outer walls would define the apartment while the open interior floor plan could be custom-designed by the tenant. A utilities pipe constituted the only fixture and suggested a logical placement of the bathroom and the kitchen in its vicinity.
Otherwise, the apartment concept remained open and could be designed according to the number and the needs of the inhabitants. This approach differed from previous apartment designs, as built-in furniture in the P₂ apartments, such as heating convectors hidden in partitions that did double-duty as desks, presented limitations and prescribed usage.

In *Variables Wohnen*, storage furniture elements, instead of traditional walls, divided the space into rooms, offering a high degree of individuality in ascribing the function of the rooms. The Bauakademie tested this concept in Berlin and Rostock with twenty-four and eighty apartment units respectively. Furniture combines were involved in interior design counseling as well as the delivery and installation of furniture. To gain a better understanding of the array of demands and needs across the population, the Bauakademie chose tenants from all walks of life, from cleaning lady to medical doctor and from metalworker to studied...
engineer. Its overarching goal was to find patterns for ideal solutions that would serve different age groups, professions, and family structures. However, after five years the organizers realized that, when tenants were given the freedom to fulfill their every housing wish, no apartment would look like the next one. The Bauakademie concluded that “the multitude of functional design solutions stood in stark contrast to the quest for an ideal solution.”

No such thing as one “socialist way of living” existed; a long-term planning concept, a one-fits-all solution, could not derive from this individual-functional approach to modern housing. The open floor plan posed an insurmountable challenge for East German industry and its five-year planning intervals. What the experiment proved in the end was the point that East German citizens had their own ideas about functionality, which did not necessarily overlap with those of designers, urban planners, and politicians. *Variables Wohnen* was just one of many ideas that the Bauakademie, the ZfF, and furniture companies across the GDR put forward in finding sensible solutions to individualize standardized housing. As the 1970s progressed, the ailing economy allowed for very few of these ideas to be realized.

In the early 1980s, official design discourse in the GDR eventually embraced the idea of the working-class living room, at a time when it had already commonly become the largest room in modern apartments. *Kultur im Heim* posed the ideologically loaded question: “Living or representation room?” The article carefully pointed out that in a nonbourgeois context the living room served multiple functions, such as socializing, eating, playing, and napping, which had once been limited to other rooms. The author saw this socialist development as inherently different from the fragmentation that sociologists had found in Western capitalist societies. There, the article claimed, individualization had led to the compartmentalization of the floor plan, each room serving the desires of one family member. This allegedly eradicated the larger room for communal activities and family time. As a result, conspicuous consumption habits had evolved and nonfunctional furniture, such as the lowered coffee table impractical for family meals, had increasingly entered Western apartments. Accordingly, the article concluded, the “capitalist living room” had exclusively representational properties—nobody lived in it anymore. However, the article completely disregarded the fact that the multifunctional living room was a modern twentieth-century development and that, historically speaking, nobody had “lived” in it much before the war either. Meanwhile, the author saw the socialist living room as a true living room (lit.: *Lebensraum*). In this room, communal activities trumped materialism and therefore, almost by definition, the furniture had to
be functional. Not in a stylistic sense, but in a pragmatic way: furniture needed to provide storage, work space for adults and children, play areas, and a table for family meals as well as for entertaining guests.\textsuperscript{76}

The claim that the eastern living room served no representational function seems to have enjoyed broad acceptance. A multiple response survey conducted in prefab building areas in East German middle-sized and large towns found that none of the study’s respondents used the living room for representational purposes. Asked about their regular activities in the living room, 94 percent responded that they used it for reading and writing, 62 percent for crafts and sewing, 53 percent for keeping and nurturing plants and pets, 42 percent for playing instruments and games, and 23 percent for activities connected to collections, such as stamps or glasses.\textsuperscript{77} It is noteworthy that entertaining is not listed among the activities, and contemporaries attested that “the GDR is not a leisure-time society and never will be.”\textsuperscript{78} In recent years, research on state-controlled cultural events and television viewing habits has shown that, on the contrary, East Germans enjoyed both leisure and company in the home, away from forced participation in cultural consumption, campaigns, and mass-organization activities.\textsuperscript{79} Evidence of a thriving private party culture supports the conclusion that East Germans hosted guests in their living room as well.\textsuperscript{80}

