

# architecture institutions and change

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## Repatriating the Home: The 1944 Home Advice Manual of Nora McDougall

*In 1944 the Royal Australian Air Force published a small but comprehensive booklet on interior design titled, Interior Decoration for Australians. Sydney-based decorator, Nora McDougall, was commissioned to write the book. Through this cheap, soft cover publication McDougall was charged with the responsibility of confirming that 'home' was still an institution worth fighting for, and Australians would soon need to begin their post-war realignment to domestic civilian values. A return to homely, conservative values would help to displace the raw and recent memory of chaos, inhumanity and uncertainty. Inside a carefully and frugally decorated home the enemy was shut out and the family bundled protectively together as ordinary, caring and honourable people.*

*McDougall's booklet contributed to the government's agenda for post-war role realignment. The war had displaced women from the home; the space commonly designated as their natural domain. Domesticity was sacrificed to necessity as women assumed the roles of men in the absence of the latter. Essential as this was, it was also the precedent that could upset the old order of gendered work once the war was over and men returned to their former civilian roles. A woman's space in the workforce denied a returning soldier his; and the bastion of home, so diligently protected throughout the war, could be put at risk by the absence of its rightful manager. McDougall's book elevated the home and its associated gendered work patterns above drudgery and dull, repetitive acts of domesticity. It was positioned as its own economy, the leadership of which was essential to national post-war reconstruction.*

*This paper investigates the potency of a small domestic advice manual as a tool of post-war re-alignment to pre-war gendered space.*



**Fig. 1** *Interior Decoration for Australians* by Nora McDougall.  
Cover illustration by Oliver Dale. RAAF Educational Services, 1944.

In 1944, more than a year out from the conclusion of World War II, the Royal Australian Air Force published a small booklet on interior design, *Interior Decoration for Australians* (Figure 1), written by Sydney-based decorator, Nora McDougall. Through this inexpensive, unobtrusive and seemingly ordinary publication, McDougall was charged with confirming that “home” had been an institution worth fighting for; and was once again a space of refuge that “speaks of welcome and peace”.<sup>1</sup> From mid-1944 Australian women were being encouraged to realign themselves to their former domestic civilian roles.<sup>2</sup> Although fiercely defended for the duration of the war, “home” and its associated family values had been put on hold as its traditional guardians – wives and mothers – were called upon to perform alternative war duties. McDougall’s book was intended to entice women back to pre-war gendered space, but not the space they remembered from the past. The war had not only irreversibly altered people and places, but introduced technology and materials that would, in the post-war age, become requisite to domestic interior space. Plastic, Laminex and modular furniture all formed part of McDougall’s new domesticity, and central to their successful adoption were the women encouraged to resume their duties in the home. But, to fully appreciate the persuasive role of McDougall’s manual, it is necessary to contextualise it in relation to the history that immediately preceded its publication.

On the morning of February 19, 1942, two consecutive Japanese air raids on Darwin would reduce its pivotal war-time infrastructure to ruins and plunge Australia, for the first time since the war began, into homeland combat. Two hundred and forty three civilians and military personnel perished. The attacks on Darwin would continue until November 1943, by which time it had been subject to 64 repeat bombings.<sup>3</sup> The first attack occurred four days after the fall of the supposedly impenetrable Singapore,<sup>4</sup> and only two months since Japan had entered the war when it invaded Malaya and Borneo and bombed Pearl Harbour in December 1941. By March 4, 1942, the Australian battleships, HMAS *Perth*<sup>5</sup> and HMAS *Yarra*<sup>6</sup> had been

torpedoed and sunk in the Java Sea by the Imperial Japanese Navy. All allied ships had either been sunk or dispersed. The Japanese force seemed swift, ruthless, unstoppable and terrifyingly close. General McArthur, having failed to defend the Philippines, arrived in Melbourne on March 21, 1942, to declare that Australia would be the next to fall.<sup>7</sup> On May 29 McArthur's prediction appeared to be realised when Japanese midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour. Although the attack only occurred once and failed in its mission, Australia's most populated city had proven to be as vulnerable to enemy penetration as any in Europe or southern Asia.

