

Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*

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There is a Wal-mart advertisement currently in circulation, which uses an interview format to promote the store. A homemaker, her husband a member of the Canadian Forces, recounts how in the past few years she and her family have had to relocate several times to various Canadian cities. In the midst of these displacements, she regains her equilibrium as soon as she locates the nearest Wal-mart, whose very presence is familiar and comforting. She can rest assured, then, that the needs and desires of her family can be met.

This advertisement can be read in a number of ways. The premise, and the assumption, are that Canadian consumers find gratification in shopping at Wal-mart — that its sales, promotional and corporate strategies, its contents, and its ethos, are readily accepted by the people who buy things there. Purchasers appreciate having ready and routine access to commodities that they need and want. Their buying inclinations are not compromised by their being left alone to make choices without the ready advice, not to mention sales-pitch, of sales associates. And, customers' purchasing practices are, on the whole, unaffected by the fact that there is a basic uniformity in the goods carried by Wal-marts throughout North America, derived from practices related to economy of scale. In other words, personal satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment are gained through the frequent acquisition of relatively small-scale goods (the store does not carry major appliances or very much furniture); those goods contribute to the well-being of a family, whose members are able to bestow, upon these objects, value as markers which give the sensation of home; and if, indeed, there are major differences between the taste and desires of Canadian and American Wal-mart customers, these differences can be accommodated without dramatically changing the format of the store or the nature of the stock that it carries.

Judging, purely anecdotally, by the frenzy of activity at the Wal-mart checkout lines in Montreal at closing time on Saturdays, a good many Canadian customers must indeed be satisfied by shopping in

this way. And that is precisely why Joy Parr's excellent book, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*, makes such fascinating reading, even to someone without a professional or academic interest in Canadian history or material culture. As Parr clearly argues, in chapters that are well-written, captivating and convincing, patterns of consumer behaviour fluctuate significantly, depending on such criteria as the nature of the object for sale, and the cultural values of the purchaser. During the interwar years, many homemakers felt that they served their families best by doing all they could to avoid certain purchases. When they did go shopping, they encountered sales associates who were carefully trained to cajole, persuade, tempt, and otherwise pressure the customer — generally a woman — into taking home a particular product. And, Canadian clientele behaved very differently from their American equivalents, for a variety of reasons.

Parr's findings are all the more surprising to readers who thought themselves familiar with North American consumer practices, especially in the 1950s, based on U.S. research and seemingly exemplified in movies and television. We have been led, by analogy, to believe that on both sides of the border, there was a postwar buying spree. Suburbanization; the baby-boom; purchasing power derived from savings during the war, when shortages meant few products were available for sale; all were said to have contributed to an energized domestic market for consumables.

Domestic Goods tells a different story, by concentrating on furniture and major domestic appliances such as refrigerators, stoves and washing machines. In fact, in Canada there was no such overall boom, and the culture of consumption was slow to evolve. Key disincentives affected the motivation and purchasing power of Canadians. Following Keynesian economic philosophy in its postwar planning, the Canadian government initially gave financial precedence to such projects as public works or industries producing for export. A consequent low priority given to the production of household goods translated into shortages. When these goods did become available, residual attitudes advocating thrift and a make-do mentality, which lingered since the days of the Depression, made consumer strategies such as built-in obsolescence and consumer borrowing into moral issues that

further discouraged indiscriminate spending. Furniture, for example, was apparently selected more on the basis of long-term utility, with a focus on durability and a non-trendy appearance, than on the need to convey status or affluence.

In her accounting for such national differences, Parr explains that "the plausibility of mass consumption was tied to perceptions of plenty and to beliefs about how the national wealth should be husbanded and shared." In terms of large household goods — which, rather than being "consumed" during use (like detergent, which goes down the drain), served as durable "working tools" — she notes that those differing beliefs were recognized by marketers and manufacturers, who were thus compelled to reconfigure the "material and symbolic functions" of the objects they sold to overcome purchasers' resistance. Despite such manipulations, however, and especially because purchasers of household equipment were conscious of the responsibility they had when buying these important, costly tools, Canadian customers would not be swayed into being defined "solely as consumers." Instead, they made firm, rational choices in line with family and cultural obligations. Commenting specifically on clothes washers, for example, Parr sums up her thesis as follows:

The choice between wringer and automatic machines implicated Canadian homemakers in forming distinctions between consumer and user, between gratification and prudence, between production and conservation, between built to last and built to replace. In the circumstances in which they then found themselves, and with the knowledge they then had, it is not hard to see why, red hands and aching backs and wet floors notwithstanding, so many resisted the chromium promises of the new machine.

Readers with a particular interest in design history will find other portions of the book equally stimulating. Parr devotes three consecutive chapters to the impact of high modernism on industrial and furniture design. Three distinct but overlapping perspectives are engaged.

