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# Power to the People: Electricity and Domestic Design.

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To be wired or not to be wired? This paper will stress the dominance of design history in the research of the 'domestic appliance revolution' and map possible scenarios for future research into domestic product design. The main thrust of the paper will be that of energy supplies and particularly the post World War II emphasis upon embracing electricity into the home with all of its concomitant 'labour saving' devices. (1) The post War appliance revolution and its aftermath will be positioned against the crystal ball of domestic design that will move away from the obvious and cumbersome nature of the object focussed electrical cord and socket to a designed environment that seamlessly includes function into space and dispenses with the singularity of form. The paper will tease out a number of tensions including modernist domestic product design and late postmodern designed domesticity. (2) Pre-Apartheid South Africa will be used as a context for a domestic appliance revolution of a different kind, a kind where electricity was synonymous with political power. White goods in this scenario are central to the theme of white power in the face of black labour. Electricity is a mitigating force in the triangle of tension between the white madam, the black maid and white-boxed appliance. (3) Design history has the tools to contextualise and expose the way in which modernity entered or remained suspended in a developing economy. Race, place and power are wrought into the capitalist machine of public and private control. Electricity is a tool of segregation and its language is encoded into the appliances so that they remain objects of white literacy.

Once the historical context has been established and the tools of design history have proved adequate in their task, alternative design scenarios will be posited. This aspect of the paper will look away from the past and glance into a future in which the meaning of power in the form of electricity, its cords, sockets, plugs and objects melt away into miniaturised, computer chipped, holistically designed environments. The nature of housework and domesticity will be reassessed in terms of the home with changed role structures and removed appendages.

Initial sources will include:

- 1** Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *The Industrial Revolution in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century, Technology and Culture*, Vol 17, 1976, pp. 1–16. Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750–1980*, (London: Methuen, 1986). Penny Sparke, *Electrical Appliances*, (London: Unwin, 1987).
- 2** Penny Sparke, *As long as it's pink: the sexual politics of taste*, (London: Pandora, 1995). Sandy Isenstadt, *Visions of Plenty: Refrigerators in America around 1950*, *Journal of Design History*, Vol 11, No 4, 1998, pp. 311–321.
- 3** Jaclyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: a study in the politics of exploitation*, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980). Part of the paper will take on a design research approach rather than a design history approach and will pose questions as well as suggest solutions for workable domestic environments in both Third and First World homes. The nature of energy, the design of products and the role of consumption will be used to show the shift from a fordist, production based design environment to that of a post fordist, consumption based design environment.
- 4** The paper will emphasise the dual roles of design history and design theory but will encourage the maintenance of each as discrete disciplines within design discourse, with the former reassessing the past and the latter engaging the present in order to map the future.

## Power to the People: electricity and domestic design

The paper will tease out a number of tensions including domestic product design and designed domesticity, particularly within the post World War 2 emphasis of embracing electricity into the home with all of its concomitant 'labour saving' devices.<sup>1</sup> Pre –Apartheid South Africa will be used as a context for a domestic engagement of a different kind – one in which black African maids in starched white aprons and headscarfs worked silently as the best of white goods were promoted as doing.<sup>2</sup> This situation flew in the face of emerging modernist tendencies. It created the unresolved tension between the white madam, the black maid and white-boxed appliance.<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of this summary the paper uses design history to reconstruct the entrance and suspension of modernity in a developing economy. Race, place

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the domestic appliance has been written and rewritten by design historians who have approached its evolution variously within gender, technology and domesticity. This narrative has formed a major part of the history of modernism, but it remains a modernism, which is largely a "trans-Atlantic phenomenon" (Norbert Elias, in Dennis Smith, *Norbert Elias & Modern Social Theory*, (London: Sage, 2001), 3. Excellent sources on this topic include the early writing of Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Industrial Revolution in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century," *Technology and Culture*, 17 (1976) : 1-16; Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750-1980*, (London: Methuen, 1986). Penny Sparke, *Electrical Appliances*, (London: Unwin, 1987) and Sparke's appraisal of modernism in female fashioning of the interior, see: Penny Sparke, *As long as it's pink: the sexual politics of taste*, (London: Pandora, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Marion Arnold explains that the uniform was adapted from the English model, which had an emphasis upon white, stressing "cleanliness and, metaphorically, respectability" also saying that "Uniforms categorise and stereotype people, denying them personal identities and conferring group characteristics determined by those who make the classifications". See Marion Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa*, (New York: St. Martins, 1996), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Jaclyn Cock's seminal work, *Maids and Madams: a study in the politics of exploitation* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980) is an indispensable source for this research. Nothing close to Cock's work has been attempted since her surveys in the 1970s. A post-Apartheid parody of the relationship between white maid and black madam is evident in the popular comic series "Madam and Eve" published in *The Mail and Guardian* newspaper in South Africa in addition to 12 other publications, see: <http://www.madamandeve.co.za> In these comics it is the maid, Eve who is more conversant with appliances than the madam who is portrayed as lazy and stupid.

