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Modernism Remodeled: Branding the Image of Modernism in

*Dwell* Magazine, 2000-2010

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Art History

by

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December 2010
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December 2010
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by

Lauren Lynda Gallow
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the extensive communication with and feedback from my thesis advisor Laurie Monahan. Her insights and advice were invaluable in guiding the central arguments of this thesis, and her endless encouragement kept this project moving forward. I am also grateful to Michela O’Connor Abrams, Keven Weeks, and Sam Grawe from Dwell magazine for being so generous and forthright with their time and comments—my interviews with them most certainly formed the foundation of this project. I also owe thanks to my other thesis committee members, Richard Wittman and Bruce Robertson, whose feedback and support were important factors in the development of this project. Finally, I am so grateful for the unyielding support and encouragement from my parents (all four of them) and my partner AMP, who were always there to listen, offer advice, and inspire me to keep working.
ABSTRACT

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by

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Dwell magazine is not a magazine and it is not about architecture. 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 circulation base of 341,000. Although the magazine has been the centerpiece of the company since its inception in October of 2000, the Dwell brand is composed of several other outlets, including an extensive website; Dwell on Design, the largest design show on the west coast; a Dwell television show; and even a line of Dwell prefabricated houses. In an analysis of the ten-year history of the Dwell brand, this project primarily examines the editorial, design, and marketing evolution of Dwell magazine to show how the company has created and insistently promoted a lifestyle based on the stylistic and philosophical tenets of early twentieth-century modernism. Effectively branding modernism as the most relevant architectural style for our time, Dwell has positioned its magazine as a kind of guidebook for achieving the modernist lifestyle.
In the pages of *Dwell*, 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, both for its magazine readership and the scores of other consumers buying modern-looking products, and consequently, to what new cultural uses the image of modernism is being put today.
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I. Introduction

In the first issue of *Dwell* magazine published in October of 2000, *Dwell* founder Lara Hedberg Deam gives this account of the current state of residential architecture in the United States:

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.¹

Identifying and addressing a *Dwell* readership tired of the ubiquitous cookie-cutter tract houses culled from a stock of such (according to Deam) banal and dated styles as Neo-Colonial, Cape Cod, Mediterranean, and Tudor, Deam calls on these readers to demand something different from their homes. Instead of looking to these past architectural styles and relying on antiquated home owner/home builder relationships where the builder calls the shots in terms of design, Deam declares, “Don’t we deserve our own movement?”² At the turn of the millennium, when architects, critics, and the general public alike had tired of the superficial pastiche of postmodernism, its stock techniques of parody and irony that had lost their radicality and become almost formulaic, and the postmodern refusal that architecture could effect social or individual change, *Dwell* magazine stands as evidence of a pivotal moment in the world of architecture when everyone seemed to be asking, ‘What’s


² Ibid.
next?’. Issuing a break from the past with Deam’s call for an architecture that “feels genuinely of this day,” Dwell began with the laudable mission of defining the next new American architectural movement. What makes Dwell such an interesting case study of this moment in the popular architectural press is not only that Dwell is the sole magazine in the shelter category with such a revolutionary and weighty mission, but that the Dwell company zeroed in on one particular style and its accompanying ideologies to define this new movement: modernism.³

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a burst of nostalgic interest in the artifacts and personalities of early twentieth-century modernism, with “mid-century modern” popping up in titles for museum exhibitions, in luxury furniture lines for high-end design stores, and as new subjects for television shows such as the 1960s-inspired Mad Men.⁴ The popular architectural press also picked up on this interest in

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³ This battle cry on the part of Deam for an architectural movement that accurately represents the current age actually closely resembles many early twentieth-century arguments for modernism as the quintessential movement and corresponding architectural style of the epoch. For example, Bruno Zevi wrote in 1950, “Our houses, no less than our clothes or our means of transport, ought to be different from those of our ancestors, to be more convenient and simpler.” Towards an Organic Architecture (London: Faber & Faber, 1950): 23. Even closer to Deam’s statement is architectural critic Catherine Bauer’s sentiment expressed in 1934 that “the new conditions… determine entirely new forms. No one would any longer endeavor to make an automobile look like a gilded royal coach, nor a steamship like a schooner; it is just as great an anachronism to attempt to make a modern house imitate a Tudor cottage or a Renaissance pavilion.” Modern Housing (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934): 218-9.

⁴ Many design and cultural critics have noted this resurgence of nostalgic interest in mid-century modernism, especially in popular culture outlets. See for example Jim Collins’ chapter on “Retro-Modernism” in his Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age (New York: Routledge, 1995), Paul Grainge’s “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling,” Journal of American
modernism by the time *Dwell* was founded in late 2000, with shelter magazines *Architectural Digest* and *House Beautiful* running such features as “Country Modernism” and “The Modern Style Kitchen” earlier that same year. However, unlike these more established shelter magazines that were treating modernism as merely one of a host of possible styles from which to choose, *Dwell* founder Lara Hedberg Deam built her magazine exclusively and entirely around modernism, with *Dwell*’s mission statement reading, “Bringing modern design to everyone—anytime, any place, any where, and in any form.”5 Even more, *Dwell* identifies the modernist past as the ideal model to define the next new movement in architecture. 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 being re-captured and re-envisioned today.

This is not to imply that *Dwell* is completely casting off postmodernist ideology; on the contrary, *Dwell* employs many postmodern tactics in its retooling of modernism. Postmodern in its mission to present a more humanistic and egalitarian architecture that incorporates elements of the past, *Dwell* zeroes in on an exclusively modernist style in this venture, rather than blending elements of multiple past styles as postmodern architecture is prone to do. While many postmodernists responded to

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the ahistorical aspect of the modern movement by reaching back into the past and appropriating such styles as classicism or vernacular regionalisms, *Dwell* looks specifically to mid-century modernism in its excavation of the past. Lending its movement an air of legitimacy and novelty, *Dwell* insists on moving past the superficial pastiche of postmodernism, sloughing off the postmodern stylistic excess to reveal a clean, restrained modern aesthetic that the magazine imbues with a new sense of purity and purpose. Yet, *Dwell* continues the postmodern tradition of resisting the dogmatic and dictatorial prescriptions of modernism, as the magazine insists that its ideologies are not tied to one corresponding style. Encouraging readers to identify their own particular taste in architecture and design, *Dwell* applies a postmodern, popularizing bent to its modernist message.

Compared to the modernism codified by critic Clement Greenberg, who held that the modern movement was driven forward by an avant-garde who defined itself in opposition to the crass consumerism of mass culture, *Dwell* defines modernism in terms that turn the Greenbergian standard on its head. Pitching itself as a popular and inclusive magazine intended for Everyman—“real homes for real people” being one of *Dwell*’s key taglines—*Dwell* professes to be breaking down this barrier between high culture and the masses by presenting a uniquely accessible brand of modernism. The discussion of architecture and design is no longer restricted exclusively to those with advanced degrees or professional training. Instead, *Dwell* proposes that architecture can be meaningful and relevant for the average layperson, using modernism as the vehicle for delivering this more straightforward and intelligible
reading of architecture. This populist element was certainly present in early twentieth-century high modernism—take the Bauhaus idea that standardization and mechanical reproduction could set higher standards of living for everyone, or Le Corbusier’s utopian vision of serving the masses in his plans for prefabricated and mass housing. However, in reality, these high modernist projects rarely filtered down to the masses and instead generally remained in the realm of Greenberg’s proposed avant-garde. 6 Dwell’s popularizing take on modernism, then, serves as a postmodern answer to the perceived shortcomings of mid-century modernism.

