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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

\*

DINERS, A PERFECT REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN  
POP-CULTURE AND STYLE?

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty  
of History of Art

and

in candidacy for the Degree

in

Faculty of Design  
Department of Ceramics

by

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## INTRODUCTION

American pop-culture and style - what was it? What did the diner have in connection with it?

I will firstly be discussing American pop-culture, how it evolved, under which social conditions did it flourish? What made this style of the fifties a uniquely American phenomenon?

I will discuss the American diner as a representation of this concept, looking at the history of diners, how they emerged and then flourished, and the factors contained within diners which I see as being paralleled with those factors which are the main thesis of American pop-culture and style.

Having discussed these subjects, I will then look at the stylistic nostalgia of diners today, the constant reminiscence of an era gone by - the fifties, a time of economic and aesthetic boom. The Americans were at their happiest during the fifties because their standard of living exceeded their expectations.

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## Chapter 1

### WHAT IS AMERICAN POP-CULTURE?

War-time America was not, unlike its European contemporaries, for the most part, physically or financially affected by the war. Apart from the attack on Pearl Harbour, the American nation was mainly unaffected; indeed, in some aspects, America prospered from the war. Their ability to build such war essentials as arms, uniforms and ships, put them in a position to actually benefit. Their counterparts, under constant attack, were virtually crippled as far as any mass production of the commodities mentioned above was concerned, and were also constantly fighting to maintain as much of a normal way of life as possible. American living standards had actually risen since the 1930s recession.

The post-war boom was largely an American phenomenon, simply because the United States had the money and manufacturing productivity to make it possible. America had achieved economic and technical superiority. Whilst Europe strove to rebuild their cities, Americans were in the position to move forward, with glory, into a prosperous and consumerist society. America had ended the war with the use of great technology; the 'bomb' had been their final victory. The whole nation seemed to be affected by their triumph over Japan.

Every aspect of living was affected by the new post-war prosperity gripping the country. A new idealism had emerged. There had been a propaganda campaign set up during the war. It was to encourage the women to leave their homes and go out to work in the factories to 'serve their country' and 'support their men' on the front line. When the war ended, with all the men flooding back into the country, and in need of employment, the propaganda campaign was reversed and the women encouraged back into the home and kitchen.

The campaign incorporated posters (Fig.1) with images of ideal homes with ideal kitchens and ideal wives. The pop-culture era was under way. The imagery extended to posters conveying designs for new 'space age' schools, shopping centres, airports, cinemas and an array of public buildings (Fig.2) built from newly fabricated materials such as glass bricks, concrete and chrome panelling.

Emerging was a new design era which came about due to post-war prosperity, financial and technological resources were no longer concentrated on the creation of weapons and arms, but the exploding consumer market. There was an emergence





Fig.1

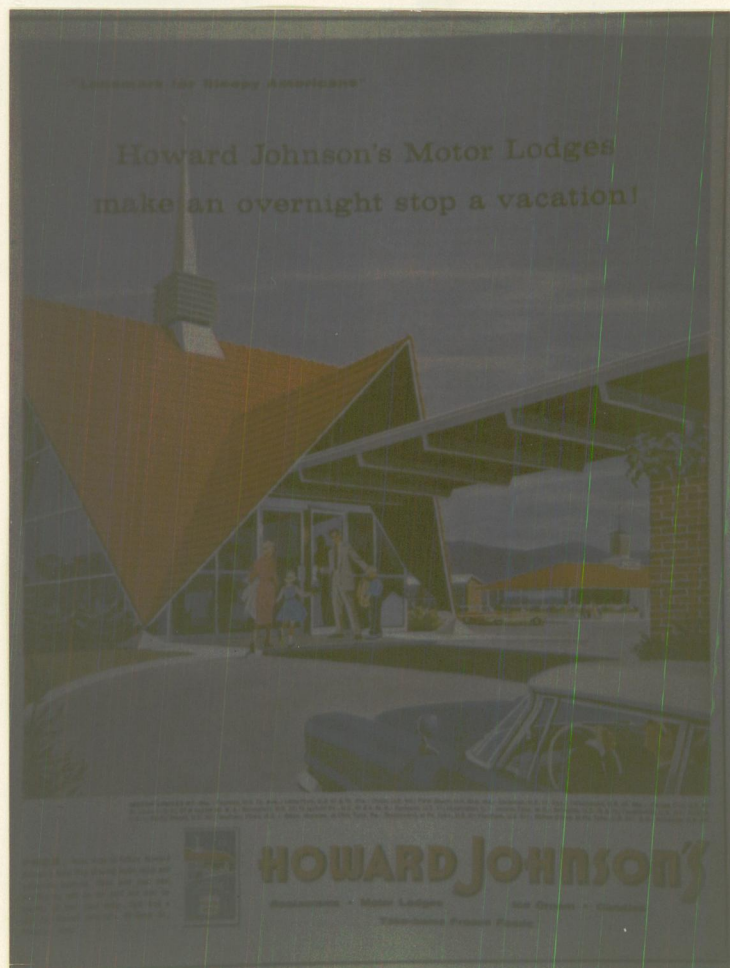


Fig.2





Fig.3



Fig.4



of new manufacturing techniques such as streamlining, which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. This process, in particular, was popular and therefore commercially successful.

New materials for all aspects of the commercial market appeared. The concept of 'for the masses by the masses' was a major catalyst in the whole movement towards the new consumerist society. The appearance of an egalitarian society grew, everyone could aspire to the same standard of living, which had quickly improved since the end of the war. Products which were previously seen as luxury items were fast becoming normal aspirations of the average worker's life.

In the early fifties a huge change in taste and in the patterns of consumption came about. These changes were associated with the ironing out of the wealth within the country; the blue collar worker and also the teenager now came into line with the rest of the nation as far as being important consumers in the mass consumerist society. I will deal with this in Chapter 11. Particular retail areas geared towards these changes were the film industry, the music industry, the clothes industry, food and most restaurants, including diners, which I will also look at in relation to teenagers in the next chapter.

There can be no doubt that in the post-war period America began to exert a considerable cultural and economic influence on European life. This was a stage in American history when, for the first time, the rest of the world raved and dreamed about the apparent American egalitarian affluence. An example of this being that, at that time, fifty per cent of all films being shown outside of America were American. This, combined with the now wider exposure of television, all helped to demonstrate the American way of life and its very successful consumerist society.

The reality was not of an egalitarian society, but of a rise in everyone's standard of living, both rich and poor. Due to technological advances, the whole spectrum of society's standard of living was stepped up greatly. The fifties phenomenon of perceived optimism and mutual prosperity sprang from the novelty and relative advantages of this shift upwards.

Every aspect of American life was optimistic - bigger than ever and growing, generally showing an ideal way of life that people would aspire to. These films not only inspired Europeans but also encouraged Americans themselves. The films showed the 'perfect family' (Fig.3) with all their perfect 'gadgets' and aspiring to be these perfect families, people acquired the gadgets (Fig.4) they saw as being essential to fulfil this dream. Everyone in the country was swept along on the tide of economic boom.



