

# 1

## The interwar house: ideal homes and domestic design

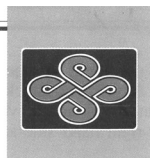
### Number 17 Rosamund Road, Wolvercote, Oxford

*A 1930's three bedroom semi detached home in need of modernisation on the western side of this popular road.*

*\* Entrance Hall \* Sitting Room \* Dining Room \* Kitchen \* Bathroom \* Three Bedrooms \* Gardens \*<sup>1</sup>*

We arrived at number 17 Rosamund Road, Lower Wolvercote, a village on the edge of Oxford's Port Meadow, on our bicycles on a sunny day in May 1995 (Figure 1.1). We were surprised to be there as we had previously ruled the area out as too expensive. We were newly married and house-sitting in Oxford, having moved there from London where we knew we had no chance of buying a house. My husband James had a junior lecturer post at the University of Oxford, and I was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Royal Holloway University of London. We may have had middle-class professional jobs but we were on modest salaries and still recovering from the financial effects of years of full-time postgraduate study. The house was just within our budget and ticked the box of 'needing modernisation'.

James clutched the estate agent's details. 'What do you think?', he said to me. The house had a pitched roof with a central chimney stack. The façade was rendered and the only decoration was a moulded diamond above the front door. The front door itself was the original wooden one with six panes of glass occupying its top third. There was a large double bay with the original metal Crittall windows with their distinctive small rectangular panes, which appeared slightly at odds with the tall narrow window to the left of the front door, which had a more 'modernistic' look. The windows and door had not been replaced with uPVC I noted with relief. 'Well, the unpainted render makes it look a bit gloomy and I would have preferred it to look a bit more "modernistic" like the houses in Botley,



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### 1.1

Leaflet by Chancellors Estate Agents advertising 17 Rosamund Rd, Wolvercote, Oxfordshire, 1995

but I like the diamond above the front door and it's got its original Crittall windows. I guess it's sort of cottagey Arts and Crafts. I like the double bay', I said. The garden gate was rusting and lopsided and the surprisingly big front garden (a depth of twenty-six feet (7.9 m), according to the estate agent's details) consisted of a tangle of bindweed and brambles. We made our way up the path, James opened the front door and I gasped.

*Entrance Hall: with stairs off, two understairs [sic] cupboards, gas fire.* I felt like a time traveller. The first thing we saw, directly opposite the front door, was the staircase, fitted with a faded and heavily worn stair runner patterned with geometrics and florals, held in place by dirty, copper-coloured stair clips. To the right, the floor of the narrow hallway was covered in grubby linoleum in more geometrics and florals in a palette of turquoise, orange and brown. The hall was lit by a mottled orange and white alabaster bowl suspended from the ceiling on three chains, filled with the customary dead flies. Immediately to the right in the hall was a door, original I noted (rectangular panel at the top, with a horizontal band underneath and then vertical panels), that opened into the front room.

*Sitting Room: 12' × 11' [3.6 × 3.3 m] into alcoves and bay window to front, picture rail, central tiled fireplace.* The front room was pale green below the picture rail, with yellowing white paintwork above (Plate 1). The ceiling was thick with cobwebs. Each wall was edged with narrow cream and brown textured border paper to give a half-frame effect. On the party wall sat a stepped 'Devon' tiled fireplace in mottled beige tiles with powder blue tiles in the top corners forming a diamond shape.<sup>2</sup> A compact, brown, leatherette three-piece suite in a style that combined 'modernistic' curves with 'Jacobethan' studs took up most of the available floor space, even though its proportions were very small.<sup>3</sup> It consisted of a two-seater sofa and 'his' (with a winged back) and 'hers' armchairs. The little area of floor we could see was covered with unfitted linoleum and the foot or so of floorboards that showed around the edges were stained dark brown. Another alabaster bowl hung in the centre of the room. The room was tiny but it was lovely and bright because of its bay window.

Heading back into the hall, there was a door to the left under the stairs. I opened it and found a rudimentary larder with a small, high, square window, through which the sun streamed, with a stone slab underneath. Straight ahead at the end of the hall was another door, which I assumed led into the kitchen. Opening it we found the bathroom.

*Bathroom: With bath and wc [sic].* Immediately to the left was a toilet with a high cistern. Straight ahead was a stained and alarmingly short roll-top bath with peculiar 'globe' taps with spouts directly under the handles rather than in the customary 'h'-shaped bend. There was more lino on the floor. Only later did we realise that there was no washbasin in the bathroom.

*Dining Room: 12' × 9'6 [3.6 × 2.8 m] into alcoves, central tiled fireplace, picture rail, television aerial point.* At the bottom of the hall to the right was

another door, leading into the dining room. Crammed into this room on the right was a sideboard that combined bulbous ‘Jacobethan’ legs and carved ‘modernistic’ details; opposite it was a small, green, leatherette two-seater sofa. On the left-hand wall there was a folding gate-leg table and chairs. The right-hand wall featured another tiled fireplace in beige, plainer than the one in the front room. Behind the sofa on the far wall a window overlooked the long rear garden. To the left of it was another door. To get to it, we had to walk around the table and squeeze through the gap between it and the sofa.