Because of these largely standardized living room functions, a standard in furnishings emerged: a large closet, a couch and easy chairs, and a dinner table plus chairs could be found in the majority of the living rooms.\textsuperscript{81} Serially produced storage furniture with functional elements, such as the glass cabinets, mini bars, and desks included in the popular MDW program from Dresden-Hellerau, featured prominently in magazine photographs.\textsuperscript{82} By 1981, the study “Wohnen ’81” found, 90 percent of living rooms in all prefab buildings contained such a multifunctional \textit{Schrankwand}.\textsuperscript{83} This postwar invention epitomized the sociological phenomenon of desired or forced mobility in the age of technology and combined it with the profitability of large-series production in the increasingly mechanized furniture industry.\textsuperscript{84} Ninety-six percent of respondents to the “Wohnen ’81” study in new workers housing described their dream living room as comfortable and cozy, that is, emotionally fulfilling.\textsuperscript{85} Yet when asked to describe the actual living room furniture they owned, respondents listed “practical and purposeful” (39 percent), “factual and neutral” (30 percent), and “timelessly dignified” (12 percent)—a clear break with their declared preferences and emotional needs.\textsuperscript{86}

This discrepancy between desire and reality warrants explanation, as it could not solely have been the result of the limited furniture availability. Although
purchases of specific styles could be difficult or take several years due to poor planning and the organization of consumer good production by district, the GDR furniture industry produced a range of styles in the 1980s. This ranged from Biedermeier and Chippendale-inspired furniture at the Zeulenzroda combine, to the postmodern pieces of the Berlin furniture combine. Evolving pro-family policy in the GDR had made the money available for the consumer desires that the “Wohnen ’81” study implies. Following the 1965 Family Law, which had aimed at containing the effects of the comparatively liberal divorce laws, the SED encouraged the founding of new families with so-called marriage loans (Ehekredite). From 1972 onward, interest-free loans of 5,000 Ostmark supported young couples under the age of twenty-seven (increased to 7,000 Ostmark for couples under thirty-one in 1986) in their start to married life. These loans could be partially “paid back” by having children. Moreover, young married couples and families were statistically over-represented in the new housing development of Marzahn in East Berlin, for instance, showing that the authorities treated these groups preferentially when allocating the new, modern apartments. With such measures, the state aligned conservative family policy and progressive housing policy and put young families in a position to participate in East German consumer culture. Therefore, in combination with a well-developed do-it-yourself culture, a large part of the population would have had the means to realize their design preferences to a certain extent.

One possible explanation for the aforementioned discrepancy could be that the discourse on socialist functionalism had been effective among the GDR population. East German neofunctionalist designers and planners understood functional to mean practical furniture that served the needs of the population. They considered decorative elements as unnecessary for the function of the piece, as expensive to produce, and as obstructive to their goal of standardized, more efficient production. They thus dedicated the majority of the furniture production capacities to serial shelf systems and multifunctional pieces, such as the MuFuTi, a multifunctional table that could be used as a desk or a family dinner table; it could be extended when hosting guests or lowered to serve the function of a coffee table. Taken at face value, the broad acceptance of the Schrankwand in 90 percent of prefabricated building households seems to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the functionality discourse in the context of standardized apartments.

A second possible explanation could be that, in the process of self-evaluation, respondents simply reinterpreted their impractical furniture solutions as practical and, thus, functional. Germans always liked to experience their home
emotionally, not functionally, as renowned architecture critic and journalist Manfred Sack asserts: “Dwelling incites feelings. If an apartment is impractical, one will notice, but get used to it and begin to think that it is practical.” Such a cognitive shift can be illustrated with further examination of the Schrankwand and its contents. Its material structure, underpinned by systemic thinking, leads consumers to three main behavioral patterns: orderliness, presentation, and representation. The differentiation between presentation and representation is significant here, as the former is about self-recognition and the latter about impressing visitors. The difference reveals thus how East German consumers thought about personalizing and appropriating the dominant piece of furniture in the living room—or more precisely the ways they had learned how to talk about it.