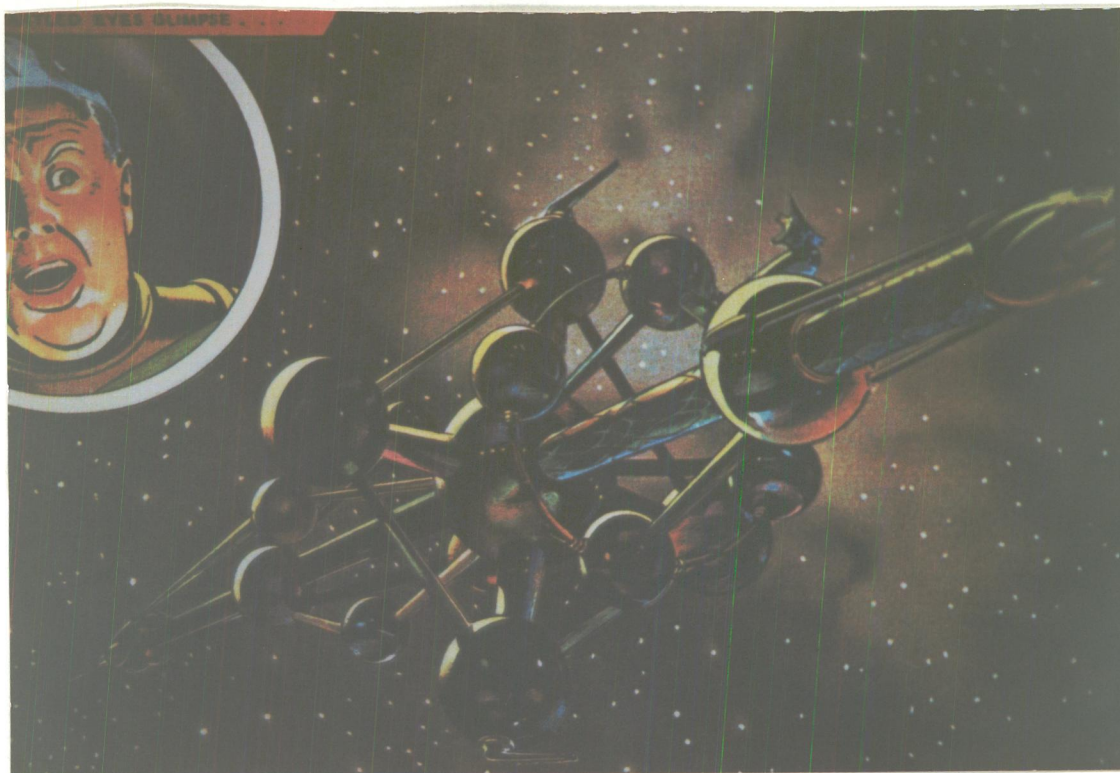
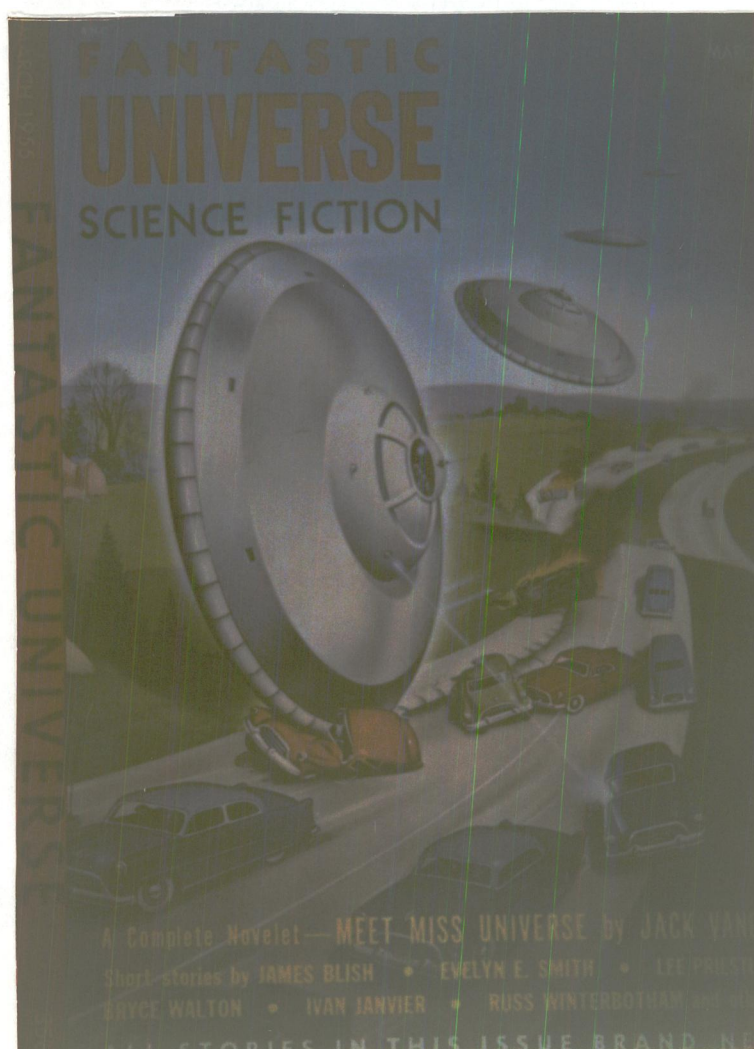
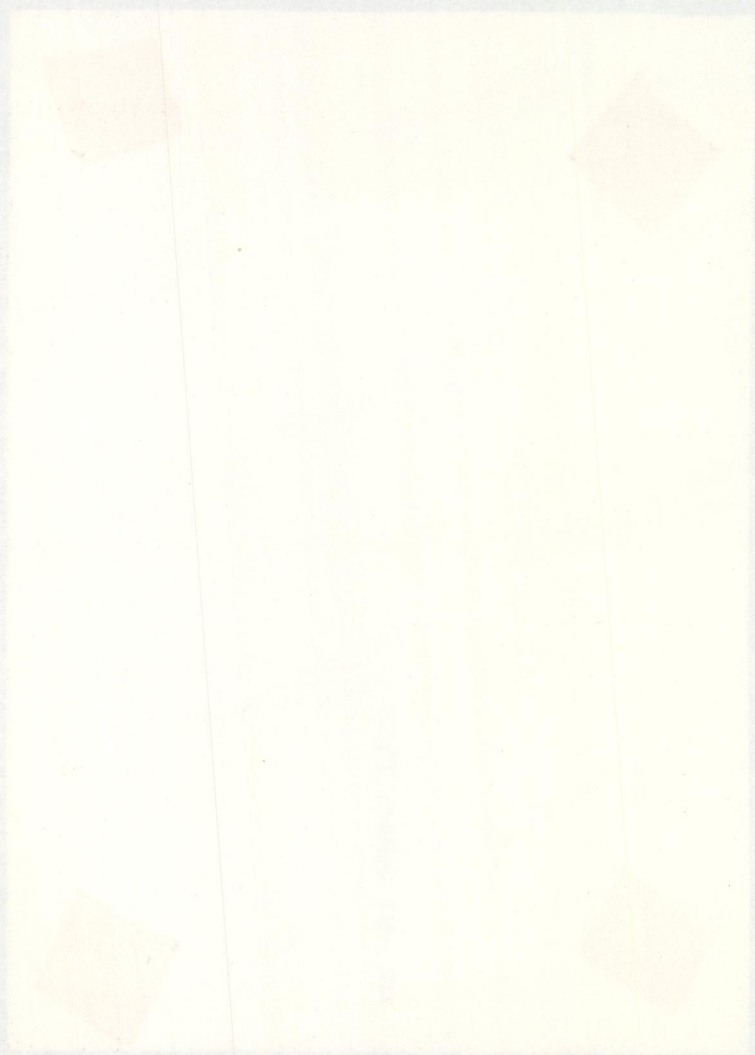
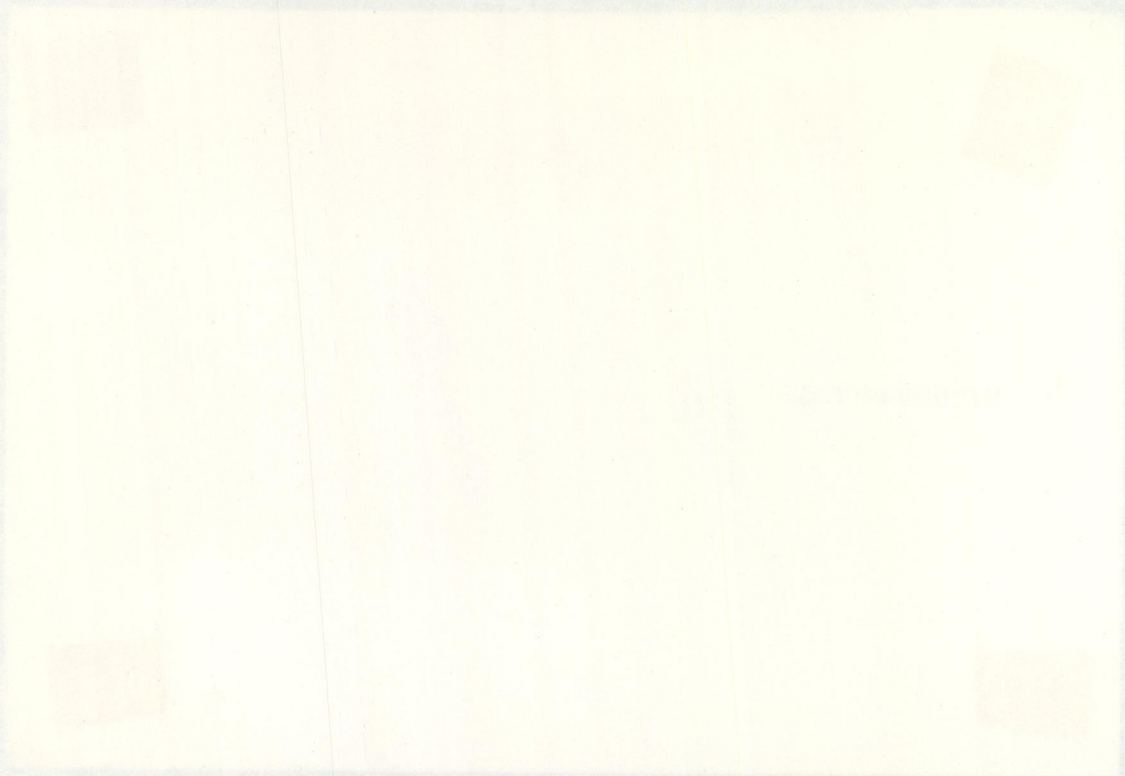


