

The Re-Definition of Domesticity By Amy Sedivi

The World's Fair

At the peak of the Machine Age, Dorothy Raley wrote the following in *Home and Furnishings: A Century of Progress*:

Within a lifetime, American homes have evolved from LABOR-PLACES to EASE-ABODES! The twenty-year-old bride cannot even imagine the home inconveniences which her grandmother was forced to accept. It is difficult for one in the meridian of life either to realize, or visualize, the sharp contrast between living conditions today and those of yesterday. The chief difference between the homes of today and those of our forebears is that our mothers and grandmothers “served” their homes; whereas, the homes of us moderns “serve” us! That differentiation marks a somersault turn in living conditions which has a tangible value. The Machine Age has liberated the world from the slavery of drudgery.¹

Indeed, homes built before the turn of the 20th century were devoid of such amenities as electricity, heating, air conditioning, telephones, and other technologies that are widely used today. Housewives labored to wash dishes and clothing by hand; husbands took time to build fires to provide warmth for their family. In the 20th century, tasks that took hours to accomplish could now be achieved with the push of a button, the flip of a switch, or the turn of a knob. The introduction of these Machine Age inventions into the home led to a revolution and, in effect, a re-definition of domesticity in the 20th century.

This revolution was showcased at the world's fairs of the 1930s. Throughout the decade, six World's Fairs were held at various locations throughout the United States. In 1933, Chicago's

¹ Quoted in H. Ward Jandl, *Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow* (Washington, DC: Preservation, 1991), 12.

A Century of Progress International Exposition highlighted advancements in the home. This fair was followed by the California Pacific International Exposition in 1935, the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936, the Great Lakes Exposition in 1936, the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939, and the New York World's Fair in 1939. While all the fairs "depicted a world of plenty and freedom – a hopeful vision of modern life in America" during the harsh time of the Great Depression, the New York World's Fair was perhaps the most successful in portraying the potential of Machine Age advancements.²

Held in Flushing, New York, the New York World's Fair was meant to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the inauguration of America's first president, George Washington. Despite the fair's origination around a historic event, the fair established the theme of "Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today."³ The entire fair revolved around solving problems of the time in order to create a truly advanced world in the future. The proposal for the fair was formulated by Michael Meredith Hare, secretary of the Municipal Art League, and a number of supporters, which included Harvey Wiley Corbett, Ian Woodner-Silverman, Gilbert Rohde, Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Wright, and Lewis Mumford. In this proposal, they labeled the exposition the "Fair of the Future" and stated the following:

Above all else, [the fair] must stress the vastly increased opportunity and the developed mechanical means which this twentieth century has brought to the masses for better living and accompanying human happiness. Mere mechanical progress is no longer an adequate or practical theme for a World's Fair, we must

² National Building Museum, *Designing Tomorrow* (Washington, DC: National Building Museum, 2010), 2.

³ Larry Zim, Mel Lerner, and Herbert Rolfes. *The World of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 29.

demonstrate that supercivilization that is based on the swift work of machines, not on the arduous toil of men.⁴

The “supercivilization” mentioned in the proposal was truly an advanced idea that was expressed in a number of exhibits in the fair, particularly General Motor’s famed Futurama display. It is clear that the designers of the fair believed that civilization as a whole could be changed through technological advancement.

The desire for change most likely revolved around the social, political, and economic atmosphere of the 1930s. The Great Depression took a large toll on the livelihood of many Americans and caused citizens to look for ways in which to improve their lives. In *Twentieth Century Limited*, Jeffrey Meikle wrote that, during the Great Depression, American’s had “faith in a future of limitless technological plenty.”⁵ This faith is most evident at the World’s Fairs of the 1930s, which depicted a life of abundance and leisure. The World’s Fairs gave Americans hope that the Great Depression would not last forever. It gave them hope that one day they would have a fruitful, futuristic life.

The theme of this fruitful, technological World of Tomorrow was represented in seven different sectors at the New York World’s Fair. These sectors were labeled Production and Distribution, Transportation, Communications and Business Systems, Food, Medicine and Public Health, Science and Education, and Community Interests. These areas were arrayed around a central display intended to create a focal point and tie together the various segments of the fair. This display consisted of the Trylon and the Perisphere, the former a soaring pyramidal structure, the latter a large white spherical building. The globe housed the Democracy exhibit designed by Henry Dreyfuss. The goal of the exhibit, according to Dreyfuss, was to create “a symbol of all

⁴ Quoted in Helen A Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day* (Flushing, NY: Queens Museum, 1980), 4.

