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Multum in Parvo: 'A place for everything and everything in its place'. Modernism, space-saving bedroom furniture and the compactom wardrobe

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Multum in Parvo : Modernism, Space-saving bedroom furniture and the Compactom wardrobe

Keywords: Clothes storage, advertising, furniture, modernism, product design, space-saving

Abstract

How did concerns about order and organisation, classification and the logical, methodical, systematic and ‘rational organization of space’ find their way into the British bedroom? Particular modernist issues around time and space-saving and organisation influenced wardrobe design. These ideas initially developed for industry and the office, eventually reached the domestic in the kitchen and bedroom. Using the concepts of design evolution and re-design, the paper considers how the planned wardrobe space gradually developed into a defined storage system for both male and female garments and accessories during the early twentieth century.

Following a brief consideration of modernism, space and storage, and the evolutionary development of the wardrobe as a space-saving and organising space, this article examines the Compactom wardrobe range to demonstrate how a piece of furniture reflects the contexts of the parts of society that used it. Designed for both men and women, it seemed to address a number of issues including concerns about efficiency, loss of domestic staff, clothes maintenance, and middle-class identity. Using a range of contemporary influences from time and motion studies to travel goods, the case study of the Compactom wardrobe between 1920 and 1950’s demonstrates how designers integrated ideas of methodical and rational use of space into a range of wardrobes to offer the supposed benefits of a tidy and orderly life in a period of rapid change.

Introduction

This essay explores how a piece of furniture can demonstrate British responses to modernism through the issues of efficiency and standardization, and thus reflects particular concepts of product design and development. Wardrobes constitute a specific range of design solutions that neatly represent the idea of a product’s evolution and re-design¹ in reaction to social changes. In particular, this paper discusses the Compactom range - a trade name for particular wardrobes – owned by Bovis Ltd that soon became a propriety eponym. The term compactum wardrobe is a much broader label often used by furniture dealers for any

wardrobe with multi-use sections made since the eighteenth century. By examining the Compactom during the period 1920-1950, we can see how previous ideas of storage were developed and amended in relation to changing interior spaces, issues around usage and consumption and altered societal conditions.

Fig 1.

The Compactom wardrobe range, which was designed to provide a quantity of specifically organised and planned storage solutions in the space of a single wardrobe, (*multum in parvo* = much in little) symbolised the embodiment of the cultural interests in classification, arrangement and standardization that had begun in eighteenth century science and industry, migrated to the office in the nineteenth century and entered the private realm in the twentieth.² Through an analysis of historical change, this essay shows not only how modernist ideas of space and function were incorporated into wardrobe design, but also how wider issues such as gender and class impacted on the design and marketing of these objects.

Sociologist Saulo Cwerner has noted that “The wardrobe is, perhaps, a leading example of the modern [late 20th century] *rational organization of space*. It translates the need for storage into a series of classifications, the result of which is the increasing rationalization of the domestic space. It is an important feature of a contemporary material culture characterized by order, practicality, and design.”³ However, this paper argues that an interest in rational space usage and clothes storage is not just a contemporary phenomenon.

Clothes, like any other asset, need looking after. The particular materiality of clothes meant and means that they need protection from dust, light and vermin. Like all collections, they need sorting and organising. As functional possessions, they need to be accessible. The physical wardrobe (as opposed to a particular garment collection) meets these needs of security, organisation and convenience.

Prior to the development of the wardrobe, clothes were stored in chests that had the benefit of security but were clearly an awkward arrangement if there were many items piled on top of one other. The introduction of chests of drawers in the seventeenth century was plainly an improvement in terms of organising clothes, but it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that purpose-designed wardrobes became available, fitted out so they developed an ordered and logical system of storage. The resulting dual practices of using wardrobes both for laying clothes flat on shelves or in drawers, and hanging them became a model still recognised today.

The Workwoman's Guide, published in 1838, highlights the importance of careful clothes storage. It described, in detail, the folding and storing of clothing, and outlined the types of available storage including robes that had separate divisions and sizes, according to various classification systems. In addition, there is a subtext referring to the need for clean and tidy habits, which remained an important issue in relation to clothes storage.⁴ Despite the obvious need for efficient clothes storage, it appears that improvement was slow.

Writing in 1908, Paul Otter bemoaned the fact that there was little progress in considering the issue:

The disposition and care of wearing apparel is an important one despite the fact that very frequently little attention is given to the subject by those having to do with the planning of homes. Men do not take this into serious account, and too often a house is turned over to the wife as a monumental gift of the husband's thrift and affection — a house of rooms, with the usual meager closet allowance.....⁵

Another factor that has a bearing on the clothes storage issue is the growth in the consumption of clothing during the early twentieth century. There is no room to discuss this in detail here but factors, including the rise of white-collar occupations, a growth in real incomes and the development of a wholesale bespoke and ready-to wear clothing industry, (incidentally itself organised on scientific management principles) encouraged a rapidly increasing consumption of clothing.⁶ The Compactom responded to these matters and some associated social changes centred on class, gender and consumption by following a number of the precepts of modernism. The essay firstly considers these links between modernism and matters of space and efficiency. A brief evolutionary analysis of the space-saving wardrobe as a type follows. The case study of the Compactom then explores its very particular link between modernist thinking, and product design. Lastly, the essay views issues around aspects of class and consumption through the Compactom's advertising campaigns. This arrangement therefore addresses both aspects of historical change and the specific moment when the Compactom was an exemplar of modernist concerns with spatialization, organization and functionality.

Modernism and issues around space

Modernism was, in part, associated with ideas around rational order and planning, the power of technology, function and multi-function, which all assisted an assumed notion of progress.⁷ The particular ideas that concerned themselves with the systematic classification

of processes,⁸ along with the logical organization of domestic space⁹, clearly influenced people's thinking about the storage and retrieval of clothes.

As seen above, these methodical ideas surfaced prior to the twentieth century. In 1842, the architect A.J. Downing wrote "The great secret of safe and comfortable living lies in keeping yourself and everything about you in the right place."¹⁰ It was not only distinguished architects who played on people's concerns about order and planning. Emily Thornwell, a writer of advice books for women, wrote more specifically in 1856, 'A place for everything and everything in its place, is a trite adage, but is certainly never more applicable than when applied to a lady's wardrobe.'¹¹ This statement would have easily been at home in an advertisement for the Compactom during the 1920s and 30s.

