Chapter 11

Gender at Play: Décor Differences Between Boys' and Girls' Bedrooms

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Led into a room of an eight year old girl, the floor scattered with parts of toys and with doll's clothes, the proud inhabitant shows me her new bunkbed by demonstratively climbing her way up. When throning on her pink bedcover like a little fairy princess, she introduces me to her royal household of stuffed toys with which she so lovingly shares her bed. It strikes me that pink is the dominant colour, not only in the romantic decoration of the room, but also in the toys and the dress of the girl. How different the bedroom of a like-aged boy is. Warned by a little skeleton fixed on the door I enter a dangerous world: alien space ships skim the wall, suggesting Star Wars is already on. The bedcover, depicting a racing car, conceals his secrete bed-mate: a teddy-bear. He treats me to demonstrations of a robot in action, the firing arm of a miniature superman and the velocity of a supersonic racing car, lecturing me on how to press the buttons for the desired effects. When I leave the room, I notice there is neither a dominant colour in the decoration, nor in the toys, but it is rather a mixture of strong colours, like black, red and shades of blue.

Introduction

When visiting friends or relatives, I never refuse the invitation of the children of the household to see their rooms and their latest acquisitions. Such an invitation is a perfect alibi for the professional voyeurism of an anthropologist of domestic space (Cieraad 1999a). Not only as an invited guest, but also as a researcher I have analysed the décor of children's bedrooms. It all started in the early nineties with a collection of photographs taken by student-ethnographers in documenting Dutch households. This material indicated that when a boy reached the age of about six, the decoration of his room somehow needed a radical change. For example, wallpaper decorated with sweet mice or elephants in soft colours was replaced by wallpaper decorated with speedy and often futuristic images. The girl's bedroom, however, did not witness such a radical change of decoration. Differences that were intriguing.

In a search for more photographic documentation I came into contact with a female photographer, Charlotte Bogaert, who had photographed a large number of children's bedrooms in the city of Amsterdam in the early nineties. In sum she has portrayed 32 girls' and 25 boys' rooms of children ranging in age from six to twelve (1993a). Bogaert also interviewed most of the children on their hobbies and dreams

for the future (1993b). Her photographs confirmed my first impression of huge décor differences between girls' and boys' rooms. Differences, not only due to the age of the boy or girl, but also and more so to different expectations of future gender roles.

Strange as it may be, but in the fifties gender specificity in the décor of children's bedrooms was not as outspoken as they are now. Still the history of gender specificity in the domestic domain traces back to the nineteenth century, when it was an upper-class affair of adults. How gender specificity has been materialised in the décor of Dutch boys' and girls' bedrooms in the second half of the twentieth century will be the topic of this chapter. A distinction between promoted or mediated gender markers as represented in ideal situations like model homes and catalogues, and adopted gender markers as represented in Bogaert's photographs of actual settings, will be crucial in understanding the nature of domestic consumption.

First, however, the historic continuity or discontinuity of promoted gender markers will be established. To determine what gender markers were used in the fifties and sixties to mark a boys' or a girls' room, the photographs of the model homes of the Dutch organization for the promotion of modern living, called *De Stichting Goed Wonen* (best translated as *The Association for Correct Living*) will be compared with the gender markers in *IKEA* children's rooms as displayed in their catalogues of the nineties. Next the promoted or mediated gender markers will be confronted with real situations, as represented by my memory of the fifties, and Bogaert's frozen images of children's bedrooms in the nineties, complemented by Isabelle Makay's ethnographic research on the changing material world of a group of girls (2003).

Finally, the question is addressed why gender differences in the bedroom decoration of boys and girls grew stronger over the decades in contrast to the simultaneous social trend towards equalising gender differences in the public domain. One of which is the official ban on sex discrimination in professional life and job applications. If there is some truth in the words written in 1907 'The children's room is an apartment of major importance; a microcosm in which the child will have to prepare himself for the macrocosm of his future existence' (Matthias 1907, 13), then décor differences between boys' and girls' rooms are likely to have their impact not only on gender formation, but also on children's respective gender roles in adult life.

The emergence of gender-specificity

When discussing the gender-specific décor of children's bedrooms not only the opposition between the private and the public domain has to be addressed, but also the gender-specificity within the private realm of the family home. Nowadays it is seldom realised that the gender-specific decoration of contemporary children's bedrooms contrasts with other domestic spaces, including the parents' bedroom (Cromley 1992, 128). The present domestic situation is quite the opposite to the upper-class situation in the nineteenth-century, when the parents had their own gender-specific rooms and children shared a common nursery which was decorated in a casual and rather neutral

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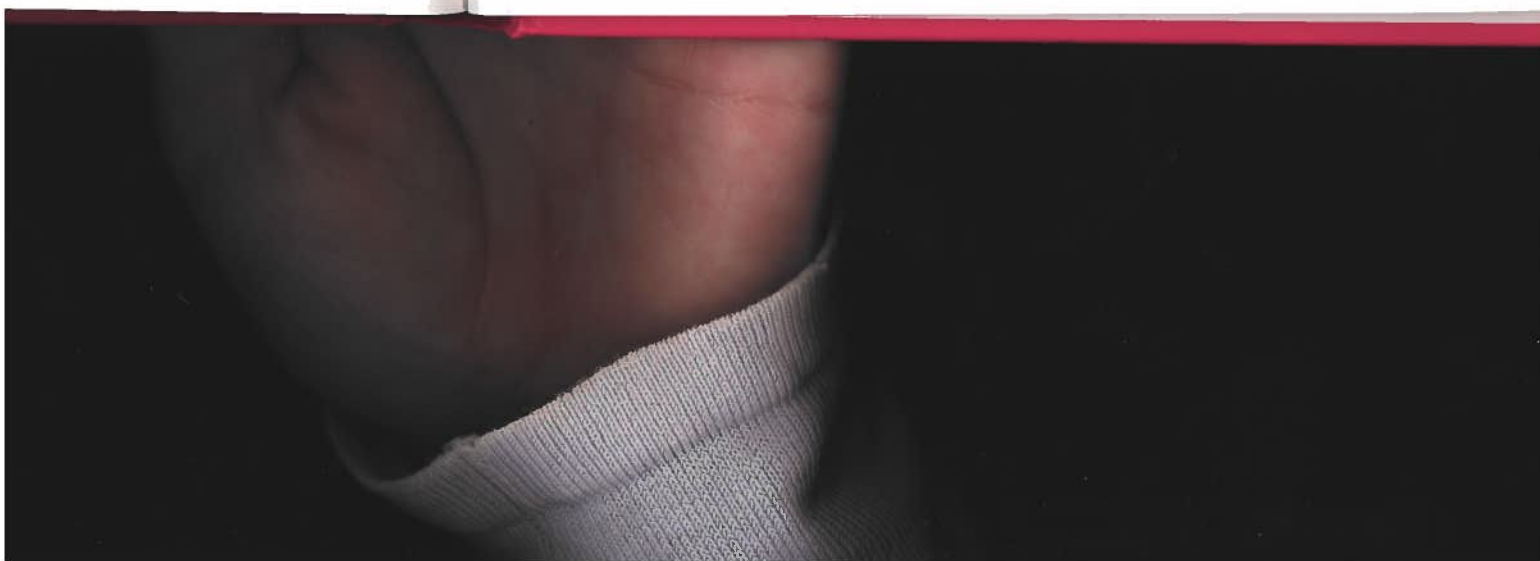
way. Distinctive children's rooms, however, and distinctive children's furniture, like most gender-specific toys became only more common in the first decades of the twentieth century, according to Karin Calvert (1992, 75).

