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FEELING IT:
HABITAT, TASTE AND THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS IN 1970S BRITAIN

Ben Highmore

Abstract In 1964 the furniture designer and entrepreneur Terence Conran, along with various partners, opened a shop in London selling furniture and household goods. It was a ‘lifestyle shop’ called Habitat. By the late 1970s it was a fixture of many cities and towns across Britain. In this essay I treat Habitat as a taste formation, as part of a structure of feeling that was specific to what many social commentators were calling the ‘new middle class’. This essay charts some of those feelings and the material culture that supported them, and argues for an approach to taste that treats it as an agent of socio-historical change as well as a practice that maintains and reproduces social class. The feelings that Habitat could be seen to activate ranged from ‘cottage urbanism’ and improvised sociability to a sense of middle-class-classlessness. Habitat’s role was ambiguous, nurturing both middle class radicalism and the marketization of democratic impulses. In the transition from welfare state socialism to neoliberal hegemony Habitat’s role was both surreptitious and substantial.

Keywords feelings, Habitat, Angela Carter, Raymond Williams, class, history, design

1.

In 1976, in an article for the magazine *New Society*, the novelist Angela Carter described the cultural significance of the High Street furnishings and kitchen shop Habitat. For Carter, Habitat signalled a generational shift in how people treated their furniture, how they felt about it, and how they lived with it. ‘Habitat purchasers’, wrote Carter, ‘are not over-awed by their own dining-room suites. They will live *with* their furniture, not alongside it – as my mother did. My mother always thought her mahogany table was too good to use *as* a table. It inhabited the rarely used dining-room like a rich lodger’.¹ For Carter’s generation and class, furniture was no longer the heirloom or the hand-me-down, no longer the heavy and dark wooden tables and cupboards of a Victorian, Edwardian or inter-war age. In 1976 furniture could have a lightness, both literally and figuratively; it didn’t have to last forever, it didn’t need to have a sense of posterity attached to it. It could be made of plastic; it could be bright red; it could be expendable.

If Carter could find a new cultural gravity in specific items like tables, she also found a new lightness and informality in the experience of shopping at Habitat:

The shops are the antithesis of the department store, with its hushed decorum and imposing, beadle-like, senior counter-jumpers, where merchandise is mediated between the firm and you by supercilious assistants who fetch items from locked glass cases, items known only to themselves, and spread them out on counters which mark the division between buyer and seller with absolute precision. There is no sense of a ritual exchange in a Habitat shop.

¹ Angela Carter, “What the Hell – It’s Home!” in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, Vintage, London, 2013, p205. Originally published in *New Society*, 13 May 1976.

The staff, usually young, wearing name tags, negotiate with the informally clad customers on friendly, easy terms. Merchandising is democratised. There is music, a pleasant sense of subdued bustle. Everything for sale may be felt, handled, touched; no locked showcases. The goods are displayed with such reckless prodigality it is easy to forget they have to be paid for.²

A world of glass cabinets, with a mausoleum-hush, gives way to a world of informality, where the haughty advice of shop assistants (assistants who might be more snobbish than their clientele) is replaced by the authority of knowledge gained from touching and feeling. Such shifts in the shopping experience have been felt before: in the nineteenth century when fixed pricing was introduced; and again when haberdashery shops turned into department stores; and in the early twentieth century when self-service supermarkets were introduced.³ In the 1970s the Sixties Revolution still had unfinished business, and you could see it in those fusty and frosty department stores that Carter is referring to. Shops such as the imaginary Grace Brothers in the sitcom *Are You Being Served?* register a world of aristocratic taste and social deference. Such a world was hanging on and holding out against new formations of informality, social mobility and sexual freedoms (however limited and uneven) that seemed to be on the rise. You can see it below in the defensive arrangement of cabinets and chests; you can see it in Captain Peacock's carnation; and you will hear the rumblings of another order in the cockney twang of Miss Brahms (Wendy Richards) and Mr Lucas (Trevor Bannister) and in the libidinal currents of permissiveness that animate the shop floor.

Fig. 1. 'Ladies Garments' in Grace Brothers in *Are You Being Served?* 1972-1985 BBC.

For Angela Carter, Habitat didn't just represent a more informal and sensual experience of shopping, it named a whole way of life:

But if I can easily imagine myself sitting on a piece of the William range ('Craftsman-built furniture which has a solid frame of beechwood'), reading the *Sunday Times* colour supplement, waiting for my Elizabeth David lunch to be ready, I can't imagine, say, a Rembrandt on the wall opposite, even if it were an unframed repro pinned up as casually as all hell.⁴

We could say that a sofa imagines a world, it imagines particular users and a range of cultural activities, it imagines connected objects, and it wants to disqualify other different worlds. This is how culture works, isn't it? A constellation conjured from the incidental and the peripheral, a series that somehow accumulates and configures, to form a culture, a world. A *worlding* produced through accumulated items and itineraries, moods and attitudes gathered and dispersed across furnishings and fashions, foods and foibles. A *worlding* that produces some sort of temporary alignment by the way that some other

² Ibid, p207.

³ A relevant history can be found by consulting: Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*, Faber, London, 2000; Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981; Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977; and Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, California, 1982.

