

**The Dissertation Committee for Katherine Feo Kelly certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:**

**Organizing the American  
Domestic Interior, 1978-2010**

**Committee:**

---

**Jeffrey L. Meikle, Supervisor**

---

**Janet Davis**

---

**Julia Mickenberg**

---

**Christopher Long**

---

**Kate Catterall**

**Organizing the American  
Domestic Interior, 1978-2010**

by

**Katherine Feo Kelly, B.A.; M.A.**

**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2013

## Acknowledgements

The first person to thank—at more length than I have space for here, but anyways I’ll try—is my supervisor, Jeffrey Meikle. I was really, really proud to be Jeff’s student and will always feel a sense of accomplishment for having studied with him at UT. As a mentor in my subject area, Jeff was able to challenge me, but also treat me as a peer and colleague, and I will always be thankful to him for providing me with an enviable intellectual legacy to be a part of. I’d like to extend my thanks to my entire committee, all of whom offered valuable feedback about the future of this project, as well as many concrete ways to make it stronger. For this, I sincerely thank UT professors Kate Catterall, Janet Davis, Julia Mickenberg, and Chris Long. I also owe a large debt of gratitude to two scholars who were not on my committee, but guided my work in truly important ways: Catherine Whalen’s commentary on an early iteration of the *Real Simple* chapter helped develop many of the sharper points found in this work; detailed feedback from Glenn Adamson, my former adviser at the V&A, was instrumental in reorganizing the structure of this work into a more cogent analysis.

A standing-ovation-level thanks goes to the professional organizers who allowed me to interview them for the final chapter of this work. Margaret Kelly, Catherine Murphy, Susan Hale, Jennifer Lava, Amy Von Andrian, Lorie Marrero, Barry Izsak, and Misty Rodriguez were all gracious and forthcoming in their interviews with me, and without their voices this project would be significantly less interesting. A big thank you goes out to them for letting me rest my work on their stories.

Two iterations of dissertation writing groups helped me get through the early, ugly stages of this project. The first includes Anne Helen Petersen and Rebecca Onion; after Annie graduated, Rebecca and I pulled Andi Gustavson in as a worthy replacement. Both groups offered the kindest possible help—they advised on content, style, and structure, but in a nice way, and often with snacks. A longtime friend, Becky D’orsogna, became my final writing partner as we both finished up in American Studies at UT. Not only did Becky provide great feedback on the work itself, but she also pulled me alongside her through the byzantine labyrinth of forms, checklists, and deadlines required by UT to graduate. Without her I might have finished writing, but I certainly would not have successfully received my degree or been wearing the appropriate graduation robes at commencement. The same goes for Ella Schwartz, the Graduate Administrator for the American Studies Department, who consistently helped me to navigate the path through graduate school and was always available to answer my frantic questions via g-chat, even when I knew she was probably busy.

Three friends listened to me for six years and deserve acknowledgment for their time and patience, if nothing else. Andi Gustavson was so reliably supportive, positive, and quick to help throughout graduate school that there’s probably no way to repay her, except she has to go through all of this next year, so I will certainly try. Dave Croke is a most durable and consistently delightful pal, and there is no replacing him. Finally, Katy Ansite, my best friend and left hand, deserves my thanks for making sure the rest of my life was still OK when this dissertation was not.

There is a sort of debt that you owe to your parents that you can't really put down on paper in any meaningful way, but the short of it is: thank you Ed and Maryann for reminding me of the intrinsic value of this degree, for putting it into real world context better than anyone else, and for being role models of hard work, intelligence, and compassion.

Most of all, I would like to thank my husband Kevin Kelly for jumping into this weird idea (grad school *and* a dissertation on organizing) with me at the start and soldiering through. Thank you for putting out all the fires, and for making our life work when I was sunk in deep. Your commentary is the best commentary, and I am a better person for it.

**Organizing the American  
Domestic Interior, 1978-2010**

Katherine Feo Kelly, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Jeffrey L. Meikle

Over the past thirty years, organization has become one of the most popular ways to spend time and money on the home in the U.S. In part, this popularity and its attendant fixation on simplicity and stillness is a reaction to historical circumstances of the late twentieth century, in which consumption and time seem to have “sped up” as a result of the postindustrial economy. Situating home organization within the fields of American Studies, Design History, and Material Culture studies, this dissertation examines the contemporary preoccupation with organizing the domestic interior through five case studies: reality television shows about messy homes, the retail vendor The Container Store, *Real Simple* magazine, self-help books on de-cluttering, and interviews with professional organizers. Although its rhetoric and aesthetics seem to mimic the principles of design modernism, home organization is highly postmodern in its adoption of neoliberal values of self-improvement and its participation in an aestheticized landscape of consumer culture. Each case study in this dissertation exposes a number of tensions at the heart of the trend: home organization is a lucrative industry that relies on anxiety around overconsumption to sell products, often depending on corporate branding

techniques that stress organization as an ongoing “lifestyle” of consumption; acknowledging gender inequity in domestic responsibility, home organization advice texts show women how to speed up, rather than delegate, housework, ultimately creating more work for women; de-cluttering manuals ask individuals to detach their sense of self-identity from their belongings, yet use the same principles to explain how editing objects results in the expression of one’s “true” self. Placing the discourse around clutter and order in the home within historical and cultural contexts, these case studies offer valuable insight into gender, middle-class culture, and the domestic interior at the turn of the twenty-first century.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
The Audience of Home Organization .....	10
A Short History of Storage and the Domestic Interior .....	23
Modernism, Postmodernism and Contemporary Home Organization .....	47
Chapter Descriptions .....	64
Chapter One: Messy-Home Television and the Cultural Pathology of Clutter .....	69
Messy-Home Shows and the “Entrepreneurial” Home .....	77
<i>Clean House</i> .....	85
Labeling the Messy home .....	93
<i>Hoarders</i> .....	100
Conclusion .....	117
Chapter Two: The Container Store and the Commodification of Home Organization .....	119
Consuming Modernism .....	124
The Container Store as Critique .....	133
Postindustrial Consumption .....	142
Lifestyle, Brands and Solutions in Perpetuity .....	154
Conclusion .....	168
Chapter Three: <i>Real Simple</i> and the Gendered Politics of Efficiency .....	170
The Demographics of Busy-ness .....	177
Selling Efficiency .....	191



Sped-up time .....	198
Designing Simplicity .....	215
Conclusion .....	231
Chapter Four: Self-Help Literature for Psychic De-cluttering .....	234
The Self-Help Genre and De-cluttering Expertise .....	241
De-cluttering: When Organization Fails .....	246
Step One: Over-identifying with Your Stuff .....	253
Step Two: The Agency of Things .....	257
Step Three: Mastering “Things” .....	266
What’s Left? Spirituality Fills the Void .....	270
De-cluttering Your Head .....	277
Conclusion .....	281
Chapter Five: The Professionalization of Organization .....	283
Organizing the Organizers .....	290
Skills .....	311
Designer, Consultant, Coach or Therapist? .....	329
Conclusion .....	340
Conclusion .....	343
Bibliography .....	352

## Introduction

*“What I know for sure: I don’t want to hold on to stuff that’s holding me back. We do this de-clutter issue every year for good reason. Clearing out the old and bringing in the new is a constant process. A metaphor for moving on, no matter how or where you live.” – Oprah*

The March 2012 issue of *O: The Oprah Magazine*, like the March 2011 and March 2010 issues before it, was themed “De-Clutter Your Life!: How to Tame Your Mess, Calm Your Mind, Lighten Your Load.” On the cover, Oprah, dressed in a pale-pink sweater and a crisp white shirt, sits inside an all pink-and-white closet—a stage set for the photo shoot, surely, but stocked with enough pink cashmere and white leather luxury goods to make you think, just for a moment, that if anyone has a color themed closet, it’s probably Oprah. Perched on a white ottoman, surrounded by an array of pink and white boxes, she beams at the camera and holds one hand in the air. The gesture is part bemused shrug, part welcome—because we’ve all been there, she seems to say—and although it defies all plausibility that your life and hers are remotely the same, it is easy enough to read the headline text (“Six Things I’m Finally Getting Rid of—Hallelujah!” – *Oprah*) and wonder what things you did not know you also need to be finally getting rid of.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, the Oprah approach, though not the subject of this dissertation, is the ideal window into contemporary home organization. The messages in the magazine speak to many of the themes brought up in home organization texts. Clutter is a negative influence because it keeps you from living your “best life” (the tag line of the magazine

---

<sup>1</sup> *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012.

and Oprah’s personal mantra). Clutter can build up in your finances, diet, relationships, career, and mind as easily as it can in your closet. Controlling clutter requires not just cleaning out your closet, but delving into “distinct habits and psychological hang-ups.”<sup>2</sup> There are various types of clutterers (“The Behind-Closed-Doors Clutterer,” “The Knowledge Clutterer,” “The Techie Clutterer,” “The Sentimental Clutterer,” “The Bargain Shopper/Coupon Clutterer”), who can be identified by “symptoms,” a lighthearted metaphor positioning clutter as a sickness we are all at risk of catching.<sup>3</sup> Finally, organization is never really complete—like Gayle King, Oprah’s best friend who receives a closet makeover from Oprah’s stylist, Adam Glassman, we learn organization is an ongoing process, requiring daily maintenance, “otherwise things will snowball.”<sup>4</sup> Beyond the theme of its content, the magazine contains other elements that mirror the home organizing industry, such as its reliance on newly minted experts: Peter Walsh, an organizer and author who has his own show on Oprah’s new network, *OWN*, offers “7 Secrets of a Master Organizer” to “make your spring cleaning easier than ever.”<sup>5</sup> Like other examples we will see in this dissertation, Oprah’s approach to her audience is to generate a sense of community among supposedly like-minded women, herself included, undifferentiated by privilege, race, or class, who share similar hurdles and goals because

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Walsh, “What Kind of Clutterer Are You?,” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012, 151.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Kogan, “Journey to the Center of Gayle’s Closet,” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Walsh, “7 Secrets of a Master Organizer,” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012, 75.

of their gender.<sup>6</sup> With the sense that all fans are her friends and peers, Oprah's advice feels down-to-earth, even when it is wildly unachievable—her editor's note, accompanied by another photo of the pink-and-white closet, reads, “tell me if this sounds familiar: you try to keep your coffee table clear, your cupboards organized, your closet from overflowing—but before you know it, they're cluttered, clogged, and stuffed to the gills. (Not familiar at all? We mess makers tip our hats to you!).”<sup>7</sup> Forgetting the likely presence of full-time staff, we are meant to believe that Oprah has the same problem keeping her house free of clutter as the rest of her middle-class audience. Finally, and most importantly, Oprah's narrative of self-improvement operates, like home organization, as an entirely inward-focused project. Although her own biography reflects the trauma of racism and institutional poverty, Oprah channels the ethos of new age spirituality, in which individual empowerment and self-transformation—not structural or economic forces—are the key to living one's “best life.”<sup>8</sup> Oprah's “thought-as-power cosmologies” have been situated as an expression of neoliberal economic restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s, in which narratives of self-improvement and personal responsibility evolve in response to shrunken public infrastructure, dwindling middle-class resources due to tax restructuring, and the application of market values to everyday life.<sup>9</sup> Although

---

<sup>6</sup> Nielson ratings via Aswini Anburajan, “Breaking Down Oprah's Numbers,” NBC News, *First Read*, December 7, 2007, [http://firstread.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2007/12/07/4425062-breaking-down-oprahs-numbers](http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2007/12/07/4425062-breaking-down-oprahs-numbers).

<sup>7</sup> Oprah Winfrey, “Editor's Note,” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Karlyn Crowley, *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 134.

<sup>9</sup> Janice Peck, “The Secret of Her Success: Oprah Winfrey and the Seductions of Self-Transformation,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 10.

a route to one's "best life" is articulated through a number of channels, such as diet, exercise, and positive thinking, the journey inevitably leads back to consumption as the primary means to participate in the Oprah lifestyle. Here, Oprah and home organizing share another important trait: both are big business, reliant on the consumption of lifestyle products in order to function. Over the last decade, Oprah's personal net worth has grown to \$2.7 billion; in 2009, \$5.9 billion in home organization products and \$6.8 billion storage products were sold in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

The overarching goal of this dissertation is to understand and interpret the messages and mechanisms of contemporary home organization. The trend to organize the home interior is enormously popular; it is almost impossible to find a retail venue or cultural outlet related to the home that does not in some way incorporate organization as a concern. Moving beyond the realm of everyday chore, home organization is now part of an entire "containment-industrial complex."<sup>11</sup> There are magazines dedicated to organization, television shows about organizing houses, books on becoming more organized, countless websites and blogs dedicated to organizing, and scores of products specifically designed to aid organization sold at a variety of price points. The popularity of home organization has also been accompanied by a healthy stream of media coverage, which itself creates a sort of echo chamber of interest in the topic. Books have even been written in backlash to the trend to organize—*A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* takes pointed

---

<sup>10</sup> For comparison, consumers spent \$592 million on home decor, \$2 billion on furniture, and \$12 billion on cooking and bakeware in 2009. International Housewares Association, *IHA: State of The Industry* (Rosemont, IL: International Housewares Association, 2009), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Wilson, "Thinking Inside the Box," *St. Petersburg Times (Florida)*, May 28, 1999, 1D.

aim at the faith in organized living, arguing that messiness in work, parenting, and the home fosters creativity and happiness.<sup>12</sup> Taking all of these disparate sources in aggregate, what can we make of the popular interest—and considerable cash—lavished on home organization?

Although home organization seems to be ever prevalent in popular discourse about the contemporary home, no sustained scholarly study on the topic has yet been produced. An article in the *Journal of Design History* in 2003 comes closest to such a task. Saulo B. Cwerner and Alan Metcalfe’s “Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World,” briefly compared popular DIY, home-making and lifestyle texts with domestic practices in the U.K. to highlight issues around materiality, spatiality and temporality of consumption in the contemporary British home.<sup>13</sup> This dissertation goes further than Cwerner and Metcalfe’s review of organization literature by looking at the entire scope of retail, self-help, magazines, television, and professional organizing to understand the cultural values attached to discourses on clutter and order, placing such discourse within the historical and cultural landscape of late-twentieth century America. Design historian Judy Attfield’s chapter on

---

<sup>12</sup> Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman, *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Cwerner and Metcalfe’s very helpful review of organization literature yields several similar findings to my own, namely that these discourses stress space, irrational consumer behaviors, and clutter’s relationship to physical well-being. My approach differs in its focus on de-cluttering, which emphasizes a harmful association between the self and objects that must be severed in order for shedding—and the subsequent psychological liberation—to occur. Furthermore, both authors explain their work exists entirely in the British context. Saulo B. Cwerner and Alan Metcalfe, “Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World,” *Journal Design History* 16, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 229–239.

containment in *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* also approaches the subject of clutter and organization in the home. Attfield considered objects of containment, the “embodiment of both clutter and order,” in the form of traditional domestic furniture, which have the ability to “reintegrate the increasingly fragmentary tangled texture of contemporary postmodern culture.”<sup>14</sup> Containment, she argued, need not only reflect the “coherence lent by the kind of unified design scheme governed by the principles of modernism,” but can instead operate “as an ecological system that manages to hold together opposing and contradictory symbolic orders of, for example, to maintain order and clutter, modernity and tradition, authenticity and ephemerality, practicality and fantasy.”<sup>15</sup> Attfield’s work invited further exploration on the topic, especially with regard to the materiality of clutter, and created a pathway for thinking about how organization can be reflective of both control and chaos.

Methodologically, this work tells a story about the contemporary American middle-class domestic environment through five unfolding case studies: an analysis of television shows that reflect and create popular anxiety around clutter; an account of a popular retail chain, The Container Store, and its relation to corporate branding and lifestyle consumption; an assessment of the design and content of the women’s shelter magazine *Real Simple*, which advises about time efficiency as well as ideal organization; a close-reading of self-help books on home de-cluttering that promise psychic, as well as physical, order; and a look into the world of professional organizing through interviews

---

<sup>14</sup> Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2000), 152.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 170–171.

with seven organizers (and one closet designer) in Austin, Texas. As I will demonstrate in my historical overview, advice literature is a powerful tool for getting at cultural perceptions of space; in this work, advice is considered quite broadly as the rhetoric produced by multiple facets of the home organization industry. The first four case studies offer some form of advice to consumers—magazines and books do this directly, but retail environments also offer messages about organization and the home through less direct methods, such as merchandise selection, design, and display. To this end, the methodology of the first four chapters is consistent; I looked to these case studies to understand the popular discourses around home organization by taking seriously the messages being conveyed by the sources, but also refracted these messages around relevant constructs, such as class, consumption, gender, and domesticity. The voices heard in these chapters are the public “voices” deliberately circulated in the media as part of a public relations effort. Such an approach requires an acknowledgment that other voices may be hard to hear—for instance, of the employees of The Container Store or the staff writers or producers of *Real Simple* and *Hoarders*. Indeed, a further study might seek to locate moments of institutional resistance within cultural production of home organization; the scope of this project, however, was to understand the messages about home organization being produced and circulated at the major venues of this popular trend. A place like The Container Store might have individuals speaking on its behalf, such as the founders, but the message is not taken as their personal opinion; rather, as they speak in a position of authority on behalf of the company, I consider their contribution another iteration of a self-consciously constructed institutional “voice”



broadcast in the popular media. The other voices largely missing in such an approach are those of the consumers of home organization, although web comments on realsimple.com provide a window into how readers of the magazine react to advice about efficiency. The interviews with professional organizers in the final case study define an alternative methodology, and as such provide the closest approximation of both missing demographics: organizers are also producers in the home organization industry, and so can explain how they negotiate the messages of the industry when working one-on-one with consumers; they also spend their time engaged in the processes of organization, and so can speak to the procedures and limitations of the practice from personal experience.

This dissertation places into context the diffuse and pervasive cultural feeling that has coalesced around the trend of home organization. As such, it is not a historical recording of the methods and products of storage in the home; a 2003 American Studies dissertation at Iowa State University, “A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955),” by Mary Anne Beecher, handled this subject quite deftly for the first half of the twentieth century and many of her insights are considered below.<sup>16</sup> Although my dissertation is not a design history of a single object or genre of objects, it does consider the allure of organization objects and the role they play in a cultural landscape of anxiety around overconsumption. By the same token, this dissertation does not attempt an anthropological or ethnological study of

---

<sup>16</sup> Beecher sought to redress the lack of scholarship on “behind-the-scenes” spaces like basements, attics, garages, sheds, cabinets and closets—those areas that “have not been documented or interpreted in terms of their ability to represent the cultural conditions of the times that produced them, despite their potential significance.” Mary Anne Beecher, “A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955)” (Iowa State University, 2003), 14.

how individuals manage clutter within their homes; such a study has already been undertaken on a scale appropriate to the requirements of the task by a team of anthropologists at the Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) at UCLA. The vast and thorough CELf study documented the material culture of everyday life for 32 families in Los Angeles, producing 19,000 photographs, 47 family-narrated video home tours, and 1,540 videotaped hours of interviews.<sup>17</sup> The findings of this study, documented in research articles and a book, *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century*, appear throughout this work to bolster claims about clutter, abundance and the contemporary domestic interior taken up by the case studies. In related social science research, work in the field of psychology has examined the way material culture can be representative of identity; in particular, the work of Sam Gosling, a psychologist at the University of Texas, examines the link between identity and material culture, showing how the things we own come to represent essential elements of our personality and sense of self.<sup>18</sup> Rather than continue to explore material culture as an expression of personality—a belief established in historical, as well as psychological, studies of material culture—this

---

<sup>17</sup> The authors of this study claim to be picking up the research begun by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols of the Self* on a much larger scale. *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century* was published only two months before this dissertation was completed; however, the archive created by this research is surely important for further iterations of this project. Jeanne E. Arnold et al., *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Sam Gosling, *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You* (Philadelphia and New York: Basic Books, 2009). See also, Samuel D. Gosling et al., “A Room with a Cue: Judgments of Personality Based on Offices and Bedrooms,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82 (2002): 379–398.; Samuel D. Gosling et al., “Material Attributes of Personal Living Spaces,” *Home Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2005): 51–88.

dissertation considers how such an assumption plays out in the historically specific discourse of home organization in the late twentieth century.

A study of home organization is an ideal, “hidden-in-plain-sight” subject for assessing what seems to be the most pressing dilemma Americans have with their stuff: after years of believing the self can and should be cultivated through one’s relationship to things, what happens when the problem seems to be that there are just too many things? How does an abundant country handle the problem of overabundance? What do messages about clutter and order tell us about culture in the U.S.? Is organization a solution that falsely posits material excess as the cause of problems ranging from the personal to the political? Why is home organization suggested as a viable solution to so many of our problems at all? In short, why should we care about home organization?

### **The Audience of Home Organization**

Demographic information for the audience of home organization literature is telling, but not adequate in explaining how home organization discourse crafts a narrative about clutter, class, and the ideal middle-class home. Home organization texts tackle the problem of clutter by harnessing an historically specific narrative about disorder in the home: as we will see, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an organized home expressed both “modern” living and “traditional” (read: white, national, middle-class) domesticity. Nonetheless, much of this dissertation is dedicated to situating home organization in the specific economic and cultural landscape of late-twentieth-

century culture. As such, it is important to consider what it means to speak to a contemporary American middle-class audience about the home.

Home organization discourse in the U.S. speaks very deliberately to an American audience experiencing an “American” problem. Cultural discourse consistently points to clutter as a national problem stemming from issues of excess and accumulation endemic to the U.S. Whether or not the U.S. can definitively be called the most cluttered nation, it certainly seems to be the most worried about its own clutter and overconsumption. From the 1980s through the 2000s, much cultural energy has been expended trying to explain and pinpoint the rising popularity of home storage and organization in this country. In these accounts, the media echo the sentiments of the case studies in this dissertation by considering over-accumulation an “American” problem, specifically national in character but nonetheless detached from historical circumstances around consumption. Peter Walsh, Oprah’s personal organizer who appears again in Chapter Four of this work, makes this point often in the media and his books. “Clutter is a huge national problem,” he told *The Washington Post* in 2004; two years later, he declared, “America has a problem with overaccumulation,” in his book *It’s All Too Much*.<sup>19</sup> At the same time,

---

<sup>19</sup> Jura Koncius, “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter,” *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2004, H01. Peter Walsh, *It’s All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 30. Along the same lines, an owner of a self-storage facility told a reporter for *The New York Times*, “a lot of it just comes down to the great American propensity toward accumulating stuff,” explaining that his parents, children during the Depression, taught him that “it’s the accumulation of things that defines you as an American, and to throw anything away was being wasteful.” Jon Mooallem, “The Self-Storage Self,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06self-storage-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06self-storage-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

America's clutter problem is juxtaposed with its supposed desire for order, rationality, and control. The desire to organize is almost always considered alongside clutter as a national characteristic—as one journalist notes, if the founders of The Container Store did not originate the concept of home organization, as they claim to have, they “certainly have capitalized on the American dream of finally putting everything away.”<sup>20</sup> As this dissertation will show, language that characterizes clutter as a distinctly American problem ends up positioning a consumer-driven, inherently technological, and fast-paced West against an anti-modern, non-Western “other” who possesses exemplary “simplicity” for Americans to emulate.

Gender provides the most consistent lens through which to examine home organizing in the U.S. Each case study presented in this work produces cultural messages for and about women because women are the intended consumers of information, advice, products, and professional help for and about home organization. The fact that many women seek advice about the domestic interior does not necessarily preclude their expertise as advice-givers in this field; rather than see rhetoric about women's responsibility for organizing as something imposed from an outside source, it is more helpful to consider home organization an entire system of discourse produced, consumed, and negotiated by women, but with a sub-current of patriarchal cultural expectation about women's traditional roles. In this, home organization plays on long-standing tropes of gendered responsibility, decision-making, and consumption in the home—a history considered in more detail in the following pages. It is not enough, however, to say that

---

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Kastor, “A New Lid on Life; For a Messy World, A Policy of Containment,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1997.

home organization focuses almost entirely on women because of historic precedent. Cultural discourse about home organization does not only set the expectation that women have primary responsibility for keeping the home clutter-free; it also tacitly lays the blame for disorganization at women's feet. Sometimes, the issue of clutter is directly related to women's work—as in the literal clutter created by work-appropriate attire in the closet. An article in 2010 in *The New York Times* claimed that as women have joined the labor force in the last 25 years, they require more clothing: "working people have demanded that closets be organized. Her wardrobe is as important as his wardrobe."<sup>21</sup> Other times clutter is generally explained by the loss of a full-time homemaker: "how did our homes become overrun by a thicket of mismatched socks, lost legos and loose DVDs? After a long day at work, most women don't have time to straighten out the linen closet. Although men report doing more housework than in the past, two-career couples still don't keep house as their mothers did...."<sup>22</sup> Beyond such accusations, the sheer amount of advice presented to women about organization has the effect of creating an entirely gender-specific cycle of obligation—because women are figured as the primary consumers of goods in the home and managers of domestic tasks, they are the ones to blame when clutter becomes a problem.

---

<sup>21</sup> James Barron, "New York Vs. California In a Closet Space Race," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1996. Explaining the need for larger, custom-built closets, an interior designer told *The Washington Post*, "in the old days, we just led less active lives. The woman of the house frequently stayed home, and she had limited requirements for dressier clothes." Jura Koncius, "Closet Hang-Ups; From Disorderly Conduct to Uncluttered Living With the Help of Shelves and Wires. Or, How About a Custom Cufflink Drawer?," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Peg Tyre and Julie Scelfo, "Clean Freaks," *Newsweek*, June 7, 2004.

Class also plays an important role in thinking about issues of clutter and order in the contemporary domestic interior. Although it remains difficult to pin down the exact demographic of consumers of home organization literature, there is enough information to paint a general picture. It seems that the seekers of advice and products on home organization are relatively affluent—The Container Store targets consumers making about \$100,000 per household, per year, while *Real Simple* describes its readers as making a median of \$93,000 per household, per year.<sup>23</sup> Although these demographics place the audience for home organization slightly above the median income in the country (\$59,127 in 2010), the movement’s emphasis on practicality and domestic responsibility self-consciously speaks to middle-class ideals about domesticity.<sup>24</sup>

Ideologies around class and the home were developed simultaneously in the nineteenth century, to the extent that domesticity has been considered “one of the principal means by which the middle class assumed a self-conscious identity.”<sup>25</sup> Although contemporary middle-class domesticity certainly relies on this history, the idea of the middle class today deserves interrogation, especially considering structural and economic forces that have created a widening economic gap between the rich and poor in the past thirty years. The mid-twentieth century idea of the middle class—once robust with an abundance of skilled jobs protected by domestic manufacturing, government

---

<sup>23</sup> Koncius, “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter.” *Reaching Your Ideal Customers (Demographics, Print Media Kit)* (Real Simple Magazine, Spring Mediamark Research and Intelligence Base of Adults 2011).

<sup>24</sup> *The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*, Pew Social and Demographic Trends (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, August 22, 2012), 61.

<sup>25</sup> Glenna Matthews, “*Just a Housewife*”: *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), xvi.

regulation, and a strong union presence—is now often just that: an idea or self-representation of a social category unrelated to economic circumstances. Currently, a wide range of income earners consider themselves middle-class; we might be able to contextualize the broadly considered “average” middle-class consumer assumed by home organization texts a result, in part, of the fact that being middle class is a touchstone of self-identification in the U.S.<sup>26</sup> A recent publication by *The New York Times* called *Class Matters* addressed issues of class in the U.S. through both polls and long-form journalism. In seeking to account for their findings that Americans increasingly dismiss class as a defining aspect of life, the book cites a “blur” of issues like consumption patterns, religious affiliation, political affiliation and race that were formerly used to project more definitive indications of class in society.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say class does not still indelibly effect life in the U.S., just to note perceptions of class have become increasingly murky; in fact, class divisions have deepened in the past thirty years as a result of economic changes, such as globalization and deindustrialization, that have in turn contributed to some of the murkiness of class perception by enabling the mass availability of inexpensive consumer goods.<sup>28</sup> In *Categorically Unequal*, Douglas Massey links economic inequality in the U.S. to the conditions of the postindustrial economy, which privileges knowledge and information production over the production of goods

---

<sup>26</sup> 53% of adults self-identified as middle-class in 2008; 49% did so in 2012. The incomes of those within the 49% of adults who currently label themselves middle-class ranges from less than \$30,000 per year to over \$100,000 per year. *The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*, 4, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Correspondents of The New York Times, *Class Matters* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 14–19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



and services, with the result of a decline in industrial jobs that were formerly the backbone of middle-class earning power and identity in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> Using U.S. government data, the Pew Research Center has similarly charted the “hollowing out” of the American middle class from 1970-2010.<sup>30</sup> Over this period, more of the adult population joined the upper- and lower-income tiers of earners as the middle-income tier became smaller—declining from 61% to 51% of earners in the U.S.<sup>31</sup> In 1970, the middle tier of earners took in 62% of the nation’s income; they now take in only 45%.<sup>32</sup> Over the course of the 2000s, middle-income America has fallen further in both income and wealth. In what the research center calls the “lost decade” of the middle class, 2000-2010, the median wealth of middle-income earners (assets minus debt) fell 28%, from \$129,582 to \$93,150.<sup>33</sup> In other words, although class appears murky, the very real decline in wealth and opportunity of the middle class continues to play a large part in major issues

---

<sup>29</sup> Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 5.

<sup>30</sup> The household income data for this study came from the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, conducted yearly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Wealth data came from the Survey of Consumer Finances, sponsored by the Federal Reserve Board of Governors and the Department of Treasury. The general public survey was conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012 with a nationally representative sample of 2,508 adults over the age of 18, including 1,287 respondents who self-identify as “middle class.”

<sup>31</sup> *The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*, 65. The Pew Research Center defines “middle-income tier” individuals as those living in households with an annual income that is two-thirds to double the national median. In 2010, this meant \$39,418 to \$118,255; in 2000, \$42,185 to \$126,554; 1990, \$37,546 to \$112,637; 1980, \$33,538 to \$100,613; 1970, \$29,896 to \$89,689. *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> *The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*, 2. By comparison, upper income earners take in 46% of the nation’s income, up from 29% in the early 70s, and lower income earners take in only 9%, down from 10%.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3. During this same time, the median wealth of upper-income earners went up about 1%, and the median wealth of lower-income earners went down a drastic 45% to \$10,151 per year.

such as health and life expectancy, family size and structure, and availability of education.<sup>34</sup>

One of the things to remain attentive to in this analysis is the extent to which home organization texts' address to an "average" middle-class audience assumes whiteness as a default. Historically, domestic advice about "bric-a-brac" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries explicitly tied domestic order to white middle-class identity. Progressive-era discourse on clutter and cleanliness in the home focused on the "education" of African-American, working-class and immigrant populations to meet prescriptive standards of citizenship that were the naturalized privilege of white middle-class families. In contemporary home organization, clutter is not framed as a threat from a presumed "other," but a problem generated and sustained by middle-class habits, like shopping. By treating race as a "non-issue," however, home organization projects whiteness as what George Lipsitz calls "an unmarked category" that "never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations."<sup>35</sup> Home organization's dependence on neoliberal narratives of self-improvement furthers this dismissal of race; scholars like Arlene Dávila have documented the "post-civil rights synergy of color blindness and neoliberalism," with the "attending view that the market constitutes the fairest space for upward mobility and that citizens who are entrepreneurial can reign supreme, unencumbered by the pettiness of race, ethnicity, and gender."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Correspondents of The New York Times, *Class Matters*, 20–22.

<sup>35</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Arlene M. Dávila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3.

Neoliberalism, a manifestation of economic circumstances in the early 1970s, is defined as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>37</sup> The work of Dávila and others shows that neoliberalism is not, in fact, color-blind; the withdrawal of public support from social welfare and justice in favor of

---

<sup>37</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2. Historically, neoliberalism is linked with the presidency and policies of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s—policies that also concentrated wealth in the top economic segment of society and encouraged the decentralization of manufacture that led to post-Fordism. By the 1980 election, the effects of inflation and economic uncertainty caused a swing in political economic policy away from Keynesian and toward supply-side economics. That is, instead of growing the economy through consumption, policy proponents (especially within the Reagan campaign) sought to reduce the tax rate on personal and corporate income with the hope that a boost in private investment would, in turn, boost the economy in general. James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century* (New York and Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 2–10. Reagan’s emphasis on large-scale deregulation, privatization and the withdrawal of the state from areas of social provision shifted the production of wealth from the manufacturing of goods for sale, with its concomitant commitments to strong union power and secure middle-class employment, to financial institutions. The result was an increase in the incomes of the very wealthy at the expense of federal welfare spending, and a decided shift away from the cultivation of a prosperous middle class. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 26. Ironically, although supply-side politics were tied to moral positioning around hard work, individualism and entrepreneurship, they did not preclude the valorization of unrestrained economic gain, which was reflected in cultural expressions of affluence and opulence—even as the country settled into a recession borne of strict fiscal policies to restrain inflation. David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007). Conservative politics in the 1980s decreed that the government should spend less on the poor—and, indeed, that the poor themselves should spend less because they had not learned market or family responsibility—but, among the middle and upper class, flaunting affluence was considered just rewards for hard work, even a guarantee of further economic growth under the free market. Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 201–202.

the marketing of racial and ethnic groups as “niche” consumers under the guise of color-blindness in fact furthers white privilege and racial inequality.<sup>38</sup>

While the majority of middle-class earners are white—about 70%, down from 80% in the early 1990s—simply assuming a white audience elides the presence of a diverse middle class; in 2011, 46% of African-American adults, 47% of Latino adults, and 50% of Asian-American adults were considered middle-income earners.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to remember a long history of discriminatory housing practices and institutionalized racism in the U.S. has influenced the demographics of home ownership, which remains an important marker of middle-class identity that necessarily overlaps with discourse around home organization. Urban red-lining, suburban discrimination, and Federal Housing Administration policies of racial segregation in the name of “neighborhood character” contributed to an existing discrepancy of wealth and resources that lay the foundation for racial inequity in suburban home ownership.<sup>40</sup> Currently, 45.9% of African-American families own their home, compared to 47.5% of Latino families, 58.2% of Asian-American families, and 74.4% of white families.<sup>41</sup> Clearly middle-class identity is more complicated than simple

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. See also, Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, “Regulating The Abject.,” *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 227–246. John McMurria, “Desperate Citizens and Good Samaritans: Neoliberalism and Makeover Reality TV.,” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 4 (July 2008): 305–332.

<sup>39</sup> In the same period, the share of Hispanic individuals in the population of middle-income earners grew from 8% to 13%, African Americans from 9% to 11%, and Asian Americans from 3% to 5%. *The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*, 68, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: a Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 246–249.

<sup>41</sup> *The State of the Nation’s Housing* (Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2011), 36. The majority of buyers of newly built homes are also

statistics or descriptive statements; however, I am interested in tracing how these cultural texts about home organization position themselves with respect to gender, race, and class. To the extent that the middle class is conceived as white by default in home organization texts, the problem of clutter is now conceived as a white middle-class problem.

While race, class and gender inform the potential consuming audience of home organization literature, it is also important to consider how the home itself figures into the discourse. The contemporary housing market has certainly experienced a number of dramatic changes in the past five years; despite the ups and down, home organization projects have remained a popular way to upgrade and renovate domestic space. Before the housing bust in 2008, the home building industry had not seen a significant downturn since the early 1990s; a rosy report on home building in 2006 from the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University cited a stable economy, muted housing cycles, and low inflation for the production of the lowest long-term interest rates in a generation.<sup>42</sup> Home remodeling also enjoyed solid growth over this period, with expenditures on improvements climbing steadily through the decade.<sup>43</sup> 2000-2005 saw a

---

white (76%)—9% are African American, 8% are Latino, and 5% are Asian American. *The New Home in 2015*, Economics and Housing Policy Group (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Home Builders, December 2010), 9. Homeownership rates also declined considerably more for black and Hispanic households than for white households, erasing the improvements made to the gap between white and minority home ownership over the 1990s and 2000s. *The State of the Nation's Housing*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> William Apgar, *The Evolving Home Building Industry and Implications for Consumers* (Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Home remodeling expenditures reached new record of \$280 billion in 2005. Amal Bendimerad, *A Long-Term Outlook for Homeowner Remodeling Activity: Results and Implications* (Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, August 2007), 1.

marked increase in “discretionary projects” like high-end kitchen and bath remodels.<sup>44</sup> After the recession in 2008, housing prices had slipped, sales declined, the number of new homes built went down, and national home ownership decreased by about 2% by 2011.<sup>45</sup> Even as new home construction slowed to a halt, however, projects like custom-built closets continued to be a focal point in the home, simply shifting from being included in the construction of a new home to being a small remodeling project in existing homes; in fact, home remodeling went up as a percentage of total residential investment as more owners chose to remodel rather than to move.<sup>46</sup> Studies tracking consumer costs related to closet redesign projects commissioned by the Association of Closet and Storage Professionals (ACSP) show that the money spent on closets did not dramatically change after the housing bust in 2008.<sup>47</sup> Although large home organization

---

<sup>44</sup> The 42.5% of growth in spending on home improvements from 2000-2005 was attributed to “atypical” factors in the housing market, including “historically low interest rates, exceptional home price appreciation, and rapid housing turnover.” *Ibid.*, 5, 12.

<sup>45</sup> *The State of the Nation’s Housing*, 1. In addition to a decrease in home ownership, the rate of new home construction also slowed; the total number of single family homes built in 2009 was the lowest since 1971 (520,000 units); possibly more telling, it was about 68% below the all-time high of 1.65 million completed in 2006. *The New Home in 2015*, 2. The average size of homes also dropped about 3% from 2007 to 2009 (2,438 sq ft). To compare, the average size home in 1973 was 1,660 sq ft. *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> *The State of the Nation’s Housing*, 10. Home improvement is not a static category—peak spending years are the ages of 35-45, with younger households tending to spend money on DIY and older households spending an increasingly higher share on professional work. Bendimerad, *A Long-Term Outlook for Homeowner Remodeling Activity: Results and Implications*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Laurel Didier, “Closets Industry Report: Research Shows Rosy Outlook for Industry,” *Closets Daily*, April 8, 2008, [http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets-blog/laurel-didier/research\\_shows\\_rosy\\_outlook\\_for\\_industry\\_129226288.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets-blog/laurel-didier/research_shows_rosy_outlook_for_industry_129226288.html). See also, Bill Esler, “State of the Industry: Independent Closet Firms,” *Closets Daily*, July 26, 2010, [http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/state\\_of\\_the\\_industry\\_independent\\_closet\\_firms\\_129228823.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/state_of_the_industry_independent_closet_firms_129228823.html). Laurel Didier, “Signs of Economic Recovery Good for the Closet Industry,” *Closets Daily*, March 24, 2010, <http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets->

projects like custom-built closets require some cost to design and implement, one of the interesting hallmarks of home organization-related improvement is its relative accessibility when compared to other more dramatic home remodeling projects.<sup>48</sup> Even when a professional organizer is hired on an hourly basis, most home organization projects can be accomplished ad hoc, without the services of a professional architect and within a range of prices.<sup>49</sup> A survey of architects, designers, builders and manufacturers by the National Association of Home Builders' Economics and Housing Policy Group in 2010 found most professionals believed walk-in closets in master bedrooms would remain a feature in newly built homes through 2015, and that the total amount of dedicated closet space in a master bedroom would also stay the same.<sup>50</sup>

---

blog/laurel-didier/signs\_of\_economic\_recovery\_good\_for\_the\_closet\_industry\_129227893.html.

<sup>48</sup> Trade industry magazines play up the relative accessibility of closet redesign, referring to the range of materials available at various price points. Cheryl Weber, "Spare the Rod ... Spoil the Margins; Builders Are Teaming with Closet Companies to Offer Prepackaged Upgrades in a Range of Homes," *Builder*, January 15, 2003. No page number indicated; located through Lexis Nexis.

<sup>49</sup> In 2009, 48% of consumers who remodeled their bedroom closet did so at a mass-market retail outlet, 28% sourced their systems from professional home organization operations, and only 10% turned to professional designers to specify and buy the closet system. Bill Esler, "Consumers Planning to Spend More on Closets, Study Says," *Closets Daily*, June 1, 2010, [http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/consumers\\_planning\\_to\\_spend\\_more\\_on\\_closets\\_study\\_says\\_129228388.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/consumers_planning_to_spend_more_on_closets_study_says_129228388.html). In 2005, the average master bedroom closet cost an average of \$3,192; after 2008, consumer expectation dipped slightly. 25% of consumers in an ACSP/CLOSETS magazine study said they completed a master bedroom closet in 2008, paying an average of \$3,011—the next year the average price remained roughly the same at \$2,947. *Ibid.* The average expenditure for households on home improvement was about \$2,500 (minority households spent about \$2,300 on average). Bendimerad, *A Long-Term Outlook for Homeowner Remodeling Activity: Results and Implications*, 6, 10.

<sup>50</sup> *The New Home in 2015*, 18.

The demographic and contextual information above helps to situate the intended audience for home organization, setting the scene for the case studies to follow. A similar understanding of the historical narratives of clutter, gender and the middle-class domestic interior more fully contextualize home organization today. The theme of clutter and order in American homes does not exist in a historical vacuum, nor are these concepts fixed in relation to cultural and social norms. In her seminal text, *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas explained “dirt offends against order”—there is nothing intrinsic about dirt, except that it is aberrance from the norm, a transgression of the boundaries society constructs to gain a sense of order.<sup>51</sup> By the same token, we can understand contemporary discourses about clutter to be an expression of cultural norms developed around class, gender, and middle-class identity over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### **A Short History of Storage and the Domestic Interior**

The themes addressed by this dissertation—consumption, class, gender, and the promise of better living through investment in the domestic interior—can be traced to historical discourse throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that addressed a very similar demographic as an audience. Contemporary home organization takes for granted the idea of the middle-class, single-family home as the norm for most people; it also assumes homes should be un-cluttered to promote happier and healthier living, and that women will be the stewards of this order for their partners and families. These

---

<sup>51</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, New Ed (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 2.



concepts are the inheritance of an intertwining history of domestic advice, architecture and design, gender, and the domestic interior in the U.S. As a result, the case studies in this dissertation necessarily rely and build upon the work of scholars in the fields of material culture, design history, material anthropology, and the history of domestic advice, home economics, and domestic technology.

Clutter's negative connotations are historically specific, although to read a manual on home organization today one would assume clutter is a universal, timeless irritant. The nineteenth-century American middle-class single-family home was a space of creativity, retreat and potential cultivation without these same concerns; in fact, by today's standards these spaces seem quite cluttered.<sup>52</sup> Katherine C. Grier details how nineteenth-century parlors functioned as a space for both culture and comfort, encompassing the ideal of domesticity in the coziness of spaces and the performance of cosmopolitanism through the accumulation and display of "refined" furniture selection and knick-knacks.<sup>53</sup> The domestic interior welcomed clutter; design reformers encouraged women to personalize their homes with handiwork and bric-a-brac to foster creative expression, moral growth and notions of "gentility" in the middle-class home.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Scholars have pointed out that although the nineteenth-century home is often conceived of as a space of retreat from the world of work, it was also a period in which the number of people employed inside the home grew to new heights. Moira Donald, "Tranquil Havens? Critiquing the Idea of Home as the Middle-Class Sanctuary," in *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, ed. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 103–120.

<sup>53</sup> Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Karen Halttunen, "From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality," in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of*

American single-family interiors in the nineteenth century were also highly specialized, with “rooms within rooms” in the form of nooks, sleeping rooms, and playpens.<sup>55</sup> Storage in this period was either non-existent—for instance, working-class homes had everything on display all the time—or, in middle-class homes, reliant on furniture or individual rooms for surplus.<sup>56</sup> Storage was an issue for homemakers, as late-nineteenth century interiors were filled with commercial artifacts, reflecting the “proliferating abundance of society as a whole.”<sup>57</sup> Even so, although concern about storage was a special focus of domestic advice literature targeted to women, it was not a particular concern of architects or pattern book authors in that period.<sup>58</sup>

Within this culture of cozy, if somewhat cluttered, domesticity, Catharine Beecher, an American educator and writer, sought to convince women readers of the importance of their work and thus “redeem woman’s profession from dishonor”—domestic work had experienced a loss of status after the Civil War in part because factory-produced goods were more available and easy to purchase.<sup>59</sup> Her method was to introduce elements of industrial rationality in the home, albeit framed in terms of

---

*Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 172.

<sup>55</sup> Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, *American Home Life 1880-1930: Social History Spaces Services* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>56</sup> Beecher, “A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955),” 16.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>58</sup> Beecher, “A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955),” 56.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 185.

Christian values of family, thrift and gendered responsibility.<sup>60</sup> In texts such as *The American Woman's Home* (1869), an advice manual co-authored with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, Beecher included plans for well-ordered kitchens, closets and pantries in order to increase efficiency throughout the house. Jeffrey Meikle positions Beecher's plans for storage and efficiency within the early struggles between "good taste" reform and popular consumption in the home. He argues that Beecher's ideal kitchen—which included an unadorned layout for cabinetry and storage that eliminated excess movement, as well as the separation of the stove to its own room to encourage ventilation and good health—is part of the intellectual and design history of modernism. Like many future modernist designs, Beecher's kitchen layouts prioritized functional efficiency, simplicity, and the arrangement of physical space to inspire the actions and behavior of individuals.<sup>61</sup> Working against popular conceptions of domestic space at the time, the restrained functionalism of Beecher's kitchen did not sway the reigning popular aesthetic of ornate abundance in the Victorian home. Susan Strasser's history of housework further contextualizes Beecher's work in terms of gender. An emphasis on efficiency "brought women's sphere more in line with that of men, enabling women to better adapt household routines to the pace and the practices of their husband's lives, and to establish their self-respect in a world that increasingly valued efficiency above more traditional values."<sup>62</sup> Beecher's advice laid the groundwork for tensions that play out through the history of home organization and efficiency: how best to marry the amorphous, irregular, and

---

<sup>60</sup> Susan Strasser notes Beecher's "habits of system and order" brought the organizational routines of industry into the home. *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>61</sup> Meikle, *Design in the USA*, 53–54.

<sup>62</sup> Strasser, *Never Done*, 189.

unending tasks of domestic work with the structure, efficiency and, ultimately, value of work that takes place outside of the home?

The end of the nineteenth century marked a shift in attitudes toward the domestic interior as a result of myriad social, cultural and economic transformations. Working from Warren Susman's concept of the "transformation" of culture, historian Thomas Schlereth argues the years 1880-1930 were also marked by tremendous transformation within the domestic interior, including innovations in domestic technology, an increase in the number of consumer items for the home, and, in terms of gender, a change in domestic responsibility as more working-class women turned away from domestic labor and the number of servants in middle-class homes declined.<sup>63</sup> The condition of modernity—here defined as a shift in the experience of space and time caused by rapid urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization and commercialization of culture at the turn of the twentieth century—created the conditions for an expanding culture of consumer capitalism that William Leach has credited with both "democratizing individual desire" and developing the "cult of the new."<sup>64</sup> Within this context of increased consumption and industrialization, writers and advisors shifted toward an embrace of more "modern" conceptions of the domestic interior.

As a result, the middle-class parlor and its attendant preoccupation with the display of objects were in decline by the 1890s. Reformers with ties to Progressive and Arts and Crafts movements criticized the parlor and its system of aesthetic refinement

---

<sup>63</sup> Foy and Schlereth, *American Home Life 1880-1930*, 13–17.

<sup>64</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and The Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 7.

and gentility through artifact display “based upon a narrow, proto-modernist definition of ‘function’” that “ruled out the Victorian conception that furnishings could be used to make complex rhetorical statements of identity.”<sup>65</sup> Penny Sparke examines this dismissal of taste within the domestic interior in the book *As Long as Its Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*. Taste, “an active agent within the consumption and disposition of goods, and within the process of domestic display,” was a means of distinction for women in the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, however, taste had become an overtly gendered and denigrated term, pitted against design, high-culture and masculine authority.<sup>67</sup> As some writers and reformers actively worked against the expression of women’s taste in the selection and display of consumer goods in the home, the concept—with its connotation of middle-class values, sentimentality, and the family unit—was further diminished “as the dominant aesthetic discourse focused increasingly on the utilitarian and the technological nature of goods and less on their symbolic and aesthetic functions.”<sup>68</sup> Of course, not all consumers took such stringent advice to heart, causing a rift between ongoing, so-called “feminine” consumption around the home and the prevailing rhetoric of an elevated, “masculine” rationality and utility. At the same time, the dismissal of the importance of the parlor caused a shift away from artifact display as a generative act, and toward a predominant vision of the ideal interior as un-cluttered. In

---

<sup>65</sup> Katherine C. Grier, “Decline of the Memory Palace: The Parlor After 1890,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Space and Services*, ed. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 68.

<sup>66</sup> Penny Sparke, *As Long as It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995), 32.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

combination, these forces led to an ongoing tension between the widely embraced, de-cluttered aesthetic for home interiors, and the enduring feminization of consumption and domestic labor throughout the twentieth century.

The professionalization, standardization, and industrialization of domestic work at the turn of the twentieth century is one example of how notions of progress and rationality in the period contributed to a growing hierarchy between expert and amateur domestic ability. As jobs in offices, factories and retail grew, fewer working-class women turned to domestic work to make money; however, rather than fundamentally change the gendered expectations of domestic work, cultural norms still dictated that women remain responsible for what went on in the home. Instead of becoming more equitable, housekeeping became more “rational”—a reaction to the decreased domestic labor force, modernization in industrial production, and a general desire to adopt scientific principles in the name of progress.<sup>69</sup>

The most famous advocate of scientific management, rational planning, and “putting the home on a business basis” in the early-twentieth century middle-class home was Christine Frederick, who translated Frederick Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) to a domestic setting.<sup>70</sup> By developing floor plans for the “Labor

---

<sup>69</sup> Kitchen efficiency was popular by the mid-teens, with many women’s clubs around the country founded on the principles of domestic science. Strasser, *Never Done*, 213.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 54. Frederick claimed her impetus for writing about home efficiency was in part a response to the decline in household service as a result of the rise of industrial work. Christine Frederick, *The New Housekeeping Efficiency Studies In Home Management* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Page & Co., 1913), 13. Christine Frederick was herself middle-class, embraced middle-class ideologies of gender and domesticity, and wrote for a

Saving Kitchen,” Frederick hoped to teach women how to make their homes into workshops or laboratories of domesticity in the fashion of industrial production of the time. Her designs prioritized both the arrangement of things in space—putting tools for like activities together and dedicating entire rooms to a single purpose reflecting its function—as well as the efficient management of movement.<sup>71</sup> Frederick was not alone in her efforts; other domestic adaptors of Taylorism, such as Lillian Gilbreth, also helped promote the “continuous kitchen”—the fusing of kitchen architecture and furniture that has become a standard fixture of the twentieth-century interior.<sup>72</sup> The design change in the domestic kitchen during this period was connected to the technological and functional strategies of commercial storage and offices at the same time; in addition to shelves, kitchens and pantries featured divided drawers and gliding, sliding, and rotating devices—all innovations developed outside of the home.<sup>73</sup> The introduction of cabinet and pantry space to the kitchen eliminated the need for long-term storage, thus necessitating more trips to the store, a fundamental part of Frederick’s emphasis on

---

primarily middle-class audience. Janice Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick & The Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>71</sup> Christine Frederick, *Efficient Housekeeping or, Household Engineering, Scientific Management In The Home* (Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1925), 19; 22–27.

<sup>72</sup> Gilbreth photographed workers in a kitchen to determine what she called the “One Best Way,” which she would eventually interpret spatially into a plan called the “continuous kitchen.” Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 54. On the continuous kitchen, see Ellen Lupton, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination* (Cambridge, MA and New York: MIT List Visual Arts Center, distributed by Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 41.

<sup>73</sup> Beecher, “A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955),” 159, 163.

consumption as necessary to the modern home.<sup>74</sup> Working in partnership with manufacturers to encourage the purchase of household technologies, Frederick quite famously endorsed consumption within the “new” housekeeping as another method to put women in a “managerial” position within the home.<sup>75</sup> Although she was not alone in her push for domestic consumption, Frederick certainly typifies the era’s re-casting of women’s primary engagement in the home along the lines of consumption. Scholars like Ruth Schwartz Cowan have subsequently shown, however, how domestic labor in the twentieth century has always entailed production—of meals, clean laundry, healthy children and well-fed adults—as much as it has involved consumption.<sup>76</sup> This point is well taken considering how much labor is suggested in the name of efficiency in contemporary home organization texts.

Christine Frederick’s crusade did not just focus on space, but also the efficient organization of time. Her “Plans and Methods For Daily Housework” depended on the development of “standard practice,” or the “one best way,” for women to become skilled and rapid at housekeeping.<sup>77</sup> The point was not just to streamline motion, but also time spent on chores. Frederick’s methods truly pre-date many of the themes of later examples of home organization, especially her expressed desire to use efficiency to get “a grip on

---

<sup>74</sup> Lupton, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Strasser, *Never Done*, 24. See also, Christine Frederick, *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (New York: Business bourse, 1929).

<sup>76</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>77</sup> Frederick, *Efficient Housekeeping or, Household Engineering, Scientific Management In The Home*, 65.



things.”<sup>78</sup> Histories of industrial modernity have figured women as having a fraught relationship to time. In his seminal essay “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” historian E.P. Thompson indicates that women, because of biological and cultural responsibility, existed outside of the framework of modernity signified by the shift to clock-time. Even as the work routine for artisans became more regimented as time became currency in the new industrial economy, women’s work remained task-oriented and, as a result, distinctly arduous.<sup>79</sup> He writes:

This remains true to this day, and, despite school times and television times, the rhythms of women’s work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of the “pre-industrial” society.”<sup>80</sup>

In Thompson’s conception, if clock-time internalized the shift to industrial capitalism, itself a key aspect of modernity, then women (for better or worse) performed labor that put them outside of this realm. Combating rhetoric that places women “outside” of time, Rita Felski has since considered how modernity has been gendered in historical accounts that present the modern individual as an autonomous male free of communal ties.<sup>81</sup> In opposition, women are aligned with tradition and conservatism, concepts the truly modern sought to transcend in the name of progress.<sup>82</sup> Christine Frederick’s advice

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>79</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* no. 38 (December 1967): 79.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>82</sup> Felski suggests that modernity is not a singular experience, but instead discontinuous, transitory, and ambiguous. Such a view takes into account how an individual might be on

around an efficient domestic schedule was useful precisely *because* it borrowed aspects of industrial capitalism in order to structure and make legitimate the de-valued tasks of domesticity. In this view, the application of scientific management principles via domestic Taylorism can be seen as an effort to ditch the laborious “pre-industrial” nature of domestic work performed by women in the nineteenth century. By trying to give household work more value according to the contemporary currency of efficiency and industrialization, Frederick was calling on earlier arguments made by household experts like Catharine Beecher.<sup>83</sup> Despite her adoption of the techniques of modernity, Frederick’s commitment to “liberating” women from inefficiency through industrial techniques was not matched by a similar attempt to liberate them from traditional notions of domesticity.<sup>84</sup>

While Frederick helped to ascribe some value to domestic work, along the way re-defining somewhat the role of educated women within the home, she remained steadfast in her assumption of the “apolitical” nature of domestic work.”<sup>85</sup> Frederick claimed her domestic schedules would actually provide more time for women to get out of the house, but in fact a model schedule in 1919 demonstrated a full day with rest periods, but no time for going out into public; historian Janice Rutherford notes that Frederick’s schedule

---

the side of progress, but also emerged in chaos and disorder, or be modern and reject contemporary culture.

<sup>83</sup> Strasser, *Never Done*, 188.

<sup>84</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender and the Promise of Consumer Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 62. Frederick has been cast in history either as an “innovative promoter of scientific management in the home or an accomplice in the selling of consumerism to the American housewife.” Janice Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick & The Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>85</sup> Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 65, 76.

allowed women to leave the house, but not for paid employment.<sup>86</sup> As a professional who had founded her career on advising other women on how to find happiness in domestic labor, Frederick embodied the contradiction of many women of her class in the early-twentieth century—she embraced new opportunities, technology, modernization and consumerism at the same time she promoted nineteenth-century ideologies of gender and domesticity.<sup>87</sup> Architecture historian Gwendolyn Wright notes this reassertion of strict gender roles within the home came at a time when women were increasingly becoming employed outside of the home; journalists and politicians raised fears of “race suicide” and “desexualization” of white women who abandoned the traditional roles of wife and mother.<sup>88</sup>

The trend of the servant-less, efficient, middle-class home rippled beyond the organization of kitchens into an overall simplification of interior architecture within the American home.<sup>89</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement, typified by the interiors of small bungalow homes designed by the architect Gustav Stickley, promoted the type of simplified, self-consciously “modern” home popular in the early twentieth century.<sup>90</sup> Such homes were part of the growing “streetcar suburbs” that boomed from 1870-1910.<sup>91</sup> Smaller homes also indicated the decline in domestic production of goods and attendant requirements for long-term storage, and the rise of consumption as a form of personal

---

<sup>86</sup> Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, 57.

<sup>87</sup> Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 173.

<sup>89</sup> Volz, “The Modern Look of the Early-Twentieth Century House: A Mirror of Changing Lifestyles,” 26.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>91</sup> Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 71–96.

expression.<sup>92</sup> Scholar Mary Anne Beecher's survey of home storage from 1900-1955 shows a "transition of the middle-class domestic condition from its status as private and sheltering to a perception of modern domestic space as exposed and permeable."<sup>93</sup> Although nineteenth-century middle-class homes included storage spaces like closets, pantries, and dedicated storage rooms, these were usually leftover spaces after active spaces were defined. With fewer rooms, bungalows required more deliberate, built-in storage throughout the home as well as the use of more manufactured products for storage.<sup>94</sup> Unlike kitchens, closets did not receive much attention in American homes before the twentieth century; a new interest in closets was spurred by the advent of more available ready-to-wear clothing for women (men's clothes had been factory made since the late nineteenth century).<sup>95</sup> Advice writers tried to help architects and builders understand women's demand for and interaction with closets and storage spaces by suggesting improvements such as making closets wide, but shallow, including a step up

---

<sup>92</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 171. Karen Halttunen argues that the drive to express personality through interior home design is a manifestation of the changing culture of interior space from 1900-1930, a period that "shaped a new understanding of the meaning of domestic things that has proved crucial to the emergence of mass consumer society in the twentieth century." Halttunen, "From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality," 158.

<sup>93</sup> Beecher, "A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955)," v.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. Some traditional Victorian-era elements remained (such as bookcases and built-in buffets), but the inclusion of more incorporated storage spaces in the home "extended the storage vocabulary established in the nineteenth century." Built-in cases were specialized by room and type of good, and, unlike the Victorian display shelf, sometimes included concealment. *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>95</sup> Beecher finds evidence of architects in *The House Beautiful* making reference to the "closet problem" as "distinctly American"—she also cites evidence of architects' disdain for the "cluttered walls" created by closets. Beecher, "A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955)," 194.

from the floor to discourage dirt from entering, and rounding exterior corners to aid cleaning.<sup>96</sup> Just as kitchen storage adapted to changes in commercial manufacturing, the concomitant boom in consumer retail inspired the look and sensibility of domestic closets, which adopted rods, rather than hooks, and featured elements of transparency, openness and display.<sup>97</sup>

The first few decades of the twentieth century brought with it a general clearing out of the domestic interior. Where fabric interiors in the nineteenth century had been an indicator of wealth and social status, such design elements—along with souvenirs, small handcrafts, some types of wallpaper, and any other small bric-a-brac items—were now considered clutter.<sup>98</sup> As a result of discoveries about germ theory, domestic instructions about cleanliness became paramount.<sup>99</sup> Although the trend was slow to catch on, home economists and domestic advisors in the early 1910s warned American women to remove textiles and other dust-gathering objects from the home, essentially equating clutter with the spread of dirt and disease.<sup>100</sup> As is the case today, anti bric-a-brac rhetoric in this period contained several underlying cultural messages. A clutter-free environment was on the one hand considered “modern.” While in the mid-nineteenth century, the word “modern” was frequently used in design and decoration manuals to describe furniture and architecture that responded to changes in industrialization, by the first few decades of the twentieth century, “modern” was used by domestic advisors to indicate a fairly strict set

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 194–205.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 159–163.

<sup>98</sup> Lupton, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste*, 44.

<sup>99</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 66.

of decorating rules, in which upholstery, ornamentation, and excessive display were limited.<sup>101</sup> Rhetoric against bric-a-brac also had a xenophobic edge; many advisors wrote deliberately to an immigrant audience, associating clutter with ethnic difference and encouraging de-cluttering as a more supposedly “American” way of inhabiting the home.<sup>102</sup> Leavitt argues that anti-immigrant sentiment was secondary, however, to the association between ornament and class. Most advisors framed bric-a-brac as a “lower-class and tawdry decorating style” that “cheapened the American home,” and endorsed simple, modern interiors as a way to announce class superiority.<sup>103</sup> The ascendancy of an un-cluttered interior in the early twentieth century is clearly an important precedent for contemporary accounts of home organization that take such an aesthetic for granted as ideal; so, too, are associations that posit clutter as supposedly lower class.

The modernist era of design influenced the decor of middle-class interiors, informing and overlapping with domestic advisors’ crusade against bric-a-brac. On the one hand, avant-garde artists, architects, and designers in the period expressed new ideas about the supremacy of engineering and functionality that seemed to suppress traditional home life; scholar Christopher Reed invokes the writings of influential early modernists such as Swiss architect and designer Le Corbusier and architect and critic Adolf Loos to show how modernist architecture was meant to transcend conventional domesticity and ornamentation, and with it associations of tradition, sentimentality, the past, disease, and

---

<sup>101</sup> Volz, “The Modern Look of the Early-Twentieth Century House: A Mirror of Changing Lifestyles,” 26. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 100.

<sup>102</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 122. For more on cleanliness as an “American” value, see Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), chap. 3, 4, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 122.

degeneracy.<sup>104</sup> Such clearly gendered rhetoric led to a further devaluing of women's taste and cultivation in the home. Ironically, however, modernist design thinking often entered the domestic interior via women invested in the project of furthering notions of traditional domesticity.<sup>105</sup> Domestic advisors in women's magazines, often women themselves, incorporated the value judgments of leading male modernists into domestic advice manuals that derided the "fussy" house and advocated sweeping changes to the American home; many even directly referenced Le Corbusier and his dictum that a house be a "machine for living."<sup>106</sup> In her history of domestic advice, Sarah Leavitt describes how essays by household advisors who championed modernism in domestic space paved the way for women to "create their own space in modernism, which would admit some non-rational decoration," while also staying within the basic guidelines described by leading modernist thinkers of the era.<sup>107</sup>

By the 1920s and 1930s, American industrial designers brought together modernist design inspiration and concerns for domestic efficiency in the design of streamlined home consumer products. The aesthetic turn to streamlining in the 1930s manifested not only in aerodynamic-inspired transportation, architecture, and product design, but also in appliances and household goods that were designed to eliminate dust

---

<sup>104</sup> Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 9–10. Hungarian architect Adolf Loos offered the foundational modernist text on the subject, equating ornament with degeneracy and cultural sickness—a judgment wrapped in notions of racial, national and social hierarchies of the time. Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998), 167–176.

<sup>105</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 110, 114, 118.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 101, 105.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

and aid cleaning with features such as smooth surfaces and rounded corners.<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey Meikle notes the streamlined shape served a dual psychological function in the depression; it was both “a style of a society whose developing technologies propelled it at an accelerating rate into the future” and, somewhat paradoxically, the “desire for stasis engendered by the Depression’s social chaos.”<sup>109</sup> This tension between progress and stasis is mirrored somewhat in contemporary home organization literature that gestures both toward efficiency and the realization of a perfectly organized, completely static interior. During the 1920s and 1930s, efficiency broadened to include the bathroom, where disparate collections of furniture were consolidated into coordinated and completely built-in fixtures. The bathroom’s supposed pure efficiency made it a relevant design consideration to architects and designers who would otherwise scorn American moderne styles that simply “expressed” modernity without embodying it fully.<sup>110</sup> Ellen

---

<sup>108</sup> American industrial designers in the late-1920s and 1930s were hired by manufacturers to stimulate consumption by including aesthetic considerations in the design of products. The popular result, streamlining, is the “visual idiom” of frictionless progress and economic function, meant to stimulate both the economy and an optimistic and utopian mood during the Depression. See, Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*, American Civilization; (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1979).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 184. The tension between progress and stasis comes directly from Le Corbusier, whose belief in design’s ability to perfect social balance expressed a desire for stasis—in his view, culture would progress through developments in the “new” architecture, engineering, manufacture and transportation until it reached Platonic ideal machine aesthetic. *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>110</sup> Lupton, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste*, 25. The streamlined aesthetic was at the time castigated by design purists who noted the utter lack of rationality in objects like a streamlined pencil sharpener. In fact, the strictness with which an idealized modernism was presented in MOMA’s 1932 “Modern Architecture” exhibition, detailed further in this introduction, was a result of the growing tension between modernism in its most pristine state and the consumer marketplace; subsequent authors have pointed out how this exhibition functioned as an “aesthetic policing of the



Lupton describes the transition from the late nineteenth-century bathroom, ornamented with wood and sculptural elements, to the streamlined and sanitary porcelain bathrooms of the 1930s as a “process of elimination” reflecting the turn to modern design aesthetics.<sup>111</sup> The shared belief by modernists and domestic advisors alike in the transformative power of a simple, modern aesthetic has clear implications for present day associations between an organized home and better living.<sup>112</sup>

Along with streamlining and the elimination of bric-a-brac, spaciousness became a primary concern of twentieth century homes.<sup>113</sup> Sandy Isenstadt’s study of middle-class homes from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century in *The Modern American House* documents the development of the idea of spaciousness, the “cultural preference in the United States for visual extent in domestic environments that developed over time.”<sup>114</sup> Isenstadt argues that concern over spaciousness in homes did not appear with regularity before the twentieth century, but also preceded modernism’s “much-vaunted ability to provide such an effect.”<sup>115</sup> Popular shelter magazines like *Ladies Home Journal* and trade journals like *Progressive Architecture* both focused on unpopulated landscapes

---

‘tasteless excess’” of streamlining. Terry E. Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 10; Chapter 11.

<sup>111</sup> Lupton, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste*, 25–26.

<sup>112</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 108–109.

<sup>113</sup> While mass production of building components and the loss of domestic help contributed to the small housing boom in the early twentieth century, a rise of consumer goods and a growing desire for “modern” spaciousness in this period also made smaller spaces less desirable. Sandy Isenstadt, *The Modern American House: Spaciousness and Middle Class Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–2.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>115</sup> Isenstadt argues that the idea of spaciousness in middle-class homes should be considered a core part of architectural history, more so than “cubic forms, unadorned walls, flat roofs, large windows, and a generalized expression of function.” *Ibid.*, 7–9.

and carefully tailored design elements to help readers feel less cramped on a middle-class budget.<sup>116</sup> Designers and architects tackled a “conflict between actual and perceived space,” developing solutions such as picture windows to provide the illusion of a larger home while, at the same time, justifying their fees as a way to create space without actually buying a bigger home. Such an argument is echoed in the voices of contemporary professional organizers who argue that hiring an organizer helps consumers save money over time. Spaciousness and its twin value, simplicity, conflicted directly with clutter and consumption; the ideal required homeowners to subsume commercial goods in order to let “the self find space to assume its natural shape” through “straighter lines, retiring profiles, plainer surfaces, and fewer things.”<sup>117</sup> The association of crowdedness with cities, immigrants and minorities meant spaciousness could function to “signify distance from urban tensions, hereditary citizenship, and racial difference and in this way function as a spatial symbolism of inequality.”<sup>118</sup> Much like domestic advice against bric-a-brac, crowdedness was a way to indicate difference from an assumed white, middle-class norm.

Suburbanization has been the primary thrust of home building and government policy around housing in the U.S. since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>119</sup> The rise of suburbs

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>119</sup> The Federal Housing Act of 1949 allocated resources disproportionately to suburban middle-class family housing. Wright, *Building the Dream*, 246. As early as the 1930s, the prevalence of automobiles meant developers could entice homeowners farther from the city; however the Interstate Highway Act in 1956 provided the means for more middle-class families to participate in the development of commuter suburbs. Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 119.

in the post-war era marked, in the words of Dolores Hayden, the “triumph of a prescriptive architecture of gender on a national scale.”<sup>120</sup> Along with government policies that encouraged the construction of new housing and tax structures that evenly distributed income among earners, Americans experienced an increased standard of living and level of affluence that was expressed through increasing suburbanization and consumption of domestic goods.<sup>121</sup> Chronicled in several texts by Hayden, suburban development has revolved around an idea of better living—for individual families, but also for the economy as a whole, as developers have profited from the landscape of sprawl. Suburbia represented not only the hidden histories of “economic deprivation, ethnic differences, age segregation, and racial segregation,” but also a highly visible “spatial prescription for suburban bliss that emphasized gender stereotypes as the most salient features of every citizen’s experience.”<sup>122</sup> The majority of the housing business from the late 1940s onward was directed toward the single-family detached home.<sup>123</sup> By 1970, more Americans lived in suburbs than in either central cities or rural areas (by

---

<sup>120</sup> Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 58.

<sup>121</sup> In the post-war period, Keynesian economic policies born of Depression-era politics used state intervention to regulate markets through interest rates, simultaneously promoting consumption to enhance economic growth and investing resources to protect the production of industrial goods to be sold at home and abroad. Massey, *Categorically Unequal*, 28–30.

<sup>122</sup> Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*, 60. The history of suburbia reveals inequity along the lines of gender and race, as well as ongoing economic “contestation” between residents and developers. Hayden argues that “contestation—between residents who wish to enjoy suburbia and developers who seek to profit from it—lies at the heart of suburban history.” Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 9.

<sup>123</sup> Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*, 54.

2000, more Americans lived in suburbs than in both cities and rural areas combined).<sup>124</sup> Americans now own the largest amount of private housing space per person ever recorded in history, and over a quarter of homes in the U.S. have seven or more rooms in them.<sup>125</sup>

The majority of suburban homes in the post-war period were open-plan—a popular aesthetic that incorporated spaciousness and ideas of modern living, but also enabled and engendered women’s ongoing association with and responsibility within the domestic interior. Open plan homes offered flexibility and modularity, which domestic advisors found highly important as an expression of modern living.<sup>126</sup> Rather than separating activities in rooms built for specific purposes, open-plan homes encouraged an amalgamation of family members and activities into one space, limiting private spaces to the bathroom and sleeping rooms. The popularity of open-plan homes in women’s magazines showed an interest in using space to promote more family “togetherness”—an ideal in which both husband and wife participated in domestic tasks, but with a clear delineation of father as head of household and mother as primary caretaker.<sup>127</sup> Despite the “togetherness” appeal, open-plan homes re-emphasized women’s responsibility in domestic space. Kitchens were placed in the front of the home and opened up to the living room, making it possible for mothers to perform multiple tasks while cooking and watching children; similarly, picture windows in the living room let mothers watch their

---

<sup>124</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 10.