Although Calvert describes the development in North-American upper and middle-class homes there is an evident continuity with the European domestic development. Also nineteenth-century European manuals for furnishing and decorating lack any reference to gender specific decorations of nurseries. The Dutch translation of Ashy's *Health in the Nursery*, published at the turn of the nineteenth century, is no exception to this rule. Although it is modern in its décor advice to cover the floor and walls with smooth and easy-to-clean material, and the promotion of separate rooms for sleeping and playing for hygienic reasons, there are no references to sex or gender differences when discussing children's rooms, clothing or toys (de Lange 1889). As the translator of the book, Cornelia de Lange, was one of the first female physicians in the Netherlands, it is all the more surprising. Still nineteenth-century publications on the implicit gender neutrality of the nursery also imply an opposition between the public and the private domain, for public life in the nineteenth century was known for its sexual segregation, at least where adults and adolescents were concerned. More or less in the same vein also the private domain of the upper-class house was divided in gender-specific spaces for adults, either by its use and decoration, or by its connotation. Studies, master bedrooms in the proper sense, and billiard and smoking rooms were considered male domains by its use and decoration, whereas the hall, library, office space and even the dining room were male-connotated spaces in its reference to the public domain and to the reception of visitors. Likewise boudoirs and bedrooms of adolescent girls were female domains by its use and decoration, while music rooms, drawing rooms, conservatories and conjugal bedrooms were female-connotated spaces. The decoration of rooms and spaces reflected the gender of the domain: serious, substantial and dark-toned for masculine rooms, and refined, decorative and colourful for feminine spaces (Kinchin 1996; Cieraad 2000).

The notable exception of the nursery within the highly gendered universe of a nineteenth-century house, draws the attention to the social nature of childhood and the social position of children in the family household as reflected in the use and decoration of the nursery. In its use the nursery was either a communal room for sleeping and playing shared by young children in the household, or a separate children's room for play, training and eating under the supervision of a nurse (Clavert 1992). The furnishings of a typical Victorian nursery would have been secondhand adult-sized goods, with only the cribs and perhaps one or more child-sized chairs specifically purchased to accommodate their new little owners, according to Calvert (1992, 81). Victorian nurseries, however, were filled with toys, not only moral and educational board and card games, but also miniature versions of gendered adult artefacts, such as carpentry-sets to develop manual skills in young sons and diminutive tea-sets to foster domestic instincts in little daughters. Calvert relates the late-nineteenth-century emergence of make-believe and stuffed toys, like soft cuddly Brownies, to a new perception of childhood in which fantasy and mischief



were not considered to be immoral sins anymore, but a stage in children's mental development (1992, 85).

This new adult's perception of childhood, according to Calvert, was first introduced into the nursery by toys, and gradually pervaded into the furnishing and decoration of the nursery as a whole, and introduced not only specially child-sized furniture instead of the usual cast-offs, but also a special colour code for children's rooms. First pastels were in vogue, primarily blue for babies and pink for young children, but in the twenties white with colourful accents was typical for nurseries. Also decorations and motifs of wallpaper became child-specific and age related, and as varied as balloons, clouds, clowns, sailboats and ducks. Calvert stresses the role of parents, and especially mothers in the creation of the new nursery décor and their adherence to the new perception of childhood. However, it also entailed a less angelic and innocent image of children than their Victorian predecessors who had roomed boys and girls together, confident of their children's innocence and purity (1992, 86-87).

In due process, the nursery became a name for the baby's bedroom, while older children moved into separate or single-sex bedrooms. A visual code to distinguish the gender of the room's occupant fairly quickly developed. By 1910, American boys' and girls' rooms looked very different. While the decoration of boys' rooms tended to be very spartan, drawing on a visual vocabulary borrowed from the militairy and the navy, like model sailboats, prints of maps, ship's lanterns, naval emblems and bunk beds, girls' rooms remained Victorian in a cluttered air of old-fashioned charm, with antiques, draperies, cushions and ruffles everywhere. Not only in the type of furnishing, but also in the colour range and material preference gender specificity was outspoken. Unadorned surfaces of plain wood, metal furniture and dark colours dominated the boys' room, while decorated textiles in pastel shades, a large mirror, a wooden dresser and an ornate metal bed in white finishing dominated the girls' room – décor differences which pertained to gender specificity of nineteenth-century adult rooms. Parents, however, with both sons and daughters complained about the expense involved, for the new gender-specific codes were definitely more expensive than a common nursery (Calvert 1992, 86-89).