⁵ Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 3.

city planning” as opposed to “the perfect city plan.”⁶ Visitors would ascend an escalator at the base of the Trylon and enter the Perisphere, where they would stand on a revolving platform and observe fifteen scale miles of a model city. In this city, a large amount of green space and pedestrian walkways were provided among business and cultural areas. Dreyfuss believed that the design of the city would eliminate many of the hassles associated with the 1930s metropolis and allow for more leisure time. This leisure time, Dreyfuss stated, would “not be dissipated in idleness and carousing, but... employed in improving man, physically and mentally... through organized athletics, lectures, concerts and the direction of his pursuit of his own hobbies.”⁷ The concern Dreyfuss expressed over the use of leisure time in his model city illustrates the fact that leisure was becoming an important element of American life, particularly after the dawn of the Machine Age. The manner in which leisure time was spent had to be considered just as much as the way in which one could eliminate labor in order to earn time for leisure.

While Democracy was the central exhibit of the New York World’s Fair, the most influential was, arguably, the Futurama exhibit sponsored by General Motors. Futurama, designed by Norman Bel Geddes, was a scale model vision of America in the 1960s. Plush, moving seats transported visitors along a series of models “covering 36,000 square feet on three levels and containing a million trees, half a million buildings, and fifty thousand streamlined automobiles, ten thousand of them in motion.”⁸ The main purpose of the exhibit was to show how automobile traffic, particularly urban traffic, could become more streamlined and efficient. Geddes depicted such elements as fourteen lane highways, continuous tube lighting eliminating the need for headlights, pedestrian walkways, and elevated expressways. Futurama was, essentially, an exploration of the elimination of the hassles of transportation. Traffic and car

⁶ Ibid, 190.

⁷ Ibid, 192.

⁸ Ibid, 202.

accidents, in Geddes' world, were rare. The world moved together with as little friction as possible.

The Futurama exhibit was reprised at the New York World's Fair of 1964 with Futurama II. Once again, General Motors aimed to show a futuristic world made efficient through technology and design. The technology shown in Futurama II, however, is much more heavy-handed than the streamlined gracefulness of Geddes' superhighway system. Futurama II depicted a vision of the world in 2024 with space stations, rockets, lunar terrain crawlers, forecasting centers in Antarctica, underwater "aquacoverters" searching for oil and minerals, automated farming machines, transcontinental highways, and, most shockingly, a "jungle juggernaut, in which, with the use of a laser, a paved road is built 'in one continuous operation!' through a jungle."⁹ Clearly, an overwhelming and arguably destructive amount of technology was imagined for the future at the 1964 World's Fair. The progression from efficiency based on design as shown in Geddes' Futurama to efficiency based on pure technology in Futurama II shows that, over the course of 25 years, Americans began to embrace technology for the sake of technology itself, rather than for the sake of advancement. Futurama II introduces an ethical dilemma to the discussion of technology as a method of eliminating labor and providing leisure to society. Indeed, while a "jungle juggernaut" might provide humanity with new roads at the push of a button, that same push would destroy miles of jungle and natural resources. This ethical dilemma comes into play throughout much of the 20th century, as well as the beginning of the 21st century.

⁹ Sheldon J. Reaven, "New Frontiers: Science and Technology at the Fair," in *Remembering the Future* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 96.

The Town of Tomorrow

While Futurama was considered the biggest hit of the 1939 World's Fair, Jeffrey Meikle states that the Town of Tomorrow represented the "fair's true vision of the future."¹⁰ Located in the Community Interests sector of the fair, the Town of Tomorrow promoted better ways of living. In a 1938 article published in *World Affairs*, Gohnny Johns describes the upcoming exhibition:

Spread over ten acres and comprising thirty-five homes, all full-scale and furnished, with community arts center, playground and shops, this model village is certain to make a strong bid for greatest popularity. It will reveal what industry, science and arts have made available in respect to the comfort, convenience and beauty of the home and its surroundings... The houses will be Fair-designed and Fair-built... Most men are interested in modern heating and air-conditioning systems, lighting equipment, insulation, and new building materials. Housewives will be attracted by the latest in refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, kitchen utensils and equipment, radios, bathroom fixtures and scores of devices for lightening home drudgery.¹¹

Each house in the Town of Tomorrow had a specific theme and showcased either a new building material, construction method, technological advancement, or design idea. The House of Plywood, The Pittsburgh House of Glass, The Small House of Brick, and The Small House of Wood all presented achievements in building with wood, glass, and masonry. The Triple Insulate Home, The Fire Safe Home, and the Celotex Home displayed materials and construction methods that could be used to protect the home and homeowner from extreme temperatures, fire,

¹⁰ Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 197.

