

Exhibit Reviews

Comptes rendus d'expositions

National Museum of Science and Technology, *Love, Leisure and Laundry: Why Housework Just Won't Go Away*

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National Museum of Science and Technology,
Ottawa, *Love, Leisure and Laundry: Why
Housework Just Won't Go Away*

Curator: Thierry Ruddel

Design team: Joanne Bergeron, Glenda Krusberg,
Gail Lacombe, Dee McEwen (Principle
Designer), John Nelson

Opening date: 20 April 1996

The title of this exhibition piqued my curiosity. Not only does it juxtapose three oddly disconnected (indeed, possibly contradictory) concepts, but, to me, it also evoked the title of one of my favourite recent books in women's history. Ellen Ross's *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London* is a magnificent study of love and laundry in turn-of-the-century working-class London, a book which makes the ordinary details of everyday life for working-class mothers come alive. Thus this exhibit sounded like an ideal and rare opportunity to examine the historical tools of the housewife's trade.

After viewing it, I see my own expectations were right and wrong. While I did not find anything approaching the sharp-edged analysis of the history of domestic labour offered by feminist scholars such as Ross, I certainly found a fascinating array of tools, gadgets and hardware. I also found subtle and ironic commentary about the North American preoccupation with the technological quick fix.

The exhibit begins with a poster proclaiming "The Housework Riddle," mounted, for reasons which are not made clear, on a giant heart. Indeed, this was not the only time during my tour that Tina Turner's question of the 1980s came back to me: what's love got to do with it? Machines, we are told, do most of the work. But do we put our feet up? "No! We do more." The

answer to the riddle, (I think), is that "we can if we choose;" a debatable assertion that sets the tone for the analysis which follows.

This exhibit tells a story in which the power relations between social groups — most notably between women and men, but also workers and owners, favoured and less-favoured ethnic groups — are minimized. Instead we see individual consumers making individual choices. Technology appears out of thin air, and the best we can do is gently chide ourselves for expecting too much from it. As the press release for the exhibit explains, appliances were supposed to "make our lives easier, but did they?"

The first display begins with a promising acknowledgement of the class dynamics of domestic labour. A Victorian upper-class couple takes breakfast at their elegant dining room, while their servant hovers in the wings. Titled "Mechanical Servants," the text explains that "people who could afford servants were the first to buy powered appliances." True enough, and the dining room table groans under the weight of an assortment of gadgets, early versions of toasters, coffee pots and the like. But these appliances did not appear magically out of the factories and into the households of the upper class. As historian Dolores Hayden has explained, there is a rich and fascinating story involved in how industrial-sized domestic appliances were "shrunk" and tailored to family consumption. This story also involves an unsuccessful, but by no means insignificant, campaign by feminists against individual "miniature" appliances, in favour of collective uses of this technology. Collective kitchens serving kitchenless houses, and shared domestic appliances were sought after by firebrand New England feminists long before they became

a symbol of the Soviet Union.² This first display would have been an ideal location for some exploration of the reasons *why* individual appliances ended up in individual households.

We move on to a consideration of rural life, which features two displays, men's farm work, and women's kitchen work on the farm. Again the tools are fascinating; indeed, this display offered a vivid reminder of how much contemporary upscale Canadian craft and design is a replication of the "ordinary" salad bowls and candle holders of years gone by. But again the story is told with no reference to conflict or power dynamics. The apparently complimentary and co-operative tale of "his and hers" labour depicted here obscures a history of difficult choices about improvement and change; choices that tended to favour "his" interests over "hers."

Next, we observe several displays depicting the effects of electrification and plumbing on the household. While lacking a context for the accessibility of electricity (particularly in terms of both region and class) these displays do feature a stunning assortment of new household gimmicks. Some are early versions of appliances which "took," but the most interesting are those which did not; the bean slicer, for example. Clearly yuppies were not the first generation to fetishize outlandish toys, though it would have been interesting to know more about the history and popularity of these early gadgets.