Displayed objects, collections, or little knick-knacks without immediate everyday function are usually assumed to have a representational purpose as means to impress. In a research study, 100 percent of Schrankwand owners in the GDR reported that they indeed used theirs for storage of porcelain and cut glass. Usually, these collections were put on display in the glass cabinets, like museum objects in vitrines. However, interviewees claimed that such items were put there because the owners liked them, not because they were believed to reflect favorably on the owner’s taste or to impress visitors. This response shows a degree of success for the East German official discourse on the working-class living room, in so far as the population accepted that it was by definition not a representational space. Further items, such as photos and personal documents (98 percent), books (91 percent), TV sets and radios (80 percent), hobby materials and collections (65 percent), records and record players (55 percent), and alcoholic beverages (49 percent) also underscore the role of the Schrankwand in leisure time activities and as a personal archive. The storage of tablecloths (72 percent) as well as sheets and towels (43 percent) obviously fall under orderliness. The Schrankwand in its storage capacity thus embodied first and foremost pragmatism, yet it was filled with hobby materials that contributed to personal well-being and expressed the personality of the owner, and finally kept safe personal items such as collections or photographs. This appropriation strategy combined the useful with the emotional.

Taste Appropriation and Obstinacy in the 1980s Living Room

Further insights into the motivations behind furniture consumption are offered by three empirical studies conducted in East and West Germany in the 1980s. All of them share an interest in the object-person relationship but relate their
findings to the broader economic culture by investigating the values and norms that informed these relationships. They were conducted in the final decade of Germany’s division, thus documenting developments in housing and interior design after thirty years under the socialist and capitalist economic systems and before reunification changed the societal context in the East. Thirty years, or one generation, not only reveals long-term change but also the success of the national brand narrative and the prescriptive design discourse in real German homes.

In the mid-1980s, an East German study supported by the AiF looked behind apartment doors in the GDR. Two cultural studies researchers, Herbert Letsch and Karla Scharf, used autobiographical interviews, photographic documentation, and theoretical analysis of the collected materials to trace the participants’ demands on their home environments. The study aimed to contribute to economic planning with a production-oriented aesthetic strategy for domestic everyday design. The project naturally had an ideological angle, operating with a theoretical concept that assumed that aesthetics embody the sensual experience of socialism. It concluded that the way in which the population conceived of domestic aesthetics was always a combination of everyday practical demands and an aesthetic appreciation of cultural and artistic objects. On top of that was the “desire for self-recognition” in the things and spaces in the home.

For the study, Letsch and Scharf interviewed six couples between twenty-five and forty years of age from working-class family backgrounds. Most of them had been trained in industrial jobs, though some of them had gone on to secondary education. Their ages indicate that all of the couples had spent their entire lives in the Soviet occupation zone and the GDR and had been socialized in socialism through membership in political mass organizations and educated in the East German school system. The interview questions included some that addressed furnishing choices and the stories behind individual furniture pieces as well as the respondents’ ideas about “the aesthetic” and “the beautiful.”

Take, for example, Frank and Marina R., born in 1957 and 1959, respectively. They were employed in working-class professions—he trained as a road construction worker and she worked as a cook. When Letsch and Scharf interviewed them for the first time in 1985, they lived with their two daughters in turn-of-the-century workers’ housing near the city center of Dresden. A year later, the family moved to a modern housing development at the outskirts of town, taking the living room furniture with them. The light brown Schrankwand with teak wood finishing, the first major furniture acquisition the couple had made together, they explained, had been chosen not because of any aesthetic objective, but because of the storage space it offered. It was too modern looking for
the couple, who preferred ornamentation and dark wood, and underlay purely practical considerations. In the absence of a bedroom closet, Family R. kept bedding, their own clothes, and their children’s clothes in it. It also offered a display cabinet for knickknacks and their glass collection, including heavy beer glasses. Mrs. R. explained that these objects add “warmth” to the room. After the move into the modern apartment, they switched the display to their newer collection of cut crystal glasses, because they had changed their taste to more elegant objects. They also moved over their upholstery furniture ensemble, which provided ample seating for guests and neighbors stopping by.