and power are wrought into the patriarchal capitalist machine of public and private control. In this context, electricity is a tool of segregation and its 'language' is encoded into the appliances so that they remain objects of white literacy. Metaphors generated from the *invisibility* of power take the paper out of South African design history into a global design theory.

The paper will acknowledge the dual roles of design history and design theory with the former reassessing the past and the latter engaging the present in order to map the future. However the conclusion of this paper refutes the necessity for these disciplines to remain discrete. The tools of design history are interpretative and historiographic yet increasingly they combine aspects of cultural and critical studies.<sup>4</sup>

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May 1943

At about ten o'clock that evening, we saw before us, glinting in the distance, a maze of lights that seemed to stretch in all directions. Electricity, to me, had always been a novelty and a luxury, and here was a vast landscape of electricity, a city of light. I was terribly excited to see the city I had been hearing about since I was a child. Johannesburg had always been depicted as a city of dreams, a place where one could transform oneself from a poor peasant into a wealthy sophisticate, a city of danger and of opportunity. ... It was eGoli, the city of gold, where I would soon make my home.<sup>5</sup>

Two worlds co-existed side by side, one black, one white, one in darkness, one in light. Outside of the circle of light were sprawling masses of slums that were kept in the shadows for another four decades. It was in these perimeters

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<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Buckley noted that design history has been taken up by researchers in cultural studies, which has resulted in an opening up of the discipline of design history, rather than "attempting to define [the] field of research ever more narrowly": Cheryl Buckley, "History, theory, and gender: researching women's relationship to the history of design." Paper presented as part of the symposium Design Plus Research, Politecnico di Milano, in Milan, 18-20 May 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, (London: Abacus, 1995), 69.

that black people of South Africa lived in order to provide cheap labour in the city of whiteness.<sup>6</sup> George Bernard Shaw broadcast the following message over the radio in 1932 in Cape Town:

One of the first things I noticed when I landed was that I was immediately dependent on the services of men and women who are not of my own colour. I felt I was in a slave state, and that, too, the very worst sort of slave state. I mean the sort in which the slaves are not owned by masters responsible for their welfare, nor protected by stringent laws from ill-treatment, but one in which they are nominally like white people, and can be thrown into the streets to starve, without pensions, or public relief when nobody happens to need their services, or when they are old and are displaced by the young.<sup>7</sup>

A large number of these workers were women who rose at 4am in the darkness to travel into the city by foot, bus and train so that the white middle class household could have early morning tea on time. The kettle, which with a turn of the switch set the swift boiling process in action, is one example of white goods in a white world. What the kettle did not do was to pour the tea, put it onto a tray and take it into the master bedroom. The black maid performed this, just as invisibly, efficiently and silently as the electricity.

In the United Kingdom the situation was different and servants were no longer in plentiful supply after the First World War. Electricity was used to promote the use of domestic appliances and substitute the servants.

Electricity ... makes a most *valuable servant* when put to do *useful work*. In its capacity as a servant, it is always at hand; *always willing* to do its allotted task and do it perfectly *silently*, swiftly and without mess; never wants a day off, never answers back, is never laid up, never asks for a

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<sup>6</sup> Until the mid 1990s domestic work in South Africa was the most silent exploitation of labour in South Africa. Some of the domestic workers that Jacklyn Cock interviewed for *Maids and Madams: a study in the politics of exploitation*, in the 1970s had been working for many decades and recounted early experiences that are relevant to the pre-Apartheid focus in this first section of the paper.