Fig.5







The 1950s was the era of the 'new'. American society was infatuated with the idea of the 'atomic' age, space travel and a futuristic society. (Fig.5). They were interested in atomic power, the main exposure to this was the atom bomb which ended the war; it was promoted as being a safeguard against further carnage. Yet, this was not necessarily a reassuring image, for during the fifties the Soviet Union had not only pursued the arms race at a pace that ensured the decade was lived under the shadow of the bomb, but it had also beaten America into space in 1957 with its Sputniks. The fear of the unknown (that is, Communism) was transmitted into threats from outer space and a mass of UFO sightings. In turn, these were transformed into the plots of countless B movies. (Fig.6). Similarly, the imagery of that one great sublimated fear - the atom bomb - became trivialised into a design motif, appearing on headscarves and picnic trays, embodied as a symbol of peace. (Fig.7). At the same time, bomb shelters evolved from being a basic civil defence requirement into a chic accessory for the modern home.

The films and their set designs had a major influence on the trend in which popular utilitarian design was going at that time. Other influences were the crystalline and molecular forms which lent their shapes to everyday objects such as furniture and even architecture. It seems that whatever new design concepts were brought about for the booming consumerist society were consumed at a tremendous rate. It was a time when consumers were collectively insecure enough to accept the marketing promise of planned obsolescence with its relentless onslaught of novelty. This insecurity was, on the whole, well disguised by the apparent harmony of a contented consumer society. They were prepared to discard a perfectly good year-old frigidaire in favour of the latest two-tone model (Fig.8), not only because they could afford to do so, but also because it was the tempo of the age - with its latest deluxe features, it just had to be better.

After the seven years of sober concentration on the war effort, the result was that people went on a binge of colours, textures and new materials, causing the sudden impact of financial and technological resources into product design where it had not been before, bringing about huge changes in forms, surfaces and colour, from timber to stucco to glass. (Fig.9).

Not only was the change taking place in the product design itself, but this in turn brought about a huge swing in the amount of people who were buying. Suddenly, society was no longer elitist and wealth structured, but quickly becoming egalitarian. The barriers broke down and everyone, from road sweepers to





Fig.6

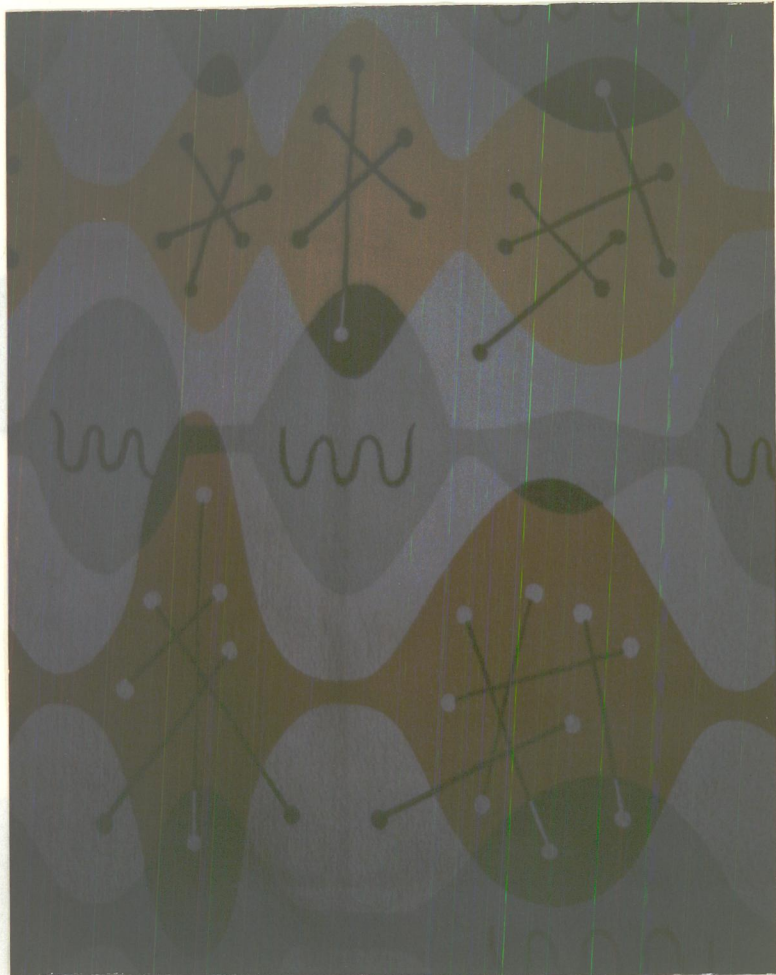


Fig.7





Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10



doctors, were striving towards similar aims. Now, not only the rich could afford the new modern furniture, cars and houses, but also the blue-collar workers. When this occurred, there was a boom in the amount of finance being put into researching everyday items - new gadgets for the home, gadgets that helped the housewife, labour-saving (Fig.10). The man was inundated with a completely new array of gadgets from cigarette-lighters (Fig.11) to pens and new equipment in their cars. The teenager, for the first time, became a very prosperous consumer; the market targeted at teenagers was endless. (Fig.12). Together with the general houses and their contents, cars and gadgets, other products such as films, records, clothing and a whole range of gadgetry. This set of generally available artefacts all come together to make up American pop-culture of the fifties. Not only were these products new, utilitarian, but also affordable by everyone. This was all geared towards a better standard of living for everyone - 'a whole nation, America'.

The new pop-culture in America affected many different aspects of design of basic utilitarian objects. These products were such a basic part of everyday life that the pop-culture, in turn, had a very real effect on life. Art and design is of utmost importance when it is affected by and affects the people. Some of the main design areas which were affected were very fundamental areas, starting with where people lived, worked and were educated - Architecture.

The restriction on building during the war was quite serious. It had frustrated architects for years. With the ending of the war and a new lease of money in the country, young architects had an opportunity to build exciting new buildings. The main types of buildings affected by this new era in architecture were public service buildings (Fig.13), cinemas and, of course, diners.

'Gas stations' were built on a much larger scale and became predominantly self-service. (Fig.14). Manufacturers saw this as a means of considerable economic benefit. Although this was again a step towards mass-consumerism, the smaller garages then needed to use innovative designs to attract customers. There were stations built to bizarre designs, such as giant petrol pumps and teepees, all in the hope of attracting the motorist's eye as they drove by.

The diners began to make extensive use of streamline modern vocabulary, including wrap-around oval windows, rounded corners and flow-like neon graphics (Fig.15), accumulating a very wide variety and range of new materials. Included amongst this array of new materials, large panes of glass and glass bricks, cast concrete slabs and curved corner pieces (Fig.16), porcelain tiling and neon strip-lighting,



