

## Culture materialised: IKEA furniture and other evangelical artefacts

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It was at the end of the nineteenth century that the world first became aware of Scandinavian décor, and in 2009 Dublin will rediscover it. In 1899 the book *Ett Hem* ('A home') was published by Carl Larsson. The Swedish artist presented family scenes and idyllic motifs from his house in rural Dalarna. The book became an immediate best-seller. Heavy, mass-produced furniture was in great demand at that time, in Scandinavia as much as elsewhere. By contrast, the rooms in Larsson's house seemed unusually empty. The few pieces of furniture all had different origins and included simple rustic furniture as well as home-made designs by his wife, Karin Larsson. This house was very different from contemporary bourgeois homes, which were traditionally characterised by a horror of vacant spaces and an obsession with ornamentation and ostentation. The Larssons' interior was unique in advocating a simplicity and craftsmanship that departed from contemporary flamboyant fashions. Their home was a uniquely Swedish version of rustic ideals, evoking an aesthetic from hand-woven fabrics, earth colours and wooden furniture.

In 1997 the Victoria and Albert Museum in London presented a Larsson retrospective and called the artistic couple 'creators of the Swedish style'. The exhibition was sponsored by IKEA, a multinational furniture company which sees itself as an informal continuation of that style. The success of the Larssons' approach lies in their show of simplicity and the elimination of the excess that characterised the period. They established simple, airy designs; their approach was avant-garde and international, whilst also being introverted and petit-bourgeois. Thus the Larssons were the founders of a style that was to dominate the post-war furniture market internationally. This style became known on the world stage as 'Swedish Modern'.

Twentieth-century design may seem to have few consequences for our daily

lives, but this chapter will challenge this assumption by focusing on some of the neglected nuances of personal possessions. We are, perhaps, familiar with the idea that things can be taken as barometers of individuals' priorities or motives. We have heard enough glib statements regarding fast cars, boys' toys and female 'shopaholics' to be aware that consumption is frequently taken as a prism through which we refract social worries and moralities. When we bemoan the current day we point an accusatory finger at the objects with which we surround ourselves. For the most part, however, the humble consumer durable does not deserve such moral censure. In fact, it is my intention to focus on the complexities involved in consuming household artefacts, and to highlight some of the myriad significances of one type of artefact soon to be found throughout the country: IKEA furniture.

There are countless ways of contemplating the material world. Everything that surrounds us as we pass through each day can be considered, scrutinised and studied. Sometimes, in fact, it is difficult to disentangle the world we inhabit from the world that we study. The material environment is so much a part of our perception of the world and our place in it that we rarely stop to think about the nuts and bolts of our existence. We forget that what we call culture is not just something we read in newspapers or see exhibited in galleries but is a lived quality, a practice and a way of being. Anthropology defines itself as the discipline that studies such an abstract phenomenon as culture. This term is both ambiguous and contested but can be more neatly described as a study of the activities that people engage in: religion, language, death, the body, landscape and bodily practices, for example. In fact, any aspect of life that has been touched by the human hand comes within the radar of anthropological interest. As an anthropologist I am often asked whether I think that Ireland is 'losing' its culture. Culture is not something fossilised at a particular point of time, however. Nor is it a thing that exists only in museums or galleries. Culture changes; it never waxes or wanes. It is the label given to the way people live.

### **Material culture**

If it is true to say that archaeologists try to construct a social context around the artefacts they find, to see the people and relationships behind a burial or an axe, then everyday objects provide anthropologists with a similar material script. Through such a medium we give form to and come to an understanding of ourselves and others, and it is precisely this quality of the everyday object that is significant because it represents the context into which we are born and socialised. It is only when we actively scrutinise the material medium that we

realise its effect on our lives. And most of us rarely think about the things with which we surround ourselves. In fact, it is frequently in moments of crisis or comedy that we come to realise how we 'enliven' objects with autonomous will-power. Computers, cars and machines of any kind can become agents of sorts when they shut down and we find ourselves cajoling, caressing and pleading with them to resume operation once more. As the anthropologist Jojada Verrips shows, this capacity for apparent irrationality is occasionally a point of comedy, as the image of John Cleese hitting his car with a tree branch in *Fawlty Towers* calls to mind. But there is a more serious point to be made here. Our material environment not only provides the background to our perception of how things are or should be, but it in turn creates the context that facilitates these expectations. As we reproduce a given material landscape, we simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of the relationships embedded therein. Therefore, if we can rediscover the things around us, we'll also discover a lot about ourselves.

