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Article

Tasteful Bunkers: Shades of Race and 'Contamination' in Luxury Design Sectors

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Abstract

In the days following the onslaught of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it became clear that this humanitarian health crisis would be accompanied by a financial crisis. In response to these inevitabilities, the industries that make up the consumer design sector – interior design, decor, architecture, fashion and so on – quickly turned their attention to aestheticizing our new, increasingly private and isolationist realities, launching advertising campaigns and editorials to address these new realities. Work-from-home edits, new 'home office' collections, wardrobes for video conferencing and 'digital gallery hopping' campaigns all began encouraging consumers to accessorize their domestic spaces as a bulwark against the threats marking urban environments and their contaminated bodies; bodies that, through the notion of 'contamination', drag along a set of inescapable racial and class-based assumptions. Echoing the ways in which interior design, architecture and media enabled America's 'white flight' and suburbanization

in the 1950s, luxury retailers are again inviting privileged populations to retreat and design their homes as comfortable bunkers, full of the accessories of art, travel and public life, without the risk of actual encounter. In this article, I argue that these luxury industries are complicit in renewing a post-pandemic racialization of urban space. In the contemporary moment, the luxury design industry's entreaties to (re)design our homes to accommodate a newly public life led in private amounts to a symbolic suburbanization founded in the fear of 'contaminated' racialized bodies.

Keywords: race; urban space; aesthetics; luxury; interior design; privatization; racial publics

Introduction

In his 2013 piece 'New York Stories', jazz musician and composer Vijay Iyer writes that cities, at their very best, are music, where daily interactions and confrontations force residents to harness the noise between themselves and others to make something of the sounds and movements of those in their midst.[1] These 'sustained, rich, detailed collaborations create radical specificity in the city's chaos of encounters,' he says.[2] Absent the music metaphor, Iyer's perspective on what constitutes vibrant urban environments has also enjoyed a long life among contemporary architects, who have long embraced the notion that density and social integration are the critical components of diverse, engaged urban environments. 'Enlightened designers', writes Philip Kennicott, agree that 'urban life must . . . be full of interaction and social energy if we are to live happily in proximity'.[3]

In 2020, as global cities teetered in the balance between a public health lockdown and slow re-opening, rethinking how we are to exist in urban space during a global pandemic, that musicality of encounter, that vibrant urban density, all but disappeared. As shelter-in-place orders became increasingly widespread across the world in March 2020, public spaces emptied out and our collective attention turned towards the domestic, towards those private interiors that would now dominate the daily lives of much of the world's privileged populations. This urgent, crisis-marked abandonment of public spaces in favour of a retreat into private, domestic ones, has revealed what was always simmering at the very foundation of the public/private divide: a racialized and class-based organization of urban space; one that marks the bodies that circulate and move within it, racially indexing those bodies and the spaces they occupy.

Already, there are early signs that the wealthy are on the move, in search of architectures and spatial designs that could protect them from the threat of the virus – of contamination – and, more broadly, from the threats posed by public life. Some are retreating to their existing domestic scapes, while others are abandoning urban environments altogether. These moves, temporary as they may be, are enabled and, in many ways, commissioned by the luxury fashion, design and art industries, which have responded to the global health crisis by peddling domesticity, comfort, self-care and what amounts to neoliberal notions of safety. The luxury design industry, bearing witness to its customers' panic about the intersections of space, contamination and safety, has stepped into the chaos to offer them a solution: beautifully appointed, evergreen domestic interiors – bunkers, where the frightened wealthy classes might retreat.

Writing for the *New York Times*, Ginia Bellafante chronicles how wealthy New Yorkers have been escaping the city for places such as Connecticut, Long Island and upstate New York.[4] Similarly, San Francisco, widely regarded as one of the most expensive housing markets in the world, is seeing its rental prices stagnate and drop for the first time in years at the same time as sales in single-family homes skyrocket. Those who can afford it are purchasing private homes and those who cannot are leaving the city altogether. In both cases, residents are fleeing in search of 'more comfortable lives elsewhere'.[5] These populations are deserting the very same urban environments they helped transform into competitive, homogenized destinations, designed to appeal to a class of wealthy global cosmopolitans under the banner of 'creative global cities' and made unfit to house anyone but those profiting from the circulations of global capital.[6] 'The flight to suburbia', writes Peter Grant, 'reverses a trend toward urbanization that gained momentum in the decade before the pandemic.'[7] As luxury design industries, eager to sell these populations domestic sanctuaries, energize these retreats, what is left in their wake is a set of assumptions about the threats posed by those cities and by those who remain.

