

ANDREA MERRETT

## picture perfect

BEATRIZ COLOMINA

*Domesticity at War*

The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts,  
2007

ISBN: 9780262033619

RRP: US\$49.95 (hb)

Modern architecture is inseparable from war. It recycles the techniques and materials developed for the military. The postwar form of domesticity turns out to be a powerful weapon. Expertly designed images of domestic bliss are launched throughout the entire world as part of a carefully orchestrated campaign.

This is Beatriz Colomina's stated argument from the cover of *Domesticity at War*, but the book is more than just an elucidation of the argument. Colomina tells the story of postwar America and the brief flowering of a truly American modern architecture, which lasted from the end of World War II to the beginning of the 1960s. The three key words from the front cover are: war, domesticity and images. Missing is propaganda, although it is implicit in 'orchestrated campaign'. From these four terms, Colomina constructs the image of postwar America, fed on the wealth generated from war and the images of happy consumption which covered the dark undertones of the trauma of war and the anxiety of the Cold War. While this image is not new or original, the way that Colomina constructs it is. Her argument is developed through words and images, the book literally divided into two, and the images in the upper section carefully cross referenced with the text below. Her originality comes from the extensive and careful study of images and archival material.

The chapter which best illustrates postwar America is Chapter Four, 'The Lawn at War'. During World War II, the lawn became what Americans were fighting for—a piece of land for every family—and maintaining it became a

national duty: 'Keeping the lawn amounted to no less than keeping the face of the nation.' (114) Colomina does not explain how the lawn gained such significance, but she clearly demonstrates the importance images of the lawn had during the war. Pictures of lawns were sent to soldiers at the front, specifically in articles and magazines which publishers encouraged families to pass along. The lawn was both a refuge from the trauma of war and a battlefield unto itself, as was American domesticity, Colomina will argue. Gardening, in the form of frontyard vegetable patches or 'Victory Gardens', both supported the war and provided veterans a healing therapy through contact with the earth and nature. The technologies of gassing and insect repellent sprays led to a whole industry of postwar insecticides. The enemy was the insects which threatened the health of the lawn. Ironically, it was the very chemicals that produced the image of the perfect healthy lawn that were the greatest threat to human health. But the lawn did come to represent hygiene and health, which is clear in how it was used in wartime advertising. The lawn also represented wealth, and Colomina points out the images of postwar consumer items displayed on lawns in front of suburban houses. The abundance of postwar America was made possible by the transformation of wartime production into domestic consumer items such as appliances. Everything from appliances to beauty products to medical supplies were displayed on the lawn, whereas what lay below told the other side of the story: the bomb shelter. The dark side of Cold-War America was the 'surrogate home' that was hidden under the

lawn: the bomb shelter was 'as isolated, self-sufficient, and stocked up with supplies as the suburban house that sat on the lawn'. (138)

Appliances were an important part of the images of domestic abundance that were propagated during the war and afterwards. Central to Colomina's argument is the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, discussed in Chapter One, '1949', and Chapter Seven, 'Enclosed by Images'. A six-room suburban house was constructed for the exhibition, split in two so that visitors could admire the myriad of appliances and consumer items inside. The Cold War was going to be won through gadgets not bombs: 'The suburban house had become a weapon.' (138) Orchestrated by the Americans, the 'kitchen debate' took place in the kitchen of the exhibition house between Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon. Nixon claimed American superiority on the basis of consumer choice and the ideal of the American suburban home, with all its gadgets and luxuries. As important as the actual house were the images of America that were part of the exhibition. Commissioned by George Nelson, who was hired to oversee the design of the exhibition, the American designers Ray and Charles Eames produced their film *Glimpses of the USA*. The film was composed of over two thousand images of life in America, projected on seven screens, each showing different images. The screens were suspended within Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome designed for the exhibition. The space created by these screens was, according to Colomina, a new type of space. It was the space of postwar consumer America—multiple, simultaneous, the space of information

with no privileged point of view, which we take for granted today. It was also the space of the war situation room, developed by the military, with the help of architects, during the war.

If there were any protagonists in this book then they would be the Eameses. Colomina dedicates almost two entire chapters to them (Chapter Three, 'The Eames House', and Chapter Seven) as well as mentioning them in the introduction and first chapter. Understanding the Eameses is critical to understanding the image of postwar America that Colomina constructs. Not only did they develop the multiscreen technique, which they used in several films and exhibitions, but their architecture reflected this manifold perception and attitude towards space: 'All of the Eameses' designs can be understood as multiscreen performances: they provided a framework in which objects can be placed and replaced ... Spaces are defined as arrays of information collected and constantly changed by their users.' (268–9) The Eames House was built in 1949 as part of the case-study program sponsored by *Arts & Architecture* magazine. The house was conceived as a framework for living, where the occupants could modify the configurations of furniture, walls, windows, and so on. The building was to disappear into the background and provide the means to creatively display the collected items of the occupants. Quoting Charles Eames, the house was also to act as a 'shock absorber' after the war. Colomina argues:

Domestic life could no longer be taken for granted. It became an art form carefully constructed and marketed by a whole new

industry: a form of art therapy for a traumatized nation, a reassuring image of the 'good life' to be bought like any other product. (91)

The domestic image was not only being used as propaganda overseas, it was propaganda for postwar America. The difference in what the Eameses were offering was creative choice: a series of components, like Lego, that could be assembled to the occupants' specifications, as opposed to a complete pre-packaged environment. The house was an exhibition house and the Eameses' gift to postwar America. Colomina points out that gift giving was so important to the Eameses that they conceived all their work as gifts.

