

# White and Fitted: Perpetuating Modernisms

Kathleen Connellan

“Freedom is not a white surface. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

White is everywhere and nowhere because of its ubiquitous association with space and light and its non-color status. Domestic design and particularly its wet areas are confined to white in modernist design; those whites are accompanied by straight lines and snugly rationalized fittings. Modernism as white and fitted is something that Mark Wigley addresses comprehensively in his book, *White Walls: Designer Dresses*.<sup>2</sup> This article probes further the connections between white, modernism, and rationalism in design, placing an emphasis upon power relations in a designed society. Consequently, “white” in this article is philosophically related to social privilege, and “fitted” not only means immovable furnishings but also a lack of flexibility in society and living. These issues are teased out against the background of an apparent return to color and flexibility in a postmodern era, when there has been a move away from totalitarianism toward inclusivity in society. Therefore, the thrust of this article is not just about color and design in the décor/decorative sense but also about how personal politics, subjectivities, and design are connected.

Michel Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France inspire a political reading of white and fitted design. This article is particularly concerned with modernism in the form of a power structure that never really went away, and with how this modernism affected and perhaps still affects the “ordinary” person in the sense that Michel de Certeau writes about the ordinary man: “To the ordinary man. To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands of streets.”<sup>3</sup> For this article, ordinariness is located in the home and specifically in the many unremarkable kitchens in stretches of suburbia. De Certeau’s thinking on the everyday and the habitual is used in this article to complement/support Foucault’s ideas on capillaries of power.<sup>4</sup> So there are at least two basic positions within “white and fitted”; crudely, this is the position person/user/consumer/individual, and the position of the design decision maker/producer/retailer/supplier. In a more complex breakdown, these positions are held by people within mechanisms and systems of power operations.

Consequently, the personal kitchen appliance and furniture or fittings that accompany the appliance(s) offer an “interior” view, and

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- 1 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63.
  - 2 Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
  - 3 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), v.
  - 4 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976* (London: Penguin, 2004), 27.

5 These surveys were conducted by the author and final year industrial design students at the then School of Built Environment and Design, Cape Technikon.

the social, political, and economic reality of the time that contributes to their production offers an “exterior” view. Both views are problematized in terms of arriving at some answers as to whether the people discussed in the case study and other examples reflect a politics of “white and fitted.” In other words, this article hypothesizes that the designed or manufactured spaces, appliances, and fittings that continue to have modernist standardized simplicity are indicative of a pervasive conservatism in society and a manifestation of power relations in the form of neutral design. The South African case study is used as a point of departure for a broader discussion of design and social theory in a global and late postmodern context.

### The Case Study

Two separate but connected surveys (consumer and retail) on home appliances and furniture were conducted in Cape Town, South Africa in 2000.<sup>5</sup> First, the consumer survey respondents represent a relatively broad social spectrum: 118 consumers from a non-probability sample were randomly interviewed in shopping centers containing domestic appliance stores in areas spread across greater Cape Town. None of the 118 were tourists. The Cape Flats area was included in the survey, which represents 35 percent of the responses; this area is a sprawling expanse of suburbs, as well as informal settlements that incorporate a previously “non-white” segregated residential area. The average age of respondents was late thirties, and the gender balance was almost 50/50. The interviews were conducted using a random, “on the spot” method in the centers. Second, the retail survey used a systematic sample of managers of appliance/furniture retail outlets, and this survey took place in 18 stores across Cape Town and its outlying districts.

Table 1: Design and Use of Color in Appliances and Cupboards in the Kitchen

| Factor                                | %    |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Built in cupboards                    | 79.3 |
| Built in cupboards (white only)       | 43.9 |
| Oak / Wood finish                     | 32.3 |
| Beige / Cream                         | 10.7 |
| Green                                 | 4.6  |
| Orange                                | 4.6  |
| 'Other' color                         | 13.8 |
| Color detail on domestic appliances   | 26.0 |
| Decoration on appliance by respondent | 85.5 |
| Open-plan kitchen                     | 58.6 |
| Adjacent room space matched           | 34.4 |
| Loose items of furniture              | 41.3 |

The consumer survey reveals that the majority of the kitchen walls were painted white, and 94.5 percent of the 118 respondents regarded electrical domestic appliances (white goods) as essential. With this in mind, Table 1 reveals additional information about how the interiors were configured and colored.