A room of my own

Although there is only a small number of historic photographs documenting Dutch boys' and girls' rooms in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is evidenced that decorative gender differences invaded the bedrooms of Dutch upper-class children in more or less the same period as described by Calvert for American homes (Cieraad 2000, 216). Not only separate rooms for playing and sleeping, but also separate boys' and girls' rooms were a privilege of the well-to-do (Cromley 1992; Wils 1923, 37; Couperus 1979, orig. c. 1910). Children in less fortunate circumstances, however, slept in drafty atticks, built-in box beds, or better still shared one bedroom and slept in seperate beds, but two or three siblings sharing one bed was not uncommon either. Also their playground was not indoors, but outdoors (van Setten 1987, 71-73). Due to cramped housing conditions after the second world war most Dutch children shared

their bedroom with brothers and sisters. These cramped bedroom spaces favoured solutions like the wall bed and the bunk bed, or the creation of a separate sleeping-level (Cieraad 2005). One of the main objectives of the post-war *Association for Correct Living*, an association of interior designers, furniture producers and a consumers' league, was to stimulate housing corporations and parents alike, in the creation of child-friendly domestic environments with room for indoor play. *Correct Living* was even rather successful in attaining this mission (Cieraad 2004).

Nowadays bunk beds, high beds or separate sleeping levels are seldom installed to facilitate the sharing of a bedroom, but to create a multi-purpose space which will attend to the needs of an individual child not so much at night as at day. Only migrant households in the Netherlands, notably of Moroccan origin, tend to cling to the traditional concept of a bedroom as a place to sleep and store clothes. Bunk beds are considered to be the inevitable space economisers in the cramped housing situation of extended migrant families. However, whenever space allows bunk beds are exchanged for separate bedsteads, as demonstrated by a Moroccan girl who Bogaert proudly portrays within the narrow space between two elegantly shaped bed-steads. The type of bed seems to be more related to the age of the child, and less to the sex. Except, however, the four poster-bed, which is only to be found in girls' rooms. Most children up to the age of nine, however, favour a high bed, like the upper part of a bunk bed, while children in the age of ten or eleven fancy a low bedstead. Nowadays, not the high bed as such, but the space underneath is definitely gender-related. In the case of girls it is transformed into a little home, while in the case of the boys it is more often used as a storing space.

Not only because the reduced number of children per household and today's more spacious housing conditions warrant private rooms for children, but also because today's parents are convinced of a child's need for a place of his or her own, even if they have to give up space of their own (Beker and Merens 1994, 29; Peeters and Woldringh 1994, 31-33; Munro and Madigan 1999, 112-114). Children of divorced parents, for that matter, have two private bedrooms, one at their mother's and one at their father's place. While migrant children, according to Charlotte Bogaert's documentation, are still more likely to share a room or even a bed. Not only because migrant households are larger and live in more cramped conditions, but also because migrant parents are less convinced of the privacy needs of their children. The size of a child's room, the equipment, number of toys and above all a fancy furnishing and decoration are still very much related to the parents' social status. Separate rooms for playing and sleeping, however, have lost their status-appeal.

The material world of boys and girls

When Calvert (1992) stresses the role of parents in choosing a décor suited to the gender of the child, Cromley traces the emergence of the notion of self expression in the decoration of American children's bedrooms in the early twentieth century (1992, 128). For the first time home-decorating books advised parents on the proper

Figure 11.1 Girl in her bedroom, 1993
Photograph by Charlotte Bogaert.

decoration for the boys and the girls of the family. It was advised to give children, and especially girls, the opportunity to select their favourite wallpaper pattern and the curtains for their room, and as such enabling them to express their real selfs. The role of parents' choice or advice, and the child's so-called self expression are also important elements when analysing the décor of contemporary children's bedrooms. However, considering the limitations of the research material at hand these issues have to be addressed in an indirect way.

Still the material world of boys and girls as displayed in the decoration and furnishing of their bedrooms is much wider than the consumer choices made by either parents or children, whether or not their choices are mediated by home-decorating advice from catalogues. Contemporary children's rooms are unique depositories of objects and stuff acquired in all possible ways. Not only objects and materials which are bought for or by them, or toys that are borrowed or shared with a sibling, or objects handed-down by the parents, or bartered with schoolmates, or birthday gifts, or stolen objects, but also prizes won at school competitions, objects found, like shells or stones, collections of free merchandising, like beer spils, or statuettes, also the drawings and diplomas that are pinned on the wall, and the toys or furniture specially made for them or self-designed or transformed objects. If children do have a sense of self identity mirrored in the decoration of their bedroom, it is often more related to objects which are not part of the consumption cycle, but acquired in another way, as illustrated by Isabelle Makay's research (2003) on the relation between children and the decoration of their bedroom.

Makay's research shows that when a girl reaches the age of eleven, she wants to get rid of the 'childish stuff' and engages more actively in the re-creation of her

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Figure 11.2 Boy in his bedroom, 1993
Photograph by Charlotte Bogaert.

bedroom into a self-styled space. Spending their pocket money on decorative objects is an important element of the styling. The first transformation often results in a more messy appearance of the room, Makay concludes, as if it reflects the girl's in-between position as a teenager. In the girls' coming of age the material cycle of acquiring possessions, displaying, hoarding, discarding and eventually destroying or selling comes into view. A material cycle which is inaugurated by the parents who did away with the baby stuff and which will accelerate even more when the child grows older. Today's parents are very alert to the fact that the child's material environment, be it toys or the decoration of the child's room, has to reflect not only the gender but also the age of the child. Incongruities are as shameful to the child as to the parents.

Mediated consumption

It will become evident that the actual material universe of boys and girls was neither reflected in the images of children's model rooms as represented in *Correct Living*'s journal in the fifties and sixties, nor in IKEA's images of children's rooms as represented in their catalogues of the early nineties. As such it marks a difference of approach between consumer studies and material culture studies, especially where children are concerned (Martens et al. 2004). In consumer studies, however, there is a neglect of mediated forms of consumption, like expert advice of the consumers' league and suggestions in journals or catalogues. The mediation is characterised by a certain degree of authority and in a more subtle way than commercials or advertorials it links consumers to products and producers. Not only *Correct Living*'s journal and its articles on model homes and decoration, but also IKEA's catalogue

images of completely furnished children's bedrooms represent mediated forms of consumption.

A vital part of the mediation in the case of the décor of children's rooms is the authoritive use of gender markers to convey to potential consumers, mostly parents, the gender specificity of the décor. Neither IKEA nor *Correct Living* labelled the portrayed rooms explicitly as a boys' or a girls' room. The presence of gendered objects, notably toys supplemented in both cases the imagery. Although toys were the first gendered objects to be introduced into the Victorian nursery, it is questionable whether today's toys witness the prevalent gender roles, as Cross states (1997, 52). In comparing *Correct Living*'s and IKEA's mediation the historic continuity or discontinuity of gender specificity since the nineteenth century can be put into perspective.

