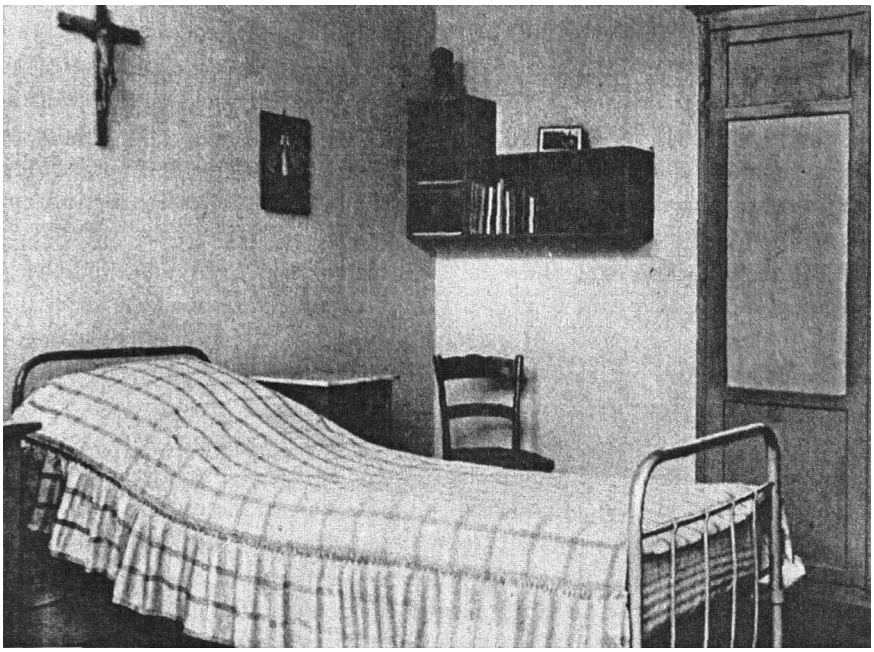
Disguised Asceticism: The Promotion of Austerity in Interior Design during the Interwar Period in Flanders, Belgium

Sofie De Caigny



The ideal bedroom for a girl in *De Boerin, Jubilee Issue 1911—1936*. From Sofie De Caigny, "Disguised Asceticism: The Promotion of Austerity in Interior Design during the Interwar Period in Flanders, Belgium," in *Beyond Pleasure: Cultures of Modern Asceticism*, ed. Leen Van Molle, Kaat Wils and Evert Peeters (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 159.

In drawings produced in an issue of 1929, *De Boerin*, the magazine of the Belgian Association of Farming Women (Belgische Boerinnenbond) tried to direct its readers towards a more austere and less ornamented bedroom. In the text that accompanied the drawings, the author stated that it was not important whether one preferred an iron or a wooden bed, as long as there was "no excess garnishing, no lie, no swaggering." Austerity was closely linked to authenticity and readers were warned not to imitate expensive types of wood, but to keep with the natural colours of cheaper timbers. The ideal was "not a showpiece bed, but a solid, strong, simple bed wherein the children of your children will be sleeping as comfortably as you!"[1]

The Belgian Association of Farming Women was not the only organisation to promote austere interiors after the First World War. As in other European countries, domestic science schools, home economics manuals,[2] commercial women's magazines, various exhibitions on popular housing, commercial furniture companies and the female branches of social organisations, as intermediary level between the individual and the state and with divergent socio-political ideologies, all engaged in the crusade for interior decoration according to ascetic values. In most countries, central

1 Matant, "De Slaapkamer," *De Boerin* 5 (1929): 103.

2 Examples include: the provincial exhibition of cheap dwellings in Ghent, 1929 — see N. Poulain, "Provinciale tentoonstelling 'De goedkope woning,' Gent 1929," *Interbellum* 18, no. 3 (1998): 6–15, 18, no. 4 (1998): 6–12; the provincial exhibition of ornamental arts and modern industries in La Louvière, 1930 — see P. Werrie, "Exposition Provinciale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes," *Habitation à Bon marché* 10, no. 7 (1930): 121—123; and the Catholic Working-Class Women's exhibition 'Wij bouwen een Nieuwen Thuis,' 1939 — see S. De Caigny, "'We're Building a New Home!' The Significance of the Domestic Sphere among Working-class Women in Flanders during the Interwar Years," *Home Cultures* 21 (2005): 1—24.

organisations such as the Women's Housing Sub-committee in Great Britain,[3] the Salon des Arts Ménagers in France,[4] or the Dutch Association of Housewives (Nederlandse Vereniging van Huisvrouwen)[5] played a key role in distributing new ideas on interior design after the First World War.

In some countries, like Belgium, strong divisions along socio-political lines and cultural differences between regions prevented national institutes like the Higher Institute for Agricultural Domestic Sciences (Hoger Instituut voor Landbouwhuishoudkunde) and the National Centre for the Study of Domestic Sciences (Nationaal Studiecentrum voor de Huishoudkunde) from dominating the debate on new types of interior design. They had to co-operate with intermediary social organisations, which were the most important disseminators of domestic advice during the interwar period.

In this search for the meaning of austerity in interior design and its relationship to the concept of 'modern asceticism,' I will examine the discourses developed by the main social organisations that addressed the rural and working classes in Flanders during the interwar period.[6] Their female branches in particular—the Belgian Association of Farming Women, a Catholic organisation with a large following in the countryside,[7] plus the Catholic Working-class Women (Katholieke Arbeidersvrouwen, KAV)[8] and the Socialist Visionary Women (Socialistische Vooruitziende Vrouwen, SVV),[9] both operating in urban districts—produced well thought out, detailed discourses on a more austere and less ornate form of home furnishing.

AUSTERITY IN VARIOUS DISCOURSES ON INTERIOR DESIGN IN INTERWAR FLANDERS

The Belgian Association of Farming Women aimed to reduce the difference in comfort between rural and urban living conditions without losing the specific characteristics of rural homes. Its ideas on housing and interior design were strongly interwoven with other elements, such as comfort, health, education, marriage and Catholicism.[10] In this way, the Belgian Association of Farming Women closely related home culture with rural identity.