⁴ Ibid, p. 206.

cultural itineraries no long seem viable, or no longer seem to be quite in-tune anymore. And of course it doesn't have to be an Elizabeth David recipe; it could be a whole host of other dishes and techniques so long as they suggest a breezy informality, so long as the green vegetables haven't totally wilted and been drained of colour through long, vindictive boiling. And it doesn't have to be the *Sunday Times*; it could be *Nova*, or the *Observer* supplement or *House and Garden*. And it doesn't have to be Habitat, not really. It doesn't have to fit completely, it doesn't need to follow the ludicrously narrow orchestrations of advertising. It can work through approximation, through ad hoc assemblages and more tentative arrangements.

Angela Carter is showing us a series of synecdoches that stand in for something: an attitude, perhaps, or a mood. But what they stand-in for might turn out to be just more synecdoches: olive oil, duvets, pasta, floor cushions, Pink Floyd, mineral water, salad, vegetarianism, CND, family planning, DIY, yoga, and yoghurt. And just as such lists accumulate, they force out other lists: bowler hats, Rembrandt, cottage pie, boiled sprouts and cabbage, cheap but sturdy reproduction Jacobean furniture, dark sherry, Terence Rattigan, Pools coupons. It's the shorthand of culture: we know what someone means when they complain about the mountains of humus that can be found in a particular neighbourhood. They don't mean that Greek or Turkish Cypriot heritage make up the households. They mean that they can sense a class disposition, a set of aspirations, a particular way of speaking, of phrasing, perhaps a typical list of names. More lists, then: Jessica, Jason, Benjamin, Rupert, Francesca, Sarah, Nigel. We have seen them grow up: we have tasted their cooking; we may be their children; we may even be them.

2.

In the 1930s, anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Gregory Bateson studied human societies in terms of the characteristic patterns and configurations of a culture. They were interested in getting a sense of the cultural totality, of the way that relays of values, practices, feelings and manners were interconnected. They coined words to describe what they were interested in studying: the word 'ethos', for instance, was used to signify the 'emotional background' of a culture. Ethos was characterised as a '*culturally standardised system of organisation of the instincts and emotions of the individuals*'.⁵ Such orchestrated impulses and emotions were the organising force of a whole way of life seen as 'fundamental and distinctive cultural configurations that pattern existence and condition the thoughts and emotions of the individuals who participate in those cultures'.⁶ Benedict and Bateson were looking for typologies of such configurations as they existed in different societies which might be thought of as Dionysian, for instance, or Apollonian, or might be understood as orchestrated by rivalry or by mutuality. They were interested in how history and psychology coalesced to form particular cultures and how inter-cultural contacts could intensify differences or, conversely, how they might blend and meld cultures together.

In England, in the teaching of literature in the 1940s and 50s such anthropological concerns were often central to understanding the role of literature and other representational forms within modern society. In Raymond Williams's adult education curricula in the 1950s Ruth Benedict's 1934 *Patterns of Culture* was essential reading.

⁵ Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (second edition), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1958, p118 (italics in the original). The first edition was published in 1936.

⁶ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1934, p. 55.

And when Williams wrote such books as *The Long Revolution* the language of Benedict and Bateson was evident throughout (he cites Benedict several times and describes cultural analysis as founded on the apprehension of distinctive patterns). It is the phrase ‘structures of feeling’ where you can see this influence most intensely. Indeed it helps to understand Williams’s notorious phrase if we think less of ‘*structures of feelings*’ and more of *patterns, configurations* and *relays* of feelings. Similarly it is useful to see the term ‘feeling’ as a purposefully vague word for anthropology that includes not just emotions but also tacit social conventions, ways of joking, attitudes, orientations, and so on. When Bateson set out to undertake the fieldwork for his book *Naven*, he recalls that he was; ‘interested in studying what I called the “feel” of culture, and I was bored with the conventional study of more formal details’.⁷

But if Benedict and Bateson were primarily interested in relatively stable patterns of culture within societies that might be facing change while desperately maintaining a specific ethos, it is clear that Williams was interested in much more fractured societies that were in a state of constant change, and where, consequently, there were dramatic shifts in ‘emotional backgrounds’ and in attitudes and orientations. In several places he describes how he found himself in a place (the University of Cambridge, primarily) where he wasn’t ‘talking the same language’ as those around him. He first notices this when coming to Cambridge from the working-class, rural milieu of Pandy in Wales where he grew up, and again when he returns to Cambridge after being demobbed from his artillery regiment in 1945. The changes evident between class-milieus (working class Pandy and ruling class Cambridge) suggest a clash between patterns of feeling that are existing in a synchronic arrangement; while the differences effected by war experiences suggests a diachronic shift in feelings that is acutely felt across and between generations. For societies structured by rivalry (capitalist competition) and characterised by accelerating patterns of change, structures of feeling will always have a diachronic and a synchronic aspect to them.

It is customary to think of Williams as someone who traces changing structures of feeling by paying close attention to genre conventions in the world of communications and drama, someone who traces configurations of feeling by tracking the changes of the use of words across centuries; we are less accustomed to thinking of him as someone who associates feelings with clothing, buildings, furnishings – to what we now commonly refer to as material culture. Yet in his more autobiographical performances (which include novels and the more anecdotal aspects of some of his essay writing) it is clear that patterns of feelings are not sustained by language alone and require material supports (ways of doing alongside ways of saying). Indeed these material supports are often what carry and nourish feelings. For example, both their clothes and the manner of wearing them are part of what maintains self-respect for the working men of Pandy; it is ‘a whole attitude in a way of dress.’⁸ Similarly, perhaps, the supercilious snobbery that he finds in Cambridge requires the fussiness of the tea rooms as their support.