<sup>125</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 38. Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*, 54.

<sup>126</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 184.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

children playing in the yard. In 1963, Betty Friedan blamed the ennui felt by American middle class women on enthusiasm for the open-plan home. Women who were sold these homes, she said, “almost have to live the feminine mystique”—with no walls to separate them from their children, women were never alone and constantly picking up messes in “one free-flowing room, instead of many rooms separated by walls and stairs.”<sup>128</sup> Such design features functioned to give women more responsibility and less privacy, although Gwendolyn Wright has argued that architecture alone is not responsible for gender inequity in the post-war suburban home.<sup>129</sup>

The post-war period brought with it issues in consumption and storage that set the scene for home organization in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s. Giddy consumption transformed clutter from a decor-gone-awry problem to one of overabundance. In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May documents the rise of family and home-oriented spending as an expression of Cold War “containment” culture. As prosperity spread after World War II, with incomes increasing over 60%, Americans translated their economic optimism into the purchasing of household goods and automobiles with newly earned discretionary income—while consumer spending increased 60% in the first five years after the war, the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose 240%.<sup>130</sup> Despite the increase in consumption that came with newly encountered affluence, ideals around moderation and thrift still had great cultural value. May notes that focusing

---

<sup>128</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 43. In Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 193.

<sup>129</sup> Wright lists the isolation from work opportunities and contact with other adults and the emphasis on men’s role as the “distant provider.” Wright, *Building the Dream*, 258.

<sup>130</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 157.

consumption on purchases for the home allowed consumers to feel that they were still upholding traditional American values of pragmatism and family enrichment while they spent, thus alleviating “traditional American uneasiness with consumption: the fear that spending would lead to decadence.”<sup>131</sup> Historian Daniel Horowitz argues that criticism of consumer culture, such as Vance Packard’s excoriation of planned obsolescence and status purchasing, “breathed life into the new moralism” of the period.<sup>132</sup> So while consumption was indeed on the rise, boundaries were placed around spending and acquiring to make it palatable within the cultural milieu of post-war America. Lingering doubt about the negative effects of pure consumption prompted some designers, such as the American industrial designer George Nelson, to teach consumers the lesson that with “adequate number of storage spaces, properly shaped and properly located, you can take care of everything that has to be kept out of sight and still have a good deal of space left over.”<sup>133</sup> His Storgewall (1945), a modular, floor-to-ceiling storage unit, was meant to contain the abundance of post-war consumerism within homes ill equipped to handle the new influx of goods.<sup>134</sup> Storage walls were a common solution to the problem of clutter within open-plan homes, which required fewer load-bearing internal walls; as space-dividing partitions, storage walls spoke to the desire for modular furniture while also

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>132</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 102.

<sup>133</sup> George Nelson and Henry Wright, *Tomorrow’s House: a Complete Guide for the Home-builder* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 135.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 134.

allowing for display as desired.<sup>135</sup> Nelson's Storgewall, along with the new emphasis on the family room, allowed an expanding suburban middle class to frame their purchasing of the latest cars, gadgets and home appliances within a setting that connoted "traditional symbolic reassurances of home."<sup>136</sup> Consumption in the post-war era, if giddy, was largely under control. The overall framework of the economy allowed consumers' incomes to keep pace with their ability to purchase, and cultural imperatives to keep traditional ideas of family at the center of consumerism enacted a set of boundaries around unlimited material acquisition.

Although home organization today leans on the principles established in nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century domestic discourse, it does not reproduce them completely. Each of the case studies of this dissertation strains our established understanding of the topic. Women, though still figured as the lone figure responsible for domestic stewardship, are no longer treated as though they are primarily homemakers—what does domestic advice literature look like when it is written for a reading audience defined by "busy-ness" and employment out of the home? This dissertation also troubles the historic connection between clutter and class; although we have seen how advice literature positioned bric-a-brac and dirt as a working-class or immigrant threat, the overwhelming message of television shows about messy homes today seems to be that

---

<sup>135</sup> Beecher, "A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955)," 219. By 1950, Beecher shows, most designs for middle-class homes in shelter magazines included plans for a storage wall. Ibid., 224.

<sup>136</sup> Meikle, *Design in the USA*, 136. Meikle describes the promotional photograph of the Storgewall surrounded by a sprawling mess of uncontained objects for *Life* magazine as a representation of the fundamental conflict at the heart of this period of domestic consumption—a war between restraint born of traditional family values and the rising tide of "things—literally things—out of control." Ibid., 137.

clutter is a “disease” endemic to the middle-class. Consumption in the late twentieth century looks far different than it did in the early part of the century, or even the post-war period—how does the organization industry, which is essentially a system of consumption that takes as its focus the problem of overconsumption, alleviate or exacerbate domestic excess? So while it is crucial to understand and work from this historical foundation, it is equally important to recognize the specificity of a history of contemporary domestic life.

### **Modernism, Postmodernism, and Contemporary Home Organization**

In style, philosophy, and the use of space, the solutions to disorganization presented by the case studies in this dissertation seem to follow functional modernist principles to the letter. The aesthetic and ideas behind home organization draw on well-established modernist historiography, and so often seem familiar enough to be true: streamlining the processes of everyday life will make things happen more smoothly and without stress or incident; cleaning out a space makes it more livable, and makes the person within it more productive, happier and calm; clutter is necessarily undesirable in the domestic interior—not just chaotic, but also outside the “norm” of middle-class domesticity. To be organized—on a spatial, temporal and even corporate level—is a fundamentally modernist concept.<sup>137</sup> The idea of modernism in home organization is

---

<sup>137</sup> Terry Smith points out how spatial organization at the Ford Motor Company’s Highland Park machine shop was a key component of Modernism. Ford married Taylorism to the imperatives of capitalist mass production to produce a “flow” that was neither predictable, nor necessary, but instead a deliberate convergence of factory



precisely that—an idea based around a very elite, functional, and historically specific moment in modernist history, distinct from what we know about the movement’s numerous voices, outlets, and expressions. Although we will see this connection is tenuous, and that home organization in fact has much to do with postmodern consumption and ideas about the home, aspects of the history of modernist design thinking in the twentieth century set a precedent for many of the trends in home organization today.

Modernist design, which roughly spanned from the 1910s to the 1960s, contains too many diverse strands of thinking and practice to be considered as a monolith. Nonetheless, design historians during the period of its inception worked to craft a singular narrative around a core group of designers and ideas (itself a modernist historical project), which was long considered a definitive history of the movement. The writing of art historian Nikolaus Pevsner in particular set forth an ironclad lineage of early design modernism that was the result of mostly European architects fashioning new forms with the use of mass-produced, machine-age materials in the wake of the rapid industrialization of the early twentieth century and the national crises of World War One.<sup>138</sup> Although Pevsner has since been reassessed, the impact of designers such as Walter Gropius, Peter Behrens, Herbert Bayer and Adolf Loos (primary actors in the so-called “Pioneer Modern Movement”) generally coalesced around a framework for

---

organization, production engineering, surveillance techniques and new technologies in a drive for profits. Smith, *Making the Modern*, 15–55.

<sup>138</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1949).

modernism that resonated for many years—even though, at the time, these designers argued amongst themselves about the purpose and ideal execution of their work.<sup>139</sup>

A second wave of design orthodoxy in the 1930s further solidified the singularly functional view of modernism crafted by Pevsner. The Museum of Modern Art’s “Modern Architecture” exhibition of 1932, along with its accompanying book by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, became another foundational text for “good design,” a term that became synonymous with international functionalist modernism. Again, the same list of mostly European male “geniuses” were featured as key players, though subsequent historians have noted Hitchcock and Johnson’s reductive reading of both the work produced by these designers and their socialist politics.<sup>140</sup> Ideal interiors in *The International Style* were large, white, stark rooms, absent of any decoration, with dividing screens to adapt a cavernous space to its

---

<sup>139</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 5–6. The history of early modernist functionalism crafted by Pevsner created a far more restrictive vision for modernism than other, more jubilant expressions of the machine age. Christopher Long’s exploration of the work of Paul Frankl (later labeled a practitioner of Art Deco) shows how stringent definitions of modernism exclude practitioners who self-defined as modernists in the period. Long argues that Frankl not only considered himself a modernist designer, but also dedicated himself to spreading the word of modernism in the U.S., even though his work was often less than fully autonomous (in the very literal referencing of his “skyscraper” bookcase) and functional. Christopher Long, *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). One of the earliest interventions into this period of design history include Reyner Banham’s rejection of the purely functional character of early modernist design. Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*. (New York: Praeger, 1967).

<sup>140</sup> Smith, *Making the Modern*, 397. Christopher Wilk also points out that by the 1930s Modernism was “gradually stripped of its previous social and political beliefs, especially as it became a part of the American marketplace”; he attributes this partially to the Museum of Modern Art, and partially to the dissemination of popular magazines that began to offer modernism as “one of a number of possible style choices for the home and its interior.” Christopher Wilk, *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914-1939* (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 14–15.

ideal functions. Johnson and Hitchcock's nod to ornament and material culture came in the form of last-resort interior decor advice: "there is no better decoration for a room than a wall of book-filled shelves."<sup>141</sup> The 1927 English translation of Le Corbusier's *Toward a New Architecture* cemented the aesthetic of total machine purity without any reference to the past or the consumer aesthetic of the present, especially his long-lived adage, "the house is a machine for living in."<sup>142</sup> Regardless of the many other "modernisms" subsequently established as part of the historiography of the subject, the principles of modernism established in *The International Style* resonated through the 1960s and remain foundational to the *idea* of modernism remembered in common parlance and reflected in the aesthetics and rhetoric of home organization today.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Norton, 1995), 88. Architecturally, "The International Style" equated very strictly to elements such as the appearance of weightlessness, regularity, and volume; aesthetics as a expression of functionality, which manifested in design features such as horizontal ribbon windows and building materials chosen only for their function; and a lack of any applied color with a preference for white or natural materials for interiors. *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>142</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986). Le Corbusier's use of ocean liners as a source of inspiration for stationary buildings inspired American industrial designer's flamboyant translation of speed into streamlined products. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 31.

<sup>143</sup> Certainly, the European functionalism that appeared in *The International Style* did not reflect what was actually built in America in the 1930s. Modernism's use of rectilinear geometry and industrial materials was just one of a number of styles to choose from in the domestic interior. Wilk, *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914-1939*, 14–15. Scholarship by Kristina Wilson has detailed the popular, "livable" expression of modernism in homes during the Depression. Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 2004). Scholars have also since documented a rich history of expressive, organic, and playful modernism through the twentieth century. One can argue that modernism had an aspect of organicism all along, even as part of the MOMA canon with the "Organic Design" show of 1941. See Brooke Kamin Rapaport and Kevin Stayton, *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in*

In *Modernism in Design*, Paul Greenhalgh defines the commonalities within the framework of “pioneering” design modernism. Many of these are concepts we see repeating throughout the contemporary discourse on home organization, such as: a drive to improve society through the consumption and experience of design products; a dedication to “truth” as both a moral value and an aesthetic quality for materials; a dedication to new technology, including mass production and prefabrication; a commitment to function and rationalism as a motivation for both construction and aesthetics; an abandonment of historicism in both social life and style in favor of ideals of progress and advancement toward a higher form; the transformative ability for design to shift the psychological outlook of those who experience it; and, finally, an atmosphere of crusade in which functionalism moves past being simply a style and becomes a way of viewing the world.<sup>144</sup> These aesthetics and philosophies are ever prevalent in

---

*the Atomic Age, 1940-1960* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001). In *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century*, Pat Kirkham shows that playful, organic, expressive, human design was a part of modernism as the Eames’s saw it. Pat Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). Further interventions into the historiography of modernism have come in the form of analyses along the lines of gender and sexuality—not only in terms of women who practiced as modernists, but also analyses of how we might re-read the subject to find examples of queered modernism(s) in the period. Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1997). Even modernism’s autonomy from the realm of popular consumption and mass culture has been effectively challenged. In *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, Beatriz Colomina argues against viewing modernism as an elite movement away from mass culture; in fact, by coming of age in the era of publicity, modernism cannot be understood outside the context of drawings, photographs, books, films, and advertisements in which it was represented. Ironically, MOMA’s marketing of The International Style had the effect of undermining its own reification of the subject in this regard. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>144</sup> Greenhalgh, *Modernism in Design*, 8–14.

contemporary home organization. Products to organize the home look “modern” in their use of materials like plastic, stainless steel, aluminum, glass, and light-colored wood. The aesthetics of such products at stores like The Container Store, in conjunction with their appeal to pure domestic functionality, aspires to a sense of modernist “timelessness.” Echoes of modernism’s preoccupation with the development of healthy bodies through the built environment are found in narratives that equate clutter with sickness in television shows about clutter like *Hoarders* and *Clean House*.<sup>145</sup> Self-help literature on home organization is premised on the idea that an interior free of excess is not only the most desirable space in which to live, but also the environment most conducive to personal and psychological well-being. At heart, home organization’s belief in perfectibility, especially through built environments, seems like a highly modernist proposition.

While elucidating, this comparison does not fully explain how or why contemporary home organization has taken on modernist aesthetics in the present day. The iterations of early-twentieth-century modernism responded to very specific historical moments in their own right. Calling home organization modernism-redux fails to fully explain the contemporary phenomenon because it neglects the economic circumstances that undergird the popular turn toward organization today. In contemporary home organization we see modernist-seeming tropes used to counteract a fundamentally

---

<sup>145</sup> A connection between bodies, efficiency, and modernism’s emphasis on efficiency, hygiene and ideal type has been linked to the ideology of the American eugenics movement. Both industrial design and eugenics adopted a rhetoric of perfectability, an ideology that infiltrated ideas about human life and the built environment. Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

postmodern problem: the anxiety around excess—in physical belongings, and also in the tempo of everyday life—reflective of the forces of late capitalism.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, critic Fredric Jameson defines late capitalism as a mode of political economy that arose out of the economic conditions of the 1970s, specifically:

...the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale.<sup>146</sup>

Both Jameson and David Harvey consider postmodernism's effect on culture—an insistence on depthlessness in both theory and image reproduction and a weakened sense of historicity resulting in the rise of nostalgia—to be a result of the expansion of capital into formerly uncommodified areas of life, tying the aesthetics of postmodernism to the historically specific condition of late capitalism.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), xix. David Harvey is more exact in his detection of the historical roots of this shift, identifying a “sea-change” in cultural and political-economic practices since 1972 that have changed the way time is experienced. Harvey connects postmodern cultural forms to “the emergence of more flexible modes of capitalist accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism.” David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into The Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), vii.

<sup>147</sup> The stylistic roots of postmodernism came from the field of architecture, which set the tone for postmodernism's “terms of engagement”: a rejection of high modernism and embrace of pop culture; the prioritization of surface and style over depth; use of quotation, metaphor, plurality, and parody; historicism and reference to past styles; and techniques of pastiche and bricolage. Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, eds.,

The nature of postmodernism explains how modernism is so readily adapted as a style by home organization texts. Early modernist designers had taken for granted that value was embedded in objects and reality was uncontested—all of which made objects and architecture prime candidates to offer social solutions to the ills of modernity. Postmodernism ungrounded this value, for better or worse, seeing reality as contested terrain and thus challenging modernism’s potential for totalizing discourse. Postmodernism’s emphasis on the fragmentary, ephemeral, and chaotic nature of culture expresses skepticism about the existence of “master narratives”—the supposedly transcendent and universal truths that underpin Western thinking. Many critics, such as Jean-François Lyotard, celebrated postmodernism’s destruction of master narratives because it signaled an end to the dominance of large-scale ideological concepts like patriarchy and capitalism by refusing to privilege any single subject position.<sup>148</sup> Abolishing narratives completely in order to celebrate plurality ushered in voices and perspectives previously unheard in culture; however, it also made postmodernism “safe” for adoption by less-radical politics.

In its insistence there can be no unified representation, only shifting fragments, postmodernism prevents a cohesive political strategy, which existed, however flawed, in modernism. Where modernism entailed the “the pursuit of better futures,” Harvey has

---

*Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990* (London and New York: V&A Publications, distributed in North America by Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2011), 13.

<sup>148</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Disagreeing with Lyotard’s idea of postmodernity as a complete break with narratives, Jameson saw postmodernism as derived from the same system of capitalism that defined modernist production. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xii.

argued, postmodernism “strips away that possibility by concentrating upon the schizophrenic circumstances induced by fragmentation and all those instabilities (including those of language) that prevent us even picturing coherently, let alone devising strategies to produce, some radically different future.”<sup>149</sup> What once was a causal relationship between representation and power had become an indeterminate system of representations and signs that create and feed each other. By emphasizing ephemerality and disinterested aesthetics over ethics, postmodernism pushes past “coherent politics,” allows style to be drained of political potential, or, worse, adopted by “the entrepreneurial culture that is the hallmark of reactionary neo-conservatism.”<sup>150</sup> Other architectural critics have since pointed to this same flaw in postmodern representation. In his Marxist critique of postmodern architecture, Reinhold Martin argues avant-garde modernism, with its “revolutionary dialectic of destruction and construction,” was co-opted by capitalism and the private realm in the 1970s in the form of office buildings serving “as the biopolitical instruments of a neoliberal economic order.”<sup>151</sup> Within the context of this dissertation, postmodernism’s unmooring of style from content allows modernism to become a free-floating signifier for consumption in the home organization market.

---

<sup>149</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 115. Although modernists also “found a way to control and contain an explosive capitalist condition,” modernism at least saw space as something to be shaped for a social purpose. *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>150</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 54; 116–117.

<sup>151</sup> Reinhold Martin, *Utopia’s Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (London and Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 31, 48. In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler describes the repression of the political in some contemporary architecture as “uncanny”—supposedly radical disruptions of cultural modes of expression that carry only the ghost of avant garde politics. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).



Although home organization's use of modernist-seeming aesthetics seems to be incongruent and anachronistic, the use of modernism as a style to cope with postmodern consumer culture is, in fact, consistent with the nature of postmodernism—a style adopted for the free-floating historical connotations of control, minimalism, and simplicity.

Home organization is also fundamentally reflective of late capitalism in its adoption of neoliberal values. On a practical level, neoliberalism's emphasis on deregulation and privatization since the late 1970s contributed to the rise of mergers and takeovers, which in turn encouraged the growth of brand identities to represent new corporate entities; on a cultural level, neoliberalism introduces a mode of thinking in which all human action is brought under the logic of the market, and individual entrepreneurship replaces collective or state-protected social welfare.<sup>152</sup> In its emphasis on personal responsibility in the absence of state and structural support, neoliberalism entails the cultural dissemination of messages about self-improvement rhetoric, often through the lens of personal consumption.<sup>153</sup> Individuals are encouraged to forge their own success or failure in the marketplace by internalizing “the right sorts of expert

---

<sup>152</sup> David Harvey contends that neoliberalism has had “pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.” Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

<sup>153</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, “Regulating The Abject.,” 230. See also, Gareth Palmer, “‘New You’: Class and Transformation in Lifestyle Television,” in *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (New York: Routledge, 2004), 173–190. McMurria, “Desperate Citizens and Good Samaritans.” Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

knowledge to sustain an endlessly adaptive and reinventing self.”<sup>154</sup> Neoliberal discourse about self-help is repeated throughout home organization texts, from narratives on make-over shows framing clutter as a failing of personal responsibility to entirely inward-facing advice on how to reach personal fulfillment through de-cluttering.

Contemporary organization’s preoccupation with time and efficiency is also a response to postmodernism. The quickened tempo of postmodern culture is manifest not just in the rapid reproduction and saturation of media images, but also in the faster circulation of objects, a result of the increased velocity of postmodern political economy.<sup>155</sup> The anxiety over “too much” that repeats itself in home organization texts—too much stuff, too much speed, too many responsibilities—seems to recognize and express the postmodern condition in non-theoretical terms. Where modernist design advice sought to teach individuals how to match their own tempo to the pace of modern life in the early twentieth century, home organizing texts encourage individuals today to simplify not in order to speed up, but to slow down. Readers and consumers of home organizing texts are meant to implicitly understand that they live in a culture of both excess and overwhelming speed, where their only option to cope with the pace is to temper their grip on material life. In this we see how the desire for static, organized perfection, which manifests in home organization’s emphasis on simplicity and latent spirituality, can be figured as a reaction to the conditions of postmodern culture.

---

<sup>154</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, “Regulating The Abject.,” 227.

<sup>155</sup> Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 2, 13.

Finally, the transformation of consumer culture in the postmodern era indelibly affects any understanding of contemporary home organization. As globalization has enabled goods to become more abundant in style, type and price-point, extensions in the availability and social acceptance of credit and debt have enabled personal overconsumption, the undercurrent to anxiety about clutter in the home. At the same time, the rise of corporate brands, a strategy of postmodern consumer culture linked to the increasing importance of image in culture, or “aestheticization of every day life,” encourages home organization to become a form of lifestyle consumption, which, ironically, seeks to compensate for the anxieties produced by overconsumption. Home organization texts—even those that supposedly advocate simplicity—encourage the acquisition of things as a form of personal expression. In this, the home being addressed by organization texts is decidedly postmodern, concerned with identity creation through the manipulation of surfaces. The popularity of organization advice literature indicates that Americans are heavily invested in expressing themselves through ideally organized spaces like the efficient office nook, the well-organized garage, or the color-coded closet. From this perspective, the desire for organization is simply a result of the ideological forces of late capitalism: the surface-level shuffling of things soothingly engages with, but does not fully halt, overabundance.

The purpose of this dissertation is not to apply a Marxist critique of consumption to home organization, leveling all interest in the subject to the realm of false consciousness. It is important to recognize, however, the fundamental changes in society that have engendered an environment in which the cultural messages of home

organization can thrive. I would be remiss if I failed to place the rise of a corporation like The Container Store—dependent as it is on the concept of “lifestyle” consumption and corporate branding—within the historical and cultural circumstances of late capitalism. Yet responses from web commenters about *Real Simple* and the voices of professional organizers complicate such a reading by offering the perspective of those interacting with the material (as would, one would imagine, a quantitative survey of customers at The Container Store). The question is, then, how do we frame home organization, which so often relies on consumption—or, if not consumption directly, then a consumer culture framework in which editing one’s self is as constitutive of identity as consumption—within postmodern culture? Is exerting control over the smallest space of the domestic interior—and, in some cases, the psyche—an act of individual expression, or are consumers simply reiterating the structures of late capitalism as “dupes” of a system they cannot break out of?

Scholars of material culture, anthropology, and consumer culture studies have taken both sides on this issue, arguing whether objects confer the ability to express individual agency within postmodern culture.<sup>156</sup> Scholarship on consumption has turned away from viewing the consuming subject as the victim of false consciousness, and toward an understanding of consumption as a creative practice requiring active manipulation of objects, meanings, and identities. Grant McCracken, working against

---

<sup>156</sup> See, for instance, Tim Putnam, “‘Postmodern’ Home Life,” in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed. Irene Cieraad (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 145.

what he called the “new orthodoxy” of anti-consumerism, called consumption a “medium of culture”:

Goods help us learn, make, display, and change the choices required of us by our individualistic society. They are not shackles but instruments of the self...the abundance, the diversity, and the obsolescence of consumer goods are not driven by marketing deception or our own giddy disregard for the state of the planet. They are driven by the objectives of our culture.<sup>157</sup>

Individuals invest in their home, McCracken argued, not because there is financial incentive to boost their investment in the property, but because homes are “transformational opportunities,” ways to boost or alter parts of the self.<sup>158</sup> However, in their study of storage and clutter discourses, Cwerner and Metcalfe argue against approaches such as these that privilege only the “spectacular” forms of postmodern consumption. Celebrations of postmodern consumer culture look only at the “visible and active dimensions of consumption: they still lack a discussion of what happens to things when not in use or when no longer displayed, and yet before they are removed from the home.”<sup>159</sup> Looking closely at storage and clutter fills the gap by looking at the material culture that unconsciously remains in the home—not what is on display, but what is ignored.

A landmark work of material culture scholarship, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton’s *The Meaning of Things* documents a similar belief in the potential for objects to contribute to the “cultivation of the self.” Rather than seeing materialism as the result of “mindless” consumers focused only on “crass self-

---

<sup>157</sup> Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning, and Brand Management* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Cwerner and Metcalfe, “Storage and Clutter,” 230.

centeredness,” the authors studied how individuals actually engaged with their belongings and used material objects to define themselves, ultimately finding that the cultivation of possessions can “serve the ‘common good’ for a person or culture.”<sup>160</sup> Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s account assumes one can have agency through their domestic belongings because the home is a space more easily controlled: “although one has little control over the things encountered outside the home, household objects are chosen and could be freely discarded if they produced too much conflict within the self.”<sup>161</sup> In *Wild Things*, Judy Attfield acknowledges this work as a seminal study of the importance of artifacts in the domestic interior, but nonetheless points out the “idealized sense of agency” the authors assume in their description of material possession.<sup>162</sup> Instead, Attfield suggests a “dynamic interplay between alienation and appropriation” in any interpretation of material culture in the home.<sup>163</sup> New inroads in scholarship seek middle ground in this terrain.<sup>164</sup> In “The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration,” Alison Clarke looks

---

<sup>160</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 231.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>162</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, 152.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> For instance, Sam Binkley’s work looks for empirical historical evidence of “specific agents and cultural entrepreneurs who, through their own innovation and design, have brought about a cultural and perceptual shift in the way consumers understand and interpret the meanings underlying everyday market choices”; such an approach finds “a far more uneven process than is typically provided by theorists of the postmodern turn who variously trace the demise of hermeneutic discursive depth in the swirling images of the new society of the spectacle.” Sam Binkley, “The Seers of Menlo Park: The Discourse of Heroic Consumption in the ‘Whole Earth Catalog’,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3, no. 3 (November 1, 2003): 285. In *Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*, Mike Featherstone argues to move “beyond the view that lifestyle and consumption are totally manipulated products of a mass society and the opposite position which seeks to

closely at why people spend time decorating their homes, using ethnography to show how construction within the home is neither the result of abstract structural forces, nor an act of pure individual expressivity; instead, the construction of a home is a “process,” “in which past and future trajectories (inseparable from external abstractions such as ‘class’) are negotiated through fantasy and action, projection and interiorization.”<sup>165</sup> An emphasis on “process” provides a path for thinking about home organization in contemporary culture without succumbing completely to arguments about the totalizing effect of abstract structural forces.

At its heart, home organization grapples with a number of tensions within postmodern culture that reappear again and again throughout the case studies of this dissertation. Companies that sell containers to help people get organized profit off discourse that posits overconsumption and accumulation as the source of America’s clutter; rhetoric from these same companies stresses the ongoing nature of organizing, which, coupled with corporate branding techniques, promotes an entire “lifestyle” of consumption in perpetuity. In order to help women find time—a scenario some home organization texts even acknowledge is reflective of gender inequity in the distribution of domestic labor—organization advice suggests women simply speed up the work they are already doing, parsing the same responsibilities into smaller chunks, in effect creating

---

preserve the field of lifestyles and consumption, or at least a particular aspect of it (such as sport) as an autonomous playful space beyond determination." Rather, he suggests, we should strike a balance between the two approaches, recognizing the consumer as an active, self-aware agent. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London and Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 81.

<sup>165</sup> Alison J. Clarke, “The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration,” in *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, ed. Daniel Miller (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2001), 25.

more work, not less. Self-help literature on de-cluttering the home asks individuals to detach their sense of self-identity from their belongings, yet uses the same principles to explain how editing objects results in the expression of one's "true" self. The promise of transcendence from the burden of one's clutter through inwardly focused self-fashioning comes at the expense of a nearly constant interaction with the minutia of everyday life.

Taken at face value, these tensions seem to indicate a closed loop for individuals who spend time and money on organization. Yet this dissertation suggests we see these tensions negotiated—not solved, but engaged—by the people who are doing the actual organizing in the space of the home. In the case of professional organizers, who provide the most vivid descriptions of how consumers take on home organizing, we are able to see some of this negotiation play out. It is in their level of engagement in the home, the fact that they go into a space and have to sort through the actual stuff in a closet, that organizers distance themselves somewhat from the rhetoric of the "containo-industrial complex." The organizers manifest the tensions of home organizing in their work—for instance, liking some aspects of The Container Store, but also acknowledging and criticizing the company for contributing to excessive consumption. We cannot ignore what we know to be true about postmodern culture and consumption. To be sure, the professional organizers are themselves participants in the patterns of consumption we see play out at other organization venues. We can, however, try to think about how people make sense of postmodern consumption in small ways, even as they participate in the very systems they are trying to work against.



## Chapter descriptions

Chapter One revolves around what I call the messy-home television programs *Hoarders* and *Clean House*. These shows have captured the public imagination, holding up a mirror to viewers reflecting popular anxieties around consumer culture, excess, and clutter that form the basis of the home organization movement. Although the interiors featured on these shows are often extreme, messy-home television programs represent issues common to everyday life, albeit in less extreme form, and therefore speak to the imagination by seeming to touch everyone. Each show frames clutter as a “sickness,” but from a slightly different perspective: *Clean House* accesses neoliberal narratives of home-makeover shows, suggesting clutter is a failing of personal responsibility, while *Hoarders* makes use of a psycho-pathological diagnosis to present an ambivalent, unresolved portrait of clutter in the home. By avoiding the easily resolved narrative of most home makeover television, *Hoarders* does not let viewers distance themselves from the mistakes of cluttering participants. Instead, *Hoarders* suggests clutter is a contagious cultural “sickness” endemic to life in the U.S. In this, *Hoarders* complicates the historic connection between clutter and class in order to posit disorder as a potential threat to all viewers. No one is safe from the perils of extreme clutter because it stems from the quotidian actions of domestic life, like shopping and collecting.

Chapter Two explores how home organization has become a corporate brand. This chapter also introduces home organization’s somewhat fraught adoption of modernist aesthetics and ideals, placing such expressions within the context of postmodern consumer culture. In its merchandise, retail strategy and brand identity, The

Container Store presents itself as a purveyor of a specific version of design modernism, in which the products of home organization can help transform the lives of consumers. The origins of such a strategy can be found in the company's early attempt to critique consumer culture by offering functional industrial products for the home. Over time, however, The Container Store has developed a seemingly endless array of manufactured organization products that formally mimic the domestic consumer products they are meant to contain. This chapter demonstrates how the application of modernist principles to a highly postmodern consumer landscape is not incongruous, but in fact a logical extension of the circumstances of late capitalism. The branding of The Container Store— itself a fundamentally postmodern corporate strategy—hinges on the selling of ongoing “solutions,” rather than just products; these “solutions” entail an entire “lifestyle” of home organization consumption that can exist in perpetuity.

Chapter Three uses the women's shelter magazine *Real Simple* to understand how time and gender become the focus of home organization. As with most shelter magazines, *Real Simple* emphasizes the construction of a beautifully arranged home interior, but the magazine's real aspirational offering is the concept of a perfectly organized schedule—which in turn produces a clean and organized interior, a fantasy space where time and chores stop. *Real Simple* is premised on the feeling that time has sped up in contemporary life, especially for women, and offers content that seems to engage with the reality that women are busy because they are disproportionately responsible for domestic work. An emphasis on efficiency in both text and graphics works to advertise the magazine's goal of being a guidebook for “real,” busy women—a designation that seeks to distance *Real*

*Simple* from other women's shelter magazines, but nonetheless relies on a range of assumptions about class, work, income, and domestic responsibility. *Real Simple* continues the discussion of how modernist design aesthetics provide a face for efficiency; easy-to-read graphics considered "modern" in their efficiency are complemented by "warm" imagery meant to appeal to female consumers. Numerous articles about how to save time doing chores, as well as reader-generated content that mirrors back to the *Real Simple* community a shared sense of domestic failings, seek to cultivate a sense of solidarity around the burden of domestic tasks. Seemingly incongruous elements—speed-oriented text and "warm" images of relaxation—work together to craft a seamless and seductive message that acknowledges, but never politicizes, gender inequality in the home. Rather than suggest increased equity as a solution to the problem of busy-ness, *Real Simple* elevates the concept of "stillness"—the warm, static, and ever-elusive future state of perfect organization—as the real aspiration for over-worked readers.

Chapter Four turns to self-help literature on home organization and the promise of psychic de-cluttering. In order to apply the principles of home organization to the psyche, literature on de-cluttering dissolves the distinction between mental and physical clutter. The leap to immateriality happens by acknowledging the emotional charge inherent to clutter, which de-cluttering literature presents as an ill-begotten result of the tendency to associate aspects of identity with material culture. De-cluttering literature flips the script of the usual framework of consumption, arguing clutter is harmful because it encourages over-identification with stuff, which in turn engenders dangerous sentimentality. Emotional attachment to objects is not just a symptom of nostalgia, however; de-

cluttering literature also frames clutter as a harmful delusion of future potential. Clutter keeps one from “living in the present”—an impediment to personal growth that finds root in neoliberal narratives of self-improvement. Although de-cluttering texts seems to entail a rejection of consumption, in fact this literature relies on the commodification of vaguely identified Eastern spirituality as an anti-modern “other” to a more commercial, excessive West. The somehow spiritual, fully de-cluttered lifestyle is, in fact, a product sold in service to the public brand of various organizational experts, who in turn offer a “clear,” un-cluttered mental space as the starting point for personal regeneration.

Chapter Five details the nascent profession of home organization through interviews with seven professional organizers in Austin, Texas. This chapter gives stronger voice to the responses of web commenters in Chapter Three, exploring in more detail how home organization is actually negotiated on the ground. In many ways, the rise of professional organization mirrors that of professional interior designers in the early twentieth century; as a distinctly gendered profession, organizing requires the strictures of professional membership in NAPO, the National Association of Professional Organizers, to legitimize the practitioners’ expertise and set it apart from amateur, DIY and otherwise devalued forms of domestic labor. In explaining their practices and skill-set, professional organizers often explain their role as “process designers” within the home. Unlike previous case studies in this work, which see organization as the “natural” ability of women, a product to be consumed, or an aspect of personal responsibility, professional organizers believe organization is a skill to be learned. Riding the wave of popular interest in home organization, professional organizers cannot be seen out of the

framework of critique that applies to all other case studies in this dissertation; organizers are also selling a product in the form of a service they provide in the home. The level of engagement required of working one-on-one with a client, however, allows professional organizers the ability to deviate from the prescriptive views of most home organizing texts—modeling what we might expect consumers to be engaging in when they take home products from someplace like The Container Store.

## Chapter One: Messy-Home Television and the Cultural Pathology of Clutter

*In our culture of collecting, hoarders hold a unique if unenviable place, wherein impairments of the mind and heart meet the foibles of the wider culture.*<sup>1</sup> –Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee

An episode in the first season of the show *Hoarders*, a popular reality TV program on the cable channel A&E, demonstrates the major issues at stake in the televised documentation of extreme domestic excess. As would become the enduring format of the show, the narrative weaves around two stories: Jennifer and Ron, a compulsive shopper and compulsive saver, respectively, who are facing a citation from the city and the loss of custody of their children as a result of their clutter-filled home, and Jill, a woman facing eviction because of her extreme food hoarding.<sup>2</sup> Two sets of experts work with the participants on the two-day intervention and clean up, a certified professional organizer with Jennifer and Ron, and a psychologist and organizer with Jill. Throughout the episode, black inter-titles add to the drama of an impending deadline subplot: “After much debate, Jill trashed some of her rotting food, but little else was accomplished during the first day of cleanup. Time is running out to avoid eviction.” Cameras slowly pan over piles of toys and clothes at Ron and Jennifer’s house, focusing closely on flies, rotting meat, and the gagging faces of clean-up workers in Jill’s kitchen. Interspersed with footage of the clean up, talking head interviews contextualize the story from a variety of perspectives (“She’s still pretty sick,” Jill’s sister flatly states near the end of the episode). Clean-up progress at both sites is arduous, and at various points

---

<sup>1</sup> Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 267.

<sup>2</sup> “Jennifer and Ron/Jill,” *Hoarders* (A&E, August 17, 2009).

family members break down—at one point, Jill’s disgusted son snaps at his mother and throws away a cooler full of expired food, leaving Jill resentful and bewildered at his quickness to waste what she believes is valuable. At the end of the episode there is only tentative success; as the viewers see a cleared dining room table, Jennifer declares that she finally feels like she has a home, but the professional organizer warns, “now your hard work truly begins.” Spaces, if cleared, are shown only briefly—there is no “reveal” of a redesign or new furniture to reward the viewer. Jill, we learn, is not being evicted and has been referred to a mental health professional with whom she is planning to begin therapy. The overall effect is to incite both incredulity and despair—there is no neat conclusion, only the knowledge that clutter on this scale invites alienation from outsiders and requires a lifetime of therapy to overcome.

In the last decade, television shows documenting the overabundance of material culture in American homes have become increasingly popular with US audiences. These shows hold up a mirror to the viewing public, showcasing the problem of overabundance on a spectrum that runs from lighthearted to catastrophic. These shows define the problem that home organizing seeks to address. In 2003, the shows *Clean House* (The Style Network, 2003-2005) and *Clean Sweep* (TLC, 2003-) began the phenomenon with a humorous makeover-style approach to homes filled to the brim with clutter. Only a few years later, the show *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009-), followed quickly by *Hoarding: Buried Alive* (TLC, 2010-), took a more serious approach to the issue of clutter, framing it as a pathological condition in accord with the professional psychology community. In all of these shows, the amount of clutter within a featured home is essentially the same—

interior shots linger on piles of paper, strewn clothes, and spaces that have become completely choked by material belongings. The difference lies in how the clutter is framed, which in turn provides an important lens through which to see how viewers are supposed to understand and explain issues around overconsumption, overabundance, and the home. The lighthearted *Clean Sweep* and *Clean House* and the documentary-style *Hoarders* and *Hoarding: Buried Alive* simply present alternative approaches to what is essentially the same topic: the problem of over-accumulation in American culture.

Whether the clutter problem should be fixed with a makeover or with clinical intervention, both types of clutter-oriented show frame excess in the home as a sickness. In the following analysis, the shows *Clean House* and *Hoarders* stand as case studies for the two types of messy house show, comparable along four major axes: the role of experts, the use of humor, the narrative arc of the show and the expectations for viewer empathy.

Anxiety about too much clutter has made its way into art and popular culture. Franz Lidz, the author of a book on the Collyer brothers, eccentric and wealthy New Yorkers who died (literally) under the weight of their excessive hoarding in the late 1940s, recently recounted his fascination with the subject in *The New York Times*. He related his belief that New Yorkers were especially prone to the problem—or at least fascinated by the subject—because small, rent-controlled apartments lacked storage space and the requirement to clean things during a move.<sup>3</sup> The Collyer brothers' story has been

---

<sup>3</sup> Franz Lidz, "The Paper Chase," *New York Times*, October 26, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/nyregion/the-paper-chase.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.



artistically rendered numerous times: a series of black and white drawings called "Love and Squalor on 128th Street" by the artist Richard Finkelstein were exhibited in 2003, and several plays, including one called "Clutter: The True Story of the Collyer Brothers Who Never Threw Anything Out," debuted in small playhouses across the country over the last decade.<sup>4</sup> The recent installation by the artist Thomas Hirschhorn, *Concordia Concordia*, is a *Hoarders*-esque explosion of material culture that the art critic Jerry Saltz calls a "clusterfuck aesthetic."<sup>5</sup> Hoarding-type behavior has appeared on recent episodes of popular television shows like *House, M.D.*, *CSI*, *Bones*, *Law and Order: SVU*, *South Park*.<sup>6</sup> Writing in the magazine *Esquire*, the journalist Chris Jones states:

A shudder-inducing TV series on A&E—*Hoarders*—and now a book by Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee called [*Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*] combine to shine a light into the minds and homes of America's estimated three million hoarders. They are scary places. They're even scarier because most of the rest of us could pretty easily find ourselves under similar burdens.

Here, Jones not only cites the general appeal of *Hoarders* for "the rest of us"—a scariness that lies in its ability to touch all members of a consuming society—but also lumps in the research of leading psychologists Steketee and Frost with the show as part of the same cultural zeitgeist.<sup>7</sup> Strict boundaries around research, entertainment, medical authority,

---

<sup>4</sup> "Robert Mann Gallery: Rick Finkelstein," *Robert Mann Gallery*, n.d., <http://www.robertmann.com/artists/finkelstein/about.html>. and Lidz, "The Paper Chase."

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Clinging to the Wreckage," *NYMag.com*, September 30, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/thomas-hirschhorn-concordia-concordia-2012-10/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jaime J. Weinman, "Can't Get Enough of Compulsive Hoarders.," *Maclean's*, January 17, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Although it is potentially unseemly to use the same source for both primary and secondary research, in the case of Frost and Sketekee's book *Stuff*, the value of the source lies both in their psychological research and in their framing and presentation of that

and popular opinion have been effaced as easily as linguistic distinctions that might have once defined the difference between collecting, cluttering, and hoarding.

On the surface, the popularity of a show like *Hoarders* seems to lie in its voyeurism into the lives of individuals living in extreme circumstances. In its self-consciously documentary style and emphasis on explicating hoarding as a pathological condition, the show *Hoarders* tends to provoke questions about the slippery boundaries around diagnosed illness and the ethical parameters of documenting mental disorder. While the exploitation of participants who appear on *Hoarders* matters in the wider context of reality television and psychotherapy, the issue of whether the disease is accurately diagnosed and treated is not taken up in this chapter. Entire fields of psychological practice and specialized associations of professional organizers are dedicated to the treatment of individuals who fall into the newly articulated category “compulsive hoarder,” and, in fact many of the experts in this field appear on the show. In the current version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), “hoarding” is considered a diagnostic criterion for obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, not its own category. Since hoarding frequently manifests

---

research for a popular non-fiction audience. There is no reason to doubt Frost and Sketekee’s research on compulsive hoarding, much of which has been referenced in this chapter; both are considered pioneers in the field of compulsive hoarding, hold positions at prestigious universities, and regularly publish in scholarly journals. They also contribute to a popular understanding of the subject—Frost and Sketekee are regularly interviewed in popular journalism around the show, Frost has appeared on *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, and both have co-authored a book with Dr. David Tolin, who has appeared in several episodes of *Hoarders*. Any scholarly doubt about the veracity of their research is beyond the scope of this project. In presenting their research for a popular audience, however, it is precisely this professionalism and its relationship to *Hoarders* that infuses their message about the cultural importance of hoarding with such weight.

independently of other disorders, however, specialists are currently recommending the creation of a new category in the upcoming DSM-V for “hoarding disorder.”<sup>8</sup> Frost, a popular expert on the subject who has appeared on TLC’s *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, readily explains that the boundaries around the topic are fuzzy at best, largely because the issues of excessive material culture affect most individuals: “the passion of a collector, the procrastination of someone who hasn’t taken the time to put things away, the sentimentality of one who saves reminders of important personal events—these are all part of the hoarding story.”<sup>9</sup> The objective of this chapter is not to assess the effectiveness of the *Hoarders* method, or the legitimacy of the DSM-IV or related definitions of hoarding, but instead to ask: why is *Hoarders* so popular? Why do so many people want to watch television about someone else’s messy house? What do these narratives say about America’s relationship to material culture and domestic consumption?

The issue at stake in messy home shows is how the framing of clutter invites or distances viewers from the messes they see on the shows, and how, in turn, they relate to messes they have in their own homes. The point of entry for viewers in both *Clean House* and *Hoarders* is how responsibility for material excess is framed, and how that responsibility implicates the viewer in his or her own involvement in consumption, acquisition, and collecting. Responsibility in this context boils down to whether the individuals featured on the shows are portrayed as suffering from an uncontrollable

---

<sup>8</sup> David Mataix-Cols et al., “Hoarding Disorder: a New Diagnosis for DSM-V?,” *Depression and Anxiety* 27, no. 6 (June 2010): 556–572.

<sup>9</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 14.

mental illness, or just caught in the grip of lax personal habits. The issue of blame and responsibility is important here not because participants on either show should or should not be held accountable for their behavior, but because both shows are positioned to teach lessons about excessive material culture to the public. When watching *Hoarders* or *Clean House* are viewers meant to believe that a house full of clutter is an addiction, a sickness, or a personal failing?

*Hoarders* and *Clean House* seek to solve, to varying degrees of success, the problem of material excess through their use of experts, tone, and narrative resolution (defined here as whether the show ends with a cleaned, made-over house). The different solutions offered by each show inform how responsibility is assigned for clutter. On *Clean House*, a wisecracking comedic host frames clutter as a failure of personal responsibility that is easily resolved by a two-day makeover, making it easy for viewers to enjoy and then dismiss what they see on the show as an individual problem. On *Hoarders*, the treatment of a psycho-pathological diagnosis guided by professional clinicians with no clear physical or psychic resolution gives viewers the impression that the participants on the show are “sick” through no fault of their own, and that excess is a problem that is not easily solved. When the problem of excess is not easily fixed and there is no clear assignation of responsibility, the narratives provided both by *Hoarders* and the experts around the show offer a metaphor of “sickness” to help viewers make an empathetic leap about the cause of hoarding. These same narratives apply the metaphor to consumer culture generally, bringing viewers around to face their own relationship with stuff through subtle admonishments about overconsumption as a distinctly American

disease. In the context of shows about clutter and hoarding, pathologizing might best be thought of as a way to assign blame for the problem of material excess, first on an individual level (where individuals are “sick” with an addiction to stuff) and then metaphorically on a national level (where American society is “sick” with consumer culture). To repeat, the purpose of this chapter is not to determine whether or not the individuals featured on the shows have a diagnosable psychological illness, or whether these terms are accurate reflections of the behaviors of excessive consumption and accumulation. The metaphor of “sickness” is important because it is deployed to hold up a mirror to *viewers* of the show—sometimes accurately, sometimes sensationally—in order to frame the pervasive message that all American families have too many things. By remaining focused around an individual home and ultimately an individual sickness, however, both shows are able to present overconsumption to viewers without providing historical or structural context that might provide another lens for looking at overconsumption.

This chapter argues that popular television shows about messy homes provide viewers with a televised jeremiad about consumer culture. In this, messy-home shows contribute to a cultural discourse on clutter that fuels the need for home organization. Televised material excess shows the lurid underside of American prosperity, where collecting and consumption exist on a spectrum that runs from retail therapy and hobby collecting to compulsive hoarding. If *The Container Store* presents itself as a bright, optimistic, and streamlined bulwark against clutter, messy home shows lurk in the background as a warning of possible things to come. Television is a powerful medium

through which to disseminate these messages. Media scholars Laurie Ouellette and James Hay argue that because serial reality TV is easily accessible within the home and part of everyday life, “its capacity to govern informally is also potentially greater than other media, including magazines and books, which require a different type of engagement on the part of the individual who must seek them out on their own.”<sup>10</sup> This point is well taken when considering how *Hoarders* and *Clean House* disseminate ideas about material culture, consumption, and the acquiring and saving of belongings. While contemporary advertising continues to represent American consumer culture as a panacea—especially in times of economic recession, when consumer dollars are a measure of prosperity and growth—these shows express anxiety with unavoidable issues of everyday life, asking viewers to ask themselves: in a culture of abundance, how much stuff is too much stuff?

### **Messy-Home Shows and the “Entrepreneurial” Home**

The contemporary boom in reality TV can be traced to the broader, transnational trend to examine “everyday terms of living” on television in the 1980s, itself a result of the deregulation of television markets. As Chapter Two details, the trends that shaped the development of reality TV are the same ones that engendered experiential retail environments like The Container Store, as well as the proliferation of material culture and overconsumption in the home. In the 1980s and 1990s, facing stiff competition from the proliferation of niche-audience-oriented cable channels and the subsequent fragmenting of traditional audience blocks and advertising revenue, the major networks looked for

---

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 73.

ways to cut production costs.<sup>11</sup> These included cutting “above-the-line” costs (those associated with talent, screenwriting, and location costs) and “below-the-line” costs (for unionized technicians, engineers, and extras).<sup>12</sup> By 2003, the reality format was firmly entrenched in both US cable and network television lineups with one-seventh of ABC programming dedicated to reality shows, and most other major networks vying to scale back scripted dramas for more reality in their schedules.<sup>13</sup> Both *Clean House* and *Clean Sweep* began airing in 2003 at the height of the reality television boom.

The rise of cable over network television has been pivotal to the genre of reality TV, allowing entire channels to spring up around niche topics.<sup>14</sup> The industrial context of reality TV for cable networks demonstrates that programs like *Hoarders*, *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, *Clean House*, and *Clean Sweep* can co-exist with such similar formats because their production costs are so low. Cable channels reside under the umbrella of larger conglomerates, which offer both the benefit of built-in sponsorship and the ability to hone in on a particular style and demographic of programming without fear of over-specification. Reality shows on cable channels also benefit from a steady stream of willing, unpaid participants. Writing about the show *Clean Sweep*, professional organizer Peter Walsh declared, “it was not unusual for our production office to receive two

---

<sup>11</sup> Chad Raphael, “The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–122.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. See also, Tania Lewis, “Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes: A History of Makeover Television in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia,” in *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, 2008, 452.

hundred and fifty applications *a day*, all begging to be on the show [italics in original].”<sup>15</sup>

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, an executive producer for *Hoarders* explained that while it was difficult to book the first seven episodes of the first season, by the second season the show had gained enough popularity that “we literally [received] hundreds of submissions every week.”<sup>16</sup> This willingness demonstrates not only the ready supply of free “talent” that is inherent to the structure of reality TV, but also the ongoing popularity and interest in the genre from the viewing community.

Home makeover and renovation shows have been an extremely popular segment of the cable reality market, reflecting postmodernism/late capitalism in both economic structure and content.<sup>17</sup> In the 1990s, Discovery’s The Learning Channel (TLC) was reinvented with great success for a lifestyle and consumer-oriented audience when it featured the first U.S. home-makeover show, *Trading Spaces*, a redux of the British show *Changing Rooms*.<sup>18</sup> This shift mirrored the general turn in television away from public service informational formats to topics that focus on home improvement, domestic life, and style (mirroring a similar shift toward experience retailing and lifestyle branding documented in Chapter Two). Design historian Viviana Narotsky has placed home design shows like *Changing Rooms* within a long history of discourse and advice literature about

---

<sup>15</sup> Peter Walsh, *Does This Clutter Make My Butt Look Fat?: An Easy Plan for Losing Weight and Living More* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Josh Rottenberg, “Obsessed With A&E’s ‘Hoarders’,” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 22, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the Home and Garden Television Channel (HGTV), ground-zero for the cable-channel home makeover boon, reached a total of 70 million home subscribers by 2001. Anna Everett, “Trading Private and Public Spaces @ HGTV and TLC: On New Genre Formations in Transformation TV,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2 (2004): 163.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, “Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes,” 453.



design and taste in the home. Contemporary makeover shows, she argues, begin with the very traditional, Victorian-era premise of the domestic interior as a safe haven, but add a “post-modern twist” by refusing to engage with highly modernist notions of good or bad taste.<sup>19</sup> Taste, in this case, means the application of specific design elements or decorating schemes; but taste does factor into makeover shows in the delineation between good and bad acquisition and display. Gareth Palmer’s analysis of the same show details how the result of home makeover programs consistently include elements such as a completely de-cluttered interior, an emphasis on maximizing space, matching colors, and the zoning of space for efficiency.<sup>20</sup> These elements function as signifiers of “taste” without necessarily requiring any single aesthetic. Programs like *Changing Rooms*, Narotzky argues, “draw viewers into a private space where the ultimate success or failure of the makeover is above all an expression of the home as a site of emotional investment,” in which the home is presented as a “blank canvas made of pre-defined colour-in areas, the discrete receptacles of a seemingly endless choice of possible dream-worlds.”<sup>21</sup> The popularity of home design and makeover shows has to do with the highly postmodern concepts of endless personalization through consumption and material culture, an ongoing thread of home organization texts and lifestyle consumption writ large.

---

<sup>19</sup> Viviana Narotzky, “Dream Homes and DIY: Television, New Media and the Domestic Makeover,” in *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant (London and New York: V&A Publications, 2006), 258.

<sup>20</sup> Gareth Palmer, “‘New You’: Class and Transformation in Lifestyle Television,” in *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (New York: Routledge, 2004), 178.

<sup>21</sup> Narotzky, “Dream Homes and DIY: Television, New Media and the Domestic Makeover,” 258–9.

Charting the history of makeover television, scholar Tania Lewis notes that while reality TV can be partially explained by transnational trends such as deregulated markets and a renewed interest in “the real,” national distinctions remain important.<sup>22</sup> Lifestyle programming especially has “traditionally been inward looking, reflecting everyday concerns and national beliefs and values.”<sup>23</sup> Although the format “shell” of shows like the UK’s *Changing Rooms* might be transferrable from nation to nation, the content of lifestyle shows needs to be specific to cultural values and mores in order to be successful; not all makeover shows succeed in all markets.<sup>24</sup> The regulation and appraisal of dirty homes has a long legacy in American culture, finding particular expression in Progressive era assimilation campaigns in which reformers worked to inculcate ideas of citizenship and middle-class values through cleanliness in African-American, working-class and immigrant populations.<sup>25</sup> Lifestyle programming in the U.S. also draws on a long history of American self-help movements; scholar Dana Heller considers makeover television as “backward glancing, or as descended from earlier national myths and practices of reinvention and transformation” at the same time that it is “forward-looking insofar as it registers faith in myths of perpetual progress and upward mobility.”<sup>26</sup> One can argue that the themes brought up in *Clean House* and *Hoarders* are compelling because they touch

---

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, “Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes,” 447.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Dana Heller, *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.

on long-standing ideas about class, American self-transformation and consumer culture within the home.

Along with lifestyle and home makeover programming, another contextual category for the shows being considered in this chapter is the “life intervention,” a genre best defined in various texts by the authors Ouellette and Hay.<sup>27</sup> Popular on reality TV since the late 1990s, the label refers to programs that “mobilize professional motivators and lifestyle experts, from financial advisors to life coaches, to help people overcome hurdles in their personal, professional, and domestic lives.”<sup>28</sup> Ouellette and Hay claim that life interventions are an important strategy of neoliberalism; as the market logic of the private sector has replaced direct government responsibility, “life interventions circulate techniques for a government of the self that complement the value now being placed on choice, personal accountability and self-empowerment as ethics of neoliberal citizenship.”<sup>29</sup> Life intervention television acts as a social service infused with commercialism, a dynamic that seeks to regulate behavior at the same time that it remains attendant to ratings, product placement, advertising, and merchandising. In this sense, Ouellette and Hay explain, life interventions “are perfectly compatible with the logic of entrepreneurial government.”<sup>30</sup> Home design shows fit into the neoliberal parameters of

---

<sup>27</sup> With its emphasis on transforming cluttered spaces and personal motivation, *Clean House* might also be considered what scholar Anna Everett calls “transformation TV,” where the traditional makeover format features “visually spectacular and—for all intents and purposes—permanently altered home situations.” Everett, “Trading Private and Public Spaces @ HGTV and TLC,” 160.

<sup>28</sup> Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, 63–64.

<sup>29</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, “Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 476.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

the “life intervention” because of their blend of self-reliance and faith in transformation through domestic space. Media scholar Gareth Palmer argues that US lifestyle shows seek to hand a “focused, self-willed individual a set of key prescriptions for the determination of the self.”<sup>31</sup> Home makeover shows demonstrate an “entrepreneurial” home, where learning the right choices about consumption, storage, and decoration from a range of experts can solve complex problems simply by bringing one closer to self-realization and self-expression.

On the surface, the commercialism of the makeover and life intervention genres seems to exist in tension with shows that purport to reckon with excessive acquisition. Like many aspects of the home organization industry, the imperative to streamline stuff does not seem to sit well with consumerism. Indeed, June Deery, writing about the show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, points out that most home makeover shows are essentially long-form advertisements for products wherein consumers are encouraged to create positive change in their lives and fix their problems through consumption.<sup>32</sup> Both *Hoarders* and *Clean House* resolve this tension between consumption and de-cluttering by delineating between good (low volume and thoughtful) and bad (excessive and supposedly random) consumption. The central premise of *Clean House*, which closely fits the model of life intervention reality TV, exists around this very idea of good and bad consumption. During the show, participants sell their belongings in a yard sale so that the

---

<sup>31</sup> Palmer, “‘New You’: Class and Transformation in Lifestyle Television,” 185–6.

<sup>32</sup> June Deery, “Interior Design: Commodifying Self and Place in ‘Extreme Makeover,’ ‘Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,’ and ‘The Swan,’” in *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 160.

money can be used by the designer/host to buy decor he deems more suitable for the household.<sup>33</sup> If, as scholar Gareth Palmer argues, lifestyle television operates on the assumption “that all goods (clothes, kitchens and backyards) function as signs of identity—they tell others who we are (or rather who we want to be),” then *Clean House*, like most home organization texts, frames the discarding and selling of objects as just another form of identity creation—a similar claim made by many of the self-help books about de-cluttering referenced in Chapter Four.<sup>34</sup> In *Clean House*, participants are encouraged to use de-cluttering to express their personal style, and to dig through their belongings to find the “best” things that are most representative of whom they would like to be. The objects the participants get rid of are just as important as the new things the show’s designer buys for their made-over home. Tellingly, the “Resource” page on the show’s website consists not of references for psychological help, as does the equivalent page on the *Hoarders* website, but links to the products that were used in the makeover: Sherman Williams paint, Evinco Design, and Club Furniture.<sup>35</sup> On *Hoarders*, however, participants are not left with a newly designed space, and further acquisition is actively discouraged. To be sure, the cable channel A&E benefits from the “entrepreneurial government” of deregulated television and niche advertising (often in the form of cleaning products, which speak directly to anxieties piqued in the show itself), but the

---

<sup>33</sup> Thinking back to Viviana Narotsky’s argument about how “post-modern” home design shows do not operate along strict lines of taste, one finds that ideas of good and bad still play into the transformation of spaces on messy home shows, but simply as a judgment wielded by the designer/co-host of the show, itself part of the proliferation of taste and expertise endemic to postmodernism.

<sup>34</sup> Palmer, “‘New You’: Class and Transformation in Lifestyle Television,” 178.

<sup>35</sup> “‘Clean House’ Website,” *The Style Network*, n.d., <http://www.stylenetwork.com/mystyle/shows/cleanhouse>.

message of the *Hoarders* narrative does not comfortably fit the life intervention and makeover format. The unease of a non-makeover show in the makeover genre is partly the source of its allure—rather than the simple, reductive narrative of so many similar programs, viewers are offered what seems to be a real glimpse of consumption gone totally awry.

### ***Clean House***

The nine-season *Clean House* follows a team of four who help families in Southern California clean out their extremely cluttered living spaces. The current team of television hosts on *Clean House* consists almost entirely of entertainers: Matt Iseman, an improv performer who functions as the show’s handyman; Trish Suhr, a stand-up comedian who sets up the yard sale of participants’ belongings; Mark Brunetz, an interior designer and reality TV regular; and new host Tempestt Bledsoe, the actress who played “Vanessa” on *The Cosby Show* (the longtime former host was Niecy Nash, a comedian on the show *Reno 911*). Although they mostly come from an entertainment background, these individuals function informally as organizers, psychologists, and interior designers within the context of the show. After an initial intervention into the participants’ home, the *Clean House* team asks the family to sort through their belongings and contribute the majority to a yard sale, the proceeds of which will be matched up to \$1000 to re-design the house. After the yard sale, a renovation team cleans the space while a member of the team of hosts redecorates the interior with new and saved objects; the episode ends with a “reveal” of the newly cleared home.

Each episode of *Clean House* is a self-contained narrative with a tidy resolution, made even more blithe by the wisecracking of the comedic cast. A small vignette from the show's 100<sup>th</sup> episode demonstrates the lighthearted tone of the show, the effect of which is to lower the stakes of an extremely cluttered home for viewers.<sup>36</sup> To the strains of the show's theme song, music that sounds like the television soundtrack version of a '60s girl group, a narrator introduces the pretense for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary episode, "The Dirty Little Awards Show." "We've plowed through 99 mountains of mayhem," the narrator jokes, "we've met 99 families *full* of foolishness, and we've found 99 ways to clear out the clutter."<sup>37</sup> The event, held at a Los Angeles club, is attended by former participants on the show who are nominated for awards ranging from "Messiest" to "Most Kooky Collection" to "The Relapse Award." While members of the makeover team interview past participants on a red carpet, all of whom seem happy enough to joke with the hosts, quick clips flash from the past six seasons of the show. Views of homes so cluttered that only small paths of cleared space are visible through the piles of stuff are punctuated by the theatrical screams and comic asides of then-host Niecy Nash. When the anniversary show begins, Nash appears on a stage in front of the audience of former participants with a feather duster prop, flanked by two muscular men dancing with brooms. Casting back over the 99 families, all living in varying states of extreme clutter, the impression one gets is not particularly dire—some families even laugh off their "relapse" into clutter while interviewed outside of the venue—although the sheer number

---

<sup>36</sup> "100th Episode: The Dirty Little Awards Show," *Clean House* (Style Network, August 31, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

of families featured over six years gives the impression that the show will be able to go on in perpetuity with a never-ending stream of cluttered participants to choose from.

Individual episodes are no less comic, even during moments of genuine human trauma. In one episode, a Vietnam veteran and his wife explain their recent revelation that his extreme clutter is a result of long-ignored post traumatic stress disorder after being the sole survivor of an attack on his barracks during the war.<sup>38</sup> Between this tearful revelation and host Bledsoe's suggestion that their clutter is a re-creation of the locker that saved his life by absorbing most of the shrapnel in the attack, a quick cut shows the rest of the team assessing the couple's bedroom with raised eyebrows and making jokes about having to "dive in" to the clutter to clean it out. The resolution of the family's problems comes from Bledsoe's suggestion to "break down the walls" of the past by cleaning out the house with the *Clean House* team. Lighthearted elements of *Clean House* are familiar tropes in lifestyle programming, where DIY mishaps and ineptitude create a narrative, "sit-tran" (situation transformation) element to the shows.<sup>39</sup> In this example, however, lightheartedness comes not from the homeowners' inability to keep up with the well-honed skills of professional designers and builders, as is usually the case in DIY home shows; instead, the hosts and experts of *Clean House* use humor to contextualize how show participants had been making mistakes in life *before* the show even occurs. The "entrepreneurial" intervention, then, is to let the family know how their clutter was a personal problem from the past, and to help them solve it once and for all

---

<sup>38</sup> "The Bucci Family," *Clean House* (Style Network, May 18, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Everett, "Trading Private and Public Spaces @ HGTV and TLC," 160.



with a makeover and redesign from a team of television-personalities-turned-home-experts.

In the episode “The Brown Family,” the documentation of one family’s clutter highlights how the narrative framing of *Clean House* is pivotal to understanding clutter as a personal failing rather than a pathological illness.<sup>40</sup> Numerous elements of the episode are directly comparable to similar elements found on *Hoarders* but simply lack the contextualizing element of dramatic music and clinical psychology. In “The Browns,” Yolanda Brown lives with her husband and two daughters amidst such incredible clutter that they are unable to wear the same clothes twice, simply because they cannot find the clothes after they have worn them once. Brown, we learn, works three jobs, and her husband is often out of town for long periods of time (he does not appear the entire episode). Rather than consider the continued absence of her husband as a sign of serious distress caused by mental illness around cluttering, Yolanda’s marriage is considered just one more comic cause for the necessary intervention. “Yes, Yolanda Brown’s got it going on,” Nash explains, “so why is her husband always out of town? Maybe because inside her own crib there’s a nasty virus going on. Uh-huh—an advanced case of clutteritis!”<sup>41</sup> Soon viewers learn that the call to producers for an intervention did not come from Yolanda, but from her sister, Deborah. Participants in both *Hoarders* and *Clean House* have not necessarily volunteered themselves to be on the show. In fact, the casting page for the show *Hoarders* often poses questions about the potential participant in the third person (“Can the hoarder sleep in their bed?”)—in this and other ways, *Hoarders* aligns

---

<sup>40</sup> “The Brown Family,” *Clean House* (Style Network, August 6, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

its language and process with current psychological research, which maintains that compulsive hoarders resist interference from outsiders who will view and judge their homes. Often, therefore, a main plot point in most episodes of *Hoarders* is suspicion and mistrust on behalf of the participant of the help they are receiving from the show. A similar situation plays out on *Clean House* with far lower stakes; although Yolanda tells the camera, “I’m really upset at Deborah for calling *Clean House*, because this is really embarrassing to me,” her embarrassment is not considered a serious impediment to the progress of the show and is never mentioned again.

*Clean House* seems to confront over-consumption head on. During a sit-down session with the Brown family, Nash addresses Yolanda’s love of shopping as the source of their problem. Yolanda’s daughter suggests her mother is a shopaholic as they all giggle and Yolanda happily explains, “some people like to drink, some people like to smoke, I like to shop!” On *Hoarders*, such an admission would be diagnosed as compulsive shopping, inseparable from the pathological collecting that landed the participant on the show, and requiring the same ongoing therapeutic treatment to be stopped. On *Clean House* the identification of a problem presents its own solution: now that Yolanda knows she over-shops, she can just stop shopping. Although it goes unsaid, viewers are led to believe Yolanda is not only shopping too much, but also doing the wrong kind of shopping. Here we learn shopping itself is not a problem; the hosts’ shopping for the re-designed space is framed as helpful and appropriate at the same time Yolanda’s shopping is characterized as too cheap, too excessive, and adding only to her clutter. In its clutter, we learn, the Brown family’s home interior fails to adequately suit

their personality and needs. As the team re-creates an interior for the Brown family based on the sale of their clutter, they emphasize a de-cluttered look over any consistent interior design coherence. The newly re-made master bedroom and living room are completely devoid of objects on any surface, shelf, or counter—the lack of material culture in the home is so extreme that both of Yolanda’s daughters comment on the need to put something they own back on the shelves. The only room with material left inside of it is the closet, where accessories hang in specified drawers, clothes hang in groups (color coded into dresses, blouses, blazers, and pants), and clear plastic boxes with small pictures of their contents hold pairs of shoes. When shown her new closet, Yolanda is instructed to make sure she always only shops for what she can house visibly in her closet; visibility is a thread that runs through home organization literature as an expression of mastery or control over physical objects. All of the material for the remodeled closet, a host explains, have been generously donated by one of her favorite places, The Container Store, thus framing the “right” kind of consumption for Yolanda in her newly made-over home.

At the end of the *Clean House* transformation, after rounds of theatrical fainting and screams of horror from the team of hosts, Iseman, the handyman, declares, “I’m pleased to say, the clutter-ectomy was a complete success!” If, like *Hoarders*, the *Clean House* team calls Yolanda’s issue a sickness, it is simply a jolly metaphor (an –ectomy, or an –itis) for a problem that has more to do with lack of motivation than compulsive behavior. More than a few times, the team asks Yolanda’s daughters if they do any housework, to which each of the daughters alternatively accuses the other of being lazy.

On *Clean House*, clutter in the American home is the result of overconsumption, which is in turn caused by laziness (buying new clothes because you can't find your old clothes) and lack of self-awareness (failing to realize "shopaholic" tendencies). Only through self-interrogation and careful consumption guided by television-host experts does a family successfully overcome and transform their cluttered space. Finally, at the end of the episode as the team is getting ready to leave, Deborah is asked if she thinks her sister will keep the house clean, to which she tiredly responds, "that's hard to say," a response similar to the tentative optimism offered by the experts on *Hoarders*. This momentary admission that the clutter problem might run deeper than a makeover show is quickly absorbed by upbeat music and scenes of the family happily exploring their newly designed space.

Using this example, there are three areas in which *Clean House* is an ideal foil for its more serious counterpart, *Hoarders*: humor, the role of experts, and narrative resolution. Each of these, in turn, contributes to how viewers are meant to perceive responsibility for a clutter problem. On *Clean House*, a humorous approach led by friendly, non-professional television personalities culminating in a neat, made-over space results in a scenario viewers can feel good about. Tania Lewis points out that in its emphasis on self-transformation, American lifestyle programming comes less from a reality TV model—where contestants are locked in a house or compete to survive on an island—but from the talk show tradition, where lifestyle experts offer advice and "ordinary" people are encouraged to confess their (often socially aberrant) lifestyles and

behaviours to the public.”<sup>42</sup> The talk show model is especially apt for this particular “messy house” show dynamic in which down-to-earth experts use humor to distance themselves from the socially unacceptable behavior of the clutter-ridden participants. The effect of this distancing, where, much like a talk show, participants are only featured because they want to admit to a viewing public that they have a problem, is essentially to invite a type of voyeurism into the lives of people with too much stuff. Ouellette and Hay articulate the distance that is created between viewers and reality TV participants when they ask for help:

The human subjects addressed by the interventions are typically presented as less knowledgeable and less personally motivated than the imagined TV audience, which makes it possible for the viewer to maintain some distance from ‘at-risk’ individuals who struggle (sometimes unsuccessfully) to overcome personal hurdles by mastering the practical lessons on offer.<sup>43</sup>

In the case of *Clean House*, the down-home-ness of the experts functions to make them a point of connection with the audience at the expense of the cluttering families, who each are guilty of a personal failure that explains their descent into material excess. Even if viewers empathize with the clutter in the Browns’ home, they can be reassured of its relatively painless solution. With the help of these experts, we learn clutter is not an irredeemable problem—the homes are able to be made-over, after all—therefore, it is also not a problem for viewers, so long as they, too, keep their homes clean.

---

<sup>42</sup> Lewis, “Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes,” 454.

<sup>43</sup> Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, 65.

## Labeling the Messy Home

Both *Clean House* and *Hoarders* try to identify the problem of excessive clutter, but a neat definition of the subject does not exist. If a fractured, multi-faceted and decentralized postmodernity characterizes aspects of home organization, from the proliferation of experts to the diversity of the marketplace for organization retail, then it also defines the absence of authoritative language to define the central problem of clutter in the first place. A range of terms, from addiction to collection to compulsive hoarding, is used to try to pin down what we see in messy-home shows.

Linking both *Clean House* and its counterpoint on TLC, *Clean Sweep*, with the rhetoric of addiction, scholar Ronald Bishop argues that these programs “create an ideology that suggests that the individuals who appear on these programs are addicts, desperately in need of a nationally televised intervention.”<sup>44</sup> He claims that both shows apply various elements of the medical model of addiction to participants, such as denial, reliance on experts, and the concept that addiction is a lifelong struggle. For instance, although participants on *Clean House* and *Clean Sweep* often refuse to admit they have a problem in the beginning of the program, after being pressed by the hosts they will admit they “have an abundance problem.”<sup>45</sup> Though participants experience momentary relief after the “reveal” of a clean room, the show stresses they will most likely fall back into their cluttered ways because “they will always be addicted—as defined by the experts—

---

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Bishop, “It Turns Out the Armoire Is Your Mother: Narratives of Addiction in Two Cable Television Organization Programs,” *Addiction Research & Theory* 14, no. 2 (April 2006): 140.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

to accumulation.”<sup>46</sup> (To this I would add the show itself ends with footage of a cleaned, made-over space, which dilutes this message somewhat; on *Hoarders*, the home makeover is never shown). Bishop also identifies the typical addiction model’s reliance on experts, who in this context are “young, hip would-be addiction counselors” who emphasize a failing of personal responsibility rather than the contextual evidence that would explain why the excessive collecting might happen in the first place.<sup>47</sup>

Emphasizing a missing element of personal responsibility, rather than cultural context, to explain the nature of the clutter “addiction” reassures the audience of their critical distance from those featured on the show, and asserts the self-help model of personal transformation as the ideal solution to the problem of material excess.

