

“This Room is Yours, Personal!”: The Rise and Fall of Middle-Class Decoration Expertise in the Bedrooms of America’s Teens, 1900–1985

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Résumé

Cet article aborde la manière dont les experts de la classe moyenne spécialisés en décoration intérieure ont re-conceptualisé dans les premières décennies du XX^e siècle la chambre des adolescents comme un lieu devant être sous le contrôle presque exclusif de leur occupant plutôt que sous celui de leurs parents. Ironiquement, plusieurs de ces experts ont éventuellement été victimes de leur propre succès alors que, dans les années 1960 et 1970, leur recommandation a été généralement acceptée, laissant le contrôle de la décoration des ces chambres aux jeunes eux-mêmes, rendant du même coût caduc l’influence des experts en la matière.

Cet article explore également comment le déclin de l’expertise des décorateurs des chambres de jeunes reflète certaines transformations majeures dans la manière dont le genre et la classe ont influencé la culture entourant ces espaces à la fin de la Guerre froide. Initialement, les stratégies concernant leur

décoration ciblaient les femmes aisées. Avec le temps, l'adoption d'une approche alternative informelle et peu dispendieuse centrée sur les jeunes et leur capacité de réaliser eux-mêmes leur décor a donné davantage de contrôle aux garçons en général ainsi qu'aux adolescentes et adolescents de la classe ouvrière.

In the summer of 1971, the *Chicago Defender* published a brief article discussing some of the major trends in home furnishings consumers could expect to encounter during the upcoming fall and winter seasons. Though the *Defender* was (and still is) geared predominantly towards African-American audiences, its views on home décor in this particular instance aligned nicely with the white, middle-class sensibilities of the *New York Times*, *Home & Garden*, and other mainstream sources of decoration expertise. For example, the *Defender* article pointed its readers towards a host of living-room accessories and items for the master bedroom, all of which were manufactured by Kemp and advertised as tasteful, affordable additions to the family home. The advice being offered to teens was similarly conventional, as the author of the piece — in all likelihood a copywriter from Kemp — discussed a host of furnishings that promised to spice up teen bedrooms in a colorful manner. The “ideal teenager’s room,” the author explained, should feature “an area for rapping and relaxing,” trendy bean bag chairs, cube-shaped furniture that could be stacked and arranged in any number of creative ways, and several home electronics items (including, most notably, a record player and a television set). Most interesting, however, was how the author of the piece unwittingly revealed the problems associated with offering unsolicited advice to teen audiences by declaring that the teen bedroom could be enlivened with a “yippy Yertle the Turtle” table, a Dr. Seuss-themed item based on a character from one of his most popular children’s books. Though Dr. Seuss did have a certain amount of cachet amongst American youth during the 1960s and 1970s, the author of the piece risked presenting him or herself as out of touch with the tastes of youth by suggesting that the average American teenager would welcome the opportunity to fill his or her bedroom with furniture that, on the surface at least, seems to have been aimed at a much younger audience.¹

The *Defender* article, in other words, is worth noting precisely because it illustrates the difficulties faced by business interests and their intermediaries in the media in engaging with the teen market during the latter stages of the Cold War. Given the economic clout of the average postwar teen — the *New York Times* reported in 1966, for example, that the nation’s 24 million teens contributed nearly \$15 billion dollars to the American economy, a number that would continue to climb throughout the 1970s and 1980s — it should come as no surprise to find that business interests were eager to court the youth market. However, this trend created some unique problems for home decoration experts,

many of whom were accustomed to dealing with middle-class adults (particularly wives and mothers) rather than teenagers. Indeed, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s much of the advice being offered by décor experts was rendered problematic by the culture’s embrace of design strategies that granted teens almost total power to determine the basic look of their bedrooms. Middle-class décor experts, in short, were trying to reach out to an audience that was quite reluctant to accept unconditionally the counsel of adults, especially when that advice dealt with a space as personal and private as one’s bedroom. The ultimate irony, though, is that home décor experts actually played an active role in bringing about this situation. Whereas design experts during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were content to concede decorating duties to parents rather than children, their counterparts during the remaining decades of the twentieth century encouraged parents to shift that responsibility to teenagers, creating a situation in which top-down forms of expertise were becoming less relevant to the very people it was expected to assist. By embracing some of the more liberal aspects of youth culture that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century (particularly in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s), interior design experts may have undermined their ability to create a meaningful dialogue with teen audiences during the last half of the twentieth century, at a time when capturing the ever-expanding youth market was proving to be incredibly lucrative.²

As a discrete area of expertise, teen room design was slow to evolve. Victorian notions regarding the appropriateness of discussing private spaces in an overwhelmingly public forum ensured that discussions of room design — for parents and children alike — were rare in most nineteenth century, middle-class publications. According to architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright, respectable design magazines such as *Godey’s Lady’s Magazine*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping* “skipped the bedrooms with a slight blush,” opting instead to direct their expertise towards the parlor or the dining-room — or “front presentation rooms,” as Wright described them. Moreover, on those rare occasions when bedrooms were addressed, experts tended to pay greater attention to rooms belonging to adults, most notably the master bedroom and servant’s quarters. According to Wright, children’s bedrooms were defined by practical concerns above all else, as experts felt that children needed little more than “sturdy furniture, open spaces, and easily cleaned materials” to get by. Though Wright may have been over-stating the situation somewhat — historian Sally McMurry, for example, has found that progressive farm magazines were giving out specialized advice on decorating children’s bedrooms during the 1880s and 1890s — her basic point remains: children’s bedrooms weren’t given nearly as much attention as other spaces in the home were throughout much of the nineteenth century.³

