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Author(s): Gwendolyn Owens

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Alison and Peter Smithson's 1956 “House of the Future”

ACCORDING TO *The Times* of London, the 1956 Ideal Home Exhibition had two outstanding features: a “Fifteenth-century Castle” designed by Martin Haylett, and the “House of the Future” designed by architects Alison and Peter Smithson. Sponsored by a rival newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, the exhibition was designed to promote various consumer projects. Eight daily cooking demonstrations, hourly presentations on how to hang wallpaper, parades of fashion models, and samples of goods from overseas animated the event. The castle, clearly inspired by the turreted medieval model at the newly opened Disneyland theme park, housed British heirlooms lent by the National Trust and offered an opportunity to be impressed by rare treasures that had nothing to do with the everyday life of the exhibition visitor. “The House of the Future,” however, offered a glimpse of a future styled for the ordinary citizen of 1980.¹ And the future was going to be fun.

Modest in size with a single bedroom and spaces that flowed from one into another, the house included an outdoor garden *within* the confines of the house. Located at the center of the rectangular structure, the garden, a triangular space with angles that have been softened into gentle curves, could be seen from every part of the house—living room, kitchen, bedroom. This allowed the house to have blank walls on the exterior so that a dense cluster of single-story houses could be put together while still allowing each unit to have its own private outdoor space. The furniture, made of plastic, was largely built into the house and included innovations like a table that could be sunk into the floor when not in use to make the most of the small space. Other futurist elements included machines that could answer the telephone and turn on the television; these were, of course, viewed in the press as completely unnecessary and bizarre devices.² Seen on newsreels of the era³, the house was “inhabited” by Mr. and Mrs. John Citizen (alternatively described as John and Anne), who, dressed in their casual

and comfortable clothing (sweater for him, mini-skirt for her—ten years in advance of its invention by British mod designers), offered guided tours.

The architects of the small futurist house, Alison and Peter Smithson, were a husband-and-wife team and part of the Independent Group, a collective of artists and architects in Britain who came of age just after World War II. Art critic Lawrence Alloway and artist Richard Hamilton were among the members of the group. As Alison Smithson noted, “We were all the lost generation together; that is, the generation

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immediately ahead of us were coming back from the war, back to their lives before the war. There was just no room, there was too great a backlog in all walks of life for any of us to be let in and we were all just the people queuing up; and while we were queuing we talked together....”⁴

In sharp contrast to the United States, which rebounded quickly from the war, Britain was slow to recover. A slow economy is always difficult for architects. The Smithsons’ innovative design for the Hunstanton Secondary Modern School in Norfolk in the early 1950s was selected in an architectural competition and gave their careers a great beginning. While they entered other architectural competitions in subsequent years, they did not have an opportunity to build another major project until the end of the decade.

Left: *House of the Future: Detail, Kitchen, 1956.*

COLLECTION CENTRE CANADIEN D'ARCHITECTURE/CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE,
MONTRÉAL. ©ALISON AND PETER SMITHSON, ARCHITECTS

In the meantime, they taught while they observed and wrote about the society around them.

The booming American economy and the creation of the consumer culture in the U.S. were fascinating to those who were observing these phenomena from the outside. And it was through magazines with their glossy ads that readers learned about how Americans were becoming obsessed with desire for the latest style in everything from cars to household conveniences. In 1951, Canadian Marshall McLuhan published his groundbreaking study, *The Mechanical Bride*, which treated advertisements as texts for analysis; at the same time, the Independent Group members Hamilton and John McHale were mining ad imagery for their collages.⁵ Hamilton's 1956 collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* with its juxtaposition of a photograph of a strongman and a tootsie pop was to become the most famous icon of British Pop Art. While this was not the first time magazine images had been appropriated by artists, the Independent Group members considered advertisements important in themselves, celebrating rather than denying their original purpose and message.

As architects, Peter and Alison Smithson knew that advertising was changing what the client wanted. In their 1956 article, "But Today We Collect Ads," they wrote:

Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,
Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes,
And Charlotte Perriand brought a new
object to the office every morning:
But today we collect ads.⁶

To the Smithsons, ads were the great source for inspiration that other, more concrete elements from vernacular culture had been to these earlier modern architects: Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus School in Germany; Le Corbusier, the great French figure famous for his "machine for living," the Villa Savoye; and his protégée Charlotte Perriand, who came to be recognized for her own innovative architectural designs. To ignore advertising was to ignore what was central to modern culture of the 1950s. The Smithsons warned:

The fine artist is often unaware that his patron, or more often his patron's wife who leafs through the magazines, is living in a different visual world from his own. The pop-art of today, the equivalent of the Dutch fruit and flower arrangement, the pictures of second rank of all Renaissance schools,...is to be found in today's glossies—bound up with the throw-away object.⁷

When chosen to create a prototype for the house of the future for the Ideal Home Show, the Smithsons, given carte blanche to create their design,⁸ chose to make their ideal home something that would appeal to the consumer whose wants were being shaped by advertising. Rather than criticize or ridicule what was being presented in the magazines, the Smithsons designed a house that reinforced and validated all that the alert consumer was already seeing in American publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Holiday*, and *Vogue*.⁹

The dominant decorative elements of the kitchen were the "Pitch Pine Waverite" work surfaces and cupboard doors with their softly rounded corners, not unlike the softly-rounded geometry of the house's central garden. But the beauty—and the innovation—was more than skin deep as the appliances were based on real developments, making what was essentially a proposal for modest housing even more appealing to the middle-class consumer. The architects consulted the Hot Point Kitchen Planning Department about the future of kitchen appliances¹⁰ so that one could actually hope that in 1980 the work-saving devices would be part of a real kitchen.

As explained in the description in the Ideal Home Show program, the saucepans and frying pans (seen on the left) were made of titanium and contained their own heating elements. The sink at the back was made of glass-reinforced plastic with thermostatically controlled tap water which could be adjusted by a lever on the floor. The drain included a waste disposal system. The refrigerator, located at the left of the sink, was at eye level and shallow and wide; the ovens (seen from the back in the photograph) faced the refrigerator and included one with a rotary spit and another with a "super high-frequency oven so that it could cook food in minutes." Under the oven, the service trolley with its warmed-food compartment, built-in toaster, infrared grill, and automatic hot plate dispenser could be stored. Innovations in food packaging were projected so that raw meat, milk, butter, and fish could be kept in the pantry since all would have been "bombed with gamma rays, to kill the bacteria," and supplies could be bought only once a week.¹¹

What the kitchen of the future could not demonstrate was how the food ingeniously stored and prepared would taste—this was a feast for the eye, not necessarily for the palate. Peter Smithson later noted that they were influenced by the design of airplane kitchens;¹² airplane food in the 1950s was not yet synonymous in the public mind with bad food. It was still a number of years before consumers (and, reluctantly, industry) would admit that new food technology did not necessarily produce better-tasting results.