*Kitchen: 8’8 × 8’ [2.6 × 2.4 m]. With sink unit, gas point, side door outside.* We entered through the door into a tiny square kitchen (Plate 2). The walls were covered in dirty, cream, peeling eggshell paint and thick with grease. Underneath the window on the centre of the far wall that looked out on to the garden was a large, deep, porcelain ‘Belfast’ sink. Either side of it was a narrow, enamelled, metal-topped table. There were some rudimentary shelves mounted on the dividing wall. On the right-hand wall was an old gas cooker. Perhaps the left-hand wall had once had a dresser or a kitchen cabinet against it?

A rotting back door on the left opened out to the side path and there was a ‘side store’ built into the external wall of the house, originally intended for storing coal. At the end of the path a gate opened into a long, narrow garden ‘with a depth of approximately 70 [feet] [21 m]’, which, the estate agent’s details noted, ‘is currently overgrown’.<sup>4</sup> It was choked with weeds and vicious brambles that pushed at the back wall of the house. On the left was what looked like the original waist-height wire fence dividing the garden from the house next door, and on the right a decrepit wooden fence that separated the garden from the one belonging to the adjoining semi. We retraced our steps through the garden and the ground floor of the house and headed upstairs.

*Landing: With access to roof space.* Off the landing, we found three bedrooms. Like downstairs, all the rooms had unfitted lino. The two larger bedrooms still had their original furniture.

*Bedroom 1: 14’10 × 9’ [4.5 × 2.7 m] into alcoves plus bay window to front, central tiled fireplace, picture rail.* We went first into the master bedroom, the largest room in the house, situated at the front. There was a small, pretty double bed with a wooden headboard decorated with carved stylised flowers. A Queen Anne style dressing table with bowed cabriole legs sat in the front bay. The right-hand side of the bedroom extended over the staircase, giving room for a wardrobe. There was more space for furniture in the alcoves on either side of the fireplace. The fireplace consisted of a cast iron insert in an Art Nouveau style with elongated stylised flowers, more typical of the design of twenty years before the house was built. I wondered if this was leftover builders’ stock, or did fireplaces keep being produced in this style because they were popular?

*Bedroom 2: 10'11 × 10'2 [3.3 × 3.1 m] into alcoves, central fireplace, picture rail.* Moving into the second bedroom at the rear of the house, we found a smaller, metal fireplace insert with geometric chequered decoration. It had a portcullis-patterned, solid grid designed for a gas supply rather than an opening.

*Bedroom 3: 7'2 × 6'7 [2.2 × 2m]. With cupboard housing hot water cylinder in one corner.* Also at the rear of the house was a tiny box room. Suitable for a baby, I noted with great longing. The airing cupboard dominated the space. There and then I decided that it would have to go.

I was totally smitten with the house. As a former curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, I pictured it as a series of period rooms that I could restore. Plus, over the last five years I had been immersed in the archives of the 1920s and 1930s Ideal Home exhibitions, along with trade catalogues, household advice manuals, memoirs, novels and films of the period for my recently completed PhD research.<sup>5</sup> Like the heroines of the 'middlebrow' domestic novels that I had read, I was newly married, seriously broody and keen to set up home.<sup>6</sup>

I knew from the estate agent's details that the house was built in 1934, which seemed an especially good omen as it was my favourite year of the Ideal Home Exhibition. My subsequent research revealed that it was built by the local builder Hinkins and Frewin.<sup>7</sup> The house was in one of three streets of speculatively built houses in Lower Wolvercote aimed at the better-paid workers of the Oxford University Press paper mill situated nearby. In its layout and compact dimensions, it was quite typical of the modest houses built in the interwar years. The downstairs bathroom saved money on plumbing. I later found out that the lean-to kitchen was a later addition. The third bedroom was very small. Such modest houses, which sprang up in increasing numbers when mortgage conditions became more favourable after 1932, were intended to appeal to the better-off working classes and lower middle classes.<sup>8</sup> In the 1930s houses on Oxford's speculatively built estates typically sold for less than £525. Because of the demand from motor workers, they were priced higher than in most other parts of the country outside London, where prices averaged between £400 and £500.<sup>9</sup> For paper mill workers who could not stretch to home ownership but could afford the rent, the alternative was the red-brick, cottage-style, local authority houses in short terraces built in the 1930s in Upper Wolvercote, separated from Lower Wolvercote by the canal and railway line.

The estate agent told us that the house was a 'deceased estate'. Leaving the house, we stopped to chat to the next-door-but-one neighbours, who introduced themselves as Eddie and Nicky Clarke and their two sons James and Adam. Nicky told us that number 17 had been owned by her recently deceased grandmother, Cecilia Collett, who had lived into her nineties. Nicky's grandfather, a worker at the Wolvercote paper mill on a modest wage, had purchased the house when it was

newly built. He died in the 1960s, which explained why the house had remained largely unmodernised.