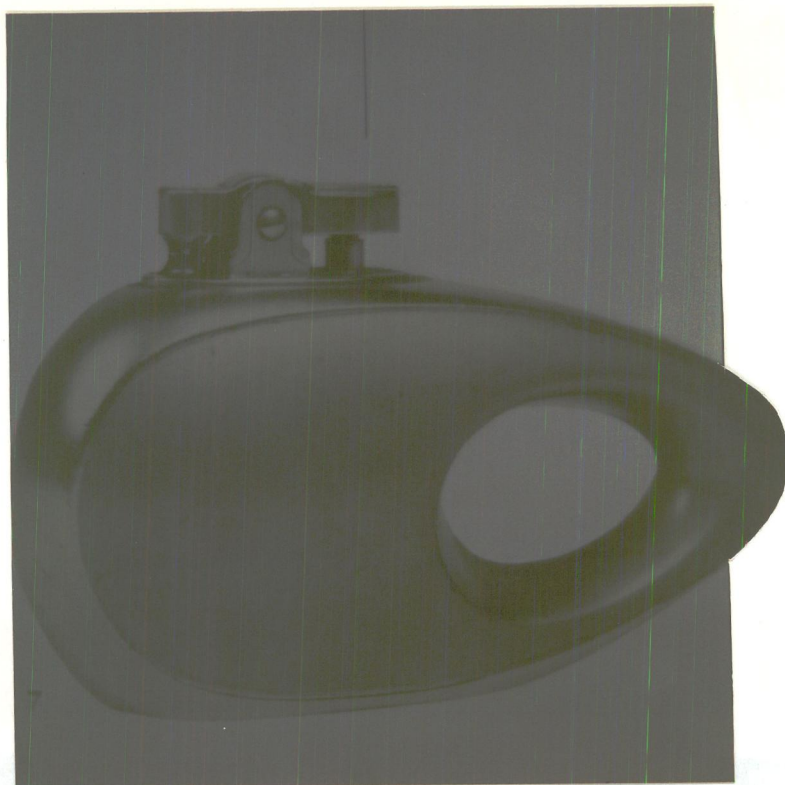


Fig.11

**PIMPLES AND RASHES**  
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Fig.12





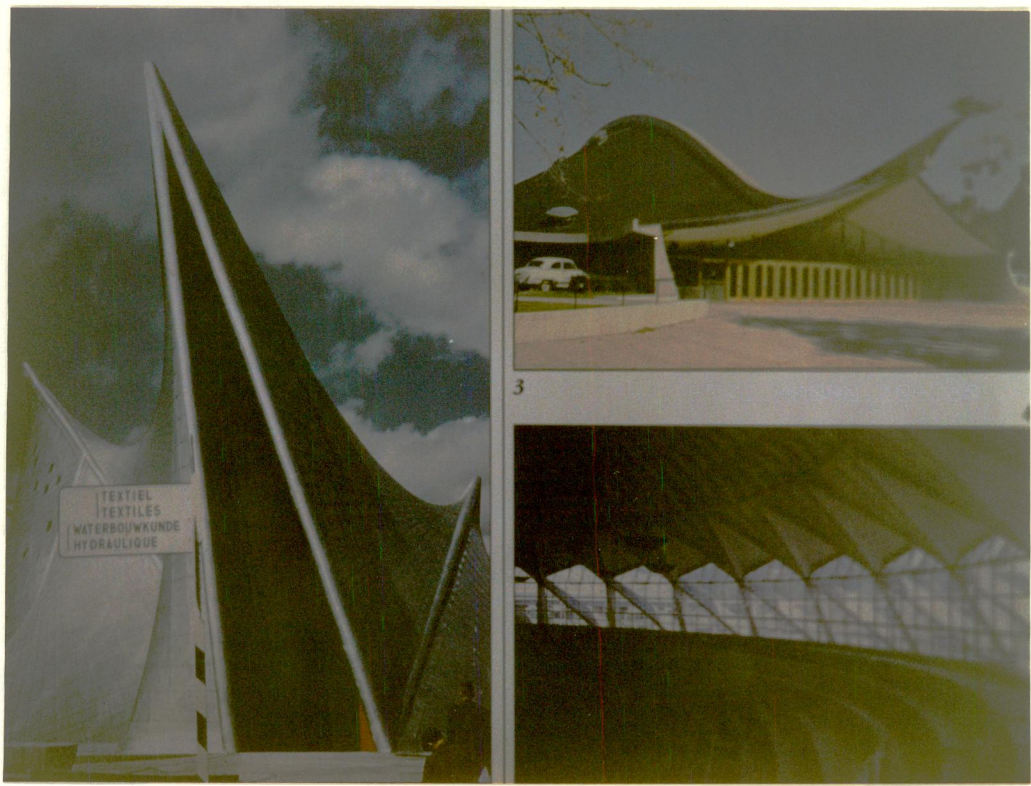


Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15



all culminating in one prefabricated station - a fifties design masterpiece. These qualities were introduced into almost all new architectural projects, from schools and hospitals to homes and, of course, diners, which I will be discussing in more detail in the next chapter.

Two very influential buildings of the fifties were Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Guggenheim Museum' in New York and Oscar Niemeyer's buildings in Brasilia. (Fig.17). Both these examples of fine architecture are very much directly influenced by the American obsession with science fiction, space and interplanetary travel.

With the introduction of open-plan buildings, there was a need for a new style of furniture. Previously, decoration was confused, now it was clean, the modern movement was an almost religious faith in purity and functionalism. It traced back to Bauhaus and to Le Corbusier's 'The house - a machine for living in'. Previously, furniture had been big and bulky, but everything changed with the open-plan constructions. The rooms, although brighter, were smaller and this brought about a movement towards lightweight furniture. (Fig.18). The latest furniture was mainly influenced by a collection of design elements from Scandinavia and Italy, where they were already exploring the new contemporary interior style. The new furniture was made with brightly coloured fabrics and materials; altogether a very different feeling of environment was created. (Fig.19).

Textile firms invited leading artists and designers to contribute to their contemporary ranges. (Fig.20). There was furniture fabricated from wire, which created a very futuristic appearance, made by Harry Bertoia (Fig.21). In 1956 Eero Saarinen designed the range of chairs (Fig.22) which fell very much in line with the Americans' love affair with the space age era, they could have been straight out of a 1950s science fiction film. Plastic laminates and chipboard were used extensively for mass producing furniture. With the decade's commitment to new materials and the modern aesthetic, plastics entered the home and public buildings in a big way. (Fig.23).

Having firstly looked at the new style of architecture and secondly furniture, I will now discuss the most utilitarian room in the house, the kitchen. This area in the home was the most functional room, full of status symbols in the form of electrical appliances such as fridges, cookers, washing machines and dish washers, food processors and coffee percolators. - the list goes on and on. (Fig. 24).

The movement towards a built-in look, and the customised dream kitchen was achieved by creating streamlined appliances which could be swapped and changed from a whole range of possibilities. These were called the frigidaire 'sheer look'