The retail survey data reveals that all the participating stores sell many more standardized and modular units than loose furniture items for the kitchen and dining area. It may be an expected result, but it is nonetheless interesting that both surveys show a continued affinity for fitted kitchen spaces. The large country kitchen or even the small kitchen with a movable table in the centre that serves as eating, working, and preparation space is replaced by countertops and islands. Respondents in the consumer survey combined their purchase of d.i.y. kitchen units with the purchase of second-hand or inexpensive new modular units. These are the decisions of people who did not hire interior designers or otherwise plan kitchen makeovers. They may have gotten their ideas from glossy magazines or home improvement television programs, but the reality is that of make-do. Despite this, 44 percent of all kitchen cupboards in the consumer survey are *both white and fitted*.

### Modernisms Past and Present

White and fitted might just be the cheap, obvious, and workable option. It was then and it is now. But this article suggests that there is something more to it. White rationalized interior designs became entrenched in a western iteration of modernism; but the existence of different types of modernisms across the globe is still not completely resolved.<sup>6</sup> My own fascination with the appliance revolution, white goods and white people, prompted the question (in an earlier study) of whether white goods had brought about the same kind of modernism in apartheid South Africa as that which took place in the trans-Atlantic west at the height of post-war reconstruction. Social conditions were different in South Africa, given that there was inevitably “a black maid” for every “white madam,” and therefore white goods were not incorporated into the white home at the same rate as in the developed West.<sup>7</sup> Jacklyn Cock’s *Maids and Madams: a study of the politics of exploitation*, a brave piece of resistance research conducted in the late 1970s, uncovered and published the pre-modern domestic regimes in apartheid South Africa that were part of both a slave and a colonial era.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, there were different but simultaneous social time zones in the kitchens of apartheid South Africa. Cock wrote that African maids were not regarded as adults even if they were grandmothers: “The child analogy involves a fundamental denial of equality and is often a component of racist, sexist and classist ideologies.”<sup>9</sup> These divisive ideologies manifested in various ways; one was to curtail the movements of the African maids.<sup>10</sup>

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- 6 In relation to the idea of “other” modernisms, see particularly: Tabish Kahir, “Modernism and Modernity: The Patented Fragments,” *Third Text* 55 (Summer 2001): 3–13; Geeta Kapur, “Globalisation and Culture” *Third Text* 39 (Summer 1997): 21–38; Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,) 1995; Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage? Un-settling ‘the Heritage,’ Re-imagining the Post-nation,” *Third Text* 49 (Winter 1999/2000): 3–13; Sabine Marshall, “The Integration Of Art and Architecture And Its Relevance in the New South Africa.” *de Arte* 59 (1999): 3–15; Wendy Kaplan, (ed.) *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion 1885–1945: Selections from the Wolfsonian* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995); and Duanfang Lu, “Third World Modernism: Utopia, Modernity, and the People’s Commune in China,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (2007): 40–48.
- 7 “White Skins, White Surfaces: The Politics of Domesticity in South African Homes from 1920–1950” in *Taking Up the Challenge: Critical Race and Whiteness Studies in a Postcolonising Nation*, ed. Damien Riggs (Adelaide: Crawford House, 2007): 248–259.
- 8 Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: a Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980): 123.
- 9 Jacklyn Cock, “Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity” in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, edited by Cheryl Walker (Cape Town: David Phillip), 82. Eleanor Preston-Whyte, “Invisible Workers: Domestic Service and the Informal Economy” in *South Africa’s Informal Economy*, edited by Christian Myles Rogerson and Eleanor Preston-Whyte (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991), 34–53.
- 10 Cock, *Maids and Madams*, 110.