For example, we may know without reflection that household objects have particular gender associations but we tend not to think further about how these nuances inform us about gender roles and activities. A study in south London showed that of all domestic objects it was the power drill that was the most 'gendered'. In part, this association is born out of an increased amount of time spent in the home, a shorter working week and a decline in pub culture (Gershuny 1982). But identifying the Black and Decker drill with masculinity can be taken one step further. If gender roles are considered as a dynamic relationship based on difference—such as the *opposite* sex—these differences may coalesce around traditional definitions of male labour and female domesticity. With a decline in such polar distinctions based on male work outside the home and female work inside, sexual differences are increasingly being played out in new ways. The rise of DIY is one expression of new forms of opposition within the home replacing traditional ones (Miller 1997).

Everyday objects, therefore, are media for thinking about much broader social phenomena. Such things as household implements are particularly interesting because they are overlooked, considered trivial, and therefore not seen as actively telling us about society—class, ethnicity and gender, to name but a few categories. Sometimes trends are only apparent when viewed over time or in patterns. When typewriters switched from being mainly associated with male clerks to being used largely by female secretaries, the keys were enclosed to hide the machine-like element. Likewise, when the motor scooter was developed as a female equivalent to the male motorbike, it not only enclosed the engine but took its lines from the familiar children's scooter (Forty 1986; Hebdige 1988). Both of these examples highlight attitudes regarding particular genders and machines but would be difficult to discern unless viewed over time. The most

banal of things may be, and frequently are, ideological. Such objects do not just reflect how people are organised but go some way towards reinforcing these organising principles. That is, our homes, our places of work and our public spaces are not backdrops for the stuff of life but actually create and constitute the distinctions we draw between types of people, gender roles or ways of life. Now, the questions prompted by this recognition are, first, how do we recognise the social life of things, and, second, what do our possessions say about us?

## IKEA

In 2009 the giant furniture store IKEA Svenska AB is planned to open in Dublin. Arguably, more than any other furniture store IKEA encapsulates many of the icons of a truly modern trans-national store. It is undoubtedly global, accounting for 235 stores in 31 countries. It is visited by over 583 million people worldwide and has made its reclusive founder, Ingvar Kamprad, one of the world's richest men. In Ireland IKEA's arrival is facilitated only by a change in national legislation that allowed a limited lifting of a size restriction on retail warehouses. Along with this change come the inevitable fears of crowd control. And these fears are well grounded. Judging from experiences abroad, we can expect the flocking of shoppers to store showrooms on its arrival. In north London in 2005 bargain-hunters were 'crushed and suffered heat exhaustion' when up to 6,000 Londoners overran one of the store's sales, while fist-fights in the carpark were also reported. In fact, the superstore was forced to close soon after its special midnight opening as people abandoned their cars on the North Circular Road and made their way on foot, causing severe traffic difficulties (Burkeman, *The Guardian*, 10 February 2005). Just what, one wonders, is so enticing about this one furniture retailer that it can be the focal point of such extreme behaviour? The store is known for inexpensive quality, but it is not the only source of inexpensive furniture and this alone does not fully explain the enormous popularity of the world's largest furniture retailer. As it was argued in the *Guardian* newspaper, despite all its frustrations, regular visitors to the store view it with love/hate reactions: 'It has become something far more emotively substantial—like a football team, or the Church of England or the government'. So how can one account for the sheer enormous popularity of this particular store, or, indeed, the Swedish brand in general? Can we follow a chair from design phase to shop floor to the interiors of people's houses and find there some commentary on society? When is a chair just a chair? The answer to this question in Ireland remains to be seen, but what we can do here is examine the potential nuances of seemingly innocuous furnishings.