¹¹ Gohnny Johns, "International Phases of the New York World's Fair," *World Affairs* vol. 101, no. 2 (June, 1938), 93, accessed December 3, 2010.

and moisture. Houses such as The Garden Home presented features such as the conservatory which could improve living. The Brides Home introduced a design in which everything was within reach and easy to handle for a new housewife.

The Kelvin Home and The Electric Home were perhaps two of the most technologically advanced homes shown at the Fair. The Kelvin Home was a display of heating and air-conditioning systems. A pamphlet describing the house to its visitors joyously expressed that the home's "quaint charm and quiet hospitality... breathes the spirit of New England's hallowed days. Yet step inside – and the world of tomorrow awaits you! Daily living brought to the effortless, automatic perfection made possible by the complete electrical home equipment of the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation."¹² The Electric Home, sponsored by General Electric, boasted a completely modern home in which tasks such as lighting, heating, cooling, cooking, washing, cleaning, and waste disposal were all accomplished through electricity.¹³ The house included a moving, talking "Magic Kitchen" as well as a car in the driveway complete with heating and air conditioning. The pamphlet for the house stated that "Electric servants with economical efficiency have taken over the tasks and time-consuming domestic drudgery of the old order."¹⁴ These "electric servants" represent the idea of an automated home reminiscent of today's smart houses. These servants took on the role of the housewife of the 1930s. Instead of washing clothes in a tub by hand, one could put the clothes in a washer and dryer. As the clothes were being washed by a machine rather than human hands, one could take time to perform other duties, rest, or participate in a specific leisure activity. These automated machines were meant to provide more time in the busy life of the housewife and increase the standard of living.

¹² Quoted in Paul M. Van Dort, "The Town of Tomorrow," accessed December 9, 2010, http://www.pmphoto.to/worlds_fair/wf_tour/town_tomorrow/town_of_tomorrow.htm.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

These houses were advertised as being affordable to the everyday individual. They were, however, a “breach of faith” according to Gardner Harding, a critic of the fair.¹⁵ Harding lamented that only six of the homes on display were truly affordable. In 1939, three quarters of Americans had a salary of less than three thousand dollars a year. Any house more expensive than \$10,000 at that time was simply too expensive to be considered by the average homeowner.¹⁶ The Town of Tomorrow was thus a vision that was not easily achievable in America at the time, although it was advertised as a town that could easily be built. Clearly, “Tomorrow” was still years away.

Despite the economic climate of America at the time, the mere conception and invention of machinery for the household was already beginning to revolutionize domesticity. Housewives were becoming less reliant on the skills taught to them by their own mother and more reliant on technology in order to aid in their housework. The human was becoming replaced by the machine. Indeed, in 1931, Norman Bel Geddes predicted that “The home will become so mechanized that handwork will be reduced to a minimum. Mechanical devices controlled by the photo-electric cells will open doors, serve meals, and remove dirty dishes and clothes to the appropriate departments of the building.”¹⁷ While not all of his predictions came into fruition, houses such as The Electric Home in the Town of Tomorrow show that designers and scientists were experimenting with devices that would serve the household.

It is interesting to consider the importance placed on machinery for the home in, not only the 1930s, but throughout the 20th and 21st century. It is obvious that a large amount of money was spent on devising new and improved machinery for air travel and industry. Flight and automated production were new to society in the early 20th century. The home, however, was an

¹⁵ Quoted in Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

¹⁷ Quoted in Jandl, *Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow*, 9.

essential part of society for centuries; advancing aspects of the home was, in some ways, not a new frontier for scientists and designers. It was simply building on something that had already been built on over and over again. The fact that the visionaries of the early 20th century looked to the home as a place to improve shows the importance of personal space to society. In *Your Private Sky*, visionary inventor and designer R. Buckminster Fuller, in a discussion of his Dymaxion House, wrote, “Remember that, inasmuch as we are here to live, the one thing we have to have most and the major expenditure we have in life is housing.”¹⁸ This quote, from a meeting in 1929, shows that the home is central to life. It is where one is most likely to spend time; it is what one wishes to improve for the comfort of his family. The automation of the house was intended for comfort; the reasoning behind the time and money spent on devising machinery for the house is apparent when one considers the desire to make the home a place for relaxation.