Frank R. was a do-it-yourself home improver, who produced intricate works, such as lanterns and small furniture, for the living room and other rooms. As these items had no commercial value, they were not representational pieces per se, but they illustrate the personality and technical skill of the owner. In the context of an economy where not everything one wanted or needed was available, these were invaluable skills. Materials, equally scarce, could be procured through official and unofficial channels. In 1984 alone, 778,000 Ostmark worth of construction materials, it has been estimated, had been pilfered from industrial workshops and construction sites.

Handmade items were visible in the other respondents’ apartments as well. Günter Z. shared Frank R.’s love for wood, and he even lined his entire apartment with wooden panels. This idea came about when he wanted to reintroduce his conservative taste into the prefab apartment. In their previous home in an old building, Günter Z., a car-body constructor turned acrobat, had invested in Chippendale furniture. Although he still liked the furniture, he could not arrange these pieces in a pleasing way in the new space. Even a handmade, complementary room divider could not fit aesthetically, “and so we decided to buy a Schrankwand.” His story allows insights into how dominant modern housing architecture was in interior design decisions and goes some way to explaining why the great majority of people living in the new prefab construction apartments eventually turned to functionalist storage furniture to solve their decorating problems. Despite their differences in education, status, taste, and exposure to culture, all of the respondents owned a Schrankwand, and discussed in the interviews the purchasing decision and the functionality of this piece. The conservative wood paneling, on the other hand, illustrates how do-it-yourself not only presented a means to make things that were otherwise unavailable but was also a strategy to undermine the overwhelming modern logic of the prefab architecture. Above Günter Z.’s couch hung samurai swords, a nunchaku, and a samurai symbol, which, he explained, showed his interest in
Asian culture and admiration for Far Eastern martial arts. He watched samurai films and read books and also practiced karate himself. The earnestness with which he described this fascination with Japan stands in complete contrast to the backdrop of the traditional dark wood paneling and the floral fabric of the couch. Collecting and displaying objects without use value allowed residents to recognize themselves in the space and made it feel homely.

The preference for traditional idioms, such as dark woods and handcrafted furniture, was apparent in most of the apartments in this study. In his leisure time, lathe operator Achim Sch. customized such objects as picture frames and semi-antiques, and treated them to look old. He and his wife described these accessories as “romantic,” indicating that some of the do-it-yourself projects catered to the emotional needs of the inhabitants to create coziness and “atmosphere” in their modern housing. Other smaller objects on display, such as a Chinese tea set, heavy wine glasses, and a silver-plated candelabra, completed the interior design. About the latter Renate Sch. remarked: “We like old things, because they have a visual effect and represent a value.” Inherited and barely
used objects such as the china tea set and the candelabra represented both status and family history, indicating that despite the utopia of a classless society, social differentiation still existed in the GDR.

In contrast, the more educated respondents in the study liked light colors and preferred simpler lines. Engineer Hubertus R. and his wife Martina, who had left her university course after the couple had welcomed their first child, fully committed to functional furniture in their apartment. They spent their interest-free marriage loan on a Schrankwand and later added additional storage pieces in the hallway and the children’s room. Their furnishing strategy rendered the home significantly less cluttered than those of the other families. Similarly, the divorced Günter N., who worked in the youth organization Free German Youth as secretary for culture and, after his studies at the SED party school, eventually ran a cultural club for adolescents, came into contact with functionalist aesthetics through his political work. More and more, his job bled into Günter N.’s
leisure time activities. He learned to play the guitar, painted, and even turned his living room into a pottery studio, where he created modern-looking vessels and vases. “Flower pottery,” overuse of color, and other decorations bothered him. His austere crafts aesthetic had transferred over to his minimalist furnishing, for example, with a shelving and storage unit that was barely large enough to accommodate the television set. In both cases, jobs and aesthetic education influenced the comfort level of the respondents with functional styles. Hubertus R. and Günter N. worked in fields where cultural and functional aspects of design carried great importance, and this affected their everyday practices. These patterns indicate that the likelihood of accepting functionalism was as much knowledge-driven in eastern socialist society as in western society.