For the first time since colonial settlement white Australia's devotion to the institutions of "home" and "family" was under threat. These institutions had sustained and nurtured Australia's white community for over a century. As the prominent politician, and advocate for Federation, Sir Henry Parkes declared; "our business being to colonize the country, there was only one way to do it – by spreading over it all the associations and connections of family life".<sup>8</sup> At the fulcrum of this national priority were women; the gate-keepers of moral behaviour and the bastions of familial nurture and virtue. To this end an extensive body of advice manuals authored by women appeared in the nineteenth century to aid the establishment of communities bonded by well-managed families. As Sarah Leavitt explains, domestic advice literature "allowed for women themselves to be in control of a collective, female, moral destiny. They contributed to a national dialogue about character and its importance to their vision of society. Though the advice was not always followed, it gave white, middleclass women a common vocabulary and a place to begin their own journeys with home (and moral) improvement."<sup>9</sup>

In its nineteenth-century transition from penal settlement to free society, colonial Australia had relied on women to impose the prescriptive ideals of civility, good behaviour and family values<sup>10</sup> and this role did not alter in the twentieth century. White women were charged with establishing and maintaining the institutions of "home" and "family" that reflected a transnational Western ideal of a modern civilised society. Its equilibrium was carefully maintained by specific and clearly demarcated gender roles. Women were required to conform to the established stereotype of respectable mother; "God's police ... good and virtuous women".<sup>11</sup> The majority of Australian men were the wage-earners, as middleclass managers, white-collar employees or the "industrial proletariat".<sup>12</sup> Each represented a "force and power"<sup>13</sup> denied of most Australian women.

A century later, this "force and power" had been relocated off-shore to Europe or southern Asia. With the absence of men, women would be called upon to become the country's "industrial proletariat" and its home-land workforce. Australia was forced to reconsider its long devotion to prescriptive gender roles and domesticity was sacrificed to necessity. The institutions of "home" and "family" were, for the duration of the war, actively if somewhat begrudgingly deactivated by another institution; the Australian Government War Office. After the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Curtin administration "decided to approve 'as a war measure' ... the extensive employment of women in industries when men are not available ... to attain the scale of production approved as a war objective."<sup>14</sup> Curtin was careful to

declare that this “measure” was only for the duration of the war, and the post-war workforce was in no danger of an “invasion of men’s work by cheap female labour”.<sup>15</sup>

The cautious and conditional tone to the government’s appeal for female workers did not deter Australian women from leaping at the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the war effort, and for the first time truly emancipate themselves from the prescriptive and protected roles they had been previously expected to perform. Over and over again women would prove themselves “the equal of men in hard, sustained, concentrated and repetitive work”.<sup>16</sup> By mid-1943, 190,000 women were involved in direct war work, and altogether 840,000 women were employed in Australia’s military and civilian workforce.<sup>17</sup> Women maintained their few traditional occupations, like nursing – that now included active and dangerous field work – but to this they added police work, tram conductor, ambulance driver, message decoder, munitions manufacturing, truck driving, air-raid gunner, mechanical servicing of planes and land vehicles, and all types of factory work. Women of all classes were bonded in a common goal – working to keep the invading foe at bay and to “keep the home fires burning”<sup>18</sup> for their absent soldiers. And, for the first time since before the Depression, they were in possession of good wages<sup>19</sup> – and not their husbands’ but their own.

While Australia remained under threat throughout 1942 and 1943, the contribution of military and civilian women to both the war effort, morale and home-front consistency was essential. However, the wage-independence, sociality and meaningfulness that came with women’s war-work could potentially prove difficult to disestablish once the war began its slow but apparent conclusion in 1944. The perceived danger lay in the decision by women to not relinquish their new independent means and return to their former roles as homemakers and mothers. Their space in the workforce denied a returning soldier his; and the institution of “home” could be put at risk by the absence of its rightful manager. Judith Pugh posits that civilian jobs for returning soldiers were a social priority; “fit men trained to fight had to be kept off the street”<sup>20</sup> – during the day in jobs and at night, securely within a well-managed home.

The Australian War Office would turn to an inexpensive, even ordinary means to induce women’s return to home. Simple, but highly persuasive printed media was produced to promote home as a “positive and life-enhancing contributing to a sense of identity, comfort and leisure”.<sup>21</sup> The production of domestic manuals and the promotion of interior design courses by the armed forces in 1944 would become a component part of Australia’s post-war social reconstruction, and promoted a return to the pre-war institutions of home and family and their prescriptive gender roles.