Yet, despite the magazine’s emphasis on ideology over style, Dwell does have a very specific look that is drawn from early twentieth-century high modernism. I explore in this paper the various implications of Dwell’s commitment to this one particular modern style, especially in the face of the magazine’s adamant editorial refusal that it possesses such a distinct look. Curiously, the Dwell company, in contrast to the editorial message of its magazine linchpin, has actually embraced its now trademark modern look, aggressively expanding the Dwell brand into various outlets and products that have helped solidify Dwell’s association with a recognizable modern aesthetic. This branding campaign has been remarkably

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6 For example, consider the fact that many Bauhaus designs for household objects never made it into the hands of the masses because their designs and shapes proved too complicated to produce industrially. Now, those Bauhaus prototypes are highly prized collectors’ items, a Bauhaus teapot designed by Marianne Brandt recently selling at auction for a record-breaking $361,000. Alice Rawsthorn, “The Tale of a Teapot and its Creator,” New York Times, 16 December 2007. It is also common knowledge that most, if not all, high modernist architects, including such social heroes as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe, devoted a large portion of their practice to wealthy, high profile clients.
commercially successful, helping to sustain *Dwell* magazine over the past ten years while a host of other shelter magazines have shut their doors.⁷

Running parallel to *Dwell*’s proposition for a new ideological purity of purpose through modernism, then, is the company’s simultaneous branding of this modern style—a commodified version of modernism that operates in the realm of the very capitalist culture against which Greenbergarian modernism was originally pitched. With the magazine consistently pushing certain Dwell brand or Dwell endorsed commodities as the ideal way to lead a modern life, this sense of commercialism is central to *Dwell*’s take on modernism—a modernism that can ultimately function only in spectacular terms. While it arguably empties modernism of any deeper cultural meaning or critical edge, *Dwell*’s particular adaptation of modernism suggests that today, a resurrection in the form of spectacle may be the only kind of cultural survival modernism can hope for. As evidenced by *Dwell*, the image of modernism has become highly valuable today, not just in terms of the high price value the *Dwell* readership is willing to pay for products with a modern look, but also a new kind of cultural value, where modern style becomes a shorthand for signifying a high cultured taste. Rather than condemn *Dwell* for this retooling of modernism where a spectacularized image of modernism is emphasized—after all, what would we expect from the highly visual medium of the popular magazine?—I aim to explore first why the *Dwell* brand of modernism holds such appeal, both for

⁷ Many of the newer titles that emerged around the same time as *Dwell* in the year 2000, including *Domino*, *Cottage Living*, and *O at Home* have recently closed down, but so have some of the category’s mainstays, such as *Metropolitan Home* and even the 125-year-old *House & Garden*, which closed its doors in 2007.
its magazine readership and the scores of other consumers buying modern-looking products, and consequently, to what new cultural uses the image of modernism is being put today.

First, I examine *Dwell*’s proposition for a new architectural movement and its subsequent adoption of modernism as the basis for this movement. As part of that new proposition, I explore the popularizing bent *Dwell* has applied to this re-tooling of modernism and how it actually plays out in the images and text of the magazine. While *Dwell* editors assert in writing that the magazine’s goal is to make modernism more accessible, I explore some alternate ways these images work for readers and for the magazine itself. Holding meanings and values to readers beyond those enumerated by *Dwell* editors, these images become a place where contemporary class anxieties and cultural aspirations get played out. I show how the *Dwell* modern style as it is marketed to the *Dwell* audience serves to quell these anxieties and feed those cultural aspirations, ultimately overturning the original ideologies invested in *Dwell*’s new modernism. Finally, I consider how all of this figures into the larger history of modernism and, more specifically, modernism’s image.

II. “Real Homes for Real People”—Popularizing Modernism in Text versus Image in *Dwell*

What exactly is *Dwell*’s new architectural perspective? How does *Dwell* explain its proposition for an architecture that is “genuinely of this day,” as founder Lara Hedberg Deam put it? From the very first issue of the magazine, the two
defining features of Dwell’s proposed architectural movement have been its focus on a modernist ideology and the popular appeal Dwell has applied to this new take on modernism. This appearance of a popular movement certainly sets Dwell apart from other attempts to define the next stage in architecture and imagine its future. Since the waning of postmodernism in the late 1990s, there have been several such attempts to name the next architectural movement, but they have largely been located in the professional and academic realms. Dwell, on the other hand, claims to be generating their new movement out of the wants and needs of a mainstream, non-professional audience—a claim that is bolstered by its position within the popular shelter magazine press.

This popularizing project is closely intertwined with Dwell’s retooling of the modern movement, as Dwell has been very deliberate about placing a more democratic spin on its adaptation of the look and ideologies of modernism. This re-consideration of modernism is certainly nothing new in the world of architecture, as one could argue that even postmodernism—a movement known for its difference in style and operating principles from modern architecture—was built on a radical critique and reassessment of modernism. “Post-Modernism does not reject

Modernism totally, as traditionalists might,” architectural theorist Charles Jencks wrote in 1983, “but develops its own hybrid language partly from its predecessor.” However, instead of criticizing modern architecture as postmodernists such as Jencks, Robert Venturi, and Kenneth Frampton did, Dwell lauds it. In fact, Dwell celebrates the very ideologies of modernism that these postmodernists sought to debunk: its utopian aspirations, its universalizing tendencies, and the promise that a particular ‘modern’ aesthetic in architecture could foster social change and a better way of life for its inhabitants.

In order to bring these aspects of modern architecture into the twenty-first century and present them as viable possibilities, Dwell actually takes a cue from postmodernists and applies a popularizing bent to its message. While some postmodernists looked to popular and vernacular architecture as a way of exposing the false promises of modernism, however, Dwell uses its popular appeal to make those modernist promises seem attainable and possible once again—a clever marketing scheme that has helped the Dwell company reach financial prosperity in a shaky economy. Although Dwell has worked hard to generate a grassroots spirit for its new architectural movement, a closer look at Dwell’s particular brand of populism reveals that the magazine and its revolutionary message may not be quite as democratic and egalitarian as Dwell would like us to think—a point that will be made clear in a later section when I analyze some of the actual costs of Dwell-endorsed products and homes featured in the magazine.