By foregrounding ‘structures of feeling’ in his version of cultural analysis Williams set about reconfiguring the way we see social life as being organised and determined. In other words ‘structures of feeling’ affects how we analyse culture:

⁷ Gregory Bateson, ‘Experiments in Thinking About Observed Ethnological Material’, *Philosophy of Science*, 18, 1, 1941, reproduced in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972, p81.

⁸ Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, ‘Working Class Attitudes’, *New Left Review*, 1, 1960, p27.

The methodological consequences of such a definition [of a structure of feeling as a particular quality of social experience], however, is that the specific qualitative changes are not *assumed* to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time they are from the beginning taken as *social* experience, rather than as ‘personal’ experience or as the merely superficial or incidental ‘small change’ of society.⁹

Or to say it slightly differently: we can’t assume that changing attitudes, manners and emotions, and all the material practices that support them, are caused by something that is more fundamental, more causal. The ‘small change’ might be the thing itself, the thing that we call social change. This isn’t a world away from the sort of concern with the alterations in the sensorial world that we associate with Jacques Rancière and the idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’, but it has the distinct advantage of not being freighted with the over-optimistic assessment that Rancière associates with sensorial re-orchestration.¹⁰ For Rancière any new organisation of sense (changes in what counts as meaningful, what counts as something worth attending to) opens up, potentially at least, a space of equality; for Williams, emergent and pre-emergent structures of feeling are as likely to usher in new inequalities, un-freedoms and restricted forms of democratic culture, as they are to offer a progressive space for the practice of democracy.

But however we assess these changes in feelings and attitudes and their material supports, it seems unlikely that change could be effected by the alteration of one or two items of material culture, or one or two shifts in attitude. It would be absurd to imagine that ‘permissiveness’ is effected through the preponderance of contraceptives, or through the availability of floor cushions, though it might be hard to imagine 1960s permissiveness without either item. It is too much cultural weight for either item to bear. But when you start configuring floor cushions and contraceptives as part of a relay that includes CND, flared trousers, cheesecloth smocks, drugs, higher wages, and so on, we are getting closer to the sort of ‘structure’ that constitutes and nourishes feelings.

3.

An example of describing a structure of feeling in terms of material culture was given in 1982 by the historian Raphael Samuel as he described what he called ‘the new middle classes’ who he saw as the constituency who would be attracted to the ‘radical’ centrist politics of the newly formed Social Democratic Party (formed in 1981 and made up, primarily, of defectors from the Labour Party). What makes them the ‘new’ middle classes is the way that their tastes have departed substantially from an earlier middle-class who anxiously aped a version of aristocratic sensibilities. The ‘new’ middle class were more confident in their choices, more sociable in their outlook and more deluded in their class consciousness (they saw themselves as classless). For Samuel:

The new middle class are outward-looking rather than inward-looking. They have opened up their homes to visitors, and exposed them to the public gaze. They have removed the net curtains from their windows, and taken down the shutters

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p131.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London, 2004.

from their shops. They work in open-plan offices and establishments, with plate-glass windows and see through partitions and doors. In their houses they make a fetish of light and space, replacing rooms with open-access living areas and exposing the dark corners to view. They turn servants' attics into penthouses and make basements into garden flats. Back yards blossom out as patios; kitchens are aestheticized; even the lavatory is turned into a miniature folly.¹¹

We can catch the noise of new office complexes being built – all polyvalent space, all 'transparency' and 'creativity', all personnel departments and team-building exercises. We can catch the sound of gentrification – all floorboard sanding, wallpaper stripping, and rent increases.

The uniforms of the cadres of this new class formation were militantly casual:

They dress down rather than up, for parties, in tight trousers rather than dinner jackets, pinafores rather than gowns. They go hatless to work and spend long and expensive hours at the hairdresser's, to cultivate a windswept look. They make a show of peasant pots in their kitchens. Their homes are imitation farmhouses rather than miniature stately homes, with stripped pine rather than period furniture, linens rather than chintz, and concealed lighting rather than cut-glass chandeliers.¹²

Perhaps they shop at Habitat, perhaps not. By 1981 you could certainly save a few quid by scouring junk shops and jumble sales for your 'peasant pots' and your 'stripped pine' tables, and if you were young and in the business of gentrification then you might very well need to save that money.

Even in 1964 when Habitat opened its first shop it was clear that it wasn't simply inventing a look, a style *ex nihilo*. The design journalist Fiona MacCarthy caught the feel of this style as some sort of melange of rural-urbanism. Reading the jokey catalogue descriptions for Habitat ('what a grind pepper mills from France', 'sweetshop jars for herbs and kitchen goodies') she finds that 'the adjectives, downright and jovial, mount up to an elaborate townsmen's code for country living. Habitat merchandise is fashionably basic, a kit for farmhouse cooking, preferably French.'¹³ Such a style wasn't specific to Habitat, it could be found in any number of boutique shops, and 'new' antique shops that were selling 'not just stripped pine' but a whole panoply of retro bric-à-brac:

Piled high on the chests and dressers and plain scrubbed trestle tables there are stoneware kitchen crocks, apothecary jars, preserving pans, giant pestles and mortars, rural English china with pictures of cows paddling lugubriously in brooks. People lug them off to countrify their cottages in Fulham.¹⁴

The interiors of any number of inner city gentrification projects are made up, not of brushed aluminium and stainless steel, but the scuffed pine kitchen tables bought from

¹¹ Raphael Samuel, 'The SDP and the New Middle Classes', *New Society*, 22 April 1982, reprinted in *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain (Theatres of Memory, Volume II)*, Verso, London, 1998, p258.