The Schrankwand was ubiquitous in the Federal Republic in the 1980s as well. Despite the populations’ differences in education and socioeconomic status, across strata they used the Schrankwand to tie together the different living room designs. In the photographic study Das deutsche Wohnzimmer (The German Living Room), Herlinde Koelbl documented this room across different socioeconomic groups in urban and rural settings in 1980. Unlike in the GDR, there was no comparable furnishing standard in the Federal Republic, and living rooms varied greatly according to family social and financial situations—with the exception of the Schrankwand.

Working-class families often did not have room to spare for a living room and used the kitchen for eating, working, socializing, and receiving guests. This multifunctionality expressed economic realities. Hannelore P. (30), a housewife with five children and a husband who dealt in scrap metal, lived in an apartment that had no bathroom. The family shared the toilet on the landing with neighbors, and the nearest bathroom was three blocks away. Clearly not everybody could partake in West German modern domestic culture. Social stratification, income, and education determined access to the markers of the promoted conservative middle-class modernity of home ownership, modern household appliances, and correct consumption.

Amid the clashing patterns of wallpapers, floor tiles, couch fabric, and tablecloth, Antoinette S. (47), a housewife with eight children and an unskilled worker husband, attested to the financial strain that urban apartment rents put on the working-class family: “We cannot afford a different apartment. My husband and I sleep in the living room.” Indeed, for a working-class household, house ownership in the 1980s entailed large sacrifices, such as foregoing costly hobbies and vacations, and years of saving money. Seated proudly in a comfortably furnished living room, new home owners Alois (55), a crane operator, and
his wife Katharina W. (52) declared: “We have arrived.” With the table set for a dinner for two, a bottle of wine on display, this living room embodied the reward for all of the hard work of building a safe haven from the daily trials and tribulations where they could recharge: “We have never gone on a vacation trip. First we had to work on the house and now we want to enjoy the fruits of our labor,” Alois and Katharina W. explained.109

Families living in the countryside, where real estate was less expensive and more abundant, had a different experience altogether. Koelbl photographed a married farming couple, Heinrich (63) and Elfriede B. (71), in two different spaces where they spent their spare time. The first was plainly furnished with a sufficiently comfortable couch behind a small table with two nonmatching easy chairs and a wooden chair assembled around the table. They explain: “We spend our evenings in this room, also because of the television.”110 The other picture was taken in a more representational room with furniture that would be fittingly described as Gelsenkirchener Barock, with seating furniture joined by an expensive-looking corner cabinet opposite a large mirror. The mostly dark wood and the busy fabrics on the couch and the easy chairs, ranging from floral print to geometric patterns, were chosen to make an impression. “According to what kind of visitor we receive,” they were quoted, “he will be brought into this living room or the other.” This comment clearly indicates that the gute Stube (parlor) was reserved for important visitors and did not fulfill everyday functions. While this room was a representational space, the other space where family life took place was furnished with functional designs that aligned with their needs for leisure and rest in the evenings. It is difficult to determine whether this separation of representational and functional spaces indicated generational difference, though it seems unlikely. Similarly, the young farming family of Josef (38) and Rosa S. (31) confirmed that “We are in the gute Stube just a few times each year.”111 In a context where the home constituted part of professional life and offered spaces for hobbies elsewhere on the premises, the living room could be used exclusively to host guests. Couple S. filled theirs with rustic furniture that expressed their cultural and social identity, but as this room had no function in the rest of their lives, it seemed unnecessary to use it on a daily basis.