As the language of addiction has been co-opted by *Clean House*, Bishop notes, it has lost, for better or worse, its medical potency. Part of his argument relies on the work of psychologists who have exposed the “ongoing effort of AA and related organizations to shape our perceptions of addiction.”<sup>48</sup> Viewed as an ideology, rather than a scientific fact, addiction rhetoric can then be applied to any number of issues—from sugar to shopping to collecting. Bishop contends that while the addiction model is highly modernist in its reliance on professional treatment by experts, the televised version of this model is fundamentally postmodern because it involves the dissolution of the boundaries between high (medical authority) and low (popular entertainment). This slipperiness in

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 156. Modifying Bishop’s analysis only slightly, I have found the unflinchingly upbeat tone of *Clean House* subsumes the negative narrative of ongoing addiction into a positive makeover message—for instance, Deborah did not believe Yolanda would keep the house clean, after all, but that did not keep the show from ending on an up-note.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 143.

the distinction between real disease and its televised representation allows the flexible ideology of addiction to be applied to seemingly unrelated concepts.<sup>49</sup>

Russell Belk, a scholar focusing on the cultural contexts of collecting, makes a similar point about the murky boundary that divides hobby and compulsion. While there is a difference between collecting and hoarding, he explains that many collectors identify their hobby as a “disease” in a “half-serious hyperbole intended to justify their ostensibly selfish and indulgent collecting behavior as something they cannot help.”<sup>50</sup> Belk references a 1988 survey of 1,300 American collectors in which 30 percent agreed with the statement, “I regard myself as a compulsive collector in that collecting is an obsession with me,” and 70 percent agreed with the statement, “as far as my interest in collecting is concerned, you might say I am addicted to this particular hobby.”<sup>51</sup> Belk rightly points out “the terms addiction, compulsion, and obsession have not been used in a consistent manner in medical, sociological, and psychological literatures.”<sup>52</sup> As previously mentioned, unclear terminology even exists in the professional psychological community, as researchers currently argue for the inclusion of hoarding in the DSM-IV.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, participants on both *Clean House* and *Hoarders* must self-select into these categories through the casting process. To be considered to be a participant on *Clean House* one must submit a fairly short online form attesting to having at least three

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>50</sup> Russell Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 141.

<sup>51</sup> Russell Travis, “Why People Collect: Motivational Tendencies and the Addiction Factor,” paper presented at the Eighteenth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 1988, in Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>53</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 14.



“messy” rooms, and answering yes to the prompt, “do you having a hard time letting go of stuff you don't need but just can't seem to part with?”<sup>54</sup> The *Hoarders* casting web page, on the other hand, is headed only by the title “Help For Compulsive Hoarding,” and includes numerous fields that directly reference therapeutic language (“Does the hoarder have a compulsive urge to acquire?” “Can the hoarder use furniture for the intended purpose?” “Does the hoarder have an emotional attachment to the items collected?”).<sup>55</sup> While, again, it is not necessary to determine whether or not the individuals who appear on *Hoarders* actually suffer from compulsive hoarding as defined by the DSM IV, it is apparent that they are meant to appear as such, and, judging from the casting forms, are likely to be participating in the pathologizing of their behavior. They, or someone close to them, agree with the label “compulsive hoarding.”

Currently, psychological researchers—including many who appear on *Hoarders*—define compulsive hoarding as “(1) the accumulation and failure to discard a large number of possessions that appear to most people to be useless or of limited value, (2) extensive clutter in living spaces that precludes activities for which the rooms were designed, and (3) significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by hoarding.”<sup>56</sup> The Institute for Challenging Disorganization (ICD), a professional body for organizers who receive certification to work with issues around hoarding, or what they term

---

<sup>54</sup> “‘Clean House’ Website.”

<sup>55</sup> “Help for Compulsive Hoarders (‘Hoarders’ Casting Page),” <http://www.aetv.com/casting/>, accessed January 27, 2013, <http://hoardersdocumentary.com/machform/view.php?id=3>. Producers on *Hoarders* say that they use the input of therapists to distinguish “genuine hoarders from the merely messy.” Rottenberg, “Obsessed With A&E’s ‘Hoarders’.”

<sup>56</sup> Gail Steketee and Randy O. Frost, *Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring: Therapist Guide* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

“chronic disorganization,” includes many of the organizers who appear on *Hoarders*. The ICD has developed its own Clutter-Hoarding Scale for professional organizers and related professionals working in hoarding environments, including “psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, nurses, health department professionals, social workers, educators, researchers, municipal planners and code enforcers, and ADD/ADHD coaches.”<sup>57</sup> The Clutter-Hoarding Scale rates interior environments according to five color-coded levels; each level is gauged via five assessment categories, which include “structure and zoning” (access to exits, function of utilities and structural integrity), “animals and pets” (compliance with local animal regulations and evidence of infestation), “household functions” (safety and accessibility of rooms for intended purposes), “health and safety” (sanitation levels), and “personal protective equipment” (a recommendation for those working in the home).<sup>58</sup> Both of these rubrics—clearly implied, if not stated outright by experts on *Hoarders*—measure domestic excess in terms of safety, health, sanitation and dysfunction, rather than along an axis of good and bad consumption developed by *Clean House*. Yet clearly, there are aspects of stories told on *Clean House* that fit this description. Yolanda’s house was nearly uninhabitable, with few places to sit or stand, and her extreme clutter was presented as the cause of her husband’s prolonged absences. Rather than being considered homeowners who are full of

---

<sup>57</sup> *Clutter-Hoarding Scale: A Residential Observational Tool* (St. Louis, MO: Institute for Challenging Disorganization, 2011), 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. The ICD also treats those living in Severe Domestic Squalor (SDS), which often involves hoarding but can exist on its own—this includes “accumulated filth and dirt (potentially including animal or human feces),” “rotting food,” “infestations of rodents and insects,” “months or years of accumulated trash,” and “broken or non-functioning facilities inside.” *Ibid.*, 14.

“foolishness,” as on *Clean House*, the individuals on *Hoarders* are introduced as suffering from a mental illness, even though their clutter looks much the same as it does on *Clean House*. Rooms are just as full and unusable, although the documentation on *Hoarders* tends to focus closely on visceral signs of squalor such as rodents, trash, and rotting food far more than the footage on *Clean House* does, whether or not these aspects are actually more prevalent in the home. These lingering shots of extreme filth follow in a tradition of reality television that relishes the incongruity and sensationalism of “clean” experts engaging with dirt in the home.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that nearly identical interiors in *Clean House* and *Hoarders* are framed in such different ways points to the constructed nature of labels around clutter. Although instances of extreme acquiring and saving have been documented throughout the twentieth century, the behavior has only recently been labeled and identified as the focus of psychological research.<sup>60</sup> Belk points out that social milieu often determines whether collecting is considered “normal” or “excessive,” both highly constructed terms.<sup>61</sup>

We generally regard museum collections as normal and accept that they legitimize objects that are acceptable for individuals to collect; if it’s good enough for the Met, no further questions need be asked. Still, if the public were given sufficient information, it is likely that many museum collections would also be judged to be excessive...The U.S. Smithsonian Institution, for example, in 1982 had 100,000 bats, 2,300 spark plugs, 24,797 woodpeckers, 82,615 fleas, 12,000 Arctic fishing tools, 14,300 sea sponges, 6,012 animal pelts, 2,587 musical instruments, and 10 specimens of dinosaur excrement in its warehouses. More recently it acquired a collection of hundreds of different airsickness bags.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Amy West, “Reality Television and the Power of Dirt: Metaphor and Matter.,” *Screen* 52, no. 1 (March 2011): 63–77.

<sup>60</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 1–9.

<sup>61</sup> Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, 143–146.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

Even in psychological research, economic and social factors play a large part in discovering cases of compulsive hoarding. People with more resources are often better able to hide their hoard simply because they have more space. Although problems around acquiring and managing possessions, not economic circumstance, are still identified as the root cause of compulsive hoarding, psychologists and therapists consider the behavior pathological only when it begins to damage the quality of one's life, circumstances that might be mitigated, even if just for a while, by economic status.<sup>63</sup>

While viewers might apply the rhetoric of addiction to various aspects of their lives as a result of the type of informal labeling they witness on *Clean House*, they are also not likely to take seriously the claim that the people on the show are clinically sick. In fact, *Clean House* can afford to assume a tongue-in-cheek tone precisely because it does not purport to address the pathology of compulsive hoarding. Viewers expect a level of artifice and manipulation in *Clean House* because, as Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette spell out in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, reality TV maintains a “self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real”—yet another nod toward the postmodernity of messy home shows.<sup>64</sup> In other words, reality television is a slightly less fraught genre than documentary when it comes to issues of representation because it carries an overt “acknowledgment of the manufactured artifice that coexists with truth claims”:

If the reality programming that we examine here celebrates the real as a selling point, it also distances itself from the deliberation of veracity and the ethical

---

<sup>63</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 12, 58.

<sup>64</sup> Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 2.

concerns over human subjects that characterize documentary programming in its idealized modernist form.<sup>65</sup>

In overtly humorous shows like *Clean House*, this is a fairly straightforward concept. Reality shows like *Hoarders* present a much more compelling case for the documentation of an actual mental illness, however—albeit one that deals with similar issues of accumulation, collecting, and consumer culture. *Hoarders* gets closer to the tricky delineation between professionalism and entertainment by using experts who are building a career in the psychological community around the identification and treatment of compulsive hoarding to frame the narratives on the show. The relationship between professional hoarding experts and the resulting narrative of clinical intervention creates a scenario in which viewers are provided with what is at best a complicated and unsatisfying take on the well-worn trope of the home makeover format.

### ***Hoarders***

*Hoarders*, which first aired in 2009 and is now starting its fourth season, runs on the Arts and Entertainment Network (A&E), a cable channel known for producing other reality shows that engage with psychological pathology and extreme behavior. These include *Obsessed* (2009-), a show about individuals living with anxiety and panic disorders that has since been replaced in the same time slot by *Hoarders*, and *Intervention* (2005-), a show where addicts are filmed engaging in destructive behavior

---

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

before their families and friends stage an intervention to confront the addict into recovery.

The premise of *Hoarders* is the exposure and temporarily relief of individuals who are labeled as suffering from compulsive hoarding; the “intervention” comes in the form of a professional (usually a psychologist) who leads a two-day clean up with the help of a professional organizer and cleaning crew. Many stylistic aspects of *Hoarders*, such as the insertion of black inter-titles with white text to introduce contextual information, dramatic music, and the involvement of clinical experts, are reminiscent of *Intervention*, which has already been the subject of much critical writing in media studies.<sup>66</sup> The stylistic seriousness of *Hoarders* lends to its pretense as a show that is saving lives. The music is dramatic, alternatively calling up feelings of dread, hope, and horror, especially when the camera slowly pans across a room piled high with garbage. In comparison to *Clean House*, the clutter on *Hoarders* is not about a comedic failure of personal responsibility, but instead a supposed illness that is out of the individual’s control. Unlike *Clean House*, *Hoarders* cannot be funny because it presents the stakes of clutter as too high, and because the root of the problem, unlike clutter that is the result of pure laziness, is not easily fixed.

In addition to claiming to provide a short-term solution to an individual case of excessive clutter, *Hoarders* purports to be a tool to educate the public about this relatively newly identified disease. Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, two leading

---

<sup>66</sup> Eric Freedman, *Transient Images: Personal Media in Public Frameworks* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), chap. 4. See also, Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, 70.

psychological researchers in the field of hoarding, describe their initial incredulity that the issue warranted dedicated research outside of the scope of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which includes hoarding as a symptom. Their most recent book, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, explains the genesis of their first investigation of hoarding as an issue in its own right in the early 1990s.<sup>67</sup> *Hoarders*' appeal seems to be equal parts the exposure of individual cases of extreme hoarding and the freshness of newly discovered psychological territory, especially with an introductory title that lists the somewhat shocking statistic, "more than 3 million people are compulsive hoarders." With 69 episodes in the first five seasons and a new season underway, one gets the feeling that there will be an ever replenishing well of hoarding tales to be uncovered by the show, each more extreme than the last.

The unrelenting heaviness in the message and tone of *Hoarders* is both caused and alleviated by the inclusion of clinical experts. Writing about trauma studies, scholar Eric Freedman points out that *Hoarders*' sister show on A&E, *Intervention*, should not be critiqued out of hand for its voyeuristic tendencies, for the same criticism could be levied against the entire genre of reality TV. Instead, he argues, the narratives created by *Intervention* offer some evidence that the show has had many positive effects on the lives of participants, often because of the inclusion of leading experts in the field of addiction.<sup>68</sup> *Hoarders* is also premised on the participation of experts who range from

---

<sup>67</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 10. See also, Randy O. Frost and Rachel C. Gross, "The Hoarding of Possessions," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 31, no. 4 (May 1993): 367–381.

<sup>68</sup> Freedman, *Transient Images*, 99. Similarly, in most episodes of *Hoarders*, the participants are offered resources for further therapy beyond the two-day cleanup.

psychologists to licensed clinical social workers (LCSW) and professional organizers.<sup>69</sup> The professional organizers featured on the show are mostly affiliated with the ICD.<sup>70</sup> These experts contribute emotional and professional weight to the narratives we see on the program—more so, to be sure, than the hosts of *Clean House*—but they also expiate the feeling that the show is entirely exploitative. The experts on *Hoarders* give the impression that the storylines have been interrogated with some degree of professional insight before being presented to a television audience.

The reliance on experts who regularly deal with issues surrounding hoarding in their professional lives produces a tension between principles of treatment and the needs of a ratings-driven show. Again, the point here is not that *Hoarders* does not adequately treat the issue of extreme clutter, but that within a framework where the behavior is considered pathological there exists a tension between the show's aims and the community of experts it engages. For instance, cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be an effective treatment for hoarding, but it is a slow process that often involves touching and deliberating over each object in the home before finally discarding it.<sup>71</sup> *Hoarders* only partially resolves this tension through a central conceit in which an impending deadline looms over the participants, forcing them to clean some part of their

---

<sup>69</sup> For instance, David Dia, Ph.D., LCSW, CCBT and Robin Zasio, Psy.D., LCSW

<sup>70</sup> These include Brendan Daniel, CPO-CD, of Action Organizing LLC, Dorothy Breininger, the founder of Delphi Center for Organization, and Dr. Darnita L. Payden, of Dr. Clutter Life Management. The ICD is closely related to the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), but differs in its focus on hoarding, its education for members, and certification. See Chapter Five for more details.

<sup>71</sup> David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures: Help For Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7; 68.



home under duress with the help of the crew. Each episode is then structured around the profound loss that will come as a result of leaving the home under a mountain of stuff—eviction, home foreclosure, or the loss of custody of one’s children.<sup>72</sup>

In many ways, however, *Hoarders* offers viewers a complex portrayal of compulsive behavior, one that seems consistent with current methods of therapy. Just as Eric Freedman points out that unresolved outcomes on *Intervention* reinforce the idea that “the recovery narrative is always tentative and never completely over,” *Hoarders* portrays the psychological state of compulsive hoarding as ongoing, with no easy fix.<sup>73</sup> The imperative that hoarding treatment be ongoing replicates a thread that winds through most home organization texts—like consumption and collecting, de-cluttering and organizing unfold as a continual requirement in the negotiation of the material culture of everyday life. On *Hoarders*, where clutter is a lifelong pathological illness, clutter management is arduous and sometimes threatening, not creative or even just mundane. In the “Jennifer and Ron/Jill” episode, after food hoarder Jill has successfully cleaned out her two refrigerators full of rotting food, Dr. David Tolin, a psychologist featured on that episode, explains somewhat somberly, “unless Jill makes a dramatic and sustained change in her behavior, then the problem’s just going to return, she’s just going to fill that space up again.”<sup>74</sup> Episode after episode, the narrative structure of *Hoarders* is fraught

---

<sup>72</sup> The *Hoarders* production schedule takes place over a two-day period. By comparison, the show *Hoarding: Buried Alive* has an initial clean-up day, followed by five to seven weeks of independent work by the participant (sometimes with the aid of a professional organizer) before the show returns to revisit the space. Susan Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer, August 1, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Freedman, *Transient Images*, 100.

<sup>74</sup> “Jennifer and Ron/Jill.”

with uncertainty and distress—usually, the only positive outcome is the temporary and contingent deferment of the impending eviction, foreclosure or other traumatic loss.

Privileging professional treatment at the expense of a tidy narrative conclusion does not necessarily eliminate the need to acknowledge the frustration this deviation from the traditional home makeover format might cause viewers. For instance, on *Hoarders* only some episodes end, in the vein of other home makeover shows, with a clean house. Other episodes end without the culminating view of a cleared space. *Hoarders* acknowledges the frustration this might cause viewers used to a more dramatic final outcome through the interjection of narrative inter-titles. In the episode “Linda/Steven,” the episode’s expert, Dr. Renee Reinardy, engages Linda, a hoarder, in a process of clearing her home in which Linda gets to carefully consider each object before throwing it away.<sup>75</sup> Reinardy explains that although it would be easy to bring a crew in to clean up the house in two days, doing so would just mean having to come back in two months. At the end of the episode, an inter-title informs viewers of the less-than-impressive outcome of the intervention: “After ten hours the cleanup crew is leaving for the day. Linda has cleared part of one room. Six people worked 10 hours in Linda’s 2000 sq foot home...only one room was cleared.”<sup>76</sup> The inter-title confirms the viewer’s suspicion that the narrative will reach no satisfactory end, promoting a sense that the project undertaken by the show far exceeds the expectation of the usual home makeover format.

---

<sup>75</sup> “Linda/Steven,” *Hoarders* (A&E, August 24, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> A commentator on an online fan community for the show called the inter-titles the “BSOJ,” or “black screen of judgment/justice.” Strega (Network Executive), “I Had Plans for That Rock!,” *Television Without Pity*, August 26, 2009, <http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?s=1536910269cc4be8022c8921bff96f8c&showtopic=3187670&st=30>.

In acknowledging the frustration of leaving the episode's narrative incomplete, the show re-emphasizes its clinical perspective on clutter—no matter how fast we want it to go away, this issue is out of our hands.

Similarly, family members who appear on the show also express frustration at the painful process of clearing a hoarder's home and are given adequate time on camera to express their disapproval, much of which touches on issues of personal responsibility, laziness, and a perceived desire for objects over personal relationships. The frustration, disbelief and disgust given voice by family members can be considered a mouthpiece for the less charitable feelings evoked by the hoarding spectacle, another counterpoint to the patient, therapeutic angle taken by the show's experts. In the episode "Adella/Teri," Darcy, the daughter of hoarder Adella, has returned to her family home after a twenty-two year absence to help the *Hoarders* crew at the request of her dying father, Adella's estranged husband.<sup>77</sup> When speaking of her newly returned daughter, Adella tells viewers, "Darcy had a good education. She's had things that I didn't have. And that's good. But you should never look back on your mother and think 'the heck with you. I made it and you didn't.'" The introduction of college-educated Darcy is meant to give viewers a point of identification that plays up distinctions between rationality and irrationality along class lines, especially since Adella is cast as being out-of-touch with the squalid nature of her surroundings. While explaining why her hoarding is not a problem during a solo on-camera interview, Adella says the real issue is that "high society people" do not like her way of living with things. Yet footage of her house in

---

<sup>77</sup> "Adella/Teri," *Hoarders* (A&E, September 6, 2010).

Edmond, Oklahoma shows spaces filled with items that most people would consider trash, undermining her words. Any critical interrogation of Adella's claim that viewers watch the show in order to judge the material circumstances of others is quickly destabilized by a living situation deemed to be illegal by the standards of the local health department (a fact revealed later in the show).

During the clean-up, Adella displays more than the usual cautious anxiety exhibited by most of the show's participants, who often express feelings of shame and remorse, but are still wary that their belongings will be thrown away without their consent. Instead, Adella expresses outrage and indignation that outsiders have come to judge her way of living. Her angry responses to what are presented as patient and generous offers of help read, within the confines of the narrative, as ungrateful and surly. After a particularly trying afternoon, Darcy breaks down and yells at her mother in front of the therapist and cleaning crew:

You know what? You need to stop the manipulation. Everyone here feels a massive disrespect from you because of what you're doing. You do not care about the impact to yourself nor to anyone else around you. (Adella: "well that's your opinion"). No, it's not my opinion. This team came here, away from their families, to give you their strength and their efforts, to make a difference for you... and you don't have the respect to say thank you! ... You need to man up and to take some responsibility for your choices! (Adella: "You need to have some respect for your mother") "You need to have some respect for everybody! ... Quit re-creating your own personal tragedy everyday. Determine you want something different. You got to want it.

If we hear strains of the self-governing agenda promoted by life intervention shows, it is a message we are supposed to understand is not directly condoned or scripted by the show. Instead, it reads as a directly emotional plea from an individual who appears

otherwise rational, incredulous, and motivated to change her mother's extraordinary situation, even as her mother rejects the idea that she needs help in the first place. Both the narrative inter-titles and the privileging of family members' angry reactions work to create a connection with viewers, acknowledging the frustration of watching such an arduous process. Here, again, we have the "life intervention" model of reality TV, where Adella is "presented as less knowledgeable and less personally motivated than the imagined TV audience," allowing viewers to maintain distance from her "at-risk" behaviors. Unlike the typical life intervention format, however, *Hoarders* does not forge this identification between viewer and elevated outsider to change the course of the episode's outcome. As opposed to *Clean House*, where the mere identification of a problem is enough to suggest its solution, *Hoarders* shows that hard work and strength of character alone do not solve the problem of excess, even if someone you love is yelling at you about it. Allowing the responsibility to be placed, even momentarily, back on the hoarder without providing satisfactory resolution—Adella remains completely unmoved by her daughter's rant—reinforces the message that clutter cannot be solved by a little self-motivation and elbow grease, even under the guidance of experts.

When I conceived of this chapter I thought it would be entirely about class-based voyeurism of excessive material culture, with a story like Adella's functioning as an exemplary representative case study of how viewers are supposed to identify and judge the show's participants. While this message is powerful, it is not the only, or even dominant message about viewer identification on the show. On "Janet and Christina," Christina, a hoarder whose complaints about the process of the show echo Adella's

suspicious about the perceived judgment of viewers, lives in a large house and has recently ended her career as a psychologist, a circumstance that lends the episode an eerie circularity.<sup>78</sup> As Christina picks carefully through garbage bags to decide what she is willing to part with, she says, “people must think this is hilarious, someone going through their trash.” Later, as the clean-up continues and Christina becomes more agitated by pressure to move quickly, she calls attention to the exploitation built into the show’s format: “it’s just sort of an affront that someone would just think it’s okay to come in here and take all my stuff and I wouldn’t be part of it...It’s sort of like I’m invisible on the screen...” Rather than offer thanks, like the participants on *Clean House*, Christina—like Adella—expresses outrage that viewers might be judging her. Whether viewers perceive Christina’s complaints as a more valid response to how one would react to a crew of outsiders throwing away one’s belongings than Adella’s because of class-indicators like a professional degree is worthy of speculation. More important, though, is how the presentation of Christina *and* Adella as “compulsive hoarders” undermines a reading of the show as one of pure class-based voyeurism.

Including participants who exist across a range of economic backgrounds bolsters the “it might happen to you” pretense of the show, as if compulsive hoarding existed at one end of a spectrum of consumption and collecting that all Americans currently participate in. Where *Clean House* maintains a fairly tidy distinction between low volume clutter and good taste (with attendant implications about class), *Hoarders* dissolves the class/clutter connection, in the process dissolving another mechanism through which

---

<sup>78</sup> “Janet/Christina,” *Hoarders* (A&E, January 18, 2010).

viewers might distance themselves from the spectacle of clutter on the show. While some *Hoarders* participants live in very small houses and apartments, others have the resources to fill multiple storage units and apartments and have even bought second homes when their first has become too full to live in.<sup>79</sup> In many instances, the show revels in moments of incongruity between higher-end living and clutter—in “Janet/Christina,” Janet has collected piles of patio furniture incommensurate with the needs of a single home; the twenty sets of un-used furniture lie rotting on her patio from exposure to rain and sun. Camera shots linger on the still-attached price tags of \$80 shirts and \$60 pillows buried in piles of other material. Dwelling in the disconnect between the value of objects and our expectations for their storage, upkeep and volume is perhaps less about class distinctions than it is about heightening the sense of surprise that extreme collecting exists on all levels of society.<sup>80</sup> This surprise does, in fact, play on our class expectations for the show, but does so to make the point that *all* Americans who shop and save might fall victim to this same fate. Here, then, is the double whammy of *Hoarders*: in explaining that extreme clutter is a sickness beyond the scope of personal responsibility, the show makes efforts to show that hoarding is an equal opportunity diagnosis, leaving viewers with the feeling this uncontrollable sickness of clutter might, someday, affect them, too.

Though the scenes of clutter on *Hoarders* seem so extreme as to create a distance between the participants and the viewers—placing the viewers in a position of power

---

<sup>79</sup> For instance, on the episode “Patty/Bill” we learn that Bill’s clutter has spilled over into four rental properties, making them unlivable and un-rentable for more than twenty years. In “Kerrylea/Lauren,” Kerrylea has convinced her husband to buy a second home to house her clutter. “Patty/Bill,” *Hoarders* (A&E, August 24, 2009). “Kerrylea/Lauren,” *Hoarders* (A&E, September 14, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> “Janet/Christina.”

where they watch the struggle of individuals in the grip of a mania about their belongings—the program takes care to show that the extremity stems from seemingly normal, everyday behaviors, like shopping. In the episode “Patty/Bill,” Patty’s home is filled with the spoils of her excessive shopping, though she insists that aside from her clutter, she leads “a very normal life.” Patty calls her clutter a “dirty little secret”—she is married, lives in a large house in a nice neighborhood, and has two children.<sup>81</sup> Footage shows Patty strolling through Target, explaining how she likes to look for deals for her family, an unsurprising activity for a suburban parent of small children. Various scenarios show Patty expressing a great deal of shame and remorse, especially in reaction to aspects of her situation that are highlighted as the most hazardous and unsanitary to her family’s everyday life (a dramatic high point in the episode occurs when the professional organizer announces the existence of rodents in the clutter, expressing concern about breathing in dried mouse droppings, at which point Patty starts to cry, saying she feels “revealed” and “exposed”). Appealing to a shared sense of propriety, Patty explains, “it was really, really difficult for me to decide to open myself up and to expose myself because this is something that nobody likes to share.” The show does not counter Patty’s voice, as it does Adella’s, with an angry family member asking her to take responsibility for her actions. Patty’s call for empathy, and her expressions of guilt and shame, remain uncontested, thus allowing her to become a point of connection with the viewing audience.

---

<sup>81</sup> “Patty/Bill.”



In these moments the show makes a larger, though tacit, argument about consumer culture. What we see on *Hoarders* is an extreme version of what all Americans experience: the constant struggle with overconsumption and the management of their belongings. By emphasizing certain shared characteristics of hoarding, viewers are given the chance to put themselves, to some extent, into the narrative of the show. Jodi Flynn, an executive producer on *Hoarders*, confirms the appeal is about viewers' shared sense of anxiety over having too many things: "Who doesn't have a junk drawer? Who doesn't have old T-shirts from college in a closet? It may not rise to the level of hoarding, but anyone can understand that."<sup>82</sup> The aspect of shared experience appears to have gained some traction with fans. Posts on an online community forum for *Hoarders* overwhelmingly mention the desire to clean homes and refrigerators in response to various episodes. In order to limit the number of comments that refer to people who know people whose homes are this messy, a post at the top of the discussion forum asks fans to keep their conversation focused on the show: "If all you have to say about the show is 'It reminded me of another person who seems like a hoarder...' then you can probably stop there."<sup>83</sup> *Hoarders'* appeal, as Flynn suggests, is that "anyone can understand" the issues at stake. It is not, like so many other reality TV shows, about circumstances most people will likely never encounter, such as being trapped with strangers in a house, like *Big Brother*, or working in a dangerous and specialized job, like *Ice Road Truckers*. *Hoarders* is a representation, albeit extreme, of issues people think about on a regular basis. The current season's advertisements pick up on the quotidian allure of the show by framing

---

<sup>82</sup> Rottenberg, "Obsessed With A&E's 'Hoarders'."

<sup>83</sup> Strega (Network Executive), "I Had Plans for That Rock!"

mundane household objects in absurd light. In one ad, the words “Prized Possession” appear above a smashed aluminum can, while in others a spent toilet paper roll is introduced as “Keepsake,” and an old sponge as “Sentimental Value.” These promotional spots demonstrate the mismatch between images and words that is *Hoarders*’ stock and trade—as participants explain their collections, or feel remorseful about their mess, or try to convince a therapist about a keepsake, viewers see piles of trash. At the same time, because these objects are not spectacular, but familiar and acquired through domestic routines common in most homes, their re-casting reveals the eerie potential of unchecked consumption and clutter.

Often it is the experts—those on the show and those who are related through their popular science rendering of the subject—who contribute to the message that hoarding is not just about individual illness, but that we should all, in some ways, be invested in this problem. In *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, Frost and Steketee explain, “the boundaries between normal and abnormal blur when it comes to hoarding. We all become attached to our possessions and save things other people wouldn’t. So we all share some of the hoarding orientation.”<sup>84</sup> The message from the experts is that the behavior we see on *Hoarders* is not only understandable, but also symptomatic of cultural issues that touch all Americans. In *Buried in Treasures*, a book on hoarding co-written by Frost, Steketee and David Tolin, a regular on *Hoarders*, the authors place their research on compulsive hoarding within the context of consumer culture:

Over the past 50 years, the number of possessions owned by the average person has increased dramatically. Modern civilizations are based on consumerism,

---

<sup>84</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 14.

saving and acquiring; the more people accumulate, the better the country does. For most of us, it is not particularly difficult to manage our possessions—in fact, most people find it pleasurable. . . . Some of us, however, have much more trouble resisting acquiring, and we save too many possessions. . . . In short, our possessions own *us* rather than the other way around.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, after spending most of their book explaining the source of compulsive hoarding is not cultural, Frost and Steketee spend the last chapter discussing American consumerism. “Objects carry the burden of responsibilities that include acquisition, use, care, storage, and disposal,” they argue, and “the magnitude of these responsibilities for each of us has exploded with the expanding number of items in our homes during the past fifty years.”<sup>86</sup> Although Frost and Steketee stress the “universality” of hoarding, they are quick to add, “our research with hoarders indicates that although materialism is a part of the hoarding syndrome, there is a fundamental difference between people who are simply materialistic and those who suffer from hoarding.”<sup>87</sup> It is important to note that although research on hoarding reveals no clear origin, it is unlikely the behavior is actually the product of an American culture of consumerism.<sup>88</sup> Though some individuals suffering from hoarding may claim to save because they lived through a period of deprivation,

---

<sup>85</sup> Tolin, Frost, and Steketee, *Buried in Treasures: Help For Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding*, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 262.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 266. See also, Peter D. Kramer, “One Man’s Trash . . .,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/books/review/Kramer-t.html?emc=eta1>.

<sup>88</sup> Cognitive Behavioral Therapy models understand hoarding to be the result of “(1) personal vulnerabilities that include past experiences and training, negative general mood, core beliefs, and information processing capabilities, which contribute to (2) cognitive appraisals about possessions, which in turn result in (3) positive and negative emotional responses that trigger (4) hoarding behaviors of clutter, acquiring, and difficulty discarding/saving.” Steketee and Frost, *Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring*, 14.

there seems to be no link between material circumstances in childhood and hoarding—many hoarders come from middle-class families and did not experience material hardship.<sup>89</sup> Although compulsive shopping is often brought up as a twin problem with hoarding—hoarding is both about acquiring and about the inability to throw away—these issues are strained by a culture of consumption, but not necessarily caused by one. For instance, the drive to acquire might take the form of compulsive shopping at thrift stores, high-end department stores or dumpster diving; however, avoiding cultural cues that promote retail and shopping is clearly difficult in American culture. Ultimately, however, it does not matter in this instance whether hoarding is definitively cultural or medical in origin; this chapter shows that the problem of excess clutter is far too fraught to be easily labeled.

So while it might *seem* like the behavior on *Hoarders* exists on a sliding scale, where everyone participates in some aspects of acquiring and collecting to a different degree, research indicates that this is not the case. The point of the cultural work *around* hoarding, however, in both books and television shows, is to make everyone who participates in consumer culture feel that they are invested in the problem. Steketee and Frost's address of contemporary America's drive to consume—despite their belief in a psychological origin of the problem—shows their understanding that these issues are in the forefront of readers' minds. Similarly, we should view the narratives sold by *Hoarders* not primarily as voyeurism or mental illness but as part of a growing anxiety

---

<sup>89</sup> Frost and Steketee believe a traumatic experience in childhood, however, may exacerbate anxiety and compulsive acquiring. Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 32.

over the “illness” of American consumer culture.<sup>90</sup> In the absence of a clear personal responsibility narrative, itself a troubling reiteration of neoliberal values, viewers of *Hoarders* are left with little investment in the show, save its purely voyeuristic take on mental illness, until hoarding takes on culturally meaningful dimensions. Unlike *Clean House*, *Hoarders* does not provide a set of quirky hosts who form a connection with viewers and attribute severe clutter to a lack of personal motivation, easily solved by a makeover and reintroduction into the world of “good” taste. Without this point of connection and hopeful narrative solution, *Hoarders* threatens to be simply about watching sick people. In order to refute this accusation, the show instead turns the concept of “sickness” into a metaphor that can then be applied to culture generally.

---

<sup>90</sup> Recently published popular non-fiction books drive home the metaphor of overconsumption-as-sickness. Peter C. Whybrow, a psychiatrist, titled his 2005 book about overwork and overconsumption, *American Mania: When More is Not Enough* to form an analogy between acquisition and “the illness of manic depression.” In 1997, PBS aired a program called *Affluenza*, defined on the program’s website as, “Af-flu-en-za n. 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream.” The program was inspired by the writing of British psychologist Oliver James, who performed research in Sydney, Singapore, Moscow, Copenhagen, New York and Shanghai to determine “how one can increase the strength of one’s emotional immune system.” *Luxury Fever*, by Robert Frank, similarly frames contemporary American consumption as a kind of crazed malady leading to social and spiritual disease. Peter C. Whybrow, *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 4. PBS, “Affluenza,” n.d., <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/>. Oliver James, “About Affluenza,” *Oliver James Website*, accessed November 30, 2012, <http://www.selfishcapitalist.com/affluenza.html>. Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Weighing the Cost of Excess* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

## Conclusion

On first glance, *Hoarders* seems far too extreme to be viewed as a cautionary tale about American culture writ large—it should, in theory, be more difficult for viewers to project their own experience onto the level of squalor demonstrated on the show because of its adaptation of the psychological-medical model of compulsive hoarding. But without a narrative that blames clutter on a failing of personal responsibility, there is no easy explanation for why something like this would happen, or how to fix it. In the absence of this narrative, *Hoarders* makes extreme clutter relevant by applying the metaphor of clutter-as-illness on a cultural level. In order for viewers not to feel that the show is simply an exploitation of the disease it strives so hard to prove exists, the show must find a way to make clutter relevant to all viewers. Viewed alongside *Clean House*, the point of identification for viewers of *Hoarders* is almost counter-intuitive: the friendly and humorous hosts of *Clean House* form a connection with the viewers at the expense of participants, who are, after all, responsible for their own minor tragedies; on *Hoarders*, the lack of clear blame and responsibility makes everyone, to some extent, responsible. The “entrepreneurial” home of *Clean House* fits the model of neoliberal reality TV in its suggestion that clutter is a personal failing remedied by the “right” kind of consumption and self-transformation. *Hoarders* deviates from this model by hinting at the real problem beneath the clutter of the show participants (Americans have a lot of stuff), even as it hides such a message within the rubric of a single-person show about mental illness. What makes *Hoarders* so much more powerful than *Clean House* is its ability to play both sides of this coin—at once drawing ratings for the view that it

provides into abject and extreme material circumstances, and also providing a sense of immediacy and inclusion for viewers, that they might one day find themselves a part of this world. The tacit narratives about consumption and clutter on messy-home television shows provide the foundation of cultural anxiety on which the home organization industry is based.

## Chapter Two: The Container Store and the Commodification of Home Organization

*“That’s what a box is. It’s sort of the distilled essence of organization.” –John Mullen, co-founder of The Container Store.<sup>1</sup>*

A typical consumer at The Container Store is taught about the benefits of organization on many levels. On the one hand, there are the products themselves—the rows of glass and clear plastic kitchen storage containers, the buffed aluminum trashcans and filing systems, the wide selection of small plastic containers for carrying liquids through airport security. From these products one learns not only about potential solutions to everyday problems, like what to do with unread magazines, but also about solutions to problems you never even knew existed in the first place, such as how to store a sponge in the kitchen sink. For those who are ready to learn more, there is direct instruction, either in the form of advice from the many knowledgeable and cheerful employees on the store’s floor, or from events like live closet organization demonstrations. Then there is the store itself, a space that models the principles it sells. Products are placed neatly at evenly spaced intervals, often further organized by color, on modular shelving in light wood or neutral gray; wide aisles are clearly labeled for the single theme of the products they contain (“Kitchen,” “Bath,” “Laundry,” “Trash”). To shop in The Container Store is to receive a lesson about organization so thorough one feels compelled to reassess his or her entire relationship with personal belongings in the home, and, after doing so, to turn toward The Container Store for help.

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Kastor, “A New Lid on Life; For a Messy World, A Policy of Containment,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1997, E01.



Currently, you can find storage and organizational products at most retail vendors, including popular chains like Target and Wal-Mart, but ground zero for home storage products is The Container Store, which bills itself with the tagline, “The Original Storage and Organization Store.” Founded in 1978 by Kip Tindell (now CEO and Chairman), Garrett Boone (now Chairman Emeritus) and architect John Mullen, The Container Store has been highly successful, with annual sales growing 20% per year until the recession in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Their typical client is a “well-educated, well-traveled woman age 24 to 54 with a household income of more than \$100,000.”<sup>3</sup> Echoing the emphasis on busy-ness discussed in further detail in Chapter Three on *Real Simple* magazine, Melissa Reiff, executive vice president of stores and marketing at The Container Store, told *The Washington Post*, “the common theme: She is busy, busy, busy.”<sup>4</sup> According to their own corporate history, the founders of The Container Store claim to have set the tone for the type of products that dominate the industry. “We’re credited with originating the concept of a store devoted to storage and organization,” Tindell told a reporter, a narrative about

---

<sup>2</sup> *Motley Fool Conversations, Interview with Kip Tindell, CEO of The Container Store*, accessed June 1, 2010, [http://mfconversations.libsyn.com/index.php?post\\_id=577576](http://mfconversations.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=577576). Despite a 4.2% decrease in sales in 2008, the company was still #31 in the International Housewares Association’s “Top 100 Domestic Housewares Retailers by Sales” list in 2009. To compare, that year The Container Store outsold Amazon (#32) and IKEA (#37) in housewares (a sub-category of total sales). The top three sellers of housewares are Wal-Mart, Costco and Target, respectively. International Housewares Association, *IHA: State of The Industry* (Rosemont, IL: International Housewares Association, 2009), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Jura Koncius, “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter,” *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2004, H01.

<sup>4</sup> Koncius, “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter.”

the founding of the company repeated in other articles about the store.<sup>5</sup> As a retail chain dedicated entirely to the sale of organizational and storage products, The Container Store is represented in the media as an exceptional venue for its myriad practical solutions to the messiness of everyday life. Within the context of this dissertation, The Container Store is also a prime example of what happens when home organization becomes a “brand” that can be sold as a commodity.

The founders of The Container Store pride themselves on being in the business not just of containers, but also of “solutions”—a far less discrete offering. In one interview, Tindell told the host of a financial podcast, “we call ourselves a solutions-based form of retail, not an items-based form of retail. If you come in and want an item, we feel like we’ve failed.”<sup>6</sup> The Container Store’s appeal resides in this claim to solve household and material excess, a strategy that is not limited just to products like baskets, bins and hangers. The entire “experience” of The Container Store brand is as important to its business model as the products it sells. This cumulative experience is the “solution” The Container Store offers customers. The strict aesthetics of the products coupled with the reassuringly clear store layout are part and parcel of the fantasy of complete control on offer at The Container Store. Media coverage of The Container Store represents the store as an oasis of rational simplicity amidst an overwhelming consumer marketplace. Such thinking not only paints a portrait of contemporary culture as one in which excess on all levels (too many products, responsibilities, technologies, and images) conflicts

---

<sup>5</sup> *Motley Fool Conversations, Interview with Kip Tindell, CEO of The Container Store.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

with well-being, but also speaks to a cultural tendency to equate the ability to control one's belongings to the ability to get a grip on everyday life.

By emphasizing “solutions” over products, The Container Store cultivates a brand with its own self-justifying and cyclical logic: if you are in the business of offering solutions to problems that are diffuse, psychological, and ongoing, then it is unlikely the consumer will ever find the solution to their problems on your shelves. Or, as Tindell explained with a slightly different intention, “many people come in for one item, but they seem to go out with loaded shopping carts after they discover so many new products to make living easier.”<sup>7</sup> Although there are many practical products sold at The Container Store—products probably being put to good use in many homes—the most influential “product” of The Container Store is the feeling of the problem of overconsumption being solved in perpetuity. The goal of this chapter is not to prove how products at The Container Store do not solve the problem of clutter in the home, although some evidence shows this might be the case; the goal of this chapter is to explain how the cyclical and ongoing nature of organizational “solutions” have informed the “lifestyle” consumption of the home organization industry.<sup>8</sup>

As a company founded during an era in which anxiety about consumer accumulation and fears of overabundance coexisted with an unceasing rise in consumer spending, The Container Store was ideally positioned to capitalize on both sides of this schizophrenic cultural expression: to reign in personal belongings by engaging in

---

<sup>7</sup> Marilyn Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 25, 1988, 24.

<sup>8</sup> The Container Store denied requests to view its corporate archives or historical records.

consumption that is itself a form of self-expression. The historical precedent established in the last thirty years provides a foundation for thinking about the entire home organization movement from the rise of professional organizers to the self-help strategies of therapeutic organization books. When it opened, The Container Store sold products out of sync with the traditional home environment—aligning the company with other critiques of consumption and design efforts that brought industrial products into the home as an act of anti-consumerism during the late 1970s. Currently, however, it offers products that are themselves objects for consumption, display, and collection—even as these same products relate messages about boundaries, restraint, and function through their modernist-seeming aesthetics. Again, this sense of restraint extends beyond just the products being sold; the entire experience of The Container Store brand, which includes marketing, merchandising, store layout, and corporate training, come together to offer customers an entire “lifestyle” of “solutions” to the clutter of their lives. This in part explains the popularity of The Container Store: its brand suggests a “solution” to the ills of consumer culture without necessarily challenging the pleasures of consumption.

The Container Store provides an ideal entry point for thinking about the popularity and endurance of home organizing not just because of its commercial success, but also because of the way it has created a “lifestyle” of consumption around home organization. The Container Store offers such a vast array of consumable “solutions” to the problem of too much stuff—a problem multiplying at the rate of contemporary consumer culture—it allows consumers to engage in the “solving” of household clutter ad infinitum. In other words, how many problems around over-consumption are being

solved at The Container Store if consumers continue to buy organization “solutions” to the tune of \$600 million per year?<sup>9</sup> Rather than view The Container Store as providing a commercial solution to individual problems around over-accumulation, it is more helpful to see the store as a response to cultural trends around consumption so large they are unlikely to be reversed, especially through the purchasing of household storage products. This chapter explores the allure of the “solutions” found at The Container Store within their contextualized environment, from the immediate retail space to the economic and material landscape that fosters such a business venture, examining what happens when organization becomes commercialized.

### **Consuming Modernism**

The solution to domestic excess posited by The Container Store has a very specific look to it, a visual language meant to imply functionality, cleanliness, and good sense. Certainly we might link The Container Store to a very top-down, aesthetically modernist conception of “good design” for consumer products set forth by taste-making institutions like the Museum of Modern Art earlier in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> In this, The

---

<sup>9</sup> Approximate sales projections for The Container Store were \$600 million in 2007, \$523 million in 2009 and \$560 in 2010. Elaine Hughes, “Private Firm Buys Container Store; Leonard Green & Partners Plans to Keep Leadership,” *USA Today*, July 3, 2007, 4B.

<sup>10</sup> With exhibitions such as “Machine Art” in 1934, “Useful Objects” in 1938, and “Good Design” in 1951, the MOMA offered taste-making guidelines to consumers by highlighting mass-produced domestic items that also fit the modernist criteria with an emphasis on clean geometric form, new materials, mass-production technology and “timelessness,” (the later exhibitions focused more on products for sale rather than abstracted forms). Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 149. See also, Jonathan M. Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30, 158. and Ellen

Container Store presents itself as a purveyor of a narrowly defined version of early design modernism based on a commitment to rationalism and function, the use of industrially or mass-produced materials, an emphasis on efficiency, the transformation of everyday life through design, and, most importantly, a sense of progress toward perfect form, which, when related to consumer culture, meant that a truly functional piece of “good design” would render unnecessary excess consumption for the sake of fashion.<sup>11</sup> Even the name of The Container Store works towards this effect; Tindell and Boone have said they chose “Container” because “it was a clean word, not overused, and not normally used in a consumer context. But it had magic to it because it connotes any number of useful products that people wanted and needed.”<sup>12</sup> This sentiment is important because it points to a rather remarkable distinguishing feature of The Container Store: it only sells one genre of product. The Container Store is not a big box store with a grocery aisle, or an interior design store with a range of furniture; it is a store solely for the purpose of selling containers. Not only does The Container Store maintain a clearly-stated purpose to help solve the problems of modern life by transforming the domestic interior with the aid of functionally-oriented design products—a modernist-seeming project from the get-go—it

---

Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *Design, Writing, Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (New York: Kiosk, 1996), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 8–14. Not all examples of design modernism shunned consumption. Industrial designers in the 1930s were inspired by modernist ideas to develop the streamlined style, which was an effort to stimulate consumption through design and planned obsolescence, thus inciting the ire of the proselytizers of “good design” and limited consumption at the MOMA. Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*, American Civilization; (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1979). See introduction for further examples of other “modernisms,” which provide alternative histories to a very narrowly defined, purely functional modernist historiography.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue.”

also sells products with a clear modernist aesthetic lineage: industrially produced glass, steel, wood, plastic and metal materials in simple, geometric shapes. The predominantly translucent material in The Container Store speaks to the preoccupation around visibility in home organizing. To be able to see all of one's objects implies control or mastery, an association with modernist roots; interestingly, the desire to see all one's belongings is also a tendency among those with extreme clutter problems, implying a fine line between the impulses of these two, seemingly opposite tendencies.<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with the very modernist theme that function necessarily determines form, The Container Store's owners express a belief there is a "correct" function and purpose for all objects in the store. Describing the 80% of products proprietary to The Container Store, Tindell states:

We have almost no "busts," product-wise. I think it's because these are basic, fundamental, functional products...everything in that store, all 10,000 of those items, does something, either saving you time or saving you space. It does something very functional for you. I don't think those things just kind of flop. It's not...fashion flops. You know, it's clean simple design that's function. So everything sells well.<sup>14</sup>

Such a statement connects The Container Store's products to a value system in which function (and with it ideas of timelessness, cleanliness, and pared-down form) is more important than fashion (which in this context is synonymous with excess, frivolity, and ornament for its own sake). With this explanation, Tindell positions The Container Store's products as if they stem so naturally from a need that they exist out-of-time, and, as such, without any expectation they will fail as a result of consumer changeability.

---

<sup>13</sup> Susan Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer, August 1, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> *Motley Fool Conversations, Interview with Kip Tindell, CEO of The Container Store.*

These products, we are meant to believe, exist outside of the exigency of the market because of their relation, in both aesthetics and principle, to the “timeless” qualities of modern design. The result is the feeling that buying from The Container Store might allow consumers not just to box up their own consumer products, but, in being more about “function” than “fashion,” participate in an act seemingly outside the ongoing cycle of consumption.

The spatial experience at The Container Store’s retail venues furthers this general feeling of functionality one gets from the brand. In 1988, Garrett Boone told a reporter, “we now offer a range of 10,000 different types of items and we never stop looking for new things,” but currently their website also claims they still only sell approximately 10,000 products.<sup>15</sup> So, if the store maintains variety in its product offerings, then it does so within boundaries that limit the total number of options in the store. The display of merchandise at The Container Store similarly models the efficiency promoted by the brand. Before stepping up to the counter to pay, one finds a rack of last-minute items pertaining to organization called “little gadgets, BIG solutions,” arranged in rows according to size—all similarly-sized packages of products are in the top row, all medium-sized ones in the second row, and on down to the final row of big solutions. At the checkout counter, only a single product, *Real Simple*, is available for purchase.

This strictness of retail focus and streamlined approach to marketing runs counter to stores like Bed, Bath, and Beyond, which is filled with so many goods the environment, as described by one journalist, “only compounds a sense of imminent

---

<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue.”



chaos.”<sup>16</sup> The overwhelming number of products jammed into every corner of Bed, Bath, and Beyond is like the retail version of a postmodern marketplace, a landscape in which a surfeit of images and signs has caused “the liquidation of all referentials”—Jean Baudrillard’s description of the condition of depthless hyperreality in postmodern culture.<sup>17</sup> Housewares, beauty products, knick-knacks, “As Seen on TV” products, small toys, linens, cookware, and snacks are jammed into every corner of available floor space, all jockeying for equal attention from the consumer. In comparison, the strict-but-cheerful atmosphere encouraged by the limited selection of The Container Store encourages the consumer to imagine a fantasy domestic space that might also be free of the “clutter” of everyday life—physical, psychological, and temporal. In many ways, The Container Store seems like the antidote to Bed, Bath and Beyond—one can imagine buying the right containers to handle the products purchased, willy-nilly and without any eye toward function, at Bed, Bath and Beyond. The Container Store, with its modernist aesthetic and merchandizing, allows one to feel as if they are avoiding the perils of postmodern consumption.

Although there are many signifiers of modernist style at The Container Store, an element of overwhelming choice—albeit restrained by category—resulting from the sheer variety of bins and boxes available to the consumer has a decidedly un-modernist effect. The “trash” aisle, for instance, is restricted in its purpose to displaying only types

---

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Selin Davis, “Little Boxes,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2005, 3.

<sup>17</sup> In the “precession of simulacra,” it is no longer possible for the real to precede the sign; the two will always be bound together as one and the same; in postmodern culture, “the network of artificial signs will become inexorably mixed up in the real elements.” Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacrum and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2, 20–21.

of trashcans; that said, within the trash aisle there are more trash cans in different colors than one might imagine being able to contemplate at once. This scenario repeats itself in the file folder aisle, the office storage aisle, the clothes hanger aisle, and the small plastic box aisle—identical products are lined up in a perfectly stacked rainbow of options. Personal choice at The Container Store does not come just in the form of color. The acrylic cosmetic box aisle, for instance, offers options with a variety of sizes of receptacles, heights, widths and shapes (even though these are all made of clear acrylic). Within the very small typology of objects at The Container Store there exists a seemingly endless possibility of personal choice.

The modularity of The Container Store’s popular Elfa storage line also contributes to the sense of ongoing organization consumption. The Elfa system is a series of modular parts in white or platinum-veneer one can attach to a wall or construct as a freestanding element to organize a closet. The constituent elements can then be constructed to fit any size or dimension of room, allowing the system to become fully customizable, and, importantly, easily adapted or upgraded. A series of elements called “Elfa décor” and “Elfa accessories” allow for personalizable elements, such as the addition of mesh drawers, wire drawers (with or without translucent liners), utility hooks for tools, utility hooks for bicycles, expandable valet rods, shoe racks, shoe racks that glide like drawers, shallow jewelry drawers with an option for sub-dividers, gliding tie and belt racks, shelves in various sizes with an option to have them pull out, solid wood “drawer frames,” and wood or melamine decor shelves (further options are available to make Elfa units adaptable to living rooms, media centers, pantries and garages). A photo

in The Container Store catalog shows an example of a fully kitted-out Elfa closet system with additional non-Elfa items from the store filling the shelves: woven baskets for folded clothes, wood and velveteen-coated hangers, small hampers for dirty clothes, drawer organizers, and two versions of the “linen drop-front” box (one for shirts, one for sweaters). A before and after photograph of this same closet in the catalog shows how the additional products make use of extra, unused space. The comparison is, indeed, remarkable—the products do a very good job making use of extra space, which only adds to the conundrum presented by the myriad options available for potential purchase. The functionality of the products seems at odds with the unending options for add-ons and customization. Does one need all of these products, or only some, in order to have a fully functioning closet? Would a different combination of products work—perhaps one of the many other choices available in the store? Considering the expense accrued as one adds each composite part to the overall bill, can one start with a smaller system and add on later to meet new and different needs—and if this is the case, why ever stop?

Modularity is a key element of modernist design, so in this sense it does not seem a surprising choice for The Container Store’s flagship product (the Elfa line grew so popular The Container Store went from being the sole North American distributor of the line to purchasing the entire firm in 1999).<sup>18</sup> The ability to flexibly adapt any space with the addition of partitions or changes in furniture was considered a hallmark of the universality and function of “good design” by elite critics in the early twentieth century—part of a shift away from the small, cozy, purpose-dedicated rooms of the Victorian

---

<sup>18</sup> “The Container Store,” *International Directory of Company Histories* (St. James, MO: St. James Press, 2001).; Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue.”

interior.<sup>19</sup> Even for less elite modernist consumer products, modularity was a popular way to express preoccupations with frugality and the elimination of waste in middle-class culture during the Depression.<sup>20</sup> The difference at The Container Store, however, comes in the size, scale, price-point and sheer number of modular parts available. Modularity is expressed on such a small, infinite-seeming scale that functionality is eclipsed by excess. With most products under \$50, price is not necessarily a limiting factor, either. A further example of this shift toward extreme modularity can be made through a comparison to early American storage items, detailed in Gerald W.R. Ward's study of eighteenth-century case furniture. Case furniture was large and heavy, challenging traditional notions of furniture as moveable. This extreme weight, along with cornice woodwork and dimensions matching door and window frames, meant case furniture was "architectonic" or integral to the architecture of the room.<sup>21</sup> Case furniture was clearly an investment one lived with for a long time. By comparison, the boxes and bins of The Container Store are not just lightweight but also relatively cheap, moveable and disposable—products themselves to be consumed and arranged, like Russian dolls, within larger organization

---

<sup>19</sup> For instance, in *The International Style*, Hitchcock and Johnson elaborated on the use of dividing screens in large spaces of modernist homes: "in contrast to the completely enclosed rooms of the past they stress the unity and continuity of the whole volume inside a building." As such, "the flow of function and the relation of one function to another can be clearly expressed." Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Norton, 1995), 98.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Gilbert Rohde's East India Laurel bookcase and desk set produced by Herman Miller in 1939 in Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald W. R. Ward, *American Case Furniture in the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 1988), 13.

systems like bigger boxes, which sit on gliding shelves, which are installed within the Elfa system. Whatever solution they may provide, the products at The Container Store are formally of a piece with the consumable material culture they are meant to contain.

Ward contextualizes the need for case furniture and the ingrained belief that our physical surroundings should be put in some rational system of order within the framework of Western cultural mores—examples of case furniture cannot be found in all cultures.<sup>22</sup> He points out the historical development of case furniture is predicated on a “culture of clothing, textiles, and small consumer goods that can be (or are perceived as *having* to be) put somewhere.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the increasing specialization and complexity of case furniture in the eighteenth century provides evidence for the greater variety of consumer products available at the time. Extrapolating this principle to the present day, the vast choice available at The Container Store hints at the concomitant and dizzying variety of domestic consumer goods requiring organization. The ongoing nature of the modular, personalizable “solutions” of The Container Store indicate how the consumption of organization products is supposed to evolve and expand to meet the similarly growing influx of consumer goods in the home. This idea is consistent across genres of home organization texts—the authors of de-cluttering self-help books write frequently about the ongoing “evolution” of organizing as a response to consumer culture: “the reality is that there will always be more to organize; you will never ‘finally’ be organized. You will always need to organize new stuff and maintain the organization

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

of old stuff.”<sup>24</sup> When the rhetoric of ongoing organization to counter ongoing consumption meets The Container Store’s seemingly endless array of products and branding of consumption around “solutions,” organization becomes a product one can consume in perpetuity.

### **The Container Store as Critique**

Starting a business that revolved around the storage and organization of personal belongings in the late-1970s was fitting, as that decade marked an end to post-war affluence and a resulting rise in cultural critiques of overconsumption, as well as, counter-intuitively, increased consumer debt to fund spending as consumption continued to escalate. As a company founded in 1978 that grew significantly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, The Container Store was uniquely positioned to capitalize on a cultural environment in which trimming excess from one’s life had cachet, but the fundamental drive to consume did not abate.

The perception of excess as a particularly salient feature of late twentieth century American culture has fueled thinking about the necessity of home organization retail. The Container Store’s founders position the origin of the store as a response to the proliferation of stuff in American homes, which is a result of consumer culture leading up

---

<sup>24</sup> Jamie Novak, *The Get Organized Answer Book: Practical Solutions for 275 Questions on Conquering Clutter, Sorting Stuff, and Finding More Time and Energy* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2009), 10. See also: Cindy Glovinsky, *One Thing at a Time: 100 Simple Ways to Live Clutter-free Every Day* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004), 258. Julie Morgenstern, *When Organizing Isn’t Enough: S.H.E.D. Your Stuff, Change Your Life* (New York: Fireside, 2008), 235. Peter Walsh, *It’s All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 186.

to and during the 1970s. According to one source, the founders of The Container Store sensed a need for home storage as “possessions proliferated and two-career families had less time to keep things tidy.”<sup>25</sup> This narrative seems to situate the origin of the store in 1978 within existing critiques of consumption of the 1970s. Although critics, such as Vance Packard, had been calling attention to the perils of consumption for personal well-being since the 1950s, by the 1970s this discourse grew as a response to waning post-war affluence and a growing sense of ecological doom.<sup>26</sup> Two oil crises, deindustrialization, rising housing costs, and “stagflation” (a term for the concomitant decline in productivity, high rates of inflation, and economic stagnation) meant many Americans felt for the first time since the end of World War II the “end of affluence.”<sup>27</sup> On July 15, 1979, President Jimmy Carter delivered his now famous “malaise” speech (although he never actually used this term) to the nation on the subject of sacrifice in the face of the ongoing energy

---

<sup>25</sup> Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue.” The veiled accusation against women inherent in laying the blame of overconsumption on the increasingly lax housekeeping of “two-career families” comes up repeatedly in discourse around the need for organization.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Vance Packard’s critique of planned obsolescence and status purchasing. Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 102.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 203. In *The Anxieties of Affluence*, historian David Horowitz highlights intellectual and cultural discourses that increasingly scrutinized consumer culture in the 1970s. *Ibid.*, chap. 7. See also: David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), chap. 10. Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, And Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 4–5. Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Oxford and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), chap. 5.

shortage; his message broadened, however, to indict a population he believed had started to “worship self-indulgence and consumption” over hard work, faith and community.<sup>28</sup>

During this era, writers and scholars called for national and personal restraint, while public discourse from journalists, social scientists, and politicians questioned whether material goods truly made people happier.<sup>29</sup> In the early 1970s, environmental activists and consumer rights advocates targeted excess in consumer goods and population growth, warning of the exhaustion of scarce resources and imminent global shortages.<sup>30</sup> The movements for ecological simplicity emerging during this period focused on wastefulness and pollution resulting from the wide-spread abundance of consumer culture, and found mainstream support during the first oil crisis in 1973 when the threat of natural shortages became a reality.<sup>31</sup> As evidence of the energy and ecological crises became more apparent in public discourse, proponents of the so-called “simple life” presented ideals such as limits, thrift and self-reliance as an antidote to overconsumption.<sup>32</sup> These ideas were as diverse as a 1976 *Reader’s Digest* article expounding the virtues of car-pooling, conserving energy, and recycling by Laurence

---

<sup>28</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Crisis of Confidence,” July 15, 1979, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-crisis-speech/>.

<sup>29</sup> Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence*, chap. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 146–155.

<sup>31</sup> Shi, *The Simple Life*, 263–4.

<sup>32</sup> Documenting the American cultural tradition to valorize an idealized “simple life,” scholar David Shi notes that both energy crises in the 1970s brought home the “specter of permanent limits to American economic growth and standards of living.” *Ibid.*, 265.



Rockefeller, to the rise of publications related to simple living such as *99 Ways to a Simple Lifestyle*.<sup>33</sup>

The drive toward simplicity promoted by cultural critics seemed to have gained traction in American consciousness in the period. In *The Simple Life*, David Shi notes the results of a Stanford Research Institute study in the mid-1970s indicating millions of Americans—predominantly young, white, well-educated and middle to upper-middle class—were committed to the basic tenets of the simplicity movement, which included “spiritual commitment, civic involvement, human-scale technology and decision-making, ecological awareness, and conscientious consumption.”<sup>34</sup> The report also indicated the preferred products of the “simple life” to be “functional, healthy, nonpolluting, durable, repairable, recyclable or made from raw materials, energy-cheap, authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and made through simple technology.”<sup>35</sup> These materials were not unlike those found at The Container Store in 1978.

In the official story of The Container Store on its corporate website, the first merchandise carried by the store is characterized as completely non-traditional with regard to home consumption at the time: “the first store was filled with products that consumers couldn’t find in any other retail environment.”<sup>36</sup> These included commercial parts bins, wire drawers, mailboxes and popcorn tins, burger baskets, milk crates, and

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 269–271.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>36</sup> “What We Stand For | Our Story,” *Www.thecontainerstore.com*, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://standfor.containerstore.com/our-story/>.

wire leaf burners.<sup>37</sup> Even though the founders were so sure of their eventual success they performed no market research, Tindell remarked of the opening, “it was kind of embarrassing to convince people that you would open a store of empty boxes... it took a long time to get commercial manufacturers to sell these things to us.”<sup>38</sup> Although the founders’ efforts recall earlier attempts to physically contain consumerism detailed in the introduction of this work, the type of containment they were selling was not in the legacy of “high design,” or even traditional consumer housewares. Instead, The Container Store seemed to be presenting a completely foreign, industrial-techie, D-I-Y antidote to consumer culture unmet by other retail venues. “We felt frustrated at first,” Boone reported in 1988. “We seemed to be looking for things that were not there but that should have been there, but slowly manufacturers began to see that this was a category that had real potential.”<sup>39</sup> In their re-telling of the store’s origin, the founders relate a sense of their products as so far outside the existing consumer market many doubted their ability to keep the business afloat, lending more credence to the sense of the venture as outside traditional consumer culture.

In some ways the founders were right to characterize the introduction of industrial products into the home as unusual, as such a look was aesthetically dissonant with the noted “eclecticism and clutter” of the typical 1970s interior.<sup>40</sup> Even though the 1970s were an era of economic stress, Thomas Hine notes interiors during this time were

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Lorrie Grant, “Container Store’s Workers Huddle Up to Help You Out,” *USA Today*, April 30, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue.”

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Hine, *The Great Funk: Falling Apart and Coming Together (on a Shag Rug) in the Seventies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 164.

marked by “an aesthetic of accumulation” that seemed a direct refusal of the “clean, uncluttered look of midcentury style.”<sup>41</sup> Hine identifies the soft, tactile quality of interiors in the 1970s as a “quest for comfort in a difficult and seemingly deteriorating world.”<sup>42</sup> The proliferation of houseplants, for instance, indicates an interest in lush, wild, and natural elements in the domestic interior. The Container Store’s commercial parts and industrial bins would have probably seemed anachronistic in such a setting. Rather than making storage part of a traditional family environment with the creation of recognizable pieces of household furniture (book cases or shelves, for instance), the founders of The Container Store offered goods seemingly at odds with the environment they meant to contain. In light of the dissonance between typical interiors of the 1970s and these industrial forms, perhaps the use of such products as a response to overconsumption signaled an end to the possibility consumerism could be successfully integrated within the home—a recognition consumption could no longer be contained by traditional structures or values.

The Container Store was not the only source of industrially-inspired domesticity at the time, however. The 1978 interior design book *High-Tech: The Industrial Style and Sourcebook for the Home* featured an aesthetic based around commercial and industrial products such as warehouse shelving, hospital hardware, industrial fencing, pipes, scaffolding, and loading dock doors—a sort of do-it-yourself, R. Buckminster Fuller design aesthetic for consumption-weary cosmopolitans. *High-Tech* advocated modular systems, mirroring the D-I-Y arrangement and use of industrial products at The Container

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 163, 165.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 165.

Store: “if out of its parts you can make a bed, bench, bookcase or colonnade—and if these structures can be easily disassembled when you move or want to redecorate—we call it a system.”<sup>43</sup> The introduction, written by Emilio Ambasz, an architect who had also been the Curator of Design at MOMA from 1970-1976, contextualized this look within historic discourses of “good” modernist design, which could stand apart from the whims of fashion and the market —these pieces had the lofty goal of “transforming everyday existence” through the use of “straightforward,” “honest,” and “noble pieces of anonymous design.”<sup>44</sup> In this we see an early, if indirect, connection between the legacy of modernist design and both the style of The Container Store’s merchandise and its mission with regard to consumer culture. Industrial products for the home, like those at The Container Store in 1978, could be both modern and actively against traditional consumer culture. Ambasz warned *High-Tech* readers against the over-consumption of industrial forms expressly chosen out of a desire “not to follow social patterns imposed by those who manipulate culture, invent desires and shape fashion.”<sup>45</sup> Considering the MOMA’s many attempts to guide twentieth-century consumption away from the giddy excesses of pop culture and toward an elite understanding of high design, Ambasz was an ideal choice to write the introduction. He also predicted, rather presciently in light of The Container Store, “there is always the risk these products will become the new fashion of a subculture that will assign these industrial objects pseudo liberating powers. This may in turn lead to the same consumption-inducing mechanisms this group was trying to escape

---

<sup>43</sup> Joan Kron and Suzanne Slesin, *High-Tech: The Industrial-Style and Sourcebook for the Home* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978), 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

from.”<sup>46</sup> Ambasz here figures *High-Tech* as an expression of “good” design, which, in its rejection of traditional domestic forms, was an aesthetic expression of the protest against consumer culture.

A second context for The Container Store that encapsulates its early preference for high tech materials, an ethic of anti-consumerism, and a romantic ideal of simple living is the counterculture publication the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968-71, 1972, 1980). Stylistically, the *Whole Earth Catalog* captured two philosophical elements of the counterculture in its array of products, services and graphic styles: romantic naturalism and futuristic technophilia.<sup>47</sup> These styles, combined with its ethos of Bay Area technology start-up culture, somewhat contextualize the industrial products offered by the young entrepreneurs of The Container Store in 1978. The first employee hired to work at The Container Store, Barbara Anderson, who later became the Vice President of Stores, described the first store as possessing “a very unsophisticated sophistication. It was very earthy organic.”<sup>48</sup> Sam Binkley’s ethnography of the *Whole Earth Catalog* documents the origins of the postmodern consumer in this “countercultural consumer publication that combined a freely adapted, holistic ecological scientism with a practical set of lifestyle injunctions and techniques meant to bring about both social and personal renewal through

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Sam Binkley, “The Seers of Menlo Park: The Discourse of Heroic Consumption in the ‘Whole Earth Catalog,’” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3, no. 3 (November 1, 2003): 283–313.

<sup>48</sup> *Staff Meeting 2011. What We Stand For | Video Gallery* (The Container Store, 2011), <http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-Service>.

a practice of environmental global stewardship.”<sup>49</sup> Binkley places the *Whole Earth Catalog* in the context of what he calls the “loose” modernity of the 1970s, where disillusionment and “malaise” resulting from the disintegration of traditional collective, state and economic structures engendered a “postradical countercultural thirst for the mellow lifestyle.”<sup>50</sup> The adoption of various “lifestyles” through consumption, exemplified by the *Whole Earth Catalog*, signaled a shift away from a sense of social change through collective, radical struggle in the 1960s and toward a focus on self-awareness, identity, and “a deepening concern with the personal experiences of the individual in social life.”<sup>51</sup> This turn inward was indicative of the rising sense of the individual in the 1970s, what journalist Tom Wolfe dubbed the “me” decade.<sup>52</sup>

The sense of the importance of the individual amidst decreasing collective and state support networks can be situated in the economic trends of the 1980s, a period over which The Container Store continued to grow into the large corporate chain it is today. By 1980, the effects of inflation and economic uncertainty caused a swing in political economic policy toward large-scale deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state from areas of social provision, shifting the production of wealth from the manufacturing of goods for sale, with its concomitant commitments to strong union

---

<sup>49</sup> Binkley, “The Seers of Menlo Park: The Discourse of Heroic Consumption in the ‘Whole Earth Catalog’,” 287.

<sup>50</sup> Sam Binkley, *Gettin’ Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 34.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1976, <http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>. As an example, in his second inaugural address President Richard Nixon revised President John F. Kennedy’s famous call for collective sacrifice by asking Americans to ask themselves, “not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself?” Schulman, *The Seventies*, 26.

power and secure middle class employment, to financial institutions.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, innovations in computerization and telecommunications, along with declining costs of transportation and deregulation of industry, made it more efficient to reduce workers at manufacturing plants, or move production overseas, resulting in an economy oriented more towards service, finance and information than manufacture (roughly considered post-Fordist or postindustrial).<sup>54</sup> It is within this context we see the rise in consumption that has led to the problem of clutter. The Container Store and other organizational outlets seek to address.

### **Postindustrial Consumption**

Although the founders of The Container Store and other organization retail vendors have used the discourse of excess to account for the need for their products, they do not point to any specific historical circumstances to explain this issue. Instead, they suggest an almost predestined national tendency to accumulate belongings unrelated to actual practices of buying goods (for such a critique would, inevitably, indict the mission to sell more products). As such, they describe domesticity in America as fraught because of a seemingly unstoppable and passively received onslaught of consumer culture. For instance, in 1988 Tindell remarked, “[Americans] were resigning themselves to becoming slobs, but we felt we could come to their rescue and find storage objects that would make

---

<sup>53</sup> James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century* (New York and Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 2–10. See also, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3, 26, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 31–32.

their lives easier.”<sup>55</sup> By placing the need for storage objects within a narrative that pinpoints excess but remains vague about its source, The Container Store harnesses the language and sentiment of historic critiques of consumption, while also avoiding a direct critique of the system in which it plays a part.

