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Abstract

*Dwell* magazine is not a magazine and it is not about architecture. Often grouped in the shelter magazine category, *Dwell* describes itself as somewhere between an architecture trade publication and a consumer shelter magazine, pulling successfully from both of these audiences to form its current circulation base of 341,000. In an analysis of the ten-year history of the *Dwell* brand—which includes the magazine as well as several other branding outlets, including a website, a design show, and even a line of *Dwell* prefabricated houses—this project examines how the *Dwell* company has created and insistently promoted a lifestyle based on the stylistic and philosophical tenets of early twentieth-century modernism. In the pages of *Dwell*, however, a spectacularized image of modernism rules, where the appearance of a modern style is invested with a new level of cultural cachet, ultimately marketed by *Dwell* as a commodity available for purchase. This project explores why the *Dwell* brand of modernism holds such appeal, and consequently, to what new cultural uses the image of modernism is being put today.
Dwell magazine is not a magazine and it is not about architecture. Although it is often grouped in the shelter magazine category, Dwell describes itself as being somewhere between an architecture trade publication and a consumer shelter magazine, pulling successfully from both of these audiences to form its current readership base of 334,000. Although the magazine is certainly the centerpiece of the company, the Dwell brand is composed of several other outlets, including an extensive website, a yearly design show, a Dwell television show, and several Dwell brand home products, even including a line of Dwell prefabricated houses. The Dwell company is based out of San Francisco, and the magazine just had their ten-year anniversary in October of last year.

Dwell is known for taking a more design-focused and environmentally conscious slant on residential living—they offer a more hip and trendy take on the typical shelter magazine. You can see here the difference in Dwell’s approach to residential living from that of these older, more traditional shelter magazines. While these other magazines such as House Beautiful and Architectural Digest feature lavishly decorated homes with a conservative aesthetic, Dwell has a much more modern, alternative feeling, lower-case title—bucking authority, not really offering an authoritative voice. The title of the issue is “Modern Living on a Budget” and in contrast to the other cover homes, the Dwell home looks relatively modest—middle-class, mid-century modern style (car, dress, house). There are actually people in the image—which produces “candid” shots rather than something that looks very staged.
In the first issue of Dwell magazine published in October of 2000, founder Lara Hedberg Deam wrote an opening letter to readers, introducing Dwell and explaining its mission. In the letter, she paints a dismal picture of the current state of residential architecture in the United States, but she also sees hope on the horizon for something better. She writes, “Somehow, times have changed but our houses haven’t. Sure, there are economic and nostalgic reasons to build certain ways, but many people are finding they can address these concerns and have something that feels genuinely of this day.” Finally, she asks of readers, “**Don’t we deserve our own movement?**”\(^1\)

Asking us this pivotal question, “don’t we deserve our own movement?” Lara Hedberg Deam issues a call to arms to Dwell readers, insisting that we owe it to ourselves as a culture to establish an American architecture that is quintessentially representative of our time, of this current moment. From the very first issue, Dwell has placed itself at the helm of a new, revolutionary movement to define an architecture for our time.

What makes Dwell such an interesting case study of this moment in the popular architectural press is not only that it is the sole magazine in the shelter category with such a revolutionary and weighty mission, but also that the Dwell company zeroed in on one particular style to define this new movement: modernism.

**Slide 4  Examples of modernist nostalgia/retro-modernism [DWR, IKEA…]**

Dwell’s focus on a modern aesthetic reflects a larger cultural resurgence of modernism that took place in the early 2000s. At this time there was a burst of nostalgic

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\(^1\) Lara Hedberg Deam, “From the Robie House… To our House,” Dwell issue 1, p. 10.
interest in “mid-century modern,” with the topic popping up in museum exhibitions, in luxury furniture lines for high-end design stores, and as new subjects for television shows. (Getty—acquired Julius Shulman archive in 2004/5, Stahl House/Case Study House #22; Design Within Reach which started the same year as Dwell and whose founder Rob Forbes is actually good friends with Dwell’s founder, Lara Hedberg Deam; the 1960s-inspired *Mad Men* on AMC, 2007).

The popular architectural press also picked up on this interest in modernism, running features such as this one from Elle Décor called “The Softer Side of Modern.” However, these shelter magazines tended to feature modernism merely as the latest flavor-of-the-month, switching back over to another style or “ism” the following month. *Dwell*, on the other hand, was founded and built exclusively and entirely around modernism. In fact, Dwell’s mission statement reads: “Bringing modern design to everyone—anytime, any place, anywhere, and in any form.” Dwell has identified the modernist past as the ideal model to define the next new movement in architecture.

Embracing a modern aesthetic in both its magazine and its other outlets has been remarkably financially lucrative for the Dwell company. I believe it is precisely this modernist branding campaign that has helped Dwell survive and thrive over the past ten years while a host of other shelter magazines have recently shut their doors [Domino, *O* at Home, Metropolitan Home, *House & Garden*, Cottage Living].

As such, Dwell stands as a rich example not only of a new architectural movement, but also of how modernism and its architectural goals are today being revived, re-tooled, and perhaps most importantly, re-branded.

