

LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE:

A Comparative Investigation into Fast and Slow Furniture

Extended Essay

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Abstract:

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the causes and effects of 'fast furniture', furnishings which have been inexpensively made and cheaply sold by the furniture industry, comparatively with 'slow furniture', pieces which are old, used, and acquired through inheriting, thrifting, and upcycling, from junk yards, charity shops, and online buy and sell sites. To provide balance, the positive aspects of fast furniture and drawbacks of slow furniture have been identified and considered.

Fast furniture has not been as readily researched as 'fast fashion' (the fashion industry's equivalent term for mass-produced clothing), however parallels between the two phenomena are directly comparable, given their situation in the world of commodified goods. Research that *has* been conducted on fast furniture is mainly reactive to the environmental ramifications of mass-production, as opposed to the equally serious stylistic repercussions; a considerable gap in knowledge that has been addressed in this study.

Using case studies on well-known proponents of fast furniture, the environmental and stylistic consequences are substantiated. By examining economic and psycho-social industry and consumer behaviour patterns- including Greenwashing, Circular Economics, and Social Influence- slow furniture as a substitute is substantiated. Its viability is further corroborated through the analysis of design styles that are exponents of slow furnishing, and the role that social media can now play in furthering their popularity. This research is significant in that it holistically observes cause, effect, and solution regarding fast furniture in a way which has not before been studied in a significant capacity.

Contents:

Introduction.....4
Chapter One: The Origins of Fast Furniture.....6
Chapter Two: The Benefits of Fast Furniture and Disadvantages of Slow
Furniture.....8
Chapter Three: The Environmental Impacts of and Solutions to Fast
Furniture.....11
Chapter Four: The Stylistic Impact of and Solutions to Fast
Furniture.....14
Conclusion.....19
References.....21
Bibliography.....25

Introduction:

The furniture industry has been systemically revolutionised by mass-production. In a historically significant departure from the artisanal origins of furniture making, pieces are now created to satisfy the fervent chain of supply and demand that characterises consumer capitalist society. Furniture produced to satiate the demands of the modern consumer is known as 'fast furniture': furnishings manufactured, sold, and discarded in quick succession. This is the interior design equivalent of 'fast fashion', a term which describes clothing of equally questionable origin, quality, and recyclability. Fast fashion has been researched extensively over the last three decades (one of the first mentions of the phrase can be found in an article for the New York Times dating from the 31st of December 1989 (Schiro)) however it is only in the last decade that fast furniture has been identified. There is little academic writing or serious study about fast furniture, making it a worthwhile subject to investigate.

In spite of the general depletion of revenue across the majority of consumer markets in 2020, the European furniture industry is still worth over £281, 597 million, with the average revenue per individual in the market for furniture at £332.09. While these figures are anomalously lower (-6.3% globally, -6.5% per individual) than previous years, given the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are set to recover; the market is predicted to show revenue growth of 6% in 2021 (Furniture - Europe. Accessed: October 05, 2020. <https://www.statista.com/outlook/17000000/102/furniture/europe>).

Despite in-store purchasing of furniture being the traditional norm (even as recently as 2017, a study showed that 59% of people preferred to buy furniture in this way (Kessel)), in recent years the ease of online shopping has facilitated a rapid increase in digital furniture sales; in 2019, the UK alone was estimated to produce over £6 billion in this market (Richter, 2019). Richter comments that 'shipping costs for larger items have come down so far that they are often outweighed by potential cost savings and the added choice and convenience of ordering your furniture online'. The aforementioned figures have been exacerbated by Coronavirus; people confined

to their homes were still able to invest time and money into reinventing their interior environments, without the confines of having to visit stores in person.

