

Perfect Lifestyle, Ideal Home

Thousands of people will visit the Ideal Home Exhibition this month. Frank Nort looks at an institution trying to keep pace with the times

'Get the idea - tomorrow's idea today', say the logos for the 65th run of the Ideal Home Exhibition on show this month at London's Olympia. This year the *Daily Mail* extravaganza celebrates its 50 millionth visitor.

Planned as an interior village, 400 stands fill the halls with an orgy of domestic delights and consumer goodies - from conservatories to custom-built kitchens, snooker tables to self-watering plants. Centre-stage are the six show houses. Here lies the real cultural message; the spectacle of ideal lifestyles and living arrangements. Interior space and the emblems of personal consumption conjure up different versions of social relations and personal life. A successful company director and his wife might opt for 'The Hardwick', flagship of the highly successful heritage range, with its inglenook fireplace and mini-gym. Or - for yuppies - there's the timber-framed house of the future, open-plan with spaces for work and entertainment.

It's easy - all too easy - to send the show up as a monster of middle-class kitsch, a sort of latter-day Great Exhibition. Admittedly the organisers do have problems. As a concept, Ideal Home belongs to a much earlier moment. Its origins lie in those vast, early 20th century corporatist spectacles - Wembley's Empire Exhibition or Berlin's *Wunder des Lebens* - where visitors came to marvel at the sheer power of size and space.

Something has happened to make Ideal Home look camp and outdated. Namely the new lifestyle politics of the 1980s; the move to intensely personal private consumption. This is not just a return to earlier, traditional values. Nor does it line up as straight cultural conservatism. The

marketing and advertising industry will tell you it is their attempt to get to grips with cultural shifts which are already at work on the ground. Changing class relations, the cultural impact of recession and feminism, the youth markets, and the 'new man' - this is what is up for grabs in campaigns.

Marketers and advertisers have never just been interested in charting rising sales figures and profitability. They have always had designs on our lifestyles. Today the talk is all of a designer-led, retail revolution - visually exciting - which responds rapidly to changing consumer demand.

Rodney Fitch, of Fitch and Co, the consultants who promoted Next, pinpoints the move quite precisely: 'the consumer is changing. The consumer's ideas, expectations and attitudes are all in a state of flux ... design has become part of competitive retail strategies. Design is a visual thing and therefore the end result is visual change.' Two basic concepts are at work here. One points up the move towards market segmentation. The other underlines the design input, and the stress on visuals, in the marketer's brief.

The argument goes like this. Cultural as well as economic splintering of what were in the 60s and 70s solid market blocs (the working class, youth, the housewife, etc) calls for a rethink. The market has filled up with segmented consumer profiles both up and down the scale: C1s and C2s, yuppies, sloanes, the working woman, gay men, the young elderly. A changed situation demands a different type of campaign. This is where the design input comes in. Lifestyle advertising, where the message is more 'emotional' than rational and informa-



Ideal Homes 1988: An interior village filled with stalls displaying ever-changing consumer goods



At the 1947 Ideal Home Exhibition the central feature was a perspex gas oven

tional, feeds off design and visual imagery. The idea is to create mood, where consumers experience their quintessential individuality in the product. Levis jeans, Saga holidays, Dr White's, all work with this brief. Lifestyle advertising is about differentiating oneself from 'the Joneses', not, as in previous decades, keeping up with them.

Put that simply it sounds as if marketers had just discovered individualism as a way of selling commodities. Of course the special, unique *you* has been the staple diet of so many campaigns over the last 30 years. What we can say is that the 80s has seen a hyping of that process, an explosion of individualities - of the number of you on offer.

Whisper it not too loud, but doesn't this marketing speak bear an uncanny resemblance to the new constituency politics of the Left which is now under such attack? Only difference is that the political rhetoric speaks a language of oppression and struggle (of gays, women, the elderly, etc), while the cultural imagery is all to do with pleasure and consumer fulfilment. This isn't an argument for turning politics into advertising, or for saying that there is nowhere to go but the shops. But it is to point to some pretty rapid shifts which are breaking up time-honoured demarcations between something called politics on the one hand, and leisure, pleasure and personal life on the other.

Last month we saw the launch of Labour's 'listening' campaign. Tucked away in there was a paragraph about taking consumer aspirations seriously - in the commercial market place as well as the public sector. If the Left can begin to find a common language which links its demands for political and social freedoms with the cultural individualism of lifestyle politics, it might have the makings of 'the big idea' to challenge popular capitalism. Meanwhile, back in the world of Ideal Home they'll be packing them in by the coachload. •