The first, most obvious reason why the Association wanted to persuade its members about the advantages of an austere interior was that this would improve hygiene, and consequently the occupants' physical health. In order to make it easier to clean the house regularly, the housewife had to get rid of all the superfluous decorative elements and choose furniture that was not overloaded with scrolls that would rapidly be transformed into dust traps. Austerity was equated with hygiene.[11] For example, tables had to be ascetic and white, symbolising purity, sobriety and hygiene. Simplicity not only had hygienic benefits, but was juxtaposed with pomp and circumstance as an

3 D.S. Ryan, *The Ideal Home through the Twentieth Century* (London: Hazar Publishing, 1997); D.S. Ryan, "'All the World and Her Husband': the Daily Mail ideal home exhibition 1908–39,' in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-century Consumer Culture*, ed. M.M. Andrews and M.M. Talbot (London: Continuum, 2000), 10–22.

4 M. Segalen, "The Salon des Arts Ménagers, 1923–1983: A French Effort to Instil the Virtues of Home and Norms of Good Taste," *Journal of Design History* 7 (1994): 267–275.

5 R. Oldenziel and C. Bouw, "Huisvrouwen, hun strategieen en apparaten1898–1998," in *Schoon Genoeg! Huisvrouwen en huishoudtechnologie in Nederland 1898–1998*, ed. R. Oldenziel and C. Bouw (Nijmegen: SUN, 1998), 9–29.

6 There could be considerable differences between the Walloon provinces of Belgium. The development of social movements was, for example, quite different in Flanders where Catholic organisations were always more powerful in the twentieth century, while socialist organisations had more members in the French-speaking part of Belgium. This article focuses mainly on the Flemish situation. See also S. Hellemans, *Strijd am de moderniteit* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990).

7 In 1919, the Association had a membership of around 20,000; in 1940 it had risen to 120,000.

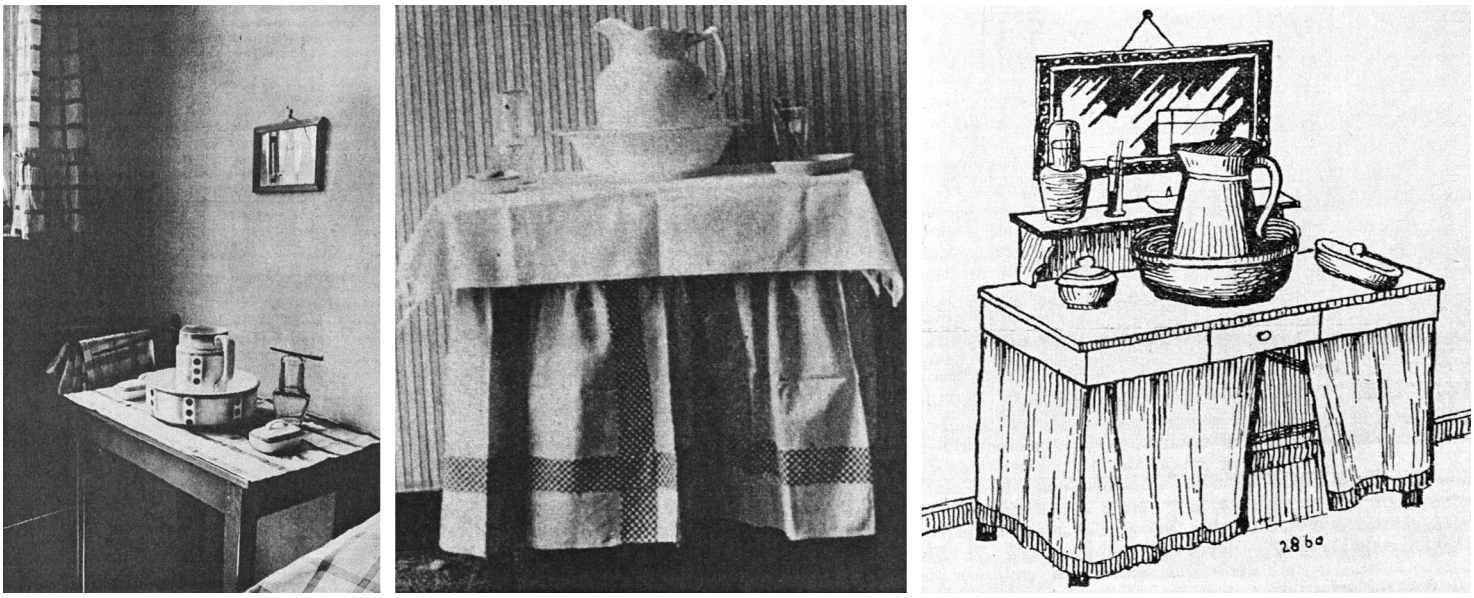
8 The KAV was established in 1920 and its membership had risen to 125,000 by 1940. See R. Christens and A. De Decker, *Vormingswerk in vrouwenhanden: De geschiedenis van de KAV voor de Tiweede Wereldoorlog (1920–1940)* (Leuven, 1988).

9 After the introduction of universal suffrage for men in Belgium in 1917, most socialist organisations started to grow fast. The socialist women's organisation already had over 40,000 members by the beginning of the 1920s. More detailed figures of the membership of the later interwar years are difficult to reconstruct since most archives of the SVV have been lost. See D. De Weerdt, *De dochters van Marianne* (Antwerp, 1997).

10 S. De Caigny and W. Vanderstede, "Spiegel van het Hemelhuis: De wissel-werking russen woonideaal en sociale rollen bij de Belgische Boerinnenbond (1907–1940)," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 2, no. 1 (2005): 3—29. Note that Catholicism is the dominant form of Christianity in Belgium; the two terms are used as synonyms in this text.