Although most attempts to strictly periodize the transformation of culture in the United States at the end of the twentieth century are disputed, including debated terms like post-Fordism and postindustrialism, certain generally agreed upon economic and cultural trends beginning in the 1980s have contributed to the importance of consumer culture and lifestyle, especially for the middle class.<sup>56</sup> In general, postindustrialism entails a shift away from industrial production and emphasis on finance, distribution, property, service, and knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Scott Lash and John Urry describe this era of political economy as “disorganized capitalism,” in which fragmented and flexible production move to an international scale (through increases in global trade, investing and finance). With this globalization comes not only greater distance in production but also greater velocity, in both electronic financial markets and in the circulation and turnover of consumer products—in fact, the feeling of a higher velocity and speed of

---

<sup>55</sup> Hoffman, “Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue.”

<sup>56</sup> Even though the term post-Fordism is debated, “what is important is that it is the distinctive uses of consumer goods by the developing middle classes that is seen to play some part in the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism.” Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>57</sup> Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 17. Peter Drucker described, somewhat optimistically, the shift from a manufacturing society to a “knowledge society” as “post-capitalist.” Under post-capitalism, “value is now created by ‘productivity’ and ‘innovation,’ both applications of knowledge to work.” Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 1993), 8.



culture might account for later discussions of consumer anxiety around “time speeding up” in this dissertation (see Chapter Three on *Real Simple* magazine and the organization of time).<sup>58</sup> Although the start of globalization has been characterized as almost entirely digital in nature, historian Mark Levinson argues that innovations in container shipping that allowed goods to be transported cheaply (sometimes called “containerization”) are more responsible for the integration of the world economy than call centers or computerization. Decreased transportation costs made possible by container shipping—especially after the oil crises—allowed for the restructuring of manufacture to accommodate global production. Once international production-sharing arrangements were made economical, low cost products that would not otherwise be traded were cheaply shipped around the world, and the price of electronics, clothing and other consumer goods declined into the late 1990s, enabling the type of inexpensive consumption that characterized the “global” consumer marketplace of the late-twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> “Containerization” enabled a seeming democratization of goods by lowering the economic bar for the mass influx of products available to consumers, while at the same time contributing to the growth of corporate power as global economic shifts consolidated financial capital.

The shifting economic policies of the period discussed above—deregulation, postindustrialization, and globalization—are linked to the rise of available consumer products, the rate of consumption, and the importance of image, aesthetics and identity in

---

<sup>58</sup> Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Marc Levinson, *The Box: How The Shipping Container Made The World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), xii, 265, 271.

consumer culture. Using consumption to craft one's personal identity is not specific to the late twentieth century, or to postmodern culture, since throughout the twentieth century individuals participated in consumer culture to create "personality" as a response to changes in modernity.<sup>60</sup> The difference lies in the rate and speed of consumption, and the loss of anchoring social structures, which puts almost all emphasis on identity creation into the consumption of various lifestyles. The heightened focus on style and image that typifies the late-twentieth century preoccupation with lifestyle branding is a result of these large-scale economic changes.

As postindustrialism made consumer products more readily and cheaply available, it also encouraged the speeding up of consumption through niche marketing. In replacing mass production with "flexible specialization" through technology and decentralized, unskilled production, postindustrialism tends to encourage small batch products for increasingly niche markets. The result is a greater range of products available at increasingly more frequent rates to match the desires of these fragmented consumer markets, one effect of which is the expansion of niche cable networks that produce shows like *Clean House* and *Hoarders*. Celia Lury maintains a cyclical logic explains the link between postindustrial economies and consumption: consumption drives postindustrialism because consumer demand "promotes greater flexibility in types and speed of production," but consumer demand in turn comes from the drive to assert a distinctive identity within a framework where individuals are encouraged to express

---

<sup>60</sup> For instance, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and The Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

professional autonomy and “self-promotion via consumption.”<sup>61</sup> She notes that as collective organizations and consciousness have eroded within the postindustrial economic paradigm, new social movements have gained importance for the development of identity—most prevalently, consumption.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the many exhortations to consume less and the seeming popularity of simplicity movements in the 1970s, Americans continued to spend, acquire debt, and consume through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This schizophrenic attitude to consumption and saving—the dueling desires to have more but be okay with less—created an ideal climate for a store that allowed consumers some feeling of control over their household belongings. In the 1970s, the rise of inflation contributed to a general acceptance of credit and debt, a change in values from the post-war era, when borrowing was seen as a sign of waste, excess and moral weakness.<sup>63</sup> From 1973 to 1982, Americans’ credit card spending increased five fold to reach \$66 billion; in 1975, credit card debt was about \$15 billion, but total consumer borrowing reached \$167 billion, and by 1979 that number almost doubled again.<sup>64</sup> In *The Seventies*, Bruce Schulman credits the sea change in the way Americans perceived debt to the persistence of double-digit inflation. Although Depression-born Americans who experienced post-war prosperity maintained a sense of thrift in their consumption, the prospect of paying for increasingly higher priced goods with diminished-valued dollars from a savings account made thrift seem far less enticing to a new generation. In *An All-Consuming Century*, Gary Cross

---

<sup>61</sup> Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 95.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>63</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 135.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

explains the rise of “dynamic, fragmented” consumerism in the 1980s as a result of wealth inequality and the increasing acceptance of shopping as a leisure activity—both circumstances born of changes in the economic landscape of the time.<sup>65</sup> Juliet Schor, a sociologist at Harvard University, argues consumption has intensified since the 1980s to the point that acquisition has become “an American institution.”<sup>66</sup> She notes the consumption of goods has doubled between the 1950s and the 1990s, and the average person’s spending has increased 30% between 1979 and 1995.<sup>67</sup> Through the 1990s, the largest increases in household debt came from families making \$50,000-\$100,000 a year.<sup>68</sup> Related studies have also shown the rise in credit amongst young and middle-class families has led to spending that outpaces the growth of incomes.<sup>69</sup> Although Schor’s argument trends towards the personal and psychological—she is mainly concerned with competitive acquisition for status purposes and does not dwell on structural economic

---

<sup>65</sup> Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, 220. Conservative politics in the 1980s decreed that the government should spend less on the poor—and, indeed, that the poor themselves should spend less because they had not learned market or family responsibility—but, among the middle and upper class, flaunting affluence was considered just rewards for hard work, even a guarantee for further economic growth under the free market. Tax cuts that benefited high incomes squeezed wealth into the top 1% of earners, who saw their income increase 107% between 1977 and 1989, while the median income only went up 7%. Along with deregulation that limited consumer protection, this inequality in income kicked off a period of intensified consumerism for those with the money to spend. *Ibid.*, 201–202.

<sup>66</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 3.

<sup>67</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline Of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 109. Schor, *The Overspent American*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Schor, *The Overspent American*, 19.

<sup>69</sup> See, E. Baek and G. Hong, “Effects of Family Life-Cycle Stages on Consumer Debts,” in *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 25, 2004. 359-385, in Jeanne E. Arnold and Ursula A. Lang, “Changing American Home Life: Trends in Domestic Leisure and Storage Among Middle-class Families,” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 28, no. 1 (2007): 36.

forces except in explanation of how the rise of the very rich in America since the 1980s set the tone for middle class spending—her work documents the consumption trends among families who engage in work-spend cycles to remain part of an otherwise dwindling middle class, what she calls “an affliction” of affluent, mostly white, Americans.<sup>70</sup>

As consumption has increased, the ability to manage it within the home has decreased. Work on behalf of the Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) at UCLA documents material culture in middle class American homes; the resulting studies have found a “mismatch between goods purchased and space needed to house them.”<sup>71</sup> In a four-year study of 32 families, a team consisting of one anthropologist, two archaeologists and a photographer took over 19,000 photographs, 1,540 hours of video, 47 recorded home tours, and almost 17,000 “scan samples” (documenting how families move around the homes, what artifacts they use, and how they interact).<sup>72</sup> The results of this study have been published in scholarly articles, and, more recently, the book *Life at Home in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors*.<sup>73</sup> Families who participated in the CELf study self-labeled as “middle class,” but varied widely in terms of

---

<sup>70</sup> Schor, *The Overworked American*, 112.

<sup>71</sup> Arnold and Lang, “Changing American Home Life: Trends in Domestic Leisure and Storage Among Middle-class Families,” 24.

<sup>72</sup> Jeanne E. Arnold et al., *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012), 17–18; 3; 23.

<sup>73</sup> The Arnold and Lang study “Changing American Home Life: Trends in Domestic Leisure and Storage Among Middle-class Families,” relies on a sample of data from the larger study that took place from 2001-2005, the results of which are featured in *Life at Home in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The goal of the article was to “explore shifting American priorities, including time and space that families allocate to work and leisure as well as family behaviors in an era of accelerating consumerism and pressing problems with clutter in the home.”

neighborhood, occupation and income.<sup>74</sup> Over the course of the study, researchers categorized and photographed every visible object within the home—ignoring closets, which were mostly stuffed with clothes and closed from view—finding spaces “so cramped with objects that it is a challenge for household members to comfortably traverse the space (and for us to arrive at reliable counts).”<sup>75</sup> The sheer number of objects the researchers found and documented within the homes speaks to the issue of overconsumption; so do the responses by parents in the study, many of whom reported finding “their accumulated possessions exhausting to contemplate, organize, and clean.”<sup>76</sup> The authors of *Life at Home* report a scenario of substantial accumulation of new objects without the disposal or replacement of antecedents; the result is “clutter amassing in ‘back stage’ storage areas such as garages, closets, and attics, eventually extending to ‘front stage’ living spaces.”<sup>77</sup> When families in the CELF study were able to keep homes tidy, it most often came at the expense of the garage—about one-third of the families needed more living space for their belongings and took it from the garage.<sup>78</sup> Researchers

---

<sup>74</sup> All participants consisted of families in which two working parents had young children and owned their own home. Nine families made between \$50,000-\$99,000 per year; fourteen made between \$100,000-\$149,999 per year; five families made between \$150,000 and \$199,999 per year; and two families made over \$200,000 per year. The self-identified ethnicities of the participants were as follows: 65% of the participants were white, 10% were Latino, 9% were African American, 9% were Asian American, and 7% were of South Asian descent. Arnold et al., *Life at Home in the 21st Century*, 20–21.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 28. The related CELF article by the same author also notes the “universal over-accumulation of goods,” especially in garage spaces. Arnold and Lang, “Changing American Home Life: Trends in Domestic Leisure and Storage Among Middle-class Families,” 36.

<sup>78</sup> Arnold and Lang, “Changing American Home Life: Trends in Domestic Leisure and Storage Among Middle-class Families,” 36, 41.

noted families almost universally describe their stuff-filled garages as “messes,” and although “they are highly aware of and frustrated about this state of affairs,” the participants “seem resigned to its continuation.”<sup>79</sup> Notably, half the families in the study did not visit the garage once to access their stored belongings during the duration of the project.<sup>80</sup> The authors of *Life at Home* touch briefly on the rise of the home-organization industry as a response to the clutter, concluding few families in the study had invested in “closet systems and garage overhauls.”<sup>81</sup> A review of photographs published by the study, however, shows a number of rooms inundated with clutter, among which are small-scale organizational solutions like bins, boxes and shelves one can find at The Container Store.<sup>82</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the self-storage industry has flourished during this period. Although storage units have been around since the 1960s as a stop-gap method of temporarily storing belongings, the industry has taken off since the 1990s.<sup>83</sup> The professional body of the self-storage industry, The Self Storage Association (SSA) claims the current total rentable storage space in the US to be 2.22 billion square feet (78 square

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>81</sup> Arnold et al., *Life at Home in the 21st Century*, 26.

<sup>82</sup> Arnold, et. al. found a fascinating link between refrigerator displays and household clutter. The six households with the most on their refrigerators (at least 80 artifacts) had a mean of 1,448 visible objects in the main rooms of the house; the seven households with the lowest refrigerator display counts had a mean of 322 visible objects in the house (the remaining households reflect neither extreme). This led the authors to conclude the refrigerator panel is an effective “measuring stick for how intensively families are participating in consumer purchasing and how many household goods they retain over their lifetimes.” Ibid., 50.

<sup>83</sup> Jon Mooallem, “The Self-Storage Self,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06self-storage-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06self-storage-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

miles, three times the size of Manhattan), with gross sales of \$22.6 billion dollars as of 2010.<sup>84</sup> Currently about 10% of households rent a storage unit, an increase of approximately 65% since 1995. 2004-2005 were “peak” development years—8,694 new facilities were built; today the SSA claims there is 7 square feet of self storage space for every person living in America.<sup>85</sup> Of the 58,000 self-storage facilities world-wide, 50,000 are in the United States.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the self-storage industry has hitched itself to the organization and de-cluttering movement.<sup>87</sup> The SSA has started to produce its own “Declutterfy” radio commercials and on-hold message recordings that “encourage the public to “Declutterfy – Your Home, Your Office – Your Life!”<sup>88</sup> Just as The Container Store has captured large volumes of media attention, so has the rise in self-storage units captured the public imagination—the popular radio program *This American Life* has covered the rise of “storage auction experts” who bid on the contents of abandoned units without full preview of what’s inside.<sup>89</sup> A show called *Storage Wars* premiered on the same network that produces *Hoarders* in 2010; every episode, the contents of units in California whose rent has not been paid for three months are auctioned off to dealers of such sales. A second show, *Storage Wars: Texas*, debuted in 2011 and a third show, based in New York, is in the works.

---

<sup>84</sup> “Self-Storage Association Website,” accessed December 8, 2011, <http://www.selfstorage.org/ssa/Content/NavigationMenu/Membership/JoinSSA/default.htm>.

<sup>85</sup> Self Storage Association, *2010 Self Storage Industry Fact Sheet*, April 1, 2010.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Mooallem, “The Self-Storage Self.”

<sup>88</sup> “Self-Storage Association Website.”

<sup>89</sup> “Contents Unknown,” *This American Life*, January 22, 2010.



To give a sense of the profitability of The Container Store during this period of intensified personal consumption, consider that Tindell, Boone and Mullen opened their first 1,600 square foot store in Dallas, Texas, with a start-up investment of \$35,000.<sup>90</sup> Within ten years, the company had opened six stores in Texas that were up to 15,000-square feet each.<sup>91</sup> Within twenty years, the company had 19 stores in six states, an advertising budget estimated at \$14 million, and \$96 million in annual sales.<sup>92</sup> By 2000 the company projected \$237 million in sales for the year, and by 2003, the Container Store was selling more than 2 million clear storage boxes per year, with sales revenue estimated to have reached \$370 million.<sup>93</sup> Even this amount was quickly surpassed over the remainder of the decade. By the time of its sale to the private equity firm Leonard Green and Partners in 2006, The Container Store was expected to earn approximately \$500 million in sales that year, and was operating 38 stores in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, New York and Texas and Washington, DC.<sup>94</sup> Ebbing somewhat from its peak sales of \$575 million in 2007, total sales in 2008 were \$551

---

<sup>90</sup> Lisa Gewirtz-Ward, "Container Store for Sale," *Daily Deal/The Deal*, February 26, 2007, <http://www.TheDeal.com>. (accessed via Lexis Nexis on May 27, 2010)

<sup>91</sup> Grant, "Container Store's Workers Huddle Up to Help You Out.," Hoffman, "Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue."

<sup>92</sup> J. Dee Hill, "TV Obsessions for Super Organizer," *ADWEEK*, August 6, 1999. Kastor, "A New Lid on Life; For a Messy World, A Policy of Containment." (accessed via Lexis Nexis on May 27, 2010); Barbara Holsomback, "Container Store Moves To GSD&M," *ADWEEK*, January 18, 1993. (accessed via Lexis Nexis on May 27, 2010)

<sup>93</sup> Peter Beller, "The Container Store Opens Its First New York Site," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2000, section 14WC, page 10. Koncius, "The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter," H01.

<sup>94</sup> Hughes, "Private Firm Buys Container Store; Leonard Green & Partners Plans to Keep Leadership." See also, Gewirtz-Ward, "Container Store for Sale." Luisa Beltran, "Leonard Green Buys Container," *Daily Deal/The Deal*, July 3, 2007, <http://www.TheDeal.com>.

million; despite the 4.2% decline in sale, the company continued to expand its base, opening its 46<sup>th</sup> store that year.<sup>95</sup> The Container Store's success during this period can be read as part of the escalating trend to spend money on storage and organization for the home. In 1995, the National Housewares Manufacturing Association (NHMA) estimated consumers in the U.S. spent more than \$2.7 billion on storage and closet supplies, about 5.1% of the overall housewares industry.<sup>96</sup> Growth of the storage and organizational retail industry continued into the 2000s, concomitant with a rise in consumer spending on household storage: by 2009, the International Housewares Association (formerly the NHMA), reported Americans spent \$5.9 billion on space and closet organizers, and \$6.8 billion in storage products.<sup>97</sup>

Over the course of The Container Store's growth as a company the products on offer have, understandably, changed. Rough, industrial products of manufacturing like milk crates and parts bins have been replaced by sleek, plastic consumables designed expressly for the home. The Container Store's website features two photographs of store interiors to highlight the company's history: one early, black and white photo from The Container Store's launch shows industrial products piled messily together in a cluster at the center of a dimly lit storefront; a more contemporary color photo shows cheerfully colored plastic bins neatly organized on regulated shelves in a brightly-lit room. This

---

<sup>95</sup> International Housewares Association, *IHA: State of The Industry*, 65.

<sup>96</sup> National Housewares Manufacturing Association, *Internal Intelligence Survey* (Rosemont, IL: National Housewares Manufacturing Association, 1995), 36.

<sup>97</sup> The average U.S. household spent \$609 on housewares in 2008; as a point of reference, consumers spent, on average, \$683 on fruits and vegetables, \$2,320 on restaurant meals, and \$2,592 on gasoline. International Housewares Association, *IHA: State of The Industry*, 32, 51.

stylistic transition makes sense; The Container Store has moved from selling non-traditional domestic products chosen for function to selling an entire experience of organization, which includes, but is not limited to, numerous specialized manufactured products. Where earlier products had a discernable, if domestically dissonant, provenance—popcorn tins and burger baskets were likely to be recognizable from the restaurant industry, for instance—current products are identifiably domestic, but indiscernible in origin. Products from The Container Store now come from a number of smaller brands producing goods for the niche market of home organization; these lesser known entities have names like “Shape Ups,” “Neat Things,” and “InterDesign.” It is unnecessary for consumers to recognize these companies, however, because they are secondary to the overarching brand of The Container Store. Rather than seeming like the composite pieces of a roughly-hewn D-I-Y project, these individual products are presented as part of the seamless “solution” of The Container Store brand.

### **Lifestyle, Brands and Solutions in Perpetuity**

The Container Store brand trades on organization’s ability to make consumers feel more secure and in control of their homes. Media discourse around The Container Store shows the psychic effect of the store is not lost on consumers. Lisa Selin Davis, a novelist who wrote an article on organization and The Container Store for *The New York Times* in 2005, explained, “The Container Store is dedicated to the proposition that there is a place for everything sprawling and untidy, and that that place is probably made of

Lucite and probably stackable.”<sup>98</sup> The author translated the ability to immediately and transparently solve spatial problems to a psychological release, “an immediate sense of calm... wandering the aisles empty-handed is enough to melt away the anxiety.”<sup>99</sup> One woman Davis interviewed remarked, “as soon as you walk in, you just feel like your problems are solvable.” In response, Davis pondered The Container Store’s “illusion of power” and its ability to offer the possibility that “the chaos of her life, not to mention the clutter found in the typical 500-square-foot apartment, can be brought under control.”<sup>100</sup> “So soothing is the place,” she described, “[consumers] simply roam among its smorgasbord of items, fantasizing about the perfect compartmentalized closet, the perfectly organized spice rack.”<sup>101</sup> Functionality, it seems, is not inconsistent with fantasy—at least not at The Container Store.

Rhetoric from the company capitalizes on the sentiment that controlling one’s material environment can translate into psychic or emotional well-being. For instance, in 1997, company founder Garrett Boone explained, “if you do have things in their place, it’s more peaceful and less stressful. That’s a way of controlling at least a small part of your world.”<sup>102</sup> In 2004, Tindell commented, “if you bring order to what you have, you feel secure.”<sup>103</sup> The Container Store’s vice president of marketing, Casey Priest, even asserted a belief that strong company sales in the years after the terrorist attacks on

---

<sup>98</sup> Davis, “Little Boxes.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Kastor, “A New Lid on Life; For a Messy World, A Policy of Containment.”

<sup>103</sup> Koncius, “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter.”

September 11, 2001, were a response to feelings of insecurity; “our customers want to get control,” she told *Newsweek*, “and when they can't control the world around them, they turn to the things they can control.”<sup>104</sup> Although this sentiment has been repeated as accepted wisdom, the desire to organize one’s environment need not be only in response to tragic events or economic insecurity, as evidenced by the fact that spending on organization consumables increases significantly around and just after the holidays.<sup>105</sup> In fact, January is “National Get Organized Month,” demonstrating how home organization is invested with notions of new beginnings and self-change as much as insecurity or anxiety.

Rather than see home organization as just an expression of control, the long trajectory of custom closets in new and remodeled homes since the 1980s shows spending on home organization has often been connected with luxury and abundance. In

---

<sup>104</sup> Peg Tyre and Julie Scelfo, “Clean Freaks,” *Newsweek*, June 7, 2004. A writer for *The New York Times* tried to make the argument that the “inward focus” of *Real Simple* offered “immediacy and significance” in the wake of September 11, 2001. David Handelman, “In Pensive Times, Comfort Magazines Find an Audience,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2001, C11. Sharon Tindell, wife of The Container Store founder Kip Tindell and the store’s Chief Merchandising Executive, similarly told *USA Today*, “when things around you in the world are more uncertain, it’s nice to have almost a sanctuary at home where you at least have control over the way things are organized.” Carl Weiser, “Many Seek A Place For Their Stuff,” *USA Today*, December 26, 2003, 6B. The author of *Why People Buy Things They Don’t Need*, Pam Danziger, claims that the events of September 11, 2001 made Americans question consumerism: “for the past 20 years, we’ve had the cocooning mind-set. We’ve filled our emotional empty spaces with things and our homes with all kinds of decorative objects, pillows, throws, figurines and collections. What used to be warm and fuzzy and cozy-looking looks cluttered, confused and disorganized. We’ve filled up our homes; now we have to do something with it.” Koncius, “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter.”

<sup>105</sup> Bruce Horovitz, “Giving Household Clutter the Old Heave-Ho,” *USA Today*, November 24, 2004, 1B.

the 1980s, designer closets became status symbols, with surprised reports of stars like Sylvester Stallone, Joan Rivers and Linda Evans getting closet makeovers from the newly-founded company California Closets.<sup>106</sup> Fancy closets continue to live in the cultural imagination as spaces of indulgence within the home today, and not just in the pages of The Container Store's catalog, where iterations of only-slightly-different personal closet schemes all seem similarly suited for the interiors of newly built mansions.<sup>107</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s, articles devoted to the home organizing trend interpreted closet design as a reaction to a booming economy, rather than a reactionary retreat into domestic space. In 1999, a journalist explained organization as a method to contain, but not restrain, abundance: "we love our designer clothes, electronic gadgets and Italian shoes too much to get rid of them, but not enough to deny ourselves something better."<sup>108</sup> The ability to commission a bespoke closet seemed to be a sign of good times; in 2000, an editor at the trade publication *Home Furnishings Network* (HFN) said, "with bigger homes and a good economy, people just keep buying more things, and

---

<sup>106</sup> Julie Schlabach, "The Closet As Status Symbol," *Forbes*, May 30, 1988.

<sup>107</sup> In May 2012, cable channel HGTV (Home and Garden Television) aired a one-episode special called "Million Dollar Closets," which featured the building of extravagant walk-in closets for reality stars Kris Jenner (of Kardashian fame) and Whitney Port. Similarly, *Vogue.com* recently posted a feature on organization that promoted the services of high-end organization experts who help "clutter-prone Chanel hoarders bring some order back into their lives." "MILLION DOLLAR CLOSETS, Special: Home & Garden Television," *HGTV*, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.hgtv.com/million-dollar-closets/million-dollar-closets/index.html>. Patricia Garcia, "It's Not Too Late to Get It Together: Expert Tips and Tools for Organizing Your Life - Vogue Daily," *Vogue.com*, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.vogue.com/vogue-daily/article/its-not-too-late-to-get-it-together-expert-tips-and-tools-for-organizing-your-life/>.

<sup>108</sup> Mike Wilson, "Thinking Inside the Box," *St. Petersburg Times (Florida)*, May 28, 1999, 1D.

they need a place to put them,” while another closet designer explained, “people are so busy and so successful, every 10 minutes saved counts.”<sup>109</sup> The story of rising interest in closets and home organization has remained consistent through varying economic climates: whether considered a logical outcome of boom or bust, closets always have to do with an excess of material goods. In the late 1990s, walk-in closets were considered the “apotheosis of the past decade’s frantic pursuit of material goods,” but, almost a decade later, the same sentiment roughly held true: during the 2008 recession, the vice-president of marketing at the International Housewares Association proclaimed, “we’ve been through an orgy of getting, and now there’s an orgy of storing.”<sup>110</sup> If the result of overconsumption is an obvious lack of storage within the home, then the antidote, whether times are good or bad, is to spend money on a new space to house and display your belongings.

The heady combination of control and luxury consumption is the key to The Container Store’s success. The cumulative experience of The Container Store’s reassuringly modernist-looking product line, its endless options for personalization and consumption, and its promise of solutions to the problem of too much stuff allows consumers to buy not just a product, but also an entire lifestyle of organization. Such techniques are consistent with corporate branding, which seeks the “total effect” of

---

<sup>109</sup> Jura Koncius, “Closet Cravings: We’re Spending \$1 Billion a Year on Custom Shelving Racks. Here’s Why,” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2000, G01.

<sup>110</sup> Jerry Adler and Lisa Bertagnoli, “The New Zen of Stuff,” *Newsweek*, November 15, 1999. Nancy Keates, “A Place For Everything, and Everything in Its Place; As the Multibillion-dollar Home Organization Industry Continues to Grow Briskly, Manufacturers Are Filling Every Niche,” *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, January 7, 2008, L5.

communication with consumers, and, in doing so, becomes a “significant contributor to the process by which goods are imbued with symbolic content, and therefore by which even relatively mundane consumption decisions become opened up to considerations based on taste or personal expression rather than simple functionality or cost.”<sup>111</sup> It is unsurprising that the look of things at The Container Store is an important aspect of its psychic appeal, contributing to the notion that everything untidy in one’s life can be solved with a translucent bin, as aesthetics took on increased importance in late-twentieth-century branding. In *Brand New*, Jane Pavitt argues that the “aestheticization of everyday life”—a concept developed by Mike Featherstone to explain the intensification of image production in postmodernist culture—has helped branding to become about more than just the selection of products. Rather, with the increased emphasis on the image value of goods, “any selection is seen as an expression of taste, a sign of style,” and lifestyle becomes the ultimate product up for consumption.<sup>112</sup>

Branding is a product of postmodern culture and the postindustrial economy. Buoyed by changes in production techniques and market segmentation, postmodern consumer culture has been defined by greater choice expressed through lifestyle consumption, “the management of which itself becomes an art form.”<sup>113</sup> The quickened tempo of production and consumption in postindustrialism results in the bombardment of

---

<sup>111</sup> Liz Moor, “Branding Consultants as Cultural Intermediaries,” *The Sociological Review* 56, no. 3 (August 1, 2008): 414.

<sup>112</sup> Jane Pavitt, *Brand New* (Princeton, NJ and London: V&A Publications, distributed in North America by Princeton University Press, 2000), 169–170. Pavitt argues that brands exemplify the experiential, rather than functional nature of postmodern consumption.

<sup>113</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London and Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 81.



cultural “signs” that are increasingly detached from their meaning (“signifieds”) and exist mainly as aesthetic goods—a renewed importance on the image value of goods that typifies the aestheticization of everyday life, or the “rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society.”<sup>114</sup> The aestheticization of culture happens through the process of branding, which attaches images and lifestyles to products.<sup>115</sup> Lash and Urry call this process “aesthetic reflexivity,” and see it manifest in areas of post-Fordist production that focus increasingly on “design-intensivity”—design services such as R&D and branding that are applied to products, companies, and non-material practices (such as employee education, which we will see is pivotal to The Container Store experience).<sup>116</sup> The result of this emphasis on branding is the production of “experiences” over products, a scenario in which “entertainment, information and communication technologies (ICTs), and lifestyle products and services combine to shape our identities in ways not seen in the modernist era of cultural consumption.”<sup>117</sup> Sharon Tindell further explicated The Container Store’s

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 66. The aestheticization is an outcropping of postmodernism’s effacement of the boundaries between high and low culture, art and everyday life, and, more generally, stylistic codes. Ibid., 65.

<sup>115</sup> Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>117</sup> Dale Southerton, ed., “Aestheticization of Everyday Life,” *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Reference, September 15, 2011). Joseph Pine and James Gilmore developed the concept of the “experience economy” or “fourth economic offering” in their business and marketing guide, *Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*: “when a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages—as in a theatrical play—to engage him in a personal way.” B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 2.

holistic brand experience when she told store managers, "it's truly meaningful when [the store] transforms more into something that evokes an emotion...that makes customers come back for more."<sup>118</sup> At The Container Store, the “experience” is the cumulative effect of the products, retail space, employee interaction, and marketing. Lifestyle consumption accounts for the myriad options for personal expression available at The Container Store.

The lifestyle being sold by The Container Store brand is so seductive (to some) that many customers transition from being consumers of home organization products to being the ideal candidates to sell those products to others. The Container Store is a popular place to work; they have made *Fortune* magazine’s list of 100 Best Companies to Work every year since 1999.<sup>119</sup> A noticeably humane work environment partially explains this popularity. As part of their highly publicized “employee first culture,” the company offers higher average wages than comparable retail jobs, benefits for their employees and relative autonomy on the sales floor; in return The Container Store has a very low employee turnover rate.<sup>120</sup> A crossover of employees into consumers is not a new phenomenon; Henry Ford encouraged his employees to participate in the consumption of Ford cars as part of the general socialization and corporate welfare

---

<sup>118</sup> *Staff Meeting 2011. What We Stand For | Video Gallery.*

<sup>119</sup> Hughes, “Private Firm Buys Container Store; Leonard Green & Partners Plans to Keep Leadership.”

<sup>120</sup> The Container Store prides itself on “employee-first culture” meaning that sales clerks can make decisions on the fly and not have to adhere to a standard protocol. I see this as part of the “internal branding” that they do to instill a sense of personal responsibility in the company in each of their employees. The Container Store’s turnover rate for all employees was 25% when the industry average is 73.6%, and their manager turnover rate was only 5.3% compared to the industry average of 33.6%. “The Container Store.”

scheme of the Highland Park production plant.<sup>121</sup> The difference at The Container Store is the crossover moves in the other direction—consumers are enticed to become employees because of the lifestyle offered by The Container Store brand. Numerous articles dedicated to how many people seek out The Container Store for employment focus not just on the many tangible benefits on offer, but on the psychic draw of the organization mecca. Often this is related as employees are described firstly as former customers. One employee interviewed in *The Washington Times* proclaimed he was an “avid” customer before he started working at the store, and that there is something from The Container Store in almost every room of his house.<sup>122</sup> In a video of an employee-appreciation event on The Container Store’s corporate website, Sunni, an employee for 10 years, described calling her mother after her first interview with The Container Store: “[she said,] I dare you to pick up a random piece from your apartment and see if it has The Container Store logo on it—it did!”<sup>123</sup> A morning segment about The Container Store on CBS Dallas highlighted an employee who “walked in as a customer seven years ago and never left.”<sup>124</sup> Another employee was interviewed in 1997 after she quit her job as a lobbyist in Washington, DC and found herself wandering through The Container Store every few days, “as if to a museum or a park.” Faced with the challenge of

---

<sup>121</sup> Terry E. Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), chap. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Donna De Marco, “Organization In Store; Eager Workers Train at D.C.’s Soon-to-open Container Store,” *The Washington Times*, February 27, 2004.

<sup>123</sup> *Celebrating 1,785 Years of Service. What We Stand For | Video Gallery* (The Container Store, n.d.), [http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-conscious\\_cap](http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-conscious_cap).

<sup>124</sup> *CBS Sunday Morning Clip. What We Stand For | Video Gallery* (The Container Store, 2011), [http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn\\_top\\_100](http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn_top_100).

changing careers, she instead took a job at the store that provided psychological comfort: “There are so many things that are unfinishable,” she said at the time, “ ‘I’m going to change my career! Well I can’t do that. But I can clean out the medicine cabinet.’”<sup>125</sup> Here, lifestyle consumption, labor choices, and the drive for control via the domestic environment diverge seamlessly under The Container Store brand.

Just as The Container Store encourages consumers to think of themselves as brand acolytes, and thus potential employees, the company uses corporate education to instill brand values once employees are hired. Writing about the rise of brands, Celia Lury notes that the reorganization of the internal structures of a company around brand identity is an important aspect of corporate branding (corporate branding is the branding of a company versus the branding of services or products). Sometimes called “internal marketing,” and taking the form of addressing potential employees as “brand ambassadors,” this means that employees are “required to interpret and constitute themselves and their interests in relation to the goals of the company,” which “may involve participating in a company philosophy or brand mission statement.”<sup>126</sup> In this vein, The Container Store offers an almost extreme level of training to new employees—263 hours for an average full-time employee, over 30 times the industry average—in order for them to present customers

---

<sup>125</sup> Kastor, “A New Lid on Life; For a Messy World, A Policy of Containment.”

<sup>126</sup> Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 33, 35. Roland Marchand documents the historical precedent for corporate employee education; GM used education to enhance corporate legitimacy among its employees, using public relations techniques “with an eye as much to its internal effect as to its external impact.” Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 136.

with their particular “solutions-based” form of retail.<sup>127</sup> This model of employee education is then replicated with customers. One of The Container Store’s “Foundation Principles”—a set of “philosophical guidelines” that define the brand and have become another strategy for marketing the company via its website—is “Man in A Desert Selling.”<sup>128</sup> On The Container Store website’s video gallery, an employee explains how “man in a desert selling” entails finding “solutions” for the customer past what initially brought them to the store:

[It’s] about finding that perfect solution for the customer... we can stop at the obvious, you know if someone comes in wanting a shoe rack, we can stop there, but that might not solve their entire problem. We equate it to a man that’s been traveling in the desert and he comes across an oasis. So the obvious thing he’d need is a glass of water. But if you stop there, you’re not addressing everything that he needs. You know, it’s thinking beyond that, thinking about he probably needs to call his family, he probably needs sunscreen, he probably needs something to eat. It’s really going above and beyond.<sup>129</sup>

The brand “foundation” of finding “solutions” entails ongoing negotiation with the many systems on hand at The Container Store. Because The Container Store sells an entire lifestyle of organization, everyone engaging with the brand is seen as similarly participating in the lifestyle—not simply selling or buying a product. The fluidity that exists at The Container Store—between product and lifestyle, consumer and employee—is consistent with the mechanism of corporate branding, which Lury says blurs the distinction between consumption and production. Rather than simply purchasing a

---

<sup>127</sup> *CBS Sunday Morning Clip. What We Stand For | Video Gallery.*

<sup>128</sup> “What We Stand For | Our Foundation Principles,” *Www.thecontainerstore.com*, accessed January 27, 2013, <http://standfor.containerstore.com/our-foundation-principles/>.

<sup>129</sup> “*Man in a Desert Selling: Foundation Principle 6*”: *What We Stand For | Video Gallery* (The Container Store, n.d.), [http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn\\_top\\_100](http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn_top_100).

product, consumers engage in a “sustained, ongoing relationship” with the brand, which allows “products and services [to] be presented as more or less open-ended, as in a process of completion.”<sup>130</sup> This is, essentially, how a solutions-based form of retail turns buying plastic bins into a lifestyle choice. Learning the “solutions” of organization requires becoming an expert on The Container Store brand, whether as employee or customer, thus facilitating a lifestyle that can remain open-ended after the initial point of sale.

The emphasis on overtly “design-y” products at The Container Store—as well as in other organization outlets, like *Real Simple*—is also a result of the aestheticization of everyday life in postmodern consumer culture. At many retail sites, linking high design to consumer products has become a popular method of marketing products; for instance, Target has begun to feature photos and brief biographies of designers next to some of their products, a practice architect and scholar Peggy Deamer sees as part of a move in the last twenty years to “popularize Design (with a capital “d”) in the most extreme of mass markets.”<sup>131</sup> In these cases we see “design” has become a free-floating signifier connoting value—not a set of ideological guidelines for work and form, but another method of providing information to consumers about the brand experience. As the introduction to this work detailed, the use of modernism as a style, detached from content, is the nature of postmodern culture. Modernism has thus become one of a number of aesthetic styles to be used in the process of corporate branding. As the

---

<sup>130</sup> Lury, *Brands*, 47.

<sup>131</sup> Peggy Deamer, “Branding the Architectural Author,” *Perspecta* 37 (January 1, 2005): 45.

products at The Container Store show, the idea of design modernism—divorced from any actual connection to the utopian and progressive values of the movement in history—is a large part of the feeling of function, simplicity and control taken up by the brand.<sup>132</sup>

While Target has indeed utilized the idea of “design” at its stores, it has done so by attaching products, however tenuously, with a notable designer; however, without any recognizable source, the niche products sold at The Container Store seem to float together in a general modernist-ish-ness of home organization and efficiency, which has now coalesced as a feeling distinct to The Container Store brand itself. The vague origin of products allows The Container Store to cultivate a brand synonymous with overarching “solutions,” made more powerful by their anonymity—these principles seem so rational, straightforward and universally true that they could not come from the creative energy of a single individual. To invoke the name of an individual designer undermines the product-out-of-time element of The Container Store’s retail strategy by introducing the possibility of expressive individuality, variation, and fashion.

So although the use of a modernist aesthetic to control the “messiness” of everyday life seems to be an adherence to some larger set of principles—those functionalist properties of the modernist design movement distilled into the form of a plastic bin—it is more appropriate to see these aesthetic choices as simply the application

---

<sup>132</sup> An article in *The Washington Post* provides an example of how the use of modernism is interpreted by observers: “The Container Store does not market itself as a design store. But more than some others—Target Stores, for example—the company has made sure the interior ambiance measures up to the products. The hallmarks of modernism—clean lines, honest materials and smooth functionality—are part of the shelving as well as the merchandise.” Linda Hales, “A New Niche For Chic Storage,” *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2004, C02.

of a style as part of a brand identity, itself a highly postmodern concept. In this sense, The Container Store is not providing an incoherent commercial solution to individual problems around overaccumulation, but instead a very logical extension of the economic and cultural circumstances from which it formed.<sup>133</sup> The Container Store, along with other organization texts and manuals, simply presents a type of lifestyle consumption that takes as its focus the fallout of consumption. Although we might desire feelings of control and security over our material belongings and our psychic lives, we are also convinced that we are able to consume ourselves into that security through our choices in the marketplace—not just goods, but also advice, services and experiences.

The result of home organization becoming a lifestyle, rather than a set of products, is that it never needs to end. As one Container Store fan and later employee declared, “storage and organization is ongoing; that’s why we will always have people

---

<sup>133</sup> Similarly, the logic of the store’s origin has been rolled into an explanation of its brand as an ambassador of “Conscious Capitalism,” or “our way of doing business since 1978.” In a video posted on The Container Store’s corporate site, Kip Tindell explains “conscious capitalism” in a way that seems to be a legacy of The Container Store’s early critiques of consumption: conscious capitalism serves “the needs of entire stakeholder group, starting with employees, then customers, then vendors, the community, shareholders and the environment.” But John Mackey, the outspoken libertarian CEO and founder of Whole Foods, presented conscious capitalism at The Container Store’s annual staff meeting in 2011 slightly differently: “I think capitalism is the greatest thing, *ever*. And yet, it has a terrible brand. People hate capitalism, they hate it. The blame everything they don’t like about the world on capitalism, and yet they are historically ignorant. Capitalism has lifted so many people out of poverty... You begin to see it’s not really about trade-offs, or balancing the stakeholders, but it’s really about synergies. The conscious businesses are going to outcompete...and they’re more profitable. And that’s because when people are motivated by a sense of higher purpose they tend to, they’re more creative, they tend to give more of their life to it, they’re more dedicated. If we’re going to transform America’s corporations then love is going to have to be front and center of it.” *Conscious Capitalism. What We Stand For | Video Gallery* (The Container Store, 2010), <http://standfor.containerstore.com/conscious-capitalism-event-recap/>. *Staff Meeting 2011. What We Stand For | Video Gallery*.



here.”<sup>134</sup> With psychic security as its core product—security bought through lifestyle consumption trading on feelings of function, simplicity, and efficiency—The Container Store seems to present its consumers a “solution” to all problems in material form. But when the problems being solved are general and diffuse, there exists no end to the need for what The Container Store is selling, regardless of the very practical accomplishments of products like hangers or bins or boxes.

## **Conclusion**

The essential push-pull of The Container Store has to do with the causal relationship between excessive consumption and organizational solutions, but it does not play out as succinctly as is often suggested. The goal of the store is to make sure everything within its walls is purposeful and rational in order to counter the excesses of consumerism, but the success of the brand is a product of the conditions of excess that it is trying to solve. This is one of the fundamental contradictions of all organization texts, manuals, and products. One begins to organize because you have over-consumed and are overwhelmed by your belongings (itself a symptom, perhaps, of the overwhelming choice of products that serve an ever-diversifying litany of needs); but the process of purchasing organization retail grows to meet the ongoing cycle of consumption that caused the clutter in the first place. The branding of lifestyle consumption, or “solution-based retail,” engenders a potentially ongoing consumer experience. To be fair, material acquisition at The Container Store is no secret, mostly because the goal of the store is to sell things,

---

<sup>134</sup> De Marco, “Organization In Store; Eager Workers Train at D.C.’s Soon-to-open Container Store,” C09.

though possibly also because the founders' approach to consumption is so passive. While they view overaccumulation as a national issue born of vague historical circumstances, they do not directly link the rise in consumption to a historical trajectory that has encouraged consumption as a means of identity creation. As such, there is no apparent contradiction between a seemingly problematic state in which "possessions proliferated" over the course of the century and Tindell's remark that "many people come in for one item, but they seem to go out with loaded shopping carts after they discover so many new products to make living easier."<sup>135</sup> Through the use of modernist aesthetics and rhetoric, The Container Store has "branded" home organization as an antidote to overconsumption; in its push for "solutions" over products, it has encouraged the consumption of home organization products in perpetuity.

---

<sup>135</sup> Hoffman, "Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue."

### Chapter Three: *Real Simple* and the Gendered Politics of Efficiency

*“It’s almost though what we do is charitable. Like people going to church to be closer to God, people come to Real Simple every month to be closer to organized.” –Elizabeth Mayhew, former style director of Real Simple*<sup>1</sup>

*Real Simple*’s tenth anniversary edition in April 2010 was an attempt to give readers the “gift of time.”<sup>2</sup> Its cover featured a yellow clock resting on a gleaming mirrored surface against a white background, with several yellow flower petals drifting into the frame. The magazine’s creative director Janet Froelich said the cover was difficult to conceptualize because “time is a very intangible thing — there isn’t a picture of time, and there isn’t a particular image that comes to mind.”<sup>3</sup> The industrial designer she commissioned to build the working clock told the *New York Times* that his design was a “constant reminder to live in the present.”<sup>4</sup> To symbolize this, the words “past” and “future” appeared on either side of the clock’s single hand—no keeper of hours or minutes, but instead a demarcation of a continuous “present” suspended in a photographic image. Against the tranquil combination of shining surfaces and color-coordinated petals, the issue’s headlines proposed a less relaxing method of finding time. Blaring text advertised the issues’ contents: “More Time For You,” “Find Extra Minutes Every Day,” “21 Shortcut Dinners,” and “30 Hall of Fame Time-Savers.” If one were to

---

<sup>1</sup> David Walker, “Pure and Simple,” *MediaWeek*, March 3, 2004. (accessed via Lexis Nexis on May 27, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Clifford, “At 10 Years, A Magazine Finds Time To Celebrate,” *The New York Times* (March 8, 2010): 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Harry Allen is the industrial designer who created the clock for the April 2010 cover. Other designers who created additional clocks for the issue include Boym Partners, Scott Henderson, and Alan Dye.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

follow these suggestions from *Real Simple*, then the “gift of time” visualized on the cover—a “present” put on pause for the enjoyment of a clean, uncluttered, and peaceful environment—would actually require a lot of strategy, hustle, and hard work.

*Real Simple* magazine was launched in April 2000 to fill a niche in the field of women’s lifestyle and shelter magazines. In the past decade, as readership of the “seven sisters” group of women’s magazine’s—the original group of women’s shelter and advice magazines that includes *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *McCall’s*, *Redbook*, *Woman’s Day*, and *Family Circle*—has declined, *Real Simple* has consistently become more popular, quadrupling its readership within only four years of its launch, with current readers estimated to be as numerous as 7.5 million.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *Real Simple* did well in the recession after 2008—it had wider advertising than its competitors and ad page increases of 33%. Ibid. After its launch, *Real Simple* moved into the black faster than all other subscription-based magazines in Time, Inc. history. David Carr, “Technology & Media; Nimble Magazines Adjust to Fast Pace,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2002, C9. Information on the declining circulation of “seven sister” magazines comes from an article in *Newsweek* in 2004, and a report from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) in 2008. The ABC is a nationally and internationally recognized non-profit forum of advertisers, ad agencies and publishers. Peg Tyre and Julie Scelfo, “Clean Freaks,” *Newsweek*, June 7, 2004.; “Average Total Paid and Verified Circulation for Top 100 ABC Magazines, 2008,” *Magazine Publishers of America: The Association of Magazine Media*, 2008, [http://www.magazine.org/CONSUMER\\_MARKETING/CIRC\\_TRENDS/ABC2008TOTALrank.aspx](http://www.magazine.org/CONSUMER_MARKETING/CIRC_TRENDS/ABC2008TOTALrank.aspx). 7.5 million refers to the total readership of the magazine in 2011; however, circulation and readership differ slightly, with circulation referring to the total numbers of copies of the magazine purchased (either through subscription or newsstand), and readership including the predicted total of times the magazine is “passed along” to new readers. The total circulation, not readership, of *Real Simple* in 2011 was 1.975 million. *Reaching Your Ideal Customers (Demographics, Print Media Kit)* (Real Simple Magazine, Spring Mediamark Research and Intelligence Base of Adults 2011). *Rate Base (Advertising Rates, Print Media Kit)* (Real Simple Magazine/Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2010). For more on *Real Simple*’s popularity, see also: Jon Fine, “Circ Model Cries for Hard Choices; How Magazines Got in a Jam, and a Bevy of Hard Choices for Getting Out,” *Advertising Age*, March 15, 2004, S2. Jon Fine, “2002 Grades:

Reputedly a guidebook for the supposedly common domestic problems of all American women, the magazine offers practical, often basic, solutions to everyday issues through what the magazine calls “simplification.” In fact, its drive to solve everyday domestic problems has invited criticism that the magazine is, in fact, too mundane. Much of the magazine’s content is almost comical in its simplicity—one advertising executive remarked dryly about the earliest issues of the publication, “‘Ten Ways To Clean Your Toilet’ doesn’t make a magazine.”<sup>6</sup> Not only does *Real Simple* offer articles such as “23 Things to Heat in Your Microwave” (which includes “melting butter”), it also does so within a graphic format that is an oasis from excess, with content that’s easy to absorb with a minimal amount of time and energy.<sup>7</sup> Design elements such as clean fonts, strict grid page layouts with maximum open space, and carefully crafted photographs of sparsely decorated rooms let readers know that this is a magazine that prioritizes efficiency, clarity, and minimalism.

---

A Look Back on 2002 Shows It Was Better Than ’01—but Not by Much—for Magazine Publishers,” *Advertising Age*, March 17, 2003, S6. Jon Fine, “Magazine of the Year,” *Advertising Age*, October 21, 2002, S1. Jon Fine, “Simply Successful: ‘Real Simple’ Overcomes Shaky Start,” *Advertising Age*, August 13, 2001, 4. Jura Koncius, “’Tis a Gift to Be Real Simple,” *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2004, H01.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Case, “Real Success,” *Brandweek*, March 10, 2003. (accessed via Lexis Nexis on May 27, 2010)

<sup>7</sup> Lindsay Funston, “Cooking Uses for Your Microwave,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/food-recipes/cooking-tips-techniques/cooking-uses-for-your-microwave-00000000042304/index.html>. There is also considerable backlash about this article on the realsimple.com website from web readers. Choice comments include, “I use the microwave to melt ice. I discovered after about the 14th time of doing it that it produces water and even hot water sometimes. Is this how water was first invented?” (Posted from “Ponkspice” on Friday 11/18/11 11:47 PM) and “Melt butter? Melt chocolate? Soften this? Warm that? AAAGGGHHH! What ELSE would you do with a microwave? This is absolutely positively, without question the most useless article in the history of the Internet, bar none.” (Posted from “precisionphoto1” on Tuesday, 5/17/11 10:00 PM)

Like much of the organization industry *Real Simple* is focused primarily on women, and takes as its purpose the goal of helping women feel a sense of control over everyday life. Kristin Van Ogtrop, the editor of *Real Simple*, says that the magazine is “for modern women looking for ways to make life easier; it’s about a psychographic rather than a demographic.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, as we will see, the magazine does cater to a very specific market demographic. Like The Container Store, *Real Simple*’s target demographic is affluent, working women who are thought of as being extremely busy. While similar to most organization texts that very literally address material excess and anxiety, telling women where to put their things in order to get a grip on their lives, *Real Simple* goes a step further by attempting to solve more intangible problems, such as those having to do with time, tasks, and responsibilities.

If the interiors represented in *Real Simple* are typical of shelter and advice magazines—idealized spaces with little clutter and whimsical decorating touches—readers are meant to understand that they become that way not just through the manual arrangement of space, but, more importantly, through the perfect arrangement of time. Although *Real Simple* covers regularly feature commonplace objects reverently composed in spacious and sparkling interiors, this magazine is not about the construction of a perfect interior space, as so many shelter and women’s magazines often are. Rather, the more important construction put forth by the magazine is the fantasy of a perfectly constructed day. At every turn, *Real Simple* focuses on ways readers can use time most effectively to both construct and be supported by their material surroundings. Folding the

---

<sup>8</sup> Robb Young, “No-glamour Glossies: A Guide Back to Basics,” *The International Herald Tribune*, March 1, 2006, 14.

temporal into the spatial, *Real Simple* ties every visual image within its pages to a streamlined schedule of perfectly used, un-wasted time: the interiors are spacious and sparkling because you have used an efficient, time-saving method to clean and decorate them; you have time to clean and decorate because you live in an organized home that eliminates the need for wasted effort and motion. Even in the act of reading, the time you spend with the magazine is rationalized—text and image are streamlined to make reading *Real Simple* as easy as possible.

As the April 2010 cover demonstrates, *Real Simple* suggests simplicity through the juxtaposition of two opposing, but ultimately interconnected, tendencies, both of which respond to a perceived lack of time for female readers. The first tendency at the heart of *Real Simple* is advice that encourages the speeding up of household chores in order to cut down on time spent on domestic responsibilities; the second is the visualization of a fantasy-like space in which time “stops” and domestic responsibilities are put on hold. The first has to do with text: articles about time-saving methods, check-lists with chores divided into timed tasks, and headlines that declare the various things one can quickly accomplish in a small amount of time. The second has to do with images: the photographic representation of an idealized, timeless space in which true relaxation can occur. Although unstated directly, the two tendencies are presented as causal—maybe, if you work hard enough to organize the household tasks set before you, then you might “find” the time to exist within the tranquil landscape pictured within the magazine’s pages.

This chapter examines how text, graphics and images come together in the design of *Real Simple* magazine to create and disseminate ideas about women, domestic space and cultural conceptions of time. Like The Container Store, *Real Simple* sustains a contradiction of purpose: in order to save time, one has to expend it. The Container Store advises consumers to spend money on an ongoing cycle of organization lifestyle products in order to manage the ever-increasing consumer products in the home, without any suggestion for closing the loop of consumption. *Real Simple* differs, however, by offering a way out of the cycle in the form of the frozen, static interior, in which time and responsibility stop. Increasingly, as the speed of everyday life is perceived to be moving out of control, busy women are meant to find refuge in being serene or still; however, this serenity is achieved by “finding time,” which means organizing, streamlining, and speeding up domestic work. So where text in *Real Simple* seeks to ameliorate the effects of a “speeded up” society by promoting more speed through efficiently timed domestic activities, images in *Real Simple* are almost entirely static: perfectly constructed still-life portraits of people-less and inert interior spaces. In the suggestion that time stasis is the housewife’s real fantasy (not fancy interiors within dream homes), *Real Simple* is similar to the de-cluttering texts in Chapter Four that suggest the payoff for shedding all extraneous physical and psychological material is a state of “stillness”: a vaguely defined achievement in which material austerity is translated into temporal terms and the truly organized are given a chance to pause within a world seen as moving too fast.<sup>9</sup> This concept of “stillness” is key to understanding *Real Simple* magazine. Whether readers

---

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Bennett Vogt, *Your Spacious Self: Clear Your Clutter and Discover Who You Are* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc., 2007), xxiii.



acknowledge the fantasy of this construction is hard to know; the magazine itself seems to offer up such a scenario genuinely as an aspiration, even as content reflects the ongoing, un-ending nature of domestic labor. Between the text and images of *Real Simple* we see a paradox that is a likely a large part of the magazine's allure. While the text provides an empathetic acknowledgement of the repetitive nitty-gritty of housekeeping, the images provide an aspirational component that seems to offer a fleeting respite from the day-in/day-out-ness of domestic chores. Even the physical specimen of the magazine helps to this end. Although its content makes for a rather depressing accounting of daily domestic life, the magazine itself, like a novel, offers a break in the day, a temporal lapse from responsibility—it is a pleasure to read a magazine, as evidenced by the number of people who still do it.<sup>10</sup> And so *Real Simple* itself becomes an object that holds within its cover both the possibility of tranquility and relaxation and the hyper-efficiency of a perfectly managed schedule.

The realistic and aspirational aspects of *Real Simple* work together to neutralize the political aspects of gender inequity in the home. Tellingly, the ideal of simplifying or “stopping time” shown in *Real Simple* photographs does not necessarily mean eliminating gendered domestic responsibilities; the aesthetic of “stopped time” is that of a perfectly cleaned house and a completed chore list. The magazine's regular features list time-saving tips aimed at easing the daily routine of busy women, but, with subjects ranging from microwaving sponges to kill bacteria to organizing all family papers in

---

<sup>10</sup> *Real Simple* did well in the mid-2000s when advertisers believed “print was dying.” Fine, “Circ Model Cries for Hard Choices; How Magazines Got in a Jam, and a Bevy of Hard Choices for Getting Out.”

color coded binders, these features still seem to reiterate women's responsibility to stay involved in the minutiae of domestic life.<sup>11</sup> Empathetic gestures toward the acknowledgment of gender inequity in domestic tasks never suggest solutions to the root problem. Rather than encouraging the delegation of tasks, *Real Simple* advises readers that simplicity requires the parsing of household activities into small achievable actions. Advice on breaking down the component parts of cleaning a pantry in under ten minutes, or creating a quick and easy centerpiece assumes that one would take the time to do such things in the first place.

### **The Demographics of Busy-ness**

Like the rest of the organization industry, *Real Simple*'s target demographic is women—77% of those who visit realsimple.com are women, but all content within the magazine and publicity around the magazine is directed to women.<sup>12</sup> With an overwhelmingly female readership and a focus on the home, a reading of *Real Simple* magazine sits at the intersection of existing histories of domestic advice literature, women's consumer magazines, and shelter magazines. In her historiography of the domestic advice genre, Grace Lees-Maffei explains that historians sometimes dismiss this literature because it reflects only an ideal of domestic life without proving how life was

---

<sup>11</sup> Clifford, "At 10 Years, A Magazine Finds Time To Celebrate."

<sup>12</sup> "Who Is She? (Realsimple.com Media Kit, Based on Nielson Real Simple Online Visitor Profile Study)," *Realsimple.com*, September 2010, <http://www.realsimple.com/static/rsr/digital-media-kit/audience.html>.

actually lived.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Lees-Maffei points out, domestic advice aimed at a popular audience can function as a corrective to dominant “top-down” accounts of taste because it “lags behind that of the avant-garde and the design profession,” giving some sense of popular taste at the time.<sup>14</sup> Even if domestic advice literature is never followed it provides an important window into cultural discourses of the period. In her cultural history of domestic advice, Sarah Leavitt defends the “fantasy” of advice literature; rather than show what women are actually doing in their homes, domestic advice illustrates “the ways in which cultural ideals could be embedded in household furnishing and ornamentation.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, *Real Simple*’s advice, however aspirational, offers a valuable lens on contemporary discourses about time, organization and domestic responsibility. Although we cannot infer how readers actually maintain their homes and

---

<sup>13</sup> Grace Lees-Maffei, “Studying Advice: Historiography, Methodology, Commentary, Bibliography,” *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 3. Even when adherence to advice literature is attempted, it rarely pans out as expected. In an article discussing the distance between the “real” and “ideal” interiors of early interior designer Elsie De Wolfe, Penny Spark makes it clear there is no such easy distinction; “so variable are the potential permutations and combinations of its multiple components—walls, ceilings, floors, heating and light sources, fitted and free-standing furniture, furnishing textiles and decorative objects among them,” the achievement of an “ideal” interior, even in the best circumstances, is rare. Penny Sparke, “The ‘Ideal’ and the ‘Real’ Interior in Elsie De Wolfe’s ‘The House in Good Taste’ of 1913,” *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (2003): 64. The problem of real versus ideal interiors is also somewhat resolved by looking at the formal qualities of the objects that make up advice literature. In *Livable Modernism*, Kristina Wilson finds looking at the “ideal” life allows one to find historical lifestyles fostered through manufacturers pamphlets, advice manuals and advertising; however, her study also “considers the ways livable modernist designs, through their functional and formal qualities, created ideal users—how the objects themselves compelled an ideal lifestyle.” Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Lees-Maffei, “Studying Advice,” 7.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5.

schedules after reading *Real Simple*, responses on realsimple.com from web commenters offer some illumination of the ways readers negotiate and contest this content. *Real Simple*'s ongoing popularity, however, shows that the overall ethos of the magazine carries some degree of authority in popular culture.

Women's lifestyle or "shelter" magazines are another point of reference for *Real Simple*.<sup>16</sup> Although the histories of advice literature and women's shelter magazines often overlap—in the 1950s, for instance, shelter magazines like *McCall's* and *Ladies Home Journal* were popular platforms for professional women working as domestic advisors—magazines differ slightly as a category of study because they are serial.<sup>17</sup> In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Design History* on the subject of interior design magazines, Jeremy Aynsley and Francesca Berry shift away from the conundrum of how readers actually interpret content to examine "the magazine itself as a design object and as a significant form of visual and textual information about the modern home and its inhabitants."<sup>18</sup> The magazine format is an important frame of reference for *Real Simple*, as messages about organization are often conceptualized as being never-ending,

---

<sup>16</sup> Like *Real Simple*, shelter magazines are a hybrid of several genres of women's popular magazines, including women's consumer titles, professional art and architecture journals, and trade journals. Jeremy Aynsley and Francesca Berry, "Publishing the Modern Home," *Journal of Design History* 18, no. 1 (2005): 1.

<sup>17</sup> Lees-Maffei, "Studying Advice," 7. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 173.

<sup>18</sup> Aynsley and Berry, "Publishing the Modern Home," 1. In the first half of the twentieth century, the abundant consumption of magazines dedicated to the home can be read as an act of modernity in itself, for the magazine's ability to bring private space into the public (on trains, in cafes and on the street) show "the magazine's ability to traverse and to problematize the conventional boundaries of public and private space." Aynsley and Berry point out "magazines insist that modernity is performed not through actual consumption of the modern home but in reading about that consumption." *Ibid.*, 5.

mirroring the ongoing content offered by a serial publication. Much as organization's ongoing-ness is suited to the imperative to consume organization products in perpetuity at The Container Store, the numerous lists, tasks, and bits of efficiency advice, when received as part of a monthly periodical—or, perhaps more overwhelmingly, as an endlessly replenishing web source—provide an ongoing, seasonal wave of efficiency advice that consistently arrives about two weeks in advance of when you need to get working. In her study of *Ladies Home Journal*, Jennifer Scanlon argues the format of the magazine provided early twentieth century readers with “a little of this, a little of that”—content that was easy to absorb while doing chores or taking care of children.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the specific demands of ongoing readership in a serial publication enabled content within the magazine that was somewhat polarizing in its approach. In order to ensure readers' ongoing loyalty to its advice, *Ladies Home Journal* fostered a “fairly predictable emotional formula”: a balance between cultural messages that spoke to women's inadequacy enough to ensure readers felt the need to seek out advice, and positive messages that encouraged them to return to the magazine the following month.”<sup>20</sup> Examining a broader range of women's magazines in a later period (1981-83), Ellen McCracken's *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms* puts forth a similar point about the dissemination of cultural messages. Rather than being “force-fed a constellation of negative images that naturalize male dominance,” readers were offered a “pleasurable, appealing consensus about the feminine” that worked to naturalize

---

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender and the Promise of Consumer Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 173.

existing power relations.<sup>21</sup> This well-worn trope of women's magazines throughout the twentieth century is apparent in *Real Simple* content, which offers aspirational images of freedom from domestic responsibility at the same time it reinforces cultural prescriptions about women in the home.<sup>22</sup> The main difference between *Real Simple* and previous incarnations of women's shelter magazines, however, is the magazine's conceit of providing "real" domestic advice to busy professional women. In this, *Real Simple* crafts itself as a more "modern" publication than competing women's magazines—its design strategy announces this distance, as we will see—and in doing so separates itself from overtly traditional rhetoric that proclaims women's only "work" is in the home.

By assuming the common denominator among its female readership is busy-ness, *Real Simple* creates the perception of a reading community that is assumed to share concerns about time and domestic responsibility. Much of the *Real Simple* approach to its readership is demonstrated in PR around the magazine, which capitalizes on terms and concepts about gender that feel so familiar that they are almost taken as cultural givens (and are therefore hard to refute).<sup>23</sup> As Susan Wyland, *Real Simple*'s first managing

---

<sup>21</sup> Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 3.

<sup>22</sup> "In many ways we're still addressing the things women have dealt with for years, Lesley Alderman, the former news editor of *Real Simple*, told *The Christian Science Monitor* in 2002. "In 1964, women reading *Ladies Home Journal* wanted to know how to make the perfect dinner. They still want the perfect dinner, but they want to find a simpler way to do it." Marjorie Coeyman, "What Women Want—to Read," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Kristin Van Ogtrop, the managing editor of *Real Simple*, said "[readers] may be career women or stay-at-home-moms, but the common thread is that they're overwhelmed and they don't have a lot of time to get it all done. They come to *Real Simple* because we give them the tools they need to get through the things they have to

editor, told *MediaWeek* in anticipation of the magazine's launch in 2000, she felt confident about the product because "life is complicated, and the desire to make things simpler has resonance for many women."<sup>24</sup> Referencing the magazine's upcoming launch in 2000, *The Wall Street Journal* identified the magazine's ideal reader as a "30-year old married working woman with too many responsibilities and not enough time."<sup>25</sup> A subsequent article in the magazine *Brandweek* referred to the magazine's demographic as the "overtaxed American" woman: "high-achieving, over-committed, and desperate to make her fulfilling yet impossibly hectic life a bit more manageable."<sup>26</sup> Carrie Tuhy, a former editor of *Real Simple*, touched on these shared assumptions about women when she spoke with *Brandweek* magazine:

Real life is not simple. That's why the magazine is first predicated on solving problems for the reader. And the other part, the 'simple,' really keeps alive the promise of a better life. To me, if someone believes in the best in you, you try to get there, and I really edit the magazine to that idea, the potential of the audience, because I firmly believe it's a wonderful moment to be an American woman. If it's complicated, it's because of the wealth of options [we have], so I'm always trying to edit for them and help them edit their lives.<sup>27</sup>

Here, Tuhy illustrates the main thrust of *Real Simple*: it relates to "real life," and so is authentic in its claims to understand and solve problems for "real" women; these problems are best solved through simplicity, a road to a "better life" largely about reducing things (both material things and time commitments). Tuhy addresses the

---

do, so they'll have more time for the things they want to do." Young, "No-glamour Glossies: A Guide Back to Basics."

<sup>24</sup> Tony Case, "Out to Launch," *MediaWeek*, March 6, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Rose, "Real Simple May Face Difficult Reception," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Case, "Real Success."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

“American woman” writ large, but elides those that do not have a “wealth of options” at their disposal. Most importantly, she introduces issues that might otherwise be politicized (“wealth of options” refers to the challenges of working and also maintaining a traditional domestic role), but are instead quickly neutralized with the suggestion that these problems are solved by learning to “edit their lives.”

In its insistence that it is a magazine focused on solving problems, *Real Simple* positions itself as a guide for “real” women’s lives (“we share stories of everyday women. *Real Simple* doesn’t care about what’s trendy. We care about what’s real.”).<sup>28</sup> According to a “Problem Detection Study” of 1200 readers in 2001 (a study that was repeated again in 2002 and 2003 to guide editorial content and marketing), the issues that *Real Simple* sought to address included organizational issues like finding more storage space in the home, as well as overall lifestyle concerns such as eating well and saving money.<sup>29</sup> In 2002 the top four reader problems included: “1. I spend too much and I don’t save enough; 2. My home is not organized well enough; 3. I am not prepared for unexpected financial events; 4. I don’t have enough storage space.”<sup>30</sup> Farther down the list were, “I feel like I’ve forgotten how to relax,” and “I have trouble finding pants that fit me.”<sup>31</sup> Such a study, and its subsequent re-purposing within the website as reader content, demonstrates *Real Simple*’s investment in providing sympathetic voice to readers’ everyday domestic concerns.

---

<sup>28</sup> Van Ogtrop, in Young, “No-glamour Glossies: A Guide Back to Basics.”

<sup>29</sup> Case, “Real Success.”

<sup>30</sup> Fine, “Magazine of the Year.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



To be “real” in *Real Simple* is to be in touch with the mundane aspects of how life *actually is*, rather than a glossy aspiration about how it could be; as a result, *Real Simple*’s tone often comes off as sympathetic rather than exhilarated—staying just on the coffee-klatch side of overtly downtrodden. Kristin Van Ogtrop, the editor, even tries to limit the use of exclamation points or hyperbole to make sure the reader does not feel like she is being shouted at or sold something.<sup>32</sup> “Women’s lives are busy,” Elizabeth Mayhew, the former *Real Simple* style director, explained in a lecture at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC in 2004 to an audience of 161 women and four men: “an organized desk and kitchen leads to an organized life. That is what our readers are searching for, versus an incredible home in *Architectural Digest* or an incredible vacation in *Travel & Leisure*.”<sup>33</sup> Such an emphasis is the rationale behind stories on how best to clean a pantry or choose toothpaste—these kind of mundane details are meant to be a realization of the daily to-do list that supposedly dominates women’s lives. As Mayhew told her audience in 2004, “we know what women’s top 200 problems are, and they don’t include, which Chanel suit looks good on me?”<sup>34</sup> By avoiding trends, *Real Simple* attempts to be timeless—an approach taken by The Container Store in its use of supposedly timeless modernist design choices. But, while a company like The Container Store hints that timelessness means being impervious to the whims of the market for all consumers, *Real Simple* equates it with aspects of gender and domestic responsibility:

---

<sup>32</sup> Young, “No-glamour Glossies: A Guide Back to Basics.”

<sup>33</sup> Koncius, “’Tis a Gift to Be Real Simple.”

<sup>34</sup> Walker, “Pure and Simple.”

“we are trend-free, so we are timeless. Who doesn’t have to put dinner on the table?”<sup>35</sup>

The answer, of course, within the *Real Simple* universe, is men.

A key element of *Real Simple*’s focus on “real” life is content that addresses women who work. 72% of *Real Simple* readers are employed—57% work full-time, and 44% are in “professional/managerial roles.”<sup>36</sup> Addressing an audience of women who work outside of the home allows *Real Simple* to hone a message about balancing home and work through efficiency that runs counter to traditional messages about domesticity found in women’s magazines. Scholar Sarah Leavitt points out that most advice literature of the twentieth century framed being a housewife as women’s one true work, downplaying the reality that many readers worked outside the home for pleasure or necessity.<sup>37</sup> That the majority of writers for such magazines were women furthered the discrepancy between the professional opportunities for women in the early- to mid-twentieth century and traditional models of femininity constructed for readers.<sup>38</sup> *Real Simple*, however, closes the gap between editorial staff and readers by conceiving of both as part of a shared community of busy women who work. Rhetoric in the media by editors and publishers of *Real Simple* shows an effort by those working at the top level of the magazine to promote both its appreciation of the experience of “real” women and the sense that all women, regardless of circumstances, suffer from the problem of being overwhelmed by their responsibilities at home. For instance, in her monthly column to readers, former editor Tuhy was once described as having a tone “of true commiseration

---

<sup>35</sup> Koncius, “ ’Tis a Gift to Be Real Simple.”

<sup>36</sup> *Reaching Your Ideal Customers (Demographics, Print Media Kit)*.

<sup>37</sup> Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 174–175.

<sup>38</sup> Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 169–196.

with the reader.”<sup>39</sup> Ann Moore, chairman of Time, Inc., *Real Simple*’s parent company, is similarly quoted as saying of the magazine: “I fell in love with the concept the moment I saw it. I may be the chairman of Time, Inc. by day, but at night I’m just another frazzled, working woman, like anybody else.”<sup>40</sup> By identifying the producers and readers of the magazine as one and the same, *Real Simple* effaces the boundary of a product being created for a consuming community. Rather, it presents a set of supposedly universal, overarching problems that require solving for all women—editors and writers included. Moore’s assertion that she, too, is one of the “frazzled, working” women is a perfect encapsulation of *Real Simple*’s message: although it seems fairly unlikely that the chairman and CEO of Time, Inc. cleans her own home, Moore’s statement hints that she is, by nature of being a woman, part of a like-minded community seeking relief from the burden of domestic chores, without any acknowledgement of differences in class, lifestyle, income, or employment.