Fig.16



Fig.17



Fig.18





Fig.19

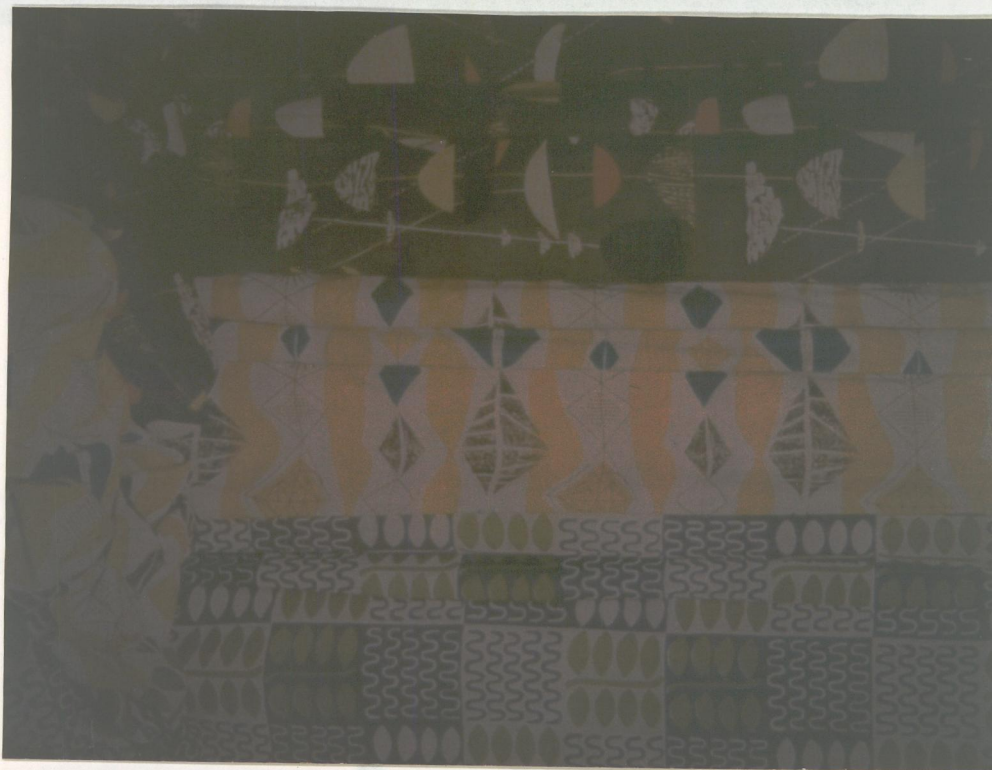


Fig.20



Fig.21



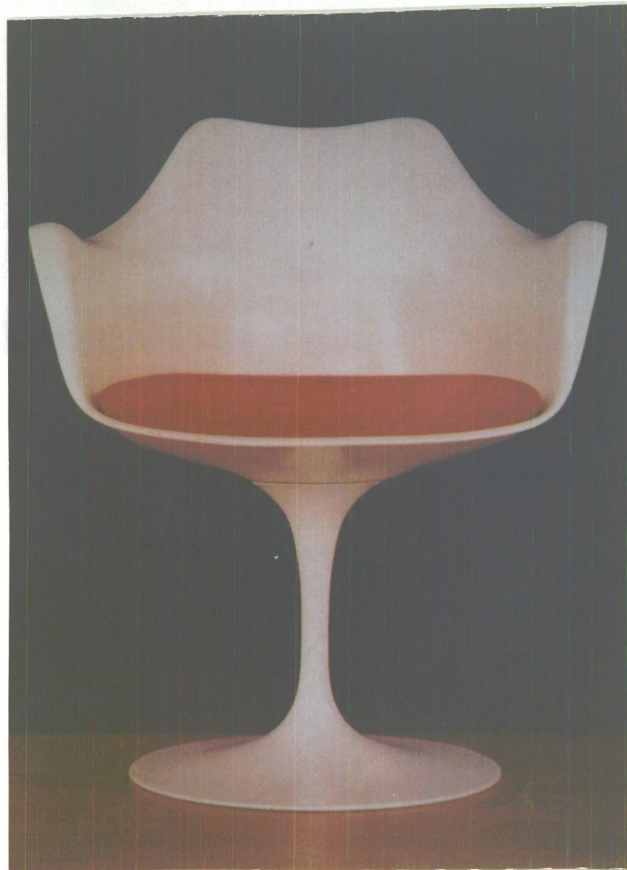


Fig. 22



Fig. 23



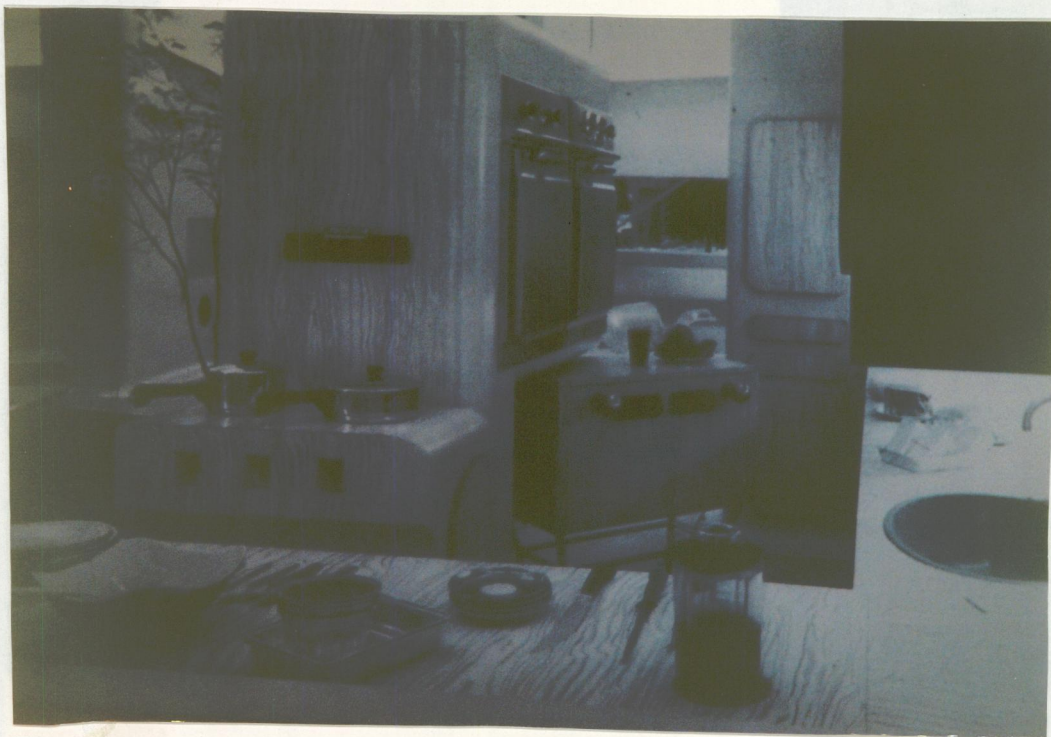


Fig.24

23

free-standing appliances. They were available in many different glamorous colours and, under the influence with the American's love affair with the automobile industry, they began sporting cosmetic chrome trims and rows of impressive-looking dials, again looking to the futuristic space age era.

It is apparent from the previous information that overall the fifties was a period of complete change. From the big and bulky, dull and unglamorous very basic war-time austerity to a new, exciting, readily available and innovative consumerist time.

The American nation were now aspiring to the same aims, the same dream home, dream car and dream kitchen, a new accessibility to leisure, travel and comfort. All these factors accumulated to create one big real life American dream.

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Fig. B1



Fig. B2







## Chapter 11

### THE DINER PARALLELED WITH THE AMERICAN POP-CULTURE MOVEMENT OF THE FIFTIES

Firstly, I intend to consider the history of the diner, how it emerged to the glorious example of pop-culture and fifties design that it became.

The history of the diner extends at least as far back as 1872, when Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island, opened a beanery on wheels and began serving factory workers and labourers sandwiches, boiled eggs, pies and coffee from a horse-drawn express truck.

This idea caught on rapidly and underwent many improvements and modifications as it spread to other cities. In Worcester, Mass, by the late 1880s, Samuel M. Jones had started manufacturing wagons large enough for customers to eat inside.

Innovator Charles Palmer modified Jones's designs and took out a patent in 1891; he then set up a lunch-wagon factory. Thomas H. Buckley opened up a competing factory in 1892, and a new industry was born. (Fig.B1). By the early 1900s, the little rectangular four-wheeled wagons became a familiar sight in cities across the Northeast. Business was so good that owners found they no longer needed to roam the streets in search of trade. Many rented an old piece of land, set in place their specially manufactured lunch wagons - if not specially manufactured, retired horse-drawn street-railway cars were often used as a substitute. (Fig.B2). This had the benefit of linking in the American's love affair with rail. Soon the carts, dwarfed by the neighbouring commercial buildings with their glass stonefronts and bracketed cornices, became a new, incongruous addition to main street.

Soon a number of other lunch-car manufacturing companies came into being, with three new main companies which led to, by the 1920s, the nation experiencing a full-fledged dining-car - or diner as they were known as - boom. Although longer and somewhat wider, this new generation of lunch-cars, with their ribbon of tiny windows and motor or barrel roofs, still resembled their lunch-car and horse-car ancestors, only the new units were now semi-permanent structures. (Fig.B3).

What was the appeal of operating, or for that matter, eating in, a restaurant that looked like, or in some cases was, a trolley car planted on main street





Fig. B3



Fig. B4





Fig.B5



Fig.B6

by the railway or factory gate, or alongside the road? For the owner, the diner was a way of converting a few hundred dollars in savings - usually an immigrant - into a substantial business, the awakening of hire-purchase, a truly American phenomenon. Many companies allowed their products to be purchased on the instalment plan, as was also applied to buying furniture and automobiles. It was an instant business, most diners of the period came fully equipped. All the thinking and planning was done at the factory. Even the most novice operator could be in business in a day or two after the manufacturer's field crews rolled a crisp, sparkling, factory-fresh dining car onto its new site. The new owner was free to worry about the menu rather than the look and layout of the premises.

During Prohibition years, the diner patronage skyrocketed. No longer seen as only a workingman's hideout, diners sported menus expanded to include breakfast, lunch, dinner and late night snacks served by waitresses at the conventional counter. (Fig.B4). Diners now appealed to a much wider clientele. The switch from portable workingman's beanery to prefabricated diner with broad appeal was further underscored by the fact that by 1938, twenty-five per cent of the patrons of the better cars were women and children. The comfortable and warm cars also provided an alternative to both the limited fare of the hog-dog or hamburger stand and the full menu main street restaurant. Eating at a diner was also cheap. The variety of good inexpensive food, served up quickly, in a novel setting carried over into the depression years. By the early 30s, an estimated four thousand diners were scattered about the country, the greatest number concentrated in the East, with one to two hundred new cars streaming out of the nation's diner factories each year. This boom amid the depression made diners, along with petrol stations and other roadside enterprises, an object of fascination, a safe investment, a seemingly recession-proof business. While major industries lagged, the diner business expanded at a rapid rate, with the national dining-car population climbing by the end of the decade to about six thousand.

The decade following World War II saw the decline of many nineteenth century institutions, as everything from trolley-cars to downtown hotels succumbed to the onslaught of car and highway. Yet the diner, which could just as easily have been replaced by a car-park, not only survived in the post-war years, but prospered. Nevertheless, the need to attract the attention of motorists and truck drivers in the modern-is-better fifties period prompted diner manufacturers to produce dining-cars with more exterior and interior pizzazz.