Fuller discussed the purpose of the home in depth in his essay “Lightful Houses,” published in *Your Private Sky*. He wrote the following:

Our singleness of purpose is housing. The home is a corporate soul and a corporate life in a house. Its activities are divided into – a) what we have to do, b) what we choose to do. What we have to do is 1) eat; 2) sleep; 3) be clean; 4) exercise body and mind. What we choose to do is – 1) work; 2) recreate by reading, music, exercise, etc. etc. A home, like a person, must be as completely as possible independent and self-supporting, have its own character, dignity, and beauty or harmony.¹⁹

The homes shown at Town of Tomorrow showed ways in which one might prepare food and clean the home more efficiently. The Electric Home advertised a “Magic Kitchen” to aid the

¹⁸ Buckminster Fuller, *Your Private Sky*, (Baden/Schweiz: Verlag Lars Muller, 2001), 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

preparation of food and a waste disposal system to help clean. These gadgets assist with the elements that Fuller describes as the needs of the home. With these gadgets, one may have more time for work or recreation; one does not have to spend hours on the menial labors of the home.

The development of machinery was expected to do more than decrease the menial labor of the household. Industrial designer Gilbert Rohde, who designed the focal exhibit for the Community Interests sector in which the Town of Tomorrow was located, believed that technology would bring about Modern Man.²⁰ This man, according to Rohde, would be a part of his community as a result of his additional leisure time due to the reduction of heavy labor. He described a transition that began in 1789 with colonial man, or “Man AND Community,” and ended with the modern American man, or “Man IN the Community.”²¹ Modern Man, Rohde professed, was aided by technology and, as a result, he was

freed from many burdensome chores, worked shorter hours, enjoyed better homes and cities, and had access to longer schooling and improved health.... The community of the future would engage in expanded adult education, develop a richer cultural life, patronize the arts, enjoy recreation, etc.²²

Rohde’s Community Interests focal exhibit as well as the Town of Tomorrow both gave visitors a glimpse at the lifestyle of Modern Man. Indeed, this man was prosperous enough to afford electric servants. His house was made of the most advanced materials which could protect him and his family from weather while remaining stylish. Mrs. Modern, as portrayed in Rohde’s Community Interests focal exhibit, could perform all of her necessary duties, such as ordering ingredients for dinner, with a simple phone call. The future expressed at the 1939 World’s Fair, particularly in the Community Interest’s Town of Tomorrow, promised to be bright. It would be

²⁰ Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

a time in which machines took care of the hard work associated with living. Humans would have time to better their bodies and their minds. They would be able to read books and visit museums, exercise and socialize. With the help of technology, humans would not simply eliminate menial tasks; they hoped to better themselves as a race.

The Smart Home

Since the 1939 World's Fair, houses have developed to the point where many of the features exhibited in the Town of Tomorrow are now found in every household. Few homes in 21st century America can be found without air conditioning, heating, a dishwasher, a clothing washer and dryer, and, additionally, elements never dreamed of in 1939, such as the computer. In this century, technology can be found in practically every room, from the microwave in the kitchen, the hair dryer in the bathroom, the television in the living room, the alarm clock in the bedroom, and so on. Homes today contain items that would have caused frenzy, had they been on display at the New York World's Fair. Certainly, a demonstration of the internet, and how one could even access it through one's own portable telephone would have garnered a much more significant response than the Fair's hit exhibit, Futurama. Today, items such as smart phones and laptops are used without a second thought as to how they improve and benefit one's lifestyle.

