

The Material Culture of Domestic Storage

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In the period between 1890 and 1930, a series of innovative designs for storage spaces and objects helped change the character of the middle-class American house. In the late nineteenth century, most suburban houses contained a number of discreet spaces filled with a combination of manufactured and handcrafted goods. Most people purchased supplies in bulk, so empty rooms in attics and basements held excess goods and raw materials such as fuel for heating. At the same time, movable chests of drawers and other types of chests and cupboards held smaller items throughout the house. Closets, storerooms, pantries, and other more architectural solutions could be tucked into corners, under eaves, around chimneys, and in similar unobtrusive locations. Also, the Victorian passions for display allowed many goods to be stored out in the open on tabletops and shelves.

The approach to storage changed when the quantity of pre-made goods purchased by middle-class Americans increased and new approaches to packaging goods made it possible to store them in new ways. After 1900, merchants sold increasing amounts of prepackaged food in tin cans and paraffin coated cardboard containers. Domestic experts such as Christine Frederick favored such containers because they could adapt to compressed living conditions, occupying less shelf and cabinet space. Ready-to-wear clothing for all members of the family likewise became available after the turn of the century.

As a result of these new developments, a new modern storage repertoire made up of a range of spaces, objects, and devices emerged. These new elements instigated domestic order in a manner similar to the way that alphabetical vertical filing systems transformed the character of office space by replacing previously popular methods of paper storage, including stacking and scrap booking. The spatial result of this shift in domestic storage design included the creation of more open and relatively empty domestic spaces.

The new storage spaces and products of the early twentieth century demonstrate the implementation of several cultural values manifested as a range of storage principles. Modern middle-class Americans valued convenience as their increased exposure to industrial and managerial processes encouraged the introduction of efficient operations to the domestic realm. They also valued the mobility brought about by new forms of transportation and a propensity for following educational and career-oriented opportunities around the country. And during a period of time that included America's participation in World War I, economic depression, and dramatic shifts in the character of a traditional middle-class existence, Americans also valued security. Nearly every storage innovation developed can be tied to one or more of the storage principles suggested by these values.

The first principle, consolidation, encouraged grouping like goods together. This strategy enhanced builders' ability to place storage spaces near where their contents could be most useful. For instance, by grouping more regularly-shaped clothes closets together side-by-side between rooms, wardrobes could be stored predictably and uniformly in locations convenient to where they were needed. Similarly, the use of bookshelves and shallow cabinets back-to-back in

combination with closets created zones of storage between rooms could serve the needs of spaces with differing functions.

A second storage principle, accessibility, provided similar convenience. Manufactured contraptions that fit inside cupboards, closets and drawers went beyond simply making stored items visible by making them easier to reach, remove, or use. In the case of closets, many types of fixtures and fittings improved the performance of older, less useful closets while others added an element of compartmentalization that discouraged piling or stacking.

A third storage principle, disclosure, implemented the use of transparent materials to enhance the accessibility of stored goods. By allowing a view into an enclosed compartment, the effort required to perform housekeeping tasks could be reduced. Glass-fronted cabinets for dishes and bookcases for the home library also maintained their contents in a relatively dust-free environment, keeping them in better condition. Disclosure was also created when moving parts were implemented in storage devices to help suggest their contents. For instance, shelves that slid in and out of cabinets like drawers (or drawers themselves, for that matter) made it possible for a storage device to show contents that might otherwise have been hidden from view.

Portability also played a role as a storage principle in the early twentieth century. The ability to move storage objects was an important feature because housekeeping processes dictated that furniture be moved regularly so that the floors and walls underneath and behind such pieces could be thoroughly cleaned. Portability also affected the ability of home occupants to move storage products with them when they changed dwellings. Since many older houses failed to provide adequate storage space to support modern habits of consumption, adding portable components helped improve the living conditions of houses that lacked architectural storage solutions.

The concept of elasticity supported the ability to add storage features to existing or newly constructed dwellings. Modular cabinets or cases that could be accumulated incrementally depending on the amount of money or space available illustrate this concept. By making units in sizes that related to one another, manufacturers presented middle-class consumers with opportunities to buy as few or as many storage components as they needed. More cabinets in an elastic system could always be added later if more storage proved to be necessary.

Finally, the desire to preserve one's belongings or provisions by keeping them safe proved to be the most basic principle behind the design and development of modern storage features. By developing spaces and products that safeguarded goods, designers and manufacturers appealed to a middle-class desire to be frugal and to conserve and preserve their excess provisions. Especially when times of war limited the supply of certain types of goods, the development of storage spaces that specifically protected delicate or vulnerable goods such as home-grown produce added a critical capability to the middle-class house. Ultimately, though, all storage needed to provide a safe atmosphere for its contents in order to be deemed useful.