The first centres on proscriptive, government-driven endeavours to establish modernism in Canada. Arising out of concurrent experimentation in other countries with an international style, the Canadian nationalist agenda concerning modernism was, between 1948 and 1953, anchored in a federal government agency, the National Industrial Design Committee. Its primary functions were twofold: to promote the incorporation into Canadian design of modernist ideology, especially

the machine aesthetic and "neo-Platonic geometric and abstract forms," and to educate the naïve palate of Canadians who were, on the whole, oblivious to its visual merits.

The following chapter is essentially a case study of one furniture manufacturer, the Imperial Furniture Manufacturing Company of Stratford, Ontario, and explores the application and advertisement of modernist design characteristics introduced by the Dutch designer Jan Kuypers between 1951 and 1959. Working with the successful, existing paradigm of loyalist maple furniture — which borrowed from the forms of colonial artifacts but used Canadian yellow birch — Kuypers made relatively subtle interventions such as tapering legs, or removing or raising stretchers on chairs. These adaptations could reflect modernism to a degree and still not alienate Canadians who valued the solidity and practicality of the familiar forms.

The third chapter, entitled "Domesticating Objects," refers to other research in the field, and also includes and interprets interviews of homemakers who were asked by Parr to recount memories of their postwar domestic environment between 1946 and 1968. The key question, here, is "How do particular people, in a particular time and place, live with goods?" Containing touching old photos of young children dressed up for the camera and propped up in chairs, smearing their faces with chocolate pudding at the kitchen table, or sitting proudly on a homemade hobby horse, the chapter focuses precisely on how household belongings are much more than the backdrop of a living space. Instead, such material culture situates and concretizes the abstract concept of the domestic landscape, and serves as a "touchable, observable representation of the subjectivities of those who participate in its composition."

Consequently, Parr asserts the significance of these artifacts as testimonials to the needs and expectations of their users, specifically as markers of stability, identity and play. As a result, the more remote valorization that these objects might have undergone, for example by their association with a particular style, becomes supplemented or even subsumed by the more immediate, subjectified identities they take on within the household. This chapter should give pause to researchers who believe that the designer imposes his or her views on the consumer: as Parr puts it, "in the balance of symbolic trade across the domestic threshold in postwar Canada, it makes more sense to say that women remade their furnishings, than that their furnishings remade them."

Perhaps the single greatest strength of *Domestic Goods* is its multiple layers of investigation, each serving to reinforce and reverberate with each other. The three differentiated parts of the book — devoted to political economy, design, and household choices, respectively — bring together a variety of methodological approaches, cross disciplines, and venture out to juxtapose experiences elsewhere, for example in Sweden. When we learn in chapter six that postwar industrial designers in Canada could no longer rely on hiring American practitioners to create products for the Canadian market because a foreign exchange crisis depleted access to American currency, our absorption of this information is built on what Parr has already presented in chapter three, namely that in an effort to assist Britain in recovering its economy after the war, the Canadian government severely reduced its stores of international exchange. This meticulous dedication and accretive presentation are immeasurably important, especially because the subject of this study will no doubt interest readers with diverse interests and backgrounds.

If there are certain drawbacks to this book, they come from the danger in extrapolating from Parr's findings, to a broader reading of postwar culture and consumption. As she herself is careful to point out, expensive products like refrigerators and furniture are exceptional purchases, about which a buyer might be more pensive and cautious than might be the case when buying a pair of pants or a lamp. This book, when read carefully, sounds a caveat to historians who might assume, for example, that Canadians were also

more conservative than Americans in their purchase of less monumental consumables or services. Quite simply, more research needs to be done before a position can be taken. In addition, Parr herself calls for subsequent work to explore regional differences within Canada. How important to her own findings is the fact that the group of homemakers interviewed for Parr's study was limited to women who responded to newspaper requests appearing only in Vancouver and Victoria? Would a more comprehensive constituency have provided consistent material, from which to draw the same conclusions? Would urban homemakers, say in Montreal or Toronto, even those of social and financial means equivalent to the women who did respond, provide supporting or conflicting data? In the final analysis, we simply hope that Parr, or other researchers, take it upon themselves to find out.

We allegedly meek Canadians, it seems, had good reason to postpone our postwar consumer explosion, relative to our American neighbours. But do we deserve the reputation of being "characteristically more subdued" in our consuming urges today, to the annoyance of Parr, who notes that "even the commercial excesses of the West Edmonton Mall cannot save us from this dull ignominy"? Is it fair or accurate to depict us, as Wal-mart does, as consuming to achieve reassurance and stability, rather than as the exuberant expression of our bubbling individual personalities and our zest for self expression? I, a Canadian, both effervescent and exacting, will look forward to studying further data before venturing an opinion.