The physical boundaries of control echoed the imposition of an order that extended to a pervasive social surveillance. Robert Thornton writes that Apartheid was an example of “rampant modernism.” He points out that Apartheid was “a special form of modernism and modernization” and stresses the sheer might and effectiveness of its bureaucratic administration.<sup>11</sup> This architectonic planning of modernism, which dealt with the calculated order of the grid, was taken up selectively in different parts of the globe and was most welcome in places ruled with repressive ideologies, such as Apartheid, Fascism, Nazism, and Communism. “In this respect, the Chinese people’s commune movement can be looked at as a concrete manifestation of high modernist vision.”<sup>12</sup> However, the freedom and experimentation often associated with the modern world was and is not welcome in such regimes of power. Therefore, modernization was fractured in places where the divide between rich and poor was more extreme, and this situation was usually outside of the nominal “West.” This meant that modernism was a drawn-out process, making itself felt in different places in different stages. The case study used in this article arises two decades after Cock’s research and 50 years after the height of modernism in the developed West.<sup>13</sup>

Today, flat pack kitchens, and similar d.i.y. assemblages in large retail furniture warehouses and stores like IKEA are white, modular, standardized units. There has been the trend to include stainless steel in appliances and finishes, but the background canvas that is presented to consumers remains predominantly white, and the rule is that of efficiency in both spatial and financial economy. Economy means rationing, keeping tally, ordering, conserving, and spending sparingly. The economic use of space is a spatial arrangement that makes maximum use of what is available. Economy is not about excess; it is about a balanced budget. Consequently, reading space as an accountant might, it is easier to have straight lines and simple digits than complex ones. Frederick Winslow Taylor worked this all out more than a century ago; rationalization and standardization became the *raison d’être* of modernism.<sup>14</sup>

Economy is a term that originated in domestic management, and Foucault throws more light on its meaning when it is translated across personal and political politics. In the Foucauldian sense, economy and the management of resources is one of the many mechanisms of power. Foucault suggests that power can be commoditized when it “is regarded as a right which can be possessed in the way one possesses a commodity. . . .”<sup>15</sup> The economic rationale of modernism encouraged people to think, act, and live efficiently in order to become individually empowered and therefore to be “worth” more.

The binaries (e.g., straight and curved; white and colored; flexible and fixed) that upheld the totalizing narrative of modernism have lingered, despite beliefs that postmodernism had dismantled

11 Robert Thornton, “The Potential of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps Towards a Theory of the Social Edge” in Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed, 1996), 137–138.

12 Lu, *Third World Modernism*, 47.

13 Rebekah Lee, “Hearth and Home in Cape Town: African Women, Energy Resourcing, and Consumption in an Urban Environment,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18:4 (2006): 55–78.

14 Frederick Winslow Taylor’s early twentieth-century experiments in time and motion studies provided much of the rationale for “efficiency” in the workplace, and his 1911 publication, *The Early Sociology of Management and Organizations* (New York: Harper Brothers), influenced production and management in the capitalist economy.

15 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976* (London: Penguin, 2003), 13.

and democratized the structure. Foucault writes that “There is no such thing as a neutral subject. . . . A binary structure runs through society.”<sup>16</sup> And Michael Dutton in a recent presentation at a conference celebrating “Foucault: 25 years on,” said “the binary never ever disappears . . . logics are held in place by the notion of a cure.”<sup>17</sup> This “notion of a cure” can be applied to modernism, which in the name of progress attempted to solve the crises of expansion with systems of control.<sup>18</sup> Modular furnishings, smooth straight finishes, and labor-saving domestic appliances remain a factor in a late postmodern context across the globe. The rise of a new modernism or a neo-modernist conservatism (even if these are not necessarily the names attributed) is apparent in both design and political thought, and it is this particular perpetuation of modernism that prompted this article.<sup>19</sup>

### Normativity and Identities in Design

“White and fitted” presumes a conformity and an anonymity associated with modernist standardization and rationalization in design. This type of design brought about a sameness that became the norm and consequently instituted a system whereby identities were built on neutrality. That neutrality, I argue, is not neutral at all but what Foucault might call a “planned spatial distribution.”<sup>20</sup> The considered modularization of space and form combined with the planned limitation of the interior palette made it easier for the mass production of an identity in kitchens of suburbia. In other words, rationalized spaces encourage rationalization of behavior and the neutralization of identity.