Inspiration has been readily accessible via social media. Pinterest, a self-proclaimed 'media-rich utility app' (Richter, 2020), had 367 million active users globally by the first quarter of 2020. The number of Instagram users in the UK has grown exponentially this year, with close to 28 million active users as of September (NapoleonCat). Downloads for Tiktok (an app focused on the sharing of short video clips) reached 72.8 million downloads during May alone: 'the coronavirus pandemic aided or at least coincided' with its unparalleled popularity (Buchholz, 2020). All of these apps feature content catered towards interior design; a brief in-app analysis shows videos under the hashtag #interiordesign have 1.2 billion views on Tiktok, and there are 102 million photos hash-tagged #interiordesign on Instagram (as of 5th October 2020). Within these broad markers, there are thousands more niche tags, yielding proportionately high levels of interaction.

The following research will focus on westernised countries, as furniture and interior design are regarded and consumed in very different ways in developing nations. Financial necessity is often the driver behind the use of second-hand products, as opposed to having the choice to practice ethical consumerism. It is important to recognise the privilege that we hold in being able to make these decisions, and the responsibility we carry in the outcomes of our consumer choices.

Because fast furniture is a relatively new phrase, the majority of the data examined will be drawn from sources dating from 2010 and later. Having said this, where historical context is required in order to frame the origins and development of fast furniture, sources will range in date from the 19th Century onwards.

Structurally, this research will be presented in four central chapters. The first two will provide context and balance: Chapter One will examine the origins and intensification of fast furniture, and Chapter Two will present the arguments for fast furniture and against slow furniture, to bring balance to the discussion. Chapters Three and Four will present the environmental and stylistic impacts and proposed solutions respectively, with literature analysis and case studies interspersed and analysed throughout.

Chapter One:
The Origins of Fast Furniture

Although fast furniture is relatively new phrase, the process of mass-manufacturing furniture is not. The First Industrial Revolution overhauled the economies of Europe and the United States around the turn of the 19th Century, from a model characterised by craftsmanship and agrarian activity to one dominated by mechanised industry. Where the popularity of craftsmanship centred furniture production prevailed well into the 20th century (bolstered by the Arts and Crafts Movement), mass-production of furniture developed in parallel.

In Michigan USA, the city of Grand Rapids became one of the first places to establish a mechanised furniture industry. Nicknamed 'The Furniture City', Grand Rapids was home to approximately 80 firms producing both replica and originally designed furniture: 'whatever it is the furniture buyer seeks; traditional, transitional, or modern' (industryfilmarchive, 2010). The first cabinetry shop was opened in 1848 by William Haldane, who introduced mechanised production in 1848 by incorporating the use of a lathe and circular saw into the production process (industryfilmarchive, 2010). The very name of the city 'became a byword for inexpensive furniture of reliable quality' (Hayward, 2001) due to Grand Rapids developing to such size and yield in terms of furniture.

Another important distinction made at this time was the departure of direct contact between manufacturer and consumer. Purchasing furniture from showrooms became the norm, introducing a formal supply chain now central to all consumer industries. This separation anonymised the maker and disguised the origins of the furniture produced, exacerbating the dehumanisation of a once personal and close creator/patron relationship, with the pre-industrial norm of hand-hewn furniture now reserved only for the wealthiest aesthetes.

Despite technological advancements, the role of the craftsman managed to coexist alongside specialist machinery until the mid-20th Century. Footage from the 1950's showing the activity of factory workers in Grand Rapids is accompanied by a voiceover which maintains that '[in furniture making] the craftsman must be something of an artist himself... [the process of furniture assembly] depends on the

skills and hand craftsmanship acquired only through years of experience' (industryfilmarchive, 2010). This prevalent aspect of individuality and specialist artisanal skill began to dwindle in significance as further technological advancements were made, and economic priorities changed.

The second half of the 20th Century saw the inception of many furniture companies we are familiar with today. IKEA was set up in the 1943 by founder Ingvar Kamprad and was originally a service offering goods such as nylon stockings, watches, and stationary, before beginning to offer furniture in 1948. All these products were delivered to those who purchased via mail order, however 'customers were sceptical of shopping via mail order... they didn't trust the quality of the items' (Scandinavian Design 101, 2020); something which contemporary consumers can identify with over half a century later. In 1953, following the fashion of utilising showrooms to sell furniture, IKEA opened their first store in Älmhult, Sweden.