**Slide 5** Popularizing Modernism
The other side of the coin to Dwell’s emphasis on a modern aesthetic is the magazine’s popular appeal. Dwell has been very deliberate about placing a more democratic spin on its adaptation of the look and feel of modernism. It is no secret that modernism in its design and architectural manifestations has been repeatedly criticized over the past 60 years for its utopian social aspirations and claims to be for the masses, when in built form, the modernist style ultimately became the face of corporate institutionalism. These critiques were perhaps voiced most loudly by the postmodernists in the 1970s and 80s. However, Dwell skims over these criticisms, instead using its purportedly popular appeal to make those utopian modernist promises seem attainable and possible once again.

One way Dwell establishes this popular appeal is by its commitment to feature and speak to “real people.” In fact, “Real homes for real people” has become the Dwell mantra, as you can see in these two covers, the one on the left from Feb. 2009 and the one on the right the cover of Dwell’s premiere issue in Oct. 2000. Dwell defines “real” as middle-class, non-elite, and non-professional. Karrie Jacobs, Dwell’s founding editor-in-chief, identifies this new target audience in the manifesto she wrote for Dwell in that first issue. In it, she writes, “At Dwell, we’re staging a minor revolution. We think that it’s possible to live in a house or apartment by a bold modern architect, to own furniture and products that are exceptionally well designed, and still be a regular human being. We think that good design is an integral part of real life.”

**Slide 6**

“**Real Homes for Real People**”

All this emphasis on “real people” isn’t just lip service—Dwell has worked hard to make its magazine look more egalitarian and democratic. There are no elaborately
staged studio sets here, and Dwell has rejected approaches like the Architectural Digest model of featuring celebrity homes. Instead, since its very first issue, Dwell has featured almost exclusively non-celebrity homes and actually pictures the people that live in those homes—something that was actually quite novel for the shelter magazine category and really made Dwell stand out from the crowd when it debuted. Dwell uses almost exclusively portrait photographers for their shoots, rather than architectural photographers. Even more, Dwell editors specifically instruct people being featured in the magazine not to prepare for the photo shoot. They actively try to cultivate pictures of homes that look lived in and authentic, rather than staged or choreographed. In many ways, Dwell has been successful in achieving this real-life authenticity, as their pictures often recall family snapshots of parents at home with dogs and kids underfoot.

However, for all the snapshot qualities of Dwell’s photography, there is often something that makes them seem highly staged. It is as if Dwell photographers pose their subjects in such a way as to make their shots appear candid.

**Slide 7  Kitchen comparison**
*Elle Décor (September 2010), Dwell (August 2010)*

Compare, for example, these two pictures of kitchens—one from Dwell and one from Elle Décor. While the *Dwell* image stands out for the magazine’s stock technique of including people, both kitchens appear equally as implausible and unrealistic in their immaculate white cleanliness. Even the ‘real-life’ elements of the *Dwell* image appear staged, with the child’s drawing and crayons perfectly centered on the kitchen table and that shiny modern tea kettle turned at just the right angle to be photographed. What’s more, the Dwell kitchen is actually much more expensive than the Elle Décor kitchen. In the Dwell kitchen, there is custom cabinetry and the table alone cost $2600, while in the
Elle Décor kitchen the IKEA cabinetry and vintage stools seem much more attainable for the everyday person.

**Slide 8  Kids’ Toys Comparison**
*Dwell (September 2006), Elle Décor (September 2010)*

Despite its propensity for featuring costly modern interiors, Dwell has consistently used modernism as the vehicle for delivering its message of optimistic middle-class access. The phrase “good design for all” means, in Dwell, “modern design for all.” However, in many ways it is precisely this modern aesthetic that accounts for the stiff, staged appearance in many of Dwell’s feature photographs. In sparse, pared-down homes such as this one on the left, the magazine’s modernist aesthetic of clean lines, crisp forms, and industrial materials often leads to barren-looking spaces that have a sense of perpetual emptiness. In this Dwell home, the trappings of everyday life—children’s toys strewn across the hallway—seem horribly out of place in this sterile modern interior. The toys here look almost like props, so incongruous with the stark modern interior that they have the effect of making the photograph seem staged. Compare to this children’s room from an issue of Elle Décor, which looks much more lived-in. The variety of textures, patterns, and shapes and the absence of any one particular design style in the Elle Décor room contrast sharply with the slick, cold emptiness of the modern Dwell home. In the end, it is precisely this modern aesthetic that makes Dwell’s images appear more staged than other shelter magazine photography.