When people shop in IKEA they inevitably talk about how much they have saved. In fact, as Daniel Miller makes clear, spending is one of the chief ways in which we save, thrift being universally seen as 'a good thing'. And thrift does not necessarily mean not spending: one can buy vast amounts but conceptualise one's purchases as value for money, good quality or getting what one has paid for. IKEA shopping is ideally suited to this idiom: in 2006 a radio presenter on the nation's airwaves talked of 'saving thousands', whilst spending as much on her recent trip to IKEA in the UK. Undoubtedly, part of the store's success does lie in its promise of modern but inexpensive Scandinavian furniture, and, compared to other retailers, flatpack packaging accounts for considerable gains for the company—and the consumer. Another possible consideration derives from links to the transience of fashion. Stores such as IKEA, and indeed Habitat, are credited with heralding a 'revolution' in attitudes to furniture. Before the mid-twentieth century, furniture was viewed as a much more permanent thing, longevity being particularly valued. With contemporary retailers we find a sea change in popular attitudes, whereby furniture and home décor in general can be transformed, downsized or modernised, depending on one's changing situation. Furniture is no longer for life but for lifestyle. Löfgren illustrates this point nicely with an IKEA advert from France that urges the generation of 1968 to redo their kitchen instead of the world: 'Mai 68, on a refait le monde. Mai 86, on refait la cuisine' ('May '68, we remade the world. May '86, we're redoing the kitchen').

I remember my first visit to IKEA. I was living in London and had seen the advertising campaign contrasting Swedish liberal living with English reserve, the 'Throw out your chintz' slogan, but was still unprepared for the colossal blue warehouse with *IKEA* emblazoned in yellow on the side. It was akin to a giant Swedish flag in the English city, a little oasis of Swedishness in foreign territory. This impression is not coincidental: a crucial selling point in this global empire is a particular play on a local version of the Swedish modern. From the blue and yellow exteriors to imported Swedish meatballs in cross-global cafes, the marketing image of the store links common icons of 'Swedishness' with proffered non-élitist, practical furnishings for the purchasing masses. In terms of brand identity, IKEA has been remarkably effective: few other companies are so intimately associated with their country of origin. So successful has it been that IKEA/Sweden can take its place alongside Coca Cola/US and Sony/Japan. Moreover, not only is there a clear Swedish identity, but alongside flatpacking, rationalisation and efficiency it projects key values associated with the country of origin, such as simplicity, equality, thrift and fashionable design. A key selling point is placed on the particular quality that Swedishness provides: Swedish lifestyles are described on the store homepage as 'fresh' and 'healthy', with 'an international reputation for safety and quality you can rely on'. But added to the

inexpensive quality and projections of Swedish lifestyles as aspirational is a projected philosophy or self-proclaimed 'vision' of providing 'a better everyday life for everyone'. This vision takes its line from the store's founder: in 1976 Kamprad wrote 'The Testament of a Furniture Dealer', in which he set out IKEA's 'sacred concept'. Reading the vision one is transported to a realm far beyond furnishings. In fact, as part of the IKEA vision we are seamlessly carried from the realm of furniture production to references to post-war modernism and, more importantly, 'a caring society', 'social equality' and, by implication, the politics of Swedish social democracy.

A recognisable social and ethical theme runs through IKEA's 'vision', such as its claim to deliver non-élitist design at affordable prices. Evocative here are images and ideals based on notions of the modern home. As it states on its homepage, 'In the 1950s the styles of modernism and functionalism developed at the same time as Sweden established a society founded on social equality'. The early twentieth century had a defined aesthetic that is variously described as modernist. What this amounted to in practice was a realisation of the impact of the ordinary, a celebration of clean lines, lack of ornament and machine-like simplicity. Amongst European—particularly Dutch, German and Russian—designers, architects and social planners there was a particular emphasis on the material realities of people's lives, and many treatises of 'good' living were aimed precisely at the interiors of individual homes. Only by changing the domestic environment, it was believed, could one improve living standards and challenge traditional mindsets—create a new classless society without the necessity of revolution. In order to be modern, the environment—from the ordinary domestic to the city space—had to be modern. *Modernism* came to describe this machine aesthetic, based on a utopian fancy that standardisation and abstraction could make a new classless world, devoid of previous ornament and associated hierarchy. Design seemed to provide the scope for a rethinking of everything from chairs and kitchens to bodily exercises, skyscrapers and cities. Radical designs were proposed for common household things. In spring 2006 an exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London entitled *Modernism: designing for a new life* was sponsored by Habitat, a would-be rival. Now Habitat is owned by IKANO, or in other words, the Kamprad family.