<sup>7</sup> George Bernard Shaw, excerpt from a radio South Africa broadcast, 1932, in Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: a study in the politics of exploitation*, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980), 26.

resit; in fact it is often willing to work for less money; never gives notice and does not mind working overtime; it has no prejudices and is prepared to undertake any duties for which it is adapted; it costs nothing when it is not actually doing useful work. Such are the merits of the housewife's new ally ... .<sup>8</sup>

The modernist utopia of rationalised and standardised efficiency operated on two levels in white South African domesticity. The electrical appliance was only useful in so far as the black maid could operate it. Therefore electricity was only desirable for services and benefits beyond the ability of black servants. Jacklyn Cock stated that the white women she interviewed said that they did not let their black domestic servants use the electrical appliances "... in case they broke them".<sup>9</sup> The inclination not to trust domestic servants with electrical appliances was echoed in the customary reference by whites to their black maids as the "kaffir-matic" and as such these maids were mechanised into anonymous appliances.<sup>10</sup>

Electricity in South Africa was laid on in cities in the mid 1930s. The *Electricity Supply Commission* known as ESCOM was part of the Union government's initiative towards state controlled enterprises.<sup>11</sup> South African segregation and education laws prevented black people from learning about or having access to electricity and its benefits long before the official Apartheid government of

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<sup>8</sup> M. Lancaster, *Manual of Electricity in the Service of the Home*, (London, 1914), 8 in Adrian Forty, *The Electric Home*, Unit 20 Open University Arts: a third level course in the History of architecture and design 1890-1939, (London: Open University Press, 1975), 41.

<sup>9</sup> Personal email correspondence from Jacklyn Cock, 11 April, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Personal experience while living in South Africa during Apartheid.

<sup>11</sup> Other similar corporations were ISCOR (*Iron and Steel Corporation*) and SASOL (*an oil from coal enterprise*). Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders, *South Africa a modern history*, (Macmillan: London, 2000), 623.

1948.<sup>12</sup> The relative impact of electrical power in South Africa signified industrialism and modernity, however the state preferred to maintain residual feudal power in which the displaced majority worked for the privileged minority. This resulted in a perverted scenario, a convoluted metaphor of power placing the South African experience simultaneously at the contradictory conjunction of feudalism and industrialism.

Within the Western domestic frame white goods have gone on to signify democratic choice brought about by electricity, but this development was neutered in the South African experience as the new appliance was seen as undercutting the hierarchical relationship of madam and master. The power that electricity provided the appliance with to wash the clothes was an anomaly because it required the involvement/supervision of the white madam, compromising her status.

In this picture of domesticity, it is the refrigerator that stands alone as a manifestation of white authority in the form of white goods because it demanded little intervention from the madam. It held the most precious of all commodities in Africa: food. Therefore owning a refrigerator was more than a status symbol of modernity; it was an icon that reinforced the material and acquisitive dominance of the white elite. Here in one place, neatly arranged in a white box, was the source of nourishment and pleasure for the family.

Sandy Isenstadt draws our attention to the refrigerator as a “vision of plenty” in America in the 1950s. She refers to the refrigerator’s central position in the

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<sup>12</sup> For a useful appraisal of pre-Apartheid segregation laws, see: Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: conquest, segregation and apartheid*, (Blackwell: Oxford, 1994).

home and aligning it to the woman, she emphasises the refrigerator as satisfying desires and maintaining the health of the family. In South Africa this white box displaced the black domestic servant because it precluded long hours of drying, bottling and preserving perishable food.<sup>13</sup>

Bowden and Offer write "... the primary attractions of electricity turned out to be a superior quality of illumination, and access to the broadcast recreation of radio".<sup>14</sup> While these authors are referring to England, this is also true of the South African situation and the deliberate gendering of domestic appliances relegated them to the less essential goods on the shopping list of patriarchy. In South Africa the preference for leisure appliances during this period is evident by the number and frequency of advertisements for transistor radios as opposed to electrical appliances in *The Cape Argus* newspaper of the period from 1920 to 1940.<sup>15</sup>

Leisure at home was the province of the man in South Africa. Following entrenched gender role stereotypes of women's work being centred in the home and men's work outside of it, the presence of a maid servant did not free the white wife from her obligation to ensure that all ran smoothly for the husband. Comfort in this sense was physical, economic and patriarchal in its orientation and the responsibility to provide it rested with the madam of the

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<sup>13</sup> Sandy Isenstadt, "Visions of Plenty: Refrigerators in America around 1950," *Journal of Design History* 11 no.4 (1998) : 311-321.

<sup>14</sup> Sue Bowden and Alner Offer, "The Technological Revolution that Never Was: Gender, Class and the Diffusion of Household Appliances in Interwar England", in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical perspective*, eds. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (London: University of Californian Press, 1999), 244-274.