IKEA was not the only Scandinavian interiors company at this time; Danish brand Hoyrup was set up in the late 1940's, designing state of the art plastic vacuum formed lamp shades, enabled by cutting edge material development and technology. By following IKEA's lead, during the 1960's and 70's they began to convert their entire range of lampshades into designs made for DIY assembly, due to the proven success of their first DIY model, the 'Butterfly' lamp. This shift was pivotal in that the designs allowed for 'low costs for production, storage, packaging and transportation – and ultimately affordable lamps on the market.' (Schoilers). Hoyrup ceased production in 1984, however their products are still highly collectable.

Furnishings made affordable by mass-production and innovative methods of self-assembly have only increased in popularity. This has been aided exponentially by advances in online shopping and the innovations of logistics companies, which have instilled an expectation of instant gratification in many contemporary consumers. Many fast fashion brands have begun to branch out into the interiors market, with companies such as Zara and H&M offering entire segments of their online and in-store capacity to their *Home* ranges which, like their clothing, are entirely concerned with keeping up with the quick succession of trends and styles through cheap manufacturing and materials- and the turnover of profit that accompanies them.

Chapter 2:

The Benefits of Fast Furniture and Disadvantages of Slow furniture

In order to establish a balanced discussion, the benefits of fast furniture and the disadvantages of slow furniture must be unpacked.

Put simply: fast furniture democratises design. Anyone with the financial capacity can access the furniture they want and need. The reality is, in the words of RMIT lecturer Liam Fennessy, that 'often low-cost furniture is very well designed, and as a sector it employs many good designers. It... caters to what a large number of consumers want, need and can afford' (Tay, 2017). This viewpoint is shared by prolific contemporary designer Karim Rashid, who is a firm advocate for Democratic Design; he believes that design '...must not be a luxury, because everyone has the right to have well-designed objects' (Mastella, 2017). Rashid bridges the gap between ordinarily inaccessible contemporary furniture and consumers by manufacturing in plastic; 'a versatile material, and therefore noble, but democratic, as everyone can afford it, economically speaking' (Mastella, 2017). Similarly, IKEA's Lightweight Agenda (using chipped wood in particle board as opposed to solid hardwood) not only allows all of the tree to be utilised, reducing waste, but also reduces manufacturing and shipping costs, keeping price tags as low as the consumer expects.

Visually, fast furniture caters to popular aesthetic trends. Mid-Century modern inspired pieces are central to fast furniture due to the current consumer demand for the aesthetic, in line with 'Laver's Law' (Figure 1), which states that it takes around 50 years for a design trend to unironically come back into fashion (Laver, 1937, chapter 18); there is now a consistent flow of affordable furniture to cater to this aesthetic demand. Moreover, the size of the catalogue inventories of retailers is extensive and diverse; Moon surmises that the range on offer '[assures] not only that customers will find exactly what they want, but that the couch they bring home will be the only one like it in the neighbourhood' (2005).

| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Indecent | 10 years before its time |
| Shameless | 5 years before its time |
| Outré (Daring) | 1 year before its time |
| Smart | 'Current Fashion' |
| Dowdy | 1 year after its time |
| Hideous | 10 years after its time |
| Ridiculous | 20 years after its time |
| Amusing | 30 years after its time |
| Quaint | 50 years after its time |
| Charming | 70 years after its time |
| Romantic | 100 years after its time |
| Beautiful | 150 years after its time |

Figure 1: A table illustrating Laver's Law

Design Democratisation in its most radical form is practiced, arguably, when the public are given access to designer pieces which were once reserved for purchase to-the-trade only (meaning they were sold not to the average consumer, but were earmarked exclusively for architects and designers (Fenton, 2015)). Thus, it isn't just pieces of renaissance mid-century modern that consumers can access via the medium of fast furniture, but design classics too. While originals are not financially viable for consumers, affordable reproductions are, and they can even be found on the high street. A direct example of this is a piece manufactured by H&M Home called *Low lounge chair* (Figure 2), an affordable £200 take on Pierre Jeanneret's Chandigarh Chair (Figure 3), which now sells for upwards of \$5,000. By allowing the average person to access even imitation designer furniture, interior design is bought into and interest in the discipline is created; 'Access to style should not be restricted by income bracket' (Murray, 2015).