The Military Education Council was established in 1942<sup>22</sup> and was charged with producing educational matter that would both educate and motivate their military personnel and the civilian public. Educational enhancement was intended to reassure the forces and the population that a positive future was to be prepared for. As Michael Bogle explains, “distance education through correspondence courses, publications and lecture tours was an important element in motivating, informing and entertaining the troops in their often

isolated posts throughout the continent and South Asia”.<sup>23</sup> Tuition in non-military subjects inferred an imminent peace-time that required alternative and reconstructive civilian skill sets. Alongside the traditional academic studies of engineering and mathematics were two late inclusions intended for female readership: *Interior Decoration for Australians*, a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) correspondence course in eleven parts written by Nora McDougall, and *Interior Decoration. A Guide To Furnishing the Australian Home*, a textbook written by Margaret Lord for the Australian Army. Both texts were first published in 1944 as the war began to deescalate and the threat to Australian soil had entirely diminished. The War Office was also beginning an active campaign to return women to their pre-war roles as wives and mothers.<sup>24</sup> Lord would republish her book three times, once for the Army, then twice more as a hard-cover commercial publication in 1945 and 1946. It is, however, McDougall’s book – a cheap, soft-cover single edition war publication – that is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

McDougall’s is a small booklet of only 50 pages. It is neither valued as a significant cultural artefact nor a historical war-time document. As explained by Grace Lees-Maffei, advice manuals are not accurate representations of historical fact but are rather “a genre of constructed ideals”.<sup>25</sup> They present idealised imaginaries of lifestyles rather than factual descriptions of historical lives. In the case of McDougall, her publication is even further removed from factual war history. Hers is advice pertaining to an idealised future; an imagined life beyond the completion of the war, that, although imminent in 1944, could not be exactly pinpointed. Its inexpensive production values – a result of war-time rationing – makes it fragile, but not rare. It was mass-produced, purpose written, and intended to be widely read. It documented reassuring but ordinary domestic advice. As such, McDougall’s publication could be simply dismissed as an insignificant edition within an exhaustive library of domestic advice literature that has existed in Australia since colonisation. Local and imported advice manuals had always played a major role in consolidating ways of thinking domestically, in terms of gendered behaviour, group identification and modernity. Tony Fry argues that historically “illustrated publications acted to create a typology that registered the look and operation of a modern world”.<sup>26</sup> McDougall’s book certainly addressed modernity but it is also a rich and revealing indication of the value mid-century Australians placed on home, design, and gendered space; and how these key values were recognised by the armed forces and cleverly and quietly exploited to help restore domestic balance to a war-altered populace. McDougall’s book was far more than another ubiquitous manual that proffered familiar but marginally different domestic advice. Hers was an “agent of persuasion”<sup>27</sup>: an enticing lure back to home and a harmonious, stable, modern, but appropriately gendered social order. It was not just an advice manual but a tool used by the War Office to manage public thought and action.

## Nora McDougall

Unlike most young, rural Australians in the 1920s McDougall pursued her vocational education abroad. Not only was she a young woman defying expectations – marriage was still the prevalent path for most Australian women – she undertook studies in Interior Decoration,

a discipline largely unknown in Australia. For most Australians the domestic interior was incredibly important. It was the site of their aspirations and the physical manifestation of their taste and status; but it was not academic. It could be informed by books and periodicals, and the persuasive sales-pitch of retailers, but any formal tertiary education in its practice was unheard of. Nonetheless, McDougall studied at the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts – now Parsons – and concluded her studies there in 1928. On returning to Australia she opened her own practice, the Sydney Interior Decoration Studio.

Her status as a graduate of a prestigious New York school gives authority to both McDougall's taste and her credibility as a teacher. The RAAF was keen to establish her credentials right from page one, though interestingly her name is omitted from the cover (Figure 1). Although one suspects most 1940s Australians were unaware of the school, they certainly knew New York by reputation. New York was the epitome of modern American sophistication, projected on Australian movie screens as a sumptuous art deco paradise, peopled by rich beautiful women and equally enticing suitors. It was a seductive world of wealth, style and privilege and any association with it was generally met with enthusiasm. As explained by Robin Boyd, "everything desirable, exciting, luxurious and enviable in the twentieth century is American."<sup>28</sup>

Borrowing from Frank Parsons' 1915 text, *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice*<sup>29</sup> McDougall was adamant that everyone's home should benefit from the intellectual capacity of a "trained decorator".<sup>30</sup> McDougall begins her book, not with fashionable décor banter, but an alignment of the decorator with a far more familiar, established and trusted professional. She wrote, "The professional interior decorator can be likened to a medical general practitioner who must have knowledge and understanding of a great number of things, and if a specialist is required, know whom to seek; so it is with the interior decorator."<sup>31</sup>