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm.<sup>21</sup>

Adopting and adapting Foucault’s point, the normativity encouraged by modernism is entrenched and has not been easily erased by the advent of postmodern philosophy (or design and architecture). In terms of the consumer survey referred to in the case study, there was a flatness to the answers; I had hoped for more color and expression—the kind that is visible on the streets and in the cafes of post-apartheid Cape Town. The blandness of cream beige surfaces could represent apathy or oblivion to changing times, or a sad backdrop to the ongoing struggle to make ends meet, but it might also be that the neutrality of modernism was so pervasive that it cast a pall across attempts to be different and inculcated a conservative pallor. And, perhaps there was something in the regularity and predictability of a white and fitted space that offered feelings of both security and anonymity simultaneously.

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- 16 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 51
- 17 Michael Dutton, “911 and the Afterlives of Colonial Governmentality,” keynote address, *Foucault: 25 Years On*. Centre for Post-Colonial and Globalisation Studies, University of South Australia, June 25, 2009. Dutton was speaking of Colonialism and post-Colonialism, and when I asked him how modernism fit into his argument about the reassertion of the binary, he said that the binary is the political reality and it cannot be ignored. Colonialism predates modernism, and I was hoping that Dutton would position modernism for me in the context of his talk. He admitted to a slide but emphasized that colonial governmentality has become the working norm of all forms of power.
- 18 Theodore Adorno grappled with the “dual” problem of progress in much of his work, questioning why “progress” did not bring about “progress” and asserting that progress could only really ever work if it benefitted humanity. It is this crisis of modernity that troubled Adorno who, when considering how and why freedom can easily turn into domination, reasoned that “Justice is subsumed in law.” See Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment” in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 16.
- 19 David Ley, “Styles of the Times: Liberal and Neo-Conservative Landscapes in Inner Vancouver, 1968–1986,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 13:1 (1987): 40–56. Steven Heller and Ann Fink, *Less Is More: The New Simplicity in Graphic Design* (Cincinnati: North Light Books, 1999).
- 20 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, translated by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 56.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 57.

Kitchen surfaces are hard and rigid. In addition to the functional necessity of durable stable surfaces, this is also a consequence of mass manufactured materials, such as laminates, metals, and baked on enamel, as well as a number of different composites. These materials are also cold. In modernism the warmth of the human element is always already absent.<sup>22</sup> And, in the contemporary advertised interior, white is a particularly shiny and gleaming type of whiteness, one that creates a haze and conceals as much as it reveals.<sup>23</sup> The person in this scenario is depersonalized into an unreal construction of “sophisticated” clean linearity, she or he is the model in the photographed white kitchen interior in the ubiquitous home-style magazine, not the tired woman or man at home after work trying to prepare a meal for the family. The aesthetic interiors are devoid of messy functionality. To reclaim the subjectivities of the users will mean acknowledging both the ordinariness and the uniqueness of individual people who feel, eat, sleep, and work. “Being is measured by doing” is de Certeau’s take on the loss of identities as a result of the normalizing “capitalist and conquering society.”<sup>24</sup> For Foucault the problem of lost subjectivity can be solved by taking time to “care for oneself” so that the extraneous world does not impinge on subjectivity in a negative or destructive manner.<sup>25</sup>

Whether the ordinary person can choose not be conscripted into normation (white and fitted) is partly what this paper questions. The tension between dominant and “subjugated” knowledge is not entirely predictable.<sup>26</sup> The push and pull between conformity to the white cube or nonconformity to a vibrant exterior of an urban kaleidoscope (i.e., spaces, smells, noise, and cultural complexity) is an aspect of contemporary life. There is a tension between what the market and overriding aspects of ideology serve to people in the shape of “design” and the personal needs or longings of real human beings in relationships and families. On the one hand, there is white in the form of new or maintained whites, and on the other hand, there are the old, tired whites, such as the white goods in second hand appliance shops and the smudged, scratched whites in the homes of suburbia. White, in whatever form or shape, is ubiquitous and easy to overlook. To what extent is this whiteness, which is inherited from modernism, an imposed order, an imposed whiteness? Could it be that, like the “scriptural economy” of which de Certeau writes, the script or text *becomes* society in the end? Is it the imposed law that writes itself upon society?