Focusing on the cultural work performed by design industries in the contemporary moment, I argue that these luxury industries are complicit in producing a post-pandemic discourse of the urban environment,

where racialized urban space is newly marked as contaminated and where wealthy, mostly white consumers are urged to seek suburban retreat. Advertising, editorials, articles and sponsored content, hailing from different categories of design industries, have responded to the pandemic by inviting consumers to privatize, to retreat and to use design as a way of closing ranks both aesthetically and literally, shoring up the proposition that public urban space represents a menace to public health and conjuring the discourses that have always racialized that space. As furniture retailers, architectural design magazines and art sellers all look to capitalize on the public's focus on domestic spaces and practices of domesticity, they are also reviving a spatial imaginary that indexes urban space according to race and class.

Retail Alarm and Urgent Solutions

In the immediate days and weeks following the rapid swell of the COVID-19 global pandemic, as cities went into lockdown and residents who could afford it were encouraged to shelter-in-place, it became clear that this humanitarian health crisis was to be accompanied by a severe financial crisis. Urban retail closed, public spaces sat empty, supply chains were projected to be in disarray and consumer habits were expected to plummet.
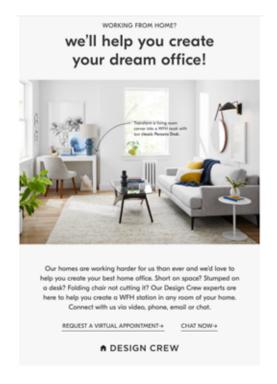
The fashion and design industries were particularly alarmed, as the luxury sector anticipated a significant hit from the impending economic contraction. Released in early April 2020, the *Business of Fashion* 'Coronavirus Update' spelled economic doom for the luxury fashion and design sector: a 'global revenue contraction of 35% to 39%' for the year, and 'if stores remain[ed] closed for two months [and they have], McKinsey analysis approximate[d] that 80% of publicly listed fashion companies in Europe and North America [would] be in financial distress'.[8] Since April 2020, the same publication, as well as others such as *Architectural Digest*, *Design Week Magazine* and *Elle Décor* have offered a string of editorials speculating on design and fashion's shaky, precarious post-COVID future: which retailers would survive and what would be the conditions of their survival? Is this a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for interior designers? What will post-pandemic architecture look like? And how will the throngs of freelancers providing creative labour for these industries survive the pandemic?

This original tide of alarm in the sector quickly revealed its would-be remedy. Luxury sector retailers turned their attention to aestheticizing their customers' new, increasingly private and isolationist realities. These retailers followed the gaze of their consumers, who turned inward, towards their domestic, private spaces. As soon as major global cities began issuing lockdown orders, luxury fashion retailers and design destinations launched new advertising campaigns.

Interior design and furniture retailers began offering work-from-home edits, with newly minted 'home office' collections, and specialty services, such as 'design crews' that could offer virtual design consultations (see Figure 1). Saks Fifth Avenue offered an edit called 'Dial-In Chic' (see Figure 2) for the 'upgraded home office'. Net-a-Porter's magazine ran an editorial with tips on 'How to Make your Home Healthier'. West Elm had similar tips in its own work-from-home office collection. The high-end antique furniture destination 1stDibs released an edit designed to turn 'your home into a soothing sanctuary' (see Figure 3). Neiman Marcus offered products and tutorials for building your own 'At-Home Spa Day'.

Forced to contend with the sudden ubiquity of tele-conferencing as a mode of both work and socialization, retailers zealously tackled 'Zoom room' decor, where buying a stylish Zoom background was only the tip of the design iceberg. Interior design and furniture retailers began offering fully furnished living room or home office backgrounds, while other retailers wagered the launch of entire homeware collections on consumers' need to curate just the right kind of background. Net-a-Porter, which launched its Lifestyle & Homewares collection in November 2020, did exactly that. The retailer's senior fashion market editor, Libby Page, told *Architectural Digest* that while plans for this collection had already been in the works pre-COVID, the timing of the launch was absolutely strategic. Lifestyle and homewares is 'a category we know will work well during this challenging time', she told the magazine's David Sokol.[9] Sokol, for his part, summarizes the launch more bluntly: 'Net-a-Porter wants to furnish your entire Zoom frame.'[10] The writer's pithy summation rings true, since honing and evaluating Zoom room backgrounds became a favourite online pastime almost as soon as the pandemic began. The popular Twitter account Room Rater (@ratemyskyperoom) launched in April 2020, offering comedic reviews of

the room backgrounds that appeared behind the journalists, politicians and pundits on cable television news. On this account, bookshelf design, the prominence of artwork, the presence of plants and the tasteful placement of decorative objects all became aesthetic materials worthy of evaluation and rating.