This concept of compactness, organisation and efficiency was gradually to become a key idea in the architectural design of living spaces and their equipment in the first half of the twentieth century. It was during the latter part of the nineteenth century these particular ideas developed in the United States.¹² The Wooton desks and Hoosier cabinets are well-known examples¹³. Indeed importers advertised the Wooton desk in the United Kingdom as having "a place for everything and everything in its place. Order Reigns Supreme, Confusion Avoided. Time Saved. Vexation Spared".¹⁴ Wardrobe promotion also adopted these sentiments. The arts and crafts designer, Gustav Stickley, developed a version of the compact wardrobe for the 'busy man'. In 1902, he published a plan for such an object in his journal *The Craftsman* and pointed out how this design of wardrobe offered, "A saving of time which will be appreciated by the hard-working business or professional man of many engagements, for whom a minute saved is sometimes a fortune gained".¹⁵ The American home economist Christine Frederick suggested one other small example of rational time-saving related to clothes storage when she devised a "Clothes Storage Record" (to be kept in a desk-top filing system) which recorded the location and details of the whole family's garments and where they were stored.¹⁶

These American ideas of efficiency, later often based on the writings of F.W. Taylor, were broadly recognised in early 20th century Britain, although not always acted upon.¹⁷ The catchphrase of "National Efficiency" represented a concept promoted by prominent politicians and intellectuals of the time.¹⁸ In 1902, the *Spectator* magazine suggested that there was "a universal outcry for efficiency in all departments of society, in all aspects of life give us efficiency or we die".¹⁹

Indeed, the historian, John Gloag, writing in 1921, made a direct link between US ideals of efficiency and furniture:

The modes of any period are produced largely by its needs, and furniture of household value, such as the admirably conceived kitchen cabinets, perfected in the United States where so many time and labour saving appliances have originated, may go down in the history of furnishing as one of the best achievements of our own time.²⁰

With generally smaller living spaces and a gradually increasing amount of goods in the home there was also pressure to increase adaptable and efficient storage. John Gloag also suggested in his *Time Taste and Furniture* (1925) that ‘The manufacturer and the original designer must create compact things if they are going to sell’.²¹

Despite Gloag’s exhortations about the value of the compact and the efficient, the scientific management mantra of good organization was mostly lost on furniture companies that often remained with traditional methods and processes of design and manufacture during the period.²² Even if some manufacturers acted upon these urgings, many consumers remained content with a traditional approach to design that reflected some apparent certainties that appeared to be disappearing in a period of rapid change.

Although these ideas of design continuity might have kept a link with the past for the British middle classes, concerns about the more pressing ‘servant problem’, focussed minds on improving many domestic arrangements to try to mitigate one of the major social changes that was occurring.²³ Indeed the Compactom Company played on this idea in their early advertising (see further below), with reference to their wardrobes being equated to ‘silent valets’ and ‘busy maids’.

The Compactom Company sold their wardrobe concept as an ideal modern solution to efficient and compact clothes storage and it indeed developed into a type form that was developed by a number of other companies. Although initially aimed at upper middle-class consumers, it eventually became a widely available commercial product, easily available to purchase on credit terms, and therefore found in a wide range of domestic and commercial bedrooms used by both men and women.²⁴

Wardrobes and the development of the systematic organisation of clothes

Distinctly difficult to define, the wardrobe as a piece of case furniture for clothes storage was derived from the *garderobe* of medieval times and has had many names and configurations as it has evolved and is re-designed.²⁵

The slow decline in the use of chests for undifferentiated clothes storage and the concomitant rise in wardrobe use for organised and planned care of garments, represent a changing attitude to clothes and their storage. During the sixteenth century, presses or cupboards were fitted with shelves for linen and pegs for hanging clothes. As furniture historian Ralph Edwards pointed out, the connection between type of clothes and the storage arrangements affected storage furniture design: “In Tudor and early Stuart times the padded trunk hose, doublet and farthingale of fashionable society were suspended in presses; ruffs, hats and hose being kept in chests. When the costume both of men and women was made of thinner materials which could be folded and laid away, drawers and sliders figured prominently in the construction.”²⁶

Eighteenth century furniture pattern books already included fitted wardrobe designs. For example, the cabinet makers Ince and Mayhew’s *The Universal System of Household Furniture* (1759-62), shows a “Gentleman’s Repository” which included a bookcase, sets of drawers, and a clothes press.²⁷ The convenience of a wardrobe was often based on a combination of either cupboard or press with shelves, initially without hanging space. By the late eighteenth century, cabinet makers linked small central chests to either side of tall hanging wardrobes to create a (sometimes) compact unit called winged wardrobes.²⁸ *The Cabinet Makers’ London Book of Prices* of 1788 gives details of various types and dimensions including a ‘winged press with shelves’ which was fitted with shelves in one wing and turned pegs for hanging in the other.²⁹

The importance of wardrobes with particular divisions was emphasised in Thomas Webster’s *Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy* of 1852 that explained the benefits of wardrobes as though they were a new phenomenon. Indeed, it is likely that he was addressing a new section of the public who previously neither had been used to the luxury of a wardrobe nor had had sufficient valuable clothes to store in anything more than a chest or chest of drawers.³⁰

Lesley Hoskins’ research into inventories of English decedents who paid Legacy Duty (15% of the population) in the period 1841-1888 reinforces this idea of the novelty of wardrobe usage. This reveals that wardrobes were relatively uncommon. Of her survey of 1098 bedrooms in 337 inventories in the period, only 11.9 % listed a wardrobe, thus making an association between wardrobe ownership and higher social status owners.³¹

Nevertheless, as demand began to grow, more compact, often asymmetrical, multi-purpose wardrobes were valued over the large-scale Victorian wardrobes. For example,

architect and designer, E.W. Godwin fostered these designs in a range of economic bedroom furniture for the London based furnishing company, William Watt in the 1870s.