Although the substance of advice in *Real Simple* focuses almost entirely on domestic labor, the magazine does not purport to address an audience of domestic laborers. Rather, *Real Simple* crafts a complicated message about domestic work specifically for its intended audience of affluent, professional women. Without directly addressing issues of class, *Real Simple* constructs an untroubled connection between the gender, relative affluence, and “complicated life” of its readers within the magazine’s pages—as the current editor of the magazine explains, “our readers are intellectual,

---

<sup>39</sup> Case, “Real Success.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

sophisticated and savvy. They have the luxury of a lot of things but [not] time.”<sup>41</sup> Historically, women’s magazines obscure difference among readers, addressing instead an “amalgam” of readers, “defined and limited by race, class and ethnicity but promoted now as ‘average.’”<sup>42</sup> Generally, women who were not married, white, native born, or middle class were left out of the assumed *Ladies Home Journal* audience.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the reading audience of *Real Simple* is treated as more or less the same—linked by busy-ness and gender rather than class, race, or ethnicity. In fact, readers of *Real Simple* are relatively affluent; a print media kit describing *Real Simple* reader demographics to potential advertisers claims the magazine is the “#1 Composition for employed, professional/managerial, and college-educated” readers.<sup>44</sup> The median household income of readers is \$93,000/year—64% make over \$75,000 per year and 46% make over \$100,000 per year—and 88% have a college education; the median income for realsimple.com readers is slightly less at \$71,000 per year, but 85% of these readers have

---

<sup>41</sup> Terri Sapienza, “More Simple,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, as magazine publication diversified to address audiences of different ages, ethnic groups, and levels of affluence, Ellen McCracken found “the structural similarities between these ostensibly different publications result from a common material factor: all of these magazines based their continued existence on the cycle of publishing profit, advertising, and women’s role as the primary purchasers of consumer goods.” McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Reaching Your Ideal Customers (Demographics, Print Media Kit)*. Advertisers consider *Real Simple* ideal for “upscale consumers.” Kate Fitzgerald, “Launches Crowd Already Tough Field: From Tony Style Books to Near-catalog Fare, Titles Seek to Win Home Front,” *Advertising Age*, April 5, 2004, S2. The GfK MRI, a marketing research group, placed the average *Real Simple* reader’s household income at about \$90,000 per year, which is considered “top” among all other women’s magazines. James Brady, “Brady’s Bunch,” *Advertising Age*, March 1, 2004, 30.

a college education and 71% are homeowners.<sup>45</sup> Stepping back from the prevailing message behind the magazine, one can speculate about the likelihood that some upper-income-level readers are also hiring domestic help for at least part of their household cleaning—although a survey indicates that 43% of realsimple.com readers would choose to outsource housecleaning (a number that does not indicate whether they actually do), this number relies on self-reporting by website readers and participation in the survey. Ultimately, the number of readers who hire domestic help remains speculation because, as the work of scholar Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo shows, domestic labor still goes largely undocumented; as domestic work has been culturally devalued it has become disregarded, forming an unregulated “shadow” economy that is now the “domain of disenfranchised immigrant women of color.”<sup>46</sup> What seems most likely is that readers are not all performing all the chores suggested by the magazine; however, in suggesting that they might, the magazine masks both the domestic labor of working-class women and the way tasks might be delegated or eliminated within the family.

The relative affluence of *Real Simple* readers complicates the magazine’s claim to represent “real” household problems. Although the majority of readers make far above the national average for middle earners (in 2010, the median income for all U.S. households was \$59,127), there is clearly a large range of incomes represented in the reading community—take, for example, the spread that could exist between the median

---

<sup>45</sup> *Reaching Your Ideal Customers (Demographics, Print Media Kit)*. “Who Is She? (Realsimple.com Media Kit, Based on Nielson Real Simple Online Visitor Profile Study).”

<sup>46</sup> Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), xiv.

for web readers (\$71,000) if they have a larger family, and the 46% of print readers making over \$100,000 per year if they have a smaller family.<sup>47</sup> In steering content away from Chanel suits and interiors that look like the pages of *Architectural Digest*, *Real Simple* seeks to resolve differences in purchasing power by eschewing luxury in favor of what is “real.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, however, this does not always go according to plan. In a recent web spread called “4 Super-Organized Women Spill Their Secrets,” the tips offered by the four featured women (an art director, freelance writer, fashion executive and interior designer—all mothers) provoked ire amongst realsimple.com readers.<sup>49</sup>

Some responses included the following:

“I agree with most other comments that these solutions are great if you have lots of space, money & time; not very realistic for the majority of women.” –womenrvets2

“I work 50 hours at a very stressful job, commute, and take care of my home, husband and pets. I’m curious if these women truly work full-time, and if they do, do they have housekeepers and nannies? Or maybe they don’t work full-time, and have housekeepers and nannies anyway! This would give them time to label their label makers. There’s organized and then there is obsessive. Real solutions for real kitchens and real women (busy women) would be more appreciated in the future, Real Simple...” –Reality 123

“If I “worked” from home and had a FT [full-time] nanny I could waste my time labeling spices too. Nice choice RS. Choose “Real” people.” –workingmomof2

“The real question is, what are these women NOT doing because they are wasting time with minatea [sic]?...I have a large family and was hoping for some real inspiration to get hot spots in my house tackled. Not to be made to feel like I’m less than organized because I don’t have a custom shoe rack in my closet with matching boxes. Plus, all of

---

<sup>47</sup> *The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*, Pew Social and Demographic Trends (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, August 22, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> In its initial stages, *Real Simple*’s advertising buys were considered markedly not “couture,” unlike other high-end women’s magazines, like *O: The Oprah Magazine* and *Vogue*. Lisa Granatstein, “Fashion Sense,” *MediaWeek*, February 18, 2002.

<sup>49</sup> Nicole Sforza, “4 Super-Organized Women Spill Their Secrets,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/organizing/organization-secrets-00000000028133/index.html>.

these solutions are EXPENSIVE!!...This is NOT a Real Simple solution, this belongs in Martha's dream world of ridiculousness!!!” –Badmamma<sup>50</sup>

These responses display a sense of frustration with content that is too expensive, complicated, or indicative of requiring outside help. It also shows how readers of *Real Simple* are invested in the magazine's contention that it addresses “real” women (in these comments, “real” means both practical and not so wealthy as to be able to afford a nanny). Some web readers, identifying themselves as part of a lower income bracket than the magazine often addresses, seem to be looking for practical advice that is also affordable, and take umbrage when they feel this goal is not being met. *Real Simple* has clearly staked its niche in the market of women's magazines as providing practical content—un-“real” content, we learn here, is the domain of other women's magazines, like *Martha Stewart Living*. Importantly, there were many reader responses to the same article that defended the content and the magazine, such as “I love Real Simple magazine...so many fun and helpful ideas. Some may not work for us all, as in too expensive on some articles, so just move on, there's plenty of info for all of us!”<sup>51</sup> Other commenters found inspiration in the ideas being described in the article and generated less pricy, alternative solutions for their fellow readers in the realsimple.com web community.<sup>52</sup> In discussing how *Real Simple* crafts cultural messages about domesticity,

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> From “RSfan2ormarylou,” posted Friday, January 22, 2010 8:51 am Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Another reader offered the following advice: “I think these illustrate high-end solutions to some basic issues. Rather than spend money on matching spice jars that look nice in a cabinet, try using plastic baggies in a drawer. Roll them tight, then label them (in your own handwriting with a pack of blank stickers), and you have the same solution. For the

time and gender, we cannot assume all readers experience these issues similarly, or that readers let tacit presumptions about the affluence of the reading community go uncontested.

### **Selling Efficiency**

*Real Simple* content presents readers with a conflicting message about domestic work. On the one hand, content in *Real Simple* presents the magazine in solidarity with the perceived complaints of its readers by acknowledging not just that domestic chores exist, but that these chores are so abundant, boring or distracting that they should be done as quickly as possible in order to move on to the more important aspects of living life. On the other hand, the sheer amount of content dedicated to domestic tasks, as well as playful messages about the shared guilt of domestic failings, subtly reinforce traditional notions of women's responsibility in the home.

Judging from the amount of total content in the magazine and website devoted to efficiency and time-saving through simplicity, one gets the sense that the *Real Simple* reading community is overwhelmingly preoccupied with this issue.<sup>53</sup> *Real Simple* and realsimple.com content includes numerous articles on general time-saving tips ("Real Simple's Best Time-Saving Tips," "18 Time-Saving Tips," "6 Time-Savers"); time-

---

wrapping paper, take the cardboard cylinders out of each roll and fold the paper. You can buy a box of Ziploc XL bags (for bigger items, not food) for about \$4.00 and store all your now-folded paper in the bags, pressing the air out so you can maximize your space. As for the shoes, I only own a few pairs, so thankfully I don't have that problem." From Karenf, Posted Thu 1/21/10 04:46 PM. Ibid.

---

<sup>53</sup> "Who Is She? (Realsimple.com Media Kit, Based on Nielson Real Simple Online Visitor Profile Study)."



saving as it relates to beauty (“6 Time-Saving, Two-in-One Beauty Products,” “Beauty Pros’ Time-Saving Strategies,” “Time-Saving In-Shower Beauty Routine”), health (“Shortcut Solutions to Health-Care Problems”), food and nutrition (“Time-Saving Ingredient: Rotisserie Chicken,” “Quick Dinner Ideas and Kitchen Shortcuts,” “Time-Saving Foods to Keep in Your Kitchen”), holiday entertaining (“8 Holiday Time-Savers,” “Our Favorite Thanksgiving Shortcuts”), and parenting (“Mom’s Guide To Managing Time,” “How Busy Moms Can Save Time,” “9 Ways To Speed Up Your Morning Routine”). Confusingly, there is also an article on “21 Top Time-Saving Cities.” Not only does the accumulated content on time-saving show a general preoccupation with the subject for the magazine’s creators and, possibly readers, but it also, in aggregate, creates its own type of overwhelming clutter. If serenity is what readers of *Real Simple* are looking for, then serenity, it would seem from the magazine’s content, is perpetually out of one’s grasp.

Efficiency advice that speeds up domestic tasks seems to imply chores should not be an important or time-consuming aspect of one’s life. Therefore, much like the domestic Taylorism made famous by Christine Frederick in her home economics advice columns and texts in the early twentieth century, *Real Simple* routinely offers women advice in terms of time spent. For instance, one of the features of *Real Simple* and realsimple.com are the “Speed Cleaning Checklists,” which give minute-by-minute break-downs of various household tasks.<sup>54</sup> These checklists break down areas of the

---

<sup>54</sup> “Speed-Clean Your Back Entryway,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-your-back-entryway-0000000053265/index.html>; “Speed-Clean Your Pantry,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed

home into composite parts—including playroom, fireplace, porch, grill, entryway, freezer, bookcase—and then further break down the cleaning process of these areas into short bursts of labor. For instance, the article “Speed-Clean Your Stovetop Checklist” includes nine steps toward achieving this goal, including:

Make sure the stovetop is cool. Remove the grates and the knobs (with an electric range, also take off the drip pans). Drop them into a few inches of hot, soapy water in the sink. Time: 30 seconds.

---

December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/kitchen/speed-clean-your-pantry-00000000044567/index.html>; “Speed-Clean Your Laundry Room,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/laundry/speed-clean-laundry-room-00000000042515/index.html>; “Speed-Clean Your Car Interior Checklist,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-car-interior-00000000037866/index.html>. “Speed-Clean Your Bathroom Checklist,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/bathroom/speed-clean-your-bathroom-00000000028739/index.html>; “Speed-Clean Your Fireplace in 15 Minutes,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-your-fireplace-in-15-minutes-00000000049874/index.html>; “Speed-Clean Your Playroom,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/more-rooms/speed-clean-your-playroom-00000000040377/index.html>; “Speed-Clean a Big Bookcase,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/dusting-polishing/speed-clean-big-bookcase-00000000040374/index.html>. “Speed-Clean Your Computer Checklist,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-cleaning-computer-checklist-00000000033423/index.html>; “Speed-Clean Your Stovetop Checklist,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/kitchen/speed-cleaning-stovetop-checklist-00000000023838/index.html>; “How to Speed-Clean Your Kitchen,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/how-to-speed-clean-your-kitchen-10000001086310/index.html>; “Speed Cleaning Your Porch,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-porch-00000000034762/index.html>.

Grab the knobs from the sink. You don't want to oversoak them or the markings might come off. Rinse. Shake excess water out of the inner workings, wipe dry, and set aside on a dish towel. Time: 1 minute.<sup>55</sup>

On first glance, these lists seem both painfully simple and needlessly complex—do you need four sentences to explain how to dry a knob? If this is something that women are supposed to be doing all the time, then these instructions either border on seeming patronizing, or, in their very simplicity, are soothing reminders of activities that can be easily “checked off the list.” On closer inspection, the checklists on *realsimple.com* also, by sub-dividing actions into improbably short segments of time, allow more tasks to be fit into a day. With such short durations, recommended responsibilities and activities that may not otherwise be a part of one's usual routine seem easily do-able.<sup>56</sup> For instance, a checklist called the “Kitchen Cleaning To-do List” sets up a schedule for “everyday,” “every week” and “every season” cleaning. Included in the “daily” routine, which is timed at a mere 4 minutes and 30 seconds, is “Sweep, Swiffer, or vacuum the floor (two minutes),” wipe down the stove, counters and sink (one minute, one minute, and 30 seconds, respectively). In asserting the speed at which they can be accomplished, these articles normalize such tasks not only as a part of what one should be doing, but also as

---

<sup>55</sup> “Speed-Clean Your Stovetop Checklist.”

<sup>56</sup> The “Daily Quick Cleaning Checklist” includes an extensive list of chores, each supposedly taking between 1-5 minutes to accomplish. “Daily Quick Cleaning Checklist,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/daily-cleaning-checklist-0000000000953/index.html#>.

too easy *not* to be doing.<sup>57</sup> In almost every instance of practical advice offered by *Real Simple*, the suggested increments of time per chore are so small that they become, regardless of the task they represent, not only manageable but also seductive; one minute to wipe down the outside of the washer and dryer—why not? When the January, 2007 cover of the magazine listed a number of things one could do in 15 minutes—from “cook a healthy dinner” to “speed clean your house,” “declutter your car,” and “banish your bad mood”—the message seemed not to be how to eliminate stress, but instead how to streamline, and then include more, into one day. So, confusingly, *Real Simple* suggests that one can achieve simplicity only by becoming very efficient at a glut of small, relatively easy to accomplish (but possibly pointless) household chores.

Although efficiency advice seems to convey a message about the relative unimportance of domestic tasks for busy working women, in fact the prevailing message of *Real Simple* hints that lack of time, rather than lack of desire, is keeping readers from completing their cleaning tasks. For instance, realsimple.com precedes the “Speed Cleaning Your Bathroom Checklist” with the headline, “You have just five minutes to clean your bathroom? Here’s how to use them.”<sup>58</sup> This same headline might have asked: “Do you hate cleaning your bathroom and want to spend as little time possible doing it? Here’s how to get away with doing a lackluster job” or even “How to get other members of your family to clean the bathroom.” Content focusing solely on how to work chores

---

<sup>57</sup> “Kitchen Cleaning To-Do List,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/kitchen-cleaning-to-do-list-10000001086325/index.html?>

<sup>58</sup> “Speed-Clean Your Bathroom Checklist.”

around a time deficit manages to consistently avoid the larger issue of whether such chores should even be done in the first place, and, if so, by whom.

The sense that readers want to take responsibility for the minutia of household cleaning is reiterated in web content on [realsimple.com](http://realsimple.com) that uses reader-generated contributions. Such content holds a mirror up to readers, possibly reinforcing their own feelings about their lives, but also reinforcing a sense of community around lack-of-time and the need for efficiency. A recent survey on [realsimple.com](http://realsimple.com) asked readers how they felt about time, “or the lack thereof.”<sup>59</sup> Though 701 readers answered the question, a few of these answers were pulled out and reflected back to readers in an article on [realsimple.com](http://realsimple.com) titled, “It’s About Time: How You Use It, Save It and Waste It.” While the survey’s results indicate how [realsimple.com](http://realsimple.com) readers feel about their time, the fact that the answers to the survey were re-used as new content is telling as a method of reader community building. Through this article, one gets the sense that fellow readers are, indeed, concerned about needing more time and feel themselves to be struggling on a daily basis with the many household tasks on their plate. The answers to questions such as, “What Time-Saving Invention Would You Most Like to See?” suggest domestic chores are the largest source of reader frustration. One reader responded with, “a drain in the middle of my house so I could just hose this place down!” while another suggested “a vacuum that will pick up large items.” Some answers specifically reference gender inequity in terms of time (or the lack thereof). One reader said her best time-saving

---

<sup>59</sup> “Real Simple Time Survey: How You Use It, Save It, and Waste It,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/magazine-more/inside-magazine/time-survey-00000000031118/index.html>.

device would be “wife robots. I would love to have one for myself, give one to my husband, and keep one on hand as a hostess gift.”<sup>60</sup> *Real Simple* does not just distance itself from earlier women’s advice magazines that naturalized the gendered division of labor in the home by cultivating “modern” women’s busy-ness; it also generates content that seems to lay such divisions bare. This open acknowledgment never approaches critique because it is framed lightheartedly—the “wife robot” comment becomes the rhetorical equivalent to a sympathetic eye-roll between readers, but without a direct refusal of the cultural expectations that make “wife robot” a recognizable joke.

The powerful conclusion to be taken from *Real Simple*’s efficiency content is in its subtle combination of burden, ambition, and guilt around the domestic interior—yes, chores are boring, but you do want them completed, otherwise why would you feel so bad when they go undone? This logic is further justified by the shared nature of collective guilt about domestic inadequacy. By reflecting a community back to readers who cannot meet the demands of perfection in their home life, and, in falling short, are all the more “relatable” and “real,” *Real Simple* cements a sense of shared duty and obligation for women in the home. In response to the question, “What Is The Weirdest Thing You’ve Eaten for Dinner in the Name of Saving Time,” answers included, “a beer and a pudding cup,” and “I served my family a chicken with two forks. No plates. No side dishes. Just a whole chicken that was thrown into the oven.”<sup>61</sup> Answers to the question, “What’s the Most Embarrassing Thing You’ve Done for the Sake of Speed?” similarly reference a comic sense of inadequacy in trying to “keep up” with domesticity: “stapled my

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

daughter's Girl Scouts patches to her vest because I didn't have time to sew them before the meeting" and "carried the kids to the car with a blanket over their (three) heads so I didn't have to put coats and mittens on all of them."<sup>62</sup> These comments show not only frustration with the responsibility of everyday domesticity but also an unwillingness to forego specifically gendered responsibilities around the home and self-presentation that are considered "necessary," such as the readers who commented that they "painted only the toenails that would show through my peep-toe shoes" and "ironed only the parts of my clothing that could be seen."<sup>63</sup> Keeping in mind that these answers are those hand-picked from the survey to be re-printed on realsimple.com, one can note an attempt to create solidarity among readers—just as Ann Moore described herself self-deprecatingly as a "frazzled working woman"—based on lighthearted confessions of inadequacy.

### **Sped-up Time**

*Real Simple's* preoccupation with efficiency and women's ideal use of time stems from two interconnected issues: a perception that time in American culture has "sped up," and the reality that most women report feeling more time pressure than men because they are probably performing more tasks around the house. The relationship between perceptions of time, especially as it relates to gender, and the reality of how time is spent is extremely complex, not least because measurements of both the perception and reality of how time is spent are highly contested. Where a number of issues likely contribute to disorganization within the home—many of which revolve around consumption addressed

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

in Chapter Two—*Real Simple* perpetuates the narrative that homes are disorganized because of women’s lack of time.

The idea that time is “speeding up” has considerable traction in contemporary society. There are many arguments, both popular and academic, debating whether this is actually the case, and, if it is, why this might be.<sup>64</sup> Many of these accounts use a diverse collection of quantitative sociological research to prove that Americans are considerably busier than ever before. A variety of phenomena are cited as evidence for the existence of a “speeded-up” society, from changes in transportation and communication over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, to increases of production and efficiency that encourage quicker turnover of consumption cycles, and faster rates of change in fashion, lifestyle, product and beliefs as a result of the above. Often, scholarly accounts link a loss of leisure or non-work time to increasing cycles of work and consumption, making a direct connection between a shortage of time and an excess of material culture (a nexus that pertains directly to the home organization phenomenon). Scholars like the Harvard sociologist Juliet Schor are often referenced in this regard—her work comes up many times in this dissertation for being at the forefront of criticism against consumption

---

<sup>64</sup> See: James Gleick, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999). Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Stephen Bertman, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998). See also productivity methods and time-tracking software, such as: The Pomodoro Technique (<http://www.pomodorotechnique.com/>), Getting Things Done (GTD, <http://www.davidco.com/>), The Action Method (<http://www.actionmethod.com/>), 1DayLater (<http://1daylater.com/>), and Chrometa (<http://www.chrometa.com/>).



and is also often included in anthologies on the voluntary simplicity movement for her arguments on overwork, lack of leisure and time deficits.<sup>65</sup>

The voluntary simplicity movement, from which *Real Simple* borrows some cachet for its title, is an outgrowth of the 1970s counterculture that has since grown into a movement with popular and scholarly branches intertwining to persuasively argue for changes to behavior around work, leisure and consumption.<sup>66</sup> Regardless of its title, however, *Real Simple* should not be considered part of the voluntary simplicity movement—even when home organizing texts claim to be about “simplicity,” they rarely make such a direct connection between capitalism, consumption, material excess and a lack of time.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, the voluntary simplicity movement shares with home

---

<sup>65</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline Of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). Juliet Schor, “The Problem of Over-consumption—Why Economists Don’t Get It,” in *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture*, ed. Amitai Etzioni and Daniel Doherty (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 65–82.

<sup>66</sup> Although debates about the role of consumption have long been a part of academic debate, with some scholars defending the value of consumption as a means of social and cultural expression and others claiming consumption to be a type of false consciousness that keeps individuals from recognizing structures of power, advocates of voluntary simplicity see consumption outside of these theoretical structures. Rather, consumption is seen simply as an obstruction to personal fulfillment and satisfaction, an artificial means of constructing happiness from which individuals should be “freed” in order to experience “authentic expressions of affection and appreciation by others.” Overlapping with rhetoric from self-help books and television shows decrying the cluttered state of American homes, scholarship and writing on voluntary simplicity places consumption and material acquisition at the heart of a range of contemporary issues, from the environment to the perils of advertising. Daniel Doherty and Amitai Etzioni, *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 13. See also, Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, Revised (New York: Quill, 1993).

<sup>67</sup> Ideas about “simplicity” have a long history in home organization advice magazines. Edward Bok, the publisher of *Ladies Home Journal* from 1889 to 1919, cultivated a philosophy around “simple living” that ran through every issue of the magazine. To Bok, simplicity “reflected the editor’s own ideal for living in the modern world” and meant “an

organizing literature a preoccupation with time as a commodity that has become scarce in the past thirty years. In the words of the author of an organization book called *The Secrets of Simplicity*, this is the problem of “our ‘busier than thou’ society—in which people pride themselves on their ability to live life at breakneck speed and maximum efficiency.”<sup>68</sup> Both home organization and voluntary simplification texts connect the “clutter” that plagues contemporary life with the “clutter” of a too-full schedule or of too many demands on one’s time, identifying both as symptoms of a “speeded-up society,” a loosely-defined sense that life is too full and moving too fast.<sup>69</sup>

John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, the authors of the comprehensive survey of time use, *Time for Life*, attribute the contemporary feeling that time is a precious commodity not to a change in circumstance but to a change in perception. Tracking Americans’ use of time in the 1990s, the authors refute arguments put forward by Schor and others that claim Americans feel busy because they are working proportionally

---

emphasis on buying simple fashions, furnishing and living in small homes, and maintaining uncomplicated relationships in the home and community.” Bok idealized simplicity as retaining aspects of traditional home life and augmenting them with modern conveniences. Importantly, the simple life required women at home to supervise the lifestyle. Bok’s idea of simple living ran through *Ladies Home Journal* from the 1910s to the 1920s, and lingered for decades after his tenure. Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 51–52.

<sup>68</sup> Mary Carlomagno, *The Secrets of Simplicity: Learn to Live Better with Less* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), 11.

<sup>69</sup> See, for instance, Marc Lesser, *Less: Accomplishing More by Doing Less* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009). Lesser identifies the business of the modern world as the real enemy of inner peace: “This book is about *that* kind of busy—that crazy, nonstop, way-too-busy ceaseless activity that exhausts our efforts and yet leaves us feeling as if we are getting nowhere.” His solution is “to believe in the power of less.” The outcome of living with less, he argues, is that it helps one to “find your song” and then “sing your song.” Lesser’s own “song” is reminiscent of the goals of the de-cluttering authors addressed in Chapter Four: to help people “reduce what is extra and unnecessary in daily life to increase the positive power that resides in every human being.” *Ibid.*, 4–5.

longer hours than ever before (they claim these accounts use outdated data).<sup>70</sup> While Robinson and Godbey agree that the pace of life has sped up with new technology and that Americans regard themselves as more rushed as a result, this does not actually mean Americans have fewer overall hours of free time and more hours of work.<sup>71</sup> They report a sense of “time famine” expressed by upwardly mobile middle or upper-class Americans, which they believe to be a product of “open-end living,” where more is always more desirable: “the progression of open-end living has moved from the endless consumption of things to endless experiences, communication, and our very concept of ourselves.”<sup>72</sup> The feeling of “time famine” is countered by “time deepening,” in which modifications are made to fit more activity into less time.<sup>73</sup> Aspects of *Real Simple* that suggest readers speed up domestic tasks certainly fit into this conception of “time deepening.”

The scholar Elizabeth Shove challenges even the perception that time has “sped up,” as such a view presumes an ahistorical conception of time. In *Time, Consumption and Material Culture*, Shove finds fault in the argument that material culture in affluent societies is “spinning out of control” and as a result moving “too fast for personal well-being.”<sup>74</sup> Such arguments emphasize a “dramatic divide between consumer society and

---

<sup>70</sup> Geoffrey Godbey and John Robinson, *Time for Life (Second Edition): The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 49–53.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann, and Richard R Wilk, eds., *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 1.

an earlier phase in which life was less complicated, more relaxed or more structured.”<sup>75</sup> Theories about time “speeding up” rely on false conceptions of the past, and are often “built around a vision of a society where everyone has time to spend with those whom they care most about, a time when everyday life was straightforward with fewer work, domestic and consumer-related time pressures.”<sup>76</sup> Beyond historical comparison, scholars who study gender and issues of temporality argue that time “must be thought of as a resource *and* as a social meaning”; that is, having more or less time, in comparison to other women, is socially referential.<sup>77</sup> The responses by web commenters on realsimple.com show how resources, family size, and the availability of domestic help can fundamentally change how one experiences time at home.

There is much evidence to suggest a large gap between the time put into domestic work by men and women, which is why time has long been a concern of feminist politics and scholarship.<sup>78</sup> Scholars such as Doreen Massey have questioned a strict dichotomy of gender and time, in which “time is constructed as masculine, dynamic, and inherently

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 4. Rather than seeing material objects “as a distracting presence that injects stress and temporal frenzy into our lives,” Shove argues, “it is helpful to see them also as communicators and stabilizing devices which people employ to attain, reproduce and challenge temporal identities.” Ibid., 5.

<sup>76</sup> Dale Southerton, “Re-ordering Temporal Rhythms: Coordinating Daily Practices in the UK in 1937 and 2000,” in *Time, Consumption, and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann, and Richard R. Wilk (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2009), 51.

<sup>77</sup> Mary Holmes, “Politicizing Time: Temporal Issues for Second-Wave Feminists,” in *Social Conceptions of Time: Structure and Process in Work and Everyday Life*, ed. Graham Crow and Sue Heath (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 41.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 38.

political, as opposed to space, which is coded feminine, static and apolitical.”<sup>79</sup>

Nonetheless, she says, the historical treatment of women’s work means there is still reason “to speak of a privileging of commodified time over time-giving activities that...are more often performed by and associated with women.”<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, studies of women and time show that one’s ability to control space and time is gendered, and that women’s time is still in large part structured by the mundane activities of everyday life.<sup>81</sup> Arlie Hochschild’s 1989 study of 50 working parents, *The Second Shift*, produced evidence of a “leisure gap” between men and women, where women work a shift at work and then a “second shift” at home.<sup>82</sup> Quantitative studies also show that women spend substantially more time on unpaid domestic work than men, even though both women and men spend less time overall than they did 20 years ago. Results from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ “American Time Use Survey” in 2010 show that on an average day about 20% of men perform housework—such as cleaning or doing laundry—compared with 49% of women.<sup>83</sup> While the more detailed time studies performed by the *Time For Life* researchers refuted the large disparity between men and women regarding time spent

---

<sup>79</sup> Doreen Massey, “Politics and Space/Time,” in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146–151.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–149. See also, Holmes, “Politicizing Time: Temporal Issues for Second-Wave Feminists,” 41.

<sup>81</sup> Karen Davies, “Responsibility and Daily Life: Reflections Over Timespace,” in *TimeSpace: Geographies of Temporality*, ed. Jon May and N.J. Thrift (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997).

<sup>83</sup> The estimates in this release are based on annual average data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). The ATUS, which is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is a continuous survey about how individuals age 15 and over spend their time. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *American Time Use Survey, 2010*, June 22, 2011.

on domestic tasks—asserting, somewhat problematically, a trend toward “androgyny” in this respect—their research still shows inequity, albeit with a decreasing gap.<sup>84</sup>

Subsequent studies have looked closer at this gap, taking up the issue of research inaccuracy in time and gender studies.<sup>85</sup> One study showed women felt they worked 13.2 more hours than their husbands per week, while the husbands felt the wives worked only 7.2 hours more than they did. The researchers account for the large discrepancy by the nature of the tasks being reported; women often perform housework as a “secondary” task while doing something else and therefore feel (and report) tasks taking a longer block of time—in fact, when women reported performing domestic tasks as a “secondary” activity, it was because the “primary” activity was also a domestic task.<sup>86</sup> Even when inaccuracies in reporting cause discrepancy in what men and women think they are each doing within the home—a general consensus in all studies is that women spend more time on domestic work than men.

Women also perceive time-related stress more regularly than men. Although almost a quarter of adults in the U.S. say they always feel rushed, women are more likely than men to feel starved for time; women who are mothers or who work are even more likely than men to report feeling rushed.<sup>87</sup> These feelings do not change according to

---

<sup>84</sup> Robinson and Godbey refute Hochschild’s findings; Hochschild in return claims *Time for Life* excludes those who are too busy to fill out the time use questionnaires. Godbey and Robinson, *Time for Life (Second Edition)*, 202–203.

<sup>85</sup> Yun-Suk Lee and Linda J. Waite, “Husbands’ and Wives’ Time Spent on Housework: A Comparison of Measures,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 328–336.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 334–335.

<sup>87</sup> *Who’s Feeling Rushed?*, Pew Social and Demographic Trends (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, February 28, 2006). 26% of women say they “always feel rushed,”

income, education level, or location—rural and urban areas are just as likely to have rushed-feeling people—although age is a factor (employed adults are, unsurprisingly, almost three times more likely than retirees to feel rushed).<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, the ability to pay for domestic help does not necessarily alleviate the problem; the survey finds that about 16% of the adult population reports hiring outside help for chores (which include, but are not limited to, housecleaning), but feeling just as rushed as those who do not hire help. Working outside the home is not correlated to stress level—mothers who stay home are just as likely to be stressed as those who work part- or full-time.<sup>89</sup> Very generally, these findings suggest women adopt time stress as a result of cultural expectations around gender, rather than circumstances of employment or family size. Women also feel stress caused by household clutter more keenly. A study performed by researchers at the Center for the Everyday Life of Families at UCLA—research discussed further in Chapter Two of this work—found that mothers who felt their homes to be more messy or cluttered experienced a higher rate of depressed mood in the evening hours measured by cortisol (stress hormone) levels; fathers in the same households did not experience the same

---

while 21% of men report the same feeling. Of employed women and men, the gap is larger: 33% of employed women feel rushed, while only 25% of employed men reported the same. Unsurprisingly, the gap grows larger among parents. Mothers with children under 18 reported at 36%, while fathers of children under 18 reported at 25%. The gap was largest between employed mothers (41%) and employed fathers (25%). This study was conducted on a nationally-representative sample from Oct-Nov, 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> *The Harried Life of the Working Mother*, Pew Social and Demographic Trends (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, October 1, 2009). The perception of parental ability changes dramatically if women are working—on a scale from 0 to 10, 43% of mothers who stay at home give themselves a 9 or 10 rating; only 33% of mothers who work give themselves a 9 or 10.

effects of clutter.<sup>90</sup> The purpose of discussing such research is not to prove women possess a biological instinct to care more about the upkeep of a home interior, but to show how cultural expectations about gender can shape the perception of what should or can be done in a home over the course of the day. If the failure to meet these expectations is powerful enough to cause elevated stress levels and depression, then surely it can motivate the consumption of organization texts for the home.

Women's perception of time-related stress also relates to the historically specific demands of late twentieth century culture. Scholar Dale Southerton conducted a comparison of the daily schedules of women in 1937 and 2000, finding evidence that both sets of women of felt " 'rushed,' 'harried,' 'fitting it all in,' and 'not wasting time on meaningless activities.'"<sup>91</sup> The difference between 1937 and 2000, however, could be found in changes in communication and unmooring from institutional structures resulting from forces of postindustrialism, which has caused "a wider variety and greater flexibility of temporal rhythms in everyday life."<sup>92</sup> The de-institutionalizing of certain regulated time-based activities such as traditional mealtimes and regular working hours has created "multiple and overlapping routines."<sup>93</sup> Even as ideas about gender have evolved, normative expectations for domestic responsibility have remained with women. The respondents of his study in 2000 were distinct from the diarists of 1937 in the number of

---

<sup>90</sup> Jeanne E. Arnold et al., *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012), 26.

<sup>91</sup> Southerton, "Re-ordering Temporal Rhythms: Coordinating Daily Practices in the UK in 1937 and 2000," 60.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



strategies they used to coordinate their own and their families' schedules.<sup>94</sup> Without reliable structures and schedules, Southerton finds that women are left crafting their own schedules and coordinating everyone else's with the use of technologies that allow on-the-fly contact and rearranging, a change "largely dependent on material goods and infrastructures that make the progressive erosion of institutionally timed rhythms possible."<sup>95</sup> As a result, women are coordinating a schedule in the same way they might be seen as shopping for a lifestyle—mixing and arranging the perfect day, but relying on completely individual sources for solving that problem. Where they were once prescriptive, domestic tasks are now diffuse, unmanageable, and seemingly out-of-control. *Real Simple*'s response is to suggest designing one's day through rules, charts, and systems. In order for the rigors of this routine to be an attractive choice it has to be warm and sympathetic-seeming; it has to seem like a glut of wonderful options: "our reader is over-worked, over-committed and over-scheduled. She loves her life and has way too much on her plate, but she doesn't want to give any of it up."<sup>96</sup> In its seemingly bottomless well of web and periodical content, *Real Simple* offers myriad options for mix-and-match domestic routines, framing such efficiency as a choice. The appearance of options from which to design an ideal but ultimately self-supporting life is a cultural effect of neoliberalism. Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine describe neoliberalism

---

<sup>94</sup> See: "Speed Up Your Family's Morning Routine," *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 27, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/time-management/morning-routine-00100000075608/index.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Southerton, "Re-ordering Temporal Rhythms: Coordinating Daily Practices in the UK in 1937 and 2000," 62.

<sup>96</sup> Robin Domeniconi, publisher, *Real Simple*, in David Carr, "Don't Aspire; Just Embrace Simplicity," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2002, C11.

in culture as “an ethos of autonomous individualism, where individuals are to become agents of their own success or failure in contemporary conditions of “late modernity” and globalization.”<sup>97</sup> Individualism is seen as separate or above discourses of class and gender; instead, they argue, women in particular are encouraged to internalize “the right sorts of expert knowledge to sustain an endlessly and adaptive and reinventing self,” usually by “consuming the self into being.”<sup>98</sup> In *Real Simple* it is the female reader’s job not just to follow a strict accounting, but also to construct for herself the regulations that combat the “speed” of everyday life. In such a call to action we forget the option that there might be another way out of the dilemma of not-enough time—that is, to question the nature of such responsibilities in the first place.

By the late 2000s, the studies, theories, and declarations about women’s lack of time due to domestic inequity detailed above had become part of the public discourse. Indeed, though it is hard to say for sure, the likelihood seems high that *Real Simple* readers are cognizant of the circulation—and, of course, the lived reality—of such ideas. That is why it is so telling that in 2011 *Real Simple* participated in its own study on gender and time in conjunction with the Families and Work institute, a non-profit research group studying issues around work and leisure. From October 24 to November 1, 2011, *Real Simple* worked with the Families and Work Institute on a nationally representative survey of 3,230 women aged 25-54 to determine how women manage their time. The study provides relevant demographic information about the way *Real Simple*

---

<sup>97</sup> Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, “Regulating The Abject.,” *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 227.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

readers feel about their time that might otherwise be difficult to find out.<sup>99</sup> More important, however, is the fact that the magazine teamed with the Family and Work Institute to conduct the study in the first place. This alliance shows *Real Simple*'s continued investment in itself as a cultural outlet focused on the issue of women's time, as does the simultaneous re-presentation of these results back to its readers, a decision that helps to build a reading community that is cognizant and self-reflective about lack of time being the largest hurdle to women's happiness.<sup>100</sup> The re-packaging of research-oriented material is one more important way *Real Simple* fosters an empathetic link with its readers. The results and, more critically, the reporting of this survey encapsulate the political stakes of the conundrum of time for women in *Real Simple*.

The results of the survey are available to the public in two forms: one as a slideshow on the *Real Simple* website directed to readers, another as an executive summary directed to marketers titled, "Women and Time: What Makes Her Tick?"<sup>101</sup> Both versions, however, are similarly designed as a hybrid of text and "graphic

---

<sup>99</sup> The results of the "Women and Time" survey show, unsurprisingly, that many women feel a lack of time in their own lives. Half of the women surveyed felt they didn't have enough time in general (free time was defined as "time that you spend on yourself, where you can choose to do things that you enjoy"): 52% of women had less than 90 minutes of free time a day; 29% had less than 45 minutes a day. Half of the working-women surveyed felt they did not spend enough time with their children, yet all mothers, including those who do not work out of the home, spend more than 14 hours per week on child care, 4 hours more than 1965—even though the report claims fathers have tripled their child-care responsibilities in the same period. Real Simple, Time Inc., *Women and Time: What Makes Her Tick? (Women and Time Study 2012, Time Inc.)*, 2012.

<sup>100</sup> "How Do Women Spend Their Time?," *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/time-management/spend-time-00100000077167/index.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Real Simple, Time Inc., *Women and Time: What Makes Her Tick? (Women and Time Study 2012, Time Inc.)*.

journalism,” a method of expressing research and public opinion in the most generic, least complex way possible. Critic Ellen Lupton finds the origin of this style of “infotainment” graphic design in the rise in popularity since the 1980s of *USA Today*, which sought to marry the visual tropes of television entertainment to popular journalism in order to create an “all-purpose marketing opportunity” (or, as she calls it, “McPaper”).<sup>102</sup> Indeed, the slideshow of the “Women and Time” survey for readers on realsimple.com looks markedly similar to a 2012 “Marketing to Moms” report from the international marketing firm, Mintel. The visual similarity is unsurprising considering the survey’s purpose as a marketing guide for advertisers; however, when considering how demographic information about the inequity in reader’s domestic lives is re-packaged as new content within a marketing framework, the distinctions between research, consumption, profit and content start to collapse.

In what seems to be a surprising turn, *Real Simple*’s executive summary of these results for marketers brushes up against overtly political messages about the media, women, and domestic labor. In one segment, the summary highlights the findings of a different survey in which commercials shown over one week of primetime television in 2004 showed 477 characters completing chores, 305 of which were women and 159 of which were men; of the men, 50% were portrayed as “comically inept.” The summary then quickly points to the larger cultural effects of gender stereotypes around domestic chores: “these portrayals of women over the years have likely penetrated our subconscious, which may be the reason why 1 in 3 married women said they were

---

<sup>102</sup> Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *Design, Writing, Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (New York: Kiosk, 1996), 145, 155.

uncomfortable delegating chores to their spouses/partners.”<sup>103</sup> Reminding marketers that “it’s important to give women permission not to be perfect all of the time,” the summary suggests that a way forward is to “encourage[e] women to delegate responsibilities to their spouses/partners and/or children and to be content with the results will likely strengthen those relationships.” Leaving aside the troubling implication that companies selling household products are in a position to grant such permission, these messages seem like a genuine attempt to facilitate change by working within a system of advertising and consumption to change messages that are damaging to women. Take, for instance, the statement, “by relaxing the standard of how women are portrayed and what is expected of them, it reinforces that **it’s OK if all the chores don’t get done by a certain time.** [bold in original]” How is it possible to square such directives with the content of the magazine?

The tone of the summary’s language helps to answer this question. Much like the web readers whose self-deprecating online comments reference their inability to reach the unrealistically stringent domestic standard for women, each section of the executive summary is headed with a humorously negative title, as if the writers were in on the joke that women are unfairly pressured to perform domestic tasks. These include, “Why Can’t Women Just Relax?”, “Mothers Haven’t Gone Missing in Action” and “They Can’t Let Go.” The tone of *Real Simple*’s editorial content and web commentary—its winking

---

<sup>103</sup> In another segment, the summary claims the fact that 45% of women who have spouses with the same or higher standard of household cleanliness refuse to give up control of organizing and de-cluttering is problematic because it points toward internalized standards of housekeeping for women and inequity in task sharing between men and women. Real Simple, Time Inc., *Women and Time: What Makes Her Tick? (Women and Time Study 2012, Time Inc.)*.

acknowledgement that “real” life for women is full of tasks that are simultaneously inequitable, never-ending, and unavoidable—comes full circle here in magazine-issued advice to potential advertisers for potential readers (who are, ultimately, also potential consumers). Almost inevitably, the summary ends with a segment titled “Implications,” offering tips to those looking to use the information to reach potential consumers. One of these is to “Talk to Women The Way They’re Thinking,” which includes using language such as “Get it done,” “Move on,” and “Check it off,” to help marketers “resonate with women in a positive way.” As with the magazine itself, the use of empathetic language works to neutralize the potential contained within the otherwise provocative statistics about expectations for women in the home. What could be a call to arms becomes instead a checklist, a counter spray, a color-coded bulletin board.

In research-oriented content, *Real Simple* nods toward some acknowledgment that the existing division of labor that exists in many women’s homes is inequitable, and that this inequity permeates the level of the subconscious and the larger culture. Ultimately, however, the “Women and Time” marketing report and reader slideshow position consumption as a solution to issues of time-related stress. Under the heading “Help Her Check Off Her To-Do List With The Right Products,” the executive summary reassures marketers that although lower prices have appeal, brands that “offer practical solutions so [women] can easily make decisions and save time will find that women will offer their loyalty willingly.”<sup>104</sup> The double-bind of opportunity and responsibility that requires the need for time-based efficiency advice for women is presented as a choice like any other

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

consumer decision. A segment of the executive summary titled “AVOID PORTRAYING WOMEN AS VICTIMS” frames the opportunities that exist in contemporary life for women as a series of “options”—these options are good for marketers to understand how to sell products, but they are also options from which women can “shop” for a solution to the dearth of time they feel in their lives (through efficient schedules, cleaning products, and simplicity guides):

Marketers should avoid portraying women as helpless to the forces beyond their control; instead, **focus on the fulfilling aspects of their complex, multi-faceted lives and not the stressful side.** [bold in original] Women are not interested in returning to the times of more limited opportunities. They relish their options now but recognize that these same options put new demands on their time and energy. By communicating an understanding of these hurdles while not pandering to women, marketers will find a more receptive audience.<sup>105</sup>

While *Real Simple* acknowledges that domestic responsibility is both inequitable and unavoidable—and seeks not to align itself with magazines that return to “the times of more limited opportunities”—it also suggests a solution that retains the very systems of efficiency that are part of the problem of having too little time: “[in this survey] we learn that women are happiest not when they ditch the list, but when they remember to put themselves on it.” Women can simply get around the problem of the “to-do list” if they “put themselves back on it.” Most tellingly, the “Women and Time” report highlights the tension in *Real Simple* between work and leisure, efficiency and stasis, and text and image. When the report advises marketers to show images of women in the home “appearing peaceful, calm, and enjoying their free time without appearing stressed or

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

isolated,” the approach reiterates that of the in-house photography throughout the magazine that supplements efficiency advice with a “warm” but static relaxation “payoff.”

### **Designing Simplicity**

As opposed to the complex and unending system of time-based content in *Real Simple*, the graphic design and photographs within the magazine present an aspirational environment in which simplicity supposedly pays off. A desire to completely stop time and take a break is the other side of the coin of hyper-efficiency in the home. Time stasis is the goal of “stillness”—of being finally finished with everything that needs to be done. *Real Simple* web and magazine content indicates that after speeding up to finish all of the many tasks that are naturalized as mandatory parts of each woman’s day, stopping time completely—not scaling back, going slower, or re-distributing—is the only way to get a break. Sometimes stopping time is just to catch up on more responsibilities; as one reader on realsimple.com responded, “you know how you can appear ‘offline’ on the Web? I’d like to be able to appear offline in my life so I can do what I need to do without interruption.”<sup>106</sup> Other times the ability to stop time and exist outside of the speed of everyday life is considered the payoff for efficient work. The “Stove-Cleaning Checklist” concludes with a culminating activity—“Put on the teakettle and relax. (The clock is off.)”<sup>107</sup> The *Real Simple* covers capture the kind of stasis described by readers as the payoff for completing all of their chores. Each cover is itself a still-life composition—a

---

<sup>106</sup> “Real Simple Time Survey: How You Use It, Save It, and Waste It.”

<sup>107</sup> “How to Speed-Clean Your Kitchen.”



perfectly constructed interior space arrested in a single, dust-free moment. Unlike shelter magazines that showcase interiors with expensive-looking furniture and decor, *Real Simple* covers revel in very closely shot, mundane images of everyday objects. Covers feature close-up photographs of bathrobes, coffee filters, hair combs, kitchen sinks, laundry baskets, and scrub brushes. While the images are not traditionally aspirational, the achievement here exists in combination of attainability and perfection along the rubric set up by the magazine: all spaces on *Real Simple* covers are clean, light, and ordered. Drawers are organized with color-coordinated spools of thread, pencils and other knickknacks. Stopping might be the ultimate goal for stressed women readers of *Real Simple*, but only when all of the work is complete. To exist in the idealized space of a *Real Simple* cover is to imagine and pause the exact moment when every chore has been crossed off the list and one can finally relax.

The simplicity and stillness of *Real Simple* is a result of its art direction—the stewardship of typography, graphic design and photography that culminates in a carefully cultivated aesthetic identity. In an effort to “stabilize” the visual identity of the magazine soon after its launch, *Real Simple* publishers hired Robert Newman, who had worked previously at *Entertainment Weekly*, *New York*, *Details*, and *Vibe*. Newman said the main difference at *Real Simple* was an audience of “almost 100% women” with “very busy and multi-faceted lives”—his goal was to design a look that would allow readers to “avoid feeling like any part of the magazine is ‘work’ to read and look at.”<sup>108</sup> The magazine has since been rewarded for its visual appeal, winning several industry design awards,

---

<sup>108</sup> Ron Reason, “The Design of Real Simple: An Interview with Robert Newman” ([www.ronreason.com](http://www.ronreason.com), October 2002).

including a gold medal for overall design from the Society of Publication Designers and *Adweek* Magazine's Creative Team of the Year.<sup>109</sup>

Like the visual identity of The Container Store, *Real Simple* aesthetics are framed according to modernist principles. In graphic design, modernism refers to a very specific set of principles meant to achieve “unequivocal clarity” through the “inner law of expression.”<sup>110</sup> Developed at the Bauhaus in the 1920s and spread internationally by designers such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Jan Tschichold and Herbert Bayer, modernist graphic design at its most basic level meant sans serif typefaces, the copious use of white space, and regulated grid layouts. These pared down design elements were meant to foster, in Bayer's terms, “universal communication” by marrying the upbeat, industrial spirit of the age with economy of expression.<sup>111</sup> During his tenure at *Real Simple* and after he left, Robert Newman consistently framed his approach to the magazine in similarly modernist-sounding principles. Graphically, *Real Simple* makes the most of a limited type family and color palette, and increased white space on the page; this exercise in restraint also includes the way that editorial content is incorporated into the design layout. Textual information in *Real Simple* is edited down to its most basic contents, with information presented in grids and text reduced down almost to caption size. An article

---

<sup>109</sup> Walker, “Pure and Simple.”

<sup>110</sup> Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “The New Typography,” in *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, ed. Philip B. Meggs and Steven Heller, Reprint (Allworth Press, 2001), 108.

<sup>111</sup> Herbert Bayer, “On Typography,” in *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, ed. Steven Heller and Philip B. Meggs (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 110–114. In *The International Style*, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson codified and tamped down the enthusiasm of early modernist typography, folding such efforts into a larger, holistic, and far more rigid design style. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Norton, 1995), 86.

on home exercise equipment for small spaces, for instance, features only four illustrations (a DVD, a jump rope, a resistance band, and a yoga mat) with four small captions as text. Newman conceived of the organization of information as a fundamental part of his job: “it’s more than fonts and white space—it’s information architecture. It’s how the design works with the story.”<sup>112</sup> Recipes, already groomed in number of ingredients and total time spent per meal, are deliberately printed on the same page as the accompanying photography to reduce time and confusion spent flipping through pages.<sup>113</sup> In the spirit of form expressing function, “nothing was purely decorative” in the magazine’s photographic approach, either: “the ideal *Real Simple* photograph fused form and function, beauty and practicality.”<sup>114</sup> What was cultivated by Newman in the early years of the magazine has endured until today: photographs in *Real Simple* are tightly managed to follow a consistent formula—an emphasis on natural light, “real people,” a single message for photo shoots (“not a bunch of them”), and “a level of service and do-able ideas.”<sup>115</sup> This use of graphic design works to make the reader feel that even doing something relaxing, like reading a magazine, can be done efficiently—taking, as Newman mentioned, the “work” out of reading about domestic work.

---

<sup>112</sup> Walker, “Pure and Simple.”

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> “Real Simple,” *Robertnewman.com*, accessed September 30, 2011, <http://www.robertnewman.com/work.php?action=viewpage&pageid=19&item=130>.

<sup>115</sup> Reason, “The Design of Real Simple: An Interview with Robert Newman.” Along these lines, Elizabeth Mayhew, the former style director, said just as she did not want an “improbable pair of slippers” in the magazine (echoing the sentiment that “real” women’s problems don’t include which Chanel suit to wear), she also didn’t want any “gratuitous information in photos.” Walker, “Pure and Simple.”

On its first arrival in newsstands, *Real Simple*'s aesthetic distinguished it from other shelter and domestic advice magazines. A comparison between the inaugural cover of *Real Simple* in April 2000 and the cover of *Good Housekeeping* in the same month shows the visual market *Real Simple* was entering at the time, an aesthetic common amongst women's magazines that design critic Steven Heller once called "a waste dump of intrusive typography."<sup>116</sup> Where designers at *Real Simple* were limited in font and color, *Good Housekeeping* employed a riotous clash of color, type, and contemporary culture, with the figure of Madonna juxtaposed against unlikely headlines such as, "Spring Cleaning for Real Women." Unsurprisingly, *Real Simple* banishes celebrities from its cover, avoiding association with one of the most pervasive signifiers of postmodern media.<sup>117</sup> Much like The Container Store sells only anonymous products, without a designer's name attached, *Real Simple*'s eschewing of celebrity allows it to seem against fashion and the trends of pop culture, and therefore timeless. Compared to magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, the aesthetics of *Real Simple* act almost like a weapon against the feeling of "too much" in contemporary culture—too many belongings, too many responsibilities, too many demands on one's time.

---

<sup>116</sup> Heller's commentary is pointed in its condemnation of "crass" women's magazine covers. He traces the contemporary look of shelter magazines to the late 1970s and 1980s, when Alexander Liberman, long-time art director at various Conde Nast publications, started modeling the fashion and lifestyle magazines under his purview after tabloids like the *National Enquirer*. At the same time, marketing directors believed less "frou frou" (high-end) and more sensationalist covers would attract readers. Steven Heller, *Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design*, 2nd ed. (New York: Allworth Press, 2004), 242.

<sup>117</sup> "Real Simple." Neither of the first two test covers of *Real Simple* featured people; a non-celebrity approach was part of the magazine's mission. Lisa Granatstein, "Time Inc. Plans New Magazine," *MediaWeek*, 1999. Granatstein, "Fashion Sense."

The self-consciously different, overtly “designed” look of *Real Simple*’s art direction has both gender and class implications. *Real Simple*’s aesthetic distance from other women’s magazines available at the time was intentional. In an interview in 2002, Newman explained one of the largest challenges in addressing an audience of entirely women readers was “trying to present a magazine that is perceived as ‘more intelligent’ than the typical women’s service publication.”<sup>118</sup> The design, he argued, had “to be pretty, but still elevated” enough to stand out in commonplace consumer settings:

The bulk of *Real Simple*’s newsstand sales come in supermarkets, drugstores, Wal-Marts, etc., with the magazine often being displayed at the checkout counters. The cover imagery, typography, and color are designed to stand out in the middle of a bombardment of celebrity, screaming headlines, and dayglo colors that decorate the covers of other women’s magazines. It’s a quiet, intelligent oasis in a world of chaos and superficiality, at least on the magazine newsstand.

Newman’s connection between understated graphic design and intelligence is telling; to be “modern” in design elements is to be against what is typical for women’s popular culture. By characterizing most women’s magazines as chaotic and superficial, he aligns himself with critic Steven Heller’s conceptualization of such publications as down-market and commercial—Heller has compared women’s magazines unfavorably to more “serious” titles like *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Rolling Stone*, an unacknowledged association between women’s mass consumer culture and kitschy excess with historical roots in the twentieth century.<sup>119</sup> Adhering to long-standing gender discourses that

---

<sup>118</sup> Reason, “The Design of *Real Simple*: An Interview with Robert Newman.”

<sup>119</sup> Heller, *Design Literacy*, 242. In *Advertising the American Dream*, Roland Marchand illustrates how advertising men in the early twentieth century neutralized the threat of women’s irrational consumption on “a modernity of rationality and self-control” by identifying “the susceptibility of women to advertising and the consumption ethic.”

position women in opposition to rational modernist design, *Real Simple* editors even frame the efficient presentation of practical information within the magazine as somehow more masculine: former style director Mayhew explained, “we are a women’s lifestyle magazine, but we have lots of practical information. Men like our power-point presentation style. And the information is presented clearly, it’s distilled. So we do have a lot of men who like it too.”<sup>120</sup> The “elevated” look of *Real Simple* does not relate only to gender; the distance between “chaos” and “intelligence” has clear class implications as well. *Real Simple*’s design choices are meant to distance the magazine from a commercial aesthetic, which, in combination with content that features efficiency advice, functions to make the magazine seem high-end and luxurious while also rational and no-nonsense.

Departing from the look of traditional women’s magazines also distances *Real Simple* from traditional, prescriptive aspects of domesticity. The different look of *Real Simple* paints a picture of a different type of domesticity—less about crafts, cooking, and child-care, and more about the efficiency demands on “real” working women. The careful balance between modern graphics and traditional domesticity provokes a comparison to *Real Simple*’s prime competitor, a publication from an empire whose leader scoffs at the idea of efficient domesticity, *Martha Stewart Living*.<sup>121</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Martha

---

Doing so freed advertising men—and men generally—from “the taint of association with fickle tastes, stylistic superfluties, and artificial obsolescence.” Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 162.

<sup>120</sup> Koncius, “’Tis a Gift to Be Real Simple.” Penny Sparke, *As Long as It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995), 75.

<sup>121</sup> *Real Simple* surpassed *Martha Stewart Living* in popularity and ad sales, especially during Martha Stewart’s trial for insider trading. *Real Simple* had already been gaining ground in 2003, when it went up 40% in ad pages; during the 2004 trial, *Martha Stewart*

Stewart supposedly called the upstart simplicity magazine “Real Stupid” when it launched.<sup>122</sup> A comparison between the two covers at the time of *Real Simple*’s debut shows remarkable aesthetic similarities—sans serif block typefaces, a muted color palette, sparse headline text, and even similar-looking stripped wooden branches on both covers. The similarities are unsurprising; the loss of Martha Stewart from the Time, Inc. publishing group encouraged investment in a similarly conceptualized magazine as a reaction, and the first *Real Simple* managing editor came directly from *Martha Stewart Living*.<sup>123</sup> The main difference, of course, is not in the look of these covers, but in their text. While *Real Simple* advocates “One-Dish Dinners,” “Simpler Skin Care,” and “Low Stress Living,” *Martha Stewart Living* advocates, albeit in a simple font, “Pom Pom Animals,” “Antiquing a Chair,” “Fresh pasta 101,” and “Rainbows.” Obviously, very little about *Martha Stewart Living* seems self-consciously simple. Martha Stewart’s aesthetic might be cosmopolitan, but her content revolves around the performance of

---

*Living* dropped to 110 from 157 ad pages. Nancy Dillon, “Martha Mag Mess: Advertising in a Dive Amid Legal Woes,” *New York Daily News*, February 3, 2004. In 2003, *Martha Stewart Living* experienced a 34.6% ad-page drop, the biggest among the top 100 magazines in the U.S. Advertisers that dropped from *Martha Stewart Living* more than doubled their ad buys in *Real Simple* and *O Magazine*. Jon Fine, “Martha’s Mag Bleeds as Trial Gets Under Way; A 34.6% Ad-page Drop in 2003; ‘Real Simple,’ ‘BH&G’ See Gains,” *Advertising Age*, February 2, 2004, 3. See also: James Bandler, “Real Competition,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2004, B2. James Bandler, “Martha Stewart Rival Makes Gains,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2004, B7.

<sup>122</sup> Walker, “Pure and Simple.” On “real stupid,” see Bandler, “Real Competition”; Fine, “Simply Successful: ‘Real Simple’ Overcomes Shaky Start.”

<sup>123</sup> Case, “Real Success.” A partner at DeSilva & Philips, a media investment baking firm, told *The New York Times* that when Martha Stewart Living departed from Time, Inc. the company was unhappy and funneled similar ideas into *Real Simple*. Sara Ivry, “How Simple? Not Even a Need to Turn Pages,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2005, C9.

Susan Wyland, *Real Simple*’s first managing editor, came from *Martha Stewart Living*. Granatstein, “Time Inc. Plans New Magazine.”

“white, middle class gentility” through homespun, self-consciously “country” domesticity.<sup>124</sup>

*Real Simple* and *Martha Stewart Living* differ not in their aesthetic, but in their treatment of time and domestic labor. Critics of women’s advice magazines have noted that aspirational images of perfect interiors suppress the manual labor that goes into their creation.<sup>125</sup> This is a tough criticism to levy against either *Martha Stewart Living* or *Real Simple*, even with graphic design that works actively against this very idea. Neither magazine denies that there is a lot of work to be done in the home. Martha Stewart’s sparkling layouts have been considered “Emersonian” in their visualization of the home as a site of self-perfection—a similar point can be made about *Real Simple*, as well.<sup>126</sup> The main difference between the two magazines is that *Real Simple* presents “real” life housekeeping as a set of unavoidable responsibilities that must be done as quickly as possible because time is perpetually running short. By comparison, *Martha Stewart Living* suggests a fantasy of domesticity in which complication and an excessive amount of time are exactly the point. Rather than take *Real Simple*’s sympathetic tone towards

---

<sup>124</sup> Much scholarly work, including papers generated from an American Studies roundtable ten years ago, contends that participating in Martha’s world requires a complex performance of “white, middle-class gentility through the careful arrangements of commodities.” Jay Mechling, “Introduction: Martha Stewart and Taste Cultures,” *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 67. Amy Bentley, “Martha’s Food: Whiteness of a Certain Kind,” *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 89–100. Mary Anne Beecher, “The Mythical Making Martha,” *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 113–124.

<sup>125</sup> McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*. S. Fraiman, “Bad Girls of Good Housekeeping: Dominique Browning and Martha Stewart,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 261.

<sup>126</sup> M. J Golec, “Martha Stewart Living and the Marketing of Emersonian Perfectionism,” *Home Cultures* 3, no. 1 (2006): 6. Michael Golec, an architecture historian, sees the graphic layout and photographs in *Martha Stewart Living* as part of a historiography of domestic advice that encourages self-perfection. *Ibid.*, 9.



the burden of domestic responsibility, *Martha Stewart Living* celebrates it. Martha's goal, as Shirley Wajda has written, is decidedly "not to make *everyday* cooking easier and efficient—this is not your mother's home economics."<sup>127</sup> Other critics have noted that the fantasy of perfection and detail in the Martha Stewart world contains a gesture toward "a language of female pleasure, self-expression and autonomy," divorced from the usual encumbrances of child-rearing and traditional domesticity.<sup>128</sup> One study of Martha fans has shown that the largely white, upper-class fantasy (not only in terms of the type of crafts performed, but also the long periods of leisure time required to complete them) is, in fact, part of the allure for women of varying class backgrounds.<sup>129</sup> Even though they might not have the resources or time to complete the projects exactly as instructed, fans adapted projects in accord with their own budgets and schedules, and expressed satisfaction in both the sense of accomplishment and the luxury of being able to take a long time to complete a project.

This important distinction in terms of time spent has led several journalists to point out that *Real Simple*, for all of its aesthetic similarities to *Martha Stewart Living*, is, in fact, the "anti-Martha."<sup>130</sup> In an article in *The New York Times*, various women weigh in on why the Martha Stewart standard is not compatible with their hectic lifestyles. The gist one gets from the article is that women who have eschewed Martha are not only exceptionally busy, but also high in cultural and financial capital. One woman, who is

---

<sup>127</sup> Shirley T. Wajda, "Kmartha," *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 78.

<sup>128</sup> Fraiman, "Bad Girls of Good Housekeeping," 263.

<sup>129</sup> Ann Mason and Marian Meyers, "Living With Martha Stewart Media: Chosen Domesticity in the Experience of Fans," *Journal of Communication* 51, no. 4 (December 2001): 816.

<sup>130</sup> Carr, "Don't Aspire; Just Embrace Simplicity."

identified as the head of marketing at Dreamworks (an American film studio) and a mother of twin three-year olds, explains, “Martha Stewart’s world used to be my fantasy, but it is complicated and requires time, which is the one thing I don’t have.”<sup>131</sup> Another article, after quoting an executive producer at a television network (who is also identified as a mother), cites the magazine’s distance from *Martha Stewart Living* because of its “pursuit of balance amid the harried lifestyles of its mostly affluent, professional female audience.”<sup>132</sup> Whether or not all readers of *Real Simple* are affluent—and indeed the web responses of many show that they are not—the magazine conveys a sense that many readers are balancing domestic responsibilities with white-collar professions. While Martha presumes, perhaps wrongly, that *all* of her readers have the time and inclination to create pom pom animals each spring, *Real Simple* indicates a readership looking to skim minutes off of every domestic task, so frantic that they require calming graphics that expressly do not require “work” to read.

While the streamlined design of *Real Simple* is one of its most unique features, the failure of the magazine’s initial launch shows that too clean was not necessarily a good thing. After the inaugural issue debuted in April 2000, advertisers for the magazine expressed dismay at an aesthetic deemed too austere, even anti-consumerist.<sup>133</sup> Things got so bad so quickly that the editor-in-chief was fired after only three issues, and meetings with ad execs and media buyers were conducted to revamp the magazine’s

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ivry, “How Simple? Not Even a Need to Turn Pages.”

<sup>133</sup> Walker, “Pure and Simple.”

approach.<sup>134</sup> The result was a warmer version of simplicity, a design aesthetic *MediaWeek* called “elegant, minimalist” but with a “clarity, warmth and ease that other magazines are scrambling to imitate.”<sup>135</sup> Clearly, the visual reality of being *too* organized was considered unappealing, although to whom was not exactly clear. Creative director Newman explained the change in terms of readers’ interests: “we discovered that readers like covers with a practical idea connected directly to an image, and that they respond to beauty.” But later explanations by the editorial staff indicated that readers did not seem to mind the “austere” format or design of the magazine because they were so enthusiastic about its content, and that the issue was purely with potential advertisers—unsurprising, considering the magazine’s emphasis on simplification veers dangerously close to encouraging less consumption.<sup>136</sup>

Advertisers should not have worried. An emphasis on consumption has remained a significant part of the magazine’s editorial thrust. Even though elbow grease is set up as the solution to the vast majority of problems discussed in the magazine and website, *Real*

---

<sup>134</sup> Susan Wyland, formerly with *Martha Stewart Living*, was the first managing editor; she resigned or was fired after three issues as a result of the magazine’s early misfire with advertisers. Wyland was replaced by Carrie Tuhy, who was an assistant managing editor at *InStyle* magazine. Rose, “Real Simple May Face Difficult Reception”; Matthew Rose, “Time’s Wyland Quits as Editor Of Real Simple,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2000, C14. Advertisers were still a little wary after the changeover from Wyland to Tuhy. Fine, “Simply Successful: ‘Real Simple’ Overcomes Shaky Start.” Carrie Tuhy announced she was stepping down in April 2003 after “significant management issues.” In 2003, Tuhy was replaced by Kristin Van Ogtrop, an executive editor at *Glamour*. David Carr, “Managing Editors Are Named At 3 Magazines in People Group,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2003, C9.

<sup>135</sup> Walker, “Pure and Simple.”

<sup>136</sup> Although advertisers balked, consumer demand was solid from the start. Fine, “Magazine of the Year.” Between June and December 2002, the magazine sold 31.9% more than the previous year, even though the cover price went up from \$3.50 to \$3.95. Case, “Real Success.”

*Simple* currently makes marketers aware that demographics indicate readers have the money to spend on domestic “solutions.” Under the headline “she is an ideal target,” a media kit provided for advertisers to realsimple.com describes the 89% of Real Simple consumers who “are willing to pay more for a better quality product”:

The RealSimple.com woman has more discretionary income to invest to solve her practical concerns and her aspirations for a fulfilled life. With her busy lifestyle and high standards, she is substantially more likely to look to us for solutions – and act when she finds them.<sup>137</sup>

Here, the *Real Simple* “psychographic” meets the real life market demographic of readers who are pitched products for sale. Perhaps unsurprisingly, cleaning check-lists are often paired with recommended products, such as the suggestion that readers “spray the stovetop generously with Clean Team Red Juice (or another all-purpose cleaner),” or “spritz with a glass cleaner. (We like Mrs. Meyer’s Clean Day window spray for its combination of shine and aromatherapy.)”<sup>138</sup> As with the “Women and Time” survey, product placement seamlessly interwoven with domestic advice is presented as simply another method of making busy women’s lives easier by taking the shopping decisions off of their plate. Such tactics are familiar territory in women’s shelter magazines, which have typically encouraged readers in their role as domestic consumers.<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> “Who Is She? (Realsimple.com Media Kit, Based on Nielson Real Simple Online Visitor Profile Study).”

<sup>138</sup> “Speed-Clean Your Stovetop Checklist.”

<sup>139</sup> *Ladies Home Journal* urged readers to “expand their role as consumers rather than producers, to accept the corporate capitalist model and their home-based role in it.” The magazine achieved this by presenting a consensus view through “fragments” of narratives (stories, ads, editorials) that seemed to represent the “average” woman’s aspirations. Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 7.

Although the *Real Simple* method is consistent, comments on the website show readers often find the endless product placements and suggestions for purchases to be unrealistic and unnecessary. In response to an article on organizing small spaces in the home, readers remarked, “great ideas but really, \$27.50 for a spindle to hold coupons?” and “I like this. Now I just need some resources to put it in action.”<sup>140</sup> Such feedback is mirrored in backlash in the media about how “simplicity” trends, and *Real Simple* in particular, are overly consumerist in their approach.<sup>141</sup> Once again, web commenters who are critical of the push to consume do not reject *Real Simple* as a whole but express frustration with what they see as a betrayal of the concept of providing organization advice for real women. Reliably, some commenters offer less expensive alternatives for their fellow readers:

For starters, the two Pantone metal boxes at \$25 each. Really, \$50 for a couple of tins for kids to store their markers in??? For a lot less money, you could find similar tin boxes with cookies inside and re-use the tin when the cookies are gone. Or, get a couple of the gladware type containers that you can see through, so then you know what is inside for only a few dollars. Also, while the little jars look really cute, small plastic boxes could stack on top of each other, thus utilizing the space better. –nostrin<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Nicole Sforza, “Storage Ideas for Small Spaces,” *Realsimple.com*, accessed December 27, 2012, <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/organizing/tips-techniques/storage-ideas-small-spaces-00100000067344/index.html>. Comments posted by “karenHMI” on Tuesday 11/1/11 10:40 PM, and “Pjw1008” on Monday 10/31/2011 at 08:51 PM

<sup>141</sup> See: Karen Heller, “Oversimplification; The Simple Life Is All the Rage, but Real Life Keeps Intruding,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 5, 2003. David Brooks, “Conspicuous ‘Simplicity’,” in *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture*, ed. Amitai Etzioni and Daniel Doherty (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Ruth La Ferla, “Living the Edited Life: The Materialism of Scaling Back,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2001.

<sup>142</sup> Posted by “nostin” on 9/30/11 01:35 PM. Sforza, “Storage Ideas for Small Spaces.”

Comments such as these show how *Real Simple* can remain popular even as readers contest certain aspects of its content.

The covers of *Real Simple* magazine exemplify the shift toward warmth that was the goal of the early editorial shakeup to placate advertisers. In the immediate aftermath of the editorial changeover, there was a clear change in both color palette and imagery of the magazine's covers. While the first two covers were both gray in tone, later covers became more sumptuous: the August 2000 cover featured a close-up of a single magnolia against a blue background with the ambiguous headline, "A Walk Into Serenity," while February 2001 showed red roses on a gold box and the headline, "Indulge Yourself." These covers provide an aspirational counterpoint to graphic design with an explicitly restrained tone and editorial content overwhelmingly preoccupied with mundane household tasks.

A visual identity that is both minimalist and warm also avoids the appearance of priggish control that underlies a visual representation of a perfectly organized interior. The publisher of *Real Simple* alluded to this problem when she described the shift toward softer aesthetics, "we'd have that perfect white bed with the perfect white sheets and the perfect white sofa—but there weren't any people in our first issues."<sup>143</sup> Reversing this trend, three covers in 2001 showed images of women in states of relaxation—drinking from a bottle in a boat on a lazy river, floating in a pool, and sleeping on a couch—accompanied by text such as "how one woman found bliss," "living easy" and "get

---

<sup>143</sup> Case, "Real Success." Tuhy claimed that the problem with the early iteration of the magazine was that "The messiness of life had been pushed aside." Fine, "Magazine of the Year."

comfortable.” After these initial forays into peopled covers, however, *Real Simple* went back to exclusively featuring inanimate objects. Surveying the entirety of covers from 2000-2010, one finds an overwhelming preponderance of both flowers in vases and food on plates (with an image of hanging clothes or organized closets and drawers a close third, although these are almost always presented with a small vase of flowers as well). By the second half of the decade, the interiors pictured on the cover remained serene-looking—almost every cover had the requisite flower or food arrangement—but were accompanied by text with words like “quick,” “fast,” and numbered lists. Two covers in 2009 contain headlines that seamlessly blend the two seemingly conflicting messages: “Comfort Food Tonight: Your Favorite Recipes Made Faster,” and “Feel Calmer Now: 20 Essential Lists to Organize Your Life.” The *Real Simple* approach of trading a frantic present for a relaxing but distant future found its best expression in these covers.