Figure 2: H&M, '*Low Lounge Chair*', 2020



Figure 3: Pierre Jeanneret, *Chandigarh Chair*

The main drawback of second-hand furniture, conversely, is that it is only accessible to those who have the time and energy to seek it. Perusing sources of second-hand furniture is a task in and of itself, and even using online sites like Facebook Marketplace usually requires the buyer to pick the item up themselves. It is a disproportionate amount of effort for consumers who could instead order online and have it on their doorstep the next day. Consumers want the assurance that they can find what they want when they want it, that it will fit in the space allocated, and that it will be new, clean, and fully functional.

Second-hand furniture carries a stylistic stigma; while you can go into a charity shop and find a pair of vintage Levi's jeans, you cannot find a Chandigarh Chair at a junk yard. Designer furniture is still completely gatekept by antiques dealers, making a large driver for thrifting clothing obsolete in the context of furniture. Furthermore, the furniture that can be found is functionally limited; many would not buy a mattress, sofa, or kitchen appliance second hand. Thrifting for furniture does not cater to necessity or quick replacement in the same way as mass-produced furniture.

The argument for fast furniture is ratified by design ethos' like democratic design and endorsed by leading names in the design world like Karim Rashid. Conversely, it is only on theoretical, subjective popular opinion that the argument against slow furniture is based. From this, we can attest that while fast furniture

won't be going away anytime soon, slow furniture is considerably more welcomed than it is avoided.

Chapter 3: The Environmental Impacts of and Solutions to Fast Furniture

In the context of fast furniture, materiality is the most blatant culprit of environmental decline; each stage in the life cycle of a piece of fast furniture is actively contributory to this, from sourcing of materials, to manufacturing, and finally when discarded.

Wood is a traditionally preferred material for furniture materiality thanks to its durability, affordability, and aesthetic appeal. Historically, a carpenter would fell local trees slowly and on an individual, necessity-driven basis; now, however, companies have to outsource their wood from different countries in order to keep the raw material available, and the price of the final product as low as possible. This loophole in the production process, sadly, leads to statistics like: 'IKEA, annually, takes 1% of all the wood supply in the world' (Broken, 2019). The environmental fallout of deforestation is widely understood; destroying 'the lungs of the planet' (UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, 2013) not only wipes out the ecosystem and habitat of hundreds of thousands of animal species, it also reduces the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere. Although IKEA has numerous 'Plant a Tree' schemes (they profess to have planted 1.5 million trees in the US between 2006 and 2010 (CSRwire, 2010)) to combat this, mature trees have a more significant impact on the earth's carbon cycle and efficiency of oxygen production than saplings and young forests (Kachur, 2017). It is in the furniture companies' financial interest to make use of all parts of the tree (the Eden table by IKEA is, allegedly, made from heartwood, the centre of the tree trunk, which many retailers discard (CSRwire, 2010)), thus most of the wood felled for IKEA furniture is chipped down to be made into particle board, which also uses sawmill by-products. However, this process not only demands high energy and pressure, but also makes the resulting material impossible to recycle, due to the resin glues used in binding (Wood Guide).

Lena Pripp-Kovac, Ikea's sustainability manager for range and supply, comments that 'Being flatpack, our furniture uses less fuel to transport' (Grahame,

2015). In theory, it does decrease the number of journeys necessary to get from factory to showroom to consumer, by increasing the amount of furniture that can fit inside one vehicle. However, in reality, not only has the manufacturing process and transport of raw materials from overseas already contributed to emissions, but often showrooms are inaccessible by public transport, and IKEA charge significant amounts for delivery. Thus, the consumer is forced to drive to collect the items themselves, further increasing emissions caused, both directly and indirectly, by the company.