Immediately McDougall positions the role of interior decorator – and therefore the interior itself – well above any dismissive regard for it as flippant or unnecessary in times of war and reconstruction. As a career it made a valuable contribution to modern society, but importantly, written from the perspective of autobiographical experience, McDougall identified a career suitable for women. It was one that did not jeopardise a woman's situation and expertise within the home – on the contrary it enhanced her domestic skills – nor did it take away paid employment from a returning soldier, who was most unlikely to pursue a role in the field.

McDougall continued; "We live in a scientific and machine age and our living requirements should express our age. Science has given us new inventions to make up for the loss of domestic help or to aid the housewife to gain greater leisure... distance means nothing to us and living has become international. We gather ideas from this country or that country overnight, for transport is so rapid and therefore our possessions and home decoration can be as cosmopolitan as we may wish or our purses permit."<sup>32</sup>

The deprivations that her 1940s readership endured were entirely ignored by McDougall, or deliberately omitted to reduce the omnipresent foreboding of their war experience. Instead,

the developments of modernity, hastily advanced by the demands war, are celebrated, if somewhat exaggerated. Overnight transport of a new decorative object or idea from one country to another was neither a reality nor a priority of war-time anywhere. But, the language is suggestive of a progressive, exciting future enhanced by science and technology that the reader, and participant in McDougall's teaching, could look forward to, and needed to prepare for.

Throughout McDougall's text there is not a single mention of "war" or "rationing", both of which were very much a part of the Australian daily experience. Though absent in direct representation both are subtly implied. The expression "in peace time"<sup>33</sup> is used only once, but to explain a current lack of access to coloured floor paint; and thrift is advised regularly as a wise and honourable practice rather than a war-time necessity imposed by a governing authority. "By making our own curtains we can save our money, and give ourselves a great deal of satisfaction in a job well done".<sup>34</sup> Here she also implores the "make-do-and-mend" ethos that was encouraged by both the English and Australian governments. Unnecessary waste and expenditure was akin to flirting with the enemy, whereas the practice of DIY was positioned as a patriotic endeavour.<sup>35</sup> McDougall's book is even produced cheaply, in black ink with only a single spot-colored green added to the cover. It, like many publications printed by Education Services, was intended for "pass-along" readership.<sup>36</sup> The reader did not "own" the book and its inexpensive materiality did not make them desire to do so. Readers took what they could from it before passing it on, more akin to a pamphlet or magazine than a covetable, hard-bound book. The approach was pragmatic and democratic, and entirely in keeping with McDougall's own mantra of thrift over waste.

Despite its obvious war-rationed production qualities, the absence of textual war reference served two purposes. For McDougall it permitted the longevity of her text beyond the war when a program of reconstruction would see a major increase in domestic DIY practice. But more pressingly in 1944, it served to reassure its readers that there was an imminent future beyond destruction, loss and bereavement. Their difficult, current reality would eventually be replaced by a welcome wave of "ordinariness", and, even if just for the period of reading, life was less dominated by the ever-presence of war.

In the context of McDougall's book "ordinary" is positioned as an admirable quality rather than an unflattering taint of humdrum mediocrity. "Ordinary" had long been fundamental to the Australian psyche, or as the architect Robin Boyd would call it, "the persuasive ambivalence of the national character".<sup>37</sup> McDougall uses "ordinary" early to describe herself and her readership: "We ordinary folk can by careful study and with constructive criticism familiarise ourselves with everything that is invented or made which will improve our living conditions, and lay the foundations for better and brighter homes."<sup>38</sup>

It is here that McDougall positioned her book. Her text was intended for the suburban middleclass. McDougall's lesson in applied decoration was not about luxury, nor was it positioned as an expensive distraction for the monied classes, the aspirational wannabes or the fringe-dwelling avant-garde. As explained by Carol Morrow, "in keeping with modern



ideals of education for the industrial arts, McDougall's initiatives democratised a field of study once considered elite and exclusive to the well off".<sup>39</sup> Her tutorage in decoration was meant to empower a band of "ordinary" middleclass Australians with the practical know-how to better their own lives and those of their family through a self-defined but informed private space. A sound knowledge of modern materials and processes was key to an up-to-date and comfortable home, not necessarily a fashionable one.