It turned out that the newly built number 17 Rosamund Road was purchased around 1934–35 by Vernon Victor Collett (1900–60) and his wife Cecilia (née Wells, 1897–1995). They moved into the house with their sons Basil, aged about 13, and Roy, aged about 10.<sup>10</sup> Between 1840 and 1918 Colletts made up 483 out of the 1,074 surnames found in the parish registers.<sup>11</sup> Both Vernon and Cecilia were from solid working-class backgrounds. Vernon was the third of six children of Percy Thomas Collett (1877–1948) and Gertrude Hall (1877–1967). The Colletts were a well-known family of stonemasons (an occupation carried out by Percy's father) but Percy had broken with the family tradition and worked as a dairyman. Gertrude had worked in domestic service before her marriage and was the daughter of an innkeeper. Cecilia was the fourth of five children of Harry Wells (1860–1910), a house builder (formerly a tallow boiler and labourer), and Sarah Ellen Cox (1859–1951), daughter of a journeyman plasterer. After Sarah was widowed in 1910 she worked as a charwoman to support her family.<sup>12</sup> Nicky told me that in purchasing number 17, Vernon Collett became the first person in his family to own his own home. The Colletts had only two children, in contrast to their own families of six and seven children. The small family of two or three children was typical of the respectable working and aspiring lower middle classes in the interwar years who sought to improve their standard of living, and was also dictated by the size and number of bedrooms in the typical interwar semi.<sup>13</sup>

That first visit to 17 Rosamund Road in 1995 was a catalyst to the research and thinking that would eventually become this book, which has been influenced profoundly by my personal experience of living in and renovating the house. I have also tried to keep my eyes open to the primary sources I have found, rather than trying to fit examples to predetermined theories of Modernism and modernity. It has also been motivated by the desire to tell the story of families like the Colletts, and indeed my own family, whose experience of first-time home ownership and its accompanying design and decoration affected their social standing and domestic practices and tastes.

### A note on sources

When I started to think about this book at the turn of the twenty-first century, three indispensable books on the English interwar suburban home were already in existence: first, the social historian Alan Jackson's *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900–39* (1991); secondly, architectural historians Paul Oliver, Ian Davis and Ian Bentley's defensive polemic *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and Its Enemies*

(1981); and thirdly, a book that accompanied the exhibition of the same name by the former Middlesex Polytechnic's Silver Studio Collection (now incorporated into Middlesex University's Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, also known as MoDA), *Little Palaces: The Suburban House in North London 1919–1939* (1987).<sup>14</sup> All three books were ground-breaking in their own ways and others have since been published, some of which are aimed at the owners of interwar houses who are planning to restore period details.<sup>15</sup> I am also particularly indebted to the careful work done by the economic historian Peter Scott on interwar home ownership in his book *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars* (2013).<sup>16</sup> However, I set out to redress the insufficient attention paid to gendered roles in the design and decoration of the home in all four books. In addition, I have also tried to give a more nuanced, complex and fluid reading of the role of design and taste in the formation of class identities.

This book draws on and extends my extensive doctoral research on the interwar Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibitions, which included unprecedented access to the *Daily Mail's* archives, and my earlier book *The Ideal Home through the Twentieth Century* (1997) and related articles and conference papers.<sup>17</sup> From the outset, I intended this book to take an interdisciplinary approach, reflecting and drawing upon recent debates in design history, visual culture, material culture studies, cultural history, cultural and historical geography and gender studies.

Although this book takes an interdisciplinary approach, it is grounded in the discipline of design history. As the design historian Judy Attfield argued, with the exception of Oliver et al.'s *Dunroamin*, the interwar semi has tended to be regarded as an object lesson in 'bad design', 'all the better to demonstrate the virtues of modern mass production exemplified by bent plywood and tubular steel furniture'.<sup>18</sup> In this book I challenge the dominance of Modernist aesthetics and values on writing on design, architecture and consumption by exploring popular conceptions of the 'modern' that accommodated past and present, nostalgia and modernity within their social and historical contexts. I also stress suburbanites' own agency as consumers, especially where they resisted and contested official notions of 'good' taste and design. Thus, this book reveals the shifting constituencies of taste and the social aspirations of interwar consumers as a commercial culture of homemaking became established.

A belief in the Modernist project in design has impacted on the discipline of design history.<sup>19</sup> The design historian Kjetil Fallan has gone so far as to suggest that 'the vast masses of modern material culture not conforming to the modernist ethos ... [are] excluded from our histories of design'.<sup>20</sup> There are some exceptions to this, such as Attfield's pioneering work on the traditional High Wycombe furniture manufacturer J. Clarke and Jonathan Woodham's recent essay on twentieth-century Tudor revivals, as

well as Fallan's own work on traditionalesque Scandinavian china.<sup>21</sup> I very much hope that this book will act as a further corrective.

I have also questioned my encounters with 'period' rooms in museums, nearly always seen through the lens of the invented retrospective term 'Art Deco'. As Mark Turner, the former curator of Middlesex University's Silver Studio Collection, said

In all the years I have spent looking at untouched interwar houses, I have never once seen an interior that was the riot of Art Deco Moderne which museums and television would have us believe was typical. Very few suburban residents could buy all their furniture new and immediately. Pieces were acquired as money allowed, and Modernism was thought to be more appropriate for easily replaceable wallpaper and mats.<sup>22</sup>

What we now call Art Deco was referred to at the time by terms such as 'Jazz Modern', 'Modernistic' or 'Moderne'. I have adopted the term 'Modernistic' in this book, for reasons I will discuss more fully in Chapter 3.