In the twentieth century the age of the automobile was upon America. (Fig.B5).





Fig.B7

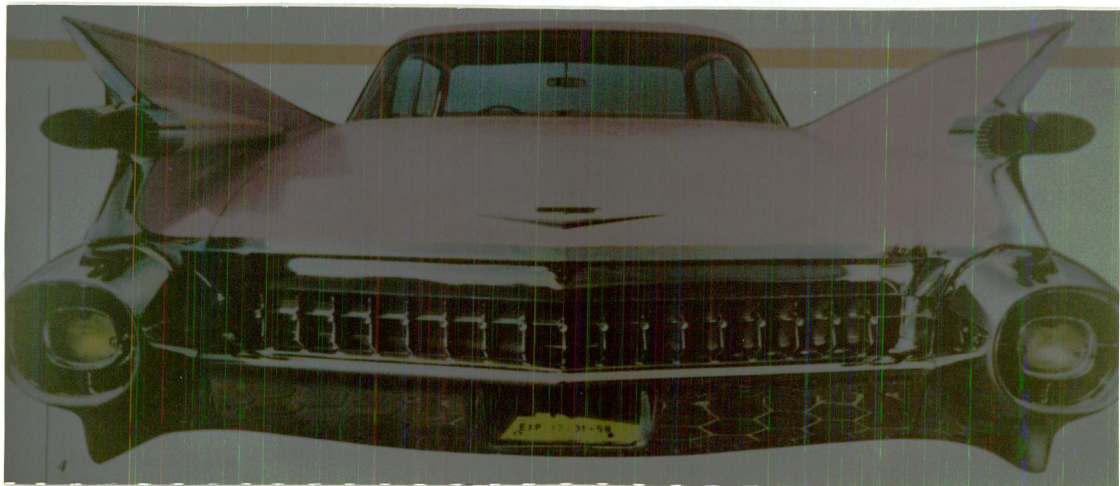


Fig.B8

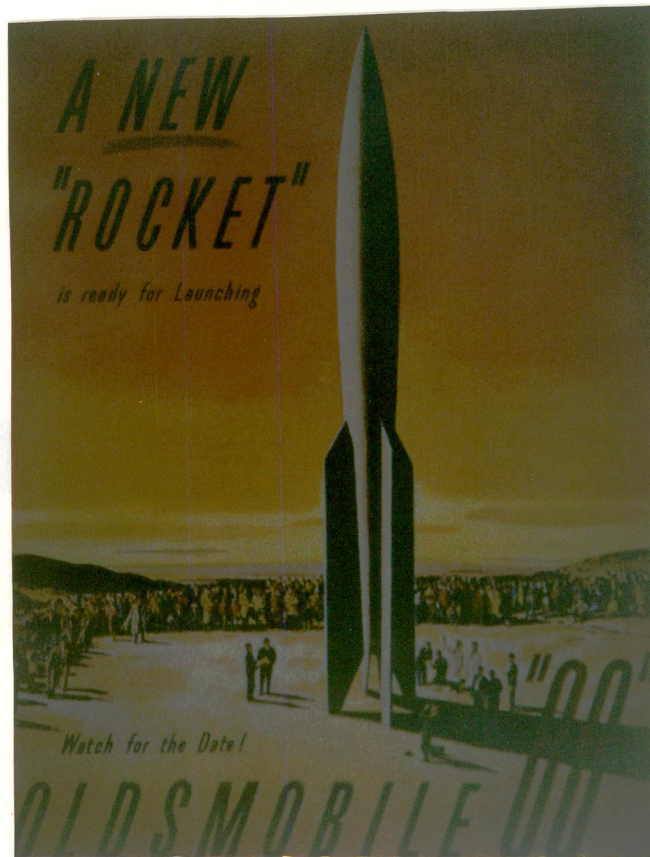


Fig.B9





Fig. B10





The owner of a car could choose exactly where and when to go and what to see, confined only by the location and condition of the roads.

Within a few years, cars began streaming from the nation's auto factories, the demand for places to drive them soared. Before long, hundreds of new highways laced the continent, and countless older roads were widened and resurfaced. Mass produced inexpensive cars such as the Model T Ford flooded the marketplace; cars became widely affordable and suddenly large segments of the population had an alternative to rail travel. (Fig.B6).

Soon, highway buildings became a great source of interest to the drivers and readily became a new advertising target. Trees were cut, buildings obliterated, front gardens taken up, hills levelled, by-passes built and traffic rerouted. Features that once appeared to leap into view as a car rounded a curve could now be seen far ahead. Architecture for speed-reading had begun. (Fig.B7).

Firstly, I will consider the motor car of the fifties and how they changed in design during this period. I will then show how the diners changed in design in similar ways, looking at the new streamlining as a major parallel between the two. The car not only adopted this design trade marks, as the diner also did, but now the new mobilisation of the nation directly brought about the new exterior pizzazz in an effort to attract passing business, in the form of speed-reading architecture.

The most potent American symbol of the fifties was the 'dream car', chromed from end to end, with upswept tail-fins and V-arched tail lights (Fig.B8), its sleek low slung lines enhanced by white sidewalls and two-tone paintwork. The essence of the 'dream car' was the one hundred million dollar look, whether the car was an up-market Cadillac, a middle-range Oldsmobile, or a low-priced Chevrolet, (Fig.B9); Americans were promised 'tomorrow's cars today'. Car stylists, advertising copywriters and graphic designers combined to make the American dream come true, and looked to the jet aircraft for inspiration. (Fig.B10). The new fuel-hungry and space-consuming breed of autos had flight-sweep styling, jet flow bumpers, and touch-down overdrive. The space age car seemed to be just around the next corner. General Motors' Firebird 11, an experimental prototype, described as America's first 'touring turbine car' was the star attraction of the 1957 Motor Show. The body of the futuristic monster was made of expensive titanium and steering was by crossbar.

The new car was an accumulation of streamlined components, resulting in what was seen as the ultimate machine of that time.

Reference to 'streamlining' first began appearing on a regular basis within American design circles in the 1930s. To begin with, the smooth cigar shapes, to which the word streamlining referred, were associated exclusively with aviation technology where it was argued that they served a specific function - facilitating speed, maximising air flow, etc. However, these usual motifs were by the early 1930s being carried over into American car design. The 1934 Chrysler Airflow, for instance, was modelled on Douglas Aircraft designs. Streamlining in the fifties constituted, in this new context, a popular, eye-catching vocabulary - one which clashed with the purist architecturally based idioms of classical European modernism. This movement away from fabricated, geometric forms to pressed or stamped ones, signalled a more general shift within industrial production towards a greater output of a more limited range of items, for a larger domestic market at a lower cost. I will show a direct link between the manufacturing of cars and diners, in this way, later in this chapter.

The emergence of streamlining from 1930 to the 1950s as the popular style, popular both in commercial success and running counter to the classical - can be explained by reference to two major developments: the refinement of pressed steel technology and the creation of new consumer markets. The development of pressing and stamping techniques can be seen as an integral part of the process of accelerated automation through which, in the years immediately before and after the war, financial and technological resources became concentrated into progressively larger and more efficient products. In other words, it was just one of the many technological innovations which enabled monopoly capital to become consolidated in the period. By the end of the decade, streamlining was beginning to be applied to commodities totally outside the transport field in which it had found its initial rationale.

The ensuing controversy surrounding these allegedly 'improper' applications of streamlining lasted for more than two decades. It caused many debates worldwide. The response of the European design establishment to the indiscriminate streamlining of imported American products was immediate and hostile. A streamlined fridge was interpreted as an act of provocation, in direct defiance of the most fundamental principle of 'good design' - that 'form follows function'. However, I see this as a very narrow-minded response to a design that is obviously both aesthetically attractive and very much in line with function. Diners of the fifties encapsulate the streamlining style. The Modern Diner, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, is one of the few surviving Sterling Streamliners. (Fig.B12). This diner's canted prow and flow-line trim create such a sense of motion that it looks like a train barrelling out of a tunnel. This kinetic creation was the work of





Fig. B12







Fig. B13



Fig. B14



the J.B.Judkins Company of Merrimac, Massachusetts, a venerable builder of coaches, founded in 1866. Judkins converted over to custom auto-body production in the early twentieth century. When the auto work soured during the depression, the company turned its energies to building diners in the period just before World War II.

The interiors of diners also sport fine examples of streamlining, from the rows of streamlined stools to the miniature wall jukeboxes and pressed stainless steel wall panels (Fig.B13). The diner is an eclectic library of references to streamlining development and later dismissal.