McDougall actively dissuades her readership from any slavish pandering to fashion. "Interior decoration is always in a state of change", she wrote. "Because a style, colour or design is fashionable does not mean that it is good. And because Mrs. Jones has an expensive purple rug bought from the most fashionable shop, we should not necessarily be doing the correct thing in buying one like it."<sup>40</sup>

Her tone is consistent throughout the book: rational; sensible; frugal. But here it is also tempered with a cutting jibe at the less "ordinary", those wealthy enough to be swayed by decorative fads. Mrs. Jones is perceivably a fool, hoodwinked by the vagaries of fluctuating fashion. An expensive purple rug represents a garish, costly mistake that can only be afforded by a class that "ordinary folk" should not try to emulate. For McDougall, good domestic taste equated to common sense and the moral superiority of careful economy, not the balance of one's bank account or the privilege it permitted even in times of crisis.

McDougall's "ordinary" society also represented a conservative one. A return to conservative home-spun moral values helped displace the chaos, inhumanity and uncertainty of war. Home was the space to shut out the enemy and bundle protectively together as an ordinary, caring, honourable community. For returning soldiers a comfortable and well-managed home was one of the keys to their re-socialisation. Within it they could ignore their horrendous war-time experience<sup>41</sup> and idealise it as the coveted prize that they had ultimately been fighting for.

In 1942 the then ex-Prime Minister Robert Menzies' had already identified McDougall's "ordinary folk" as he delivered his famous "Forgotten People" speech to her same war-affected public. Significantly Menzies used the familiar allegory of the Anglo-centric "home" to reassure his middleclass audience of the importance of their oft-underrated practice of "ordinary" domestic nesting.

The material home represents the concrete expression of the habits of frugality and saving 'for a home of our own' ... One of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a house and a garden which is ours; to which we can withdraw, in which we can be among our friends, into which no stranger may come against our will ... as in the old saying, 'the Englishman's home is his castle', it is this very fact that leads on to the conclusion that he who seeks to violate that law by violating the soil of England must be repelled and defeated.<sup>42</sup>

As clearly identified in Menzies' speech the home-centred middleclass Australian was at the forefront of homeland defense. The home was a metaphor for the nation and the invasion of both had to be repelled. By suggesting the proud Anglo-tradition of property ownership may itself be under threat, Menzies hit upon the same nationalistic fervor the military services sought to invoke when including interior design training in their program of educational enhancement. The well-kept home was the "castle" every Australian understood, and the one they would unquestionably defend. It represented a space of peaceful respite throughout the war, and the hero's reward on its successful completion. Both Menzies and McDougall would each provide the reasons for its preservation. The institution of "home", as Australians knew it, was modeled on "civilised" European precedents. It was not to be violated by an unwelcome foreign force that no Australian was prepared to acknowledge as "civilised". Domestic comfort was civilised; the barbarity of war and the perceived heathenism of an invading Japanese enemy were not. "Home" was both a site of comforting war-time reprieve, and one of passionate nationalistic fervor. To lose our sense of home, either forcefully or willingly, would be to abandon a cultural system that honoured family, Christian morality and democracy. Lucinda Kaukas Havenhand identified in her recent investigation of the American post-war domestic advisors, Russel and Mary Wright, that "home constituted a participatory democracy".<sup>43</sup> Similarly in Australia a devotion to the betterment of home was identified as a democratic act accessible to all who sought to participate in it. One 1951 Federal Government publication declared, "a person who owns a house, a garden, a car and has a fair job is rarely an extremist or a revolutionary".<sup>44</sup> Conforming to the domestic expectations of suburban life had long been thought to quell the destabilising effects of internal rebellion as much as strengthen our resistance to external invasion.