11 S. De Caigny, "'White Cells': Norms and Practices of Sanitary Installations in Houses during the Interwar Period in Flanders," unpublished paper presented at the Joint Doctoral Seminar, Theory and History of Architecture, Louvain-la-Neuve, 4 November 2004.

aesthetic category with strong moral implications, the opposite of waste and falsity.[12] In order to stimulate honest beauty in the home, the Association stressed that objects and furniture were also there to catch the eye. Promoting simplicity was closely related to discussions about functionality and comfort: kitchens and living rooms ought not to be filled with cupboards "full of odds and ends … Smooth panels, simple lines are also preferable in these rooms."[13] The Belgian Association of Farming Women communicated its ideas on home culture through its monthly magazine for members. In the articles about austerity, the Association juxtaposed 'bad' examples with 'good.' The texts accompanying the illustrations made it clear that it was not just about taste, but that living conditions influenced the occupants' religious, moral and political opinions. Apart from its magazine, the Association also helped to organise model farms to show innovations in interior design, domestic comfort and agricultural equipment.[14]



Washing tables in *De Boerin*, 1929. From De Caigny, "Disguised Asceticism," 146–148.

During the interwar period, model farms were constructed at the International Exhibitions in Liège (1930) and Brussels (1935) and at the International Water Exhibition in Liège (1939).[15] Visitors were guided through the rooms of ideal farmhouses, filled with the newest and most efficient furniture. The organising committees seemed to have been aware that these were still far beyond the reach of most of its target group, but hoped that these farmhouses would stimulate the visitors to install similarly austere furniture in their own homes.

Housing was also a permanent item on the agenda of the Catholic Working-Class Women (KAV) during the interwar period. This stemmed from a dual concern: on the one hand, the need to improve hygiene, functionality and comfort (including water distribution and electricity) of working-class housing; and on the other, for the full-time housewife to raise the cognitive standards of furnishing a house. In discussing interi-

12 M.L., "Ons Huis," *De Boerin* 10 (1919): 145.

13 Matant, "Over keukenkasten," *De Boerin* 1 (1928): 7–8.

14 Prewar examples were the model farm at Liège in 1905, the Provincial Agricultural Exhibition in Brussels in 1907, the 'Pavilion of the Farmer's Wife' at the International Exhibition in Brussels in 1910, and 'The Modern Village' that was constructed at the World Exhibition in Ghent in 1913. See P. De Vuyst and E. Tibaut, *Het moderne dorp op de wereldtentoonstelling te Gent 1913* (Brussels: Goemaere drukker, 1913).

15 F. Graftiau, *La ferme moderne démonstrative: applications mécaniques et électriques, procédés et méthodes rationnelles d'exploitation* (Leuven, 1930); J. Giele, *De betooghoeve: Tentoonstelling Brussel* (Leuven, 1935); J. Giele, *La ferme démonstrative: maison rurale, bâtiments d'exploitation, jardins, l'amélioration de la vie rurale* (Leuven, 1939).

or design, the KAV stressed the need for plain, simple interiors, as was well illustrated in the design of bedrooms: "No musty curtains, no heavy wallpapers, these are old fashioned sources of infection ... The housewife cleans the bedroom every day, which is an easy job when the room is not filled with unnecessary stuff. So, no extra compacts, flacons, statues in the bedroom!"[16]

The writing mirrored that of the Belgian Association of Farming Women by closely interweaving the advantages of hygiene with those of functionality—austerity helped the housewife in her duty to keep the home clean—and aesthetics. Only simple and practical furniture would have a permanent value: "One has to think of decoration in terms of simplicity, beauty and functionality." [17]

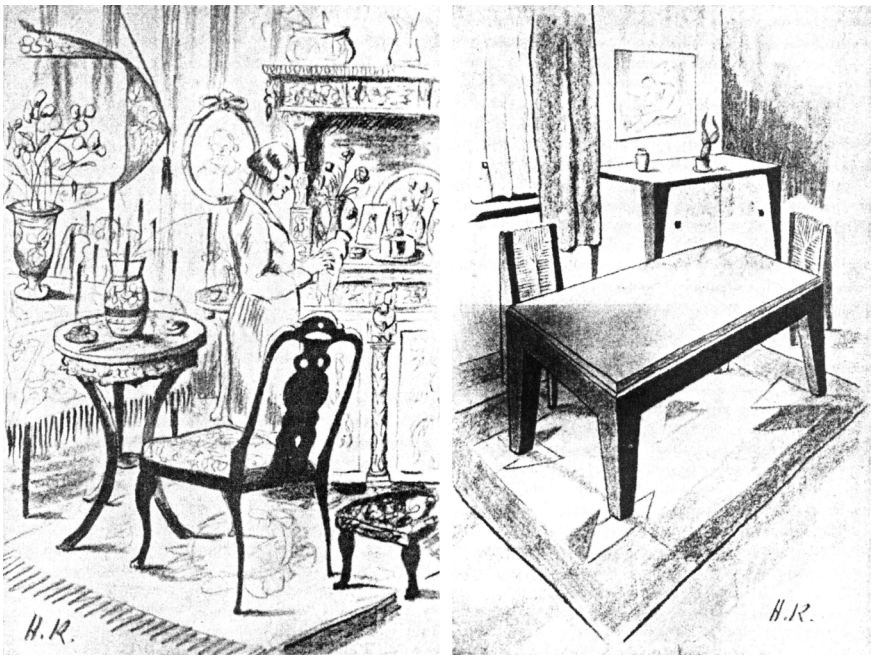
The KAV promoted its ideas on interior design through three different media. Firstly, its members' magazine—its most important means of communication. Secondly, local branches of the association held a number of small exhibitions to inspire visitors to imitate the design and placing of furniture in their own homes. Thirdly, local delegates organised courses and classes on housekeeping and interior design.[18] The KAV's continuous efforts to improve and reorient the daily living habits of its members resulted in a travelling exhibition, 'We're Building a New Home,' visited by over 38,000 people in 1939.[19]

The Socialist Visionary Women (SVV) and some magazines of the Socialist Centre for the Professional Education (Socialistische Centrale voor Arbeidsopvoeding) also gave austerity a central role in home decoration.[20] Their magazines similarly showed 'good' and 'bad' examples of furniture, accompanied by explicit educational texts. Like their Catholic counterparts, these stressed the idea that socialist houses ought to be freed of superfluous decoration in order to become more hygienic and functional.