This book will contribute to recent literature by art and design historians on 'other' modernisms. For example, Christopher Reed argues that what he terms the 'amusing style' was a specific form of modernity formulated by the Bloomsbury set in their homes.<sup>23</sup> Michael Saler suggests that the Arts and Crafts movement inspired 'Medieval Modernism' in the design of the London Underground.<sup>24</sup> Paul Greenhalgh describes an 'English compromise' as a response to Modernism.<sup>25</sup> Alan Powers identifies a 'modern George VI style'.<sup>26</sup> Katherine Wilson describes 'liveable modernism' as a phenomenon related to the conditions of post-war America.<sup>27</sup>

However, these studies are few and far between, and design historians have lagged behind literary critics such as Nicola Humble, Alison Light, Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, who have exhaustively studied multiple modernisms, particularly focusing on what they term 'middle-brow' writers, outside of the canon of literary Modernism.<sup>28</sup> I want to take up especially Bridget Elliott's interdisciplinary work which calls for a more careful reading of 'definitional dissonances ... looking at the slippery nature of words like *modern*, *moderne*, *modernistic* and *modernist* which have been routinely evoked to make value judgments that have shaped the early twentieth-century architectural canon'.<sup>29</sup> Therefore this book calls for an understanding of multiple, nuanced and even conflicting forms of Modernism in architecture and design.

My approach stresses that the meaning of objects is not just formed at the site of production by designers but also throughout their lives by users. This is especially useful for understanding objects for which there is no known designer or readily identifiable style. Design historians, particularly those writing from a feminist viewpoint on women as consumers of design, have been influenced by a 'material culture' turn in design history, which has more recently also influenced art history.<sup>30</sup> Both disciplines have been



influenced by social anthropologists who investigate how objects embody sets of social relations and acquire values and symbolism through use, and help form personal identities.<sup>31</sup> They have been especially informed by the work of social anthropologist Daniel Miller and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, both of whom consider the social meanings that goods acquire, as well as their role in constructing social identities.<sup>32</sup>

This book is the result of a great deal of time spent poring over the surviving representations and actual material culture of the home in repositories such as Middlesex University's Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Getty Images (which incorporates the Hulton Picture Library, which supplied publications such as *Picture Post*), newspapers (especially the *Daily Mail*) and the publications and records of the Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibitions. But I have also scoured the unofficial spaces of antique shops and fairs, auctions, car boot fairs, charity shops and eBay. Thus, this book draws on exhibitions, advice manuals, trade literature, advertisements, magazines, novels, memoirs, photographs and films as well as actual examples of suburban architecture, interiors and material culture.

I am mindful of my non-textual visual and material sources as representations that acquire layered, multiple and, sometimes, contradictory meanings as they are constructed, circulated, mediated and consumed. I have tried to take into account the biographies of my sources as they travel through time and also their roles as what the anthropologist Janet Hoskins has called 'biographical objects'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as Bourdieu describes in his theory of 'habitus', individuals form their relationship to social groups through shared sets of attitudes and tastes.<sup>34</sup> So this book asks, how did the domestic design of the interwar suburban home in England both dictate and express the identities and sense of belonging of homeowners to wider communities and networks, including their hopes, desires and aspirations?

In writing this book I have been influenced by novels and memoirs, both interwar and contemporary, in which stories of houses and home-making activities feature prominently.<sup>35</sup> Several books present biographies of houses fused with personal memoir, notably Julie Myerson's *Home: The Story of Everyone Who Ever Lived in Our House* (2005), Rosa Ainley's *2 Ennerdale Drive: An Unauthorised Biography* (2011) and Margaret Forster's *My Life in Houses* (2014). Akiko Busch's *Geography of Home: Writings on Where We Live* (1999) and Ben Highmore's *The Great Indoors: At Home in the Modern British House* (2014) also deserve particular mention for their fusion of historical and sociological observations on the design and use of the twentieth-century home with the authors' own experiences.<sup>36</sup>

Encountering the material culture of the interwar home in more or less its original state at 17 Rosamund Road has proved a useful counterpoint to the ideals of advertisements, trade catalogues, promotional literature, consumer journalism and advice manuals, room sets from shops and exhibitions and show homes. My personal experience of this interwar home

also stands in for a more systematic trawl of diaries and memoirs to reconstruct the experience of living in the interwar home. This has been outside the remit of this project, which is first and foremost concentrated on the meanings of domestic design in terms of style.

### Snapshots

One of the biggest challenges in writing this book has been to try and capture the domestic design of the interwar home as it was inhabited and lived. I looked hard for photographs of lived interiors in modest semi-detached homes that had not been tidied up for the camera. Rare before the accessibility, availability and popularity of flash photography, the interwar amateur domestic interior snapshot has proved elusive. However, photographs of working-class rented homes from the interwar period, particularly slum dwellings, are more readily available. These continued a tradition of photography as a tool of social exploration that started with John Thomson in the 1870s and continued in the twentieth century with the post-First World War concern with slum clearance and the ethnography of Humphrey Spender's Mass Observation photographs.<sup>37</sup> A rich vein of interwar photographs reveal slum interiors located in older nineteenth- and eighteenth-century buildings.