¹² *Ibid.* p258.

¹³ Fiona MacCarthy, 'In Habitat', *Guardian*, October 5, 1966, p8.

¹⁴ Fiona MacCarthy, 'Geared Up', *Guardian*, January 16, 1965, p6.

the local junk shop. (Within a decade or two such junk shops will change hands and become retro-boutiques selling old tin shop signs advertising Cadbury's chocolate and Alka-Seltzer, and the kitchenware of working class Victorians and Edwardians.) Just at the time when domestic appliances, such as refrigerators, were becoming widely available, a previous era's technology (preserving pans, pestle and mortars) take on the patina of a 'golden age'. Such re-accentuating means eradicating the whiff of labour that might be attached to these implements and replacing it with 'charm'. Old mangles once deodorised become 'charming'. White enamel bowls with a thin blue rim, used by previous generations for washing on a night stand, became home to flower pots and trinkets in an age of central heating and hot water 'on tap'.

To be modern, switched-on and trendy in 1950s England often meant looking to the United States for a sense of what it felt like to be up-to-date or to seem modern. In an age of post-war austerity the US presented a world of plenty: of giant refrigerators overflowing with luxurious food; of houses brimming with gadgets and oversized furnishings; of cars with baroque radiator grills and jet-age fins. Habitat, though, offered a declension of the modern with a set of references and feelings that in the 50s would have been decidedly unmodern. One of the keywords for naming this feeling is 'natural':

Most of the items are British – a rare tribute when design is the criterion, though happily less rare as the years go on – but the panel shopped also in France, Italy, and Scandinavia, and as far away as Japan. No matter where they come from, though, there is this natural feeling, epitomised by country pine kitchen units and rush-seat chairs.¹⁵

Of course country pine kitchen units are no more 'natural' than mahogany tables, Japanese paper lampshade globes are no more 'natural' than linoleum: again it is the feeling that counts. And this feeling was secured through connections to the 'naturalness' of French and Italian cooking. To associate a sense of the modern with naturalness (French cooking, pine furniture, Victorian earthenware, and so on) was partly a way of distancing the feeling of the modern from that associated with the US. In this, the Habitat taste formation figured Americanism (as a domestic culture) is implicitly artificial and inauthentic. In its ability to create a hybrid culture, that can mix old and new (in both design and materials), urban and rural, Habitat put the emphasis on urban pastoralism that was decidedly un-American in association. Even for commentators who saw the Habitat taste as fake it seemed implicit that the reference points were English pastoral: 'In any big city, on Saturdays, you find them, living like peasants, exchanging rustic jokes. [...] These are Conran people. Or imitation Conran.'¹⁶ Were these the same people who joined CND to protest not just nuclear weaponry but the siting of US nuclear military bases within Britain?

4.

As a taste formation, Habitat was a relay machine: it taught you a whole way of life. It didn't just offer chairs and cutlery, cushions and butcher's blocks, but smells, sounds, cooking, living, parenting, socialising, inhabiting, and so on. Habitat, as a shop, was a

¹⁵ Anne Donaldson, 'Back to Nature in Home Equipment', press clipping, source not given, May 1964. Habitat archive AAD/1995/12/15/1.

¹⁶ MacCarthy, 'In Habitat', p8.

sensorial orchestration. When the second shop opened in London's Tottenham Court Road in 1966, it extended its sensorial world. The first shop in Fulham brought together old and new (Chesterfield sofas alongside sharply modern Italian chairs, for instance) in an environment of quarry tiles and sisal carpets, whitewashed brick and ambient lighting. The smell of Provençal herbs drifted up from the basement, and the sounds of Coltrane and Miles floated on the air. By 1966 there was a section in the shop dedicated to stereos (Braun and Bang and Olufsen) and portable mini TVs (Sony). The section dedicated to cooking now included herbs 'picked and packed in great bunches' which 'will be part of a collection of essential aids to cooking on sale from the marble-topped Herb and Food counter. There will be good olive oil, leaf gelatine, rock salt, and other useful things that are hard to find.'¹⁷ (This was still a time in Britain when you were most likely to find olive oil in a chemist, prescribed for loosening ear wax.) Alongside herbs and oils you would be able to find cookery books and terracotta 'chicken bricks'.

The selecting and connecting of items was the point of Habitat. As the first press release had it: 'We hope we have taken the foot slogging out of shopping by assembling a wise selection of unusual and top-quality goods under one roof. It has taken us a year to complete this pre-digested shopping programme.'¹⁸ It was a one stop shop for a way of life. It took the worry out of taste by offering a pre-digested programme. By the time Angela Carter was writing it was not just a shop, but a vast network of shops. Twenty two shops in the United Kingdom, clustering around outer London (Romford, Guilford, Watford, etc.) but also stretching out to Glasgow, Bolton, Bristol, Brighton, Manchester, and so on. A few years later (1980) and there will be forty seven shops including some in France, Belgium and the USA (under the banner Conran's Habitat in North America – invoking the name of Terence Conran as designer, retailer and tastemaker). By the mid-1970s Habitat, as a taste formation, would also include the beginnings of a publishing industry in domestic advice, and included the gentrifier's bible *The House Book* by Terence Conran, first published in 1974 and then constantly updated and reissued throughout the rest of the century. *The House Book* offered advice and examples of interior design for your home, as well as practical advice about finances, maintenance, DIY improvements, as well as the odd bit of parenting advice thrown in for free.