Nevertheless, this façade of a mass-market appeal has been central to Dwell’s conception of its own post-postmodern movement. Essentially telling its audience that everyone and anyone can be part of this new architectural movement, Dwell uses the appearance of equal access to peddle its revolutionary message. In fact, while postmodernists often criticized modernism for its proclivity towards paternalism, this elitism often seemed to be an unintended after-effect of the modern movement, as many early modernists championed modern architecture for its ability to affect positively the average, everyday person. Indeed, Dwell is drawing on this early history of modernism—the promise that “modern architecture is eager to serve, not the autocrat who wishes to perpetuate himself, but the masses,” in the words of Italian architectural historian and critic Bruno Zevi in his seminal text on modern architecture, *Towards an Organic Architecture*.\(^\text{10}\) Thus, Dwell seems to be asking, “What about what the everyday person wants and needs in a building, and in their own personal dwelling in particular?” In answer to this question, Dwell presents its revolutionary movement as a non-professional one, aiming its message at “real people,” as the cover line on Dwell’s first issue identifies them (Figure 1).

In fact, “Real homes for real people” has become the *Dwell* mantra. The phrase frequently pops up on issue covers, in *Dwell* promotional material, and in *Dwell* staff descriptions of the magazine (Figure 2).\(^\text{11}\) Identifying ‘real people’ as


\(^{11}\) ‘Real’ certainly seems to be the catch-word for the type of people on which *Dwell* focuses, *Dwell* editor-in-chief Sam Grawe using it over and over again in his
their target audience, *Dwell* defines ‘real’ as middle-class, non-elite, and non-professional, seeking out a readership who may or may not have formal training or education in architecture and design. Karrie Jacobs, *Dwell*’s founding editor-in-chief, identifies this new target audience in the manifesto she wrote for *Dwell* in the first issue. “At *Dwell*, we’re staging a minor revolution,” she writes. “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.”

It is difficult to quantify exactly what *Dwell* means by ‘regular,’ ‘real’ people, as *Dwell* descriptions of their readership are consistently vague and open-ended. When I asked Dwell’s President and Publisher Michela O’Connor Abrams to describe the average *Dwell* reader, she skirted around statistical information on *Dwell* readers’ gender, age, income, education, etc. and instead insisted, “It’s really

assessment of *Dwell*’s success over the past ten years: “I think why Dwell succeeded was because we had a very real approach to things, and we talked […] with real people doing real things. […] There was a need for a shelter magazine that was actually about real people, and real people living in real, modern spaces.” [Emphasis mine.] Sam Grawe, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, 16 February 2010. International Brand Director Keven Weeks also echoes this sentiment, describing *Dwell* readers as people who “live everyday lives, they’re in the industry, they’re not in the industry,” highlighting the appeal *Dwell* seeks to have to ‘average’ people who may or may not have professional experience in the architecture and design industries. Keven Weeks, interview by the author, Mill Valley, CA, 13 February 2010.

not a demographic as much as it is a psychographic.” Implying that *Dwell* readers share a common mindset about architecture and design, one that is not necessarily derived from education, life experience, or income, Abrams and other *Dwell* leaders cast a wide net around their desired audience base, perhaps in an attempt to set their magazine apart from other titles in the shelter category. While home magazines such as *Architectural Digest, Elle Décor*, and *Veranda* have built their reputations on featuring lavish homes and catering to an elite readership, *Dwell’s* insistence on targeting their magazine towards ‘regular people’ seems to subvert this sense of elitism. At least rhetorically, *Dwell* has actively distanced itself from these types of magazines in the shelter category. 

Adopting a conspiratorial tone with stories and editorial features geared more towards generating a conversation with readers than preaching to them, *Dwell’s* two-way communication is in high contrast to the dictatorial attitude propagated by most shelter magazines. *Architectural Digest*, for example, actively cultivates an authoritarian tone that instructs readers what’s hot and what’s not when it comes to 

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Michela O’Connor Abrams, interview by the author, Mill Valley, CA, 13 February 2010.

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This relates very closely to the way *Dwell* envisions their close, mutually beneficial relationship to their readers. Instead of treating their readers as consumers like most magazines tend to do, *Dwell* President and Publisher Michela O’Connor Abrams insists, “We set out not to be a publishing company. We did not create a magazine model in a traditional sense. We certainly have all the basic tenets of really good consumer magazine practices, but the overall vision was not to focus on the platform, i.e. the magazine, but to focus on the community that we served. And more to behave like a research company who constantly surveys its readership, analyzes its readership, in myriad ways.” Michela O’Connor Abrams, interview by the author, Mill Valley, CA, 13 February 2010.
home design, as its mission statement reads, “Architectural Digest is the authority in design and architecture.” Elle Décor likewise has established itself as an influential and commanding voice in the shelter category, announcing in its mission statement, “The magazine focuses on the homes of A-list but approachable influencers.”

Dwell, on the other hand, proclaims not to be interested in directing its readers in such a way, and instead hopes to inspire its putative real-person audience to “grapple with your own ideas about how you want to live,” as Lara Hedberg Deam put it in Dwell’s first issue.

Dwell has certainly driven home this terminology of ‘real,’ ‘regular people’ to its public, but how does it actually feature in the magazine? What do Dwell’s ‘real people’ with ‘real lives’ look like? Rejecting the Architectural Digest editorial model of featuring celebrity homes, or the Elle Décor gimmick of picturing empty home interiors that are actually just elaborately staged studio sets, Dwell has since its first issue featured almost exclusively non-celebrity homes and—novel for the shelter magazine category—actually pictured the people that live in these homes. Because of these tactics, Dwell has garnered a reputation for having a more realistic, down-to-earth look than most shelter magazines. As former Dwell Creative Director Claudia Bruno put it, “[Dwell]’s not about fantasy the way some [shelter] magazines are,


17 Lara Hedberg Deam, “From the Robie House… To Our House,” 10.
where you look at it and go, ‘Someday…’ and then get back to your life.” Instead, *Dwell* has attempted to show that good architecture and design can (and should) be integral parts of the average person’s daily life. In order to achieve this, *Dwell* editors made the decision early on to use exclusively portrait photographers to give their pictured homes a more personal, intimate aesthetic. Furthermore, *Dwell* editors specifically instruct those featured in the magazine *not* to prepare for a magazine photo shoot, attempting to cultivate photographs of homes that look lived in and authentic rather than staged or choreographed. In many ways, *Dwell* has been successful in achieving this kind of real-life authenticity with editorial photographs that often recall family snapshots of parents at home with dogs and kids underfoot (Figures 3, 4 and 5). However, for all the snapshot-like quality of *Dwell*’s photography, there is often something about the images in *Dwell* 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. Take, for example, this image of homeowner Nick Roberts grilling on the patio of his recent Los Angeles remodel (Figure 6). Roberts is not posing for the camera or even acknowledging its presence, but that hardly makes the shot candid; in fact, the photo is highly staged. The circular barbeque outside provides a counterpoint to the round dining room table on the interior, creating a visual balance.

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19 Ibid.
that ties the two spaces—interior and exterior—together. The photographer, Darcy Hemley, has even managed to imbue the image with a narrative, as the slightly outturned dining room chair and bowl of salad on the table foreshadow the meal Roberts is perhaps completing at his barbeque. While Roberts may in fact be a grilling-enthusiast in his everyday life, no adept reader is going to be fooled into believing that Roberts just happened to be barbequing when Dwell stopped by to photograph his home. Instead, the photograph pictures the kind of highly stylized lifestyle for which Dwell images have become known.

