
The mid-century American home, and the consumer goods that filled it, were used to the benefit of both East and West during the Cold War. Entire prefab houses, furnishings, appliances, and packaged foods were exhibited around the world as examples of a consumer way of life that was promoted to the benefit of the United States and, alternately, the Soviet Union.

The Kitchen Debate provided the setting for the most famous display of this soft power game. Nixon and Khrushchev, crowded together in a state-of-the-art American kitchen—which had been reassembled in Moscow for the 1959 American National Exhibition—debated the merits of their respective economic systems, based on the ability of each to provide for the middle-class, modern lifestyle portrayed in the exhibition. The availability and quality of consumer household goods became an important factor in the outcome of the Cold War.

With a particular focus on divided Berlin as a battleground in this ideological war, Castillo illustrates his argument with abundant examples of soft power displays on both sides, tracing the history behind the Kitchen Debate back over a decade to the multitude of popular exhibitions that put consumer household goods on public display. The abundance of examples and the richness of their descriptions make this an enjoyable read.

In exploring uses of midcentury design as soft power in the Cold War, Castillo draws from disciplines including architecture, design, history, politics, sociology, and gender studies to examine the ways in which design and its displays were adapted to suit the propaganda needs of government ideology, as well as public reception of these displays. He elaborates on the cultural and political history of the Cold War, providing even the inexperienced reader with the background and context necessary to appreciate the importance of household goods as a political tool.

The book is extensively researched, including an incredibly thorough and thoughtful review of the existing literature—both scholarly and popular. Castillo’s far-reaching primary resources include archival materials, correspondence, and newspapers from the United States, Germany, and the former Soviet Union. Photographs are likewise drawn from a variety of sources and provide a valuable visual compliment to the text. A well-organized index and exceptionally in-depth notes section make it easy to find information about Cold War design. The scholarly nature of this book, together with its tight focus on the subject matter, should prove useful to students and researchers interested in design, political science, and history.

Rachel Martin Cole, Circulation Manager, Ryerson & Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago, rcole@artic.edu