The educational programme of the SVV, in particular, paid considerable attention to simplifying home interiors and rationalising household practices in order to relieve women from domestic work and create more possibilities for them to work outside the home. In socialist discourse, most arguments related class identity closely with sobriety. Socialist women had to be 'pioneers' in adopting the new austere forms of interior design since they were supposed to be important advocates of "a new culture that was young and had a future."[21] This statement encapsulates the conviction that nineteenth-century bourgeois culture was in decline, a belief the socialists shared with other modernist progressive ideologies.

Bourgeois concepts of beauty were attacked on the basis that the highest aesthetic category was simplicity created for functionality. "Decoration just for decoration is always based on an incorrect logic and consequently is of an incorrect taste, so its conception is barbaric."[22] In contrast to decent working-class homes, bourgeois homes were not adapted to their occupants' real needs. Their only function was to show off, which socialist experts in interior design strongly rejected on functional, aesthetic and ethical grounds.[23] The moral dimension followed from the notion of authenticity. People had to learn that imitating historical styles was old fashioned, could not be beautiful, and was the opposite of truth.

16 Martha, "Gezondheidsleer: Onze slaapkamer," *Vrouwenbeweging* 4 (1925): 57–58.
17 "Onze levende thuis," *Vrouwenbeweging* 1 (1930): 9.
18 KAV/KADOC/L—2.10.55: Modelvoordrachten 1920–1959, Lecture 1927–1928 "Oost West, 't Huis Best," Paaswerking 1938 "Wij bouwen onzen haard"; KAV/ KADOC/L—2.10.55/17: Lecture 1938 "Wij bouwen een nieuwen thuis"; KAV/ KADOC/L—2.10.45: 1939 "Woningactie"; CSVW/ KADOC/L—95: "Over vrouwenadel."
19 De Caigny, "'We're Building a New Home!'," 2.
20 As most of the archives of the Socialist Visionary Women are lost and as its magazine focused more on household practices than on furniture design, I have also used publications of the Socialist Centre for Education of Workmen to reconstruct the socialist ideology of interior design and furniture. See: P. Van den Eeckhout and P. Creve, "De socialistische sociaal-culturele organisaties voor volwassenen," in *Bronnen voor de studie van het hedendaagse België, 19de-20ste eeuw*, ed. P. Van den Eeckhout and G. Vanthemsche (Brussels, 2001), 967.
21 "Goede smak in verband met de Huisinrichting," *Opgang* 2 (1931): 40.
22 O. Van de Casyne, "De stemmige woning," *Arbeid en Kennis* 1 (1924): 69.
23 J.K., "Een praatje over bouwkunst," *Arbeid en Kennis* 1 (1924): 113.



Interior design in the socialist magazine *Opgang*, 1931, 40–41. From De Caigny, "Disguised Asceticism," 150–151.

These examples of the various intermediary organisations' domestic advice show that most of them developed very similar arguments on sobriety: all stressed the material and moral advantages of an austere interior. The material advantages of plain interiors were expressed in terms of hygiene, health, comfort, functionality, economics, solidity, beauty and thrift. The moral values they represented were linked to authenticity, soundness, modesty and dignity. In parallel with the moral implications, an austere interior would have a liberating effect on its inhabitants. All of these intermediary organisations were convinced that austerity and asceticism in their members houses would raise them to a higher moral and physical level. It was important that they internalised ascetic interior design in order to become better human beings.

This tendency to a sober interior and its formative effects was inspired by two cultural traditions that gained momentum in interwar Europe: home economics and modernist architecture. Austerity as a key value in housing was one of the most important objectives of domestic advisory literature that was published in the United States from the middle of the nineteenth century and became widely available, including in translation, in Europe in the 1920s.[24] The publications of some European experts on home decoration and household practices, like Paulette Bernège and Erna Meyer, also reached a wide international readership.[25] Whereas the US literature mainly addressed middle-class women, its European counterparts also focused on farming and working-class homes. However, this focus towards new target groups did not produce fundamental shifts in the emphasis on austerity as objective for popular interiors. Although the language that was used to argue for austerity evolved from simple concerns about hygiene and health into well-developed scientific arguments, the content of the message remained basically the same.

These experts in domestic science received unexpected support from modernist architects, including Adolf Loos,[26] who started to address popular housing as an important field of work after the First World War. During the interwar period, concepts like rationality, functionality, eco-

24 I. Cieraad, "Het huishouden tussen droom en daad, over de toekomst van de keuken," in Oldenziel and Bouw, *Schoon Genoeg! Huisvrouwen en huishoudtechnologie in Nederland 1898–1998* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1998), 31–57.

25 See, e.g., P. Bernège, *De la méthode ménagère* (Paris, 1928); E. Meyer, *Der Neue Haushalt* (Stuttgart, 1926).

26 Editorial note: read more in Wessel Krul, "Adolf Loos and the Doric Order," in *Beyond Pleasure: Cultures of Modern Asceticism*, ed. Evert Peeters, Leen Van Molle and Kaat Wils (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 123–143.

nomics and social reform became equally as important in architecture as aesthetics, monumentality and representation.[27] Central to the discourse and practices of modernist architects was the rejection of ornamentation and the encouragement of abstinence in daily life and home culture.