Once the pieces are in use, their materiality drastically reduces their durability, thus they are discarded and replaced, and the cycle begins again. Annually, the UK throws out 1,600,000 tonnes of what is classified as 'Bulky Waste' (waste which does not fit inside a standard dustbin), according to the 2015 report *Rearranging the Furniture*; 42% of this figure is comprised of furniture. In actuality, 32% of this total figure (by weight) is reusable, rising to 51% with minor repairs. Particleboard furniture is not only difficult to recycle, it is impossible to upcycle; the synthetic makeup of the material means it cannot be sanded down and refinished, and its lack of robustness means that it is pointless to spend the effort repairing. Karim Rashid's beloved, universally accessible plastic also cannot be recycled or refinished easily; this admiration of plastic is a bygone stance from the latter decades of the 20th Century, before its environmental impact was common knowledge, but is unsurprising coming from the 'Prince of Plastic', as *Time Magazine* dubbed him in 2001 (Luscombe).

Furniture is increasingly regarded as a commodity: '(the) worst aspects of fast furniture production will exist as long as consumer habits lay waste to them' (Tay, 2017). The way that consumers regard their furniture consumption arguably begins with the designers and retailers themselves and the influence they have in the branding and promotion of their goods. Karim Rashid, in his *Karimanifesto*, states that '...design is not about solving problems, but about a rigorous beautification of our built environments'. Contrariwise, Michele Chow, founder of Australian brand Dessien Furniture, is of the belief that 'Consumers need to question their reliance on unsustainable systems... [what consumers] should be asking before purchasing is: Where does this product come from? Where does it go at the end of its life cycle?' (Tay, 2017). Rashid's standpoint is contributory to the paradigm of fast furniture, while Chow's stance is mirrored in the ethos of ethical consumerism. *The Myth Of*

The Ethical Consumer (2010) argues that 'most of our results reveal a remarkable reluctance on the part of the majority of consumers to make consumption choices that include a social dimension' (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt, p.184).

Yet times have changed in the last 10 years; a 2020 study shows that 55% of consumers have made 'a few changes' to the products and services they use out of concern for climate change (Ipsos, 2020). Another study showed that 79% of respondents had changed how much/often they recycled products, and a further 70% to how much/often they reuse products (Ipsos, 2020). These statistics illustrate the fact that the worsening climate crisis combined with the widespread influence of social media have led to a drastic shift in the pattern of consumer behaviour. The Co-op's Ethical Consumer Report (which aimed to 'bridge the gap between consumers' claims to shop ethically and the actual impact of their consumption decisions' (Co-op, 2019)) reveals that over the twenty year span between 1999 and 2019, the ethical consumer markets has grown from £11.2bn to £41.1bn; a fourfold increase.

Thus, furniture retailers are at risk of alienating a large proportion of their customer base by neglecting to address their direct impact on the environment. In response, retailers have made changes from the most low-level tokenistic gestures to what appear to be systemic overhauls. H&M's 'Conscious' range professes to denote 'pieces created with a little extra consideration for the planet' (H&M, 2020). In October 2020, IKEA announced a buy-back scheme to begin to bring its supply chain in line with circular economic models by offering customers up to 50% of the original price for non-upholstered furniture if returned in resalable condition. The Buy Back scheme will be launched to coincide with Black Friday in November, as a comment on the wastefulness of the event: 'Ikea hopes that the initiative will help its customers take a stand against excessive consumption this Black Friday' (Tereshchenko, 2020).

On the surface, these are all commendable efforts, especially since '[consumers] may voice green or ethical sentiments, but they are often too lazy, too cash-strapped or too short of time to turn belief into action... they are looking to manufacturers, retailers and brands to do the good work for them' (Grahame, 2015). However, contrary to this statement (as demonstrated by figures from Ipsos, 2020), consumers of these brands are in fact becoming increasingly aware of the concept of

Greenwashing, making these gallant proclamations flimsy. IKEA's Buy Back scheme (IKEA, 2020) offers up to 50% of the original price is offered to incentivise reuse; that is, 50% of the price, not in a direct refund, but in the form of an IKEA gift card. IKEA make it easy for you to apply to sell your furniture back to them: all you have to do is fill out a form, then take it back to them, fully assembled, yourself; no pick-up service to be seen. IKEA is doing everything in their power to make it difficult to utilise what seems to be, in theory, a long overdue, progressive scheme.