Adding “warmth” in a controlled way through touches such as small, well-groomed, single-variety bunches of flowers, or images of colorful, but small portions of food arranged compactly on white dishware provides a stereotypically feminine twist on a graphic look that deliberately distanced itself from typical women’s publications.<sup>144</sup> In its visual reference to upscale garden and home magazines, the addition of flowers and food also furthers *Real Simple*’s adherence to ideas about “good” taste, an up-market

---

<sup>144</sup> Although *Real Simple* (and *The Container Store*) borrow the clean, un-cluttered look of a narrow strain of modernist design, there have been various “soft” iterations of modernism throughout the twentieth century. From the 1940s to the 1960s, a strain of American design experienced a “softening” with the introduction of biomorphic, organic shapes to express both the hopes and nightmares of the atomic age. See Brooke Kamin Rapaport and Kevin Stayton, *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001).

aesthetic that corresponds with the overall “elevated” graphic look of the magazine.<sup>145</sup> However, “warmth” is also a means to counter the austerity complained about by advertising buyers by appealing to female consumers. While the adaptation of modernist aesthetics and efficiency advice in a women’s shelter magazine might have functioned to invert traditional notions of women as modernism’s “other,” the addition of “warmth” as a marketing tool—along with a self-conscious distancing of *Real Simple*’s modernist graphics with traditional women’s publications—shows any radical inversion to be hollow at best.<sup>146</sup> Ultimately, these covers accomplish the task of softening the overriding textual message to speed-up a daily routine by elevating the visual landscape of the magazine to an aspiration, thereby lessening the impact of the otherwise-unrelenting efficiency advice. “Warm” covers with images of static, perfectly organized interiors provides the aspirational complement *Real Simple*’s editorial message to busy women.

## Conclusion

*Real Simple* distances itself from both its contemporary competitors and its historical precedents in its appeal to working women, its empathetic tone, and its

---

<sup>145</sup> Some precedent for this aesthetic exists in upscale garden magazines, which combine affluent readership with “sensual” subject matter. Steven Heller’s short analysis of *Garden Design* magazine provides a useful description of the style, although it also plays into the type of rhetoric that associates a pared-down graphic look—a basic grid format, three type families, and an “elegant” logo—with ideas about class and taste. Rather than being “ruined by excess cover lines and intrusive mastheads” like most magazine covers, *Garden Design*, he argues, is “so smart and tasteful that it could teach all magazines a lesson in restraint.” Heller, *Design Literacy*, 81.

<sup>146</sup> For instance, *Real Simple*’s “warming” of modernist graphic design is reminiscent of the “livable” modernism adopted by consumers in the Depression, chronicled by Kristina Wilson in her exhibition and catalog *Livable Modernism*. Wilson, *Livable Modernism*.



aspirational stillness, an approach reinforced by both its graphic look and editorial content. Historical predecessors, such as *Ladies Home Journal* from the 1910s-1950s, perpetuated traditional gender roles and domestic labor as women's one true work; *Real Simple* assumes its readers do not work solely in the home, and presents a tone of commiseration, rather than acceptance, of everyday domestic chores. *Real Simple* also distances itself from contemporary women's shelter magazines by cultivating a visual aesthetic that is modern and professional, with connotations of being "upscale" and "intelligent" in its graphic choices. Although they share a similar design aesthetic, *Real Simple* does not expect its readers to spend large amounts of time or creative energy on domestic tasks, unlike its other contemporary competitor, *Martha Stewart Living*. Efficiency advice paired with modern-but-warm graphics that make reading about work seem less like work crafts an image of *Real Simple* as a magazine that understands its readers' busy lifestyle.

Counterintuitively, *Real Simple* takes on the large-scale issue of being "overtaxed" by focusing on the minutiae of everyday life, thus applying micro-solutions (in the form of micro-chores and easy-to-absorb graphics) to a macro problem. In presenting abundant self-referential content that relates back to the issue of women and a shortage of time due to domestic tasks, *Real Simple* presents itself as sympathetic to what it articulates as a truism for its readers. In this, *Real Simple* crafts an empathetic rhetoric around housework, making the personal details of micro-chores and to-do lists a touchstone of commiserative solidarity. This empathetic language works in concert with the cultivation of a supposedly like-minded reading community; regardless of what is

happening with actual readers of the magazine, an idea of this group of women (always conceptualized as “all” women, even though the demographic is decidedly affluent) has been created through media engagement, press releases, marketing reports, and web and print content. Although the problems of this carefully constructed *Real Simple* community are shared, they are never politicized; commiseration mitigates politicization. Instead, problems that are vaguely political receive micro solutions—consumer products for the home or a fantastical space in which time is paused. In the absence of actual critique about a “second shift” or excessive domestic responsibility, the micro-chores and corresponding promise of an ever-receding future “stillness” creates a cycle of endless domestic engagement. The contradiction between text and image detailed in this chapter works not to create a disjointed, confused message from the magazine, but instead they seamlessly blend together to form one seductive message (indeed, the text and visuals are so seamless that they are hard to unpack). That message is essentially this: *Real Simple* understands the issue of gender inequity and time, almost feminist in politics but never directly stated as such, but still never offers a larger cultural solution to the issue; instead there is an ever-receding future moment in which time stops and, with it, work. Ultimately, though, this future stasis is itself the outcome of the hard work and efficiency promoted within the magazine’s pages—perfectly organized, spotless still-life portraits of “real” life.

## Chapter Four: Self-Help Literature for Psychic De-cluttering

*“When we throw out the physical clutter, we clear our minds. When we throw out the mental clutter, we clear our souls.”*<sup>1</sup>

In 1978, the same year entrepreneurs founded The Container Store and California Closets, Stephanie Winston wrote her first organizing book, *Getting Organized: The Easy Way to Put Your Life in Order*.<sup>2</sup> The preface of *Getting Organized* asked two central questions about being organized. The first, as the author stated, was “nuts-and-bolts”; it asked how a reader might “take control of paperwork, arrange a hectic schedule, organize my books, clear out the closets.”<sup>3</sup> Winston seemed prosaic about her ability to help in this practical arena, and directed her readers almost bluntly to “consult the table of contents or extensive index for the pages that deal with your problem and work from there.”<sup>4</sup> Her tone shifted, however, when presenting the second question: “how can I clarify the confusions of my life?”<sup>5</sup> Winston clearly prioritized this as the more important benefit to be gleaned from the book, explaining this less tangible problem and its solution were nonetheless “more personal and more pervasive in its effect” on everyday life than the organization of physical stuff.<sup>6</sup> In two short paragraphs Winston shifted from identifying her book as “a straightforward reference, similar to a dictionary or encyclopedia” to a text

---

<sup>1</sup> Gail Blanke, *Throw Out Fifty Things: Clear The Clutter, Find Your Life* (New York: Springboard Press, 2009), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Winston later went on to revise the work in 1991 as well as to write numerous other texts on organization for the individual and, as became her specialty, the executive.

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Winston, *Getting Organized: The Easy Way To Put Your Life in Order* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), Preface.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

able to clarify “the reasons why many people feel that things are out of control, the basic attitudes involved and, most important, new ways to think about time and physical environment to give life a coherent shape.”<sup>7</sup> If such a leap does not seem overstated, then it is only because in the years since 1978 a large body of self-help literature has developed around the concept that physical organization and de-cluttering correlate directly to emotional life. Self-help literature on de-cluttering is notable for the almost uniform assumption its reading audience will take as a matter of course the message put squarely in organization-expert Gail Blanke’s book *Throw Out Fifty Things: Clear the Clutter, Find Your Life*: “If you think you can separate the physical from the mental clutter, forget about it!”<sup>8</sup> Along with the rise of professional organizers and home organization retail, self-help literature that focuses on de-cluttering has worked to normalize the relatively arbitrary correlation between a tidy home and a meaningful life at the same time it has popularized the tactics of de-cluttering as a form of self-help therapy. This chapter addresses how de-cluttering literature posits a ground-zero of organization in which the psyche receives the same treatment as a physical space filled with “emotional clutter.”<sup>9</sup>

The promise of de-cluttering literature extends past spatial and temporal order; there is more to be gained from de-cluttering than the tangible lifestyle benefits of having, say, a clear place to store one’s keys. The books in this chapter emphasize a more

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Blanke, *Throw out fifty things*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Gail Blanke describes emotional clutter as: “Feeling Inadequate, Irrelevant, and Just Plain Not Good Enough,” “Regrets and Mistakes of the Past,” “Being Right About How Wrong Everybody and Everything Is,” and “Thinking the Worst” Ibid., xxv.

elusive concept than organizing, which generally involves how to assess, sort, store, and arrange the extra stuff in your life. This is de-cluttering, which foregrounds “shedding” over the object or outcome of disorder.<sup>10</sup> In a practical sense, this means the authors writing self help de-cluttering books would not necessarily recommend their readers go to The Container Store and buy plastic bins to hold their belongings—though it is probably a solution they would use in their other books or professional practice. Instead, the books addressed in this chapter are specifically about de-cluttering, which is figured as the ultimate solution for when the problem of stuff—physical and psychic—is past the reach of organization. Using the phrase “de-cluttering,” rather than “organizing,” the thirteen self-help books forming the core evidence of this chapter (which I call “de-cluttering literature”) promise readers the act of “shedding” one’s material belongings—not re-ordering them to promote daily efficiency or reflect one’s lifestyle and taste—leads to therapeutic benefits as diverse as decreased anxiety, increased self-esteem, respect for others, and better decision-making.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, de-cluttering literature asserts that readers only achieve the full therapeutic benefit of de-cluttering when they apply these same shedding tactics to the *immaterial* clutter in their lives—their relationships, memories, and feelings. In the rhetoric of de-cluttering literature, the word “clutter”

---

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Schechter, the author of *Let Go of Clutter*, distinguishes de-cluttering as “discarding, removing, or markedly reducing any accumulation of material objects,” and organizing as “putting things in a logical order for the purpose of making it easy to locate them.” Harriet Schechter, *Let Go of Clutter* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 15.

<sup>11</sup> These are just a few of the “Lifestyle Traits Learned From Decluttering” that appear in Mike Nelson’s book, *Stop Clutter From Wrecking Your Family*. Mike Nelson, *Stop Clutter From Wrecking Your Family: Organize Your Children, Spouse, and Home* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2004), 16.

becomes a transitive object that can stand in for non-material obstacles to a better life.<sup>12</sup> This chapter outlines the move from material to immaterial in de-cluttering literature and addresses what is at stake in the transition.

The de-cluttering texts in this chapter exist on a spectrum moving from practical (those more focused on physical tips, with an emphasis on the psychic benefits of de-cluttering) to psychological (books from authors who are considered experts in the field of physical organization, but in this context write entirely about the psyche). Despite these differences, all of the books in some way address the connection between de-cluttering and personal psychology, and all of them characterize the impulse to shed belongings as a universally therapeutic and liberating act that extends beyond the physical environment. In some cases, authors separate their advice about immaterial clutter into its own volume, such as Peter Walsh's entirely immaterially-focused *Enough Already! Clearing Mental Clutter to Become the Best You* (2009). More often, the instruction to throw away negative emotions is almost seamlessly bound up in the instruction to throw away things. For instance, Gail Blanke primes readers on the dual-nature of the process from the start, warning "in addition to the socks and lipsticks, you're going to throw out the old regrets and resentments, the resignation, the fear of failing or the fear of succeeding."<sup>13</sup> Soon after explaining how things, such as a wedding dress from a failed marriage, can hold one hostage with negative emotion, Blanke offers

---

<sup>12</sup> For example, Stephanie Vogt organizes her book *Your Spacious Self* around chapters that distinguish non-material clutter: "Clutter is a State of Mind; Clearing is a Way of Being," "Clutter as Imbalance," "Clutter as Perception;" "Clutter as Energy;" and "Clutter is Feeling." Stephanie Bennett Vogt, *Your Spacious Self: Clear Your Clutter and Discover Who You Are* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc., 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Blanke, *Throw out fifty things*, xix.

advice centered wholly on psychic de-cluttering in chapters like “Attacking the Mental Mess,” where she offers guidelines including, “steps to help you let go of needless negative comparisons and dump debilitating feelings of inadequacy.”<sup>14</sup> In order to get to the immaterial de-cluttering, however, Blanke and other authors start by asserting the connection between material culture, identity, memory, sentimentality, and psychic well-being.

Across the board, de-cluttering literature offers a “how-to” guide for shedding that relies on the assumption that individuals construct themselves through objects and therefore must address their own emotional investment in clutter in order to conquer it. Most de-cluttering literature follows the same pattern: objects are seen as containing an emotional charge, this emotional charge is identified as harmful because it keeps one from living their most ideal life in the present, and individual agency is re-asserted over emotionally-charged objects through de-cluttering. This three-step process so fully equates objects with aspects of the psyche that material goods fall away completely, and the literature quickly moves towards recommending “psychic de-cluttering” via the same process.

In de-cluttering literature, the act of shedding requires acknowledgement of a self constructed through objects—in order to get rid of something, a reader must first assess and conquer its emotional value in their lives. The sense that material objects and home interiors are expressive of personal beliefs is familiar to the fields of consumer culture

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 125.

and material culture studies of domestic space.<sup>15</sup> Although premised on this principle, de-cluttering literature seems to reject the over-attachment to belongings, asking readers to sever all ties with their things to avoid false attachments. Taken at face value, de-cluttering literature's emphasis on shedding seems like a rejection of materialism and consumption. To live an un-cluttered existence is described as being the "ultimate payoff": "clarity, lightness, and living as your most genuine self."<sup>16</sup> The moment one finally reaches this state is analogous to the frozen fantasy space of the *Real Simple* interior. Within the rhetoric of ongoing organization, this moment, space, or mental state is an ever-receding aspiration lingering at the border of perpetual engagement with material culture. In de-cluttering literature, the achievement of a de-cluttered psyche is equated not only to finally finding one's "true" self, but also to being less "modern," and less "American" as a result. This rhetoric is often accompanied by pseudo-Eastern philosophy, thus positing an anti-modern "East" as context for the ideal de-cluttered existence. Although seemingly radical in its rejection of Western capitalist values, de-cluttering literature is of a piece with the project it critiques for two reasons. One, it is an industry that finances itself through the commodification of Eastern philosophy drained of any political, cultural and historical context. Two, in its effort to control the influence of excessive material culture on everyday life, de-cluttering literature develops metaphors

---

<sup>15</sup> See for instance, Irene Cieraad, in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*: "we still express ourselves symbolically in the spatial arrangements and decorations of our houses and the surrounding public space." Irene Cieraad, *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Morgenstern, *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life: A Four-step Guide to Getting Unstuck* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 8–9.



in which the psyche is conceived entirely in terms of consumption and material organization.

The belief that clutter stands in the way of developing one's "true" self exists alongside—and as a manifestation of—the idea that consumption is constitutive of identity. De-cluttering literature ultimately shows that acquiring and shedding objects are two sides of the same coin: I construct myself when I buy something, and I edit myself when I throw something away. Just as *Clean House* suggests participants need to sell most of their belongings in a garage sale to make their homes reflect their best potential, so does de-cluttering literature ask readers to dispossess themselves of objects in order to become (or, more accurately, return to) their "true" self. These calls to de-clutter suggest consumption has been a negative influence in the reader or viewer's life, distancing them from happiness, satisfaction, or well-being. Once shedding occurs without actual objects—that is, when one starts to get rid of what de-cluttering authors call emotional or spiritual clutter—an "authentic" life premised on anti-materialism is no longer at odds with the principle of self-construction through consumption. So, although this literature seems to suggest authenticity is synonymous with less "stuff," the tacit discourse asserts authenticity only comes when de-cluttering has been fully internalized and *everything* becomes "stuff" to be managed. At the end-point of de-cluttering it is possible to re-build one's ideal psychological life (including relationships, self-worth, and career choices) from scratch, using the metaphor of re-stocking an empty bookshelf or closet.

## The Self-Help Genre and De-cluttering Expertise

Home-organization is a popular genre of domestic advice literature and as such provides a window into the ideal ways consumers are supposed to relate to material culture. Although de-cluttering and home organization texts are not well-trod scholarly territory, this is not the first study to use texts about home organization to talk about domestic space. Saulo B. Cwerner and Alan Metcalfe compare home organization books (which they term “discourses of storage”) to a study of how consumers in Britain organized their belongings in their homes; they argue popular texts are a valuable way to gain insight into ideal models for the construction of home life.<sup>17</sup> Home organization and de-cluttering books remain a popular method through which individuals engage with material culture within the home; according to *Publisher’s Weekly*, statistics for the home organization industry citing 5% annual growth include the growing category of organization and de-cluttering books and instructional DVDs.<sup>18</sup> By 2009, when the economic recession was expected to have a negative effect on retail sales, books that addressed clutter were still in demand as part of a general buoyancy of the self-help publishing genre during hard economic times.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Saulo B. Cwerner and Alan Metcalfe, “Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World,” *Journal of Design History*, 16, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 229-239.

<sup>18</sup> Jana Riess, “Christian Publishers Embrace Books on Home Organization and Home Management’,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, August 13, 2007, <http://reviews.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20070813/15785-bless-this-house.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Gwenda Bond, “Bailouts of the Self-Help Kind: Self-Help Books in a Down Economy,” *Publishersweekly.com*, April 6, 2009, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/4607-bailouts-of-the-self-help-kind-self-help-books-in-a-down-economy.html>.

The increasing popularity of self-help literature has taken place as a result of transformations in the labor market and economy over the last four decades. From 1972-2000, the number of self-help books increased from 1.1 to 2.4% of the total number of books in print.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary self-help has roots in the New Age movements of the 1970s, which in turn were a product of that decade's turn toward individual narratives of transformation in the face of political, social, and economic disillusionment.<sup>21</sup> In *Self-Help, Inc.* Micki McGee links self improvement discourse in American culture to the myth of the self-made man (even though, she points out, in the U.S. this myth clearly relied on the labor of women and people of color); however, she connects the tremendous growth in the publication of self-help texts since the 1970s with the trend of stagnant wages and destabilized opportunities for American workers, along with the dismantling of social welfare programs and other traditional structural forms of support.<sup>22</sup> As work hours have become longer and the economic potential for average American workers has declined, the promise of self-help and the “cultures of personal transformation” implore Americans to work on themselves to remain relevant and competitive in the job market.<sup>23</sup> Thus, contemporary self-help sets up a paradox in which “the imperative of inventing the self that is found in the literatures of self-improvement is often cast in the form of discovering or uncovering an authentic, unique, and stable self that might function—even

---

<sup>20</sup> Micki McGee, *Self Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 200.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, And Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>22</sup> McGee, *Self Help, Inc.*, 7, 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

thrive—unaffected by the vagaries of the labor market.”<sup>24</sup> The result, McGee articulates, is “a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly belabored”—the “belabored self” is McGee’s intentionally un-celebratory reconfiguring of existing patriarchal notions of the “self-made man.”<sup>25</sup> McGee’s identification of the labor inherent in self-help is especially interesting considering the very tangible labor home organization texts like *Real Simple* suggest to its female readers. Because the reality behind traditional notions of the self-made man required the details of everyday life be handled by someone other than the self-made man, the contemporary belabored self, which includes women, exists in tension with the daily chores of domestic life and caring for others. I would argue *Real Simple* and de-cluttering texts generally seek to resolve this tension by making these very chores the labor through which transformation can occur, especially for women. De-cluttering literature in particular makes promises regarding well-being and personal fulfillment that require a near constant engagement with the most intimate aspects of the home and the most intimate aspects of the self.

All of the authors featured in this chapter present themselves as experts in some field relating to clutter, organizing, or life coaching, although the professional focus differs slightly among them.<sup>26</sup> It is helpful to conceive of these authors as individual

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12, 16. McGee argues for a new term, “the belabored self” to replace existing ideas of the “self-made man,” which is “a construct that is gendered in its basic formation, patriarchal in its assumptions of how individuals come into being, and self-congratulatory in its tone.” In contrast, “the belabored self presents itself as overworked both as the subject and as the object of its own efforts at self-improvement.”

<sup>26</sup> Approximately thirteen books serve as the primary sources for this chapter; many of the authors presented here have written other books that I have used for ancillary support in building my argument. The core group of books were chosen through the online

expert “brands” self-consciously developed through multi-media platforms such as book publishing, magazine writing, television appearances, spokespersonship and public speaking. The branding of organizational expertise is simply one more expression of the larger tendency to link home organization to lifestyle consumption, a concept discussed in more depth in Chapter Two. Several of the authors in this chapter are nationally recognized professional organizers: Peter Walsh has an organizing show on Oprah Winfrey’s new network, OWN, as well as a line of organization products at Office Depot; Jamie Novak was on the HGTV Show *Mission: Organization*; and Julie Morgenstern delivered the keynote address at the NAPO annual conference in 2011 and runs “Julia Morgenstern Enterprises,” a business that includes public speaking, corporate training, books and endorsed organizational products. Other authors self-identify across a range of professions: there is a magazine columnist and personal coach (Jennifer Loudon), a teacher of a branch of feng shui branded Space Clearing (Stephanie Vogt), the CEO of a company called LifeDesigns (Gail Blanke), and a home organizing infotainment motivational speaker (Barbara Tako).<sup>27</sup> One author describes his career—he has branded both his book and his motivational talks as *Clutter Busting*—in terms of the argument about psychic clutter presented in this chapter: “In his ten years of Clutter Busting in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City, Brooks Palmer realized the

---

marketplace Amazon.com’s “Frequently Bought Together” and “Customer’s Who Bought This Item Also Bought” feature, with the idea that these are the books most-often purchased by consumers who are using search terms similar to “how to de-clutter your home.” These books were all written between 2000-2010 and have all received high reviews from Amazon customers—always above 4 (out of 5) stars, though with an inconsistent number of reviewers.

<sup>27</sup> All information about the authors comes from their own publicity and self-marketing, either through book jackets, websites or Amazon.com biography pages.

intense emotional connection most people have with material possessions, and that internal clutter must be addressed before external clutter can be discarded.”<sup>28</sup> Here, the act of shedding material culture, so quickly entangled with psychic well-being, is rolled into a “brand” entirely dependent on familiar narratives of belabored self-transformation.

Several assumptions exist in all of the texts examined in this chapter, offering clues about the potential reading audience and showing the way certain discourses about de-cluttering and organization are normalized and self-perpetuating in the literature. Unlike television shows like *Hoarders*, the language used in the de-cluttering texts does not assume its readers have a diagnosed mental illness or a problem with pathological hoarding. Instead, these books seem to be addressing a general audience who just has a problem with “stuff”—this problem is characterized as being typically “American” and therefore ubiquitous of contemporary life in this country. The objects being addressed in the texts are not considered inherently value-less, but are supposed to be representative of the type of consumer products found in a middle-class home: clothing, electronics, furniture, memorabilia, other items of decor. Often, the authors put themselves in the position of the reader, displaying empathy with what they see as a common and relatable dilemma—they too are participants in the culture of consumerism that has given rise to the cluttered home. Rarely do these authors assume one should live a completely ascetic lifestyle with all goods purged from the home. Instead, they operate on the assumption that the homeowner does not know the difference between good and bad things, and that the bad (by far the vast majority of objects) often encroaches on the good. Finally, several

---

<sup>28</sup> “Brooks Palmer Amazon Author Page,” *Amazon.com*, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.amazon.com/Brooks-Palmer/e/B002BMN7GY/ref=ntt\\_athr\\_dp\\_pel\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/Brooks-Palmer/e/B002BMN7GY/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1).

of the books assume a familiarity with yoga or mention the presence of a therapist—both practices indicating at the very least a level of comfort with therapeutic and wellness practices for an audience seeking to find psychological comfort through de-cluttering. The general ease with which the idea that psychological healing can come through one’s relationship with their objects indicates this is a reading audience comfortable with organization as a means by which to achieve happiness, relaxation and mental well-being.

### **De-cluttering: When Organization Fails**

In de-cluttering literature, organization is characterized as a process of ordering one’s belongings to reflect a sense of identity and purpose—where things go needs to correlate to one’s daily habits and priorities. De-cluttering, on the other hand, is about removing objects in the way of these habits and priorities. The distinction between organization and de-cluttering is fairly fuzzy, not least because the authors writing about de-cluttering are themselves professional organizers, and often advise about organizing in other books; the difference between the two seems to be a matter of necessity borne of extreme psychic distress. As Julie Morgenstern, self-dubbed “queen of putting people’s lives in order,” explains “organizing is the process of arranging your home, office, and schedule so that it reflects and encourages who you are, what you want, and where you are going...*But what happens when organizing isn’t enough?*”<sup>29</sup> Her answer lies in a system she calls “S.H.E.D.”: “**S**eparate the Treasures, **H**eave the Trash, **E**mbrace Your Identity, **D**rive Yourself Forward.” Like other authors of de-cluttering literature,

---

<sup>29</sup> Morgenstern, *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*, 7.

Morgenstern does not want readers to take time arranging extraneous material that only deserves to be discarded.<sup>30</sup>

A good example of the difference between organizing and de-cluttering can be found in books about closet makeovers, which model the kind of creative shuffling and identity building rejected in de-cluttering literature. This example runs the risk of causing further confusion because of the finely drawn distinction between the authors of de-cluttering books, who are mostly professional organizers, and authors of closet makeover books, who are organizing for all intents and purposes, but mostly come from the fashion industry.<sup>31</sup> That said, it is fairly unsurprising that the majority of authors of closet makeover books are fashion insiders, as the point of these texts is to guide readers toward self-expression through clothing and dress, with organization functioning merely as a

---

<sup>30</sup> “Clutter shouldn’t be organized, and it doesn’t need to be controlled,” declares Barbara Tako, the author of *Clutter Clearing Choices*. “Clutter just needs to be tossed out!” Barbara Tako, *Clutter Clearing Choices: Clear Clutter, Organize Your Home, & Reclaim Your Life* (Winchester, UK and Washington, D.C.: O Books, 2010), 280.

<sup>31</sup> The authors of closet makeover books are often, interestingly, not professional organizers. Most work in the fashion industry. Philip Bloch, a former model and author of *The Shopping Diet: Spend Less and Get More*, calls himself a stylist, designer, writer and actor, while Barbra Horowitz, author of *Closet Control: The Ultimate Guide to Revitalizing Your Wardrobe and Revolutionizing the Way You Store It* is a modeling agent turned stylist. Jesse Garza and Joe Lupo, the authors of *Nothing to Wear? A 5-step Cure for the Common Closet*, are the owners of Visual Therapy, a “Luxury Lifestyle Consulting” business. Melanie Charlton Fascitelli, who owns the business Clos-ette calls her book, *Shop Your Closet: The Ultimate Guide to Organizing Your Closet with Style*, “part how-to workbook, part design guide, and part style notebook.” Melanie Charlton Fascitelli and Kevin Clark, *Shop Your Closet: The Ultimate Guide to Organizing Your Closet with Style* (New York: Collins, 2008), x. The two women who wrote *I Have Nothing to Wear: A Painless 12-Step Program to Declutter Your Life So You Never Have to Say This Again*, a stylist and a news broadcaster, have never been in-home organizers, although the title of their book uses keywords (“de-clutter[ing] your life” and a “12-step” reference) that otherwise lump the book in with scores of therapeutic self-help books from professional organizers.



necessary step toward “discovering and expressing your fullest, most powerful self.”<sup>32</sup> As opposed to the message of so many de-cluttering books that stress the negative effect of stuff, books on closet makeovers are almost uniformly positive about material culture, emphasizing the power of objects and clothing to project social messages and become agents of change in an individual’s life. The process of organization in most closet guides begins with a series of questions readers must ask in order to determine which items of clothing work with their “fashion personality.”<sup>33</sup> The idea of developing a “fashion personality” is about eliminating disparate styles in order to streamline the wardrobe into one cohesive “type,” which is why closet design books often suggest readers decide if they fit the mold of, for instance, the “Preppy Girl,” “Fashionista,” “Surfer Chick,” “Bohemian Girl,” or “Soccer Mom.”<sup>34</sup> These criteria then serve as a guide for further clothing purchases to both supplement the existing wardrobe and avoid “schizophrenically shopping” for more of the wrong types of clothes.<sup>35</sup> In many ways,

---

<sup>32</sup> Jesse Garza and Joe Lupo, *Nothing to Wear? A 5-step Cure for the Common Closet* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2006), xii.

<sup>33</sup> Garza and Lupo declare the theme of their book to be “how to align your wardrobe choices with your life and your ‘fashion personality’ so that you can best express yourself.” *Ibid.*, 5. Jill Martin and Dana Ravich ask readers in their closet guide to go through three “rounds” of assessment: once for the condition of the object, once for fit, and once for style (asking if it “represents your personality”). Jill Martin and Dana Ravich, *I Have Nothing To Wear!: A Painless 12-step Program to Declutter Your Life So You Never Have To Say This Again!* (New York: Rodale Books, 2011), 72–77. In *The Shopping Diet*, Philip Bloch also provides three questions (the author calls these “Fashion Fanatics Mathematics”) to readers to help sort through what to keep in their closet: “How does this fit in my life? How does this fit on my body? How does this fit in with my personal style?” Phillip Bloch, *The Shopping Diet: Spend Less and Get More* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), 77.

<sup>34</sup> Martin and Ravich, *I have nothing to wear!*, 45–55.

<sup>35</sup> Knowing your exact style type, Block similarly argues, not only helps you determine the image you want to project to the world, but focuses your shopping experience: Step

closet makeover texts are simply a reiteration of lifestyle consumption—find your “personality” and consume accordingly—although in this case the act of consuming has been divorced from an actual market exchange and readers are encouraged to spread the consumerist metaphor to all acts of selection within the closet. The phrase “shop your closet” is ubiquitous in closet makeover books, an example of how market values and metaphors play out in the most intimate spaces of the home.<sup>36</sup> Stopping the analysis here, however, limits a view of the entire picture of what is happening in closet makeover books. Even as they encourage readers to think of their engagement with material culture as a form of shopping, closet makeover books also ask readers to cultivate the value of the things they already own.<sup>37</sup> Asking readers to assess each piece of their wardrobe forces an engagement with material culture on an intimate scale. Many closet books push readers to cultivate their investment with clothing already in the closet (as long as it fits the “fashion personality”), offering advice on how to alter, mend and care for clothes, as well as methods for “reinventing the clothes you already have in your closet into fabulous new looks.”<sup>38</sup> The idea of “shopping” one’s closet, therefore, also implies that there is value to be found among the clothes one already has.

---

Three [Ch: Know Your Personal Style and Body] helps you to determine your look so that you’re not schizophrenically shopping all over the place and buying items that don’t add up to clever outfits. It’s time to figure out your own personal trademark style. The benefit is that you’ll never again buy needless items that don’t work with your look or your lifestyle. Bloch, *The Shopping Diet*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Charlton Fascitelli and Clark, *Shop Your Closet*.

<sup>37</sup> Often this is still framed through the lens of fashion, as when Bloch argues that one should curtail shopping because “It’s not about trends; it’s about style.” Bloch, *The Shopping Diet*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. Rather than simply advocate the purchasing of new clothes, almost all closet guides feature sections on how to re-sell clothes as well. For instance, see Barbra

The authors of de-cluttering literature see their advice as distinctly different from what is offered in closet design books. In a telling crossover, Morgenstern, author of *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*, wrote an introduction for the closet makeover book *Nothing to Wear: A 5-step Cure for the Common Closet*. She began by explaining in a revelatory tone that she had only recently become a believer in closet design.

Morgenstern's surprise is hard to fathom, especially for the lay-person operating without a clear sense of the difference between the many similar but nonetheless distinct careers built on the general trend of home organization—a topic addressed in further detail in Chapter Five. Morgenstern felt the distinction revolved around her “ability to look past people’s ‘stuff’ and see the real person inside.”<sup>39</sup> Here, Morgenstern characterizes the goals of professional organizing as, ironically, above or detached from physical objects. She described feeling at the start of the project that closet design’s focus on fashion was superficial; however, after meeting in person with the book’s authors, both wardrobe consultants who helped her clean out her own closet, Morgenstern felt that attention to one’s closet is “about so much more than fashion”—in fact, closets are about “building a stronger, clearer communication with the world.”<sup>40</sup> Where de-cluttering literature is often conceptualized as a painful process of confronting sentimentality and admitting when material belongings negatively impact one’s life, Morgenstern reflects only positive feelings as she tossed out more than fourteen bags of old clothes that do not meet her new

---

Horowitz, *Closet Control: The Ultimate Guide to Revitalizing Your Wardrobe and Revolutionizing the Way You Store It* (New York: Sterling, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Garza and Lupo, *Nothing to Wear?*, xii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

criteria (“Do I love it? Is it flattering? Does it project the image I want to portray?”).<sup>41</sup> Similarly, she claimed in purging her clothing she was “driven by the idea of creating room for new things and a new life.”<sup>42</sup> The outcome of Morgenstern’s closet project is markedly similar to the claims of her “S.H.E.D.” method, which has the potential to “release intangible burdens including unhealthy beliefs and limiting thoughts” and act as a “catalyst and companion on the journey to living a richer, more connected life.”<sup>43</sup> Professional designations aside, although de-cluttering claims a distance from organizing, clearly both projects focus on personal transformation through deliberate, evaluative engagement with material culture and are both premised on the assumption that the identity can be shaped by the things around us. De-cluttering simply takes a subtractive position where organizing and consumption are additive. This point is important to keep in mind when considering the claims made by de-cluttering texts about the negative effects of consumption and over-identification with material culture.

In its emphasis on the liberating action of shedding, de-cluttering literature shifts focus away from the material object being shed. Oprah’s personal organizer, Peter Walsh, reminds his readers, “clearing the clutter isn’t about ‘the stuff’.”<sup>44</sup> Instead, clutter is used as a transitive term to represent—as a cause or an effect—any negative emotion, whether it be a memory, a relationship, or a long-held feeling about one’s self. At first glance, this seems like another iteration of the often-used metaphor “baggage.” The subtle but

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>43</sup> Morgenstern, *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*, 8–9.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Walsh, *It’s All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 47.

remarkable phenomenon distinguishing this literature from the cliché is the way the actual, physical baggage of clutter remains inseparable from the creation, identification and conquering of negative thinking. De-cluttering literature grapples with both negative emotions *and* material objects; the two are treated interchangeably as “clutter.” Advice for discarding old financial statements, for instance, might be followed directly by advice for leaving an unsatisfying partner. More often, the two are conflated together as the same problem—perhaps the papers are from your cheating husband’s bank account, in which case you should throw out the papers, the memory, and probably even him.<sup>45</sup>

Passages move quickly between instructions about the physical and the psychic, like this excerpt from the book *Throw Out Fifty Things*, reinforcing the easy slippage between material and mental clutter:

What are some things in your life that are “over”—a job, a relationship, or maybe just a friendship—but not “done”? When something’s not done it can haunt us, drag us back into the past, make us feel inadequate, angry, bitter, you name it, but it’s no good. So the question is, what do we have to let go of to make it done? Maybe it’s physical stuff, maybe it’s mental stuff, maybe it’s both. The fact is that, until Kelly burned the pictures and threw out the dress, some vestiges of her failed marriage still haunted her.<sup>46</sup>

This passage is typical of the vague cause-and-effect explanation for the “clutter problem” that dominates this literature—emotional problems cause clutter, clutter causes emotional problems, and the strategies for recognizing and dealing with each are one and the same.

---

<sup>45</sup> Gail Blanke tries to explain the transitive object of shedding in her book *Throw Out Fifty Things*: “If it—the thing, the belief or conviction, the memory, the job, even the person—weighs you down, clogs you up, or just plain makes you feel bad about yourself, throw it out, give it away, sell it, let it go, move on.” Blanke, *Throw out fifty things*, xxii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

Authors of de-cluttering literature convince readers the practice of de-cluttering works equally well when applied to their relationships as to their closets by showing how clutter can be mastered only when it is rendered purely psychological, a process that occurs within de-cluttering literature in three steps: (1) objects are seen as containing an emotional charge, (2) this emotional charge gives objects malevolent agency over their individuals, keeping them from present success, and (3) human agency is re-asserted over emotionally-charged objects through de-cluttering. Although these steps are not explicitly laid out as such in the literature, they appear as a consistent element of the discourse throughout almost all de-cluttering texts.

### **Step One: Over-identifying with Your Stuff**

De-cluttering literature asks readers to tune into their own psychological reactions to clutter as a form of evidence to prove their belongings have dangerous emotional heft. The most basic way these authors achieve this is to ask readers to imagine how good they might feel seeing the outcome of a successful de-cluttering process. More than just the promise of life-enhancing benefits—ranging from losing weight, to finding a career, experiencing increased self-esteem, and even learning “respect for others”—there is a sense one will have instant physical relief from anxiety once they de-clutter.<sup>47</sup> For instance, Maarje de Wolff insists in *Clear Your Way to a Clutter Free Life*, “the effect of clearing the smaller clutter can go much deeper, and seeing a filing cabinet drawer that

---

<sup>47</sup> Peter Walsh claims that de-cluttering encourages weight loss, positive career changes, new relationships and the end of “hurdles that have stunted their emotional lives.” Peter Walsh, *Enough Already! Clearing Mental Clutter to Become the Best You* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 4.

looks neat and organized, with space to spare, can feel very calming and rewarding.”<sup>48</sup> It is only a short leap, then, to emphasize to readers how bad it feels to face a clutter problem—after all, anyone who is reading a de-cluttering book has determined clutter has become a sufficient problem in their life that they need to seek a solution to it. Most de-cluttering authors ask their readers to pay attention to the feelings of fear arising around clutter, positioning that fear as evidence to nudge their readers towards the understanding “we often hold on to stuff we don’t need because we feel emotionally attached to it.”<sup>49</sup> If belongings did not represent something valuable emotionally, then why would one experience, as Julie Morgenstern terms it, the “*wall of panic*,” or the moment “you suddenly can feel the emptiness of space you have created”?<sup>50</sup> Our grip on material culture is so tight, this literature suggests, that its loss is panic-inducing.

The high stakes of clutter in de-cluttering literature is premised, like all texts on organization, on the idea that material culture represents intimate aspects of the self. The ease with which the premise of clutter-as-self is taken as a given in this literature indicates the basic tenets of material culture scholarship—“objects have a determining effect on the development of the self”—have been absorbed or independently developed by those who are writing, buying and reading organization self-help books.<sup>51</sup> Professional organizer Gail Blanke, like many other authors in this genre, speaks casually about the way objects come to represent aspects of the self:

---

<sup>48</sup> Maartje de Wolff, *Clear Your Way to a Clutter Free Life* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2006), 12.

<sup>49</sup> Walsh, *It’s All Too Much*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Morgenstern, *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53.

You've already realized, I'm sure, how closely connected the physical and mental clutter are to each other. It's hard to throw out even something as innocuous as an old, beat-up bath mat without throwing out some old point of view of yourself with it.<sup>52</sup>

In the scenario she describes further in her book, the bath mat represents not only her, but also a fiction of herself bringing the real her down. When Blanke decides to throw the bath mat away, she claims it was because the bath mat “didn’t match my idea of the kinds of things I should surround myself with”; furthermore, it did not register highly on her “How did it make me feel? Scale.”<sup>53</sup> Here, Blanke indicates there is a scale against which to judge objects to redeem them from being considered clutter, one that directly correlates to how accurately the objects represent one’s most ambitious idea about themselves—for instance, she decides to stop using wire hangers because they are cheap, and make her feel cheap about herself. This passage demonstrates several important points about clutter. First, no one category or type of object is determined to be bad (and therefore clutter) or good (and therefore saved and organized into the routine of daily use). Second, the judgment for whether something is clutter is based on a constant evaluation of how the object reflects back on the self, though the threat of false distinctions is ever prevalent. Why, after all, did you ever think that item was valuable in the first place? If de-cluttering literature functions as a type of self-help makeover text, it is in these constant evaluations each makeover moment occurs. Objects are not clutter when they reflect the “best” version of the individual, a makeover-view of material culture emphasizing constant self-evaluation.

---

<sup>52</sup> Blanke, *Throw out fifty things*, 112.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



Investing material culture so heavily with aspects of self-identity means throwing items away becomes a highly loaded proposition. Removing items from the house provokes a natural emotional response, according to author Jamie Novak, because “the items actually can become a part of your identity. After all, who are you without all that stuff?”<sup>54</sup> Authors of de-cluttering literature suggest readers have *over-identified* with their belongings, and so face panic-inducing loss when the time comes to throw things away. Along these lines, Peter Walsh asks his readers, “are you afraid that if this painting, this pile of mildewed photos, or this stack of crayon drawings is gone, you will lose that part of your past forever?”<sup>55</sup> Warnings about material culture’s negative potential is reminiscent of shows like *Hoarders* and *Clean House*, even in the suggestion that retaining clutter is a sign of “addiction.” In his book *Clutter Busting*, under the heading “You’ve Become What You Own,” author Brooks Palmer determines people have an “addiction” to their belongings because they are “hooked on identifying with [their] things, on seeing them as representatives of who [they] are.”<sup>56</sup> The intimacy of one’s relationship with personal objects is inherently harmful, he argues, because the feelings around those objects are manipulative, false and keep us from experiencing “real” emotion:

We are junkies to clutter. We use things to keep away pain. We use our stuff to manipulate a feeling of joy. We care more about the feeling we associate with a thing than about the thing itself; we crave the feeling we associate with the

---

<sup>54</sup> Jamie Novak, *The Get Organized Answer Book: Practical Solutions for 275 Questions on Conquering Clutter, Sorting Stuff, and Finding More Time and Energy* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2009), 16.

<sup>55</sup> Walsh, *It’s All Too Much*, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Brooks Palmer, *Clutter Busting: Letting Go of What’s Holding You Back* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009), 25.

thing... You think you want an item, but unconsciously you crave the feeling associated with it. You need the “hit” the feeling gives you.<sup>57</sup>

Here Palmer suggests having any feelings about objects in the first place is enough justification to get rid of them. De-cluttering literature, which begins with the premise that objects are invested with aspects of the self, moves toward castigating such an investment completely. Once objects turn into clutter—a vague and ever-shifting classification—they become universally harmful. Moreover, they are deemed harmful for precisely the same reason other objects remain valuable, that is, they are over-invested with aspects of the self. Ultimately, however, this literature uses the concept of shedding unwanted clutter to point readers back toward crafting an interior that is fully “curated,” featuring only those objects that fully reflect the transformative, future potential of the individual.

### **Step Two: The Agency of Things**

The second step de-cluttering literature takes in the process of de-materializing clutter is to explain how objects, through your emotional investment in them, acquire their own fearful agency and actively work against your best interests. Stephanie Vogt, an author of the de-cluttering book *Your Spacious Self*, explains one feels fear when de-cluttering because of the clutter talking: “If any litany of judgments derails you, remember: *This is the “clutter part” of your mind talking, not the real you!*”<sup>58</sup> Across this literature, one finds that when clutter is a problem, it is characterized, linguistically

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>58</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, xxv.

and metaphorically, as having gained the upper hand over its owners. For instance, one de-cluttering author rather playfully describes clutter in these fantastical terms:

There is something about clothes that makes it quite difficult to keep on top of them. They seem to have parties when we are asleep, quietly moving around in our wardrobes when we are not looking. I don't know what they get up to, but one thing is for sure: they require good management and regular care and attention if we want them to be where and how we want them to be.<sup>59</sup>

This trend might be explained as merely a catchy linguistic turn (“the stuff we own ends up owning us”), but more often the agency of objects is an intentional language choice meant to express and empathize with the overwhelming nature of clutter. Phrases like “Paper attacks daily” and “my stuff needs me” position clutter as a subject enacting problems onto an individual, much as chapter headings such as “Clutter robs us of real value,” “Clutter monopolizes our time,” and “Clutter takes over” characterize clutter as an animate enemy that enters one’s home uninvited in order to wreak havoc.<sup>60</sup> In granting clutter rhetorical agency, de-cluttering authors bolster excessive material culture into an anthropomorphized figure that can only be defeated once readers take the necessary de-cluttering steps to get their lives back.

Material culture scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s stressed the home as a “mode of expression, a means by which people constructed themselves and their ideologies,” although Daniel Miller argues in *Home Possessions* there is a “growing realization that

---

<sup>59</sup> De Wolff, *Clear Your Way to a Clutter Free Life*, 77.

<sup>60</sup> Tako, *Clutter Clearing Choices*, 125. Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, xxvi. Walsh, *It's All Too Much*, 1.

there are clear constraints to regarding the home as an expressive genre.”<sup>61</sup> Instead, people are often “thwarted by the presence of their houses and the orders of their material culture,” which sometimes take on their own agency.<sup>62</sup> This agency, Miller articulates, has a constraining impact on what one feels they can do with their possessions within their own home—possessions have agency when they force you to take them into account, not merely as an extension of personal expression, but sometimes as a legacy to be maintained, or as a compromise between family members, or as something an owner simply lives with because it is too expensive to fix.<sup>63</sup> The agency material culture acquires when it becomes clutter keeps homeowners from constructing the domestic interior into a purely expressive, personalized, self-representative space. Although seeming to reject over-identification with objects because such connections breed “false” emotional attachment, de-cluttering texts retain the goal of creating an interior environment entirely representative of the self. The key, they suggest, is to determine which items stay and how to feel good about purging the rest.

As clutter is shaped into an enemy, de-cluttering literature advises readers to single out and psychologically neutralize individual objects in order to defeat them. If “clutter” refers to an indistinct mass of objects and emotions, then “things” emerge as the enemy that can be tamed. In several of her books, professional organizer Cindy

---

<sup>61</sup> For an example of a text that deals with the home as a mode of expression, see Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women, and Design* (London: Women’s Press, 1989). Daniel Miller, *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2001), 10.

<sup>62</sup> Miller, *Home Possessions*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Glovinsky speaks directly to the issue of “Things” acting on a seeming helpless subject by using a capital “T”:

I’ve kept the nonstandard capitalization of the word *Thing* to mean a personal possession, as opposed to *thing*, which I use only as an all-purpose indefinite noun. The original use of *Thing* relates to the pervasive human tendency to personify the objects closest to us.<sup>64</sup>

Literary theorist Bill Brown has developed a similar technique to separate out things from objects, which he calls “Thing Theory.” Brown’s work plays with the tension of the word “thing,” which is, like clutter, more unique than the general flotilla of objects that surround us. Objects, he notes, we “mostly look through,” but “things” jolt us into recognition:

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things... We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.<sup>65</sup>

In a remarkably similar vein, de-cluttering author Glovinsky explains the non-standard use of the word “thing” is “intended to help you look at familiar possessions with new eyes, to create new ‘Thing meaning’ in place of old ones, and to detach yourself from

---

<sup>64</sup> Cindy Glovinsky, *One Thing at a Time: 100 Simple Ways to Live Clutter-free Every Day* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004), 6.

<sup>65</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 4. Brown cites the work of Bruno Latour, which tries to “transcend a simple dualism in which agency is seen as the possession of persons or society, and objects merely that which is passively worked on. Latour has promoted instead an approach based on networks of agents that include both animate and inanimate forms.” See also, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

automatic emotional responses that perpetuate cycles of clutter.”<sup>66</sup> She suggests that viewing “things” as distinct from clutter allows them to be addressed on their own terms in order to determine the psychological, not physical, reason it remains in the home (these reasons include “memory problems, visual processing problems, attention problems, or task completion problems, because you’re depressed, ill, grieving, obsessive-compulsive, addicted, or for a host of other reasons.”)<sup>67</sup> “Things,” she argues, only get out of control when individuals try to deny there is a psychic element to material culture; therefore, Glovinsky reasons, “if you want to make peace with the Things in your life, you must first understand and make peace with yourself. There is no other way.”<sup>68</sup> When offering advice on how to neutralize “things,” Glovinsky asks readers to first recognize what representations get projected onto them; as Palmer suggested in his connection between clutter and addiction, these are what she calls false attributes such as power, belonging, identity, and perfection. Although Glovinsky is the only author to explain her decision to use the word “Thing,” many de-cluttering authors use the same method of singling out objects to identify the problem of clutter. De-cluttering literature consistently presents its readers with the imperative to single out and evaluate every object in the home, even as it seems to promise transcendence from the oppressive nature of material culture and clutter.

---

<sup>66</sup> Cindy Glovinsky, *Making Peace with the Things in Your Life: Why Your Papers, Books, Clothes, and Other Possessions Keep Overwhelming You and What to Do About It* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002), xv.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Photographs and photography collections are the some of the most consistently problematic nostalgic objects discussed in de-cluttering literature.<sup>69</sup> An entire professional group has come together around this very issue. The Association of Personal Photograph Organizers, an affiliate of NAPO, is a group of individuals who help clients “tell stories” with their photographs through organization and display, much like experts who write about closet makeovers.<sup>70</sup> De-cluttering literature, however, takes a more cynical approach. Photographs are unsurprisingly difficult to get rid of—to throw away a photograph is to discard at once a “thing,” a feeling and a part of the past. Interestingly, none of these de-cluttering books focus on digital photography (though other books have since come out on the subject), probably because physical photographs produce a spatial problem that is the result of both past emotions and past technology.<sup>71</sup> Scholarship on the materiality of photography provides a useful lens through which to understand how memories and “the past” become concretized into physical items that can be removed to make life easier. Scholars Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart point out that often the

---

<sup>69</sup> Though unsubstantiated, Barbara Tako’s claim that “unsorted photos are in the top three of people’s undone household projects” seems to ring true when considering the high frequency that personal photo management appears in de-cluttering books. Tako, *Clutter Clearing Choices*. In *Let Go of Clutter*, Harriet Schechter similarly notes that, for most people, “the clutter caused by an overabundance of unorganized photos seem to be a source of stress.” Schechter, *Let Go of Clutter*, 131.

<sup>70</sup> “Association of Personal Photo Organizers,” accessed December 3, 2012, <http://www.appo.org/>.

<sup>71</sup> Examples of books that address digital organization include, Mike Hagen, *Thousands of Images, Now What: Painlessly Organize, Save, and Back Up Your Digital Photos* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012). Aimee Baldrige, *Organize Your Digital Life: How to Store Your Photographs, Music, Videos, and Personal Documents in a Digital World* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2009). Sarah Bay Williams, *Digital Shoebox: How to Organize, Find, and Share Your Photos, The* (Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 2009).

meaning of photography is not solely reliant on the image—the life of the photo goes beyond the what is captured in the frame. In order to push scholars to look at materiality, Hart and Edwards argue, “there is a need to break, conceptually, the dominance of image content and look at the physical attributes of the photograph.”<sup>72</sup> Hart and Edwards stress scholars need to work against the “prevailing tendency” to understand the “consumption of photography as a visual act, where image and object are absorbed simultaneously, yet the former dominates an understanding of the latter.”<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, just as de-cluttering literature seems to have already absorbed—or arrived independently at—the messages of material culture scholarship, it has also pre-empted Hart and Edward’s point by focusing almost entirely on the materiality of photographs. Photographs become clutter both because of their nostalgia potential and because of the very quotidian and persistent presence of the material photograph as the primary reason to seek to abolish it from the home.

Photographs are, then, the physical manifestation of the most persistent fixation of de-cluttering self-help literature, which is that objects become destructive when they keep individuals from living in the present. Coined “The Tyranny of Photos” by Brooks Palmer, the problem of photos seems to be these “treasured moments” combine object, emotion, and memory together to form a barrier to personal growth and the achievement of an “authentic” self.<sup>74</sup> Objects have agency because of their ability to retain sentimental value; overcoming these attachments requires recognizing and breaking the desire to

---

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories: On The Materiality of Images* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Palmer, *Clutter Busting*, 62.



“live in the past.” Chapter Three of Palmer’s *Clutter Busting* (titled “Clutter Keeps Us Living in the Past”) details how clutter is “made of memories”; in one example, memorabilia from the start of a relationship is considered “un-real” because it represents the past and is therefore harmful to the couple in the present day.<sup>75</sup> “Trying to keep memories alive in *things*,” Palmer explains, “is like trapping a ghost in a box. It will always be a ghost.”<sup>76</sup> Here, being present connotes vitality, realism, and positive forward movement in one’s life; the past represents a form of fantasy and personal stagnation. Backwards-looking especially entails a devotion to “sentimentalia,” which is then figured as a sickness, draining “the life force right out of our homes and lives.”<sup>77</sup> When de-cluttering author Harriet Schechter asks, “Are you a memorabilac?” of a person who “accumulates vast amounts of personal memorabilia,” the suffix of the neologism renders the condition pathological, much like the conception of clutter developed in *Hoarders* and *Clean House*.<sup>78</sup> In its rejection of objects of sentimentality and nostalgia, de-cluttering literature seems to echo twentieth-century modernist design ideals of progress, as well as modernism’s rejection of history and tradition.<sup>79</sup> Where design modernism embraced forward-thinking on all levels, pushing equally for a cleaned out domestic interior and the development of new forms in order to transform everyday life, de-cluttering literature turns inward to the microcosm of personal history retained in a single object, a familiar move in postmodern and neoliberal discourse that eschews the political

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>77</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, 23.

<sup>78</sup> Schechter, *Let Go of Clutter*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> See Introduction.

in favor of personal transformation. Against such evaluation, the nostalgic sentimental object functions similarly to Gail Blanke's ratty bath mat—both are representations of the self that are dated, old, worn, or cheap.

The issue of mass-produced objects as an expression of harmful nostalgia is not unfamiliar to the field of material culture or consumption studies. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin argued for acknowledging the “presence in time and space” of a work of art—determining what he called its “authenticity” against the ever-decreasing “aura” caused by mass reproduction of art images.<sup>80</sup> This process was necessary to clarify the political ramifications influencing visual culture during the threat of fascism. The fear of decreasing authenticity was about the fear of encroaching ideology in the form of mass culture. While de-cluttering literature also privileges “authenticity,” unlike Benjamin this literature presents no political ramifications to clutter or material culture at all. The only threat clutter poses is to personal growth. This is why “staying present” remains the primary fixation of de-cluttering even when clutter does not indicate a preoccupation with nostalgia.

The fundamentally a-political nature of de-cluttering literature is revealed in its conception of the past *and* the future as equal threats to present day fulfillment, as opposed to a fear that “nostalgic” visual culture uses a comforting past to hide ideological subtext. “The future *is* important,” advises Peter Walsh, “but you have to consider the quality of your life today and strike a balance between the life you are living today and

---

<sup>80</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Reprint (original 1969) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 2007), 220.

the multitude of paths your life may take in the future.”<sup>81</sup> Readers are advised not to think of themselves as something they are not just because they own objects that contain the hope of a new identity—as Jamie Novak told *The New York Times*, “having a French cookbook does not make you a French chef.”<sup>82</sup> Holding on to an abundance of stuff for future use is problematic not because it reflects an illogical scarcity mentality that encourages overconsumption—essentially a sign one has internalized consumer capitalist ideology—but because it privileges false personal potential. On the surface, de-cluttering texts seem to present a domestic interior of pure functionality, echoing modernist principles which declared everything within the interior work must toward the purpose of better living. By this token, if you’re not a French chef, the cookbook is extraneous and non-functional. In fact, function rarely comes up in de-cluttering literature. The objects that are supposed to remain in the home after de-cluttering are only functional if they work toward the transformation of the individual, passing the “how does this make me feel?” test. Imagining oneself to be a French chef and then not acting on the impulse is essentially an act of irresponsibility; the leftover cookbook is the documentation of this past failure, a messy lapse of wishful thinking cluttering what should be a tightly controlled representation of one’s “best” self.

### **Step Three: Mastering “Things”**

---

<sup>81</sup> Walsh, *It’s All Too Much*, 34.

<sup>82</sup> Alina Tugend, “Willpower, and Maybe a Camera, to Get Rid of Your Unused Junk,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2010.

After asking readers to identify the problem “thing,” de-cluttering literature encourages them to assert their mastery over it by reclaiming personal agency, repositioning the reader as the subject of their own life, both physically and linguistically.<sup>83</sup> Often, the fact that objects have been purchased and stored by a human has to be plainly restated (“everything in your home is there with your permission”).<sup>84</sup> The individual’s relationship to the formerly anthropomorphized “thing” is made explicit: “It’s your responsibility. It’s your doing. When clutter becomes overwhelming, something shifts in our relationship to our stuff. For whatever reason we hand control over to the things we own...[clutter] won’t fix itself. Step up!”<sup>85</sup> Turning the rhetoric around, de-cluttering literature suggests it is absurd to think stuff can talk, walk, or in any other way make your life miserable—if the reader feels that way, it is because he or she has let clutter overrun their lives. De-cluttering literature solves the problem of clutter by turning back toward a narrative of personal responsibility. Readers can take back agency from their “things” once they identify and discard an object based on the emotional currency it carries.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Cindy Glovinsky is the most forthright though by no means the only de-cluttering author who resituates humans as the primary actors in the relationship with their things, debunking the idea that “Things, as a rule, do not give birth to baby Things.” Although occasionally humorous, at other times she clearly feels the need to be more blunt: “YOUR THINGS DO NOT DO ANYTHING TO YOU.” Glovinsky, *Making Peace with the Things in Your Life*, 23, xiv.

<sup>84</sup> Walsh, *It’s All Too Much*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>86</sup> For instance, Barbara Tako explains “the moments and the memories reside in you, not in your stuff. You are the one who had the experiences you associate with the stuff, and besides, your stuff can’t talk!” Tako, *Clutter Clearing Choices*, 212.

Within the piles of harmful clutter, and among the sentimental “things” keeping one from living in the present, there are also items that retain a depth of meaning and association that cannot be divested. Although de-cluttering authors almost universally disavow the presence of memorabilia, most usually recognize the inevitability that a fully de-cluttered life is impossible. To get around this problem, the literature suggests readers isolate those “things” that cannot be thrown out because of their emotional value and recast them as “treasures” to be contained within a “treasure box.”<sup>87</sup> This is a handy method, not only because it allows the dreaded “thing” to be recast as valuable and sustaining, but also because the treasure box puts a limit on “things,” keeping their emotional power culled and contained through the curatorial selection process of “treasure”-ness. For instance, de-cluttering author Julie Morgenstern has an entire chapter on identifying and separating out “Treasures” from clutter, essentially helping readers distinguish between the good and bad nostalgic material. Morgenstern dedicates a chapter to the positive potential of treasures (including headings such as, “Treasures define you,” “Treasures empower you,” and “Treasures connect you to your life’s passions”) and devotes several more chapters to methods of finding “time treasures” and “habit treasures” in much the same way.<sup>88</sup> “Treasures” might be a way to rationalize and contain items that do not match the physical environment—items that are too old or too ugly to display—but still carry too much emotional weight to be thrown away. One also gets the sense, however, that “treasures” might not be saved because they are loved the most of all

---

<sup>87</sup> Novak, *The Get Organized Answer Book*, 26.

<sup>88</sup> Morgenstern, *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*.

other objects, but because they have the ability to contribute to the ongoing construction of a “best” self.

Separating out treasures is one way to manage the unruliness of objects; another way to do this, confusingly, is through photography. Multiple de-cluttering authors suggest if certain “things” retain too much charge, positive or negative, to be discarded they should be photographed in order to “bid adieu to the actual objects.”<sup>89</sup> Here, the transitive object/emotion/person being de-cluttered gets flattened into one convenient totem, as when one author suggests, “If you must, take a photo of it (him, them) and let it (him, them) go! Then use the photo in a ritual of letting go.”<sup>90</sup> The nostalgia that previously made photographs so troubling is also what makes them the perfect solution to the difficulty of parting with a formerly loved “thing.” Taking a photograph of an object is a way to control both it and the memory it represented. Through photography one can acknowledge, stage, shoot, and file away that which cannot remain in the home. That photographs are presented as a solution to clutter suggests the discrimination process of shedding is not as clear-cut as it is presented in de-cluttering literature. When photographs lie in untended piles, they are harmful sentimentalities that indicate both personal laziness and an unwillingness to “live in the present.” When they can substitute themselves for a bulky object, they are the perfect space- and psyche-saving solution.

---

<sup>89</sup> Schechter, *Let Go of Clutter*, 134.

<sup>90</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, 25.

## What's Left? Spirituality Fills the Void

Though de-cluttering literature promises many positive outcomes, one overarching benefit rises to the surface: the achievement of an “essential,” “clear,” or “genuine” self after all of the clutter has been thrown away.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, de-cluttered life is often described as being “still.” De-cluttering author Stephanie Vogt explains that while “clutter shows up in our lives and blocks our true nature,” behind clutter “there is an infinitely spacious place one might call stillness or joy.”<sup>92</sup> By prioritizing “stillness,” de-cluttering literature places a premium on the idea that shedding belongings is a way to slow down or stop “Our Noisier, Busier World.”<sup>93</sup> When stillness is at the core of a de-cluttered life, the issue of clutter expands to encompass the ills of contemporary culture. De-cluttered simplicity is the solution to a “busier than thou” society—in which people pride themselves on their ability to live life at breakneck speed and maximum efficiency<sup>94</sup> This is, to say the least, an ironic outcome, considering the strong emphasis on efficiency promised by the organization industry. An emphasis on stillness mirrors the rhetoric about time proffered by *Real Simple*; a “still” or “clear” place beyond clutter suggests a fantasy space where one can re-group without the excesses of contemporary consumer culture. Practically, however, achieving the fantasy of a de-cluttered existence requires an enormous amount of engagement with one’s stuff (as *Real Simple* demanded

---

<sup>91</sup> Gail Blanke addresses this moment in a section of her book titled, “Stepping into the Clearing.” Blanke, *Throw out fifty things*, xxv.

<sup>92</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, xxiii.

<sup>93</sup> Marc Lesser, *Less: Accomplishing More by Doing Less* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009), 4–5.

<sup>94</sup> Mary Carlomagno, *The Secrets of Simplicity: Learn to Live Better with Less* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), 11.

a similar engagement with domestic tasks), resulting in nearly constant evaluation of personal objects in an effort to keep the home, and one's psyche, as close as possible to "clear."

Anti-materialism coupled with anti-modern stillness is synthesized in de-cluttering literature as spirituality. De-cluttering author Stephanie Vogt emphasizes her version of this spirituality as a method of "clearing anything consciously and gently," which she believes will ultimately lead readers "slowly and surely to soften our grip of attachments."<sup>95</sup> In a section of his book titled, "You Are Sacred—Your Things Are Not," Brooks Palmer makes the case that recognition of the "sacred" comes only when one recognizes "there is no inherent value in things":

Things themselves are neutral, but we ascribe them false value... If you are unhappy and you buy something to help you feel better, you are buying into an ad campaign that was designed to part you from your money.<sup>96</sup>

This quotation perfectly introduces the conundrum at the heart of de-cluttering: in order to arrive at the claim materiality works against spirituality, and identity is not constructed through things, authors have first had to convince readers their "things" were, in fact, value-laden and deeply personal.

In *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King describe the ways neoliberalism's ethos of self-improvement, coupled with an over-emphasis on the self and personal psychology in the late-twentieth century, has led to the popularization of "spirituality," a term with no essential meaning. Spirituality,

---

<sup>95</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, xxvii.

<sup>96</sup> Palmer, *Clutter Busting*, 15.



they contend, is a generic term that has come to represent “a new cultural addition and a claimed panacea for the angst of modern living.”<sup>97</sup> As a therapeutic technique, spirituality claims to address the ills of consumer culture but does so by prioritizing self-discovery over social justice; as such, spirituality discourses “promote accommodation to the social, economic and political mores of the day and provide little in terms of a challenge to the status quo or to a lifestyle of self-interest and ubiquitous consumption.”<sup>98</sup> Although the genre may be individually nourishing, self-help books function as a “palliative for the ills of consumer society, rather than addressing the underlying social problems that create a need for such works in the first place.”<sup>99</sup> Throughout de-cluttering literature, the shedding process is conceived of as absolutely individual and psychically located, a “monistic assumption that the Self itself is sacred” that is typical of a number of new age therapeutic movements.<sup>100</sup> Scholarly work on spiritual and New Age movements helps to understand why, after shedding is complete, de-cluttering literature suddenly pulls back from the individual and begins to question the “noisier, busier world”—what seems to otherwise pose a contradiction in emphasis. In *The New Age Movement*, Paul Heelas argues the “self-spirituality” of New Age discourses coexist with a fixation on social and cultural problems, where it is essential to move away from a

---

<sup>97</sup> The authors stress that spirituality has no essential definition, but is instead a series of discourses that arise out of the work of authors, speakers, gurus, products and movements. J. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>100</sup> Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 2. See also, Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 8.

“contaminated” culture to a more “authentic nature.”<sup>101</sup> In the case of de-cluttering literature, the effect of placing blame on fast-paced modern society is to suggest pure inward-facing is an act of personal rebellion; the real solution to the problem of consumption is to look within yourself, sort the clutter in your head, and achieve perfect “stillness.”

In addition to being more spiritual, the ideal de-cluttered life is decidedly *not* “Western” or “modern”— I use these terms here not as fixed concepts, but as they are employed in de-cluttering literature, synonymous with technological advancement, speed, action, waste, and consumerism. For instance, Barbara Tako’s book *Clutter Clearing Choices* seems expressly anti-consumerist and features a section called “Consumerism Doesn’t Clear Clutter,” in which she argues we live in a “consumption-oriented materialistic society” that has “permeated every aspect of our American lives.”<sup>102</sup> In another example, Stephanie Vogt indicts “Western culture where ‘action’ reigns supreme.”<sup>103</sup> Opposed to the “West” are numerous groups, often identified as Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, which become models for slowing down. Often, these comparisons are made through casual, uncontextualized references to Eastern figures: “under what circumstances do you notice yourself holding on so tightly that, as Lama Surya Das describes it, you get ‘rope burn’?”<sup>104</sup> Although the direct references to

---

<sup>101</sup> Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Tako’s anti-consumerist, highly spiritual approach is unsurprising, considering her book is published by Alternatives for Simple Living, a Christian organization founded in 1973 to combat “American consumerism” and teach simple living. Tako, *Clutter Clearing Choices*, 122.

<sup>103</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, 87.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Eastern philosophy are concentrated in a handful of books, even the more pragmatic, clutter-focused books occasionally reference supposedly “Zen” principles.<sup>105</sup> In *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*, scholar Kimberly Lau examines how popular practices such as macrobiotic eating, yoga, t’ai chi and aromatherapy are commodified to provide “personal transformation through alternative, non-Western paradigms of health and wellness.”<sup>106</sup> Most of the spiritual references in de-cluttering literature fall precisely within her analysis:

This mode of cultural critique in popular discourses relies upon an Eastern agelessness, in opposition to a Western modernity. Without question, ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ are elaborate constructions, and such inventions only further the Orientalist fantasies at their core. In this way, the West is represented as a highly individualized, technologized, and scientized modernity, while the East remains the timeless representation of collectivity, spirituality, nature, and harmony.<sup>107</sup>

In assuming the existence of a stable and a-historic Eastern philosophical or spiritual tradition “un-touched” by consumerism de-cluttering literature trades on a stereotype against which to pit American culture, consumerism and clutter.

Possibly more problematic, de-cluttering literature often equates multiple, divergent groups as similarly simplistic and outside modernity. These include children,

---

<sup>105</sup> For instance, Julie Morgenstern, an author who does not otherwise privilege spirituality, casually begins an anecdote with, “a well-known Zen parable tells of a wanderer on a lonely road who came upon a torrential stream that had washed out a bridge... take a moment to think about the meaning of this story. How often do we hang on to things that served us that are no longer relevant or useful?” Morgenstern, *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*, 39. See also, Marc Lesser, *Z.B.A., Zen of Business Administration: How Zen Practice Can Transform Your Work and Your Life* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2005).

<sup>106</sup> Kimberly J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

figures from the historical past, Native Americans and anachronistic Christian sects. Mary Carlomagno explains how her de-cluttering expertise was born out of her yoga practice, which led to her discovery that Buddhists, Shakers and the Amish share the practice of simple living. She goes on to list Lao-tzu, St. Teresa of Avila, Confucius, Henry David Thoreau, and “Algonquin wisdom” as sources of inspiration, sometimes following shortly after with de-cluttering tips from these sources, such as “planning ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning and end of each day for organizing yourself.”<sup>108</sup> In another example, Stephanie Vogt provides three examples of proper placement and housing of belongings to prevent clutter, each of which she positions outside the realm of Western modernity: the Montessori classroom, the Japanese domestic interior, and the Shaker tradition.<sup>109</sup> Unsurprisingly, women are also added to the group who seem to exist outside of time and according to the ancient laws of nature.<sup>110</sup> One of Jennifer Louden’s “principles” of an organized life is “a way of planning our days that takes into account the true form and flow of a woman’s life—rarely linear, always forged in connection, deeply influenced by our bodies, intimate with the often-difficult dance between what we want and what our life requires of us.”<sup>111</sup> Here, Loudon simply re-asserts a biological approach to gender, placing women closer to nature and therefore outside of technology-driven, “masculine” culture, a historic duality that has long functioned to place women

---

<sup>108</sup> Carlomagno, *The Secrets of Simplicity*, 113, 139.

<sup>109</sup> Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, 77.

<sup>110</sup> Louden is not the only author to identify women as more intuitively able to be clear and still; Stephanie Vogt warns that until readers experience a “shift in our mindset” that “includes the feminine aspects of clearing, we will not begin to change our lives, nor bring change to the planet.” *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>111</sup> Jennifer Louden, *The Life Organizer: A Woman’s Guide to a Mindful Year* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007), 6.

outside of modernity, which has been falsely gendered male.<sup>112</sup> The association between women and a “natural” instinct to be outside the rigors of contemporary life is ironic considering the vast amount of home organization literature about efficiency that is directed at and consumed by women. This somewhat confusing approach to gender and clutter—is women’s supposed “natural” instinct against the “busy-ness” of contemporary consumer culture stronger than the twin assumption that busy, multi-tasking, working mothers crave efficiency advice?—speaks to the complicated and unresolved relationship between women, time, and domestic responsibility inherent to home organization texts.

The anti-consumerist sentiment in de-cluttering literature is often so direct it persuasively suggests itself as a radical intervention against capitalism in the form of a domestic advice manual. For instance, some authors describe candidly how to combat a consumer-oriented society through de-cluttering:

Beware of becoming a replacer, someone who constantly churns items in and out of the house looking for the latest and newest design. Understand that the job of retailers is to persuade you that you need to buy more. Demystify the sales pitch, take stock of what you have, and only buy what you absolutely need.<sup>113</sup>

De-cluttering literature’s acknowledgment of the ills of consumer culture brushes close to an indictment of its own legitimacy. As a de-cluttering author who does not also have a professional organizing career, Mary Carlomagno puts this sentiment most explicitly when she writes, “the Western world’s addiction to accumulating and spending has given rise to new industries that help people manage their everyday lives”<sup>114</sup> Building on Lau’s

---

<sup>112</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8–9.

<sup>113</sup> Carlomagno, *The Secrets of Simplicity*, 64.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

work, it is possible to address the unresolved dilemma of anti-consumerism in the most “spiritual” de-cluttering literature. Her scholarship on the cosmetic company Aveda similarly showcases an enterprise that “gives the impression of participating in a cultural critique of modernity and of the technologies enabling ‘today’s fast-paced world’” by presenting an alternative form of wellness therapy.<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, however, Lau finds “any cultural critique is an ironic one as consumption becomes a mode of addressing social, political and cultural disenchantment.”<sup>116</sup> Using Lau’s example, Carlomagno and other de-cluttering authors’ rejection of consumption might be explained as no more than the corporate branding of spirituality, itself a way to sell a product (in this case, a book, or the brand of the author-as-expert). This branding occurs as a vague reiteration of the Buddhist ideal of overcoming attachments, presented without historical, political, or social context—thus detaching the message to be used as commodity valued especially for its “authenticity.”