These architects developed three complementary arguments to support their conviction that asceticism was crucial when taking the current socio-economic and cultural circumstances into account. Firstly, architecture had to be defined in terms of transparency, hygiene, openness, purity and functionality.[28] This meant that form had to follow function, that the aesthetic of a building had to reflect its constructive logic, and the use of materials and constructive elements had to be 'true.' It is in this context that Ernst May stated that asceticism was needed to achieve the essence of things.[29] This line of argument aimed at liberating human beings from their (excessive) material concerns.

Secondly, socio-economic and political arguments stressed that architecture should reflect social justice and equality.[30] Every citizen, it was said, has the right to decent housing that meets contemporary needs. For this to be possible, the cost of proper housing had to be reduced, and ornamentation dispensed with—the social emancipation of the masses played a central role in this argument.

A third line of argument saw the lack of ornament as the logical response to the uprooted and fragmented modern way of life.[31] If architecture and housing wanted to be authentic, they had to show up the conflicting structures of modern society. According to this reasoning, ornamentation was rejected as an empty instrument of display, which was condemned as a nineteenth-century bourgeois relic that had no place in modern society.

The modernists' arguments for an ascetic architecture all reflected an ethical and an aesthetic concern, and they were applied in both ideology and material culture.[32] By embracing the unstable, discontinuous, progressive and revolutionary characteristics of modernity, the modernists defended a radical social renewal.[33] As a logical consequence, modernist interior design broke with prewar traditions, used new materials like glass and steel, and experimented with new forms. Sobriety was only a first step that radical modernists like Hannes Meyer recommended to come to terms with an ever-changing, complex and anonymous society. They believed that authentic modern interior design also had to redefine domesticity in terms of "transience and instability rather than permanence and rootedness."[34]

Domestic advisers, mostly women, and modern architects, mostly men, were aware that their objectives were very similar.[35] In many countries their collaboration resulted in revolutionary kitchens, built-in furniture and popular housing design. During the interwar period, a mutually influential dynamic developed between modernist architects and experts in domestic science and much of the popular media started to spread the ideal of austerity in housing. As a result, austerity became a dominant value in normative discussions about interior design.

27 H. Heynen, "Plekken van het dagelijkse leven: Over vrouwen in de architectuurkritiek," *Archis* 4 (2000): 60.

28 K. Van Herck, "'Only Where Comfort Ends, Does Humanity Begin': On the 'Coldness' of Avant-garde Architecture in the Weimar Period," in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. H. Heynen and G. Baydar (London: Routledge, 2005), 125.

29 H. Heynen, *Architectuur en de kritiek van de moderniteit* (Nijmegen: SUN, 2001), 72.

30 L. De Cauter, "Authenticiteit," in *Dat is architectuur*, ed. H. Heynen et al. (Rotterdam, 2001), 683.

31 H. Heynen, *Architectuur en de kritiek van de moderniteit*, 138.

32 B. Verschaffel, "'Architectuur is (als) een gebaar': Over het 'echte' als architecturaal criterium," in *Wonen tussen gemeenplaats en poëzie: Opstellen over stad en architectuur*, ed. H. Heynen (Rotterdam: 010, 1993), 76.

33 H. Heynen, "Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions," in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. H. Heynen and G. Baydar (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

34 H. Heynen and K. Van Herck, "Introduction," *Journal of Architecture* 7 (2002): 224.

35 S. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 99; S. Stage and V. Vicenti, eds. *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (London: Cornell University Press, 1997); G. Lees-Maffei, ed. *Domestic Design Advice, Journal of Design History* 16, no.1 (2003), special issue.

POPULAR RESISTANCE AGAINST MODERN ASCETICISM IN THE HOME

Unfortunately, it is difficult to know what visitors' actual opinions were about the Belgian Association of Farming Women's model farms, about the KAV's exhibition on interior design or about the furniture that was published in their members' magazines. Based on the historical evidence that she found on the situation in the United States, Sarah Leavitt concludes that a great part of the public disliked the austere furniture on show because they did not find it very "homely."[36]

Reading the repeated domestic advice of the governing bodies of Flemish intermediary social organisations gave me the impression that their efforts were probably not very successful. In their attempt to implement the ascetic ideal, domestic scientists, the media and modernist architects discovered that practices in interior design were resistant to change. The explanation for this probably lay in the political and social-economic developments in most Western European countries during the 1920s and 1930s. Male universal suffrage was introduced in most countries after the First World War and fuelled the hope of the masses that they might acquire the respectability and standard of living of bourgeois families. More and more working-class and rural families could indeed participate in consumer culture for the first time in history when the Roaring Twenties reached Europe from America in the second half of the decade. Better education, fashion and modern entertainment (especially cinema) came within the reach of the masses. Exemplifying Norbert Elias's explanation of the progress of civilisation, these social groups liked to show their increasing income and progress up the social ladder by buying objects to decorate their homes. In doing so, they imitated nineteenth-century bourgeois houses. Most people thought of austere interiors as furniture for poor people.

To overcome the resistance to more sober interiors, and to inform people about the inherent moral and material advantages of voluntary austerity, Flemish social organisations designed a specific strategy to promote the ascetic ideal. First of all, the designs they created were fairly traditional compared to the radical ascetic interiors of some modernist architects.[37]The two, very different forms of material outcome that emerged illustrate the divergent attitudes towards modernity taken by intermediary social actors and modernist architects. In contrast to the radical position of modernist architects, social organisations and the media advocated an 'integrative modernity': they were not opposed to modernity, but tried to control the way the public would handle it.[38] From this perspective, asceticism as a formative value could be used for the physical and mental well-being of society. It was thus possible to offer a model of austerity in dwelling culture that was adjusted to the organisation's ideology. Asceticism could be used to control modernity in its members' daily lives and was promoted as an instrument to stimulate the positive aspects of 'being modern.'

Catholic organisations, in particular, combined traditional interpretations of domesticity and family life with modern ideas of hygiene and sobriety. They selected 'good' aspects of modernity, such as health care, and passed them to their members. The situation was somewhat different for the socialist organisations that supported progress and modernization as a means of social emancipation for the working class. Consequently, their examples of what they saw as good, contemporary design reflected this more progressive perspective.