One case in point is a photograph of a working-class home showing a family eating a meal in their kitchen/living room (Figure 1.2). Washing is strung over the table and there is a traditional range. Yet on the wall there is startling Modernistic wallpaper (see also Plate 14). I found many other examples where the modernity of some of the interior decoration is in striking contrast with items from an older period. Most often this takes the form of wallpaper in a riot of 'Jazz Modern' patterns, which could be purchased cheaply and was frequently papered over previous layers. Or sometimes it is a small item of ceramics, as in the example here of a vase depicting a camel, no doubt influenced by the Egyptomania craze that followed the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen.<sup>38</sup> These elements sit alongside traditional Windsor chairs and a piece of lace covering the mantelshelf over the range. A photograph like this suggests the evolution of an interior and a sense of 'making do'. It points to a very real human need for colour, pattern and modernity. It also goes some way to explaining why such wallpaper might have been seen in its time by designers and cultural critics as cheap, nasty and vulgar – in 'bad taste' and as an example of 'bad design'.

Relatively few people decorated their homes, or went out and bought brand new furniture and furnishings, all in one go. Moreover, few subscribed to one particular style, and fewer still to the tenets of Modernist 'good design' advocated by the design reformers of the interwar years. New homeowners who had struggled to scrape together the deposit for their houses and strained to make the monthly repayments often had



Alfred Smith and family photographed by Kurt Hutton for *Picture Post*, 11 March 1939

1.2

to make do with borrowed things. There was a thriving market in second-hand furniture, with some big furniture shops selling used furniture alongside brand new.<sup>39</sup> However, if they were given a choice and had the means, many opted for new furniture but in a reassuring traditional form. They did not value antique furniture for its patina, which for them was too associated with dirt and making do. Moreover, it was common for people to hang on to their furniture for years, whether for sentimental or purely pragmatic reasons.

Consequently, when I have been lucky enough to stumble upon unstaged amateur photographs, which are nearly always undated, they are also nearly always impossible to place within a design history chronology of style, progress and fashion. A photograph found in the Hulton Collection in the online Getty Images collection is a case in point (Figure 1.3). It appeals to me because of its seemingly casual quality: the informal pose of the child sitting on her mother's knee; the mother's sideways glance; the discarded toys on the floor; the clutter of ornaments on top of the display cabinet and the screen propped against its side. This is reinforced by the photo's skewed horizontal. However, this is a photo that resists further research. Simply captioned 'Mother and daughter in arm-chair 1922', I have been unable to find out the identity of the sitters or its original purpose.

For many like the Colletts at 17 Rosamund Road, the home they made in the interwar years stayed very much the same for subsequent years



1.3 Mother and daughter in armchair, 1922

once it was ‘done’. The modernity – or otherwise – of the interwar years stalled because of the Second World War. Years of rationing and austerity compelled people simply to ‘make do and mend’, as a government campaign advised. After the war, exhibitions such as ‘Britain Can Make It’ (1946) and the Festival of Britain (1951) promised the modernity of the ‘Contemporary Style’.<sup>40</sup> In the dream palace of the cinema, British audiences swooned over the new consumer world of goods depicted in American films. However, even if such luxuries as a fitted kitchen made of Formica were available, for the majority they remained firmly out of reach, prohibited by cost, lack of credit and the legacies of the ‘make do and mend’ of two world wars.

A photograph of a ‘sub-standard’ kitchen in London County Council’s archives is a case in point (Figure 1.4). At first glance it is a typical interwar kitchen, very reminiscent of the one at number 17, with its gas cooker, Belfast sink and enamelled table top. However, its date is 1962, not 1932 as it first appears. This serves as a reminder of the slippery nature of visual sources, particularly photographs. It is also a reminder of the changing nature of ideals: the dream kitchen of 1932 is the substandard kitchen of thirty years later.

A black-and-white snapshot of a sitting room that I found on eBay has especially intrigued me (Figure 1.5). The seller could tell me nothing about its provenance. The furniture and furnishings appear to date from the interwar period but the photo may have been taken much later. A ‘Devon’

tiled fireplace, most likely coloured in a mottled orange-brown and beige, is slightly off centre. Its geometric form and stylised diamond central decorative feature nod to the Modernistic. The compact three-piece suite – remember the small dimensions of 17 Rosamund Road – is quite traditional but a little bit Modernistic. The cushions, especially the patchwork one, look homemade, a reminder of the popularity of home crafts as part of the domestic repertoire of the ‘professional’ housewife advocated by women’s and homemaking magazines.<sup>41</sup> There is a hint of the Modernistic in the design of the china cabinet and a glimpse of a Queen Anne leg on



‘Sub-standard kitchen’, 43 Rigault Rd, London, 1962

1.4



1.5

Anonymous photograph of c. 1930s sitting room, purchased by the author on eBay

a side table (reproduction rather than original surely?). The mantelpiece holds family photographs of men in military uniform, recording proud moments and perhaps loved ones lost. The mounted horns that sit on top of the display cabinet are perhaps part of the detritus of Empire, washed up in the British home through military service, family networks and trade connections. But these are all speculations.