In Scandinavia this style was particularly influential, but was combined in interesting ways with traditional design elements and also with the politics of the day, the Social-Democratic Party. And while all this history of design seems very remote from the IKEA bookshelf named 'Billy', it is something that the store actively plays on. An aspirational convergence between design ethic and a social ethic remains, and Swedish design continues to be described as embodying qualities like equality or social responsibility. Comparing it with other Nordic

countries and with Ireland, one finds that, while quality of life is a stated aim of national design policies, Sweden is unusual in stating directly that quality and shared wealth is an objective to be served by better-designed products and services. At the time of writing, national design policy for Ireland by contrast places emphasis on 'Creative Ireland' as part of our national image. In a comparison of such policies among Nordic countries, Sweden's national design objectives are grouped under the headline 'The innovative caring society'. We hear this message echoed in IKEA's webpage when it claims that:

'[It] . . . was founded when Sweden was fast becoming an example of the caring society, where rich and poor alike were being well looked after. This theme fits well with the IKEA vision. In order to give people a better everyday life, IKEA asks the customer to work as a partner.'

As anyone who has visited a store knows, 'working as a partner' can be translated into hours of frustrating reassembly. In this one statement the efficiency of flatpack is translated into a morality of work. In the 'Testament of a Furniture Dealer' Kamprad writes, 'You can do so much in 10 minutes' time . . . 10 minutes, once gone, are gone for good . . . Divide your life into 10-minute units and sacrifice as few of them as possible in meaningless activity.' As detailed by a visiting *Guardian* journalist to the IKEA headquarters, this moral crusade finds its way into the offices in the form of mid-day gymnastics for the staff and a frugality that insists that even senior executives travel around Europe on budget airlines and stay in cut-price hotels. For the customer it is found in the value of exertion and the hard work necessary to reassemble flatpack furniture. Self-assembly is more than a cost-cutting measure, we are told by the visiting journalist: it is a 'tool of evangelism'.

And where does all of this bring us? In spring 2009 IKEA will come to Ireland, and inevitably thousands of shoppers will flock through its doors. But possibly alongside all this commentary will be the researchers: anthropologists and other social scientists trying to find out just exactly what we see in this Scandinavian chain and whether all the IKEA hyperbole reaches its consumer target. When we purchase a Hensvik storage unit, to what degree, we must ask ourselves, does the image of Swedish lifestyles, the tantalising promise of an ordered modernity, play a part in our choices. While the marketing strategies of the IKEA empire, replete with images of healthy, tidy Swedes, may play a minor part in its popularity, are we aware of the brand vision we are buying into? Within the social sciences it is acknowledged that what we consider individual taste has often very little to do with personal preferences but relates more to upbringing and class allegiance. IKEA claims to go beyond class distinction: 'we

do not need fancy cars, posh titles, tailor-made uniforms, or other status symbols. We rely on our own strength and our own will.' Maybe what all this ultimately provides is an awareness that social commentary starts in the least profiled of places—the home. We often talk and think of the house as real estate but neglect this silhouetted space as itself bespeaking volumes on our ideas of society or culture. Forgetting the importance of this institution in favour of the more public spheres leads us to neglect recognition of a deliberately constructed emotional, physical and social environment. After all, it is not happenchance that the home is as it is, and yet, while we labour over our interior décor so attentively, we have still to rediscover its social significance. As G. K. Chesterton so eloquently put it, '... of all modern notions generated by mere wealth the worst is this: the notion that domesticity is dull and tame. Inside the home (they say) is dead decorum and routine; outside is adventure and variety.' The truth, he ventures, is that 'the home is not the one tame place in the world of adventure, it is the one wild place in the world of rules and set tasks'.

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### Further reading

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