Fig 2 Godwin wardrobe

This range included a small deal combination wardrobe described as being ‘usually enough for a gentleman whose means are limited’ as well as a modular multi-purpose wardrobe.³² These various examples, when changed in size and increased in complexity, were clear precursors to and influences upon the later Compactom wardrobe with its fitted interior designed for the organised storage of particular items of clothing, both flat and hanging.

Attempts at compact adaptability continued. In 1898, a British tailor, Frederick Hoare, patented a wardrobe design that was apparently multipurpose, easy to use and space-saving. His patent application explains:

I propose to divide the wardrobe into two main parts by a vertical partition, one compartment being preferably narrower than the other. A horizontal division or shelf is also provided at the upper part of the wardrobe forming an additional smaller chamber at each side. This serves to receive bags, hat boxes, and cases of various kinds, as well as boots and shoes. The larger division is also provided with a large bottom drawer. At the side a series of smaller drawers is provided, four being a convenient number, these smaller drawers serving to receive hosiery, shirts, collars, ties, and the like. Racks for boots, umbrellas, hats and the like are also provided.³³

Fig 3 Hoare patent design

The notions of time-saving, space-saving and having a wardrobe where there was ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’ developed in the early twentieth century. Initially they seem to be particularly associated with the male consumer. An advertisement from 1911 by the London furnishers, Hamptons, offered a ‘gentleman’s ideal wardrobe’, which was fitted with coat hangers and a sliding trousers’ press. The copy explained, “The drawers are specially constructed to accommodate the various articles of a gentleman’s wardrobe”.³⁴ A decade or so later in 1923 the London department store, John Barker, advertised a man’s wardrobe. The copy is quite revealing. It says that “Some men are naturally untidy, others because they have no facilities for being otherwise. It is extraordinary that until recently designers [had] completely neglected men’s especial needs in the matter of

bedroom furniture.”³⁵ The reference to men’s untidiness seems to make some connections with either the comparative tidiness of women’s storage, or conversely, the importance of an idea of military precision, order and discipline. This gendered concern of who cares for clothes, where and how, also points to an interesting question as to whether designers consciously planned men’s wardrobe spaces to combat their alleged untidiness or reflected the nature of male clothing. One example from a publicity pamphlet produced by the Compactom Company in March 1937 entitled ‘John was a most untidy man until he visited our showrooms’ was quite clear as to its message.³⁶

A final influence on compact and systematic clothes storage was the travelling wardrobe trunk, which included carefully-designed spaces for hanging, and divided drawers that all closed up into a compact upright trunk case.³⁷ Introduced circa 1900, the ‘Innovation’ type trunk with hanging and shelf space and a range of interior fittings, made an impression on more than one influential modernist architect/designer. Architect and designer Le Corbusier later wrote in 1927 ‘Why do you not demand from your landlord: Fittings to take underclothing, suits and dresses in your bedroom, all of one depth, of a comfortable height and as practical as an “Innovation” trunk?’³⁸

Clearly, Corbusier saw the Innovation trunk as a model for fitted and efficient modern wardrobes. If a house was a ‘machine for living’, it followed that a wardrobe could be a machine for storing clothes.

Fig 4 Bonsall’s patent mechanism for Innovation wardrobe

Interestingly, the Innovation [trunk] Company expanded their product range to include so-called Innovation wardrobes intended for permanent bedroom use. These wardrobes, based on a patented design from 1904 by Seymour Bonsall, claimed “wardrobes are made convenient and available for the suspension of various articles, and particularly of garments and the like, while permitting such easy access and full inspection as would otherwise not be possible”.³⁹ The company sold these through their own showrooms in London at 16 New Bond Street⁴⁰.

This brief overview of the development of wardrobe types indicates the evolutionary nature of their design and re-designs by numerous unknown designers and makers who were responding and adapting to the changing circumstances of their time. One important and particular issue was the reduction in room sizes and the incorporation of wardrobes into small

flats. As important are the connections with issues surrounding efficiency, gender roles and the systematic organization of clothes. The Compactom was a result of all these changing conditions.

The Compactom wardrobe

Fig 5 Compactom wardrobe

Through the continuing process of change and adaption in wardrobe design, the Compactom demonstrates one moment in the history of responses to storage issues for a particular time and for particular socio-economic consumer groups. Although there were any number of designs for ‘fitted’ or gentleman’s wardrobes on the market, the Compactom range of wardrobes, or “Clothing cabinets”, were particular in that they were fitted out with patented devices to assist both hanging and flat storage in such a way that garments and accessories could be seen and accessed at a glance, and thus they exemplified a systematic ordering process. An article in the ‘Current Art Notes’ section of the *Connoisseur* from 1924 suggested that

It would not be inaccurate to say that the hanging wardrobe as we know it did not come into anything like general use until about the second half of the seventeenth century. Subsequently to reach its apogee so far as size was concerned, in the ponderous erections of Victorian days. Since then the rapid increase in small houses and the introduction of flats has necessitated the invention of something far more commodious than has ever yet been attempted. The only really successful solution of the problem has resulted in the Compactom Clothing Cabinet ... which combines the advantages of sightliness with the utmost economy of space and utility of arrangement.⁴¹

Founded in London in 1919, the Compactom Company was a subsidiary of the building firm Bovis with the joint managing directors being Vincent Gluckstein and Edward Pinto.⁴² From early on, in order to protect their products, the company were keen to use both the patent process and the registered design system.⁴³ With eleven patents granted in a period of twelve years,⁴⁴ the Compactom could justifiably be viewed as the culmination of 250 years of

wardrobe history and the epitome of a particular and representative ‘modern’ approach to time and space-saving in relation to clothes storage.

The first patent granted was number 150924 in 1920 for a ‘new and improved wardrobe... which shall be more convenient than those hitherto in general use’.