### **De-cluttering Your Head: The Entirely Psychic Experience of Clutter**

The trajectory of de-cluttering literature first posits the process of shedding as fraught with emotion, and then maintains things themselves contain an emotional charge that needs to be mastered and controlled. The effect of these steps is to present what seems to be a closed loop: one can solve the physical problem of clutter once they deal with their underlying psychological issues, and one can solve psychological issues by dealing with the physical problem of clutter. It is a seductive and convincing argument.

---

<sup>115</sup> Lau, *New Age Capitalism*, 131.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

To make psychological problems concrete and knowable by associating them with an object means one can master these emotions simply by throwing something away; however, by showing material culture can be made neutral once it is drained of individual meaning and purged, de-cluttering literature re-opens the loop—after all, if my stuff means nothing, why does shedding it change my life for the better? A material culture framework for psychological problem solving seems likely to fall apart under the burden of expectation placed upon it by de-cluttering literature.

By privileging the idea of shedding (anything) as the primary tool for changing one's life, this literature implies de-cluttering is a universal action that can be applied to any issue, even when the stuff disappears from the equation completely. In one de-cluttering book, a reader articulates the willingness to adopt the principles of de-cluttering for purely psychic purposes in a letter to the author: "Dear Peter: I have been working on decluttering my head for about nine months now. And really, it's much the same as decluttering a room."<sup>117</sup> In this quote, the processes at work to tidy up a physical room are handily applied to one's psychic "room." The pervasive use of the metaphor of de-cluttering psychic spaces is typified by a chapter from the book *Clutter Clearing Choices* titled "Inner Simplicity: Have an Internal Garage Sale This Fall."<sup>118</sup> The best example of a de-cluttering book using the principles of shedding for entirely immaterial ends is Jennifer Louden's *The Life Organizer: A Woman's Guide to a Mindful Year*. In *The Life Organizer*, Louden borrows the trope of the day planner, with numbered weeks and various tasks, but upends the traditional format by offering very few tips on physical

---

<sup>117</sup> Walsh, *Enough Already!*, 9.

<sup>118</sup> Tako, *Clutter Clearing Choices*, 224.

de-cluttering or organization within its pages. The goal, however, seems consistent with other de-cluttering books: to “help you reduce stress, widen your perspective, take better care of yourself, manage your multiple roles, and let go of what you don’t need”<sup>119</sup> Louden instructs readers to take stock of their life insights by reading old journals for themes, much as they would pull out all the clothing in their closet while de-cluttering. She also gives directions for a number of self-awareness exercises (asking questions like “what are your favorite books?” and “what has your therapist told you that you’ve said that is worth remembering?”) and suggests “you might want to use Post-its to capture insights, choosing a color for each particular theme, like pink for body, blue for nature, and so on.”<sup>120</sup> The organizational day-planner in this case is a suitable model to help readers with “how we think, how we react, and where we put our attention.”<sup>121</sup> These are the same tactics one might use to organize an interior: reduce the number of items to focus around those used currently, and then make sure these priorities are recorded neatly and remain visible.

De-cluttering literature warns readers the immaterial is even harder to shed than the physical “because you truly can’t see it and neither can anyone else.”<sup>122</sup> A piece of physical clutter might *represent* a multitude of emotions, but it is always objectified in a discreet “thing.” Mental clutter is diffuse, complicated and multifaceted. For instance, “Relationship Clutter,” according to Peter Walsh, includes anger, passive-aggressive behavior, lack of communication, fear, low self-esteem, grievances, and over-talking.

---

<sup>119</sup> Louden, *The Life Organizer*, xii–xiii.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 35–37.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>122</sup> Walsh, *Enough Already!*, 2.



This is only one type of mental clutter in a book that also addresses “career clutter”, “family clutter”, “health clutter”, and “financial clutter.”<sup>123</sup> Not only do readers learn it is more difficult to de-clutter the mind, but the stakes are higher as well; if physical shedding is supposed to offer mental relief, then mental shedding adds to nearly every facet of one’s life. Once de-cluttering is applied solely to the mind, readers are able to reach their fullest potential:

So here is the question: Who are you now? Now that you’ve let go of all the extraneous marble, now that you’ve chiseled your way through the stuff, junk, and clutter of your life, now that you’ve thrown out fifty things, who are you? Or more important, who do you want to be? The fact is, this is the moment to decide what your own idea of good is...At this particular moment, it’s all up for grabs—nothing’s given, nothing’s decided, nothing’s written until you write it.<sup>124</sup>

The concept of writing a new life is essentially a move to curate the psyche much as one would a closet or a bookshelf. At the far end of de-cluttering, the psyche being de-cluttered turns into a commodity itself, something to be shaped and molded according to the market: “Remember, clutter blurs clarity. Clutter also cramps your ability to be agile, not to mention your ability to spot the opportunity to periodically refine and at times, depending on market conditions, reinvent your brand.”<sup>125</sup> Through the dual processes of physical and psychic de-cluttering, readers are encouraged to “brand” themselves with the careful selection of objects, behaviors, and emotions.

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Blanke, *Throw out fifty things*, 213.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 92.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter argues the process of de-cluttering is premised on the requirement that readers of de-cluttering literature see their belongings as wrapped up in their emotions, memories, and concepts of the self, all of which need to be acknowledged as having power over individuals. De-cluttering makes a sudden turn, however, when it challenges readers to shed their belongings—to reassert themselves against their own memories and psychic longings—in order to find an “authentic” self, created without “things.” De-cluttering literature seems to present readers with the argument that over-identifying with their material belongings keeps them from living their most fulfilling life. At face value, this appears to be an anti-Western cultural critique relying on Eastern philosophy to argue aspects of a consumer-oriented world leave people unfulfilled. In reality, de-cluttering literature presents an argument for limitless self-construction based on the principles of lifestyle consumption and branding. This literature suggests it is possible to engage in constant curatorial process in one’s life by turning inward to develop a “best” version of one’s entire existence through the principles of de-cluttering.

While there may have been a sea change in attitudes towards personal belongings since the 1980s, there has been no actual end to the consumption and acquiring of goods—organization has simply become a part of this process by shoring up the stuff we do have into manageable piles. One would assume if enough people were truly convinced that the excess of their belongings was in some way negatively affecting their lives (as the amount money invested in the organization industry implies), disorganization and clutter would not continue to be an ongoing problem. Acquisition—for status, for

psychological comfort, as an end in itself—is clearly an ever-expanding process; however, shedding presumably reaches its limit as one approaches the bare minimum of objects required for living. The rising profits of the organization industry suggest organizing is characterized as a life-long process precisely because it is wrapped up in the consumerism it attempts to put at bay. This chapter pushes further to argue the emphasis on the action of shedding emotional baggage can—precisely because it involves no materiality—go on in perpetuity.

## Chapter Five: The Professionalization of Organization

*“I can walk in and see things that someone who is living there, it has become wallpaper to them and they can’t see it anymore. So I can see where the log jams are, and say, well clearly you’re coming in and everything is piling up here—why is that? Let’s talk about that.”<sup>1</sup>*

The thriving home organization industry demonstrates Americans’ continued desire to get organized. A contemporary culture of consumption, coupled with neoliberal discourses of self-help purchased through lifestyle consumption, has created an awareness of and desire for systems of organization to manage the mounting material of everyday life. A number of sources have been developed to help people get organized, from books to television shows to magazines to retail stores. While DIY methods displace the expertise of organization entirely into the hands of consumers, the growing field of professional organization offers a more personalized, hands-on approach to the problem of clutter. What follows are the voices of seven professional organizers who work in and around Austin, Texas.<sup>2</sup> Lorrie Marerro, Barry Izsak, Catharine Murphy, Margaret Kelly, Jennifer Lava, Amy Von Andrian and Susan Hale are linked not only by location, but also by professional commonalities. Though some are sole proprietors and others have employees, all of the interviewees own their own organizing businesses. Both Lorrie Marerro, owner of The Clutter Diet, and Barry Izsak, owner of Arranging It All,

---

<sup>1</sup> Lorrie Marrero, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 19, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> These interviews were conducted outside of a professional setting for the interviewees. Although some of the professional organizers brought photos to show examples of their work, and many shared anecdotes about their experiences with clients, most exhibited a sense of privacy about their client relationships. Out of respect for their desire for privacy and the sensitive nature of maintaining client relationships when operating a small business, the interviews were better suited to a non-work setting, such as a café or restaurant.

employ other organizers; Catharine Murphy (A Passion For Order), Margaret Kelly, Jennifer Lava, Amy Von Andrian (AVA Designs), and Susan Hale (UBEU) all work alone. All seven are members of the Austin chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, or NAPO, and most have held official positions in the group.<sup>3</sup> Although as sole proprietors they may not always have enough clients or jobs to be considered full-time, all of the organizers make their living primarily through their organizing businesses. The interviews of professional organizers that make up this chapter focused on issues of professionalization and skills required to organize. Each organizer was asked to reflect on the nature of their profession, both in terms of what professionalism means in the context of home organizing and why professionalism is an important element of what they do. They were also asked about their practice: how they assess clients, what processes they take within the home or office, and how they define a successfully organized space. Finally, they all offered some opinion on why the phenomenon of home organization has exploded recently, speculation based on authority acquired over years of practice.

Professional organizing is a fascinating subject to study at this very moment because it is balanced on the fulcrum of professionalization, having already established many of the necessary structures (such as the founding of a membership organization,

---

<sup>3</sup> Barry Izsak is a former national NAPO president (2003-2007); Susan Hale is the current NAPO Austin Chapter President; Amy Von Andrian is the current NAPO Austin Chapter President Historian and Award Chairperson; Catharine Murphy is the current NAPO Austin Chapter Secretary; Jennifer Lava is the current NAPO Austin Chapter Director of Marketing (and former Membership Chair). Margaret Kelly has also served on the board of the Austin Chapter of NAPO, but for the purposes of anonymity would prefer not to have exact offices mentioned.

certification, and a code of ethics), without the concomitant acknowledgment and legitimacy within the culture. Therefore, even an introductory examination of the field allows one to see myriad issues around the practice and acceptance of professional organization as they unfold. As with most professions, to be recognized as a professional organizer has the advantage not only of bolstering business through marketing and public awareness, but also of legitimizing and proving important the work organizers do in the home. Although public interest in organizing is high, professional organizing still seems to have a somewhat tenuous foothold in public consciousness, evidenced in the fact that the main professional body, National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), still devotes sections of its website to explaining exactly what a professional organizer does.

Talking to professional organizers allows some of the trickier aspects of the growing field to come to the fore, many of which are discussed in this chapter. First, the fact that the profession is gendered—most practitioners and clients are women—means that it is part of a history of professional marginalization that has occurred in other fields that approach the domestic interior, such as interior design. Second, although the people interviewed in this chapter possess very unique and concrete skills, the methodology for organizing others is a little messy. Becoming organized is not as smooth a process as The Container Store suggests, but instead requires individual negotiation of a client's limitations and expectations for their own space, methods that put the profession in line with many design practices. Third, professional organizing is highly intimate because it takes place in the most personal areas of the home, areas that have the additional

qualification of also being in a state of disarray and deemed not fit for showing off. Navigating these issues requires a skill-set that blends both spatial and interpersonal expertise. Finally, although a clear need has been identified for the type of work professional organizers do, it does not yet have a clearly defined economic value, and has yet to be fully recognized as a profession in the vein of other home-related fields (people generally know what an architect or interior designer or contractor does, even without knowledge of the professional trade association that legitimizes these groups). Even the practitioners themselves have a hard time articulating the precise rationale for their profession, expressing surprise that such a field even exists at the same time as they defend the value of what they do.

Although all interviewees identified themselves as professional organizers, most recognized that aspects of their work make labeling difficult. Professional organizers are uniquely positioned within the home, operating somewhere between the personal and the professional. In some ways they are like designers, thinking through how to live most efficiently in the home and adjusting the material environment to reflect that potential; in other ways they are like material-culture therapists, working one-on-one with clients to evaluate how objects within the home affect the clients' daily lives, and how parting with, storing, or positioning objects might make them more satisfied. Some organizers simply think of themselves as coaches whose role is to help the individual, family or office accomplish tasks that they might have been able to do on their own, but lacked motivation for. These somewhat diffuse boundaries around the profession have the effect of bolstering interest and membership in NAPO, a group that, while offering some

education for professionals in the field, exists mainly as a source of credibility for its members, who are navigating through territory in which amateur DIY and professional advice overlap.

This chapter is unique in the context of this dissertation—every chapter thus far has examined some aspect of the production of discourse around home organizing in American culture. In this method, the case studies provide a window into the types of narratives that exist in American culture around issues of messiness, consumption, class, gender and the home. We are able to see how organization should look, what one should buy in order to maintain an organized space, and who should be taking responsibility for doing all the organizing. Occasionally, specific voices emerge to challenge these cultural narratives, such as the web commenters on realsimple.com, who give a small glimpse into how consumers negotiate the advice being provided in these sources. Professional organizers are not outside of the system of consumption being critiqued in this work. They are also selling a product being consumed by individuals who feel the pressure to organize their home—perhaps because they have over-consumed, or are heeding cultural pressure about maintaining an organized home, or believe organization can solve problems beyond the scope of material culture, such as emotional or psychic distress. The professional organizers' investment in NAPO, which legitimizes the service they are providing for consumers, as well as their occasional endorsement of certain organizational products and belief in the redemptive powers of organization certainly place them squarely in the same critique encompassing *The Container Store*, *Clean House*, *Hoarders*, *Real Simple* and self-help literature. Where the previous chapters



examined various forms of advice—a type of cultural “work,” however diffuse—the professional organizers at the heart of this chapter actually work in the home by providing a one-on-one service. The editors and writers of *Real Simple*, founders and employees of The Container Store, and producers and participants in *Hoarders* do not enter the domestic interior—they may offer advice and guidance, but their efforts are ultimately guided toward the selling of a product that is secondary to the actual state of organization within an individual home (a TV show, magazine, book, or bin). The “product” being sold by professional organizers is their own labor, a near—but not complete—collapse of the distance between advice, consumption, and practice of organization in the home. The closest comparison within this dissertation is the work of self-help authors, who are often professional organizers offering advice based on their own experience on the actual processes of de-cluttering. Nonetheless, these authors remain outside of the home environment; to a large extent the product they sell has as much to do with their personal “brand” as it does with their expertise (although we will see how some professional organizers in this chapter also engage in the process of branding and spokespersonship). The professional organizers in this chapter provide an additional layer of complexity to what we have already seen in this work because their “product” is not mediated by a commodity, but is a one-on-one engagement with clients in the home.

Examining the work of professional organizers also provides an on-the-ground perspective into issues that are otherwise heavily framed by the media and popular culture, allowing a glimpse into how organization actually plays out in consumers’

homes. Where published self-help books, television shows, women's magazines, and retail environments project an exacting standard of organized living—at once painfully mundane in the commitment to daily chores and wildly unachievable in the supposed outcomes—professional organizers often adopt a more practical approach, mostly because, by entering the home, they can. By virtue of being in the home and handling material culture themselves, professional organizers are able to negotiate solutions in a far less consumption-oriented, exacting, or perfectionist way. The perspectives of professional organizers show that being organized is a far cry from the vision of *Real Simple* magazine or what's on offer at The Container Store; in fact, becoming organized is a negotiation between these cultural expectations and the reality of living in a space. Professional organizers are far more pragmatic, less judgmental, and less rigid in their understanding of what makes a space (or person) organized, simply because the nature of their approach to disorganization—offering a service rather than a product—means they are able to go where these other outlets cannot. Furthermore, because professional organizers are themselves the agents of organization within the home, they have to take responsibility for a failed outcome in a way that a magazine, retail chain, book or television show can never approximate. Retail venues only have a responsibility to frame the potential value of a product as solution to clutter until the point-of-purchase; a small business owner who is reliant on referrals and repeat clients has to reach a satisfactory state of organization for the client, which usually means they set a far more achievable goal in the first place. As a result, not only are professional organizers less able to hide behind the promise of better living through perfect organization, they are more likely to

see disorganization as the result of a myriad of cultural, social, and economic causes and therefore lacking any one easy solution that they are able to provide.

Like professional organizers, places like The Container Store and *Real Simple* also seek, to a more or less personalized degree, to provide solutions to the problem of clutter. There is no reason to imagine an employee at The Container Store would not be able to help someone find a specific product to contain his or her clutter problem at home. Working within the home, professional organizers can rarely develop a solution as handily because they have to deal with the entire scope of the interior's clutter, and so often deal with issues of process rather than simply containment. Depending on their issue, consumers might find The Container Store, *Real Simple*, self-help books and the services of a professional organizer equally useful in solving their clutter problem—and the definitive efficacy of any method is certainly not being assessed in this work. Within the spectrum of approaches to organization discussed in this dissertation, however, the work of professional organizers is most useful for thinking about how organization plays out in the real world because they physically encounter the problem of clutter in the home.

### **Organizing the Organizers**

Six of the seven organizers interviewed for this chapter were women; this is because the overwhelming majority of professional organizers are women, mirroring the fact that the majority of cultural output about home organization is also directed toward women. With professional organizing, however, we see another dimension to the gendering of organization, whereby mostly female practitioners legitimize their work

within the domestic space through the process of professionalization. The history of interior design provides a useful model for thinking about the development of professional organization. Like professional organizing, interior design at its inception was practiced primarily by women who were performing skills that had traditionally been considered “feminine”; in both fields, professionalization became a way to validate these skills as above and beyond unpaid labor in the home. A comparison with interior design is especially helpful given that various design professions also run up against issues of professionalism and legitimacy when certain practices are devalued. Despite the many helpful similarities this comparison brings to light, there exist a number of small contradictions that complicate our understanding of the contemporary practice of professional organizers in the home, troubling a one-to-one identification with professional designers.

Relating the history of the field of interior design, Grace Lees-Maffei explains that professionalization, especially of work that revolves around the home, is far more complex than simply working for pay. Practically, in addition to the production of a recognizable body of work by a single individual, professionalization includes, “the setting up of professional organizations, the articulation and monitoring of standards and codes of conduct, the institution of clear educational routes and means of assessment, networking and gate keeping.”<sup>4</sup> The particular course of professionalization for interior design has also been shaped by the gendered nature of the profession. In part because interiors were long considered simply the domain of women’s “natural” affinity towards

---

<sup>4</sup> Grace Lees-Maffei, “Introduction: Professionalization as a Focus in Interior Design History,” *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 1 (March 20, 2008): 1.

homemaking, and because from the mid-nineteenth century onward women were the key creative force behind the meanings that came to be embedded in the domestic interior, the women who were instrumental in the field had to “shift its emphasis from taste to skill” in order to be considered credible design professionals.<sup>5</sup> The effect of this supposed “natural” ability, however, is that women have historically been able to make a living as interior designers, even as other design specialties were closed to them, in some cases even leveraging their authority in the domestic realm as the basis for their professional authority.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, professionalization—which has traditionally been gendered “masculine”—was the real key to legitimacy for the otherwise amateur “feminine” practice of interior design.<sup>7</sup> Professional interior design by women in the U.S. gained momentum in the late-nineteenth century and was well-established by a core group of practitioners by the 1910s.<sup>8</sup> The process of professionalization for interior design

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11. A similar history can be traced in the professionalization of home economics. Ellen Swallow Richards turned the “non-academic”-seeming work associated with household labor into the academic discipline of home economics through standardization and professionalization in the 1890s. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Lees-Maffei, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>8</sup> In *Elsie De Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration*, Penny Sparke documents the work and life of another foundational interior designer, Elsie De Wolfe. De Wolfe, an interior decorator practicing in the early twentieth century who wrote for *Good Housekeeping* and published her own book, *The House in Good Taste* (1913), believed the interior was an important form of self-expression for women. Penny Sparke, “The Domestic Interior and the Construction of Self: The New York Homes of Elsie De Wolfe,” in *Interior Design and Identity*, ed. Susie McKellar and Penny Sparke (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), 73. De Wolfe’s use of modernist tropes, such as ample use of the color white and a relatively “clean,” uncluttered aesthetic, challenged preconceived gendered notions of what modernism could look like in the home; she also chose freely from a number of historical references in her design of

included the establishment of an organized body with standards for membership, which began with the American Institute of Interior Decorators (later the American Institute of Decorators) in 1931 and the National Society of Interior Designers in 1957, and accreditation through groups like the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research, which started in 1970.<sup>9</sup> These attempts functioned to both legitimize and police amateur home decorating, a “middle-class ritual” of women throughout the nineteenth century that was being regulated by the emerging modernist discourse on the interior.<sup>10</sup> Another important aspect of the transition to professionalization in interior design had to do with naming, which involved a self-conscious shift away from the use of “decorator” and toward the official designation “designer”—for instance, in 1961, the American Institute of Decorators changed its name to the American Institute of Interior Designers.<sup>11</sup>

Scholarship on the professional life of Florence Knoll shows that the architecturally-trained designer—who labeled herself both “architect” and “interior designer,” rather

---

feminine spaces that Sparke identifies as a sort of proto-postmodernism. Penny Sparke, *Elsie De Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> By 1938, one could become a Certified Interior Designer in Canada, but the first attempts to create a licensing program in the U.S. occurred in 1951. True licensing did not occur until 1982 when Alabama passed the “Interior Design Title Act.” Clive Edwards, *Interior Design: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Berg Publishers, 2010), 59.

<sup>10</sup> Viviana Narotzky, “Dream Homes and DIY: Television, New Media and the Domestic Makeover,” in *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant (London and New York: V&A Publications, 2006), 259.

<sup>11</sup> The splintering of the National Society of Interior Designers from the American Institute of Decorators in 1957 and the process of accreditation through the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research in 1970 were both critical to this movement. Bobbye Tigerman, “‘I Am Not a Decorator’: Florence Knoll, the Knoll Planning Unit and the Making of the Modern Office,” *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 63. Edwards, *Interior Design*, 59.

than the less-professional sounding “decorator”—was instrumental in disrupting the supposedly strict boundaries between architecture and interior design.<sup>12</sup> This boundary, although overlapping in many practical ways, remains contested and highly gendered to this day, with interior design continuing to occupy a “marginal place within the cultural hierarchy, as a feminized sphere of activity, playing a secondary role in relation to architecture.”<sup>13</sup> Although a number of similarities exist between professional organizing and interior design, the most significant is this interplay between professional and amateur as it relates to gender: whether as a professional occupation or part of the “normal” routines of housekeeping, contemporary organizing of the domestic interior is overwhelmingly the domain of women.<sup>14</sup>

As the following section will show, the history of interior design overlaps with the professionalization of organizers in a few key areas; as a result, the stakes of professionalization are similar in both fields. Although the organizers in this chapter explained their professional start as something that felt “natural” to them, they also emphasized their “skill,” which sets them apart from amateurs. In organizing, as in interior designing, being part of a professional body lends the field legitimacy among peers and credibility with clients, especially with domestic-related work that might easily be considered amateur. Certification—in this case through an NAPO affiliate, the Board

---

<sup>12</sup> Tigerman, “‘I Am Not a Decorator’,” 61.

<sup>13</sup> Lees-Maffei, “Introduction,” 7.

<sup>14</sup> Of the 35 members of the Austin, TX chapter of NAPO, only two are men. The vast majority of organizers listed in the directory of the national NAPO website were women (not all members are listed on the website directory, so an exact count is not possible; repeated emails to the NAPO headquarters to request more information on the group were not answered).

of Certified Professional Organizers—adds another layer to the legitimizing potential of professional membership for organizers. In both fields, the way a professional is named has significance. Much like the distinction between “decorator” and “designer,” the designation of “professional organizer” is a deliberate way to set boundaries around the type of work being performed and around the demeanor and presentation of the person performing the work. Unlike interior designers, however, professional organizers do not see themselves as a counterpoint to the practice of architecture and do not have to directly engage with the gendered dichotomy of architecture and interior design. The reason for this, and another important distinction in the comparison, is that professional organizers do not position themselves as designers.

Almost across the board, the organizers expressed their ability to organize as a “natural thing.”<sup>15</sup> Often their introduction to the field came as a logical extension of a skill-set they had already been exercising informally in their own lives for years. One professional organizer, Margaret Kelly, said that organizing is “like breathing to me.”<sup>16</sup> When asked how long she had been organizing, she responded, “my usual answer is that I’ve been doing it all my life, but officially as a business for about three years.” Similarly, when people ask Jennifer Lava how long she has been an organizer, she said she commonly replies, “I’m coming up on my 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary officially, but I always say I really was doing it my whole life.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, this assumption is so prevalent that one organizer, Susan Hale, felt it necessary to point out that she believes her own history of

---

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 20, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 18, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.



being extremely unorganized makes her stand out among her colleagues. As a “creative, divergent” thinker, she had to consciously teach herself to become organized, which is why she believes she is able to help so many other people learn the same skills.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the assumed norm among the mostly female organizers is that organizing is usually an in-born talent seems to point to an acceptance of gendered expectations about domestic ability, another similarity to interior design at its inception. None of these women, however, attributed their ability to organize to their gender. In fact, many of the organizers either stated outright or implied through conversation that the majority of their *clients* were also women. Sometimes the organizers would state this directly—one organizer said the majority of her clients were professional women between the ages of 45 and 70—but most often they would relate their stories about clients, either hypothetical or real, using feminine pronouns.<sup>19</sup> Many times this came up when discussing the ways that the organizers encounter families of their clients (the families are always identified as husbands or sometimes children) who are not supportive of the organization process (“you know, the wife who has been left to figure out all of this and the husband is off at work and he’s not—he wants it done, but he’s not going to help”).<sup>20</sup> With both the organized and the disorganized predominantly women, it is too

---

<sup>18</sup> Susan Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer, August 1, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Catharine Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 12, 2012. Several organizers hinted at a dynamic in which a wife was seeking the help of an organizer behind her husband’s back. Amy Von Andrian said, “I’ve had several situations where I’ve gone in, and the woman has hired me, and the husband finds out and is upset. Because she’s spending money on doing this, so it makes her look weak, like she can’t do it on her own, so then she’s got guilt. Or they just don’t see a need for it. And if you’ve

simple to assert that more women than men are organizers because they are culturally shaped to be good at maintaining order in the home. Rather, it is more accurate to say that women are culturally encouraged to pay attention to and take responsibility for all aspects of home maintenance, which includes honing the skills of home organization when they already exist and seeking help when they are missing.

When Susan Hale mentioned her own history of being disorganized, she described the ability to become organized as a tangible, learnable skill (albeit one that otherwise came naturally to many people): “as a result [of being un-organized,] as I honed those skills and practiced them, people began to notice that and say, ‘oh, well can you help me get organized,’ and I was like, ‘sure!’ and I began to get paid referrals, which just astounded me, I couldn’t believe that.”<sup>21</sup> This tension—between natural ability/learned skill, professional/amateur, and paid work/hobby activity—runs throughout the organizers’ thinking about their own work. As Hale identified being organized as a teachable skill, she also expressed a sense of being “astounded”—feeling “a little weird that someone would want to pay me for something that I taught myself.”<sup>22</sup> In this, she is not alone. Many of the organizers related their own surprise upon learning that organizing could be a paid occupation. Catharine Murphy said that she initially had no idea such a service even existed; in her words, “I thought it was a joke; I mean, who needs an organizer?”<sup>23</sup> Margaret Kelly similarly expressed surprise, recalling that she first thought,

---

got reluctance from the husband or the children, you’re spinning your wheels.” Amy Von Andrian, Interview with a Professional Organizer, August 1, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

“no one is ever going to pay me for that—but they do!”<sup>24</sup> Surprise about organizing being a “real” job underscores feelings of doubt about whether organizing skills are indeed professional. If, after all, these professional organizers were once “astounded” by the existence of the field, then perhaps their clients also feel the same way.

Coupled with the cultural expectation that home organization should be part of the daily chores taken up by women in the home, doubt or surprise over the professional status of organizing might be what fuels the desire to join and promote a professional group like NAPO. For instance, the former president of NAPO, Standolyn Robertson, told *The Huffington Post* that when she related her desire to become a professional organizer to her high school guidance counselor, the counselor replied, “so you want to be a wife?”<sup>25</sup> With publications like *Real Simple* pushing toward an understanding of organizing as women’s work, membership in NAPO draws a clear boundary around labor that might otherwise be dismissed as merely part of one’s daily list of chores.

Considering, as well, the somewhat precarious boundary between organizing and housework—professional organizers may spend time doing the physical cleaning out of pantries or closets—labeling themselves “professional” and joining NAPO also functions to distance the field from paid domestic work, which is part of a devalued shadow

---

<sup>24</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer. Lorie Marrero is one of the few who did not seem surprised that organizing could be a career. Although she had a corporate career for a few years before starting her business, *The Clutter Diet*, Marrero says that she always knew that this kind of work existed. In fact, she described reading *Getting Organized*, by Stephanie Winston at the age of ten. For the most part, however, the organizers’ disbelief in the field seems to indicate an understanding that the field is still relatively obscure. Marrero, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Vanderkam, “Core Competency Mom Part 2: Life, Uncluttered,” May 29, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-vanderkam/core-competency-mom-part\\_b\\_104001.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-vanderkam/core-competency-mom-part_b_104001.html).

economy occupied mainly by women of color. Even if the tasks are the same, calling themselves a professional organizer is an attempt to claim more cultural authority, although the potential similarity of tasks suggests more studies of domestic work might yield equally interesting findings about the nature of their organization-related skill-set. NAPO, then, makes professional organizing a “real” job as much for those within the profession as for outsiders. In fact, for some organizers, the discovery of the existence of professional organizing came simultaneously with learning about the existence of NAPO. For example, Jennifer Lava explained that she immediately joined NAPO once she “started investigating that [organizing] was a real career.”<sup>26</sup> As we will see, NAPO is a critical element of the professionalization process, to the extent that membership is viewed as synonymous with being a professional organizer.

NAPO is fundamental to the professional lives of the organizers in this study, but it is also defining of the field at large because of its attempt to legitimize the profession through advocacy, standards and certification. Susan Hale explained that membership in NAPO gave “me more confidence in my ability to do my job, for me to market myself, for me to be able to say, this is me—it’s legitimate, it’s what I do.”<sup>27</sup> As the main professional body for organizers in the U.S., NAPO helps to construct many aspects of professionalization, including the establishment of standards and a code of ethics, networking, gate keeping, and educational programs and assessment through certification. Founded in 1985, NAPO’s mission is to “recognize the value of organizing”

---

<sup>26</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>27</sup> Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

and “develop, lead and promote professional organizers and the organizing industry.”<sup>28</sup> The group started a national conference in 1987 to provide seminars, education, and networking on a national level. By the early 2000s, NAPO became recognizable to the public as part of the rising general interest in home organizing; in 2003, NAPO was featured on the television shows *Oprah*, *Dr. Phil*, HGTV’s *Mission Organized*, and TLC’s *Clean Sweep*.<sup>29</sup> NAPO members began to push for certification in 1997 by performing a “job task analysis” to determine boundaries and standards of the profession.<sup>30</sup> The majority of NAPO members are college-educated (79%) and former professionals (62%); 68% of them have been working as professional organizers for over three years, and 80% have made organizing their primary career.<sup>31</sup> In 2001, NAPO started an education program to give newcomers an introduction to the industry, and a program to become a Certified Professional Organizer (CPO) was ultimately launched in 2007 under the auspices of a NAPO affiliate called the Board of Certification for

---

<sup>28</sup> “About NAPO,” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®, accessed January 3, 2013, <http://www.napo.net/who/>.

<sup>29</sup> “NAPO’s Fun Facts,” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®, accessed January 3, 2013, [http://www.napo.net/who/history/fun\\_facts.aspx](http://www.napo.net/who/history/fun_facts.aspx).

<sup>30</sup> During a meeting of the Austin Chapter of NAPO, which I attended and documented, Barry Izsak related the history of NAPO, and said that although the founding members wanted to create a certification program in 1997, they ultimately decided they were not ready because the profession was not yet mature enough. He also hinted that board members were afraid the organization would lose money trying to launch a certification program. Meeting of the Austin Chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, February 11, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> 62% of NAPO members worked in management, business, education, or sales before becoming professional organizers. “Organizer Statistics,” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®, accessed January 3, 2013, [http://www.napo.net/our\\_profession/statistics.aspx](http://www.napo.net/our_profession/statistics.aspx).

Professional Organizers (BCPO).<sup>32</sup> A BCPO media kit (itself a sign of the cultural interest in the topic), justified certification in terms of both personal and marketing gains: by becoming a CPO, organizers can “confirm your dedication to the professional organizing industry,” as well as “gain recognition from clients, peers, employers, employees, coworkers, the industry, media, publishers, and companies looking for spokespeople.”<sup>33</sup> Of the 4200 organizers who currently belong to NAPO, only 275 organizers have become CPOs.

NAPO certainly benefits from and participates in the uptick of cultural interest in home organization, producing discourse about the value of organization similar to what we see in the other case studies of this dissertation. The fact that few of the professional organizers knew about the field until they found out about NAPO is telling; clearly NAPO is carving out space within the general landscape of interest in the topic to market a new profession. Using similar terms as the rest of the case studies, the NAPO website explains the genesis of the contemporary need for home organization in terms of facilitating the rising profession of organizers:

Facing more and more demands with less and less free time, consumers are struggling to manage their days and conquer the clutter and chaos building up in their lives. Increasingly, they are turning to professional organizers for help. With

---

<sup>32</sup> Although NAPO provides classes to its members, becoming a CPO does not require the completion of NAPO coursework. In order to become a CPO, an organizer has to document 1500 hours of paid work in a professional organizer role and pass a formal examination. Members can substitute hours worked with “virtual organizing,” speaking engagements, writing about professional organizing, or serving on the board of directors, among other activities. The Board of Certification for Professional Organizers, *Candidate Handbook for the Certified Professional Organizer Credential* (The Board of Certification for Professional Organizers, March 2011).

<sup>33</sup> “BCPO® Media Kit” (Board of Certified Professional Organizers®, n.d.).

this growing consumer demand, there are more business opportunities for professional organizers than ever before.<sup>34</sup>

Although some professional organizers began practicing before the inception of NAPO and the boom of consumer interest in the practice, clearly the current popularity and market value of home organizing has enabled the growth of profession. This popularity has in turn spurred the creation of an ever-broadening array of niche professional groups.<sup>35</sup> For instance, NAPO is part of an affiliated network of groups that might, without proper clarification, seem to be of the same general stripe, such as the National Association of Senior Move Managers, the Association of Personal Photo Organizers, the International Special Events Society, and the International Association of Home Staging Professionals. Home organization's cultural moment encourages not only more consumers of organization products, but also entire fields of production and labor around newly charted professional territory.

In addition to the marketing of various organization-related professions, NAPO's numerous corporate partners, such as Post-it, Pendaflex, Rubbermaid, Gladiator Garage Works (the Whirlpool Corporation), and Smead, help to place it within the trend to treat

---

<sup>34</sup> "Our Profession," *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®, accessed January 3, 2013, [http://www.napo.net/our\\_profession/](http://www.napo.net/our_profession/).

<sup>35</sup> The trend to organize the organizers has slowly built over the decade, with NAPO and BCPO teaming with affiliate groups in other specialties to form an international professional body called the International Federation of Professional Organizing Associations (IFPOA). International groups include the Professional Organizers in Canada (POC), the Australasian Association of Professional Organisers (AAPO), and the Nederlandse Beroepsvereniging van Professional Organizers (NBPO), which joined with NAPO and ICD (formerly the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization, or NSGCD) to form the International Federation of Professional Organizing Associations (IFPOA).

disorganization with consumption, a process we have seen throughout this dissertation. At the annual NAPO conference and expo, various companies exhibit their products and businesses for attendees; Lorie Marrero, an organizer interviewed in this chapter, explained that the expo is a good opportunity for professional organizers who have become spokespeople, like herself, to network with various companies and keep an eye on what new products have come out.<sup>36</sup> Marrero's move into spokesperson work is not uncommon for nationally recognized professional organizers, as Chapter Four details. One of the more well-known professional organizers in Austin because of her book, *The Clutter Diet*, Marrero endorses a range of products on her website, including Simple Division Garment Organizers, Space Scaping Kitchen Organizing Systems, various planners, and, of course, products relating to her own business, such as The Clutter Diet Timer, The Clutter Diet "Improve Your Move" Pack, and The Clutter Diet *Home Office Rules of Thumb: A Handy Guide to Organizing Your Time, Information, and Workspace*. As we saw in Chapter Four, Marrero's cross-over work shows how professional organizers brand their own expertise into products to be consumed. Not all of the organizers interviewed in this chapter take the same approach to marketing, however. Catharine Murphy said marketing goes against her personal preferences for running a business and is the hardest part about being an organizer. Most new businesses, she said, "bombard you with 'my book my book my book' or whatever it is they're selling"; currently, she said, she is "still trying to figure out what works without being

---

<sup>36</sup> Marrero, Interview with a Professional Organizer.



obnoxious.”<sup>37</sup> Though Murphy does participate in marketing and branding her business through networking events and advertising, her feelings on the subject illustrate how professional organizers, by virtue of owning their own businesses, are able to adopt the standards of the industry to varying degrees based on their own comfort level, picking and choosing aspects of the profession they wish to develop or leave behind.

While NAPO should be read alongside other case studies for its cultivation of professional organization into a marketable product, the organizers interviewed in this chapter argue that NAPO provides significant tangible benefits for small organization-business owners as well. One of these is the provision of a community with whom to network and share professional resources both on the local and national level. Jennifer Lava explained that as “solopreneurs,” professional organizers lacked a “water cooler” around which to build community; monthly local chapter meetings of NAPO provide a network for information sharing and general camaraderie that most of the organizers felt was a prime benefit of the group.<sup>38</sup> To Lava, the advantage of the group is enormous—she credited NAPO entirely for her ability to operate an organizing business.<sup>39</sup> Another tangible benefit is education—NAPO provides education through mostly web-based

---

<sup>37</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>38</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>39</sup> Lorie Marrero also cites the annual conference as one of the most valuable aspects of NAPO, explaining that local businesses can get trapped in a “bubble” unless proprietors are able to network with peers on a national level. At a NAPO conference in 2005, Marrero and a few others started a sub-group called Leading Edge Organizers (LEO) to compare notes on issues around being incorporated, having employees, and expanding their business. Marrero was one of the first members of NAPO to employ other organizers; in 2005, she and several other national NAPO members started a sub-group for organizers with employees to compare notes and learn from others’ experiences. Marrero, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

courses that range from marketing and business-related topics, such as “Starting an Organizing Business” and “The Power of Multiple Income Streams and Other Business Model Options,” to more intangible topics reminiscent of de-cluttering self-help literature, like “Eliminating Excess” and “Sticky Issues.”<sup>40</sup> Most of the professional organizers interviewed here commented on the benefit of classes that focused primarily on operating a business, rather than interpersonal or client-relationship skills.<sup>41</sup> Catharine Murphy, who has taken four or five NAPO courses, said that even though she managed industry projects in her previous career as an engineer, the project management, business and ethics courses she took through NAPO were helpful when working through an organizing project with a client.<sup>42</sup>

While there are certainly tangible benefits to becoming a professional organizer, the intangible benefits of credibility—whether through certification or simply membership—seem to far outweigh what is being offered through classes, networking and trade shows. Two anecdotes relate the organizers’ feeling about the credibility of professional membership by explaining the difference between members themselves and non-members. To Catherine Murphy, a professional organizer should join NAPO because

---

<sup>40</sup> “Professional Organizer Curriculum,” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®, accessed January 3, 2013, [http://www.napo.net/our\\_profession/education/curriculum.aspx#none](http://www.napo.net/our_profession/education/curriculum.aspx#none).

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Lava elaborated this point in particular. Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer. Susan Hale says the NAPO focus on business curriculum is the reason she has dual membership in NAPO and the Institute for Challenging Disorganization (ICD), a group that trains and certifies organizers who work with hoarders (what the group classifies as the “chronically disorganized”). Hale prefers the ICD’s instruction on how to work with clients versus NAPO’s focus on business development. Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

it shows they take their business seriously—she related a story about meeting a woman who called herself an organizer but who was not a member of NAPO and therefore showed a lack of dedication to furthering her professional persona through education, meeting attendance or dues paying. Murphy said she was unsurprised when she found out the woman quickly turned to another profession. Similarly, even though Amy Von Andrian has not received her CPO certification (she feels she is too advanced in her career to start the process), she defended its merits because it demonstrated seriousness of purpose: “if you’re certified, it means you’ve gone through all the classes, you’ve shown you’re a professional. You’re not just a girl around the corner that has helped her friend do it and has just decided to go out and help other people.” The figure of the “girl around the corner” stands in for an amateur organizer; in both of these stories, professionalism is pitted against the casual female helper with neither a specifically developed skill-set nor a dedication to long-term career building.<sup>43</sup>

Possibly because they were all in NAPO, the organizers stressed the importance of adhering to professional standards in order to be set apart from amateurs, a familiar issue in other female-dominated design fields as well.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most basic way that NAPO has drawn attention to professional organizing is simply by naming the profession. Naming themselves “professional” is another method for organizers to put

---

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Kelly defined a professional organizer as someone who has taken the time to seek education, rather than someone who “considers this a hobby more than a job or career.” Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>44</sup> The role of the amateur always needs to be considered in design history, as an exclusion of all but “professional” designers yields an uneven and unproductive range of scholarship by ignoring not only production within the domestic interior, but also craft indigenous and DIY design. Lees-Maffei, “Introduction,” 4.

some space between themselves and amateurs. Several of the organizers mentioned recent discussions within NAPO to make affiliation with the group required of anyone who wants to call themselves a professional organizer (one organizer described it as the difference between being a realtor and a real estate agent, though did not know quite how NAPO would enforce the rule).<sup>45</sup> Lorie Marrero made the importance of naming explicit: “it is true that in this industry you can print business cards that say you’re a professional organizer tomorrow and nobody will argue with you, but now we have certification so that shows that you have stamina in the business and that you have a certain number of work hours under your belt, certain education under your belt and that you can pass an exam written by your peers.”<sup>46</sup> Because the work being performed is difficult to categorize, and so often included in the “normal” duties of housekeeping, simply articulating the skills involved in organizing is not enough to prove one’s professionalism—according to Lorie Marrero, “being able to organize, and having a successful organizing business are quite different.”<sup>47</sup> Marrero said she has seen a “huge problem” in the organizing industry: “people love to organize, but they don’t know how to run a business. To me, a successful professional organizer is someone who first knows how to run a business.” For the professional organizers interviewed here, the main distinction between the professional and amateur is not only the ability to run a successful

---

<sup>45</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>46</sup> Marrero, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>47</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

business, but also the ability to “act in a business-like manner.”<sup>48</sup> Naming the profession claims credibility, education, and seriousness of intent.

NAPO’s legitimizing function and its ability to firm up the boundary between professional organizing skills and those easily attained by the layperson is especially important in light of a fairly robust economy of organization-related DIY materials.<sup>49</sup> In this, The Container Store is not the only game in town. As general interest in organization and closet design has grown, big-box stores like Lowes and The Home Depot have not only expanded their DIY offerings in store but have also developed a series of online planning tools.<sup>50</sup> Although the professional relationship between an organizer and client has the potential to achieve something quite a bit more individual and specific than what one can get online at a big box store, clearly the popularity and proliferation of DIY organization materials lends the professional legitimacy of NAPO more weight.

---

<sup>48</sup> Barry Izsak similarly defined being a professional as someone who not only abides by the NAPO code of ethics, but also acts in a “business-like manner,” as opposed to “the hobbyist who might have printed up some business cards with a phone number.” Barry Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 25, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Another reason that NAPO members might feel it’s necessary to maintain a clear boundary between professional and amateur organizing is the relatively low-risk point of entry into practice. Financially, it is fairly easy for first-time business owners without large amounts of capital to become professional organizers; Catharine Murphy pointed out that entering the field when she was contemplating a career change was not as risky as other new business ventures, requiring not much more than a website and business cards to get started. Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>50</sup> The industry journal *CLOSETS* magazine seems to view such ventures warily, claiming DIY programs “lack planning and design know-how and installation skills” (*CLOSETS*’ online trade publication is called *Closets Daily*) Bill Esler, “State of the Industry: Independent Closet Firms,” *Closets Daily*, July 26, 2010, [http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/state\\_of\\_the\\_industry\\_independent\\_closet\\_firms\\_129228823.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/state_of_the_industry_independent_closet_firms_129228823.html).

Naming professional organizing is also a necessity because the job overlaps with a variety of other fields. Although she is a member of NAPO, Amy Von Andrian, owner of AVA Designs, identified herself primarily as a professional stager—someone who helps arrange and design interiors for homes going on the market to increase the likelihood of sale. Even though her work had always involved some amount of organizing—de-cluttering in order to make the house on the market look orderly and spacious, or to help her clients pack for their impending move— she did not know about the existence of NAPO, or that a chapter of the group existed in Austin, until she saw a business card of a local practitioner. She recalled thinking, “this is fabulous, it’s what I do anyways!” and joined the group soon after.<sup>51</sup> She said she now sees representation for stagers at the national NAPO conference and feels glad her particular specialty is being acknowledged and included. Clearly, professional organizing brushes up against numerous other types of work. Working one-on-one with a client, in a home or office, to sort, arrange and prioritize objects, projects, and workflow could fall into any number of potential titles: is this the work of a designer, a therapist, a “life coach,” a business consultant, or just another aspect of domestic work?

Although many argue for NAPO’s value in distinguishing professionals from amateur organizers for potential clients, it is not clear whether clients actually care. The distinction of NAPO membership seems to have as much to do with fostering a sense of self-recognition among practitioners as it does promoting recognition of the field to the public. In some instances, organizers were pragmatic about their clients’ knowledge or

---

<sup>51</sup> Von Andrian, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

recognition of NAPO. After explaining that the main benefit of NAPO is credibility, Margaret Kelly added, “I have to temper that with, most people don’t know what NAPO is and they couldn’t care less.”<sup>52</sup> A similar pragmatism held true with regard to certification. Of the professional organizers interviewed here, only two had received certification from NAPO. The reasons for this were diverse—for instance, Kelly explained that the lagging economy made 1500 hours of documented work a hard requirement to fill. Some expressed some skepticism about the merits of certification at all; Jennifer Lava said she knew certification was a move in the right direction for the field, but in practice her clients rarely asked about whether she was certified and did not seem to care about it. And while some organizers felt NAPO was critical to their understanding of being a professional, for others professionalization was simply about making a mental shift. Although Kelly defined a professional organizer as someone who has taken the time to seek education, rather than someone who “considers this a hobby more than a job or career,” she also made a somewhat more personal case for her own feelings of credibility in her career:

I had to take some time to get to the point where I realized that my skill is marketable and special and not everybody can do it. And so where at first some feel like, “I don’t know if I can really call myself a professional,” but I do now because I feel like I have enough feedback from clients that they really could not have done this without me.<sup>53</sup>

The path to professionalization, we can see, is not as black and white as simply joining a professional group like NAPO. Instead, it is a complex negotiation of factors, including

---

<sup>52</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

gendered expectations of work that is often considered “amateur,” judgments about what it means to act and present oneself professionally, the development of a group identity in relation to other professions or types of work, cultivation of business acumen, and, as we see above, a degree of personal confidence developed over time.

## **Skills**

Regardless of their title or membership in NAPO, it is clear that the organizers in this study have developed a set of skills that makes them successful at their jobs. Some of these skills have to do with spatial mapping and finding solutions to problems of workflow and process. These are, I argue, very similar to the “designerly ways of thinking” described by scholars and practitioners in Design Studies, yet professional organizers do not consider themselves designers. Other skills are harder to define and more therapeutic in nature, but generally refer to what the organizers in this chapter mean when they claim, like the authors of de-cluttering books, that disorganization is “not about the stuff.” The categories I’ve set up are intentionally problematic—not only are the organizer’s therapeutic skills somewhat nebulously defined, but in fact professional organizers practice both types of skills interchangeably when trying to best assess and solve problems for their clients in the home. Between these two, somewhat falsely divided, skill-sets is the ability to successfully interpret, assess and interact with clients based on their needs—interpersonal skills in some respects but also necessary ones for all client-based relationships, including those in the design professions.



Like the other organizers interviewed for this chapter, Barry Izsak remarked that not everyone who is good at organizing is a good professional organizer; however Izsak went a step further and made a distinction based on the specific skills that good organizers have developed based on their experience and expertise:

I was telling people who want to join the profession that just because you have an organized home, or perhaps even helped a friend organize a garage, does not mean that you're going to be able to deal with the myriad emotional or mental kind of issues that clients face that brought them to the point of needing to hire you.<sup>54</sup>

Izsak's answer here is telling because it directly states what the majority of the organizers end up saying less directly. When asked the difference between professional and amateur organizers, most of the organizers responded as above: many people can organize, but what makes a professional is the ability to run a business and conduct oneself in a professional manner. When asked other, less direct questions about the nature of their work, however, it was clear from the bulk of responses that there *are* specific skills organizers possess that others do not.

One of the best ways to determine what skills professional organizers believed they relied on most in their jobs was to ask why people become disorganized. Rather than see organization as an innate ability, or at least desire, that resides in all women (the subtext of *Real Simple*) or a matter of owning the right organizational products (like The Container Store) or a manifestation of personal responsibility (like *Clean House* and *Hoarders*), professional organizers framed organization as a skill to be learned. The lack of this skill could come from any number of sources. For instance, after explaining that

---

<sup>54</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

there are many factors to someone's disorganization, from poor executive function to cognitive disability to the structure of one's house, Susan Hale said simply, "another reason people aren't organized is because they were never taught the skill."<sup>55</sup> In articulating the skills that the disorganized lacked, the organizers were often able to point back to their own knowledge and expertise. When Catharine Murphy saw an unorganized home before she became a professional organizer, she thought the occupants were just messy people. "I didn't realize," she said, "that it was a skill that they hadn't learned, or that there was a life event that had disrupted their normal organizing."<sup>56</sup> Here, Murphy conceives of organizing very concretely as a skill that can be learned. "Anybody that's motivated and has some basic skills can take courses and with practice...can end up being a pretty good organizer," Murphy said. Clearly some ambiguity remains around the exclusivity—and, one could say, the relative attainability—of professional organizing. Thinking of organization as a skill that anyone can learn seems to contradict a stringent division between professional and amateur organizing, although, as above, the organizers interviewed in this chapter tend to downplay skill as a requisite for professional status in favor of professional conduct and business ability. The quickness with which one could learn organization skills is perhaps why professional organizers seek to distinguish themselves by jumping through the various hoops of professionalization.

While most of the professional organizers do not identify as designers, the work that they practice is remarkably similar to the work being performed by interior designers, interior architects, environmental designers, industrial designers and process

---

<sup>55</sup> Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

<sup>56</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

engineers: organizing professionals work closely with clients to creatively solve spatial problems within the home and office, but also generate solutions to less tangible problems, such as disruptions to ideal processes, workflow, and systems. Design at its essence, according to scholars of design history and design studies, is about human intervention into the natural world, or what Herbert Simon famously called the science of the artificial. John Heskett calls design “the human capacity to shape and make our environment in ways without precedent in nature, to serve our needs and give meaning to our lives.”<sup>57</sup> Specifically in the design of environments, design can provide “frameworks for activities, significantly affecting patterns of use, behavior, and expectations in home life, work, leisure and a range of commercial ventures.”<sup>58</sup> Comparing professional organizing to more traditional design professions is a useful jumping off point for understanding what sort of work professional organizers are doing in the home. The skills the organizers discussed in their interviews included project management, creative decision-making, being able to successfully identify the sometimes hidden root problem of disorganization, as well as spatial skills, such as the ability to map out and rearrange a home, and situate space and work processes into an ideal flow. These skills are comparable to the type of “design thinking” articulated by Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan in *Discovering Design*. Rather than look at the products of design, these authors look closely at the act of designing itself, arguing for the development of the discipline of “design thinking, not only as a body of professional practices and

---

<sup>57</sup> John Heskett, *Design: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

specialized techniques but as an art of communication.”<sup>59</sup> By opening up the practice of “design thinking” to other professions, we can see that many of the skills of professional organizers mirror the type of thinking and problem-solving performed by designers.

One organizer in particular typifies the way that organization solves problems around process and flow. Catharine Murphy, the owner of Passion for Order, described herself as “an engineer all over.”<sup>60</sup> Her previous job was working as a software quality and process improvement engineer at Freescale Semiconductor, a manufacturer of microcontrollers and microprocessors in Austin. When Murphy was laid off in 2009, she decided she wanted her next job to have a more flexible schedule in order to care for her aging parents; at the time, she did not seek out professional organizing because she did not know it was a paid occupation. She thought her education—she has a Bachelor’s degree in business and data processing and a Master’s degree in computer science—and her career history as a process engineer made being an organizer easier: “just because I have that kind of background, and it’s something that comes naturally.”<sup>61</sup> Complicating a traditional reading of organization as gendered domestic work, she described organizing as something that is both acquired through education, and therefore available to anyone who wants to learn, and also “natural,” although not because of her gender, but because of an education in fields that are, in fact, often coded masculine—even though the flexible schedule of professional organizing allowed her the ability to move into a more traditionally feminine care-taker role.

---

<sup>59</sup> Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii.

<sup>60</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Catherine Murphy's experience and expertise highlight how different on-the-ground organizing can look as compared to the highly gendered, often stringent, and self-help oriented approach of popular organizing texts. During her interview, Murphy made a point to say that, unlike many of her colleagues, she does not work with underlying psychological issues around object acquisition or storing. Instead, she framed her practice in terms of problem solving, a skill she honed from earlier work experiences. Organizing, she said, is "like solving a puzzle": "I'm not an emotional kind of person, I don't buy into all the emotional stuff that's going on, but I just come in, I'm very task focused, like, 'OK, how can we solve this problem?' And that's what I enjoy, solving the problem."<sup>62</sup> Because she sees her work primarily in terms of "processes and systems," Murphy de-emphasized the aesthetic aspect of her work as well—to her, "clutter" problems can be found in workflow disturbances, which often, though not always, manifest in physical form.<sup>63</sup>

When Murphy founded her business, she worked mostly on residential organizing, like closets, garages and a few pantries. Soon, though, she started seeing home offices and small businesses, which allowed her to engage in the sort of workflow and process organization she considers her specialty. One experience in particular highlights Murphy's emphasis on process. As an established professional organizer, she was referred to a job with a construction firm by a consultant who was working on strategic planning with the company. The consultant felt that she might be able to straighten up the construction firm's messy office space. Murphy immediately

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

understood the problem; it was not, as the consultant thought, just about the numerous construction drawings cluttering the space:

What I found was a huge amount of process problems. They didn't have any system for "this is where you make the drawing, this is where you store the drawing when you're not using it, this is where you store the drawing when you're finished with it, when the job's over." They didn't have that process for many things, so I went in and made a proposal and said, "I can fix many of these problems." And so I did, and I think it was very successful.<sup>64</sup>

While she noted that the immediate problem in the office was, in fact, clutter, since the workers were unable to tell which projects were active and where old jobs should go, she also was able to identify a larger problem of process that would incorporate all elements of the company's workflow, from hand drawings to completed documents. This solution was not determined via an aesthetic approach in which organizational products were added to the space:

If you just go in and say, "We're going to make some cubby holes for these drawings" that doesn't solve a "what do you do with the drawings at the end [problem]?" You've got to look through the entire process, and once you do that there's not going to be clutter because there's always some defined step that that drawing has to do next.<sup>65</sup>

Murphy's solution came from the ability to think through the entire workflow of the company, "not where to store the drawings so much, just the processes and systems thinking."<sup>66</sup> This story relates how similar professional organizing can be to other, more established design fields, and also how outsiders misconceive her ability as simply making cubby-holes. Murphy's experiences are not exclusive. Susan Hale explained that she also started out working in homes but has since transitioned to working in offices

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

where she helps businesses with “information flow, communication flow, even where people sit.”<sup>67</sup> Hale also occasionally develops standard operating procedures and job descriptions in order to eliminate the disorganization that arises when boundaries about job requirements are unclear.

Process and system design is not simply relegated to office organization, which would reiterate a gendered division of space—workplace as masculine, home as feminine—and an attendant gendered division of skills, with design a “masculine” skill and aesthetic or interpersonal skills conceived as “feminine.” True, office organization lends itself to an analysis of process design more quickly than does the domestic interior, but other organizers point out that disorganization in homes is often the result of similar “flow” problems (and, as we will see later, even those who are approaching organization from a design perspective require interpersonal skills when it comes to developing strong relationships with clients). When organizing a home, Barry Izsak asks clients “if their life is flowing the way they want it to flow?”<sup>68</sup> The concept of ideal flow within the home has a clear historical lineage—domestic advisors since Catharine Beecher have sought to arrange home interiors in ways more conducive to the work conducted within them. The domestic time and motion studies by Lillian Gilbreth following in the footsteps of Frederick Taylor in the 1910s were especially specific in this regard, charting the exact movements of domestic tasks photographically to suggest changes in the placement of

---

<sup>67</sup> Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

<sup>68</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

objects and movement of bodies for ideal workflow.<sup>69</sup> Where historical models for domestic workflow were prescriptive—perhaps understandably so, as the nature of widely published domestic advice is to provide the most applicable advice to a general audience—the workflow designed by professional organizers is specific to each problem and space they confront.

Devising a plan conducive to a client’s needs regarding space, objects, time and processes requires a type of “designer-ly” creativity that Nigel Cross, a design scholar, addresses in multiple texts about the nature of design ability.<sup>70</sup> In asking designers to explain how they work, he found several common traits. One is that they depend on creativity and intuition; another is “the recognition that problems and solutions in design are closely interwoven—that ‘the solution’ is not always a straightforward answer to ‘the problem.’”<sup>71</sup> Designers are able to put together a solution that works, but that does not

---

<sup>69</sup> For more on Lillian Gilbreth, see Jane Lancaster, *Making Time: Lillian Moller Gilbreth—A Life Beyond “Cheaper by the Dozen”* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004). For more on women and efficiency planning in the home, see Ellen Lupton, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination* (Cambridge, MA and New York: MIT List Visual Arts Center, distributed by Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> Nigel Cross, “Discovering Design Ability,” in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 107. He summarizes design process as follows: “designers produce novel, unexpected solutions; tolerate uncertainty, working with incomplete information; apply imagination and constructive forethought to practical problems; use drawings and other modeling media as means of problem solving.” See also Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007). Nigel Cross, *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Cross, “Discovering Design Ability,” 106.



seem obvious; in fact, reaching a solution might come about in a roundabout way because design problems often do not present all the necessary information for an easy solution.<sup>72</sup>

Creatively developing solutions to unspecific problems around domestic space and processes—both physical and work/time-related—is the mainstay of what professional organizers do. The skill of properly assessing a client’s disorganization means the having ability to identify problems that a client cannot necessarily see themselves. For this reason, professional organizers’ initial assessment of their clients’ clutter problem often happens within the home, “because sometimes what they describe and what they actually do can be different things.”<sup>73</sup> Barry Izsak framed this as an ability to see how to approach a large project and make decisions when clients feel overwhelmed: “They see the project as one big ‘Oh my god, I don’t know how to do this.’”<sup>74</sup> Having the expertise to then find the one best solution that also fits the clients’ needs is a particularly pressing issue when working with clients who have problems that revolve around disorganization, Izsak explains. These solutions are not usually straightforward; often the greatest skill a professional organizer has is the ability to break down the composite elements of a task and see the big picture when their clients can’t (“that’s why they hired us in the first place” he says.) In order to work with people who are overwhelmed by their space, organizers “need to understand them and their need and

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>73</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer. Margaret Kelly also likes to see the space, and in doing so ask questions about their daily routine and use of the room (“What’s your daily routine? How do you use this space every day? How would you like to use this space?”). Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>74</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

what they want enough to eliminate some of the solutions.”<sup>75</sup> As with “design thinking,” much of the creativity of organizing comes first in determining the nature of the problem.

The creativity required to develop solutions to disorganization also requires the skill of knowing how to make objects and processes work well in space, a fundamentally “designer-ly” ability. Jennifer Lava noticed she has the ability to “visualize the spaces going from messy to clean, knowing that something can fit into a space, being able to recognize and have that spatial relations ability—that not everyone has evidently [laughs].”<sup>76</sup> Of course, professional organizers have been hired in cases when clients have deemed themselves unable to solve the problem of their own clutter; not all consumers require this level of attention for their particular problem. Among a certain sub-group of consumers of home organization, however, professional organizers are able to deploy creative ability to come up with solutions that their clients cannot necessarily generate on their own.

Margaret Kelly’s experiences further illustrate the connection between design thinking and professional organizing, especially with regard to space. “I love being able to solve problems dealing with how people live in their home,” she explained.<sup>77</sup> Although Kelly does not call herself a designer, she described her skill as the ability to solve problems through the arrangement of space, which is consistent with the role of a designer in the home—so much so, in fact, that when pressed to describe what she does,

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>77</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

she responded with “storage design” or “space planning.”<sup>78</sup> Kelly said her most valuable skills as a professional organizer are her “spatial mapping abilities”: “I envision how it’s going to look better, work better, and then depending on the client’s lifestyle and how they live, I can customize it to them.”<sup>79</sup> Although many organizers will work on a client’s paper-filing or time-management, Kelly works only on “reconfiguring storage space” within the home, with an emphasis on “home design, traffic flow, [and] ergonomics.”<sup>80</sup> She described several scenarios in which she was able to successfully help clients use spaces such as garages and pantries to best augment their hobbies and activities. Kelly did not attribute her ability to organize successfully to any formal training, although she briefly attended architecture school, which speaks somewhat to her interests and abilities. Currently, Kelly does not consider herself practicing any form of interior architecture, insisting that architects are artists, and that she is not an artistic person (“I can’t paint, I can’t sculpt, I can’t do anything like that...I can’t envision a new type of airport, but I can look at a floor plan and see instantly how it can be better”).<sup>81</sup> Although she believes she is not traditionally creative, Kelly said that organizing fulfills her creative desire because it allows her to “create something out of nothing and visualize things that aren’t there and how it could be better.”<sup>82</sup> Kelly’s own description of her work references hierarchical boundaries within the design profession—elevating architecture to art, while

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

somewhat devaluing her own skill—while also demonstrating the cross-over skills that make her work applicable to a design context.

A comparison between NAPO and another professional group—the Association of Closet and Storage Professionals (ACSP)—highlights the difference between strictly “design”-oriented skills and those cultivated by professional organizers. The ACSP, a professional group for dedicated closet and storage experts, was founded in 2000 and maintains many ties with woodworking trade groups.<sup>83</sup> The varying qualifications for certification between the ACSP, where members become Registered, Certified, or Master Storage Designers, and NAPO/BCPO, where members become Certified Professional Organizers, highlight the perceived professional differences between professional organizers and closet and storage designers. Even the designation “designer” sets this field apart slightly from the status of “professional organizer” designated by NAPO (it seems likely that this distinction is a legacy of the woodworking and trade history behind ACSP).<sup>84</sup> ACSP certification at the Certified and Master Storage Designer level requires

---

<sup>83</sup> The ACSP has three “tiers” of degrees, each involving a range of experience and testing and/or portfolio review—Registered Storage Designer (1-2 years of experience), Certified Storage Designer (3-7 years of experience), and Master Storage Designer (over 10 years of experience). “ACSP Launches Designer Certification Program,” *Closets Daily*, February 9, 2011, [http://www.closetsdaily.com/closet-news/closets-industry-news/acsp\\_launches\\_designer\\_certification\\_program\\_129230458.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/closet-news/closets-industry-news/acsp_launches_designer_certification_program_129230458.html).

<sup>84</sup> As with becoming a CPO, being a Certified/Master Storage Designer is not a prerequisite for working in this field (there are currently only nine Certified Storage Designers), although existence of such programs shows the degree to which certification is integral to the presentation of professionalism in these industries. The relatively small number of Certified Storage Designers might have to do with the popularity of closet franchise businesses—versus professional organizers, who for the most part operate their own small businesses. Because employees of franchises operate under the umbrella of the parent company—often with training provided by the employer—the marketing and educational benefits of a trade organization are less important. Unaffiliated practitioners

a portfolio review, a practice that aligns it more with practices of architecture and interior design than NAPO, which is more diffuse in its aims and outcomes.<sup>85</sup> Sample ACSP portfolios for potential certification-seekers model the case studies required for the ACSP exam. These include a textual “project overview,” with the main “problem” and “solution” defined in design terms, as physical problems in the space that require creative design solutions to resolve.<sup>86</sup> Drawings, floor plans and photos complete the portfolio submission. Emphasis here is on the creation of spatial solutions within an existing architectural setting.<sup>87</sup> CPO certification, on the other hand, is based more on interpersonal and experience-based skills. The CPO exam consists of topics that, according to the BCPO website, “empirically define the necessary competencies for the successful practice of organizing.”<sup>88</sup> 25% of the test is on organization “fundamentals,” which include such widely varied and sometimes nebulous skills as “sorting and

---

stand to gain the most from inclusion in the ASCP; for instance, once officially recognized in the group a closet designer is “licensed” to use the ACSP logo on their marketing material to distinguish them from competitors. In addition to not requiring professional certification for their employees, franchises are known in the closet and storage industry to eschew the annual ACSP Closets and Home Organization Expo, demonstrating again how professionalization exists mainly to benefit sole proprietors and independent business owners. Bill Esler, “First Closet Professionals Are Certified,” *Closets Daily*, February 16, 2012, <http://www.closetsdaily.com/closet-news/closets-industry-news/First-Closet-Professionals-Are-Certified-139490953.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Association of Closet and Storage Professionals, “ACSP Designer Certification Program Details and Requirements,” 2011, <http://www.closets.org/certify/>.

<sup>86</sup> Association of Closet and Storage Professionals, “ACSP Case Study Example #1,” 2011, <http://www.closets.org/certify/samples.cfm>.

<sup>87</sup> In one case study, problems included working around window dormers and angled ceilings; the proposed solution was a sloped cabinet top to accommodate a double row of hangers along one wall. Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> “Examination Content (for the CPO Examination),” *The Board of Certification for Professional Organizers*, September 2010, <http://certifiedprofessionalorganizers.org/examination-content.php>.

categorizing,” “purging and letting go,” “consolidating and containing,” “decision-making,” “process and workflow (sequential order),” “prioritizing,” and “time management strategies.” Each of these skills is listed equally with “space design and planning.” Five percent of the exam covers legal and ethical considerations, and certification requires adherence to the BCPO Code of Ethics of Certified Professional Organizers, an aspect of professionalization that closely aligns CPO certification to that in fields such as medicine and the law.

Clearly, the boundary between designing and organizing is not particularly solid. An interview with Misty Rodriguez, a design consultant at California Closets, demonstrates how practitioners articulate subtle distinctions between closet designers and professional organizers. Rodriguez, who is not a member of ACSP but received internal training before she transitioned from “customer liaison” to design consultant at California Closets, sees her professional role as more closely aligned with traditional design practices than with the selection and sorting of objects, which she identifies as the domain of a professional organizer.<sup>89</sup> For Rodriguez, there is a clear distinction between

---

<sup>89</sup> A number of the most well-known closet services operate as franchises, a system of semi-independent businesses that operate under a larger corporate umbrella that provides marketing and occasionally manufacturing. For example, California Closets has long been running on the franchise model. As opposed to a sole proprietorship, franchises require that the business owner start with a fair amount of capital. California Closets recommends that franchisees have a minimum financial net worth of \$500,000 and at least one partner with substantial business operations experience in order to run a franchise of the company. Other companies have different levels of entry for business owners—Classy Closets, also founded in the early 1980s, requires as little as \$10,000 to start a franchise in certain areas. Often the cost of franchising depends on both the area (for instance, Classy Closet locales in more expensive areas require up to \$189,000 to start up) and manufacturing access—some franchises have the option to manufacture on site, while others need only to maintain a store front and can depend on the parent

the “editing” skills of a personal organizer, and her own conception of her role as a creative figure. In her terms, the primary difference between the two professions seemed to be about the assessment of objects within a closet. She noted that she never tells a client to get rid of anything (“I don’t typically ask them to get rid of anything, I just try my hardest to make space for everything”). Instead, she lets her client know how much “inventory”—her term for clothes and belongings—they currently have and, with her design, how much they will be able to keep. If a client has too many belongings, she suggests they hire a personal organizer to help them divest themselves of their unwanted possessions. She is currently an “industry partner” with NAPO and so has connections with local professional organizers whom she can recommend to clients who need help “editing”; this association also helps her to generate new work, as she is often

---

company to provide materials and fabrication. Closet by Design, for instance, a company founded in California in 1982, requires \$280,000 to start a franchise if the location will be manufacturing their own product; non-manufacturing franchises can start up at \$125,000. Responsible for their own success, franchises find a number of ways to weather economic ups and downs independently from their corporate franchiser—some report that they’ve changed their pay system to commission-based fees, effectively transferring the risk of low sales onto employees, while others have ceased manufacturing their own product and started outsourcing. As a result, closet companies exist somewhere between the one-on-one service provider model of professional organizers, and larger organization retail venues—closet franchises often provide an individualized design service, but also follow through with the provision of materials and installation for a project. Jo-Ann Kaiser, “State of the Industry: The Franchise Sector,” *Closets Daily*, January 22, 2010. Rodriguez’s expertise comes from her knowledge of the type of materials and solutions available through the California Closets product line—she described solutions such as jewelry drawers, double hanging rods, shoe racks and valet rods, as well as the varying types of material used, their price point and the general aesthetic created by each. Nonetheless, she framed her expertise in such a way that went beyond marketing for the California Closet product; she believes her skill lies in the ability to identify where space is wasted and to see the best way to create efficient, functional spaces in the home when her clients cannot.

recommended by professional organizers who ask her “to create space for what’s left over” after they have helped de-clutter a space.

The differences between the two jobs, however, tend to fall away when one looks at the entire scope of what is being done in the home. On the one hand, Rodriguez’s distinction seems to be about engaging with the stuff: professional organizers get in the closet and go through each item with a client. But Rodriguez also engages with material culture in the home; she said her process consists of measuring her clients’ clothing and shoes for hanging space, counting their purses and belts to determine what needs have to be met, and then looking for ways to find a spacious “home” for all of their belongings. Furthermore, Rodriguez characterized her skills as being able to create an interior space unique to her client’s needs. First, she identifies a problem—clients come to her with the fundamental problem of having a “space that’s not working,” which she tries to more fully understand by asking deliberate questions about habits, needs, and goals for the space; then she generates a solution based on what she learns. As we have seen, many professional organizers see themselves engaging in the exact same process, with the slight difference that Rodriguez positions her work within the context of the desire to express creativity through fashion and self-presentation, much like the closet makeover authors discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Just as “there’s not just one way to organize a closet,” Rodriguez says that clients “have their own answers on how they like things to be stored or how they like to group their clothes.” She believes the desire to organize closets represents both the wide variety in fashion as well as the myriad types of activities her clients dress for. Misty Rodriguez, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 16, 2012.