... the idea of producing a society by a “scriptural” system has continued to have as its corollary the conviction that although the public is more or less resistant, it is moulded by (verbal or iconic) writing, that it becomes similar to what it receives, and that it is *imprinted* by and like the text which is imposed on it. . . . Today the text is society itself. It takes urbanistic, industrial, commercial, or televised forms.<sup>27</sup>

22 Michael K. Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilbersheimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 4.

23 “White Spaces,” *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* e journal 2:1 (2006).

24 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 136, 137.

25 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Bruchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 3.

26 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. (London: Penguin, 2003), 7.

27 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 167.

In saying this de Certeau does not support the idea that consumers are passive or that they are not creative. He contests the idea that the populace is left “grazing on the ration of simulacra the system distributes to each individual,” but he does emphasize the might of that system.<sup>28</sup> To be creatively different, to avoid being part of a system (of white and fitted kitchens or other interiors, for example) may mean that you are in receipt of an education that reaps alterity and ingenuity. It takes time and energy to defy normative trends, which could also indicate a privileged status, even if it is the privilege to have time to be different. The blandness apparent in the answers to questions in the consumer survey may be indicative of an imposed economic order. This is an order represented as white and middleclass in terms of society, and in South Africa, merely having appliances means that you are middle class, which in the year 2000 was still mostly white. In a country that had been ruled by an exclusive white order of government, the possessions that went with that white order became part of the previously disadvantaged people’s sense of right in a post-apartheid scenario.

The imposition of an order is something that Foucault spent most of his life investigating and that de Certeau engages with in terms of consumerism, saying: “It is in any case impossible to reduce the functioning of a society to a dominant type of procedures.”<sup>29</sup> The idea of an overriding ideology that dominates and dictates how people should or should not live is, according to de Certeau, at variance with the “innumerable other practices that remain ‘minor,’ always there but not organizing discourses....”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the question needs to be asked: How do the 23 percent of green, orange, and other colored kitchen cupboards in the case study fit into the hypothetically dominant color of kitchen interiors? And how do the people who inhabit these colored spaces live and act? Are they any different from those who accept or even choose the white and fitted scenario?<sup>31</sup> It is a fact of late capitalist society that people are often no longer referred to as people but as consumers, market sectors, and generational categories. This terminology has infiltrated many areas of communication, and people often become delineated according to material acquisitions and associated aspirations.

Material acquisitions are acquired in a variety of ways, and choices often depend on complex relationships between the family or household. Pierre Bourdieu writes that “educational capital” is an important distinguishing factor when making purchasing decisions. However, in terms of furniture and home decoration, he says, social class is usually more important than education.<sup>32</sup>

The adjectives respondents have chosen to describe an interior, and the source of their furniture, are more closely linked to their social origin than to their educational qualifications....<sup>33</sup>

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28 Ibid., 166.

29 Ibid., 49.

30 Ibid., 48.

31 Ibid., 45 and 49.

32 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 79.

33 Ibid., 78.

Bourdieu's position is that lived experience and learned habits through class inheritance and the type of education afforded to it determine the kinds of "taste" decisions people make. Such a perspective presents one way of reading the idea of "white and fitted" as possessions worth having.<sup>34</sup> In the Bourdieu sense, the "social origin" of people in particular economic categories fixes their purchasing decisions unless they move out of that class through education. Daniel Miller's more recent ethnographic investigation examined the way in which tenants of flats with fitted kitchens in North London individualized their spaces and resisted the standardized installation-style lifestyle handed down to them or prescribed to them by the blandness of modern design.<sup>35</sup> Alison Clarke notes that immigrants from a wide array of countries in North London tend to either "perpetuate" or "reinvent" their material culture; these are not the same stories as those of architectural or interior design magazines or (as Clarke notes) the many home decorating shows on television that set the trends for decorating.<sup>36</sup> Glossy advertising and the promotion of furnishings and appliances present a distorted reality of an idealized social setting. This idealization is not a simple consumerist dream construction, but rather a distorted mirror, a "zerrspiegel,"<sup>37</sup> reflecting the avoidance of complex and different realities and governed by differing purchasing potential and social status.<sup>38</sup>