Indeed, bedroom-oriented design expertise would only become commonplace during the first two decades of the twentieth century when Victorian

views on sexuality were challenged by more frank, social-scientific perspectives. Wright, for example, claims that the master bedroom became a focus of attention in women's magazines in the 1920s due, in part, to "the new freedom to discuss women's sexual needs and methods of contraception." However, specific advice pertaining to the bedrooms of older youth was still rare during this time because adolescence had not yet been fully embraced as a concept by the culture at large. Though G. Stanley Hall's works on the subject created a sensation during the early 1900s, adolescence — along with its more popular variation teenager — was still a novel concept until at least the 1930s and 1940s. The adolescent stage, as a result, was more often than not seen as a continuation of childhood, with the words child or children encompassing both teens and pre-teens alike. The teen bedroom most certainly existed in a physical sense during the first few decades of the twentieth century, but not in a linguistic one, as design experts offered advice in which bedrooms for "little boys," "little girls," and "a boy in his teens" were often discussed in the same breath. Moreover, even in those rare instances when a distinction by age was made, the criteria was often ill-formed and vague by today's standards. For example, Henrietta Murdock, a design expert from *Ladies Home Journal*, argued as late as 1946 that a room for an eight-year-old boy would suffice until he was 16 years old, whereupon a separate design "for a boy 16 to 21" was to be utilized. Though this narrow view of adolescence may have resonated during the first few decades of the twentieth century, during the 1950s and beyond this approach would have seemed both woefully dated and ignorant of the growing "separateness" of teens and teen culture.⁴

Early design experts also tended to tow a rather conservative line in terms of who had the task of actually decorating the child's room. Though children during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were rarely cut out of the design process altogether, decoration strategies were, by and large, determined by adults, particularly mothers, the home décor industry's target audience. According to historian Karin Calvert, children's bedrooms during this period were usually defined by "an artificial code of childishness devised and implemented by adults," as mothers were given almost total power to decorate the rooms of infants, young children, and teens alike. A child's room was, first and foremost, a reflection of his or her mother's taste. Emphasis was placed on elegant color schemes and comfort, while words and phrases culled from self-help literature — for example, "enchantment" and "harmonious" — were thrown around in an attempt to stress how a properly designed room could act as a means of developing good taste and cultivating, as one design expert put it, "a deep interest in, and an appreciation of, a gracious mode of life." On the surface, then, much of the early design discourse was parent-centric and conceived with an eye towards replicating a uniquely middle-class aesthetic, featuring a mildly instructive role. "Surround children with harmo-

nious colors,” urged a design expert from the *Olean Evening Times* in 1928, “and they will learn to appreciate beauty, and to apply it, in later life, to everyday problems.”⁵

During the years leading up to World War I, however, home decoration expertise started to come under the sway of various theories on child psychology. The teen bedroom came to be seen by many child development experts as an integral part of the maturation process, a multi-use space where introspection, experimentation, individualism, and identity formation was expected to flourish. Basically, child development experts helped medicalize the sheltered childhood ideal, the notion, first expressed in the early nineteenth century, that proper development depended, in part, upon separating children from various parts of the adult world (including, most notably, the world of work). James Kirtley, a follower of G. Stanley Hall, suggested in 1912 that the bedroom could help prepare children for adulthood, claiming that “the virtues of self-dependence, self-control, responsibility for one’s own belongings, companionship, imagination, originality and cooperation will have been nurtured in that room.” In 1918, Norman Richardson, yet another devotee of Hall, claimed that separate bedrooms could aid the cognitive growth of adolescents and help the child develop a unique personality by ostensibly freeing them from parental interference. “Here is another argument for giving the adolescent youth a room of his own,” Richardson proclaimed. “He needs a sanctuary, he needs a place to be by himself where he can think out his long, long thoughts. He needs a chance to get out of the influence of his gang and even of his parents, so that he may become a personality.”⁶

During the 1920s, the bedroom’s purported value as a developmental tool only increased, as more and more child development experts from all ends of the ideological spectrum made a point of urging parents to give children — particularly adolescents — rooms of their own. In 1928, the trail-blazing feminist psychologist Leta S. Hollingworth offered perhaps the most ringing defense of the teen bedroom, declaring it a “developmentally significant” space where teens could establish an identity free from parental interference. “Part and parcel of the normal sundering of self from the rest of the world, and especially from the family,” Hollingworth argued, “is the delight of the adolescent in having a room of his own.” The bedroom was expected to act as a sanctuary of sorts, a fortress of solitude where adolescents could escape from the din of family life and pursue his or her own interests. “Here the developing self is master, can relax from vigilance, can live entrenched, and can elaborate peculiar interests and ideas pertaining to decoration, hobbies, and so forth.” Families who could not afford or were simply unwilling to foster these types of sleeping arrangements, Hollingworth added, were doing their children a disservice by hampering “the development of personal autonomy.” Though she agreed that “a room may be hygienically shared by two or more children during the years of

childhood,” Hollingworth claimed that developmental goals rendered these types of arrangements particularly dangerous during the adolescent stage. “It becomes especially desirable at adolescence,” she concluded, “that each one have his own room, if possible.”⁷

Home décor experts responded to this trend by peppering their advice on room design with developmental jargon, often suggesting links between simple decorating tasks and cognitive growth, identity creation, and other phenomena associated with the maturation process. Particular emphasis was placed on how decorating one’s room could enhance teen autonomy and encourage self-sufficiency. “There is a time in the life of nearly all young people when they come as it were into their own,” an expert from the *Christian Science Monitor* claimed in 1911. “At last they are considered old enough and of sufficient importance to be given a room to themselves, and are even allowed a voice in the matter of furnishings.” Indeed, the freedom to decorate one’s room was seen by this particular expert as a manifestation of the child’s “desire for creative work,” a means of fostering skills that would come in useful during adulthood. “The wise mother,” the expert concluded, “realizes that to give a child a free hand in his or her own room is an effective way of planting a seed that will bear rich fruit in later years.” In 1913, yet another contributor to the *Christian Science Monitor* suggested that, although more expensive items in a child’s room should be determined by the parents, children “should be allowed to exercise his individual taste unhampered,” especially when it came time to pick out suitable wall decorations. Given free rein to decorate his walls according to his own tastes, the author warned, “Dick,” the fictional youth whose room was being redone, will most certainly populate his room with an assortment of “trash,” including swords, guns, native relics, flags, and pictures that probably would not “measure up to your standard of fine art.” Ultimately, though, parents were encouraged to “let him have what he wants,” if only to help develop the boy’s character and maintain his inchoate sense of self.⁸