The high years of Habitat coincided with the gentrification of many inner-city areas, most famously London's Islington in the 1960s and Stoke Newington in the 1970s.¹⁹ In 1986 the Scottish journalist Neal Ascherson could look back on ten years of middle class gentrification of Stoke Newington, noting how the place went through a cycle of decline and 'renewal':

At the end of Victoria's century, Stoke Newington began to 'decline' as the middle class moved gradually out and left their villas to working-class families. The place became shabby, then decidedly poor. In the post-war years, West Indians arrived, Turkish and Creek Cypriots, Asians from many countries. And then, perhaps 10 years ago, came the first ripples of the London middle class, soon a tidal inrush of families buying Victorian villas, refurbishing Georgian

¹⁷ Habitat Press release 10 October 1966 – archived at the V&A, AAD/1995/12/16/143-176

¹⁸ Habitat Press release 11 May 1964.

¹⁹ For a general account of London's gentrification see Joe Moran, 'Early Cultures of Gentrification in London, 1955-1980', *Journal of Urban History*, 34, 1, pp101-121.

façades, bringing with them their retinue of health food shops, delicatessens, 'California restaurants,' wine bars and – of course – estate agents' boutiques.²⁰

Gentrification brings with it a whole way of life – forms of financial exchange, ways of eating, leisure practices, and so on. These are the new middle class, some of whom might shop at Habitat. Many more would be likely to own a copy of *The House Book* or at least to have looked through it. For Ascherson this wave of gentrification 'aren't "wealthy", by London standards'. 'The Stoke Newington settlers are' according to Ascherson 'teachers, social workers, middle-aged media people starting a second marriage, the highly educated young who prefer trading to the dole.'²¹

Habitat as a taste formation could be thought of as an assemblage of cultural technologies instilling feelings about material domestic life, and achieving this through books, catalogues, shops, newspaper articles (Habitat was regularly featured in the Sunday colour supplements in the 70s and 80s) as well as through the actual objects that were bought. Such a cultural technology taught a section of the public, not just how to shop, but how to live. And one of the lessons that it taught was that you could be a Habiter without necessarily having to buy anything from Habitat. Indeed it would be more 'authentically' Habitat to buy your stripped pine kitchen table from a second hand shop than to get a new one from Habitat. For some commentators Habitat was no longer engaged in the pedagogic mission of instilling a knowledge of 'good design': 'the shop is not a schoolroom but a theatre, a place where fantasies are played out and identities are taken on and discarded with each new set of commodities.'²² But this is in many ways a false opposition: here the theatre is a classroom. Habitat's pedagogic function was performed with ironic glee, offering endless examples of tousled-haired kids clambering over furniture, while unflustered parents quaffed wine and performed their well-rehearsed improvisations of spontaneous sociability. You learnt on the job so to say. You learnt in the process of acquiring space and *inhabiting* it.

Fig. 2. The Lennon family in Weybridge, 1965, photograph by Robert Whitaker.

Early students included Cynthia and John Lennon. In 1965 living west of London in Weybridge the Lennons were regular visitors to Habitat's first shop in Fulham. But judging from the photographic evidence above they have achieved the Habitat look without acquiring specific Habitat items. But it isn't the 'look' so much as the 'feel' that's important. The photo is knowing, ironic, almost to a fault. Everything is being squeezed into the frame, even the plant pot now sits precariously on the corner of their stripped pine second hand kitchen table, giving up security for a place in the scene. It is all a joke of course. He plays the provider, hoe in hand, foot on the chair of mother and child. She plays the nurturer, the home-maker, sitting on her domestic throne, child on her knee, with the mop as the sceptre. It's a gleeful re-enactment of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* from 1930: this time the homestead is in metroland, and instead of

²⁰ Neal Ascherson, *Games with Shadows*, Radius, London, 1988, p21. The ur-texts on gentrification remain Sharon Zukin's *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1989, and Neil Smith's *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Routledge, New York, 1996.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Hewitt, 'Good Design in the Market Place: The Rise of Habitat Man', *Oxford Art Journal*, 10, 2, 1987, p29.

endless struggle and misery all is fecund, all is fun, all is easy. The photo plays with its own sense of naturalness. ‘What could be more natural’, it seems to say ‘than this scene of a man, a woman, a child, each with their allotted role?’ But at the same time it admits to this as play-acting, as if to say that the ‘natural’ might just be another performance, another role to play, and that such a display of ‘conspicuous thrift’ (the phrase was used to describe the interiors of many financially over-stretched but culturally-confident home owners at the time) could only be performed with tongue firmly in cheek. It is conspicuous heterosexuality, as well as conspicuous whiteness, played-out with pop sensibility.