**Slide 9  Unhappy Hipsters**
*Dwell (February/March 2006), Dwell (November 2009)*

Dwell’s critics have also recognized the tense, uneasy nature of Dwell’s photography—one of the more humorous of these critiques is the anonymous blog
“Unhappy Hipsters.” The blog takes pictures almost exclusively from Dwell magazine and attaches these sarcastic, cynical captions. Capturing the sense of loneliness often lingering just beneath the surface of Dwell’s images, the blog pins these feelings of discomfort on the modernist aesthetic propagated in the magazine. As the blog’s tagline dejectedly reminds us, “It’s Lonely in the Modern World.” There is, then, a disconnect between Dwell’s claims of presenting a more accessible version of modernism, and the highly staged, unrealistic appearance this same modernism creates in its featured images. Nevertheless, the magazine continues to maintain that this modern aesthetic holds the power to improve the lives of everyday people and the spaces in which they live. In fact, this promise embedded in their version of modernism has been quite appealing, as Dwell’s circulation has steadily increased since 2000 when they started with a meager 50,000 circulation, whereas today it’s at 334,000.

Slide 10 The Dwell Brand Experience

Since launching the magazine, Dwell has also expanded to become a recognizable brand with a footprint much larger than the magazine’s circulation figure. This is something the Dwell company pushes to its potential advertisers, as you can see in this diagram of the “Dwell Brand Experience” which I pulled from the Media Kit Dwell sends to potential advertisers. [...] In all cases, Dwell’s signature brand of modernism rules, where the productive possibilities for modernism’s image are open and limitless. As current editor-in-chief Sam Grawe put it in a recent issue, “Modern design offers the surest foothold on the future—a step closer to paradise.” Visually, Dwell promises that this personal improvement can occur when readers take charge of their
living environments and apply Dwell’s modern look to the trappings of their domestic lives.

**Slide 11  The Dwell Aesthetic**

Even more, the Dwell aesthetic offers its audience a way to show the world that just like the magazine they read, they too are forward-looking and occupy an avant-garde position. The magazine implies to its readers that applying the Dwell aesthetic is a way to mark themselves and their design taste as distinctive and cutting edge. Dwell readers stand out because they “have a different idea of home,” as this early promotional ad for Dwell claims. Dwell homes such as these two pictured here stand out from neighboring homes and look very different. The home on the bottom being a prime example, as the clean, modern lines of the home and the wide, projecting windows made from re-purposed truck bodies look even more architecturally innovative when sandwiched between two traditional cornice-capped buildings. This is just one example of Dwell merging design ingenuity with a modern aesthetic—a tactic that has helped Dwell’s modernism to stand for forward-looking innovation and cultural acuity. It is precisely Dwell’s modern aesthetic that seems to best fulfill the promises of personal and cultural improvement that the magazine offers to its readers. In this way, Dwell serves as a place where readers’ assumptions about upward mobility and continuous personal progress can play themselves out, even if ultimately, these assumptions and the images by which they are represented function primarily as fantasies.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the American dream and its promise of upward social mobility is today becoming a fantasy in the U.S. The reality is that the middle class in the U.S. today is shrinking, not expanding, and goals that used to seem
attainable, like sending your kids to college, the security of a comfortable retirement package, and owning your own home, are becoming increasingly harder to attain. With income inequality at an all-time high, the socio-economic position of the American middle class is slipping further and further out of reach for those in the lowest income brackets. Not to mention those who were middle-class and are now falling off the wagon. However, this has by no means stopped shelter magazines like Dwell from portraying such quintessential markers of a middle class identity as home ownership and home renovation projects as ubiquitous and attainable realities.

Ultimately, these promises of social improvement and ease of upward mobility function as a kind of utopia for Dwell readers—a vision of an idealistic future where dreams, especially the American dream of middle class homeownership, are realized. This kind of thinking recalls earlier modernist imaginings of a utopian future, such as the Bauhaus dream that rationality and functionality in mass-production could yield quality household products for all. However, principles such as these have been transformed by Dwell for an entirely new set of goals. Dwell channels this earlier utopian vision of cultural progress through a set of middle class markers, imagining a future where “good design is an integral part of real life” [as Karrie Jacobs put it in the Dwell manifesto]. Dwell’s modernist utopia restores faith in a failing middle class population, creating a place where cultural aspirations for things like “good” architecture and design can function as a way for readers to hold on to a middle class position that is rapidly slipping away. In buying into these particular goals being peddled by Dwell, readers can use them not necessarily as actual objectives—one wonders how many Dwell readers are actually going to remodel their kitchens or buy a Dwell prefabricated home. Instead, they function
as a set of cultural aspirations that readers can try on as a means of asserting their middle class prosperity and stability. The Dwell style, then, functions not so much as a means of actually changing or improving one’s social status, but rather as a way for readers to appear cultured and upwardly socially mobile, without necessarily being so.

Because *Dwell* has so actively promoted its own image, shaping it into an easily identifiable modernist aesthetic as a means of increasing brand recognition, modernism in *Dwell* hinges on the way this style is marketed to its audience. In the end, *Dwell*’s new modernism becomes not a new cultural movement, but instead, to use a phrase borrowed from journalist Naomi Klein, it is “marketing that thinks it’s culture.”¹ A marker of a high cultured taste, the *Dwell* aesthetic takes on a new, perhaps unintended function for the *Dwell* reader—a mask of cultural aspirations he or she can put on at a moment’s notice in order to hold in check the anxieties of an uncertain middle-class position.