"Nixon: I want to show you this kitchen. It is like those of our houses in California. (pointing to dishwasher) This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women...

Khrushchev: Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.

Nixon: To us diversity, the right to choose, is the most important thing... we don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official... we have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewife has a choice.”

-Excerpt from “The Kitchen Debate,” Moscow, 1959

It wouldn’t have been a “Cold War” if a fist-fight had erupted between Nixon and Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in 1959. That summer, Sokolniki Park in Moscow was transformed into the sole bastion of consumerist capitalism in the Soviet Union. The highlight of the show was the proclaimed “house that every American could afford.” This house, built by Sadkin, served as the site of the now infamous “Kitchen Debate” between Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The house, representing American domestic standards, was used as a tactical weapon by Nixon as he provoked Khrushchev into defending socialist living conditions. While Khrushchev declared that every Soviet had a birth right to housing, Nixon pounced with the assertion that “diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different houses is the most important thing. We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official.” The house thus became a weapon of political commentary, eventually becoming the Leisurama house. Drawing from this historical moment, architecture as a practice is not innocent to such power shifts, struggles, and the lives lived between walls. Architecture should be guided by a
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reflective discipline, one that acknowledges its inevitable lack of autonomy and seeks to encourage the narratives appropriated by space.

Identification is central to the operations of a discipline that concedes to narratives. Neil Leach relates identification to a mirroring of experience, where occurs “the recognition of the self in the other.” The mirror is described as not only reflecting what is immediately conveyed, but what narrative can also be repeated or reshaped—an operative nostalgia. The qualitative functions of space support a conceptual frame of memories. Leach points out that identification also requires a level of perception, that one must not simply look, but specifically gaze into the mirror to comprehend reflection. This kind of performativity acts as the interactive frame of our work, which engages the conscious memory to trigger nostalgia. According to Leach, “mirrorings not only occur between the self and the environment, but also between that engagement and memories of previous engagements.” Thus, the double mirroring of the gaze exhibits the potential of the nostalgic narrative and accommodates multiple meanings dependent upon the individual.

The ready-made object is a manifestation of such operative nostalgia. As outlined by Marcel Duchamp, the ready-made has specific qualifications: the first being that the object must be “a kind of rendezvous.” Understood as a ‘rendezvous,’ one must already be familiar with the object, having encountered it before (I know what a urinal is, and how to use it!). Secondly, the object must be inscribed with information. This implies a signature of some sort, marked by a time of encounter (R. Mutt). Finally, Duchamp was insistent that “the object chooses you.” Here the object is an abstraction of what it was, presenting itself consciously in a new light (It looks like a urinal, but it is art, titled ‘Fountain’).

Accordingly, narrative architecture can be understood as the production of ready-made objects. The architectural ready-made must be an intentional abstraction of its own physicality, misread as an object embedded with much greater meaning. Sadkin was aware of this commercial potential for housing, and following the international press his house in Moscow received, sought to market this ready-made house concept as the Leisurama.
The first *Leisurama* houses were built in Montauk, New York. Sadkin was able to lure famous industrial designer Raymond Loewy onto the project, who was very intrigued by the all-inclusive design ideal. Loewy passed off the architectural work to in-house architect Andrew Geller. Summed up in the all-too-clever name for the product, the *Leisurama* introduced the American public to the abundance of leisure-time in the post-war lifestyle. You no longer had to be wealthy to have a vacation home with the *Leisurama*, which had a base cost of $12,990 (roughly $95,000 today).  

A full-scale house was built on the 9th Floor of the Macy’s department store in New York City, where it was noted that one woman had gone shopping for a bra, only to return home having purchased a *Leisurama* house. Macy’s was crucial to the success of the concept, and teamed up with Loewy and Geller to create an inventory list of furnishings that would be in the house upon move-in. The ads claimed that all you needed were “your clothes and a six-pack!” upon move-in, with even towels and toothbrushes provided by Macy’s. It couldn’t be any easier to make the *Leisurama* part of your life, indicative of the ease of anything that could be qualified as ‘leisure’.

It is not coincident that Loewy and Geller were the designers chosen for the house, as two of the champions of *streamline-moderne* design. Though there were aerodynamic considerations for automobiles and planes, the technique of streamlining was primarily used as an aesthetic operation, making objects seem more progressive and forward-looking, from a train to a pencil sharpener. *Streamline-moderne* pursued the narrative of modernity in all objects. A theory of Critical Distance, as proposed by Hal Foster, is central to understanding the objectives of *streamline-moderne*. Such theory emphasizes that restraint (withholding expression) will push the discipline in the right direction, away from capitalist monumentality and towards the advocacy of the contemporary individual. Michael Speaks, on the other hand, has argued for his theory of *design intelligence*, where the discipline accumulates intelligence to find revelation through modes of innovative technique. Such techniques can be applied to several design problems, allowing the designer to create much more
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than buildings. Loewy’s practice engaged multiple facets of design, utilizing a sort of ‘design intelligence’ in the technique of streamlining. All the same, this streamlining operates at a critical distance to the capitalist market, only serving the market to further its own agenda of progressive aesthetics. The built environment here takes a role in elevating the existence of the individual to the modern being.

This American being possessed the luxury of leisure, with the need for a supplementary environment that could accommodate their weekend memories. It wasn’t long before many Leisurama owners began to live in Montauk year-round, perhaps finding that the lifestyle of modern leisure was the only story that they really desired to be a part of.

Over time, the original Leisuramas have become hardly recognizable, as owners customized the houses to fit their identities. In a way, the streamline-moderne design of the houses did serve the objectives of the concept, to elevate the lifestyle of the contemporary individual. Maybe unintentionally so, the houses now convey the narratives built into the frames over the years, reading as a kind of story far removed from a universal streamline aesthetic. Every change in the houses register a moment of the owner’s identification, whether acknowledging the growth of one’s family, a change in domestic fashion, or an acute consideration of economic sustainability.

Identification is at the core of the architectural discipline where lifestyle bridges the gap between art and architecture. The single-family home is not merely a place of shelter: it is a representation of domestic ideals in a post-industrial society. The narrative of prescribed lifestyle emanates from the house-object. As such, domesticity is programmed into the notions of what a house’s architecture should be: it is a ready-made for the single-family lifestyle.

In architecture, identification and function are not just constraints, but can actually be design problems within themselves. Exterior disciplinary standards are always introduced to the architectural project. The discipline must acknowledge its role in determining such parameters for future design implications.
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The ready-made architectural object has the power to reflect such cultural definitions. In her book, *Architecture and Narrative*, Sophia Psarra suggests that “narrative enters architecture in many ways, from the conceptual ‘messages’ it is made to stand for to the illustration of a design... this aspect of architectural expression, what design speaks of, is relevant to narrative as representation. It concerns the semiotics of buildings and places, and the contribution of architecture to the expression of social and cultural messages.” As a discipline, architecture can mirror such cultural identifications to cultivate multiple narratives of space. Architecture will always explicate the nature of memory, and our built work can speak to the future, the present, and the past as part of the continually developing story of our existence.

Sources: