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The ambiance of the modern home

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Abstract. *What happened to the interior of the private home with the advent of modern telecommunication? Reaching beyond the confines of intimate domestic space, human interaction across long distances opened up powerful avenues to the outside world, leading to a questioning of both the private and public dimensions of the dwelling place. Physical mobility and transportation, for their part, became obsolete conditions for communication and entertainment. In this paper, I will discuss how innovative means of communication supported new patterns of life as well as visions of the modern home and its interior atmosphere. As a result, I will argue that telecommunication systems came to embody the process of modernization, becoming instruments for innovative domestic experiences in the process.*

Keywords: *telecommunication, modernity, home, mobility, private, public*

“There are a number of music rooms in the city, perfectly adapted acoustically to the different sorts of music. These halls are connected by telephone with all the houses of the city whose people care to pay small fee [...]. There are on that card for today, as you will see if you observe closely, distinct programs of four of these concerts, each of different order of music from the others, being now simultaneously performed, and any one of the four pieces now going on that you prefer, you can hear by merely pressing the button which will connect your house wire with the hall where it is being rendered.” (Bellamy, 2000)

The successful utopian novel by Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888), describes a world bettered by electricity. The author imagines the world in the year 2000 and describes astonishing electrical inventions which are uncannily close to actual devices introduced into our everyday lives over the years. He imagined, for instance, a 24-hour service of programmed music broadcasted via telephone wires into the interiors of private homes – something of a cross between the radio and Muzak. Even if, acoustically speaking, no preservation of spatial proprieties is possible outside of an original site, the principle of transporting sound and its spatial qualities through a system of wires opened up original perspectives for the concept of domestic intimacy and private ambiance. Indeed, this suggestion of bringing architectural features into the home through broadcasted sound generated several visionary positions. Broadcasting technologies introduced, on the one hand, the idea of virtually projecting the home dweller into the outside world (fig. 1), for instance by listening to public concerts and having personal communications with people located far away. On the other hand, these technologies reinforced a sense of private intimacy (fig. 2), as the home became a more self-sufficient environment, offering dwellers a range of modern comforts and minimizing the importance of mobility as a socializing agent.

Promoting regionalist patterns for the urban postindustrial development of 1920s America, historian of technologies Lewis Mumford observed how telecommunications and transportation allowed a rethinking of the capitalist over-populated city as a unique model for economical, political and social progress: “Socially, the popularization of the radio had made concentration obsolete, for today the songs, the news, the gossip and the speeches, which were once available only by taking a journey and sitting in a hall, are now increasingly the

property of anyone who possesses a radio outfit" (Mumford, 1976). For Mumford, modern communication was a way to gain individual freedom by choosing where to live, work and socialize, thereby allowing subjects to finally prevail over spatio-temporal constraints.

By way of example, AT&T's propaganda insisted on the way the telephone led people to feel closer by overcoming isolation and loneliness while staying safe and alert. Radio, for its part, was promoted as a device for entertainment, information, and pleasure. Orchestras and sports events were suddenly invading living rooms and drawing in a new domestic audience (fig. 3). At its very beginnings, the radio had offered a private experience accessible only through individual headphones capable of isolating initially weak wireless signals. After the technology improved in the 1920s and radio became a popular device, listening to the radio became associated with shared moments of socialization between groups of people and families. The increased mobility achieved through the development of modern means of transportation, associated with the consolidation of self-sufficient family homes, is described by Raymond Williams in terms of mobile privatization (Williams, 1974). This phenomenon reflects the process of atomization of modern societies, where individuals are in perpetual movement while taking with them their intimate sphere.

Studies on the cultural effects of electrification (Nye, 1992, Gooday, 2008) bring to attention myths and legends created around the mysterious and magical powers of electricity. The personification of electricity as a new god, goddess or idol demonstrates how telecommunication and electrical transmission embodied major cultural and social ideals and expectations for the modern age. Conversely, however, the introduction of emerging technical devices was also accompanied by suspicions and fears of alienation and machine-dependency for users. Thus, home dwellers often went through a phase of resistance concerning the changing of habits and the rearrangement of the home's interior organization and design. Indeed, filling the traditional home with new technological objects wasn't a simple and natural process: defiance against machinery was demonstrated by the evolution of the very designs of technological devices. Camouflaged, initially, behind the wood of Victorian furniture, it took a period of adaptation and acceptance to freely display these objects as naked machines and icons of progress (fig. 4). Radios and telephones, then, entered the modern home by revolutionizing its interior environment (fig. 5). How to plan for home telephone conveniences and Modern Telephone Service for the Home (fig. 6) were late 1920s manuals addressed to architects, engineers, builders and owners giving strategic solutions for multi-telephone installations for different types of housing. The modern ideal of comfort became associated with a kind of telephone rationalism: "The modern concept of comfortable living requires a logical relationship between the interests and activities of a household and the number of telephones it should have. Interest in the world outside, in school or church, in clubs and neighbors, in shops at home, or friends far distant, requires a reasonable accessibility to the telephones which afford the means of maintaining these interests comfortably and pleasurably." (Modern Telephone Service for the Home, 1929)