It is a man's world

A model of a wooden sailer was one of the primary examples used by *Correct Living* to convey to the public that the decorated bedroom was an intended boys' room (van Moorsel 1992, 175; Niegeman 1958, opposite 37). Also carpenting tools were frequently portrayed to convey the message 'mind you, it is a boys' room you are looking at'. In the same way as badminton rackets or roller-skates symbolised boys' activities in *Correct Living*'s model homes (Niegeman 1958, opposite 101; van Moorsel 1992, 179, 190). Even the age-old male marker of the globe was presented in some early specimens of *Correct Living*'s boys' rooms (van Moorsel 1992, 176; Niegeman 1958, opposite 101). Ever since the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of the interior images of globes and printed maps have referred to the male-dominated domains of travel, transport and exploration (Cieraad 1999b). Technology, however, although a typical male domain since the nineteenth century, was not over-represented in *Correct Living*'s décor of boys' rooms (compare Cross 1997, 52-67). Except a carpenting-set and an out-moded telephone device, only once were a father and son portrayed while constructing a radio transmitter (Teijmant et al. 2001, 20; van Moorsel 1992, 190). Car models or dinky toys, however, are absent from *Correct Living*'s examples of boys' rooms. On the whole, *Correct Living* fancied a craft-like 'wooden' image.

Issues of home decorating magazines and furniture sales-books in the nineties show a striking continuity of these gendered toys. For instance, in 1994 an advocated 'trendy' boys' room was decorated with several models of wooden sailers (Ariadne 1994, 1, 86-93). Like a combination of a wooden sailer and a teddy bear present not only in a young boys' bedroom of *Correct Living* in 1955, but also in 1995 by IKEA. The linked representation of a boys' marker, being a sailing vessel, and a more child-like stuffed toy seemed to indicate the ambiguous status of premature boys. IKEA sales-books portray the established array of gendered toys and objects, not only car models, a rugby ball or an angling rod are unmistaken signs of a man's world, but also the traditional globe and map. However, also more modern toys, like roller-skates and beach-balls adorn the floor of IKEA's boys' rooms. Technology, the

male domain since the nineteenth-century, is updated by IKEA in the representation of audio sets. IKEA's colour and furniture arrangements, however, contributed in a reverse way to the image of a boys' room, as will be illustrated in the following description of girls' rooms.

A woman's homey world

The absence of male gendered objects was *Correct Living*'s primary way of representing the image of a girls' room. *Correct Living*'s more obtrusive indicators, however, referred to Nature, as was demonstrated by a vase with flowers, a poster with birds, or wooden statuettes of farm animals (van Moorsel 1992, 179, 183). However, more than the objects on display the spatial organisation of *Correct Living*'s girls' rooms betrayed the designer's ideas on the needs of little girls in contrast to boys. For example, whereas bunk or high beds were advised for boys and girls, only in girls' rooms a 'snug' space underneath was created, which was furnished like a little room with a doll's cradle and lighted by a little lamp. Also the furniture arrangement in *Correct Living*'s model room for a teenage girl resembled the propagated arrangement of family living-rooms in purpose-specific corners. The girl's bed was disguised as a couch, which formed in combination with an easy chair and a coffee table a 'real' sitting-corner for relaxation, while the presence of a writing desk signalled the office-corner.

A furniture arrangement which became female gendered, considering the pictures of girls' rooms in the issues of decoration magazines and IKEA-catalogues in the nineties (e.g. Doe het zelf 1994). IKEA's images stress the homy character of girls' rooms even more by the display of served food and drinks on the coffee table, and by complementing the bedroom's sitting-corner with a real couch. Except correspondences, however, there are also differences to account for. In IKEA's catalogues the girlish snug space is not only advised for little girls, but also for little boys. Although symbols of domesticity, like a carpet, floor-lamp or cushions, invade IKEA's boys' rooms, they are all the more present in its girls' rooms. Like reversely, technology, in the guise of a real telephone, invaded IKEA's designated girls' rooms. However, positioned in the snug space underneath the bunk bed, the telephone reinforced the gendered link between women and socio-talk in lengthy telephone conversations.

Although in the fifties stuffed toys, often a teddy bear, were typical toys of wee ones of either sex, there was hardly any trace of stuffed toys in the children's bedrooms decorated by *Correct Living*, in contrast to IKEA's where legions of stuffed animals are portrayed in rooms designed for little girls, wheras only two teddy bears show up in a room designed for a young boy. Not only the number of stuffed toys is indicative of sex and age, but also its location. In the case of both teenage and young boys' rooms teddy bears are positioned on a shelf or cupboard and not in the child's bed, for the bed proves to be the gendered location of stuffed toys in IKEA's girls' rooms. The prominent presence of a rocking-horse in one of its girls' rooms seems to be related

to the actual horse riding hype amongst girls. Traditionally, however, rocking-horses were boys' toys. The rocking-horse is one of the few gender shifts in toys.

Strange though, but the doll, the most evident girls' symbol, was not portrayed in any of the pictures of *Correct Living*'s model rooms for girls. The only reference to a doll was the presence of a doll's cradle on one of its pictures (van Moorsel 1992, 183). However, also in the images of IKEA's girls' rooms there is never ever a Barbie-doll represented and its boys' rooms lack dolls what so ever. The absence of audio-technology seems to be IKEA's best indicator of a girlish décor. When reading the images not only the presence of gendered objects and toys is telling, but also its absence.

Also in the depictions of girls' rooms there is a long persistance of gender markers, like the gendered toy combination of a blackboard and an abacus. A combination which was not only present in a girls' room designed by *Correct Living* in 1963, but also in IKEA's girls' rooms in addition to a tiny shopping basket and a bucket. Objects which refer to the traditional gender image of an economising housewife engaged in calculating, shopping and cleaning. However, also the persistence of absence is telling. For example, neither *Correct Living*'s designs of girls' rooms, nor IKEA's images presented modern sports goods. IKEA came up with traditional girls' objects like a skipping-rope and a hoop, but no ballet shoes, riding boots, or jockey caps.