The influence of child development theory on home décor expertise intensified during the years leading up to World War II when psychology and psychiatry began to seep into the larger culture. Room design was often equated with identity formation, as experts suggested that adolescents needed a well-designed space they could call their own in order to properly deal with the trials and tribulations of adolescence. A properly designed boy’s room, one contributor from *Ladies Home Journal* explained in 1930, “is in some respects more important than some other rooms in the house, because it is here that much of his time is spent in studying, reading, or just fooling around with his possessions, and the background of his room plays a most important part in his development and character building.” A well-maintained girl’s room, one expert from *House & Garden* added in 1944, will be a “haven when your young daughter wants to get away from it all, a quiet retreat for her daydreams,” as

well as a “study, play area, harbor for collections, refuge from the family and sometimes as a place to entertain friends besides.” According to many design experts, then, an improperly designed room was not simply an eyesore; it was an obstacle to proper development. To deny children (particularly adolescents) the opportunity to design and maintain their own bedrooms was to risk derailing the maturation process by, in effect, keeping the younger generation in a state of dependence, reluctant to alter earlier manifestations of the parent-child dynamic.⁹

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to suggest that parent-centered approaches to room design died a quick death during the interwar years. Indeed, many design experts continued to cling to the belief that the basic contours of the child’s bedroom be determined mainly by parents, developmental outcomes be damned. Lip service was paid to questions of autonomy and youthful independence, but advice that actually encouraged these concepts in practice was not always forthcoming, even amongst publications that had previously offered support for child-centered design strategies. In 1930, for example, an expert from the *Christian Science Monitor* made the rather uncontroversial claim that the teen bedroom should enhance “the individuality of the owner,” facilitate “the expression of his own tastes and needs and activities,” and afford him “free opportunity for his own pursuits, without disturbance, and without disturbing others.” Unfortunately, the author’s arguments were seriously undermined by virtue of the fact that he proceeded to spend the rest of the article arguing that parents should dictate nearly every single aspect of the boy’s bedroom, including wall hangings, color schemes, bedding and furnishings — even the books that would end up on the child’s shelves. In many respects, the continued presence of advice like this reflected both the persistence of traditional child-rearing strategies — most notably, a reluctance by parents to cede authority over certain aspects of their children’s lives — as well as the weaker economic standing of children during the decades preceding World War II (particularly during the Great Depression). Without a certain amount of wealth and personal autonomy at their disposal, American children could not be expected to take control of their room in anything but a superficial manner. As a result, decoration experts continued to provide advice that sought to impose individuality on children rather than encourage it directly. “You will find here,” one expert, seemingly oblivious of his somewhat contradictory logic, explained during the tail end of World War II, “ideas which you can adopt to your own rugged individualists.”¹⁰

Eventually, though, these types of parent-centered design strategies fell out of favor, as most mainstream experts during the interwar years slowly began to accept the idea that American children (particularly teens) deserved greater input in decorating their bedrooms. Though the triumph of child-centered design strategies was not by any means a foregone conclusion, many of the social and cultural changes of 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s certainly helped hasten

this process. For starters, the growing popularity of child development theory — the vast majority of which skewed towards a child-centered rather than a parent-centered approach to adolescence — created tensions that even the most clever design experts could not overcome. After all, it would be quite difficult for the average home décor expert to acknowledge the importance of self-expression and autonomy on the maturation process while simultaneously denying youngsters the authority to make their own decorating decisions. Perhaps more important, however, was the fact that the interwar years witnessed the creation of a unique youth culture that was often predicated upon generational conflict and increasing amounts of agency in the marketplace. Paula Fass, for instance, has claimed that the “mores and peer life” encountered on college campuses during the 1920s “helped create the first modern American youth culture,” acting as a dress rehearsal for the generational upheaval associated with the Beat and Hippie movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Steven Mintz has similarly characterized the 1920s as a period of youthful revolt in which the “domestic authority” of parents was declining, and has also suggested that the economic tribulations of the 1930s contributed to the empowerment of youth by forcing “hard-pressed marketers and manufacturers to target children as independent consumers.” The interwar years, in short, represented an opening salvo in the generational battles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. To quote Grace Palladino, interwar youth were developing “individual personalities” and “had no intention of deferring to adult wishes without a fight.”¹¹

The generational tension that often defined youth culture during the 1930s and 1940s would find expression in home décor expertise in unique ways, as experts made it known rather quickly whose corner they were in. Though total control over room design was rarely encouraged, home decor experts understood that autonomy could not be forced on youngsters, but rather was something that teens had to encounter first hand. Parents were still expected to play a role in room decoration, but they were most certainly being phased out of the process as World War II neared. No less an authority than Emily Post explained in her 1935 best-selling book, *The Personality of a House*, that the demands of youngsters should almost always trump the demands of parents when it came time to decorate the bedroom. “A child’s room should be as pretty as possible,” she warned, “but must not be hampering to freedom. In other words — should a choice be necessary — freedom is of first importance, and beauty second.” Post, an acknowledged fan of Sigmund Freud and the British sexologist Havelock Ellis, also linked up room decoration with ideas on child development, suggesting that “normal development is checked — sometimes even deformed — by the continuous pressure of restraint.” She fortified this position by mentioning how her parents’ decision to grant her exclusive decorating privileges was a key contributor to her development as an individual.