On the one hand, massive propaganda encouraged architects to introduce technological interfaces as powerful windows opening onto public society and adding commercial value to domestic interiors. On the other hand, home dwellers were invited to experience the benefits of modernity by changing their habits and behaviors. Notably, telecommunication propaganda was primarily targeted toward housewives who were suddenly exposed to the possibility of communicating with the outside world, emancipating from a solitary life focused on the home in the process.

Returning to Bellamy's novel and predictions, we might acknowledge that his vision was more than just a technical prophecy. For him and other modern thinkers, the introduction of electricity and broadcasted sound provided a way of entry into a better, more democratic, society. A fundamental trust in technical progress, in total and totalizing systems of communication, and other infrastructures, as opposed to an over-concentrated capitalistic model,

gave birth to a modern techno-utopianism. The possibility of stretching time and space and of overcoming physical barriers and distances through the installation of unified and unifying networks represented the application of a deeply social and economical ideal to different political models. Once “wired,” the home became more explicitly part of a system constituted of networks and nodes, “a receiver of messages coming from the extraordinary” (Sloterdijk, 2006), multiplying the ways in which the interior domestic space represents an actual interface with the exterior. Within the modern home, notions of private and public merge into multiple connections and spheres of communication extensible to a universal scale.

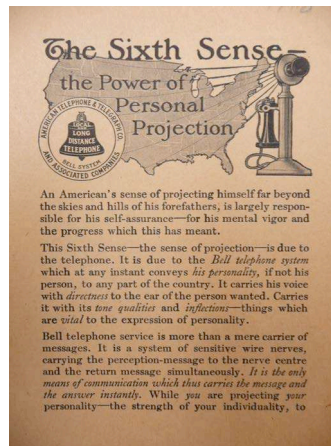


Figure 1. AT&T advertisement. N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

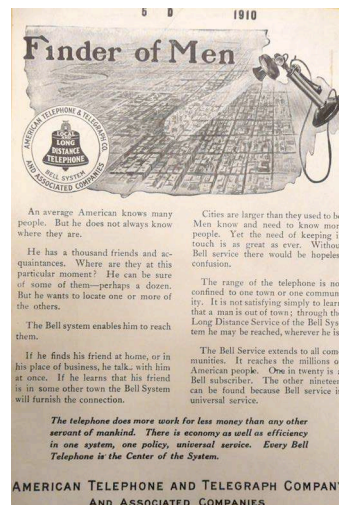


Figure 2. AT&T advertisement. N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 3. Brochure for Oward Radio (1930). George H. Clark Radioana Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 4. Cover for a journal (1922). George H. Clark Radioana Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 5. Brochure for Bell Telephone Company. N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

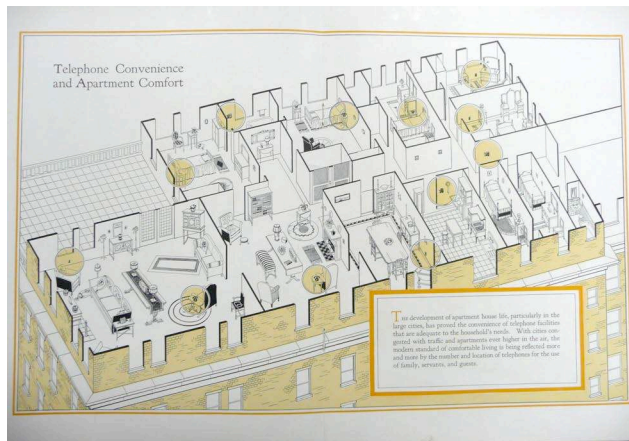


Figure 6. *Modern Telephone Service for the Home* (1929), American Telephone and Telegraph Company

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Carlotta Darò is an art historian teaching at the École nationale supérieure d'architecture Paris Malaquais, and a member of the LIAT laboratory. Her work explores the impact of sound technologies, telecommunications infrastructures and media on modern architectural and urban theories. Carlotta Darò is presently preparing a book on *Sound Avant-Gardes in Architecture* (Presses du réel, forthcoming 2012). carlotta.daro@free.fr