On the contrary, educated middle-class families of the 1980s often considered the living room to also be a workspace where reading, thinking, and writing took place. City council woman Inge H. (53) explained: “We are mostly in the kitchen. We use the living room only when we want quiet to read or to work.”112 And cleric Josef W. (51) affirms this sentiment: “I am very seldom at home and thus this room suffices. I use it to work and spend my leisure time.”113 Large
bookshelves dominated both Josef W. and Inge H.’s rooms, and the small but functional seating furniture and coffee table were not suitable for hosting a nice afternoon tea or a dinner party. Inge H.’s living room solely contained a desk. These rooms made a purely functional impression by accentuating the need for academic work space. Hosting guests was not a priority, and thus hardly anyone ever saw the only representational element: the books.

This pattern of the multifunctional living room usage among the West German middle class was unlike the way in which Robert N. (40), an administrative clerk, furnished his room. Over the tiled coffee table floated a crystal chandelier, and on the wall hung a print of a painting depicting a young lady in a leisure pose with a book—presumably signifying the importance of education for this family. The silver-plated tea service displayed on an ornamented tea trolley seemed to come from an entirely different time and place when such objects symbolized respectability and high social status. The Schrankwand in dark wood towers over the family in the picture, next to which Robert N. is quoted as self-importantly saying: “Those who come to my home have to follow my volition.”115 The entire room is stuck in the tastes and aspirations of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, this is an exception and only one of a few pictures showing representational living rooms of the aspirational upper middle-class styles.115

Despite what these examples suggest about the multiple functions that the 1980s living room served in the Federal Republic, the foreword by Manfred Sack to Koelbl’s photographic study presented a pessimistic viewpoint on the inhabitants’ ability to create a functional space to live in, rather than merely to represent its owners.116 Sack identified the reasons for what he saw as a growing tendency to buy furniture that embodied social aspirations, rather than actual personality and circumstances of the owner, as a disenfranchisement of the population, a lack of education about simple laws of proportion and materiality, and the increasingly predetermined apartment layouts, including bathroom tiling and built-in kitchens. Yet such wide-ranging, unspecific conclusions reveal more about Sack than about the people depicted in the study. His claims ignored the photographic evidence in favor of architectural trends and a personal bias toward functionalist styles, and thus missed an opportunity to actively engage with the inhabitants’ appropriation of spaces and their everyday relationship with objects.

Offering a more deeply engaged approach, Gert Selle and Jutta Boehe’s ethnological study of West German living cultures in the early to mid-1980s rebuts Sack’s pessimistic claims.117 Their method resembles that of Letsch and Scharf’s parallel study in Leipzig. Three couples, all of them homeowners, were chosen
from three different middle-class backgrounds: Mr. (41) and Mrs. S. (42) held white-collar jobs as a technician and a secretary at a TV station and came from a working-class background; Mr. and Mrs. Z. (both 43) came from the well-educated middle class, having earned degrees as an engineer and a teacher, with a petit-bourgeois background; Mr. (45) and Mrs. H. (46) had an upper middle-class background, working as a social worker and a dentist. Their names were anonymized and the location of the study remained undisclosed. Photographic documentation in combination with couple interviews as well as individual interviews detail the history and context of the families’ acquisition choices. The analysis evaluated furnishing habits vis-à-vis the participants’ personal past to explain the relationships the respondents had to the objects in their homes. The study’s subjects had been infants at the end of the Second World War and grew up in the western zones of occupation and later the Federal Republic, with one exception. They thus were completely socialized in the West; only Mrs. S. spent her childhood in the eastern zone of occupation and the GDR before her family moved to the West.

Only one of the three houses fit the state-promoted modernity of the Federal Republic. Couple H.’s house, a bungalow made of white brick, steel, glass, and a little bit of wood, was the only one that the researchers call “functionalist-modern.” The bungalow had a special place in Bonn’s official architecture. In 1963, Sep Ruf built a flat-roofed bungalow as residence and reception building for the West German chancellor, expressing the values of political horizontality and transparency with large windows and unassuming architecture. Couple H.’s heightened awareness of modernist idioms could be due to the fact that they both had been married before to spouses who worked in artistic professions, a painter and an architect respectively. With its low ceilings and skylight bands in place of windows, the architecture dominated the atmosphere of the dim-lit house. The mix of furniture styles, ranging from functionalist electronic gadgets over mainstream modern furniture to Ikea pieces and do-it-yourself shelving on trestles, interrupts the austere look of the bungalow’s severe construction materials. Meanwhile, large oriental rugs introduced a noticeably competing aesthetic into this house, adding warmth to the cold, drab concrete floors.