The development of computers and other automated technologies has led to the design and advancement of smart homes. First conceived in 1989 by engineer Ross Heitzmann, a smart home contains technology that "allows the homeowner to program all automated features from a central location."²³ In *Intelligent Spaces*, authors P. Bull, R. Limb, and R. Payne describe their vision of a smart home in their essay "Pervasive Home Environments." This vision "is one in

²³ Jandl, *Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow*, 209.

which the overt technology of today will ‘disappear’ into everyday artefacts in the home. The devices will communicate via a range of wired and wireless technologies appropriate to the device and context.”²⁴ These devices will be programmed to perform a number of services described by the authors. These services include: “well-being, care, education, continuous learning, entertainment, [and] energy management.”²⁵ This list is reminiscent of the needs of the home described by Buckminster Fuller in his previously discussed “Lightful Houses” essay. It is interesting to note that *Intelligent Spaces* was published in 2006, almost eight decades after Fuller’s essay from 1928. Clearly, while technology has advanced dramatically in the past eighty years, scientists and designers are still searching for the best way to provide the same services to households. General Electric’s “Magic Kitchen” in the Town of Tomorrow’s Electric Home was not advanced enough to truly eliminate drudgery. As time progresses, more and more devices are created and, on occasion, discarded in the quest to end menial labor.

This cycle can be explained through an examination of Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*. In a discussion of happiness in his famed work, Freud brings up the topic of technology and argues that, in some respects, it does not improve life or make a person happier. Freud states the following:

From the recognition of this fact we ought to be content to conclude that power over nature is not the *only* precondition of human happiness... One would like to ask: is there, then, no positive gain in pleasure... if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away...? ...But here the voice of pessimistic criticism makes itself heard... If there had been no

²⁴ P. Bull, R. Limb, and R. Payne, “Pervasive Home Environments,” in *Intelligent Spaces*, (London: Springer, 2006), 82.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 83.

railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice...²⁶

Freud's argument implies that technology does not provide happiness or eliminate drudgery. It simply replaces one problem with a different problem. If trains had never been invented, telephones would not have been necessary to communicate with loved ones who had moved away by train. Similarly, the introduction of technology in the household has not yet eliminated the labor associated with caring for families and homes. For example, one might set out to wash a load of laundry with the simple turn of a knob. Any number of technological flaws could cause the washer to leak, thus leaving an excess of water on the floor that one must take the effort to mop. In this case, a machine meant to provide ease in washing clothes has malfunctioned and thus created another chore.

Indeed, technology has brought about its own form of drudgery in terms of technical malfunctions and confusion about how to operate more complex devices. Additionally, it has created an ethical dilemma previously discussed in regard to Futurama II. This ethical dilemma involves a misuse of technology that can easily result in destruction of the world's natural environment. Chicago Sun-Times columnist Ann Landers expressed this fear of technology when she stated the following:

“Progress” has poisoned the atmosphere, polluted the rivers and lakes, depleted the forests and hatched a whole new set of problems that threaten our environment. If we don't get some balance in our environment soon, life on this planet, as we know it, is finished.²⁷

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, (New York: Norton, 2010), 60-61.

²⁷ Quoted in Reaven, “New Frontiers: Science and Technology at the Fair” in *Remembering the Future*, 75.

This statement gives the impression that one must be wary of technology and handle it with caution and care. While technology has caused a revolution, it may also cause destruction. Indeed, the use of atomic bombs in Japan during World War II, in many ways, ended the rose-tinted view of the future imagined at the 1939 World's Fair. After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Robert Rosenblum, author of *Remembrance of Fairs Past*, believed that “only fools and hopeless provincials could look with wide-eyed hope at the future of modernity and the blessings of the Machine Age.”²⁸ After World War II and the end of the Great Depression, the view of a utopian world of tomorrow was tarnished.

At the same time technology has brought about ethical dilemmas, technical malfunctions, and confusion, it has also re-defined domesticity. People have become more reliant on technology in the home. This reliance has grown to the point where many of the well-known skills of the 19th century home have been forgotten. These skills were no longer needed after the advent of devices such as the washing machine and refrigerator. In some respects, the forsaking of these skills represented progress. The revolution of the home advanced the quality of life and made it easier to perform the necessary duties associated with the home. It re-defined how people live and work. In other respects, the abandonment of these skills has created a reliance on technology that could be seen as dangerous. If technology ever fails due to a number of reasons such as energy shortage or mass malfunction, society would be left without some of the essential skills for not just the care of the home, but also for survival. While the advancement of technology for the home has created a certain level of ease, it has also re-defined domesticity in such a way that society has become reliant on technology in order for its members to live their life.

²⁸ Robert Rosenblum, “Remembrance of Fairs Past,” in *Remembering the Future*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 17.

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