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# Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design

By Greg Castillo



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**Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design** By Greg Castillo

Amid a display of sunshine-yellow electric appliances in a model home at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon squared off on the merits of their respective economic systems. One of the signature events of the cold war, the impromptu Kitchen Debate has been widely viewed as the opening skirmish in a propaganda war over which superpower could provide a better standard of living for its citizens. However, as Greg Castillo shows in *Cold War on the Home Front*, this debate and the American National Exhibition itself were, in fact, the culmination of a decade-long ideological battle fought with refrigerators, televisions, living room suites, and prefab homes.

The first in-depth history of how domestic environments were exploited to promote the superiority of either capitalism or socialism on both sides of the Iron Curtain, *Cold War on the Home Front* reveals the tactics used by the American government to seduce citizens of the Soviet bloc with state-of-the-art consumer goods and the reactions of the Communist Party. Beginning in 1950, the U.S. State Department sponsored home expositions in West Berlin that were specifically designed to attract residents of East Berlin, featuring dream homes with modernist furnishings that presented an idealized vision of the lifestyle enjoyed by the consumer-citizen in the West. In response, Party authorities in East Germany staged socialist home expositions intended to evoke the domestic ideal of a cultured proletariat.

Castillo closely follows the course of this escalating rivalry between competing consumer cultures through the 1950s, concluding that the Soviet bloc's inability to make good on the claim that it could emulate goods and living standards offered by the West was a contributing factor in communism's eventual demise. Using a mosaic of sources ranging from recently declassified government documents to homemaking journals and popular fiction, *Cold War on the Home Front* contributes an engaging new perspective on midcentury modernist style and its political uses at the dawn of the cold war.



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Greg Castillo is associate professor of architectural history at the College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley.

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