Exhibitions were critical to the development of modern architecture in the United States and Chapter One focuses on them. There was the *Arts & Architecture* case study program, where the houses were real, in that they had real clients who would live in them. They were also required to be open to the public for a minimum of six weeks. There were also the exhibition houses built for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) during and after the war. The date Colomina gives as significant for American modern architecture is 1949: the year of the Eames House and of Marcel Breuer's house at the MoMA. Implicit in her argument is the importance of the suburban house in the development of a uniquely American modern architecture. Nineteen-forty-nine was both the high point of any American avant-garde (which she argues is a debatable term in the context of American architecture), and also the end, when

the house went from high-art status to consumer product. The first house to be exhibited at the MoMA, in 1941, was Buckminster Fuller's Defence House, or Dymaxion Deployment Unit (DDU). Chapter Two, 'DDU at MoMA', is dedicated to this project. The DDU was developed from grain bins built by the Butler Manufacturing Company. The units could be used as emergency housing for families, or as barracks for soldiers. The United States Army ordered thousands of them and installed them in the Persian Gulf before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, after which all steel went into producing weapons. But not before two of the units were installed in the garden at the MoMA, connected together and configured for a family of six. Colomina points out how easily the DDUs moved from military to domestic use, with Fuller suggesting they could be used as bomb shelters or guest houses. The next house to be exhibited at the MoMA was Breuer's House in the museum garden. While neither house was presented as a high-art object by the museum, the way European avant-garde houses were in the 1932 exhibition 'Modern Architecture', the DDU was considered a design object. Breuer's house, on the other hand, was aimed at the commuter, the soldier returning from war to a house in the suburbs. Colomina argues that what was radical about this house was its location in a museum which previously catered to art collectors.

Nineteen-forty-nine was also the date of the glass houses: Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in Illinois. Colomina compares these to X-ray technology (in Chapter Five,

'X-Ray Architecture'). X-rays allowed the interior of the body to be scrutinised in the same way the interiors of glass houses could be scrutinised. Colomina quotes Edith Farnsworth on her acute awareness of the impact of any item lying around on the view of the house from the outside. The same thing was true of the large picture windows in suburban homes. They acted as a frame for the image of the 'perfect' domestic interior, a space no longer private but open to the public gaze. Of course, the glass worked both ways, and the picture window also acted as a means for the inhabitants to keep an eye on their neighbours and any stranger passing by. Colomina illustrates this effect through Dan Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978), where he replaced the façade of a suburban house with glass, and ran a mirror lengthwise through the middle of the house. The distinction between the interior and exterior was dissolved. Further compounding the dissolution of this division was the television, which acted to bring the outside world into the 'private' domestic space. In the last chapter, 'The Underground House', Colomina examines the 'hyperinteriorization' that occurred to the suburban domestic environment with the impact of television. The extreme example is Jay Swayze's Underground Home, built for the 1964 New York World's Fair. The house was conceived for protection from nuclear fallout, and the interior environment was completely controllable by the occupants. Swayze even included windows with display screens behind them allowing the view to be chosen at will. The Underground Home and the glass houses represented the two directions American

domesticity was going in the decades following World War II. On the one hand, the house was becoming increasingly dematerialised, no longer demarcating the distinction between inside and outside, and, in the case of the Eames house, almost portable. On the other hand, the house itself was becoming the bunker, a wholly interiorised building, but where the distinction between public and private was being blurred through communication media. In neither case were the houses able to create a real sense of security. In Cold-War America everyone was under threat, and to alleviate the stress this caused, an ideal domesticity was engaged to construct a sense of security, a domesticity that was as much a picture of itself as anything real.

*Domesticity at War* covers a vast quantity of material and Colomina subtly builds up her argument through the entire text. Each chapter also stands alone, and many of them were in fact published in journals or presented as lectures. I would certainly recommend the book to any student of modern architecture, and it is also a fascinating read for anyone interested in postwar America and the social role of architecture.

---

ANDREA MERRETT has recently obtained her Masters in History and Theory of Architecture from McGill University in Canada. She is currently working as an independent scholar while she prepares to begin her PhD in the fall, on theories of bodies and space as they intersect through architecture and dance. <andrea.merrett@mail.mcgill.ca>