Figure 1   West Elm offers advertised a 'design crew' that could help customers create their 'dream office', since, as the text explains, 'Our homes are working harder for us than ever' (Source: West Elm promotional email).
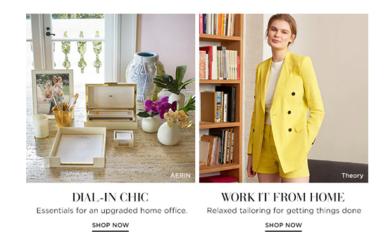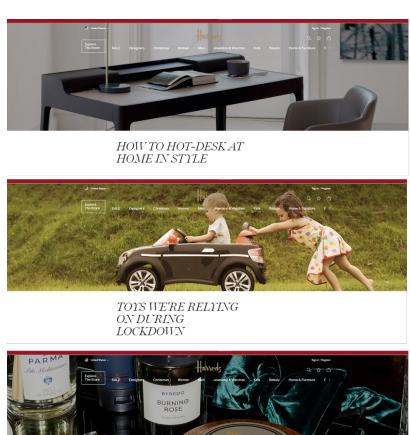

Figure 2   Saks Fifth Avenue offered an edit of items called 'Dial-In Chic', suggesting these pieces of decor as ways to decorate your home office and, effectively, decorate your video conferencing background (Source: Saks Fifth Avenue webpage).

Figure 3 A promotional email newsletter from 1stDibs promised to transform 'your home into a soothing sanctuary' with their collection of antique and vintage luxury goods (Source: 1stDibs promotional email).

Other retailers, such as New Zealand-based furniture design company Noho, began offering tips for transforming small living spaces into comfortable work-from-home stations. Harrods offered a telling trifecta: 'how to hot-desk at home in style', 'toys we're relying on during lockdown' and 'grooming at home made easy' (see Figure 4). The proposition here is clear: working, playing and grooming are all possible within the confines of one's home with the right set of design solutions; interior design can render public space useless.

Figure 4 The website for London-based luxury retailer Harrods offered a variety of edits targeting different aspects of life in lockdown: toys for children, grooming accessories and, of course, the ubiquitous stylish home office (Source: Harrods website).

Art galleries around the world began offering would-be art buyers 'digital gallery hopping' through online spaces such as Artsy and Artnet. The Affordable Art Fair consortium, which took their scheduled gallery exhibitions to their online marketplace, called the offering 'a little escapism … from the comfort of your home' (see Figure 5). At the same time, fresh e-commerce art retailers began to gain new circulation and visibility with impressive speed.
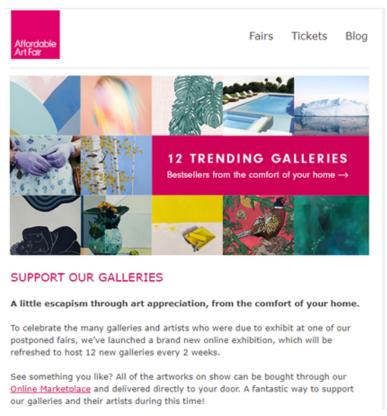

Figure 5 The Affordable Art Fair launched an online experience to spotlight galleries that were selected to participate in the original fair. The global art fair consortium presented this opportunity as 'a little escapism through art appreciation, from the comfort of your home' (Source: Affordable Art Fair promotional email).

Not to be outdone, fashion retailers also tackled the privileged classes' new sheltered, work-from-home reality with endless wardrobe edits tailor made for video conferencing, and loungewear designed to help, as one brand put it, '#ModernCitizens make staying at home chic'. There are invitations to first embrace 'stay-at-home style', to take that 'at-home style to the next level' and, ultimately, to declare this 'the year of the staycation'. Net-A-Porter reminds us of the 'importance of dressing up at home', while Neiman Marcus pulls together your key 'elevated basics' in an 'at-home comforts' collection.

In all these advertisements, testimonials, videos, editorials and email blasts, contented, chic, conventionally beautiful people smile back at the consumer, telegraphing a sense of calm and an unmistakable tone of casual condescension. These icons of private tranquillity and design accomplishment, the visual landscapes of the advertisements suggest, have mastered both themselves and their spaces. The figures dispensing advice in these advertisements and editorials are mostly women and almost exclusively white. This demographic is, of course, common for advertisements in the luxury sector. In this context, however, having lithe, tranquil and unbothered women, whose bodies signify whiteness and wealth, instruct consumers to discipline their private spaces in order to safely avoid public ones has inescapably racial, class-based implications. Asking economically well-situated consumers to simply stay at home, to treat their homes as isolationist oases and to fear public space takes on new meaning and new significance within the public imaginary and, specifically, within the public's racial imaginary.