Gendering colour and material

Also the persistency in the gendering of decorative colours and furniture material is striking. The finishings and textiles in *Correct Living*'s boys' and girls' rooms had bright, primary colours, mostly blue for boys', and red and yellow for the girls'. More or less the same colour scheme is displayed in IKEA's full-colour catalogues in the nineties. There was, however, more diversity in colour schemes of designed boys' and girls' rooms in the nineties when other sources than IKEA's catalogues are taken into account. For example, pastel shades – and in particular pink – are more prominent in the finishings of designed girl's rooms in lifestyle magazines. As regards the type of furniture used in the fifties and sixties' model rooms of *Correct Living*, there were no differences in the kind of furniture propagated for either boys or girls. The most pronounced difference, however, was a difference in design: an elegant writing desk for teenage girls and a sturdy work bench for boys (van Moorsel 1992, 173, 179, 190, 176; Niegeman 1958, opposite 101). It was, however, the presence of additional furniture elements, like an easy chair or a low table, that typified *Correct Living*'s teenage girls' rooms. The same holds true for the colourful designs of girls' rooms in the nineties (IKEA 1995, 174, 111; Ariadne 1995, 1, 95).

The selection of furniture material for children's rooms, however, differed over the decades. Steel tube was a dominant material in the furniture designs fancied by *Correct Living*'s architects, especially for the legs of furniture, often in combination with painted wooden tops. IKEA's dominant furniture material in children's rooms, however, is plain pinewood, in combination with white-coated or brightly painted fibreboard, a choice of material that pays tribute to IKEA's Swedish legacy of

producing cheap pinewood furniture. Neither *Correct Living*, nor IKEA gendered their material preferences. In reality, however, there proves to be huge differences between furniture materials used in boys' or girls' rooms.

Since the early twentieth century there is a fast continuity in the way designers labelled rooms to be a boys' or a girls' by their usage of gender-specific toys, gender-related colour schemes, or by gender-related furniture arrangement. The imaged traditional boys' toys refer to the public domain of sports, transport, adventure and technology, like the traditinal girls' toys refer to the private, domestic domain and to domesticated nature. Over the last decades, however, the designed gender specificity of the decoration of children's rooms has become more outspoken. But how effective were these gender images in moulding the minds of twentieth-century parents and children when decorating their rooms.

***Correct Living*'s mediated consumption**

Growing up in the fifties and sixties, as I did, some of the developments in décor differences between boys' and girls' bedrooms have been intimately experienced. My parents advocated the upper middle-class ideals of *Correct Living*, and as a matter of course, my own bedroom and my brother's resembled the photographs of *Correct Living*'s sparsely furnished children's bedrooms in an austere modern style. Not only a multi-coloured blanket, being the bedspread, but also the yellow curtains were colourful elements in my bedroom, laid with black lino. The colour scheme of my brother's room, however, was more gloomy: grey and dark blue, lighted with patches of yellow. Our rooms represented the colour gendering as propagated by *Correct Living* rather well.

There was, however, some difference in the presence of gendered objects, for there was no vase with flowers on my desk, nor a model of a wooden sailer on my brother's. Instead there was a plastic baby doll sitting in my room and there were plastic aeroplane models hanging from the ceiling in my brother's. Plastic toys, however, did not fit in with the advocated material philosophy of *Correct Living*. Also the popstar images I pinned on the wall, or the Mickey Mouse painting my brother fancied were abhorred representations of mass culture according to *Correct Living*'s cultural paradigm. My parents, however, indulged our attacks on their scheme, and my mother even made a special wall hanging to display our collection of brand pins and picture postcards. On the whole, however, *Correct Living*'s gender philosophy dominated our bedroom-scene, for indeed a little felt parrot and a few peacock's feathers were the references to nature in my room and not in my brother's. Like carpenting tools were prominently present in my brother's room and not in mine. My room had steel furniture, like my brother's had a wooden work bench.

It was a major event when I got my first bookshelf at the age of eight. The bookshelf was part of a rather expensive wall-mounted system of metal shelves, including a desk and drawers, which was advertised in nearly every issue of *Correct Living*'s journal since the late fifties. My parents presented it to be a trophy of

adolescence and a prime element in the re-creation of my bedroom into a small-size bed-sittingroom, in due course complemented with a metal desk, an easy chair with iron tube legs, a carpet and a coffee table. Although my parents stressed the distictive quality and brand name of the wall-mounted system of brightly coloured bookshelves, which were not to be mistaken for an inferior but more popular system, I was more impressed by the expense involved. As such it did not contribute to my sense of self-expression, but more to my sense of brand awareness. My collection of green bottles in different shapes and shades, which I had carefully arranged on the shelves, would have been a more likely candidate. At that time I was even surprised by my parents enthousiasm for my design preferences, however, without realising that *Correct Living* used the shape of bottles in their campaigns for taste reform (Cieraad 2004). In mediating consumption *Correct Living* had been rather effective, at least where my parents were concerned.

IKEA's mediated consumption

IKEA's appeal is less class-bound than *Correct Living*'s, although both are rooted in the same post-war social-democratic philosphy of supplying well-designed furniture at reasonable prices. The Swedish company opened its Amsterdam branch in 1979 and attracted a huge crowd at the opening through its publicity campaign. Previous to the opening IKEA's full-colour catalogue was delivered in nearly every household in Amsterdam and beyond. In its consumer approach IKEA lured their clients by playing on the economising desire and by putting their design philosophy second, while *Correct Living* stressed that good design does not come cheap. IKEA's strategy was far more successful from a marketing point of view, but if also its material philosophy and gender coding was as effectively mediated will be the topic of the following sections. Charlotte Bogaert's photographs of 57 children's rooms (32 girls' and 25 boys' rooms) from all over Amsterdam, portray a cross-section of Dutch urban society: not only the better and the less well-off, but also different taste and ethnic groups.