Fig 6 Compactom patent drawing for shirt filing

In 1923, took out another patent (203251) based on the idea of a horizontal office filing system and then applied it to men’s shirts. The patent specification explains that:

The object of the present invention is to provide an apparatus which will permit shirts and the like articles of wearing apparel to be stored in a properly folded condition and which will protect such articles against contamination from dust and dirt, and allow of the removal of one or - more- without disturbing the balance.⁴⁵

The plan was to ‘file’ the shirts in wallets fitted into a frame in the wardrobe. Two years later in 1924, the company applied for a patent that again adopted a version of a filing system. This time it was similar in principle to a concertina card file. This specification stated that

The invention is more particularly intended for supporting ladies’ dresses or other garments in a clothing cabinet, the supporting device being - so constructed and arranged that when the cabinet door is opened the supporting device will be spread out fanwise or like the leaves of an open book thereby displaying all the garments to the view of the operator and in such positions that any particular garment can be selected and removed without disturbing or in any way interfering with the others. The invention, however, is of general application for supporting any article usually hung up in a cabinet.

An advertisement placed in the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper in April 1934 by the retail store, Goodalls of Manchester, makes an even more direct reference to the world of office efficiency. Here the copy, entitled “Gentlemen file you apparel” makes direct reference to the Compactom’s 1922 patent (see above):

The old spike file has [no] part in the equipment of the modern man of business. Its day is past and the vertical filing cabinet has become a necessity of the well-ordered office. The same principles of orderliness are now being applied to clothes...⁴⁶.

As important as the patents were, it was the company's advertising concepts that reflected not only diluted modernist approaches to design but also offered consumers some apparent comfort and support that the Company's products would address their private anxieties that were being derived from an unsettling new world.⁴⁷ Apart from general concerns about the economy, education, and employment, men in particular, were anxious about the changing gender relations in the 1920s and 30s that appeared to many to feminize and domesticate middle-class life.⁴⁸ A shrinking of the concepts of masculinity that had existed prior to World War I reflected this. For example, in the contemporary magazine *Men Only*, there were articles and discussions around fashion topics couched in such a way as to ensure that knowledge about new clothing styles would allow practical and fashionable choices but without appearing to be unmanly or irrational.⁴⁹ The ownership of a Compactum might be part of an attempt to return order and discipline into a world where old certainties were diminishing.

We cannot read advertisements as direct representations of reality but they can indicate the concerns and influences of the time. As design historian, Grace Lees-Maffei notes 'between 1920 and 1940 ... advertisements changed the way in which they offered advice to the viewing public from a straightforwardly didactic model to a more allusive model informed by psychoanalysis'.⁵⁰ An early Compactom advertisement from 1920 was already extolling the virtues of the new time, space and money-saving wardrobe: "Truly the Compactom Wardrobe is the thing for the man-about-town: it retains in his clothes that well-groomed, just pressed appearance that makes other men envy him his valet. Time, space, clothes and money are all saved by this remarkable invention."⁵¹ Apart from the modernist message, the reference to the 'man-about-town and his valet indicates the type of customer whom the company were aiming at. Two years later, another advertisement was emphatic about the benefits of the wardrobe to the "man-about-town": Its copy included this commentary:

Fig 7 Compactom Advert ILN

COMPACTOM. "The Things that Matter."

FLOOR SPACE ECONOMY -4 ft. 4 ins. by 1ft. 7ins.

INTERIOR CAPACITY —It will hold three times as much as any ordinary wardrobe — everything a well-dressed man requires.

ACCESSIBILITY— Each and every article is at hand, in view, and in properly proportioned compartments — supplies are seen at a glance— there is no waste space.

PLEASURABLE UTILITY— An unending pleasure to the tidy — a necessity as well to the untidy — it is the most convenient way of preserving clothes, and economises time, space, money and . . . temper.

QUALITY AND FINISH— These are the best that English workmanship can yield.

THE COMPACTOM CLOTHING CABINET is efficient, and sufficient to your needs.⁵²

Each paragraph addresses some particular concern, whether it is space, quality, or efficiency. In the same year (1922) a Compactom advertisement in *House and Garden* spelt out how ‘the toilet of the busy man and the duties of the busy maid are both simplified by means of the Watts extensible fitting, all the hanging clothes can be pulled out into the light at a moment’s notice, a selection made, and the remained replaced without disorder.’⁵³ Although this copy was clearly directed towards both men and women, much of the company’s advertising copy was particularly aimed towards men. The following example from 1924 may equally have been talking about a car or a machine: “The numerous refinements in the Compactom Clothing Cabinet give it an air of luxury, built upon and around a dependable design, the efficiency and reliability of which has been perfected in actual use under every normal condition”.⁵⁴ A different advertising copy from 1928 worked on a number of levels. Not only did it refer to the role of the Compactom by emphasising the familiar space and time saving issues but also again as a personal valet:

And lastly, A SILENT VALET. Underwear first; shirts (from a dust- proof envelope); collar now — thanks ! No not that tie— the gray one. Socks? Urm — the new cashmere ones, please. ... trousers-shoes-waistcoat-coat ... And so they come- everything in order due, ready to your hasty hand- from a Compactom Clothing Cabinet ... It saves time — precious time. It saves temper. It saves meals being kept hot. It prevents wives from having to tidy up. It ends the “Hunt the Slipper” part of dressing. And it is such a wonderful piece of cabinet making. Looks so good. Saves so much room. Does away with drawers. And makes clothes last so much longer.⁵⁵

The advertisement in the *Daily Mirror* published in November 1929 this time emphasised time-saving over space and energy-saving, and other intangible benefits to choose from:

Compactoms must be classed among the greatest time-saving inventions of recent years. They save minutes of your life everyday-minutes that quickly add up to hours. Why not devote the extra time to sleeping, working or playing according to your temperament or mood?⁵⁶

Class and Consumption

The ads referred to above tend to link aspects of modernism to social class. Literature scholar, Hilary Hinds has suggested that modernity, although often seen as a democratising force, actually reinforced class differences. She noted how “the home ... was the object of modern scientific scrutiny, theorization and innovation; it offered new possibilities for consumption, whether of household appliances or new styles of furniture, thereby allowing for the production and exhibition of finely calibrated class distinctions and aspirations by its occupants”.⁵⁷ The Compactom Company clearly understood its market.