Some marginal living practice(s) resulting from immigration, refugee, and unsettled diasporic identities are overlooked identities that have the power to revise and unseat dominant ideologies by a natural resistance to the institutionalization of normativity.<sup>39</sup> This does not mean that architecture and interior design disciplines are not sensitive to the unusual and the peripheral—far from it; but the mainstream visual communication of most interiors does not do justice to the many mixtures of humanity and their spaces.

White becomes the (non) color of many spaces, so that the neutral space does not have the mark of anyone's individuality. D.J.B. Young's survey of real estate agents in London reinforces the ubiquity of white or cream neutrality:

Evidently there is some widely understood social consensus about neutrality. It does not mean grey, which is the color that Western color science would term neutral. Here it constitutes lightness, a feeling of space and is impersonal, 'a blank canvas' is the recurring description agents give .... Anything that is not neutral, i.e. is colored, is by implication, a personal idiosyncrasy that other people cannot relate to. Nonetheless neutrality is culturally constructed....<sup>40</sup>

The cultural construction of neutrality is the permeating ideology of western similitude, but neutral is not the color that one would use to describe Cape Town in South Africa or, for that matter, any large

34 Ibid.

35 Daniel Miller (ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (London: Berg, 2001).

36 Alison Clarke, "The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration" in *Ibid.*, 26.

37 Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), xvi.

38 See also Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic of Modern Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwood, 1989); "Consumption and the Rhetorics of Need and Want," *Journal of Design History* 11:3 (1998): 236; and Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

39 Alison Clarke (2001, p. 29) notes this point with particular reference to ethnic immigrants who live in state-designed, standardized housing; but see also Matthew Barac, "Transit Spaces: Thinking Urban Change in South Africa" in *Home Cultures* 4:2 (2007). Theodore Adorno, "Refuge for the Homeless," in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: New Left, 1974), 38–40; Sebastian Ureta, "Domesticating Homes: Material Transformation and Decoration among Low-Income Families in Santiago, Chile," *Home Cultures* 4:3 (2007): 311–336.

40 D.J.B. Young, "The Material Value of Colour: The Estate Agent's Tale," *Home Cultures* 1:1 (2004): 9.



city with a significant multi-cultural component—when the focus is on the details. That detailed visual culture includes the people, bright lights, signs, banners, markets, and hawkers, all animating the environment with energy and change. When and if this detail is merged into the superstructure, sameness is the residue. It is a case of people and power; the populace and especially the crowd always pose a threat to systems of control and governments.<sup>41</sup> The contradictions between the clean, neutral surfaces of modernisms (old and new) and the vibrancy of color conflate with the dialectic in power relations and governmentality. In this way white and its equivalents in the post-industrial world compete with voices of constituted colors. Stephen Eskilson traces the entry of color into consumption, describing the 1920s and 1930s environment as if it were a symphony and theatre of color, both day and night. He writes that color became the dominant code for retail in a “rainbow arsenal of products.”<sup>42</sup> This era was a period of high modernism, with the vitality of synthesized color relegated to retail, shopping, and consuming. While the stories and reality of color in visual culture cannot be ignored, not then and not now, this article argues that there is also a resistance to the varieties of color that is easier to overlook. Whites in their apparent neutrality can permeate backgrounds without their advancement’s being particularly noticeable. It is this seemingly stealthy movement of whites and neutrals across culture and thinking that is of particular interest to me.