The pink reign

When looking at the photographs of all these actual children's bedrooms, the most striking difference between the boys' and the girls' room is the colour scheme. The dominance of pink in most of the girls' rooms contrasted with the blue or black in most of the boys' rooms. Pink not only dominated the bedlinen of most of the ten to twelve year-old girls, but expanded its reign into curtains, wallpaper and even floor covering (Sparke 1995). The toys displayed in the girls' rooms, like Barbie-dolls and the doll's accessories, were also dominantly pink-coloured, including a fair number of stuffed toys. The colour pink evolved from an initial age marker into a real gender marker for girls in the eighties and nineties. It emancipated from a dull female baby-image in the fifties into a colour with a revolutionary touch when

linked to the sexual liberation of homosexuals in the seventies. Nowadays the colour pink seems to have been faded into a highly commercial sign for the female gender, robbed of its revolutionary image (Cieraad 2004). A colour scheme, however, which in the early nineties was not in any way mediated by IKEA.

Also the massive influence of the media, and especially tv-series, movies and popstars on the design of children's toys can not be ignored when looking at the decoration of the images of real boys' and girls' rooms (Bauer and Hengst 1980, 184; Cross 1997, 182). From the seventies onward a lot of popular tv-series for teenagers focussed on horses, but these series seem to have affected girls only. Most of the portrayed eleven-year-old girls practised horse-riding. They dreamed about a future career as a horse instructor, or to become an actress in a horse movie. The success of the Barbie-doll was also due to the tuning to the growing girls' obsession for horse-riding. It caused not only a shift in Barbie's anatomy, but also in the doll's wardrobe: from a glamorous, party outfit to a more casual, sporty look (Bauer and Hengst 1980, 134). Pink lost its supremacy in the jockey outfits of eleven-year old girls, who are really horse-crazy. Some bedrooms have been over-decorated with pictures of free-running horses and one had even a large mural of a horse. IKEA, however, did not fancy pink for girls, neither did they display Barbie-dolls, nor any other American image of popular culture. IKEA also refrained from the English-inspired horse-hype.

Gendered technology

Although technology was a nearly exclusive boys' marker from a designer's point of view, in reality, however, the situation proved to be more diverse (see also Peeters and Woldringh 1994, 50). Girls possessed as often a tv-set as boys, but more girls than boys had a video device and an audio-device in the early nineties. Girls had sets in bright colours and boys' devices were predominantly black. Also karaoke devices to record a join-in voice with an instrumental tape seemed to be especially popular amongst girls. The device was promoted by a popular tv-programme in the nineties showing children in a play-back contest. Not surprisingly girls rather than boys aspired to a career as a singer.

In the case of game computers and personal computers the situation was reversed, for more than twice as many boys than girls possessed a game computer. This difference might be due to the marketing policy of the firm Nintendo who gendered the game computer by naming it 'Game Boy'. However, when the type of games to be played on a 'Game Boy' are taken into account, there may be another reason why the games were not appealing to girls. Most games are highly competitive and are played individually, whereas research into the separate social worlds of teenagers indicates girls' opposite preferences (de Waal 1989). In the case of the personal computer gender differences were even more pronounced. In 1993 none of the portrayed girls had a personal computer, but most boys did. Only one girl, twelve years old and of East-Indian origin, stated that she would like to buy one and hoped that her savings would make her dream come true. A like-aged boy, however, stated that he got the

computer from his mother who was a professional computer saleswoman. Although he hated to disappoint her he confessed he never used the device. In most cases, however, it was the other way round: fathers had donated their outdated computers to their sons.

In sum, when technology is concerned, the actual situation is more complex and diverse than the situation suggested by IKEA. Audio-sets are in reality more linked to girls' aspirations than to boys', and illustrate an actual gender shift of a technical device from a male to a female dominated domain. Like the telephone shifted from a male to a female specific technology, at least from the designer's point of view, for an old-fashioned telephone was used as a boys' marker in *Correct Living*'s model room in the fifties, while IKEA-designers used a modern telephone device as a girls' marker in the nineties. In reality, however, none of the portrayed children possessed a telephone device in 1993. A situation that has changed dramatically in ten years, considering the popularity of cell phones even amongst teenagers.

Although technology may generally be considered more a boys' than a girl's thing, the boys Bogaert interviewed did not burst with technical ambition. On the contrary, technology so it seems, and perhaps more the manual labour associated with it, was unpopular. In contrast to the work- bench in the designed boys' rooms of *Correct Living*, there was only one boy who had a work-bench in his room in 1993, while most of the fathers of these boys would have been actively engaged in DIY and as such possess at least a foldable work-bench and an electric drill. Perhaps sons don't imitate their father because the toy industry is not eager to convey father's domestic role model. There are not as many toy DIY-tools for sale as toy domestic appliances, except of course the traditional carpenting set. Toys, like Calvert stated, seem to be of prime importance in conveying traditional gender roles, but not in promoting more up-to-date gender roles.

Female fitness and male sports

Only in the display of sports goods the designed situation in the IKEA catalogues more or less parallels the actual situation. Winner's trophies, like medals, ribbons or cups, were prominently displayed in boys' rooms. Most of the boys confirmed to be engaged in football, baseball, basketball, tennis, kick boxing or karate, also most of the girls confirmed their engagement in horse riding, aerobics, ballet, tennis or hockey. A situation that matches the national percentages of boys and girls engaged in sports (ter Bogt and van Praag 1992, 106-107; Beker and Merens 1994, 77). The prominency of team and duel sports amongst boys compared to the solo sports amongst girls may be responsible for the boys' over-display of winner's trophies.

However, contrary to boys there was no display of sports goods in the girls' rooms. Jockey caps, riding boots, horse whips and ballet shoes are stored out of sight, and probably not in the girls' room. A large mirror, however, known to be a traditional gender marker since the late nineteenth century, is prominently present in most late twentieth-century girls' bedrooms too, but absent in IKEA's decoration. These full-size fitting mirrors, may be considered to be sports items too, for the girls claimed to

use the mirror to correct ballet and aerobic poses. Even if these mirrors are taken into account, still the display of sports items and goods in boys' rooms is overwhelming. Most of the décor of boys' rooms is a glorification of sports: wallpaper decorated with rugby items, posters of sports heroes, club flags and bedcovers decorated with the national football-team, with surfers or racing cars. No wonder more boys than girls dream of a professional sports career, for only a few girls aspired to a horse-riding or a ballet career. Sports goods have been a male gender marker for more than a century, and are still recognised as such by children of both sexes to be boys' stuff, as Makay noted (2003).