36 S. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher*, 97.

37 This ambiguity is very similar to the situation of Das Neue Frankfurt, where the fairly traditional but austere designs of Kramer were contemporary with more modernist designs of, for example, Marcel Breuer. See H. Hirdina, *Neues Bauen, Neues Gestalten: Das Neue Frankfurt, Die neue Stadt. Eine Zeitschrift zwichen 1926 und 1933* (Berlin: Verlag der Kunst, 1984), 40–41, 185.

38 S. Hellemans, *Strijd om de moderniteit*, 125.

A second strategy that the intermediary social organisations adopted to overcome the difficulties of implementation closely linked the ascetic ideal with class identity and disguised it by an idiosyncratic definition of *gezelligheid*, the Dutch word for 'cosiness' or *Gemütlichkeit*. In the ideology of the KAV, class identity had to be visible in housekeeping and the appropriate decoration of the home.[39] In concrete terms, this meant that a Christian working-class woman had to be the central figure of the household, had to have fixed washing and cleaning days, and had to get up early to prepare coffee for her husband and those of her children who left the house for the factory every morning. In other words, she organised the family rituals of daily life according to her class identity. By doing so, she would bind the family members to the home. Material culture could help her in this process of homemaking.

The KAV explained carefully how a Christian working-class fireplace had to be decorated, which cushions were appropriate on the chairs in the 'living-kitchen,' and where fresh flowers should be placed.[40] The Catholic working-class movement explicitly stated that the working-class home should not imitate a bourgeois or middle-class home.[41] The parlour, a symbol of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, had no function in a working-class house since it was inefficient, unhealthy and immoral for families to live in small kitchens while the parlour was only used to receive occasional visitors.

Austerity played a key role in the development of a kind of Flemish popular interior design that distinguished itself from the "exaggerated and unreasonable bourgeois boasting in possessions, not in correspondence with the actual democratic spirit."[42] Thus, in defining the close relationship between class identity and interior design, the Catholic working-class movement's governing body attacked remnants of the bourgeois, stuffy interior and pleaded for austerity.

This assault on the bourgeois home was also one of the main focal points of the modernists' struggle for an austere dwelling culture. The most radical modernists of the Weimar period attacked the bourgeois idea of domesticity and did away with its most important character, namely the idea of a cosy interior.[43] Only a classless society could represent authentic cosiness, and there would be no need to clothe it.[44] This rejection of what had traditionally been understood as cosiness had strong implications. After all, cutting all ties to representative material objects led to the ideal of the 'naked' or ascetic house, in which the experience of a new and better life would emerge.

Although some parallels existed between the modernists and the Catholic working-class movement's plea to do away with bourgeois interior design, the Catholic working-class movement did not want to do away with the concept of cosiness. On the contrary, according to its female branch, the KAV, an austere interior would lead to cosiness! Cosiness was indeed the central concept in the KAV's marketing strategy of austerity. This seemingly paradoxical statement can be understood by examining the two meanings of cosiness in KAV discourse. On the one hand, cosiness had a conceptual meaning of 'togetherness,' including 'a caring housewife,' 'Catholicism and feelings of safety.' On the other, cosiness needed a material dimension to create an appropriate framework for this conceptual meaning. Austere and thus authentic cosy interiors would generate phys-

39 My analysis of the ideology of dwelling culture of the Catholic working-class movement is based on a reading of the archives and periodicals of its female branch, the KAV, and on the periodical of the League of Owner-occupiers, the most active section of the General Christian Workers' Union in terms of communication on home culture.

40 The living-kitchen was the most common space in popular Flemish houses. It was the room with the fireplace that served as both living room and kitchen at the time. See S. De Caigny, "'We're Building a New Home!'," 10–13.

41 "Wij bouwen een nieuwen thuis," *Vrouwenbeweging* 25, no.5 (1938): 6–7.

42 J.L., "Een gezellige woning heeft haar socialen terugslag op de bewoners," *Onze Woning* 7 (1933): 4–5.

43 K. Van Herck, "'Only Where Comfort Ends, Does Humanity Begin'," 125.

44 The translation of the Dutch word *gezelligheid* into English is fairly problematic since it has a material and social component that refers to the etymology of the word *gezelschap*, signifying 'company.' As 'cosiness' is used here as the translation of *gezelligheid*, I want to stress both the material and the mental significance of the word.

ical well-being because bodies could freely move in them without being hindered by excessive decoration and furniture.[45] The combination of the conceptual and material dimension came down to values like order, purity, functionality and simplicity. It seems as if the KAV governing body was disguising austerity by introducing this new notion of cosiness in an attempt to convince its members of its advantages.