From mid-1944 women in roles classified as "non-essential" were actively encouraged by the military and the government to relinquish their waged positions to make way for returning servicemen.<sup>45</sup> Thousands of women willingly obliged. McDougall's book was intent on guiding their transition back to home, but not by reasserting any prior prejudice pertaining to the position of "housewife". McDougall presented home management as a sophisticated modern economy aided by scientific invention and cutting edge materials that eliminated any old-fashioned connotation of repetitive drudgery and dull, unchallenging domesticity. A woman's ability to manage the post-war complexities of modern living – especially in the kitchen – was a skill equal to any she may have experienced during the war. In her defense of kitchen expenditure she wrote, "a good kitchen costs money, but remember that its appliances are the tools by which women carry out the job bigger than any outside career."<sup>46</sup>

For McDougall well-managed and appointed utility rooms were essential to good home management. "The kitchen is the equivalent of the heart in the human body"<sup>47</sup> and a "convenient workshop for the preparation of food".<sup>48</sup> The elevation of the kitchen absolutely confirms that McDougall's book was for women since, "it is (where) ... the modern housewife spends three quarters of her working day".<sup>49</sup> But, her clever alignment of it to a man's workshop – or perhaps even her own if she worked in manufacturing – removes the taint of oppressive drudgery. Instead it's a site of essential, reconstructive industry.

For Australian women, the domesticity McDougall advocated – “the job bigger than any outside career” – was not the one of old. It was new, exciting and intelligent. It was not a step down from the camaraderie and challenge of meaningful war work, but a step up in socially reconstructive domestic management. At the forefront of its development was not the ornamental skills of upholsterers and wallpaperers, but the discoveries of scientists and industrial designers.

Scientists and industrial designers are searching out our every-day utensils to give them greater utility and beauty of line ... science is giving us streamlined goods, making the most of new surfaces, especially plastics, giving us smooth and beautiful finishes for which a damp cloth is all that is needed to bring them back to their pristine freshness.<sup>50</sup>

As described by Fry, modernity was “the materialisation of enlightened thought”<sup>51</sup> and for McDougall “modern” represented an efficient new materialism (like hygienic wipeable plastics), labour saving devices and better-informed approaches to living that freed time for other pursuits that permitted nurturing family relationships. Remembering that McDougall’s modern home was for “ordinary folk” the new materials and products she advocated were intended for the benefit of everyone. Modern efficiency was not just for the well-heeled; nor was the luxury of the spare time it would permit: “Science is trying to give the housewife more leisure for the development of cultural pursuits to broaden and vary her life as well as her children’s, with wider interests, and taking the “Ds!” out of domestic drudgery.”<sup>52</sup>

By “cultural pursuits” we may assume she meant intellectual engagements with the arts or music; or a friendly gathering of similarly “liberated” women. It did not mean paid work that could otherwise be performed by returning men. Australia’s children, too, were to benefit from the spare time science would bestow upon their mothers. In 1944, despite the trauma many mothers suffered with the death or injury to their elder sons, the intellectual and moral development of younger children was still closely tethered to the nurturing of home and diligent, conservative motherhood.

## The McDougall home

Within her small 50-page publication, McDougall provides ample pictorial evidence of her claims to the benefits of a modernised home, and the homemakers ability to construct it according to personal needs and modern efficiency. On page 49 she presents two examples of “comfortable” living rooms (Figure 2). The first is a spacious family room, arranged with contemporary, unfussy furniture, devoid of the “dust-catching crevices, bulges and unnecessary knick-knacks”<sup>53</sup> familiar in many pre-war Australian homes. Its smooth unadorned surfaces present a hygienic alternative to their predecessors in which intricate carving, bloated upholstery and ornamental indulgence provided a repository for accumulated dust. Her distaste for “dust” is mentioned repeatedly throughout McDougall’s book, but this was by no means a modern obsession. Dust had been a substance vilified since the nineteenth century as evidence of laziness and poor, unhealthy domestic management.

As described by Celeste Olalquiaga, “dust is a cumbersome residue that taints what it touches and must be eradicated: dust is seen as dirt, a persistent contamination exuded by death onto the world of the living”.<sup>54</sup>



**Fig. 2** Living rooms in *Interior Decoration for Australians* by Nora McDougall, 49. RAAF Educational Services, 1944.

While presenting an almost display-home vision of modern domestic desirability, the room also challenged the interior expectations of Australian families. The window is left uncurtained. The view outside is uninterrupted, but so is the gaze from those unknown passers-by outside. But most unfamiliar to the average Australian would be the patronage of contemporary art. As late as the 1930s and 1940s, Judith Pugh posits that “reassuring images derived from Australian Impressionism served yet another generation with the comfort of imagined pastoral joy”.<sup>55</sup> Most ordinary Australians remained wedded to the familiar McCubbin-like visions of idiosyncratic bush landscapes and those pioneers who set about conquering it. The presence of an abstract sculptural form upon a plinth by a domestic doorway would have represented a war-time invasion of another kind: a challenging, unfamiliar and arguably “un-Australian” interior object.