Ultimately, the most sustainable piece of furniture is the one sat in a local second-hand shop. Research commissioned by the International Antiques and Collectors fairs (IACF) showed that a new chest of drawers has a total (combined effect of manufacture and shipping) carbon footprint of 170.38kg over a 15-year lifespan. This figure makes the fast furniture piece 16 times as environmentally detrimental, per year of lifespan, than an antique chest of drawers produces which produces only 139.6kg of carbon dioxide over a lifespan of 150 years (Lansberry). This altogether conclusive evidence proves that slow furniture is a far more environmentally viable method of furnishing than fast furniture.

Chapter 4:

The Stylistic Impacts of and Solutions to Fast Furniture

Slow furniture has not taken off in the same capacity as thrifted clothing has, in part because designers are often reluctant to address ethical considerations for the sake of aesthetics. In *Objectified* (2009), Karim Rashid states that by using modern technology like mobile phones and laptops then using antique furniture 'we are building really kitsch stage sets that have absolutely nothing to do with the age (we live in)'. He reiterates this standpoint in his *Karimanifesto*: 'My real desire is to see people... release themselves from nostalgia, antiquated traditions, old rituals, kitsch...'. However, ironically, despite his staunch support of design democratisation, even his products are now becoming overinflated in price to the point where the masses cannot afford to access them.

Something oft forgotten is that, in the history of design and natural progression of design styles, looking backward is not unheard of. Any movement with the affix

Neo (Neoclassical) or the suffix *Revival* (Gothic Revival, Renaissance Revival, Greek Revival) has its basis in a style which has gone before. One could argue that slow furniture is to us what the Arts and Crafts Movement was to people in the early 20th Century, who returned to artisanal design processes in retaliation against industrialisation. Fast Furniture is actively stunting the natural progression of design style by making real contemporary design inaccessible, while all the time churning out an international style of furniture which only becomes more and more insincere as the gap between it and its roots in the middle of the previous century becomes wider. We are at risk of realising Koolhaas' *Generic City* (1995) in furniture form by erasing historically and culturally significant artefacts from our domestic spaces entirely.

Drawing a parallel between fast furniture and industrialisation, and slow furniture and the arts and crafts movement is not unfounded; the IKEA Föremål range, launched in 2018, represents how mass manufacturing actively dehumanises design, by having the Swedish conglomerate collaborate with glass and ceramic artist Per B. Sundberg. The artist described the 26-piece range of 'pretty, ugly, lovely' scatter cushions, candle holders, vases, and blankets as '... a bit rough... based on folklore' (Estiler, 2018). By putting such bespoke, personal objects into mass-production, the artists touch is anonymised; reminiscent of the anonymisation of makers in the wake of the industrial revolution. Promotional imagery (Figure 4, Figure 5) of the Föremål range is overexposed and shot in stripped-down, pared-back interiors, and the objects in this context almost look like they could be on a trestle table at a yard sale, or in the corner of a junk shop. This interpretation begs the question; is slow furniture becoming popular to the point where fast furniture is trying to imitate it?



Figure 4: IKEA X Per B. Sundberg, FÖREMÅL collection, 2018



Figure 5: IKEA X Per B. Sundberg, FÖREMÅL collection, 2018

The way in slow furniture is perceived will be the key to its fate. The aforementioned, once humble Chandigarh Chair by Pierre Jeanneret, originally designed for use in the legislative and educational buildings of his cousin Le Corbusier's brand-new city, Chandigarh, in Punjab province, India, were reduced to 'Bulky Waste' status; that was until antiques dealers caught sight of them in the late 1990's. Now, chairs which were once piled up on street corners (Figure 6, Figure 7) and consigned to landfill grace the dining room of one of the Kardashian sisters (Figure 8) (Martin, 2017). It goes to show that, at least in part, the social value placed on objects, regardless of age or current trends, is the facilitator of popular aesthetic appeal. In the words of architect Joseph Dirand: 'Put one in a room, and it becomes a sculpture.' (Martin, 2017).