Designing Interiors of Isolation and Privatization

The message across these dimensions of the design, art and fashion sectors has been consistent: *you will be home for a while, make it your sanctuary and decorate accordingly*. Global cities might be empty, this logic suggests, but your home can be designed to help you experience all the attributes of a wealthy, comfortable public life in private. To wit, there are extraordinary consistencies across these collections and advertisement campaigns: an emphasis on cultivating plants indoors, transforming bathrooms into spa experiences, rigging up home offices, doing 'date night' at home, fashioning already private outdoor spaces into at-home movie theatres. The ideological suggestion across this body of messaging is that the consumer is designing an increasingly private, domestic and long-term future, rather than making-do in a moment of emergency.

Among these themes, perhaps the most telling is the nearly universal focus on 'wellness', with retailers encouraging consumers to tackle their pandemic-related anxiety with an ever-narrower look inwards. In other words, there are appeals to design your domestic sanctuary, yes, to both mimic public life and to simultaneously shut that public life out in an effort to ensure premium-priced safety, but there are also appeals to tap into an even deeper interiority, to look to self-care as a private solution to this very public problem. Writing primarily for an audience of designers thinking about how to adapt their aesthetics and architectures for post-COVID consumer demands, Donya Farhangi proposes that the solution is to focus on consumers' well-being, mental health and 'emotional safety'.[11] She argues that this can help designers 'create spaces that can serve as a refuge from the ongoing health, social, and economic crises and contribute to our mental health and well-being'.[12]

These entreaties to focus on interiority and the elusive notion of wellness are both underwritten and fuelled by an unstated but hovering assumption that well-being is a private matter that necessitates, first and foremost, that consumers and designers use clever design strategies to shut the public, outside world out of their everyday lives. In other words, within the promotional materials and editorials that have proliferated, there is a persistent suggestion that it is, in fact, the public domain that has inflicted trauma on consumers' individual wellness, and that it is investment in the private domain that constitutes the only solution. To that end, Poppie Mphuthing's advice to architects is also grounded in 'wellness', but it goes a step further in suturing that wellness to design and creation of spaces akin to private, personalized bunkers.[13] The author reports that Dan Carlin, the founder of WorldClinic and a former adviser at MIT's School of Architecture, encourages architects embarking on post-COVID projects to consider 'standalone care spaces' within private homes: 'a high-tech telemedicine solution to avoid having to break physical distancing protocols by going to a crowded hospital or waiting room, even in a medical emergency'.[14] Wellness, in other words, is not only about an aggressive focus on you, as the individual consumer who is deploying discourses of health and safety, it is also inescapably about identifying an outside, public 'them' – a public that poses a threat with every potential encounter and that must be avoided even in the most severe circumstances.

The consistencies are not simply ideological; they are also aesthetic and, often, architectural. In *Porter* magazine (the editorial arm of luxury e-commerce site Net-a-Porter), the article 'How to Make Your Home Healthier' recommends embracing 'plant power' first and foremost (see Figure 6). 'Making small changes to your home can improve your health and well-being,' the article begins. The first tip is to add plenty of plants, because 'what you breathe in at home is hugely important'. Similarly, the furniture retailer West Elm sent its customers a weekly edit titled 'Why Plants Make Everything Great'. Inviting readers to create an 'urban oasis', this blast calls this the 'golden age of houseplants', arguing that plants are connected to happiness. *Elle Décor* went straight to the point with its own list of high-end planters: 'If you're at home right now – and we know many of you are at home – you may be looking to start up a garden or improve upon your existing one.' Providing guidance to architects (as opposed to consumers), Mphuthing's piece in *Architectural Digest* also advocates for green spaces because 'plants and trees are scientifically proven to make us feel less stressed'.[15] The suggestion here is that plants not only work to mimic outside, often public, spaces inside private homes, but that their presence enriches the quality of these privatized lives, improving the air quality and contributing to health, rendering the need to actually emerge outdoors, into public spaces, null.