The rest of the exhibit is devoted to what we might consider the "modern" era of the household, from the post World War II era to the present (actually, the future). A prominent display is a giant wedding cake laden with appliances from the 1950s to the present, which also incorporates advertisements of smiling postwar brides. A wedding album accompanies this display, which includes photos of people from different cultures. Yet with no accompanying discussion of access to the postwar dream, one is left wondering about how a Chinese immigrant couple fit into the story of marital happiness through consumption. This problem is echoed a few paces on, when we observe two identical "modern" kitchens, one filled with "Italian" groceries, the other with "Indian" groceries. To me, this evoked the worst aspects of liberal multiculturalism: we are really all the same, all middle-class, with just enough twists in language, dress and food to make us interesting. Interspersed through this section are imposing and interesting displays of particular appliances; several generations of vacuums, stoves, refrigerators, washing machines and irons.

It makes good historical sense for an exhibit on domestic technology to devote a considerable amount of attention to the postwar era. There is a wealth of interesting new historical research on the centrality of the domestic sphere in this era. American historian Elaine May, for example, has put forward a view of post World War II domestic life that links it to international Cold War politics. Part of what made "our" system better, as Richard Nixon explained to Nikita Khrushchev, was that "our" women don't have jobs, and "our" housework is done by machine magic.³

In Canada, Joy Parr has recently recounted the history of "kitchen politics" in the same era, noting, for example, the conflicts between female consumer groups and appliance manufacturers over questions of design (conflicts which, incidentally, the consumers lost).⁴ Yet there is little such social context provided in this exhibit. One display features a distraught-looking woman in an extremely messy kitchen, looking through the window at a man (presumably her husband) relaxing on a hammock in the backyard. Perhaps an opportunity to comment on the history of the politics of housework? The accompanying text, however, blames advertisers (and, I think, women themselves). "Advertising," it proclaims, "has long pushed products that make exaggerated claims and exploit the concerns of homemakers regarding cleanliness. Nightmarish images...create guilt in the housewife's mind."

The most hard-hitting critical commentary is saved for the last exhibit, which features a scale model of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's futuristic "Healthy House." While the many unique energy efficient features of this model make it quite a fascinating display, my favourite part was the video playing in the living room. At the centre of this "house of the future" we watch several clips of 1950s images of the future: a woman showing off her high tech kitchen, another woman (dressed in full Joan Jetson/Star Wars garb) serving the food of the future (in Corningware) and Jacques Tati's Mon Oncle fumbling his way through one of these future kitchens. Coming at the end of the exhibit, the point is clear: we have been down this futuristic road before, beware of false promises.

When I saw this exhibit, many of the interactive computer displays and taped commentaries were not working, so perhaps some of my concerns might have been addressed if they were. My assessment, however, remains a split decision: a great collection of stuff, but bring your own history.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to Susan Whitney for accompanying me to this exhibit.
2. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980).
3. Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). See also Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
4. Joy Parr "Shopping for a Good Stove: A Parable about Gender, Design and the Market" in Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). See also Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-1960," *Canadian Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (1991): 470-504.

Curatorial Statement

THIERRY RUDEL

An exciting aspect of working in a museum is to see a concept take on an engaging physical form that touches the daily existence of visitors. The idea of doing an exhibit on the history of appliances and their relationship to socio-cultural, technological and environmental themes grew out of my interest in combining social and technological history. In 1991, when the museum requested ideas from curators for small and medium size exhibits (200-600 m²) I proposed this one on household technology. In early 1992, members of the museum's exhibit committee expressed concern about available artifacts, the treatment of possibly volatile subjects and the importance of making the project pertinent for all family members.

One of the catalysts for the exhibit was the 1992 donation of a large collection of Ontario Hydro electrical equipment, devices and appliances. The donation included 3 500 artifacts and associated archival material. Financial resources were also provided to help catalogue the collection to make it more accessible to the public. Cataloguers, librarians and a researcher (Franz Klingender) set about organizing and documenting domestic technology artifacts and acquiring monographs and trade literature on the subject.