Photographs such as this one, which feature homeowners actually interacting with their dwellings, certainly fulfill Karrie Jacobs’ original declaration in the Dwell manifesto that “the only way we [Dwell] know to demonstrate that a home is truly livable is to show it as it is lived in.” However, at the same time, Dwell’s pictured interiors often seem just as staged as the “insanely perfect” homes Jacobs bemoans as dominating other architecture magazines. Compare, for example, these two photographs of kitchens, one featured in Dwell (Figure 7) and the other in Elle Décor (Figure 8). 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


21 Ibid. President and Publisher Michela Abrams held a similar view of Dwell’s pictures in relation to those of other shelter magazines, as she insisted in our interview that, “Truly what we [Dwell] did pioneer, is shelter magazines did not put people on the cover [sic]. It was either a vase and no cover lines in the case of Veranda, or it was the perfect living room or kitchen. And now [with Dwell] it’s all about living in design. I think that has made it so much fun. [Our pictures] tell a story.” Michela O’Connor Abrams, interview by the author, Mill Valley, CA, 13 February 2010.
immaculate white cleanliness—where are the stray spaghetti spatters or the empty juice glasses left over from breakfast? Even the ‘real-life’ elements of the *Dwell* image appear staged, with the child’s drawing and crayons perfectly centered on the kitchen table. What’s more, the custom cabinetry and $2600 Kartell table in the *Dwell* kitchen seem far less attainable for the everyday person than the IKEA cabinetry and vintage stools in the *Elle Décor* kitchen, further undercutting *Dwell*’s claim to be presenting a more widely accessible design aesthetic.

While this example casts some skepticism on *Dwell*’s stated aim to focus on a mainstream and middle-class readership, *Dwell* nevertheless projects a sentiment that the beautiful homes and furnishings it features could—and should—be accessible to any one of the ‘real’ people flipping through the pages of the magazine or clicking through the Dwell website. By wrapping the magazine in this type of popular packaging, *Dwell* tries to connect with their audience in such a way that readers feel the magazine is speaking to and for them, rather than above them. Regardless of whether or not their audience can actually afford anything featured in the magazine, *Dwell* contends that readers should be able to attain its version of modernism—a conviction *Dwell* uses to define itself against and above early twentieth-century modernism. For example, in the March 2007 issue, which was titled “Home at Last: Modern Living on a Budget,” *Dwell* includes a feature by Barry Katz called “Modern Appreciation.” Katz opens the article by writing, “Modernism promised to bring good design to the masses, but just how affordable
was it?”22 Already, we can see that Katz is leveling a criticism at the modern movement—it promised to benefit the everyday person, but Katz suggests this promise may not have actually been realized at all. He then goes on to investigate a selection of modern design “classics,” as he calls them, in order to see how they compare to equivalent products with similar design features available today. After noting that the Knoll Tulip chairs and Pedestal dining table by Eero Saarinen (Figure 9) would cost a whopping $5661 today if the original price of $784 were adjusted for inflation, and that the reissue of the set from Knoll currently costs $5371, Katz then counters this with a more affordable modern-day equivalent: the $309 Urban chairs and Docksta table set from IKEA (Figure 10). Here, we see the other side to Dwell’s pricey, highly staged photographed interiors discussed in the previous example. This Knoll versus IKEA table comparison exemplifies Dwell’s contention that its modernism, the one it dishes out monthly in the pages of its magazine, is not only comparable to the mid-century version, but that it does it one better: Dwell’s brand of modernism realizes the promise of “bring[ing] good design to the masses” that twentieth-century modernism left unfulfilled.

As this example indicates, despite its propensity for featuring costly, luxurious modern interiors, Dwell has also consistently used modernism as the vehicle for delivering its message of optimistic middle-class access. Remember, it is not just that Dwell is interested in making architecture and design meaningful and available to all, but the magazine has from the beginning tied these ideologies very close together.

closely to those it identifies as arising in the modern movement: “[What is] most interesting to me is the way modernism lends itself to new ideas and individual approaches,” Deam established in her opening letter.\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, in \textit{Dwell}’s mission statement—“Bringing modern design to everyone—anytime, any place any where, and in any form”—modernism is loaded with \textit{Dwell}’s popularizing goals, the word ‘modern’ becoming a stand-in for the whole spectrum of \textit{Dwell}’s varied optimistic aspirations. Not surprisingly, as implied in \textit{Dwell}’s mission statement and seen in the “Modern Appreciation” article discussed earlier, it is not just the ideologies of modernism that \textit{Dwell} is interested in retooling, but also a modernist style. For \textit{Dwell}, a modernist aesthetic has become the primary signifier for expressing its egalitarian message of meaningful architecture and design for all.

As we have seen, however, in many ways it is precisely this modern aesthetic that accounts for the stiff, staged appearance in many of \textit{Dwell}’s feature photographs. In seeking out and featuring almost exclusively modern-looking homes, \textit{Dwell} consistently forwards an aesthetic that is drawn from the functionalist tenets of early twentieth-century high modern architecture, where a mantra of “form follows function” dictated that excess ornamentation be avoided. As such, \textit{Dwell}’s modern look is manifested in sparse, pared-down homes where clean lines, crisp forms, and industrial materials often lead to barren-looking spaces whose sterility creates a sense of perpetual emptiness. In seeking out this aesthetic, \textit{Dwell} homes, although pictured with people and their possessions, ultimately seem devoid, or at

\textsuperscript{23} Lara Hedberg Deam, “From the Robie House… To Our House,” 10.
least incapable, of containing or stimulating the happenings of everyday life. In this image culled from the February 2010 issue, Parisian apartment-owner Mathieu Vinciguerra lounges in his living room in front of his custom-designed storyboard shelves (Figure 11). The word ‘lounging,’ however, is a bit of a stretch, as Vinciguerra actually seems quite cramped on his modern-looking couch, which does not appear at all conducive to any kind of comfortable reclining. In fact, the whole room looks more like a gallery space for exhibiting Vinciguerra’s perfectly arranged comic book collection than a lived-in apartment. The photograph, too, is highly staged, imbued with Dwell’s signature look of stylized spontaneity, Vinciguerra posing as though he has just removed his shoes to prop up his feet and read a comic.

However, these trappings of everyday life—discarded shoes and strewn about magazines—seem horribly out of place in this crisp modern interior, as do the children’s toys in this Spanish home from the September, 2006 issue (Figure 12). Instead of producing the candid, ‘real life’ interiors Dwell aims for, the toys strewn about in this home look almost like props, so incongruous with the stark modern interior that they make the photograph seem staged. As a point of contrast, take this photograph of a children’s room from the September, 2010 issue of Elle Décor (Figure 13). While the Dwell and the Elle Décor rooms actually employ similar design elements in terms of color and materials, the Elle Décor room just seems 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. This modern aesthetic, combined with
Dwell’s persistent attempt to feature the trappings of ‘real life,’ instead of producing homes and photographs that seem candid and lived-in, actually makes Dwell’s images appear more staged than other shelter magazine photography.