Figure 6: *Damaged Chandigarh Chair*, (no date)



Figure 7: *Discarded Chandigarh Chairs*, (no date)



Figure 8: Nicki Sebastian, *Chandigarh Chairs around Kourtney Kardashian's dining table*, 2019

This concept of putting furnishings of perceived low value on a figurative (or literal) pedestal is central to the Parisian style of interior design. Where one may hear the name of this style and envisage a provincial French farmhouse, or the lavish Palace of Versailles, the reality is that the Parisian style is centred around the eclectic collection and cohesive presentation of *objet's d'art* and *objets trouvés*; furnishings valued not for their trendiness or monetary value, but their aesthetic appeal (Figure 9 and Figure 10 show examples of Parisian style interiors). While there is sometimes, naturally, an element of financial aspiration to this style, it is in its essence characterised by the rewarding process of discovering furnishings for little to no money in France's revered *brocantes* (flea markets); despite décor columnists pushing the detrimental fast furniture paradigm under the guise of helping to make readers' homes "Feel French (and Impossibly Chic)" (Morgan, 2019), then linking a two thousand pound gilt frame mirror from Anthropologie. In direct contrast to Rashid's comments on the utilisation of slow furniture turning our homes into nothing more than "kitsch stage sets" (Objectified, 2009), Saint Sauveur (1988) comments of a Parisian style apartment that "Each room is a distinctive stage set" (p. 152). Put simply: "... apartments in Paris are rarely "decorated": there are simply objects and pieces of furniture that someone loves, treated like works of art" (Ypma, 1996, p.13). Parisian interior design embodies slow furniture and turns it into something highly fashionable; not in terms of financial expenditure, but in terms of personal collection, and the reward of turning tired, everyday items into sculptural artefacts of incalculable sentimental value.



Figure 9: Alpha Smoot, *French Style Home Office*, 2019

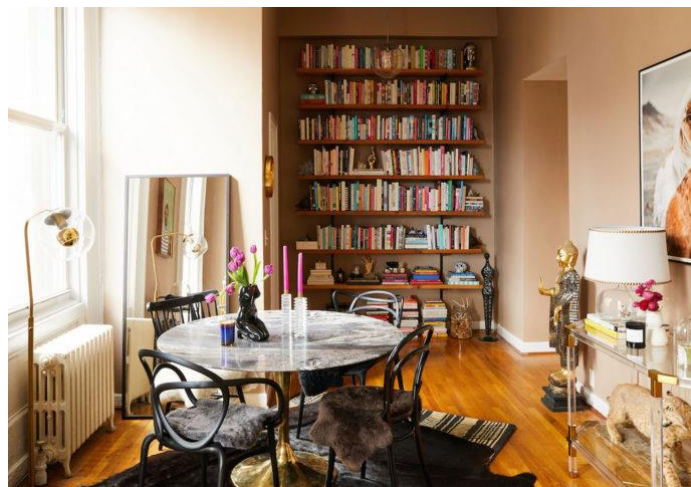


Figure 10: Alpha Smoot, *French Style Dining Space*, 2019

The sentimentalisation of slow furniture found in Parisian interior design is exacerbated by social media, with apps like Instagram, Tiktok, and Pinterest serving as fervent hotbeds of trend creation. A resurgence in the popularity of maximalism and eclecticism is occurring (in line with Laver's Law) under a new name in the internet lexicon: 'cluttercore'. Tiktok, for example, hosts videos with the hashtag #cluttercore, which have a total of 3.8 million views (as of 26 October 2020). This, while a fairly niche aesthetic, is a direct example of how younger people have adopted and adapted the concept of second-hand shopping by not only practicing it but glorifying it through social media. Another thing which has been firmly integrated into the adolescent experience of Millennials and Generation Z is the act of thrift shopping in itself; Generation Z is, according to statistics published in THREDUP's 2020 sustainability report, is 'powering the growth of second-hand shopping', with 40% buying second-hand apparel in 2019, compared to under 30% in 2016. While these figures relate specifically to fashion, due to the inextricable links between furniture and fashion, it is not unreasonable to infer that these same priorities also apply to home furnishings. The Wall Street Journal summarises: 'Bargain hunting, environmental concerns and the sharing economy have erased the stigma of used goods at the same time technology has made thrift shopping more accessible, reliable and cool.' (THREDUP, 2020).