Exhibit committee members' concern about controversy stemmed from those recently generated by exhibits in other museums. After it was agreed that our questions could be addressed in a balanced way, and that the museum should encourage debate on such subjects, the proposal was accepted by the exhibit committee, partly because it promised to include different elements than those found

in the museum's more traditionally technological spheres of computers, cars, trains, and space shuttles. Finally, we also thought household technology would have relevance and interest for women, and especially for mothers who often come to the museum more for their children than for themselves.

Once the general outline of the exhibit was accepted in 1992, it was given a production budget of about \$1 100 a square metre, a space of 700 m², a 1994 opening date, and a life span of five years. Budget cuts, however, put the gallery on hold during 1993 and 1994. When opened in April 1996, the project, which had been three years in the making, included 1 000 objects, 600 of which are artifacts, over 200 illustrations, numerous interactives, computer games and demonstrations.

Team Objectives

The team approach, which I strongly support, involves reaching a consensus on many subjects. Although it is sometimes difficult for team members to maintain separate roles, the synergy that develops in the team can be highly productive, providing, of course, that each maintains their responsibilities for specific products and are held accountable for completing them. Everyone on the exhibit team (Dee McEwen, designer, Claude Faubert, project manager, Mitzi Hauser, interpreter, and myself, curator), had different perspectives on how to present the subject, but we agreed we wanted to:

1. show the evolution of familiar household technologies (except those already depicted



Fig. 1 (above)
 This panel (situated before a demonstration of washing machines) shows how photographs, graphics, levels of information, bilingual texts, and a time-line are juxtaposed to portray a complex evolution in a simple, evocative fashion. One of the captions states: "Despite enormous improvements...washing machines never liberated the women who used them." Graphic designer, Gail Lacombe.

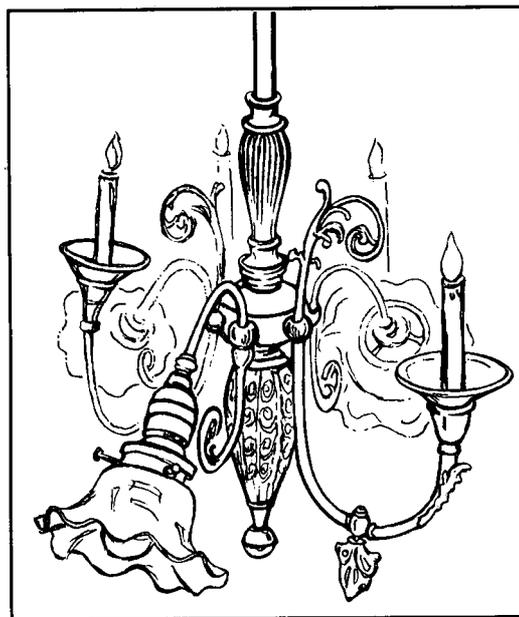


Fig. 2 (right)
 Copies of artifacts and illustrations reproduced on display panels allow visitors to quickly find information on items located in partial reconstitutions. System developed by the museum's head designer, Glenda Krusberg.

- in the museum's exhibit on communications, for example, telephone, radio, television, etc.);
2. help demystify the technical aspects of household devices by showing how they work;
3. validate the importance of household appliances and housework by bringing the kitchen into a museum of technology;
4. show that domestic technology has not removed housework, but has contributed to redefining how that work should be organized and done;
5. provide an engaging, interactive and friendly environment to help visitors move through the exhibit, while simultaneously learning and socializing;
6. make the exhibit lighthearted and occasionally humorous and entertaining, while also providing depth;

7. provide opportunities for partnerships and sponsorship outside the museum.

"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen" might be an apt expression for curators working on a major gallery like this one. It is difficult, for example, to illustrate how the exhibit development process alters the original curatorial vision, and how design occasionally overwhelms content. Preparing an exhibit such as this is very different from writing an article, where the author working independently has total control over the ideas. Given this reality, I wondered whether curatorial statements are still pertinent in the new museological world of financial constraints, exhibit teams and project management. The public still does not understand that museums are increasingly driven by financial pressures and visitor statistics, which helps explain why exhibits are occasionally superficial and why they may have to open before they are complete.