Dwell’s critics have also recognized the tense, uneasy nature of Dwell’s photography and the discomfort the featured residents seem to feel in their modern homes. One of the more humorous of such critiques is the anonymous blog “Unhappy Hipsters” which started in January 2010. With a dark humor that plays on the alienating and isolating qualities of modernist living—criticisms that have long been leveled at modern architecture—the blog’s authors attach cynical and sarcastic captions to images pulled almost exclusively from Dwell magazine (Figure 14). What initially seemed in the context of the magazine just to be stiff and awkward photos become with the “Unhappy Hipsters” captions alternately humorous, depressing, and stressful scenes (Figures 15 and 16). Capturing the sense of isolation and 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. “It’s Lonely in the Modern World,” the blog’s tagline dejectedly reminds us—perhaps even more lonely in a modernist home where the familiar trappings of everyday life always seem tragically out of place.

Despite the disconnect between Dwell’s claims of presenting a more accessible, realistic version of modernism, and the highly staged, unrealistic appearance this same modernism creates in its featured images, Dwell nevertheless continues to maintain that its particular modern aesthetic holds the power to improve
the lives of everyday people and the spaces in which they dwell. In fact, this promise embedded in their version of modernism has been quite convincing and appealing for *Dwell’s* readership, as the magazine’s circulation base has steadily increased since 2000. Because *Dwell* has managed to be so convincing in the realm of the visual, its image of modernism must be functioning for readers in some way beyond *Dwell’s* written explanations of it as a popular project with mass-appeal. The fact that *Dwell* has succeeded in imbuing its magazine with a certain look that is recognizable among other shelter magazines—a look defined by the slick, highly stylized modern lifestyle *Dwell* perpetuates in its photography—gives us a clue to another way the image of modernism functions in *Dwell*: as a signifier of a highly cultured way of living. Indeed, through its magazine images and extensive branding campaign, *Dwell* suggests that its modern style can act as a kind of shorthand for a refined and distinctive taste.

One way to see how *Dwell* cultivates this meaning for modernism is in examining how it markets itself to potential magazine subscribers and advertisers.

Playing up its niche appeal in these marketing campaigns—*Dwell’s* 340,000

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24 Starting with an initial circulation base of a meager 50,000 in 2000, *Dwell’s* circulation has now surpassed the 340,000 mark and is expected to keep growing. 2000 circulation figures from Stephanie Smith, “Dwell Sets Design on Growth,” *MediaWeek* (13 June 2005), [http://www.mediaweek.com/mw/esearch/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000955198](http://www.mediaweek.com/mw/esearch/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000955198) (Accessed 25 April 2010). 2010 figures from Audit Bureau of Circulations, Consumer Magazine Circulation Report, 31 December 2009. [www.accessabc.com](http://www.accessabc.com) (last accessed 14 April 2010). This 340,000 mark is also not an accurate representation of *Dwell’s* influence, as there are countless other *Dwell* audience members who may not have a subscription to the magazine, but who attend yearly Dwell on Design home shows, purchase Dwell products, or watch Dwell television shows.
circulation pales in comparison to other shelter magazine mainstays *House Beautiful* (845,000) and *Architectural Digest* (850,000)—*Dwell* portrays its readership as anything but middle-class and average.\(^\text{25}\) Indeed, *Dwell* paints its readership as distinctly above average, as the media kit *Dwell* sends to potential advertisers opens with the assurance that “*Dwell* reaches a highly-desirable, unique and largely untapped demographic of affluent, professional, well-educated readers.”\(^\text{26}\) Among their readers, *Dwell* also cultivates a sense that they are not like everyone else, and instead are atypical and somewhat above the typical magazine-reader in terms of taste and intelligence. *Dwell* even has a name for their atypical readers: “Design Seekers,” which the magazine describes as “the modern-savvy consumers and professionals who passionately seek good design.”\(^\text{27}\)

From the very beginning, the magazine has pushed the *Dwell* lifestyle—that is, the modern lifestyle—as a way for readers and their homes to stand out from the crowd of cookie-cutter houses dominating the field of residential architecture. In an early advertisement for *Dwell* that featured in the magazine itself, *Dwell* plays up its ability to speak to a nonconformist, freethinking audience (Figure 17). Answering the question, “Why read *Dwell*?”, the advertisement tells the reader, “Because you have a different idea of home,” implying that this “different” point of view will be


\(^{26}\) *Dwell* Media Kit, 2010.

welcomed and celebrated in Dwell. Just in case you didn’t get the point, the line “HINT: It’s not one of these…” appears directly above a literal ‘cookie-cutter’ gingerbread house. In this way, the modern homes featured in the pages of Dwell serve as a template by which readers can design (or at least imagine) a home as a marker of their own individual status and taste. Instead of Architectural Digest, Elle Décor, or Veranda’s proposition that high cost, vast footprint, and opulence are the ultimate status symbols in design and architecture, Dwell suggests that one particular style—modernism—can stand in as a signifier of a refined and distinctive taste.

However, the way the image of modernism functions as this kind of signifier of a distinctive taste is not quite so cut and dry. As the highly staged, unrealistic aspect of Dwell’s feature photography suggests, modernism in Dwell is also invested with a high level of fantasy, removing it another level from the ‘real-life’ impact Dwell’s editors assert it should have. This element of fantasy comes into focus when taking a closer look at how Dwell’s editorial content relates to its advertisements. It is often difficult to tell the difference between advertisements for opulent products and the magazine’s editorial content, as Dwell often publishes advertisements that are strikingly similar in format and photography to their editorial sections. Such is the case in these two pages from the December/January issue (Figures 18 and 19). Both feature a similar long, white, rectangular kitchen island—the visual correspondence of setting enhanced by the high vantage point from which both images are photographed. Dwell also frequently recommends products and companies that have taken up ad space in the magazine, such as this bathtub from
February, 2010 which was featured in both advertisement and editorial form (Figures 20 and 21). Not just any bathtub, this particular model of the Duravit bathroom series can run upwards of $9500—a price tag that few ‘regular’ people could actually afford for a bathroom appliance, especially since it would most likely accompany a full bathroom remodel as it did in this “Loo and Improved” *Dwell* feature. Thus, while such products as these kitchen islands and bathtubs with a distinct modern look—one of clean lines, unadorned surfaces, and a purity of form—certainly work as signifiers of an expensive taste, their simultaneous position in both advertisement and editorial complicates their ability to function as such signifiers in a world outside the magazine. Ultimately, the image of modernism in *Dwell* functions in spectacular terms, where the highly constructed image of the dream-kitchen in the advertisement and the staged, unlife-like picture of the *Dwell* dream-house on the opposing page both “use the modern idiom in the service of the banal,” as cultural critic Dwight MacDonald describes such examples of high culture imitation.  

Both the advertisement and the editorial in *Dwell* act as though they are the real thing by using a modernist aesthetic to evoke associations with a certain kind of lifestyle and status, but ultimately, each are operating primarily in the realm of fantasy.

