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The politics of furniture: Identity, diplomacy and persuasion in post-war interiors. [Book Review]

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Review of *The Politics of Furniture , Identity, Diplomacy and Persuasion in Post-War Interiors*, Freddie Floré and Carmine McAtee, eds , Routledge 2017, 215 pages, 66 b/w and 16 color illustrations, hardback, £95.00 ISBN 978-1-4724-5355-6.

This innovative and exciting addition to the literature develops recent specialist research and new debates on the topic of the role of furniture in interiors. Whilst furniture studies have moved a long way from their traditional roots, and now comfortably engage with material culture, consumption practices, science and technology studies, and other disciplines, it is a relatively new approach to look at furniture through the lens of politics, and vice versa. In the work under review, we now have a set of ground-breaking contributions to furniture and interior studies that takes a specific period of time in the mid-twentieth century and considers the politics of furniture through the three headings of identity, diplomacy and persuasion. Within these broad sub-topics, the authors, through a series of case studies, successfully engage with other issues including soft power; the nature of agency and relationships; the role and nature of mediation; issues of identity, and of course, the role of furniture in and out of the context of interiors. Whilst emphasizing the political and cultural aspects of modern furniture between 1945 and the mid 1970s, the chapters are illuminated by contributions from design history, heritage studies, interior architecture histories, cultural and political histories, postcolonial and tourism studies. Whilst most of these are not new territory for furniture studies, the breadth and depth of the studies and the links to politics clearly move the subject on, and suggest great possibilities for further studies. Overall, the book provides a well-integrated collection of chapters

mostly derived from primary sources, built around a particular theme that adds substantially to the body of knowledge. As it is so wide-ranging, many different audiences will find much to appreciate within it.

It should be no surprise that one of the major names that runs through much of the book is that of Knoll. Consistently associated with post-war modern furniture design, manufacture and marketing, the importance of the company to the discussion is evident in the extensive index entries for Knoll, Florence Schust Knoll, Knoll Associates Inc., Knoll International, the Knoll Planning Unit and Knoll Textiles. Indeed the editors refer to and introduce the Knoll phenomenon in their introduction, and the first figure in the book is an advertisement by the Knoll company showing their worldwide reach. One could see the whole argument of the book in this one image of power, mediation and identity politics.

As is the custom with multi-authored publications, the editors introduce the main themes and the ethos of the work. They explain the Knoll phenomenon, the nature of furniture as a political agent, and explain the driving theoretical positions adopted. These include power politics, global perspectives, cultural biographies of individual pieces, actor-network theory and the nature and role of mediation. Thus the introduction lays out the ground work for the more specific case studies which are organised in three parts.

The first part is Furniture and Identity Politics. Johan Lagae's chapter opens up a discussion of how 'modernist' consumer cultures were introduced into the Belgian Congo in the post-war period -the so-called "Tropical modernism". Although it is

extremely interesting, not least for its analysis of the BKR (aka Butterfly) chair, this reviewer found the discussion of the afterlife of some of the original furniture objects particularly revealing and stimulating. Erica N. Morawski's chapter considers the politics of hotel furniture in the Spanish Caribbean through issues of identity, tourism, politics and revisionism, using the case studies of the hotel interiors of the Caribe Hilton (Puerto Rico 1949) and the Havana Riviera (Cuba, 1957). The relationship between the reality of the USA's influence and the desire for a local style is examined to understand how the shifting demands of identity were met by hotel interiors.

The difficulties of reconciling tradition with modernity are considered in Martin Racine's chapter on post-war furniture design in Québec. Here, the discussion enters the field of education and issues raised around the identity of Québec furniture products through the conflicts between traditional style and modern identity. The last chapter of this section addresses the interiors of the Belgian Royal Library by Freddie Floré and Hannes Pieters. Here national identity and representation is examined through a prestige library building and its furnishings. The chapter considers the 'library's interior as a negotiator of political identity ... before focusing on the mediating role of the remarkable modern interior furnishings'. (62) This neatly sums up how the whole book inextricably links interiors and furniture to the issues of identity and mediation.

The second section, titled Spaces of Persuasion, starts with Margaret Maile Petty's discussion of exhibitions for modern living in the United States between the 1930s and the 1950s. The crucial role played by manufacturers' showrooms and exhibitions as agents of change, is examined to consider the notion that 'better living' through 'good design' expressed the mid-twentieth century American 'way of life'. The

authors explain the role of mediation: ‘How and where these messages were delivered and the critical role of cultural and commercial networks in the promotion of modern design and furnishings forms a core theme of the chapter’. (84) This is followed by a chapter by the editors titled *Knolling Paris: From the “New Look” to Knoll au Louvre*. The part explores the roles of Yves Vidal and Charles Sévigny in marketing Knoll products not as American ‘cool modern’ but as French ‘luxury chic’. The last chapter in this section by Yasuko Suga addresses *Correction Fairs and Japanese Furniture Made in Prison*. Immediately fascinating as a topic, it again reflects the influence of American furniture as an exemplar of modernism. More specifically it considers the important role of mediation through correction fairs, where the goods were sold and thus persuaded customers to enjoy Western style furniture whilst supporting local crafts.

The third part relates to The Diplomacy of Furniture. Not unsurprisingly, the three essays in this section relate to government buildings. First is an interesting discussion of *National Identity and Modern Furniture in Brasilia’s Itamaraty Palace* by Luciana Saboia, Elane Ribeiro Peixoto, and José Airton Costa Junior. This chapter looks at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brasilia and identifies the various and changing conflicts of how to project a country’s identity. Secondly, Cammie McAtee’s discussion of Eero Saarinen’s United States embassy in London not only raises important issues around Saarinen’s building and the interiors, but also raises questions around the issue of the identity of the container (shell) and the contained (interior). The discussion is interwoven with an evaluation of the concept of soft power in relation to Abstract Expressionism, along with analysis of contemporary heritage issues. Finally the chapter by Philip Goad discusses the furnishing and

decoration of Australian embassies in Washington DC and Paris. The comparison allows the reader to explore two very different approaches to Australia's embassy building. In the Washington (1969) version, the interiors and furnishings identify a country that is in the sphere of influence of the USA, whereas in the case of Paris (1978) the spaces and furnishings reveal a new-found individuality reflecting a confident Australian sensibility.

Generously provided with 66 b/w and 16 color illustrations, the book includes many unfamiliar images that illuminate the discussions in the chapters. This is an exciting and valuable addition to architecture and design studies that raises the bar for future authors.

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