Canadian historian Bruce Retallack suggests that it was through the ritual of ‘active appropriation of the values already accepted from the advertising and marketing processes’ that consumers began to make their imaginary worlds real.⁵⁸ Retallack’s comments on private objects link the aspirations identified by advertisers to the products sold: “grooming [or private] goods [such as bedroom furniture] are intended to help us define ourselves to ourselves through appropriation, and as implements, are used in a second process to create a display good, that is, our visible bodies.”⁵⁹ The Compactom wardrobe achieved this, both as a piece of ‘defining’ furniture (I am tidy, for example) and as a repository for the objects of sartorial display.

The initial class distinctions were also apparent in other aspects, including the placement of adverts (e.g. *Illustrated London News*, *Punch*, and *Connoisseur*), and the idea of a ‘silent valet’ as a replacement for an individual. Spaces for sportswear, opera hats and dress shirts, as well as a fixed packing or travel check list of necessary clothes and accessories, indicate both actual and aspirational aspects of the product.⁶⁰ Additionally, Hind’s ‘finely calibrated class distinctions’ were catered for by the availability of a wide variety of models, sizes and finishes.

The notion of a particular target market is illuminated by the cultural historian Bronwen Edwards's discussion of the 'Simpson man' [a reference to the customers of the London menswear store] when she discusses 'the creation of the Simpson's man [who was] defined by the relationship he had with fashion, consumption, leisure and the city, [which] helped to legitimize a new kind of English masculinity'.⁶¹ This was just the sort of customer who might buy a Compactom wardrobe for organising and storing his purchases. Edwards makes an interesting connection between bedroom furniture and the retail customer when she notes that the Simpson's 'system of selling [was] designed to replicate a gentleman selecting garments from his own wardrobe'.⁶²

Although the Compactom Company cultivated the man-about-town image, the later placing of advertisements in the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express* from around 1928, as well as a change of showroom address from exclusive Upper Berkeley Street, Mayfair to more popular Regent Street, appears to indicate a broadening of the market. Indeed, the company made the range available to local regional stockists, usually furniture retailers, from at least 1924.⁶³

Finally, we may judge the status of the Compactom wardrobe from contemporary cultural references to them in the very particular popular novels of Alec Waugh, the elder brother of Evelyn Waugh. At least six of his novels refer to Compactoms in the lives of his heroes. An example from *Sir She Said* is demonstrative: "When morning broke, a grey and misty morning, he stood in irresolute deliberation before the open door of his compactum wardrobe. Which was it to be? A lounge suit, plus fours, or a morning coat?"⁶⁴ He actually settled for the morning coat.

Fig 8 Compactom Regal model

The habit of giving Compactom wardrobes as retirement gifts casts a light on another side of British attitudes to gender. There are many recorded examples of presentations to male town clerks, lawyers, and head gardeners. One such example in the *Gardeners' Chronicle, Horticultural Trade Journal* noted the retirement of a particular individual: "His colleagues greatly appreciated his ability and kindness, and when he retired presented him with a Compactum Wardrobe as a token of their esteem and affection."⁶⁵

Despite the apparent emphasis on the male customer, it is clear that the company had from early on recognised an important market of women users. In 1924, they offered four cabinets for women out of a total of nine. In a leaflet published in 1937, they illustrated a

model (O) which was apparently ‘Designed by women for women’ where ‘particular attention has been given to full length and ample width for hanging.’ The YY model for Ladies complemented this, complete with an ‘auto-radial coat fitting’ that allowed all hanging garments to swing out and be viewed all at once.⁶⁶

Fig 9 YY model designed by women for women

Although the links to contemporary space and time-saving ideals were evident, the Compactom was not directly in the forefront of modern design thinking in terms of surface design and finish. Produced with figured oak, mahogany or walnut veneers, and in some cases ‘retro’ features such as cabriole legs or linenfold effect, the clear intention was to fit into homely interiors. This is an example of a predictable British response to modernist ideals wrapped in tradition.⁶⁷ This is an example of a predictable British response to modernist ideals wrapped in tradition. A slightly different but still decidedly British approach was in the wardrobes designed for students of Loughborough College (later University). Based on a revision of Arts and Crafts ideals using simple undecorated timbers and revealed construction, they demonstrate another rather particular tradition.

In contrast, around 1929, Bauhaus student Josef Pohl designed a small plywood wheeled wardrobe for a bachelor (*rollender Kleiderschrank für Junggesellen*).⁶⁸ This wardrobe, clearly based on a Compactum concept, had hanging space, shelf storage at the side and a shoe cupboard, but it was set in a minimal frame without any gadgets.

The critical reception of the Compactom products varied. In a review of the book *Innen Decoration* published in *The Studio* in 1930, the critic wrote, with tongue firmly in cheek, “The photography [of the objects shown] is admirable and one fears sometimes makes a better effect than the piece of furniture warrants. ... One feels that, given such photography our English armchairs might lay claim to modernity, and Compactom wardrobes be exhibited with pride in Continental capitals.”⁶⁹ In any event, at least one continental publication favourably featured the Compactom. The Dutch journal *Het Moderne Interieur* recommended and extolled the Compactom for its practicality.⁷⁰

The furnishing demands of consumers with smaller rooms, flat dwellers, and those living in furnished accommodation defined the changes in furniture styles and sizes. The *Architect & Building News* noted his evolutionary development: “The factory-made kitchen cabinet killed the dresser, and wardrobes of the “Compactum” type [have kicked] the rather crude bedroom cupboard.”⁷¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, the company expanded into the manufacture of kitchen units. Design publications also recommended them.⁷² Architect, Maxwell Fry, in his *Fine Building* published in 1944, commented: “The Compactum wardrobe and the kitchen cabinet are exceptions [to on-site fabrication] that point the way towards an extension of pre-fabrication or factory-made fittings.”⁷³ Specifiers for furnishing hospitals, ships and armed forces barracks who purchased the Compactum wardrobes also recognised the connection with Modernist preoccupations with efficiency and space and time saving.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the authors of the Board of Trade *Working Party Report on Furniture* published in 1946 acclaimed the Compactum. Discussing the state of the industry before the War, the report noted

There was little organised advertising or publicity in the industry; there was little study or research amongst consumers to discover their needs and to exploit unsatisfied (and perhaps inarticulate) demand. Moreover, the exceptions to this prove the rule. Wherever a need has been realised and products have been made to satisfy it, the value of design as a means of creating profitable sales has been shown. Some examples are: — Compactum wardrobes. Parker Knoll chairs. Sectional and unit bookcases. Branded divans and bedding.⁷⁵

This commentary appears to acknowledge what these companies had known for a while, namely that advertising and branding that targeted real but unarticulated anxieties and insecurities were likely to result in more sales.