If only the armchairs in the photo were not empty then perhaps I could read something more about the interior from the appearance of its inhabitants, particularly their clothes. So, I will turn to another found photograph of a family listening to the wireless in England in the 1930s (Figure 1.6). Like many of the digitised images found in online picture libraries, there is no record of its provenance and original use. However, this example seems to be one of a sequence of photos showing a day in the life of the lady of the house, Mrs Beaver, as she goes about her business feeding her family and cleaning. The family here may be dressed for the camera: the father is in his suit, the son is in a jacket, the mother and the two daughters are in pretty dresses. All look smart and the epitome of middle-class respectability.

What I like so much about this photo is the fact that the furniture has been rearranged – there is another photo in the sequence of the same room with the furniture in different positions – to allow the family to listen to the radio. The photograph reveals a variety of different styles of furniture and furnishings. There is a ‘Devon’ tiled fireplace on which sits a barley twist candlestick. The furniture includes a heavy, dark brown cabinet under the window, a monolithic radiogram, a vaguely Jacobean armchair upholstered in geometric fabric and a curved armchair covered

in different geometric fabric. There are different but similar patterns in the fabrics on the piano stool and *pouffé*. Mottled wallpaper, likely to be beige, is decorated with borders of country cottage flowers. The carpet has a stylised geometric floral pattern. Mother's dress is covered in a Jacobean floral pattern, strikingly similar to the fabric that covers the loose cushion that she leans against on her chair. This is a lived interior, albeit one staged for the camera.

There is one photo that has intrigued me above all others. Systematically working my way through files of photographs in the *Daily Mail* picture library over twenty years ago, I found an image that stopped me in my tracks (Figure 1.7). A battered photograph depicted a lamp 'designed' in an 'antique' style. Its base appears to be made of a dark wood, in vaguely Regency style, topped with a fringed, chintz-patterned shade. The circular base of the lamp contains doors that open to reveal a gramophone player. A caption on the reverse revealed that it is a 'phono-lamp' exhibited at the 1923 Ideal Home Exhibition, describing it as a 'novelty light: artistic lamp, provider of music and decorative item'. The phono-lamp has obsessed me ever since. It is an object that appears to exist outside of existing histories of design. Perhaps the only place in the discourses of design that it might have been found is on one of the lantern slides produced by the Design and Industries Association to helpfully instruct the public through comparisons of 'good design' and 'bad design'.<sup>42</sup> It would not have been out of place at



The Beaver family listening to the wireless, 1937

1.6

**1.7**

The Phono-lamp, 1923

17 Rosamund Road but its exemplary status as ‘bad design’ has made it invisible to subsequent historians of design. How then might I make sense of it?

In his *Homes Sweet Homes* (1939), which satirised the interwar English obsession with homemaking, the cartoonist Osbert Lancaster commented on a noted tendency to produce multi-purpose objects:



It is significant that the Old English fondness for disguising everything as something else now attained the dimensions of a serious pathological affliction. Gramophones masquerade as cocktail cabinets; cocktail cabinets as book-cases; radios lurk in tea-caddies and bronze nudes burst asunder at the waist-line to reveal cigarette lighters; and nothing is what it seems.<sup>43</sup>

Lancaster's description seems to hint at what would have been called at the time a Modernistic style. The term Art Deco, which we would now use, does not adequately describe let alone explain the phono-lamp or its currency in interwar popular taste.

Perhaps the best way to understand the phono-lamp is through the networks of people and things in which it acted. The French sociologist Bruno Latour's notion of the dynamic networks of relationships between people and things – as 'actants' – is useful in understanding this.<sup>44</sup> As this book goes on to show, there was an active relationship between the small suburban semi, its decoration and furnishings, and its inhabitants. The phono-lamp was an object intended to make the most of the space of the tiny interwar home, built just at or even below the government's minimum standards for space to make it affordable for the emerging lower middle classes. The phono-lamp's multi-functionalism was an absolute essential in such very limited interiors, where every inch of space had to be made to act efficiently. Furthermore, the gramophone lamp implies an action of sitting in a comfy chair with a nice cup of tea, listening to music. Placed within networks of class aspirations, speculative housebuilding and commercial cultures of homemaking, such an object can be understood as a non-Modernist and even non-Modernistic but 'modern' thing, acting as part of a distinctly modern way of life. It is an exemplar of the material culture of suburban Modernism.