Though she recalled a sense of “bewildered disappointment” when the end results did not match her expectations, Post chalked up her initial forays in room design as an invaluable learning experience. “It had been my own taste and my own choice,” she declared, “and that was that!”¹²

Post’s Depression-era peers, as it turns out, were more than willing to offer like-minded views on teen room design. In the spring of 1937, for example, Martha Wirt Davis, a design expert from the *Christian Science Monitor*, wrote about a 13 year old named Paul who, together with his parents, redecorated his room in a manner that managed to satisfy both parties. Though larger, more costly concerns such as shelving and furniture were expected to be provided by the parents, Paul was given free rein to decide on all other aspects of the project, including the knick-knacks and other decorative items that supposedly defined him as an individual. The end result was a unique, aviation-themed room filled with Indian rugs and maps, while a “muzzle-loading shotgun” given to him by his grandfather was “given a place of honor over the bed.” One month later, Davis introduced her readers to a 17 year old named Bob who had transformed his bedroom into a social centre where his friends could “come in and sprawl around without getting the bedspread mussed up.” Once again, Davis pointed to the virtues of granting teens greater leeway in choosing appropriate décor schemes, as the boy went about re-designing his bedroom with the help of a friend, his friend’s father, and an Aunt Harriet who was kind enough to sew new slip covers for a ratty old chair. Bob not only decided on the knick knacks and wall coverings in the room, he also, with the help of his friend’s father (who just so happened to be a carpenter), designed and built a bed that doubled as a couch, as well as a dresser to house all his clothes. “When Bob’s books had been installed, his pictures and trophies hung on the wall, and two braided rugs laid on the floor,” Davis noted, “it was a room for any boy to be proud of, particularly if he had helped to do it himself.”¹³

Even the experts at *Ladies Home Journal*, one of the more conservative home magazines in the country, began to encourage America’s younger generation to take control of their personal space in a rather forceful manner. In 1938, for example, Henrietta Murdock encouraged “sub debs” — teenage girls who were not yet debutantes — to decorate their rooms in a style of their own choosing. “Do your room in your pet color,” she explained. “Why not? This room is yours, personal!” One year later, Murdock took aim at teen boys, once again emphasizing the importance of allowing older children to take ownership of their personal space. “Get busy on your bedroom,” she demanded. “Test your skill. A little ingenuity and a lot of Idaho pine and it’s all yours.” Indeed, by the tail end of World War II, it was rare to find a decoration expert who still defended the parent-centric approach. “In decoration and colors experts are getting away from the idea that everything must seem cute to adult visitors,” a contributor to the *New York Times* proclaimed in 1945. “Decorators now favor

the child's eye-view." In the case of Ann Hatfield, an interior designer from New York during the late 1940s, parental oversight was abandoned altogether when the time came to decorate her 12-year-old son's room. Hatfield was so confident in this somewhat permissive approach to room design, in fact, that she allowed her son to fill an entire wall of his room with ads for Winchester Rifles. "While the result did not meet with her unqualified approval as a decorator," Hatfield commented, "as a mother she believed it was important for her son to try out his own ideas."¹⁴

Suffice it to say that these types of child-oriented schemes only grew in popularity during the Cold War era. While parents (particularly mothers) held a monopoly on decorating the other parts of the family home, Cold War-era teens were expected to claim exclusive decorating privileges in their own bedrooms. Décor experts often reinforced this notion by drawing sharper distinctions between teen bedrooms and the sleeping quarters of younger children. A room meant for a seven or eight year old, many experts argued, would simply no longer suffice once the child entered into adolescence. Parents were told that younger children "should be allowed positive participation in furnishing his own room" and that they not be subject to "decorative ideas conceived and imposed on him by grown-ups"; but teenagers, it was generally agreed, were to have near total control over their surroundings, no matter how ungainly the end result may be. "Mother better resign herself," one expert warned her readers in 1944. "The color [in her teen-age daughter's room] will be too bright, possibly the wrong hue, and streaked in execution, but Independence Day will have arrived and the children's room will have started to fade away." Parents were still encouraged to offer helpful advice, but they were forbidden to interfere with their children's decisions lest they disrupt their developmental progress. "Be generous about getting out the family sewing machine and helping whip up the new bedspreads, curtains, or vanity ruffles," one expert told her audience in 1967. "But, for heaven's sake, don't interfere, or insist on other schemes. Awareness of décor is part of growing up."¹⁵

In many respects, the act of decorating a teen bedroom came to be seen by décor experts as a significant rite of passage that helped affirm the identity of its youthful occupant. Even more so than their interwar counterparts, postwar design experts suggested that decorating the teen bedroom could be seen as an uncomplicated reflection of the occupant's emerging personality, that taking stock of a teen's design choices was akin to being familiar with the inner workings of his or her soul. This was a particularly common perspective in publications that catered specifically to teens (particularly girls). As one décor expert from *Seventeen* explained in 1951:

Every girl in the world wants a small place that is completely her own. Some nook or corner, perhaps, which will wholly belong to her; a place bright and

“THIS ROOM IS YOURS, PERSONAL!”

cheerful enough to depict her personality and her interests, and yet private enough to work as a diary or poetry. This special portion of the big, wide world is the pride of a girl's life — for it is, in a way, a record of what the woman was and is and will be Here, is the corner of the house which signifies You-as-a-Person, You-as-an-Individual.

Enid Haupt, an editor at *Seventeen*, carried this idea one step further in a 1957 spin-off book called *The Seventeen Book of Young Living*:

As your personality grows you will want your own room to reflect these new developments. Just as you style yourself in clothes, you will want your surroundings to reflect your personality. Decorating a bedroom or a home allows a display that is truly creative. It is often only after long speculation that you can decide your choices, for in this you make a statement!