Unable to hold the rhetoric of mass-appeal and popular accessibility with which *Dwell* originally invested its new modernism, the pictures in the magazine,

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where highly stylized and fantastical products and interiors rule, suggest that modernism in *Dwell* has been reduced merely to its image. In writing, *Dwell* has insisted on its social aims, drawing on past ideologies invested in modern architecture to maintain that *Dwell’s* version of modernism holds the power to serve “the masses and to help them to live a life that is simple and sincere, purposeful and liberal,” to use historian Bruno Zevi’s description of mid-century modern architecture’s aims.  

However, this textual account of modernism in *Dwell* is at odds with the visual side of the magazine, where picture after picture suggests that *Dwell* has invested the image of modernism with a different kind of power: the ability to signify the pleasure and reputation of a high cultured taste. Reducing modernism to this kind of style that can be applied quickly and easily to any possession that one wants to use to say something about oneself, from an appliance to a piece of living room furniture to an entire home, *Dwell’s* image of modernism has cancelled out those earlier ideological meanings. As I have shown, however, this image is just as unstable as *Dwell’s* textual accounts of its modernism, as it too operates primarily in the realm of fantasy, where the dream home in the editorial is just as far-fetched as the one pictured in the adjacent advertisement. Ultimately, *Dwell’s* version of modernism functions in highly spectacular terms, where an appealing but ultimately superficial façade works as a false front for an ideological base that is equally as remote from reality.

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III. “A Step Closer to Paradise”—The Continued Appeal of the *Dwell* Modern Aesthetic

Even so, despite this remove from reality, the *Dwell*-constructed dream of a modernism that looks and acts as though anyone could attain it is highly appealing to the *Dwell* audience. Year after year, *Dwell*’s subscription base, branding outlets, and profit margin have continued to grow. Indeed, although the magazine has been the centerpiece of the company since its inception in October of 2000, Dwell has since expanded to become a recognizable brand with a footprint much larger than the magazine’s circulation figure. The Dwell brand is now composed of several other outlets, including an extensive website; Dwell on Design, the largest design show on the west coast which is held yearly in Los Angeles; a Dwell television show; and even a line of Dwell prefabricated houses. In all cases, Dwell’s signature brand of modernism rules, where the productive possibilities for modernism’s image are open and limitless. Why does this fantasy of modernism as powerful enough to improve life for anyone and everyone hold such persistent appeal? Why do so many readers and consumers of Dwell products continue to buy into this image of modernism?

Cultural critic and designer Natalia Ilyin characterizes this sustained enthusiasm for modernism as stemming from a desire for the sense of control that modern design and architecture promises. As she puts it, “This belief in control, that somehow building the tallest tower or the fastest jet is going to save us from the ugly side of life—from death, really—is the fundamental lie of modernism. And we
believe it.” This assurance of control and the faith in an ensuing improvement and liberation from our present situation, however dire that situation may be, is at the core of modernism. Indeed, this promise of a better tomorrow is very much invested in Dwell’s version of modernism. As Dwell editor Sam Grawe wrote in a recent Editor’s Note, “What attracted us to modern design was not the dogma or rigidity of statements like ‘form follows function’ or ‘less is more’ but rather the notion that by exploring and exploiting all the means available to us in the world today, modern design offers the surest foothold on the future—a step closer to paradise.” This emphasis on a utopian, paradisical future, where modern design holds the power to better the lives of individual readers, is a central feature of Dwell.

In fact, it is the particular appearance of Dwell’s brand of modernism that holds most intensely this problem-solving power. Visually, Dwell promises its audience 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—the countless before-and-after remodel stories attesting to the ameliorating power of a new, freshly applied Dwell-inspired modern aesthetic. In writing, Dwell asserts that their version of modernism “allows you to grapple with your own ideas about how you want to live” instead of “finding a style and adhering

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to its tenets,” as Hedberg Deam put it in her opening letter.\(^\text{32}\) In the Editor’s Note listed above, Grawe likewise insists that the modern sentiment being championed by *Dwell* does not have one corresponding stylistic equivalent.\(^\text{33}\) However, as I have shown, *Dwell* very much has a recognizable aesthetic that comes through in the visual appearance of the magazine and the other Dwell brand outlets. Even in staff descriptions of the design and layout of the magazine, this modern aesthetic is foregrounded. *Dwell* Design Director Kyle Blue notes that because the magazine has consistently “aim[ed] for clean and clear presentation” in a streamlined appearance devoid of excess ornamentation (a key modern stylistic conviction), a “clean and modern” font was selected as the jumping off point for the magazine’s design.\(^\text{34}\) Lara Hedberg Deam also affirms that this font—Avenir—was selected because it is “a sort of classic modernist font,” reinforcing the magazine’s attempt for a modern look.\(^\text{35}\) It is this particular *Dwell* style that the company has invested with the power

\(^{32}\) Lara Hedberg Deam, “From the Robie House… To Our House,” 10.

\(^{33}\) *Dwell’s* assertion that their movement does not take form in any one particular style relates very closely to the magazine’s insistence that its significance and import runs much deeper than other home magazines that are interested merely in such “cosmetic” and “temporary” things as style. By contrast, *Dwell* envisions itself as a “philosophy” of living, “a way of life” that is in no way grounded in one particular style. Quotations from Michela O’Connor Abrams, interview by the author, Mill Valley, CA, 13 February 2010.


to help readers reach the better and more meaningful future that the magazine promises is just around the corner.

This *Dwell* aesthetic follows very closely the stereotypical stylistic elements now associated with architectural modernism—such as those now famous tenets of the International Style enumerated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their seminal 1932 MoMA exhibition and accompanying book. Hitchcock and Johnson’s three basic criteria of the modern International Style could easily be applied to the aesthetic forwarded by *Dwell*: both emphasize architecture that models volume instead of mass through the use of smooth, continuous surfaces; *Dwell’s* enthusiasm for prefabricated architecture mirrors the International Style’s focus on regularity and standardization; and both actively avoid excess applied ornamentation.\(^3^6\) As seen in the images culled from *Dwell* discussed earlier, along with these two additional examples of homes featured in the April and May, 2010 issues, *Dwell* consistently serves up a modern aesthetic where minimalist, pared down, industrial-looking homes rule (Figures 22, 23, and 24). It is this aesthetic that *Dwell* champions as a means of achieving the better future the magazine so earnestly promises, as the same types of houses and interiors pop up over and over again in the pages of the magazine. Even more, the *Dwell* aesthetic offers its audience a way to show the world that they, too, are forward-looking and occupy an avant-garde position. *Dwell* gives readers the sense that applying the *Dwell* aesthetic is a way to mark themselves and their design taste as distinctive and cutting edge. Such *Dwell*

homes as these stand out from neighboring homes and look different—the LOT-EK home a prime example of this distinction, with the clean, modern lines of the home and the wide, projecting windows made from re-purposed truck bodies looking 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. Despite their written protests to the contrary, it is Dwell’s particular aesthetic that seems to best fulfill these promises of personal and cultural improvement that the magazine offers up 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 notion of upward social mobility is becoming a fantasy in the U.S. today. While these assumptions about ease of social and economic mobility—especially the belief in the American dream—are still alive and well, this may actually be more of a dream now than ever before. The reality is that the middle class in the U.S. today is shrinking, not expanding, and what used to seem attainable goals—sending your children to college, the security of a comfortable retirement package, and owning your own home—are becoming
increasingly harder to attain. With income inequality in the U.S. today at an all-time high—some data even suggests it is higher than levels seen during the Great Depression—the socio-economic position of the American middle class is slipping further and further out of reach for those in the lowest income brackets. 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. One reason why *Dwell* has been so successful could be the desire on the part of its readership to believe that these middle class aspirations *are* still obtainable—certainly, *Dwell* editors and staff writers aim their articles at an audience who would find this believable, or at least something they *want* to believe is true. Not only does *Dwell* insist on the widespread attainability of their particular aesthetic, but the modernist promises of individual