After the Second World War, the compactum continued to be a generic ‘brand’ name for any small fitted wardrobe.⁷⁶ In 1947, architect Howard Robertson discussed “The “compactum” wardrobes [that] are movable and fit close to the walls ...”⁷⁷ and in 1955, furniture author Rodney Hooper said “This type [of wardrobe] is usually referred to as a Gentleman’s Fitted Wardrobe, and is also known as a Compactum type with accommodation in the left hand carcass for hanging suits on shoulder sticks ...”.⁷⁸ The Compactum had undoubtedly achieved the status of a type form.

The Compactum had served its purpose well, over a period of more than thirty years. However, like many other product types before them, changes in habits and tastes overtook the Compactum. The particular design solutions were appropriate for their time but never represented ideal solutions. Here is a classic example of a product life cycle process, where an item introduced into the market, grows its market share, and finally becomes a mature and

established product.⁷⁹ Eventually overtaken by other articles it is finally withdrawn. Two major factors contributed to the Compactom's decline. One was the growing perception of the benefits of built-in wardrobes widely recognised from the 1950s onward. In addition, changes in fashion, including more casual clothing, reduced the demand for highly organised wardrobe interiors whilst conversely requiring space that is more general. Indeed, as people's attire grew in quantity, so did their need for a variety of storage space.

Fig 10 Built-in compactom Co. Advert

In the early 1950s, clearly in response to the changing market, the Company developed a range of custom-made built-in wardrobe storage systems with similar fittings to the free-standing pre-war models, but by the end of the decade, they stopped making any furniture in order to concentrate on the production of partitions for building interiors.⁸⁰

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how an evolutionary approach to wardrobe design and redesign can help to inform the history of a product and its development. It has also shown how the principles of modernism that migrated from other spaces, inter-related with issues of class, society and gender and found expression in clothes storage. Designed for both men and women, the Compactom seemed to address a number of issues including concerns about efficiency, loss of domestic staff, clothes maintenance, and middle-class identity.

The product's advertising campaign, linked to these issues, attempted to target the source of some of these concerns for a section of the populace. Whether a single compact piece of furniture ever answered all the storage needs of a user is questionable, but even the idea that it could, is still of interest as an example of modernist beliefs of function and rationality.

Using the idea of design evolution and re-design, the paper has considered how some wardrobe spaces gradually developed into a defined storage system for both male and female garments and accessories during the period 1920-1950. It has also shown how a product lifecycle ends. In the case of the Compactom, one reason was the growing use of built-in wardrobes from the 1950s onward. Secondly, changes in fashion, and the growth in the quantity of garments owned meant that a prescriptive modernist solution was incompatible with these new lifestyle changes.

‘The adage of “a place for everything and everything in its place” still resonates today. However, storage and wardrobe products now address different problems in the twenty-first century, often relating to issues around hoarding, clutter reduction, and stress avoidance.’⁸¹

¹ For evolutionary design and re-design see G. Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology*, Cambridge University Press, 1988; A. Yagou, ‘Rewriting Design History from an evolutionary perspective’ *Design Journal*, vol.18, no. 3, November 2005, pp. 50-60; J. Michl, ‘On Seeing Design as Redesign: An Exploration of a Neglected Problem in Design Education’ *Scandinavian Journal of Design History* 2002, vol. 12, pp. 7-23, and J. Whyte ‘Evolutionary Theories and Design Practices’, *Design Issues*, vol. 23, no. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 46-54.

² The term compactom was also more widely used to demonstrate these space-saving and organisational features. In the 1930s, ships were sometimes fitted with a mahogany Compactom washstand-storage unit and pedestals; the Marples Compactum tool cabinet, devised in the late 19th century, was still available in the 1940s and advertisers made reference to the “compactom principle” in the design of residential flats. See e.g. *The Times* June 28th 1933, p 27.

³ S. Cwerner, ‘Clothes at Rest: Elements for a sociology of the Wardrobe’ *Fashion Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2001, p. 83. See also S. B. Cwerner and A. Metcalfe, ‘Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World’, *Journal of Design History*, vol. 16 no.3, 2003, pp. 229-239.

⁴ A Lady, *The Workwoman’s Guide*, Simpkin Marshall and Co., London, 1838, p.119

⁵ Paul Otter, ‘Cabinet work for clothes chests’, *Carpentry and Building*, vol. 30, 1908, p.103. For a female commentary on the problem see Grace Miller and her correspondence with architect Richard Neutra in Stephen Leet and Richard, J. Neutra, *Richard Neutra’s Miller House*, Princeton, 2004, p. 79.

⁶ See for example K. Honeyman, *Well suited: A history of the Leeds clothing industry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. L. Ugolini, ‘Ready to wear or Made to measure? Consumer Choice in British Menswear Trade, 1900-1939’, *Textile History*, vol. 34 no. 2, 2003, pp. 192-213,

⁷ See for example, Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*, 1927 (various reprints). Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization takes command: a contribution to anonymous history*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press

1948. Paul Greenhalgh, *Modernism in design*, London: Reaktion Books 1990. Christopher Wilk, *Modernism: designing a new world: 1914-1939*, London: V&A Publications 2006.

⁸ See for examples Geoffrey C. Bowker, Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* MIT Press, Cambs. Mass. 2000.

⁹ See Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs Consumer, Christine Frederick and the rise of household efficiency*, Athens Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 2003, and Frederick W. Taylor *The Principles of Scientific Management.*, New York, Harper, 1913.

¹⁰ H. Urbach, 'Closets, Clothes, Disclosure' *Assemblage*, No. 30, August 1996, p. 64.

¹¹ E. Thornwell, *The lady's guide to perfect gentility: in manners, dress, and conversation ...*, Derby and Jackson, New York, 1856.

¹² J. K Alexander, *The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008.