As such, outside interference of any kind was *verboden*. One columnist from *Co-Ed*, a competitor of *Seventeen's* that was distributed in high schools all across America, was so wedded to this idea that she actually encouraged her readers to avoid taking decoration advice from close friends. “Sharing ideas with friends is fun,” the writer argued, “but certain things have to be done on your own. Your room is your own special world, and it should be fixed up to suit you, not your friends.”¹⁶

The language décor experts used to describe the teen bedroom also underwent significant changes during the Cold War era. No longer content to refer to it simply as a room, a bedroom, or sleeping quarters, experts increasingly began to use terms that emphasized both teen ownership and the bedroom's ability to generate distance between parent and child. During the 1950s, for example, teen bedrooms were often described as “teen retreats” or “teenage havens.” At times, the teen bedroom was even portrayed as a separate dwelling of sorts, a privileged space that was considered part of the home in a structural sense, yet divorced from it in an emotional one. “A teen-ager's room is no longer simply a bedroom but a home in which to start living one's own life apart from the family,” Cynthia Kellogg, a design expert from the *New York Times*, explained in 1960. “In it, the young person entertains, studies, listens to records, perhaps even watches television or uses a private telephone. To provide for all these activities the room must be furnished almost like a one-room apartment.” According to Kellogg, the teen bedroom was no longer a space in which input from other members of the family was particularly welcome, but was instead a heavily fortified castle that teens could use to keep their mothers, fathers, and siblings at bay.¹⁷

Though traditional designs based on hobbies, sports, and other wholesome activities did not die out altogether during the 1960s and 1970s, a new term appeared in the design lexicon — “sophisticated” — that further illustrates

design experts' willingness to indulge the needs and demands of contemporary American teens. If experts during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries offered their readers a view of children's bedrooms defined by "an artificial code of childishness devised and implemented by adults," it can be safely said that their postwar counterparts oftentimes offered a view on adolescent space that was defined by a code of "adultishness." The teen bedroom was often portrayed as a hip apartment, "a perfect teenage den," to quote one expert from the early 1960s, that should be "tailored to a fifteen-year-old bachelor's taste." Some experts even likened the teen bedroom to the most modern (and urban) of living spaces, the studio apartment. "The favored decor for a young modern's room is crisply tailored and grown up," a columnist from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, explained. "It minimizes the bedroom and emphasizes a studio look which makes the teenager feel she's gained a sitting room plus the necessary sleeping space." Although most of these "sophisticated" room plans were formulated with both sexes in mind, one cannot help but think that the teen bedroom was seen by many experts as an *Esquire* or *Playboy* reader's dream space, a sophisticated little realm where a suave, Heffner-esque figure, martini in hand and smooth jazz playing in the background, would feel right at home.¹⁸

Perhaps the biggest change to come about during the Cold War era, however, was the extent to which home décor experts began championing increasingly eclectic design strategies. During the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, a much less formal approach to room design began to take hold, one that contrasted sharply with older, more traditional plans. For example, in 1979 a décor expert from Chicago's *Daily Herald* offered advice on how to build shelving out of bricks and old planks (an option familiar to many college students), turn old sheets into stylish curtains, build furniture out of discarded doors, and craft pillows out of corduroy or fake fur. Yet another commentator out of Syracuse, New York, told his or her readers in the early 1980s that a "lively teenage environment" could be brought about by using an old basketball hoop as a nightstand or by making one's own wallpaper out of long stretches of paper and poster paint. Perhaps the strangest example of the design community's indulgence of teen eclecticism, however, came in 1975 when a columnist from Ohio offered teens with an interest in ecology advice on how to make a bed frame out of tree branches:

For a teen-ager's bedroom, small trees, with branches trimmed down, can serve as unusual posts. Posts then are secured via screws to two-by-fours, which act as connecting rails. Let the posts grow white and shiny. Prime and paint with high-gloss paint. Voilà. A place for Sister to branch out, if nothing else, to hang her clothes — better the posts than the floor.

As with the Kemp furniture article mentioned earlier, this article nicely illustrates how experts during the latter decades of the Cold War had adopted a

largely reactive approach to room design, one that depended heavily on their own, often problematic interpretations of youth culture. After all, how else would one describe an ecologically-themed room plan that required teens to cut down and paint “small trees”?¹⁹

The latter decades of the Cold War also witnessed the growing use of collage as a means of decorating the teen bedroom. Though the collage method has been used in children’s rooms since at least the nineteenth century — Karen Sanchez-Eppler, for example, has pointed out that children were being encouraged to create collages on their bedroom doors as early as the 1860s and 1870s — its boundaries were carefully proscribed by home décor experts during much of the twentieth century, as both parents and teens were often told to limit pin-ups and other types of visual material to bulletin boards, mirrors, and other designated areas. “Most of our mothers won’t allow us to hang just anything on the wall,” Linda Baxter, a 12 year old New Yorker, explained in a 1959 *New York Times* article. “So the pin-up board is the center for all our treasures — programs, snapshots, banners and a lot of other junk.” Limiting pin-ups to select areas of the bedroom was not, however, meant as a means of punishing teens, but rather to avoid damaging bedroom walls. Candace Rich, the owner and operator of a nostalgia website for Baby Boomers, decorated her room during the 1950s with pin-ups of Frankie Avalon, but only on the mirror on the back of her bedroom door, so as not to upset her parents. “Adhesive tape does real nasty things to a paint job,” she explained. “But the back of the door was all mirror so I could use that space without controversy.”²⁰