### The ideal home?

The focus of this book is on the meanings of the domestic design – architecture, interiors, decoration, furniture and furnishings – of the modest, semi-detached, privately owned, 'modern' suburban house in the interwar years.<sup>45</sup> These meanings were not solely made at the point of production but were formulated by homeowners, changing over time. Home ownership became established as an ideal in the interwar period and almost three million houses were built for private sale. This was the period during which the idea of Britain as a nation of homeowners became established. There was also a substantial local authority building campaign of over one million 'homes fit for heroes' that brought improved housing and a new way of suburban living to the 'respectable' working classes.<sup>46</sup> While some areas of the country, particularly those with traditional manufacturing industries, suffered badly from economic depression, those that hosted new industries in the south of England and better-off towns and cities in the Midlands and the north boomed.<sup>47</sup>

In the interwar period the idea of ‘home’ became increasingly important to the huge numbers of people like the Colletts, skilled manual workers and non-professional, non-manual workers. Seeking to better themselves, many such people moved up the social scale by entering white-collar professions and moving into houses in the new local authority and speculatively built suburbs. Together they constituted the aspirational lower middle classes. While many in this category earned little more, or sometimes even less, than their contemporaries in lower-status manual work, they had aspirations towards a modern way of living, one that was markedly different to that of their parents, and home ownership was part and parcel of this. The First World War and its aftermath threw traditional class boundaries into disarray and presented new opportunities for social advancement. While many of the established middle classes – dubbed the ‘New Poor’ – were hit hard in the economic climate following the war, the respectable working classes and lower middle class remade themselves as the ‘New Rich’ through their consumer aspirations, gleaned from their betters and from the new media such as the *Daily Mail* (launched in 1896) and its Ideal Home Exhibition (launched in 1908), magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Modern Home* (launched in 1922 and 1928 respectively), advertising and cinema.

Women took on the new identity of professional housewife, promulgated in the new women’s and homemaking magazines and household advice manuals, often having to make do without servants.<sup>48</sup> In this book I have made particular use of *Modern Home* magazine because of its direct address to the new, modern ways of life that emerged in the suburbs.<sup>49</sup> Its front covers depict couples engaged in homemaking activities such as choosing paint colours, shopping for furniture and doing the dishes. For example, November 1931’s cover depicts a woman seated in front of a scale model of an ‘ideal home’ (Plate 3). Beside it are scissors and paint, implying that she has made it herself. A man crouches with one arm around her shoulders, his hand clutching her arm. His other hand holds blueprint plans for the house, which she also holds. This is an image that may be read as the man exerting control over the design of the house, or it may be read as a joint act of homemaking and a vision of a new form of ‘companionate’ marriage.<sup>50</sup> This points to the slippery nature of evidence, particularly when it depicts ‘ideals’.

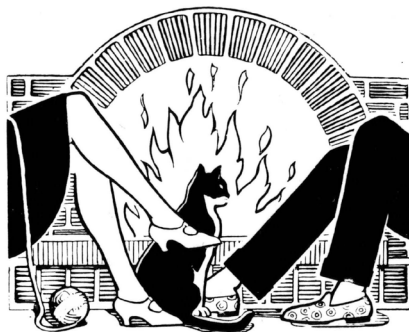
Women’s identities as mothers also changed in the interwar years. The desire for an increased standard of living, together with advice on birth control, meant that smaller families like that of the Colletts became more common.<sup>51</sup> The small, three-bedroom semi like 17 Rosamund Road was both a response to the ‘ideal’ family of four and their consumer aspirations, but also went on to shape both family size and the scaled-down, multi-purpose and ‘metamorphic’ furniture and other objects that occupied it.

A sense of 'home' was essential as a place of shelter for individual family units and the making of new communities. The meaning of home, after all, is not solely confined to shelter and well-being, but to emotional, spiritual and moral values, as well as nourishment.<sup>52</sup> Home is and was, as Davidoff and Hall have said, 'as much a social construct and a state of mind as a reality of bricks and mortar'.<sup>53</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century 'home' was also the nation at the heart of the British Empire. The words of the King – 'The foundations of the nation's greatness are laid in the homes of the people' – were used on the frontispiece of the Ideal Home Exhibition catalogue in 1928, accompanied by a graphic illustration of a cat sitting in front of a fireplace, where a man relaxed in slippers and a woman knitted, conjuring up an image of cosy, harmonious domesticity (Figure 1.8). The quotation was taken from a speech that King George V had made to the Convocation of York on 8 July 1910.<sup>54</sup> Questions of nationhood, patriotism and race were important in the early twentieth century, when Britain was struggling to maintain its economic and military position in the world. 'Home' was the site of production of the citizens of the future, as well as morality.<sup>55</sup> The King's speech fused home and Church in a conservative response to the uncertainties of modernity.

It is also worth noting that 'home' in an imperial context embraces the microscopic, in the form of the individual dwelling, and the macroscopic, as the 'mother country', looking outwards to the wider shores of the Empire. Thus, this book also looks at the impact of the further flung colonies and dominions on the British 'ideal home', as sources for raw materials and exotic objects as well as places from which the home is imagined and on which the home is mapped.

I first became fascinated with what was 'modern' in the discourses of the Ideal Home Exhibition and its catalogues and publications, its sponsor the *Daily Mail* and the trade catalogues and other ephemera produced by exhibitors. I argued that a specifically 'suburban modernity' emerged in the interwar years that combined new technologies with new forms of the past.<sup>56</sup> This could not be explained by a notion of art and design history, where Modernism and in particular the Modern Movement in design is defined by a very particular set of Bauhaus-derived dictums that are encapsulated in the phrase 'form follows function'. Even the practice of the discipline of design history itself is sometimes framed as a Modernist one of progress. In developing my research in this book, I focus particularly on the tensions between the longings for the past and the aspirations for the future displayed in interwar suburbia. Many of the objects and decorative schemes of the interwar home that I encountered could not be accounted for within the existing framework of design history. Suburban Modernism, I argue here, was dependent upon a mixture of symbols of progress, such as labour-saving appliances, and peculiarly English invented traditions, such as the Tudorbethan semi. The interwar

# Daily Mail IDEAL HOME EXHIBITION



**OLYMPIA • LONDON • W**  
**FEBRUARY 28 • • •**  
**MARCH 24 • 1928**

*"The foundations of the National  
Glory are set in the Homes of  
the People."*

*—KING GEORGE V.*

home was both a retreat from the outside world and a site of change and experimentation.