¹³ For Wooton desks see J. C. Showalter, J.T. Driesbach *Wooton patent desks: a place for everything and everything in its place*, Indiana State Museum, Oakland, 1983. For the Hoosier cabinet see N. R. Hiller *The Hoosier Cabinet in Kitchen History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009.

¹⁴ Richards, Terry, and Company, London dealers for the "Wooton Cabinet Office Secretary" desk, advertisement *The Graphic*, 17 May 1884. See also the hybrid 'chifforobe'; a piece of space-saving furniture incorporating a wardrobe and a chest of drawers first sold in a Sears, Roebuck catalogue in 1908,

¹⁵ "A Man's Dressing Cabinet" *The Craftsman*, vol. 4, no. 4, July 1902, pp. 267-8.

¹⁶ C. Frederick, *The new housekeeping: efficiency studies in home management*, Doubleday, Page, Garden City, N.Y., [c1913] p.134. She also suggested record cards for linen, gifts, pantry, and the library.

¹⁷ F.W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911, Harper New York and London. For more on Taylorism and UK industrial management see K. Whitston, 'Scientific Management and Production Management Practice in Britain Between the Wars', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 1 March 1996, pp. 47–75 (p. 53) and also M. Guillén, 'Scientific Management's Lost Aesthetic: Architecture, organization and the Taylorised beauty of the Mechanical', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 42, no.4, 1997, pp. 682-715.

¹⁸ G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency, 1899-1914: A Study in Politics and Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971.

¹⁹ M. R. Polelle, *Raising Cartographic Consciousness: The Social and Foreign Policy Vision of Geopolitics in the Twentieth Century*, Lexington Book, Lanham MD, 1999. p. 68

²⁰ J. Gloag, *Simple Furnishing and Arrangement*, Duckworth, London, 1921, p 114.

²¹ J. Gloag, *Time Taste and Furniture*, Grant Richards, London, 1925, p.245.

²² See further Clive Edwards, *Twentieth Century Furniture*, Manchester, 1994, Chapter 3. However, there were notable exceptions including Plan Furniture, Combiunits, Globe-Wernicke Bookcase systems and Easiwork kitchens. For Plan furniture see Barbara Tilson 'Plan Furniture 193–1938: The German Connection', *Journal of Design History* (1990) 3(2-3): 145-155: For Combiunits see Bristol Museum, Catalogue for 'Combunit' furniture by P.E. Gane (late Trapnell & Gane) Ltd., Bristol; 8 pages. Advert in *The Spectator* 1932 149, p. 539. The Globe-Wernicke Company was incorporated in 1882 as the Globe Files Company. The business originally sold office equipment, and later changed name to the Globe-Wernicke Company. In 1889, the company took out a patent for the flexible storage system. They made products in both USA and UK. G.E.W. Crowe established Easiwork in 1922 to import Canadian kitchen fittings etc., By 1931 they had a showroom in Tottenham Court Road designed by Raymond McGrath and were well established as suppliers of fitted kitchens etc.

²³ See L. Delap, *Knowing their Place, Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011

²⁴ Regional stockists were selling the wardrobes by 1924 in the UK, and the products were exported to Australia by at least 1926. See advert by retailers Bear Watson of Sydney, in *The Sydney Morning Herald* at trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/16272421. Accessed 1st Nov. 2012.

²⁵ Allison Burkette has investigated the lexical issues associated with the word in an American context through an analysis of contemporary variations on the word wardrobe along with an introductory historiographic survey A. Burkette, 'The Lion, The Witch, and The Armoire: Lexical variation in case furniture terms', *American Speech*, 2009 vol. 84, no. 3, pp. 315-339.

²⁶ R. Edwards, *Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture*, Country Life, London, 1964.

²⁷ Ince and Mayhew, *The Universal System of Household Furniture*, London, 1759-62, plate XXI.

²⁸ See J. Gloag, *Dictionary of Furniture*, Revised Edition, Unwin, London, 1991, entry on *Clothes Press*, p 237-9. In the antiques trade these winged wardrobes are confusingly called compactums. Not to be confused with the trade name Compactoms

²⁹ *Cabinet Makers London Book of Prices*, 1788, (plate 3)

³⁰ T. Webster, *Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy*, Harpers Bros, New York, 1852, p.278.

³¹ L. Hoskins, *Reading the inventory: household goods, domestic cultures and difference*

in England and Wales, 1841–81, PhD University of London, 2011, Table 6.1.

³² William Watts Art Furniture Catalogue 1877, cited in S. Weber Soros, *The Secular Furniture of E. W. Godwin*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999, pp. 186, 225.

³³ Frederick Hoare, Patent GB189800846, 1898

³⁴ *The Times*, 10th May 1911. Hermann Muthesius reminded his readers in 1904 that ‘Traditionally a man’s clothes-cupboard in England consist of a piece of furniture with drawers and pull-out shelves, for a man’s clothes are all laid flat when put away’. *The English House*, 1904, Reprint Rizzoli, New York, 1987, pp. 231.

³⁵ *The Times*, 27th November 1923. Some years later Compactom Ltd, published a sales leaflet entitled ‘John was a most untidy man until he visited our showrooms’, dated March 1937, Private collection.

³⁶ ‘John was a most untidy man until he visited our showrooms’, dated March 1937. The Compactom Co. Private Collection.

³⁷ ‘Patent furniture’ makers originally developed these in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

³⁸ Le Corbusier *Towards a New Architecture*, trans, F. Etchells, Architectural Press, London, 1946 edition, p. 108. See also C. Benton, ‘Le Corbusier: Furniture and the Interior’ *Journal of Design History* vol. 3, no. 2-3 1990, p p.111-112. M. Risselada, (ed). *Raumplan versus plan libre: Adolf Loos [and] Le Corbusier*, 010 publishers, Rotterdam, 2008, p.2 and 141. We can see Le Corbusier’s interest in the ‘Innovation’ solution in two ways. Firstly, the contract for advertising in *L’esprit nouveau*, where Corbusier designed advertisements endorsed by his signature and included copy that mentioned the role of typeforms and standards in modern industry. Secondly, it is found in the Innovation Company’s involvement with the furnishing of the Pavilion de l’Esprit Nouveau in 1925

³⁹ US Patents 760725 and 760727 both May 24th 1904.

