



Sitting on Artifacts of Gender

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Abstract

The purpose of this photographic essay is to outline the questions, research, and methodology for a study on how furniture design aesthetics reinforce power relationships with a particular attention to gender. What homes look like, what they contain, how they are inhabited, and how they are represented are always functions of the totality of social practices that constitute culture at particular times and places (Logan 2002, 299).

Furniture design can be defined as the mental processes that take place before, during and after its manufacturing for this purpose. It is part of a broader field, industrial design which has inadvertently permeated practically every aspect of our lives (i.e. cellphones, iPads, smart watches, etc.) and therefore, brought attention to its significance and transcendence. This increased interest in the sociological and cultural aspects of design has been a fundamental catalyst for the development of design research and its many related fields - from research through, for or about design to constructive design research and a newfound understanding of design's role in propagating and counteracting oppression (Prado de O. Martins 2014, 1, 5).

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Introduction

Since domestic furniture refers to common household objects, we overlook its influence over us. The purpose of this photo-essay is to share some thoughts about an on-going research project that explores this influence as it relates to gender power relations. All the pictures shown are of living rooms (or of the areas that their proprietors defined as such) from the Dominican Republic. There — as in the rest of the Western Hemisphere — the idea of “home” without furniture is inconceivable. Furniture sets the stage for the actions that take place in particular areas of our homes and it also has other meanings for us. In my examination of the work of Caribbean theorists, the conflation of home, gender and power is historical. White women were held as symbols of wealth and class status in relation to their performance in given tasks or roles assigned by men and therefore appraised by them and an accomplice society. In this way colonialism drew the blueprint for interwoven relations between the home, race, class and gender that were to reach across to our time and reality. In this regard, products may not contribute to changing gender, race and class relations, but stabilise the existing ones.

The arrangement of different furniture pieces according to areas is common to different cultures; it is what Chevalier (2002) calls the “cultural construction of domestic space”. She argues that “basic pieces of furniture characterize [each] room and embody the home” so that “it is the relationships among the elements that create the specificities of every room” (2002, 848-849). This partly explains why these living rooms have certain furniture pieces even if they do not fit in the space well enough to be used. Their importance surpasses practical use.

Nonetheless, there is a pervasive underlying assumption that the existence of furniture is accounted for because of the practical use given to it. Intermittently, the history of design has tied furniture's value to its function as defined by its practical use (there are other ways in which function could be defined). When

at the apex of the Modernist movement, Le Corbusier called the house “a machine for living”, the chair was portrayed as part of its equipment: “a machine for sitting” (1986, 89). However, even if function were the *raison d'être*, furniture is a cultural object. Homes and their chattels are tied to social practices (Logan 2002) and not solely to functional needs. If one considers how the furniture has been laid out in the living rooms pictured below, one can infer that it is not used frequently. The chairs must be pressed against the wall because placed otherwise they would interfere with the entrance or main pathway of the house. In this situation too, furniture shows that its existence is not only accounted for by its function.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1 and 2. The dining table chairs in the upper right hand corner of both pictures are pressed between table and wall. Because of the trouble it would take to use them and place them back, I infer that they are not used often. Source: Carlos Juan Mateo (2015).

On the other hand, in the same way as “the relationships among the elements [...] create the specificities of every room” (Chevalier 2002, 848-849), the elements that constitute each particular furniture style determine how the furniture is perceived and what it is regarded as. To extrapolate this concept from elements in a room to elements that condition our perception of furniture may seem far-fetched, but the details of a furniture piece partly determine whether we hold it appropriate for a living room, for a family member, for certain uses, and so on. This idea is not entirely new: the term “affordance” refers to the perceived properties of an object (whether tangible or not) and how these properties condition how we interact with the object (Norman 1998). Moreover, despite its seemingly practical nature, Norman's definition highlights that there are both actual and perceived properties. Decades before, after studying the Ojibwa Indians, Hallowell (1955, 87) coined the term “culturally constituted behavioural environments”, acknowledging how objects “must be considered as relevant variables because they can be shown to affect actual behaviour”, meaning that the perceived qualities – whether tangible or not – produce an affect.

Domestic furniture “shows” the possible uses and limitations, is then arranged accordingly and becomes a setting whether within the context of Norman's affordance or Hallowell's behavioural environment. In this manner, what we do in a living room is not the same as what we do in our bedrooms; each setting calls for specific actions. This has other implications because “when things tell us how to act, then they too can be considered moral agents” (Kaplan 2004, 171). In our homes, are there designated chairs for members of the family? For example, a rocking chair for grandmother? A reclinable chair for father? When the “message is carried, not by a hectoring voice, but well hidden within the mere substance of apparent silent stuff, we are less likely to sense our disempowerment” (Miller 2010, 82). Throughout his books, Miller has been reiterative of this idea. For him objects “determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so” (2005, 5); “objects are artful; they hide their power to determine the way you feel” (2008, 163); and

“the cues that tell us how to interpret behaviour are usually unconscious” (2010, 49). If in the Dominican Republic furniture is mainly women’s concern, for they are the ones that choose, buy and decide where to place it (Rodríguez Bencosme 2014), what is implied when the “best” furniture has masculine qualities? Moreover, the private sphere is generally women’s domain (Brandes, Stich and Wender, 2013) and by extension of lesser importance than the public sphere. Hence, how does furniture reinforce gender power relations? What kinds of gendered subjectivities are produced through relations instantiated by furniture? We think that we, human subjects, are free agents who can do this or that to the material culture we possess but “[t]hings do things to us, and not just the things we want them to do” (Miller 2010, 94). Furniture may not contribute to changing gender relations, but may stabilise the existing ones.



Figure 3

Figure 3. In the Dominican Republic, living rooms are commonly held to be a social area of the house for visitors or adults, in which children are not allowed to play or sit. Source: Carlos Juan Mateo (2015).



Figure 4

Figure 4. These chairs have arms that would most likely place them at the head at the table, where hierarchy is implied. On the other hand, the seat cushion is of a light colour and has been covered with a patterned cloth. Has anyone ever sat on the light coloured cushion or are they waiting for a special occasion? Source: Carlos Juan Mateo (2015).



Figures 5



Figure 6

Figures 5 and 6. The white chairs in both pictures are the ones used most often. Are we avoiding treating others like we treat ourselves? Does the undercurrent of this idea hold a relation to the foreign being of more prestige or importance than the local? Source: Carlos Juan Mateo (2015).



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figures 7, 8 and 9. In these interiors of Dominican houses, note how domestic aesthetics not only show who we are (pictures of family) but how we want to be perceived (successful with diplomas that demonstrate we are professionals, religious, etc.) As women's domain it is valued for formality and respectability, an extension of what is expected of women. Source: Carlos Juan Mateo (2015).

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