During the 1970s and 1980s, however, design experts seemed to have largely abandoned the idea of placing fetters on how teens arranged visual material in their bedrooms. Though it is possible to attribute this trend to improvements in adhesive technology during the postwar years — Scotch tape, for instance, was invented by 3M in 1944, while sticky tack (or Blu-Tack), a putty-like substance that was meant specifically for posters and promised to minimize wall damage, first became available in 1971 — anecdotal evidence suggests that this type of expertise was probably a victim of teen eclecticism more than anything else, a willingness by American youths to eschew order and formality in favor of a more expansive, scattershot approach. In 1977, for example, Georgia Dullea, a reporter for the *New York Times*, reported on teens who had taken to decorating their bedroom walls with beer cans, despite parental warnings about their bedrooms smelling “like a barroom.” One boy, the article noted, had over 450 beer cans in his room, while a 15 year old girl by the name of Susan Haenel told the reporter that her decoration choices came about because she simply liked “the look of the shiny, gaudy beer cans on the wall.” Apparently, many teens seemed to have followed in Haenel’s footsteps by incorporating a wide selection of common consumer goods in their decoration schemes. A *New York Times* article from the early 1980s spoke of one girl,

Eliza Pertz, who decorated her room by getting her friends to kiss the wall with lipstick on, while yet another teen was reported to have stored her old collection of Barbie dolls in a bird cage hung from the ceiling. In that same article, the author claimed that teen boys were apparently fond of hanging stuffed barracudas over their beds, along with guitars and a host of other assorted consumer goods and knick-knacks. Teen bedrooms, in short, were no longer expected to be decorated with handsome, mother-approved *objet d'art*, as earlier design experts had urged, but were now expected to house a vast array of cultural detritus, much of which reflected their teen occupants' various consumer loyalties and could be arranged in a seemingly anarchic manner.²¹

Indeed, in some instances, teen eclecticism was rewarded by both décor experts and the prominent business interests that underwrote much of their work. During the 1970s, for example, *Co-Ed* magazine started a "Room Revival Contest," an annual competition sponsored by 3M and DuPont in which American teens were asked to submit photos of their newly renovated bedrooms in hopes of winning a wide assortment of prizes. Though many of the submissions featured a more conservative, traditional aesthetic, other designs can only be described as being bold and unique. In the 1974 edition of the contest, Melanee Florian, a junior high student from Plantsville, Connecticut, submitted an ecology-themed room that featured a night table and chair made from old barrels, tin can wall art, and curtains that were made out of soda can tabs. Kandice Maas, a teen from Hebron, North Dakota, submitted a design that featured a chaotic zig-zag wall mural and a home-made tube chair, a hand-crafted, snake-like item that lay coiled at the foot of her bed. For the 1975 competition, the winning design, submitted by 16-year-old Kimberley Peterson from Little Rock, Arkansas, included shelving that was made out of soda pop cases, a shelf for plants that was made out of an old stepladder, and, perhaps most jarring of all, walls that were painted an electric shade of yellow. Meanwhile, runner-up Sarah Ann Sly of Tonawanda, New York, in lieu of an actual rug, stenciled one on the floor of her room, while Tammy Evans of Austin, Colorado, painted a constellation of polka dots on her bedroom floor. Under such conditions, it is easy to understand why décor experts gave up trying to regulate the ways in which teens arranged wall hangings and other types of visual material in their rooms; teens had their own ideas on the matter and were more than capable of bringing them to fruition.²²

Nonetheless, many postwar design experts rationalized their support of teen eclecticism by once again referring to long-standing ideas on child development. In 1982, for example, Sheila Mary Eby, a design expert for the *New York Times*, introduced her audience to the Silvers, a middle-class Brooklyn family with two daughters — 12-year-old Sydney and 15-year-old Samantha — both of whom were given *carte blanche* to decorate their rooms. The end results were quite interesting to say the least. "Recently Sydney Silver, aged 12,

decided that she did not care to sleep on a bed,” Eby began. “She dragged a discarded refrigerator box into her bedroom, turned it on its side and slipped her old camp sleeping bag into it. Cutting windows in the cardboard and suspending a reading light overhead, she created a cozy if quirky room within a room.” Samantha, meanwhile, opted for a less drastic approach by dismantling her four-poster canopy bed and choosing to sleep, as the author put it, “on a mattress and box spring plunked on the floor.” The girls’ parents, Gary and Marcia, were none too impressed with the state of their daughters’ rooms — the father thought they looked “like crash pads” — but decided to look the other way. Eby suggested that this was a wise decision, if only because censuring teens for their design choices would have produced negative consequences on their children’s developmental progress. According to Dr. David M. Kelley, a psychologist Eby consulted in the course of writing her article, younger children “are perfectly happy with whatever organization their parents give their rooms.” By the time they turn 11 or 12, the psychologist continued, they “start breaking away from their parents and begin developing their own identities,” with their rooms taking centre stage in this process of emancipation. Off-beat decoration schemes were to be seen as nothing more than a sign of maturity, a cry for greater independence from one’s parents, according to Eby. “A child should feel comfortable in his or her bedroom,” yet another of her psychologist experts was quoted as saying. “As long as the house isn’t being damaged, walls aren’t being broke down and bugs aren’t festering, the bedroom should be the teen’s domain.”²³

The home décor community’s numerous attempts to accommodate the specific needs of youth during the Cold War era should, of course, come as no surprise to anyone. It was during this time, after all, that teenagers truly came into their own as a distinct demographic whose influence on the economy, political culture, and other areas of American life was expanding at a significant rate. Grace Palladino, for example, has suggested that the emergence of teens as a cultural force during the Cold War was a product of both an overall increase in the American standard of living and teens’ growing power in the marketplace. For America’s teens, she argued, the economic prosperity brought about by the postwar boom “was quickly translated into personal freedom and enjoyment,” as business interests embarked on a mad rush to accommodate teen demands for all manner of goods and services. Steven Mintz, moreover, has suggested that the postwar years (particularly the 1960s and 1970s) saw the formation of a powerful political consciousness amongst youth, one that was often set apart from some of the more conservative values of their parents and grandparents. “The young lived through turbulent times,” he argued, “including a sexual revolution, a cultural revolution, a student revolution, and a rights revolution.” The Cold War era, in short, was basically a giant coming-out party for youth; buoyed by demographic supremacy and access to growing amounts

of wealth and leisure time, postwar teens demanded to be taken seriously by their elders and were, to quote Palladino again, “determined to prove that they could take care of themselves.”²⁴