Amy Von Andrian, who alternatively calls herself a stager, interior designer, organizer and “re-designer,” further illustrates professional organizers’ cross-over with a number of other home- and interior-related fields.<sup>91</sup> Working primarily as a stager, Von Andrian came to her job because her mother and grandmother were both interior designers. The staging work brushes up against the organizing work in terms of “pre-packing”; this is what she calls the de-cluttering and organizing that goes into making a client’s home look ready for sale. She feels comfortable calling herself a designer—“because I think designing incorporates other things too”—and feels that design and organizing are especially similar because “designing is part of organizing, you’re really designing an area for them and you’re designing elements of storage units that will make their life easier.”<sup>92</sup> The following explanation of how Von Andrian feels about her professional title illustrates what’s at stake in naming one’s profession, as well as the ways that professional organizers conceive of the importance of the more delicate aspects of the work they do in clients’ homes:

I always call myself a designer, but I won’t call myself an interior decorator, even though I’m probably qualified for that. Why not? Because it’s a stigma. People think that interior decorators come in there and, “they’re so almighty and they are going to make me get rid of everything I have and I have to buy everything brand new.” And so, from the very beginning when I started doing my design work and I was working with couples that had young children, and young mothers, I thought: there’s a need for someone to come in and help with accessories, help with color, paint a wall, take what they have and move it around. And that’s where re-design came in. And people still aren’t sure of the terminology, they don’t know what that necessarily means, but I feel that there is a great need for a re-designer. Or re-positioner, I may call myself, because we take what you have.

---

<sup>91</sup> Von Andrian, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

And if you have it, you must like it, and there's some things you don't like and you want to get rid of it.<sup>93</sup>

Here, Von Andrian touches on a number of issues: the assumed value judgments that reside in professional designations, the various overlapping boundaries of work involved in “re-positioning” someone’s furniture and belongings, and the relative non-import of a hard and fast classification for clients, who “still aren’t sure of the terminology.” Interestingly, her understanding of decorator/designer is flipped from what is understood in Lees-Maffei’s history of the field, though perhaps this is a function of seeing a “designer” as connoting function, practicality and helpfulness (which, in Von Andrian’s case, means using the furniture one already owns) versus “decorator,” which seems here to mean wealth, imposition and judgment when working in the home (or, making people buy more stuff they do not want or need just because it is fashionable). Von Andrian’s designer/decorator distinction points to her own desire to meet her clients’ needs in a way that is most helpful to them, not to her own standards.

### **Designer, consultant, coach, or therapist?**

Professional organizers’ pragmatic approach to organization results from the negotiations they engage in with clients in the home. Successfully navigating client relationships, especially within intimate spaces of the home, requires skills that include listening, helping to make decisions, working to a client’s specific needs, and understanding the sensitivity required of sifting through someone else’s belongings.

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Several of the organizers noted their position is often fraught because they work in spaces that contain the most personal belongings in the least presentable way. Margaret Kelly feels the intimacy of the process—both the idea of having a stranger look at your belongings, and the fact that these belongings often are within spaces hidden from public view in closets, garages, and drawers—is one of the most difficult parts of being a professional organizer:

You're inviting a total stranger to rifle through your underwear drawer and go through your paperwork. It's a very delicate, emotionally fraught profession. Some clients have tragedies in their past and there is still stuff around their house that is from that and they can't bring themselves to pick it up and put it somewhere else.<sup>94</sup>

She acknowledged that inviting a stranger into your house to see it at its worst put clients in a somewhat awkward position; nonetheless, she said, “I try to tell everybody not to straighten up when I come, because I really need to see what the problems are.” Intimacy, in most cases of domestic organizing, also means physical proximity. Most organizing happens with the client present, or at least with the client involved in much of the assessment, goal-setting, and de-cluttering. Often the organizers work directly with the client to sift through papers, make decisions about objects to keep or give away, or think through how to best use a space.<sup>95</sup> Kelly related a shift in her own practice towards

---

<sup>94</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>95</sup> Jennifer Lava described working with a client who made art out of found objects and garbage, which required picking through piles of objects to decide “what’s trash and what’s garbage?” Lava said it was difficult to figure out “what’s real trash and what’s the garbage she’s trying to make something with, cause you, know, space [is limited].” She described the process of determining trash a “negotiation”: “so it’s those negotiations of what do we keep and what’s inspirational, we can’t keep everything—or can we keep

working alongside her client—she used to work alone, but now she makes sure the client stays with her through much of the organizing process. The clients are “integral,” she says, “because they are the only ones who know how they really live, even if they’ve never articulated how they really live.”<sup>96</sup> She feels projects are more likely to be successful when the outcome reflects the way her clients live in and use their domestic space.

As a result of the intimacy inherent to home organization, most professional organizers seek to be measured and specific in their approach to the process of organizing a client. Jennifer Lava knows that working with a client means being aware that hyper-organization can be alienating and ultimately unhelpful; some of her clients “worry about being put in a box and being forced to be organized in a linear way, and they don’t necessarily think in a linear way.”<sup>97</sup> Organization in the real world can be messy and malleable. She says she tries to strike a balance between being organized and making the processes of daily life easier, “but without interfering with the part that you hold dear of being different, of being creative, of still being able to do your art or your craft or whatever it is.”<sup>98</sup> On a similar note, Margaret Kelly said that being a truly successful organizer means being able to recommend things, but not forcing a client to arrange their house in a certain way: “I don’t know that there’s anything specific to this profession

---

everything that’s inspirational? These challenges go on and on.” Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>96</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>97</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

besides being non-judgmental.”<sup>99</sup> Because organizing jobs are often based on personal recommendation and then taken on ad hoc—beginning with a small job and then moving on to further projects in the same home—it obviously behooves professional organizers not only to be non-judgmental, but to work toward an organizational solution that does not quickly fall apart under out-sized expectations.

Rather than see clutter as uniformly problematic, all of the professional organizers expressed in some form the belief that clutter and disorganization were only a problem if the client felt it was a problem. “If it’s not stressing them out, or if their space isn’t overcrowded—if they are not telling me it’s a problem, then I’m not going to nudge them, I’m going to let it go,” said Jennifer Lava.<sup>100</sup> This bears somewhat on when and why someone might seek out a professional organizer to begin with—most organizers explained that people come to them when they are in some sort of “pain” because their clutter has begun to negatively impact their lives.<sup>101</sup> “Pain,” then, describes a threshold of tolerance with clutter. The desire to understand the source of pain—the source of a particular clutter problem—reflects professional organizers’ cognizance that everybody’s tolerance of clutter is different, and so the need to “fix” clutter only really exists if they want to believe it is a problem in the first place. Most often this does not always have to do with how a space looks; Barry Izsak claims that very organized people hire him to help with specific aspects of their lives, like bill-paying or home office paperwork. He says there is a false notion that “our services are only for those who are grossly

---

<sup>99</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>100</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>101</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer. Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

disorganized and have clutter piled high in the garage and flowing out of the house, papers all over the desk and the floor.”<sup>102</sup> To Izsak, being organized means asking the question: “are they able to do the things they want to do in the time frame they want to do them and does the clutter have no negative impact on their life? Well then they’re organized.”<sup>103</sup> None of the professional organizers reflected a prescriptive or universal system for all of their disorganized clients.

In fact, the professional organizers expressed an almost unanimous sense that the outcome of organization need not look a specific way because “everyone’s vision of organized is not the same.”<sup>104</sup> Along these lines, Susan Hale remarked, “I had to redefine what it meant for me over the years to be organized.”<sup>105</sup> When she opened her business, she believed that organizing meant what she called “pretty-box organizing”—“it’s like what you’ll find in *Real Simple*, or like when you go to The Container Store.” She found that this expectation got in the way of solving the actual problems that result from disorganization; if her clients had worked to “pretty-box” organize in the past, they were often frustrated and unable to keep it up, even though they found the initial results beautiful. The singling out of “pretty-box” organizing highlights the tension between the “ideal” put forth by media and cultural perceptions and the reality of how homes are actually organized. Being organized “doesn’t have to look like *House Beautiful* all the

---

<sup>102</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>103</sup> Hale puts it more simply: “it’s being able to find what you need when you need it, and you know where it goes when you’re done.” Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

<sup>104</sup> Von Andrian, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>105</sup> Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

time,” said Catharine Murphy.<sup>106</sup> Certainly not every professional organizer deliberately eschews the kind of aspirational outcomes for organized interiors found in magazines and catalogs. Hale noted that many professional organizers still “pretty-box” organize their clients’ homes, but also personally dismissed the long-term viability of this strategy, mentioning that she has been called in by clients who were unsuccessful with these strategies in the past.

Popular cultural representations of organization tend to suggest a single outcome for the problem of disorganization—a perfectly uncluttered interior. By rejecting a single product, schedule, or clean-up as a solution, professional organizers also reject the idea that disorganization is caused by a single problem. When asked, the organizers were split on the reasons why their clients became disorganized in the first place. For the organizers who frame their work primarily in terms of space and process flow, disorganization was highly tangible, spatial and therefore fixable. For instance, when asked why people become disorganized, Margaret Kelly quickly responded with an answer that privileged the use and design of space: the fault was with home-builders, specifically the way that houses are designed without customizable options that allow home buyers to adjust storage to their needs. Such a response is a testament to Kelly’s belief that physical space determines one’s overall level of organization, rather than intangible issues such as sentimental attachment to objects or a “cluttered mind”—one of the common accusations of popular self-help books on organizing. Kelly recognized that her approach was not typical of all organizers: “a lot of organizers do more, I don’t want to say emotional,

---

<sup>106</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

but...they effect more intangible changes into the client. So they are coming in and talking to the client about, OK, why do you think you're having trouble get rid of this stuff, and let's talk about it and get to the root of that."<sup>107</sup> Kelly's conception of disorganization is very similar to that held by Catharine Murphy; she said that while some of her colleagues have a more psychological approach to the problem of fixing clutter, she believes in a physical, spatial solution: "people get to the thing in different ways, but I'm just presenting it as, you have all this clutter because you don't have a system for putting things away. That includes the storage, where you get stuff, where you put it when you're done."<sup>108</sup> Other organizers, however, noted that aspects of their job had to do with less tangible issues of disorganization. "The stuff is the symptom," said Susan Hale. "It's always working with what's between the ears and it's about working with a client on new skills and being a change agent for a client so they can make a new decision, learn a new behavior, and practice it."<sup>109</sup> Hale's alignment with the more therapeutic practices evinced by self-help literature on the subject simply speaks to the diversity that exists within this cohort—and, realistically, all cohorts—of professionals.<sup>110</sup> Her response also seemed informed by her dual membership in the Institute for

---

<sup>107</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>108</sup> Murphy, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>109</sup> Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.

<sup>110</sup> Even so, the organizers who prioritize the psychological issues behind disorganization are very clear that they do not provide therapy for their clients. Jennifer Lava makes a distinction between being "as compassionate as I can" when clients are having a hard time, but still acknowledging "I'm not a psychologist, psychiatrist or counselor." Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer. Susan Hale calls this a "fine line"—one that we might say is true of many successfully navigated professional relationships—but is very forthright about not handling mental health issues. "I do coaching," she says, "but I can't be their therapist." Hale, Interview With a Professional Organizer.



Challenging Disorganization (ICD), which informs her specialty work with the “chronically disorganized”—the ICD’s designation for those with hoarding behaviors. Sometimes the professional organizers acknowledged that disorganization is simply about a lack of motivation and so positioned their role as mediator or coach, what Barry Izsak called “that extra body working alongside you.”<sup>111</sup> Jennifer Lava explains that it is hard to organize on your own because often there is a “motivational road-block” rather than any physical impediment:

To me, I really think that the physical act of organizing something is not that hard. People kind of get it. OK, I need to clean out my closet, people really understand what that means, but there’s a reason they are not doing it. Just like it’s not hard to lace up your tennis shoes and go out and take a walk, but they are not taking a walk, so why do they have to hire a personal trainer, you know? So to me, it’s so much more about that motivation and accountability. And that’s what we really focus on.<sup>112</sup>

While Lava did not discount the use of books or television shows in helping consumers get more organized, she framed the need for a professional organizer as simply a personal preference for a little extra help.<sup>113</sup> In the range of the professional organizers’ conceptualization of the causes of disorganization—generated through their individual experiences working with clients—we see a distinction from the extraordinarily singular approach that defines other cultural representations of the topic.

---

<sup>111</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>112</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>113</sup> Lorie Marrero’s business, *The Clutter Diet*, functions in basically this way by extending a metaphor about getting organized and losing weight. She also describes the difference between hiring a professional organizer and using DIY methods as a matter of personal motivation: “yes you can hire a personal trainer, and work out with that person and have a different kind of experience and different type or results, or you can DIY your fitness and your diet and you know, read magazine articles and get a little advice here and there. Both can be very effective, it’s just what kind of person are you, what motivates you.” Marrero, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

While the organizers were quite specific in their responses to why their clients might be disorganized, when asked very global questions about why there was so much interest in home organization now and in this country, most of the organizers immediately responded by explaining that people seek organization because they have over-consumed. Further, they emphasized the connection not just between having too much stuff and being disorganized, but a systemic culture of consumerism that encourages acquisition through social pressure and the availability of inexpensive goods. What Lorie Marrero called the “rampant consumerism” of all first world countries, Barry Izsak described as being “consumer-holic” in the U.S. and Canada—he then tied this condition to being “bombarded on the airwaves and every type of media” to consume.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Jennifer Lava explained, “American society is so acquisitive, we’re being fed to buy so much stuff,” and, counter to the prevailing wisdom promoted by shows like *Clean House*, the problem lay not just with “shopaholics.” “Folks in general,” she said, “seem to buy too much stuff.”<sup>115</sup> Although they did not tie the phenomenon to large-scale economic changes of the late-twentieth century, both Margaret Kelly and Any Von Andrian pointed out that the availability of and access to cheap products—between them they mentioned Ross, Marshall’s, TJ Maxx and Tuesday Morning—creates a scenario in which consumers are able to buy far more than they have space for in their house.

Almost all of the case studies in this dissertation similarly reference consumption as a cause for clutter: this is essentially the entire message of messy-home television shows in Chapter One, albeit with the added subtext that the real failing is of personal, or

---

<sup>114</sup> Izsak, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

<sup>115</sup> Lava, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

even national, restraint; it is a point detailed in Chapter Two, with The Container Store's vague, ahistorical critique of domestic consumption; and it has come up in Chapter Four, in which self-help books' seeming rejection of material life relies on a similarly commodified Eastern "spirituality." In each of these cases, consumption is identified as the problem behind clutter, and organization industry is posited as the solution, but without any acknowledgment of the organization industry's contribution to the problem in the first place. What is striking about the responses of some of the professional organizers is their quickness to point back to the organization industry, as when Jennifer Lava explained that she felt "aspects of our industry are feeding into [over-consumption], too":

I think that now there are a lot of organizing products out there. I mean, I love The Container Store, and I love that you can go to Target and even CVS next door and buy some containers to organize. But there's almost too much of that, too. And now people think that will solve their problem and it's a little worrisome that you can buy so much of that and think it's going to solve your problem as well. And it's a little disturbing to me. I don't think that's quite out of control yet, but it's getting bad.<sup>116</sup>

This might seem ironic considering how the general interest in organizing has helped raise the profile of groups like NAPO, which in turn clearly legitimizes, advertises, and contextualizes the trade of professional organizing (none of the organizers pointed to NAPO or their own profession as benefiting from the culture of consumption around home organizing). To the professional organizers, their identification of a larger cultural ethos of over-consumption is not ironic, however, because they view their skills outside

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

of this equation.<sup>117</sup> Most of the organizers believe that their services actually discourage consumption by keeping clients from buying more than they need (or, rather, already have but cannot find). Hale, Lava, Kelly, and Von Andrian all brought up how in their experience organization helps counter over-consumption because “if you don’t know what you have and you can’t see [your things], you’re just going to buy more.”<sup>118</sup> To this end, Von Andrian, who argued “you don’t have to spend a lot of money on organizing,” sees her skill set as the ability to organize with the materials already in the home and identify solutions that do not require further consumption (“a lot of times they have different things that can be used in place of. I look at what they have, and they’ll say, ‘I never thought about that!’”). Von Andrian’s emphasis on using existing products, much like Catharine Murphy’s insistence that a few cubby-holes were not going to solve the process problem at the construction company, speaks to the ways professional organizers see their work as beyond simply recommending a product to solve the problem of clutter.

Of course, hiring an organizer is itself a form of consumption, albeit one that has somewhat more pragmatic outcomes as a client-negotiated service, rather than a product. In this, professional organizing is not completely outside of the system of consumption being described in this dissertation. To be sure, some professional organizers, as we have seen in Chapter Four, participate in the marketing of organizational products and

---

<sup>117</sup> Angela Wallace, the current president of NAPO, expressed the same skepticism of home organization retail to *The New York Times* in 2012: “I think [The Container Store has] given more options for solutions. And yet the average person buying stuff in there is just going to become more cluttered. I never take anything with me to a job. They already have enough boxes. My biggest tool is my brain.” Penelope Green, “Angela Wallace Organizes the Clutter Busters — Q&A,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2012.

<sup>118</sup> Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer.

encourage their clients to consume these products in the home. The nature of working within a space with a client, however, allows for a more cautious approach to the need for organizational products—as Lava said, she loves the products at The Container Store and often recommends them, but also does not see them as the ultimate solution to her clients’ clutter problem. Perhaps tellingly, Lorie Marerro, the professional organizer with the most public organization “brand” who also does spokesperson work for organizational products, has expanded her business so that she no longer works with clients in the home. Although she spent eight years working with clients (and still sees several occasionally), in 2008 she launched her online business in which a team of organizers under her supervision performs “virtual consulting” with the help of photos, emails, and phone calls. Marerro has since published a book, *The Clutter Diet* (2009), been mentioned in magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman’s Day*, *Family Circle*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and appeared on the numerous television shows and local news stations. The move from small business to organization “brand,” a trajectory that ends with a place like The Container Store, is suggestive of how home organization becomes a “product” distinct from the actual practice of designing systems to avoid clutter in the home.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of professional organizers in Austin, Texas, reveal three key conclusions about professional organizing and how it fits into the home organization industry at large. The first conclusion regards the professionalization process itself. Interestingly, though not surprisingly considering the path of other, related fields,

organizers have banded together to reap the rewards of professional recognition, which include cultural legitimacy, small-business support through education and networking, and a defined sense of purpose through the creation of boundaries among themselves, amateur practitioners, DIY consumers, and domestic laborers. Second, professional organizers act as designers of the processes, systems, and small spaces of the home. Not only do professional organizers work spatially to “re-design” areas of the home, they also solve issues that tie the physical and the ephemeral together, such as those around workflow, time management, and office systems. In doing so, professional organizers are required to think creatively for solutions that work within the framework presented by the client, assessing both the individual nature of the particular disorganization problem and the potential solution to best meet the client’s expectation for an organized and functional space. Where most home-organizing texts stress the therapeutic nature of organizing and the source of disorganization as a “cluttered mind,” the organizers in this chapter either reject such notions altogether and instead frame their work as “problem solving,” or recognize the need to approach disorganization as the result of a variety of factors, both psychological and physical. The organizers realize that in order to engage in an effective relationship with clients, they need to combine spatial expertise with less tangible skills such as listening non-judgmentally, behaving with sensitivity and tact in an intimate setting, and providing motivational support throughout what is usually a one-on-one process.

The final conclusion has to do with how engagement in the process of organizing within the home distances professional organizers somewhat from the aspirational and

consumption-oriented aspects of home organization discussed in this dissertation.

Although professional organizers participate in selling the promise of home organization, the experiences detailed here show how paid help with home organization provides a mediated approach to the stringent and often unrealistic goals set by most organization-related cultural texts. Professional organizers work as consultants to their client's disorganization, bringing their own expertise but also setting goals to meet the relative needs of each client. Furthermore, professional organizers' rejection of the usual tropes of "pretty-box" organizing extends to a sense of skepticism about the ways the organization industry can contribute to the problem of disorganization by encouraging consumers to buy more products to cope with what they already have. By adapting their sense of what being organized looks like and working with the organizational systems and belongings their clients already own, professional organizers deviate slightly from the standard understanding of the contemporary organizing industry set forth in other chapters of this work.

## Conclusion

*“When we transform chaos into order, we feel a sense of relief. This makes organizing a wonderful anti-depressant... There can be something almost magical about the process of organizing.”*<sup>1</sup>

The ironies of writing a dissertation on home organization are ever present. Generating and managing a document of this size requires a considerable amount of organization. This happens not just on a level of rhetoric—though effective argument is essentially the ordering of ideas in a convincing sequence—but also in terms of research, planning and execution. Soon after I began, I started to gather the systems that I believed would structure my writing: what notebook to fuel thinking? What system of folders in my hard drive? I approached this task with almost as much enthusiasm as I viewed the project as a whole; it seemed natural that one was reliant on the other, that I would write a better dissertation if I minimized the friction on the information gathering, note taking, outlining, draft constructing, and reference hunting. And so I embraced the use of a citation program called Zotero, which allowed me to store reference information in folders organized by subject, chapter, or sub-theme within subject within chapter. I knew what section I needed to write each day because I used an online application called Workflowy to outline, store, and export lists of books and to-dos. Scrivener, a tool that helps writers structure long and complicated documents, arrived too late in my process to be helpful, but I nonetheless felt a small longing for the “corkboard” feature, which would have allowed me to organize my ideas into moveable chunks on a graphical user

---

<sup>1</sup> Cindy Glovinsky, *Making Peace with the Things in Your Life: Why Your Papers, Books, Clothes, and Other Possessions Keep Overwhelming You and What to Do About It* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002), 11.



interface both evocative and cute. Even my time was strictly organized with the adoption (and subsequent rejection, and subsequent re-adoption) of programs that document the number of minutes spent writing in order to maximize my available time.

The deeper I sunk into the writing, however, the more skeptical I became of the systems I created. Notebooks were started, then abandoned; folders were labeled, re-organized, and labeled again. Zotero worked wonderfully until it didn't, and I had to spend hours re-inputting sources to already finished footnotes. While I diligently developed a system for file folders to contain the physical documents I kept at home, changes in the project made re-categorizing them tedious enough that I rarely kept up with it. The more I learned about home organization, the less patience I had with the promise of my own systems. Surely, I thought, all this organization is the essence of “productination”—the *feeling* of work one gets by engaging in work-related procrastination?

My ongoing relationship with the systems that helped produce this work speaks to the glimmer of optimism organization offers when one feels unable to grasp the larger and less-manageable problem at hand—in this case, an original piece of writing that documents, and in many ways justifies, the last six years of my life, but for others perhaps a boring job, or mounting debt, or overwhelming family and home responsibilities. When it is too hard to do the big thing, you can feel good about doing a small thing, like organizing research into sub-folders or buying a system of shelves for your closet. Most of the case studies in this dissertation suggest the allure of organization is in the outcome: a perfectly organized interior and the sense of control, clarity, and

calmness that supposedly follows. While these outcomes are indeed seductive in their promise, perhaps the allure of organization is less about outcome than it is the process of repetitive engagement with the tangible manifestations of the project at hand—even when, as we have seen in Chapter Four, that project is the most intimate aspect of one’s inner life.

A sense of satisfaction gained through process is a hard feeling to reliably document, though some scholars have tried. In a study of the material culture of home furniture arrangement, anthropologist Pauline Garvey finds the physical rearranging of furniture carries meaning apart from the resulting décor; the production of such meaning has been overlooked in most studies of home decoration in favor of more permanent structures that produce “long-term narratives through which residents find self-expression.”<sup>2</sup> The participants in Garvey’s study reported feeling that furniture rearrangement is “immediate, cathartic and allows a degree of private introspection that is frequently lacking in long term decorative projects.”<sup>3</sup> Even though this kind of work in the home is “continually enacted, soon forgotten and has minimal presentational value,” its practice still “cultivates a sense of domestic empowerment.”<sup>4</sup> With home organization, a similar principle applies—keeping a space organized demands continued involvement with material culture, a constant assessment of what should be kept and where it should be put. The process requires a sense of purpose, as well as some degree of self-reflection, which both exist beyond the promise of a perfect-looking interior.

---

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Garvey, “Organized Disorder: Moving Furniture in Norwegian Homes,” in *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (Berg Publishers, 2001), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65.

To some extent, the work involved in organizing allows one to re-invest value in the goods of the home. This reinvestment recalls an anecdote from Roland Marchand's history of the advertising industry in the U.S., *Advertising the American Dream*: in 1924, Dupont released its new Duco paint for cars with advertisements promising the ease with which soil and grease could be wiped from the paint with soap and water, obviating the need for car polish. Consumers had become used to cleaning their cars with something out of a bottle, however, and refused to take advantage of the easy-wipe technology; they demanded a special product so they could continue to polish their cars for special occasions.<sup>5</sup> Marchand treats the example as a parable of the perils of being too inflexible in suggesting "advice" through advertising, but he also suggests consumers insisted on polishing "perhaps merely to experience a feeling of participation in the 'production' and repeated re-creation of a prized possession—to help make it 'theirs.'"<sup>6</sup> The example of the car polish suggests the popularity of home organization might have to do with a similar re-production of objects within the home. As with books on closet makeovers that suggest one "shop their closet"—a consumerist metaphor that nonetheless advises seeing old articles of clothing with new eyes—organization becomes a way of re-investing in the objects one already owns by taking inventory, weighing value, and rearranging in space.

Of course, organization is not the only way to experience such engagement. After the conclusion of her interview for Chapter Five, Margaret Kelly emailed me to say my questions made her think about a friend who did not share her belief in the benefit of

---

<sup>5</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 346.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

organization. When Kelly suggested to her friend the method of photographing an object one finds difficult to discard, her friend responded it would not work because she wanted to “know that it's there in a box somewhere in her house so that in the future she can still pick it up and examine it and touch it again.”<sup>7</sup> A photo, Kelly explained on behalf of her friend, “could never replace the physical object, to her way of thinking.” She went on to reflect:

I remembered that one time I was talking to [my friend] about how I could make her utensil drawer in her kitchen more organized. She loves kitchen gadgets, and her utensil drawers are packed full, and I was saying that if she could see things separated out more, she wouldn't have to dig around in the drawer to find what she was looking for. And her response was, "But I like to dig! I like the digging and searching part!" I think for her it's all about the actual touching and handling of the objects, and she just simply doesn't experience stress from not being able to find things. It's interesting, how foreign that concept is to me, and probably to most professional organizers. ;)<sup>8</sup>

The photograph solution amounted to a loss of materiality when materiality was precisely the point; against the prevailing wisdom of the de-cluttering texts in Chapter Four, it is not always possible to detach the physical aspects of stuff from its emotional and sentimental value. This anecdote is more suggestive than definitive of any larger, quantifiable feeling among the less-than-organized, but it hints at the pleasure of engaging with material culture in a repetitive way. Kelly's surprise over her friend's desire to “dig” also denies any acknowledgment of the similar satisfaction she expressed about the process of going through other people's things and arranging them in a way that makes their lives easier (described in Chapter Five). Clearly, the haptic pleasure of stuff can be experienced by both the messy and the neat.

---

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Kelly, Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 18, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

While process seems to explain some of organization's popularity, it does not explain the development of the home organization industry, the growth of which was at the heart of this dissertation. For along with home organization's emphasis on process is the desire to "solve" the problem of clutter through the consumption of organizational products, services, and advice. The popularity and reach of the home organizing industry suggests that process and consumption are intertwined—to become organized is to find the right product, hire the right professional, subscribe to the right magazine. Both consumption and process are conceived as ongoing: clutter is caused by an un-ending influx of consumer goods; organization necessitates constant vigilance to blunt the effects of this consumption; and myriad organizational "solutions" are available for purchase along the way. The emphasis on ongoing-ness finds expression in Susan Stewart's conception of seriality in the collecting process. In *On Longing*, she writes, "the Collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries, just as the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space."<sup>9</sup> The bounded seriality of ongoing acquisition provides part of the allure of collecting. If organization is seen as a parallel activity to collecting, not merely a response to it, then the mantra of perpetuity espoused by home organization texts is part of this same effort towards seriality. As collections grow, so does the need to organize them; both collecting and organizing involve require continual interaction in order to reflect the self. Seriality "provides a means for defining or classifying the collection and the collector's life history, and it also permits a systematic substitution of

---

<sup>9</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 157.

purchase for labor.”<sup>10</sup> At sites like The Container Store the boxes, bins, and shelves available to help one get organized make this substitution clear—the labor and process of organizing is synonymous with the consumption of organization products.

An examination of contemporary home organization discourse brings to light several important conclusions about domestic life in the U.S. in the early twenty-first century. At its most general, this work demonstrates the increased attention paid to the objects of everyday life. Books, advice manuals and products that encourage constant interaction with one’s belongings show a popular turn toward thinking about material culture’s materiality. If scholarship on material culture ever pleaded for increased awareness of the importance of things, then surely those same scholars must be pleased with the level of examination and reflection currently occurring in many American homes. The clutter documented on messy-home television shows is, essentially, the most extreme display of this preoccupation with materiality, which is then countered by advice literature on managing objects in the home. In part, these television programs reflect, as I have documented, anxiety around overconsumption, but they also speak to an awareness of the way material culture can come to dominate our lives. De-cluttering literature’s emphasis on human agency over objects speaks directly to this fear, while home organization’s overarching message of ongoing vigilance is itself a recognition of the ebb and flow of human-object interaction in everyday life.

Another conclusion of this work regards the adoption of home organization as both a process and a material end—as The Container Store and the experiences of

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 166.

professional organizers show, to be organized is both an act of consumption and an ongoing process of elimination and arrangement. Several of the case studies of this dissertation revolve around how home organization becomes a product for consumption. In this, we see how home organization is reflective of the circumstances of late capitalism. The rhetoric around home organization speaks constantly to the sense of “too much” in contemporary culture, which is a simple way of describing the increased production, consumption, and velocity of transactions in contemporary life. While home organization purports to rectify the “too much” of everyday life, the industry is itself a product of the same system. Chapter One, on The Container Store, demonstrates the way the “solutions” of home organization become part of a brand identity with which to sell products through lifestyle consumption. The extent to which one is able to break through this cycle seems directly related to how much one engages with the work of organizing within the home. Chapter Five provides examples of how professional organizers negotiate the home organization industry—at times relying on it for professional legitimacy, at times rejecting its consumerist tendencies. As a result, professional organizers present the hybridity of process and product that can exist in home organization.

Yet there is a limit to how much the process of material engagement can effectively challenge structural inequity. Chapter Three, on *Real Simple* magazine, examines just a single source of the discourse about gender and efficiency produced for the predominantly female audience of home organization. This chapter brings to light the issue of imbalance of gender responsibility in the home, a second structural issue at the

heart of home organization (along with overconsumption). When home organization grapples with overconsumption it does so with a heavy hand; television shows like *Hoarders* characterize clutter as both a psychological malfunction and a pervasive cultural disease. The problem of women being too busy because they have overwhelming domestic responsibility is backed into quietly, however, with humor and a lighthearted touch. Where process might alleviate some of the consumption inherent to the home organizing industry, it does not provide similar relief for the problem of women's time. Advice about efficiency and time organization in *Real Simple* re-directs energy away from the source of gender inequity in the domestic interior, demonstrating the way micro-chores substitute for macro-level change. Home organization might seem to be only about the shuffling and sorting of objects, but the messages of home organization provide a lens on gender, class, consumption, and the contemporary American home environment.



## Bibliography

- “100th Episode: The Dirty Little Awards Show.” *Clean House*. Style Network, August 31, 2008.
- “About NAPO.” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®. Accessed January 3, 2013. <http://www.napo.net/who/>.
- Abrahamson, Eric, and David H. Freedman. *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.
- “ACSP Launches Designer Certification Program.” *Closets Daily*, February 9, 2011. [http://www.closetsdaily.com/closet-news/closets-industry-news/acsp\\_launches\\_designer\\_certification\\_program\\_129230458.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/closet-news/closets-industry-news/acsp_launches_designer_certification_program_129230458.html).
- Adamson, Glenn, and Jane Pavitt, eds. *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990*. London and New York: V&A Publications, distributed in North America by Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2011.
- “Adella/Teri.” *Hoarders*. A&E, September 6, 2010.
- Adler, Jerry, and Lisa Bertagnoli. “The New Zen of Stuff.” *Newsweek*, November 15, 1999.
- Anburajan, Aswini. “Breaking Down Oprah’s Numbers.” NBC News. *First Read*, December 7, 2007. [http://firstread.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2007/12/07/4425062-breaking-down-oprahs-numbers](http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2007/12/07/4425062-breaking-down-oprahs-numbers).
- Von Andrian, Amy. Interview with a Professional Organizer, August 1, 2012.
- Apgar, William. *The Evolving Home Building Industry and Implications for Consumers*. Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2006.
- Arnold, Jeanne E., Anthony Graesch, Elinor Ochs, and Enzo Ragazzini. *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012.
- Arnold, Jeanne E., and Ursula A. Lang. “Changing American Home Life: Trends in Domestic Leisure and Storage Among Middle-class Families.” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 28, no. 1 (2007): 23–48.
- Association of Closet and Storage Professionals. “ACSP Case Study Example #1,” 2011. <http://www.closets.org/certify/samples.cfm>.
- . “ACSP Designer Certification Program Details and Requirements,” 2011. <http://www.closets.org/certify/>.
- “Association of Personal Photo Organizers.” Accessed December 3, 2012. <http://www.appo.org/>.
- Attfield, Judy. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2000.
- Attfield, Judy, and Pat Kirkham. *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women, and Design*. London: Women’s Press, 1989.
- “Average Total Paid and Verified Circulation for Top 100 ABC Magazines, 2008.” *Magazine Publishers of America: The Association of Magazine Media*, 2008.

- [http://www.magazine.org/CONSUMER\\_MARKETING/CIRC\\_TRENDS/ABC2008TOTALrank.aspx](http://www.magazine.org/CONSUMER_MARKETING/CIRC_TRENDS/ABC2008TOTALrank.aspx).
- Aynsley, Jeremy, and Francesca Berry. "Publishing the Modern Home." *Journal of Design History* 18, no. 1 (2005): 1–5.
- Baldrige, Aimee. *Organize Your Digital Life: How to Store Your Photographs, Music, Videos, and Personal Documents in a Digital World*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2009.
- Bandler, James. "Martha Stewart Rival Makes Gains." *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2004.
- . "Real Competition." *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2004.
- Banham, Reyner. *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*. New York: Praeger, 1967.
- Barron, James. "New York Vs. California In a Closet Space Race." *The New York Times*, February 22, 1996.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacrum and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Bayer, Herbert. "On Typography." In *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, edited by Steven Heller and Philip B. Meggs, 110–114. New York: Allworth Press, 2001.
- "BCPO® Media Kit." Board of Certified Professional Organizers®, n.d.
- Beecher, Mary Anne. "A Place for Everything: The Influence of Storage Innovations on Modern American Domesticity (1900-1955)." Iowa State University, 2003.
- . "The Mythical Making Martha." *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 113–124.
- Belk, Russell. *Collecting in a Consumer Society*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Beller, Peter. "The Container Store Opens Its First New York Site." *The New York Times*, September 24, 2000.
- Beltran, Luisa. "Leonard Green Buys Container." *Daily Deal/The Deal*, July 3, 2007. <http://www.TheDeal.com>.
- Bendimerad, Amal. *A Long-Term Outlook for Homeowner Remodeling Activity: Results and Implications*. Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, August 2007.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 217–252. Reprint (original 1969). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 2007.
- Bentley, Amy. "Martha's Food: Whiteness of a Certain Kind." *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 89–100.
- Bertman, Stephen. *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.
- Betsky, Aaron. *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-sex Desire*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1997.
- Binkley, Sam. *Gettin' Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

- . “The Seers of Menlo Park: The Discourse of Heroic Consumption in the ‘Whole Earth Catalog’.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3, no. 3 (November 1, 2003): 283–313.
- Bishop, Ronald. “It Turns Out the Armoire Is Your Mother: Narratives of Addiction in Two Cable Television Organization Programs.” *Addiction Research & Theory* 14, no. 2 (April 2006): 139–157.
- Blanke, Gail. *Throw Out Fifty Things: Clear The Clutter, Find Your Life*. New York: Springboard Press, 2009.
- Bloch, Phillip. *The Shopping Diet: Spend Less and Get More*. New York: Gallery Books, 2010.
- Bond, Gwenda. “Bailouts of the Self-Help Kind: Self-Help Books in a Down Economy.” *Publishersweekly.com*, April 6, 2009. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/4607-bailouts-of-the-self-help-kind-self-help-books-in-a-down-ecomony.html>.
- Borstelmann, Thomas. *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. Oxford and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Brady, James. “Brady’s Bunch.” *Advertising Age*, March 1, 2004.
- Brooks, David. “Conspicuous ‘Simplicity’.” In *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture*, edited by Amitai Etzioni and Daniel Doherty. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- “Brooks Palmer Amazon Author Page.” *Amazon.com*. Accessed December 1, 2012. [http://www.amazon.com/Brooks-Palmer/e/B002BMN7GY/ref=ntt\\_athr\\_dp\\_pel\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/Brooks-Palmer/e/B002BMN7GY/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1).
- Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1–22.
- Buchanan, Richard, and Victor Margolin. *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. *American Time Use Survey, 2010*, June 22, 2011.
- Carlomagno, Mary. *The Secrets of Simplicity: Learn to Live Better with Less*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008.
- Carr, David. “Don’t Aspire; Just Embrace Simplicity.” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2002.
- . “Managing Editors Are Named At 3 Magazines in People Group.” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2003.
- . “Technology & Media; Nimble Magazines Adjust to Fast Pace.” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2002.
- Carrette, J., and Richard King. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Carter, Jimmy. “Crisis of Confidence,” July 15, 1979. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-crisis-speech/>.
- Case, Tony. “Out to Launch.” *MediaWeek*, March 6, 2000.
- . “Real Success.” *Brandweek*, March 10, 2003.

- CBS Sunday Morning Clip. *What We Stand For | Video Gallery*. The Container Store, 2011. [http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn\\_top\\_100](http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn_top_100).
- Celebrating 1,785 Years of Service. What We Stand For | Video Gallery*. The Container Store, n.d. [http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-conscious\\_cap](http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-conscious_cap).
- Charlton Fascitelli, Melanie, and Kevin Clark. *Shop Your Closet: The Ultimate Guide to Organizing Your Closet with Style*. New York: Collins, 2008.
- Cieraad, Irene. *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999.
- Clarke, Alison J. "The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration." In *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, edited by Daniel Miller, 23–45. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2001.
- "'Clean House' Website." *The Style Network*, n.d. <http://www.stylenetwork.com/mystyle/shows/cleanhouse>.
- Clifford, Stephanie. "At 10 Years, A Magazine Finds Time To Celebrate." *The New York Times* (March 8, 2010): 6.
- Clutter-Hoarding Scale: A Residential Observational Tool*. St. Louis, MO: Institute for Challenging Disorganization, 2011.
- Coeyman, Marjorie. "What Women Want—to Read." *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2002.
- Cogdell, Christina. *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.
- Conscious Capitalism. What We Stand For | Video Gallery*. The Container Store, 2010. <http://standfor.containerstore.com/conscious-capitalism-event-recap/>.
- "Contents Unknown." *This American Life*, January 22, 2010.
- Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986.
- Correspondents of The New York Times. *Class Matters*. New York: Times Books, 2005.
- Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Cross, Gary. *An All-Consuming Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Cross, Nigel. *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011.
- . *Designerly Ways of Knowing*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007.
- . "Discovering Design Ability." In *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, 105–120. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Crowley, Karlyn. *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Csikszentmihaly, Mihaly, and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

- Cwerner, Saulo B., and Alan Metcalfe. "Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World." *Journal Design History* 16, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 229–239.
- "Daily Quick Cleaning Checklist." *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/daily-cleaning-checklist-0000000000953/index.html#>.
- Davies, Karen. "Responsibility and Daily Life: Reflections Over Timespace." In *TimeSpace: Geographies of Temporality*, edited by Jon May and N.J. Thrift. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Dávila, Arlene M. *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Davis, Lisa Selin. "Little Boxes." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2005.
- Deamer, Peggy. "Branding the Architectural Author." *Perspecta* 37 (January 1, 2005): 42–49.
- Deery, June. "Interior Design: Commodifying Self and Place in 'Extreme Makeover,' 'Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,' and 'The Swan'." In *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation*, 159–174. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Didier, Laurel. "Closets Industry Report: Research Shows Rosy Outlook for Industry." *Closets Daily*, April 8, 2008. [http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets-blog/laurel-didier/research\\_shows\\_rosy\\_outlook\\_for\\_industry\\_129226288.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets-blog/laurel-didier/research_shows_rosy_outlook_for_industry_129226288.html).
- . "Signs of Economic Recovery Good for the Closet Industry." *Closets Daily*, March 24, 2010. [http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets-blog/laurel-didier/signs\\_of\\_economic\\_recovery\\_good\\_for\\_the\\_closet\\_industry\\_129227893.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/closets-blog/laurel-didier/signs_of_economic_recovery_good_for_the_closet_industry_129227893.html).
- Dillon, Nancy. "Martha Mag Mess: Advertising in a Dive Amid Legal Woes." *New York Daily News*, February 3, 2004.
- Doherty, Daniel, and Amitai Etzioni. *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Donald, Moira. "Tranquil Havens? Critiquing the Idea of Home as the Middle-Class Sanctuary." In *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, edited by Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd, 103–120. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New Ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1984.
- Drucker, Peter F. *Post-Capitalist Society*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 1993.
- Duffy, Enda. *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Edwards, Clive. *Interior Design: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Berg Publishers, 2010.
- Edwards, Elizabeth, and Janice Hart. *Photographs Objects Histories: On The Materiality of Images*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Elgin, Duane. *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. Revised. New York: Quill, 1993.

- Esler, Bill. "Consumers Planning to Spend More on Closets, Study Says." *Closets Daily*, June 1, 2010.  
[http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/consumers\\_planning\\_to\\_spend\\_more\\_on\\_closets\\_study\\_says\\_129228388.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/consumers_planning_to_spend_more_on_closets_study_says_129228388.html).
- . "First Closet Professionals Are Certified." *Closets Daily*, February 16, 2012.  
<http://www.closetsdaily.com/closet-news/closets-industry-news/First-Closet-Professionals-Are-Certified-139490953.html>.
- . "State of the Industry: Independent Closet Firms." *Closets Daily*, July 26, 2010.  
[http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/state\\_of\\_the\\_industry\\_independent\\_closet\\_firms\\_129228823.html](http://www.closetsdaily.com/articles/state_of_the_industry_independent_closet_firms_129228823.html).
- Everett, Anna. "Trading Private and Public Spaces @ HGTV and TLC: On New Genre Formations in Transformation TV." *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2 (2004): 157–181.
- "Examination Content (for the CPO Examination)." *The Board of Certification for Professional Organizers*, September 2010.  
<http://certifiedprofessionalorganizers.org/examination-content.php>.
- Featherstone, Mike. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London and Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- La Ferla, Ruth. "Living the Edited Life: The Materialism of Scaling Back." *The New York Times*, January 21, 2001.
- Fine, Jon. "2002 Grades: A Look Back on 2002 Shows It Was Better Than '01—but Not by Much—for Magazine Publishers." *Advertising Age*, March 17, 2003.
- . "Circ Model Cries for Hard Choices; How Magazines Got in a Jam, and a Bevy of Hard Choices for Getting Out." *Advertising Age*, March 15, 2004.
- . "Magazine of the Year." *Advertising Age*, October 21, 2002.
- . "Martha's Mag Bleeds as Trial Gets Under Way; A 34.6% Ad-page Drop in 2003; 'Real Simple,' 'BH&G' See Gains." *Advertising Age*, February 2, 2004.
- . "Simply Successful: 'Real Simple' Overcomes Shaky Start." *Advertising Age*, August 13, 2001.
- Fitzgerald, Kate. "Launches Crowd Already Tough Field: From Tony Style Books to Near-catalog Fare, Titles Seek to Win Home Front." *Advertising Age*, April 5, 2004.
- Foy, Jessica H., and Thomas J. Schlereth. *American Home Life 1880-1930: Social History Spaces Services*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994.
- Fraiman, S. "Bad Girls of Good Housekeeping: Dominique Browning and Martha Stewart." *American Literary History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 260.
- Frank, Robert H. *Luxury Fever: Weighing the Cost of Excess*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Frederick, Christine. *Efficient Housekeeping or, Household Engineering, Scientific Management In The Home*. Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1925.
- . *Selling Mrs. Consumer*. New York: Business bourse, 1929.

- . *The New Housekeeping Efficiency Studies In Home Management*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Page & Co., 1913.
- Freedman, Eric. *Transient Images: Personal Media in Public Frameworks*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.
- Frost, Randy O., and Rachel C. Gross. "The Hoarding of Possessions." *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 31, no. 4 (May 1993): 367–381.
- Frost, Randy O., and Gail Steketee. *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.
- Funston, Lindsay. "Cooking Uses for Your Microwave." *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/food-recipes/cooking-tips-techniques/cooking-uses-for-your-microwave-00000000042304/index.html>.
- Garcia, Patricia. "It's Not Too Late to Get It Together: Expert Tips and Tools for Organizing Your Life - Vogue Daily." *Vogue.com*. Accessed July 13, 2012. <http://www.vogue.com/vogue-daily/article/its-not-too-late-to-get-it-together-expert-tips-and-tools-for-organizing-your-life/>.
- Garvey, Pauline. "Organized Disorder: Moving Furniture in Norwegian Homes." In *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, 47–68. Berg Publishers, 2001.
- Garza, Jesse, and Joe Lupo. *Nothing to Wear? A 5-step Cure for the Common Closet*. New York: Hudson Street Press, 2006.
- Gewirtz-Ward, Lisa. "Container Store for Sale." *Daily Deal/The Deal*, February 26, 2007. <http://www.TheDeal.com>.
- Gleick, James. *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.
- Glovinsky, Cindy. *Making Peace with the Things in Your Life: Why Your Papers, Books, Clothes, and Other Possessions Keep Overwhelming You and What to Do About It*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002.
- . *One Thing at a Time: 100 Simple Ways to Live Clutter-free Every Day*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004.
- Godbey, Geoffrey, and John Robinson. *Time for Life (Second Edition): The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.
- Golec, M. J. "Martha Stewart Living and the Marketing of Emersonian Perfectionism." *Home Cultures* 3, no. 1 (2006): 5–20.
- Gosling, Sam. *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You*. Philadelphia and New York: Basic Books, 2009.
- Gosling, Samuel D., Kenneth H. Craik, Nicholas R. Martin, and Michelle R. Pryor. "Material Attributes of Personal Living Spaces." *Home Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2005): 51–88.
- Gosling, Samuel D., Sei Jin Ko, Thomas Mannarelli, and Margaret E. Morris. "A Room with a Cue: Judgments of Personality Based on Offices and Bedrooms." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82 (2002): 379–398.
- Granatstein, Lisa. "Fashion Sense." *MediaWeek*, February 18, 2002.

- . “Time Inc. Plans New Magazine.” *MediaWeek*, 1999.
- Grant, Lorrie. “Container Store’s Workers Huddle Up to Help You Out.” *USA Today*, April 30, 2002.
- Green, Penelope. “Angela Wallace Organizes the Clutter Busters — Q&A.” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2012.
- Greenhalgh, Paul. *Modernism in Design*. London: Reaktion Books, 1990.
- Grier, Katherine C. *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1997.
- . “Decline of the Memory Palace: The Parlor After 1890.” In *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Space and Services*, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, 49–74. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992.
- Hagen, Mike. *Thousands of Images, Now What: Painlessly Organize, Save, and Back Up Your Digital Photos*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012.
- Hale, Susan. Interview With a Professional Organizer, August 1, 2012.
- Hales, Linda. “A New Niche For Chic Storage.” *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2004.
- Halttunen, Karen. “From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality.” In *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, edited by Simon J. Bronner, 157–189. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989.
- Handelman, David. “In Pensive Times, Comfort Magazines Find an Audience.” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2001.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into The Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989.
- Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.
- . *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984.
- . *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.
- Heelas, Paul. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.
- Heller, Dana. *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Heller, Karen. “Oversimplification; The Simple Life Is All the Rage, but Real Life Keeps Intruding.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 5, 2003.
- Heller, Steven. *Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design*. 2nd ed. New York: Allworth Press, 2004.
- “Help for Compulsive Hoarders (‘Hoarders’ Casting Page).” <http://www.aetv.com/casting/>. Accessed January 27, 2013.  
<http://hoardersdocumentary.com/machform/view.php?id=3>.
- Heskett, John. *Design: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.



- Hill, J. Dee. "TV Obsessions for Super Organizer." *ADWEEK*, August 6, 1999.
- Hine, Thomas. *The Great Funk: Falling Apart and Coming Together (on a Shag Rug) in the Seventies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, and Philip Johnson. *The International Style*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Norton, 1995.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997.
- Hoffman, Marilyn. "Bins, Boxes, Bottles, and Baskets to the Rescue." *Christian Science Monitor*, March 25, 1988.
- Holmes, Mary. "Politicizing Time: Temporal Issues for Second-Wave Feminists." In *Social Conceptions of Time: Structure and Process in Work and Everyday Life*, edited by Graham Crow and Sue Heath, 38–52. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Holsomback, Barbara. "Container Store Moves To GSD&M." *ADWEEK*, January 18, 1993.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.
- Horovitz, Bruce. "Giving Household Clutter the Old Heave-Ho." *USA Today*, November 24, 2004.
- Horowitz, Barbra. *Closet Control: The Ultimate Guide to Revitalizing Your Wardrobe and Revolutionizing the Way You Store It*. New York: Sterling, 2007.
- Horowitz, Daniel. *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.
- "How Do Women Spend Their Time?" *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 28, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/time-management/spend-time-00100000077167/index.html>.
- "How to Speed-Clean Your Kitchen." *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/how-to-speed-clean-your-kitchen-10000001086310/index.html>.
- Hoy, Suellen. *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Hughes, Elaine. "Private Firm Buys Container Store; Leonard Green & Partners Plans to Keep Leadership." *USA Today*, July 3, 2007.
- International Housewares Association. *IHA: State of The Industry*. Rosemont, IL: International Housewares Association, 2009.
- Isenstadt, Sandy. *The Modern American House: Spaciousness and Middle Class Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Ivry, Sara. "How Simple? Not Even a Need to Turn Pages." *The New York Times*, April 11, 2005.
- Izsak, Barry. Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 25, 2012.
- James, Oliver. "About Affluenza." *Oliver James Website*. Accessed November 30, 2012. <http://www.selfishcapitalist.com/affluenza.html>.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

- “Janet/Christina.” *Hoarders*. A&E, January 18, 2010.
- “Jennifer and Ron/Jill.” *Hoarders*. A&E, August 17, 2009.
- Kaiser, Jo-Ann. “State of the Industry: The Franchise Sector.” *Closets Daily*, January 22, 2010.
- Kastor, Elizabeth. “A New Lid on Life; For a Messy World, A Policy of Containment.” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1997.
- Keates, Nancy. “A Place For Everything, and Everything in Its Place; As the Multibillion-dollar Home Organization Industry Continues to Grow Briskly, Manufacturers Are Filling Every Niche.” *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, January 7, 2008.
- Kelly, Margaret. Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 18, 2012.
- “Kerrylea/Lauren.” *Hoarders*. A&E, September 14, 2009.
- Kirkham, Pat. *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
- “Kitchen Cleaning To-Do List.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/kitchen-cleaning-to-do-list-10000001086325/index.html?>
- Kogan, Lisa. “Journey to the Center of Gayle’s Closet.” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012.
- Koncius, Jura. “’Tis a Gift to Be Real Simple.” *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2004.
- . “Closet Cravings: We’re Spending \$1 Billion a Year on Custom Shelving Racks. Here’s Why.” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2000.
- . “Closet Hang-Ups; From Disorderly Conduct to Uncluttered Living With the Help of Shelves and Wires. Or, How About a Custom Cufflink Drawer?” *The Washington Post*, May 25, 1995.
- . “The Organization Biz; TV Shows, Stores, Books, Magazines And Personal Pep-Talkers Are Lined Up To Help Us Control Our Clutter.” *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2004.
- Kramer, Peter D. “One Man’s Trash . . .” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/books/review/Kramer-t.html?emc=eta1>.
- Kron, Joan, and Suzanne Slesin. *High-Tech: The Industrial-Style and Sourcebook for the Home*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1978.
- Lancaster, Jane. *Making Time: Lillian Moller Gilbreth—A Life Beyond “Cheaper by the Dozen”*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004.
- Lash, Scott, and John Urry. *Economies of Signs and Space*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Lau, Kimberly J. *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Lava, Jennifer. Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 20, 2012.
- Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and The Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

- Leavitt, Sarah A. *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Lee, Yun-Suk, and Linda J. Waite. "Husbands' and Wives' Time Spent on Housework: A Comparison of Measures." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 328–336.
- Lees-Maffei, Grace. "Introduction: Professionalization as a Focus in Interior Design History." *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 1 (March 20, 2008): 1–18.
- . "Studying Advice: Historiography, Methodology, Commentary, Bibliography." *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 1–14.
- Lesser, Marc. *Less: Accomplishing More by Doing Less*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009.
- . *Z.B.A., Zen of Business Administration: How Zen Practice Can Transform Your Work and Your Life*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2005.
- Levinson, Marc. *The Box: How The Shipping Container Made The World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Lewis, Tania. "Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes: A History of Makeover Television in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia." In *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 22:447–458, 2008.
- Lidz, Franz. "The Paper Chase." *New York Times*, October 26, 2003.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/nyregion/the-paper-chase.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
- "Linda/Steven." *Hoarders*. A&E, August 24, 2009.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998.
- Livingston, James. *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century*. New York and Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.
- Long, Christopher. *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime." In *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, edited by Adolf Opel, translated by Michael Mitchell, 167–176. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998.
- Louden, Jennifer. *The Life Organizer: A Woman's Guide to a Mindful Year*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007.
- Lupton, Ellen. *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination*. Cambridge, MA and New York: MIT List Visual Arts Center, distributed by Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Lupton, Ellen, and J. Abbott Miller. *Design, Writing, Research: Writing on Graphic Design*. New York: Kiosk, 1996.
- Lury, Celia. *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- . *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

- “*Man in a Desert Selling: Foundation Principle 6*”: *What We Stand For* | *Video Gallery*. The Container Store, n.d. [http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn\\_top\\_100](http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-dmn_top_100).
- Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.
- . *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.
- De Marco, Donna. “Organization In Store; Eager Workers Train at D.C.’s Soon-to-open Container Store.” *The Washington Times*, February 27, 2004.
- Marrero, Lorie. Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 19, 2012.
- Martin, Jill, and Dana Ravich. *I Have Nothing To Wear!: A Painless 12-step Program to Declutter Your Life So You Never Have To Say This Again!* New York: Rodale Books, 2011.
- Martin, Reinhold. *Utopia’s Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*. London and Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Mason, Ann, and Marian Meyers. “Living With Martha Stewart Media: Chosen Domesticity in the Experience of Fans.” *Journal of Communication* 51, no. 4 (December 2001): 801.
- Massey, Doreen. “Politics and Space/Time.” In *Place and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Michael Keith and Steve Pile, 141–161. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Massey, Douglas S. *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.
- Mataix-Cols, David, Randy O Frost, Alberto Pertusa, Lee Anna Clark, Sanjaya Saxena, James F Leckman, Dan J Stein, Hisato Matsunaga, and Sabine Wilhelm. “Hoarding Disorder: a New Diagnosis for DSM-V?” *Depression and Anxiety* 27, no. 6 (June 2010): 556–572.
- Matthews, Glenna. “*Just a Housewife*”: *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- McCracken, Ellen. *Decoding Women’s Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.
- McCracken, Grant David. *Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning, and Brand Management*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- McGee, Micki. *Self Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- McMurria, John. “Desperate Citizens and Good Samaritans: Neoliberalism and Makeover Reality TV.” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 4 (July 2008): 305–332.
- Mechling, Jay. “Introduction: Martha Stewart and Taste Cultures.” *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 67–69.
- Meeting of the Austin Chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, February 11, 2011.

- Meikle, Jeffrey L. *Design in the USA*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*. American Civilization; Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1979.
- Miller, Daniel. *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2001.
- “MILLION DOLLAR CLOSETS, Special: Home & Garden Television.” *HGTV*. Accessed July 13, 2012. <http://www.hgtv.com/million-dollar-closets/million-dollar-closets/index.html>.
- Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo. “The New Typography.” In *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, edited by Philip B. Meggs and Steven Heller, 108–109. Reprint. Allworth Press, 2001.
- Mooallem, Jon. “The Self-Storage Self.” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2009. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06self-storage-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06self-storage-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
- Moor, Liz. “Branding Consultants as Cultural Intermediaries.” *The Sociological Review* 56, no. 3 (August 1, 2008): 408–428.
- Morgenstern, Julie. *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life: A Four-step Guide to Getting Unstuck*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- . *When Organizing Isn't Enough: S.H.E.D. Your Stuff, Change Your Life*. New York: Fireside, 2008.
- Motley Fool Conversations, Interview with Kip Tindell, CEO of The Container Store*. Accessed June 1, 2010. [http://mfconversations.libsyn.com/index.php?post\\_id=577576](http://mfconversations.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=577576).
- Murphy, Catharine. Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 12, 2012.
- Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2004.
- “NAPO’s Fun Facts.” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority®*. Accessed January 3, 2013. [http://www.napo.net/who/history/fun\\_facts.aspx](http://www.napo.net/who/history/fun_facts.aspx).
- Narotzky, Viviana. “Dream Homes and DIY: Television, New Media and the Domestic Makeover.” In *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance*, edited by Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant, 258–273. London and New York: V&A Publications, 2006.
- National Housewares Manufacturing Association. *Internal Intelligence Survey*. Rosemont, IL: National Housewares Manufacturing Association, 1995.
- Nelson, George, and Henry Wright. *Tomorrow’s House: a Complete Guide for the Home-builder*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945.
- Nelson, Mike. *Stop Clutter From Wrecking Your Family: Organize Your Children, Spouse, and Home*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2004.
- Novak, Jamie. *The Get Organized Answer Book: Practical Solutions for 275 Questions on Conquering Clutter, Sorting Stuff, and Finding More Time and Energy*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2009.

- “Organizer Statistics.” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®. Accessed January 3, 2013. [http://www.napo.net/our\\_profession/statistics.aspx](http://www.napo.net/our_profession/statistics.aspx).
- Ouellette, Laurie, and James Hay. *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- . “Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen.” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 471–484.
- “Our Profession.” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®. Accessed January 3, 2013. [http://www.napo.net/our\\_profession/](http://www.napo.net/our_profession/).
- Palmer, Brooks. *Clutter Busting: Letting Go of What’s Holding You Back*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009.
- Palmer, Gareth. “‘New You’: Class and Transformation in Lifestyle Television.” In *Understanding Reality Television*, edited by Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, 173–190. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- “Patty/Bill.” *Hoarders*. A&E, August 24, 2009.
- Pavitt, Jane. *Brand New*. Princeton, NJ and London: V&A Publications, distributed in North America by Princeton University Press, 2000.
- PBS. “Affluenza,” n.d. <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/>.
- Peck, Janice. “The Secret of Her Success: Oprah Winfrey and the Seductions of Self-Transformation.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 7–14.
- Pevsner, Nikolaus. *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949.
- Pine, B. Joseph, and James H. Gilmore. *Experience Economy : Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999.
- “Professional Organizer Curriculum.” *National Association of Professional Organizers. The Organizing Authority*®. Accessed January 3, 2013. [http://www.napo.net/our\\_profession/education/curriculum.aspx#none](http://www.napo.net/our_profession/education/curriculum.aspx#none).
- Putnam, Tim. “‘Postmodern’ Home Life.” In *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, edited by Irene Cieraad, 144–152. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999.
- Rapaport, Brooke Kamin, and Kevin Stayton. *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960*. New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001.
- Raphael, Chad. “The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV.” In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 119–136. New York and London: New York University Press, 2004.
- Rate Base (Advertising Rates, Print Media Kit)*. Real Simple Magazine/Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2010.
- Reaching Your Ideal Customers (Demographics, Print Media Kit)*. Real Simple Magazine, Spring Mediamark Research and Intelligence Base of Adults 2011.
- “Real Simple.” *Robertnewman.com*. Accessed September 30, 2011. <http://www.robertnewman.com/work.php?action=viewpage&pageid=19&item=130>.

- “Real Simple Time Survey: How You Use It, Save It, and Waste It.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/magazine-more/inside-magazine/time-survey-0000000031118/index.html>.
- Real Simple, Time Inc. *Women and Time: What Makes Her Tick? (Women and Time Study 2012, Time Inc.)*, 2012.
- Reason, Ron. “The Design of Real Simple: An Interview with Robert Newman.” [www.ronreason.com](http://www.ronreason.com), October 2002.
- Reed, Christopher. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1996.
- Riess, Jana. “‘Christian Publishers Embrace Books on Home Organization and Home Management’.” *Publisher’s Weekly*, August 13, 2007. <http://reviews.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20070813/15785-bless-this-house.html>.
- Ringrose, Jessica, and Valerie Walkerdine. “Regulating The Abject.” *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 227–246.
- “Robert Mann Gallery: Rick Finkelstein.” *Robert Mann Gallery*, n.d. <http://www.robertmann.com/artists/finkelstein/about.html>.
- Rodriguez, Misty. Interview with a Professional Organizer, July 16, 2012.
- Rose, Matthew. “Real Simple May Face Difficult Reception.” *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2000.
- . “Time’s Wyland Quits as Editor Of Real Simple.” *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2000.
- Rottenberg, Josh. “Obsessed With A&E’s ‘Hoarders’.” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 22, 2010.
- Rutherford, Janice. *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick & The Rise of Household Efficiency*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003.
- Saltz, Jerry. “Clinging to the Wreckage.” *NYMag.com*, September 30, 2012. <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/thomas-hirschhorn-concordia-concordia-2012-10/>.
- Sapienza, Terri. “More Simple.” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2005.
- Scanlon, Jennifer. *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender and the Promise of Consumer Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Schechter, Harriet. *Let Go of Clutter*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.
- Schlax, Julie. “The Closet As Status Symbol.” *Forbes*, May 30, 1988.
- Schor, Juliet. *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer*. New York: Basic Books, 1998.
- . *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline Of Leisure*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- . “The Problem of Over-consumption—Why Economists Don’t Get It.” In *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture*, edited by Amitai Etzioni and Daniel Doherty, 65–82. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, And Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002.
- Self Storage Association. *2010 Self Storage Industry Fact Sheet*, April 1, 2010.

- “Self-Storage Association Website.” Accessed December 8, 2011.  
<http://www.selfstorage.org/ssa/Content/NavigationMenu/Membership/JoinSSA/default.htm>.
- Sforza, Nicole. “4 Super-Organized Women Spill Their Secrets.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/organizing/organization-secrets-0000000028133/index.html>.
- . “Storage Ideas for Small Spaces.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 27, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/organizing/tips-techniques/storage-ideas-small-spaces-00100000067344/index.html>.
- Shi, David E. *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007.
- Shove, Elizabeth, Frank Trentmann, and Richard R. Wilk, eds. *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009.
- Smith, Terry E. *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Southerton, Dale, ed. “Aestheticization of Everyday Life.” *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Reference, September 15, 2011.
- Southerton, Dale. “Re-ordering Temporal Rhythms: Coordinating Daily Practices in the UK in 1937 and 2000.” In *Time, Consumption, and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann, and Richard R. Wilk, 49–63. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2009.
- Sparke, Penny. *As Long as It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*. London: Pandora, 1995.
- . *Elsie De Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration*. New York: Acanthus Press, 2005.
- . “The Domestic Interior and the Construction of Self: The New York Homes of Elsie De Wolfe.” In *Interior Design and Identity*, edited by Susie McKellar and Penny Sparke, 72–91. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004.
- . “The ‘Ideal’ and the ‘Real’ Interior in Elsie De Wolfe’s ‘The House in Good Taste’ of 1913.” *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (2003): 63–76.
- “Speed Cleaning Your Porch.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012.  
<http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-porch-0000000034762/index.html>.
- “Speed Up Your Family’s Morning Routine.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 27, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/time-management/morning-routine-00100000075608/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean a Big Bookcase.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012.  
<http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/dusting-polishing/speed-clean-big-bookcase-0000000040374/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Back Entryway.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012.  
<http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-your-back-entryway-0000000053265/index.html>.



- “Speed-Clean Your Bathroom Checklist.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/bathroom/speed-clean-your-bathroom-00000000028739/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Car Interior Checklist.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-car-interior-00000000037866/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Computer Checklist.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-cleaning-computer-checklist-00000000033423/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Fireplace in 15 Minutes.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/speed-clean-your-fireplace-in-15-minutes-00000000049874/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Laundry Room.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/laundry/speed-clean-laundry-room-00000000042515/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Pantry.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/kitchen/speed-clean-your-pantry-00000000044567/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Playroom.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/more-rooms/speed-clean-your-playroom-00000000040377/index.html>.
- “Speed-Clean Your Stovetop Checklist.” *Realsimple.com*. Accessed December 26, 2012. <http://www.realsimple.com/home-organizing/cleaning/kitchen/speed-cleaning-stovetop-checklist-00000000023838/index.html>.
- Staff Meeting 2011. *What We Stand For | Video Gallery*. The Container Store, 2011. <http://standfor.containerstore.com/video-gallery/#ui-dialog-title-Service>.
- Stage, Sarah, and Virginia B. Vincenti. *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Steketee, Gail, and Randy O. Frost. *Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring: Therapist Guide*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.
- Strasser, Susan. *Never Done: A History of American Housework*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- Strega (Network Executive). “I Had Plans for That Rock!” *Television Without Pity*, August 26, 2009. <http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?s=1536910269cc4be8022c8921bf96f8c&showtopic=3187670&st=30>.
- Tako, Barbara. *Clutter Clearing Choices: Clear Clutter, Organize Your Home, & Reclaim Your Life*. Winchester, UK and Washington, D.C.: O Books, 2010.
- The Board of Certification for Professional Organizers. *Candidate Handbook for the Certified Professional Organizer Credential*. The Board of Certification for Professional Organizers, March 2011.
- “The Brown Family.” *Clean House*. Style Network, August 6, 2008.

- “The Bucci Family.” *Clean House*. Style Network, May 18, 2011.
- “The Container Store.” *International Directory of Company Histories*. St. James, MO: St. James Press, 2001.
- The Harried Life of the Working Mother*. Pew Social and Demographic Trends. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, October 1, 2009.
- The Lost Decade of the Middle Class*. Pew Social and Demographic Trends. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, August 22, 2012.
- The New Home in 2015*. Economics and Housing Policy Group. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Home Builders, December 2010.
- The State of the Nation's Housing*. Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2011.
- Thompson, E. P. “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” *Past & Present* no. 38 (December 1967): 56–97.
- Tigerman, Bobbye. “‘I Am Not a Decorator’: Florence Knoll, the Knoll Planning Unit and the Making of the Modern Office.” *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 61–74.
- Tolin, David F., Randy O. Frost, and Gail Steketee. *Buried in Treasures: Help For Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Tugend, Alina. “Willpower, and Maybe a Camera, to Get Rid of Your Unused Junk.” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2010.
- Tyre, Peg, and Julie Scelfo. “Clean Freaks.” *Newsweek*, June 7, 2004.
- Vanderkam, Laura. “Core Competency Mom Part 2: Life, Uncluttered,” May 29, 2008. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-vanderkam/core-competency-mom-part\\_b\\_104001.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-vanderkam/core-competency-mom-part_b_104001.html).
- Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994.
- Vogt, Stephanie Bennett. *Your Spacious Self: Clear Your Clutter and Discover Who You Are*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc., 2007.
- Volz, Candace M. “The Modern Look of the Early-Twentieth Century House: A Mirror of Changing Lifestyles.” In *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Space and Services*, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, 25–48. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992.
- Wajda, Shirley T. “Kmartha.” *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 71–88.
- Walker, David. “Pure and Simple.” *MediaWeek*, March 3, 2004.
- Walsh, Peter. “7 Secrets of a Master Organizer.” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012.
- . *Does This Clutter Make My Butt Look Fat?: An Easy Plan for Losing Weight and Living More*. New York: Free Press, 2008.
- . *Enough Already! Clearing Mental Clutter to Become the Best You*. New York: Free Press, 2009.
- . *It's All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- . “What Kind of Clutterer Are You?” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012.

- Ward, Gerald W. R. *American Case Furniture in the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 1988.
- Weber, Cheryl. "Spare the Rod ... Spoil the Margins; Builders Are Teaming with Closet Companies to Offer Prepackaged Upgrades in a Range of Homes." *Builder*, January 15, 2003.
- Weinman, Jaime J. "Can't Get Enough of Compulsive Hoarders." *Maclean's*, January 17, 2011.
- Weiser, Carl. "Many Seek A Place For Their Stuff." *USA Today*, December 26, 2003.
- West, Amy. "Reality Television and the Power of Dirt: Metaphor and Matter." *Screen* 52, no. 1 (March 2011): 63–77.
- "What We Stand For | Our Foundation Principles." *Www.thecontainerstore.com*. Accessed January 27, 2013. <http://standfor.containerstore.com/our-foundation-principles/>.
- "What We Stand For | Our Story." *Www.thecontainerstore.com*. Accessed February 1, 2012. <http://standfor.containerstore.com/our-story/>.
- "Who Is She? (Realsimple.com Media Kit, Based on Nielson Real Simple Online Visitor Profile Study)." *Realsimple.com*, September 2010. <http://www.realsimple.com/static/rsr/digital-media-kit/audience.html>.
- Who's Feeling Rushed?* Pew Social and Demographic Trends. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, February 28, 2006.
- Whybrow, Peter C. *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.
- Wilk, Christopher. *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914-1939*. London: V&A Publications, 2006.
- Williams, Sarah Bay. *Digital Shoebox: How to Organize, Find, and Share Your Photos, The*. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 2009.
- Wilson, Kristina. *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 2004.
- Wilson, Mike. "Thinking Inside the Box." *St. Petersburg Times (Florida)*, May 28, 1999.
- Winfrey, Oprah. "Editor's Note." *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012.
- Winston, Stephanie. *Getting Organized: The Easy Way To Put Your Life in Order*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.
- Wolfe, Tom. "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening." *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1976. <http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>.
- De Wolff, Maartje. *Clear Your Way to a Clutter Free Life*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2006.
- Woodham, Jonathan M. *Twentieth-Century Design*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Wright, Gwendolyn. *Building the Dream: a Social History of Housing in America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.
- Young, Robb. "No-glamour Glossies: A Guide Back to Basics." *The International Herald Tribune*, March 1, 2006.

*O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2012.