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38 According to UC Berkeley Economics Professor Emmanuel Saez, in 2005, the bottom 20 percent of American earners had an average income of $10,655 while the top 20 percent of households made nearly $160,000—a disparity of 1,500 percent, the highest gap ever recorded. In 2007 the top .01 percent of American earners took home 6 percent of total U.S. wages, a figure that has nearly doubled since 2000. Emmanuel Saez, “Striking it Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States (Update with 2007 estimates),” *Pathways Magazine*, Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality (5 August 2009, original published Winter 2008): 6-7.
progress and upward social mobility that underwrite this *Dwell* aesthetic have also been made to seem equally as accessible in the pages of the magazine.

One way this latent optimism and faith in the middle class comes through in the magazine is in the tone of feature articles, where success stories of home ownership, architectural commissions, or do-it-yourself remodels frequently pop up. The March, 2005 issue of *Dwell*, for example, is entitled, “Time for a Change?: Real-Life Renovations” and features several home construction and remodel projects that are pitched as authentic, real, and attainable, as opposed to the fictitious extravagant remodel projects often invented and staged by other shelter magazines.

Much like *Dwell*’s decision to use exclusively portrait photography and picture real people as a way of popularizing modern architecture and design so that it may appear more accessible, these types of ‘real-life’ home stories in *Dwell* similarly work to make the middle class dream of home ownership seem an attainable reality.

In this March, 2005 issue, *Dwell* features a story on 35-year-old Murray Siple, a former snowboarder who, although becoming quadriplegic after a car accident, was still able to realize his dream of buying and renovating the perfect house. By reducing Siple’s story to a mere page or two of upbeat, inspirational text—“A devastating accident could have made Murray Siple a bitter man. Instead, he decided to renovate a house.”—and a handful of images, *Dwell* seems to say to readers, ‘If he can do it, you can too!’.[39] Further bolstering this can-do attitude, the article also includes a detailed floor plan of the house—a common representational strategy used

in *Dwell* articles, perhaps as a way of demystifying the construction and design processes for readers and making them seem closer within their reach.

However, the reality is that buying a house—let alone remodeling one—is hardly a viable option for much of Middle America today. In fact, owning a home is not even as secure a financial investment as it once was. Between mid-2007 and early 2009, the collapse of the 2008 sub-prime mortgage market resulted in U.S. households losing about one quarter of their wealth, or about $13 trillion.⁴⁰ Home ownership, a once-attainable goal for the middle class, is indeed slipping further and further out of reach, as 2.8 million homes faced foreclosure in 2009, and an estimated 3 million more are expected to be foreclosed on in 2010.⁴¹ Nevertheless, *Dwell* continues to make home ownership seem an achievable reality, and readers continue to buy into this fantasy. 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, or

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Le Corbusier’s vision of a simplified, reproducible “Dom-Ino” mass-housing design that could alleviate the post-WWI housing shortage in Europe, while simultaneously improving the lives of its inhabitants. These utopian ideals of modernism certainly possess a kind of “haunting relevance” for *Dwell* today, as architectural historian Felicity Scott describes the lasting influence of modern architecture in her recent reappraisal of that history, *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics After Modernism.*

However, *Dwell’s* version of modernism posits a very different type of utopia. The initial utopian aspirations of such modernists as Walter Gropius of the Bauhaus, or Theo van Doesburg of the de Stijl movement, who thought of standardization in modern design as a way serving the masses and providing higher standards of living for all, have been transformed by *Dwell* for an entirely new set of goals. Drawing on this utopian vision of idealistic cultural progress, *Dwell* channels that vision 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. Implied in this utopian musing of a future where anyone and everyone has access to “good design” are the assumptions not only that the average reader can afford this good design, but also that they have a place in their very own homes to display it. Thus, *Dwell’s* modernist utopia restores faith in a failing middle class population, creating a place where cultural aspirations for things like “good”

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architecture and design can function as a way for readers to hold on—at least socially if not economically—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 so much as actual objectives—one wonders how many *Dwell* readers are actually going to remodel their kitchens or buy a *Dwell* prefabricated home—rather, they function as a set of cultural aspirations that readers can don as a means of asserting their middle class prosperity and stability.

*Dwell* is fully aware of this cultural benefit it provides to readers, as it figures largely into the way the company markets its particular brand of modernism. The style promoted in *Dwell* is supposedly informed by ideological and theoretical positions—Deam’s proposition for a new architectural movement for our time, for example—but *Dwell* has also imbued its style with less weighty cultural significations. I have shown that these ideological meanings behind the *Dwell* aesthetic are not always grounded in social or economic realities and more often function as utopian fantasies; however, *Dwell’s* style perhaps holds another, more tangible function for its readership. Instead of representing a certain theoretical position, the *Dwell* aesthetic as it is marketed holds a different, but no less meaningful value—it becomes a kind of veneer of a cultural position that readers can try on and take off at their leisure, so long as they have the funds to purchase it. 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. The cultural trappings of
architecture and design presented in *Dwell* become for its audience just one more accessory or accoutrement to add to one’s wardrobe, something he or she can put on display at a moment’s notice in order to re-assert their social positioning. Reduced to this spectacularized ornament, *Dwell*’s modernist style functions as a shortcut for readers to make a generic life look individualized and high taste, without necessarily having to do the long work of developing that taste or paying the high price of being ‘cultured.’

One example of how this is evident in *Dwell* is in the way the magazine celebrates and encourages home remodeling projects. *Dwell* devotes a huge amount of airtime to home renovations—at least one issue a year is completely devoted to the topic, there are numerous interactive tools on the *Dwell* website with remodel tips and resources, and many articles featuring modern homes end with instructions on how to “Make It Yours” by adding a few key pieces to your home décor. All of the remodeling projects featured in *Dwell* conclude with an end product that falls under the *Dwell* aesthetic. Take this modern renovation in Austin, Texas, for example, where a newly cantilevered, boxy, steel-beamed exterior makes the original run-of-the-mill, low-level, pitched-roof house seem even more outdated (Figures 25 and 26). Or, take the June, 2008 issue of *Dwell*, titled, “Renovate It!: Modern Homes With Old Bones,” which sought to show how even older, more traditional homes could be made modern by applying the *Dwell* aesthetic. With these kinds of remodeling projects, where the flexible and adaptable *Dwell* style can be applied quickly and easily to virtually any home, room, or item of furniture, *Dwell* has
turned their aesthetic into an image that readers can use as a shorthand for signaling a cultured, discriminating taste.