Youths’ demands to “take care of themselves” would, of course, have some fairly serious implications for many postwar home décor experts, particularly those who worked for *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping*, and other publications that catered primarily to adults rather than teens. Indeed, the decision by many in the home décor community to embrace child-centric design strategies, though a necessary step in order to secure the loyalties of the ever-expanding postwar youth market, may have actually helped undermine their authority in the long run. By the 1970s and 1980s, publications that had once been quite willing to offer décor advice to the younger set during the early parts of the twentieth century — *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *House & Garden*, among others — basically abandoned the teen bedroom as a topic of interest, perhaps tacitly acknowledging that publications such as *Seventeen* and, later, *Teen People* were better-suited to accommodate the specific demands of the contemporary teen consumer. Though design books and home decoration magazines occasionally devoted a page or two to the teen bedroom, much of the advice being produced over the course of the last 30 or 40 years has been directed towards the rooms of infants and pre-teens, towards younger children who were still subject to parental authority and were, as a result, less likely to resist parent-centric design schemes. However, it should be noted that even teen-oriented publications began to reduce the amount of column space devoted to room design. During the first two years of the 1960s, *Seventeen* published a grand total of 29 articles on the subject — 15 in 1960 and 14 in 1961. By the 1970s and 1980s, the number of articles devoted to this topic dipped precipitously: six articles were published in all of 1972; five in 1973; four in 1983; and seven in 1985.²⁵

Nonetheless, the apparent decline of teen-oriented décor expertise should not be regarded in entirely negative terms. It could be argued that this trend helps illustrate the extent to which teen room design was democratized during the years following World War II, becoming much more accessible to groups that had, historically, been excluded from the home décor discourse. Though earlier design expertise made numerous claims of affordability, most of these plans generally skewed towards the affluent, featuring a host of expensive, brand name products that were out of the reach of poorer families. By downplaying the importance of large (and costly) furnishings and emphasizing personal expression through found objects, child-centered, do-it-yourself approaches allowed even the poorest of teenagers to take an active part in the decoration process. All that was needed to personalize one’s bedroom, after all, was some tape or thumbtacks and some magazines or newspapers, all of which could be tracked down in a relatively inexpensive manner. This approach was

on full display in *Teddy*, a 16-minute documentary produced by the Extension Media Center at UCLA that offered an in-depth look at an African-American teen and his thoughts on growing up poor in the Watts community of Los Angeles. Though most of the 1971 documentary deals with Teddy’s opinions on school, church, and his growing interest in the Black Power movement, a brief portion of the interview takes place in Teddy’s bedroom. Hanging on his walls were an assortment of posters, pin-ups, and found objects, including an army helmet with “power to the people” and “kill pig” written on it, an anti-abortion poster (courtesy of the Nation of Islam), African art posters, and cut-outs of Che Guevara and Martin Luther King. Suffice it to say that the advice being offered in, say, *Ladies Home Journal* would not have been of much use to a teen such as Teddy.²⁶

Similarly, the triumph of child-centered design strategies represented a powerful rebuke to some of the more gendered aspects of room design that had marked the discourse since the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. It perhaps goes without saying that most middle-class design expertise, owing to the fact that it was usually expressed in publications aimed primarily at women, would have had a tough time appealing to teen boys. Though traditional views on gender continued to shape the discourse in a somewhat predictable manner during the postwar years — a Syracuse-area expert declared in 1983 that girls opted for “ruffles and lace” just as much as boys went for “rugged, heavy pine furniture in the early American country mode” — the emergence of child-centered, do-it-yourself strategies allowed boys to decorate their rooms on their own terms while avoiding some of the more feminine trappings associated with mainstream forms of expertise. As Ruth Gilkey, a design expert for the *Oakland Tribune*, argued in 1969, the do-it-yourself approach was incredibly well-suited to the temperament of boys because they had “been collecting and hanging up posters, stop signs and labels on bedroom walls for years, generations before adults suddenly got around to pop art.” Gilkey, in fact, encouraged teen girls to continue to seek out the advice of their mothers, while teen boys were told to go it alone and decorate their rooms relatively free from outside interference. In defending this somewhat strange double standard, Gilkey both drew attention to her own irrelevance amongst teen boys, while also suggesting that teen girls were still seen as a potential market for formal home décor expertise. Though Gilkey’s claims are somewhat dubious — after all, it is a bit presumptuous to assume that only teen boys would be interested in veering away from mainstream forms of home décor expertise — they do illustrate how the do-it-yourself approach may have represented a more palatable alternative to the gendered views on room design that had characterized the discourse since at least the nineteenth century.²⁷

A mere two years after Gilkey’s article was published, at around the same time as the Kemp furniture people were encouraging teens to decorate their

rooms with Dr. Seuss-themed table and chair sets, several companies began offering a new type of decorating material that subtly reinforced the declining relevance of middle class décor expertise amongst American youth. The back pages of youth-oriented publications such as *Seventeen* and *Rolling Stone* were littered with advertisements for the Blow Yourself Up Company, Photo Poster Incorporated, and Photo Hang Ups Incorporated, small companies out of New York and California that offered teens the chance to turn pictures of themselves into posters they could hang on their bedroom walls. For between \$2.00 and \$7.50, teens were encouraged to transform their own grinning visages into 3x4 foot posters, many of which featured a host of psychedelic embellishments and personalized messages. Though there is no evidence to suggest that these types of posters achieved any amount of popularity amongst the teenage population, their very existence offers us a potent symbol for the ways in which top-down home decor expertise had become a victim of teen empowerment during the Cold War years. More than anything, these posters suggested that teenagers were to be — quite literally — at the center of the decoration process. Older, more traditional experts may have encouraged teens to think of wall-hangings as a reflection or symbol of their emerging personalities, but the companies who offered to “blow up” teens in the back pages of *Rolling Stone* took this idea one step further by, in effect, encouraging teens to broadcast their flaws and imperfections — their awkward yearbook smiles and intermittent bouts with acne — right there on their bedroom walls. American teens were expected to use their enhanced decorating powers to assert near total control and ownership over their bedroom, a process that both reinforced earlier, child-centric views on teen room design while simultaneously threatening to destroy the authority of the very people who helped bring these ideas into prominence.²⁸