Some of the features seen in popular cars of the fifties, such as Chevrolets, De Sotos and Plymouths, were chromed grilles, two-tone bodywork and swept-wing jet fins. All these aspects of the new streamlined cars can also be seen in the diners of the time. (Fig.B14).

The car brought about the new mobilisation of the people; white collar businessmen to teenagers were now driving these accessible machines, which in turn led to greater mobility and therefore utilise the products of this mobility - drive-in movies, shopping malls, motels and diners. Now that the question of capturing the attention of the driver, through their windscreens, had arisen, thousands of commercial structures designed to capture the attention of an audience passing by at high speed were emerging at a colossal rate. On driving along any of the main roads of the fifties, one would commonly encounter roadside buildings cloaked in a wide variety of guises. Take the gas station, for example. Some looked like cottages, or big white boxes; others had soaring canopies reminiscent of a jet taking off from a runway. Nearly all roadside building types from motels and diners to auto showrooms and supermarkets had been built in a similar way - designed to attract the eye of the speedily passing motorist and promote business. (Fig.B15).

Why were these particulars designs for roadside selling in style? To what extent, if any, does the imagery of these buildings reflect the values and priorities of the age in which they were built? A look at the general phases in the evolution of roadside commercial imagery can begin to answer these questions.

Not surprisingly, the evolution of roadside commercial building imagery began at the same time when the car first began being a main source of transport and interest to the people.

The mould of rather rigid business structures took form in the mid-nineteenth century. The colonial gable-roofed house with ground-floor shop no longer





Fig. B15



Fig. B16





Fig. B17



Fig. B18



provided adequate prototype for business structures. Now shopkeepers needed commercial structures that could be built in a variety of sizes and shapes, adhering to the current design trends. Over the next several decades, architects, developers and speculators responded with a generation of business structures neatly tucked behind facades usually designed according to one basic prescription shop fronts along the sidewalk. Whether detailed in Great Revival, Italianate or Romanesque, this basic formula went well into the new century and became synonymous with the image of the main street. (Fig.B16). A collection of establishments - department stores, restaurants, hotels - all competed for business from behind the coloured shop fronts and heavily ornamental windows. The speed of passing vehicles played a role in the trend for more and larger signs - fast-moving electric street-cars in operation carried passengers who could, in the few seconds of their passing, catch only the most vivid and arresting advertisements. As the automobile era arrived, more and more aggressive commercial messages appeared, firstly in the form of billboards and then in the actual design of the buildings themselves. (Fig.B17).

I think that you can see that the reason for this new movement of architectural advertising was in vogue primarily due to the car, but the actual style of architecture was influenced by the obsession of fifties America with the space-age era, and streamlining.

The connection between the auto boom and diners of the fifties should now be becoming quite clear. The car industry of this time, brought about new architectural qualities - architecture for speed-reading, in the form of the new 'streamlining' trend. This, in turn, was a major influence on the designs of the new cars of the fifties, somewhat of a symbiotic relationship.

From the early 1930s until well after World War II, streamlining was the main cause of the redesign of scores of objects from automobiles and locomotives, which could benefit from aerodynamic design, to thousands of perennially static objects, such as radio cabinets, furniture and many more objects. Although it began as a futuristic wrapper for mechanical products, streamlining soon became a prominent form of architectural expression.

Diners were design with rounded corners and detailed with lines creating a sense of movement, with modern materials which enhanced the effect. Structural glass and procelain enamelled metal panels, once used for bathroom partitions and advertising signs, made walls smooth and gleaming; stainless steel provided a futuristic feeling and glass blocks were built into huge, translucent yet structured windows. (Fig.B18). What made streamlining so commercially viable and successful within the context of diners? Was its subconscious appeal to a





Fig.B19

**COOL OFF... HAVE FUN... GO BOWLING!**

While perfect strikes, delicious drinks, and atmospheric "Magic Triangle" bowling entertainment, there's a third pleasure that's hard to beat... the fun of bowling with AMF bowling accessories!

Look who's here! Bowling's most sure fire when you have a group... and what a stylish group too! Be there with AMF bowling accessories!

Remember the classic bowling's no longer "old"? True! Innovation makes bowling new, and AMF's "Magic Triangle" Bowling Ball makes bowling more fun!

Refreshment time... a real treat, is the "Magic Triangle" bowling center. The first to find and bowl to win... add a refreshing touch to your bowling pleasure!

**And bowl where you see the "Magic Triangle" - for bowling at its best!**

Look down the lane to where the bowling action is... and you'll see AMF's "Magic Triangle" Bowling Ball... the only bowling ball that's new!

History of AMF Automatic Pinsetter. This amazing device repeats your strike, makes bowling more fun... and more!

It also tells you what pins are left standing after the last ball is rolled, helps you make more money for your bowling center!

AMF Automatic Pinsetter... the only automatic with the "Magic Triangle" Bowling Ball. For the best in bowling...

**BOWL WHERE YOU SEE THE "MAGIC TRIANGLE"**

AMF Always Means the Finest

**AMF PINSPOT**

AMF Pinspot... the only automatic with the "Magic Triangle" Bowling Ball. For the best in bowling...

Fig.D20







society just out of war and economic turmoil? There was a conceptual link between streamlining and a prosperous future.

Railroads of the time called their sleek new trains 'streamliners', a direct link with the streamlining design trend of that era. (Fig.B19). This in turn was a direct link with the dining cars of the era, not only playing to the American interest in streamlining but also with rail, captivating a mesmerised audience was one of the main successes of the fifties diner.

The link between diners and pop-culture goes further than streamlining and the transport industry. There was a new movement towards gadgetry. Primarily, this phenomenon was seen in the home, particularly the most functional room of the house, the kitchen. Now seen as status symbols, gadgets were a fundamental sign of one's success: when put in the context of a commercial business, such as a diner, streamlined gadgets were of paramount importance.

The era of labour-saving devices was upon America.

In the home, such items as washing machines, dish washers, food processors and hot and cold drinks dispensers became every woman's dream. The dream kitchen that every housewife could aspire to.

This array of labour-saving gadgets soon entered the diner, from milk whiskers to food blenders and televisions for customers to enjoy during their lunch.

Manufacturers began building diners with bigger kitchens to accommodate these new gadgets and also to accommodate the newly expanding menus which were becoming, in true fifties style, bigger and internationalised menus, to cater for different nationalities to different religions, from Kosher to **Italian**. These diners seemed a more appropriate setting for a family's meal out than the days when dining cars catered for the factory workers on corners.

In 1954, Blake Ehrlich celebrated in words the attractive power of these 'glittering chrome-and-neon inns'<sup>1</sup>

"A diner flaunting its chromium curves on the edge of a traffic circle caught the rays of the afternoon sun and flung them full into the driver's face."<sup>2</sup>

Another fifties phenomenon, 'the teenager', can be seen in direct connection with the diner.

Booming, consumerist fifties America gave rise to a new market force - the teenager, whose purchasing power, though limited, was free from adult responsibilities. Teenagers spent a disproportionate amount of their earnings on leisure and entertainment, two factors catered for in fifties diners. (Fig.B20).

The term 'teenager', invented in America, brought into focus, youth at its



leisure. The word establishes a permanent wedge between childhood and adulthood, that wedge being money. The invention of the teenager is ultimately bound up with the creation of the youth market in the fifties. Eventually, a new range of commodities and commercial leisure facilities were provided to absorb the surplus cash.

Although the diner was around for many years, the organisation saw this gap in the market and began catering for the teenage market. Jukeboxes, Coca Cola, hamburgers and milk-shakes all became synonymous with the teenager and all available at your local diner.

The diner became a social gathering-place for young people of the fifties, being a meeting place for boys and girls. The diner catered for teenagers and the new 'rock-and-roll' era, with juke boxes sporting all the latest pop hits, which could be enjoyed with your friends in the booths.

The teenage era sweeping American soon began spreading across the globe. All over the world people emulated the life of the American teenager. It was so much freer than it was anywhere else. Anything the young wanted to do they would do in an automobile, which links in directly with my point earlier in this chapter. On Saturday nights, the diner was the automobile meeting ground where car-loads of boys and girls would go to do anything from picking up each other to picking a fight. From this time onwards, the young would never again revert to what they had been in previous ages - a group without rights, without money, without music and a culture of its own. The diner represents all these aspects of teenager life in the fifties - an accumulation of all these positive aspects of their lives.

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#### Footnotes.

1. The Streamlined Decade: Donald J. Bush. New York, Brazillier, 1975 p35.
2. Fifties Homestyle - Popular Ornament of the U.S.A.: Mark Burns and Louis Di Bonis. London, Thames & Hudson, 1988 p76.





Fig.C1 'Macy's' window display

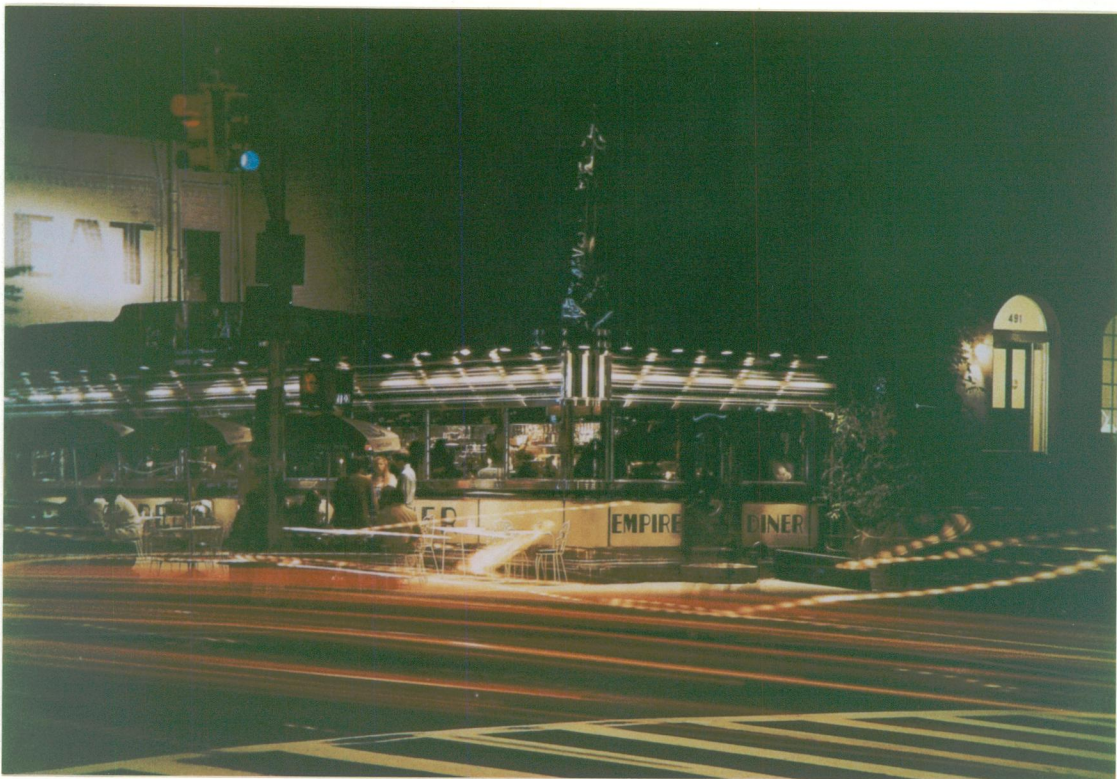


Fig.C2





Fig.C2





## Chapter 111

### THE STYLISTIC NOSTALGIA OF DINERS

The American dream 1950s style portrayed the country as a time when it was at its greatest as a nation - a time of economic and social boom. It was an egalitarian society, when utilitarianism, affluence and leisure swept the nation. Mass consumerism was at the heart of all that was changing during this period. We can see constant references to the fifties in today's society in America, from architecture to film. (Fig.C1).

Through aspects of everyday life, one thing has become apparent - the never-ending fight to recapture fifties design, economic boom and fifties euphoria. In my opinion, it was the only time in American history when America was moving forward with the rest of the western world following suit, the only time when America created its own culture. Since the fifties, America has tried but has failed to regain that stance in the world.

Fifties and fifties artefacts are constantly cropping up in slightly altered forms today, from 'new' jukeboxes, styled to look like their fifties predecessors, and new cars, motorbikes and many other gadgets which are modernised versions of the real things. Even in the yuppie market, we see reproductions of such fifties paraphernalia as wind-up razors, kidney bean lighters and an array of fifties lookalike hair styles and clothes.

This stylistic nostalgia is encaptured in the diner, and so therefore there is a rekindling of the ol' 50s favourite.

Diners are making a comeback, but they have undergone a metamorphosis in the process. New-old diners like the Empire in New York City, the Fog City Diner in San Francisco and Ed de Bevis in Chicago (Fig.C2) are all upscale eating places with diner motifs. They sport the design features and materials traditionally linked to fifties diners, and in a nostalgia-provoking way attract customers. Such diners are opening at a tremendous rate all over America - particularly in the major cities, where trends flare up quicker than in the quieter, small towns of America. They are filling in a gap in the restaurant market. The yuppie market beckons. What is so marketable now is the look, the romance, the design, the chrome sheen, the trouble-free fantasy-like quality, almost a time-warp.

In the past, diner owners always thought progress meant moving up to a restaurant. Now it seems that the trend is towards fine restaurants in a beautiful







and nostalgic setting - a diner.

The rise of gourmet-diners has been paralleled by a growing nostalgia-filled appreciation for yesterday's stainless-steel, formica-filled diners. Artists John Baeder, Richard Estes and Ralph Goings, three prominent photo-realists, who specialise in diners, are an example of this. All three see the diner not only as technically challenging but also worthy subjects in their paint.

Other creative streams to pick up on is the social relevance of diners in television and film.

The Barry Levinson film "Diner", 1982, shows the American youth's passion for diners. Set in a small town, it shows a group of friends 'growing up' under the prevailing secure wing of the diner environment. In the recent television programme, "Twin Peaks" by David Lynch, the diner is seen as a centre to the town's activities, a nucleus of the community. David Lynch is constantly referring to the good ol' American way of life in his work, and sees the diner as a necessary landmark in this programme.

One could argue that people love diners best when they've lost them. I think that it is the affluent consumerist society which diners symbolise that they yearn for - the fifties.

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## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I set out to reveal whether the diner is a representation of American pop-culture and style.

Having firstly discussed what pop-culture is, how it evolved and grew and then looked at diners, what they were and represented in the fifties, I have shown that the diner was indeed a consolidation of all the main components which, when accumulated, certainly represent the pop-culture and style of the fifties. This is shown in the use of streamlining in diner design which, in turn, was widely used in a lot of other aspects of design at that time. The transport and motor-car industry instigated the streamline look and also brought about the new speed-reading architecture. The teenager, a fifties phenomenon, put diners on the map internationally. Nearly every fifties phenomenon has been absorbed by the diner and so it is a eclectic library and memorial to the era that gave birth to a continually consumerist society.

Diners constitute one of those rare institutions to have survived long enough to be rediscovered by another generation in virtually unaltered form.

Some have survived as they were, still run by a family with as much care as ever. Some have been rediscovered and revamped and are the source of many a nostalgic reunion. Some did not exist during the true reign of the diner but are taking on a pretence of having been so, and do it with great glamour. But, most of all, they are universally recognisable from the blue collar worker to the corporate businessmann, as a representation of the Americanisation of the fifties. They are universally beautiful, both in atmosphere and aesthetics. The diner is a trendy definitive example of time in a capsule. Diners make a historic footnote of the fifties both as works of art and social economic diaries.

A true fifties diner contains an endless supply of objects which reflect the consumerist society in which they were invented. The space-age era, a nation fixated on futuristic materials and gadgets, diners being veritable galleries of such accessories. Jukeboxes, food processors, linoleum, chrome stools, in an environment which all created a pseudo spaceship.

Although people try, by building these new 'nostalgia diners' to recapture the



naivete of the fifties, the first mass-consumerist decade, it cannot be. Since the fifties, the consumer society has spread across the world. More people now have more of everything than ever before. Miniature 'personal' TVs and stereos are commonplace. Modern advertising and image-building techniques are altogether more subtle and sophisticated than those over thirty years ago. Although the majority of people in the developed countries are more prosperous than ever before, millions worldwide now question the very idea of unlimited economic growth, with its implied exploitation of third world countries and waste of natural resources.

America is today like one big factory, churning out products to be consumed by another big factory - the people. The fifties was a time of great economic and social boom, the standard of living rose, the consumerist society took over. America has never looked back; everything is money, size, economy, bigger is better - all as a direct result of the fifties.

Although the diner represents the fifties and the style that went along with that era, the fifties in its own right was a genuinely prosperous time. However, the consumerist society has not stopped growing and has now taken over. But it was that very movement, the fifties, which has caused America to be the consumerist jungle, the chaotic wealth orientated society that it is today. It is ironic that people are now looking back to the fifties as a time when crime was low, life was good and diners were diners.

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