Figure 6   An article in *Porter* magazine recommended that consumers solve their problems of anxiety by turning to 'plant power'. The yoking of individual mental health and wellness to a focus on home improvement is quite common across this body of messaging. 'Feeling stressed, anxious, tired, or simply want to improve your surroundings?', the article begins, 'Making small changes to your home can improve your happiness and wellbeing – here's how' (Source: Net-a-Porter promotional email).

Plants are a relatively simple addition, however. Luxury design industries are also overseeing a significant restructuring of private home spaces. Dubbed New York's 'Renovation Coach', Asher Lipman tells *Architectural Digest* that the most common renovation being requested during the global pandemic is the home office. While that is unsurprising, he adds: 'We're also seeing interest in creating children's workspaces – I call it the "Zoom Room". They can close the door, have some privacy, and do whatever they need to do.'[16] Interviewed for West Elm's blog Front + Main, Maria Cambria, one of the retailer's leading stylists, extolled a similar set of coping strategies: 'I've found it's really helpful to zone the house for different activities,' she recommends. Summing up Cambria's suggestion, the interviewer underscores the importance of 'segregat[ing] your space to accommodate everyone'.[17] The language here is telling. Not only are designers, stylists and home decor and furniture retailers encouraging consumers to carve up their homes into a series of functional, standalone destinations, they are also using the language of urban planning to do it: zoning, spatial segregation, privacy. Both the aesthetic and ideological implications here are clear. Luxury design retailers are selling their consumers the opportunity to build cities within the confines of their private homes; to divide, remix and redesignate the private in such a way that it could operate as a series of spaces that are faux public and others that are now doubly private.

Speculating on the future of residential architecture and design, and accounting for the above solutions regarding zoning private homes and segregating already privatized space, designers and architects are

telegraphing a future wherein all private spaces are transformed into multipurpose entities. Brooks Howell and Tom Steidl of the Gensler firm's Residential Practice argue that all residential spaces should ideally be multi-use, where dens, offices, dining rooms, nurseries and bedrooms could each be easily transformed to mimic each other and whatever previously public amenity might be necessary.[18] While Howell and Steidl are only speculating, retailers have already caught on to this shift, with West Elm advertising the 'everything room' (see Figure 7). According to Howell and Steidl, this flexible design could mean that each room is 'equipped with a retractable green screen background for video conferencing or a closet build-out option that includes space for a printer and office supplies'.[19] Echoing the 'care spaces' and medical bunkers proposed by designers seeking to cater to wellness as a selling point, the authors also suggest that 'lock-off units' would constitute the ideal cross-section between the needs for collaboration and the desire to safeguard one's space from potential contamination. Furthermore, thinking about multi-family residential buildings, the authors add that 'amenity spaces should not have labels. Instead, they should come in various sizes and have varying degrees of privacy.'[20] If business centres, poolside amenities, gyms and common rooms are to be properly designed, they suggest, these spaces can become entirely interchangeable. Here, investment in design that is both flexible and multi-use envisions consumers dialoguing with their public surroundings only insofar as those public attributes can be reproduced in private. Shared, public space, in other words, becomes not a destination but a source of inspiration, to be mimicked in miniature within private homes.
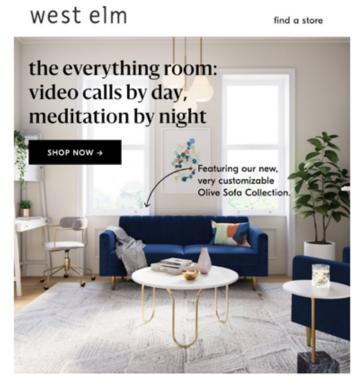

Figure 7   The retailer West Elm showcased the 'everything room', designed to function as a space for living, working and playing; a space that actualized Brooks Howell and Tom Steidl's forecasts for the future of design (Source: West Elm promotional email).

It is tempting to view this tidal wave of advertising efforts, urging consumers to transform their homes into tastefully decorated sanctuaries that prioritize safety, as both expected and banal. After all, seizing the conditions of a global pandemic as an opportunity for commerce is hardly a surprising move for any sector of consumer industries.