Furthermore, while antique furniture may be more cumbersome than particleboard fast furniture, its materiality makes it hardy and customisable, allowing it to stand the test of time by appealing to those who wish to invest time and energy in upcycling. Upcycling allows consumers to purchase a true one-of-a-kind piece and either restore it to its former glory, or invest time in turning it into a bespoke talking point; the latter being a much more affordable and personal way of acquiring tailor made contemporary furniture than buying 'true' contemporary, which is often out of budget. Restoring furniture or plainly leaving it as purchased can also yield financial gain; fast furniture usually depreciates in value as it simply does not last long enough to play its cyclical part in Laver's Law, whereas slow furniture of all ages and styles can be resold in the future for a healthy profit (Lansberry).

Conclusion

By analysing contemporary and historical sources, this dissertation has investigated the fast furniture phenomenon in the context of both its environmental and stylistic ramifications. These implications include, environmentally, deforestation, landfill waste, and carbon dioxide emissions; and stylistically, the stunting of the natural progression of design styles, anonymisation of contemporary maker, and the erasure of historically and culturally specific furnishing.

Quantitative and qualitative data from news articles, archive footage, studies, and reports have concluded that slow furniture is a more sustainable way for consumers to furnish their homes. Collectively, the data illustrates the fact that fast furniture is a popular contemporary commodity, however exposure to and subsequent concerns pertaining to environmental issues and the popularity of thrifting is turning the tide on fast furniture's attractiveness.

As predicted, information on the environmental ramifications of fast furniture were plentiful, however details on the stylistic bearing were scarce. Inference from these rare sources was corroborated by cross examining it using examples from the fashion world and statistics on consumer behaviour.

The word count did not allow investigation into a third area of impact: the ethical implications of fast furniture and the bearing that fast furniture has on the wellbeing of people who make and use it. Further research may scrutinise the conditions of people who work in the manufacture of fast furniture, where companies have outsourced labour to developing nations to further keep down costs, and the pay inequalities and working conditions they are subjected to in order to keep pace with the demands of consumers. Contrariwise, if fast furniture is avoided and the market collapses, what will be left for those workers? In a separate vein, research may investigate sawmill workers whose health is affected by the process of particle board manufacture, the effects of which extends into consumers and users of fast furniture who have the potentially carcinogenic items in their homes. Finally, the infamous product recalls by companies including IKEA as a result of the accidental deaths of multiple children crushed beneath poorly made and unstable furniture.

Additionally, the consumer theory and behaviour side of the discussion has much more depth and breadth to be unpacked. It has been established in this research that the ethical consumer is a much more common concept than it was when *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer* was published in 2010; it applies to more individuals than it doesn't in 2020, given the amount of scientific and media attention that is devoted to covering the climate crisis. One pivotal argument worth expanding on in the context of the furniture sector is centred around the debate between the 'every little helps' consumer mentality versus the responsibility of conglomerates and governments for their carbon emissions, which are far too extensive to be tackled by even large swathes of a concerned population.

Lastly, it would be interesting to consider the efforts of contemporary furniture brands who are pioneering sustainable materiality, and the processes and techniques being designed to facilitate this.

A comparative investigation between fast and slow furniture yields the conclusion that fast furniture is the product of a myriad of historic and socio-economic influences and factors, culminating in a phenomenon which has the potential for irreversible environmental and stylistic damage. Alternatively, slow furniture is a suitable and accessible way to counteract the effects of fast furniture, incentivised by the potential for social and financial betterment. Life in the slow lane of furniture consumption may have more profound benefits than originally anticipated.

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