Separated from any larger ideological basis, the *Dwell* style becomes in these instances a way for readers to display and garner a cultural cachet, without necessarily needing to possess any of the “prerequisites for culture” that we think of as necessities for attaining a cultured position: money, leisure, and knowledge, as Dwight MacDonald identifies them.  

Very much belonging to the “Midcult” of MacDonald’s seminal 1952 article “Masscult to Midcult,” the *Dwell* aesthetic seems to have the best of both high and low culture—it is designed with a mass-culture simplicity and ease of application, but also pretends to respect and be a part of high-culture. In fact, MacDonald’s description of such Midcult examples as Bauhaus design that “has seeped down, in vulgarized form, into the design of our vacuum cleaners, pop-up toasters, supermarkets and cafeterias” could easily include as a “vulgarized” example the so-called modern aesthetic propagated in *Dwell*.  

Watered down to its most basic form so that it may be quickly and easily employed by anyone who buys it, *Dwell’s* modernist style evokes the high culture of historical modernism, but only in completely spectacular terms—there is no longer any deeper ideological meaning informing it.

In this way, *Dwell’s* image of modernism functions not so much in ideological terms as a full-fledged new architectural movement that will drive and

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44 Dwight MacDonald, “Masscult to Midcult,” 37.  
shape culture, but instead as a means for *Dwell* readers merely to appear cultured. Because *Dwell* has so actively promoted this 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 and activist Naomi Klein, it is “marketing that thinks it’s culture.”

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.

**IV. Conclusion**

*Dwell* magazine marks an important juncture in the worlds of architecture and advertising. Even more than that, though, *Dwell* speaks to the possible consequences of moments when these two worlds overlap. Successfully capitalizing on the recent resurgence of interest in the modern movement, as well as the urge over the past decade to move beyond postmodernism to something new in architecture, *Dwell* has attempted to brand modernism into the latest architectural movement for our time. Applying a popularizing impulse to this re-tooling of modernism, *Dwell* has sought to create an architectural movement that appears as though it could and should be accessible to all. However, if one looks a little closer,

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the ‘real’ aesthetic *Dwell* has tried to create actually works in the complete opposite way—it comes through in the magazine as a highly stylized look that functions as a marker of a refined, distinguished taste. It is this *Dwell* modern style that ultimately holds the most meaning for readers, over the ideological significance *Dwell* editors initially sought to invest in their version of modernism.

For the middle-class reader, then—the median household income of the *Dwell* reader was $156,573 in 2009—the modern style promulgated in *Dwell* functions as a way of insisting on that socio-economic position. With the American middle class more unstable now than it has been in decades, it is clear why this *Dwell* modernist aesthetic has held such powerful appeal over the past ten years. Reduced merely to an image that can be tried on and taken off at will, modernism in *Dwell* can no longer work as a means for readers to improve their socio-economic position; instead, this image is functioning as a way to make their lives appear individualized, cultured, and economically secure. The modernist style in *Dwell* initially stood as a marker of a larger ideological promise of architectural progress and improvement—now, it seems, that image has actually become the thing itself. The image of modernism in *Dwell* holds a power that, although admittedly spectacularized, is doing more for contemporary audiences than any ideological backing that might have initially been invested in it. While many early twentieth-century modernists warned against the reduction of the modern movement to a list of stylistic tenets, fearing the loss of content and meaning this might cause, the image

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of modernism today depends on this very stylistic reduction in order to hold any meaning at all for a contemporary audience. In *Dwell*, at least, the image of modernism is extremely valuable—it is a way to insist on a middle-class position that is rapidly slipping away.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1  Cover, Dwell 1, no. 1 (October, 2000).

Figure 2  Cover, Dwell 9, no. 3 (February, 2009).
Figure 3  Texas, Austin, Trabulsi-Orr Home, exterior. Featured in *Dwell* 8, no. 4 (March, 2008). Photo by Jack Thompson.

Figure 4  California, San Francisco, Bishop-Lieberman Home, kitchen. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 4 (March, 2010). Photo by Leslie Williamson.
Figure 5  New York, Brooklyn, Miro-Weiss Home, dining room. Featured in *Dwell* 6, no. 7 (July/August, 2006). Photo by Dean Kaufman.

Figure 6  California, Los Angeles, Buckner-Roberts Home, dining room and patio. Featured in *Dwell* 4, no. 8 (Sept. 2004). Photo by Darcy Hemley.
Figure 7  Missouri, Kansas City, Serra Home, kitchen. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 9 (August 2010). Photo by Miyoko Ohtake.

Figure 8  Connecticut, New Canaan, Fielden Home, kitchen. Featured in *Elle Décors* (Sept. 2010). Photo by William Waldron.
Figure 9  Tulip chairs and Pedestal dining table by Eero Saarinen, distributed by Knoll

Figure 10  IKEA Urban Chairs and Docksta table
Figure 11  France, Paris, Vinciguerra Apartment, living room. Featured in Dwell 10, no. 3 (February 2010). Photo by Celine Clanet.

Figure 12  Spain, Llers, Villa Bio House, interior stairway. Featured in Dwell 6, no. 8 (September 2006). Photo by Gunnar Knechtel.
Figure 13  Connecticut, New Canaan, Fielden Home, children’s room. Featured in Elle Décor (Sept. 2010). Photo by William Waldron.

You can come out when you can properly explain the differences between Modernist architecture and postmodern ornamentation.

(Photo: Craig Cutler; Dwell, February/March 2006)

**Figure 15**  Unhappy Hipsters blog, [http://unhappyhipsters.com](http://unhappyhipsters.com). Accessed 4/15/10.

Still recovering from broken trust, neither wanted to be the first to try the eggs.

( Photo: Mark Mahaney; Dwell, November 2009)

**Figure 16**  Unhappy Hipsters blog, [http://unhappyhipsters.com](http://unhappyhipsters.com). Accessed 4/15/10.
Figure 17  *Dwell* promotional ad, *Dwell* 1, no. 2 (December, 2000).

Figure 18  “Slim Fit,” *Dwell* 10, no. 2 (Dec/Jan, 2010).
Figure 19  Advertisement for Fisher & Paykel, *Dwell* 10, no. 2 (Dec/Jan, 2010).

Figure 20  “Loo & Improved” (featuring Pura Vida by Duravit bathtub), *Dwell* 10, no. 3 (February, 2010).
Figure 21  Advertisement for PuraVida by Duravit, *Dwell* 10, no. 3 (February, 2010).

Figure 22  Canada, Toronto, Fleming/Adams home, exterior. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 6 (May, 2010). Photo by Lorne Bridgman.
**Figure 23** New York City, Weiner home (center), exterior. LOT-EK architect. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 5 (April, 2010). Photo by Dean Kaufman.

**Figure 24** New York City, Weiner home, interior. LOT-EK architect. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 5 (April, 2010). Photo by Dean Kaufman.
Figure 25  Austin, TX, Avenue G House, exterior before remodel. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 9 (August, 2010). No photo credit given.

Figure 26  Austin, TX, Avenue G House, exterior after remodel, Alter Studio architect. Featured in *Dwell* 10, no. 9 (August, 2010). Photo by Wilson Barr.
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