David Batchelor, in his book *Chromophobia*, begins his first chapter entitled “Whitescapes” with a personal visit to the home of a renowned Anglo-American art collector. Batchelor notes the appearance of empty whiteness:

. . . seamless, continuous, empty, uninterrupted. Or rather: unintermittable. There is a difference. Uninterrupted might mean overlooked, passed by, inconspicuous, insignificant. Unintermittable passes by *you*, renders *you* inconspicuous and insignificant. The unintermittable, endless emptiness of this house was impressive, elegant and glamorous in a spare and reductive kind of way, but it was also assertive, emphatic and ostentatious. This was assertive silence, emphatic blankness, the kind of ostentatious emptiness that only the very wealthy and the utterly sophisticated can afford. It was a strategic emptiness, but it was also *accusatory*.<sup>43</sup>

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41 James M. Mayo, “Propaganda with design: Environmental Dramaturgy in the Political Rally,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 32:2 (1978).

42 Stephen Eskilson, “Color and Consumption,” *Design Issues* 118:2 (2002): 27.

43 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000): 9, 10.

One may ask, then, to what extent the idea of a neutral, smooth, uncluttered, monochromatic and built-in kitchen is evidence of an identity that differs from the normative institution of modernism (the bland bank building; the grid-formed office block of an insurance company; the modular mass housing estates)? Is not such an identity still the tenacious modernist and Taylorist gauge of time and motion? Easy to clean and saves time? However, white, as Wigley tells us, is

only as clean as its surface layer, one that is thin and impermanent.<sup>44</sup> This point is the subject of another paper<sup>45</sup> on the relationship between washing and whiteness, but it can suffice to say here that the continued and increasing pressures of work and life are not so easily washed or boxed away.

### Conclusion

Post-apartheid society and the fêted rainbow nation have been generally romanticized as a colorful ideal of multi-lingual ethnicities making efforts to share cultures and bury hatchets. But that is an exterior, trendy street view and constitutes a quintessential postmodernism, one that is vibrant and edgy. Certainly the “post” in this sense is nonconformist—it does not fit to size; it is a “post” that constantly plays with its rainbow reflections. Against the backdrop of such color, pristine white kitchens photographed in glassed interiors are the marketing face of a design that capitalizes on the contrast such romantic color offers to the neo-modernist visage of whiteness. However, the reality is more mundane and filled with the dulled whites of overuse. Old whites are a continuation of a faded modernism that failed to be redeemed by the promise of a post future. In this sense the ordinary person is a tired individual. Late capitalist production continues to serve up the leftovers of an unrevised type of modernism because it is the easier and cheaper option for consumers.

At certain times in their lives and in certain places of their domicile, people construct a type of identity according to their circumstances. Such an identity results from an external collective association and does not necessarily include the formulation of subjectivities that are internal and personal. Identity (as in design identity) incorporates color, form, and shape and is directly aligned with the material world. To be white and fitted, then, is an identity that suits certain strata of society that, for economic, social, or other reasons, is unable *or* unwilling to move out of that mold for a certain period of time. The mold or structure offers a safety net, a secure status that is part and parcel of institutionalized normativity. Such is the strength of uniform design and color distribution; a leveling out and neutralizing of form and color is precisely the ideology of whiteness as an institution.

People, possessions, and power are calibrated upon the surface structure of whiteness. White in domestic design in this way is a type of imposed order that emanates from the dominant text of a western capitalist society. To succumb to the prescription of being white and fitted as a human being is less easy to describe than to be white and fitted as an interior, and it is the interiors as an extension of the human being with which this article has concerned itself. In so doing, the identity of the person and the kitchen area of their home conflate interior architectural space with subjectivity (interior psychological space). To be white and fitted as an

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44 Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, xviii.

45 “Washing White” in *The Racial Politics of Bodies, Nations and Knowledges*, edited by Barbara Baird and Damien Riggs (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).

individual person and not a collective (e.g., an institution, as stated above), could indicate either a denied and confused identity or a latent search for subjectivity. The ordinary person living, working, cooking, and cleaning in a white and fitted space is not necessarily there out of choice in a world so filled with choices. Perhaps then, the questions surrounding “white and fitted, perpetuating modernisms,” constitute the ironies and tensions that are part of democracy and freedom—something much deeper than the color and form.