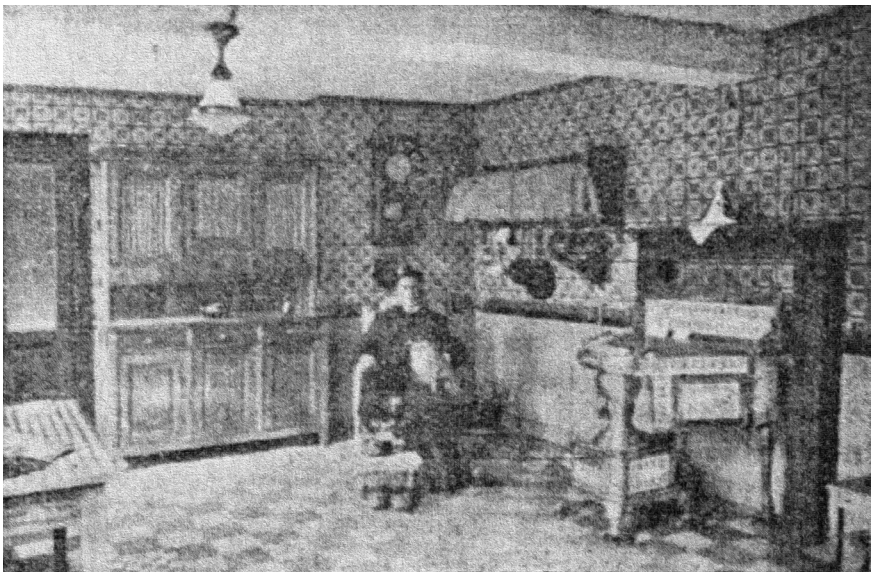
The situation seemed to have been somewhat different for other social organisations. As illustrated above, socialist discourse focused more explicitly on the anti-bourgeois character of its dwelling ideology then did that of its Catholic counterparts. In fact, the socialists' entire political, cultural and socio-economic ideology was far more opposed to bourgeois culture than that of the Catholic working-class movement. The ideology of the Catholic socio-political bloc mirrored a peaceful class-based society, whereas the ideology of the socialist bloc was rooted in class struggle.[46] Thus, when the socialist governing body argued that interior design had to be closely linked to class identity, all remnants of bourgeois culture had to be rooted out. Therefore, "the 'home' of the workman cannot be what it used to be. Austere beauty must rule in it."[47]

Left: Material culture of 'cosiness' in the women's magazine *Vrouwenbeweging* 24, no. 6 (1937): 7. Right: Mental significance of 'cosiness' in *Vrouwenbeweging* 22, no. 12 (1935):4. From De Caigny, "Disguised Asceticism," 156.

At first glance, in contrast to the strategy of the Catholic working-class movement, cosiness does not seem to have been a central instrument in the socialist marketing of austerity in the home. Did 'cosiness' sound too bourgeois to the ears of socialists? It is striking that socialist discourse avoided the use of the word *gezelligheid* (cosiness), and instead substituted the English word 'home' (rather than the equivalent Dutch word, *thuis*, which was only used sporadically). A 'home' was a house that met all the requirements of its occupants' daily living practices,[48] it was functional and was rationally equipped,[49] and it was a symbol of welfare and happiness.[50] Although the word 'cosiness' was not used, there was great similarity between the KAV's notion of cosiness and the socialist idea of 'home.' However, the concrete material examples given by the socialists often corresponded more to the modernist designs than did Catholic examples.

45 S. De Caigny, "'We're Building a New Home!'," 13–15.
46 S. Hellemans, *Strijd om de moderniteit*, 1–50.
47 A. Gautier-Finck, "De meubelskunst," *Arbeid en Kennis* 1 (1924): 72. The English word 'home' was used, and put between quotation marks in the original Dutch: *Het "home" van den werkman mag niet zijn wat het vroeger was. Eenvoudige demokratische schoonheid moet er heerschen.*
48 Ibid., 70.
49 V., "Het stemmige huis," *Arbeid en Kennis* 1 (1925): 169–172.
50 Van de Casyne, "De stemmige woning," *Arbeid en Kennis* 1 (1924): 68.

Whereas the socialist and Catholic working-class movements defined class identity by focusing on the differences between themselves and the bourgeoisie, the Belgian Farmers' Association and its female branch accentuated differences between the countryside and the city in marking out its identity. Consequently, the Belgian Association of Farming Women did not attack the bourgeois notion of cosiness. In fact, cosiness in terms of clothing, furnishing and decoration was a central and structuring topic of the Association's ideology of 'good living.' "Someone who appreciates cosiness will find it most rewarding to give his house, and everything surrounding it, a nice appearance. The choice of the curtains, the place of the flowers on the windowsill and the planting of a climber can perform miracles to the most ponderous houses and the most naked façades."[51]



A farmer's model kitchen in *De Boerin*, 1928, 30. From De Caigny, "Disguised Asceticism," 158.

As this example demonstrates, a sensory analogy was constructed in which 'cosy,' 'clothed' and 'warm' were the opposites of 'uncomfortable,' 'naked' and 'cold.' Besides, since it was the woman's duty to create a cosy interior for her husband and children, the notion of cosiness went far beyond the merely material. Cosiness was a way to introduce a family atmosphere into rural life and culture.

Nevertheless, women were warned that they should not overdo cosiness: moderation was the watchword. Meeting the requirements of cosiness could indeed run counter to the demands of cleanliness and sobriety. To overcome this paradox the governing body of the Association of Farming Women marked out different spheres in the house. The place where people had to wash themselves and the bedrooms must be as austere and clean as possible.[52] In contrast to this, the living-kitchen ought to be cosy and nicely decorated with flowers, wallpaper and paintings.

51 M. Lemaire, "Ons huis," *De Boerin* 1 (1920): 6.

52 Most farmhouses in Flanders were not equipped with a bathroom during the interwar years. People washed themselves near the water pump or, as was recommended by the Association of Farming Women but hardly practised, by means of washing tables in bedrooms. See S. De Caigny, "'White Cells'."

MODERN ASCETICISM AS AN EMANCIPATING OR RESTRICTING VALUE?

Both modernist architects and domestic scientists hoped to improve the living conditions of the working classes and the rural population with their plea for austere interiors. But it was hard to convince these social groups of the advantages. If they had the economic means to change their interiors, people seemed to prefer decorated interiors in which they could express their newly acquired purchasing power. In order to get more control over this development, both socialist and Catholic working-class organisations started to market the austere ideal. The socialists disguised austerity by covering it up with the concept of 'home,' while the Catholic organisations substituted the notion of 'cosiness' for it. Whereas expensive Wilhelmine sanatoria tried to sell their unpleasant ascetic practices under the palliative umbrella of luxurious residence,[53] the advisors of working-class and farming people sold austere interiors as a new form of cosiness. Both wrapped their own modern ascetic ideals, for the so-called common good, in a pragmatic, attractive frame.