This sense of style as a relay of feelings, of practices animated by a selection of objects, as a set of resources that becomes instrumentalised by the retail trade, was central to Jean Baudrillard’s understanding of consumer culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

Few object today are offered *alone* [...] they are always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse towards *networks* of objects in order to captivate that impulse and bring it, in keeping with its own logic, to the highest degree of commitment, to the limits of its economic potential. Clothing, machines and toiletries thus constitute object *pathways*, which establish inertial constraints in the consumer: he will move *logically* from one object to another. He will be caught up in a *calculus* of objects, and this is something quite different from the frenzy of buying and acquisitiveness to which the simple profusion of commodities give rise.²³

Baudrillard’s sense of being ‘caught up in a *calculus* of objects’ is fitting for understanding Habitat – after all nothing quite goes as well with a Habitat couch as a Habitat lamp or a Habitat rug. But this commitment to logic doesn’t quite fit the ‘conspicuous thrift’ which was also an element of Habitat’s taste formation. In this, Habitat taste was never as totalising as the high-modernism that is associated with the Bauhaus. Indeed I would imagine that the range of aspiring new middle class householders who either actually shopped at Habitat or were otherwise inculcated with a Habitat sensibility often only lived a partial relay of the form. In this the taste formation of Habitat was varied, and might include a total dedication to the ‘logic’ of Habitat at one end and the sort of ‘slight-Habitat-ism’ that is represented by Ann Oakley’s mother at the other:

The house was composed of matt white surfaces, dull carpets that wouldn’t show the dirt and such an economy of decorative items that the eye was mildly shocked to chance on any of them. There were a few highly polished dark wood tables and chests inherited from my mother’s respectable South East London family, and later some blonde wood constructions, my mother’s pride and joy, acquired in the 1960s from new furniture stores such as Habitat. It was a house bought by my father and made by my mother in a formula rife among the English middle-middle-class in the 1950s.²⁴

²³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Sage, London, 1998, p27 (originally published in France in 1970).

²⁴ Ann Oakley, *Father and Daughter: Patriarchy, gender and social science*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2014, p 1-2.

The mixture of dark tables alongside the pale woods of Habitat furniture recognises the compromises that many people had to make by living across worlds of taste.

In this respect Habitat taste favoured the young, those unencumbered by a previous generation's furniture. It also favoured the make-do-and-mend necessities of squatters, housing cooperatives, and gentrifiers. It echoed with the bohemian sensitivities that was a crucial ingredient of the new middle class's commitments to 'freedom', social informality and looseness.²⁵ In this Habitat-taste could be achieved in inner-city terraced housing without setting foot in a Habitat shop, by adopting a back-to-basics of raw floor boards, 'original features' (Victorian fireplaces, coving and ceiling roses, and so on), junk shop tables, and assorted bric-à-brac. This is where Habitat as retailer both connects and disconnects with 'Habitat' as a sensibility shared by people who might despise everything that the shop stands for. In Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, published the year before Angela Carter's essay on Habitat, you can get a sense of how flexible this taste formation was, and how easily it was to adopt. The Kirks, the novel's protagonists, are social radicals: he's a philandering narcissistic Marxist sociologist, she's a community activist, who would be much happier if he didn't suck the life out of her. They are the shock troops railing against bourgeois life, but caught in their own class contradictions: 'when you visit the Kirks, there is always a new kind of Viennese coffee-cake to eat, and a petition to sign.'²⁶ Their interior decoration suggests how a loose 'conspicuous thrift' aesthetic might morph into something more suited to retail shopping:

At first the main furniture was the mattresses and the cushions that lay on the floor, but gradually the Kirks got around to going and buying things, mostly on trips up to London; what they bought was transient furniture, the kind that inflated, or folded up, or fitted into this into that. They built desks with filing cabinets and doors, as they had in Leeds, and bookcases out of boards and bricks. What had started as a simple attempt to make space liveable in gradually turned into something stylish, attractive, but that was all right; it still remained for them an informal camp site, a pleasant but also a completely uncommitting and unshaped environment through which they could move and do their thing.²⁷

As their prosperity increases the Kirk's squat aesthetic ('conspicuous thrift' with a political edge) seamlessly transmogrifies into hip design.

5.

Raymond Williams includes a vast swathe of phenomena under the category of 'feeling': emotions, attitudes, rhythms, habits, orientations and so on. He sometimes wants 'feeling' to refer to what could be called 'intuitive life': our most proximate resources of attitudes and behaviours that don't require conscious effort. Thus a 'democratic feeling' is more important than a democratic 'thought' or 'idea' because the feeling suggests a practice

²⁵ Sam Binkley uses the term 'looseness' to describe the structures of feeling being articulated by certain lifestyle cultures in the USA at this time: Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007.

²⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man*, Arena Books, London, 1984, p. 3, first published in 1975.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p44.

that has been lived, that has become enfolded through habit and routine. (Of course, 'racist feelings' and 'sexist feelings' could also inhabit the world of intuitive life.) It is the category 'energy' that strikes me as particularly relevant for tracing Habitat as a pattern of feeling. There is a vitalist aspect to Williams's thought that is constantly interested in tempo, liveliness, movement, pulse and pace. For instance, in *Keywords* when he is discussing the saying 'we just don't speak the same language', he explains that it means 'that we are aware, often intangibly, of different formations and distributions of energy and interest.'²⁸ In his collaborative book with the editorial team of *New Left Review* he continually describes cultural situations and his relation towards them in terms of energy. But energy is never just a quantity for Williams – it is never simply a question of having it or lacking it, of feeling deflated or elated and everything in between. Energy is also about focus, distribution, concentration – it always contains a social attitude. Thus in the immediate postwar years, after a number of political and literary projects had collapsed he writes that 'the experience confirmed the pattern of feeling I had found in Ibsen. For a period I was in such a state of fatigue and withdrawal that I stopped reading papers or listening to the news.'²⁹ But this feeling shouldn't be construed as pessimistic or depressed: for Williams it meant a re-focused energy, but one that wasn't socially expansive, but concentrated on understanding and working-through cultural change. In clarifying the reference to Ibsen he writes: 'In his plays, the experience of defeat does not diminish the value of the fight. That was precisely the personal 'structure of feeling' within which I lived from '45 to '51 at the deepest level.'³⁰

For Raphael Samuel energy and pace are also themes that are articulated by the new middle class: 'The new middle class have a different emotional economy than that of their prewar predecessors. They go in for instant rather than deferred gratification, making positive virtue of their expenditure, and treating the self-indulgent as an ostentatious display of good taste.'³¹ Habitat was all about the energy of the instantaneous, the prodigal, and the fizz of improvised sociability. In the shops it found a display form:

Conran has perceptively exploited urban restlessness. In Habitat, things happen almost anywhere you look. Glasses and steak knives and cooking pots pile up: dozens of dolls sit in pyramids of chairs: folksy wicker baskets tilt from side to side with loads of striped and checked and flowered Conran hurdy-gurdy fabrics. The merchandise is ordinary and fairly cheap. But its setting and its build-up, the frenzy all around it, makes it seem more covetable, gives it its mystique.³²

Habitat's guidebook for shop display even coined a term for displays that were characterised by the cascading superabundance of things: dump displays. A single chicken brick may or may not be a desirable object, but hundreds stacked and heaped starts to look like something else, like the outpourings of cottage industry run by an army of happy peasants. There is energy in the extravagance of such plenitude.

²⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, London, 1983, p11.

²⁹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, Verso, London, 1981, p77.

³⁰ Ibid. p63.

³¹ Samuel, 'The SDP and the New Middle Classes', p259.

³² MacCarthy, 'In Habitat', p8.

But if Habitat employs the frenzy of the dump display, it also sought to increase the speed at which domestic desires could be realised. In the 1960s, furniture shops rarely kept items as stock, so tables and chairs had to be ordered, taking many weeks to arrive at a customer's home. In a press release from 1970, Habitat announced their new range of KD furniture: 'This is the first time ever, anywhere in England, that a chain of retail stores is offering a large range of KD furniture packed flat in "carry-homeable" cartons, for customers to satisfy instantly that "can't wait to get it home feeling".'³³ KD stood for 'knocked down' furniture that could then be reassembled with QA – quick assembly. The terminology never really caught on, and this way of producing and selling became known as 'flat pack' furniture. It is all about a feeling – a 'can't wait to get it home feeling'. 'The first Saturday our Manchester store had its take-away section', writes Habitat's publicity team 'ten three-seat sofas plus lots of other packaged furniture were carted away by instantly satisfied customers.'³⁴

In 1969 Habitat merged with the office equipment retailers Ryman. It wasn't a success and Conran bought Habitat out of the merger the following year. In the process, though, Habitat had acquired the furniture maker Lupton Morton who specialised in self-assembly furniture that was sold through the post. Lupton Morton were also experts in producing 'lifestyle catalogues' for their goods, by showing their furniture within a domestic context, within a living situation. Lupton Morton's campus range of KD items became a staple of Habitat's basic range of furniture and could be bought by post or from the shops themselves. They even showed you what it might look like to assemble it: no overalls, no specialised tools, just a young man in jeans and a shirt 'making' some furniture.

Fig. 3 and 4. Campus furniture by Lupton Morton, owned by Habitat and sold as part of a 'basic' range during the 1970s.

Or a young woman experiencing that 'can't wait to get it home feeling'.

Of course assembling your own furniture is not instant at all. But it has a 'feeling' of immediacy, of getting on with things, of moving along. It has a pulse to it. In the first press release Habitat's first managing director Pagan Taylor stated that 'friends are already describing this operation as "instant good taste". I don't like the phrase, but I suppose it is roughly descriptive of what Habitat aims to do.'³⁵ It is easy enough to see that Habitat is in the business of 'good taste' (whatever that might be) but the operational energy of Habitat is firmly aimed at the feeling of the 'instant': everything is geared towards the pace and rhythm of the 'instantaneous' – self-assembly units that you can pick up from the shops and warehouses; hire-purchase financial arrangements that meant you could 'buy now, pay later'; a cavalcade of social scenes displayed in catalogues, brochures and Sunday supplements that offered a feeling that you could immediately start living a life of casual and spontaneous sociability.

6.

³³ Habitat press release, 21 August 1970.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Habitat Press release 11 May 1964.