A curatorial statement like this needs to focus on the marriage of content and design, because although curators often initiate the original ideas, and are ultimately held responsible for the content and quality of exhibits, they control neither. The following, therefore, is a personal, curatorial discussion of this gallery's goals. It includes an example of how process can change the original message, and a brief look at objectives.

The Transformative Reality of the Exhibit Process

The initial idea was to examine how new technologies industrialized the home and affected housework and the gender division of labour. This involved considering how socio-cultural and regional factors shaped the design and use of domestic technology, and



Fig. 3
Demonstrations, such as the one shown here on washing machines, provide the public with information on technological problems and possibilities in an active environment.

analyzing current trends in technology and society that suggested future ones. Initially, chronology was to be the organizing principle, with in-depth treatments being done on certain developments (for example, the marketing of electricity). This was replaced by a more thematic approach that includes typological displays arranged chronologically.

For example, a typological display on irons, set in an ironing scene of a circa 1950s kitchen, is considered to be more stimulating and comprehensible than a historical one that includes ironing as only a part of cleanliness. In museums such as this one, small dramatic displays with clearly defined subjects and artifacts (for example, the wedding cake, and interactive gadget wall) are seen to provide visitors with clearly visible choices and thus hold their attention more than those based on a continuous historical development. Although this approach tends to truncate consistent and coherent concepts into multiple pieces, it also makes them easier to digest.

Parallel to this approach was an editing process that significantly reduced and altered the original text. Following is a sketch of this process. Once the initial ideas had been accepted by the exhibit committee, they were discussed and sharpened by a dozen specialists (academics, curators and an engineer) during a workshop. The museum then formed a team and hired an interpretive planner (first, Mary Jones and then Linda Dale) who reworked the main ideas with other team members (including the curator) into an interpretive plan composed of key ideas, design approaches, artifacts and illustrations.

While Suzanne Beauvais (Assistant to the Curator) and I started completing the collection, Susan Jenkins and other cataloguers registered and described them and conservators began analyzing restoration work. I wrote the first draft for the main exhibit ideas, and along with others (Sophie Drakich, Elise Dubuc and Kerridwen Harvey), prepared secondary texts and captions for artifacts and illustrations. These were then subjected to word counts (15 to 30 words for artifacts and illustrations; 30 to 50 words for secondary texts; and 60 to 80 words for main texts); edited by an in-house interpretive officer to see if they could be understood by 12-year-olds; rehashed again by the exhibit team; and finally rewritten by the interpretive specialist and sent to Jane Foy, an editor of popular literature. Her material was examined another time, returned to her when necessary and rechecked and corrected by Michelle Benson, the production editor. During this process, the texts were so transformed that they had a different meaning than the original ones.

Although the final text is more readable than the original, constant revisions trivialize complex developments, often discard important parts of a message, and usually have to be corrected yet again. Many steps and people are involved in this time-consuming process, but it is part of adapting a voluminous label copy in both languages to museological and design standards and ensuring that they are short and easy to read. An ongoing problem is the tendency of outside editors to misconstrue meaning and produce erroneous texts by telescoping complex

Fig. 4

Family members socialize while learning about healthy housing alternatives and resource use in a display produced in collaboration with CMHC.



stages in technological evolution into a phrase or two. For example, a paragraph on the long-term development and problems of nichrome wire was replaced by a sentence that suggests it suddenly appeared on the market as a wonderful solution for heating elements.

Dealing with an Incomplete Project

It is a challenging task to discuss the goals and intentions of a project when so much of it is still incomplete. Opening such exhibits seems to be acceptable so long as the missing elements are not too noticeable to the public. Premature openings occur partly because dates are set far before the real extent of a large gallery such as this one is realized. In many instances visitors are not aware of missing links, but they are important in understanding the message. Since gaps can diminish the exhibit's impact on media coverage, they also undermine resources dedicated to public relations.