<sup>15</sup> Newspaper (microfiche) survey research undertaken by the author at the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town. The frequency of advertisements for electrical domestic appliances in the same newspaper during the same time frame is markedly lower.

house. Tomás Maldonado writes "... in its most hidden recesses, comfort is a scheme for social control ...[and] ... beyond a certain threshold, can be transformed ... into the sources of new hardships and sufferings. In short comfort can flow into a negation of comfort".<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the largely symbolic figure of the white South African housewife, was both isolated and alienated in her own home and risked a loss of respect from both husband and servants. The home, as Phil Goodall writes, "... is the primary site of subordination ... the political heartland".<sup>17</sup> Housework was not glamourised in South Africa as was the case in the U.K. and America, the South African housewife who did not leave the home to work in another profession was suspended in a strangely pre-modern world.

The South African white domestic environment presents a picture of deep ambiguous pathos. Housework in South Africa was not only women's work but 'black women's work'. The black woman who arose before dawn to perform the daily tasks of cooking, cleaning, serving and caring for the white family was separated from her own family and could not even use her own name.<sup>18</sup> In South Africa, where patriarchy was entrenched by years of religious fundamentalism on the part of the white Afrikaner culture and years

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<sup>16</sup> Tomás Maldonado, "The idea of comfort," in *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*, eds. Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Cambridge: Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 248,249. Having pointed out the negatives of comfort, Maldonado warns against simplistic reductionism, which runs the risks of repudiating comfort and ignoring its "...substantial advantage to the daily life of humanity".

<sup>17</sup> Phil Goodall, "Design and Gender," *Block 9* (1983) : 50.

<sup>18</sup> Jane Barrett et al., eds., *South African Women on the Move*, (Sydney: Pluto, 1985). Barrett uses a case study of "Joanna Masilela" to reveal the callous disregard that white South African madams had for their African maids' children and families. In Jacklyn Cock's words the domestic worker's enforced separation from her own children "is uniquely vicious" given the central matriarchal role of the mother in African families; Cock extrapolates on this "role dispossession ... of maids and mothers". Cock, 52, 60, 61.

of elitist colonialism on the part of the white English culture, gender inequalities were exacerbated by racism.<sup>19</sup>

The triangle of power and tension that existed between the master, madam and maid was fraught with the double victimisation of both the maid and the madam. The white woman was in the pivotal point between maid and master. She was both suppressed and suppressor. Black women sustained white dominance in the domestic sphere; black males sustained white dominance in the public sphere. Unfortunately subsequently white Western feminist doctrine saw little difference between racial and sexual servitude in the context of domestic unpaid labour. In view of recent writing, the work of the African American feminist, bell hooks can be applied to the South African situation:

White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor and oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people.<sup>20</sup>

The invisibility of both electrical and black labour power in the South African situation makes the above even more compelling in the play of absent-presence.

The utopian home conjures up images of voice activated or silently programmed domestic appliances. However, this dematerialisation of the power source had already occurred in South Africa with the black maid acting

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<sup>19</sup>For personal accounts of the hypocrisy of the white elite in Johannesburg during the 1930s and 1940s see Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for your Comfort*, (London: Collins, 1956), 62.

<sup>20</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 15. Note that bell hooks spells her name in lower case.

as the virtual press button appliance. Black labour did not require that umbilical attachment to the power grid.

In terms of the language of power there is currently a disappearance of conventional political power as it merges discretely into the mediatised and the corporate. In this sense electrical power and political power have mutated into a global matrix.

With the move out of an object based design history, domestic design no longer has a specifically functionalist trajectory. In this instance it is the role of design theory to ascertain implications of an ostensible collapse of progress. One of the bases of postmodernism is that progress is a myth.<sup>21</sup> The end of ideology is a condition of the postmodern and historically, the appliance can be seen as an ideological object – a symbol of racial and economic superiority in South Africa as well as of women's oppression. From the point of view of design history, the appliance was utopian and progressive (modernist). Appliances signified the final conquest of nature by culture sired as they were from turbines generating energy at the heart of the industrial machine. But in the new age of electronic nature, design is assimilated via a systems based connectivity that bridges previous divisions of nature/culture and production/consumption.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas McEvelly critiques the Hegelian view of progress being an onward and upward development towards ever greater fulfilment. See Thomas McEvelly, "History, Quality, Globalism", *Kunst Museum Journal*, 3 no 2 (1991): 2,3.

How does this relate to the domestic environment? A world that is both over designed and simultaneously controlled by abstract electronics is not representative of the majority. Design theory needs to philosophically plan for a more humane world and domestic environments that are built for sustainability rather than power. Victor Papanek and others have written extensively about a design that gives life rather than one that destroys life.<sup>22</sup> These 'green' technologies (think global, act local) threaten the monopolies of conventional energy cartels as can be seen in the lack of support for Kyoto by American and Australian governments.

