



"Competing Utopias: Modern Design on Both sides of the Iron Curtain"

By Lyra Kilston

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Living Room | Photo: David Hartwell

"I always thought of the [Soviet] East in black-and-white, and the West in color," says filmmaker Bill Ferehawk. He is one of six curators of the installation "Competing Utopias," which puts this preconception to the test by placing furniture and objects from the Wende Museum and Archive of the Cold War into the rooms of the Neutra VDL House. The curators call it an irreverent play on period rooms, illustrating two forks of a Cold War history.

Renowned architect Richard Neutra's VDL House in Silver Lake is a paragon of refined modernist design, so the addition of the Wende's objects creates an immediate uncanny experience while walking inside. From the tangerine-colored biomorphic chair to the bright red-and-yellow child's school bag, this show proves that Ferehawk's monochromatic vision was very wrong. As Patrick Mansfield of the Wende explained, the curatorial team selected items that blended stealthily with the house, those that were slightly different, and then some that were blatantly not from the West. For example, the jarringly official atmosphere of the foyer, where a government portrait overlooks chairs facing a podium.



Reception Seating | Photo: David Hartwell

The most baffling items, though, were those that seemed completely Western, revealing that contrary to our perception, the Soviet East was in-sync with global styles. Or had they started them? The sleek, geometric chairs, colorful packaging, bright kitchen appliances and jazz records make you wonder.

Questions of origin arise in every room of the house. Take the rough-hewn ceramic vessels in the living room; they look like pure 1970s California, but they're East German. Then the dots start connecting: Southern California ceramic style was greatly influenced by Gertrud and Otto Natzler, who emigrated from Austria during World War II. Of course, Los Angeles's two giants of early architectural modernism, Rudolph Schindler and Neutra, emigrated from Austria as well, importing the legacy of modern European design. Curator Donna Stein of the Wende points out that the influences of the Bauhaus school remained in (both sides of) Germany too, long after its founder Walter Gropius, and many of its members, fled to the West.

The cultural cross-pollination abounds, with surprising results; the East brightens and American exceptionalism goes a bit limp. Plastics may be associated with American postwar prosperity and suburban Tupperware parties, but East Germany had the muscle of a huge petrochemical industry and evolved a galaxy of plastic objects in parallel.

Far from creating a day-glo picture of a misunderstood wonderland, the curators made room for the dark side of Soviet Communism. A clunky video camera installed on a staircase gives a hint, and on the top floor, a small room is crammed full of banal but insidious army-green and grey audio and video equipment. (Here, at last, is the lack of color we expected.) Amid the elegance and kitsch of the comfortable furnishings, the surveillance room reminds us that communist East Germany employed more spies to observe its own citizens than any other totalitarian government in recent history.



Breakfast Nook | Photo: David Hartwell



Kitchen | Photo: David Hartwell

Many house-museums, like the Neutra VDL House, can struggle to engage their visitors when they stay frozen in time, or emptied of context. "When a historic house is not lived in, it's hard to really understand how the rooms worked," notes Ferehawk. This installation activates the house by arranging the objects to suggest the lives of fictional characters, like a child and a pilot, and the curators asked two artists to create a set of image-and-text postcards that suggest vague, evocative narratives for parts of the house.

"This is not a historical exhibit. But it does represent a living history in Los Angeles," adds Ferehawk, referring to East German ex-pats who have immigrated to this city. For them, this installation will prove a different kind of funhouse mirror: the right objects in the wrong setting.

Parallels and mirrors abound around the big questions posed by this exhilarating and confounding show: How was modernism developed on both sides of the Iron Curtain? What did modernism represent to each superpower? Clues emerge from every object in the house. The toy set of cowboys and Indians on the floor seems innocuous enough. But in East Germany, the meaning wasn't what was shown on American televisions. Here, the cowboys were evil imperialists.

And our mental image of a somber, grey society -- was that just what was marketed to Americans as a kind of capitalist realism? As Mansfield points out, "the promotion of our lifestyle was better" in the West. But what about the promotion of the Soviet lifestyle in the East which we weren't seeing? According to a couple of East German magazines in the house, life looked pretty good too. While lifestyle magazine photos seldom reflect reality -- both in the East and West -- the domestic dream remains the same. American magazines of the time would espouse a similar -- and largely imagined -- vision too, where citizens consumed in the name of capitalism. Both sides were trying to rebuild their

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identities after the war, and while each employed different ideologies, they seem to want to say the same thing: We are progressing. We are the future.

Competing Utopias is on view at the Neutra VDL House through September 13, 2014.



Reception Desk | Photo: David Hartwell



Surveillance Room Exterior View | Photo: David Hartwell

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Child Room | Photo: Laure Joliet



Courtyard | Photo: Laure Joliet



Living Room Side Table | Photo: Laure Joliet



Telephone Nook | Photo: Laure Joliet

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Waiting Room | Photo: Laure Joliet

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<http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/los-angeles/competing-utopias-neutra-vdl-house.html>