In the case of *Love, Leisure and Laundry*, it is difficult for visitors to grasp messages when texts and illustrations are absent, and captions are missing on most illustrations and for over half of the artifacts. This commentary on artifacts is particularly important to specialists because it provides depth to the short introductory section panels. Unfinished displays like those on tradesmen's tools, the spread of electricity, refrigeration, cultural communities, toys and children, the healthy house model, the smart kitchen and the concluding area made little sense in the state they were in at opening. And how can visitors learn by doing, when the

interactives, flip books and demonstrations are still absent, not working, or lacking instructions?

An example of the confusion engendered by incomplete exhibits can be found in a reviewer's concern about gender. Susan Riley of the *Ottawa Citizen* (22 April 1996) wanted more information on manipulative advertising. Although three of the nine sections include text and visuals on advertisers' attempts to exploit consumers' hopes and fears, many critical elements were missing: the rural kitchen that confirms the existence of traditional gender roles lacked text and a flip book on the evolution of self-help books (from the years 1500 to 1900); the satire on advertisements for people getting married (oversized wedding cake with appliances on it) was incomplete; the parodies on cleaning and ironing were missing mannequins and thought bubbles; the children's area did not include captions or text about the role of toys in reinforcing gender roles. The flip book based on Statistics Canada's study of gender roles is not yet finished and the concluding area, which is about making choices in terms of gender roles and appliances, is still almost non-existent. Finally, quotes and cartoons about gender roles remain absent. Obviously once an exhibit is unveiled reviews are justified, but it would make more sense once completed.

Demystifying Technology and Making Choices: Examples of Exhibit Messages

In order to provide an idea of some of the significant ideas in the different parts of the

exhibit, here are some examples. An important secondary theme is the evolution of construction techniques, depicted by typologies of early electrical devices and partial reconstructions of: a nineteenth-century rural *pièce sur pièce* house; a 1920s balloon-type urban construction; an alternative, infill healthy house of 1996; and a 1996 "smart house." When finished, the section on cultural communities will show that North American household appliances and foods have always been enriched by the technologies and techniques brought here by immigrants.

Once in operation, Ontario Hydro's 1960 replica of the Beck Circus (circa 1915), used to sell electricity and appliances to farming families, will be a graphic demonstration of how a strange new technology was sold to consumers. The display on industrial design states that well-designed appliances combine aesthetics with durability and a fair price. The Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CMHC) section on the healthy house depicts alternatives to current construction devices and practices and uses a computer interactive to portray Canadians' wasteful use of resources.

The futuristic house boasts an informative and innovative display on energy efficient appliances produced by the Energuide Program of Natural Resources Canada. This area includes *aiphones* with small screens that allow occupants to see visitors at the door, and Honeywell's automatic remote system for controlling lights, blinds, music and a gas fireplace. This type of sophisticated display incorporates a "wow" factor meant to fascinate and surprise visitors who expect to see the latest innovations in museums of science and technology. When completed, the concluding area will

include a comparison of a combination stove, circa 1900, and a 1995 "express breakfast" machine that makes toast, eggs and coffee. We suggest that manufacturers constantly produce such machines and it's up to consumers to make intelligent choices.

Given the breadth of topics presented here, they are general in nature. They are, however, helping visitors better understand how ubiquitous technologies, which they take for granted, work and affect their daily lives. As the exhibit is being completed (at the time of writing, slated for September 1996, but December 1996 is more likely), it clearly will help our visitors make choices concerning the efficiency, design and environmental impact of appliances, as well as the various roles family members can play in using them.

Judging from visitor comment cards, this gallery is stimulating most, upsetting some and amusing many. It is, then, provoking predictable reactions. Whereas some, like Susan Riley, argue for more material on sexist advertising, her colleague, Ken MacQueen (27 April 1996) thought the male perspective could be strengthened. Thus far (July 1996), the only negative comments came from two men who thought "tax money should not be spent on feminist exhibits."

In delivering our message it has been difficult for me as a curator to omit depth, but making compromises as a museologist and as a member of a team was critical to the production of such a public event. Curators are compensated by the opportunity of learning new ways of visualizing ideas from an excellent design team and by the pleasure of seeing so many people enjoying themselves while examining factors that influenced their pasts and will condition their futures.