However, surveys of the actual living conditions of working-class families revealed that many dwellings during the interwar period were over-populated and unhealthy, often lacking water and sanitation.[54] Moreover, most families had no furniture except for some old, inherited, worn-out pieces,[55] and the problem of the masses living in slums was a recurring central issue in social debates during the interwar years in Flanders.[56] The data clearly suggest that not all working-class and rural families enjoyed increased purchasing power in the 1920s, particularly taking into account the general economic crisis of the Great Depression, when a large number of families were hit by high unemployment.[57] Therefore, one might question what was excessive in popular dwelling culture.

Nevertheless, most of the social organisations' governing bodies fulminated against superfluous elements in their members' homes. They tried to control their members' slow economic emancipation and hoped to persuade them to buy more austere furniture. Firstly, because the women of the governing bodies believed that a higher level of austerity would make housekeeping easier. These women, who followed the recent trends in housing matters, operated at a professional level between the daily struggle of most of their members and the advice of domestic science experts, architects, politicians and entrepreneurs.[58] Their position at the top of influential social organisations gave them opportunities to take part in workshops, to visit international housing projects and exhibitions, and to read international literature regarding recent developments in architecture and domestic science.[59] This convinced them that more sober interiors would liberate their members from domestic drudgery. Moreover, they believed that their mission was to liberate their members by teaching them how to reduce the workload of housekeeping.

Secondly, the leading bodies of intermediary organisations appealed

53 Editorial note: read more in Michael Hau, "Asceticism and Pleasure in German Health Reform: Patients as Clients in Wilhelmine Sanatoria," in *Beyond Pleasure: Cultures of Modern Asceticism*, ed. Evert Peeters, Leen Van Molle and Kaat Wils (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 42—62.

54 The information is hard to reconstruct, but data from 1961 show that only 22.2 per cent of the homes had a bathroom or shower (hot water), 12.2 per cent had central heating, while 22.75 per cent could only warm one room. See Werkgroep alternatieve ekonomie-Leuven, *Ongezond Verbeterbaar: Ekonomische en sociale aspekten van het wonen in België* (Leuven, 1977).

55 "Vijfde Algemeen Congres der Christelijke Sociale Vrouwenwerken," *Vrouwenbeweging* 25, no. 7 (1938): 114–119.

56 The National League against Slums was founded in 1927. The League functioned as a central organ where political groups, social organisations and housing companies discussed various solutions for the slums.

57 G. Vanthemsche, *Le chômage en Belgique de 1929 à 1940: son histoire, son actualité* (Brussels: Labor, 1994).

58 Interview with Liesje Moelants and Régine Katrysse, Kraainem, 12 July 2004, conducted by S. De Caigny and E. De Vos. Both Moelants and Katrysse were active in the governing body of the KAV from the 1930s until the 1970s.

59 Socialist authors visited Rotterdam — see A. Van den Brempt, "De Arbeiderswoning," *Ontwikkeling en Uitspanning* 2 (1921): 167—168; the Netherlands — see "De socialistische arbeidersvrouwen op studiereis door Nederland," *Stem der Vrouw* 27, no.6 (1937): 6; Russia — see S. Blieck, "Sovjet-Rusland: De Positie der Vrouw," *Stem der Vrouw* 16, no. 2 (1926); Vienna — see "Een bezoek aan Weenen," *Stem der Vrouw* 26, no. 12 (1936); Strasbourg, Colmar and Mulhouse — see M. De Keyzer, "Op Studiereis: Straatsburg, Colmar, Mulehouse," *Stem der Vrouw* 28, no.7 (1938): 6—7. Catholic authors visited the exhibition of Das Neue Frankfurt in 1929 — see H. Heynen and A. Van Caudenberg, "The Rational Kitchen in the Interwar Period in Belgium: Discourses and Realities," *Home Cultures* 1 (2004): 23—50.

to their members to introduce a more ascetic material culture into their homes because they classified the objects and furniture their members were buying as pure kitsch, objects that were appropriate to the bourgeois home rather than authentic designs for the urban working classes and rural population.[60] They disapproved of their members' spontaneous taste and outlined what should be the appropriate content and appearance of decent working-class culture.

Indeed, as the analysis of the marketing of austerity reveals, austerity was promoted as a means of liberation and social emancipation, but also as an instrument of class identity and a means of dissociating the working-class and urban population from bourgeois culture. The relation between this class-bound way of applying austerity and social emancipation was very ambiguous. Both ways of understanding austerity limited each other. After all, a farmer had to stay a farmer, just as a worker had to remain a worker, and this had to be visible in the material culture of the home. At the same time, the cultural elite and avant-garde of the interwar period adopted new ascetic values in interior design on a large scale. The way in which the aforementioned social organisations promoted these ascetic values in the furniture of farming and working-class houses can therefore also be read as an offensive in the process of emancipation and civilisation.[61]

The paradox lies in the difference between asceticism as an explicit individual choice—an option among other options—of someone who could materially fulfill all his or her needs on the one hand, and the forced asceticism of less well-to-do social groups on the other. A key factor in this dichotomy was that the governing bodies of these social organisations were composed of women who, whilst they did not necessarily come from well-off backgrounds, had received training and a broader education than those they were appealing to and had the power to impose values and norms upon them. In the domain of interior design, these women, supported by male architects, promoted ascetic values in the homes of their target group, hoping to consolidate a strong connection between social identity and home culture. Paradoxically, in contrast to the emancipating task these organisations assigned themselves, the fairly haughty way they had of defining and imposing what they considered appropriate in matters of taste veiled a conservative belief in social and gender inequality.

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60 "Dit is de moderne Vlaamsche trant," *Vrouwenbeweging* 25, no. 4 (1938): 5; Martha, "De schouw onzer keuken," *Vrouwenbeweging* 25, no.4 (1938): 19.

61 A. de Regt is one author that explicitly underscribes this vision. See A. de Regt, *Arbeidersgezinnen en beschavingsarbeid: Ontwikkelingen in Nederland, 1870–1940. Een historisch-sociologische studie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1984), 136–142.

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