In fact, scholars, who have already begun parsing the myriad ways in which coronavirus capitalism has ushered in transformations, revealed the deep reliance of our economic system on the exploitation of vulnerable populations, and, of course, transparently appropriated this emergency as an opportunity

for profit accumulation. Building on her earlier work on shock doctrines and disaster capitalism,[21] Naomi Klein has discussed how institutions of power and domination use moments of emergency to push through previously unthinkable policies.[22] In conversation with the economist Ellen Brown, Robert Scheer paraphrases her position: the pandemic has 'unmasked capitalism'.[23] Christian Fuchs has tackled how it is that the lockdowns have produced a 'radical transformation of space-time in everyday life', wherein the social spaces of our lives all 'converge in the locale of the home'.[24] Fuchs explains:

> Whereas daytime used to be for many individuals working time, at the time of the coronavirus crisis it has to be simultaneously working time, play time, educational time, family time, shopping time, housework time, leisure time, care time, psychological coping time, etc. The convergence of social spaces in the home is accompanied by the convergence of time periods dedicated to specific activities. The result is that activities that humans usually perform in different social roles at different times in different locales converge in activities that are conducted in one universal, tendentially unzoned and unstructured space-time in one locale, the home.[25]

What Fuchs positions as alarm, however, arguing that this pandemic has accelerated the convergences of social space already triggered by neoliberal capitalism, designers such as Howell and Steidl see as opportunity. 'As a result of our experience with COVID-19, the lines between live, work, and play will increasingly blur at an accelerated pace,' they predict.[26]

Within this context, the cultural work that is being done by design industries gains critical new dimensions in the contemporary moment. These industries' entreaties to create sanctuaries, to build chic, stylized bunkers, to turn inward, to re-domesticate already domestic, private spaces, contribute to critical urban transformations, wherein public space is subjected to renewed racializations and the notion of a private home is newly sutured to safety.

Conjuring Racializations of Urban Development

Hendri Yulius Wijaya argues that within 'the current discourse of lockdown, the association between safety and home has become a hallmark of the COVID-19 mitigation'.[27] For Wijaya, the assumptions that underwrite the link between 'home' and 'safety' are being brought into question, revealing home, instead, as a precarious 'assemblage of socio-material infrastructures that cannot easily be detached from the external world'.[28] In the face of this encroaching exposure (the exposure of 'home' as, in fact, precarious, as Wijaya argues), the luxury sector is responding to the threat by intensifying the proposition that home and safety are one and the same. Here, luxury design consumers are being invited to invest in curating and outfitting their private lives in a manner that would supplant their previously public ones, shoring up the imagined proposition that you can escape the global pandemic by simply creating new worlds at home, away from urban environments and, importantly, away from their contaminated bodies. Luxury retailers are encouraging consumers to accessorize their domestic spaces as a bulwark against the threats marking urban environments and the presumably contaminated bodies that continue to circulate within those environments.

During the global health crisis, as many scholars and journalists have noted, it is people of colour and the working poor who are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, in part because it is precisely their labour that has been marked as essential. Both populations have been forced to continue working in public spaces to fulfil capital's extractivist needs for profit and wealth accumulation, consequently becoming the very bodies whose circulation in public space is identified as potentially threatening. As a result, both populations are too often cited as the source of the pandemic and, also, blamed for its continuation. Less overtly, and perhaps more egregiously, however, the suggestion that bodies operating in public space are marked by contamination drags along a set of inescapable racial and class-based assumptions. The concept has fundamentally indexed histories of both colonial and racial violence, appearing in debates about immigration, in eugenics narratives and subsequently in narratives about interracial marriage, in discourses on school and housing segregation and, of course, in conversations about the intersections of race, disease and the environment. The notion of contamination, in effect, exists in the public imagination as a technology of racialization and a weapon of racist violence.

Furthermore, as critical race theorists, historians, urban geographers and legal scholars have all argued, this notion of a racialized contamination – of racialized encounter that might lead to racial interaction, collaboration and socialization – is responsible for the shape and organization of many American cities. Race, and the threat of what is positioned as racial commingling and contamination, govern how it is that we see, organize and consume space. Government policy, as Richard Rothstein has argued, has deliberately and strategically segregated urban environments, and arguments about racial contamination have been at the heart of these practices.[29] Add to that the long-standing use of infrastructure, such as railroads and freeways, as well as natural elements, such as rivers, to enact and attempt to naturalize racial segregation. Maya Wiley sutures these spatial practices to the production of identity, adding that in the US, 'we've racialized physical space through housing policies, land use planning, and many other public and private actions . . . Space then drives psychological space around our identity and who "we" are'.[30] Similarly, writing about the histories of racial segregation through banking policies, restrictive zoning, red-lining, environmental racism and urban renewal programmes, George Lipsitz explores the ways in which the racialization of space and its production of social relations 'helps produce much of the antisocial behavior that it purports to prevent . . . It deprives cities, counties, and states of tax revenues . . . It promotes a suburban culture of contempt and fear . . . [and] it undermines democracy'.[31]

Within this context, when luxury design industries encourage consumers to invest in their own, private, increasingly isolationist spaces, they are also conjuring – although not naming – the implied threat posed by public space; public space that is, in the contemporary moment, defined by a virus and by the notion of possible viral contamination. In this way, luxury design brands are tapping into long-standing narratives about the racialized contamination of public, urban spaces and selling their consumers visions of chic isolationist sanctuaries as a solution. If, as George Lipsitz (by way of Laura Pulido)[32] reminds us, 'relations between races are relations between places',[33] then in the contemporary moment, design industries are helping their consumers build and curate their homes as the kinds of sanctuaries that would foreclose even the possibility of racial entanglement.