Therefore to take up the title of this paper: "Power to the people" and move towards a conclusion, let us say that: Once upon a time there was a republic of design, and that was modernism. In late modernity the sign, which became the media, superseded the commodity; the new sign is the superstructure that floats free of the old. Now in late postmodernity, power is no longer a matter of being in control of the industrial base; it is a matter of being in control of the *code*. Power is an intangible, caught increasingly in the hands of media and energy cartels with more and more financial demands being made to consumers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: human ecology and social change*, (New York: Pantheon, 1972) and *The Green Imperative: Ecology and Ethics in Design and Architecture*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> The cartels are connected to government imperatives such as American oil imperialism and media support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 against the majority of public opinion. Useful sources on the topic of consumerism include Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) and Miller, Daniel, ed. *Acknowledging Consumption*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

In 1995 Marzano, senior director of *Phillips* at the time complained about the term “consumer” and called for a return to “people”, saying “We have gained a great deal of freedom but have lost important human qualities”.<sup>24</sup> Referring to the slums in Papua New Guinea, Papanek writes:

The high level of social happiness that exists in these slums often surprises visitors. They are medically unhealthy and poverty is great, yet their inhabitants have solved many social and urban problems. There is no loneliness for the old, no lack of supervision for children.<sup>25</sup>

Papanek’s main point in the essay is that design and technology do not necessarily enhance life’s fulfilment. Moving between the metaphors of technological power and personal/political power: real power (empowerment) exists in harmony and unity. Michel Foucault writes that power is about denial, that it is the authority to say no.<sup>26</sup> Adopting this stance, power is an artificial exterior force imposed upon matter/life - and it is precisely the *force* of this power that weakens it.

With this in mind, design theory can learn from design history because design history provides us with hindsight regarding the effects of living both with and without what used be called “mod-cons”. There is no doubt that domestic appliances changed the nature of domestic labour in the modern West but *design*, at the heart of the appliance revolution succeeded quantitatively and failed qualitatively. Even anecdotal evidence will tell us that the quality of life

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<sup>24</sup> M. Dallal, “From Humanware to Hardware,” *The International Design Magazine*, January/February (1995) : 82.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Papanek, “The future isn’t what it used to be”, in *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*, eds. Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, (London: Harvester Press, 1980), 139. Having said this Foucault warns against reductionism in the critique of power especially when linking the “procedures of power” to the laws of prohibition (ibid.).

has not been predominantly determined by materialism. In the case of South Africa, large sectors of black society continued to be deprived of political and electrical power throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Black townships that mimicked Western suburban sprawl had little or none of the commodity benefits of the other. In the light of South Africa's ten-year anniversary of freedom from Apartheid rule, it is possible to argue that this relative deprivation has not made them any poorer.

The South African indigenous Africans' deep sense of culture sustained them in the face of prolonged oppression and material deprivation. A reason for this is precisely because their quality of life has not been not design oriented, that is to say in the consumerist sense of design. Allister Sparks recently stated that even though Apartheid was considerably more horrendous than the inequalities and oppression in other societies, the change over of power from white to black has occurred with relative harmony given the enormity of the problems to be resolved. This relative success stands in sharp contrast to the social divisions that still exist in materially wealthy societies of the Middle East and Eastern Europe.<sup>27</sup>

A claim of this paper is that black indigenous Africans were kept in darkness and slavery. In servility they performed tasks for white madams and masters that was the province of electrical power in other countries. Trans-Atlantic modernity had witnessed the influx of electrical domestic appliances as a

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<sup>27</sup> Allister Sparks is a renowned South African journalist and writer whose publications include *Tomorrow is Another Country: the inside story of South Africa's road to change*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and *The Mind of South Africa*, (Heinemann, 1990). This reference is taken from a radio interview broadcast on Australian *Radio National*, 16 April 2004.

solution to the shortage of servants while South Africa continued to live in a “feudal-industrialism”. Both social contexts were dominated by a patriarchal ideology, the fundamentals of which were apparent in the domestic sphere - in South Africa the home as site of conflict and oppression for women became the site of comfort and leisure for men. In the West comfort was commoditised into appliances that disguised the dialectics of gender politics.

Even though we recognise the ostensible dialectic between design history and design theory, as a result of how history has constructed the paper, we believe a more coherent and holistic approach would be to consider these two areas in the context of design philosophy. In this context futuristic projections of a purely technocratic kind pale in the light of a humanist approach to the needs and requirements of civilised societies.