In the next chapter I discuss the growth of suburbia in the interwar years and the constituents of the 'suburban'. This is contextualised by a discussion of the emerging class identities of the 'New Poor', the established middle classes whose fortunes had been affected by the First World War, and the 'New Rich', comprised of those who had moved up the social scale to form the new lower middle classes. I also discuss the representation of the new home-centred identities of the professional housewife and suburban husband. I consider how these issues impacted the rise of home ownership, which the increased availability of cheap mortgages brought within the reach of new working- and lower-middle-class households. I end by discussing the use of the term 'suburban' as an insult, through the material culture of the parlour, the mantelpiece and the napkin ring.

The constituents of what it was to be 'modern' in the home through the idea of suburban Modernism are the focus of Chapter 3. I relate the condition of modernity and the practice of Modernism to the culture of suburbia. I examine the ways in which the architecture and design of the Modern Movement was interpreted by speculative builders, manufacturers and retailers in the form of what was termed 'Modernistic' by design critics and reformers. I show how critics in England damned popular suburban Modernistic taste as 'bad design', in opposition to Modernism's 'good design'. I discuss how homeowners engaged with and responded to modernisation through the choices they made in the decoration and furnishing of their homes. Finally, I discuss the emergence of 'metamorphic Modernism': multi-functional furniture and objects, like the phono-lamp discussed above, that responded to the compact interwar home.

The development of the 'Efficiency' style, which drew on debates about labour-saving in the home and the emergence of the middle-class professional housewife who had to do without servants, is the focus of Chapter 4. I also examine the points of view of architects, housing reformers, manufacturers and retailers and how they influenced or otherwise 'ordinary' housewives. The post-war 'servant problem' and the constraints of lower-middle-class incomes meant that the role of the housewife became professionalised. The discourses of exhibitions, magazines and advice manuals appealed to lower-middle-class housewives by presenting a vision of domestic progress that addressed housework as both work and leisure, and posited specifically modern gender identities. I focus on the design and equipment of the kitchen and examine the ways in which it appealed to suburbanites' aspirations for modern identities. The 'ideal home' was constructed as a site of change and experimentation, with the term 'labour-saving' signifying a suburban Modernism far removed from the dictums of the Modern Movement in architecture and design.

The role of nostalgia and tradition in the home is explored in Chapter 5. This was manifest in the fondness for an imagined Old England and the detritus of the British Empire, which I argue was an intrinsic component of the suburban vision of Modernism that interwar suburbia offered. The Tudor period held a particular appeal in interwar Britain. Speculative builders' Tudorbethan was the architectural style that most characterised interwar suburbia. There was also a fashion for antique, reproduction, cottage-style and 'Jacobethan' furniture and interiors. Cultural critics denigrated the popular taste for 'Old England' as 'sham' Tudor, 'Jerrybethan' or 'Stockbroker's Tudor'. Contrary to these critics, who dismissed the Tudorbethan as ersatz and backward looking, the Tudorbethan signified a coming together of nostalgia and a particularly suburban form of Modernism that allowed suburbanites to dwell in the past, while looking forward to the future. The chapter also considers the relationship between 'home' and Empire through the notion of imperial suburbs. Crafts produced by so-called 'peasant workers' were highly prized in Britain, as, for example, the rows of ebony elephants and the like that can still be found in many homes testify.

The interwar suburban home has not only influenced the architecture and design of subsequent housing but has also become an 'ideal'. Just why is it that the compact, three-bedroom, semi-detached suburban house with a pitched roof and bay windows still holds such popular appeal? Despite the fact that there are now several books available on the restoration of the interwar home, there is little sense, beyond a few vintage enthusiasts who live a vintage lifestyle, that interwar houses, beyond a few Art Deco or Modernist examples, are valued as period properties to be conserved and restored. Indeed, greater regard seems to be given to 'Mid-Century Modern' and Brutalist styles. The book ends by considering the modernisation of the interwar home. I look briefly at subsequent housebuilding and the expansion of suburbia, the rise of home ownership and the adoption and adaptation of interwar houses by their contemporary residents.

Suburbia and suburbanites have continued to be denigrated by sections of the intelligentsia and the architectural and design press. Home ownership is now out of reach for many who earn the present-day equivalent of the individuals I discuss in the chapters that follow, in which I investigate the period during which Britain became a nation of homeowners. Nevertheless, there are some parallels in our current age of austerity in the search for the authentic and the resurgence of craft or an interwar 'making do' spirit. To some extent, as I go on to show, the interwar suburban semi still epitomises the 'ideal home' and occupies a significant space in the popular imagination.