White Flight and the Intensification of Historical Patterns

In the US context, the design world's role in these shifts within urban landscapes is not new. Lynn Spigel, for example, has written extensively about the role that television, as well as design and architecture sectors, played in the 1950s in helping new suburbanites customize their homes and transform them into spaces where well-designed 'private' spaces, as parts of new communities – both immediate and imagined – acted as fortresses, keeping the threatening public at bay.[34] That suburbanization was America's infamous 'white flight', where the manufactured threat posed by the public was the threat of people of colour, depicted – although again, as now, not identified or named – as contaminated, threatening bodies.

Historian David Freund locates the onset of those American policies that would later yield what is now commonly known as 'white flight' (or, suburbanization) in the years leading up to the Great Depression. The history he offers focuses, in part, on zoning practices which 'had, from the outset, a racialist foundation and racial intent, one that later . . . enabled postwar suburbanites to employ municipal ordinances as instruments of racial exclusion'.[35] This 'racialist foundation' is a reference to the ways in which zoning policies were animated by race science and eugenics: 'Most early zoning advocates believed in racial hierarchy, openly embraced racial exclusion, and saw zoning as a way to achieve it.'[36]

In the post-Second World War era, racist zoning practices converged with the Federal Housing Administration's home loan programmes and the new needs of returning war veterans to 'spur a stunning transformation of the nation's market for private housing and, with it, the racial and class geography of metropolitan areas'.[37] The period during and after the Second World War, according to Leah Platt Boustan, was marked by important peaks 'in two population flows: black migration from the rural South and white relocation from central cities to suburban rings'.[38] The two population flows are intrinsically linked, according to Boustan, showing that 'white departures from central cities were, in part, a response to black in-migration'.[39] More pointedly, her data demonstrate that throughout the 1950s 'each black arrival was associated with two white departures'.[40] Ultimately, federal incentive programmes and zoning policies subsidized the growth of American suburbs in the post-war era, wherein white families fled urban

environments in search of home ownership and, more critically, in search of racial homogeneity and communities designed to preserve that homogeneity through the discourses of private property.

Critical for the present discussion is that private property – those new real estate developments, located inside exclusively maintained suburban communities with segregated schools, private clubs, private sports facilities and active parent–teacher associations – was also imagined, curated and maintained in part with the help of the design and media industries. Spigel writes that the industries of interior design and architecture, and the emerging television industry, were all integral to the public/private imaginary conjured and meticulously cultivated by new suburbanites. The author complicates those discourses on the time period that posit a rigid distinction between the public and private, arguing instead that new suburbanites were not simply shutting the world out, but rather opting into new, private social formations. Belonging to suburban communities was critical for suburbanites' newly acquired identities; new homeowners 'secured a position of meaning in the public sphere through their new-found social identities as private land owners'.[41] According to Spigel, while suburbanites might not have 'barricaded' themselves in their private homes, they did create communities around those private homes and adopt identities as homeowners that would function to establish boundaries between the public and the private. Significantly, 'the domestic architecture of the period was itself a discourse on [this] complex relationship between public and private space'.[42] Flowing, continuous interior space inside the home, the visual merging of the indoors and outdoors, and the popularity of the 'window wall', alongside other design elements such as images of large-scale outdoor life depicted on interior walls (landscapes, busy cafe streets) and the prominence of globes placed in the home, were all intended to give the illusion of a dialogue between the public and private where no such dialogue actually existed. Bärbel Harju has also discussed how 'picture windows' served as one key architectural example of the ways in which notions of privacy and surveillance were reinvented within the context of suburbanization.[43]