The other couples described their houses and their furniture as functional as well, although the architectural shells of their homes cannot be described as functionalist-modern. While the furniture did not closely resemble Bauhaus designs, they were simple with clear lines and practical shapes. One or two pieces were embellished, but the majority of the furniture served clearly the functions of storing, eating, working, hosting, and playing. Based on their preconceptions
about the age and profession of the couple, Selle and Boehe remark that they would have expected less educated Mr. and Mrs. S. to represent themselves differently, perhaps with Stilmöbel or modish furniture, and that they were surprised by the “sober” impression of the house during their first visit. The couple explained that after the expense of the house they were unable to invest in expensive furniture as well. They therefore made do with hand-me-downs and acquired functional pieces bit by bit. Expensive fantasies, such as a modern Interlübke bedroom furniture ensemble, had remained financially out of reach. A skilled handyman, Mr. S. built a similar looking set with his wife’s help. Do-it-yourself thus flourished on both sides of the border and became an important strategy for consumers navigating the power relations between official taste paternalism and production. It has been estimated that do-it-yourself activities, such as fancywork and redecorations, cost the economy around 4 percent of West Germany’s annual GDP in the 1970s and 1980s. One could go as far as claiming that this practice undermined the modernization effort. Yet, considering its broad application, it also implies that it was part of the economic culture in East and West, which idealized a conservative appreciation of the crafts.
Two of the couples recognized that certain corners of their houses exclusively served emotional purposes, such as the decorative and historical objects assembled on an old wooden trunk and the kitschy stoneware plates ornamented with birds hanging next to the fireplace and above a rock collection in couple Z.’s living room. A porcelain piggy bank sat as a lucky charm in couple S.’s living room. And they kept some needlework pillowcases, which had been gifted to them. Mrs. S. commented that she always kept handicrafts out of respect for the work that went into making them, even if they did not suit her taste. Just like the respondents in Letsch and Scharf’s East German study, these West German couples explain their strong relationship to knickknacks and handmade objects through symbolic, emotional value. They remarked that these objects had been given or made by relatives and that these objects symbolized happy memories. The porcelain piggy bank in couple S.’s living room was a wedding present, and couple Z. had accumulated the rock collection during their travels.

In both houses, these knickknacks co-existed, or rather clashed, with the iconic, modern Braun Hi-Fi stereo. Braun became a household name for user-friendly electronic gadgets that conformed to the aesthetic austerity of neofunctionalism. Braun designer Dieter Rams’s own design principles aligned with the functionalist mantras of honesty, innovation, durability, and unobtrusiveness. In the Z. and S. households, the functionalist stereo sat right next to memorabilia and other objects that had only decorative functions. In this way, the couples developed strategies to co-opt prescriptive taste regimes, and in some places in the house, they outright rejected the functionalist vision that the Federal Republic had modeled since the 1950s. They counterbalanced the accepted maxim of practicality with emotionally laden objects to add warmth and coziness to their house interiors.

At the same time, such things also presented the character of their owners to guests. These were not aspirational pieces meant to represent their status or even pretend to a higher status. The objects in the house of couple Z. demonstrated five different interior design styles, Selle and Boehe reported: (i) timid versions of Stilmöbel, (2) functional-classical modernism (such as the Braun stereo and the TV), (3) Scandinavian influences (Ikea), (4) historical pieces with decorative character, and (5) inherited designs from the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas this style mix confused the research team, to the couple it did not present a contradiction. Couple Z. had personal relationships to all of these objects that rendered them practical from their viewpoint. The researchers supposed that “In this tendency [toward heavy mixing of styles] strong contradictions emerge; however, these are presumably largely resolved through invisible interpretational
and practical factors in the respondents’ consciousness.” It is therefore important to understand that individuals with high awareness of questions of taste consciously justify furnishing solutions that do not fit any design prescription to overcome the embarrassment of their lacking rationality. In this justification process, functionality and practicality derive from the usage of objects in combination with the accommodation of emotional needs to create homeliness. Individuals satisfy these needs by surrounding themselves with objects that contain memories, carry familiarity, or are the products of their hobbies, resulting in an eclectic style mix.