Below the large living room is featured a much smaller room in which modern convenience is moulded into multifunctional furniture, and therefore multifunctional rooms. A sideboard converts to a dining table, and when not in use folds away to save space. Again the furniture is clean-lined and contemporary, but the room is devoid of challenging interior objects. The room conveniently acts as both sitting room and dining room, but, more importantly, McDougall provides the evidence that civilised behaviour via correct dining practice can be maintained even among those whose financial situation does not afford them space. Modern as her homes were, she demonstrated that the traditional patterns of domestic social behaviour had remained, reassuringly, unaltered by the war experience.



**Fig. 3** Before and after supplement, *Interior Decoration for Australians* by Nora McDougall, 47. RAAF Educational Services, 1944.

Page 47 presents the McDougall's reader with the best pictorial summation of her text (Figure 3). The page presents two sets of "before and after" scenarios; one a living room (leisure) and the other a kitchen (work). "No home is 'hopeless'<sup>56</sup>, states McDougall, suggesting that the rooms in their "before" state were, indeed, "hopeless". The original living room is denigrated as an "ill-assorted jungle of furniture".<sup>57</sup> Old-fashioned furniture forms, frilled cushions and turned leg tables occupy the room in an apparent but heavily edited Victorian fashion. 1920s barley sugar columns separate the room from the dining area where a florid Axminster carpet, familiar to many Australians, covers the floor. The disparate collection of furnishing styles, and the interior architectural devices have been "removed" by McDougall in the re-drawing of the room. Her modernisation, she declares, is "pleasing and harmonious."<sup>58</sup> Like her living room on page 49, it contains comfortable modernised lounge furniture, but it is intermixed with traditional and familiar interior forms: draped windows, side table and a simple Regency dining suite. There is no suggestion of modern art, or other content that challenged what Australians desired within their domestic space. This is the pictorial summation of McDougall's advice: a gentle conduit between the interiors of old and a domestic modernity that embeds contemporary comfort within simplified yet familiar forms.

In her kitchen we see the real triumph of modern industrial design and war-advanced materials. The old kitchen is presented as largely unchanged since the nineteenth century. It contains unfitted wooden furniture and an awkward and difficult to clean floor area, interrupted by the table legs, chairs and the stove. Arduous work would be needed to keep this space hygienically clean. Food spills and waste would gather under surfaces and grease and dust would collect on the flue of the stove. In this modernised interior we see the origins of our contemporary kitchen. A stainless steel sink has replaced the ceramic one, and electric devices such as a chrome toaster are evidence that modern conveniences were readily

available to Australian consumers. The old stove has been replaced by a built-in electric model. The room is laboratory-like; clean white cupboards protect their contents from spills and contamination, and are themselves easily wiped down. Corners are minimised and awkward to clean surfaces eliminated. Most apparent are the proliferation of cupboards that, in the old kitchen, are non-existent. This quantity of storage suggests the introduction of an affluence not seen during or before the war: an abundance of “things”: china, gadgets, utensils and food, all neatly and politely hidden away behind a wall of modern storage.

## Conclusion

“A house”, claimed Gaston Bachelard, “constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability”.<sup>59</sup> Stability, whether real or inferred, was an ambition desperately sought throughout World War II, and for many Australians, realised in the construct of home. Through the work of McDougall the armed forces would rekindle the country’s well-established culture of home-centredness and quietly quell any hint of national instability by invoking its resident’s passion for comforting domestic space.

McDougall, through her small, easily comprehended text would provide Australians towards the end of World War II with the touchstone they sought to a hopeful, peaceful future. “Home” was the reward due to them for contributing to a successful war campaign, and her book would provide the requisite knowledge to run and decorate it in the post-war age. McDougall succeeded in elevating the status of the interior to one of intelligent informed space, rather than a tedious domestic drudge, or rooms blighted by the poorly considered arrangements of amateur homemakers hoodwinked by short-lived fashionable tastes. Hers was a “model interior designed according to moral as well as aesthetic principles (that) became a potent symbol for a future, better society”<sup>60</sup>. McDougall provided the knowledge to realise the Australian desire for self-identification within the comforting homogeneity of a home-centered community. Informed, sensible and contemporary homemaking was her personal contribution to the country’s wartime stability and post-war reconstruction. She helped to re-commit her female readers to the institutions of home and family via the broad reach of the institution that employed her, the Military Education Council. McDougall’s contribution did not rest with just her war effort – keeping the populace gainfully distracted from fear and insecurity via an optimistic vision for domestic continuity – but she was among the first popular commentators to raise the general acceptance of new ways of living in the modern world. She successfully dislodged the suburban Australian suspicion of modernity and led us via gentle, uncondescending text to a domestic environment aided by invention, good design, self belief and informed, confident domestic decision making.