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Endnotes:

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- 3 Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 35–6, 39, 136, 159. McMurry’s discussion of decoration advice at the end of the nineteenth century can be found in Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouse in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 196.
 - 4 Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1983), 209; Margaret McElroy, “Rooms for Little Boys and Girls,” *House & Garden* (February 1927): 150; Henrietta Murdock, “Rooms to Grow In,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (April 1946): 186, 193.
 - 5 Karin Calvert, “Children in the House, 1890 to 1930,” in *American Home Life, 1880–1930*, ed. Jessica Foy (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 86; Ethel Davis Seal, “The Young Girls Room,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (January 1927): 30; *ibid.*, “Boys Like Fine Rooms Too,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (November 1928): 30, 146; Alice Starr, “A Whole New World of Enchantment in Children’s Rooms,” *House & Garden* (April 1931): 120, 122; Schuyler White, “A Boy’s Red-White-and-Blue Room,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (July 1930): 58; A. Louise Fillebrown, “Child’s Bedroom,” *Olean Evening Times* (7 May 1928), 10.
 - 6 James S. Kirtley, *That Boy of Yours: Sympathetic Studies of Boyhood* (New York: Hoddard & Stoughton, 1912), 193; Norman Richardson, *The Religious Education of Adolescents* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1918), 9. For more on the emergence of the sheltered childhood ideal, see Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), chap. 4; Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), *passim*.
 - 7 Leta S. Hollingworth, *The Psychology of the Adolescent* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928), 187–8. Behaviorists and psychoanalysts held similar views during the 1920s. For example, see John Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (London: George Allen & Unwin Limited, 1928), 103; Smiley Blanton and Margaret Blanton, *Child Guidance* (New York: The Century Company, 1927), 113, 120–2.
 - 8 “Young People’s Own Rooms,” *Christian Science Monitor* (25 August 1911), 6; “Dick’s Own Room As His Den and Headquarters,” *Christian Science Monitor* (22 November 1913), 23.
 - 9 “With the Teens in Mind,” *House & Garden* (August 1944): 29; “A Boys’ Red-White-and-Blue Room,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, 58.
 - 10 “A Room of His Own,” *Christian Science Monitor* (9 September 1930), 9; “With the Teens In Mind,” *House & Garden*, 28.
 - 11 Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), xii; Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 216, 236; Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 3.
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 - 14 Henrietta Murdock, “Your’s Personal ... A Bedroom for a Sub-Deb,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (May 1938): 93; *ibid.*, “The Right Room for a Good Scout,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (May 1939): 28; Edith Sonn, “A Room to Grow Up In,” *New York Times* (7 October 1945), 34; Mary Roche, “A Permanent Room for Junior,” *New York Times Magazine* (18 September 1949): SM32.

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- 16 Mimi Sheraton, "A Special Place Just for You," *Seventeen* (August 1951): 201; Enid Haupt, *The Seventeen Book of Young Living* (New York: David McKay Company, 1957), 63; "Room Service," *Co-Ed* (May 1974): 107.
- 17 "Rooms to a Teen's Taste ... 'Real Cool' is the Word for It!" *Chicago Defender* (5 March 1960), 16; "Teenage Havens, Boy and Girl" *Ladies' Home Journal* (January 1961): 66; Cynthia Kellogg, "Designs for a Teen-Ager's Castle," *New York Times Magazine* (10 April 1960): 76. Similar terminology can be found in "Teen Apartments Above ... Hobby and Play Space Below," *Ladies' Home Journal* (October 1957): 94; "A Room Becomes A Castle," *News Journal* (4 August 1968): 25; "High-Tech Makes Fun Functional," *Syracuse Herald-Journal* (18 April 1980), 15; "The ABCs of Decorating for Kids," *New York Times* (23 October 1983), C16; Denise Salvaggio, "Whose Bedroom Is It, Anyway?" *Syracuse Herald-Journal* (16 March 1985), 22.
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- 20 Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Doors Onto Childhood," paper presented to 2008–2009 Center for Historic American Visual Culture and the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture Conference, Princeton, New Jersey, 14 February 2009; "Teen-Agers Select Décor for Bedroom," *New York Times* (23 May 1959), 16; Candace Rich, e-mail to author, 9 June 2000. The collage approach is also discussed in Jeanne R. Steele and Jane D. Brown, "Adolescent Room Culture: Studying Media in the Context of Everyday Life," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24, no. 5 (1995): 551–76; Adrienne Salinger, *In My Room: Teenagers In Their Bedroom* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), passim.
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- 25 The somewhat marginal status of the teen bedroom amongst contemporary home décor experts is evinced in Ro Logrippio, *In My World: Designing Living & Learning Environments for the Young* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 197–202; Wendy A. Jordan, Taunton, *Kidspace Idea Book* (Newtown, CT: The Taunton Press, 2002), 62–9. Logrippio, for instance, discusses teen bedrooms in a chapter called "Special Challenges."

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- 28 Photo Poster Incorporated advertisement, *Seventeen* (June 1972): 170; Photo Hang Ups Incorporated advertisement, *Seventeen* (February 1973): 230; Blow Yourself Up Company advertisement, *Seventeen* (January 1972): 117. See also Photo Poster advertisement, *Rolling Stone* (24 June 1971): 54.