It is interesting to note that neither the photographic study by Koelbl nor the ethnological study by Selle and Boehe included the numerous high-rises and so-called mehrparteien apartment blocks in the city centers of the Federal Republic. In fact, the prefab tower-and-slab developments, once considered at the forefront of modern postwar architecture, had already fallen from grace by the 1970s. Rather, the studies explore—with the few exceptions in Koelbl’s book—the state-funded ideal of middle-class home ownership, emphasizing West German social conservatism enshrined in a housing policy that celebrated family and respectability. The East German studies, meanwhile, seem to trace
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young families’ processes of becoming “bourgeois” in the GDR, which the state supported through a systematic combination of conservative family laws and progressive housing policy. The result was, in both cases, a conservative modernism in German homes by the 1980s.

The photographic sources and field notes from the sociological studies in East and West show that even after forty years, despite the best efforts of taste reformers, functionalism as an aesthetic remained elitist. In both Germanys, the better educated showed a higher likelihood of adopting modern-functional idioms and did this in a more cohesive fashion. They tended to surround themselves less with bric-a-brac. One difference that did emerge between East and West was the fact that West Germans looked at their kitschy belongings and emotional affection for things with a good amount of irony and self-mockery. This indicates that lacking refinement in taste, as it was understood according to the prescriptive aesthetics of the RFF, was something of which West German consumers were conscious. In the GDR, however, kitsch objects were treated with the same respect as the most practical of objects. This might stem from the general experience of material scarcity and the effort that had gone into acquiring or making these objects in the first place.

Most important, the studies show that, over many decades of modernist design discourse, the populations of both East and West Germany appropriated functionalism as individual practicality. The interviews indicate that functionality, interpreted as pragmatic and useful, was held in high esteem across the two Germanys. Yet the distancing irony with which West Germans talked about their bric-a-brac showed that the discourse of taste education was more pervasive in the West than in the East. This finding is not surprising considering that the SED rehabilitated functionalism only in the 1960s. Some solutions that found approval from designers, politicians, and economic planners, such as the Schrankwand, were convincing to the population because of the storage they provided or the multifunctionality they offered. The pattern that emerges in postwar Germany shows that the population had a good grasp of what functionalist furniture does and is.

The overall impression that the interiors of houses and apartments offered, however, was far removed from the aesthetics of modernist designers and design councils who adopted functionalism as a political style, symbolizing modernity. Consumption choices proved that the population did not wholeheartedly buy into the political constructions that both the FRG and the GDR had tried to create around functionalism as a source of national belonging. In the early postwar decades, consumer counseling and taste education continued the prewar
discourse on what it meant to live like a German. Once functionalism revealed itself as a dogma in the late 1960s, the national emphasis on correct consumption stopped, yet the striving for modernity continued in both parts of Germany. The population did develop a sensitivity to practical design that served the needs of their family life. However, they accepted the functionality discourse on their own terms and created areas that fulfilled their emotional needs.

The analysis suggests that functionalist discourse diffused German society, yet not with the consistency that the disciples of modernism would have liked. It was a conservative modernity that showed widespread awareness of the right materials, the wrong embellishments, and the need for the emotional comfort of traditions and social relations. The population accepted the practicality of functionalism’s clear lines and rectangular shapes for small apartments. However, it did not accept the emotional emptiness of the functionalist extreme. These conclusions align with sociologists’ findings about the diversification of lifestyles gaining momentum in the 1960s. Individualization of space through the personal appropriation of general guidelines for functional living, in the end, made the populations of the GDR and the Federal Republic cautious participants in an economic culture in which, for quite different motives in East and West, class lines became increasingly blurred and the material codification of status diversified.