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1 Nora McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians* (Melbourne: Ware Publishing, 1944), 7.

2 Patsy Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 362.

3 Australian Government website, [www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/japanese-bombing-of-darwin](http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/japanese-bombing-of-darwin) (accessed February 13, 2015).

- 4 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 130.
- 5 Royal Australian Navy website, [www.navy.gov.au/hmas-perth-i](http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-perth-i) (accessed February 13, 2015).
- 6 Royal Australian Navy website, [www.navy.gov.au/hmas-yarra-ii](http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-yarra-ii) (accessed February 13, 2015).
- 7 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 340.
- 8 Henry Parkes quoted in Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1994), 337.
- 9 Sarah Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2002), 39.
- 10 Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, 342.
- 11 Caroline Chisholm quoted in Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, 337.
- 12 Linda McDowell and Doreen Massey, "A Woman's Place?" in *Geography Matters! A Reader*, ed. Doreen Massey and John Allen (Cambridge: The Open University, 1994), 136.
- 13 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 87.
- 14 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 141.
- 15 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 141.
- 16 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, vii.
- 17 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 142.
- 18 "Keep the Home Fires Burning" is the title of Ivor Novello and Lena Gilbert Ford's 1914 song of English patriotism that re-emerged in World War II in both Britain and Australia.
- 19 Those women not engaged in paid work were just as essential to the country as they continued to raise children alone, and manage domestically within the strict framework of a rationed economy.
- 20 Judith Pugh, "Introductory Essay: What Colour Blue?" in *Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* by Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2005), 4.
- 21 Jeremy Aynsley, "Displaying the Modern Home, 1850 to the Present," in *Imagined Interiors*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 231.
- 22 Michael Bogle, *Design in Australia 1880-1970* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), 103.
- 23 Bogle, *Design in Australia 1880-1970*, 103.
- 24 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 362.
- 25 Grace Lees-Maffeï, *Design at Home: Domestic Advice Books in Britain and the USA since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.
- 26 Tony Fry, "A Geography of Power: Design History and Marginality," in *The Idea of Design*, ed. Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 213.
- 27 Viviana Narotzky, "Dream Homes and DIY: Television, New Media and the Domestic Makeover," in *Imagined Interiors*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 262.
- 28 Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2010), 83.
- 29 Carol Morrow, "Women and Modernity in Interior Design: A Legacy of Design in Sydney, Australia from the 1920s to the 1960s" (PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales, 2005), 192, <http://handle.unsw.edu.au/1959.4/23312> (accessed February 13, 2015).
- 30 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 5.
- 31 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 3.
- 32 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 3.
- 33 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 22.
- 34 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 36.
- 35 Narotzky, "Dream Homes and DIY," 262.
- 36 Bogle, *Design in Australia 1880-1970*, 103.
- 37 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 74.
- 38 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 6.
- 39 Morrow, "Women and Modernity in Interior Design," 199.
- 40 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 5.
- 41 Pugh, "Introductory Essay," 4.
- 42 Robert Menzies, *The Forgotten People*, radio broadcast, 1942, [www.liberal.net/theforgottenpeople.htm](http://www.liberal.net/theforgottenpeople.htm) (accessed February 13, 2015).
- 43 Lucinda Kaukas Havenhand, "Russel and Mary Wright's Guide to Easier Living and the 'New American Way of Life'," *Interiors: Design/Architecture/Culture* 5, no 2 (2014): 199-218.

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- 45 Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, 362.
- 46 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 38.
- 47 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 37.
- 48 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 37.
- 49 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 37.
- 50 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 44.
- 51 Fry, "A Geography of Power," 204.
- 52 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 43.
- 53 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 49.
- 54 Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 91.
- 55 Pugh, "Introductory Essay," 4.
- 56 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 47.
- 57 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 47.
- 58 McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians*, 47.
- 59 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 17.
- 60 Aynsley, "Displaying the Modern Home, 1850 to the Present," 188.