⁴⁰ *Post Office London Street Directory*, 1915.

⁴¹ ‘Current Art Notes’ *Connoisseur*, LXVIII, Jan- April 1924, p. 50.

⁴² Edward Pinto is known to historians as a collector of (and author about) treen or wooden wares. His personal collection is now housed in Birmingham Museum. It has been suggested that Samuel Joseph (father of Sir Keith Joseph) a main board director of Bovis had ‘invented’ the Compactom as a response to his wife’s storage needs but this is probably apocryphal. See Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett, *Keith Joseph*, Acumen, 2002, p.11

⁴³ Their trademark was a configuration of three ‘C’s standing for Compactum Clothing Cabinet.

⁴⁴ Patent Nos. 203251 December 1922; 213730 Feb 1923; 216748 August 1923; 227658 Feb 1924; 229493 Feb 1924; 252550 June 1925; 327601 April 1929; 329139 November 1929; 346619 June 1930; 402065 May 1932; 462405 Dec 1935.

⁴⁵ V. Gluckstein/ Bovis Patent No. 203251 05.09. 1923.

⁴⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, Display ad, 27th April 1934.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919 – 1939*, Penguin, 2009.

⁴⁸ For this feminization of culture discussion, see A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and conservatism between the Wars*, London, Routledge, 1991.

⁴⁹ J. Greenfield, S. O’Connell, & C. Reid, ‘Fashioning Masculinity: *Men Only*, Consumption and the development of marketing in the 1930s’ *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 10, No.4, 1999, pp. 457-475.

⁵⁰ G. Lees-Maffei ‘Studying Advice: Historiography, Methodology, Commentary, Bibliography’ *Journal of Design History*. Vol.16, no. 1, 2003, pp.1-14

⁵¹ Advertisement in *Punch*, vol. 159, 1920, p 538.

⁵² *The Play Pictorial*, vol. 40-41, 1922, p. 90.

⁵³ Compactom Advertisement, *House and Garden* vol. 4 1922, p. 44.

⁵⁴ *The Adelphi*, January 1924, p. iii.

⁵⁵ *Printer’s ink*, vol.145, no. 2, 1928, p.19.

⁵⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 6th November, 1929.

⁵⁷ H. Hinds, ‘Together and Apart: Twin Beds, Domestic Hygiene and Modern Marriage, 1890–1945’, *Journal of Design History*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2010, pp. 277.

⁵⁸ G. B. Retallack, ‘Razors, Shaving and Gender Construction: An Inquiry into the Material Culture of Shaving’ *Material History Review* vol. 49, Spring 1999, 13-14.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Indeed, a typical specification demonstrated quite an extensive male wardrobe. It included spaces for 12 Suits/36 Handkerchiefs/24 Shirts/24 Pairs of Trousers/12 Pairs of Pants/36 Collars/12 Pair of Pyjamas/6 Hats/12 Undervests/36 Pairs of Socks/8 Pairs of Boots or Shoes. The company repeated his detail in many advertisements from 1922 and 1923 in *Punch*, *Illustrated London News* and the *Play Pictorial*.

⁶¹ B. Edwards, “A Man’s World? Metropolitan Modernity at Simpson Piccadilly”, in David Gilbert, David Matless, Brian Short, (Eds) *Geographies of British Modernity: Space and Society in the Twentieth Century*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, p.151.

⁶² Ibid 163

⁶³ See for example, *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 7/11/1924; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1/6/1925; *Western Times* 7/8/1928 and *Hull Daily Mail* 2/7/1930.

⁶⁴ A. Waugh, *Sir She Said*, Bloomsbury, London, (1930) 2011 reprint, Chapter 6.

⁶⁵ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, horticultural trade journal, vol. 101, 1937, p.164.

⁶⁶ Compactom Ltd, Leaflet entitled 'John was a most untidy man until he visited our showrooms', dated March 1937, Private collection.

⁶⁷ Hilary Hinds makes a similar point with the issue of twin beds(modern) designed in reproduction styles See Hinds, 'Together and Apart: Twin Beds, Domestic Hygiene and Modern Marriage, 1890–1945', p. 284.

⁶⁸ The wardrobe was designed as a model-piece in the Bauhaus furniture workshop and was published in the A.I.Z. (*Die Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*) in an article *Das Bauhaus auf dem Wege zum Faschismus*, 1931. Manufacture of the wardrobe was not developed; therefore, it may very well be possible that this wardrobe is a unique piece. 152 cms high, 60 cms deep, 70 cms wide. Courtesy of Christies.

⁶⁹ *The Studio*, vol. 100, 1930, p. 460.

⁷⁰ W. Retera, *Het Moderne Interieur*, N.V. Uitgevers-maatshappij "Kosmos", 1937, p. 48

⁷¹ *The Architect & Building News*, vol. 153, 1938, p. 253.

⁷² Compactom 'fitted' kitchen units in M. Merivale, *Furnishing the Small Home*, The Studio, London, 1943, p. 82.

⁷³ Maxwell Fry *Fine Building*, Faber and Faber, London, 1944, p. 60.

⁷⁴ See for example *Flight International*, vol. 55, 1949, p. 577.

⁷⁵ Great Britain. Board of Trade, *Working party reports, Furniture*, H. M. Stationery Office, 1946, p. 181.

⁷⁶ This is often the destiny of an innovative product. There are numerous examples including e.g. Hoover for vacuum cleaner and Kleenex for paper tissue.

⁷⁷ H. Robertson, *Reconstruction and the Home*, The Studio, London, 1947 p. 39.

⁷⁸ R. Hooper, *Modern Furniture and fittings*, Batsford, London, 1955, p. 7.

⁷⁹ G. Day, 'The product life cycle: Analysis and applications issues', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 45, Autumn 1981, pp. 60–67.

⁸⁰ *RIBA Journal*, vol. 65, 1958, p.133.

⁸¹ Saulo B. Cwerner and Alan Metcalfe. "Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World" *Journal of Design History*, (2003) 16 (3): 229-239