Conclusion

The similarities in the actualizations of these two projects – 1950s suburbs and the contemporary moment – are stark. Like the picture windows and window walls that Spigel, Harju and others have written about, home decor, architecture and the consumer goods that populate these spaces are once again implicated in the reinvention of the public and private spheres, with private homes at the centre of the discourse and the fear of racialized encounter simmering at its foundation. There is once again a concerted effort to introduce wellness – ideological stability routed through discourses on health – by reproducing a simulated version of the public within the space of the private, by visually recreating accessories of public life within private domains in order to eschew physical interaction or coexistence. The privileged classes are again being invited to retreat and to design their homes as comfortable bunkers, full of the accessories of art, travel and public life and, importantly, without the risk of actual racial encounter. They are being invited to find comfort in the private in a moment when the public is understood to be riddled with mysterious, unrecognizable, although deeply racialized threats. On the part of the design industries, this constitutes a desperate marketing move as this luxury sector awaits what it has identified as certain economic doom. What the move implies socially, however, is far more pernicious and enduring.

Luxury design industries are today complicit in producing a renewed racialization of urban space for post-pandemic life, wherein divisions between the public and private are newly reinforced as divisions between class and race. More than that, these divisions, through the normalization of 'social distancing' rhetoric, are positioned as responsible social practice, both fuelling the notion that the bodies of others are potentially contaminated, and validating the subsequent avoidance of those bodies. In the contemporary moment, marked by a global pandemic, an impending global recession and fraught public interactions, the luxury design industry's entreaties to (re)design our homes and our bodies to accommodate a newly public life led in private amounts to a symbolic suburbanization founded in the fear of 'contaminated' racialized bodies. Here, however, the wealthy are not asked to abandon what are now global creative cities and testaments to the growth of neoliberal capitalism. Rather, they are asked to remake their homes and their bodies by intensifying the sensibilities of racialized privatization.

Declarations and Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests with this work.

Notes

[1] Iyer, 'New York Stories'.
[2] Iyer, 'New York Stories', 3.
[3] Kennicott, 'Designing to Survive', 9.
[4] Bellafante, 'First They Fled the City', describes how this temporary exodus has resulted in a surge of requests for swimming pools among contractors in these new areas, as newly arrived New Yorkers look to rebuild these homes to wait out the pandemic.
[5] Charnock, 'San Franciscans Continue Leaving'.
[6] I am referring here to the ways in which global cities took up the mantle of creativity to brand themselves as global hotspots of culture and innovation under the influence of thinkers such as Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, who fuelled contemporary attachments to neoliberal notions of urban economic prosperity.
[7] Grant, 'Renters Flock to Suburbia', 9.
[8] Business of Fashion and McKinsey Company, 'Introduction', 7.
[9] Sokol, 'Net-a-Porter', 2.
[10] Sokol, 'Net-a-Porter', 1.
[11] This piece appears as a feature on the website of the global design firm Gensler. Farhangi, 'Designing Spaces'.
[12] Farhangi, 'Designing Spaces', 16.
[13] Mphuthing, 'Four Considerations'.
[14] Mphuthing, 'Four Considerations', 10, 11.
[15] Mphuthing, 'Four Considerations', 9.
[16] Lipman, 'New York's "Renovation Coach"'.
[17] Cambria, 'Ask a Designer'.
[18] Howell and Steidl, 'Will the Work From Home Trend'.
[19] Howell and Steidl, 'Will the Work From Home Trend', 5.
[20] Howell and Steidl, 'Will the Work From Home Trend', 8.
[21] See Klein, *The Shock Doctrine.*
[22] Klein, 'Coronavirus Is the Perfect Disaster'.
[23] Brown, interview by Robert Scheer.
[24] Fuchs, 'Everyday Life and Everyday Communication', 378, 379.
[25] Fuchs, 'Everyday Life and Everyday Communication', 379.
[26] Howell and Steidl, 'Will the Work From Home Trend', 10.
[27] Wijaya, 'Home Sweet Home', 2.
[28] Wijaya, 'Home Sweet Home', 3.
[29] Rothstein, *The Color of Law.*
[30] Wiley, 'Racialized Public Space', 21.
[31] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 21.
[32] Lipsitz arrives at this conclusion by referring to work by Laura Pulido, specifically her 2000 article 'Rethinking Environmental Racism'.
[33] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 6.
[34] Spigel, *Make Room for TV.*
[35] Freund, *Colored Property*, 46.
[36] Freund, *Colored Property*, 46.
[37] Freund, *Colored Property*, 182.
[38] Boustan, 'Was Postwar Suburbanization "White Flight"?', 417.
[39] Boustan, 'Was Postwar Suburbanization "White Flight"?', 418.
[40] Boustan, 'Was Postwar Suburbanization "White Flight"?', 418.
[41] Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 101.
[42] Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 101.
[43] Harju, 'Picture Windows'.

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