Gendered TV-Idols

Images of TV and pop idols were present in nearly every actual boys' or girls' room, but totally absent in designed rooms. As IKEA's commercial philosophy was akin to *Correct Living*'s cultural paradigm, there is the same avoidance of images of popular culture in the design of children's rooms. It also explains the absence of tv-sets in IKEA's design of children's rooms in the nineties. However, children's reality has become – for decades now – a media reality or, a second-hand reality as Bauer and Hengst (1980) termed it. Characters of popular tv-series were widely displayed in children's rooms, for children are known to be highly sensitive to media messages. In response they have become a main consumer target group for tv-commercials (Mergen 1982, 114; Seiter 1993; Engelhardt 1994). Marketing departments of toy firms do realise that children more than their parents determine the choice of toys. Considering the media impact on childeren, it is no wonder that the sale of simple wooden toys motivated by pedagogical intentions, and less loudly propagated in IKEA's catalogues was bound to fail.

Also the well-marketed Walt Disney's cartoon characters, although more than 60 years old, proved to be still popular, especially in the decoration of boys' rooms. Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Pluto are also overrepresented in boys' rooms, while the clumsy character Goofy only appeared in girls' rooms. It seems as if the more life-like cartoon characters, like the coquettish Betty Boop and Little Mermaid or the philosophical dog Snoopy and even the heroic Batman, were more appealing to girls, than bizarre characters like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Gremlins, Ghostbusters or Jurassic Park Dinosaurs. These bizarre creatures only populated boys' rooms and always in large numbers: turtle wallpaper in combination with a bedcover decorated with turtles or a bookcase completely filled with miniature dinosaurs.

For the same reason, human characters like those in the nineties' tv-series *Beverly Hills 90210* seem to be popular among girls from the ages of ten to twelve, considering the posters on the wall and bedcovers with portraits of the members of this neighbourhood group of rich youngsters. Their portraits competed with those of sexy female pop stars and numerous animal pictures stuck on the wall. Like-aged boys, however, had fancy posters of macho characters from nineties' movies like *Bay Watch*, *Cop* or *Double Impact* or posters of science fiction or horror movies.

Competing images were those of kick boxers, football-stars or male pop stars like Michael Jackson. Both boys and girls in the age-group of six to twelve did not seem attracted to images of pop or movie stars of the opposite sex. A situation that seems to be changing, for ten years later notably eleven year old boys also prefer posters of individual female pop stars, while like aged girls tend to favour female pop groups (Makay 2003, 76). To nine-year olds, according to Makay's research, posters are the most evident way to express the social self.

Musical instruments, though absent in IKEA's arrangements, were prominently present in the actual children's rooms. Surprisingly, however, only one boy wished to be a popstar, although more boys than girls played a musical instrument, notably the drums. Even boys who performed in bands did not value a career in the performing arts. From a male perspective, however, a professional sports career may have more or equal performing qualities. Also there are few if any tv-series or movies in which artistic qualities or technical ambitions are incorporated in its leading characters.

The effect of tv-series or movies seems to be stronger on the social self of boys than girls. Especially when the tv-induced influence of sports is taken into account. For example, the traditionally dusty image of an archaeologist was successfully upgraded by then popular movies like the 'Indiana Jones' series and 'Jurrasic Park', and was very attractive to boys. Moreover, statistics reveal that boys watch more tv than girls (Peeters and Woldringh 1994, 50; ter Bogt and van Praag 1992, 98). Also the traditional professional aspirations of girls in becoming a hairdresser, housewife, teacher, or a nurse – only expressed by girls in the age of six to nine – seem to be toy and not tv-induced ambitions. For example, the future hairdresser is portrayed with a giant long-haired doll's head to train her hairdressing abilities and the future nurse rolls a doll's carriage in a nurse's outfit. Gender-specific toys as presented by IKEA are not fore-grounded in any of the photographs.

Gender-specific schemes

Except for toys, objects, and poster images, gender specificity is also represented in colour and material preferences. Also the children interviewed by Makay characterised boys' and girls' rooms primarily on the prevalent colour scheme: pink and pastel colours for girls and predominantly blue, black, red, and yellow for boys (Makay 2003). Although IKEA has not advocated gender specificity in furniture material, the actual situation is different, for there is a dominant use of coated fibre board, painted wood and steel in the boys' room, while plain natural wood is the dominant material in the girls', among other things due to IKEA's popular wooden bunk beds. These trivial décor differences between girls' and boys' rooms are nowadays characteristic traits of contrasting gender schemes, which have grown stronger over the last decades of the twentieth century.

Especially, the gender specificity of metal furniture turns out to be the most recent example, for in the late nineteenth century metal bedsteads were still advised for both boys and girls. At that time metal furniture represented modernity and hygiene. *Correct Living*, however, assigned metal furniture to girls, not so much

because of the material but more because of the elegancy of the designs. In the course of the sixties, however, the suitability of metal furniture for domestic spaces was contested. Societal controversies were stressed in contrasting material preferences of consumers. Notably young consumers with an academic education discredited modernity and progress for causing exhaustion of natural resources and environmental pollution. Metal, plastics and synthetic coatings were banned, while plain, natural wood was glorified as the very symbol of nature, purity, roots and tradition. The controversy was extended into the related colour schemes: natural shades contrasted with modern white finishings and artificial colours. Hard-liners, for instance, banned shocking pink, which was increasingly commercialised by Barbie's producer Mattel to indicate a girly dream world.

However, these contrasting material codes became also linked to the aggravating split between the public and the private domain. The public domain of commerce and progress expressed itself predominantly in a modern material code of 'cold', coated and polished materials like metal, glass and stone. While the homely world had to express community and care in a preferred use of 'warm' and natural materials like pure wood, cork, natural wool and cotton (Cieraad 1991, 30-31). The linkage of these contrasting material schemes to the public and the private domain resulted also in a linkage to gender. For the 'cold' material scheme of the world of commerce and progress came to be the expression of a male-dominated professional world, while the 'warm' material scheme of the home came to be an expression of the female-dominated world of care.