In the words of Kathleen Woodward, ‘Williams’ concern is to find a way to feel the pulse of social change, to grasp what is emerging, to reveal it in its “generative immediacy”, to preserve it, and above all, not to reduce it.’³⁶ To foreground patterns of feeling and to see taste as a motor for changing these patterns of feeling is to sensitise enquiry to the way that changing orchestrations of the sensorial reconfigure social differences and social connectivity. Taste, as a cultural energy and orientation, is today predominantly understood via Pierre Bourdieu’s complex triangulations of field, habitus, and capital. In Bourdieu’s schema material objects lose their sensual specificity to become symbolic markers that can flag social positioning. But if, instead of seeing taste as symbolic, we remember its connection to the senses (gustatory, alimentary) and treat it as part of a complexity of feelings we might have a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between taste and change.

To treat taste as a ‘feeling’, that also patterns feelings, is to recognise the historical agency of taste. It is also to see it as a form that animates both the synchronic and diachronic axes of culture. As tastes are introduced, adopted, championed and enthused over, diachronic changes occurs that we can recognise from one epoch to another, from one taste moment to another. But such diachronic work also produces synchronic disturbances and transformations that alter the landscape of social relations. In this way Habitat wasn’t simply a style that was adopted by a new class formation, it actively recruited this class formation and supplied the material support for it. It was constitutive of a class formation; it was part of what brought it into being

In returning to Williams’s foundational project of attending to ‘structures of feeling’, and in extending it to include the thingly world of objects and interiors I want to suggest that historical enquiry could look at the way structures of feelings are found in the complex intermingling of words and things. In this there are key-things as well as key-words. Or rather key-feelings that exist across and between the interplay of words, things and practices. Stripped pine kitchen tables, Japanese paper lampshades, knocked-through kitchens and living rooms, coalesce with words like ‘freedom’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘design’, and ‘social life’. And these relays are animated by practices as varied as home ownership, squatting, impromptu dinner parties, casual dress, second wave feminism, gentrification, belonging to CND, knocking-through, and so on. As a structure of feeling it actively recruited for a new class fraction, but this class had a broad and changing cultural and political role.

Terence Conran always maintained that Habitat was a progressive project designed to extend democracy by providing inexpensive good design to as many people as possible: ‘five years ago, good taste meant a rosewood dining table, eight dining chairs and rosewood sideboard to match, costing £600. If you couldn’t afford that, you simply didn’t have good taste. But all that is changing now. Today good taste can mean a simple wooden table and half a dozen bentwood chairs, for as little as £50. Suddenly, it’s within everyone’s reach.’³⁷ Even in the 1970s he could still think that the shop was producing citizenship rather than surplus value:

Many people still think of Habitat as a shop for the young – or even just the higher-income-bracket young. ‘Certainly our customers are much younger than

³⁶ Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009, p11.

³⁷ Conran quoted in Anne Barrie, ‘Terence Conran: Young Man Leading a Furniture Revolution’, *House Beautiful*, December 1964, p58.

the majority of customers in other furnishing shops’, says Mr Conran, ‘but we particularly dislike being thought of as a young “trendy” organization. We would much prefer to be thought of as High Street furniture store selling good, solid-citizen furniture’.³⁸

Habitat grew out of a time when design was part of post-war reconstruction, when ‘good design’ had a moral ethos as part of a democratic culture. Conran, as a designer emerged in this climate: ‘My whole attitude to life was really formed in those couple of years – about why shouldn’t design be something that is available to the entire community? The mood in England in those postwar years was that we had an opportunity to reshape the world.’³⁹ He pursued this ethos within a private sector that required ceaseless expansion and ruthless competitiveness. Contradictions were bound to ensue. For a time these contradictions fed a lively culture that could support various forms of middle-class radicalism. But it also provided an incentive to the endless property booms that have produced the savagely uneven developments that have scarred our cities making them so inhospitable to so many.

If Habitat was an active but often surreptitious agent in smoothing the transition from welfare state socialism to neoliberal hegemony, as I think it was, it was because Habitat carried a whiff of a welfare state design ethos while being animated by the energetics of neoliberalist capitalism. Habitat, and a host of other cultural resources that connected to Habitat through semiotic relays, offered the sensorial conditions for neoliberalism to flourish. It fitted out the *mise-en-scène* of emergent neoliberal feelings with floor cushions and stripped pine kitchen tables. It provided an energy that could be directed at home ownership and household life. It allowed the ruthlessness of capitalism to be disguised as self-actualisation and individualism: it named the new flexibility of capitalism as ‘going with the flow’. This is the structure of feeling of Habitat as a set of sensorial materials animated and orchestrated by an energetics of looseness and improvised sociability that could feed go-getter individualist ambition. Habitat wasn’t the cause of the transition from welfare state socialism to neoliberal hegemony but it wasn’t a bystander either. It was the condition of possibility that allowed aspects of neoliberalism to take the form they did, where anything goes, and responsibility ended at the front door.

Fig. 5. Habitat in the High Street in the wake of its 2011 financial collapse.

[In the spirit of full disclosure I should note the following: my parents brought my sister and me bedroom furniture from Habitat’s basic range in the early 1970s; I recognise Malcolm Bradbury’s description of the Kirks’ house from living in housing cooperatives in south London in the early 1980s; the first sofa I bought new was from Habitat in the 1990s (end of line discount offer, of course). When Habitat went into liquidation in 2011, I felt that an era had ended, but I think that era had ended several decades earlier.]

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³⁸ ‘Counterpoint’, *The Times*, February 16, 1973, p20.

³⁹ Conran quoted in Nicholas Ind, *Terence Conran: The Authorised Biography*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1995, p37.