Although gender specificity in the home is rooted in the nineteenth-century décor differences between male and female spaces, it is differently materialised in the late sixties and early seventies. The traditional schemes, however, are revived and blended into new. Its domestic course parallels the traditional nineteenth-century schemes, for the material coding initially affected only adults and their related domains, but progressively it invaded the décor of boys' and girls' bedrooms in the eighties and nineties (Calvert 1992, 90). The radical re-decoration of a boys' room when a boy reaches the age of six illustrates the invasion. Wallpaper in soft colours decorated with sweet animals is replaced by wallpaper of darker shades decorated with objects referring to technical progress, commerce, competition or to the public domain. For example, decorations like futuristic space shuttles, racing cars or science-fictional Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles encoded the young boy's professed orientation towards a technological future (see also Engelhardt 1994).

Not only the predominance of brand names and club names, but also the number of printed announcements and commercial and national flags in the décor of teenage boys' rooms are numerous material references to the public domain and the world of commerce. For example, a twelve-year-old boy is portrayed in his room surrounded by objects with Coca-Cola's brand name on it. The walls of boys' bedrooms are decorated with movie-posters, kick boxing announcements, graffiti, foreign number plates, or traffic signs. They merge into the traditional male scheme of transport, technology and velocity, as expressed by numerous images of trucks, motorcars,

motorcycles and aeroplanes. All these visible material references to the public domain are missing in the décor of girls' rooms.

Nature was not only encoded in the wooden material of the girls' furniture, but also in the pictures on the wall, representing a multitude of animals, mainly horses and cats. Images that contrasted with photographs of ferocious African wildlife, skulls of antelopes and a mural of a savannah landscape which decorated the only nature-dominated boys' room. The overall-image of Nature in girls' rooms is rather traditional, for it is a cultivated, domesticated and therefore a safe kind of Nature. Murals of a flowering meadow or a running horse, a row of real potted plants in the window-sill, or vases with bouquets of artificial flowers are all representations of domesticated Nature. Although pictures of free-running horses on the walls of girls' rooms may suggest an image of the wild, the horse's domestication in horse-riding is ignored. Nature as being unspoiled, innocent and in need of protection was encoded in pictures of little seals and sleeping babies. Numerous images of the Holly Hobbie doll in rustic dress – being a typical seventies outfit – underlined the gender specificity of traditional romanticism, like reversely futuristic images underline the male gender.

The homy code of care and share, however, invade the rooms of girls of a younger age than in the fifties. It was not only expressed in the young girls' furniture arrangement, but also in the caring and sharing values that go along with it. For example, a portrayed family of stuffed animals all sharing the same bed, numerous posters with yearning looks of helpless animals begging for support, and last but not least doll's cradles and carriages referring to maternal love and care. Most teenage girls' rooms, however, also function as private stage floors: safe training grounds for the aspired performing career, managed with the help of mirrors and recording devices, like video cassettes. Teenage girls stress the importance of privacy, especially when practising their ballet and street-dance poses (Makay 2003).

Conclusion

Décor differences between boys' and girls' rooms have a history since the late nineteenth century. The continuity of gender markers as mediated by home-decorating books, journals and catalogues is striking. Within the context of domestic consumption the authority of advisory literature like manuals, journals, and catalogues is seldom recognised. However, viewed as mediated consumption its effect on the material environment and décor of actual children's bedrooms can be judged. When scrutinising photographic documentation of actual boys' and girls' rooms the material reality proves to be more diverse and at some points even contradictory to the promoted gender markers. For example, the model of a wooden sailor promoted not only by *Correct Living*, but also by IKEA to mark a boys' room, is not present in any of the actual boys' rooms. Whereas brand names are very visible when inspecting the photographs of the actual teenage boys' rooms, there is no visual

evidence of brand names in the arranged settings. The same with Barbie dolls in the actual girls' rooms and their absence in IKEA's arranged rooms.

These examples illustrate not so much the limited authority of mediated consumption, as its censorship in filtering out the day-to-day commercial reality children are confronted with. For instance, the authority of mediated consumption is not in jeopardy where adults and notably couples are concerned, for in the decoration of kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms and also their own bedrooms not only commercial references, like brand names are screened out, but also images of pop stars or media personalities.

This brings to the fore the special position of children in the domain of domestic consumption, and notably the creation of an age and gender-related material environment, which is by every means a co-production between parents and children. Teenagers, however, are more likely to take over in a deliberate attempt to express their new social self into their décor. In their judgements they will tune more to their social peers outside the household than to family members. A vital part of the expression of their new social self is the keen awareness of creating a visible gender specificity in the décor, according to Makay. The peer group represents in the minds of teenagers the public eye. As such the décor of teenagers' rooms can be perceived as a representation of the public in the private realm of the house. This may also explain why references to DIY as a domestic affair of parents, and notably fathers, are missing in contemporary boys' rooms, like it explains why technology in the guise of kareoke-sets and video-devices has become more a girls' than a boys' thing. And that is why neither cookers nor washing machines are appliances to be found in teenage girls' rooms, while a few years later these appliances will be part of her private student room.

Visibility and display, however, are key words, not only in the parents' creation of the décor of children's rooms, but also in the teenager's re-creation, characteristics that confront us with the limitations of reading meaning exclusively from a material environment. Brand names may not be displayed in girls' rooms, but this does not entail that girls lack an awareness of brands or miss commercial expertise. On the contrary, they seem to be as price and brand-conscious as boys, and perhaps even more, but their expertise is related to other gender-specific products. Also the absence of sports goods in girls' rooms does not mean girls are not engaged in sports, but that riding boots and jockey caps are stored elswhere. In reading the décor of a room absence can be as telling as presence, and only by comparing boys' and girls' bedrooms, and children's rooms with family living rooms differences can be put into perspective.

The notion that a child's room, as stated in 1907, '(...) is an apartment of major importance; a microcosm in which the child will have to prepare himself for the macrocosm of his future existence' is still very true on a psychological level in providing a personal haven for an individual child. However, the research presented here questions the continuity between the microcosm of the children's room and the macrocosm of society on the material level of the gender specificity displayed in the objects and décor of boys' and girls' rooms. In the case of the proclaimed continuity

it would forecast children's respective gender roles in adult life. However, not only the history of the gender neutrality of the nineteenth-century nursery illustrates a discontinuity between the private and the public domain, but also the gender-specific decoration of contemporary teenage boys' or girls' room bears witness to a discontinuity with the gender roles of contemporary adults in domestic and public life. As such it typifies the present societal situation in which sex discrimination is prohibited by law, but justified in decorational differences between boys' and girls' rooms at home.

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